



HISTORICAL

BETROTHED *to the*
BARBARIAN
CAROL TOWNEND

◆ PALACE BRIDES ◆

Mills & Boon Historical

Carol Townend

Betrothed to the Barbarian

«HarperCollins»

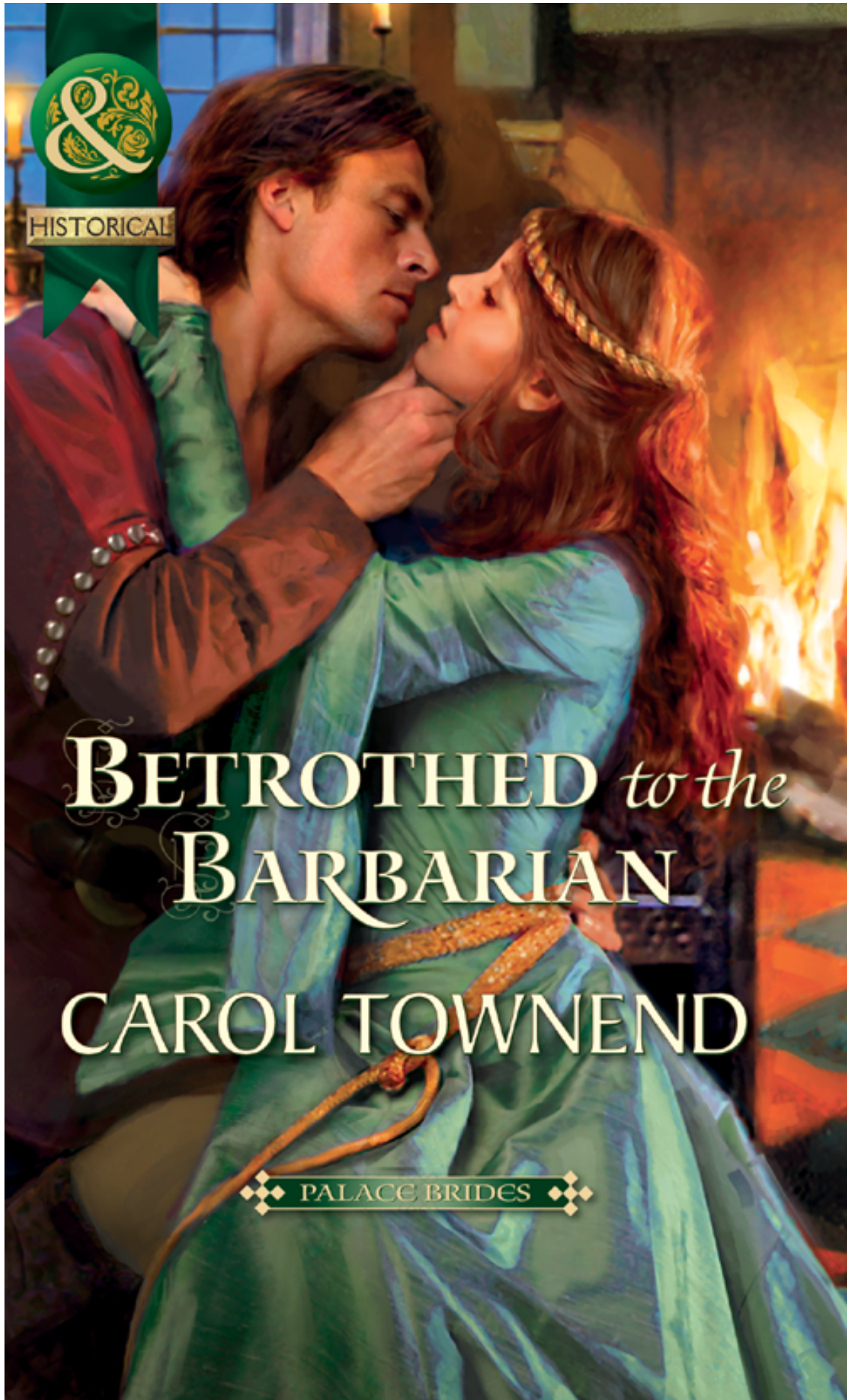
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Betrothed to the Barbarian / C. Townend — «HarperCollins»,
— (Mills & Boon Historical)

A LESS THAN PERFECT PRINCESS... Princess Theodora of Constantinople is to marry Duke Nikolaos, General-in-Chief of the army, a man chosen for her by the Emperor. An imperial princess must always do her duty: be beautiful, obedient and pure. But Theodora spent ten years in exile in a barbarian land. There, once, she might have forgotten protocol. Forgotten enough to have given birth to a baby in secret. As her wedding night approaches Theodora finds she wants to share her bed with the Duke, except she knows she's on the verge of revealing her biggest sin... Palace Brides Beauties of Byzantium – claimed by warriors!

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‘With your permission, Princess?’

Theodora allowed Nikolaos to push her back into the mulberry-coloured pillows and sent up a swift, if muddled prayer. Tonight she must give the performance of her life. She must pretend that she was a virgin and that this was the first time she had lain with a man. She must also—God help her—please him.

Were these aims compatible?

She breathed in her new husband’s scent. It was dark and spicy—like him, it was utterly male. She pressed her lips against a satisfyingly wide shoulder and covered it with kisses. She took the tang of salt onto her tongue. *Delicious ... this man even tastes delicious.* And she was melting with desire. Theodora didn’t delude herself that it was love that was making her feel this way but, Lord, she had never felt like this before ...

About the Author

CAROL TOWNEND has been making up stories since she was a child. Whenever she comes across a tumbledown building, be it castle or cottage, she can't help conjuring up the lives of the people who once lived there. Her Yorkshire forebears were friendly with the Brontë sisters. Perhaps their influence lingers ...

Carol's love of ancient and medieval history took her to London University, where she read History, and her first novel (published by Mills & Boon®) won the Romantic Novelists' Association's New Writers' Award. Currently she lives near Kew Gardens, with her husband and daughter. Visit her website at www.caroltownend.co.uk

Previous novels by the same author:

THE NOVICE BRIDE

AN HONOURABLE ROGUE

HIS CAPTIVE LADY

RUNAWAY LADY, CONQUERING LORD

HER BANISHED LORD

BOUND TO THE BARBARIAN*

CHAINED TO THE BARBARIAN*

*Part of *Palace Brides* trilogy

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AUTHOR NOTE

For me, the word *Byzantium* conjures images of an exotic medieval empire. It carries with it an aura of magic. Byzantium ... I loved learning about it at university, and enthusiastic teachers ensured that for me Byzantium lost none of its shimmer.

These books bring Byzantium alive:

Byzantium, the Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire by Judith Herrin (Penguin, 2008)

Byzantium by Robin Cormack and Maria Vassilaki (Royal Academy of Arts, 2008)

Fourteen Byzantine Rulers by Michael Psellus (Penguin, 1966)

The Alexiad of Anna Komnene translated by E.R.A. Sewter (Penguin, 1969)

Names can be tricky. Without being too rigid, I have used Greek versions of names where possible, and in a couple of cases I have shortened the names of real people.

Betrothed to the Barbarian

Carol Townend



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Chapter One

‘Constantinople,’ Princess Theodora Doukaina murmured, staring into the dark over the ship’s guardrail. ‘At last we are home.’ She clutched her baby to her chest, angling her so that she might have her first glance of the city at the heart of the Empire. Martina was busy sucking a corner of her blanket, her gaze caught by the glow of a lamp nailed to the mast amidships. As Theodora shifted her, easing the blanket from her mouth, Martina’s eyes tracked the lamp, not the City. Theodora sighed.

‘My lady, with your permission?’ Sophia was hovering at her elbow and, as the galley rose on a gentle swell, she slipped a steadying arm under Theodora’s cloak and wound it round her waist. The warmth of her lady-in-waiting’s body was welcome. It was not yet Easter and out on the Sea of Marmara the wind had bite. ‘Perhaps I should take the baby below?’

‘No. The sea is calm and I would like Martina to see the city.’

Above them, the night sky glistened with stars. Moonlight from a full moon washed over the deck, playing with the shadows of sailors preparing to lower the sail, stretching and shrinking them with the rise and fall of each wave. Over Constantinople itself, there was not a star to be seen, likely a bank of cloud lay over the City and was blotting them out.

The helmsman’s voice rose sharply over the creak of timbers. ‘Captain Brand!’

‘My pardon, ladies.’

The captain pushed past them, heading for the stern. Theodora barely noticed, she was staring hungrily across the water, throat tight. *We are home. Home.* Her mind was in turmoil. Fear, guilt, hope—she felt them all.

To the north, several lights were spaced out at intervals along a dark, indistinct skyline. That must be the palace wall, it was hard to see tonight. There were domed silhouettes—churches—glowing with an eerie radiance. Puzzled, Theodora stared at the domes; something was out of place, something was missing. She knotted her brow—why could she not get her bearings? She knew the City like the back of her hand. Was that the Palace? She ought to know. Holy Mother, she should be able to see the Boukoleon Palace; the entrance to the Imperial harbour should be lit by the braziers on top of the towers, and a little to the right of that the dome of Hagia Sophia ...

A gust of wind wrenched a strand of brown hair from her cloak hood. A chill went through her, a chill that had nothing to do with salt-laden sea breezes. There was something else in the air ... something that chilled more effectively than the wind, something other than salt. Theodora’s skin prickled. *Danger, danger.*

‘Sophia, can you smell something?’

Like Theodora, Sophia was looking landwards, towards the Imperial Palace. Her grip tightened, her nostrils flared as she inhaled. Wide eyes met Theodora’s. ‘Smoke! My lady, I can smell smoke!’

‘The City is burning. Look at that dome, the gilding never glows like that, not even at sunrise. Parts of the city have been fired.’ Even as Theodora watched, the dome winked out of sight. A pall of smoke was drifting over Constantinople. That was why no stars were visible in the north.

‘My lady ...’ Sophia flung a worried glance at the stern ‘... perhaps we should get below.’

Behind them, a sailor swore. Captain Brand snapped an order; there was a sudden flurry of activity, and beneath their feet the galley altered course. Ropes groaned, wind filled the sail. It was then that Theodora heard the screams. Faint screams, borne by the wind across black briny water.

‘Sophia, can you hear that?’

Sophia tugged at her arm. ‘Please, my lady, I really think we should get below.’

Captain Brand marched up even as Theodora had opened her mouth to object. His face was grim. ‘Ladies, it is time to retire, I believe.’

‘What is happening, Captain?’ Sophia asked.

Their Varangian escort shook his head. ‘I have no idea, my lady, but the Palace lighthouse is out. I won’t risk sailing into the Imperial harbour tonight.’

Theodora looked at the city skyline, mind racing. The Palace lighthouse—of course, that was why she could not get her bearings! For years, the Palace lighthouse had stood like a sentry next to the Boukoleon Palace. It was lit at dusk each day and for it to have been extinguished before dawn, something appalling must have happened. The wind shifted, pushing at the smoke, and the sea wall swam into focus, a grey ribbon bathed in moonlight. Flames flared like bright flowers on the domed skyline. Then the smoke drifted and the flame flowers, the gilded domes and the sea walls vanished.

Shivering, Theodora hugged Martina close to her breast. ‘The City is on fire.’ She felt hollow inside.

‘We cannot be sure, my lady. It is probably perfectly safe, but we shall not be entering the Imperial harbour tonight.’

