

HER MATCH, HER MATE, HER
MASTER



VANESSA BROOKS

BLUSHING BOOKS

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PROLOGUE



“Come back with a wife, son.”

John Foster sighed, exasperated. “We’ve discussed this, Mother; I have made my feelings clear upon the matter. Kiss me goodbye and wish me a safe voyage.” His mother reached up to hug his neck; he leaned down to embrace her. He loved his mother dearly but he found this matchmaking between her and his English business partner profoundly irritating. He knew what he wanted in a wife, and a spoiled, aristocratic English girl was not his expectation.

Since his father’s death two years ago, he’d taken over the reins of the business. His aristocratic business partner, Sir Edward Wainwright, had written to John’s mother explaining that he was ailing and looking to secure his daughter’s future. To this end, he’d begged her help in looking favourably upon a match to be made between his daughter Linnet and John. He’d also strongly intimated there would be financial advantage should such a match be realised. Whilst John was of an age and prosperity to take a wife, he was decidedly against this proposal, whatever the inducement.

His mother, a strong, determined woman, absolutely insisted

that he make the arduous journey to England to meet the young woman.

John had other plans. He favoured a home alliance with a colonial girl, a born and bred American woman. One who understood the rigours of this wild country, someone who loved this huge and beautiful continent as much as he did himself.

So he agreed to undertake the long passage across the sea back to the old world, England, in order to cement the ties with his father's old friend, Sir Edward, to please his mother and honour his father. But he had absolutely no intention of taking the Englishman's spoiled daughter to wife.

Aboard *The Tempest*, he stood on deck and watched as the ship slipped out from Boston harbour, through Cape Cod Bay, and out into the vast Atlantic Ocean, leaving the land of his birth far behind. On deck, he watched as the distant shoreline diminished until all that remained in sight were a line of clouds that marked the edge of his homeland. John remained at the ship's side until there was nothing left to look at but the sea. "I'll be back, Massachusetts," he avowed silently before turning away at last to seek his cabin and rest.

The arduous voyage took longer than he'd anticipated, mainly due to foul weather but, finally, after nine long weeks at sea, land was sighted, and he'd arrived in Devon, England.

CHAPTER 1



The household held its collective breath, waiting for the enraged young mistress to leave for her daily ride. Until that time came, there would be no peace for anyone—and the cause of her rage? The lady's father had informed her, that morning at breakfast, that the man he had chosen for her future husband was due to arrive on this very day. Since then, any of the household staff who had the misfortune to encounter the young mistress had suffered the outraged lash of her tongue. When she had finally slammed out of the house on her way to the stables, her father, Sir Edward Wainwright, emerged from his study, mopping his brow with his kerchief. He'd hidden himself there after imparting the momentous news that so upset his precious daughter.

The staff relaxed, breathing a communal sigh of relief as the girl was seen to gallop away from the house. Meanwhile, preparations continued for the arrival of the important guest. The finest sheets were placed on the bed, flowers arranged throughout the house, silver polished, and cakes and puddings baked in abundance. Despite all the fuss, the staff privately thought the young man's suit bound to fail. Rumour had it that the young mistress's heart was

engaged elsewhere. This gossip had spread from the mouth of one Lottie Brown, the young mistress Linnet's very own personal maid.

When word reached Lavenstock Hall that at long last, Sir Edward's ship, *The Tempest*, had docked at Plymouth, the coachman Davis, who'd been on standby for the past week, made haste to the port to fetch the honoured guest.

It was noted by the staff that Miss Linnet sought refuge from her irritation by taking a long gallop on her beloved horse, Pango.



JOHN FOSTER DISEMBARKED from his ship. Grateful to be ashore again, he climbed into the large, dark green coach that his English host had so courteously dispatched to fetch him, and promptly fell asleep.

When he awoke, John stretched his long legs until his joints cracked complainingly. He gave an all-encompassing yawn followed by a grateful sigh. It had been a rough voyage, and a long one. Normally, at this time of year, the trip from the American Colonies took about eight weeks, but high seas and bad weather had delayed the return to England by another six days. It was a tremendous relief to be ashore. He was not a man who took kindly to long periods of inactivity; an athletic fellow, he was a man who enjoyed physical hard work.

Half opening his eyes, he gazed sleepily out of the small carriage window. It was May in England, the hedgerows full of hawthorn blossom. The leaves on the trees were gently unfurling into soft greens and pale yellows, other trees were already in bud. The scented promise of a summer not far away hung sweet and heavy in the spring air. As the soft rolling green countryside of Devon rolled by, John relaxed, enjoying the sights and smells that only an English spring could offer. He found himself pondering upon the health of his host, his late father's dear school friend and former business partner.

