

Tristan Tolker

Book 2

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Every day Tristan Tolker worked at the shipyard from daybreak until dark. Every evening he supped with his wife and tried to take an interest in the coming event. Every day he missed Meredith Baker.

The days turned into weeks and the weeks into months, but still he could find nothing to love about his wife. Every day he tried and every day he failed. Just when he thought they may find some common ground Jane would preach a sermon and put an end to his budding optimism. It was not that they argued, they simply had nothing to talk about, no mutual understanding. She was indifferent to what happened at the shipyard and he wasn't interested in her religion which he thought was fast turning into fanaticism.

Yet he assiduously kept away from Kettleness and turned away from all social events, accepting only those invitations which would further the growth of the business.

His days were tolerable, his nights endless.

Throughout her pregnancy Jane had been at low ebb; she had spent much time abed saying she was ill. Dr Lewis assured Tristan there was nothing to worry about, the pregnancy was normal, but the first time mother was sometimes anxious he explained. Tristan knew Jane was fretful from the minute she knew she was expecting a child. He had tried to understand, he knew like many women, she was frightened of childbirth. The mortality rate, even amongst the higher classes, was high. Yet still he couldn't find the words to talk to her about any of this. Because of her religious beliefs she was quietly stoical saying she accepted 'God's will'.

Then, unexpectedly early Jane was brought to bed on the sixth day of December. The labour, though premature, was without incident. It wasn't a long protracted delivery and Dr Lewis and the midwife were pleased with both mother and baby.

Tristan and Jane had a beautiful baby girl.

Contrary to what he'd expected, Tristan was at once besotted with baby Constance. When she arrived one frosty December morning like an early Christmas gift, he found he didn't begrudge the child after all. In fact he'd been surprised how quickly she had wheedled her way into his affections. In the months before the birth Tristan had been convinced he'd resent the child, after all she was the reason he and Merry had been forced to part but it proved not to be the case. She was the best thing in his world now Merry was lost to him, the light in his life.

Since the birth he spent more time at Westcliffe House than ever before; for the first time in his married life he had a reason to go home. His daughter had given him the will to live again which astounded him. He found, despite himself, he adored her. Indeed he found it hard to be away from her or take his eyes from her when he was in her presence. He thought her the most perfect baby he'd ever seen. He thought she favoured the Tolkers in looks with her blonde curls and long, thick lashes, but the baby was more like Jane in temperament, being quiet and biddable.

Before the birth Tamsin had said she hoped the baby would bring him and his wife together and mend their broken marriage. He hoped so too, but sadly Tami was proved wrong. It hadn't helped - in fact he and Jane were as distant as ever. Whilst Tristan was devoted to Constance, Jane was finding motherhood somewhat of a trial. She wasn't a naturally doting mother. She was disinclined to spend time with her daughter and when she did visit the nursery it was to give instructions to the wet nurse rather than spend time with the baby. Since the birth she was often in a poor state of mind and was more than happy to let the new nursemaid take over. Tristan thought Jane even more remote than before the birth. He failed to understand why and without a mother to ask for guidance he presumed Jane was simply not maternal.

One evening in the drawing room at Pannett House a few weeks after the birth Titus Tolker addressed his sons: 'What's wrong with the men in this family? I produced two sons yet you two with five children between you can only get girls. Andrea, who had two months ago given birth to her fourth daughter Tabitha, was unperturbed. 'It looks like it will be up to you Tamsin, perhaps you'll be the one to finally give me a grandson. Jane kept her eyes lowered and twisted her handkerchief between her thin fingers.

'I've been married hardly any time at all Father. Give me leave to draw breath first!'

'Yes Father-in-law let's not rush the fences.' Francis took the comment in good humour. 'After all any child Tami has will be a Wheeler remember, not a Tolker.'

Titus was half joking so no one took offence at these comments - except Jane who coloured deep red and fidgeted in her seat. She'd complained to her husband many times before about the Tolkers' habit of free speech. Jane thought them too forthright where private, family matters were concerned. Jane's own family were never so frank with each other and certainly never shared light hearted banter about such matters.

'Hopefully there will be another in the nursery soon Tristan, little Constance will need a playmate, perhaps your next will be a boy?' Titus winked at his youngest son. Jane visibly shrank as if by making herself smaller she might not be noticed. Her face remained crimson.

'Perhaps we should adopt Father, from the new foundling hospital? That way we'll at least be certain to get the right sex.' There was slight irritation in Tristan's retort. Despite his own feelings he was still protective of his wife; he saw her face and knew she was mortified. Was she about to faint? She'd barely recovered from Constance's birth and here was his father anticipating the next Tolker offspring. Even though the first had been straightforward, his wife could hardly contemplate a second birth,

Nor could he for that matter.

There would never be intimacy between them again - how could he go to his wife's bed after meeting Merry? It would seem disloyal to his one true love and besides he had no inclination for Jane or any other woman for that matter. Tami tactfully changed the subject and talked of other matters.

When there was a lull in the conversation Jane jumped in. 'I'm tired Tristan, shall you call for the carriage?' Jane looked at him beseechingly.

'Of course my dear, I hope to see Constance before I retire. If we go now she may still be awake.' He pulled the bell and made the order. While the footman brought Jane's cloak Tamsin followed them into the hall to try to talk to her brother alone.

'How are things at home?' she asked taking him to one side. 'Jane looks paler than ever. Is she not fully recovered? Is she ill?'

'Jane is beginning to recover from her ordeal, though she took some persuading to come today. The doctor assures me the birth was routine enough and without complication, yet Jane has been laid up ever since. Dr Lewis thinks some ladies don't cope well with the birth process. He says she's of a nervous disposition and will need time to regain her strength.' Then his face lit up. 'Constance on the other hand is thriving,' he smiled broadly, 'and growing every day. You must come and see her now you're home'

'I will, now I'm back from my belated honeymoon I'll have the time.'

Tamsin's honeymoon had been postponed when Francis had been taken ill two days after the wedding. He'd lain ill for three weeks. Then when they did go abroad it had been more like a convalescing sojourn rather than the honeymoon they'd hoped for. 'Perhaps I might be of help to Jane, see if I can buck her up. I did try earlier, while you were taking port with Father and Theo, but she was intractable as always.'

They moved to the door. 'Is Jane good with Constance?' Tamsin asked.

'A little hesitant perhaps, I fear she's not a natural mother, but I'm sure she loves the baby in her own way.'

'I'd thought she'd dote on the child.'

'She says I spoil her.'

'In what way do you spoil her? Have you bought Constance her own carriage?'

Tamsin laughed.

'Apparently I go to her immediately when she cries. Why would I not? I can't stand to see her upset; she's a docile little thing and only cries when she's hungry or needs her clouts changing. The wet nurse says she's the most placid baby she's ever tended. What father would let his daughter fret? I for one would not and if that's spoiling her then so be it.'

'You have a soft heart Tris. I'd hoped Jane might have too.'

'Oh she has, but her family aren't like us, they're not as demonstrative as us, more dispassionate perhaps. Reserved, is that the right word?'

'I'd hoped a baby would bring you two closer together, given you something in common to talk about, cement your relationship.'

'She may well do when Jane feels better, only time will tell.'

Tamsin stroked her brother's arm. 'You're so loyal, Jane doesn't deserve you.'

Tristan shrugged and pushed his hair back with his tricorne.

'How's Francis? Has he recovered?'

'Since childhood he's always had a weak chest so any chill seems to take him a while to get over. The dry, sunny weather helped his recovery no end. He's well again now thank you.' She returned to the subject of Constance. 'So your daughter was christened whilst we were away, I'm sorry we missed it.'

'So was I but you were pronounced godmother in absentia. Jane was anxious to get Constance baptised. We thought you may be back in time from your honeymoon, but it wasn't to be.'

Tristan watched as Jane hovered by the carriage waiting for him.

Tami giggled. ‘So you’ve thrown tradition to the wind! Constance does not begin with the letter “T”!’

‘Well spotted my dear.’ Tris laughed.

‘Was Constance a name you chose together?’

‘We seldom do anything together.’ Brother and sister exchanged a look. ‘I didn’t want to continue with the custom and Constance was preferable to some of the more religious names Jane had in mind. I like the name; to my mind it has a quiet dignity.’

‘Yes I must agree. She will of course, be a daddy’s girl and speaking as one myself I can see no harm in that.’

Tristan smiled self effacingly. ‘I’ve taken to going to the nursery early before I go to the shipyard. If she’s sleeping I sit with her, watch her breathing, try to imagine who she’ll become when she’s grown. If she’s awake I hold her, talk to her, tell her stories, tell her about her Aunt Tamsin and her tremendous hat collection.’

Tami smiled. ‘I’ve brought her a beautiful shawl from Italy, the lacework is exquisite. I’ve also brought her a silver teething ring, although she’ll not need it quite yet, I’ll bring them tomorrow and see if I can’t cheer Jane up. Perhaps I’ll tell her about some of the pleasure gardens we visited, that should do the trick.’ She laughed loudly.

‘Speaking of things Constance won’t have need of yet, I’ve commissioned a present for her first Christmas. I wanted to give her something special. Can you guess what it is? I might have known you would commandeer our old one, I was always surprised Theo didn’t take ours for his girls.’

‘Black Bess? A rocking horse! It is a little premature as you say, but it’ll be something she’ll be able to keep forever and pass on to her own children. Such a perfect idea Tris. We always loved Black Bess did we not?’

Tamsin was itching to change the subject and flashing a look at Jane who was fiddling with her cloak asked: ‘Have you seen anything of your ... lady friend, perhaps you’ve bumped into her on market day or out riding?’ Tamsin had been dying to ask all evening.

Tristan sighed deeply. ‘Jane is waiting Tami, I must go.’ He moved to his wife’s side and handed her into the carriage.

Tamsin was not so easily put off. She held his arm stopping him from getting into the carriage.

‘Well?’

Tristan turned his face away from Jane. ‘I’ve seen her from afar.’

‘Oh?’

‘Don’t ask me why, but I seem hell bent on torturing myself.’ He shook his head. ‘I’ve ridden to Kettleness occasionally and watched her cottage from the safety of the cliffs. Three times I’ve been rewarded with seeing her, though of course I took care she didn’t see me, I made sure of that.’

‘Oh my love how awful, why do you do that to yourself? No good can come from such visits. The wounds need to scab over. All you’re doing is re-opening them. You must stop. Tell me you’ll give up these visits.’

‘The last time we spoke, when I told her we must part, she said she might go away, to get work as a cook. I go to Shingle Roar to reassure myself she’s still close by. After all these months I’d thought she might have gone by now. I know it’s perverse, but I’m glad, glad she’s still close.’

‘Perhaps jobs are not so easy to come by, who knows. Please tell me you’ll stop this foolery, how are you ever to forget her otherwise?’

‘I’ll never forget her. She’s the love of my life.’

‘Tristan I’m getting cold, come it’s late. Let’s go home.’ Jane’s face appeared at the carriage window

‘Sorry Jane, I’ll only be a moment.’

Tamsin led her brother back towards the house so they wouldn’t be overheard.

‘You must stop this, you have to live *your* life, look to *your* future. You have Constance to think of now. Meredith is lost to you. Stay away from Kettleness, will you promise me?’

‘It’s easier said than done.’ Tristan chewed his lip.

‘Oh Tris, I wish you could be happy.’

‘I’m happier since Constance was born, she’s a joy and in the fullness of time I’m sure she’ll be an estimable companion.’

‘When she’s grown up! You’ll have a long wait.’

Tristan was saved from making a promise he couldn’t keep as a footman coughed lightly. ‘Mrs Tolker says she’s feeling a little unwell sir and begs to know if you are ready to leave.’

Tamsin raised an eyebrow then kissed her brother’s cheek.

‘Goodnight my love, I only wish you could be as happy as Francis and I. Tomorrow I’ll call at Westcliffe and do what I can.’

William Wheelwright had made a temporary repair to the fence which had blown down at the back of Shingle Roar. He waited at the kitchen door to tell Meredith he would need to replace a fence post as the old one was rotten.

Over tea and cake they sat, mainly in silence, until Merry could bear it no longer and she chatted about the garden simply for something to say. William was even quieter than usual she noticed. Did he have something on his mind? She tried again.

‘Are you unwell William?’

‘Unwell? I never had a day’s illness in my life.’

Again there was silence then William suddenly burst out: ‘I’ve something I should like to ask you Mrs Baker, it may come as a slight surprise to you, or perhaps not. I’m not very perceptive where ladies are concerned.’

Merry could feel her cheeks turn pink. She hoped he wasn’t going to ask the question she feared. If he proposed, she would be embarrassed beyond words. She’d never encouraged him, not once. It would be awkward to deflect him.

‘I’m a bachelor and you’re a widow.’ He made a slight cough. ‘Both of us live quietly, but comfortably and I’ve been thinking for some time now that two could live as cheaply as one, if you were to marry me that is.’

A painful stillness opened up between them. Merry was unsure whether he was going to continue. If this was a marriage proposal it was most unlike the one she’d received from Steven which had been passionate and full of love and warmth. Merry waited; she didn’t feel inclined to ease the conversation along. He’d mentioned nothing of love.

After a long minute William continued. ‘I’ve a good solid business and a goodly amount of money lodged at Champion’s bank in Whitby. Along with this new contract from the Tolkers things are better situated with me than usual if truth be told.’ He was proud of the fact but the mention of Tristan’s family business made her heart miss a beat.

‘As I live above the smithy and it being small and not so well accommodated for a lady, if you accepted my offer I thought I should come to live here with you at Shingle Roar.’

Merry was horrified at the thought. This was by far the longest speech William had uttered in her company. It had cost him dear, but still she grew impatient.

‘You’re proposing marriage to me William, yet you mention nothing of your feelings but it’s of no moment as -’

He interrupted her hastily. 'I'm not good at flowery speeches as you must know, I do like and respect you. Love ... well ...' He swallowed hard. 'We should do well together in all respects if you would agree to my offer.' Merry could see William was truly flustered now. 'I don't ask for an answer today, it's maybe come as a surprise, this offer of mine. Think on it, mull it over. I hope you might see it as I do. It's a good match for the both of us; you need a man about the place.'

