

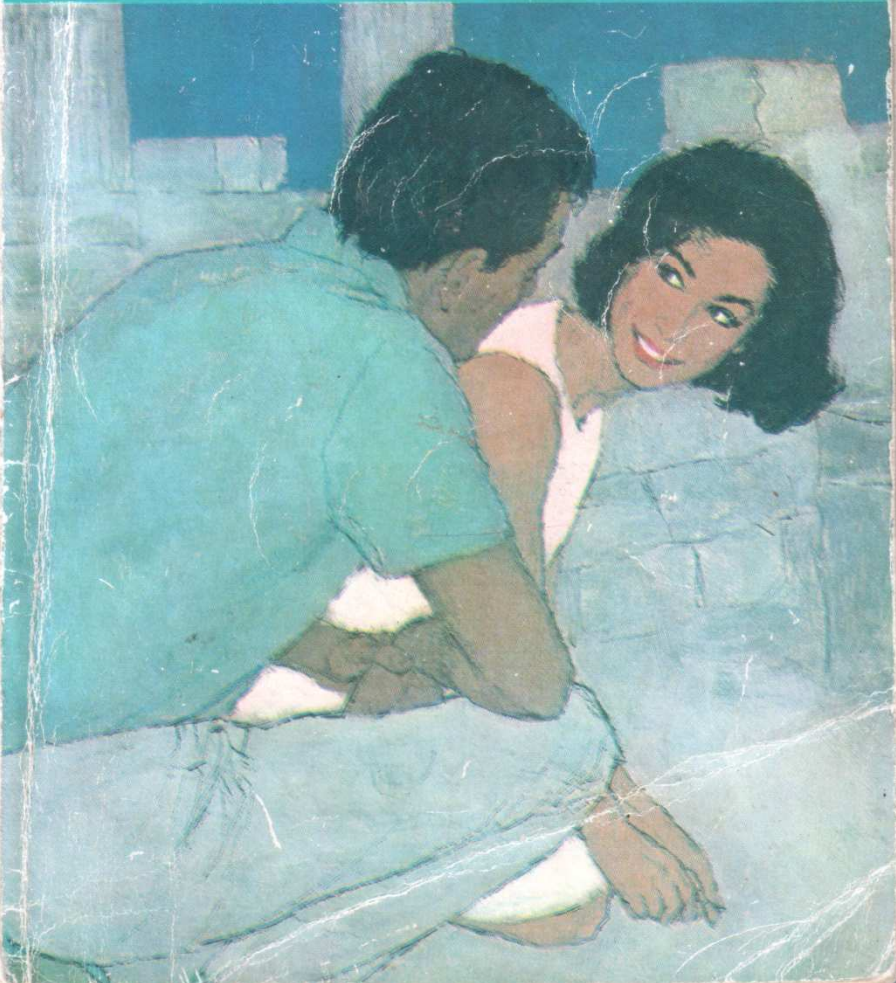


Mills & Boon

734

A THOUSAND STARS

Anne Hampson



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'From the eyes of a maid in love there glows the light of a thousand stars' goes the Eastern saying - and that light had been dimmed from Lisette's eyes when her fiance Dick had gone off on an extended business trip with a glamorous singer, and she was glad of the opportunity to go to the Greek island of Aegina for a while, as companion to the charming Mrs. Mallory. However, there was not only Mrs. Mallory but her nephew, the handsome, unpredictable, stern Greek Sula Condylis. Thoughts of Dick began to fade in the company of the attractive Sula, and Lisette found the light of a thousand stars beginning to shine in her eyes again. But she was still technically engaged to Dick, and Sula - if he should find out about it - would regard the engagement as being just as binding as a marriage. So he must not find out. But suppose he *did* learn how Lisette was deceiving him?

CHAPTER ONE

HUMMING a little tune to herself as she gave a final pat to her short curls, Lisette allowed her gaze to settle for a space on her ring, a single diamond, glistening in the reflected light from the mirror. She was sublimely happy, and it showed - in her fleeting smile and in the glow in her soft almond-shaped eyes. Large and brown, they glowed even brighter as she heard the car stop, followed by the two short pips of the horn which were so familiar. A moment later she was in Dick's arms and he was telling her how beautiful she was.

'I'll never know why you chose me,' he declared for the hundredth time. 'I'm the luckiest man on earth!'

'So am I lucky,' came the spontaneous reply from Lisette as she gazed lovingly into his handsome face. His blue eyes smiled; he thrust a hand through his fair curly hair. 'Dick -I love you, love you, love you!'

They went out to the car hand in hand and drove to the Marton Hotel where the dinner dance was being held. It was the staff dance given by Dick's firm, where he worked as a traveller, or outside representative, as he was now termed. This time the staff dance was something special because the guest of honour was Lana Southern, the famous singer, who was at present staying with one of the directors and his family at their house in Surrey. From there she would be going to the United States, having obtained a contract to tour the country for six months. Her success had been phenomenal, but then she possessed beauty as well as talent. Men could not resist her and already she had had three husbands.

Her beauty had not been over-estimated nor did her pictures do her full credit, Lisette was quick to admit on first seeing her, and Dick heartily agreed. In fact, he seemed quite unable to take his eyes off the singer throughout the entire evening. He danced with her and the two seemed immediately to act as if they had known one another all their lives.

Towards the end of the evening, when Lisette and Dick were sitting together chatting, Lana approached their table and smilingly asked if she might join them.

'Of course,' eagerly from Dick, who instantly gave up his chair and went off to fetch another. The singer's wide blue eyes fixed themselves on Lisette's engagement ring.

'You're lucky,' she purred, her long lashes drooping to mask her expression. 'Richard - he is just something!'

'I think so too,' smiled Lisette, throwing him a tender glance as he returned with the chair and sat down opposite to the singer. The glance went unnoticed, for Dick's eyes were on Lana.

Two days later Dick telephoned Lisette at the office and asked her to lunch with him. Naturally she agreed since this was a special treat, Dick almost invariably being away at lunch time. In fact, his job took him away from home for a week on occasions, although for the most part he and Lisette did manage to see each other three or four times a week.

'This is lovely!' she exclaimed on meeting him outside the restaurant. 'I thought you were going up north today.' She smiled up at him and suddenly a frown knit her brow. 'Are you not well?' she asked anxiously.

Dick shook his head but made no reply until they were seated at the table, when he then told her he had not been into work that day.

'Are you feeling ill?' she asked again, her spine tingling for no apparent reason. Dick looked perfectly well, she now realized - but troubled. No, not troubled exactly; uneasy would be a better word. She waited for him to speak, and this he appeared to have difficulty in doing. However, he managed to speak at last, informing Lisette that Lana Southern had asked him to work for her.

'Work?' interrupted Lisette, bewildered. 'What do you mean?'

'She rang me last evening and asked me to meet her this morning. It was important, she said, and so I went to the coffee bar she mentioned—'

'Instead of going to work?'

His mouth tightened slightly as he nodded.

'She's offered me three times what I'm getting.' Dick fidgeted with his folded serviette, unable to meet Lisette's gaze.

'What sort of work? You have an excellent job,' Lisette's voice was husky, her lovely eyes still bewildered.

'As you probably know, women like Lana have of necessity to have a man around - to keep off the cranks and fens, and of course the press photographers, who are useful at times, but very often they're annoying to a star like Lana. Her husband is a cad, and has left her, although this is not common knowledge at present. And so she has no one to - well - protect her, as it were.'

For a long moment Lisette could only stare unbelievably at her fiancé. Vaguely through her mind ran the thought that Lana's hosts must know her husband had left her - but this was irrelevant and she wondered why it should have occupied her mind when all her dreams seemed to be crashing about her.

'I don't know how you can even consider working for Lana,' she managed at length. 'You're willing to leave me?'

'It's for six months only— Don't look so hurt, darling,' he begged. 'Just try to imagine what it will mean to us - the extra money. We need this money, Lisette. All the struggling we do, you and I, and we don't save a lot, do we? At the rate we're going it'll be another couple of years before we can get married.' Dick looked up as the waitress appeared; he waved her away, telling her to come back in ten minutes' time.

'Are you trying to convince me that you're doing this for us?' Lisette's face was pale. This was not happening, she told herself fiercely, recalling her delight on receiving her fiance's telephone call less than fifteen minutes ago.

'It is for us,' he promptly asserted, and Lisette had the sure conviction that he was trying to convince himself as much as he was trying to convince her.

A nerve throbbed in her temple; the veins, blue and delicate, shone through the transparency of her skin.

'I don't mind waiting,' she told him in distracted tones. 'I've always said so when you yourself have become impatient. We have fun going without things so that we can save.' Yes, they did have fun, especially when they decided to have a reckon up. 'I like going for walks instead of dining out; I don't mind in the least not having new clothes.' Pleadingly she looked at him across the table. 'Can you really leave me for six whole months?'

He moved uncomfortably, but she saw that his jaw was set.

'I had hoped you would understand,' he said coldly at last. 'I felt sure you would see the advantage of my accepting the post. Instead, you're adopting this most unco-operative attitude - being thoroughly unreasonable.'

'Unreasonable!' she retorted, stung by his heartlessness. 'Supposing it were I who had been offered a post that would take me away from you—?'

'I knew that would come,' he snapped. 'You haven't been offered a post, so why begin an argument that can have no satisfactory conclusion?'

'What about when you return?' she asked, her mind clouded by misery. 'You'll have no job.' Lisette recalled what Lana had said about Dick's being 'something'. Lisette also recalled that, during the entire evening of the staff dance, Dick had seemed mesmerized by the beautiful singer, scarcely ever taking his eyes off her. That circumstance took on a deeper significance now. Was Dick attracted to Lana? Could that be the reason why he wanted to accept the post offered? And Lana... What a detestable thing to do!- to tempt a man away from his fiancée. The woman must be completely heartless.

'Jobs are easy to get these days,' Dick was pointing out defensively, and he added, 'I've never cared for my present job anyway, and would soon have considered looking for another.'

'You have an answer for everything, it seems.' She spoke her thoughts aloud and as he did not comment she went on, 'Have you not thought how unhappy I shall be without you? I've given up most of the friends I had, so I'll be quite alone.' Still he made no response and she said, softly and pleadingly, 'Were the positions reversed I shouldn't even consider leaving you - I'd find it impossible.'

'It's for the benefit of us both,' Dick returned stubbornly, and as the waitress reappeared he and Lisette were forced to give their order. She would not be able to eat when it came, decided Lisette, still dazed by what had transpired during the past few minutes, and half believing she was dreaming and would soon awaken from her nightmare.

The meal was eaten in silence; the fact of Lisette's partaking of scarcely anything escaped the notice of her companion, whose thoughts were obviously elsewhere . . . with Lana Southern, no doubt, surmised Lisette, bitterness welling up within her. How little she had known her fiancé, after all. And yet how often he had asserted that they were made for one another, that no two people could ever be as close as they.

'There doesn't seem anything more to say,' she murmured when their coffee had been brought and Dick leant back with his lighted cigarette between his lips. 'Your mind was already made up even before you telephoned me.' A statement; he went slightly red, but his mouth tightened as he took the cigarette from it and held it between his fingers, staring at the rising curl of smoke in order to avoid the eyes of his fiancée.

'I fully expected you to be reasonable.' Dick's voice was pettish and for one impulsive moment Lisette could have taken off her ring and handed it to him. But no, that would be too melodramatic, she decided, and for the next few minutes she sat there, sipping her coffee in silence. Other couples were seated about; nearby a couple of teenagers were holding hands across the table and looking soulfully into one another's eyes. Lisette glanced again at her ring. She said quietly,

'Do you want to break the engagement, Dick?' Her voice was hollow; it did not sound like hers at all.

'Are you crazy!' And indeed he did seem quite dumbfounded at her suggestion.

'I'm dreadfully unhappy,' she returned, a break in her voice. 'Please don't go.. *. please.*'

An impatient sigh issued from his lips, the first she had ever heard from him in the year and a half they had been going out together.

'It's only for six months. Why, it'll be over before you know I've gone.'

'I can't take it in. How can you leave me?' Bewildered her tones, and her lovely eyes beseeched. She felt she was fighting for her very life.

'I know you'll be lonely,' Dick admitted in a softened voice. 'But it'll be worth it, I promise you. I shall save every single penny.'

'I can't take it in,' she repeated, and another sigh of impatience fell from her companion's lips. Nothing could ever be the same again, Lisette told herself miserably, since here was proof that Dick could manage very well without her.

Her entreaties were resumed the next time she and Dick met, but he was determined to go with Lana Southern. In fact, from little things he let slip, Lisette deduced that all the preliminary arrangements had already been made.

'It's the most shocking behaviour on both their parts!' Maureen, Lisette's married sister, was speaking her mind with vehemence. It was three days since Dick and Lana had left by air for America, but this was the first Maureen knew of what had transpired, for Lisette, who had a small flat in town, had kept the secret as long as she could. But always on Fridays she and Dick spent the evening with Maureen and Stephen, and as Lisette saw no

advantage in holding back the news any longer she went to her sister's alone, and within five minutes of her entering the house her sister knew everything, and now Lisette's tears flowed freely, released from the suppression she had imposed upon herself.

'I'd have chucked his damned ring back at him and told him where to go!' Maureen's face was red with temper as she watched her sister endeavouring to dry her eyes. But the tears still came and Maureen added, 'Are you going to sit moping for six months - waiting for that cad?'

'He isn't a cad—'

'Well, you can hardly describe him as the adoring lover! In my opinion you'll do very well without him. Forget him, and start all over again.'

So simple to proffer advice like that. But Lisette's whole life had centred round her fiance. She could never visualize a future without him - no, not even now. Yet this act of his would always be there; she would remember to her dying day that he could leave her for six whole months, remember that she was not as necessary to him as he was to her.

'It's not so easy to start all over again,' she murmured at last through her sobs. 'I gave up everything for Dick; I didn't feel I needed anyone else at all.'

'You'll make new friends. In my opinion this is a warning to you, Lisette - a timely warning. The man's not worth a thought, and if you carry on as you have in the past, working and saving and going without things, then you're not right in your head. Enjoy yourself, because you can be sure *he* will be having a good time ... in his role of gigolo !

'Oh, he isn't—'

'Why delude yourself? Lana Southern's already had three husbands - and heaven knows how many lovers. What makes you think Dick will be immune to temptation?' Lisette said nothing, but she could not help dwelling on these assertions which Maureen so freely voiced. 'He'll be in a servile position,' Maureen added. 'He'll be at the beck and call of his mistress, and he'll jolly well have to pander to her needs.'

Would these needs really include what Maureen was implying? Once again Lisette with a switch of memory saw her fiance holding the singer in his arms as he danced with her ... and only now did Lisette admit that he had held Lana far too intimately, and that it was by design and not by accident that his cheek had rested against hers.

For a whole month Lisette stayed in during the evening, reading or listening to the radio. Dick had promised to write every day, even if it was only a short note, and in fact he had written six times the first week. The second week she received four letters and the third week one. For over a week now she had not heard from him, so there were four of Lisette's letters remaining unanswered. Why didn't she face the truth? she asked herself. And yet the engagement was not broken; as things were Dick would expect her to be waiting when he returned from the tour. Was he saving every penny, as he had promised to do? Lisette herself certainly was, and yet through it all she was constantly aware that things would never be the same again, that she could never forget what Dick had done. Could they be happy? Six months. Already an eternity had passed and she felt they must be strangers when at last he did return to her. Added to this nagging anxiety was the uncertainty of his relationship with the beautiful singer. Was he already her lover? The idea was too hurtful, and yet she could not help dwelling on it. But her mind was diverted somewhat when one day she met an old friend who was now married. They met in the park, both having gone out into the spring sunshine during the lunch hour break from their respective places of work.

'How nice to see you!' The exclamation was balm to Lisette's wound, as it was spoken with obvious sincerity. 'How's Dick?'

'He's working away at present,' was all the information Lisette would provide at this stage, for she did not want pity from this old friend of hers. 'How are you? You're looking fine. Marriage agrees with you.'

Sylvia blushed and nodded, then suggested they sit down on the seat under the trees.

'Mother's very ill,' Sylvia was saying a moment later, her eyes clouding suddenly. 'Susan's had to give up a marvellous job in order to be at home with her. I would have given up mine, but Susan wouldn't hear of it. She says I need the money more than she does - with having to furnish a home and pay the mortgage on the house.'

'I'm sorry to hear about your mother. Is it very serious? I mean, she'll get better?'

'Oh, we think so. But it'll be a long job, the doctor says.' A small pause and then, 'Susan's a good sport, because the job was just what she wanted. She's tried for several jobs abroad, and always failed to get one until this came along. It's in Aegina - a Greek island.

Have you heard of it?'

'Yes; it's supposed to be very beautiful.'

'Most of the Greek islands are. Susan was to look after an old lady - act as sort of companion-cum- nurse.'

'A Greek woman?'

'No. This woman's English. Her nephew, though, is Greek. He came to London to interview the applicants, and I think he chose Susan because she's older - she's thirty-six, as you know.' A wry smile touched Sylvia's lips. 'He didn't have much of an opinion of young women, not from what Susan gathered. And was the interview tough! He asked her just about everything he could think of.'

'I suppose he had to make quite sure before offering her the post, because of the expense of the journey out there.'

'That's what I said. But Susan wasn't at all enamoured with this Greek - Sula Condylis, his name is, and Susan said he was so pompous and superior that she felt no bigger than a flea!'

Lisette had to laugh. Susan was so confident as a rule, and had often bragged that she could stand up to anyone.

'Would she have had much to do with him - had she taken the post, I mean?'

'Shouldn't imagine so, otherwise she'd never have agreed to go and work over there. She said she just couldn't stand the man.'

'He sounds awful. Why should he be like that, I wonder?'

'Dunno. Susan got the impression that he intensely disliked females in any shape or form.' Sylvia laughed and went on to say that he would like them less when he received Susan's letter saying she could not now take the post. 'Just think, he came all this way in order to interview the applicants, and the one he chose has let him down.'

'Surely he'll understand,' said Lisette indignantly. 'Your mother comes first, after all,'

'Certainly she does, but I very much doubt whether that high-and-mighty Greek will think so.'

'He can't dislike all females,' said Lisette a trifle absently, for she was not really interested in the conversation and only carried it on out of politeness. 'He must like his aunt, simply because of all the trouble he went to in order to find her a suitable companion.'

'Perhaps it's only the younger generation of females he doesn't like. They're a peculiar lot in many ways, these Greeks. Have dozens of lovers and then expect to marry a virgin. Now where do you find a virgin when they're all being seduced?'

'They don't seduce their own women,' explained Lisette, who had read a little about the way of life in Greece. 'Their own girls are too well protected by their fathers and brothers, so the men find foreign women to pass the time with until they decide to marry.'

'I see. So that could explain the man's attitude. It's probably only Western girls he doesn't like.'

By this time Lisette was growing bored by the subject and she changed it, inquiring about Sylvia's other relatives, and glancing at her wristlet watch as she did so, because she had further to walk than Sylvia, and she had no wish to be late for work.

'If you get lonely come and see us,' invited Sylvia as the two girls parted at the gate. 'Just give me a tinkle first, to be sure we'll be in.'

Thanks, I will. It does get a bit lonely sometimes.' Another week passed and still there was no word from Dick. In spite of herself Lisette was fast becoming embittered. And she was becoming restless too. She felt she could not go on like this for another four and a half months and when, on visiting Sylvia one evening, she was told about the reply to Susan's letter, she found herself actually quivering with excitement.

The old lady's asked Susan to find someone to take her place?³

'That's what I've just said.' Sylvia was in the kitchen making coffee and sandwiches, while her husband had just popped out to buy the evening paper and a packet of cigarettes. The nephew doesn't know anything about it, apparently, because he's had to go somewhere on business. The old girl opened the letter on seeing the postmark.'

'Will he be mad, do you think?' 'Not as mad as if no one at all turned up. Shouldn't imagine he wants to go through it all again - the advertising and the interviews.'

'Has - has Susan anyone in mind?' What was she saying? Lisette asked herself. It would be quite unfair to take the post and then leave in a few months' time.

'Not as far as I know. She was trying one or two of her more venturesome friends, but she hasn't rung for a couple of days, so I've no news—' She stopped, the breadknife poised. 'You! Are you contemplating the possibility of going?'

Mechanically Lisette nodded.

'I wouldn't mind.' She stopped at Sylvia's look of astonishment; then, after only a trace of hesitation, went on to explain everything to her friend. Sylvia's eyes became even wider as Lisette talked and when Lisette had finished she said in disbelief,

'Dick's gone and left you? But you were so devoted to one another! How could he go off like that?'

'It's so he can save more,' began Lisette, then pulled herself up, aware of just how weak and unconvincing the explanation was. Dick had *wanted* to go, either for the adventure of travelling to the United States, or, more likely, for the pleasure of being with Lana Southern. 'Do you think I could do the work?' she asked, anxious to change the subject before more questions were put by the astounded Sylvia.

'The work? Oh, yes - er - yes, I expect so,' Sylvia was shaking her head and it was plain that her thoughts were still on what she had just heard. 'But the post was supposed to be permanent, and you say Dick will be back by the middle of July.'

A bitter smile touched the full, generous mouth; Lisette said,

'He'll be back in England, yes, but whether he'll come back to me is another matter. He - he might already have fallen for Lana.' The words came slowly, and with difficulty, and ready tears filmed Lisette's eyes. It did not seem possible that Dick could ever love someone else. She and he were meant for each other. He was hers and she was his; it was as simple as that - had been right from the very first meeting. But now ...

'Would you take the post permanently?' Sylvia was clearly feeling embarrassed and she bent to her task again, cutting thin slices of bread from the brown loaf on the board.

'That I can't truthfully say,' admitted Lisette. And she added, 'It wouldn't be fair to take the post and then leave.' She paused in thought, then shook her head. 'No, I'll not bother. You see, the way I feel now, it seems that Dick and

I can never successfully pick up the threads, but if he does come back to me then I'm sure I'll feel differently - that I shall want him.' Her voice caught because of the tightness in her throat.

Sylvia's face flushed with anger, just as Maureen's had done, but the anger was not expressed in words, as Sylvia did not consider she had the right to voice her opinion.

'I'll give Susan a ring in a minute,' she said, just as if Lisette had not spoken, 'and see if the post is still vacant.'

'He wants an older woman, though,' said Lisette in a sort of panic-stricken tone. 'No, Sylvia, I'd better forget the whole thing.'

But she did not forget it. When Sylvia rang her sister and discovered that no one had yet been persuaded to take her place, Lisette once again found herself quivering with excitement. She could take the post and after a month or two she would be able to see the position between Dick and herself more clearly. If he should resume his letters, and be "tender and loving, she would tell her employer that she would soon be leaving. This nephew of hers would then have time to find someone else. And should Dick not write then Lisette would have to face the fact that the affair was at an end, in which case she would remain in Greece - if she liked the work, that was.

CHAPTER TWO

AFTER flying to Athens Lisette took a taxi to Piraeus, from where she caught the ferry to the island of Aegina. In just over an hour she would be there; less than half an hour after that she would be meeting her new employer. Lisette was glad that the nephew would not be there; she wanted to settle in before undergoing the ordeal of meeting the arrogant and superior Sula Condylis. A faint smile touched Lisette's lips as, standing by the rail as the small craft left the quay at Piraeus, she dwelt on the conversation she had had with Susan. After her initial surprise Susan had been rather relieved to find that Lisette would be willing to accept the post as companion to old Mrs. Mallory.

'I felt terribly guilty at letting her down,' Susan owned to Lisette, 'and for that reason I was anxious to help her, when she suggested I find a substitute. It was proving more difficult than I at first surmised - but then I expected people to be like me, and have an insatiable urge to go abroad.' Susan had then gone on to talk about Sula, and although a sudden grimace betrayed an inner humour Susan's mouth was tight, and it was not difficult to conclude that she intensely disliked the man who had interviewed her for the post. 'However,' continued Susan, 'you'll not be meeting him yet awhile because he's away from home, so his aunt says in her last letter. It's perhaps as well that you'll be settled down - and have proved satisfactory - before he meets you, because, quite frankly, he strikes me as the type who, if he didn't like the look of you, would pack you back to England without even giving you a trial. As I said to Sylvia, he seemed to approve of me only because I was older than the other applicants. I gained the impression that he was wary of the youngsters who might be interested only in the glamour of living on a Greek island.'

'I sincerely hope I do prove to be satisfactory to his aunt,' put in Lisette a trifle anxiously. 'If I don't I shall find myself back in England, without a job, and blaming myself for acting so impulsively.'

A strange look passed between Susan and her sister. Sylvia said, without much expression,

'It was a retaliatory action, wasn't it, Lisette?'

Faint colour fused Lisette's cheeks. She nodded her head.

'In a way, it was. Although,' she added instantly, 'I seemed to have come to a stage when I just couldn't settle. I felt the need for a complete change. I'm not nearly so restless now that I've made up my mind to go to Greece.'

'I hope everything will turn out just as you want it to,' from Susan, who looked sympathetically at her. 'You might come to like the island so much that you won't want to come home again.'

Lisette nodded, aware of what the two sisters were thinking. Maureen had again voiced her own thoughts, and these two girls were of the same opinion. Dick had acted in a callous manner, and he wasn't worth the devotion which Lisette had always lavished upon him. By this time Lisette was reluctantly beginning to agree about that, but she still loved Dick, and each moment away from him hurt abominably. This post abroad would help, though; she would be busier than she had been at the office. Moreover, she would not be alone during the evenings, which had seemed so long since Dick went away. Her employer would in all probability require her to read to her after dinner, or perhaps talk or walk in the garden. Yes, time would be filled and, therefore, would pass much more swiftly than it had done in recent weeks.

Lisette's musings were interrupted by the activity aboard the little vessel. People were talking excitedly; cabin boys were distributing paper containers and old, black-robed women were crossing themselves as their lips moved in prayer. A rough passage was expected. Automatically Lisette glanced about her. It was a very small craft indeed and Lisette did not know whether or not she was a good sailor. Well, she would soon find out, she thought wryly, and went inside to find herself a seat. She was invited to sit next to a young woman. With her was her husband and two small children, a girl and a boy. The girl was already asleep, stretched out on the seat; the boy was whimpering and his father reached for a container, handing it to his wife. He smiled at Lisette, who responded, then leant back. The boat moved and the bright caiques and larger craft receded, being left safe in the harbour of Piraeus, which was soon a semi-circle of indistinct white buildings with grey, ominous clouds gathering in the sky above.

For a short time the sun managed to shine through the clouds, and it produced a metallic effect on the sea, but soon the clouds triumphed and one vast cumulonimbus portended imminent rain, probably to be accompanied by a thunderstorm.

'Ayios Christopholos ... Ayios Nikolaos ... Ayios Georgios ...' The old woman at the other side of Lisette was praying to all the saints as she repeatedly made the sign of the Cross. The young man beyond her was cutting a lemon in half. Across the old woman he handed a piece to Lisette, who took it out of politeness, thanking the man, who said,

'Suck it - all the time. I have plenty more. You'll not be sick. Eat the skin as well - go on, try it now!'

'Yes.' Gingerly she bit at the peel, which she then chewed in obedience to the order being rapped out at her from across the old black-clad Greek peasant woman. 'It's very good.'

'Good? Yes. And it stop you from being ill.'

Lightning flashed as he spoke and a clap of thunder followed; then the rain came, in one continuous sheet, tropical rain that lashed the writhing sea and the windows of the tiny craft. It rocked, and cries went up as articles placed on the table were thrown to the floor. Cabin boys were still rushing about, emptying containers and providing others. They alone appeared to be enjoying the voyage; they laughed together and hummed to themselves as they raced around, cheerful as birds in spring.

Lisette felt her stomach lurch and took a large bite out of her lemon. It set her teeth on edge, but she persevered. She felt better, but looked out of the window instead of at the people, most of whom were ill. Islands rose from out of the gloom, their twisted barren peaks resembling the horns of grotesque monsters; the sea frothed and boiled and waves rose high, tossing the *Mykenai* about as if it were a mere cork.

