

The Greek's Million-Dollar Baby Bargain
Julia James



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**The Greek's Million-
Dollar Baby Bargain**
Серия «Mills & Boon Modern»

Аннотация

He's paid a million for the baby... he'll take her as his mistress for free!When Greek tycoon Nikos Theakis offered grieving Ann Turner a million for his orphaned nephew, she took the money and walked away... Young, penniless and alone, Ann did what she thought was best – and it nearly broke her.But now little Ari needs her, and the ruthless Greek is offering Ann a different bargain... One month, on his island – at his mercy...

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‘You think a diamond necklace will get you into my bed.’

She said it flatly, getting the words out past the emotion that was seizing on them as she spoke them.

‘Why not? Your track record shows you are very amenable to such an approach to life.’ There was a twist to his mouth as he answered her, his voice terse.

It made the emotion spear deeper into her. Her eyes went to the necklace again—the necklace Nikos was offering her in exchange for sex. Emotion bit again—a different one. One that seemed to touch the very quick of her. But she must not allow *that* emotion, only the other one, which was as sharp as the point of a spear.

Her eyes pulled away, back to the man sitting in his hand-made suit at his antique desk, rich and powerful and arrogant. A man who had kissed her deeply, caressed the intimacies of her body, who had melded his body with hers, who had transported her to an ecstasy she had never known existed.

Who was offering her a diamond necklace for sex...

Carefully, very carefully, she snapped shut the lid of the box and placed it back in front of him. ‘I am not,’ she said, ‘your mistress.’

Julia James lives in England with her family. Mills & Boon® were the first ‘grown-up’ books she read as a teenager, alongside Georgette Heyer and Daphne du Maurier, and she’s been reading them ever since. Julia adores the English and Celtic countryside, in all its seasons, and is fascinated by all things historical,

from castles to cottages. She also has a special love for the Mediterranean—“The most perfect landscape after England”—and she considers both ideal settings for romance stories. In between writing she enjoys walking, gardening, needlework, baking extremely gooey cakes and trying to stay fit!

THE GREEK'S MILLION- DOLLAR BABY BARGAIN

BY
JULIA JAMES



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**THE GREEK'S MILLION-
DOLLAR BABY BARGAIN**

PROLOGUE

THE EXECUTIVE JET cut through the wintry night, heading north. Inside, its sole passenger stared through the darkened porthole. His face was sombre. His gaze unseeing. Looking inward, into the distant past.

Two boys, carefree, happy.

Brothers. Who'd thought they had all the time in the world.

But for one time had run out.

A knife stabbed into the heart of the man sitting, staring unseeing into the night sky beyond the speeding plane.

Andreas! My brother!

But Andreas was gone, never to return. Leaving behind only a weeping mother, a stricken brother.

And one precious, most miraculously precious gift of consolation...

The front doorbell rang, peremptory and insistent. Ann paused in clearing the mess in the kitchen and glanced into the second-hand pram, checking that the noise hadn't woken Ari. She hurried to the front door, pushing back untidy wisps of hair, wondering as she opened it who on earth it could be.

But even as she opened the door she knew who it was. He stood, tall, and dark, face set like stone. Beyond him, at the kerb, a chauffeured car, sleek and expensive, looked utterly out of place in this run down part of town.

‘Miss Turner?’

The voice was deep, and accented. It was also cold, and very hard.

Ann nodded briefly, dread suddenly pooling in her stomach.

‘I am Nikos Theakis,’ he announced, as the breath caught in her throat in a shocked rasp. ‘I have come for the child.’

Nikos Theakis. The man she had most cause to hate in all the world.

Ann could only stare, frozen, as he stepped past her, inside, dominating the narrow hallway, glancing dismissively around the shabby interior before arrowing back on her, as she stood shocked into immobility. ‘Where is he?’ he demanded.

His eyes lasered into her—dark, overpowering. Her mind was reeling. Out of all the insane things to do at this moment all she could do was stare at him. Stare at six foot of lean packed male, sheathed in a business suit that shouted wealth, sable hair immaculately cut, and a face—Ann’s stomach clenched—a face that widened her eyes involuntarily.

Night-dark eyes, a strong blade of a nose, high cheekbones, steel-jaw and sculpted, sensual mouth.

She gulped mentally. Then, with a jolt of effort, she dragged her mind away. What the hell was she doing, staring at the man like that? As if he were anyone other than the man he had just announced himself to be.

Nikos Theakis—rich, powerful, arrogant and ruthless. The man who had ruined her sister’s life.

Because he had. Ann knew. Her sister had told her time and again.

Carla, always the golden girl, vibrant and glamorous. Partying her way through life. Then the party had ended. She'd turned up late last summer at Ann's poky, dingy flat with no place else to go. Distraught.

'He said he was crazy about me. Crazy! But now I'm pregnant and he won't marry me! And I know why.' Her beautiful face had twisted in hatred. 'It's that snobby bully-boy brother of his! The almighty Nikos Theakis. Looking down his nose at me like I'm dirt!'

Shocked, Ann had listened while Carla's tearful tirade flowed on. She had tried to reassure her, to remind her that the father of her child had to support it financially—

'I want Andreas to *marry* me!' Carla had railed.

The months that had followed had not been easy. Carla had sunk into a depressive lethargy, forbidding Ann to make contact with the father of her child even to at least sort out maintenance for the baby.

'Andreas knows where I am,' she'd said dully. 'I want him to come and find me! I want him to come and marry me!'

But Andreas had not come, and Carla's difficult pregnancy had ended with an even more difficult labour that had left her with postnatal depression, brought on, Ann was sure, by Andreas' rejection of her. To Ann had fallen the task of looking after baby Ari—for Carla, it seemed, had failed to bond, sinking deeper

into depression, refusing all treatment.

The cure, when it had come, had been dramatic. A knock at the door—a young man, handsome, but with a strained, uncertain manner.

‘I—I am Andreas Theakis,’ he’d told Ann.

That was all it had taken. Carla had flown to him, her face transfigured. Her life transfigured. Or so she had believed. In reality it had been a little less romantic than Ann had hoped. Andreas had wanted a paternity test done.

‘I have to convince my brother...’ he’d said uneasily to Ann. But Carla had been viciously triumphant.

‘Oh, Ari is Andreas’, all right! And Mr Almighty Nikos Theakis is going to get his comeuppance! Andreas will marry me now—he’s promised me, because he wants his son—and there isn’t a thing his damn brother can do about it!’

Had Carla been tempting fate, to be so triumphant? Ann wondered, with a bitter twist of misery. It had not taken the malign will of Nikos Theakis to keep his brother from marrying her sister. It had taken a moment’s misjudgement by Andreas, whisking Carla away—glamorous once more, vibrant once more—in his powerful hire car on unfamiliar British roads. Nothing more than that.

And two lives snuffed out.

Ann had been at home with Ari, looking after him willingly while Andreas and Carla went off for the day together. He had been orphaned at a stroke.

Ann knew that the horror and grief of that day would never leave her. Andreas's body had been flown back to Greece. None of his family had come near Ann. Ann had been left to bury her sister on her own. Left to look after baby Ari, all alone in the world now, except for her. She had made no attempt to contact Andreas' family. They had clearly never wanted Carla—never wanted her child. Whereas she...

Ari was all the world to her. All she had left. Her one consolation in a sea of grief. Grief for her sister and for the man she had so desperately wanted to marry. Anger for his brother—who had stopped them doing so. The brother who was now standing in her own hallway, eyes like lasers.

Demanding to take Ari from her.

