

Together

by

Icebard

Alternative

Sex: Yes

Violence: No

Love, warmth and tenderness: Definitely yes

Author's notes:

I wrote this as a work of original fiction. However, if the reader would prefer to visualise the main characters as resembling a certain warrior and her bard, please feel free to do so.

Although this story takes place in southwest England (mostly) and in the present day, the perceptive reader may notice that some distances, towns and historical references have been altered. This is deliberate. There is a real village called Otterhampton, but it is nothing like the town described here.

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Peace, happiness.

PART ONE: Two Individuals Meeting

Chapter One

Alone

Thursday 23rd June, 6 Years before Meeting:

Ember Leaves looked out at the passing fields and farms, hedgerows and woodlands. The sun had gone down over the western hills but the sky was still ablaze with red, yellow and mauve light.

Ember was a young woman of slightly less than average height, with shortish blonde hair and silver-blue eyes. She watched and smiled, delighted by the simple beauty of the passing landscape, a sense of warmth and well-being seeming to come from deep inside her. Even as the colours and light drained from the sky she found herself captivated.

She was barely aware when Mr Fairfax, who had been intending to go to Otterhampton anyway and had offered to give her a lift, looked across at her a couple of times. Nevertheless it registered; and she supposed that, like so many, he was thinking that she was a very odd girl.

An hour later they neared the edge of the small town of Otterhampton.

'Are you sure you don't want me to drop you off at Mrs Waechter's?' Mr Fairfax asked.

She smiled at him. 'I'm sure.' She could see the confusion on his face and perhaps a little bit of concern, but she was used to people being confused where she was concerned, used to people clearly not understanding her. 'Just up here will be fine. It's a good place, and I'll enjoy the walk into town.'

'All right,' he said, and pulled over, partly onto the grassy verge, by a fence that enclosed a field that had been left fallow.

Ember climbed from the car, opened the back door and removed her backpack. After closing the door, she leaned into the open front door again. 'Thank you so much,' she said with a grin.

'You're welcome.' Mr Fairfax smiled back at her.

When she closed the door, he gave her a wave and then pulled away. She watched as the rear lights retreated from her, their red glow leaving her behind, the noise of the vehicle rapidly dying away to nothing. She wondered at Mr Fairfax's simple kindness. She had not asked for a lift, but when he had heard that she was going to stay with Mrs Waechter in Otterhampton, he had

immediately offered her a lift. She did not know him well - he had simply been a neighbour, owning an end-of-terrace house next door to the boarding house she had been living in.

The drive had been just over a hundred miles and she was glad to be able to stretch her legs and be under the open sky. Looking around her, she was almost surprised by the quietness of the evening. There was a little wood up ahead, and the field on her left, and a high hedgerow before a sloping field beyond it on the other side of the road. The last of the light lingered in the sky - summer twilight. The night to follow would be short. She wondered if it might even be the summer solstice though she could not remember its date.

Picking up her pack, she walked towards the trees and at a convenient place climbed through the wire fence into the fallow field. Away from the road, where the trees opened into the field, there was a secluded place where she knew she would not be disturbed.

She unrolled her sleeping mat, then opened her pack and took out her sleeping bag. Laying it out on top, she sat down and brought out a bottle of water and a little food - a snack before she settled down for the night.

A small chuckle escaped her and she realised that she was smiling. She had often been asked why she smiled so much and seemed happy in the smallest things. She had never known how to answer, and wondered at the fact that other people did not seem to find pleasure in some of the things that filled her with wonder. On the other hand the reverse was also certainly true: she could not understand at all, nor relate in any way to so many of the things that others clearly found very important.

After finishing eating a sandwich and a couple of biscuits, she stood up and walked a little way along the edge of field, and among a few ash and Scots pine trees at the edge of the wood. She listened to the rustlings of small creatures, the occasional birdsong, and felt the still, soft and warm air upon her skin. She was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, and though she carried a pullover with her she did not need to put it on.

When she returned to her pack and sleeping bag, it was almost fully dark. She sat there happily for an hour, watching as the stars peeked between clouds and the glow of the moon began to light the clouds over the eastern horizon.

Finally she undressed, climbed into her sleeping bag, and pillowed her head upon her rolled up sweater. Lying on her back and staring up into the sky, she wondered at the beauty that was all around her. She listened, and watched, and realised she was smiling again.

At length her thoughts began to drift and dreamlets stole across her mind. Turning onto her side, she briefly took pleasure in how comfortable she was, and let herself slide into a deep and peaceful sleep.

Friday 24th :

Ember woke to the dawn chorus. She listened, awed by the songs of the many birds around her. The air was cool and slight damp against her face but she did not mind. After a while, though she regretted that she would miss the songs that would continue, she allowed herself to fall asleep again.

When she next woke she felt very refreshed. Checking her watch, she found that the time was a little after six o'clock. Deciding to get up, she shivered a little as she climbed from her sleeping bag and the air chilled her warm skin. Dressing quickly, she pulled on her sweater and also shrugged into her lightweight coat, though she left it open down the front.

Looking out into the summer morning, she drank some water and ate a couple of biscuits. The sun was rising and, taking a few steps away from the trees, she was able to stand in the clear golden sunshine. The temperature was rapidly warming, and after a little while she took off her coat.

At length she decided that she would set out for Otterhampton. It would take her about an hour and a half to walk to Mrs Waechter's house. The route was picturesque, and she thought she might stop by a small stone bridge that crossed a stream, to take a break and see if she might spot any fish swimming there.

It was just after nine o'clock when Ember reached Mrs Waechter's place. It was a pleasant home, of brick and carved stone casements, on two floors, with leaded glass windows. A neighbouring house was visible on its right, and on the left was a churchyard.

As Ember walked up the short path across the front garden, the door swung open and a plump woman in her mid seventies stood there, smiling, one meaty hand on her hip over her floral apron. Though she was standing in shadow and Ember was in the sun, Ember could see her clearly enough - she had unusually good vision.

'Ember!' said the woman, brushing back an escaped strand of grey-brown hair that was otherwise tied back in a bun. 'I'm so glad you could come. Did you have a good trip?'

'Hello Mrs Waechter. Yes thank you, it was very good indeed. Mr Fairfax was kind, and the weather has been really beautiful.'

'Come in,' Mrs Waechter said. Her rosy cheeks dimpled as she smiled, her small brown eyes full of light. 'You must be hungry after your trip. Let me make you some breakfast.'

* * *

Six Years Later:

Wednesday 3rd May, Year of Meeting (Year 1):

Waking and sleeping, drifting and dreaming . . . Ember basked in the comfort of slumber and wakefulness. At length she woke more fully in the light of the window and the drawn curtains against which the morning sun brightly shone.

She had had a dream about being utterly at peace, safe and warm and loved, but she could recapture it, could not fall back into its warm embrace.

'So beautiful,' she murmured to herself. And for a moment she thought that she was actually speaking to someone else. She realised that she must have met someone in one of her dreams - someone wonderful - and that she was addressing her. But she could not quite recall the dream, though she was usually good at doing so. She wondered why this particular one eluded her. Perhaps, when she wrote in her dream diary after getting up, some of it might come back to her - but it seemed unlikely.

Ember found that her thoughts were clear and that she had woken in a mood of slightly heightened perceptions and feelings. Throwing back the duvet with apparent decisiveness - and smiling at the knowledge that she really was not a decisive person - she swung her legs out of bed and stood up. Blinking slightly against the morning brightness, she walked naked and barefoot into the en-suite bathroom, ran the shower, then stepped under the water.

She enjoyed the feeling of the warm cascade rushing over her. After a couple of minutes - she did not want to empty the hot water tank, though Mrs Waechter was always very tolerant with her - she turned off the tap and towelled herself dry. A few minutes later, dressed in pale blue jeans and a brick-red t-shirt, she stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom and brushed her hair.

Standing in front of the mirror she suddenly stopped and stared. Strange feelings of displacement and disorientation welled up within her.

I have forgotten something. The thought came to her with startling power. She felt as if she had forgotten something that she had known all along, as if she had stepped into another reality and could not remember something fundamental about where she had come from. At the same time she wondered if she should not be here - though she was happy here - and should be somewhere else instead - though she did not know where.

The confusion drained from her then, leaving as quickly as it had come.

Coming back to herself, Ember finished brushing her hair, staring at her reflection as she did so.

In the golden light of early morning, her fair skin was warmed and a touch of colour brushed her cheeks. Her short, light blonde hair was darkened because it was still damp. She pursed her full lips and for some reason a giggle escaped her at her expression. For a moment she looked into her silver-blue eyes. They were large and many people had commented on them, saying that they were amazing; though she also suspected that people found her eyes too unconventional in the brilliance of her crystalline gaze for her to be beautiful.

Fifteen minutes later Ember was sitting at the table in the kitchen. Mrs Waechter bustled about, bringing her breakfast with all the pleasure and enthusiasm that Ember had come to realise was normal for her. Though Ember had poured her own coffee, today as so often she was not allowed to help with the preparation of breakfast.

Ember was glad when Mrs Waechter sat down to eat with her. For a little while, as Ember ate fried eggs and sausages, fried tomato, toast and butter, she observed her. She was plump, caring and cheerful, and she could not help but feel a wave of affection for her.

'Thank you,' she said, the words escaping her quickly but sincerely.

'You are welcome.' Mrs Waechter took a bite of toast and regarded her, clearly glad that she was there.

After a short pause, Ember said: 'I am going to go on a trip in a few days.' She looked up into the old woman's eyes. 'I am not sure when I will be back, but it will probably be about ten days.'

Mrs Waechter was very interested at this. 'Where are you going?'

'I want to go to Bodmin Moor and explore it.'

Mrs Waechter grinned. 'You can be so adventurous sometimes. You will be careful, won't you?'

Ember nodded and smiled. 'You have always been so kind to me, always wanting to protect me,' she said then. It was far from the first time she had told Mrs Waechter this, but she had meant it every time and she knew that ageing woman appreciated it. 'You have always taken care of me, and I am so grateful for that.'

'Thank you dear.' Mrs Waechter's eyes had become moist with tears at Ember's words. 'You have brought me more than you realise. Like sunshine in my life.' She smiled, then became more serious. 'I know you are going alone. You are young and so full of light and joy. Are there no other people of your age that you would like to be friends with?'

Ember considered this. In the six years that she had lived with Mrs Waechter, the fact that she had no friends at all of her own age had come up in conversation a few times, especially if any of Mrs Waechter's own friends were visiting. 'I like many people. I am not lonely. Most people think I am very strange, and I admit that I do not understand them and think they are strange in the way they live their lives.'

Mrs Waechter nodded. 'It is more difficult to be in the world when you are different. But that difference can also be a sign of great specialness.'

Ember chuckled at this notion, which seemed like it would be true enough for some people, but in her case rather absurd. Then she wondered at what she had said: that she liked many people. She wondered if that was true. She did not really visit people, and no one came to visit her. What conversations she had were always at work, or because of circumstance. Perhaps she did not,

after all, like people's company. Perhaps she just liked them in the sense that she felt positively for them and wished them happiness.

Then she smiled again, more widely. *I am happy*, she thought, and knew it to be true. *Even if I have forgotten something.*

* * *

Thursday 11th May, Year 1:

Vibeke Kaestner awoke from a dream in which she had been struggling to find something but had been unable to do so. As she opened her eyes, the details of the dream dissolved and escaped her even while she made an effort to recall them. After a minute or so there was not much left but vague unease and sense of depression.

She was lying on her back and had a slight headache. After glancing at her alarm clock, she climbed out of bed. It was just before 5:30am, and she was able to turn off the alarm a couple of minutes before it was due to go off.

She padded from her bedroom, went a few steps down the hallway and entered the bathroom to relieve herself and splash water on her face. From there she went to the small kitchen and downed half a glass of water and a full glass of grapefruit juice.

A few minutes later, dressed in a faded green t-shirt, black shorts, white sports socks and trainers, she stepped outside and locked the door behind her.

She walked for a minute or so, then began to jog fairly slowly. Gradually she increased her pace until she was at the speed she would hold for the rest of the five miles she ran every morning.

It was a beautiful day. The sky was completely clear, a very deep blue, and golden sunshine shone warm upon her skin. The air was cool and soft and slightly damp, perfect as it flowed over her, pleasant in her lungs. Scents of meadow flowers came to her from the fields at her left, and the richer fragrances of roses - not yet fully open - and other blooms that brightly adorned the gardens, cottages and houses on the right. Cutting along a path, then around a narrow track between a farmhouse and a barn, she turned onto an unpaved road that would take her two miles to an old windmill near the coast.

As she usually did, she cleared her mind of all but immediate sensations. She appreciated all that was around her - the countryside at the edge of the town of Otterhampton, the beauty of the morning, the sound of her deep, even breathing and the steadiness of her feet upon the ground. She concentrated upon the cool air, and the increasing heat in the muscles of her legs, and the strength that she felt. As she turned a steep corner and ran over a low, weed-edged bridge that signified she had run for just over three miles, she felt the first prickling of sweat upon her skin.

Finally, as she neared the end of her run, she increased her pace and found herself smiling at her speed and the ease with which she managed it.

Back at her house, she downed a glass of water, pulled off her trainers and clothes, and took a shower. After drying off and dressing, she brushed out her still-damp hair.

Standing before the mirror, she wondered at herself. Dark red hair; fair skin that was rather tanned from the sunny spring weather and the amount of time she spent outside. Her eyes had a rather unusual colour: an intense shade of mauve, like amethyst; and which, just occasionally and in the right light, seemed to reflect hints of ruby. Some people found her gaze a little disturbing, though the habitual gentleness of her expression and manner usually put them at ease quickly enough. Quite a tall woman, she was slim and strong, with pleasing but not exaggerated feminine curves. She was wearing the usual casual clothes she wore to work: jeans and a t-shirt - light blue and dark blue today - and trainers. She wore no make-up or jewellery, and did not usually do so even when going out - which was very rare.

Vibeke was not sure if she liked herself or disliked herself - the question seemed somehow meaningless when she considered it, which she did not often do - but she acknowledged that she had a good body and a face without obvious flaw.

Setting her hairbrush back down on the dressing table, she went through to the kitchen, prepared her breakfast and sat at the kitchen table, looking out into the small back garden.

Despite her run, despite the beauty of the day, she felt a familiar sense of darkness within her - a sense of pointlessness, a hint of despair, though it was a quiet feeling rather than intense.

She wondered why she ran. It seemed empty in and of itself, and it was rarely enough to make her feel genuinely good despite her sometime enjoyment of it - such as today. She was not particularly trying to stay in shape in order to remain attractive. She realised that it was rather a kind of negative motivation that drove her to do it: if she did not, then she would feel worse and her day might be plagued with depression or discomfort.

With an effort she turned her mind away from such thoughts - thoughts that were all too familiar and insistent. Instead she concentrated upon her breakfast and genuinely enjoyed it: toast, butter and Marmite, orange marmalade, and cups of good tea with milk. Some mornings she would turn on the television or listen to some good music - she usually preferred classical early in the day, though she would turn to rock music later - but today she simply sat and enjoyed the peacefulness and the songs of the birds that came in through the open window.

After tidying away the breakfast things and a trip to the bathroom to brush her teeth, she took her small pack and headed for the door to go to work.

* * *

Saturday 13th May, Year 1:

Ember returned from her holiday to Bodmin Moor early in the afternoon. She had enjoyed the trip but found it strangely unconvincing - as if it was not really something she had really wanted to do of itself, but rather something that helped her to pass the time while she was waiting for

something of much greater importance to happen. Objectively, she realised that this was irrational. If she was waiting for something, she thought, then it was not something from outside her but rather some kind of internal confrontation or acceptance that she needed to reach, and through which she might perhaps change things. In truth she was not sure what she might want to change.

Nevertheless, she was glad that she had gone. She had liked walking over the open expanses of grass cropped by sheep, and heather, and strewn boulders and impressive tors. The weather had been changeable but she had expected that and had been prepared. The jacket she had worn had seemed rather expensive when she had bought it but she was glad that she had.

Now, walking back to Mrs Waechter's place from the railway station, she was rather glad to be home.

Curious, she considered as she thought this. Was Mrs Waechter's house really home for her? She supposed it was. Mrs Waechter treated her like the daughter she had never had, and was clearly very happy that she was there. And Ember in turn loved the lady's calming warmth.

Letting herself in, she realised that there was no one at home. Going upstairs to her room, she unpacked her backpack, then took a shower and changed into some clean and comfortable clothes. She was hungry and rather tired, and thought that she would lie down for a while after some lunch. The day was pleasant and warm, the sunshine softened by a hazy sky. Maybe she would lie down on a blanket on a back lawn and sleep for a while.

That evening, Ember and Mrs Waechter sat in the living room - at the back of the house, its French windows looking out over the small garden. Mrs Waechter sat in her customary armchair with embroidered clothes over the threadbare arms. Ember sat on the sofa.

'Do you want to watch anything else?' Mrs Waechter asked. They had just watched a nature documentary about the fish and birds, dolphins and seals, crustaceans and more that thrived along certain stretches of Britain's coastline.

The news was on next, and Ember was rarely interested in that. She considered checking to see if there were any films coming on on any of the other channels, but decided she was not in the mood. 'No, thank you.'

Mrs Waechter nodded, picked up the remote and turned off the television.

'I think I'll make myself some more tea,' Ember said. 'Would you like some?'

Mrs Waechter looked up. 'Yes please. The usual.'

Ember returned a few minutes later with two steaming mugs, and they sat in companionable silence. Though Mrs Waechter and Ember both liked to read, neither of them appeared to be in the mood this evening.

'It's Carolyn's birthday in a couple of days,' Mrs Waechter said after a little while. 'I sent her the card. She'll be glad you signed it. She likes you.'

Ember saw that Mrs Waechter was looking at one of the framed photographs on the mantelpiece. Carolyn was the lady's niece. 'Have you spoken to her recently?' Ember asked.

'A few days ago, yes. She and the family had just come back from a trip to Catalonia. Michael had some work to do at one of the museums, and Carolyn said she took the opportunity to get some research of her own done there. Apparently the little one had a lot of fun with some new friends at a local playgroup. She said they'd try to visit in the autumn.'

Ember was still looking at the photographs. Mrs Waechter did not have a large family - though it had been very large fifty and a hundred years ago - and she did not see her relatives very often, but she kept up with them and was always glad to hear from them.

For a little while, Ember asked her questions about her parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins. Many of them had died during the Great Terror and a few had emigrated. Not many had raised families of their own.

And then, after half an hour or so of talking, Mrs Waechter turned to Ember and regarded her with an uncertainty that was uncharacteristic of her, as if she was considering something that made her uncomfortable but found herself unable to wonder.

'What is it?' Ember asked.

Mrs Waechter brushed a strand of hair behind one ear with plump fingers, and smiled a smile that dimpled her pink cheeks.

'It's all right,' Ember said. 'I promise I won't take offence, no matter the question you ask. I can't promise to answer it, but you can ask.'

Mrs Waechter chuckled at this. 'You know me well,' she said. Then: 'I was just wondering, not really thinking about asking you, but wondering why you haven't met anyone, fallen in love, married and had children. I mean, you are just the most beautiful young woman I have ever seen, and the boys must be falling over themselves to ask you out.'

Ember did not answer for a full minute or so. She felt a little uncomfortable, but it was not that which prevented her from saying anything. Rather, she did not know quite what to say because she did not know what the reason was herself.

At length she tipped her head sideways and gave a half shrug. 'I actually do not know,' she finally said. 'I am not sure that many would agree with you that I am beautiful. I am . . . a little

strange to look at. But aside from that . . . In truth I think most men avoid me. I'm not sure why. And it does not bother me at all. I cannot imagine falling in love with anyone I have ever met.' This was true, but she refrained from saying that she could not imagine falling in love with any man at all. She could imagine falling in love with another woman - not that she had met any that made her feel much at all. Looking up then, she gave Mrs Waechter a slightly mischievous smile and said: 'What about you? Did you have some young beau to walk out with when you were a young woman?'

'Oh yes,' Mrs Waechter replied with a chuckle. 'Let me tell you about a very kind young man I met when I was about twenty. He was rather shy and awkward, but I liked him and he seemed to have an internal strength to him. I met him when I worked in a small factory in Winchester. I was at one of the machine benches, pressing these little metal parts that were used in the engines of cars and, I think, fighter planes. I don't know what they were exactly. And Thomas was an assembly engineer. He must have been good because he supervised the controls and testing. I remember how embarrassed he always was when he had to test and check the work that much older men had done. He used to wear loose brown trousers, a heavy shirt and thick suspenders. And he had these rather heavy glasses with thick rims that he kept having to push up his face. He was handsome though, and had thick brown hair that was parted on one side and swept across.'

Ember smiled as she listened, glad to hear Mrs Waechter's story. But, as she had expected, the story did not have a happy ending - the young man had been killed in the war that put an end to the Great Terror. But she was gladdened to see the way that Mrs Waechter smiled and took pleasure in the telling of her short-lived romance with him. Clearly the old lady had long ago largely accepted what had happened, and simply looked back on that time in a positive way.

That night, lying in bed, Ember wondered about the direction their conversation had taken. She considered some of the fantasies that she had had as a child - long stories she had made up that were full of romance. She thought about the more vivid fantasies she sometimes indulged in now, as an adult. They made her smile and she thought that tonight she might like to fall asleep to such musings and imaginings. Strange, though, that they seemed so very far away from anything that she thought she might experience in reality.

Monday 15th:

Walking to work on her first day back after her holiday, Ember was aware of her happiness both in the trip she had taken and in the nature of her everyday life. As the sun shone down she enjoyed the soft warmth in the air, the sounds of the birds that sang, and the quiet prettiness of the cottages and houses she passed.

Ember worked as a dressmaker. She had always had an aptitude for doing fine work with her hands; had always been dexterous and precise. When she had first started work at the seamstress's shop - just a week or so after she had first come to Otterhampton to stay with Mrs

Waechter - she had simply helped the customers, manned the till, kept track of stock and, soon after that, kept up the books. Then she had asked Evelyn Compton, who owned the shop, if she might help her with the fittings and cutting, and then with the sewing.

Now it was Evelyn who kept up the books and looked after the stock - though she still liked to sew, and did so when she had time - while Ember made dresses at speed and with perfection. Evelyn still had more say in the designs - though not as much as the customers - but it was largely Ember whose craftsmanship turned those designs into perfectly fitting blouses, skirts, dresses and more.

The bell above the door rang as Ember pushed it open and entered the place. The familiar scents of cloth, wool, cotton and dyes struck her.

'Hi Ember,' said Evelyn Compton, looking up and smiling at her. She was sitting on a stool behind the main counter, nursing a cup of coffee. A good-looking woman in her mid-forties, she had long, fair hair and hazel eyes. Her skin was still tanned after a recent holiday in Morocco. She was moderately tall and quite slim and she always wore stylish clothes - though to Ember they usually looked rather fussy.

'Good morning,' Ember replied, returning the smile. She had always liked Evelyn, though they were very different and tended to spend their time together in comfortable silence rather than in animated conversation. She was aware that Evelyn considered her an incomprehensible eccentric whose personality was so baffling that it was not even worth trying to understand.

After exchanging a few words about orders that had come in while she had been away, Ember went through to the store room and workroom, made herself a cup of tea, then sorted through the work she had been doing before she had gone on holiday. Soon enough she settled down at her sewing machine and set to finishing a long, loose-fitting skirt she had fitted for an elegant-looking woman just before she had left.

At lunchtime Ember sat by the window that faced the tiny, overgrown garden at the back of the shop. She was aware when Evelyn joined her, sitting at her own work-bench, but did not look at her.

'You have been so good for this place,' Evelyn said then.

Ember turned her head and looked at her boss. It was far from the first compliment she had received from her but she was struck by the seriousness with which she had spoken. 'Thank you,' she said.

'Why have you not tried to work for yourself?' Evelyn asked. 'I'm so glad that you work here, but you are a better dressmaker than I ever was. You could become very successful, run your own shop, perhaps make really expensive clothes for the wealthy.'

Ember was slightly amused at this. She tipped her head sideways a little and the corner of her mouth quirked in a half-smile. 'All that does not seem important,' she said. It was an honest answer, though simple. Looking away, gazing out through the window, she watched as a female blackbird and a couple of sparrows pecked at seeds fallen into the unkempt lawn. The grass was a clear emerald green in the sunlight and she was amazed by the movement of the birds and their clear and distinctive colouring. 'Aren't they beautiful,' she said softly, and realised that she had been holding her breath for a few seconds as she had watched them.

* * *

Tuesday 16th May, Year 1:

Vibeke left the long greenhouse - one of six, the flowers growing within which she mostly tended herself. Stepping out into the direct sunlight, she took a moment to enjoy the warmth of the afternoon and the deep blue of the sky. Behind her to either side were the large greenhouses, which were at the northern edge of the plant nursery. On her right was a small building with a storeroom and packaging room, then a large shed of equipment. Beyond them was a gravel area where the deliver vans would load up. On her left were rows of outdoor beds, and beyond them a small field with specially cultivated shrubs and trees.

Vibeke did most of the cultivation, the planting, and tending and watering and pruning. An older woman called Felicia Harper took care of the orders and the books and the packaging and delivery. The two of them worked well together, though they rarely talked much. Also, a middle-aged man who dealt with general maintenance put in one or one-and-a-half days a week.

Vibeke had worked here for four years. She enjoyed the job for the most part. She liked the quietness of it, she liked the scents of damp earth and the fragrances of flowers. Most of all she liked the work she did on the trees in the field, which could occasionally be physically demanding - and she welcomed that. She liked that the flowers she helped grow here ended up, via various florists, in vases in so many homes in the area, bringing a little colour and fragrance to many people. She knew the work was of no great importance, but it was still gently rewarding.

After brushing off her hands on her faded jeans, she glanced at her watch. It was close to five o'clock and she decided she would go home after checking on a few of the long flowerbeds she had not had time to walk along earlier in the day.

Twenty minutes later, she stepped into the main building to fetch her small backpack and cycle helmet and to tell Felicia Harper she was leaving. 'I'm heading off home now,' she said.

Felicia looked up from her desk, which was strategically placed next to a large window so that it caught plenty of light and had a pleasant view of rows of flowers, then trees and the hills in the distance. 'All right Vibeke. Have a good evening.'

'You too. Bye.' Vibeke smiled and left. Entering the shed to one side of the building, she brought out her bicycle, closed the door behind her, mounted up and checked the strap of her helmet. Then she pushed off across the gravel forecourt and turned left along the road.

Looking about her as she went, she enjoyed the bright and sunny light of the early evening. It was warm and the air was very still, the sky a pale blue tinged with deep yellow. She saw a few small insects, and fluffy seeds turning and floating in the air, bright in the sunbeams or hidden by shadows cast by trees. Fields opened up on her right, and woods and hills on her right. She passed a couple of farms, and some farm buildings. A few cars passed her from the opposite direction, and a couple of vehicles overtook her.

Deciding that she did not want to waste such good weather, she turned left into a smaller road that curled between hedgerows and over a hill. She thought she might cycle for about half an hour before heading back home.

The sun had gone down by the time she pulled into her tiny driveway and left her bike and helmet in the garage. She had been out for longer than she had expected and dusk was drawing in. She was not very thirsty - she had been carrying a bottle of water, and had drained it halfway through her ride - but she was very hungry.

She stopped of a sudden before her front door and a slight frown touched her brow. The muted light seemed colourless after the brightness of earlier, and she suddenly felt as if walls were closing in on her. With startling speed - though it should not have been startling, for it had happened so often during her life - she felt a sense of depression and despair descending upon her. Suddenly she did not want to enter her home. It seemed only to embody the emptiness that always filled her and was now, in her declining mood, once again being revealed to her.

She turned away from the door and looked outwards. There was a cottage at an angle to her house across the road on a corner, and she had a neighbour on the right. Otherwise she could only see trees and the road, a field, and sky.

Her hunger finally drove her to move. Turning, she let herself into her house. She had made a good - and large - pasta dish the previous day and it would only take a moment to heat the rest of it up.

Chapter Two

Meeting

Thursday 18th May, Year 1:

Half an hour after getting back from work Vibeke decided to go out instead of eating at home. It was just three quarters of a mile to an Indian restaurant and takeaway that she had often bought

food at and which she happily considered to be the best Indian food available in Otterhampton - there were two other Indian restaurants she had tried closer to the town centre.

It did not take her long to get there. The restaurant was at the end of a row of small shops and the scents that came from it were captivating to her hunger-enhanced senses. Despite the sense of depression that had almost frightened her with its intensity just a few minutes earlier, she found herself anticipating the meal as if it was going to be a great event. She even noticed that her sense of anticipation leaked over into a more general feeling of waiting for something good to happen. She was aware that it was illusory but it was still pleasant in itself - though she knew from past experience that hoping that something good was going to happen, especially if it involved waiting, usually resulted in nothing happening at all.

Glancing briefly along the row of shops - all of them closed except for a newsagent that also sold alcohol - she took in the brick façades, the pleasingly-shaped bay and sometimes leaded windows. The bricks were of different colours, for the shops had mostly been built separately and tacked onto each other. Across the road was a pub that was not large but rather grandiose in design, and a post office and bank, then small houses. It was quite a picturesque street she thought.

Stepping within the restaurant, she was greeted by one of the waiters - a quiet and very polite man of about twenty-five years old, dressed in traditional waiter's attire. He recognised her and smiled, and she returned the smile.

'Good evening madam.'

'Hi, good to see you.' It occurred to her that, despite the many times she had been here over the years, she did not know the man's name, nor that of the other waiter and the manager of the place, and if they knew hers - which was likely given the orders she had placed from time to time - they never addressed her by anything other than 'madam'.

'I think I'll eat here this evening,' she said. When he nodded and smiled at her, she indicated a free table for two by a window at the side. 'May I sit here?'

'Yes, of course.'

They stepped across to table and the waiter pulled out a chair for her to sit down, then returned a few seconds later with a menu. 'Can I get you anything to drink?'

'A jug of water please.'

After looking through the menu - she was familiar with most of what the restaurant served - she sat back and sipped from the glass of water the waiter had poured for her and looked around the place. There were three couples eating and a group of three men and a woman who were also enjoying a few beers. Everyone spoke quite quietly and there was some Indian music playing in the background. She liked the décor of the place, even if it was stereotypical in some ways. Candles burned in brown glass holders.

She placed her order, waited for her meal, then began to eat with much pleasure. The food was very good and she was very hungry indeed. Though she did not often eat heavy foods, she was not paranoid in any sense about health or diet and liked to indulge herself from time to time.

Once her initial hunger was sated, she ate more slowly, taking her time and enjoying the flavours. She tried not to listen to the conversations of other people in the place, not because she did not want to eavesdrop but because she wanted to be alone with her own thoughts.

While she ate, three or four customers entered to collect takeaways they had ordered. She did not pay them much attention until a woman of quite remarkable appearance entered.

Vibeke set her fork down and simply watched her. The woman's hair was a light blonde, thick and straight and cut quite short. Her face had quite high cheekbones and an expressive mouth with pleasingly-shaped lips. Her eyes were extraordinary: large and an amazing silver-blue colour like Arctic ice and brilliant winter skies. Vibeke thought that the woman's appearance was fascinating and quite lovely. She acknowledged that it was a rather curious appearance - especially because of her eyes - and that others might feel that she looked rather unusual, but to Vibeke the slight strangeness of her only added to her beauty.

She watched as the woman looked around even as the waiter approached her. It seemed to Vibeke that she was slightly relieved at the waiter's appearance, as if she had felt a little self-conscious coming into this place.

She watched as the woman spoke quietly with the waiter and he led her over to the bar area where she could look at a menu and wait while her takeaway order was prepared.

Vibeke supposed that she was about five feet and four inches tall. She had a figure that was very feminine but also looked quite strong and on the athletic side. She was wearing a long skirt of some loose and lightweight grey cloth that swirled about her as she moved, and Vibeke caught a glimpse of shapely, sandalled feet. A loose-cut top of some blue-grey silk-like material with spaghetti straps revealed pleasingly-shaped shoulders and suggested pleasant curves and a slim waist. She also wore a belt that was quite wide, with many semi-precious stones embedded in swirls, earrings that each consisted of three hanging silver chains that swung and caught the light each time she moved her head even a fraction, silver bracelets on her right wrist and three silver rings - one with small blue stones and one with colourless stones - on her left hand. Vibeke wondered if she wore an ankle bracelet too and realised she would have been almost surprised if that was not the case, though she did not know why she thought that.

Taking her time, Vibeke finished her meal and sat and enjoyed where she was. As much as she could, she looked at and took in all she could about the beautiful woman who was waiting for her takeaway food to be ready. She did not want to appear to be staring, but it was hard for her not to keep glancing at her and watching her.

Once, as Vibeke sipped from her glass of water, she thought that she was being stared at in turn. Looking up and across, she found herself looking into the wondrous silver-blue gaze of the woman. Amazement, wonder and self-consciousness immediately threatened to overwhelm her.

Instinctively she looked away, her wish and reflex not to be intrusive winning out - an automatic reaction that she did not particularly like, for she wished she could consciously choose how she might react.

Yet as she failed to see the last of her meal in front of her, or even notice the candle that flickered on her table, and as she became aware of the heat in her cheeks, she found herself considering that the beautiful woman had had an openness to her expression, a candour and curiosity that was not plagued by the kind of doubts that Vibeke had but which, rather, was a simple and straightforward interest in her - though whether it was Vibeke's appearance or manner that intrigued her for a moment, she did not know.

When the waiter brought the woman her meal, handing her a handled bag of sturdy brown paper with trays of food stacked within, she thanked the young man and crossed the restaurant to leave. As she passed closest to Vibeke's table, she turned to her for a moment and smiled - a regard and expression of such innocent and uninhibited joy, delight and goodwill that seemed to be without calculation and without any need for any kind of response, that Vibeke was left marvelling long after she had exited through the front door and had gone to wherever she was going.

It was not long afterwards that Vibeke walked home. She took her time, enjoying the warm, soft air, the clear night sky that was spangled with innumerable stars, and the easy movement after the rich and satisfying meal. She was glad that she had decided to eat out. She was glad of the food she had eaten and the interactions she had had with others. Most of all she was intrigued, astonished, filled with wonder by her reaction to the beautiful woman with silver-blue eyes who had done nothing more than order a takeaway, glance at her and smile at her.

Lying in bed that night, the moonlight shining through two windows upon a rug and the wooden tiles of the floor, she found it difficult to sleep. She was not sure if she felt good, excited, enlivened because of the heightened awareness that the woman had brought to her, or if seeing her had simply brought home to her the emptiness that was so much a part of her life - the loneliness, lack of meaningful contact, lack of anything at all that seemed of true value that was her life.

Not for the first time, she considered the nature of her loneliness. It was not that she could not make friends or that people did not like her. Rather, it was that she felt a kind of hollowness and falsity when she interacted with others, as if she was not really relating to them and they were not relating to her. She was different, she knew.

She wondered if the beautiful woman she had seen at the restaurant had many friends, or was in a relationship, and if she felt much valued and if she much valued others.

* * *

Tuesday 23rd May, Year 1:

Early in the afternoon, Ember walked to the small park that was barely two hundred yards from the dressmaker's shop where she worked. She should have taken her lunch break an hour or more earlier, but she had been absorbed in her work and had lost track of the time.

Making her way to a bench by the duck pond, she sat down and opened her small pack on the bench beside her. Usually her lunch was rather bland when she made it herself, but Mrs Waechter often took charge of the matter and created a meal for her that was always interesting and carefully thought out.

Bringing out a sandwich of brown bread with lettuce, chicken, mayonnaise and chilli sauce, she munched happily while she watched a dozen ducks swimming and diving in the large, elongated pond, and resting on its banks.

Her thoughts returned to the woman she had seen eating alone in the Indian restaurant she had gone to for a takeaway the previous week. She had not considered it at the time - wished she was better at making decisions, at creating situations for herself rather than just moving through them - but she had come to think since then that the woman had been someone truly extraordinary. Her appearance had certainly been amazing - long, dark red hair, fair skin, eyes the colour of amethysts and a curious, disturbing beauty; and a slim, pleasingly-curved body that suggested, even at rest, that she was strong and powerful and fast.

Ember took poured a cup of coffee and milk from her vacuum flask, took a sip and enjoyed its rich aroma, then tilted her head back and closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth of the bright sunlight upon her face.

* * *

Wednesday 24th May, Year 1:

Vibeke turned off the engine of the van, climbed out, went to the back doors and opened them. She picked up the first of the crates of flowers and leaves and sprigs and potted plants she was delivering, crossed the pavement and entered the florist that was located on Otterhampton's High Street. After greeting the freckled, red-haired man who stood behind the counter making up a large bouquet, she walked through to the storeroom, set down the crate and headed back to the van. 'Is the side door open?' she asked before she left.

The man nodded, and Vibeke noticed not for the first time that he had trouble not staring at her. 'Just leave them on the right,' he said.

'Thanks.'

Vibeke proceeded to make several trips until she had finished with the delivery. When she had done so she did not return to her van along the alley at the side of the shop but walked through the shop so that she might let the shopkeeper know that she had finished and was leaving.

Stepping through the open door to one side of the counter, she stopped of a sudden when she saw who was standing by a display in one corner of the shop, looking at what flowers and arrangements were set out. It was the woman she had seen and watched in the Indian restaurant. Today she was wearing a loose-fitting beige skirt and a white buttoned shirt, though the silver jewellery that adorned her was much the same.

For long moments Vibeke did not move. It did not even occur to her that she might talk to the woman. Rather she simply wanted to watch her for a few more seconds before she took her leave. When she saw the woman lean down and select three light yellow roses, she marvelled at the grace that was revealed in her simple movements.

Eventually she moved towards the door, though she felt as if she was being a coward when she did so. But even as she reached for the door handle the woman turned and saw her. And when she did, she smiled that full and lovely smile that she had smiled when she had looked at her when they had been at the restaurant. Vibeke saw the surprise in the woman's eyes but she also saw delight there, a happy startlement.

The woman looked down at the roses she was holding. Then she looked up again and tilted her head a fraction, as Vibeke's hand failed to open the door.

'Please don't leave,' the woman said.

Vibeke did not reply and did not know how she could possibly respond.

Then the woman took three steps towards her until she was stood before her. For a few seconds she did not speak but looked up at her, into her eyes, and her expression was one of wonder and did not seem to have any kind of need or agenda at all.

'I saw you in the Ganesha Indian Cuisine restaurant,' she said. 'You looked extraordinary. Later I thought about you. Please do not go. I would like to know more about you. I wondered if . . .'
She trailed off, perhaps realising - though not understanding - that her words were forward and might be interpreted by some in a negative way.

At last Vibeke found her voice. 'Would you like to walk with me for a while, perhaps in the park?' she asked, and she almost felt as if it was someone else who was speaking, as if she was merely listening to her words and voice. Her heart was beating quickly and she was amazed at how suddenly nervous she felt, even though it was not her that had initiated contact.

The woman looked down for a moment and Vibeke saw that her gaze seemed almost to slide rather than to jump from place to place. Then, those lovely crystal silver-blue orbs looked back up, fully into Vibeke's eyes, and Vibeke felt her breath catch at their beauty. 'I would like that,'

the woman said. And she smiled again, that radiant and so straightforward and sincere smile that she had.

Vibeke grinned too, happiness and excitement welling up within her, amazed at how a simple smile from this relative stranger could fill her with such joy. 'I have to finish my deliveries and drop the van back at work, but I could come back into town in a couple of hours.'

'All right,' said the woman. 'That would be great. I have to finish at work as well. You see the dressmaker's shop just down the road on the right?'

Vibeke nodded. 'Compton's Dresses?'

'Can we meet there?'

'That will be great. I'll be there at about half past five. Is that all right?'

'Absolutely. My name is Ember Leaves.'

Vibeke found herself smiling again - something that she suspected Ember could make her do endlessly. 'Vibeke Kaestner,' she said.

They simply stared at each other then for long seconds, almost completely forgetting about the world around them. Nor did they notice the shopkeeper's befuddled expression and then surprise at their conversation.

At exactly half past five, Vibeke slowed her bicycle and dismounted outside the dressmaker's shop. Even as she took off her cycle helmet, the glass-panelled door swung inwards and the woman she now knew as Ember Leaves left the building.

She could not help but chuckle and marvel at the smile that lit up Ember's lovely face when she saw her.

'Hi,' Ember said, stepping across to her.

'Hi Ember.' Vibeke felt slightly awkward and shy but did not see any nervousness reflected in Ember. She thought that Ember seemed like the most natural and genuine person she had ever met, her responses utterly sincere and very much focused on the world around her rather than on whether she might make a good impression or not. Vibeke found that inspiring.

'Let me just chain my bike here and we'll head for the park,' Vibeke said.

Half a minute later they were walking down the road together, away from the centre of town towards the nearby park. Though they did not say anything, Vibeke felt that it did not matter. She

was aware that her initial nervousness had abruptly gone and she did not feel uncomfortable at all.

Shortly they passed through the open wrought iron gates of the park and headed around the edge along a gravel path. Though not large, the park was well tended, and now as spring turned to summer its flowerbeds were ablaze with colours and the many fragrances of the flowers filled the still air. The slanting sunlight was warm but not too hot, and there was plenty of shade. Old trees - oak, yew, Scots pine, and a few birches and rowans grew here and there. The paths took meandering routes and there was a pond by a tiny artificial hill. A few other people were there - a young couple that were holding hands, and three old ladies on a bench, talking animatedly.

'I'm glad you decided to speak to me,' Vibeke said. 'I wanted to speak to you too, but was worried I would be being intrusive. Silly really. I think maybe I was being self-destructive too, somehow convinced that you would not want any contact with me.'

Ember looked across at her but did not speak for a few moments, as if she was considering Vibeke's words carefully. At length she said: 'I wanted nothing more than to have some contact with you. I wonder why you think you are self-destructive.'

Vibeke grinned self-deprecatingly and shook her head. 'You know, just irrational complexes.' As they strolled slowly past a bed of daisies that were laid out in a coloured pattern that slightly resembled a coat of arms, she said: 'This place really has been looked after well this year.'

'You deliver flowers. Do you supply the park as well?'

Vibeke nodded. 'Some of what they grow here, yes, but not things like bulbs and rarely saplings. I like my job,' she said, and was glad it was true.

'You spend most of your time delivering?'

'No, that's only a fraction of it, and lots of our customers collect from the nursery. Mostly I cultivate and look after the flowers and plants.'

'I think I'd like that too,' Ember said, looking across and up at her with a smile.

'Are you a dressmaker?' Vibeke asked.

'Yes. I didn't really plan on becoming one. But once I'd been working at Mrs Compton's shop for a while, I asked if I could try and then she gave me all the work I could handle.'

'Did you make what you are wearing? And what you were wearing at the Indian restaurant last week?'

Ember merely nodded. She did not seem to expect a compliment but when Vibeke said: 'Your clothes suit you just perfectly,' she was clearly very pleased.

As Ember walked alongside Vibeke she was completely caught up in her presence. Though the warm evening and the park around them were very pleasant, she barely gave a thought to them. Whenever she could without seeming to stare, she looked across at her new friend - abruptly realising that was exactly what she was, even after so short a time, and the confidence she had in that knowledge was so great that she did not question it. She wanted to take in everything about her, and she knew that there was a very great deal. She thought that Vibeke's actions and thoughts at different times and places, as they changed and she changed, would always fascinate her.

She found that it was difficult to look at Vibeke without seeming to stare, because Vibeke seemed to want nothing more than to look at her too and they kept meeting each other's gaze. A couple of times they looked away, then the third time they found themselves grinning at each other and chuckling.

Ember much liked the way Vibeke's dark red hair fell about her shoulder and halfway down her back, and the way individual strands caught the sunlight with brilliant red hues. She was fascinated by Vibeke's face - the curious beauty she had that seemed rather haunted or scarred. Her eyes were expressive and their colour was strange but to Ember very appealing, intense mauve that was occasionally touched by a hint of ruby. Her skin was fair but lightly tanned. She was perhaps six inches taller than Ember, and she moved in such a way that there was little doubt that she was very athletic.

Vibeke was wearing faded blue jeans, ankle boots, and a plain, dark red t-shirt that she had changed into since Ember had seen her at the florist's.

Just as when she had first seen her at the restaurant, Ember was very aware not only of a great strength about Vibeke that almost seemed to radiate from her, but also a kind of uncertainty or vulnerability. She wondered if Vibeke had had some bad experiences - or if, simply, she had never been able to find a place and way of being in the world that fit her and brought her joy.

'What do you do when you are not working?' Ember asked.

Vibeke glanced across at her with a half smile. Suddenly she seemed almost amused at her own life. 'I live in a small house at the edge of town. I do quite a lot of exercise, run most mornings, do some weight-training, and practice martial arts. I read, and watch television programmes and films.'

'Martial arts?' Ember said. 'Hmm. I am not surprised, given the way you move. I expect you're really good at it. What kind do you study?'

'Well, I used to take classes in kick-boxing, and then aikido and karate. Later I really enjoyed studying kendo and all the tradition that goes with it. But that was a long time ago. I haven't actually taken any classes in eight or nine years. But I still do the exercises, and I sometimes learn new sequences from books. I didn't much like being in groups of people trying to learn.'

'You're not very sociable?'

Vibeke gave a slight shrug at this. 'I suppose not. I certainly spend most of my time alone, but it's not because I have anything against other people. Rather that I feel as if I am different somehow, and the contact that I do have with people means little to me or to them.'

Ember reached across and gently nudged Vibeke's upper arm with her loosely-held fist. Smiling, she looked up at her and said: 'You're not alone in feeling like that. I quite often like people, but it often feels like it's from a distance. I like Mrs Waechter though - she's an older lady who has been good enough to let me stay with her. She's very kind.'

They walked onwards, and Vibeke said: 'What do you do when you are not working?'

'I paint and write,' Ember replied.

'That's great! I'd really like to have a look at what you've done.'

'It's possible you have. I've shown quite a lot of paintings at the church hall and at the gallery, and sold them when possible, though I always keep photographs of everything I do. I paint all kinds of things - landscapes, buildings, people, and even a few things purely from my imagination. As for the books I write . . . they are only for me.'

'What kind of books are they?' asked Vibeke.

'A mixture. Some adventures, some relationship fiction, some fantasies, and some stories that are just really weird. Actually most of them are a bit weird. I don't think other people would much appreciate them. Also, I think that what I write about relationships and families is a bit curious since my experiences are largely observational rather than actual.'

Vibeke found that she was fascinated by Ember, but she did not ask any more questions for a while. She hoped that she would learn a great deal about her, that they would spend much time together, but right now she did not want her sensitivity Ember's presence and manner to be clouded by simple facts and small talk. Instead she walked along and enjoyed the moment, and sometimes met Ember's eyes, and enjoyed the amazing beauty that seemed to shine from within her.

'Shall we sit for a while?' Ember said after they had walked twice around the park and taken a detour. She gestured to a bench that overlooked the pond. It was in dappled sunlight and there was no one around.

'That would be nice,' Vibeke said. 'I've always enjoyed watching ducks and other birds on the water.'

And so they sat, close but not too close to each other. The sun was lowering through the upper branches of trees on their right and shone brightly upon the wavelets of the pond. A few ducks swam about and dived and wagged their tail feathers and made small chuckling sounds.

Vibeke realised that, in the peacefulness of the moment, she was aware of the slow, steady rise and fall of Ember's chest as she breathed and of the suggestion of her lovely scent, which was not of any kind of perfume.

Vibeke felt as if the whole universe was shifting around her, changing everything that she knew.

They talked for a while longer, and sat in silence as the shadows lengthened. Ember felt a peacefulness within her that she did not remember ever feeling before. There was something about Vibeke's easy manner and presence that spoke to her as nothing else ever had. It astonished her that she could react to her with such intensity; but though it was a little disorienting and even overwhelming, she was not afraid.

After a few minutes, Vibeke and Ember strolled slowly around the park twice more, taking different, meandering routes. They did not speak all that much, and when they did their voices were slightly hushed, for both of them were feeling a near reverence at being in the other's presence, as if they had suddenly stepped into some kind of celestial temple. They mostly talked of small things that seemed, in the moment, curious poignant to them. And Ember discovered that Vibeke had a slightly quirky sense of humour behind her seemingly serious exterior. She had given several of the ducks at the pond names, and had then described a kind of soap opera of relationships and interactions between them.

Back at the entrance to the park, they stopped and faced one another. Looking down into Ember's face, Vibeke said, with an appealing look of nervousness and hope and simple acknowledgement of how Ember felt about her: 'I've really enjoyed meeting with you today.'

'And I would like to see you again too,' Ember replied with a smile. Vibeke's hope was not hard to read. Then: 'I feel I . . . I need to go home now.' Looking down, almost struggling to find the right words, she said: 'I mean, I would really enjoy spending all evening with you but I feel rather . . . stunned. You have a rather astonishing effect upon me.' Looking up again, she saw the sunlight, striking Vibeke from the side, making her eyes glow with amethyst light. The colour and brilliance of her irises was breathtaking.

'You can be sure that it is mutual,' Vibeke replied. 'Would you like to meet on Friday evening maybe? Perhaps we could go for another walk and then get something to eat.'

'I would like that very much. And I have a feeling you know that I would like that very much. Let us walk back to the dressmaker's shop to get your bike.'

Arriving back home, Ember was rather relieved that Mrs Waechter was out at a friend's house, playing cards. It amused her when she considered how, usually at such games, Mrs Waechter would drink a single small glass of cherry liqueur and then, on returning home, would mention her indulgence as if it was scandalous.

Sitting at the dining table and eating a light meal of chicken salad, fresh bread and butter, Ember sat in half-darkness. The twilight lingered outside and she had left a lamp on in the kitchen, but she had not turned the lights on in the dining room.

She ate slowly, letting her mind wander. She felt a profound sense of awe within her, a kind of shifting in the deepest parts of her mind and being. Her senses seemed heightened and her thoughts and emotions amazingly intense and clear - though curiously without clear direction, except in so far as they were all about her amazing meeting and talking and walking with Vibeke Kaestner.

She shook her head once as she sipped from her second cup of tea, as the blue-tinged shadows deepened in the room. She had never imagined that anything like this was possible - that she could feel such a sense of depth and meaning associated with such surging emotions. She had dreamed of meeting someone she could really relate to and care about, but those fantasies had never been like this. This was almost unbelievable, and really quite disorienting.

A little later, as Ember sat in the living room and failed to read a book she had perched on her knee, Mrs Waechter returned home. They greeted each other, and Mrs Waechter joined her for a little while before turning in. They did not say much, but Ember did not miss that the lady regarded her - trying to do so covertly, and always failing - with curiosity on several occasions, including a time when Ember just happened to be smiling quietly to herself, a blissful feeling filling her, as she thought of Vibeke's lovely head tipped at a slight angle, one side in shade and the other in sunlight, her hair falling forward slightly and seemingly illuminated by fire. She remembered the exact expression Vibeke had had: gentle, warm, and also clearly captivated. She remembered the slight pursing of her lips and the faintest suggestion of a smile.

Ember stood up. 'I think I'll go for a short walk before bed,' she said. 'Did you have a good time?'

Mrs Waechter regarded her fondly. 'Yes, it was good fun. Cessy and Emma said to say hello to you and tell you they would love your company any time if you would indulge two old ladies.'

'Thank you Mrs Waechter.'

'Enjoy your stroll Ember. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Ember did not miss the fact that Mrs Waechter seemed rather pleased that Ember was happy and distracted - she was usually happy but rarely distracted.

A few minutes later she was walking along deserted lane, and sometimes looked up into the clear sky, seeing the stars and the overhanging branches of trees but only really thinking of the truly extraordinary thing that happened to her today and the more than extraordinary woman that it was all about.

Everything has changed, Ember thought. *Everything*.

Chapter Three

Joining

Friday 26th May, Year 1:

Vibeke:

I slow down and count the last few houses to where you live. Being closer to the town centre, it is more suburban here than where I live, but the road is quiet. I stop just before your place and take off my cycling helmet. There is a streetlamp just a few yards from the corner of the front fence and I decide that it is as good a place as any to chain my bike.

Even as I step through the small front gate to walk up the path rather than across the drive, the front door opens. I see you standing there for just a moment, then you are hurrying down the steps and towards me. The early evening sun shines brilliantly upon you.

I take in your loose-fitting dress of pale blue-grey, that is a curious mixture of almost hippy relaxedness and extravagance combined with a near-formal style. I see the way you have clipped your short, pale hair back. I take in the blue stone pendant that hangs just above your cleavage from a silver chain, and the matching stones that dangle upon double silver chains from each of your earlobes. Upon your left wrist you are wearing a bracelet with red stones that is curiously out of place and yet adds a real poignancy to your colouring and the colours you are wearing.

But I see your body more than your clothes and your face more than your jewellery. I like the way you have framed your appearance but it is your own loveliness that enthrals me.

When I look into your eyes and see your smile of excitement and gladness, what is communicated from within you thunders within me, and I am very aware that I have never been to this place of such feeling and awareness before.

When you reach out and take my hand, your touch seems to be transferred through my whole body. I feel a pleasant tingling and shivering sensation across my skin. I am so pleased that you have the courage simply to reach out like that.

I squeeze your hand. 'Shall we wander through the woods and into the fields?' I ask. 'There is a viewpoint that is worth going to. Maybe you have been there but it is nice on a clear evening.'

Later we stand upon the rounded hill and look across the fields and small woods towards the town. The buildings, mostly of brick, are lit by the last of sunlight. The winding river is dark. We have said very little on our way up here, but my awareness of you is powerful and poignant, beautiful and intense.

Ember:

You hold the door open for me and I step past you into the restaurant. I am so aware of you at my side and then behind me as I enter. I feel protected, though there is no threat here. How is it that the simplest thing that you do - or even just your presence - so alters my perceptions and emotions?

I think it is a fine idea that we chose this fish and chips and seafood eatery for our meal. Far better than going somewhere formal. I have never much liked paying detailed attention to form.

We walk up to the bar and, yet again, a hopeless smile is on my face. Damn it, I think with much amusement. I shake my head and consider my happy loss of control. How do you do that to me Vibeke?

I take a look at the menu behind the bar, then look at you while you are studying it. I can see that your awareness is divided between choosing, and the stress of the young woman who is serving up people's orders, and the people and place around us, and me. I feel very special that you are very obviously most concerned about me. I also wonder what the nature of your feelings about other people is. I have seen almost since I first met you that you do not like crowds or people being too close to you, but I am not sure why. I wonder if it is due to some kind of trauma or bad experience, or if it is just a simple preference. I know that I will ask you, or that you will simply tell me, but it will not be tonight.

Later that evening, Vibeke walked Ember back to Mrs Waechter's home. The air was warm and there was little traffic. They passed houses and cottages from which yellow light escaped dimly past drawn curtains, and streetlamps that shone brightly orange with their sodium glow. On one street they passed a small group of boys and girls, supervised by a couple of adults, who seemed

to be on the way back from a party - and the noise from the children was abrupt and lively and chaotic, then faded behind them.

Walking hand in hand, Ember guided Vibeke down a section of country lane that took them past a field and some woodland. With a grin she turned off the way, climbed over a gate and led the two of them into the very middle of the field, long grass brushing their legs.

Then she turned and faced Vibeke, and held both of her hands, and simply looked up into her eyes for long moments.

Vibeke returned her gaze, and there was such tenderness and emotion in her expression.

'Can I hold you?' Ember said in a voice that was barely a whisper.

Vibeke smiled more widely then. 'I would like that very much,' she said.

And Ember stepped forward into Vibeke's embrace. She felt Vibeke's arms wrap around her body even as she felt an amazing warmth wrap around her heart. At the same time she held Vibeke about her waist, and squeezed her against her, pressing her head against Vibeke's upper chest. She felt Vibeke's cheek upon the top of her head, and listened to the strong, steady beating of her heart.

For a long time they stood there, simply holding each other close, feeling as if they had come home to a place where they belonged absolutely, though they had never before known that such a blissful haven and sanctuary existed.

Later, Vibeke walked Ember the rest of the way home. She unchained her bicycle and donned her helmet while Ember looked on, then swung her leg over the saddle.

Ember reached out and took her hand, and they were still for a few long seconds, merely looking at each other.

'I'll see you tomorrow,' Vibeke said with a smile.

'See you tomorrow then,' replied Ember and beamed with happiness.

Vibeke pulled away and turned into the road. After a last backward glance and a wave she headed for home. As she watched her go, Ember wondered if Vibeke felt as awed and vulnerable and overwhelmed as she did; and as she considered it, realised she had no doubt that she did.

Saturday 27th:

Vibeke and Ember met just before nine o'clock the following morning, at the corner of the field where they had held each other the previous night. Ember had arrived first, though Vibeke was also a little early. She marvelled as, for a few seconds, she was able to watch the smaller woman before she realised that she was there.

Ember was wearing a white t-shirt with a cartoon rabbit on it, beige shorts that came down to just above her knees and showed off her shapely, slightly muscular legs, thick white socks and beige, suede walking boots. Her hair looked slightly windswept, though there was no wind, and she was wearing no make-up or jewellery. Beside her was a small tan backpack. She was standing leaning against the wooden fence on the inside of the field, gazing towards the spot at its centre where they had stood the previous evening and, for a long while, held each other close. Her fair features seemed to Vibeke to be almost angelic and she seemed to radiate a mixture of excitement and serenity and peaceful joy. When she heard Vibeke walking along the road behind her, she turned to her and grinned.

Vibeke stopped for a moment, looking back at her. 'Hi,' she said. 'You look . . . magical. I'm sorry, I was struggling to find a good word for how you look, but there isn't one that is good enough.' She almost felt regretful about this, because it was important to her that Ember see and feel and understand what she felt in her presence and what Ember made her feel, no matter that it was so far beyond words.

'Thank you,' Ember replied, staring back at her. 'You look magical too. But there seems to be something wrong.'

Vibeke raised an eyebrow. 'Something wrong?'

'Yes. We seem to be standing on opposite sides of this fence.'

'That does seem unfortunate,' Vibeke replied. But she stepped up to it, and leaned upon it so that they were facing in opposite directions but next to each other, all four forearms upon the sun-heated wood. Looking into Ember's amazing eyes - in the bright sunlight, the pupils were dark points in oceans of glowing ice-blue - Vibeke entwined their fingers.

'And the bus stop is on the other side of the field,' Ember said after long seconds, both of them enjoying the gentle contact.

Vibeke nodded, climbed over the fence and dropped down beside her, setting her small backpack on the ground as she did so. A moment later she realised that Ember was regarding her with near wanton appraisal. 'What?' she said with a sideways quirk of her mouth.

'Well . . . I just think that you look amazing when you move. Of course, you look amazing when you don't move as well, but so much strength and grace and coordination is revealed and . . .'
Abruptly Ember fell silent and looked down, blushing slightly. 'I'm sorry, I . . .'

Vibeke reached out and brushed her fingertips down Ember's cheek and across her chin. As she had hoped, Ember looked up at her. Very softly, she said: 'I look at you and I see such beauty that I feel it will overwhelm me.'

Ember leaned in and held her close then, and Vibeke held her back. In the bright morning sunlight, Vibeke marvelled at what had happened between them.

At length they reluctantly pulled back from each other. 'Perhaps we should go,' Ember said. 'The bus will be by in a few minutes.'

Vibeke nodded, and picked up her small backpack as Ember picked up hers. After shouldering them, they set off to the other side of the field, to the crossroads of the lane beyond and the bus stop that was just beyond it.

'I like your t-shirt,' Vibeke said, and Ember glanced across at her, seeming to be wondering if she might be making fun of her. In fact Vibeke found the t-shirt amusing and colourful and thought that it mirrored the delight that she had seen Ember had in so many things.

'Thanks,' said Ember, realising that she was being sincere. 'I saw it at a stall at the Tuesday market in town a couple of years ago. There wasn't another t-shirt like it there and the rabbit just seemed like it needed a friend. I've worn it so often that it's getting a bit worn now, but I still like wearing it.' Then she looked at Vibeke, taking in her light blue denim shorts, deep red t-shirt and walking boots. 'Hmm,' she continued. 'You don't seem to be adorned with any kind of animal motif. Are there any animals that you particularly like?'

As they reached the gate on the other side of the field, Vibeke climbed over first. 'I like a lot of animals,' she said. 'Though as far as cartoon animals are concerned, I'd have to say that my favourite is Clyde the Cat. I like his surreal interpretations of things and his weird philosophising.'

Walking across the crossroads, they reached the bus stop and sat down on the wooden bench to wait. Behind them was a steep bank and high hedge, but on the other side of the lane was a view of fields falling away to lines of trees and a little woodland. A few birds could be heard singing. In the distance was the drone of a tractor, but the day was largely quiet.

'It's certainly a beautiful morning,' Vibeke said, and immediately wondered that she had so. It was obviously a beautiful morning and Ember knew it too, so there was really no need to say the words. Indeed, Vibeke had never much participated in small talk, had never had any wish to speak very much, and she felt almost as if she had suddenly become someone else. Then she realised that she had spoken simply because it was important to share her simple appreciation of the day with the lovely woman who was sitting beside her.