'The sun come out soon,' said the man with the lemons, and a young woman sitting opposite nodded her head.

Lisette looked doubtfully at the sky and decided it would be a very long while before the sun appeared. But she was mistaken; the clouds parted miraculously an hour later as the boat was approaching Aegina, and the sun appeared, shining over the lower slopes of the island and revealing them to be lush and colourful - in great contrast to the unclothed heights above.

As the boat drew closer Lisette discerned rocky cliffs interspersed with smooth sandy beaches backed by tall stately palms and ancient plane trees. The hills in the distance were clothed with olives, their silver-grey leaves fluttering and twisting in the breeze. White buildings appeared, and the campanile of a church shone brilliantly in the sun. Cubic houses dotted the hillsides, flowers spilling from their balconies even at this time of the year.

On disembarking Lisette was approached by the taxi driver she had been told would be there to meet her. He was stout and brown and his ready smile was generously illuminated by flashes of gold. Lisette was soon to learn that the Greeks loved to have their fillings made of this precious metal.

'Miss Tracy?' Half question, half statement and Lisette nodded and smiled. 'My name's Panos.' A chubby hand was extended and Lisette put hers into it. 'Welcome to Aegina!'

'Thank you.' She got into the cab and watched as her luggage was picked up and put into the boot. 'I understand we haven't very far to go?'

'Not far, madam.' Sliding into his seat, Panos started the car and soon they were passing along a street of white, flower-bedecked houses. Lisette was struck by this whiteness; it was everywhere, and she was also struck by the peace, and the paucity of traffic. The island seemed like paradise after the rush and bustle of the big town in which she had worked and lived.

Within a few minutes of leaving the quay they had also left the houses and were climbing into the foothills of the mountains, thick with trees and brilliant with yellow flowers. Here and there was an orange grove, or a pistachio orchard, while everywhere flourished the ubiquitous olive trees and vines. Lisette had been told that Aegina was a green island, and this was proving to be true. As the road wound its way into the heart of the mountains, passing through the lovely villages of Ayios Nektarios and

Messagros, the scenery became even more spectacular, with pine forests taking over from the less hardy trees growing lower down. It was a breathtaking vista such as Lisette had never before encountered and excitement held her despite the ever-present heaviness of her heart. This was a new life into which she was entering and whether it was to be temporary or not seemed unimportant at this time. She would try to put from her the old life and enjoy what the new one had to offer. Perhaps she would be called upon to work very hard; that did not matter. She would enjoy working - so long as her employer was pleasant, and she did seem to be, judging by her letters to Susan, which had been shown to Lisette.

'We are on the other side of the island now,' Panos was saying as they drove on through the wooded mountains. There, on that crest, you can see the Temple of Aphaia—' He broke off as Lisette gave a gasp of appreciation, and then added with a smile, 'You like?'

'It's wonderful!' And it was. Poised in solitude on a plateau on the summit of a hill covered with pines, the grey limestone Doric temple stood etched against the sky, while below - far below - the merciless sea battered at the ragged cliffs. Clawing mist hung low in the clefts of the mountains; the dimness produced seemed only to illustrate the magnificence of the temple. Out across the sea other islands could be seen, floating vaguely like marine monsters that would dive suddenly, and disappear. The sun, still shining weakly, was dropping in the west, leaving a trail of lurid yellow on the sea. 'The temple's been so beautifully restored. Lisette spoke hastily on realizing that the driver was waiting for her to continue - waiting with his eyes on her, and not the road!

'You go there soon - yes?'

'Yes.'

He turned his head again to look at her.

'You have ... no man?'

She frowned slightly. What did he mean?

'I'm not married, if that's what you mean,' she replied innocently.

Then you let me take you to the temple? I take you to other places also. You like?'

She understood, so her tone was a little cold as she answered,

'I've come here to work - for Mrs. Mallory. I don't expect I'll have much time for going out.' Which was the wrong thing to say, although at this stage Lisette did not know enough about Greek men to realize she should have been much more firm than that.

'You have time off. Yes, of course you do. I call for you— Tomorrow evening I telephone and make arrangements.' He paused to negotiate a hairpin bend and then asked Lisette her name.

'Miss Tracy, you know that,' she said stiffly, and then added, 'You mustn't telephone me, understand?'

The man looked pained.

'Not Miss Tracy,' he said, ignoring her last words. 'What is your given name?'

Lisette sat back in her seat and pressed her lips together. She was learning quickly and although he again spoke to her she retained a frigid silence: and this was continued right up to the front door of the magnificent white villa which they had approached along an avenue of plane trees interspersed with fragrant shrubs and flanked by terraced gardens blazing with exotic colour.

'Thank you,' was all that Lisette said as Panos put her bags on the white marble step. She rang the bell, relieved to see the man get into his car and drive away. The door was opened by a Greek maid who smiled and said,

'Miss Tracy? Mrs. Mallory said I must take you to her as soon as you arrived. Come with me, please.'

Hesitating, Lisette glanced at her suitcases, but the girl said she would send someone to see to them immediately, and they would be taken up to her room.

'Thank you.' Lisette followed the girl through the big square hall, along a wide passage and entered a south-facing sitting-room furnished entirely in the English style. Mrs. Mallory extended a hand to Lisette, apologizing at her inability to rise from her chair.

'I'm so glad you could come, Miss Tracy,' she said with a smile as she grasped Lisette's hand firmly. 'It was such a disappointment to receive your friend's letter saying she now had other commitments. However, I'm sure you'll suit me just as well.' She broke off to tell the maid to bring tea and cakes and then invited Lisette to sit down. 'Have you had a good journey, dear?' Her pale lined face was a trifle anxious as she added a question about the crossing from Piraeus. 'The sea was very rough?'

'Yes, but I was on the boat only about an hour and a half. The flight from England was very smooth and enjoyable.'

'So long as you weren't ill on the boat - I'm sure I should have been, because I just abhor the sea even when it's calm.' Mrs. Mallory picked up her spectacles from the table at her elbow. 'You know the duties, I expect?'

'Sylvia - Miss Craig did explain. You require a companion?'

'Rather more than that, I'm afraid. Today I'm not so bad, although I can't walk, and quite often I *can* just manage to get about with the aid of a stick. However, I'm having a good day, on the whole. Sometimes I have to stay in bed; it's my heart, you see, but rheumatism as well - the scourge of old age, my dear, and nobody seems to do anything about it. Why do we have to grow old when all we can expect is discomfort? Don't you think it's very bad management on someone's part?'

Lisette felt at a loss as to how to answer this and she remained thoughtfully silent. Mrs. Mallory appeared to understand, for she laughed and, changing the subject, asked Lisette to tell her about herself. 'I felt I knew all about Miss Craig because Sula, my nephew, had interviewed her and was quite

satisfied with her. She was a sensible young woman, he said - though not too young, as you know. I was surprised that he was satisfied with her, for he is *so* difficult! Nothing pleases him, believe me. He finds fault with everybody and everything! Of course, I'll admit he's had trials with these companions of mine—'

Abruptly she stopped, staring at Lisette as if to ascertain just how much she had deduced from those unthinking words. Lisette had deduced nothing whatsoever, as the blank expression on her face denoted. The old woman breathed a sigh of relief. 'As I was saying, my dear, I felt I knew Miss Craig, but you ... I know nothing.' She peered at Lisette, automatically leaning forward in her chair. Her eyesight was none too good, Lisette realized, and wondered why She did not put on her spectacles. They were in her hand, and it would almost seem that she had completely forgotten they were there. 'I suppose you've been wondering about me? - wondering how I come to be here in Greece, and with a nephew who is wholly Greek?'

'I admit I was rather puzzled, but of course I wasn't really curious.'

'You weren't?' with some measure of surprise. 'Sula should be pleased with you, since he himself is never curious about people. But I'm afraid his disinterest stems from boredom. People bore him, and I expect that's because he has so little patience. As I've just said, he finds fault with everything and everyone; he's so very hard to please. I expect that's why he's never married - no woman comes up to his high standards.' These last words were added as an afterthought, and were quite irrelevant, but even on this short acquaintance Lisette was beginning to realize that Mrs. Mallory talked about what was in her mind at one given moment, irrespective of any questions she had previously asked, or any swaying from one subject to an entirely different one. 'Now, what was I saying before . . .?' A frown of concentration settled on Mrs. Mallory's brow and her blue eyes flickered. 'Ah, yes! You were asking why I was English—'

'No, I wasn't,' objected Lisette without thinking that it might be considered rude to interrupt. 'If you remember I said I was not really curious.'

'Sorry, dear, of course you did. Well, to explain - even though you aren't curious. I married Sula's uncle, who was Greek, and my name was Condylis,

like that of Sula. When my husband died ten years ago I came to housekeep for Sula who was then only twenty-three. Four years ago I met and married an Englishman and moved back to my own country. I suppose I'd been away too long, though, because I wasn't happy. Perhaps I'd have persevered had my husband lived, but he was knocked down by a car and died a week later. We'd been married just over a year, and Sula came over and fetched me back to his home.' She stopped a moment and an almost tender smile hovered on her thin pale lips. 'Sula must have a soft spot for me, because he knew I was no longer in good health, and that I would become even more inactive as time went on. He doesn't seem to mind that I've become a liability to him.'

Lisette said nothing; she was thinking that Sula Condylis must be a man of dual personality, yet in spite of this conclusion she could not dispel the vision she had built up of him, both from things Susan had said and from things his aunt had mentioned only a few moments ago. He made an unattractive picture and Lisette sincerely hoped she would be able to avoid too much contact with him. That he had an exaggerated sense of his own superiority was plain; that he lacked tolerance and patience was also plain. It was as well that he had never married, since he would surely make some poor woman's life a misery.

Dismissing the absent Sula from her mind, Lisette returned her attention to the woman sitting in the big armchair opposite to her. About sixty years of age, Mrs. Mallory was slender of build and aristocratic of bearing, despite a back that was slightly bent and a leg that was swollen. Her hair was grey but smartly set, with waves at the front and a bun at the back. Her skin was lined but otherwise unblemished; her blue eyes were large and her lashes thick and long. In her youth she must have been a beauty, was Lisette's firm conclusion as, noting her interest, the woman smiled and put on her spectacles.

'You haven't told me about yourself,' she said, taking off her spectacles again and proceeding to polish them with her handkerchief. 'You have parents, I suppose, and sisters and brothers?'

'I have one sister, and that is all. My parents are both dead.'

'How sad. You just have this one sister, you say? And what about a boy-friend?' Before Lisette had time to reply Mrs. Mallory had gone on to say, 'But no, of course you haven't a boy-friend - not one that matters, obviously. Otherwise you wouldn't be here. We don't go off and leave those we love.'

Lisette looked down at her hands; bitterness sweeping over her as she recalled the ease with which Dick had gone off and left her. His ring was hidden, for one of Lisette's hands was resting on the other. She glanced up; the old woman was still polishing her spectacles and swiftly Lisette removed the ring, slipping it into her pocket. Far simpler to forget all about her engagement for the time being, she decided, glancing up as the maid entered with the tea tray.

'Thank you, Chrystalla; just leave it on this table. That's right. Have you seen to everything in Miss Tracy's room?'

'Yes, Madam Mallory.'

'And her luggage has been taken up?'

'Yes - er—' She turned to Lisette. 'Do you want me to unpack for you?'

'Yes, please, if it's not too much trouble.'

'Nothing's ever too much trouble for Chrystalla,' put in Mrs. Mallory. 'We are certainly blessed here with the most willing servants - but then of course Sula chose them. He never makes a mistake in his judgment of people.' By this time Chrystalla had left the room and Mrs. Mallory asked Lisette to pour the tea. The spectacles were fixed at long last and the first thing Mrs. Mallory did was to peer keenly at Lisette, who was now closer in any case, standing at the table which was by her employer's chair.

'Good God!' suddenly exclaimed the old lady, and so sharp was the tone that Lisette actually jumped.

'Is something wrong?' she asked anxiously.

'Wrong! How old are you?'

'Twenty-two—'

'And you don't even look that! Now, what's to be done? Didn't Miss Craig tell you that my nephew preferred older women?'

Lisette swallowed.

'Yes, she did hint at something of the sort - but I don't see what difference it makes, not so long as my work is satisfactory.'

'Oh, dearie me!' Mrs. Mallory took off her spectacles and shook her head. 'Now we're in for trouble, both of us. Sula doesn't know anything about this change-over; he wasn't here when I sent the letter requesting Miss Craig to find a substitute. He'll be furious—!'

'But why? If I do my job efficiently he can't have any complaint.' Lisette looked indignantly at her employer, the tea forgotten. 'Why does he have this preference for older women?'

'Woman, in the singular,' said Mrs. Mallory absently, forgetting that she herself had mentioned women only a moment ago. 'This time, he said, he'd have someone with a little common sense. And what have we? A young girl - just like all ...' The voice trailed away and once again its owner examined Lisette's face to ascertain how much she had guessed. Lisette frowned, but eventually shook her head in bewilderment.

'I don't understand, Mrs. Mallory. You've had a great number of companions?'

'I've had quite a few—' She broke off and shrugged her shoulders. 'Never mind, my dear,' she said reassuringly. 'You're here now, so he'll just have to get used to you. And in any case, I'm sure you're a sensible type.' The spectacles were fixed again and another examination took place, with Lisette standing there, feeling like something in a shop window. 'Yes, you've a sensible sort of face, so I don't see how he can object to your working for me.'

'Obviously these young women have, one and all, proved unsatisfactory.' Lisette picked up the teapot but made no immediate attempt to pour the tea. 'You've been unfortunate, Mrs. Mallory, and I must say that it seems a strange coincidence that they were all the same. But I assure you it had nothing to do with their age.'

'Oh, but it had!' A small pause followed during which Mrs. Mallory appeared to be endeavouring to make up her mind about something. At last she said, with a note of determination in her voice, 'You see, my dear, they all—' She stopped as the door opened. Turning, Lisette stared at the tall man standing there, just inside the room, his hands thrust deeply into the pockets of a light grey linen jacket of superlative cut and fit. The dark brown hair was slightly awry, due to the wind blowing outside; the topaz eyes were narrowed and alert. Beneath the high cheekbones, over which a very dark unblemished skin was tightly drawn, were deep hollows which lent an added angularity to features which were already clear-cut and lean.

Lisette gave a little inward gasp. The man was unbelievably handsome, but in a sort of severe and chilling way. One could look, and admire, she decided, but one could never get close to such a man. She thought of the picture her mind had conjured up; the arrogance and air of superiority were there, but of course Lisette had not envisaged anyone so inordinately good-looking as this man who, having taken a couple of steps into the room, stopped again, his eyes fixed on Lisette's face.

'Who are you?' he asked in perfect English, and in the most attractive voice Lisette had ever heard. It was deep and rich and contained an edge of authority which made Lisette feel quite small and she was reminded of what Susan had said about feeling no bigger than a flea!

'Oh, dear, you *would* come back just now,' complained his aunt. 'You were supposed to be in the capital for the next ten days or so.'

'My business couldn't be conducted owing to the absence of one of the directors,' he explained, his eyes leaving Lisette's face for a moment to rest in a puzzled way on his aunt. 'Aren't you going to introduce me? I must say, you don't appear at all pleased to see me.'

'I was never less pleased to see you!' She looked at Lisette, then told her to leave the room. This Lisette was glad to do, as, having seen Sula Condylis, she had no wish to be present while the explanations were being made.

'Come back in half an hour, dear.' 'Yes, Mrs. Mallory.' Without even a glance in Sula's direction Lisette went out, pulling the door to behind her. She had not taken more than half a dozen steps when Chrystalla appeared.

'Your suitcases are locked, Miss Tracy—' 'Of course they are. I'm sorry; I'll have to get the key from my handbag. It's in the sitting-room.'

'Shall I be unpacking your hand luggage?' asked „Chrystalla, and Lisette nodded. She ran to the door, hoping to get her bag before the conversation between Mrs. Mallory and her nephew got under way, but she was disappointed, for the whole appeared to have already been blurted out and Lisette halted by the door, unable to go in.

'So you have it all, Sula, for there was nothing to be gained by beating about the bush. She's here and we can't very well send her back without giving her a trial.'

'She's going back, you can be sure of that! There'll be no trial either! If you had to ask Miss Craig to find a substitute then why didn't you make it clear that you wanted someone her own age - or older?'

'I didn't want anyone her age or older. You did.' 'Don't let's get ourselves into an argument. You know the reason why I won't have stupid, featherbrained English girls in this house, girls who invariably follow the same pattern—'

'And fall in love with you.' The voice was untroubled now and faintly tinged with humour. 'You shouldn't be so attractive, Sula. Your uncle was the same; no girl could resist him. I certainly couldn't.' An exasperated sigh was the only response from Sula and his aunt continued, 'Personally, I feel she'll be different from the rest. She seems to be a sensible sort of girl.' A small pause as if giving Sula an opportunity to speak. Lisette knew she should move, but curiosity held her to the spot. Chrystalla had disappeared, so there was no one to know she had eavesdropped. 'I'm fairly certain that she won't follow the same pattern; I can't imagine her sitting there, making play at you the

way the others did - with their soulful eyes. It was embarrassing for you, Sula, I do admit that—'

'She's going,' interrupted Sula at last. 'When I recall the way that Margot used to sit there, right opposite me, and flutter her damned silly eyelashes—I was driven at last to leaving the dinner table on occasions, as you know.'

'You've no proof that Miss Tracy will be the same.'

'All young English girls who take these kind of posts do so with the idea of finding a husband - or at least a rich lover. That's why I said that the next would be an older woman, one who was obviously resigned to spinsterhood.'

By this time Lisette's shackles were well and truly up. The pompous, self-opinionated creature! Perhaps girls in the past had fallen for him, but that didn't prove that she herself would do so. She moved away and went upstairs, forgetting the key until she saw Chrystalla standing by the chair on which she had placed one of the suitcases. With a sigh of impatience at her own forgetfulness Lisette turned instantly and went downstairs again. Her knock on the door was answered by an invitation to enter, spoken in a masculine voice. Mrs. Mallory frowned, however, and reminded Lisette that only a couple of minutes had elapsed.

'I told you to come back in half an hour, if you remember?'

'I came for my handbag,' Lisette began, when she was interrupted by Mrs. Mallory, who introduced her to Sula. 'How do you do,' she said stiffly, and picked up her handbag from the chair where she had left it. Her cold treatment created a tense atmosphere which lasted until Lisette reached the door. Then Sula spoke before she could leave the room.

'There's been a misunderstanding, Miss Tracy. You are not suitable for the post of companion to my aunt.'

Turning, Lisette allowed her eyes to run disdainfully over him. He seemed to give a slight start, a circumstance which afforded Lisette enormous satisfaction. But, basically, her spirits were low. She was to pay for her

impulsive act in coming here; she was to be sent home and there was no job to which she could go - not immediately.

'Mrs. Mallory has been telling me that you prefer someone older. I'm sorry I'm unsuitable, Mr. Condylis, but unfortunately I can't help my age.' And without even waiting to note the effect of those words on the arrogant Sula Condylis Lisette turned stiffly away towards the door. Nevertheless, she would dearly have loved to see his face at this moment, since she felt sure that no girl had treated him with such icy indifference as she.

Half an hour later she returned to the sitting-room, in obedience to Mrs. Mallory's request. The old lady was sitting in her chair, frowning darkly, but she looked up as Lisette moved from the door into the centre of the room.

'You didn't have your tea,' she began, rather absently, her thoughts plainly being on something more important than tea.

'I don't feel like any. When do you want me to leave?'

'I don't want you to leave, but my nephew does.' Watching her, Lisette wondered if she would disclose the reason for her nephew's attitude, as she had obviously intended doing when she was interrupted by the arrival of Sula. However, if the idea did occur she Allowed it to pass, probably of the opinion that there was nothing to be gained now that Sula was so adamant about Lisette's leaving the island. 'He says you must stay tonight—'

'How generous of him,' Lisette couldn't resist exclaiming. 'I believe there isn't a ferry to Piraeus this evening in any case.'

'That wouldn't matter; Sula has a launch. You'd never get him on one of these public ferries - dear me, no. He uses his own launch all the time.'

Too high-and-mighty to use the public launch, was he? Insufferable snob!

'I leave in the morning, then?' 'I'm afraid so, dear.' Mrs. Mallory looked apologetically at her. 'I've caused you considerable inconvenience, and I must make some sort of reparation. I've a little money saved—'

'I want nothing more than my fare,' interrupted Lisette quietly. That I can't afford to lose, and therefore I'll have to insist on having it refunded.'

'Certainly you shall have your fare. I'm so sorry.' Clearly Mrs. Mallory was uncomfortable and Lisette had to feel sorry for her. It wasn't her fault, after all. The situation resulted from the unreasonable attitude of her nephew.

Dinner was an ordeal, but Lisette maintained an icy front, speaking only when she was spoken to - and never once directing a glance at Sula. Immediately the meal was over she rose stiffly, excused herself and, with a fleeting glance of disinterest for Sula, she left the dining-room. A short while later Chrystalla appeared with a message. Mr. Sula wanted to know if Lisette would join his aunt and himself for coffee.

'Thank Mr. Sula, but tell him I prefer to remain in my room. Perhaps you will see that my coffee is brought up to me?'

'Certainly, madam.'

That, decided Lisette with satisfaction as the girl nodded and departed, should be more than enough to put the conceited, self-opinionated Sula Condylis well and truly in his place.

CHAPTER THREE

THE feeling of nausea came upon Lisette immediately she lay down. She should not have drunk the coffee, she decided, sitting up and taking a small bottle of aspirins from her handbag. An hour later, having tossed and turned from one side of the bed to the other, she got up and sat by the window, opening it so that she could have air. But she shivered, and all at once she was shocked to realize that she had all the symptoms of influenza. She must have caught a cold while on the boat; the wind was icy when she stood by the rail and even inside the saloon there was a cold damp chill.

It was dawn before she slept and when Chrystalla wakened her at eight o'clock with tea on a tray Lisette was soaked in perspiration.

'Mr. Sula asked me to remind you that your boat sails at ten o'clock—' Chrystalla stopped on seeing Lisette's unsuccessful attempt to sit up in bed. 'Is anything wrong, madam?'

Lisette's throat was swollen; she spoke gruffly, and it hurt.

'I'm afraid I'm not very well,' she admitted reluctantly. 'Just leave the tray here, on the table. The boat sails at ten, you said?'

'Yes, madam ... but you are not able to get up, I think?'

'I'll manage.' A wan smile was produced as a sign of confidence, but Chrystalla's gaze remained troubled.

'I'll tell Mr. Sula that you are not able to get up—'

'No, you mustn't,' interrupted Lisette with haste. 'I shall be all right in a little while - when I've had my tea.'

Silently Chrystalla left the room; two or three minutes later Sula knocked and waited for permission to enter. Half suspecting it was he, even though she had heard no sound of his approach owing to the thickness of the carpet, Lisette hesitated a little while before, shrugging resignedly, she called,

'Come in.'

He came straight to the bed and stood staring down at her, a formidable figure whose face was set and hard. Lisette had the impression that he had not believed she was unwell and had come himself to investigate.

'What's wrong?' Crisp the tone and piercing the topaz eyes. 'Chrystalla tells me you are off colour?'

That was putting it mildly, she thought, angry with herself for standing out on the deck of the boat when everyone else had gone immediately to the saloon.

'I caught a chill on the boat. The weather was very cold and blowy.' Her voice was gruff still and a small frown appeared between Sula's eyes. Unexpectedly a hand was lowered to her forehead and the frown deepened.

'You won't be sailing today,' he pronounced after what could only be described as an angry silence. 'I'll send for my doctor—'

'It isn't necessary,' she put in, then stopped on noting his expression. Apparently the superior SulaCondylis was not used to being interrupted.

'This whole business is damned annoying,' he said shortly. 'It looks as if you're going to be here for a week at least.'

Her cheeks reddened, but she could find nothing to say, for she was thoroughly exhausted, both from the way she felt and from lack of sleep. Disgustedly she recollected that it was five years since she had been ill - and then it was for no more than a couple of days. And now she had to be ill in this insufferable man's house!

The doctor, a Greek of stocky build and very dark features, diagnosed influenza, as Lisette expected, and he said she would be in bed for at least four days.

'But probably longer,' he said, writing out a prescription there and then. He was kindly and Lisette was tempted to tell him all that had happened, ending by expressing deep regret that she was causing Sula so much inconvenience.

'It isn't your fault,' he said with an understanding smile. 'Illness is one thing over which we have no control.' A small pause and then, 'You mustn't worry; it won't do you any good - in fact it will have the adverse effect. Just take the tablets I shall give you - and relax. No amount of fretting is going to hurry matters. You'll ' be here in bed for the greater part of a week, and after that you'll need to be kept warm for another few days. So it will be about ten days to a fortnight before you're able to leave.'

'So long as that?' She bit her lip. Sula would be furious, she thought, but when on the doctor's departure Sula appeared there was, surprisingly, nothing very alarming in his expression at all. In fact, his face was merely an unreadable mask as he stood by her bed, his eyes on her flushed countenance. She wondered vaguely if the doctor had repeated what she had told him. If so, then Sula would know how deeply she regretted causing him this inconvenience. He continued to stare, but she was too ill to feel any embarrassment. Her lips were parched and stiff, but at length she managed an apology. His expression remained unchanged but, like the doctor, he said it was not her fault.

'Chrystalla will look after you,' he promised, then asked if she had eaten anything yet.

'I couldn't,' she answered. 'I don't think I can swallow.' Why was he here? she wondered, for she knew he had no interest in her indisposition. His aunt had sent him, Lisette decided; she would be anxious to know how she was, and whether she was comfortable. Chrystalla's opinion would not suffice for Mrs. Mallory, Lisette thought, and she asked about the old lady, surmising that this was another of those days when she was unable to walk - otherwise she would have been here herself.

'My aunt is not well today either. The dampness affects her greatly, but she says she will try to come up to see you later.'

'She mustn't, not if her rheumatism is so bad.' Unknowingly she allowed a wealth of compassion to enter her voice, and this was reflected in her eyes. Her grandmother had suffered with rheumatism and Lisette knew exactly what Mrs. Mallory was going through.

Sula's eyes flickered with an odd expression and the hush that fell on the room was more than ordinary silence. Even in her present condition Lisette sensed the strangeness acutely and for some reason a smile quivered on her lips. Sula's instant reaction was to stiffen and she knew she had made a mistake. He wanted no friendly gestures from her.

'She'll insist on making an effort, but if she doesn't come you must excuse her.' Coolly impersonal tones and unmoving countenance ... and yet in spite of the surface austerity Lisette could not dispel the growing conviction that he was now a little less hostile towards her. Was he beginning to admit to himself that she was not one of those 'stupid, featherbrained English girls' of whom he had spoken so disparagingly to his aunt the previous afternoon?

It was three days before his aunt could get in; she was full of apologies, but even now she was in pain. Lisette could see this from the twitching of her mouth as she walked with the utmost difficulty across the bedroom floor.

'My dear, you must consider me very bad-mannered, but truly, I've been quite unable to walk.'

'Of course I don't consider you bad-mannered,' Lisette denied swiftly. 'In any case, I've been so ill I shouldn't have known you were there.'

'Yes, Sula told me how bad you've been. It was most unfortunate ... but ...' Silence fell upon the room and Lisette glanced up quickly, her heart missing a beat as she noticed the faint smile on the other woman's face. It appeared for a fleeting moment only, then vanished in the twist of pain that touched the colourless lips. But it spoke volumes and Lisette's hopes had risen even before Mrs. Mallory spoke. 'It could very well be a blessing in disguise, my dear. My nephew is melting slowly and I feel there is every likelihood of his reconsidering his decision about you.'

This fitted in with Lisette's own assumption that she was now considered in a very different light by Sula. Her coldness and pointed lack of interest on that first evening had served her in good stead, it seemed. Also, on the two occasions when Sula had come into her bedroom yesterday she had practically ignored him. No more smiles - not under any circumstances, she had decided.

'I might be able to stay, then?' she murmured at length, and Mrs. Mallory nodded. Having moved over to a chair she sat down.

