



High Seas:
Book 1

A young woman's
desire to escape an
arranged marriage
sends her on an
adventure of a
lifetime!

THE CABIN BOY

Michele L. Hinton

High Seas: The Cabin Boy

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Dedication:

*This is dedicated to the first two people to read and enjoy my
rough manuscripts.*

*To Janet, one of my former Taekwondo students,
who said I was included among her favorite authors, and is
looking for me to publish her favorite of my works.*

&

*In memory of my aunt, Rose Marie Kuchenbrod.
If she didn't like it, she would tell me straight —
she loved everything I wrote.*

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the adventure of *High Seas: The Cabin Boy*. The true author of these pages is the woman who lived them, and I'm about to tell you her story. To begin with, I need to explain to you how I came across it.

I went to an estate auction with my husband. I don't really care for them, but he does and we were looking for some nautical items for a room I was redecorating in my house. Among the items he won the bid on were a sextant, an old diver's helmet and a sea trunk. The trunk was pretty rough looking. The handles were broken, the latch was missing and it had a small hole in it. However, it had character and it went cheap. The trunk was also filled with old books. The auctioneer had put them in there earlier when no one bid on them. I assume the owner just wanted to be rid of them. So we ended up with a bonus.

When we got home, I started to unload the trunk so I could repair it. As I looked at the books more closely, I found they were actually journals. They were quite old. I read some of the pages and found them to be very entertaining, so I put them in order the best I could. The dates on these journals were faded with age, and it was difficult to make most of them out. Some of the pages were smeared where the paper had gotten wet. On other pages, there were no dates or the pages were torn. But as far as I could figure out, they began somewhere in the 1760's. The earliest journals

were written by a child's hand. As they progressed, the handwriting improved.

The journals were written by Margaret Ann Wallingham, an English woman born on May 24, sometime in the 1750's, to the wealth and privilege of an aristocratic family. Her first journal was written when she was a child. The young girl wrote in one of her first entries that she hated keeping this journal. Writing down her thoughts, feelings and things she did was a requirement of her mother. She even wrote as one of her entries:

“Mother, if you want me to write things about myself, quit reading my journal!”

Her mother occasionally checked to make sure she was keeping it up. In later journals, she wrote that she was glad her mother encouraged her to keep one. They were a way to express her happy feelings, vent her frustrations as well as a way to remind herself *not* to repeat mistakes she'd made.

As I continued to read, I became more and more fascinated with the life she led. The journals were not only about her, but the history of her family. It was then I had a brainstorm. I wanted to write down her life — so here it is. I hope you enjoy her adventures as much as I did. I apologize to those people who like to read two page descriptions about women's clothing. Margaret only gave passing mention — so did I.

I'm picking up her story at age seventeen. Margaret had just received some upsetting news from her parents, Phillip and Clarice

Wallingham. Therefore, without further comment, I present for your enjoyment, *High Seas: The Cabin Boy*.

CHAPTER 1

“ARRANGEMENTS”

SLAM! The door closed with a bang. The vibration caused the sconces on the wall to shake, and a piece of porcelain went crashing to the floor. Margaret turned her head at the sound.

“Oh no,” she sighed. It was one of her favorite pieces in the collection of porcelain cats that lounged in their places on the shelf in different poses.

“Just like my life!” She dumped the broken pieces into the wastebasket in her room. “Ruined!”

There was a slight rapping on the door, and then Scotty, a young maid of the household, entered the room. Margaret considered her more of a friend than a servant. She was the daughter of the cook and about a year older than Margaret. The petite, brown haired girl’s real name was Heather Scott, but everyone called her Scotty — except for Margaret’s mother, of course.

Their friendship had been a secret over the years. If it had been found out, her parents would have discharged the girl. According to them, friendship with someone below your station in life was not done.

When Margaret turned fifteen, Scotty became her attendant which made their friendly association easier. However, she was never able to get the girl to call her anything else, but “Miss”. The

young maid was afraid she might make a slip of the tongue before her employers and feared being “sacked” as Scotty called it.

Margaret paced back and forth across the floor. “Scotty, they did it. They really did it! How could they do a thing like that to me? I’m their only daughter!”

“Now, now, settle yer’self, Miss, before ya’ wear a hole in the rug,” said Scotty.

Margaret sighed, walked to the window seat and sat down. “They signed my life away, Scotty. I am betrothed!”

It had started to be a wonderful morning for Margaret. She’d had an early morning ride on her horse, Shadow, and her dreaded piano lesson with Mrs. Albertson was canceled due to the woman’s bout with the gout. Margaret thought the woman absolutely bathed herself in perfume to the point of nauseating a person.

It was while enjoying a fencing lesson in the recreation room of the family estate that the butler entered to issue Margaret a summons. He coughed slightly to make his presence known. “Excuse me, Miss.”

“What is it — Charles?” Margaret replied in a breathless tone as she continued her swordplay.

“Your presence is requested in the library.”

