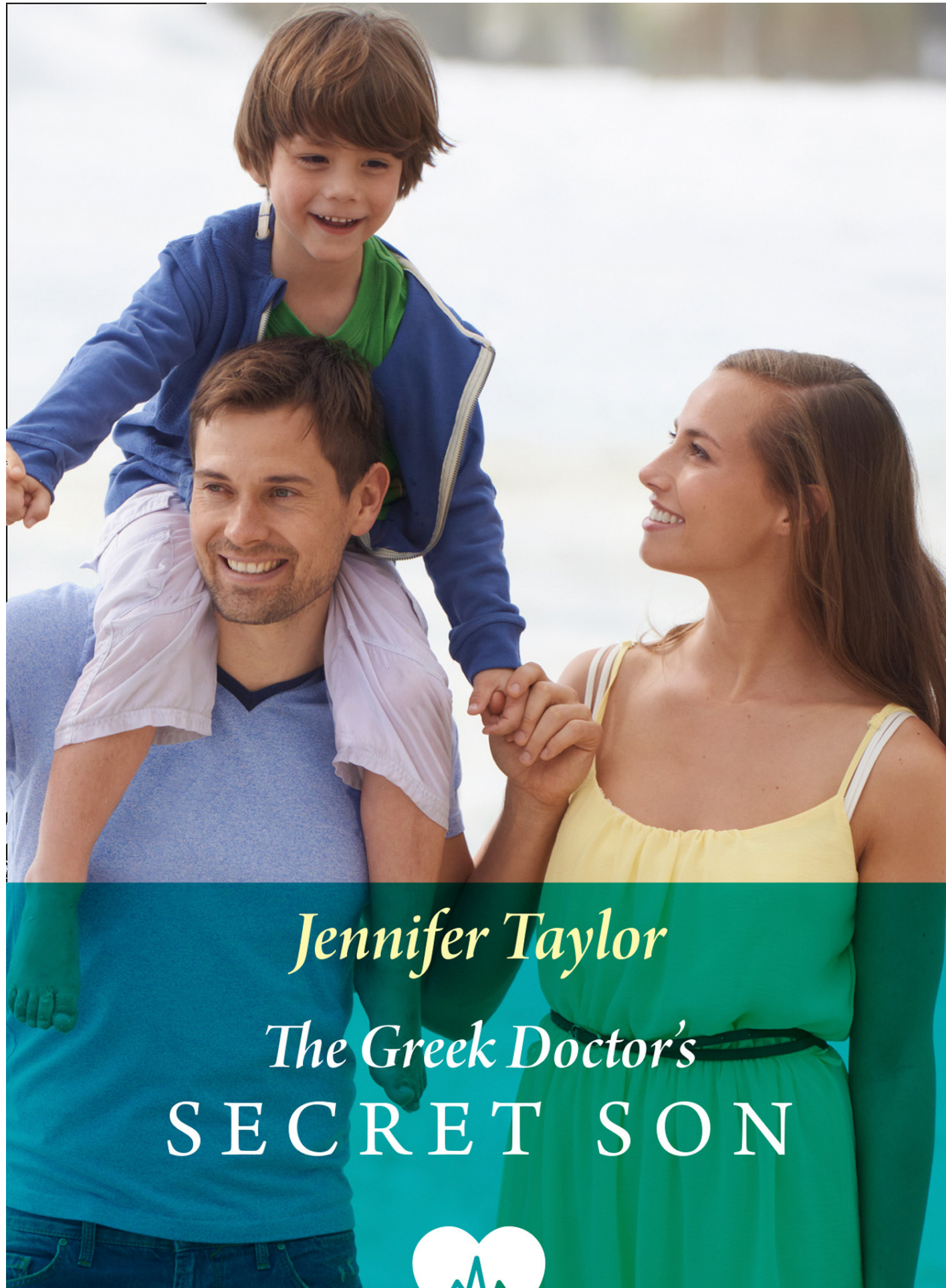




Jennifer Taylor

The Greek Doctor's
SECRET SON



MILLS & BOON
MEDICAL

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Jennifer Taylor

The Greek Doctor's Secret Son

«HarperCollins»

Taylor J.

The Greek Doctor's Secret Son / J. Taylor — «HarperCollins»,
— (Mills & Boon Medical)

Finding his son...and his bride?When Nurse Amy Prentice takes her son to the island of Constantis, to show him his Greek heritage, the last person she expects to see is Dr Nico Leonides – the man who broke her heart...and Jacob's dad!But there's no denying that Nico, as he gets to know Jacob, proves to be a remarkable father. And as he bonds with Amy over their son the love they once shared resurfaces. Now, can Nico find the courage to share his own secret...and finally make them a real family?

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Praise for Jennifer Taylor

‘A superbly written tale of hope, redemption and forgiveness, *The Son that Changed his Life* is a first-class contemporary romance that plumbs deep into the heart of the human spirit and touches the soul.’

—*CataRomance*

‘Powerful, compassionate and poignant, *The Son that Changed his Life* is a brilliant read from an outstanding writer who always delivers!’

—*CataRomance*

‘All ready?’ Nico asked, walking over to them.

His gaze skimmed over her, taking stock of the coral-pink dress she had chosen to wear. Although it wasn't an expensive designer number it suited Amy, he decided, the colour setting off her soft brown hair and adding a glow to her lightly tanned skin.

She looked so young and so lovely as she stood there holding Jacob's hand that he was overwhelmed by a sudden need to touch her. Bending, he kissed her on the cheek, his lips lingering on her warm, sweet-smelling skin as a host of emotions flowed through him.

He cared about her and there was no point pretending that he didn't. He cared about her and, what was more, he always had.

Dear Reader,

The idea for *The Greek Doctor's Secret Son* came to me a couple of years ago, after I had enjoyed a wonderful holiday in the Greek Islands. I decided it would be the ideal setting for my next book, and soon came up with a story and characters who seemed absolutely perfect.

I set about writing Amy and Nico's story with great enthusiasm, only to find halfway through their tale that I had reached a dead end. I simply didn't know where I was heading, or how to do justice to the characters I had created, so I set the book aside and wrote something else. However, at the back of my mind Amy and Nico kept niggling away, demanding that their story should be told.

I returned to the book earlier this year, and lo and behold everything suddenly slotted into place. Some books just need that extra bit of time to allow the characters and their story to develop. This book was one of them!

Best wishes to you all,

Jennifer

To learn more about the setting for this book please visit my blog: jennifertaylorauthor.wordpress.com.