Ember did not reply, but reached out and took her hand, and, smiling just as Vibeke was, looked out across the pleasant view.

A few minutes later, the bus pulled up and they climbed aboard, paying the rugged-looking bus driver for their tickets, then choosing seats about half way back - Ember by the window, Vibeke beside her.

'I haven't been to the coast in a while,' Vibeke said. 'And never to where we're going.'

'I hope you'll like it,' Ember said.

Half an hour later, they climbed from the bus and walked across the small car park, down some steps and onto the beach. Stones crunched under their feet, and they headed west, away from the tiny coastal village. Closer to the shore, the stones gave way to sand, and as they rounded a small headland they stepped onto a long, curving beach that defined a small bay. There were dunes at the back of the sandy beach, and then headlands marching away from them, tall hills ending at cliffs.

They stopped for a moment to take off their boots and socks, and then walked barefoot through the shifting, sun-warmed sand.

'This is great!' Ember said with a small giggle.

They walked for about two hours, around the bay and over cliffs and up into the hills. They stopped for lunch on a cliff-top that faced northwest. Around them was grass that had been cropped by sheep, a jumble of stones and large boulders, heather and a few wind-sculpted pines.

They found sun-warmed rocks on which to sit, and shared the food they had brought - sandwiches of various types, tomatoes and celery, and Ember much liked the chocolate biscuits Vibeke provided and was clearly delighted that Vibeke liked the coffee cake that she had baked according to a recipe she had looked for and found the previous day. The flask of coffee with milk that they shared, that Vibeke had brought, went down very well indeed.

'I only brought water, but this is great,' Ember said, sipping from one of the plastic cups that screwed to the top of the flask.

Vibeke also took an appreciative sip. 'I do not usually drink much coffee, though it's scent and taste is really wonderful. I don't like the effect it has on me most of the time, making my heart beat faster and my face feel hot. But when outside and walking, it's great.'

After eating they headed back the way they had come. Most of the time they did not speak. Both of them admired the views of the water - grey-green-blue, the sunlight behind them and not reflected upon the sea. Passing through areas of woodland, Ember noticed that Vibeke

sometimes stopped and simply took in the appearance of a tree, looking up into its branches or appreciating its leaves, its bark, the colour of the sunlight through or against leaves or needles. 'I'm glad I'm not alone in liking trees,' she said.

'I did not use to notice them so much,' Vibeke admitted. 'But since working at the nursery I've come to appreciate the way every plant is different. There are billions of trees in the world.' She gestured to the tree before them. 'Of this type of mountain ash there are no doubt millions in existence. Yet no two are the same and in the differences I find myself amazed.'

At length Vibeke turned away and they continued on for a little while. 'It is something I notice about you,' she said. 'You take so much delight in so many things. I marvel at the way you find happiness in so much that is around you.'

'Do you usually like walking in mountains or forests, or on the coast, or elsewhere?' Ember asked.

'I've always dreamed of spending some time in a desert,' Vibeke replied. 'A place of dunes, and rare formations of rock, and incredibly clear nights where the stars are brilliant. But here, in Britain? You know, it is your company that defines today for me. On a moor or a mountain or a beach, in a woodland or a field, I would be happy simply because I can experience them with you. The truth is that the most extraordinary desert landscape would not be . . .' She trailed off. How could she express that her awareness of everything was now through the lens that was Ember? Perhaps she could only say it as she felt it. 'In the time I have spent with you, I have seen everything through and in terms of you,' she finally said.

Later, back on the sandy beach of the bay, Ember echoed her thoughts in a slightly different way. 'I've been here once before,' she said. 'I was alone then, and walked three miles or so on the shore, not going up onto the cliffs or hills like we did. Then I sat for quite a while, just over there at those rocks by the water. I had a good day, and didn't really care that there was no one with me. I saw some couples and families, and wondered what it would be like to have people close to me like they did. I did not feel disturbed, did not think of myself as lonely. In fact I was really quite happy.' She fell silent for half a minute, thinking, then said: 'But it's so different, being here with you. If I was with Mrs Waechter or anyone else it would be different too, but nothing like to the same extent. You seem to cast some kind of magical spell upon me, so that the simplest colour of light becomes like the brilliance of the sun seen through a gemstone.'

Making their way among the dunes at the back of the beach, they found a place that was out of the stiff, warm breeze that had risen. They settled down upon the sand, dune grass shifting around them, sand sometimes hissing before the wind. Sheltered and warm, they lay back upon the slope. The sun shone down upon them from the pale blue sky. Little could be heard except the rush of air above them and the occasional call of a seabird.

They were very close to each other, and for a while they simply lay there very comfortably. Ember felt a sense of peace and fulfilment that was mixed with excitement and anticipation - a remarkable, seemingly impossible combination that made the deepest part of her seem to resonate with gladness. After a little while she turned to Vibeke and looked into her eyes. For a moment she was caught in their colour - the pupils were small in the brightness such that the irises were lighter, clearer amethysts tinted as if with pale ruby glass.

'Vibeke?' she asked.

Vibeke's lovely head tipped slightly, her expression suddenly open, vulnerable, even slightly afraid. And Ember found that she could not say anything, though she had been about to ask Vibeke if she might kiss her.

And then Vibeke leaned down and closer to her, and brushed her lips across hers. It was the most fleeting contact, gentle but full of promise. Ember felt a tingling energy rush through her at the contact, an exquisite pleasure that was tender yet which contained immense power.

She leaned in closer, and felt the softness of Vibeke's lips more fully. And then, after a long while, they broke apart and Vibeke took Ember in her arms, holding her against her. And Ember knew that they both wished for the contact to continue, that they both wanted more; but this was something that they would savour, that they would not rush.

As Vibeke lay back, Ember slid closer to her and laid her head between Vibeke's right shoulder and upper chest. She wrapped her arm about Vibeke's waist and felt Vibeke's holding her close. She felt the press of Vibeke's lips upon the top of her head, and then she smiled at the amazing warmth and wonder that she felt, wrapping her about.

* * *

Saturday 3rd June, Year 1:

Ember was sitting at the kitchen table, sewing a torn seam of one of Mrs Waechter's favourite blouses. She was aware when there was a knock on the door but did not think much of it. Probably it was their neighbour, or the postman, or one of Mrs Waechter's friends.

She was barely concentrating on her sewing either - it was a simple task that required little attention. Her mind kept wandering to Vibeke and a smile kept tugging at her lips. They had seen each other three times during the week. Yesterday evening they had had a candlelit dinner at Vibeke's house and it had been truly wonderful.

Half a minute after the knock on the door, Mrs Waechter popped her head into the kitchen and said: 'Ember, it's for you.'

Ember looked up, set down her needle and thread and went into the hall.

Vibeke stepped up onto the doorstep, hoping that Ember would not mind that she had come here. She sounded the heavy brass knocker, then waited.

A few seconds later, the door opened and a woman who might have been in her late sixties was standing there. She was plump and had rosy cheeks and her small brown eyes seemed full of humour and light. 'Good morning,' she cheerfully said.

'Hello,' replied Vibeke. 'I just came by to see if Ember is here?'

The woman nodded. 'I'll just get her.'

A few moments later Ember stepped into the hall beyond the front door. On seeing that it was Vibeke that had come to visit, a beaming smile lit up her face.

And then, with a squeal of pleasure, a compact, hurtling blonde form threw herself into Vibeke's arms.

Ember held Vibeke close, her arms around the back of her neck. She pressed her head into the space between Vibeke's shoulder and upper chest and beneath her chin. She held her tight, aware of the press of her body against her, of her clothes, of her warmth and scent.

For a little while there was nothing else in all the world except her experience of Vibeke. She felt Vibeke's breathing and felt a low chuckle, and the press of Vibeke's lips against the top of her head as she kissed her once. She felt so glad to feel the strength of Vibeke's arms about her.

Half a minute later she shifted slightly in Vibeke's embrace and realised that Mrs Waechter had just emerged to stand in the hall by the doorway to the kitchen. She saw Mrs Waechter's cheeks dimple as she smiled, and then the lady ducked back into the kitchen.

Leaning back slightly and looking up into Vibeke's smiling face, Ember said: 'How much time do you have? I thought you needed to make a delivery today.'

'It was set back, but I should get going around half past two. Are you free?'

'Absolutely! And happy you came by. Maybe I could invite you in and introduce you. Would you like a cup of tea?'

'That would be good. I'm sorry I didn't call first but as soon as I realised I had some free time I had this sudden notion that maybe I should come and visit a certain beautiful young woman with pale hair and truly extraordinary eyes.'

'I see,' Ember said, pursing her lips slightly. 'And if you should happen to find this young woman, what are you planning to do with her?' Even as she said the words, Ember wondered at them and blushed, unsure if she had actually meant them to be so suggestive or if they were merely accidental.

'Well . . . Leaving aside many possibilities that might make her adorably pink face blush further, I was wondering if perhaps she might like to accompany me to lunch at a rather nice pub I know of.'

'I think she would consider that a wonderful idea,' Ember said. Taking hold of Vibeke's hand, she led her into the house.

'Mrs Waechter?' Ember said, looking into the living room and then the dining room. Mrs Waechter was just picking up a silver tray, clearly intending to make some tea.

The lady turned and looked up. With a warm smile she approached the two of them.

'Mrs Waechter, this is Vibeke Kaestner,' Ember said, smiling widely.

'It's lovely to meet you,' Mrs Waechter said, looking up into Vibeke's face. She reached out and took hold of Vibeke's upper arms. 'You certainly are a striking and beautiful young woman and I've seen how happy and, well, distracted by daydreams my Ember has been these last few days. I knew something was going on and . . . Well, this is just wonderful.'

'Thank you,' Vibeke said, and Ember did not miss that she was clearly touched by Mrs Waechter's warmth. 'It's very nice to meet you too.'

Mrs Waechter then proceeded to usher Ember and Vibeke into the living room. 'You girls make yourselves comfortable. I'll bring a pot of tea and some lemon cake.'

Ember sat down on the sofa and drew Vibeke down beside her. She still had not let go of her hand.

PART TWO: Being Together

Chapter Four

Living Together

Saturday 8th July, Year 1:

Vibeke drifted through fleeting dreams that seemed hazy as if she was looking at soft sunlight through warm mists. As she slowly rose towards consciousness she became aware of the deep comfort of her limbs, the softness of the bedclothes about her, the pleasant lethargy she felt.

More than anything else she was aware of the soft, strong body pressed against her, wrapped about her. Vibeke was lying on her back and Ember's head was upon her shoulder, her arm about her waist, one leg over one of Vibeke's. Vibeke held Ember in return, her arms about her.

This is how I always want to wake up , she thought.

She took in the scent of Ember's hair and gently nuzzled the top of her head. She listened to Ember's steady breathing and could feel her heartbeat against her. Each breath brushed across her bare breast, and that certainly felt good. A smile came to her face as she considered how they had brought each other to delightment and fulfilment time after time the previous evening and during the night. She felt a pleasant soreness between her legs that was a nice reminder and her breasts were rather tender.

Happiness filled her so deeply and so fully that she wondered how it was possible.

Glancing about the room she saw that the light that seeped about the curtains was grey and muted. At the edge of hearing she could hear the softest patter of fine rain against the outside sills. The large bed was on the north side of the bedroom and there were windows on the south and east sides, dark red curtains closed. Glancing at the clock on the chest of drawers on her side of the bed, Vibeke saw that it was just before half past eleven. Not as late as she might have expected - they had last been awake around seven o'clock, and had sat and drunk some water and held each other for a little while after giving each other so much pleasure.

Ember stirred in her arms and let out a tiny squeak that made Vibeke grin. Turning slightly, clearly rather confused, Ember reached up with one hand to pull down the sheets a little. Then she faced upwards a little and one eye fluttered open and peeked up at her. Ember's hair stood out at all angles and Vibeke could not help but smile and chuckle.

'Hmph,' said Ember, raising her head further, blinking at her and rubbing her eyes. 'And just what is so funny?' She returned Vibeke's smile.

'Well, you . . . Except that it's more that you're charming, adorable, incredibly cute, utterly gorgeous and definitely edible.'

'You think I'm edible, huh?'

'Well, yes. I did think that would have been rather obvious during the night.'

Ember adopted a mock offended look. 'Are you suggesting that I am no more than a gastronomic object to be consumed? What about my inner self?'

'Well, that tasted pretty good too. Although, I do not wish to actually consume you. Rather just to taste you, kiss you, lick you, nibble upon you.'

Grinning, Ember raised her hand to her face and shook her head a fraction then ran her fingers back through her unkempt hair. 'Kind of like a sensual lollipop?' she asked. 'I think last night gave me some memories I'll never forget. In fact most of our nights seem to be like that.'

Vibeke watched then as Ember settled down upon her again, her head against her upper chest. 'I love you Vibeke,' Ember said, her voice soft and utterly serious. There was no humour in it - just a profundity of meaning that seemed to come from the deepest part of her and which went straight to the deepest part of Vibeke. 'All that I am is yours if you want it.'

Vibeke held her close. 'And all that I am is yours.'

They lay together for another few minutes. Vibeke realised that she was on the verge of falling asleep again, such calmness filled her mind and such deep relaxation and lassitude touched her muscles. She guessed that Ember must feel much the same.

Then: 'Why don't I start getting some breakfast ready while you take a shower?' Ember suggested. Her voice was muffled against Vibeke's skin and the top of the duvet. Then, propping herself up on an elbow, she continued more clearly: 'Then I'll take a shower. I mean, I'd like to take a shower with you but there's a serious risk we might end up back in bed, which, admittedly, would be very nice indeed. The trouble is that I am hungry. Of course, much though I would enjoy having something to eat, it would not be as good as making love to you again, but I fear that if I do not satisfy my body's serious need for energy then we might be impoverished later on in terms of our spending time exploring each other's bodies and pleasures.'

'That was almost legalistic,' Vibeke said with a smile. 'All right. Let's get going.' And she winced and groaned slightly as she sat up.

Vibeke stood in the bathroom, towelling dry her hair. When she was done as much as she cared to she stood for a moment, naked, looking into the mirror above the sink. She grinned more widely when she realised that a quiet and fulfilled and happy smile had been touching her mouth and lent light to her eyes - it seemed to have become a near permanent fixture since she had met Ember.

Back in the bedroom she dressed in comfortable grey leggings and a dark green t-shirt then brushed her damp hair. As she did so she could hear Ember pottering about in the kitchen. The wonderful aromas of coffee and frying bacon came to her, making her feel ravenous. It was amazing to her when she considered it that she was sharing her house, her life, with another. It was so very different to the solitary existence she had led for so long. It astonished her that she had found it not merely easy but positively exciting and enjoyable that Ember was living here with her, to see her every morning and evening and sometimes during the day, to hold her through the night. She did not feel that she had made any difficult adjustments or that she had made any troublesome compromises. Rather it was as if she was now able to live in the way that her deeper self had always wanted and craved.

It was because of Ember, she knew. She was fully aware that sharing her space with anyone else, no matter how easy going they might have been, would have been a real struggle and would have made her feel deeply uneasy. Better solitude than that. But to go back to that solitude now or to be without Ember at all was simply unthinkable.

Walking down the hall and turning into the kitchen, she stopped for a moment and regarded her love. She was wearing a comfortable-looking bathrobe of deep blue that was rather ragged but which Ember clearly liked. Her feet were bare upon the tiles. She was concentrating upon making pancakes, and Vibeke saw a small smile was on her face that matched the one she had seen on her own face when she had stood before the mirror.

Vibeke walked over to her and stood beside her. 'That is some feast you have going there,' she said. 'It looks and smells absolutely fantastic. Would you like me to finish it?'

'Thanks. I'll take a shower myself now.'

A little over ten minutes later they sat at the small kitchen table.

'This has got to be the best grapefruit juice I've ever drunk,' Vibeke said.

'And this is the best coffee,' Ember remarked.

'As for the food . . .'

They did not talk much for a while then, quiet with their own thoughts, immensely enjoying the meal. Vibeke looked out of the window for a little while, taking in the grey day, the low clouds, the mist that hung still in the air and the drizzle that fell through it. It was quite a warm day. Two sparrows and a blackbird pecked at the ground near the base of a bush.

Then she looked back at Ember and took a sip of her coffee at the same time that her love took a sip of hers. They gazed into each other's eyes.

Vibeke washed up. Afterwards as she dried her hands Ember entered the kitchen and went over to stand by the window. Vibeke joined her, standing quietly for a little while, looking out. It was still drizzling though the mist had mostly cleared. The pattering of rain against the sill and against the leaves of the climbing plants on the walls and of the trees came clearly through the partially opened window. Scents of wet and growing things came to them and a slight, pleasant, damp coolness.

'It's a sleepy day,' Ember said softly. 'A time of contemplation, as strange and mystical spirits dance and hide among the raindrops, mischievous and diminutive beings mutter incantations beneath the leaves, and the clouds become full of the slumbering thoughts of the old gods.'

Vibeke enjoyed Ember's words but did not say anything.

'Who used to live here?' Ember asked, her voice soft.

Vibeke regarded her for a moment, taking in the paleness of her face and eyes in the grey light. 'I am not sure,' she replied. 'My guardian left me everything that he had. The estate was not worth much and was certainly not in order. We lived in his house in Barrow and he died there when I was in my third year at university. Although he had the rights to his house and to this one, he had debts and had to mortgage this place. And he never managed to pay off the mortgage to where we lived. For a while I was thinking of offloading both properties and renting or trying to buy a new place for a kind of fresh start of my own. But I realised that I liked this place, and where it is, and I'm glad I decided to stay here. It suits me somehow. My guardian told me that he had inherited it from his great aunt, a woman called Penelope Lambrick. I don't know whether she actually lived here - he said that he only recalled her living out her later years at a townhouse in Winchester. Sometimes I think that it might be interesting to find out a little bit more about Penelope Lambrick but at other times I imagine that she would have been as interesting or ordinary as anyone else. I have hardly been the most sociable person during my life, so perhaps I would do better to learn something about the living.'

Ember brushed her fingers along Vibeke's arm. Then she looked around. 'This place does seem to reflect you,' she said. 'The structure is old and I sometimes see you as if you have an old soul - and I don't mean that in a negative way at all, simply that you sometimes seem to have a depth of experience and emotion that might almost go beyond one life. At the same time its design is straightforward and unpretentious, just as you are straightforward and honest. And the fact that you have kept the furnishings sparse seems to reflect the way you are quite quiet and do not advertise yourself in any way. Your depth is revealed instead in subjects you have studied, the journals you write, the music you listen to, your inner thoughts and feelings.' She gave a little shrug and looked up into Vibeke's eyes with a sideways smile. 'You never know. Maybe an older incarnation of you had this place built according to your own design, knowing that a younger incarnation would live here.'

'Hmm,' Vibeke said. 'If so, then that older incarnation should also have anticipated that you would be here too and that it would be your house as much as mine.' She paused for a moment then said: 'Do you feel comfortable here, like you want to live here, like it is your place? It's important to me that you feel that it is. If not I would rather find somewhere you like.'

'I like being here very much,' Ember replied. She wrapped an arm around Vibeke's waist and pressed her head into her shoulder for a moment. 'I'm quite looking forward to bringing the last of my painting and drawing things over from Mrs Waechter's. I think that once I actually start painting here it will make me feel very good. I hope you don't mind the scent of oil paints and turpentine.'

Vibeke shook her head then felt momentarily puzzled. 'Why haven't you painted anything yet? Is there a reason? I know you've been sketching a lot but . . .' She was concerned that, having been living here with her for almost a month, there might be something holding Ember back.

'Nothing bad,' Ember replied. 'Actually I've really enjoyed making all those sketches. I have a lot of ideas and I'm trying to separate them out, see what themes I most wish to explore. I have more ideas than I could ever possibly have time to paint and I like coming up with interesting arcs and variations rather than just very different or disparate works.'

Ember stepped back and took Vibeke's hand and led her past the dining table and into the living room. Vibeke did not miss that there was a sense of purpose to her decision to go into the other room.

They halted in front of the sofa. It was a comfortable but rather battered piece of furniture, its dark red leather scuffed and needing treating. There was a single chair at an old-style desk in one corner and there were bookshelves - simple shelves of untreated wood that might have been used in a storage room rather than a living room - that were full of books and CDs and stacks of CDs and some DVDs. There was a television and basic DVD player and there was a good quality stereo system. The parquet floor had clearly been set down quite a long time ago and needed sanding and varnishing. There was a rug between the sofa and the TV and stereo. There were two small lamps set on the floor and several candle holders about the room with candles of several colours in various states of burning down and melting.

'No ornaments,' Ember said.

Vibeke shook her head. 'I never really saw the attraction of them for the most part. I always wanted to put some artwork on the walls but something held me back, as if I didn't want the intrusion of some artist I did not know in my own home.' She smiled at Ember then. 'I would really like it if you would select some of your paintings and set them around the house. It would be really good.'

'I'll do that,' Ember said with a warm smile. 'Will you help me choose?'

'I can if you want,' Vibeke replied. 'But I know that I'll be happy with whatever you most like and in fact I would like it to be something you determine, something just from you, without anticipation of my response. An expression of self.'

'All right. Speaking of expressions of self, can we go to the garage and have a look at your weights? Maybe you could show me some exercises that might be good for me.' She grimaced

slightly, amused at herself. 'Not that I feel like exercising at all right now, since I seem to be aching in all kinds of curious places, but I'd like to be prepared for when I do try.'

'All right,' Vibeke said. 'I'll be happy to show you.'

A minute later they made their way through the drizzle and down the front path to the single-car garage on the left. It was a small building of whitewashed concrete blocks with a flat, slightly sloping roof. Vibeke let them in through the side door and turned on the light.

Ember closed the door behind her then looked around. 'Not a lot of clutter,' she said. 'Just exercise gear, a punch-bag and your bike. Very *you* !'

'Well,' Vibeke shrugged. 'I keep the few tools I need in the garden shed.' As she regarded the punch-bag that hung from a beam, the bench and the free-standing weights, the stacks of metal discs and the contraption against the wall with all its pulleys and presses, she felt a curious glow of pride. Even the simple, thin blue carpet she had laid out seemed just right. She had spent many hours in here, simply exercising, blanking her mind to anything but the heat in her muscles and the rhythm of her breathing - unless, as she sometimes did, she exercised more gently and allowed her thoughts to wander wherever they would.

Except . . . 'You know, sometimes I wondered why I exercised,' she said. As Ember looked at her curiously, she considered her thoughts before saying anything more. Then she continued: 'I know that it made me feel better. I'm not someone who can go without physical exercise and movement for very long. I start to feel uncomfortable, irritated and a little anxious if I do not move and make demands of my body. So it makes me feel better and I do enjoy the glow and the peacefulness and the physical relaxation afterwards. I even enjoy the exercise itself a lot of the time, that feeling of my heart beating strongly, of the blood flowing in my veins, the heat of my skin, the rush of air in my lungs. I like the feeling of strength it gives me.'

'But exercise is also associated with looking good and being healthy. And I never had anyone to look good for and could not really imagine finding anyone I might want to look good for - until I met you. As for living healthily, I did not much think about it. My diet is fairly good and I exercise a lot, so I am healthy, and general physical well-being is important to me. But I really did not think much about the future, did not really care if I might live a long life or not. I was neutral at best about being alive at all.'

Ember watched Vibeke as she spoke. She was facing her but Vibeke was turned slightly away, looking mostly at the weights and bench though apparently not seeing them. Not for the first time she saw the bleakness that she had sometimes seen behind Vibeke's gaze - as if the darkness of her pupils led not to the warmth that she usually sensed there but to a place of shadows, as if a dark shroud was lowering across her mind and her heart.

She wanted to know more about this darker side of Vibeke but was uncertain for a moment what to say. Instead she simply reached out and brushed her fingers up and down Vibeke's upper arm and gave her a little squeeze.

Vibeke looked across at her and gave her a small smile. 'Sorry for sounding rather depressing.'

'You have nothing to be sorry for. I like hearing you speak, like taking in everything you say to me. Even the more difficult things are valuable to me, making me feel that I can know you more fully. Perhaps I can take those more difficult memories you have and shine them until they are clear with the reflection of understanding, and then give them back to you. I would like that.'

Vibeke stepped towards her and embraced her, holding her tightly. Ember savoured the feeling of Vibeke's body pressed against her, her cheek against the top of her head, enjoyed the scent of her and of the clean cotton of her t-shirt.

Stepping back at last, Ember said: 'It is a strange thing. We were both alone for much of our lives but it seems to have hurt you in many ways.' She hesitated before continuing, not wanting to make Vibeke feel uncomfortable. 'You felt unwanted, I think.'

When Vibeke looked down and nodded there was a hint of tears in her eyes, a sudden liquid shimmering. 'But I felt confused as well,' she said. 'Among most of the people I knew I did not really want to be wanted. It would have made little difference to me - their view of me did not mean that much as long as it was not hostile.' She shrugged slightly. 'I wanted to be valued by someone that I valued.' Looking into Ember's eyes: 'I imagined what it would be like to have real friendship.' Smiling: 'But I never imagined what I have with you. I could not imagine anything so profound and wonderful.'

Ember smiled in return, looking into her eyes. She felt the connection between them deepening, bonding them ever more strongly, a near tangible emotion of togetherness and endless warmth and love.

A little later Vibeke and Ember sat on the sofa together, each of them sipping a cup of tea that Vibeke had made. For a while they were silent, simply enjoying each other's warm presence.

'I love the delight that you see in everything,' Vibeke said. 'I have said it before I know, and I'm sure I'll often say it again. It just always amazes me.'

Ember entwined their fingers and just smiled.

'Sometimes it seems as if you can find enjoyment as if there was something good in every day of your life. I know you have had a difficult life in some ways and it amazes me and inspires me that you managed to deal with it so well; that you were able to find gladness even when the things around you were not going well.'

'It is only when I think about it that it seems unusual,' Ember said. 'I know that many people find that when something goes badly wrong, it becomes like a dark lens through which they see everything. But I have never been like that. Even in the most difficult foster home I was in there were good things. There were times when I was bullied but I found that I could not take the other, bigger children very seriously. Their spite and malice and their need to prove themselves and take out their frustrations on others was merely absurd to me, a manifestation of their own problems and very little to do with me. I was afraid of being hurt and there were times when I was hurt. But afterwards I did not think about it much. There was still the beauty of the plants growing in the scruffy garden - even the weeds fascinated me. There were the endless and never-repeating patterns of raindrops on the sills and running down the panes of the windows. There was the kindness of a cook who gave me a pat on the head when she gave me my dinner. And when I lay in bed I always had my dreams of other places, strange worlds. I know that I did not have close friends, and none at all really of my own age, and I sometimes wished that I could have. But I was still happy, most of the time. There were so many fascinating things about me and within me.'

Ember looked into Vibeke's eyes and saw the bright and deep emotions that were there. She smiled, realising that she had deeply moved her.

'Lie down with me, my love,' Vibeke said. And she set down her near-empty mug of tea and settled herself upon her back on the cushions of the sofa with her head upon the padded arm. Ember settled in beside her on her side, between Vibeke and the sofa's back. She rested her head upon Vibeke's shoulder and wrapped an arm around her waist as Vibeke held her and traced slow, gentle, abstract patterns upon her lower back.

Then, softly and not for the first time Vibeke said: 'It's odd and intriguing that neither you nor I have any idea who our biological parents were. And that we never really had any very close friends.'

Ember smiled. 'Maybe we both appeared out of the ether as infants, and were found and taken in. Maybe we never had any parents at all, except in so far as we are children of the stars. Maybe that is also why we had no close friends: because we felt, though perhaps did not think, that we were other, different, strange. And maybe when we met each other we were finally meeting another who was also a child of the stars. And so we knew each other, recognised each other, right from the beginning.'

Chapter Five

Watching Television

Thursday 20th July, Year 1:

Vibeke was quite tired. For four days running she had had to work extra hours at the nursery, getting there earlier than usual so as to make a delivery, then staying late in order to do some work on the trees, including cutting several of them down and cutting them up. The owner of the nursery, rarely there, had stated that he wanted it done by the weekend. She understood that there was some urgency in the tasks given the saplings he wanted dug in - they were vulnerable and should really have been planted in spring. But she also suspected that he was simply taking the opportunity to demonstrate that he was the boss by telling her to do something that was difficult. This did not sit well with her, but there was little enough she could do or say about it.

Cycling home on the Thursday evening, she found herself very glad that the long day was over. She knew that she would be able to finish all her tasks with relative ease tomorrow, and then she could enjoy the weekend.

Under a twilight sky of amaranthine clouds and a darkening blue vault, she pulled into her tiny drive, climbed off her bike and wheeled it into the garage. As she made her way to the front door of the house, she smiled - as she seemed always to do when she came home and she knew Ember would be there.

Opening the door, the notes of some early Baroque music drifted to her in stately harmony from the living room; and the delicious scents of fried spices made her realise how very hungry she was.

She set down her small backpack, then wandered through to the kitchen. Ember looked up at her when she entered, grinning broadly. 'It's almost ready,' she said. 'Ten minutes at the most.' She was stirring vegetables and sauce in the frying pan and at the same time had taken a sample of rice to see if it was nearly ready.

'Ember, that smells absolutely delicious.' Vibeke crossed the small space, squeezed Ember's shoulder and leaned in for a brief kiss. 'And I will take a quick shower and get changed.'

A little more than an hour later, they sat together on the living room sofa, each with a mug of tea. Vibeke had washed up, and now they had the rest of the evening just to relax.

'That really was a fantastic meal,' Vibeke said. 'So full of flavour. You could run a successful curry house. I really liked the cinnamon and cardamom chicken. And the fried spinach was great. I liked that you used a lot of chillies.'

Ember patted Vibeke's belly. 'I'm glad you enjoyed it. I don't recall the last time I saw you eat so much.' She smiled and reached to the coffee table and picked up a box of chocolates. Unwrapping the cellophane that covered it, she said: 'Maybe you'll manage one or two of these as well. I've always thought that sweet things taste especially good after something very spicy.'

'A gift from a customer perhaps?' Vibeke said with a raised eyebrow. It was not unusual for Ember to receive a small gift of thanks when she did a particularly good job - which was, as Vibeke understood it, all the time - especially if she had sewn a wedding dress or other special occasion piece of clothing.

Ember nodded. 'I made a ball-gown for Andrea Seavers. She's quite a character. Loud but probably quite kind I think.'

'She does a lot of charity work,' Vibeke said. 'She orders a lot of flowers for the old people at the home, and makes sure they have some kind of surprise for their birthdays if they don't have any family to organise it.'

'I imagine she sings happy birthday louder than anyone else too,' Ember said with a chuckle, and offered Vibeke the open tray of chocolates.

Vibeke selected one. Then she took the tray from Ember and set it down on the coffee table. Leaning in close, Vibeke said: 'I think this particular chocolate belongs to you and that, in its essence, it has a cosmic imperative that requires it to end up in your belly.' And with that she held the chocolate to Ember's mouth so that she could take a bite.

Watching Ember bite the chocolate in half, seeing her white and perfect teeth and full lips close upon it and watching her eat, Vibeke immediately decided that she had made a good decision in feeding her love. As Ember savoured the chocolate Vibeke merely regarded her, rapt; and then fed her the second half.

And then Ember selected a chocolate for Vibeke, and fed her too.

A few minutes later they settled down and Vibeke turned on the television. 'I am happy to be a couch potato this evening,' she said.

'Me too,' Ember replied. 'Is there anything you want to watch? Any film you'd like to see?'

'Um . . . Damn, I think my brain isn't working. I'd be happy with pretty much anything actually. Will you select something?'

'Sure,' said Ember. She stood and crossed to the shelves where the DVDs were stacked. 'How about *Ragnarok*?' she asked after just a few seconds.

'Good choice. A perfect mixture of action and relationships.' And Vibeke watched as Ember kneeled down and put the DVD in the player. She felt a warm glow fill her as she regarded her. Ember was wearing cream shorts and a green top with spaghetti straps that was quite revealing. She was barefoot and Vibeke was aware of the slight flush to Ember's skin - it was a hot summer evening.

Soon they were watching the film, Ember leaning slightly against Vibeke's shoulder.

After a break to use the bathroom and to make more tea, the film came to an end and the credits rolled to stirring music. After using the remote control to turn down the volume, Vibeke shifted around slightly and leaned in and embraced Ember, holding her close, feeling the heat of her skin, breathing deeply of her scent and the fragrance of her hair. 'I love how you smell so good,' she said without really thinking.

Ember chuckled against her. 'The feeling is certainly mutual.'

Holding each other they made themselves comfortable. Vibeke sighed with contentment and said: 'It's amazing how much watching a film or television programme with you makes it such a different experience to watching on my own.'

She felt Ember's smile rather than saw it. 'You mean I'm terribly distracting? I thought I was quite quiet, rather like a mouse.' Then: 'I know what you mean. I feel the same.'

'It is amazing,' Vibeke said. 'It's exciting because I know that we are sharing the experience, which is magical in itself. I'm also aware that if we see something good - or spectacularly bad - we can talk about it and explore it or even laugh at it. No doubt we will even refer to some films many years after watching them, enjoying our memories of what we saw together. And there's also something else. It's as if we have planned and then done something pleasurable and which has great value. And that is so different to when I used to watch films alone. Then, I often felt as if I was merely passing the time, or felt I should be doing something to get somewhere more meaningful in my life. With you it is as if we have succeeded in some good task.' She looked across at Ember then. 'Oh, and I really love it when you squeal with delight, or grab hold of me with fright.'

'Oh, Gods,' Ember said, blushing slightly and covering her forehead with her hand. 'I can't help it if I'm excitable, or easily scared.'

'I wouldn't want you to help it. I love you very much for your excitability. It makes me feel remarkably alive every time I am aware of your wonderful delight in even small things. As for being scared sometimes, it's really quite charming.'

For a while, they were silent, simply cuddling each other, and Vibeke wondered at the bliss she felt. And then, she became aware of Ember's emotions, that something had deeply moved her. Softly she said: 'Tell me what you are thinking.'

Ember shifting and looked up at her and Vibeke was startled to see the liquid softness of welling tears.

'Tell me,' Vibeke said, very gently.

'It's such a simple thing,' Ember said, and Vibeke heard the happiness in her voice. 'It's just that you said we could refer to films years into the future. And I suddenly realised that I cannot imagine being apart from you even though we haven't known each other for very long. And that

thinking about being with you in the coming years brings me such an amazing sense of excitement and joy.'

'I cannot imagine being apart from you either, Ember. I want to be with you and feel like this forever.'

Chapter Six

Buying a Car

Wednesday 26th July, Year 1:

'Have you ever owned a car before?' Vibeke asked as they took the bus across town to the home of a man who had advertised in the local paper that he was selling a ten-year-old Volkswagen. They were sitting on a double seat near the front of the lower deck and there were only a handful of other people on the bus. The passing streets and houses, shops and offices were darkened and pale in the cool grey light.

'No,' replied Ember. 'Since I can't drive, I never even thought about buying one until now.'

Vibeke looked at her, slightly shocked. 'Um . . .'

Ember gave her a small, apologetic shrug and her limpid, light blue eyes were almost glowing. 'Will you object very much to driving until I can take my driving test?'

'No, not at all. I just . . . Actually that's pretty funny.'

'You know, since you pay the mortgage and we're sharing the bills, I'll actually feel a bit better knowing I'm paying for the car and its running costs. I know it silly, that you don't expect anything from me, but I want to contribute.'

'I understand that,' Vibeke said. 'Whatever jobs we may have in the future, and even if one of us is earning much more than the other, we'll just contribute what we feel glad to. In fact I don't really feel much of a sense of your money or my money, your income or mine. I'd be happy to make my bank accounts shared with you if you want.'

'You can have mine too.'

So strange, so amazing, Vibeke thought. She had never thought it was possible to have such a level of trust in anyone. Yet, with Ember, she had no doubts at all and she knew that Ember felt

the same way about her. But it was much more than a simple trust in basic honesty. Rather, it went far beyond such that Vibeke was profoundly aware of the way that Ember so deeply desired her happiness just as Vibeke's desired Ember's. Furthermore, in accepting - indeed marvelling at - each other as they really were, there was an ease about their being together.

As she thought about how Ember desired her happiness Vibeke felt a constriction in her throat and was filled with happy emotion. Thinking of Ember's happiness and how she could make her as happy as possible made that feeling all the stronger.

When Ember reached out and took hold of her hand, squeezing it, she looked across at her and was sure that Ember knew what she was thinking and feeling: it was all reflected back to her in her large, deep silver-blue eyes.

After a little while Vibeke looked out of the window at a small stretch of woodland that was dark in the damp, murky light. Then, turning back, she said: 'Do you like Volkswagens in particular?' she asked.

Ember nodded. 'Some of them. I'm hardly a car enthusiast but when I saw the advert I thought maybe it would be promising.'

Saturday 29th July:

'Isn't this exciting?!' Ember said as she almost skipped down the front path, carrying her pack over one shoulder and jingling the car keys in her hand.

Vibeke smiled as she locked the front door behind them, then turned and followed her love to the gleaming, metallic, graphite-coloured Volkswagen parked in front of the garage. She and Ember had spent quite a while cleaning it inside and out the previous evening, and now it seemed more truly theirs.

And today, they would take it out for a longer drive in the country, hoping to explore a new place or two and just see where their instincts took them. Though Vibeke had brought a map with her, they hoped they would not have to use it.

They climbed in and buckled up. Vibeke slipped the key into the ignition. Then she sat there quietly for a moment, staring straight ahead. 'We have everything we need?' she asked.

'A rather large picnic lunch, plenty of water, coffee. Emergency snacks. A blanket. Waterproof jackets.'

'Money, driving license. Each other.'

Ember nodded. 'Each other. That's the most important thing. Also we have good weather - sun, blue skies. Plenty of roads to choose from, hopefully without traffic.'

'Senses of humour?' asked Vibeke.

'Yes, I think so. And CDs for the stereo.'

'And gravity.'

'Well, yes. Is it necessary to remember that, though?'

'Probably not. It just seems important that, as we are driving, we don't suddenly find ourselves drifting off the planet and out into deep space. Interesting though that would be.'

Vibeke turned the key and the engine came easily to life. Putting it in gear, releasing the handbrake, she eased off the clutch and pulled to the edge of the road and out.

They drove southwest, towards St. Bede's forest. Vibeke drove without much care for what route they took, simply maintaining her sense of direction and keeping an eye on road signs. She avoided faster roads and simply enjoyed guiding the car along country lanes among hedgerows and fields, and through several small villages and a town with two interesting-looking churches facing each other across its central square. Whenever Ember called out a direction she always followed it.

The sun was bright and the world seemed to have taken on a slightly golden glow, as if the air was gilded, tinged, enriched. The day was warm but not too hot and there were no clouds at all in the blue sky. Scents of meadow flowers came to them sometimes, and resin and pine from woodlands. The smells of sheep-farms passed, and clear breezes touched with stone and heather came to them from higher areas on the edges of the moors.

'How do you like your new car?' Vibeke asked.

'I'm really pleased with it. It's good to be out here with you, just going.'

'It is good to be here,' Vibeke agreed.

A little later, when they had been driving for just over an hour, Ember said: 'How about up here? It looks pretty good.'

They had passed over a low stone bridge that crossed a stream, and then the road climbed up the one side of small valley. On the right was some old woodland, gnarled, stunted trees growing from among moss-covered rocks and boulders. On the left, just as they crested the low hill above the valley, there was a ridge and then some open woodland, rocky areas and then fields.

Vibeke slowed until she found a place where she could pull the car onto the verge. After turning off the engine, she turned to Ember and grinned. 'Let's explore,' she said.

A few minutes later, carrying their picnic things in their small packs, they made their way over meadow-grass among small, angular oak trees, and past birch trees that drooped and bobbed in the soft breeze. Coming out on the far side of the ridge, they both stopped and looked about them.

'Wow,' Ember breathed. 'Some luck.'

Vibeke nodded, seeing the way Ember beamed as she looked about her. Before them were some rocks, then a sizeable pond that was about twice as long as it was wide. About half of it was defined by flat-topped rocks that led down like steps to its clear water, and the rest surrounded by pebbles and then grass, and just a little sand as well. There were three trees at the far end - a willow and two birches - and, as they watched, a duck and six ducklings emerged from beneath the hanging veils of leaves.

Ember chuckled and made her way down the rocks, Vibeke following until they were just above the water. On a large, flat surface of sun-heated stone, they set out their picnic blanket and unpacked their lunch. About them the warmth of the day was like the soothing touch of deity of comfort and peacefulness, pleasantly counterpointed by the coolness that drifted upon the air from the pond before them. The water shimmered in the sunlight as if it was alive, dancing with its partner the wind, tiny waves shifting back and forth across its surface as the gentle breeze picked up and fell away. A few insects hummed past, with purposes that seemed to make humanity's designs seem somehow absurd, and a bee explored a small clump of delicate pink-mauve flowers, seeming to bounce from one bobbing head to another.

'This is great,' Ember said, and took off her sports shoes and socks and set them to one side; and wiggled her toes in the soothing breeze.

Vibeke decided to do the same.

And then, she looked across at Ember as she was unwrapping some salad she had prepared that morning. She took in her movements, seeing the sureness of her shapely fingers, the shifting of muscles under the smooth, slightly tanned fair skin of her bare arms. She watched each of Ember's breaths, feeling such a sense of life radiating from her. Her skin was slightly flushed in the heat, lending her a pink and healthy glow. When she looked up, Vibeke found her breath taken away by the brightness of her silver-blue eyes, that seemed to reflect as much of the brilliant day silver-blue mirrors might.

Ember regarded her, a momentary look of pleasure and humour being replaced by a more serious expression that went far deeper; and for a while they just gazed at each other, each lost in the other's beauty.

At length, Vibeke reached out and took Ember's hand. She raised it to her face, and kissed the palm, and the inside of the wrist. She felt the slight shiver of Ember's fingers against her cheek, and smiled.

A little later, as they ate their lunch and reclined in the sunlight, Vibeke said: 'Tell me about the book you were reading during the week. You seemed really quite absorbed in it. Once I even heard you gasp with surprise.'

'*The Silent Forest*,' Ember said. 'It is a good book. At least, I like it, though I'm not sure that very many people would.' She took a cherry from a small pile and popped it into her mouth, chewed and removed the stone. 'It's a story set in the mythical times of Ancient Greece, about a girl who meets various of the gods and goddesses, giants and monsters, dryads, river deities and more. She is manipulated from all sides, though she is also helped by some. What I like about the story is her aloneness. Even as a child she is apart from others because of her the obligations placed upon her and the encounters she has. As she grows up she tries her hardest to make good decisions and take good action when there are often very few choices, and none of them good. Though she has some success, and even makes friends, she soon loses those she cares about and becomes, later in life, utterly lost.'

Vibeke enjoyed listening to Ember speak. She loved the sound of her voice and the way she formed each word. 'It sounds like the kind of book that you might like,' she said softly. 'Me too, I think.' Then she looked across at her - they were side by side, Ember propped on one elbow and turned towards her, Vibeke propped on both elbows. 'You have a wonderful voice,' she said. 'And you know, you also seem to have a slight accent. It is nothing very obvious, and I cannot identify it as coming from a particular place or people, but it is a distinctive way of speaking. It makes me think of distant stars and cosmic mysteries. Mixed with your voice and lips and tongue, it becomes something exotic and also rather erotic.'

Ember chuckled. 'I'm glad you like it.'

'Did you live anywhere where you might have picked it up?' Vibeke asked. 'I have a feeling it is just yours, but . . .'

'I think it is mine too, though I do not know why I speak slightly strangely. I am aware of it, but it is the most natural way I have.' She stared at the surface of the pond but Vibeke knew she was really looking into the past. 'When I was eight and nine years old I lived in Houndstone, at a foster home not far from the centre of town. The home was loud and some of the kids were troublemakers, but they learned to leave me alone when they found that they didn't understand me and that they couldn't feel any kind of control over me like they wanted. I had a little table behind my bunk. It was next to a window - the room was on the second floor - and I used to spend hours and hours sitting there reading, and drawing pictures that were suggested by what I read. Sometimes I even wrote out the plots and characters of a few stories of my own. And I remember all my trips to the library, looking for books that I might like to read. I used to go two or three times a week. I really liked reading the old myths. At first I read mostly Greek and Norse myths since those were the most obvious ones, but later I read Egyptian and Indian and Japanese and Sumerian myths, and more. I really enjoyed it.' She shrugged slightly. 'Once I talked to my teacher about it. She was very enthusiastic, and I liked that. I wished I could talk about it more.'

Vibeke watched as Ember fell silent, contemplating her words and manner. Then she said: 'I used to read and look through lots of books about dinosaurs.'

At this, Ember looked at her and beamed, then laughed gently. 'I'm sure you did. That is just so . . . *you* . I imagine you dreamed of wandering through swamps in the Cretaceous, watching tyrannosaurs fighting with triceratopses.'

'Well, actually . . . yes.'

'Was that the beginnings of your interest in biology? Or did something else trigger that?'

'I'm not sure really,' Vibeke replied. 'I've thought about it at some length. I'm certainly glad that I studied it at university. I don't think I would have been as happy with any other subject, and although I went into botany for my master's degree, it was important to me to have studied animal biology as well. When I was child and during my teens, I watched a lot of nature documentaries and read or looked through a lot of books about natural history. Oceanic life was the most interesting to me I think, though by the time I was applying to universities I knew that I wanted to go in the direction of plant biology.' Vibeke paused and shook her head a fraction. 'But there was another reason for my initial choice of studies. I wanted to understand myself - and other people too - and I see myself and others primarily as animals, evolved in certain ways, exhibiting certain patterns of behaviour. It was more interesting for me than psychology and sociology. Actually philosophy interested me too, but I felt that I could learn what I needed to about that by myself.' Looking across at Ember again she said: 'What about you? How did you come to want to study fine art?'

Ember leaned back and cushioned her head upon her pack. Staring up into the sky, her eyes briefly tracking the paths of a few birds that flew swiftly, swooping and changing course then pressing onwards, she said: 'It was a difficult choice. I also considered archaeology, and English literature - though I tend to have rather extreme reactions to stories and poems, often really disliking what others consider indisputable classics. But really I just wanted to develop my own ability to paint, and I wanted to be surrounded by the paintings of the old masters, and discussions of their work, and to understand a greater range of art. I really liked the fact that I had a teacher who was fascinated by the ancient and medieval artists of Byzantium, China, India and elsewhere.' She smiled. 'I always have this amazing reaction now when I smell oils or turpentine. I feel this sense of familiarity, resonance, depth and potential. It was nice to set up my painting gear in the spare room and to touch brush to canvas again. I'll do that rather more from now on I think.'

'I'd like to watch you,' if you wouldn't mind. Vibeke wondered at this. It was more than just a passing fancy. She had little doubt but that watching Ember paint would be truly fascinating.'

'I'd like you to model for me,' Ember replied. 'Clothed, naked, and everything in between.' For a moment she looked almost shy, then said: 'Can I paint you while you are working out with your weights?'

Chapter Seven

In the Darkness

Wednesday 2nd August, Year 1:

Ember awoke with the sense that something bad had happened. She guessed that it was about three o'clock in the morning and a glance at the glowing numbers of the bedside clock confirmed she was only five minutes wrong.

She recalled that she had fallen asleep on her side, with Vibeke at her back, curled about her, cradling her and making her feel so wonderfully safe. Vibeke had run her fingers through Ember's hair, brushing it back from her forehead, and had kissed her beside her ear, as Ember had marvelled at how contented and fulfilled she felt. She had squeezed Vibeke's hand, which rested upon the bare skin of her belly. And then, though she had wanted to stay awake so that she might savour the warmth of emotions that sighed through her like a warm breeze through the palms of some tropical island, her consciousness had soon enough been stolen away into peaceful slumber.

Turning, she found that Vibeke was lying on her back. Despite the dimness - just a faint orange glow from a distant streetlamp crept around the edges of the curtains - she was still able to make out the tenseness revealed in her face, as if she was trying to shout out but couldn't. She saw the twitch of her hand beneath the covers beside her chin. Most of all she was aware that Vibeke's breathing was erratic, laboured, almost gasping.

'Vibeke, wake up,' she said softly, reaching out and squeezing her shoulder.

Vibeke shifted of a sudden, her head turning fully towards her. Her eyes were open a fraction but she was obviously still asleep and dreaming, her eyes moving behind her lids. Ember did not miss the mixture of fear and desperation written on Vibeke's face.

'Wake up, my love,' she said more loudly, though still gently. She brushed Vibeke's hair back from her face and gave her shoulder a little shake. 'Wake up, it's just a dream.'

With startling abruptness, Vibeke visibly relaxed, taking in a deep breath and letting it out. Her eyes fluttered open and after a moment's disorientation she looked at Ember and a look of relief crossed her features. 'Oh, Ember,' she said. She shook her head and sat up, and reached out and grasped Ember's hand, holding her tightly. She ran her fingers back through her long hair and rubbed her eyes.

Ember sat up beside her. 'Vibeke,' she said softly. She rubbed Vibeke's back with a soft, circling, comforting motion. 'I'm here,' she said. 'It was just a bad dream.'

Vibeke's head dropped. 'Yes, it was.' Then she looked up again. 'Thank you for waking me.'

Ember just gave her a small smile. 'Would you like to talk about it?'

Vibeke did not reply for a moment, seeming to think about it. 'Let me just go to the bathroom. I'll be back in a moment.'

As Vibeke went to the bathroom, Ember went out to the kitchen, naked and barefoot. She splashed some cold water onto her face, then went back to bed, sitting up against a pillow against the headboard. As Vibeke joined her - also with a damp face - she handed her one of the two glasses of water they kept on the bedside table, and took the other for herself, and took a couple of gulps.

In the darkness, Vibeke sat next to her against another pillow, leaning slightly against Ember. Once she was settled, she said: 'I dreamt I was a child. I was at school and all the other children were taunting me, standing around me and pushing me. I knew I could push them back, that I could hit them and that I could hurt them, but I stopped myself from doing so - I did not want to hurt anyone, knew that if I did I would feel terrible guilt.' She shrugged and then said: 'And that part of the dream was true, and just the same as my memory of what happened. But then I was walking home and I felt this sense of absolute terror. I was afraid that you would not be there. I thought, in my dream, that you did not exist, that I had just imagined you. And when I reached my guardians' house in Barrow, the front door was open. I walked in and my foster-father was not there. Everything was dark, the rooms filled with brown light, the furniture old and sparse, the spaces seeming wrong. I searched frantically through the downstairs rooms, looking for you. And then I found my foster-mother in the dining room, lying upon the table. She was dead, draped in a sheet, and I recalled that she had died from a brain aneurism a few weeks earlier. Somehow, seeing her did not disturb me but the dread that filled me became worse - it was as if she was a symbol that you were not real. When I ran upstairs and looked into all the rooms, you were not there. But there was one door that was shut and I could not open it. Then I found that I was back downstairs, and tried to get back to the door but could not find it again. I knew that if I could not find the door, then you would be gone forever.'

Ember listened, and heard the way that Vibeke's voice became hoarse as she told the story. When she fell silent, she realised that tears were falling from Vibeke's eyes; and immediately she shifted, and held her to her. With her fingertips she brushed the tears from Vibeke's face, and then she kissed the top of her head, and ran her hand up and down her arm. 'I am here,' she said. 'And I will never let you go, never leave you, if there is anything at all I can do about it.'

Vibeke sniffled. 'I will never leave you either,' she said softly. 'I do not know how it happened so absolutely, but it would be like ripping out my own eyes. In my dream I felt as if I had been torn in half. It was awful. Such a sense of barrenness filled me, such blackness and despair.' Sitting up for a moment, Vibeke reached for a tissue and blew her nose, then settled back into Ember's embrace.

They sat like that for a while, Ember holding Vibeke, trying to make her feel safe and loved. She was as amazed as she always was by the astonishingly deep tenderness and strength of feeling

that she felt for her. And as Vibeke relaxed into her embrace, she knew that Vibeke felt it too, this bond that connected them so fundamentally, in the very deepest parts of their existences.

'I feel so good now,' Vibeke said, her voice full of warmth and wonder.

At length, they settled down and went back to sleep, Vibeke's head on Ember's shoulder, her arm across her waist, as Ember held her - a reversal of their more customary position.

They arose at their usual time of six o'clock. After a shared shower - rather quicker than either of them would have liked, for they both felt powerful stirrings of desire as they soaped each other and washed their hair - they dressed and sat down to eat breakfast together. Usually Vibeke arose a little before Ember and went for a run, unless Ember decided to join her. But today Vibeke had to be at work at around half past seven, so there would be no early morning run.

In fact Vibeke was glad that she was not heading out along the lanes and paths to the bridge and around. She was feeling a little washed out after the dream and powerful emotions it had evoked the previous night. Besides, it was a dull and grey day, the sky and air tinged with a subdued softness that suggested that staying indoors - and best of all staying in bed - were good ideas.

Ember poured tea for them both from a large pot. While Vibeke ate cereal and toast, Ember just stuck with toast.

'You like Marmite, don't you,' Vibeke said with a smile. It was a not a question.

'Yes, I do. Do you have a problem with that?'

'No, not at all. I like Marmite too. I just notice that with you it seems to be something of a religious experience. A morning ritual. When you take that first bite of Marmite on toast, it is as if you are communing with some great deity, a Lord of the Universe.'

'Are you suggesting that there is no Marmite God? I mean that would be blasphemous and I might have to report you to the Church of Marmite for heresy.'

They looked into each other's eyes, smiling. Vibeke marvelled at the way the grey light was made into a clarity of amazing colour, light blue and icy silver in Ember's gaze.

As Ember poured a second cup of tea she said: 'Did you sleep all right in the end? You seemed fairly peaceful.'

Vibeke nodded. She was very aware that Ember had not been sure whether she should ask the question. She wanted to be comforting and wanted to know that Vibeke was all right and if there was anything she might do, but she also did not want to bring Vibeke's mind back to the dream unnecessarily. Reaching out and taking Ember's hand, Vibeke entwined their fingers and said: 'I love that you are so sensitive to the effects your words or actions might bring. And thank you for

being concerned. It's a while since I've had a bad nightmare, let alone one so awful, but it made such a difference that you were there - that you are here.'

Ember gave her a small smile and handed her her refilled mug of tea. 'Did you have nightmares often before?' she asked. 'Not about me, obviously, but . . .'

'Sometimes. They've changed a lot as I've become older. As a girl I dreamt about people full of hate, chasing me. As a teenager I mostly dreamt about being alone, feeling that I had driven away everyone who cared about me and being sure that it was my fault.' She shook her head a fraction. 'When I was five years old, I found my foster-mother lying on the kitchen floor. I tried to wake her up, and couldn't. I didn't really understand, but knew she would never wake up again. Her eyes were open. So then I just sat there and waited. My foster-father came home about three hours later. Later I thought that I could really have been traumatised by it, and I know my foster-father was worried about me and was very concerned and caring during the following weeks, while he was grieving silently. But the truth is I did not react badly to it. I missed her, and I was sorry for my foster-father, but it did not seem to me to be such an awful thing that she had died. There was such a peacefulness about her as she lay there. There was nothing ugly at all. Just a quietness. Her face was relaxed, her eyes defined more by the laughter lines that surrounded them than by the blankness of her stare. I remember that as I sat there I almost felt as if I was sitting in an empty church.'

'But I do wonder if her dying was part of what coloured my dreams of loss and rejection and self-hatred. Perhaps it went with my deep sense of disconnection from others, my feeling of being lost.'

Ember swallowed her last piece of toast, and sipped her tea. Then she looked into Vibeke's eyes and said, quite simply, without judgement and with much tenderness: 'I'm sorry that you spent a lot of your life feeling rather empty and lost. I'm sorry that depression and despair were a part of you for so long.'

Vibeke was slightly surprised at this, realising the extent to which Ember had come to know her; and she was also moved. Though she had been completely honest with Ember, and had volunteered information about her past, her desires, and almost anything else, she had not dwelled upon the unhappiness very much. She did not much like thinking about it, and she had never wanted to give the impression that she felt any self-pity or was subtly asking for help. It was not that she was too proud to ask for help if she needed it - she had done so on occasion. Rather, she simply felt that her life was truly hers and that the depressions she had suffered were, while real and sometimes deep, hers to deal with and not an excuse for anything.

She gave Ember a small smile. 'Perhaps I would like to talk with you a little more about it,' she said. Then, with a wider grin: 'But you know, I feel so happy being with you, I've been so happy over the past few months since I met you that those times of bleakness seem like they come from a different life.'

Later, once Vibeke had left for work, Ember cleared the kitchen table and washed up their breakfast dishes. As she did so she thought about what Vibeke had said. And she considered some of the many ways in which she could make Vibeke happy, how she could make every day special and full of colour and light and warmth for her. Just thinking about it filled her with excitement and she giggled once as she considered the joy she might be able to create for Vibeke and see reflected upon her face.

That evening, after a light evening meal, they went out into the back garden and sat upon two deckchairs. The weather had brightened during the day and now there was a hazy sunset, the sun a carmine sphere settling into a bed of mauve and yellow clouds. They each had a cup of tea, and sat close together. Sometimes they would reach out and touch, fingers brushing fingers, entwining, loosening, dancing across soft skin. For a long while they did not say anything, but simply enjoyed the quiet of the evening, the occasional and sleeping songs of birds, a flight of geese or ducks across the sky, and the ever-changing, ever deepening colours and light. The scents of roses and honeysuckle came to them from the beds and frames where Vibeke had planted them.

'I felt like I was of no value,' Vibeke said of a sudden, quietly.

Looking across at her, Ember was glad to see that Vibeke had a slight, self-deprecating smile upon her face. She gave her hand a small squeeze.

'As a child I was alienated. My foster-father did his best, but he became increasingly distant as time passed. I sometimes wonder if he was actually slightly ill. Once I suggested he see a doctor, and he knew that I meant a psychologist. I think perhaps he knew that he was starting to suffer from dementia, but it was also as if he knew he would die before it became too serious.' Vibeke raised Ember's hand and traced the shapes of her fingers one by one. 'But it wasn't the alienation that I found difficult. It was the sense that I was of no value. I helped at the old people's home in Barrow, reading books to those who couldn't see well enough any more, or simply chatting with them. They liked me and were glad I was there, but somehow I could not *feel* anything. I knew that they valued me, and I was glad I gave them some company and entertainment, but it seemed to have very little effect upon me, at least in any deeper sense.'

After a short silence, Ember said: 'It is difficult to change such things. We cannot usually decide how we feel about things. We can usually only decide what to concentrate upon.'

Vibeke looked across at her then. 'Being with you, I feel not only valued, but treasured. And I can actually feel it, for the first time in my life.'

'I am glad.'

Chapter Eight

Gifts

Friday 11th August, Year 1:

Ember sat at her workbench at the dressmaker's shop. She was humming happily to herself and, after each few bars, would insert one or more words. *Amethyst, compassion, shield of my protector, touch*, and *Clyde the Cat* were some of them.

When Evelyn Compton entered the workroom, Ember noticed but it did not occur to her to stop.

'What are you doing?' Evelyn asked after a few seconds.

The surprise in Evelyn's voice made Ember look up. She was not quite sure why Evelyn would be surprised and so she simply said: 'I'm making a t-shirt with a Clyde the Cat design. I couldn't find a Clyde the Cat t-shirt where he had quite the right expression, so I decided to make one.'

Evelyn regarded her steadily. 'Clyde the Cat?'

'Yes.'

Later, on her way home from work, Ember stopped at the shoe shop that was just down the road from the dressmaker's shop. She pushed open the door and a bell sounded above it. To one side, a mother was helping her young daughter try on some shoes. On the other side, the shop's owner was standing behind his desk, writing in a ledger.

He smiled when he looked up over his half-moon glasses and recognised her. 'Ember!' he said. He was a rather distinguished-looking middle-aged man, bald on top with grey at the sides, wearing a shirt and striped tie and grey cardigan.

'Hello Mr Chalmers. How are the fish?'

'Very well. The new goldfish seems to be getting along quite well with the others.' He stood then. 'Now, your requested delivery came in.'

Ember was delighted to hear this and her hands came up in small fists. She realised that the mother, holding a small shoe, was looking at her curiously.

'If I can just remember where I put it,' continued the shopkeeper. He scanned the shelves behind him. 'No, I must have put it in the storeroom. One moment.'

Ember waited, and a few seconds later he emerged carrying a shoebox - one that was a little larger than most. He handed it to her, and Ember quickly and eagerly opened the top. A beaming smile lit up her face. 'They're just perfect!' she said. She checked that the size was right and then looked up into Mr Chalmers' amused face. 'How much are they again?'

'Seventeen ninety-nine. I'm glad you like them.'

She chuckled. 'Hang on, let me find my purse.'

