

ANNE HERRIES

The Abducted Bride



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“How dare you take advantage of me, sir?”

Nicholas stepped back. She thought she saw a glimmer of laughter in his eyes, then it was gone, and his expression became harsh, withdrawn.

“I am sworn to one purpose, Mistress Stirling—to avenge the dishonor and murder of a gentle lady. Until then I can promise nothing.”

“I want no promise from you, sir,” Deborah replied. “I am already promised to Miguel Cortes.”

Nicholas stared at her. “You are a stubborn wench, mistress. I pray you will change your mind, lest I make you a widow before ever you are a wife.”

“You are a wicked rogue, sir!”

“I warn you, lady. If you set sail for Spain with this intent, you will never reach its shores. I take anything I can that rightly belongs to the Cortes family—and Miguel’s bride is no exception.”

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ANNE HERRIES

lives in Cambridge but spends part of the winter in Spain, where she and her husband stay in a pretty resort nestled amid the hills that run from Málaga to Gibraltar. Gazing over a sparkling blue ocean, watching the sunbeams dance like silver confetti on the restless waves, Anne loves to dream up her stories of laughter, tears and romantic lovers. She is the author of over thirty published novels.

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Chapter One

‘Pray look over there! Now, is he not a fine figure of a man?’ Mistress Sarah Palmer whispered to her cousin and giggled. She clutched at the other girl’s arm in her excitement. ‘Were he to offer for either of us, we should make haste to accept. Would you not agree?’

Deborah Ann, daughter of Sir Edward Stirling, glanced across the crowded gallery of the palace at Whitehall and frowned. The gentleman at whom her cousin had been gazing was indeed handsome, but to her mind he looked proud and arrogant, his dark brown eyes holding a haughty stare as they swept over the assembled courtiers.

‘Oh, Sarah,’ she said, a hint of laughter in her voice. ‘How can you speak so? I vow I should not be comfortable married to such a man. His countenance is so harsh. He looks as if he might be...’ Words failed her. ‘Why, marry, he might be anything. I do not know.’

‘I think he is a sea captain,’ Sarah replied, giving the object of her admiration a roguish smile. ‘He has a brownish look about his skin, as if he were often exposed to wind and weather.’

Deborah glanced again in the direction of the gentleman who had so captured her cousin’s interest. He was looking directly at Deborah and his dark eyes held a distinct gleam of mockery. She turned her head away at once. The wretched man! He need not imagine she was interested in him, for she was not—not one whit!

She cooled her cheeks with the large fan she carried, which was made out of chicken skin and painted with pastoral scenes. Her embroidered satin shoes were new and pinched her toes a little, and the elaborate dress she was wearing had begun to feel heavy and over-warm, for all she had thought it so fine when she chose it. Indeed, her pleasure in being at the Court of King James I was fast waning.

Deborah turned away from the mocking gaze of the stranger, glancing about her with feigned interest. Here, in the older wing of the palace, the gallery walls were thick stone, which kept out both the cold and the heat of the summer day. At night torches flared from iron sconces set at intervals about the large room, but for now the only light was from narrow windows in the thick walls. Here and there a silk tapestry covered the rough surface of the walls, lending colour and warmth to the sparsely furnished chamber, but the floor was flagged with thick stone tiles of black and white, its icy coldness sending a chill through her body.

How she wished they were back in her father’s pleasant manor house, with its wooden floors and the fresh scent of herbs replaced daily to keep the air sweet. Deborah would not have wasted such a lovely day inside, for her herb garden would have tempted her out into the sunshine.

She spied her father in conversation with a tall, thin gentleman; the other man had pale, pinched features and wore clothes of black and silver, his body hunched as if he felt the chill of the palace in his very bones. Seeing Sir Edward nod his head at her,

Deborah began to make her way towards them, here and there exchanging a pleasant word with various acquaintances as she passed.

She was fond of her father, and proud of his air of distinction, which marked him out as a man to be reckoned with. He, too, was thin but upright in his stance: a handsome man, though past his prime, his hair streaked with silver at the temples and his eyes a faded blue that held memories of his private sorrow.

Sir Edward had brought his daughter and her cousin to Court this very week, and this was their second attendance at His Majesty's promenade. Deborah had been a little disappointed at how swiftly the King had passed through the assembled ladies and gentlemen, noticing only a few and passing on without speaking to more than one or two favoured courtiers.

She had heard much talk of the King before she came to Court, and a great deal of it was not good; people spoke disparagingly of his temper, his obsession with witchcraft, his lifestyle and his love of hunting, but Deborah had thought him merely sad and a little ugly.

Sir Edward's purpose in bringing the two young women to Court was to find husbands for them both if possible, but Sarah Palmer in particular. Sarah had some three years earlier lost both parents to the plague. Fortunately, she had been from home at the time and thus escaped taking the terrible illness. When he had been informed of the terrible tragedy of his sister and brother-in-law's deaths, Sir Edward had gone immediately to fetch Sarah to his home, where she had since resided as friend and companion to his daughter.