JENNIFER TAYLOR has written for several different Mills & Boon series, but it wasn't until she 'discovered' Medical Romances that she found her true niche. Jennifer loves the blend of modern romance and exciting medical drama. Widowed, she divides her time between homes in Lancashire and the Lake District. Her hobbies include reading, walking, travelling and spending time with her two gorgeous grandchildren.

The Greek Doctor's Secret Son
Jennifer Taylor

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

IT HAD SEEMED like such a good idea back home in England. Now she wasn't so certain any more. What if something went wrong, something she hadn't foreseen? She could end up creating even more problems if she weren't careful.

Amy Prentice could feel her anxiety mounting as she and her eight-year-old son, Jacob, joined the queue for the ferry that would transport them to the small Greek island of Constantis. It had all appeared so straightforward when they had set off that morning. She would take Jacob to Constantis for a holiday and whilst they were there, she would tell him about his father being Greek. At the moment Jacob knew very little about the man who had fathered him apart from the fact that he was a doctor and that he worked in America, which was why they never saw him. Jacob had accepted it without question, or he had done before the other children in his class had started teasing him. Although a lot of them came from single-parent families too, at least they had some contact with their absent parent. Jacob, however, had never met his father and that was all down to her.

Nicolaus Leonides had made his feelings abundantly clear nine years ago. He hadn't been interested in the child Amy had been carrying and there was no reason to imagine that he had changed

his mind. Not after everything she had read about him. Nico had achieved everything he had set out to do, establishing himself as one of the world's foremost cosmetic surgeons. The name Nicolaus Leonides had become a byword for perfection and the fact that only those with a great deal of money could afford to be treated at his clinic in California was immaterial.

No, Nico wouldn't be interested in Jacob's problems even if she was prepared to contact him, which she had no intention of doing. Staying on the island where Nico had spent so much time when he was growing up had been the best way Amy could think of to give Jacob an idea of his paternal heritage. So why did she feel so unsure all of a sudden, so afraid that she might be opening up a whole new can of worms? She hung back, the weight of the suitcase dragging painfully on her arm as she debated the pros and cons of carrying on with her plan. Jacob had already skipped up the gangplank but he stopped when he realised that she wasn't following him.

'Come on, Mum! You're going to miss the ferry if you don't hurry up!'

Amy sighed when she heard the excitement in his voice. Coming on this trip had given Jacob a much-needed boost and it was good to hear him sounding so upbeat for a change. He would be bitterly disappointed if she announced that they were no longer going to the island. She worked such long hours in her job as senior sister on the acute assessment unit at Dalverston General Hospital and saw far too little of him. This trip had been a chance to redress the balance as much as anything else.

Amy took a deep breath then hefted their suitcase up the gangplank. She couldn't give up now that they had come this far. And as for creating problems, well, there was no basis for thinking that. After all, there was no danger of them running into Nico. He was thousands of miles away, adding even more dollars to his bulging coffers!

* * *

Nico broke into a run. The last passengers had already boarded the ferry and the crew were preparing to cast off. If he missed this boat there wouldn't be another one until the following day and he couldn't afford to stay on the mainland overnight. There was an open surgery in the morning which was always packed full of people requiring his attention and he couldn't let them down.

He put on a final spurt and just managed to leap aboard as the crew cast off the final rope. He nodded apologetically when one of the older men remonstrated with him. Maybe he shouldn't have taken such a risk but it felt good to know that he was fit enough to push himself like that. When he'd had that heart attack three years ago, he had honestly thought that was it, that all he could expect from then on was a sedentary existence. It had taken him a while to adjust to the idea of his own mortality but once he had done so, he had realised that he could still enjoy life so long as he was sensible about it.

He had set about making changes to the way he had lived, starting with the biggest issue of all, the amount of stress he was under. Setting up the practice in California and making it a success had been his *raison d'être*. He had worked eighteen-hour days and then spent any free time networking; however his cardiologist had made it clear that he couldn't do that any longer. Not if he wanted to avoid another heart attack.

He had sold the practice and moved back to Greece, taken a year out while he worked out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. It had been hard to imagine doing anything other than what he had devoted himself to for the best part of twenty years and he had struggled to find a new direction. And then one day he had taken a trip to Constantis, the tiny island where he and his sister had enjoyed so many holidays with their grandparents, and he had realised in amazement that he had wanted to live there.

There had been no medical facilities on the island at the time. If anyone was taken ill, they had to be ferried to the mainland for treatment. Nico had contacted the IKA, the body which ran the Greek health service, and they had been cautiously enthusiastic about his proposal to build a clinic providing primary health care as well as a ten-bed hospital unit. It had taken a lot of negotiation but in the end he had been given the go-ahead, mainly, he suspected, because he had been willing to

fund the building costs himself. The Ariana Leonides Clinic had been open for twelve months now and it was thriving.

Nico moved further along the deck, smiling as he passed several people he knew. Although he had a staff of ten working with him at the clinic, he was well known to the islanders and he had to admit that he enjoyed that aspect of the job too. Although he had led a busy social life in California, he had been aware that the invitations had been extended because of his status more than anything else. His name on a guest list had been seen as real kudos by the hostess, something to brag about. He was rich, successful and that was what had mattered most of all.

A sudden commotion made him glance round and he frowned when he saw a crowd starting to gather near the railings. Forcing his way through it, he spotted a girl lying on the deck. She was obviously a tourist from her clothing—tiny denim shorts and an equally skimpy top—and she appeared to be unconscious. There was a young man kneeling beside her and he looked up in panic when Nico approached.

‘I don’t know what happened. One minute she was taking photos with her phone and the next second she just collapsed!’

‘Does she have a history of fainting?’ Nico asked, crouching down beside the girl.

‘I don’t know! We only met a couple of days ago so I have no idea if this is something she does regularly,’ the young man explained.

‘I see. What’s her name?’ Nico asked, checking the girl’s pulse which was extremely rapid.

‘Jane.’ The boy gulped. ‘She’s from Australia although I don’t know where exactly. As I said, I only met her a couple of days ago and we’ve spent most of the time since then partying.’

Nico sighed. Partying implied that the young couple had been drinking and maybe even taking drugs. He had dealt with several such cases recently and the most difficult task of all was getting the youngsters to admit what they had taken so they could receive the appropriate treatment. He stood up and drew the boy aside so they could speak in private.

‘Has she taken something? I’m a doctor and you need to tell me if she has taken any drugs or I can’t help her.’

