

The Visitor

Epilogue

Sonny glanced at the departure board. "You know I've got your best interests at heart, don't you?"

"Oh, God." Helen yawned and stretched her legs. "Is this a safe sex talk? If it is, I don't need it."

"You won't like what I have to say."

"When did that ever stop you?"

"Never." A pout grew on Sonny's lips, and he eyed the departure board again. "I don't trust that woman, Sophie. There. I've said it."

At the mention of Sophie's name, Helen felt her stomach tighten into a knot. "Why?"

"I don't trust her motives."

"What the hell would you know about Sophie's motives?"

"About as much as you know, and that's nothing at all. Be careful around her, sweetie."

Helen sighed. "I'll keep it in mind, but I think you're worrying for nothing. She encouraged Ingrid to get back in touch, remember."

"I know, but that's what bothers me."

Helen kicked her carry-on bag to the side and twisted around to look at Sonny full on. "Okay, tell me why you're bothered. I'm all ears."

Sonny licked his lips. "All right, here goes. I don't trust her motives because nothing makes sense. I know she got mom to contact you but really, why would she do that?" He pulled his hand out of Helen's grasp and steepled it with his other one as if in prayer. "Nothing you've told me about her suggests she's the forgiving type, but *everything* you've told me about her screams manipulative little madam." He shook his head. "If she wants you over there, it's not for a romantic reunion with mom, and you can take that to the bank. Princess Sophie has another plan, and as I'm a betting man, I'll throw a hundred bucks on the table and say she's out for revenge."

"Revenge?"

"Come on," said Sonny, "think about it with your smart head and not your heart. You go over there, and it's all love and romance. Then madam gets herself inside your head, and you do your usual motor-mouth, and that's it screwed. She'll run to mommy in tears, and before you

know it, you'll be on the sidewalk waiting for a ride to the airport." Sonny took a deep breath and lowered his hands. "So there you have it, revenge served cold."

Helen said nothing.

"Don't you think it's possible?"

All Helen could do was nod. Sonny had a point. Ingrid's letter said she should find comfort in Sophie pushing for the reunion, and she'd taken it entirely that way. It hadn't crossed her mind there could be something more to it.

"Of course, I could be wrong," Sonny shrugged his shoulders, "but I think if you go there thinking she *might* be trying to fuck things up, then you've got a chance."

Helen rubbed her mouth and swallowed. "If it all goes crazy, I won't be able to cope; it'll finish me."

"I know, but that's why I have a plan."

Helen snorted a half-laugh. "A plan? Like I give up and go home now and just forget it all?"

"Oh God, no!" Sonny slapped his palms together. "I mean a workable plan. Would you like to hear it?" He tilted his head and smiled. "Come on, you know I'm good at this. Ask me about the plan."

Helen said nothing but reached into her pocket and brought out a foil strip of tiny green pills, popping the foil, then dry swallowing one of the inmates.

"What the hell are those?" Sonny's eyebrows shot up, and he extended a hand. "Let me see them."

Waving his hand away, Helen put the strip back in her pocket. "It's only cyclizine. It stops me from throwing up. Now stop acting like an old woman and tell me the plan."

Sonny pulled his hand back. "You better not be shitting me about those pills."

"The *plan*, Sonny."

"Okay, okay, here it is. Firstly, you need to presume Sophie means to fuck you up; no matter what she says or does, it's a plot to ruin the rest of your life. You got that?"

Helen nodded, picturing Sophie's face and the coy smile she always pulled when she wanted to get her way.

"Next up, you need to make sure you're never alone with her. If she's upstairs, you're downstairs and vice versa." Sonny placed a hand on Helen's arm. "That's an important one, sweetie, don't let her put you in a compromising position, okay?"

Again, Helen nodded, remembering the horror she'd felt when Ingrid found Sophie and her draped over each other in the kitchen in Gravesend. A similar scenario now didn't bear thinking about.

"The last part of the plan's the hardest." Sonny twisted his mouth. "No matter what she says, you need to control your mouth."

Helen's eyes widened. "I'll try, but you know what I'm like."

"You'll have to do more than try, sweetie. If you can't keep your mouth shut, you're finished."

"I know, but it's not easy."

Sonny nodded and took a deep breath. "Two things. Firstly, when she drops it on you, say nothing for at least twenty seconds." He grinned. "I know that'll be like a week in Helen time, but trust me, if you can hold out, she'll fill the gap. When she does, say nothing for another twenty seconds."

