



Michele L. Hinton

High Seas: Book 2

Is Margaret alive or
dead? It's up to Todd
to uncover the truth.

*A Matter
of Blood*

High Seas: A Matter of Blood

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INTRODUCTION

*H*igh Seas: *A Matter of Blood* picks up where the first book, *High Seas: The Cabin Boy*, leaves off. If you read the first book, you know that the story I'm bringing you comes from the journals I found in an old sea trunk written by Margaret Ann Wallingham. From the first book, you learned she married Alec Mitchell, a man known world-wide as the Pepper King of India, before he was murdered.

Margaret's journals were not the only records I found in that old trunk. There were ship's logs, personal writings of Todd Withers, captain the Neptune's Daughter, as well as the journals of Drake Mitchell, Margaret's stepson. Pressed between the pages of these diaries I found old legal documents, news clippings, invitations and letters.

Bringing you this part of her story was rather difficult to piece together, for I had to glean information from all these sources. In the introduction of the first book you learned Margaret opposed keeping a journal when she was a child, so you may wonder why she had her stepson keep one? This is one of the entries I found on the subject from her journal:

I tucked Drake into his bunk this evening. It has now been two months since his father's passing. We both still miss Alec. Drake expressed a fear that he would forget things about his father as he had his mother. I suggested that he start keeping a journal and write down all the things he wanted to remember about them.

I have to laugh when I remember my mother forcing me to keep a journal of my own. I detested the idea when I was a child. However, Drake thought my suggestion a wonderful idea, especially when I told him that a good ship's captain always keeps a daily log. We start work on his journal tomorrow. Even though Drake is a bright, intelligent boy, he, as all other boys would rather play than study. I believe this will also be a good way to disguise his studies, making it enjoyable

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for him.

Drake started his first journal at age seven and continued the practice throughout his lifetime. Not only were his experiences as a child adventurous to say the least, his adult life was as well — but that's another story.

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If it's been a while since you've read *High Seas: The Cabin Boy*, I'll recap that adventure for you. If you've just finished reading the first book, you might want to skip the following summary and go on to the first chapter of: *High Seas: A Matter of Blood*.

SUMMARY

HIGH SEAS: THE CABIN BOY

I began Margaret's story in her seventeenth year. She was a red-headed, high-spirited, British girl, born to the wealth and privilege of an aristocratic family during the 1750's (Exact date due to the age and condition of the pages was an obstacle). Her parents, Phillip and Clarice Wallingham, arranged a marriage for her to Nathaniel Braxton, son of an English Lord. Margaret decided she wasn't going to go through with the arrangements, so with the help her maid, Scotty, her fencing instructor, Claude, and Nathaniel's twelve year old brother, William, she faked her own kidnapping.

As a means of escape, Claude and William convinced her she could easily pass as a thirteen-year-old boy, and could be hired aboard a ship. After a haircut and the binding of her very small breasts, her transformation was complete. She took the name Marcus Allen, after her brother's first and middle name. She was known to all as Marc.

Though her disguise was successful, getting hired proved to be painful when a young bully pushed his way to the front of the line and force a fight with her. She defended herself admirably, but not without receiving a black-eye as a reward. The fight was broken up by officials and the bully was made to leave the dock. Margaret was also about to be ousted, when a burly man named Pete Smithers, a watch commander for the ship, Neptune's Daughter, interceded and helped her acquire the position of cabin boy aboard his ship. At first, she found life aboard the ship taxing on her small frame with the loading and unloading of cargo and sometimes tedious with its daily routine. However, she persevered acquiring the blisters and sore muscles to prove it.

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On their first day out, the ship's surgeon, Dr. Ridenhour, or Doc as he was called, discovered her true nature. After a convincing argument, he decided to keep her secret and became her friend and confidant. He also teased her relentlessly.

Things went well for Margaret until the announcement that the shipping company they worked for was holding their biennial boxing tournament. When the only man qualified to fight in his weight-class was injured, the crew made life aboard the ship more difficult for Margaret, as they tried to coerce her into taking his place. After several horrid tricks played on her by the crew, her resolve was broken, and she agreed to fight. The crew rallied behind their cabin boy and put her through an extensive training regiment. She wins her division.

