



Long Shadows

A Prequel to The Reynolds Seafaring Saga

by Jane Fenwick

Gabriel Reynolds stood on the prow of the ship which bore his name. The Alnmouth Boy drew alongside the quay and dropped anchor in her home port. No sooner had the gangplank been lowered than his father was shaking his hand, slapping him on the back and pulling him towards him in a bear hug.

‘Steady on Father, I’m returning from Amsterdam not The Colonies!’ Gabriel knew although he’d been away less than three weeks on this his first business trip for Reynolds Shipping, his widowed father would have missed him. For Gabriel it had been an exciting trip, he was still young and learning the ropes, yet his father had trusted him to go to Amsterdam alone and strike the lucrative deal. Gabriel appreciated the confidence his father had in him, but he had also felt the responsibility placed upon his inexperienced shoulders.

‘Did all go to plan?’ Jack Reynolds asked back in the office of the shipping line he had founded twenty years ago. Over a glass of mountain, father and son discussed the contract in detail. ‘But look at me rabbiting on,’ Jack Reynolds said, ‘you must be tired. Abner has brought your horse so you can get straight home to Westshore. Lisbet says she’s made your favourite pudding, the woman spoils you.’ Both knew it was he who would have asked the cook-cum-housekeeper to make a Sussex Pond Pudding especially for Gabriel’s return. ‘Thomas and Caroline are coming to sup; you’ll have missed your sweetheart I expect.’

Gabriel downed the rest of his wine and stood to leave. ‘Not half as much as she’s missed me,’ he said in jest.

Jack Reynolds’ face turned sombre. ‘About that Gabriel... ’

‘I know Father, I’m aware of my duty, well not duty exactly but... ’

‘Duty? Since when did marrying the most beautiful heiress in the county become a duty?’

‘I chose the wrong word, I’m sorry. Of course it’s not an onerous obligation it’s just I’d not thought to marry yet, I should like to concentrate on the business, wait a while longer before tying the knot.’

‘What, wait until you’re certain about how you feel?’ Jack laughed as if it was the funniest thing he’d heard all year. Once again his face clouded. ‘I married your mama when I was nineteen and never regretted a moment of it, especially as she was taken from us all too soon.’

Gabriel too looked downcast. ‘But - ’

His father interrupted: ‘Then why not ask for her hand formally and wait a year or two, I know long engagements aren’t the done thing but when all is said and done we all know it’s inevitable you two will wed. Haven’t you been sweet on each other these past six years?’

‘I’ll make my move soon Father; perhaps ask her to be my wife at Christmas.’

‘Good plan my boy, it doesn’t hurt to keep a lady waiting, but don’t make her wait so long she looks elsewhere. A girl like Caroline Hodgeson can take her pick of eligible men, with her looks she could net a lord.’

‘Not if she’s got any sense,’ Gabriel grinned, ‘why would she look further than me? When we wed, the two biggest shipping lines in the North East will be joined, and besides,’ he winked at his father, ‘she has two good eyes in her head. She knows I’m the most handsome man in these parts.’

‘Pride comes before a fall my boy.’ His father put his arm about his son’s broad shoulders. ‘I know you are in jest but Thomas grows anxious, not anxious but... ladies have their reputations to think of and all of Alnmouth is waiting with bated breath.’

‘Then let them wait,’ Gabriel snapped. ‘I won’t be rushed into... oh never mind. I’ll see you at home Father, as you say it’s been a tiring journey.’

On the short ride home Gabriel’s shoulders slumped. It bothered him he didn’t look forward to reuniting with his childhood sweetheart after three weeks away. To his mind a

man about to ask for a lady's hand in marriage should at least feel a flutter of anticipation at seeing her at supper this night. His thoughts turned dark and gloomy. Then he remembered the deal he'd struck and was cheered.

The business trip, his first major deal on behalf of Reynolds Shipping, had gone better than he'd dared hope. He'd thought the Dutchmen may not take him seriously, he was still a young man. He thought they may insist on a further meeting to finalise the deal with his father, but they had happily signed the contract there and then. Not only that, he'd secured a better deal than he'd hoped into the bargain. He knew his father was pleased with him and had faith in him. He appreciated it but must the payoff be marriage to the daughter of his father's best friend?

He shook himself. He had nothing to complain about. Caroline was the most stunning looking woman he'd ever seen, and some of the Dutch ladies he'd met this past few weeks were striking. Caro was a classic beauty, an English rose if ever there was one. Blonde curls, alabaster skin, limpid blue eyes a man could drown in, not to mention an enviable figure. More importantly she was sweet natured, kind and good company. It wasn't as if he was being forced into a marriage of convenience with a plain drab. In fact he wasn't being compelled at all. Two years ago he had come to believe he loved her. Now he wasn't so sure.

At Westshore, the family home practically on the beach at Alnmouth, Gabriel handed Copper's reins to Abner Boatwright, his father's old retainer, and headed for the kitchen. Finding it surprisingly empty, except for Scrabble his terrier who made a great fuss of him, he stripped to his breeches. Had it not been turning dark he'd have sea bathed to wash the grime of the journey from his body, but as it would be fully dark in fifteen minutes he opted for a sluice under the pump in the yard as an alternative.

Soaked to the skin and with water coursing down his strong body and into his eyes he felt better, refreshed. He shook his head and squeezed the water from his dark curls. He felt something flap against his back and turned to see Lisbet Cotter brandishing a huckerback towel. 'You'll be needin' this A imagine.' The large Geordie woman smiled at him; she was like the mother he'd never really known, well not exactly. His mother, beautiful but delicate, had died in childbirth when he was seven. Lisbet, large of body and as strong as a mule but twice as stubborn, had acted as nursemaid to him as well as being "chief cook and bottle washer" as she never tired of saying. She had practically raised him.

'Yer back then.'

'It appears so.'

'A bad penny allus turns up again.'

He followed her into the kitchen where the aroma of roasting meat mingled with a lemony tang. His mouth watered. He lifted the lid on a platter warming on the stove and stole a pork chop from the pile. In two mouthfuls it was gone. He reached for a second. Lisbet's face broke into a smile. Gabriel threw the bones to the waiting terrier.

'You'll ruin yer appetite... no wait that's not true, yer can eat one potato more than a pig.'

'You may not have a way with words Lisbet Cotter but you can certainly cook,' he said dropping a kiss on her floury cheek. 'Is that my favourite pudding I can smell? It had better be or else there'll be trouble.'

She bent her broad beam to retrieve a pie from the oven. 'Get yerself out er ma kitchen, yer take up too much room these days. If yer expect supper on the table by eight A'd best get on.' She put the pie to cool then squeezed his arm affectionately. 'Yer pa's been like a spare part while yer bin away, he'll be glad yer home. A daresay A feel the same an'all.'

Gabriel smiled to himself as he ran up the stairs. It wasn't often Lisbet spoke affectionately, she was more likely to growl at him these days. In his room he looked at the clothes Abner had already laid out for him. The looking glass told him he needed a shave. Perhaps he should grow a beard? He knew they weren't fashionable but the time he would

save not shaving twice a day was most appealing. He wondered what Caro would think. Like most fashionable ladies he knew she'd be appalled at the idea of him having whiskers.

He stood before the picture window of his bedroom as he buttoned up his waistcoat and tied his stock. Two riders were heading towards Westshore. He knew they were Thomas and Caro, their figures, one portly the other svelte, were as familiar to him as his own. They were often in each other's company, spent at least two nights a week together, more in wintertime when there were fewer social events to attend.