‘No, no! It’s nothing like that,’ the young man protested but Nico could tell he was lying.

His tone hardened. ‘This isn’t the time to worry about your own skin. If Jane has taken drugs then I need to know what I’m dealing with. To put it bluntly, she could die if she doesn’t receive the appropriate treatment.’

‘I don’t know anything about any drugs!’ the young man claimed. He suddenly spun round, forcing his way through the crowd and disappearing from sight.

Nico cursed under his breath as he knelt down beside the girl again. He couldn’t afford to go after him when he needed to stay here. He rolled her onto her side, working on the assumption that she had taken some kind of narcotic and could start vomiting. She was burning hot and her breathing was shallow which all supported his theory that an overdose of drugs was to blame for her collapse. The problem was finding out exactly what she had taken.

‘My mummy’s a nurse,’ piped up a small voice. ‘She can help make the lady better—shall I get her?’

Nico glanced up and saw a boy of about eight years of age watching him. He had light brown hair and dark brown eyes and for some reason he looked strangely familiar... He blanked out the thought and smiled at the child. It would be a huge help if he had someone to assist him, especially if Jane’s heart stopped beating, as could very well happen.

‘Yes, please. I could do with an extra pair of hands.’

The child nodded gravely then hurried away. Nico turned back to the girl, checking her pulse once more as well as her breathing. Neither seemed to have improved but there again they didn’t seem to have got any worse either which was something to be grateful for.

‘Jacob said you needed help.’

The clear tones cut through the babble of voices and Nico felt his heart come to a dead stop. He looked up, squinting against the glare of the sun. It couldn't be her, he told himself, his gaze resting on the slender figure standing over him, not here, not now, not on this ferry. It was too big a coincidence to imagine that fate had brought them together after all this time.

'You!'

The word exploded from her lips yet she hadn't shouted; it was said so quietly, in fact, that only he could have heard her. Nico rose to his feet, his breath coming in laboured spurts as he tried to make sense of what was happening. He regretted very little that had happened in his life simply because he had worked out what he had wanted and how he would achieve it too. Every decision he had made had been thought through and deliberated upon. Except one. He had never planned for her to get pregnant.

'Amy.'

Her name flowed so easily from his lips that it shocked him all over again. It was years since he had seen her and yet there was no hesitation about recalling who she was. His eyes skimmed over her, taking stock of the light brown hair falling to her shoulders, the brilliant gleam of her green eyes, the slender curves of her body. She didn't look a day older than the last time he had seen her, he realised in amazement. It was hard to believe that all those years had passed...

'Do you know what's wrong with her?'

The abruptness of the question brought him back to earth with a bump. Nico crouched down beside the girl again, doing his best to steer his thoughts in the direction they needed to go. He had a patient who required his help and this wasn't the time to start thinking about how much he regretted what had gone on between him and Amy Prentice.

'I suspect it may be a drug overdose,' he said, relieved that he was still able to function on a professional level. He nodded towards the girl's backpack. 'Can you take a look in there and see if there's anything that may give us a clue as to exactly what she's taken?'

'Of course.'

Amy knelt down and unzipped the bag, trying her best not to let him see that her hands were shaking. Meeting Nico like this had been a massive shock and she could feel the aftermath of it rippling through her like a series of seismic explosions. It was difficult to maintain her control but she had to do so for Jacob's sake. There was no way on this earth that she wanted her son to guess that this man was his father!

A moan slid from her lips and she hurriedly turned it into a cough when she saw Nico glance at her. She turned away, focusing on the contents of the girl's bag. There were all the usual items: T-shirts, underwear, toiletries. And then right at the bottom, tucked into a corner, she found what they were looking for. Holding up the small glass bottle, she showed it to Nico.

'GBL if I'm not mistaken. The bottle's half full though there's no way of knowing how much she's taken today.'

'Right.' Nico's tone was grim. 'At least we know what we're dealing with although that doesn't guarantee that we'll be able to help her.'

Amy nodded. Gammabutyrolactone, GBL for short, had become increasingly popular with the student population. Even a small dose could have a powerful sedative effect and if mixed with alcohol could be extremely dangerous, often leading to unconsciousness or even death. The girl would need immediate treatment if she was to have any chance of pulling through.

'What's that, Mummy? Is it medicine to make the lady better?'

Amy tried not to show her dismay that Jacob was witness to what had happened. He was only eight and she wanted to protect him from things like this for as long as possible. She opened her mouth to explain that it was nothing for him to worry about but Nico beat her to it.

'It's not medicine. Medicine makes people better but this is something very different,' he explained quietly. 'Something she shouldn't have taken.'

‘Oh, you mean drugs.’ Jacob nodded sagely. ‘They told us about them in school. I don’t know why anyone wants to take them when they make them ill, do you?’

‘No, I don’t.’

Nico smiled up at the boy and Amy felt her heart turn over in fear. The resemblance between them at that moment was so marked that she couldn’t believe Nico hadn’t noticed it. Although Jacob had her colour hair, he had inherited Nico’s olive skin and chestnut-brown eyes. Even his nose was a smaller, childish version of Nico’s, arrow straight without even the hint of a tilt to it. It was all she could do not to whisk Jacob away and hide him so that Nico would never guess he was his son. After all, he didn’t deserve a son like Jacob, did he? Not after what he had said when she had suffered that miscarriage.

It’s for the best, he had stated coldly when she had told him that she had lost the baby. They had never planned on having a child and the fact that she had lost it made things simpler.

Even though Amy had known from the outset that Nico hadn’t been overjoyed when she had realised that she was pregnant, she had been deeply hurt. They had met at the hospital where Amy was completing her nursing degree. She was in her final year while Nico was on the exchange programme. The hospital was a centre of excellence in the field of plastic surgery and Nico had taken up the offer of a consultant’s post there.

They had both attended a fundraising event one evening. It had been very well supported and the room had been crowded. She had, quite literally, bumped into him and managed to spill her drink all down the front of his jacket. She had been absolutely mortified but Nico had taken it remarkably well, brushing aside her apologies and insisting on fetching her another drink. They had got talking and one thing had led to another; he had asked her out for dinner, she had accepted. After a couple of months, she had been more than a little in love with him and had thought—hoped!—that he had felt the same way. However, his reaction first to her pregnancy and then to the miscarriage had soon put paid to that idea. Amy had realised that all she had ever been to him was a pleasant little interlude, someone to spend time with while he was in London, someone to sleep with. He definitely didn’t want to tie himself to her with or without a child.

