

Where Seagulls Soar

Janet Woods

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Extract

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'With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow. In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.'

The ring Alexander Morcant slipped on to Joanna Darsham's finger was fashioned from a nugget of gold unearthed from the Victorian gold fields by a convict jeweller.

'Those whom God hath joined together may no man put asunder.'

Thaddeus Scott, master of the clipper *Joanna Rose* – en route from Australia to England with a cargo of wool, 65,000 ounces of gold, seventy-three passengers and mail destined for families left behind in Great Britain – closed his Bible and smiled at the couple standing before him, both of them dear to his heart.

'Best you tie the knot properly in a church when we go ashore, just to make sure it's legal.'

Later, Thaddeus wrote an entry in the ship's log:

Thursday 15th April 1858. Weather fair with following winds. Progress 203 miles. Able Seaman Philip Divers charged with falling asleep when on watch. First offence.

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Reprimanded and docked two days' pay. Joanna Darsham and Alexander Morcant exchanged marriage vows before several of the ship's passengers and some of the crew. The marriage conducted by Thaddeus Scott, Master of the Joanna Rose. Solemnized over the King James Bible and entered therein. May God bless their union.

It had been a fast voyage so far. The anchor having been hove up eight weeks previously, the *Joanna Rose* had been towed by steamer to open water, where a wind from the north west had filled her sails and seen 260 nautical miles pass under her keel and turn into wake by the following midday.

The shores of England were now only three weeks away, the equator crossing having been celebrated just the day before. Alex had proposed to Joanna during the revelries, and in front of everyone. He had suggested this unorthodox and romantic ceremony himself, knowing it would appeal to her adventurous nature.

Joanna couldn't stop smiling, and Alex couldn't prevent himself from smiling back at her. 'Now I've made an honest woman of you I can claim spousal rights without the damned passengers gazing upon my overtures towards you with disapproval,' he whispered against her ear.

She'd noticed that Alex was getting used to the ship's motion now, though compared to her master, Thaddeus Scott, who'd spent his entire life at sea, he was a beginner, for he still had to cling to whatever was handy each time the ship canted, and he wove from

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side to side when walking, as if he'd imbibed too much liquor.

The nimble-footed Joanna was much better at adjusting to the ship's movement, but even she could be taken unawares. Alex laughed when a jolt pitched her forward into his arms and she said, 'I swear, the sea's got lumps in it today.'

'You'd think that a ship which had been named after you would treat you more gently,' Alex said.

Blue eyes blazing with happiness she gazed up at him. 'Ah, but she threw me in the right direction, for this is exactly where I want to be.'

'Is it now?'

Just then young Toby began to kick up a ruckus. Alex released her and stooped to pluck their son from the arms of the Chinaman, Chin Lee, who'd been holding him during the ceremony.

Toby had been born three months earlier in Melbourne, on the eighth day of January. Named Tobias Alexander, he'd quickly become Toby.

Father and son were alike with their dark hair and liquid dark eyes. For that reason alone, nobody would ever be able to dispute the relationship of the pair, though they might speculate about the boy's sudden appearance.

Joanna would never forget the look on Alex's face when he'd first set eyes on his son, and, although Alex hadn't said so at the time, Joanna knew the existence of the boy had given him someone to provide a future for. It would be a close relationship, a far cry from the lonely childhood Alex himself had experienced, which

had been reinforced by the shock disclosure that he was the son of his mother's affair, and not the absent father he'd always looked up to.

'I must take Toby below and feed him,' she said, refusing the celebratory tot of rum Thaddeus Scott laughingly offered her. It was a brew that was reputed to strip varnish from the mast.

Alex declined it too, saying casually, 'I'll come with you and collect your luggage, for you'll both be with me in the stateroom tonight.'

Later, when they were alone in their luxurious cabin together, Alex said, 'Do you realize you've kept me waiting eight weeks?'

'But we'd agreed to wait until we reached England before we wed.'

'Damn it, Joanna, you never needed a ring on your finger before. We've already produced a son between us to prove it.'

'I wanted the second one I conceived to be legitimate. Besides, it's not my fault you were sick for the first few weeks at sea.'

