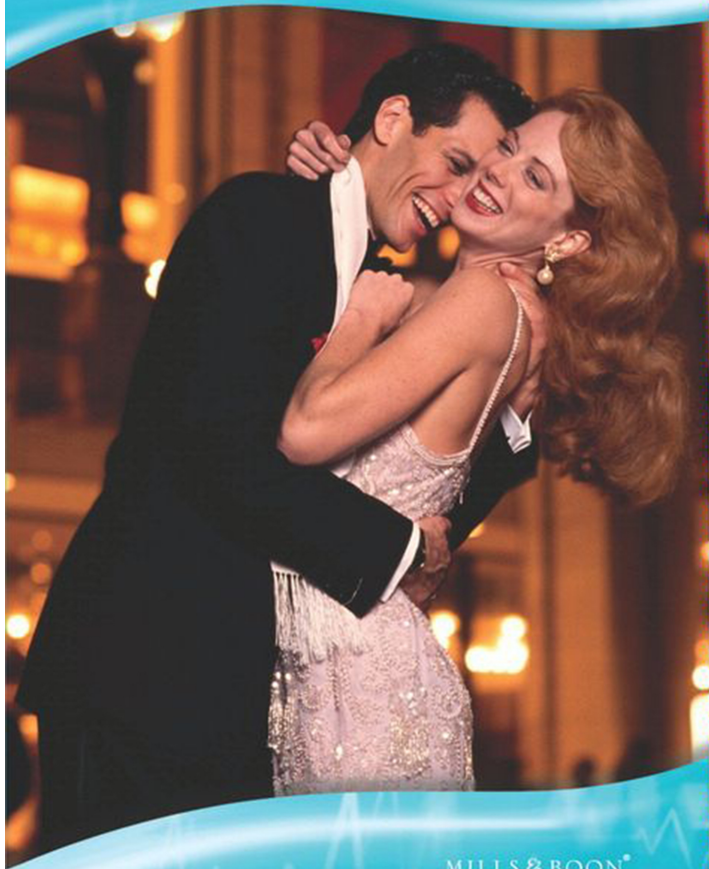


THE GREEK BILLIONAIRE'S LOVE-CHILD

Sarah Morgan



MILLS & BOON®
MEDICAL™

Sarah Morgan

The Greek Billionaire's Love-Child

Аннотация

Enter into the world of high-flying Doctors as they navigate the pressures of modern medicine and find escape, passion, comfort and love – in each other’s arms! Accidentally pregnant with the billionaire doctor’s baby Six months of bliss with gorgeous, high-flying paediatric surgeon Nikos Mariakos leaves children’s nurse Ella head-over-heels in love...until Nikos unexpectedly ends the relationship. Later that same day Ella’s pregnancy test turns positive, and it is only then she discovers – from a celebrity magazine! – that the father of her baby is also a billionaire! On learning Ella is expecting his love-child, everything changes for Nikos. This rich Greek playboy is back on the children’s ward, and back into Ella’s life. Determined to be a full-time dad, taking Ella as his convenient wife seems his only solution... Billionaire Doctors Hot, jet-set docs at the top of their game – professionally...and personally!

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Never, if he lived to be a hundred, would he understand women.

Nikos swung his sleek, high-performance sports car into his parking space directly outside the paediatric emergency department.

He'd offered her marriage and put a diamond the size of New York on her finger.

And she'd given it back.

Theos mou, what was going on in her head? How many women had longed for him to make exactly that gesture?

Her refusal had been genuine. And yet she still wanted him. He knew that. So why hadn't she just said yes?

Realising that he didn't have any answers made him realise how little he knew about her.

What, in all honesty, had they shared in the six passionate months they'd spent together? Sex, he acknowledged ruefully. They'd lived in a small intimate bubble that had involved their work at the hospital and the two of them. Nothing had intruded.

And that had been the way he'd wanted it.

Locking his car, Nikos strode purposefully towards the entrance of the paediatric emergency department, his naturally competitive nature roused by the block she'd erected in the path of their relationship.

She would marry him, he vowed silently. She was carrying his baby. It was just a matter of understanding why she was saying no. Once he understood that, he would turn the no to a yes.

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Sarah Morgan:

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—*Cataromance* on BOUGHT: THE GREEK’S INNOCENT VIRGIN, Modern™ Romance June 08

Sarah Morgan trained as a nurse, and has since worked in a variety of health-related jobs. Married to a gorgeous businessman, who still makes her knees knock, she spends most of her time trying to keep up with their two little boys, but manages to sneak off occasionally to indulge her passion for writing romance. Sarah loves outdoor life, and is an enthusiastic skier and walker. Whatever she is doing, her head is always full of new characters, and she is addicted to happy endings.

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BY
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PROLOGUE

IT WAS a bad time to realise that she was in love.

The atmosphere in the resuscitation room was strained and tense—the child’s injuries so severe that no one was holding out much hope of a good outcome.

No one, that was, except Dr Nikos Mariakos, the Greek consultant who had a reputation for making miracles happen.

Ella adjusted the oxygen flow with shaking hands and sneaked a glance at the man working across from her. Her heart tumbled, dipped and soared.

Why now? And why this man?

She’d broken both her rules.

Don’t trust.

Don’t love.

At the age of eight she’d learned that men were bad news and she’d locked away her emotions and thrown away the key.

But this man had not only found the key, he’d used it. And what had started as a scorching affair, *a physical release from the constant stress of working in the paediatric emergency department*, had turned into something deeper.

Ella felt a moment of pure panic, but the child’s condition didn’t allow time for reflection.

‘Suction—more light.’ He gave his orders in a calm, detached tone, apparently undaunted by the enormous task that faced him.

It was almost as if he relished the challenge. His hands didn't shake, his brow didn't sweat and there was no trace of emotion on his cold, handsome face as he worked to stabilise the critically injured child.

I really do love him, Ella thought helplessly, watching every movement of his swift, skilled fingers with something close to desperation. Only hours earlier they'd been in bed. Those same fingers had created a very different kind of magic and the sensual spell he'd woven had somehow unravelled the protective web she'd spun over years of suspicion and caution.

A feeling of dread seeped into her bones as she realised how vulnerable she was.

Love had punched holes through her defensive shield.

Love now made her open to the same agonising hurt she'd suffered as a child.

'Do you want to give him another unit of blood?' It was one of the more junior doctors who spoke, his face almost as pale as that of their small patient.

'No. I want to control the haemorrhage.' The consultant's coldly analytical approach to the critically injured child was in direct contrast to the less experienced doctor's agitation. 'Raise the temperature in here. I want overhead heaters and warming blankets.'

Ella quietly did as he instructed, remembering the day Nikos had started in the department. His reputation had caused such a stir that for days before his arrival no one had talked about

anything but his technical brilliance and the fact that he was the youngest consultant ever appointed in the hospital.

And then he'd strode through the doors and the talk from the females in the department had shifted from his clinical skills to the fact that he was sexy enough to start a riot in a nunnery.

Even Ella, with her natural suspicion of very handsome men, had been blinded. Not just by his startling good looks, but by his bold, determined approach to every case that came through the doors of the emergency department.

Dismissive of bureaucracy, Nikos Mariakos was fearless in his pursuit of clinical excellence. His willingness to challenge conventional thinking and push boundaries meant that he frequently clashed swords with the hospital management who were terrified by his indifference to protocol and policy.