Meredith flinched and wiped crumbs from the table and put them on her plate. She was deeply uncomfortable. 'William, I thank you for your kind offer. I had no idea you felt this way,' she lied. 'But I can put you out of your misery today. I don't need to think it over. I know you like plain speaking.' She drew breath. 'I'm afraid I must decline your proposal.'

'I'd hoped you'd do me the honour of considering it for a few days at least.' There was a flash of something unpleasant in his demeanour, anger? Loss of pride perhaps? Merry thought she must excuse his rudeness under the circumstances; he clearly hadn't expected a refusal. 'If you'll let me explain William, you'll see I have other plans.' She tried to sound apologetic. 'You see I'm hoping to move away. I'm eager to secure a position as an under cook, I didn't share the confidence because so far I've been unsuccessful at my attempts to find work, but I'm hopeful of a post I've recently applied for in a large establishment in York. I'm sorry William, but I don't have plans to marry anyone - ever. I intend to work my way up to be a cook and cooks are of course, always unmarried. I intend to better myself and have staff under me. I want to have a good position and fend for myself.'

'I never thought you'd leave Shingle Roar. You gave me the impression it would always be your home,' he said showing he was disgruntled.

'So it shall be eventually, I'll never sell; I hope to let it by and by.'

William stood abruptly and picked up his hat. 'You seem to have your mind made up Mrs Baker, there's no more to be said then. Good day to you.'

Merry watched him stride down the path without a backward glance. Would any woman agree to such a proposal? On reflection she thought it possible they would. She'd seen how the other village girls looked at William - there was many a young woman who would be honoured by such an offer from the handsome, well off smithy. But she was better situated than most widows, so hadn't the financial necessity to marry. She need not marry for security, only for love.

Now that would never be.

Meredith considered the proposal as she cleared the table. William hadn't talked of love at all until she had prompted him and even then he'd been taciturn. Whilst her head saw the logic behind the scheme her heart couldn't accept it. She wouldn't settle for second best.

If William *did* love her it was not the sort of love she and Tristan had talked of, not the kind of love she'd had with Steven. She'd been lucky to find love and unlucky to lose it - twice. She'd been most fortunate to experience love at all, many were not so privileged but the pain of loss was still raw.

First Steven and then Tristan.

It occurred to her William had more of a liking for Shingle Roar than for her as a woman with needs and desires. The whole conversation had been like a business transaction rather than a marriage proposal.

Merry cleared away the plates from the table then slumped heavily on the settle by the stove. Suddenly she was overwhelmed with self pity. Tristan was never far from her thoughts and for once she allowed herself to wallow. What was he was doing? Was he missing her as much as she was missing him? What would he have made of William's proposal? He would not have urged her to consider such an offer that much she did know. She missed Tristan every minute of every day. She hardly dare allow herself to remember the past when they had been so happy. She even dreamed about him. In her dreams they were walking hand in hand on the beach or on the moors. She pictured Tristan's handsome, smiling face, felt his touch, his kiss, his arms holding her tight, making her feel safe. Waking from such dreams was more than she could bear. The reality of her life now was stark and empty, her future grim and lonely. Tears came as they did all too frequently these days.

Tristan's child was due any time now. How did he feel about the baby and about his marriage? Perhaps the infant would bring husband and wife closer together? She hoped it would, she could never have him herself, but she wouldn't have him be as miserable as she felt. She wished nothing but happiness for him. He had done wrong by her but even now she was thankful for the time they'd spent together.

If she could only find more challenging work perhaps she could throw herself into it and start to make a future, albeit a lonely one. It would be a small consolation, but at least she might find some happiness in carving out a role for herself as a cook. Meredith prayed the job in York would materialise; she needed something to aim for, something to focus on and keep her spirits up. If it didn't happen then she was unsure what to do next. Her life so far had had its ups and downs; she had suffered her fair share of love and heartache, but without hope there was a bleak future ahead of her.

She roused herself from the pit she had allowed herself to sink into. She had to be strong and keep busy. Work would keep her from despair. She went outside to bring the washing in from the line. Glancing towards Whitby as she often did, she saw someone seated upon a horse looking down on Shingle Roar. For a split second her heart leapt. Could it be him? Was he watching over her? She folded the sheets carelessly sighing heavily then threw them in the basket. What if it was? What good would it do? They could never be together. She turned away and went indoors to finish her chores and then to retire early as usual. Perhaps if she was lucky Tristan would come to her in a dream, there at least they could be together.



Tamsin watched from the cliff top as a man strode down the path away from the well kept, whitewashed cottage. Perhaps the woman who'd beguiled her brother so thoroughly had already found a replacement for him? Part of her hoped so for if she had then she'd been stringing Tristan along.

Tamsin waited to be sure the man was not going to return, then made her way down the path which was in fact the main road into Kettleness. Just as she was in sight of the garden she saw a woman come out to take the washing from the line. If this was Meredith Baker then her brother had good taste; even from this distance she was a striking looking woman.

Leaving her horse tethered further along the track, Tamsin approached the cottage on foot. Just as she was about to make her way to the front door, which looked out to sea, she saw the man returning. Tamsin dithered not knowing whether to proceed or retreat. At the same moment the man, handsome in a rough hewn sort of way, was clearly in the same quandary. He saw her then stopped, turned and retreated towards Kettleness once again not looking back.

Tamsin screwed up her courage, headed up the garden path and knocked at the door. She'd come this far, she couldn't falter now.

'Good day to you, I'm sorry to bother you, but may I trouble you for some water? I'm feeling a little dizzy.' Tamsin cringed. The lie sounded lame even to her.

'Of course, please come in. The woman, who had the most beautiful eyes, showed her into a small sitting room and went to fetch the water.

Tamsin was surprised by the cottage. When Tristan had told her where Meredith lived she'd pictured something one step up from a hovel; she couldn't understand why he'd stoop so low. As she had ridden towards the cottage she'd been surprised at its size, not big, but

larger than she'd imagined. It was pretty, the paintwork fresh and the roof in good repair. Inside the cottage was clean and tidy with a good turkey rug in front of the fire. At one time there had been money to spare for pretty ornaments and good solid copper candle sconces, there was even a three branched candelabra on a sideboard. A cat slept in a basket by the unlit fire. The woman brought a pitcher of water and poured some for her visitor.

'I have my own spring so the water's clear and refreshing.

'Thank you, most kind. My name is Mrs Wheeler I'm sorry to intrude upon your day. I was out for a ride and suddenly felt faint.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. I'm afraid there's no fire in the grate, I don't usually light it until the evening. My name is Mrs Meredith Baker.' Tamsin noticed the woman was a little wary. 'Please take a seat, have you ridden here unchaperoned?'

'Thank you.' She sat and took a sip of the spring water. It was indeed invigorating. 'I'd thought a ride on the moors might be bracing, I often ride this way alone. One rarely meets a soul. I've left my horse along the track, in the shade. Today I came over a little light headed as I entered the village. It's warmer than I imagined.'

Tamsin hated lying; she was no good at it. When she'd first had the idea to come and see this woman who had so captivated her brother, she'd had two objectives in mind; the first to satisfy her curiosity as to why a lowly cook was so special and the second to try to find out why the woman hadn't moved away as Tris said she'd planned to do. Tami hoped the woman wasn't hanging on meaning to cause mischief. If she was then Tami would somehow induce her to seek fresh pastures.

'Such a pleasant cottage and what stunning sea views you have. I noticed the name - quite unusual is it not? Shingle Roar. Did you choose it?'

'Thank you, my late husband bought the land and had the cottage built for us. The first ship my husband sailed in was called the Shingle Roar; it was always a lucky ship for him. When we moved here we noticed when the tide is rushing in we could indeed hear the shingle roar and so we chose the name hoping again it would be a lucky omen.'

'How romantic; but it seems it was not so auspicious this time around. Your husband was lost at sea?'

'He was, on a whaling mission.'

'It seems he left you comfortably off at least, which is something I suppose.' Tamsin suddenly was ashamed of her thoughtlessness. 'I'm sorry to sound unfeeling, I hadn't meant to appear callous, please forgive me Mrs Baker.'

‘Are you feeling better?’ the woman asked looking as if she would be rid of her visitor.

Tamsin was uncomfortable pretending she didn’t know the poor woman’s circumstances. She was never one for subterfuge and thought to say who she was. Then she remembered why she was here and thought better of it.

Tamsin could see why Tristan was attracted to Meredith Baker despite their differences in station. The woman had an easy, confident manner and an open countenance. She was indeed as beautiful as her brother had said; Tamsin had thought that as a man in love her brother had exaggerated the cook’s beauty, but he hadn’t at all. Meredith’s hair and skin were indeed as he described, like caramel. Thick, dark lashes edged watchful, intelligent eyes. Her figure was comely as she stood tall and proud. She was well mannered and polite, yet it was clear she was anxious for Tamsin to leave.

Meredith interrupted her thoughts: ‘Forgive my forwardness Mrs Wheeler, but are you not related to the Tolkers’ of Whitby?’

Tamsin grew flustered, her cheek’s burned. Surely this woman didn’t know her? Should she continue with the lie? She stammered a confession. ‘I’m recently married, but yes I was a Tolker, indeed I still forget I have another name.’ She played for time trying to think what to do or say next.

‘I once saw you, from a distance, with your brother at the market in Whitby.’

‘Ah, I see.’

‘So is it coincidence that brings you to my door today in need of assistance or are you here by design Mrs Wheeler?’

Tamsin might have known any woman Tristan admired would have a backbone. She certainly didn’t mince her words. She couldn’t brazen it out any longer. It was beyond Tamsin’s good nature to be duplicitous and besides, she’d warmed to the woman. She liked her. She had spirit. Meredith Baker was not at all what Tamsin had expected; she might have known Tristan’s choice to be nothing less than an astute, clever and beautiful woman.

‘I’m ashamed to admit I’ve told a fib, a white lie if you will. You see my brother told me of your ... liaison and I’m of a curious nature and thought to come and see you for myself.’

‘To what end may I ask? To open old wounds?’ Sadness clouded the cook’s watchful eyes. ‘If your brother told you of our situation, you must surely know why we parted and on what terms. Tris spoke of you often and in the most glowing regards. Forgive me Mrs

Wheeler but from what he told me I wouldn't have thought you heartless. I would be grateful if you would leave now please.'

'I'm sorry. It was thoughtless of me to come.' At that moment Tamsin wished to be anywhere on earth but here. She was only too happy to oblige and stood to leave. It had been a mistake to come but before she left this poor woman to her misery she needed to explain.

'Tristan told me you planned to go away, seek work in a town away from Kettleness, and I wondered why, after all this time, you were still here. I know this is impertinent and is none of my business, but you see my brother hasn't entirely given you up. I fear he won't while ever you're in his eye line. It's beyond him to give you up completely, he loves you still. Now I've met you I can understand why.'

'I can assure you Mrs Wheeler that I've not set eyes on your brother for -'

'You misunderstand, I know you've not seen *him* but he's seen you - from afar that is. My dear Mrs Baker, I'm so sorry I've made a bad situation worse, I see that now. I shouldn't have come.'

'How has Tristan seen me, I don't understand?'

'It's of no matter; it cannot do you any good to know. I'll take my leave as you ask. Please accept my sincere apologies for the distress I've unwittingly caused you.' Tamsin was unable to look the poor woman in the eye. 'I must go. I'm so sorry my meddling has caused you to remember that which is lost to you, it's unforgivable of me.'

'Every moment of every day I remember the good fortune I had in knowing your brother, but as you point out all that is lost to me now.'

Meredith swallowed hard. 'Before you go let me tell you I'm not staying here because I expect anything from Tris.' Meredith's chin lifted proudly. 'The affair is over and done with and I haven't known peace since we parted but,' Meredith swallowed hard then continued, 'I *have* been trying to find work away from here, yet it's hard in these straightened times. I'm hopeful of a situation in York. Then as you say, I'll be out of Tristan's reach.'

'I don't excuse what Tris did, deceiving you about his situation in the first place was wrong, but I see why he would behave so out of character; my brother wouldn't have misled you had he not fallen deeply in love.' Tamsin witnessed despair on the young woman's face. 'When he met you immediately there was something different in him. He was like his old self. Before his marriage he was always hard working but cheerful and light hearted. After his marriage ... well, he changed. He became quiet, withdrawn. He spent long hours at the shipyard and put off going home to his wife by supping at Whitehall as often as he could. Then suddenly something had happened because he was once again cheerful. For the first

time since his engagement he was embracing life and not hiding away from it. I knew something had happened to return him to his old self.'

Tamsin moved to the door then stood for a long moment before turning back. Should she say anything more? Had she not already caused Meredith Baker enough pain? She plunged in. 'You know Tris has a daughter?' The woman recoiled as though she'd been slapped.

'How could I?'

Tamsin decided to carry on, telling herself if the roles were reversed she would want to know the whole story. 'I only tell you so you can see there's no way back now. He's besotted with Constance, he loves her to distraction, but his feelings for the woman who bore her remain the same. He doesn't love her, he never will. I thought you should know that despite everything, nothing has changed. He couldn't leave his daughter of course; it's not in his nature to desert her. She's the one good thing in his life. He still loves you my dear, and I'm as sorry as can be that you cannot be together. It's a cruel, hateful situation which you find yourselves in, but sadly there's no way to amend it.'

Tamsin could see Meredith trying to hold back tears and remain composed. 'I'm happy for him.' she muttered.

'After all is said and done my brother wouldn't have you waste your life waiting for him. I wish there was something I could do for you both, but regretfully it's not possible. It seems no one is happy, not even Jane. You must try to make a life for yourself, preferably away from here.'

'It's the only road open to me. I have to get away for myself as well as for him.' Again Meredith lifted her chin defiantly. 'I should hate your brother for the torment and hurt he's caused, yet I cannot find it in my heart to do so'.

Tamsin bid Meredith farewell, her heart heavy knowing she could have spared the woman further grief and heartache. She was cross with herself for coming and upsetting the love of her brother's life. How could she have been so stupid, so arrogant? She might have known this was no light flirtation. Had Tristan not poured out his heart to her? Her meddling was wrong-headed and irresponsible.

She saw that now.

Tamsin turned her horse towards home and galloped at full pelt across the cliffs. All she'd done with her interfering was to cause more pain and distress, she would never forgive herself.



Merry had been dragging her heels. She'd known all along the way to get a position was to travel to a town, York or Newcastle, and present herself in person. She needed to get to know the lay of the land, try to gain introductions and thereby get herself a position and begin to climb the ladder.

