

MILLS & BOON®



**90s** MODERN™

# **The Playboy And The Nanny**

**ANNE MCALLISTER**

# **Anne McAllister**

## **The Playboy And The Nanny**

### **Аннотация**

Tempted by a tycoon... Mari was thrilled when a wealthy businessman offered her a job as live-in nanny to his son. But on arrival at his luxury home Mari realized her employer had two sons - and her charge, Nikos Costanides, wasn't the little boy who had greeted her. It was his half brother, a thirty-two-year-old playboy! And it was no mistake. Nikos's father had hired nanny extraordinaire Mari to reform his rebellious son. Mari wasn't sure she could persuade this sinfully gorgeous man to take orders from her. Especially as he didn't want to be reformed - he was more interested in seducing Mari into his wicked ways!

[“Welcome to your new job, Ms. Lewis...”](#) [About the Author](#) [Books by Anne McAllister](#) [Title Page](#) [CHAPTER ONE](#) [CHAPTER TWO](#) [CHAPTER THREE](#) [CHAPTER FOUR](#) [CHAPTER FIVE](#) [CHAPTER SIX](#) [CHAPTER SEVEN](#) [CHAPTER EIGHT](#) [CHAPTER NINE](#) [CHAPTER TEN](#)  
[Copyright](#)

“Welcome to your new job, Ms. Lewis...”

Nikos continued, “Apparently my father has hired you to baby-sit me!”

He was obviously a madman. But he was the most stunningly handsome madman Mari had ever seen. A lesser woman—many lesser women—would have fallen panting at his feet.

Mari Lewis was made of sterner stuff. She had a job to fulfill, a reputation to uphold.

“Look, Mr. Costanides, I don’t know why you’re doing this, but—”

“You’d do better wondering why my father is doing it.... He hired you.”

“To take care of his little boy.”

“To take care of Nikos,” her fully-grown, very masculine nemesis agreed. He poked his chest. “Me.”

ANNE McALLISTER was born in California. She spent long lazy summers daydreaming on local beaches and studying surfers, swimmers and volleyball players in an effort to find the perfect hero. She finally did, not on the beach, but in a university library where she was working. She, her husband and

their four children have since moved to the Midwest. She taught, copyedited, capped deodorant bottles and ghostwrote sermons before turning to her first love: writing romance fiction.

RITA Award-winning author Anne McAllister writes fast, funny and emotional romances.

You'll be hooked till the very last page!

Books by Anne McAllister

HARLEQUIN PRESENTS® 1620—CALL UP THE WIND  
1680—CATCH ME IF YOU CAN 1769—THE ALEXAKIS  
BRIDE 1854—A BABY FOR CHRISTMAS 1890—FINN'S  
TWINS! 1932—FLETCHER'S BABY!

Don't miss any of our special offers. Write to us at the following address for information on our newest releases

Harlequin Reader Service

U.S.: 3010 Walden Ave., P.O. Box 1325, Buffalo, NY 14269  
Canadian. P.O. Box 609, Fort Erie, Ont. L2A 5X3

The Playboy and the Nanny

Anne McAllister



## CHAPTER ONE

NIKOS COSTANIDES needed a woman.

Not just any woman, either. He needed a babe. Luxuriously blonde. Definitely sultry. Naturally brash. And the blowsier the better.

It wouldn't hurt if she wore a skintight leopard-spotted dress, either, he thought with a ghost of a smile. But he wasn't going to hold out for that, he decided as he tucked the telephone under his chin and punched in the number. A close approximation would do just fine.

"Debbie's Dollies Escort Service," a voice purred moments later on the other end of the line.

Nikos grinned. If the woman who came was as promising as the voice on the phone, he'd be out of here by sundown. "I'd like the services of one of your escorts this afternoon."

"Certainly, sir," the voice purred. "Whatever your heart desires."

What his heart desired was to be five thousand miles away from his father's Long Island mansion, but he knew that wasn't what the woman on the phone had in mind. Still, she would be helping him get there, so he gave the receptionist an idea of the sort of escort he wanted.

"A flagrant sort of woman?" she said doubtfully when he'd finished.

"In your face," Nikos agreed cheerfully. "Over the top."

Definitely not subtle. You know what I mean?"

"Er, well," the receptionist said, though she still sounded a little doubtful. Then her business sense won out. "I'm sure we have just the woman. I'll send her right out."

Nikos gave the receptionist the address. "I'm in the caretaker's cottage behind the main house. There's a party going on by the pool, but it's perfectly all right if she comes straight up the main drive and walks right past them."

Nikos looked out at the group of party-goers on the patio behind the main house—particularly at his stubborn, strait-laced father, who was carrying a footstool for Julietta, his very pregnant young wife—and flexed his shoulders in anticipation. The weight of his confinement eased slightly. It wouldn't be long now and the shackles would be completely gone.

"Yes, sir. I'll tell her. And I'm sure she'll do just what you want her to, Mr. Costanides," the receptionist assured him.

"Yes," Nikos agreed with a purr of satisfaction in his own voice. "I'm sure she will."

It was actually closer to forty-five minutes before he heard the knock on the cottage door. It was a short rap. Brisk and no-nonsense. Not especially sultry. But then it was probably hard to sound sultry in a knock.

No matter. Maybe the gardener had stopped her when she came up the drive, suspecting she was lost. She would hardly look like one of the guests coming to his stepmother's baby shower! Nikos grinned again and finished stuffing the last of his gear into

a duffel bag, the better to be ready when his father threw him out.

If he'd been able to drive, he'd have been gone long before this. But a car accident following a shouting match with his father a month ago had left him with a cast on his leg that limited his mobility. It had given his father the chance he wanted—to nail Nikos down until he could badger him into working for Costanides International.

Not on your life, Nikos thought now, as he thought every time the subject came up. There would be six feet of snow in hell first.

He hauled himself out of his chair to go answer the door, thinking that if, in fact, old Thomas the gardener had stopped the floozie, it would be that much better. He would be one more person shocked by Nikos's disrespectful behavior, one more voice telling Stavros that his elder son was irredeemable, one more reason to throw the blackguard out.

To be honest, though, Nikos doubted it. After thirty years in the employment of the Costanides family, Thomas was unlikely to be shocked by anything any of them did.

It didn't matter in any case. It was his father he wanted to shock, his father he wanted to anger, not the long-suffering Thomas. It was even too bad he would horrify all those women fawning and fluttering around his gorgeous young stepmother, but that was just tough. And anyway, they'd probably love tittering and gossiping about it.

Nikos was used to being the subject of titters and gossip. He'd cultivated it once he found out how it infuriated his old man. And

if people didn't have anything better to do than fret about other's supposed peccadillos, it wasn't his problem.

Still, occasional glances out the window while he'd waited for his buxom lady had proved that his audience was going to be considerably larger than he'd expected when he made the call. At least fifty of the Hamptons' best-dressed, wealthiest women were laughing and chattering on the deck around the pool as Julietta opened a pile of gaily wrapped baby gifts. Julietta's friend, Deanne, who was giving his stepmother the baby shower, must have invited the whole damn county!