The wind buffeted the galley and the sound of drumming reached them. Theodora gave the Captain a straight look. ‘Battle drums, Captain?’

Captain Brand pressed his lips together. ‘That seems most unlikely. However, I have been ordered to protect you ladies. My apologies for the delay, but you will not be sleeping in the Boukoleon Palace yet awhile.’

Theodora exchanged glances with Sophia. She wanted to laugh, she wanted to cry. Naturally, in her role as simple lady-in-waiting, Princess Theodora Doukaina did neither; she went meekly below deck, as she had been instructed. There was no sense rousing the good Captain’s suspicions about her identity at this late stage.

‘Have you decided what you will do with the baby, my lady?’

‘Mmm?’ Theodora lifted her gaze from the infant dozing in her lap. She and Lady Sophia were sharing a bench in an ill-lit guest chamber in St Michael’s Abbey, a few miles outside Constantinople. They were waiting for word on what had happened in the City; they had been waiting for nigh on two weeks. *Two weeks*. Easter had come and gone.

Outside rain was falling, the air smelled dank. Wool-lined slippers made a poor shield against the wintry chill seeping up from the stone floor. Goose-bumps had formed on Theodora’s legs and arms. Keeping firm hold of the baby in question—her daughter, Martina—she cocooned both herself and the child tightly in veil and shawl.

Theodora was grateful for this unexpected time alone with Martina, every moment spent with her was so precious. She was achingly conscious that Sophia, who was her friend and lady-in-waiting, believed that she and Martina would soon be separated. Permanently. Protocol would demand it. Protocol was an old foe. Theodora had fought it before, she would fight it again. She did not know how, but somehow she would win the right to keep her daughter.

Sophia gave her a sympathetic smile and tried again. ‘Martina. What you will do with her when we reach the Imperial Palace?’

The Princess and Lady Sophia were alone; the other ladies were in a larger guest chamber. Theodora was almost certain that they had managed to secure privacy for herself and Sophia without arousing Captain Brand’s suspicions; she was almost certain the good captain did not know she was the Princess Theodora Doukaina. They had taken great pains to make him think she was just one of the many ladies-in-waiting he was escorting to the Great Palace. A niggler of doubt remained. *Has Captain Brand seen through our deception?*

The accommodation at St Michael’s was far from palatial, the guest chamber was little more than a monk’s cell. The walls were whitewashed and the meagre furnishings—sleeping pallets, bench—were dusty and decidedly rustic. The icon on the wall was shrouded in cobwebs. Since Captain Brand had decreed that none of the ladies could leave the monastery until they received confirmation it was safe to proceed to the Palace, the guest chamber had, in effect, become their prison. Thanks to the rain, even the Abbey courtyard was out of bounds.

Theodora held down a sigh. The voyage back to Constantinople had been fraught with difficulties, not least because none of the soldiers escorting them to the Imperial Palace could know that she was anything more than another lady-in-waiting. Only Theodora's waiting women realised the truth.

The day of reckoning is almost upon me. I am Princess Theodora Doukaina and it is time for me to reclaim my proper identity.

Theodora sat on the bench, stroking her daughter's hair. The problem was that she did not want to reclaim her true identity. Outwardly, her expression was calm—years of training had ensured that. Inside, she felt as though her heart was made of glass, glass that had shattered into a thousand pieces. She could no longer remember what it felt like to be whole. Much as she loved Constantinople, she dreaded her return. If it was discovered that she had a daughter, the scandal would rock the City.

If they discover that Martina is mine, will they take her away? Holy Mother, that must not happen!

Captain Brand—the Varangian officer charged with ensuring their safety on their journey to the Great Palace—had assured them that St Michael's Abbey would be the ideal place to wait for news. They would not be allowed to set foot outside until he knew it was safe.

Safe. It had been hard not to laugh in the Captain's face. Safe. If only he knew—Theodora had so many secrets she could never feel safe again.

The voyage from Dyrrachion on the Empire's western border had been nothing less than torture. Theodora had been obsessed with the thought that with every day that passed, they were a day closer to the moment when she might lose her daughter. On the one hand, she had wanted the journey to last for ever, so that she could enjoy being with Martina. On the other, pretence did not come easily to her. It was a challenge pretending to be just one lady-in-waiting among many, particularly when the other women knew her to be the Princess Theodora Doukaina and were in the habit of bowing to her every wish. The strain of the pretence was taking its toll on her.

We should be in the Boukoleon Palace—what can have happened?

'Why was the Palace lighthouse out?' Theodora asked, not for the first time. 'It's unheard of. Unimaginable.'

'I do not know. Perhaps the wind ...' Sophia trailed into silence.

'The wind ... no.' Theodora rocked her daughter and adjusted her wrappings. The bench creaked. Theodora thought about the fires they had seen and the acrid smell of smoke. The screams. The wind had *not* extinguished the Palace lighthouse that night, Sophia knew that as well as she. For the Palace lighthouse to have gone out, and for it to have remained out, something terrible, revolutionary, must have happened in the Palace itself.

'What can have happened?' *Has there been a Palace coup? A revolt of some kind?* Even in Dyrrachion they had heard the mutterings; the Emperor—who insisted on calling himself Theodora's uncle—was not the most popular of men.

Sophia lifted her shoulders. 'My lady, I do not know.'

'It will take time for a messenger to reach the Palace and return, of course.'

'Time? The messenger is certainly taking an age,' Sophia said. 'I don't understand it—isn't St Michael's used as a hostel by the Court because of its proximity to Constantinople?'

Sophia was in the right. St Michael's Abbey sat on a promontory overlooking the Gulf of Lasthenes where their galley was currently at anchor, it really was not far from the City. Theodora forced a smile. 'If something has happened in the Great Palace, we shall soon learn of it.'

She rested her hand gently on the top of her daughter's head, her thumb absently smoothing the baby-fine hair. Martina was snug in several layers of fine linen and silk. *Safe, my daughter is safe. God knows what is happening in the City, but He has granted Martina and I another day together. For now, Martina is safe.*

Martina was infinitely precious to her, it was terrifying how much Theodora felt for this small bundle of life. Terrifying and marvellous. When Theodora had learned of her pregnancy, she had had

no idea she was capable of such powerful feelings. *Martina is mine, I will not let them take her away from me.* Death might have broken the bond between Theodora and Prince Peter—nothing would break the bond between Theodora and her child.

Lady Sophia looked at her. ‘It cannot be long until we are back at the Palace, my lady.’ And then, even though she and Theodora were alone in the stark little cell, she lowered her voice. ‘If you want to keep your secret, it is time to decide what you are going to do with her. You can put it off no longer.’

Tears burned at the back of Theodora’s eyes, her heart ached. Sophia spoke the truth, she had hard decisions to make. There was no doubt in Sophia’s mind as to what she ought to do—protocol demanded that Theodora give up her child. Theodora ought to pretend that she and Peter had not created this wonderful, mysterious scrap of humanity.

I cannot do it.

However, there were other reasons why Theodora should give up Martina, reasons known only to her, reasons which outweighed protocol, important though that was.

It might be safer for Martina if I do give her up.

It was a powerful reason, but powerful as it was, Theodora would not do it. There had to be a way to keep Martina safe without losing her. She squared her shoulders and looked directly at her lady-in-waiting. ‘I cannot give her up.’

‘My lady, you must! Think of the consequences if you are found out.’

‘Sophia, I have been thinking of nothing else since we left Dyrrachion. I will not give her up.’

Lady Sophia’s sigh was loud in the quiet. Outside, Theodora could hear the chanting of the monks; she could hear the scream of a gull as it flew over the gorge; she could hear the spring rain hissing on the paving outside the lodge. Several moments passed.

‘Sophia, she’s my daughter!’

‘I understand, but what will you do? Confess you have had a child out of wedlock? An Imperial princess?’

‘I cannot do that.’

‘No.’ Sophia blew out a breath. ‘I suppose you could keep on running. The scouts Captain Brand sent to the City may already have learned if Katerina and Anna arrived safely. You could let Katerina continue the pretence a while longer.’

The pretence. Theodora sighed. She was Princess Theodora Doukaina, but because she had borne a daughter that few people knew about, she had temporarily taken on the guise of a mere lady-in-waiting. Some of her own ladies, already shocked by her pregnancy, had been even more shocked by this pretence. Little did they know. Theodora would take on the guise of a shepherdess if it meant she could keep her daughter.

Sophia tipped her head to one side and looked thoughtfully at her. ‘How long will Katerina and Anna be able to keep up the deception?’

‘If you are trying to rouse my conscience about asking Katerina to take my place for a time, then I must tell you, you are succeeding.’ Theodora reached for Sophia’s hand, she needed the contact. She had been bred to do her duty, but duty had never seemed such a ruthless task master as it did today, guilt was twisting her into knots. ‘I hated asking them to do it, but I wanted more time with Martina and that has not changed. It never will.’

‘What will you do, go into hiding?’

Dread sat heavy in Theodora’s belly. She pushed to her feet and Martina stirred, eyelashes fluttering against sleep-flushed cheeks. *That tiny nose is surely the sweetest in the world ...*

‘It is a tempting idea, but it would be selfish to consider only myself and Martina. I must also consider Katerina, it is not fair to expect her to keep up the pretence indefinitely. Sooner or later she will give herself away. For Katerina’s sake, I must resume my position as Princess Theodora Doukaina—I must return to the Palace.’

‘I am sure that would be best.’ Sophia leaned forward. ‘What will you do? If you admit that Martina is yours, perhaps Duke Niko—’

Theodora cut Sophia off with an imperious jerk of her head. ‘Sophia, I should not have to remind you, that would not be safe for Martina.’

‘What will you do?’

Theodora frowned at the closed door of the guest chamber. There were too many unanswered questions for her to be as decisive as she would like. *How long do we have? What has been happening at the Palace? Does Captain Brand suspect ...?*

‘Have the men in our escort shown any curiosity about Martina?’

‘Why, yes, my lady.’

‘What did you say? Did you claim her as yours?’

‘Mine?’ Sophia’s eyebrows shot up. ‘I am unwed, my lady, so, no, I said nothing of the sort. I told them Martina’s mother had died in childbirth and that one of our maidservants was acting as her wet-nurse.’

Theodora let out a snort. ‘Her mother died in childbirth, eh? Well, it’s certainly true that I am no longer the woman I was.’

Red-cheeked, Sophia hastened to reassure her. ‘I meant no insult, my lady, truly, but I could not claim Martina is mine. If my mother heard rumours ... the very thought of me giving birth to an illegitimate child ... it would kill her.’

‘And the entire Court would probably ostracise you. Don’t worry, Sophia, I am painfully aware what it is like at Court—the rules, the protocols. I understand.’

‘If you so command, I could pretend Martina is mine,’ Sophia said, doubtfully. ‘It is just that my mother ...’

‘We are about to return to the Great Palace and you are willing to assume responsibility for my transgressions? You are very loyal.’ Theodora shook her head. ‘I appreciate your generosity in making such a suggestion, Sophia, but it will not be necessary. If there is any shame to be borne over my daughter’s existence, it is I who must bear it.’ She stared thoughtfully at the whitewashed wall. ‘I am in hopes that we shall be able to avoid shame. Let me think. Take Martina, will you?’

Carefully placing Martina in Sophia’s arms, Theodora went to stand in the shaft of light coming through the window slit. A light breeze played over her cheeks. The stone walls of the building opposite were blurred by rain, the opening was too narrow for her to see much else. After a moment, she turned. ‘Sophia, I like your story about Martina’s mother dying. We shall embroider it a little and with luck I shall be able to convince everyone at the Palace that I am exactly what I ought to be ... a dutiful, obedient princess returning home from a vassal state to meet my fiancé.’