Helen puffed out her cheeks and shook her head. "Do I speak at all?"

"Doesn't matter if you do or not. If you keep schtum for twenty seconds at a time, it'll probably freak the woman out. After that, if she asks why you're struck dumb, tell her you now think before you speak. That'll *really* freak her out, believe me, and you'll have time to think."

"Okay, I'll try, but what do I do then?" Helen glanced at the departure board, then turned to Sonny again. "I can't just keep saying the same thing."

"I know, but the second part of the plan's the masterstroke." Sonny's grin broadened, and his eyes shone in triumph. "If Sophie says something dangerous, call the little fucker's bluff. Tell her it deserves a wider audience, namely her mother. If I'm right, she'll backtrack like a politician the day after an election, and then you'll know for sure she's up to no good, and she'll realise you're on to her. Job done."

Helen sighed. Sonny made it sound easy, and it was, but only if you were in an airport terminal five and a half thousand miles away from the action. Face to face was a different proposition. She smiled at him. "Anything else I should know?"

"Just one thing. No matter what Sophie says to you," Sonny's shoulders drooped, "you *will* have to tell Ingrid. It's not the time for keeping secrets to spare feelings."

Puffing out a breath, Helen ran a hand through her hair. "You don't ask much, do you?"

"It's for your own good." Sonny shrugged. "Anyway, if you manage only one thing, don't speak without thinking." At this he took Helen's hands and smiled again. "I love you dearly, but it's your worst trait, and it needs work, honey."

Helen squeezed his hands and glanced at the departure board. "I should go, or I'll never get through security in time. Look after things for me here, please."

"Of course I will." Sonny's eyes became soft as he spoke. "Just remember, I'm rooting for you, sweetie."

Helen nodded then they both stood, hands still clasped together. "This is it," she said, "London here I come, and then..."

"Message me when you get to your hotel, okay, then call me when you get to Sweden."

"I will."

"And remember, silence for twenty seconds; if you sing the chorus of Waterloo to yourself, you're on a winner." Sonny pulled his hands away then patted Helen's arm. "I won't hug; if I do, I'll cry."

"Me too," replied Helen, snatching her bag from the floor. "Wish me luck."

"You've got it, honey, now," Sonny flicked his hands, "get your butt through there and don't come back unless you're bringing that nice Swedish lady with you."

"Thanks for everything, Sonny. I won't forget it."

Sonny flicked his hands again. "Go, go..."

Helen slapped his shoulder and smiled, then she walked away without looking back.

Standing less than six feet away from the arrivals hall, Helen watched as the other passengers trundled through the connecting doors with their trolleys, cries of recognition drowning out the thump of her heart each time the doors slid open. All she had to do was follow them and her misery would be at an end, because Ingrid would be waiting for her. She shivered and sucked in a deep breath, remembering looking back as the taxi took her away from Ingrid's house in Gravesend, a scene replayed almost nightly in her dreams. Perhaps she would never dream of it again after today, or maybe if she did, it would have a different ending. She shivered again and looked at her hands; they were shaking. It was time to go.

Arrivals buzzed with chatter Helen didn't understand, and all around her, people smiled and hugged, some of them crying in joy as children tugged at their coats in excitement. Pushing her way through them, she walked towards the centre of the hall and began scanning the area, searching for a familiar face but finding only one happy stranger after another. Where was Ingrid? Surely she hadn't forgotten. Helen yanked the phone from her trouser pocket, one glance at the screen bringing it to life, the same glance confirming there were no messages. In an instant, her heart sank. Ingrid wasn't coming; she'd changed her mind. If she'd been running

late or there was a problem, she'd have phoned or sent a message, but she hadn't done either, so that meant...

"Hello, little bear."

Helen whirled towards the voice, and at that moment, all the pain of the last year fell away because there she was, bedecked in the same long tan coat she'd worn when they'd gone to London, her hair shining gold and her sapphire blue eyes dancing in the light. "Ingrid." It was all she could say before her eyes pooled with tears and the saliva in her mouth thickened, stealing her words.

"Oh, Helen, come here." Ingrid held out her arms as she stepped forward, and Helen fell into them.

"It's you; it's really you."

"It is," said Ingrid, "and it is you, my little bear." She pushed Helen's head back slightly, then ran both hands over her cheeks, thumbing away tears before leaning in and kissing her softly on the mouth. "I have missed you so much."