When John had first inherited his father's half of the business, Sir Edward Wainwright had invited him to visit his country estate, Lavenstock Hall in Devon. John had been far too busy learning the ropes of his father's import business for the past couple of years to make time for the journey to Britain. Sir Edward was adamant that his girl and John would suit; both parents were keen to strengthen business ties with a family knot. John felt himself to be a brow-beaten man forced on an unnecessary and arduous journey simply to meet a chit of a girl he barely remembered. The last time he'd seen Linnet, she'd been a small, extremely spoilt, precocious young miss. John doubted the girl's suitability on the grounds that a gently raised English miss would not endure the rigours of the Colonies, let alone the arduous sea voyage required to reach the shores of the Americas.

The cumbersome carriage lumbered on, the rolling motion lulling him into a much needed nap. Eventually, they passed through the lodge gates at Lavenstock. The coach lurched while making the awkward turn and John's head snapped forward, rudely awakening him. Glancing blearily through the half opened window, he could see atop the brow of the hill a horse and rider who, upon seeing the coach, turned towards it, riding at breakneck speed down the slope of the hillside. He held his breath, admiring the fluid movement of horse and rider as they seemed to merge as one; the horse, a large black beast, raced along with its tail held high, the rider lying forward, almost flat over the horse's neck.

At first, he'd taken the rider as male due to the fact that this person rode astride but the length of russet hair that streamed out behind indicated this was a female. Her hair, glinting like a flame, caught in the sun's rays. John noticed her physical outline as she swung her horse around, and he perceived in profile the soft curves and shapely form of a woman. Could this possibly be the girl he had come to meet? Intrigued, he watched her disappear around the side of the hill and then he sat back in his seat, wide awake at last and feeling a strong sense of anticipation.

As the coach swept between rolling hills, a view of Lavenstock Hall emerged, its ancient, twisted chimneys standing high above the trees. The house was nestled in a small valley surrounded by parkland. The structure was originally built around Saxon times, hence the name 'Hall,' but different generations of Wainwrights' had added to the original building over the centuries. For the most part, the house was Elizabethan in style, the windows mainly diamond-shaped, set in stone mullion. The architectural mix worked well, the house had a mellow and welcoming appearance. At last, they drew up outside Lavenstock Hall, scattering gravel as the coachman bought the vehicle to a flourishing halt. John was met by Sir Edward Wainwright himself, beaming a jovial smile as he descended the Hall's wide shallow steps, arms flung wide in welcome. "John Foster, at long last, wonderful to see you, m'boy! How is your dear mother, keeping well, I trust?"

John stepped forward and held out his hand with a warm smile which lightened the dark severity of his rather harsh features. A tall man, he stood a head taller than his host. He silently assessed his host's health, studying him closely. He knew that his partner had suffered a seizure before Christmas, and although Sir Edward had written assuring them of his recovery, John and his mother were extremely concerned. It was partly this concern that had prompted John's final decision to agree to travel to England. He noted Sir Edward's skin held a yellowish tinge, his lips underneath the large white moustache showed the thinning of age, and his hazel eyes appeared to have a film across the surface. John frowned. It was a good thing he'd decided to visit.

"Something troubling you, m'boy?" Sir Edward asked his guest.

"No, sir, not at all. Mother is well, I thank you. She sends you her regards and trusts that your health has improved."

Sir Edward placed a friendly hand on John's shoulder. "I could be better, lad, but I tell you, leeches are the answer. A good bleed put me to rights. Upset m'daughter, I can tell you, she don't take to me being bled, disagrees with the practice. I think it's just a

case of a female's natural squeamishness. My wife was the same, don't you know. Now come along inside, you must be exhausted!"

Gravel crunched as the coach pulled slowly off to the coach yard situated at the back of the house. Two footmen hastened down the steps and gathered John's luggage. Sir Edward led the way into the house and John followed, answering his hosts questions regarding his journey as they went.

Arriving in the inner hall, they met a young woman coming through from the rear of the house. She wore a dark green riding habit, her skirts unusually split down the middle. John guessed that this must be the rider he'd seen from the coach. Sir Edward went to greet her. "Well met, Linnet, m'dear! You remember John Foster, do you not?"

Sir Edward Wainwright beamed cheerfully at his daughter. She drew herself up ramrod straight, her back rigid. The girl's haughty but beautiful face remained expressionless. She waited, one foot poised upon the bottom of the stair, ready to ascend. Casting a brief glance over John, she spoke directly to her father. "I was a child when last we met but I do vaguely recall him, Papa," she replied in a disinterested tone.