That was why she had ended their relationship. She simply couldn’t bear to carry on seeing him, knowing how he really felt about her. It was also the reason why she had decided not to tell him when she had discovered a couple of months later that she was still pregnant, that she must have been carrying twins and had miscarried only one of them. Nico had finished his stint on the exchange programme by then and had left London and moved to Los Angeles to further hone his skills. Although she could have tracked him down if she had wanted to, there hadn’t seemed any point. Nico hadn’t wanted her or their child, and he had made it clear.

He probably still wouldn’t want them now either, Amy thought bitterly. Which meant that she would need to be very careful. Maybe she had coped with having her heart broken but she wouldn’t allow the same thing to happen to Jacob. She took a deep breath. She couldn’t afford to panic, not when she had to make sure that Nico didn’t find out that Jacob was his son!

CHAPTER TWO

NICO USED THE ferry’s radio to contact the clinic so an ambulance was waiting when they docked at Constantis’s tiny, picturesque harbour. He supervised the transfer himself, wanting to get the girl back to the clinic as quickly as possible. She was still unconscious and the longer she remained so, the greater the risk that she might not recover.

Once the ambulance was on its way he went to fetch his car, pausing when he saw Amy and the child disembarking. He couldn’t just drive off without speaking to her, could he? Even if they had been total strangers, at the very least he would have to thank her for helping him, and they were a long way from being strangers. Heat poured through his veins as he found himself recalling the time they had spent together in London. Even though it was years ago, he could remember only too clearly how he had felt when they had made love. Amy had touched him in ways that no woman had ever done.

The thought shocked him, unsettled him, made him feel all sorts of things, and that was another first. He had learned to contain his emotions at an early age and preferred to keep his feelings under wraps. To find himself feeling so churned up wasn't a pleasant experience and he did his best to get a grip. Maybe Amy had aroused feelings he had never experienced before or since but that was all in the past and a lot had happened in the interim. His gaze moved to the boy at her side and his mouth thinned. How old was he? Eight? Nine? Whichever it was, the child was proof that Amy hadn't wasted any time getting over him.

That thought accompanied him as he made his way over to them. He forced himself to smile even though it wasn't as easy as it should have been. The realisation that Amy had found someone to replace him so quickly didn't sit comfortably with him, funnily enough. He found himself recalling her distress when she had suffered that miscarriage and frowned. Had that been a key factor? Had she felt the need to replace not only him but the child she had lost? It made a certain kind of sense and yet he couldn't quite believe it. Amy had never struck him as the kind of woman who moved from one man to another without a great deal of thought.

'Thank you for your help,' he said formally, determined to get back on track. All this soul searching was unsettling and he needed to call a halt. He glanced at the suitcase at her feet. 'I take it that you are staying on the island?'

'That's right. We're staying at the Hotel Marina, right on the beach. We're really looking forward to it, aren't we, Jake?' She smiled at the child although Nico saw a flash of something that looked almost like fear cross her face.

'I'm sure you will enjoy it,' he said politely, wondering what had caused it. He brushed aside the thought, determined that he wasn't going to be sidetracked. 'My sister and I spent many happy holidays here with our grandparents when we were children.'

'Is that why you're here now?' she said quickly. 'For a holiday?'

'No. I opened a clinic on the island twelve months ago and I live here now.'

'Really?'

'Yes.' He shrugged. 'I'm very fortunate to live and work in such a beautiful place.'

'You are, although I don't imagine that was the main reason you set up a clinic here.' She gave a soft little laugh and Nico felt his skin prickle when he heard the contempt it held. 'No doubt it's the ideal place to tap into the lucrative European market. There's a huge demand for cosmetic surgery procedures from across the whole of Europe, I believe, and travelling to Greece must be a lot quicker than travelling to the USA.'

'The Ariana Leonides Clinic doesn't offer cosmetic surgery procedures. Its aim is to provide primary health care for locals and tourists.' He shrugged when he saw from her expression that he had surprised her. For some reason he couldn't explain, he knew that he wanted to set matters straight. 'There's also a ten-bed hospital unit for minor surgery cases.'

'I had no idea...' She broke off and shrugged. 'It all sounds very different from what I would have expected, but there again it's been a long time since I saw you, Nico. There's bound to have been changes in your life.'

'In yours too,' he agreed, looking pointedly at the child standing beside her.

'Indeed.' She gave him a brief smile but once again he saw that flash of fear cross her face and it intrigued him. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her what was wrong when she picked up her suitcase. 'Anyway, I won't keep you. I'm sure you must be anxious to check how your patient is doing. It was nice to see you again, Nico. Take care.'

With that, she made her way to the taxi rank. There were only three taxis on the island and as luck would have it, there happened to be one free. Nico watched her hand her case to Aristotle, the driver, then usher the boy into the back of the cab. It roared away in a cloud of exhaust fumes, leaving him wishing that he had said something, done something, at least made arrangements for them to

meet again. Even though he knew it was crazy, he couldn't help feeling, well, bereft as he watched the taxi disappear around the headland...

Nico shook his head to rid himself of that foolish notion. Going over to his car, he got in and started the engine. He had everything he needed and wanted. He had made up his mind a long time ago that he would never commit himself to a relationship. He was too much like his father to take that risk. Maybe he had made a lot of changes to his life since his heart attack, but, basically, he was still the same person he had always been. One couldn't escape one's genes, after all. No, getting involved with Amy was out of the question even if she had been willing, which he very much doubted.

As for having a family, well, that was another non-starter. To put it bluntly, he refused to subject any child to the kind of upbringing he'd had. That was why he had been so dismayed when Amy had announced that she was pregnant. He had kept thinking about his own childhood, remembering how he had felt growing up as the son of Christos Leonides. Although his father might be revered by the business community even today, few people knew what he was really like.

Christos Leonides was a cold and ruthless man who had always put his business interests first and had cared nothing for his wife and his children. While neither Nico nor his sister, Electra, had been physically mistreated when they were growing up, they still bore the mental scars of their father's indifference. Their mother had done her best while she'd been alive to compensate for it but it had had a lasting effect on both of them, especially on Nico. Although Electra seemed to have come to terms with the past since she had married and had her own family, Nico had been unable to rid himself of the fear that he would turn out exactly the same as his father.

That was why he had ruled out the idea of having children and why it had been a relief when Amy had miscarried their baby, even though part of him had grieved for their lost child. He had been so shaken when he had realised it too that he had buried his feelings beneath a veneer of disinterest and it didn't make him feel good to know that he had hurt Amy. Badly. She had suffered one of the worst experiences any woman could go through and he had made it so much worse by pretending that he hadn't cared.

