

ROPE OF SAND

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Mortal Fire
Death Be Not Proud

“C. F. Dunn has a voice that makes you want to read on. *Rope of Sand* is a curiously addictive mix of suspense, romance and the supernatural. Exciting!”

Jane Bidder, author of *Guilty*

“The previous volumes in this saga were amazing. This surpasses them – a triumph of storytelling involving us with a flawed but courageous heroine and an invulnerable yet haunted hero, fighting to maintain their integrity under terrible pressures. Fascinating characterization in a constantly intriguing storyline draw us into an electrifying climax. A true tour de force.”

Eric Delve, author



ROPE OF SAND



C. F. Dunn



LION FICTION

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Characters

ACADEMIC & RESEARCH STAFF AT HOWARD'S LAKE COLLEGE, MAINE

Emma D'Eresby, Department of History (Medieval & Early Modern)

Elena Smalova, Department of History (Post-Revolutionary Soviet Society)

Matias Lidström, Faculty of Bio-medicine (Genetics)

Matthew Lynes, surgeon, Faculty of Bio-medicine (Mutagenesis)

Sam Wiesner, Department of Mathematics (Metamathematics)

Madge Makepeace, Faculty of Social Sciences (Anthropology)

Siggi Gerhard, Faculty of Social Sciences (Psychology)

Saul Abrahms, Faculty of Social Sciences (Psychology of Functional Governance)

Colin Eckhart, Department of History (Renaissance & Reformation Art)

Kort Staahl, Department of English (Early Modern Literature)

Megan, research assistant – Bio-medicine

Sung, research assistant – Bio-medicine

The Dean, Stephen Shotter

MA STUDENTS

Holly Stanhope; Josh Feitel; Hannah Graham; Aydin Yilmaz; Leo Hamell

IN CAMBRIDGE

Guy Hilliard, Emma's former tutor

Tom Falconer, Emma's university friend

EMMA'S FAMILY

Hugh D'Eresby, her father

Penny D'Eresby, her mother

Beth Marshall, her sister

Rob Marshall, her brother-in-law

Alex & Flora, her twin nephew and niece

Archie

Nanna, her grandmother

Mike Taylor, friend of the family

Joan Seaton, friend of the family

MATTHEW'S FAMILY

Henry Lynes, his son

Patricia (Pat) Lynes, Henry's wife

Margaret (Maggie) Lynes, his granddaughter

Daniel (Dan) Lynes, his grandson

Jeanette (Jeannie) Rathbone – Dan's wife, and their children:

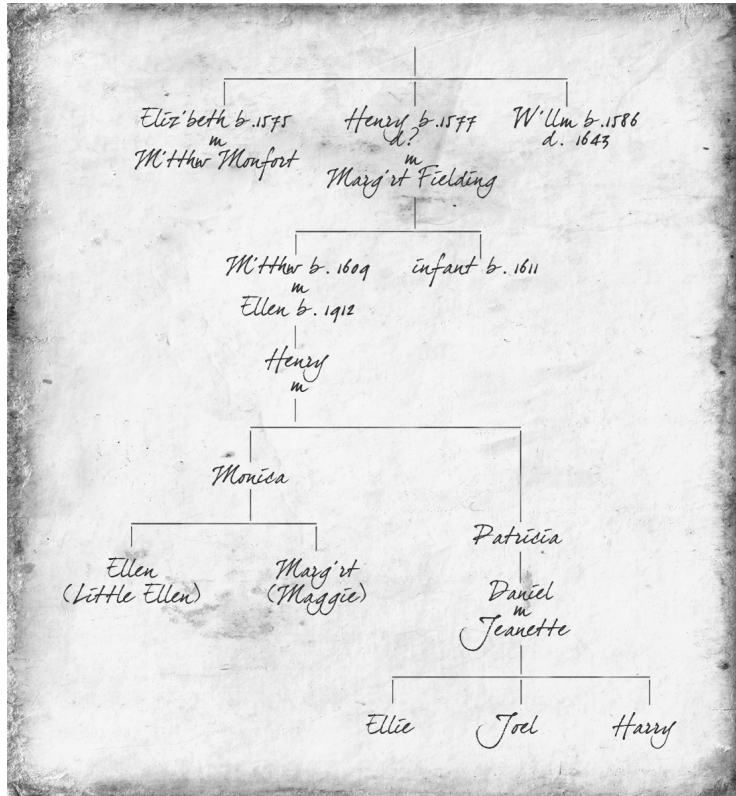
Ellie Lynes

Joel Lynes

Harry Lynes

Monica – Henry's first wife

THE LYNES FAMILY TREE



The Story So Far

Independent and self-contained British historian Emma D'Eresby has taken up a year-long research post in an exclusive American university in Maine, fulfilling her ambition (and that of her grandfather) to study the Richardson Journal – the diary of a seventeenth-century Englishman – housed in the library there.

Single-minded and determined, Emma is wary of relationships, but she quickly attracts the unwelcome attention of seductive colleague, Sam Weisner, and the disturbing Professor of English, Kort Staahl. Despite her best intentions to remain focused on her work, and encouraged by her vivacious Russian friend, Elena Smalova, Emma becomes increasingly attracted to medical research scientist and surgeon, Matthew Lynes, whose old-fashioned courtesy she finds both disarming and curious.

Widowed and living quietly with his family, Matthew is reluctant to let her into his life, despite his clear interest in her, and Emma suspects there is more to his past than the little he tells her. His English-sounding name and the distinctive colour of his hair intrigues her, and Emma believes there is a link between Matthew and the very journal she came to the United States to study. Against her nature, she smuggles the historic document from the library to investigate further.

Events take a sinister turn as a series of savage assaults on women sends ripples of fear through the campus. Emma is convinced she is being followed, and during the prestigious All Saints' dinner at Halloween, is viciously attacked by

psychotic Professor Staahl, leaving her on the edge of death. Only Matthew's timely intervention saves her and, as he cares for her in his college rooms, their relationship deepens and Emma finds herself battling between her growing love and her need to learn more about him.

A near-fatal encounter with a bear raises questions about Matthew she can no longer ignore.

Frustrated by the mystery surrounding his past and his refusal to tell her who he really is, Emma reluctantly flees Maine to her claustrophobic family home in England. Hidden from sight, but not her conscience, she has also taken the journal.

Years of acrimony with her family and a bruising affair a decade before with her tutor, Guy Hilliard – a married man – have left their scars. Now broken both physically and emotionally, and facing a crisis, Emma drifts, until a chance meeting refocuses her attention on the unanswered questions she had left behind. Using her historical training to trace Matthew's family to an almost extinct hamlet in the tiny county of Rutland, she makes a startling discovery. Her instinct had been right: Matthew is a relic of the past.