After supper Caroline rose to leave the men to their port and pipes. 'We won't leave you alone long my dear,' Jack said as he held the door open for his future daughter-in-law. 'In fact perhaps Gabriel will come sooner than your father and I as we have business to discuss. He'll be with you directly won't you my boy?'

Caroline blushed becomingly. 'Don't hurry on my account; I have my maid to keep me company.'

Once Caroline had left the room the three men regained their seats. 'Did absence make the heart grow fonder?' Thomas winked at Gabriel. 'I know she's been pining for you, she's been listless, hardly eaten a thing.'

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. 'You exaggerate, she has a tiny appetite so how could you tell?' The two older men exchanged a look; Gabriel knew they were pulling his leg. 'I can take a hint, I'll go to Caro and leave you to talk about the good old days, I know you two like to reminisce.'

In the drawing room Caroline was sipping tea by the fire with her maid sitting opposite. She stopped with the dish halfway to her cupid's bow lips and smiled at him as he entered. She really was a beauty he had to admit. She wore a lilac silk gown in what he imagined was the latest style, a faint rosy hue tinted her cheeks.

'I said not to hurry, we're perfectly capable of entertaining ourselves Gabriel.'

The maid rose and moved to the window tactfully looking out as if she'd never seen the view before - she had, many, many times. She was their chaperone, their shadow. Gabriel guessed she knew every word he'd uttered to his sweetheart, every syllable he'd said since they were walking out together at least. He sat in the place Ellise had vacated.

'Tell me all about Amsterdam. I know the boring business details - our parents dissected the deal to death did they not? I'm glad it went well for you Gabriel but tell me what are the ladies wearing? Are the gowns as revealing as it says in the fashion magazines?'

'I have no idea about styles as you well know. But yes, now you come to mention it the gowns were low cut, there were acres of cleavage on show I seem to remember... not that I was looking for any other reason than to report back to you Caro.'

'And colours, surely you noticed the predominant shades for the season.'

Gabriel puffed out his cheeks and then let the air out slowly. 'Not a clue, all the colours of the rainbow I should think.' He smiled as she attempted to look cross with him.

'What have you been up to whilst I've been abroad?'

'We supped at Sir John Riddleston's last Thursday and Lord Acton's on Saturday week. I played cards at Lottie's last night, she fleeced me as usual. Other than that it's been quite tedious, the time passes so slowly when you're away. I've missed you so much my darling.'

Gabriel felt a twinge of guilt - he'd hardly missed her at all. To be fair he'd spent a lot of his time securing the deal, or thinking about it in the run up. Then he'd been kept amused by his host at various dances and supper parties all of which had been diverting as he found Dutch women quite entertaining and not a little forthright. He admitted to himself a dalliance with one of the blonde-haired beauties would be interesting but anything more would be out of the question. They were far too opinionated and headstrong for his taste. Still, he'd enjoy telling his best friend Bendor about a flirtation with one young lady he'd met. She was the

daughter of the broker he'd been staying with; she'd made it perfectly clear what was on her mind. He'd not taken her up on the offer needless to say.

'Sorry Caro, I was miles away. What did you say?'

'Never mind, our fathers are on their way. I can tell by the noise they're making they think to find us in a compromising position.' She blushed prettily as Gabriel wondered what was wrong with him. Of course it's what he should have been about, not daydreaming about the Dutch girl who'd offered him far more than he'd bargained.

Thomas and Jack joined the young lovers and they played a few hands of cards. At last the night came to an end and the Hodgesons left for Eastshore. Gabriel was surprised to feel tired after his trip. Perhaps it was the strain of the deal which had made him weary, that and the heat from the fire. It was October and the nights were drawing in but it wasn't cold. He knew Caroline liked to be warm so his father always kept the fire banked up when she was at Westshore. It would be odd having a woman about the place when they married. He tried to imagine it but couldn't quite see Caroline as mistress of Westshore.

R

Two nights later Gabriel saw the light spilling out of The Hope and Anchor as two drunken sailors poured themselves out of the tap room. He made his way to the public bar and looked about for his friend. He saw Bendor Percy wave in his direction, a half empty bottle of claret in his hand.

'Don't bother waiting for me - I'm not late am I?'

'I'm early. What did you want me to do, suck a sherbet while I wait?' He playfully punched his old school friend on the arm. 'Good trip, successful?'

Gabriel told the man who was like a brother to him an edited version of the deal. He proposed they celebrated by ordering another bottle. A comely looking serving wench sidled up to the table. 'What can I get you two young gentlemen?' She fluttered her lashes at them both.

'Another bottle of this decidedly mediocre claret, unless you've something better to offer.' Bendor was an established flirt.

'I'll see what I can do, oh and I'll look out a better bottle for you as well, cheeky boy.'

Gabriel guffawed loudly as they watched the wench move her snake hips between the tables. 'Are the ladies of Cambridge as obliging?'

'I'm pleased to report they are, they know a good thing when they see it.'

'It's strange here without you, I don't mind admitting I miss you Ben. Three years at university is a long time is it not? We were inseparable for so long and now we're apart for most of the year.'

'Good Lord Gabe, don't go getting gloomy on my last night. This is my final year. Believe me I too will be glad to return although I've had fun. Don't forget I'll be home for Christmas as always, sooner if I get sent down.'

'Why should you get sent down? You're a brain box and work hard, you've made a great success of university.'

'I should get honours in carousing and womanising at the pleasure gardens. The extracurricular activities have certainly broadened my horizons.'

The serving wench placed a bottle of brandy in front of them. 'Will this pass muster? Just in on a ship from France, finest cognac this side of Boulogne.' She sat on Gabriel's knee. 'Well aren't you a handsome one, have you forgot your manners? Don't you want to thank me?'

'*He* doesn't but you can be my leaving present, hold hard for an hour and I'll be right with you.' He tossed her a silver coin which she caught deftly and dropped down her cleavage.

‘Then consider me yours. And if you can find that later I’ll let you have it back.’ Ben grinned as he uncorked the brandy stopper and poured two glasses to the brim.

‘To friendship, to women and to good times yet to come.’ The two friends raised their glasses then downed the brandy in one before refilling them.

R

Gabriel last saw his best friend smirking and leading the comely bar wench aloft. He left the bar and made his way to the east side of the bay. He wasn’t keen for the night to come to an end just yet. He always hated the end of the summer break when Bendor returned to campus but this would be the last time he told himself. To stop his mood becoming morbid he thought to have a diversion of his own.

He rounded the corner of Foxton’s yard and side-stepped a drunk in the gutter then knocked at the door of his lady friend. She wasn’t his mistress he told himself, though Bendor always strenuously disagreed, he was too young to have a mistress he’d argued. Old married men had mistresses, not young bucks like him.

Libby Lawson opened the door a bright smile on her pretty face. ‘You’re home safe and sound I’m pleased to see. Come in, let me take your hat.’

They sat side by side on the settle by the fire. ‘You still have enough coal left?’ Gabriel asked. ‘Let me know when you need more, your stocks must be running low.’

‘It’s been mild so far this autumn, I’ve hardly lit the fire except for cooking of course. I should be fine for another week or two but thank you.’

‘I almost forgot,’ he said fumbling in his jacket pocket, ‘I got you a little present from Amsterdam.’

He handed over a small but beautifully beribboned box of chocolates. They were a little squashed he noticed but Libby looked happy enough.

‘Thank you, you’re so thoughtful. Would you like one?’

‘Save them for yourself, they’re a treat for you not me.’

