

Chapter 1

In the deep mid-winter of 1625, Cecilie Meiden stood in the bows of a ship as it moved smoothly towards the entrance of the harbour at Copenhagen. Since leaving Norway, the vessel had sailed through much bad weather and was now long overdue. The early darkness of that February evening was already settling over the sea and the city and, despite wearing thick fur mittens, Cecilie was blowing instinctively on her fingers from time to time to keep them warm in the raw winter chill.

Not wanting to touch the tar-blackened timbers of the hull, she stood freely on the deck, shifting and adjusting her stance to the roll of the ship with the ease of an experienced sailor. It was wonderful to feel the fresh sea air on her face and standing there alone, as far forward in the ship as she could, made her feel as though the whole world belonged to her.

As she gazed towards the harbour, however, she found herself thinking back over the past few months and years, and some pangs of unease crept into her thoughts. How could she have made such a mess of her life? Surely it had not all been her fault?

For what must have been the hundredth time she told herself she could not bear to see Alexander Paladin ever again.

She knew it would be impossible for her to look him in the eye without revealing what she knew of his unspoken vice. In fact it had come as a big surprise to her that knowing his secret could cause her so much anguish. This was perhaps because she had never fully admitted to herself just how much Alexander meant to her.

As the ship began to slow and to manoeuvre towards its moorings, she found herself recalling their first fateful meeting. At the time she had been frightened, unsure of herself and saddened by the news that had just arrived from home about the effects on her family of the recent plague. She had recently arrived as a total stranger at the Court in faraway Denmark. Then, by mistake, Alexander Paladin had entered her room and in that short meeting he had seemed to give her back the strength and courage to go on. She had liked him very much from the first moment and he had continued to support her in that small and difficult world that was always filled with intrigue and envy. Whenever he was near, her whole being seemed to fill with happiness.

One of the King's cavaliers, he was an unusually handsome man with obvious strength of character and an air of quiet authority about him; dark-haired, manly and with aristocratic features, he had a distinctive yet melancholy smile. And without her realising it, that unforgettable smile was to have lead so bizarrely to her downfall.

Alexander Paladin had always been reticent and reserved. He had made it very clear that he liked her – but nothing more. He had conveyed unmistakably that he was a man she could trust, a true friend who cared for her. Why then should it hurt so to discover his secret? Shouldn't she of all people, a daughter of the Ice People and the equally broad-minded Meidens, be able to accept and understand it? Why should she be so disturbed?

It was during her home visit to Norway that she had learnt the painful truth about the enigmatic Alexander. The explanation had come from cousin Tarjei, a grandson of Tengel the Good and a young man already possessed of great knowledge and an uncanny understanding of human nature. And how had she reacted? She had been shocked and saddened. Perhaps that was only natural. But had she really needed to throw herself into the arms of young Pastor Martinius simply because his sad smile reminded her of Alexander? It had been uncanny how alike those two men were in so many ways.

Never before had Cecilie regretted anything as much or so fiercely as she did that short passionate encounter with Martin. How horrid, how repulsive it had been, in retrospect. Two people: both bitter, disappointed and alone; both desperately needing at that time to be loved or – to be more brutal – needing to be physically intimate with somebody.

In effect she had willingly allowed herself to be violated. Were she ever to marry, she would have to stand before her husband and confess that she was not a virgin. How would that unknown man react? Would he turn away from her because of her rash actions? Or would he understand?

Through the turmoil of her thoughts she realised the ship had come alongside and mooring lines were being thrown ashore. Although people at Court knew when she was due to arrive, she could see that there was nobody on the quayside to meet her. Even though they had been delayed by the stormy weather, from the vantage point of the castle it would not have been difficult to see that the ship had arrived. Now she would have to make her way there alone – through unlit streets, where all manner of riff-raff might be skulking in the shadows waiting to creep up on her. She looked around for someone on the ship who might accompany her, but in vain. So, grasping

her travelling case firmly in one hand, she took a deep breath, summoned up her courage and went ashore.