Born in the early years of the seventeenth century, Matthew had been betrayed during the English Civil War when a clash with his uncle left him fighting for his life. He not only lived, but *persisted*, growing steadily in strength and surviving events that would have killed any other man. Diary entries by the family steward in the same journal now in Emma's possession reveal that in the overheated atmosphere of seventeenth-century England – where rumours were rife and accusations of witchcraft frequent – Matthew faced persecution because of his differences, and he fled to the American colonies.

Coming to terms with Matthew's past, Emma is all too aware that she possesses knowledge that could destroy his future and, when she learns he has disappeared from the college, sinks further into desolation. But as winter descends on the old stone walls of her family home, unable to remain separated from her, Matthew comes to find Emma and takes her back to America.

Looking forward to the future, Emma believes she has all the answers, but Matthew has one more revelation that could end their relationship once and for all. In a fraught confrontation in a remote snowbound cabin high in the mountains, Matthew tells her that he is still married. Over a harrowing few days with their relationship hanging in the balance, Matthew recounts his story, and Emma learns that his wife, Ellen, is a 96-year-old paraplegic, and the man she thought was his father is, in fact, his son. Emma is faced with a stark choice: cut all ties with Matthew as she once did with Guy, or face an uncertain future with the only man she has ever really loved. Emma believes that her life is inextricably linked with Matthew's, and makes the decision to stay with him with all the complications it will entail.

As she prepares to meet Matthew's family at Christmas, the last thing on Emma's mind is college professor Sam Wiesner, but it becomes apparent that she has been very much on his. After a brief but unpleasant encounter in which Sam acquires a broken jaw, Emma is forced to warn Sam off. But, despite her best efforts to protect Matthew's identity, wheels have been set in motion that one day could expose him to the world.

Secure in their bonds of faith and love and now approaching the threshold of his home, Emma faces far more than just meeting Matthew's family for the first time; but what she does not know surely cannot hurt her?

CHAPTER

1

Future Perfect

When had curiosity become fascination? At what point had fascination become love? How could I have let it happen after everything I have been through, after all the promises I made myself? After all the years spent reined in so tight that I hadn't let my guard down – not once, not ever – and now this; stealthily and without declaration and without any shadow of doubt.

Riding compacted snow, the car drew in front of the classical house and came to a standstill. Emphatic silence replaced the sound of the engine.

“Do I *have* to do this?” I asked Matthew, knowing the answer before he came around to my side of the car and offered me his hand. Reluctantly stepping onto the snow, I looked up, and an unexpected movement caught my eye as a face appeared at a first-floor window. Ghost-pale and with silver-white hair, hollow eyes punctuated its skull. The disembodied face hovered momentarily before retreating into the darkness. I stared. I blinked. “Matthew, is your house haunted?”

The tall, distinguished man who greeted us had one of those faces you couldn't help but like straightaway. Well-cut hair of a distinctive aluminium framed his face with a neat,

trimmed moustache and beard. Eyes of an indeterminate blue gleamed behind silver-framed glasses, and he was already smiling, a habit evident in the uplifted corners of his mouth and the deep lines either side of his eyes that crinkled on seeing me. There was good humour and kindness in this face, patience and wisdom.

“Dr D'Eresby, you are welcome. Please, come in.” He opened the door wide and I stepped across the threshold of Matthew's home, finding reassurance in the steady pressure of his arm around my waist.

“Henry, thank you.” Matthew indicated the older man in front of him. “Emma, this is my son Henry, and his wife, Patricia.”

I held out my hand to the man old enough to be my father, although the quality of his skin was that of a much younger man than his hair suggested. With a slight bow of his head he took my hand within his firm handshake. “We're so glad you can join us for Christmas, Dr D'Eresby.”

“Thank you. How do you do?” I said shyly.

“Pat's been looking forward to quizzing you about traditional English fare. I think she's hoping to ring the changes with Christmas dinner, and experiment on you.”

“I'm probably not the best person to ask,” I said apologetically, turning to a woman in her sixties, my height, and with fashionably short hair coloured soft greys and gold, the colour of late summer, and returning her smile.

Pat tutted. “There now, don't listen to him! He's a terrible tease. We can do with some more female company around here, can't we, Ellie?” I recognized the slim figure of Matthew's great-granddaughter from the hazy days I had spent recovering in the medical centre, and noted she didn't reply.

Matthew interjected before her silence became too obvious. “Emma – you’ve already met Ellie and Harry.” Leaning on one of the elegantly curved banister rails of the wide wood staircase, Harry beamed cheerfully at me over his sister’s head. “Dr D’Eresby, *ma’am!*”

I suppressed the urge to respond with something pithy, and Ellie threw him a sharp sideways look and smiled stiffly, but I saw the way she glanced at Matthew’s hand on my hip, and the slight pout of her mouth.

Pat left Henry’s side. “Oh, just look at us all standing around here when I’m sure you would like to come on in and have a cup of tea. I’ve been just dying to meet you, sweetie, and I want you to tell me all about where you come from. Matthew has been so secretive that getting him to say anything is like drawing rope through a needle.”

Matthew held on to me firmly. “Before I relinquish you to Pat’s interrogation, I’ll show you around. Where is Maggie?”

Henry’s briefest hesitancy said it all. “I... don’t think she knows you’ve arrived. I’ll find her and let her know.” *That must be Ghost-face*, I thought; *and therein lies a problem.*

“Thank you, if you would. Pat, we won’t be long. Harry, will you fetch Dr D’Eresby’s bags from the car, please – they’re in the back.” Matthew guided me towards the stairs, and I could feel four pairs of eyes watching us. He didn’t take his arm from around my waist until we reached the galleried landing and were out of sight; then he enfolded me in both. “That’s the worst bit over; have you survived?” he asked, his mouth against my ear. I held on to him, my head tucked under his chin.

“I will now, but I didn’t expect to meet your family so soon.”

“They wanted to be here to help you feel at home.”

“That was kind. Pat and Henry are so welcoming, and it

must be as strange for them as it is for me. They live next door in the long building at right angles to this one, don’t they?”

“Yes, in the barn conversion, and Ellie and her brothers live with their parents in The Stables across the courtyard. You’ll meet Dan and Jeannie later, I expect.”

He’d left out one other member of the family: his granddaughter, Margaret.

“And does Maggie have a problem with me being here?”

He nuzzled the top of my head with his cheek. “Oh, you caught that, did you? Maggie has a few issues to work through. It’s not you so much as her internal demons. But whatever her problems, you are here with me and that won’t change, so don’t let it worry you.” That was easier said than done and I suspected that it was more straightforward than he let on: Maggie didn’t want me there. Full stop. End of discussion. He took me by the hand, not letting me dwell on it. “Come on, I’ll show you where everything is.”

