

She'd been shocked and saddened. Maybe that was only natural. But had she really needed to throw herself into the arms of young Martinius, the vicar, 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 and so fiercely as she did that short passionate encounter with Martin. In retrospect it had been horrid and repulsive. Two people: both bitter, disappointed and alone; both desperately needing to be loved or – to be more brutal – needing to be physically intimate with somebody.

In effect, she'd willingly allowed

herself to be violated. Were she ever to marry, she'd have to stand before her husband and confess that she wasn't 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 that the ship had come alongside and mooring ropes 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'd been delayed by the stormy weather, from the vantage point of the castle it wouldn't have been difficult to see that the ship had arrived.

Now she'd 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 business was over. As she hurried 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'd probably have loved 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 at defending herself. Although Cecilie was a descendant of the Ice People, she hadn't been endowed with any of their mysterious powers. She only had her wits to depend upon.

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 lady-like. It

seemed that it was only when she was at home in Norway with her warm-hearted, loving family that she allowed herself to relax a little. But what had come over her to hurl herself headlong into the arms of the vicar's embrace? She shook her head, shuddering once more at the memory and lowered her eyes like a schoolgirl brought in shame before her teacher.

She was absolutely mortified now at her uncharacteristic behaviour in the potting shed at the churchyard. Her only consolation was that the vicar had taken the initiative. If he hadn't put his hands on her and whispered enticing words of loneliness and desire in her ear, then it would never have