'I sincerely hope so.' Another difficult smile fluttered. 'I can't manage without help, especially now, for I do seem to be getting worse every day. And if Sula had to go through all that wretched business again it would be a considerable time before I was fixed up. You see, I do prefer an Englishwoman, someone with whom I can converse about things which interest me.' She fell into a reflective silence and Lisette dwelt on what she had mentioned about Sula's 'melting slowly'. Optimism grew as the moments passed and by the time Mrs. Mallory rose to leave Lisette had become convinced that she would at least be given a trial.

And she was. A week later, having fully recovered, she found herself in Sula's presence, having been told by Chrystalla that he wanted to see her.

'He is in the small sitting-room, madam. I will show you the way.'

This small cosy room looked out, over the pine-clad hills, to the site of the Temple of Aphaia, buoyantly outlined against the quivering, contrasting blues of sea and sky. In the foreground, hills were spread with riotous colour as spring flowers splashed their vivid scarlets and yellows and blues across the lush green landscape. This was an idyllic island, floating in dreamy peace on the smooth still waters of the Saronic Gulf.

'Sit down, Miss Tracy.' The cool invitation was accompanied by an impersonal - yet slightly imperious - wave of a hand towards a chair. Sula scanned her face for a fleeting moment before adding, 'You are fully recovered?'⁹

'Thank you, yes.' Her voice clipped off as the last word was uttered. Lisette's manner was as cool as his ... or even cooler. But she looked at him, noting the prominent jawline that spelt inflexibility, the lips that were full and sensuous while at the same time giving the impression of firmness and lack of feeling. His eyes were piercing under their straight black brows. Without doubt this man was attractive in some unique compulsive way. Lisette had the unaccountable conviction that any woman who allowed herself to be drawn to him would be inviting self-destruction. Reflectively she saw Dick, and comparison took place in her mind, almost unconsciously. With a shock she owned that Dick was ordinary when viewed beside this austere Greek. Everyone had asserted that Dick was exceptionally handsome, and undoubtedly he was, so why should he now fade into insignificance when compared with Sula? And why should the comparison have occurred at all? Unaccountably she felt a strange uneasiness creep over her; it was gone on the instant and yet she was left frowning, more as a result of bewilderment than anything else. Sula had taken possession of a chair on the opposite side of the room and she saw that his brows were raised slightly as if he were wondering at the reason for that sudden frown. But the frown was not dispelled by a smile, as it would have been in different circumstances. Guardedly Lisette changed her expression to one of inquiry, but otherwise her face was set, and the contours which normally were so alluringly soft were now deliberately etched into hard, severe lines matching those of the man sitting opposite to her. 'You have something important to say to me, Mr. Condylis?'

Faintly he relaxed.

'It would appear that you have guessed why you are here,' he remarked, instantly disconcerting her.

'I have been hoping you would give me a trial,' was her honest reply as she met his searching gaze.

'That is my intention, since my aunt has undoubtedly taken a liking to you. We will consider that you were employed from the day you arrived here.'

'Oh, no!' came her automatic response. 'I couldn't possibly accept money for doing nothing. I'll start from today,' she ended, but her voice had trailed away to a mere whisper as she noted the man's changing expression.

"Your salary will be paid as from the day you arrived here,' he said softly, and Lisette averted her head. His words had produced a blush, but she had no intention of allowing him to see this. 'I'd like to know something about you,' he requested. 'How was it that you were in a position to accept the post - at such short notice?'

She had fully expected this and, omitting to mention her fiance, she otherwise told the truth, saying that she had become unsettled and felt like a change. She knew there was a risk, recalling what Susan had said about his being wary of young girls who were interested only in the glamour of living on a Greek island. But Lisette also surmised that with a man like Sula Condylis honesty was the best policy, and that any attempt at dissimulation would be spotted immediately - and condemned. A little breathlessly she waited; a swift glint lit his eyes, then flickered out.

'I admire your candour,' he returned unexpectedly. But at the same time he shot her a shrewd glance which left her in no doubt at all that he knew why she had not made any attempt to deceive him. No fool, this man; he would be alert to every trick. Lisette was tempted to counter by remarking that there was nothing else she could say; Sula's reaction to this was a slight inclination of his head in acknowledgment and Lisette permitted herself a secret smile. They were actually sparring! Had Sula realized this? But surely he had. 'So you had become unsettled,' he murmured at last, looking beyond her in a preoccupied sort of way, 'and felt like a change. What sort of work were you doing?'

'I worked in an office.'

'In what capacity?'

'I was secretary to one of the managers.' Sula's eyes flickered over her.

'What you are contemplating doing will certainly be a change - a complete change.' He paused, frowning. 'Are you sure this is what you want?'

She nodded, and after another thoughtful pause he said, his voice over-crisp,

'The post is permanent, Miss Tracy. I trust you were given to understand this?'

She glanced down, hesitating before, once again, deciding that she must be completely honest.

'I was given to understand this, Mr. Condylis . . . but I've never done this sort of work before and until I have given it a trial I can't say whether or not I shall remain here with your aunt.'

'Fair enough,' he returned, surprising her. 'My aunt will give you a trial and you in turn will give the work a trial. How long . . .? Shall we say three months?'

'That will suit me perfectly, Mr. Condylis.' There followed some talk about salary, the amount of which Lisette already knew from Susan, and about time off. Mrs. Mallory would manage with Chrystalla every Sunday, Sula told Lisette. In addition, she went once a month to stay with another relative on the other side of the island.

'This has been the procedure up till now, Miss Tracy. Aunt Alice goes on Friday afternoon and I bring her back on Sunday evening, so for the time being you will have this long week-end every month. However, my aunt's deteriorating in health - being quite unable to walk at times, as you already know - and it's impossible to say when she will reach the stage where travelling is too difficult.' He went on to explain that this relative, a distant cousin to Mrs. Mallory's husband, did not mind doing things for her guest and that the visits would stop only when Mrs. Mallory herself decided they should.

All the time he spoke Sula's manner was cool and impersonal; Lisette responded by a cool nod now and then, or a crisp word when necessary. Once or twice Sula looked oddly at her and she gained the impression that he was puzzled. He would be more puzzled as time went on, she decided with some considerable measure of satisfaction. For Lisette knew that the only way to retain the post was for her to avoid the danger of allowing him to

think for one moment that she found him attractive. Perhaps she should have told him she was engaged; that would no doubt have satisfied him that there was no possibility of her falling for him, as all the others had done, much to his annoyance.

But as the days moved on into weeks Lisette began to wonder whether she were engaged or not. Since coming to Aegina five weeks ago she had received only three letters from Dick, and two of those could only be described as mere notes - conscience notes, she thought bitterly as she stood on the balcony of her bedroom, staring out towards the Temple of Aphaia, rising in great beauty against its background of hills on which the fragrant stone-pines flourished in such glorious profusion. It was now the end of April and the sun was rapidly gaining heat. Sula had been swimming every morning for over a fortnight, but Lisette had not yet ventured into the sea, inviting as it was, gently lapping the golden sands, part of which formed the sheltered bay owned by Sula.

She glanced down as a tall lithe figure moved into view. Sula had come from the house and he stood now, gazing down at a flower bed blazing with exotic colour. Stooping, he pulled out a weed and tossed it away over a hedge formed of pink and white oleanders. He had a newspaper under his arm and after a few minutes looking round the garden he sat down underneath a tree, opened his paper, and began to read. Lisette moved from the window, in case he should happen to glance up. It was Saturday, and this was the second time Mrs. Mallory had been away since Lisette arrived on Aegina. Lisette was now settled into a fixed but pleasant routine. Her employer was never difficult no matter how much pain she might be in, but if she decided she had been rather trying she would then insist on going to bed before dinner, just so that Lisette could have a rest. This kind of consideration naturally found a response in Lisette, who for her part went out of her way to make Mrs. Mallory's life happier, taking on tasks which in the ordinary way would not be hers. Sometimes Lisette would surprise a curious expression on Sula's face and she would wonder in a vague sort of way if he too was appreciating what she did. To Lisette it came natural, because of her compassionate nature, but often Mrs. Mallory would express gratitude by telling Lisette that she was the most conscientious of all the Companions she had had.

She once said this at the dinner table and Sula glanced up, his eyes flickering from his aunt to Lisette, and remaining there.

'You're obviously happy here,' he remarked, and Lisette, adopting the cool demeanour she kept for him alone, inclined her head stiffly and replied,

'I'm extremely happy - in my job.' The slight hesitation was not lost on him, she felt sure, and she lowered her head, regretting the slip. For it was a slip, and she did wonder if, momentarily, her expression had reflected the unhappiness within her. If only she could forget Dick, she felt sure she would be wise, since by his action he had proved that his love was not nearly as strong as hers. Unfortunately for her she could not forget him; he had been her life, her all. Yet even though she could not forget him she dared not think about him too often, as the picture was always the same: him and Lana, together most of the time, attending parties - and giving them, going about from one hotel to another as Lana's work took her around the country. No, she dared not dwell on Dick, and the life he was at present leading.

Unhappy now, Lisette moved apathetically about the room, deciding one moment that she would write a very straight letter to Dick, conveying her anger at his neglect, and the next moment feeling that a more revealing letter would perhaps have a better chance of jerking him into a consciousness of what he was doing to her. Pride, however, forbade that she should lay bare her misery. Besides, Dick had said in his last letter that he and Lana were moving on again and that if she wrote to the address in New York there was every chance that he would not receive the letter.

At last Lisette went downstairs and out into the garden. She would go for a walk, she decided, but as she wandered along the path towards the gate Sula glanced up and, to her utter astonishment, he smiled at her and beckoned, actually moving on the seat so as to make room for her to sit down.

Warily she took a place as far from him as possible; he seemed to frown at her action even while the smile still hovered on his lips.

'I wonder if you would do me a favour?' he said without preamble. 'I require some typing to be done and it's rather urgent, the report having to be in first thing Monday morning. Would you do it for me?'

'Of course.' The spontaneous reply was out before Lisette remembered to be cool and aloof and an odd expression entered her companion's eyes. Her mind carried the conviction that he welcomed this apparent thaw, but, with what she had overheard so strongly fixed in her consciousness, Lisette repressed the smile that rose as an accompaniment to her swift agreement to do his work for him. The sudden change in her manner automatically influenced the timbre of her voice and he seemed almost to give a start at its coldness as she added, 'When would you like me to make a start?'

'Before dinner, if you have nothing important to do. About two hours today, and another two in the morning, should suffice. I wouldn't ask you to work during your free time, but this has cropped up as a result of a telephone call I had just before lunch.'

'I have nothing important to do,' she returned stiffly, 'so I can begin at once if you wish.' She knew that he worked in Athens, having many business interests there. He had his office staff employed all the time, Mrs. Mallory had told Lisette, but he himself usually put in an appearance only about twice a week.

'He can do much of his work from home,' Mrs. Mallory had said, 'so there's no need for him to be going over to the city every day.'

'The typewriter I have here is rather old,' Sula was saying. 'I hope you can manage with it.'

Sula dictated to her and afterwards she typed for over an hour. He read what she had done - or part of it - and expressed his approval of her work.

'Your employer must have been upset at losing you.' He looked oddly at her as he spoke. Still puzzled by her decision to leave and take on the task of caring for his aunt, Lisette surmised.

'He did try to persuade me to stay,' she said, her tones curt and impersonal. 'But as I told you, I felt like a complete change, both of work and environment.'

Sula was returning his attention to the papers in his hand, and he appeared to have lost interest in the reason for her being here on the island.

They had dinner together. It was not a very comfortable situation in which Lisette found herself because, for one thing, she would much have preferred to be natural, to chat with Sula and be friendly towards him. But she dared not, and so she remained stiff and remote, and although to her surprise Sula made some attempt to draw her out she maintained her impersonal front. Towards the end of the meal she had the astounding impression that he was piqued by her attitude, and that nothing would have afforded him greater satisfaction than to conquer this frigidity which she continually extended towards him.

They took their coffee in the lounge, it being too chilly for sitting out on the patio. Another month and the weather would be really warm, Sula told her.

'I think I'll take a short stroll before I go to bed,' Lisette said on glancing at the clock and realizing that it was ten minutes to ten. Time had flown from the moment she had begun working on Sula's report. This was the first time he had remained with Lisette after the evening meal was finished. Always he would go along to the small sitting-room that looked out towards the temple, and there he would read or listen to the radio. He wasn't very sociable, Mrs. Mallory had said, but in a tolerant sort of way that clearly conveyed her opinion that everyone had a right to do as he or she pleased.

'It's very dark,' returned Sula with a slight frown. 'Which way are you going?'

'Along the cliff path. It's all right; I'm used to it by now.'

'It can be treacherous in the dark. I should give it a miss if I were you.'

Lisette's chin went up. She rose, excused herself, and left him, the frown still between his eyes. But she herself was frowning as she made her way through the villa grounds and came to the cliff path. Why was it becoming so difficult to retain her cold manner towards Sula? she wondered. At first it had seemed the easiest thing in the world to treat him with complete lack of interest, since in any case this appeared to be what he himself desired. But

recently Lisette had found her role not only difficult but irksome. It would be much more pleasant to be free with him and to allow herself to smile now and then.

Slowly she proceeded along the cliff path, descending all the while towards the sea, and the semi-circle of sand which formed Sula's private beach. The sea was gently heaving and here and there white foam caught the moonlight. Islands floated all around, dark against a purple sky. Not a breath of wind stirred the scented air, yet there was a chill in the atmosphere and Lisette drew her coat more closely around her. How still it was! - and how lonely! Not another human being, not a sound other than the swish of the waves on the deserted shore below. Lisette stopped, and the deep ache of her loneliness rose up in her throat. If only Dick were here with her what a paradise this place would be. A trembling sigh left her lips as she recalled the happiness they., had known together, finding pleasure without difficulty in small things like buying something for the home they would some day have. They had needed only each other . . . and Dick had so often maintained that it would always be so. It seemed impossible that he could leave her, could go off with Lana Southern, not caring how much his fiancée might be hurt.

How long she had stood there, on the cliff edge, with the dark heights behind her, their peaks melting into the sky, and with below her an almost sheer drop to the sea, Lisette did not know, but she suddenly realized that it must have been some considerable time and she had just decided to return when she became conscious of a movement in a bend of the path. For a split second her heart lurched, then settled instantly as she recognized the tall figure striding towards her. How distinguished he was, even in this indistinct state. There was something majestic in the way he walked, and the way he held himself, with his shoulders so erect and his head held in that proud and aristocratic way. His curt voice appeared to be edged with anxiety as he said,

'Do you know how long you've been out? I became worried about you.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't notice the passing of time until, just now, I realized I must have been out a long while.'

'Over an hour,' he informed her, anxiety replaced by sternness. 'I felt that something must have happened to you.' He stood beside her, his gaze moving from her profile to the dark outline of the shore below. 'I told you, this path can be dangerous in the dark.' The merest hesitation and then, 'I prefer you not to use it at night.' An order ... and yet for some incomprehensible reason Lisette took no exception to it. She murmured, without turning her head,

'I enjoyed the walk, though. One feels - well - away from the world—' She spread a hand. 'The islands out there - so lonely and dark. The sea and the sky ... everything is so immense ...' She tailed off, wishing again that Dick were here with her. He would have her in his arms, of course, and the magic of the night would affect his lovemaking, and she would be the one who would have to be strong. She closed her eyes tightly, but moisture escaped to dampen her lashes. 'I'm sorry if I caused you anxiety,' she said again. 'I seemed to lose all idea of time.'

'One does out here,' he agreed in a softened voice. He was looking sideways at her, but Lisette kept her profile towards him. 'Young women like you don't usually enjoy such quietness as this. They seem to favour night life and dancing and the rest.'

'I never danced very much.' Only at the staff dances, she recalled bitterly. If only she and Dick had not attended that particular one! Lisette had been reluctant to spend the money on a dress, but Dick said it was time she treated herself, so she did ... with the result that Dick had met Lana. ... 'Perhaps I'm old-fashioned.' Lisette spoke to herself, and her voice was natural - soft and pensive, unmarred by the curtness she always infused into it when speaking to Sula.

'An old-fashioned girl, eh? You must be unique.' Faint satire in his tone? Lisette thought she detected this, but could not be sure. She knew his gaze was one of interest and the situation became rather unreal. Hitherto Sula had appeared aloof, even if piqued at times, and there were occasions when he seemed totally unapproachable. It would strike Lisette then that a wife would not have a very happy time with such a man, because she would find herself pushed away, occupying a place outside the aura of superiority with which he surrounded himself. Now, however, Sula was suddenly human; he

was talking to her because he wanted to, otherwise he would have suggested, immediately on finding her, that they should return to the house.

'I don't consider I'm unique.' She spoke at last, aware that some comment was expected from her.

'Unusual, then. Decidedly unusual.' Soft tones, yet retaining the rich firm quality which Lisette had even from the first admitted was inordinately attractive. 'You're entirely different from the other girls who've come here as companions to my aunt.'

She knew what he meant, but turned her head inquiringly, because she knew this would be expected of her. But Sula did not elaborate and for a little while they were both involved in the vast silence of their surroundings. How strange it was, standing here with this man who until now had been so distant, affording her neither time nor attention. Suddenly Lisette discovered to her astonishment that she was tensed in some indefinable way, and she strove to throw this tension off. But some intangible force seemed to have taken her into its grip; she felt different, somehow, but in what way she could not even begin to explain.

'It's becoming chilly.' The words were spoken in her customary curt tones; she wondered if Sula had noticed that for a few moments she had dropped them. She wondered also if, with his alert mind, he sensed the awkwardness which now assailed her. ^CI - I want to go back.'

No comment from Sula; he merely fell into step beside her as she began walking back the way she had come. The path was boulder-strewn here and there, the result of fallen debris from the rocks above, and once or twice Sula warned her to take care.

'It seemed to be lighter than this when I was coming.' Lisette turned her head as she spoke. Sula's dark face was like something chiselled out of stone.

'The moon is hidden,' he pointed out. 'Clouds are covering it.'

'Yes, of course.' The awkwardness remained. For no apparent reason she wished she was back at the house, and upstairs in her bedroom, away from

this man. Silence fell between them, but suddenly Lisette stood on a small boulder and a cry of pain left her lips as, unable to steady herself, she fell against Sula. 'Oh ... I'm so sorry ...' But the words drifted away as her mouth tightened. The pain in her ankle was excruciating. 'I think I've pulled a muscle.'

'I warned you to take care.' Slight impatience edged his voice as he reminded her of his advice that she should give the cliff path a miss. 'Is the pain very bad?' She was still close to him and his arm slid about her. 'You can't put it down?'

Lisette shook her head, angry with herself for not taking more care.

'Perhaps in a moment—' she began, then stopped as, bending down, Sula took hold of her ankle.

'Swelling already,' he observed, the impatient note becoming more apparent. 'You'll not walk home on this.'

'Not—?' Her eyes widened. 'I shall have to.'

Faintly he smiled, but without humour.

'It would appear, Miss Tracy, that I must carry you.'

'No!' The exclamation escaped almost before he had finished speaking. 'Certainly not, Mr. Condylis! It's unthinkable!' Icy tones; Lisette drew away from him and gingerly put her foot on the ground. With difficulty she smothered the cry of pain that rose to her lips. 'Oh, dear ...' The fight went out of her and although hot with embarrassment, she had no option than to allow Sula to pick her up and carry her back to the house.

CHAPTER FOUR

SULA laid her down on the couch, but she instantly sat up.

'I must go to bed. My ankle will be all right in the morning.'

An exasperated sigh issued from Sula's lips but, ignoring her protest, he took off her shoe and began to probe with his fingers, feeling for any sign of a broken bone. As she watched his dark head, and experienced the firmness of his hands on her ankle, Lisette became conscious of a gripping vibration which attained such strength that her whole body reacted in a way that left her trembling inwardly. What was the matter with her? Why should she be affected like this? Lisette came to the conclusion that she had been thoroughly shaken and her nerves were playing her up as a result. Yes, it was nerves that caused this trembling, she told herself firmly, and when after fixing her a bandage Sula insisted on her having a drink she accepted without protest.

'It - it affected my nerves,' she told him, reverting to her cool manner after thanking him for all his trouble. To her surprise she saw a humorous gleam enter his eyes as they roved over her before finally resting on her face as she sipped the brandy he had given her.

'I don't think your nerves have suffered overmuch, Miss Tracy,' he commented, holding out a hand for the glass as Lisette emptied it. 'Feeling better now? Is the pain eased?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Then we'd better have you to bed.' She frowned at him. 'I can walk upstairs, Mr. Condylis.' He shrugged his shoulders.

'Then I'll bid you good night. If you happen to be troubled by pain take a couple of the tablets which I've put on the table by your bed.' He went towards the door and on reaching it held it open, inviting her to precede him.

'You've put tablets in my room?' She looked at him in some surprise. 'Thank you very much.'

'The servants were in bed, so there was no one else to provide you with the tablets - and it's very probable that you'll need them. Are you going up now?'

'Er - yes.' Her uninjured foot touched the floor, but an involuntary cry rose when she tried to put her weight on the other one. She looked at Sula, constraint in her manner, but an expression in her eyes that was half apologetic, half pleading, and a wave of colour had spread over her face. 'I can't ... after all ...' she ended in a subdued tone.

'I didn't expect you could, Miss Tracy.' His face was an expressionless mask, but the cool formality of his tone was a mixture of satisfaction and censure. The arrogant Sula Condylis would have hated to have been proved wrong.

The following morning Chrystalla was there, her pretty face touched with concern. 'Mr. Sula says you have hurt your foot. Is it a little better this morning?'

Lisette tried to wriggle it about, but winced as she did so.

'I can't tell yet, Chrystalla. I sincerely hope it is. It will be a nuisance if I can't walk.'

'I think after a while you will be able to - to— What do you say - hobble?' Chrystalla ended brightly and a swift smile lit Lisette's eyes.

'Yes, that's the word. Well, if I can hobble it will be something.' She had Sula's work to finish, she remembered, but that would not necessitate using her injured foot, she thought with relief.

'Would you like to have your breakfast in bed?' inquired Chrystalla, and Lisette shook her head.

'No, I must get up. What time is it?'

'Only half past eight,' with faint apology from Chrystalla. 'But Mr. Sula sent me up to make sure you were all right.'

That certainly was considerate of him, thought Lisette, not fully aware at this stage that she was revising her original opinion of him.

'I'll be down in about half an hour,' she said, hoping she was not being too optimistic.

With tremendous perseverance Lisette managed to stand, and to get to the bathroom. And she also managed to get downstairs.

'So you're much improved,' Sula observed, entering the breakfast-room a few seconds after her. 'I rather thought you might be out of action for a day or two.'

'I was a little afraid of that myself,' she admitted, looking at him in some surprise as he brought out a chair for her. He and she had never before taken breakfast together, Sula usually having finished his while Lisette was preparing breakfast for Mrs. Mallory, who always had hers in bed. 'Have - have you not had your breakfast, Mr. Condylis?'

'Not yet. I'm a little late this morning.' Sitting down opposite her, he eyed her across the table. 'You're pale,' he observed. 'Did you have a disturbed night?'

'I woke twice, and took the tablets. They eased the pain/

'It's always unwise to ignore the advice of those who know better than you, Miss Tracy,' he said, a hint of arrogance playing about his mouth. 'There have been two nasty accidents on that road, one of which almost proved fatal.'

She bit her lip, hating being admonished even though she secretly owned that she deserved it.

'I shan't venture along there in the dark again,' she said at length, and gave an inward sigh of relief that Chrystalla had appeared with the breakfast.

During the meal Sula would have chatted, but taking up her guard again, Lisette reverted to her former aloof attitude, afraid that he might misconstrue any display of friendliness on her part. She saw him frowning to himself

because of her change of manner, and then a glint came into his narrowed, topaz eyes, just as if anger had flared momentarily. Once again she had the impression that he was piqued. What did he want? He had spoken disparagingly of the girls who had fallen for him, firmly declaring that he would send Lisette back to England, simply because she was young and in his opinion would follow the pattern of all the others. Yet, conversely, he appeared to resent Lisette's lack of interest in him, and more especially her lack of response to his deliberate attempts to awaken some sort of emotion in her. Lisette supposed that had she not overheard his comments about the companions whom his aunt had employed, she would have acted with her customary friendliness and warmth. This would undoubtedly have misled him into believing that here was another of those stupid females who had caused him so much annoyance, but fortunately for Lisette she *had* overheard his comments, so it had been a case of 'forewarned is forearmed'.

'Do you feel like continuing with that work for me?' he inquired stiffly when the meal was over.

'Of course. I'll come along to your study right away.'

The work took longer than anticipated by Sula and at eleven o'clock he suggested they have a coffee break.

'We should be through by lunch time, though,' he said, faintly apologetic. And he added, 'If you are feeling tired, just say so and we'll leave it.'

'I'm not in the least tired.' Lisette felt she could spare him a thin smile without running any risks. 'I shall welcome the coffee, though. Chrystalla has a special way of making it which I like.'

'Chrystalla does most things well,' was his only comment as he reached up to pull the bell-rope.

The work was completed ten minutes before lunch and to Lisette's surprise Sula invited her to have a drink with him while they waited. She hesitated, every nerve suddenly alert. Was he playing a game with her? Could he be so greatly piqued that he was determined to make her notice him? This idea

seemed not to fit in with his personality ... and yet a little warning voice told Lisette to take care.

'Thank you, but I have to wash, and change my dress.' Curt tones and the merest glance into his face. 'It will take all of ten minutes, with my ankle as it is,' she added with a little deprecating shrug of her shoulders. The snub went right home, and during lunch Sula scarcely spoke to her. But several times she caught him glancing at her with an odd expression. He was puzzled for the first time in his life, she concluded, and felt a tinge of satisfaction that she herself was responsible for it.

At the end of the month Lisette received her cheque as usual, and after attending to Mrs. Mallory's supper and making her comfortable for the night, she sought Sula out in his study.

'Come in,' he called in reply to her knock, glancing up in some surprise as she stood there, cheque in hand. Sula had his back to the window, and the garden was alive with all the pristine beauty of a Grecian spring. Flaring hibiscus bushes splashed their scarlet blooms against the deep green of ornamental cypress trees, while to one side of the rolling lawn clouds of jacaranda swayed in the breeze, misty purple against the clear sapphire sky. 'Is something wrong?' Sula's eyes were on the cheque and Lisette moved forward into the room, putting the cheque on his desk.

'You've paid me too much,' she began, but Sula had already interrupted her, saying the extra money was for the work she had done for him. His mouth was set in an implacable line, almost as if he anticipated an argument, and was ready for it.

'I didn't expect payment, Mr. Condylis.'

'Then it has come as a pleasant surprise.' Sula leant back in his chair, tapping the arm idly with his fingers.

'I'd rather not accept payment,' Lisette said curtly. 'After all, it was only a few hours, and I did it in time which I would not normally have off.'

A dark frown settled on his brow.

'Shall we not argue, Miss Tracy? I was more than satisfied with the work you did for me and I see no reason whatsoever why you should not be paid for it.'

'But—' She stopped, warned by the raising of his dark brows and the sudden cautioning glint in his eyes.

'I said,' murmured Sula in a very quiet tone, 'that we shall not argue.' And, picking up a pen, he eased himself forward in his chair and began to write.

Flushing, and more angry with herself than him, Lisette picked up the cheque and turned away towards the door. This was the first clash of wills and she was the one left smarting. She should have known that to argue with Sula was to invite trouble. On his having said, so firmly, that they would not argue, she should prudently have allowed the matter to drop. Instead, she had made an attempt at protest, with the resultant humiliation.

