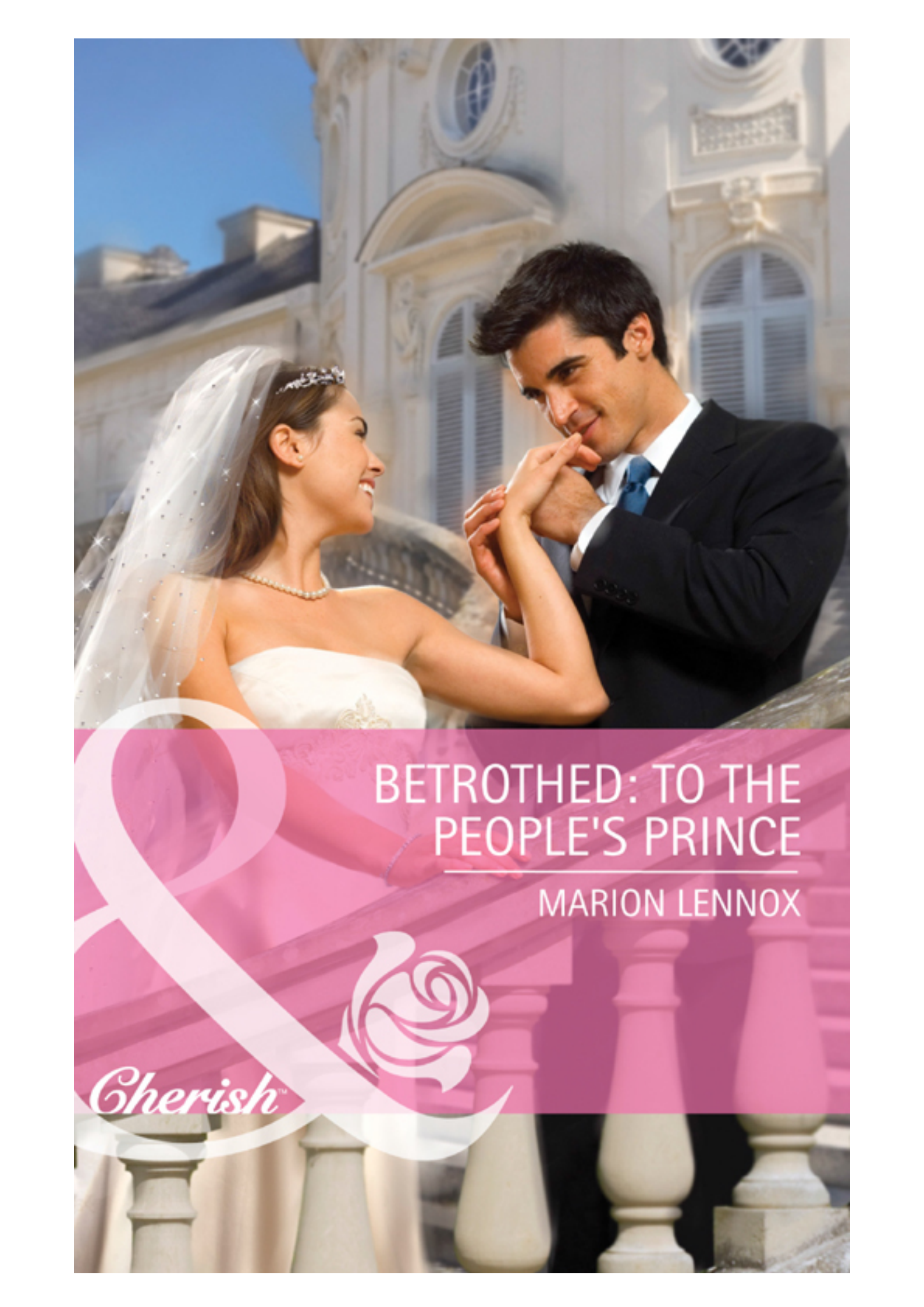


A photograph of a bride and groom in wedding attire standing on a stone balcony. The bride is wearing a white strapless dress and a long veil, while the groom is in a dark suit. They are holding hands and looking at each other. In the background is a large, ornate building with arched windows and shutters. A large, stylized white heart is overlaid on the lower half of the image, partially covering the couple and the text.

BETROTHED: TO THE PEOPLE'S PRINCE

MARION LENNOX

Cherish[™]

Marion Lennox

Betrothed: To the People's Prince

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Betrothed: To the People's Prince

Marion Lennox



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Join Marion Lennox on the Diamond Isles next month for the final instalment in the magnificent Marrying His Majesty trilogy:

CROWNED: THE PALACE NANNY *For Elsa, nanny to the nine-year-old heiress to the throne of Khryseis, there's more in store than going to the ball. Can this Cinderella win the heart of the new Prince Regent?*

CHAPTER ONE

INTO her crowd of beautiful people came...Nikos.

She was taking a last visual sweep of the room, noting descriptions for tomorrow's fashion column.

The men were almost uniformly in black—black T-shirts, black jeans and designer stubble. The women were Audrey Hepburn clones. Cinched waists, wide skirts and pearls. The fifties look was now.

There was little eating. Cinched waists and 'body slimmers' didn't allow for snacking, the waiters were sparse and it wasn't cool to graze.

Nikos was holding a beer, and as the waiter passed with a tray of tiny caviar-loaded blinis he snagged four. He tipped one into his mouth, then turned back to search the room.

For her.

After all these years, he could still stop her world.

She'd forgotten to breathe. It was important to breathe. She took a too-big sip of her too-dry Martini and it went down the wrong way.

Uh-oh. If it wasn't cool to eat, it was even more uncool to choke.

But help was at hand. Smooth and fast as a panther, Nikos moved through the crowd to be by her side in an instant. He took her drink, slapped her back with just the right amount of force, and then calmly waited for her to recover.

Nikos.

She could faint, she thought wildly. An ambulance could take her away and she'd be in a nice, safe emergency room. Safe from the man she'd walked away from almost ten years ago.

But fainting took skills she didn't have. No one seemed about to call for help. No one seemed more than politely interested that she was choking.

Except Nikos.

She didn't remember him as this big. And this...gorgeous? He was wearing faded blue jeans instead of the designer black that was de rigueur in this crowd. His shirt was worn white cotton, missing the top two buttons. He had an ancient leather jacket slung over his arm.

The fashion editor part of her was appreciative. Nice.

More than nice. Nikos.

She coughed on, more than she needed to, trying desperately to give herself space. His dark hair was curly, unruly and a bit too long. His brown-black eyes were crinkled at the edges, weathered from a life at sea. Among this crowd of fake tans, his was undeniably real. His whole body was weathered by his work.

Nikos. Fisherman.

Her childhood love.

He'd grown from a gorgeous boy into a...what? She didn't have words to describe it. She was the fashion editor of one of the world's leading glossies, and she was lost for words.

Words were what she needed. She had to think of something to say. Anything. Almost every eye in the room was on them now. She couldn't retreat to choking again.

'You want your drink back?' His tone was neutrally amused. Deeper than last time she'd heard him. A bit gravelly, with a gorgeous Greek accent.

Sexy as hell.

He was balancing his beer, her Martini and his three remaining blinis. He'd used his spare hand to thump her.

He was large and capable and...

Nikos.