Deborah Ann and Sarah were much of an age, being close to seventeen years and therefore well ready to be married. Sarah's parents had died before the arrangements could be made for her marriage, and Deborah's betrothed husband had been taken by a dread fever when but seventeen years himself.

Since the death of a young man of whom both he and Deborah had been fond, Sir Edward had been in no hurry to see his only child wed. Nor did he wish to have her marry out of her faith, for he and his dear lost wife had been devout Catholics. However, during the reign of the present king it had proved wise not to flaunt this fact to the world.

When Queen Bess was on the throne Sir Edward had been a frequent visitor to Court, for Gloriana tolerated those she liked no matter what their faith, and after her death he had retired to his home in the north of England.

James I was a man with whom it was possible to find favour if one was prepared to court it—and most were more than willing for the wealth such favours could bring.

Sir Edward did not court the King's favour, neither did he speak against him, preferring to mind his own business, living quietly on his estate and tending his land. He would not have come now to London had not the matter of his ward's marriage begun to weigh on his conscience. It was time both girls were wed, and if he found his house too empty after they had gone, he must look about him for a pleasant widow to warm his bed and tend his comforts. Yet he could not imagine his life without Deborah. He smiled as she approached.

'Father,' Deborah said, reaching his side at last. 'I grow weary. May we not go to our lodgings?'

'Ah, daughter.' Sir Edward looked at her with affection mingled with approval.

She was without doubt a beauty, though perhaps a little too slender. Her cousin was more comely, but her fair English rose looks were not as striking as Deborah's dark chestnut curls and green eyes. 'This is well met, my dear. I wished to introduce you to this gentleman. He asked if he might speak with you himself.'

'Mistress Stirling—your servant.' The gentleman spoke English with a heavy foreign accent as he bowed gracefully to her. 'I am the ambassador of Don Manola Cortes, a gentleman of high rank and the owner of fine vineyards in Spain.'

'I have done business with Señor Juan Sanchez for many years,' Sir Edward said to his daughter. 'Some twenty years ago I had the honour to call Don Manola my friend, and Señor Sanchez has brought me much good wine from his vineyards.'

'My master is a wealthy man,' Señor Sanchez went on with a smile for Deborah. 'He has a son, Mistress Stirling. A fine young man of just five and twenty. It has long been the Don's hope to see his son wed to a worthy young woman. I believe I may at last have found the lady he seeks—a lady of both birth and beauty.'

'Not so fast, señor,' Sir Edward interrupted with a smile of caution. 'My daughter and myself will listen to your flattering proposal. You shall be given a fair hearing, but I must know more of Don Manola's son. You will furnish us with a likeness of the gentleman if you please, and if my daughter favours the young man—and he her, of course—we may then discuss the details of a marriage contract.'

'You indulge Mistress Stirling,' Señor Sanchez replied. He seemed surprised and not altogether pleased. 'Our ways are more direct, I think. In Spain a father's wishes are paramount.'

'Many an Englishman would agree with you,' Sir Edward said, his eyes meeting the Spaniard's steadily. 'It is, of course, accepted that a daughter should marry where her father pleases, but Deborah Ann is precious to me. I shall not lightly give her to any man—no matter how wealthy or virtuous. Her happiness is also mine.'

'My father does truly indulge me,' Deborah said, her mouth soft with love as she looked at him. 'Yet my respect for his wishes is all the greater because of it, sir. I am confident that he wishes only my good, therefore my pleasure is to obey him in all things.'

'Not quite all,' Sir Edward murmured. 'You manage to have your way in many things, daughter.'

Deborah laughed, tossing her head and gazing mischievously up at him. 'But that is because you are so very kind to me, sir.'

Father and daughter smiled in perfect understanding. Both knew that the girl was capable of twisting the man around her little finger, but both also knew that their love and respect was mutual: neither would willingly distress or hurt the other.

'Your willingness to oblige your father is most pleasing, Mistress Stirling,' said Señor Sanchez. 'I return to Spain on the evening tide tomorrow and will carry news of your beauty and good character to my master.' He bowed low before Deborah and her father. 'If you wish it, I shall carry a letter from you to my master, sir. With fair winds I shall return in three weeks. I shall then be able to bring greetings from my master's son.'

'The letter will be ready in the morning. We wish you a safe voyage, señor. Do not neglect to bring Don Miguel's likeness,' warned Sir Edward with a smile for his daughter. 'All the ladies like a well-favoured man. Is that not so, Deborah?'

Señor Sanchez bowed once more and walked away.

‘He has always been honest with me in business,’ Sir Edward said to his daughter when the Spaniard had disappeared amongst the press of courtiers. ‘I have settled nothing, Deborah. If you should meet a suitable admirer you truly like and respect before Sanchez returns, I shall not force you to this marriage—nor yet if you should form a dislike for the idea. I would have you content in this as in all things, Deborah.’

‘You are always so good to me, dearest father,’ Deborah said, her hand on his arm. ‘I shall be guided by you. I know you wish only that I might be as happy with my husband as you and my mother were together.’

Sir Edward’s faded blue eyes clouded with sorrow. ‘Would that my dear Beth were here with us now. How proud she would be of her daughter.’ He sighed and touched Deborah’s cheek. ‘It cannot be. Now—did you say you wished to return to our lodgings?’

