

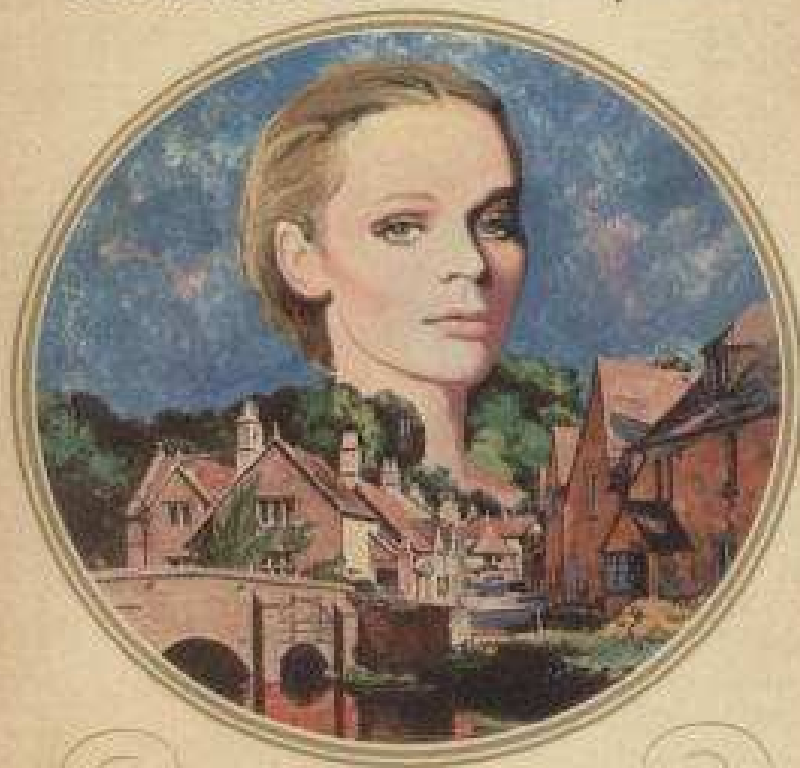
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Harlequin Presents...

ANNE HAMPSON

when the clouds part



WHEN THE CLOUDS PART

Anne Hampson

When Judi Langham's selfish stepsister Hannah, an up-and-coming film actress; needed a professional name, she hadn't hesitated to appropriate Judi's. Judi couldn't care less -- she had far more pressing problems on her mind; principally, how she could best get away from the unhappy atmosphere of her home.

So when the Greek millionaire Vidas Theron, who had never met Hannah but for some mysterious, quixotic reason had asked her to marry him, proposed to Judi instead, Judi accepted. She didn't see what difference it would make to Vidas; Hannah would never know; and it would solve all Judi's immediate problems. In fact everything seemed perfect when, once they were married, the two of them fell deeply in love.

But Judi knew that her unexpected happiness could not last long. And what would happen if Vidas ever found out who she really was?

CHAPTER ONE

THE view from Judi's bedroom was one of the most delightful in all Dorset. Surrounded by low hills, the village of East Maldone seemed to have been cut off from the bustle of civilization; certainly it was cut off from the nearby seaside town of Bridport, which during the summer months overflowed with visitors, mainly from the Midlands. Until recently Judi had been able both to appreciate the view, and her own good fortune in living in so secluded a village, with its pastoral scene of sheep on the hillsides and cattle in the fields, with its ancient stone bridge spanning the pretty little stream and its medieval tower peeping through the pines at the front of her father's seventeenth-century thatched cottage.

But now, as she stood by her window gazing out to the green-clad hills, she saw nothing, for her mind was filled with the scene just enacted in the sitting-room downstairs. It was a familiar scene, and one which invariably ended up in the same way - with her father looking guilty, her stepmother red-faced with anger, and Judi almost in tears.

Judi turned slowly as she heard a firm tread on the stairs.

'You had better stay with her,' she said immediately her father stepped into the room. Closing the door, he came towards her.

