



June Francis

PIRATE'S
DAUGHTER,
REBEL WIFE



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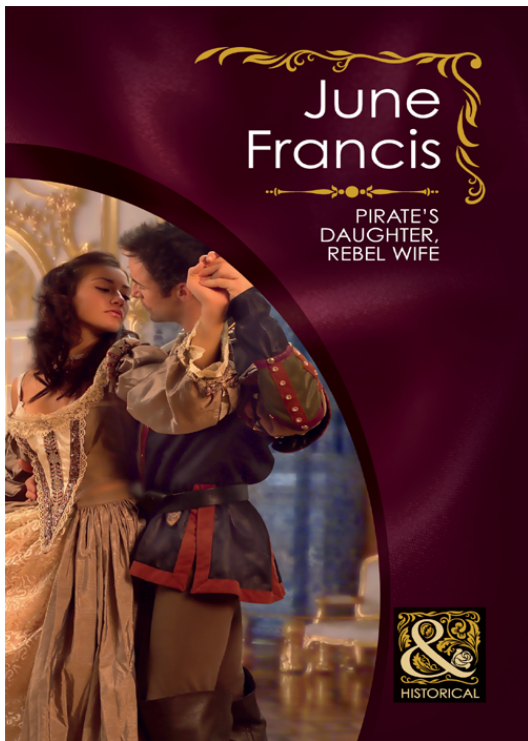
Pirate's Daughter, Rebel Wife

Аннотация

Indulge your fantasies of delicious Regency Rakes, fierce Viking warriors and rugged Highlanders. Be swept away into a world of intense passion, lavish settings and romance that burns brightly through the centuries. Sizzling holiday fling. . . or the real thing? Serena's Greek island holiday job suddenly improves when roguish pilot Pete arrives! He revels in the thrill of the chase, but never settles down. So one heady month later, what's keeping Serena in his arms? In a week Alice is dumped and fired – if she hadn't just won the lottery, she'd feel like the unluckiest woman alive! Then she bumps into gorgeous old flame Will Paxman on a tropical escape and it seems Alice's luck is about to change. . . Cleo's teenage crush is back in Melbourne. Jack Devlin used to treat her like a kid. . . now he's treating her like a woman. She's determined not to fall at his feet – or into his bed – but Jack has other ideas!

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‘You are a penniless woman alone in a foreign land and in need of a protector, and I have decided that a wife could be useful to me.’

Bridget cleared her throat. ‘I thank you for your offer, Captain, but does it not bother you that we scarcely know each other?’

He raised those devilishly dark eyebrows of his and drawled,

‘Most couples who make convenient matches are barely acquainted.’

‘So, will you agree to be my wife?’ asked Harry, after a pause, his heart thudding as he waited for her answer ...

About the Author

JUNE FRANCIS's interest in old wives' tales and folk customs led her into a writing career. History has always fascinated her, and her first five novels were set in Medieval times. She has also written fourteen sagas based in Liverpool and Chester. Married with three grown-up sons, she lives on Merseyside. On a clear day she can see the sea and the distant Welsh hills from her house. She enjoys swimming, fell-walking, music, lunching with friends and smoochy dancing with her husband. More information about June can be found at her website: www.junefrancis.co.uk

Previous novels by this author:

ROWAN'S REVENGE

TAMED BY THE BARBARIAN

REBEL LADY, CONVENIENT WIFE

HIS RUNAWAY MAIDEN

PIRATE'S DAUGHTER, REBEL WIFE features characters you will have met in

HIS RUNAWAY MAIDEN

PIRATE'S DAUGHTER, REBEL WIFE

June Francis



www.millsandboon.co.uk

This book is dedicated to those readers of

HIS RUNAWAY MAIDEN who e-mailed me wanting to

know Harry's story.

Also to my dear husband, John,

who enjoys my historical romances,

in memory of a lovely holiday on the

island of Madeira for a special birthday.

Prologue

1504

If she did not act now then she would never be free. Bridget McDonald stood on the slanting deck, her hands gripping the side of the ship. A few moments ago she had caught sight of a tall, dark figure on the cliff, but now he had disappeared as the rain swept in.

Was the landfall ahead Madeira, the island she had been searching for? The master of the slave-trader ship and his remaining crew were frantically busy trying to save the vessel from being blown towards the rocks. This could be her only chance of escape. If they succeeded in saving the ship, then she feared its master would immediately come after her again. He had been eyeing her in a manner that terrified Bridget. Since disease had killed his woman a week ago, she had lost the one person who had provided her with some kind of protection from his lustful nature. She was convinced that if the storm had not blown up, he would have raped her by now. If he managed to save his vessel, she feared that this could still happen.

A wave suddenly drenched Bridget, leaving her gasping for breath, and she clung tightly to the side of the ship, trying to summon up the courage to go over the side. She thought how she might not be in this position if the man she had known as Captain Black Harry had not separated her from her father, Callum, by

refusing to allow her on either of his ships, destined for the New World, almost two years ago.

She shuddered, recalling the desperate straits she was in, and knew she had no choice but to trust her fate to the waves. She might yet find her father—and if she perished in the water, at least she would not die as a slave-trader's whore but as a free woman. She took a deep breath and dropped into the sea.

Chapter One

Harry swore loudly, cursing the rain that almost blinded him as he slithered down the cliff path, gaining momentum as earth collapsed with the sheer volume of the rain, sending him hurtling towards the beach. He landed on the black sand on his hands and knees to the accompaniment of falling rocks. He drew in his breath with a hiss, his face drawn with pain, and pushed himself upright. He flicked back dripping dark hair and wiped his sodden face and beard on the sleeve of his doublet.

Had he really seen someone poised to jump into the churning sea from that ship? As suddenly as it had started the driving rain had stopped; he wasted no more time, but strode along the beach, scanning the waves for signs of that lonely figure. He was on the verge of turning back when he spotted something down by the shore. He put on a spurt and, as he drew closer, found a body sprawled face down on the sand.

He knelt down and, to his astonishment, discovered that it was a woman; and, more surprisingly, one who was able to swim—that was a rarity in his experience. She had girded the green skirts of her gown by tucking the ends into her belt at the back—no doubt so they wouldn't hamper the movement of her legs in the water. He eased her into a sitting position, but the upper part of her body flopped forwards against his forearm. She made a choking sound and he thumped her on the back, attempting to

free the water from her lungs. The tension inside him subsided as she began to cough, seawater and mucus staining the sleeve of his already soaked doublet. Eventually her coughing ceased, but the action must have drained any resources she had left after such a swim because she lay limp in his arms.

A single, long braid of sodden, dark red hair dangled against his thigh as he manoeuvred her gently round so that he could see her face more clearly. His heart seemed to lurch sideways. He had the oddest feeling that he had seen her likeness before. But where? Her skin was pallid, but it did not detract from her beauty. She had the daintiest of noses, full sensuous lips and a heart-shaped countenance.

At that moment a raindrop splashed on to her face and then another and another. He thought that the rain would rouse her, but although her cheek twitched, her eyelids remained closed. God's Blood! What was he to do with her? She would be doubly soaked to the skin if he tried to carry her all the way to Machico. It seemed he had no choice but to take her to the house of his Portuguese friend, Jorge de Lobos, where Harry was staying.

His face tightened with concentration as he lifted her higher. Holding her close to his chest, he slowly rose to his feet. For a moment he swayed, but then recovered his balance, gritting his teeth against the pain in his thigh. He decided to keep to the beach as long as possible and prayed that there would be no landslides on his chosen path.

Despite the weight of her sodden garments he was able to

make reasonable speed, conscious, all the time, of the woman's ashen face and shallow breathing. He took extra care on the shale when he climbed on to the main path, fearing a disastrous fall. It was a relief when he reached the house and was able to put her down on a wooden settle in the entrance hall.

He eased his shoulders and shouted for Joe. When there was no response he made for the kitchen but that, too, was deserted. By the Trinity, where was the youth? Harry returned to the hall and stared down at the woman in the green gown. He found himself remembering the tales of mermaids that an erstwhile pirate called Callum McDonald had told him when he was a boy.

Harry, too, had been plucked from the sea, although he had only been a child. He had been out of his wits when he had woken on the pirate ship, unable to remember his own name or his age as a result of a blow to the head. He had been told by the pirates that his parents had died in a boating accident that had almost taken his life and it was a miracle he had survived. He scowled at the memory, scrubbing at the beard that concealed a hideous scar on his cheek.

He wondered what to do with this unexpected guest. Normally Harry did not have women in the house, but he knew there was naught for it but to keep her here for now. He drew in his breath with a hiss. She needed to be rid of her wet garments, so Joe must ride to Machico and fetch the widow, old Juanita, to undress her. But first Harry had to find him. He left the house and searched the gardens and the stables, but there was still no sign of the

youth.

Exasperated, Harry returned to the house. Immediately, he noticed that the woman had moved because she was now curled up in a ball against the arm of the settle. He shook her shoulder and her eyelids opened, revealing red-rimmed eyes the colour of cobnuts. She squinted at him as if her eyes were sore and she was trying to focus. She muttered indistinctly and shrank back against the back of the settle, lifting her arm as if to shield herself from a blow, but then it flopped weakly across her breast and her eyelids closed.

Harry's heart lurched in that peculiar fashion again and he ran a hand over his still-dripping black hair and beard. He took a deep breath and, without more ado, scooped her up into his arms and headed for the stairs, leaving a trail of water pooling on the floor. He took the marble steps slowly because the soles of his shoes were slippery and was relieved to reach the first floor without mishap. He carried her into the guest bedchamber and collapsed with her in his lap on top of the chest at the foot of the bed.

A loose damp tendril of auburn hair tickled his chin and he frowned as he gazed into the lovely face pillowed against his arm. 'Mistress, you must rouse yourself,' he said in Portuguese.

She moaned but, irritatingly, her eyes remained closed.

Harry lightly slapped her on both cheeks. 'Wake up!' he commanded.