She had been with Mrs. Mallory almost three months when Dick began writing more regularly, excusing his earlier remissness by saying that as he and Lana were on the move all the while, his life was hectic. It was a weak excuse, to say the least, but the letters from then on were all that any girl in love could desire. Dick was missing her terribly; he was making a lot of money but had begun to wonder if it was worth it to be parted from the girl he loved. He asked Lisette how she was faring in her new job, and whether she was able to save, as he was doing. She wrote back, supplying all the information for which he had asked, but somehow a change had taken place in her feelings for Dick, a change that she bitterly regretted even while wondering how it had occurred. Despite his act of leaving her Lisette had still loved him; love did not die easily - not real love. And yet she now failed to experience any thrill or excitement on his letters being brought to her by Chrystalla. In fact, his last one had lain on her dressing-table for almost a whole day before she opened it, for she had been extra busy with Mrs. Mallory, who had had a slight stroke and was confined to bed. When she did finally open it Lisette read it through several times, feeling she should be able to grasp something by reading between the lines, and yet there was nothing tangible. She gained the impression that Dick had become restless,

that was all. It never occurred to Lisette at this stage that Dick was tiring of the glamour, or that the demands of his employer were becoming irksome.

It was a week before Lisette got down to replying, when she did she actually found that she had scarcely anything about which to write. What was happening to their wonderful love? Dick, it seemed, was now as devoted as ever ... but what had happened to her own feelings? Was it possible that she was fickle? Lisette would have liked to throw off this idea, but found herself brooding on it instead. Yet she was unwilling to admit that a love such as that which had existed between Dick and herself could die.

She set her mouth. She would not succumb to the force that seemed to be drawing her away from Dick, she told herself fiercely ... and yet at the same time she was being torn in another way - a way she could neither analyse nor comprehend, but ever in her consciousness dwelt the memory of the sensation that had swept over her on the night she had sprained her ankle. Prior to that she had been finding it increasingly difficult to maintain her austere front with Sula; since that night it had at times been almost impossible. She knew a vague longing to be friends with Sula, although the precise reason eluded her. In any case, she must never be too affable towards him, in case she was instantly placed in the same category as those girls who had fallen in love with him, much to his annoyance. With the complications brought about by these various facets in her life, plus the extra work entailed by her employer's rapid deterioration in health, it was only natural that Lisette should begin to look rather worn and tired. And as always when in the throes of some deep anxiety Lisette lost her colour completely and her eyes became dull.

Inevitably Sula noticed these changes and, despite his icy indifference of late - adopted in retaliation to Lisette's resistance to his friendly overtures - he inquired one evening at dinner if she were feeling unwell.

'No - I'm all right,' she answered, but listlessly and with an absence of her curt accents. 'It's nothing.'

His searching gaze remained on her white face as he said, his voice slightly edged with irritation,

'You look thoroughly tired. Aunt Evelyn is becoming more than one person's work. I must get you some help.'

Lisette stared, speechless for one astounded moment. Such consideration from Sula! - who in recent weeks had adopted towards her a coldness and indifference far exceeding her own. And now, without the slightest warning, he was evincing this grave concern.

'I'm perfectly able to cope with Mrs. Mallory,' she returned in curt clipped tones. 'Looking after her is what I'm paid for and I've no complaint whatsoever with my work.' She sat upright in her chair as Astera, the housekeeper, served the second course. Sula's mouth tightened, but naturally he refrained from making any comment while the servant was there, but his intention was so apparent that Lisette steeled herself for it, making a determined effort to maintain her austerity. However, Lisette was quite unprepared for what Sula did have to say and once again she was reduced to a state of dumbfounded amazement.

'What the devil's the matter with you!' He spoke immediately the door had closed behind his housekeeper, and his voice vibrated with suppressed anger. 'Is this iceberg state normal - or do you thaw out on occasions?' He glared at her, enraged because she had picked up her knife and fork with what appeared to be complete unconcern. But in reality it was a nervous and delaying action resulting from her disconcertment. 'Is it possible that you're a man-hater?'

She glanced up from her plate, remembering that while he was not actually her employer, it was in fact he who paid her her salary.

'Have I given that impression, Mr. Condylis?' she asked, and he drew an exasperated breath.

'The impression you give,' he replied in acid tones, 'is that of a woman who has no time at all for the male sex - and never will have.'

Why should that trouble him? she wondered, blinking at his plain speaking.

'I'm not a man-hater,' she said in a rather subdued voice.

'Then why this incivility?' he demanded, eyes glinting.

'I'm sure I haven't been uncivil to you,' she argued. 'I'm not a demonstrative person by nature.' Which was totally untrue, as Dick would assuredly have agreed.

'One need not be demonstrative in order to act with common courtesy—'

'I've never been discourteous!' she protested, but was not allowed to say more, even had she wished to do so.

'You obviously don't intend making any admissions,' he snapped, 'so we had better get back to this question of my obtaining help for you.' A small pause as he eyed her with an expression which was a mingling of expectancy and warning. Lisette now followed the course of prudence and refrained from arguing or even inserting a comment. 'No rash move?' he queried, reading her thoughts, and the colour did then flood into her cheeks. This lent an enchantment to her elfin face of which she was totally unaware, but Sula's quick change of expression, the curious light that entered his eyes, and the inexplicable softening of that stern mouth certainly did not escape her and she stared at him in bewilderment. 'You'll have a week's break,' he told her at length. 'Aunt Evelyn won't mind in the least, since she's fully aware that it's no easy task caring for her now that she's bedridden and has to have everything done for her. You won't get your long week-end off any more, so obviously you must have a break now and then.' He looked at her, inviting some remark, but she held back, quite unwilling to risk incurring his displeasure again, and in any case, his interest and concern were balm to her distress and also acted as a boost to her morale. For although Dick's love was hers she still felt the sting inflicted by the casual manner in which he had left her, going off with the glamorous Lana Southern. 'The three-month trial you set yourself is almost at an end. Have you decided to stay on here with my aunt?'

So that was the reason for his concern! It had nothing to do with her at all; he was thinking only of his aunt, who had often expressed her satisfaction with Lisette and the hope that she would remain with her, here on the island of Aegina.

'I'll stay on for the present,' Lisette answered, the flatness of her tone bringing a frown to his brow.

'I'll get the nurse in as soon as I can,' he promised, and gave an automatic little nod, indicating her untouched food. 'Eat something, Miss Tracy, and after dinner I should go to bed if I were you.'

Lying in bed a short while later, Lisette dwelt on all that Sula had said, and his expression of concern was a clear vision, there before her, all the time. Surely he could not look like that unless he really was a little concerned for her alone. Warmth entered into Lisette quite unbidden. She would not be *quite* so cold with him in future, she decided. Cautious, yes, as he must not misconstrue her altered manner. He must never get the idea that she was attracted to him, a circumstance that would be ironical anyway, since there was not the remotest possibility of her becoming attracted to him.

Mrs. Mallory, pale and drawn as she lay back against the pillows which Lisette had arranged for her, smiled and expressed her pleasure that Lisette was to have a week's holiday.

'And thank you, dear, for deciding to remain with me. I'd never get anyone like you—' She stopped and watched as Lisette straightened the bedcover. 'Do you mind if I call you Lisette?'

'I'd much prefer it,' responded Lisette, going on to say that she had been hoping for some time that Mrs. Mallory would do so. 'I don't feel I need a week's holiday,' she added, anxiously regarding her employer's tired face.

'Sula's very determined about your having it.' A very odd note indeed crept into Mrs. Mallory's voice and the expression in her eyes was impossible to fathom. 'I've never known him show such concern ... no ... never ...' Mrs. Mallory shook her head from side to side against the pillow. 'He's always been just the opposite with the girls I've had - acting so impatiently with the poor things. And he'd never think of dining with one of them if I weren't there too. He used to have his evening meal taken to him in that small sitting-room he always uses. Most impatient,' mused the old lady

reflectively. 'Don't know what's come over him. You're very honoured that he dines with you . . .' Again she tailed off, becoming deep in thought for a space before continuing, 'Really anxious about you, he was. Said you were thoroughly worn out, and pale and tired-looking. Just imagine his noticing such things!' Mrs. Mallory's voice was little more than a whisper; clearly she spoke to herself, merely voicing her thoughts, which apparently were puzzled in the extreme. 'What are you going to do with your break?' she asked presently. 'Are you intending going to Athens - or merely taking a rest?'

'I haven't given the matter much thought.'

'Well .. .' A sidelong glance and a small hesitation and then, 'Sula seems to have it in mind that you'll rest. He talked of your swimming and sunbathing on the beach. And he seemed to have the idea that you would merely want to sit about most of the time, on the lawn, reading and relaxing.'

Lisette said nothing, but this interested her exceedingly all the same. No doubt about it, Sula had changed. Last evening at dinner, encouraged no doubt by Lisette's own dropping of her coolness towards him, Sula had chatted in the most friendly way. He smiled often, too, and on a couple of instances she had, quite unconsciously, brought back to mind the night when she had hurt her ankle. Some change had taken place in her prior to that... some subtle, impalpable change that infected her with a desire to establish a more friendly relationship with Sula. And on that night, as she and Sula stood there on the cliff path, she had been overwhelmingly conscious of that desire, just as she had been profoundly aware of the man's presence, aware in a way totally different from anything she had known with Dick. There was a strange magnetism about Sula, and Lisette wondered if it were owing to his being a Greek. He was so dark and distinguished-looking, so aristocratic in bearing and severe of feature. His topaz eyes searched even while they appeared to be dulled by boredom; his out-thrust jaw spelled implacability and there was a certain element of ruthlessness about the high cheekbones, prominent in a face that was otherwise so lean that it gave the impression of excessive angularity.

Lisette's reflections and musings were cut short as Mrs. Mallory's breathing became difficult.

'Do you want to lie down?' Already Lisette was preparing to remove a couple of the pillows. 'Shall I give you a tablet?'

'Perhaps I'd better have one. It's not that serious, dear, but— Yes, I'll take a tablet.' She swallowed it with the water Lisette gave her, and then lay down. 'I'll not have the pillows, Lisette. I think I shall try to sleep.'

'Ring the bell if you want me. Promise, now, because you don't always ring it. You didn't last evening and it was just good luck that I came in when I did.'

The old woman nodded.

'Yes, I should have rung for you. But you'd had such a trying day.'

'I'm here to look after you, Mrs. Mallory; that's my job.'

Mrs. Mallory's eyes were closed and Lisette stood looking down at her for a long moment. She had grown extremely fond of her employer and it grieved her to know she was in pain. Lisette turned her head, her pulse increasing the merest fraction so that she was only just aware of it. Sula came and stood by the bed. He had sat with his aunt for a couple of hours during the afternoon after sending Lisette off to have a rest. Later he had expressed slight concern about his aunt and now, as he stood beside Lisette, looking down into the pale lined face, his brow creased in a frown. He did not speak, but sent Lisette an interrogating glance.

'I've given Mrs. Mallory a tablet,' she told him, smiling as the tired eyes opened. 'Are you feeling better now?'

'Much better, Lisette dear. Sula, have you eaten - without Lisette?'

'No, Aunt Evelyn. It's only half-past seven.'

'Really? I thought it was much later .. .' Her voice faded to silence, but a thin smile appeared as she turned her head into the pillow. 'I shall be quite all right. Off you go, both of you. I want to sleep.'

Sula was frowning as he left the room with Lisette.

'I don't like the look of Aunt Evelyn this evening,' he said when they reached the hall. 'I've a good mind to send for the doctor.'

'She won't like that. I suggested it one day last week and she stated definitely that she would not have him. She seems to have an aversion to doctors.'

'She always did have. Said she was a do-it-yourself type, and I must admit that when she was younger she always managed to cure herself of any ailments that came her way. She maintained that she could sleep herself better from a cold, for instance. For other things she had all sorts of herbal remedies.' Sula paused in thought, the frown deepening on his brow. 'This is different; not only does she suffer from rheumatism, but she has this heart trouble also. Yes, I think she must have the doctor tomorrow.'

CHAPTER FIVE

ALTHOUGH the doctor's face was rather grave as he examined Mrs. Mallory's heart, he told Sula afterwards that there was no immediate danger. He would change the tablets, he said, and he would also give Mrs. Mallory something to ease the pain of her rheumatism.

'It's a new drug and up till now I've been reluctant to give it to my patients. However, it has been proved over a long period of time now, so I'm willing to prescribe it for your aunt.'

'Thank you, doctor. Mrs. Mallory does need something to relieve her pain.' It was Lisette who spoke, involuntarily and without realizing that it was Sula who should have replied. Hesitantly she glanced at him, in an apologetic sort of way, but to her relief he took no exception to her unthinking interruption.

'You seem to have become most attached to my aunt,' Sula observed when the doctor had made his departure.

'She's such a kind and considerate employer. You can't help liking anyone who is so appreciative as Mrs. Mallory. After all, it is my job to look after her, and it would be quite normal if she took what I do for granted.'

'Aunt Evelyn never did take kindness for granted.'

Sula and Lisette were on the patio; across the blue and sunlit Saronic Gulf islands floated like pearls on the gentle sea, while beyond them, to the west, the hills of the Argolid were festooned with swathes of chartreuse mist. In the opposite direction the gentle hills around Athens shone clearly in the sunshine. The capital seemed so close; Lisette decided she must pay it a visit at the first opportunity. Perhaps during her week's holiday, she thought, automatically glancing at Sula as she remembered that he was expecting her to rest the whole time.

'She always seems to feel she owes me something,' Sula was continuing, his eyes pensive and strangely softened by his musings. 'But she owes me nothing. On the contrary, it is I who am in her debt.' He became silent and thoughtful. Lisette felt she dared not intrude, yet at the same time wondering

if he expected some comment from her. 'She was all the things my mother was not,' said Sula as if talking to himself. 'Yes, I'm greatly in her debt - if only for the wisdom of which she gave me the benefit.' He looked at Lisette, but she felt sure he did not see her. He was back somewhere in the past . . . with his aunt. 'Values, Lisette, are so important. One must sieve and sort and be sure to place them in their correct order. I had my values all mixed up; Aunt Evelyn helped me to get them straightened out.'

Still a long way off, Sula gave a small sigh. It was totally out of character and Lisette watched his dark face, fascinated all at once by this man she did not know, this softened person who, within seconds, had become thoroughly human. Did he realize that he had called her Lisette? She felt sure he was entirely ignorant of the fact. What was he thinking? Without knowing why, Lisette was convinced that his thoughts were with a woman. Had he ever been married? So many people these days were married and separated and Sula could easily be one of these. Inwardly Lisette frowned, bewildered by the sudden dart of dejection that passed through her at the idea that he might be married. He was looking at her again, and seeing her this time because at the corners of his mouth little humour lines were fanning out. 'Have I been boring you, Miss Tracy? I'm afraid I was miles away, and speaking my thoughts aloud.'

Lisette was shy all at once, and she could not have been cool with him no matter how hard she tried. A soft smile fluttered to her lips and her big, almond- shaped eyes looked with childish frankness into his. She saw his own eyes widen, slowly and ... could it be appreciatively! Something stirred within her and she spoke with breathless haste, impelled to break the silence, a silence so deep and wide that it extended over the entire garden. Even the cicadas had ceased their whirring in the olive trees, and on the hillsides the goat bells were momentarily hushed.

'You weren't boring me, Mr. Condylis. In any case, you weren't talking for very long.'

'I wasn't?' with faint surprise. 'Then I must have voiced very little of what I was thinking.' His gaze was still fixed on her face, keenly searching.

'I must go back to Mrs. Mallory,' Lisette said awkwardly, turning as she spoke.

'The nurse will be here the day after tomorrow, and she'll stay the week.'

Lisette merely nodded. She knew that something more than physical tiredness accounted for her loss of energy and of colour, but Sula did not know, and in consequence he had decided she needed a break. His mind was made up and Lisette admitted to herself that it would be futile for her to protest; Sula Condylis was used to having his own way.

To Lisette's relief and satisfaction the new tablets proved to be instantly effective and the palpitation and breathlessness which Mrs. Mallory had recently been suffering did not recur. And as her pains were also relieved Lisette began her holiday in a much happier frame of mind than she had at first anticipated. The nurse, a middle-aged Greek woman called Iphigena, but which both Sula and his aunt shortened to Gena, was a smiling, pleasant sort of person and at the same time highly efficient. Lisette wondered why she had not been employed permanently and mentioned this to Sula on the evening of her first day, when they were having pre-dinner drinks on the patio. She had been lying in the sun all day and already she felt different - had gained a little more energy. Sula had been away in Athens; on his return, fairly late in the afternoon, he had walked on to the lawn and stood staring down at Lisette, who was clad in brief shorts and a sun-top.

'Good girl,' he approved unexpectedly. 'This is how I meant you to pass your time.' Imperious the tone and Lisette did wonder why she should accept it without resentment. She had never cared for being 'bossed about' and, fortunately, Dick was not the masterful type. Sula on the other hand was not merely masterful; he could be domineering, Lisette had long since concluded, and she had also decided that, should he ever take a wife, he would very soon reduce her to a state of complete subjugation.

'Gena won't accept a permanent post,' said Sula in reply to Lisette's question. 'In any case, Aunt Evelyn had no need of a nurse; it was a companion she required - until quite recently. I did advertise for a nurse-companion, I know, because I could see what was coming, and so could my aunt.' Sula was immaculately dressed in a suit of light grey mohair, the collar and cuffs of

his white shirt contrasting vividly with the mahogany of his skin. An attractive if formidable figure he made, with that out-thrust jaw, stern and flexed, and those hollows beneath the prominent cheek bones. In the shadows cast by the gentle-moving vines there was an unreality about him . .. almost as though he were merely the ghost of some departed heathen god.

Lisette, smiling at her thoughts, was stirred again by that inexplicable emotion and, instead of endeavouring to cast it off unanalysed, she allowed her mind to dwell on it, and to admit into her consciousness the findings she made. Her lovely brown eyes widened. Was she gradually yielding to the driving force of this man? Surely she was not going to follow the pattern after all. Besides, there was Dick. He had written three times in five days, written the sort of love-letters she had longed in the beginning to receive. But what kind of letters had she written back? She had tried, no doubt of that, remembering how acutely she had been hurt when Dick's letters had lacked sincerity and depth. Yes, she had tried, and she hoped she had deceived him, because when she and he met again all her love would flow unrestricted. ... Would it, though? It must, she told herself. Their love had been so strong that it could not perish owing to a mere six months' separation.

Profoundly aware now of Sula, sitting there just a few feet away, reclining with a sort of easy grace in the comfortable garden chair, Lisette fluttered a glance at him from under her long curling lashes. His eyes were on her and, disconcerted by that unwavering stare, she felt the colour rise to mantle her cheeks. Faintly he smiled; with perception? she wondered, and instantly averted her head. He must not class her with those others - she was *not* one of those others!

'Dinner is ready, Mr. Sula.' The voice of Panayiotis, husband of Astera, came quietly over the air as he stood in the open doorway of the sitting-room on to which the patio opened.

'Thank you.' The man withdrew and, rising, Sula waited for Lisette to do the same. Awkwardness assailed her; she wished she had refused to join Sula for drinks before dinner because the velvet night, wrapped as it was in the mothy, scented darkness of the East, was far too potently exotic .. . and romantic. If only Dick had been here— She braked her thoughts, realizing

they were not desires. Dick was a million light years away . . . and Sula was right here, beside her, waiting with a sort of indulgent humour for her to precede him into the house.

The dining-room was no less romantic than the night outside. Tall candles lit the table, held in elegant silver candlesticks. Flowers spilled their colour and perfume, wineglasses sparkled, reflecting stars on to the silver arrayed on each side of the place settings. Sula pulled out Lisette's chair for her, and either by accident or planned intent, his warm hands touched her bare arms . . . and remained there a split second longer than was necessary. Enchanting colour rose. She must be cool with him, and impersonal, she whispered to herself - and instead she flashed him an open charming smile and murmured a shy, 'thank you', as he moved away from her chair.

What folly was this? Could she possibly be in that state referred to as 'on the rebound'? Was she trying to assuage a hurt by indulging in a flirtation? Alarmed at this idea, she strove to recapture her frigid manner, but so abrupt was her changed attitude that it had the same effect on her companion as a douche of water from a freezing mountain stream. He stared in disbelief at the cold proud face opposite to him, unable to assimilate the icy, impersonal reply to the question he had smilingly asked.

'Is something wrong?' His query was voiced as soon as Panayiotis had left the room after serving the fish. 'Are you not feeling well?'

Lisette sat upright in her chair, meeting his anxious gaze unflinchingly.

'Is something wrong?' A small, almost arrogant shake of her head. 'No. What makes you ask, Mr. Condylis?' With fine unconcern she picked up her knife and fork. But she lowered her eyes as she noticed the muscles contracting round her companion's mouth. The sensuous lips were sensuous no longer, but tight and thin and giving the impression that their owner could be totally ruthless.

'Why the sudden change?' he demanded, making no attempt to touch his food. 'You don't switch about like this for no reason—'

'Switch, Mr. Condylis?' Again she shook her head, an action that seemed to set his temper well and truly alight.

'Very well, Miss Tracy,' he returned with biting emphasis, 'if that is how you want it, then that's how it shall be!'

Her heart seemed to sink right into her feet. What had she done? And what of Sula? How unpredictable he was. He should by rights - had he followed the course she would have expected, and which aligned with his character as she had come to know it - have assumed a cool, indifferent air towards her, uncaring whether they dined in an atmosphere of affability or one of near silence. It would appear that either he was playing a game with her in which it was his object to make her fall in love with him, just for his own private amusement, or that he was in deadly earnest and actually desired to arouse in her an interest which would be reciprocated. Neither of these aspects found favour with Lisette, simply because they were both at variance with his character. He himself had expressed annoyance at the behaviour of the girls who had previously embarrassed him by felling in love with him.

Her thoughts causing her some considerable bewilderment, Lisette gave an involuntary sigh - and was glowered at for her trouble. Her eyes fell to Sula's hand, which gripped his fish knife so tightly that his knuckle-bones glistened through the skin. She had the staggering impression that he would very much have enjoyed rapping *her* knuckles, good and hard, with the blade of the knife he held. She glanced quickly away and concentrated on her food. And no other word was spoken throughout the meal. But at the end Sula said to his manservant,

'We'll have our coffee and liqueurs on the back veranda,' and this was accompanied by another glowering look in Lisette's direction, as if he were daring her to raise any protest or refusal to join him. What odd behaviour from so superior a being as Sula Condylis! What exactly had he in mind? Perhaps, she thought, he was hankering after an affair, but instantly dismissed the idea. He'd had affairs, she felt sure, and he would have more - but not with a girl who was in his aunt's employ.

The back veranda, arched and marble-paved, looked out towards the Temple of Aphaia, elegantly poised in its pine-enclosed haven above the limpid

waters of the Gulf. Terraces of vines arrayed the hillsides, winding towards the Agia Marina where there was a delightful *taverna* where Lisette had eaten once 011 her day off.

'Sit down, Lisette, and relax.' Firm tones, yet oddly gentle; Sula's flare of temper appeared to have died now and he seemed ready to forget the friction that had been responsible for that silent meal. He was drawing forward a chair for her and she murmured, 'Thank you, Mr. Condylis,' as she sat down.

'Sula,' he said briefly, his gaze narrowing as she glanced up swiftly, her eyes questioning and wide. She wanted to know what he was about. 'We've known each other three months, so it's high time we cut the formalities.'

'Oh, but... I don't think I can call you - call you - Sula.'

'You have - and charmingly too. Your shyness is as refreshing as your frigid veneer is irritating.'

She blinked at him, vaguely ashamed that her mind was not on her fiance ... but he was only a shadow, and Sula was real.

'I don't understand you, Mr. Condylis,' she began, when with an imperious lift of his hand he cut her short.

'Sula, if you please.'

She swallowed saliva which had collected in her mouth.

'I - I was saying that I didn't understand you.'

'Yes, I heard you. What is it you want to know?' Reaching for another chair, he put it close to that of Lisette and sat down, stretching his long legs out in front of him.

Disconcerted because she had no idea what to say, Lisette glanced sideways at him. The profile was dark and forbidding, but there was an ease about Sula for all that. She gained the impression that he was fully relaxed ... and content.

'Here's Panayiotis!' A great sigh of relief came audibly from her lips and Sula's dark head turned and she saw the half-smile on his lips and the faint lifting of his brows that betrayed amusement. 'He's brought the coffee and liqueurs,' she added brightly, and of course quite unnecessarily. The half-smile broadened as with a lift of his hand Sula snapped on a light above their heads. Lisette noted the gleam in his eye, further evidence of an inner access of amusement. This was yet another side to his nature . . . and an exceedingly attractive one, admitted Lisette, and a tiny voice inside seemed to be asking her where she was going. Heeding this voice, she attempted to bring her fiance's face into her line of vision, but failed utterly. Dick was nebulous; he did not exist in this realm - a realm redolent of Eastern magic where nights were balmy and sprinkled with starlight, where sweet-smelling flowers and herbage mingled with the tang of the sea and where the atmosphere was alive with reincarnated spirits of a long departed past. For the gods were present if unseen, inhabiting their lonely temples on the mountainsides, and enticing to their shrines hosts of eager pilgrims in the shape of modern tourists.

Panayiotis poured the coffee and departed silently. Tensed, and strangely alert, Lisette picked up her cup and held it to her lips, watched by Sula, who seemed quite unable to take his eyes off her. And there was every excuse for him, although Lisette did not know it. But the picture she made, sitting there under the soft rose-coloured lamp, her hair glinting with lights of bronze and russet and burnished gold, her pale skin tight -and unblemished over perfectly-modelled bone structure, was one that few men would have been able to ignore. Her great brown eyes, so delightfully shaped, looked into his, not with proud coolness and indifference, but with a soft and sweet expression she had never dared let him see before. Indeed, she was unaware of its presence now, but even had she known she could not have changed that expression, simply because she was caught in the magic surrounding her, and in the magnetism of this man's personality.

'I was asking what you wanted to know about me.' The reminder, spoken in the softest tones, was accompanied by that humorous smile, to which Lisette managed after a while to respond.

'I don't want to know anything.' Lisette reached for her cup again, a nervous gesture which was not lost on the man sitting beside her.

'You don't? Then tell me about yourself. I know your age, and that you have no parents - at least, I believe my aunt mentioned this to me at one time or another.' Lisette nodded and Sula went on, 'You have brothers and sisters?'

'I have one sister, that's all. Her name's Maureen.'

'She's married?'

'Yes.' Placing her cup and saucer on the table, Lisette reached for the large blown glass and watched the cognac glisten with well-simulated interest. A quiet laugh escaped Sula and he said,

'Still shy? What a strange girl you are, Lisette. So unsure of yourself one moment and determinedly offhand and arrogant the next—'

'Not arrogant,' she protested instantly. 'No, certainly not arrogant.'

'That is a matter of opinion.' Reaching for his own glass, he put it to his lips, savouring the aroma of its contents. 'Have you a dual personality or is there some reason for this inconsistency?' Naturally she did not reply and Sula went on to say that his aunt had always found Lisette friendly and cheerful - certainly never cold and indifferent.

'You discuss me with Mrs. Mallory?' she retorted, flashing him an indignant glance.

'I did ask if you treated her with the same frigidity you extended to me,' he admitted with a bland smile. 'She seemed amazed that you possessed such a side to your nature. I gathered, therefore, that your coldness was reserved for me alone.'

Lisette fingered her glass, wondering what he would say were she to give him the reason for her attitude towards him. She could not, of course, as she had had no right to be listening to that conversation at all.

'One doesn't feel bright and friendly all the time,' she said at last after several attempts to find something less weak. Again he laughed.

'One day you might decide to explain. Meanwhile, is the thaw permanent, or merely an interim of warmth in this ice age through which we've been passing?'

He was actually teasing her! What a contrast to his manner when first he spoke to her, saying she was unsuitable for the post of companion to his aunt.