Getting no answer, Nikos glanced into the empty room beside the front door, then strode down the narrow hallway to the kitchen at the end. His expression hardened even more. The place was a mess. There was a sink full of washing up, a plastic covered table with food debris on it. But it was the pram that drew him. He strode up to it and looked down. Emotion knifed through him. Andreas' son! Out of this night—mare, one shining miracle. He gazed down at the sleeping baby, his heart full. Slowly, he reached a hand towards him.

'Don't touch him!' The shrill whisper made him halt, whipping his head round.

Ann Turner was in the kitchen doorway, one hand closed tightly around the jamb. Nikos's brows snapped together. Did the

girl think he was going to take the boy there and then? Obviously he was not. He would return when he had all the papers drawn up, a suitable nanny engaged, and then make an orderly removal of his nephew. He was here now simply because he had had to come. He had had to see for himself, this baby who was the only consolation in the nightmare that had closed over the Theakis family with Andreas's death.

His eyes rested a moment on the figure in the doorway, his mouth tightening as his gaze flicked over her. She suited the place. Shabbily dressed, with her hair tied back, an unkempt mess, and baby food on her shapeless T-shirt. She couldn't have looked less like the girl who had got her avaricious claws into his brother. Carla Turner had been a gilded bird of paradise. This sister of hers was a scrawny street sparrow.

But Ann Turner's appearance was irrelevant—only the baby in her care was important.

She was standing aside from the door now. 'Mr Theakis, I want you to leave. I've nothing to say to you, and I don't want you disturbing Ari.' Her voice was sharp. Hostile.

For a moment he said nothing, just went on looking at her. Ann could feel the colour run into her cheeks. The shock of seeing him was still jolting through her and she was fighting for composure. And losing. That soul-searching gaze of his was transfixing her. Then, without a word, he started towards her. She pulled aside swiftly as he brushed past her, striding down towards the front door. But her relief was short lived. He merely

wheeled into the living room.

She hurried after him, heart thumping. ‘Mr Theakis, I asked you to leave—’ she began, but he cut her short with a peremptory lift of his hand, as if she were a servant who had spoken out of turn.

‘I am here merely to see the child for myself, and to inform you of the arrangements that have been made to take him home.’

Ann stared. ‘This *is* his home.’

Nikos Theakis glanced around him. The sagging sofa, the worn carpet and faded curtains were encompassed in his condemning glance. ‘This, Miss Turner,’ he said, his eyes coming back to her, resting on her as if she were a cockroach, ‘is not a home. It is a slum.’

Ann coloured. Poverty wasn’t a crime! But Nikos Theakis clearly thought otherwise. His eyes were pinning her as if she were on a dissecting board. Instantly she became conscious of her messy, drab appearance and unwashed hair—conscious, inexplicably, of a feminine shame that she should be caught looking so absolutely unappealing in front of a man as expensively and physically drop-dead gorgeous as Nikos Theakis. Angrily, she broke her gaze away. What did it matter what she looked like? Or him? This was a man who’d just announced to her his intention of stealing the baby she loved more than anyone in the whole world. Her only living family.

Then suddenly he was speaking again, and this time his tone was quite different from the curt, condemning one with which

he'd informed her she was living in a slum.

'But how could it be otherwise?' he said smoothly, as Ann's eyes flew to him again. 'It is very hard, is it not, Miss Turner, to have the unwelcome burden of a small baby? What girl your age could want that?'

His smooth words backfired. Instinctive rage reared in Ann. Yes, it was hard work looking after a baby. But Ari was never a burden. Never.

Nikos Theakis was speaking again, in the same smooth voice. 'So I shall relieve you of this unwanted burden, Miss Turner, and you may return again to the life of a young, idle and carefree girl.'

She stifled down the rage that his unctuous words aroused in her, trying to keep her voice steady.

'Mr Theakis, you rejected Ari's existence from the moment he was conceived,' she shot at him witheringly. 'Why the sudden concern about him now?'

Nikos's eyes darkened. 'Because now I have the DNA results forwarded to me from the laboratory. I know that he is indeed my brother's son.' There was no trace of smoothness in his accented voice now.

'My sister said so right from the beginning!' Ann protested.

The sculpted mouth curled contemptuously. 'You think I would trust the word of a whore?'

It was spoken in such a casual way Ann blanched. 'Don't speak of Carla like that!' she spat furiously.

His eyes skewered her. 'Your sister slept with any man rich

enough to keep her in the lifestyle she hawked herself out for. Of course I warned my brother to check the child was his.’

‘My sister is *dead!*’ she rang back at him.

‘As is my brother. Thanks to her.’ The coldness in his voice was Arctic. ‘And now only one person is important—my nephew.’ Abruptly his manner changed again. That surface smoothness was back in his voice. ‘Which is why he must return to Greece with me. To have the life that his father would have wanted. Surely, Miss Turner, you cannot disagree with that?’

He sounded so smooth, so reasonable—but Ann’s hackles did not go down. ‘Of course I disagree! Do you propose, Mr Theakis—’ she was even more withering now ‘—to raise Ari yourself? Or will you just dump him on a nanny?’

The dark eyes flashed. Ann felt a stab of angry satisfaction go through her. *He doesn’t like being challenged!*

‘To assuage your concerns, Miss Turner—’ the deep voice was inflected with sardonic bite ‘—Ari will live in the family home. Yes, with a professional nanny but, most crucially, with my mother.’ And suddenly his voice that was quite different from anything Ann had heard so far. ‘Do I really need to tell you how desperate my mother is for the only consolation she has left to her after the death of her son? Her grief, Miss Turner, is terrible.’

Involuntarily, Ann felt her throat tighten.

‘She is welcome to visit any time she wants—’ she began, but Nikos Theakis cut right across her.

‘Generous of you, indeed, Miss Turner. But let us cut to the

chase,' he said bitingly, the Arctic chill back in his voice.

His eyes were pinning her again, but this time there was not disdain in them for her shabby, messy appearance. Now they held the same expression as when he had called her sister a whore...

His voice was harsh as he continued. 'I expected no less of you, and you have ensured that my expectations are fulfilled. So, tell me—what price do you set on the boy's head? I know you must have a high one—your sister's was marriage to my brother. Yours, however, can only be cash. Well, cash it will be.'

Ann stared disbelievingly as Nikos Theakis slid a long-fingered hand inside his immaculately tailored jacket and drew out a leather-bound chequebook and a gold fountain pen. Swiftly, with an incisive hand, he scrawled across a cheque, then placed it on the table. His face was unreadable as her gaze flickered to it. Ann stood in shock as he spoke again. 'I never haggle for what I want, Miss Turner,' he informed her harshly. 'This is my first and final offer. You will get not a penny more from me. I am offering you a million pounds for my nephew. Take it or leave it.'

Ann blinked. This wasn't real. That piece of paper on the table in front of her wasn't a cheque for a million pounds— a million pounds to buy a child. As she still stared, Nikos Theakis spoke again.

'My nephew,' he said, and once more he had resumed that smooth tone of voice, 'will have an idyllic childhood. My mother is a very loving woman, and will embrace her grandson into her heart. He will live with her in her home in Greece, at the Theakis

villa on my private island, wanting for nothing.’ He gave a small chilly smile. ‘So, you see, you may take the money, Miss Turner, with a clear conscience.’

Ann heard his terrible words but they didn’t register. Nothing registered except that piece of paper on the table in front of her. He saw her fixation upon it and his expression tightened. The deep lines around his mouth were etched more harshly. She kept on staring at the cheque.

Monstrous! *Monstrous!* Emotion swirled inside her and she felt the pressure build up in her chest as though it would explode. Only when he moved to the door could she tear her eyes away.