A central window above the front door, and one either side, made the broad horseshoe of the landing immensely light despite the overcast day. Doors led off the landing.

“That’s Maggie’s room when she stays here – she has a place of her own in town – another couple of guest rooms, then yours, and then mine next to it. Come and have a look at your room and make sure you have everything you need.”

A fire had been lit in the fireplace of a room much bigger than my bedroom at home. Matthew led me past the rosy polished wood of the bed to where a wingback chair overlooked the sheltered courtyard and the mountains roaming the skyline beyond. On a slender-stemmed table, a crystal vase of pale pink and cream blooms lent an unseasonal fragrance. It felt a comfortable, inviting room and someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to make it feel so.

I turned to Matthew. "It's lovely, and I'll have everything I need – but you."

He gave me a roguish grin. "Who says you won't have me – or most of me, at the very least?"

"Well, in that case, I have everything." I glanced around the room at the pretty antique bed with its floral quilted covers, and the glossy women's magazines on the table. "Who stays here normally?"

He frowned. "Normally? No one. Only Maggie stays in this part of the house. Why?"

"It almost feels as if someone does, that's all."

He nodded slowly, "Good, that's how it's supposed to seem. Would you like to see my room?"

He took me out onto the landing and through the next door. I didn't know what I expected to find. Bedrooms are so intensely personal that entering one without invitation is tantamount to a violation. Even being there with him made me feel a little awkward. Larger again than mine, windows threw cold, snow-reflected light against sombre grey-green walls. Classic it might have been, and in keeping with the fine, restrained antiques that simply furnished the room, but it lacked heart.

He led me past his plain bed lying forlornly against the left wall and to the far windows, where a gleam of sunlight struck the richly polished floor, casting a strip of light across my feet. Almost enclosed by the heavy curtains, we were alone again in our own world as we looked out on his. As he stood behind me, I pushed back against his solidity, feeling safe.

"This is what I wanted you to see," he said quietly.

A vast snowscape of foothills, rising to meet the distant mountains, flowed from the house, velvet-gloved and rolling away to where clusters of trees marked the course of the river.

Trees stood more thickly beyond the thin ribbon of water, crowding along the embankment as if queuing to cross. The attraction of the land derived from its simple beauty, and the sense of total peace and freedom that lay upon the open spaces and big, wide sky.

"It's so different to what I'm used to..."

"But do you like it?"

"I *love* it," I breathed.

His arms tightened about me. "In spring, the new leaves on those trees look like early morning sun, even when it's cloudy, and those dips and bumps down there..." he pointed at the white undulations "... are covered in flowers, just... just as I remember the meadows down by the river at home after the winter floods." I heard a note of longing in his voice and gave him a moment. "When we first came here and the children were younger, we taught them to fish in the river – not rod and line fishing – we caught them by hand..."

"You tickled trout!"

"Mm, well, they didn't catch much but that wasn't the point; they loved to have a go, and it was great when they succeeded. Have you ever tried?"

I remembered my one and only attempt to tickle a fish. "Yes – and no. I tried to catch a wounded pike and it didn't like it."

He shook his head, and held out my hands, spreading my fingers, a tiny white scar at the base of my thumb all that remained of my encounter. "No bits missing. What were you doing trying to catch a pike by hand, you strange creature?"

"Well, Granddad – my father's father, that is – had managed to hook a monster, but it had become caught in a bit of submerged fence so he sent me in to get it."

Matthew peered at me incredulously, “And how old were you?”

“Ten-ish, I think.”

“What did he think he was doing? You could have lost a hand!”

“Um, well, I don’t think he thought about it that much. He said, ‘Don’t let it see you’re frightened, girl; show it who’s in command,’ or something like that. Anyway, it tried to bite me...”

“Oddly enough,” Matthew muttered.

“... and I fell in and managed to dislodge the fencing and it escaped – thankfully. I didn’t want to see it stuffed and mounted on the wall.”

“What did your grandfather say to that?”

“He wasn’t very pleased. I managed to avoid going fishing with him after that.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” He wrapped his fingers through mine and stroked my palm with his thumb as we took pleasure in our solitude.

“Will you show me how to tickle trout?”

“If you would like me to,” he laughed. “I promise I won’t use you as bait. On another note, what do you think of this room?”

I looked around it again. “Why?”

“I would value your opinion.”

“You don’t spend very much time here, do you?”

“No, not really. I don’t need to.”

“That’s what it looks like – empty; there’s nothing of *you* in here. Lovely furniture, wonderful room, of course, but it’s like it’s staged: no photos, no books, no – oh, I don’t know – dressing gown. It’s un-lived in.”

He sighed. “That’s probably because it is. I was afraid of that. I try to make everything look as normal as I can,

in case... let’s just say so that it doesn’t invite unwelcome questions, but I can’t seem to get this room right. Perhaps you could help me change that in the future?” His voice softened, and I noticed that he had slipped that bit in as if he were testing the waters, and my heart tumbled haphazardly. I bent my head back to look at him upside down and he kissed the tip of my nose.

“That sounds good. That sounds *very* good. How long do you think you will have here before you have to move on?”

“Another three years or so, perhaps a little longer, before we – before *I* – become obvious. I’ll be sorry to leave; we all will.” I wondered whether by then I would be leaving with him. “Like to see the rest?” he asked, interrupting my thoughts.

We were halfway down the stairs when Henry came into the hall with a sheaf of papers in his hand. He looked up as he heard us. “I was coming to find you. When you have a minute I have something I think you’ll want to see.” He raised the papers and an eyebrow, in that instance looking just like Matthew. There was an undercurrent of excitement in his voice, and I saw the query on Matthew’s face, and the sudden light in his eyes.

“Any chance I could have that cup of tea now and see the rest of the house later?” I suggested.

Matthew squeezed my hand. “Thank you for that. This is work-related, I’m afraid. I’ll find you as soon as Henry’s shown me these.” He showed me a door on the far right of the hall beyond the staircase and kissed me, not attempting to hide it from his son. “I won’t be long.”

As they moved across to a door diagonally opposite to where I still stood, Henry was saying something quietly to Matthew about Maggie. I didn’t catch his reply.

The kitchen had fabulous views looking towards the river on one side and into the sheltered courtyard on the other. Broad, pale wood planks made up the floor, and where the black iron stove would have been, a modern range sat radiating heat. This homely room of light painted wood and glass-fronted cupboards had a disarming simplicity – the finish bespoke – and I wondered if all the family used it or whether this represented part of the stage upon which Matthew acted out a normal life.