She kissed his cheek then he took her in his arms and kissed her on the lips. After a few moments he slid his arm about her shoulders and pulled her closer. ‘This house is much drier than your old one is it not? The old one was excessively damp.’ He realised he was a little drunk. It was hardly a fitting topic for seduction.

‘It is. I’m so pleased you found this place for me. It’s a better neighbourhood too.’

Gabriel remembered the drunk lying on the street not one hundred yards from the front door. Not such a good area, but better than where Libby had lived before. When her brother had lost all their money she had been forced to take in sewing even though she’d never had to work when her father was alive. But then her father had died and her wastrel brother had gambled away their inheritance leaving Libby destitute. When her only brother killed himself with drink Libby had been at her wit’s end. Gabriel had stepped in and helped her, paid her rent, brought her coal and food, befriended her.

Gradually the friendship had morphed into something more... they were lovers. Yes he discreetly put money in the little tin she had by the kitchen door, her rainy day tin she called it, but it wasn’t payment in kind. It was money freely given to help keep her head above water in lean times and to assist her until she could find work as a governess or a companion. The problem with this dream of hers was she knew of no one who could give her a reference. In the past she herself had had a governess, before her father’s business had failed. Now she was stranded, marooned between classes. Not quite a gentlewoman nor was she working class. Her role now, as she rightly thought, was as a governess but how it was to be achieved without references was anyone’s guess. He knew she would like to return to Alnwick but she couldn’t until a good position turned up.

‘Did you hear from the job you applied for in Bamburgh?’

‘Not yet, but there’s still time I hope. The position sounded ideal. Two orphaned little girls and their father a vicar. It would suit me down to the ground.’

Gabriel knew she was clutching at straws; it had been two weeks before he went away he’d posted the letter for her. The position would long since have been filled. He marvelled at her positive attitude. He’d never once heard her complain about her lot in life, though she had good reason to be despondent. She was indeed between a rock and a hard place.

He began to doze as he leant against her. He felt calm and relaxed, at ease. She shook him awake gently. ‘Gabriel, you’ll get a crick in your neck. Are you going home or staying? I’ll lock up if you’re to stay.’

The next morning Gabriel woke with a sour taste in his mouth. He remembered the bottles of claret and brandy he and Ben had polished off the night before. He had a dull ache behind his eyes.

He glanced over at Libby sleeping soundly beside him. She always said she slept better when he was there. He wasn’t surprised - the houses in this area of the bay were a target for burglars. Her chestnut coloured hair laid spread across her pillow like autumn leaves on a woodland floor. She snored, tiny light snuffles. He wondered if she was dreaming. What did she dream about? A home, a family, children?

Then he groaned. He’d been so drunk the night before all thoughts of precautions had gone out of the window. He couldn’t rightly remember if they’d even made love. Perhaps he’d fallen asleep as soon as his head had hit the pillow. All would be well he told himself, no need to worry. He was sure he’d been too inebriated now he came to think about it.

R

Gabriel didn’t like dances. Caroline, however, did and so he’d agreed to accompany her to the assembly rooms one wet and windy night in October. He was beginning to wish he’d stayed at home. Dances in draughty assembly rooms were the limit to his mind.

‘Who is that with Sir John? She looks young enough to be his daughter.’

‘Perhaps she’s his niece, a relative, who knows, who cares? Not I for sure.’

‘Gabriel, I hope you aren’t going to be grumpy all night. I would rather you stayed at home if you are going to be unsociable.’

That’s rich Gabriel thought, Caroline had pestered him all week to bring her to the dance. He hadn’t promised to be in a good mood, just to be present. Her father would have brought her but she had wheedled and talked him around and now he was regretting being coerced.

A family friend of the Hodgesons asked Caroline to dance and he watched as she tripped off happily to take her place in the line. All heads turned as she began to dance. Not only was Caroline good looking she was accomplished. She was light on her feet, poised and perfectly attuned to the music. He would have to brush up on his technique when they married. He could hardly lead her out for the first dance of their new life together and step on her toes as he most assuredly would. He lacked practice, always avoiding the dance floor if at all possible.

He looked about him then saw a matronly looking lady watching him and smiling from across the room. It was Rosalind Coates the wife of his father’s lawyer. He hadn’t recognised her. He knew she’d been ill but now he saw how altered she was. He moved to speak with her and her two young daughters, Felicity and Mary. He asked after Saul. He was away on business it seemed. When there was an awkward lull in the conversation Gabriel knew he was supposed to ask one of the daughters to dance. He guessed Mary was the eldest so felt compelled to lead her out. He led her to the floor and was further dismayed to find the dance

was a minuet. He suppressed a sigh. Caroline was also on the floor but with a different partner this time.

Gabriel also felt he had to escort Felicity too. It turned out it was her first dance and she was excited. He tried not to spoil her evening and made an effort to be sociable. After returning Fliss to her mother Gabriel led Caroline through to the refreshment room. When they were seated he noticed she was quiet, reserved.

‘Is something wrong?’ he asked innocently.

‘Not at all, I’m having a lovely evening.’

The look on her face said differently.

‘You at least have had enough partners. You’ve danced every dance have you not?’

‘Yes indeed, every dance with a different partner.’

Gabriel chewed a pastry thoughtfully. Women were a closed book to him most of the time. What they *said* and what they *meant* was sometimes beyond him. He realised now was one of those occasions. Although he’d known Caro for years, since they were children, he had no clue what was amiss. This was because she was well brought up and never said what she really thought. She was always the lady; she never got cross, never raised her voice, never laughed too loudly and always gave in to him on all matters. The latter trait he admired, the others confused him. She was clearly upset about something but what he had no idea. She had wanted to dance and as he’d just remarked, she had danced every dance so what could the problem be he mused.

Before he could ask her, Lizzie Bright and her beau came to join them. Caroline’s face lit up as if she’d just been presented with a diamond necklace. More confusion.

‘Good evening Gabriel.’ Lizzie sat down and began to pick at the food on her plate like a little bird. Did any woman eat a square meal these days?

‘Have you told Gabriel our news Caroline?’ Lizzie asked waving her hand under Gabriel’s nose.

‘Finally popped the question,’ Tommy Smith admitted. ‘Your turn next Gabriel.’

The penny dropped. Lizzie was an old school friend of Caroline, friend being a loose term in this case. For friend read rival. Gabriel knew Caroline had wanted to become engaged before Lizzie, why he didn’t comprehend. Now blasted Tommy Smith had landed him in hot water. It mattered not to Gabriel whether Lizzie Bright was engaged but it went some way to explaining Caro’s long face, well until she put on a front for Lizzie’s benefit that is.

On their way back to Eastshore Caroline sat opposite him in her father’s carriage. The silence was deafening.

‘Are you cross because Lizzie is engaged before you? You are aren’t you?’

‘Of course not, I’m pleased for her. I’d be pleased for any of my friends if their beau had proposed marriage.’

‘I see, then the reason you’re upset is because I haven’t yet formally asked for *your* hand, though why you think it important heaven knows. You know we’ll get married sooner or later. It’s understood.’

‘Sooner or later is a somewhat vague time frame is it not Gabriel? Understood by whom?’

‘By our families of course who are all that matter surely?’

‘Of course you’re right. When you put it like that I see your point of view perfectly.’

‘Good, then come and sit beside me, unless Ellise would be lonely.’ The chaperone shrank back into the shadow but was still listening he knew.

Caroline didn’t move. ‘It wouldn’t be seemly, we’re not betrothed.’ There was no hint of irony in Caro’s reply Gabriel noticed.

‘I won’t tell if you don’t.’ He tried to lighten the mood.