Margaret called her match to a halt and turned toward the family butler. “By one or both?”

“Both, Miss.”

Margaret removed her mask and rolled her eyes. “Lord, have mercy!” What have I done this time?”

There was a ritual with her parents when they requested her presence. If her mother called her to the sitting room, it was for a spot of tea with her boorish friends, or for needlepoint and general conversation. If she was called to the library by just her father, it was for a game of chess. But — if she was called to the library by both — she was in trouble. But this time, for the life of her, she couldn’t think of what she’d done lately to irritate them.

Margaret turned to her instructor. “Thank you, Claude. The same time tomorrow?”

“As you wish.” He bowed slightly. “You’re much improved. I’d say you’d give Marcus a good challenge.”

“Only in my dreams.” She laughed as she tossed him her sword and mask.

Margaret loved fencing or just about any sporting activity for that matter. Her parents, especially her mother, disapproved of her ‘boyish’ activities as she called them. If it hadn’t been for her brother’s intervention on the issue of fencing lessons, she wouldn’t be having them today.

Marcus was older than her by five years. He could talk their parents into anything, and just about everything he wanted he got. Anything Margaret wanted she had to go to Marcus for help — unless it was some sort of traditionally feminine pursuit.

Margaret changed out of her fencing attire in the dressing chamber inside the recreation room. Walking through the house in

her knickers was strictly taboo. As she headed for the library, she racked her brain trying to figure out what she had done, but nothing could come to mind.

Upon arriving, she opened the door and there they were. Her father, Phillip Wallingham, was leaning against the mantle with pipe in hand. His brown hair had just a touch of grey at the temples. He was a good father and provider for his family, but whenever she'd asked him for something, he would always say, "Go ask your mother."

Her mother, Clarice Wallingham, was sitting in the chair next to him. Margaret always considered her mother to be quite lovely and always wished she'd inherited her blonde hair and blue eyes.

Margaret gathered the butterflies fluttering inside her, entered the room and quickly stated before they had a chance to chastise her, "Whatever I've done this time, let me apologize in advance, and I promise not to do it again — or I'll do better the next time."

"Paranoia doesn't suit you, my dear." Her father kept his amusement in check and raised his eyebrows. "Are you feeling guilty about something?"

Margaret shrugged. "No — not recently."

"Have a seat, Margaret. Your father and I have something important to discuss with you," said her mother.

Margaret was uneasy. This was the library and her parents were smiling. She knew this couldn't be good. The last time they summoned her like this was to convince her to attend the surprise birthday party of Aurora Sebastian, the daughter one of her father's

friends. She didn't like associating with her. Aurora was selfish, and probably the most spoiled girl in England, if not the whole of Europe.

"We want to talk to you about your future," her mother continued. "Your father and I feel that it's about time you take your place in society."

Margaret was rather perplexed. She was just introduced into society last year. It was one of the year's most lavish events. Her parents spared no expense. Since then, there was hardly a function that she hadn't attended; a ball here, a charity function there, boring teas with her mother's friends.

"How much more out in society can I be? If I'm not mistaken, you've only turned down one invitation this year," Margaret replied, "And that was only because it conflicted with Marcus's engagement party."

"Let me be blunt," her father answered. "It's high time you start to think about marriage for yourself. Your mother and I have made an arrangement..."

"Arrangement?" Margaret interrupted. She had this sinking feeling that she knew where this conversation was going. "What kind of an arrangement?"

"You know Nathaniel Braxton," her father continued. "He's expressed a sincere interest in you."

"I don't think I like the direction of this conversation, Father!" Margaret folded her arm.

“Margaret, dear,” her mother added, “You’re beginning to be talked about. A daughter of ours is not going to be labeled...” Her mother could barely utter the word she was about to speak. She put a handkerchief to her eye to catch a tear and continued. “...Labeled a spinster!”

“Spinster!” Margaret laughed. “Please, Mother. I’m just seventeen.”

“That’s our point,” her father said. “You should have started receiving gentlemen callers a year ago.”

“I did, Father,” Margaret replied.

“He doesn’t count,” her mother said in a huff. “Jeffrey Hawthorne is beneath you. He was just after you for your inheritance.”

“You didn’t know that! Just because his family isn’t wealthy, that doesn’t mean...”

“Don’t argue! That is neither here nor there,” interrupted her father. “The point is we’ve made an arrangement with Nathaniel. He’s had an eye on you for a while and approached me with a proposal.”

“Nathaniel Braxton — really, Father, he’s double my age.” Margaret’s outrage was growing.

“Consider yourself fortunate, young lady,” her mother replied. “He’s from one of the most influential families in England. He’s not only handsome, but one of the most eligible bachelors in London, and he’s asked for your hand.”

“But I don’t love him!” Margaret insisted. “I’ve never even associated with him beyond a few dances and brief conversations.”

By this time, Margaret had wished they’d called her into the library for something she’d done wrong. Now, her whole life was going to be punished!