A minute later, Ember was walking homewards again, humming to herself, modifying her melody of earlier, delighted with what she had ordered and bought.

The early evening air was warm and pleasant, the sunlight golden and copper through hazy clouds. Ember took in the familiar streets and houses, the small green she passed, the wood on her right. Soon enough she was home, turning down the familiar path to the front door.

Home, she thought. Our home. And it felt like home to her far more than any other place she had lived.

She let herself in and her suspicion that Vibeke was already back from work was immediately confirmed - Vibeke's small backpack was near the door, her keys on top. She set her own down beside it - the t-shirt and shoebox were inside it.

Vibeke came from the kitchen then. 'Hi, Ember,' she said with a smile.

They embraced in the hallway, holding each other close, rocking slightly.

'It's good to be home,' Ember breathed after a while, her cheek pressed against Vibeke's upper chest and neck.

'I'm glad you're here too,' Vibeke said, drawing her fingers through Ember's hair at the back of her head, then holding her tighter for a moment.

After a while, stepping back but holding Vibeke's hand, Ember said: 'Something smells really good. You always smell really good of course, but I mean something to eat. I'm very hungry.'

'Penne with mushrooms, spinach and cream, black olives and garlic,' Vibeke said. 'I hope it'll be all right. I'm not as good at cooking as you are.'

'You're pretty good you know,' Ember replied. 'Is there time for me to take a quick shower?'

'Sure, I haven't put the pasta on yet.'

Once Vibeke had turned back to the kitchen, Ember picked up her pack and went through to the bedroom to remove and hide the surprises she had with her. Once that was done, she stripped out of her clothes and padded to the bathroom, showered and washed her hair, towelled herself dry,

and returned to the bedroom to change into comfortable clothes to relax in for the evening - soft black shorts and a mauve t-shirt. After brushing her short blonde hair, she returned to the kitchen.

Vibeke was standing in front of the table, facing her and clearly waiting for her.

'Hi,' said Ember, feeling such a sense of warmth suddenly filling her.

'I decided to pick you some flowers,' Vibeke replied. And she stepped towards her, bringing her hand from behind her back. She was holding a small bouquet of yellow meadow flowers and white daisies, with a few leaves about them.

'Oh, they're beautiful,' Ember exclaimed, taking them from Vibeke and slowly raising them and inhaling their delicate fragrance. 'Yellow flowers. They're really nice.'

Vibeke's breath had almost been taken away when Ember had rounded the doorway into the kitchen. It was amazing how Ember could do that to her. She took in her beauty, the loveliness of her face, the large, silver-blue eyes that were so clear and light in the golden evening light. She took in the shape of her body, strong and curved, feminine muscles and movement and an unconscious eroticism. Her skin was slightly flushed, slightly damp still from her shower, and her hair was rather wet still, but it framed her face perfectly.

And then she had handed the flowers to Ember, and as she saw the way Ember beamed at her with happiness, she felt as if she might simply melt into a puddle on the floor. She wondered how she had become so soft, but then thought it did not matter - not if it made her feel like this and if she could make Ember feel like this.

Ember looked from the flowers to her and back, then up into her eyes again. 'Yellow flowers,' she said again.

Vibeke gave her a small shrug and a sideways smile. 'I remembered that you said you liked them most a couple of weeks ago. And I didn't want to just give you some flowers that might be found in a florist - I mean, I work in a nursery so it would hardly be . . . Anyway, I went up into one of the fields behind it and gathered them for you. And said your name with every one I picked.'

As Vibeke watched Ember, she saw that tears welled in her eyes, though she was smiling brightly. Reaching out, she brushed two falling tears from Ember's cheeks with her fingertips.

Ember sniffled. 'Sorry,' she said, still grinning, and chuckled.

'I love you Ember.'

Ember came to her then and threw her arms around her waist - careful not to damage the flowers she still held in one hand - and buried her face in Vibeke's chest.

A few minutes later they sat down to eat together. Vibeke had served up the meal, and Ember had filled a vase with water and arranged the meadow flowers within. Now the flowers were on the table, just to one side of them. Though dusk was not yet drawing in, Ember had also lit a single tealight that she placed between them.

They did not talk much, but every so often Ember would look up at Vibeke and feel a rush all over again at the fact that she was there with her, that they had found each other and they were together.

Saturday 12th:

Vibeke awoke lying on her side. She was vaguely aware that Ember was not there and had got up a few moments before - to go to the bathroom, she assumed - which was what had woken her.

As she opened her eyes, she saw that a curious, cute, fluffy creature with huge eyes and golden fur was staring back at her from a distance of about six inches.

Clyde the Cat? she thought. And a smile graced her face.

It was a few seconds later, as she shifted in the bed and reached up to touch the furry animal, that she realised that Ember was crouched on the other side of the bed a little way down, only blonde hair and eyes visible over the edge, staring at her.

Vibeke chuckled and propped herself on one elbow. She looked at Ember and said: 'Good morning.' And then she lifted up her Clyde the Cat and regarded it. 'You brought me a Clyde the Cat slipper,' she said, unable to stop smiling.

'There's a note in it,' Ember said.

Vibeke removed the small, folded piece of paper from inside and read it.

I've lost my friend, was written on it.

'Hmm,' said Vibeke. 'I wonder if Clyde's almost identical friend has run off somewhere and is hiding.'

'Maybe,' said Ember. 'I looked, but you know Clyde, he can be pretty mysterious. I'm sure he'd want you to find him though.'

'Right. Any clues?'

'Well . . . maybe some help. Will you stand up and turn around?'

'All right.' Vibeke climbed out of bed and stood, entirely naked, before Ember. When she turned her back to her, Ember climbed onto the bed at her side.

'Here, let me dress you properly so that you can search for the other Clyde more effectively.'

And then Vibeke helped Ember help her to put on a t-shirt. When it was done, she looked down at the front and her bemused smile became a grin. 'This is just great!' she said. 'My very own Clyde the Cat t-shirt!' She ran her fingers over the material that had been sewn over the front of the cloth and which defined the cat. Several different pieces had been used, in four different colours. The expression of the cat was perfect - mysterious, warm, amused. 'You made this,' she said softly, turning to Ember.

'Well . . .' Ember shrugged, climbing down from the bed. 'I didn't see one I liked in the shop when I had a look, and thought I'd try.'

Vibeke gave her a hug, then stepped back from her. 'Thank you.'

'And now you'd better go and find the other slipper.'

A few minutes later as Ember was setting out breakfast, she grinned as Vibeke said in an almost outraged voice: 'I can't believe you put the other Clyde in the fridge.'

'He ran off by himself,' Ember protested. 'Probably he was just hot. It's a warm day.' Then, turning to Vibeke she said: 'The summer's been pretty warm so far, so I know slippers aren't that useful right now. But I'm sure there'll be a few cool evenings, and I just wanted to get them for you.'

'I wonder if my Clyde t-shirt would like your rabbit t-shirt,' Vibeke said. 'We'll have to find out.'

Chapter Nine

Painting and Exercising

Saturday 19th August, Year 1:

Vibeke:

I step from the living room onto the small patio area. The sun is bright, slanting from the southeast. It is warm for the time of day and the air is still, but the early morning is a good time to be outside in sunlight and to be still. Later it will probably be uncomfortably hot.

You are sitting upon one of the kitchen chairs, on the lawn, your easel and a canvas in front of you. You are just setting out your paints, your pallet, your brushes and a jar of turpentine. You clip a photograph onto the edge of the easel - an image of a beach where we walked, and a headland and nearby, wind-sculpted trees. I was not aware of you when you took the photo. I am in the centre, lying mostly on my side on the sand, propped up on one elbow, looking out at the sea. You have told me that you will make a few changes to the image in your painting, not wanting to make it simply realistic but also suggestive of emotion and thought.

For a minute I return to the kitchen. I take the other chair from the kitchen table and take it out into the garden and set it about five feet behind and to one side of you - sitting there, I will be able to see you and the whole canvas, but do not want to be so close that I disturb you. Then I go back to the kitchen again and make a couple of mugs of tea. I bring them out, set one down beside my chair, then hand the other to you.

You look up, and your eyes catch the sun - liquid, limpid silver-blue pools - and I am willingly captured by your beauty. You smile as you see that I have brought you some tea, and I think you are slightly surprised that I am there - perhaps your thoughts were upon the painting you are about to begin working on. Your smile is full of joy, and a deeper moment is reflected in it too, and in your eyes - love that connects us, almost tangible: tender but powerful, making us both feel so wonderfully vulnerable to each other's regard. Your lovely face is angelic, brightly lit, framed perfectly by your pale blonde hair.

'Thank you,' you say, and take the mug by its handle.

'It's hot,' I say as you bring it to your mouth, but you only inhale the fragrance. 'Do you mind if I watch you? I would really like to.'

I can see that you feel almost shy for a moment, but I also know that you do not like to be ruled by self-consciousness. You nod once, and give me another, smaller smile. 'Maybe you will sing for me while I paint?' you ask, but I know you are not really serious.

'I think that would definitely distract you. I think it would distract me, too.' I squeeze your shoulder, then gently run my fingers through the hair over the pretty pink shell of your ear. I smile back at you, then retreat and sit down upon the chair that I carefully positioned for myself.

Taking up my mug of tea, I watch. I like how you are dressed. You have chosen a short-sleeved blouse that is slightly frilled, with many buttons down the front, and a long, cool white skirt that is very light and looks very comfortable. I suspect you could wear such a get up in the nineteenth century on a relaxed summer's day in the country with friends and that you would not look particularly out of place - not that I know anything much about clothes from that era. And perhaps young ladies of those times were encouraged to paint as you do - maybe it was considered terribly cultured. Though I doubt many women wore their hair short back then, not

that I know much about that either. I smile when I realise that you are barefoot, the pink toes of your shapely feet peeking out from the material of your skirt.

A minute passes as you mix the first of the paints that you will need, squeezing a few different-coloured blobs from tubes, then adding some to each other and stirring until you have the right tones and hues. The smell of oils is clear in the air, suggestive of the possibility of great masterworks. A minute passes before you set brush to canvas, and I am already amazed by how much detail I take in of your movements and expression.

I am aware of how you sit, the angle of your neck, the set of your shoulders. I see the way you regard what you are doing with gentle thoughtfulness and calm alertness. I see the slight rise and fall of your breasts as you breathe, the slight expansion and relaxation of your chest and belly. Breathing in time with you, I enjoy the sensation. And I watch your hands most of all. I have always known that you are extremely dexterous, that you have an extraordinary flair for any kind of fine work. I have always loved your hands - and smile as I reflect that there is no part of your body that I do not love - they are not narrow and fine-boned like a tall and thin woman's might be, but rather have a wonderful mixture of femininity, shapeliness, and also strength. Your fingers are not long but they are quite delicate. Though most women have longer forefingers than ring fingers, I see the differences between yours as obviously attractive. You are not wearing any rings. So far I have refrained from buying one for you, but I will.

Then you select a brush, and set it to paint and then to canvas for the first time. I am aware that you have not sketched out your picture with a pencil, to set the paint over it. I can see that you do not need to.

And I watch as you paint. You are remarkably swift, making your lines and strokes and shadings with consummate ease, apparently effortlessly - though I see the tranquil concentration that is revealed in your gaze. You do not seem to struggle or wrestle with your ideas or approach, but rather seem simply to release what you want, like a waterfall on a sunlit mountain, letting rainbow-hued creations fall into the light. There is something deep and fluid about your way of doing this, as if you have some key to the most profound parts of you and can express what is there in infinite ways.

You take a break after about an hour, sitting back and regarding what you have done for long seconds then turning to me with a smile. 'What do you think?' you ask, and I can see that you know that I am amazed.

'I think you are truly talented,' I say. 'You know that I think you are unique, so full of light and beauty that it so often takes my breath away. And your painting has that light too, such a beautiful expression of you.'

'Well, it is not finished yet, and will take a while more.' You set your pallet down, and set your paintbrush with the others you have been using in the jar of turpentine. Then you stand up and stretch, her your fists above your shoulders, then stretching your arms above your head. I smile as I see you do this. Damn, I smile so much when I am with you.

I stand too and step across to you, and we hold each other close. 'Would you like something to eat?' I ask softly after a little while. When you shiver slightly I know that it is because of my breath against your ear.

You nod against me. 'Let's go in and make ourselves a good snack.'

Sunday 20th:

Ember:

I follow you to the garage. I have my sketch pad with me, though I am not sure I am going to use it - I suspect I might have trouble concentrating on anything other than my erotic fascination with you when you start exercising. When I told you I would like to watch you exercising entirely naked, I remember being surprised by myself, not that I wasn't entirely sincere. I guess I just wanted to see it so much, and it was such a clear desire, and I so worship your beauty, that I did not even blush - at least, for a few moments until a flood of images came to me as I consider what I had just said.

The day is surprisingly cool after the heat of the past few days. A gentle breeze blows across my skin as we walk down the front path to the garage that you have made into your own compact gymnasium. The clouds are low, unbroken, and there is a sense of imminence in the air that I feel, such that I think it will rain later.

You step through the side door and I follow you and close it behind me. I watch as you walk to the centre of the space and turn towards me. You stand straight and I can see that you are breathing slightly more deeply than usual, standing with strength and conscious balance, preparing yourself. I take in the simple clothes you are wearing - a faded, pale mauve tank top, black sports shorts, white trainers and white socks with the tops rolled down. Your skin, tanned with the summer, contrasts with your footwear. Not that it shows with what you are wearing, I am aware that you are slightly self-conscious about how the paleness of your skin that has not seen the sun very much - where your shortest top or shorts cover you - contrasts with your skin that has been exposed. But I do not care. I know that you spend a lot of time outside at work and that you have to keep as cool as you can; and also that you are not so concerned about your image that you feel a need to even out your tan at every opportunity.

I sit down cross-legged on the floor against the unpainted wall at the back of the garage. I will not disturb you from here but can see everything. The punch-bag is just in front of me to my right. The weights bench is beyond that to the left, and the tall weights machine is against the far wall.

I set down my spare pencils beside me, prop my sketch pad on my knee, then open it and am ready.

And you begin to stretch, moving slowly, standing forwards and raising your hands over your head in a classic yoga 'archer' pose. After a while you adopt the same pose with the other leg forward. You push your head back, then stand straight. You shift and relax your arms and shoulders. Then you pull on a pair of lightweight gloves and walk towards the punch-bag. There is an obvious and clearly conscious ease and calmness about the way you move. Your limbs seem loose and at the same time ready to whip into clear and powerful responses.

Then you release a series of punches, none of them very hard. I can see that you are not clenching your fists very tightly and that the impacts against the punch-bag are very light. You told me that slamming your fists into it with all your strength for an extended period of time would result in aching and perhaps damaged joints. Now I can see that you allow the bag to cushion the blows, to give you a sense of distance, but not to receive the full force you are able to exert. But as the minutes pass and your speed increases, sometimes nevertheless you hit the punch-bag harder. Though I can see that you are holding back, I am still very aware of the way the weight of it shudders with each strike. I tell myself to ask you just what thickness of wood or brick or ice you are actually capable of breaking if you hit it with all your strength.

Then you kick the bag a few times. Shortly you take off your trainers and socks and set them neatly by the door, then return to the bag and launch into a swift and varied sequence of kicks that you repeat at length and then vary for several minutes. Front kicks at different heights, kicks to the sides, sideways kicks that you put your hips and weight behind that I think might rip the bag from its chains. Then spinning back-kicks that start low and go higher and higher until they are above your head. I have loved your long legs since I first saw you, but did not consider them such weapons until now.

And I watch the muscles of your legs sliding under lean skin. Your limbs are straight and so pleasing in shape to me. I watch the calf muscle and quadriceps of your left leg tense as you launch a kick with your right. I see the perfect articulation of your hips. I see the turn and push of your left foot against the floor as you go up onto the ball of the foot and shift.

I realise that I am smiling.

I listen to your breathing, coming more deeply now. You have been working on the punch-bag for fifteen minutes or so. I sense that you could probably keep going for hours, but suddenly you step back. For half a minute you simply walk up and down, breathing and relaxing.

Then you turn and look at me for the first time since you began to exercise. You give me a wide smile. Your face is faintly flushed, and the pinkness is also across your upper chest. I can see that the veins in your arms and hands are dilated. You have not yet worked up a sweat.

I am aware that I have not actually drawn anything at all on my sketch pad.

'You want me to be naked as I lift weights,' you say. I am not sure if you intended it to be a question but it does not come out as one. I can guess you know my answer, hedonistic and marvelling as it might be.

I nod, but say: 'I see such beauty in you anyway.' This is not merely erotic for me. I see that very clearly now. I realise I am leaving it up to you.

You regard me for a long moment, then reach down and pull your tank top over your head. You throw it into a corner. Then you slip out of your shorts and throw them after it. Standing straight, you look down slightly, breathing deeply and steadily, wearing only your sports bra and skimpy underwear. You take off the sports bra first and discard it, your beautiful breasts released from their confines. Then you slip off your panties and stand before me completely naked. Slowly, you look up into my eyes and I can see that you enjoy watching me as I do not know whether to return your look or simply slide my gaze across the magnificence of your body.

I smile widely, and realise that you are smiling too. I can feel that we both feel extraordinarily happy.

You set your underwear on top of your other clothes, then walk over to the weights bench. The barbell lies across the supports and you remove four of the iron discs that are clamped in place on it so that you can start pressing at an easier weight as you warm up.

I can see the number of pounds that each disc weighs, moulded on the sides of them, and wonder how you can possibly lift so much. You are not heavily muscled, simply athletic rather than like a body-builder, but you are clearly very strong indeed.

Then you sit down on the bench, lean back so that your back is flat, and slide up the bench so that you are under the weights in the right position. Your legs are apart on either side of the bench - the leg curl mechanism is at the foot of the bench - and I find myself staring at your centre, at the triangle of soft curls of dark red-brown hair and the soft folds of your half-concealed centre. I recall the wonderful taste of your arousal with powerful clarity and feel a flush race across my skin and a heat in my lower belly.

I look up and see you reaching for the bar of the barbell. I can see that you are breathing deeply, readying yourself for the first repetitions. Then you lift the barbell from its supports and bring it down across the juncture of chest and neck. Your chest is pushed up. And then you exhale as you push the weight back up until your arms are straight. You breathe twice, then bring the bar down, inhaling deeply. Then again, exhaling, you push up.

You do fifteen repetitions. Then you settle the barbell back on its supports and you sit up. You look at me and smile. As I look into your eyes, the contact is startling.

You pick up a dumbbell, set your elbow against the inside of your knee, then execute fifteen curls. I watch the muscles sliding beneath your skin and I want to rest my fingers against you so that I might feel those powerful cables contracting and thickening. When you are finished with your right arm, you repeat the curls with your left.

Then you cross over to the machine against the wall. You adjust the key that slides into the weights to determine how much you will lift, and then stand straight and take hold of the pull-bar above your head. You hold the handles at the ends of the bar so that your hands are far apart,

rather than the handles close to the centre where the cable connects before passing over the pulleys to the weights.

You are standing with your back to me, and I watch as you pull the bar down until it is close to the back of your neck. You let it up again, then pull it back down so that it is in front of you. Then you release it again and pull it to the back of your neck again, then up and to the front. Each motion is long and smooth and you make it seem easy, though you are almost lifting your entire weight from the floor with each pull. I watch as the muscles ripple down either side of your back.

You go back to the bench, increase the weights on the barbell, and settled down to do another set of repetitions. This time you do ten. Then you add weight to the dumbbell, and do another set of curls with each arm. And then you return to the machine and the pull-downs, again with more weight.

You repeat the simple circuit, and by the fourth set I wonder at the changes in you. The veins in your arms and hands are dilated. Your skin is flushed and a light sheen of sweat covers you. The muscles that you have been exercising are swollen with blood and heat and effort.

Breathing deeply but steadily, you stand and turn towards me as you finish the fourth set. We are smiling at each other, and I can see that you are very happy with the effect that watching you has on me. I have no doubt that you can see some of the desire that I feel.

I have not drawn anything of course. Now I simply discard my sketchpad and pencil and stand up and walk towards you.

'There are many possible exercises I could do here,' you say. Your voice is slightly husky. 'I could do some others if you wish.'

I reach out and rest my fingertips upon your upper chest. I can feel the cool sweat over the heat of your skin. I close the space between us and place a gentle kiss upon your salt skin upon the top of your left breast. I lick you once, and taste you. Then I pull back - though it is hard to do so and a fire has lit deep within me that will not go out now and which demands attention. But I say: 'Will you lie on your front and do some hamstring curls?'

'No problem,' you say, with a slight flourish as you draw your hair back from your shoulders.

You set the weights on the contraption at the foot of the bench, then lie down on your front and set your ankles beneath the pads on the bar. You reach before you so that you hold the top of the bench and your shoulders are slightly raised from the padding. Then you draw up the bar, raising your feet behind you. I watch the sliding of your hamstrings. You release the weights, straightening your legs, then pull again. Standing there, I stare at the shape of your legs as you exercise, but then my gaze is drawn upward to the curve of your hips and the beautiful shape of your bottom, the slimness of your waist and the shape of your torso up to the high set of your shoulders.

I kneel beside you, and slide my hands over your shoulders and down your back. The heat and the sweat of your flushed skin is remarkable to me. I lean down, and place soft kisses in a path across your skin, and trail my tongue over you in between each gentle nip. I make my way across your lower back, over your bottom, to the back of your right leg. I am aware of salt and skin and heat and you. I am aware of the scent of you that I love so much and the recognition of which goes so deeply within me.

After a little while, I realise that you are lying still and that I am simply trailing my fingers over you, as if I can capture your shape and beauty like a sculptress, committing your structure to memory by touch. I use more force then, squeezing your shoulder muscles, then kneading the muscles down your back on either side.

Then I stop. 'Perhaps you would like to go inside, to bed,' I say softly. 'I can give you a full massage if you want. And then . . . more.'

You turn, and peek up at me with one eye obscured by your unbound hair. 'I would like that,' you say.

I stand and pull you to your feet. You dress quickly, though do not bother with your trainers or socks, and we hurry from the garage back to the house. Then we almost run down the hall to our bedroom, and slip out of our clothes quickly.

'Will you join me in the shower?' you ask.

'I rather like the taste of your sweat,' I say. 'But all right. Let's just try and make it out of the shower too.' And I pull back the back the bedclothes in readiness for when we will fall into it.

To the bathroom then, and you turn on the water and test its temperature, then we step together into the bath and pull closed the shower curtain.

We hold each other beneath the pounding water, and I feel such gentleness in your strength. For a moment I can feel tears in my eyes even through the falling water, such emotion wells up within me. I have never felt desire anything like that which you can so easily trigger in me, and it seems inseparable from the love which I can feel wrapping like a fist about my heart - love from you and for you, mixing and igniting together.

Chapter Ten

Helping Out

Saturday 2nd September, Year 1:

Ember and Vibeke walked from central Otterhampton towards Mrs Waechter's house. They had just been to a hardware shop to buy some nails and to collect a sharpened axe-head. Though they could have driven, the way was not far and the weather was good - warm and dry, though light, high clouds often obscured the sun - and they had decided they would prefer to walk. Earlier, they had eaten breakfast in bed, then made love at length, and slept again for a little while. It was past ten o'clock by the time they had got up. Now it was good to walk at a fairly leisurely pace, sometimes to talk a little.

As they turned from a row of shops into a residential street, they saw a group of young men ahead of them, walking towards them. There were five of them and Ember guessed that they were in their late teens and early twenties. They were loud, their voices brash and full of arrogance. They swaggered as they walked, everything about them seeming to be a repulsive demonstration of how strong and important they considered themselves to be. Ember suspected they were rather drunk, no matter the relatively early hour of the day.

As the young men neared, Ember noticed a slight change in Vibeke. It was not an obvious thing, for she did not seem particularly concerned or anything other than relaxed. But she seemed to have a heightened alertness about her, a readiness, and Ember almost felt as if a powerful energy, hidden beyond usually impenetrable walls, could now be felt radiating from her. She did not miss the fact that Vibeke moved across the pavement so that, when they passed the young men, Vibeke would be the one closer to them and that Ember would be shielded.

A few seconds later the group passed, laughing and swearing. A couple of them looked at the two women and their eyes lingered on Ember, but they did not say anything and just went onwards.

A minute or so later, as they turned into another street, Ember said: 'You were ready to protect me.' She spoke softly and realised that there was more emotion revealed in her voice than she had expected.

Vibeke looked at her and smiled slightly sheepishly. 'I know it wasn't very likely that anything would happen, but I couldn't have just ignored the possibility or left you vulnerable.' She paused for a moment and then said more quietly: 'It went really deep in me.'

'I feel very moved that you wanted to protect me,' Ember said. Then, with no humour at all and with a sudden realisation, she said: 'If they had been aggressive towards us, I think you would have been able to fight them off easily.'

Vibeke gave her a little shrug and said: 'I don't know.' It was almost a sigh.

Ember regarded her curiously. After a while she decided to say what she was thinking, but was worried that she might bring up something that might make Vibeke uncomfortable. After some thought she said: 'If you don't want to talk about this it's all right. And you can tell me to stop talking of course.' She gave Vibeke a sideways, slightly humorous smile at this. 'But I've noticed

that you don't much like to talk about sports, and from what you told me you've barely participated in any sports since you were a child. I'm just curious as to why. You like exercising, and you even have some interest in watching sports - tennis and cricket occasionally on television. And those young men we just passed . . . It's almost like you don't want to have to reveal your physical abilities, even though I know they are amazing.'

Vibeke regarded her for a few seconds and Ember was glad that she did not seem disturbed by what she had said. She seemed thoughtful and intrigued more than anything. 'You're right,' she said as she turned into Mrs Waechter's street. 'I've avoided most physically competitive activities for most of my life. At the same time, I've sometimes pushed myself hard in things I can practice alone or which I can practice without competing. When I was a teenager and went to martial arts classes, the teacher and his supervisor several times asked me to enter competitions, and I always refused. They never understood why and I did not explain. And when I was at school and had to participate in sports, I avoided such things as squash and tennis if I could, and used to do deliberately badly in athletics - still near the best of the class, but nothing like what I was capable of.'

'I think you could have been a really amazing sportswoman at almost any sport,' Ember said. 'Even competing professionally.' She nodded to the little green on the corner just past Mrs Waechter's house. 'Let's go and sit on a bench for a little while.'

Vibeke nodded, and they crossed the quiet street. 'Maybe I could have been a sportswoman. I know I was pretty good. I still would be if I trained. But something held me back. For much of my life I have felt rather averse to what most people consider success. I did not want to have a high-powered career, did not want to struggle and compete. Not in any sense, whether sporting or in some corporation or in any kind of business or field. To an extent I simply wanted to live rather quietly, which is partly why I came to live here and why I work at a nursery. And though I cannot say that my job fascinates me or deeply satisfies me, there are things about it that I like and which can be quite rewarding.'

Vibeke fell silent for a while, and they walked through the open gate onto the green, and sat down on a bench in the muted, hazy sunlight. Around them was a well-tended lawn, and tall shrubs and young trees hiding the streets around, making it an oasis in a tiny suburbia. There was only one other person there - a late middle aged man who was reading a book, sitting on the far side of the enclosed area.

Sitting shoulder to shoulder, Ember leant slightly against Vibeke, and Vibeke took hold of Ember's hand and held it close.

'I also feel a kind of paralysis and a hint of fear,' Vibeke said. 'When I think about attempting the kinds of things that are required to be what other people consider successful, I know that I would be more than competent in most ways, and that in some fields I would be a natural. Still, I do not like the idea. A deep sense of tension comes to me when I think about it, though I do not know where its root might lie. Sometimes I wonder if it is a manifestation of some kind of self-destructiveness that is a hangover from having lost my real parents, and my foster-mother dying, and the fact that I never fitted in with my peers through both primary and secondary school. In

the end, I don't know. But as a result, and because of my choice not go down the path to great successes, my life has been small in some ways.' She leaned the side of her head against Ember's then and said, while Ember knew that she was smiling: 'But my life with you is not small. With you my emotions are so often a downpour of happiness and joy, bliss and wonder.'

Ember wrapped her arm around Vibeke's waist, and held her close.

'And you know,' Vibeke said, 'I could ask you the same kind of question.' She said this gently, and Ember giggled. 'You are such a wonderful painter, and you could have been wonderful at so many things, yet you did not try to promote your artwork or follow some dream of success. Instead, you became a dressmaker - albeit an extraordinarily good one.'

'You are right of course, about me choosing a life of littleness too,' Ember said. 'Or feeling unable to choose another life.' She chuckled. 'Actually, I do not think I could ever have had success in the business world. People think I'm a bit weird you know. Noticing strange patterns in things and being really happy about it, when no one else can see anything at all - or if they do they consider it banal.'

'Hmm.' Vibeke ran a finger in abstract patterns across Ember's jean-clad thigh. 'I don't think I could be successful in a corporation either,' she said. 'I suspect the other workers would think of me as threatening in some ways, or just too different.'

'I'm glad you're different,' Ember said, leaning slightly harder against Vibeke. 'It's good that we're both a couple of weirdos.'

'I agree.'

When Mrs Waechter opened her front door, she gave them a big smile and her eyes twinkled with happiness. 'Ember! Vibeke!' She gave Ember a warm hug and then, after just a moment's hesitation, gave Vibeke a hug as well - which Vibeke had to lean down to accept. Ember did not miss that Vibeke was quite touched by the gesture.

'Come in, make yourselves comfortable,' Mrs Waechter continued as she ushered them through to the kitchen. 'I was just going to make a pot of tea. Are you hungry? I can make some sandwiches if you haven't had lunch, and we could eat them outside.'

'Thank you Mrs Waechter,' Ember said. 'Maybe when we've finished helping you in the garden. A cup of tea would be good though.'

A little later, after chatting for a short while, Vibeke and Ember set about the work they had agreed to do in Mrs Waechter's garden. A tree had died close to one of the fences, and once Vibeke had fitted the axe handle back to the newly-sharpened axe-head they had brought back

from the hardware shop, she set about cutting it down. It did not take her very long, and she enjoyed the physicality of the work. Though she could have brought a chainsaw to do it - she could have borrowed one from the nursery - she preferred using the axe and was glad not to have to endure the loud noise a chainsaw would have made.

Ember, with her small camera, took a several photographs of her as she swung the axe; and another as the tree fell.

Then, as Vibeke used axe and handsaw to cut the tree up, Ember set to work digging out and redefining a flowerbed that had become completely overgrown. Though Mrs Waechter tended the garden well, this was a piece of heavier work that she had been relieved to ask for help with.

After a couple of hours, the two of them stopped for a break. Standing facing one another, Ember and Vibeke found themselves grinning as they regarded each other. They were rather flushed, their jeans and t-shirts streaked with mud and dirt, and both wore heavy gardening gloves.

Removing one hand from its glove, Ember reached out and brushed some pieces of bark from Vibeke's hair. 'We look pretty good,' she remarked.

They turned then as they heard the clink of glasses, and saw Mrs Waechter setting down a tray upon her small patio table. A jug of water with slices of lemons in it, glasses and a plate of biscuits awaited them.

As they walked over, Mrs Waechter said: 'Would you like anything else? Maybe tea? I know it's hot, but . . .'

'This is great,' Ember said.

The three of them sat for a little while, relaxing. Ember was glad that Mrs Waechter was grateful to them for their help but seemed neither to see it as her right nor as something she should feel guilty or indebted about. And she knew that Mrs Waechter would always be willing to help them in any way she could.

'I've almost finished cutting up the tree,' Vibeke said. 'Then I'll stack all the logs and sticks.'

'While you're doing that, I'll mend the fence,' Ember said. At the back of the garden, four cross-pieces had rotted or fallen away. It would not take long to nail the replacements in place.

'You girls are just wonderful,' Mrs Waechter said, looking from one to the other. Her eyes twinkled, and then she became suddenly serious, regarding them more intently. To Ember, she said: 'I know I never said anything, but I always hoped you would meet someone who could fill your heart with love and make you whole. There's not a sweeter or kinder person in the world than you are, and it was difficult to know you were alone for so long. I know you always said you were happy, but I'm so very glad you and Vibeke have found each other.'

Ember smiled at her, then turned to Vibeke and looked into her eyes, and suddenly found herself lost in a moment of deeply shared knowledge and emotion. She reached out and they entwined their fingers together.

At length, turning back to Mrs Waechter, Ember said: 'Thank you, Mrs Waechter.'

'Oh gosh,' Mrs Waechter said. 'Look at me.' And she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

Later, as Ember and Vibeke made their way back home, Vibeke said: 'Why do you always call her Mrs Waechter? You've known her for a long time, and she doesn't seem to be the kind of person who cares much for titles or formality. I find it sounds rather nice, in an eccentric, respectful, old-fashioned kind of way. I was just wondering if there was a particular reason.'

Ember looked up at her. They were holding hands as they walked. 'There is a reason actually. I called her Mrs Waechter when I first met her, and I could see that she rather liked it. It was as if she was warmed by the sound of it. When she told me I could call her by her first name, she barely seemed to notice, so I went back to calling her Mrs Waechter because I knew she liked it. It took me a while to work it out, but the reason is simply that it reminds her of her husband. She just likes to be called by her married surname. They were very happy together from what she's told me and from what I can hear in her voice and observe in her manner when she talks about him. From what I understand, he was quite quiet but very kind, and with a gentle and rather romantic sense of humour.' She shrugged slightly. 'He died fifteen years ago, from a heart attack when he was at work. I find it impressive that Mrs Waechter dealt with it so well. I don't know whether she really accepted it, but she certainly didn't let it make her bitter. I think she was depressed for a while, but saw that as something she just had to work her way through.'

'She never met anyone else?' Vibeke asked. 'Never wanted to re-marry?'

'Not that I know of. I think she would rather consider herself still connected with him than to really move on. I can understand that actually, though others might choose differently.'

Chapter Eleven

Time

Sunday 3rd September, Year 1:

i: *Waking*

Vibeke was making her way through a garden that was of a form she had never seen before. It was as if she was surrounded by natural sculptures of meaning; as if the dreams of the gods were revealed here and a veil had been drawn back from her eyes such that she could now perceive and understand the deep natural truths of reality. Beds of plants whose leaves, flowers, petals and thorns were more like crystals surrounded her, and among them were small, curious monoliths of eroded stone. The sky was a low and powerful presence above her, seemingly aware of her, enveloping her - of deep hues, dark green and muted mauve and streaks of bronze. Ahead of her was an old wall of red brick, stained green with moss and time, blocking her way like a line of impassable warriors that had dedicated their lives to never letting anyone pass. Yet, to her amazement, they parted before her, the wall was revealed to have a door, and she went through it.

'Ember?' she said. Around her was a small courtyard, in the centre of which a fountain danced in sudden sunlight, an angel trapped in this finite space, lost, hopeless, but embracing its endless movement. Beyond it was a statue of white marble - a wondrous sculpture of a naked and utterly beautiful woman in whose form seemed revealed the most absolute and exquisite truths. Even as she watched, the statue came to life and approached her.

'Vibeke,' the statue said in a voice that startled her as if she was suddenly held in a warm embrace that changed everything.

'Ember,' she heard herself say, and wondered how she had not known that this was Ember, the only real love she had ever known.

Vibeke woke, and the profundity of what she had felt resonated within her. She shifted slightly in bed, turning towards Ember, who lay facing away from her. She snuggled up to her, sliding her arms around her and holding her close from behind. As she did so she smiled as Ember shifted backwards into her, pressing herself even in sleep more closely into her embrace. Vibeke raised her head a fraction before she settled into her pillow again, and in the faint grey light that filtered through the half-open curtains she saw Ember's lips pull upwards at the corner in a slight smile in a her sleep. And then Vibeke settled down, amazed by the intensity with which she was aware of Ember's warmth and softness - naked skin against her - and her delightful scent that suggested so much, and the movement of each of her breaths, the beating of her heart, the softness and fragrance of her hair. She closed her eyes, savouring the bliss that she felt. And as she held Ember, she smiled again as Ember's hand moved in her sleep and came to rest upon Vibeke's hand that rested gently upon Ember's lower belly.

Vibeke remembered her dream, and hoped that she would recall it later in the day; and then she allowed herself to drift into comfort and dreamlets and slumber.

When Ember woke, she did so quite quickly. She felt good, and rested. She felt almost immediately and unusually awake. She felt a smile tug at her mouth as she became aware of

Vibeke's arms about her, one under her head and the other over her side such that her forearm rested across her belly.

It was early, the sun not yet up. A glance at the clock told her it was ten minutes before five o'clock.

She turned in Vibeke's arms, and Vibeke shifted. Then they were lying in their more customary position - Vibeke on her back, Ember on her side with her head upon Vibeke's shoulder and her arm wrapped about her waist. And Ember was aware that Vibeke was awake.

'Vibeke?' she asked, and could hear the smile in her own voice.

'Hmm?' A smile was in Vibeke's voice as well.

'You are more and better than anything in my life, and you have brought me such happiness.'

ii: *Running*

Vibeke and Ember each went to the bathroom, then dressed in shorts and t-shirts, socks and trainers. In the kitchen they drank water and a little orange juice. Then they headed out the front door and Vibeke locked it behind them. Outside the air was cool and fresh - perfect for exercise.

They walked for twenty or thirty yards, then they broke into a slow jog.

Ember concentrated on her breathing and the steadiness of her stride, easing into the exercise. It was always a little uncomfortable at first - but then she would find a rhythm and would soon feel very good. As their pace picked up just a little - though no more than she would be comfortable with - she looked around them. It was barely half past five in the morning. The sun was up now but they were running in shadow - the deep shade of trees and hedgerows contrasting with the bright pinks and yellows and deep blue of the sky. The last three cottages on their early morning route were behind them and they would be out among fields and woodlands from here to the small stone bridge they would cross before heading back.

For a little while Ember focused upon the air rushing in her lungs and the beating of her heart. She enjoyed the feeling of strength and balance she was filled with as they exerted themselves a little more and ran up a short but fairly steep slope at the corner of a field, leaping from stone to stone at times on the tumbled, rocky ground. Then they were on easier terrain again, and turned onto a farm track.

Ember was very aware that Vibeke could easily run faster than this, but she was also aware that, in them being together, Vibeke was very happy. Sometimes Ember would catch Vibeke glancing across at her with a look of pride and shy love, and it would touch Ember's heart such that a couple of times her breath caught with emotion.

iii: *Breakfast*

Back at their house, Vibeke and Ember drank down glasses of water and then took a shower together. Afterwards they dressed in comfortable clothes and went through to the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

'Let me make something fairly substantial,' Ember said. 'I am very hungry.' She opened the fridge and looked inside. Then she looked up and said: 'Would you like to watch television after breakfast? I feel like a little laziness.'

'Sure. I'll lay the table and then see what I can find that might be worth watching.'

Fifteen minutes later Ember served up their breakfast - fried eggs, mushrooms, sausages, tomatoes, mustard. She set the plates down at their customary places across the corner of the kitchen table. Vibeke had already set out a plate of toast, butter, jars of marmalade and Marmite, a large pot of tea, milk and large mugs.

Sunlight flooded from the east through the window, and they basked in the clear light and the sense of relaxation that they felt after their run and their shower.

'This looks great!' Vibeke said as she poured tea for both of them.

Ember regarded her with a curious intensity of a sudden. Their knees brushed against each other as they sat there, and Ember reached out and took Vibeke's hand. Then she smiled and let go, and picked up her knife and fork.

For a little while they ate in more than companionable silence, and Vibeke was very aware of how happy she felt and how happy she could see that Ember felt too.

Vibeke deliberately took her time eating, enjoying each morsel, savouring the flavours, aware that her hunger and the exercise they had done intensified her enjoyment. She realised that Ember was eating slowly as well, and sometimes she noticed a little smile touch Ember's lips. Sometimes they merely looked at each other, into each other's eyes, full of tenderness for each other.

Through the open window the sounds of summer birdsong came to them, gentle and calming, complex and beautiful.

iv: *Television*

As Vibeke settled in the corner of the sofa, Ember squirmed around until she was leaning back against her, her legs along the cushions.

'Comfortable?' Vibeke asked.

Ember wriggled against her slightly and gave her a little giggle. 'Very.'

'Good.' She ruffled Ember's hair, then picked up the remote, turned the television on and flicked to the channel she wanted. 'Now, if I'm right, we should be just in time for an episode of *The Force*.'

'*The Force*?' Ember repeated. 'Oh wow, I haven't watched that since I was a teenager and student. I really liked it.'

'All right. We have our cups of tea and a packet of chocolate biscuits. We have each other. I think we're all set.'

'I think so too.'

They watched as the opening credits rolled and then the action started. It was an American series set in Philadelphia, a police procedural that was almost hard boiled in style yet which had a healthy dose of humour and three great characters: Hudson, the witty and diminutive hero, who was able to put together even the most obscure facts to solve a case; Jaimie, the charming, compassionate and beautiful heroine, who could talk almost anyone into anything; and Lauren, their secretary, who was something of a genius in seemingly every field.

Vibeke and Ember watched through the forty-five minute programme almost without a word. They drank their tea, and handed each other biscuits. Vibeke ran her fingers across Ember's arm in comforting, almost unconscious contact, and Ember kept her hand on Vibeke's thigh. Occasionally Vibeke leaned her head against Ember's.

When it was over, Vibeke turned the volume down and grinned at the good choice she had made.

'I really enjoyed that,' Ember said. 'Did you work it out?'

'No, I didn't,' Vibeke replied. 'I think I was concentrating too much on the acting and the characters to try to solve it myself.' She gave a little shrug. 'Although I'm not sure I could have.'

'I guessed about a third of the way through who it was, but wasn't sure until a bit later. I really like the two actresses.'

Vibeke looked at Ember's profile and saw a certain thoughtfulness there. 'You do?'

'Yes,' replied Ember. 'Don't you?'

'I think they have great chemistry. They look so different to each other but they're both attractive.'

'It was probably the main reason why I used to like watching it,' Ember said. 'I always used to think that Jaimie and Lauren should get together. They obviously like each other, and their banter is sometimes provocative. They seem to have a real affection for each other too.'

'Hmm. I liked the same thing, though I didn't really think about them actually being romantically involved. It would've been nice, but it wasn't the kind of programme where that was going to happen. I guess it's just a bit too old, too much a cop show before being a drama. And I guess the market for same-sex relationships isn't so big.'

They were silent for a little while and Vibeke did not want to say more. She could see that Ember's manner was rather serious and guessed she was thinking of the past and perhaps of difficult times.

'It was strange, growing up and knowing I was not attracted to men,' Ember said. 'I never said anything to anyone for such a very long time. And then after watching twenty or more episodes of *The Force*, and lying in bed and dreaming about Jaimie and Lauren being together, I suddenly realised what I was doing and how impossible and disconnected it seemed. I felt as if I was falling from a great height when I realised that my fantasy, which seemed so real, was just a fantasy about two television characters.' She chuckled then. 'I think I was quite addicted to the programme and to the thoughts it provoked in me. I'd always known I was attracted to girls - always identified with falling in love with the heroine even in the earliest fairy stories and children's stories I read or was read. But I think I didn't realise the potential power of such an attraction. Watching *The Force* gave me a greater idea. But then, meeting you . . . Well, that just went beyond anything I'd ever conceived of.'

'Did you try to meet any girls who might feel the same way?' Vibeke asked after a short silence.

Ember shook her head. 'I'm not sure why. I think I never really saw relationships as something to be sought out and achieved. I don't mean there's anything wrong with that - certainly not. I just mean that I could not see it as a thing to be tackled like another task and worked towards. Silly really - I mean, it's not like there's anything wrong with going and out and meeting people and also hoping that one might meet someone special. I'm not honestly sure where my reluctance came from.'

'I was much the same,' Vibeke said. 'In fact I was a real loner, very reclusive a lot of the time.'

A minute passed in quiet thought, then Ember stretched charmingly, yawned delicately and then squiggled around so that she was facing Vibeke. 'Hey,' she said. 'Shall we take a drive up the coast? Maybe go east? We haven't been that way together. I could make us a good picnic lunch.'

Vibeke grinned. 'I was just thinking you looked so damn cute when you stretched and yawned and turned to me. And yes, a trip up the coast would be great.'

Vibeke drove, watching the road and their surroundings while Ember spent rather a lot of time just watching her.

'You look pretty comfortable,' Vibeke said, glancing at her with a smile.

'I am,' Ember said with a returning smile. Her right ankle was tucked under her left leg and she sat turned slightly towards Vibeke. She was wearing green shorts and a loose-fitting, sleeveless yellow t-shirt. Her fair skin was slightly tanned and her pale hair was slightly unkempt from the wind that blew in through the open window. Even when Vibeke looked at her just for a moment it struck her how very beautiful and healthy and full of life she was.

The sky was a clear blue, the day warm but not too hot. There was not too much traffic on the roads. They watched as the fields passed, and the edges of the national park to their south. Their route took them close to the coast, heading east in the direction of Bath. They passed through fishing villages and a couple of towns, and past many bays and peninsulas and over high cliffs.

'There's a fort up ahead,' Ember said after checking the map. 'Medieval apparently. I wonder what it was guarding. Maybe sometimes marauders came in from the sea.'

'Maybe,' said Vibeke. 'Or maybe it was a stronghold for a local lord who was concerned about his neighbours. There were many baronies and fiefdoms during early medieval times. A great deal of in-fighting. The kings of England tolerated it as long as the lesser nobles and lords obeyed him. Perhaps it would have been very difficult for the king to actually police his lands. And maybe all the in-fighting and vying for favours weakened those who might otherwise have made trouble for him.'

They drove for half a minute in silence, then Vibeke looked across and said: 'Do you want to stop at the fort?'

'Mm,' Ember replied. 'Yes. Maybe there's somewhere there we can have some ice-cream.'

Vibeke chuckled. 'Ah. All is clear.'

Five minutes later they were parked at the edge of a small village whose houses and shops were built on quite a steep slope around a cove. There were forty or so dwellings. The fort was on a high promontory just to the northeast, but even from a distance it could be seen that it was simply some jumbles of rock and fallen walls that were little more than mounds of stone. A few lonely, wind-sculpted, stunted pines stood about it.

Vibeke and Ember climbed from the car. 'Ice-cream hunt first?' Vibeke asked with a grin.

'There was a shop just back there,' Ember replied. 'Let's have a look.'

They walked hand in hand along the quiet, curving street. Small houses were joined to each other on one side, many of them painted white. There was a pub or small hotel opposite them, lower on the slope. The beach curved beyond, mostly sandy, but with sea-carved stone showing or

jutting in places, and boulders beyond. They could hear the sussuration of the waves rolling in and sliding back. Gulls drifted around the headlands to either side and the salt breeze was touched with a faint scent of smoke and seaweed.

An old lady was standing in the doorway of one of the small houses they passed. She was gazing out into the distances, her wrinkled face almost devoid of expression, but her watery blue eyes seemed alert - it was almost as if she was waiting for something to appear out on the sea. She was bent and rather plump and wore a loose, rather ragged print dress of large blue checks.

The shop was a mixture of newsagent and grocery, every shelf crammed with a remarkable variety of products. The middle-aged Indian man at the till nodded to them and smiled. 'Good afternoon,' he said. There were no customers apart from Vibeke and Ember.

Ember located the ice-cream freezer quickly. Vibeke enjoyed Ember's excited pleasure as she gave a little dance. 'Oh, these are good ones!' Ember exclaimed. 'I haven't seen this brand in a long time.' Looking up, she said: 'What do you want?' And she looped a finger through Vibeke's belt and pulled her closer.

They both selected large chocolate ice-creams on sticks, Ember's with nuts and raisins. Vibeke paid for them before Ember could take out her money.

'Do you know anything about the fort on the hill?' Vibeke asked.

The shopkeeper gave her an apologetic shrug. 'I should, I've lived here for twenty years. I'm not sure there's much history known about it though. Mrs Caldwell who works with the church is something of an enthusiast about local lore. I heard her talking once about this place being a bronze-age settlement.'

Vibeke nodded. 'Thanks,' she said.

The man nodded back and his eyes were twinkling. She realised that he was enjoying her and Ember's presence. She guessed he found them rather attractive.

They stepped back out into the warmth and the sunshine. A gentle breeze blew, then dropped away and the calls of gulls passed over them, then receded.

Eating their ice-creams, they made their way back past their car and up the road a little way, then turned onto a small path that led over the headland. Before long they were at the top, and walked over grass that was kept short by the grazing of sheep, and among a few small pines to where the mounds of stone were.

They walked around the place, wondering what it might have looked like when it was built or still in use. It was not a large place, and there were only a couple of fragments of wall still intact - the rest had simply fallen. There was also an area that was slightly lower than most of the ground, floored with several slabs of flat stone, around it a few more large stones defining a near semi-circle.

'It's amazing to think of how different people's lives must have been,' Ember said as they stood shoulder to shoulder, looking across the fort and out to the green-grey sea. 'I don't know if this is a thousand years old or more or less, but so many perceptions of the people who lived here - or built it, or fought in defending it - must have been so very different.' She looked up into Vibeke's face. 'Imagine seeing the stars as twinkling points of light without thinking of them as distant suns. Imagine looking out across the sea and the oceans with no idea at all how extensive they are - whether they are small or go on forever. And places that must have seemed no more than myth or speculation, while most nations and peoples were simply unknown.'

Vibeke absorbed Ember's words. 'I wonder if it made them more aware of some things,' she said after a little while. 'They might have stood here and simply absorbed the sea and the sky and the sunlight just as an experience, rather than needing to assign too many concepts to it. Perhaps the most enlightened of them sometimes assigned no concepts at all.'

vi: *Climbing*

After returning to their car, Vibeke and Ember drove another five miles to the edge of an area of hills and moors. After parking in a small car park provided for visitors and walkers to the area, they took their small packs and headed up into the rolling countryside.

A drifting, indecisive wind moved about them, bringing scents of heather and flowering gorse. Ember enjoyed the exertion of the walking up the fairly steep slope before them, feeling the heat and strength of the muscles of her thighs, aware of the deepening of her breathing and the strong beating of her heart. She knew that their walk would not be a great exertion, indeed that it would be less trying than most of the runs they went on in the mornings. Perhaps it was the ease of her moving across the rather rugged ground that made her exult in it, aware of her strength and well-being.

As they reached the first low summit, the view ahead opened up before them. Glaciated hills and scoured granite moors were before them. Small, steep-sided wooded valleys divided the hills, most of them with streams and small rivers.

'How about heading to that highest hill over there?' Vibeke said.

'It's not very high,' Ember replied with a grin.

'No, it isn't. But I think we should feel that we are in rugged and demanding terrain and that we are intrepid and brave explorers. We will not merely climb that hill. We will call it a peak, and we will not just climb it but conquer it.'

'Conquer it?'

'Yes. Although I seem to have forgotten our flag. To be really banal we should really plant a flag.'

'I'd rather sing a song. Or just eat lunch there. And then maybe sing a song. Maybe a song about a piglet.'

'Do you know any songs about piglets?'

'No. That's probably one of the reasons why I'd like to sing a song about one.'

'Well, I guess that makes sense.' Vibeke reached out and squeezed Ember's shoulder and they looked at each other; and Ember wondered at the affection that they shared in those few seconds.

And then they set off for the hill that Vibeke had indicated.

Half an hour later they settled down in an area of heather away from any path. There were some large boulders to their right, to one side of the top of the hill. From their packs they took out the food and water they were carrying.

They ate lunch mostly in companionable silence.

They took a spontaneous, unexpected and rather long route back to their car and it was more strenuous than they had anticipated. They walked over peaty ground and over rocks and through heather and had to cross numerous small watercourses. Much of their route was determined simply according to whim. Ember would often remark upon some landmark or wander to some place because it looked interesting and Vibeke was more than happy to let her explore as much as she wished. After an hour they found themselves not closer to their car but further away.

And Vibeke also was responsible for the extended length of their walk. While Ember tended to be distracted by the shapes of stones or the colours and clusterings of flowers, Vibeke three times suggested they ascend to the top of one low hill or another.

By the time they returned to where they had parked, both were pleasantly tired.

Sitting on the front seats, they both took off their walking boots.

'Are you all right to drive barefoot?' Ember asked.

'I'll put them back on in a moment.' Vibeke smiled. 'Did you enjoy our walk?'

'It was great!'

Vibeke opened the front door of their house and stood aside for Ember, then followed her in and closed the door behind her.

'Cup of tea?' Ember asked her as she set down her small backpack and walking boots.

'Sounds great.'

Vibeke unpacked their lunch things and put what needed to be washed up in the kitchen sink while Ember made a large pot of tea. Then they sat quietly together at the kitchen table, hand in hand. They sipped from their mugs of tea and then drank more deeply once it was cool enough.

Ember reflected that there was a curious poignancy of emotion between them and in the moment. She was very aware of the sunlit garden outside and the golden light that streamed in through the window. She was very aware of the kitchen around them - its shape and dimensions, the pine cabinets, stainless steel sink, oven and gas stove, the sturdy and unvarnished table at which they were seated. She was aware of her own breathing and her heartbeat and the pleasant sense of deep relaxation and enjoyable sleepiness that she felt.

Most of all she was aware of Vibeke. Their right hands were upon the surface of the table, touching each other lightly, their fingers shifting lightly in gentle caresses and connectedness. Sometimes they looked at each other almost shyly, looking into each other's eyes. And Ember saw that Vibeke's gaze and expression reflected her own emotional openness and vulnerability. She could see Vibeke was so very aware of her just as she was profoundly aware of Vibeke.

And then she realised that Vibeke was breathing in rhythm with her, her chest rising and falling slowly and gently at exactly the same time. For a little while she watched as she raised her mug and took another sip of tea.

'Did you do that deliberately?' she asked, smiling.

Vibeke raised an eyebrow. 'What do you mean?'

'You have been breathing in time with me.' She paused then said: 'I've noticed it before. I've synchronised my breathing with yours because I wanted to sometimes as well. I really like it.' She realised that she probably looked slightly sheepish when she said: 'I like watching the slow rise and fall of your breasts.'

Vibeke looked down for a moment. 'I have also intentionally matched my breathing to yours on quite a few occasions,' she said. Looking up again: 'But this time maybe it was just luck - though I do not think so. I think I just did it automatically, subconsciously.' She shrugged slightly and gave Ember a little smile. 'Well, I'm glad of it.'

Ember squeezed her hand. 'I don't think it was luck either,' she said. 'I think that we are simply matching each other, recognising each other more deeply.'

After a minute or two, Vibeke set down her empty mug. Then she looked into Ember's eyes and said: 'Would you like to take a shower with me?'

'Is there some reason you would like to take a shower with me?' she asked mischievously. Then she shook her head with self-deprecation and said: 'No, wait, it does not matter. I would be very happy to take a shower with you.'

Vibeke grinned and stood and pulled Ember to her feet. Together they made their way from the kitchen into the hall and down to their bedroom, where they stopped in front of their bed.

Vibeke turned and unbuttoned Ember's shorts. Then she slipped her hands beneath Ember's sleeveless t-shirt and over the skin above her hips and around her chest, caressing her gently about her ribs; and Ember shivered with pleasure at the warm glow and the pleasantly tingling sensation that raced over her skin from Vibeke's touch and which ignited a fire deep in her belly.

Ember found her breathing catch and deepen slightly. She found herself smiling, though unsurprised when she became aware of the pleasure revealed in her expression. She wrapped her arms around Vibeke's waist and brought her close, burying her face against into her chest, holding her tightly, savouring the scent of her love, the press and strength and softness of her body against her. Loosening her hold, she took hold of the bottom of Vibeke's t-shirt and lifted it up and over her head. She held her close again, inhaling her scent and feeling amazed by the sensuality of it and the press of soft, warm skin against her. She ran a few small kisses across Vibeke's chest, then pressed her face against her again. Reaching around Vibeke's back, she deftly unclipped and then removed her bra. As she took in the perfection of Vibeke's breasts and leaned forward against her with a soft moan, she wondered at the power of the rising desire that she felt, that was so great that it rushed through her in an irresistible wave that swept her under.

Together then, with smiles and touches of tender pleasure, they quickly removed the rest of each other's clothes. Once that was done, Ember took hold of Vibeke's hand and led her into the bathroom and to the shower. She turned the tap, adjusted the temperature, checked the water with her hand and then stepped within.

Vibeke followed her in and closed the shower door behind them.

'I like being in here with you,' Ember said.

'Really?' Vibeke took the bar of soap and a sponge from the shower shelf, created a lather, then diligently began to soap and gently scrub Ember's body. When that was done, Ember returned the favour. They shampooed each other's hair, then helped each other rinse off, standing together under the waterfall of warm water. For a little while they held each other close and tightly. Ember wondered at her need to hold onto her love, squeezing her around her waist and pressing the side of her face against her upper chest and shoulder, and feeling Vibeke holding her back, her strong arms about her.

At length they turned off the shower and used thick, soft towels but, impatient and still a little damp, soon left the steam of the bathroom and went back into the bedroom.

Vibeke pulled back the covers of the bed, then fell backwards onto the sheets and drew Ember with her. Ember came down on top of her and simply lay there for long moments, staring down into Vibeke's eyes and brushing her damp hair back from her lovely face. She rose and fell slightly as Vibeke breathed, and she could see the flush of warmth and desire revealed in Vibeke's face. Her mauve eyes were darkened and just suggested that hint of a ruby colour that sometimes touched them. Her pupils dilated were but there was no forgetfulness there, no clouding because of lust, rather an extraordinary openness about her as if she was drinking in everything about Ember that she could - and, it seemed, almost disbelieving her happiness in them being together.

'My heart and everything that I am is yours,' Ember said softly.

'You are my heart and my life.'

Ember pressed her forehead against Vibeke's, and then kissed her way down past one shapely ear, across the side of her jaw, then finally pressed her mouth against Vibeke's soft lips. At the same time she felt Vibeke's fingers entwine through her hair.

For a long while they kissed, full of tenderness and rising desire. Then Vibeke rolled them over so that Ember felt Vibeke's weight upon her. Then Vibeke kissed her way down her neck, biting gently at her pulse-point, then slid down until she could caress and kiss her breasts, bestowing much and lingering attention upon them.

And so time dissolved and awareness narrowed until all they knew was their experience of each other - and widened too, for they were filled with this experience, with each other. Lingering kisses and caresses, the sliding of skin against skin, the pressure of body against body was all they knew. Sometimes they looked into other's eyes. Sometimes they held each other tight, eyes closed against the pleasurable intensity that burned through them in liquid heat. Ember pressed her thigh against Vibeke's centre and felt the rocking of her hips against her. She tasted the sweet, slick wetness that flooded from Vibeke's centre and lapped at her and buried her face between her legs. She lost herself, the universe seeming to explode outwards in an eruption of light that flooded back in on itself as Vibeke held her tightly and slid her fingers in and out of her. On and on they loved each other, until finally, after one more simultaneous and tender delightment, they found themselves lying in a dazed and wondering and pleasure-filled tangle of limbs.

After a little while, Ember's breathing and thundering heart slowed to something approaching normal. She turned slightly, resting her head upon Vibeke's shoulder and wrapping her arm about her stomach, and felt Vibeke holding her back, her arms about her. She smiled as Vibeke gave her a little kiss upon the top of her head. She breathed deeply, intensely aware of Vibeke's scent - of sweat and arousal. She nuzzled Vibeke's skin, then settled down again.

And slowly, breathing deeply but more slowly, they drifted into half-dreams that were full of contentment and bliss and a sense of thundering profundity.

viii: *Romantic Meal*

After waking, Vibeke and Ember took quick showers - separately this time. When Vibeke, who had gone second, came out to the kitchen, Ember was just setting a fresh pot of tea, mugs and milk upon the kitchen table.

They sat at their customary places across the corner of the table. They were both wearing bathrobes - Vibeke's was a deep red and Ember's was of light blue.

As they sipped tea, Vibeke smiled when she saw that Ember had a blissful, almost lost expression upon her face. Her eyes were staring at Vibeke's chest and she had slipped a hand inside Vibeke's bathrobe, drawing it apart a little. Her fingers were tracing gentle, abstract patterns across the skin of Vibeke's upper chest and around the curves of her breasts.

'You seem to be enjoying yourself,' Vibeke said with a chuckle.

Ember stopped what she was doing of a sudden and blushed slightly. 'I'm sorry. Just can't keep my hands off you, it seems.'

'Don't stop, if you don't want to,' Vibeke said, suddenly serious. 'I wasn't meaning to tease you. I really like that you want to touch me.'

Ember met her gaze for a moment and smiled. 'I like that you want to touch me,' she said softly.

A few quiet minutes later, as they finished their tea, Vibeke said: 'Would you like to go out for a meal with me? If you are anything like as hungry as me . . .'

Ember nodded, and entwined her fingers with Vibeke's and then raised her hand to her lips, and kissed each of Vibeke's knuckles. 'I would like that.'

'There is that restaurant by the river that we have not tried. It seems like quite a romantic place and the evening may be warm enough for us to sit outside.'