Margaret turned eighteen the day after the tournament (fourteen as far as the crew was concern), and her shipmates celebrated her birthday. She ended up getting drunk on the rum cake baked by Orvil, the ship's cook. In her drunken state, she had a seahorse tattooed on her arm. As Pete Smithers carries their drunken cabin boy back to the ship, she unwittingly reveals her true nature to him and he takes her to the ship's doctor. Doc convinces him to tell no one — not even her that he knows.

Things go on as normal until she's almost strangled by a mysterious thief among the passengers they're carrying. Margaret managed to stab him with her knife, but he got away in the dark. When the ship docked, they discovered that the heavily veiled woman traveling with them was actually a man —and their thief.

With her daily contact with Captain Todd Withers, Margaret started falling in love with him. The captain also grew fond of who he thought was his boy and asked Marc if he'd like to become his ward. Margaret had told everyone that her parents had died, and she was orphaned.

Problems continue when the Neptune's Daughter encountered a storm at sea. They weathered the storm but the ship was severely damaged. The captain was also injured. Doc told Margaret that he needed warmth to help break his fever or he might die. He suggested body heat. Swallowing her moral code, Margaret got into bed with the captain, who's delirious with fever. Both of their body temperatures rise, but before her virginity was sacrificed, she hit him over the head with a metal pan and knocked him out.

A French ship came upon the ailing Neptune's Daughter. They

need of a doctor. Jordan L'Orange, daughter of Capitaine Jon-Pierre L'Orange, of the Antoinette, needed surgery. Jordan discovered Margaret's true gender and decided to kidnap her to enlist her aid in making the man that she loves jealous. Margaret was shocked to learn that her abductors were actually pirates and for her own self-preservation she's temporarily forced to join them. When Jordan's goal was accomplished, and she married the man she loved, they dropped Margaret off in Pondicherry, India.

Stranded in Pondicherry, Margaret, still pretending to be a boy, is hired by a widower, Alec Mitchell, to educate his young son, Drake, to speak proper English. Alec was a wealth owner of a pepper plantation. In the world of business, Alec was known as the Pepper King of India.

Things go well for Margaret. She's content in her role as Drake's tutor, until Alec walked in on her finishing a bath. Her true gender is then — disrobed. A special relationship developed between them, but Alec was a dying man. He asked Margaret to marry him and become Drake's legal guardian and custodian of his massive trust. He wanted to protect both his son and his son's inheritance from his greedy brother, Lawrence Mitchell.

Though Margaret still had feelings for her Captain, she also had affection for Alec and loved Drake dearly. She agreed to the marriage and, for awhile, her life was content. However, Alec's pain worsened and walking became difficult. But before his illness could take him, Alec is shot protecting his son, while Margaret defended herself from being raped by Judd Brickerman, the foreman Alec had discharged. Margaret killed Brickerman with a knife she had hidden on her person, but Alec died from his injuries.

Margaret and her adopted son leave Pondicherry and head back to England on the Arrow Star. Their ship is attacked by the notorious pirate ship, Tarantula. Since fighting in a dress was awkward, Margaret again disguised herself as Marc to better defend their lives.

The Neptune's Daughter came to the aid of the Arrow Star. After reading a note left to Captain Todd Withers by Jordan, he learned his cabin boy's secret and set sail to Pondicherry to rescue her after his ship was repaired.

The Tarantula is defeated and sunk. Margaret is reunited with her captain, the crew and her brother, Marcus. With some extensive investigation, Marcus had discovered her whereabouts after reading

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the note Margaret had left for him about her faked kidnapping.

Now that I have brought you up to speed, I give you, *High Seas: A Matter of Blood*.

Important Characters From High Seas: The Cabin Boy

Wallingham Household

Clarice Wallingham — Margaret's mother
Phillip Wallingham — Margaret's father
Marcus Wallingham — Margaret's brother

Braxton Household

Nathanial Braxton — Formerly engaged to Margaret
Robert Braxton — Nathanial's older brother
Rose Braxton — Robert's wife
William Braxton — Nathanial and Robert's younger brother

Crew of the Neptune's Daughter

Captain Todd Withers — The man Margaret loves
David Coruthers — Second in command
Pete Smithers — First Watch Commander
Doug Taggart — Second Watch Commander
Levi Dalton — Third Watch Commander
Dr. Jonas Ridenhour "Doc" — Ship's surgeon
Mr. Ben Richards — Ship's paymaster
Sam — Crew member
Charlie — Crew member
Justin — Crew member
Orvil Catrill — Ship's cook