He saw his sweetheart’s eyes dart to Ellise.

‘Ellise, could you just once turn a blind eye, pretend you didn’t see Miss Hodgeson sit beside me? I solemnly promise not to molest her.’ His grin faded from his face as silence greeted his witty riposte. It seemed he was the only one amused.

At Eastshore Gabriel handed Caroline from the carriage.

‘Goodnight Gabriel and thank you for escorting me. I’ve had a pleasant evening. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘You and Jack are dining with us here at Eastshore.’

‘Are we? I thought we were dining on Friday.’

‘It is Friday tomorrow.’

‘So it is. I seem to have lost a day.’

‘Perhaps it was the day after Bendor left for Cambridge. I think Jack said you were away again.’ Gabriel looked puzzled, then remembered he’d been at Libby’s. ‘It’s Father’s birthday, surely you remember?’

‘Of course.’

‘Are you to use our carriage or will you walk to Westshore from here?’

Gabriel sighed. ‘I think I’ll walk, it’s stopped raining. The fresh air will do me good.’

R

At breakfast the next morning Gabriel and his father had finished discussing the day ahead.

‘We’re expected at Eastshore at three don’t forget,’ Jack added as Gabriel refilled his coffee can.

‘Caro reminded me last night.’

Jack smiled. ‘She’ll make a good wife, keep you on the straight and narrow, remind you about your social engagements, and be a good hostess, keep house. It will be good to have a woman about the place again. Our lives will change of course, we’ll have to make adjustments when Caroline is at the helm. I wonder if Lisbet will bend.’

‘She’ll not like doing things differently for certain but that’s some way off. I was going to talk to you about that, my marriage I mean.’

‘When are you to make the engagement formal? When had you thought to announce it?’

‘That’s just it, think about it Father. If we formalise the arrangement it will be expected we’ll marry within three or four months.’

‘Exactly, now is the perfect time to ask for her hand. You know she and Thomas have their hearts set on a Christmas wedding. Mary and Thomas were married on Christmas Eve and as a way of marking the happy day Caroline wants to replicate it. Ask her now and her wish will be granted.’

Gabriel thought for a long moment. ‘But what of my wishes? Why this Christmas? Why the rush? It could just as well be the Christmas after.’

‘I suppose it could.’ His father suddenly looked wistful. ‘I stood up for Thomas as you know. There was heavy snow the week before his wedding day, we all thought the guests wouldn’t get to the church but as Mary was a local lass they hadn’t to come far. All was well in the end. To my eyes your mother outshone the bride, not that she had intended to of course, she adored Mary. Loaned the bride her sapphire earrings as her something blue... Alice wore a stunning gown, it was gold taffeta. I remember it as if it was yesterday.’

Gabriel saw his father’s eyes become glassy and thought to change the topic. It didn’t bode well to dwell on the late Alice Reynolds; they would both become down hearted, morbid.

‘Bendor will be my second of course so a Christmas wedding would suit me; Ben will be home from university but I still favour the following Christmas.’ Gabriel stirred sugar into his

third coffee. 'When we marry there will be a honeymoon. I don't want to neglect the business for three months whilst we travel Europe. I'm just learning the ropes, taking some of the responsibility from your shoulders.'

Jack chewed thoughtfully. 'I'd not considered the honeymoon. Your mama and I had but two days in Morpeth. It's up to you my boy, your happiness comes first as always. If what you *really* want is to wait then of course you must but don't postpone for my sake. I'm as strong as an ox, I'm still able to do the heavy lifting figuratively speaking.' He looked at his son directly. 'May I offer you some advice?'

'You know I value your opinion.' Gabriel waited.

'Tell Caroline how you feel, tell her *why* you want to wait. Assure her of your love and devotion and then I'm sure she'll understand. She too is young. You both have a lot to learn about life, love and for you, business. Talk to her, let her know how you feel.'

Gabriel nodded. 'I'll take heed of your counsel Father, I'll speak to her.'

R

After the birthday dinner for Thomas, Gabriel managed to manoeuvre Caroline into the library - without a chaperone.

'Alone at last,' Gabriel said taking Caroline's slender fingers in his. He raised them to his lips then taking full advantage of Ellise being absent, kissed Caroline's soft lips. She didn't exactly melt into his arms but then he didn't expect it. Caroline of course was inexperienced in such matters. She wasn't like any of the women he knew, she was no light woman. Well brought up young ladies kept their feelings on a short leash at least until they were married.

'I want to talk to you about our engagement Caro. I know last night you were... well anyway I want to explain how I feel.'

'Go on,' she said warily.

He explained his reasons for not formally announcing their engagement and why he thought they should wait a year before they married.

'I understand perfectly. Of course it makes sense now you've explained it to me. I should have realised you wouldn't want to go on honeymoon because of Reynolds Shipping.'

'So you're in agreement? We'll wait a year?'

'Of course.' She looked up at him through her lashes and placed her hands on his chest, a forward gesture for her. 'I thought you had changed your mind. I thought you were putting off the engagement because you had fallen out of love with me.'

For a moment Gabriel was lost for words. It was true he wasn't madly, passionately in love with Caroline but he did love her, like her, respect her. But did he *desire* her? *Need* her. He'd never been the type to believe in fairytale love, although he knew his parents had had a true love affair, but he did think he should feel more somehow. A wanting, a yearning, an excitement of what their futures would hold. He and Caroline had never discussed children. In this respect he was like his father; he loved children, wanted lots. Gabriel knew the one aspect of his father's marriage which had disappointed him was his wife dying young and before she could give him more children.

'Of course I still want you, I love you.'

'You rarely say so these days.'

'Surely you know why? Ellise is tactful but pouring one's heart out in front of a chaperone is off putting to say the least.' He pulled her into his arms. 'She's not here now so let me assure you of my feelings.' He kissed her again. He'd hoped she'd unbend a little now he'd put her mind at rest but it wasn't the case. She pulled away, moved to a table and began idly turning the pages of a book.

‘I know of course you will want a son and heir Gabriel but once that ambition has been achieved then we will... desist from producing more, or so I hope.’

He looked at her closely. Was this a question or a statement?

‘Of course I want children, boys and girls, lots of them hopefully. He watched her pretty mouth turn down. ‘We’ve never discussed it, I just presumed all women wanted babies... ’

‘As a wife it is my duty to give you a son. After an heir has been produced I don’t think I will want more. Childbirth plays havoc with a lady’s figure. Have you seen Cecily Noble recently?’

Gabriel was taken aback. ‘In that case you’d better hope our first born is a son. I’m able to provide for you financially as you’re well aware but I can’t guarantee to provide you with a son at my first attempt.’ Caroline blushed to the roots of her hair. He realised he’d spoken harshly. He moved to her side and again took her hands in his. He tried cajoling. ‘Imagine lots of little Carolines toddling about Westshore. If they’re the image of you will they not be adorable?’

The library door opened and a flustered looking Ellise entered. Seeing him holding Caroline’s hand she threw him a look which screamed *unhand my mistress you brute*. Gabriel stepped back frustrated.

‘I’m sorry Miss Caroline I got sidetracked, I’ve been looking for you. Your father said you’d gone into the garden.’

‘In this weather,’ Caroline said trying not to show her irritation. Gabriel couldn’t work out if she was annoyed because they had been interrupted or because the maid had been lax in her duty in the first place.

Ellise continued to glare at Gabriel. It was clear she thought he’d manufactured this situation, to be alone with Caroline. On this occasion she was wrong. It had been a happy accident. Now he wished they’d not been left alone. The conversation had unnerved him. He bowed to Caroline. ‘I’m needed back at the bay Caroline. Good afternoon, please excuse me.’ He swept from the room and was gone before she could reply.