Half an hour later they were ready to go. They had not dressed formally but had decided against jeans and t-shirts as well. Vibeke wore elegant black trousers and a white blouse with loose sleeves drawn in at the wrists, open at the neck and with a ruby pendant upon a silver chain just above her cleavage. Ember wore a long, loose-fitting skirt of light grey-mauve cloth, and a red blouse that had lace edges. She wore light golden chains at wrist and neck, and three matching chains dangled from each ear.

Before leaving they stood together before the tall mirror in their bedroom, holding hands.

'We really do make rather an attractive-looking couple,' Ember said, smiling as she regarded their reflection.

'I think we do,' Vibeke agreed. 'Taller and smaller, dark red and light blonde. And much more than what is immediately visible.'

Ember turned around once, and then faced Vibeke, holding both her hands.

'Shall we go?' Vibeke asked, raising one of Ember's hands as if to escort her with much chivalry to the front door.

They took their bags from the top of a chest of drawers, and headed for the car.

Twenty minutes later they were seated at one of the three tables that was out on the patio at the back of the restaurant. One of the other tables was occupied, but the one between them was not. The patio was built such that it jutted slightly from the building and its edge was directly above the edge of the narrow river that ran below. From where they sat, Vibeke and Ember could look down into the dark flow, and see the lights of a few streetlamps and houses reflected in the swirling, inky liquid, and the reeds and grasses that moved and bobbed with the current. A small family of ducks appeared as they watched, swimming slowly upstream and stopping to investigate a thicker patch of weeds and bushes on the far bank.

A candle burned and flickered upon their table, and more candles, protected from the wind by coloured glass - red and dark blue - were lit in sconces upon the narrow wooden pillars that supported the roof over the patio. Earthenware urns were set here and there, with climbing plants ascending the pillars, two of them blooming with fragrant yellow and mauve blooms.

The light that came from inside the restaurant was muted and soft, and the conversation from the few customers there was inaudible except when one or another waiter or waitress passed through one of the outer doors.

For a few minutes they looked through their menus as they sipped water and ate a little bread that they dipped in a saucer of olive oil and balsamic vinegar.

'Glad they provided this,' Vibeke said. 'Otherwise I'd probably scarf down my entire meal in about three minutes.'

'Yes, I feel rather ravenous myself.'

Shortly their waitress returned to them - a girl in her early twenties, with mousy brown hair and round, innocent looking eyes. She made Ember think of a spaniel that liked to please its owner and was no doubt a likeable woman. 'Are you ready to order?' she asked.

They did so, having planned to share what they could.

'Anything else to drink?'

'No, thanks,' Vibeke said. She had asked Ember if she wanted to have some wine with the meal, but Ember was indifferent at best and Vibeke did not really want any.

The waitress thanked them and took their menus.

'You are not too keen on wine or other alcoholic drinks,' Ember said, her thoughts apparently along the lines of Vibeke's.

Vibeke tilted her head slightly. 'No,' she said. 'I like the taste of some dry, intense red wines very much. And some real ales are good too. And a few other drinks are hardly objectionable. But although alcohol makes me feel good in some ways, it nevertheless muffles my thoughts, dulls my perceptions and makes my emotions somehow shapeless. I do not want the crystal clarity with which I perceive you to become blurred. I want to perceive you perfectly, and be as awake as it is possible to be as I do so.' She fell silent for a little while, thinking before she continued. 'You are the most precious thing in my life. You have so much beauty. For me to turn away from that even for a moment . . . I would rather savour every moment with all the alertness and wakefulness that I can.'

Their starters arrived shortly, and they ate in companionable silence for a while, though they were both intensely aware of the other. Often they would simply find themselves staring at each other. Both of them sometimes looked up to find the other staring and then blush a little as if they had been caught. They lightly touched hands upon the table, and smiled at each other.

'Pretty good seafood selection,' Ember said as she sat back. They had eaten shrimp and mussels and oysters, lemon and lettuce, and fresh bread. The starter had been a taster more than anything, but had been very good.

When the waitress returned with their main courses, they saw that they were much larger. Vibeke had chosen trout, fried potatoes and salad, while Ember had chosen spinach lasagna and salad. The servings were more than generous.

As they picked up their knives and forks to dig in, they met each other's eyes and Ember said: 'Well, we ordered rather different things but could we share a few bites?'

'I'd like that.'

A little later Ember looked about them with mock furtiveness. Then, keeping her voice low, she said: 'You know, I feel a certain tenderness, a very pleasant ache in a rather special place.'

Vibeke looked at her affectionately. 'Me too. For a while there I was wondering if I would be able to walk straight for the next couple of days. But it is actually just a rather nice reminder.'

'It is,' Ember agreed. She took a small bite of her lasagna, chewed slowly and swallowed - clearly savouring the morsel - and then said: 'After we make love, do you sometimes find that you have amazing little dreams?'

Vibeke looked up at her, almost startled by Ember's words. It was strange that they had not talked about this before, though perhaps, as was the nature of dreams, they tended to hide themselves from their more waking moments. 'Yes, I do,' she said quietly. 'And they are amazing.'

Ember nodded. 'They are fleeting but they seem to be so very deep,' she went on. 'Sometimes I feel as if I am recognising a kind of truth that I have always known or which lay deep within me, and think that if I could only grasp the meaning that floods through me I would be everything, would know the deepest of all secrets about myself and about you and about the universe.' She shrugged slightly, self-deprecatingly. 'I know that sounds exalted but it's really how I feel. It's quite extraordinary. I wish that I could hold onto those moments and fall into them. It is almost like I am falling into you.'

Vibeke regarded her with a gentle smile. 'I have the same experiences,' she said. 'I cannot describe them in any way other than the way you did. But they are so blissful. I have occasionally had equivalently blissful dreams during a night's sleep but it has been very rare indeed. It's incredible that when we make love it always triggers them though.'

They were silent for a few moments, and then Vibeke carefully cut a small forkful of trout, rained a little lemon juice on it, and held it out for Ember. She grinned as Ember's mouth closed about it, removing it from the fork, then chewing and tasting it.

'Good?' Vibeke asked after she had swallowed.

'Good. Can I have another piece?'

'Of course.'

Vibeke had golden pudding with custard for desert, while Ember had hot chocolate fudge cake with liquid chocolate drizzled on top. They drank a pot of tea, and took their time with finishing.

'That was a great meal,' Vibeke said, leaning back and folding both hands across her belly.

'It certainly was. I'd like to sit here for a little while just to digest, but maybe afterwards we could drive out of town and go for a short walk? I think I need to burn just a little of this energy before we go to sleep tonight.'

Vibeke thought there was a twinkle in Ember's eyes and said: 'Sure, I'd like that.'

Ember smiled, then looked about them, taking in the mildness and peace and the lights of the night. The stars were out and a crescent moon was rising. 'Oh look,' she said then. 'The ducks are back. Maybe they live here.'

ix: *Stars and Moonlight*

They had parked their metallic, graphite-coloured Volkswagen in the small car park at the front of the restaurant. They were quiet as Vibeke drove into and through central Otterhampton and back to their house. They only stopped there for a couple of minutes to change into training shoes and grab a bottle of water and a couple of lightweight blankets, and then they set out again, driving four or so miles to where the hills became more pronounced. Vibeke much enjoyed the drive, and the quietness of the roads, the headlamps cutting a bright swathe through the darkness ahead of them. She concentrated upon her driving and was very aware of each curve of the road, each change of gears and the way she controlled their speed with ease and smoothness. A few times an oncoming vehicle's lights appeared, bright and harsh, swelling and then flashing by them. They passed a few muted glimmers of lights from farmhouses and a few cottages. Vibeke watched as a plane crossed the eastern sky, betrayed by its steadily flashing lights.

She reflected that there was an intimate and tender peacefulness between her and Ember now. She found that Ember glanced at her from time to time; and for a minute or two they held hands until Vibeke needed to change gears on a steeper slope and curve.

They parked at a small layby and sat still for a moment in the abrupt silence after Vibeke turned off the engine. Then, with a gentle smile, Vibeke climbed out and Ember did the same.

After locking the car, they set off up an easy path that led along the side of a field that had been left fallow. It had not rained for a few days and the going was not difficult, but nevertheless they were glad they had stopped to change footwear. The moon was rising and, though less than quarter, threw sufficient silver light across the ground for them to see well enough not to trip. The stars were remarkably bright in the sky and there was no cloud to be seen beyond a faint haze upon the horizons.

After about a mile and half, as they reached the top of a hill that was carpeted by heather and cropped grass, they stopped by a stand of boulders. 'This seems like a good place,' said Ember.

Vibeke unfolded one of the blankets she was carrying and threw it out from her while she held two of its corners, then let it settle upon the ground.

They sat down then, and Ember unscrewed the top of the bottle of water and handed it to Vibeke. After taking a few gulps Vibeke handed it back.

'This is nice,' Ember said with a chuckle, and in the silvery dimness Vibeke saw that she was smiling as she looked out across the landscape. The fields and woods and hills were dark, and here and there was the twinkling yellow light from one or another house. In the distance they could see some of the lights of Otterhampton, and of another town rather further to the east. A gentle breeze had picked up as it had become later and though it had been very comfortable to sit outside at the restaurant, now the air was becoming rather chilly.

But it was the lights of the sky that caught their attention.

'Will you lie with me?' Ember asked.

Vibeke nodded, and lay back, and Ember lay down beside her. They lay very close to each other at a slight angle, their heads almost touching, their arms brushing, and they held hands. Vibeke pulled the second blanket around them so that they were comfortable. The warmth of each other's body and the cosiness beneath the blanket contrasted with the cool air whispering over their faces.

For a while they gazed up into the immensity, marvelling at the countless stars that glimmered and twinkled so brilliantly above them. Vibeke felt almost as if they would fall upwards into the endless, velvet depths of blue-black sky and diamond stars - and thought that as long as Ember was with her, she would not fear the enormity or the loneliness of tumbling among the distant stars. Then she chuckled at this notion, that seemed both grandiose and suggested she was a mushball that Ember was able to melt into a puddle of warm goo on a remarkably frequent basis.

She grinned to herself. 'You realise you've made me incredibly soft,' she said with mixed amusement and pleasure.

'Have I?' Ember seemed to consider this for a while, then said: 'I find it hard to imagine you ever being anything other than sensitive before I met you.'

Vibeke thought about the matter too. 'Maybe you're right. I guess I just never had the experience of feeling like this before and the mixture of vulnerability and tenderness I feel towards you is quite overwhelming - in a very pleasant way.'

Ember brought Vibeke's hand to her lips, and gently kissed her palm. 'I feel the same,' she said.

They were quiet for a couple of minutes then, before Ember said, looking up: 'That looks like a cartoon bear pulling an enormous jar of marmalade behind it.'

'Really? Show me.'

'Look.' Ember pointed. 'There's the face, with the eyes and nose as three bright points. You can see the paws beneath. And back there is the jar of marmalade.' She traced the outline.

'Hmm. You're not wrong, except . . . how do you know it's a jar of marmalade? It could be a barrel of jam.'

'No. Definitely marmalade. A bear like that would only pull a jar of jam after it on a Wednesday, so it can't be that.'

'Fair enough.'

Later: 'I think that's a frog down there beneath the jar of marmalade,' Vibeke suggested.

'You're right. Why is it carrying a duck on its head?'

x: More Love

It was midnight when they got back home. After undressing, brushing their teeth and taking yet another quick shower, they tumbled into bed. Extracting herself again for a moment, Ember managed in the darkness to locate a box of matches upon the bedside table and to light the solitary, half-burned nightlight that was there.

Then Ember squirmed across to Vibeke and laid her head upon her shoulder and wrapped her arm across her belly. She smiled at the press of Vibeke's warm skin and soft flesh against her and the amazing feeling of safety and love she felt in Vibeke's embrace. She snuggled a bit closer and sighed with happiness.

'It has been a wonderful day,' Vibeke said a moment before Ember was able to say the same thing.

'It really has. I hope we will have many more days like this.'

They lay quietly for a little while, and Ember realised that the day was not even over. She had not considered closing her eyes to go to sleep and she was aware that Vibeke was fully awake beside her - seemingly lost in contemplation of the pleasures of them spending such a blissful time together.

'Of course, the day is not over yet,' Ember said, giving voice to her thoughts.

And she drew back the covers to one side of her and wriggled around until her head was resting upon Vibeke's thigh and her knees were by Vibeke's shoulder.

Slowly then, she reached out and brushed her fingertips across Vibeke's ribs, and over her stomach, even as Vibeke turned slightly to give her better access. She felt Vibeke kiss her way up her thighs in turn, and slide her fingertips up the outsides of her legs and around her hips, then down through the soft curls above her centre.

Ember felt the amazing sensitivity that raced across her skin, the pleasure in the touches. She felt her breath catch, and realised that she was smiling in gentle awe of the love she felt for her beloved Vibeke.

Making love was different to how it had been earlier in the day. Then it had lasted a long time - and several times - and had been full of passion and fire. This time lasted just as long, but it was a slower, more languorous love: lingering kisses and caresses and explorations that were always gentle, bringing each of them to the edge of the summit and holding them there for a long, sweet time.

xi: *Sleep*

Later, in the small hours of the morning, Ember and Vibeke lay close and warm together as the candle flickered and the flame became smaller. They were lying on their sides, facing the same direction, Vibeke holding Ember from behind, her hand pressed to Ember's stomach, Ember's hands pressed over Vibeke's.

Vibeke nuzzled Ember's hair and breathed in her fragrance. She felt the gentle movement as Ember breathed, and could faintly feel the steady beating of Ember's heart.

'I feel so safe, so protected,' Ember said softly, putting into words what she felt so often when she was in Vibeke's embrace.

'I feel that way too, when you hold me,' Vibeke replied. 'I don't really remember feeling accepted much in my life, or accepting myself. But with you I feel loved.' As she felt Ember shift slightly, settling down, she said: 'Sleep well, my heart.'

'You too, my life.'

A little while later, Vibeke was aware of the slowing and deepening of Ember's breathing as she drifted to sleep. For a while she remained awake, not wanting to sleep even though she knew she would be tired tomorrow - indeed it was too late for them not to be tired tomorrow anyway, not that she in any sense regretted it.

Sometimes, she reflected, she liked to wake up during the night and lie there for a little while, resisting sleep. She liked to be aware of Ember being with her, lying beside her or snuggled up against her. Such moments made her nights seem not merely passed in unconscious slumber, but savoured as much as she could.

At last, as the clock passed half past two and the candle finally glimmered one last time and died, Vibeke closed her eyes and allowed herself to fall into a deep and restful and utterly peaceful sleep.

Chapter Twelve

Things to Do

Monday 11th - Sunday 17th September, Year 1:

It was a busy week. Vibeke had to reorganise a section of the nursery and it meant getting to work a little early and getting home an hour or two late. Each evening she felt physically rather tired and sometimes rather frustrated because of difficulties she was having with the contractors who were building a new glass house behind the existing ones. Not that she was indifferent to the project - it would have better temperature and light control than the others and it would be used to grow rarer and more delicate tropical plants. The owner of the nursery had explained that he was hoping to be able to grow certain plants that could be used for medicinal research, which seemed to Vibeke to be a good idea.

On the Tuesday, they arrived home from work to find that one of the windows at the back of their house was broken, though not much of the glass had fallen in. They guessed that it had been hit by a bird. The window would need replacing, and Ember said she would organise for someone to come round and fit the new glass as soon as she could.

On the Wednesday Ember found herself needing to stay late at work in order to finish a dress for a business function that a valued customer was going to the next day - but at least it paid well. On the Thursday morning she had a dentist's appointment - just routine care - that meant she had little time for a final fitting of the dress with her customer. But, fast and precise as she was, she was able to complete the work on time and the woman even paid her extra for the quality with which she had done it.

On the Thursday evening, Mrs Waechter phoned and asked if Vibeke and Ember might give her a lift to the home of one of her good friends that she was rather concerned about. He lived in a country cottage that had been converted from the gatehouse of an old country estate that had been divided up a century or so ago. Though he had told her not to worry, Mrs Waechter suspected that he was more unwell than he was letting on. Since it was not an easy place to reach by public transport, she hoped that Vibeke and Ember might be available to take her there.

They collected Mrs Waechter shortly after six o'clock. She opened the front door of her house just as they pulled up outside. Ember climbed out and gave her a brief hug as she reached them. 'Hi Mrs Waechter,' she said with a big smile. 'How are you?'

Mrs Waechter took her hand and patted it. 'I'm fine,' she said. 'Just a bit worried about Edward. He's a stubborn old goat in some ways. Thank you for helping out.'

'Not a problem.' Ember took in Mrs Waechter's brown skirt and green pullover and her rather large brown handbag. She noticed that Mrs Waechter had a certain nervous energy about her and wondered if perhaps she cared for her friend more than she might have admitted. 'Let's get going then,' she said, and opened the back door for her.

Mrs Waechter climbed and reached for the seatbelt and settled herself. 'Hello Vibeke,' she said as she did so. 'Nice to see you.'

'You too Mrs Waechter,' Vibeke said, turning to her for a moment. 'We'll be at your friend's place soon enough.'

Once Ember had climbed in, closed the door and buckled up, she gave Vibeke a quick grin. 'Let's go.'

Vibeke put the car in gear and pulled away.

For the next half hour they did not say much. Ember navigated onto a faster route, then among surprisingly labyrinthine country roads in an area of old farmland, small fields, stone walls, hamlets and run down farmhouses. The evening was dull and grey, low and uniform cloud seeming to brood over the world. Seeing a few falling-down cottages, disintegrating walls, fields overgrown with saplings or birch and pine, and decaying barns, there was a sense of gloom about the errand they were on.

At length Mrs Waechter pointed out her friend's home and Vibeke turned into its long drive and pulled up beside the old cottage. Its walls, once whitewashed, were rather grey and its roof was clearly in disrepair. Its garden was unkempt and overgrown with weeds.

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Waechter. 'I haven't been here in six months or more but Edward always used to like working in the garden. He at least liked to keep it under control. Well, let's go. He should be expecting us.'

They climbed out and walked up the short path. Mrs Waechter knocked on the door using a large brass knocker. They had to wait a little but then the door swung aside to reveal Edward in his dressing gown.

He might once have been quite tall and solidly built, or so Ember supposed. Now he was stooped, probably rather shrunken with age. His long-fingered hands were gnarled and emaciated and liver-spotted. His cheeks and eyes were sunken and his skin was waxy. Nevertheless his thin grey hair was neatly cut and brushed straight back and he was clean-shaven, and he managed a smile that suggested he was a kindly man who was glad to see an old friend.

'Hello Emma,' he said. His voice was hoarse and deep and might once have been a powerful baritone. He nodded to Vibeke and Ember. 'Please come in,' he said.

When he turned from them, they all noticed that he almost stumbled and that it was clearly an effort for him to walk.

Ember let Vibeke precede her into the house. It smelled of old wood, varnish and leather and a hint of pipe smoke. It also smelled of human age, though one of the windows in the living room was open. The rooms were small and the panes were deep set in the thick walls, dusty and failing to let in much light. Ember saw a simple, small but clean kitchen down a couple of steps with a door to the overgrown garden; and then she followed Vibeke into the main room.

Edward sat himself down in an armchair by the unlit fireplace. 'Please forgive me,' he said, seeming to struggle a little for breath. 'I'll offer you a cup of tea, but please give me a moment to catch my breath.' His thin arms shifting him awkwardly, he finally leaned back with a sigh.

'Let me make the tea,' Mrs Waechter said. 'I know where everything is.' She did not wait for an answer but bustled from the room, a woman with a purpose.

Edward regarded Ember and Vibeke and smiled at them then with surprising alertness and warmth. 'Please take a seat,' he said. 'It's good to see you Ember,' he continued as they sat down on the sofa. Then he regarded Vibeke and said: 'And you must be Vibeke. I've heard some wonderful things about you. And . . . my word, it's been a while since I had the pleasure of the company of a couple of young beauties such as yourselves.' He chuckled and his slightly self-deprecating air revealed his words to be clearly genuine.

'How are you Edward?' Ember asked.

He did not answer for a moment and his expression became thoughtful and perhaps grim. 'I've been struggling a bit these last couple of weeks. Can't seem to get my strength back.' He shrugged slightly. 'Damn. I remember when I visited my grandfather when he was ill. That was barely past the middle of last century. Didn't think I'd ever be like him.' He shook his head and then regarded Ember with his clear blue gaze. 'You seem to have found true happiness,' he said. For a moment his face was very serious, just as his words were. But then he nodded a couple of times and smiled at her, his eyes smiling too.

'I have,' Ember said. And she reached out and took hold of Vibeke's hand and gave it a squeeze.

'Good for you,' said Edward. 'I always hoped you'd find someone to be with. You didn't seem lonely, and in fact you seemed to be one of the happiest people I'd ever met. Still, it's good to find your soulmate if you can.'

'Thank you Edward. It means a lot to hear you say that.' She looked at Vibeke then and said: 'Edward was married to a woman he met in Southern Rhodesia. They lived there for a long time.'

As Ember said this Mrs Waechter entered the room carrying a tray with a teapot, four cups and a small jug of milk and a plate of biscuits. Vibeke moved the small coffee table from beside the sofa so that she could set the tray down, then Mrs Waechter took a seat in the armchair facing Edward.

'You lived in Rhodesia,' Vibeke said. 'That's fascinating. What took you out there?'

'I was an engineer,' replied Edward. 'Working on a dam, then at a power station. Margaret was studying in London at the time and I met her when she was visiting her parents. She was a real looker. Light auburn hair and green eyes. She always had to carry a parasol with her otherwise she would get badly sunburned.'

Ember felt warmed as she saw the pleasure that Edward felt in recalling his wife. Margaret had died four years ago - a sudden and unexpected heart attack while she slept.

As Ember poured tea for them, Mrs Waechter stood and went over to Edward and carefully knelt her heavy body beside his chair. She reached out and touched her hand to his forehead and looked into his eyes. More than that, Ember was aware that she was listening to the way he was breathing for he was doing so more quickly and deeply than should have been necessary. 'How do you feel Edward?' Mrs Waechter said. 'Really. I know you're a tough old soldier but you've lost a lot of weight and . . .' She trailed off and there was a suggestion of tears in her eyes - but then she seemed to scold herself so that she might be strong for him.

He looked away into the empty fireplace for a few seconds, then back at her. 'I've been having trouble sleeping. I don't seem to be able to get enough air into my lungs to relax.' As he said the words his pale face seemed to become almost grey with sudden fear; but then the look cleared as he took hold of his emotions again.

'I think you need to see a doctor,' Mrs Waechter said very gently. She brushed his hair back from his forehead - not that it needed to be brushed back, rather she clearly just wanted to soothe him.

He nodded, looking away again. 'I suppose you're right. I just . . . Well, I suppose I'll have to face it.'

Mrs Waechter gave him a little smile and Ember could see the sadness in her face. She thought that Mrs Waechter might have guessed something about the nature of his illness. Ember too suspected that it was likely to be serious at best and perhaps that he would not recover.

'Let us take you to the Otterhampton hospital,' Mrs Waechter. We can go tonight. I'll give them a call to let them know we're coming and we'll have someone check you out.'

Again Edward was quiet for a little while. At length he said: 'All right. Will you help me pack some clothes and a few books to read? I have a feeling I might be there for a while.'

'We don't know what the matter is,' Mrs Waechter replied. But then, as if sorry she had spoken if it might give him false hope, she said: 'All right. Maybe Ember can help you to your bedroom and you can tell me what you'll need and where I can find it.'

'Thank you, Emma.' Edward spoke the words softly and there was a great sorrow and gratitude and awareness in his tone and expression. Then, looking up he said: 'Let's just have tea and biscuits first. Maybe Ember and Vibeke can tell me of some adventures.'

Less than three hours later Edward had been checked into hospital for 'at least a few days' so that he might undergo some tests and observation. Mrs Waechter talked with him for few minutes once he was settled in, and promised that she would be back to visit him the following day. Afterwards, Vibeke and Ember gave her a lift home. She asked them if they would like to come

in for a little while, but Ember could see that she was rather upset and not really in the mood for company.

As they headed back to their own place Ember said: 'I hope he'll be all right.'

Vibeke nodded. 'He seems like a very good man. I bet he had quite the sense of humour when he was younger.'

'I expect you're right.'

Vibeke reached out and took Ember's hand and gave it a little squeeze. She could tell that Ember was feeling down but knew that she would talk about when she wanted to. She thought that perhaps she needed a little space before she might wish to put her thoughts and feelings into words.

But as Vibeke pulled into the driveway and parked, Ember said: 'More than anything I want him not to suffer.'

Vibeke turned off the engine, pulled up the handbrake and turned slightly towards her, watching her closely.

'I know people are afraid of death but a painful death is so much worse,' Ember continued. 'And it must be so strange. Most of our lives we feel we are going somewhere. It might only be towards the next day, when we look forward to going for a walk or reading a good book. Or it might be just taking pleasure in looking at old photographs and considering one's achievements. But then, suddenly, there is nothing one can look forward to much, and one's achievements suddenly do not matter becomes one knows they are about to be taken away in their entirety.'

Vibeke gave her hand another squeeze. 'We cannot really argue against it,' she said. 'I . . . I just hope that we can hope to find some kind of acceptance of it.'

Ember looked across at her then and gave her a smile. 'You know . . . I can accept it. I mean, to have to die seems such a little thing in comparison with what I have with you. Such a small price.'

Vibeke tilted her head slightly, returning the smile and looking into her eyes.

And then Ember giggled. 'You really have turned me into a mushball,' she said.

'You have had much the same affect on me,' Vibeke said, her eyes twinkling.

At length they climbed out of the car and let themselves into their house. As Vibeke set the car keys down on the hall table she said: 'Well, let's just hope Edward will be all right. And let's visit him and get the details of his adventures in Southern Africa. I think he'll like that.'

On the Friday Vibeke had to go into work to make sure she was there in time for an early delivery. As she cycled to the nursery, her breath frosting in the chilly early morning air and the wind cold on her face, she considered how the week had been so far - without as much time for her and Ember as they were normally used to.

They had still managed to savour their time together. They had had breakfast together every morning, making sure they arose a little bit earlier so that they might have an extra fifteen minutes in which to enjoy the meal and each other. On two mornings they had managed to go for a run, though on the other three they had decided not to. On two of the evenings when Vibeke might have exercised, Ember had suggested they do some yoga together, and that had turned out to be fun - and Ember was really very flexible. Both times it had led to Vibeke watching Ember closely and finding herself unable to resist her flexible and very sexy love - and she had ended up carrying her giggling partner to bed. On three of the four evenings of the week so far they had also watched a little television, and on one evening had watched a film before turning in rather late.

Arriving at work, having enjoyed her cycle ride - it had certainly cleared her head after slightly less sleep than she might have liked - Vibeke found herself looking forward to returning home in the evening and spending the weekend with Ember.

At nine o'clock that evening, Vibeke sat in the corner of the sofa with Ember leaning back against her. They watched a film called *Fighting the Hurricane*. It was a mixture of emotional drama and action with a fair amount of humour thrown in. It was a good choice and Vibeke found herself grinning at the way Ember would laugh lightly or do a little stationary dance or lean her head against her as if to punctuate her enjoyment of the humorous moments.

Vibeke considered that in comparison to Ember she was much less demonstrative and that she must appear to have a quiet stoicism that contrasted with Ember's vivacious delightedness in so much. She wondered what it was that Ember liked about her in this respect. Perhaps she saw Vibeke as strong and capable, which she acknowledged she was in most senses.

'I don't really want to, but I'm wondering if we should go to the supermarket today,' Ember said over breakfast on the Saturday morning.

'Maybe we should,' Vibeke concurred. 'I like it when we manage to go before work because it's so much emptier and quicker, but we have so much to stock up on maybe we should go today. A trip to a DIY shop would be useful too. She took a small bite of wholemeal toast with butter and marmalade, chewed and savoured the mouthful and swallowed. After a sip of tea she said: 'Well, since I'm not usually that much of a fan of shopping, maybe we should dress up as pirates and swing in through the doors on ropes while waving fake cutlasses, plant a Jolly Roger flag on our trolley, rush about throwing things into it like lunatics while saying clichéd pirate things, and then politely queue at the till to pay just like ordinary decent citizens.'

'We could do that,' agreed Ember. 'Do we have any pirate gear, fake or otherwise?'

'No. And I'm guessing neither of us want to go looking for any.'

'How about going as lemurs instead?'

'We have lemur costumes?'

'No, but we could pretend. And then we could feign surprise when anyone fails to notice that we are dressed as lemurs.'

'Sounds like a plan.'

On the Sunday afternoon Vibeke and Ember went to the hospital to visit Edward. He was comfortable and in good spirits but seemed to have weakened further. They enjoyed listening to him as he answered questions they asked him - they both saw how much pleasure he took from reminiscing about his life, especially when he had been young and most especially about his wife. They found that he had a curious mixture of directness and self-honesty combined with a rather wry and dry sense of humour and it made his stories and company entertaining. After twenty minutes or so, seeing that he was finding it more difficult to talk, they took over and talked rather more themselves.

'Thank you so much for visiting an old man,' he said to them from his hospital bed as they took their leave - they could see that he had had enough, much though he had clearly enjoyed their company. He took each of them by the hand, giving them a firm squeeze.

'I was our pleasure,' Ember said.

'It's been most interesting getting know you,' Vibeke said.

They stopped at a Chinese takeaway on the way home. It was coming up to five o'clock and they thought a fairly early meal would be good. Then they could relax for the evening.

The Chinese takeaway was around the corner and about a hundred and fifty yards from the Indian restaurant where Vibeke and Ember had first seen each other. There were a couple of empty parking spaces outside it, so Vibeke pulled over and they went straight inside.

A bell rang over the door as they entered. 'Good evening,' a young Chinese woman said to them.

It was a small place that just provided a takeaway service - it had no eating area. It had a small table of white plastic and two chairs, and a long padded bench, where people could sit while they were waiting for their orders. The woman was sitting behind a long counter and had a pen poised

over a pad she had been writing in. Vibeke noticed the calligraphy of Chinese words. They were exotic and seemed complex and she wondered if they were difficult for children to learn or if children took them in their stride as they did so many things that might seem insurmountable to adults.

Vibeke and Ember took a couple of menus and sat down next to each other on the bench. They looked through them for a couple of minutes.

'I always enjoy looking through takeaway menus,' Ember remarked with a chuckle. 'It's like there's this amazing degree of possibility, and just the process of imagining what a certain dish might taste like is a great pleasure.'

Vibeke glanced across at her and saw how absorbed Ember was in her perusal of what they might eat. It gave her great pleasure just to watch her. She saw that there the suggestion of a smile was curving the corners of Ember's lips.

'How about spicy fried beef, and bean sprouts with pork and tomato?' asked Ember.

'Sounds good. Also some egg fried rice and Chinese chicken curry. And Cantonese fried noodles.'

'Good choice. Those are pretty spicy.' Ember nodded to herself. 'And some prawn crackers.' Looking up she remarked: 'I suspect that the noodles have very little to do with Canton.'

'No. I wonder if in Canton you can go to an English restaurant and buy a dish called Birmingham roast beef.'

'I wonder where all the décor in this place comes from,' Ember said then. 'I mean the calendar with Chinese writing and images, and the scroll wall hangings with more symbols, and the little red and gold lamp-shades.'

'I guess we could ask.'

Together, they stood and went to the counter and placed their order.

Back at home, relaxing on the sofa together, they slowly finished their rather large meal. They had lit candles and Vibeke had put on some quiet, atmospheric, rather abstract music that suggested wind and waves and bird calls on an electronic landscape. The evening had drawn in early due to heavy cloud out and the first patter of rain could be heard soft against the panes and sills. There was a quietness and intimacy to the evening and Ember felt very alert and aware of the room about them, the flickering candlelight, the music, the rain, the deepening darkness, and most of all of Vibeke. She suspected Vibeke also shared her heightened awareness.

'I am about ready to explode,' she said as she finally put her not quite finished meal aside. 'That really was very good.'

'I think we are lucky with that takeaway,' said Vibeke. 'I've had a few meals from there and they've all be excellent. Good value too. I hope they're doing well - they didn't have any other customers when we were there, but I guess it was fairly early.' Putting her own plate aside, she sat forward and poured them each a mug of tea with milk. She handed Ember her mug with a grin. 'You seem to have taken a liking to this particular mug,' she said. 'Even though you brought your own when you moved in.'

'And I did notice that you started to choose it for me on a regular basis once you noticed I kept using it. What can I say? It has a picture of a happy-looking sheep on it.'

'Fair enough,' Vibeke said with happy grin. 'No more explanation necessary.'

'Where did you get it from?' Ember asked after a moment.

'I bought it. About two years ago, at the supermarket.'

'Hmm.' Ember pictured that, imagining a solitary Vibeke standing before the shelves that displayed mugs and cups for sale and trying to choose one. She considered what Vibeke might have been thinking and why she had chosen that particular mug. It was certainly cute and had pleasing colours. But as she thought of this she also felt a curious sadness and sense of poignancy welling up within her. She thought it was such a pity that Vibeke had made such a charming decision - small though it might have been - and had not had anyone to share this quirk of taste and personality with. She found it quite difficult to think of Vibeke being alone like that - adrift from others, with so much to her and yet without anyone to see it.

She reached out and took Vibeke's hand, and raised it to her lips and kissed the knuckles one by one.

A little later, after clearing away the remains of their meal and quickly washing up, they returned to the sofa and snuggled up together at one end, Ember with her back to Vibeke, wrapped in her arms. They had opened the window and savoured the increased sound of the rain and the brush of cool, damp air that drifted over them from time to time.

'I feel so happy,' Ember said.

She felt Vibeke give her a little squeeze and rub her face gently against her hair. 'Me too.' And Vibeke said: 'Did you enjoy this week?'

Ember paused a little before she answered, wondering for a moment why Vibeke might have asked this. But she thought she knew. 'Yes, I have,' she said at length. 'It's been rather busy. We didn't have any long stretch of time just to have fun together. Too many chores and work and things we really needed to do. I'm glad we did them though.'

Vibeke felt the warmth and solidity of Ember's body pressed against her, and smiled. 'Me too.' Then: 'You know, I'm glad we try to find so many moments to savour during our days, even if they are not long. I really like that we can spend a few minutes together before we go to work. I really like the conversations we have in the car when we are just going shopping. I really like waking up in the small hours and to enjoy being awake for a few minutes, being aware of you, of being in bed with you. It makes me feel so alive.'

'Let's never forget to enjoy those small moments,' Ember said softly.

'Never,' Vibeke breathed even more softly.

Chapter Thirteen

A Trip to Winchester

Saturday 30th September, Year 1:

'Isn't this exciting?!' Ember exclaimed.

Vibeke looked across at her. She had not even started the car yet and Ember already had a beaming smile as she looked out and clearly looked forward to their trip. She wondered what kind of happy imaginings Ember might be thinking of.

'It's our first real trip together. I mean, for more than a day,' Ember went on. 'I wonder if we might ever go on a trip to Scotland, or Zanzibar, or Paraguay.'

'You want to go to Scotland, Zanzibar and Paraguay?' Vibeke turned the key in the ignition and the engine caught immediately. She depressed the clutch, put the car in first gear, released the handbrake and eased off the clutch. The vehicle started smoothly forward.

'Who knows where we might go, but I'm sure it'll be good! As long as we're together.'

Vibeke glanced at her again. She realised that Ember's words had not been said for effect or humour, had not been said mechanically. Rather, she had spoken the words utterly sincerely and had not apparently noticed that they might seem customary or contrived. Realising how deeply she had meant them, Vibeke felt a wash of emotion rush through her and felt a sudden lump in her throat and tears stinging her eyes. *Amazing how Ember can do that to me so often and so easily*, she thought. 'I love you,' she said with a smile after regaining control of herself.

Ember looked across at her, clearly not having expected this - as if this was an unexpected time. She was silent, watching, then finally said with wonder in her tone: 'I love you too.' And she reached out and rested her hand on Vibeke's thigh, rubbing her thumb gently upon the fabric of her worn jeans.

The drive to Winchester could be done in about three and a half hours if they stuck to fast roads but they had decided to take their time. They took a detour along a stretch of quieter roads through hills and woodland and moorland that was particularly picturesque. The weather was very changeable. Sometimes huge, menacing clouds towered up into the sky, with clear blue around them, and in other areas there was low cloud that descended into mist over the higher ground. They found a layby where they could stop for a leisurely snack, sitting at a table and gazing out over a view of rolling farmland and distant tors. The temperature was cool and they were both wearing sweaters but not coats - Vibeke thought Ember looked particularly cute in the fluffy, dark blue woollen pullover that she had chosen. As they finished the cups of coffee they had poured from a flask, a fine drizzle began to fall from the grey sky and they retreated back to the car.

'I like being on the road,' Ember said as they set off again.

'You do?'

'Yes. I mean, I've not been on the road all that often, but the times I have travelled have been enjoyable. I remember when I moved to Otterhampton I felt really good. It was only quite a short journey - a gentleman called Mr Fairfax gave me a lift - and I felt such a sense of anticipation. But I also enjoyed just going. Watching the passing countryside. Liking the sense of movement. Maybe if I travelled more it would become less special.'

'Would you like to go anywhere in particular with me?' Vibeke asked. 'We could save up and try to organise something. There's no reason why we can't.'

'I'd like that,' Ember replied. 'I'm not sure I'd actually be a very good tourist, and I rather like being comfortable, but it'd be nice just to go somewhere very different.'

'I'd like to drive through the old Prussian lands,' Vibeke said.

'Do you think that's where your family came from?'

Vibeke shrugged slightly. 'I don't know. My surname is German but my first name is Norwegian. I have a memory of my foster-mother telling me some amazing fable about my family from hundreds of years ago, and she said they lived in Prussia. I know she was exaggerating at best and perhaps just making it up but she said that's where she thought my parents came from. When I asked my foster-father about it in more detail, he said he had just been told that I'd been brought over from Germany as an infant but he did not know any more than that. But the truth is

I'm not really that interested in my family history. I would like to see some of the country though.'

'If you found you had a cousin who was alive and living in Brandenburg you wouldn't want to visit them?'

Vibeke considered this for a moment. 'I don't think so. They would just be another person to me, no more or less special than anyone else.' She shook her head once then in sudden confusion. 'You know, I don't have any idea why, but I've always had this subconscious conviction that I don't have any living family. Not even any distant cousins. I wonder why that is.'

They were silent for a little while, and Vibeke concentrated on driving. The rain was falling more heavily now and so she had slowed a little. She found that she enjoyed the sound of the water against the windscreen, and the wipers were doing a fairly good job. Sometimes there was a gust of wind that buffeted the car. At length she looked at Ember for a long moment. 'You know even less about your ancestry than me. Do you think have English blood?'

'My name and surname are both older English, but I've no idea. I'm just a foundling. Maybe I'm from a different world.'

Vibeke smiled. 'Could be. Your eyes are really quite remarkable you know. Utterly beautiful but nowhere to be found on the bell-curve of human eyes.'

Ember chuckled. 'No. The weird thing is that I was found with a birth certificate with my name, but the parents either couldn't be tracked or had falsified their names.' After a moment she said: 'Maybe we're both aliens. I rather like that idea. We could be the last survivors of two starships that crashed just after we were born. Perhaps the ships were carrying the last surviving members of two alien races with glorious pasts. And we are the last.'

Vibeke smiled, but also felt a pang of sadness at Ember's words. She realised that through all their lives they had not only been largely apart from others but had actually come to embrace the idea that they were really different. Not that she could imagine seeing herself in any other way now. She knew she would never be highly sociable and that she had no interest in fitting in with one group or another. All she wanted was to be with Ember.

They arrived at their hotel at half past midday. It was in a built up area of shops and offices surrounded by suburbs - a town within a city.

'Looks good,' Ember said as they exited the underground parking area and walked around to the side entrance. The building was new and had a curiously rounded architecture. Its walls were faced with white stone and its blue-tinted window panes were tessellated in never-repeating patterns.

Entering the lobby, they took in the fountain and the little pond to one side. There were huge, sloping windows reaching high above their heads on the south side, illuminating the area in a pleasant glow despite the greyness of the day.

They checked in with a polite desk clerk - a man with an accent that Vibeke suspected was characteristic of New Zealand rather than Australia - and then took a lift up to the third floor and their room.

'Glad your client is paying for this,' Vibeke said with a smile as they took in the new and comfortable appointments of the spacious room.

'They seem to like my work,' Ember said. 'They're really wealthy but it was still generous of them to offer this to us. Hopefully I'll only have to spend about three hours with the fittings tomorrow and a couple of hours on Monday.'

They set down their bags and Vibeke walked over to the window and looked out and down at the street. It was quite narrow but fairly busy with a steady stream of traffic and plenty of pedestrians. She liked that the people were clearly of many different backgrounds and races and liked the contrasts between colourful casual clothes and formal business wear, older people and younger.

Vibeke:

I am glad you have the map and are deciding our route. It is not that I could not do so - I am sure I could be decisive and you would be happy to follow my lead - but I can see how much you enjoy choosing the streets you want to walk down, the famous buildings that you want to see, the parks and bridges that you want a view of. As we pass down a fairly quiet road that runs past the back of some old colleges of imperial sciences - aged and distinctive and rather beautiful as these buildings are, they are not places visited by tourists - I see the way you absorb and take in all that is around you. I have known for some time that you are remarkably observant, that you seem to bathe in the sensations of sight and sound and feeling and atmosphere that surrounds you. It is as if you let go of yourself and simply allow your mind and emotions to fly upon what you take in. Yet now I can see that you are also conversant with the details of what we see - that you not only appreciate the architecture but you really understand it.

You stop outside the low wall of grey stone outside the last of colleges. This one is not the most ornate of them - none of them are flamboyant, all rather understated. The brick walls are grey-black with the soot and dirt of many years. The windows are of leaded glass in small rectangular and square patterns, all set in impressive casements. There seems to be a lot of shadow to the complex walls, more corners and sections than necessary. It is almost as if the architect was looking for a kind of darkness in the design that would instill feelings of sombreness and hence sincerity. I like the grey slate roofs, the small rounded buttresses, the small windows into top floors that seem too shallow to house proper rooms - perhaps it is just attic space. The cloudy

day - more uniformly cloudy than it was earlier, such that the light is clear, deep grey - enhances the impact of the structure.

But the building catches my attention far less than you do. I watch you as you look at it and is as if I cannot help myself - not that I want to. You stand there on the cobbles of the quiet street, a little back from the pavement to get a better view. Your beige walking boots, pale blue jeans and dark blue pullover are very fetching. You hold the map in one hand and you have your small backpack on your back, the straps over both shoulders. I watch you breathing. I take in the way you look at the building, seeing the way your lovely ice-blue eyes are made more silver than usual in the light. I see the fleeting expressions pass upon your features as you react to what you take in. I can see your appreciation of the darkness of the structure but there is also the touch of a smile upon your lips. The gentle, intermittent breeze ruffles your short blonde hair. I see such light and life in you and the emotion it triggers within me is so poignant that I feel as if I am falling, that I cannot endure its strange and pleasurable intensity.

Then you turn to me, and you smile widely when you see that I am looking at you, and your visage glows with the light of an angel.

Ember:

It is really charming that you led me to a bakery so that we could buy some bread not to eat but so that we could feed the ducks in St. Edith's Park. Especially since it meant leaving the park and then returning to it. You were a woman with a mission. I have a feeling that you were moved to do this partly because you could see that it is not the kind of park tourists go to and the businessmen and women tend not to see the ducks. Perhaps you worried that they were hungry.

I stand a little away from the pond and watch you. You are right at the edge of the bank, your knees slightly bent, leaning forward as you throw small pieces of bread out into the water, always aiming for the ducks that have not yet had a fair share. I like that you have such a sense of fairness about you - I suspect it is an earnestness that you might not even be aware of.

Your face is quite pale, your expression intent, your eyes so very deep - it is amazing sometimes how the light catches them and even in moments of simple pleasure like this I can see something behind your gaze: a depth and profundity that seems infinitely deep, ungraspable, astounding. I wonder what the truth of you is, what depths of emotion you experience. Often I think you are so much more than anyone else I have ever met, as if there is an essential you that is ancient, suggesting vast experience. I know that seems like a strange thought but sometimes it seems quite true.

I like the way you brush your dark red hair back when it falls across your cheek or face, and smile when you tuck it behind your ear. I like each small movement you make. I take in your slim and nicely curved form in old jeans and green pullover. Your boots are black, very different to mine. For long moments I find myself staring at the shapes of your hands, the strong and slender fingers, the knuckles and nails. I see such beauty in you, and not simple beauty either.

You turn then and look into my eyes. 'Join me,' you say, perhaps wondering why I stopped feeding the ducks - then realising that I was enjoying watching you, for I can see a nascent chuckle and a slight, pleased self-consciousness revealed in your expression for a moment.

I join you and side by side we take our time throwing fragments of bread out onto the water. There are three male ducks, four females and five ducklings. I like the ducklings most. I am fairly sure you do too.

For their evening meal they chose an interesting-looking restaurant on a road off the business district not far from their hotel. The place was called *The Painting*, and within many pieces of artwork were on display. But it was not pretentious, the atmosphere was relaxed and there was a mixture of businessmen, couples and a few younger people there, most of them eating but some of them just enjoying a drink by the bar in a separate room. It was quite a quiet place and was not expensive, and Ember wanted to try one of the fish dishes that she had spotted when they had stopped to examine the menu that was displayed outside.

A waitress dressed in a pleasant and rather old-fashioned outfit of black and dark green guided them to a table - and then Vibeke asked if they could have the one behind it, since it was in the corner and also by a window. Once they were seated she brought them menus.

'Anything to drink?' she asked.

'Water,' said Vibeke. She looked at Ember. 'A pot of tea?'

Ember nodded. 'That would be good.'

After looking through the menu for a couple of minutes, Vibeke said: 'Excuse me. I'll be back in a moment.' And she stood up to make her way to the toilets.

While she was gone, and now that she had chosen what she would eat, Ember looked around the restaurant. As she did so she noticed that a man of about thirty, sitting at a table with another man, was looking at her. He had fair hair and was fairly tall and athletic looking, and she supposed many women would find him handsome. He gave her a smile and raised his glass of wine to her.

Though she felt slightly discomfited by it, she acknowledged the gesture with a small smile of her own and then looked away.

The waitress returned then with a pot of tea, a small jug of milk and a larger jug of water, and set them down on the table. She also gave Ember a smile. 'Just visiting?' she asked. She had light brown eyes and long, curling mid-brown hair.

Ember chuckled. 'Is it so obvious I'm not from here?'

The waitress tipped her head slightly. 'Well. Winchester is so cosmopolitan that it shouldn't really be possible to guess whether someone is from here or not. I guess you just have very distinctive looks.'

'We are just visiting,' Ember said. 'We live in Otterhampton.'

'Oh, I've heard that's a nice town.' She glanced around her. 'Well, I'll come and take your orders in a moment.'

The meal was very pleasant. Vibeke and Ember took their time, savouring their food and each other's company. They shared some of what they had ordered. They talked about what they had seen during the day.

'I really liked the view along the river,' Ember said. 'I think it's because the river is quite small that it looks so distinctive. All those old buildings, libraries, colleges, government buildings, places of business - all built up to the edge, none of them very large. A kind of architectural smorgasbord in a remarkably small area.'

Vibeke grinned. 'I'm not sure if it was a smorgasbord. Maybe a cornucopia, a profusion, a teemingness of styles.'

'Teemingness? More like a . . . copious verdancy and abundance of form and expression.'

'Indeed. You're right. And probably a smorgasbord too.'

'Would I be able to persuade you or bribe you into giving me a massage when we get back to the hotel?' Ember said.

Vibeke blinked, then chuckled. 'I like your sudden change of direction,' she said. She looked away for a moment and then back. 'I've noticed that before. It's really quite charming. In any case, no persuasion or bribes are necessary. I'll be happy to massage you in any way you wish.'

'Any way?'

'Yes. Any way.'

'Hmm.'

After they had finished their dessert and paid the bill, Ember and Vibeke stood and made their way towards the front doors of the restaurant. As they did so, the man that had been watching Ember earlier approached them from the bar area.

'Hi,' he said, looking mostly at Ember. He smiled and seemed to have a strange mix of both uncertainty and confidence about him. She was not sure if his manner was real or just an act.

She did not say anything but just looked up at him, then across at Vibeke, then back.

'I noticed you earlier,' the man said. He was quite well spoken and his manner was respectful. 'I don't mean to disturb you, but my friend and I were wondering if the two of you would like to join us for a drink.'

'Oh,' said Ember. 'That's kind of you to offer, but I rather want to go outside and walk for a while with Vibeke.' She looked into Vibeke's eyes then and smiled at her.

'All right, no problem,' said the man. 'I'm just in town for a few days and will probably be here tomorrow if you happen to stop by.'

Ember had found herself staring into Vibeke's eyes and did not look back at him until after he had stopped speaking. Then she turned to Vibeke again. 'Come on, let's go.' Then, to the man: 'Thanks again.'

He nodded and they turned away and made their way out of the restaurant.

'That was interesting,' Vibeke said as they walked along the pavement. There was not too much traffic on the street so it was not too noisy. There were quite a few pedestrians though, many of them out enjoying the evening. 'He liked you.'

Ember took hold of Vibeke's hand and gave it a squeeze. 'He seemed to. Maybe his friend had been admiring you all evening but didn't have the courage to approach us.'

Vibeke smiled. 'It's weird you know. He seemed polite enough, and I certainly do understand why someone would find you attractive. But I felt such a surge of . . .'

'Protectiveness?' Ember offered.

Vibeke looked slightly sheepish. 'Yes. I guess I felt there was a potential threat there, though not a likely one. Probably he was completely harmless and just liked you. And it's fair enough he would approach you. But I didn't want you to feel uncomfortable.'

They were quiet then as they headed back to their hotel. The walk was enjoyable after the large meal they had had and it was good to burn off a little energy. They would be glad to get back though as it had been a long day.

Ember:

You have fallen asleep before me, which is quite unusual. Sometimes I have worried that I have prevented you from falling asleep or that you have become uncomfortable because I am wrapped around you and sleeping half on top of you. I have woken up in the small hours from time to time and have often seen that you are not asleep. But I have come to realise that you like those times of wakefulness, mostly - though sometimes I know you cannot sleep even though you are very tired. I am glad you feel confident enough to wake me at such times now so that I might rub circles upon your belly or back, or simply talk quietly to you, soothing you until you can fall asleep.

Now I simply watch you in the dim lilac light of the streetlamps that slides around the curtains. You are breathing deeply and evenly and seem very peaceful.

And I consider some of the differences between us that I like so much.

I was concerned when I first got to know you that perhaps I talk too much. I know I am not exactly a chatty person and certainly not a gossip, but I can sometimes go into long discourses, exegeses and digressions - hopefully with some sense. You are quieter, rarely making speeches, usually offering your thoughts in one or two sentences. I think that you worried that your silences might disturb me just as I worried that my talkativeness might disturb you. Now I know that you like listening to me, while I find your silences curious and fascinating. When I watch you, seeing the suggestions of the thoughts that fill or distract or puzzle or concern you, I see such strength and determination revealed. You wish to get to the bottom of things, to the root of any problem or notion or idea, to see what you might learn and what you might do with that knowledge. At other times I notice that you have managed to put aside all thought - a difficult thing to do but a skill very much worth mastering. And then I see the straightforward honesty of you, your ability to be yourself in the world, the clarity of your emotions. When I watched you driving earlier today I saw this. Later, as we sat together on the bus that took us into the centre, I saw it again.

Sometimes you seem so real to me that all the rest of the world seems to fade into shadows and indistinctness, noise and illusion, while you stand strong at the centre of my universe. I know such ideas are grandiose. But I like them.

I snuggle down, rest my head upon the pillow by your shoulder. I listen to your breathing, feel the warmth of your naked body that brushes mine. I reach out and place my arm over yours, needing the contact. Perhaps when I wake up I will be wrapped in your arms, my head upon your chest, with no memory of how I moved to get there. The thought makes me smile and I close my eyes to rest and sleep.

Sunday 1st October:

Vibeke and Ember walked together to Ember's customer's house. Stopping outside the gates they saw that it was almost a mansion and had the appearance of a stately home. Grandiose and impressive, it was also a little forbidding. The roofs were of dark red tile that was rather

overgrown with moss, and the brick walls were dark with age and in many places covered with climbing ivy. The front garden was well-tended and there were two gleaming cars - a Mercedes and a Bentley - parked out the front. A gardener was sweeping up a few leaves around one side.

'Are you sure you don't want to come in?' Ember asked. 'Mrs Cornell is really very nice and I'm sure she won't mind you waiting. Probably she'd get her cook to bring you a snack the size of a buffet for twenty.'

'Thanks,' Vibeke said. 'I'll come back around midday so that I'm here when for when you finish your fitting.'

'All right,' Ember said. 'Have fun.' Her eyes twinkled. 'Maybe you're a better and more enthusiastic tourist than you think you are,' she said.

Vibeke gave her a brief hug and then waited as Ember pressed the buzzer by the recently-painted gate.

'Cornell residence,' said a tinny voice.

'Hi, it's Ember Leaves here,' Ember said.

'Hello Miss Leaves. Please come up to the house.' There was a click of shifting metal and then the gate rolled back along a track.

Ember looked up into Vibeke's eyes for a moment and held her forearm, the touch lingering. 'See you later.'

'See you later.' And Vibeke nodded as Ember walked in and up the drive. The front door swung open before Ember reached it, revealing what Vibeke guessed to be a housekeeper. She saw Ember exchange a few words with the woman, then turn and look at back at her and give her a wave and a smile.

Vibeke returned the wave and grinned, then set off towards the library she had decided she wanted to visit. It was just a ten minute walk away and she had read that it had a large collection of old poetry and medieval texts - accounts and diaries and stories mostly. Though Winchester had many old libraries, and this was certainly not the most well-known of them, she wanted to be able to read some records of people who had lived many hundreds of years ago. It was not that she was looking for anything in particular, nor anything spectacular. Rather she thought it would be interesting to learn something of everyday lives from centuries ago according to the people who had lived them.

The day was cool and cloudy and there was an erratic breeze. There was also a distinctive smell of approaching autumn in the air. Vibeke wondered if it might rain later.

Vibeke took a different route from the library back to the Cornell residence. Not that she had intended it, she found herself walking past a well-kept green, in the centre of which was a war memorial. Since it was still twenty-five minutes before midday, she decided to cross the edge of the green to have a closer look.

The memorial featured a simple stone block about ten feet high, fifteen feet across the base and tapering to about twelve feet across the top. On the sides were carved many names of people who had died in battle. On the top was a green-tarnished metal sculpture of two men - one lying back, shown to be suffering and dying, the other holding him.

Vibeke walked close to the base of the stone and read a few of the names. They meant nothing to her and it was that very fact that made a sudden rush of emotion well up within her. All these men, and a few women too, people she knew nothing about except that they were all dead as a result of human stupidity and callousness, the hunger for power of a few and the primitive tribal convictions of many. She wondered how many people now, many decades after the war, remembered or knew anything about those who had died. She wondered if the soldiers had thought that their deaths were worthwhile or if, in their suffering, they had wondered what they had been doing and found it pointless, empty and destructive. She hoped that as many of these men as possible had died quick deaths and not slow ones. She was glad that now, for her and Ember, there seemed little threat of a war that would touch them and that she had never faced the possibility of having to fight. She suspected she would be a good fighter but a bad follower. She knew that she would much rather be a pacifist in most senses.

Looking around the green, she took in the hedges and green-painted railings that bordered it, and the three old trees - a plane tree and two large beeches - that grew there. Those trees, she knew, would have been alive when the men listed on the memorial had been alive. She wondered if any of the men had passed by here, or even lived here, and remarked upon the trees and appreciated their beauty. It seemed poignant to consider all that had happened around the trees since they had begun to grow here. So much history, so many lives, the changes of the city all about, the countless people that had passed them by.

Vibeke reached the Cornell home at exactly midday. She pressed the buzzer and was welcomed in by the same voice she had heard earlier. Walking up the drive, she was aware of the gate sliding closed behind her again. As the front door opened and the presumed housekeeper appeared there to greet her, she found a stirring of amusement within her. It was as if she was stepping into a very different reality.

'Good morning,' the woman said as Vibeke made her way up the three wide, shallow front steps. 'I'm Mrs Tewly. Miss Leaves is still busy with Mrs Cornell's fitting, but I was told to expect you. Please come in.'

Vibeke entered the stately and grandiose house. The entrance hall was large, with large tiles of cream and beige marble upon the floor, old paintings on the walls - some country scenes but also

portraits, presumably of family members. Flowers and potted plants, rather ornate and fussy antique furniture, large candelabra and the trappings of wealth and tradition were very evident.

'Do come into the front room,' said Mrs Tewly. 'Make yourself comfortable. You can watch the television if you wish and today's papers are on the side there. I'll bring you some refreshments. Would you like some coffee, tea, or anything else?'

'Tea would be very good. Thank you.'

The housekeeper nodded and left.

Vibeke looked with interest about her, taking in the rich, mostly dark furnishings, some sculptures that looked to be of Indian origin, a few musical instruments that appeared to be more for their decorative value than to be played. There were a couple of old skins on one wall - some kind of African antelope she suspected. There was a sideboard that was well-stocked with bottles of various spirits and bottles of wine. Some rows of leather- or cloth-bound books filled a bookshelf and Vibeke wondered if anyone had paid the books any attention at all in the past ten years.

Mrs Tewly returned shortly carrying an ornate silver tray with a more ornate silver teapot, a small jug of milk and a rather fussy and delicate cup and saucer. She had also brought a small plate with a selection of biscuits and another plate with a couple of precisely-made square sandwiches with the crusts cut off.

'Thank you,' Vibeke said from where she was standing by the mantelpiece and looking at a few small, aged black and white or sepia photographs in silver frames.

The housekeeper set down the tray for her.

'That's very kind of you,' Vibeke said. 'Are these photographs of the family?'

Mrs Tewly approached her. 'Yes, that's Mr Cornell's grandfather. He was a general, just like his father, a strict military man who had a supposedly glorious career.' Mrs Tewly shrugged slightly and Vibeke was amused by the scepticism she heard in her voice. 'That's Mrs Cornell's family around her, and her as a child. That photograph must have been taken in the grounds by the summer house. And that is Mrs Cornell's great-grandfather. He was a mining magnate and politician.' She nodded to the oldest of the photographs. It was faded and had a crease down one side and showed a stern-looking man with a fierce beard.

Vibeke regarded Mrs Tewly for a moment. She was a woman of middling height who was well into middle age. Her hair was cut short and she had allowed it to grey naturally. She was wearing a uniform that was casual and practical, but still a uniform. 'Do you have a family?' she asked.

Mrs Tewly looked at her, seeming slightly startled, then pleased. 'Yes, I have two wonderful daughters. They're in their early twenties now. I do worry about them finding someone good to settle down with though. It can be so difficult and require so much luck to find a good person.'

Vibeke nodded. 'Yes, it can.'

'Well, I'd best be getting on with my tasks. I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything. It's down at the end of the hall on the left.' And with that Mrs Tewly made her way from the living room and Vibeke was left to reflect that perhaps people very rarely asked her questions that concerned her and not the people she worked for.

Half an hour later, Ember came and found her. She had been sitting in an armchair and reading and was glad when she looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps and saw her love round the corner and almost skip over to her.

'Hi!' Ember said happily.

Vibeke stood and Ember embraced her, squeezing her hard about the middle. 'I missed you too,' she said with a grin.

Ember stepped back after a few seconds. 'Let's go. I'm hungry and some lunch would be excellent.' And she took Vibeke by the hand and led her from the house. The gate slid open before they reached it and closed again behind them.

They found a pleasant place to eat with pillared, arched windows all about it and airy, vaulted ceilings. It offered a form of cuisine that was based on Sri Lankan styles but largely limited itself to cold dishes, vegetarian dishes, salads, breads and samosas and an interesting range of desserts. They drank large amounts of green tea and sat by one of the large windows that overlooked a pedestrian area with cobblestones and many shops. The decor of the establishment was light, simple, the tables and screens of pale-coloured wood.

'I'll be accompanying Mrs Cornell to a fabric shop tomorrow morning,' Ember said. 'We had a fair number of fabrics to work with today but there are a few rare ones we could do with and Mrs Cornell seems to be treating this as some kind of adventure.'

'Are you enjoying the work?' Vibeke asked. She looked into Ember's eyes. 'Is Mrs Cornell not too demanding to work with?'

'She's very nice actually,' Ember said. 'A little difficult to read sometimes, and it seems to me she's rather detached from the world, perhaps unaware of some realities. But she's patient and kind. She has this kind of plump, placid, patient manner and sits there quietly with her hands folded upon her ample lap while I work, or just stands there very still as I take measurements and fit her.' She looked sideways slightly, then back. 'I wonder if she's lonely.'

