

Tristan Tolker.

By Jane Fenwick

Part 1

1

The North East Coast 1769.

Tristan Tolker peered into the forge. There was no one about; he hoped he'd not had a wasted journey. He glanced up and down the dusty street as a mangy mongrel trotted by giving him a wide berth. Hands stuffed deep into his pockets the young man turned to his left where The Anchorage Inn sheltered by the cliff face; he entered the tavern and approached the bar. The cool air was welcome after the heat of the sun. It was an unusually hot day in May.

‘Good day. Is William Wheelwright about? His forge appears to be deserted.’

The ruddy faced landlord took in the fact his new customer was a well dressed gentleman and so ordered his words accordingly. ‘I’m sorry sir he’s been called away on urgent business. A carriage has a broken axle I do believe, out near Runswick. He left two hours ago but shouldn’t be much longer.’

Tristan sighed. ‘A pint of ale landlord if you please. I shall wait a while and hope he returns soon.’

The landlord wiped a tankard on his apron and filled it to the brim. ‘Shall you be wanting victuals sir? We have a good rabbit pie and a stew that’s bound to be tasty.’

Tristan doubted the truth of the statement but it had been a long time since he had broken his fast. In this backwater of Kettleness on the north east coast of England the fare would, at best, be mediocre but his stomach was growling. ‘Very well bring me what you have.’

He sat by a window where the late spring sun slanted through the bubbled glass. He looked about the deserted inn as he quenched his thirst. The ale was surprisingly good and he accepted the top up the landlord offered, he was thirsty as well as hungry. His nose twitched

as the aroma of the food set before him wafted up. It certainly looked and smelled better than he'd anticipated.

'Will there be anything else sir?' A young girl who looked no older than fourteen looked at him expectantly. His hunger was fierce now his senses had been aroused. 'I have everything I need thank you.' The girl dropped a curtsy and carried away the empty tray.

He turned his attention to the food and cut a slice of the pie. Thick, herby gravy oozed out. The pastry melted in his mouth, the rabbit was perfectly cooked and succulent. The stew was equally delicious. He mopped his plate with the best bread he had ever tasted. He sat back replete and noticed for the first time three old men playing a game of cribbage by the empty fireplace. Apart from them the inn was still and empty.

Tristan looked for the landlord for more ale but he was nowhere to be seen. He noticed a young woman serving the three men. He called her over. She glided across the room towards him. 'Give my compliments to your cook, I've never tasted such pastry before and the rabbit was cooked to perfection. Her talents are wasted here.'

'Thank you sir. We have a blackcurrant tart if you'd care for some with good Yorkshire cream?'

'Had I known I'd have left room but I've been greedy enough already. Perhaps more ale if you please, the landlord seems to have disappeared.'

She cleared his plates and moved off. Tristan noticed the easy sway of her hips. It wasn't a deliberate action, not a sassy "come on", it was unconscious and natural. She was tall for a woman, shapely rather than slender and Tristan couldn't take his eyes from her. He was a young man and like many his age, he noticed attractive women.

Noticed, but never acted upon his observations.

The serving woman refilled his tankard before returning behind the bar. Tristan saw the inn door open and a strongly built man with a mop of unruly fair hair entered. He exchanged a word with the woman before she passed him a foaming pot of ale. Tristan hadn't noticed the landlord was before him.

'Sir, William Wheelwright be back, that's him just come in.'

Tristan finished his drink and approached the man. 'William Wheelwright?'

'Aye,' a surly look passed across the man's angular face before he took another swig of his drink. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

'My name is Tristan Tolker and I have a business proposition to put to you on behalf of my father, would you sit with me while I put forward my offer?'

Tristan thought the man was about to refuse but then had thought better of it recognising the name of one of the biggest shipbuilders in Whitby. They sat opposite each other, the blacksmith in his greasy clothes, his shirt sleeves rolled up revealing strong forearms. Tristan in snuff coloured riding breeches and a work-a-day jacket was equally well built, but smarter than the smith. Tristan's shirt and stock were snowy white whereas William's was grey and covered in oil and grease. Tristan Tolker was a good looking man and this, along with the fact his family were well respected, made him appear confident and at ease.

William was wary whilst the shipbuilder's son explained the reason for his visit.

'My father's shipyard has received an order, a large order that our regular man cannot fulfil in time. We have good reports of your work and want to put the job your way if you can assure me the work would be speedily done.'

Tristan went on to explain the order was for a special sort of bolt and that the order would need to be completed within a month. He placed a specimen bolt on the table for William's inspection. The smith turned it around in his blackened, calloused fingers.

'It is an order of the utmost importance and we are prepared to pay a good price for the job. If you were to make a success of it who knows, perhaps we would put more work your way.'

'Who says I need more work?'

Tristan looked about him at the almost empty inn and smiled. 'I'm sorry for wasting your time, I have perhaps been presumptuous.' He stood to leave. 'Perhaps you have enough work in this out of the way place.'

'Ordinarily I have enough to occupy me, the mail post has started this route lately so me and the inn have benefitted from the extra traffic.' He took another long gulp from his ale. 'I suppose I can take the order and fulfil in the time scale, but as you see I'm often called out. We can discuss terms if you want.' Tristan resumed his seat a triumphant smile on his lips.



His business complete, Tristan untied his horse from where he'd left her munching grass in the shade of the forge. It was still hot as he rode out of Kettleness along the track to Whitby. There was a welcome breeze ruffling the waves out at sea. He considered the deal he'd just struck. His father would be pleased.

The better built cottages of the main street of the hamlet gave way to more raggedy dwellings, which in turn gave way to ramshackle huts, some little better than hovels, soon even they petered out. Kettleness was a small hamlet dropped down the cliffs north of

Sandsend, one of many such places dotted about the east coast. It was backed by rough, heather clad moorland. The cliffs which ran down to the beach were steep in places; there were many small coves and sheltered shingle beaches where smuggling went on unhindered. The preventative men would find it hard to police such out of the way spots. The extra income from running goods would supplement the otherwise meagre incomes of the fisher folk hereabouts.

Ahead of him he noticed a whitewashed cottage gleaming in the sun. It stood alone facing out to sea. It was sturdily built with its pantile roof and Yorkshire stone walls. To one side of the little cottage there was a stable and well maintained outbuildings. A walled garden to the fore sported an apple tree. A cluster of wind bent trees clung to the hillside beyond.

As he drew closer he noticed a driftwood sign with the name "Shingle Roar" painted on it. A tortoiseshell cat lay sleeping on a slate slab sunning herself. As he drew closer still he saw a woman sitting in the shade of the apple tree shelling peas into a colander. If he wasn't mistaken it was the serving woman from the inn; the good looking one. She certainly was a beautiful woman.

He reined Jem in and called out to her: 'Either you have a twin or I have recently had the pleasure of meeting you at The Anchorage.' The woman lifted a hand to shield her eyes from the sun which had found a gap in the branches of the tree.

'Ah yes, you refused my blackcurrant tart I remember.' She carried on shelling peas.

'I used to help our cook with that job when I was a boy. I ate more than she cooked. They're sweetest when eaten raw I seem to remember.' He dismounted and approached the gate in the dry stone wall. 'May I come in?'

'If you must.'

He grinned at the typical brusque Yorkshire response. He stood before her and waited for her to offer up the colander.

'I thought you said you had little room left for food?'

'I did, but I always seem have an appetite, I'm never full for long.'

In the sun Tristan noticed her hair glinted gold, and her eyes peered cat-like up at him. He smiled and handed back the peas. 'You've finished work for the day, at the inn I mean?'

'For the time being, yes. I go back later when the mail coach is due. While they change the horses the passengers eat. For an hour or so it will be busy.'

'Lucky them! The food is uncommonly good for such a small place. They will be pleasantly surprised. I wager your cook could get herself a position in a much better establishment, but perhaps she's the landlord's wife?'

‘Do you ever stop asking questions?’

‘Only when I’m satisfied I have the full picture.’

‘And what picture would that be?’

‘I’m wondering how you come to be here at this house, I expected you would live at the inn.’

‘You expected? Given it some thought have you? You think I’m Rabbity Dick’s wife?’

Tristan was confused. ‘Who pray, is Rabbity Dick?’

‘The landlord of The Anchorage Inn of course.’

‘Ah no, you misunderstand me. I thought you his daughter and his wife the cook.’

She tucked a caramel coloured curl behind her ear as she threw her head back and laughed. ‘Good job you aren’t a constable, you aren’t very good at solving mysteries.’

Tristan lay on the grass at her feet enjoying the heat of the sun as he lounged back on his elbows and crossed his ankles. ‘Then pray tell me how I am in error.’

‘Make yourself at home why don’t you? Do you think it proper I tell a stranger my business, a stranger who doesn’t even have the good manners to introduce himself when he enters a lady’s property?’

‘I apologise, how remiss of me. Your servant ma’am, I am Tristan Tolker of Whitby.’ He stood and bowed in an exaggerated fashion and grinned. ‘To whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?’

‘Another question!’

‘But one which by necessity has to be answered if the niceties are to be followed as you suggested.’

She smiled contritely: ‘My name is Mrs Meredith Baker, an apt name as I am the cook whose food you praised so highly. When we aren’t busy, like this afternoon, I wait tables too.’

Tristan pinched his brows together in confusion. ‘So you are Rabbity Rick’s wife?’

‘Rabbity Dick!’ she guffawed. ‘No I’m not a relation; I work there and live here. Do you understand now?’

Tristan screwed up his face. She explained further. ‘The landlord has a wife, Meg and two young daughters; the oldest Mabel helps out in the tavern. I’m the cook there.’

‘Ah I see!’

‘The landlord’s nickname is because he’s the one who provides the hamlet with a steady supply of rabbits. He’s a good shot. The rabbits he catches, some also in traps, I make into pies, pasties and stews for the inn. Any that are left over Rabbity Dick donates to the poorest members of the hamlet free of charge.’

‘I see, very kind of him I’m sure.’

‘Beneath his rough and ready ways Dick has a kind heart. Are there any other questions you need answering Mr Tolker?’

‘Possibly,’ Tristan said sitting back down on the grass. This woman disarmed him it had to be said. In this attractive woman’s company he seemed to have lost his wits or was it the heat of the sun making him stupid? He mopped the sweat from his brow. He noted she was a married lady. This was something he hadn’t considered though now he came to think of it she was such a handsome woman no wonder someone had snaffled her up. He was disappointed at the knowledge though he didn’t quite know why.

When he’d first seen her at the inn he’d admired her beauty even though he guessed she was a little older than him. He had entertained the idea of seeing her again next time he came to the hamlet. He recognised she wasn’t the sort of rough and ready wench he saw in the Whitby ale houses who could be bought cheaply. Meredith Baker had a quiet dignity, a self assurance ... as well as a beautiful face. He was not the sort of young man who took ladies for granted, it wasn’t in his nature, yet he did have a sudden, unexpected taking for her. She had caught him when he was at an especially low ebb. He silently chastised himself for a fool.

‘I’m in Kettleness on business. I’ve been to see William Wheelwright about some work to do with my father’s shipyard. He is Titus Tolker of Tolker Shipbuilders of Whitby.’

‘The name isn’t familiar to me sir, we’re not from hereabouts. My husband and I are from Northumberland originally, we moved here a while ago, there were better opportunities for Steven. All the main whalers are berthed in Whitby are they not?’

‘Ah whaling, a lucrative business. Our shipyard has built many a whaling ship.’

‘Whitby is world famous for its strongly built ships; it was the main reason to remove here. My husband wanted to better himself,’ she said proudly.

‘So your husband is a whaler? He is at sea?’

‘Sadly I’m a widow. My husband was lost at sea a year last February. He was on a whaling mission and never returned to me. His ship, The Mermaid, was lost.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. It’s true what they say; only the tide is certain to return to shore.’ Tristan remembered the incident, it had been a sorry business.

Meredith stood and holding the peapods in her apron walked to the side of the cottage where she sprinkled them on the ground. Ducks and chickens appeared from nowhere to gobble them up. Tristan followed her with the shelled peas to the side door. He hoped she would invite him in. She did.

The kitchen was bright and cheerful, but today the thick stone walls kept it pleasantly cool. The dresser displayed blue and white china and the mantel shelf over the fire held more china and a model ship. Tristan peered at the name painted on the model, "Shingle Roar".

That name again.

He put the peas on the scrubbed pine table. Meredith crossed to the pantry and took a jug of lemonade from the slate shelf and poured two glasses passing one to the shipbuilder's son.

'Thank you, it's thirsty work shelling peas,' he said good humouredly.

'It'll be an enjoyable ride home for you at any rate. It's not often the wind drops quite so much hereabouts, it's a pleasant change. Do you reside in Whitby as well as work there?'

'The family home is called Whitehall, it looks down the Esk and out to sea. You might have seen it, an imposing white building? My father inherited it from his father.'

Tristan's answer was true but somewhat evasive.

'I don't believe I know it. I really only go into town to do my marketing, I have little time to look about.'

'Where in Northumberland did you live? I've been there on business once or twice. I thought your accent different, not altogether Yorkshire.' She motioned to him to sit at the kitchen table. She took the seat opposite.

'My husband was from Newcastle and I'm from Craster, further north. We met when he worked for a shipping line which plied its trade between the two ports. When we married I removed to Newcastle where we lived until he started in the whaling trade.'

'Did you not want to return after he was lost?'

'Steven had this cottage built for us, he worked hard to save the money to buy the land and besides,' she sipped her lemonade, 'I have only distant cousins left in Northumberland. My husband worked his way up to being a boat steerer, although it's a dangerous job it's the highest paid post on a whaling ship as you're no doubt aware. He was proud to be able to provide for me and so Shingle Roar is very special to me.'

'So you own the cottage? He left you well situated at least, not that it's a consolation of course.'

'As you say I'm better off than most widows who've lost their men folk at sea, but I still have to work to put food on the table.'

'And excellent food it is too as I said earlier. Could you not get better paid work at a bigger establishment?'

‘I hope to do so soon; I want to continue as an under cook which is what I was in Northumberland before I married, but I’ve been unable to find a post as yet, something will turn up I’m sure.’

‘I could ask for you when I’m out and about in Whitby. I’ll let you know if I hear of anything, you deserve a better position. You’re a talented cook Mrs Baker.’

‘Thank you that would be most kind.’ Meredith stood and put her glass in the sink; it was a dismissive gesture. Tristan reluctantly took the hint.

‘I have to return to Kettleless in a few days to see William Wheelwright. I hope I’ll see you then, with or without news of a position. I’ll look forward to sampling more of your food. Thank you for the refreshment. Goodbye Mrs Baker, I can see myself out.’



Meredith watched as the handsome, affable young man rode away raising his tricorne as he went. Chatting to him had reminded her of how lonely she felt. Tristan Tolker was tall and straight backed, slightly taller than her husband had been. Her admirer, for she was old enough to recognise when a man had a liking for her looks, was a good looking man himself. He was clean shaven, with hair the colour of ripened corn; his eyes were the colour of hazel nuts. He looked young, younger than her perhaps. At four and twenty she sometimes felt old beyond her years wallowing in this quiet backwater where very little of note ever happened.

She seldom had company and never anyone as attractive or as entertaining as this young buck. He’d cheered her up immensely, made her day if truth be told, not that she would have let him know. He was a flirt and she’d allowed herself to flirt back, just a little. It was a long time since she’d chatted so freely with a man. In the end she’d remembered herself and given him the hint to go which, in his defence, he’d done without rancour and with a charming parting smile.

As she tidied the kitchen she scolded herself. He was possibly a womaniser who expected someone of her rank and position to fall for his looks and charm. It would be all too easy to do, but she wasn’t a silly chit of a girl. She’d met men like him before. They began all sweetness and light, but that soon turned to a feeling of entitlement when they were refused what they thought was theirs by right. Meredith swept the crumbs from the table. She’d bet a pound to a penny the good looking young man had a sweetheart. Probably more than one. Such a wealthy, handsome young rogue would have ladies lining up at his door.

Merry, as her friends called her, rarely had anyone at her door let alone suitors. In truth her life was a solitary existence. She and her husband had not been in Kettleless long when Steven was lost at sea. They’d not found the locals as welcoming as they’d hoped. The

poorer elements thought the “blow-ins” with their new built cottages were uppity while the few tradesmen there were thought them no better than they should be.

Steven, like her, was out-going and friendly, yet they’d found Yorkshire folk to be difficult to get to know which had surprised them. Tight little communities like Kettleness where everyone seemed related to one another were hard to penetrate. Unless you were born here you were forever an “offcumdun”.

It hadn’t helped that since Steven was lost most of the hamlet’s women had given Merry a wide berth. They kept a close eye on their husbands as a pretty widow with her own cottage was too much temptation for their men folk apparently. One or two of the younger women also widows, nodded and passed the time of day, but in general she had few acquaintances; Rabbit Dick and his family and Hester Thwaite, a young, unmarried seamstress, were the only friends she owned. It was a lonely life for a young woman with a lively personality and a kind and open heart.

Hester Thwaite leaned on the dry stone wall of Shingle Roar and watched as Merry took in the washing from the line. ‘If yer goin’ to The Anchorage I’ll walk with ’e for the company? I’m off to deliver these aprons to Rabbit Dick.’

Hester was one of the few young women to give Merry the time of day, possibly because the seamstress had no man to steal Merry concluded cynically. The young girl lived with her mother who suffered serious bouts of ill health which kept her house bound for most of the time. Despite this Hester was always cheerful. She liked to chatter.

‘Let me put these sheets in the kitchen and I’ll be with you.’

They set off together down the dusty track. ‘’ad any luck findin’ another job yet?’ The last time they’d talked Merry had told Hester she wanted to move to find a better position. Positions in Kettleness were thin on the ground.

‘Not yet, but soon I hope to move to a town or even a city where there’s bound to be more choice.’

‘I envy yer, but I can’t leave my mother, she couldn’t manage on her own so I’m stuck ’ere. Will you look to keep cookin’?’

‘I hope so. I want to continue as an under cook until I can get more experience then I’ll be my own mistress and be a cook with staff under me. I’ll cook with the finest ingredients for the best people who can afford and appreciate my talents.’ She laughed and nudged her friend. ‘I’ll miss my cottage, but I need to look to the future, spread my wings. Kettleness is too quiet a place, too quiet since ... especially in the winter.’

‘Rabbity Dick’s customers will miss yer grub, afore yer came it were pitiful fare that Meg served up.’

‘It’ll be a sadness to leave Shingle Roar where I was so happy with Steven, but it won’t be forever.’

‘Will you leave the cottage empty? That’d be a shame.’