Pat sat reading a newspaper at the old farmhouse table, frameless glasses perched on her nose. A large box of mixed vegetables bulged on the floor next to her. She looked up when she heard me come in. “There you are!” she greeted me, putting the paper down, rising from the table and kissing me on both cheeks. “Come on in. I’m just about to sort things out for this evening. Are you ready for that cup of tea now, or would you like something to eat? Did you get lunch? Matthew does remember you need to eat, doesn’t he?” She had a clear, down-to-earth voice, gently accented. I nodded before she could force-feed me.

“Yes, he does – constantly – and no, thank you, I had lunch. I’d love a cup of tea, though. If you show me where everything is, I’ll make it and then give you a hand, if you would like?”

Pat looked at me over her glasses making her appear like a schoolteacher. “You just sit on down there and let me look after you.” She moved across to the kettle and switched it on, evidently at home in Matthew’s kitchen. I frowned, tried really hard to get my head around the fact that she was his *daughter*-in-law, found it too much at this stage in the game, and gave up. I settled for sitting on the edge of a chair at the end of the table, trying to look more relaxed than I felt.

“My son, Dan, and his wife, Jeannie, will be back soon. I don’t know if Matthew’s told you, but they work in pharmaceuticals and they’ve been on some sort of conference these last few days. And Joel... that’s their oldest boy...” Pat took an elegant teapot out of one of the cupboards and lifted the lid, peering into it doubtfully. I wondered if she had used it before, “... will be back on leave tomorrow. We’re fortunate to have him home for Christmas this year.” She opened a narrow door and disappeared, returning a moment later with a small packet. “Won’t your family be missing you this Christmas, Emma?”

“Yes, I suppose so, but... well, I’m here.”

She took a moment to assess me, then said, “Yes, you are, and very welcome you are too.” She peered at the packet, then opened it and sniffed the contents, frowning.

“Pat – may I call you Pat?” I ventured.

“Why, of course, that’s my name.”

“I wasn’t sure. Matthew can be quite, er, formal and I don’t know what’s expected in your family.”

She took me by surprise with a sudden hoot of laughter, reminding me of my mother on sunny days. “He *can* be very old-fashioned, can’t he? But he’s making sure that... oh my, I suppose I can only explain it in this way: Matthew is just making sure that we understand your *position*, so that there’s no misunderstanding.”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me.”

“He’s making certain we recognize your status. What you mean to him. That you’re not just a casual... acquaintance.”

“Yes, I think I’ve got the picture,” I said hurriedly so that she didn’t have to embarrass us both with further explanations. “Even so, Pat, I’d prefer to be called by my name. It could get quite awkward otherwise. It’ll be much

less like a college faculty meeting – all titles and no respect.” I found Pat very easy to talk to, a little like my mother in some respects, but without the burden of prior knowledge and family responsibility. And she appeared far more relaxed, despite the fact she tried to look as if she knew what to do with the tea, but clearly hadn’t a clue.

“I’ll make the tea if you like.” Pat handed me the packet of loose-leaf tea gratefully. “Can I make you a cup?”

She hid her involuntary grimace well. “I’ll have coffee, and *I’ll* make it. I’m afraid we’re a family of coffee drinkers – except for Matthew, of course, but then he doesn’t drink anything. I expect you find that strange?”

I smiled. “I’m getting used to it,” I said, and took the teapot. Boiling water released aromatic bergamot, taking me straight back home in an instant. Loose-leaf Earl Grey: a considerable amount of care had gone into making me feel welcome, even though my presence must have been difficult, whatever Matthew would wish me to believe. “Pat, you wouldn’t happen to have a tea-strainer by any chance?”

“A *tea*-strainer?” She glanced dubiously towards a colander hanging on a hook by the sink. “No, I don’t think we do. Can you use anything else?”

She accepted my offer to help sort vegetables for tomorrow’s evening meal and we gradually emptied the crate into piles of green and brown and orange, until it stood empty. “Enough to feed an army,” I commented.

“Sure, it’ll take this and then some, especially with Joel home.” She produced stout paper sacks of the sort provided by supermarkets, and we started putting the piles into separate bags.

“Pat, how does Christmas work here? What’s the normal routine – apart from the vegetables?”

She laughed. “I reckon that’s the same in all families. Well, we start the celebration on Christmas Eve with a big meal. My grandfather came over from Norway, and it’s been the way we do things in the family since Ellen was crippled.”

Her directness quite disarmed me, but she eased off her stool and carried a bulky bag of potatoes over to the wood kitchen counter, so didn’t see my reaction at the casual mention of Matthew’s wife. She came back to the table. “After the meal we gather together and each have one gift from around the tree – that’s traditional in Norway – but we have most of our gifts on Christmas Day, as I expect you do?” I must have appeared a little subdued because Pat put a reassuring hand on my arm. “You mustn’t worry, nobody expects anything from you – you’re the guest.” How could I tell her that the whole idea of being trapped around a table making conversation and eating brought me out in a sweat of cold, clawing horror, when my instinct told me to slide away into obscurity and escape? I felt a little better when she added, “And you’ll be next to Matthew, not that he’ll let you sit anywhere else. And then on Christmas Day, we all do our own family things straight off – presents and church and such – and then...” she wavered, seemingly unsure whether to tell me something.

“What?”

“Then we all go and see Ellen,” she finished, looking away from me for the first time.

“Yes, and...?”

“So Matthew told you?”

“It’s fine, of course it’s fine – it’s what I’d expect,” I said as if I had known all along, and briefly wondered when Matthew had planned to tell me about this part of the proceedings.

Pat appeared relieved. “Well, that’s just dandy. I wasn’t sure if you knew. I’m not sure if Jeannie’s going this year anyhow.

She's had a bit of a cold and doesn't want to risk passing it on to Ellen. Then, when we come back, we have our Christmas dinner, and that takes just for-*ever*." She sounded as if she loved every minute of it.

"You said 'church' a moment ago," I said, moving the conversation away from food.

"Sure. Henry and I always go to my Lutheran church in the morning – although Henry's Episcopal – and Harry goes to his church in town."

The potatoes had seeded granules of earth on the table and I used the soft edge of my hand to gather them in a pile. "What about the rest of the family?"

"Oh, they do their own thing, you know?"

I concentrated on scraping the grains over the precipice and into my other hand. "And Matthew?"

She knew I was going to ask, I could tell by the way she hesitated, looking uncomfortable.

"I don't feel I can say. You'd better ask him yourself."

Light seeped from the overcast sky and Pat switched on the low-slung lamp over the kitchen table. In the time it took for her to avoid answering my question and me to find something to fill the awkward silence that followed, she persuaded me to eat and we sat opposite each other – I with my toast and a preserve of some kind, she with her coffee and a bucket-load of questions about my family which she held back out of politeness.

I took the opportunity to clear up one or two queries of my own, and I thought that the only approach to take with Pat would be a direct one.