“Love has nothing to do with it. That will come in time,” said her father. “You have to think about the respectable name you will want for your future children.”

“Children!” Margaret couldn’t believe her ears. Eventually, she wanted a husband and children, but right now both were the furthest thing from her mind. True, she hadn’t had any gentleman callers, and actually, Jeffrey Hawthorne was just a fencing partner. He was a friend of her brother’s who came to call a few times and then for some reason, her father forbade him to call unless it was to visit with Marcus.

“Needless to say, what is done — is done. I have accepted his proposal on your behalf. The two of you will need to be seen in public together. After a period of time, an engagement will be announced,” replied her father. “That’s our decision. Discussion closed.”

Margaret was livid. Her face turned as red as her long, curly hair and her abundance of freckles disappeared beneath the color.

“May I be excused to my room? I want to contemplate my life — or should I say the ending of it!” She tried her best to keep her temper in check.

Her father gave his permission ignoring her dramatics as she left. It was all Margaret could do to keep from slamming the door behind her. When she got to her room that is exactly what she did.

Scotty shook her head after hearing Margaret's account. "Tis' not fair, Miss, that they wed ya' to the likes of — him!"

Margaret thought Scotty's tone was somewhat coarse. The way she said, 'him', sounded like she knew something unsavory about Nathaniel.

Nathaniel Braxton was a well respected man of property and wealth. His generosity to the local orphanage was renown, as well as his charity to the poor at Christmas time. He seemed to be a true gentleman. He was a fairly handsome man of thirty-four years and still had a youthful look about him. She might even have fancied him, if he'd come to call in the usual manor. But this way! An arranged marriage! It just went against her nature. If she made mistakes in her life for her decision, she could deal with that. However, having to live with decisions that someone else made for her caused the hairs on the back of her neck tingle.

Margaret was curious about Scotty's disapproval. There was a look of hatred in her expression. She knew something about him that others didn't.

"What do you know, Scotty? Please tell me."

"I've been sworn ta' silence, Miss." She lowered her eyes to the floor.

“Scotty, this is my life we are discussing! If you care anything about me, you’ll tell me,” Margaret pleaded.

Scotty hesitated for a moment then sighed. “I do care, Miss. I’ll tell ya’, but this is ta’ go no further than you and me. Do ya’ swear on everything ya’ count as holy?”

“Cross my heart. Not a word, I promise!” Margaret raised one hand and put the other on her heart.

“Very well, Miss,” Scotty sighed. “Mr. Nathaniel has two faces, he does. He looks and acts one way on the outside, but on the inside he’s different. Me cousin worked for his family. A few bones rattle in his closet, don’t cha’ know! With his flowery words, he coaxed me cousin to his bed. He told her pretty words and gave her small gifts. Their relationship was a secret. No one knew ‘bout it. One day, me cousin tells him she was with child. She was happy ‘cause she thought he loved her as she loved him. But it weren’t so. He called her such names! Then he told her he was sendin’ her away. But he didn’t do it quiet like. It was a public affair, it was! The Lady Braxton, God rest her soul, had a tradition ta’ allow the servants of the house to throw a party for anyone of them that was gettin’ married. So Mr. Nathaniel had her lie. He had her tell everyone she was gettin’ married and leavin’ the county to be with her new husband. In return, he said he would make sure she and her child were taken care of. But if she ever come back to make claims on him or told a soul ‘bout it, he would cut her off without a farthing! The boy is now goin’ on three years. Surprisin’ ta’ say, the bugger has been true to his word. Me cousin

has a small cottage in the country, and he's provided her with a story that her husband died as to keep her with a good name."

Margaret's anger was turned to sorrow, not only for herself, but for Scotty's cousin.

"If only my parents knew," Margaret sighed. "They would think twice about what they have done."

"Please, Miss, ya' promised!" Scotty pleaded. "For me cousin's sake!"

"Don't worry. I'll keep my word. I just need to think of something to get out of my situation. If only Marcus was here. He could help me."

Marcus was married about a month ago to a wonderful girl named Rochelle Dupré. They'd gone to Paris to spend time visiting with her relatives and wasn't due back for two or three more months.

Margaret walked to her vanity and sat down to take stock of her looks in the mirror. She wasn't one to spend much time in front of it. She hadn't thought much about it, but her parents were right about one point — she'd had no suitors. Was it the red hair and freckles that she'd inherited from her great grandmother? She knew some people were superstitious about redheads. She stood about five-foot, four-inches tall. She didn't believe herself to be a raving beauty, but neither did she think of herself as ugly either. Maybe it was her almost flat chest? Her mother had the bodices of her dresses stuffed to make her appear slightly more enhanced in that area. That way she could hide what wasn't there.

As Margaret ponder her situation, and how she could get out of it, her mother came through the door and looked at Scotty.

“Heather...” She addressed the maid by her given name, “...have a bath drawn for my daughter at once, and be quick about it.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” She curtsied and left the room.