‘Yes, Father. May we, please? We have seen His Majesty’s procession. There is no reason to linger—and my shoes pinch.’ She did not add that she thought the King so ill favoured with his large eyes, thin beard and ungainly stature that she had found the sight of him progressing through his fawning courtiers less than inspiring.

Sir Edward laughed. ‘Uncomfortable shoes! A better reason could not be found. Where is your cousin?’

‘I left her in conversation with Mistress Goodleigh, but...oh, there she is. She seems to be talking to a gentleman.’

‘No gentleman, if rumour be truth,’ Sir Edward replied with a frown of disapproval. ‘That is the Marquis de Vere, a Frenchman by birth though his mother was an English gentlewoman—and he himself a privateer by all accounts. He preys on Spanish ships. Sanchez has complained of his actions to the King, but apparently his words fell upon deaf ears. His Majesty promised only that he would consider the matter.’

‘Surely His Majesty must listen to the Don’s complaints,’ Deborah Ann said. ‘We are not at war with Spain. Are not the prince and my lord Buckingham in Spain to treat for a marriage between the Spanish King’s daughter and Prince Charles?’

‘Indeed, it is so,’ Sir Edward agreed. It was the news that the negotiations for the Catholic marriage had seemed to go well that had encouraged him to venture to Court once more. ‘One would think His Majesty would rather hang de Vere than welcome him to Court—but it seems the rogue finds favour in the royal eyes.’

‘Why would that be, Father? The marquis is little better than the Algerian pirates who prey on our ships.’

‘Queen Elizabeth was wont to smile on such men,’ Sir Edward said with a little frown. ‘One could not blame her so much, for the might of Spain could have snatched the crown from her had our brave sailors not beaten off the great Armada the Spanish sent against her—but our present king should have no need to fear Spain.’

‘Then one must suppose His Majesty to have other reasons for his leniency.’

‘With a king it is always best to suppose nothing and be ever on one’s guard,’ Sir Edward replied. ‘Your cousin is alone now. Go to her and tell her we are almost ready to leave. There is someone else I must speak to for a moment and then we shall go.’

‘Yes, Father.’

Deborah began to walk towards the spot where she had last seen her cousin.

Where was Sarah? Oh, there she was! She had moved to the other side of the gallery. Changing her direction to catch up with her, Deborah was startled when a man stepped directly into her path.

‘Whither so fast?’ a deep, husky voice asked. Deborah caught the faint accent, which she realized must come from his having spent much of his life in France. ‘Why are you in such a hurry, mistress? You were like to knock me down in your haste.’

That was most unlikely! Deborah stared up into the wicked dark eyes of the Marquis de Vere and drew in her breath sharply. Close to, he was even larger than he had seemed from a distance. A powerful man with broad shoulders and strong thighs, his nearness was intimidating. His court dress was fashioned of black velvet slashed through with dusky gold braid, his doublet heavily sewn with jet bugles.

Unusually in these times he wore no beard, though a slight shadow could be discerned on his chin as if it were some hours since he had shaved. His hair was dark brown and waved thickly back from his brow, and he wore only a small ruff about his neck. Even in court clothes, which taken to excess could appear ridiculous on some, this man had the look of an adventurer.

‘It was you who impeded my progress, sir,’ Deborah replied, her head high, two spots of colour in her cheeks. ‘I pray you, allow me to pass. I wish to speak with my cousin.’

‘Ah, yes, the pretty Mistress Palmer,’ Nicholas Trevern, Marquis de Vere, murmured throatily. ‘A bold wench that one, and no better than she ought to be, I’ll vow.’

‘How dare you impugn the honour of my family?’ Deborah’s eyes flashed with anger. ‘If I were a man I would demand satisfaction, sir!’

‘I could afford you a deeper satisfaction as a wench, Mistress Stirling.’

The expression in his eyes coupled with the mockery in his voice shocked her. She knew that men were freer in their speech in town than she was accustomed to hearing in her father’s house, where she was always accorded the deepest respect, but this was outrageous. How dare he make such a ribald suggestion to her!

‘You are unwise to insult me, sir. My father has powerful friends.’

‘Indeed?’ Laughter danced in Nicholas’s eyes. ‘Would you have me hanged drawn and quartered for daring to tease you, mistress?’

‘I have no wish to listen to your teasing, sir.’

‘Have you not? Your cousin seemed amused.’

‘My cousin is young and perhaps something foolish.’

‘Of your own age, methinks?’ He made her an elegant leg. ‘Forgive me, mistress. I bow to your superior wisdom.’

‘You are pleased to mock me, sir.’

It was all Deborah could do not to stamp her foot. Oh, if she were but the son her father had hoped for and never had! She would teach this devil a lesson he would not soon forget.

‘One must mock at life,’ Nicholas went on before she could make up her mind how to deliver her set-down. ‘Too oft life plays its cruel jests on both the godly and ungodly alike. ’Tis as well to laugh in the face of fate as lie down beneath it. Yet I meant not to offend you, mistress. Go on your way in peace.’