'She certainly lives a different kind of existence to any I've ever known,' Vibeke said. 'Have you met her husband?'

'No, he's been overseas for the last six months. I suspect their marriage is very steady and solid and faithful and with very little emotion at all. They had two children but one of them died as a child and the other seems to be very independent, not liking to have too much to do with them.'

For a little while Vibeke and Ember were busy with their food. It was fun to try all the different little cakes and fried breads, delicacies and sauces and dip and mixtures of vegetables - cresses and types of spicy fresh beans and shoots of some greens that they did not recognise.

'Tell me a bit more about your trip to the library?' Ember asked.

Vibeke did so, relating a few of the things she had read. 'I think the most interesting book I found was a kind of diary kept by some kind of petty baron or lord of the manor - I've no idea what his title was - from the early fourteenth century. I couldn't understand all of it as the words were sometimes unfamiliar and the spellings just plain weird. It was really good to read. The parts that listed farming stock and the levels of grain storage and so on were dry and factual but he also put down quite a few thoughts and observations, frustrations and hopes. And a couple of bawdy poems too. Maybe they were even songs, though there was no mention of it.'

'Maybe we lived lives before, back in the same era,' Ember said. 'Wouldn't that be funny, if we lived before but only have the vaguest hints of emotion and memory to remind us of it? If we did live then, I hope we would have met each other and found a way to be together. It would have been very lonely for us otherwise.'

Vibeke smiled and reached out and took Ember's hand. She rubbed her thumb across Ember's knuckles and looked into her eyes. 'I hope we would have been together too,' she said. A frown touched her brow then. 'Actually it seems somehow impossible that we would not have been together. For that to be the case we would have had to be completely different people.'

Ember chuckled. 'I have a feeling we're on the edge of a very complex philosophical conundrum regarding the nature of identity and change,' she said.

As they talked onwards a little, it began to rain outside. The window at their side was streaked with raindrops and the street was darkened with water. People hurried or huddled under umbrellas. The sky became indistinct and darker and the light more ominous.

Not wanting to get wet and enjoying the comfort of where they were, Vibeke and Ember took their time over their dessert and then sat and sipped cups of a distinctive and refreshing kind of green tea - they were on their second pot.

'I stopped at a war memorial on the way back to the Cornell place,' Vibeke said after a while. The thoughts she had had when she was there had been circling in her head ever since, though she had not been sure what to say about the subject until now. 'It really quite moved me. It was depressing but it also made me feel very aware of being alive and also aware of how lucky I have been - never having to fight, or to struggle in a war-torn country.'

Ember regarded her quietly. 'Yes,' she said at length. 'It is hard to imagine how awful it must be for people who cannot find enough to eat, who need to feed their families, while bombs are falling about them and enemy soldiers are prowling the streets.'

'I don't think I would fight in any but the most extreme circumstances,' Vibeke said. 'To protect you or someone I cared about. Even to prevent some bullying I might happen upon while walking along a street. But to fight for a country against another country . . . I don't really understand that.'

'I guess sometimes one has to push back,' Ember said. 'But it is never very clear what the consequences of national movements towards violence will be.'

'It was so strange to read those names of faceless men and women,' Vibeke said. 'Dead people, mostly forgotten. I wonder if they felt their lives were worthwhile.'

'We all die,' Ember said. 'Spectacularly obvious though that may be, we do tend to live as though it were not the case.'

That evening, after making love with much pleasure and at some length, they sat in bed in their hotel room and watched television for a little while. They had made themselves comfortable, Ember leaning back against Vibeke's chest, Vibeke's arms about her waist. They shared some chocolate they had bought at a small newsagent run by a black man of remarkably small stature, and sipped cups of hot chocolate.

Turning off the television, Ember wriggled around until she was facing Vibeke, both of them propped up against pillows. 'Did you ever want to do something of great value with your life?' she asked. 'I mean, something that would make the world a better place? Whether campaigning for environmental issues or working for medical relief charities in Africa, or simply being a really good doctor and helping people as well as you could. Putting your energies into doing good for others and leaving your mark on the world.'

Vibeke considered the question, though in fact she had considered it on many occasions before. 'I'm not sure,' she said at length. 'It would have been good to have done something that brought great value to others. I really admire people who are motivated to do something good for others, as long as there is sense in what they do - I suspect too many people think they know what would bring benefit to others but are just seriously misguided, and that causes all kinds of problems. But I could never imagine myself being a campaigner, or doing volunteer work in Africa. I don't know whether that makes me lazy or callous. I guess the best I could imagine was doing something in a professional capacity that would bring benefit to others, but I didn't have much of a direction when I was in school or at university. I can think of a few fantasies that would be nice - doing medical research for example. But I think we shouldn't forget how important some comparatively simple jobs are. It's not like we could live without farmers and the people who distribute their crops, and plumbers seem pretty essential too.' She shrugged slightly. 'I help grow plants and flowers that are mostly just to bring people some quiet pleasure. I like that. I know it

is such a small thing, that it doesn't really touch the world. I'm certainly not changing the world in any major way. It's hard to imagine doing something much grander and more ambitious.' She smiled then. 'I think you make people pretty happy with the dresses and outfits you make for them.'

Ember looked into her eyes for a long moment. She was naked, the sheet wrapped across one shoulder so that one breast and one leg were bare. 'What about a more ambitious career for yourself?' she asked. 'I don't mean something valuable and world-changing for others, but just something on a large scale for you.'

Vibeke chuckled at this. 'I never really had enough desire for that. I probably have a good enough brain for it, but my personality really doesn't fit with that. I'm too much a loner, too uninterested in getting to the next place and climbing the ladder over other people. I've noticed some people think I'm strange, or negative, or that I gave up in many senses when I was young, I even used to give myself a hard time about it. But now, I don't know. I guess I just prefer having a quiet and simple life. I don't know anything else, and don't really want to try anything else. Maybe around the time I'd graduated, if I'd been offered a high-power job I would've taken it and adapted to it. But I never wanted to look for anything like that.'

'And you know,' she continued, 'when I consider things now, my priorities are so clear. And you are so far above all the rest of them. The happiness you bring to me makes everything else so pale in comparison. Every day I find myself smiling, thinking how seemingly impossible it is to be as happy as I am, and yet still I am, because of you.'

They had entwined the fingers of their right hands as they had spoken, and now were simply silent for a while, looking at each other with open vulnerability, exchanging tender touches.

'What about you?' Vibeke asked softly, at length. 'Did you have some spectacular ideas about how to live your life?'

'Not really,' Ember replied with a small smile. 'I always felt so alienated and different that the idea of really actively participating in the world never really occurred to me. I just wanted quietness and space and time in which to paint and to be myself.' She looked down, then back up, her head tilting slightly to one side, a curious and slightly quizzical expression upon her face, a slight twinkling in her eyes. 'I did try to imagine finding love, but those imaginings were pale things compared to the reality and I certainly never expected to find it.' She smiled widely then, and tipped her head back as if to laugh, then looked forwards again into Vibeke's eyes. 'I love our life together. I love its simple quietness. It amazes me, and I know that I am such a different person living in such a different reality to how I was less than a year ago.'

Monday 2nd:

They drove back to Otterhampton in the late afternoon. They took their time, driving slowly due to heavy rain and wind that buffeted them at times. Neither of them minded. For a while they

sang songs together, though they realised that they did not know many that they both knew the lyrics of. It was fun though and they really enjoyed it.

They took a short detour to the coast shortly before they returned home. At a small cliff-top village they halted and went to a fish and chip shop, and bought cod and chips for them both. Then they found a small lay-by off the main road, parked and climbed out of the car. They sat against the side of the front of the vehicle, eating their meal and looking out to sea. The rain had stopped though an erratic breeze still blew. The air was cool and damp but the sky had partially cleared. Heavy mauve clouds, their edges touched yellow with evening sunlight, moved through deepening blue skies. Everything was fresh and wet. The sound of the waves rolling heavily against the rocky shore beneath them was a regular and energising thunder. Looking out over the darkening grey water, standing in the cool breeze, hungrily eating a somewhat decadent meal, they happily enjoyed the place and time and each other and wondered what the autumn and winter would bring.

Chapter Fourteen

Thoughts on a Rainy Morning

Wednesday 11th October, Year 1:

It was just after half past six in the morning when Vibeke and Ember emerged from a shared shower. Steam filled the bathroom and their skins were flushed pink and dripping with water.

'Here,' Vibeke said, handing Ember a thick towel.

'Thanks.'

They towelled themselves dry, turned off the light and returned to their bedroom, holding hands on their way along the darkness of the short hall. Ember found herself smiling at the sensation of being gently towed along by Vibeke while she followed along like an aspiring limpet that was not yet quite close enough to press its body to its beautiful intended target.

'Wow. Dark day,' Vibeke said as she opened the curtains.

Ember peeked past her shoulder. 'Hmm. It's still early and the days are getting shorter, but it's as if you just opened the curtain of a window of a tank at the bottom of the sea.'

It was raining steadily but not too heavily. What little they could make out of the sky was just a low and heavy overcast that seemed almost brown against the darkness. As the wind shifted, fine raindrops hissed upon the window pane.

'Pretty cold too,' Vibeke said. 'And I don't really feel like going for a run. I think we already had quite a bit of exercise this morning.'

After a lingering hug they separated and brushed out their damp hair, and dressed. Vibeke put on jeans, a dark red t-shirt and a loose-fitting sweatshirt. Ember put on a long dress of dark blue material that was stylish but not formal. It had long sleeves, was form-fitting around the waist and then hung loosely to her ankles. Over it she put on a cardigan of pale beige wool that was soft and a little fluffy.

Vibeke and Ember found themselves glancing at each other and grinning as Vibeke put on her Clyde the Cat slippers and Ember put on her rabbit slippers.

They stood and walked up to one another again and embraced. They were still full of tenderness after the love that they had shared after waking early together. Since about five o'clock they had kissed and caressed each other in slow and then more urgent desire.

Vibeke circled Ember's waist with her arms, then stepped slightly back so that she could look down between them. She pressed the noses of two Clyde the Cats against the noses of two blue rabbits. 'I think they like each other,' she said.

They had a slow and leisurely breakfast. They had woken earlier than usual, though they had risen at their usual time. They were not going to exercise as they usually did. And neither of them were in any rush to get to work. Ember's working hours were fairly flexible anyway unless it was her who was opening the dressmaker's shop - and usually Evelyn Compton preferred to do that. Vibeke's day was sometimes a little stricter due to the need for her to be there when vans would arrive to collect flowers and plants to distribute to florists and garden centres. Though Felicia Harper always dealt with lists and requests, orders and invoices, Vibeke was still needed make the decisions about which plants and flowers were ready to go. Today, however, there were no scheduled pick-ups.

'Damn, I'm hungry,' Ember said with a smile as she buttered her second slice of toast and then covered it in honey.

'Pancakes and bacon were clearly not enough for you,' Vibeke agreed. 'Me too actually.' She took another sip of her tea, then took her last bite of pancake with blackcurrants and maple syrup.

The sky was lightening just a little outside, though the sky was still dark grey and the rain seemed to have set in for the day. Vibeke smiled as she felt Ember's fingers entwine with hers across the corner of the table they were sitting at, and felt her thumb rub the back of her hand.

When she looked across at her she found that Ember's light blue gaze was deeper than usual in the muted light, the blue-grey of deep ocean.

'How would you rate the decades of your life in terms of happiness?' Ember said to her then. She spoke the words gently, though Vibeke was no less startled by the suddenness of the question.

Vibeke looked down, then back up at her. 'I think that's difficult to answer clearly,' she said. 'I know it's not the kind of question that is designed to have a definitive answer, but it's still difficult.' She raised an eyebrow. 'Why do you ask? I'm just stalling for time here you understand.'

Ember chuckled. 'I was thinking about the differences in how I have perceived things at different times of my life,' she said. 'When we were in the shower this morning I felt so very good. And then I realised that I have nothing to compare that kind of happiness to from before I met you. I mean, it is just so very different. It's wonderful.' She shook her head, smiling with clear amazement. 'I was generally happy through my life but in a very different way. Now it is a happiness that is not just light and enjoyable but also with such thunderous depth and such amazing meaning. Everything has shifted, opened, deepened.'

'And I know you are still more than capable of feeling the lightness of pleasure you had before,' Vibeke said. 'It's just that your delightment has become . . . more.'

'More,' agreed Ember.

They were silent for a while then, holding hands and looking out the window, and sometimes just looking at each other.

'I think that when I was a child and through the first half of my teens, I was most focused on playing,' Ember continued. 'Just like most children I guess, though I think I was rather more focused than most.' She tilted her head and gave Vibeke a sideways, rather wry smile. 'I remember quite a number of occasions when one teacher or another, or one of the house guardians, would have to physically drag me away from whatever it was that I was doing. Not that I resisted really. I was almost always pretty placid I think, and they usually liked me for it - except in one case, where one of the guardians seemed to hold it against me. It's pretty funny when I remember being in the tatty, unkept garden of the orphanage when I was about four years old. Three days in a row I was out there playing with daisies and dandelions. Each day I allowed myself to pick just two daisies and two dandelions because although I liked to carry them, or enjoy their fragrance, I preferred just to watch them in the grass, their colours bright in the sunlight. I watched a tiny spider climb onto a daisy on its web. Sometimes a breeze blew and I enjoyed watching the daisies and dandelions nod and bob as if talking to each other or to me. I wondered what they were saying and if there was some magical and mystical and wonderful message that they had to give me. I dreamed of what that message might be and felt such a sense of happiness and well-being. They were really beautiful days. The sun was warm but not hot, the sky mostly clear blue, sometimes with a few cotton wool clouds.'

Ember finished her tea, and Vibeke poured her another cup. 'Thank you,' she said, and took small sip.

'And then,' she continued, 'each lunchtime or before the evening meal - and a couple of times before breakfast - Mrs Carter would call me to come in and eat, but I would be too absorbed to pay any attention. I wasn't being disobedient, just didn't want to leave the flowers that so fascinated me and brought me such happiness. So after a couple of tries, Mrs Carter would come out and take me by the arm and gently lead me back into the house, even as I looked back at those beloved daisies and dandelions. I remember her smiling and shaking her head in bemusement. I think she liked me but wondered if I was quite right in the head.' Ember smiled at the memory, then chuckled. 'A few times, in the autumn as I recall, Miss Melford came to drag me in from the garden. I was playing with fallen leaves, or looking for particular colours or shapes of leaves, comparing them and setting them out in large patterns upon the ground. It was a bit damp and my clothes got a bit dirty. Miss Melford was the teacher that didn't like me. She tried shouting at me and was a bit rough when she dragged me in. But I think the fact that I didn't really react to her callousness protected me just like it did from the children who were rough or tended to bully others. She and they could hurt me but I didn't feel it emotionally. And they could see that, because I did not cry or act distressed as other victims did, and then they mostly left me alone.' She chuckled. 'A few times other children disturbed what I was doing - whether I was drawing a picture or putting together a jigsaw puzzle or whatever. For a while they found it funny that I did not complain or react but simply started again. Either they would repeat their behaviour until they got bored and left me alone, or if they were particularly persistent then I would just go and do something else. A couple of times, when they followed me, I simply went into a room where a teacher or guardian would prevent any particularly bad behaviour and I would just sit quietly, doing nothing at all until the spiteful children left me alone. Even then I was actually pretty happy. I remember the dreams that I had and they were quite magical.'

Ember sipped a little more of her tea. 'And you know, I wonder now at the nature of those dreams. They seemed to have purposes in themselves. I mean that they were good and enjoyed them and they were enough. They brought me much pleasure. But now I wonder if they were preparing me in some way. I had dreams of love, and now I am with you.'

Vibeke rubbed her fingers over the back of Ember's hand. 'I guess when children play - or puppies or lion cubs or whatever play - they do not generally think of the reasons why they do it. Nevertheless it lets them become familiar with their bodies and limitations, with their desires and biological purposes. Disguised practice that is fun.'

'I guess that's right,' Ember said after a moment. 'You know . . . When I was in my late teens and early twenties it was a bit different. By then I was focused mostly on my studies and my artwork. The artwork had become its own purpose. I still took simple pleasure from the things around me, and sometimes I enjoyed the people that I met. I didn't have any close friends, but I liked listening to a particular lecturer at university, or the way a girl behind the counter at a local shop spoke. I was a spectator in many ways. It seemed enough, and I was happy. But now I have a different perspective on those times. I feel as if I was waiting without knowing that I was waiting. Even if I did not clearly think it, I suspect I must have known on some level that there was more - though I'm sure I could not have guessed just how much more.'

Vibeke had been watching Ember closely as she had spoken. It fascinated her to watch the way emotions and thoughts were reflected in her expressions and in her eyes. She saw the way in which she looked inwards, or regarded her cup of tea for a moment, or looked up into Vibeke's eyes. She took in the way the light shifted with each movement of those lovely orbs, from light blue through clear silver through shadowed blue that suggested deep northern waters. She liked to watch Ember's shapely lips move, and the crinkle of skin at the sides of her eyes - and sometimes at the sides of her nose - when she smiled. She took in the movements of Ember's hands and fingers when she occasionally gestured. She absorbed the way in which she breathed, the rise and fall of her breasts.

'You moved around a bit before you came to Otterhampton,' Vibeke said. 'Were you restless?'

Ember considered this for a little while as she drank more tea. She looked out of the window, into the greyness and the rain. 'I am not sure,' she said at length. 'I lived in three different places while I was studying at Salisbury. Then four places in the southwest before I came to Otterhampton. I think I was more curious about experiencing different places than anything. I didn't really mind what jobs I had as long as they were comparatively simple. I never went very far afield though.' She shrugged slightly, then looked fondly at Vibeke and her gaze warmed. 'Maybe I sensed that you were somewhere around here and I was searching for you. It's a nice idea.'

Vibeke smiled too. 'Yes, it is.'

They were quiet then, simply sitting there and enjoying the tenderness between them, the gentle warmth that was there. And Vibeke reflected how very special these moments were, how wonderful this breakfast was on this workday, when breakfast could so easily be rushed and not enjoyed.

'My first decade of life was very mixed,' she said at length. 'It was very difficult sometimes, but there were also really good times. I suppose that, like all children, I didn't have the experience to really contrast and put in context my times of difficulty or joy. But I do remember some things very well, including intense pain or enjoyment.' She was glad when Ember gave her fingers a little reassuring squeeze. 'My foster-parents had quite an effect on me of course, though I think it was not so pronounced as the effect most true parents or most involved adopting parents have on their children. My foster-mother was rather eccentric, by turns energetic and full of cheerful chatter and frenetic activity, then listless and moody, taciturn and irritable. When I was older and became able to question such things, I realised that she was probably ill in some way, or at least quite unbalanced. My foster-father more obviously cared for me than she did, at least until he became distant and withdrawn in the years following her death and when I was older.'

'I think, like you, many of my happiest childhood moments were when I was alone, absorbed in some toy or activity. I remember spending hours on summer days juggling tennis balls and throwing them and bouncing them off walls. I remember sneaking out into the woods and exploring, even though I wasn't supposed to. I climbed trees, and sometimes I would sit high in a tree and read a good book, and that was really enjoyable.'

'At school I felt genuinely lonely. I do not mean that I could not make friends or was not liked. I just mean that even when I spent time with other children I did not really enjoy their company. I actually felt lonelier when I was with others than I did when I was on my own. I did not understand it. I knew that I wanted a friend, and I dreamed of having a good friend, but I did not know anyone who could become such a friend. I think that my dreaming seemed to me to be not just a purpose in itself but rather a manifestation of what I thought was missing.

'I had some trouble with the spite and nastiness of some of the other girls at the schools that I went to. In itself it did not disturb me all that much, though I was not quite an impervious to it as you describe yourself. I think what hurt about it was not that they made fun of me or tried to find ways to hurt me - after all, I did not really care much about them and did not care if they did not like me. Rather, they were able to remind me of what I was missing. Physically, none of the girls would try to hurt me though. I was taller than most and good at sports. I remember playing football with the boys, and cricket too. I was quite good at them. They did push me around though, and I got into a few fights. Sometimes I came off better, but against older boys I sometimes came off worse.

'I think I felt lost in many ways. The dreams I had seemed somehow unobtainable, and I did not have the sense that my life was going in a good direction. As a teenager that became worse. I did not think about it with any distance, but I was actually quite depressed at times. I thought that death might be preferable to life. I remember all those evenings of coming home, and my foster-father being out at work. I would sit at my desk in my room and stare out into the street - light in the summer, or dark except for the orange glow of the streetlamps in winter. But everything seemed grey. Then I would do my homework, or revise for tests. I actually quite liked that. It was a way to lose myself for a while.

'I suppose that from my late teens to my early twenties I was focused on my studies and on exercise and individual activity. I went to the mountains in Wales a few times, and to Bodmin Moor and Exmoor, where I walked a long way every day, camping or staying in youth hostels. I preferred camping of course. And I read a great deal during those years, and listened to a lot of music. I think that the sense of loneliness that had been so deep within me for so much of my childhood had actually receded a lot by then. I think I had just become used to being alone and had come to enjoy the things that I liked to do alone without such a sense of something being profoundly missing.' She smiled then, and chuckled. 'I was glad when I moved here and found work. When I started at the nursery I was particularly glad because I knew I would enjoy it. But I had no idea what was coming. I find it so amazing that you have just changed everything. You have brought me so much happiness, so much warmth and love and joy. I see everything in such a different way now. When I am at work it is as if I am doing a different and much better and fun kind of work. When I exercise it feels better than it ever did and seems to have real purpose. Even just going to the supermarket to buy food it can be quite entertaining.'

Vibeke looked into Ember's eyes for long seconds. And then she moved her chair closer to her, and embraced her in a warm hug, holding her close.

Chapter Fifteen

Shopping

Tuesday 17th October, Year 1:

Vibeke sat down on a plastic chair by the table in the little kitchen of the main building at the nursery. She had just made herself a large mug of tea and had opened her packed lunch. She smiled as she saw the exquisitely-drawn picture of Clyde the Cat that Ember had slipped into her lunchbox. Clyde was looking at her with a big smile and a speech balloon above his head said: 'Ember told me to tell you she thinks you are just wonderful. She also wanted me to give you a kiss for her, but I think I'll let her do that herself.'

Vibeke took a bite from a tomato and removed her wrapped sandwiches. They were quite thick, of wholegrain bread with butter and spicy strips of chicken breast and leaves of fresh spinach. 'Wow, these look great,' she murmured. Then there was a peach, a couple of cookies and a couple of fudge brownies. Vibeke and Ember took turns - approximately - making their packed lunches. Vibeke was fairly sure that Ember was consistently better at surprising her than she was at surprising Ember.

As Felicia entered the kitchen, Vibeke looked up. 'Hi there,' she said. 'There should still be some hot water in the kettle if you want some tea.'

'Thanks Vibeke.' Felicia was fifty-three years old and rather plain looking, with dyed brown hair and curiously coloured eyes - brown-green with obvious flecks. She wore rather old-fashioned clothes. She was quiet and competent and occasionally asked Vibeke if she had watched one or another television programme the previous night. She had a husband who was even quieter - Vibeke had met him a couple of times when he had come to collect her, and he was a very small man with a face like a gerbil and a manner like a mouse. They had two children who had both left home and they liked to watch television.

Felicia made herself some tea, then brought out her own lunch. Settling down opposite Vibeke, she ate quietly for a few minutes as Vibeke did the same. Then Felicia cleared her throat with obvious amusement, making Vibeke look up at her.

Vibeke had been in a reverie, both enjoying her excellent lunch and thinking of Ember - wondering if she was taking her lunch break at the same time and if she was talking with Evelyn Compton or sitting alone and perhaps reading a book. Or perhaps Ember was dealing with a customer, and if so she hoped that it was a pleasant customer that she would enjoy making a dress for.

Vibeke found herself smiling in response to Felicia's smile and the fact that Felicia was looking straight at her. 'What?' she asked.

Felicia shook her head a fraction and set down the roll she had been eating. As she picked up her tea she said: 'I'm not meaning to say anything too personal, but I can just see that you are very happy. When I came in you were smiling and it was such an innocent, simple expression. You looked really beautiful.' Felicia looked down, seeming suddenly to realise what she had just said, then looked back up again. 'And then when I looked at you again you were grinning again. I'm glad you're happy.'

Vibeke regarded Felicia for a long moment. They did not generally speak very much except about the nursery and what work needed doing and when and which order, though sometimes Felicia would offer some small talk and Vibeke might make a comment or two of her own. So Felicia's comments were something of a departure, but Vibeke was glad of them. 'I am happy,' she said.

'I always hoped you'd find someone,' Felicia said. 'I'm glad you did.'

Vibeke looked down for a moment. 'Yes,' she said. 'Me too. It has been amazing.' And she wondered about what Felicia had said. She was surprised - she had not thought that Felicia considered her in terms other than as her colleague such that she might have hopes for her happiness. 'Thank you for saying that,' she said.

Felicia smiled. 'You're welcome. And even though I've only met her briefly a couple of times, Ember seems like a lovely young woman. You two have such distinctive looks and you really are remarkable together. I bet you get a lot of stares when you're just walking down the street together.'

That made Vibeke smile. 'True enough,' she said. 'Sometimes we speculate that we're from some other world and the natives here can't quite pinpoint what is different about us.' She finished her last sandwich, chewed thoughtfully, then said: 'Didn't your son go to the University of Salisbury?'

'That's right,' said Felicia. 'He's a clever one. He's a physicist.'

'Ember went there too. She really liked the place.'

Vibeke arrived home at half past five. She had enjoyed the cycle ride from work, liking the cold air in her lungs and rushing upon her face. The ride always refreshed her, gave her a short break after work and gave her energy for the evening. It could be a difficult ride in winter - a few times she had had to ask Felicia for a lift when there had been too much snow on the road or if there was a very strong wind. Usually it was something she enjoyed in all weathers.

She set her bike in its usual place in the garage and took off her cycling helmet and hung it on the handlebars. Then she went from the garage to the front door, let herself in and set down her small backpack.

Ember, who preferred to walk to and from work - it was barely twenty minutes away at a quick pace - was not home yet. After a quick trip to the bathroom she went into the kitchen to make herself some tea.

She grinned as she heard footsteps outside and then the front door opening. Walking out into the hall, she waited as Ember stepped within and closed the door behind her.

Ember's cheeks were a little flushed, though the rest of her face was quite pale. 'It's getting cold out there,' she said.

'It is,' Vibeke agreed. 'Good evening my love.' Once Ember had set down her bag she stepped forwards and embraced her.

'Hi Vibeke,' Ember replied softly. She laid her head upon Vibeke's shoulder and rubbed Vibeke's back through her pullover.

Vibeke nibbled the edge of a conveniently placed ear and felt a shiver of pleasure run through Ember. Then: 'I was just making some tea,' she said softly. 'Would you like some?'

'That sounds great. And then shall we go?'

Vibeke stepped back and nodded once.

'Let me just go to the bathroom and I'll join you for that tea.'

A few minutes later they were sitting together on the sofa in the living room. 'I wonder where we'll end up eating tonight,' Vibeke said. Her arm was around Ember, who was leaning against her.

Ember slid her hand inside the bottom of Vibeke's pullover and the t-shirt below and gave her a little tickle. 'Shopping with me is so bad that you're only thinking of what we might eat afterwards?'

Vibeke smiled at this. 'Actually shopping with you is really all right. I've never much liked shopping, perhaps with the exception of looking for something interesting to eat in a quiet supermarket, or looking for interesting books or music. But with you it can be fun. I like watching you when you see something you like. And though I'm hardly good at clothes shopping, I do like considering what you will look like in one item or another.' She turned her slightly then, looking down at Ember with a raised eyebrow.

One ice-blue eye with a deep pupil peeked up at her quizzically.

'Maybe we could find some sexy underwear for you,' Vibeke said.

It was a twenty minute drive to the shopping centre on the other side of Otterhampton. They had decided to go to the supermarket there first, then load the car with their groceries before they took their time with the other shops.

They parked the car a little way away from the supermarket's entrance - it was easier to walk than to contend with the cars and people closer to it. Then they made their way towards the main doors, and Vibeke pulled a shopping trolley from one of the rows outside. 'It's always a little bit dangerous shopping for food when one is hungry,' Vibeke remarked. 'But fun, too.'

'True enough,' agreed Ember. She patted Vibeke on the arm. 'You're hungry? We could stop for a snack if you want.'

'That's all right. I'll wait and it'll enhance my enjoyment of whatever we have later.'

Into the supermarket they went then, past the fruit and vegetable section to buy heavier goods first - they would come back for fruit and vegetables at the end so that they would not squash them with other items.

A little later, with their trolley half full, Ember said: 'Wow, look at that display of fish!' There was indeed an impressive number of different fish laid out in imaginative array on a bed of ice. The man behind the counter, dressed in apron and wearing a white chef's hat, smiled at her exclamation. 'Can we get a selection?' she asked Vibeke.

Vibeke was charmed by Ember's manner and enthusiasm. 'We can get anything you like,' she said.

'Help me choose. Look, that red fish is ugly but looks really interesting. And maybe we could get a couple of those really small ones, they're quite cute. And two large trout.'

'You want me to choose those?'

'Yes,' Ember said with mock seriousness.

'All right then. I'd like the ugly but friendly red fish, two of those small ones and two large trout.'

'Maybe this trout?' asked Ember. 'And this one? Oh, and look! They have mussels. We have to get them.' Ember looked up at the man behind the counter and gave their order. 'But we'll need to freeze some of the fish,' she said. 'Will that affect the flavour much?' she asked the man.

'I'm sorry, I don't know,' he replied. He was clearly amused by them.

'Well I guess we'll take a chance. We'll have the mussels tomorrow evening and freeze the rest. Can you pack them with some ice please?'

A little later, having dropped their grocery shopping off in the car, they headed back into the shopping centre, which was a pleasant enough place laid out as three large triangles around a central area of fountains with a domed glass ceiling.

Vibeke was very aware that Ember's birthday was coming up the next week and hoped that Ember might let something slip or that she might find some inspiration as they wandered among the shops.

There were quite a lot of people in the halls of the centre, though no more than they had expected and far fewer than would be there on weekends. Vibeke found herself wondering about all the shoppers. There was the usual mixture of mothers and small, energetic and usually noisy children, husbands getting in and out quickly or struggling with boredom, old people who seemed oblivious to the people they held up on the escalators or in doorways, teenagers and young people dressed in colourful outfits having fun. But these were really just first impressions and somewhat stereotypical, and Vibeke wondered about some of the individuals she saw. A girl of about sixteen with silver piercings and purple-streaked hair was being rather loud and full of herself with her friends, but Vibeke also detected a hint of anger or desperation about her and she wondered what had caused it. A man of about twenty-five, sitting on a bench and staring at one of the fountains seemed lost in some inner world, his expression revealing a deep unhappiness. An old lady who was helping another, weaker old lady along the way was smiling and seemed utterly at one with the world, as if she had found the secrets of true acceptance and balance. A young mother quietly took control of one of her young children - a little girl who was crying - and Vibeke saw the tiredness and general weariness revealed in her, but also wondered at how intensely she might experience moments of deep love for her offspring.

On and on, people hurrying or dawdling, people with a need to buy something or simply wondering what they might buy. Vibeke was not sure that she liked this place and was generally not enthusiastic about crowds, but she admitted she found it quite interesting.

Ember held her hand. 'You are thinking about people,' she said. There was humour in her voice.

Vibeke looked at her. 'Yes. I was wondering rather than observing, and I know it's impossible to really know what they are like. Still it's sometimes good to consider what people's lives might really be like beyond what we see. I often find myself trying to guess if people are happy or merely struggling.'

Ember seemed to look inwards for a moment. 'I think many of us find that we are not sure if we are doing something that will make us and other people happy, or if it is just causing problems. Sometimes the effort we put into things is painful and the results do not justify it - or may be very negative. But sometimes we feel that when we do not try so hard, we are giving up on something that could be good.' She shook her head slightly. 'You know, I sometimes think that

people spend too much time trying to predict and control their futures rather than simply being adaptive in the present. There is a tendency to end up neurotic rather than to ride happily on waves of perpetual change.' She chuckled then. 'Hmm. Maybe I shouldn't try to philosophise.'

But Vibeke thought about what she had said - until Ember let out a sound that was almost a squeal and tugged at her arm. A moment later she found herself being dragged at some speed between shoppers until they were in front of a pet shop.

'Look at those guinea pigs!' said Ember, grinning. 'They're all in a pile!'

They stood and watched twitching noses and whiskers and feet for a minute.

'They really have a remarkable mixture of patches and patterns,' Vibeke said. 'I wonder what they looked like before they were domesticated and bred - what the original guinea pigs looked like.'

'Maybe we could look it up on the internet,' Ember suggested. 'Although then we might find out that they are descended from aliens.' Looking up she said. 'Those three birds are really beautiful. Are they types of parrot or something else?'

'I don't know,' Vibeke said. 'But when I was studying I was very interested in the classification of species, how they fit into this immense evolutionary tree. I was always amazed at the varieties. But I don't know much of the specifics outside certain aspects of botany.'

Ember took her hand. 'Let's go in,' she said eagerly, seeming on the edge of jumping up and down.

'I think you might explode if we don't.'

Ember adopted a mock-indignant expression, bumped her with her shoulder and pulled her inside. In truth Vibeke was very happy to go in and see what other animals they had.

It was a long but narrow shop and not large. It had the distinctive scents that most pet shops had - of animals and animal feed, straw and sawdust, dog snacks and chew-toys, and waterweed and fish from the many small aquaria that lined one side of the wall near the back. There were many lights of slightly different colours in cages and fishtanks. There were not many people there and those that were spoke in noticeably quiet voices. A middle-aged man was at the counter and a young woman was stocking some shelves on one side. It was a peaceful place that seemed almost like an oasis in the busy shopping centre.

Ember and Vibeke stopped at three cages piled one atop the next, each of which contained a few rabbits.

'That one with patches of orange and black is really cute,' Ember said. 'I love the way their noses twitch, little upside-down triangles.'

Next they stopped at a large cage that contained a number of budgerigars. 'They're really nice, aren't they,' Ember said softly. 'I think I like the blue ones more than the yellow. There's something so restful about them.' She turned to Vibeke then and looked up into her face and Vibeke noticed that her expression was open and quite serious. 'Did you ever want a cat?' she asked. She was still holding Vibeke's hand and now she took hold of it with both hands and gave it a little squeeze. 'I mean, I know that your appreciation of Clyde the Cat doesn't mean that you would actually like a real cat as a pet but I just thought maybe you might like one. I can imagine you might like cats.'

Vibeke found it charming that Ember was being so earnest. 'Are you suggesting that Clyde the Cat doesn't exist?' she asked. 'Because if so then the universal spirit that hears all - the spirit of Clyde the Cat I mean - might be quite offended.'

'No, obviously Clyde the Cat does have a transcendent existence,' Ember concurred.

'But yes, I do like cats,' Vibeke said. 'I know that it's easy to forget that domestic cats are actually well-armed killing machines, predators without a doubt. Still, that is how they are and . . . I like that they are rather aloof, that they are independent and not like humans. I know that dogs are much more loyal, but dogs sometimes seem rather too similar to people to me. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing. Pet owners just have different tastes.'

They wandered down to the aquaria.

'These are so beautiful!' Ember said, going to a tank that contained a small cloud of small fish - probably the smallest fish of any that were for sale. They were grey-white on their backs and bellies and they had reflective mauve stripes down their sides. They swam almost as one, turning together mostly, swimming in the same direction. Vibeke wondered how that happened - she assumed there was not some leader that they all followed. Perhaps each of them just had some kind of potential to swim and turn and the one that reached that potential first did so and the rest followed; but some other fish might reach that potential first the next time.

'They really are,' Vibeke said. As she watched, her thoughts just seem to fall away, perhaps even to stop, and she just observed and was captivated by the colourful fish and their movement. After a minute or so of simply standing next to Ember and gazing into the tank, she came back to herself and looked at Ember, who was still watching. She felt almost as if she had been taken into quite a different kind of awareness for a little while: one that was peaceful but also seemed quite profound.

Together, they looked into other aquaria then. Sometimes they pointed something out - a fish or a kind of water weed or a layout of stones. It was only when they finally turned to leave that they realised that they had been speaking quietly as if they were in a library.

Outside, back along one of the main halls, Ember led the way. Vibeke was not sure if she simply wanted to see what they might find or if she had some target. They both wanted to buy some clothes which was why they had come here.

When they made their way up to the first floor, Vibeke felt a sudden awareness of strategic thinking. There were three jewellery shops there. Two were fairly conventional but the third, opposite them, was anything but.

Gently, Vibeke led Ember over to the window display. It was full of interesting, glittering, colourful pieces. Curious necklaces with odd stones in strange shapes sat next to bracelets fashioned into weird-looking serpents or long-winged birds or other animal, and chains of all metals and colours and types. There were trays of earrings, some of which were outrageous, some whimsical or fanciful. The shop also sold a few items of clothing - scarves and wraps and belts.

'What an interesting place,' Ember breathed. 'I wonder if that buckle would go with my grey-blue skirt.' Then she giggled and said: 'Hey, look at that parrot brooch. Wide-eyed, innocent and cute.'

Vibeke listened and then led the way within.

'Mmmm!' said Ember. 'Wow, that looks sexy.' And Vibeke could even hear the slightly throaty way in which she said the words.

'Thanks. Uh, this top is a bit revealing isn't it?' It was a silvery satin blouse with a cut-away back and rather open at her cleavage. The two of them were standing by the mirrors in the changing rooms of a clothes shop. They had a small hill of items piled on a table to try on.

'Well, yes, but in a good way. Although I might not be able to keep my hands off you.'

'I'd be happy to wear this at home but it's not really casual. And I'm not sure about going out in it. I'm not really a provocative type of person.'

Ember regarded her for a few seconds more. 'I see your point. Maybe we can just stick to underwear for the really sexy stuff.'

Vibeke looked up at that and took in the way Ember was watching her. Her eyes were slightly darkened and she could see the desire that was revealed there. As she became aware of it she felt a slight, tingling flush upon her skin and deep in her belly. She also felt a profound sense of amazement and awe. Perhaps it should not have surprised her that she had such an effect upon Ember but nevertheless it seemed so very special and incredible and good. *Is my body really that good?* she wondered. *Or maybe it's just Ember's taste.* At the same time she felt a very pleasant and rather unexpected sense of vulnerability, as if all her emotions and desires and self were open to Ember; and somehow, Ember accepted and loved what she saw there.

'How about you try on these two now?' Vibeke said, lifting two interestingly-shaped lightweight tops that they had spotted. One was really for the summer and would leave Ember's belly bare but it looked very good and seemed worth trying.

Chapter Sixteen

Ember's Birthday

Friday 27th October, Year 1:

Ember awoke in the darkness before the dawn. Though she thought she had been wrapped around Vibeke most of the night, her head on her shoulder, her arm around her waist and her leg over Vibeke's leg, she was immediately aware that she was alone in the bed. Sometimes she wondered if she might make Vibeke uncomfortable because of her tendency sometimes to lie half on top of her, but Vibeke clearly liked the closeness. She sleepily smiled as she considered that they sometimes slept like a couple of cats, curled up in a pile.

As she automatically reached out she felt that the bed was still warm beside her. Perhaps Vibeke had just gone to the bathroom. Glancing at the clock she saw that it was a few minutes before six o'clock and that they would be getting up soon. But she still had a few minutes to doze.

Settling back on her pillow, she closed her eyes and almost immediately drifted into a half-sleep in which she thought she was running with two friendly-looking blue kangaroos across water that inexplicably bore their weight. With amusement and delight she chased them around a number of crystalline fountains.

Then she was waking up again, blinking and wondering what kind of psychedelic chemicals her brain produced. Now she could smell coffee and something toasting and she grinned broadly. Vibeke was making breakfast for her - and though she might have climbed out of bed and gone to join her she decided that she would just get up, go to the bathroom, then come back to bed - guessing that Vibeke intended to bring her breakfast in bed.

When she came back from the bathroom she found that Vibeke had sneaked into the bedroom while she had been gone: there was a chocolate rabbit wrapped in colourful foil sitting on her pillow. She chuckled as she climbed back under the covers and examined the creature.

A few minutes later the bedroom door opened and the light of a flickering candle lit the dark room. Vibeke was standing there with a laden tray - a single birthday candle set into a croissant, plates of pancakes, a bowl of strawberries, a jar of maple syrup and more.

Ember crawled further up in the bed, sitting up and grinning.

'Happy birthday Ember,' Vibeke said, smiling at her as she reached the bed. She set down the tray on the bedside table then propped pillows up behind Ember, set another one against the

headboard for herself and then slipped into bed beside her. Once they were settled she reached across to the tray and took a single flower from it - a yellow bloom that Ember could not name. Vibeke handed it to Ember. 'For you.'

'Thank you, my love.' Ember held the flower to her nose and inhaled its gentle, refreshing fragrance. 'I love yellow flowers,' she said softly.

'That's actually from the new greenhouse,' Vibeke explained. 'It's a Burmese variety related to the buttercup.' She shrugged slightly. 'You know, it occurred to me that bringing you breakfast in bed on your birthday, and a flower, was something of a cliché. But then I thought I'd do it anyway.'

Ember gave her hand a squeeze. 'I'm glad you did. And the chocolate rabbit was hardly a cliché. Though it does seem a little cruel to consider eating it. It's also true that this is not the first time you have brought me breakfast in bed with a flower.'

'And you've done the same for me.'

'Maybe we could get Clyde the Cat to bring both of us breakfast in bed sometime.'

Next Vibeke reached across and carefully set the tray down in front of them - they were both sitting cross-legged. 'Grapefruit juice, and coffee ready to pour when you're ready,' she explained.

'This looks great!' said Ember. 'Wow, pancakes, and toasted croissants with butter and marmalade. And great-looking strawberries. This is quite a feast.'

Vibeke chuckled. 'Well, we've got to keep our strength up.'

For a while they simply enjoyed their breakfast, taking their time with it and often feeding each other. Sometimes they found themselves looking at each other with poignant tenderness.

'How do you expect your day to go?' Vibeke asked as she sipped her second cup of coffee. She had placed the tray back on the bedside table and now they were digesting, replete, satisfied, happily and decadently well-fed.

'It should be fairly straightforward,' Ember replied. 'I'm working on a wedding dress but I'm not under any real pressure with it and it shouldn't take much longer to finish. I'm currently working on the lace. It's pretty detailed, but I like it. Evelyn's always telling me she doesn't understand how I don't get frustrated with complicated designs that require a lot of fine manipulation, but I find it more enjoyable than just working on plain forms. It's true that correcting mistakes can be very time-consuming, but -'

'I'm guessing you don't make many mistakes,' Vibeke said.

Ember gave her a little shrug. 'Rarely.'

Vibeke left work at half-past four. Felicia had just smiled and waved off her thanks when she had agreed to Vibeke going home early. 'Have a nice evening,' she said. 'Say happy birthday to Ember from me.'

She cycled home, quickly took some plates, knives, forks, candles, matches, a bottle of sparkling water and two blankets and put them in the boot of the car - all ready for some of what she had planned for her and Ember a little later. Then she walked the rest of the way into Otterhampton to meet Ember at the dressmaker's shop. She had thought of driving in to pick Ember up but the weather was quite pleasant - cool and overcast but still and dry - and she was aware that Ember liked the walk home as it refreshed her after her day's work.

The bell above the door sounded as Vibeke stepped into the shop. Evelyn Compton was just finishing dealing with a customer at the counter. Looking up she smiled and said: 'Hi Vibeke! Ember's in the back. Tell her it's time she got out of here and started celebrating.'

'Thanks Evelyn.'

Going into the back room, Vibeke saw that Ember was at her workbench working on a lace cuff. 'Hi, my love.'

Ember looked up - apparently she had been utterly absorbed in her work. 'Vibeke!' She almost squealed with delight, then slipped off her stool and ran around her table and into Vibeke's arms.

Vibeke held her tight. It was so very good to feel Ember pressed against her like this, to feel the soft solidity of her body, to inhale the scent of her hair as she kissed the side of her head. 'How has your day been?' she asked.

Ember made no move to pull back but simply nuzzled closer against her shoulder and neck. 'Well, I found half a dozen small chocolate rabbits in my lunch box, which was a bit of a surprise. Not sure how they got there,' she said with a grin, giving Vibeke a little poke in the side. 'Maybe the larger rabbit you gave me this morning has started breeding. Anyway, it was very charming. And then I worked. And now I feel much better now that you're here. I didn't expect to see you until I got home. I'm glad you came to collect me.'

Finally they stepped back from each other but held onto each other's arms. 'Shall we get out of here?' Vibeke suggested. 'Evelyn asked me to pass on instructions to you to make yourself scarce and celebrate.'

'That's kind of her. All right, let me just tidy this up a bit so I don't lose my place.'

'And Felicia said to say happy birthday to you as well. I know you haven't spoken much but she really likes you. When she mentions you it's clear she thinks you're some kind of angel. Which I happen to agree with,' Vibeke said with a smile.

Ember glanced up at that. 'Maybe an alien. Not so much an angel.'

Vibeke watched as Ember quickly moved about the table, ordering the cloth and threads and pins. She noticed not for the first time how dexterous Ember was - every movement graceful, swift and very precise. Today Ember was wearing a long skirt of grey-green and a white blouse with rounded shoulders and cuffs. It was a look that evoked echoes of Victorian fashion, though there was nothing uncomfortable or unduly fussy about it.

When she was ready, Vibeke took Ember's green, tasselled shawl of loose-knit wool from the clothes stand by the door and held it open for her. With a near pirouette Ember turned into it, wrapping it about her shoulders. Then she gathered up her small backpack of dark brown leather and was ready to go.

A minute later they were walking home hand in hand - more of a leisurely stroll.

'So,' Ember said. 'What is the plan for this evening?'

Vibeke looked across at her. 'I'm sorry I asked you if you could put your birthday plans on hold until tomorrow,' she said.

'That's all right,' Ember replied, giving her hand a little squeeze. 'I am more than happy to be surprised.'

'Well, I had this idea and . . . well, maybe we can just go and you can see for yourself. And I do have a birthday present for you, but if you don't mind it'll be better to wait until a bit later for me to give it to you.'

Ember looked happy with this. 'Adventures are good,' she said. 'What should I wear? Should I take anything with me?'

'Wear something casual and warm and bring a coat.'

They arrived home soon enough. Ember and Vibeke both changed and then they sat in the kitchen for a little while and drank some tea and chatted briefly about their days.

Vibeke filled a thermos flask with hot water, filled a small bottle with milk from the fridge and grabbed a few teabags, thinking that they might want some hot tea later.

And then they climbed into the car, throwing their coats and bags into the back.

'First, let's make sure that we will not be hungry this evening,' Vibeke said. And she carefully guided the car out of the drive and headed into Otterhampton. A few minutes later she pulled up in front of the Indian restaurant where she and Ember had first seen each other.

Ember chuckled. 'Our place of first meeting!' she exclaimed. They had eaten here before and had sometimes had a takeaway from the establishment but it always gave both of them pleasure to think that this was where they had first laid eyes upon each other.

'Well, probably,' Vibeke said. 'Though sometimes I have dreams of you and impressions of you that seem so full of recognition and memory that it is as if I knew you before, and will know you again.'

'I dream and feel just the same,' Ember said, resting her hand on Vibeke's arm.

Vibeke checked her watch. 'All right, let's go and get some food.'

As they entered the restaurant the waiter by the door smiled and nodded to them. 'Good evening,' he said. 'Your order should be ready in a few minutes. Would you like to take a seat?' And he gestured them across to a pair of comfortable, padded leather benches near the bar.

As Vibeke and Ember sat side by side on one of the benches, the waiter brought over the bill for the order Vibeke had placed and Vibeke paid cash. Then he went behind the bar and removed two glasses from a refrigerator. Returning to the, he set the glasses in front of them. 'Banana lassi, madam' he said to Ember, indicating the drink he had set down for her. 'And Keralan lassi,' he said to Vibeke.

'Oh, I love banana lassi!' said Ember.

The waiter nodded and left them and Vibeke said quietly: 'Maybe he's psychic.'

'Or maybe you placed the order earlier,' Ember replied. She picked up her drink and took a large sip, closing her eyes for a moment and savouring the cool mixture of yoghurt, banana, cardamom and pistachio nuts. 'That's really good,' she sighed.

Vibeke tried some of her own drink. 'This is pretty good too. Would you like some?'

'Thanks. I've had it before but I'd like to be reminded of it.' She tried it and tilted her head in appreciation. 'It is good. I find it a bit strange though. Maybe I just need the sugar in the banana lassi. Do you want some?'

'That's all right. I must say I do like watching you drink it.'

They were quiet for a little while then, enjoying their drinks. Sitting next to each other, Vibeke was glad to feel Ember's touch, her hand upon her arm - she was not sure if it was a conscious or automatic gesture but it made her feel good either way. It amazed her how much such simple contact gave her such a sense of warmth and belonging. She had never considered herself a person who was in need of much physical contact and yet with Ember it was something she wanted all the time: that connection, that being together that made her feel warm and at one and which made her emotions flow so clearly and such pleasure.

There were two other couples and a group of four in the restaurant, talking and laughing. Indian music played softly in the background.

'We did not speak to each other when we first saw each other,' Ember said in a contemplative tone.

Vibeke considered this. 'It was . . . so startling for me,' she said. 'I remember it very clearly. Your beauty was just so amazing. I felt as if I had suddenly come alive, as if I had woken up. I could not stop thinking about you after I left here.'

Ember chuckled softly. 'I felt the same,' she said. 'I wished I had actually spoken to you. But I've never really approached people spontaneously. I don't think I was ever afraid of doing so, it's just that I never had. And the habit of not approaching people was too strong for me to overcome it then, I think.'

'I think I just did not want to be intrusive,' Vibeke said. 'Even when we met later at the florist I was going to leave before you stopped me.'

'Why did you feel that way?' Ember asked.

'I think I felt that you would not want to speak to me.' She shook her head. 'I don't usually like it when people I don't know expect anything from me, or even just hope for something from me. I guess I felt that it would disturb you if I talked to you. And you know, I do understand how irrational that is. To think that someone would welcome my saying hello is no greater an assumption than thinking someone would find me intrusive.' She shook her head. 'I think I was afraid of rejection. I think I was also punishing myself, which has sometimes been very easy for me to do.'

Ember clearly thought about this for a little while. 'You had some bad experiences when you were younger,' she said. 'You had entered a kind of pattern of living, of loneliness.'

'Yes, you are right. Although, I had not usually wanted anything other than my loneliness. Yet after I saw you . . . I was just fascinated, uplifted, made to feel alive. And that made my loneliness feel more poignant than I could remember.'

Ember gave her a little bump with her shoulder. 'I'm just damned glad we saw each other again in the florist and that we got to speaking to each other.'

A couple of minutes later, just as they finished their drinks, the waiter returned from the door that led to the downstairs kitchen. He was carrying a rather large and full paper bag and brought it over to them.

'Thank you,' Vibeke said as she stood up and took it from him.

'Thank you madam. Enjoy your meal.' And he escorted them to the front door, which he opened for them before stepping aside. 'Enjoy your meal and have a nice evening,' he said.

'You too,' said Ember, following Vibeke out.

Vibeke smiled as she felt Ember hook a finger through a belt loop of her jeans. It was not infrequently that Ember did that and it always charmed her. It was as if she was some cute creature that needed to be connected to her. Which she was, of course.

'Do you think you ordered enough?' Ember asked with a grin as she took the bag of takeaway food from Vibeke and settled in the passenger seat.

'Well,' said Vibeke as she closed her own door and buckled her seatbelt, 'better too much than too little.'

'That really does smell good,' Ember said. 'And I'm very hungry indeed.'

'Not long to wait,' Vibeke said. 'Maybe twenty minutes. Hopefully the food will easily stay warm enough.'

Ember looked at her but did not ask where they were going. Instead, as Vibeke drove south out of Otterhampton and then southwest through farmland and woods towards the hills and moors, she looked about them with interest, clearly wondering where they were headed.

And then Vibeke noticed that Ember was spending just as much time looking at her. Glancing across at her she said with an amused quizzical look: 'What?'

'I was just thinking how great it is that you planned our evening like this. And then I was looking at you and I saw the way the darkening grey light was falling across your face, and the look of easy concentration as you drove. You are very beautiful and every shift in the light reveals different things about you. I know I've taken a lot of photographs of you but I was thinking how I might take many more. And I'd like to sort through the images I already have and find some I could paint from. You are my muse you know.'

Vibeke reached over and took hold of Ember's hand. 'And you are mine,' she said softly. It always amazed her how they could go from talking about small things, or enjoying banter and playfulness, and then they would suddenly find a tenderness and seriousness in the moment. It was something very special and she felt the welling of emotion suffusing the entirety of her being, so deep that nothing was left untouched by its wonder.

'We are almost there,' Vibeke said a few minutes later. She pulled most of the way off the small road onto the verge - there was no parking area or layby nearby - and turned off the engine. About them were gorse bushes and heather and a few stunted trees - hawthorns and oak a couple of ancient pines - and many exposed boulders. To their right was a low hill - not so low when they considered that they had driven most of the way to its summit. Everything was rather shadowy in the deepening gloom of the evening. It would be dark soon.

They climbed from the car and shrugged into their coats - it was cool and there was a breeze up here on the moors. They took their bags and Vibeke included what she had placed in the boot earlier. Then she turned to Ember and said: 'All right, let's go. It's only a short walk.'

Five minutes later, heading around the side of the hill on a barely-visible path, they came out onto a flatter area of grass mixed with some heather. 'This is it,' Vibeke said.

Ember stopped still, looking around. 'Vibeke, this is fantastic! I didn't know this was here so close to where we live.'

There was a stone circle about the flat area. It was not large and several of the stones had fallen over or sunk. The standing ones were just three feet high or so. Nevertheless they appeared to have been laid out perfectly. To one side were some boulders, including a fairly flat one tilted at an angle across the stones beneath it - perhaps put there deliberately.

'I thought this might be a good place for a birthday meal,' Vibeke said. 'Is this all right?'

'It's great!'

'Right then, let's get everything out. I think both of us are starving.'

Vibeke quickly laid out a blanket on the flattest part of grassy ground to one side of the circle's centre. Then she set down plates and cutlery, cups, and water. And she also brought out six tea-light candles and lit them - though the wind made them flicker a lot it did not blow them out.

And then they sat together cross-legged on the blanket and set out and opened the various dishes of Indian food they had brought. Quickly they spooned rice and different vegetable and meat dishes onto their plates. Ember broke and shared some naan bread.

Then, grinning like idiots at each other, they began to eat.

'This is so good,' Ember moaned after a bite of a particularly spicy spinach and chicken curry.

Ember:

I feel the gentle wind upon my face. It is cool and pleasant. I feel the heat of the food that we eat and know that my hunger makes this excellent food taste even better. I am so very aware of our surroundings. Though it is almost dark now, I still like what I can see - suggestions of moors and rounded, stony hills rolling away to the southwest, and the woods and distant fields behind us. The evening drew in early because of the heavily overcast sky. The candles burn brightly, their flickering suggesting to me the laughter of mischievous spirits.

I cannot hear anything except the gentle sighing of the wind on the occasions it is strong enough to be heard; and of course Vibeke's and my movements, the clink of knife or fork on plates. I am glad we have kicked off our boots and drawn a blanket over our legs.

I am so aware of you. Always I am drawn to you, want simply to look at you. I'm sure I would have been happy if we'd just had an ordinary evening at home, but your idea of coming here and the uniqueness of this place and time and weather and food is just magical. I feel so awake, so alive, as if more conscious than I usually am. I smile as I realise that you often do that to me: make me feel more aware than I used to think possible. It is a slightly scary feeling because it is so poignant and involves a feeling of vulnerability. But it is very pleasant. Sometimes I feel as if I am no more than my awareness of you - it happens most times we make love. I feel that now, breaking over me in waves that retreat only long enough for me to think a moment about the experience before I am overcome again. These are times of a kind of rapture and oneness that I utterly treasure, and you have told me that you feel the same. I marvel that we fit each other so well and evoke so much in each other.

They took their time eating. They talked of small things but were mostly quiet. Yet even their few simple words they spoke with soft voices. Each was so aware of the other. Ember marvelled at how a few sentences about Vibeke's day meant so much to her. It seemed impossible that this sense of connectedness and love filled her in such a profound manner, yet in Vibeke's manner and voice and the tender and slightly shy and touches and looks she gave her, she knew she felt the same.

After finishing eating they packed up the remainder of the food - quite a lot and it would make a fairly good meal tomorrow - and set their plates to one side. They had taken off their coats before they had started eating, and now Vibeke wrapped them both in the second blanket she had brought. That done, she dropped teabags into the vacuum flask of hot water she had in her bag, and after letting it steep poured tea for them.

And they sat their in the near-darkness for a long time, silently watching as the hills slowly shifting clouds became one and indistinguishable. Around them the candlelight still flickered with warm yellow radiance.

They lay down at length and Ember crawled into Vibeke's embrace, laying her head upon her shoulder and wrapping her arm about her waist. 'This is wonderful,' she said softly. 'Thank you for bringing me here.'

'You're more than welcome,' Vibeke replied. 'There is a little more to come for your birthday, but it'll have to wait until we get home.'

Ember did not reply to that, but after a minute said: 'Do you think the spirits of the old gods and goddesses of Albion are watching over us here?'

'Perhaps they are,' Vibeke said. 'I certainly feel sometimes as if there is something extraordinary about the fact that we even met. I know that it was probably just luck, but it was the most amazing and profound luck.'

'I think so too,' Ember said, snuggling more closely against her. Since she was lying on her side, her head on Vibeke's shoulder, she could look across her chest and see the shape of a couple of standing stones that were illuminated by the candles, and beyond them she could just make out the shape of rounded top of the hill they were on. 'What can you see, looking up?' she asked Vibeke. She could have looked herself but for the moment did not want to move - she felt utterly content and in a state of bliss where she was.

'Very little,' Vibeke said. 'Just a shifting of darkness, dark grey and black. Away to the north, the hint of yellow streetlamps.'

'You may not be able to see him, but I think the spirit of Clyde the Cat is with us,' Ember said. And she felt rather than heard Vibeke chuckle, her chest moving slightly against her. Then she said: 'I like listening to your heartbeat. It makes me feel safe. It is really quite slow when you are resting. You must be very fit. Well, I know you are.'

'I like listening to your heartbeat too. Sometimes when I wake in the night, or before you in the morning, I love listening to your breathing. You seem so peaceful and it makes me feel peaceful too.' She paused then said: 'Have you noticed how often we breathe in time with each other?'

Ember nodded slightly against her. 'Yes. I used to do it deliberately sometimes. Still do, actually. But more often now it just seems to happen of its own accord.'

Vibeke turned her head slightly, nuzzling her hair. 'I've done it deliberately as well sometimes,' she said. 'And sometimes I've just been mesmerised, watching your breathing, the rise and fall of your breasts.'

It was almost eleven o'clock when they got back home. They had been quiet during the drive back, a deep peacefulness and gentle tenderness between them. When Vibeke turned off the engine of the car and turned off its lights, they sat in silence for a half a minute. Vibeke suspected that Ember was quite sleepy.

Entering the house, they both blinked in the comparative brightness of the lights. Ember sorted the leftovers of their meal and put it in the refrigerator while Vibeke returned to the car to collect the rest of their things. Both of them made trips to the bathroom, and when Vibeke returned to the kitchen, Ember was making some tea.

'Hi,' she said.

'Hi, Ember.' And, walking up behind her, she put her arms about her waist and laid her head on her shoulder.

Ember patted her hands. 'That's nice.'

Once they had taken their mugs of tea into the living room, Vibeke said: 'Sit down and relax. I'll be back in a minute.'

'Sounds mysterious,' Ember said with a grin. And she sat in the corner of the sofa and brought her feet up under her.

Shortly, Vibeke returned to the living room carrying a birthday cake with three candles lit upon it. She stepped across to Ember and set it on the coffee table before her. 'Happy birthday Ember,' she said.

'Oh!' said Ember when she saw it. She put her fingertips to her mouth in surprise. 'A cake in the shape of a rabbit!' Then she chuckled.

'I hope you like it.'

'I love it!' Ember said. 'That's really thoughtful of you.'

'I'm sorry to say that I didn't make it myself, but honestly you're probably better off that I didn't. I'm not much good at baking. The baker at the end of the parade on Green Street made it. Mrs Kelly or her husband I guess. Let me go and fetch a couple of plates and a knife.'

She returned carrying not only the plates and knife but also a large, colourful paper bag with handles.

'Should I blow my candles out now?' Ember asked as Vibeke sat down next to her.

'You can do as you wish,' Vibeke said.

'I think I'll leave them burning for the moment then. They look nice.' She picked up the knife and cut two generous pieces and set them on the small plates. 'Chocolate, chocolate and more chocolate?'

'Pretty much.'

'Just absolutely my favourite kind of cake then.'