Pink and blue balloons, tethered to the light poles for the occasion, bobbed in the soft summer breeze. Streamers of pink and blue ribbon fluttered from the roof of the new gazebo. He'd seen them preparing for it all morning. He'd gritted his teeth then.

Now he gritted them again as he crutched his way slowly to the door. But this time it wasn't precisely a grimace, more like a feral grin. Then, dressed only in a towel and the cast on his leg, Nikos opened the door.

She wasn't a babe.

She wasn't even blonde—or not very. Her hair was brown, but not dark, a sort of deep honey color, long and pulled back into a plait at the nape of her neck, not blowsy at all. She didn't look very sultry, either, though she had the biggest blue-green eyes he'd ever seen. Even with her big wide eyes, though, she looked prim, proper and barely more than a schoolgirl in her

plain navy blue skirt and a scoop-necked shirt. It wasn't a very deeply scooped neck either, he noted with considerable irritation.

She had a good bosom on her, though, he'd give her that.

Still, if this was what Debbie's Dollies thought qualified as "in your face," he didn't think they'd be in business very long. His audience was going to have to use a lot of imagination.

Nikos glanced toward the group on the deck to see if they'd even noticed her arrival, since it hadn't been nearly as spectacular as he'd hoped. Almost none of the women was paying attention.

But—Nikos smiled to himself—his father was.

The old man looked definitely curious. He stood just a little apart from the women, his body turned toward the group sitting around the table where his wife was still opening gifts. But his gaze—and his attention—were focused toward the cottage.

Good.

It would have been better, of course, if she'd been blowsy and brash, but at least she was a woman—and as such she would suffice.

Maybe her schtick was the prim schoolmarm facade that became all the more sexy by contrast once she let her hair down. Looking her over, Nikos could see where that act might have possibilities.

Too bad he wasn't going to get to test it out.

He pasted his best macho shark grin on his face. "It's about time," he reproved her, though his face spoke only eager anticipation. "But at least you got here."

She opened her mouth, but he didn't give her a chance to speak. "Come and show me what's under that prissy look, sweetheart." And, so saying, he reached out, hauled her into his arms and kissed her.

Past her ear he saw his father's jaw drop. The old man's eyes bugged. If he'd been closer, Nikos would have bet he could've seen his father's mustache quiver.

He wanted to cheer. Instead he pressed his advantage, wrapping his arms around the woman and, because upon touch she turned out to be far more tempting than he'd expected, he thrust his tongue past her parted lips as he molded her body to his.

For just a moment it was a stiff, resisting body. A body that exactly mirrored the starchy persona she was playing.

And then, almost imperceptibly, she changed. The starch went out of her. The ice melted. She drew a sweet, astonished breath—as astonished as the one Nikos himself was drawing because, by God, yes, there was fire here!

And then she bit him!

Nikos yelped. He jerked back and swiped the side of his hand across his mouth. There was blood on it. She'd bitten him!

"What the hell—?" He glared at her. "You won't get very many jobs if you behave that way, lady!"

"Getting kissed like that isn't part of any job I want!"

"Kissing's extra, then?" Nikos asked, annoyed. "You'll have sex with me, but you won't kiss me?"

Her face flamed. “I’ll do no such thing! What do you think —?”

“I think you’re carrying the prissy librarian act too damn far!” She was going to spoil the whole thing. Nobody—least of all his father!—was going to believe he was flaunting a high-priced prostitute, if his high-priced prostitute kept on behaving like a nun.

And she didn’t need to think she was going to get paid if she kept her prissiness up, either!

“Librarian act?” the woman sputtered.

“Some men might find it sexy, sweetheart. I don’t.” He shot a quick glance in the direction of the pool. There were several onlookers now, including his old man who was actually looking poleaxed. Maybe all was not lost.

Nikos reached out a hand and snagged hers. “Come on.”

She tried to jerk away from him, twisting sideways. But clutching both crutches under one arm, he slid the other around her, making them look even cozier as he wrestled her inside.

With one leg in a cast and his arm still healing from the sprain, he was barely strong enough to hold her. And, once the door was shut and he was leaning against it, he let her go at once and shut his eyes.

Damn it! The toll of even limited exertion was still more than he could handle. He still wasn’t used to it. He’d barely done more than eat, sleep and argue with his father in the two weeks he’d been out of the hospital. Damn. He hated this weakness. His head

was beginning to throb again, too. It did almost every time he tried to focus on anything too long.

“What do you think you’re doing?” his sexy librarian raged at him now. “Open this door. I want to leave. Now!”

“No.”

Her blue-green eyes widened. “What do you mean, no?”

“Just what I said.” Nikos sucked in a harsh breath. “You were hired. You’re here, and by God you’re going to stay. Sit down.”

She didn’t. She backed up. Damn it! If his father came down to see what was going on, he’d know it wasn’t what Nikos wanted him to think. She was fully clothed and perfectly visible through the window.

“Damn it all. I said, sit down!” Nikos barked.

She shook her head. “I can’t. I have to leave. I must have got the wrong place.”

“No. It’s the right place. Relax, damn it. How the hell did you get into this line of work?” he muttered.

She straightened up and glared at him. “I’m very good at my job.”

She sure didn’t look like it But maybe she was—once she got out of her no-nonsense clothes.

There had sure been heat in that kiss they’d shared. It was a shame he wasn’t going to be able to enjoy this encounter the way it was meant to be enjoyed.

“Well, you’ll have to show me another time,” he drawled.

She wrapped her arms across her breasts. “I don’t intend to

show you anything. I don't even know who you are! But you have to let me go!"

You have to shut up! Before his head exploded. "Sit down!" Nikos bellowed.

The force of his voice seemed to plop her right into the chair. She glared up at him.

"Not there." Nikos sighed wearily. "He can see you there. Sit on the couch."

She didn't move. "He who? What are you talking about?"

Nikos didn't answer. He just stood, teeth gritted, and looked from her to the couch expectantly. He didn't move away from the door either. Couldn't if he wanted to remain upright. God, his head hurt!

"I don't know why you're doing this," she muttered ungraciously. But at last she got up and moved to the couch.

"Thank you," Nikos said tightly. He waited until she was settled, then lowered himself gingerly into the armchair across from her. He adjusted the towel. She looked at it, the color rising in her cheeks. Quickly she glanced away, her gaze going toward the door again.

"Don't even think about it."

She looked at him, startled, but she didn't try it.

And thank God for that, because the truth was, he didn't think he had the strength to stop her.

Fortunately she didn't move. She sat right where she was, hands folded in her lap like some proper Sunday school teacher,

looking at him with a combination of wariness and expectancy. There was nothing sultry or seductive about her—except the way she'd kissed him.

“You haven't been doing this long, have you?”

“Four years.”

“Four years?” He couldn't imagine.

“I started while I was working on my master's degree. I have excellent qualifications. I'm very good at what I do,” she told him firmly. “I have references.”

Nikos bit back a grin. “I'd like to see them.”

Her eyes flashed green fire at him. “I don't have to show them to the likes of you! I don't understand why you're keeping me here,” she said fretfully. “I must have made a mistake and got the wrong cottage. Please! I need to talk to Mr. Costanides.”