‘I will leave you for now, and return at the end of the week,’ he announced. ‘All the paperwork will be completed by then, and you will hand my nephew over to me.’ His voice hardened again. ‘Understand that a condition of your payment is that all connection with my nephew is severed—he will not benefit from any communication with his late mother’s relatives. However, since my mother can have no idea of the sordid life your sister led, or your squalid circumstances, she has asked me to give you this letter from her.’ He slid his hand inside his jacket once more, and withdrew a sealed envelope, placing it beside the cheque. ‘Do not think to reply to it. And do not attempt to cash your cheque yet—it is post-dated until I have my nephew.’

Then he was gone, closing the door behind him. Numbly Ann heard his footsteps on the pathway, then the soft clunk of a car door and the hushed note of an engine.

Her eyes went back to the cheque, disbelief and loathing filling her. Then slowly her eyes went to the letter. Numbly she picked it up and opened it. Her heart was wrung as she began to read Sophia Theakis' words.

You cannot imagine, my joy when Nikos told me of Andreas' son. I felt the mercy of God's grace upon me. To be blessed with making a loving home for this tragically bereaved infant would be a privilege I pray for. If you can see it in your heart, despite your own grief for your lost sister, to grant me this prayer, and allow me to lay the love I had for my own son before his son, you will have my eternal gratitude. He will be cherished and loved throughout his life.

Forgive, I beg you, the selfishness of a woman who has lost her son, and for whom old age beckons, in desiring her grandchild to raise. But you are young and have your whole life before you, and you must be free to live it without assuming the premature responsibilities of motherhood to your sister's child which will consume your precious youth...

Ann could taste the terrible mix of grief and hope in every sentence. Her heart constricted. What should she do? What was for the best? Did Ari really have a ready-made, loving home waiting for him with his grandmother? Would it be better for him than the home she provided, or only richer? A child needed love—emotional security, above all. Far more than material security.

Ann's face shadowed with memory. Carla had been her emotional security as a child—all that Ann had had—and she had

clung to her sister as the only constant in an uncertain, unstable world after their mother's death. Andreas' mother's words echoed in her head, offering 'a loving home for this tragically bereaved infant'. Was that what would be best for her nephew? Was it what Ari's parents would have wanted for their son? Ann's heart squeezed. She knew the answer already.

Andreas *would* have wanted his son raised in his family, by his own mother who had so clearly loved him. In the short time that she had known Andreas he had often mentioned his mother, with love and affection clear in his voice. His mother, he had told Ann, would welcome the news of Carla's existence—and their child she would welcome with open arms and open heart.

And Carla? What would she have wanted? Ann knew the answer to that question too, and a hand clutched her own heart. Carla had spent her brief life trying to claw her way to the wealth she thought meant happiness—she would have given her right arm for her son to take his place in the heart of the Theakis clan.

She had given more. She had given her life.

How can I keep Carla's son away from what she would have wanted so much for him? How can I?

Slowly, inexorable logic crushed her desperation to find reasons to keep the baby she loved so much. How could she? It would be pure selfishness on her part. If a loving, financially secure home were being offered to Ari, which both his parents would have wanted for him, how could she keep him within her own impecunious protection? However much she loved Ari, one

day he would grow up. How would he feel then, having been deprived of the birthright that should have been his? The time to decide was now, while he was a baby— before emotional ties could be formed, before he grew to love her, and could be wounded by parting with her. Now was the time, she knew, for her to be strong—to let him go to his grandmother, to be cherished and loved, protected and safe.

As every child should be.

And there was yet one more reason for giving Ari up to his grandmother. One that she could not ignore. One that the monstrous offer by Nikos Theakis made it impossible to ignore.

A million pounds. *So much money.* How could she possibly say no to that?

Nikos stood, as he had stood only a few days before, in the dingy living room of Ann Turner's flat, watching with rigid features as she signed away her custody rights to his nephew. But as she put her name to the last of the legal papers, and shakily got to her feet, he allowed himself the satisfaction of letting his opinion of her show in his face.

Ann flinched. It was quite visible. Then his lawyer was picking up the papers and placing them inside his briefcase. At the door, a young nanny held Ari. For a second the emotion was so overpoweringly strong that she swayed with the need to snatch him back. Never, never let him go! But it was too late. The nanny, with a last sympathetic smile at Ann, was going, followed by the lawyer.

At the doorway, Nikos paused. Ann Turner was clutching the back of the chair, her face white. For a second Nikos frowned, then his face cleared, resuming its expression.

‘You may cash your cheque now, Miss Turner,’ he said softly, and his words licked over her like a whip.

But Ann was beyond his scorn. Beyond anything but the silent scream in her head that she could not do what she had just done. Yet even as the scream sounded in her mind Nikos Theakis was walking out, the front door closing behind him.

Its echo haunted her, tearing at her through the years ahead.

CHAPTER ONE

Four years later...

THE FAMOUS LONDON toy shop was crowded with children and parents as Ann threaded her way through, studying the myriad toys on offer. Most were far too expensive, but some gave her excellent ideas. It was strange being back in England. She’d hardly been back here at all in the years since she’d taken Nikos Theakis’ cheque—and given Ari away.

Four years—and still guilt assailed her over what she had done. *Oh, Carla, did I do the right thing? Tell me I did. Tell me that Ari is loved and happy.*

That was all that mattered—that he was growing up, as Nikos Theakis had said he would, in an idyllic childhood. Orphaned, yes, but with family to love him and material wealth in abundance. Not all children were so fortunate.

She steeled herself. Yes, that was what she had to

remember. Yet it was with a heavy sigh that she continued her perambulation. Being back in England brought back all the memories of Ari as a baby. Would she even recognise him if she saw him now? Her heart ached. Of all the strictures that Nikos Theakis had laid upon her, the loss of contact had been the worst to bear. But it was the price she'd had to pay.

Familiar blackness filled her as she thought of the man who had taken Ari from her. Remembered the vile things he'd said about Carla, the contempt in his eyes when she'd taken his cheque. His banning her from ever seeing Ari again.

Eyes shadowed, she rounded a display of soft toys, pausing to check the price and flinching when she saw it. Then, across the aisle, she heard a voice that stilled her utterly.

'Ari, my darling, speak English—remember we are in England now.'

As if in slow motion, Ann's head turned. A little way away was a huge railway track, laid out with trains whizzing around. Children crowded to see it. Right in her line of sight was a small child, flanked by two women with their backs to Ann.

'That's the train Uncle Nikki is buying me!' came a piping voice.

The younger woman beside him turned to smile. Ann saw her profile and gasped, her hand flying to her throat. Four years might have passed, but Ann recognised instantly the nanny who had taken Ari from her arms. The little boy beside her must be... must be...

She felt faint with shock, staring, transfixed. Even as emotion convulsed her, the nanny's gaze shifted outwards slightly and caught hers. Ann could see her expression change as she recognised her. Then the older woman saw the nanny's expression, and turned as well.

It was Ari's grandmother. It had to be! For a moment the older woman, elegantly beautiful, but with a frail air about her, returned Ann's stare with mild curiosity, and then her brow puckered questioningly. She murmured something to the nanny, who nodded slowly, assessingly, then walked across to Ann.

'You will excuse me, please,' she said in an accented voice, curious and a little hesitant, 'but...is it possible...? Could you possibly be...? You have a look about you of my grandson.'

Ann swallowed, unable to move, her throat still tight as a leash. Then, into her eyeline came another figure. Much taller, male, clad in a black cashmere overcoat, striding towards the train display from the cash desk. Ann's breath caught in her throat. Simultaneously the man's head skewed round, his eyes searching for his mother, absent from his nephew, who was still absorbed in watching the trains scurrying round the track. They lighted on Ann and he stopped dead.