This time she winced and her eyelids fluttered open and she

appeared to stare up at him, only then to turn her face away. He could feel her shivering. ‘Mistress, will you wake up?’ he urged, tugging on her plait. She lifted a fist and for a moment he thought she would hit him, but then her arm dropped to her side. He smiled grimly. At least he seemed to be getting through to her. Again he lightly slapped her cheek.

‘If you—you do—do that again, my father w—will m—make you regret it one day,’ she stammered in the same language he had spoken.

Harry raised his eyebrows at her fractured accent and wondered where she had learnt Portuguese, as it obviously wasn’t her native tongue. ‘You must get out of your wet garments or you will catch a fever,’ he rasped. ‘There’s a bed here. Get yourself beneath the covers and I’ll see that food and drink is brought to you.’

She began to struggle. He found her amazingly strong, considering the energy she must have spent swimming ashore. But she could not match his strength and he captured both her wrists and held them above her head. He could feel the rapid rise and fall of her breasts against his chest and was aware of sensations that he had not experienced for a while.

‘There is no need for you to fight me,’ he growled. ‘I will not hurt you. Now rouse yourself, undress and get into bed.’

To his dismay, her body sagged and her head fell forwards on to his shoulder. He flinched and tried to wake her once more, but whatever he did, it failed. He knew then that there was naught

for it but to undress her himself.

His hands shook as he unfastened the belt from about her waist, so freeing the skirts she had girded there. Then he loosened the ties on the bodice of her gown. Noticing the design of the garment, he fingered the fabric, certain that it had been fashioned in England. So this mermaid was likely to be no peasant Portuguese woman, but could be English. What was she doing here and where was the father she had mentioned?

After removing her gown and having exposed the perfect roundness of her breasts in the damp, cream silk shift that clung to her skin, he knew that he would have had to have been made of wood, not to be stirred by their loveliness.

‘Holy Mary, mother of God,’ he groaned, clutching his hair with one hand and holding her off from him with the other, ‘What am I to do with you?’ There was no reply. Clearing his throat, he said loudly, ‘Mistress, you need to remove your shift. I will fetch one of my shirts for you to wear. We have no female apparel in this house.’

‘Men are s–s–such d–devils,’ she stuttered, her eyes still closed.

‘Women are no angels, either,’ he replied roundly, getting to his feet, leaving her sprawled out on the chest.

When she did not reply, he presumed that she had slipped into that semi-conscious state again. He dragged her upright and swung her over his shoulder. Then he carried her to the side of the bed and placed her down gently. Seizing hold of the thickly

woven coverlet of red and brown, he pulled it over her to ensure she stayed warm before hastening from the bedchamber.

Harry stripped off his wet garments in his own bedchamber and rubbed himself dry. Then with the cloth wrapped around his nether regions, he went over to the window and pushed wide the shutters, staring down over the sloping garden that was fragrant with the perfume of scattered blossoms after the rain. His gaze fixed on the wide expanse of ocean, but could see no sign of a vessel. For as long as he could remember the sea had been his life and a ship his main home, but on days like this he was glad to be on land since the damage to his leg.

He turned from the window with an impatient movement and limped over to the armoire and chest. He removed all that he needed and donned undergarments, shirt, hose and doublet and pulled on boots before removing another shirt from the armoire. Then, gathering up his gloves and hat, he headed for the guest chamber.

He saw that the woman had managed to divest herself of her shift. She was lying on her side, her head close to the edge of the bed with her braid dangling so that its end touched the floor. He would have liked to have seen her hair newly washed with perfumed water, smelling sweetly of camomile or lavender, and hanging loose. He drew in his breath with a hiss. What was he thinking of, fixating on her hair? He could only be glad that her naked body was mostly covered!

He placed his shirt on the bed and was in the process of pulling

up the coverlet further, when he saw the scarring on her back. For a moment he froze and then his fingers gently explored the weals in the soft skin across her shoulder blades and lower back. Anger exploded inside him. Someone had cruelly *whipped* her? Could a husband have done this? He reached for her left hand that was curled on the sheet beneath and found it ringless.

He peered closer at the scars and remembered the beatings he had suffered growing up on the pirate ship. He scowled as he drew the coverlet over her. Then, gathering up her discarded garments, he left the room. He went downstairs and this time was fortunate to find Joe preparing the evening meal.

‘We have a guest,’ said Harry in English, placing the clothing on the table where the youth was slicing an onion.

Joseph stared at the sodden green gown and darted a startled glance at Harry. ‘A woman?’

‘Of course it’s a woman, Joe! That’s a gown, isn’t it?’ Harry sank on to a chair. ‘And such a woman, Joe. You wouldn’t believe how beautiful she is. The odd thing is that I feel I have seen her before.’

‘God’s Blood! A woman under *your* roof!’ Joe’s voice rose to a squeak as he reached for the sodden gown and sniffed a handful of material. ‘This smells of the sea. Where did you find her?’

‘She swam ashore from a ship that was in trouble.’ Harry stared at Joe through his fingers. ‘Unusual a woman being able to swim, hey, Joe? I saw her drop into the sea and later came upon her sprawled on the sand. She is in the guest bedchamber, so keep

your eye on her. I need to go out. I want to find out what's happened to that ship.'

Joe had now found the silken shift and dropped it as if it had burnt his fingers. 'Me!' His blue eyes widened in dismay. 'What's she wearing if her clothes are here? Wh-what if—if she starts wandering around half-naked?'

'Enough of that nonsense,' snapped Harry, not wanting to dwell on the image the words conjured up. 'I've left her one of my shirts and I doubt she has the strength to get off the bed. If she wakes, she'll be in need of food and drink. Some soup, perhaps.'

Harry made his way to the stables and saddled up a horse. He rode in the direction where he had last seen the vessel, wanting a closer look at it if possible. He wondered if it had foundered on the rocks. If so, there was a possibility of there being survivors; if not, then others on the island might have seen the vessel and be planning to steal what they could, before those who owned the rights to salvage arrived on the scene.

Bridget was wakened by the sound of a door slowly opening and then stealthy footsteps approaching the bed. Her heart thudded as into her mind came an image of a man with shoulder-length black hair, angry dark eyes, a scar on his nose and a great black beard. She shivered, recalling the face of the master of the slave-trader ship who also had a great black beard. Her instincts were to sit up and defend herself but, not only did her limbs ache unbearably, her head throbbed and her throat felt raw. She was already aware that someone had taken her garments away and

left a clean, soft woollen—and—linen shirt behind.

‘Who’s there?’ she asked in a husky voice.

‘I’ve brought you some soup and bread and a drink, mistress,’ replied a cautious young English voice.

Bridget was confused. Hadn’t her rescuer spoken to her in Portuguese earlier? She opened her eyes and stared at the youth holding a tray. He could not have been more different to the other man as night was from day. He had straw—coloured hair and a freckled face that was filled with curiosity.

‘You’re English,’ she stated in that tongue.

‘Aye, mistress.’

‘What is your name?’

‘I’m Joe,’ replied the gangly youth.

‘Where is the bearded man who was here earlier?’

‘That would be the captain. He’s gone off to see what’s happened to the ship you deserted.’

She prayed that he would find no sign of the ship or that it was wrecked and its master drowned. ‘The captain? Is he a mariner, then?’ she asked, picking up on what the youth called the man who had rescued her.

‘Aye.’

‘He—he looked fearsome. Is he Portuguese?’

‘No, he’s English and you have naught to fear from him.’ He gave her a reassuring gap—toothed smile. ‘Here, mistress, I’ll leave your food and drink on this little table here. You get it down you and then have another little sleep.’

Bridget clutched the open neck of the shirt and managed to ease herself into a sitting position. ‘Tell me, where am I?’

He paused in the doorway without looking back. ‘You’re on the island of Madeira, mistress,’ he replied and closed the door before she could ask him any more questions.

Bridget sank back against the pillows. Her relief was such that tears filled her eyes and threatened to overpower her. Praise the Trinity that she had at last reached her destination! Now she must hope that she had not arrived here in vain. She remembered her first meeting with the man she still thought of as Captain Black Harry. She and her father, Callum, had been on the coast of Ireland after escaping from a brigand called Patrick O’Malley and his cutthroats. For many a summer past Callum had set sail with young warriors from Scotland to support his Irish wife’s family in their battles with the O’Malleys. That summer two years ago his luck had run out and Callum had lost not only his fortune, but his ship.

When Bridget had met Captain Black Harry, she was alone, having left her father trying to persuade the master of another ship to take them back to Scotland with only the promise of payment when they arrived there. She had been embarrassed due to his need to beg for help. Then she had walked slap bang into the handsomest young man she had ever seen. He had helped her to her feet and she had begged his pardon. He had inclined his head and asked in the Gaelic whether he could be of further assistance to her.

Impulsively she had explained their situation and he had escorted her back to Callum. Only then did she discover that the two men had sailed together when Black Harry was a boy. They had much to say to each other and had headed for the nearest tavern.

Bridget frowned as she reached for the cup on the table and gulped down the drink thirstily. If only she had overheard their discussion, she would have been more prepared for what happened the next day. Her eyes darkened. She would never forget what she considered Black Harry's hardhearted treatment of her.

She placed the cup on the table and reached for the food. She dunked the bread in the soup and, despite being ravenous, ate slowly because it hurt to swallow. As she gazed at her surroundings, her eyes began to feel heavy. The white walls appeared to waver and the blue shutters at the window shimmered. On another wall was a niche holding a statue of the Madonna and Child and they appeared to be smiling at her. She fumbled for the cup, picked it up and sniffed it. Had she been drugged? The lad might have assured her that she had naught to fear from the captain, but could she trust him? She had suffered sorely at the hands of men in the past and she felt a rising panic. Her last thought before she slipped into unconsciousness was of her father.

'You put *what* into her drink?' exploded Harry.

'Only a *little* poppy juice, Captain,' replied Joe hastily, backing

away from him. 'It was what Juanita gave to me when I couldn't sleep for my aches and pains after I was attacked in the town. She dosed you with it, too! It's not that long since we returned from Africa with you wounded so bad, and I thought you'd not only never walk again, but smash every looking glass in sight.'