‘When I resume Princess Theodora’s mantle, we must take pains to ensure that I appear perfect. Pure. Duke Nikolaos must have no idea that I am not the virgin he has been promised.’

Sophia glanced at the infant on her lap. ‘And little Martina? What of her?’

‘Martina shall be the child of a slave who has died in childbirth. Princess Theodora has taken it upon herself to care for her.’ Her smile twisted. ‘That way I may keep her. No one will question her presence in the entourage of an unmarried princess.’

‘Very well, my lady,’ Sophia said, slowly. ‘If you think that will work.’

‘You might look a little more convinced. This *will* work, it has to. Martina is my life, I cannot give her up.’ Theodora brightened her tone. ‘I shall say I have adopted her. Stranger things than that have happened in the Great Palace, I can assure you.’

‘And the Duke of Larissa? What if he objects? A good princess, a perfect princess, must obey her betrothed.’

Theodora bit her lip. She had almost managed to put Duke Nikolaos of Larissa out of her mind. She had yet to set eyes on the man whom the Emperor had decreed she must marry. ‘If fortune favours me, I shall not meet him for some time.’

Sophia nodded. 'I heard the Duke was recalled to Larissa.'

'Yes, his mother is gravely ill,' Theodora said.

'Thank goodness.'

'*Sophia!*'

Sophia grimaced. 'I am sorry, my lady, that did not come out quite as I meant it. Please don't think I wish illness on the Duke's mother, it is just that it must have occurred to you that the Duke's absence from Court will be a relief to Katerina and Anna.'

Theodora nodded—that had occurred to her. It had also occurred to her that with any luck the Duke might remain in Larissa for some time and her meeting with him would be delayed. A reprieve of any sort would be most welcome.

Sophia looked at Martina. 'I pray he lets you keep her.'

'I shall make sure of it.' Theodora spoke confidently, even though she was convincing herself as much as Sophia. In truth, she had no idea how her fiancé would react to news that Princess Theodora Doukaina had a baby in her entourage. Duke Nikolaos was a noted general in the Imperial army, a man surely more given to command than to being persuaded. What might he say? What might he do?

She dreaded the moment of their meeting. She wished she could avoid the marriage.

Sophia looked up at her, eyes large with concern. 'Will you marry him, *despoina*? Will you be able to after Župan Peter ...?'

Theodora's gaze misted. Swiftly she looked away and was vaguely aware of Sophia's hand fluttering apologetically in her direction.

'Theo—my lady, my apologies. I have hurt you by mentioning him.'

Theodora swallowed down the thickness in her throat. 'Prince Peter is never out of my mind.'

'Of course not.' Sophia bent over Župan Peter's child. 'Are you ready to marry Duke Nikolaos?'

Blinking rapidly, Theodora lifted her head. A strand of brown hair uncoiled and fell across her breast, briskly she tucked it back in place. 'I am as ready as I shall ever be.' Her voice became a thread of sound. 'No one can replace Peter. But, despite my many failings, I remain a princess of the Imperial House. If the Emperor insists that I marry Duke Nikolaos of Larissa, I shall obey him.'

Lady Sophia nodded and adjusted Martina's shawl. 'Of course. I am glad we have thought of a way you may keep this little one.'

Theodora sent Sophia a watery smile. 'I have you to thank for that. We are simply embroidering your story.'

'Yes, my lady. I am pleased to have been helpful, but ...'

'Yes?'

'I want you to be happy. Can you be happy with Duke Nikolaos?'

'I shall strive to be,' Theodora said, firmly. 'I am the Princess Theodora and it is my duty to cater to my husband's happiness. My happiness will depend on his.'

Sophia opened her mouth to reply, but brisk footsteps sounded outside the lodge.

'Hush, that will be Captain Brand.' Deftly, Theodora dragged her shawl over her brown, simply dressed hair, arranging it so most of her features were concealed. 'We have come this far without him realising that I am the Princess—we must not fall at the last hurdle.' When she was satisfied that all Captain Brand would see was a pair of dark eyes, she nodded at Sophia to admit him. Not wishing to draw attention to herself, Theodora tried to speak to him as little as possible.

'Come in,' Lady Sophia called.

The latch clicked and Captain Brand stepped on to the threshold. Theodora nodded distantly at him. He was Anglo-Saxon, as were many men in the Varangian Guard. Because of his origins, to those born within the Empire, the Captain was as much a foreigner as Peter had been. A barbarian, an outsider. Pain twisted Theodora's insides, a sudden cramp. She recognised the pain for what it was, an impossible longing for Peter to be brought back to life, for her life to have continued in Rascia.

Peter, why did you have to die?

She kept her features clear of emotion. She had been trained.

As had Captain Brand. Even though the man had been born in England, far beyond the reach of the Empire, he had a firm grasp of Palace protocols. In the Imperial Palace, men and women lived almost separate lives unless they were married. The unmarried women's quarters were in one section of the Palace, the men's in another. And Captain Brand, God bless him, had displayed his understanding of the protocols during the voyage from Dyrrachion. He had spoken to Theodora and her ladies only when absolutely necessary, and then never when one of the ladies had been on her own.

It was all so different from the friendly informality of the Rascian Court. And doubtless, when they finally reached the Imperial Palace, everything would become even more formal. Theodora's days of freedom were over.

'So, Captain ...' Sophia smiled politely at him '... have you discovered what was happening the night our galley reached the City?'

'Yes, my lady.' The Captain remained on the threshold. He was carrying his helmet and his hair was rain-dampened. He looked over his shoulder. 'It is a ... delicate matter.'

'Come in, do,' Theodora said, her hunger for news temporarily overcoming her resolution to play the part of a quiet, shy lady. 'We are not back at Court yet.'

The Captain's eyes widened, nevertheless, he did as he was asked, closing the door behind him.

Sweet Mary, the news must be grave indeed. And I was too forthright. I must take care not to betray myself. It was a struggle constantly having to pretend, particularly when she was impatient to learn what had been going on in Constantinople. *I must keep Martina. Somehow I will find a way to keep Martina.*

'Ladies, as you know, I sent scouts back to the City after we arrived here.'

Captain Brand's accent betrayed his foreign, barbaric birth, yet he was perfectly comprehensible. In any case, Theodora had had much practice in understanding barbarians.

'The lighthouse, yes, of course,' Sophia said, correctly interpreting Theodora's subtle nod as meaning that she should take over and speak for her. 'And the fires, the smoke drifting across the water—you thought we were in danger.'

Captain Brand nodded. 'I was afraid there may have been some ...' he was picking his words with care '... unrest in the City.'

Theodora cut in, despite herself. 'Captain, the Palace has its own walls, its own fortifications. Surely unrest in the City would not penetrate the Palace?'

'I did not wish to take the risk, my lady. Not with Princess Theodora's entourage. As it turns out, my instincts were right.' His voice became confidential. 'Ladies, my scouts tell me that, while we were at sea, there has been a palace coup.'

Theodora's breath left her. Indeed, she was so startled she loosed her grip on her shawl and it fell away from her face. Irritably, she retrieved it. Until she was once again the Princess Theodora Doukaina, she must keep hidden. 'A revolution?'

'Yes, my lady. One of the generals has seized the throne.'

Theodora exchanged stunned glances with Sophia. *Has the Emperor been murdered?* It had happened before. Theodora's mind began to race and her next thought was, shamingly, that perhaps the tide had turned in her favour. If the man who called himself her uncle was no longer Emperor, she might not have to marry Duke Nikolaos.

My secret will be safe, Martina will be safe. Finally, she found her voice. 'One of the generals? Which one?' *It could not be Duke Nikolaos. It must not be the Duke. If it is the Duke ...*

Her mind seized up. It was bad enough to consider deceiving a general, but the thought of deceiving an Emperor ...

'Alexios Komnenos is now Emperor,' the Captain said.

Not Duke Nikolaos. Thank God. 'And what of my unc—?'

A sharp kick from Sophia had Theodora's mouth snapping shut just in time. As she herself had said, they had made it thus far without mishap, it wouldn't do to fall at the last hurdle. 'What of Emperor Nikephoros? What has happened to him?'

'He abdicated, my lady, about two weeks ago.'

The Emperor had abdicated.

'Two weeks ago,' she murmured. 'That would have been about the time we sailed past the Palace.'

'Yes, my lady. His Imperial Majesty Alexios Komnenos was enthroned on Easter Day. Both he and his wife—Empress Irene—have been crowned.'

Theodora struggled to control her expression, but this news had turned her world upside down.

Sophia gave her a subtle nudge and smiled sweetly at the Captain. 'Empress Irene is a cousin of our princess, is she not?'

'Yes, my lady, so I understand.'

Theodora shifted. This would take time to absorb, her young cousin was wearing the Imperial crown. 'Captain, do you know if Emperor Nikephoros has come to harm?'

'He is safe, we were informed he has retired from public life. I believe it was at the instigation of the Patriarch.'

Theodora nodded. That made sense, the Patriarch was Bishop of Constantinople, one of the most influential men in the City. That the Patriarch had suggested Emperor Nikephoros should abdicate bore testimony to the weakness of her 'uncle's' regime, he had never been popular. She sighed, not much about Emperor Nikephoros had filtered back to Rascia. He was old, that much she did know.

Theodora had no genuine blood ties with Emperor Nikephoros. The man had seized the throne from her real uncle, Emperor Michael, forcing him to abdicate and retire to a monastery. He had then legitimised his claim to the throne by marrying Emperor Michael's wife.

'How ironic that Emperor Nikephoros should himself be forced to abdicate,' Sophia observed.

Theodora's thoughts raced on, the coup changed everything. It might invalidate her betrothal to Duke Nikolaos ... The old Emperor had pushed for the marriage, but if he were gone ...

Can I escape the marriage? Theodora looked longingly at the infant on Sophia's lap. *If I escape marriage with Duke Nikolaos, it will surely be easier to keep Martina.*

'General Alexios Komnenos has become Emperor,' she murmured.

She might have to revise her plans. Alexios Komnenos was nothing like his aged predecessor. Theodora had a chance of hiding what she had done from the old Emperor. But the new one? Alexios Komnenos was young and vigorous, he was reputed to be highly intelligent. Holy Mother, the last thing she needed was a young, vigorous and intelligent emperor! It would be hard, if not impossible, to pull the wool over his eyes. And extremely dangerous if she were found out ...

'Yes, my lady,' Captain Brand said. 'Komnenos had the backing of the generals. The army was camped outside the City walls for weeks.'

'The army?' Theodora went very still. She had gone sharply, horribly cold. 'I don't suppose you know if Duke—General—Nikolaos of Larissa was with them?'

The Varangian Captain reached for the door latch. 'Yes, my lady, I believe he returned from Larissa shortly before the coup. Duke Nikolaos is loyal to Emperor Alexios. He is his Commander-in-Chief.'

'Where is he now?'

'The Emperor?'

'No, Duke Nikolaos, the Commander-in-Chief.' Theodora watched Captain Brand's eyebrows lift, her question had surprised him, as well it might. She rushed to explain. 'I ... I was wondering if you had heard whether ... whether the Princess and the Duke have had a chance to meet?'

‘My lady, I have no idea. But if you would care to warn the other ladies about what has happened at Court, I would be grateful.’