'I'll try to be more friendly,' she promised, surprising herself as much as him. But she felt impelled to add that he himself had been distinctly hostile towards her at first. He nodded reflectively at this but made no apology, merely saying,

'There was a very good reason, but let us forget it. I'm certainly not hostile towards you now, Lisette.' He sounded so sincere, she thought, wishing she knew just how to take him. Was he playing with her, she asked herself again, or was he ... could he possibly be attracted to her in a genuine sort of way? The idea persisted even while she chided herself for allowing it the smallest place in her mind. She was engaged to Dick, who was expecting to marry her - soon, he had hinted in his last letter. He had saved and hoped she had also. They would marry, and what they did not have would come later. 'But I can't wait much longer, my darling Lisette. How I have missed you these past months ...' There had been much more and Dick had ended by saying that in less than two months they would be together. Strangely, though, Lisette had not been affected in any way by that letter. Her home was here, on the lovely island of Aegina - and she had no desire to look into the future, which had lost substance and colour the instant Dick had told her he wanted to work for Lana Southern. And yet, unaffected as she was, Lisette obstinately refused to believe her love could die. Once she saw Dick, and found herself in his arms—

'What gargantuan problems are causing that haunted expression?' Sula's half-bantering voice cut in on her reflections and once again Dick became lost in the mists of the past. Here was the present - luxurious surroundings and good wine, an attractive companion whose interest - whatever its object - was flattering and also comforting. Lisette smiled at him, a smile of unaffected charm which brought an odd expression to his handsome face.

'They're not gargantuan,' she replied easily. 'Just minor ones that will resolve themselves with time - I expect.'

The hesitation did not escape him, but he made no comment, and when they had finished their drinks he invited her to walk with him, which she did, and they took the path through the pine-woods, making for the temple which was the glory of Aegina; and indeed it was a spectacular sight as the moon, having emerged from its covering of light cloud, shone full on to the flecked and granulated stone of the columns. Palm trees on the hillside swayed gently and their fronds moved with the grace of tentacles in water as the zephyr rippled caressingly through them. Stars twinkled from a velvet sky and the stolen light from the moon flared across a sea of glass. They reached the site, entering into a sacred, hushed and tranquil world where no living thing existed but their two selves. A feeling of timelessness swept through Lisette; she made no demur when Sula took her hand, ostensibly to help her over the fallen masonry.

'How still, and peaceful.' Lisette whispered the words, looking up into her companion's face. His eyes held hers and she felt herself caught by the power of him, unable to move or even draw her eyes from his.

£'Did anyone ever tell you how beautiful you are?' Half-bantering his tone, but grave too, and his manner was serious. Lisette's colour rose enchantingly and emotion brought depth to her eyes. Shaking his head as if endeavouring to throw off the effects of some potent drug, he bent to whisper in her ear, 'Still shy? You're unique, Lisette, for girls are not shy these days, least of all English girls.'

'You - you seem to know,' she countered shakily, and managed to laugh.

'You're asking if I'm a womanizer? I've had my moments, Lisette, but I don't think I'm any worse than any other man.'

'Why tell me? Your past is no concern of mine.' She was trying to gain confidence, to disprove his assertion that she was shy.

'Of course it isn't.' Sudden tightness entered his voice and Lisette wished she had not tried to be arch, because undoubtedly she had spoiled a pleasant - if dangerous - situation.

'I'm sorry . . . ' Her eyes were raised and he saw that they had shadowed, but the hard glint in his remained. 'Have I - angered you?'

Sula did not reply instantly and in the velvet balmy silence she found herself willing him to soften.

'No,' he answered at last, 'you haven't angered me,' and, with a hint of amusement, 'Would it have troubled you if you had?'

'It would have spoiled this pleasant interlude,' she responded frankly.

'You find my company pleasant, then?'

'Yes,' she answered simply. 'Yes, I do.'

'Then we must walk again, you and I.' A small pause before he said, 'How would you like to come to Athens with me one day?'

Her eyes brightened.

'I'd like that very much. I was thinking I must go, but then I thought you might not—' Abruptly she stopped, colouring as his straight brows lifted in an interrogating way.

'Well?' he queried briefly.

Lisette looked down at her hands, not quite knowing how to answer and wishing fervently that she had thought before she spoke. At last she shrugged resignedly and said that she had it from Mrs. Mallory that Sula hoped she would rest all the while, except for a little swimming. Also, when he had seen her on the lawn, sunbathing, he had said that this was the way he had meant her to pass her time.

'And you meant to obey me?' with a sort of satirical disbelief. 'Well, well...'

Lisette's pointed chin lifted. In the darkness following the masking of the moon by cloud she saw only the outline of his figure, not his expression.

'I do not like the word obey, Mr. Condylis!'

He laughed, a deep attractive laugh and said,

'So we're back to Mr. Condylis, are we?'

'I wasn't aware that I'd called you anything else.'

'You did - and charmingly, if you remember?' The moon emerged again from behind the cloud and Lisette saw that Sula's eyes were flickering with amusement. 'If I agree to take you to Athens then you must agree to call me Sula. In fact, I shall not in future answer to anything else.'

Lisette laughed in spite of herself; the laugh echoed through the sanctuary, sweet and clear as the goat bells on the mountainside. And before she realized what his intention was Sula had caught her in his arms, and before she could even recover from her surprise his lips had found hers and claimed them in a long and ardent kiss. Shocked by her own lack of resistance as much as Sula's totally unexpected action, Lisette eventually did make some sort of effort to twist away, out of those encircling bands of steel. But she was not allowed to escape; Sula held her with effortless ease, and when she would have opened her mouth to protest her words were smothered in a second kiss, more ardent even than the first. Vaguely through her mind there came a vision of Dick, and she wondered if she would make a confession, telling him of this lapse.

Sula's arms relaxed and Lisette moved away, but slowly. His hands had caressed her back and waist, and she could still feel a sort of guilty pleasure in the experience. His lips also seemed to be still on hers, pressing hard so that they hurt a little . . . but it was a sort of exquisite pain which left her mouth feeling rosy and warm . . . and yearning for more.

'You - you shouldn't have k-kissed me,' she stammered, feeling foolish instantly because of the amused gleam that entered Sula's eyes and the humorous twitching of his mouth. But he refrained from making any

comment which might embarrass her and pronounced instead that it was time they were getting back to the house. And he chatted on the way so that Lisette regained her composure, and by the time they reached the villa that little scene might not have taken place, so prosaic had become the conversation. Chrystalla came to them in the lounge and asked what they wanted for supper.

'Just a cup of tea for me,' said Sula, and Lisette had the same. 'I have a strong suspicion that we're going to lose Chrystalla in the near future,' Sula observed when the girl had left the room.

'Lose her? Why?' Lisette sat down on the couch, her cheeks flushed from the cool night air, her hair entrancingly windswept. 'She wouldn't leave you to go somewhere else, surely?'

Mechanically Sula shook his head.

'Not to go anywhere else - but she'd leave me to go to a husband.'

'She's engaged? But she never mentioned a boy.'

'She isn't engaged yet; she would have told me if she was. But she's in love.'

Lisette blinked at him.

'How do you know?' A faint smile hovered on the full sensuous lips, but before Sula had time to answer Lisette's question she was saying, 'Greek girls don't marry for love. Their marriages are always arranged for them by their parents.'

'Not always,' he corrected. 'Chrystalla has very different ideas. You see, she lived in England for three years, with a married friend who has settled there, and that's why she speaks such excellent English. She also came away with her own ideas on marriage and she once told me that the boy who wanted her would have to take her for love, and to prove it he would not ask for a dowry.' He paused, but Lisette merely waited and he said, his eyes twinkling suddenly with amusement,

'There's an ancient Eastern saying, Lisette. "From the eyes of a maid in love there glows the light of a thousand stars." Take a look at Chrystalla's eyes when she comes in with the tea.'

CHAPTER SIX

LISETTE combed her hair in front of the mirror; she was looking at her eyes, and recalling what Sula had said the night before last. 'From the eyes of a maid in love there glows the light of a thousand stars.'

A sigh fluttered as she put down the comb on the dressing table. There were no stars in her eyes, and no matter how hard she tried she could not produce any. What must she say to Dick when they met in about seven weeks' time? But surely, when she saw him again, and he smiled in that particular way that had thrilled her, and when he spoke tenderly to her. ... Yes, surely she would recapture the old excitement, and her heart would beat far too rapidly as he took her into his arms.

Glancing at the clock, Lisette grabbed a coat and ran downstairs. Sula was waiting, a smile on his face.

'Ready?' he asked, and she nodded. Here was excitement and the quickening of her heartbeats. ...

They boarded his launch, a luxurious vessel with a man to do all the work. Lisette and Sula sat together outside, enjoying the sunshine and the sail on the calm waters of the Gulf. Athens lay so close that they were there in just over an hour. Sula had some business to which he must attend, but promised to dispatch it promptly and meet Lisette for lunch. She would spend the morning on the Acropolis, she said, but Sula advised her against it.

'There is an extraordinary beauty of light in Attica,' he told her, 'and this enhances the Acropolis best in the late afternoon, especially at this time of the year.'

'In that case I'll explore the town and wait for the visit to the Acropolis.' She felt glad in a way, because now Sula would be with her when she experienced her first exploration of the sacred rock with its buildings, one of which was unanimously declared to be the most beautiful piece of architecture in the world.

She wandered about, in Omonia Square where she sat under trees and had coffee, and then in Constitution Square. She eventually found herself in the Plaka, ancient Athens, region of tortuous alleyways where blacksmiths and tinsmiths and numerous others plied their trades to the sound of *bouzouki* music from the nearby *taverna* and the smell of *kebabs* cooking on the charcoal stoves. Children played in the streets behind the shops, men sprawled in the pavement cafes; swarthy men beckoned, inviting Lisette to purchase souvenirs. She could not resist, and she bought things to send home to Maureen and her husband, to Susan and Sylvia ... but what of Dick? For a little while she searched, and then gave it up. But in a junk shop whose window was cluttered with dust-begrimed items from old smoothing-irons to crustacea-covered amphorae taken from the sea Lisette found an antique silver bracelet that she knew Mrs. Mallory would love, because she was extremely fond of old jewellery, and an ivory figure of Hermes who among other things was the ancient Greek god of luck. This was for Sula, although she did not know why she should have wanted to buy him something, nor did she know how she was going to present it to him, but she optimistically hoped an occasion would arise where this could be done without causing undue embarrassment to either of them.

Promptly at the time appointed she was at the meeting place in Omonia Square and they went into a hotel for lunch. It was the first time Lisette had known this sort of luxury, as she and Dick, saving so hard right from the first, had always eaten in small cafes, usually scanning the price list before venturing inside.

'I expect you're keeping to English food?' Sula's dark eyes smiled tolerantly as he handed her the menu, taking up another himself.

'I had *stifado* in the *taverna* at Agia Marina,' she told him, glancing quickly down the list of foods. 'It was wonderful.'

'They cook it very excellently at that *taverna*. You can have it here, but it might not be quite the same.'

'I'll try it.'

Sula nodded, his attention on the menu.

'I think I'll have the same.'

The *stifado* was served as the third course; it was a most appetizing stew made with meat and vegetables marinated in delicious spices and wine.

'That wasn't at all bad,' Sula declared as the waiter removed their plates. 'I thought that perhaps they might not have the special art here that the keeper of the cafe at Agia Marina has.'

After lunch they went through the Plaka, climbing through groves of trees to the great rock which was the Acropolis, dropping sheer on all sides but the west. Many sightseers were strolling about among the ruins; Lisette stopped and stared at the Parthenon, bathed in a strange aura of colour ranging from shadowed ochre to tawny brown but with the fantastic play of light which Sula had mentioned - and this was due to the incredible clarity of light in Attica - many other subtle colours sprayed their beauty over the columns of the great temple to Athena, protectress of the ancient city.

'What must it all have looked like when every building was standing?' Lisette, speaking in a rather awed voice, was wishing she had brought her camera. 'And the gold statues—'

'They weren't made of gold,' he interrupted. 'Embellished, yes, but even in those days they couldn't afford to make them entirely in gold.' He fell silent, pensive for a moment. 'I agree, it must have been truly magnificent, for all the buildings were of white Pentelic marble. The weather has done this - changed the colour.'

'It's richer, somehow. I like the patina of age.'

Sula turned his head and looked down at her, seeming to be taking in every detail of her face. Then his eyes moved slowly and appreciatively, over her whole body, from the lovely arch of her neck to the tiny waist and down to her brown, sandalled feet.

'Yes, the patina of age is most attractive,' he agreed, returning his attention to the temple.

'I wonder how much it cost? I suppose it wouldn't be very much in those days.'

Sula's brows lifted.

'What gave you that idea?' He turned, indicating the Propylaea - the magnificent entrance to the Acropolis. 'That cost the sum of a million gold pounds - and that was well over two thousand years ago.'

She blinked.

'As much as that, and for one building only?'

Sula nodded, telling her that the taxes levied by Athens on her allies paid for all these things, but inevitably it led to strife and, in the end, the breaking away of those allies.

After a long while they moved away from the Parthenon, and wandered over to the small Temple of Nike, where they sat down on the warm stones, and fell into casual conversation. That feeling of unreality engulfed Lisette again as she cast her companion a sideways glance. How did she come to be sitting here with this magnificent Greek? Only a week ago the possibility would have been as remote as a trip to the moon. Such a man would never become interested in a girl like her. But he had been interested for some time, Lisette now realized that. And although his interest had begun as pique, something else had developed . . . and Lisette now sensed a depth to his interest, a depth that thrilled her in spite of herself and her stubborn refusal to admit that her love for Dick could die. If it weren't for him she would enter fully into this situation, and accept whatever it was that Sula was holding out to her, tentatively, it was true, but honourably. Lisette knew instinctively that Sula was to be trusted.

She continued to watch his profile. His mouth was firm, but there was a strange movement in his throat. What were his thoughts? His eyes were fixed on the distant rise of Lycabettus and Lisette followed their direction. The sun shone on the hill, and on the gentle hills encircling the city. Buildings were clustered closely together on the lower slopes and so thick

were they even lower still that it would appear that Athens must soon begin bursting at the seams.

Sula turned his head, his eyes falling automatically to the watch on his wrist.

'Do you know how long we've been here?'

'I expect it's a long while. Time goes so swiftly when you're happy and contented.'

His eyes flickered.

'You're happy?'

Lisette gave him a ready smile, and inclined her head.

'Yes, Sula, I'm happy.' It was the first time she had used his name, despite the threat he had made, and a smile broke from his lips.

'I'm glad you're happy, Lisette. You see, I had the impression that you were not only thoroughly tired, but that you were - well, unhappy about something.'

She looked down at her hands, half inclined to tell him the whole truth. But she refrained, and for some reason which was important and yet inexplicable. All she knew was that she had an overwhelming desire to keep her engagement from Sula.

'Perhaps I was a little homesick,' she offered, considering this to be a reasonable explanation. 'But, as I said, I'm happy now.'

They stayed on the Acropolis for a little while longer and then went back through the Plaka and, after taking some refreshments at a *taverna* where they watched men dancing to the strains of *bouzouki* music, they returned to Piraeus and boarded the launch.

'I've had a lovely time? Lisette turned to Sula as they sat down, and the words came spontaneously. 'Thank you very much for taking me.'

His lips twitched. He said slowly,

'Don't thank me, Lisette. I'm quite capable of demanding payment.'

'Payment?' Her heart gave a tiny jerk despite the fact of her having decided that Sula was to be trusted. 'What s-sort of payment?'

He laughed softly.

'Nothing more frightening than a kiss, Lisette.'

'Oh ...' Delicate colour fused her cheeks. She was reminded of those other kisses, and of her vague desire for more. 'But - but you shouldn't k-kiss me.'

He looked swiftly at her, and she gained the impression that he frowned inwardly.

'Is there some good reason why I should not?' The engine had started up and the launch was moving, leaving behind all the bright little craft, and the large white cruise ships anchored in the harbour.

'Well... not really.. .'

He did not speak immediately, and when he did his voice had taken on an edge of harshness.

'There are no complications in your life? No - boyfriend?'

'No.' The lie came instantly, appalling her so that she gave a little inward gasp. By what compulsion had that one short word escaped her? She must retract, she thought desperately, because something warned her that to deceive Sula would have the most dire results, that were he to discover that deceit his fury would sweep her to destruction with the swiftness and ferocity of an avalanche. But he was speaking even while she made that fatal hesitation, speaking softly to her in a voice no longer tinged with harshness and his eyes were almost tender as they smiled into hers. She caught her breath and her heart did strange things. She could not disclose the truth and

see this most attractive mood swept away and hear instead that harsh edge creep again into his voice.

They arrived back at the villa at six o'clock, so there was time for a visit to the sickroom before preparing for dinner. Mrs. Mallory's eyes lit up on seeing both Sula and Lisette enter together, and they darted from one to the other in a way that brought an amused smile to Sula's lips and a faint blush to Lisette's cheeks.

'Are you staying a while?' she asked as Gena fixed her pillows and, when Sula nodded she told Gena to go off for half an hour or so and get a breath of fresh air. 'Tell her to go and have a stroll in the garden,' Mrs. Mallory said when the nurse had left the room. 'But she's so conscientious that she won't leave me.' A smile flickered for Lisette as Mrs. Mallory added, 'How very fortunate I am - with two such kind and efficient people to look after me. Sula, how can I ever thank you?'

'You mustn't thank me for Lisette,' he replied with some amusement. 'If you remember, I would have sent her away.'

'Because she is young,' mused the old lady. 'Well, I expect you're thanking your lucky stars that you changed your mind?'

He assumed a mask-like expression but said, an odd inflection in his deep rich voice,

'Yes, Aunt Evelyn, I am certainly glad I changed my mind.'

His aunt looked at him long and hard before returning her gaze to Lisette, for whom Sula had drawn up a chair so that she could sit down by the bed. He himself stood for the present, his eyes now on Lisette's flushed face. He seemed amused that she was embarrassed yet dropped a hand on to her shoulder, as if he would help her over her discomfiture which had been caused both by his words and those of his aunt. For her part Lisette was passing from the stage of bewilderment to that of entire comprehension.

Sula and his aunt had been discussing her . . . and Sula had given some hint to Mrs. Mallory that he was interested in Lisette.

'I have a small present for you.' Lisette just had to speak, so that her chaotic thoughts would not trouble her so. If Sula cared. ... 'I found it in a junk shop, but it's really lovely.' She spoke with breathless haste, her voice far from steady. If Sula cared. . . . 'I'll go and get it!' And without another second's hesitation she left the room, running upstairs to get the small parcel from her handbag. Did she want Sula to care? Hastily she put the idea from her and willed Dick's face to appear before her vision. But he was a vague shape in the cloud-mist of the past. She frowned. Could it be a mere four and a half months since the parting between them? It seemed a long long while ... and in that long long while something had happened to her feelings for her fiance. She was fickle, this had to be admitted. 'But I'm not in love with Sula! I *couldn't* forget Dick, and fall in love again so quickly as that! What sort of a girl would I be if I could change so easily? Why, I wouldn't be any good to a man at all, because there would be no constancy about me!'

The bracelet lay on the palm of her hand. Dirt was encrusted in the fine filigree and in the clasp with its semi-precious stone. Taking it to the bathroom, Lisette gently scrubbed the bracelet with her nail brush, then dabbed it with the towel. Delighted with the result, she went downstairs again to Mrs. Mallory's room.

'I hope you'll like it.' Rather shyly she handed it over, her eyes brightening as she heard the little gasp of pleasure uttered as the bracelet changed hands.

'Like it! I adore it! My dear, how clever of you to find it. It's a genuine antique - but of course you knew that. It's a gem! Thank you very much, Lisette.' She held out her hand and asked Lisette to fasten the clasp for her. 'You see how lucky I am, Sula. And I'm sure I don't deserve it, for I'm the most trying patient imaginable.'

'Mrs. Mallory,' protested Lisette, 'you are a perfect patient!'

'She's merely asking for praise,' teased Sula, taking hold of his aunt's wrist and examining the bracelet.

'Yes, it certainly is beautiful.'

The handing over of the present, and the conversation which followed, served to take Lisette's mind off her problems, problems that threatened to grow and expand enormously. She was glad to be able to forget them in the pleasant atmosphere of Mrs. Mallory's room, with its delightful antique furniture - her own which she had brought with her from England - the glorious views it commanded from the two high wide windows, one facing east and one south. Wooded hill slopes formed the distant backcloth for orange groves and carob fields and, closer to, the sun-drenched gardens of the villa, smouldering with exotic flowers and shrubs. Just outside the window a Judas tree flaunted its delicate pink blossoms, and against the stone support of the patio roof a bougainvillea also showered its bloom in a cascade of violet that mingled enchantingly with the trellised vines shading one large section of the patio.

The conversation eventually becoming centred round Chrystalla, Mrs. Mallory told her nephew that the girl had hinted at an engagement in the near future.

'We'll miss her,' admitted Sula on a note of regret. 'What does her future husband do? Can we employ him also, do you think?'

'I doubt it, Sula. He's got his own little holding just above the village of Messagros; it belonged to his stepfather and I don't expect he'd want to give it up to enter service.'

'No, of course he wouldn't. Oh, well, we must resign ourselves to the loss. Did Chrystalla give you any idea when the wedding will be?'

'Not yet awhile - I don't think. Chrystalla's a very sensible girl and she knows that once she's married there'll be children quite soon and she won't be able to go out to work. So she did say that she wants everything in her home before she gets married. She'll get engaged, of course, and so you must be prepared to attend the party.'

As it happened Chrystalla decided not to have a party, but she asked Sula and Lisette to attend the engagement ceremony in the church. Her fiance

was a Greek Cypriot who had been brought over to Aegina by his mother when, after being widowed at the age of twenty-one, she had remarried eight years later. The ceremony, therefore, would be conducted in the Cypriot way.

'It will be a very quiet affair,' Chrystalla-said. 'I have only a sister, you see, and Petrakis has only one sister also.' She smiled rather sadly, for it was not often that Greeks were lacking in relations. On the contrary, they almost always had a surfeit of them. 'I hope, Mr. Sula - and Miss Lisette - that you will be able to come to the church to see Petrakis and me get engaged?'

'Most certainly we shall come.' Answering for them both, Sula glanced at Lisette as he did so. She nodded instantly. 'It's to be in the church here, I suppose?'

'Yes, that's right. And it's to be a week on Saturday.'

The following day Lisette was lying in a hammock on the lawn when Sula came out to her, a letter in his hand. She saw him approaching, saw that his eyes were on the envelope, as if he were examining the handwriting. On all other occasions when Lisette had received letters they had come by the first post, and Chrystalla had brought them up to Lisette's room with her morning cup of tea. Therefore Sula had not seen these letters with the various American postmarks.

'For you, Lisette.' Sula looked curiously at her as she took the letter from him. 'It's just arrived.'

'Thank you.' Because that lie flashed into her consciousness Lisette coloured slightly, and averted her head. The letter was slipped under the cretonne-covered pillow on which she had been resting her head. A matching garden chair stood close to the hammock and Sula took possession of it, his eyes wandering without restraint over Lisette's lovely curves and slender bronzed legs, which were naked to the limit of decency. Her blush deepened - not owing to embarrassment but, to her shame, owing to the pleasure which his admiring look gave to her. She felt she was being just as unfaithful to Dick as if she were married to him, and being so, gave herself to another man.

'You're not going to read your letter?' Soft tones and eyes that were questing and keen. 'You have friends in the United States?'

'Just one.' Tell him the truth, said a warning voice - tell him, before it's too late.

'But not an important one, obviously?' Tones still soft and the topaz eyes still questing. But they moved suddenly and with a sigh of thankfulness Lisette saw Chrystalla approaching with the tea. This was set out on a small table, a usual procedure during Lisette's holiday, which was now nearing its end.

'Shall I bring another cup and saucer?' smiled Chrystalla, glancing at Sula. He nodded and she went away, returning a short while later with the necessary crockery and a few more sandwiches and cakes. Slipping off the hammock, Lisette donned a gay towelling beach wrap and sat down at the table opposite to Sula. It was an intimate occasion, with just the two of them, having afternoon tea in the welcome shade cast across the wide velvety lawn by a cluster of high palms growing on the edge of the garden. From a hedge of pink and white oleanders a timeless fragrance hung on the still summer air, and in the nearby olive grove countless cicadas provided the only sound, for the sea below was still, touching the shore, but soundlessly, and spreading out like a sheet of glass towards the shimmering horizon.

The tea was piping hot and fresh cream was there for the taking. Sula did not take milk or cream in his tea, but Lisette helped herself liberally.

'Not troubled about your figure,' he observed in teasing accents, and Lisette shook her head.

'Not yet, thank goodness, for I do enjoy cream and such things as puff pastry and doughnuts.'

He smiled indulgently and Lisette felt her heart jerk excitedly. There was no doubt that this tall lean Greek could without conscious effort completely upset her equilibrium and send her grappling with emotions and sensations which she feared would in the end be sure to overwhelm her.

Did he care - as she was beginning to believe he did And what of her own feelings? His touch, his kiss, his voice and even his smile ... all these affected her like some irresistible motive force. But what of Dick, who, she knew, still loved her? - had never ceased to love her. He would be back in England in six or seven weeks' time, and he would expect Lisette to be there, eager and loving and ready to fall in with his plans for an early marriage.

'Lisette, my dear—' Sula's soft and faintly anxious voice broke into her troublesome musings and she uttered a tiny sigh of relief and automatically sent him a glance of gratitude. 'You're a long way off,' he murmured, picking up the plate of sandwiches and holding it out to her. 'Where were you - with that faraway look in your eyes?'

A sweet smile broke and her eyes brightened because of the way he regarded her and the gentleness of his voice which so short a time ago had been cold and indifferent so that its owner seemed remote and impregnable.

'It was nothing important, Sula,' she told him, and in fact those thoughts *were* no longer important. For as her eyes met his across the table, in the strange little silence following her words, Lisette at last knew that profound moment of revelation. . . . And she lowered her eyes then because she was recalling what Sula had said about a maid in love. From her eyes there glowed the light of a thousand stars. He must not know yet, not until he himself revealed what was in his heart. Somewhere in the deep recesses of her mind guilt vaguely lurked, because of Dick. Fear lurked there too, a tiny access of fear that she might just have made a mistake, and-that she attached too much significance to the change in Sula. Her lovely lips trembled then and a frown touched the brow of the man opposite to her.

'What is it, child?' he asked her concernedly.

Her face cleared and her doubts fled, and she looked so adorable in her relief that Sula leant across the table and, taking her chin in his hand in a masterful sort of way that sent tingles running all along her spine, he kissed her on the lips.

'The payment I spoke of,' he said with some amusement. 'But consider that merely an instalment. There'll be others to pay!'

Lisette read Dick's letter later when she went to her room to shower and change for dinner. At first she left it on the dressing table, reluctant to read it, but after her shower she sat down on the bed and slit open the envelope.

Dick began with, 'My darling', and went on to say how much he was missing her. It was a tender love- letter ringing with sincerity. In another moment of enlightenment Lisette saw the whole position unfold before her. In the beginning Dick had been dazzled by Lana, and by the glamour of travelling around with her. Lisette suspected he had become infatuated with her, but that both the infatuation and glamour had soon begun to fade, probably helped by Lana herself, who would not be able to hide her true colours for long. Lisette had known from the first that she could not be a *nice* girl, simply because she had gone out of her way to entice Dick from his fiancée. Also, rumour had it that all three of Lana's husbands had walked out on her, and Lisette could not see them doing that for nothing. Yes, Dick was tiring of the post he had accepted with such eagerness, and Lisette now realized that this had come out in a previous letter, but at that time she had not been able to read what was there between the lines.

'I can't wait to see you, my darling Lisette,' Dick wrote several times in his three-page letter. 'But it will not be long now. I suppose you have already told your employer that you will be leaving her very soon? Does she know you're getting married?'

Lisette was pale when, dressed and ready to go down to Sula, she took one last look in the mirror. Taking out her blusher, she applied a little and felt more satisfied. Sula was so quick to notice - and so concerned for her. He would be bound to ask questions if he thought for one moment there was something wrong.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE little church shone like a jewel in the sunshine and as Lisette and Sula entered the gate a smiling black- bearded priest rose from a wrought-iron chair and came across the flowered courtyard to greet them.

'Yassooy he said, embracing them both with a benign stare from piercing brown eyes.

'*Yassoo*,' responded Lisette and Sula together.

'Chrystalla and Petrakis are not here yet, as you can see. They are at Petrakis's house and they will come from there together.'