Helen dropped her head back onto Ingrid's shoulder then pulled her closer, half afraid that if she released her, she would somehow vanish like the early morning mist. "I'm so sorry. I truly am."

"Why would you be sorry?" Ingrid eased Helen's head up, then she kissed her again. "You did nothing that needs an apology. It was circumstances, just circumstances."

"I was an idiot." Helen risked removing one hand from Ingrid's waist. "I messed it all up, and it was horrible." She paused to wipe away fresh tears. "I didn't want to live."

"Oh, Helen, you did not mess anything up, look." She gestured to the passengers surrounding them. "Here we are now, entertaining the arrivals hall at Landvetter airport and not messed up. We are very much alive and together."

Helen cleared her throat and glanced around, smiling wanly at the people staring at them before turning back to Ingrid. "I promise I'll do better this time. I'll do anything you want."

"I know you will, and right now, what I want is to stop being the floorshow here. Are you ready?"

Helen nodded. "I've always been ready for this."

"Then let's go home."

Less than an hour after leaving the airport, they turned into a long, narrow street lined with trees and home to white-panelled houses, each of them wearing a hat of red tiles. Snow dusted every surface, but Ingrid's Volvo made light work of it, and in no time at all, she pulled the car into a wide driveway edged with a russet-coloured hedge.

"This is beautiful," said Helen, "everything looks so clean."

"Thank you." Ingrid killed the engine and nodded towards the house. "We have finished the outside work and most of the inside too. I hope you like it."

Helen reached for Ingrid's hand. "I'll love it no matter what, you know that, don't you?"

"Yes," replied Ingrid in a whisper, "I do." She pulled Helen's hand to her mouth and brushed her lips across it, then she pulled back and smiled. "Thank you for reading my letter. I was worried you might not and that you would put it in a box in your attic."

"That would never have happened," Helen shook her head, "there was no chance of that, I promise."

"After Oskar posted it for me, I could hardly contain myself. Every time the phone rang I..."

"I know." Helen leaned over and kissed Ingrid's cheek. "I called your number the second I finished reading it," she sighed, "took me three goes to punch in the number. Seriously, I was shaking like a leaf, and I couldn't believe it was you and..." She stopped, as the tears building at the memory, drained her of words.

"Come on, little bear. It is all right now." Ingrid leaned into Helen, and their heads rested together. "We should go inside. Sophie and Michael are out for the day with little Freya, but Oskar is waiting for us."

"Oskar's here now?" Helen pulled her head back and glanced at the house.

"Yes, he took the day off work. He's missed you."

At this, Helen's face crumpled, and she dropped her head onto Ingrid's shoulder, tears flowing freely. "I never thought I'd see him again...or you, I never thought..." At once, she felt Ingrid's hand on the back of her neck, stroking gently, and she relaxed into it, believing for the first time that her days in the wilderness were over. Here she was with Ingrid, and Oskar, sweet, wonderful Oskar, was waiting inside, her partner in crime. It was almost too much.

"Shall I get you a tissue?" Ingrid kissed Helen's chin and smiled.

"Maybe make it two." Helen sniffed, and half a laugh escaped. "Or three. My face must be a mess."

Ingrid pulled a small pack of paper tissues from her coat pocket, and together, they worked on Helen's tear-streaked face to make it presentable.

"Right," said Ingrid, "are you ready to go inside?"

Helen nodded and sniffed again. "Is Oskar okay?"

Ingrid beamed a smile. "He is very much okay. He is doing well at his new job and has lots of friends, outside friends. Oh, and as you know, a nice girlfriend who does not ask him for photographs." She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head. "You can tell me later what that means."

"Oh, please no." Helen smiled as a burst of heat washed over her face.

"You are blushing," Ingrid snorted a laugh, "and that tells me I do not *want* to know. Come on, it's time to go." She opened the car door and climbed out, Helen following suit. "Leave the luggage just now; Oskar can help carry it later." With that, they headed for the house.

The living room was large and square, the combination of white walls and light-coloured furniture adding to the sense of scale. Helen stood in the centre of it, sliding her socks against the polished wooden floor and smiling at the bare Christmas tree standing proudly in one corner. "I love it," she said, spinning around, "you have great taste."

"Thank you." Ingrid joined her in the middle of the room. "It was nice for once to be able to choose what I wanted." She gestured to the tree. "We cut it yesterday, and we will decorate it tonight."

"You waited for me," said Helen.