Nico's heart was heavy as he set off for the clinic. He didn't regret many things in his life, but he regretted that.

* * *

Amy finished unpacking and stowed the suitcase in the corner out of the way. Glancing around the small, whitewashed bedroom, she felt some of the tension start to seep out of her. Meeting Nico had been a shock but the upside was that she had got through the experience relatively unscathed. She had often wondered how she would react if they met again, but surprisingly she didn't feel much different from normal. Although her heart was beating a shade faster than usual, it certainly wasn't racing, and her breathing was only the tiniest bit laboured. She was functioning perfectly well and if that wasn't proof that she was over him then she had no idea what was.

'Can we go to the beach now, Mum?'

Amy glanced round when Jacob came racing into the room. She had allowed him to explore the small hotel where they were staying while she unpacked, although he had been under strict instructions not to leave the building. Now she smiled at him. 'I can't see why not. Do you want to put your swimming trunks on? We may as well have a swim while we're at it.'

'Yes!' Jacob punched the air in delight as he ran over to the wardrobe and took out his swimming trunks. Stripping off his clothes, he put them on and raced towards the door.

'Hold it right there, young man.' Amy picked up the bottle of sunscreen, ignoring his grimace as she started to apply it to his skin. 'There's no point pulling a face. I told you before we came here that you have to use sunscreen before you go outside. The sun is a lot hotter here than it is at home and you don't want to get burned, do you?'

'I bet he doesn't wear sunscreen,' Jacob muttered, screwing up his face as she applied a layer of cream to his nose.

'Who doesn't?' Amy asked, busily rubbing it in.

'The man on the ferry, that doctor—Nico, you called him.' Jacob tilted his head to the side and looked questioningly at her. 'How come you knew his name, Mum? He knew yours too 'cos he called you Amy, so have you met him before?'

'I...erm... Yes. But it was a long time ago.' Amy screwed the top back on the bottle, feeling her hands trembling. She had forgotten how observant Jacob was and she should have realised that he would pick up on something like that.

'Where did you meet him? I thought you said that you hadn't been to this island before,' Jacob continued, making it clear that he didn't intend to let the subject drop.

'I haven't.' Amy picked up her beach bag, making a great production out of checking that she had everything they needed: towels, sunglasses, water...

'So you met him somewhere else?' Jacob persisted. 'Was it at the hospital? Did he used to work in Dalverston?'

'Not Dalverston, no. We met in London while I was studying to be a nurse,' Amy explained, hoping that would satisfy him.

'London? That's where you met my daddy, wasn't it? Does he know him?' Jacob's voice was filled with excitement. 'Maybe he has some photos of my daddy or knows where he lives. Can we ask him, Mum? Please!'

'Jacob, stop it! Nico—I mean that man—doesn't know anything about your daddy.' Amy took a deep breath, struggling to stay calm, but it wasn't easy. Maybe it wasn't a total lie; after all Nico had no idea that he was Jacob's father. Nevertheless, it didn't make her feel good to have to fudge the truth and she hurriedly changed the subject. 'Now come along. No more questions. Let's go and have that swim. Last one in the water is a lazy monkey!'

Jacob responded to the challenge as she had hoped he would, racing out to the terrace that led onto the garden. Amy followed more slowly, needing to get herself together so that he wouldn't suspect anything was amiss. She sighed. Jacob had become increasingly curious about his father since the other children had started teasing him and it was only to be expected when he knew so little about him. Jacob had never seen a photograph of Nico, never been told anything about his father's background, and it was all her doing too.

She had blanked out that period in her life because it had been too painful to think about it. However, she couldn't continue blanking it out, certainly couldn't refuse to answer Jacob's questions for ever. At some point she would have to tell him about the man who had fathered him, which was why she had decided to bring him to Constantis. Giving Jacob a sense of his true identity was the first step, she had reasoned, and the rest would follow later. However, she was very aware that things might happen sooner than she had anticipated now that Nico was on the scene. Should she get it all over and done with? she wondered suddenly. Tell Nico who Jacob was and then tell Jacob that Nico was his father?

Amy immediately dismissed the idea. She couldn't tell Jacob that Nico was his father until she was sure of Nico's reaction and even then she might have to keep the truth from him. After all, there was no reason to believe that Nico would welcome the news that he had a son, was there? The one thing she wouldn't risk was Jacob getting hurt if Nico rejected him, as he might very well do.

* * *

'We'll keep her here overnight. She may need to be transferred to the mainland tomorrow but it's too risky to move her at the moment. Can you keep an eye on her, please? She may have recovered consciousness but she's not out of the woods yet.'

Nico smiled his thanks when Sophia nodded. As acting sister on the hospital unit, Sophia Papadopolous had proved her capabilities more than once. He was planning on making her position permanent and only hoped that she would agree. Sophia had returned to Constantis after a long stint of working in Italy. Although she hadn't said anything to him, he had heard via the clinic's

redoubtable grapevine that she had returned following the break-up of a relationship. Sophia had been disappointed in love and had come home whereas he had come here for the good of his health. Everyone had their reasons for being on the island, it seemed, even Amy. Had she come here simply for a holiday? Or had there been another reason for her visit? From what she had said, she'd had no idea that he was living here so that couldn't have been a factor and yet it seemed strange that she should have chosen this island rather than one of the more popular tourist destinations.

He tried to dismiss the unsettling thought as he went to his office and put through a call to the Australian Embassy in Athens. He had found Jane's passport tucked into the pocket of her haversack and now had her full name and address. He spoke to one of the attachés who promised to contact the girl's parents. According to her passport, Jane Chivers was eighteen years of age and although legally an adult, Nico guessed that her parents would want to know what had happened to her. In their shoes, he would have done.

Nico frowned as he ended the call. It was the kind of thought that would never have occurred to him before and yet it had appeared, fully fledged, in his mind. Why? Had it anything to do with meeting Amy and her son? Had it somehow triggered a reaction to see the boy and wonder what would have happened if she hadn't lost their baby? He sensed it was true and it alarmed him. He didn't want to go down that route. It was pointless. Pointless and strangely upsetting too.