Beyond the bustle of the well-lit port area there were few signs of life in the narrow empty streets of the town, now that the day's trade was over. As she hurried onward towards the castle, Cecilie Meiden realised that she was afraid. Sol of the Ice People, whom Cecilie resembled in so many ways, would have looked on this as a challenge. Sol had loved darkness and turmoil. She would probably have liked nothing better than to meet some gang of ruffians intent on robbing her; they would have given her the opportunity to exercise her extraordinary talents to defend herself. Despite being a descendant of the Ice People herself, Cecilie had not been endowed with any of their mysterious powers. She had only her wits to depend upon.

But as she walked on, inside her mind she was still trying distractedly to justify her past actions to herself. She knew how a lady must conduct herself and her demeanour at Court had always been in every way perfectly ladylike. It seemed it was only when she was at home with her warm-hearted, loving family that she allowed herself to relax a little. But what had possessed her to hurl herself headlong into the Pastor's embrace? She shook her head, shuddering afresh at the memory and lowered her eyes, like a schoolgirl brought in shame before her teacher.

She was utterly mortified now over her uncharacteristic behaviour in the tool shed at the churchyard. Her only consolation was that it had been Pastor Martinus who had taken the initiative. If he had not put his hands upon her and whispered enticing words of loneliness and desire in her ear, then it would never have happened.

But she could not console herself that easily: she knew she had been very willing, so very willing.

During the first stretch of her journey through the narrow

streets that led up from the harbour, Cecilie suffered nothing worse than some crude insults from a pair of street whores warning her to stay away from their patch. She pointedly ignored their shouts and hurried on, but unbeknown to her, a greater danger was lurking at the end of the last street before Copenhagen Castle. She had to pass through an alley that seemed to her to be packed with a noisy crowd of wretches – vagabonds, drunkards, whores and criminals of every hue. In the middle of the alley they had built a fire of straw to warm themselves, and were busy cursing and blaspheming loudly over how unfairly life had treated them.

Cecilie hesitated, but she knew she had to get past – there was no other way. With her heart in her mouth, she hoped she would be invisible and walked on as fast as she could. Far up ahead she glimpsed the open square in front of the castle. Fires were burning up there as well, and she could see the silhouettes of horses and riders – life of a completely different kind. Although it was not far to the square, to Cecilie the narrow alley suddenly seemed like an endless road filled with anxiety and danger.

She almost managed to get past the fire and the raucous crowd without being seen, but just as she was about to heave a sigh of relief, she heard a lisping, fawning voice close behind her. Her back stiffened at the sound and her blood ran cold.

‘Well, well! Look what we ’ave ’ere!’ murmured the voice and Cecilie felt someone grab hold of her cape.

Turning quickly, she found herself staring into the insolent face of a man who was leering toothlessly at her. She realised at once that this was not a situation where the protests of a refined, self-confident young noblewoman would do any good. It was clear she faced two stark choices: to stand and fight – or turn and run. Quickly choosing the latter, she tore herself free and began running. Another man joined the leering individual and they began together to chase after her.

‘We’ll let you keep your virtue, gracious lady, just you let us take care of that case o’ your’n,’ yelled one of them, making a grab for her travelling bag.

Cecilie’s instinctive reaction was perhaps characteristic in some ways of her more robust Ice People ancestors. Not bothering to point out that they were already too late to take her virtue, she swung the case at them with all her might. Made of wood, it struck the leering man with some considerable force and he tumbled backwards. Another man immediately joined the chase and Cecilie stumbled on ahead of them as fast as her skirts would allow, but she was no match for them and they caught up with her at the very moment she reached the edge of the wide, open square.

In the flickering light of the fires, Cecilie saw a group of soldiers on horseback approaching, but before she could cry out, one of ruffians grabbed her, putting his hand over her mouth, and tried to drag her back towards the alleyway once more. As he did so, his companion tugged violently at her travelling case.