"I promised I would."

Helen smiled and was about to ask where Oskar was when she heard the unmistakable sound of his massive frame clattering down the stairs. She closed her eyes and whirled towards the door, and when she opened them again, there he was, all blond hair and perfect white teeth. His beard, nothing more than fluff when they'd last seen each other, was now full and reddish-blond, but despite that, it was still the Oskar she knew. She half-turned to Ingrid. "He *does* look very Swedish, you know."

"How can anyone *look* Swedish?" said Oskar before grinning and sliding across the floor with his arms open wide. "You're back!"

"I am," replied Helen, as they crashed together, Oskar's long arms wrapping themselves around her. When eventually they pulled themselves apart, both had tears in their eyes.

"You haven't changed a bit," said Oskar, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand.

"You have." Helen ran her hand over Oskar's chin. "I'm impressed. That's almost as good as mine."

"And mine," said Ingrid as she walked over. "He's been working on it since we arrived here. I quite like it."

"So does Elin," said Oskar, looking at Helen, "she's my girlfriend."

"I heard you had one of those." Helen grinned and was about to ask if he was practising safe sex when she stopped herself and instead gave Oskar another hug. "I'm happy for you, and I'm even happier to see you again. I missed you, big guy."

"I missed you too," said Oskar, "it's been too quiet around here."

"I bet." Helen grinned at him again, but from the corner of her eye, she saw Ingrid's face tighten. "However," she looked at Ingrid and Oskar in turn, "I'm not the same this time around. The talking bear isn't quite so talkative these days, so I hope you're not disappointed." She turned to Ingrid, who had visibly relaxed, and shrugged her shoulders. "I think before I speak now. All those years, and I didn't realise that's all it would take."

"I'm not disappointed," said Oskar, "I'm just glad you're back, and you and mum can be happy together." He grinned at Ingrid and tipped his head towards the door. "I'm starving. How about we Fika?"

"Yes," replied Ingrid, taking Helen's hand, "why not?"

"What's Fika," said Helen, "will I like it?"

"It is coffee, buns and conversation with good friends." Ingrid turned to Oskar. "Switch the oven on for me, please. I have Kanelbullar in the freezer ready to bake," she smiled at Helen's puzzled face, "cinnamon buns, you will love them."

"I'm on it," said Oskar, squeezing Helen's shoulder and heading for the door. "See you both shortly."

Helen began to raise a hand to wave, but Oskar vanished before she got half way.

"So," said Ingrid, "the little talking bear has lost her voice."

"Yes, she has." Helen didn't bother to mention that the new version of the bear was less than ten minute's old. "I'm not the same."

Ingrid pulled her close and kissed her slowly on the mouth. "I hope part of you is still the same." Her eyes twinkled with mischief.

"That part is," said Helen, "if you meant the part I think you mean. You did mean that part, didn't you?"

Ingrid just smiled. "Come on; it's Fika time."

By the time she'd washed down her third cinnamon bun with the dregs of her second cup of coffee, Helen was in love with Fika because the coffee and cake ritual didn't just expect chatter; it mandated it. How she'd lived without it, she couldn't fathom, and she glowed as they munched and talked their way through the afternoon, catching up with each other's news and generally feeling at ease. When it was her turn to give a precis of the previous twelve months, she kept things vague, although she admitted to having seen a therapist and being on an enforced sabbatical. Other than that, she kept it light, and she managed quickly to switch the topic of conversation to Oskar's new job, at which point he produced a gift he'd made for her, a beautifully crafted walking stick. After thanking him and trying not to laugh, she commented that it would undoubtedly come in handy in the future and that she would ensure she bequeathed it to him in her will as it would be a shame for something so lovely not to get much use. Oskar, as usual, took it in good part, and he only pretended to be affronted when Ingrid congratulated her on not being the recipient of a chopping board. At that point, Helen did laugh, and that was the way the afternoon passed, a joyous stretched moment that seemed never-ending until, at half-past four, they heard the front door opening and the sound of a small child laughing. Sophie was back.

At once, Ingrid stretched and touched Helen's hand. "Everything will be fine, do not worry."

"I know."

"I mean it."

"I know you do." Helen smiled as much as she was able, far from certain that Sophie's return wasn't the start of something awful.

"She's changed," said Oskar, glancing at Helen. His eyes said, '*maybe*.'