Nico left his office and went to check that there was nothing that needed his attention before he went home. There had been an antenatal clinic that afternoon but Elena Delmartes, one of their most experienced doctors, had dealt with it and there had been no problems. Offering a comprehensive health care package to the islanders had been his aim when he had set up the clinic and he knew that the women appreciated not having to travel to the mainland for their antenatal care. Although most still preferred to have their babies delivered at home by the local midwives, they came to the clinic for their check-ups. It was a system that worked extremely well. According to the latest figures, very few women had missed an appointment at the clinic which certainly hadn't been the case when they had needed to travel to the mainland. It meant that every baby born on the island had an increased chance of being born healthy.

He drove home, taking his time as he travelled along the familiar route. Once his proposal for the clinic had been given the green light, he had set about finding himself a place to live. Although a few luxury villas had sprung up along the coast, he had preferred a more rural location and had opted to search the villages tucked into the foothills of the mountains for somewhere suitable. He had come across the tumbledown old farmhouse at the end of a particularly long day and had fallen instantly in love with it. With views of the mountains to the rear and a sweeping view of the sea from the front, it had been exactly what he had been searching for. He had immediately put in an offer then had to wait months while the various members of the family who owned it were contacted and persuaded to sell him their shares.

He had taken possession twelve months ago and there was still a lot to do, but he had discovered to his surprise how much he enjoyed working on the property. There was something deeply satisfying about crafting and replacing the old worn stone. It was a little like performing cosmetic surgery, he often thought; he was taking something less than perfect and improving its appearance.

Nico parked the car and stood for a moment, drinking in the view. The air was ripe with the heady smell of the vines that grew in the nearby fields and he inhaled appreciatively. There was a good crop of grapes this year so maybe he should think about making his own wine. It would be a treat to sit out here next year, sipping a glass of wine that he had produced himself. He closed his eyes, picturing the scene: the sun turning the sea blood red as it sank below the horizon; the sky darkening before the first stars appeared; the woman seated beside him, raising her glass and smiling at him...

Nico's eyes flew open. Hurrying inside, he set about his nightly routine—shower, change of clothes, make himself a meal—all the things he did every night when he got home. However, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't erase that final, disturbing picture, the one of Amy seated beside

him, smiling at him with such warmth in her eyes. Maybe it was a long time since he had seen her but it didn't feel like it, not when he could conjure up her image in the blink of an eye. However, the most worrying thing of all was that now her image was in his head, he knew that he was going to have the devil of a job getting rid of it.

CHAPTER THREE

'EFHARISTO. THANK YOU. That was delicious.'

Amy smiled her thanks as she and Jacob got up from the table. Breakfast had been simple but delicious: thick creamy yoghurt with honey and fresh figs followed by a selection of tiny sweet pastries. It proved that she had been right to choose this small, family-run hotel. Jacob would gain a much better idea of the Greek way of life by staying here than he would have done if they had stayed in a hotel that was part of an international chain. Hopefully, it would help him develop a better understanding of his paternal heritage.

She sighed as she followed Jacob out of the dining room. Maybe he would gain an insight into the Greek side of his heritage but unless she was prepared to tell him that Nico was his father what would it achieve? Jacob needed something solid to give him a true sense of his identity—photographs, meetings, conversations. At the moment his father was some shadowy figure he had never met and it wasn't enough to arm him against the taunts that had made his life such a misery lately. He needed proof that he had a father and the only way to give him that was by introducing him to Nico.

Amy was still worrying about it as they made their way to the beach. Although it was still early, the sun was strong so she went through the routine of applying sunscreen to Jacob as well as to herself. There was another English family staying at the hotel but the parents didn't seem concerned when their two children ran off to play before they could apply sunscreen to them. The mother shrugged when she noticed Amy watching.

'They hate having to use sun cream. I have the devil of a job putting it on them.' The woman laughed as she dropped the bottle into her beach bag. 'Mind you, I'm a bit like that myself. There doesn't seem much point coming all this way to get a tan and then coating yourself with that stuff, does there?'

Amy smiled, although she disagreed wholeheartedly with what the other woman had said. She had seen too many cases of people being badly burnt after they had failed to take adequate precautions even in England. She checked that Jacob was playing safely in the shallows with the other children then took her book out of her bag. It was the latest mystery by a favourite author but it failed to hold her attention. She kept thinking about Nico and what she should do, whether she should tell him who Jacob was or not. It all depended on how he would react and that was something she couldn't foretell. She sighed. If it was anything like the way he had reacted when she had miscarried Jacob's twin, it would be better to keep Jacob's identity to herself.

The morning flew past. Amy spent some time helping Jacob build a sandcastle then decided it was time they got out of the sun. It was almost noon and the sun was at its peak so she opted to take him for an early lunch. Once they had put on dry T-shirts, they strolled around the headland and discovered a small taverna in the next bay. There was a shady terrace overlooking the beach where a couple of local fishing boats were unloading their morning's catch and she elected to sit out there, ordering a Greek salad for herself and a toasted sandwich for Jacob. They had just started to eat when Nico appeared.

Amy felt her heart leap into her throat when she saw him standing at the foot of the steps leading up to the terrace. It was obvious that he had come straight from the clinic because he was wearing a lightweight suit with an open-necked white shirt that made his olive-toned skin look more bronzed than ever. With those deep chestnut-brown eyes, that crisp black hair and those clean-cut features, he was an arresting sight and she noticed several of the women in the restaurant looking at him with interest.

Amy took a quick breath as her gaze ran over him, comparing how he looked now to how he had looked nine years ago. He was definitely thinner, she decided, thinner and even more commanding. Nico had always projected an air of confidence, of authority, of being completely in charge of himself, and it was more apparent than ever these days. He looked exactly what he was, a handsome, successful man in his prime, and the thought scared her. Once Nico found out about Jacob then she wouldn't be in control of the situation any longer. Nico would try to take charge and that was the last thing she wanted. How could she be sure that Nico would put Jacob's needs first? How could she guarantee that Jacob wouldn't get hurt?

It was that last thought which frightened her most of all, although she did have other concerns, ones which she refused to dwell on. How it would affect her to have Nico back in her life wasn't the issue.

Nico felt his breath catch when he saw Amy sitting on the terrace. Just for a moment he was tempted to turn around and leave only that would have been far too revealing. Did he really want her to think that he had a problem about seeing her? he thought as he made himself walk up the steps. Of course not! He stopped by her table, dredging up a smile that he hoped appeared more natural than it felt.

'Hello again. I see you've discovered my favourite lunchtime haunt.'

'I had no idea that you came here,' she snapped.

'Of course not.' Nico had to stop himself taking a step back when he heard the defensive note in her voice. It was obvious that he had touched a nerve, although he wasn't sure which nerve it was. That remained to be seen. 'It's just a happy coincidence.'