Cecilie twisted her head free for a few seconds and managed a short muffled scream before the hand silenced her again. Hearing her cry and seeing her distress, several of the soldiers rode quickly towards her and when Cecilie’s assailants saw the mounted men approaching, they immediately released their grip on her and melted away into the shadows of the dark alley.

‘Are you all right, Mistress?’ asked a bearded officer.

‘Yes, thank you!’ panted Cecilie. ‘A thousand thanks to all of you!’

She was gasping for breath and her legs were shaking so violently that she was barely able to stand up. At that moment another rider reined in his mount beside her.

‘Cecilie, heavens above, it’s you!’ said a voice she knew very well. ‘My dear child!’

She lifted her eyes, and in the light from the fires she saw that the proud figure astride the horse was Alexander Paladin. She could not begin to describe the joy she felt at seeing him there. Gone instantly were all thoughts of his irredeemable secret; instead she saw only a dear friend, looking noble and larger than life, clad in shining breastplate, black cape, big knee-boots and sporting a large feather in his hat.

Her face lit up. ‘Alexander!’ she cried, smiling in delight.

He bent down and took her outstretched hands. ‘Have you just arrived from Norway?’

‘Yes. The ship was delayed and nobody came to meet me.’

‘I did not know you were coming,’ he told her, shaking his head. ‘People at Court can sometimes be so inconsiderate.’ Turning, Alexander instantly handed over command to one of his men. ‘I must go with Mistress Meiden and see that she arrives safely inside the castle.’ Dismounting quickly he handed his horse to the rider next to him.

‘It’s wonderful to see you again, Cecilie,’ he said pleasantly as they walked towards the castle gates. ‘Copenhagen has been empty without you. But how have things been for you?’

‘Oh, Alexander! It was lovely to be back home for a while!’ She then described in vivid detail what life was like at Gråstensholm.

When she had finished, Alexander Paladin put his arm around her shoulders and said: ‘It’s good to see that you are so happy, my little one.’

She smiled gladly back at him – then suddenly remembered again the terrible truth she knew about him. Sadly, she realised once more, his commanding manliness could not be hers. Without meaning to, she moved away from him very slightly and, perhaps sensing her thoughts, Alexander dropped his arm from her shoulders. In a strained silence, they walked past the guards and entered the domestic wing of the castle. When they

reached the door to her room, he turned to face her and said very quietly: ‘I believe you know?’

Cecilie nodded. In the glow from the lamps hanging from the walls his eyes looked black and filled with infinite sorrow.

‘Who told you the truth?’

‘My cousin, Tarjei. He is the one with knowledge of medicine – and is also very worldly wise. I have sometimes spoken to you about him.’

Alexander nodded. ‘Of course, yes, I remember.’ He hesitated, looking uncomfortable. ‘And how did you take it?’

Cecilie found it very difficult to speak. She wanted only to rush into her room and close the door. But she knew he did not deserve to be treated in that way.

‘At first I didn’t really understand it. Your ... situation I mean. I had never heard of anything like it before. Then I became ... troubled and ...’ She fell silent, biting her lip and on the verge of tears.

‘And?’ he encouraged her softly.

‘And very sad,’ she whispered.

Alexander stood quietly for a long time. Cecilie looked down at the floor. Her heart was hammering.

‘Yet just now, when we met out there,’ he said gently. ‘You were happy then, weren’t you? Glad to see me?’

‘Yes, I was. Just for that moment I had forgotten.’

‘And now?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Now that I want so badly to retain your friendship, Cecilie.’

She hesitated before replying. Could she cope with such a friendship? Was she strong enough to hide her distaste? How humiliating would it be for him to sense her contempt and her unspoken criticism? Suddenly she remembered her own experience with Martinius and a tide of her own shame washed over her. What did she have to be proud of?

‘You have my friendship, Alexander,’ she answered softly. ‘You know you do. It is important to me.’

‘Thank you, Cecilie,’ he said, breathing a sigh of relief. ‘I am very glad.’