Now she'd stopped choking, the crowd had turned their attention to him. Well, why wouldn't they? The models, designers, media and buyers were openly interested. Maybe more than interested. Their concentrated attention contained more than a hint of lust.

'You going to live?' Nikos asked mildly, and she thought about it. She might. If he went away.

'What are you doing here?'

'Looking for you.'

'It's invitation only.'

'Yep,' he said, as if that hadn't even crossed his mind as something to bother about. How had he done it? People would kill for an invitation to this launch. He'd simply walked in.

'You look cute,' he said, raking her from head to toe.

Right. She'd gone to some trouble with her outfit. Her tiny red skirt was clinging in the right places, she'd managed to make her unruly black curls stay in a knot that was almost sophisticated, but in this crowd of fashion extremists she knew she disappeared.

'Go away,' she said, and he shook his head.

'I can't do that, Princess.'

'Don't call me that.'

'It's what you are.'

'Please, Nikos, not here.'

'Whatever,' he said easily. 'But we need to talk. Phones don't work. You keep hanging up.'

'You don't hang up phones any more.' Very knowledgeable, she thought. What sort of inane talk was this?

'On Argyros we hang up telephones. After we talk to people.'

'I don't live on Argyros.'

'Yeah, that's what I want to talk to you about. It's time you came home.' He handed her back her Martini. He drained his beer and ate his three bitesized blinis, then looked about for more. Two waiters were beside him in an instant.

He always had been charismatic, Athena thought. People gravitated to him.

She'd gravitated to him.

'So how about it?' he said, smiling his thanks to the waiters. Oh, that smile...

'Why would I want to come home?'

'There's the little matter of the Crown. I'm thinking you must have read the newspapers. Your cousin, Demos, says he's talked to you. I'm thinking Alexandros must have talked to you as well—or did you hang up on him, too?'

'Of course I didn't.'

'So you do know you're Crown Princess of Argyros.'

'I'm not Crown Princess of anything. Demos can have it,' she said savagely. 'He wants it.'

'Demos is second in line. You're first. It has to be you.'

'I have the power to abdicate. Consider me abdicated. Royalty's outdated and absurd, and my life's here. So, if you'll excuse me...'

'Thena, you don't have a choice. You have to come home.'

Thena. He was the only one who'd ever shortened her name. It made her feel...as she had no business feeling.

Just tell it like it is and move on, she told herself. Be blunt and cold and not interested. He was talking history. Argyros was no longer anything to do with her.

'You're right,' she managed. 'I don't have a choice. My life is here.'

But not in this room. All of a sudden the room was claustrophobic. Her past was colliding with her present, and it made her feel as if the ground was shaking underneath her.

She and Nikos in the same room? No, no, no.

She and Nikos in the same city? She and Nikos *and their son*?

No!

Fear had her almost frozen.

'Nikos, this is futile,' she managed. 'There's no use telling me to go home. My home is here. Meanwhile, I have things to attend to, so if you'll excuse me...' She handed her Martini glass back to him and, before he could respond she swivelled and made her way swiftly through the crowd.

She reached the door—and she kept on walking.

She hadn't retrieved her checked coat. It didn't matter. Outside was cold, but she wasn't feeling cold. Her face was burning. She was shaking.

Maybe he'd let her be.

Or maybe not. He hadn't come all the way from Argyros to be ignored.

It was raining. Her stilettos weren't built for walking. She wanted to take them off and run. Because of course he'd follow.

Of course he did.

When he fell in step beside her she felt as if she'd been punched. Nikos...He threatened her world.

'Where are we going?' he asked mildly.

'Nowhere you're welcome.'

'Is this any way to greet family?'

'I'm not your family.'

'Tell that to my mother.'

His mother...She thought of Annia and felt a stab of real regret. She glanced sideways at Nikos—and then looked swiftly away. Annia...Argyros...

Nikos.

She'd walked away from them ten years ago. Leaving had broken her heart.

'It's your heritage,' he said mildly, as if he was simply continuing the conversation from back at the fashion launch.

'I never had a heritage. It was all about Giorgos.'

'The King's dead, Athena. He died without an heir. You know that.'

'And that makes a difference how?'

'It means the Diamond Isles become three Principalities again. The original royal families can resume rule. But you know this. By the way—did you also know that you're beautiful?' And he took her arm and forced her to stop.

She'd been striding. Angry. Fearful. Confused. Rain was turning to sleet. Her heels, her tight skirt and sheer pashmina wrap were designed for cocktail hour, not for street wear.

She should keep going but she wasn't all that sure where to go. She couldn't outwalk Nikos and she surely wasn't leading him back to her apartment. She surely wasn't leading him to her son.

She might as well stop. Get it over with now.

She turned to face him. A blast of icy wind hit full on, and she felt herself shudder.

Nikos's ancient leather jacket was suddenly around her, warm from his body, smelling of old leather and Nikos and...home. Argyros. Fishing boats in an ancient harbour. White stone villas hugging island cliffs. Sapphire seas and brilliant sun. The Diamond Isles.

Suddenly, stupidly, she wanted to cry.

'We need to get out of this,' Nikos said. His hand was under her elbow and he was steering her into the brightly lit portico of a restaurant, as if this was his town and he wasn't half a world away from where he lived and worked.

Nikos...

'You call those clothes?' he growled, and she remembered how bossy he'd been when they were kids, and how he was always right.

Bossy and arrogant and...fun. Pushing her past her comfort zone. Daring her to join him.

The number of times she'd ended up with skinned knees, battered and bruised because: 'Of course we can get up that cliff; you're not going to sit and watch like some *girl*, are you?'

She never did sit and watch. Even when they'd been older and the boys from the other islands became part of their pack, she'd always been included. Until...

Let's not go there, she told herself. She'd moved on. She was fashion editor for one of the world's best-selling magazines. She lived in New York and she was fine.

So what was Nikos doing, here, ushering her into a restaurant she recognised? This place usually involved queuing, or a month or more's notice. But Nikos was a man who turned heads, who waiters automatically found a place for, because even if they couldn't place him they felt they should. He was obviously someone. He always had been, and his power hadn't waned one bit.

Stunned to speechlessness, she found herself being steered to an isolated table for two, one of the best in the house. The waiter tried to take her jacket—his jacket—but she clung. It was dumb, but she needed its warmth. She needed its comfort.

'What's good?' Nikos asked the waiter, waving away the menu.

'Savoury? Sweet?'

'Definitely something sweet,' he said, and smiled across the table at her. 'The way the lady's feeling right now, we need all the sugar we can get.'

She refused to smile back. She couldn't allow herself to sink into that smile.

'Crêpes?' the waiter proffered. 'Or if you have time...our raspberry soufflé's a house speciality.'

'Crêpes followed by soufflé for both of us then,' he said easily, and the waiter beamed and nodded and backed away, almost as if he sensed he shouldn't turn his back on royalty.

Nikos. Once upon a time...

No. Get a grip.

'I'm not going anywhere,' she muttered into the silence. 'You can't make me go back.'

Nikos smiled again—his smile wide and white, his eyes deep and shaded, an automatic defence against the sun. His smile was a heart stopper in anyone's language. Especially hers.

'You're right. I can't make you. You need to decide yourself. But that's why I'm here—to help you to decide that you need to come home.'

'My home's here.'

'Your career until now has been here,' he agreed. 'You've done very well.'

'There's no need to sound patronising.'

'I'm not patronising.'