Nikos didn't care.

When it came to his work, he cared about one thing alone.

His young patients.

It was as if he was on a one-man crusade to save every injured child.

And that included the little boy on the trolley.

'He's arrested. Get me a thoracotomy pack. I'm going to open his chest.'

A stunned silence greeted his statement and Phil, the anaesthetist, shook his head in disbelief. 'In the emergency department? You can't be serious, Nikos. Do you know the mortality rate for performing that procedure outside the

operating room?’

Nikos was resuscitating the child. ‘I’m sure you’re about to remind me.’

The anaesthetist proceeded to do exactly that, but Nikos didn’t pause in his efforts.

‘Get that pack open, Ella,’ he ordered. ‘You should take a job with a medico legal company, Phil. They’d love you. Has someone called the cardiothoracic surgeons?’

‘What the hell is the matter with you, Nikos? Were you dropped on your head as a child?’ His colleague was perspiring under the heat of the lights, his concern for the patient eclipsed by concern for himself and the potential consequences of what the Greek consultant was proposing. ‘Don’t you ever follow protocol?’

‘Not if following protocol means giving up on a child,’ Nikos said coldly. ‘This child has a penetrating chest wound which appears to be confined to the thorax. If I can stop the bleeding within the next few minutes, he stands a chance. Ella—the pack. Now.’

‘Think of your reputation.’ The anaesthetist became a shade paler as Nikos prepped the child’s chest. ‘You could be struck off.’

‘If I’m struck off for doing my best for my patient then I would leave medicine happy. A bit like having a heart attack during sex.’ Nikos spoke in a lazy drawl, nothing in his demeanour suggesting that he was about to perform major surgery. ‘I’ve always thought

that if you are going to make an exit, you should at least make it while striving for perfection.’

It must have been the impossible tension of the situation that made Ella want to laugh. Or perhaps it was just the inconceivable idea of someone with Nikos’s physique and stamina dying during sex.

‘Your girlfriend is obviously a lucky woman,’ quipped one of the cheekier nurses, and Ella felt her face grow scarlet.

They’d always kept their relationship secret, but suddenly she had a wild desire to tell everyone that this incredibly talented man was *hers*. That she was the one he spent his nights with.

He’d chosen *her*.

His gaze met hers and her heart skipped several beats because she knew he’d read her mind.

A faint gleam of irony lit his dark eyes and then he held out his gloved hand.

‘Scalpel,’ he said softly, and she took a deep breath and handed him the instrument, feeling that the moment was almost symbolic. He had the ability to heal, but he also had the ability to hurt.

Would he hurt her?

The only thing she knew for sure was that if she were the one who was injured, he was the only doctor she would want in the room.

Unfortunately the anaesthetist didn’t share her confidence. ‘If you can make a joke then you have no idea of the seriousness of

what you are about to do, Mariakos,' he said harshly, but Nikos was already operating.

'For this procedure to have any chance of success, it has to be performed within five minutes of cardiac arrest. I have four minutes remaining, Phil.' His tone was conversational. 'Do you want to talk or save a life?'

'I want you to consider what you're doing.'

'Retractor.'

Ella handed Nikos what he needed as sweat beaded on the anaesthetist's brow.

'The child will not survive if you do this, Nikos.'

'He won't survive if I don't do it.' Nikos worked swiftly and with cool precision, not once faltering as he carried out a procedure that would have been beyond the nerve or capability of most doctors. 'Now I see the problem.' He made it sound as though he was dealing with something routine. 'There's a tear in the atrium—give me a suture.'

Ella detached herself mentally from the emotional side of the case. It was a procedure, not a child. If she thought about the human story behind every injury that came through the doors, she'd be an emotional wreck. So she passed the sterilised instruments, concentrating on what he was doing, trying to anticipate what he was going to need even though she'd never seen this performed before.

The anaesthetist wiped his forearm over his brow. 'If this child dies, the parents will sue you. Doesn't that frighten you?'

‘I think you are frightened enough for both of us,’ Nikos murmured, his fingers swift and skilled as he staunched the bleeding and repaired the damage. Cool, unflustered, he lifted his gaze to the monitor. ‘Come on, *agori mou*. Fight for me. Put a little effort into this. So far I have been doing all the work. I am tired—it is your turn, I think.’

As they continued to resuscitate the child, Ella found that she was holding her breath.

If there was ever the slightest hope, Nikos never gave up.

Every child mattered to him.

And, this time, his efforts were rewarded. The child’s heart responded and the monitor flickered to life just as the cardiothoracic surgeon entered the room.

‘You’ve missed the party.’ Nikos didn’t shift his focus from the child. ‘How’s he doing from your end, Phil?’

‘Surprisingly well.’ The anaesthetist sounded stunned. ‘You’re a cool customer, Mariakos. And you have the luck of the devil.’

‘Is that why you’re looking at me as if I’ve grown horns? I’m done here.’ Nikos’s gaze flickered to the cardiothoracic surgeon, who was watching with a faint smile of admiration. ‘Do you want to close? I have no doubt you’ll do a neater job than me. Sewing has never been my speciality. Do you have a bed on ITU?’

The cardiothoracic surgeon started to scrub. ‘I’ll arrange it. Are you sure you want me to finish off here?’ His tone was dry. ‘You seem to be doing very well by yourself.’

‘I want to talk to the family.’ Nikos stepped away from his

patient and stripped off his gloves, allowing his colleague to take over. His eyes lingered on the monitor for a moment and then he nodded with satisfaction. 'If there's any change, call me.' And with that he strode out of the room.

His departure was greeted by stunned silence and then the junior doctor cleared his throat.

'When I grow up, I want to be him,' he muttered. 'What's his secret? I want to be that cool. Is it down to experience?'

'No, it's down to temperament.' The surgeon took over where Nikos had left off. 'You need two things to be a good cardiothoracic surgeon. Technical brilliance and balls of solid steel—no offence, ladies. Tell Mariakos that if he's ever bored with the emergency department, he can come and work with me.'

'I don't know about the rest of his anatomy, but the man has ice in his veins,' the anaesthetist snapped. 'And he's arrogant. Too sure of himself. If you ask me, he's going to come unstuck. Today, he was lucky.'

'I saw what he did, and it wasn't luck.' The cardiothoracic surgeon started to close the chest. 'It was skill. And I can't remember the last time I praised anyone other than myself so cherish the moment.'

'The child is alive.' Ella handed the surgeon the equipment he needed. 'And he's alive because Nikos was prepared to take a risk.'

'Maybe. But his lack of emotion worries me.' Phil adjusted the flow of gases. 'Technically he's brilliant, I agree. And, yes, he

has...’ he cleared his throat and rephrased his colleague’s earlier description ‘...*nerves* of steel. But he’s cold. Doesn’t that make you just a little uneasy?’

Ella kept her eyes down as she cleared away the remains of the pack, careful to give nothing away.

Yes, it made her uneasy.

It was easy to forget his emotional detachment when they were in bed. But out of bed...

She gave a little shake of her head, determined not to create problems that didn’t exist.

Her own experiences as a child had given her a dysfunctional view of the world—she needed to remember that. She needed to remember that not every man was her father.

Phil stood up. ‘It would be nice to see that he’s human. Nice if that icy control of his slipped for five minutes. I’d like to think it was an act that he puts on when he’s working—plenty of us do that in order to cope with the emotional stresses of this place. But Nikos Mariakos...’ He shook his head. ‘I don’t think the man is blanking out his emotions. I don’t think he has any. I don’t think he’s capable of feeling.’