‘I thought to rent it out, I won’t sell, it would break my heart. When I get a new job I intend to keep Shingle Roar so when I’m older, and hopefully a little richer, I can return and live here once more.’

‘Yer seem to have got yer life planned out, know what they say about best laid plans!’

‘Steven was a great planner. He had our lives mapped out, he was full of ideas, much good it did him. We’d often talk about what we’d do when we’d saved enough money. He wanted to be his own master, own his own ship.’

Hester squeezed Merry’s arm in a comforting gesture. ‘At least yer’ve loved and lost; luckier than some, luckier than me.’

‘There’s time for you yet, you’re pretty and accomplished, sociable and still young.’ Merry winked at the girl. ‘There must be some fisherman hereabouts interested in a young woman with your looks and talents. How old are you?’

‘Not yet turned eighteen, but there’s me mam, I couldn’t leave ’er. What man wants a wife wi’ a sick mother in tow. She takes up all my time.’

They had reached the smithy. Hester grinned. ‘Will yer miss William Wheelwright when yer gone? Think ’e’ll miss you! It’s plain ’e’s a soft spot for yer. Wish ’e’d glance in my direction ... maybe ’e will when you move on.’ She laughed as Merry raised her eyebrows.

‘Is that meant to be funny, is it a joke?’

The young widow had first got to know William Wheelwright when she bent her favourite ladle and he’d straightened out the handle at his forge. Since Steven died the blacksmith had done the heavy jobs about Shingle Roar which she couldn’t manage herself. He did this not for coin, but in exchange for the odd meal, pie or pan of stew. He was a bachelor and a good looking man, but being of a taciturn nature and despite having a good trade, he didn’t appeal to Meredith. He was far too straight-laced and dour. And besides she had loved her husband. He would not be replaced easily.

William must be in his early thirties and although handsome enough, tall, broad and well muscled from the heavy work he did at the forge, his reserved demeanour put off all but the bold.

‘There’s many a lass ’ereabout would give their eye teeth to be walkin’ out on ’is arm. William’s a looker and ’as a trade and brass to spend.’

At that moment the smith stood in the doorway wiping his brow. Hester flushed crimson. ‘Good afternoon William.’ Merry smiled.

‘Day to you both.’ What passed for a smile touched his lips as he returned to the heat of his forge.

‘Do yer think ’e ’eard?’ Hester giggled when they were safe inside the tap room.

‘What if he did - listeners rarely hear good about themselves. You’d do well to cast your eye in that direction Hester.’

The seamstress followed Merry to the kitchen where half a dozen rabbits lay on the kitchen table waiting to be skinned.

‘Me an’ ’alf the villagers from ’ere to Runswick Bay. Wheelwright’s a catch, but like I said, reckon ’is ’ead’s bin turned in another direction.’ Hester grinned and went in search of the landlord.

‘Come and have a slice of apple pie with me before you walk back?’ Merry called after her.

‘I’ll ’ave to get straight back, me mam’ll wonder where I got to otherwise.’

‘Then I’ll cut you a slice to eat on the way home.’

‘What’s this? You givin’ snap away.’ Rabbity Dick’s huge frame stood in the doorway blocking Hester’s exit. His broad grin showed he was in jest. Merry tapped his large stomach playfully.

‘I’m doing you a favour, keeping temptation away from you.’

‘It’s right enough,’ he stroked his paunch, ‘since you’ve taken over the cooking I seem to have grown.’

Merry laughed. ‘Don’t blame me. Stay away from the kitchen. I don’t force you to eat.’

He helped himself to a slice of veal and ham pie. ‘Come on Hester, Mabel’s waiting for you to measure her for another frock; she’s another one who keeps on growing and not just upwards either.’



It was mid afternoon and Merry was chopping swedes while Mabel, Dick’s youngest daughter, was washing pots and pans. ‘Will you be makin’ more of the apple pie this week? It’s right good. What’s that flavourin’ you use?’

‘Cinnamon, it brings out the flavour of the apples. I thought of baking some apple dumplings for a change, I’ll be sure to add a pinch of cinnamon if you like it.’

Dick bellowed from the taproom door. ‘Wheelwright’s here for his dinner Merry,’ Mabel go and see what your ma wants, she’s calling for you.’

With her tray filled with a hearty stew and potatoes, Merry weaved her way through the mainly empty tables to where William Wheelwright sat waiting. The mail coach would be another hour yet so it was still quiet.

She unloaded the food before him.

‘Thank you.’

‘There’s apple pie for afters if you have room.’

‘In that case I’ll leave room.’ William chewed thoughtfully. Merry smiled to herself as she went back to the kitchen. If that’s someone “looking in my direction” I think I’ve lost my touch she thought.



A few days later William Wheelwright had made good headway into the Tolker order. The work was fiddly and demanding, but he was enjoying the challenge as it was more detailed work than he had been used to undertaking. He’d welded the odd bolt in his time, but making one from scratch was most satisfying.

Merry stood in the doorway to the forge.

‘Morning Mrs Baker.’ He still couldn’t bring himself to call her by her Christian name, not outside her own cottage anyway. She had a basket over her arm which she presented to him.

‘I brought you some scallywags and a pat of butter to go on them. You might enjoy them with a dish of tea later.’ She handed them over wrapped in a cloth.

When William had begun to do the heavy work for her it had suited the new widow that over a plate of fish and potatoes her handyman was reserved, sometimes almost monosyllabic. She’d just lost her loving husband and didn’t want to engage in idle chatter herself. But now, after almost a year, William was still poor company, still aloof and introverted for most of the time. It was difficult to make small talk with him or simply to pass the time of day for that matter.

‘Thanks, how much do I owe?’

‘I don’t want payment, they are ...’ she hesitated to use the word “gift”, ‘a donation for helping to get the tick off Ledge’s fur. I never could’ve got it had you not held her fast.’ Ledge was Merry’s part feral cat.

‘You shouldn’t have bothered, it took no time and I was at your place anyway mending the manger.’

‘Nevertheless I appreciate it. Are you to join me for supper on Wednesday? Are you still able to come and look at the gutter?’

‘Aye, about seven.’ The blacksmith remained a man of few words.

Once on a visit to Shingle Roar he’d come close to being garrulous when a crow had come down the chimney while they were at supper. The commotion it had caused had made them laugh as it flew about the room with the pair of them in hot pursuit.

Merry suspected there was talk around Kettleless, about the two of them, if what Hester had hinted at was true. The locals were agog waiting for news that she was either his lover or his future wife. Either way Merry didn’t care. They could think what they liked it was no one’s business but her own.

Merry waited for William to speak, but suspected no more was forthcoming. ‘I might see you later for your dinner?’ She nodded towards the inn. ‘I’m here now for the rest of the day.’

‘Too busy,’ he muttered as he held a bolt up to the light and inspected it closely.

‘This man, William Wheelwright is it? He can fulfil the order in the given time you say?’ Titus Tolker handed a glass of port to his youngest son. Titus was tall and lean with iron grey hair. He was still a fine looking man even though he was past fifty. He had a stern look and the worry lines were deep set about his eyes and mouth.

They had dined at Whitehall the Tolkers’ magnificent mansion which overlooked their shipyard. Looking out to sea from the front elevation it was possible to see directly down the harbour mouth which allowed Titus Tolker a perfect view of his workers and business.

‘He can fill the order but I intend to ride over on Wednesday to see how far ahead he is. If he is behind I shall need to encourage him to hasten.’ Tristan mimed a kicking action with his boot and grinned.

His father scowled. ‘Have a care son; unbeknown to the man we need him at the moment more than he needs us. Remember that, do not be heavy-handed. This order is important to us.’

‘All orders are important you always say Father, but I’ll tread carefully as you say.’

‘Your brother is at Yarmouth now trying to buy us a little time; it was a bother that all this work came at once, a bother but welcome of course under the circumstances.’ Titus coughed and fidgeted with his stock. Recently the business had been in financial straits and they were only now beginning to resurface. It had been a challenging time.

The door opened and a tawny-haired young lady flounced in carrying a small spaniel. She sat by the fire and deposited the dog at the booted feet of her brother. Tamsin Tolker or Tami as she was known to friends and family was the youngest of Titus’s offspring.

‘Have you finished talking shop? If you haven’t I’m going to the library to read. I’d hoped you would play a hand with me Tris before you go home. It’s been so hot today I’ve not had the energy to do a thing.’

‘So I was mistaken when I saw a lady looking remarkably like you coming out of the hat shop on Church Street this afternoon?’

Tamsin screwed her face up and laughed. ‘Thank you brother dear for informing on me. I bought nothing but ribbons Papa.’

‘I shall await the bill,’ he said smiling ‘ribbons are more expensive than rope I think looking at the milliner’s bill for last month.’

‘Why anyone needs so many hats is beyond me. You only have one head and a silly one at that,’ Tris said taking a pack of cards from a drawer and dealing them.

‘You seem cheerful, any good news to impart?’ his sister asked ignoring his jibe as their father vacated the room. Tami was always the height of fashion and tonight with her hair in ringlets tumbling down her back and a new burgundy gown she looked particularly stylish.

‘About what?’

‘About anything at all.’ She smiled sympathetically at her beloved brother. ‘Is everything alright at Tolker Towers?’ she mocked wickedly.

‘Very droll. All’s well at Westcliffe House. Don’t poke fun - it’s unbecoming in a lady.’

When Tris had turned one and twenty his father had bought him the imposing house as a wedding gift. ‘But I’m not married!’ Tristan had said. ‘Why do I need my own establishment?’

‘Not yet you aren’t my boy, but soon you will be and then you shall give me a grandson. Your brother Theo and Andrea only seem able to produce girls.’ Titus sniffed disapprovingly. ‘Why not call the house Tolker Towers as it’s high up on West Cliff?’ Much to her father’s vexation Tami had almost fallen off her chair laughing at the suggestion.

Brother and sister played several hands of cards and chatted amiably. ‘Not keen to go home? Shall you go to the bawdy house on your way back?’ She grinned and raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. ‘Why so shocked? Don’t pretend you haven’t been there before.’

‘Tami! I don’t know how your fiancé puts up with you.’ He shook his head not at all surprised by her brazenness. She liked to provoke. ‘I’ve never been there I can assure you. Perhaps you mistake me for Theo? I’ve never had to pay for my pleasures and I’m not about to start now.’ He grinned as he won the hand.

Tami taunted. ‘Is that so?’

‘Perhaps you want me to check out whether Francis is there, I think he has a wandering eye?’ Tristan teased his sister back knowing he’d hit a nerve.

‘That’s not all he’ll have if I catch him. I’ll poke his other out with a scabby stick if he so much as glances at Libby Burns again. She’s bound to be at the dance tomorrow.’ She affected to be annoyed, but knowing her intended was besotted with her she wasn’t believed. ‘You’re still coming to the dance are you not?’

Tristan sighed. ‘I suppose I’ll have to make an appearance although I suspect a tricky problem at the yard will keep me occupied until late.’ He winked at Tami who in turn grasped his hand.

‘Oh, I wish you were as happy as me my love, you’re still only two and twenty, you should be having fun not affecting to be slaving away at the yard or hiding out here every evening.’

‘Pray don’t worry about me, all will be well in the fullness of time I assure you.’ Neither of them believed the statement. ‘Anyway your happiness may be short lived when you marry Francis and he sees what a grump you are in the mornings.’ He laughed as he picked up his winnings. He leaned over and kissed the top of her head. ‘I’d better make tracks, I’ve an early start in the morning and you need your beauty sleep.’

Tami took his arm and walked him to the door. He sighed knowing she’d fret about him despite what he’d said. They were especially close since their mama had died.

Mounting his horse Tristan pasted a cheery smile on his face. ‘Good night my dear.’

He waved as he pointed Jem for home.



A dark haired figure was ahead of Merry as she passed through Sandsend on her way to Whitby. As she drew closer she saw it was Hester Thwaite. ‘Come aboard,’ Merry offered her hand so her friend could ride pillion.

‘That’s a weight off,’ the pretty seamstress said as she sat behind Merry and wrapped her arms around her friend’s waist. ‘I got to get the material for Mabel’s new frock, she explained, ‘I’ve let out ’er old en as much as I can. Fourteen year olds grow quick it seems.’

The two women gossiped as they rode along in the fine weather. When they reached Whitby Merry left Stone with the ostler. ‘Fancy a stroll?’

‘I shouldn’t really. Me mam ... oh go on then it’s such a lovely day, just ten minutes.’

Merry turned away from the busy town towards the imposing houses where the well-to-do sea captains resided. Hester stood hands on hips and frowned.

‘Why’re we goin’ this way?’ she asked. She’d hoped to head where there was hustle and bustle, people, shops and life.

‘Just a thought I had,’ Merry said purposefully walking towards the tall iron railing which enclosed a gleaming white mansion. ‘Do you know who lives here?’ Merry asked.

Hester was awestruck with the grandeur of the well proportioned house. ‘It’s like a palace; imagine livin’ ’ere. ’ow they clean all them windows I wonder?’

Merry laughed and holding the iron gates peered in. ‘I know the son of the man who lives here. He came to The Anchorage the other day. William’s doing some work for him. The family are called Tolker, have you heard of them?’

‘Everybody ’ereabouts knows ’em. One of biggest shipbuilders an’ owners in Whitby they are. That’s where they live is it? Blimey. Yer should get a job cookin’ fer them - bet that’d pay well, better than Rabbity Dick any road.’

‘You too should seek work here Hester, imagine the silks, linens and lace you would get to sew in a house like this.’ Merry sighed. ‘We can but dream.’

They peered at the Doric pillars and the sweeping flight of marble steps which led to great oak doors. At that moment a carriage arrived and a finely dressed young lady wearing the biggest hat Merry had ever seen tripped lightly down the steps and was handed into the carriage by an outrider. Both girls giggled. ‘Imagine ’aving yer very own carriage. Surprised she can fit that ’at in there.’ A groom jumped down and came to open the gates as both women jumped back and the carriage swept past. Hester curtsied.

Merry laughed. ‘She’s not royalty!’

‘Might as well be,’ Hester said sighing. ‘Imagine swappin’ places with ’er.’

William Wheelwright had re-attached the guttering which had come lose after the storm a week ago. He stood by the kitchen door in the heat of the afternoon sun, hat in hand.

‘Had you a pair of ladders you could have done the job yourself, it was but a moment’s work.’

Merry wiped her hands on her apron. ‘Well I have ladders, but no head for heights so I’m grateful nonetheless. Come in, dinner won’t be long.’

She poured ale into a pot and passed it to the smith as he sat stiff backed and upright at the kitchen table. Since her husband died she spent most of her time in the kitchen. The first time she’d invited William to share her dinner she’d suggested they eat in the back room which sported a dining table. Steven had bought it second hand when he’d won a bet. William had been mortified at the thought of sitting in the ‘best room’ as he was wearing his working clothes.

‘It’s been another glorious morning,’ Merry said straining peas into the colander and adding a knob of butter.

‘Aye, it has that.’

Merry took a chicken pie from the oven and lifted it onto the table. She poured rich, thick gravy into a jug and brought over boiled potatoes and peas.

‘There now, cut yourself as much pie as you like.’

William cut a slice and put it on Merry’s plate before serving himself. They ate in silence until her guest, after his second slice, said: ‘I never had pie like it till I tasted yours.’ He smiled and his eyes twinkled; she’d noticed before his eyes were blue. They were nice eyes when he smiled which was not often enough to her mind. Merry was happy with the compliment and was about to thank him when there was a knock at the door. She glanced questioningly at William as if he should know who might be calling. She was surprised when she opened the door to see Tristan Tolker.

‘Good afternoon Mrs Baker.’ The unexpected visitor held a brace of pheasant, a bright and breezy smile on his handsome face. ‘I come bearing gifts as you can see. I imagine you can make good use of these.’ Tristan then noticed William and acknowledged the blacksmith. ‘I’m so sorry to interrupt your dinner, forgive me I hadn’t noticed the time.’

Before Merry could say anything William was behind her. ‘I’ll be off Mrs Baker. I thank you for the meal. The gutter should be sound now.’ He nodded to Tristan then strode passed him and around to the front of the cottage and was gone.

Tristan smiled broadly. 'Again I apologise, had I known you had a guest I wouldn't have dreamt of intruding.'

'William has mended my gutter and I asked him to share my dinner as payment. He wouldn't take coin as he said it was such a small job, but I like to pay my way. Come in please.'

She took the pheasants and hung them in the larder. 'Did you shoot them yourself? They look good and plump.'

Tristan was shame-faced. 'I did not. I'm far too tender hearted to shoot anything that lives and breathes. All the way here they were looking at me reproachfully. I'm a hypocrite I know as I love to eat them roasted. My father's game keeper shot them up on the moors yesterday. They'll need to be hung a while, you'll know for how long I'm sure.'

'Are you on your way to see William?'

'I am, but I'm not so sure I'll get a warm welcome now, I seem to have chased him off.' Tristan glanced at the remnants of their dinner.

'Warm welcomes aren't William's strong point I fear.' Merry laughed. 'And as he has left without his pudding ... Have you eaten?'

'I was hoping to sample your cooking at The Anchorage, so no, I'm hungry I must admit.'

Merry tidied away the used plates and put clean ones in their place. 'I'll reheat the gravy, but the pie's still warm.'

'Are you sure? You are kind.' Tristan sat down where only a few moments ago William had been enjoying his dinner. Her new guest was not so reserved; he was much more at ease.

'This pie is as good as the rabbit from the other day. How do you do it? On my way here I admit I had been trying to imagine what would be on offer at the inn, but this surpasses anything I could have expected.' He patted his stomach where, unlike Rabbity Dick, there was no hint of a paunch.

'You don't work at the inn on Wednesdays?' Again he used a hunk of bread to mop up the remainder of the gravy.

Merry went to the larder and brought out a bowl of syllabub. 'There you go again with your questions.' She wagged a finger at him. 'The coach doesn't come on Wednesdays so I have a day off usually.' She handed a dish to Tristan and served first him and then herself.

‘I must remember that and when next I have to come to the forge I’ll make sure of the day,’ he said laughing. ‘Is there no end to your talents? This is so light, it might float away. You’re so clever.’

Merry laughed too. How different the praise from that which William served up. She watched as he licked his lips. His face was even more handsome when he laughed. His hazel eyes shone and his cheeks glowed.

‘I bet you say that to all the girls.’ She suddenly felt self conscious and wished she hadn’t been so forward; if the villagers could see her now they’d be tittle tattling for a week and with good cause. She remembered the size of this man’s family home and how tiny in comparison her humble abode must seem to him, yet he was perfectly content as he took a swig of ale. She was flattered by his attention but knew she shouldn’t take it seriously.

‘The blacksmith is friendly with you? I know you said he does odd jobs.’