“Margaret, dear, you need to get ready,” said her mother.

“Ready for what?” Margaret huffed.

“Don’t take that tone with me, young lady! I’ll not tolerate your disrespectful attitude.”

“I apologize, Mother. I didn’t realize my tone was ill. I’m just still upset.”

“Be that as it may, what is done is done. Anyway, a messenger just delivered an invitation to dine at Braxton Manor tomorrow evening. Your husband-to-be wants us to join his other guests. So we have no time to dawdle. You need something appropriate to wear for the occasion.”

She opened the doors to Margaret’s wardrobe and scanned through her attire. “You’ve been seen in everything, and it wouldn’t do for the future Mrs. Braxton to be seen in these old rags. We’re going to the couturier.”

“Oh, please, Mother,” Margaret sighed, “I’ve got a headache. Besides, Gaston won’t be able to create a dress to your specifications on such short notice.”

Gaston’s Modern Fashions was her mother’s dress designer of choice.

“Nonsense! I’m his best customer. He makes a good income from my patronage. Besides, I commissioned three dresses two weeks ago for myself, and they are just about finished. I think one of them will be perfect for you. All he’ll have to do is make a few adjustments here and there. So hurry on now.”

“Very well, Mother.”

Arguing would have been pointless. Her mother left and Margaret resigned herself to an afternoon of being dressed and adorned with all the trimmings, just as a goose being served up for Christmas dinner.

CHAPTER 2

“THE BRAXTON’S”

The Braxton household was bustling with the task of getting the manor ready for the arrival of the guests that evening. Nathaniel was in the smoking lounge with his older brother, Robert, discussing his upcoming nuptials.

“It’s about time you get married, Nat. Maybe Mother will finally quit turning in her grave.” Robert Braxton clipped the end of his cigar. “But why such a young woman? Why not pick someone able to run your social calendar? And why her? All that red hair!” Robert shivered. “You know what they say about redheads, they don’t listen worth a damn. I have a feeling you, little brother, are going to have your hands full.”

Nathaniel puffed on his cigar and blew several smoke rings. “How about all that red hair. I can’t wait to run my fingers through it,” he said with a grin. “And I really don’t give a tinker’s damn whether she can run my social calendar or not. That’s what I pay the household manager for. I’m just getting married for regular sex. Besides, it’s about time I produce an heir to carry on the name.”

“Dare I remind you, you’ve sired three little bastards already,” Robert’s disappointment in his brother’s philandering rang in his voice. He cared about his brother, and basically Nathaniel was a good man. However, he was somewhat of a whoremonger.

“And that’s the point. They’re bastards. What would it look like if I’d married one of those young harlots?”

“And who was it that took their virginities in the first place?” Robert shot back.

“Then answer me this. If they were such innocent lambs, why did they willingly go to the wolf’s den? I never forced one of them. I guarantee you it was lust or hopes of upping their social status not love in their hearts.”

“You don’t know that for sure, Nat. I know how you operate. You could charm a turtle out of its shell.”

“Be that as it may, it wouldn’t do for our family image. I can see it now in the London Chronicle Headline: *Nathaniel Braxton Weds Chamber Maid.*” He then laughed. “Mother wouldn’t just turn in her grave; she’d climb out of it and paddle my ass!”

Robert couldn’t help but laugh at that. “You’re not wrong on that point.”

“Besides, Robby, old boy. If I’m going to marry, you know I like them young, and Miss Margaret Wallingham foots the bill. She’s just old enough for society to accept us as a proper couple, without me being labeled a lecherous cradle robber.” Nathaniel looked in the mirror over the mantle to make sure his blonde hair was still without any streaks of grey. “I still look good.”

“But why her? Granted, she has a certain charm, but you could have your choice of London’s most beautiful. They even go out of their way to throw themselves at you.”

“A couple of reasons,” he replied. “She’s not as pretentious as the others. I’ve only had brief conversations with her, but she still intrigues me. The second reason is her brother, Marcus.”

“Marcus?” Robert laughed. “What in the world has he got to do with it?”

Nathaniel puffed on his cigar. “I complimented him on his sister and asked him if she was seeing anyone. He told me to stay away from her.

He's a protective bastard when it comes to his little sister. He said I wasn't good enough." He laughed. "Can you imagine that? Me!"

Robert just shook his head at his brother's conceit and Nathaniel continued. "Unknowingly, Marcus has managed to put off just about every eligible young man in the city."

"How did he do that?"

Nathaniel had a devilish grin on his face. "With my help. In conversations with others, I've found out that he's said the same thing to a couple of other men interested in pursuing her. So, for the past year, I've made it my mission to discourage anyone who's had an interest in her. I subtly had words put in inquiring ears, that Marcus said they were not good enough for his sister."

"Why the hell did you do that?" Robert was aggravated by his brother's deed.

"Because no one tells me I can't have what I want," he huffed. "And I've decided I want Margaret. I've just made sure others lost interest."