He stood aside. Deborah swept past, the wide skirts of her sumptuous gown

swaying with indignation. It was as well for her peace of mind that she did not turn her head to look back, for the sheer delight and mischief in Nicholas's eyes would have added to her sense of frustration. How many times had she longed to be free of all the restrictions placed on a woman? How often she had wished herself a man, and never more so than now. Oh, that dreadful man should suffer if she but had a sword to run him through!

Deborah was no stranger to swordplay, or to a man's costume. Her father had indulged her in whims others might find strange. He had been amused to see her strut and playact in her role as a youth, and had delighted in her skill with the rapier.

'I vow I could wish for no finer son,' he had told her once when they had practised the art of fencing together and he found himself disarmed. 'But this must be our secret, Deborah, for the old tabbies would speak you ill if it were known you had behaved so immodestly.'

'I care naught for the spite of tabbies,' Deborah had replied confidently. 'But as you ask it, Father, I shall be discreet. What we enjoy in private shall remain so.'

'You are always my good daughter,' her father had teased, a smile curving his mouth. 'I must be on my guard for 'tis certain you will want something—a new gown, perhaps?'

'How should I want a new gown when I already have so many?' Deborah asked, then a little smile flickered in her green eyes—eyes that had caused many a young village lad to dream of her in vain. 'But there is one thing you might do for me—if you wish?'

'Of course, daughter. What is it now? Would you have me give more of my gold to master parson—or open my kitchens to every beggar in the whole of Northumbria?'

'It is just Mistress Donovan. She is a widow now, Father, with three small children. All I ask is that she may remain in her cottage until she can find a man to take her husband's place.'

'Of course, child. She is a comely good woman. I dare say a man can be found to wed her before I am entirely ruined by lack of rent or labour.'

'Oh, Father!'

Deborah had laughed at his gentle mockery of her good works. Yet she was not moved to laughter by the wicked teasing of the Marquis de Vere, though in her heart she could not find him guilty of malice. When he smiled he did not look so very harsh, but there was mettle in him. She thought that he might make a fearsome enemy, and a little chill ran down her spine. For a moment it was as if a dark cloud had passed over her and she was afraid of something, but of what she could not be sure. It was just a sense that her life of sweet content was about to change forever.

She shook her head as if to clear it of such thoughts. Sarah had turned her way and she lifted her hand to beckon her to her side.

'It is time we were leaving,' she said as her cousin came up to her. 'I have had enough of the Court for one day.'

'Oh, must we go?' Sarah dimpled as a young man smiled at her from across the crowded gallery. 'I have found our visit vastly amusing, have you not, cousin?'

'It is interesting to see so many gathered here in the hope of a smile or some notice from His Majesty,' Deborah replied. 'Though his appearance was so brief that most must have been disappointed.'

‘Oh, the King...’ Sarah pulled a laughing face. She was well aware that she had aroused the interest of more than one gentleman that day. ‘It is not His Majesty’s attentions that I care for, cousin.’

Deborah noticed the young man who was staring so hard in their direction and smiled inwardly as she saw the flush in Sarah’s cheeks.

‘Come, Sarah,’ she urged. ‘Master Henderson will find his way to our lodgings if he wishes to further his acquaintance with our family.’ So saying, she took her cousin’s arm and began firmly to steer her towards Sir Edward, who was now waiting for them.

The bold-eyed marquis seemed to have disappeared and Deborah was relieved that there would be no more encounters with such a wicked rogue. She wondered that he even dared to appear at Court, for if there were any justice His Majesty would surely hang the fellow.

‘What would ye have of me now, rogue?’ James I of England and VI of Scotland eyed the younger man with amusement. Disfigured by childhood weaknesses and birth defects, he liked to see charming, handsome faces about him and his partiality led to many complaints about his favourites.

‘Why, nothing, sir,’ replied Nicholas. The son of an English gentlewoman and a French nobleman, only a genuine liking for this man some called fool kept him at court. He had estates in France that needed his attention, but James had asked for him and he had come in answer to the summons. ‘I believe you had some need of me?’

‘Mayhap.’ The King frowned. He had to look up to this giant, who towered above most men at Court, and he disliked the crick in his neck it gave him. ‘Sit on that stool by me, laddie. I give ye the royal permission. Aye, I might have need of your services. This foolish venture of my son has cost me dearly, and I do not know what will become of it all in the end.’

‘You mean Prince Charles’s marriage to the Infanta of Spain? I thought it was Your Majesty’s own wish?’

‘Aye, I have thought it for the best. You know I do not want war. These miserly Englishmen will vote me no money for peace, let alone war. The marriage might have brought a lasting peace between our two countries, one that would go on when I am dead—yet I confess I am uneasy. Buckingham and my son went incognito to Spain, thereby placing themselves too securely in the hands of the Spaniards. ’Twas foolishness and against my orders—though you will keep that to yourself, Nicholas. I will not have *Baby* criticised by others. You hear me?’

‘Yes, sire. Nothing you confide in me goes beyond this chamber.’

