

'Wonderful,' Veronika said when she had finally recovered enough to speak. 'I think it is absolutely perfect.'

'I'll take it,' Astrid said, and returned to the fitting room. Veronika could hear her chortle behind the curtain. The girl at the counter stood immobile, her glossy lips half open.

The swimsuit in a bag, they wandered out into the summer-drowsy city. It was too early for lunch and there was nothing more either of them needed to buy. They walked aimlessly and when they passed an ice-cream kiosk they stopped and bought a cone each. They went and sat on a park bench in light shadow underneath some trees.

'You know, I have never been here before,' Astrid said. 'I am grateful to you for letting me see all this.' She lifted her hand that held the ice-cream and indicated the surroundings. 'I am taking it all in, and I am enjoying it, but I realise now, when I actually see it, that it doesn't matter that it has taken me a whole life.' She sat with her face turned towards the sun, occasionally licking the ice-cream. 'I'm sure there are extraordinary places that I will never see. But now I don't mind.' Her voice trailed off. 'This day is enough. I know now that it would have made no difference. It was never about the place.'

Veronika reached inside her blouse and pulled out the greenstone pendant. She opened the clasp, took it off and held it up against the sun.

'Here, Astrid, look,' she said. The old woman bent over and their heads touched lightly as they both looked at the stone. 'If you have the right heart you can see everything you love in here. The lakes, the forests, the sky. The entire universe.' She held out the pendant for Astrid to touch and the old woman let her fingers run over the smooth surface. 'I haven't worn it since the day James died,' Veronika said. 'Because I lost my

heart. And there was nothing for me to see.' She tied it around her neck again. 'But this morning I put it on. And I think I can see it. I think I can see the beauty again.'

Astrid looked at her. 'Yes,' the old woman said. 'Yes, there is beauty. You just have to have the heart and you can see it anywhere.'

After a short stroll through the quiet streets, they returned to the car and drove off.

The pension was a substantial old wooden house, painted pale yellow, in a village where all the other buildings were the usual rust-red. It looked like a queen bee, sitting in a large mature garden at the peak of its summer abundance, surrounded by a village of reddish-brown worker bees. They parked outside the gates and walked slowly up the path to the front door. To their right there was a herb garden with rows of parsley, dill, chives and basil. Tall hollyhocks grew along the front of the main building, on either side of the front door. A large grey cat was asleep on the front steps and a wagtail fearlessly pranced on the grass just below. There was silence as they walked through the open front door and along the hallway, and they met nobody. But just as they entered the dining room a slim woman approached with a welcoming smile. Up close they could see that she was not young, but there was an appealing energetic air about her. She spoke with a slight foreign accent and this, together with her brightly hennaed hair, made her seem intriguingly out of place in this old and staid environment.

She suggested lunch inside and coffee in the garden afterwards, and Astrid and Veronika sat down at a table in the dining room. Astrid looked up at the waitress. 'It's Veronika's birthday today,' she said with a small nod.