A muscle clenched in Harry's jaw. He would never forget seeing his scarred reflection in the mirror for the first time. Later, when he had rattled in the cart into town, the women who had previously fallen into his arms had shrunk away from him and walked by on the other side of the street. Deeply hurt and also suffering agony from the wound in his thigh, he had grown a beard to conceal the scar and chose to keep away from women altogether.

'What if she suspects you've drugged her?' Harry pointed out.

'Why should she? Surely she'll deem her feeling drowsy is due to exhaustion after swimming ashore? I was only trying to ease any pain she was in.'

Harry gazed at him with exasperation. 'I suppose you thought you were doing what was best, but I wanted to question her. Now I'll probably have to wait several hours before she wakes up. Don't ever do such a thing again without my permission, Joe, or you'll be out on your ear!' He paused. 'So what did you think of her?'

'Comely. Her eyes are hurting her. She could do with a potion to bathe them. More importantly, Captain, is the information that she *does* speak English and there is a lilt to her voice that convinces me that it is not her first language.'

Harry nodded.

‘So what happened to the ship?’ asked Joe.

‘I could see no sign of any wreckage, so it appears that her master managed to avoid the rocks. Perhaps on the morrow I will have a search made for the ship.’ He changed the subject. ‘Now, Joe, what about supper?’

‘I’ll have it ready for you, Captain, in no time at all.’

‘Then I will dine as soon as I make certain that the lady is still breathing. In the morning you can wash her clothes along with mine.’

Harry climbed the stairs, disposed of his outdoor clothes and went to visit his guest. He drew a chair up to the bed and looked down at her. Her cheeks were flushed and when he placed his hand on her forehead, he found it hot and dry. Damnation! She was feverish. Hopefully her condition would not worsen.

He leaned back in the chair, thinking as soon as she was awake he would ask what was her name and for information about the ship and her father. Now he would have supper and return here later. Perhaps she would be willing to speak to him then.

Bridget felt as if she was floating, drifting in that state betwixt sleep and wakefulness. She was aware of discomfort and of being hot one moment and then cold the next. She had vague memories of a man lifting her and being carried in his arms. He had a great black beard, but he was not the cruel master of the slave-trader’s ship who had beaten her for her defiance of him. Even so, could she trust him? There was something that had happened before

she fell asleep that worried her, but she could not remember what it was.

She heard a door open and footsteps. A chair creaked and she sensed it was not the lad, but *him*. He must be sitting by the bed and looking down at her. She could feel his wine-scented breath on her cheek and then she felt him lift her damp curls and feel her brow. She struggled to force open her eyelids, but when she managed to prise them apart, the candlelight so hurt her eyes that she swiftly closed them again. Even so that brief moment was long enough for her to catch a glimpse of him: he with the strong nose, dark brows, frowning eyes and that great black beard. She shivered.

‘So you’re awake,’ he said roughly. ‘You’re feverish and that is an inconvenience.’

‘Perhaps you should have left me on the shore to die,’ she whispered.

‘That’s a foolish remark to make,’ he growled, ‘Why did you swim ashore if it were not because you wanted to live?’

‘That is true. I was in fear of the slave trader. Do you know what happened to the ship?’ she asked anxiously.

‘I could see no sign of it.’

‘So that beast could still be alive!’ She grasped his arm with a trembling hand. ‘You must not tell him I am here.’

‘His ship could still be in difficulties further round the coast. I shall see what I can find out on the morrow. Now don’t fret yourself about him. You are safe here.’

Was she? She gazed into his eyes, but could not read his expression and could only pray that he was telling her the truth. She sank back against the pillows, exhausted.

‘How did you come to be on his ship?’ asked Harry.

‘I was sold to him by a pirate in Africa,’ she whispered. ‘I deem originally the slave-trader’s aim was to sell me to some Eastern potentate, but his woman was utterly against such a plan. She wanted me as her servant. She was very beautiful and he could refuse her nothing. We sailed to different islands with slaves, to Tenerife, the Cape Verde Islands. Sometimes we went ashore for several days and twice we returned to Africa for more slaves. I tried to escape, only to be beaten for my attempts. Then disease struck the ship and one by one people began to die.’

Harry felt anger and pity and knew that she’d had a very lucky escape indeed. But what she had said about disease disturbed him greatly. ‘What was this disease?’ he asked.

‘I do not know its name, but I deem it was not the plague,’ she said hastily.

He frowned. ‘How do you know? Have you seen people die of the plague?’

‘No, but I know someone who suffered from the smallpox and she described its symptoms to me.’ Bridget’s eyelids drooped wearily despite all her efforts to stay awake.

Harry was relieved to hear that she had not been in contact with that horrendous disease. Still, he hoped that she had not been infected by whatever had struck down those on the ship.

‘Sleep now,’ he said. ‘We will speak again in the morning.’

The door closed behind him and she drifted into sleep. Now her dreams were not of the slave trader, but of her father and how the handsome Captain Black Harry had offered him a berth on his ship that was sailing westwards in search of a passage to the Indies. Her father’s conversation to her had been full of plans to regain his lost fortune. His excitement had been infectious and Bridget had been just as eager as Callum to take part in such an adventure. But then Captain Black Harry had refused to have her on board his ship and so, rather than allowing her to accompany the men to the Indies, instead he had paid for her passage to Scotland to the home of her father’s brother and his wife.

Now fear stalked her dreams. For her kindly aunt had died and her Uncle Ranald had taken her south to the home of his mistress, Lady Monica Appleby, once a McDonald and twice married. Both wanted to get their hands on her father’s hoard and would not believe Bridget when she’d told them it had all been stolen. They had even tried to force her into marriage with the lady’s imbecile son. She must escape! She had to get away from them!

Bridget shifted restlessly in the bed and began to cough. She was aware of the sound of footfalls and a door opened. She started with fright, for outside it was now dark and the candle burning beneath the statue of the Madonna and Child cast shadows on the walls. Her heart thudded inside her breast as she watched the captain approach her.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked hoarsely.

‘You will need to sit up if you are not to spill this potion,’ he said in a low voice.

She remembered the conviction that she’d had earlier about the drink she had downed and croaked, ‘Potion! Are you wanting to poison me? I deem the drink I was brought earlier was drugged.’

‘A little poppy juice, that is all,’ he said easily. ‘Joe deemed it would ease your pain. By the Trinity, why should *I* wish to poison you? I might consider some women cruel and selfish, but the truth is that I heard you coughing. Now drink up and pray to God that in the morning you will be rid of the fever.’

Did he speak the truth? It was certainly true that her body ached all over. She struggled to sit up, but the act was beyond her. The captain perched on the side of the bed and hauled her upright, slipping an arm about her shoulders. He reached for the cup and held it to her dry lips. As she felt warm liquid trickle into her mouth, she was aware of the strength in the arm that held her and hated being in his power. So he considered women cruel and selfish, did he? Well, no more so than she thought some men arrogant and brutal. Even so she had no choice but to suffer the captain’s ministrations for the moment. She swallowed thirstily until the cup was empty.

Harry lowered her against the pillows and watched as, with a faint sigh, she drifted back into sleep. He did not immediately leave the room, but remained sitting in the chair at her bedside.

There was a definite lilt to her voice and it would not surprise him if her first language was the Gaelic. He found himself thinking of Callum McDonald and his daughter, Bridget. What had happened to Callum after he had disappeared sixteen months ago along with one of Harry's two ships, *Odin's Maiden*?

His eyes darkened with anger. God's Blood! He had made a mistake in trusting that wily old pirate when they had met again in Ireland. He should never have offered him a helping hand or been keen to assist the lovely but hot-tempered Bridget, who would now be a young woman of seventeen or eighteen summers.

He gazed down at the beautiful face on the pillow, trying to imagine how this woman might have looked two years ago, remembering how he had considered Bridget older than her years when he had first set eyes on her. Then he had discovered she was much younger than he'd thought, and knew he must put some distance between them in order to protect her from herself. She had been furious with him and he had likened her to an angry cat, spitting out accusations that he was well-named Black Harry because he had a black heart. How dare he separate her from her father, she had ranted. She had attempted to persuade Callum to get him to budge from his stance, but the old pirate had told her in Harry's hearing that it did not do to cross Black Harry. It was then that Harry realised that Callum also did not want to take his daughter with him on such a risky venture, but did not have the heart to tell her.

So Harry had parted from Bridget with her insults ringing in

his ears. If naught else, her behaviour had proved to him that however comely she was, she still had some growing up to do. She knew what shipboard life was like from having sailed with her father after her mother had died. Surely her common sense should have told her that his decision was the right one? He certainly hoped she had come to realise that in the past two years.

He continued to gaze down at the woman in the bed. Was she Bridget McDonald? She certainly had a look of her. If she *was* Bridget, then where was her father? When Callum had vanished along with Harry's ship, he had wondered if the man's intention had been to cross the northern seas and make landfall in Scotland in order to be reunited with his daughter. Yet here she was in Madeira, having just escaped a slave-trader's vessel. Perhaps Callum had never arrived in Scotland and, along with Harry's ship and other crew, was now at the bottom of the ocean?

Harry could scarcely contain his impatience for her to wake up and to provide him with some answers to his questions!

Chapter Two

‘You must ride into Machico, Joe, and bring Juanita here,’ said Harry, turning away from Bridget’s bedside. Two days had passed and he had hardly had a sensible word out of her. ‘The fever is getting worse. She needs a draught that is stronger than the one you mixed for her.’

Joe gazed down at Bridget’s scarlet cheeks and twitching face. ‘She does look bad and she’s been muttering in her delirium.’

Harry shot a glance at him. ‘I know. She mentioned a Lady Elizabeth and pirates and then the rest was just a gabbled stream of nonsense. I want you back here with the widow before midday. I need to visit the cane fields and see how the harvest is progressing.’

Joe nodded and left the bedchamber.

Harry resumed his seat next to the bedside and tried to contain his worry. He must persuade Juanita to stay here at the house; only then would he feel some freedom from anxiety about the sick woman he suspected was Bridget McDonald. He could not afford to change his plans and needed to be on hand to supervise the loading of the sugar cane into the carts that would carry the cargo to his ship.