'Like you'd know about my career.'

He raised his brows, half mocking. 'There were seven candidates for the position you're now in,' he said softly. 'Each of them was older, more experienced. You won the job over all of them and your boss believes he made a brilliant decision.'

'How do you know...'

'I've made it my business to find out.'

'Well, butt out. There's no need...'

'There is a need. There was always a chance that you'd inherit, and now you have.'

'I have no intention of inheriting. Demos wants it. Demos can have it. It should be you, but if that's not possible...Demos.'

'It was never going to be me.'

'You're nephew to the King.'

'You know the score,' he said evenly. 'Yes, my mother was the King's sister, but the King's lineage has to be direct and male. That's me out. But the individual island crowns have male/female equality. First in line for the throne of Argyros is you. Princess Athena, Crown Princess of Argyros. Sounds good, hey?' He smiled and tried to take her hand across the table. She snatched it away as if he burned.

'This is crazy. I've told you, Nikos, I'm not coming home.'

'Can I ask why not?'

'I don't belong there.'

'Of course you do. My family has always welcomed...'

'Your family,' she interrupted flatly. 'Of course. How's your wife?'

Why had she asked that? What possible difference did it make? But suddenly—she had to know.

Nikos didn't answer directly. He'd given up trying to take her hand. Instead he'd clasped his hands loosely on the table top. He flexed them now, still linked. Big hands and powerful.

He wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

She shouldn't even care. She shouldn't have asked.

But she had asked, and there was something in his face that said the answer was never going to be easy. For a couple of moments she thought he wouldn't answer at all. But finally he beckoned a waiter, ordered a beer and answered.

'Marika and I are divorced. She's remarried and left the island.' His gaze was expressionless, not giving a clue if this still had the power to hurt.

Ten years ago—two months after she'd left the island—her aunt had written.

By the way, Nikos has married Marika. Rumour is there's a baby on the way, but I guess no one worries about such things any more. You know, I always thought you and Nikos would marry, but I know King Giorgos would hate that. So you're best out of it.

Until then she'd hoped, desperately, that Nikos would follow her. But when she'd read that...

Marika was a distant relation of Nikos, giggly, flirtatious and ambitious. She'd always thought Marika was in love with her cousin, Demos—but obviously it had been Nikos all the time.

She'd been so shocked she'd been physically ill.

Then, four months later her aunt had written a much shorter note. '*A baby. A little girl for Nikos and Marika...*' Her note had trailed off, unfinished, and the writing on the envelope had been scrawly.

It was no wonder. The letter had been delivered two days after her aunt's death.

She'd wept then, for not going home in time, for not guessing her aunt was ill until she'd received the letter, for knowing her last link to the island was ended. And if she'd wept for the fact that Nikos had a baby with Marika, then so be it, the whole thing was grey.

'I'm sorry,' she said now, feeling useless. 'How...how long?'

'How long ago since she left? Nine years. It wasn't what you might call a long-term marriage.'

His tone was bitter. Oh, Nikos, she thought. You, too? Wounds might heal, but scars remained.

'I'm sorry,' she said again, but then made a belated attempt to pull herself together. 'But...it's nothing to do with me. Nothing from the island's anything to do with me. My aunt was the last family I had, and she's dead.'

'The whole island's your family. You rule.' It was said explosively, with passion, and Athena flinched and couldn't think how to reply.

The crêpes arrived, light and hot, oozing a wonderful lemon liqueur and doused with clotted cream. This was everything she most denied herself in food. Nikos picked up a fork and started in—then paused.

'What's wrong?'

'I didn't really want these.'

'You're ill?'

'No.'

'Then eat,' he said. 'You're stupidly thin.'

'I am not!'

'Are, too,' he said, and grinned and suddenly there it was again—the bossiness, the arguments, the *fun*. Childhood with Nikos had been wonderful. Magic.

'Can't make me,' she responded before she could help herself, a response she'd made over and over as a kid.

His dark eyes gleamed with challenge. 'Want to bet?'

'No!'

'Eat your crêpes, Thene.'

She smiled, despite herself, picked up a fork and ate.

How long since she'd indulged in something this full of calories? They tasted fantastic.

'You're not a model,' Nikos said, halfway through his crêpes and finally pausing for breath. 'Why starve?'

'It's expected,' she said. 'You can never be too rich or too thin.'

'Yeah, I've heard that, too,' he growled. 'So, they'll fire you if you gain a pound or six?'

'That party we were at tonight... If I'd turned up as a size fourteen, you think I'd get a foot in the door?'

'You're invited to write about it. Not be it.'

'I'm part of the scene. They like their scene perfect.'

'And this is a career you like?'

'It beats pulling craypots.'

More silence. But he wasn't angry, she thought. He kept on eating, as if she'd just commented on the weather. She'd never been able to needle him.

Oh, she'd missed him. For ten long years it had felt like an ache, a limb missing, phantom pains shooting when she least expected. Watching him now, it felt as if she was suddenly whole again. He was intent on his pancake, maybe giving her space—who knew with Nikos?

He'd fitted right in with the people at the party, she thought. But then she thought, no. She'd got that wrong.

Nikos was an embodiment of what the people she worked with wanted to be. They went to gyms and solariums and plastic surgeons and every other expensive way to get their bodies to where Nikos had his.

All they had to do was haul fifty or so craypots a day for life, she thought, and found she was smiling.

'What?' he said, and she was suddenly smiling straight at him, almost pleading for him to return the smile.

And he did. In force. His smile had the capacity to knock her sideways.

The waiter, about to descend to take away their plates, paused with the strength of it. This was a classy establishment. Their waiter knew enough not to intrude on such a smile.

'I've missed you, Thene,' Nikos said, and his hand was reaching over the table for hers.

No. She found enough sense to tug her hands off the table and put them sensibly in her lap. But she couldn't stop herself saying the automatic reply. 'I've missed you, too.'

'So come home.'

'Because I've missed you?'

'Because the country needs you.'

Here it was again. Duty. Guilt.

'No.'

She closed her eyes and the waiter decided it was safe to come close. He cleared the plates and set them again, ready for soufflé. Maybe Nikos was watching her. She didn't know.

Duty.

It had torn her in two ten years ago. To go back now...

'You know Demos wants to open the diamond mines again?' he said, almost conversationally, and her eyes flew open.

'What the... Why?'

'He's wanted to for years. It was only Giorgos's greed that stopped him. Giorgos wasn't fussed about mining them—he had more money than he knew what to do with, thankfully. But the royal money chests have gone to Alexandros on Sappheiros. There's little money in the Argyros exchequer.'

'Which mines does he want to open?' She shouldn't care, she thought. She shouldn't!

'All of them.'

'All? The island will be ripped apart.'

'You think Demos cares?'

She stared at him, but she was no longer seeing him. Argyros...The Diamond Isles. Three magic island nations in the Mediterranean. All whitewashed stone, steep cliffs, sapphire seas. Three diamonds glittering in the sun.

Home.

Once upon a time the Isles had been three separate nations—Sappheiros, Argyros and Khryseis, but for the last two hundred years they'd been ruled as a Kingdom. Now, however, with the death of King Giorgos without an heir, the islands were Principalities again.

And she was Crown Princess Athena.

Ha. She'd walked away from the royal title when she'd walked away from the island, but it always had been a hollow tag.