The cake was moist and the layers of icing were soft and so they used teaspoons to eat. 'That really is great,' Ember said, closing her eyes in appreciation as she savoured the cake.

They ate, and then Ember said: 'I guess I do have to blow out those candles now before they burn down. And I know that it's traditional to keep one's wish secret. I think it's not supposed to come true if one reveals it. Is that right? Or is it that twenty tons of hamsters fall from the sky? I don't know.' She looked into Vibeke's eyes. 'But since it's a superstition anyway, I'd like to say my wish out loud.'

Vibeke reached out and took Ember's hand. As Ember turned and looked at the candles on the cake, she absorbed the way their flickering light was bright, reflected in her eyes almost as if they were silver-blue mirrors. Then she listened as Ember said:

'I wish for us to always be able to bring so much happiness to each other as we already have done in our togetherness. I do not doubt us at all. As my love for you is endless I feel it reflected in you and know that we will always feel as we do. Whatever fears I have are only that the world changes and things happen that we cannot control. I wish that nothing in the universe will ever happen to hurt us or frustrate our togetherness.'

And then Ember leaned forward and blew out the candles. Leaning back, looking up at Vibeke, she smiled.

Vibeke looked back at her for a long moment, gazing into her eyes, seeing such tenderness and hope there. Then she took her in her arms and held her close for a little while, gently rubbing her back with comforting, circular movements of her hand and nuzzling her neck, breathing her in.

They had never spoken much of fears that they might have in their relationship, she thought now. And she realised that what fears she had were much the same as Ember's. She trusted her own feelings for Ember and trusted Ember's feelings for her. Indeed, it was not so much a matter of trust as a sense that anything else was unthinkable, that maiming or death would be preferable, that a change in their feelings for each other would be like becoming different people, ripped into parts that could not be reassembled and that would make no sense. Yet she acknowledged that the world could be a dangerous place and that life always entailed risk. It was possible that one or other of them - or both - could succumb to an accident or illness. There were no guarantees against such things happening.

Then Vibeke thought: there is always death. And she said, knowing that Ember was thinking along the same lines as her: 'Though we will always love each other there is always danger and death. But to be with you while alive makes me feel that I can accept death very easily. I could not bear to be alone after what we have and I think you feel the same. But I could die with you, happily enough even in those last moments.'

Ember squeezed her more tightly. She sniffled slightly and said softly: 'I love you Vibeke.'

They sat back from each other after another minute. Vibeke wiped away Ember's few tears with her thumb.

'I'm sorry,' Ember said. 'My wish seemed rather morbid I guess.'

'It was also beautiful,' said Vibeke.

Ember looked up at her and smiled. 'You know, your words really echoed what I was feeling. It's such a strange thing, isn't it? My perception of death has changed so much because of being with you. It seems so much . . . less.'

'That's how I feel too.' She chuckled. 'And it's probably a good thing that twenty tons of hamsters didn't fall on top of us.'

They settled back then, and picked up their plates to finish their slices of cake. Then Vibeke said after a couple of bites: 'Maybe you'd like to open your birthday present?' And she set the colourful bag before her. 'I'm actually a little bit nervous.'

'I'd be happy if you gave me no more than a kiss,' Ember said. Setting her plate down, she looked within. 'More than one present, apparently,' she said. She grinned as she took out the first item. It was quite small and wrapped in paper that had teddy bears on it. 'Hmm, I wonder what this is. It's quite heavy.' She shook it slightly. 'I really don't know.' Then she slowly unwrapped it until a belt buckle was revealed, and she looked up at Vibeke with a grin. 'I'd forgotten about this,' she said. She held it up to look at the metal patterning and the blue stones that were set into it. 'Thank you. I have a feeling you might have been listening for hints when we went shopping.'

'Perhaps,' Vibeke replied.

'Now, what's this next gift?' Ember said as she reached in and took out a rather larger package. It was soft and square and quite thick. 'An item of clothing perhaps?' Soon enough she had unwrapped it and revealed a pullover of light blue, loose-knit wool. It was fluffy and its colour was striking.

'I hope it'll fit all right,' Vibeke said. 'The colour reminded me of your eyes so I just had to buy it for you.'

Ember ran her fingers over the softness of the pullover, then held it up, admiring it. 'It's beautiful. I shall try it on in a moment. But first . . .' And she reached into the bag again and removed the last gift. This was small, and when she unwrapped it a jewellery pouch was revealed. Opening it, she tipped a gold chain bracelet into her hand.

A little gasp escaped her when she held the bracelet up and examined the little golden ornaments that dangled from it all the way around. There were three small, golden letter Vs, three small, golden letter Es and six small, golden infinity signs. They were laid out so that there was an infinity sign between each of the Vs and Es.

Ember did not say anything for long seconds, but just stared at it, absorbing its meaning. And then she set it gently down and reached out and took Vibeke in her arms, holding her close.

'Forever,' she said.

'Forever,' Vibeke replied.

And then Ember made space on the sofa and drew Vibeke down beside her, and they lay wrapped in each other's arms, full of wonder.

Chapter Seventeen

Edward's Life

Monday 4th December, Year 1:

Vibeke pulled up outside Mrs Waechter's house, pulled up the handbrake and turned off the engine. She sat back in the sudden silence and turned to regard Ember.

Ember was wearing traditional black - a skirt and suit jacket that were quite nondescript, that were simply made to fit in. It was as if Ember had shed her individuality to become anonymous at the funeral - which was exactly what the kinds of clothes worn at funerals were intended for in some ways: forgetting about the self so that one could think about the deceased.

Vibeke was also wearing a black skirt and jacket.

She reached out and took Ember's hand. 'Shall we go and get Mrs Waechter?' she asked.

Ember nodded. She did not say anything for a few seconds, simply looking down, but then she looked up into Vibeke's eyes and said: 'Edward was very kind.'

Vibeke knew that she meant several things by this: not only that he was kind to others and perhaps kind to himself but also that it was sad that he should have died given how much he had brought to other people's lives; how it seemed unfair not only to others but to him; how kindness did not result in much control at all over life or death.

Vibeke gave Ember a hug, then climbed from the car and went around to the passenger side and helped Ember out. Together they walked up the short path to the front door. Ember lifted and dropped the knocker.

Mrs Waechter opened the door almost immediately. She looked pale and appeared to have applied rather too much powder to her face, which made her skin look aged and cracked. Her eyes were bloodshot. But still she smiled with warmth and perhaps a little relief and warmly embraced the two of them, Ember then Vibeke. Then she took them both by the hand and led them into the house. 'Come in,' she said. 'Would you like a cup of tea before we leave? Maybe a sherry?'

Vibeke found a parking spot just down the road from the church - its small carpark was full. As Ember gave Mrs Waechter a hand to climb from the back seat, she walked around the car and then closed and locked the doors after them. Then together they headed for the church.

There were a few small shops at one end of the street, and a green around a curve in the road. There was a small primary school and a small public library next to each other. There were rather older terraced houses with bay windows. And then there was the church in its small grounds and graveyard, with a few old trees around it, almost bare of leaves now in the encroaching winter. The church building was made of orange-red brick, with roofs of darker tiles and a simple steeple. It was perhaps a hundred years old and though it did not have a grand design or intricate architecture and did not have the prettiness of an old country church, it was still attractive. The limited grounds were well-maintained but the trees and some bushes allowed to grow quite freely. Vibeke thought that it was a pleasant place and that, in such a small area as it occupied in an ordinary suburb, so much significance and feeling and purpose were captured.

Other people were gathering at the church, some of them entering it, a few waiting outside in the cold, still air of the grey day. Their funeral clothing was predictable, their manner - quiet, supportive, rather pensive, vulnerable in some cases and almost confused in others - were also what Vibeke supposed were common to most funerals. It occurred to her just how many gatherings like this must take place every day, few of them very different to each other, as the living tried to accept but never really understood the passing of the dead.

Mrs Waechter quietly greeted a couple of people she knew. One was a very old lady who was thin and rather stooped, who peered up through thick glasses and smiled as if surprised when she recognised her. The other was a younger woman with rather fussy and heavily hairsprayed auburn hair. She was glad to see Mrs Waechter and it seemed she had been crying.

Mrs Waechter, Ember and Vibeke followed them into the church and they made their ways to the pews. Mrs Waechter sat in front of Vibeke and Ember with friends that Ember knew from the card games they sometimes played. Vibeke sat by a pillar at the end of their pew and Ember beside her; and a younger man of about twenty or so with a woman who was probably his sister settled beyond Ember.

The church's interior was pleasant, the wan but coloured light filtering through the stained glass windows was evocative. Vibeke glanced at a few paintings on the walls between tall, leaded windows. But mostly her attention was caught by the coffin that had been placed before the sanctuary - dark wood in a simple design. She was very aware that Edward's body was within and wondered what he would have thought had he been able to look in and see himself now, and if he would be pleased with the way he had been dressed and set out, and if his expression was peaceful or anguished or haunted.

The organ began to play and the last few people took their seats. There were about forty people there in total.

Then the priest, a balding man with a thin grey hair and kindly grey eyes took his place and the service began.

The words of much of the service did not particularly touch Vibeke. Grand statements about salvation meant little to her. But the eulogy, and the place, the solemnity, the hymns that were sung meant a great deal indeed. Mostly of course she thought about Edward. And the emotions of everyone present were clear.

Vibeke kept hold of Ember's hand, very aware of the fragility Ember seemed to have had since they had woken that morning and wanting to be there for her love. On the one hand Ember was so full of life and in some ways so accepting of difficulties that she was very strong indeed, yet her sadness today seemed to be almost overwhelming. Perhaps it was simply that, just as Ember could take such delight and pleasure in the simplest of everyday things, such as how just an angle of sunlight and shadow through a window could make her happy, so a sad thing like Edward's death would not only be felt very clearly but also, as Ember felt most things, very deeply.

Vibeke reflected then that she had not known Edward as well as Ember but that perhaps her quiet distress went beyond the loss of her friendship with him and also in some ways beyond his death. She wondered what it might be and hoped that Ember would wish to talk with her about it when she was ready. She would, she thought. Ember did not hold things back from her. The only reason she might wait to tell her anything was if she did not really understand how she felt and so had to become surer of what it was before she could really communicate anything about it.

The burial took place not within the church grounds but at another graveyard a few hundred yards down the road. Edward was lowered into the ground in an area that had been freed up recently where a dying tree had been cut down and dug up.

Afterwards they went to the wake at a country pub to the east of Otterhampton, about ten minutes' drive from the church.

'I live life in the present, mostly,' Ember said later as they sat upon a bench outside at the back of the pub. The light was pale and the air was cold, winter very much here and bringing the promise of snow. Across the road from where they were sitting was a hedgerow and a rising field already ploughed for the spring. 'And I think that today I was struck by how the present ends - subjectively, at least. It frightened me, and saddened me regarding others. But then I thought of you and realised how happy I am now. And that I will be happy even when we die to know that we shared such happiness. I have no doubt that I will want more but I think I will be able to accept it. Today it was a bit difficult though.'

Vibeke held her hand and listened. She was surprised when Ember said: 'Are you all right?' She had not really been thinking about herself.

After long seconds she said: 'I am. I just realised that I am sometimes tired in some ways and that I think I can see that tiredness in you too on occasion, no matter the life and energy and excitement we share. We focus on bringing each other happiness mostly, which of course brings

happiness to ourselves. I don't know if it was because of difficult childhoods or something else, but it is as if we have found sanctuary in each other and that now we can rest and play and create. In some ways we ignore the rest of the world except in so far as we try to be good for others when we interact with them. It is selfish and unselfish, like many things in some ways. It is also love, and amazingly profound at that.'

Ember regarded her. 'Some people might say we have old souls,' she said with a small smile.

'Yes, they would.' Then Vibeke gave her a small shrug. 'You brought Edward happiness by being his friend, and by visiting him in hospital, and just by being a beautiful person. That is so special in itself, no matter where it came from.'

Returning inside, Vibeke and Ember listened to many people as they spoke about Edward's life. His small remaining family had many stories of him. His two nieces and nephew talked of how they remembered him as their favourite uncle - though they had only had the one. His sister and cousin, who had not seen each other in many years, reminisced about summer holidays sixty years past.

They all had different ways of describing Edward. None of them were absolutely true but none of them were invalid either. They were simply the ways in which they saw him.

'It's amazing how he touched people in so many ways,' Ember said once.

Vibeke nodded. She thought of how that was true of everyone in the long term: how even the most insignificant action changed almost everything in the world given enough time.

It was amazing, she thought, to learn about what Edward's life meant to people that cared about him and were interested in him.

They sampled and ate the food provided, and drank cups of tea. Vibeke had felt very emotionally aware most of the day and she did not doubt that Ember felt the same and more. Yet they tired quickly too, and Vibeke was a little relieved when Mrs Waechter approached them and told them that she would like to leave. Some others had already left and the wake was drawing to a close.

They politely said their goodbyes, and then headed out to the car. Vibeke did not miss the deep breath of cold air that Ember drew in and exhaled, clearly glad that they were going. Like her, Ember sometimes struggled when she was in a situation where people usually talked a lot and she did not have much that she wanted to say.

They drove back to Mrs Waechter's house in silence except for a couple of comments Mrs Waechter made about how she thought Edward would have been pleased. When Vibeke pulled up in front of her home she said: 'I would invite you girls in but . . . Well, I think I'd like to be alone and I suspect you have had enough for the day as well.'

'That's all right Mrs Waechter,' Ember said.

Mrs Waechter squeezed Vibeke's shoulder and Vibeke patted her hand. 'Thank you Vibeke.'

'Good night Mrs Waechter.'

Ember hopped out and gave Mrs Waechter a hug, then climbed back into the car. Vibeke did not pull away until Mrs Waechter had let herself into her house and turned to wave.

'Time to go home,' Vibeke said.

'Any chance we can climb out of these uncomfortable clothes, take a shower, put on sleepshirts and curl up on the sofa in a blanket with mugs of tea and watch a silly movie?' Ember asked.

Vibeke grinned. 'I'd like that,' she said.

PART THREE: Being Together through the Years

Chapter Eighteen

Rowing on a Lake

Saturday 10th March, Year 2:

'Isn't this great?!' said Ember, grinning widely, doing a happy little dance while not moving from her spot.

Vibeke looked at her and felt a wave of almost giddy happiness go through her. *How do you do that?* she wondered. *Just your way of being, your simple delight give me so much pleasure. How many times a day do I think I'm about to melt into a boneless puddle of mush?* 'It certainly looks it. A bit windy and chilly.'

'That's why it's great!'

They were standing on an old wooden jetty that jutted out into a fairly large lake of very irregular shape. Three yachts could be seen in the distance, two of them heeled at a sharp angle in the wind and apparently moving quite quickly. There were hills and rather barren moors around most of the opposite side of the lake, and there were several small islands here and there.

Up against the jetty were tied five simple fibreglass rowing boats.

'Here he comes,' said Ember, nodding towards the shore.

Vibeke turned and saw the fat, middle-aged man ambling towards them from the back of the boathouse. He was wearing wellingtons, stained jeans and an old checked workshirt. He was unshaven and rather ugly but he had had a pleasant and relaxed manner when they had spoken to him and asked to rent one of the boats.

He nodded as he reached them. 'Bit of a wild day today,' he said as he fumbled through a ring of keys. 'Keep your life jackets on,' he said amiably.

Vibeke was in the process of putting hers on and Ember was already wearing hers. She looked strangely cute in the bright orange padding and Vibeke was not really sure why - until she reflected that, to her eyes, Ember just looked perpetually cute - except when she was looking beautiful, of course.

The man kneeled heavily and unlocked the padlock that secured the rowing boat, and handed the line to Vibeke. 'There you go.'

'Thanks. How long do we have?'

'Normally these are rented by the hour, but I don't imagine anyone else is going to come along. You can stay out as long as you like, just make sure you bring it back by the time I close. I'll be leaving at five o'clock, but I think you'll be cold and tired well before that.' He nodded to them again. 'Have a good time.'

'Thank you,' said Ember.

Vibeke held the front of the boat up against the wooden dock while Ember climbed in. She handed their small backpacks to her, then once she was settled on the middle bench she hopped on board after her, making the boat rock rather a lot.

'Not got my sea legs yet,' Vibeke explained. 'Here, let's get the oars set. Do you mind if I row first?'

'No problem. There's not a lot of space on the bench, but maybe we can try rowing together once we're away from the shore. That might be fun. As long as you don't pull too hard, as then we'd just end up going in circles.'

Ember climbed to the back bench of the boat and Vibeke set the oars and sat down between them. Then, without much trouble, she pushed away from the jetty and between two of the other boats, then turned their boat around with strokes of her right oar. Then she dipped both blades and pulled once, then more strongly, and then settled into an easy rhythm.

Soon enough they were well away from the shore and out on the water.

'I'm glad you're sitting at the back and not at the front,' Vibeke said.

'Why's that?' Ember asked. 'I guess if I was at the front the bow would be lower in the water. Would that increase the resistance of the water and make it slower and more difficult going?'

'I didn't think about it. I just meant it was nice that I can see you.'

Ember chuckled at that, looking about them at the expanse of the lake, the picturesque countryside beyond, and taking in the openness of the grey day.

Vibeke watched the way that Ember's pale hair was whipped by the wind. She saw that her face, usually fair, was paler in the chilly air and her large, ice-blue eyes were unusually light, reflecting the light in an almost clear silver while her pupils were very constricted.

Then Ember looked at her smiling widely. 'As I said, this great,' she said. 'But it's also rather cold so I'm going to wear my hat. Do you want yours?'

'I'm all right for the moment. I'm actually kind of enjoying having my hair tugged about me.'

Ember picked up her backpack and rummaged inside it, coming out with her blue and white woollen hat with a bobble that hung from the top. She tipped her head forward and pulled it on, settled it in place then looked up again. Her hair was mostly hidden and her ears were covered but Vibeke thought she looked adorable.

Then Vibeke grinned. 'You have rabbits on the sides of your hat,' she said.

'Yes,' Ember replied. 'I had to knit them onto it myself since I couldn't find a hat that had any. I thought that was pretty weird actually. You would have thought that rabbits would be a pretty basic requirement for any hat, but no. Such is the world we live in.' She looked up at Vibeke with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. 'Would you be terribly disappointed if your hat disappeared one day in inexplicable circumstances - kidnapped by aliens perhaps - and then reappeared a day or two later with an image of Clyde the Cat on it? I mean, such things can happen. You never know when the image of a cartoon animal might suddenly make an appearance.'

'Hmm,' said Vibeke. 'No, it wouldn't disturb me, though I wonder how it would be done. My hat is black and has loose-knit wool.'

'I guess I could just make a full-size Clyde the Cat and get him to sit on top of the hat,' Ember said.

They fell quiet for a little while then as Vibeke pulled steadily and glanced over her shoulder from time to time, heading for the very centre of the lake and a string of islands off to the right.

'Here, can I join you?' Ember asked.

'Of course.' Vibeke stopped rowing and slid over a little. She held the oars steady as Ember stood and then settled beside her on the rowing bench. They were pressed up against each other and she found herself very aware of the contact, the press of Ember's body even through the coats they were wearing.

Then they leaned forward together, each of them holding an oar.

'Ready?' asked Vibeke.

'Ready.'

Together, they dipped their oars and pulled slowly, Vibeke timing her strokes to Ember's. Once and again and again they pulled until they had a steady rhythm going.

'Wow, this is fun!' exclaimed Ember, grinning as she rowed.

Gradually and somewhat erratically they made their way onwards.

Half an hour later they stopped in the lee of a small island. They decided not to get out and explore - there were only a few trees there, some sandy ground and some tangled undergrowth. But they guided their boat close to a ridge and an overhanging ash tree so that they could be out of the wind for a little while, and then Vibeke took their flask of coffee from her backpack. She filled a cup and handed it to Ember, then filled another for herself.

Sitting there, leaning against each other, their hands warmed by the coffee, their bodies warmed by their efforts, Vibeke marvelled at how good she felt - not that it was a rare occurrence in Ember's company.

'That's great,' Ember said as she took a small and careful sip. 'I like your fingerless gloves,' she remarked. 'I always find it annoying when I'm wearing gloves and try fumbling with my bag or try to take out some money and I have to take them off except my hands are full so I put them under my arm and then risk losing one.'

'Thanks. I need to get some new ones really as these are a bit worn out.'

Vibeke and Ember both took items of lunch from their packs then - Vibeke had been carrying some sandwiches and a couple of packets of crisps, and Ember had been carrying some rich chocolate cake with white icing that she had made the previous day.

'Nice sandwiches,' Ember commented as she ate one. It had chicken, lettuce, pickle and cheese and was thick enough to require a large bite.

Vibeke gently bumped her with her shoulder and smiled as she looked across at her. 'I loooooovve yoouu,' she sang softly.

Ember grinned and wrapped an arm about her waist and gave her a squeeze. 'You are my heart and my life.'

As they fed each other crisps - salt and vinegar, and prawn cocktail flavoured - Vibeke said: 'Damn, what a great idea it was to come out here today.'

'I do feel almost smug about it,' Ember replied. Then, after a little while: 'I wonder what people thought of this place back in stone age and bronze age times. I guess some people must have lived on the shores from time to time. Maybe there was once a village here. Those line of standing stones we saw on the way here are only a few miles away.'

'I wonder if they fished here much. I imagine there were once quite a lot of fish here.'

'They must have had such a different perspective of the world,' Ember went on. 'Many strange beliefs about the nature of reality, about gods and magic, about seasons and creatures and the immensity of the wilderness about them that seems comparatively small to us.'

Vibeke considered for a moment. 'Yes, it's fascinating. Except it would not have been strange at all to them, though no doubt the world was full of mystery.'

Chapter Nineteen

A Happy Evening (One of Many)

Friday 6th April, Year 2:

'I do like Friday evenings,' Ember said. 'And you certainly prepared a great meal this evening. And we have the weekend still in front of us!' She smiled contentedly.

They were sitting at their customary places across the corner of the kitchen table. They had finished their dessert and were just taking their time sipping their cups of tea. Twilight and the first stars did not light the room well and Vibeke had only lit a single candle with a stem of dark green.

'I have something for you,' Vibeke said. 'For us, really.'

'Really?' Ember smiled. It was not unusual for them to give each other small gifts - usually just something fun, or some flowers, or some small thing each though the other might make good use of. But Ember saw that from Vibeke's manner that whatever it was was probably not without significance. Vibeke seemed a little self-conscious, excited and vulnerable at the same time.

'Yes. Stay here a moment. I'll just get it from the bedroom.'

Ember waited, watching the flickering of the candle flame and its reflection against the glass of the darkening window. It was very quiet, as it usually was in the house - there was no traffic to be heard.

She heard Vibeke's soft footsteps and watched as she turned through the door, crossed over to her and settled back down in her chair. With a smile and small sigh of happy decisiveness she set down a velvet pouch on the table between them.

'I had this idea and it just seemed . . . Well, I really hope you like it. It's something for both of us.'

Ember looked into Vibeke's eyes. Her pupils were dilated in the dimness and the light of the candle was steady in her eyes. As so often, she thought of amethysts touched with a hint of ruby.

'Open it?' Vibeke asked with a smile.

Ember picked up the pouch and felt the shifting of weight. It was jewellery of some kind. Opening the drawstring, she gently let the contents fall into her palm.

'One for you and one for me,' Vibeke said.

Ember blinked and felt a rush of deep emotion flow through her as, for a long minute, she examined what she was holding. 'They're beautiful,' she said, holding them up to the light. There were two silver chains and two pendants. One of the pendants was of a light blue stone. Though its colour was completely different, it was almost like tiger's eye in the way that parts of it were transparent and refractive and other parts were translucent. The other was of a light amethyst, clear and of a lovely hue.

Each was a perfect half-sphere a little less than an inch in diameter.

Even as Ember realised what that meant, Vibeke took the two stones from her and fit them together, back to back. With a small turn the clasps at the top of each stone fitted together. Now Vibeke was holding a single sphere of stone. 'Like us,' she said softly, and handed it back to Ember.

'Like us,' Ember agreed. And she took hold of Vibeke's hand and intertwined their fingers.

For a while they just sat there in near darkness, pondering the combined stones and their togetherness, filled with a profound sense of endless connectedness.

A little later Vibeke said: 'Will you watch some television with me as we digest? And then maybe can take a bath together.'

Ember smiled at her. 'I would like that very much. We do seem to take a lot of baths and showers together. I like doing so.'

'How about I wash up while you choose a film or TV programme to watch and maybe get some candles and bubble bath ready?'

Before long they were settled in the corner of the sofa. Ember was leaning back in Vibeke's embrace, Vibeke's arms about her. It was good to be so comfortable and close. It was good to feel Vibeke's chest moving against her, to even be aware of her heartbeat if she concentrated.

They watched a television programme about mysteries and hoaxes and curious discoveries. They both liked the sceptical way in which it was presented, enjoyed the eccentric enthusiasm of a professor of zoology who was consulted, and were intrigued by films of weird animals from the deep oceans. It was all a bit sensational but it was done in such an amusing way that they liked it.

When it was over, Ember turned off the television and turned to Vibeke and said: 'I think we have an appointment with a bath.'

'It agreed to fit us into its schedule?'

'Yes. You know, with all the bath ducks that need its attention it was very generous to give us as much time as we want.'

A few minutes later they were undressing each other in the bedroom. Then, naked and holding hands, they went through to the bathroom where hot water was pouring into a mass of foaming bubbles. Vibeke had lit half a dozen candles about the room and their soft golden radiance lit everything softly.

After testing the water, Vibeke stepped in first and helped Ember in after her. Slowly, they eased themselves down into the soothing heat. Reaching behind Ember, Vibeke turned off the water seeing as it was deep enough that they risked overflowing the bath.

'Lean back against me,' she said as she settled back against the sloping end of the bath.

Ember nodded and turned and leaned back. Vibeke found herself grinning at the soft pressure of her against her breasts, her legs to either side of Ember. As Ember leaned her head back against Vibeke's shoulder, Vibeke nuzzled her hair and kissed the edge of the shell of her right ear.

They scooped up handfuls of bubbles and let them fall. After a little while of simply relaxing, Vibeke picked up a sponge and shifted Ember forward a little so that she could scrub her shoulders and back. It was not much to do with washing her of course, it was just a form of pleasant contact and massage that they both liked.

When Ember leaned back against her again, Vibeke scrubbed her upper chest. And then she set aside the sponge, and cupped Ember's breasts with her hands, and gently squeezed and caressed them, starting very gently and slowly, taking her time, enjoying the catch of Ember's breathing and the shift of her body at the sensations she was causing. She brushed her fingers across her nipples, and pulled them very lightly. Then she took as much of her breasts in her hands as she could and began a rather more intense manipulation and squeezing and massaging of the soft flesh, enjoying the whimpers of pleasure she could evoke from Ember in just this simple way.

A while later, after the bath water had begun to cool, they stepped out and dried each other off. Making their way to the bedroom, they pulled back the covers of the bed and lay down together, kissing and touching, Ember lying almost on top of Vibeke.

For a very long time then they shared pleasures. They brought each other to peak after peak, but more than that it was the time of delightment that they spent holding each other close to that greatest pleasure that made them soar upon the oneness of their experience of each other. Entwined together, caressing and tasting, kissing and licking, becoming slick with sweat and the sweet wetness of their desire, all else vanished: there was only them, their bliss, their togetherness.

Later, after sleeping for a little while, Vibeke awoke to find that Ember was sitting beside her up against the pillows, her beauty lit by a solitary, still-burning candle.

And she saw that Ember was holding their new necklaces and pendants up, gazing into the sphere that they made, absorbed by the light that entered it and was reflected from it. A look of such awe and happiness was upon her face, a profound and lovely tenderness revealed in her gaze, that Vibeke simply stared at her, transfixed and marvelling. She did not think that Ember was aware that she was awake until, after a minute or so, Ember turned and looked down into her eyes, smiling, her own eyes shining with love.

Chapter Twenty

Running and Playing

Saturday 5th May, Year 2:

Ember:

You are so beautiful.

I stand by the overgrown hedgerow beneath an old oak tree that has spread and lost some of its limbs and grown strangely, some of it dying back. I suspect some of its trunk is hollow and that, though it may seem close to death, it will outlive most people that are currently alive.

The sun is shining brightly, the air cool. There was a heavy dew when we went out this morning, and mist hanging in swathes like silk over the landscape.

I watch as you run. Sometimes you slow to a walk, and turn, and then set off again. You have been at it for more than two hours, and before that you were working out with your weights.

I smile as I think about how reluctant you were to ask old Mr Caldwell if you might use his field for running. I was not sure if you simply did not wish to be intrusive and did not want to disturb him, or if you had some need to hide in some way, or if you simply did not want your neutral anonymity as far as your neighbour was concerned to become familiarity, with the social expectations that might entail. I am glad that you have discovered that he is so pleased that you are making good use of his field. I have seen him watching briefly on a few occasions, when he has been in an adjacent field or standing by his barn. I also know that he has kept the outer path clear for no reason other than that you would want to use it - though I suspect he would, with some humour, deny it.

You are wearing khaki shorts that come to mid-thigh, a black vest and a sports bra beneath. You are barefoot, and I know that you love to run barefoot. When you surge forwards you seem to have both the grace and lightness of a deer and the unstoppable power of a hunting cat. I watch the muscles rippling along your legs. Even from this distance I can see the flush of your skin and the sweat that gleams upon your skin, the blush of heat that caresses your face, the strength and depth of each of your deep breaths.

Sometimes I wonder if your raw physicality might overwhelm me, though it never has. I have seen the way you need to move, to push your body, and understand that you would feel constricted, uncomfortable, tense if you could not do so. I also am aware of the deep relaxation such an intensity of motion and effort brings you afterwards. I love the way you are so tired, and then shower and eat and then, when I hold you, you are so amazingly responsive to my touch. My every breath and caress, kiss and gentle bite makes you thrum and vibrate in my arms such that you quickly ascend to the experience of aching liquid pleasure where you might find release

- unless I hold you for as long as I can at the very summit, at the edge of release, which sometimes both of us want.

Vibeke:

I have never seen you playing cards before, and though I have been watching you for the best part of half an hour I still do not have a clue what game it is that you are playing or what the goal of it is. It looks complex, and I am amused at the fact that I cannot work it out just by observing.

I am sitting on the sofa, and am glad that we carried it out onto the cracked patio so that we might sit and have breakfast in the cool air of the early morning. I enjoyed listening to the birdsong, and at moments I saw you were quite enraptured by it. It was shortly after six o'clock that we arose, and though I think we both might have liked a little more sleep, I am happy that we so much enjoyed sitting here in the muted shell-pink light, drinking orange juice and coffee and eating an omelette and toast.

Now, after a workout and a shower and a return to bed so that we might make slow, lingering and tender love, we are back out here as midday approaches. And though I brought a book out to read, I have barely taken in a single sentence, so caught up have I been in trying to work out the nature of the game you are enjoying.

Well . . . Even if I do not yet comprehend it, I enjoy watching the smile of surprise and pleasure that sometimes crosses your face when you turn over a particular card. It is an amazing thing to take in the depth of your concentration, the way your eyes absorb the nature of each card, the way your gaze shifts to take in some more profound meaning that more than merely eludes me.

You are sitting on the warm stone of the patio, your back to the brick wall of the kitchen on my left. Climbing plants frame you and the wall gives you a little shade, but dappled sunlight still falls across your legs and the side of your face. You are wearing a dress of light white material, gauzy and partly see-through from the waist down. The sleeves are short such that your faintly tanned arms are bare. The dress has a kind of mock bodice of clearer white cloth, and small pearl buttons down the front. I look at your bare, lightly tanned feet and watch your toes shift once and then again as you tackle some tricky problem in your game, and the littleness of it and the fact that I notice it so clearly fills me with a deep warmth and amazement. Your silken hair is still fairly short but it is long enough that you have parted it slightly. I like the way that it looks slightly unruly and how it frames your face uniquely. You are not wearing any make-up or jewellery. You have not done so for some time, and I remind myself to ask you what your reasons might be for setting such things aside.

You look up at me as I take a sip of my cooling golden tea. 'You are watching me,' you say.

I nod. 'You are beautiful.' Then, after a few seconds in which I absorb the way in which you look down, take in my words, then look up again with pleasure and shy warmth, I say: 'Will you tell me the rules of your game?'

At this you set the cards that are in your hand down on the sun-warmed stone beside you, face-down. You smile but also look slightly puzzled. 'There are no rules,' you say quietly. 'I was simply looking for patterns.'

I feel my wonder deepen at this. Ever since I met you I have been astonished by how much you can see in almost anything.

'The combinations of cards - not only their order but also the way I lay them out - becomes infinite,' you say. 'But every combination and laying out tells many possible stories. I have been trying to understand a few of them. Would you like me to show you, and to tell you a few of the stories?'

'I would like that very much,' I reply. I stand up and walk across to you and sit down beside you with my back to the wall. I feel the cool stone against me, and the heat where there is no shade.

'Look,' you say as you pick up the remainder of the deck and set out half a dozen cards in a pattern around those you have already dealt. And you tell me a story, fairly short but very poignant, of what the cards mean to you. As I listen, I marvel at what you say, the amazing beauty of your imagination and the connections you make, the kindness and compassion that is revealed in your tale. At the same time I am, as so often, amazed your lovely voice, the colour of which is so perfect, so feminine but yet quite low. I take in your gentle expressions and absorb the meanings of what you say as best I can.

Chapter Twenty-One

Art and Work

Thursday 14th June, Year 2:

Vibeke:

The day is sunny and not yet hot. It is just before eleven o'clock in the clock in the morning but we have been up since five. The sun had risen by then of course, but it was so good to drive out into the hills with you and find a place where we could sit and enjoy breakfast and gaze out across the landscape. The light was cool and a misty veil clung to vales and drifted over the fields. The birdsong was clear and endlessly varied.

Tomorrow we will go on a trip, a holiday that we do not know much about yet except that we will drive to get wherever we are going. Today we are simply taking a day off.

I stand at the kitchen windows, looking out. The garden is rather overgrown but I like it like this. I find it amusing that you like to take care of it as much as you can and that I prefer to let you. A consequence of my working at the nursery I guess. The grass is a remarkable clear green and there are so many blooms coming out in a chaos of colour.

I turn away and step across to the surface under one of the cupboards where the kettle and toaster sit. I stop for a moment before pouring us mugs of tea - you have been in your art room for quite a while now and I think you will appreciate it. I am suddenly very aware of the simple fact of the surface, the kettle, the toaster, the cupboards. How many times have I made tea or toast here? I realise that this small and simple place can be considered mine but I am also aware that these everyday things - cupboards, surface, kettle, toaster - are laid out in a way that is unique and that the light from the windows falls upon them in a way it would not anywhere else. With a smile I reflect that I like our house and I wonder how it was planned and built and with what degree of awareness.

I add milk to our tea and put some biscuits on a plate - oat biscuits with sesame that I know you like. I pick up both mugs with one hand and the plate of biscuits with the other, and leave the kitchen and pass down the hall to the room that has become your studio.

I feel like knocking before entering in case you are in some kind of creative fugue but instead just enter quietly.

You add a couple of strokes with a stick of charcoal to the picture you are working on and then look up to me with a bright smile.

I take in the meaningful chaos of the room - the many stacked pictures and paintings, the paints and pencils and papers and sketches, the long, scored table and tilted work-table and easel, the books and notebooks and jottings, the marks of paint on two pallets, the brushes, the many colours of lines of pastels and so much more. The windows are open and the lace curtains billow and settle and drift in the light breezes. The light is bright, dappled because of the spreading ash tree and the climbing plants about the frame outside. Summer and sunshine and clear yellow-gold radiance fills the space. The scents of turpentine and oil paints and other art materials are pleasant in the air.

But most of all my attention is upon you: sitting upon your chair, wearing a light summer dress of pale cream, loosely tied with long laces up the front, the short sleeves and the long skirt layered but simple. One of your shoulders is bare and the plunging back reveals much fair skin over the insides of your shoulder-blades, down the dip of your spine and the curve of the small of your back to where the material comes together again above a slim belt of light, braided cloth. Your feet are sandalled upon the wooden floor and I can see your shapely toes peeking out from the cloth of your long dress. You are utterly lovely.

I look into your smiling face and find myself grinning in return. Sunlight and shadow fall across your visage and your hair is very pale. Your eyes are like limpid expanses of crystalline water in some northern lake, with depth and desire and profundity in their centres.

You say with amusement: 'You seem to have become distracted.' You say it warmly and I love your voice.

I blink and shake my head a fraction. 'I entered a fugue of rapture for a little while,' I reply. 'Which was clearly your fault.' I chuckle and look down. 'I brought you some tea,' I say unnecessarily.

'Thank you that's kind of you. I must admit I was becoming a little tired and thirsty. And lonely.'

For a moment I think you are being charming and are amused at us - we have several times reflected that we so much like being together and find it difficult to spend time apart. Then I realise that you are completely serious. I swallow and feel a sudden sense of contingency, and a gladness and astonishment that things are not other than they are. 'I am always here for you,' I say. Then, with a small smile: 'I did not want to disturb your work though I did not think I would disturb you.'

You shake your head slightly, and pick up your mug of tea once I have set it down upon the table. 'Thank you,' you say softly. You cup the mug in your hands carefully, for it is hot. Then you stand, still holding it.

Standing before me, looking up at me, you say with a look of profound and endearing bemusement and humour: 'How did it happen that I always drink tea from this mug?'

'I thought you brought it with you from Mrs Waechter's place.'

'Well I did, and I used it all the time. But I brought a couple of other mugs with me too. I like this one best though.'

'I always chose it for you if I was making tea because it seemed the nicest mug for you.' I pause then say: 'I wonder if I chose it selfishly. It's dark red, not unlike my hair. But I do think it looks good with your eyes and hair, a most pleasant contrast.'

You smile. 'I like that you chose it for me and perhaps did so because it suggested you. And maybe it was already my favourite mug because my favourite colours were your colours even before I met you.' You chuckle then. 'Do you know how much I sometimes loved to look at the light of a candle flame through a holder of mauve glass, with a glass of red wine held in front?'

I am surprised by this and for a moment do not know what to say. 'Really?' is all I manage.

Your smile widens. 'Really. You know my candle holders? When I bought them I chose the mauve, green and yellow ones. But whenever I drank wine by candlelight it was always the mauve-tinted light that fascinated me when I held my glass of wine in front of it.'

Ember:

'I love coming in here,' you say.

I look around, surprised for a moment though I do not know why.

'I like watching you work,' you continue. 'I like looking at what you create. Will you show me your latest pictures?'

It is something that has been a constant ever since I moved in with you, your interest in my artwork. I love that you want to see what I am creating, how each picture is progressing. When I drew that series of pictures of you naked and you did not know what I was working on, you were so gracious and unquestioning when I asked if you could leave me alone for all those hours across a number of weeks. And then when I showed you what I had done . . . I found myself amazed and became so aware of my love for you when I realised that you had no idea that I was drawing you and that you had thought that I simply wanted some privacy for a while.

I pick up my sketch book. 'I haven't started painting any of these yet or doing any in pastels but I am quite proud of them. Here, let's sit together and we'll look through them. I'd like to know which ones you like.'

I take your hand and we sit down together, our chairs side by side. I am so aware of your attention, your presence, your delight in what I show you. I am so fascinated by your responses. I am aware of your scent.

You say much to me as we go through the ten sketches that I most like. I can see that in these simple, quiet moments you are so happy and content, just like I am.

Vibeke looked at the last picture that Ember showed her. It was of a cat that was sitting at the foot of the birch tree that grew about fifteen feet from the window of the room. The image really caught her attention because of its intense sense of atmosphere. 'That's really quite remarkable,' she breathed.

'What do you mean?' Ember gently pressed when Vibeke was silent for a little while.

'Usually I might expect a picture of a cat in a garden to picturesque, pleasant, gentle, and also still and calm. Yet this is distinctly dark despite the brightness of the sunlight. The shadows are so deep and defined. And it seems as if something is about to happen. I really like it. The cat seems to be surrounded by mystery.'

'I'm glad you like it,' Ember said.

Vibeke closed the sketch book and looked about the room again. Her gaze fell on some of the stacked canvases and upon the piles of drawings. The images on the walls had been chosen by both of them. Three small ones were of Vibeke. Two were of both of them entwined, and one of

these included them looking into each other's eyes. Ember had captured such a look of trust and quiet joy in both of them that Vibeke loved to look at it.

'Your drawings and paintings are very varied,' Vibeke said at length.

'I think my artwork has undergone quite a change since I met you,' Ember replied. 'I always drew in fairly disparate and varied styles but since meeting you there has been an evolution that seems profound even to me. I do not just mean that I love to draw and paint you most, whereas I used to draw more strangers or landscapes or buildings. It's more than that. Even a drawing of a tree comes out differently now. I think it is because the intensity of feelings that you evoke in me is so powerful and the nature of those feelings is so profound that it has affected everything about me including the nature of what I try to depict. Whereas I used to take delight in details and juxtapositions and the simplest variations of shadow or colour, now there is an added dimension to my awareness. It infuses everything. I do not think many people would notice but I can see that it is there.'

Ember set the sketch book aside and leaned her head against Vibeke's shoulder. Vibeke kissed the top of Ember's head and kissed then pressed her cheek against her.

'Of course, I like drawing and painting you most of all,' Ember continued, and Vibeke could tell that she was smiling as she said this. 'I really like trying to capture rather erotic images of you.' She wriggled a little in her chair.

'Is there any way I can persuade you to draw and paint more pictures of yourself?' Vibeke asked.

'I find it a bit difficult,' Ember replied. 'But I like to do so if it works. I do have an idea for a series of images featuring both of us. I think it may be rather ambitious and that it will take a long time, but I would like to try. It will probably be spread across several years.'

Early that evening they had a light meal: spinach and mixed green salad with eggs and cubed, fried chicken breast, then cheese and savoury biscuits afterwards. They ate at the end of the garden, close to the fence, sitting on chairs and looking out across the farmland and woodland to the south and west.

'I was thinking more about what to do about my work,' Ember said as she cut pieces of good Camembert, red Leicester and Cheddar.

Vibeke watched her as she sat back, and a smile touched her lips as Ember raised a cracker and cheese to her lips and took a small bite. She saw Ember's appreciation of the good food, her enjoyment of the flavours and texture and smell. For a moment Ember's eyes closed as she concentrated and chewed and swallowed.

'Are you happy working for Evelyn still?'

Ember glanced at her, then looked out again through and over the wire fence and untended low hedgerow and across the field on the other side. 'Yes, she's still pleasant and easy to get on with. Actually she's told me a few times that she cannot imagine ever being upset with me as an employee and that she really likes that I work for her, but she also wonders why I stay there and do not set up on my own. And that's what I'm thinking about.'

'I suspect there is some reluctance in you,' Vibeke said. 'If I'm reading you correctly.'

Ember looked at her for longer then, smiling into her eyes. 'You're right. It's what I said before. I take a certain amount of pleasure from being a dressmaker, though I do it for the money more than anything. But keeping the books and being self-employed and the paperwork it would entail really do not appeal to me. I know that I would earn a lot more - though Evelyn gives me a pretty good share of the takings because she wants me to stay on.' She shook her head, looking away again. 'I don't think I'm cut out to be a businesswoman. I think there are good reasons for it though, despite my lack of interest. It would give me more freedom. I wouldn't have to work regular hours. Those are good things. And I'm aware that once I got things set up then it would become easier - I mean doing the administrative stuff.'

They were silent for a while then. It was hot and still and the sun was bright, but they were sitting mostly in the shade of an ash tree. Vibeke poured cups of tea for them and handed Ember hers.

'What about your work?' Ember said. 'Are you happy with what you are doing?'

Vibeke gave her a little shrug and for a moment did not know how to answer. 'I quite like most of the work. I think my frustration is that it can be quite restrictive and I do not like listening to other people. I don't mean that I am uncooperative, only that I am not really interested in their plans and often think they are not good. I like working with Felicia and we've come to know each other a lot better over the past six or eight months. There's more to her than I thought. But I don't really like the boss. I'm glad he's not often there.'

'And you don't know what else you would do,' Ember said.

Vibeke shook her head. 'I think that in some ways it would be more difficult to set up such a business of my own than it would be for you to become self-employed,' she said. 'I wouldn't have guaranteed customers at the beginning and we couldn't afford the space for a nursery anyway.'

Ember nodded, seeming to consider for a while. 'You could do the books while I make dresses,' she said.

'I guess so. I'd like to work for you, but you'd be doing more work than me.' She chuckled then. 'You make more money than me as it is. If I worked for you I would be your assistant. I actually quite like that idea.'

Ember reached out and rubbed Vibeke's bare forearm. 'Well, let's think about it,' she said. 'I would be concerned about you having a job that is not physical though. I don't think sitting still really suits you except when you're physically tired.'

'You're probably right,' Vibeke agreed.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sea Monsters

Wednesday 20th June, Year 2:

'I really didn't expect to end up here,' Vibeke said as they sat upon towels upon the sand, in the warm, early afternoon sunlight.

'No, it did not seem likely,' Ember agreed as she lay down, settling herself on her back to bask in the sun.

'But it's fantastic!' Looking along the deserted beach of white sand she wondered at how amazing this place was. It was hard to believe that it was part of Britain. She knew, of course, that the weather here on the west coast of Scotland was often far from good. But today, at least, they had had luck - so far. She suspected it would rain later though.

They had driven here from home in four days, taking their time with two fairly long walks - in Yorkshire and Northumberland - and doing some fairly random and slightly bizarre sight-seeing on the way. They had stayed in a couple of motorway inns and a bed and breakfast. Last night and the night before they had camped in a secluded area around the ridge of a mountain - about two hundred yards from a layby where they could leave their car. They had left their tent up and tonight they would be sleeping there again.

Vibeke sifted some sand between her fingers. Although it was dry, it was quite hard packed and there was little in the way of ripples in it. It was very pale - almost white. At the back of the beach there were some low scrubby plants and then some stunted pines. To the north there was a sweeping headland that led out towards some islands. More islands could be seen out to sea, including a couple that were like rounded mountains thrusting from the sea. The water was grey-blue, shimmering with reflected sunlight. There was cloud in the east over the mountains inland and more cloud to the north, but out over the sea there were mostly clear skies. The wind was gentle but blowing to the south.

Ember was lying on her back on her towel, with her small backpack under the towel as a pillow. She was wearing sunglasses that Vibeke thought looked rather cute - she was often struck how Ember managed to look at one moment like an artistic, sophisticated woman and at the next became adorable and charming. A short white top exposed her belly and she was wearing beige shorts. Her feet were bare - she had taken off her walking boots and socks - and slightly dusted with sand. After watching her chest rise and fall for a few moments, Vibeke saw she was very relaxed and wondered if she was on the edge of falling asleep. For a while she simply watched, a small smile playing upon her face. And she saw that a smile was tugging at Ember's lips too.

Vibeke sat for a while longer, simply enjoying the peacefulness and wonder of the day. There were a couple of boats - fishing vessels perhaps - out to the southwest. She watched as a couple of sea-gulls banked and dived low over the water, then soared again. On the water close to an area of rocks she could see a couple of birds bobbing and diving sometimes. She did not know what kind of birds they were but she admired them for a while.

She took out her digital camera - small, simple, inexpensive - and took a few photographs of the surroundings - though she did not get up not least because she did not wish to disturb Ember. Ember was a better photographer than her she knew - for herself her pictures were as much to help her memory and appreciation of where she had been and things she had seen, which would remind her in turn of conversations and touches and thoughts she shared with Ember. She always kept her journal up to date for the same reason: it helped her both to savour things and to think about them and to lock them more clearly into her memory. Alertness and awareness were things she had cultivated greatly since she had met Ember. She had learned to fall into a moment, to be aware of little but a sight or sound or place, to be as aware of Ember as possible, drinking in her form and voice and movement and presence and scent.

At length, realising that she felt almost giddily happy, Vibeke lay down as well and made herself comfortable. She reached out and let her fingers rest lightly upon Ember's, savouring the light contact. Ember's fingers lifted slightly, brushed against her, and became still again.

Closing her eyes, Vibeke concentrated first upon what she could feel - Ember's light touch, the press of her head and body against the towel, the warmth of the sun upon her skin, the coolness of the breeze upon her face and bare feet. She was aware of the scent of the sea, of seaweed and salt, and of some slightly resinous scent from the bushes or pines at the back of the beach. Next she listened to the sound of the waves, little more than a gentle lapping because of the calmness, and to the sounds of birds, and to the sounds of the air flowing over her and through tough dune grasses and shrubs and pine needles.

After fifteen minutes or so she drifted towards sleep. As she did so strange images flitted through her mind combined with words and sentences that did not make sense. She had a sense that she recognised some of the things that she saw and heard - and especially felt. These dreamlets seemed profound in some ways though she was mostly only partly aware of them. They were also very pleasant and, in a moment of greater wakefulness, she thought that perhaps even the most hidden parts of her mind including whatever fears she had were gradually being filled and transformed by the deep power of her love for and being loved by Ember.

And then her awareness drifted away or her memory of what she experienced narrowed to almost nothing; and she fell into a light but peaceful sleep.

Ember woke and soon sat up, feeling slightly disoriented. She had the sense that she had been asleep for about half an hour. Blinking her eyes and taking off her sunglasses, she saw that Vibeke was asleep. A glance at her watch showed her she was right. It was just before three o'clock.

Though it was still sunny, the clouds in the north were drawing closer and the air over the sea seemed to be becoming rather hazy as moisture gathered.

Reaching for a bottle of water, Ember took a few gulps and rubbed a few drops into her eyes. Then she climbed to her feet and walked away down the beach and towards the water. The slope of the beach was gentle and the distance from water to the rising, overgrown area at the back was about a hundred feet. Ember smiled as she felt the sand against the soles of her feet and between her toes.

For fifteen minutes she strolled - though she always stayed close to Vibeke - and paddled in the lapping water a little. When turning back she saw that Vibeke was sitting up and watching her. She smiled and gave her a little wave.

'Hi,' she said, after walking back up the beach to her.

'Hi yourself,' Vibeke said, reaching for some water to drink. 'Would you like to go for a walk up to that headland and maybe to the next beach?'

'That sounds good,' Ember said. 'I think it's going to rain though. Not that I will mind much if it does.'

Vibeke climbed gracefully to her feet and embraced Ember, holding her close. Ember laid her head against Vibeke's shoulder and upper chest and breathed her in, aware of salt and her scent. She snuggled closer, grinning in contentment.

Vibeke and Ember walked for a little less than an hour as they went north, going slowly and exploring rock-pools and the creatures therein, stopping to pick up interesting shells and stones, watching birds and generally taking their time. Then they walked back the way they had come, and as they reached the place where they had slept earlier it began to rain - just a fine drizzle that was a little misty. Vibeke took her umbrella from her pack and held it up over both of them. To the south the last of the clear sky was swallowed up and the day became quite grey, though still quite light.

'Would you like to take a swim?' Ember said, looking across at her mischievously. 'The water is probably rather cold but . . .'

Vibeke was surprised. She looked into Ember's eyes and felt uplifted by the light and energy that she saw there. 'I would like that very much,' she said. 'What the hell, it'll be fun swimming in the rain. Walking back to the car afterwards might be a bit chilly but it'll mean that drying out will be fun.'

They spent a few minutes setting their packs down on the sand at the top of the beach under their umbrella making sure nothing would be blown away by the wind. They undressed quickly and put their clothes within their packs. Then they ran hand in hand down to the sea. It was strange and enjoyable, Vibeke thought, that they felt such a sense of urgency. There was also a stronger wind now.

And then they were running into the waves, skipping through the tops of them and then lowering themselves into the water. It was indeed cold - they would not be able to stay out for long. The sandy ground sloped away only gradually so that they were in rather shallow water at first, but then they made their way further out and even as they became aware of rocks and seaweed underfoot they found that the sea bottom fell away quite quickly. Then and they were swimming and treading water as they held onto each other and savoured the sensations of effort and water and cool air and lightly falling rain.

'It's getting darker,' Ember said as she surfaced from a short dive to the bottom.

'It's amazing how there are areas of warmer water and colder water,' Vibeke said.

'Or rather, cold and even colder water,' said Ember.

They swam just a little further away from the shore. For a moment Vibeke imagined them to be heading towards one of the islands that was several miles away. Then she halted and turned to Ember. She suddenly became very aware that she could easily tow Ember a considerable distance if it was necessary. The thought seemed rather ridiculous - they were still quite close to the beach, and Ember was a strong swimmer and she did not doubt that she would say they should head back if she felt tired or too chilled. But still she felt protective of her.

Ember smiled widely. 'This is great!' she said, her voice full of joy and her eyes full of light. Her hair was slicked back from her head and Vibeke was struck by how the shape of her face and head were so beautiful to her.

Vibeke looked up at the darkening sky and back towards the shore. The areas beyond the sand were becoming obscured as the rain fell more heavily. The waves were also becoming a little larger in the wind. Then she looked back at Ember. 'Yes, it really is,' she said. She found a sense of well-being surging up from within her. It felt so amazing to be in the sea, swimming with Ember, enjoying her presence and the sensations of water and wind and rain.

'I feel so very alive!' she said loudly, grinning. And she held onto Ember, taking just a little of her weight. 'I think it's time to go back,' she said.

Ember nodded. 'Yes, I'm getting cold. And I feel rather hungry too,' she said. 'I think we might have a very good meal tonight.'

A couple of minutes later they walked up out of the water and onto the beach, shivering beneath the now pouring rain, heading back to their packs and clothes.

The walk back to the car was chilly but no more difficult than they had expected, and their good moods and light humour certainly helped them.

'I think I'm glad to be completely wet through rather than only partly wet,' Ember said. 'It makes me feel rather free somehow.'

At last they were back at the place where they had left their car. Quickly they climbed in out of the downpour.

'I was going to suggest drying off but I think we might do better just to drive back to the layby, head for our tent and get dry once we're there,' Vibeke said.

'Let's do that,' Ember agreed even though she was shivering. And then she started singing a fairly arbitrary rendition of the song: 'Clyde the Cat Fell Down a Hole.'

'Aaaahhh!' Ember said as she threw herself through the opening of the tent and turned and ended up sitting by the back wall of the tent. She had left her boots outside under the fly-sheet. Now she began to squirm out of her wet clothing while trying not to make their sleeping bags and pillows and sleeping mats too damp.

Vibeke almost fell into the tent after her. A hissing and patter of rain fell upon the outer cloth and gentle gust of wind made the structure tremble and sway but not too severely.

After a couple of minutes they had managed to divest themselves of all their wet clothing and put it in a plastic bag, towelled themselves dry, and climbed into their combined sleeping bags so that they might lie together.

'Oooh, that's nice,' Ember said. 'Damn, I'm all covered in goose bumps.'

'Me too. Let's just lie here until we get warm.'

It did not take too long. And then - and Vibeke realised that she had really expected it - Ember rolled on top of Vibeke and kissed her deeply and then slid down her body until she was suckling upon one of her breasts.

She looked up after a moment. 'I might be here for a while,' she said.

Vibeke chuckled and sighed. 'Take as much time as you want,' she said, feeling a flush of heat across her chest and a liquid warmth at her centre. 'Though I might wish to spend twice that much time with my face buried between your legs later.'

As Ember returned her attention to Vibeke's breasts she forgot her thoughts and found herself falling deeper and more powerfully into a need and depth of desire and experience such that she felt as if her mind was coming apart. Her emotions and awareness deepened in a way that was visceral, absolute. She was drowned in her awareness of Ember's scent, sweat, tenderness, the softness of her breasts, the taste and heat of the wetness that flowed from her, the beauty of her centre.

There was a hint of light but it was muted.

'There is mist and the clouds are low and the rain is falling, but it is June in northern Scotland,' said Vibeke. 'Are there even three hours of darkness each night?'

They were sitting up in their sleeping bags, warm and happy, dry and comfortable. They were enjoying the pleasant sense of lassitude after their long love-making. They had completely missed their intended evening meal of the day before, had slept longer than they expected and now it was two o'clock in the morning. Neither of them thought they would sleep again for a while and they were happy to be up.

Together they prepared a small meal though they were not sure if it was an evening meal, a night snack or an early breakfast.

'Damn, my body is confused,' said Ember. 'But very happy,' she added.

They had bread and butter and some crackers and cheese. They ate a couple of chocolate biscuits each. They boiled a large pan of water to make cups of tea. They ate and drank with much enjoyment.

Afterwards they sat cross-legged in their sleeping bags and Ember told Vibeke a story. The light about them seemed to be retreating and the light rain became heavier.

'Did you know that two sea-monsters live in the deeps not far from the shore just where we were swimming?' Ember asked.

Vibeke shook her head, amused and gladdened by Ember's way of starting her tale.

'It's true,' Ember said. 'They are ancient monsters that are really quite friendly but they are misunderstood by the few fishermen and the hunters for whelks and mussels that see them. In some ways their existence is sad because all that they have is completely invisible to others. But in other ways it is amazingly joyous because they love each other and love the sea in which they live.'

Vibeke wrapped her arms around Ember as she spoke. She listened, basking in the sound of her voice, her low and sensuous tones, her manner and gestures.

At length, though she was not sure how it happened - and she was not sure that Ember knew either - she found herself lying back with Ember in her arms, still holding her close. Ember already appeared to be asleep but Vibeke thought she would stay awake just for a little while.

Soon enough she fell into a peaceful and dreamless sleep that was infused with an amazing sense of well-being.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Bonfire Night

Sunday 4th November, Year 2:

Ember was standing in front of the mirror and had just tucked her long-sleeved white blouse into her comfortable and well-worn jeans. She closed the buckle on her slim belt of braided brown cloth, then slipped into a cardigan of loose-knit wool that had a pleasing and simple pattern of cream and brown. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she stepped into and laced up her beige, suede walking boots which she always thought looked good on her.

Standing up again she brushed out her hair after a close inspection of her face she decided that she would do without make-up this evening. Not that doing without make-up was a rare occurrence for her.

She turned as Vibeke entered the bedroom from the hall. 'Hi,' she said, smiling.

'Hi,' Vibeke replied, her eyes warming at the sight of her.

'Do I look all right?'

Vibeke looked her up and down and Ember knew from her expression that she looked more than all right. The problem - or good thing - was that she knew Vibeke would see her in a positive light in most things.

'You look great,' Vibeke said. 'Mrs Waechter will be really happy to see you and I'm sure she'll think you look great too. And then we'll be out walking in the dark.'

Ember glanced out of the window. It was barely mid-afternoon but it was gloomy and grey. Leaves were falling from the trees and piling up on the lawn. She thought that the colour of the leaves that remained on the birch and ash that she could see was very pleasant.

Then she turned back to Vibeke, who was wearing paler jeans and a black turtle-neck pullover. She had tied back most of her hair but left some free at the front and sides. Her face was pale and beautiful in the near-monochromatic light.

They put their arms around each other and Ember felt, as she always did, as if she was suddenly infused with a sense of peace and wrapped around by safety and love. It was a while before they parted. The day was quiet and still - a day of calmness but also of alertness.

At length they stepped back from each other. 'I'll just make us a flask of soup and we can go,' Ember said.

They went into the kitchen together. While Ember looked in cupboard and inspected what kinds of soup they had, Vibeke took down a saucepan and set it on the stove. 'We have cream of leek, chicken noodle, asparagus, and mushroom,' Ember said. 'And croûtons to add of course. Any preferences?'

'They're all good,' Vibeke said.

'I have to admit I'm pretty indifferent too. All right, let's make it random.' She counted the packets. 'Give me a number from one to eight.'

'Small fluffy lamb with a cute black face flying on a small blue cloud and playing an electric organ.'

Ember bumped her with her hip and chuckled. 'Hmm. Good choice. Chicken noodle it is.' Then she proceeded to tear open the packet and pour its contents into the saucepan, add cold water and mix it then set it down on the lit gas stove. 'You liked the real soup I made a few weeks ago,' she said, musing. 'I guess it was all right. It took some time but maybe I'll try again and try to make some in a larger quantity.'

Vibeke wrapped her arms around Ember from behind as Ember stirred the pot. 'If you give me instructions, maybe I could try too.'

Twenty minutes later they were in the car and heading to Mrs Waechter's place. They had brought coats because it was rather chilly, though they did not wear them in the car.

'I like this weather,' Vibeke said.

'Me too.'

'How are you finding the driving?' Vibeke asked then, though it was only a few minutes to Mrs Waechter's place.

'I like it,' Ember said, glancing across at her before changing down a gear as she slowed at a rising curve. I'm glad I finally got around to taking the test. You were a pretty good teacher, I must say. Very patient.'

'I was impressed by how easily you took to it. Do you know how often I feel so proud of you that I wonder if I'm going to burst?'

Ember grinned but did not reply, and a couple of minutes later they pulled up in front of Mrs Waechter's house. Ember parked the car and turned off the engine.