‘Certainly, Captain,’ Sophia said. ‘Thank you for keeping us informed.’

The Captain bowed. ‘Lady Sophia, please ask the ladies to gather their belongings together. We shall board within the hour. It is only a short sail down the Bosphoros. The galley should reach the Palace Harbour early this evening.’

‘Thank you, Captain, I shall inform the others.’

When the door clicked behind the captain, Theodora sank on to the bench. ‘Holy Mother—he’s in the City! Duke Nikolaos is *already* in the City.’

Sophia nodded. ‘Yes, my lady.’

Martina gave a small murmur. Theodora’s throat tightened, somehow she straightened her spine. ‘I can put this off no longer, there must be no more delays. We must get to the Palace, and quickly. I can’t expect Katerina to meet the Duke in my stead.’

Chapter Two

Duke Nikolaos of Larissa, dark hair whipped by the wind, was riding like a demon into the mêlée on the Palace polo field when he realised his manservant Elias had returned and was waiting for him by the sea wall. Reining in sharply, Nikolaos wheeled Hermes about and spurred away from the action.

‘Devil take you, Niko! What are you playing at?’ a team-mate cried, with scant regard for formality, as the ball hurtled across the turf. Duke Nikolaos was General of the Athanatoi Cavalry and Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Army, but he had made it clear that in this practice session, he was playing with friends. He was not on his warhorse today. Hermes was small and light-boned. Hermes was built for speed.

‘*Niko.*’ Another player leaned out of the saddle and took a wild swipe at the ball flying beneath his horse’s hooves. Missing the ball, the man righted himself with difficulty.

‘Damn you, Niko,’ he bawled, as his general trotted from the field.

Nikolaos swung his mallet over one shoulder and grinned. ‘A thousand apologies, I have business to attend to. In any case, I fear the girth is going on this saddle.’

A chorus of shouts and groans went up. ‘We’re a man short.’

‘Curse it, Niko, you can’t retreat mid-game.’

‘Keep practising,’ Niko said. ‘There’s less than a month before the tournament—the tournament, I remind you, that the Athanatoi shall win.’ He gestured at a lad standing with the reserve horses on the edge of the field. ‘Zeno?’

‘General?’

‘Take my place, will you?’

The boy’s eyes lit up and he vaulted on to the back of one of the horses. ‘Gladly. Thank you, my lord.’

‘It’s your first time in the field, isn’t it, Zeno?’

‘Yes, General.’

‘It looks like a game and so it is. But one word of warning, it’s a ruthless one. Take no prisoners. Those miscreants ...’ with a grin, Nikolaos jerked his head at the men he had assigned to the opposite team ‘... will show you no mercy. Remember that, and there’s a chance you will keep your seat.’

‘Yes, General.’

Nikolaos swung from the saddle, tossing the reins to Elias. His stallion’s brown coat was flecked with foam. ‘You delivered my message?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Elias looked troubled. One of the reasons Nikolaos had kept Elias as his manservant for so long was that he never dissembled or lied to him. And that, as Nikolaos had learned, was a rare and precious quality. ‘Don’t tell me, the Princess is still ailing?’

‘Apparently so, my lord.’

A cypress at the edge of the polo ground was swaying slightly in the onshore breeze. Nikolaos scowled at it. ‘That’s twice I’ve sent messages to her apartment. I take it you saw no sign of her this time either?’

It had occurred to Nikolaos that Princess Theodora might be hiding from him, but that would seem absurd. She was an Imperial princess and the former Emperor, the man who had married her aunt, had approved their marriage.

She could not have taken a dislike to me, since we have never met.

Elias was shaking his head. ‘Not as much as a glimpse, my lord. All I saw was a handful of maidservants and a guard assigned to her apartment. Other than that her chambers were quiet.’

Nikolaos tapped his thigh with his mallet. ‘You left my message with the guard, I take it?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘What regiment was he?’

‘Varangian.’

Nikolaos grunted. ‘Should be reliable. Did you get the man’s name and rank?’

‘Kari. A trooper.’

‘Very well. My patience is wearing thin, but I shall give the Princess till this afternoon to respond. And then, if she continues to ignore my existence, I will have to speak to His Imperial Majesty. Our betrothal was made at the behest of his predecessor. Perhaps Emperor Alexios has decided he has other plans for her.’

Removing his gloves, Nikolaos tucked them thoughtfully into his belt. He could not decide whether Princess Theodora’s illness was genuine or whether it was an excuse designed to keep him at a distance. Nikolaos wanted this marriage. He had seen other men’s careers blighted by innuendo and rumour and he was determined that was not going to happen to him. Marriage with an Imperial princess was a great honour, it would bolster his position at Court. Was it possible that Emperor Alexios had changed his mind?

Turning his back on the polo field and the turreted wall that protected the Great Palace from both sea and invasion, Nikolaos began walking towards the stables. Elias and Hermes kept pace. ‘It is odd, though,’ Nikolaos said, raking a hand through windswept brown hair, ‘you would think that His Majesty would have mentioned any concerns he has over my marriage arrangements when I was asked to organise the polo tournament.’

‘Didn’t he confirm that your marriage was to go ahead shortly after he was crowned?’

‘He did, he did indeed. Why, then, is the Princess so elusive?’

‘I do not know, my lord. Perhaps she really is unwell.’

‘Or a reluctant bride,’ Nikolaos said. ‘Think about it. First, she refused to return to Constantinople when the old emperor summoned her from Rascia, and when she does return, she hides away like a nun.’

‘You should give her the benefit of the doubt—she could really be unwell, my lord.’

Nikolaos gave Elias a straight look; he and his manservant had been together since Nikolaos was a boy and there was a strong bond of affection between them. Nikolaos could discuss anything with him. Nikolaos’s gut tightened—well, almost anything. ‘I have been giving her the benefit of the doubt for some days,’ he said, drily. ‘It occurs to me that Princess Theodora has no wish to marry.’

‘You cannot assume that, my lord.’

‘True. I am ready for this wedding to take place, Elias, but if my bride is reluctant?’ Nikolaos grimaced. ‘Lord, no.’

Nikolaos wanted this marriage. It would signal to the world that he was firmly ensconced with the new regime. And he wanted it soon, before anyone else got wind of his mother’s unexpected confession.

I am illegitimate.

The man Nikolaos had always thought of as his father was the late Governor of Larissa, Governor Gregorios. But according to his mother, Lady Verina, Gregorios was not his father. Nikolaos had received his mother’s confession as something of a body blow; her marriage to Gregorios of Larissa had seemed blissfully happy. They had been the perfect, loving couple with Governor Gregorios idolising his wife. And Nikolaos would have sworn the affection had not been one-sided, his mother had given every appearance of adoring her husband in return. The intense grief she had displayed at his death could not have been mere pretence. And yet ...

I am illegitimate. I have no blood ties with Governor Gregorios.

Dear God, better men than he had their careers wrecked because of their birth. That would not happen to him.

‘Will you ask His Majesty for another bride, my lord?’

‘I may have to, if Princess Theodora continues to show reluctance.’ Nikolaos sighed and ran his hand round the back of the neck. In view of his mother’s confession, he needed this marriage more than ever, but ... a reluctant bride? No.

‘Your mother will be disappointed. She was delighted when you were chosen for the Princess.’

Nikolaos felt his face stiffen, it was hard to keep the anger from his voice. ‘Naturally my mother would be pleased. Such a marriage would appease her conscience, if she has one.’

Elias frowned. ‘You have had a disagreement with Lady Verina?’

Nikolaos let out a bitter laugh. ‘You might put it like that.’

‘My lord, I thought—’

Nikolaos silenced Elias with a look. ‘Yes, old friend, you are right. My mother was delighted. I never thought we’d hear the end of it. But I will not marry a reluctant bride, however highborn.’

‘Duke Nikolaos?’

‘Mmm?’

‘If the Princess continues hiding away, will you ask Emperor Alexios to release her from the betrothal?’

Hermes clattered across the paving stones as they passed through a fountained courtyard. Water jetted from the mouths of a shoal of bronze fish; rainbows shimmered in the spray. ‘I am undecided. It was the previous Emperor who gifted her to me. If Princess Theodora really does prove reluctant, it should be easy enough to persuade His Majesty to give me another bride.’ He smiled at Elias. ‘I shall give the Princess until this afternoon to respond. Come, let’s get to the stables, Hermes needs a rubdown and that girth needs checking.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

That afternoon, Elias carried a third message to Princess Theodora’s apartment in the Boukoleon Palace. When he came away, he knew exactly where to find his master. Duke Nikolaos had told him he would be in one of the saddlers’ workshops outside the Palace walls.

The saddlers’ workshops were clustered together in a narrow street that cut away from the Mese—Middle Street—the main street of the City. Sure enough, Hercules, the Duke’s black warhorse, was tethered outside, next to an animal usually assigned to one of the grooms. Entering the workshop, Elias nodded at the groom and leaned against a wall to wait for the Duke to conclude his business.

‘But, General—’ the saddler’s voice was high and tight, his fingers shook as he examined the girth ‘—it is not as though you take this saddle into battle.’

Nikolaos shook his head. ‘You should not underestimate the rigours of the polo field, it’s an important part of training for my officers. Use stronger leather next time. Look—’ he pulled at the offending strap ‘—see here?’

‘That’s a natural flaw, General, part of the animal’s skin. You can’t avoid natural flaws.’

‘Nonsense! Even an untrained eye could see that this section of leather is weak. It should have been discarded. It has no place in a saddle of this quality—of any quality, come to think of it. Serious injuries can be caused by workmanship like this. If it happens again, I shall take my custom elsewhere. And I shall certainly ensure that the officers in my regiment know to avoid your merchandise. That said, I am sure you’ll put it right ...’

‘Yes, General.’ The saddler flushed dark red. ‘My apologies, it shall not happen again.’

Nodding at the man, Nikolaos stepped back into the street and smiled at Elias. ‘Well? I can tell from your face that you had no luck at the Princess’s apartment.’

‘No, my lord. This afternoon she is apparently a little recovered, but there is no message for you.’

Nikolaos tucked his thumbs into his belt. ‘Does the total lack of response strike you as odd, Elias?’ The Princess might be reluctant, but surely she would have to be gravely ill to ignore so many messages from the man to whom she had been betrothed?

‘My lord?’

The skin was prickling at the back of Nikolaos's neck. It was the sort of prickling he usually had on the eve of battle. His instincts were trying to warn him ... of what? Danger. Danger to him? No, he did not sense that the danger was to him. To the Princess? That did not seem possible, yet his instincts had not let him down before.

He looked at the groom. 'My thanks, Paul, that is all. I shall walk back. Take Hercules back to his stall, would you? Elias, you are with me.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Something's wrong,' Nikolaos murmured, once the groom had taken the horses and was well out of earshot. He followed the route the groom had taken, turning into the street that led past the Hippodrome, back to the Palace.

'I agree,' Elias said. 'It seems extraordinary that after sending several messages, you have received no response from Princess Theodora.'

The walls of the Palace loomed over them. 'The former Emperor appeared keen, even eager, to promote my marriage to Princess Theodora,' Nikolaos murmured, thinking aloud.

Elias, probably realising that this remark did not require a response, said nothing.

Nikolaos let his thoughts run on, thoughts which he was well aware a few weeks ago would have bordered on treasonous. He had not held the previous Emperor in high regard. Emperor Nikephoros had been weak and ineffective—unscrupulous courtiers had wasted no time in manipulating him. With little strength of will, and almost no understanding of military matters, the man had made a disastrous head of state. Which was why Nikolaos had supported Alexios Komnenos in his bid for the throne. The Empire needed a strong hand at the reins.