Nikos paused outside the relatives’ room, looking down at his shaking hands with wry self-mockery.

He didn’t have to be back in the resuscitation room to know what they were saying about him.

Ice cold.

Emotionless.

All the usual things.

It was a good job they couldn't see him now or his reputation would be shattered into a million pieces.

Fortunately for his patients, his body had never betrayed him inside the resuscitation room. Only afterwards did the reaction come. *Only afterwards did the memories catch up with him.*

Nikos inhaled deeply, pushing aside the images that mocked him.

Images of a different child.

A child he hadn't been able to save.

But this time—this time he'd won the fight.

He pushed open the door and greeted the relatives, ignoring hospital protocol that demanded that he take a nurse in with him. Unlike many of his colleagues, Nikos didn't dodge the difficult task of handling emotional relatives. The thought of breaking bad news and then abandoning them to cry on a nurse was alien to him.

He was the one who had managed the case. He was the one who could answer their questions, although inevitably he never had an answer to the most desperate question of all.

Why?

Fortunately, on this occasion the news was better than anyone had hoped and ten minutes later he took refuge in his office, knowing that the staff would still be talking about the risks he'd taken.

He rolled his shoulders to relieve the tension and stared out

of his office window to the busy city streets below. Thinking. Remembering...

‘Nikos?’

Ella’s voice came from the doorway and he turned, a smile on his lips because she was the one person who could relieve his current stress levels.

‘Are you off duty?’

‘Yes. The child is safely in ITU and doing well.’ She strolled towards him, all long legs and sparkling eyes.

‘Good.’ But he wasn’t thinking about the child.

She stopped in front of him and placed her fingers on his chest. ‘You were amazing.’

‘I thought Phil’s heart was going to stop, along with the patient’s.’ Nikos was captivated by her sweet smile and her frank adoration. She was deliciously uncomplicated.

And she had a fabulous body.

‘Phil is a very cautious person.’

Nikos pulled her into his arms, feeling the immediate response of his body as her softness pressed against him. ‘You need cautious people in this business.’

‘To counter people like you?’ Her eyes teased him. ‘You’re not cautious, are you?’

‘If you’re asking if I know what I want, then the answer is yes.’ Nikos lowered his head and took her mouth, tasting honey and temptation. ‘At the moment what I want is you, in my bed, naked.’

‘My bed.’ She trailed a finger over his rough jaw, her breathing

slightly faster than it had been before the kiss. ‘We’ve only ever made love in my bed. It’s been six months and we’ve never once been back to wherever it is you live. Do you realise that?’

Yes, he realised that.

‘Your place is closer.’ Smoothly he steered the conversation away from that particular topic. ‘I’m hungry. What do I have to do to get some of your delicious cheese on toast?’

Her arms slid round his neck. Affection. Warmth. ‘I would have thought you were sick of eating cheese on toast in my room. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather go out to eat?’

‘I want to have sex, then eat, then have sex again,’ Nikos purred, backing her against the wall and feeling the volcanic response of his body. ‘And then have sex again. We’d get arrested for that in a restaurant.’

She was giggling, breathless—her eyes slightly shocked. ‘Nikos, this is ridiculous. We always end up in my single bed in the nurses’ accommodation. We’ve been together for six months. It’s time to stop behaving like hormonal teenagers.’

Nikos brought his mouth down on hers, but his brain refused to be as easily distracted as his body.

Six months?

Surely that wasn’t possible.

‘Nikos?’ She dragged her mouth away from his, laughter and love in her eyes.

Love?

Nikos stilled. When had that happened? *And why hadn’t he*

noticed?

Mentally, he retreated. ‘I like sleeping in your single bed.’ *She was getting too close.* He curved his hand over her bottom, knowing what had to be done, but finding it surprisingly difficult. Usually, ending a relationship was easy. ‘You have a choice. Either I go for a ten-mile run or I take you to bed. Which is it to be?’

The sexual tension reached almost unbearable proportions.

‘That’s a tricky choice.’ Her breathing was shallow. ‘It isn’t safe to be on the streets of London at this time of night.’

‘Good decision.’ Nikos kissed her again and reached for his jacket. As he urged her out of the door, he pondered on the best way to tell her that the relationship was over.

CHAPTER ONE

‘I STILL can’t believe he’d just dump you, Ella. Why would he do that?’

Ella stared straight at the long slender boat nestling quietly against the bank of the river, appalled by the discovery that her grip on her self-control wasn’t as firm as she would have liked it to be. ‘Obviously he didn’t like me enough.’ And even now, after four long months of no contact, she found it hard to believe that she wasn’t going to see him again—*that the connection she’d thought was there hadn’t existed for him.*

Helen made a disparaging noise. ‘Ella, you told me he barely let you out of the bedroom for the six months you were together. He liked you.’

‘He liked the sex.’ Ella watched as a kingfisher dived into the water, a flash of iridescent green and blue, searching for breakfast. ‘Men don’t turn every sexual encounter into happy ever after, you know they don’t. Women mate for life, men mate whenever the opportunity presents itself.’

But somehow she’d allowed herself to forget that fact.

She’d romanticised a relationship that had been based on physical chemistry and, worse than that, she’d trusted a man.

‘Change the subject,’ she said flatly. ‘I need to just forget him and move on.’ Which was what he’d done, wasn’t it?

‘How can you forget him? Ella, you’re pregnant! What are you going to do?’

Ella clutched her tiny suitcase and stared at the long, slender canal boat. She’d learned a long time ago that if you focused hard enough, it was possible to hold back tears. So she stared. And gradually the flood levels of emotion subsided. The hot stinging in her throat became a dull ache and the pressure behind her eyes eased. It was OK. She was going to be OK. And so was the baby. She’d make sure of it.

‘I’m going to stop crying over a man who doesn’t deserve it. And while I’m deciding what to do about my life, I’m going to live in this place. I didn’t know it was possible to live on a canal boat. I love it.’

The dark green paintwork gleamed in the sunshine and brightly coloured fresh flowers tumbled from boxes set along the low, flat roof. Ella leaped from the bank to the boat, landing on

the polished wooden deck.

‘Why did you pick this? You can’t live in this isolated place.’ Helen glanced nervously up and down the deserted path that ran alongside the sleepy, overgrown canal. ‘You’re a city girl. You like bright lights and people around you.’

‘I want something different. I’m tired of that life.’

‘Well, this is a bit extreme. When you said it was a canal boat, I thought it would be in a marina or something—not just moored in the middle of nowhere. You’re going to have loads of weirdos wandering along here.’

‘I like it.’ Ella watched as a duck glided past, followed by her family of six fluffy ducklings. Her eyes misted. It wasn’t all bad. *She was going to have a baby.* ‘Aren’t they sweet?’

‘Yeah—if a nutter happens to come stalking you, they’ll be the perfect weapon. You can pick one up and yell, “Duck.”’

‘Very funny. Are you coming aboard?’

‘I don’t know why you can’t carry on living in my spare room.’ Helen followed more cautiously onto the boat. ‘I love having you.’

‘I can’t live with you for ever. I’ll use this as a base while I decide what to do.’ Ella unlocked the doors at the bow of the boat. ‘It’s so peaceful here.’