From Pondicherry

Alec Mitchell — Margaret's deceased husband
Drake Mitchell — Margaret's stepson
Casper L'Orange — Governor-general of Pondicherry

Other Characters

Jackson Evers "Jax" — Cabin boy of the Arrow Star
Jon-Pierre L'Orange — Captain of the Antoinette
Jordan L'Orange — The Capitaine's Daughter
Phillip Jacard — Husband to Jordan
Laura Sarandon — Captain Todd Withers' former fiancée
Jessica Brighton — Todd's sister
Sir Chester Brighton — Jessica's husband
Sarah Jacobson — Todd and Jessica's older sister

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CHAPTER 1

London

“EXTRA! EXTRA! Read all about it! Alec Mitchell is dead!”
shouted the newsboy.

Lawrence Mitchell reined in his horse and turned his head toward the boy. *What did he say?*

“EXTRA! EXTRA! Pepper King of India murdered!” the boy shouted again.

“You!” Lawrence called. “Over here!”

The boy handed him a paper after accepting the coin and continued to peddle the word. “Get your *London Chronicle*! Alec Mitchell is...”

Lawrence looked at the bold headline and then read the article:

Alec Mitchell of Pondicherry, India’s largest pepper grower, was killed by Judd Brickerman, a former employee of Mitchell’s. Mitchell is survived by his wife, Margaret, and son, Drake. Brickerman was killed by the Mitchell’s coachman. Wife and son expected to return to London. Margaret Mitchell, daughter of Phillip and Clarice Wallingham, of London, was just recently married to....

Lawrence stopped reading at that point, put the paper in his coat pocket and galloped home as fast as his horse could carry him. Upon his arrival, he jumped off his sweating mount and ran into the house.

“Livie!” he shouted. “Olivia! Where the bloody hell are you?”

Olivia Mitchell came out of the bedroom at the top of the stairs and looked over the railing. “I’m doing what I normally do on Wednesday’s. I’m changing the bed linens!” She brushed a strand of hair away from her eyes. “What’s all the excitement?”

“He’s dead! Alec is dead!”

“Oh no, poor Alec!” Olivia quickly came down the steps. “And

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he was just recently married. I'm sorry for your loss, Lawrence. When did it happen?"

Lawrence pulled the paper out of his pocket. Olivia couldn't read, so he read it to her.

"How horrible!" Olivia wiped a tear from her eye. She had always liked Alec.

"Woman..." Lawrence shook his head at his dim-witted wife. "... don't you know what this means? We're going to be rich! There's no telling how much Alec's estate is worth. But I do know it's a bloody fortune!"

Olivia planted her fists on her hips. "Some brother you are. Alec is dead, and you're happy about it! He was a good and decent man."

"Ha! If he was so good, why didn't he share his wealth with me?" Lawrence argued.

"You're forgetting, my dear husband, he saved our house from your debt collectors! If it hadn't been for him, you'd be rotting in debtors prison, and me and our son would have been sold into indentured servitude to pay the debts."

Lawrence frowned. "I said never to bring that subject up again. Besides — he was obligated to protect the family name."

"Reputation isn't what motivated him to help us." Olivia folded her arms and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Aren't you forgetting about his wife and son? Alec probably left everything to them."

Lawrence paced the floor in thought. "The woman he married was that Wallingham girl."

Olivia smiled. "She seemed to be a nice girl. I met her briefly at the Seafarer's Ball last year. She bought a quilt I made."

Olivia made a few quilts every year for the charity auction held during the Seafarer's Ball. Her brother was killed in service of the Royal Navy, leaving a young daughter behind. She always felt it her duty to do her part. Her thoughts were brought back to her husband's question. "So what about her?"

"The point is she's young. She may not want to be tied down with a child that's not hers. Therefore, it's possible I could still get custody of Drake and control of his fortune. Besides — she's just a woman. What does she know about handling an estate that massive?"

Olivia shook her head. "She doesn't need to know. Mr. Wallingham

is a well-to-do businessman. He could advise her.”