‘Aye, I know it. I trust ye. The negotiations for the marriage go apace and all seems well—but I fear that I do not hear all that goes on in the council chambers of Spain. I have been forced to make concessions, though I do not like them—nor do they please these stiff-necked Englishmen. There are rumblings, laddie...rumblings. I cannot grant too much favour to Catholics or my crown may fall, but Spain would suck the last drop of blood from my poor old body.’

Nicholas nodded. He had heard rumours of the way Buckingham had conducted himself at the Spanish court, preening his feathers and generally giving himself airs. The Duke believed he was secure as James’s favourite, but there had been murmurs

against him and it was plain the King was anxious about what was happening behind the scenes.

‘Buckingham has perhaps been a little unwise,’ Nicholas said carefully. ‘Yet the good that may come of this marriage is perhaps worth the expenditure of your jewels, Majesty...which reminds me. I have a gift for you somewhere, sire—silver and gold from the New World.’

‘Treasure you stole from Don Manola, I’ll warrant.’ Humour sparkled in James’s eyes, a humour seldom seen by any outside the few he favoured with his confidence.

‘His ship was over-heavy in the water and like to sink,’ Nicholas replied, an answering gleam in his own eyes. ‘I did but relieve the captain of his burden and send him safe on his way. Besides, he had stolen the treasure from its rightful owners. I see no crime in robbing thieves, sire.’

‘The Don’s emissary would have me hang you,’ said James. ‘But though some would have it otherwise, I am not a fool.’

‘The wisest fool in Christendom,’ Nicholas murmured beneath his breath.

‘Your grandfather, Sir Nicholas Trevern, was a good friend to me at a time when it seemed my life might lie in the balance. During those dark days I was forced to suffer indignity and oppression, but a puppet in the hands of those who would rule in my stead—and though a young child, your mother was like a sister in her kindness to me,’ James went on. ‘For their sakes I would spare you did I not love you for your own.’

‘You are generous, sire.’

‘Whist, no such thing! At times I love too well and some take advantage of me, but never you. I want your loyalty, Nicholas. Few have your knowledge of the Spanish and their ships. I pray for peace, but this business troubles me and I sleep little. I suspect Spain of demanding too much and I fear some misunderstanding that will lead to war between us. They have long coveted our crown.’

‘I think you are wise to be cautious, sire. Queen Bess gave Spain a bloody nose and it has not been forgot.’

‘I know it,’ James sighed. ‘I would have *Baby* back home safely, Nicholas. I must take care and seem to acquiesce in all things until he returns—with or without his bride.’

James was a man who loved good company, feasting and hunting. Nicholas thought he might have lived content had he been born a country gentleman. The flattery of others had exploited a weakness in the King, but the man was sound.

‘You know you have my loyalty. I choose to live in France, but the land of my mother’s birth is dear to me—and I would serve you if I can.’

‘Bring me word,’ James said, ‘if you hear anything of importance. I would be warned of any ill news before it is too late.’

‘My ship is being provisioned and made ready,’ Nicholas replied. ‘I sail for Spanish waters within three days and will return ere long. Be assured that I shall glean what news I can—but is it certain that things go ill with the contracts?’

‘I have no firm confirmation yet, merely whispers and innuendo,’ James replied. ‘But I feel something dark and heavy in my heart. Now, away with you, laddie. The night is young. Have you no wench waiting for you?’

Nicholas laughed. ‘Why should I have but one when there are so many beautiful young women in London?’

‘They say you have only to glance at a wench to have her itching to warm your bed,’ said James, chuckling. ‘I vow it would be a shame to disappoint the lasses. Away now and do your duty.’

Nicholas bowed and walked respectfully from the King’s apartments. His smile faded as he left the palace and began to make his way towards the river, where he intended to summon a boatman. He was lodging at an inn down river and had promised to meet with Henri Moreau, his friend and able lieutenant. They had much to discuss before they put to sea once more.

Attacking Don Manola’s ships afforded Nicholas little satisfaction these days. After the death of Isabella Rodrigues, to whom Nicholas had been betrothed, his first thought had been to take revenge on her murderer. Now, almost two years on, he still had not managed to take Miguel Cortes prisoner. He had been told that the Don’s son cowered at home, afraid to put to sea lest *Le Diable* should take his ship and his miserable life be forfeit.

Nicholas had cursed the man who had raped and killed the beautiful young woman because she had refused him in favour of another. What woman would willingly become the bride of that monster?

Miguel Cortes might have the face of an angel, but his soul was twisted and evil, as black as hell. Nicholas knew that the Don’s men called him *Le Diable*, because he outran and out-fought their ships with ease, but he had never taken life wantonly, never tortured men or animals for pleasure, sparing his enemies whenever possible: there was only one man he wished to kill!

Nicholas had never taken an unwilling woman, though there had been wenches enough to warm his bed. Of late, though, Nicholas had found little satisfaction in pleasuring tavern wenches. His feelings for the lovely Isabella had been those of a gentleman for a woman he admired and respected. He had liked and cared for her, believing that such a virtuous woman would teach him the gentle ways of love.

It was Isabella’s very vulnerability that hurt Nicholas so much—that such a sweet child should have suffered so terribly at the hands of a monster! He had been told that she had screamed and begged for mercy on her knees before she died, but none had been granted.