"Nat, you're a cad!" Robert couldn't believe he made an important decision like this on such a silly premise. "Are you going to honor the vows you take once you have her?"

"You're always trying to be my conscience. And yes, I plan on keeping them. I'm tired of paying for my little mistakes. At least, if I beget anymore little mistakes, they won't be bastards." He then added with a grin, "Who knows, maybe I'll be as good a father as you."

Robert chuckled. "When pigs grow wings!"

They both laughed and then changed the subject to other estate matters.

Margaret sat quietly in the coach as it approached Braxton Manor. It was a beautiful evening. The air was warm and a slight breeze blew through the trees and night birds were singing their songs. However, all Margaret could think of was rain. In her mood, it should have been pouring rain in buckets; the wind should be uprooting trees and lightening striking the ground. Bats should be flapping their wings in the night and getting tangled in her mother's hair!

Her parents just kept chattering away about the attributes of Nathaniel Braxton, and what good fortune it was that he wanted their daughter. Margaret's mind, on the other hand, was cluttered with what Scotty had told her. All she wanted to do was blurt out what a philanderer he was. She also wondered if he would continue his flirtations with other women after their marriage – or even take a mistress!

“That would be too humiliating!” she mumbled.

“What would be humiliating, dear?” her mother asked.

Margaret just realized she'd spoken her thoughts aloud. “Oh, nothing.”

As the coach pulled up to the door, it seemed they were the first to arrive. Usually, her parents preferred to be fashionably late. The doorman greeted them cordially and announced their arrival.

“Welcome to my home,” Nathaniel said, as he shook her father's hand. “I'm glad you could come on such short notice, Phillip.”

“Thank you for inviting us,” Phillip replied.

Nathaniel turned to her mother. “Clarice, you look absolutely lovely this evening. That is a *Gaston* original you're wearing, is it not?”

“As a matter of fact, it is! How did you know?” Clarice was pleased and impressed.

“What else would you be wearing? No one else could do justice to your natural beauty.” He kissed her hand.

“You are too kind, sir.” Clarice was now certain they were right in their choice of a husband for their daughter.

Margaret rolled her eyes. She hoped her mother wasn’t so gullible as to fall for such obvious flattery.

Nathanial turned to her next, and she smiled at him politely.

“Margaret, my dear, I’m unworthy to stand in the light of your presence.” He bowed gracefully and kissed her hand also.

“I hope that light doesn’t blind you, sir,” she replied, forcing a smile. However, internally she felt like throwing up. She also noticed her mother’s disapproving glance at her sarcasm.

Nathanial just laughed. “Margaret, your wit is as charming as always.” He extended his arm, and she reluctantly took it.

After the pleasantries were exchanged, the other guests were beginning to arrive. It was just a small gathering of about fifty. An orchestra was playing softly in the background, while servants offered champagne to the guests until it was time to dine.

Most of the people Margaret knew, and those she didn’t, Nathanial introduced her as his special guest-of-honor.

About twenty of his guests were relatives; an assortment of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Those who live at the Manor were his older brother, Robert, his wife, Rose, and his younger brother, William, who was twelve years of age. Lord Albert Braxton, their father, was away visiting with friends in India.

The evening’s conversation was as usual for this type of gathering. Margaret was also relieved that nothing was said about the arrangement. She saw that Nathanial was cordial and witty with his guests and relations.

After a while, the chimes sounded that dinner was served. Throughout the meal, Margaret worried that the ball would drop and some sort of toast would be made on their behalf. To her relief, no announcements were made. When dinner ended, the men gathered in the billiard room to talk about affairs of state, and the women to the courtyard to enjoy the flora and fauna of the garden and the usual gossip.

Margaret was enjoying her conversations, when from the corner of her eye she saw two other eyes spying on her from the bushes. She excused herself from her from the woman she was talking with and approached the pair of eyes. They were attached to the smiling face of William, the younger brother. He was about her height and had the same blonde hair and blue eyes as both his brothers.

“Are you playing hide and seek?” Margaret asked.

“Yes — and you found me!” He grinned. “Would you care to walk with me in the garden?”

“It would be my honor, young sir,” Margaret said with a slight laugh.

She took his arm, and they walked down the lighted pathway of the garden.

“Is it true you’re going to marry, Nat?” William asked.

His question caught her off guard. “What makes you think that?”

“I hear things,” he replied.

“What kind of thing?” she inquired.

“I overheard bits and pieces when Nat was talking to Robert the other day. Your name and the word marry was all I heard before Rose caught me spying on them. So, is it true?”

Margaret was at a loss for words as how to answer the boy. However, before she could formulate an answer, he added, “I wish you wouldn’t.”

That statement caught her a little off guard and she couldn't help but giggle lightly. "And why not?"

William grinned. "Because I want you to marry me instead. I think you have pretty eyes."

Margaret laughed delightfully at the precocious young boy. "That's the nicest compliment I've ever had." She gave him a kiss on the forehead.