In a second she made her decision. She took half a step forward.

'Yes, I am Ann Turner. Ari's aunt,' she announced.

After that it became a blur. The expression on Sophia Theakis' face turned to pleasure, and she reached out her hands to take

Ann's and draw her forward. Immediately Nikos Theakis strode up, his face like thunder. But his attempt to intercept the greeting was too late.

Sophia Theakis held up one small but imperious hand to her son. 'Nikki, this is quite extraordinary,' she said, speaking English. 'Look, this is little Ari's aunt. I can scarcely believe it!'

Her son's face might have been carved from stone. 'Extraordinary indeed,' he drawled, and the menace in his voice vibrated like a warning.

But Sophia Theakis did not hear it. Instead, she was drawing Ann towards where her grandson was still riveted by the train display. She laid a gentle arm on his shoulder, spoke something low in Greek and turned him around. For the first time in four long years Ann looked into the face of the little boy she had last seen as a tiny baby.

His face blurred as her eyes hazed with tears. She dropped down to a crouch and took his little hands.

'Hello, Ari,' she said quietly.

The child frowned slightly. 'Ya-ya says you are my *thia*. But I haven't got a *thia*, only a *thios*—Uncle Nikki. Are you married to Uncle Nikki? *Then* you would be my *thia*,' he reasoned, with impeccable logic.

Ann shook her head slightly. His grandmother said something, again in Greek.

'But I haven't got a mummy any more. She and my Daddy live in heaven,' said the little boy.

‘Your mummy had a sister, Ari,’ said Ann, her voice husky as she spoke. ‘That sister is me.’

‘Where have you been?’ demanded Ari. ‘Why have you not been to see me?’ He sounded indignant as well as confused.

‘I live very far away, Ari,’ said Ann, trying to give the child an explanation he could cope with.

‘Ari.’ Nikos Theakis’ deep voice cut curtly across hers. ‘We are keeping Ya-ya waiting and delaying your...aunt. She is a very busy woman. I will accompany her to her taxi.’

His voice was as grim as his face, and as he spoke Ann felt his hand clamp heavily around her forearm. Removing her from the scene of her crime was evidently his first concern. But he had reckoned without treachery from within.

‘Nikos!’ said his mother, surprise and disapproval in her soft voice. She spoke to him rapidly in Greek, with the expressive use of her hands. As she spoke Ann saw his face harden, grow even grimmer. He bit something back to her, and shot a glowering glance in Ann’s direction. His mother raised astonished eyebrows, then said something again in Greek to her son.

Nikos Theakis’ face set, then he gave a brief, curt nod. ‘As you wish,’ he said tightly, in English.

Sophia Theakis smiled, and then turned that smile on Ann. Graciously, she invited Ann to lunch, taking Ann’s hands in hers.

‘I have longed to meet you for many years, my dear child,’ she said in her warm voice. She tucked Ann’s hand in her arm.

‘Come,’ she said.

Ann was in a daze, scarcely able to believe what was happening. They left the store and were conveyed by chauffeured car to the hotel where the Theakis party were evidently staying—one of London’s premier hotels, overlooking Green Park.

Ann only had eyes for Ari who, realising he had a brand-new admirer, took full advantage, chattering away to her. Yet, despite her undivided attention to the little boy, Ann could not help but feel the dark, glowering presence of his uncle, his anger at her vibrating from every pore, condemning her for her temerity in daring to be there. She ignored it. What did she care if Nikos Theakis were wishing her to oblivion? She returned the compliment tenfold!

Her only concern was Ari.

Her heart clenched again as she took in the miraculous reality of seeing her nephew here, now, in the flesh—a little boy, no longer a baby, no longer only a wrenching memory....

Lunch passed in a daze as well. What she ate she had no idea. She had no idea of anything except the fact she was sitting at a table with Ari, asking him all the questions a child his age would be ready to answer—his favourite toys and stories and activities. He regaled her copiously, prompted sometimes by his nanny, Tina, and sometimes by his grandmother.

His uncle, however, spoke only when referred to by his nephew. This, however, was not seldom, and Ann could see that Nikos Theakis was regarded as a high authority and the fount of

great wisdom by his nephew. What she also had to accept—and she knew she should be glad of it—was how patient and attentive he was to Ari, and how Ari showed no timidity or reticence with him. As for his grandmother—it was obvious to Ann that Ari was the apple of her eye.

Across the years, the ghost of her voice, so heartrending in the letter she had written for Ann, echoed in her head: *He will be cherished and loved throughout his life.*

Oh, Carla, thought Ann, her throat catching with emotion. You can be happy—you can be happy at how safe and loved your son is!

A small beeringed hand was laid lightly on her wrist. It was Ari's grandmother. 'You are thinking of your sister?' she said, her eyes kind.

Ann could only nod, unable to speak. The older woman smiled sadly.

'We do not know why they were taken from us—your sister and my dear son—but we know they gave us a gift beyond price. And I am so pleased—*so* pleased, my dear—that you are here with us now, after far, far too long away from Ari.'

Again, Ann could not speak—but this time not because of the emotion of grief. What could she say to this kind, sympathetic woman of how cruel the separation had been for her? How cruel, too, her surviving son's strictures on Carla and herself.

She looked away—and straight into dark, hard eyes. Time buckled, and it was if she were once more standing in front of

Nikos Theakis in her dingy flat, with him looking at her as if she were a cockroach. Almost she dropped her eyes under that killing basilisk gaze, but then she rallied, her chin lifting slightly, her eyes clashing with his. Then, as she continued to hold his gaze defiantly, refusing to back down, his expression began to change. She didn't know what it was, but something shifted in those hooded night-dark eyes, and as it shifted something quivered down the length of her spine... something that suddenly made her snap her gaze away after all.

Then Ari made some childishly amusing remark, causing her to smile, as well as his grandmother and nanny, and the moment was gone.

As the meal came to an end, Sophia Theakis took Ann's hands again, drawing her to her feet.

'For the moment, alas, we must say goodbye again, while I place myself in the hands of my doctors.' She spoke lightly, but Ann wondered what it was that had brought her to London for medical treatment. Then Ari's grandmother was speaking again. 'But this must not be the end of our acquaintance. Within a week I shall be returning to Greece for our Easter celebrations, and then, dear child, if it is at all possible, I shall count it the greatest pleasure if you will be my guest there. On Sospiris you shall finally have a chance to make up for the years you have lost with little Ari.' She smiled benignly.

'My son will make all the arrangements. Nikos—' She spoke swiftly in Greek, clearly giving him some kind of instruction. He

nodded curtly at the end.

‘I will indeed,’ he said grimly. ‘With the greatest pleasure, I will escort Miss Turner to her destination.’

Dark eyes rested on Ann, and she did not need to be a mind-reader to know where it was that Nikos Theakis wanted her destination to be. Somewhere exceedingly hot would do nicely. With flames.

Nikos closed his hand over the rich material of her coatsleeve, his grip tightening on the arm beneath. Tightly leashed anger lashed within him, as it had been doing since his incredulous gaze had first landed on the figure daring—*daring!*—to speak to his mother in the toy store.

Theos mou, he should have expected this! Should have expected that the girl would make such an attempt! Doubtless the million pounds he’d paid her off with had all been frittered away by now.

His brow darkened. Had it been deliberate? Positioning herself in that toy store, richly arrayed as she was in the spoils of her ill-gotten gains? Of course it had! Why was he even questioning it? What else would a girl like her have been doing in a toy store of all places? No, she must have plotted it deliberately, after discovering—he had yet to find out how!—that his mother was visiting London with Ari, and seeking the opportunity to put herself forward. More fool him for not having expected it. For letting her take him totally by surprise...