After chatting to the priest for a few minutes Sula took Lisette's arm and together they entered the church. It was the first time Lisette had been in a Greek Orthodox church and as she sat down she could only stare for a while in appreciation of the magnificent ornamentation, the lovely cut-glass chandeliers and the delicately-carved wooden pulpit supported by two massive lions. In the centre of the church was an icon of the Virgin Mary - the saint for that particular day.

Women were still dusting, their faces serious, their tongues miraculously still. The couple were late, but no one seemed to bother. The priest still sat in the courtyard; the women had departed after lighting nine candles which they placed in hanging silver candlesticks. All was very leisurely, with just Sula and Lisette sitting there, right at the front of the church. Birds sang in the lemon trees outside and in the distance a cock crowed. Children's laughter could be heard from the cluster of cubic houses just across the way. A donkey brayed on the hillside. Lisette, whose mind had been troubled by her problems, and by the uncertainty of her future, found herself becoming totally relaxed, her anxiety stilled by the peace given off by this easy-going atmosphere and unhurried tempo.

Choirboys arrived, their faces expressing relief that the couple were also late. Next came the photographer; then the sisters of the couple entered carrying trays of cakes prettily wrapped in coloured paper. Two crosses made of olive leaves lay on another tray, along with two gold wedding rings

to which bows of crimson ribbon had been attached. One or two people from nearby houses came in and sat down; they chatted together until Chrystalla and Petrakis arrived, followed closely by the priest.

'Doesn't she look lovely!' Lisette turned to Sula as she uttered the exclamation. 'The dress, and the flowers in her hair!'

'And the stars in her eyes,' supplemented Sula in a strangely teasing voice. And then he went on to tell Lisette that the dress would have been made by Chrystalla's sister who was an expert with the needle. 'She'll be delighted to make you a dress if you want one,' he ended, and Lisette nodded eagerly, for the dress, made of pale lilac embossed satin, was perfect both in fit and style. It had long wide sleeves and a high neckline. The flowers in Chrystalla's hair were white; the dainty sandals on her feet were of silver kid. In her hand she held a small bouquet of mixed flowers from Sula's garden.

The photographer was already busy and the service was delayed while he took numerous photographs of the couple, the priest and the small congregation. Then the priest began to chant while the couple stood facing him, their hands clasped in each other's. Once or twice Petrakis would turn his dark head and give his fiancée an affectionate glance. Lisette was still entranced by the beauty of Chrystalla.

'Will she be married in the same dress?' she asked in a low tone as the priest stopped chanting and one of the choirboys began to sing. Sula shook his head.

'No, she'll have something much finer than that for her wedding.' Lisette said nothing for the moment, but sat listening to the sweet clear voice of the young boy who was singing. The others joined in and people at the back began to chat.

'It's almost like having two wedding services.'

Sula nodded and smiled. Casting him a sidelong glance Lisette saw that despite this smile his face was fixed with a serious expression and the topaz eyes were grave as, turning his head, Sula stared at Lisette for a moment in silence.

'This is our custom,' he told her presently. 'The engagement service is very solemn because, you see, we regard the engagement as irrevocably binding. Once we're engaged we never break that engagement. So, as you say, we do in reality have two marriage services. In other words, the engagement *is* the marriage.'

'This is a Cypriot way.' Lisette's mouth had suddenly gone dry, and all her anxieties pressed in upon her again. 'Is - is yours the same?'

'Not quite, but similar.'

The engagement is the marriage.. .. But not in England, Lisette hastily amended. Yet, according to Sula's beliefs, the engagement was definitely binding.

She closed her eyes, trying to disentangle herself from a net that was remorselessly imprisoning her. If Sula were to know she was engaged, then he would without doubt expect her to remain engaged. It would be the end, she thought with a kind of frantic despair. Sula would turn from her in disgust were she even to suggest putting an end to her engagement.

'I think the photographer is wanting to take us,' Sula murmured, and she opened her eyes. 'Smile, my dear - prettily, now, for I shall want to keep this photograph.'

She obeyed and Sula smiled approvingly when the photographer had turned away.

'It should be a good one,' he said, and his warm hand sought her little cold one, and enclosed it in a firm possessive grip.

The priest had taken the rings from the tray, which had been held out to him by Sophia, Petrakis's sister. Turning his back to the couple, he began chanting again before, once more facing them, he gave them the rings which they exchanged, and wore with the ribbon bows still on them. The rings were on their right hands, but at the wedding they would then be transferred to the left hands, where they would always remain. Finally, the two crosses were handed to the couple.

Everyone began to move now, and there was laughter and congratulations and the passing round of the engagement cakes. The priest was shaking hands with Chrystalla, who bent to kiss the hand, but it was instantly drawn away.

'Do they normally kiss the priest's hand?' Lisette wanted to know, feeling slightly disgusted at the idea.

'Yes, I'm afraid they do,' replied Sula, not without a tinge of amusement on seeing her expression. 'However, this priest obviously doesn't believe in it—See, he won't allow Petrakis to kiss it either.'

'Well, I think that is very nice of him,' said Lisette, rising from her seat as Sula got up from his. There were more photographs, more congratulations from the people who were now running in and out of the church, as were their numerous children. Everyone smiled; it was a simple occasion, yet an extremely happy one, with Petrakis now kissing his fiancée as the last photograph was being taken. The couple then came to Sula and Lisette, and Chrystalla said, in a faintly husky voice,

'Thank you very, very much for coming to my engagement. As you see, we have not many people ...'

'I've thoroughly enjoyed it, Chrystalla. Thank you for asking me. I found it most interesting.'

'You do not have this ceremony in England - yes, I know this because I lived there. It is very strange to us when you don't have the ceremony.'

'The customs are different,' Lisette said, feeling faintly embarrassed as the Greek girl kissed her on both cheeks.

'Yes, the customs are different. But you are just as serious about your engagements as we are, I suppose.'

Fortunately Lisette was spared the difficulty of replying as the priest was beckoning to the couple and they went over to a little alcove where they paid him for his services.

Sula and Lisette left the church and drove back to the villa, through lanes bordered with flowering Judas trees and jacarandas and almonds. Sula was strangely quiet, as if he were still thinking of the ceremony which they had just attended: Lisette's thoughts were troubled and she wished one moment that she had been honest with Sula and told him about Dick, while the next moment she admitted that the last thing she wanted Sula to know was that she was engaged, and she wondered if she could manage to extricate herself without his ever discovering the truth.

That she could not marry Dick there was no doubt whatsoever. Her love had died, despite her efforts to keep it alive; the separation had in reality been an act of fate for which she was now deeply grateful; it had proved that neither her love nor that of her fiance was strong enough to carry them through the rest of their lives. Had Dick's love been strong he could not possibly have left her to go off with the glamorous Lana Southern, and had her love been strong it would have stood the test. She would have been able to forgive Dick, now that he was sorry and desired only to pick up wherethey had left off. Could she have forgiven him had she not met and fallen in love with Sula? No, it would not have -been possible, Lisette saw that now. She had said at the time that things would never be the same between Dick and herself, and that was true. All her life she would have remembered what he did, remembered that he could manage without her, and that he had not cared that she was immeasurably hurt at the idea of his being able to leave her for six whole months. And he might have done the same again, later on when they had children, should the opportunity have arisen.

Immediately on their arrival back at the villa Lisette went up to her room to put her handbag away before going down to Mrs. Mallory. Gena had come in for a couple of hours this afternoon, so that Lisette could attend the engagement service, but she had to be away by half-past four to attend another patient. The little ivory figure was on the dressing-table and Lisette picked it up. Silly to have bought it, since she was too shy to give it to Sula. It seemed too personal an action; they weren't yet sufficiently close for anything so intimate as giving presents. Suddenly she glanced up; the door was open - wide open - and Sula, who had evidently been passing, had glanced in and then stopped.

'Gena's just going, Lisette. Are you ready to see to Aunt Evelyn's medicine?'

'I'll be down immediately—' She stopped as he actually stepped into the room.

'Where did you get that?' He was looking at the figure which she had put back on the dressing-table.

'It's exquisite. Did you buy it here or did you bring it with you?'

'I bought it when we were in Athens, at the same time as I bought your aunt's bracelet.' Shyly she handed it to him. 'You - you like it, then?' Here was the opportunity she had been seeking. She hoped he would accept her gift.

'Very much, Lisette .. .' He turned it over, admiring the fine workmanship which had all been done by hand. 'As I said, it's exquisite.'

A small hesitation and then,

'I bought it for you, Sula.'

'For me?' He stared, perplexed. Plainly he was wondering why she should have waited all this time before giving it to him. A faintly sceptical light entered his eyes. 'Are you sure you brought it for me?'

'Yes.' She nodded, her colour heightening a little. 'I couldn't give it to you before ... somehow.'

'Somehow?' he echoed, suddenly amused as perception dawned.

'There wasn't a suitable occasion. You see, you - I— we don't really know each other very well and after I'd bought it I realized that it wasn't quite the thing to do - to give you a present, I mean.' Sula said nothing, but his regard was strange and searching as he looked down into those beautiful brown eyes which were upraised to his, wide and frank and yet a little timid too, revealing the fact that their owner was unsure of herself. 'I'd been buying presents for everybody,' she elucidated when the long silence threatened to continue indefinitely. 'And - and I decided to buy one for you.'

'We don't know each other well...' He spoke softly, to himself, his eyes on the exquisite little statue of the god. Lisette sat there, at her dressing table, her heart beating a little too quickly. It would be such a disappointment if he refused the gift, to say nothing of the embarrassment she would experience. But she need not have worried; Sula's face softened suddenly and an almost tender light entered his eyes. He held the figure in one hand while with the other he took hold of her wrist and brought her to her feet. And, quite naturally, she was in his arms, her lips quivering and parted and ready for his kiss. 'Thank you, Lisette,' he said when at last he held her from him, and looked deeply into her eyes. She caught her breath at his expression, and at the magnificence of him, so tall that he literally towered above her. 'It was a charming thought, my dear; I shall treasure this - your first gift to me.'

Your first gift. ... Words portraying confidence in a future together and although Lisette gave herself up to the wonder of the moment as, drawn once more into Sula's arms, she knew the thrill and sweet pleasure of his lips against hers, she trembled inwardly. What was to be the outcome of her deceit? Could she hope to keep her engagement from Sula? Lisette decided to write a frank letter to Dick, confessing to her change of heart, and asking him to consider their engagement to be at an end.

But the letter was never written. By the late post there arrived a letter from Dick informing Lisette that the tour had been cut short owing to a disagreement between Lana and several artists. Lana, he said, had become so arrogant - because she was the star of the show - that the others refused in the end to work with her. 'I'll come over to Aegina,' he added, and Lisette immediately sensed his eagerness. 'I'll be there around the twentieth.'

The twentieth! Lisette's heart missed a beat. Today was the eighteenth.

That evening after Mrs Mallory had been made comfortable for the night, Sula and Lisette remained with her for a little while and then left the room together. For a few moments Lisette's troubled mind cut out the problem of Dick as she turned anxiously to Sula, who, she instantly noted, was as concerned as she.

'Mrs. Mallory ... I felt she wasn't too good. Her eyes kept moving strangely ...' Sula was nodding as he walked with Lisette towards the lounge. 'Do you think it's anything serious?'

Again he nodded, his mouth tight and his eyes grave. They entered the lounge and he closed the door.

'In my opinion it's extremely serious. I'm phoning for the doctor—' He stopped, appearing to be overcome with emotion. Lisette recalled his affectionate manner on the occasion of his saying that his aunt had helped him get his values right. That was at some crucial time in his life, Lisette felt sure, and she remembered wondering if a woman were involved. Had Sula been in love with the wrong one? - with someone whom his aunt could see would do him no good? If so, he must have been very young at the time, since Lisette could not imagine his making that sort of mistake now. 'I'm phoning for the doctor,' Sula repeated, 'but I have a feeling that he won't be able to do very much.'

Lisette felt the colour drain from her face. She had guessed that there was something seriously wrong with her employer, but hope and optimism had been uppermost in her mind. Now, these words of Sula's were so final. She knew he would never have uttered them unless he himself were convinced that his aunt was dangerously ill.

The end came suddenly, that same night. Both Sula and Lisette were with Mrs. Mallory and it was a painless, peaceful end. Lisette was weeping as Sula led her from the room, his comforting arm about her shoulders.

'I'm sorry,' she apologized, but the tears still came. 'I was so fond of her - and she was so patient and kind ...'

He gave a deep sigh.

'Yes, she was patient and kind,' he agreed in an abstracted sort of way. 'I know just how you feel, dear, but,' he added, his frown clearing somewhat, 'we should be thankful that she didn't suffer in the end. It could have been much worse - and she had no inkling that she was dying.'

'No, and I'm glad about that.' Lisette raised her tear-stained face to his. 'It - it must be awful when you know you're dying.'

Suddenly he became stern.

'Let us not talk about it. Come into the lounge and have a drink. Then you must go to bed—'

'I can't! I won't sleep!' She tried to tell Sula about Dick's visit, but could not. Why hadn't she told him immediately she received the letter? What a tangle she was in now.

'You'll sleep,' he told her firmly, adding that she was to take some tablets he would give her.

She had been in bed half an hour when to her surprise Sula knocked gently and entered her room. The tablets lay on the table by the bed where she had put them. She did not want to sleep; she must *think* - about Mrs. Mallory and Dick and Sula and the future. But her employer only remained on her mind. Her death was a shock even though the doctor had said that with these new tablets she could last for years - or die tomorrow. Strangely, Lisette had dismissed the latter possibility - until this evening when Sula had spoken those words, the words which rung with an awful finality.

'You're still awake?' Sula's voice was edged with disbelief. 'That's very strange . . .' He had caught sight of the tablets and, transferring his gaze he said sternly, 'Why haven't you taken the tablets?'

'I don't take sleeping pills.' She dared not tell him the truth, that she wanted to lie awake and grapple with her problems, for as sure as he stood there he would demand to know what these problems were.

'They're not ordinary sleeping pills.' Sula picked up a tumbler and half-filled it from the water jug. 'Sit up,' he commanded in tones that brooked no protest. 'Take these with water.' The tablets were handed to her and she obediently swallowed them. 'All right; now lie down. It's a good thing I came in - just to make sure you were sleeping peacefully,' he added still with that stern inflection in his voice. 'You can do no good at all by lying awake

all night. Further down,' he ordered, and as she obeyed he pulled up the bedclothes and tucked them around her. 'One tends to feel cold at times like these.' Straightening up, he stood for a while, his face taut because of the emotional stress which he himself was experiencing. No doubt about it, concluded Lisette, he had thought a great deal about his aunt.

At breakfast the next morning she had to tell him that a friend of hers would be arriving on the Monday. It was certainly not the right time, she thought unhappily. Sula looked tired and she knew he had not slept despite his insistence that she should do so.

'Tomorrow?' sharply. 'But why didn't you tell me before?'

'I didn't know myself until late yesterday afternoon when the post came. There was no opportunity of telling you—'

'No opportunity?' He stared at her, impatience revealed in the frown between his eyes. 'There was plenty of opportunity. You could have told me at dinner.' He was angry, and Lisette could fully understand this. Never could the time have been more inopportune for receiving and accommodating a visitor, and Lisette felt a sudden surge of anger against Dick for taking so much for granted. He should have inquired first, if it were convenient for him to visit her at the home of her employer. Of course, he was not to know of the tragedy, nor that, far from being ready and waiting to receive him with open arms, Lisette was in fact dreading his visit. He knew of Sula's existence, but that was all, Lisette having mentioned him casually in her first letters, but later omitting to say anything about him at all.

'I'm sorry.' She spoke hesitantly, angry with herself for her stupid silence. 'I suppose I should have told you, but - but ...' She allowed her voice to trail off lamely. How could she explain her reluctance to tell Sula of Dick's forthcoming visit?

'I'm afraid, Lisette,' said Sula in a slightly modified tone, 'that you'll have to put her off. As you know, we have to bury people straightaway here and it would not be convenient for me, or pleasant for your friend, if she were here on the day of the funeral. Invite her to come again - in a week or two.' He paused and Lisette tried desperately to say that her friend was a male, but for

the moment she was also occupied with these words of Sula's. Invite her friend over in a week or two. ... So revealing ... for by rights she should be leaving the island, now that her employer was dead. Sula loved her and had no intention of letting her go. Soon, when he had got over his aunt's death, he would declare his love, and ask her to marry him. This much Lisette knew, yet her heart was heavy as lead itself, because of the plight she was in - not merely owing to the lie she had told but owing to the fact of her engagement, which, in Sula's eyes, was irrevocable. 'You can send a cable,' Sula was saying. 'She's coming from England, I presume?'

Averting her head, Lisette stammered,

'It's - it's a young man. He's been in America -working, and now the job's finished and - and he wants to look m-me up, as it were.'

Silence dropped like a blanket on the room. Lisette felt guilty and unhappy that she should be upsetting Sula at this time of tragic loss.

'A young man,' he repeated slowly at last, his eyes fixed on her bent head. 'He's not a special friend - for you said you hadn't one, when I asked you, so I find it very strange that he should be coming here - especially without sending you ample warning, which he has not done, evidently. I should have imagined he would in fact have asked you if it would be convenient for him to come. He knows you're working here?'

'Yes, he knows.' She looked up, guilt and fear and apology in her eyes. Sula's own eyes narrowed; and she saw him as he had been at first: cold, aloof, unapproachable.

'The letter I brought out to you, it was from this - friend?' An edge of harshness had crept into his voice and Lisette knew a moment of near terror, for those topaz eyes seemed to dart fire.

'Yes - yes, it was.'

'You're not exactly at your ease, Lisette,' he observed. 'Is something troubling you?' No concern on this occasion. On the contrary, his voice so lacked feeling that it gave the impression of ruthlessness - or even actual

cruelty. Lisette found herself quaking and it was only by the greatest effort that she managed to keep her voice steady.

'I expect it's because he's coming at such an inconvenient time, Sula. And I can't get in touch with him.

But when he does come I'll explain, and tell him he must go. He'll understand, naturally.' He would have to go, she decided firmly. Once she had talked to him, and explained that there could be nothing between them now, he would not want to stay in any case.

'You'll tell him to go?' Sula's face relaxed and the trace of a smile touched his lips for one fleeting moment. 'Well, I know it won't be good manners, but as you say, he will understand - or he should do.' The change was miraculous; no doubt of the relief her words had brought him. 'He could stay in Athens for a week, and then come over for a short stay - if that is what you want?'

'Thank you, Sula. But I feel that he might want to go straight on to England. You see, his home's there.'

Sula nodded; Lisette saw at once that his mind was no longer on the visitor but on his own loss, and without even a word or a smile he rose from the table and went out, leaving Lisette alone with her troubled thoughts . . . and with the strange fear that Dick was not going to be so easy to handle as she had so optimistically hoped.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE phone rang and Sula answered it, frowning heavily as a voice at the other end spoke.

'For you,' he said curtly, holding the receiver until Lisette took it from him. 'I'm sorry I can't have your friend here - but you can explain why,' he added impatiently, and left the room. He looked tired and drawn and she suspected he'd had another sleepless night. He was dressed in black, as were all the servants, who would be attending the funeral in an hour and half's time. Lisette saw the door close, then looked at the receiver in her hand. Dick had certainly chosen the most inopportune time possible to phone.

'Lisette ... darling!' His voice, eager and happy as he heard her speak, seemed to jar on her nerves and automatically she held the receiver away from her ear. 'I'm here - at the harbour! Just landed from a small tug which I boarded at Piraeus. I've got a taxi and the driver says I'll be there in about twenty minutes. I can hardly wait! Darling, are you there?'

She found her voice. It was low and husky. It was repellent too, but this was unintentional. Never would she have believed she could hear her fiance's voice and feel no emotion other than annoyance.

'Yes, I'm here. But my employer died early yesterday morning and we have the funeral today. I'm sorry, Dick, but it's not possible for you to visit me here.' The words tumbled out. Lisette wanted nothing more than to keep him away ... to send him away, from the island, to be sure he would never come back. Yet conscience smote her for all this. Dick had come a long way to see her. As far as he knew she was still his fiancée, the girl he loved and hoped soon to marry. He was confident of an eager welcome, of arms outstretched and lips that smiled, and invited. 'Mr. Condylis apologizes, but says you can't stay here, at his house, and you will understand, I'm sure.' That was all; she could find nothing more to say. Silence followed her words, an unbelievable silence before Dick said,

'I do understand of course, Lisette ... but what I do *not* understand is the tone you're using. Aren't you glad I'm here?'

She swallowed hard, but her throat felt blocked. Nevertheless she decided to be fully honest. The sooner Dick learned the truth the better.

'Things have changed between you and me, Dick. I - I don't feel the same. It's most unfortunate that you've come all this way, but had you written first, and told me of your intention, then I could have saved you a good deal of trouble and expense.'

Another astounded silence. She swallowed again, half sorry she had spoken in this way. It would surely have been kinder to have suggested Dick stay at an hotel tonight and in the morning she could have gone to the harbour and met him, when she could have talked and told him of her change of heart.

'Things have changed, you say? I've come all this way to hear that! I don't believe it. You're just angry because I went away—'

'No, Dick. In fact I was never angry, but dreadfully hurt, as I told you at the time. I'm not at all angry, but I am feeling differently about you. It's just one of those things which happen and it was better that we found out now than later, when we were married.'

'You're telling me you no longer love me? - that in five short months you've had a change of heart? No, Lisette, I absolutely refuse to believe it! When can I see you? What time's the funeral?'

'In an hour and a half—'

'You don't have to go, do you?' he broke in sharply. 'Can you come over now, and see me?'

'I'm going to the funeral,' she told him quietly, wondering if she were as pale as she felt. 'I became most attached to Mrs. Mallory and I wouldn't dream of not attending the funeral. Besides, it would be a dreadful slight to Sula - to Mr. Condylis.'

'Sula ...' softly from the other end of the line. 'This is the nephew you spoke about in your first couple of letters?'

'That's right.'

'And you call him Sula, do you?'

'We all use Christian names—'

'You called your employer by her Christian name?'

'We'll - no-'

'Just her nephew, eh? I believe, Lisette, that I'm beginning to see the light. You said in your letters that the man was extraordinarily handsome, but cold. That he had an exaggerated sense of his own superiority. And yet you're now on intimate terms with him.' A short but significant pause and then, 'The man you describe is the type women often fall for—'

'Please, Dick! I don't want to talk about Mr. Condylis!'

'It seems to me,' Dick said ignoring the interruption, 'that you've been foolish enough to become infatuated with the man.'

She glanced at the receiver in her hand. It seemed impossible, but she had an almost irrepressible urge to hang up on Dick. But should she do that he would probably ring again and again, or even come over, despite the inconvenience he would cause.

'As I've said, I don't want to talk about Mr. Condylis,' she said quietly. 'And I'm afraid I must go, Dick. Perhaps you'll stay there, at an hotel on the harbour, and I'll see you in the morning, when we can talk.'

'About what?' gratingly from over the wires.

'Us,' she said, her voice sinking even lower. 'I can't marry you, Dick. It wouldn't be fair for me to pretend, or even to waste your time. I'm quite determined to break the engagement.'

A long silence followed during which she began to wonder if Dick were still there. He spoke at last, and no sign of hurt could be detected, merely anger,

deep and somehow frightening. Lisette frowned. Why should she be trembling like this? No matter how angry Dick might be, he could not do her any real harm.

'We'll talk about us, shall we? And what of this Greek you've lost your head over?' For the moment Lisette was too angry herself to speak and Dick said in rasping tones, as a thought suddenly occurred to him, 'Does this fellow know you're engaged?' 'I didn't tell either him or his aunt.' 'And why not, might I ask!'

'There were reasons, the main one being that, had I owned to being engaged, these people would have thought it very strange indeed that you could have gone off and left me—'

'Oh, my God, not that again! All right, I was to blame, but surely we can let that drop now. I asked you about this Sula you've lost your head over!'

'I'm not talking about him,' Lisette returned promptly and with emphasis. 'And in any case, I haven't said I've lost my head over him - though it wouldn't be relevant if I had. Nothing can put things right between you and me, Dick. I don't love you any more and, frankly, I do feel that your love wasn't strong either—'

'You shan't say that, just in order to vindicate your own behaviour!' He stopped and Lisette heard a sound that was almost a sob. And when Dick spoke again a profound change had taken place. His voice was hoarse and faintly pleading as he admitted that he had been stupid, making the wrong decision when offered the post by Lana. 'But I love you, Lisette, and that love was always strong, no matter what you would now like to think, just to suit your own ends. It *was* strong, and still is - and I've no intention of allowing some damned foreigner to take you from me. In any case, he wouldn't be interested in marriage, not to an English girl.' Another slight pause before he continued, 'Must you go to this funeral, darling? Make an excuse and come over here to see me. There's an hotel right here - the Atlantis. I'll book in and then wait in the lounge for you.'

'That's impossible,' she returned in firm and definite tones. 'I'll meet you in the morning if you want me to, but it won't do any good. I'm not marrying you, Dick.'

Another sound, that of a trembling, indrawn breath. Lisette's eyes filled up. How had she and Dick come to this? Why hadn't they discovered, long ago, that they were not really in love? But Dick was in love, or so he truly believed and, in consequence, was suffering immeasurable hurt.

'I refuse to accept that you won't marry me,' he said at length. 'It will be different when we meet, Lisette, I know it will. If you insist on attending the funeral then I must be patient. But surely you could come this evening?'

'Tomorrow morning, Dick—'

'I expect your damned Greek needs comfort, is that it?' he suddenly exploded, and Lisette excused him because undoubtedly his flare of wrath was ignited by pain.

'What time do you want me to come in the morning?' she asked. 'Shall we say about eleven o'clock?'

'Can't you come earlier than that?'

'Ten, then.'

'All right. You will come? That's a definite promise?'

'Of course,' she answered gently. 'I shall be there.'

She told Sula, at dinner that evening, that she was going to see Dick the following morning.

'You were a long while on the telephone,' he commented, 'I noticed this because I was wanting to use it myself.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't know.'

'It wasn't important.' A pause while he eyed her searchingly. 'Yes, a long while, Lisette.'

She coloured, because there was an unmistakable question in the words . . . and a trace of doubt.

'We - we had a lot to say to each other.' She looked down at her plate, wishing she could be completely honest with Sula, and in so doing find relief from her oppressive anxieties. If only she could say to him, 'I'm engaged to that young man, Sula, but I've discovered I don't love him.' And if she could tell Sula of what Dick did, that he had been able to go away with the glamorous Lana Southern and leave his fiancée despite her pleadings; if she could tell Sula these things and be sure he would understand. . . . But he would neither agree with her decision to break the engagement, nor forgive her for that impulsive lie. His own ideals were high, his character strong. He would feel only contempt for Lisette if she told him the truth.

'It seems strange that he should come here, without giving you ample warning.' Sula spoke meditatively, voicing what he had already expressed in a previous conversation. 'He's come a very long way.'

'Yes.'

Sula glanced swiftly at her; she raised her head and her eyes were troubled. She could not go on like this, but, on the point of blurting out the truth, she had to draw back owing to the entrance of Chrystalla with the sweet. The girl was red-eyed from weeping, and she still wore black. Everyone had been devoted to Mrs. Mallory, and a pall of gloom had settled on the house.

'We'll have coffee on the patio,' Sula said quietly, and although Lisette sensed that he now had more on his mind than the tragic loss of his aunt, Sula refrained from mentioning Dick again that evening. But he left her early, bidding her a rather curt good night, and she remained on the patio, brooding over her situation and knowing that, were she to lose Sula, she would sustain a wound so deep that what she had suffered at Dick's hand would seem like a mere scratch. Everything would be all right once she had seen Dick, and convinced him that she meant what she said. He would leave the island and that would be the end; he would never want to see her again.

And Sula would never know that she had been previously engaged to be married.

However, it was not to be so simple, and as Dick sat there, in the hotel lounge, stating vehemently that he would not give up without a fight, Lisette again experienced that access of fear which had assailed her on more than one occasion of late.