"Trying to steal her from me, Will?" Nathaniel asked, as he came up behind them.

William tried to sound serious. "I asked her first."

"So, I leave it to you, Miss Wallingham. You have your choice. Will it be me, or young William?" Nathaniel grinned.

"William, of course!" she replied, as she put her arm around the boy. "After all, he did actually ask me."

Nathaniel sighed. "My heart is crushed! There's nothing left for me to do but satisfy my honor. William, I challenge you to a duel. Draw your sword!"

"Stand back, my love!" After saying that, William couldn't help but giggle and pushed Margaret behind him.

Nathaniel pulled a wooden sword from behind his back, and William presented one from the scabbard at his side, and they began their mock battle for her affections. Margaret couldn't help but enjoy the spectacle, even though she tried hard not to. After a few moments, Nathaniel thrust the wooden sword between William's side and his arm pit.

"I am vanquished!" William said as he fell to the ground pretending death.

"Alas, poor William, I shall miss him," Nathaniel sighed. "But I must say, he was a lousy actor. Shakespeare would be appalled."

“I thought I was pretty good!” William exclaimed as he popped his head up.

“See what I mean? He’s supposed to be dead,” Nathaniel laughed and extended his hand to help his brother up. “Off with you, scamp!”

William bid them a good evening and disappeared from sight.

“Care to walk with me?” Nathaniel asked Margaret as he clasped his hands behind his back.

“Without a chaperon?” Margaret looked at him from the corner of her eye.

“Believe me, you may not see him, but rest assured William is there,” he replied. “You seemed uneasy at dinner this evening. Were you afraid I was going to shout to the world our intentions?”

“You’re very perceptive,” she replied as they walked.

“Believe me, my dear. I wouldn’t do that to you. I know you need time to get used to the idea of us being together.”

“That was quite a production the two of you put on,” she replied, avoiding the subject.

“I wanted you to feel more at ease before our talk. So I asked William to help me with this little play. Did it work?”

Margaret had to admit she was more relaxed. When Scotty said he had flowery words, she didn’t understate it.

“Do you want the truth?” she asked seriously.

“Always. I want nothing but the truth between us. That’s the best way to start a good relationship.”

“Yes, I was nervous and still am. I don’t really know you. Why me anyway?” she asked bluntly.

“Because you’re real. You don’t put on airs. For example, I watched you at dinner this evening. Most of the women took a small piece of prime

roast, barely enough to satisfy the appetite of a small mouse. You, on the other hand, took a piece that was larger than mine. I looked at the expression on some of the other women's faces. You could see the jealousy in their eyes. They envied your plate though custom demanded that they deny their taste buds."

"I was hungry," she shrugged.

"So were they. Believe me. I know they'll satisfy their appetites when they get home. And as for my family, they'll gorge themselves when the rest of the guests are gone."

Margaret knew that to be a fact, for her mother had admonished her in private about her plate. It wasn't considered lady-like to eat more than a few morsels. One didn't want others to think you were piggish.

"I want someone by my side that will make a difference in my life. You have a vibrant personality. I'm sure in time love for me will grow in your heart. You've already begun to saturate mine just by your presence."

Margaret thought his words were smooth and buttery. "You present yourself well, Nathaniel, but would you really want to marry someone who doesn't love you?"

"My parents had an arranged marriage that turned out well, until Mother passed on. My father was devoted to her, and she grew to love him. I'm sure our love will grow and develop as time goes on."

His words seemed sincere, and if she didn't keep her head about her, she could easily fall for this handsome devil's charm and wit. But, her resolve not to marry him was absolute. How could she marry a man who would ignore his own son, even if the child was a bastard?

"It's getting late. I think we should be going back," Margaret was starting to feel a bit nervous again.

“You’re quite right, my dear.” He then called out, “William! You can quit spying and join us.”

The boy jumped out of bushes and walked beside them. They discussed William’s play acting, and who was better at it, Nathaniel or him.

“I wasn’t acting when I said you had pretty eyes,” William said. “Doesn’t she, Nat?”

“Indeed she does,” Nathaniel replied. He took her hand and kissed it, before they emerged into the courtyard.

Margaret shook her head. “The both of you could charm a zebra from its stripes!”

“Charm runs in the family.” Nathaniel laughed inwardly, for those were almost the same words that Robert had used earlier.

The evening was drawing to a close. The guests were leaving and the relatives that were spending the night excused themselves to retire to the apartments in the mansion that had been made ready. Nathaniel bid the Wallingham’s good evening, and Margaret was relieved that the festivities were finally over as their coach headed for home.

She’d wished that Nathaniel had presented himself more as the ogre that Scotty had painted for her. But to the contrary, he was charming, witty and the perfect gentleman. She remembered the gleam in her mother’s eyes as she and the Braxton brothers emerged from the garden path together.

“Did you have a good time this evening, dear?” her mother asked.

“For the most part,” Margaret answered honestly. She then decided to taunt her. “The meal was excellent.”