Nikos stuck his casted leg out in front of him and settled back into the chair. “You're talking to him.”

“You're not Mr. Costanides! I've met Mr. Costanides! He's much older. He has a mustache. He's—”

Nikos sat bolt upright. She'd met his father? Bloody hell!

He couldn't believe it. The old man might have had his profligate tendencies over the years, but Nikos had never thought they'd ever extended to bringing home women of the evening! Stavros had always had too much respect for family. That was, in fact, precisely why Nikos was throwing this woman in the old man's face now.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

"My name is Mari Lewis," she said stiffly.

Which meant precisely nothing. "The dolly?" he prompted.

"Dolly?" Her brow furrowed. "No. What dolly? I'm the nanny."

The nanny?

Nikos gaped. And then, replaying the whole scene in his mind, he began to understand what had happened. And with understanding came not consternation, but an even greater satisfaction. An unbelievable satisfaction. The grin spread all over his face.

He'd kissed the new nanny? He'd swaggered out dressed in only a towel and, before his father's eyes, had swept his half-brother, Alex's, brand-new nanny off her feet?

No wonder the old man was looking apoplectic.

It was even better than he'd dared hope!

No matter how badly he wanted to strongarm Nikos into the company, Stavros would never let him stay here after he'd sullied darling Alexander's new nanny.

Let him stay, hell! Rigid, strait-laced Stavros would throw his philandering firstborn out on his ear!

He might even go so far as to make his secondborn his heir. And why not?

As far as Nikos could see, Alexander, the four-year-old result of his father's second marriage, was the center of the old man's universe, anyway. Alexander was the sun around which Stavros Costanides spun, the darling doted-upon child that his elder son

had never been—which didn't bother Nikos a bit.

In fact it made him feel a little sorry for the kid.

Not that he'd ever had much to do with the boy. He barely even knew his half-brother. Stavros did his best to keep his younger son away from his disreputable older one.

He'd never exactly told Nikos to stay away, had never come right out and said Nikos was a bad influence on the boy, but Nikos didn't have to be told.

Nothing he did had ever pleased the old man.

He'd long ago stopped trying to. It was a hell of a lot more interesting—and rewarding—to be the thorn in Stavros Costanides's side. As long as he could leave when things got unbearable.

Since the accident Nikos hadn't been able to leave. As if the cast wasn't impediment enough, the head injury he'd received in the car accident required him to be on medication. He couldn't drive until he was through with it. And Stavros wasn't allowing anyone else to drive him.

"You're keeping me prisoner!" Nikos had accused him.

"I am looking out for your well-being," his father had replied. "Besides," he'd added scornfully, "it's not as if you have any pressing demands on your time. Work, for example?" A bitter smile had touched Stavros's features. "God forbid."

Nikos hadn't replied. There was no point. Stavros had long ago decided that he was a good-for-nothing. It was Nikos's greatest joy to do his best to confirm his father's estimation.

“It’s time you settled down,” his father had gone on implacably. “Until you are able to drive away under your own power, you will stay here.”

And there was no arguing with him. No going around him. No convincing anybody to spirit him away. He was stuck until he could drive—with his father and his father’s notion of how things ought to be done.

It was exactly what his father had been angling for. It had been the subject of their quarrel right before Nikos’s accident. It had been the subject of the quarrel they’d had last week.

Stavros had come to the cottage to try to badger Nikos into studying the company prospectus. “Learn about your inheritance,” he’d demanded.

“I know all about my inheritance,” Nikos had retorted bitterly, and he’d tossed the prospectus aside.

“I’ll shape you up if it’s the last thing I do,” his father had vowed, glowering down at Nikos who had stared insolently back.

Nikos’s jaw tightened. “I’d like to see you try!”

“Would you?” Stavros went very quiet. “Fine. Count on it.” He’d turned on his heel and stalked out. The door shut quietly, ominously, behind him.

Nikos had ignored it, ignored him. He’d been enormously pleased that, for the last five days, the old man had been avoiding him completely. So he wasn’t counting on Stavros being able to “shape him up.”

He was counting on getting out of here—away from his father,

away from all the demands and distrust, away from the bitterness and the battles and the disappointment they'd been to each other for all of Nikos's thirty-two years. He didn't need it, God knew.

Let Alex have it—all of it—and the grief that went with it.

He looked at the woman sitting primly on the sofa now. She did look like a nanny. Or a nun.

Poor Alex.

She must have impeccable credentials, Nikos thought. He paused and corrected himself—must have had impeccable credentials. His father wouldn't have picked anyone less worthy than Mary Poppins to look after the likes of master Alex.

"Sorry about that," he said with a repentance he didn't feel. In fact, he was still grinning.

She wasn't. "It's not funny. I have a reputation to uphold. Standards to maintain."

"I wouldn't give you a nickel for your reputation now, sweetheart," Nikos said cheerfully. "Or your standads. "

"Mr. Costanides will be upset."

"I devoutly hope so." He wondered if the old man was even now bearing down on the cottage, determined to rescue Mary Poppins from his grip.

"He expected me at three. It's important for me to arrive on time," she said. "To be punctual. To be fair. To be strict. Mr. Costanides says his son needs that."

Did he? Nikos didn't know Alex well enough to say. Certainly the kid wasn't as headstrong as he'd been.

“Punctual. Fair. Strict. You must be a regular paragon. I’m sure you’ll impress the hell out of him,” he said lazily. “What other virtues do you have?”

“I don’t use profanity,” she said.

Ah, so she could sting when she wanted to. Nikos grinned. “Little brat getting out of hand? Don’t want him turning out like his big brother, do we?”

The nanny looked perplexed. “Big brother? Are there two children? Mr. Costanides didn’t mention a brother.”

“I’m not surprised,” Nikos said drily.

“But, yes,” Miss Mari Lewis went on quite sincerely, “he did say Nikos had been giving him some problems.”

“What?”

His yelp caused her to jump. But instead of answering him, she folded her hands in her lap, pressed her lips together, and looked like he’d have to torture the information out of her.

“What did you say?” Nikos demanded again.

She gave a quick determined shake of her head. “I shouldn’t have said anything. Not about the child—or his behavior. It’s indiscreet. Improper. It’s entirely between me and my employer.”

But Nikos wasn’t listening to her babbling. “The boy,” he demanded, hobbling close, glowering down at her. “What did you call him?”

Mari Lewis blinked at him like some near-sighted owl, but he wasn’t ruffling her feathers. She lifted her chin, as if to tell him he wasn’t going to intimidate her. Then, “Nikos,” she said,

exactly as he'd thought she had.

His teeth came together with a snap. "No."

"Yes."

"No," he said again. "His name is Alexander."

"No," she replied just as firmly, "it's not."

She reached down and picked her bag up and pulled out a contract. She held it out toward him. "See for yourself. It says right there. His name is Nikos. I might have got the wrong cottage, but I have not got the wrong child!"

Yes, she damned well had!

But, from his father's standpoint, obviously, no, she had not.

The old man hadn't been apoplectic at all. He might have been a little astonished when Nikos had hauled Mary Poppins into his arms and kissed her, but ultimately he would have been amused—and justified.