She needed to begin again, start anew. Tamsin Wheeler's visit was the prompt she needed to move on with her life. Tristan had his daughter to focus on and so now she had to find a position to distract her, to throw herself into. Cooking in a grand house would help put the past behind her. If she could gain the training and experience she needed she could realise her dream of becoming a well regarded cook. From now on her occupation would be her reason to live, her reason to go on.

The trouble was since meeting Tristan she'd lost her ambition. She found it hard to motivate herself or to even try her luck by moving to a town; confidence in her own abilities had never been so low. Instead she'd half heartedly sent off a handful of random enquiries and applied for just two positions. The Newcastle one was hopeless she acknowledged. She had seen it too late and the position would have been filled by the time her application was received. The vacancy in York had also turned out to be unsatisfactory. She'd been offered the post, but before the terms were agreed the job turned out to be different to what she'd been led to believe; being a cook cum housekeeper wasn't what she was looking for at all. Reluctantly she had let it go.

Merry and Hester sat in the garden peeling and coring apples. Merry told her friend about Tamsin's unwelcome visit.

'Maybe she were just tryin' to 'elp?'

'How? By telling me what I already know? That Tris still can't be mine. And to rub salt into the wound by telling me he has a daughter. '

'I couldn't believe it when yer told me Mr Tolker were married but I 'ad wondered. I were that sorry for yer. All yer 'opes and dreams dashed.'

Did Hester think her a fool for believing the tissue of lies in the first place?

The young girl prattled on, 'Seems cruel what 'e did, but like yer said I can see why he dint tell yer 'e were a married man. Gentry are funny the way they marry fer money, but not to tell yer the truth from the start, well that's awful. No wonder yer 'earts broke.'

'But then I would never have known him.' Merry sighed. 'But now I see I must move on. I've been putting off the fateful day when I should leave. I'll miss you Hester, you've been a good friend, especially these last few months. I don't know how I'd have coped without you.' Merry dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. 'I don't really want to leave

Shingle Roar and I certainly don't want to leave Tris. Even though I know we can't be together. It's strange but I still feel a deep connection, a bond with him which feels too strong to break. In short I'm -'

'Still in love with Tristan Tolker?'

'And will be until the day I die.'

Hester smiled encouragingly. 'A young beauty like you won't spend the rest of 'er days alone! A new start in a bigger place with new opportunities that's what yer need. In a bigger pond you'll get the chance to meet someone new, get married, 'ave kiddies. Time's a great 'ealer so they say.'

Merry shook her head. 'At first the news about his having a daughter brought my mood low; it was disturbing to know he's a father. The baby must have come early. Yet now I'm truly happy for him, for now at least one of us has a purpose in life, some ray of hope. Although he's unhappy in his marriage, a child will be some compensation at least.' Merry decided to confide further; she'd always found Hester a good listener.

'You know I had a miscarriage?' Hester nodded. 'Since I lost Steven's baby I'd thought never to have the chance again, I wasn't even looking for a replacement for Steven. Then when I met Tris I dared to hope that perhaps in the future we might have a family of our own.' Tears rolled uncontrollably down her cheeks.

'Merry, I'm right sorry I can't do owt to 'elp yer.' The seamstress put her knife down and held Merry's hand.

'Now it's all ashes and dust, my hopes and dreams dashed like a wreck on a stormy sea. I'll never know what it's like to be a mother now.'

Merry and Hester sat in silence on the bench under the apple tree where on that first day she'd talked to Tristan while she shelled peas. Ledge brushed up against her legs arching her back. Merry watched a ship tacking north and blew her nose on her hankie.

'There now that's got it out of my system,' she said trying to smile through eyes that were still glassy with tears. 'I've been thinking ... should I perhaps move to Gateshead and try my luck there? Steven has a cousin there. I could look him up?'

Her heart grew heavy at the thought of never seeing Tristan again. At least if she stayed she might hear of him, see him at a distance perhaps. She shook herself for being a fool.

What good would it do to know how his life was progressing without her? How would knowing he prospered and had moved on help her to heal? Each time she had to go to Whitby her eyes were peeled searching the crowded harbour and streets in the hope, and

dread, of seeing him. What if she bumped into him and he was with his wife, how should she feel then? In time perhaps he would have more children, grow richer become more prosperous. He would forget her altogether.

‘Maybe that’s the best idea.’ Hester paused then grinned cheekily, ‘Unless yer stay an’ get together with a smithy we both know would ’ave yer in the blink of an eye.’ She laughed loudly. ’

‘William Wheelwright? Are you mad? I’ll never entertain him.’

Merry’s mind was made up. She would write to Stephen’s cousin and ask him if she might stay with his family a while, just until she found work. She hoped it wouldn’t be long. In fact she would make sure of it.

3

With the shortening days and the festive season looming Meredith was at a low ebb. She noticed the dreary weather and the cold more than she’d ever done before and spent much time indoors with only Ledge for company.

Her work at the inn continued but all the joy had gone out of it for her. Rabbit Dick tried to cheer her up but not knowing what ailed her he was at a loss to help.

Then to add to her woes Meredith received a reply to her letter to Stephen’s cousin informing her that his wife had died and that he was moving to America for a new start. For a few days Meredith entertained the idea of doing the same thing. She imagined cooks would be in demand in the New World. Good cooks would be needed by the newly emerging merchant classes now they were making their fortunes in the tobacco and sugar trades. Putting an ocean between herself and Tristan would surely cure her of her heartache? She put the idea aside telling herself she’d think of it again in the new year. She didn’t have the energy to think about it now.

Then Hester had asked Merry to help her cook Christmas dinner for her and Mrs Thwaite. Meredith suspected it was her friend’s way of trying to make her feel useful and to get her out of the house. Against her better judgement Meredith had agreed, even though it was the last thing she wanted to do. She was trying to look ahead but it was harder than she had imagined. She told herself she must keep trying.

Then a week before Christmas Hester’s mother took a bad turn. Merry had gone to her friend’s aid as soon as she heard. She did all she could for Hester - cooking nourishing food and sitting with Mrs Thwaite while the poor young woman tried to catch up on her sleep. For

a week Hester's mother's life was in the balance but in the end she passed, not from her usual malady but from the dreaded putrid throat. The disease had reared its head in many of the villages in and around Whitby over the winter. Now it had claimed Hester's mother leaving the young woman alone.

Christmas morning arrived unseasonably mild. Merry asked Hester to come and stay with her but she was, understandably, in no mood to celebrate and declined the offer.

Meredith had not been able to contemplate inviting William to share her Christmas repast as she had the year before. Since his failed proposal in the autumn their friendship, if it could ever have been called such a thing, had cooled considerably. Now if he came to Shingle Roar he did the work she asked of him and made excuses to leave as soon as the job was complete. He sent bills for the work he did which she paid by sending a boy from the village with the money. They had barely exchanged a greeting in months.

Rabbity Dick had tried to persuade both Meredith and Hester to have Christmas dinner at the inn with the family but both had thanked him turning down his kind offer.

As it happened Meredith was glad she'd turned down the invitation as she didn't feel at all well herself. Her spirits had never been lower and her head ached. She'd woken with a dry, sore throat and despite taking honey and lemon it was still like swallowing razors when she tried to drink.

She decided against bothering to cook a meal just for herself; a celebratory Christmas dinner was hardly cheering when eaten alone, and anyway she had little appetite. Recently she could not be bothered to cook for herself, she'd lost the will. When she was at the inn she ate a little, picked at a morsel or two but at Shingle Roar she subsisted on bread and cheese if she bothered at all. She had lost her appetite, not only for food but for life.

She looked through the window at the cold, grey sea; it was hard to see where the sky started and the sea began. She shook herself. She'd never been one for self pity or morbid thoughts but she was tired, weary of feeling her life was over. When she did sleep she dreamt of happy times with Tristan only to wake to the harsh reality of life without the man she loved with all her heart.

Listless she laid on her bed to rest. What with working at the inn and sitting up with Mrs Thwaite she was exhausted. She threw more logs on the fire, but continued to shiver. She pulled the blankets over her to try to keep warm.

'Merry Christmas,' she croaked as Ledge settled herself comfortably on the bed beside her. Meredith fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The Tolkers had finished their Christmas dinner, all ten glorious courses of it. Earlier they had sat in their box pew at St Mary's as was their custom. On the way home they had given alms to the poor and needy that waited at the gates of Whitehall for their return. The remainder of the food left over from their dinner would be enjoyed by their staff later.

After dinner the family gave each other small tokens, the children especially were excited. Theo's girls were boisterous and Tristan at least had fun playing with them. He'd bought them a set of miniature skittles which they played with in the hall creating much laughter and noise. Tamsin's dog had plagued them by chasing the ball and knocking over the skittles until she had picked Zacky up and put him out.

Constance of course was too young to understand about the celebrations, but that hadn't stopped her father from presenting her with a replica of the rocking horse he and his siblings had shared as children. He'd always loved the horse they called Black Bess. Constance was too young for such a present but he didn't care. It was the best present *he'd* had this Christmas; seeing his daughter happy and healthy truly was a precious gift.

Of course Jane had been dismissive when she saw the horse saying it was inappropriate and extravagant. She'd chastised him as she always did for spoiling Constance.

Throughout the day's festivities Jane had been, as usual, quiet and sulky. She picked at her food and of course drank no alcohol; being a Methodist she never touched the demon drink.

When later Jane made her excuses to leave Whitehall Tristan was not at all surprised. After tea had been served she complained of her usual malady, a headache. Tristan suspected she had been wounded by some perceived slight Andrea had made earlier but he thought she was being over sensitive as usual. Needless to say he didn't relish going home to Westcliffe House to be alone with his saturnine wife. He could see Jane was offended and upset but to him it was her natural state these days.

For once he didn't care if she went home alone. He grew tired of pandering to her moods. He was forever trying to appease her, to cajole her and to what end? She would never be light hearted or affable. And anyway it suited his purpose if she was out of the way. She had sorely tried his patience over the last few days refusing to join in any of the Christmas festivities saying she preferred to celebrate the Twelve days of Christmas quietly as the Lord intended. Her piety was to be admired but it wasn't the Tolker way and it certainly wasn't Tristan's way.

After Jane took her leave Tristan stayed on a while to play cards with the family. As the evening wore on Francis became more and more inebriated, but he was a happy drunk and put up with his new wife's teasing that he couldn't hold his drink. Tristan drank only moderately; he wanted a clear head. From recent experience he was aware too much drink made him maudling. In his cups his thoughts would turn to Merry and then he'd feel himself sinking into despair and hopelessness.

Back at Westcliffe House later on Christmas night Tristan was in the nursery with his daughter. The wet nurse had fed her and been sent away. As Constance slept in his arms he hummed a carol they had sung in church that morning. Tristan cherished these moments, it was the one time he felt happy when he and his daughter were alone. Jane crept in and stood beside the rocking horse. Her gloomy face made him recoil.

'You will make a rod for your own back. Our daughter will grow up a spoilt brat if you are not careful. Children must learn they cannot have everything they desire, that includes the attention of their elders and betters.'

Tristan was often irritated by his wife's manner but seldom did he lose his temper with her. No matter what he said she would only bow her head and look injured.

He'd found today an especially trying day as he'd desperately wanted to see Merry; he'd bought her a small token, a Christmas gift. He'd known in his heart he couldn't give it to her in person but the thought of being with her had been too hard to resist.

After Jane had left Whitehall he'd ridden over to Shingle Roar and left the small, beautifully wrapped package in the porch where he hoped she'd find it. He shouldn't have done it, but he couldn't help himself. He had been surprised to notice the cottage was in darkness. Perhaps she was with friends? He hoped she'd enjoyed her day more than he had. If only he could spend one more day with Merry, just one ... but what was the point in punishing himself with such thoughts. He only had himself to blame - he never should have started the affair, it had been unfair on both of them but especially to her.

Was she with William? A stab of jealousy entered his heart. He hoped she'd spent the day with someone, anyone rather than be on her own. Even if she was with William Wheelwright he couldn't hold it against her. How could he when he had treated her so badly, she deserved better. She had few friends but if she had spent the day with the Smith, then surely they would have dined at Shingle Roar and not at his garret above the forge. Perhaps she had finally found a position and moved on. His heart sank.

Jane interrupted his thoughts with her sermon: 'You ought not to have got Constance the rocking horse, not this year at any rate. She will be ruined. You and the rest of your family indulge her far too much.'

Tristan's grief and anguish over the loss of Merry had been kept locked away securely these past months. Now they simmered and rose to the surface, he'd never been so furious with anyone in his life before.

He kissed his daughter's plump cheek and laid her tenderly in her crib. He turned slowly to face his wife. 'I will speak with you in my dressing room Jane.' His barely suppressed anger and rage threatened to spill over. He breathed deeply as he strode out of the nursery.

His wife turned white and made to follow behind him. She stood in the same spot where some months earlier she'd told him the fateful news she was with child. At this moment he despised his wife. Until now he'd sought to make excuses for her. Neither of them had chosen this marriage but he'd tried his best to console her, to meet her half way. She was young he'd told himself, and frightened of the rigours of the childbed but she'd survived and so had their daughter. But since the birth she'd shown not an ounce of love for Constance, why was she not thanking that Lord of hers that their baby daughter was healthy and thriving?

Tristan tried to hold himself in check. He took a calming breath. 'If and when I decide to buy my daughter a gift I will do so without the need to consult you or anyone else.' Tristan gritted his teeth. He didn't raise his voice but the look on Jane's face quelled any thoughts she might have had of replying. She stood meekly with her hands clenched in front of her and stared at the ground.

This only angered him more. If only she would stand up for herself he might have more respect for her, yet there she stood passive and cowed before him. He couldn't imagine Tamsin or Merry acting in so submissive a manner; they would have spoken out, defended their point of view. Yet his wife displayed little or no spirit, no backbone, no passion.

Jane was entitled to her opinion yet he failed to understand how she could deny their daughter anything. She purported to be a religious woman so how could she not want her own daughter to have every possible advantage when many children barely had enough to sustain life. Now that the business was prospering again Tristan gave monies to charities. These alms he gave were not simply for show, he genuinely cared about the less well off. It was the one thing he and Jane agreed on but surely charity begins at home?