"I don't know how this works and, quite frankly, I'm finding it all a bit scary. Joining you for Christmas when you don't know me or I you is one thing, but our particular set of

circumstances makes it downright bizarre. I know Matthew says everything's fine, but I'm acutely aware of treading on toes – especially Henry's, given the situation with his mother – and I really need to know from someone less... *biased*, I suppose, what the real situation is." I had begun to spread the jam on my toast, but now stopped, knife still in my hand, waiting.

She set her mug down on the table and looked at me directly. "I can't pretend this is easy, Emma, but then, as you said, this isn't a normal situation we find ourselves in. But you can rest easy about Henry – and about me, if it's any comfort. Matthew's been very upfront with us, and we've known about you for some time." She picked up her mug and put it to her lips, then put it down again without drinking. "Look, Henry's realistic. He knows Ellen will die sooner or later, and sure, it would have been simpler if she had already gone when Matthew met you, but then that's just the way the cookie crumbles. Henry wants his father to be happy. Matthew's been pretty lonely for a long time – ever since I first met him, and that's longer than I care to remember – and you've..." she halted as she heard voices outside the kitchen door "... you've brought him back to *life*," she finished rapidly, and then picked up her mug and looked towards the door as it opened.

"Mom! We thought you might be in here." The tall, grey-suited man bent to embrace his mother, kissing her on the cheek she offered. He turned to me, holding out his hand. "Hi there, you must be Dr D'Eresby – good to meet you. I'm Dan, and this is my wife, Jeanette." He indicated to the earnest-looking woman next to him.

Instantly warming to his open manner, I stood up and shook his hand. "Hello, yes, I'm Emma." And turning to

Jeanette, I held out my hand. She took it and I realized with a rush how different it felt to her husband's: hard, thin, bony, but with little pressure as she shook my hand, as if her heart wasn't in it. She didn't say anything, but looked at me inquisitively. Dan loosened his tie and inspected the level of coffee in the pot, muttering cheerfully about the appalling standard of the catering at the conference.

"I understand you work in the pharmaceutical industry?" I ventured, trying to engage Jeanette.

"Yes, sure, we both do," Dan answered, handing a mug of black coffee to his wife and then pouring milk into his own. "We've just been to a conference in Ohio. Not much of interest, Mom, but there was one contact we made. Dad and Grand... Matthew'll be interested." He directed a sideways look at me to see if I'd caught his slip, but I sat down again and spread the rest of the preserve on my toast, assiduously oblivious. He must be in his forties, but he appeared much younger, whereas Jeanette was clearly middle-aged with her untidy brown hair greying in streaks. Skinny, medium height and slightly olive-skinned, her dark eyes narrow and lined beneath, she carried her years wearily. Her features lacked the refined elegance of the Lynes: her nose ended in a rounded blob and her lips were too thin to be attractive, and when she smiled I thought her chin would wrinkle unevenly. But she had a well-meaning face, if rather serious, and the lack of malice more than made up for her want of beauty. She must have been aware of her appearance of age next to her husband, even if she clearly wasn't concerned with how she looked. Or was it that she had given up trying? She sat down in the chair next to me. Dan finished his coffee in a gulp. "Where's Dad, by the way? And I haven't seen the kids. Joel's not back yet, is he?"

The door from the courtyard slammed open in answer, and Harry came in with a mass of cold air and darkness, followed by Ellie, each carrying a huge box stuffed full of packets and foodstuffs, and dumped them on the table. Ellie gave her parents a hug, lingering longest with her mother. I felt as if I were intruding on something unvoiced, but understood, and wondered if I should leave. Harry had no such reserve. "I've put your bags in your room, Dr D'Eresby." He grinned.

"Thanks, and you *can* call me Emma – unless you would like me to call you *Master Lynes*, that is?"

"Aw shucks, Dr D'Eresby, ma'am, that would be just *great*."

I pulled a face at him which he thought very funny. Ellie watched us, unsmiling, and I wondered if she thought I should act my age, whatever *that* meant.

Jeanette broke her silence. "You're a lecturer at the University of Cambridge?" I detected a note of respect in the way she said it.

"Yes, I'm here on a research project."

"Is that a fixed-term position? Is it held for you, or do you have to reapply for your post? It must be a senior lectureship you hold."

I cut my toast into quarters, wondering what lay behind her questions. "It is a permanent position, but it isn't that senior. I don't hold a Chair, or anything like that."

She looked disappointed. "Never mind. You must be glad you've a position to go back to, and there must be opportunities for advancement, I expect."

I wasn't quite sure how to answer that. I didn't know whether Matthew had said anything to them about the possible future we might have together. It seemed unlikely as we had only just agreed it ourselves.

Ellie hovered behind her mother, her hands gripping the top rail of her chair. "So, you *are* supposed to go back at the end of the year?"

"Yes..." I said.

"Then you'll be leaving, won't you?"

"Ellie!" her grandmother said sharply. "That's none of your business."

Ellie flicked her long toffee-coloured hair over her shoulder, giving me an arch look, blatantly unrepentant.

"We'll see," I said noncommittally, taken aback by the aggressive stance the young doctor had adopted since our first meeting, when she cared for me after Staahl's attack. She had been cool then, but this bordered on ice age. Dan shuffled his feet looking embarrassed as Pat briskly collected mugs from the table. "Time we were thinking about dinner. Ellie, you can help me. I think we'll eat in here tonight. Dan, if you're looking for your father, he's in the study. Perhaps you'll take Emma through so she knows where it is."

I followed him back through the hall. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, solemnly surveying me with dark blue eyes from behind glasses. His suit emphasized the heavier set of his shoulders, and he carried a little more weight around his waist and face than either his father or Matthew although, for all of that, he moved as easily as they did. He was not as fair-skinned either, having a more naturally bronzed complexion as if he tanned easily, but he smiled in a similar way, and his eyes creased with the same humour. At this moment, though, he looked confused, and he scratched behind one ear.

"I'm sorry about that; Ellie's not normally rude. I don't know what got into her. I'll have a word with her later on."

I shook my head. "It's all right. It must be a bit strange with me being here. I'm sure she didn't mean it." I thought about the

look she gave me, and wasn't persuaded by my own argument.

"Well, now, I hope not," her father said, equally unconvinced, but he smiled readily and changed the subject. "The study's through here..." He had his hand on the door handle when it opened suddenly.

"...I'll see what I can do," Henry was saying over his shoulder as he almost stepped into him. "Dan, you're back! How'd it go? Any news? Come and tell me over a beer, son." He gave him a bear hug in greeting, then saw me hanging back. "Dr D'Eresby, we're just coming through."

"Please call me Emma – everyone else is," I urged him.

"Emma it is, then, thank you. I'm going in search of food if my brood have returned."