R

The relationship between Caroline and Gabriel had been strained since their talk in the library. With Christmas looming Gabriel felt even more confused than before. Since Caroline’s announcement regarding her thoughts on children he’d been forced to wonder seriously if they were compatible at all. He could have kicked himself for not seeing this before. Why in all the years they’d known each other had they not discussed children? He’d assumed Caroline would want them but until that day they had never discussed it, then they’d been rudely interrupted. Since Ellise clearly felt derelict in her duties that day, she had been even more vigilant since. It was most perplexing.

It was Christmas Eve as Gabriel made his way to the east side of the bay. After leaving his office he had completed his Christmas shopping; now he would deliver the gift he’d bought for Libby. He knew she would be alone at Christmas and he was sorry for it, he felt for her but there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing except make sure she was warm and as comfortable as possible. He’d already made sure she had more than enough fuel and had called two days ago with little extras, sweetmeats, nuts, mincemeat and other little luxuries he knew she wouldn’t buy for herself. He knew she saved every penny for when the time came to move back to Alnwick, then she would have money in reserve for travel and moving expenses. He applauded her positive attitude and forward planning. If ever she married she would make someone a good wife. The thought struck him forcibly. Was he, because of their *misalliance*, holding her back? How was she to meet anyone else whilst she consorted with him? If indeed she did want to meet someone. He presumed like most women

Libby wanted to marry, but then again he'd mistakenly presumed all women wanted children; he'd been wrong on that account.

Now wasn't the time to think of it but he vowed after Christmas he would give it some thought. Libby let him in laughing as he dropped several parcels on the floor.

'Oops! Good job there are no breakables amongst the presents.' He kissed her flushed cheek.

They sat beside a roaring fire and she handed him brandy and mince pies. 'I made these this morning. I'm sure they aren't a patch on Lisbet's baking but I like them.'

He bit into one and declared they were just as good as Lisbet's which seemed to please her. After half an hour he made to leave. 'I've bought you a little something for Christmas; I know you won't have anything from anyone else so I hope you won't be offended.'

He rummaged amongst the parcels he'd left by the door. There was a fine wool shawl for Lisbet, tobacco for Abner and various other gifts for his father, Thomas and Caroline. He'd bought several presents from Fattorini, the jeweller on Northumberland Street; he searched for the one he'd bought for Libby. He couldn't find it. It wasn't there. He looked again. Surely he'd not lost it? He searched again to no avail.

'Man alive, I must have left it in the shop, or dropped it! I'll retrace my steps, see if I can't find it, I'm so sorry Libby.' He pushed his hands deep in his coat pocket cross with himself for disappointing her. Not that she would have expected anything from him, she was always unassuming. Then he laughed out loud. 'It's here in my pocket all along. What a fool I am!' He handed the beautifully wrapped box to her. He saw her notice the ribbon which had the Fattorini name on it.

'My goodness Gabriel I can't accept this, it must have cost the earth.'

'Of course you can, it's just a little token of my... erm... esteem. Open it tomorrow and think of me.'

'I have a little something for you too, but nothing like this I'm sad to say.'

She handed him a small, carefully wrapped parcel tied with string and decorated with a sprig of holly and ivy.

There were unshed tears in her eyes as he left her wishing her a Merry Christmas. After the festivities he would come to a decision about what to do about Libby. He knew he owed it to her if she was to make any sort of life for herself. He would try to help her secure a good position. He didn't know how but he'd think of something.

R

After eating a huge Christmas dinner Gabriel, Jack, Thomas and Caroline sat replete in the drawing room at Westshore. The fire was blazing, enough candles were lit to light up the town and now all there was left to do was to unwrap their gifts.

Since their respective mothers had died not eighteen months apart, it had been the custom at Christmas for Caroline to open her gifts first, then it would be Gabriel's turn and finally Jack and Thomas would unwrap theirs, if that is they hadn't fallen asleep as they usually did. Caroline was spoilt by her father and always received a mountain of presents.

Thomas looked on as Caroline unwrapped a pair of leather riding gauntlets, the final gift from her father. She thanked him. Her main gift had been a new hunter, a handsome dappled mare she had decided to call Mercury.

'Imagine what it will be like Jack when we have grandchildren,' Thomas chuckled jovially, 'then the youngest will get to open their presents first. Shall you be able to wait Caroline?' Her father's innocent teasing had caused Caroline's face to flush. Gabriel stepped in to save her further embarrassment. 'Here Caro, open my gift next.' Gabriel passed her a box with the telltale Fattorini emblem on the ribbon. No sooner had he handed it over than a

thought struck him. Surely Thomas wouldn't think it an engagement ring? Gabriel held his breath as she pulled the ribbon and lifted the lid of the box.

'Oh... they are quite the prettiest earrings. Thank you Gabriel.'

Earrings? Now, too late, he could see what had happened. The two boxes, the one for Libby and the one for Caroline were practically identical. In his confusion when he'd lost one of the boxes on Christmas Eve he'd handed the wrong one to his lover. Instead of Libby getting a pair of simple gold hoops he hoped she could wear if ever she secured a job, she would open a ruby and diamond ring. A ring which was far too extravagant for anyone from her walk of life. In comparison Caroline had a pair of modest earrings she would never dream of wearing, they were far too plain, even for everyday. What to do, what to say to make amends? He knew Caroline was too polite to say anything but he could see by the look on her face she was disappointed. Had she too, despite what he'd said, expected an engagement ring?

'Caro I'm so sorry, I can't think how this has happened. I bought you something different, not earrings. The jeweller must have wrapped the wrong gift.' It sounded lame even to him.

Jack said: 'For whom did you buy the earrings? Lisbet I expect. I remember her saying she'd lost one of her favourite pair. Well done Gabriel for remembering, she'll be cock a hoop. But where is Caroline's present? Presumably you've given it to Lisbet by mistake.' He roared with laughter. 'Quick my boy, before she opens it, go and swap the parcels.'

Gabriel wasn't used to lying but recently in business he'd grown used to thinking on his feet. 'I wanted to give the earrings to Lisbet in person so I kept them back. I think the error is with the jeweller. He must have forgotten to give me Caro's Christmas box. I also bought your cravat pin from Fattorini so I can see how it happened. I'm sorry Caro can you ever forgive me? As soon as the jeweller opens I'll go and fetch it. He'll also get a flea in his ear for poor service.'

'I should think so too,' Thomas chortled, 'I'm sure you can wait one more day Caroline. I'm sure it will be worth waiting for.' He winked at her. Gabriel stifled a groan. Thomas obviously thought it was an engagement ring, he only hoped Caroline wasn't of the same mind.

R

It was the day after Boxing Day and Gabriel and Bendor were drinking rum in the library at Westshore.

'Lord Gabriel what a pickle! I knew this double life you're leading would catch up with you.' Bendor was red in the face from laughing at his friend's news. Gabriel had told him about the mix up with the Christmas presents. He still couldn't see the funny side, he doubted he ever would. Gabriel hated lying and he hated causing pain. And now he'd done both and felt ashamed.

'So what did you do to rectify the error? Is the mess sorted out?'

Gabriel crossed his legs and looked pointedly at his best friend. 'It's far from funny Ben, the only person happy with the damn situation is Lisbet. She got a new pair of earrings. Of course I had to go cap in hand to Libby and explain what had happened. Luckily she thought I'd taken leave of my senses buying her a ruby and diamond ring in the first place. She's so down-to-earth, sensible. Before I went to see Libby of course I had to buy another pair of earrings for her as well. I felt bad, really bad. She had no visitors at Christmas and then when she opened the ring box she must have wondered what I was up to.' Gabriel put his head in his hands. 'I wouldn't hurt her for the world but now...'