Had he and his siblings not had every advantage, yet none of them had been spoilt brats. Tamsin especially had been yielded to especially when their mother had died, she'd been so young, yet she'd grown into a sweet natured and unselfish woman.

Suddenly the scales fell from Tristan's eyes. 'Are you jealous? Envious of a baby?'

Jane showed a hint of petulance as she replied: 'What if I am? You see more of Constance than you do of me. You flee to her first thing in the morning and last thing at night and so many times in between *when* you are at home that is. You prefer her company to mine, you have made that perfectly clear, you do not even try to hide it.'

Tristan sighed heavily. At last she found her voice but what could he say in his defence? It was true he barely gave Jane the time of day. Often he ate his meals at Whitehall or at the coffee house; he often ate alone in his study having stayed late at the shipyard. Jane went to prayer meetings on a daily basis so she was also often from home. It was the excuse he gave himself when he wanted to be away from her.

He neglected her shamefully but what could he do? They had no mutual interests. The only thing they did have in common was their daughter and now it was evident she was not a common bond, but a bone of contention.

Faced with the truth of the matter Tristan's anger dissipated. It was hardly Jane's fault he couldn't love her. They were *both* trapped in this loveless marriage, both ill at ease with each other after over a year of marriage. She would have been far happier married to another Methodist he reasoned but what was the use of thinking like this now. It was too late for recrimination.

The weight of the burden he carried was overwhelming. Perhaps he should try to show a little more interest in his wife, yet how he was to do this he was unsure, Lord knows he had tried before. The crushing realisation that there was no way out of this marriage hit home. He had a lifetime in front of him with this cold, unfeeling, jealous woman.

'I'm sorry Jane. I spoke out of turn. You're right. I haven't been a considerate husband, you're perfectly justified in feeling aggrieved. From now on I'll try to be a little more understanding.'

Jane offered a wan smile as a peace offering. 'I too will attempt to be a good wife to you Tristan. If as your father wishes we are to add to our family then - ' Jane blushed knowing he understood her meaning. She moved towards him lifting her face up to be kissed. Tristan was taken aback. She had never offered herself to him before. He was at a loss how to respond. There was no hint of desire in either of them. He had only ever gone to her from

duty and now since Merry ... After a moment he placed his hands on her slight shoulders. 'It has been a long day Jane, go to bed.'

Tristan sat by the fire cradling a brandy glass in his hand. He stared into the flames feeling chilled to the bone. He sighed then drank off his drink though it failed to warm him.

He was aware of what he was expected to do. She'd invited him to her bed. She would be waiting for him. He pictured his wife's thin, angular body laying there taut and stiff, the bed sheets pulled up to her chin, her eyes closed and a barely disguised look of fear on her plain face. She would be waiting for him, not with warm anticipation, but with dread and trepidation. How could he subject her to his presence? She clearly was only trying to stick to her wedding vows and he had no inclination to fulfil his end of the bargain.

Merry's beautiful face swam into his mind's eye, her luxurious caramel hair, her cat like gaze, her soft, yielding body.

He poured another brandy and went through to his own bedroom. He would begin his new regime soon, tomorrow perhaps or in the new year but not tonight. He needed to find strength first, but from where he had no idea.



Rabbity Dick poured William a pint of ale. 'When Meredith dint arrive this mornin' I despatched Mabel to find out where she were. Dinner won't cook itself will it?' The landlord frowned. 'Mabel's bin to Shingle Roar but she's not at home.'

'I knocked more'n once Father, there weren't no answer,' Mabel chipped in.

'It's unlike her not to turn up for work.' The landlord poured himself a tot of whisky. 'Hope yer not wanting hot snap William it'll have to be cold fare today I'm afraid.'

'Best bring me what yer have then.' William sat by the window with his ale and waited.

'Yer not seen ought of her over the last few days then William?' The landlord put cold cuts in front of his customer.

'Last I seed her was Christmas Eve - in here when she brought me my dinner as usual. I bin nowhere to see anybody.' William started to eat. He resented being asked about the cook. How should he know what she was up to?

'Tis not like her. Imagined if she not bin able to come she would've sent word. It's not like her to let me down, never has afore even when she were sitting with Hester's ma.'

William continued with his meal batting away any further questions about Meredith's whereabouts. Since she'd refused him he'd avoided her as much as he could.

When he'd finished his meal he returned to his forge. An hour passed. Despite himself Meredith was still on William's mind, a fact which he begrudged. Since she'd turned him down he'd tried not to think of her at all, especially as she was still living at Shingle Roar. She'd turned him down supposedly because she was moving away she'd said, so why then was she still living in Kettleness? He plunged the red hot pole he'd been hammering into the water butt sending a cloud of steam up into the air.

Happen she's gone now he thought as he held the pole up to the light. But then William thought again, as Rabbity Dick had said she was always reliable and a good time keeper. Why had she not told the landlord she was leaving her job at the inn if that was the case? She wouldn't leave Dick in the lurch, it was out of character. She'd know that come the afternoon the inn would be thronged with hungry guests.

He reluctantly decided to take a walk by Shingle Roar to see if she was about. He passed by but could see the place was in darkness. The cottage was quiet as the grave. The chickens were still locked up he noticed which was unusual at this hour. He knocked at the kitchen door and waited but there was no answer. William stood hands on hips and thought where she could be. It was an icy cold day, not the sort of day for a walk on the beach or a stroll on the moor. He was not normally of an inquisitive nature but Meredith was not one for wandering about in freezing cold weather. He couldn't think where she could be.

Perhaps Meredith was visiting Hester? The seamstress was the cook's only real friend in Kettleness. Hester's mother had died before Christmas so could she be comforting her friend? William hoped that was the case. Meredith had a kind heart. He'd meant to call to see her over the festive period, but his injured pride wouldn't allow him. Since she'd turned him down the friendship had cooled considerably.

He stood on the doorstep and thought again. Shingle Roar was deserted. If she'd moved away could she have left so soon? William thought it unlikely, she'd not leave the chickens or the horses. He was about to knock again, this time at the front door when he noticed a package on the seat in the porch. He picked it up. The box was damp to the touch as though it had been left out for days. From what he could see the wrapping had fancy ribbon and pretty bows, expensive. The kind of present a rich man might give his lady, but it had been spoiled by the weather. Why would she leave such a thing outside? If she'd seen it naturally she would have taken it indoors.

He returned to the kitchen door and this time turned the handle. It opened. He called Merry's name. There were dirty pots in the sink. Ledge leapt forward and immediately brushed against his legs. The cat wailed loudly. William called out again. She wouldn't have

gone off somewhere and left Ledge in the house to fend for herself. She loved that cat. Ledge was obviously hungry. With growing anxiety William climbed the stairs.



After the doctor had seen Meredith he came down to the kitchen where William was waiting.

‘It’s a good job you found her when you did, although even now I’m not sure I can save her.’

‘When I got here I thought she was dead, she was that white.’ He pointed to the milk he had given to Ledge who was eagerly lapping it up. ‘What’s wrong with her?’

I’m afraid it’s the putrid throat, this is the fifth such case I’ve seen hereabouts in the last two weeks, three have succumbed. There’s little I can do, sometimes a patient pulls through whilst others do not, it doesn’t discriminate between the rich and poor, the young or the old seemingly. Mrs Baker appears to be a well nourished young woman, normally that would hold her in good stead, but I cannot make any promises. Is there someone who can stay with her? I’ve made her as comfortable as I can.’

‘Mabel from The Anchorage is coming, I sent to Rabbity Dick. She’s to sit with her tonight.’

‘She may be gone before morning.’ The doctor shook his head. ‘Only if the fever breaks will she survive.’ The doctor put on his hat ready to leave. Tell Mabel to send for me if it does.’

‘Thank you Doctor, I’ll pay your fee.’

‘Pay me later William, it’s of no account as yet.’

William sat by Meredith’s bed and watched as she slept. From time to time he mopped her brow with a cold cloth. It was an imposition, but the doctor had said to try to keep her cool. Despite the open window her forehead was as red hot as his furnace, her face flushed and her hair stuck to her head with sweat.

Once her eyes opened but she didn’t see him. It was as though she looked through him to another world. She muttered incoherently, ‘I’m coming Steven ...the bread is burning ...’ She was rambling and restless, thrashing her head from side to side as sweat poured from her furrowed brow. William tried talking to her hoping to reassure and calm her, but she neither saw nor heard him. ‘Tris, Tris, I cannot, please, let me go.’ She tried to sit up but didn’t have the strength. ‘You’re worse than a child ... Ledge come down ... Steven my love ... Tris you should not call ...’ the whispered words tumbled from her lips as her eyes darted about the room.

At last as the day wore on she became calmer, less agitated. Mabel came to stand by William's side.

'I'll stay wi' Merry Mr Wheelwright, Father says yer needed, one of the horses on the coach has lost a shoe.' William told her what the doctor had said.

'Tell me mam I'll stay till somebody comes to take over, our Susan can come Pa says when she's finished in the kitchen.' Mabel touched Meredith's forehead gently. 'She dosen't look long for this world. Such a shame, Merry's allus been a kind, cheerful woman.'



After their talk on Christmas day Tristan had tried to spend more time with his wife, though not in their bedchamber. Tristan still couldn't bring himself to breach her defences.

Three days later he'd taken Jane shopping saying he'd like to buy her a piece of jewellery for giving him a daughter. It was the first time they'd done such a thing together and it was proving harder than Tristan had imagined. When he'd taken his sister shopping it had usually cost him a small fortune but Jane had simple, inexpensive tastes.

The jeweller, Green's of Flowergate, laid out several trays for her to peruse; necklaces, bracelets and eternity rings were all dismissed. 'It is customary on the birth of a baby the husband gives his wife an eternity ring,' Mr Green explained as he pushed the tray of diamond rings towards his customer. Jane gave them a cursory look only to dismiss them for no other reason than the cost. Every piece she was shown Jane thought too showy, too expensive or was not to her liking.

To the jeweller's utter consternation she at last settled on one of the least expensive items in the shop; a simple jet drop. It was almost austere in its plainness, more like a mourning piece than a present for the birth of a daughter. She waived away all other suggestions, quietly pleased with the purchase.

The couple took supper together and Tristan noticed Jane wore the jet drop. The neckline of her dark, brown gown was high and demure as always. It did not show the jet off to best advantage. Tristan called to mind Merry's silky skin and how the jet would have sat on her slender neck, how it would have rested on the swell of her breast. Tristan crushed the crippling thought.

He watched as his wife raised an eyebrow as his glass of canary was refilled. She placed her hand over her own glass when the footman tried to serve her. 'Why do the servants persist in trying to serve me alcohol? You would think they would know by now I do not touch wine and spirits.'

Tristan bit his tongue. ‘Why not ask him yourself my dear, he’s standing right there?’ Jane pursed her lips folded her napkin and stared at her plate. Most of the food was left untouched.

Throughout supper Tristan tried to engage his wife in various topics of conversation, but each was met with monosyllabic replies. At last he resorted to talking about the shipyard.

‘Theo has managed to retain a contract we had thought lost, Father is content, as am I. It will make a big difference to the balance sheet.’ His discourse was met with little enthusiasm. She had no interest in the business and could not think of a response. He tried again but this time when his attempt at conversation seemingly fell on deaf ears he asked her why she did not answer.

‘I have nothing sensible to say therefore I prefer to hold my tongue.’

Tristan, never one to give up easily, tried another tack. He mentioned something Tamsin had told him earlier. ‘Amy Brookes has been seen about town with a new beau, John Miles. He’s a steady chap. I believe an engagement will be announced shortly. Your father does business with him does he not?’ When Jane failed to comment again Tristan asked her opinion. ‘My thoughts, for what they are worth, are that what Miss Brookes does is her own affair and is not a subject for conjecture.’ Tristan let the air escape from his lungs in slow exasperation and allowed his glass to be refilled again.

He soldiered on determined now that Jane would be able to join in on at least this subject. ‘Constance is such a biddable baby. Her nursemaid seems efficient, yet kind hearted. Already I think Miss Burns is besotted with her.’

‘Miss Burns came with excellent references.’ At last common ground. His face soon changed when his wife added: ‘Our daughter will not remain so compliant however if all those about her insist on spoiling her. I have instructed the nursemaid to let Constance cry if she is being wilful. It will do her good in the long term.’

‘She cries when she has need of something not to be wilful. That is what babies do surely. What if she’s hungry?’

‘The wet nurse is hardly likely to starve her.’

Tristan gave up. He would rather toil in the mines of the North East than attempt further conversation. Mining for coal he was sure was easier. So often of late he thought he had found a seam worth exploring but time and time again Jane had shut him down.

Finally he came to a decision. He would ask guests to join them when he was next to sup at home; dining alone with his wife was causing him to have indigestion. The remainder of the meal was taken in silence.

Later in his study Tristan reflected upon the state of his marriage. He drank a glass of crusted port and tried to think what more he could do to improve the situation. He couldn't think how he was going to get to like his wife let alone love her.

He had tried, Lord knows he had tried, but she'd none of the attributes he admired in a woman. The only opinions she had she had learned from the Bible. It was not that she was dim-witted, she was educated at the Methodist school but mainly in theology it had to be said. Her wider knowledge was limited and she certainly wasn't worldly, quite the reverse. She had few interests and didn't have natural curiosity about the world about her.

Would his mother have been able to talk to Jane? Bring her out of her shell? His dear mama had been a considerate woman who got on with people from all walks of life. He thought of his sister but knew it would be futile to ask Tami to speak to Jane. They had nothing in common whatsoever.

Physically he couldn't admire Jane either. She might at least have been pretty had she cared to make an effort but she didn't bother about her hair or appearance one jot. Personally he preferred some meat on the bone but his wife, who ate hardly at all, was not just slim but positively scrawny. Her mousy hair, usually pulled back severely from her pale, thin face, was fine. Wispy strands often escaped from the unflattering style if the air was damp. Her clothes, always plain, dark and drab, were more suited to a widow or dowager aunt than a young lady of class and privilege. He didn't expect her to dress solely to please him of course but if only she would make a little effort.

She was quiet, which some men would think a positive, but Tristan liked lively conversation and healthy debate about current affairs, politics or general gossip. He had an ironic sense of humour which he shared with Tamsin; Jane was devoid of humour of any sort. He couldn't remember a single time when he'd seen her laugh. Sometimes she could hardly manage a simpering smile. Perhaps jollity and frivolity went against her moral or religious code, either way Westcliffe House was not a jolly place.