Matthew joined them on the threshold of the room, smiling at me over Henry's shoulder and making me feel better instantly. Standing together, the resemblance became more striking than ever.

"It's good to see you safe back, Daniel. We'll catch up later." Matthew said as he took my hand in his.

They were barely out of sight when I turned on Matthew. "Don't ever leave me alone that long again," I rushed.

"Why? What's happened?"

I took a breath; he didn't need to know about Ellie. "Nothing, it was just too long not to see you. I missed you, that's all."

"That's all?" he queried. I reached up and kissed him to make my point. "Mm." He caressed my face, his eyes suspicious. "I suppose I'll have to believe you. Have you been given the third degree by Pat?"

I shook my head. "No, we've been making polite conversation over tea. You promised to show me the rest of the house."

"I did indeed. Have you met Maggie yet?" he asked almost casually as he led me through to a room opposite the kitchen where a fire burned low in the grate.

"No, is she avoiding me?"

He didn't answer but the familiar tightening of his mouth was a bit of a giveaway. "This is the drawing room," he said needlessly.

"Why?"

"Because it's one of the principal reception rooms..."

I poked him in the ribs, remembering not to do it so hard that I risked breaking my finger. "Don't be facetious. *Why* is Maggie avoiding me?"

He looked as if he were weighing up whether to tell me. "I don't think she's come to terms with me seeing you." That didn't seem enough to justify the tension that surrounded this woman.

"And?"

"And... nothing. Do you like this room?" He turned me around so that I could see it.

"It's fine, very nice," I said huffily, not doing it justice. Cushions on the sofa had been dimpled by someone who had recently sat there, and a book lay open on a table where a reading lamp spread light in the darkening room. I craned my neck to read the spine: *In the Mind of a Killer*. "What does Maggie do?" I asked.

He lifted my hand and kissed my palm. "She heads up the psychiatric unit of the hospital in town."

I remembered the stark, masculine face staring at me. "Is she married, or seeing anyone, or anything?"

He pushed up the sleeve of my sweater and planted a series of tiny kisses along my wrist that tickled, making me giggle. "You're doing that on purpose; I was just asking."

He sighed and pulled my jumper back over my wrist. "I didn't think I needed a reason to kiss you, but since you ask, no, she's single. It's just her in her flat with her cats. I don't think she's ever been interested in relationships of any kind other than with the family – and even those are limited."

"And I'm a relationship too far for her?"

"That's one way of looking at it, yes."

Since I didn't know any better, it seemed the only way I *could* look at it. He was beginning to look twitchy so I brought the subject back onto safer ground. "This *is* a lovely room; it has beautiful proportions. Do you choose all the furniture? And what happens when you move. Do you take it with you?"

He touched the golden satinwood surface of the table and ran his finger along the thin line of inlaid ebony. "I choose the furniture and, yes, when I can, I take it with me depending on the circumstances. This piece I haven't had for very long, but this..." He went to a handsome display cabinet and opened the glass door, "... I've had since I watched it being made." He picked out a fragile-looking glass object from among a group of pieces. About eight inches high, it resembled a finely wrought winged glass horse, with a dragon's tail curling up its back to where the broken end must once have formed a narrow fluted cup at the top, held above the animal's head. Its translucent apricot body shimmered with flecks of gold, its wide, wild eyes, tail and clawed feet, coloured a deeper, richer salmon.

"It's a candlestick?" I turned it over in my hands gingerly, feeling its fragility.

"Yes, a hippocampus – a winged water horse – made by a master craftsman. It must be nearly two hundred years old now."

I gave it back to him in case I dropped it and compounded the damage. "Why did you buy it?"

He held it out in front of him, a faint smile just evident. "I chose it... why did I choose it? It's such a long time ago." He drew his eyebrows together as he tried to remember. "I bought it because it's a fantastical creature, like me. Neither of us should exist, but we do." He placed it carefully back in the cabinet and closed the door.

"For which I am grateful," I whispered.

He looked at me. "Are you?"

"Of course I am!"

"To whom? My uncle for his betrayal which led to this, or to God, for allowing it to happen?"

He had caught me off guard, and I took a while to answer. "Not your uncle, no – betrayal can never be good – but God? Yes, I am thankful you are here, for whatever reason, or purpose – or none."

He grunted. "Do you think I might have a *purpose*, then?"

"Of course – don't we all have a part to play? You're already fulfilling a purpose in what you do, aren't you?"

"*Can* there be a purpose in living for ever?" He wasn't really asking me, but searching for an answer that had been eluding him for all of his existence. I put my hand tentatively on his arm and he glanced down at it, then placed his over mine, finding reassurance in my touch.

"I'm not sure if we necessarily know what path we tread, Matthew, or why, until we are already on it. Even then, sometimes we don't find out until we get to the end. I wouldn't have known that I would be here with you six months ago when I booked my flight to America. I knew I was coming to find something, but I didn't know it would be *you*."

He lifted his hand and gently splayed my fingers on his arm, running his index finger in and out of the indentations they made before answering. "I think I knew you were coming

– not *you* exactly – but someone. I can't explain the feeling. It was like waiting for an electrical storm: you know it's coming long before you see it; you feel it in the air."

"*Spo*-ky," I shivered.

"And I'm not?" he said, more lightly this time.

"No, you're not in the least bit sinister, and I should know."

"Of course, you being an expert on monsters," he smiled, all darkness gone. "Hmm, you're chilly."

I went and sat down while he built up the fire before joining me, and I curled up next to him in the hook of his arm.

"But then, you're not a monster, Matthew, so you wouldn't spook me."

"So if you had a choice, what would I be? A zombie, a vampire – what?"

I shrugged under his arm. "I don't know, that's all Gothic novel stuff. I suppose you could describe your life as being rather Gothic, though..." I stifled a laugh. "How about Shelley's monster?"

He fingered his chin, pulling a face. "I would rather you suggested Dr Frankenstein. That would be a little more flattering."

"Yes, and a little more dead. *He* didn't get a second chance."

"If not him, how about a vampire? They've gained more kudos over the last century. Quite popular again now, I believe." He pretended to bite my neck and kissed it instead, sending a shiver of pleasure through me.

"Mm, and there's a certain attraction associated with them, of course. Definitely a possibility, but for one thing..."

He had reached the base of my throat, becoming absorbed in his task. "What's that?"

"You're not, are you?"

He sat up. "No."

“Alien?”

“Certainly not.”

“Elf?”

He laughed.

“Mutation?”

“Probably closer.”

“You don’t know what made you the way you are, do you?”

“No, not for certain, but I’m working on it.” The fire popped and a blue tongue of flame flared before it became green and died. He stared into the heart of it, the light in his dark pupils subtly changing as I watched.

“Matthew, is that what all this research is about?”