Alex shuddered. 'Don't remind me. Thaddeus had no sympathy at all. He said I'd get over it, and as head of the Darsham and Morcant Shipping Company I should have gone to sea earlier with my brother Oliver, to learn the ropes.' He brushed a finger gently down the side of her face. 'So why did you change your mind about waiting until we got back to England?'

'Why?' She grinned. 'How could I reject such a romantic proposal. And if you kiss me again, you will know exactly why. I just cannot resist you, Alex

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Morcant. We'll cause a scandal as it is when the existence of Toby is made known. And it will be me who's whispered about, not you.'

He smiled at that. 'I'll tell them we were secretly married at Gretna Green.'

'No more falsehoods, Alex. They're too hard to maintain. Will you change the name of the shipping company now?'

Her blue eyes drowned in the darkness of his gaze. 'Is that what *you* want, Joanna Rose?'

'Yes. I talked it over with my father, and that's what he wants too. He said that the less people who are reminded of the Darsham name, the more comfortable he'll feel.'

'But when you married him neither of you knew of the blood tie between you.'

'All the same, I can't help feeling that I ruined his life. If he and I hadn't accidentally met he'd still be running the company. He gave up everything he loved to save my reputation.'

'And his own, and the future of the company.' Alex kissed the sadness from her lips. 'You needn't feel guilty, Joanna. Despite the problems it caused, finding you brought Tobias Darsham great joy. It was just a pity that you wed. Luckily, he realized the mistake before any harm was done. Your father knows what he's doing, he always has. He's enjoying the challenge of his new life.'

'And he and Jane are expecting their first child.' A smile spread across her face at the thought of having a brother or sister after a lifetime of being an only child. 'He deserves to be happy, Alex.'

‘Aye, he does. He told me that learning of your survival was something he’d treasure for the rest of his life. One day we’ll make this trip again, I promise. I can’t turn my back on Tobias, or Gabriel Tremayne, as he now calls himself. He was always there for me as a child. I love the man as much as I love his daughter.’

‘Do you truly love me, Alex?’

‘What a thing to ask me on our wedding day,’ he said, his voice gruff. ‘Would I have wed you otherwise?’

She wondered. If circumstances had been different, with their different backgrounds, would he have considered her a suitable wife for a successful businessman?

She dismissed the lingering doubt that she’d manoeuvred Alex into following her to Australia, and the thought that the existence of Toby had tightened the noose around him. ‘I’ll be a good wife to you, Alex. I promise.’

She was sitting on the bunk, which was fitted against the wall. He traced a fingertip across the breasts so recently exploited by their son. One by one he opened the buttons on her bodice to expose the camisole beneath. She quivered when his lips grazed over the material, seeking the swollen nubs where their son had recently suckled.

He gazed down at her, unsure. ‘Are you positive you’re fully recovered from Toby’s birth?’

Her arms snaked around his neck and she gave an exasperated snort. ‘Are you going to talk all night, Alex Morcant?’

His eyes met hers for a moment, his lips twitched and his hands slid under her buttocks. Lifting her from

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the bunk he held her against him. Her long legs wound around his waist. How enticing she was. He surged up to connect with her warmth, his need for her making him as eager as a youth as he pressed against the front of his linens. 'I imagine not.'

She was laughing now, covering his face with kisses. He had a job lowering his trousers, and they were trapped around his ankles, so he teetered backwards on to the bunk with her on top of him, his head in an awkward position against the bulkhead.

She stood up to pull his ankles free, throwing aside his shoes at the same time, then she bent forward and gently kissed him where it ached the most.

'Oh, God,' he groaned, feeling his control falter as she slipped from her skirt and tossed her bodice and camisole aside.

'Do you like what you see?' she cooed, parading in a red satin corselette, frothy petticoat and high buttoned boots.

'You're exquisite.'

She turned her back on him, looked over her shoulder and demanded, 'Loosen my laces, then.'

He grinned at her tease. 'Damn it, Joanna. I'm going to have you wearing them, first.'

'Feeling frisky, are you?' she whispered. 'Lay down then, else you'll break your neck.'

He was surprised by the request, but complied, sliding down on to the pillows. Under her flaming petticoat she wore nothing.