“That doesn’t matter,” said Lawrence as he paced. “I’m sure the money is tied to the boy. If we get the boy, we get the money.”

Olivia saw a gleam in his eye. “I know that look, and I want no part of whatever you have in mind.”

She started to walk back to the stairway, but Lawrence grabbed her by the arm.

“Oh, yes you will! And so will that son of yours.” Lawrence glanced around. “And by the way, where is he?”

“He’s your son too!” she shouted. “It would be nice if you’d let him know you cared about him once in a while. Eric’s in school and won’t be home for another couple of hours.”

“Waste of time,” Lawrence huffed. “Eric is thirteen and it’s high time he started to earn his keep around here. That private school he goes to is too expensive.”

“Well, you aren’t the one paying for it, so you have no say. And as for the work around here, he does his share, unlike you!” Her tone was bitter.

Alec had also been Eric’s means of getting an education. When he came back to England to introduce his first wife, Silvia, Olivia secretly approached him and asked for aid. Lawrence barely acknowledged his son — much less pay for an education. Alec had set up a special trust, which he put in the hands of his solicitor, Tobias Underwood. That way Lawrence couldn’t touch the money or coerce her into giving it to him. That suited Olivia perfectly.

Lawrence just ignored her comment. “I’m going back to town to talk with Alec’s solicitor. I want to find out what he has to say about the matter.” He walked to the door, and before he exited, he turned back to his wife. “I won’t be home for dinner. In fact, I won’t be home until late, so don’t wait up for me.” He closed the door behind him.

Olivia rolled her eyes as she walked up the steps. “So what else is new,” she muttered, as she went back to the bedroom. She figured he was probably going to get drunk with some of his friends and then visit his mistress. “Better her than me!”

Olivia thought about her life with Lawrence. He used to be handsome, and his tall frame used to be well-defined and muscular. But over the past several years his chest dropped to his gut and his brown hair was thinning. She wouldn’t have minded that, if he was

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a good person. Now, she'd much rather sleep alone. To him, she was just a vessel to satisfy his urges when he wasn't with his mistress. She hated having him slobber over the top of her. He only satisfied his needs and left her wanting.

She sat down on the bed and sighed. Olivia wished she'd listened to her father about Lawrence when he told her that the man was lazy and good for nothing. However, she let a moment of passion get out of control, and she lost her virginity as well as becoming pregnant by him. What else could she do? She had to marry him. Now it was too late to leave him. She had been a child of her parents' old age. Both were now dead, and she had nowhere else to go. Lawrence had frittered away the modest inheritance her father left her in a matter of months.

Olivia walked to the mirror and looked at her facial features. She was only thirty-six, but she already looked past forty. Her brown hair had streaks of gray and her hands were rough from cleaning. Instead of having a maid, she was the maid in her own house. But at least she had a house that she loved and there was no debt on it.

When her father-in-law past away, Lawrence had inherited enough money for the three of them to live comfortably for many years — if Lawrence had also continued to work. For a while, they had a maid to do the cleaning and someone to cook. But her poor excuse of a husband quit his employer and gambled part of his money away. The other part he invested in get rich quick schemes which floundered. Alec tried to talk his older brother into going to India with him years ago and combine their inheritance. But Lawrence laughed and told him he had no head for business.

Olivia sighed and continued with her housework. "If only you had listened to your brother, Lawrence!" she exclaimed as she vigorously fluffed a pillow. She then thought about what Lawrence said before he left and she laughed out loud. "Who doesn't have a head for business? Ha! You surely don't. If you were in control, Drake's inheritance would be gone inside of a month!"

Arabian Sea – Same Day

Two weeks had passed since the Neptune's Daughter and the Arrow Star defeated the pirate ship, Tarantula, and sunk her. The

Neptune's Daughter was now on its way back to India to fulfill the shipping contract.

Margaret's shoulder wound from the battle was now healed well enough for Doc to pronounce her fit for duty. Her brother, Marcus, asked her into his quarters for a serious conversation.

"Margaret, I've never known you to be this stubborn! I'm beginning to believe it's true what they say about red heads." He paced floor of his cabin.

"Keep your voice down, Marcus," she scolded. "How many times do I have to remind you to call me Marc while we're on this ship?"