Nikos had more right to rule than she, she thought. He'd lived and worked on Argyros all his life. He loved it.

And Demos?

Demos was the son of Athena's uncle. Because his father was younger than Athena's mother, he was second in the ancient lineage where she was first. But neither of them had expected to rule.

From time to time she'd read about Demos in the society pages. Whereas she'd left her title of Princess on the island, Demos still valued the title Prince and he used it.

He'd phoned her a week ago and asked that she abdicate and leave the Crown to him. She'd tentatively agreed, because what was the alternative? Going home...going back herself was impossible.

'Demos arrived back on the island the day after we learned the King's rule was ended,' Nikos said, and she realised he'd been following her thoughts. 'He wants it so badly he'll do whatever it takes to get it. He's assuming you don't want it. Do you know why?'

'He rang and asked.'

'Alexandros rang you as well.'

'Yes.' Alexandros, the new crown Prince of Sappheiros, was trying to untangle the mess that was the succession.

'And you told him you were confused.'

'I was,' she said. 'Until Demos phoned.'

'So you'd let Demos have it?'

'It's an empty title anyway. Demos will enjoy it. And how can I come home now?' she demanded.

'It's not an empty title. Not if he opens the diamond mines.'

'It doesn't matter. It can't matter. My life is here.'

'It's not much of a life if it doesn't include crêpes. Or soufflé. Hey, look at this!'

The house speciality was arriving. The soufflé. This dish was famous. *How had Nikos manoeuvred his way in here?*

'Who do you think you are?' she demanded, and he grinned.

'A fisherman from Argyros. A kid in a lolly shop. Wow! Shut up and eat, Thene. This food needs serious respect.'

She opened her mouth to deny it. She so did not need another sweet.

Her raspberry soufflé was exploding upward and outward, crusty, dusted with sugar, irresistible. While she thought weakly about denial, the waiter produced a jug and poured a thin, hot trickle of

blood-red juice down into the soufflé. The crust burst at the centre, the soufflé swallowed the juice and Athena conceded that maybe Nikos was right. This demanded serious respect.

She shut up and ate.

Heaven. Right here on the plate. Seriously wonderful food...

Missing out on such treats was the price she paid for being where she was. If she got up at five tomorrow and jogged double her normal distance...Maybe...

'Let it go, Thene,' Nickos said. He was wiping the inside of his bowl with his forefinger and licking in deep appreciation. 'You had a bigger butt when you were eleven. It's not natural.'

'It's what I do.' She finished and set down her spoon. Who licked their fingers?

She had a sudden blast of memory. Nikos's mother, Annia, standing at her kitchen table, endlessly baking. She remembered a plum pie that was to die for...

Before she could help herself, she let her finger drop into the bowl, ran it round the edges and licked. Not sure whether she was tasting soufflé now, or pie from the past.

'How's your mother?' she asked.

'Great,' Nikos said. 'She sends her love. She says come home—though if I take you home looking like this she'll have forty fits.'

'I loved your mother.'

It was said without thinking. She hadn't meant it. Or...she hadn't meant to say it.

'She hated it when you went away, Thene.'

'Yeah. Well.' Suddenly she'd had enough. More than enough. Emotion was threatening to overwhelm her. She stood up, too fast. It made her feel dizzy. Disoriented. Nikos was beside her in a flash, gripping her elbow, supporting her.

She should wrench away. He made her...melt.

'I need to go home.'

'My car's close.'

'You have a car? Here? In Manhattan?'

'Borrowed from Stefanos.'

Stefanos. Of course. The third member of the guardians.

Stefanos, Alexandros and Nikos had been friends from childhood. Three intelligent boys, bound by one common goal. To free their respective islands.

They'd run together as a pack. Only, of course, while Giorgos was alive they could do nothing. But now...

'Stefanos is still in New York?' she asked. She'd seen him once, when she'd walked into a city hospital to visit a friend. She'd turned and walked out before he'd seen her. She'd even thought of moving to another city because he was here. But that was ridiculous. It was a big city.

'Stefanos is in Australia trying to find the heir to the throne of Khryseis. He's Prince Regent of that island. Like you, he doesn't have a choice.'

'I do have a choice,' she snapped. 'And one of them is to make my own way home. To my home. To where I live now.'

'How do you get home from here?' he asked, as if mildly interested, not taking up her nuances. 'A cab? I'll drive you.'

'I ride the subway.'

'The subway...'

'This is my neighbourhood, Nikos,' she said, and made her voice sound sure and mature and...determined. 'This is where I live. But I need to go. Oscar and Nicholas are expecting me.'

'Who are Oscar and Nicholas?'

'My family,' she said, and the thought of Nicholas brought fear flooding back. 'So...so, if you'll excuse me...Oh, you need to pay? Sorry if I don't wait. Goodnight.'

And she turned and walked from the restaurant.

When she reached the pavement she slipped off her shoes and she started to run.

CHAPTER TWO

CARRIE was watching TV when she let herself into her apartment. Lovely, comforting Carrie, middle-aged and buxom, knitting endless squares to turn into endless blankets for the homeless. She closed the door, leant on it as if to lock the world out and let herself be comforted by the domesticity in front of her.

Oscar was lying draped over Carrie's feet. The big basset hound looked up at her with soulful reproach, as if to say, *You expect me to get up at this time of night? You need to be kidding.*

She smiled. Oscar helped as well.

'Hey, great jacket,' Carrie said equably from the couch. 'You swap jackets with a boy?'

Whoops. She'd forgotten she was wearing it. Or maybe subconsciously she'd known, and she liked it. She fingered the soft, worn leather and found comfort there as well.

'Yep,' she said.

'A good-looking one?'

'Yep to that as well. Really good-looking.'

'Excellent,' Carrie said and dumped her knitting into her carrier bag. 'He ask you out?'

'We did already. We ate soufflé and crêpes.'

'And crêpes? Wow. You going to see him again?'

'Once is enough.' Once in one lifetime.

Carrie's face puckered into disappointment. 'Why the heck?' she demanded, seriously displeased. 'You know I can take Nicky whenever you want. You need a love life.'

'I've had one.'

'But you've kept his jacket,' Carrie said, thoughtful. 'Smart girl. A guy's going to miss a jacket like that. Does he know where you live?'

'No. I'll post it to him.'

'Don't post it for a couple of days,' Carrie said. 'Give the man a challenge.' She pushed her more than ample self to her feet, made her way across the room and gave Athena a hug. 'You deserve some excitement. And Nicky needs a dad.'

'Carrie...'

'Just saying,' Carrie said placidly. 'Just going.'

And she went. Leaving silence.

She sat, on cushions still warm from Carrie. She stared mindlessly at the soap Carrie had been watching. Oscar sighed, heaved himself sideways and redraped himself over her feet.

She needed comfort.

She needed to stop being angry.

Why the anger? After ten years, surely she had no right to still be angry with Nikos.

Or maybe she had. Ten years ago she'd ached for him to follow her. Just one word... something...a message to find out if she was okay. Her aunt had known her address. Nikos had known her aunt.

But it was as if the moment she'd walked off the island she'd walked out of Nikos's life. And now...here he was, demanding she take a part in the island's future. Demanding she think about Argyros.

And all she could think was that she hadn't told him he had a son.

He was here. The time to tell him was now.

The time to tell him was ten years ago. For him to find out now...

It had to happen. She had to find the courage.