“Mm.”

“And when you’ve cracked it, what then? Is it just a question of gaining a deeper understanding of what you are or *why* you are, or are you looking for something else?” He didn’t answer. I turned around in the circle of his arm. “Matthew?” He looked away so that I could no longer see his eyes. “You’re not looking to change yourself, are you?”

“Would that be such a bad thing?”

“Yes!”

“Why?”

I put both my hands around his face, making him look at me. “Because you’re you. I love you as you are. I don’t want you to change.”

“Do you want me condemned to this shadow life forever, when *you* can leave it and find peace?”

I slowly shook my head. “Is that how you see it? A life of nothing but shadows? But surely where there are shadows there has to be light?”

“Would you seek immortality, Emma, if you were given a choice?”

“But you weren’t given a choice were you? Your uncle took that away from you!”

“Are you saying that I should accept this life because I wasn’t given a choice in the first place, is that it? *Fait accompli* – no going back.” The darkness filling him spilled into his voice, and I couldn’t look at him any more in case I disappeared into it.

“No...”

“So, would you choose to live for ever?” I couldn’t answer him. “You wouldn’t, would you?” He put his fingers under my chin and raised my face so that I looked into his. “Even though we could be together.”

I thought of being with him, inseparable by death, ready to take the plunge into the unknown if he asked me. I swallowed, pulling back from the brink. “I don’t know, Matthew. I’ve never had to think about it and there are so many issues to consider. It would be easier if that decision were to be taken away from me, but then, immortality is not an option, is it?” It was his turn to look away. “*Is it?*”

He took a very long time to answer. “No, it isn’t,” he said eventually, “and I wouldn’t wish it on you.” He smiled suddenly, a tight, drawn smile. “Not a vampire or a monster, then, just an anomalous entity waiting to be resolved. And you, Emma – still willing to wait with me? What does that make you?”

“Patient. And hungry.”

He laughed, hugging me close and lifting the atmosphere in an instant. “Well, that’s something we can sort out at least. We’d better see what’s on offer that will tempt you, even if I can’t.”

I put my fingers over his mouth. “Don’t say that, please, Matthew. *Temptation* doesn’t even come close.”

He put his lips against my brow. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, I

know. I was trying to make a joke, but obviously not a very funny one.” He stood up and I joined him, finding my legs unexpectedly shaky. He put out a hand to steady me. “Low blood sugar,” he said. Food would undoubtedly help, but it wouldn’t ease the inexplicable trembling that unsettled me, but then I didn’t know what would.

Dinner proved interesting. We all sat around the big family table in the warm kitchen looking like an episode from *The Waltons*. I say *all*, but one chair remained stubbornly vacant until it was removed and the setting taken away. Matthew and I sat at one end of the table, our legs touching, tension stretching across my shoulders like the string of a bow. In full view of everyone, he took my hand and, to my surprise, said Grace. Not a modern version, but straight out of the mid-seventeenth century. Pat then took over and plates passed around the bewildering array of food, until they were piled high. Matthew had a setting laid in front of him, and a token of each food arrived before him on a plate.

“Normality, just in case,” he murmured, “and in celebration of what I once was,” he said even more quietly. I nodded and looked despairingly at my own full plate.

I did pretty well, all things considered. I remained quiet for most of the meal, and the family left me alone to gather information about each of them from the rapid scattering of banter that tattooed the conversation. As a result, I made considerable inroads on the food, and avoided the usual comments my lack of appetite inevitably caused. Nonetheless I felt relief when the end of the meal came, and I stood up with everyone else to help clear away.

“No, you’re the guest. You go and sit back down, this won’t take long.”

I put my foot down at that. “Pat, I really would like to help.” She took one look at the set of my jaw and at Matthew grinning behind her – whom I tried to ignore in case he made me laugh – and gave in.

There is such relief in having something practical to do, especially when among strangers; it takes the searchlight of their interest off you. At home, I couldn’t wait to escape the cramped, damp kitchen space with its walls dripping condensation from the old gas stove and the Belfast sink. How anyone cooked for the family in there was a bit of a mystery. I dreaded Nanna’s attempts to teach me to cook and Mum didn’t have much success either, although she would rather have been on a tennis court than in the kitchen with me. I took as little pleasure in combining the ingredients and cooking them as I did in their consumption. Nanna persevered until even she relinquished her obdurate granddaughter to the all-embracing arms of history. It would have helped my cause if Beth had a similar outlook, but my sister loved food, and spent many happy hours ensconced in the kitchen with Dad. As I couldn’t see the point in trying to compete, I didn’t, and retreated to the less contentious issue of cleaning and tidying.

Hailing from a family where the production of food had been ritualized to something resembling a military operation overlaid with an almost religious mysticism, to me the Lynes were a revelation. Everyone joined in and, out of the seemingly chaotic process, produced order amid much laughter and jostling, jibes and wet tea towels that were used more for flicking unsuspecting victims than for drying anything. By the end of the process, I became adept at darting between the flying elbows and comments to retrieve a plate or glass, drying it and giving it to whoever was putting things away

at the time. Chaos it might have been, but it made it all so much more *fun*.

“Is it normally like this?” I asked Matthew as the family began to disperse to their different homes.

He wiped a bunch of soapsuds off my cheek. “Yes, although that was pretty tame. Wait until Joel arrives tomorrow, that’ll liven things up a bit. Doesn’t your family do this sort of thing?”

“You’ve met them! The most interesting thing that I can remember happening recently was Flora’s Barbie getting stuck in the gravy.”

“Point taken; you had a deprived childhood for which we must endeavour to make amends.”

My mind boggled, especially as he had that look on his face which suggested he was scheming. “It wasn’t *that* deprived,” I said backing away from him.

“Indeed,” he said, eyes glinting, “but there’s always room for improvement.” He glanced around the empty kitchen. “Now, which will it be tonight, your bed or mine?” He picked me up before I could respond and flung me over his shoulder, my hair falling out of its loose plait and swinging as he spun around and headed for the door.

“Matthew! Propriety please!” I gasped, although all I could do was hang on to his sweater.

“I reckon I have the best view in the house,” he said, patting my behind. I squeaked, kicking my legs in token gesture of protest.

“This one’s not bad either,” I pointed out, laughing. His strong legs carrying me easily, we were already halfway up the stairs, my protests undermined by fits of giggles when he suddenly stopped, his head whipping up.

“What’s the matter?” I tried to look around, but he slid

me off his shoulder, guiding my feet to the broad steps. He listened intently. I could hear nothing. “What is it?”

He put his finger to his lips, eyebrows pulled together in concentration. Just as suddenly, he took my hand. “Come on, let’s go.” As we reached the landing, a door on the left opened and Henry came out with his head down, a look of concerned displeasure on his face. He looked up as he heard our footsteps. He said nothing as he came towards us but gave a slight nod of his head as he passed to go downstairs.