'But now... what?'

‘I was going to end the liaison in the New Year, make a fresh start - for her benefit more than mine.’

‘You’re all heart.’

Gabriel ignored his friend. ‘I thought to help her to get back to Alnwick, secure a good position, but now I feel, oh I don’t know.’ He went off at a tangent. ‘And Thomas was clearly expecting me to give Caro an engagement ring... man what a muddle.’

‘Well it’s of your making my friend. Life is complicated enough without keeping two women.’

‘I’m *not* keeping two women. You make me sound like a rakehell.’

Bendor raised both eyebrows. ‘Come to Cambridge at Easter, I’ll show you a good time. I’ve found the ladies from thereabouts to be most accommodating.’

‘I’m giving up women, they’re too confusing. I’m going to remain single.’

‘I take it you haven’t told Caroline yet?’ Bendor was still laughing.

Gabriel took a deep breath. ‘Far from it. In fact now I feel compelled to present the ruby and diamond as an engagement ring which of course I’d not intended. However, I’m going to suggest a long engagement if I do.’ He let the statement hang in the air and heard Bendor give out a low whistle.

‘Lord Gabe, finally.’

Gabriel bit his lip and scraped his fingers down his cheek. ‘I love Caro I really do but...’

‘You aren’t madly in love with her.’ Bendor offered his point of view freely knowing it would be considered. ‘I always assumed you’d grow out of love with Caroline, come to see her as a friend rather than a lover. I thought it would have ended long before now. I could be wrong but you seem to be just going through the motions; you never appear excited to see her. You barely mention her to me, in fact you talk about Libby more than you talk about Caroline.’

‘Libby isn’t the issue,’ he sighed, ‘but I have some serious thinking to do. Not only will my decision affect me, it will affect my father and Thomas. They have expectations too.’

‘Think carefully Gabe. You can’t spend the rest of your life married to a woman who you aren’t *in* love with, it’s unfair on both of you.’

‘I know it, and I do love her, just not passionately but there’s something else... no forget it, I shouldn’t betray a confidence.’

Bendor waited and when no more was forthcoming said: ‘You’ve made up your mind then? You’re going to propose marriage, become formally engaged to your childhood sweetheart.’ Ben wasn’t laughing anymore.

Gabriel hauled air into his lungs. ‘I rather think I am, and sooner than I’d thought. The damn ring debacle has forced my hand. Everyone, especially the lady herself, is expecting it.’

R

The footman showed Gabriel into the drawing room at Eastshore where Caroline was at her embroidery. She was alone. He could hardly believe his luck.

‘What an unexpected surprise,’ Caroline said. ‘To what do I owe the honour? You don’t often call in the middle of the day.’

‘I felt obliged to rectify my error. I can’t apologise enough for the mix up on Christmas Day.’ He threw his tricorne on a chair. ‘I know it spoilt your day.’

‘Don’t be silly, these things happen.’

He moved closer. ‘Where’s the shadow?’

‘By that I presume you mean Ellise. She’s running an errand for me and won’t be back for at least an hour.’

Gabriel was relieved, what he had to say would be difficult enough but with the maid listening in it would have been even harder. He inched closer still to his sweetheart and took a deep breath.

‘Caroline, will you marry me?’ He took a small box from his pocket, opened it so she could see the ruby and diamond ring which was now transformed from a simple Christmas present into an official engagement ring.

‘Oh Gabriel, it’s so beautiful.’

‘Is that a yes?’

‘Yes, yes, yes!’

He placed the ring on her finger then drew her into his arms and kissed her; she was more responsive than she’d ever been. It was surprising the difference an engagement ring could make he thought.

‘There’s just one small detail Caro.’

‘Oh, what detail?’ She pulled apart from him and looked at him suspiciously.

‘I know you would like us to wed soon but I thought to marry next Christmas, on Christmas Eve like your parents.’

‘Of course, it was always an unspoken plan was it not? Now I’m betrothed I don’t mind waiting at all. It will give me plenty of time to plan the perfect wedding, it will be wonderful.’

‘Good then that’s settled.’ He watched as she held her hand in the air admiring the ring as it glittered in the light. He was pleased she liked it; he’d hoped she would especially as when he’d chosen it he hadn’t intended her to wear it as a betrothal ring.

He dropped to a sofa then pulled her onto his knee, wrapped his arms around her and began to kiss her thoroughly. He was all for taking advantage of this rare opportunity of the maid’s absence. Caroline wriggled, trying to free herself from his grasp as his hands began to wander. She giggled nervously.

‘Gabriel, someone may come in.’

‘Who? Your father’s at the bay and Ellise is Lord knows where, lost hopefully.’

‘How do you know Father isn’t in his study?’

‘Because not an hour ago I called at the bay to ask for your hand.’

‘Oh, and what did he say?’

Gabriel stroked her hair. ‘What do you think he said? I’ve proposed haven’t I? And anyway you don’t want to know what he actually said.’

‘Why? Do tell me. He looks upon you as a son, surely he didn’t make you beg?’

Gabriel was amused at the thought. ‘Very well then, what he said was “about blasted time, I thought you’d never get on with it”.’

Caroline made no comment but tried to get up. Gabriel, however, was keen to keep her captive, they seldom had time alone. He ran his hands over her body lightly then nibbled her long, elegant neck. She had a beautiful neck.

‘Gabriel, would you take advantage of a lady, we are betrothed *not* married.’ She tried to free herself.

‘Come on Caro, give a man a little pleasure. It’s somewhat of an ordeal proposing marriage, I need a reward.’

‘Which you shall have on our wedding night.’ Her cheeks pinkened.

Gabriel wasn’t about to give up so easily. Caro’s dress, always stylish, was cut revealingly low. The lacy fichu that made the bodice a little more modest had come loose. Gabriel’s finger ran slowly from her neck to lightly skim her silky breast. Her reaction took him aback. It was as though she’d received a thunder bolt. She pushed him away quickly but in doing so the brooch which secured the fichu caught on the button of his sleeve. They were stuck together. Caroline’s face and neck were flushed as she tried in vain to unfasten them.

‘Let me Caro, you’re making it worse.’ She stopped writhing, sat perfectly still like a marble statue while Gabriel tried to release the bar on the brooch without bending it. His cheek was almost touching her breast. He realised it was impossible to do one handed.

‘I give up, you try - you have two hands after all.’ He looked up and saw she was almost in tears. ‘What’s all this? Caro don’t upset yourself.’

Her lips were a stubborn line, without answering she attempted to unfasten herself from him just as Ellise entered the room. Caroline leapt from his knee wrenching the button from his sleeve and tearing the material of his jacket. She ran from the room in tears. The maid glared at him then ran after her mistress.

Gabriel inspected the tear to his sleeve. ‘Well that’s a good start,’ he said to himself. He wondered what to do. He could hardly run after her, and anyway Ellise had probably bolted the door of the bedchamber to which his fiancée had presumably fled. He puffed out his cheeks, helped himself to a large brandy and sat down.

He realised he had pushed too hard. Caroline had led a sheltered life, she wasn’t a woman of the world. She lived here at Eastshore almost in isolation with just her father for company. She didn’t have a mother to guide her, she didn’t even have female relatives nearby in whom to confide. He realised his wedding night would need careful handling. He hadn’t meant to frighten her but of course Caroline knew little of courtship let alone what couples got up to in the bedroom. He drank off the brandy.