He gazed down at the shivering, restless figure; as he did so, she flung off the bedcovers and, muttering to someone to get away from her in Portuguese, attempted to get out of bed.

Starting to his feet, he caught hold of her and could feel the heat emanating from her body. He lifted her back on to the bed and it was then that he noticed what looked like red pinpricks on her skin. His heart sank. Perhaps her fever was not the result of her soaking, but from that disease she had mentioned?

He considered the consequences if that was true and swore beneath his breath. Yet he had no choice but to accept that if whatever had caused the rash was infectious then it was too late for him to protect himself from its effects. He could only hope and pray that it was just a heat rash.

He left the bedchamber and returned shortly after with a cloth and a bowl of cold water. He soaked the cloth in water before wringing it out and wiping her face with it, bathing her eyes especially. Then he folded the cloth into a wet compress and placed it on her forehead. Carefully, he repeated this action and carried on doing so until she appeared less restless. When he touched her skin, although it still felt hot, it was not burning. Was the fever breaking? Or was she cooler due to his ministrations with the wet cloth? Perhaps it was both.

Suddenly her eyes opened and she stared up into his face. Her hand shot out and her fingers fastened on his wrist. ‘What have you done to me?’ she croaked. ‘Where is my father and Captain Black Harry?’

He stiffened. ‘What is your father’s name?’

‘Callum McDonald. Have you seen him here?’

‘No.’

Her eyes showed dismay.

Harry's heart began to thud with heavy strokes. So his instincts had been right and she *was* Bridget McDonald, but it seemed she was expecting to find her father and him together. So was he right in thinking that Callum had never arrived in Scotland? It would do no good him asking her that question now. He prised her fingers from his wrist and said, 'You have a fever, mistress. I have sent Joe to fetch a healer.' He wrung out the cloth and placed it on her forehead once again.

'I need help to find him. I cannot waste time lying here,' she said fretfully. 'I must find my father. Perhaps someone else has seen him.'

She made to push down the bedcovers, but Harry prevented her from doing so by placing his hands over hers. 'You're in no fit state to go anywhere right now,' he said firmly. 'Be patient. I will fetch you a drink.'

'Where are my clothes?' demanded Bridget. 'I must find my father.'

He bit back the words that were crowding to be released and went downstairs. He went to the kitchen and made her a drink of wine and water and poured himself a measure of liquor. He decided he needed some fresh air and carried the drink and the flask outside. He sat on the terrace, moodily gazing out over the ocean glistening in the sunlight. He had survived hunger and thirst, battles and storms since last he had seen Bridget. He had been prepared to confront all these adversaries

for himself, wanting adventure, as well as discovering new ways to increase his wealth, but he had refused her passage on his ship, determined that not only would she not have to face such dangers, but that her burgeoning beauty would not distract himself or the crew from the business in hand. Now she had come back into his life, bringing uncertainty and trouble.

Why was she searching for Callum here on Madeira? Who was this Lady Elizabeth she had spoken of in her delirium? On whose ship had she originally set sail before being captured and sold to a slaver?

He downed the drink in one gulp and refilled the cup. He stayed there for a while longer, thinking about the fragments of information he'd gleaned from Bridget so far. Then he went indoors, cut bread and spread it with honey and placed food and drink on a tray and carried it upstairs, hoping that she had recovered her composure and would be able to eat something.

As he reached the upstairs passage he heard a crash coming from the bedchamber and made haste. He was stunned by the sight that met his eyes. The small table had been knocked over and Bridget was writhing on the bed and babbling words he could not make out. He seized one of her hands and clasped it between his own. 'Hush, woman, there is no need for such a commotion,' he said gently. 'You are safe.'

She stared at him, but he sensed she was not seeing him because she was still muttering to herself. He wondered if she had fallen asleep and was having a bad dream. She was defying

someone, saying that she would not marry their son. Suddenly she went limp.

Harry took her in his arms and brought her against his chest and spoke soothingly, recalling words in Swedish that the grandmother of his friend Alex, the Baron Dalsland, had used to comfort him when he'd suffered from his recurring nightmares. He was ashamed by the memory because he had been a youth on the verge of early manhood at the time. He should not have given in to such weakness after he had survived three years on board a pirate ship. He'd finally escaped by sneaking off and concealing himself from his shipmates behind a pile of barrels in the Swedish port of Visby. It was Alex who had found him and taken Harry to his grandparents' home. They had provided him with a roof over his head and fed him until his lean body filled out and grew strong. That first summer he and Alex had become like brothers and they were soon fluent in each other's language. Alex's grandfather, the old Baron, had a merchandising business and owned several ships. Harry had asked if he could work for him and the old man had put him under the tutelage of one of his finest captains. When the old Baron had died he had left Harry the *Thor's Hammer*.

Harry stroked Bridget's dark red hair, remembering how he had grieved for the old man. Suddenly he realised that the room had fallen silent. His patient had fallen asleep again. He waited several moments before placing her down on the bed and pulling up the covers over her. He decided to stay with her until she woke

or Juanita arrived in case she should have any more bad dreams.

Bridget opened her eyes and her gaze fell on the man asleep in the chair by her bedside. His bearded chin was cupped in one hand and his elbow rested on a cushion on the arm of the chair. His thick dark lashes would have been the envy of many a woman, she thought, wondering how long he had been sitting there. He shifted suddenly and Bridget started nervously and, clearing her throat, asked, 'Captain, are you awake?'

He yawned, revealing excellent teeth, and then his eyes opened and met her gaze. For an instant she felt as if drawn into the depths of those dark blue orbs and her heartbeat quickened. 'I did not mean to go to sleep, but I've been keeping long hours lately,' he said drily.

'You mean because of me, Captain? I am grateful to you for your care.' Her voice was husky and Harry found it extremely attractive, almost as seductive as her physical beauty. 'I wish to leave as soon as possible. I need to find my father. My information is that he and Captain Black Harry were on this island.'

Harry wondered from whom she had had this information. 'But you are ill. You cannot possibly leave,' he said firmly.

'I am feeling much better,' she insisted.

He wondered if he should tell her that her face was covered in spots, but at that moment there came the sound of voices below. He asked her to excuse him and left the bedchamber.

Bridget gazed after him, wondering if it was the healer who

had arrived. She was aware that the shirt she was wearing smelled of her perspiration due to her fever. Despite this she knew it to be a fine shirt of excellent quality, so her rescuer was a man of some wealth. At that moment she heard the sound of footsteps coming upstairs and along the passageway towards her. She decided to pretend to have fallen asleep again, thinking she might discover more about the man who had given her shelter that way.

‘I have seen this rash before,’ said Juanita in Portuguese, glancing over her shoulder at Harry. ‘It is a complaint suffered mainly by children and can sometimes kill, but the fever has broken and I have no doubt this woman will recover.’

‘How soon will she be fit to leave?’ asked Harry, taking coins from a pouch at his belt.

Juanita’s eyes fixed on the money. ‘Where would you have her go?’

‘She is seeking her father, a Callum McDonald, and she has heard that he has been seen on this island. As far as I am aware he has never set foot on Madeira, but I could be mistaken. I ask that you would keep your ears and eyes open in Machico. I will have a search made of Funchal, just in case he could have anchored there at any time this past year.’

Juanita stared at him from under grey, bristling brows. ‘You do that, Captain, but if her father is not here, what will you do with her then? She is young and no doubt beautiful when she does not have this rash, but she is also a foreigner. Surely you will not desert her?’

‘I have a cargo of sugar cane to get to Lisbon. She needs a woman to keep her company. If I were to leave her here in Madeira, will you stay with her? I will pay you,’ Harry offered.

Juanita shook her head and said firmly, ‘No, I wish to leave Madeira. I am getting old and I would return to my family home in Portugal. I still have kin there and would spend my last days with them.’

Harry frowned. ‘I understand, but would ask another favour of you. Have you heard aught of a slave-trader ship foundering anywhere off this coast or it may have anchored in Machico?’

‘I have heard nothing, but I will make enquiries for you.’

He thanked her and changed the subject. ‘Is there aught you can prescribe for her rash?’

The old woman fished in a capacious cloth bag and produced a phial. ‘You may give her three drops of this liquid if the rash itches her unbearably and keeps her awake.’

Harry took the phial and handed a coin over to Juanita. ‘When do you plan to leave for Portugal?’

‘When the signs are auspicious.’ She chuckled and patted his arm. ‘If you have need of me again, send Joseph to fetch me.’

‘I will bear in mind what you say.’ Harry glanced towards the bed as a thought occurred to him, but he remained silent and went downstairs. He called Joe to keep a watch over their patient and headed for the fields, knowing that he could not afford to change his plans to leave the island once the sugar-cane harvest was gathered in.

Bridget inspected the rash on her arms and frowned, turning over in her mind the conversation she'd overheard between the captain and Juanita. Unfortunately, she had not been able to understand every word spoken, but she felt certain that he had asked Juanita to make enquiries about her father and for that she was grateful. Hopefully he would also have a search made for the slave trader and his vessel. What if the slave trader was still alive and came looking for her? After all he *had* bought her. A chill ran down her spine. What was she to do if the captain were to sail for Lisbon, leaving her behind here on Madeira at the mercy of any unscrupulous person?

There was a knock on the door. 'May I come in?' asked Joe. Bridget sighed. 'Aye, please do.'

The lad entered the bedchamber, carrying a tray.

'D'yer know that at one time me and the captain thought you might die, but here you are looking a whole load better despite your rash. The captain reckons it could be caused by the fever making you all hot.' He beamed at her.

Bridget forced a smile, guessing why the captain had not been completely honest with Joe. She was also remembering that it was the lad who had put poppy juice in her drink the first day she was here. 'I am much better so I do not need any potions, Joe,' she said hastily.

'All right. But the captain said you're to eat this bread and cheese and then I'm to bring you a custard apple.'

'Tell me about your captain?' she asked.