His son's flagrant disregard for propriety, his inappropriate kissing of a total stranger would have only underscored Stavros's notion that he had done the right thing.

The old rogue had hired a nanny to straighten him out!

Far from running down here to rescue her, the old man was probably standing up on the deck now, congratulating himself—and laughing his fool head off.

Nikos's teeth came together with a snap. His headache returned with a vengeance. He dropped his head back and shut his eyes, his mind whirling furiously. And furious was the operative word.

“I’ll shape you up if it’s the last thing I do.” His father’s words came back to haunt him. To mock him. To humiliate him.

It was Stavros Costanides, down to the ground.

“Mr....er...I’m sorry, I don’t know your name—” the very proper nanny’s voice broke into his bitter reverie “—but you really do have to let me go. I have to find the right cottage. I have to—”

Nikos opened his eyes and glared at her.

She blinked again, but met his gaze determinedly.

Just how determined was she? He couldn’t imagine. He could bet, though. And he was willing to bet he could run her off in less than twenty-four hours.

A corner of his mouth tipped up slightly. Did the old man think he was just going to roll over and give up his wicked ways without a fight?

Well, if he did, he’d vastly underestimated his older son.

Whatever he was paying Miss Mari Lewis, it had better be a bundle. She was damned well going to earn it.

“You don’t have the wrong cottage,” Nikos told her.

“But you said—” She looked around, puzzled. “But... where’s Nikos?”

He smiled. It was a hard smile. There was nothing pleasant about it. “I’m Nikos.”

She gaped at him.

“Welcome to your new job, Ms. Lewis. Apparently my father has hired you to babysit me.”

He was obviously a madman.

But he was the most stunningly handsome madman she'd ever seen. He had dark brown eyes and tousled black hair, a lean face with high cheekbones and a wicked-looking dimple just to one side of his mouth that deepened when he gave her that bitter smile of his.

And he kissed like—

Mari didn't want to think about what he kissed like! She'd never been kissed like that in her life!

A lesser woman—many lesser women, she was sure—would have fallen panting at his feet,

Mari Lewis was made of sterner stuff.

She had a job to fulfill, a reputation to uphold, a magazine ad and article to live up to, and a pair of lovable, impractical, dangerously gullible aunts to support.

And despite the fact that her heart was still hammering and her head was still spinning and her lips were still tingling, she needed to find Stavros Costanides. And she needed to do it fast.

But how? When Mr. Whoever-he-was was sitting next to the door, looking as if he would pounce on her if she made a move in that direction.

“Look, Mr....” She paused.

“Costanides,” he said helpfully. He smiled again. The same humorless smile he'd smiled before. However heart-stopping it was, his smile wasn't meant to be friendly. It wasn't even, she was fairly sure, meant to be attractive. Unfortunately it was. The

dimple deepened again.

She wanted to touch it, To touch him. Again. Help! Determinedly Mari looked away and forced herself to say in a level tone, “Mr. Costanides, then. I don’t know why you’re doing this, but—”

“You’d do better wondering why my father is doing this.”

“Your father?”

“The well-known despot, Stavros Costanides. You know? Older than me. Mustache.” He parroted back her description. “The man who hired you.”

“To take care of his little boy.”

“To take care of Nikos,” her fully-grown, very masculine nemesis agreed. He poked his chest. “Me.”

“But that’s ridiculous!”

“You’re telling me,” he muttered. His smile faded and suddenly he rubbed fiercely at his forehead. “Damn.”

Mari frowned. Maybe he wasn’t totally mad, after all, she thought. Maybe he was suffering from concussion—a head injury that made him think he was someone else. He certainly looked as if he’d recently done battle with something formidable—and lost.

His left leg was in a cast; he held one arm close to his body, as if he was protecting his ribs; he had a fresh scar on his jaw, and his very handsome face still showed the lingering signs of bruising beneath the left eye and temple.

“Are you all right?” she asked quickly.

He lifted his gaze to meet hers. “Would you be?”

The very bleakness of his tone startled her. It also stopped her cold, having the effect that his words hadn’t had. It made her think that he wasn’t talking only about his physical condition at all.

It made her worry that he might be telling her the truth. Mari swallowed. Pushed the notion away. Tried not to think about it.

Stavros Costanides had hired her to be a nanny to his son. His little boy! She knew he had a little boy. She’d glimpsed a picture of him on the credenza in Stavros’s office.

“Is that Nikos?” she’d asked him.

He’d smiled a proud papa smile and had picked up the picture, saying proudly, “That’s my son.”

Nikos, she’d thought

But he hadn’t actually said, “That’s my son, Nikos,” she realized now. He’d just agreed, “That’s my son.”

And the devilishly handsome man sitting across from her now was...?

“You’re Nikos?” she asked faintly. “You’re not... kidding?”

Deep brown eyes met hers. Slowly he shook his head. “I’m not kidding.”

Outside in the distance Mari could hear the gabble of cheerful women. Overhead a jet engine droned. A bird twittered.

“But...but it doesn’t make sense. I mean, why would he—?” she faltered. “You’re not—” She broke off. “I understood he had a four-year-old. He showed me a picture of a four-year-old!” She

gave him an accusing look.

“He does have a four-year-old. My half-brother. Alexander.”

“Then it’s obviously a mistake.”

“It’s not a mistake.”

“But—”

“It’s his way of making a point. He thinks I’m wasting my life. He thinks I don’t take things seriously enough, that I haven’t accepted my responsibilities as heir to his damned empire, that I’m shirking my duty to follow in his footsteps as the eldest son.” His tone became more and more bitter as he spoke. His dark eyes flashed, and it was all Mari could do not to flinch under his gaze.

She didn’t, because as a nanny she knew that the slightest crack in her armor could do her in. Don’t let them intimidate you, was the cardinal rule of dealing with one’s charges.

One of her charges?

She wasn’t seriously thinking she was this man’s nanny, was she?

It was a joke. Any minute now Stavros Costanides would come along to say he’d made his point and they would all laugh about it—though this particular son might laugh a little harshly—and then she would get her real job as nanny to Alexander.

Wouldn’t she?

Oh, heavens, she’d better! She had to have a job. She couldn’t not have a job!

Aunt Emmaline and Aunt Bett would be out on the street if she didn’t keep this job. It had been a godsend when Stavros

Costanides had called her two days ago and wanted to hire her.

“I read about you in a magazine my wife gets,” he told her. “You’re the woman who could make Little Lord Fauntleroy out of a Katzenjammer Kid?”

Mari remembered laughing a little self-consciously. “The writer might have been exaggerating a little,” she allowed, recalling the article that had appeared in last month’s issue of an upscale magazine for parents. The article had been subtitled “Mari’s not Mary, But This Nanny Could Make That Poppins Woman Take a Back Seat” and it raved about Mari’s ability to deal with problem kids. “I was nanny to her nephew for two years.”

“He was a handful?”

“Oh, yes.”

“My son is, too.”

His four-year-old, she’d thought.

The more fool she.