'I'm quite determined,' she told him. 'We used to think we were in love, but we weren't, otherwise our love couldn't have died—'

'My love hasn't died! And I don't believe yours has either. It's this damned Greek! You've lost your head over him - you, who were always so sensible! Well, I'm not losing you that easily! It isn't as if he means marriage, - I can tell you that!' Dick's face was becoming redder and redder with every word he spoke. One or two people at the far end of the lounge were casting interested glances across the room, but of course they were too far away to catch the words being so furiously uttered by Dick. Lisette's voice was much more quiet and controlled, yet inside she was trembling and every nerve was on edge. Her hopes of an easy way out were fading, and yet when she tried to visualize losing Sula she could not bring such an eventuality even remotely into her consciousness. Dick was still speaking; he asked her outright if she were in love with Sula and although she refused to answer her heightened colour instantly gave her away. Dick was so maddened that there was not the remotest semblance of the man she had known in England. He declared emphatically that he would see Sula and no amount of pleading would break his determination.

'You'd spoil my chances of happiness?' Her voice and her eyes pleaded, but Dick in his enraged state remained immune, reiterating his threat to visit Sula and tell him that Lisette was engaged to be married. 'I'm not engaged!' Her voice sharpened for in her opinion this implacability was both futile and ridiculous. 'I'm free to make my own decision, and that decision is that I no longer want to marry you.'

His teeth gritted together and his hands clenched as they lay on the arm of his chair. On the table in front of him a large whisky stood untouched. Lisette had refused a drink, wishing only to have her say and leave the hotel

as quickly as possible. But of course it had not turned out that way, Dick being stubbornly unwilling to accept that the engagement was broken.

'You want to marry this foreigner instead?' The sneer fell harshly on Lisette's ears and as she looked into his face and saw the ugly twist of the lips she did begin to wonder if there was a side to Dick which had never been revealed to her.

'I must admit that Sula has not yet mentioned marriage, or even mentioned love,' admitted Lisette in all honesty. 'But by the way he has acted lately I know he cares, and if he asks me to marry him I shall accept.' She was recalling with a switch of memory the conversation of yesterday afternoon when Sula had said that Lisette must not trouble herself about her position, now that she no longer had employment. It was not the time to talk at length, he had said, but Lisette must not think of leaving. She must have guessed that he wanted her to stay, and for the present they would leave it at that. She had smiled, and nodded understandingly. His aunt lay, there, in her room. And over the whole household lay a brooding sadness. As Sula said, this was not the time to talk. But the promise was there and Lisette had no doubts about his future intentions.

'He probably has no intention of marrying you.' Having seized on her words, Dick spoke with a flash of triumph not unmingled with contempt as he looked into Lisette's face. 'These Greeks are notorious for *using* foreign women, but marrying their own.' Lisette's colour rose, but anger was her chief emotion.

'You don't know Sula, so please don't voice an opinion about him.'

Dick's eyes glinted and his teeth snapped together again.

'Touchy about him, eh? Well, he'll not get you without a fight, whether his intentions are honourable or not! I'm going over there to see him—'

'Please don't,' she broke in, the whole scene rising up like a lightning flash before her vision. She continued with the haste of desperation . . . and without thinking, 'Sula w-won't marry me if he knows I've been engaged because in Greece they attach tremendous importance to the engagement,

believing it should never be broken. It's as strong a tie as that of the marriage - so please, Dick, promise you'll not go to Sula ...' Slowly and perceptibly she allowed her voice to trail away into silence. Dick's eyes were narrowed; his whole manner was one of triumph. 'Promise me!' she whispered fiercely. 'It would be a dog-in-the-manger action, and one which couldn't possibly benefit you in any way at all.' He sat there, a gloating expression on his face. It was as if by sustained silence he would subject Lisette to torture. 'You'd deliberately ruin my chances of happiness?' She shook her head unbelievably. 'It doesn't seem credible.'

'You'd do it to me,' he flashed defensively, and again Lisette shook her head, this time for a very different reason.

'When you went off with Lana I suspected you were attracted to her, but I knew that if this were so I must accept it and become resigned. I would never have made a single move to interfere.' Lisette watched him carefully, and noticed the sudden lowering of his head as he avoided her gaze. 'You were attracted to her, weren't you, Dick? I mean, it wasn't just the money which tempted you.'

He glanced up then and his mouth went tight.

'What are you trying to do - vindicate your own conduct?'

'I have no need to do that,' she answered quietly. 'I'm doing what I know is right.'

'If you hadn't met this Greek—'

'It's nothing to do with him,' she broke in, speaking with absolute truth. 'I would have ended our engagement whether I had met him or not.'

'I don't believe you.' Slightly softer tones now and some of the hardness had left Dick's eyes. 'You'll get over him, and want me, Lisette. I always said we were meant for each other, you and I, and that still holds no matter how you're feeling about this other man at present.' His eyes met hers and, unable to miss the shadows lurking there, Lisette knew he was suffering. 'You've

admitted that he's never mentioned marriage, and I'm sure I'm right when I say it's the last thing he has in mind.'

'There hasn't been much opportunity for talking about us, and your future,' she returned defensively. 'At first we didn't get on and it's only recently that he's begun to care for me. He has had the worry of his aunt on his mind and now her death. He will talk to me soon, I know it—' She broke off, and a pricking sensation touched the backs of her eyes. 'Don't go to see him, Dick. Let me be happy.' She flicked a hand across her eyes as the tears reached her lashes. In any other man this involuntary action might have inspired pity; in Dick it lighted a flame of desire which fought side by side with the jealousy slowly consuming him. With a glance at her wristlet watch Lisette said, 'T must be going. Sula expects me back for lunch.'

'So you're not allowed even a couple of hours with your fiance, who's come thousands of miles to see you?' The sneer was evident; she looked down into his handsome face, saw the twisted lips and knew that the last vestige of feeling for him had gone. Even pity had fled, because she was now convinced that what love he had for her was shallow, and her heart was stilled for one fractional space of time as she caught a vision of what their lives would have been had they married. Either they would have drifted - as so many couples did - into the 'habit' of living together, or they would have parted, perhaps when they had children.

'If you could only accept it,' she said, voicing these thoughts which had held her, 'you would see that this has happened for the best. To marry, and then make the discovery that you're not in love, must be both shattering and heartbreaking. And that is exactly what would have happened to us.'

He was silent for a space, brooding now and no longer gripped by anger.

'If I hadn't gone off with Lana—' he began, when Lisette interrupted him.

'That was fate, I own to it now. By your action we were shown the way.' She spoke softly, and a dreamy expression fleetingly entered her eyes. She was thinking of Sula. But the next instant shadows masked the love which had appeared there and she knew only fear and a terrible despair.

'I was an utter fool,' Dick was admitting, a slight break in his voice. 'I thought it would hasten our marriage, you see - the earning of the extra money - but it wasn't worth it because she turned out—' He stopped and Lisette's eyes kindled perceptively. It was just as she had concluded. Dick had been infatuated by the singer and although in some vague way he was convinced that he really was making an earlier marriage to Lisette possible, he had at the same time allowed himself to be drawn into what he fully expected would be a pleasant relationship with Lana.

'She didn't come up to expectations? Is that what you mean, Dick?' She paused, glancing at her watch again. Sula had not asked her to be back for lunch, but she had promised him she would be. He needed her - instinctively she sensed this, and in any case she herself desired only to be with him. 'Something went wrong, obviously,' continued Lisette when Dick remained broodingly silent. 'I gathered that from one of your letters - although I should have sensed it earlier than I did. I wonder, Dick, if you would be here now had this something not gone wrong?' Her regard was searching and he went red. His hand came up and he fingered the ring which had lain on the table in front of him since Lisette placed it there only seconds after she and Dick had met. 'You wouldn't,' she asserted with conviction. 'No, Dick, you're here only because Lana turned out to be quite different from what you expected. However, it doesn't matter, for I believe the experience through which we've both passed has been of untold benefit to us. Experience is the best teacher of all because what one learns by it is never forgotten.' She took a step away from the table. 'It's good-bye, Dick ... and I can only hope and trust you will be honourable and go away, so that I can be happy.'

T shall not! It isn't good-bye! No, I'm coming to see this Greek who thinks he can steal my girl from me—'

'He doesn't know you exist,' Lisette reminded him. She was trembling violently now, for fear had her in its grip. Dick's face told her that he meant what he said. She had the firm conviction that, if he could not have her himself, he intended doing everything in his power to prevent Sula from having her either.

'Then he very soon will! I shall see him this afternoon!'

She stood, a little way from the table, her eyes clouded with tears.

'He's just had this loss, Dick. You can't come to his house this afternoon.'

'Fighting for your life, eh?' he sneered. 'Well, Lisette, you are fighting a losing battle. You've said yourself that he'll not marry you once you've been engaged - and, believe me, he's very soon going to be put in possession of the fact that you're engaged.'

At that her eyes moved to the ring on the table.

'I'm not engaged,' she murmured, but in broken tones as, for the second time in her life, she saw her happiness being utterly shattered, and there was nothing she could do to prevent it.

CHAPTER NINE

NATURALLY Lisette was in a state of suspense both during lunch and for the whole of the afternoon. Several times she had opened her mouth to tell all, but ever intruding was the hope that Dick, after some quiet rational thought, would change his mind about coming to see Sula. And it seemed as if her hopes were materializing, since dinner time arrived and still he had not put in an appearance.

Lisette had managed successfully to hide her anxiety and as Sula was not in the mood for work the two of them spent a quiet, companionable time together in the garden. And after dinner they strolled in the grounds, and in the quietude enveloping them words were superfluous, the simple action of Sula's taking Lisette's hand in his being all that was necessary to bring them close in mind as well as body. He had earlier questioned her about her friend, saying that if she wished he could come to stay in about a week's time. Lisette said she expected he would be going home to England and there the matter ended, much to her relief. Sula seemed too preoccupied to dwell much on the situation, otherwise he must have considered it very odd indeed that Lisette was so vague about her friend's movements, especially after he had come so far to see her.

The following morning just as Chrystalla had served coffee Sula came to join Lisette and she saw the heavy frown on his brow.

'I've to go to Athens,' he informed her, still frowning. 'My presence is required at a meeting and I can't get out of it as far as I can see.'

'You're going today?'

'No, tomorrow. And I might not be back for a few days - it just depends on circumstances.'

'Has something gone seriously wrong?' At the anxious note in her voice he smiled, shaking his head.

'No, dear, just one of those annoyances one has to expect in business. It concerns the export of some of our tobacco, but the trouble will be resolved,

though several discussions might have to take place. That's why I say I might not be able to get home for a few days.'

She hesitated, telling herself she was not yet close enough to Sula to extend advice. However, she ventured to say,

'Athens isn't far; surely you could manage to get home each evening?'

Sula shook his head.

'If prolonged talks do prove to be necessary then undoubtedly some of them will take place in the evening.' Again he shook his head, a little absently this time as he appeared to be absorbed in grappling with some problem. Lisette's eyes shadowed; Sula could very well do without business worries at this sad time in his life. 'No, dear, it will be much more convenient for me to stay in the city.'

He was away for three days but returned on the Saturday morning and spent the week-end at home. On Monday morning early he was gone again and Lisette, feeling lost on account of his absence, and still a trifle worried about Dick's intentions in spite of the fact that his silence seemed proof positive that he was no longer on the island, decided to go into the town of Aegina and do some shopping.

The little fishing harbour was characteristic of a palm-studded lagoon, with the motionless translucent water spreading like a sheet of cerulean glass towards the buoyant sea beyond. Peace and simplicity were made more apparent by the languid way in which the fishermen sat on the warm rocks mending their nets and chatting together under a clear Grecian sky from which the sun poured forth its dazzling light. Tiny caiques and other sailing craft lined the quayside or lay at anchor some small distance out, while on the misty horizon the white silhouette of a luxury liner could be discerned, cruising the magic waters of Greece. Behind the harbour dark grey rocks, superimposed one upon another in a series of ridges and scarps, formed a spectacular backcloth for the lush green slopes lower down where flourished the exotic vegetation which itself formed an enchanting setting for the pretty white villas with their red roofs and flower-bedecked verandas and patios. Here and there, standing in a sort of proud and grand isolation, there rose a

mansion occupying far more than its share of the landscape. Sula's house was one of these, but it lay on the other side of the island, over the mountain crest.

After doing her shopping and strolling around the small town for a little while Lisette sat down and the owner of the pavement cafe appeared on the instant, smiling and allowing his dark eyes to sweep over Lisette's lovely slender figure. She ordered coffee and leant back, her eyes wandering - as they had on several occasions as she had strolled about - to the hotel where she and Dick had met - and parted. No word had come to her from him - neither reassurance nor threat, and a week had passed. How long before she felt a hundred per cent confident? She was glad in a way that Sula was in Athens. Had he been at home he might have asked her to marry him. As it was, Lisette was being given time, and this time was vital. For if only another week could go by without any communication from Dick she would then be able to accept Sula without any qualms of fear pressing down to mar her happiness. Dick must have changed his mind, she told herself, as otherwise he would have contacted Sula in the beginning, coming over to the house as he had threatened to do. He must be in England by now, she decided, and perhaps he had found a new job already and was prepared to throw himself into it, and to forget the past. He lived with his parents and an elder brother. They were a happy family who had been delighted with Lisette, declaring that Dick was exceedingly fortunate in finding her.

On finishing her coffee Lisette ordered a taxi and was driven along the now familiar road across the mountains on the other side of the island.

Sula telephoned during the evening, saying he would not be home until Saturday, when he hoped to be in time for lunch.

'Sorry, dear,' he ended. 'I hate this interlude as I have so much to say to you.'

Warm and reassuring words which sent a flood of happiness surging through her despite the fact that her feelings were mixed regarding this forced absence of his. Here was the time she needed and yet she missed Sula abominably. But the time would soon pass, and with it the uncertainty which with every passing hour was becoming less and less until, by Friday afternoon, Dick scarcely intruded into her mind at all. And so it was with an

almost paralysing shock that she heard Chrystalla say, as she came into the lounge after answering the doorbell,

'A visitor, Miss Lisette - a gentleman.' Curious gaze and puzzled tone. Lisette felt the colour drain from her face.

'A - visitor?'

'He asked for Mr. Sula, but I said he would not be at home until tomorrow. The gentleman then asked for ... his fiancée, Miss Tracy.'

'Show him into the large sitting-room, please, and tell him I'll be there in a few moments.' Lisette's voice was tight because of the fear and despair rising within her. Why had Dick waited so long? Had he been on the island all the time? Surely not— Putting a brake on these questions which she could not answer, Lisette waited until Chrystalla had left the room before she herself moved. And when she did her legs felt so weak that she could instantly have sat down again.

He was standing by the window, looking out on to the lovely scene of temple and mountain, of islands in the calm blue sea and, much closer to, the lovely gardens of the villa from where sweet exotic fragrance drifted on the Etesian wind, so cool and welcome in the great heat of the summer. Lisette stopped just inside the room, her face pale as alabaster, her hands clenched tightly as if by this she would still the wild beating of her heart.

'Dick - why have you come?' She spoke with difficulty, moving further into the room. He turned and she gave a little start, for he was thinner of feature and his eyes were dulled. Was his love so very great, then? Had she made a mistake in believing him to be shallow? His eyes raked her in a way that instantly robbed him of the sympathy she was ready to extend.

'You know very well why I've come. I said I would. I want to see your fine Greek and let him know you're engaged to me.' There was something indefinable in his manner and Lisette gained the impression that he was about to impart some momentous information to her. But for the present he remained quietly waiting for her to speak and she asked him why he had left it so long before coming to the villa.

'Have you been to England in the meantime?' she ended, and he nodded his head.

'I was taken ill just after you left the hotel and a doctor was brought. I had food poisoning and the doctor advised me to return to England if it was at all possible, as to be ill here would cost a great deal of money. As the damned thing had not yet got a firm grip on me I did as he advised and flew to England after the doctor had taken me to Piraeus on his own private launch.'

'I'm very sorry, Dick.' She felt inadequate, looking at his face again and realizing that the illness had taken a great deal out of him. She had not yet invited him to sit down, the omission being the result of her own agitation of mind. She now indicated a chair and Dick sat down, Lisette taking possession of a chair opposite to him. 'You're feeling much better now?' For answer his eyes glinted in a way that plainly gave the impression that he treated with extreme scepticism any show of concern on her part. She swallowed the misery and despair gathering in her throat as she asked him again to go away and leave her to be happy with Sula.

For a long moment he stared at her across the lovely room and no sound broke the silence until a dog barked somewhere in the distance. The glint remained in his eye as he said, slowly and with a distinct sneer edging his voice,

'Did you know that your precious Greek was once in love with Lana? - and he still is, according to her, because he's never married in all these years. He was twenty at the time and she eighteen. And that's a long while ago, so it's feasible that he still cares for Lana.' He stopped, an unconcealed light of gloating in his eyes as he saw what his words had done to her. She was white and trembling, recalling Sula's words about this aunt having helped him to get his values straight. Lisette had sensed at the time that he was referring indirectly to a woman who had at one time played an important part in his life. But that it should have been Lana! It wasn't possible ... and yet what was it going to profit Dick to lie about such a matter?

'It - it isn't true,' she whispered tremulously. 'Sula would never be attracted to a girl like Lana Southern. He would see beneath the veneer, because he's so discerning. ...' Tailing off as she realized her lack of tact, she looked at Dick.

His mouth was tight and it was plain that what she had said was affecting him, because a drift of colour had crept into his sallow cheeks.

'He would see further than I, is that what you're insinuating?'

'So you admit you were in love with her?' flashed Lisette, for the moment diverted. Dick's colour increased, but he refrained from supplying an answer to her question and instead went on to explain how he had learned of the affair which had taken place between Sula and Lana Southern over twelve years ago.

'Lana arrived in England a couple of days after I did,' Dick explained, untouched by the paleness of Lisette's face or the spasmodic clenching and unclenching of her hands as they lay in her lap. 'On learning I was ill she visited me and I told her that you'd thrown me over because you had become infatuated with the nephew of your employer.' A small pause during which Dick appeared to be in a state of reflective amusement. 'She knew nothing of your being here, as I didn't see the necessity of confiding in her.' He stopped as Lisette raised her brows. He had not seen the necessity of confiding in Lana, he said, but Lisette surmised that the reason was that there was no room in his mind for his fiancée at that particular time in his life. He was too fully occupied with his beautiful employer. 'However,' continued Dick at length, 'I did then tell her about this job of yours, and when she heard the name of this Greek you've fallen for she roared with laughter. He was an old flame of hers, she said, and went on to tell me all about it. He wanted her to marry him, but on his terms: she must give up all idea of a career.' Dick shrugged and Lisette realized she was not to learn any more about the affair. 'He's still in love with her, obviously, otherwise he'd have married long before now.' A sneer curved Dick's lips as he added, 'Are you now resigned to the fact that marriage is the last thing he has in mind?'

She sat there in wordless misery, grappling with this new situation in which she found herself, and it seemed in this moment of agony that the best thing to do was for her to leave the island before Sula returned from Athens tomorrow morning. Dick repeated his question, but by this time a more rational trend of thought was making itself felt and Lisette allowed it to have free rein. She had no proof that Sula still cared for Lana; also, Lisette was convinced that even if he did, his love was weakening and that it *was*

marriage he had in mind with Lisette. He respected her and there was no doubting his affection which, Lisette suspected, was very near to becoming love.

'It might be love already,' she told herself fiercely. 'He can't still be in love with Lana after all these years!'

'The obvious thing for me to do is wait until Sula returns tomorrow and see what happens. I was expecting him to ask me to marry him—' She made a pathetic little gesture with her hands. 'If he does then I shall accept him, as I've already told you - but then you'll carry out your threat and tell him about us?'

'Of course,' grittingly as the muscles of Dick's face tightened. 'I'm not losing you, Lisette—'

'You already have, so please don't talk as if there's any possibility of our marrying.'

'You'll marry me in the end,' he returned with conviction. 'We were meant for each other and our path can never divide.'

Lisette ignored this and said,

'I shall tell Sula myself - about our engagement. If he doesn't want to marry me then I shall return to England and live with my sister until I can reorganize my life.'

Dick rose from his chair and came towards her; she got up, and would have backed away, but he caught her wrist and she was pulled into his arms. His lips found hers, savage and possessive, and despite her struggles Lisette could not extricate herself and, exhausted, she just remained there, frustrated by her helplessness.

And then, suddenly, Dick stiffened and drew away from her, his gaze directed over her shoulder towards the open door. Her spine tingling, Lisette turned. Sula stood there, in the doorway, staring in disbelief at the scene

before him, his face dark and glowering, his jaw flexed. Like the lash of a whip his voice reached her.

'Will you kindly explain, Lisette?'

'Sula!' Drained of strength, her mouth bruised and burning, she stared stupidly towards the door, terror seizing her at the expression on Sula's face. 'You - you s-said you wouldn't be home until tomorrow.' Her voice was cracked and faint; vaguely she was aware of Dick's presence, but only Sula seemed real. 'I didn't expect you today—'

'Obviously,' through clenched teeth, his eyes moving from her face to that of the man standing behind her. 'Who is this person, might I ask? - and what is he doing in my house?' He knew who Dick was, of course, Lisette saw that, but she answered, still in the same cracked voice,

'This is Dick Ellwood - my - my friend from America. I t-told you about him.' Instinctively she cast a glance of entreaty in Dick's direction but the blue eyes hardened.

'I came to visit my fiancée. You have no objections, I hope?'

'Your . . . fiancée?' Slow and disbelieving words as Sula's eyes were lowered to Lisette's left hand. 'I don't think I understand?' He spoke to Lisette, moving into the room as he did so. 'You never mentioned anything about being engaged?' He paused a moment and then, 'When I asked you if you had a boy-friend you said no.' Hard the voice and accusing. Lisette felt sick with apprehension and despair.

'I admit I - lied, Sula—' She turned her head. 'I want to speak to Mr. Condylis alone. Will you wait in another room? I'll ask Chrystalla to take you to the lounge.' She spoke with a sort of panic-stricken haste, and moved towards the bell. Sula barred her way, tall and overpowering, dignified even in his anger. She halted and looked up, not a vestige of colour in her face. Measuring her darkly, he said in tones of ice,

'If this man's your fiancée then why should he leave? You've obviously invited him here—'

'No, Sula, I didn't!' she broke in impulsively. 'He came of his own accord. I've told him our engagement is broken—'

'Broken?' Sula's topaz eyes narrowed. 'When was it broken - and why?'

She looked down at her hands; the action was in itself a confession of guilt and her whole body sagged. What was the use trying to vindicate herself? Her strength was insufficient for the struggle and all she said was,

'A short while ago I decided that Dick and I had made a mistake, but before I could write to tell him this I received his letter saying he was coming over to see me.' Again she was only vaguely aware of Dick, standing to one side of her now, his eyes riveted on Sula, an expression of deep hatred in their depths. 'I told him, almost a fortnight ago when I saw him at the hotel, that I could never marry him, but he seems to think I shall in the end.'

'You knew your own mind at the time of the engagement, I presume?' The metallic edge to his voice cut her like a knife. She inclined her head in agreement and Sula then continued, making a move towards the open window leading on to the back veranda, 'I'll leave you to discuss your differences in private . . . and to resolve them.' And with that he stepped out on to the veranda, bright with the morning glory spilling over its trellis, and with bougainvillea growing up the weathered limestone supports. Her eyes followed, but Lisette was blind to the beauty of the flowers and the garden and the olive-dotted slopes beyond.

'Are you quite satisfied?' Her lovely eyes accused, her mouth trembled piteously. It seemed incredible that Dick could stand there, impervious to her unhappiness. He who had been so tender and loving, declaring over and over again that he adored her and that he was the luckiest man on earth. 'And now, if you'll go . . .?' She indicated the door with a listless gesture, wondering at the way she felt - with no emotion other than a sense of numbed desolation and an apathetic acceptance of her fate. Sula was lost to her but she would never marry Dick.

'You're ordering me out?' His teeth gritted and he went on to remind her of Sula's reason for leaving them alone. 'Aren't we going to make some effort to resolve our differences?' he ended, and Lisette, spurred to life by the

absurdity of his request, gave him a piece of her mind before saying yes, she *was* ordering him out.

'And don't ever come near me again,' she flashed. 'When I get back to England I shall be with Maureen and her husband. Maureen was thoroughly disgusted with' the way you treated me and should you venture to call she'll probably tell you what she thinks about you.'

'I suppose,' sneered Dick, 'that you're hoping to make it up with your Greek?'

Stepping to one side so that he could reach the door unhindered, Lisette at the same time rang the bell for Chrystalla.

'Neither my intentions nor my future can be of any interest to you now. All that is to be said has been said—' She broke off as Chrystalla entered; the Greek girl's eyes darted from one occupant of the room to the other, and then wandered to the lonely figure going towards the little summerhouse set amid an enclosure spread with asphodels and poinsettias and shaded by tall swaying palm trees. 'Show this gentleman out, please, Chrystalla.'

'Yes, Miss Lisette.' The girl, sharp of intelligence and sympathetic of nature, looked squarely at Dick and said in firm and emphasized accents, 'If you will come this way, sir .. .' She waited by the door, a rather wooden expression on her dark face. Eyes glinting, and with a spread of crimson fusing his wrathful countenance, Dick threw Lisette a baleful glance as, passing close to her, he made his way to where the Greek girl was waiting to escort him to the front door.

After a long and timid hesitation Lisette at last gathered sufficient courage to go out to Sula, who was sitting in the summerhouse, gazing unseeingly at a magazine he had taken from a shelf and opened out on the table in front of him. He glanced up as she approached the open door and a swift frown gathered on his brow. Looking into his eyes, Lisette felt a stab of pain at the hurt she saw there, although the veneer Sula had donned was one of contempt not unmingled with suppressed wrath.

'What is it, Lisette?' with marked impatience. 'I'm not in the mood for talking just now. If you have anything to say to me then say it later, at dinner time.'

Flinching at his tone, Lisette coughed to clear her throat of the blockage that seemed to have settled there.

'Dick has gone,' she began, entering the pretty little rustic building despite the deepening of his frown. 'He isn't coming back because - because I've told him I can't marry him. I don't wish to intrude, Sula, if you don't want me to stay, but I - I came to say how sorry I am for telling you that lie. You won't find any excuse, I know, but at the time I felt a - a sort of compulsion to keep my engagement secret— Oh, I do realize just how weak that sounds, but I can't explain, not fully.' Not now that she knew about his affair with Lana; had she remained in ignorance she could perhaps have tried to make Sula understand, just by telling him how hurt she had been when her fiance left her to go off with the singer, but she was now prevented from doing this by the knowledge which Dick had imparted to her.

'At that time you were - in love with your fiance?' Stiff tones and a contemptuous raking of her figure. Yet underneath she sensed a tremulous little note which did not fit in at all with Sula's inordinate strength of character. Lisette had to hesitate a long while before replying to his question, and when she did reply she knew just how weak her answer was.

'I don't honestly know, Sula. I suppose I believed I was in love with him—'

'In that case why did you disown him, denying his existence?'

Lisette swallowed hard.

'Your aunt had previously asked me if I had a boyfriend, but immediately took it for granted that I hadn't, otherwise I shouldn't have been here at all.'

'But you were here. I presume you came merely for the glamour of living on an island? If I remember rightly you admitted you'd become unsettled and felt like a change.'

Damning now, those innocently-spoken words. Passing her tongue over dry lips, she said,

'There is much you don't know, Sula, and which, unfortunately I cannot go into. But I'm deeply sorry for deceiving you - and for hurting you now - at this time when you are so upset over your aunt . . .' She allowed her voice to drift away into silence as his dark brows rose with such pronounced hauteur that she was instantly plunged into a state of inferiority. His words, too, spoken with such arrogant precision, were calculated to put her in her place, to strip her of any idea that she was anything more than an employee.

'Hurting me? I don't think I understand, Lisette. In what way could any action of yours hurt me?'

Swiftly she averted her head, but not before he had seen the spanked child look on her face.