It was strange because she'd told him, shyly and demurely that she loved him. This was declared when he'd been to her bed for the third and final time. He didn't hold much store by it however; she'd said it because it was expected. Wives must love and obey their husbands. She must have read it in the bible, the bible that even when he made love to her, was by her bed. She obviously thought she was being dutiful remembering her wedding vows. He was her cross to bear, her hair shirt. It was not a comforting thought. No wonder he was reluctant to return.

Yet at the same time he was aware she admired him; she always blushed when he took her arm in the street or kissed her hand. Why then if this were the case did she not try to please him, to tempt him to engage in light topics of conversation, to try a little banter as foreplay? Flirting was clearly beyond her. To play the coquette was to play with the devil.

He'd often flirted with other women before his marriage, he'd enjoyed it, it fanned the flames. Yet he couldn't tease his wife; it would feel wrong, awkward, insincere. She would think it totally inappropriate and frivolous. Once she'd overheard Francis flirting with Tamsin. Jane had made comment later and called it, "wanton giddy talk". With growing anxiety Tristan climbed the stairs.

They simply did not share the same tastes and values. How was he to make love to this woman who didn't stimulate him in the least? Once again when he retired it was to his own bedchamber. Alone he gazed up at the blue canopy and his mind returned to Merry.

Of late Tristan slept badly when he slept at all. After another restless night he decided to rise early and ride out before breaking his fast. He headed north to Kettleless.

Where else would he go?

As he sat watching Shingle Roar from his usual vantage point on the cliff he noticed a young woman go into the cottage through the kitchen door. A few moments later another young girl came out and hurried down the track towards the hamlet. Tristan was intrigued. Never before had he seen anyone else at the cottage. It was early to be receiving visitors.

He tied Jem to a tree and walked down to the cottage. The door opened and the young woman came out to draw water from the pump.

'Good morning,' he ventured, 'are you a maid here?' He couldn't think Merry had employed a maid yet could think of nothing else to ask. The young woman had a harassed countenance 'I'm looking after Mistress Baker she's bin poorly, thought she were going to peg it a couple a days ago, but she's coming right now thank the Lord ... sir.' The young woman stared at him obviously wondering what he, a gentleman, was doing hereabouts so early in the morning and asking questions too.

'Ill you say? Has Mrs Baker seen a doctor?'

'Oh aye, he's bin more'n once. Thought he'd lost her, but she's come good at last.' The girl moved to the door. Tristan's heart pounded in his chest.

'Could you deliver a message for me?'

The girl's eyebrows shot up. 'I suppose, but Mistress Baker is still abed sir. She's still as weak as a kitten. I'm about to try to tempt her to eat summat.'

‘In that case.’ It was improper but needs must. He ran through the kitchen and up the stairs, he could wait no longer. He must see her.

Merry was sitting up in bed with her eyes closed, her skin was pale and waxy.

‘Meredith, my love.’

She opened her eyes wide in surprise. ‘Tris what are you doing here?’ Her voice sounded hoarse as if it was painful to speak.

‘I’ve come to help you my love, if you’ll allow it. Say you will?’

‘I’ve been so ill.’ She swallowed hard. ‘In truth I thought I was going to die but now seeing your face once more is the best medicine in the world.’

5

Tristan continued to visit Meredith every day. He hired a nurse, ensured the doctor called thrice daily and brought her fruit from his Father’s hot house.

‘I’m sure I shouldn’t have mended so quickly without your care and attention Tris, but as you can see I’m well again. You must stop now, for all our sakes. You know this cannot continue.’

Stronger now, Merry was determined to resist him. She was in the sitting room before a roaring fire. Tristan had sent fuel in the form of logs and coal. He was frightened she would relapse again if she caught a chill.

‘Had I have known sooner I might have spared you the worst of the ordeal, to think you almost died.’

‘But I didn’t.’

‘You’ve lost so much weight. I expect it will take time to build your strength up again.’ Where once there were dimples, now there were fine cheek bones. She was still beautiful, but her illness had wrought changes. She still could only speak in a whisper and she tired easily.

‘For the first time in a while I have a waistline.’ Merry laughed. It sounded the sweetest sound in the world to him even though it was harsh and croaky. The septic throat had left its mark. ‘No one hires a thin cook, but I had become over fond of my own puddings.’

‘Nonsense my love, most men like to get hold of something,’ he joked, ‘you’re too thin but that will soon change.’

Merry tipped her head sideways and tried to frown, but couldn’t be cross with him.

‘Seriously Tris, nothing has changed between us, we still cannot be together, especially now your daughter is real flesh and blood, it would be harder than ever to leave her. We must return to how we were before, reluctant as I am to lose you for a second time.’

Tristan took her hand in his. She was right, but it didn’t make it any easier. ‘You never lost me, you never could lose me. You and you alone will always own my heart.’



Three days later Tristan was home for supper having delivered grapes and oranges to Merry earlier in the evening. The doctor had said fresh fruit in particular would aid her recovery. Tristan was keen to do all he could for her.

He poured himself a brandy to fortify himself for the meal ahead; it was the first time in days he had been home to share a meal with his wife. His promise to Jane to be more attentive had fallen by the wayside while Merry had been recuperating. He couldn’t be in two places at once and he knew where he wanted to be and it wasn’t at Westcliffe House. If it wasn’t for seeing Constance he might not have come home at all.

He grew impatient as the clock struck nine. He rang the bell and a footman answered almost at once. ‘Is Mrs Tolker indisposed, did she not hear the supper gong?’

‘I was on my way to see you when you rang sir. Mrs Tolker sends her apologies and says she is unwell and is unable to join you.’

Tristan experienced a tinge of guilt that his wife would not show herself at supper. It would save him having to make small talk and at that he was pleased. Since Constance’s birth his wife was often unwell, ailing with one malady or another. He had suggested she see a specialist doctor, but she had said it wasn’t necessary, it was something she had to bear, her cross.

Perhaps she was paying him back for breaking his promise of coming home to supper more often. She was of a mopish disposition and even more so since the birth of their daughter. She may not speak her dissatisfaction, but she made her thoughts plain by her silences, her sulks.

As Tristan broke his fast the next morning he smiled to himself knowing he would see Merry later that day. Nothing had changed as Merry had been at pains to point out, but he clung to the excuse of her recent illness to keep visiting, for now. He couldn’t set her aside yet, not for a second time. It had been difficult enough before, but knowing how close to death she’d been made it all the more necessary to see her, at least until she was fully fit and recovered.

Tristan was at Whitehall taking dinner with his father, brother and two business associates when a footman brought him a note from Jane's maid. It said Jane was unwell and was asking for him. Tristan showed the note to his father. Titus raised an eyebrow. Tristan was aware his father long regretted he'd forced the marriage.

'We can manage without you my boy if you feel you must go; most of our business here is complete.'

'My wife, although often unwell, never sends for me. I feel I must go to her.'

When Tristan arrived home he met Dr Lewis outside Jane's bedchamber, The old man had been the Tolker family doctor for as long as he could remember.

'You need to brace yourself Tristan. Your wife has the rash which typically shows itself with the putrid throat.' He shook his head. 'There's an outbreak; it's rife here in Whitby. I've seen a dozen cases this last week alone. No doubt you're aware there is little to be done in such cases, although I've bled Mrs Tolker and tried to make her as comfortable as possible. There's little else I can do for her. She's in the grip of fever.'

Tristan was astonished. He'd thought her ill health Jane's usual affliction: a headache, a tummy ache, something and nothing. She'd suffered with her nerves since Constance was born so he'd expected it was one of the usual afflictions which were troubling her.

'I've left your wife a tincture if she can try to take it. Perhaps it may help alleviate the soreness in her throat, but aside from that ...' The thought trailed off. Tristan gasped. 'I feel for you my boy, I know you're not long married. If the fever doesn't break soon I'm afraid it will be the end, I'm sorry to be so blunt but I know you'd not want the truth dressing up.' He picked up his medical bag. 'Your wife is frail, she's not a strong lady and I doubt she has the reserves to fight such an onslaught.'

Dr Lewis followed Tristan back into the sickroom. Tristan stared at the bed where Jane lay with her eyes closed. He hardly recognised his wife of less than a year. Her chest was rising and falling heavily as she struggled to pull air into her lungs. Her thin hair was plastered to her skull and her face was livid with fever.

'Do not I beg of you, give up hope Tristan. Where there is life there is hope. This disease is unpredictable. I've seen it knock down big, burly fishermen and leave their undernourished offspring alive. The next few hours should decide the matter. I've instructed Mrs Tolker's maid to keep her cool. I will return later this evening but don't hesitate to send for me if she takes a turn for the worse.'

A thought struck Tristan. 'Before you go will you check on Constance? She was well this morning, but I need to be sure she's not suffering too?' Tristan accompanied the doctor to

the nursery where the wet nurse was winding his daughter. Dr Lewis checked Constance over and declared all was well with the infant. Tristan heaved a sigh of relief.

Tristan returned to sit by his wife's bed. He held her bony, claw-like fingers in his. He tried to comfort her, but whether she noticed he was there was hard to say.

For hours he sat by her bedside willing her to survive. He remembered the night before when she'd not come down to dinner. Had he known she was so ill he would have come to her, but so often of late she'd been unwell, he'd not realised the situation was any different, not known it was life threatening.

Tristan dispatched a hasty note to Merry telling her why he couldn't see her, but assuring her of his love. He had also sent to Whitehall and Nab House with the news of Jane's illness.

Tristan was sorry for his young wife. Had Merry suffered so badly too? Had she gone through all this suffering to survive this terrible illness? He was suffering himself; not from sickness but from the torment of watching another human being fighting for her young life. He had no love for Jane yet he hated to see her so afflicted, at the very least she was the mother of his child.

During his vigil a thought wormed its way into Tristan's head. A thought he pushed aside until at last it crept insidiously into his consciousness: What if Jane were to die? It would put an end to all his troubles. Merry could be his. He pushed the thought aside, ashamed at even thinking that way. He would not wish it even though his wife's death would make him a free man.

His father arrived at Westcliffe House shortly after Tamsin. Both waited for news in the drawing room. 'Dear Lord, this is a bad situation Tris, I never could like the poor girl but she does not deserve this.' Tristan had joined them looking grave as he poured himself a large brandy.

'What news, my love?' Tamsin asked as she kissed her brother's cheek.

'Dr Lewis is with her now. I sent for him to return as she seems worse if that is possible, though he says there is nothing more he can do. The next few hours are critical yet I feel helpless, there is nothing to do but wait.'

Tamsin put her hand on her brother's arm. 'May I go to Constance; she will be missing the attention of her parents I imagine?'

'Of course, it's good of you to think of her. I must go back to Jane. I shouldn't want her to ... be on her own if ... '

‘Are her parents not in attendance? As poor Jane is their only daughter why would they stay away?’ Titus Tolker asked.

‘They’re abroad, spreading The Lord’s Word apparently.’ Tristan shook his head dismissively. As he left the room his sister followed him up the stairs on her way see her niece in the nursery.

‘We have not told Father or Theo yet, but we are expecting a happy event. It must be a honeymoon baby.’ She smiled and squeezed her brother’s arm affectionately. ‘I know this isn’t the right time for such news but I hope it brings you some cheer.’

‘That is good news! Congratulations my love. Lord knows I’m in need of happy tidings.’ Tamsin turned to the nursery. ‘Hold hard my love I’m sure Jane will pull through.’

Tristan opened the door to his wife’s room cautiously and found all was quiet and still, the laboured breathing of earlier had stopped. ‘Has the fever broken?’

Dr Lewis shook his head.

‘I’m afraid not my boy, she appears peaceful enough now, but it will be just a matter of time. You must ready yourself; there is nothing more to be done.’ He patted Tristan’s arm and closed the door behind him as he left.

Tristan slumped by his wife’s bed and took her hand. ‘I’m so sorry Jane.’ He didn’t know if she was able to hear him, but he needed to talk to her, to comfort her, let her know she wasn’t alone.

‘It’s a sad fact we were forced together and that our marriage has been an inconvenience and a trial to us both. It’s not been the greatest of successes has it my dear, and I take full responsibility. You tried your best and I’m only ashamed I couldn’t love you more.’ She continued to lay still, her breathing becoming more and more shallow. Her eyes remained closed.

‘I don’t know if you would have preferred to stay a single lady, I suspect you would given the choice. At least you gave me our darling Constance and for that I’ll be eternally grateful to you Jane.’

There was a soft knock at the sickroom door. It was Betsy Burns, Constance’s nursemaid. She was agitated. ‘Beg pardon sir but is the doctor still here? I was hoping to catch him, Constance is a little fractious and not her usual self.’

‘But he checked on her yesterday!’ Tristan ran along the landing and called down to Dr Lewis who was just leaving. ‘Dr Lewis please ... my daughter.’

Tristan hurried to the nursery. ‘Come to Papa my precious girl,’ Tristan took his daughter from Tamsin’s arms.

His sister raised an eyebrow and smiled. ‘She looks fine to me, does she always dribble so? I hope my offspring will not!’ Tristan scrutinised his daughter closely then smiled. He was reassured when she smiled up at him.

‘Your child must be perfect or you’ll send her back like you do with one of your hats.’ Tristan was relieved to see Constance looking well, if a little rosy cheeked. Perhaps Betsy was erring on the safe side. Constance began to cry not a loud wail, more of a slight whimper.’ Tristan jiggled her in his arms and talked to her softly.

‘Now you’ve upset her with your unkind remark.’ He chastised his sister.

‘I can see how it’s easy to become attached to one’s child.’ Tami put her hand to her tummy. ‘I swear I have an attachment already.’

Tristan was only half listening. ‘She looks a little heated now I come to look.’ Tristan presented Constance to Dr Lewis for inspection. The doctor was visibly out of breath as he entered the nursery. ‘She does not usually have high colour,’ Tristan added. ‘Aside from that she’s happy enough. Perhaps she’s missed her Papa? She’s possibly registering a protest as she has been ignored.’ Tristan dabbed the drool from his daughter’s chin.

‘It’s nothing for heaven’s sake,’ Tamsin said trying not to sound alarmed. Is it not the case that babies drool when they’re teething? Tamsin had seen her brother’s face drain of colour. He turned his daughter so Dr Lewis could see her better.