After climbing out, Ember looked at Vibeke across the top of the car and said: 'It's amazing, the scent of autumn. I really like it. It's so evocative. I feel as if I'm about to remember the most incredible secrets and delightful things from my childhood and from past lives that I have forgotten. At the same time it makes me feel so optimistic. Which, let's face it, I have every reason to be.'

Vibeke came around the car to her. She looked into her eyes and Ember was very aware of the warmth in her gaze, the pleasure Vibeke took in her pleasure. Vibeke's eyes were quite light in the grey, declining afternoon, the mauve colour very intense. 'We both do,' she said quietly. Then she took Ember's hand and they made their way up the short path to the front door. Ember leaned in, lifted and released the heavy brass knocker.

A moment later the door open and Mrs Waechter stood there, beaming at them.

'Hello Mrs Waechter!' Ember said.

'Hello dear girls,' she replied. 'Do come in.' She stepped back and gave Vibeke a brief but warm hug and then gave Ember one too. 'It is so good to see you. I am always so happy that you find time to visit an old woman like me.' She closed the door and then bustled past them. 'Come in, make yourselves at home. I'll just put the kettle on.'

Ember followed Mrs Waechter into the kitchen to help while Vibeke, not wanting to get in the way, went into the living room to peruse the interesting collection of books that Mrs Waechter had filling a large bookcase.

A few minutes later they were all sitting down and drinking tea and eating slices of a carrot and banana cake that Mrs Waechter had baked. Ember and Vibeke sat on the sofa together while Mrs Waechter sat in her usual comfortable and rather worn armchair.

'This is great,' Vibeke said after a couple of bites of the cake.

'Thank you dear,' Mrs Waechter replied. 'Now, tell me about this evening. I was meaning to check in the community newsletter for the details but I think I lost my copy.'

'It's a walk of about four miles,' Ember explained. 'There'll probably be quite a few people but we thought it would be fun with all the torches everyone will be carrying and the three hilltop bonfires to guide the way.'

'I'd like to go, but I think a walk over the hills might be a bit much for me since I hurt my ankle,' Mrs Waechter said acceptingly - there was no self-pity in her tone.

'Well, we can come back for you around half-past eight,' Vibeke said. 'We can drive there easily enough. And we'll make sure we get you to the main bonfire in time for the fireworks display. I think it'll be a pretty good one. I think it was a good idea that they decided to make it a kind of competition between different display organisers.'

'Should I bring anything?' Mrs Waechter asked.

'Well, we have some soup,' Ember said. 'You're welcome to share it with us.'

Mrs Waechter nodded. 'I'll bring three buttered rolls along and maybe one or two other things in case we're peckish.' She seemed satisfied with her decision.

'Tell me about your cards group and all your outings,' Ember said. She had always enjoyed it when Mrs Waechter told her of her 'adventures' with her friends.

'Well . . . There is one extraordinary thing that happened. We went to a certain art gallery where there was a remarkable display by a certain young artist of quite extraordinary talent,' Mrs Waechter began.

They talked at some length. Vibeke mostly sat quietly, listening. She always found it curiously calming and interesting when she heard the way in which Ember and Mrs Waechter chatted. Much of what they said might have seemed inconsequential but Vibeke was aware of Ember's attention to details and she was very aware of Ember's lovely voice and expressiveness.

Vibeke and Ember walked towards the field at the edge of the town of Otterhampton where people were meeting before the walk. Vibeke was carrying her small pack but there was no need for Ember to carry a second one. They were both wearing their coats as the air grew chillier.

Vibeke watched as Ember kicked at some leaves with childlike enthusiasm, then came trotting back to her side and held her hand. She was grinning happily - but then Vibeke saw that she looked suddenly serious. After half a minute she said: 'What is it?'

Ember seemed slightly startled by the question - perhaps she had been deep in thought. 'I was just thinking about the exhibition. I'm glad I did it. It's also interesting that neither you nor Mrs Waechter pushed me in any way to show some of my pictures, but it was your confidence that gave me the confidence to do so.' She looked down for a moment then looked across at her and Vibeke saw the light of pleasure in her ice-blue eyes. 'I didn't think I really cared all that much what other people thought, which was why I never much thought about exhibiting my work before. I felt that I painted and drew just because I liked it. Which was true enough. Then I met you and I found myself pursuing my artwork with more enthusiasm because you liked what I did too. I certainly never wanted acclaim, though it is nice to know that people like what I do rather than dislike it. But I think what most startles me is the realisation that I was able to give some people some enjoyment. That is important to me. And I'm glad we made up those prints so that people could take home some full-size copies. I really didn't want to sell the originals, and we managed to keep the price really low for the copies.'

Vibeke gave Ember's hand a squeeze. 'I'm glad you're glad about the exhibition,' she said, then laughed a soft and happy laugh. 'I'm always glad when you're glad about anything.'

Half a minute later they rounded the corner to the entrance of the meeting field. There were quite a few cars parked in the road and to one side of the field and there were about a hundred people present, including quite a few excited children and two or three quite elderly people.

Walking in among them, Vibeke and Ember headed for a truck with an open back where people could pay a small price to buy torches for them to carry with them on the walk. There was a lit brazier beside it in which the torches could be lit. The torches would not last the length of time the walk would take so some people were buying more than one each, and not everyone would light theirs at the beginning.

Vibeke bought four torches for them and handed over the four pounds that they cost.

'All money goes to charity,' the burly, rather overweight and unshaven man who was selling the torches said cheerfully, and dropped the cash into a box with a white cross on it. 'It'll go to the children's home,' he said.

Vibeke decided to light the first two torches straight away and handed one of them to Ember. Then the two of them went to the edge of the crowd and stood there on the muddy grass watching the proceedings.

Within a few minutes there was the sound of a bell being struck and a man in a green jacket headed off across the field to where a footpath began. The people all followed him, straggling back in a long line of twos and threes and fours. Their torches flickered and sputtered and the smell of the smoke from them was evocative. Vibeke and Ember followed along almost at the

back. The burly man who had sold the torches and a plump woman who was perhaps his wife brought up the rear, chatting in friendly and sometimes bantering tones.

Vibeke held Ember's hand; and looking at her, she smiled and saw the love that she felt for Ember reflected in her wonderful eyes. Then, for a while, they walked in silence as the people headed at a leisurely pace up a slope across the corner of a field that had been left fallow. There was a stream further up, flowing at an angle with a rickety-looking wire fence by it. Oak and beech trees grew regally in a woodland low on their right. Soon enough they were rounding a fairly rocky edge of the hill and the first of the hilltop fires that they were aiming for came into view.

Vibeke and Ember stopped for a moment and looked at the line of people, many of whom were carrying lit torches that sputtered and smoked, leading away along the curve of the path in the direction of the fire. The countryside all around was almost dark, the clouds just distinguishable over the hills.

'It's quite a sight,' Ember breathed.

Vibeke could not help but agree. 'I feel as if we have stepped into some fantasy world and a parade of clerics and acolytes marching towards the temples of ancient gods.'

Behind them the burly man and plump woman caught up with them. They too stopped and stared, not saying anything but simply taking in the view.

As they headed onwards, down the slope and around the hill, the man said: 'I think I've seen you two in town once or twice.' He had a pleasant, easy-going manner. 'I'm Pete, this is my wife Jennifer.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Vibeke said politely. 'I'm Vibeke and this is Ember.'

'Hi,' said Ember.

'You two really are quite striking you know,' Jennifer said then. Then she looked away slightly sheepishly. 'Sorry, I hope that wasn't too direct. I was just thinking aloud.'

'That's all right.' Ember looked at Pete. 'You said you were collecting for the children's home.'

'Yes, that's right. You know, Otterhampton's not a big place and I suppose the kids have it much worse in the cities but they're still pretty strapped for cash. The garden there is pretty small so it's good if the kids can be taken out for outings when it's possible, but that takes some organisation, time and money.'

'I grew up in a home like that,' Ember said quietly, and Vibeke caught the musing, contemplative tone of her words. 'I know it's not always easy for the children and also that it can be very difficult for the helpers and guardians. You know, sometimes one or two of the kids can be difficult or even traumatised, and occasionally a house-guardian doesn't really fit them and

things can go wrong. But it can work well and I remember the support of one house-mother that really meant a lot to some of the children. I think she gave them a sense of lives to live, that she made so much possible for them when it had seemed impossible.'

As they walked, Pete and Jennifer listened to Ember talk a little more about her experiences. They were obviously very interested in what she had to say and Vibeke could see that they also were a little in awe in her. Ember was beautiful and intelligent and clearly had great depth. Her way of being, so earnest sometimes as well as charming, was nothing if not impressive. They seemed glad that such a remarkable woman could come from a background that was far from ideal.

'You know, if you ever want to be a mentor to any of the kids . . .' Pete said at length, trailing off uncertainly. 'I don't know if you have time or are interested and I don't want to be intrusive. But if you are, think about it and let me know. I'm sure you'd be really good at it.'

'You might have to endure one or two of them getting a crush on you of course,' Jennifer said.

Ember chuckled. 'Well, thank you for suggesting it. I will think about it. I'd be a bit worried because I don't have any experience with children.'

Vibeke suspected Pete and Jennifer were both wondering if Ember might want children, but neither of them said anything.

The walk was pleasant, the pace not surprisingly gentler than Vibeke and Ember would usually have chosen. They passed one bonfire and the next. Pete and Jennifer talked to other people and most of the time Vibeke and Ember only spoke to each other. They had promised to keep an eye out for stragglers when Pete and Jennifer had passed them, and they had done so.

At length the walk curved back towards the field where it had started. To one side of the centre there was a huge pile of branches that would be set fire to for the evening's main bonfire. On the other side, beyond a long rope that had been strung between poles as a barrier, two men were checking and finishing setting up the fireworks that would be set off later. A small wagon that was selling hotdogs and chips and sandwiches was doing business at the entrance of the field.

Vibeke and Ember headed back to Mrs Waechter's place.

The three of them returned to the field just as the bonfire was becoming a real blaze. Heat blasted from it such that the people kept their distance. It was really quite spectacular. There were more people in the field now and the children there were enjoying eating hotdogs or running around and generally being very excited about the fireworks that were to come.

Vibeke, Ember and Mrs Waechter chose a spot at one edge of the field by some trees to wait and watch a little away from most of the crowd. They drank cups of soup, stamped their feet against the cold, and Mrs Waechter told them about fireworks displays and November the Fifth celebrations she could remember as a child.

And then the first of the fireworks was set off, a rocket that shot up almost invisibly and then detonated with a small flash but a thunderously loud bang that boomed and rolled away over Otterhampton and the hills and fields around.

There were three displays, and all were nothing short of spectacular. The sky was lit with flashes and crackles and arcs and explosions of multicoloured light. Firework smoke drifted everywhere, its smell very evocative, making everyone remember former times of excitement. The crowd sometimes clapped, voices were raised, amazed, and children shouted out and spoke in wonder. And so did Vibeke and Ember.

'Damn, I really love the thunder,' Vibeke said.

'Those streamers of green sparks are so beautiful,' Ember said.

They looked at each other, grinning, holding hands, feeling like kids themselves.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Christmas

Monday 2nd December, Year 3:

Rain and sleet were falling quite hard and it was fully dark. A rather erratic but sometimes strong wind blew. As Vibeke cycled home along the country road she thought that perhaps today she really should have taken the car to work. Though her wet face felt bitterly cold and she was soon going to be drenched and generally uncomfortable, it was the wind that most disturbed her. She had to keep her speed down and on a couple of occasions stopped when a particularly strong gust threatened her balance.

Well, she thought grimly and with some amusement at her stubborn self for being so determined to cycle, the discomfort now would only enhance the pleasure of getting home and being warm and dry again.

It was half past six when she put the bike in the garage and hung up her cycling helmet. Then she hurried to the front door and was just turning her key in the lock when she faintly heard Ember call over the sounds of sleet and wind.

'Vibeke!'

Vibeke turned, grinning, to see Ember hurrying up the path towards her. She was wearing a red raincoat with the hood up, water running down over her, and her face was pale and wet.

'Hi, my love,' Vibeke said.

'Hi,' Ember replied, peeking up at her from beneath her hood, reaching out to take hold of her sleeve for a little contact.

Then Vibeke was pushing the door open and they hurriedly entered the hallway and the warmth and dry air.

They stood there looking at each other, smiling. Ember let go of Vibeke's sleeve and pulled her hood back from her head. 'I was a little worried about you,' she said. She was slightly out of breath - had probably been running a bit through the rain on her way home.

'I went very slowly,' Vibeke said. She reached out and cupped Ember's chilled cheeks with her hands. 'Let's get dry and warm,' she said. 'Want to take a shower with me?'

'Sounds great!'

Quickly they kicked off their boots, hung up their coats, ran down to their bedroom and took off the rest of their clothes. Then, damp and shivering, they hurried to the bathroom where Ember turned on the shower. Once it was warm enough they stepped under the falling water and held onto each other.

Somehow they ended up shampooing each other's hair and soaping each other's bodies and it became a generally pleasurable and decadent affair of sensual bliss.

After finishing their shower and drying themselves, they went back to their bedroom and climbed under the covers, still just a little damp. Luxuriating in the pure animal pleasure of the moment, Vibeke beamed as Ember climbed on top of her body and began to kiss her, holding her face in her hands, brushing her lips over Vibeke's, trailing her tongue over her lips and then sucking in her bottom lip.

Liquid fire ignited in Vibeke's lower belly and she held Ember close, running her hands across Ember's back and then around her sides. She was just about to roll Ember over so that she might pay much attention to her breasts when Ember seemed to have the same idea - sliding down, sucking at the pulse point on her neck, then kissing lower, gently squeezing her breasts and then suckling upon them.

For a long time they loved each other, wrapped up in each other's beauty and the pleasures of each other's bodies.

Later, dressed in sleep shirts and slippers and wrapped in nightgowns, Vibeke and Ember prepared an evening meal of rice with fried, shredded chicken breast and spicy fried vegetables.

'You seem to be thirsty too,' Ember said once as they regarded each other over glasses of water that they had both drained twice.

'Hmm. We seem to have made quite an investment of warm and sensual wetness this evening.'

Ember giggled. She stirred the vegetables again and then turned back to her, looking Vibeke up and down. 'You look great! I still like you in your Clyde the Cat slippers very much.'

'And right now you are the essence of beauty wrapped in cuteness. Your rabbit slippers look great on you too.'

Soon enough they were sitting at the kitchen table, across the corner from each other at their regular places. They ate, both of them very hungry. It was later than they usually ate and they had exerted themselves quite a lot.

When the main course - of quite sizeable portions too - was finished, Ember dished up a heated, shop-made steamed golden pudding, with custard that Vibeke had prepared.

'This is really, really good,' Vibeke enthused as they ate.

'It certainly is.' Ember drank a little of her tea. 'It's so good to eat like this. Probably not a good idea to have quite such a large meal every day. I do like indulging sometimes though.'

'Absolutely.'

After sitting quietly, finishing their tea and digesting and chatting about their days - just simple things about what they had been doing and one or two customers they had met - they cleared the table and Vibeke washed up.

When Vibeke went into the living room afterwards, she found that Ember had retrieved their box of Christmas decorations from a storage cupboard.

'What a great idea!' Vibeke said. In truth she had just been about to suggest it. 'I'll bring a Christmas tree home from work tomorrow. The order was supposed to come in a couple of days ago but they'll be delivered tomorrow morning.'

'Let's get some of the lights up at least,' Ember said.

And so Vibeke put on a CD of some Christmas music - the first carols they had heard of the year - and they spent a happy little while putting up what they could. They put up two strings of lights, one over the television and stereo system and the other over one of the large bookcases. They also set out a few simple decorations: a couple of small, cute reindeer Ember had bought, some tinsel and a cluster of silver bells.

'Ready to turn on the lights?' Ember asked when they were done and had put the box and remaining decorations away.

'Let me just turn off the other lights,' Vibeke said, crossing to the doorway and hitting the switches. 'All right,' she said to Ember across the suddenly dark room.

Ember turned on the switches by the sockets they had plugged the lights into and suddenly the strings of lights lit up, deep red, blue, amber, deep green and deep mauve.

Vibeke crossed to Ember and they stood in the middle of the room, their arms about each other.

'That looks great,' Ember said as she snuggled into Vibeke's embrace, her head pressed against her shoulder as she looked at the Christmas lights.

And it did. Vibeke wondered at the evocativeness of the simple coloured bulbs. It was as if she and Ember might so easily just step through the most tenuous barrier and back into the wonders of their childhoods.

Vibeke realised of course that the wonders she had shared with Ember since she had met had been much greater, though so very different - much wider and deeper and less simple. Still the memories of childhood excitement touched them with quiet joy.

Saturday 14th :

Vibeke and Ember had driven through the morning and were now in Bath. Tonight they would drive to a bed-and-breakfast in the countryside to the east, but for now they were exploring the centre of the small city.

'These Christmas lights are really wonderful!' Ember said. 'I like the ones in Otterhampton just as much because they are a bit more subtle, but this really is impressive.'

Vibeke nodded, looking up and down the wide street - pedestrians only, no traffic allowed. The lights were strung between the lampposts, both along the way and across the way. Large patterns of lights hung over the centre of the road, one after another. Most of the street was divided into areas where one colour of lights dominated - red, green, blue, mauve, pink, orange, white - and Vibeke liked the idea. There were also a few trees, quite old and large and gnarled, that were impressively strung with smaller lights - dim blue or soft pink - right to the ends and tops of their branches.

Most of the shop windows had lights and decorations too. Christmas carols could be heard coming from the doors of some of them when people entered or left.

And there were many people on this Saturday afternoon when so many wanted to buy gifts for their loved ones, family and friends. Harried mothers, excited children, struggling but determined old people, impatient and patient men moving with purpose, young women browsing the window displays, families discussing what they might like, grandparents quietly selecting things for their grandkids, and most people carrying one or several shopping bags. Scents of the perfumes from a chemist mixed with the smell of fish and chips, carried on the cold air. It was just below freezing and everyone was well wrapped up, breath frosting in the air and cheeks, ears and noses red with the chill. Many loud discussions and excited calls and laughter filled the street. A baby cried and a mother rocked it and shushed it patiently. In the distance a boy's choir sang carols, most likely collecting for some Christmas charity; and closer at hand a plump, balding, rather ugly but very cheerful man was wearing a very unconvincing Father Christmas outfit, holding a donations box and collecting money for a children's home. Vibeke dropped a few coins in as they passed.

'How about we try over there?' Ember suggested, pointing to a stationary and art shop. They had bought Mrs Waechter a kettle - hers had seen better years - but also wanted to buy her a couple of photo albums and a few picture frames - Ember knew she had quite a collection of photographs but that they were kept in stacks in a drawer.

'All right, let's try it. And then maybe we can split up for a little while.'

Ember looked up at her, smiling. 'Yes, I think we should. And then after we put our purchases in the car, maybe we could go to the old church I want to see, and perhaps the museum of fine art? And then find a restaurant?'

'We are likely to have worked up quite an appetite by then,' Vibeke said.

Hand in hand, they crossed the road to the stationary shop and entered it, feeling the dry, heated air envelope them after the cold of outside. Once they had made their purchases they were glad to get out of the stuffiness and back into the fresh air.

'I really like this time of year,' Ember said happily.

Wednesday 25th:

Vibeke and Ember woke at seven-thirty. It was not yet fully light out and the day looked set to be grey and cold and still. After a trip to the bathroom Vibeke brought them mugs of tea and they sat quietly in bed together, propped up against pillows against the headboard.

Ember raised her mug. 'Happy Christmas Vibeke,' she said with a smile.

'Happy Christmas to you too my love.'

Ember found herself wondering at the strange quietness that seemed to be with them. She felt very aware of the day, of the morning, of being in bed with Vibeke, of the breakfast and Christmas dinner and Christmas tea they would have, of the decorations that they had around the house, of the presents that they would share by the tree. She was aware that today they would simply enjoy themselves, with only some washing up to do as a chore.

'It's quiet, isn't it,' Vibeke said, echoing her earlier thought.

'It does seem to be. I don't know why. It's not like the road is ever busy, and not many planes fly over.'

'We're even speaking quietly,' Vibeke said. 'I like this feeling.'

Ember ran her fingers lightly up and down Vibeke's bare thigh under the bedclothes. 'I like it too.' Then, after a moment: 'This is our third Christmas together,' she said softly, wistfully.

Vibeke lifted her hand and ran her fingers back through Ember's hair. 'Yes, it is,' she said.

They had a simple but good breakfast: grapefruit segments, toasted croissants with butter and thick orange marmalade, and more tea. Sitting quietly at the table, with a string of Christmas lights over the window casting a colourful glow over the dim grey of the day, Ember enjoyed the atmosphere and knew that Vibeke did too. Sometimes they looked at each other with what seemed almost like shyness, and certainly vulnerability, but they much enjoyed the sensitivity of their emotions and their awareness of their togetherness. A single Christmas table ornament with a flickering tea-light candle sat in the centre of the table, and Ember found herself staring at it from time to time; and also watched as Vibeke stared into it, finding herself fascinated by the beauty of Vibeke's eyes as the dancing candlelight was reflected in them.

At length, finished with their meal, Vibeke washed up while Ember put the turkey in the oven to cook. They had prepared their Christmas dinner the previous day, as much as was possible, peeling potatoes and sprouts and parsnips, getting sausages and bacon rolls ready, making gravy, choosing a bottle of wine - though they only had two bottles in the house so it was not difficult. Today it all just had to be cooked or heated and served or poured, which would be simple enough as long as they kept track of the time.

In the living room they settled down to open their presents, sitting on the floor in front of the Christmas tree. A CD of Christmas carols played softly, the Christmas lights were on, the scent of the tree was great, and three candles burned, flickering and pleasant.

Vibeke glanced about her, feeling very happy and content. She felt as if there was nothing more she could possibly want than what she had.

'I notice we've gone for comfortable but dressed this year,' she said then, looking herself and Ember up and down. They were sitting cross-legged, Vibeke's right knee touching Ember's left.

'Yes. I'm not sure how that happened. We went for dressing gowns last year without discussion either. At least, until just before lunch.'

They turned their attention back to the presents. There was a small pile of them, from just the two of them to each other. They would visit Mrs Waechter tomorrow to exchange gifts.

Vibeke reached for a present to give to Ember, and stole a glance at her love as she did so, feeling a warm glow of delight when she saw Ember's anticipation.

'This is really exciting,' Ember said as she reached for a present to give Vibeke. 'I wonder what you're going to think of . . . Well, here you are. I think that can be the first thing to unwrap.'

And so they took turns with the few presents they had chosen for each other. There was nothing very expensive and the gifts were chosen for what they meant or because they were useful, a mixture of humour and tenderness and thoughtfulness determining their choices.

When they had finished opening their gifts and Vibeke had put the wrapping paper in a bag to be thrown away, she turned to find that Ember had neatly set her gifts from Vibeke upon the coffee table except for a scarf that she was holding upon her lap. She was sitting with her back to the sofa now, her legs straight out in front of her, and she was staring at the scarf, her head a little bowed.

Vibeke watched for a moment, startled when she saw Ember's shoulders twitch in a sob and heard a small snuffle. Settling down beside her, she ran her fingers through her hair.

'Hey,' she said gently. 'Are you all right?'

Ember nodded once, then looked up at Vibeke and smiled, seeming a little embarrassed. Tears welled in her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She laughed softly at herself, and Vibeke brushed the tears from her cheeks.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I was just . . .' She looked down, sniffled, and patted the scarf - soft, simple black with a dark green weave that was slightly reflective. 'I was thinking about you going into a shop and choosing this. I know it is not so remarkable. I know that people buy things all the time. But you went into the shop and bought this for me. And I could see it clearly in my mind. It is so simple yet I felt so connected to you when I thought about it. So marvelling that you would do this simple thing. It is amazing. We are part of each other.'

Vibeke smiled. 'Yes,' she said tenderly. 'We are.' And she felt her heart swelling with astonishment that this sweet, loving, remarkable, beautiful woman had given her so much. She marvelled at the fact that she was so lucky that she could spend time with her, and give her all that she could as well.

Ember, shaking her head in amusement at her overflowing emotions, found a handkerchief and wiped her eyes and then gently blew her nose. 'Silly me,' she said.

'Not at all,' Vibeke said, pulling her close. 'I love you for it. I love you for your sensitivity and all that you all.'

And Ember rested her head upon Vibeke's shoulder and they sat that way for a long time, in the glow of the Christmas lights against the dark stillness of the day, with the carols playing softly in the background. Yet Vibeke was most aware of the press and warmth of Ember's body against her, of her breathing and the beating of her heart; and she more than suspected that Ember's awareness was mostly of Vibeke.

They cuddled quietly, curled up together on the sofa for an hour or so before they set about finishing making and serving their Christmas dinner. It was fun to check the turkey's progress in the oven, to add potatoes to roast, to boil the vegetables, to put the Christmas pudding in the microwave ready to be heated up.

Amidst wonderful smells of a meal that promised to be excellent, they served up two large plates of the main course and sat down at their customary places to eat. Ember poured wine for them and they toasted each other.

'Happy third Christmas,' Ember said, beaming.

'Happy third Christmas,' Vibeke replied.

They clinked glasses, and sipped. And then they set down their wine and dug into the sizeable meal.

After the main course, after they finished washing up and drying the pots and pans, plates and knives and forks, Ember set the Christmas pudding to heat. As she turned her back to the microwave and waited, she held Vibeke's hand and ran her thumb over its back. Looking up she said: 'You know, although we could have tried to make a Christmas pudding ourselves, it does seem like it would have been a rather daunting task. I'd like to make one one day, but . . .' She trailed off.

'I'm sure our shop-bought one will taste good,' Vibeke said. 'And you're right. Making one kind of terrifies me in fact.'

Five minutes later, they sat at the table, doused the steaming and hissing Christmas pudding in brandy, and set light to it. For a little while they stared into the large, flickering blue flame until it went out. Then Ember served two large portions for them. With cream and brandy butter they marvelled at how good the rich pudding tasted.

Finally, after cups of tea, they sat and stared at the remains of their meal. They were full, content, replete.

'I am very full,' Ember said with amusement.

'I think I ate enough to last me a month. But that was really very good.'

'Let's just sit here for a little while. I think I need to digest. Then once we clear up, it'd be good to go for a walk. Is there any particular route you'd like to take?'

Vibeke considered this. 'Actually, yes. We have three routes that we run in the mornings, and I'd like to go across all three of them and up to the top of the wooded hill beyond the bridge. We've never actually been in there.'

'That sounds great!' Ember said enthusiastically. 'Maybe at the centre of the wood we might uncover some great mystery. Maybe there is a portal that, if we step through it, will transport us to other ages - medieval times or antiquity.'

'Or maybe we will discover an alien that has been living in the trunk of a tree for the past couple of centuries.'

Ember giggled. 'As long as it's not a green alien.'

'Why not green?'

'They're usually mischievous and malicious. Yellow ones and pink ones are usually more friendly. Unless they have three antennae of course.'

'Oh. Of course.'

Vibeke:

We walk up towards the top of the hill. The trees around us are dark in the grey of the day. Many of them are very large and perhaps quite old. There are oaks and ashes and beech trees, all skeletal. In some places there are younger birches growing quickly in the spaces where other trees have fallen, their bare, slender limbs stretching upwards. There are a few pines and I amused myself on the way up trying to recall what I know of the different species thereof. And there is holly. I watch as you stop by one holly tree and carefully run your fingers over the sharp points of a dark leaf. There are a few clumps of berries on the tree and I suspect you may pluck some on the way back to take home as decorations.

I look at you as you look at the holly. You are wearing a padded beige coat of a canvas-like material with large pockets, large buttons and a hood. It comes to mid-thigh. You are wearing tight-fitting black leggings that reveal the strong shapeliness of your legs, and beige walking

boots. And you wear the scarf that I gave you today, its green and black fitting well with the rest of your clothes.

I take in the paleness of your hair and the fairness of your face - quite light against the gloom of the day. There is a little colour in your cheeks and your breath frosts in front of you as you breathe. You are utterly beautiful, and I am fascinated by the light in your ice-blue eyes as you regard the holly.

Then you look up, into my eyes, and smile, and I am actually quite startled, so fascinated by and absorbed in watching you as I was. My breath catches and my heart beats more quickly for a few beats and a rush of emotion engulfs me. I find myself smiling back at you, though with a tender seriousness filling me. I feel as though I am falling in love with you all over again. And I am glad that I often feel like this and that it always amazes me.

You slip your hands back into your brown and white woollen gloves and take my hand, and we walk onwards.

Soon we are almost at the top. There is no path here, though we followed one for some time. The leaf-litter is thick and soft, there are roots and areas of soft earth, but the going is not difficult and the undergrowth not usually too thick.

You release my hand and jump a puddle, then step from one large root to the next until you can take a few skipping steps to the summit. I love watching your joy in the moment, your delight in being here. Then you turn back towards me and prop one arm against the trunk of a tree there and lean against it. You put your other fist on your hip and look at me with a happy expression.

'I'm first,' you call.

I raise an eyebrow as I near you. 'It was a race.'

'Yes,' you say innocently. 'Didn't you know that? Now you have to give me my prize or face the consequences of failing to reward me for my great achievement.'

'Really. And what kind of prize and what kind of consequence were you thinking of?'

You giggle. 'Oh, a hug would be fine in either case.'

I take a last step towards you and you shift away from the tree and we are in each other's arms. You press yourself against me and I feel your head against my shoulder and chest, your body along the length of mine, your sweet hair against my cheek, your arms wrapped around my waist and holding me tight. I hold you back and rub my hand up and down your back.

'Christmas love,' you murmur softly, just loudly enough to hear you.

'Christmas love,' I echo.

After a little while we step back from each other. And then we head back the way we came at a leisurely pace. It has been a good walk, long enough that we have burned some energy and given ourselves some alertness after our large lunch. It will be fully dark before we get back I think.

I am looking forward to a cup of tea. Perhaps then we will sit in the living room, I will put on a CD that you gave me, and . . . well, we will see. I have no demands on the day, just a sense of peaceful relaxation and a wonderful sense of you.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rain

Sunday 23rd March, Year 4:

Vibeke and Ember walked hand in hand through the botanical gardens that had been opened the previous year - a new attraction in Otterhampton. In fact they were slightly outside the town and were laid out behind an old watermill. The millhouse was still there, a tiny museum, but its wheel was still and the deep stream it had once turned in had been diverted.

The day was cool, an erratic and chilly breeze sometimes blowing. The sky was cloudy, no blue sky to be seen. But Vibeke and Ember were glad to be here. They had been here twice before, once in the autumn and once in the winter.

'It'll be amazing in a few weeks,' Ember remarked.

Vibeke nodded. 'It will. I think they've been pretty careful to choose sufficiently different plants that it's attractive year-round though.'

'That's true. Just the evergreens looked good in the winter. I like the way its laid out too.' Ember regarded three paths laid out in square fashion, and another area of concentric circular paths, then a widening spiral. There were three little hills, a couple of ponds that narrowed and broadened again, and some secluded places behind young trees and a little hedging. There were also some rockeries, and plants growing in urns. It was not a large place at all but a great deal was there to look at and enjoy.

Glancing up, Ember noticed that Vibeke was looking at a couple of elderly women that were by one wall of the garden, looking closely at a climbing plant. They were wrapped up in woollen coats and their heads were grey. They were chatting animatedly and seemed caught up in the moment and in their conversation.

She squeezed Vibeke's hand. 'What are you thinking?'

'I was thinking that those two look happy. I don't know if they're a couple or sisters or friends. But it just made me think of us being together when we're old and grey.' She did not look unhappy at the notion but rather gladdened at the thought of all the good years they could spend together.

Ember leaned her head against Vibeke's shoulder for a moment. 'We'll enjoy every minute of it, right until the end,' she said.

'Yes,' Vibeke said softly. 'We will.'

They walked onwards. Sometimes Ember asked questions about certain plants and enjoyed listening as Vibeke described some of the characteristics of the plants' ways of reproducing, or of their life-cycles. She liked the detail that Vibeke could reveal and the plants became more interesting as she learned about them.

Then: 'How many of these plants did your nursery supply?' Ember asked.

Vibeke looked at her and smiled. 'Quite a lot. Maybe a quarter of them. It was good fun when we were discussing what might go best here according to the time of year.'

Ember considered that. After a while she said: 'Do you think you could have enjoyed being a professional botanist? I mean, looking for certain types of plants in the jungles of South America or the Australian outback, or working in a lab investigating the biochemistry or certain plants, or something like that?'

Vibeke thought about this for a little while. 'I'm not sure,' she said at length. 'I always found botany fascinating and wanted to understand a lot and appreciate what I was looking at, I'd rather grow simple and common plants that appeal to me than be involved in esoteric research. I'm sure that would be very rewarding but I guess I didn't think about it that much when I was studying as something I wanted to go into.' She shook her head and chuckled. 'I was never very ambitious,' she said. 'I have no wish to be.'

'Hmm,' Ember said. 'Me neither.'

Before long they came to a small structure, a gazebo with climbing plants growing up its stone columns and trellises, with small beds about it and three curious potted plants within. There was a single stone bench with a back, and there were wind chimes hung from a corner of the arched roof.

'Let's sit down for a while,' Ember suggested, tugging Vibeke over to the bench.

For a couple of minutes they sat there, shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand. Ember enjoyed the feel of Vibeke's lithe and powerful body against her. She could just feel the heat she radiated. And she listened to - and thought that Vibeke was also listening to - the pleasant and irregular

clink of the wind chimes as they were caught by the erratic breeze. Though the weather was chilly Ember felt very warm inside.

It started to rain then, not hard, just a drizzle at first. Neither of them made any move to leave - in any case it was not far back to the car. They just watched, and listened as the rain fell upon plants and earth, concrete and stone. They heard the splashes of drops on water, and the almost imperceptible hiss against the roof above them.

As the minutes past the rain became a little heavier, steady but far from a downpour. There was no one else to be seen in the part of the gardens that was visible to them. The light had become very soft and grey.

And then Ember beamed and looked up into Vibeke's amethyst eyes as Vibeke put her arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

'Always,' she said.

'Always.'

And Ember felt tears in her eyes and blinked them away as she laid her head upon Vibeke's shoulder and wondered and was amazed by the perfection of the moment, of the bliss that she felt, of the profound happiness she felt at all that Vibeke was.

They stayed that way for quite a while, just listening, holding each other, enjoying the cold air and the dampness and the warmth of each other. After about three quarters of an hour, Vibeke stirred and sat up straighter, though she did not let Ember go. As she did so, Ember realised that the rain was easing off to the finest drizzle and then just a few spots. A fine mist hung in the air, mostly diffuse, though low over the ground the air appeared to be clear, and above head height it seemed clearer as well. Ember watched as it drifted and changed direction in the lessening wind. Perhaps as evening drew in the air would become quite still.

'How about we have fish and chips for dinner?' Vibeke said at length. 'I'm getting hungry.'

'That is a fantastic idea,' Ember said enthusiastically. She turned slightly on the bench. 'Do you know what kind of fish they have, and where they are caught and what they taste like? I don't know much about it though I've eaten fish and chips often enough.'

'No, I don't,' Vibeke replied. 'I don't know where the usual fish come from. And I can only think of cod, plaice, haddock . . . There must be a few other types I guess. I wonder if deep frying them blurs their flavours and makes them similar to each other. Or maybe that's the point. They still taste really good.' She chuckled. 'Maybe we can find a fish and chips connoisseur to tell us more.'

Vibeke stood up and then drew up Ember up after her. They stood for a moment, straightening their coats. Then they looked out.

'I'm glad we came here,' Ember said.

'Me too.' Vibeke smiled and took Ember's hand and said: 'Let's go.'

They made their way back through the gardens, stopping just a couple of times to look more closely at some crocuses that bobbed vivid yellow or mauve under the weight of glimmering raindrops and the stirring of the gentling breeze; and at a tree that neither of them recognised but which seemed quite exotic.

Then they left the gardens through the main gate and returned to their car. They took off their coats, buckled their seatbelts, and Vibeke started the car and pulled out of the otherwise empty carpark.

They chose a fish and chips takeaway on the north side of Otterhampton - there were three in the town and they had not been to this one before. It took them less than ten minutes to get their. They ordered and paid, and waited on a bench to one side of the shop. They were delighted when their bundle of two fish and two portions of chips were handed to them. The enticing smells of deep frying fish and vinegar made them ravenous.

The drive back home was quick. Both of them were rather thirsty when they got there and drank glasses of water. At the kitchen table, Ember laid out plates and knives and forks, salt and vinegar while Vibeke unwrapped their precious food.

Then they sat across the corner of the table at their usual places, and ate.

'That was so great!' Ember said a while later as she sat back from her meal.

'It was. I'll make us a pot of tea. Then we can sit here and drink, and I have a feeling we may finish out food in a little while. Not that we have to. But it is really good.'

Later, they watched television for an hour. Vibeke found her attention drifting and fell into a light but very pleasant doze. Nonsensical but strange and interesting and emotional half-dreams flitted through her mind.

When she awoke after half an hour or so she found that Ember was asleep in her arms.

At eleven o'clock that evening, they went for a walk together. Having over-eaten - pleasant though it had been - and then slept, they had some energy to burn off and knew that doing so would help them sleep. The night was cold and clear and they stopped from time to time to look up at the bright stars in the dark vault.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ordinary Problems

Saturday 10th May, Year 4:

'So, I'm not sure what is going to happen,' Vibeke said.

They were sitting at the breakfast table having a good breakfast - Ember had decided to make pancakes and also to fry some bacon. Since it was a Saturday morning they were up a little later than usual and were taking their time. They had not slept so much during the night because they had found themselves making love at great length, sleeping for a while and then waking up and making love again. They had finally made it out of bed at close to ten o'clock and, after sharing a shower had prepared a large breakfast together.

The day was cloudy and cold for the time of year. The light was grey and the wind gusted, whistling around the edges of the house and rushing through the trees, tugging their branches this way and that. Some sticks and leaves, torn free, were picked up and whipped through the air.

Ember took a sip of tea and considered what Vibeke had said. 'You've been working there for quite some time. Do you enjoy it as much as you used to?'

Vibeke took a bite of crispy bacon. She stared out the window for half a minute and said: 'It has changed. I think it was a bit more relaxed when I first worked there. I guess the owner is fairly ambitious and he has done quite well making it more profitable, but it has led to more work for me. But I still like it. I like that most of the time he is not there and that in any case he does know I do a good job even if he never says so. I like working with Felicia.' She shrugged then. 'If the nursery is bought out though it'll probably just be turned into a garden centre. No more growing of plants required or necessary. I might be asked to stay on of course, but I'd effectively just be working in a shop.'

'How would you feel about that?' Ember asked.

Vibeke drizzled some liquid chocolate over a pancake, then cut out a section with her knife and fork and ate it. 'You know, this tastes just great. It really hits the spot. Great idea to make pancakes!' And she smiled at Ember.

'I'm glad you like them.'

'In answer to your question, I don't know. I'd probably take the job at first just so that I wouldn't be out of work. I guess it would be all right. Not interesting, but certainly not difficult or stressful.' She looked up into Ember's eyes for a moment, then down, seeming slightly

embarrassed. 'I regret that I don't have any really sought-after skills. I always knew that I was never interested in having a big career but I do feel slightly uncomfortable that I don't have more skills I can really depend on for employment. There are a few large nurseries - like farms really - where I might be able to find work. Otherwise maybe I will just end up working in a shop. I wouldn't mind too much I think.'

'You could always set up a dressmaking business for me,' Ember said with a slightly mischievous look.

Vibeke nodded. 'I know, and I have thought about it since we've talked about it a few times. I imagine it would be fairly profitable too - you're quite in demand. It kind of scares the hell out of me though. I'm really not a businesswoman.'

'You'd do a good job though. I know it's not the sort of thing you imagine for yourself because it's not outside and not active - apart from a bit of driving, collecting and delivering. It wouldn't be full-time either. Once you'd set things up and understood how to run accounts and invoices and tax payments and so on.'

'I'm sure I could do it. You could do all that yourself without my help though.'

Ember nodded. 'I know. But I'd rather just make dresses.' She took a last bite of a pancake with honey, finishing it off. Then she placed her hand on Vibeke's and said gently: 'Does it concern you that you'd be working with me? Would you feel at all dependent or uncomfortable?'

Vibeke took her time before answering. As she thought about it, she found herself looking into Ember's concerned eyes, into what she perceived as a sea of ice blue around deep and quite dilated pupils. She felt such a sense of warmth and love then, a deep awareness of their togetherness such that the subject of their conversation seemed completely undisturbing and almost unimportant. 'Your eyes and beauty are touched by this wild weather in interesting ways,' she said softly. Then: 'Thank you Ember. I actually don't know the answer to that. I guess I want to be useful and valuable in whatever work I do. I'd know that what I do is less important than what you do, that you could do it without me but that I could not do it without you. I would in that sense be dependent on you. But the idea of you being more valuable than me is hardly a problem for me. You are more valuable than anything in the world to me. I think worrying about comparative value is probably silly. As long as I'm useful.'

Ember sipped her tea. 'It's amazing how our work is so insignificant compared with our being together. It doesn't really matter, does it? We need to work so we can live and but food and pay bills but it seems so paltry compared with what I feel right now in my awareness of you.'

Vibeke grinned and shifted her chair. Then, with a small grunt of effort, lifted Ember out of her chair and onto her lap so that they could hold each other close for a time.

Sunday 11th:

'That does not feel right,' Ember said, pulling the car over to the side of the rather busy dual carriageway at the first place she could where they would not still be on the inside lane.

'Flat tire?' Vibeke asked.

'I think so.'

They climbed out - Ember having to wait until a couple of cars had flashed past. The noise of the traffic was quite loud since the vehicles were travelling at speed. A lorry passed them, chill air buffeting them as it did so.

'Damn, it's on the driver's side,' Vibeke said after a quick look. It was the front tire on the right.

They went to the boot to get the jack and the spare wheel. Pulling back the carpet, Vibeke lifted the wheel clear and set it down on the road beside her. 'Can you set out the breakdown triangle some way back?' she asked. 'I'll pull the car over another couple of feet, right up onto the grass before I change the wheel.'

Ember nodded and opened the reflective triangle and walked back a little way along the edge of the road to put it down.

Vibeke had rolled the wheel to the front of the car before she became suspicious of how hard it was. She pushed her thumb into it and bounced it. 'Oh dear,' she said to herself.

Ember returned to her side.

'Unfortunately our spare wheel's tire is also flat,' Vibeke said. 'We're going to need to call the breakdown service.'

Ember nodded. 'I'll get my phone.'

An hour later they were at a garage in a village off the main road about five miles from where they had broken down. Vibeke paid the bill for the tow.

'Thanks,' the grizzled tow-truck driver said. He was a rather heavy and unkempt man with what she imagined was a near-permanent stubble, but he also seemed to be a decent and straightforward sort. He gave them a small wave after climbing back into the cab and starting the engine before pulling back out of the garage's forecourt.

Vibeke and Ember stood outside as the two tires were repaired. Vibeke wrapped her arms around Ember when she realised that she was shivering.

'My coat's in the car,' Ember said. 'But I like your warmth better,' she said with a giggle. 'I know that was a cheap line but I thought I'd say it anyway. It's also true.'

'Do you still want to go to the moors?' Vibeke asked.

'Yes, I think it'll be good. We won't have quite so much time but it'll still be nice. I want to see those bronze age ruins again. That was really interesting. I wonder if there might have been some more among the trees and undergrowth on one side of the area. I'd like to have a look.'

It was almost nine o'clock when they pulled into the driveway. They were hungry and pleasantly tired.

'That was a good day,' Ember said.

'It was,' Vibeke agreed and patted Ember's thigh. 'Thanks for driving.'

They climbed out, took their small packs and coats and locked the car, then walked along the short path to the front door. 'How about I make some soup and a couple of boiled eggs to go with the rest of our tea?' Vibeke said. 'I have a feeling you're probably hungry. I know I am.'

'That sounds great.'

Ember unlocked and opened the front door and threw the lightswitch but the hall light did not come on. Going through to the living room she tried to turn on another light but it also remained off. 'Either a power cut or a broken fuse I guess,' she said to Vibeke.

Vibeke went back outside towards the road until she could see the house next door and the house opposite it. Lights were on in both, as was the solitary streetlamp she could see.

Back indoors she said: 'I'll get a torch and check the fuses.'

They ate their evening meal by candlelight. They were still able to have soup and boiled eggs since they had a gas stove.

'This is really rather romantic,' Ember said with a grin.

'It is.' Vibeke reached out and cupped Ember's cheek with her hand. 'I love looking at the way the candlelight dances in your eyes. The colour is less distinct but an amazing liquid depth is added.'

Ember actually felt herself blushing slightly at the compliment. Vibeke very often complimented her, always with complete sincerity, and it amazed her that it could still sometimes make her blush.

They ate quietly then, glad to be home and warm, to have food and tea and the peace of the evening. They were both tired and would probably turn in before long.

'I'll call the electrician first thing,' Vibeke said. 'If they can only come round during the day I'll make sure I'm here.'

'Are you sure? I'm sure Evelyn wouldn't mind me popping home for whatever time it'll take.'

'It's fine.'

Ember tilted his head as if puzzled and then suddenly beamed at Vibeke. 'You don't like the idea of me being alone with a strange man in case he is dangerous or threatening.'

Vibeke covered her face with her hand and shook her head, chuckling at herself. 'Busted. Guilty as charged. I know the electrician will probably turn out to be a little old man who's no more threatening than a hamster, but I do feel a little protective of you, you know.'

'And I find that really charming.'

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Physicality and Dancing

Thursday 12th June, year 4:

Vibeke:

I run and run. I do not know if you understand or relate to the energy that fills me today. But, though I might have found myself worried and self-conscious shortly after we met, now I know that you will accept and wonder and see this in a positive light, even if you will not fully understand. I smile as I think this. I realise that you will more than likely simply be fascinated by what it is that I have become.

I feel an amazing energy within me. Though I often feel physical energy and like to release it and I exercise both regularly and intensely, I have not felt such energy as this in quite a long time. I feel amazingly focused and my breathing and heartbeat and movement feels almost effortless. I think that with such good weather today, with the time that we have - a day off, and three more days off after it - I may be able to hold onto this mood for the next eight or ten hours. If so then I will probably seem manic, empowered, unstoppable, restless, exhorting and more. I hope that you will enjoy it.

I am glad that this is possible at our home and around it. I watch as the corner of the path around the field that backs onto our home passes me a sixth time as I round the field. I feel as if I will never have to stop.

But back at the house I halt my run and go to the garage so that I might lift weights for a while.

As I bench-press I hear the door open and your quiet steps. I suspect that you are bringing me a bottle of water and perhaps something to eat. When I set the barbell down and sit up from the bench, I see that I was right. I look into your eyes and smile. 'Thank you,' I say to you.

Later, I run for seven or eight miles along paths of the fields and woodlands I am not familiar with. Back in our garage I spend more than an hour working out against the hanging punch-bag.

I am aware that you are sketching pictures of me, one after another. I am glad that you feel that there are moments to capture in my release of energy.

Ember:

I am aware that you are very tired but I am also aware that your senses are enhanced in some ways. When we ate barbecued food this evening you clearly very much enjoyed it - and I really enjoyed your enjoyment of the chicken drumsticks, burgers, fried onions, mustard and ketchup and toasted rolls that you ate. I liked them too but you must have been very hungry. I was impressed that we ate such a large salad with such pleasure. I enjoyed preparing it and I think I will prepare a variation upon it tomorrow.

You were so beautiful today. You are always beautiful, but I so much enjoyed watching you as you fell into a fugue of exercise. I fell into a fugue as I watched you. I reflected that I would also like to watch you playing tennis or squash, though I know you do not usually like competitive sports. Yet for me you are my gladiator, my fighter, my heroine, my champion.

It is finally dark.

'Would you like to live in a place above the Arctic circle?' I ask. We are sitting on the sofa together. Your head is upon my lap and I run my fingers through your hair. I have lit a single candle that burns in the open window.

'I think it would depend where above the Arctic circle,' you reply. 'Maybe in Norway or Iceland.'

'I like the idea of nights one barely sacrifices to sleep but which one celebrates.'

I look into your eyes and smile. I can see that you are relaxed and physically tired, though not sleepy - I can see that you are very aware of all that is around you.

'Will you dance for me?' you say.

I am slightly surprised by this. I have danced for you on many occasions but realise that this evening I have underestimated your alertness.

'I would like so much to watch you,' you say. 'You are so beautiful.'

I nod, looking into your eyes. 'I will be happy to,' I say softly.

For a minute or so I sit there. And then I lift your head from my lap as you shift around so that you are sitting up. You give me a slightly sheepish smile as you make yourself comfortable. I watch as you reach for the teapot - hot over the candle that I lit beneath its stand - and pour yourself another cup of tea.

So curious, I think. Usually I perceive you as so strong, a force of nature that envelopes me. Yet now, tired as you are, you are also vulnerable - though I know that if there was any danger you would fiercely protect me. I am happy to give you the pleasure that you ask for.

I pad barefoot across to the stereo system and change the CD to something that seems appropriate - something with both a strong rhythm and complexity. As it begins I think it has the atmosphere of mystical northern landscapes, tribal drums and drifting snow. I turn up the volume and then turn to you, watching you. I am wearing a tank top, shorts and underwear and I can see that you find me desirable. Sometimes I have donned carefully selected clothes for you before I have danced, but today I think that this casual look will suffice - at least until I end up naked. The thought makes me smile and as I feel a wave of excitement rush through me in a tingling flush of my skin.

How many times have I danced for you since we met? Many times, I know that, and I am glad that your wish to watch me has not lessened. I can see what seems to be a perpetual fascination in you, just as I have a perpetual fascination with you. I do not think I could ever grow tired of watching you move or the sound of your voice or less desirous of your body or less stimulated by your thoughts. Even your quiet silences fascinate me.

I look into your eyes and sway with the rhythm of the music. I am aware of the closeness with which you watch me, the smile that touches your lips. I know that you like the movement of my body. Now I let myself show you what I want you to desire and to possess.

Vibeke:

I feel my heart beat harder as you cross the room to the stereo and choose some music. I do not suppose you are unusually aware of how you are moving - at the moment, I guess, you are

considering what music to put on and perhaps how you will dance. Yet for me the dance has already begun. I love the way you pick up one CD and another, discarding a couple before you find what you want. I love the way your hands move, the way you bend to pick up or discard a disc. Once you brush strands of hair back from your face - you have let your hair grow a little longer recently. It was never very short and I am not sure what I prefer. What I do know is that I like the way your face is framed in each way and I do enjoy the differences.

When your choice of music fills the room I think it is a good choice. It is evocative rather than of any clear form. The drumming is impressive.

Then you turn to me and begin to move, slowly at first, and the music is simply a background thing that carries us. My awareness and attention are all for you.

You move, sway, shift. You reach back behind your head, bring your arms down. Your movements are simple, revealing such wondrous articulation and grace. I know that you are revealing yourself to me but there is something so utterly sincere about it that it seems not a performance but merely that you are showing me some of what you are, bringing to me an awareness of the wonders of your body in motion.

You move more, gradually increasing your response to the rhythms. I can see that you are enjoying it, that you are not thinking too much but letting yourself be carried away by your self-expression.

For ten minutes and more I watch you dance and move. You shift about the room and even climb, on all fours, towards me across the coffee table. You raise your tank top over your head, revealing your breasts to me and the curving lines of your bare back. I watch as every small movement reveals a different aspect of you. I love the way your shoulders shift, the muscles in your back and arms. I love the way your breasts move with each breath - deeper now, as you exert yourself - and each step and sway.

You slip out of your shorts and your underwear. You spin about the room and I can see your joy in this freedom, your joy in your awareness of how much pleasure you bring me.

After a while there is a light sheen of sweat upon you and I want so much to taste you. I have licked droplets of sweat from skin before, and suckled upon the wetness between your legs and I know that this will always bring me bliss.

In a short while or a long while I know that we will share each other's bodies and love, entwined together until we find sweet delightments and release. But there is no urgency. I will be happy for your dancing and then our caresses to continue for as long as they might.

I am floating upon a timeless appreciation of your beauty and desire, floating upon my desire for you.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Science and Archaeology

Saturday 10th January, Year 5:

Vibeke looked at Ember across the corner of the breakfast table. She smiled. 'Well, I think I'll get on with it. Do you mind clearing away the breakfast things today?'

'No, of course not.' Ember returned her smile and rested her hand on the back of Vibeke's upon the table. 'You don't really want to do this do you?'

'Actually . . . I'm not sure. There's certainly no point getting a decorator in, and I'd as soon do it as you. I think once I get going it might actually be fairly enjoyable. It's just sometimes difficult to start things.'

'True enough. I'll be doing some cleaning while you're at it. Let's have a good late lunch when we're done, and let's think of a really nice way to spend the evening.'

Fifteen minutes later Vibeke was moving furniture - or just covering it with plastic - in their bedroom. Once she had finished there, she did the same thing with the furniture in Ember's studio.

And then she set to work painting the walls and ceiling in the bedroom, using a pleasant pastel shade, cream with a touch of rose, that would go well with the deep, wine-red curtains. She used a ladder, and a large sheet of plastic that she moved across the floor beneath whatever area she was working on. She had a roller and a paintbrush. She wore old clothes and was soon spattered with drops of paint - though not too badly.

As she worked she kept the light on because the day was grey and gloomy and the light coming through the windows was rather dull. She smiled when she heard Ember singing quietly to herself as she went about getting the general housework done in the kitchen, dining area, living room and bathroom.

It did not take very long. *Good paint*, she thought. *My thanks to the technologists of the world*. When she was done with the bedroom she took a break to drink some tea with Ember.

Ember washed the tiles on the walls of the kitchen as well as the usual cleaning. After vacuuming she washed the coffee table and then spent quite a lot of time dusting throughout the

living room, on the bookshelves and the stereo system and television, upon all the surfaces. She cleaned the bathroom from top to bottom - excluding the ceiling.

When she was done she peeped into the bedroom to see how Vibeke was doing, and seeing that she was nearly finished she went to the kitchen to make them a pot of tea. She took out a packet of oat biscuits with chocolate as well - both of them liked this particular type of biscuit very much, and last time they had gone to the supermarket they had both put a packet in their trolley without realising that the other also did so.

They sat at the kitchen table while they sipped from their mugs.

'Not too much paint in your hair,' Ember commented.

'Just a little. It went really all right. The only thing that was awkward was when I splashed drops of paint onto the light fixture or onto the window and had to clean it off quickly before it dried.' She took a bite of her second biscuit. 'Good idea,' she said after enjoying it and swallowing, gesturing with the biscuit.

Ember chuckled. 'We can be predictable at times.'

'But only in a good way.'

'True enough.'

When she had finished most of a second cup of tea Vibeke stood from the table and went to get on with painting the study. She used a different roller and a different brush, and used white paint - it was important to Ember's artwork that there was no obvious or dominant colour in most of the room.

It was quicker to do than the bedroom. She found herself humming the tune that Ember had been quietly singing earlier.

Ember's art equipment, stacks of paintings and sketchpads were mostly in the hallway. She manoeuvred around them to put away the vacuum cleaner in the cupboard and then looked at what was in the cupboard to see if there was any junk that might be thrown out - unlikely, since neither she nor Vibeke liked clutter and were pretty good at getting rid of what they did not need - or any treasures to be found.

She noticed a cardboard box that she had brought here but which she had not opened in all the time since she had moved here. Bringing it down from its shelf, she carried it into the living room and flipped open the lid.

I feel like an archaeologist looking at ancient artifacts , she thought as she looked through what was within.

There were a few photographs and letters. There were also a few wooden carvings, each no more than two inches across, all of animals. She remembered buying them at a museum near the children's home she had lived in when she had been seven years old. It had taken her several weeks to collect them and several trips, each time spending most of her very small pocket money allowance. But she had been delighted with them.

There was also a small diary she had kept off and on when she had been about ten years old. Opening it, she found herself wondering at her rounded, childish handwriting. She read a few entries and looked at a few sketches that were there. Then she read a story, just two pages long, that she had written and realised she had not thought of it almost since she had written it.

It fascinated her. It was based on a story the children had been read at school but there were significant differences. Ember's protagonists were both woman and one of them was a powerful heroine that saved the other.

I was the other , Ember thought. *And I was waiting and hoping for the heroine to come to me, to love me and for me to be in love with. So strange. And now my heroine is with me.*

Vibeke was glad when she had finished clearing away paint-spattered sheets of plastic and had left the rollers and brushes to soak. She returned the furniture and everything else to the rooms she had painted. Then she cleaned brushes and rollers and took them and pots of paint and folded sheets of plastic out to the garden shed to put them away.

Back in the house she stripped out of her old clothes and put them in the washing machine, then took a shower and changed into clean jeans, a t-shirt and a warm pullover.

It was late in the afternoon now and quite dark. Ember was cooking and Vibeke took a seat at the kitchen table and just watched her contentedly, amazed as she so often was by how happy she felt.

Sunday 11th:

'This was a great idea!' Ember said, sitting in the passenger seat and opening the foil that wrapped the butter and bacon sandwiches Vibeke had made earlier.

Vibeke glanced at her then looked back to the road. There had been very little traffic at all on their journey so far. 'Even though we got up rather early?'

'Well, we usually get up quite early. You know, so that we can share plenty of love in the mornings.' She chuckled. 'I love just thinking of your touch, the feel of you when I wake up. Or go to bed. Or in between. The reality is even better.'

Vibeke looked at her again, smiling broadly. Then Ember handed her a sandwich and she took it and took a bite.

'Damn, that's really good,' she said.

'Would you like some coffee afterwards?' Ember asked.

'Yes, please.'

Outside, the dual carriageway sped beneath them; fields and hills, villages and farms, woodland and a few mills or factories passed by. The day was quite bright, intermittent sunshine sloping in pale, wintry rays between the clouds and across the landscape.

They arrived in Plymouth at half past ten. Driving down around the estuary and into the small city was picturesque and pleasant.

'Let's find a carpark and then walk a bit before we go to the museums,' Vibeke said. 'I'd like to stretch my legs a bit.'

'All right.' Ember was looking at a map of Plymouth. 'There's a park we could walk around that looks like it might be nice.'

They had lunch in a café-restaurant that was rather like an American diner in its layout and appearance, though it sold typical English fry-ups, soups, fish and chips and fried chicken as well as burgers.

'This coffee is really pretty good,' Vibeke said, quite impressed as they finished their meal.

'It was a pleasantly indulgent feast,' Ember replied.

It was a little after one o'clock when they entered the archaeology museum. There were not too many other people around - it was not the time of year for tourism.

Vibeke smiled as they walked into the first of the exhibit halls and saw Ember's face light up with wonder and delight.

'Wow!' Ember breathed. 'This is amazing. A Phoenician ship! I didn't expect there to be something like this here. Is it real or a reconstruction? What a distinctive shape! Of course I remember now, the Phoenicians and Romans and others traded with the ancient Britons around here for the tin that was mined.'

For an hour and a half they wandered through the halls, galleries and rooms. The museum was not especially large but its spaces were extremely well used and there was a great deal to see, together with both short explanations of what was on display as well as longer explanations being available in a book that could be borrowed or bought and read during their wanderings - Vibeke opted to buy a copy since both she and Ember were interested. She thought she would likely read it from cover to cover at home, and she also thought it would be a nice memento of their trip here.

'It's so hard to imagine how one would find life so long ago,' Ember said as they looked at some remains that had been found in a barrow just a few miles from the museum. The skeleton was complete though it was not in good condition. There were interesting rings of coiled bronze, and what seemed to be an axe head of some kind. There were even some fragments of leather and crude cloth. There were other Bronze Age remains - metal objects, jewellery, pots and shards, together with maps and diagrams and artists' impressions of what early settlements looked like based on what was left of them. 'I mean, if we stepped through a door and found ourselves in Ancient Britain during pre-Roman times, living in stone huts and following Druidic beliefs, farming or hunting. It must often have been a difficult life. Little medicine, no supermarkets or refrigerators or decent plumbing. But beautiful too. Imagine all that space, the natural forests and so on. But our perceptions, as people from the future would be so different to the perceptions those born there would have. They would find some difficulties simpler to accept, simply normal, while the natural world would be so different to them - not only beautiful but also mysterious and sometimes menacing if there were wolves or big cats.'

Then Ember looked up at Vibeke and her eyes were full of light. 'I wonder what you would have been if you had been born in ancient Egypt, or the Golden Age of Greece, or two thousand years ago in the Nordic countries. I think you would have been some kind of fighting woman.'

Vibeke smiled at her. 'Really? Don't you think that, being something of a pacifist except in extreme cases, I'd not be much good as a fighter? Although I confess to liking the odd action movie, I really don't like any kind of violence and even verbal violence really disturbs me. Besides, I'm not sure they had many female fighters back then.'