Maybe he'd leave without trying to see her again. Maybe she'd have to go to Argyros to tell him.

He was in New York right now. She had to get over her anger and tell him.

And then say goodbye. For to go back to Argyros... Even if Demos were to destroy the island with his greed for diamonds...

No. It couldn't happen. She'd have to do something.

What?

Nothing, she told herself, but there was desperation behind the word.

It had to be nothing. She'd left Argyros behind. That first dreadful year, she'd coped with homesickness, isolation, fear, and the birth of Nicky, and she'd faced it alone. She'd fought to make herself a living, knowing she was all her baby had. *That which doesn't kill us makes us stronger*. The often used platitude had become her mantra.

She'd never again let herself need anyone as she'd needed Nikos. She no longer loved Nikos and she no longer called Argyros home.

Her head hurt. Thinking hurt.

She needed to sleep, but sleep wasn't going to come easily tonight. If she filed her story now... That'd mean tomorrow was free. Saturday—Nicky had the day off school. They could go to the park... something, anything, just to get her away from here, buy her a little time.

She should take off Nikos's jacket.

Not yet. For just a little bit longer she'd allow herself that one small comfort.

Who the hell were Oscar and Nicholas?

Husband? Son? Sons? He was going nuts not knowing.

He'd hired someone to find her. The firm he'd hired had given him the magazine she worked for and a brief summary of her career. It was hardly personal.

Why had he never thought she could be married?

She wasn't wearing a ring.

That could mean anything. Rings weren't compulsory. Nor was marriage; its lack didn't necessarily mean you were without a long-term partner.

Why had she responded to him with anger?

He'd hardly expected her to fall into his arms as her long lost friend. He'd married someone else.

Marika... He thought of his ex-wife now and fought back anger that stayed with him still. But you needed to move on. *He* needed to move on.

He had.

Or he thought he had until he'd seen Athena tonight. She was every bit the girl he remembered—but now she was a woman. Her eyes had tiny creases—smile lines. Did she smile often? Did the unknown Oscar and Nicholas make her smile?

He'd forgotten how she'd made him feel—or maybe he'd blocked it out. Looking at her across the restaurant table tonight... it had taken all the power he had to keep his voice neutral, to keep his feelings in check.

She was still Athena—the girl he'd loved to the point of madness—and then she'd chosen her career over him. The woman he'd held in a corner of his heart for ten long years.

Oh, there'd been other women—of course there had. As the owner of the biggest fishing fleet in the Diamond Isles he was considered more than eligible. He was never lost for... companionship, only every woman he dated compared with Athena.

Even the woman he'd married.

Especially the woman he'd married.

The old anger gripped him, tore at him. The old hunger...

Only it wasn't an old hunger. It was as real and as raw tonight as it had ever been.

He opened the door to the adjoining hotel room. The woman from the hotel sitting service rose to leave.

'She's been very good, sir. I read her the book like you said. She even undressed herself. I didn't think...'

'That's great,' he said. He didn't want to hear what she didn't think.

'Goodnight, then,' the woman said and slipped away into the night.

He stood for a moment gazing down at Christa. His daughter was sucking her thumb, even in sleep. She shouldn't—but who cared?

He crossed to the bed and sat down beside his sleeping child. He stroked her pretty dark hair. She opened her eyes and smiled sleepily at him. 'Papa.'

'Go to sleep, kitten,' he said softly.

'N...nice.' She closed her eyes again and was instantly asleep.

How could he still be angry? Athena had moved away but now, in his heart, in her stead, he had his little daughter.

For years he'd tried to think that. It didn't work. It never had.

For years he'd envisaged Athena in a barren, lonely existence in a strange land. He'd almost hoped for it.

She'd left him. He should have cut off all thoughts of her. He shouldn't care.

But it wasn't possible. Not then and not now.

Athena...or his daughter.

Athena and the unknown Oscar and Nicholas.

So she had a family, too. Well, so be it, he thought, trying to be rational. He had his Christa and he was content. What he was feeling now was the echoes of the past. From now on the personal had to be set aside for the good of the island.

Tomorrow he had to find her again. She had to face her duty. She must.

He'd take Christa sightseeing tomorrow morning. Maybe they could take a buggy ride round Central Park. She'd enjoy that. Then, in the afternoon, he'd go to see Athena again.

And get his jacket back.

He thought of his jacket as he'd last seen it, draped round Athena's shoulders as she'd fled the restaurant. Maybe he should have followed her.

But...and it was a big but. There had been fear in her eyes as she'd fled. Real fear.

He didn't know why. He intended to find out, but for now...He was inexplicably glad she'd worn his jacket home.

How could she explain a man's jacket to the unknown Nicholas and Oscar? Unaccountably, he found himself smiling. He hoped they were good to her. Yeah, that was a rational thought. Generous, even.

But...she had to come back to the island, even if it meant she brought this unknown Oscar and Nicholas with her. Though their existence could make things much more complicated.

Whatever. Tomorrow could be faced tomorrow, he told himself, trying to block out the unwanted image of Athena with another man by her side. Trying to block out how it made him feel. After all this time, surely jealousy was crazy.

Of course it was.

He kissed his daughter softly on the forehead, the touch and scent of her soft little body helping him put things into perspective.

'Goodnight, sweetheart,' he whispered. 'We'll have a good time tomorrow; just see if we don't. And then we'll persuade the Princess Athena to come home. Where we belong and where she belongs, too.'

In the morning the sun finally decided to shine. Nikos and his little daughter did the circuit of Central Park twice, and then they did it again. Christa's unalloyed happiness, the sun on her face, the beauty of the horses, the garishness of the decoration on the buggy...she loved it. She clung to him, breathless with excitement, laughing out loud for sheer joy.

Halfway through their third circuit he saw Athena.

And a dog.

And a child.

How could it be? How could fate be this cruel?

Why on earth had she decided to come to a tourist destination this morning?

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

They'd been using their ball-thrower. Dogs were supposed to be on leads here, but she knew a place...most dog owners did. So they'd tossed the ball until Oscar was out of puff. Nicky had run more than the dog. Oscar wasn't the brightest light on the Christmas tree, so about half the time it had been Nicky who'd had to retrieve it. Finally they'd bought ice cream cones and now they were waiting for Oscar to finish his before they walked home.

Oscar, a big, lumbering bear of canine dopiness, took his ice cream eating seriously.

A horse and buggy was wheeling briskly along the path towards them. The horses looked gorgeous, she thought. The day was gorgeous, making up for last night's misery. She was dumb to be anxious on a day like this.

She chuckled at Oscar's pink nose.

The buggy grew closer. The driver raised his crop in salute. It was that sort of day.

She smiled. She waved back.

And then she saw who was in the buggy.

Nikos.

And a child?

The sounds around them faded. Everything faded.

She heard Nikos's snapped order as if it came from a distance. The buggy stopped. Nikos climbed down, paid the driver and lifted the little girl down after him.

The child was little and dark and beautifully dressed, in a pink dress with a wide pink bow, white socks edged with pink lace and shiny pink shoes. A pink Alice band held back her glossy black hair. Shoulder-length with bangs.

Smiling and smiling.

Down's syndrome.

The little girl laughed as Nikos swung her down, and Nikos laughed back.

Athena's heart did a back flip. Landed upside down, somewhere else in her chest than where it should be.