In more ways than one. For a moment Nikos felt again the

second of the two shocks that had hit him as he'd recognised the woman accosting his mother. Not the rage that had signalled the moment he registered that it was Ann. But the other one. The one that had almost made him look twice, as if his eyes were deceiving him. Deceiving him that the woman with the knockout face and figure could possibly be the same drab, unkempt girl he'd last seen four years ago.

But then, he thought cynically, it was amazing what a million pounds to spend on herself could achieve by way of improvement! Sleek, beautiful hair, subtle make-up, flattering designer clothes and—his cynicism deepened—an expensive winter tan on flawless skin. Oh, yes, Miss Ann Turner with a million pounds at her disposal could well afford never to be drab and repellent ever again! Now she could look every inch a man-trap, like her trollop of a sister...

Not that she was anything like as blatant as her sister. Carla Turner had flaunted the kind of sugar-babe looks that pulled men in the most obvious way possible—including his gullible brother!—but Ann Turner was in a quite different style.

Classy.

The word came to him, and irritated him even more. Yet the woman whose arm his own was now pinioning had fitted in as effortlessly with the hotel dining room and their party as if she had been born to it.

His eyes went to her rigid profile, and assessed it.

Yes, classy. Her *soigné* hairstyle, the discretion of her makeup

and the restrained chic of her outfit all created that image.

But it was more than just classiness...

His eyes lingered, and he felt again, angering him, the same reaction he'd felt as his eyes had first settled on her. He knew what it was, that reaction—it was a familiar one to him, and one he usually enjoyed. But *not* when it came in response to a woman like the one he was frog-marching out of the hotel and away from his family...who should never have been allowed to contaminate it in the first place.

What the hell had his mother been thinking of? But even as he posed the question he knew the answer. He'd deliberately sheltered her from the sexually sordid truth about Andreas' disastrous involvement with Carla Turner, and the financially sordid truth about her sister. So no wonder she had taken Ann Turner at face value.

Anger bit in him again—he would have loved to expose the girl for the worthless sham she was, but he would not upset his mother. His brother's death had nearly destroyed her, and Ari had become her only reason to keep going. With her health still frail, he would never upset her by exposing the truth about Ann Turner. But a free lunch was all the girl was going to get. Nothing more.

He thrust her inside a taxi at the hotel entrance, and came in after her. Immediately she slid to the farthest side of the seat, away from him. Illogically, the move annoyed him. Who did Ann Turner think she was to flinch away from him?

He ordered the taxi driver to ‘just drive’. Then he turned on his target.

Ann tried to keep the maximum distance from him, but Nikos Theakis seemed to take up far too much space—exacerbated by the way he’d thrown his arm along the back of the seat, stretching out his long legs into the well of the cab.

Four years had made him even more formidable and grim-faced—and his impact was just as overpowering. He was still ludicrously good-looking, but now he looked tougher than ever. He must be into his thirties now, she reckoned swiftly, and the last remnants of youth were long gone. He looked hard, arrogant, and as self-assured as ever. Wealth and power radiated from him. A lot more radiated from him as well...

No! She crushed down the realisation. It was as inappropriate now as it had been four years ago. Worse than inappropriate—wrong. Wrong to pay the slightest attention to the fact that Nikos Theakis had the kind of looks to turn female heads for miles around. The *only* thing about Nikos Theakis she had to register was that she hated him...

Hated him for despising Carla, hated him for taking Ari from her, hated him for paying her to take him...

No—she wouldn’t think about that either. It was gone, in the past. And the money was spent, too. All gone now. So she would not let him intimidate her now any more than he had four years ago. She sat in her corner, back stiff, and met his coruscating gaze unflinchingly. It seemed to make him angrier yet. With a

rasp in his deep voice he began his attack.

‘Doubtless, Miss Turner, you think yourself very clever indeed, insinuating yourself into my family thanks to my mother’s innocence and kind nature!’ His dark eyes narrowed viciously. ‘But make no mistake. You will not be allowed to capitalise on scraping an acquaintance with her. This,’ he assured her grimly, ‘was your first and last meeting.’

Nikos Theakis’ mouth tightened. Irrelevantly, Ann registered the sensual twist to it, and then he was continuing his condemnation of her.

‘You have no place in my nephew’s life—*no place*—do you understand? That was the agreement you made, was it not, four years ago, when you sold your dead sister’s baby to me for cash?’

The scorn in his voice excoriated her. Ann felt herself flushing beneath its venom. She opened her mouth to retaliate, but his eyes flicked over her like a whip.

‘And I can see just where the cash went.’ His hand, resting along the back of the seat, dipped to touch the fleece of her coat’s shoulder, trailing one finger down her upper arm. ‘Cashmere,’ he murmured, his tone changing suddenly from angry to smooth, his long lashes sweeping down over his eyes. ‘So soft. So warm.’ His mouth twisted. ‘So expensive. Tell me,’ he went on in that dangerous voice, ‘has the million pounds all gone? Is that why you have decided to break your agreement and try to stick your greedy little fingers into the Theakis honey pot once more?’

The hand was still on Ann’s sleeve, idly brushing the soft

fabric. It should have been a harmless gesture, but it wasn't. It should have been intangible through the layers of her coat and the sleeve of her dress beneath, but it wasn't. Ann felt that light touch all the way through to her skin. Felt it, out of nowhere, cut right through her anger and resentment to reach the quick...

Her heart started to beat more heavily and her eyes were dragged to his. They were very dark, the eyes of Nikos Theakis, half closed as they surveyed her all over, from the pale gleaming crown of her gilt-blond head, sweeping on across the fine bones of her face, dwelling a moment on her long-lashed grey eyes, then on down the slender curves of her body to the long, shapely length of her stockinged legs.

The breath caught in her throat. It was that moment again—the one that had happened so fleetingly, so briefly, at the end of lunch—the one that she had deliberately ignored, refused to acknowledge. But now she could not ignore it...

Four years ago this man had consigned her to the realms of the sexually repulsive. He'd cast one look at her messy, drab appearance and dismissed her.

He wasn't dismissing her now.

The dark eyes washed over her leisurely, keeping the breath stifled in her lungs, the muscles of her throat constricted. Her heart was giving slow, ponderous slugs as everything seemed to slow down, inside and out. The traffic noise faded, everything faded except the pulse in the hollow of her neck, the tightness of her lungs. She tried to fight it, tried to draw breath—but she

couldn't. Could only go on sitting there as his eyes came back to her—reading her reaction.

He smiled.

It was not a nice smile, but it made a pool of heat flush all the way through Ann's body. He watched the heat flood through her as if it were a visible wave, his dark eyes veiled as they looked over her, through her.

The air in the taxi was thick, tangible. She felt his hand lift from her shoulder and reach a little further. Then the pad of his index finger was touching her cheek, drawing down it like a knife blade. Her eyes were locked on his—she could not break away.

She shivered.

The hand dropped, and rested again innocuously on the back of the taxi seat. But it had done its damage. She felt his touch sear her cheek as if his hand were still there. As if his touch had burnt into her skin...

'I will tell you how it will be, Miss Turner,' Nikos Theakis informed her, as though he were having a normal conversation with her. His voice had become flat and unemotional. All trace of his awareness of her as a female had vanished, as if a light had been switched off. 'There will be no more Theakis money for you. You have had your pay off. If you have squandered it, that is your misfortune. You will have no opportunity to take advantage of my mother's generosity and sentimental kind-heartedness.' His voice flattened even more, and the dark eyes beheld her opaquely. 'Accordingly, there will be no little holiday for you

on Sospiris. No continuation of this touching reunion with the child you sold for a million pounds so that you could buy yourself a worthless lifestyle for a few years. No further contact with my nephew or my family at all. Do you understand me?’