Joe grinned. 'He's a hard man to please, but he's fair. His ship is anchored in Machico harbour and he's here to load and transport the bulk of Senhor Jorge's sugar-cane harvest to a buyer in Lisbon. It's the *senhor* who owns this house, but he's gone off with a fleet of warships, led by the explorer Vasco da Gama. They're going around the tip of Africa, hoping to find a swifter passage to the Indies. The captain intended going as well, but we were caught up in a battle with the natives at one of the Portuguese trading stations on the African coast.'

'What happened?' she asked, unable to conceal her curiosity.

Joe's eyes took on a faraway expression and he did not immediately answer, then he said solemnly, 'I don't think the captain would like me to give you the gruesome details, but I can tell you that there were more of them than us. There were spears and arrows flying through the air with us managing to dodge most of them. Then it was hand-to-hand fighting. Unfortunately whilst the captain was fighting three of them at once and winning, a spear came out of nowhere and he got wounded in the thigh. The captain drew out that spear and stuck it in one of the enemy. He has a stubborn streak does the captain. Even so that didn't stop him, but then something even nastier happened and we had no choice but to get him out of there.'

'It sounds as if he was lucky to survive,' said Bridget, admiring the captain's bravery.

'You can say that again,' said Joe, his face alight with enjoyment. 'It was the same when we sailed the northern seas and

we did battle with pirates. We often ended up in hand-to-hand combat. The captain only ever used the cannon as a last resort. He's always aware that there might be innocent captives aboard who could suffer along with the sinners.'

'That's very perceptive of your captain,' said Bridget.

Joe grinned. 'I'm not sure what that means, but he's the best captain to work for that I know. Now I'll have to be going or he'll be wondering what I'm up to.'

Bridget would have liked to have heard more of the captain's exploits, but did not wish to keep the youth from his work. 'I would like some warm water, Joe, and if you could fetch my clothes I'd be very grateful,' she said persuasively.

'Certainly, the captain had me wash and dry them.'

She said softly, 'You are kind.'

He flushed to the roots of his hair. 'My pleasure, mistress,' he mumbled, and hurried from the bedchamber.

Bridget ate the bread and cheese and drained the cup of wine and water, marvelling that the captain and Joe had survived such adventures. She wondered why, if the captain was English, was he staying here and plying his trade between this island and Lisbon instead of returning home? If her father and Captain Black Harry were not to be found on Madeira it was possible that they might not be because more than a year had passed since his ship had been seen here—then she must try to persuade him to take her to Lisbon. It was possible that she might find news of her father in that bustling city. She wished Joe would hurry and

bring her clothes.

However, it was the captain who knocked at the door before announcing his presence and coming into the bedchamber when she bid him enter. He was carrying a basin and had a drying cloth over his arm.

‘Where are my clothes?’ she blurted out. ‘I want to get dressed and out of this bed.’

‘I am glad to hear you say that, mistress, but are you certain you are well enough to do so? I am having a search made for your father, but if he cannot be found, I am at a loss what to do with you once you are recovered. I will be leaving Madeira soon.’ He placed the basin on the table and the drying cloth on the bed.

‘When will you be leaving?’ she asked, sitting up straight. ‘Joe told me that you are here for the sugarcane harvest. If you are to find my father, surely it would be of help to you to have the name of the ship he sailed on? It is called *Thor’s Hammer* and was last seen anchored in the harbour at Funchal.’

Harry shot her a glance. ‘So it was only *Thor’s Hammer* that your informant saw?’

‘Aye!’ Her brow knit, thinking it sounded as if he thought there should be another ship. ‘It belongs to a mariner known as Captain Black Harry. He and my father set out almost two years ago in search of a northwest passage to the Indies in the wake of the voyage made by John Cabot. I was expecting my father to return last year, but he never did so.’

Harry frowned. ‘Who told you that the ship could be found

here?’

‘A mariner in London.’

Harry drew up a chair and sat down. ‘It does not necessary follow that your father was on that ship.’

She gripped a handful of the bedclothes convulsively. ‘Are you saying that he could have been on the *Odin’s Maiden* instead? That’s the name of Captain Black Harry’s other ship.’

He hesitated. ‘It is possible. You must accept, Mistress McDonald, that ocean voyages hold great risk for mariners and explorers.’

She had paled. ‘I am not a fool. But Cabot returned, so why shouldn’t my father?’

‘Why not, indeed?’ said Harry, knowing that Cabot had not returned from his second voyage. He went over to the window and gazed out. ‘But I have to be honest with you and tell you in the light of what you have told me that I do not believe your father to be on this island. I, too, have journeyed to the New World and your father went missing the same time as *Odin’s Maiden*. This was fifteen, sixteen months or more ago.’

Bridget stared at the captain’s broad back in bewilderment. ‘What are you saying? That you knew my father? If that is so, why did you not tell me earlier?’

‘You have been ill and out of your mind and I didn’t immediately know your identity and that you were searching for Callum.’

‘Were you on either ship?’

‘Aye, I was a shipmate of your father’s at one time and that is how I became acquainted with him.’

‘Then you will know Captain Black Harry, too?’

Harry wondered how long it would be before it occurred to her that he and Black Harry could be one and the same. He was not looking forward to that moment and was determined to delay it as long as possible. He would wager a gold coin that she would blame *him* for Callum going missing!

He turned and faced her. ‘Your father and the captain quarrelled. The captain was keen to sail further south along the coast of the New World, but your father was not.’

‘Why not?’ Her eyes were intent on his face.

‘I assume it was because Callum had no taste for such a venture. I deem he realised that we were not going to find the passage to the Indies or make our fortunes, so he decided to return home. The captain, on the other hand, was keen to speak to the Portuguese explorers who had knowledge of the southern ocean and its winds and currents. Your father chose to disobey his orders and, I suspect, stole *Odin’s Maiden* from the captain to make his own way home.’

‘My father is no thief!’ she said indignantly.

Harry raised his eyebrows. ‘He was once a pirate, woman, so how can you say that? When did *you* leave home? It is possible that you and your father missed each other by a cat’s whisker.’

Bridget was mortified that this man knew something of her father’s past life and said stiffly, ‘I left London last May. I know

what you are thinking—why has it taken me so long to get here?’ Her expression was strained.

‘I know why. You have forgotten that you told me that you were sold by a pirate to the slave trader whose ship you escaped from.’

‘That is true. I had forgotten,’ said Bridget, putting a hand to her head. ‘A slave trader who could be on this island and looking for me right now.’ Her voice trembled. ‘He paid good money for me and might not wish to lose out on his investment.’

Harry said, ‘He could also be dead or have already left these waters. As for your father and *Odin’s Maiden*, a mariner can always think of reasons why a ship should be delayed. A storm can blow a vessel miles off course and if a ship survives the storm, it can still be damaged, making repairs necessary. If the materials are not to hand, then the ship would need to limp into the nearest harbour, perhaps to remain there for weeks on end.’

‘You’re saying that this could have happened to *Odin’s Maiden* and my father might have arrived home after I left,’ said Bridget eagerly. ‘Although, you cannot know for certain that my father stole the ship,’ she added swiftly.

Harry said, ‘Where else could they have both gone, along with a complete crew of men? No doubt he knew that you would be worried about him and wished to be reunited with you. He told me of his affection for his daughter, Bridget.’

Suddenly Bridget’s eyes were shiny with tears. ‘I can accept that as a possible reason why my father might have taken the ship.

It is also possible that he might never have reached Scotland and be at the bottom of the ocean.’ Her voice broke on a sob.

Harry said bracingly, ‘You would give up hope so soon? He could have wintered at New-found-land, an island discovered by Cabot, whose waters are teeming with fish. This would have delayed his setting out for home.’

Bridget fought back another sob and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. ‘I will try to believe that is what happened, but if he was to search for me at my uncle’s house in Scotland, then he would not have found me. He would need to go to London.’

‘Why London?’

‘Because that is where I was taken by my Uncle Ranald, my father’s treacherous brother, after my aunt died. He decided to visit his mistress, Lady Appleby, in the north of England, and because her elder son lived in London and she wished to see him, they forced me to go with them.’

Harry wondered if this was the son she had mentioned earlier in her delirium. ‘Why did they do this?’

‘They believed I knew where my father’s hoard was and would not accept that it had been stolen by an Irish brigand, Patrick O’Malley.’ Her eyes darkened. ‘If only we had not met Captain Black Harry in Ireland, who took my father away to the Indies without me, how different my life would have turned out.’ Bridget scrubbed at her damp eyes. ‘I would that you would leave me now.’

Harry was tempted to say that if she had not met him, then she

might have been recaptured by Patrick O'Malley and what would have happened to her then? Instead he left her to her *toilette*.

Bridget so wished she knew if her father was alive or dead. Callum usually drank far too much when life dealt him a blow and then he could be reckless in the extreme. She had believed her presence had helped rein in some of his excesses and that was another reason why she had wanted to accompany him on Black Harry's ship. Yet when Callum was sober, he was an excellent seaman and she had learnt much about handling a ship and commanding men by watching him.

She washed her face and hands and then dried them on the cloth. At least she knew more about her father than when she had arrived here. She must cling to the hope that he was still alive. She was also a free woman, so should rejoice in that and keep her spirits up. She still feared the slave trader appearing on the scene despite the captain telling her that she was safe with him. No doubt in the eyes of the Portuguese she belonged to that beast and the law would be on his side if he were to catch her again. The captain, being a foreigner on this island, might come off worse if he were to defend her. She had to get off this island as soon possible and look for her father elsewhere. As for Captain Black Harry, she would ask her host if he knew what had happened to him since his ship had been seen in Madeira last year.

Chapter Three

Harry swung into the saddle, determined not to blame himself for all that had befallen Bridget since they had parted in Ireland. Yet it was true that if he had not been prepared to pay her passage to Scotland in order for her to stay with her uncle and aunt, then her life would have been different. He remembered wanting to kiss Bridget's luscious mouth when they had first met. Even later when she had insulted him, he had wanted to grab a handful of that red hair of hers that was aflame as if it had caught fire from the sparks that seemed to fly from her in her rage and disappointment and kiss her soundly. How very different both their lives would have been if he had surrendered to his desire. But he still thought he had been right to not take her aboard his ship. A man needed to be totally focused to survive on such a perilous journey.