She smiled at him uncertainly and placed her hand tentatively on the door handle. Realising it was time for him to go, he took her hand and kissed it. ‘When will you be leaving the city?’ he asked quietly.

‘To travel to Dalum Abbey, do you mean?’

‘No. The royal children are now at Frederiksborg. They are staying there for a time.’

‘Oh, are they? I did not know that. Tomorrow I must find out what is happening.’

‘Yes, do that! And please tell me too. Goodnight, my dear friend.’

Cecilie’s gaze followed his tall confident figure as he walked off down the corridor. He moved gracefully, she thought, like a Knight of the Holy Grail and, as she continued to watch him, she reflected that Paladin was another name by which the Knights of the Grail were known. So he truly did bear his name with dignity – and yet there was that other ugly incomprehensible flaw that took the shine off this otherwise perfect nobleman. How strange life could be, she reflected sadly as she closed the door behind her. It was only later when she was settled in her room that she realised she had forgotten to ask him why there were so many troops mustering outside the castle.

The very next day she heard the rumours about Alexander. His position, she discovered, was very uncertain, and it was only the support of the King and his excellent ability as an officer that had saved him from terrible disgrace. There was talk of a court-martial or trial, but she could not find out any details. She was now deeply concerned for his sake because,

in spite of everything, she realised that she shared a very deep and heartfelt affinity with him.

* * * *

Cecilie had not been back in Copenhagen for more than a few days before she suffered an even worse shock. This time, she discovered that she was going to have to face up to an even more earth-shattering dilemma of her own – the consequences of her fleeting ill-considered encounter with Pastor Martinus.

The day of the discovery was the worst of Cecilie's young life. At first she was petrified; then she reeled quickly back and forth between panic and hope. She felt all the wrenching emotions and upset that every young woman since the dawn of time has ever felt after an impulsive act of love. She wrung her hands so hard and so frequently that her arms ached; then she laughed nervously and hysterically over and over again, telling herself it wasn't possible – and anyway she could not be sure for several weeks yet at least.

Then, next came the fury: for a long time she cursed the young priest from the depths of the ocean to the heights of heaven, calling him by all the worst, most insulting names she could think of. Eventually when exhausted, she admitted to herself reluctantly that she too had been equally at fault. She hadn't exactly tried to resist his advances.

But to whom could she turn for good advice? Luckily not much time had passed. It was in fact only fourteen days earlier that she had met Martin in the potting shed in the churchyard, so she could be absolutely certain of the time. Although she could not be completely sure of her condition, Cecilie had enough intuition to suspect that this was very serious.

While waiting to leave Copenhagen, she had been asked to finish embroidering a dress for Anna Catherine, the King's daughter by Kirsten Munk. But she did not manage to sew on many beads. The patterns floated together in a muddle before her eyes and all the while she imagined fearful pictures from the future, seeing herself with a child nobody would accept, cast out and condemned, punished in some way she could not presently imagine. Sighing repeatedly, she tried again and again without much success to concentrate her attention on the beaded embroidery.

In three days time, she knew a carriage would be taking her to Frederiksborg. What should she do until then? There would be no compassion shown to her if her condition became known. The best she could hope for would be expulsion from Court. But should fate be really unkind, she knew the pillory could await her – and after that nothing but a life of shame.

Cecilie had become aware of her condition that morning. On rising she had felt suddenly light-headed and had vomited. But it was not only that which had disturbed her. A week earlier she had expected her monthly menstruation to begin but it still had not happened – and this was otherwise always on time, without any exception. As a result, every single minute of that day her mind had been in turmoil.

She had considered and then rejected many harebrained ideas. Of course she knew there were several different ways to drive out an unborn infant from the womb: you could work like a woman possessed, dance a jig until you were almost dead from fatigue, lift heavy loads until your spine was fit to break, go to see a wise crone or take different potions. The list was endless, but Cecilie knew in her heart she had not been brought up to take life.