Merry suspected Tristan was on a fishing mission. Why she hadn’t yet fathomed. ‘I don’t think William has friends, only acquaintances. He and my husband sometimes went line fishing but he was never what you would call a family friend.’

‘So he’s not your sweetheart?’

Merry was careful with her answer. ‘There you go again asking questions, what business is it of yours what my relationship is with any man around these parts?’ She kept her face deliberately devoid of emotion.

Tristan leaned forward, his elbows on the table and smiled making her heart miss a beat. He really was a good looking man.

‘Well I asked for that I daresay,’ he said not looking at all put out. ‘If he’s the best Kettleness has to offer then I’m sorry for you and all the other ladies hereabouts. He’s a handsome man, but Lord he’s as dull as ditch water. Each word he utters feels as if it’s been drawn from him at great personal cost.’

‘Yet he has a bevy of beauties trailing in his wake. He has a good trade, money and as you pointed out he’s good looking to boot, quite a catch some might say.’

‘Ah!’

‘What then if I was to tell you we are courting and that I am deeply offended by your comments Mr Tolker?’ She watched as he threw his head back and laughed.

‘I would say that you’re fibbing Mrs Baker. If he was courting you I’m certain he wouldn’t have left you in the company of a relative stranger. If you were walking out together he’d have stayed to protect your honour, although now I come to think of it he didn’t seem pleased at my arrival but then again ... ’ His eyes glittered.

Now she knew his game.

He drank off the ale then surprised her by offering to help clear the table. He must have servants at his beck and call for every little job at home so why was he being so helpful?

‘I almost forgot why I came, besides to deliver the birds that is. I asked about in Whitby and a friend of mine is in need of a cook. His name is Burton and he lives at Sandsend so not too far distant, the position sounds ideal. He has a large brood and entertains often.’

‘Thank you, but I know of the post. I’m afraid it’s been filled already. I enquired myself yesterday and was told it’s been taken but thank you for asking, I appreciate the thought.’

‘Damn! Oh sorry, pardon my language. I’d thought it the perfect situation it being a large private house.’

‘I thought so too, but never mind. I was hoping to move further afield anyway. A bigger town perhaps, but it would have been a good stop gap.’ She shrugged. ‘It was clearly not meant to be.’

‘We share the same philosophical outlook on life it seems; sometimes things just don’t work out as we plan do they?’

Merry noticed the sombre look and the sudden sadness behind his eyes. It was as if a cloud had passed before the sun turning the world into a gloomy, grey place. His shoulders sagged as if he carried a burden too heavy to bear.

He stood abruptly appearing to metaphorically shake himself. ‘I must be off to see Wheelwright.’ He pushed his hair back with his tricorn.

Merry was confused at this about turn; she’d half expected to be trying to defend her honour by now. She’d expected he would be looking for payment in kind for the pheasants, not that he would’ve had any success.

‘Thank you for the meal Mrs Baker, and your company too of course, I’m in your debt.’

‘My friends call me Merry. The pheasants and your company are ample recompense and thank you for trying to find me a position; it was good of you to think of me.’

Tristan Tolker was suddenly self-conscious, his swagger had deserted him. ‘The fact is I’ve thought of you often since last we met. I’ve no right to think of you at all, I don’t know what I expect you do with the information. Forgive me Merry.’ For the first time she noticed he was not so sure of himself. ‘I like the sound of your name, Merry. My friends call me Tris.’

‘There’s nothing to forgive as all we’ve done is enjoy a pleasant chat, let me see you out.’

When he’d gone Merry drew in a long breath as she sat at the kitchen table with a dish of tea. What a pity this handsome, agreeable young man was out of her league. She was aware of where it would lead if she encouraged him further. More realistically what a pity he didn’t need a cook! His family home looked just the sort of place she was looking for. If he had such a position to offer he’d have told her she suspected, but then again would such a young man know of his father’s domestic arrangements? She sipped her tea thoughtfully. Perhaps she should call at the Tolker mansion, but this time present herself at the servants’ entrance, after all nothing ventured nothing gained.



Tristan had inspected the bolts which William Wheelwright had made. He noted the quality was good, better than good in fact. He had told the man so. You wouldn’t have guessed it had you seen the smith’s sour expression.

‘You’re on target too,’ Tristan said putting the bolt he’d inspected back with the others.

‘I told you I’d have no trouble filling the order on time.’ Tris was exasperated. The man was arrogant to say the least.

‘Very well, I’ll expect the first consignment next Saturday as arranged.’ He unfastened his saddle bag. ‘Here’s a banker’s draft for half the order.’

William took it and pushed it into his apron pocket. ‘If there’s nothing else I’d best be getting on.’

Tristan raised an eyebrow. The man was verging on insolent. Had his attitude something to do with Meredith Baker or was he always this rude to his customers? The man should be pleased to have the custom of such an esteemed shipyard yet he acted as though he was the one bestowing the favour. Tristan remembered his father’s words and bit back a curt retort.

As he rode out of the village Tristan wished he could think of a reason to call back at Merry’s cottage, but he could think of none that wouldn’t seem contrived. There was also another consideration, more than one if he was being honest. In small communities like Kettleness everyone knew everyone else’s business. He didn’t want to tarnish the widow’s reputation. People would talk if they saw him entering or leaving Merry’s cottage for a third time.

He scoured the garden hoping to see her as it was still a warm day. Perhaps she might be enjoying the late afternoon sun, but all was quiet, not even the cat was about. He rode on and as the track petered out onto the cliff top he looked out to sea. A schooner was tacking close to shore, its sails puffed out in the light breeze. He noticed the sound of the shingle as it rushed up the beach.

A lone figure walked on the beach below. The woman was paddling in the surf, her waist length hair blowing freely in the wind, her skirts billowing in the breeze.

It was Merry.

With her samples of pies and tarts carefully wrapped in her basket Merry made her way to the servants' entrance of the Tolker family home. Whitehall, large and imposing, gleamed snow white on this cloudless day. She straightened her bonnet and stood up straight and tall.

After giving it much thought she'd decided to try her luck and seek work here. Not that she held out much hope, but cooks in Merry's experience, were a garrulous lot. If there wasn't work to be had here she hoped to glean knowledge about other positions. All cooks talked to one another so if a job was in the offing close by then the Tolker's cook might know about it. Merry thought to impress the woman here at Whitehall with her samples and her enthusiasm. The cook may well see her as enterprising and offer her advice if not a job. The door was answered by a harassed looking woman with a round, red face.

'Good morning, my name is Meredith Baker and I'm a cook looking for work. I've brought -'

'Save yer breath missy we don't need help.' She started to close the door.

'I've brought samples of my wares if you'll be so kind as to try them' She offered up the baking.

'You're wasting my time and yours, I've enough to do.' She slammed the door in Merry's face.

Meredith bit her bottom lip. She'd been up since dawn making sample sizes of her best pies and tarts and all for what? To be turned away without any of them being even looked at let alone tasted. It was a disappointment to say the least.

She trudged back to collect Stone from the ostler with a heavy heart. She handed her samples to the grooms; there was no point in wasting good food. They fell on it like locusts. One bow-legged joker even offered her marriage.

Merry sat on the harbour wall, unshed tears stinging her eyes. She could have cried, but she wouldn't allow herself to be too down hearted; no one had died after all and she still had work. She was luckier than some, luckier than most.

The interview, if it could be called that, had been over in a flash, but as she'd been at pains to tell herself all along if you didn't dare to ask you didn't get. But it was a disappointing blow nonetheless. That morning all the time she'd been baking she'd imagined the food she'd prepare for her new employer, when she got the job that is. She'd imagined the many parties, dinners and soirees where she'd prepare wonderful creations that would be admired by their rich, important guests.

But it was not to be.

Now, because of the warmth of the sun she was reluctant to set off home so soon, it was a beautiful day. She lifted her chin defiantly and turned towards the town.

Market day in Whitby was always busy, but today as the sun beat down it took on the appearance of a carnival. Never one to be down in the mouth for long Merry soon cheered up. She didn't come to market regularly, but had decided to do so as a small treat after her earlier disappointment. To be in Whitby and to wander about in the warm weather would be a pleasant change and an entertainment. She had a few spare coppers and thought to treat herself to a new ribbon or some buttons to smarten up an old dress.

Besides the usual stalls and booths several gypsies were selling their wares. One old crone was doing a brisk trade in remedies that would cure all ills known to man if she was to be believed. Another was telling fortunes. Merry speculated what *her* fortune might be. She wouldn't waste her money finding out. She believed you made your own luck through hard work.

As Merry looked up from inspecting a lace collar that was far beyond her price range she saw a familiar figure; Tristan Tolker. A flutter of excitement bubbled inside her; she'd half hoped to bump into her handsome new acquaintance. Then, to her frustration, she saw a pretty young lady on his arm. She was talking to him animatedly and he was smiling down at her. Merry's spirits were dashed for the second time that day.

Without thinking she pulled back by the side of the booth selling gin and shamelessly spied on him. Jealousy was a new emotion for Merry. The young lady on his arm smiled up at him adoringly. In return he squeezed her arm affectionately.

Merry's heart sank.

Had she started to manufacture an attachment to the handsome shipbuilder's son, to think about him fondly? She was a fool if she had. It dawned on her it was the first time she'd allowed herself to think in such a way about any man since Steven was killed. Not that there had been anyone to attract her attention of course. Apart from William Wheelwright that is and he was of such an introverted frame of mind she'd hardly consider him, despite his good looks and eligibility.

She admitted to herself that she had daydreamed about the fair-haired charmer as she'd kneaded and stirred, boiled and chopped. Tristan Tolker was light and easy company and he made her smile, something she'd not had cause to do for some little time.

She reprimanded herself under her breath for her stupidity. He was more than a cut above her it was clear and she'd known it from the off that nothing could come of the liaison.

She'd known of course, but had allowed herself to be pleased by his courtesy and kindness. It had been a long time since she'd been admired by a man.

The day she had met him on the beach, after he'd concluded his business with William, he'd been so attentive and amusing. They'd chatted easily about everything and nothing. He'd paid her compliments which she had stored away to think about when she lay alone in her bed at the end of a long day at the inn. She enjoyed her job but it was hard work and Tristan's words had warmed her heart.

Tris had a wicked sense of humour and had acted out a disparaging impression of the sour-faced smithy which had made her laugh despite herself. She'd hoped to see more of Tristan even though she knew to be careful of her reputation; the villagers of Kettleness had sharp eyes and even sharper tongues.

Besides which, could she trust him?

Was he only after one thing like most men? Why else was he being so friendly to someone of her station? She'd met men like him before she married. "Chancers" they called them in Northumberland. Men who were on the lookout for pretty girls who were naive or with loose morals. She wasn't green and never had been that type of woman and never would be.

Seeing him today with a lady on his arm proved she was right in her assumptions - he was a chancer for here he was escorting a young lady of his own class about Whitby. They were obviously familiar with one another. Merry had been played; he was after one thing - light entertainment, a woman to bed on the side. Merry suspected men like him sought their pleasure with all sorts of women. Perhaps he would have called again and tried to sweet talk her into his arms. For him it would have been a passing fancy, a little diversion. Her heart sank all the same. She might have guessed what type of character he would have. Still she was disappointed, let down.

The attractive lady with him today was clearly besotted with him. Was she his wife or at the least his fiancé?

The fun evaporated from Merry's outing. She decided to cut her losses and ride home. Two blows in one day - it was too much to bear. She made her way out of the market by a circuitous route taking care not to be seen by the handsome rogue.

As she rode home Merry chastised herself for her foolishness. First she'd tried for a position that didn't exist and secondly she'd thought to cross paths with a man way above her situation. Both the job and the man were pipe dreams. No doubt he *was* a scoundrel, the type

to try his luck with any woman who would fall for his flighty talk and winning smile. She was annoyed with herself for almost falling into the trap. She'd had a lucky escape.

At the beach that day he'd asked her if he could call again next Wednesday week and she'd happily agreed. She should have known someone of his standing and good looks would not be honourable. It was true she thought, he was a fraud, a rascal who no doubt preyed upon vulnerable women knowing if he took advantage they would have no one to complain to, no recourse. He was aware of her circumstances, aware she had no one to protect her. She had indeed had a lucky escape.



'I wonder if the gypsy sells a cure for a wandering eye,' Tristan teased his sister. Tamsin had asked him to escort her to the market on a shopping trip although she hadn't really wanted anything except his company.

'Ha Ha very funny, Francis has eyes only for me now, I've made sure of that. I've told my beloved I intend to reward him for his steadfastness. He is as I think you men say, "on a promise".'

'Tami! For goodness sake.' Her brother spluttered, 'I'm not sure I want to know anymore or I'll feel compelled to tell Father ... or call your fiancé out.'

Tami laughed and inspected some herb sachets. 'Are you coming to supper tomorrow evening?' She changed the subject skilfully.

'I'm otherwise engaged.' Tris turned his head away from her gaze and looked at a jar of honey with more interest than was necessary. His sister stared at him with open curiosity.

'How intriguing that sounds.'

Tami had always been close to her brother and had recently detected a change in his mood; a change for the better she was pleased to note. He was happier somehow, more bright and breezy, more like his old self. The haunted look was beginning to fade from his eyes. She was pleased, but eager to know the reason.

'Do you dine out?'

Tris tucked her hand under his arm. 'Is that Andrea over there by the pie stall?' He was being deliberately vague.

'It wouldn't surprise me at all. Our sister-in-law has a healthy appetite and so do her darling daughters.' Tami pushed air into her cheeks imitating how she thought Andrea looked. She burst out laughing. Tris gave her a mock scowl before laughing himself.

‘It’s not her and I believe you’re trying to distract me, I will not be deterred.’ She looked up at him mischievously. ‘Do I detect you’re a little more content lately my love? Has something happened to cheer you up?’

‘Nothing especially; it must be this fine weather we’re enjoying. This early summer sun has lifted my spirits.’

Tamsin wasn’t fooled. ‘Father seems more content too, and Theo. With work coming into the yard once more the Tolker men have quit scowling and have become almost cheerful again.’ Tami had been only too aware the business had sailed close to the wind this last year or two. They’d come close to losing everything, including their good name.

‘It’s been tiresome for you I know.’ Tris had sorrow in his eyes. ‘You’re young and sociable and have had your entertainments curtailed. You’ve also had your reputation compromised through gossip but thank God Francis stuck by you, and his family too. I’ll never forget that and neither will Father and Theo. The Wheelers are good people.’

‘It hasn’t been so bad,’ she lied, ‘and now you’re all smiles and optimism so the situation is all changed and this time for the better.’ They walked on to the quay where the Tolker carriage waited. ‘After all is said and done you’re the one who’s made the biggest sacrifice Tris, you’re the one who was forced to - ’ He put his finger to her lips. Her heart went out to him. She took her favourite brother’s hands in hers. ‘Perhaps I should plan a party to celebrate our return from the brink.’ She squeezed his hands. A slow smile reached his eyes. ‘It’s an age since we entertained on any scale, what think you of the idea brother mine?’

‘I think that would be a grand idea, but one that may plunge us back into insolvency.’ He handed her into the carriage. ‘Be patient a while longer Tami. After all your wedding has to be paid for soon and I’ve already been forced to put the Bank of England on alert. I suppose an extravagant, expensive hat will already be on order.’

‘But of course. You wouldn’t have me penny pinch and make do with one of the dozens I own already. The good people of Whitby would be sorely disappointed were I to marry in a hat they’d admired before.’

She watched as Tris shook his head smiling at her flippancy. ‘That’s something else to thank Francis for I think,’ Tris called up to her. ‘Soon all your expenses will pass to him. Our rise will be all the quicker because of it.’

As the carriage pulled away Tami’s expression changed. She was vexed. How did he do that? She’d arranged this meeting expressly to find out what had changed her brother from morose to merry and now she was none the wiser, no further forward than yesterday. Somehow he’d managed to steer her away from the very topic she was eager to discuss. She

sat back in her seat and smoothed the wrinkles from her dress. She would set Francis on the trail. Something had happened and she wouldn't rest until she found out what.

‘Where are you off to?’ Titus addressed his younger son. Tristan had mounted Jem and was heading for Kettleness. It was Wednesday and he’d planned an afternoon visit to see the lovely Merry. He’d been looking forward to it all week.

‘Have you sorted Mr Gilbert’s problem? He was hopping mad yesterday, I shouldn’t want to keep him waiting any longer than necessary.’

‘Yes Father, I’ve sent Conrad over with the parts he was missing, he knows not to come back until the error is mended.’ Jem was frisky and as eager to be off as his owner. ‘I also wrote a note saying how sorry we were the matter had been overlooked. I’m well aware he is an important client so I also sent a bottle of your best brandy.’ He tipped his tricorn to his father knowing he would be pacified.

As he rode into Kettleness black clouds loomed on the horizon; there would be rain before nightfall. The fine weather was about to come to an abrupt end.

As arranged with the lovely widow Tristan led his horse around to the side of Shingle Roar to the stable. He tied Jem up out of sight of anyone who happened to pass by. He knocked on the door and waited, his tricorn clutched in his hands. He ran his fingers through his fair hair. There was no reply. He went to the front door checking over his shoulder no one was watching. It was not only for himself he was worried, he didn’t want Merry to be the subject of evil gossip. Had she gone to the inn? Perhaps she’d been called in unexpectedly to cook.

He made his way down the track and entered the tap room. Rabbity Dick was filling a tankard with ale for a bent over old man who leaned heavily on a stick. Tristan ordered brandy. There was a chill in the air now the hot weather had passed. He stood at the bar thinking what to do next. He could hardly ask if Merry was here, that would be bound to arouse suspicion.

He took his drink to the same seat he’d occupied on his last visit and decided to wait. Perhaps if in a while she didn’t show herself he’d order food and then he might get a word with her, perhaps make a plan to visit her when she’d finished her work.

A half hour passed and there was no sign of Merry.

He ordered food. The same young girl as before brought out his order. Tristan was disappointed, not with the veal and ham pie, which was as delicious as he’d expected. The same wench came to clear his plates and dishes. He ordered a third brandy and continued to wait. It was futile but he held on in the hope of seeing Merry.

At last he gave up, tossed back the brandy, paid his bill and left the inn. He stood in the porch and watched as the rain pattered down. As he moved to walk past the forge he glanced in hearing a tinkling laugh. Merry was standing inside the doorway talking with William Wheelwright.

Tristan hesitated. At first he was pleased he'd found her, but then if she wasn't working why hadn't she waited in for him as arranged? It was too late to walk on - William had spotted him.

'Is it me yer wanting Mr Tolker,' the man said almost cheerfully. He was smiling at something Merry had said; no doubt they were sharing a joke. A knot of jealousy twisted in Tristan's gut. As Merry turned and saw him the happy smile was wiped from her face.