It certainly explained the bonus offer he’d made her when she’d met him at his office yesterday afternoon. He’d detailed his son’s stubbornness, his reluctance to toe the line, his determined rebellion in the face of parental authority.

“I thought I could handle it myself,” he’d said gruffly. “Now I don’t think so. But I need it done. If you bring him up to scratch at the end of six months—if you last six months—I’ll give you a hundred thousand dollars bonus.”

Mari had gaped at him.

And then, steeping his hands on his desk, and looking at her over the tops of his fingers, he'd said, "And if you quit before six months are up, you owe me ten."

"Ten?"

"Thousand dollars."

To him it was chicken feed. To her, in her family's straitened circumstances, it was more than she could promise.

But she wouldn't have to give him ten thousand dollars, she'd reminded herself—if she didn't quit. She wouldn't quit. She knew she couldn't quit!

"All right," she'd agreed.

"He must have been kidding," she said hopefully now to the dark brooding man who sat and watched as all these thoughts flitted across her face.

Slowly, deliberately, Nikos Costanides shook his head. "No."

"But—"

"He's hired you to reform me."

Mari wanted to deny it. She couldn't. She had the awful sinking feeling that it was true.

"I can't—"

"You bet your sweet tail you can't!" he said harshly. "So just march yourself up to the house and tell him the joke is on him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, go tell him you're not going to play. That whatever he's paying you, it's not enough. That there's no way on earth he can con you into staying."

Ah, but there was. There was that enormous white elephant of a house her aunts owned—their pride and joy, their legacy from their profligate father. It ate money. They couldn't give it up.

"Where would we go, dear?" Aunt Em's frail voice echoed in her ears. "We've always lived here."

"Can't put Em in one of those homes," Aunt Bett said over and over. "It'd kill her."

Probably, Mari acknowledged, it would. Aunt Em had a bad heart. It wouldn't feel any better if she learned about Aunt Bett's disastrous attempt to bail them out by playing the ponies, either.

Actually having to leave their home would likely kill them both. And Mari could see that they didn't have to leave it—she could even see that the gambling debt was paid and the house had new struts, new paint and a new roof—if she managed to keep this job and earn Stavros Costanides' bonus.

"No," she said. "I can't."

Nikos Costanides scowled at her. "Why the hell not?"

"Because I need the job."

"What did he offer you?"

Mari blinked. "What?"

"Obviously he offered you a bundle," Nikos said impatiently.

"Fine. I'll offer you more to leave."

It was tempting. Terribly tempting. She wanted to take it. And yet—

She shook her head. "I can't."

He glared at her. "What do you mean, you can't?"

She knotted her fingers. "My reputation is at stake."

"What?" He looked thunderous.

"I have a professional reputation, as I said before." She felt her cheeks warm and, certain that he could see how flimsy that excuse was, she felt compelled to add, "Not the sort you imagined, but such as it is, it's important to me,"

His jaw clenched. Their eyes battled.

Mari's heart beat faster, her pulses raced. She felt like a racehorse in the home stretch, given its head. "All you have to do is shape up," she reminded him a little breathlessly.

"Like hell. I'll be damned if I'll knuckle under to his threats!"

"Yes, well—" She took a careful shallow breath, then shrugged lightly. "Maybe you can't."

A nerve in his temple pulsed. He shoved a hand through disheveled dark hair. His eyes narrowed. "You're saying you're staying, Ms. Lewis?"

Say no, she told herself. Walk out. To hell with your reputation, your aunts, the hundred thousand dollars, the way he kisses! Where's your common sense?

She didn't know. She only knew that something had happened when Nikos Costanides kissed her. She had been kissed before. Heavens, she'd even been engaged before. But when Ward had kissed her it had been pleasant, warm, and in a few seconds, gone.

Even now the imprint of Nikos's mouth was still on hers. The taste of him was a part of her, reaching into her. And somewhere deep inside it was as if a fundamental answering

chord responded.

She hadn't known such a response existed. She wanted desperately—perhaps foolishly—to know more.

Sanity—despite her reputation, her aunts, the money——told her to say no. It was foolish. It was insane to agree to be nanny to a grown man for any reason or any amount of money.

Mari was practical. Mari was sensible. Mari was grounded.

“People who are grounded have never flown,” her free spirit uncle Arthur always said with a twinkle and a hint of challenge in his eye.

She took a deep breath and said, “Yes.”

## CHAPTER TWO

SHE had lost her mind.

A twenty-nine-year-old virgin who'd never felt the slightest tingle—not even from the kiss of the man she'd been engaged to for three years—had no business taking on a man who looked like he ate nuns for breakfast!

But she'd committed herself.

Mari didn't see that she had any choice.

It wasn't just the fact that she'd given her word—even if Stavros Costanides had fudged a little bit on his. It wasn't just that it was a matter of honor. And pride. And integrity. And the fact that she was good at what she did.

It was that recently she'd felt incomplete. Unfinished. Inadequate somehow.

At least Ward had certainly thought she was!

“You want to know why I’m breaking it off?” her fiancé Ward Bishop had said last month when he’d come to tell her he’d had second thoughts about marrying her. “It’s because you’re a cold fish, Mari. I want to make love and you talk about the weather. I touch your breasts and you grab my hands. I kiss you and you don’t respond.”

“You mean I don’t tear your clothes off-or mine,” Mari had retorted scathingly, hurt beyond reason at her fiancé’s outspoken words.

“You don’t even unbutton them,” Ward snarled.

Later he’d apologized, had said he’d never meant to be so blunt. “You’re a fine person, Mari,” he’d said in a conciliatory, unctuous manner that made her want to wipe the floor with him. “It’s not your fault. You just aren’t...passionate.”

“I don’t remember you burning down any buildings either!” Mari retorted, stung.

“Not with you I haven’t,” he’d agreed readily enough. Which she supposed meant that he and the new love of his life, Shetley—the twenty-three-year-old he was dumping her for—were setting whole forests on fire!

Well, fine. Let him. Let him have Shelley! Let them burn up the world!

She didn’t care. Much.

But, as little as she wanted to admit it, long after Ward had gone his accusation still hurt. It hurt thinking there was something wrong with her, that other people had something she

was lacking, some fire deep within that God had apparently forgotten to build.

And then this afternoon, completely unexpectedly, totally out of the blue, something had happened-something deep, strong, passionate. And all she could think was that God apparently hadn't forgotten to build the fire at all.

It just wasn't Ward who'd been given the match!

But...Nikos Costanides? A—

“How old are you?” she asked a glaring Nikos as she came back into the cottage with her luggage.

“Thirty-two,” he growled as he watched her come in with her luggage.

A thirty-two-year-old Greek playboy? Because she had no doubt now that a mindless frivolous playboy was exactly what he was.

Mari shook her head. What could God have been thinking about?

Nikos apparently wondered the same thing. He was sitting right where she had left him, scowling at her. While she'd been out finding Thomas the gardener, he had put on a pair of white shorts, and she supposed that was some concession. Still, he looked very adult, very masculine and very intimidating as he again sprawled bare-chested in the chair, watching like a sulky child as Thomas, laden down with suitcases, followed her in.

“How old are you?” he asked insolently.