Ann bit her lip. She longed to yell back at him but what was the point? She already knew she could not accept Mrs Theakis’s invitation—it was *impossible*, impossible. She did not need Nikos Theakis telling her that, ordering her to stay away from Ari.

Seeing Ari again like this, out of the blue, had been a miracle—a wonderful gift. But that was all it was. Oh, now that Mrs Theakis had met her perhaps Ann would finally be allowed to write to Ari, send him presents, even occasionally see him—but she could never be part of his life. She knew that—accepted that. Had long ago accepted that.

So all she said now was a tight lipped, ‘Yes, I understand, Mr Theakis.’

‘That is as well,’ he said curtly, lifting his hand to rap on the cabby’s glass. ‘I see we understand each other. Make sure it stays that way, Miss Turner.’

Then the taxi was stopping, and Nikos Theakis was climbing out, having pressed a twenty-pound note into the cabby’s hand and told him to take his remaining passenger wherever the fare warranted. Then, briefly, he turned his attention back to Ann.

‘Stay away from my family.’

Then he strode off into the London crowd, and Ann could see him no more.

For the second time in four years Nikos Theakis had walked out of her life.

He would walk back in far more swiftly.

CHAPTER TWO

ANN HAD JUST returned to her flat with a bagful of groceries. She had heard nothing more from Ari's grandmother, though she had posted a polite thank-you letter to the hotel, thanking her for lunch and for her kindness in letting her have such precious time with Ari. It saddened her profoundly that she would never know him as she longed to, but at least she knew now that he was having the happiest of childhoods, with a doting grandmother and, she forced herself to acknowledge, an uncle who clearly held his nephew in affection, despite his harsh condemnation of his mother and aunt.

She gained the kitchen and started to unpack the groceries. The front doorbell rang. Frowning slightly, for she was not expecting anyone, Ann trotted down the narrow hallway and cautiously opened the door.

But not cautiously enough. Like an action replay from four years ago, Nikos Theakis strode inside.

'We,' he announced balefully to an open-mouthed Ann, 'shall speak.'

'You want me to do what?' she demanded, staring down at Nikos Theakis disbelievingly. He was sitting in the armchair by the window of the living room, and his expensive, bespoke tailored presence was as dominatingly incongruous as it had been

four years ago.

‘Spend a month in Greece, at my mother’s house on Sospiris,’ repeated the man who’d told her to stay away from his family.

‘Why?’ she asked bluntly, folding her arms defensively over her chest. She was wearing jeans today, and the top she was wearing with them suddenly seemed to be showing off her figure voluptuously. Nikos Theakis’ gaze had swept over her as he’d walked in and sat himself down without a by-your-leave, and she had not liked it.

But then there was nothing about Nikos Theakis she liked. Least of all the way he was speaking to her now.

He was angry. That was obvious. It was suppressed anger, but anger all the same, leashed on a tight rein. It had not stopped him flicking his gaze over her in a way that had brought a flush to her cheek—a flush that had nothing to do with the fact that she not expected to set eyes on him again and did not want to anyway. Even if her insides *had* given a sudden gulp as she’d rested her eyes on him...on his tall, powerful frame...the hard, handsome face and those night dark eyes.

Then all other thoughts had vanished from her head as he had dropped his bombshell.

‘You are to come to Sospiris because,’ he bit out, ‘my mother insists! And,’ he ground out even more bitinglly, ‘as her doctor informs me that her heart condition will be exacerbated by any emotional upset, I have no option but to concede to her wishes. Well?’ he demanded, tight lipped. ‘What are you waiting for?’

Start packing.’

Ann crushed her arms more tightly over her chest.

As if in an action replay from four years ago, Ann watched him reach into his suit jacket, take out his leather-bound chequebook, hook one leg over his knee to create a writing platform, and fill out a cheque with his gold fountain pen. He presented it to her with a contemptuous flourish.

‘The fee, Miss Turner, for your very expensive and valuable time.’

His opinion of her cut through his voice.

Numbly she took the piece of paper he proffered her. The zeros blurred, then resolved themselves. She gave a faint sigh of shock and her eyes widened.

‘Ten thousand pounds, Miss Turner.’ Nikos Theakis’ hatefully sarcastic voice floated over her head somewhere. ‘Now, that is what I call an expenses-paid holiday...’

Slowly, Ann shifted her gaze so that she met his eyes. The expression in them could have incinerated her on the spot. Answering emotion seared her breast. With one part of her she wanted to rip the cheque into a dozen pieces and throw them in his cold, contemptuous face. And with another she felt a gush of excited anticipation at seeing her nephew again, combined with the sudden rush of realisation that she held ten thousand pounds in her hands. A fortune—and one that she knew exactly how to spend.

Just the way she had spent her last cheque from Nikos Theakis.

A smile of sweet pleasure broke across her face. ‘Why, Mr Theakis,’ she said saccharinely, knowing just how angry she could make him, and how satisfying that would be to her insulted soul, ‘how very, very generous of you. I believe I shall start packing straight away.’

As she turned away, heading for the stairs, a word slithered out of the sculpted, sensual mouth. She couldn’t tell what it was, because it was Greek. But it was enunciated with such deadly venom that she did not request a translation.

For a moment Ann stood transfixed, as if he’d struck her physically, not just verbally. Then, back stiffening, she gave a tiny, indifferent shrug of her shoulders and walked out of the room to begin her packing.

* * *

Ann craned her neck as the helicopter swooped in to land on the helipad behind the Theakis villa. Set in a huge, landscaped Mediterranean garden, on the tiny private island of Sospiris, the villa was breathtakingly beautiful—gleaming white, its walls and terraces splashed with bougainvillea, the vivid hues of an azure swimming pool competing with the even more azure hues of the Aegean all around. As they disembarked, she gazed around her, revelling not just in the beauty of the surroundings, but in the balmy warmth after the chill British spring.

Nikos Theakis watched her reaction as she stared about her, visibly delighted. ‘Worth getting your greedy little claws into, Miss Turner?’ he murmured.

Ann ignored him, as she had done her best to do all the way from London on the private jet that had flown them to the Greek mainland. He had returned the favour, occupying himself with his laptop and a pile of what she had assumed were business documents.

But if Nikos Theakis made it crystal clear she was here very nearly over his dead body, the warmth of his mother's greeting almost equalled the exuberance of her grandson's, who had swooped on his newly discovered aunt with a fierce hug from so little a body. As she crouched down to return his embrace, Ann's eyes misted.

Oh, Carla—if you could see your son now. How happy he is, how much he is part of the family you wanted for him. And this would have been Carla's home too—she would have been bringing her son up here, in this beautiful villa, married to Andreas, in the perfect life that her sister had so longed for. Instead a grave had been waiting for her, and for the man she'd so wanted to marry...

Anguish crushed Ann, then resolutely she put it aside. The past was gone—it could not be undone. Only the present was left, and the future that was Carla's and Andreas' son.

* * *

Nikos watched Ann Turner entering the salon that one of the house staff was ushering her into. He had seen nothing of her since he had handed her over to his mother on their arrival at the villa that afternoon, taking refuge from his grim

mood by incarcerating himself in his study. Work, at least, had taken his mind off the unwelcome presence of a woman he wished to perdition, but who had, instead, succeeded in further insinuating himself into his family. Now, however, he was face to face with her again. His gaze surveyed her impassively. But impassiveness was not the hallmark of his mood. Resentment and grim anger were. And another thing he resented, even more than her presence.