Tristan thought quickly. 'I'm returning from Runswick where I've had a business meeting and thought to call to see how things were progressing. That, and to avail myself of Mrs Baker's good food at the inn.' He smiled and bowed. She returned a curt nod.

'I'll leave you two gentlemen to talk business. Goodbye William, Mr Tolker.' She slipped past him averting her gaze.

Tristan contrived to discuss the work, but all he wanted to do was follow Merry and see what was amiss. He wanted to find out why she'd changed her mind. He was at a loss to know what to think.

He was disappointed.

When at last he got away from the odious blacksmith he walked with head bent against the wind and rain to her cottage and waited for her to answer his knock. Once again there was no reply. He turned up his collar, mounted Jem and rode off more than a little disgruntled.

Tristan was ill-tempered, frustrated and bemused. He would have waited at Shingle Roar, but fearful someone would see him he had been forced to leave. What else could he do? If Merry was inside it was clear she didn't want to see him but he couldn't fathom the reason why. She'd happily agreed to meet him again so what could have happened in the meantime to change her mind?

He was halfway home when he had the idea to go back when it was dark, when beady eyes were a-bed. But on reflection he'd thought better of it. Someone knocking at her door late at night might frighten her so he'd reluctantly abandoned the idea.

He spent a sleepless night, another reason why he was irritable. He couldn't remember being so attracted to a woman before. It was more than an attraction, she'd got under his skin and now he was denied her attention he was frustrated and let down.

It was for the best he told himself in his more reasonable moments, but still he couldn't get her out of his mind. Her eyes, her bright smile, her quick wit and her tinkling, infectious laugh. He was more than a little drawn to her; he was besotted like a teenage boy. Never before had he been so fascinated. If he didn't know better he'd think himself in love.

That evening he dined at Whitehall with his father and sister. His brother Theo and his wife Andrea were also in attendance. Tristan was quiet and distant, preoccupied. His sister noticed the change again. She threw him a pitying look.

At last when she got him alone she confronted him. 'You seem a little downcast, is something wrong? I'd hoped you were turning a corner but it seems I was wrong.'

'It's of no matter, you fret too much Tami.' He picked up a book and idly perused it. His sister tried all evening, without success, to lift his spirits. Eventually she pushed too far and he snapped.

'Tami you're in a particularly chatty mood. Why not go and sit with Andrea? No doubt she'll be interested in your stories.' His sister's face fell; he was immediately ashamed.

'I'm sorry you don't find me diverting, I was only trying to cheer you up.'

Tristan dropped the book on a foot stool. 'Ignore me; I'm sorry for being so irritable.' He made a fuss of her little dog Zacky in an attempt to appease her.

Tami was sympathetic. 'Over the past year or so you've changed, your usual happy disposition has turned morose and down hearted. You never were so introverted, I understand why of course, but you cannot let matters get you down Tris, there's nothing to be done. I realise it's easy for me to say, but don't let it embitter you. You're young and have all your life before you.'

He laughed wryly. 'That's what worries me!' His sister was frustrated, helpless to do anything about his predicament.

'Tami my love, you need not worry on my behalf, I'm as happy as most men. It's a relief to me that soon you'll be married and happy enough for the both of us.'

As he rode home his heart sank. He pictured Merry's beautiful face, her glorious hair blowing freely in the wind. On the beach that day he was carefree and happy in her company.

She'd rolled her eyes at his impersonation of William Wheelwright and laughed at his boyish humour. Then he remembered how she'd avoided looking at him as she side-stepped past him at the forge. A stab of pain shot through his heart. It wasn't only injured pride and jealousy. What had changed in those few days since he'd last seen her? He couldn't understand it no matter how he tried.

Suddenly it struck him forcibly. He guessed she'd more sense than him. He was a fool not to have seen it before. She'd obviously seen the truth of the matter; they could never have had a future together. Not a sociably acceptable future at any rate. She was nipping it in the bud before it grew out of control.

He could tell she wasn't the sort of widow with her eye on the main chance. She was no light woman. She'd told him she was respectable, proud, eager to find a situation and make her own life. Their different positions wouldn't allow them to be together, not in any decent way that is. Lots of men kept a woman on the side but he'd never considered it for himself. He'd had the odd dalliance of course when he was younger, bedded women of all types, but he could never view Merry in that way, she was far too precious to him.

Yet despite the differences in their station inexplicably she had managed to get under his defences. A man in his position had learnt to turn away and protect his heart. He was stunned at the strength of his feelings for Meredith Baker.

He'd never been in love before.

These burgeoning feelings for Merry were indeed love, real love. He saw that now. How could that be? He hardly knew her. Yet there was an attraction, something which drew him to her. She was beautiful, but it was more than that, more than mere looks. She was warm and easy to be with, kind and amusing. He'd never felt this way before and he saw now she was right; it must end before it had a chance to gain momentum. His gut wrenched at the thought of never knowing her better. Their positions wouldn't allow it. Merry had clearly read his mind, a mind he'd not known himself and she'd pulled back before her reputation was damaged. Like an idiot it had taken him days to reach the same come conclusion as her.

He was a fool.

Tiredness engulfed him as he dismounted and handed Jem to his groom. He sighed deeply as he lit a candle and climbed the stairs at Westcliffe House. Another sleepless night awaited him.

It was Sunday and the family were at church so Tristan, never a big church goer, had contrived to avoid climbing the one hundred and ninety nine steps to St Mary's. It wasn't the effort to get there which had put him off, indeed it was usually the best part of the Sunday morning ritual to his mind, but he'd had an idea. He wasn't about to admit defeat over Merry yet. For days now she'd been on his mind; he had to see her again if only to dispel the unsettling feelings he had.

As he pointed Jem in the direction of Kettleless, there was a cold westerly wind blowing. He hoped there might be a warmer welcome awaiting him at Shingle Roar but he doubted it. He almost turned back, again arguing with himself that he had nothing to offer Merry, well nothing conventional or respectable. Yet despite his misgivings he had to see her again if only to say goodbye. He'd tried to put her from his mind, but it would have been easier to try to hold back the tide. He tied his horse out of sight of prying eyes and knocked at the side door of Shingle Roar.

When she opened the door she was clearly surprised to see him. Surprised and not exactly pleased by the look on her face. Merry's eyes opened wide like windows flung open.

'I'm sorry to call unannounced. Could I speak with you if it isn't too much of an intrusion? There seems to be a misunderstanding, something has changed since we last talked at the beach. Have I done something to offend you Merry?'

She hesitated then opened the door wider and let him in. He stood by the kitchen table, tricorn in hand. Once again he was struck by Merry's loveliness, her poise and the way she lit up the room like the sun on a cloudy day. She was a woman who needed no artifice or fancy clothes to look her best. She was a natural beauty. The sleeves of her dimity dress were rolled up and her hair was tied in a simple chignon; she'd been rolling out pastry. Little tartlets were lined up ready to go into the oven.

Tristan had rehearsed what he was going to say, but now he was here, face to face with this beguiling creature he couldn't get the words out. He cleared his throat and started haltingly. 'I thought we had an arrangement for Wednesday last? When I called you were out, then I saw you at the forge and called here again when I had - '

She cut him off abruptly. 'Yes, yes I know all that. I'm sorry, it's nothing you've said or done but this, this, friendship is not seemly, not if I'm to keep my character. I may not be a gentlewoman, but I have a healthy regard for respectability and the need to safeguard my good name.' She swept pastry crumbs up in her hands and tossed them onto the fire. 'You

must see we're from different worlds, I cannot have you come here anymore Mr Tolker. I can't be alone with you unattended. I may not be a grand lady, but it is improper to be in your company without a third person present, it's as simple as that. I'm sorry if you thought more would come of it.'

It was indeed as he'd expected. He noted with dismay the formal use of his name.

'I understand, of course I do. I thought that would be the reason you pulled back. I was wrong to place you in such a position but could you not have met with me on Wednesday and told me how you felt? I've thought of you often since we first met, in fact I've found it hard to think of anything but you. I'd hoped - '

'Hoped what Mr Tolker? That I'd be your mistress, a little distraction away from town, someone to keep you entertained.' She lifted her chin proudly. 'I think you should go, you've mistaken my character, I may not be rich or wear fancy clothes, but I have a good name to uphold. I'm not that sort of woman.'

'I know that! Of course you value your reputation, I understand. I hadn't meant to take advantage of you I swear, I think highly of you, of course you're an attractive lady who must get more than her fair share of attention, but please accept my sincere apologies and also this.' He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a small parcel wrapped in paper. He put it on the table and pushed it towards her.

'Earlier in the week I accompanied my sister Tamsin to market, she's a great one for shopping. She helped me choose these ribbons as a small token though I told a white lie and said they were for my nieces; I would still like you to have them even if they're to be a parting gift.'

'Your sister?'

Tristan was puzzled at her exclamation. She opened the parcel and took out the three yards of pale blue satin ribbon he'd bought thinking it would suit her colouring.

'Such a pretty colour, but I cannot accept it, thank you all the same.'

'I expect nothing in return I assure you.' He held up his hands in supplication. 'I wanted to thank you for the food you've served me, that and your company of course. I thought the colour would look striking in your hair. You have such beautiful hair.'

They stood apart, the table between them. Merry turned and put the kettle on to boil. 'You're kind, thank you. I'll accept the gift, no strings attached, if you're sure you still want to give it to me now you know my feelings.'

'Ribbons with no strings attached.' He rolled his eyes, the charged atmosphere lightened, the tension dispersed. 'Of course I want you to have the ribbon,' he smiled, 'my

sister could stock a shop with ribbon, she has no need of more and thankfully I only have the one sister.'

She visibly relaxed. 'You two are close?'

'We are - her name is Tamsin. She's to be married soon and it's possible she'll bankrupt her future husband before too long as she has a serious hat addiction. If you saw the creations she wears.'

Merry smiled the most beautiful smile he'd ever witnessed. His heart thudded in his chest.

It was love!

'Would you care for some tea?' Merry cleared a space on the table and laid out the crockery. Tristan was confused by the sudden turn of events; the change in her attitude was puzzling. Surely a scrap of ribbon couldn't have changed her mind so quickly? A moment ago she was saying she couldn't be alone with him, now she invited him to take tea. Whatever the reason he heaved a sigh of relief.

'Thank you, tea would be most welcome.' She bid him sit at the table. Tristan wanted to keep the conversation going. 'Tami is quite a girl, I often feel sorry for her intended. His name is Francis Wheeler and she has him wrapped around her little finger. Last week at a dance he dared to cast a glance at one of Tami's old school friends and he's been in the dog house ever since.'

Merry smiled. 'Ah, a woman scorned.' She filled the teapot. 'She has a temper?'

'Not really, but she knows her own mind, Tami is sure of herself, wilful. In her marriage she'll be the one holding the reins. As I said I pity poor Francis. She really is a lovely person; you'll be getting the wrong impression. She's kind, thoughtful and witty, but she has a wicked tongue too I have to admit. She has a bad-tempered little dog she dotes on, Zacky. She loves animals and is sentimental about them. I often think she prefers her little dog to Francis.' He laughed. 'Zacky doesn't answer back.'

'I too like animals; I have a cat called Ledge. Perhaps you've noticed her about the place? I call her Ledge for that's where I found her, half way down the cliff face sheltering on a narrow precipice. She must have fallen. I coaxed her back up, then nursed her back to health. I think her tail was broken because now it has a kink in it near the tip. She follows me about like a dog.' Merry looked slightly shame faced. 'When I saw you at the forge on Wednesday it was she that William and I were amused by. She'd followed me and then set about William's lurcher who is ten times her size. The dog shot off scared for his life; she can be quite feisty.'

This beautiful woman had mellowed since his arrival but he couldn't think why. He was a little surprised at her about face, but he was hardly about to complain. Would she be swayed by a trifling gift? Perhaps it was his boyish charm? He smiled to himself as his earlier gloom lifted. Whatever the reason he was happy.

'Is Tamsin your only sibling?' She put a scallywag and a pat of butter before him. Tristan's eyes lit up and he sent up a silent prayer that he was back in her good books.

'I have a brother Theodore, the son and heir ... I'm the spare. You may have noticed all our names begin with the letter "T".' He raised his eyes heavenward. 'My father is Titus my mother was Teresa. She died ten years ago.' Merry expressed her condolences.

'Theo has three daughters and he's continued the tradition. My nieces are called Thomasina, Tallulah and Teodora, otherwise affectionately known as Tom, Tally and Teo. My sister insists on calling the youngest Dora to be perverse. Tami says she's going to buck the trend and call her children names which begin with U.

Merry furrowed her brow, bemused. 'It is the next letter after "T",' he explained.

'I hope she doesn't intend to have many, I can only think of one, Ursula.'

'No doubt my little sister has a whole list. Ulysses is a boy's name.' Tristan wrinkled his nose.

'Is Mr Wheeler in shipping?'

'He is, like Theo and I he helps run the family's business. It's a good match, a love match, both families are happy with the union. It's good for business too of course which Father sees as important. It will make the two families allies rather than competitors.'

'You don't look happy about it.'

'Sorry, I was thinking of something else. I couldn't be happier for her. Francis is a good fellow and has a strong enough character to stand up to her in spite of what I said earlier.' He finished his scallywag. 'Delicious as always,' he said.

'Tami will remove from Whitehall to Nab House at Sandsend on her marriage and my brother has his own residence, Pannett House near the harbour.'

'So it will be just you and your father at Whitehall?'

Tristan shuffled uncomfortably and sipped his tea. 'When I reached my majority my father gave me a house, Westcliffe House. Unsurprisingly it's situated on West cliff. It's far too big, but he expects me to fill it with sons, as Theo only seems able to produce daughters. I like children and won't care what they are when the time is right, though Father will be in seventh heaven if one is a boy. There's time yet for my sister-in-law to produce a boy, the law

of averages and all that. Do you have any family?' He wanted to know about Merry, but he also wanted to turn the light away from his own home life.

'I had a brother, but sadly he died when he was three. I'm not sure of what he died because it was before I was born. Both my parents died young too sadly.' She cleared the plates, dishes and the teapot. 'I often wish I had more family, there are a few distant cousins in Northumberland. I would have liked children of my own but it wasn't to be. '

Tristan stood by the sink and dried the dishes as she washed them. 'So you have your own residence?' Merry asked.

'I do and I only wish my cook was as capable as you, I've a mind to sack her and hire you.' He grinned as she put the dishes away. Tristan again moved the conversation away from his living arrangements.

'I was wondering,' he hesitated. He was unsure how things stood now, 'do you ride for pleasure? Might we go for a ride? I noticed you have a horse stabled.'

'I usually ride on Sundays as it's the one chance I know for certain I'll be free. The mail coach doesn't come this route on Sundays.

'If we head for the moors I shouldn't think we'll meet anyone. I know you worry about what your neighbours may think.'

While she changed her shoes for boots Tristan saddled her horse. When she joined him in the yard he helped her to mount. It was the first time he'd touched her. His hands held her waist as he lifted her onto the side saddle. He hadn't expected this visit to go so well, he was hopeful if he was discreet she would allow the meetings to continue but he didn't know for certain. He was mystified by her about face. He still had reservations about their predicament but who was he to dictate where his heart landed. He'd never been so content. He was a great believer in fate and told himself they'd been thrown together for a reason. Later he would come back down to earth but for the moment he was happy, happier than he'd ever been.

'You ride well,' he said after they had galloped across the open moor. They had arrived at a small secluded copse, he helped her down from her horse and kept his hands on her shapely waist and looked into her eyes. She swallowed and averted her gaze. Tristan let her go and threw the reins over a low branch; both horses began to crop the coarse grass.

They sat side by side on a boulder and looked out to sea. They talked companionably of matters of little consequence and then she told him about Northumberland and its busy ports, glorious beaches and castles.

He encouraged Merry to tell him about her husband; he wanted to know everything about her. She told him about how they had met, about their small wedding and how they had reached the decision to move further south so Steven might get a position on a whaling ship.

A stab of jealousy stirred in Tristan's gut but it was idiotic to be envious of the love and life she'd had before he met her. She had married for love, but then had suffered heartache and loss. She told him about the fateful night when The Mermaid had been lost. Merry shed a tear as she told him the story of her husband's ill starred mission.

'At the time he sailed I hadn't known I was with child; I found out later. I couldn't wait for him to come back to share the happy news, but of course he didn't come back. I tried to comfort myself with the thought that at least I'd have his child. It was a small consolation that kept me from complete despair. Then a week after I was told I'd never see him again I lost the baby. The doctor said it was the shock perhaps, grief. I was devastated all over again.'

Tristan took her hand, put it to his lips and kissed it softly. She didn't pull it away. He thought her a remarkable woman. So strong, yet vulnerable.

Back at Shingle Roar he helped her out of the saddle and dared to ask if he could call again. They arranged he would call on the following Sunday in the afternoon. Tristan rode home a cheerful albeit a confused man.



Merry had been in error. The lady on Tristan's arm was his sister and *not* a wife or fiancé, she had been mightily relieved, relieved and extremely pleased. Now it was clear this handsome man was *not* spoken for everything changed.

Merry was surprised to have growing feelings for Tristan Tolker. To have lost him before they'd really got to know each other had disturbed her more than she'd ever expected. But what were his intentions she asked herself? This of course was the fly in the ointment, the sticking point that gave her pause for thought. Questions teemed in her head. Could she trust he would not take advantage of her? Could he be serious in his wooing or was he playing a long game lining her up to be his mistress? Was she to be his plaything tucked away here in this backwater, away from his Whitby life? Was she to be visited as and when he had the time or the inclination, at his beck and call day or night? Was that his intention? Did he think she could be cheaply bought; had she not accepted the ribbon gleefully?

Her head was spinning.

If this was his idea then he would be sorely disappointed. Merry couldn't be any man's floozy not at any price. Tristan Tolker was an attractive man and a rich one by all

accounts, but she couldn't be bought, she was not that sort of woman. Why then was he buying her ribbons and paying her court? Such a man could surely have any lady he wanted.

She'd wanted to tell him she couldn't play the harlot when they were at the copse but she couldn't find the right words. Was it presumptuous to say anything at all on the matter as he'd behaved the perfect gentleman? There had been no impropriety except that they were alone and unchaperoned. Even then when she might have expected him to chance his arm, he'd behaved impeccably. Indeed, he'd acted most properly on each of their meetings and that in itself puzzled her; not many men behaved themselves with a lady, not when they had the opportunity to take advantage.