“I’ll see you in the morning, Henry,” Matthew said, as if in answer.

“Goodnight,” his son replied.

“That was Maggie’s room,” I prompted, as my bedroom door shut with a reassuringly solid *click*.

“Yes, it was.” He walked over to the fire and began placing logs in the raised grate. “Your room or mine?” he asked, without offering any further information. I took the hint.

“Yours needs to look more lived in,” I suggested.

“True, but yours is warmer. How about yours tonight, mine tomorrow?”

I pursed my lips and tried to look as if it were a really hard decision until he tickled me around my waist and I writhed to escape. “OK, OK, you win, but give me half an hour’s head start.”

He squinted unnecessarily at his watch. “Twenty-nine minutes and forty-six seconds and counting. Forty-five, forty-four, forty-three, forty... what are you waiting for?”

I waved him towards the door, laughing. “For you to leave. Go – now – *shoo*.”

“I know what’s missing.” I spluttered around my toothbrush, coming out of the bathroom to speak to Matthew who lay,

ankles crossed and fully clothed on my bed, waiting for me to finish. He had given me exactly the half hour in which to shower and get ready for bed. He had his hands behind his head as he contemplated the ceiling. “What’s that?” He turned to regard me, a smile hovering around his lips as he took in the toothbrush I brandished like a conductor’s baton.

I retreated to the bathroom to rinse the mouthful of toothpaste. I returned to the doorway, brush still in hand. “Christmas decorations. Why don’t you have any? You don’t have anything against them, do you, any religious objections, or anything like that? Without them, it makes the house look sort of... forlorn.”

Light from the bedside lamp glinted off the face of his watch as he adjusted his position on the bed. “Does it? I hadn’t thought about it. I don’t have any reservations about having them, and certainly not religious ones. There didn’t seem to be much point before now – not just with me here – and this year... well, it might surprise you to learn I’ve been preoccupied.” He slipped off the bed and sauntered over, running the palm of his hand down the length of my hair and then the long revers of my dressing gown. “Can’t think why that might be... mm, you have toothpaste just... *there*...” I tried to lick at the remnants at the same moment he used the side of his thumb to wipe the corner of my mouth, and my tongue brushed inadvertently against his skin. Our eyes met, an unspoken current running between us. “It’s being *very* resistant.” He leaned down slowly, eyes locked, mesmerizing, and drew the tip of his tongue in a line along my bottom lip, lingering at the corner. My lips burned as I stretched towards him, feeling his mouth smile beneath mine at my response.

“That’s better,” he murmured. “I’ve been waiting to do this all day.”

Breathing him in, my cheek against his. “Do what – exactly?”
 “Be alone with you in my own home, in our own time, no interruptions.” His voice became low and gruff and laden, and the room swam out of focus. His mouth travelled under my jaw and down my neck sending goosebumps along my arms and across the top of my shoulders.

“*Almost* alone,” I managed to remind him as my breaths shallowed and shortened, and my heart battered against my ribs. And then it didn’t matter anyway because he picked me up and took me to my bed and showed no sign of stopping, and I didn’t care because this is what I wanted and had wanted for so long that it hurt to remember.

But it was wrong.

“No, Matthew, no. Please, don’t...” I twisted my head away and tried to push him from me but, encased in his arms, I had no room to break away although every corpuscle of my body yearned to be with him. “Matthew – no, this is *wrong!*” His arms opened abruptly. I wriggled out from under him, curling my legs up tight on the far edge of the bed, and pulling my dressing gown around me. He looked bewildered, his honey hair dishevelled, his blue wide eyes wild. “You wouldn’t forgive yourself,” I whispered.

He ran his hand slowly across his eyes and down his face, then rolled over and sat with his back to me for what seemed like an age. “You’re right, of course,” he said, at last. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t put you in such a position. That was stupid; no – selfish – of me. It’s just that sometimes...” He shook his head, “... sometimes it feels so right – *we* feel so right – that I forget. God forgive me, but I *do* forget, Emma.” He turned and looked at me so despondently that it was all I could do to resist throwing my arms around him. I grabbed a plump pillow and hugged it instead.

“Don’t be sorry for me, I’ll survive. And you’re not being selfish, and if you are, then so am I, so don’t go and do a guilt trip on me. Although,” I said ruefully, “I think we both deserve medals for our restraint.”

He managed a half-hearted smile. “As I said, that was selfish of me...”

“But utterly tantalizing,” I interrupted, clasping the pillow more firmly and burying the lower part of my face in it so that all he could see were my eyes peeping out over the top of it.

He leaned over and stroked my bare feet, which I hadn’t realized were wiggling feverishly. “So I see.” He kissed my toes and my skin warmed at his touch. He drew the counterpane resolutely but regretfully over them. “I think we’d better think pure thoughts for a while. So you would like some Christmas decorations, would you?”

“Can I ask one thing first, before we change the subject?”

“What’s that?”

“Do your family think we are sleeping together as in *not* sleeping together, if you see what I mean?” I flushed, embarrassing myself with my ridiculous ambiguity.

He held back a laugh. “Well, I think I do. Let me see... I haven’t said anything directly other than to Henry, and he won’t have said anything to the others – except perhaps to Pat – so I would have to say that the rest of the family have probably drawn their own conclusions. Why, does it matter what other people think?”

I gazed at him over the pillow, thinking it through. “Normally, I would have said not, because it is our business and our consciences, but I wonder if it does matter to them, or to some of them at least, especially Maggie and perhaps Ellie. It’s not a usual situation as it is.”

His brow puckered. “Are you saying I should tell them?”

I cringed at the thought, my toes curling correspondingly under the covers. “No! Well... *blow it*, I don’t know, Matthew, but you know as well as I do that where there is room for doubt and speculation people fill it with all sorts of nonsense and, sometimes, it’s better to give them the information straight rather than let them make it up – or let it fester.” I shook my head slowly. “I don’t envy you this one.”

He stared blankly at the floor. “I’m not sure what’s for the best. I’ll think about it. Now, decorations.”

I welcomed the change of topic. “I wasn’t asking, so much as saying the house looks a bit bleak without them.”

He smiled. “But you would like them all the same?”

“Can we – please? It would make it more Christmassy. Just a few; we don’t need to go over the top.”

He patted my feet beneath the counterpane. “I think we can do something. In the meantime, you need your sleep, and I need a distraction.” He rose from the bed and I felt my face fall as he made for the door.

“You’re not leaving, are you?”

He stopped and looked back. “I won’t leave you. I’m just going to get a book. I’ll return in a minute.” And he smiled his half-smile, thin with restraint and thick with longing.