Miguel Cortes deserved to die. Justice demanded that he pay the penalty for his dread crime! And die he should. Nicholas had sworn it and he would find a way—even if he had to pry the sniveling coward from his hiding place. Isabella’s pleas should not go unanswered.

Unbidden, on the scent of summer flowers, the memory of a young woman’s face came to Nicholas’s mind. He smiled as he recalled the spirited way she had parried his teasing. It had been obvious that she was unused to Court manners, which could be coarse and bawdy, for most women attending that day would have responded very differently to his flirting.

The King had spoken truly when he said Nicholas had only to look at the ladies of the Court to have them panting for his loving.

He was not sure why he had found Mistress Deborah Stirling so intriguing. She was beautiful, but so was her cousin Sarah Palmer. It was the obliging Mistress Palmer who had furnished him with the details of her cousin’s name and person.

Mistress Stirling was in the market for a husband. Her father was a gentleman of

whom little was known at Court, though it was said he owned a goodly estate in the north—and that he was Catholic. Not something he flaunted at Court, being more discreet than many of his kind who screeched of betrayal and broken promises and made their position all the worse.

Nicholas too had been raised a Catholic, yet he had denied his faith these many months. What kind of a god would let scum like Miguel Cortes flourish when poor Isabella lay in her grave unavenged?

Not for much longer! Somehow Nicholas would find a way to tempt that monster from his lair—and then he would kill him with his own hands.

Dismissing his wayward thoughts of a girl with fire in her eyes, Nicholas put his mind to the task ahead. Henri had news for him. Perhaps at last the means to take his revenge had come within his grasp.

Perhaps Miguel Cortes had at last been driven back to sea by his frustration at having been cooped up for so long. If that were not the case, then some plan must be found to make him leave the shores of Spain.

Chapter Two

The girl was lost in a mist...running from something that terrified her. She glanced over her shoulder, but could not see anything. Yet she knew if she stopped running it would catch her and then...

Deborah woke from her dream, shivering with fright. What could she have been thinking of to make her have such a nightmare? She usually slept peacefully and woke refreshed, but that morning the unease the dream had created seemed to stay with her as she dressed and went downstairs.

Was it that strange meeting with the Marquis de Vere the previous evening, that had prompted such dreams? No, how could it be? She laughed at herself. She had met the man but once and he could mean nothing to her. She would think of him no more.

They had come to London to enjoy themselves, and she meant to make the most of her visit. It was very unlikely that they would come again. Nor did she particularly wish for it. Oh, it was amusing at Court, and she liked to see the courtiers parading in their fine gowns, but there was too much backbiting and spite amongst them to please her.

She thought that, if she were to marry, she would like to live in the country with her friends about her. She tried to picture the man she might wed, but the only face that came to her mind was the Marquis de Vere's. How very vexing! She was sure she did not wish to meet the rogue again.

'Ah, there you are, daughter,' Sir Edward said, coming out of the parlour as she reached the hall of the house where they were lodging. It was a fine house, sturdily built of brick and wood in the Tudor style, and situated near the river. Like most other houses in the street it had wooden shutters, which were firmly closed at night, and the windows were so tiny and so dark that they let little light inside. 'I have been composing a letter to Don Manola. Señor Sanchez is to call for it this morning. Would you care to see what I have written?'

'Thank you, Father.' She took the letter and glanced through the elegantly phrased words. 'I think it will do very well, sir.'

'I shall send the small portrait I had done of you on your last birthday as a gift for Don Miguel,' her father said, smiling at her with affection. 'I have others and it is my intention to ask the artist to make another portrait of you when we return home. I shall want some keepsake when you leave me for your husband's home, Deborah.'

'Oh, Father,' she said, her heart aching for the look of sadness in his eyes. 'You know you will always be welcome in my home. I could not bear to part from you forever.'

'Ah, my sweet child,' Sir Edward replied. 'I must not seek to hold you. You must be allowed to find happiness in a home of your own—but I admit that I shall miss you sorely.'

'I am not married yet,' she reminded him. She linked her arm in his, smiling up at

him. ‘Now, dearest Father—pray tell me what you have planned for today?’

‘I thought we might take a little trip on the river,’ Sir Edward replied. ‘And then, after we have supped—a visit to the theatre?’

‘Oh, yes.’ Deborah smiled at him in delight, the remnants of her headache disappearing as she thought of the pleasures to come. ‘Yes, my dear Father. I think I should enjoy that above all things.’

She would forget the marquis and his impudence and she would forget her foolish dream. The next few weeks would fly by and then they would go home—whether or not they had found husbands.

‘Prithee tarry a little longer,’ Sarah begged as she poured over the fabulous wares of the silk merchant in Cheapside. ‘I cannot decide between the rose damask and the green brocade—which do you prefer, Debs?’

‘They would both suit you very well,’ Deborah replied with an indulgent smile at her cousin. ‘Why do you not order a length of each?’

‘But they are so expensive.’ Sarah stroked the soft materials under the indulgent eye of the silk merchant. ‘And I have already overspent my allowance. I do not like to ask my uncle for more.’