Kneeling across his lap she gently lowered herself on to him, covering him in red taffeta. Her thighs trapped

his hips, her hands were planted either side of his head and her glorious dark hair tumbled in a fragrant curtain about their heads. Bare buttocks cushioned themselves on his thighs, her leather boots grazed against his knees.

Joanna's sleepy blue eyes were an inch from his, her mouth a curve of desire. 'I adore you, Alex Morcant.'

He liked her uninhibited ways and found himself sinking into the mesmerizing depth of those eyes – losing himself in her, in the intimate togetherness of them.

Reaching up he took her face between his palms and, bringing her mouth down to his, he drowned in the sea of her sensuality as she gently tightened her muscles around him.

As they neared England the weather worsened and they sailed into a series of squalls.

To Alex, the ship became a highly unstable creature. Her stern rose and fell like a whore's backside. Her prow cut into the water and scooped it up. It rolled along her deck at knee height to pour over the legs of the unsuspecting, then it cascaded out of the scuppers. Spray was thrown sky high, to run off the snapping sails in every direction, usually the one he was standing in. To make matters worse, the horizon canted this way and that, so his perspective was constantly shifting.

Her master, thinking nothing of this ungainly behaviour from his elegant ship, calmly smoked his smelly tobacco and threw incomprehensible orders to the

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crew, who swarmed over the rigging, seemingly with complete disregard for their safety.

Sails were run down lines, others just as quickly run up, so there was a constant kaleidoscope of movement.

Although Alex had determined not to succumb to seasickness again, the *Joanna Rose* had other ideas. Much to his chagrin, he was overtaken by the misery of it. Even though he wasn't actually sick, he was constantly queasy and was forced to remain in his cabin. As he hugged his stomach, Alex swore he'd never go to sea again unless desperation drove him to it, whatever he'd promised Joanna.

Thankfully, Toby had inherited Joanna's stomach, for he was affected not at all. He bawled loudly and forcefully when he was hungry or uncomfortable, but otherwise was sunny natured.

At least he had Joanna to care for him now, Alex told himself, and he wouldn't have to live in that big house, alone with his own thoughts. But he envied the fact that his wife seemed to thrive on, even enjoy, the uneven motion of the ocean, as if she were a piece of seaweed floating on the currents.

She looked after him, washing the sweat from his pallid face, or coaxing him to eat a little. She tempted him with morsels of food, soft words and sympathy in her eyes. When they made love she was passionate and innovative, and he couldn't get enough of her.

But when Joanna came to the cabin one day, her eyes sparkling and raindrops glistening in her hair, to bring the news, 'England is on the horizon, come and see,' Alex instantly began to feel better.

‘Thank God,’ he croaked. ‘I hate living on this damned ship, even though I now own the company. I worked hard enough to get it, though, and thanks to you it’s now mine. And I’ve got myself a wife into the bargain.’ The pride and arrogance in his words suddenly vanished as he said pathetically, ‘I’ll be so pleased to have solid ground under my feet again.’

She giggled and held his head against her breasts. ‘My poor darling man, I know you will. But you’ll change your mind about the ship when we go ashore, and you’ll look on the voyage as an adventure.’

‘I shouldn’t be at all surprised.’ He felt quite comfortable being held like this and wondered if his own mother had put him to her breast to feed, as Joanna did with Toby.

A shudder ran through him at the thought. But no, Clara Nash hadn’t been a motherly type. He’d spent most of his childhood with Tobias Darsham and his mother, unless his late father had been home from sea. Despite their mother and son relationship, Alex had never felt close to Clara, and neither did he hold any respect for her. Surprise filled him, for he realized that he didn’t even like his mother.

He turned his head to kiss the pert little bud that had suddenly ripened against his ear.

Joanna laughed and combed her fingers through his hair, relaxing his scalp. ‘You’re beginning to feel better, aren’t you?’

‘By the second.’ His mouth moved a little further up. ‘How do you feel?’

In the cradle next to the bunk, Toby woke. His legs

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rose in the air, taking the blanket with them. They quivered in a stretch for a moment, then the blanket fell off and covered his face.

‘In demand,’ she said, grinning as Toby’s head turned from one side to the other, as if wondering where the light had gone. He began to punch at the air and voice his annoyance at the event.