She lifted her chin. “Twenty-nine.”

“You don’t kiss like you’re twenty-nine.”

Mari felt her cheeks flush. The feelings of inadequacy reared their head again. She wondered if that meant Nikos hadn’t felt what she’d felt.

At his impertinent words Thomas made a disapproving noise in his throat, and Mari knew she should be feeling more embarrassed than she was, but in fact she was mostly curious. Hadn’t he? She looked at Nikos closely.

Immediately his gaze shifted away.

Yes! He had felt it! Mari felt a twinge of triumph. Hugging herself inwardly, inadequacy vanquished for the moment, Mari said to Thomas as blithely as she could manage, “Don’t mind him. He’s just sulking.”

“I am not sulking!”

His outrage made Mari hide another smile. “You can take them through here,” she said to Thomas, ignoring Nikos. She started toward the hallway that led away from the small living room, then looked back. “I presume that’s where the bedrooms are?” she said over her shoulder.

Nikos grunted something. His dark gaze was brooding as he looked at her again.

“Did he kiss you, miss?” Thomas asked worriedly.

“Oh, yes.” She tried to sound blithe, matter-of-fact and indifferent, not at all as if, by doing so, he had turned her world upside down.

“She’s not any good at it,” Nikos said loudly.

"I can see why your father thinks you need a nanny," Mari said pleasantly. "Someone needs to teach you how to behave."

Then she sailed out of the room and down the hallway. A strategic exit after having the last word was always a nanny's strength.

"A nanny?" Thomas's eyes goggled.

"Mr. Costanides has a strange sense of humor apparently," Mari said. It was all she was going to say.

"Didn't know he had a sense of humor," Thomas mumbled. Then, "Which room, miss?"

Behind her Nikos called, "She can sleep with me."

"Mr. Nikos!" Thomas was clearly scandalized.

"She loves it when I talk dirty." Nikos's voice followed them. Thomas sputtered.

"Children act up when they think we're watching, Thomas," she said firmly. "I advise you to ignore him. Come along. I'll find my own room."

Down the short hallway beyond the small living room and kitchen, Mari found three bedrooms. The biggest, with a view overlooking the garden, was clearly the one Nikos was inhabiting. The king-size bed was unmade. There was a laptop computer and a lot of boating magazines scattered on the desk. The better to choose his next yacht from, Mari thought.

The room itself was actually very Spartan-looking, done in whites and tans and browns with just a hint of black. Somber. Harsh.

Rather like its occupant, Mari thought.

“Like my bed?” Nikos called. “It’s plenty big enough to share.”

She ignored him. She tried to ignore the bed, too. But the thought of sharing it with Nikos was astonishingly vivid. She could imagine him naked against those white sheets, could envision herself, equally naked, tangling with him—

Oh, girl, stop this! She’d never had such blatant fantasies in her life!

She wondered if it had something to do with the squid her Aunt Em had fixed for lunch. Was squid an aphrodisiac?

She turned and hurried out of the room.

The bedroom across from Nikos’s was equipped as an office, but with a daybed instead of a sofa or pair of chairs. It didn’t look as if anyone was using it at the moment. No big surprise there. If Stavros imagined that Nikos needed “shaping up,” it wouldn’t be because he was a workaholic!

She could have stayed in this room, but somehow Mari didn’t want to be that close to Nikos Costanides—whether because she thought he might get the wrong idea, or whether she didn’t trust herself, she wasn’t sure.

Fortunately there was a third bedroom along the back of the house. It was a long narrow room that seemed to have been converted from a sleeping porch and was more casually decorated than the rest of the house. Airy and sunlit, with balloon curtains done in white eyelet, it was soft and romantic. Soothing, not passionate.

Just as well, Mari thought. She was curious. Not suicidal.

“Put my things here, will you, Thomas?” She went over to the window and looked out. Beyond the main house she could see the beginning of the dunes that dipped toward the Atlantic. Now, in the silence, she could hear the sounds of the waves.

“Miss?”

She turned to see that Thomas had set down her cases and now stood looking at her. He had a slight smile on his face. “I just wanted you to know, miss...he isn’t as bad as he says.”

“He couldn’t be,” Mari agreed drily.

Thomas’s bare hint of a smile turned into a real one. He almost chuckled. “He’ll try, though.”

“It...should be interesting,” Mari agreed. “Tell me, Thomas. Did you know about this? That Mr. Costanides was setting us up, I mean?”

Thomas hesitated a moment, then said, “No, but, I’m not surprised. It’s no secret Mr. Costanides is worried—about Mr. Nikos, about the future of his company. He’s getting older. He’s had one heart attack. He wants time with Mrs. Costanides and the children. So he wants Mr. Nikos to take over. But,” he added, “only if he does it the way Mr. Costanides wants.”

Which was the situation in a nutshell. “And why am I sure that Nikos has his own mind?” she asked wryly.

Thomas smiled again. “Because he’s his father’s son.” Thomas shook his head. “Mr. Costanides doesn’t always handle Mr. Nikos very well.”

“And he thought hiring a nanny would help?”

“I’m not sure he thinks anything will help at this point,” Thomas said bluntly. “But this, at least, he hasn’t tried.”

That would make two of them.

“He won’t hurt you, miss,” Thomas said quickly. “He teases, that’s all. If he gives you trouble, you call me. I’ll come whip him into shape for you.” He grinned. “Mr. Nikos listens to me.”

“But not to his father.” It wasn’t a question.

Thomas shook his head adamantly. “Never. Mr. Costanides never talks to Mr. Nikos, come to that. Just yells. And demands.” He gave a shake of his head, then brightened and looked at her. “You can fix that.”

“Sounds like it’s been broken for a very long time.”

Thomas hesitated, then gave a small nod. “They’re good men, though. Both of them.”

“Then what’s the problem? Why don’t they listen to each other? Why don’t they talk to each other?” She needed a place to start. Some clue as to what dynamic existed between them.

Thomas lifted broad shoulders. “You got to ask Mr. Nikos or Mr. Costanides about that.” His warm brown eyes met hers. He reached out a hand and squeezed hers briefly. “I wish you luck, miss.”

Mari thought she was going to need it.

The knock on the door was quick and staccato. Seven taps, the last two separated from the first ones in brisk, cheerful fashion.

Obviously the old man—pleased with himself and coming to

gloat.

“Door’s open,” Nikos growled.

A second later it was, and a seductively stacked blonde in a revealing leopard-spotted dress sashayed in. “Nikos?” she purred, her eyes lighting up at the sight of him.

Oh, hell. He’d forgotten about her!

But a second later he grinned with unholy glee at the thought of what his father must be thinking now—and how gloriously shockable the Mary Poppins clone was going to be!

He pushed himself forward in the chair and held out a hand. “Come here, sweetheart,” he drawled.

Debbie’s Dolly shut the door behind her, then moved toward him, unbuttoning the top two buttons of her very low-cut blouse as she came. “Aw, did you hurt yourself, darlin’?” she murmured, taking in the yellowing bruises on his face. “Let me kiss it and make it better.” She bent over him, giving him a good glimpse of a pair of her more outstanding assets as she did so.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” said a firm female voice from the hallway.