With regard to his marriage to Princess Theodora, Nikolaos had been led to believe that Emperor Alexios would honour the arrangement made by his predecessor.

The guards at the Palace gate jumped to attention, saluting as they passed through and entered the first of the courtyards.

'What will you do, my lord?'

'I have had enough of delays and evasions,' Nikolaos grinned at Elias. 'I shall visit the Princess's apartment myself.'

Elias flung him a startled look. 'You would go to the women's quarters in person, my lord?'

Nikolaos lifted his shoulders. 'Why not?'

Elias began to splutter. 'But, my lord, you cannot ... not the women's quarters! They ... they are sacrosanct ... only a close relative may enter ... and the Princess ... a cousin of the Empress ...'

Smiling, Nikolaos waited for his manservant to stutter to a halt which he did, with a final 'My lord, you cannot visit the women's quarters, particularly not those of the Princess.'

Nikolaos sighed. 'Elias, these days it is almost impossible to gain an audience with His Majesty. Ever since the coronation, he has either been deeply involved in affairs of state, or else he is doing penance for seizing the throne.'

'I had heard about the penance. Forty days of fasting and sackcloth and ashes,' Elias pulled a face. 'How much of the penance is left?'

'A little over three weeks. The polo tournament comes towards the end of it. Until then, it is possible to arrange an audience with His Majesty only for the most pressing of matters. I must resolve the question of my marriage myself.' Niko gestured ahead of him. 'Lead on, Elias, I am hazy about which staircase leads where in the Boukoleon.'

'My lord, you do recall that Princess Theodora's apartment is watched over by Varangian Guards?'

Nikolaos lifted a brow. 'I remember. And I am sure they have sworn allegiance to Emperor Alexios and are as loyal as they have always been. As I am. May I remind you that my own regiment supported His Majesty? I doubt I will be questioned.'

'Yes, my lord, I know. But ... but ... she is a princess.'

By now Nikolaos and Elias had left several courtyards behind them and had passed the stables and the lighthouse. An imposing building rose before them, with walls like cliffs. The Boukoleon Palace. On the upper levels, Nikolaos could see the stone balustrades where terraces overlooked the gardens and courtyards. On the other side of the Boukoleon, the balconies looked out over the Sea of Marmara.

Nikolaos and Elias reached a columned portico where a broad flight of marble stairs led upwards. ‘The women’s quarters, Elias?’

His manservant’s throat worked. ‘This way, my lord.’

Some hours earlier, Theodora’s galley had docked at the Imperial harbour. By the time the sun began to sink, she and her entourage were busy exploring the Princess’s apartment at the top of the Boukoleon Palace.

It was a magnificent apartment and had been reduced to chaos by their arrival. Slaves and servants ran in and out of the great double doors, laden with packing cases and trinket boxes. Others bore ewers of water and linen cloths. Trays of refreshments were set out on side-tables for travel-worn ladies. There was something to suit all palates—goblets of wine; milk sweetened with honey; cold meats and soft cheeses; shelled hazelnuts, almond cakes, dates. The gleaming marble floor was hidden under untidy heaps of baggage; ladies’ cloaks were strewn over gilded chairs, across inlaid tables and painted screens. Braziers had been lit to lift the chill from the air; and there, on another side-table, perfumed smoke wreathed from a golden globe—roses and the rich scent of incense mingled with the slight tang of salt blown in from the sea.

The time had come for Theodora to end the deception. She must stop pretending to be a lady-in-waiting and become, once again, Princess Theodora Doukaina. The transition from lady-in-waiting to Princess would be tricky, though. There was much to take account of ... sins both real and assumed.

‘It is time, Sophia,’ Theodora murmured as they stood in the light of a large window.

Martina was held fast in Sophia’s arms. Filmy purple drapes hung from ceiling to floor, silk hangings that shifted in the breeze coming off the Sea of Marmara. Imperial purple. Theodora bit her lip as guilt rushed through her. Theodora had not herself been ‘born in the purple’. This meant that she had not been born in the Purple Chamber, the great birthing room in the Palace that was lined with purple marble and set aside for the confinement of an Empress. Notwithstanding this, she had been allocated this wonderful apartment decorated with the Imperial purple. It was a great honour.

It is an honour I do not deserve, I was not born in the Purple Chamber. Worse, I have deceived everyone. Worse still, I have every intention of continuing to deceive them.

Theodora was as heavily veiled as a Princess of Persia, her gown was voluminous and hid her shape. Until she had successfully reclaimed her place as Princess Theodora Doukaina, she would have to go on hiding behind shawls and veils. Until she found Katerina, the maidservant she had sent on ahead to impersonate her, she must continue to conceal her identity.

Theodora and Katerina were completely unrelated and it was by chance that they might be taken for twins. They had the same dark hair, the same dark eyes, the same slight frame. Some of the ladies had said the Princess and her maidservant were as alike in features and build as two peas in a pod. And until Theodora was once again in her own shoes, until she knew what had been happening in the Palace in the past few weeks, she was not prepared to be seen by anyone save her ladies.

But, Holy Mother, what a mire she had walked into! Katerina seemed to have vanished and so, too, had Lady Anna of Heraklea. Lady Anna was the lady-in-waiting Theodora had sent to accompany Katerina. Theodora had charged Lady Anna with ensuring Katerina had everything she needed to convince the Court that it was she who was Princess Theodora Doukaina.

‘Where do you think Katerina and Anna have got to, Sophia?’ she asked, conscious of the Varangian Guard standing by the great polished doors, watching them. She edged away from him. ‘Why is that guard staring at us? Do you think he knows where they are?’

Sophia gave the Varangian a surreptitious glance. 'You are imagining it, he is simply curious to see the Princess's ladies. I do not think it is more than that.'

'I wish I could agree with you. Where are Katerina and Anna? Why aren't they here?'

'The guard mentioned they were visiting friends.'

'Which friends?'

'He refused to say.'

'Why? Why would he not say?'

'Perhaps he does not know.'

Theodora sighed. 'Perhaps. Lord, it would have been better if Katerina and Anna had kept themselves to the apartment.' She rearranged her veil, making sure the guard could only catch a glimpse of her. In Rascia, she had received many comments about the uncanny resemblance between herself and Katerina. It would not do for someone here to look too closely. Not yet.

My deception must not be discovered, the transition must happen smoothly, Martina's welfare could be at stake.

Theodora reached for her daughter. 'Let me hold her.'

'Are you sure, my lady?' Sophia tipped her head at the watchful Varangian and the army of servants and slaves. 'There are many eyes here.'

'Sophia!' As Theodora took her child, a measure of peace settled over her. Martina gurgled. A chubby hand reached out, pushed Theodora's veil aside and reached for an earring. Theodora's heart squeezed. 'She has her father's eyes,' she murmured. 'Thank heaven we found a suitable wet-nurse—I like Jelena.'

Sophia nodded.

Theodora felt stinging at the back of her eyes. She had enjoyed feeding Martina herself, a sentiment that would surely shock most ladies in the Great Palace, Princesses did not usually feed their babies. But since she had been sent to join the barbarians in Rascia, it would seem she had become something of a barbarian herself. It had been more painful than she cared to admit, handing Martina over to the wet-nurse. It had taken time. Weaning Martina had been as painful physically as it had been emotionally. Theodora's breasts had hurt, her heart had ached. The sacrifice had been necessary though, no one at Court must suspect that she had borne a child.

Setting her jaw, she stared out of the window, out past the Palace Harbour to the Sea of Marmara. The sea was as grey as the sky. Ships were sailing past the promontory—merchantmen, dromons, rowing boats. Seagulls were circling a fishing boat; she could hear their thin mewling.

'The lions and oxen are still there,' Sophia said. 'I had forgotten about them.'

'Hmm?'

'The statues on the Imperial quays. I had forgotten how impressive they are, like sentinels.'

'It is certainly a change from Rascia,' Theodora said, wistfully. She caught a flutter of gold, a couple of galleys were flying the Imperial standard. The same flag was flying on the towers on either side of the entrance to the Palace Harbour and the double-headed eagle was plainly visible on both of them. There was no doubt of it, she was home. She sighed and wished she did not feel so torn. The coup had changed everything.

What will I say if I am summoned to meet Emperor Alexios? It was one thing to have planned to deceive a weak and ageing Emperor, but Emperor Alexios was strong and in his prime. Intelligent. *God save me.*

Sophia was fingering the delicate purple curtains. 'I have never seen such hangings, my lady, all silk. Everything in your apartment is silk, silk and marble.'

'This apartment is not mine,' Theodora reminded her quietly. 'Not until I have reclaimed my identity.'

She risked another look at the Varangian by the doors. He had stood at his post like a rock since their arrival. His gaze was alert. Too alert. Several ladies had returned with her to the Palace, but it

was she whom he was focused on. *He has noted the resemblance between me and Katerina.* ‘That man knows exactly where Katerina and Anna are, and I would swear he knows who I am, too. Why will he not answer our questions?’ Anxiety clawed her insides. ‘Do you think they are safe and well? Do you think they have been found out? Arrested?’

‘Sweet Mary, I hope not.’

‘Then where are they? I took pains to tell them to be discreet until we arrived. I shall never forgive myself if they have come to harm, but I had to wean Martina on to the wet-nurse, I had to —’ she broke off as the guard’s gaze never wavered.

Enclosing Martina’s tiny hand in hers, Theodora pulled her veil across her face and presented the Varangian with her back. She was on the point of handing Martina back to Sophia when there was a disturbance at the entrance.

The shining double doors were flung wide. The guard stood firmly in the centre, feet braced as he challenged someone out on the landing.

‘I am sorry, General,’ the Varangian said. ‘You may not enter these chambers—they are assigned to Princess Theodora.’

‘I am aware of that.’ The newcomer’s voice was cultured. ‘Why do you think I have been sending messages here these past few days?’

Theodora froze. She could not see the man on the landing clearly—the doorframe blocked full view of him—but she caught the impression of height. He sounded confident, even arrogant. A jewelled sword-hilt flashed, a gold ring gleamed on a strong, well-shaped hand. Oh, no! If this man was permitted to bear arms in the Palace, he must be trusted indeed. And for him to have been sending messages to the Princess’s apartment, he must be ...

‘Duke Nikolaos,’ Sophia hissed. ‘It must be your general.’

Theodora’s heart started to race. If it was Duke Nikolaos, he was breaking with the conventions by coming in person to an apartment in the women’s quarters. She was not prepared to meet him. And yet ... curiosity flared into being, undeniable curiosity ... What did he look like? If she were careful ...

Martina firmly in her arms, Theodora went to the door. It might not be Duke Nikolaos, she told herself, it might be that this man was one in a long line of courtiers who had come to pay his respects to the Princess. Katerina could simply be hiding away because she had been overwhelmed by the part she had been asked to play.

The man was tall and broad-shouldered. He had strong features and a Roman nose that would not have looked out of place on an ancient coin. His hair was thick and dark and in need of a trim. Theodora received the impression of much energy, energy that was barely contained. He had a faintly disreputable air, despite the patrician profile. His jaw was square and he had high cheekbones. Bold, dark eyes.

Noticing her looking at him, he smiled. His teeth were white and even, the smile practised.