‘Dear God she has a rash. The putrid throat begins with such a rash does it not?’ Tamsin waited with her brother while the doctor examined Constance. Tristan looked on helpless as the doctor confirmed what they knew already. Constance was also afflicted with the putrid throat.



Later that night Jane died as quietly as she had lived. She was nineteen. She was not alone as her father-in-law Titus sat beside her bed whilst his son nursed his baby daughter who was now in the throes of the same awful disease.

Titus bore the weight of the responsibility. He was at fault for this state of affairs, not the illness of course but the poor marriage his son had been forced to make and then endure. Neither party had benefitted from the match. The fact the marriage had secured his business from failure was small consolation to him now, seeing his son so unhappy.

Baby Constance grew steadily weaker throughout the night as her doting father sat and watched her struggle for each and every breath. The dark hours dragged slowly by. Tristan found himself praying, hoping, asking God to take him instead and spare his daughter.

He mopped her brow, sent the nursemaid away. He wanted to be alone with Constance, to cherish her, to love her.

Then in the early dawn light, her condition changed. She became calmer, her breathing became quieter. At last she lay sleeping, almost contentedly. As dawn broke Titus came to his son in the nursery. 'Go and get some rest my boy, you look done in. You cannot help her if you don't eat and get some rest yourself, I'll stay with her.'

'I cannot, if she woke ... I would not have her be frightened; she would look for me.' He turned down the blanket which had moved up over her chin; he noticed at once the rash had gone.

'Do you think that a good sign?' Titus asked. He looked from his son to Betsy who had brought tea.

'I'm not sure; Jane's rash didn't disappear. Dr Lewis will be here soon I hope. He said he would call this morning unless I sent for him sooner.'

Father and son drank tea in silence after Tristan told Betsy to go and get some rest. She too had been up most of the night, only leaving when Tristan insisted she go to get her supper.

Dr Lewis arrived. 'There's little change, the rash having gone might be a good thing, who knows? We know little of the disease as I said yesterday, Constance is certainly no worse. Tristan, please go and break your fast, your father and I will stay with her. You must eat or else you will be ill yourself.'

Tristan sat with Tamsin hardly tasting the food before him. 'Please try a little more Tris you need to look after yourself.' Pushing his plate away he went and sat by the fire and closed his eyes for a moment.

'That's it my love, try to rest. I'll go and sit with Constance.'

'Send down immediately there's the slightest change, promise me Tami?'

'Of course, try and sleep a while.'

Though the warmth of the fire made him drowsy, he didn't sleep. His thoughts took a negative turn. If the worst happened and Constance didn't survive, what would he do? He couldn't imagine life without her now. He'd never been particularly religious, but he remembered something Jane had once said to him when she was in one of zealous moods. "As ye sow ye shall reap". Was God punishing him for his affair with Meredith? Was he taking revenge on his innocent daughter? At last exhausted he fell into a dreamless sleep.

Tristan woke with a start. His father stood before him. For a long moment he could not think where he was and why his father was looking drawn. Then he remembered where he was.

‘What time is it, how long have I slept? Constance ... ’

‘... is a little better Dr Lewis thinks? You have had a few hours of well deserved sleep; it will have done you good to rest.’

Tristan took the stairs two at a time. His daughter was in Betsy’s capable arms. He took her into his own.

‘You’re awake, have you missed me?’ Constance gurgled up at her Papa. ‘While you slept the fever broke and soon after she rallied. I hope, I pray, she is out of danger.’ Dr Lewis smiled. Tristan allowed himself the faintest flicker of hope.

6

Jane’s funeral was held at the Methodist church at the request of her parents. Afterwards Tristan, his family and the mourners retired to Westcliffe House for the wake. Her shocked parents’ had returned from their mission and sat grim faced apart from the other mourners. They had wanted a quiet affair and Tristan had acquiesced to their request, he wanted the day to be over as quickly and as quietly as possible. He’d received many letters of condolence and they’d all said the same thing; what a nice, devout young lady Jane had been. Strangely Tristan didn’t feel comforted although he did feel guilt; guilt he’d been unable to make his young wife’s life a better one. To his shame Jane must have been a lonely young woman.

Constance continued to rally and was almost back to full health. Throughout the wake Tristan clung to her like a drowning man hangs onto driftwood. She was a helpful distraction for him.

Tamsin and Francis sat beside Tristan who was holding Constance as she wriggled in his arms, he could feel she was getting stronger day by day. Francis, a light hearted young man tried to lift the mood.

‘Why not go away for a time, go abroad, see the sights, come to terms with your loss.’

‘I couldn’t leave Constance, and she’s too young and still not fully recovered enough to travel, perhaps in a few years time when she’s older.’ He smiled at his daughter. ‘Wait until your child is born Francis, you’ll soon be aware at the changes a child makes to one’s life.’

‘Francis will hardly notice, I fear,’ Tami said. ‘If the baby does not come out talking and riding to hounds he’ll think it a very dull thing.’

Francis smiled at his wife. ‘I shall hope I’m not relegated to second best anyway, though I fear that will be the case.’ Francis greeted his sister Amy and wandered off to speak with her.

Theo took his place. ‘I’m sorry I was away when Jane and Constance were ill, I would have been back from Holland sooner, but the rough seas had other ideas.’

‘Thank you Theo. Susan Smythe’s oldest boy is the latest victim I hear.’ He named a family they all knew.

‘I’m sorry to hear that, I hadn’t heard the news. You must thank God you still have Constance Tris. At least that’s something to hold on to.’

‘It is,’ Tristan said as he kissed his daughter’s dark curls, ‘and I’ll be eternally grateful.’



A few days later Tamsin had persuaded her brother to dine at Nab House. Although he was in mourning Tamsin told him it was permitted to dine with close family in private. She told him Francis was away on business so it would be just the two of them.

After they had dined they retired to the library. Tamsin wanted to show him a book she’d found which she hoped he would like. Eventually she managed to steer the conversation around to Merry which had always been her main intention. This was neither the time nor the place, but her curiosity was piqued.

‘What plans for the future have you my love? Now the obstacle to your happiness has been ... that is to say ... Have you seen Meredith?’ Tami was cross with herself for her ineloquence. ‘Shall you take up with her again, after your period of mourning that is?’

‘Tami! You’re presumptuous. Have you no sense of propriety? To think of such a thing is too ... premature.’

‘Sorry, I only meant in the future when perhaps ...’

Tris sighed and refilled his brandy glass. ‘It’s too soon to contemplate. Merry too has been dangerously ill.’ He told Tami about Merry’s illness, how he had found out and how he had helped in her recovery.

‘Goodness Tris I was unaware. So you had rekindled the affair before poor Jane died?’

‘Again Tami you put the cart before the horse! No we had not, but I couldn’t stand by and not go to her assistance. She’d been at death’s door.’

Tami smoothed the silk of her gown looking down.

‘You think I may have passed the disease on to Jane? Is that what you think?’ Tris sat opposite his sister anguish flooding his features. He was hollow eyed, pale and tired.

‘It’s strange is it not how both Jane and Constance caught the putrid throat in quick succession.’ Tamsin had not meant to go down this path and now regretted it.

Tristan shook his head. ‘From what I understand the person is contagious until the fever breaks, so I hope I wasn’t the carrier; Merry’s fever had broken when I went to her. I should be mortified if I was to blame, don’t think I’ve not lain awake at night wondering.’

‘Then you cannot have passed it on if that is the case so you can rest easy.’

‘Dr Lewis has reassured me.’ Tamsin noticed her brother didn’t look wholly convinced. ‘He says it’s not known how the thing spreads. Miasma? Bad humours? The greatest medical men are divided as to the cause, treatment and how it’s carried.’

Brother and sister sat quietly weighing their thoughts.

Tristan said: ‘Life is strange is it not? We want something so badly then when we can possess it we’re still not content. Life is rarely straightforward, there’s always some underlying niggle that keeps us from true happiness.’

‘You mustn’t blame yourself Tris. Guilt can be corrosive. Guilt at surviving when others have perished, guilt at being one of the “haves” in a world full of “have nots”. You endured an unsatisfactory marriage, but you have to look forward now and make plans. Make up for lost time. Your future and your daughter’s is all that matters now.’

‘Indeed, but are you happy Tami,’ Tristan wanted to change the uncomfortable subject, ‘is there an underlying niggle in your marriage?’

‘My marriage is blissful, but in truth this pregnancy is trying my patience. Every morning until midday I’m sick. Sick as a dog. I know it will pass, everyone tells me so, but in the meantime I’m confined to barracks until dry toast restores my equilibrium. I’m never usually ill and it’s hard to bear. All this must be worth it.’

‘Oh it is Tami, it will be. Yet I find it hard to imagine you as a mother. Shall you suddenly develop maternal feelings after the birth?’

‘I have them now. I cannot wait until she’s born. I hope she will be a little playmate for Constance.’

‘And if it is a boy?’

‘We’ll not send it back,’ she laughed. ‘We’ll love whatever comes.’

They had wandered from the subject at hand but Tami was keen to return to it. ‘So now that Merry is on the mend what shall you do? Do you have plans to see her again?’

‘Until a suitable period of mourning has observed there is nothing to be done. I’ll use the time to reach a decision.’

Puzzled Tami asked: ‘Why? Your dilemma has been solved surely, you can be with Merry. I know you didn’t wish it, but Jane’s passing has changed everything. Now you’re set free.’ She whispered the last words although no one but her brother was there to hear.

Tristan glowered at his sister’s insensitivity. ‘Of course all you say is true but I feel guilty for the half thought, it was horrifying to see Jane in such dire straits, the suffering she endured.’

‘What is it my love?’ Her brother was an open book to her; he had something else on his mind. ‘Tell me Tris, you will feel better to get it out into the open.’

Tristan put his head in his hands. The minutes passed. ‘When Jane was first taken ill I imagined she was simply feigning sickness. Every day she suffered some malady or other. I thought she was crying wolf.’

‘To get your attention?’

‘Yes, but not just that. When I saw how ill she was I didn’t think she would give up. Why would she not fight, if only for her daughter but she didn’t. She seemed to want to give in, she just wanted to lie down and die.’ There was a long moment while Tamsin waited for him to continue, she suspected he’d been bottling up this misery. ‘It was almost as if she wanted to die, perhaps like a martyr, as if she knew she would never be happy and had given up all hope.’

‘This is nonsense talk Tris, it’s grief talking. You feel guilty. Fundamentally you’re a good man, flawed as we all are, but essentially good. Dr Lewis told you how relentless the putrid throat is once it takes hold.’ Tami looked at her brother. ‘You don’t imagine she knew about you and Merry surely? You were discreet. I only found out because you told me and I never breathed a word, not even to Francis.’

‘I hope she didn’t know. I wouldn’t have hurt her or humiliated her on purpose.’

‘Of course she didn’t know. Stop punishing yourself and look to the future.’

‘I must try, for my daughter’s sake if nothing else. Merry is recovered; she is stronger every day thank God. She has a strong will.’

‘And therein lies the difference: Jane didn’t have the strength to fight, she didn’t have the resources. You think she gave up because she was unhappy yet surely she would have fought if she had possessed the strength, but she didn’t. She was never hale and hearty, she would pick at her food like a sparrow as you can testify. Merry is a stronger character and a different build, more robust than poor Jane. Meredith is shapely rather than skin and bone.

She has a pleasant figure which could cope with losing a little weight unlike Jane who didn't have the reserves to fall back on.'

She could see Tristan was taking solace from her frank words but then he furrowed his brow and pierced her with a look. 'How do you know about Merry's build, about her character?'

Tamsin could have kicked herself. 'You must have mentioned it.' Her face flamed red. Tristan was no fool. 'Oh very well, we neither of us lie well. I went to see her at Kettleless. I was curious.' She told her brother of her visit to Shingle Roar.

'So you went to see her behind my back, I don't admire you for this Tamsin.' When her brother used her full name she was in bother. 'What did you hope to achieve with your interfering?'

'Hardly interfering,' Tami said audaciously, 'I was sorry for you, and her of course. I liked her by the way, she has character. It doesn't hurt I suppose that she's exceptionally beautiful. I'm only surprised she's not been snapped up by another, it's only perhaps because she lives in such a backwater.' Tamsin was good at deflection. 'You told me she was going away and I wanted to know why she was still here. You would never rest while she was close by.'

'You shouldn't have gone. It's none of your business.' He stood and paced the floor. He was angry with her.

'I'm sorry; it was thoughtless of me but I was only trying to help. I thought if she had plans to leave you would feel better if you knew what they were.' She smiled up at him and saw him relent.

'I've written to Merry of course and told her about Jane. She knows it's a peculiar situation and that from adversity we could find happiness. Merry is a kind, sensitive woman; she knows we must wait.'

'And then what? Shall you court her openly? There's still the question of rank. I don't care a fig but what about Father? What will he say?'

'After his previous attempts at matchmaking I hope he'll leave well alone. Surely he wouldn't begrudge me happiness and besides I've reached my majority so I can do as I please, within reason.'

'Father will have something to say I'm sure of it. He'll think her below you, but after all is said and done he knows what a sacrifice you made in marrying Jane, he'll soon come around, as will Theo. You know you already have my blessing. All will be well in the end.'

'I hope so.'

‘So you will marry your cook? What will your friends say?’

‘What my friends and family say is of little consequence to me, though I should like them to accept her of course. Merry is the only woman I’ve ever loved and I cannot be without her now. We’ve been given a second chance, a chance we never thought to have.’

‘Merry is charming. I shall enjoy instructing her on how to be a fine lady.’ Tris grimaced then smiled. It was the first time he had smiled in a while. ‘After a reasonable time and a courtship of a short duration you can have your heart’s desire my love.’ Tamsin smiled and squeezed his arm. ‘At last you’ll be happy, Constance will have a step-mama and you will have the lady you love as your wife.’

‘You make it all sound so simple. I suppose it is now, but I have struggled so long with my conscience and then tried so hard to forget her. It is difficult to believe we will be together at last.’

7

Tristan wrote to Meredith and asked if he might call on her. He was keen to see her again. His wife’s death and his daughter’s illness had all weighed heavily upon him, but he’d missed her so much. Merry’s letters had helped him through the dark days and long nights, but now he could see the future, their future.