‘I have sufficient monies left to lend you some. Besides, my father would not think of denying you. Order both and let us away to the glovemaker. The hour grows late and I have bespoke a pair of gauntlets for Father.’

Sarah dimpled with pleasure, for in her heart she had wanted both silks. She gave her order to the merchant, who promised to deliver it within the hour to their lodgings, and, tucking her arm into Deborah’s, she willingly accompanied her cousin from the shop. The two girls walked farther down the street, then turned into another where the sign of the glovemaker swung to and fro in the breeze.

‘Mistress Palmer—Mistress Stirling. Stay a moment, I beg you.’

Deborah glanced at her cousin and, seeing the blush in her cheeks as Master Will Henderson hurried up to them, understood why her cousin had lingered so long over the purchase of the materials. This meeting had not happened by chance.

‘Oh, how pleasant to see you, sir.’ Sarah dimpled up at her young and handsome suitor. ‘We are on our way to the glovemaker.’

‘Why do you not wait here a moment or two?’ Deborah suggested as she caught the longing in the young man’s eyes. ‘The shop I need is but a step away and I have our footman to watch over me. Bide here while I see to my business, Sarah. I shall not be long and you will be safe enough with Master Henderson.’

‘That she will,’ he declared, ‘for I would defend her with my life—and you, of course, Mistress Stirling.’

‘I do not doubt it, sir.’ Deborah smiled and left them together. Sarah had other admirers, but only one made her blush so prettily. She was certain that her cousin would soon be wed. As for her...Deborah sighed. They had been in London for more than three weeks now and she had met no one she could think of as a husband.

She had not lacked for suitors, but none appealed to her. Some were too old, some too foolish—but most were greedy. They wanted her for her father’s fortune, not her person. She saw no reason to exchange her happy companionship with her father for

something that could afford her no pleasure or benefit.

As yet no news had come from Spain. Deborah was not certain how she felt about the prospect of marrying a man she had never met, but the negotiations were only just beginning. Until the contracts were signed, it would be a simple matter for either side to draw back. Besides, Don Miguel might not be pleased with her likeness.

When she thought about it, she was not at all sure she wished to wed anyone. Perhaps she would do better to remain at home and care for her beloved father?

For a moment the memory of a pair of mocking eyes came to haunt her, but she dismissed it instantly. The Marquis de Vere had been no more to Court—at least, he had not on the days when she and Sarah had attended. Why should she care whether he came or not? Besides, she did not like him. He was arrogant, insulting and rude!

There was to be a masked ball at Court on the morrow. It would be their last visit for the time being, for Sir Edward was minded to go home. He did not care to neglect his estates too long, and Deborah was tired of the long, tedious appearances at Whitehall, which for her were neither pleasurable nor useful.

‘Your cousin is in a fair way to be settled,’ Sir Edward had told his daughter a day or so earlier. ‘As for you, Deborah, I have seen no sign of any preference on your part?’

‘I have none, Father. I would as soon go home unpromised.’

‘I expect word from Señor Sanchez any day now. We shall hear what my old friend Don Manola has to say—and then we shall go home and discuss the matter. I am duty bound to find Sarah a husband, but there is no haste to arrange your own marriage, my dear.’

Deborah knew that her father was secretly glad of a reprieve. In his heart he dreaded the moment of their parting yet felt he would be failing in his duty if he did not see her safely wed. Deborah would be an heiress of some substance. Sir Edward had no male heir or any relatives to speak of, and his estate was not entailed. There was a distant cousin on her mother’s side—Mistress Berkshire—but she and her husband were old and lived quietly in the country, and would not be deemed fit guardians.

If anything should happen to Sir Edward before her marriage—God forbid!—Deborah’s estate would be overseen by the King’s council and she become his ward. A marriage deemed suitable by His Majesty would be arranged, unless James coveted her estate. She might then be left to live a solitary life or sent to a nunnery, never to fulfill the bright promise of her youth.

Sir Edward knew he must see her safe one day, but he was still only in his middle years and a strong, healthy man. A few more months, even a year or so, could not harm her and would afford him joy.

Deborah completed the purchase of the gauntlets for her father. They were fashioned of soft grey leather and studded with pearls at the cuffs. She thought he would be very pleased with the gift and was smiling as she left the merchant’s shop. A startled cry left her lips as she walked into a man who was about to enter, stepping heavily on his foot and dropping her package.

‘Forgive me, sir! I was not aware of...’ The words died on her lips as she found herself staring into the mocking eyes that had haunted her dreams these past three weeks. Her heart began to beat wildly. ‘Oh, it is you...’

‘You seem determined to injure me, mistress,’ said Nicholas and bent to recover her package.

‘Indeed, I do not!’ Deborah gave him a speaking look, but despite her annoyance a smile quivered at the corners of her mouth, which had she but known it was quite delectable and extremely tempting. Face to face, she had to acknowledge that her cousin had been right from the start—he was a fine figure of a man! She had seen none to rival him at Court.

‘Your purchase, mistress.’

‘Thank you. I apologise if I injured your foot.’