By evening she had made her decision, although it hardly helped calm her fears. If only she had more time to prepare,

she thought. If only time had not been so important. She really could not afford to waste one day. Having made up her mind, although she was still almost scared out of her wits, she made her way discreetly to Alexander Paladin's quarters.

'His Grace is not at home,' said his servant, and Cecilie's courage began to ebb. 'He is in the barrack wing.'

'Ah, so when will I be able to see him?'

'I do not know, Baroness. He has so much to attend to at present. His Majesty, our King, is arming for war against the Catholics. A great many troops are assembling.'

At that moment Cecilie had no interest at all in the wars of nations. She knew nothing about the press-gangs rampaging through Norway, for she had already left Gråstensholm before they arrived, and was therefore unaware of the fate of her own cousins. She was merely thinking about her immediate problem. Only a short time ago she had been dreading this visit, but now she was very anxious to meet Alexander and the delay irritated her.

'Oh, what am I to do?' she half whispered, her face pale and drawn. 'It is a matter of haste! Time is so short!'

The servant wavered, then said: 'If you would care to enter, I shall try to send a message to His Lordship.'

Cecilie considered the alternative: the pillory, perhaps? This was not a proposition she relished. 'Yes, please do send a message,' she told him and stepped through the doorway. As she followed the servant, she put her hand on his arm and he stopped instantly. 'Tell me,' she said tentatively, 'I have heard some fearful rumours. Is our good friend, the Marquis, in trouble?'

The servant's expression hardened, but because he was aware of Cecilie's closeness to Alexander, he understood her kindness and saw the warmth and worry in her eyes.

'Indeed he is, Baroness. In truth his situation is extremely

serious – a matter of only a few days at most. Then it will be the end.’

Cecilie nodded. ‘A court-martial?’

‘Yes.’

No more needed to be said and a moment later the servant showed her into the elegant drawing room and disappeared. Although what he had told her had made her undertaking easier, Cecilie felt no sense of triumph. Her wait was a long one and did nothing to calm her nerves. Her hands felt cold and clammy, and she paced the floor continually, examining every last detail of the room.

It was so exquisitely furnished. Here were heirlooms of the highest quality, including decorated Renaissance chairs, a map of the world that she could not really understand and beautifully bound books. Alexander Paladin must be very prosperous, she thought. But could his great wealth help him now?

Cecilie had been standing looking at a portrait that hung on the wall and was startled when at last she heard his hurried steps in the hallway. The blood rushed to her cheeks and, clenching her hands tightly, she turned to face the door. Her eyes were wide with apprehension; this was the moment and she knew she had to choose her words carefully.

Pulling the door open without ceremony, Alexander entered the room with a rush, his expression grim. ‘What is it, Cecilie? The messenger said it was a very urgent matter – I was in a meeting of the King’s Council.’

The apprehension she was feeling had made her even more tense. ‘And you must hurry back?’

‘Yes, indeed I must.’

‘Can you spare me half an hour?’

He hesitated. ‘Less, if at all possible. The Council does not suffer interruptions gladly.’

‘Forgive me,’ she said, her eyes downcast. ‘I shall make

this as brief as I can, but it is not something I can explain in a few minutes. I really need several days!’

‘Sit down,’ he said. His tone was gentler now. He sat down facing her. ‘You are clearly in distress. What has happened?’

How handsome he was, she thought, with his fine aristocratic features and eyes that always seemed to be beckoning her. All these things had no meaning now, she reminded herself – it was time for other things to be said. But although she had carefully rehearsed everything she was about to say, suddenly she found words were failing her.

‘Alexander,’ she began haltingly then stopped again. ‘Alexander – if I were to propose something, I would not want you to think that I sought to hurt you or offend you ...’

He raised his eyebrows in puzzlement, but said nothing.

‘Please do not think ... I am intending ... blackmail!’ she stammered. ‘Or anything like that – I know that you are in trouble, but I will support you. You must not forget that.’