He thrust that tantalising thought aside. Digging into the reason for her touchiness would be a mistake. He needed to remain detached, aloof, distant if he wasn't to find himself being drawn into a situation he would regret. He and Amy Prentice had had an affair—that was the long and the short of it. He hadn't made her any promises, hadn't wanted anything more than they'd had. If Amy hadn't got pregnant then he probably wouldn't even have remembered her name...

Would he?

The question buzzed around inside his head like a pesky wasp around a jam pot but he swatted it away. He didn't intend to go down that route—it was a waste of time. Maybe he hadn't thought about her for a long time but he was very aware that somewhere in the depths of his mind, she had occupied a small space all of her own. Amy and the miscarriage had been a milestone in his life, even though he hated the idea. It implied that she had a hold over him and that was something he didn't appreciate. He preferred to live his life on his own terms and not have to account to anyone else for his actions.

'So how are you enjoying your holiday so far?' he asked, pulling out a chair. There were several empty tables he could have chosen but he was determined not to make an issue out of this encounter. The more significance he bestowed on it, the more important it would become.

'We've only been here for a day,' she shot back then flushed when she realised how rude that must have sounded. Her tone softened as she glanced at her son. 'It's been great so far, though, hasn't it, Jacob?'

'Uh-huh,' the boy mumbled, his mouth crammed full of sandwich.

Nico laughed with genuine amusement. 'I'll take that as a yes. Obviously, Jacob has worked up an appetite, so what did you get up to this morning?'

'We went to the beach for a swim and then made a sandcastle,' Amy told him, spearing a juicy black olive with her fork.

Nico looked away as she popped it into her mouth, not proof against the feelings it aroused as he watched her lips close around the ripe fruit. He took a deep breath as he picked up the menu and studied it. There was no point thinking about Amy's beautiful mouth and the kisses they had shared. It was never going to happen again purely because he didn't intend to put himself in the position of kissing her. Not if he had any sense! As he had already discovered, Amy had the power to disrupt

his life and the last thing he needed was her turning it upside down. He mustn't forget that the main reason he had moved to Constantis was for his health and he didn't need the stress.

'Dr Leonides, how lovely to see you!'

Maria Michaelis, who ran the café with her husband, Stavros, greeted him warmly as she came to take his order. Maria had been one of his first patients when he had opened the clinic. She was diabetic and had had many problems over the years, including the biggest one, her inability to get pregnant. However, after a change of medication, everything had been sorted out, although it was a little embarrassing that she now believed he was some kind of a miracle worker.

'Kalimera, Maria.' Nico stood up and kissed her. 'How are you today?'

'Very well, Doctor, thank you.' She patted her swollen tummy. 'This little one is certainly keeping me on my toes.'

'You mustn't do too much,' he admonished her, sitting down. He glanced at Amy, wanting to include her in the conversation as it would appear more normal that way. And keeping everything normal was vitally important, he suddenly decided. 'Maria is seven months pregnant with her first child and I keep telling her that she should rest more.'

'How wonderful! Congratulations.'

Amy smiled at the other woman and Nico felt his heart skip a beat when he realised how lovely she looked. With her light brown hair pulled back into a ponytail and her face free of make-up, she looked far too young to be the mother of the child sitting beside her. His gaze moved to Jacob and he frowned when once again he was struck by a sense of recognition. Had he met Jacob's father? Was he someone Nico had worked with in London perhaps? All of sudden he realised that he wanted to know about the man who had supplanted him in Amy's affections and fathered her child.

'Do you know if it's a boy or a girl yet? Or have you decided to wait and see when it's born?'

Amy was still talking to Maria and Nico forced himself to concentrate on the conversation. Maybe he did want answers but this wasn't the time to start asking questions. He preferred to do it when he and Amy were alone. A shiver danced down his spine at the thought of them spending time alone together but he ruthlessly suppressed it. He wasn't going down that route either!

'I wanted to wait but Stavros couldn't bear to.' Maria laughed as she patted her tummy. 'We've waited such a long time for this baby, you see, and Stavros had to know what it was. It's a boy and we're going to call him Nicolaus after the doctor because without his help we would never have had the chance to become parents. Dr Leonides did far more than we could have hoped.'

Amy smiled politely when Nico made some dismissive remark about only doing his job but she had to admit that she was surprised. Although the Nico she remembered had been an excellent doctor—thorough, committed, focused—he had never really related to his patients on a personal level. However, from what Maria had said, that was no longer the case.

The thought was intriguing. Amy had no idea what had brought about such a change in his attitude but she knew that she wanted to find out. She glanced at him, studying the strong lines of his profile as he gave Maria his order. Had something happened to make him reassess his outlook on life? He had been driven by the need to succeed when she had known him, by a desire to prove himself at the very highest levels, and yet she sensed that it was no longer the case. Nico might look much the same on the outside but inside he was a very different person, it seemed.

It was a disturbing thought when it made her see that she didn't know him as well as she had thought she did. By the time his lunch arrived, Amy had had enough of thinking about it. She and Jacob had finished eating so she asked Maria for their bill. Nico looked up and frowned.

'Please. You must allow me to pay for your lunch.'

'Oh, no, I really can't let you do that,' Amy protested, taking her purse out of her bag. 'If you can just let me know how much I owe you,' she said, glancing at Maria. Maria looked uncertainly from her to Nico, obviously unsure what to do, and Nico sighed as he put down his knife and fork.

‘Let’s not make an issue of it. If you prefer to pay your own bill then it’s fine. I’m not going to argue with you, Amy.’

Amy flushed, realising how churlish it must have sounded to refuse his offer. She gave a little shrug as she put her purse back in her bag. ‘Then thank you. It’s very kind of you, isn’t it, Jacob?’

Jacob nodded, although she could tell that he was growing bored and wanted to leave. Maria said something to Nico and Amy saw him frown as he glanced at Jacob and shook his head. Although Amy had no idea what Maria had said, judging by Nico’s expression it was something that bothered him. All of a sudden she was struck by a need to get away. Maybe she was overreacting but there was something about the way Nico was looking at Jacob that had set all her internal alarm bells ringing. Grasping hold of Jacob’s hand, she led him to the steps, pausing reluctantly when Nico called her name.

‘Yes?’

‘I thought you’d like to know that the girl we treated on the ferry has regained consciousness.’ He shrugged but his gaze was oddly intent as it travelled from her to Jacob again.