Down's syndrome...

Her aunt's letter came back to her.

'A little girl for Nikos and Marika...'

'Hi,' she managed, and if her voice came out a squeak she couldn't help it.

'Hi,' Nikos said back. He sounded as incredulous as she was—and as wary. The horse and buggy bowled on, leaving Nikos and his daughter on the verge of the path.

Nikos wasn't looking at her. He was looking at Nicky.

Nicky, who was the spitting image of his father—a mirror image of the younger Nikos.

Father...and son.

She should have...she should have...

It was too late for should haves. The time was now.

'This is Christa,' Nikos said at last, and his voice seemed to come from a distance. 'Christa, this is my friend, Athena.'

'Dog,' Christa said in Greek, still smiling. Pointing to Oscar. 'Ice...Ice cream.'

The ice cream vendor was right behind them. 'Would...would you like an ice cream, Christa?' Athena asked, and then thought desperately, what if she had a dairy allergy. What if...

'Yes,' Christa said, very firmly. She looked up at her father, searched for another word and found it. 'Please.'

She smiled again. She was gorgeous, Athena thought, and suddenly found she was blinking back tears. Nikos was holding his little daughter's hand with pride. With tenderness. With love.

'Ice cream, Papa?' Christa asked and Nikos nodded. He hadn't taken his eyes from Nicky.

'Introduce us,' he said.

'This is Nicky,' she said, trying to find the right words. And then, because she didn't want him to get the wrong idea—even if there was no denying the wrong idea was right—she added quickly, 'Nicholas.'

'Of course,' he said. Non-committal. 'And the dog?'

'Oscar.' She turned away—fast. 'I'll buy Christa a cone. Would you like one?'

'No. Thank you.'

It took time to get the cone. There were people queuing ahead of her. Then she thought she should have asked Christa what she wanted. But somehow...she knew. Strawberry.

And she was right. 'Pink,' Christa said with huge pleasure. She looked at the bench where Nicky and Oscar were seated. 'Sit,' she said.

Nicky smiled and shifted, just slightly, so there was room for Christa to sit between him and Oscar.

Athena thought, I'm going to cry.

She was *not* going to cry.

Still Nikos said nothing. Neither did she. Words were too big. Or too small. There was nothing to fill this silence.

Finally Nikos found words that might do. For now. Filler words. 'It's good to meet you, Nicholas. Is Oscar your dog or your mother's?'

'Mine,' Nicky said and she thought, great question. Generally shy, discussions of Oscar made Nicky blossom.

'How old is he?'

'We're not sure. He was in our street one day when we came home. He was dirty and really, really hungry. We took him to the animal shelter 'cos Mama said someone might be looking for him, but no one wanted him so we got him back. I called him Oscar 'cos Mama told me she had a dog called Oscar when she was little. Before my Mama's mama died.'

'I remember Oscar,' Nikos said softly, gravely. 'He was great. If your Oscar's like him he must be really special.'

'He is.'

'Does he eat everything like that?' Oscar was still licking, stretching the experience for as long as he could. Nicky had chosen a rainbow ice cream for him and he'd wedged it between the planks on the bench. Oscar had a paw on either side of the cone so it couldn't tip. His nose colour had changed now to green.

'He enjoys his pleasures, does Oscar,' Athena said, and Nikos finally looked at her. Really looked at her.

The look would stay with her all her life, she thought numbly. Disbelief. Awe. Anger. And raw, undisguised pain.

'He is, isn't he?' he asked, and there was only one way to answer that.

'He is.'

He closed his eyes.

Where to go from here?

'You can't do this, Thena,' he said, and his voice was suddenly harsh. 'No more. You walked away with *this*...'

'I didn't know.' It was a cry of pain but she knew it was no excuse.

'You walked away. And now...' He paused, took a deep breath, then another. 'Leave it,' he said and she wasn't sure if he was talking to himself or to her. 'I can't take it in. Just come back to the

island and we'll sort it there. We need to get the succession in place. If you don't come home the island will be ruined. How selfish can you be?

'Selfish?' She would have gasped if she hadn't felt so winded. 'Me? Selfish.' Then, before she could stop herself she produced the question that had slammed at her heart for almost ten years. 'How old is Christa?'

'Nine.'

'And her birthday is when?'

'June.'

'So there you go,' she snapped, the old, stupid grief welling up in her all over again. 'Nicky's nine and he was born in September. What does that tell you, Nikos?'

'Nothing,' he snapped. 'Except that you should have told me.'

'So maybe you should have asked. When I left...there was nothing.'

'You told me not to follow.'

'I didn't expect you to believe me,' she yelled—really yelled—and everyone looked at her. Even Oscar. Christa's ice cream started to drip on the side she wasn't licking. Nikos automatically stooped and turned it around for her, wiping her chin before it dripped on her dress.

It was a tiny gesture but, for some stupid reason, the sight of it cut through her anger and made her want to weep again.

'It's time we went home,' she whispered, and Nicky looked up at her in surprise.

'We were going to walk right round.'

'I'm tired.'

'I'm not,' he said, clearly astonished.

'Tell you what,' Nikos said. 'Why don't we compromise. Nicky, I'm from the island where your mother was born. I know your mama just shouted at me, but maybe that's because...because we both got a shock. Your mother and I have known each other since we were children, but this is the first time I've been to New York.'

'Yes...' Nicky said, not sure where this conversation was going.

'What if Christa stays here with your mama? Christa gets tired easily—she has a problem with her heart that makes her tired. But she'll be happy here with a dog and an ice cream. So your mama and Christa can rest here. Christa can finish her ice cream and you can show me all the way round.'

Nicky looked doubtfully at his mother. She was too numb to respond.

'Then,' Nikos said urgently, and she tried to pull herself together. What was he asking? Fine, she decided. Anything. The gods would have to take control from now on. She couldn't.

'Can I take Oscar?' Nicky asked.

'Yes,' Nikos said.

'You really knew my mother when she was little?' her son asked.

'When she was Princess Athena,' Nikos told him. 'Your mother needs to be Princess Athena again. Come with me and I'll tell you why. Will Oscar come with us?'

Nicky was looking at her. Waiting for her approval.

What did it matter? She was no longer in control here. She knew nothing.

'Fine,' she said weakly. 'Take...take your time. Christa and I will look at the zoo.'

She sat on the bench and watched Christa finish her ice cream, and the desire to weep grew almost overwhelming.

What was it with men? How could she have thrown those two birth dates together and have Nikos react without the slightest regret? Or shame. Or guilt.

He'd called her selfish for leaving the island. She'd told him she wanted to leave for an exciting job in New York and he'd looked at her with shock and disbelief—and he'd let her walk away.

But if he knew the true reason...That if she'd stayed his family would be ruined. That the old King had threatened everything Nikos loved if she stayed. How could he never have guessed?

He'd never, ever asked. He'd never so much as written. And, when she'd learned of Christa's birth, she knew the reason why he hadn't.

Her fingers were clenched into her palms so hard they hurt.

'Papa,' Christa said suddenly, as if she'd just realised Nikos was gone. She looked worried.

This wasn't Christa's fault. She had no right to let her own misery and confusion spread to this little girl. 'He'll be back soon,' she said gently.

'Papa.'

'There's a little zoo just near here. Do you like animals?'

The little girl considered. 'Big?' she asked.

'Little. Funny animals. Friends.'