Alex gave a rueful smile and rolled off the bunk.

Toby’s indignant squawk became a chuckle when his father uncovered him. Smothered in Alex’s kisses and convulsed in paroxysms of giggles, the beautiful and robust little boy who so resembled Alex was brought to the bunk and placed in Joanna’s arms. Alex was going to be a good father to him.

She frowned when Alex paled and an expression of pain appeared on his face.

‘Do you feel unwell again?’

‘It’s nothing much. It comes now and again. I’ll be all right once I get ashore.’

And that was only a day away.

Up on deck with the rest of the passengers, who were beginning to disembark, Alex glanced towards the building where the company’s offices were situated.

Joanna grinned. ‘I suppose you’re going straight there.’

‘I’ll see you and Toby home first.’

They said farewell to Thaddeus, who had completed his last voyage and was about to retire from the company.

‘Who’s taking my place as master?’ he said gruffly.

‘Edward Staines. He’ll be the senior master.’

‘She should have gone to your brother. One thing’s for sure, though, we’d never make a seaman out of you however hard you try.’

Alex grinned and the pair shook hands. ‘I know. As for Oliver, it’s not my fault he went haring off to America after a woman’s skirt. Come to the office in the morning. I’ll hand over your severance pay and bonuses.’ Alex also intended to present the company’s senior captain with a gold watch. He just hoped that his manager, Henry Wetherall, had remembered to order it, for Thaddeus would be off down to Poole as soon as he could, to visit Charlotte Darsham, the woman he intended to wed.

Joanna hugged the captain. ‘You’ll let me know when the wedding is, won’t you, Thaddeus?’

‘Maybe, but maybe not. The pair of us are too old for fuss, so don’t be surprised if your grandmother has become Mrs Scott the next time you see her, for I expect she’ll have things all arranged.’

‘You know, I’ll never forgive the pair of you if you marry without me there.’

‘I reckon you will, lass,’ he said calmly, ‘for you’re not a fussing woman yourself. Now, stop hugging me and go off home with your husband. He’s tapping his foot, which means he’s impatient to get started. I’ll send your luggage up on a cart.’

After six months’ absence, Joanna and Alex’s house at Southwark had a neglected look to it. The garden was overgrown, though threaded through with May flowers. The windows were dusty, but the blackthorn was in

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bloom and the heavenly scent of the massed cream blossoms was heady to the senses.

Their housekeeper came scurrying through from the back when they entered the dusty hall.

‘Where are the servants, Mrs Bates?’ Alex asked her, frowning as he glanced around.

‘Your mother . . . Mrs Nash dismissed them. She said they weren’t needed.’

‘Did she now.’ Alex’s mouth tightened. ‘And your husband. Where’s he?’

‘Bates up and died a month or so ago. He caught the cholera, he did, and it took him off real quick.’ A tear or two tracked down her cheeks. ‘I’m glad you’re home, sir, and you, Mrs Darsham.’

Toby was looking around his new surroundings with interest. Mrs Bates eyed him uncertainly, then gazed from one to the other, as if not quite knowing what to say.

‘I’m Mrs Morcant now,’ Joanna told her gently. ‘And this is our son, Tobias Alexander, though we call him Toby. I’m so sorry to hear about your husband.’

Mrs Bates gave a deep sigh as she dried her eyes on the corner of her apron. ‘Bates was older than me, but a good man for all that. I’m going to miss him. It will be nice to have a child running around the house, though.’

She looked gratified when Toby decided to bestow his best smile on her, revealing the pair of sharp teeth he’d grown in his bottom jaw on the journey. ‘He’s a dear little lad,’ she said, her mouth stretching into a smile. ‘And so like you, Mr Morcant. Shall I fetch some refreshment to the drawing room?’

Alex shook his head. 'Not for me, Mrs Bates, thank you. I'm going to the office. We'll do something about the servant problem tomorrow.'

'And I must sort out a nursery for Toby. He needs a sleep.'

'Use the room next to mine . . . *ours*.' He grinned and kissed her cheek in a slightly perfunctory manner, as if he were impatient to be off. 'I'll be going then. I'll leave you ladies to sort things out and will see you at dinner, I expect.'