'They had a few,' Ember said. 'Actually you're too fair to fit in in Egypt or Greece but you'd look great in Norse battle gear. I imagine your long hair in plaits, and you dressed in leathers or even furs, wielding an axe or two. And you're so strong and fast, and your beauty would distract your enemies too.'

'And what would you be?' Vibeke asked with a sideways smile. 'I imagine you as a bard or a musician or a master craftswoman of some kind. You'd make a really beautiful Norse princess you know.'

Hand in hand they strolled into the next room.

They found a pleasant tea shop in a narrow street around the corner from the archaeology museum, and stopped there for tea and pastries. The street had a number of small establishments, unusual jewellery shops, a New Age shop and some curious clothes stores. 'I won't look!' Ember had said to herself, keeping her eyes forward as much as she could as they had walked down it. 'I won't look or I'll lose track of time and we won't make it to the science museum.'

But they took a pleasant three quarters of an hour in the tea shop and enjoyed the fragrant teas they chose - taking sips of each other's to find out what they were like - and the apple pastry and custard pastry that they shared.

'It's good to come into a place like this when it's so cold out,' Ember remarked.

'It is,' Vibeke agreed. She looked outside, seeing a couple of people making their way along the street. There were few pedestrians, few people shopping. The day was grey and cold and seemed rather empty, rather bleak, but she liked its peacefulness.

At length they stood, and put on their coats and walked the short way to the science museum.

'I like that coat on you,' Vibeke said as they went. Ember was wearing a coat of heavy black cloth with interesting tassels that were attractive but not overdone.

'I'm glad you chose it for me,' Ember replied.

'Oh,' Vibeke said, suddenly surprised. 'Yes, I did. I knew that. It's just that I looked at you and thought it looked good on you and said it aloud.'

Ember's gloved hand gave Vibeke's a little squeeze. 'And I think that scarf looks great on you. It really goes with your eyes and hair.'

Vibeke found herself laughing at Ember's antics.

'What?' Ember said, turning to her and feigning outrage. 'It's not my fault if I can't line up the lights properly.'

'Well, you already did line them up properly. You're just not supposed to line them up in that particular sequence of colours.'

'But I like this sequence of colours. They just keep jumping out of line again!'

They were on the third floor of the science museum. It had an interesting layout because the old, pillared and sculpted building that housed it was quite tall - at least eight stories - but also quite narrow. Its rooms were not especially large either so there were no very large displays, but what was there was very interesting.

'Hey, look at this!' Ember said, leaving the light display behind. 'It's a heat camera.'

For a minute they stood in front of the camera and looked at themselves on the large screen that was set beside it.

'You look weird,' Ember said.

'Yes. I do have rather a yellow face and red nose and ears.'

'Your hands are cooler than mine.'

'Your eyes are amazing when you look directly at the camera,' Vibeke said. 'I wonder what temperature registers coming from your pupils.'

They stood there and moved a little, turning and regarding themselves and each other. Then Ember turned to Vibeke with a twinkle in her eyes and a mischievous grin. She glanced around them - there was no one there - and then she said: 'Let's try something.'

Ember leaned in then, and tilted her face upwards and cupped Vibeke's face. She kissed her upon her lips, softly and then with more force as Vibeke returned the kiss. She felt like she was melting, wanting more, but finally pulled herself back.

Then they turned towards the camera and the screen.

'Remarkable,' Vibeke said with a raised eyebrow - the effect was exactly what she had expected.

'Yes, your kisses certainly are,' Ember replied, looking at the way their lips glowed with heat on the screen.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Loving Each Other

Saturday 17th - Tuesday 20th July, Year 5:

'Aaahh, a whole week off work starting today.' Ember smiled happily as she strolled to the doorway of the bedroom, leaned against the doorframe and then pushed off from it, spinning in a circle and then stepping across to Vibeke.

Vibeke looked up at her and grinned. Ember was wearing a short, pale green skirt that ended at mid-thigh and which was belted with a string belt. She wore a small red top with spaghetti straps that revealed plenty of cleavage and which ended just below her breasts, leaving her belly bare. And that appeared to be all she was wearing. She was clearly not wearing a bra and Vibeke wondered if she was even wearing any underwear. Her bare feet and bare legs and bare arms and shoulders and belly all had a healthy glow of sun and warmth - and a very slight suggestion of sweat.

A wave of desire rushed through Vibeke at the sight of her, of her movement, of the muscles shifting in her thighs and calves, of her breasts moving with each breath, each change of angle as she bent down over the bed. The desire settled in a warm glow deep in Vibeke's belly.

'What are you doing?' Ember asked as she sat down beside her on the bed.

Vibeke regarded Ember's lovely face - a little flushed in the heat of this very hot day - and the ice-blue light in her amazing eyes, which were now turned towards the papers and a few photographs and printed pages that were spread out and piled beside her.

'Right now I'm thinking about how beautiful and desirable you are, and that with the clothes you're wearing it's something of a miracle that I'm not bursting into flames, spontaneously combusting on the spot.'

Ember looked up at her and beamed. When she glanced down at herself Vibeke realised that she had not been meaning to be provocative and had not thought of what effect she might have on Vibeke right then. When she looked up her expression was earnest and suddenly open and perhaps a little vulnerable.

'I am glad you find me desirable,' Ember said, and looked down again for a moment before looking back up into Vibeke's eyes. 'I find you so desirable, my yearning for you sometimes so strong that it is as if any more intensity of feeling could not be endured.' She reached out and took Vibeke's hand. 'It is a wonderful thing.'

Vibeke gave her a little squeeze, and with her free hand reached out and cupped Ember's cheek softly. She ran her thumb across Ember's lips, once then twice, feeling the softness of them, looking at their fullness and pleasing sensual shape, watching in something approaching awe as those lips parted a little in a caught breath.

Then with an effort of will she pulled away, wanting a shower after a couple of hours of fairly heavy work in the garden earlier. She wanted to make love with Ember but would be patient so that the reward would be greater.

'I was just sorting through some of the notes and thoughts that I write down, the photos I take, the records I have kept of things,' she said.

'It is quite a collection of things you have written,' Ember said, looking at the papers. 'I've often seen you writing things down and tried to guess what your thoughts might be. Can I have a look at some of them some time?'

'Yes, if you like. Some are just records of things we have done. Some are contemplations and reflections. A few things that I like to remember from time to time. There are some things I've written on my computer that I'd like to print out. And these are the photos that I have printed out - just a few of many that I've taken,' Vibeke said as she reached for a stack and neatened it. 'You've seen most of them before I think.'

'May I?' Ember asked, and smiled as Vibeke handed her the images. They were in a number of sizes, some of them printed on glossy paper for high quality, some simply on ordinary sheets of A4 - which strangely, in the slight blurring and changing that resulted, gave the pictures a slightly artistic look in some cases.

Ember looked through some of them, smiling or chuckling sometimes as she did so - and Vibeke ran her hand in small circles upon Ember's back, enjoying the simple contact of it.

'A lot of pictures of me,' Ember said.

'Well, you are my favourite subject.' Vibeke took a couple of photos from the pile when she saw them, and held them up. 'These are two of my favourites. Your face is so utterly beautiful in this picture. I can't quite tell what you are thinking but it seems to be something of amazing depth and wonder. I really like the shadows here that darken the right side of you face, the way your hair falls. The colours are so soft too, and your eyes so brilliant.'

'I remember when you took that,' Ember said. 'We were walking through fields not far from here on a spring day.'

'And this is nice too,' Vibeke said as Ember looked at the other. It was a picture of both of them, sitting on their sofa a few days after Christmas. They had propped the camera on the television to take the shot, thinking it would be a fun image but not remarkable. In fact it showed the two of them looking at each other not only with joy but the most extraordinary love - and Vibeke remembered being caught in that moment when they had looked at each other, looking into Ember's eyes and seeing her love for her reflected there, and an infinite tenderness and warmth wrapping about her heart.

'Yes, it is,' Ember said very softly.

Vibeke looked up at her then and saw the seriousness of Ember's face as she examined the photograph; and she saw the liquid shimmer in her eyes that betrayed the welling up of emotion in her as she looked at the two of them looking at each other.

Vibeke squeezed Ember's shoulder, and leaned in and hugged her as a little snuffle escaped her.

'I love you so much Vibeke,' Ember said softly as Vibeke ran her fingers through Ember's short hair and tucked Ember's head beneath her chin.

Vibeke took a shower and shampooed her hair. When she was done, she dried herself with a towel and then wrapped her bathrobe around her, wondering where Ember might be.

She found her in the bedroom, standing at the large window and gazing out into the garden and over the farmland beyond. She did not turn, but leaned back as Vibeke came up behind her and wrapped her arms about her waist.

Vibeke felt Ember's cheek press against hers and knew she was smiling. 'It is very dark,' she said softly. Though it was two o'clock in the afternoon it was as if night was falling. Clouds had been gathering, seeming to congeal all morning and now they seemed to press down upon the world.

Ember nodded a fraction. 'The weather has been so hot and heavy these past few days. It would be good if there was a storm.'

Even as she said this, there was a flicker of lightning away to the south. It seemed that the wind was picking up too. The treetops swayed back and forth, then leaned in a stronger gust. A few leaves flew through the air, and a couple of birds - crows, Vibeke thought - in flight over the field wheeled and struggled against the shifting air.

'Do you feel that sense in the air that something is going to happen?' Vibeke said. 'Like a kind of electricity building up?'

'Yes, it's really something. Maybe it really is electricity. I feel like something wonderful is going to happen.'

They stood there for another couple of minutes, Vibeke holding Ember and Ember leaning back against her, her hands over Vibeke's upon her belly.

'I have a suggestion,' Vibeke said then. 'Let's prepare some lunch and eat in the living room. We could open the patio doors and move the sofa right in front of them. If we're lucky the storm will break and we can watch it. I'll get a blanket to wrap us in if the temperature drops a bit.'

'That's a great idea,' Ember said with enthusiasm. 'I'll be in the kitchen,' she said, stepping out of Vibeke's embrace and turning.

Vibeke returned to the bathroom, shrugged out of her bathrobe, ran a brush through her damp hair, then went back to the bedroom and dressed in string underwear, short denim shorts and a black tank top. Then she found an appropriate blanket, went into the living room and manoeuvred the sofa into position. When that was done she went to join Ember in the kitchen, deciding that she would select plenty of decadent treats to go with their usual light lunch. Ice cream and chocolates seemed like a good plan.

'Right, I think we have everything,' Ember said as they settled upon the sofa. The patio doors were open in front of them and the warm air blew steadily. No rain had yet fallen though.

'We have a lot of good food and a pot of tea,' Vibeke said. 'A blanket. My camera. Your sketch book and pencils.'

'And rabbit slippers and Clyde the Cat slippers just in case,' Ember added with a chuckle.

They toasted each other with lettuce, cheese and pickle sandwiches and nibbled them; and watched and listened as the wind rose still more and the first fat drops of rain began to fall.

They were silent as lightning flickered. It took a while for the thunder to reach them, not very loud but deep, ominous, and lasting for some time. Then more lightning flashed brightly straight after it, ragged lines of electricity connecting clouds to earth. Then there was a more muted rapid flickering, lighting the heavy clouds in sudden brightness from within.

'It looks like the storm is coming directly at us from the south,' Vibeke said, and Ember nodded.

After a few minutes the rain began to fall harder, then harder still, the wind whipping it in sheets across the further distances that became greyed out, the hills and trees and fields of the distances being obscured. The curtains of rain seemed to stumble and surge erratically across the landscape as if fleeing from a great power that chased them. Lightning lanced down more closely in three brilliant flashes that stabbed between sky and ground, and the cracks of thunder shuddered across the land and through the sky, rumbling and deep, making the windows and smaller objects of the house shake. The echoes boomed and rolled around them and away across the countryside.

Ember reached out and took Vibeke's hand. They turned and looked at each other at the same moment, and shared their amazement and joy and anticipation. Their faces were sombre but also filled with emotion.

Storms, Vibeke thought, seemed like they could break the world apart so that everything could start anew. There was excitement in this, and seriousness too, a mixture of destruction and promise.

For a while they did not eat, but simply drank tea and stared and listened as the storm closed in on them and the lightning flashed and the thunder ripped and crashed almost without break. The rain was heavy to an extent that Vibeke thought she had seen only two or three times before in her life. Apart from the lightning everything remained dark grey, indistinct because of the torrential downpour.

A fine misty spray was in the air now and Vibeke and Ember could feel it upon their faces, upon their bare arms. It was pleasant and quite refreshing after the heat of the earlier. The temperature had dropped by quite a few degrees though it was by no means cool.

Vibeke and Ember pulled their feet up onto the sofa and sat cross-legged side by side, looking out and marvelling at the power of the raging storm.

They barely moved for half an hour, until the initial fury had lessened a little. Though the rain still fell very heavily - indeed, it looked as if it had set in for the day, that it would keep falling for a long time - the darkness of the earlier clouds had lightened to a steel grey. Lightning and thunder still raced and boomed across the vault, but not so incessantly.

'I never knew that the bottom of the garden could turn into a stream,' Vibeke said.

Ember nodded. 'There's water flowing down off the road from around the corner. But the house and shed and garage should be all right I think.' She squeezed Vibeke's hand. 'I think some of the flower beds and flowers will be a bit damaged though.'

Vibeke looked across at her and smiled. 'It's all right. It won't be too serious. And you know, I really enjoyed the work out there.'

'I did too,' Ember said after a moment. 'Isn't that funny? That some of what we've done over the past months and years might be damaged but it doesn't take away that fact that we enjoyed doing it.'

'I'm glad it's like that,' Vibeke said. Then she realised that she was slightly chilled because of the damp air and her bare skin, so she spread the thin blanket out over her and Ember's legs. Then she reached for the plate of sandwiches on the small table at the side of the sofa. She offered the plate to Ember, who took one, then took the last for herself.

For a long time they sat there, watching the steady downpour and enjoying the natural fireworks that continued across the sky - and watching the rising water levels at the bottom of their garden and in the field beyond.

As the time passed and the storm quietened but the rain fell onwards they talked a little about what the storm meant to them - whether it was the sound or the light that meant most to them, and what they associated with it - Norse legends and the power of the ancient gods. They remembered storms experienced during childhood and times they had been caught out in the rain.

'I remember that I felt so good lying in bed and listening to the thunder and loud drumming of rain upon the roof,' Ember said. 'Especially when I was at my second children's home. The room I stayed in was in the loft so the sound of the rain was very clear. I really liked it. The head of my bed was close to the window as well, so the rain would drum upon the sill or sometimes be swept by the wind against it.' She smiled, remembering. 'It was strange to me but some of the other children were afraid of the noise and the apparent violence of the elements. A couple of them wondered why I liked it so much. I suppose they had good reasons to be scared of many things given their backgrounds. And now it seems to me to be almost a choice - that I can think about what might happen and expect it to be bad or that I can either not think about it or expect it to be harmless or good.'

A few minutes later Vibeke said: 'When I was twelve or thirteen I spent a lot of time away from home though my foster-father was barely aware of it. I could have hung out with other kids of my age but most seemed too different to me and the wild and trouble-making ones not interesting at all. Mostly I just went on very long walks, along streets or to the woods near where I lived. I just let my mind wander and to an extent I enjoyed the sense of freedom, though there was also a sense of bleakness within me that went quite deep - a sense that I had little to live for, for happiness seemed so rare and I did not imagine finding any real joy in my future.' She shrugged and smiled sheepishly as she looked into Ember's eyes. 'I certainly never imagined it was even possible to feel so good as I do since I met you. And sometimes I ended up walking through the rain and I quite liked that. Perhaps it fitted my tendency to brood. And I also remember a couple of times of being in the woods and standing under a tree in a torrential downpour and once in a storm that rivalled what we have just seen. I felt so alive then - a real energy that I so rarely felt back then. I loved the wind and the rushing water, the light and the noise. They were some of the best times of my youth I think.'

Vibeke and Ember were quieter then for a time. They finished cups of tea, and small portions of ice cream and melted chocolate, and slices of a rich, experimental chocolate cake that Ember had made.

Replete, they snuggled up together, Vibeke lying back on the sofa with her head on its padded arm, and Ember lying between her and the sofa back, on her side with her head upon Vibeke's shoulder and her arm wrapped about Vibeke's waist. It was a favourite position for them to cuddle or to sleep and they both found themselves smiling in blissful contentment as they lay there. They had draped the thin blanket over their lower bodies and listened to the steady, heavy rain and intermittent thunder.

After a while they drifted and fell into light and pleasant sleep.

They awoke after an hour or so - Vibeke just a little before Ember. She watched her love for a little while and smiled when, after a few minutes, Ember's deep and steady breathing changed and her eyes fluttered open and looked up into her own.

It was still raining and the rain did not seem to be any lighter than it had been when they had fallen asleep. For a few minutes they lay where they were, but then Vibeke looked down and smiled gently as she rubbed Ember's arm and back, holding her close. 'Would you like to go to bed with me?' she asked.

Ember snuggled a little closer. 'I would like that very much,' she said and Vibeke did not miss the apparently unconscious and happy sensuous purr to her voice.

Ember:

I ran my hands over your body. For a long time I kissed and explored your lips and mouth. I caressed and suckled upon your breasts. I lost myself in you, in the beauty of you, in your soft moans of pleasure, my touches and caresses bringing such pleasure to us both. I slid over your body, your thigh against my centre and mine against yours until we found release even as we knew it was just the beginning, a small delightment that promised so much more.

We bathed together by candlelight. We scrubbed each other and you washed my hair. We played with the bubbles that foamed thickly and deeply from the bubble bath. We laughed sometimes, or just looked at each other or touched each other with such tenderness and seriousness that I felt so open it was as if you could feel the deepest parts of me and I could feel the deepest parts of you - and I think that is what happened. I still feel the echoes of it, quiet thunder in the depths of my heart.

Outside it still rained hard, the light gradually dimming with the oncoming evening and the steady flow of heavy clouds.

We returned to our bed and loved each other's bodies and each other's openness. We kissed, tenderly and passionately. Later I felt as if I drowned in happiness, lost in rapture as I drank in your essence, kissed you deeply between your legs, buried my face in your centre. We rose and fell over the peaks of ecstasy. I fell asleep with my head upon your centre and you with your head upon my thigh - hardly the first time we have done that.

I awoke before you in the dead of night. Carefully, gently, I crawled around and sat up cross-legged beside you, looking down at you. You had slid your head onto your pillow and the white-gold sheets were partly draped and tangled over you as you lay on your side. Your mussed hair partly fell across your face and I brushed it back with my fingers, making you stir slightly but not awakening you. For a long time I simply watched you as you slept, your chest rising and falling, fascinated by the movement of your breasts, fascinated by the shifting of your ribs beneath your skin. I thought I could see the smallest smile tug at your lips sometimes even as you slumbered and the thought that you were happy even in your sleep made me feel so very good.

Your face is so beautiful. I could not ever fail to see the beauty in it for it mirrors that which is within you and which I love so much. I feel that I am always perceiving more, experiencing more about you from moment to moment and each look and expression fascinates me and seems never to be repeated. Rather they seem to be endless and infinite variations on the theme that is you.

It is the dead of night and only one candle still remains alight in the room. And I sit and watch you, wondering and amazed.

And then, after almost an hour, I see you stir and awaken. You look up at me with a slow and contented smile. Then you turn onto your back and reach for me and draw me down on top of you, my breast to your mouth. For a long time you suckle upon me, kneading my flesh, making heat flood across my chest and liquid fire well deep in my belly and between my legs.

You wrap your arms around my chest and pull me hard against you, taking my other breast into your mouth. I relax, going limp but for the trembling of pleasure that overcomes me, knowing that you will lead me to those places of bliss that I so desire: the places where we are one, nothing separating us, knowing nothing but each other.

Vibeke:

The days and nights pass blissfully. Sometimes when we are together in our love, sharing ecstasies and delight, lost in each other, it is as if time disappears altogether as if we are held eternally in our togetherness. And though I know that this wonderful week will be over too soon, I will remember every moment and know that thinking about it will bring me such a sense of tenderness and love and desire for you. And I know that we will have many more weeks like this. It is amazing, how our physical pleasures and the depths of our emotions, our vulnerable selves and our love have all become one.

We sleep at strange times and wake at strange times. Outside the rain does not stop though the lightning is only occasional and the thunder rare and muted. We rise and bathe together, taking a long time washing each other in a kind of ritual that we have grown to enjoy so much. Sometimes we give each other long massages with delicately scented oils.

We exercise in the garage, usually together, until we are exhausted and then return inside through the rain - stopping outside a couple of times and just standing in the falling water and enjoying it, the heat of our exertion keeping us warm and making the rain a simple pleasure. Back indoors we shower and then, our muscles aching, we curl up on the sofa and watch a movie or a nature documentary, and eat a good meal. Usually we fall asleep in each other's arms on the sofa. When we wake again we feel our desire for each other welling again within us, an opening bloom of liquid yearning and tenderness.

After three days the rain eases to a fine drizzle. In the early morning we pack small backpacks, then leave the house as the sky is getting light - still grey, damp, with mist lying low over the garden and the fields and the road.

I drive and you sit quietly in the passenger seat. I can feel a very pleasant mood of alertness and quietness upon us. I feel very good and I can see you do too as you look out at the passing landscape, the road and the villages, the pub and shops we drive past in a twisting valley. The roads are quiet at first because of the early hour. Though the rain continues to fall it is little more than mist now.

It is mist that seems most to define the world around us. There is no wind and in many places wide swathes of mist cover the near distances, hanging ethereal and mysterious over the damp ground, obscuring trees and sometimes obscuring the road so that I have to drive very slowly.

A few times we see rabbits dart across the road in front of us, or away from the grassy verges and into the hedgerows or the undergrowth of woodland. Then, from between tall trunks of beech trees that seem like columns and the vault of a temple about them, we see two deer, standing and facing towards us. After a few seconds of perfect stillness they turn as one and bound away from the noise of the car.

After a little more than an hour we reach the stretch of coastline that we have been heading for, about forty miles to the west of where we live. I park the car at the side of the road and turn the engine off.

We can hear the sea from here, waves breaking upon the rocks. Otherwise everything is silent. Climbing out into the amazingly still air, we look about us at the grey and beautiful morning. Though there is some mist inland and a little over the sea itself there is no rain. We put our small backpacks upon our shoulders and take a cliff path up a gentle slope.

For a while we walk along the clifftops. Both of us are wearing jeans and walking boots and t-shirts. At first we wear pullovers as well against the cool, damp morning but soon enough we take them off. The day will be warm.

After two miles or so we walk down a narrow, rocky and probably infrequently used path to a beach in a deep cove. We walk down soft, wet sand to hard-packed, rippled sand closer to the water. The tide is out, and we stand close to where the waves come in, hand in hand, looking out across the grey waves.

We walk around small, rocky headland to another cove and decide to stop for our breakfast. We are both hungry now and all we had after getting up was a couple of cups of tea.

We find a good place to put a small plastic sheet upon the damp sand, and sit down. We share sandwiches, chocolate biscuits and coffee. We do not say much but look out at the brightening day, gaze at the expanse of sea and listen to the roll and hiss of the waves. I wonder if the sun will break through later.

Sometimes I steal glances at you, but when you look back at me - knowing I was looking at you - I simply look more openly, as you look at me. The fair skin of your lovely face is lightly tanned. Your eyes seem almost luminous around the darkness of your pupils. You look into my eyes and smile.

At length we get to our feet and continue our walk. Above us the cliffs of red and grey rock loom higher and fall away. Sometimes we stop by a rockpool and I though I am interested in what we may find - limpets and barnacles, anemones, shells and drifting seaweed, it is your interest that most fascinates me. I wonder if you are searching for something or simply looking at the wonders of these pools.

You collect a few shells and stones as we go. I suspect you will not bring them home with us but simply wish to treasure them for the day. Perhaps at the end of our walk we can look at them together and see if we would like to keep a few of them.

About three miles from the car we come to another cove that has small dunes and tough grasses at the back, and a stream curling down to the sea. The cliffs are low and rounded here, sloped rather than vertical. There are yellow flowers of some of the bushes. It is a lovely place and we find ourselves walking up and down by the sea a few times rather than continuing on or heading back.

'We live quiet lives,' you say after a time of silence.

I think about this. 'Yes, we do,' I say after a little while. 'In some ways at least.'

'Our lives are quiet but very rich,' you say and I can hear the smile in your voice.

'Yes,' I agree. 'Does it bother you at all that we do not have more adventures, more strivings? I sometimes think about all the things that some people do. There are those who are ambitious and have impressive careers. There are others that raise families, which must be very hard work. There are those who travel all over the world. There are some who are famous and wealthy and whose lives are very intense. There are even some who try to have everything. Yet we have lived in the same place for quite some time now, and though the nature of our jobs has changed a little it has certainly not been dramatic.'

You take my hand and give it a little squeeze. 'No, it doesn't bother me,' you say. 'Not at all. I'm glad that most of my work is freelance now and not through Evelyn, but it has not had much impact on anything. And I don't think I would like to live a very stressful life or even a particularly adventurous one. I suppose that people who experience extremes of hardship and striving have a different perspective on things but it is not something I want. I feel so happy when I simply sit by a flowerbed in our garden in the sun and watch the daisies bobbing in the wind that I do not wish for anything else - except you.' You look at me and a beaming smile lights up your face. 'It is really true that it is you that makes the daisies most beautiful.'

I smile and laugh gently. 'That sounds like an exaggeration but I feel the same way,' I say. 'When you are not with me because you are at work or at the shops or something, it is still you that determines much of my perception.'

We walk on for a few minutes then turn and come back again. We are barefoot now, carrying our walking boots. We walk a little through the edge of the chill waves, letting the water run over our feet and away again.

'Sometimes I am very aware of how our moods change,' I say. 'There are times I feel contemplative, as if darker times from the past are welling up within me. I don't usually feel bad. Although there are those days when I wake in a bad mood for no reason except that I must have slept badly or something like that.'

'I am quiet too sometimes. Occasionally I feel rather emotional, a sense of falling, almost a kind of grief though I never know where it comes from. As if I am remembering losing something a long time ago even though I have found it again.' You shrug slightly and there is humour in your eyes. 'I'm glad that we still get on well even when our moods are not great. We have become

very good at saying when we feel irritable or when we want space, or when doing something - or not doing something - is important to us. Or even unimportant.'

We stop near sloping rocks where they meet the tiny range of dunes. We set down our packs and boots. From my pack I take out a frisbee. 'I thought I'd bring this along,' I say with a grin.

Your eyes light up. 'Oh, I didn't know you had one!'

'Just bought it last week,' I say. 'I saw it in the shop and thought about what we might do this week. We were throwing a tennis ball around a couple of weeks ago but this might be a bit different.'

'You chose a yellow one.'

'I thought it looked good,' I agree.

We go back towards the sea. We have plenty of space and for a while we throw the frisbee back and forth. We throw it straight to each other at first but then begin to curve its path more ambitiously once we get the hang of it. We miss our throws sometimes and find ourselves running around quite a lot. I like this kind of easy exercise and I can see that you do too.

I love watching you as you run, as you catch, as you throw; as you bend to the water to pick the frisbee up. You are always graceful, always strong and beautiful.

A little out of breath, we return to the dunes and sit down. We drink some water and eat oranges, sandwiches and slices of banana cake.

'It's so good we came here,' you say.

'Yes, it really is.'

The sand here is mostly dry now but we place our lightweight raincoats and our sheet of plastic down so that we can lie down together without getting wet. For an hour and a half we lie down together, your head on my shoulder and your arm wrapped about my waist, my arms about you. We doze in the warmth or simply lie awake, drifting and happy.

Eventually, after sitting quietly again for a time, we pack up our things and head back the way we came.

We stop at a country pub about five miles from home. It is a pleasant place, a converted farmhouse I think, old with many black wooden beams and rather sagging roofs. We sit outside in the garden, which is above the level of the main building. There are four tables and some benches but we are the only people there. We can look down over the road and into a small village. In the distance I can see the curve of a river.

I drink a mug of hot chocolate and you savour half a pint of stout.

'You seemed so absorbed in the painting you were working on last week,' I say. 'I like watching you when you are like that.'

'I like it when you watch me,' you say, looking down but smiling gently, almost as if you are slightly shy about admitting that you like having an audience when you are working on some art. But I think that you must know that you are good and I am sure you know it brings me much pleasure.

'It amazes me how sure you are of what you do. The way each brush-stroke or movement of pencil or charcoal catches something so perfectly.' I am always amazed. 'Do you think you enjoy it more or less as time passes and you get older?'

You consider this for a while though I know that you have thought about it before. I take a sip of my hot chocolate and appreciate it. It was a good choice.

'I don't know,' you say at length. 'It is different. I always enjoyed painting or drawing but the experience has changed a great deal. As a child it was just fun. As a teenager I was trying to master what I could. Then I was exploring different ideas and styles. I often felt that I wanted to develop what I knew in a more powerful way, to evoke emotions more strongly. But then I discarded some ways of portraying things and I think my artwork has become more subtle, more delicate. But also, to me, more interesting. Perhaps not quite as striking, perhaps slightly less passionate even - or at least more understated.' A frown crosses your brow. 'I think that I am repeating myself more now. Actually I know I am. I don't have to. I am sure I could do something really new, attempt a style that I have never tried before. But what is most important at the moment is working with the style I have come to like most. I think most of what I have painted and drawn for the last two years has mostly been variations on a theme rather than anything very new. Although, the variations are never the same. I think it is the portrayal of what most clearly reflects me, what is closest to my heart and self that is important. I do not want to create artwork that is loud or brash and impresses others. I want to explore the littleness of what I most like, the variations on the little things that define me or which I am.'

You fall silent and I think about the truths of what you have said. I suspect that it reveals something of why we are so deeply happy and remain so even though our lives are quite stable and quite quiet. Somehow the entirety of me responds to you in the most amazingly deep way and I can see that you respond to me just as strongly. I know that I am much more interested in small variations and expressions of yours than I could possibly be in anyone or anything else, no matter how different or dramatic they might be.

I wonder how to express this. Then I think I will try to write it down more clearly. I will give it to you to read and at the same time give you a yellow flower.

I realise that you are staring at me and as I look into your eyes I can see desire there. It takes a moment for your gaze to fall from my lips to watching me breathe, the rise and fall of my chest, then back up to my eyes. You blush very faintly when you realise I am watching you.

We smile at each other.

'Let's go home,' you say then, reaching out and taking my hand. 'Can I perhaps interest you in showering together? And then I would like to explore and cover your body with tender kisses and caresses.'

We stand and head for the car.

Chapter Thirty

Tension and Relaxation

Saturday 7th August, Year 5:

Ember knocked on the door and it was a minute before Mrs Waechter opened it. She was wiping her hands on her apron looking quite flustered but she still managed a smile, clearly glad that they were there.

'Hello girls, come on in,' she said and tucked a stray lock of grey hair behind her ear. 'I'm just putting the finishing touches to a couple of desserts.' She gave each of them a quick hug as they entered.

'We've brought a couple of salads if we can leave them somewhere,' Ember said as they followed her into the kitchen.

'That's great, let me just find a space for them.' Mrs Waechter took the covered dishes into the dining room and set them on the table, then returned. 'Would you two like a cup tea?'

'I'm all right for the moment thank you,' Vibeke said.

'Me too,' said Ember. 'How's it going?'

Mrs Waechter chuckled. 'I'm not as quick as I used to be,' she said. 'I found myself forgetting where I'd put some things. But I think it'll all be done on time. Anyway, none of my friends will mind if I'm a bit disorganised.' As she spoke she opened the oven to check a couple of cakes that were baking. 'And how are you two?'

Ember and Vibeke glanced at each other and smiled happily. 'Oh, we're doing very well thank you,' said Ember. Then, turning back to Mrs Waechter she said: 'What time do you think is best

for serving up the main course? It'll take a little while to get the barbecue set up and going and then for everything to cook.'

'I think we should aim for about one o'clock,' Mrs Waechter replied. 'My friends are all early risers and usually eat lunch a bit before that, but they'll probably be chatting non-stop and drinking sherries so it'll be a while before they settle down anyway. Although I hope Arthur isn't going to get drunk before he's even eaten anything.'

'Is there anything we can do before we get the barbeque going?' Vibeke asked.

'Well, if you could just take some chairs and the dining room table outside and set them up on the patio. And then put cloths on the tables and set out the cutlery and place mats, glasses and water and wine. That'll be a great help.'

'All right, we'll do that. Just call us if you need help with anything else.'

For the next little while Vibeke and Ember set out the tables and places, and once they were done carried out what food they could - salads, covered bread in baskets, butter and a few pickles and sauces, salt and pepper and vinegar.

Ember looked up as Vibeke set down two full jugs of water with lemon slices. She found herself smiling as she watched her. 'Sorry my love,' she said softly.

'You're quite amused by me aren't you?' Vibeke said good-naturedly, returning the smile.

'Well . . . Your stoicism is impressive but also rather painful to watch.' Ember came around the end of the patio table and bumped her with her hip.

'I'm sorry. Damn, I hope Mrs Waechter doesn't see how morose I can sometimes be.'

'It's all right. She probably knows you don't actually like gatherings like this and what goes into them. We don't have to stay very long and I'm sure she really appreciates you being here for a bit and helping out.'

'I wish I could say I was looking forward to it but I think I'll just feel a bit uncomfortable and wish I could escape. Getting the barbecue going and cooking will be all right though. I can enjoy that. Maybe while I'm tending it I won't have to make small talk with the guests.'

'You look great you know,' Ember said, holding Vibeke's hand and leaning back a little to look her up and down. Vibeke was wearing a new pair of black jeans that fit her hips and long legs very pleasingly, black ankle boots that were well-shaped, a belt with a silver buckle and a fairly tight-fitting, high-necked sleeveless black t-shirt. Unusually for Vibeke she was wearing silver stud earrings as well. She had tied her hair back in a plait. 'Elegant and relaxed, sexy without being provocative,' Ember mused.

'You look great yourself,' Vibeke replied, taking a long moment to enjoy the sight of Ember in a long white summer dress that brushed the ground. The skirt was loose while the top tapered and had thin shoulder straps. Ember was wearing some black and white make up around her eyes that made them even more stunning and remarkable. Her light blonde hair was brushed loosely, a little longer than usual, framing her face and touching her shoulders. She was wearing a necklace, bracelets, earrings, rings - and an anklet - of silver with many small stones of blue and red and some small silver spheres that jingled a little like bells. The look was quite exotic.

Vibeke was setting out some of the chicken drumsticks and thighs at the back of the barbecue when the first guests arrived. She had moved the portable barbecue off the patio and onto the lawn at one side of the garden to keep too much smoke away from people. She looked up when Ember brought her a large glass of water.

'Thank you my love,' she said.

'You're more than welcome,' Ember said as she took a sip from her own glass. She looked around. 'The weather is really improving. It was a bit chilly this morning. I'm glad the sun is out.'

Vibeke nodded, then glanced at an elderly couple who were just coming out through the patio doors into the sunshine. They were quite well wrapped up, wearing summer coats.

'Hello Vibeke,' said a rather distinguished man who was about seventy-five years old. He was wearing a casual beige suit, white shirt and striped tie. Vibeke suspected he had been wearing a fedora when had come here and that only Mrs Waechter's quick grab for it explained why he had taken it off. His thinning grey hair was brushed straight back and a fine network of broken capillaries darkened his nose and cheeks a little. He regarded her with humorous brown eyes through his small, round glasses. He was quite a handsome man despite his years, his drinking habits and his fondness for cigars.

'Hi there Arthur. How are you doing?' Vibeke grinned at him. She rather liked the old man - he was something of a character and she admired that he had a reputation for doing things his own way and living his own life no matter the disapproval of others. As well as being quite the wit and raconteur he was in any case completely harmless, so she did not really understand why a few of the more uptight older people of the community disapproved of him.

'Better for seeing a beauty such as you,' he said and gave her a little bow. Then he adopted a self-deprecating look. 'I really am predictable. Sorry about the obviousness of what I just said but it is actually true.'

'No problem Arthur.'

'You need any help there Vibeke?' He leaned in. 'Although I would understand it if you want to keep as busy as possible so as not to have to make polite chitchat to all the old duffers around here.'

Vibeke laughed at that, thinking that perhaps the afternoon would not be so bad after all. These people were kind at the least. 'I'm fine,' she said. 'How's the golf going?'

'Well, it's good and I've done better this year than I was doing at this time last year. Although, I'd had a few before the last interclub match and didn't do so well then. I don't think my team mates were very pleased with me. Although I think they're also rather jealous that when I go home three sheets to the wind I don't get yelled at for it.'

'Arthur? Did you ever want to get married?' Vibeke asked then. She knew it was a very direct question but thought that he would not mind.

He looked quite sombre at this and looked down, nodding to himself as he thought. 'Ah, well . . . I'd like to say that I just enjoyed the bachelor lifestyle too much to want to give it up, but that wouldn't be quite honest. No, I did meet a really good woman when I was about forty. I really liked her and we spent a couple of years together but in the end after I asked her to marry me, she said she didn't feel the same way I did. I never did learn quite why. I didn't drink so much then and I had a pretty good job. I guess it's impossible to say exactly why people are attracted to each other and I suppose she just wasn't. Anyway, I did go out with a few women after that. It was fun and I liked them all, but I couldn't find what I wanted.' He gave her a small shrug and smiled, clearly not feeling sorry for himself but just being straightforward. 'You and Ember seem to be doing well,' he said then.

'Yes, it's really amazing,' Vibeke replied, unable and not wishing to stop the big smile that came to her face at the thought of Ember.

'It really makes me happy to see two people so much in love,' Arthur said. 'I know you don't make a show of it in public but I can see the way you two look at each other. I wonder if light does actually shine out of your eyes.'

Vibeke regarded him for a long moment. 'You're a good man Arthur. Thank you.'

'Here, let me get out of your way now. Mrs Waechter's coming over with some plates for you to dish up. Maybe I can take the opportunity to sneak indoors and grab myself another sherry without her noticing and scolding me.'

Vibeke and Ember ate sitting upon a low wall at one side of the patio. Their plates were piled high with food. The gathering was full of chatter and laughter. A couple of the older people were being looked after, though Ember guessed they felt a little isolated from the conversations going on around them because of deafness or difficulty taking part.

'I enjoyed talking with Charlie,' Ember said. Charlie was a woman of late middle-age with greying blonde hair. She still had some of her looks and must have been quite attractive as a younger woman. She was something of an eccentric and was a very gifted musician.

'I noticed that she and Alexis cornered you.'

Ember snorted softly. 'Alexis, yes. I really don't like the way she stands so close, stares straight at you and speaks intensely at high speed about the most banal things, all the while backing you up until you're against a wall and moving sideways. Someone should tell her, but they'd have to have more courage than me. I think she'd get angry.'

'Any scandals to amuse us?' Vibeke asked.

'To tell the truth I was mostly just nodding politely and barely listening. I think she said something about changing her cat's diet.' Stabbing some lettuce with a fork, she ate it and then reached across and patted Vibeke's hand. 'Glad you weren't there. Although, being rather taller than her I wonder if you could out-intimidate her without being rude.'

They ate in silence for a time.

'This is really well cooked you know,' Ember said then, pointing to the chicken and sausage and barbecued skewer of peppers and onions on her plate. 'You did an excellent job.'

'Thank you.' Vibeke found a curious pleasure in the moment. She did not like gatherings like this and knew that for some of the next hour and more she would probably be making polite conversation. But it was obvious that the people there were enjoying themselves and were pleased with the party and the afternoon and each other, and that meant a lot. 'You know, it's a shame I can't just be myself when talking to a lot of people,' she said. 'I'd like to be sincere all the time but that would hurt some of these people and come across as rude. I'd be letting them know that I do not want to listen to them and do not want to speak to them. So I pretend, with politeness as a mask of faked sincerity, a social lie for the most part. But I don't want to hurt anyone.'

'I don't think it would be constructive or helpful to be genuine all the time with all people,' Ember agreed. 'There's not a lot we can do. Let's see how it goes. I wouldn't mind betting Mrs Waechter will tell us we shouldn't feel obliged to stay at some stage. And then maybe, if we can get a court, we might go and play tennis?'

Vibeke looked sideways at her, grinning at the slightly surprising suggestion. 'You know, that is an excellent idea.'

* * *

Vibeke and Ember had been playing tennis on a semi-regular basis since the spring. They still considered themselves beginners - though Ember harboured more than a suspicion that Vibeke would become very good very quickly if she were to push herself. She was also aware that Vibeke did not reveal just how much talent she had when they were on court simply because she wanted to have a good time with Ember and have plenty of rallies rather than simply beating her.

There were two sets of courts that they played at. One was at the edge of one of Otterhampton's parks and had to be booked and paid for while the other was close to where they lived and anyone could play there for free - but there was no way to book.

They went home to change and did so quickly. Vibeke always thought that Ember looked great in her white shorts and randomly-coloured t-shirt, white socks and tennis shoes. Then they drove to the courts nearest them and were pleased to find that no one was there.

It was just before seven o'clock when they stepped on court. The sun was low and golden in the hazy sky, low streaks of cloud beneath it over the horizon. The air was very still and seemed tinged a golden-green colour by sunlight and oak trees. It was a beautiful evening.

Vibeke closed the gate after them, then they set down their bottles of water, racket covers and tennis ball tins. With rackets and tennis balls in hand they moved to opposite sides of the court - for some reason they had got into the habit of Vibeke playing first on the northern side and Ember playing first on the southern side, though they would swap regularly from then on.

They knocked up, Vibeke being careful to hit the ball repeatedly into a good place on Ember's forehand, then repeatedly to a good place on her backhand. After a while she varied between the two. She loved watching the way that Ember moved. She was graceful and strong and looked great even though she was not yet a particularly good player.

They practised serving after a while, and then they played a set. Vibeke did not try to win but simply to prolong the rallies and to send Ember to different parts of the court - though not so much that she could not reach the ball. Vibeke knew that Ember was no match for her should she play to win. She also knew that, should she play a much better player, it would be a very different experience. But the truth was she was not really interested in testing herself and did not feel particularly attracted to competitive sport - she never had despite her talent. She was much more interested in playing just with Ember and enjoyed it enormously.

They played a second set and a third, each lasting quite some time. After an hour and a half Ember - who had done rather more running than Vibeke - was quite tired. Still they played for another half hour because she wanted to and was really enjoying it.

The light was fading by the time they called it a day. They gathered up the balls and returned to the gate and Vibeke gave Ember a big hug.

'I am a bit sweaty,' Ember said, giggling as Vibeke span her around.

'You are flushed and sexy.'

They drained the last of their bottles of water and then returned to the car.

'That was just great!' Ember said. 'You really know how to give me a workout! I feel quite weary now but it feels so pleasant.'

'I had a great time too,' Vibeke said, looking at Ember and grinning as she turned the key and the engine started. 'You look really good you know. You look full of life. And I really love watching you play.'

'You've said that before and I know you mean it but . . . Well, I'm really not very good. I know I keep mis-hitting the ball, which must be a bit tiring for you.'

'But you do look good. When you run, when you reach for the ball, when you hit. I find your double-handed forehands and backhands good to watch because of the way you bend and turn. You have a natural balance about you.'

'I like watching you too,' Ember said. 'I always have, whenever you move or exercise.' Then, with a little poke to her side: 'Or sleep, or love me.'

Vibeke smiled at that and they drove home.

'How about a shower, a light tea and then watching TV or a movie?' Vibeke suggested.

'Sounds good to me,' Ember replied.

Chapter Thirty-One

The Graveyard and the Pier

Friday 3rd June, Year 6:

'What a beautiful day!' Ember sighed. She stretched languidly, her folded arms above her head in the confines of the car, then settled back again and propped her bare feet up over the glove compartment.

Vibeke glanced at her and grinned as she took in her lithe form, her sleekly muscled legs, her shapely feet. Ember was tanned from the early summer sun and was wearing cream shorts and a light green t-shirt. A silver bracelet flashed with sunlight at her wrist. 'It certainly is,' Vibeke said, looking at the sweeping curve of the road ahead.

They were in Pembrokeshire in southwest Wales. Their route took them past pleasant fields and hedgerows, then more open country of rounded hills with rock outcroppings where flocks of

sheep could be seen grazing, and often they came close to the cliffs and bays of the coast and could look out across the expanse of blue-grey sea.

Looking out the passenger window, Ember said: 'Otterhampton is over there across the water. I wonder if I'm looking directly at it. Maybe your Clyde the Cat slippers and my rabbit slippers have climbed up onto the window sill on the north side of the living room. And they're looking directly towards us - even if their view is blocked by trees and a few hills - and wondering when we'll be coming back.'

'I think that is in fact quite likely,' Vibeke concurred.

'Are you convinced yet that your new Clyde the Cat slippers are actually the reincarnation of your last pair?' Ember asked. 'I know it was very sad that you had to give them up but they were rather falling apart.'

'I think you were right,' Vibeke said happily. 'I think they do have the same souls as the first pair.' Looking across at Ember with a smile she said: 'Your rabbit slippers are just your second pair? Or are they the latest in a long and ancient dynasty?'

'Oh, very much just the latest in a dynasty. Although I don't think I'm old enough for it to be really ancient.' Ember giggled suddenly. 'I just had an image come to me of me being reincarnated from some ancient Egyptian woman that lived about four thousand years ago. I think the rest of the ancient Egyptians would have been a bit puzzled to see her walking around in rabbit slippers.'

Vibeke chuckled. 'Although if I'd been alive then too, I'd have just been charmed.'

They drove on in silence for a little while and Vibeke had to slow as the road turned and sloped sharply down into the southern edge of a village.

'That's a really pretty church,' Ember remarked as they passed a solitary shop and a few houses and the place of worship came into view just a little up the steep hill, trees in full leaf hiding some of it.

Vibeke turned the car up the narrow road leading to the church and parked in a small open area before the fence and gate that enclosed the church grounds. 'Let's have a look,' she said.

'Good idea,' said Ember. 'I've always liked going into churches. I mean, I know I don't believe in it all but they can still be really inspiring places. They're good for making one feel kind of small, and wondering.'

Vibeke turned off the engine and they climbed out. The air was soft and warm but not hot, the sunshine bright and clear, the sky a very deep blue that Vibeke usually associated most with spring mornings.

'Wow, it's so quiet,' Ember breathed.

Vibeke listened. There was no sound of traffic at all. They could only hear a little birdsong and some rustling in the undergrowth, perhaps from a bird or squirrel or mouse. There was no wind at all. Scents of growing things and earth, warmth and dampness were in the air.

Vibeke locked the car and Ember looped her arm through hers. She looked into her lovely face and smiled and saw that look of childlike wonder that she loved so much in her.

'Let's go,' Ember said very softly.

They went through the gate and closed it behind them. Around them most of the churchyard was obscured by a lot of undergrowth, bushes and grass that had grown unchecked for a while - though not so much that they would not be able to make their way around. There were many old-looking trees around the church too, blending in with the woodland that climbed the hill behind it. Hawthorn and oak seemed to dominate.

The church itself was not large and seemed to be very old. Its walls were of stones of irregular sizes, mostly quite flat, mortared atop one another. The roof was sagging and tiled with slate. An old bell was visible under the pointed roof of the small spire. The windows were not large and two of them were slightly obscured by climbing plants.

They tried the door and found it open. There was a little entrance area with some curled and faded notices pinned to a noticeboard, then a stone archway that opened into the fairly small space of pews and the centre aisle.

They walked around for a few minutes. They looked at the designs of the stained glass windows - those behind the altar were very simple, almost childish in their portrayals, but they were still attractive and moving. They read some of the names and date and epitaphs upon a few stone slabs upon the floor on northern side of the church, and upon one of the walls. There were friezes on two walls, both of them cracked and faded, the plaster fallen away in places, but it could be seen that they portrayed scenes from the story of the Passion. There was a large bible upon the lectern and it was open. Stopping by it they looked at the simple illuminations that decorated the text and the ornate gold ribbon that lay between the pages. They did not look through it though.

They walked back to the entrance. There were prayer books and hymn books stacked on a table near a collection box. Ember dropped a coin into the box. Then they walked out of the church into sunlight and shadow.

'Let's walk around,' Ember said.

'I'd like that.'

Hand in hand they made their way along a rather poorly tended path that led around the west side of the church, then threaded their way among the graves and looked at some of the gravestones. Many were partly hidden by weeds and undergrowth, brambles and saplings.

Ember stopped at a stone that was laid flat upon the ground - there was no upright headstone. She squatted and brushed away a little moss and ran her fingers over worn text cut into the stone.

'I think that says Cuthbert,' she said. 'I can't make out the surname. And . . . eighteen twenty-one?'

She stood again and they looked down at the stone.

'I wonder if anyone alive now knows anything about who he was,' Ember said. Then she looked up at Vibeke and said: 'I know that's a very ordinary remark. I know that so many people wonder if they'll be remembered, and other people look at their family histories in great detail, trying to learn as much as they can about the people they're descended from. And there are others who don't care about who went before but want to be acclaimed in the present. But I rather like the way that being in a place like this makes me feel. I feel a kind of sadness to know that everything passes, that these graves are all that is left of these people and in many cases they are just forgotten. I feel a sadness for us too. At some stage we'll be gone - though I hope we die together because losing you would just break me in half and I think you'd feel the same if I was to go first. But also feel a kind of relief when I think that we're just so small. I don't suppose death is anything at all. It's nothing to fear.'

Vibeke gave Ember's shoulder a squeeze. 'We are so lucky,' she said softly.

'Yes,' Ember replied quietly, looking up into Vibeke's eyes. She smiled and there was much emotion in her amazing, limpid gaze. 'We are very lucky.'

Taking their time they made their way onwards around the graveyard. It was a little larger than they had expected. There were headstones that were tilted over by the roots of trees and a few that had fallen completely. Some were almost completely hidden by undergrowth. Though some of the inscriptions were obscured they were able to read others. They found themselves intrigued by some of the dates and the names. A few of the dead had lived long lives but some had died very young, including a few children.

At length they returned to the car, in quiet and contemplative mood. Once they had climbed in and closed the doors and buckled up, Vibeke did not start the engine immediately but turned to Ember and laid her hand on her leg and simply looked into her lovely visage.

Ember looked back with great tenderness. 'Let's lie together,' Ember said. 'Or be cremated together and have our ashes sprinkled on a hillside together. I know we'll just be dead. But I like the idea anyway. Being with you until even our remains are gone.'

'I like that idea too. But let's live long and happy lives first.' She smiled then. 'I love being with you. I'd like to know this happiness for a long time.'

'Me too.'

Vibeke put started the engine. After slowly turning the car around and heading back into the tiny village she said: 'Right now, let's see if we can find a nice place to walk and perhaps a beach to have our picnic lunch at.'

Saturday 4th:

The following afternoon they found themselves in the town of St Ewan's. They had stopped there when they had spotted a grocery and decided to buy a couple of pasties, some bread and cheese and olives that they thought would be good.

'It's quite busy here,' Ember said as they emerged from the shop with a full plastic bag of good food - including some fairly decadent-looking chocolates and cookies.

There were indeed quite a lot of pedestrians and many of them seemed to be tourists. Children chattered in high voices and held their parents hands and carried windmills or candyfloss or buckets and spades. Parents looked either irritated and tired and struggling, or in some cases really enjoying their family day by the beach.

'There's a pier here,' Vibeke said. 'Maybe that's one of the reasons this place is popular. Would you like to walk around for a little while?'

'All right. It'll be different for us. Because we often try to avoid people and crowds we probably miss out on interesting attractions sometimes.'

For a while they strolled through the streets of the old town. The centre was pretty, its shops mostly converted cottages. There were a lot of thatched bungalows with rounded and irregular walls, mostly painted white. There were drystone walls. The main street winding through the centre was rather narrow, so cars had to go quite slowly. There were a few narrower streets with tiny shops leading off the main way, and a cobbled stone square of sorts just for pedestrians - though it was more round than square. A stage was set up and some children were practising some kind of musical performance.

'I wonder what those kids feel,' Ember said as they left the area.

'What do you mean?' Vibeke asked. She had caught the contemplativeness in Ember's voice.

'I was just remembering when I was a kid and the teachers at school organised Christmas nativity plays, or a sequence of songs and sketches we did one summer, and a play that we once did. It was strange. The songs and sketches were really fun because we had a good teacher organising things and she was really imaginative. I think most of the children enjoyed it all. I also remember one teacher that was bad-tempered and let us know it, clearly thinking that it was our fault that she had to do what she clearly thought was a waste of time. I also remember the parents when we gave our performances. The kids from the orphanage were very aware that they were different from other children then, though the house mother always came. I think the parents enjoyed

some of the sketches and rooting for their children. I also think they were largely bored. I was just wondering if those children in the square were enjoying themselves, or wondering what they were doing there, and if their performance would be good or bad and what the parents would feel - if they would be proud or not.'

'Did you like being on stage when you were a child?' Vibeke asked.

'I didn't mind. I didn't feel afraid.' Ember gave a little shrug and a sheepish smile. 'Actually I think the teachers and audience thought I was really cute.'

Vibeke chuckled. 'I have no doubt that you were. I've only seen a handful of photos of you as a child but you really did look rather angelic.'

'What about you? Did you like being on stage?'

Vibeke shook her head. 'No, I really didn't. I actually became pretty afraid of public speaking when I was a teenager. I wouldn't feel comfortable about it even now. Silly really.' But she smiled slightly. It did not disturb her now - she just accepted it as a quirk of who she was.

They walked a little away from the centre of town up a winding road that led over an abrupt and high ridge. Small houses were on either side, built on levels against the steep slope, mostly painted white. They stopped briefly at the summit to admire the view of the bay and the sea and the small pier that jutted out into the blue-grey waves. There were quite a lot of people on the sandy beaches to either side of the pier.

Heading onwards, they descended to an area of houses that looked like they had been built in the early twentieth century. They were mostly terraced and narrow and dark. They were the kind of homes that were often built close to factories throughout most of the country. Just ahead of them was an old area of docks - probably this had once been a fishing village.

Vibeke and Ember walked along the beach back towards the pier. It took a bit of clambering to make their way around the rocks at the end of the ridge but it was fun.

Soon they were walking past people who had set down towels on the sand and were lying sunbathing or sitting and talking, drinking and eating. A few people were paddling in the waves and a few were swimming. There were quite a few children - running and shouting, building sand castles or playing with beach balls or other toys. There were not many young adults or teenagers.

They climbed up the steps along the sea wall and approached the entrance of the pier. Walking in, they were surrounded by talking and laughter and shouts and music. Smells of frying and sugar, chips with vinegar and some grilling meat came to them. There were quite a lot of booths along the centre of the pier and then, at the end, a rounded area with a few rides for children - a small roller-coaster and a kind of merry-go-round with hanging chairs that swung outwards as it spun. There was also an indoor place with video games and a bar.

Vibeke and Ember reached the area of the rides, and leaned against the railing looking and looked out to sea, and down into the water where the waves broke against the metal pilings of the structure.

Ember laughed softly. 'I'm glad our slippers aren't here,' she said. 'They'd be traumatised.'

'That's true.' Vibeke chuckled too. 'I know this won't surprise you but you know, this place just isn't me. It was interesting to see but . . . shall we go?'

'Let's do that.'

Two hours later, Vibeke and Ember were sitting on their picnic blanket on a grassy slope of a hill some way inland - though they could still see the sea as they were quite high up. The area around them was grazed by sheep. There were a few stunted trees that were shaped by the wind and there were many stands of large rocks and boulders. A gentle breeze drifted over them and the sun was warm against their skin.

'Do you feel like an alien sometimes?' Ember asked. Then she took a bite from one of the particularly decadent chocolate cookies they had bought earlier and happily munched it.

Vibeke had just taken a sip of water from a bottle. She grinned and swallowed. 'Well, yes,' she replied.

'Me too,' Ember said after a little while. 'Sometimes I used to imagine that I might one day find the ability to just fly up into the sky, to rush through space, to leap between planets and stars. To become something . . . more. Or to remember something that I should never have forgotten, some truth about me or the universe.' She shook her head. 'That sounds a bit silly I know.'

'Not really,' Vibeke replied. 'I've had notions like that too, and they are not unpleasant. But if you do learn to fly across deep space, I hope you'll be able to carry me too.'

Ember knew she was just being humorous but said: 'I couldn't stand being without you no matter the secrets of the universe. And you know, since I met you that feeling that I should become something more has mostly gone. With you, I am more.'

Vibeke looked into Ember's eyes and saw the depth of emotion revealed there. Then she made space for them on the blanket and took her in her arms and lay down.

Lying there on her back on the sunny hillside, holding Ember close, with Ember's head on her shoulder and her arm wrapped around her waist, Vibeke wondered, amazed as so often by the bliss of their connection and the endless tender warmth of their togetherness.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Onwards

Tuesday 12th September, Year 18:

Ember:

I stand at the kitchen window looking out. It is raining - not that rain is unusual here. For a little while I find myself absorbed by the shapes of the clouds overhead with their heavy bellies, the water falling from them, the light that shines between them yet which never seems to become as powerful as it promises. This is a land of shifting meanings that urge one to endless reflections and deep emotions.

The view is good. Others might have wished to buy a place with a commanding position, or a larger place near a main road. But we did not desire it and could not afford it. In fact I like the way that we seem to be always looking up from here. There are mountains on all sides and woodland to the south and southwest. There is a small loch two hundred yards to the northwest.

I smile as I recall the adventure of moving here. My dressmaking was going well and I was earning a good salary. And then suddenly I found myself without any work at all. I had been earning more than you for most of the time that we had known each other. It did not matter but it was strange to suddenly find myself dependent upon you and having to wonder if I would have to look for some other type of work altogether.

Moving to northern Scotland was something we had been thinking about for a long time. I am glad we did so, at least in terms of our home and the landscape that surrounds it.

Now I am glad that I am working as a dressmaker again. For a long while I was concerned about how you felt working as a commercial forester - planting and cutting varieties of pine that are of no interest to anyone except for their wood that can be used for furniture or other functions. And yet I have not seen much sadness in you about this despite your having said how often the work seems pointless. I know that you believe me when I tell you I would be happy to support you but I can also see that you are happy to make your own salary, no matter you lack of emotional connection to what it is that you do.

Sometimes your strength and stoicism and acceptance leave me amazed and wondering.

I hear your soft footsteps upon the rug that divides the kitchen from the dining room and I smile at your approach. I can hear that you are barefoot and I suspect that you are wearing a tank-top and shorts. I wait with anticipation, hoping that you will put your arms about me and hold me close from behind.

I am not disappointed. Leaning back against you, I enjoy your soft strength and inhale your scent and feel wrapped about with such a sense of safety and warmth.

Vibeke:

I brush out my damp hair - I have just emerged from a shower. Unusually you were awake quite a while before me today. Perhaps you are now sipping your morning tea and reading some abstract book, some esoteric novel at the kitchen table. I hope that you are enjoying your morning before we must go to work.

I glance out of the window. The light is grey and sombre and a light rain is falling. I am glad about it. I like how much it rains here. I most especially like the days and nights when the wind blows very hard and the rain hisses against the panes and we do not have to go out but can simply enjoy the cosiness of our home.

I will probably spend most of today outside but I do not mind. I think I am lucky to have the job I have. I like the physicality of it. I do not much enjoy the company of the other workers that sometimes work with me though they are friendly enough. I am happy you have managed to find the work you wanted here.

We were never very sociable but in moving here I think that we have become less so. I think we have become quieter as well. Yet I do not think we have become any less feeling or emotional. We have changed but it has not entailed a lessening of emotion or intensity. Rather, the contentment and oneness I feel with you on the simplest evening, as we eat together or watch television together or retreat to bed early so that we might make love at great and tender length sometimes amazes me with such a wash of meaning and profundity. I feel as if I might not be able to survive such poignancy. And yet you are there, holding me, and I marvel at how safe I feel and how you will never let me go, never let me fall.

I remove the towel that wrapped me about and return it to its customary rail in the bathroom - and I am struck by how many times, how many mornings and evenings I have hung it there, and how our lives' days repeat in so many ways - and how I am so happy with that repetition, for it is good. There are also small and pleasing variations. Back in our bedroom I slip into a black tank-top and grey shorts, then head for the kitchen. Maybe now you are standing, staring out at grey-draped mountains tinged with the purple of late heather.

Smiling, I make my way to the kitchen on the north side of the small house. I see you standing at the window and looking out and I suspect you know that I am there. I think you are waiting for me with some pleasure. Smiling more widely - I cannot help but do so, just as across all these years of being with you - I walk forwards and embrace you.

You lean back against me and I hear your gentle sigh of pleasure. I nuzzle your hair, then kiss you between your shoulder and neck. I love your scent and the soft warmth of your skin. I can feel the beating of your heart. I am very aware of your breathing.

'Ember,' I say. I love the sound of your name. I love saying it, feeling its shape upon my tongue and lips.

'Good morning Vibeke.' You reach back and hold me against you.

I feel such bliss.

The End

I hope you enjoyed it. If you have a moment, drop me a line:

noumenal_rabbit@hotmail.com

Peace, happiness :-)

Icebard

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