When he'd told her the lady was his sister she'd done an abrupt about turn. He wasn't spoken for so she had changed her tune. The relief had been immense like a candle shedding light in a darkened room. Tris had seemed bemused, but too much of a gentleman to question her motives when she'd gladly accepted the gift and asked him to take tea; a minute before she'd told him never to darken her doorstep again. He must think her capricious to say the least.

Now she saw her mistake, he was free and she was thrilled, delighted. But there was still a stumbling block to any relationship that might develop; he was still way above her station. Nothing had changed as far as that was concerned. His rank ordinarily would have meant they wouldn't have been in the same circles; yet they'd met when she'd served him and now he was pushing for more. He'd sought her out and on more than one occasion, she saw every reason to shun him but couldn't make herself. If he was happy to be friends then so was she. Merry smiled to herself and shook her head. She already thought about him as more than a friend, she was fooling herself.

She was playing with fire and was sure to get a nasty burn.

But she hadn't felt this way about a man since Steven had died. Indeed she'd never thought she would feel this way again. She missed the company of a man, and this man in particular. She'd been affected more than she'd thought when she'd seen Tristan with a lady on his arm, but could she expect more than friendship now? Why would a rich, good looking man such as he spend time with the likes of her if not for one thing? Doubt once again crept up on her like the tide crawling up the beach. They were still from different worlds after all, nothing could come of it. She would enjoy it while it lasted she at last decided.

The dark days were over, summer was fast approaching. She had high hopes but managed to convince herself she would try to contain them and live for the day. Despite all Merry's reservations the meetings continued. Now every Wednesday and some Sundays they

would ride together. The weeks passed and they enjoyed each other's company more and more. Still Tristan continued to behave like a gentleman although she noticed he did hold her waist longer than was strictly necessary when he helped her from her horse. Their usual trysting place was the small copse on the moors and as usual the next time they met Tristan was waiting when she arrived.

He sprang down from the boulder where he'd been looking out for her and helped her dismount. He kept tight hold of her waist and searched her face intently.

'I've missed you so much, you don't know what an effect you have on me.' His hands moved over her body in a most familiar manner.

'I've missed you too, though I'm not sure we have a right to make such declarations, it's hardly proper under the circumstances.'

His face changed. He stepped away from her then led her by the hand to the boulder.

'Why do you say that?' There was a hint of caution in his voice.

'Well is it not clear that things are taking a different turn, are we not becoming more than just friends. If I'm not mistaken you were about to kiss me then.' She looked him in the eye. 'Tris you know I cannot be your mistress.'

He laughed. 'Are you sure you don't flatter yourself?'

'Oh Tris don't joke! Can you not see we cannot carry on like this? Our worlds are poles apart, nothing but a light flirtation can come of our meetings and most men wouldn't be satisfied with such an arrangement in the long run, indeed just now you were about to take things to a different level were you not?'

'Is that why you pulled back?'

Was he relieved?

'Of course, why else? You're a gentlemen and I'm just a cook but I'm not some silly slip of a girl who can be toyed with. I know how the world works.'

He took her in his arms. 'You think I care about such things? Two generations ago my ancestors were fishermen sailing cobbles out of Sandsend. My grandfather made a small investment which went his way and he made enough money to start boat building. Our origins are the same; I come from humble beginnings like you. It's you I care about not our different stations.' He kissed her tenderly making her heart swell with joy.

'But ... '

'But what? Come let me help you up. He lifted her onto the boulder as if she was as light as air then jumped up beside her.

‘Our differences don’t matter to me. What matters is how you make me feel and you make me feel happy, very happy. Do I have a similar effect on you?’ He smiled cheekily knowing the answer she suspected.

‘You might do,’ she giggled. She was a little cross with herself for giving in to him so easily, but she was finding it harder and harder to resist as the weeks passed.

‘You look so young and carefree when you laugh. I know this is not a gentlemanly thing to ask but then I just explained I am not much of a gentleman. How old are you?’

‘You’re right, very ungallant, how old are you sir.’

‘Two and twenty last birthday.’ He arched his eyebrows and waited.

‘A youngster then! I was four and twenty in March.’

‘Belated happy returns.’ He kissed her cheek. ‘I’m surprised as I’d thought you younger than me.’

‘Flatterer.’

‘I am not. Have you by any chance brought any of your delicious food with you? I have quite an appetite.’

She laughed at the double entendre. ‘I see the way the wind blows, you only want me for my baking.’

‘Ah! You see through me.’

After they’d eaten the pasties and tarts she’d brought they sat with their backs resting against the rock in the warm sunshine. Tristan passed her the ale and she took a drink.

‘I’d wager none of the ladies in your circle drink ale from a bottle.’

‘I agree though my sister would if the need arose, she’s a little unconventional at times. My er -’

‘Your what?’ Merry waited expectantly.

‘I was only going to say my family despair of her sometimes.’

Merry noted the fleeting look on his face.

Was that an untruth?

Was his response guarded, cautious? She suspected he was going to say something else, but then changed his mind at the last moment. What, she speculated, had he been about to say?

The moment past as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her again.

She pulled away. ‘Please stop Tris. I cannot give you what you want.’ He was becoming far too amorous. Today for the first time she suspected his intentions. Perhaps he had been biding his time, reeling her in like a fish on the line.

Yet she trusted him.

‘I know you said you respect me, but please don’t think I’ll change my mind and give myself to you, I could never be anyone’s mistress, anyone’s “bit on the side”.’

‘I know that, I’m sorry I forget myself when I’m near you.’ He stroked her cheek. ‘You fascinate me; you’re a tantalising blend of innocence and knowledge. I suspect you know how you could keep me interested by leaving me wanting more at the end of each night.’

Merry blushed and laughed lightly though she was shocked at this turn about. ‘You think I’m scheming, holding back to keep you dangling?’

‘No I don’t. You’re too good to be underhand but believe me I don’t mean to take advantage of you, well not very much anyway.’ He smiled boyishly.

If she didn’t make a stand now she was lost.

‘I must go.’ She was up and mounted before he had time to stop her. ‘Merry don’t rush off, allow me to apologise, I got carried away. Can you forgive me?’

‘It’s not only you I don’t trust.’ Now she was safe on Stone’s back she laughed. ‘Will you call on Wednesday as usual, by then both of us may have cooled down.’

The relief on his face was evident. ‘Of course I will come to you my love, nothing and no one could stop me.’

Soon their meetings became a regular occurrence. Tristan would ride over on her days off to see her. These times were when they really began to get to know one another. She loved to cook for him and he became her guinea pig as she tried out new, more complicated recipes she said she would use when she got a new position. She looked forward to them supping together at Shingle Roar and cherished the times when they could throw off the cares of the day and be together.

Yet Merry was troubled. Alone and unchaperoned at Shingle Roar there was nothing but their own resolve to stop them from becoming intimate. Merry feared her resolve and his restraint would fail at the same moment and then where would she be? She didn't want to be left with a baby in her belly and cast aside once he'd taken what he wanted. Last time he'd called she'd almost succumbed and given way to him. She loved him and wanted to please him, yet she remained cautious, wary.

She had so much to lose.

She trusted Tristan, but there had never been talk of commitment from him. It had been two months since they first met and although they talked about everything under the sun the future had always been off limits.

In her quiet moments she worried he'd leave her if she didn't submit to him. Then again in the middle of the night she wasn't so sure; sometimes she had the distinct feeling *he* was the one holding back and not just for proprieties sake. He'd joked last time they'd met saying he should be revered as a saint for his self-control in not ravishing her. Their meetings were becoming more and more difficult; lust, love and mutual respect were finely balanced.

Merry tried not to worry about the future, but sometimes she couldn't help herself. What if he stopped coming to see her? What would she do? Despite her earlier resolve to enjoy the relationship while it lasted she was in too deep to pull back now. She loved him and wanted to be with him. A life without him couldn't be envisaged. It would be a desolate, lonely existence. It would be the sort of life she'd had when Steven was killed. She couldn't face that again.

There was also another consideration. They had known each other only a short while, but if he really cared for her why were they hiding away? Why did he not seek to introduce her to his friends and family? If rank didn't matter, as he assured her it didn't, then what was stopping him? Why did he not make an honest woman of her? Would he ever ask her to marry him? She wouldn't hesitate if he did yet although they weren't skulking around they weren't openly courting either.

In her heart the reason was obvious; despite what Tristan said, it had to be their different positions in society that held him back. Merry had seen his sister, seen what a fine lady she was. She had seen her beautiful clothes, their carriage, their family home, all the trappings that money could buy. And what of Tristan himself? His clothes were more than a cut above anything Steven had ever worn. His work clothes were better than most men's everyday garb and his formal clothes were so well cut they must have cost the earth. How could she mingle with his friends and family? She simply wouldn't fit in; she was a fool to think otherwise. Her clothes, her manners, her lack of status all meant they were incompatible as far as society was concerned. Surely Tristan saw this? Perhaps he'd be ashamed of her if they were to accidentally meet a friend or family member when out riding. But then they only ever rode in remote areas where they never met another living soul. He said this was for her sake, for the sake of her reputation, but was it really for his convenience as much as hers? Tristan must know they couldn't marry; his father wouldn't allow it even if his son proposed. But neither was he prepared to give her up.

Fear ate away inside her. Their two worlds were kept completely separate. Their days together were spent riding on the moors and enjoying each other's company. Their evenings were spent in more intimate ways. After dining they would talk and try not to go too far beyond decency, but still they were always alone, unchaperoned. Part of her liked it that way, liked being alone with him, yet she longed to share his family life, meet his friends know him in company other than her own. She wanted to see him with his sister who he talked about lovingly. She wanted to meet Tami and share their mutual love of this extraordinary man.

Merry only really called Hester a true friend, but Tristan had never met her. Merry too was hiding him, keeping him to herself. Hester was a level headed young woman and would immediately suspect Merry was on the road to ruin, was a "kept woman". She would think the worst. The young widow didn't want to be judged, not by anyone.

She admitted to herself the relationship was at a crossroads. She loved Tristan with all her heart, but could they continue in this way? In spite of what she told herself she was a hair's breadth from becoming his mistress. Indeed to all intents and purpose she *was* his mistress! How had that happened? If he really respected her as he said he did would he treat her this way?

When Merry saw how it looked to the outside world, the revelation was like a beam from a lighthouse piercing the darkness. She had been swept along and enjoying life again. Tristan had all the advantage, everything to gain and she the mistrust and everything to lose. That was the crux of the matter; in society's eyes they could never be together, never marry.

Her future lay in his hands. It didn't sit easily with her to be so beholden to any man. When she married Steven theirs had been a marriage where each had their own role. From the beginning they'd been partners, but that was because they were of the same social class and had similar backgrounds. They worked hard *together* for everything they owned.

Tristan worked for his father, but he had never known hardship, never had to let down a stew with water to make it go further, never had to mend and patch clothes as she'd done. Merry had to talk to Tristan. Discuss the future. She wouldn't issue an ultimatum, she was too proud for that, but she would have their situation made clear. It was time to lay the cards on the table, time to make a stand. Too late she lamented, to protect her heart but if she failed to act now she'd be lost for good. How and when she was going to broach the subject she had yet to decide, but she must speak out and soon.

The next time they met the pair sat in Merry's small parlour. Tristan sat gazing into the fire seemingly lost in thought.

'You're quiet, a little distracted?' she said concern on her face. He'd eaten the fish pie she'd made but not with his usual enthusiasm.

It was hard to enjoy anything when he was struggling with his conscience. He apologised but didn't elaborate. He was finding it harder to remain guarded with this mesmerising woman. He wanted to know everything about her, but he was hiding part of himself from her. This distressed him. She was so open, honest and trusting and he had a secret which would undo not just his life but hers too. He was a scoundrel, a cad. Merry deserved better. Guilt was crushing him.

'Penny for them,' Merry said as he continued to stare into the fire cradling a glass of port.

'Sorry I was miles away.' He rolled out the banality and sipped his drink.

'Oh, and is that where you'd rather be, miles away?'

'Not at all.' He turned and noticed her face had clouded over. 'You must know the only place in the world I want to be is by your side - or better still in your bed.' He tried to lighten the mood.

Merry shook her head at his cheeky retort, but smiled warmly. It made him feel worse. The guilt was spoiling what they had.

'Has something happened with the business that troubles you, do you want to talk about it? I'm willing to listen.'

She was so kind, so thoughtful. He didn't deserve her. Often he told her about the shipyard, about the struggle to keep the orders coming in. She was a good listener and often had sympathetic comments to buoy him up.

'Ignore me Merry I ...' Silence opened up between them. 'I've come to realise something, something I'd not anticipated would happen when we met. Actually that's not quite true. I knew from the moment I saw you I had to have you.' She lifted her gaze questioningly and his heart missed a beat. 'I've fallen in love with you Merry.'

She beamed at him and joy filled his being. He knew it would be short lived, but he savoured the moment nonetheless.

'And I love you, I never thought it possible, I never thought it would happen for me again, after my husband was lost.'

‘It’s the first time for me; I’ve never felt this way before. I cannot think of anything other than you but ...’

Her face fell. ‘But you know we cannot be together because we’re from different walks of life?’

‘I told you before I don’t care about society - but there is an obstacle.’

He took her in his arms and kissed her then held her close. She rested her face against his chest. He could smell the sea in her hair. He breathed it in like a man taking his last breath. Merry was waiting for him to explain, but how could he? He tried to make light of the situation. ‘This isn’t the most romantic of declarations, I hadn’t meant to declare myself if truth be told, but I couldn’t help it. You look so lovely tonight. I love you with all my heart, but you already knew that before I spoke. Perhaps I should have rehearsed what I was going to say, told you how much I admired you, how beautiful you are how - ’

‘It was beautifully said, it was all I needed to hear.’

They kissed again.

It was true Tristan was all at sea. He was in deeper than he’d ever intended. When he’d first seen Merry at the tavern he’d liked the look of her. He’d thought she would be diverting, perhaps a little something to distract him from his unsatisfactory, unfulfilled life. The thought had merely tripped across his consciousness as from the start it had been love at first sight. It had knocked him off balance, sent him reeling. He’d been powerless to resist from the moment he’d set eyes on her. How could he live without her?

But here was the rub.

Now all these weeks later he’d been stupid enough to declare his love. And to what end? How could he have been such an idiot? Now he had backed himself into the very corner he had been trying to avoid for so long. He was a fool, a dolt. Worse still by opening up to Merry he was going to hurt her. It was inevitable. He hated himself for it.

She was waiting for him to say the words he couldn’t utter. How could he ask for her hand in marriage? He was at a loss to know what to do or say next. The heat from the fire suddenly became oppressive. He released her from his embrace and stood abruptly.

‘It’s late, I should go.’

‘It’s not so late as all that but if you feel you must.’ He witnessed her confusion and his heart ached.

‘I’ve an early start tomorrow. I’ll need to be on the road by five at the latest. Do you remember I’m away to Thirsk for a few days? I did tell you. I will be away for a week, maybe more. If I can secure this important contract it’ll put the shipyard on a much firmer footing

and mean we will be more than secure at last. Father has entrusted this challenge to me and I'll not let Theo and my father down.' He stood resolute and firm.

She saw him to the door, a look of resignation on her lovely face. They embraced as a brother would hold a sister; coolness had crept between them. He shuddered. It was a distance he alone was responsible for creating.

'I'll miss you so much Tris, take care while you're away.'

'And I'll miss you, more than you will ever know.'

'What troubles you, what is it? Tell me. Do we not share everything? Has something happened? You say you love me but then cannot wait to leave!'

The young man's face was stony. 'I'll send word, but I fear I'll not be able to keep to our usual arrangement, though I'll try to return as quickly as possible.' He kissed her goodbye. It was not the kiss a lover bestows when he has just declared himself. It was the kiss of a man who despairs he'll ever kiss the love of his life again. He rode off into the night full of remorse and self loathing.

His ride home was not a pleasant one. He was angry with himself. Why had he let his guard down and said the words she longed to hear? He'd hurt her; he would never intentionally cause her pain yet ... He swore under his breath as he gave Jem her head.

After his declaration she'd been waiting for him to say those four little words; "Will you marry me". When they failed to materialise he couldn't bear the pain and bewilderment in her eyes.

As he rode along West Cliff Tristan slowed his horse. This situation couldn't go on, but what could he do? He berated himself for a deceiver and a cheat. The time away in Thirsk would help him to put matters in perspective perhaps, but he wasn't altogether convinced. There was an obstruction in the way of their happiness and sadly it wasn't going to disappear. He didn't know how he was going to get around it.

Merry had asked Hester to supper. The young woman didn't get out often as she spent so much time looking after her invalid mother. Merry also hoped it would help pass the time while Tristan was away. Today was Friday and he had indeed missed their usual Wednesday liaison and she missed him all the more because of it. The week dragged on. She should have been happy for at last he'd declared his love for her, but then he'd almost fled Shingle Roar without a backward glance. She was even more confused than before.

Hester was chattering on. 'Wish I could cook like you. That were right tasty.' Hester wiped her mouth and pushed her empty plate away.

I'll send you home with some leftovers, enough for you and your mother for your dinner tomorrow.'

'Thanks Merry, you're so thoughtful.'

'What have you been up to? I haven't seen you about much.'

'Mam 'ad one of 'er turns last week an' she's bin laid low ever since. Tell me what you've bin up to, I'm bored to death with sickroom talk.'

Merry was dying to tell Hester about her burgeoning romance, but she wasn't sure how she stood after Tristan's last visit. And besides the poor girl hardly had a life of her own what with her sickly mother and all. Merry didn't want to rub Hester's nose in her happiness as she didn't have a sweetheart.

And besides Merry didn't want to be judged by her best friend.

Merry cleared the table. 'Nothing special, just the usual cooking and cleaning.'

Hester smirked. 'You're a dark 'orse Meredith Baker! Yer should know yer can't 'ave a secret round 'ere.'

'Secret?' Merry could feel the heat in her cheeks.

'Yer were seen riding on the moors wi' a man, don't deny it, I've 'ad it from a good source.'

'What source?' Merry wanted to refute the allegation even though it was true.

'Me own eyes!' Hester slapped her thigh and laughed. 'Last Wednesday I was on me way back from the Tranters over by Troutbeck 'All an' I saw you by the little clump of trees where the big rock stands.' She sat back in her chair looking pleased with herself.

'Oh! In that case,' Merry burst out laughing, 'it's true I have met someone. I never thought after Steven I'd ever love again, but I'm the luckiest of women am I not Hester? I wanted to tell you, but I thought I might jinx it and besides ... '

'I'm that glad fer yer, who's the lucky man? 'E's not from around 'ere I'd warrant an' it wasn't William, this man were a different type altogether. Smartly dressed - A Whitby man p'haps? Yer were too far away fer me to clock 'im, but yer both looked right cosy an' close.' She winked again.