He waited, still saying nothing and she sensed she could feel the distance growing between them. She stared at him helplessly for another long moment, then blurted out: ‘I need your help, Alexander. Most desperately!’

He looked at her warily, ‘Is it money?’

‘No! No! But I believe I can help you too – I believe we can both help each other!’

Cecilie realised this was not going at all well. She had seen his shoulders stiffen at her last outburst and she sat twisting her fingers nervously, squeezing them so tightly that they hurt. All the time her heart was pounding loudly inside her chest and she felt sure he must be able to hear it.

‘I know that you are in trouble, but I know nothing of the particulars. Yet ...’ She broke off again, realising that in her desperation she was repeating herself. ‘Please excuse me, I know I have already said that.’

‘Go on,’ Alexander said tightly. ‘You need my help. In what way?’

Cecilie gulped. ‘There is no other way to say this. Whilst I was at home this Yuletide past I did something terrible and foolhardy – an unforgivable act of stupidity for which I cannot forgive myself nor yet explain away. This morning I discovered that I am with child!’

Alexander gave an astonished gasp and stared at her speechless.

‘It has not been long,’ she assured him quickly, ‘not more than two weeks. But I have also discovered that you risk losing your commission – and maybe your head too – because of your ... weakness. Something has happened while I have been away, hasn’t it?’

Alexander said nothing for a long moment. ‘Yes,’ he replied at last in a strangled voice, getting to his feet. It was obvious that he could not bear to look her straight in the eye and he turned away before continuing. ‘Do you remember young Hans?’

‘Yes.’

‘He ... he left me for another.’

It was so strange to hear him speak like that, she thought, exactly the same as describing any normal tale of heartbreak between man and woman. She struggled to understand, images whirling in her mind, until Alexander’s voice interrupted her thoughts.

‘They were both discovered *in flagrante*, and the new companion of Hans has also named me. He has spoken on oath at his trial saying that Hans had told him about me.’

Cecilie could feel his pain. ‘And what of Hans?’

‘He is very loyal and denies it, for which I owe him my gratitude. But no one believes him. It puts me in a horrifying position, Cecilie.’

He had turned to face her again while he was speaking.

Sitting down once more, he felt able to look at her now that he had told her almost everything.

‘The case will be heard in a few days, and I shall be called to explain myself there. I shall have to swear an oath on the Bible. I am a devout man, Cecilie. I cannot perjure myself. It would be unthinkable.’

‘So the King himself cannot save you?’

‘He has taken me at my word – for the time being. Should he discover that I have lied to him, then I am finished.’

Cecilie nodded, feeling lost for words. She knew precisely what such disgrace and humiliation would mean to a nobleman like Alexander. He would be left to the mercy of the seething crowds, threatened with flogging in the streets, abandoned by his peers.

‘Who was he?’ he asked softly.

Suddenly Alexander had made her predicament the focus of attention. It startled her a little, because she had briefly forgotten all about it. Nonetheless, his glimmer of interest warmed her heart.

She averted her eyes, disgusted with herself and what she had done. ‘A good friend of the family,’ she replied, ‘a priest in a fearfully unhappy marriage – starved of human kindness. The whole episode was so shabby! So unnecessary!’

‘But why, Cecilie?’

‘If I did but know! At the time I felt compelled.’

Alexander smiled, thin-lipped but still amused. ‘You have a strange way of expressing yourself, dear Cecilie, but I understand what you mean. Sometimes such things are so very compelling.’ He looked at her inquisitively for some time before adding: ‘You will understand that I wish to know more about this man’s character. Is he intelligent?’

‘Oh, yes! And he has a fine and noble manner. He was the victim of impossible circumstances, with a wife who refused

him his conjugal rights. I, on the contrary, can blame no one but myself.’

‘Is he very different from me?’

‘No! Oh no, not at all. Quite the opposite,’ she said fervently. ‘There would be no questions about that ...’ Cecilie stopped speaking suddenly in confusion, the colour mounting rapidly to her cheeks.