"I have too," said Helen, "remember, the bear thinks twice as much as she speaks now, so it's all good here." She heard approaching feet and squeezed Ingrid's hand, then let it go, preparing to stand and face the music. Before she could plan what to say, the kitchen door swung open, and Sophie was there, carrying little Freya, with Michael standing by her side.

"Helen! I'm so glad to see you!" Sophie turned to Michael. "Hold Freya for a second, please." As Michael eased the baby into his arms, Sophie threw hers wide and rushed towards the table. "I can't believe you're here at last."

Helen stood, and she smiled as she entered the embrace. "It's good to see you," she pulled back and nodded to Michael, "I mean you too."

"Thanks," said Michael. He didn't smile.

"What have you been up to?" said Sophie, taking Helen by the shoulders and squeezing them.

"Oh, you know me. Working too little and drinking too much. It's been a blast." Helen forced another smile then she pointed to the baby. "Aren't you introducing us?"

"Of course I am." Sophie took the baby from Michael. "Look, Freya, look who it is; it's aunt Helen." She ambled back to Helen, smiling at Oskar and Ingrid, who were watching the reunion and glancing at each other uneasily.

"Hello, little one." Helen found a genuine smile for Freya, and she touched her chin and tickled it, eliciting a gargle of chuckles. "I think she likes me." She looked over Sophie's shoulder at Michael. "She looks like you, apart from the red hair."

"Do you think so?" said Michael, a slow smile spreading over his face.

Helen nodded. "It's unmistakable. The shape of the face, the eyes, everything." Of course, it was a lie, and Helen felt no guilt at telling it; little Freya looked nothing like Michael. That she so closely resembled Sophie was a blessing.

"Oh yes," said Ingrid, standing, she certainly has your eyes, Michael." With arms wide, she strode over to Freya. "Come to mormor, little one, that is it, there you go." As the baby cuddled into her, Ingrid looked at Helen, her eyebrows raised. "What a gorgeous little girl she is."

"She sure is." Helen turned to Sophie. "I haven't forgotten, you know."

"Haven't forgotten what?" Sophie's face pinched, and her eyes narrowed just before she smiled.

"I'm aunt Helen, so I get to buy trumpets and drums." She grinned at everyone in turn. "I need a toyshop, and I need it now." Oskar laughed, as did Michael, but Ingrid tutted and shook her head, although she smiled sideways at Helen whilst doing it. Sophie said nothing at all, but the flash of relief in her eyes told Helen she was nervous about what might be said, which was good news. The little fucker was on the back foot already. It was one-nil to the away team.

"Right," said Ingrid, "we need dinner, so..."

"I'll do it." Sophie interrupted and nodded towards Helen. "You can help me so mum can spend time with Freya."

"Oh, I don't know, I'm not that good at cooking. I usually do takeout." Helen looked around for support but none came. Sophie had scored an equaliser.

"Don't be silly, you'll be fine and I'll show you what to do. Is that okay, mum?"

"What do you think, Freya, shall we leave them to it?" Freya gurgled a reply, and Ingrid smiled. "She said yes."

"Great," said Sophie, her face glowing. "Right, everyone except Helen and me out of the kitchen, go on, we'll shout when it's ready."

As the others began to head for the door, Helen slipped over to Ingrid and tickled Freya's chin again, laughing as she chuckled. At the same time, she held Ingrid in her gaze, willing her to stay in the kitchen, but a few seconds later, Oskar held the door open, and Ingrid waltzed through it without a backwards glance. The kitchen door was barely closed when Sophie made her play.

"This brings back memories, doesn't it?"

'Twenty seconds.' Helen heard Sonny's voice in her head as she walked to the sink and poured herself a glass of water. Taking one sip, she sauntered to the opposite side of the kitchen and when she got there, she smiled but said nothing.

Sophie drew her head back, and her eyes narrowed. "Don't you remember, in the kitchen, when we were making a chicken salad?"

Taking another sip of water, Helen thought about Sonny and his twenty-second rule, and it made her smile because his plan was working; Sophie looked totally confused.

"Have you lost the power of speech since you've been away?"

"No," Helen answered instantly. "I'm not the person I used to be, and I think before I speak." At this, Sophie's eyes bulged. It was two-one to the away team.

"That's not like you."

"I told you, I'm not the person I was."

"So I see." Sophie smiled. "Anyway, how about a hug for old time's sake?" She held her arms out and tilted her head.

"No, thank you."

"What?"