'Do you remember when we went to Whitby and I told you about a man who was employing William, the son of a shipbuilder?' Hester nodded. 'Well it's him, Tristan Tolker. The beautiful white mansion we gawped at belongs to his father. He's the most handsome, thoughtful, caring man.'

Hester's eyes were on stalks. 'An' as rich as a king!' Hester grinned then Merry's best friend's face changed. 'But would a gentleman such as 'im, what I mean is, surely yerv'e not fell for that old trick Meredith?'

'What old trick?' Merry tried to stand up for herself. 'He says he loves me and doesn't care that we're from different ranks.' The look of incredulity on Hester's face was hard to take. 'There's nothing improper going on. Please don't jump to the wrong conclusions. We're in love.' Merry took her friend's hands in hers. 'He's declared his love for me.'

Hester continued to look sceptical. 'Well if you marry 'im then you'll be a fine lady an' too good fer the likes of us?'

'Marriage hasn't been mentioned. I don't know how that could happen.' Merry wiped her hands on a tea towel. 'Sometimes I have to pinch myself that he loves me but it's complicated. It's not clear how I'll fit into his life, I admit I can't see how it can happen sometimes.' Merry at once saw the situation from Hester's point of view. Not for the first time doubt crept into her mind. Did he really love her? Was she naive in thinking he did?

'Last week I rode into Whitby along West Cliff - that's where he lives - Westcliffe House. His father bought him the mansion for his coming of age. It's an impressive town house five stories high. It's a far cry from my cottage I know.' Merry could see Hester was lost for words. 'In truth I cannot imagine living in such a fine house.'

'If yer marry 'im you'll be mistress of a grand mansion?' Hester's face was an expressive one and she couldn't hide how she felt. 'I 'ope you've not been reckless Merry. Yer wouldn't be the first to fall for a silver tongued rogue.'

'He's not asked me to marry him, but he's no rogue. And if he did ask I wouldn't be marrying him for his money, I told you we're in love.'

Hester laughed 'Bet it 'elps though that the gentleman's rich *an'* 'andsome. Lucky you.' Merry could see her friend thought her green, gullible. At moments like this she thought

so too, but when she was in her true love's arms all was right with the world. They could surmount any problem together; no obstacle existed that they could not overcome.

A knock at the door roused Merry from her thoughts. Sam the young servant Tristan used to send messages was standing there holding out a letter for her. She scanned it quickly. Hester's eyes opened wide as she waited to know what the note said.

'It's from Tris,' Merry smiled, 'he's back from his business trip and wants to see me tomorrow. He says he has something to ask me!'

'Do yer think ... ' Hester's eyes were wide.

'That he means to ask me to marry him? No ... don't be silly.'

'But yer say yer love each other? Isn't marriage the next step? I 'ope yer know what yer doing my girl. Give nowt away' til yer 'ave a ring on yer finger.' Hester advised but seeing the look on Merry's face added: 'Merry, you're older than me. You've bin married and know more about these things than me but be careful, yer wouldn't be the first to fall for a sweet talker. Think about your reputation.'

Merry laughed self consciously. She could see how it might look to Hester. 'I fear you and I are both getting ahead of ourselves. Tris and I are in love, but it's all so new. He respects me I can assure you. There's been no impropriety, beyond kisses.' Merry swallowed hard. 'Tris can be light hearted and fun, but underneath he's steady, not prone to impulsiveness, he can often appear pensive. The other night for instance - '

'In business mebbe he's cautious, but where the 'eart's concerned who knows. Men don't see life like we do, especially rich men. If there's an accident it'll be you left wi' a baby in yer belly. Men don't tend to 'ang around when they've taken what they came for. I'd 'ate for you to be upset again. Think Merry, 'ow would yer survive with a baby to look after?'

Merry tried to laugh off Hester's concerns, but she was beginning to see herself in a different light. Had he been taking her for a fool? She'd already let their relationship go further than she had ever intended. She'd already compromised herself. *He* had compromised her. Would a man who loved her do that?

'I'll have to wait and see what he intends. In the meantime I'll try to enjoy the romance while I can.' Merry tried to sound more light hearted than she felt.

'You do that Merry, but take care. Yer future's at stake as well as yer good name.'

'But you above all know how lonely I've been Hester. Tristan makes me happy. Since meeting him I feel alive again, I'm not merely existing as I was before. Since Steven my way of life has been a solitary one and now I have another chance of happiness and I intend to take it.'



After supper the next day Tristan rode over to Shingle Roar. He'd been to see his father with news of the success of the business deal he'd secured and ended up staying at Whitehall longer than he'd intended. Then he'd met up with his old friend Josh Wilding who was on shore leave from the navy. He had need to unburden himself about his private life and again Tristan had been delayed.

Merry was in his arms immediately the door opened. 'I've missed you so much, was it only ten days you were away!' She laughed.

'And I you. I'm sorry I'm late, but I had to report to Father about ... oh come here let me look at you. It's less than two weeks since I saw you last yet it feels like a lifetime. Each day the dreary business deal dragged on I knew more and more that I wanted to abandon it and come back to you.'

They went into the parlour where Merry poured him a brandy and herself a small glass of port. He talked of the deal, the friends he'd stayed with and the people he'd met.

'It sounds so exciting, and you say your father is happy with how you brokered the deal?'

'He most certainly is.' Tris stretched out his legs to the fire. 'The business has been in some difficulty of late as you know, but things are on the up again thanks to, well thanks to circumstances and hard work,' he shifted in his seat, 'and my ability to sweet talk Mr Harris of course, my business acumen is second to none.' He kissed her cheek and grinned.

'Pride comes before a fall,' she warned. They laughed and clinked their glasses together. All was right in his world.

They talked of other subjects, about what Merry had been up to, about Hester coming for supper and other every day matters.

'You said you wanted to ask me something in your message.' He noticed how bright eyed and beautiful she looked.

'Ah, yes.' He took her hand. 'Tomorrow I have to go to Runswick Bay, a business matter that will only take an hour or so. As we've seen so little of one another of late I hoped you might ride over with me? Perhaps take dinner at The Ship, make a day of it. The weather seems set fair.' He was puzzled to see her frown. 'What's the matter?'

'It's a lovely idea,' she said her voice biting, 'but I'll be at the tavern from early in the morning until after eight in the evening. I work for my living remember?'

'Well yes but I thought - '

‘I can’t simply take a day off as and when it suits me, I need the money Tris, I have bills to pay.’ She was upset he could tell.

‘Could you not send the landlord a note, tell him you’ve an unexpected errand to run, I’ll pay you any money you’d lose.’

She moved to stand by the fire a look on her face he’d never seen before: anger, frustration, irritation?

‘You’ll pay for my time? Like a harlot? Tris I can’t come and go as I please, how do you not know this? Are you so high in your ivory tower you cannot see how the rest of us live? You’re your own master, but I’m a wage slave. I cannot afford to lose my job and I’ll not take your money, what do you take me for? A kept woman!’

‘I’m sorry, it was thoughtless of me. I’ve missed you so much and wanted to try to make up for lost time. In suggesting recompense for your loss of earnings I’d not meant to insult you. I only wanted to help out a little; you will never take anything from me.’

Merry’s shoulders sagged as she sat back beside him. ‘I’m sorry I flew off the handle. It’s the disappointment, I too would love to spend a whole day with you, I’ve missed you more than I can say. I can’t bear us to quarrel, but the practicalities of our situation are becoming -’

‘Not all together straight forward, yes I see that. Allow me to think about it. I’m sure I can conjure up some other treat to make up for the day out I’d planned. In fact I almost forgot.’ He put his hand in his pocket and handed her a small box. ‘I have a small token for you.’ He handed over the gift and watched as she unwrapped it.

‘My goodness it’s so fine!’ The gold chain slipped through her fingers until it reached a small anchor. Besides her wedding band she’d never owned any jewellery.

‘I’d hoped when we had our day out you’d wear it, but now, never mind there will be other times.’

‘Will there Tris?’

‘I promise.’ He held her close, loving the familiarity of her scent. ‘In the meantime let me see how it looks.’ He smiled as he stood behind her to fasten the clasp. He kissed her neck lightly, tenderly.

‘Tris - I don’t think ...’

‘You’re anchored to me now,’ he whispered. She shuddered with pleasure. ‘I love you Merry.’

Right here right now was where he belonged. He would give all his riches, all his possessions to stay in this moment forever.

For the first time in his life Tristan Tolker was truly in love: In love with Meredith Baker of Shingle Roar, Kettleness. He also knew he couldn't carry on thinking and behaving in this way. His feelings for Merry were powerful and she loved him too, but sadly life was rarely so simple.

He'd meant to tell her of his situation the night before he went to Thirsk, but when it had come down to it he couldn't do it - instead he'd declared himself! Had he ruined everything?

He was aware that once he told her about his circumstances she'd put an end to their meetings, she'd see they had no future together. Tristan berated himself for letting things slide; he should have stopped this relationship before it got out of hand. He *should* have but he had not, he could not. She bewitched him.

He could have had a dalliance, a little light relief to pass the time, but he soon saw Merry was not the type and neither was he in this instance. He was besotted, in love, in too deep and in a mess.

Yet she made him happy. Before they met he'd never been so lonely. His dreary life had been weighing him down further and further every day. Each day he was busy at the shipyard and every evening he worked late to avoid going home. Now because of Merry he was young and carefree again, well not carefree perhaps as there was always something holding him back, stopping him from letting go completely.

He spent a fitful night composing what he should say over and over again. There was no easy way to break the news, but he had too much regard for this beautiful woman to deceive her any longer. He should never have misled her in the first place. He bitterly regretted deceiving her.

Yet the fact remained he loved her.



It was a fine, sunny Sunday afternoon and they had galloped across the moor, the wind pulling at her hair. They stopped in their usual spot by the little copse. Tristan took a deep, calming breath. It was now or never. He could put off the moment no longer.

'We've talked of our families, about our hopes, dreams and fears, but I'm afraid I've not been entirely honest with you Merry. I love and admire you and know you love me too but you don't know the real man; I've hidden him away from you. If you really knew me you would despise me, indeed when I say what I have to say today you'll hate me and I won't

blame you.’ Her eyes widened. ‘This is a difficult conversation for me to have and I know I should have broached it before, long before if truth be told, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell you,’ he took a lungful of air, ‘to speak the words that will tear you from me.’

He was an utter scoundrel, a rake and a liar.

Merry’s face fell. ‘Tris whatever is it? You’re scaring me.’

‘Will you do me the honour of listening though I don’t deserve it; all I ask is that you try not to judge me too harshly, I swear I never meant to hurt you, but I need to make a clean breast of things, I’m not a bad person I assure you, usually I’m honourable though you may think differently when I tell you my story. I don’t like dishonesty or deceit, but alas you need to know my true circumstances.’

His words were running away with him, he was putting off the inevitable. ‘I’ve been living a lie.’ He stood by the boulder his tricorn passing through his agitated fingers.

The love of his life bit her lip anxiously but did as he asked.

‘When I became one and twenty, as I told you before, my father gave me Westcliffe House. When he gave me the keys he said: “Here’s your wedding present”’.

Merry stepped away from him as if she had been burnt.

‘Let me finish please Merry,’ he asked as she tried to interrupt. ‘As I was not intending marriage to anyone at the time I was confused.’

Her shoulders relaxed but her relief would be short lived. It cut him like a knife to see her trusting face. ‘Unbeknown to me my father had been in talks with the Scotsbys, another important shipping family, and was keen to contract a union between myself and their daughter Jane. Of course when he told me I was against the match, I wanted to choose my own wife naturally.’

The look on her face was torture to him, but he must continue, press on. ‘My father isn’t a hard man, he wouldn’t have forced me to marry, but our shipyard was in trouble and Jane’s dowry ... he did exert quite some pressure as did Theo and they eventually wore me down.’

Merry was in shock. ‘Dear God I hope I’m misunderstanding you?’

‘This is so difficult.’ He continued standing by the rock though his legs could scarce hold him up. ‘After a short courtship my father urged me to make the alliance official. Jane is a perfectly nice girl, but I didn’t love her, or even like her if I’m honest, we are as different as night and day. She was eighteen at the time, shy, gauche and extremely pious, her family are Methodists. Tristan looked at his feet intently, anywhere was better than looking at the hurt on his true love’s face.

‘I told my father that after consideration I couldn’t go through with the marriage, I’d tried, but couldn’t love her. I don’t want to say more about Jane - it would feel disloyal, I’m not altogether sure I could explain anyhow. I know now what love feels like; back then all I knew was I couldn’t see a life with her. I told my father I was going to break the engagement. It was then he told me the business was in a worse financial state than I’d realised.’ Tris ran his hand through his hair. Merry was stunned by his declaration. ‘I won’t bore you with the details, but the matter involved embezzled funds.’

‘I’m not sure I even know what the word means, but I can hazard a guess. I can’t take this in ...’

He longed to hold her, comfort her, but he couldn’t. ‘I’m so sorry my love, let me get this over with before I lose my nerve.’ He walked a few steps then stopped.

‘You can see my predicament. In other words without the marriage settlement, Jane’s considerable dowry, Tolkers would sink, putting seventy men out of work and putting an end to the line for good.’ There was a long moment’s silence.

‘So are you telling me you’re engaged to be married?’

Tristan forced himself to look at her. ‘Worse ... I’m already a married man. We’ve been married less than a year but nevertheless I’m a married man.’

Merry moved away from him. He thought she was going to faint, her face had turned so pale. He moved to catch her as she sank to the ground. He knelt before her.

‘What was I to do Merry? I had no choice, it was either marry Jane or let the business fail along with the livelihoods of our men; my father would have been ruined, declared bankrupt.’ Tristan’s heart was breaking and so was Merry’s. ‘I should never have let this thing between us go so far. I know this, but I was so unhappy and you’re so lovely. It was dishonourable and I’m sorry.’ Merry continued to stare at him clearly in shock.

‘I never even thought you could be married though I once had suspicions.’

‘When, how?’

‘I saw you in Whitby with a lady, but the next time we met you said she was your sister and I believed you.’

‘Describe her to me. What did she look like? No I’ll tell you. Was the lady pretty and wearing an extravagant hat, did she have tawny ringlets? If that is the woman you saw then it was my sister Tami. Jane and I rarely go about together.’

‘I worked out she was your sister when you told me about her hat collection.’ Merry was dazed like a fatally wounded animal.

‘My wife wouldn’t be seen dead in anything so bold and fashionable. Her beliefs won’t allow her to wear such fripperies. We’ve been married a matter of months but they’ve been the longest and worst months of my life ... until I met you. I spend as much time as possible at the shipyard or at Whitehall, or with you. I’m trying not to be disloyal to my wife, but needless to say we don’t get on; we have different opinions on almost every subject. I don’t expect that she’s happy either; she would have been happier married to another Methodist, another who shared her faith. I’m as sorry for her as I am for myself. It’s been a marriage in name only from the off; please know that is the honest truth.’ Tristan lifted her chin gently to look at him. ‘Do you despise me? I shouldn’t blame you if you do.’

There was a look in her eyes, a look which said: “Who are you? You’re not the man I thought you were?”

‘I can’t think straight, I’m astonished. It’s hard to believe all you’ve told me. I don’t know if I can hate you, but why did you get involved with me? You were never free to begin a courtship so why did you string me along at the start? Oh Tris you should have told me sooner, much sooner, this thing between us, this romance has been going on for weeks, months. I’m a naive fool, I should have known, it all makes sense now.’

‘I know and I’m sorry, but you wouldn’t have entertained me if I’d told you I was married. Believe me when I say I didn’t set out looking for a mistress. I loved you from the moment I saw you. I was lost. You’re a beautiful woman, inside and out. What man would not want you? I can’t bear to lose you Merry.’

Merry stood and stepped away from him. She turned her back and sighed. ‘Before we met I was lost and lonely then I found you and thought all my troubles were over. I trusted you Tris, but you’ve lied to me, deceived me and more to the point deceived your wife. How could you?’ She continued to look away from him. ‘I can’t reconcile the fact you’re not free to love me. How can I ever see you again Tris, how can I? You’re a married man with responsibilities, a wife and a life way above me. It wouldn’t be honourable. I said at the start I couldn’t be your mistress yet I see that’s exactly what I’ve become. If you respected me you would never have compromised me.’

Tristan could hold back no longer. He pulled her into his arms. ‘I know we’ve known each other hardly any time at all in the scheme of things, but I truly love you, I cannot live without you. Please Merry you know I respect you. Have I not shown the greatest restraint?’ She struggled to get free. ‘Listen, hear me out. I said just now there was no spark of love with Jane, but there is with us, can you deny it? Do you not feel it too? We have to be together. He

took her hands and looked into the depths of her beautiful eyes. ‘Answer me this - had I not been married would you still love me, would you have married me if I’d asked?’

Merry pulled free and folded her arms defiantly. She raised her voice, something she’d never done before in his company. ‘What’s the good in thinking like this, would I have married you? How could I unless you were planning on becoming a bigamist. What good will it do us to speculate? You’ve used and humiliated me. Whether or not we’re in love we *cannot* love each other, you’re joined in holy matrimony to another. I’ve been a fool. I loved a single man, a free man. You’re not the man I fell in love with.’

‘You didn’t answer the question.’ He would not give up so easily. ‘Would you still love me if I was a free man? Please say you understand why I’ve behaved in this reckless way, I’m no rogue, surely you see I was not after one thing.’

Merry sighed. ‘After Steven was killed I never thought to love again, I’ve been shocked at the strength of my feelings for you; shocked how quickly I fell in love with you. I never dreamed it possible, but I was in love with a single man, not a married one. I don’t know this man who stands before me today.’

He took her in his arms and kissed her, she pushed him away again.

‘This is wrong; I can’t do this, not now I know the truth. You must go and never come back, we can never be together don’t you see? We’ll have to look upon this as a summer madness, as an *affair* that can’t continue, though we both know that’s not true. I do understand your dilemma, why you thought to make the sacrifice for your family business but not how you lied to me. How can I ever trust you?’

She walked towards her horse. Tristan grabbed her hand and stopped her in her tracks. ‘I can’t let you go my love. I would sooner throw myself off a cliff than live without you. We’ve not known each other long yet I know I’ll never love another, not as I love you.’

He led her back to the boulder, each lost in their own thoughts.

‘You lied to me.’

‘By omission yes and I’m sorry for it. It was selfish.’ The guilt cut deep. He was causing her pain and bitterly regretted it. ‘If I could turn back the clock to that day at The Anchorage when I first laid eyes on you but I can’t. I should never have pursued you, but I couldn’t resist. I have no other excuse. You drew me in.’