“The less said about your behavior at dinner the better!” Clarice changed the subject. “I’ve received Nathaniel’s social schedule. We need to correlate it with our own.”

“Do we have to discuss it this evening?” Margaret sighed.

“She’s quite right, darling,” her father agreed. “We’ve overwhelmed her enough for today.”

“Oh, very well,” her mother huffed. “Tomorrow at tea.”

Margaret closed her eyes and listened to her parents talk about the evening’s events. All she wanted to do was get home and go to bed. Tomorrow was going to come soon enough.

The next morning found Margaret with her fencing instructor. After disarming her a second time, he called a halt to their practice.

Claude had been both her and her brother’s fencing instructor for years. He was not only her instructor, but her friend and confidant. He was about the same age as her father, born in France, but raised in England. He lived with his wife, Renee, in a cottage not far away. Their son was recently honored to be assigned to the Queen’s Guard.

“Your head and your heart are not in this room today. Where did you put them? Yesterday, there was anger in your foil, Today there is nothing,” said Claude.

Margaret walked over to a chair and flopped down. “My parents have arranged a marriage for me.”

“I would offer you my most hearty congratulations, but by the tone of your voice would condolences be in order?”

“I’ll take the condolences.” Margaret felt cheated. “My brother was allowed to pick his wife. Why can’t I choose my own husband, in my own time?”

“Such is the nature of the times and your status in the world.”

“It’s still not fair,” she replied. “What would you do if you were forced to marry someone you didn’t love?”

Claude grinned. “Is she rich?”

“I’m serious and you’re laughing at me,” Margaret huffed.

“I’m sorry. I was just trying to coax a smile.”

“It didn’t work.”

Claude thought for a moment. “Join the army?”

“I’m not Joan of Arc! You’re not helping.”

Claude chuckled. “I’m sorry for your dilemma, Margaret. It’s easy for me to consider what I would do. I’m a man. I could teach my craft anywhere. I could work anywhere I had a mind to. I could sign aboard a ship and work my way to another country and start over. But you, being a young woman, that’s a different story. Do you have any relatives you could go to who would be sympathetic to your situation?”

“Unfortunately, no. Marcus is the last of the line. Mother and Father had no siblings.”

“I’m afraid I’m not much help.”

“Thanks anyway for listening. You’re a good friend, as well as a fencing instructor, Claude.”

“You wouldn’t know it by today’s lesson. Maybe you’ll feel better by next week.”

“I hope so,” she sighed.

The chimes from the clock sounded that her lesson was over. Claude bid her adieu, and Margaret entered her dressing chamber to change out of her fencing garments. She thought about what he had said:

He's right! What can I do? Where could I go? I have no real skills, and if I did, who would hire me around here? I can't book passage to some other country; I've no financial resources of my own. Father pays for everything.

Margaret sighed as she exited her dressing chamber. Escaping this eventual marriage seemed impossible.

My only hope is for Marcus to come home and intervene!

At noon, Margaret joined her mother in the sitting room. She poured the tea and they nibbled on their biscuits as they discussed the current gossip from last evening. Next it was down to the main topic — the itinerary. The list was three pages long and covered a span of about six weeks. Some of the functions were for her and her parents to attend, and others were just for her and Nathaniel.

“Well, dear, your father went through Nathaniel’s schedule and compared it to his own before he left this morning. He marked the ones impossible for him to attend. Now we need to discuss a few conflicts of ours. I’ve marked them.” Her mother handed her the papers.

Margaret scanned the list. “No opera, we’re keeping the ballet.” She continued scanning. “You and Father can attend the fox hunt.”

“You! Don’t want to go on a fox hunt?” Her mother was surprised. “You’re giving up the chance to be on a horse?”

“Mother, the women’s croquet tournament is next weekend. I’m sure to win top prize. I’m at the top of my game.”

Her mother just shook her head. “You and your boyish sports!”

“I’ve heard the Queen even plays croquet,” Margaret replied smugly.

“Why do you think I allow you to play?” her mother came back.

Margaret continued scanning the list. “The Seafarer’s Ball is a must. Not the 25th anniversary party of Lord and Lady Huntington.”

“Margaret, the Braxton’s and the Huntington’s are long time friends,” her mother argued.

“Which is more important, Mother? A charitable function to raise funds for the widows and orphaned children of our naval seamen, or an anniversary party?”

“I agree.” Clarice was disappointed at having to turn down that invitation. She was anxious to meet Lady Huntington. She had hoped with that event she would manage to be included in the woman’s circle of friends.

The last statement on the list shocked Margaret, and she shot up out of her chair. “Oh, no! Mother, six weeks? I’m to be married in six weeks!” She crumpled the paper in her hand. “No! No! No! I refuse. That is too soon!”

“I know it’s a short time to plan a wedding...”

“That’s not the point!” Margaret interrupted as she paced the floor. “Marcus won’t be home yet. He’s not expected back for another two or three months yet.”