'Don't work too hard, Alex. You look tired.'

'I can't promise that, my love. I'm sure I'll be fine in a day or two.'

'Right,' Joanna said, turning to Mrs Bates after the door had shut behind him 'Where does my husband sleep?'

'In the room next to the one you used to occupy.' A faraway expression filled her eyes. 'It's the room Mr Darsham used to use when he was still alive, poor man. Such a nice gentleman, he was, even though he wouldn't take any nonsense from anybody. Still, you'd know that, you being his widow.'

Mr Darsham's widow, once his wife! It was odd imagining herself as ever being his wife, when Joanna now knew the man was her father. That ill-fated yet innocent liaison seemed a long time ago now – as did her upbringing on the isle of Portland as another couple's daughter.

Mr Darsham is still alive, did you but know it, Joanna thought, saddened because her father had been obliged to abandon his home and identity for her sake.

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Only he lives in Australia and is calling himself Gabriel Tremayne, these days.

It was lunchtime. The offices of the Darsham and Morcant Shipping Company were almost deserted except for one or two familiar faces – clerks who greeted Alex with welcoming smiles.

He nodded pleasantly to them as he walked through. It smelled familiar, and he felt at home here, in charge of himself.

Alex hadn't expected to find his mother waiting for him in his office.

The arrangement of the lines on Clara Nash's face made her look dissatisfied and unpleasant, a true reflection of her meddlesome nature.

As the door closed, he gazed at her, saying sharply, 'Why are you here?'

Clara was wearing a powder-blue gown that matched her eyes, a colour too young and fresh for a woman of her mature years. Her skin had a yellowish tone to it.

'Is that any way to greet me? Come, Alexander, give your mother a kiss.'

His mouth stretched into a thin line. 'I'd sooner kiss a viper, Mother. I believe you've been interfering with my household staff.'

'Actually, I've saved you considerable money in wages. Servants are easy to come by, you can hire others.'

'It's my money, not yours. Now, why are you here?'

She turned and walked towards the window. 'I saw

the ship come in, and I wondered if you'd be on it. I heard you went running after that girl?'

'*That girl* is called Joanna. What of it?'

'What of it?' She turned, her eyes blazing. 'Don't be a fool, Alexander. The girl is an opportunist. First it was Tobias Darsham, now it's you. I hope you've left her in Australia.'

'Why would I do that when I went all that way to bring her home?' he said. 'Joanna and I were married on the ship on the way home.' Swallowing the urge to strangle his mother, Alex smiled. 'You might as well know. Joanna has borne me a son. His name is Toby. Now let me see, doesn't that make you a grandmother?'

'You fool,' she scorned. 'You could have done much better than marry some stupid island girl. She didn't even have the sense to hang on to what she inherited from Tobias. Instead, she used it to buy you with.'

He didn't allow her to see how badly that stung, but crossed to the door and opened it. 'I've got work to do . . . goodbye, Mother.'

She didn't budge, just stared at him. 'Aren't you going to ask after your sisters?'

He'd forgotten the twins in his rush of anger, and sighed. 'Of course. How are Irene and Lydia?'

'Tiresome. They're resisting my efforts to find them husbands. They said you told them they didn't have to marry the men I chose for them.'

He smiled at the thought that his half-sisters had found the guts to resist his formidable mother. 'For God's sake, they don't have to wed yet. The pair are only sixteen. Allow them to grow up first.'

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‘They need to be found husbands of means.’

His eyes sharpened. ‘Has something happened to the inheritance from their father, then?’

She shrugged. ‘Entertaining in London is costly, especially for three of us.’

And his mother was excessive in every way. ‘I’ll invite them to stay when Joanna and I are settled back in. Have you heard from Oliver recently?’

‘He wrote to you saying his marriage is in trouble. The fool invested his money in some get-rich-quick scheme, and that girl he married, along with her father, has absconded with it, leaving him to shoulder the blame. I took out a private loan to bail him out of trouble and repay the sum owing. The bank has since dropped the fraud charges against him. You can read about it for yourself. Oliver’s letter is on the drawing-room table at your house.’