The blonde jerked back.

Mari Lewis stood in the doorway to the living room, a stern look in her eyes. The blonde, eyes like saucers, looked quickly from Mari to him.

Nikos didn’t move, just watched, fascinated, as Mari gave the blonde what looked like an affable smile, and said almost pleasantly, “Or what happened to him could happen to you.”

The blonde looked beyond Nikos's bruises to his taped ribs and casted leg and gulped. Then her eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

"His nanny."

"What?"

"I'm Nikos's nanny." Mari Lewis repeated the words as if they made perfect sense, and she said them with such forcefulness that Nikos found himself admiring her. For a second.

Right before annoyance set in.

He could sense the blonde beginning to retreat. "Don't mind her," he said, reaching out a hand and snagging hers, drawing her close. "Ms. Lewis is just a frustrated spinster my father's wished on me. She won't bother us."

"Won't I?" Mari said, and once again, though her expression was perfectly pleasant, her tone was like steel.

He didn't think it was a question even though it sounded like it. But he was damned if he was going to let some governess bully him!

"Of course not," he said. "Because if you leave," he told the blonde, though he slanted a gaze Mari's way, "she knows I'll have to kiss her again instead."

"Again?" the blonde echoed nervously. She tugged her hand out of his and stepped back, looking from Nikos to Mari, an increasingly worried expression on her face. "I...think maybe you should settle this between yourselves," she said quickly, edging toward the door.

“Excellent idea,” Mari said, moving toward her.

“Terrible idea,” Nikos disagreed. Didn’t Debbie’s Dollies have any backbone? “Come back here.”

“Keep right on going,” Mari suggested, herding the blonde ahead like a sheepdog nipping at the heels of a ewe. “Thomas, would you show Miss... Miss.. ?”

“Truffles,” the blonde supplied nervously.

“Would you show Miss...Truffles the way out, please?” Mari said quite pleasantly, though Nikos was sure he could hear a hint of a smile when she said the ridiculous name. He gritted his teeth. Surely even a blonde with very little brain could have thought of a better moniker than that!

“And give her something for coming all this way,” Mari added.

“You stay right here,” Nikos commanded. But the blonde wasn’t listening to him. She fumbled to open the door. Mari opened it for her.

“He doesn’t need to give me anything. We have his credit card number,” the blonde said nervously.

“You’re not charging me! You didn’t do any—”

“We’re supposed to charge whether or not they—” Truffles-the-blonde apologized to Mari. She wasn’t even looking at him! “For the, um, er...house-call, y’know?” she said a little desperately.

“Of course.” Mari nodded sagely. “Makes perfect sense.”

“The hell it does!” Nikos shoved himself up, trying to get out

of the chair. "You can't give my money away like that!"

She turned and gave him a blithe smile. "I didn't. You did."

"Come along, miss," Thomas said smoothly, taking the blonde by the arm. He gave Nikos a hard level look over his shoulder and a slow despairing shake of his head as he steered the woman down the path. "You should be ashamed of yourself."

Nikos wasn't sure if Thomas meant the blonde or him, but judging from the look on the old gardener's face he had a pretty good idea.

The door shut. The silence was deafening.

Used to prevailing in arguments about bedtime, homework and when to allow a friend to sleep over, Mari found it a little difficult to pretend that she commonly vanquished women of the evening—as Aunt Bett called them—in the course of her work.

It's not much different than a sleepover, she told herself firmly, then rolled her eyes.

Surreptitiously she wiped damp palms on the sides of her navy skirt and drew several steadying breaths before she shut the door after Thomas and 'Miss—she still smiled as she thought the name—Truffles, and turned to face the ire of Nikos Costanides head on.

Big mistake.

The sizzle she'd felt from his kiss seemed to arc right across the room and hit her between the eyes. He was slumped back into his chair again, glaring at her, looking for all the world like a sulky child who'd just had his treat taken away, and she could

feel her palms dampen and her mouth dry out. There was some deep primitive response going on inside her, too, that she didn't really want to focus on.

'Hormones, dear,' her Aunt Bett would have said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. And doubtless Uncle Arthur would have winked at her.

Well, now was not the time for hormones!

No matter how curious she was, she couldn't simply jump a man she didn't know. A man she probably didn't even want to know!

What, she wondered, were you supposed to do if these suddenly wide-awake and raring-to-go hormones aimed you at entirely the wrong man?

Go slow, she cautioned herself. Learn as much as you can about the phenomenon. Then, once she understood it better, she could transfer the feeling to someone more suitable than Nikos Costanides.

Right now the thought of what he and Miss Truffles would be doing if she hadn't arrived set a blush on Mari's cheeks. Was that why he'd been so eager? she wondered with sudden dismay. Had he been primed for any woman, and simply let it all out for her?

Now there was food for thought.

She slanted a glance at him again, wondering just what sort of man he was. Surely he didn't routinely hire "women of the evening" and parade them past his father and family!

If he did, it was no wonder his father was out of patience with

him.

“You don’t look like you’d have to hire that sort of thing,” she said now.

Nikos blinked. Then, “I don’t,” he said flatly.

“Then why—?”

He plucked irritably at the fabric on the arm of the chair. “Think about it,” he growled at last.

Mari tried. She thought about everything that had happened since she’d knocked on the door, expecting Stavros Costanides and his four-year-old son and getting a virile man clad only in a bath towel instead. A virile man in a bath towel who’d said, “About time,” and then hauled her into his arms and kissed her!

She hurried past that part of the memory before it could affect her equilibrium again. But as soon as she did, she had to back up and go over it again, because somehow she suspected it was the key.

Obviously he’d mistaken her for Miss Truffles. But why was he waiting to kiss Miss Truffles? It wasn’t as if he knew the woman, for heaven’s sake!

Mari was sure he’d never seen her before in his life. Anyway, even in Mari’s non-existent experience, a man didn’t lie in wait to kiss a woman he hired by the hour.

Unless, perhaps, he was doing it for effect.

Effect. On whom?

She remembered the gathering at the poolside. There had been a lot of women, a few children. And his father.

She remembered seeing him there, starting to go over to talk to him, but then him shaking his head and waving her on. Waiting. Watching.

For Nikos to open the door. To meet his nanny. To blow sky-high?

Perhaps. Or maybe to be amenable then to another “discussion” with his father. Yes, she was willing to believe that was what Stavros had been doing.

And Nikos?

She suspected that, for all their differences, he was his father’s son.

“What were you trying to prove?” she asked.

“I wasn’t trying to prove anything. I was trying to get him to damned well throw me out!”

“Ah.” Flaunt the hooker in front of the family and watch Daddy take action. She understood now. But... “He’s keeping you prisoner?”

Nikos lifted the cast. “I can’t drive. As soon as I can, I’m out of here.”

“I see.” She did. Sort of. She wondered what Stavros was playing at, hiring her, then. Nikos was certainly not going to be wearing the cast another six months.

“I doubt it,” he said flatly. “He’s a manipulator.”

“And you’re not?”

He frowned. “I’m only doing this in response to what he’s done. He doesn’t have to keep me here.”