‘Ella, you’ve been crying yourself to sleep for the past four months. You don’t need peaceful!’

Without responding, Ella ducked down into the long, narrow sitting area. Dark green sofas were piled with contrasting cushions and the polished wooden floor gleamed in the sunlight.

She could imagine herself curled up on the cushions in the bow of the boat, a cold drink in her hand.

Alone.

The sudden stab of pain took her by surprise and she dug her nails into her palms.

Alone was fine. Until she'd met Nikos, that had been her life choice.

And she wouldn't be alone for long, would she? Soon she'd have the baby. They'd be a family...

Helen was looking round doubtfully. 'Do you realise that we've only seen one other person since we arrived? And that was a man on his own, walking a dog. This is not a suitable place for a woman.'

Ignoring her, Ella wandered further down the boat, trying to be positive as she explored her new surroundings. 'The bedroom is cosy.' She dumped her suitcase on the floor. 'I'll unpack later.'

'Who did you say owns this place?'

'One of the consultants at the hospital—he's gone to Australia for six months with his family. One of the conditions of living here is that I have to water the plants.'

'Ella, please...' Helen plopped onto the side of the bed. 'Just think about what you're doing.'

'I'm getting on with my life.' Ella knelt on the bed next to her and looked out of the window at the overhanging trees that brushed the still surface of the water. 'It's so calming here. I can wake up every morning gazing at that.'

‘Crying. *Talk to me, Ella. Tell me how you’re feeling.*

Like he’d taken a scalpel to her heart.

‘I’m fine,’ Ella said brightly. ‘No morning sickness, no swollen ankles, no—’

‘I’m not talking about the pregnancy—I’m talking about the way you feel inside. You shut everyone out, Ella. You always have.’ Helen spread her hands in exasperation. ‘Did you do it with him? Didn’t you tell him how you felt?’

‘He knew.’ And that was why he’d ended it. For her, the relationship had been more than the hot sizzle of sexual attraction. He’d wanted shallow and she’d waded in deep. ‘You want to know how I feel? I’ll tell you. I feel as though I’ve been broken into a million tiny pieces. I’ve stuck the pieces back together and so far it’s all holding, but I don’t feel like me any more.’

‘Is that why you’re planning on living in the middle of nowhere?’

‘I need space to work out what I want. And it’s cosy here.’ Ella looked out at the trees spilling over the path and listened to the mellow sound of ducks. ‘I’ll be all right. I’m a paediatric nurse—at least I already know how to pick up a baby and change a nappy.’

‘I’m not worried about your ability to change a nappy.’ Helen swatted a fly. ‘I just don’t want you to be single.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with being single. Single can be a lifestyle choice, you know. We single women earn our own

money, we buy our own homes, we—we...’

‘We what? We have sex with ourselves? Hug ourselves when we’re miserable? Fix the car when the engine won’t start? Sounds great.’ Helen recoiled as she noticed a spider lurking in the corner. ‘Sorry, I know it isn’t politically correct to admit it, but I’m not ready to turn into a spinster yet and neither are you. Buried under all that insecurity, you’re an old-fashioned girl. The man made you pregnant. You have to tell him about the baby.’

‘No, I don’t.’ Strengthened by a core of steely determination, Ella lifted her chin. ‘He didn’t want me, Helen.’

And she would do everything she could to protect her baby from the emotional agonies she’d suffered as a child.

‘He didn’t know you were pregnant. And you don’t know why he walked out.’

Oh, yes, she did. Ella closed her eyes. Shut out the images. ‘He had another life. A life he didn’t tell me about.’

‘That bit is bizarre, I agree.’ Helen frowned. ‘I still find it hard to believe that the guy is *seriously* a billionaire. I’ve never actually met a real live billionaire before.’

‘And to think I used to make him cheese on toast.’ Ella slid off the bed and walked back through to the living area of the boat. ‘Must have been a real letdown after Michelin-starred restaurants. No wonder he left. I was probably giving him indigestion every night.’

Helen followed her. ‘Perhaps not telling you about the money was some sort of romantic test.’

‘Stop endowing him with thoughtful, sensitive qualities.’ Ella tugged open a cupboard and found plates and mugs. ‘Nikos was a selfish, driven, work obsessed male who only wanted one thing.’

‘Well, at least he was jolly good at that one thing.’ Catching Ella’s eye, Helen subsided with a shrug. ‘Sorry—but I just don’t see why the money would make him walk out. It doesn’t make sense. God, this is frustrating. Don’t you want to *talk* to him?’

‘There’s nothing to talk about. He lied to me and he left. He didn’t even have the courage to tell me face to face—just sent me an email telling me that he was going back to Greece and that our relationship was over.’

Helen winced. ‘I hate email. Did you ever reply?’

‘No. Because that was the day I went to the doctor about being sick. Hard though it is to believe, it hadn’t even occurred to me that I might be pregnant.’ Ella rolled her eyes, embarrassed by her own stupidity. ‘While I was in the waiting room I flicked through a celebrity magazine. And there was a four-page spread on Nikos.’ Heart pounding, she broke off and pressed her fingers to her temples. She still couldn’t actually believe it had happened to her.

Helen slipped her arms around her. ‘I don’t know what to say. I’m really sorry.’

‘So am I,’ Ella said wearily, extracting herself from the hug. ‘But that’s life, isn’t it? I should be grateful that I found out what sort of man Nikos is before the relationship went too far. At least this way it’s only me that gets hurt.’ Better now, before the baby

was born.

Funny how protective you could be about a person who hadn't even arrived in the world yet.

'But if he turned up, you'd talk to him, right?'

'He won't turn up.'

'How can you be so sure?'

Ella was silent for a moment. 'Because he's married.' Saying the words made her wince. She felt ashamed, even though she knew she had nothing to be ashamed of. *Another woman's man.* 'I suppose that's why he didn't want emotional attachment. He already has one. His wife's name is Ariadne. And she must have the tolerance of a saint to keep taking him back after all the affairs he's had. All the time he was in London, he had a wife back home in Greece.'

Realising that Helen hadn't actually responded to her confession, Ella turned and found her friend staring at her in appalled horror.

'Married?'

'Yes.' Ella gave a twisted smile. 'Don't look so shocked. I feel bad enough as it is.'

'How do you know he's married?'

'I've seen his wedding photos. They were plastered all over that same celebrity magazine that told me he was a billionaire. She's very pretty. They obviously got married very young.'

'Why didn't you tell me this before?'

'Why do you think? I despised myself for having an affair with

a married man. I'm hardly going to boast about it, am I?

'I'm your best friend! And I can't believe you're only telling me this now. The rat. Oh, Ella...' Helen sank down onto the sofa and drew in several panicky breaths. 'I—I wish you'd told me this before. If I'd known... Oh, my God, what have I done?'

'You haven't done anything. It's me who—' registering Helen's dramatic reaction, Ella frowned, puzzled. 'What are you talking about? What *have* you done?'

There was a long, painful silence while Helen just gazed at her, wide-eyed with guilt and trepidation. 'You have to understand that I had your best interests at heart...'

'Now you're making me nervous.' Ella felt a sinister tingling in her nerve endings and dread seeped through her veins as she watched her friend's face turn pale.

'I didn't know he was married. I thought the pair of you were just being stubborn and that you could work it out if you'd only get together.'

Ella stared at her, her heart pounding. 'Helen...'