Theodora’s belly lurched. She had time to notice a small scar beneath one of those dark eyes. She had time to notice how good-looking he was—if you found dark men who ought to have visited a barber a week since attractive. Which she, of course, did not. She had time to notice his clothes. They were those of a nobleman. His tunic was olive-coloured samite, a heavy silk, lavishly embroidered in silver and gold thread. Theodora’s gaze lingered on his sword. The grip was leather, the pommel was gold and set with an emerald of exceptional clarity. The sword looked like a dress sword, but the wear on the grip warned that this sword was more than mere ornament. This man might be dressed as a nobleman, but he was clearly more warrior than courtier.

Duke Nikolaos of Larissa, General of the Athanatoi Cavalry regiment—the famous Immortals—Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Army. He had come to the very doors of her apartment. Captain Brand had been correct—the coup had brought the Duke racing back from Larissa in support of his fellow general, Alexios Komnenos, now Emperor.

Mouth dry, Theodora lifted her gaze. Dark eyes were fixed on her, the intensity of his gaze was vaguely unsettling. He inclined his head.

‘My lady?’ He glanced briefly at the baby in Theodora’s arms. ‘I take it you are one of the Princess’s ladies-in-waiting?’ His voice had a thread of steel running through it; it was the voice of a man who had the habit of command, of a man whose commands were always obeyed. And his mouth, now she looked at it, was held in a tight line. The veneer of politeness was thin in this man, his manner was verging on insolent.

Theodora ignored the frantic tug Sophia gave to her sleeve and her murmur of protest; she was *not* going to retreat. ‘Please take the child,’ she said, placing her daughter in Sophia’s arms. Secure in the knowledge that her veil was wrapped tightly about her and that only her eyes were showing, she turned back to the man in the doorway. ‘My lord? You are addressing me?’

The dark eyes sharpened, her tone had been too peremptory. A lady-in-waiting, as she was purporting to be, would never address a nobleman in such a tone. Certainly not before she found out who he was.

‘Yes, you.’ Shouldering the startled Varangian to one side, he occupied the doorway. ‘Where is your mistress?’ His tone moderated. ‘I have been trying to arrange an audience with the Princess for some days, but I have been told she is ailing. I trust she is not seriously ill?’

Theodora gave him a diplomatic smile. Cool, formal, and slightly distant. She would not let him annoy her. ‘Princess Theodora is, as I am sure you have already been told, not receiving guests today. I will, however, ensure your message reaches her. May I know to whom I am speaking?’

He bowed, and as he did so Theodora couldn’t help but notice how his mouth had eased as she answered him. His lips twitched. As though he were laughing at her! ‘I am Duke Nikolaos of Larissa and I am entirely at your disposal, my lady. And you are ...?’

It *was* Duke Nikolaos. Inclining her head to hide the rush of emotion—this was the man her uncle had decreed she must marry—Theodora affected not to have heard his question. ‘Please come back tomorrow, my lord.’

He looked her up and down. Theodora was confident her veil was still in place, so why had she to resist the urge to adjust it? Thankfully, he wouldn’t see much of her. Just her eyes. With luck, he would assume he was speaking to one of the more modest of Theodora’s ladies. She stared at the toes of her slippers as though her life depended on it. She could not let him study her, lest when he met her as Princess Theodora, he realised that she was the same woman who had told him the Princess was not yet well enough to meet him.

This man is a commander, a general of the Imperial Army. I must say as little as possible. Duke Nikolaos had an air of ruthlessness about him, a man such as this would not hesitate to dispense with Palace protocols if it suited him. That he had come to the apartment in person proved it. This man is dangerous.

Theodora effaced herself, backing away, her gaze fixed on the marble floor tiles. For the first time in her life she was grateful for the rigid rules and conventions set up to protect unmarried women. Even as she prayed they would keep him at arm’s length, an odd thrill of uncertainty shivered through her. *Protocols mean nothing to this man, he is a rule-breaker.*

She retreated with Sophia into a room that opened out from the reception chamber and overheard him exchanging remarks with the guard. When she looked back, the great double doors were closed, Duke Nikolaos had gone.

Martina began to whimper. ‘It is time she was fed,’ Theodora said.

‘I will take her to Jelena,’ Sophia said. ‘One moment.’

Theodora found herself standing alone in the large bedchamber. It was so lavishly appointed that her jaw had dropped when she had first arrived at the apartment and seen it. A huge bed filled much of the space, liberally festooned with mulberry hangings. There was yard after yard of gold braid and fringing; there were silk mulberry sheets, gold and mulberry-coloured cushions. Marble-

topped tables were set against the walls; there were golden basins and ewers; there, on the floor, was one of the travelling chests she had given to Katerina to help her play her part as Princess.

This is my bedchamber, or it will be when I am Princess Theodora Doukaina once more. Her heart missed its beat. If I marry Duke Nikolaos, that bed is where we will consummate our marriage.

The great bed was a world away from her bed at the Rascian Court. In Rascia, Theodora had had her own chamber, as befitted a Princess of the Empire, but her bed there had been very different to this one. The bed in which she and Peter had loved each other had been furnished with plain linens, not silks and damasks and ...

The air shifted behind her, Sophia had returned.

‘Martina is feeding well, my lady, she ... Good Heavens,’ Sophia said faintly, looking at the bed.

‘Quite.’

‘What are you going to do?’

Theodora glanced at the door and lowered her voice. ‘First, I shall reclaim my identity. I shall make that Varangian tell us where Katerina and Anna have gone. And then I shall once again be Princess Theodora Doukaina.’

‘Will you marry him?’

Theodora stared at the mulberry-draped bed in the centre of the chamber and bit her lip. Marry that handsome, ruthless-looking stranger? ‘Only if I have to.’

Chapter Three

Sophia moved so she had clear sight of the apartment entrance, anxiety clouding her expression. 'Oh, dear, Duke Nikolaos did seem rather ... rather ...'

Overpowering?'

Sophia nodded. 'Perhaps you should seek an audience with the Emperor, my lady, he may look kindly on a request to set the arrangement aside.'

'I wish I had your confidence. Emperor Alexios is a soldier, he is more likely to expect blind obedience. Oh, Lord, of all the times for there to have been a coup, this is surely the worst! The last thing I need is a strong emperor.' Theodora jerked her head in the direction of the Varangian posted at the entrance. 'And I had forgotten the extent to which women here are cloistered. Life here is going to be somewhat different from life in Rascia. Just look at that man. Is he there for our benefit, or is he spying on us?'

'Married women have more freedom than unmarried ones, Princess.'

Theodora shot her lady-in-waiting a sharp look. 'You think I should marry the Duke.'

Sophia lifted her shoulders. 'It is hard to tell on a first meeting, but Duke Nikolaos did not strike me as a ... conventional man. Such a man would not care for the opinions of others ...'

'You are saying he would let me go my own way?'

'I do not know. Perhaps.' Another shrug. 'However, if you do marry him, he will soon discover you are not ... not as innocent as he believes.'

Theodora sighed. 'Were I to marry him, I would simply have to pretend.'

'You would act the virgin?'

'I shall be as pure as the driven snow.'

'He would know,' Sophia said, firmly. 'A man like that would surely know.'

'I disagree. He's a general, a warrior ... he didn't strike me as being particularly ... subtle. Surely I can convince him I am innocent?'

'If you say so, my lady.'

Giving Sophia a curt nod—her doubts were irritating—Theodora strode back into the reception chamber. *'Guard!'*

The Varangian looked warily at her. 'My lady?'

'I have questions and this time you will give me the truth. When we arrived, you told us that the Princess was visiting friends—is that not so?' The guard flushed dark red and opened his mouth, but Theodora swept on. 'You also told Duke Nikolaos the Princess was sick. Why? Where is she?' When the guard would not meet her gaze, but stared woodenly at the wall behind her, she went to stand directly in front of him. 'Look me in the eye, when I am speaking to you. The Princess is not sick, nor is she out visiting friends. *Where is she?*'

The guard's throat worked.

It struck Theodora that the Varangian was young to be in such a position of such responsibility, she softened her voice. 'Do not be afraid. It is my belief you are acting on orders. It is also my belief that you know the whereabouts of the Princess.' Her foot tapped. 'You will tell me. This instant.'

The young man stared at her and gave a slight nod. With a lurch Theodora realised that he had been studying her while he made up his mind about her. *He realises I am the Princess.*

'Very well, my lady. If you wish, I can send her a message. I am sure she will join you shortly.'

Theodora let her breath out in a rush. 'Thank you. Please send the message at once.'

The young Varangian was as good as his word. Scarcely an hour later, when Theodora was in the bedchamber supervising the unpacking of her belongings with Sophia, someone scratched on the door.

'Enter.'

Katerina burst into the room. She was swathed in shawls and silk veils and escorted by a man wearing the uniform of a Varangian officer. The officer followed her right into the bedchamber and scowled at Theodora.

Theodora's heart sank, she knew this man. He was Ashfirth Saxon, Commander of the Varangian Guard. She had last seen him in Dyrrachion on the outskirts of the Empire.

Theodora had never actually spoken to the Commander, because it had been in Dyrrachion that she and Katerina had switched places. They had deceived him into thinking that he was escorting the Princess back to the Palace, whereas in truth he had been escorting Katerina.

Does the Commander know that rather than escorting me, he was duped into escorting my maidservant? Is that why he is looking so coldly at me?

'My lady!' Katerina dropped to her knees and bowed her head, several veils slithered to the floor. 'It is so good to see you! Oh, my lady—'

Afraid that Katerina might mention Martina, Theodora held up her hand. 'A moment, Katerina, we are not alone.'

Commander Ashfirth gazed at her with cool, assessing eyes and stepped fully into the bedchamber. Reaching behind him, he shut the door with a snap.

Theodora stiffened. 'What do you think you are doing?'

'My lady, you are the Princess?' the Commander demanded, voice curt. Holy Virgin, he knew about the deception practised upon him.

Does he know about Martina?

Katerina scrambled to her feet. 'Of course this is the Princess.' She laid a hand on the Commander's chest. 'Ash, all is well. The Princess is home at last and I need to speak to her, in confidence.'

'You want me to go?'

'If you wouldn't mind waiting in the reception chamber.' Katerina smiled. 'I will introduce you properly when I have brought the Princess up to date with everything that has happened since we last saw each other.'

Commander Ashfirth nodded at Katerina, gave Theodora a grudging bow and left the bedchamber.

Theodora looked thoughtfully at Katerina. Katerina had had an unhappy past. Indeed, it had been Theodora who had saved her from a life of abuse as a slave and had freed her. The Katerina whom Theodora knew had been extremely wary of men. 'You are very familiar with Commander Ashfirth.'

What has she told him?

Katerina's smile lit up the bedchamber. 'Yes, my lady, and with very good reason—the Commander is my husband.'

Theodora's eyes went wide. 'You *married* Commander Ashfirth?' Theodora had never thought Katerina would be able to trust a man again, never mind marry. 'So soon?' It had only been a few weeks since Theodora had persuaded Katerina to take her place. And now she was married?

'It was not a difficult choice, my lady, *despoina*. Ashfirth is an honourable man, and thanks to you I am—' her chin inched up '—a free woman. I have every right to marry.'

Theodora smiled and touched Katerina's arm. 'Of course you do.' Her hand fell away. 'You must tell me everything. First, if you please, you must tell me how much you have told him.' She lowered her voice. 'Does he know about Martina?'