He had expected Merry to rant, shout or cry, but she was icily resolved, silent.

‘All this time I’ve been married, but in name only there’s nothing between Jane and I. I don’t ... I don’t avail myself of her.’

‘What difference does it make? You’ve not just deceived me you’ve gone against your wedding vows. I thought you a man of honour, but it seems I was mistaken. I’ve been wrong about you all along and now I must go. You’ve broken my heart Tristan Tolker. You’ll have that on your conscience for the rest of your life, if you even have one that is.’

She almost ran to her horse. ‘Of course I have, how can you doubt it? Please let me help you.’ She was already in the saddle.

‘Leave me alone, I wish I’d never set eyes on you. Don’t ever come to Shingle Roar again.’

Tears coursed down her face as she sped off at break neck pace.

Merry could hardly remember how she got back home. Possibly it was only because Stone knew the way. She ran upstairs and flung herself on the bed and cried until her eyes were red and her head pounding. The whole night long she sobbed and remonstrated with herself. How could she have been so stupid? She should have trusted her instincts in the beginning when she thought him a chancer.

Yet in her heart she was certain Tristan was hurting too. She believed him when he said he loved her. He was as much a victim as she was herself; he was a young man trapped in a loveless marriage. 'But he should have told me so that I might not get hurt, it's dishonourable to lie as he's done,' she said out loud to Ledge. The cat, bemused, jumped down from the bed. 'What kind of a man sets out to deliberately mislead? Not one that cares for the woman he pretends to love surely.' Merry spoke to the cat's retreating back.

By dawn, exhausted she dragged her weary body from her bed and went to get water from the pump. She still had chores to do, chickens and a horse to feed, even if she just wanted to hide away from the world. Ledge wound around her legs reminding Merry to feed her too.

She picked up the bucket and saw Tristan standing by the dry stone wall.

'I thought I told you never to come here again. How dare you? Go back to your wife, you're not welcome here.'

Quietly and slowly Tristan walked towards her his head hung in shame. 'It's because I love you that I lied.' His voice was calm and gentle. 'I know it's wrong headed, but truly I cannot go on without you.' Merry kept her head bowed and worked the pump.

'What if we were to go away together, I'll leave my wife for you. I'll do anything you ask.'

Merry's eyes opened wide. She spat out: 'Leave her! How can you?'

'Not easily, I realise that. My wife is very religious, she wouldn't separate from me willingly, but if you came away with me ... I couldn't offer you marriage of course.' He lifted his eyes to hers. The spark, the twinkle she loved had left them replaced now by sorrow.

'We could go away to Northumberland or Scotland - anywhere. A place where no one knows us, start afresh, live as man and wife even if in the eyes of God and the law we aren't joined.'

Merry was astounded; it was as if he'd asked her to fly to the moon. 'Surely you don't believe I'd agree to living in sin, what do you take me for? A common strumpet!'

‘Please don’t dismiss the idea out of hand, if you truly love me you’d give it some thought. Please Merry.’

‘How dare you! I thought I loved you, but that was before I knew you’ve been living a double life, before I knew you could lie and betray with calculated ease.’

‘Ease - ah! It hasn’t been easy I can tell you. I couldn’t help falling in love with you. Can you hand on heart tell me you wish we’d never met?’ He said the words softly. ‘Listen to me my love. In six months I’ll inherit my grandfather’s money, it’s money which has been held in trust for me as the younger son. It’ll be enough to buy a house, not a huge one, but big enough. I could begin again, buy my own business, be my own boss, I should like that. No one would know we were not man and wife. To each other we’d be married, bound by love not convention or marriage lines.’

Merry was about to reply when he put his finger to her lips. ‘Wait, don’t say anything, think about it, mull it over. Don’t act in haste I beg you. I know I’ve disappointed you but don’t dismiss the plan out of hand. I understand it’s a lot to ask of you. I wouldn’t be surprised if you turned down my offer poor as it is; you deserve better and I know that.’

She took a step back. She could hardly believe what he was asking her to do. Be his floozy, be his mistress!

‘You need not sell your cottage. Rent it or leave it empty it’s up to you; we won’t need the money, we could live comfortably until I can grow a business. Then we will live well. I’ll make it up to you my love. I promise on my sister’s life I’ll never lie to you again if you will only consider my proposal. All I ask is you think about it. Please tell me I’ve not lost your love forever?’

Ledge wound her lithe body about Tristan’s legs. He bent and picked her up and stroked her absent mindedly. Ledge purred loudly. Merry was amazed; the little cat never let anyone pick her up, not even her.

Even her cat was a turncoat.

‘I could buy a sail makers or buy shares in ships, set up my own small line and expand in time. We could be happy together, just the two of us.’

Merry’s head was spinning. How could he think she would agree to this? Did he think she had no self respect? ‘I’ve never been a particularly religious woman, but I couldn’t live openly, brazenly as your wife when you’re married to another. I’m not as unconventional as all that. You ask too much. Neither of us would be happy creeping around, waiting for our secret to be discovered. No, this has to end now Tristan before anyone else gets hurt.’

His face showed his disappointment.

‘And besides what of her family, of your own? What would they say? You’ve taken her dowry then you’d leave her, disgrace her. Is that not cold hearted and callous?’

‘It is and I don’t undertake any of this lightly, but what can I do? I’ve thought about this more than you might imagine and it’s the only solution, the only way we can be together. I married against my better judgement to save my father from disgrace and ruin. Am I to live out the rest of my days in misery? I’m sorry I sound self pitying, I only have myself to blame. I should have walked away from you at the beginning, when I first saw you, while I still could.’

‘You’ve made your bed and now you must lie on it. I’m sorry for you, I understand you tried to do the honourable thing, marrying Jane, but you can’t turn the clock back. We have to part and go our separate ways; there’s nothing else for it. You know I love you Tris, but you have a wife.’

Tristan bit his bottom lip. ‘Will you not even consider my proposal?’

‘Proposal!’ She huffed, hardly a proposal a woman would cherish. ‘Would her family not come after you? Your family would disown you? Surely you’d be an outcast.’

‘I’d feel wicked running away - it’s a caddish thing to do, not something I’d be proud of but what’s done sadly cannot be undone. My family would be disappointed in me, Tami would forgive me; she knows how unhappy I’ve been since my marriage. My wife’s family are exceptionally upright, as I said they’re Methodists. They would take care of Jane and I, of course, would make monetary provision for her.’

Merry hung her head, her shoulders slumped; she had a lead weight pressing her down. She wanted to be with him, she loved him to distraction. Her heart was breaking, but how could she run away with him?

Tristan continued as if thinking aloud: ‘I suppose I could change my name, it would feel deceitful, I feel guilty even thinking like this, but I’d do anything short of murder to be with you. I love you so much. How would my family know where we were if we changed our names? We could go abroad?’

‘You’d cut yourself off from your family, from the sister you adore?’

‘For you, yes.’

In her confusion a thought occurred to Merry. ‘You say you never loved your wife. You say you don’t love her now, but you haven’t said how *she* feels. Does she love you? Was it a misalliance for her too?’

‘I said I’d never lie to you, but I cannot honestly answer that question. She has *told* me she loves me, but I sense she said it because it was expected, she has more regard for me

than I do for her I think. On our engagement there were never declarations, nor were there honeyed words of adoration on our wedding night. I'm sorry; it feels disloyal to my wife to speak about her like this, she is still my wife and undeserving of my neglect but it's the most honest answer I can give.'

Merry shivered. The sun had risen, but a milky white sky kept any warmth away from the earth. She sighed. 'I have to think, I need time to decide what I must do.'

'Then I may dare to hope ... just a little?'

'Go away Tris, I cannot say whether you may hope or not. I'll send word if I want to see you, but you must promise me you'll leave me alone until then. There's so much to consider. I fear I won't be able to reconcile how I feel with how I should act. When I'm with you it's as though I'm under your spell, I need time alone to think.'

'Of course I'll do as you ask and wait.' He moved towards her.

'No, leave me, go.' He stepped away not wanting to alarm her further. The look on her face was breaking his heart. He strode away but as he reached the apple tree he turned. 'I'll never give up Merry. I beg you to think carefully. My future is in your hands.'

The Tolker men rejoined the ladies having lingered over their port. They were still discussing a business deal that was in the offing as they entered the drawing room at Whitehall.

Andrea was eating biscuits and drinking tea, even though she'd only half an hour ago finished a good supper. Tami was reading a book and stroking her little dog absentmindedly with the other hand. Theo joined his wife on the couch nearest the fire. Tristan held back a little waiting to see where his father would sit. To his relief Titus made to sit beside Jane. He visibly relaxed and sat beside his sister and her dog. The dog bared his teeth but Tristan knew the dog was only being protective of Tami. Jane Tolker looked up from her sewing, a religious script no doubt. He noted the look Jane gave the dog - she wouldn't have allowed it in the house, believing all dogs belonged outside. Tami tapped the dog.

'Naughty dog, Tris won't hurt you, say you're sorry.' Tristan shook his head in mock disbelief at the way she talked to the animal.

'Will Francis let you take Zacky with you to your new home?' He pulled a face at the mutt. 'I should not. He's thoroughly spoilt and bad tempered.'

'Who Francis or Zacky?' Tami glanced at her father and then Theo who both laughed along with her. Jane kept her eyes on her sewing, but Tristan recognised the disapproval, the slight pursing of the thin lips. She didn't look up.

'Did you see the living of St Jude's is vacant Jane? This was his father's attempt at trying to draw Jane into the conversation. Tristan's father never knew what to talk about with the young woman, he knew next to nothing about her except that she was religious.

'I'm a Methodist sir. I have no thought for the Anglican Church.' There was a stony silence broken by what was clearly a stifled giggle from Tamsin. Tristan threw his sister a quelling look.

After some desultory talk and local gossip, Theo and Andrea stood to leave.

'Come along old girl, early start for me in the morning. If I'm to catch the early tide I'll need to be gone by six.' Tristan watched as Andrea heaved her great bulk from the sofa.

Was she with child again?

Jane put aside her sewing and looked at him expectantly.

'I presume this means you too are ready to leave?' He sighed. She smoothed the skirt of her brown dress with her bony fingers and patted her mousy hair which had turned frizzy on the ride over; damp air always made her hair untidy.

‘If you’re ready Tristan, then yes I am too?’ She took off the spectacles which she wore for close work and tucked them in her reticule then rubbed the red spot on her nose where they had pinched.

‘It’s early yet,’ Tami said looking at Jane disdainfully.

‘Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise,’ Jane recited.

Tristan reluctantly sent for their horses whilst Tami sealed her lips tight shut.

When farewells had been exchanged the unhappy couple climbed the steep hill to West Cliffe House riding side by side in silence. Tristan wished someone else was riding by his side; the silvery moon suspended gloriously over the calm sea was a marvellous sight. It would be so romantic to ride like this with Merry.

‘Where were you on Sunday night? I didn’t know you were working away from home. I don’t remember you telling me you would be gone again so soon after your last trip.’

‘It was a last minute decision.’

‘And you did not think to send a note? I only mention it because I was worried.’

She wanted him to know she cared about him he realised that, but she always made it seem like nagging; she never could seem to say the right thing. Jane was a poor conversationalist at the best of times, but when they were alone she became even more tongue tied. He imagined how different this moonlit ride would be with an ebullient, smiling Merry by his side.

‘Forgive me Jane, I should have thought. I didn’t imagine you’d notice my absence.’ He wanted to say “as we don’t share a bed” but didn’t want to sound churlish. He knew he was supposed to fulfil his side of the bargain in this marriage contract, but he’d not the stomach for it especially since meeting Merry. He shuddered.

‘Have you ordered a new gown for Tamsin’s wedding my dear? You should, it will be a splendid day.’ He was trying to make up for being a neglectful husband.

‘I thought to wear my grey brocade.’

‘As you wish, but I’ve said before you may treat yourself to whatever your heart desires. Most ladies will be in new gowns I’ll wager.’

His sister’s wedding would be another ordeal for his wife. She would view it as another excuse for reckless spending and over indulgence. Her Methodist principles would be affronted at what she would perceive as extravagance. She would simper and smile and although not meaning to she would make him feel uncomfortable for celebrating Tamsin’s good fortune. Jane would be looking down her long nose and waiting for the first opportunity

to leave the celebration. Sadly she had the capacity to suck the joy out of every occasion. Tamsin at least would have a happy, loving marriage and for that Tristan was truly grateful.

‘Thank you Tristan you’re kind and I thank you but I shall be happy enough with my grey.’



Tamsin Tolker was married to Francis Wheeler on a fine autumnal day in September. A wedding breakfast for one hundred and twenty people was held at Whitehall. The bride, resplendent in ivory watered silk with a waterfall of French lace at the cuffs and neck presented a pretty picture. As expected she wore a magnificent hat of huge proportions that everyone remarked upon.

The happy couple were to honeymoon abroad and on their return would reside at Nab House at Sandsend, a matter of three miles from the bride’s former home in Whitby. The house was a wedding gift from the groom’s father.

The Tolker family had enjoyed the day; Jane had not been quite so morose as usual which was something at least. Then, when the night was still young, Jane predictably hinted she was ready for home, ready to leave the party. Tristan, who was enjoying himself for once, was not at all eager to go; he was catching up with old friends and family, and anyway what was there at home for him?

An early night laying abed thinking of Merry?

As so often his attention drifted to his one true love. He daydreamed how he would have loved to show her off on this special day. They would have danced and laughed together, had fun. There was still no word from her, but he hoped no news was good news.

Captain Josh Wild an old school friend of Tristan’s had been regaling him with stories of his adventures at sea, or rather more to the point with his escapades with the ladies in various ports around the world. He’d always had a roving eye and disrespect for the conventional, indeed Tristan suspected he had more than one “wife” stashed away, and possibly several children. The more they drank the more inflated the stories became, but Josh told a good tale and Tristan was in need of light entertainment. Jane was taking no part in the conversation sitting sour faced next to Tristan’s maiden Aunt. Jane’s eyes only lifted to look longingly at the door.

‘Go on ahead if you’d like Jane, Father’s carriage can take you home if you wish to go now, I’ll be along later. I still want to have a word with my Uncle Ned as I’ve not seen him or cousin Toby for years.’

Jane pressed her lips together and stood to leave.

‘Very well, could you see me to the carriage husband? I have a slight tummy ache,’ she whispered, ‘too much rich food I expect.’ Tristan had watched his wife wrinkle her nose as dish after delicious dish was put before her at dinner. She’d barely eaten enough to keep a sparrow alive. ‘Would you have your wife go home alone?’ He had just handed Jane into the carriage. It was as near to pleading as she’d ever come; guilt washed over him. Why did she have to spoil every occasion?

‘Then stay a while longer, it’s not yet midnight.’ He held the carriage door open and held out his hand to help her back down. She settled back against the seat. ‘I told you I don’t feel well.’ He frowned. If only she’d try to meet him halfway and say ‘Oh very well, lead me to the dance floor,’ but no she was intransigent, unyielding. Her Methodist upbringing held her back. He couldn’t help finding it wearing.

‘Then be sure to ask your maid to prepare something to ease your ache my dear. I hope you sleep well.’

He closed the carriage door, wished his wife goodnight then went in search of his young cousins who were happily in their cups. Later in the library he and Josh sat nursing a glass of brandy each.

‘Your marriage is not working out Tris? From what I witnessed this evening that much is clear.’

‘You could say that.’

‘She seems ... quiet, ill at ease.’

‘You could say that.’

Josh grinned. ‘I see you aren’t eager to race home.’

Both men chorused: “You could say that.” They laughed loudly. Both had drunk far more than was necessary but neither regretted it.

‘It’s not so funny Josh. The reality is unbearable. I have the most miserable of marriages, if only you knew the half of it.’

Josh topped up his friend’s brandy. ‘Jane is not to your liking clearly. I know why you married her of course; it was a grand gesture, laudable. I’m sure your father is grateful but, well, I thought she may possess some character traits which might make her appealing.’ Tristan was silent. ‘But why the long face?’ Josh continued. ‘Surely you’ve found someone else to warm your bed; you’re young even if not free. You’re free enough if you play your cards right. A little bit on the side is perfectly acceptable in your situation. You deserve that much at least.’ He slapped Tristan on the back, stepped back to resume his seat almost knocking over the side table as he misjudged his landing. ‘You’ve done your duty, saved your

father's neck, so now you deserve a reward. If you don't mind my saying Jane doesn't look the type to be accommodating,' he slurred.

Again Tristan didn't reply. He may have drunk too much, but he was still a gentleman and Jane was still his wife.

'Tris for the love of God, get yourself a mistress. I hope to God you at least get yourself a whore now and again. You're a young, red blooded man for pity's sake.' Josh's patience was wearing thin.

'I've found someone. Not a ... what I mean to say is I've met someone.'

'Then why are you downcast? If you're getting your needs met elsewhere what's the problem, you're having your cake and eating it surely? Your wife can be avoided if you try hard enough. The house is large enough.'

Tristan explained about how he'd met Merry and how he had only recently told her about his marriage.

'Are you mad? Why would you tell this other woman you're married? Sounds to me like you were onto a cushy number, a beautiful widow, without father or brother breathing down your neck and looking out for her best interests. Her own little place for a love nest and she cooks!' He roared with laughter. 'She sounds like my type of woman.'

'All women are your type, you old rake. Merry's not like that. If only things were different, I should marry her tomorrow.'

'That, my friend would be your first mistake. A man like you doesn't marry that type of woman you -'

'Merry isn't that *type* of woman. Josh you and I have been friends since school, but we have different views where the opposite sex is concerned.'

'True. My latest conquest is also married ... but not to me.' He sniggered. 'She's oh so willing and compliant. Her husband's an ugly old brute, so she's all the more grateful for my attentions. Also I've recently acquired a pretty little Mademoiselle in Le Havre to take care of my needs when I'm away. Petit Michelle has some exceedingly saucy French tricks.' He winked at Tristan who was feeling more and more despondent; the drink was making him maudling. He missed Merry so much. Waiting for her answer was like a slow death. Josh knocked over his brandy glass and cursed as only a seaman can.

It was true Tristan liked Josh, they'd always got on well, been friends but on this matter they'd never see eye to eye. Josh was all for using women and discarding them before they formed an attachment. He'd never have allowed himself to get embroiled in such a dilemma.

‘Josh, if I lacked a conscience or morals like you I’d perhaps be happy, but I’ve never been one for womanising as you well know. I respect my wife ... but I love Merry. I love her deeply.’

‘We reap as we sow as your dear wife would say. And I sow a lot of seed.’ He chuckled and thumped his friend awake. Tristan had started to drop off. The drink and the emotion of the past week were taking their toll.