'I wrote to him,' Helen confessed, her eyes glistening with tears. 'You're my best friend and I've been listening to you crying your heart out every night for four months. I was *furious* with him and I thought if he knew about the baby...'

'You *told* him about the baby?' Ella felt the colour drain from her cheeks. 'Helen, *no!*'

'I'm so sorry.' Helen was crying openly now, her hands over her face. 'It was the wrong thing to do. I see that now. But you

can be so stubborn and so can he, and the two of you seemed *so* in love. I thought that if I could just get you together, you'd be able to sort it out. I thought I was helping—I wanted you to be happy...'

'*What have you done?*' Breathing like someone in the last stages of labour, Ella struggled to think straight. 'What if he comes? If you told him about the baby...'

'But perhaps it will be a good thing if he comes. You'll talk and—'

'Helen, he's a married man and as far as I'm concerned that's the end of it! A man can't have two families!' Saying the words was agony. 'How could you do this? How could you interfere with my life?' Distraught, Ella's voice cracked and Helen rubbed the tears from her own face.

'I didn't know he was married! You'll never forgive me, I know, and I wish I could turn the clock back. It's just that for your whole life you've been screwed up about men and I thought I was helping.'

'I know I'm screwed up about men!' Ella's voice was hoarse. 'I'm completely dysfunctional when it comes to men, I admit it. And I've been proved right, haven't I? He lied to me, Helen. He lied about his wife, about the fact he's a billionaire—all lies. I don't think he said a single honest thing to me. And no conversation is going to change that. That sort of deception is *not* an accident. And if he does walk through that door, the only thing he's going to get from me is a black eye.'

‘Perhaps you’d better give me one, too. I deserve it.’ Helen rummaged in her bag for a tissue and blew her nose. ‘I hate to say this but we’re due at the hospital. We’re both on a late shift. Do you want to call in sick? The new paediatric emergency department will probably fall apart if you’re not there, but I can make excuses.’

‘No way.’ Ella closed her eyes for a moment. She couldn’t afford to lose her job. She had a baby to support. And, anyway, they needed her at the hospital. ‘I’ll be fine. Management have refused Rose’s request for extra staff yet again and the place is so busy.’

‘It’s the hot weather.’ Helen looked out of the window at the blue sky. ‘The tourists will already be on the beach, hitting themselves with cricket bats and being stung by wasps.’ She bit her lip and turned back to her friend. ‘I’m sorry, El.’

‘Forget it. It’s done.’ Numb with shock, her mind in a spin, Ella stared sightlessly out of the window. ‘You go. I’ll lock up here.’

Helen hesitated, clearly torn between going and staying. ‘Ella...’

‘Just go.’

He wouldn’t come, Ella tried to reassure herself as she listened to the soothing lap of the water against the sides of the wooden boat and tried to stay calm. He was married. He probably already had children. She’d been a convenient distraction while he’d been in London, nothing more.

Greek or not, he wasn’t going to care that she was pregnant.

It was over.

His emotions threatening to overwhelm him, Nikos glanced around the waiting room of the paediatric emergency department, aware that some sort of response was expected from him. Never before had it been this difficult to concentrate on work. His stress levels mounting with every second that passed, he dutifully scanned the neat rows of small red seats, the colourful play area and the bright murals that livened the walls. ‘You have a separate entrance for the children?’

‘Yes. From the moment they come through the main door, they’re separated from the adults. What do you think?’ Rose, the senior nurse in charge of the main emergency department, looked at him nervously. ‘We’ve had builders working non-stop for the past four months.’

Trying to show an interest, Nikos strode through the cheerful reception area and paused in the doorway of one of the cubicles. As well as state-of-the-art equipment, there were neat boxes of toys, piles of children’s books and DVDs. ‘Resuscitation room?’

‘Next door on your left.’ Rose hurried along next to him, struggling to match her stride to his. ‘Can I ask you something, Professor?’ They were in the resuscitation room now and Nikos was mentally itemising each piece of equipment in an attempt to distract himself from the issue that had dominated his brain for the past week.

‘Call me Nikos, and, yes. Ask.’

‘We’re thrilled you’re here, obviously but—why did you take

this job?’ Rose gave an apologetic shrug. ‘You’re in demand all over the world. I heard you lecture two years ago. The auditorium was completely packed out—there wasn’t even breathing room.’

‘Perhaps it was raining outside,’ Nikos drawled lightly, and Rose gave a lopsided smile.

‘I think we both know that wasn’t the case. You could be working anywhere. Why us?’

‘Sick children are sick children. It doesn’t matter what the setting is.’ Nikos cast his eye over the intubation tray, refusing to reveal his real reason for being there, even though he knew it would become apparent soon enough. ‘Tell me about the staff.’ He kept his tone neutral. ‘They are paediatric trained?’

‘We have a core of staff who are paediatric trained and we also rotate staff from the main emergency department according to need. This afternoon the paediatric nurse in charge will be Ella. She’s wonderful.’

Ella.

A hard knot of tension settled in his stomach and his brain was filled with a distracting image of perfectly smooth blonde hair, a sweet, seductive smile and curves designed to fuse a man’s brain.

‘I know Ella.’ Not by a flicker of an eyelid to Nikos reveal just how well he knew her. ‘We worked together in London.’

And now she was pregnant with his child.

A fact she’d concealed from him.

Sharp claws of anger dug into him like talons and he breathed deeply, searching for control, shocked by the raw intensity of

his rage. Well aware that people called him the ice doctor, he wondered what they'd say if they knew that at the moment he was close to meltdown.

What was that phrase that people threw out so carelessly?
Everyone has their limit.

Was this his?

Had he reached his limit?

With a supreme effort of will Nikos reminded himself that anger achieved nothing. Losing his temper was *not* going to help.

Emotion didn't solve problems. What was needed was rational discussion.

She was going to have her say. He was going to have his say.

It was all going to be calm and reasonable.

They were going to be civilised.

'You know Ella?' Rose was looking at him, surprised. 'That's wonderful.'

Nikos gave a cool smile, well aware that Ella was going to find the situation a great deal short of wonderful. *She'd kept the news of her pregnancy from him.* 'I'm looking forward to renewing our acquaintance.'

'Well, you won't have to wait long. She's on a late shift this afternoon. She'll be here any minute.'

As if on cue Nikos heard her laughter from somewhere behind him and the sound released his temper. How could she laugh?

What was funny about intentionally depriving a man of his child?

Emotion thickened until he could taste it, until he was ready to put his fist through something.

Rational discussion was no longer on his wish list.

He forgot calm and reasonable.

He forgot civilised.

As she walked through the door, his anger erupted with volcanic force.

Her arms were raised, her hands occupied scooping her shiny blonde hair into a ponytail, a pose that seemed to emphasise the air of vulnerability that surrounded her. And suddenly Nikos found himself thinking about all the times he'd kissed his way down her slender, creamy throat while she'd writhed and moaned his name in a desperate plea for satisfaction. He remembered how shy she'd been the first time, how hard he'd found it to believe that a woman of twenty-four had so little experience.

Looking at her now, it was like taking a punch full in the gut.

She was wearing a scrub suit covered in pictures of jungle animals and for a moment Nikos was distracted. With her cheerful smile and sense of fun, she'd always had a gift for turning the emergency department into somewhere a child was almost pleased to visit.

'Hello, Ella.'

She stopped instantly, the smile dying on her lips as she saw him standing there.