Marcus looked at his sister's short mop of curly red hair and shook his head. It used to be long and beautiful. Now, his green-eyed, freckle-faced sister looked more like a street urchin. She was dressed like most of the crew. Her breeches were baggy, the sleeves on her shirt were ragged, exposing that vulgar seahorse tattoo she sported on her arm and the vest she wore effectively covered up any sign that she had breasts. That surprised him, for he always thought she was well-endowed on top. He laughed when she told him that their mother had her dresses enhanced for just that appearance. Marcus walked to the porthole and looked out.

"Why do insist on continuing with this charade? You look like my brother instead of my sister."

She stood beside him and leaned against the wall. "Because the crew would treat me differently."

He faced her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Neither the Captain or I would let anything happen to you."

Margaret rolled her eyes. "I'm not worried that they would do me harm." She walked back to the chair and flopped down. "I have several friends on this ship..."

"Friends!" he interrupted "Ha! They tease you constantly. What kind of friends call you cake boy?" He shook his head. "What does that mean anyway?"

Margaret laughed. "It's a private joke."

She remembered her birthday. The crew had given her a party at a tavern called the Crow's Nest. She'd gotten drunk from Orvil's rum cake which was how she ended up with a tattoo. To this day, her memory was still vague about events of that night.

"If they were truly your friends, they won't change toward you,"

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Marcus pleaded.

“Ohhh, yes they would!” she insisted. “Mr. Coruthers has already started treating me differently. I was slacking on a task I was helping Charlie with other day. He gave Charlie a dressing down, but not me.”

“It’s a matter of quality — he knows who you are.”

“No — it’s a matter of gender. He knows I’m a woman. If I were a man, he would have jumped on me with both feet whether I was quality or not. Doug Taggart, one of the watch commanders, is a gentleman. I’ve seen Mr. Coruthers tongue lash him with a vengeance. So don’t tell me it’s quality where this ship is concerned. I know better.”

Marcus sat down beside her. “Very well, what about Drake? You have a responsibility toward him. What kind of example are you setting?”

She folded her arms. “Now you’re starting to sound like Mother!”

Marcus chuckled slightly. “You don’t have to be insulting.”

They both laughed and Margaret continued her defense. “I feel I’m being very responsible. Drake likes me as Marc, because I can play with him and teach him things a woman wouldn’t normally do.”

“Such as?”

“Fight with a sword, throw a knife...” she hesitated a moment then added, “...spit for distance.” She watched Marcus roll his eyes and continued. “When I’m dressed properly as his mother, he loves that too. So as I see it, he has the best of both worlds.”

“I still don’t like it.”

“Think about it, Marcus. I have to continue this charade. Say I did expose my true identity. How would it look in the eyes of society if it were known that I served on a ship of men for over a year? And then what about the boxing tournament I won in Liverpool? People would put two and two together.” She pointed to her tattoo. “Shall we forget about this? The men on this ship gossip just as much as women do.”

Marcus stood and threw his hands up in the air. “I give up!” He sighed. “I concede your points. If you want to swab decks and load heavy cargo, who am I to stop you.”

“Cheer up, Marcus. When we reach Dover, Marc is going to resign from the ship, and Margaret will come aboard to rejoin her son and brother for passage to London. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have duties.”

Marcus grinned. “Well, since it’s your intention to continue as a

servant aboard this ship...” He sat down in a chair and stretched out his leg. “...help me off with my boots. They are in need of a good polish.”

“Certainly, Mr. Wallingham. I’ll be happy to be of service. However, there’s a small fee for that type of personal service.”

“I saw that list.” He pretended outrage. “Piracy! Shear piracy!”

“Did I neglect to tell you that I was a member of a pirate’s crew for a while?” she said as she walked toward the door.

“Ohhh! Get out of here before I forget you’re my sister and turn you over my knee for a sound thrashing!”

She laughed as she closed the door behind her. Margaret loved her brother dearly, and he’d always been protective of her. His concern was appreciated, but her experiences over the past year had changed her. She was in control of her own destiny, and no one was going to dictate how she lived her life if she could help it.