Alexander bit on his knuckles. ‘I think I am beginning to see what you are considering, but are you certain that this is what you want?’

‘I should not have come here otherwise. It was not an easy decision, you must believe me!’

‘I do believe you. But you have only been thinking about it since this morning, is that not so?’

‘Time is very important, you must see that.’

‘Of course I do. There is however one thing that worries me.’

‘And that is...?’

‘What made you give yourself to *him*?’

‘Why does that worry you?’

‘Do you not see it, Cecilie? Think about it!’

He had understood – he had recognised the similarities between himself and Martin!

She sat up straight. ‘I will admit there was a time when your indifference both confused and saddened me. But you must understand that all feelings and desires I may have had for you were swiftly quashed – left cold as the grave – when Tarjei told me about your ... predilection.’

‘And still, you gave yourself to a man who reminded you of me?’

‘Let us say it was the last flickering of the flame, a flame extinguished forever by that perverse act. I am healed and inured, Alexander, and I am strong. I will not be a burden to you. You can live your life, and I mine.’

‘That would not do you justice. You are young ... and ...’

His obvious reticence became too much for Cecilie. Fear and shame were tearing at her very soul and she stood up abruptly.

‘Forgive me,’ she muttered. ‘Please overlook my lack of forethought!’ She hurried towards the door, but he was ahead of her. His hands grasped her arms in a vice-like grip and his fiery eyes stared into hers.

‘Please, Cecilie, you must not feel humiliated! Never – not you! You are so dear to me! I welcome your offer with open arms. Can’t you see how I must clutch at any straw? Your words have aroused such hopes in me in my hour of desperation. But it is you I am concerned for, my dearest friend. You cannot know what it is you are asking of yourself.’

‘What other choice do I have?’

‘None, that’s true. Please forgive my hesitation just now. I know it must have been demeaning for you. Let me spare you the further indignity of begging for my help by saying something you have not, but which must be said. You have to know that you will never have my love ... not ever. A marriage between us will never be consummated.’

‘I know that. I can live without it.’

He looked at her thoughtfully. ‘Can you? It is a great sacrifice. Greater than you might think.’

‘My aversion to all things erotic started fourteen days ago and, believe me, I think it will remain with me for many more years to come!’

Alexander was nodding absent-mindedly and although he was watching her, his thoughts were obviously far away. Realising this, Cecilie stood in silence, running her long thin fingers to and fro along the backs of her gloved hands. She wondered what she would do if Alexander *refused* to take pity on her.

Naturally she could return home. But she would bring shame upon her kind warm-hearted parents. She was, after all was said and done, the notary's daughter. Yes, they would be sure to forgive her and accept the child, just as they had once taken back Sol and her little daughter, Sunniva. But could the family name withstand any more scandals?

Grandmama Charlotte had been the first to come home with a 'stray' in her arms. That had been Cecilie's own father, Dag. Later Sol had brought Sunniva to them. Now it might be Cecilie with her bundle of misfortune. But even though it might have become something of a family tradition, it seemed hardly right for her to place another heavy burden on her parents, however broad-minded they might be.

Yet far worse than anything else was the thought of returning to the parish of Gråstensholm, to where the married pastor, Master Martinius, lived. She never wanted to lay eyes on him again. He was a kind and friendly person in every way, but the sin they had committed together, devoid of all feelings except loneliness, now forced them apart. Like drops of water on a red-hot iron, they skimmed in every possible direction, always away from each other. And besides, if Martin's adultery became known, she would certainly lose her head on the block – and so might he. Her bleak reflections were taking her spirits spiralling downwards towards new depths of despair, but she was jerked back to the present by the sudden sound of Alexander's voice.

'Before anything is agreed, dear Cecilie, how had you thought to arrange this – between you and me?'

'The practical details? Is that what you mean?'

'Yes.'