Harry frowned. He had little faith in Callum having survived the northern ocean in autumn despite his having told Bridget to keep her hopes alive. He was going to have to take responsibility for her, but if she knew he was Captain Black Harry, he sensed she might do something desperate rather than accept his help. She would very likely run away from him and end up in further trouble. He had to think up a plan that would ensure her safety, not just for the next week or two, but for the future. In the meantime he had to ensure that she did not realise he was the

man she appeared to despise.

Bridget stirred, wondering what had disturbed her sleep. She could hear a bird singing and eased herself into a sitting position. She had been dreaming of Captain Black Harry and it was not anger she had felt, but a wild excitement. She supposed it was to be expected that she would dream of him now she was here on Madeira where his ship had last been seen. Where was he now? There had been a time after he and her father had set sail when she could not get him out of her mind.

This latest dream had shocked her and she could only believe that her mind was playing tricks on her. There was no way that she would ever take Black Harry as a lover after what he'd done to her.

Besides, she knew the man's real identity, which was one of the reasons she had set out in search of him and her father, as Harry himself was unaware of it. She had initially been accompanied by Lady Elizabeth Stanley, who had befriended her when she was in London, her ladyship's maid, Hannah, and Joshua Wood, a childhood friend of Black Harry, whose real name had turned out to be Harry Appleby. Shockingly, he was heir to a manor in Lancashire and a house and business in London, so no doubt he would not consider her good enough for him. How could she even imagine him making love to her in the light of all these facts? She must be mad!

Her eyes roamed the room and she noticed that the bowl and drying cloth had been removed. She must have fallen into a deep

sleep, indeed, to have been unaware of the captain or Joe's entry. How long had she slept? She needed to speak to the captain. What was his name? Her wits had indeed gone begging for her not to have asked that simple question.

She heard voices outside and looked towards the window. The shutters were wide open, allowing sunlight and a flower-scented breeze into the room, along with birdsong. She wanted to be up and doing and longed to be outside in the fresh air. Suddenly she noticed her green gown and silk shift on the chest and her face lit up. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up.

Her knees shook and she realised that she was still weak from her illness, but, by holding on to the bed, she managed to reach its foot and sank down on to the chest. Her fingers fastened on the skirt of her gown and she drew it towards her, along with her shift. She held them to her face and breathed in the smell of the ocean breeze and that of lavender. She wasted no more time, but dragged off the captain's shirt and hastened to pull the shift over her head. It proved more difficult putting on her gown, due to the weight of its skirts.

Once dressed, Bridget felt much better, so decided to unbraid her hair and let it hang loose. If only she had the company of another female to help wash and comb it. She had spent most of her childhood with women until her Irish mother, Mary, had died and her father had taken her with him on his ship, due to his fear of her being abducted by one of the rival Irish clans. She recalled her excitement and had looked forward to a more

interesting life. She'd had to familiarise herself with his ship and become accustomed to all-male company. The crew had spoilt her and she had come to feel less awkward in the company of men, to love the sea and visiting new places. She had admired her big strong red-haired father, but never forgot the long weeks that she and her mother had spent waiting for his return from sea. Tears welled in her eyes as she thought of all that was lost to her. She could very likely be an orphan now.

There came a knock on the door. 'May I come in?'

Bridget recognised the captain's voice and her heart leapt. Swiftly she wiped her face, not wanting him to consider her a weak female. It had been a mistake, thinking of the past. It was the present and future that were important. She must persuade this man to help her further.

'Please do, Captain,' she called.

The door opened and he stood, gazing at her with an expression in his indigo eyes that brought a blush to her cheeks. 'You are dressed and looking much improved in health, Mistress McDonald. I deem that you are almost fit to leave this place,' he said.

The colour drained from her face; it appeared to her that he would be rid of her that day and she was not ready to cope alone just yet. Despite her wanting to be up and doing, this house had proved to be a safe haven. How could she possibly manage alone and penniless in a foreign land?

She cleared her throat. 'I do understand, Captain, your

wanting to be rid of me because you have your business to attend to—but I must confess my limbs are still a little weak. I much appreciate your hospitality. I only wish I could reimburse you, but I have no money. Yet if you are prepared to continue to help me, then I will see that you are rewarded.’

‘I ask for no reward,’ he said abruptly. ‘You look pale and still need to rest.’

‘I am better than I was,’ she murmured, tilting her chin.

There was a silence.

‘You are English, Captain, and have told me that you were one of my father’s shipmates. Does that mean you were once a pirate, too?’

Harry stiffened. ‘Never.’

She flushed with embarrassment for she felt as if she had insulted him. She cleared her throat. ‘May I ask why you decided to live here on Madeira? You never thought of sailing home with my father?’

‘No, he never took me into his confidence before he disappeared. By the purest stroke of luck, I was able to perform a service to the owner of this villa whilst on the other side of the world. There was a skirmish with the natives and I saved his life. We conversed and discovered we had a common ambition, so that is why I set sail in company with him and his companions for Madeira.’

‘What was this ambition of yours?’ she asked.

‘I wished to sail around the coast of Africa to the Indies. I hope

that answer will suffice for the moment. Right now I would know more about you and how you came to be captured by pirates.

She sighed and plucked at her skirts. ‘When I set out from London in search of my father, I had three companions and we were accompanied by another ship. Unfortunately the vessels were separated by a storm and our ship was attacked by pirates. Our captain was killed and so were several members of the crew.’

He frowned. ‘And your companions?’

‘Certainly, owing to her station, Lady Elizabeth should have been ransomed, but I do not know what might have happened to Hannah, her maid, and Joshua Wood, who was also in her service. I was separated from them, you see. They remained on the captured ship and I was taken on to the pirates’ vessel to be sold to the slavers.’

‘It is possible Joshua Wood might have been forced to join the pirates.’

‘I see.’ Bridget sighed. ‘Tell me, Captain—do you know what happened to Captain Black Harry?’

Harry’s heart leapt. He had been waiting for this moment and he still did not know how to answer the question. His dark brows knit and he folded powerful arms across his broad chest. ‘I had almost forgotten you knew the captain. This Joshua Wood, you admired him?’

Bridget gave him a startled look. ‘He was a good man. Dependable.’

Harry felt a curl of envy. ‘A handsome man?’

‘I would say pleasant, rather than handsome.’

‘You were fond of him?’ he pressed.

She frowned, wondering why he asked such questions of Joshua. ‘I liked him. As I have told you, he was a good man, not the kind to force himself on a woman like some,’ she added, dropping her gaze and gripping her hands tightly together.

Harry thought of the slave trader and wished he had him there in front of him, so he could punch him in the face, but all he said was, ‘I am glad to hear it. This Lady Elizabeth—what is her full name?’

Bridget pulled herself together. ‘Lady Elizabeth Stanley. She is related to the King of England.’

Surprise flared in Harry’s eyes. ‘A rare prize, indeed, for a pirate. I deem you have no need to fear for her life. She will certainly have been ransomed. It is a pity she did not arrange for you to be ransomed, too.’

Bridget nodded. ‘But the fault was not hers that I was taken away by the pirates and I know she was deeply concerned for me. In the past she was exceedingly kind to me. When I escaped from my uncle I was able to help in the rescue of her goddaughter, Rosamund, who was abducted by her stepbrother around that time. Afterwards, her ladyship offered to be of assistance to me. I became part of her household and she took my problems to heart and decided to accompany me on my search for my father and Captain Black Harry. Only on the way ...’ She became agitated and jumped to her feet. ‘You can have no notion of what it is like

to be desired by men who have you in their power! What I had to do just to survive ...’

Harry reached out and was compelled to take her by the shoulders. He gazed down into her face and slowly lifted a hand and stroked her cheek. ‘You are very beautiful.’

Bridget closed her eyes and allowed her face to rest against his hand. ‘Beauty can be a bane,’ she whispered, thinking of the time when even Black Harry had looked at her with a delighted expression on his handsome face. She opened her eyes and looked up into the captain’s bearded face. ‘Do you know the whereabouts of Black Harry?’ she asked again with a troubled look.

Harry released her. ‘He no longer exists.’

‘*What!*’ Bridget was taken aback. ‘When did this happen? Did he die recently or was he lost in the New World and someone else took over his ship?’

Harry was surprised by her reaction. ‘You sound like you care what happened to him. Yet earlier I received the impression that you despised him, so why should it matter to you if he is dead?’

‘There are those I know in England who will be saddened to hear of his death,’ she said.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. ‘If you talk of his family, he has none.’

‘How do you know that? He had lost his memory and could not remember his family,’ she said with a toss of her head, causing her glorious hair to swirl about her shoulders. ‘If only he had not separated me from my father and gone to the New World.’

Harry's gaze fixed on her hair and he longed to touch it and run his fingers through it. Instead he clenched his fists. 'No doubt when last you confronted each other, you were showing all the signs of burgeoning womanhood.'

Bridget flushed. 'What are you suggesting? That he thought I would have an unsettling effect on his crew?'

He raised his eyebrows in a speaking manner. 'No doubt he was aware that a woman's needs are very different from a man's and to be the only female on a long voyage would have presented you with problems.'

She knew he was right about that, but was not going to admit it. 'I would have coped, Captain. A woman can adapt to difficult situations the same as a man.'

'I am not disputing your courage and stamina, Mistress McDonald, but a woman cannot help but practise her feminine wiles on a man in order to get him to do what she wishes.'

Bridget's jaw dropped and, for a moment, she was speechless and hurt that he could believe that of her. 'Are you daring to suggest that I am a coquette?' she demanded. 'I thought you were different from other men because you have been kind to me, but I see now that I was mistaken. I will seek help elsewhere. I have been called a witch in the past and accused of putting a spell on a man. The slave trader was typical of a certain kind of man who blames the object of their lust, without caring what damage they do to a woman. No doubt Black Harry was the same.'

Harry's jaw tightened. 'You do him an injustice when he

cannot defend his reputation. I understand why you were desperate enough to jump into a raging sea, but I am not like that slave trader. Anyway, if you prefer to manage without any further help from me then I will leave you alone to consider your options.’ He left the bedchamber, closing the door carefully behind him.