'I'm sorry,' she returned, and unconsciously a stiffness came into her voice. 'It was - was presumptuous of - of me to say a thing like that.' Tears pricked the backs of her eyes; she was not sure what she'd had in mind on deciding to come out here to Sula. Perhaps there had lingered in her unhappy vision some possibility of a miracle . . . and yet how could she have supposed that Sula would receive her with anything other than contempt? That he cared she did not doubt, although to what extent he cared she could not even begin to estimate, simply because their relationship had not reached the demonstrative stage. He had kissed her, it was true, and there had been many evidences of affection, hence the reason for Lisette's growing confidence in a future shared with him. But now. . . She had not managed to extricate herself as she had hoped. Also, Sula had donned an armour of pride which Lisette knew for sure she would never pierce. Then, added to the fact of her deceit, was his belief in the permanency of the engagement. By breaking hers she had immediately sunk even lower in his estimation. There was no hope for her, no hope at all.

At length she raised her eyes, surprising a brooding expression in his, but this was instantly replaced by the loftiness he had a moment ago assumed.

'If you've nothing more to say then perhaps you'll leave me.'

She took a couple of backward steps.

'I'm very sorry I lied to you,' she quivered, repeating the apology, but without any hope of forgiveness. 'At the time it seemed simpler to keep my engagement a secret, so as to avoid questions from your aunt. When you asked me if I had a boy-friend I answered impulsively, saying I hadn't, yet I knew on the instant that I'd done wrong.'

Impatience marked his manner with her.

'In that case why didn't you immediately rectify that wrong?' he asked in hard metallic tones, and Lisette could only shake her head and answer lamely,

'I don't know, Sula ...' She did know, but how could she tell him that his most attractive mood had done strange things to her and owing to this she found it impossible to retract and tell him the truth?

'I asked you if you had anything on your mind . . He spoke reflectively, forgetting her presence, and in tones so low that she could scarcely catch them. 'Yes, you've practised a good deal of deceit since coming here, though what your reasons were I cannot see—' He glanced up suddenly and added with an inflection that chilled her to the very marrow, 'Perhaps I do see ... yes, perhaps I do see a reason for your deceit.'

No mistaking the implication, especially in the light of what Lisette had overheard about his opinion of English girls, and the reason for that opinion. Now, it seemed, she was classed with the rest, with those girls whose object was to find rich husbands or lovers. ...

CHAPTER TEN

IN view of this implication Lisette fully expected to receive her notice immediately or, more probably, a month's salary in lieu of that notice. But it so happened that Sula's secretary in Athens became ill and sent in word that she would be away from work for about five weeks as she had to enter hospital for an operation. Sula then told Lisette that her notice would run from the end of the following week, when in the ordinary way she would have received her current month's salary.

'But there's nothing for me to stay for - not now.' The sooner she left the better, she decided, as she stood there, very much alive to the potent qualities and attractions of this man whom she had at first branded as arrogant and pompous and possessing an exaggerated sense of his own importance.

'You will help me,' he told her curtly, and went on to explain about his secretary's absence. 'On occasions you'll have to accompany me to Athens, but in the main the work I shall require of you can be done here.' His manner was one of the superior, and his words were an order. Lisette wondered what would be his reaction were she to refuse to carry out this work, but as she had no intention of doing so she instantly dismissed the superfluous question from her mind.

Lisette threw herself into the work, hoping to take her mind off her unhappy situation, but occupying a chair and desk so close to where Sula had his own desk, spending hours in the intimacy of the luxurious study, lunching at the same table as Sula, and dining with him in the evening ... all these were not conducive to forgetfulness, and as the days and weeks passed she became more and more affected by his magnetism and she did wonder if she would ever be able to put him completely out of her thoughts. For his part he was icily impersonal - the office boss who seemed to regard his secretary as an efficient robot rather than a human being. But of course this attitude was reserved for Lisette alone. He would surely not be quite so bad with his Greek secretary, whom he had had for several years, according to what Mrs. Mallory had once said.

Lisette learned a great deal about Sula during these weeks of working with him; she discovered a hardness and ruthlessness in his nature which she

assumed he kept for his business dealings. The arrogance she had early encountered was always in evidence and she often likened him to some being from the distant past when paganism was the rule and with it went the assumption of superiority which these days enveloped Sula like a cloak.

Three weeks had gone by when Lisette received a letter from Maureen informing her that Dick's mother had been to see her, asking about Lisette and desiring to know when she was expected back in England.

'She was terribly upset over the break,' Maureen went on. 'I told her it was entirely Dick's fault, and that he couldn't really have loved you, otherwise he'd never have gone off with that woman. However, she seemed to think you and Dick would eventually come together again, but she said her son was greatly puzzled because you hadn't yet returned.' He must have been making inquiries, Maureen added in parenthesis, and continued, 'She asked what you could be doing over there, now that Mrs. Mallory was dead, but I felt bitchy and kept her guessing. Why should I tell her that you were now working in a secretarial capacity for Mr. Condylis? She went off looking rather abashed, but I couldn't feel sorry for her because of Dick - which is quite illogical, though I've no excuse. She's rather sweet, really, and would have made a much nicer mother-in-law than her son would have a husband.

'The next piece of news is that Dick has been seen dining at the Carlton with Lana Southern, so what does one make of it all? Have they resumed their relationship - whatever that might be! - and if so what the heck is he still hankering after you for? If you ask me, it's a purely dog-in-the-manger attitude. He probably thinks you might be getting off with Mr. Condylis!' Love and kisses followed and, finally, Maureen had signed her name.

The contents of her sister's letter remained in Lisette's mind for a long while, which was natural. Lisette felt deeply for Mrs. Ellwood, as she had liked her from the start. And what of Dick? A frown knit Lisette's brow as she thought of his still 'hankering after her' as Maureen put it. Obviously his mother believed him to be suffering, hence her trying to be helpful. But Lisette could not accept that he was suffering - at least, not overmuch. What could be imagined, though, was his humiliation at being thrown over by his fiancée, as all his friends, and colleagues at his old firm, would be in no doubt whatsoever as to the reason for Lisette's action. Not that their

deductions were correct, since there were other reasons involved, but that was immaterial. Dick, having gone off with the glamorous Lana Southern, had been jilted by his fiancée. To everyone it would appear as simple as that, and in consequence Dick must now be an object of pity not unmingled with amusement. People would be sorry for him, while at the same time humour must enter into their feelings since only an idiot would do a trick like that and expect to get away with it unscathed.

Strangely, all this afforded Lisette no satisfaction whatsoever. She and Dick had without doubt been deliriously happy for almost a year and a half and she bore him no ill-will. In fact she would like to see him find happiness even though he had deliberately robbed her of any chance of attaining it. Perhaps he had found happiness, she thought. Perhaps he and Lana would eventually make a go of it— Automatically Lisette shook her head. Lana would never be constant to any man; besides, she was quite a few years older than Dick - six years older, Lisette calculated, remembering that she had been eighteen when Sula was twenty.

That same evening Sula asked Lisette to work a little later and dusk was enfolding them imperceptibly when at length he said he was satisfied, and that the rest could be left until the following day. There was a strange tenseness in the atmosphere as they both rose from their chairs; Lisette wished Sula would put on a light, although it was by no means dark, far from it, as the slanting golden rays of the sun could still be seen a long way off, shining on the mountains behind the Saronic Gulf and the height of Acro-Corinth.

Lisette wondered why she did not make some move to leave the room, but for some incredible reason she felt almost as if she had lost the use of her legs. Sula also stood there, motionless by his desk. He seemed to be absorbed by the sounds and smells outside - the cicadas in the olive trees and the soft sweet music of bells on the hillsides, the perfume of roses and lavender mingling with the scent of herbs drifting down from the distant rise, borne on the *meltemi* which was beginning to die away with the lowering of the pressure gradient as the lands to the south and east began to cool. In the other direction the quivering mountain peaks melted into the pure violet spread of the sky where already a sprinkling of stars had appeared. As the sun drifted towards the rim of the earth the room became

filled with a dull but gentle light reflected by the radiance hovering between sea and sky. This was a realm of magic into whose spell Lisette found herself drawn as Sula, moving from his desk to where she stood, hesitated for one silent moment before, with what seemed a perfectly natural gesture, he reached for her hand and pulled her gently into his arms.

His lips found hers, caressingly. She offered no resistance, nor yet any response, for this was not real. They were two entirely different people from those who a few moments ago were working together, not speaking as she performed her task and he his. Coldness was in the air and the sunlight was brittle and hard. There was no emotion, no awareness of this interlude which was so imminently hanging over them, compelling ... irresistible, enfolding them both in a world where time had no meaning and where dreams and desires pressed dangerously close. Lisette raised her head as her lips were freed; her eyes glowed— With a thousand stars? she wondered, and swiftly lowered them even though in this abstract light of gathering dusk he could not possibly read her expression.

'Lisette ...' The name trembled on his lips as if it had reached them right from the very heart of him. 'You're so beautiful—' His mouth crushed hers and this time she gave unstintingly, infected by his ardour and gentle mastery. His kiss was long and passionate, demanding and possessive; Lisette allowed herself to drift on the tide of his emotion until it eventually spent itself and she was free.

But her release came as a shock, so abruptly was it effected. Shame flooded her whole being as she realized without a trace of doubt that Sula was ashamed of his weakness, that he would have done anything to re-live that few moments which to her had been filled with bliss ... and hope.

'I'm sorry.' Curt and icy tones; without another word Sula left the room and, finding herself alone, Lisette put her hands to her face and wept bitterly into them. Darkness fell around her and still she remained in the study, motionless, and crushed by the weight of her own despair. What were Sula's thoughts at this moment? Was he still of the opinion that she was like all the jrest he had mentioned? If so then he must be filled with disgust at the way she had responded to the passion of his kisses. How could she face him at the

dinner table? she wondered as after getting ready she stood hesitantly in the hall, half afraid of going along to the dining-room.

She need not have worried. Sula had ordered his meal to be served in his own small sitting-room, where he remained for the rest of the evening. This state of affairs continued for another three days; and for Lisette, working with Sula in the frigid near-silence of his study, the time seemed interminable and she was becoming so affected by nerves that she felt she could not carry on, even though there were only about ten days left before her employment by Sula came to an end. He spoke only when necessary; he scarcely ever looked at her. He never extended a word of thanks or appreciation no matter how hard or how long she worked.

On the Sunday she was free, and she decided to take some sandwiches and go off to explore a little more of the island, since she would never be visiting it again.

She wandered through the pine-clad hills, sometimes climbing, sometimes moving easily downhill towards the sea. The volcanic mass of the island of Moni rose starkly from the smooth aquamarine waters, a grey and green rock half covered in mist. Other islands raised their heads, some naked and sinister, others wild and rugged, and still others which, more fortunate, were clothed in softest greens and greys and rich mellow russets. Lisette recalled having read somewhere that there were about two thousand Greek islands, most of which were uninhabited, being no more than jagged summits of vast mountain ranges submerged in the far distant past by the movements of the earth. She stood on a rise not far from the great rock of Palaiochora and gasped at the panorama of unadulterated beauty spread out before her. The expanse of placid sea with its ever-changing stream of colours as it swept towards the line beyond which it could be seen no more; the pine-clad mountains towering all around and seeming almost to mingle with the peaks of the adjacent islands; the ground beneath her feet spangled with sweet-scented herbs and bushes; the limpid atmosphere which, owing to its extraordinary clarity, lent a brilliant lustre to the whole wide scene, and was reflected even in the purity of the sky.

Sitting down, Lisette decided to have her lunch in this divine spot, where peace reigned supreme and even Sula drifted from her consciousness as she became enfolded in a protective cloak of calm serenity.

Dusk was falling when she returned, her sense of peace fast becoming submerged under the weight of her dejection, which descended more heavily after the temporary respite it had given her.

As she passed through the hall on her way to her room she stopped, halted in her progress as if by some stunning impact with an object barring her way. She felt the colour leave her face and a trembling seized her despite the fact that she was too numbed to move.

Lana Southern's voice! There could be no mistake; Lisette would never forget that indolent drawl, that affected purr with which went the smile which most men found irresistible.

Why was she here? At this stage Lisette failed to grasp the truth, even though memory brought back the faint feeling of disquiet she had experienced on reading Maureen's latest letter telling her of Mrs. Ellwood's visit and informing her that Dick and Lana had been seen together, dining at the Carlton Hotel. All that hit Lisette at this time was the fact that Sula had once been in love with Lana....

'Neither of them are in? Well, I can't leave because I've sent the taxi away. Besides, it's most important that I see both Miss Tracy and Mr. Condylis. Are they out together?'

'No, madam. Miss Tracy's been out all day, but Mr. Condylis went only about an hour ago. I expect he's walking and will return very soon.'

At last Lisette managed to move. Chrystalla turned as she came up to the open door of the lounge, from where the voices had reached Lisette as she stood further along the hall.

'A visitor—' began Chrystalla, when Lisette stopped her with a nod.

'Thank you, Chrystalla.' The door closed behind the girl; for a long moment Lisette and Lana took stock of one another before Lisette said, her voice hollow and unsteady,

'Why have you come, Lana?' and when the singer did not immediately reply, 'Is it - is it to see Sula?'

How lovely the girl was! Such beauty must surely evoke memories for Sula ... and surely it must tempt him again. The new drag of her despair brought a tiny sob to Lisette's throat. The other girl looked curiously at her.

'Sula ...? Well, yes, as a matter of fact I have come to see my old friend. I was amazed when Dick told me you were working here.' The merest pause and then, with an unmistakable hint of amusement, 'I understand you have a crush on Sula? Infatuation, Dick called it.'

Hot colour flooded Lisette's cheeks at this utter lack of diplomacy. She felt choked and glanced automatically at the shuttered window facing the veranda. Air flowed freely through the slats, as the window itself was open, but Lisette moved towards it with the intention of throwing back the shutters, for the sun had now moved round, its light entering the room through the west window, which was always unshuttered. Before she could carry out her intention, however, Lana was speaking again, and Lisette turned round to face her. Dick had solicited her help in effecting a reconciliation, the girl explained, and that was one reason why she was here.

'One reason?'

A flash of white teeth as Lana produced her most dazzling smile.

'The other reason is that I suddenly felt an urge to see my old - er - lover.' Softly the last word flowed from those adorable lips. Lisette flinched and glanced away, escaping from this girl's triumphant expression.

'He'll be in shortly, the maid informs me.'

'Yes, he's bound to be, because there's only an hour and a half to dinner time.' She forgot about the shutters as she said, 'My sister wrote telling me

that you and Dick had been dining together. Was it then that he asked you to help him?'

'That's right. The poor boy's desperate, Lisette,' Lana added, but not with any marked degree of interest. 'You really must take him back, for I'm sure he loves you still.' She looked at Lisette, whose colour was receding now, leaving her skin pale and transparent. 'I feel that the break is partly my fault and that's why I agreed to come and talk to you—'

'But you wouldn't have come had you not wanted to see Sula?' Lisette could not help interrupting, a hint of contempt in her voice.

'True, very true,' came the instant admission. 'However, if I can kill two birds with one stone so much the better. As I was saying, I feel partly to blame for this break-up of your engagement. I shouldn't have suggested he come and work for me, but how was I to know you'd be jealous? It's so old-fashioned these days when everybody has the odd diversion.'

Lisette felt a little sick. She said that she was not jealous, but she was hurt - unbearably hurt.

'I would never have believed Dick could go and leave me,' she continued, her voice husky with emotion because of the memory of that lunch when her whole world had fallen about her ears. 'I could never have left him, had someone offered me a job abroad.' 'It was for you, Lisette, he did make that clear - or so he led me to believe.'

'For me?'

'For you both, then. He would be earning a great deal more money than if he stayed in the job he had, and it was his idea that this extra money would enable you to marry sooner than would otherwise have been possible.' A small silence and then, 'You were not very understanding, he told me.'

'All I understood was that you had tempted him - for some reason of your own. Certainly I wasn't understanding when he told me he was going to America with you. I was his fiancée, and his place was with me, not you.'

'He was working. You talk as if he'd eloped with me or something! He genuinely believed the extra money would solve your financial problems.'

'At that time I'd rather have had Dick than any extra money.' She looked across the room to where Lana sat, relaxed against the costly upholstery of the chair, one shapely leg crossed over the other. 'Money isn't nearly so important as being together with someone you love, and I felt desolate when he told me about this job you'd offered. Life isn't long enough to sacrifice six months in that way. Had it been vitally necessary, as sometimes it is, then I should have accepted the separation as inevitable. But Dick had no need to go with you; he went from choice and without any thought whatsoever for my feelings. I begged him not to go, but he was adamant.'

'You begged ...?' Lana lifted an eyebrow with well- simulated surprise. 'And he wouldn't listen?'

A small sigh of exasperation from Lisette before she said,

'Shall we not pretend, Lana? We both know that the primary incentive was not the money at all. Dick as good as admitted that he'd found you attractive.' Lisette was cool now and her voice remained steady and calm. Lana on the other hand had gone red and for a few seconds she seemed incapable of speech.

'He admitted that?' was all she said when at last she did manage to find words.

'Not at the time, but later, when he came here to see me. I tackled him with it and he was unable to deny it.' Lisette smiled faintly. 'I told him it didn't matter, because I no longer loved him.'

'Oh, but you do love him, Lisette! A girl like you could never be so fickle as to fall out of love so easily as that.'

'I admit that at first I did feel rather ashamed of myself for being fickle, but I also had to be honest with myself; I had to accept that any love I'd had for Dick was dead.' No comment from Lana and Lisette said, looking squarely at the other girl, 'I suggested to Dick - when he visited me here - that

something had gone wrong between you . . .?' Lisette tailed off deliberately, a question in her silence. Lana's colour deepened. She spoke defensively.

'We did have one or two slight differences of opinion. Dick is so young, and so impetuous. I had to keep reminding him that he was my protector, not my possessor.'

Lisette looked down at her hands, her thoughts wildly imaginative as she saw this girl and Dick as lovers. She said, as if forced by some Influence beyond her control,

'You and Dick . . . can you honestly say that you were no more than employer and employee?'

A little startled silence and then Lana gave a laugh and said,

'Are you asking me if we were lovers?'

Pallor swept across Lisette's face.

'I suppose I am.'

'But you know, surely?'

Lisette nodded. Strange how this admission of Lana's left her cold, her only emotion being one of faint disgust.

'I expect I do.'

'We live in that sort of age,' shrugged Lana. 'It doesn't mean a thing. I'm sure it never interfered with Dick's love for you.'

'No? Then love is something I don't understand. I wonder what he would have said had I taken a lover.'

The singer laughed again, and opened her handbag, searching for her cigarette-case. Heady perfume wafted on the air from something in the bag -

a handkerchief, thought Lisette abstractedly, or a powder compact whose lid did not fit quite tightly enough.

'Men are different, unfortunately. But they're becoming educated to the fact that full equality's on its way. The day is not far off when the so-called indiscretions of women will be classed in the same category as the wild oats which men sow.' Taking a cigarette from the case, she flicked a gold lighter and then watched the smoke as it curled away towards the shutters, drawn there by the draught of air. 'Surely our little bit of fun hasn't upset you? You should be grateful for the experience he's gained. Who wants a man without a past, anyway? I'd hate it myself—' Lana shook her head emphatically. 'No - let them learn on someone else; I'm all for a man with a little finesse.'

Automatically Lisette's thoughts went to Sula, but with a sudden frown she switched them, saying,

'I also suggested to Dick that he would never have come here to see me at all had that something I mentioned not gone wrong.' Lisette's eyes held those of Lana as she added softly, 'Dick made no verbal admission, but his manner gave him away. You say he loves me and wants me back, but, Lana, if he could have you he wouldn't give me a second glance. I have to admit that, and so do you, if you're honest.'

A small uneasy silence followed this outspoken declaration of Lisette's. Uncrossing her legs, Lana played absently with the hem of her skirt, glancing at her companion now and then from under long mascaraed lashes.

'You're very frank, Lisette,' was all Lana could find to say when at last she broke the silence.

'It's' the truth. And so you see, you've wasted your time in trying to plead for Dick.'

'It's this infatuation for Sula that's the trouble. When you didn't return to England after Mrs. Mallory died Dick became worried in case there was some reciprocation from Sula, but I said definitely no. You're not his type at all. I asked the Greek maid what you were doing now and she told me you were working in a clerical capacity, so that explains that.'

Faint colour tinged Lisette's cheeks, but she said, her chin lifting a fraction,

'Why are you so sure that I'm not Sula's type?' 'Because he goes for my type, that's why. Always went for the girls possessed of flawless beauty—' Lana stopped on noting Lisette's expression, and then added, 'I suppose you're considering I'm immodest, but I'm merely stating a fact. Sula had a couple of girls before me and both were devastatingly beautiful.'

'He was very young at that time. He once told me his aunt had taught him about values, and I think that he was referring to a - well, to a . . .' Lisette bit her lip. Much as she disliked this girl she would never be so ill-mannered as to insult her. 'Perhaps he was referring to these two girls—'

'To me, you were going to say,' with a snap of Lana's teeth. 'You were about to say he was referring to a woman - meaning me.' The blue eyes darkened and glinted. Lisette could see no beauty in Lana's face now. On the contrary, it was almost ugly. 'Sula was madly in love with me at one time, let me tell you. But even at that early age he was so possessive and domineering that he expected me to give up any idea of a career, and marry him. A wife should be satisfied with her husband and home and children, and all that kind of rubbish. I told him I was destined for better things, and my success has proved this to be correct.'

'But now ... now you want to renew your relationship. You'd ... marry him?'

'Marry !' Lana's golden head went back against the couch as she laughed. 'Heavens, no! I've finished with husbands. They're so darned difficult to discard - oh, I know it's supposed to be simple these days, but the simplest way is not to fetter oneself at all. You can have a lover one day and be free as the air the next.'

Lisette shook her head, her dark eyes filled with disgust.

'Sula will never bother with you again,' she declared, but as the lovely face relaxed and the smile appeared she knew that what she had said was mere wishful thinking. A man would have to be made of granite to resist a girl like Lana.

'It's my belief that Sula still cares,' returned Lana confidently, her eyes cloudy and musing, as if she were back in the past - with Sula at her feet. Faintly Lisette smiled at this idea. Sula might have adored the girl - undoubtedly he had - but Lisette could not by any stretch of imagination see him in a position of humility. His arrogance was inherent; it was there from the moment of his birth. 'So you see, Lisette, there isn't much chance for you. And there wouldn't have been even if Dick hadn't spilled the beans about your engagement. The best thing you can do is go back to Dick—'

'Thank you for your advice,' cut in Lisette, angry now and determined to bring this conversation to a speedy end. 'I don't require it! I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions - and keeping to them. And now I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me as I have things to do in my room.' Lisette moved to the other side of the lounge. 'Sula shouldn't be long—' She broke off as Sula walked in, through the shutters which he had opened from the outside. 'You - you have a visitor,' she said, and left him alone with the girl who was already treating him to her most alluring smile.

As Lisette was sure that Lana would be staying to dinner she asked for hers to be served on the balcony of her bedroom. Chrystalla brought it up, looking bewildered, and faintly regretful. Chrystalla had been hoping for developments in the friendship which had sprung up between Lisette and Sula and she was plainly disappointed that nothing was to come of it after all. First Sula had avoided the dining-room and now Lisette was doing likewise.

'The table's very small,' she commented as she endeavoured to cram everything on to it. 'Will you be able to manage?'

'Yes, thank you, Chrystalla.' Lisette sat down after switching off one of the lights above her head. Flowers and trailing foliage now hid her from the view of anyone who might be walking in the garden outside. Not that Sula and Lana would be walking yet, she thought, but later they might go out, into the romantic atmosphere of this Eastern garden with its night sounds and colours and scents. The moon was full, and its beams flooded the mountain peaks and valleys and the quivering sea. Nocturnal crickets chirped and from somewhere in the high places came the warning echo that a bird of prey was hunting for its food.

A light but firm step in her bedroom brought a sudden frown of puzzlement to Lisette's eyes.

'Sula!' she gasped a second or two later as he stood on the balcony, his eyes not on her but on the lights of the car still faintly discernible in the distance. He had not changed and was still in a pair of grey denims and an open-necked shirt. But clothes could not detract from his magnificence - in fact, they seemed on this occasion actually to emphasize his air of distinction and superiority. 'Lana - aren't you h-having dinner with her?' A trembling had seized Lisette because Sula should not be here at this time - and in his casual walking clothes.

'Lana?' A flick of a finger carelessly in the direction of the disappearing car. 'Panayiotis is taking her to the harbour. There isn't a boat, but she can put up in an hotel until tomorrow.' So casual his tone, and now he dismissed the matter of Lana and said, glancing at the table with its clutter of dishes. 'What's all this, might I ask?'

She ignored his question, staring bewilderedly at him as he stood there, towering above her, his dark head almost touching the vine-cover of her balcony.

'You sent Lana away?'

'I've just told you - she's on her way to the harbour.'*

'But - but.. .' Unsteadily she got to her feet, almost upsetting the table in her agitation. 'You weren't glad to see her?' Lisette tilted her head, wishing she had not risen to her feet after all because she was far too close to Sula. And then she gave an audible little gasp on noting his expression. She had seen affection in his eyes, and even tenderness on one or two occasions ... but never had Sula looked at her like this before. 'What's h- happened?' she stammered.

He did not speak for a moment, but took her hands in his, looking down at them, small and brown, with long tapering fingers. His eyes lifted, wandering to her face.

'The simplest way to make you understand is to tell you, Lisette, that I was outside, on the veranda, the whole time you and Lana were talking together.'

'You—!' She stared into his dark face. 'You heard everything?'

'I heard everything.'

She fell silent, trying to assimilate what this meant.

'You don't still care for Lana?' she murmured, and went a trifle hot as that was not what she had intended saying at all.

A light and tender laugh escaped him; his hands left hers and found her waist, encircling it.

'Look at me, my little love, and say what you really meant to say ...' He shook his head, his own eyes dark with tender emotion as he said, 'A thousand stars. ... There they are, in your lovely eyes. Lisette, why did I not notice before?'

'I deliberately hid my feelings because I felt you would never want me after I'd been engaged, and after I'd lied to you.'

'It was all explained as I listened out there. I make no apology for listening, although naturally I hadn't intended to do so. I was in fact just coming in when I heard- Lana's voice, and yours. I felt compelled to listen, for so much depended on my becoming possessed of the full facts. Darling, why didn't you make an attempt to explain?'

'I should have done so, and I expect I would, in time, but once I discovered that you and Lana had been in love I couldn't, could I?'

'I can see your difficulty,' he admitted after a thoughtful pause. 'But it so happened that you were attaching too much importance to the fact that I once cared for Lana. I was very young at the time - as you seem already to know—'

'It was Dick who told me that you were only twenty at the time. Lana had told him, you see.' Sula nodded.

‘I admit I was a while getting over it, but Aunt Evelyn eventually talked to me and I saw that for true worth one must look beneath the surface. Lana was as shallow as your fiancé. Once I accepted the fact of her shallowness all feeling for her died. It’s as you said to Lana - being together is the important thing and life is too short to be parted. Lana put money and fame first; your fiancé appears to have been interested in money but, primarily, in Lana. No, darling, I don’t blame you for giving him up - not now that I know the circumstances—’ He broke off and pulled her into his arms. She was breathless when at length he held her from him. ‘You had to give him up. It was fate, because you were meant for me.’ Simple words, spoken softly and with profound tenderness, yet beneath it all she sensed the depth of emotion from which sprang a reflection of her own little prayer of thankfulness that she was his, now and for ever.

They talked for a while, clearing up several things which each had found puzzling. Sula learned why Lisette had adopted that cold indifferent manner with him and she in turn was told that she was right in assuming Sula to be piqued by this attitude.

‘It was that which made me notice you,’ he smiled, looking tenderly and deeply into her eyes... eyes glowing with the light of a thousand stars.

Silence enfolded them again as Sula drew her into his arms and she felt the great strength of him and sensed the hidden ardour as his lips closed on hers. In the heady perfumed half-light they did not notice Chrystalla’s slender form as she brought Lisette’s sweet on a tray. The Greek girl’s eyes moved from the dark silhouette of the lovers to the table, with its meal gone cold, quite untouched. Chrystalla smiled contentedly and withdrew, taking the tray with her.

Miss Lisette was obviously not interested in food.