Gabriel had been coming to Eastshore since he was a small boy, he knew the house well. He made his way to the study and sat behind the desk Thomas used when he was at home. He sharpened a quill and set about writing an abject apology to his fiancée.

R

The night of his engagement party was cold and frosty. The January sky was clear and a sprinkling of stars littered the heavens.

‘I’m so happy for you my boy,’ Jack Reynolds said as they arrived at Eastshore. ‘I just wish your dear mama was here to share this night with us, but listen to me being gloomy! This is a celebration, come, let us enjoy ourselves.’

They were shown into the drawing room where Caroline and Thomas awaited them. Caroline, wearing an ivory silk confection edged with pink, looked elegant and more beautiful than ever. A hundred friends were expected as Gabriel and his fiancée stood waiting to receive their guests.

The incident on the day of the marriage proposal had been forgotten after Gabriel’s letter of apology had been graciously accepted. Later he’d been able to talk to her and promise there would be no repeat of his forward behaviour. She had forgiven him saying she knew she’d behaved foolishly, she too had asked forgiveness for her hysterics. She told him what he’d already guessed; she was shy of men’s attentions and his in particular. He’d been able to reassure her and told her on their wedding night he would take the greatest of care to make her feel at ease. She had been pacified.

Later, as Gabriel mingled with his guests, he met up with a branch of the local aristocracy, the Noble family. ‘You’re a lucky man Gabriel,’ Captain Charles Noble said, ‘many are the men here tonight who are envious of your good fortune in securing such a beauty.’ His brother Claude agreed enthusiastically.

‘I know it, don’t think I wasn’t aware when you set your cap at her many moons ago, but not only is my fiancée beautiful she has good sense where men are concerned.’ Gabriel was in good spirits. He was pleased Charles, an old school friend, was able to attend as he was home on leave from the navy. It went some way to making up for Bendor’s absence; he of

course was back in Cambridge. 'You were always a rogue where the ladies were concerned Charles. Will you ever settle down?'

'I doubt it and if I do the day is a long, long way off.'

Charles was part of the Noble family who were local landowners. They were landed but not rich which probably explained why Charles had attended the same school as Gabriel instead of Harrow or Eton. His family were always short of funds. Claude, the eldest, had married for money but he seemed happy enough with his choice, a large lady of certain appetites. They had a tumble down pile and a growing family to support. Gabriel couldn't remember how many children he and Cecily had but he knew they were all girls. A male heir had yet to make an appearance.

Charles said: 'And if I marry she'll need to have a decent dowry - it made Caroline a tempting prospect. Riches and beauty, what more could a man ask for?'

'Brains!' Cecily Noble, Charles' sister-in-law, replied quick as a flash. 'Dear Lord all we women are to you men is a source of money, oh and breeding machines too of course.' She brayed like a horse. She was a larger than life character in every sense of the word.

Claude asked: 'When's the wedding to be Gabriel, spring I expect?'

'Not until Christmas.' Gabriel looked uncomfortable as Cecily exclaimed: 'Christmas! That gives you plenty of time to change your mind.' The group laughed loudly then Charles steered Gabriel towards a footman bearing drinks. 'Why the wait, not got cold feet already have you?'

Gabriel explained his reasoning for the delay.

'I see, I'm sure in the meantime you'll be able to get your needs met elsewhere. Tell me, is Lottie Lambton free and easy?' They both watched as the young lady in question danced with Thomas.

'She's free, *and* an heiress I believe, but I'm not sure how easy she is. No doubt you'll be able to tell me next time we meet.' Charles was a handsome man, a magnet for the ladies in his naval uniform.

'No doubt I will.'

When the last of the guests had finally departed for their beds Gabriel managed to snatch a moment with his future wife.

'Did you enjoy yourself? You were certainly the belle of the ball.'

'I had so much fun. When we are married we must entertain often, it's so diverting.'

'Of course, and it will be good for commerce. Much business is done at house parties.'

'I noticed.' She raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. 'Jack and Father can't help themselves. I hope you won't become such a bore.'

'I'll try not to but as I say when men are well fed and watered they like nothing better than to do a little business.' He stifled a yawn. 'I must be going or it'll be easier to go straight to the bay from here. Have you seen the time?'

'Good night Gabriel, sweet dreams.' She leaned in and planted a chaste kiss on his cheek.

As they rode home side by side it began to snow. Gabriel wrapped his coat tightly around him. Copper snorted her displeasure at being out on such a bone chillingly cold night. Jack disturbed the silence. 'Well my boy, there is no turning back now, not that you would want to - why would you? I only hope you and Caroline will be as happy as your mama and I.' Gabriel smiled across to his father whose muffler smothered his face. 'I pray you two will be more fortunate than us and have a large family.'

Gabriel hoped so too but kept the thought to himself. The snow was shrouding the earth obscuring all as it covered the land. Hadn't Caroline intimated she wasn't keen on children? Perhaps when she'd had her first baby she'd change her mind, become more maternal. He knew he'd do all in his power to persuade her, Westshore was a large house and like his

father Gabriel dearly wanted a house full of children to overrun it with love and laughter, sticky fingers and scuffed knees.

R

‘A sent the lad fer the doc, he’s here now,’ Abner said taking Gabriel’s coat.

‘The doctor? Why? Is Father so bad? Has he a chill, a fever?’

‘Lisbet says he’s a funny colour. A just did what she telled me an’ sent fer the doc an’ then fer you. She said to send in that order so that’s what A did.’

‘Where is he?’

‘She’s med him stay in bed. Said as how he were short of breath.’

Gabriel flew up the stairs two at a time and rushed into his father’s bedchamber. The doctor was leaning over him listening to his chest. ‘How is my father? What’s wrong with him?’ The doctor looked too young to be practising medicine; to Gabriel he looked the same age as himself.

‘I’ll be as right as rain in no time,’ Jack said wheezing. His face looked slick with sweat and was undeniably a strange colour. Puce? ‘I had a sore throat and Lisbet has been too quick off the mark. I just told this nice young man I’ve not had need of a doctor these last thirty years and I don’t need one now. I’m so sorry to have bothered you Doctor. What did you say your name was?’

‘Chaffer, Wilson Chaffer. You’re not a bother to me sir, I am your servant. I think you are in need of my ministrations, you need medication. I can give you something for your throat and something to help you sleep.’

‘The pain isn’t so bad now. Sleep you say, I have work to do. It’s the middle of the day.’

‘You need to rest, you have a chill. I’ll leave powders for later but I want you to take this now. You will feel easier.’

‘Father I think you should do as the doctor says. There’s nothing pressing at the bay. Take a day off, as you say you’ll be back to your usual self by tomorrow.’

‘Very well, but it’s all a fuss about nothing.’ He took the draught the doctor offered.

When Dr Chaffer and Gabriel were alone in the drawing room Gabriel asked: ‘Is it serious, will he be better tomorrow?’

‘He may well be. I think it a problem with his lungs. They are congested, tight. He is wheezy, short of breath. Has he been out in the cold?’

Gabriel told of their short but snowy ride home from Eastshore the night before.

‘Mr Reynolds seems a strong character both in body and mind but the lungs are inflamed. Although we’ve come a long way we are still at odds about how to treat lung conditions. My guess is it will depend on how he responds to the treatment I’ve prescribed.

‘Your “guess”?’