‘Oh. Right. That’s good, isn’t it?’ Amy replied, her whole body trembling as fear overwhelmed her. Had Maria noticed the resemblance between Nico and Jacob? she wondered sickly. Noticed it and remarked on it too?

She shot a glance at her son and felt her breath catch. Even though she had been at such pains to protect him from the sun, his skin had started to tan, making the resemblance between him and Nico all the more apparent. It didn’t take a genius to see it or to realise that Jacob’s chestnut-brown eyes were the mirror image of Nico’s and that his nose was an exact, albeit smaller, replica of the man’s. Anyone looking at them could tell they were related and all of a sudden she didn’t know what to do.

Amy’s heart was racing as she muttered a hasty goodbye and hurried Jacob down the steps. She could try to brazen it out, of course, deny it if Nico asked her if he was Jacob’s father, but deep down she knew it would be a waste of time. Nico was already suspicious and now all she could do was try to minimise the damage it could cause. No matter what happened, she had to protect Jacob and if that meant them leaving the island then that’s what they must do.

* * *

Nico returned to the clinic after lunch although he had intended to take the rest of the day off. There were no surgeries scheduled that afternoon and he had been planning to enjoy some much-needed down time. However, meeting Amy had aroused so many questions that he knew he wouldn’t rest until he found out the answers to them. He went straight to his office and closed the door, letting the silence wash over him in the hope that it would help to clear his head, but it didn’t work. One question kept hammering away in his mind: was it possible that Amy’s son was his child?

He sat down at his desk, struggling to make sense of the idea. It wasn’t easy when he had thought that Amy had miscarried the baby they had conceived. Admittedly, it had been very early on in her pregnancy—barely six weeks, in fact—and she had refused to go to hospital afterwards, claiming that early miscarriages were extremely common and that there was nothing anyone could do. And yet as soon as Maria had asked him if Jacob was related to him, he had seen the resemblance for himself.

Closing his eyes, he pictured the boy’s face, examining in his mind’s eye each and every feature from the child’s deep brown eyes, which were the exact same colour as his, to the shape of his nose, which was undeniably a Leonides nose. His sister, Electra, had three boys and each of his nephews had inherited the family nose. Why, they had even joked about it—he and Electra often remarking that the children could never deny their heritage with noses like that!

Nico opened his eyes and stared blankly across the room. Everything pointed towards the fact that Jacob was his son but how could he be? How could Amy have given birth to a child she had lost...unless she had lied about the miscarriage? Was that the answer? Had she deliberately misled him? Claimed that she had lost their child so she could bring it up on her own? Used it as an excuse to get him out of the picture? Maybe that had been her intention from the outset—she had wanted a

baby but had not wanted him. He knew there were women like that, women who wanted to raise a child without any input from the father, yet he couldn't see Amy doing that. She had been too open, too honest, too transparent to have devised such a scheme—or so he had thought.

Anger roared through him as he realised that he really didn't know what she was capable of. He had accepted her at face value, accepted her kindness, her sweetness, her apparent lack of guile. But what if it had all been a front, a means to an end, and the end result was the child she had wanted? What if he had been nothing more than a sperm donor in her eyes, an unwitting one, granted, but no more than that when it came down to it? He couldn't bear to think that he had been used that way, used and then discarded, but what other conclusion could he reach when all the evidence pointed towards it being true?

Nico shot to his feet, his anger soaring as he strode to the door. Amy had a lot of explaining to do!

* * *

Amy had just finished her shower when there was a knock on the bedroom door. Jacob was lying on his bed, playing on his games console, so once she had wrapped a towel around herself, she went to answer it. It was Helena, who ran the hotel with her husband, Philo. She smiled apologetically when she saw Amy.

'Kalispera. I am sorry to disturb you but there is someone asking to see you.'

Amy felt a rush of fear swamp her. There was only one person who would seek her out and she wasn't sure if she was ready to face Nico yet. Not until she had worked out what she was going to say to him.

'Oh, right. Thank you.' She glanced down and shrugged, playing for time. 'I'm not really fit to see anyone right now, I'm afraid.'

'Do not worry.' Helena smiled reassuringly. 'I have shown the doctor into the sitting room and given him something to drink. There is nobody in there so you will be able to talk in private once you are dressed.'

Amy closed the door as Helena went on her way. She couldn't think of anything she wanted to do less than have a private conversation with Nico but what choice did she have? Knowing him, he wouldn't give up and go away if she failed to appear. No, he would be far more likely to come to her room and that was something she wanted to avoid. The last thing she needed was Jacob overhearing their conversation.

Gathering up her clothes, she hurriedly dressed, opting for a cotton dress in a delicate shade of green which she knew suited her. A slick of coral lipstick and a flick of mascara helped to relieve the pallor that had invaded her skin. Her hair was still wet from the shower but she didn't have time to dry it so she brushed it back from her face and secured it at the nape of her neck with a silver clip. Maybe it was silly to make such an effort with her appearance, but she needed to feel that she was in control of herself, especially as she had a feeling that she was going to need every scrap of control she could muster when she faced Nico.

'I just need to have a word with someone,' she told Jacob, slipping her feet into a pair of tan leather sandals. The heels weren't all that high but they did add an extra inch or two to her height and that would help. Nico was over six feet tall and she hated the thought of him towering over her, although at one time she had loved the way he had made her feel so small and feminine—

'I'll be in the sitting room if you want me.' Amy blanked out that thought, knowing how foolish it was. The last thing she needed at this moment was to start harking back to the past. 'I shan't be long so you're to stay here until I get back. Understand?'

'Uh-huh.' Jacob barely glanced at her, too absorbed in his game to worry about her absence.

Amy wasn't happy about leaving him on his own, however. As she made her way to the sitting room, she decided to make it clear to Nico that she had no intention of getting into a protracted discussion. Whatever he had come to say would need to be said as quickly as possible. Taking a deep

breath, she pushed open the door. Nico was standing by the window and he turned when he heard her enter the room. He had his back to the light, making it impossible to discern his expression. She felt at an immediate disadvantage and decided to take the impetus from him in the hope that it might help to ease the situation.

‘Helena said that you wanted to speak to me.’ She gave a little shrug, as though the request didn’t worry her although it did. ‘I don’t mean to be rude but I’ve left Jacob on his own, so can we keep it brief?’

‘Of course.’ He inclined his head although his eyes never left her face, she noticed. ‘It’s quite simple. I just have one question I would like you to answer: Is Jacob my son?’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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