He needed to see her to reassure himself she was fully recovered. She said she was, but he wanted to see for himself. He couldn’t bear more loss. It was inappropriate while he was still in mourning but he so desperately wanted to talk to her, to tell her what was in his heart now he was a free man. He suggested he should call after dark so as not to arouse curiosity. To his joy and relief she agreed to see him.

The next evening after he had kissed her thoroughly they had sat and talked long into the night. He’d told her everything that had happened since he saw her last, most of which had been stated already in his letters. He’d needed to unburden himself, explain what he’d not been able to put into words, say what he could not say in a letter.

Tristan suddenly got to his feet, and then dropped onto one knee. Merry smiled but before she had time to think what was happening he said: ‘Merry will you make me the happiest of men and marry me?’

A single tear rolled down her cheek.

‘I never expected to hear those words, and even though we will have to wait a while, it will be worth it knowing we’ll have the rest of our lives together.’

‘Is that a yes?’ he said taking her in his arms.

‘Of course it is. Yes, yes, yes.’

Later still as he lay in her bed, they’d not been able to help themselves, Tristan said: ‘I must go before the village awakens. There’s still your reputation to think of is there not?’

Merry stretched and held the bed sheet close about her. ‘It’s a little late for that now,’ she smiled, ‘but yes you must go.’

He kissed her again. He could never remember being so happy. The night before Merry had been passionate and yielding, giving and receiving love freely and unselfconsciously. It had been all he’d ever hoped for.

‘I’ll be in touch soon. I know it will be some months before we can make it official, but there’s plenty to do to set the wheels in motion in the meantime. You’ll need new clothes for a start.’ She tried to interrupt him but he carried on. ‘I know you said you don’t want them, but when a lady marries she takes on the rank of her husband. You’ll have to dress the part as the new mistress of Westcliffe House. My sister will enjoy helping you choose a trousseau. She likes nothing better than shopping for clothes, oh and hats of course.’

‘I have a hat, why do I need another?’

He searched in the dawn light to find his breeches. ‘As you are already acquainted with my sister, you’ll at least have one friend, besides me that is. She’s already told me she admires you.’

‘I’d never thought to have her as a sister-in-law.’

‘It’ll be good for you to be able to share confidences, to talk about the things women like to talk about *and* she will help you fit in, help you learn how to run a household. She has much experience, she’s run Whitehall since Mother died and now she has her own establishment of course. It will be a big change for you, but you’re clever and will adapt. Everyone will love you I know it.’

‘Are you sure you would not sooner have me as your cook?’

Tristan nibbled her ear. ‘I should not mind if you give Mrs Matthews some pointers - her pastry is like shoe leather compared to yours. It will be a waste of your talents not to cook, perhaps as a special treat you would bake a rabbit pie from time to time.’

‘You think I have other talents?’ He tried to pull the sheet away from her. ‘At last I’ll have a decent kitchen to cook in.’ She laughed.

‘With or without your culinary skills it’ll be a special treat when we’re married and I come home from the shipyard to you and Constance each evening. I’ll be the happiest of men.’

Merry couldn’t help but get caught up in Tristan’s excitement, but still had some concerns, some reservations. ‘I see a few problems ahead my love, it won’t all be plain sailing. We’re from different backgrounds, we’re different ranks. And what of your father? Will he and your brother be so easily won over?’

‘After the last time when they interfered in my life I hope they’ll be easily convinced. When they meet you they’ll see what I see and love you too.’

‘I hope so because I’m worried I’ll not be able to suddenly become a fine lady with airs and graces. It’s a role I’d never dreamed of. Your friends and associates may not find me up to snuff. It’ll be a huge change for me. It’s a little worrying I have to admit.’

‘For the moment try to put the doubts aside, and join in with my enthusiasm and optimism,’ he asked. ‘With me by your side steering you in the right direction you need not fear. You’ll be a great success. Your natural beauty, character and poise will shine through.’ He tied his neck cloth. ‘I cannot wait for you to meet Constance.’

‘If she is anything like her father I’ll love her too I’m sure.’ She sank back against the pillow. ‘And with God’s grace and in the fullness of time we might have children of our own.’

It was music to Tristan’s ears. ‘Can you supply a boy?’ He joked as he leaned over the bed to kiss her. ‘I must be off before day breaks, write a note if you need anything.’

Merry frowned; ‘Such as what?’

‘Oh I don’t know. Me perhaps?’

As he rode back to Whitby the dawn light was breaking over the abbey. The sky was bathed in a warm golden glow. It matched Tristan’s mood exactly.

8

‘This will be fun,’ Tamsin said as she led Merry to her dressmaker on Baxtergate. ‘Getting a whole new wardrobe is my idea of heaven.’

‘Not exactly a whole wardrobe,’ Merry said, ‘I’ve been thinking about it. All I really need at the moment perhaps is three outfits; a day dress, a riding habit and a gown, I don’t own a gown of any description. Why would I in my line of work?’

‘You won’t have a line of work. Times everything you have thought of by at least three my dear. You cannot manage without a change of dress. If the weather is wet or

someone should knock your arm and spill a drink down your gown you would need another, so you see Merry you need a minimum of two of everything to be on the safe side, and that's just for starters.'

Merry shook her head. 'I wasn't thinking of rolling in mud or suddenly becoming accident prone. I can see your point but what of the cost?' Merry had seen the fine silks and brocades the dressmaker had shown them. They were exquisite but so expensive.

'Don't worry about money, Tris will not care how much you spend, he's so pleased you are to be his wife. All he wants is for you to be happy and buying clothes makes most women happy so what could be simpler my dear.'

After four hours at the dressmaker Merry was flagging.

'Enough. My head is spinning!' Merry was unused to spending money in such quantities. It was too extravagant, too decadent. Tami insisted on one last purchase that she was adamant she would buy for Merry. It was a beautiful silk nightgown. Tamsin said Merry could wear it on her wedding night. It was light and gauzy, almost diaphanous and extremely daring, but Tamsin had been resolute.

As they strolled along Church Street Merry saw the world in a new light. She'd never dreamed of riches. She'd been more than content with what she had with Steven. They had not been wealthy like the Tolkers, but she'd had everything she needed, more than most. Now, if Tamsin had her way, she needed a whole lot more. Her future sister-in-law was already talking of jewellery, hair ornaments, silver buckles and other items Merry never knew she wanted or even needed.

'Come home with me now and after some revitalising tea my maid will show you the hair irons I was telling you about. There is of course, the other problem to resolve.'

'What other problem?'

'The problem of a lady's maid of course. Has Tris mentioned anything to you about hiring one? You must have a personal maid.'

'He's not mentioned it. Why would I not do for myself? I always have before.'

'That was before you had gowns to take care of, hair to dress, make up to apply.'

'Make up ... I don't think ...'

Tamsin waved her worries aside. Merry suspected her future sister-in-law was enjoying herself more than she was herself. 'This is going to be so much fun. I imagined the months of being with child were going to drag on and on but now I have you to keep me occupied I'll not have a minute to worry about swollen ankles and a thickening waist. You've

become my new project.’ They sat in the morning room at Nab House which was exquisitely furnished. The room was stylish yet comfortable. Merry took the proffered dish of tea.

‘I hate to mention Jane,’ Tamsin looked anything but sorry, ‘But she had a good little maid. I expect Tris has kept her on, he won’t have even noticed if she’s about still, speak with him about her. If you don’t mind that she’s Jane’s cast off perhaps you could have her?’

The time soon came when Merry was to be introduced to Tristan’s father. She was unsure about it. On the one hand she was a little in awe, yet at the same time she thought he was just a man after all. She was sure if she was herself all would be well. She was reassured by Tamsin who had already introduced her to Francis who was welcoming and sociable.

As they arrived at Whitehall Merry changed her mind. She *was* in awe, not of the man, but of the mansion. She had been to Tamsin’s house which to her eyes was magnificent, huge, but Whitehall was like a palace. She remembered when she and Hester had peered through the railings. Was this really happening? She never imagined a house for one family could be so enormous.

Tristan took her hand and led her up the marble steps to the door where two footmen were waiting. They were shown into a beautiful drawing room decorated in pale blue and gold. Tamsin, invited especially for support, rose to greet her smiling encouragement.

Tristan’s father was gracious, but aloof. He talked mainly to Tristan and mostly about the business. Merry was not unduly perturbed. She imagined it would be like this from what Tristan had told her about his father. He said he was a serious minded man.

Later back at Shingle Roar Tristan took her hand. ‘Father is quite conservative. He will take time to come around to the idea of my marrying again but he liked you, how could he not?’

‘I was so nervous.’

‘You acquitted yourself well. You’ll get used to my father. He only ever talks of business. You can understand why I expect, what with all the trouble I’ve told you about over the past few years. Don’t take it to heart that he didn’t ask too much about you.’ He smiled at her warmly. ‘You’ll win him over.’

‘Tamsin has been a great help. Without her guidance I wouldn’t have known where to start. I wouldn’t have had a clue what to buy. There are other clothes being made too. Are you sure you don’t mind all the expense?’

‘Tamsin told me she had to practically twist your arm to buy what you did; you can pay me back in kind,’ he said taking her in his arms and kissing her.

‘Tris we agreed,’ she said pulling away. ‘If you start getting amorous we both know where it will lead. We said we wouldn’t take the risk again, indeed we shouldn’t have done so before, I shouldn’t like to fall. That would ruin our plans.’

‘I’m sorry, I know we should be careful but I love you so much, you are hard to resist.’ He stood back, folded his arms and smiled. ‘I’ll have to be patient but it won’t be so long now and then I can ravish you morning, noon and night. I know from our first tumble it will be worth the wait.’

‘Tumble! Is that what you call it?’ She feigned indignation. ‘You have plans for me I see but what of all the other things I must learn about being the mistress of Westcliffe House? Tamsin says it will be my job to order the servants about. At least I’ll know how to instruct the cook! And what of morning calls? Tamsin says ladies will pay their respects to me and I must make calls in return when I’m a married lady?’

‘The only calls you will be making will be on my time and in our bedchamber.’ Merry could not help but smile at his simple view of life.



Titus Tolker sat across from his youngest son at the Tolker shipyard. It was the morning after Tristan had introduced Merry to his father and brother. ‘Sit down my boy. Did the All for One get off on the morning tide?’

‘Eventually yes; there was a problem with the topsail but it was sorted out in time thankfully. We should let Tommy White go. He’s not up to the job. He spends more time brawling than working.’

Titus poured them both a glass of canary. ‘I know but the Whites have worked for us this last forty years.’

‘There’s a rotten apple in every barrel and I say we get rid of him before he infects the rest.’

‘Very well, I’ll leave it up to you to tell him but make sure he’s paid up to date. We don’t want him spreading it around Whitby he was sacked unfairly. He’s had more than one chance I have to agree.’ Tris took a sip of his drink. He was in a buoyant mood. Now that he could see Merry openly all was right with his world.

‘You look better than I’ve seen you in a long time Tristan. Your period of mourning will soon be over and you can embrace life once more. Constance continues well I hope?’

‘She does. I fully intend to make up for lost time. Now that I am a single man again I intend to -’

‘About that Tristan. Last night you brought a young woman to meet us but do not go headlong into another marriage. What I’m saying my boy is don’t go rushing and getting yourself tangled up with another woman so soon after Jane. Live a little, let your hair down. You’re still young and now you won’t be breaking your marriage vows you can afford to play the field. I would never have let you marry Jane had I known how unhappy she would make you. I was aware the family were Methodists of course but her father is more tolerant than his daughter ever was. In truth I thought her just shy and that she would come out of herself but ... I regret the pairing more than I can say. I’ll never forget the sacrifice you made for my sake and for that of the business. At least now the debt is discharged.’

Tristan, bemused, waited for his father to explain.

Titus continued: ‘Most men who find themselves in a less than ideal marriage make discreet arrangements as you did. I’m glad you didn’t go without, a handsome young buck like you was bound to find a warm bed,’ he laughed, ‘and at least you had the sense to pick someone a little distance from your own back door.’ Tristan shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. ‘All I’m saying son is don’t go getting embroiled with this young lass from ... where is it? Runswick?’

‘Kettleness.’

‘She’s a pretty thing I grant you but she’s not our sort. Let’s face it nothing can come of it. She’s a whaler’s widow without breeding.’

Tristan was furious. ‘Not our sort! No breeding! Two generations ago she would have been just our sort.’

‘Things change Tristan. Now you’re a widower you can have your pick of any of the young ladies hereabouts. Their mothers will be beating a path to your door the minute you throw off your mourning clothes. There’s the Scoresby’s daughter ...’ Titus stopped suddenly. ‘No I’ve learnt my lesson I sharn’t go down that road again. My matchmaking days are dead and buried - sorry son that was an insensitive turn of phrase but you understand my meaning well enough I’m sure.’

‘On that score Father my mind is made up. Meredith Baker will soon be my wife, as you say my mourning is all but over. There’s nothing to stop me from marrying the woman I love.’

His father’s face flushed with anger. ‘By God Tristan men like us don’t marry kitchen maids! Men like us do not marry their mistress. Our family will be a laughing stock. A man who beds his kitchen maid only arouses sly comments, envious gossip perhaps, but a man who marries her makes himself unacceptable to his own class.’

Tristan was shocked. He hadn't expected this. He tried to swallow down his own anger. He stood to leave. 'She is a cook sir, not a kitchen maid.'

Titus threw his head back scornfully.

'Let them laugh Father. I for one will not care if "my class" turn their backs. What need have I of their permission?' Tris slapped his riding crop against his boot irritably.

'And what of the business, eh? Bit by bit we've rebuilt the yard this last eighteen months. Shall that suffer because you marry your whore?'

'I'll thank you to moderate your tongue Father. I'll not stand for my future wife being maligned.'

'Future wife!' Titus pulled himself up to his full imposing height. 'Marrying down is madness. It will not only affect the business, what of your sister? Do you expect her to befriend such a woman? We'll all suffer. After all we've been through would you jeopardise the Tolker name for a cook?' Titus was in full flow. 'You may not be the son and heir but you are a Tolker and any error of judgement you make will reflect badly on the rest of the family. We still need investors as well as orders if we're to keep our heads above water. The tittle tattle about our finances is dying down at last but such an ill advised match would have the gossips begin again?'

'If all our friends and neighbours have to talk about is who I choose to marry then I'm sorry for them.'