'Friends,' Christa said and put out a hand for Athena to help her to her feet. She smoothed her dress, tucked a sticky hand into Athena's and had another lick of her ice cream. 'Friends.'

There were so many questions...Where to start? An inquisition could be a good way to send Nicky straight back to his mother.

'Where do you go to school?' he asked, and then thought, great, very insightful. Not.

'Over there,' the little boy told him, pointing south east.

Good. That got him places. 'Do you like school?'

'Sometimes. I hafta go to Greek lessons after school, too.'

'You speak Greek?'

'Mama does. She makes me.'

He needed time to take that one in.

They walked along. Kicking stones. Nikos suddenly realised...He was kicking stones in front of him. So was Nicky. With his left foot.

'You're left-handed?'

'Mmm,' Nicky said.

'Your mama's right-handed.'

'Mmm.'

Riveting stuff. Both being left-handed. It meant nothing.

It meant everything.

'Has your mother told you about Argyros?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Are you a fisherman?'

'Yes.'

'I like boats.'

'Have you been on boats?'

'Twice. I don't get seasick. Mama does. This is the place where a Beatle was shot.'

'Right,' Nikos said. He gave up. There were too many questions for one small boy to handle.

There were too many questions for him to handle.

They were sitting right where he'd left them, only Christa had replaced her ice cream with a hand puppet. A squirrel.

She wiggled it as they approached, her face lighting up as she saw him.

'Thena bought...me...squirrel.' He grinned and swung her up into his arms. No matter what else was happening here, this mustn't touch her. That had been his mantra for almost ten years and he wasn't budging now.

'Thank you,' he said gravely to Athena.

'We didn't get all the way round,' Nicky said. 'We caught another buggy. Nikos says John was his favourite Beatle. He was yours too, wasn't he, Mama?'

'Yes,' she said, sounding repressive.

'Imagine,' he said softly and watched her wince.

It had been the last night they'd been together. 'I have to go away,' she'd said, but she'd sobbed and clung.

He hadn't understood why she had to leave. She'd completed her university degree by correspondence, far younger than most. Her writing was brilliant. Everyone said so. She could take a job with the local paper and write the novel to end all novels. They'd agreed. She could stand by him in his battle with Giorgos.

That was what they'd planned, but suddenly she was crumpled, broken, sobbing about having to leave.

'I need to go. I just need to go. Please, Nikos, don't make it any harder.'

He'd thought it was her writing that was driving her. 'You'll come back?'

'I don't know. I can't. Nikos...'

She'd run out of words. He'd been angry, shocked, bewildered.

That night in his family's boatshed... Their last night. He'd played music by John Lennon on his tinny little sound system.

Imagine...

He thought now: Nicky must have been conceived that night.

No matter. He had to get rid of the white noise. There was only one absolute. 'You need to come home,' he told her.

'No.'

'Then Demos wins.' He made an almost superhuman effort to rid himself of his emotional tangle and concentrate on what was important. 'I need to go home tomorrow,' he said. 'I thought I had a week to persuade you, but Demos has already contacted mining companies. He's acting as if he owns the place. I daren't stay longer. But it's your birthright, Athena. And,' he added, 'it's your son's.'

'And your...'

'And my daughter's,' he finished for her, harshly. For maybe she was going places he wasn't ready to go just yet. 'Our children's. You must come home.'

'No.'

'Think about it,' he said briefly, harshly. 'There's so much happening here I can't take it in. Whatever's gone on in the past...' He glanced at Nicky and felt as if he was on a shifting deck, unsure of his footing, unsure of anything. 'For now we need to put that aside. If you don't come home, then some time soon I'll be back here to...sort what's mine. But my priority right now has to be the islanders. Thousands of livelihoods, Thena. Princess Athena. They're your people. You answer to them and not to me. Except...'

He hesitated and then said the words that had to be said. The words that had been in his head for the entire tour of the park.

'Except on the question of my son,' he said.

She gasped. 'That's not fair.'

'Life's not fair. Get over it, Athena, and come home. Princess.'

Nicky had been listening on the sidelines, troubled, not understanding but trying. 'You said *my son*,' he pointed out, trying to be helpful. 'Did you mean your daughter?'

Nikos nodded. Grave as Nicky. 'I must have,' he agreed. 'But I'm a bit upset right now. I need your mama to come back to the island where she was born.'

'You called her a princess.'

'She is a princess.'

'She's my Mama.'

'She can be both. I bet your mama says you can be anything you want if you try hard enough.' He turned and faced Athena straight on. She was lovely, he thought. In her casual sweatshirt, her jeans, her tumbled curls tied back with a piece of red ribbon... She was a mature version of the girl he'd fallen for ten years ago. Longer. The girl he'd loved for ever.

He couldn't think that.

'Your mama can do anything she wants,' he said to Nicky, but he kept right on looking at Athena. 'I think it's time for your mama to do just that. Because I think she wants the island of Argyros to be safe just as much as I do.'

CHAPTER THREE

SOTWO weeks later... Maybe she was out of her mind, but she was going back to a place she'd thought she'd never set foot on again. Argyros. The Silver Island of the Diamond Isles.

If Giorgos had had a son this never would have happened.

Generations of islanders had ached for the islands to revert to the three principalities they had once been. Now with Giorgos's death, they had.

'But why did it have to happen on my watch?' Athena muttered as she stood on the deck of the Athens-Argyros ferry and watched her island home grow bigger.

Beside her was Nicky. He was practically bursting with excitement. He should be in school, she thought. How could he get into the college of his choice if she kept interrupting his education?

That was only one of the arguments she'd thrown at Nikos during the tense phone calls that followed his visit. But always it had returned to the bottom line.

If she backed away from her role as Crown Princess then Demos would open all six diamond mines.

Whereas Nikos had a very different proposal—to open one mine, avoiding mess and with minimal effect on the island's environment. Profits to go into the island's infrastructure and the island could prosper.

Nikos had told her all of this by phone, talking of nothing but the island, making no mention of how these children had happened, how Nicky and Christa affected their future—nothing, nothing, nothing.

Apart from that one outburst in the park, he'd contained his rage.

As she'd contained hers. We've been civilised, she thought, and tried to feel proud of herself.

Instead she felt small. Belittled by the latent anger she heard behind Nikos's civility. Frightened of what lay ahead.

'How long will we stay?' By her side at the rails, Nicky suddenly sounded as scared as she was. 'For ever?'

'I've taken a month's leave. I'm hoping by the end of the month Nikos should be able to take over the running of the place.'

'Running?'

'Like...the government. If I can organise things then Nikos will be the government when I leave.'

'Are you the government now?'

'Technically, yes. Though my cousin has been filling in.'

'We don't like your cousin Demos?'

'I'm not sure we do,' she said. 'Nikos says he's greedy. But let's just see for ourselves, shall we?'

'Okay,' he said and tucked his hand into hers, with the infinite trust of childhood.

She needed someone to trust too, she thought. What was she letting herself in for?

'We'll just slip in quietly, do what we have to do and leave,' she said. 'I'm hoping we'll hardly be noticed. I'll show you the places where I swam and played when I was a little girl. I'll figure how to stop Demos digging his great big diamond mines. Then we can go home, with as little contact with the locals as possible.'

'So we won't see Nikos and Christa?' He sounded astounded. More. Sad.

'I guess we will,' she said and he lit up again.