If there had been anything close by that she could have picked up and thrown at him, Bridget would have done so. She wanted to scream at him. How could he not understand how much his words had hurt her? She had done everything possible to hide her feminine charms from the pirate crew but little good it had done her. When she had fought off the advances of the ones who had tried to steal a kiss from her, she had been repaid with a beating.

She dropped on to the bed, wondering how she could get off this island without the captain. She remembered Black Harry paying for her passage to Scotland, so she could leave Ireland as her father had wished her to do. She had to admit that it was strange behaviour on Black Harry’s part if he really had lusted after her. She recalled how strong and indestructible he had appeared as he had stood on the quayside last time she had seen him. It seemed wrong that two such strong men as he and her father could now be dead.

A lump filled her throat and she wanted to weep. She must return to Black Harry’s friend, the Baron Dalsland, in England, but what sad news she would be taking with her to the Baron and his wife, Rosamund, who was Black Harry’s sister—the sister he did not know existed. Joshua, too, would be disappointed,

as would Lady Elizabeth—that is if they were still alive. She wondered if they believed she, herself, was lost to them for ever.

A tear trickled down her cheek. Perhaps it would be better if she did not return to England because then she would not have to give them such disappointing and sad news. But that was a cowardly thought and she must consider some way she could get back to them.

She wondered if she were to get down on her knees and kiss the captain's feet and beg his pardon he would extend his helping hand to her again. Her proud nature balked at the very notion of behaving in the way she had been forced to act whilst in the power of the pirate chieftain when she had rebelled against his orders. Fortunately, where he was concerned her beauty had saved her from rape, because she was worth more to him as a virgin.

A knock on the door and her heart began to race and she felt quite faint at the thought of coming face to face with her host again. He was beginning to have the most odd effect on her. Had he returned to tell her that he did indeed want her out of the house immediately?

'Who is it?' she asked in a trembling voice.

'It's Joe.'

She felt a mixture of disappointment and relief. 'Come in.'

He opened the door and peered round it cautiously. 'The captain said that you were vexed. He told me to make sure not to get too close to you with a knife.'

His words came as such an anticlimax that Bridget laughed.

‘Your captain jests. I would not hurt you, Joe. I look upon you as my friend.’

‘Honestly?’ He pushed the door wider with his hip and came further into the bedchamber. ‘I’ve got no female friends, but I’ve food here that’s real appetising. It’ll nourish you and make you strong.’

‘I suppose you don’t get a chance to become acquainted with a suitable lass being away at sea so long,’ said Bridget.

‘Aye. But, to be honest, I don’t know what to say to lasses, unlike some of the crew. Women and drink are the first things they think of as soon as we drop anchor in port.’ He reddened. ‘I suppose I shouldn’t be talking to you about such matters ...’ His voice trailed off and he looked even more embarrassed.

Bridget lowered her eyes and toyed with her fingers. ‘Does the captain go with women?’

Joe placed the tray on the chest and made for the door. ‘No, he steers clear of them. There was a woman he once loved, but she was in love with his closest friend.’ Joe looked guilty. ‘The captain would have me hide if he knew I was gossiping about him. Now you eat your fish and bread.’

Bridget gazed down at the pure white fillets swimming in a creamy herb sauce as if in a daze. ‘What kind of fish is it?’

‘Forget its name, but it has a real ugly head. Anyway, you’re not going to have to look at that because I chopped it off.’

‘Did you catch it yourself?’ she asked.

Joe grinned. ‘Aye. Captain’s too busy to go fishing. Time’s

money and he reckons the winds will be blowing in the right direction soon to take us to Lisbon.’

The lad’s words made Bridget feel almost as desperate as she had felt when she had dropped into the sea. ‘Tell me, Joe, what is your captain’s name?’

‘We call him Captain Mariner.’

‘Mariner?’ She stared at him in surprise. ‘But that is simply another name for a sailor.’

Joe nodded. ‘Aye, the captain was an orphan like me, so he chose his own name.’

Bridget supposed it made perfect sense. ‘And what’s your surname, Joe?’

‘I’m Joseph Cook because that’s what I am. I’ll leave you now, mistress, to enjoy your meal.’

After Joe left, Bridget forced herself to eat whilst she mulled over what he had told her. If the captain had naught to do with women, it meant that she was safe from any advances from him. She wondered about the woman he had loved and recalled the expression in his eyes when he had looked at her earlier. He was all man and no doubt could have made many a woman happy. She regretted speaking to him the way she had done now. He must have been deeply hurt when the woman had preferred his friend. Somehow she had to overcome his misgivings about her and convince him that it would serve him well to take her with him on his ship to Lisbon.

Harry stood outside Bridget’s bedchamber. He had calmed

down and now regretted upsetting her. He should have taken her sufferings into more consideration and considered his words before he spoke. But he had spoken honestly when he had told her that she was beautiful. He desired her and wanted her for himself, but for the moment he had to keep those feelings under control. She was penniless, far from home and her situation was unlikely to improve if Callum was at the bottom of the ocean along with Harry's ship and its crew. She might speak of friends in England, but that country was thousands of miles away. Her beauty, as she had said, was a hindrance rather than a help, and she needed protecting from other men. He could see only one way of ensuring such protection and security for the future. But if she knew him for who he really was, then she might reject his suggestion. If it were not for his beard, she might possibly have guessed who he was by now.

How long before she realised he was deceiving her? He had not actually lied to her when he'd told her that Black Harry no longer existed but she had reacted to the news as he intended, by believing that he had meant he was dead. Harry had always hated being called Black Harry and no one had called him by that name for years, so in a way he did no longer exist. Now Harry, as his alter ego, Captain Mariner, needed to apologise to Bridget McDonald if he was to lay his plan for their future before her. Taking a deep breath, he wrapped his knuckles on the panel of the door and asked for permission to enter.

'Of course, Captain Mariner, do come in,' invited Bridget.

Perhaps he should not be surprised by the sweetness of her tone, aware how desperate was her situation. He half-expected to find her lying on the bed, resting, but she was standing in front of the statue of the Madonna and Child. He cleared his throat. She turned and their eyes caught and held, and he guessed she was trying not to show how nervous she was of him.

‘I hope you will forgive me for having spoken words that were hurtful to you?’ said Harry quietly.

Bridget did not drop her gaze, but her insides were quivering. ‘I, too, spoke out of turn earlier, Captain Mariner. I really am grateful for all you have done for me and I really do need your help. If I had any money, I would pay you to take me aboard your ship and provide me with passage to Lisbon.’

‘And what would you do when you reached Lisbon?’

‘I would hope that there would be an English ship whose captain would be generous enough to take me to London. I am sure my friends would willingly reimburse him for his trouble.’

Harry frowned. ‘You cannot be as foolish as you sound, Mistress McDonald. I refuse to believe that you have forgotten already your earlier fears about the slave trader still searching for you. I deem what you really want is for me to take you all the way to England.’

She blushed. ‘It would certainly be the perfect answer to my dilemma.’

Harry muttered, ‘Sit down, Mistress McDonald.’

She hesitated and he rasped, ‘I cannot sit down until you do

and I've been on my feet for hours.'

Hastily she sat on the bed. 'You are busy supervising the loading of the sugar-cane harvest?'

'Aye. All is nearly ready and I will be departing soon.' He paused and was silent for so long that she thought he was going to refuse to take her. Then he took a deep breath. 'I have a proposition to put to you.'

'What kind of proposition?' she asked warily.

He frowned. 'There is no need for you to look so apprehensive, but you are an attractive woman and could cause havoc on my ship.'

'Joe told me that you—'

He glared at her. 'What did he tell you?'

She changed what she had been about to say. 'That you were an orphan just like him, so you chose your own name.'

Harry said drily, 'I don't believe that was your first choice of words, but no matter.' He paused, putting off the moment when he would put his proposition to her. 'Would you like to know how Joe came to be in my employment?'

'Aye. I know that he is fond of you and thinks you are the best captain he knows.' She smiled.

Harry scrubbed at his beard. 'I found Joe being tormented by a couple of bigger lads down by the waterfront in London, so I took him under my wing because I knew what it was to have no one of your own to fight your corner. He's been with me ever since. He's like a son to me now.'

Bridget felt a strange warmth inside her. ‘Surely you’re not old enough to have a son his age?’

Harry gave a twisted smile. ‘A younger brother, then. I do not know my exact age, but I reckon I must have seen twenty–four summers.’ He paused. ‘How old are you, Mistress McDonald?’

‘It will be the eighteenth anniversary of my birth in a few months.’

He nodded. ‘Then it is time you were wed.’

Her mouth tightened. ‘You would tease me, Captain Mariner? What kind of man would marry a dowerless woman?’

‘I will marry you,’ said Harry simply.

Bridget went still and was convinced that she must have misheard him. ‘I beg your pardon, Captain? I didn’t quite catch what you said.’

‘A marriage of convenience, Mistress McDonald,’ he said, meeting her gaze squarely. ‘You are a penniless woman alone in a foreign land and in need of a protector, and I have decided that a wife could be useful to me.’

She was stunned by his suggestion. ‘I cannot believe you would wish to marry me. I have naught to bring you.’

‘You are a beautiful woman and will enhance my life. I have roamed the seas for years and it has seldom bothered me that I have no wife or house to call home when I make landfall. Now I have decided that I will buy a house in some port and you can live there. Will that not suit you? You will not have to constantly tolerate my presence for I will be away on business some of the

time. You can make a home for me and Joe. Do you think you can manage to do that? If you feel it is beyond your capacities, then say so now.'

Bridget was still feeling stunned by his proposal, but his reasoning sounded sensible. She had to give it serious thought, because what would happen to her if she turned him down? He might feel he no longer needed to feel responsible for her. He had been kind and tended her when she was ill. No doubt he had saved her life and not once had he taken advantage of her dependency on him. He appeared to be an honourable man. But what did he mean exactly by a marriage of convenience?

She cleared her throat. 'I thank you for your offer, Captain, but does it not bother you that we scarcely know each other?'