Katerina shook her head and a twist of hair, as dark as Theodora's, trembled at her temple. *No.*

Theodora felt her tension ease. 'Thank God.' She frowned at the closed door. 'Is Anna outside? I should like to see her, too.'

Katerina grimaced. 'Princess, I ... I'm afraid that is impossible, Lady Anna has left the City.'

'I beg your pardon?'

‘Lady Anna left Constantinople several days ago.’

Theodora groped for the bed, she had to sit down. ‘Anna *abandoned* you when I charged her with looking after you?’ Katerina had little knowledge of the ways of the Court, which was why Theodora had asked her lady-in-waiting, Anna of Heraklea, to go with her. Anna was meant to have taken Katerina under her wing; she had promised to explain the intricacies of court protocol to her ... but if Anna had left the City ...?

‘Princess, Lady Anna knew I was safe. By the time she left, she knew that Commander Ashfirth and I ... that we ...’ Katerina glanced at the great bed and coloured ‘She knew I was safe.’

Theodora rubbed her forehead. ‘What on earth happened? Blessed Mother, you had best start from when you arrived at the Palace.’

‘All went well, at first. I was nervous, of course, but Lady Anna was a great help and Ash ... the Commander ... was kind. We did not make much of a show of ourselves, nor did we plan to do so. But almost as soon as we had arrived, General Alexios staged his coup and his mercenaries overran the City. For a few days all was chaos.’

Theodora shook her head as Katerina told her about the old Emperor’s downfall, as she learned how Katerina and Anna were caught up in the unrest at the time of the coup and had to flee marauding mercenaries. Theodora did not have to be a seer to realise that Commander Ashfirth had helped Katerina, but her jaw dropped when she learned that Anna had been saved by a Frankish knight she had bought in the slave market.

Theodora held up her hand. ‘You are saying that Anna bought a cavalry officer at the slave market? A Frank?’

‘Yes, my lady, *despoina*.’

When Katerina proceeded to explain that Anna had fallen in love with the slave and had sailed off to Apulia with him in order to escape an arranged marriage, Theodora fell back against the mulberry pillows.

‘Anna let a Frankish cavalry officer carry her off to Apulia?’

‘Yes, Princess.’

Theodora could not help but groan. ‘I don’t know what I expected when we returned and found the apartment empty, but this ...’ She caught her breath. ‘The knight will not hurt Anna, will he?’

‘I believe that he loves her, he intends to marry her.’

‘That at least is something to be thankful for.’

‘I am sorry, Princess. Everything was going smoothly until His Majesty, the new Emper—’

‘Yes, yes, I am sure you did your best.’ With a sigh, Theodora pushed herself upright. She needed no reminder that the dawn of the new regime changed everything. ‘In truth, Katerina, in the circumstances you did well. There is one slight problem ...’

‘*Despoina* ...?’

‘Duke Nikolaos came to this apartment in person this afternoon. He was looking for me. As I understand it, he arrived in Constantinople with His Majesty and he has been sending me messages for some days. The Duke is not pleased to have been, as he sees it, ignored.’

‘Oh.’

‘Exactly. Oh.’

Katerina clasped her hands at her breast. ‘Princess, I am deeply sorry not to have been here. Ashfirth felt it was too risky. I have been at his house in the City; he refused to let me leave.’

‘And you were happy to fall in with his wishes.’

‘I ... yes.’

What must it be like to be loved in such a way? A painful twinge that felt alarmingly like envy shot through Theodora. *What must it be like?*

Katerina was staring at a swirling pattern in the marble floor, twisting her fingers together. 'My apologies, Princess, I would have insisted on being here if I knew the Duke was in the City. Ashfirth didn't tell me.'

'Never mind, he was probably trying to protect you. And you are here now, which means we can each step back into our own shoes. It will be a relief to you, I am sure. Katerina, tomorrow the Imperial Court is going to find that Princess Theodora Doukaina is much recovered. She is going to make something of a show of herself and we need to discuss how she is to go about it. Once we have done that, you must take me into the reception chamber. I should like to thank your husband for all he has done for you.'

Next day, the bells for morning service had barely faded when courtiers in the Great Palace were at last granted clear sight of Princess Theodora Doukaina. She trotted out of the Imperial Stables at the head of a glittering entourage. Her stallion was the colour of milk, its flowing mane and tail had been neatly plaited with violet ribbon made from the same delicate fabric as her gown. The Princess had, so the word went, been up and about since dawn.

Princess Theodora led her cavalcade through the spring sunlight to the Mangana Palace, where she dismounted and went inside with a handful of ladies-in-waiting. She was doubtless reacquainting herself with her aunt, the former Empress. No one could say how the meeting went, the Princess had simply dismounted and gone inside. She emerged some half an hour later, climbed back into the saddle, and set about reacquainting herself with the City.

Princess Theodora Doukaina rode out through the Palace gates and no one had seen the like of it in years. A contingent of Varangians marched alongside her, fearsome battle-axes flashing in the light. Her outriders were wearing the uniform of Palace Guards and Lady Sophia, a favoured lady-in-waiting, was riding at her side. With the rest of her attendants riding a horse-length behind, the Princess processed down the entire length of the Mese—Middle Street.

Her next stop was at the Church of the Holy Apostles for prayers. Then she and her retinue paraded about under the arches of the aqueduct that carried fresh water into the heart of Constantinople. Citizens and slaves stopped in their tracks. From streets and alleyways, from windows and doors, heads craned to look.

There was no mistaking Princess Theodora Doukaina on that milk-white stallion. Some of the onlookers half-expected to discover that the Princess who had lived so long among the barbarians—ten years, imagine!—had grown horns and a tail. But there were no horns, just a jewel-encrusted diadem that had been set on elaborately arranged brown hair. Pearls swung on pendants dangling from the diadem; matching pearls hung from her ears. There was no tail, either, just yards of flowing violet silk. Princess Theodora's smile was gracious and her brown eyes sparkled. She looked happy to be home.

Behind the Princess and her lady there was always that long and colourful train of ladies and maidservants. In short, the Princess was seen with enough attendants to satisfy the needs of a dozen princesses, let alone one. Silver glittered at wrists and fingers; gold shone on headbands and jewelled cloak-pins. Shawls fluttered, bright as butterfly wings—pink, blue, green, crimson. The ladies' eyes were, as was seemly, downcast; they were talking to each other non-stop, chattering like sparrows. Harness jingled; hooves struck sparks from the paved streets.

Word spread like wildfire, the crowds grew. Everyone wanted to see for themselves that Princess Theodora was back. She was clearly enjoying perfect health and looked every inch the Princess. For those hoping for a scandal, she looked disappointingly normal.

'So that's what she looks like,' one man muttered to his slave. 'She was hidden away for so long, I thought she must be hideously scarred, but she's lovely, quite lovely.'

'That stallion is no lady's mount,' observed the young wife of one of the generals.

'She's controlling it well,' the general said. 'And given it only returned yesterday with her women, that is no mean feat, it must be champing at the bit for a good gallop.'

At last Theodora rode back to the stables, she was aware that all eyes had been on her—she had expected nothing less. *They hoped for a pageant. I trust this has satisfied them.* She felt exhausted.

‘Princess, we can leave the horses at the Boukoleon portico,’ Sophia said gently. ‘A groom will walk them back to the stables.’

‘I prefer to walk,’ Theodora said, realising, too late, that her tone had been curt. A slave-girl watching from one of the doorways lifted her eyebrows. Theodora made a note to soften her voice. She was not going to enjoy the restrictions that would be imposed on her, but there was no point snapping at poor Sophia because she was unused to being the centre of so much attention. ‘Besides, I have yet to inspect the stables. I want to speak to the head groom, there may be days when I am unable to ride and the horses must not be neglected.’

Sophia nodded.

Theodora gestured for one of the accompanying guards. ‘Captain Brand?’

‘Despoina?’

‘There are orders for the head groom that I should like to deliver personally. Lady Sophia will accompany me.’ She gestured at the train of attendants. ‘Be so good as to tell the other ladies they may return to the women’s quarters. You may escort them.’

‘Yes, my lady.’ The Captain exchanged words with a couple of sergeants and turned back to her. ‘Princess, I must tell you I have orders myself. Commander Ashfirth insists that I remain with you until you are safely in your apartment.’

Theodora kept her irritation from her face. Yes, this was how it was going to be. Already it had started; she was hedged in by rules, by other people’s expectations. Her days of freedom were truly over.

‘Very well, Captain.’

In a tack room in the Imperial Stables, Duke Nikolaos was checking his equipment with Elias and one of his grooms. That faulty girth had been weighing on his mind. His gear was regularly checked, both by himself and his groom, it seemed unlikely that they should have missed such an obvious flaw.

‘This saddle is fine, my lord,’ Elias pronounced.

‘This halter also,’ said the groom.

Nikolaos looped the bridle he had been examining on to its hook with a sound of exasperation. ‘And this. I simply don’t understand how we could have missed that girth.’

‘Everything here is in order, Duke Nikolaos. Shall I return the saddles to the racks?’

‘Please do.’ Nikolaos waved at the heap of harness. ‘Put it all away, Paul, there’s nothing wrong with any of it.’ He paused. ‘On second thought, leave out gear for two horses, I have business in the City; afterwards I shall take a gallop through the countryside. Elias, saddle up, you are coming with me.’

Nikolaos hefted a saddle at his manservant and together they headed for the stalls.

‘Where to, my lord?’ Elias asked, slipping the bridle over the brown mare that had been his gift from his master some years previously.

Hercules harrumphed and whickered a greeting as his master entered his stall. ‘We shall go to Cleo’s first and then—’

‘Cleo’s?’ Elias looked faintly uncomfortable. ‘Are you sure you want me with you?’

‘I shan’t stay long,’ Nikolaos said, slinging the saddle on to his horse and tightening the girth.

‘You are going to tell her about your marriage.’

‘She knows about that already. I am going to bid her farewell.’

Elias went very still. ‘Really?’

Nikolaos gave his manservant a rueful look. ‘I cannot afford to alienate a princess, Elias. Remember, she is a Doukas—cousin to the Empress.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘It strikes me that, if I am to be married, I should start by trying to do the right thing. Cleo must go.’ Lady Verina had given Nikolaos a mistrust of women; nevertheless, he wanted to at least start his marriage by trying to do the right thing.

Light footsteps approached. Voices. A shadow formed in the doorway. One of the stable boys was hanging about outside, watching someone in the stable yard.

Elias muttered under his breath.

‘What’s that, Elias?’

‘Nothing, my lord.’

Niko narrowed his eyes. ‘You don’t believe me.’

Elias leaned against the black’s neck. ‘You and the lovely Cleo go back a long way, that is all, she is more than fond of you. Do you want me to take her a message?’

‘No, I must tell her myself.’ The voices approached and more shadows darkened the doorway. ‘Cleo will understand, she’s a practical woman. If only all women—’

Elias glanced towards the door and blanched. ‘My lord,’ he hissed, with a swift, silencing gesture that had the black mare toss her head. ‘We are no longer alone.’

A diminutive lady was silhouetted in the doorway. Her features were in shadow, but Nikolaos could see that she was wearing one of the finest gowns ever to grace the Imperial Court. Violet silk. His heart lurched. Her gown wasn’t the deep purple that was reserved for the Emperor’s closest family, but violet such as might be worn by ... Princess Theodora Doukaina?

Holy hell. First sight of his betrothed would have to be when he had been talking about Cleo. And the Princess was well within earshot ...