Helen sighed. "I said, no, thank you." Now it was her turn to smile. "If you want me to help with dinner, that's fine, but there won't be anything else."

Sophie's face hardened. "After all we had, how can you be so cold towards me?" She pulled out a chair and flopped onto it.

"I'm not cold; I'm just neutral. We have nothing, Sophie, and I'm truly sorry for the way I behaved before, but as I said, I'm not the same person now."

"I see." Sophie leaned back in her chair and let her eyes roll slowly over Helen. "Do you honestly think you can make a go of things with mum?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then I'm pleased for you both, but," Sophie sighed and gave a sad smile, "I think there's something you should know."

Helen blinked several times and took another sip of water. Here it was, the second equaliser. They were three minutes into stoppage time and Sophie was lining up to take a penalty. "What should I know?"

"It's about mum and why she wants to take up with you."

"I see."

"Do you?" said Sophie, "I doubt that." She tapped the chair next to her own. "Why don't you sit down and listen? Can the new you manage that?"

"My hearing's perfect at a distance, so I'll stay over here if you don't mind."

"Suit yourself," Sophie replied, smirking. "Have you ever wondered why mum stayed with dad all that time, despite what he did and how he behaved?"

Helen almost asked what the hell Gary had to do with her, but before she could spit the words out, she heard Sonny's voice in her head saying, '*twenty seconds*.' She took another sip of water and shrugged her shoulders.

"Okay, I'll tell you. Mamma was too afraid to go because she'd have no money. You, on the other hand, have money to burn, so when you came along, she saw a chance to be rid of him and never have to worry about her finances again." Sophie sighed. "I'm afraid you were only an excuse to get out; she pretty much told me that herself. Now, you're just a secure future for her old age."

Helen took another sip of water as she stared at Sophie, staring at her. She had to say *something* to the lying little fuck. She couldn't just stand there and let her... '*twenty seconds*,' Sonny's voice was in her head again, and she sighed. '*Waterloo, I was defeated you won the war, Waterloo, promise to love you for evermore...*'

"For God's sake, Helen, don't you have anything to say?" Sophie's eyes were blazing.

Helen nodded. "Actually, I'd like to congratulate you."

"On what?"

"Your talent for fiction. You should write a book, but your plot needs work; it's a bit far-fetched."

"Are you calling me a liar?" Sophie's eyes were wide, and her nostrils flared.

Helen smiled. "No, but I think your story deserves a wider audience, like your mother."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"I told you, this is a different version of me, and I *will* dare." Helen's stomach churned. She had to tell Ingrid, that much was certain, but would Ingrid believe her? That's where the certainty ended.

"She won't believe you!" Sophie's face flushed, and her eyes popped. "She won't, Helen, you know that, so you needn't bother telling her anything."

Helen took a deep breath and was about to answer, when the kitchen door swung open and Ingrid marched into the room, her lips pressed grimly together.

"Hi, mamma." Sophie's tone lightened at once. "We haven't started dinner yet, I'm afraid."

"So I heard," said Ingrid, taking a seat at the table.

"What did you hear?" Sophie's face flushed a deeper shade of red.

"Twice now, Sophie, I have listened at a kitchen door, and twice I have heard something shocking from you." Ingrid shook her head. "For a long time, I regretted listening at the first door, but tonight, I am happy I listened at this one."

Sophie shifted in her seat. "Mamma, it's not what you think."

"It is *exactly* what I think!"

"But mamma..."

"Be quiet and listen to me!" Ingrid grabbed Sophie's hand. "You *know* I should tell you to leave my house and never return, but I will not because I know how difficult this is for you." She gestured between herself and Helen, who stood rooted to the spot, eyes wide. "You are my daughter, and I love you. I know how hurt you are but this stops now. I will not allow your lies to wreck what I have found."

Sophie's eyes pooled with tears. "Mamma, it's just hard. I'm *sorry*."

"You should be, Sophie; you should be." Ingrid pulled her hand away and glanced at Helen. "You can apologise to Helen in your own time, but for now, I want you out of my sight."

Sophie sniffed and nodded, then she stood.

"Freya needs changing. Go and attend to that with your baby's father." Ingrid folded her arms and looked Sophie in the eye. "If indeed Michael *is* her father."

At Ingrid's barbed comment Sophie ran from the kitchen, and Helen rushed over to the table and threw herself onto a chair. "I'm sorry you heard all that, but... I'm glad too because I didn't know how the hell I was going to tell you without everything kicking off and me ending up on the street."