'Good. I like them. Christa likes Oscar.'

'Oscar.' She glanced down at the dog on the deck beside her. Crazy. Coming all this way and bringing a dog.

But she needed to. She needed as much family as she could get. Nicky and Oscar were it.

We slip in quietly, do what we need to do and leave, she said to herself again, as she'd told herself countless times before. I'll give Nikos the authority he needs and leave.

But what about...Nicky? The small matter of Nikos's son.

It can't matter, she thought. Yes, Nikos was angry—maybe he even had a right to that anger, but there was still the matter of Christa, conceived three months before Nicky. When he and she...

It didn't bear thinking about.

'We'll get in, do what we have to and get out again,' she said again to Nicky. 'No fuss. Nothing.'

And then the boat passed the headland and turned towards the harbour. And she discovered that no fuss wasn't in the island's equation.

She'd come. Right up until now he'd thought she'd back out. But he knew she'd boarded the ferry in Athens. Short of jumping off, she had to be here.

So he'd let it be known. Demos had been acting Crown Prince. If Athena arrived on the quiet, as if she didn't want the Crown, it would give everyone the wrong idea. The islanders were terrified by Demos's plans. They needed Athena.

And...they knew her.

The only child of a lone and timid mother, home schooled because the King didn't want her to mix with the island children, Athena had every reason to be isolated and aloof. But Athena had been irrepressible. Born a tomboy, she'd declared, aged eight, that Nikos was her very best friend and whatever he did was cool with her.

As children they'd roamed the island, looking for mischief, looking for adventure, looking for fun. Tumbling in and out of trouble. Giving their respective mothers cause for palpitations.

He'd loved her. The islanders had loved her. They had been kids, who together just might make a difference to this island's future.

And now that time had come. He watched the ferry dock and knew that how Athena reacted in the next few moments affected the future of every islander.

Including him.

'Mama, why are all these people here?'

'Uh-oh,' she said.

'What does *uh-oh* mean?'

'It means Nikos is making a statement.'

'What sort of statement?'

'That I'm a princess coming home,' she said.

'So the streamers and balloons and the great big signs...'

'Saying Welcome Home To Our Princess? That would be for us.'

'What do we do?'

'I'm not sure. Stay on board until they get tired of waiting and go home?'

'I don't think that's a good idea,' Nicky said dubiously.

So it wasn't a good idea, she conceded. It was an excellent idea. But she knew Nikos was down there. She knew how much he loved this island and she knew for certain that if she didn't walk back onto her island home he'd come aboard and carry her.

Balloons had drifted into the water. A couple of excited kids had jumped in to retrieve them, and the ferry captain was forced to reverse and wait for his men to verify it was safe to dock.

Nikos watched and waited, feeling as if he shouldn't be here. Feeling as if he had no choice.

The islanders were going crazy. Their pleasure in Athena's arrival was a measure of how terrified they'd been that Demos would destroy them. It was also a measure of confidence that Athena wouldn't betray them.

Did he believe it?

Up until she was nineteen he'd believed it. He and Athena had plotted what they'd do if Giorgos was to die without an heir.

He grinned now as he thought of their plans. They'd build a cinema. They'd set up a surf school—Thena thought she'd make a great surf instructor—and what the heck, they'd invite a few rock groups over. But in their serious moments they'd had a few more solemn ideas. They'd slowstart the diamond mines. They'd ensure every child had the funds to get a decent education. They'd set up a democracy.

All of these things had been discussed over and over, as they'd wandered the island, as she'd come with him in his family's fishing boat and helped him haul pots, as she'd sat at his mother's kitchen table and helped shell peas or stir cakes.

When had he first figured he loved her? It had crept up on him so slowly he hardly knew. But suddenly their laughter had turned to passion, and their intensity for politics had turned to intensity of another kind.

The night her mother had died...She'd been seventeen. He'd cradled her against his heart and thought his own heart would break.

And then...suddenly it had been over. It seemed she had a chance of a journalist apprenticeship in New York.

Leaving had never been in his vocabulary, and he'd never believed it could be in hers.

And now she'd returned—she was standing at the ferry's rail looking lost, and he was standing on the jetty wondering where he could take it from here.

She had Nicky by the hand. Mother and son. And dog. The sight made him feel...Hell, he didn't know how he felt.

'Go on, Nikos.' His mother, Annia, was beside him, holding Christa. 'Go and speak for all the islanders. You know it's your place.'

'It's not my place.'

'It is,' Annia said fiercely. 'No one else will do it.'

And hadn't that always been the case?

As the King's sister, Nikos's mother had always stood up to the old King. She'd fought for the islanders' rights and, as he'd matured, Nikos had taken her fights onto his own shoulders.

He'd built up a fishing fleet that was second to none, but the islanders knew he worked for the whole island. They looked to him now as leader. He was in an uncomfortable position but he had no choice—there was no one else willing or able to take it on.

And now...If the only way Athena would rule was for him to stand beside her and guide her every step of the way, then he'd do it. He'd been raised to love this island, and he would not see it destroyed.

So now...He shoved aside anger, loss, confusion, a host of mixed emotions he wasn't near to understanding, and he strode up the gangplank with the determination of a man who knew where his duty lay. And, as he reached Athena, he took her in his arms and he hugged her. Whether she willed it or not. Whether he willed it or not.

'Welcome home,' he said and lifted her and swung her round in his arms, a precarious thing to do on a gangplank, but jubilation was called for. 'Princess Athena, welcome,' he said in a voice to be heard by all. 'We all welcome you, don't we?' he demanded of the crowd, and the islanders roared their assent.

'It's our royal family,' someone yelled. 'Princess Athena and Prince Nikos.'

'Nikos is only a prince if he marries Athena,' someone else yelled and there was a huge cheer of enthusiasm.

'Hey, Demos is already a prince. Maybe she should marry him,' someone yelled as the applause died, and the crowd laughed. The laughter was derisive.

And Nikos glanced to the back of the crowd and saw Demos. Even from this distance his body language was unmistakable. He was rigid with mortification and with fury.

Athena had a real enemy there, he thought. In the mood he was in, Demos could do harm.

Not if he stayed close.

He had no choice. In order to protect this island then he needed to protect this woman. He intended to stay very close indeed.

Athena's smile looked pinned in place. She was terrified, he thought.

'It's okay,' he murmured.

'No,' she murmured back. 'It's not okay at all. I'm doing this because I have no choice. If you think I like being hugged by you...'

The crowd's cheers were building. Athena waved and so did Nicky.

And Nikos had no choice either. He waved.

They stood together.

'There's a reception tonight at the palace,' he told her.

'There's a what?'

They were all in the royal limousine, heading for the palace. Nikos hadn't wanted to come with her, but once again there'd been no choice. Someone had to introduce her to the palace staff.

He'd brought Christa along, to lighten the atmosphere a bit. To stop things getting too personal. Oscar lay on the floor looking exhausted. It had been a very long waddle down the gangplank.

Giorgos would have had a fit if he could have seen this dog in his limo, Nikos thought and suppressed a grin.

The limousine, the palace, these trappings of royalty, had been kept so Giorgos could come in state whenever he wished. They could get rid of it all now, Nikos thought, but then he considered the crowd who'd turned up to see Athena arrive. They'd cheered her with joy. She was giving the island its identity back. Did she even realise it?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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