Her arms dropped to her sides and she turned so pale that Nikos took an involuntary step forwards, preparing to catch her

if she crumpled to the floor. Her breathing was audible and she stepped back, as if his approach represented a physical threat. For a moment she just stood there, her chest rising and falling as she sucked in air and stared at him.

Guilt, he thought grimly, as he watched her face. What she'd done was unforgivable and she knew it. But even as the anger took him by the throat once again, his hands were ready to catch her if she fell. There was no way he was going to let her land on the floor in a heap, pregnant with his child.

His lips burned with the need to speak his mind, but it wasn't the time or the place so instead Nikos communicated the full force of his anger in a single, hotly charged glance.

Apparently unaware of the dangerous shift in the atmosphere, Rose was cheerful. 'Ella—good timing. I had no idea that you and Professor Mariakos know each other. I'm delighted. It will make things so much easier. Now I have an experienced team running the paediatric emergency unit. It's going to be a happy summer.'

Anticipating anything but a happy summer, Nikos kept his simmering, accusing gaze fixed on Ella's pale, shocked face. 'It will be like old times.'

Something flickered in her slanting green eyes and he knew that she was thinking what he was thinking—that it was going to be *nothing* like old times.

This time when they worked there would be no intimate glances, no delicious thrill of excitement as they anticipated the

time when they could be alone. No soft whispers, no swift smiles and absolutely no explosive sexual chemistry.

Only anger, blame and recrimination.

She'd hidden the fact that she was pregnant, and no woman was doing that to him again.

This time he wanted the right to be a father to his child.

Pain thumped through his gut and suddenly he wanted to tower over her and demand an explanation right here, right now. He wanted to know why the hell she hadn't contacted him herself.

The depth of his disillusionment surprised him because he'd always considered himself to be realistic about women.

Rose glanced between them. 'I've scheduled the two of you to work together on every shift right through the summer. I don't need to tell you that the hospital management are scrutinising this department very closely. I know it's going to be a fantastic success.'

Nikos dragged his gaze from Ella's but somehow his eyes simply shifted to a different part of her, this time her abdomen. To the untrained eye her pregnancy wasn't visible under the loose fabric of her scrub suit and yet he knew her so intimately that he could see the changes in her. Her glorious breasts were even fuller than usual, her hips more generously curved.

Cradling his child.

What would she have to say for herself?

What excuse would she give?

Was she one of these modern feminist women who wanted a

baby but not a man?

His mouth tightened into a grim line as he pondered that possibility. If that was the case then she'd picked the wrong guy for a stunt like that. He was Greek. And she was about to discover exactly what that meant.

'Just breathe normally, sweetheart,' Ella soothed, her hand gently stroking the little girl's head as she tried to relax the terrified child. 'This mask is going to help you breathe.'

The little girl squirmed and clawed at the oxygen mask and Ella felt her heart contract as she tried to calm her. The poor child was terrified and her fear was making her condition worse.

Faced with a potentially life-threatening situation, Ella pushed her own problems to the back of her mind and concentrated on the job she was trained to do.

Moments after Rose had given her the keys to the drug cupboard, the department had suddenly been swamped with patients. A dog bite, two asthma attacks and a child who had slipped while scrambling over the cliffs and sustained a nasty laceration to his lower leg.

Denied any opportunity to dwell on the implications of Nikos's presence, Ella had taken the most serious of the cases, a three-year-old girl with an acute asthma attack.

Thank goodness for training, she thought numbly as she adjusted the flow of oxygen and carefully observed the child's breathing. It was only training that was allowing her to function as if nothing was wrong. Her hands were doing the right things

and her mouth was saying the right things, but inside she was shocked and shaking.

After Helen's confession, she'd cycled the brief distance along the canal to the hospital, her mind sifting through the various scenarios and how she'd handle them.

He'd come. Deep down, she'd known he'd come. And she'd decided that the most important thing was to stay calm and not allow emotion to play a part in their discussion. She'd be dignified and distant and keep the conversation focused on facts and nothing more. She'd find out what he wanted in terms of access and then go away and think about it. Nothing personal. She'd dismiss him as easily as he'd dismissed her.

At least, that had been the theory.

But how could any woman dismiss a man like Nikos Mariakos? How did you dismiss six feet two inches of strikingly good-looking, unwaveringly confident, muscle-packed male? Muscle-packed *angry* male.

Fortunately he'd gone with Rose to complete some paperwork, leaving Ella to work with Alan, a doctor with six months' accident and emergency experience who was spending the next month in the paediatric department as part of his training. Alan was unfailingly polite and courteous and perfectly competent with the routine stuff that came through the doors of the main emergency department. Privately, Ella wasn't sure he had the skill set to work with sick children, but she was hoping she'd be proved wrong.

So far three-year-old Tamsin had refused to allow him to listen to her chest, and nothing he tried could persuade her to cooperate. Flustered and out of his depth, the young doctor grew red in the face as he tried to reason with the child using a falsely bright voice.

Sensing his lack of confidence in a way that children always seemed able to do, Tamsin's panic increased and she flailed her little arms, becoming more and more upset and making it harder for Ella to calm her.

'Sweetheart, he's not going to hurt you.' Deciding that his presence was counter-productive, she discreetly waved a flustered Alan away from the trolley and picked up a doll from the toy box. 'This is Angie, isn't she beautiful? We're going to put a dress on her and then give her some special air to breathe, just like you. Which dress do you think? You choose.' She grabbed two dresses from the box and held them up. 'Pink or purple?'

Tamsin was panting for breath but she stopped clawing at the mask and pointed to a dress.

'Pink? Good choice. I love pink, too.' Ella pulled the pink dress over the doll's head and Tamsin reached out a hand for the doll.

'Say please, Tams,' the child's mother muttered, but Ella didn't care about manners. She just wanted the child to keep the oxygen mask on.

'Are you going to help me put a mask on Angie? Oops—it's a bit big.'

Forgetting her own mask, Tamsin tried to help the doll.

‘Good girl. Aren’t you clever? She’ll soon be feeling all better.’

As Ella praised the child she glanced at the monitor again and felt a flash of unease. Worried about what she was seeing, she glanced at the child’s mother. ‘Amanda, has she had an attack like this before?’

‘Nothing this severe.’ The woman was cradling a young baby and trying to calm Tamsin at the same time. ‘Just breathe through the mask like the nurse is telling you, Tams.’

‘Has she had a cold? Any sort of infection you’re aware of?’

‘Nothing.’ The baby started to cry and Amanda shifted the tiny bundle onto her shoulder with an apologetic look. ‘Sorry. I wouldn’t have brought the baby but I didn’t have anyone to leave her with. Shh, Poppy—not now. Good girl, hush.’

Alan pushed his glasses higher up his nose. ‘Someone could give your husband a ring, if that would help?’

Amanda gave a quick shake of her head and looked anxiously at Tamsin, clearly afraid of upsetting her still more. ‘He’s not on the scene any more,’ she murmured quietly. ‘Not since he discovered I was having this one.’

Ella felt a rush of sadness as she focused on Tamsin’s sweet face. Long eyelashes. Blonde curls. And no father.

Another fractured family.

He should be here, she thought grimly, holding his little girl when she needed him.

Mortified at having been tactless, Alan mumbled an apology,

but Ella was too concerned about the condition of the little girl to dwell on the unreliability of the male gender.