Margaret went about her duties. She was tasked to mend canvas, so she gathered her materials and went to the bow to do her work and think. She thought about the conversation with her brother. Mr. Coruthers wasn’t the only one who’d changed toward her. The Captain had also. Before he found out she was a woman, when she brought him his coffee in the morning, he was half-awake, unshaven and without a shirt. Now, when she brought him his coffee, he was completely dressed, hair neat and he was clean-shaven. They used to carry on conversations with ease in the morning. Now they were strained.

She decided to do something about it. If they were going to explore a relationship, things had to get back to normal. She had a good idea how she was going to do it, but it would have to wait until tomorrow.

The next morning, Margaret woke earlier than normal. Quietly, she opened the door to the Captain’s quarters and peeked in. He was still asleep. She went in and took one of the chairs by the chess table and straddled it next his bed. She propped her chin on the back and stared at him. Herculean is how she thought about him. He was ruggedly-handsome, with his coal black hair and sun-bronzed, muscular form.

She closed her eyes for a moment and thought about the night of passion in his bed. It still embarrassed her to think about it. She had been in his bed to keep him warm and help rid him of the fever

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he suffered from. In his delirium, he started kissing her. She still felt badly about hitting him over the head with that metal pan. But it was a necessity. Kissing almost turned into something else.

Shaking herself from past memories, she opened her eyes and saw the Captain gone from his bed. She turned her head and met another pair of eyes staring into hers. The Captain was straddled across another chair beside her.

She smiled. “I must have dozed off.”

“I don’t remember giving you permission to enter my cabin.” He said hiding his own smile.

“I didn’t ask.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To talk.”

“About what?”

“Me.”

He grinned. “Sounds like a fascinating subject.”

“Why did you keep my secret from the crew?” she asked seriously.

“Just in case we found you. I didn’t want things to change for you. I don’t have the words to tell you how glad I am we did.”

He reached over to touch her cheek, but she grabbed his hand gentle and put it back down on the chair.

“Then why is it you’re treating me differently?”

Todd was puzzled. “How am I doing that?” He stood and returned his chair back by the chess table as did Margaret.

“This is how I am used to seeing you in the morning when I bring you coffee — bleary-eyed, half-dressed and hair mussed. How is that the same?”

“So you enjoy seeing half-naked men, do you?” He suppressed the urge to laugh.

Margaret put her hands on her hips. “That’s not the point!” Although in her thoughts, he was right. She loved looking at his body.

“You’re right, I admit it,” he sighed. “I guess I just wanted to present myself as a gentleman in your eyes.”

“Do you think I’m a lady?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Look at me.” She turned in a complete circle. “I’m dressed like the rest of your crew. So, if attire denotes whether you’re a lady or a gentleman, what does mine make me?”

“I see you’re point.” He put his hands on her shoulders. “I guess I just wanted to make things more comfortable for you. I still feel guilty about what I put you through aboard this ship.”

Margaret took his hands from her shoulders and held them. “You didn’t put me through anything. I could have left this ship anytime I wanted to. And I don’t think I’m any worse for the wear. In fact, I even think it’s prioritized my thinking about things.”

“Margaret, you amaze me.” He shook his head.

“Marc, if you please,” she grinned. “When I’m dressed like this, I’m your cabin boy who brings you coffee in the morning and tends to the other duties of this ship. I just had the same argument with my brother yesterday. When we get to Dover, Marc is going ashore to stay and Margaret is boarding to return to London with Drake.”

“Margaret, you’re a contradiction to the normal. I offer you comfort and you take hardship.”

“I’ve always had comfort and never really appreciated it, until I came aboard this ship. A little hardship makes you appreciate the comfort when it comes your way.”

“So, if I’m to treat you the same...” He plastered a stern look on his face, “...where the bloody hell is my coffee?”

“Aye, sir,” she replied. “I’ll be back shortly.” She headed toward the door and then turned around. “Oh, by the way, if you please, could you tell Mr. Coruthers to treat me the same as the other crew members also?”

“Aye, aye, Marc!” He saluted her. “Any other orders for the day?”

Margaret laughed. “No, that will be all — sir.”

Todd watched her leave then started to get ready for his day. He wanted to kiss her, but she subtly let him know she wasn’t ready yet. There was plenty of time — a lifetime, as a matter of fact. When she was ready for a relationship between them, she would let him know.