“He started it, in other words?”

The frown deepened. “You make it sound like two little kids fighting.”

“I see some similarity,” Mari pointed out.

“You don’t see a damn thing.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll enlighten me.”

“I don’t want anything to do with you.”

Mari wasn’t entirely sure she wanted anything to do with him, either. If she hadn’t felt what she’d felt when they’d kissed, she would have been running the other way.

“Why are you staying?” Nikos demanded.

“I gave my word.”

“He as much as lied to you!”

“I know that.” Mari shrugged. “I’m not going to play on his level.”

“You’re going to reform me instead?” he said cynically.

I wish, Mari thought. She ran her tongue over her lips. “I’m going to stay here because that’s what I’ve been hired to do. I’m going to try to help because that’s my job. What happens between your father and you—well, I’ll do my best.”

“It won’t be good enough,” Nikos said. Then almost to himself he added, “It never is.”

Mari, caught by his words, wanted to ask what he meant, but he hauled himself to his feet and crutched past her toward his bedroom. “I have a headache. I’m going to sleep. Do whatever the hell you want. Just go away and leave me alone.”

She left him alone.

She went looking for his father. She had plenty of questions that only Stavros Costanides could answer.

He wasn't with his wife and her shower guests. Julietta waved a hand toward the house. "He took Alex in a little while ago. He's probably in his office by now. It's on the second floor. Go right on up. I think he's expecting you." As she said this last with a completely straight face, Mari merely thanked her and headed toward the house.

"I think he's expecting you'," she muttered under her breath. "I'll bet."

Stavros was sitting at his desk, the phone to his ear, when she appeared in the doorway. When he saw her, he smiled and beckoned her in.

Man didn't smile back. She entered the office, but she didn't take the seat he indicated. She had no intention of sitting down and putting herself at an even greater disadvantage.

"Tell Adrianos to get right on it," Stavros said into the phone. "That's right. As quick as he can." This last was almost a bark. Then he hung up and turned a thousand-watt smile on her. "Ah, Miss Lewis, you've come to chat."

"Not quite."

"You can't quit," he reminded her. "You signed the contact."

"I know that. What I don't know is what you expect me to do! If you intended to annoy and humiliate your son, I think you succeeded. Beyond that, I'm at a loss."

“He was annoyed? Good. Humiliated? It serves him right. He has done plenty to humiliate me. And I want exactly what I said that I wanted. He is a problem. I want him not to be.”

“He’s thirty-two years old!”

“And he needs to grow up. He is lazy. He will not work in the company. He would prefer to be sailing his boat. Dancing attendance on unsuitable women. Creating gossip. Irritating me.” He fixed her with a charming, conspiratorial smile. “I want it to stop.”

His smile was, in its way, as handsome as his son’s. But Mari felt no sizzle, only annoyance. “He won’t cooperate, Mr. Costanides.”

He lifted a brow. “And always your charges cooperate, Miss Lewis?” His tone was deceptively mild.

“Not always,” she admitted.

“So you have ways... yes?” He looked hopeful. He made it sound like she tortured them into behaving properly.

“I teach by love and care and example,” she said with an edge to her voice.

He nodded. “Just so.” He steepled his hands on his desk and regarded her complacently over the top of them. “I should like to you love and care for Nikos.”

A frisson of primal fear skittered down her spine. Perhaps it was because he’d used the words love and Nikos in such close proximity—even though Mari knew he didn’t mean that kind of love!

She paced to the far end of his office and turned, with her hands on her hips. “And you think that will work?” she demanded finally, when he just looked at her expectantly.

“My dear Miss Lewis, you yourself assured me it would work.”

“But—”

But there was nothing to say to that because, in fact, she had. And it had worked—with all her other charges. But this was different!

“He’s not a child!” she argued.

“No, he is not. But I lost him when he was a child. I think I have to start there to get him back.”

It was the first real honest remark she thought he’d made. Mari took a seat in the chair she’d been avoiding. “Why, Mr. Costanides?” She leaned her elbows on her knees and rested her chin in her palm so she could look at him as she asked quietly, “Why now?”

For a moment Stavros Costanides stared off out the window toward the beach and the ocean beyond. It was a beautiful view, but Mari didn’t think he was seeing it. What was he seeing? Nikos? As a child? And himself? A young father? His expression grew almost pained for a moment. Then he seemed to recollect himself. His jaw tightened and he looked back at her as he admitted almost grudgingly, “I need him now.”

“You didn’t before?” she pressed.

He gave an irritable wave of his hand. “We don’t talk about

‘before.’ Before is over. It is now that matters. Now and the future.”

Mari didn’t believe that. He’d said himself that what was happening now was a result of what had gone before. But obviously he wasn’t willing to talk about it.

Stavros picked up a silver pen and tapped it on the desk, watching the movement it made for a long moment before he continued his explanation. “I want to slow down. I work too hard. Too many years too hard. I am getting old. Sixty, you know? I don’t have so many years left. Two years ago I had a heart attack. Not bad, you understand. But it scares me a little. I will not live forever. I want to spend time with my wife. My children.” He raised his gaze to meet hers. “You understand?”

“Children?” Mari said archly.

Stavros’s mouth pressed into a thin line for a second, as he absorbed the hit, then he nodded to acknowledge it “My little children. They need a father.”

“And Nikos doesn’t?”

“Nikos is an adult, for all that he acts like an irresponsible idiot!”

And I wonder why that is? Mari said silently. But she just waited for Stavros to continue.

“I keep my company, though,” he said. “I built it!” These last three words were spoken with the most emotion she’d heard from him. “From nothing I built it. Almost thirty-five years I have invested in it. It is my life, my legacy! I won’t see it wasted.” His

eyes met hers again, dark and fierce. "I don't let Nikos waste it!"

"You think he would?" Mari didn't know anything about that possibility.

Stavros made a spitting sound. "Bah. Why wouldn't he?" He picked up a folder from his desk and shoved it at her. "See for yourself!"

Mari took the folder automatically. It was at least an inch thick, filled, she could see, with copies of newspaper clippings. Headlines like "Greek Playboy Turns Heiress's Head" and "Nick the Hunk Bares All" blared out at her. She shut the folder with a snap.

"You see? He knows nothing! He cares nothing! He respects nothing!" Stavros's dark complexion was a deep shade of red. He aimed the pen at her. "That is what I want you to fix."

Helping children become emotionally healthy was something she was pretty good at. Keeping an adult man from running amok in the scandal sheets and driving a family business into the ground was not exactly in the same league.

"I'm not sure..." she began hesitantly.

"I am sure." The pen leveled on her again. "You will teach him to respect."

It was on the tip of Mari's tongue to tell him that respect was earned, not taught, but she didn't think he wanted to hear it.

Stavros tapped the pen irritably on the desktop. "He is smart. He is clever. He could do well if he wanted to. But he has to understand the business, the work I do. He won't. He behaves

like a fool. Then he wants to take over just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “‘I can do it,’ he says. ‘Trust me,’ he says. ‘You want me to take over? Step down, I will take over,’ he says. Never! I never started at the top!”

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.