"Not a word of what she said was true," Ingrid's eyes were fearful, "I promise you, Helen, I do not want to be with you for *money*!"

"Don't you think I know that?" Helen took Ingrid's hand. "Look, how about *we* make dinner? Everybody's hungry, and there's a bare Christmas tree with my name on it. Unless we eat, I won't get to decorate it." She smiled, and kissed Ingrid's hand. "We can talk about this later."

Ingrid nodded slowly, "Okay, dinner it is."

"That went better than I thought it would," said Helen, adjusting the cushion on her lap and curving her arm over Ingrid as she dropped her head onto it and stretched her legs. "Even Sophie seemed relaxed."

"I know." Ingrid sighed. "Perhaps she has realised this is how things will be now." She tilted her head back and smiled. "What do you think?"

"I think," replied Helen, shaking her head, "that we haven't heard the last of it. Sorry."

Ingrid sighed again. "You are probably right, but if we work as a team..."

"Yeah, a tag team," said Helen, laughing, "like in the wrestling on Saturday afternoon television. I can just about remember watching that. Do you remember it?"

"I was never a fan, but yes, I do."

Helen smiled at the memory, distant as it was, then she stroked Ingrid's hand and gazed at the tree again, enjoying its beautiful simplicity. "Do you know that's the nicest Christmas tree I've ever seen?"

"Really?"

"Yep. It's my new favourite, and you were right; white lights work better."

"Of course I was right," said Ingrid, laughing, "but Oskar was right about the little reindeer; it is much better at the top."

At the mention of Oskar's name, Helen felt a warm glow but out of the blue, tears pricked her eyes, and the sensation was so unexpected, it robbed her of words for a few moments.

"Do you agree?" said Ingrid, pointing to the top of the tree.

"Yes," replied Helen, "you can see it better up there." She cleared her throat. "His new girlfriend sounds nice. Have you met her?"

"Yes, I have." Ingrid rolled inwards and onto her side, gazing up at Helen. "She is very pretty and very polite. I like her. Her father works for ProCorp in Trondheim; Oskar said he is engineering machines that will be able to mine for minerals on the moon on their own."

"Not in our lifetime," said Helen. She shivered.

"Very much in our lifetime, according to Oskar. He seems rather excited about it."

"Can't say I am." Helen shivered again. "We should leave well enough alone."

Ingrid smiled and eased herself up until she was face to face with Helen and leaning on one elbow. "Are you afraid of the future?"

"Not now." Helen leaned forward and kissed Ingrid on the nose. "In fact, I've been thinking about it, and now we're fixed, and now I've seen little Freya, I was wondering if we should have kids."

Ingrid's eyes widened, and she drew her head back. "Are you serious?"

Helen nodded. "I'm still probably young enough to have one, and I think it would be nice." She grinned. "What do you think?"

Ingrid stared at Helen for a few seconds without speaking, then she smiled and half-closed her eyes. "When I was giving birth to Oskar, I thought I knew what to expect as I had already had one baby, but it was not the same." She opened her eyes and laughed. "His head was the size of a football, or even," she laughed again, "a watermelon. I began to think they would never get it out of me."

"What happened?" said Helen, her eyes wide.

"Well, of course, they did get him out, but I will never forget it. They had to stitch me afterwards because he tore me." She looked into Helen's eyes and nodded. "Yes, stitched without anaesthetic too."

"You're joking." Helen's voice was whisper quiet.

"No, it was not a joke, but compared to what I felt during the delivery, it was nothing."

"Maybe we could adopt," said Helen, "that might be better."

"We could think about it perhaps."

"Mmm." Helen's eyes narrowed. "If we adopt we could take a kid nobody else wanted, and then they'd know they really *were* wanted because we chose them."

"That is true," said Ingrid, softly, "we can think about it after Christmas. Is that all right?"

Helen smiled and nodded. Then she looked at the Christmas tree again. "I've got one thing left I want to put on the tree, but it won't match what's there."

"What is it?"

"Hold on." Helen leaned back, and from her trouser pocket, she produced a small clump of green tissue paper. "It's in here. I bought it at the airport on the way here." She bit her bottom lip and handed the bundle to Ingrid. "You open it."

With half an eye on Helen, Ingrid began to peel back the layers of paper until, when the last one fell away, she uncovered a tiny glass Paddington bear. "Oh Helen, this is perfect."

"I know," replied Helen. She smiled.