‘Stop being so serious,’ Josh ordered. ‘You’re a young buck, good looking, rich. Most women would give anything to be kept by you. Use this as a wakeup call.’ He laughed again as Tristan’s eyes drooped. ‘Get yourself another mistress, in fact I have just the lady now I come to think of it; a ravishing brunette I know. Very accommodating she is and well schooled by yours truly. I can assure you you’ll not be disappointed. I’d not give her up, but for an old friend. Tris are you listening?’

Tristan’s Uncle Ned shook him awake. ‘Tell me about Thirsk. Your father is pleased with the outcome; he tells me you managed to strike a good bargain.’

Tristan roused himself to wakefulness and began to tell his uncle about the deal.



Later that night back at Westcliffe House, more than a little worse for wear, Tristan retired to his study. He sat at his desk with his head in his hands. He tugged at his hair as if trying to pull a plan into being. He let the air out from his lungs slowly. It was a week since he’d seen Merry to speak to, a long, unsettling week.

He had agreed to leave her alone to try to sort out her feelings about his proposition. He was anxious in case she turned down his proposal, as he expected she would. The days were long even though he kept busy; the nights were even longer. He lacked sleep. He could not sleep. He lay awake every night thoughts racing through his head. What if she rejected his offer? Who could blame her if she did? What sort of life was he offering her; a sham marriage was all he could propose - hardly respectable. Why would she acquiesce? She was too good, too proud, not that sort of woman.

Every night he’d ridden over and gazed down on Shingle Roar from the cliff top just to be near his one true love. He’d done so every evening excepting tonight; he could hardly slope off from his sister’s wedding party. It was also Jane’s birthday and although they had not celebrated it alone, he’d thought she might enjoy the double celebration of a wedding and a birthday. Clearly she had not.

He thought to ride over to Kettleness now but then thought again. Merry would be abed and he would not see her. On Friday he *had* seen her. It was sundown and she’d gone

into the garden to lock up the chickens. It had taken all his strength to stop himself from riding down and taking her in his arms.

He would not go tonight. He would do the sensible thing and try to get some sleep. He went to his dressing room and washed his face then dismissed his valet saying he would fend for himself. He poured brandy into a glass, but left it on the bedside table. He'd drunk too much already. His head was blurry.

In one respect he had used his time constructively this past week whilst he waited for Merry to send a note, a note that might change his life for good or ill. He wanted to be ready with a valid plan if Merry agreed to "elope" with him.

He'd worked out that depending on the type and size of the business he bought they could afford to buy a good sized house. He'd spoken with a captain who was based in Merry's old hometown and he said businesses and houses could be got relatively cheaply the further north you went. Perhaps houses were cheaper still in Scotland? The border town of Berwick or Port Glasgow might suit? That was far enough away for no one to know them. If only she would agree to his plan.

He was lost in thought as Jane glided into his bedchamber on soundless feet. He was startled to see her standing before him. They'd had separate bedrooms from the outset. She had never entered his bedroom before.

'Thank you for my birthday gift Tristan, it was thoughtful of you to buy me new riding gloves. My brown ones are almost worn through.'

'You're welcome, I'm afraid I'm not good at gift buying, and besides you would have shunned jewellery, a new gown or a hat.'

'You're quite right, I have an elegant sufficiency of all things fancy. I swear I could wear Quaker garb and think nothing of it if it weren't for letting you down. Far too many waste money on gaudy fripperies and gewgaws when the poor are without enough to sustain life.'

This was a dig at his sister.

He continued to undress ignoring the barb. He'd every sympathy for the poor, he didn't need Jane to tell him he was fortunate. He gave willingly to the lower orders and supported the building of the new hospital, but life needed a little colour from time to time surely? He found his young wife's piety off putting to say the least. All her family shared the same moral high ground, they were all devout. A meal taken with them he likened to The Last Supper. Jane rarely missed an opportunity to provide a sermon on the ills of the day. It was the only time she had anything to say.

She stood before him wearing a high necked nightgown with a dark robe fastened tightly around her thin body.

‘I’ve waited up for you. I had hoped you would have been home earlier so that we could have had a little conversation.’

‘Conversation? I said I wanted to speak with my relatives as I seldom see the ones from Carlisle.’ He sighed at having to explain himself. ‘You were perfectly welcome to stay.’ He remembered she’d said she felt unwell. ‘Are you feeling better?’

‘Yes thank you, it’s thoughtful of you to ask. I’d wanted to speak with you, I have wanted to share some good news with you since yesterday, but you came home so late again last night that I had retired by the time you got home.’

‘I had urgent business at the yard, I sent a note.’

‘That was kind of you. It is late now so perhaps I’ll wait until tomorrow. You look tired my dear.’

‘What news, we’ve been together all day why have you not told me of any news at the wedding?’

She smiled shyly and clasped her hands together tightly. ‘It’s not the kind of news one can discuss in company,’ she murmured coyly. ‘I am with child Tristan.’

Tristan stared at his wife in horror and disbelief. If she had just announced she was going to dance naked around the room he could not have been more shocked.

‘With child! Are you sure? You must be mistaken. How can it be?’

She flushed scarlet. ‘It was not an immaculate conception I can assure you.’

Tristan slumped on the edge of his bed. He could hardly believe what he was hearing. She’d been eighteen when they married and chaste of course. Both she and her family were deeply religious people so Jane had no idea what to expect on her wedding night; her mother wouldn’t have thought to tell her and she would *never* have dreamed of asking.

Tristan was not inexperienced, what handsome young man was, he was a fine looking man and more than one young lady had been indiscreet with him. One such lady, the sister of Theo’s best friend, had been most obliging for half a year before her arranged marriage.

Then he had wed Jane. For the first three months of his married life once a month like a convicted man to the gallows Tristan had gone to Jane’s bed. She, in her turn had lain there like a marble effigy on a tomb, cold and unyielding. She had endured the act like a dutiful wife, screwing her eyes tight shut, much to his mortification. Uncomplaining, yet showing no pleasure or interest in the coupling, she had lain motionless and rigid. After the third

excruciatingly embarrassing encounter Tristan could not return to his wife's bed for a fourth time. In all his experience he had never felt so inadequate.

'Have you seen a doctor?'

'Doctor Lewis came yesterday and confirmed my suspicions. I'm over four months gone. He thinks we should expect sometime in January.'

Tristan stared vacantly ahead, his face devoid of emotion and his plans in tatters. It was one thing to leave one's wife, shocking and not without repercussions as the action would be, yet it was quite another to leave a wife and child. Tristan's world was crashing down about him. What in God's name was he going to do?

Show me the sea and let me end it now.

Jane stood before him hands still clasped like a bride without a bouquet, her face frightened and confused. He wasn't without compassion for his young wife but what to say?

'I only knew because Susan asked about my missed ...' she shuddered and stared at the floor unable to say the words. Susan was her worldly-wise maid. 'Susan said there was only one reason I should miss ...' she hung her head like a small child waiting for a scolding. 'She sent for the doctor and here we are. I had thought you would be pleased, I thought this was what you wanted. Did you not say you wanted a son? Your father will be pleased at least.' She blew her nose.

'Yes, of course I'm pleased, it's excellent news.' He kissed her cheek like one would kiss a child who needed comforting after a fall. 'Don't upset yourself I was a little taken aback that's all. Is this why you feel unwell?'

'I've been sick every morning, but Susan said that is what first alerted her to my condition.' She took her husband's hand in hers. 'I do love you Tristan, I will pray day and night for a boy.'

'Jane, don't worry - you'll make yourself ill. It matters not so long as the child is healthy. It's no business of my father's ... I shouldn't have told you what he said. Let Andrea bring forth a boy for all I care.' He wiped the tears from her red rimmed eyes. 'Go to bed, we'll speak further tomorrow. Get some rest, you look tired too. It's been a long day, had I known I should have come home with you.'

She reached up and kissed his cheek demurely, something she had never dared do before. 'It will be alright will it not? You'll take care of me?'

'Of course Jane, good night my dear I'll see you in the morning.'

Tristan was a condemned man. He slept not a wink all night. He tossed and turned and went over in his mind what he could do, what he should do and what he ought to do. He sought a way out of his predicament which would suit everyone, but of course there was none.

He wanted to see Merry but he could not - not yet at least. She would take one look at his face and know something was amiss. How could he discuss this with her? He'd told her it was a marriage in name only and so it had been; except for the three "duty calls" he'd performed. He could never have imagined Jane would fall so early on in their marriage.

As dawn broke he gave up the struggle, dressed and went for a walk along the cliff top. Above the ruined abbey of St Hilda's the sky was bruised pink, mauve and orange. He was going to be a father! In all this mess a child was going to be brought into the world. He had always wanted children of his own. He doted on his brother's girls, loved to listen to them chatter and watch as they grew. But the timing of the news could hardly be worse. In the pit of his stomach he knew what he had to do, but couldn't imagine how he was going to do it.

Back at Westcliffe House he wrote and begged leave to see Merry at her earliest convenience. He had to see her, despite their arrangement. He could not bear to have her struggle with a dilemma that was now solved, there was only one path and it was a rocky one. He sent a boy off with the note with a heavy heart.

All day at the shipyard Tristan was distracted, distant but most of all despondent. He stayed in his office for much of the day trying to stay out of his father's way. Titus had popped his head around the door mid afternoon to ask his son to dine at Whitehall, but Tristan declined the offer citing pressure of work as the reason. His father had half-heartedly tried to persuade him, but given up. He was pleased his son was conscientious.

Late in the afternoon there was a tap at the door and Tamsin entered Tristan's office, a basket on her arm. 'If you won't come to - 'she stopped mid flow. 'Are you unwell my love, you look awful? When Father said you wouldn't come to dinner I thought I'd bring you something to eat, but is the reason you declined the offer because you're sickening?' She put the basket down and touched his forehead. 'No fever, at least that's something.'

'Sit down Tami, I have need to unburden myself, I know you'll understand when I tell you my sorry story. I've been a fool and now I'm to pay for my mistake.'

Tristan and Tamsin had always been close, time and again since their mama died they'd confided in one another. Tristan had often listened when his little sister had been let down with some infatuation or other. Theo had had his wife to lean on, they'd had each other. He could trust his sister's judgement; for all the silliness she affected she was an intelligent, sensible young woman. He was only glad she hadn't left on her honeymoon yet. He told her everything.

'Jane is with child and you've been conducting an *affaire*. Oh, Tris if only you'd held fast and refused to marry Jane.'

'And have Father thrown into debtors' prison.'

Tamsin expelled the air from her lungs slowly. 'I know why you gave in and married her. It was honourable to make the sacrifice but it seems your timing is always a little off my dear.'

Tristan poured himself a brandy and offered his sister canary which she refused. 'I have thought the very thing myself.'

'You must tell your lady friend you cannot be with her if she decides to be with you that is. I don't condone what you were both about to do, yet I can understand why you would leave Jane. A loveless marriage must be hard to bear, especially when one has found love elsewhere. I thought you were more cheerful, more content of late.' She sat down opposite him. 'You must see you cannot leave a pregnant wife, you're not heartless. You wouldn't desert poor Jane now. I know she's not to your taste but perhaps it's for the best, you and Meredith are from different walks of life, how would she have fitted into your world Tris? You must see it could never have worked, she may not have suited you in the long term, think on that.'

Tristan didn't reply. His head hurt with the conflicting thoughts he'd been having since Jane's news. 'The one thing I know for certain is that I'll always love Merry, no matter what. If only ...'

Tamsin shrugged her shoulders ironically. 'Father at least will be delighted at the prospect of another grandchild.'

'If it's a boy certainly, I'm pleased someone is to get their wish.'

'Did Jane not appear happy?'

'She's like a terrified mouse waiting for a cat to pounce. How she'll cope with the birth I dread to think. If it hadn't been for her maid we might all still be in ignorance, I've a mind to sack the woman.' He tried to make light of his plight. 'Jane is an innocent, a child in many ways. Merry is a woman, a beautiful, warm, caring woman.'

‘You want the child though?’

‘Of course, theoretically, just not with Jane and not at this moment. I love children as you know, but I hadn’t imagined there would be any.’

Tamsin arched an eyebrow questioningly.

‘If you must know we have separate sleeping arrangements. I should have had to do my duty again at some juncture but ... this is all such a muddle.’ He put his head in his hands.

‘On a purely selfish note I’m pleased I’ll not lose you to Scotland or wherever it was you were going,’ Tamsin said. ‘I would have missed you dreadfully, you know that of course. I wish you’d confided in me earlier, you could trust me to be discreet.’

‘I doubt you would have missed me at all, now you and Francis are just married. Soon you’ll have children of your own. At least *you* will be content.’

‘More than content I hope. I look forward to getting babies more than poor Jane! You must be a pitiable lover Tris.’ She smiled trying to lift his spirits. ‘I know why your eye wandered. Poor Jane is a plain, pious woman who shuns dancing and jollity of any kind. She is a dampener on many a dinner party, Lord knows what she must be like to live with. She has little in the way of entertaining conversation and God forbid she should gossip or take pleasure in a new gown or hat.’

‘She’s a Methodist; it’s frowned upon to enjoy *this* life apparently. We must not judge her, she’s been raised this way, she knows no other way. Before I married her I had doubts but it’s different living with her day in and day out. I feel a stranger in my own house, I’m there so infrequently. I neglect her I know.’

‘For my part I’ve tried to befriend my sister-in-law, but it’s clear the only thing we have in common is you brother dear. She has no sense of fun whatsoever, no zest for life. She thinks I’m a flibbertigibbet, an empty headed numbskull. She rarely speaks to me or Andrea for that matter. She hasn’t taken us to her heart. I know Father feels for your predicament too. He feels guilty he’s placed you in this position.’ Tamsin narrowed her eyes. ‘It came as something of a surprise I must say when I saw that Jane admires and loves you Tris. It’s the only time she looks happy when you enter a room, but she’s clearly at a loss of how to demonstrate her love in a physical way.’

‘Again this is down to her upbringing and shyness of course.’

‘What will you do about Meredith?’

‘I’ve sent a boy with a note saying I need to speak with her urgently and asking her if I can call later this evening; I’m anxiously awaiting a reply. I need to get this over with for all our sakes.’

Tamsin put her arms about his shoulders. 'I'm so sorry my love, I feel of no use to you at all. Send me a note if you need me, you know I'll come night or day.' She kissed his cheek and left him to his fate.



A solitary gull called from the roof as Tristan tied Jem by the stable at Shingle Roar. He made his way to the side door. Having received a note saying she would be at home anytime after eight, he was eager to see her, yet reluctant at the same time. It was the last time they would be together. He'd waited a lifetime to find this woman, now he was to lose her all too soon.

In the little sitting room the curtains were drawn against the dreary night. It was cheerful scene with the fire and candles lit.

'Why have you asked to meet when I told you I needed time, has something changed?'

She always was intuitive.

'Meredith, I'm afraid so.' He bit his lip. 'It's the worst possible news.'

'Sit down Tris, you don't look well. Are you ill?'

He paced the small room, then took a deep breath and poured out the whole sorry story. When he'd finished Merry handed him a brandy.

'I don't know what to say.'

'There's nothing you can say to make the situation better, there's nothing anyone can say or do to change how things are. I must never see you again though you know it breaks my heart to say it.'

Tristan moved to sit by Merry on the little sofa where they had spent many happy evenings chatting and finding out about their lives before they met.

'I see you cannot leave your wife now, not in her condition. I don't blame you Tris; you wouldn't be the man I love if you abandoned her now. It's a cruel irony that this should happen just when I'd resolved to be with you.'

'You would have come to me?'

'I would. I've thought long and hard but the shame of being a common law wife was over ridden by my undying love for you. Put simply I thought I couldn't live without you, but it seems now I have no choice. All the soul searching, all the thinking was in vain.'

Tristan hid his face in his hands. 'You do believe me about my sleeping arrangements? I swear I went to her only on those three nights, and one of those was our wedding night! Those times were before we met.'

‘Yes, oh yes. I know you wouldn’t lie to me otherwise you need not be here now. You could have abandoned me, thrown me off if you’d merely tired of me. I can see this pains you as much as it pains me.’

‘Ordinarily I would never abandon you, I love you more than life itself, but I could never be happy knowing I’d left a child behind. I’m to be a father, it’s a huge responsibility yet,’ he took her hand in his, ‘I still cannot love my wife and never will. This child has come between us my love. How can I possibly love it?’

‘You’ll find a way I’m sure, you have a kind heart. I see how it would become a source of bitterness between us if you left a child behind, even if you made financial restitution, but I couldn’t ask you to do it. I should feel the guilt also of depriving your child of its father.’ They sat gazing into the flames, not speaking, not touching.

At length Merry took Tristan’s hand. ‘It’s best if I stick to my original plan and move away.’ A single tear slipped down his lover’s cheek. ‘Find a job as a cook in a big town or city away from here. I know we don’t mix in the same circles, but at least then we would be out of temptations way.’

The tears began to fall, he tried to kiss them away, but she struggled free. ‘Stop, I can’t bear it, if you hold me I’ll never let you go.’ She sobbed. ‘You should go - there’s nothing more to be said except that I’ll love you until the day I die.’

‘My love, how will we bear it? Please let me hold you one last time, let me try to comfort you.’ He took her in his arms and this time she didn’t resist, but wept bitterly against his chest.

‘I’ll always love you, I’ll never stop,’ he murmured.

‘And I you. I’ll always love you no matter where I end up. You will always own my heart.’

Eventually Tristan stood to leave. ‘I must go though it grieves me to part this way. Dear God you must rue the day we met. I should never have involved you in my life, I’m so sorry. This heartache is all my fault.’ He picked up his tricorn. ‘Don’t see me out.’ He couldn’t bear for her to wave him goodbye.

Merry did as she was bid and lifted her chin. ‘Goodbye my love.’

Tristan Tolker rode home as the sun disappeared slowly beneath the sea. With it went his hopes and dreams. Behind him was the love of his life, the only woman he had ever loved. The only woman he would ever love.

In front of him stretched a life with a woman he barely knew, but who was to be the mother of his child. He chewed his lip as he considered his future. There wasn’t a glimmer of

hope to be found. The past must be put behind him for all their sakes. His job now was to be as good a father and husband as he could manage.

But how to do that?

At this moment in time he hated his wife, and this child when it came had torn him from his heart's desire. How could he even look at it without bearing a grudge?

Tristan couldn't face going home. He turned Jem away from Westcliffe House and rode on to Whitby. He wouldn't sleep so what was the point in going home? There was always work to do at the shipyard. He would throw himself into rebuilding the business they had so nearly lost, at least then his life would not be entirely futile.

Part two will follow in my summer newsletter.