He raised those devilishly dark eyebrows of his and drawled, 'Most couples who make convenient matches are barely acquainted.'

Bridget knew this to be true. Even the King of England's daughter, Margaret, had married the King of Scotland by proxy without ever having met him. 'That is certainly true. You speak of a marriage of convenience—does that mean you intend this to be a match in name only or shall it be a proper marriage?'

He hesitated. 'Perhaps we can discuss that when we are better acquainted.'

She could see the sense in that because it was possible that they both might have a change of heart in a few months' time. But even so—She frowned. 'Wouldn't a housekeeper do you just

as well?’

Harry blinked at her. ‘Am I to presume you would rather be my housekeeper?’

‘No! For what security would that give me?’ she said honestly, reaching out and touching his arm. ‘Yet what if, against all the odds, you were to meet another woman and fall in love with her? You might decide that you’d rather be rid of me.’

‘It is hardly likely, Mistress McDonald,’ he said ruefully. ‘But your point is worth considering, only maybe it will be you who will fall in love with another man. You are lovely. It isn’t as if you are stuck with an ugly visage like mine. Maybe you will come to hate looking at my face.’

She hesitated. ‘I confess I do not have a fondness for black beards. Perhaps if you shaved it off, I would marry you.’

Harry’s hand went to his beard in a defensive gesture. ‘Is that really necessary?’

‘No, it’s just that the slave trader had a black beard and I would rather not be reminded of him,’ she said.

Harry did not want her constantly thinking of the slave trader, either, as that would not bode well for their future. On the other hand, when she saw him without his beard and recognised him, as well as getting a good look at the disfiguring scar currently hidden beneath his beard, she would have more than one reason for refusing his offer. ‘What if I were to promise to shave it off after the wedding?’

She smiled. ‘That is a rare promise. I cannot believe you are as

ugly as you say you are. I deem you just hide behind that beard because you wish to keep the women at bay.'

He grimaced. 'I would like to hear you say that when you see me minus this beard,' he said, touching his whiskers.

'I deem you dwell too much on the importance of a person's appearance. Surely it is what one's heart is like that is more important.'

'You can say that because you are lovely,' said Harry, 'not that I disagree with you about a person's nature. I would add that, if you decide to accept my proposal, I will expect your complete loyalty to me once we are married.'

His words surprised her. 'Why should you doubt my loyalty? You are offering me a home where I will rule when you are not there. I have no dowry, so no other man of worth would take me as I am. A home of my own is something I have never had before. Just like you, my home was a ship for several years. Even when I lived on land before sailing with my father, my home was either in my Irish grandfather's keep or my uncle's castle. It is true that there will be much for me to learn about organising a household, but I have seen how it is done and I have certain housewifery skills, such as sewing and cooking.'

'Then you will agree to be my wife?' asked Harry, his heart thudding as he waited for her answer.

Chapter Four

Bridget said hesitantly, 'You are offering me so much. I only wish I had part of my father's hoard to give you, then I would feel more worthy of you. I would that neither of us will regret my agreeing to be your wife.'

'I have no need of a dowry,' said Harry, relieved. He took her hand and lifted it to his lips and kissed it. 'Obviously there will be no time for banns to be read, but I will visit the priest in Machico today and, for a few pieces of silver, I am sure he will obtain a special licence so we can wed before we leave Madeira. I pray that you will feel well enough to make the journey in the next few days.'

'If that is your wish.' Bridget could feel her skin tingling where his lips had touched it. 'How will we travel there?'

'On horseback or you could ride alongside me when I drive the cart into Machico. After the ceremony we will go aboard my ship. I will need to oversee the loading of the cargo and, God willing, we will set sail the following morning on the outgoing tide.'

'You have it all planned,' said Bridget, attempting to conceal her sudden apprehension. Could he have planned this from the moment he had discovered her identity? But why should he have done? He had, after all, given sensible reasons why he wished to marry her.

‘Naturally, I gave my proposal some thought before broaching the matter,’ said Harry. ‘Of course, plans can easily be overturned by forgetfulness or misfortune,’ he said idly. ‘If you can think of aught I might have forgotten, then I will be glad if you will inform me of it. I will leave you now and speak to you on my return.’

Bridget watched him go. She found it difficult to think of anything other at the moment than this man who had saved her life. She had a fair notion of what life was like being married to a mariner. Lonely, if one did not have a family or friends living close by. She felt a tightness in her chest and a moment’s panic. Had she made the right decision? He had made no mention of wanting children. Yet she knew from listening to married women talking that most men wanted a son. Her mother had wanted a son, but it had never happened.

There were footsteps outside in the passage that she recognised and her heart began to thud. ‘Is that you, Captain?’ she called.

He entered the bedchamber and smiled down at her. ‘I have been thinking you might like to sit outside on the terrace. I am certain the fresh air and sunshine will do you good.’

Instantly his thoughtfulness banished her ponderings. ‘I would like that,’ she said sincerely. ‘But I have no shoes.’ She lifted her skirts to reveal her bare feet. ‘I lost them in the sea.’

He frowned and stroked his beard. ‘I should have thought of that earlier. No doubt you could also do with more clothes for the journey. I shall see what I can do about such matters when

I go into Machico.’

She thanked him.

‘I think it is best if I carry you downstairs as this will be the first time you will leave your bedchamber since your arrival,’ he said.

Before she could protest and say that she was quite capable of walking, he scooped her up into his arms and carried her from the room. ‘But, Captain, my condition is much improved,’ she assured him.

‘Aye, but you have been close to death and need to conserve your strength for the journey.’ Harry was not going to deprive himself of the pleasure of holding her close to him.

On those words, Bridget decided to remain silent, conscious of the strength in his arms and the beating of his heart. It gave her an odd feeling to be cradled in his arms that was not unpleasant.

He set her down in a chair on the terrace where she could gaze down over the garden to the glistening ocean below. ‘How calm the water looks today,’ she said.

‘Aye, it is hard to believe that it can turn into a raging monster with little warning,’ said Harry. ‘If you will excuse me. I will be back soon.’

‘Of course,’ said Bridget hastily, watching him until he was out of sight.

Then she turned and looked again over the garden, determined to make the most of these moments of tranquillity. Soon she would have to strengthen her will to face going aboard ship again.

What the captain had said about the sea being a raging monster had struck home. But she would not mention her fear of getting caught up in another storm to him.

‘Taste this and give me your opinion,’ said Harry, handing a goblet to Bridget.

Grateful that he was treating her as he would a normal guest, she took a cautious sip and then a mouthful of the wine. ‘It is sweet and fruity with an unusual flavour. If you could bottle it, I’m sure you could make your fortune.’

He smiled. ‘I see you have a business head. The unusual flavour is spirit fermented from the processed liquid sugar for the estate’s own use. Perhaps one day enough will be produced to make it worth my client’s efforts to turn the liquor into a profitable business. At the moment Jorge does not possess enough agricultural land to do so.’

‘Jorge is the man who owns this house?’

Harry nodded. ‘You have not had the opportunity to discover that Madeira is a heavily forested mountainous island. A lot of trees have to be felled to clear the land for the plough and many of the fields are on a slope. The sugar-cane harvest makes him a decent profit as it is and he also grows vines.’

‘So you ship Madeira wine, as well?’

Harry nodded. ‘It is a popular wine.’

‘Do you have a buyer?’

‘I doubt I’ll have difficulty finding one in England.’ Harry poured a little more of the drink into her goblet. ‘I had, until

recently, thought of making my home here, but now we are to be married no doubt you will wish to live near your friends in England. I have heard that Lady Elizabeth has a fine mansion near the Strand in London.'

'That is true.' Bridget gazed at his bearded face and tried to imagine his profile clean shaven, but it was not easy and she gave up.

'I have also heard she is an eccentric and prone to do exactly what she likes if she takes a fancy to someone, having no husband to rein in her wayward behaviour.'

Bridget smiled. 'She is also extremely wealthy because he died without issue and she inherited his fortune. She is so droll and says exactly what she thinks, even if it is insulting. Yet her heart is warm and once she heard my story, she was determined to help me to find my father.'

'Kind of her, indeed,' said Harry drily. 'I presume it was she who provided the ship you sailed on.'

Bridget shook her head. 'No, her goddaughter had recently married the Baron Dalsland and it was he who placed two of his ships at our disposal.'

'What!' exclaimed Harry, sitting bolt upright.

She looked at him, startled. 'Of course, you will recognise the name. The Baron was a close friend of Captain Black Harry. After we discovered that *Thor's Hammer* had been seen in Funchal harbour, the Baron was determined to have him found.' She drew in a trembling breath. 'As you can imagine I was

desperate to leave England as soon as possible, fearing the ship would be gone if I delayed, but the Baron insisted that we wait until the weather improved.'

'Wise of him,' rasped Harry. 'You are fortunate in your friends.' He longed to ask about this woman whom the Baron had married, but knew it would be more sensible not to show too much interest, if he was to keep his identity secret a little longer. Yet he was extremely curious to know why Alex had not married Ingrid Wrangel, the woman with whom they had both been in love.

'I sincerely hope that Lady Elizabeth is back in London where she belongs,' said Bridget.

'Would you like to live in London?' asked Harry.

'Surely where we live will depend on your trading interests, Captain?'

He did not dispute it because he had seen Joe approaching with food.

Bridget watched as the youth set a basket of bread on the table, as well as dishes of meat, soft white cheese and fruit. She had regained her appetite and her mouth watered. Joe left for a few moments and returned with plates and knives and a jug of wine. She reached for bread and meat and, for a while, neither she nor the captain spoke, but gave all their attention to consuming the meal set before them. It was a while since she had tasted food so good as that she had consumed in this house.

'Perhaps you would prefer to live in Scotland?' suggested

Harry, picking up the conversation where they had left off.

‘Not particularly. My memories of life with my kinsfolk are not particularly happy ones. I was happier with my mother’s family in Ireland, but I would not like to return there. There are too many memories of her in that place where she died and it would make me sad.’ She sighed heavily. ‘If only my father had not gone to the New World and she was still alive.’

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