‘Medicine as a science is still not as exact as one would like, only time will tell how your father responds. I suggest the room be kept warm but the window left open a little to allow fresh air to circulate. I have made a poultice for his chest to draw out the inflammation. Also I have given him a draught, another dose will be required in four hours and yet a third dose later this evening. He may well pick up. It all depends on how long his lungs have been failing. Has he complained of chest pain before?’

‘No never.’

‘The next few hours will tell me more. I can call again after I’ve done my rounds.’ He stood to leave.

‘Thank you, I would much appreciate it, let me see you out.’ Gabriel stopped suddenly. ‘I’ve never known my father to have a day’s illness in his life.’ He looked amazed at the thought.

‘Then he’s a lucky man, let’s hope he is soon on the mend sir.’

After Doctor Chaffer left, Lisbet came into the room. 'Shall A serve dinner? Are you hungry lad?'

'I suppose I ought to eat something but I can't say I'm starving.'

'A'll serve up then go an' sit with him, A don't like to think of him alone.'

'And then I'll take over, thank you Lisbet.'

Doctor Chaffer called at Westshore again, he was later than he'd expected. 'I had a difficult birthing over in Lesbury. How is the patient?'

'He woke around seven but he took the powder you left and slipped straight back to sleep again.'

Wilson Chaffer took his patient's pulse and checked his vital signs. Back in the drawing room Gabriel noticed the doctor rub his eyes. 'You're tired Doctor?'

'It has been a long day - yes I'm weary to the bone.'

'Then sup with me, stay the night if you've a mind.'

'Thank you, I will. I had intended to stay with your father at any rate.'

Later as they ate the doctor looked Gabriel in the eye. 'You said earlier your father had always enjoyed good health. I'm afraid to say I'm not sure he will fully recover from this condition. You say he's seventy two?' Gabriel nodded. 'At his age it is my opinion he will be an invalid for the rest of his days, if that is he survives the bout. It is my feeling he's suffered pain for some time, this chill has compounded an underlying condition. It is often the way with gentlemen - they are reluctant to call upon the services of a doctor and when they do it is often too late.'

Gabriel was stunned. He'd had no idea his father was failing. How had he not noticed?

After he and Chaffer had broken their fast the next morning the doctor set off on his rounds. Gabriel sent a note to Thomas telling him about his father's illness, he knew he'd want to know. Within the hour Thomas arrived and was standing by his old friend's bed. Jack was awake but short of breath.

'Lord Jack what's all this? Malingering?' He tried to sound jolly. 'Have you a woman hiding under the blankets? Is that what you're about?'

Jack smiled grimly. 'There's only ever been one woman for me Thomas, you know that and I think if I'm not much mistaken I'm soon to be reunited with my darling Alice.' Gabriel began to remonstrate but Jack shook his head slowly. 'I'm not afraid, don't fret. I leave all my worldly goods to you my boy, you know my will is lodged with Saul. I am content the business is in safe hands.' He closed his eyes and drew a ragged breath which was painful to behold.

'Rest Father, you know what the doctor said.'

'I do know. My only regret is I won't live to see you and Caroline fill this house with children.' His eyes flickered then closed. Thomas looked at Gabriel. 'He was hale and hearty only two nights ago, how changed he is, how sudden this has come upon him!'

Despite Dr Chaffer's best care and attention pneumonia complicated Jack Reynolds' condition. With each passing day he became weaker. His many friends visited knowing they were there to say their goodbyes. Three weeks after Gabriel's engagement party Jack Reynolds passed peacefully in his sleep.

Epilogue

The spring following his father's death was one of the sunniest and warmest Gabriel could ever remember. The gentle waves washed up on the sandy beach at Westshore hardly bothering to make a mark on the sand. The skies were clear and the winds temperate. Sea bathing was once more a pleasure after a turbulent winter.

Bendor, home for Easter, sat opposite his friend as they steadily drank their way down a bottle of French run brandy.

'How's Caroline?'

'She's well. She's been remarkably patient with me. I don't think I've been the easiest man to be around since Father's death.'

'Now she has a ring on her finger I imagine she's content, most women are I hear when they've bagged their prey.'

'Cynic,' Gabriel admonished. 'What news of the lady you wrote to me about, the one from Yorkshire, Grace is it?'

'Ah yes the lovely Grace. I do believe I shall soon be following in your footsteps. There, I admit it I'm truly smitten.'

'What tremendous news Ben, I can't wait to meet the woman who's tamed you. Tell me more about her.'

'She's dark haired, curves in all the right places and has the most adorable dimples when she smiles, which she does often. She has a lovely temperament and best of all a sense of humour. She laughs at all my jokes.'

Gabriel hiccupped spilling brandy down his breeches. 'Are you certain she's not a simpleton? She must be if she finds you humorous. Have you popped the question?'

'Not yet but I've taken Mama's advice and will do so when next we meet which will be on my way back to Cambridge. I'm to break my journey in Yorkshire and stay with her family for a few days. I'll write when I have her answer, not that there's any uncertainty she'll have me.'

'As Father used to say pride comes before a fall.'

'I know, it's the brandy talking; secretly I'm terrified she'll turn me down. I really love her Gabe.'

'She'll not turn you away, I'm so happy for you. You'll probably marry before me at this rate.'

'I wouldn't be at all surprised, but seriously Gabe how are you two lovebirds getting along?'

The two friends sat gazing at the fire for a few moments.

'Well enough - it's just as we discussed before. I love her but not like you seem to love Grace. It's different for us, we've known each other all our lives, been sweethearts for six years or more. We know each other inside out. There are no more surprises.'

'There's the wedding night!' Bendor winked. 'I take it you've not ventured there yet, not pre-empted the wedding vows?'

'With the shadow always in attendance? You have to be joking.'

'Tell me, are you and Libby still warm?'

Gabriel knitted his brows together. 'I meant to end it all in the New Year as you know but with Father's death and all I've not exactly got around to it. I haven't seen Libby since after Christmas when I had to explain about the ring. I feel bad as I'd intended to help her.'

'I remember you saying. So is it off then?'

Gabriel sighed. 'I'm still keeping her, paying her rent, if that's what you want to know but as I said I'm not visiting. Perhaps I'll call in the next week or so. It's never been just about the physical side as you well know. I like her, feel sorry for her – we're friends.'

'Friends! If you say so Gabe.' There was a companionable silence until Bendor broke it by changing the subject.

'So you've made your mind up. You're to commission a new ship.'

'I am, another collier to add to the two other ships in the line. It will be a huge undertaking but if, as I intend, I expand then another ship will help me exploit markets further afield.'

'Will you go with Bradshaws, the boatyard here in Alnmouth?'

Gabriel raked his fingers down the stubble on his cheek thoughtfully. 'I'd intended to but then I got talking to a man from Whitby. Of course I know Whitby built ships are renowned but I'd not thought to look further than Bradshaws. I'm to meet with two or three shipyards in Whitby next month. Two in particular have been recommended; one is Fishburns and the other a firm named Barkers. I've heard especially good things about John Barker.'

'It's good to see you looking to the future Gabe; you've had a rough time of it since your father passed. Those black moods of yours are never far away I know.' Bendor pursed his lips in a half smile and refilled their glasses.

Gabriel shrugged. 'I know. It's my nature, I always seem to look on the black side, but I feel strangely optimistic about the future, I'm quite positive for a change. This new project is diverting, giving me something to work towards, something to plan for, hopefully it'll be something which would make my father proud too. I have a good feeling. It will be the start of something big, I can feel it. Who knows what will happen in Whitby?'

'A toast.' Bendor and Gabriel raised their glasses. Finding them empty again they filled them to the brim. 'To Whitby and to women.'

The End