'Sorry! You'll be the one who'll be sorry. You say you don't need the permission of your class, but you need mine, if that is you're to inherit your grandfather's money before you reach your twenty fifth birthday. How will you live without it? On her dowry. Ah!' Titus threw back his wine and poured himself another.

'I'll live as I live now of course. I have Westcliffe House and my salary from the yard.'

'I said I would not interfere ever again but I cannot stand by and watch you throw yourself away on this woman. It'll cause a scandal, ladies of our acquaintance won't receive her. Why would they? Titus half smiled and trying to sound conciliatory added, 'Be realistic Tristan you say she has her own cottage so carry on as before for God's sake; visit her to get your needs met but marry for position *within* your own class.'

'Your comments today make me ashamed of my own class as you call it. Goodbye Father.'

Tristan slammed the door shut behind him. He didn't trust himself to breathe the same air as his bigoted father. He headed for home.

After six months of mourning, the most Tristan was prepared to wait, his engagement to Meredith Barker was announced. There had been a ball to celebrate. Not a huge, lavish ball as they both thought it too insensitive so soon after his wife's death.

Merry had worn a pale blue, silk taffeta gown and her sparkly engagement ring; a sapphire as big as a gull's egg. The occasion was not the success Tristan had hoped it would be.

Although Tristan was proud to show off his beautiful bride-to-be his situation had changed. His father had refused to listen to reason and had effectively disowned his son for the past two months. For his part Tristan had stopped going to the shipyard not wanting to take anything from his father that was not freely given. Relations between the two were soured, neither willing to give way.

Tami stood by Tristan. She'd been trying to mediate between her father and brother whilst at the same time trying to shield her future sister-in-law from the backlash.

Many of Titus' business associates, men of a certain age and position, agreed with the ship owner; they too would have balked at the idea of one of their sons marrying beneath them. Other, younger friends and associates were of a different opinion. True friends saw Tristan happier than he had been for a long time and wished him luck with his choice of bride.

Then at the eleventh hour Titus, along with Theo who had of course sided with his father, had arrived at the betrothal ball. Titus sought to mend the breach which had grown between father and son. Magnanimously Tristan had accepted the olive branch on condition his father attend the wedding without complaint. Reluctantly Titus had agreed; he loved his son and couldn't bear to split the family.

A week later after Tristan had dined at Westcliffe House, something he did more often these days, he decided to take his daughter for a walk along the cliff top path. Constance, wobbling on chubby, little legs kept on sitting down, so he decided to carry her. She became surprisingly wilful and wriggled until he set her down again. She was beginning to have her own personality and was not as quiet and biddable as she once was. Tristan still doted on her nevertheless but saw he must try at least to be a little more strict with his daughter.

Constance meanwhile toddled about on the grass laughing cheerfully. Each time she lost her balance she giggled and plopped to the ground.

Rain clouds were gathering on the horizon. He took his daughter's hand and turned to make their way back to the house where Betsy would be waiting to take Constance for her nap. As he left and set off back to the shipyard he waved to her. Since his father had softened Tristan had once again been working at the yard.

He had decided to walk down the steep path rather than ride around the long way as he often did. He wanted to call on his old friend Josh Wild who of course had been invited to the wedding. He'd not seen him for a while as the naval officer had been away at sea.

Tristan strode out confidently his mind on the meeting he had planned with Merry that evening. Sometimes his intended came to Westcliffe House if his sister could be spared to chaperone. They had decided they must conform to tradition as much as possible now they were betrothed. It was the least they could do if they were to placate Titus and Theo. Tristan would not have his friends and family thinking badly of his choice. There were those who had an opinion but they could have gone to hell ordinarily; it was only because of his father and Merry's reputation that Tristan toed the line.

He was so engrossed in his thoughts he wasn't properly looking where he was going. He slipped, went over on his ankle, almost recovered himself and then crashed to the ground heavily. He swore a string of profanities. He sat awkwardly on the wet grass. It had rained when he had taken Constance indoors, that's why he must have slipped and fallen. He went to rub the sore ankle but it was too painful to touch. It must be badly sprained at least. Luckily for Tristan the friend whom he was going to call upon was on his way to see him.

'Ahoy there, are you hurt? Have you had one too many with your dinner?' Captain Josh Wild shouted jovially up the cliff path after he saw his friend take a fall. He staggered up the cliff.

Tristan had known Josh for years and let go with a whole string of oaths that would have made even a sailor blush. Josh laughed heartily until he got closer. Sweat had burst upon Tristan's brow. He was in real pain now.

'For Pete's sake don't stand there laughing,' Tris said half laughing himself. 'I can't put weight on my foot and no I've not had one over the yardarm. I only wish I had. A brandy or two would numb the pain.'

Josh helped him up and leaning heavily on his friend the pair managed to return to Westcliffe House.

After Dr Lewis had left Josh passed his friend a glass of brandy.' Here, you look like you're in need of this. You'll not be dancing a jig at your wedding anytime soon.' Josh was

always a bit of a joker, it was one reason the two of them got on so well, they shared the same sense of humour.

‘The wedding is next Friday. How am I to get married with my leg in a splint?’ The doctor was worried the ankle may be broken not just sprained. ‘Six weeks Dr Lewis says it could take to heal, six weeks walking with a stick like an old man, if I’m lucky that is.’

Josh tried not to laugh. ‘Well that will put a damper on your wedding night antics.’ Tristan swore again, it was far from funny.

‘How am I to reach the church? In a bath chair, confound it, what am I to do? I’ll crawl up the damned steps if I have to!’

‘All one hundred and ninety nine?’ Josh asked still laughing. ‘Good job there’s coffin rests at intervals - you’ll need them. But you’ll just have to go by carriage via Green Lane. I’ll drive with you as your best man.’

When Merry and Tami arrived an hour later they were both of the same opinion: the wedding must be postponed.

‘How can I let you down Merry? Everything is arranged; the church, the reception the honeymoon.’

Tami answered for her future sister-in-law. ‘Merry doesn’t want a cripple on her wedding day. How are you to dance with your wife on your wedding night if you can hardly walk?’ Tami laughed in a most unladylike manner. They all knew she was not only thinking of dancing.

‘I know you were only having two days for your honeymoon,’ Tris had not wanted to leave Constance for longer, ‘but you can hardly go away on crutches. How would you manage?’

After much persuading Tristan gave in; being bullied by two women was too much to bear. Tami tactfully went to the nursery to see Constance.

‘I know it’s disappointing my love but you must see it is impossible, we have to alter our plans. Six weeks will soon pass you’ll see.’ Merry kissed him hoping to cheer him up.

‘I know you’re right, but it is so disappointing. We’ll have to change the date for six weeks hence, write to our guests with the bad news.’

‘It’ll soon pass, these things happen.’



Five weeks after his slip Tris was still limping slightly but was much recovered. Dr Lewis had thought it a bad ligament tear rather than a break. Preparations were once again in full swing for the ceremony.

The wedding was once again rescheduled to take place at St Mary's Church high above Whitby. Indeed the banns would be read for the final time this coming Sunday.

The wedding breakfast was to be held at Whitehall; Tristan's father was keen to put on a united front and provide the venue and the feast for the one hundred and twenty invited guests. Merry thought with sadness she couldn't think of a single person to invite. The only friends she had would feel uncomfortable at such a lavish event. She'd asked Hester of course but all to no avail.

'Please come, I have no one else to support me. It won't be just gentry at the wedding there will be people from all walks of life. Men from the shipyard will attend too. Tris has made sure some of the workers will be there to watch us marry.'

No matter how much she pleaded Hester wouldn't give in. 'I saw that palace remember, I'd faint clean away if I were to step over the threshold! I should want to be clearing the tables and plumping the cushions with the rest of the servants.'

When Merry told William who she was to marry, as she knew she must, he had surprised her by showing little interest.

'I'm to be married,' she announced without preamble taking a leaf out of William's book and getting straight to the point, 'to Mr Tristan Tolker.'

William turned his back, took a red hot rod of iron from the fire and hammered it flat. When he looked up from his work he said. 'So the gossip's true then. I didn't believe it but there you are, shows what I know.'



Even though the wedding was imminent Tristan still had work to do. He had a business trip to Edinburgh to undertake and would be gone for over a week.

He and Merry had a bittersweet parting but for her part the bride was not so down hearted. Over the last five weeks while Tristan had been immobile she'd spent much time with him, chatting, reading to him, laughing and sharing confidences. They'd really got to know each other. Soon they would be married. She would use the last days of her freedom to garner her confidence, sort out Shingle Roar which was to be let to a local farmer, and savour the thought of becoming Mrs Tolker.

Merry was in the small sitting room at Shingle Roar sorting out the items she wanted to take to her new home. There wasn't much to take that would look well in her new surroundings.

When she'd seen the inside of Westcliffe House for the first time she could hardly believe she would be mistress of such an establishment. To her eyes it was a grand, imposing house not a home at all. It was a little overwhelming but Tristan had made her welcome and asked her to choose which rooms she would like as their own private quarters; he hadn't wanted them to use the rooms he'd shared with Jane and she was glad of that. The new set of bedchambers and dressing rooms were being decorated in colours they had chosen together. The rooms were closer to the nursery which pleased them both; Merry already doted on Constance.

Merry thought to take a small rosewood table to Westcliffe House. It was one Steven had made. It was a pretty piece, with an inlaid top. Her late husband had been good with his hands and she'd always cherished it. It wouldn't look too out of place and she couldn't part with it.

As she ran her hand over the rosewood inlay there was a knock at the door, she could see through the window it was the man who sometimes carried the post, not that she'd ever had a letter. Young Sam still brought the odd note from Tristan but that was all.

She stood by the window the better to read the letter. Her eyes could hardly believe what she was reading.

Her head was spinning. She felt faint.

She had thought she recognised the hand writing but had half dismissed the idea. She staggered to the chair by the fire and sat down heavily. How could this be? She was thrown into utter confusion.

The letter was from her husband.



Merry could hardly believe her eyes. She read the letter over and over again:

My Dearest wife Merry,

I think it will be a shock to you to receive this letter but I hope less of a shock than if I turned up at Shingle Roar unannounced. I hope it will be more of a nice surprise when you get over the first astonishment. I do not know whether you thought me dead or press ganged and for a time I can tell you my love, neither did I!

When The Freelove was attacked some of the crew were killed instantly, some were pressed and others perished when she sank without trace. I was injured and left for dead until some scurvy Frenchman came to search my pockets. When he saw I was not badly hurt, just feigning death to try to escape, I too was pressed into action.

I sailed aboard a French frigate for over a year, forced to attack other British ships and take their plunder, ships and crew back to various ports in France. I was worked like a dog, like a slave but all the while I was thinking of you and how I would get back to you or die trying.

Then two months ago I got the chance I'd been hoping for and I took it. How I managed it I hope to tell you soon enough, face to face my sweetheart, my beautiful girl.

I am now landed on British soil for the first time in over two years and mighty good it feels I can tell you. I am at Newcastle and have taken a passage that sails tomorrow for Whitby. By the time you read this letter I hope to be less than a day away from you. To see you once more I know will make me weep but believe me when I say they will be tears of joy.

Your loving husband, back from the dead,

Steven

For a long time Merry stared at the letter. If she hadn't recognised Steven's scrawly hand she would not have believed it.

He was alive!

The reports had been wrong after all. He hadn't gone down with The Freelove.

For months after the news of Steven's death she'd convinced herself he wasn't dead. She had prayed for his safe return night and day but as the weeks turned into months she'd finally accepted he was never coming home.

But he had survived!

She'd been right after all. Now, virtually on the eve of her wedding to another man, another man she loved desperately. Steven was returning to reclaim her as his wife, reclaim his old life, his home. She thought of her loving husband even now beating a path to her door. How happy would she be to see his handsome face once more?

She loved him still but

Tristan's face at their betrothal ball swam into her mind, laughing, carefree, showing her off as proud as any man would be in the circumstances.

It was dark by the time Merry finally folded the letter and put it in the drawer of the little rosewood table. During the hours which had passed she had come to realise something.

She was no longer free to marry Tristan Tolker.

She was not a widow but a married woman.

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In Edinburgh Tristan stared in the window of the jewellers shop on Queensferry Street. A business associate had told him the establishment had the best selection of jewels in Scotland. As he was in the city on business and as he'd concluded his business quickly - he was keen to return to Merry - he'd decided to take the man's advice and take a look at what was on offer.

He had given Merry an engagement ring but she didn't wear it from day to day - she was worried about wearing expensive jewellery while she was still living alone at Shingle Roar. It was in the safe at Westcliffe House where it would remain until they were married.

Tris was looking to buy Merry a wedding band of course, but also jewels as a wedding gift. He wanted her to have something extra special to wear on her wedding day. Something of her very own.

She owned no other jewellery but her wedding band from her first marriage but she wouldn't wear it after they were wed naturally.

The jeweller set out a tray of rubies, sapphires and emeralds but nothing interested or excited Tristan. For some reason he couldn't picture Merry wearing them. Some were far too ostentatious. Tris knew instinctively Merry wouldn't like something too showy.

He asked to see other pieces. He had in mind a necklace and perhaps a bracelet. The man produced a tray of topaz, peridot and turquoise, these too he quickly dismissed.

He'd never really given jewels much thought before but he'd never been in love before either. He wanted only the best for his future wife.

Jane had chosen a modest sapphire that was almost more black than blue for her engagement ring. The only other piece she'd allowed him to buy her, besides her wedding band, had been the jet drop. She'd been buried wearing all three. Later, after the funeral Tris had regretted letting Jane's mother have her way; the pieces should have been handed down to Constance when she was older. He had realised too late.

The jeweller produced another tray. This time a necklace caught Tristan's eye. It was fire opals and diamonds on a single rope and he knew at once it was the one. The way the opals' fire lit up reminded him of the greenish, topaz glint in Merry's eyes.

‘You have made a good choice sir. Both the fire opals and the diamonds are of exceptional quality. I have a bracelet and earrings to match. Tristan appraised them and then decided to purchase all three. The price was high but soon he’d come into his grandfather’s money and so he felt justified in the extravagance.

Nothing was too good for Merry.

Besides the joy he’d get from seeing his future wife’s face when she saw them would be reward enough. He also bought Constance a tiny gold bangle. He wouldn’t leave her out. With his purchases safely and extravagantly wrapped he left the shop.

Tristan could hardly wait to get home.

End of part 2