Her impact on him as a woman.

His mouth tightened as he watched her approach his mother. Damn the girl—why did she have to look like that? Why couldn't she still look the way she had four years ago? Why did she have to be wand slender, with that incredible hair swept back off her face, her classically beautiful features set off by an aqua knee-length dress in some fine jersey material that skimmed her lissom body, making her look both subtly alluring and yet not obviously so. Why did he have to wonder what it might be like to sift his fingers through that long hair, inconveniently restrained in a velvet tie? Why did he have to speculate whether her breasts, scarcely outlined in the discreetly styled dress, would repay his personal investigation?

Forcibly, he dragged his eyes away from her towards his mother. She was smiling graciously at her guest, holding out a hand to invite her to join her on the sofa for pre-dinner drinks. Nikos felt his mood worsen. Watching his mother smile, bestow her kindness, her favour, on so worthless an object, galled him

bitterly—yet there was nothing he could do about it. Not without hurting his mother, shocking her with the squalid truth about Ari's aunt.

No, like it or not—and he did *not*—he would have to endure this farce, and make sure it ended as swiftly as possible, with the least opportunity for Ann Turner to get her greedy little claws yet deeper into both his coffers and his family.

She was greeting his mother prettily now, in halting phrasebook Greek, which set Nikos' teeth on edge but drew a warm smile of approval from his mother. Then she was taking the place indicated to her, and smiling her thanks as one of the staff offered her a drink. Moodily, Nikos seized his martini from the manservant's tray. He felt in need of its strengthening powers tonight.

'So, my dear child,' his mother was saying to her guest, 'I hope you have had an enjoyable afternoon with little Ari? Was I wrong to let him monopolise you so much on your very arrival? But he has been so eager for you to come.'

Ann smiled warmly. 'I've had a wonderful time! He is such a lovely little boy, Kyria Theakis,' she said spontaneously. 'Thank you—thank you so much for all you have done for him...'

Her voice threatened to break, and she fell silent.

'My dear,' said Sophia Theakis, reaching out her small hand to touch Ann's. 'He is our own precious child, is he not? We love him for himself—and for the memory he brings of those we have loved and who are no more.'

As tears pricked in Ann's eyes she felt her hand squeezed briefly, comfortingly. She blinked, looking away—straight into a pair of hard, dark eyes. Nikos Theakis' scathing gaze as he beheld this affecting scene.

Her own gaze hardened in response. She would not let this obnoxious man judge her—condemn her. She turned away, back to Mrs Theakis.

'Now,' Ari's grandmother went on, 'you must allow me to introduce my dear cousin, Eupheme, who is so very kind as to keep me company and take charge of the beautiful garden we have here which she created for us all.'

Another woman of late middle-age—who had, Ann realised, just entered by a different door on the other side of the room—came forward now. Ann stood up and waited as Mrs Theakis performed the introductions. Again, Ann murmured in phrasebook Greek. It drew a kind smile from her hostess's companion, and an answer in Greek, which was swiftly translated for her by Mrs Theakis, who added that Cousin Eupheme spoke little English.

The topic of the conversation returned to Ari, and Ann was more than happy for it to do so, turning away from Nikos Theakis. Yet she felt him watching her like a malevolent bird of prey. The back of her neck prickled.

Why did the damn man get to her like this? She didn't like him—he didn't like her. God knew he had made that clear enough! Well, she didn't care about that—didn't care anything about him

—cared only that she was here, in Ari's home, for the first time in her life. She would not let Nikos Theakis spoil so treasured an occasion for her.

This was difficult, for Nikos Theakis in a white dinner jacket that set off his natural tan and his strong, ludicrously good-looking features, was hard to ignore, though Ann did her dogged best. Surely she couldn't care less that he was a darkly stunning specimen of the male species, compelling and magnetic—this man who had called her sister a whore? Her mouth tightened as she took her place at the beautifully burnished dining table indoors.

Nevertheless, thanks to Mrs Theakis' impeccable skills as an experienced hostess, dinner passed comfortably enough, helped by the fact that Nikos Theakis contributed little more than his glowering presence at the table.

'You have arrived at a time that is both happy and sad for us, my child,' her hostess remarked at one point. 'Perhaps Tina has already told you that she is to be married from this house shortly? Her fiancé, Dr Forbes, is an archaeologist, excavating on our larger neighbour, Maxos. Indeed, she is spending the evening with him there tonight. I am happy for her, of course, but I confess I shall miss her—and Ari even more so, for she has been an essential part of his family since he came here. So your arrival will serve to divert him from his impending loss.'

'I'd be delighted to divert him,' enthused Ann, and the conversation moved on again.

After dinner, they removed to the salon for coffee, but it was not long before Ann, feeling the strain of the day, opted to retire to bed. As if the punctilious host, Nikos escorted her to the door in a parody of politeness. Away from his mother and Eupheme, Ann could feel once more the assessing, leisurely flick of his eyes over her, lingering a moment on the swell of her breasts. To her flustered dismay, she felt them tightening beneath his scrutiny.

‘Another beautiful garment—and one that flatters your beauty,’ he murmured in a low voice. ‘I am glad to see you disposed so tastefully of my money...’

His smile was like the baring of a jackal’s teeth. She turned her head sharply away and strode off across the wide, marble-floored hallway towards the staircase, sure that she heard a soft, jibing laugh behind her.

Damn him, why did he get to her like that? Why should she care what Nikos Theakis thought of her? He was nothing to her—*nothing*.

I’m here for Ari—that’s all.

That was what she must remember—only that.

Tina reinforced Ann’s determination the next day. The two women were on the beach in front of the villa, watching Ari industriously dig a very large, deep hole in the sand some little way away. Tina, so similar to her in age, with a friendly personality, was easy company. She was full of praise for both Mrs Theakis and Nikos Theakis. The former Ann could well understand, but her expression must have showed her doubt

about the latter.

‘Nikos is a fantastic employer,’ enthused Tina. ‘Incredibly generous. He’s sponsoring Sam’s dig, you know, and letting me have my reception at the villa. Plus he’s wonderful with Ari, and is devoted to his mother’s welfare too.’

Yes, thought Ann, enough to force himself to pay me a ridiculous amount of money to come here because she wants me here!

Aloud, she simply murmured, ‘I suppose that’s understandable, given Mrs Theakis’ frail health.’

Tina’s eyes lit. ‘Is it, though? You know, I suspect that Mrs Theakis finds her poor health very useful! Nikos was dead set against the trip to London, saying it would be too tiring for her, but lo and behold Mrs Theakis’ doctor recommended a heart specialist there, so off we all went! Mind you,’ she went on, ‘he’s nowhere near so co-operative with other women! As you can imagine, with his looks and money, women are all over him—and desperate to become Mrs Nikos Theakis. But he won’t be caught by any of them! He just enjoys them, then it’s over. But of course he gets away with it. Men like that do.’ She shrugged good-humouredly, then turned her attention back to her charge. ‘Ari, pet, how’s that hole coming along? Can we come and see it yet?’

The rest of the morning was spent with Ari, but after lunch, while Ari had his afternoon nap, Ann could no longer resist the lure of the swimming pool. Sliding into its silky azure depths, she

did a few taxing lengths, then slowed to a leisurely breaststroke. Her wet hair streamed behind her, sleeked off her face, and the sun glittered in her eyes, warming her with its rays, as she moved soothingly, rhythmically through the water. A sense of well-being filled her at the peace and quiet and beauty of it all.