“As it was explained to me, Nathaniel booked passage to India to join his father. He wants you to go with him, and it wouldn’t be proper for you to go unless you went as his wife,” she explained.

“Then we’ll just wait until he comes back! Believe me, I won’t mind.”

“Dear, he’ll be gone for at least a year, if not longer.”

“So! I don’t care. I want to wait for Marcus comes home.”

This time her mother came to her feet. “That’s enough, Margaret! It’s high time you quit depending on your brother. You need to put away your boyish toys and ways and start thinking about a family of your own to care for. Your brother has continued with his life, and you need to do the same. One would think I’ve been raising another son instead of a daughter. It’s time to grow up!”

“But Mother!” Margaret pleaded.

“No buts!” Her mother was adamant. “Now, go on about your day. Tomorrow we’re going to be busy making plans, and I’ll hear no more complaints. We have no time to waste. So anything you have planned for tomorrow — cancel!” Her mother left the room.

Margaret flopped down into the chair. A tear unexpectedly ran down her cheek, and she quickly wiped it away. “I’m not going to cry!” she said to herself. She hated crying. She thought about what her mother said, and she was right about one point. She did depend on Marcus to fight her battles for her. She had counted on him to help her with this situation, but he wasn’t going to be here. She had to deal with this situation by herself. But what could she do?

Nathanial and Robert Braxton retired to the billiard room after dinner for a game of pocket billiards.

“Five ball in the corner pocket,” called Nathanial. He made his shot.

“I don’t know if I like this style of billiards,” Robert said. “I like the traditional table without the pockets.” He watched him sink another ball.

“Only because I beat your ass this way.” He missed his next shot.

Robert took his shot, knocking in both his ball and the cue ball.

“Damn!”

Nathanial laughed. “I rest my case!”

Just then the butler came into the room. “Excuse me sir, a messenger has just delivered this.”

Nathanial opened the envelope.

“Who’s it from?” Robert asked.

“The Wallingham’s. It’s the schedule changes.” He looked down the list. “Hmmm...ballet instead of the opera.”

Robert laughed. “Are you going?”

“I suppose.”

“I thought you said you wouldn’t be caught dead at the ballet?”

“I guess concessions have to be made — for now,” Nathanial replied. “What about you and Rose joining us?”

“Oh, no! And don’t you tell her either. She’s been after me for years to attend the ballet with her.”

Nathanial continued down the list. “Margaret’s not coming to the fox hunt next weekend. She has a croquet tournament. However, her parents will attend. That spoils my plans.”

“What kind of plans?”

“I was going to announce our intentions to be wed at that time,” Nathanial replied.

“You’re moving a little fast, are you not?”

“I have my reasons.” Nathanial continued down the list. “Seafarer’s Ball. It’s the same night as the Huntington’s anniversary party.”

“Which are you attending?”

“The Seafarer’s Ball,” he sighed.

Robert smiled. “A harness around your neck already, brother?”

“As I said — concessions.” As he continued to the end of the list, he smiled. “Good! No objections.”

“Objections to what?”

“Robert, in six weeks time, you’re going to have a sister-in-law.”

“Six weeks! You’re not in a hurry are you?”

“I want her wed and in my bed before her meddlesome brother comes home.”

“So how did you convince them to prepare a wedding so quickly?”

“I told her mother that I was going to join Father in India in about six weeks, and I wanted Margaret to join me as my wife.”

“When did you decide to go to India?”

“When I had the list prepared.” Nathaniel grinned. “I wanted to see what their reaction was before I did book passage.”

“What if they’d said no?”

“I had faith in Clarice Wallingham. I know her type. She wants nothing but the best, so why settle for anything but the best for her daughter? If we didn’t marry before I went to India, she would figure I would lose interest and marry someone else.”

“And what about Margaret’s father, Phillip?”

“Now, he’s a man with a harness around his neck! He follows where ever Clarice leads. The man may be wise in the ways of the world of business, but when it comes to his wife and household, she rules the roost.”

“And what makes you think Margaret won’t have the same control over you?”

“As I told you before, I just want a permanent bed partner, and someone to bare my legitimate children. Other than that, I don’t care one way or the other what she does.”

“Nat, you may be my brother, but sometime you can be a real ass!”

“I don’t think I’m being an ass. On the contrary, what other man would let his wife do what they wanted to do? I’ll do what I want — she can do what she wants. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, I suppose. It just doesn’t sound right. Something’s missing in a relationship like that.”

“If you’re talking about love, to me it’s overrated. I’ll give her all the love she could ever want between the sheets.” Nathaniel took his next shot and missed. “It’s your turn.”

“I concede!” Robert hung up his stick.

“Why?”

“I’ve decided to ask my wife if she wants to attend the ballet with me.”

“I thought you said you didn’t want to go?” Nathaniel was surprised.

“Because, brother, I *do* love my wife!” Robert stormed out of the room.

Nathaniel shrugged and finished the table.