A golden diadem sat on glossy, elaborately arranged brown hair, pendant pearls glowed in the sun. Yes, this could only be Princess Theodora Doukaina.

Involuntarily, Nikolaos reached a hand towards her and stepped out of the stall.

Her head turned, the pearls swung on their pendants, and a pair of dark eyes flashed in his direction. Head high, she gave Nikolaos a cool look and turned away. A woman—one of the ladies he had seen yesterday in the apartment—trotted after her.

With a groan, Nikolaos shoved his hand through his hair. ‘Don’t tell me, that was Princess Theodora.’ He hadn’t been able to see her properly, but she had looked vaguely familiar. Her dark eyes ... He might be imagining it, but her eyes were extremely similar to those of the heavily veiled woman he had spoken to yesterday in the Princess’s apartment. A man noticed a woman’s eyes when that was all he could see of her, particularly when those eyes were unusually fine. And those long, sooty eyelashes and lustrous brown eyes were exceptional. ‘Blast it, she heard me mention Cleo.’

Striding to the door, he leaned on the frame. Violets, he could smell violets. There was a rustle of silk as his betrothed picked up her silk skirts and crossed the yard. He noticed she was crumpling the costly material with little regard for its rarity, which was interesting. Was she angry? Irritated? Yes, he would swear that anger was there in the set of her shoulders, in the way she never looked back ...

Very interesting. Could this be the same woman he had spoken to in the Princess’s apartment yesterday? If so, why had she made such a mystery of her identity? True, convention demanded they met officially before they spoke together, but she could surely have been more open with him. What was going on?

I spoke to the Princess yesterday, those eyes are unforgettable. As was the scent of violets. Yesterday he had barely noticed it, but a spring-like fragrance had hung about her, cutting through the heavier scents of musk and roses.

The anger was a puzzle. He was not the first unmarried general to have taken a mistress and he would not be the last. Since he and the Princess had yet to form a bond, she could not be jealous. Pride might explain it. She was a proud princess and learning of Cleo had angered her. Yes,

pride was probably at the root of it. Which meant that she knew who he was. *So I did speak to her yesterday—why the mystery?*

Thoughtfully, Nikolaos watched the violet silk whisk along the sunlit path. It seemed he must watch his step where his Princess was concerned. He must watch her. It occurred to him that for her to risk ruining that priceless violet gown—Imperial silk—in a stable yard, she must like her horses. ‘We have that in common, at any rate,’ he muttered.

‘My lord?’

‘The Princess likes horses.’

As Princess Theodora gained the path that led towards the Boukoleon Palace and vanished behind an antique statue, Nikolaos glanced back at Elias. ‘Did you recognise her?’

Elias looked blankly at him. ‘My lord?’

‘She’s the lady we spoke to in the Princess’s apartment.’

‘I don’t think so, my lord.’

Niko shrugged. ‘I can’t be certain it’s the same woman, but why else would she be angry?’

Elias began to splutter. ‘That’s obvious, my lord, you mentioned your mis—Cleo. Everyone knows that whenever you are in the City, you go straight to Cleo.’

‘Exactly. Think, man. It’s one thing for me to recognise the Princess in all her finery, but how did she recognise me?’

I ... I don’t quite follow.’

Nikolaos gestured at his plain brown tunic, at his workaday chausses and scuffed boots. ‘We have yet to be introduced. Unless she was the lady we spoke to yesterday, how would she know me?’

With a sigh, Nikolaos returned to the stall, unbuckled his saddle and heaved it off Hercules.

‘We are not riding, my lord?’

‘Later. Since Princess Theodora has at last emerged from hiding, the least we can do is go and greet her.’

‘And Cleo?’

‘Cleo will have to wait.’

‘Did you hear him, Sophia?’ Theodora demanded, taking the stairs up to her apartment in the women’s quarters. Captain Brand dogged their heels. ‘My betrothed probably has women hidden all over the City.’

At the landing outside the apartment, sight of her jewelled diadem had the guards jumping to attention—they saluted, they bowed almost to the floor. The polished doors swung open. Brushing past the guards, Theodora made straight for the small room at the far end of the reception chamber. The room had one slim window and was little more than a closet, but Theodora had decreed that it should be Martina’s nursery. She wished it might be more spacious, but to have given anything grander to a child who was supposed to have been born to a slave would certainly rouse suspicions.

The wet-nurse Jelena was sitting next to a wooden cradle, folding baby clothes. Jelena had been with them since Dyrrachion and she had that morning been informed of Theodora’s Imperial connections. However, she remained ignorant of the fact that Theodora was Martina’s mother.

Bending over the cradle, Theodora ran her finger down a lightly flushed cheek and stroked her daughter’s hair. Martina had recently begun to teethe, and since Theodora was in the habit of spending most of the day with her, she had been concerned that the baby might be upset with only her nurse for company.

‘She went to sleep without fretting, Jelena?’

‘Martina has been fine, my lady, *despoina*. She began to fuss, but I found a coral teether and that did the trick.’

‘Thank you, Jelena. How long has she been asleep?’

‘Not long.’

Theodora nodded. It was dawning on her that even if she managed to keep her daughter, her duties as a princess would separate them more than she would like. However, Jelena was both caring and competent, and if Martina was happy with her, that was what mattered.

Lightly, she touched Jelena's arm. 'I am glad you came with us.'

'Thank you, *despoina*.'

Theodora rubbed her forehead, her head was thumping. 'I shall come back to see Martina later, when she is awake.'

'Yes, my lady.'

Theodora left the nursery, nodding at the smiling, curtsying ladies who awaited her pleasure in the reception chamber. Her head ached so much, it was a struggle to remember that the servants were always watching and she must give lip service to the lie that some of her ladies would not have spoken to her for some weeks. *I must remember, I am meant to have returned to the Palace some weeks ago and my ladies sailed in yesterday.*

'Thetis, are you well?' she asked, smiling.

Thetis curtsied and followed Theodora's lead. 'I thank you, *despoina*, I am very well.'

'And Cassandra ...' Theodora made her voice warm '... how are you?'

'Never better, my lady.'

'That is good to hear.' For the benefit of the servants and any guards not under Commander Ashfirth's orders, Theodora raised her voice. 'It is such a relief to be reunited with my ladies at last—I have missed you. You shall tell me about your voyage in due course. First, I would speak alone with Sophia. Come, Sophia.'

Retreating into the opulent bedchamber, Theodora dragged the diadem from her head and tossed it on to the mulberry bedcover. With a groan and a grimace, she began massaging her scalp. 'I had forgotten the weight of that thing.'

Sophia clucked her tongue and retrieved the diadem, the pearl pendants had become entangled. Reverently, she straightened them.

Theodora began to drag the pins from her hair and Sophia watched the destruction of the elaborate hair arrangement she had taken so long to create with rueful resignation. Hairpins went the way the diadem had gone, bouncing off a tasselled cushion. Theodora's hair rippled as it was released, a glossy dark cascade which hung to her waist.

Aware she was frowning, Theodora searched her hair for more pins. 'Did you hear my betrothed? He knows our official meeting must be soon, yet he is arranging assignations in the City.' She thrust her shawl and a couple of stray hairpins at Sophia. 'She must be his mistress.'

'You don't know that, my lady.'

Theodora let out a sound of vexation. 'You don't need to be a soothsayer to read Duke Nikolaos. A man like that will have women scattered all over the Empire, waiting on his pleasure.'

Carefully, Sophia set the diadem and hairpins on a gilded side-table. She shook out the shawl. 'A man like that?'

'A ... a man of ... vigour and experience.'

'Vigour. Experience. Hmm.' Sophia shot her a penetrating look and pursed her lips. 'Certainly. Duke Nikolaos seems extremely ... vigorous.'

Theodora held down a blush and paced to the window. Sophia knew her too well. She had realised that Theodora found the Duke handsome, she knew Theodora was carnally attracted to him. And as for his vigour ... his energy ... that, too, was attractive. She sighed. What would it be like to be loved by a man of experience, rather than a boy? The thought seemed so disloyal, she pushed it away. *I loved Peter, I do not love the Duke and he does not love me. If I bedded with the Duke, of course it would be disappointing ...*

There. That was better, that was much more loyal. If only she could believe it.

Resting her arms on a window ledge, she found herself gazing out over one of the Palace courtyards. She could see the Palace walls that separated them from the city she had once been so sad to leave. And beyond the walls lay the huge stone oval of the Hippodrome, the great arena where chariot races and circuses were staged.

She turned and caught Sophia's eye. 'The Duke is nothing like Peter.'

'I don't suppose that he is, my lady, but you have only spoken to him once and, don't forget, he is unaware he spoke to you yesterday.'

'I cannot marry him.'

'Why not? It's obvious he intrigues you.'

'It is no good, I cannot marry a man like that. I shall have to seek an audience with the Emperor.' *Yesterday Sophia said that a man with the Duke's experience would know at once that I am no virgin. She was right. He will expose me. I was dreaming to think otherwise.*

Sophia put Theodora's shawl on the bed. 'His Majesty is doing penance for usurping the throne, many of his duties have been set aside until his penance is over.'

Theodora frowned. 'How long a penance?'

'Forty days, my lady. There is more than three weeks left of it and—'

'The Emperor must still govern! I shall insist on seeing him.'

'Are you sure that's wise? It might be better to go ahead with the marriage as planned.'

'I cannot marry that man.' Theodora had reached the window again. Heavens, there were soldiers everywhere. Varangian Guards, Palace Guards ... she recognised the uniforms of several local regiments. 'The army is here in force, the grounds are bristling with soldiers.'

Sophia came to lean against a mulberry-coloured curtain and murmured agreement. 'I don't remember half as many when I was last here.'

'The army will want to make the most of the regime change. Emperor Alexios is himself a soldier, I expect the military are delighted the balance of power has shifted in their favour.' Theodora sighed. 'It may be no bad thing that the Emperor has decided to do penance for so many days. In truth, Sophia, I was dreading the moment I must meet him. A reprieve will be most welcome.'

'Look, my lady.' Sophia pointed. 'Duke Nikolaos is by that fountain.'

For a moment Theodora was able to study her betrothed unobserved. He stood casually, a boot on the rim of the fountain, exchanging jokes with a Varangian officer. When they flung their heads back, their laughter reached the apartment. The Duke's teeth were white and even, his dark hair was ruffled. He was dressed as he had been in the stables, like a groom. Even at this distance Theodora could see that his brown tunic was fraying and worn. The Duke should have looked out of place among the immaculate uniformed officers. It was mildly irritating that he did not. The brown tunic stretched across wide shoulders, a worn brown belt cinched a slim waist. The man was big, but he carried not an excess ounce. And he was wearing his sword—he was the only non-uniformed man in the courtyard to be doing so.

She felt a pull on her skirt. 'He will see you watching him, *despoina*.'

'Too late,' Theodora observed, as that darkly handsome face turned up to the window.

Duke Nikolaos grinned and, with something of a flourish, gave her an elaborate bow. He clapped the Varangian officer on the arm and continued towards the steps that led into the Boukoleon.

'I wonder if he's coming to meet you?'

'Dressed like a stable hand? He wouldn't dare.'

Sophia gave Theodora a look that told her that Sophia believed the Duke would dare anything. In her heart Theodora knew Sophia was right.

'He is not in the least like Peter,' Theodora murmured.

'No, my lady, I do not believe he is.'

As Theodora pondered on the nature of the Duke's character, a nervous shiver shot through her. She really did not think she could marry him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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