Until, with the strangest prickling in the back of her neck, she started to feel uneasy. Reaching the far end of the pool, she halted, holding the marble edge and looking around her.

She saw him immediately. On an upper terrace, one hand resting on the balustrade, looking down at her.

Nikos Theakis.

Instantly she felt vulnerable—exposed. Instinct told her to get out of the water as fast as she could and grab a towel. But that would mean he'd see her, and out of the pool she'd be even more exposed than with the translucent veil of the water. For a moment she hesitated, then, with a splash, she plunged back into the water, swimming again. After another two lengths she glanced surreptitiously up at the balcony again. To her relief, no one was there. Quickly, she got out of the pool and wrapped her towel around her tightly, recovering her composure.

She would not feel intimidated by Nikos Theakis! Recklessly, she settled down to sunbathe, lying on her tummy and loosening her bikini top to expose her back. As she lay soaking up the sun she started to feel drowsy in the quietness and warmth, and felt herself slipping away into sleep.

Dreams came, hazy and somnolent, drifting through her

unconscious mind, scarcely registering.

Except one.

She felt in her dream a shadow falling over her, and then a hand stroking down the bare length of her sun-warm spine with a slow, caressing touch. She murmured something, nestling her face into the cushion. Then dreamless sleep closed over her once more.

Beside the lounge Nikos stood, watching her motionless form. His face was shuttered.

Why had he just done that? Why had he succumbed to the impulse he'd experienced when he'd taken a break from his work, gone out on to the terrace outside his office to get a breath of fresh air, and seen that lissom figure cutting smoothly through the water, the sunlight shimmering on her barely veiled body? He should have gone straight back indoors. Instead, he had gone on watching her, until she'd glanced up and caught him watching.

Abruptly, annoyed that she'd seen him looking at her, he'd gone back to his office. But he hadn't settled. And before ten minutes were up he'd pushed his chair back restlessly and gone out on the terrace again. She'd get out of the pool now, sunning herself.

His eyes had gone to her immediately. To the slender body, the sculpted perfection of her back, the narrow indent of her waist and the gentle swell of her hips, rounding down into long, gazelle legs.

He'd felt himself respond to the image, unable to look away,

annoyed with himself for succumbing. Even more annoyed when he'd found he had started to walk down the flight of steps to the pool level, had strolled across to her, to see her in close-up, and worse, had succumbed to the impulse to lower a hand to her exposed nape, then glide it slowly, leisurely, down the elegant length of her spine.

She was like silk to touch...

He snapped his hand away.

Hell, this was not supposed to be happening. He shouldn't be responding to the damn girl! He was supposed to be ignoring her, being wise, totally wise, to the allure she held for him!

Because anything else was folly. Folly and madness. He knew exactly what Ann Turner was, and despite the beautiful packaging the woman inside was venal and worthless.

If she'd thrown that cheque back in his face—told him that no power on earth could part her from her nephew—then he might have thought better of her! But, no, she hadn't been able to take her eyes from the cheque...

For a long moment he simply stood, looking broodingly down on her sleeping, near naked form.

She really was lovely...so very tempting..

No. Cost him what it would, he must remember the only important thing about Ann Turner—she had sold her nephew to him for cash, and was here only because she was hoping for yet more money from the Theakis coffers. That was all he must keep in his mind.

Everything else was—irrelevant.

Abruptly, he turned away. There was work to be done. On swift, disciplined strides, he went back to his office, closing the doors to the terrace behind him with a decided snap.

Ann's sleep ended abruptly some time later when Ari, energy levels recharged from his nap, emerged with Tina, like a miniature rocket in swimming trunks and armbands. A hectic water playtime ensued, followed by refreshments at the edge of the pool, where they were joined by Ari's grandmother and Cousin Eupheme.

Sitting on a swing seat, Ari beside her, chattering away, Ann found herself thinking that although she had been here only such a short time, she fitted in as easily and naturally as if there had been no dark history keeping her away, parting her from Ari. But she knew exactly why she was feeling comfortably at ease now—because Nikos Theakis wasn't there, casting his malign, intimidating shadow over everything.

She had to face him again over dinner, however. She'd come up from the nursery quarters with Tina, who was not with her fiancé that evening, after helping her put Ari to bed. Once again she'd read him to sleep, and as she'd dropped one last light kiss on his forehead she'd felt a lump form in her throat.

Carla's son. Happy and secure.

Her memories swept back to the days of her own childhood, when her whole universe had been her older sister, to whom she had clung in the frightening, confused times they had both faced.

In those fearful years where would she have been without Carla to hold her, to kiss her goodnight, to be all the family she had? And here, now, she was kissing Carla's son goodnight—who had no mother of his own.

But Ari's happy, she thought, fighting down the lump. He does not miss the parents he never had. He has his grandmother, and his uncle, and a kind and affectionate nanny. And now, for this brief time, he has me.

The briefness of her time with him clutched at her heart like a cold hand. Then anger stabbed in its stead. *Damn Nikos Theakis!* she thought. *Damn his arrogance and his pride and his despicable double-standard that lets him help himself to as many women as he pleases, but allows him to sneer from his golden throne at my sister, who had to make her own way in the world the best she could! He had kept her apart for Andreas, cheated them of what little time they could have had together...*

She sheered her mind away from the dark, familiar thoughts. Recriminations were pointless. The past was gone. Carla was gone, and so was Andreas. Only little Ari remained—and he was happy and content. That was enough. It would have to be.

There was no sign of Nikos Theakis when she and Tina first entered the salon, and Ann was relieved. Tina stepped out on to the terrace with Cousin Eupheme, who was telling her about some new plantings she was planning. Mrs Theakis called Ann to her side, smiling fondly at her.

'I am so glad to see you here at last, my dear. I am more sorry

than I can say that so much time has passed without your taking your rightful place in Ari's life,' Mrs Theakis said sadly. Her beautiful dark eyes shadowed. 'I grieved so much,' she went on slowly, 'when Andreas was killed. It is the greatest tragedy of all—to lose a child. That is why, my dear, I begged you for the care of Andreas' son. Holding his child in my arms, I knew God had given me back my own son. You gave me a gift, that day, that I can never repay—'

She stopped, and Ann could see she was near to tears. Impulsively, she took the older woman's thin hand.

'I gave him to you with all my heart,' she said quietly.

There was a footfall, and a voice from the doorway spoke.

'Gave?' questioned Nikos Theakis.

The single word crawled like ice down Ann's spine.

His mother seemed not to hear him. Her face lightened. 'Nikki!' she exclaimed. 'There you are!' She made to get to her feet, and immediately, attentively, her son was there. But even as he moved, he did not stint from casting a look at Ann that might have withered her to the spot.

For the remainder of the evening, until she could retire, as early as she decently could, Ann did her absolute best to minimise the presence of Nikos Theakis. But when, having finally escaped, she stood on the balcony of her room, gazing out over the beautiful nightscape of gardens, beach and sea, emotion seethed in her.

Why do I let him get to me? Why?

It made her angry with herself that she could not ignore him, could not blank him out. She knew what he thought of Carla, what he thought of her—and why should she care? The soft wind winnowed at her hair, lifting it from her nape, making her give a tiny shiver that was not from cold. Why should she care that when she felt that dark, brooding gaze resting on her resentment and intimidation was not all she felt...?

Why could she feel the power of that dark gaze?

The wind came again, playing over her body, sifting her hair with long, sensuous fingers...

No! Her hands clenched over the balustrade. *No!* She turned away abruptly, heading indoors to make herself ready for bed. But when she lay sleepless, gazing up at the ceiling, that dark, brooding gaze was all that she could see.

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