‘Alan, that salbutamol inhaler isn’t having much of an effect. Do you want to give her some prednisolone?’

‘She doesn’t seem to be wheezing that badly.’ Wary of approaching the child and unsettling her again, Alan hovered a safe distance from the trolley. ‘Perhaps we ought to just try checking her peak flow?’

‘She won’t be able to manage it. She’s too young.’ Ella contemplated telling him that wheeze didn’t give an accurate indication of airway obstruction, but decided it would be better to mention it later when they were alone. She didn’t want to worry the child or the mother.

Suddenly she wished that Nikos hadn’t chosen that moment to disappear with Ruth. It was impossible not to compare Alan’s hesitant, hyper-conservative style with Nikos’s bold, fearless approach to every emergency that crossed his path. He might be the last man in the world she wanted to see personally, but professionally he was a dream.

She was swiftly weighing up her options when Tamsin’s small hand slid into hers. She looked exhausted and frightened, but the trust in her eyes tugged at Ella’s heart.

‘You’re going to be fine, sweetheart. We’ll make you better.’ Her hand tightening over the child’s, Ella looked at Alan. ‘She needs prednisolone.’ She spoke firmly, hoping that Alan would realise that she had experience in this area and just agree with

her. 'I think a dose of 20 milligrams would be a good idea.'

Alan rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. 'I'm wondering whether perhaps I might just pick the prof's brains on this one.'

Ella gritted her teeth. 'Go ahead.' She didn't really care, just as long as someone with more experience than Alan checked the little girl. 'See if he's free.' *Do it now.*

As if the cosmos had ordered it, Nikos strode into the room at that moment. He'd shed his jacket, rolled his shirtsleeves up to the elbows and everything about him was relaxed and confident. 'Everything all right in here?'

'Professor... ' Alan straightened, a flicker of awe in his eyes. 'We weren't sure whether or not to go straight ahead and give her a dose of prednisolone or wait a bit and see if the inhalation improves her breathing. It's been a bit tricky, persuading her to co-operate.'

Nikos took one look at the gasping child and murmured, 'Give the prednisolone—now,' in a tone that suggested the question should never have been asked.

Alan gave Ella an apologetic look and she gently pulled her hand from Tamsin's. 'I'm not going anywhere,' she soothed as the child gave a whimper of protest and clutched at the air. 'I'm right here. Just getting you something to help you breathe.'

She felt Nikos's gaze on her as she reached for the dose she'd already prepared in anticipation of that exact outcome.

'Her sats are 95 percent.' Ella turned back to the child, making encouraging noises as she coaxed the medicine down the little

girl, painfully conscious of Nikos's powerful frame on the other side of the trolley. 'The charts are behind you if you want to take a look.'

But Nikos didn't look at the charts. He was looking at his little patient.

'Tamsin?' A smile danced in his eyes and his expression changed from detached to playful. 'You have no idea how happy I am to see you.'

Tamsin shrank closer to Ella, like a tortoise retreating into the safety of its shell to hide from danger. 'Go away.'

Nikos leaned on the trolley to reduce his height and make himself less intimidating. 'I will if you want me to, but first I was hoping if you could help me out with this. I have no idea what to do with it.' From his pocket he produced a small stuffed mermaid with long golden hair. Despite her growing stress levels Ella couldn't help smiling because it was so typical of him to know exactly how to relate to each patient.

People said he was cold, but she knew that wasn't always the case.

The little girl's expression changed from panic to interest. Still clutching Ella's hand, she reached out for the toy, but Nikos held it just out of reach. 'First you have to give her a name. What are we going to call her?'

Ella caught the startled expression on Alan's face and knew that he was wondering why a professor of international repute would choose this moment to play mermaids with a little girl.

He looked at Nikos and saw him playing a frivolous game. But Ella saw something very different.

She saw a skilled doctor using a distraction technique as a tool to give him answers. She saw Nikos's gaze rest on the child's chest as he assessed her breathing. She saw him encouraging the child to speak to him, so that he could evaluate how breathless she was.

And she saw a more relaxed child.

Look and learn, Alan, she thought wryly.

Nikos removed his stethoscope from his pocket. Tamsin immediately tensed and opened her mouth to protest loudly, but Nikos simply smiled and listened to the mermaid's chest, a look of total concentration on his handsome face.

'Well?' Playing along, Ella asked the question with a solemn expression on her face. 'How's the mermaid?'

Nikos nodded slowly. 'I think she might have swallowed some sea water but, other than that, she is good.'

Tamsin grabbed at the stethoscope. 'Me.'

'You want a turn?' Ella stroked Tamsin's silken curls. 'Would you like to listen?' She took Nikos's stethoscope and pretended to put it to the child's ears.

Seeing Ella smiling at Nikos, Tamsin started to relax. And Nikos was so skilful at dealing with her that by the time he finally placed the stethoscope on the child's chest, the little girl was so fascinated by him that she simply reached up a chubby hand and tugged at his dark hair. Then she pushed the mermaid in front of him again and Nikos smiled.

‘She’s all yours, *koritsi mou*. Make sure you look after her.’

Ella felt her heart flip because this side of him always left her in a puddle. She’d seen him verbally dissect experienced doctors who had fallen short of his expectations, she knew he was capable of being ruthless when the need arose, and yet with a small child he was a pussy cat—extraordinarily gentle, all that latent strength and power firmly leashed.

It was so hard to hate this man. So hard.

Choked by the thought of what could have been, she concentrated her attention on the monitor.

‘Her sats are improving.’

Nikos nodded. ‘She’s doing fine.’

Despite the simmering tension between them, they worked together seamlessly, their movements smooth and slick as they did what needed to be done—a veneer of normality covering dangerous undercurrents...

Twice his fingers brushed against hers and in the end Ella stepped back from the trolley because although he was clearly indifferent to her, she didn’t think she had the control to be this close to him and not react. He registered her retreat with a faint narrowing of his eyes and she wished she knew what he was thinking.

Why was he so angry?

He should have been thanking her for making things easy for him.

For quietly accepting his cold email brush-off.

She studied his handsome face for signs of strain—some evidence that the separation of the last four months might have affected him in the same way that it had affected her. Had he lost weight? Did he look as though he'd suffered?

But his face showed no sign of the ravages of worry. He looked strong and healthy, as if the weaknesses that permeated other mortals were afraid to lay a hand on him. The collar of his white shirt was undone and for a moment Ella's gaze lingered on the strong column of his throat, remembering how many times she'd pressed her mouth to that exact place. And his skin was a deeper bronze than usual, suggesting exposure to a more generous climate than that enjoyed by the South of England. Which reminded her of just one thing.

He'd been back in Greece.

With his beautiful Greek wife?

The pain almost split her in two and with the pain came anger.

He'd betrayed her and she needed to remember that. What she didn't need was to be seduced all over again by his skills as a doctor.

'So—her breathing is much improved.' Having won the child's confidence, Nikos addressed his remark to the little girl's mother. 'We need to try and establish what might have caused this attack. Her asthma is usually well managed?'

Still jiggling the baby in her arms, the woman nodded. 'Yes. In the winter she sometimes has problems if she has a chest infection, but nothing like this. We've rented a house on the

coast with my sister and her family. One minute she was playing happily, the next she couldn't breathe.'

'And she is well at the moment? No cold? No temperature?' As he questioned the mother Nikos carried on examining Tamsin, this time checking her throat and her ears, feeling her glands and doing the same with the mermaid whenever required to do so by the little girl. 'Nothing different?'