'I have given it some thought,' she said hurriedly. 'If it is at all possible, I had thought we should each have our own bedchamber – next to one another so that no suspicions could

arise. But the rooms would remain private, each to his own. There is nothing out of the ordinary in that, is there?’

‘No, not at all,’ he replied, waiting for her to continue.

‘There is just one thing I beg of you. I understand that you cannot change the nature of your being, but will you show me the courtesy of not taking your friends to your bedchamber? Maybe another room – further away – could be ... used?’

How did she dare speak so freely? Cecilie had surprised herself, but she had to set down clear boundaries and that meant trying to hide her reluctance to talk about the subject. Alexander frowned, obviously giving deep thought to what she had said.

‘These are reasonable terms,’ he agreed, nodding slowly. ‘Except that you demand I exercise greater discretion than before. And yet I must indeed be more careful for my own sake, even though it was Hans who was the wayward one in this instance. He paid no heed to whether anyone saw him or not.’

As he finished speaking, a pained expression returned to Alexander’s face, and once again the bond he had with the other man took her aback. For Alexander it seemed so filled with – *love!* There was no other word. Despite herself she could not help but feel a little moved.

‘However, we cannot begin to live as you suggest in my rooms here. My family has a manor, Gabrielshus, some distance from Copenhagen – not far from Frederiksborg, as it happens. We shall move there.’

‘But will that not be too much trouble for you?’ she interrupted.

‘No! No, not at all – I shall be pleased and delighted. Besides, you know how I have always found pleasure simply in looking at you. Your beauty is rare, with a mystical quality – your dreamy almond-shaped eyes, skin so pure and auburn hair. Everything about you fascinates me.’ There was a

considered pause, then. ‘Now – you are giving me the freedom to meet other ... friends. But how shall it be with you?’

‘Do you mean you are asking for *my* discretion, should I decide to entertain other men behind your back? Or are you demanding my absolute fidelity?’

‘I have no right to ask you to remain celibate when you have shown me such ... largess.’

‘So you are asking that I be discreet and that I am judicious in my choice of friends?’

He nodded, his face tense.

Cecilie smiled. ‘I have already told you! I shall not step over the line. But *should* such a thing ever occur, and I become attracted to another man, let us discuss it then. I believe we owe each other that much honesty. All I will say is that, for now, I have had enough of men and their affections.’

Alexander took a deep breath. He seemed quite touched by it all. ‘Oh, well! Tell me, Cecilie Meiden, small tough unusual girl that you are ... Do you really want to marry me, in spite of all the difficulties?’

Her lips trembled slightly. ‘Yes, Alexander, I do – so very much! This will be a marriage of reason. There are a good many such marriages and many of them are very happy. Thank you.’

Alexander took her hands in his. ‘Considering the hopelessness of our dilemmas and the conditions we have set for ourselves, I think you and I have every probability of becoming truly happy. And of course I shall probably be off to war very soon.’

‘Oh, no!’ Cecilie exclaimed loudly. ‘Surely not!’

‘Your eyes are lovely when you’re startled, Cecilie. Yet you must appreciate that for me to fall in battle would be the perfect outcome for you.’

Her gaze hardened. She was glaring at him. ‘That was the

meanest thing you have ever said to me! I never thought you could be so unkind.'

'Don't take on so, my little powder keg! I was not mocking you. It was simply an observation.'

'My affection for you as my friend is beyond measure, as well you know. I cannot have that friend taken from me.'

It seemed as though her words had raised his spirits. 'I had planned to return,' he replied with a certain irony.

She smiled with relief. Suddenly she remembered the time. 'But Alexander! Your meeting! You could spare only half an hour!'

'Oh, forget about the King's Council – this is far more important! However, you are right; I should leave now, but I will see you later on.'

Cecilie, her eyes closed, stood alone for a while. She breathed a long slow sigh before whispering very quietly to herself, 'Thank you, Lord.'

She was still not sure that this marriage was a good solution to her problems. It was not perfect in any way. But considering the muddle she had got herself into, and the problems Alexander was facing, nothing could be perfect.