Nicholas grinned. God’s body! She was a beauty—and such spirit! It was no wonder the memory of their brief encounter had lingered in his mind despite all attempts to dismiss it. Perhaps it was in part why he had returned to London sooner than he had intended, though he also brought news for King James.

‘You have no doubt made a cripple of me, mistress—but I shall struggle to bear the pain with dignity.’

His taunt was so outrageous that Deborah laughed. ‘You are a wicked tease, sir. I cannot think what I have done that you should mock me so.’

‘Nor I, come to think on it,’ he replied, his bold eyes challenging her. ‘Unless it is that your eyes are more lovely than the brightest star in the heavens—your lips as sweet as a rose dew kissed.’

‘You would rival Master Shakespeare,’ Deborah replied with a toss of her head. She had been to the theatre several times now, and found the performance entrancing, though the audience was noisy and often shouted at the actors whenever they disagreed with something that was happening on stage. ‘I shall listen to no more of this nonsense, sir. My cousin awaits me in the street and I must go to her.’

‘I believe she is pleasantly engaged,’ Nicholas said, a faint smile on his mouth. ‘You will allow me to delay you a little, mistress. May I be of service to you? Perhaps I could call chairs for you and Mistress Palmer?’

‘Thank you, sir, but I believe Master Henderson will escort us should we wish it—and my footman is close by.’ Deborah avoided looking at him. He was too sure of himself and her heart would not behave itself when she saw the way his eyes danced with laughter.

‘If Master Henderson puts his claim above mine I have no love for the rogue. I believe I shall call him out!’

‘Pray be serious, my lord.’ Deborah was beginning to remember this man’s reputation. She had been warned that he was not to be trusted. She ought to walk away at once, but her feet would not obey her. ‘Your levity does not become you.’

‘I fear you would like me even less if I were to show you my other side, lady.’

‘Yes, I do think you have a darkness in you,’ Deborah said with a considering look. There were two sides to this man, one charming and pleasant, the other dark and threatening. ‘I sensed it when we first met.’

‘Is that why you disliked me?’ Nicholas frowned. ‘You have no need to fear me, Mistress Stirling. I have never harmed a wench. It is true that I have a devil inside me, but it is for others to fear—not you.’

‘Do you speak of a Spanish gentleman, perchance?’

‘What have you heard of that accursed rogue?’ Nicholas’s eyes glittered with

sudden anger, startling her. 'I swear you will hear nothing to his good from me.'

'They say you attack Don Manola's ships—that you are little more than a pirate.' Deborah tipped her head to gaze up at him defiantly. She did not know why she was pressing him like this, unless it was a perverse need in her to see his reaction. She would be a fool to let his charm sway her judgement of him. He was both a scoundrel and a thief.

'Some would call me a privateer,' Nicholas muttered, his mouth hard, features set into the harsh lines she had noticed before. 'Know this of me, Mistress Stirling—I may be *Le Diable* to the Spaniard I attack, but I have never killed for pleasure.' He touched his hat to her. 'I bid you *adieu*, mistress.'

For a moment Deborah was quite unable to speak. She wanted to cry out, to beg him to wait and explain his meaning, yet could not force the words from her lips.

What could he have meant? Who killed for pleasure—Don Manola? It was what he had implied, yet it could not be. He was her father's friend and Deborah would trust Sir Edward's judgement above any other. He was considering a marriage between her and Don Miguel Cortes. Never would he think of entrusting her to the son of a man he did not admire or trust.

Was it merely spite on the marquis's part, then? She would not have thought it of the man. Surely a powerful man like that would have no need of petty lies and innuendo? His weapons would be sharper and more deadly.

There was clearly some quarrel between Don Manola and the marquis. She imagined that the marquis truly believed his cause was just. Was it not always thus when men quarrelled? For herself she abhorred violence of any kind. It was surely wrong to attack another man's ships? Men must be wounded or killed during the action. Yet seemingly the marquis believed he was behaving fairly. Why should that be?

'Know this of me...I have never killed for pleasure.'

Once again Deborah shivered as she felt the chill go through her. She sensed a dark shadow hanging over her, as she had after their first meeting at Whitehall. Yet what had she to fear from him? Her destiny was not to run with his. Sir Edward would never contemplate such a match—nor did she wish it!

Deborah denied the prompting of an imp within her—a wicked voice that whispered she had never felt so challenged, so alive as when in the presence of the marquis. It was but a wayward thought that told her life had been almost too safe, too comfortable, that her true fulfilment as a woman would only come if she were brave enough to snatch at the burning brand this man offered.

For there had been fire in her when she gazed into his eyes. She had known a restless longing for something—but she knew not what. It was surely not to be in the arms of that wicked rogue!

Deborah shook her head. She was foolish to let him into her head. The Marquis de Vere was nothing to her, nor ever could be.

Sarah turned to her as she approached, her eyes glowing with excitement. 'Dearest Deborah,' she cried. 'You will never guess what has happened since you were gone.'

'What is it, cousin?'

Deborah was already certain that she knew. Master Henderson had spoken of his intentions. She smiled but held her peace. Let Sarah enjoy her moment of triumph to