Ella's heart jerked as her eyes settled on his skilled, bronzed fingers. *Fingers that could save a life or drive a woman crazy.*

She had so many questions.

Why was a billionaire playing at being a doctor?

Why hadn't he told her the truth about himself?

The mother was trying to give him the answers he wanted. 'I can't think of anything. She hasn't even been on the beach much because the children have mostly been playing in the house with the puppy.'

Nikos raised an eyebrow. 'Puppy?'

'I'm on holiday with my sister. They bought a puppy last week. A little spaniel. Tamsin loves the dog. They've been sleeping together.'

Ella exchanged a brief glance with Nikos just as the little girl snatched the mask off her face.

'Want to see Bruno.'

'Keep the mask on, Tams. Oh, my goodness.' Her mother was staring at Nikos. 'You think it might be the dog? Some sort of allergy? I hadn't thought of that.'

‘It’s possible.’ Nikos reached for the notes. ‘For the rest of the holiday play with the dog outside, not inside. When you get home, go and see your own doctor and talk it through with him. He might want to rethink your management plan.’

‘Do you want to do a chest X-ray?’ Ella asked. ‘Shall I phone the radiographer?’

Nikos shook his head. ‘Her oxygen saturation is improving, her heart rate has come down and her breathing has improved. I’m happy with that. You can move her to one of the cubicles and she can play for a while. If she’s all right in an hour, she can go home.’

‘I wish my sister would pick up my message and call. They’ve all gone for a walk.’ Tamsin’s mother fretted as the baby’s wails grew louder. ‘I want her to take the baby so that I can give Tams some attention.’

‘The baby is probably picking up on your stress levels.’ Ella held out her arms. ‘Give her to me for a moment. I’ll hold her while you give Tamsin a cuddle.’ She took the baby, her heart melting as she studied the child’s miniature features. If she felt like this about a stranger’s baby, how would she feel about her own? ‘There, now, Poppy. I bet you’re wondering what you’re doing in this strange place.’ She murmured nonsense to the baby who promptly stopped crying and stared up at Ella.

Holding the baby securely, Ella smiled at her.

Apparently reassured and intrigued by a new face, the baby smiled back.

‘She smiled!’ Her arm around Tamsin and the mermaid, Amanda laughed with amazement and delight. ‘Did you see that, Tams? Poppy smiled at Ella. It’s the first time. She was six weeks yesterday and we’ve all been trying to get her to smile. You’ve obviously got the touch. Do you have kids of your own?’

Ella’s eyes shifted from the baby to Nikos and found him looking at her with an almost fierce intensity. The emotion inside her tumbled and threatened to spill over.

‘No,’ she said huskily, dragging her gaze from his before she made a fool of herself. ‘I don’t have children.’

‘Oh, well, plenty of time.’ Amanda stroked her daughter’s hair. ‘First you have to find that prince, don’t you, Tams?’ There was a wistful note in her voice that said her own ‘prince’ had fallen far short of expectations and Ella frowned slightly, wondering whether it was a good thing to fill a child’s head with fairy stories.

If she had a little girl, she wouldn’t do that, she vowed silently. She’d bring her up to have realistic expectations of life.

No relying on fictitious princes for happiness.

Without looking at Nikos, she handed the cooing, contented baby back to Amanda and, at that moment, another nurse popped her head in with an urgent request for him to look at another sick child.

With a smile at Tamsin and a fulminating look at Ella that promised a future far more complicated than that of any fairy story, he left the cubicle.

Ella felt a flicker of panic as she transferred Tamsin into one

of the cubicles and contemplated the inevitable confrontation. What was he going to say to her? What excuses would he give? Was he going to tell her that his wife didn't understand him? That their marriage was in name only?

Frustrated with herself, she fished a book out off the shelf and sat down next to Tamsin. Nikos was married. The exact circumstances of that marriage were irrelevant. All that was between them was recriminations. And, on her part, self-blame.

Would he apologise for not telling her the truth?

Or was he one of those men who thought affairs were a natural part of marriage?

Forcing herself to concentrate, she read to Tamsin for a bit and then let her play with toys.

An hour later Nikos reappeared and pronounced her well enough to be discharged.

'Thanks so much for everything.' Amanda held Poppy against her shoulder with one hand, while Tamsin tugged at the other. 'You've been so great. Thank you.'

Nikos was writing up the notes as Tamsin dropped her mother's hand and held out her arms to Ella.

'Play.'

'No more playing today. You're going home, Tamsin.' Ella dropped into a crouch and smiled at her new friend. 'And you're going to have a lovely holiday.'

'You come.' Tamsin grabbed Ella's hand and gave her a tug. Ella laughed and stood up. 'Now, that's a tempting invitation.'

The way she felt at the moment she'd do anything to escape from the prospect of working with Nikos. 'Unfortunately, I can't come home with you.'

'I wish you could,' Amanda breathed. 'You're a miracle with the children. You have a real way about you.'

Ella saw Nikos's pen still and wondered what he was thinking.

Did he feel regret that they could never be a proper family?

Guilt that his child would grow up without a father?

Pushing that thought aside, she guided Amanda and the children out of the department and then reluctantly returned to the cubicle.

Fortunately there was no sign of Nikos and Ella felt a rush of relief as she cleared and restocked the room ready for the next patient.

The tension had formed a knot inside her stomach and she reminded herself that he wasn't going to say anything while they were at work.

Having used that fact to calm herself, she turned to leave the room only to find Nikos blocking her exit, his legs spread apart in a confrontational stance, the look in his black eyes dark and dangerous.

This time there was no evidence of gentleness or kindness. This wasn't a man who would be pulling a mermaid out of his pocket.

Anger surrounded him like a forcefield.

Closing the door firmly behind him, he strolled forward until

his body was brushing against hers. 'It's time you and I had a conversation, *agape mou*.'

CHAPTER TWO

'I DON'T have anything to say to you, Nikos.' Heart racing, desperately flustered, Ella pushed at his shoulders but he didn't budge.

This wasn't a man about to apologise for anything. Mouth grim, he backed her against the wall and planted an arm either side of her shoulders, imprisoning her and blocking her escape. Through the fabric of his shirt she could feel the heat and power of his body and the immediate response of hers, and it appalled her that she could still feel like this after the casual, careless way he'd treated her.

He didn't care and yet still she couldn't switch off the screaming need inside her.

Her body was no judge of character, she thought bitterly, turning her eyes away from his in the hope of reducing temptation. He was everything male, from the top of his glossy dark head, down six feet four inches of supremely fit body, to the arrogant way he stood in front of her, as if he owned the world.

Which apparently he did, she thought, biting back a hysterical laugh as she remembered all the things she'd learned about him during that one, awful afternoon four months ago.

'You don't have anything to say to me? You are pregnant with my child and you don't think you have anything to say to me?' His voice shook with emotion, his eyes narrowed to dangerous slits

as he focused on her face. ‘Answer me one question—were you going to tell me? If your friend Helen hadn’t written that letter, *would you have told me?*’

‘Why would you even care?’

The hiss of his breath was the only sound in the room. ‘You are seriously asking me that question?’

She pushed at his chest, the enormity of the issue closing in on her like huge brick walls. ‘We can’t talk about this here. It’s going to have to wait until we’ve finished work.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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