Alex frowned as he stated the obvious. ‘You opened my letter and read it?’

She shrugged. ‘Oliver is my son, why shouldn’t I read it?’

‘Because it was addressed to me.’

‘If I hadn’t read it, he’d be in a prison cell now.’

Alex hated complimenting her, but swallowed his pride to say stiffly, ‘It was good of you to raise the money.’

‘All it took was a signature. I used the *Charlotte May* and the *Clara Jane* as security. Lord Durrington witnessed it and Henry Wetherall endorsed it.’

Anger surged, then ebbed, leaving him drained. He paled as the pain in his side came back to nag at him

and was hard pushed not to double over and retch. Sweat coated his forehead. 'You signed over half of the company ships? To whom?'

'Barnard Charsford.'

'That usurer! Are you insane? You didn't have the authority to do that. How much was the loan, for God's sake?'

'Considerable. But it didn't take long to persuade Henry Wetherall that the signature I had was genuine. Your signature is easy to copy and, after all, it was all for the company's good.'

'Like hell! There were other ways of raising the money than compound a fraud with another fraud. I could have you and Durrington arrested.'

'Don't be tiresome, Alexander. It would simply be your word against ours. Lord Durrington is a peer. He witnessed your signature and backdated it. And Barnard Charsford is a friend of ours, who will swear on oath that you lodged the document yourself, before you went gallivanting off after that girl.'

'Joanna is my wife, and I'd have you talk of her with more respect.'

'We will never have respect for each other, since we are sworn enemies.' She gave a small, tight smile and her eyes suddenly became as cold and as hard as ice. 'May I remind you that Oliver used to own half of this company before your *wife* persuaded him to sell it cheaply to her. Do you ever wonder how she managed that? Perhaps she spread her legs for him, in the same way she did for you.'

Clara gave a light laugh when his fists clenched. 'You

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didn't imagine I'd bailed Oliver out with my own money, did you? I haven't got that much left. The cards have proved unlucky, of late.'

'I did think for a moment that he might have roused some motherly spark in you. I should have known better. And you can only apply your own low standards to the situation, since I never knew who my father was until recently. Certainly not the man you were married to at the time. But don't imagine Joanna is the same. She has more love and compassion in her little finger than you have in your entire body. Now, get out.'

And his voice was so hard that Clara left rather quickly.

Later, Alex heard Henry Wetherall come in. His manager came straight to his office, a wry smile on his face.

'I'm sorry, Mr Morcant. I wanted to be here when you arrived. There's something I need to discuss urgently with you, regarding a loan taken out against the company assets.'

'I've already talked to my mother, Henry. She forged my signature on the document.'

Henry looked shocked. 'Mrs Nash said the loan was authorized by you. I'm sorry. If I'd known I'd have never endorsed it, for the interest rate was extremely high. However, I was led to understand it was an emergency.'

Alex shrugged. 'I believe it was. Don't feel bad about it, Henry, it's not your fault. But I'd be obliged if you kept what I've told you to yourself, for there were extenuating circumstances. I'd have done something similar

under the circumstances, I expect, though I'd probably have sold the *Nightingale* rather than take on such a loan.'

'I did suggest that, but the guarantor wouldn't consider it, because of her age. It was the clipper ships, or nothing. They threatened to impound them, otherwise. At least the *Joanna Rose* is free of debt. I insisted that the ships were insured for the sum required, and was able to prove it, so *Joanna Rose* wasn't included as collateral.'

'Aye, there's that, but you can be sure they'll seize her too if the need arises. We'll have to try and keep her at sea, with a quick turnaround every time she's in port, Henry. Fetch the books. It looks as though there's going to be some hard work in front of me before the company's solvent again.'

'You could take in a partner, sir, cut your losses. I know Lord Durrington is interested in purchasing a share of the company.'

Alex tried to keep a sour look from appearing on his face. Durrington was the man who'd fathered him, but Alex detested him, and knew he'd never publicly acknowledge him as his father.

'I could, except for one thing.' He smiled broadly at his manager. 'I married Joanna Darsham, and my wife has recently presented me with a healthy son. So, you see, I have his future to prepare for. That future doesn't include Lord Durrington, believe me.'