John stared, drinking in her good looks. Such an exquisitely lovely young woman, with a mass of titian hair, her build slender but full breasted. It was her eyes, however, that caught his attention; they were certainly her most striking feature, a clear translucent green, almond-shaped and almost uncannily cat-like. John took a step forward, determined the beauty should notice him.

"How do you do, Miss Wainwright?" he enquired politely.

She raked her gaze over him somewhat insolently before turning her back on him rudely. "Papa, I intend to bathe before dinner." She spun away and ran lightly up the stairs, disappearing from view.

John raised an eyebrow. Phew, she may be a rare beauty but no

one had taught her manners. Sir Edward Wainwright was florid with embarrassment.

“Sorry about that, John, my fault entirely, I’ve quite spoiled her, don’t you know! I expect you find that understandable now that you’ve see what a delectable beauty she is. Actually, she doesn’t mean to be ill-mannered. Well now, come along, how about a brandy, m’boy? Follow me.” He led the way into his comfortable library, where a fire burned cheerily in a large stone hearth, the yellow flames throwing reflections onto the many richly adorned books that lined the walls. The warm flickering light picked out the odd gleam of gold lettering on the books’ spines. After pouring out two goblets of brandy, Sir Edward gestured John toward two chairs placed invitingly either side of the welcoming fire. They sat in companionable silence, ruminating for a while, sipping the warming liquid and contemplating the flames.

Eventually, Sir Edward spoke, “So then, down to business. Have you any more information about that pirate rogue, Jacques?”

John shook his head. “Nothing. The man is like an eel—each time, he slips away without a trace. Still, we are lucky, we’ve not lost as much to him as others. George Hayden has been unlucky, a whole cargo of the finest silks and satins, gold leaf for braid and ribbon. He has lost a small fortune.”

Sir Edward reached up and scratched under his wig thoughtfully. “All that finery being worn by poxy French whores by now, I shouldn’t wonder. Godsdamn the man to hell and back! Those Frenchies don’t even drink tea! Wonder where our cargo ended up, eh?”

John laughed and shook his head. “We shall never know. He’ll have got a good price for it, of that you may be sure. Tea is worth almost as much as gold these days! Providing we don’t experience any more misfortunes of the kind, we can cope with the loss of one cargo. We were lucky not to lose the ship as well. Our next shipment due out is in three weeks, aboard *The Tempest*.”

Sir Edward rose to fetch the brandy decanter. John nodded his

assent to his host's enquiring gaze, holding out his goblet for a refill.

"We have a problem. This tea levy that Lord North has introduced—the colonists are enraged by what they see as an attempt by the English Government to redeem their losses from the war with France by exploiting them. So they are simply not buying our tea," John explained.

Sir Edward looked thoughtful. "Well, there was a great fuss made about the Declaratory Act in '66, after the Stamp Act was repealed in Parliament. That blew over. I tend to think this will lead to a temporary dip in relations with America, only a minor business setback, I am sure."

John shook his head pensively. "I wish I could share your confidence, sir, but the mood in Boston is very anti-English, especially now, with a garrison stationed in the town. Mother, however, continues to hold her lavish tea parties, she has managed so far, at least, to keep up our regular local sales."

Sir Edward chuckled. "Wonderful woman, your mother, has a head for business as sharp as a whip! Still, it wouldn't hurt to look at the possibility of carrying some other cargo, just in case this all gets out of hand. You are still adamant, I suppose, that we shouldn't touch on the slave market?"

John nodded, his face grim. "I will not be involved with trading in human misery, Sir Edward."

"Well, well, I tend to agree, but we might think about cloth, eh? The mills in the North of England are churning out some wonderful material, thanks to new machinery, and at a damned good price, too. We could turn a profit, I'd be bound. Leave that to me, I'll make enquiries. Now my boy, what do you think of my girl Linnet, a little beauty, eh?"

John sipped his brandy, pondering a careful reply. "She is certainly blessed with good looks. I wonder, though... will I have enough time to court her? She seemed a trifle frosty when we were introduced. Three weeks seems a very short time to woo a

reluctant bride. Have you told her of your intention to arrange a match for her?"

"Well, yes... I told her what a handsome fellow you were. I explained to her that you were my partner in business now that your father had passed on. I said it would be a splendid thing if the two of you made a match. Linnet's a little highly strung. It came as something of a shock to her that I was contemplating matrimony for her but I want to see her settled and financially secure. Should anything happen to me, she will be without a roof over head. Lavenstock is entailed down the male line, my second cousin inherits the title." Sir Edward refilled John's glass. "Just give her a few days, John. I know my girl, she'll come around. Why, I'd wager this time next week, you will have a ring on her finger."