After Margaret’s talk with the Captain, things got back to normal. She tested Mr. Coruthers by slacking on an assigned duty, and he called her down for it. But when he passed her, he gave her a subtle wink. He was playing a part, but that was fine. The crew heard him chastise her and that’s what was important. If he showed her any favoritism the crew would notice, and it would put her in a bad way with them.

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Neptune's Daughter pulled into its first port of call at Bombay. There were only six ports they need to make stops at before heading back home. In conversation with Captain Devan Reid of the Arrow Star, they learned he'd already picked up the contracted cargo in the area around the Bay of Bengal just after the trade embargo with France was lifted. That meant they would be able to head for home at least two months sooner than expected.

Margaret was down by the loading dock with the crew on cargo duty. Marcus was leaning on the ship's rail watching and laughing at her.

"Having fun — Marc?" he shouted down to her.

She wiped the sweat from her brow and looked up. "You should try it — Mr. Wallingham! If I were a betting man, I'd bet you wouldn't last the day before collapsing."

"Is that a challenge — boy?"

"I believe it is — sir." She watched him take off his coat.

Sam nudged her in the ribs. "Are ya' daft, Marc! Talkin' to a passenger like that? It'll be yer' arse if Pete heard ya'."

"I know what I'm doing," she assured him.

Marcus came down the gangplank and stood beside her. So, what's your wager?"

Margaret thought for a moment. "I'll polish your boots for free for a month against that fancy vest you're wearing."

"Done!" Marcus put out his hand to shake on the deal.

Margaret felt mischievous, so she spat on her palm and gripped his hand. It was all she could do to hold back her laughter when she saw the horror expressed on her brother's face.

"What do I do first?" he asked.

"See Pete," she shrugged. "He's the watch commander in charge. I'll take you to him."

Margaret took her brother to Pete and explained the situation.

"Are ya' sure, Mr. Wallingham? It's gonna be a long day ta'day," Pete warned.

"I'm sure," Marcus replied.

"Suit yer'self. We've got plenty of help topside. I'll take ya' ta' Levi. He's in charge of the storage hold."

Pete took him below deck. He knew exactly who Mr. Wallingham was. Marc — was his sister. He'd heard Marc challenge her brother

and laughed inwardly. He could have left him on the dock to work in the fresh air, but decided to take him to the hold — the worst place to be on a day like today. Pete wanted to give his young friend all the advantage he could.

When they reached the hold, Pete told Levi that Mr. Wallingham was bored and wanted something to do. Levi shrugged then put him to work. But then Pete pulled Levi aside and whispered, “Work the ‘ell out of him, Levi. Marc bet ‘em ‘e wouldn’t last the day.”

Levi laughed. “If the man wants to work — work is what the gentleman will get.”

It was noon before they had a break in their day. The bell sounded for the noon meal. Marcus could barely get his legs to climb the ladder from the hold. When he reached the deck, he saw Margaret leaning against the rail with a grin on her face. He walked to the railing and stood beside her.

“Have fun, brother?” she said so as not to be heard. His hair was plastered to the side of his face and his clothing was drenched with sweat.

“No — as a matter of fact. My muscles have declared mutiny on me, and my blisters have blisters,” he replied, looking at his hands. He sniffed the air. “I think I smell worse than you do.”

Margaret laughed. That was exactly how she felt her first day aboard. “And the day isn’t over with yet.”

“Don’t remind me!” he exclaimed. “Aren’t you sore?”

“A little, but not much. It’s been a while since I’ve had cargo duty. But I’ve tried to keep my muscles in shape for it — just in case I came back to the ship.” She flexed the muscle in her arm. “You want to call off the challenge?”

“And have you show me up? I don’t think so. You’d never let me live it down.”

Charlie and Sam were watching Marc with Mr. Wallingham.

“Will ya’ look at those two,” said Charlie. “By the looks of ‘em, they could almost be brothers. They kind’a look alike.”

“Who knows,” Sam shrugged. “They might be. Maybe Marc’s mother was diddled by Mr. Wallingham’s father. Marc said his mother worked as a ladies maid.”

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“Could be,” Charlie replied. “Well, come on, I’m starved!”

Marcus made it through the day — but barely. He’d gained a new respect for his little sister, if that was what she had to endure on a daily basis. Though he won the wager, he called their bet a draw. He was exhausted. Instead of having dinner, he went to see Doc for some liniment and went straight to bed.