'Judi, my love - forgive me for marrying her—'

'It's best that you go down,' she interrupted flatly. 'You know very well that she'll only accuse you of talking about her behind her back.'

He ignored that, and sat down heavily on the bed, his grey eyes troubled, a deep furrow creasing his forehead.

To think ... we were so happy until a year ago. I'd been without a wife for over twenty years - since you were born - and then I had to go and make a mess of things like this.' A deep sigh escaped him. 'They say there's no fool like an old fool—'

'You're not old, darling.' Swiftly she crossed to him, sitting on the bed beside him and putting her arm around his neck. 'Forty-five isn't old; why, it's the prime of life for a man.'

'I feel a great deal older than forty-five, Judi.' He looked at her and shook his head. 'We were so happy, you and I,' he said again. 'Why did I do it? You - it's said that a woman has greater intuition than a man - did you feel, at the beginning, that it wouldn't work out?'

'Before you married her, you mean?' He nodded, and she went on, 'It isn't for me to express my opinion of Alice, Father. You're married to her and at first you must both have felt something for one another. As I've said several times, you and she would probably get along much better without me here. Alice's own daughter has left, and I must do the same.'

'Hannah. ...' Bitterness edged his tone and Judi did not have much difficulty in reading his thoughts.

Hannah's father had been able to afford to let his daughter take up an acting career, but he died while she was still unknown, taking small parts and never so much as having a mention in a review. 'This sudden success,' Judi's father was saying, 'why must her mother keep on throwing it in your face? It's been luck as much as anything else that's been responsible for her being chosen as the star of this film. And in any case, her talents haven't yet been put to the public test. She might not be as popular as her mother expects.'

'I don't begrudge Hannah her success,' said Judi sincerely. 'And I hope she'll be popular with the public. She certainly works hard.'

Her father frowned.

'She isn't a nice person, though. Funny thing, but I always thought she was; had a most charming way with me when I was courting her mother.'

And so did the mother, Judi could have said, but naturally she refrained from a remark that could only bring more hurt to her father. Judi herself had had doubts, but she put them aside, feeling that her father's judgement could not be at fault. He sat silent, brooding, and a re-creation of memory brought

back to Judi the day when, having been told that she had a good chance of obtaining the part of the heroine in Franz Geinburger's new film, *Twilight Fantasy*, Hannah had said, her manner so deceptively charming,

'Judi Langham. ... So suitable a name for a film star. Judi, would you mind very much if I use it?'

The idea did not appeal to Judi; the giving of her name seemed to rob her of her own identity, some-how. Noticing this hesitation, Hannah had added, still as charming as ever yet with a subtle inflection to her tone,

There's nothing to prevent my taking any name I choose, of course . . . but I thought I'd like yours, and also that I'd like to have your agreement.'

In other words, she intended assuming the name whether Judi agreed or not, and in order to prevent any unpleasantness Judi had agreed. From then on Hannah Smith became Judi Langham, whose name would shortly be released as the star of the new musical which was to be filmed on an island in the South Pacific.

Judi looked at her father; so dejected he was, and her arm tightened around him.

That dreadful scene ...' He spoke to himself, shaking his head. 'What good does it do Alice to work herself up into a frenzy like that? What makes her do it?'

'Temperament, I suppose,' sighed Judi, hearing again that grating voice saying,

'Look at *my* daughter! A famous film star she's going to be, but your daughter - if she hadn't been so dense at school she might be able to pay me sufficient for her bed and board. As it is, she's just a sponger!'

'That's enough!' broke in Judi's father. 'My girl had to leave school because I was dangerously ill and it was thought I'd die. It was a long illness and the doctor said I'd never work again. Judi was brilliant at school, but she didn't hesitate to forgo the opportunity of a career, insisting that she leave school

and care for me. Then, even when I did recover, I couldn't work for a very long while, so Judi had to be the breadwinner. That's why she's now in a dead-end job, and you know this, anyway, Alice, so why keep on at her?'

'She could get something better if only she made the effort. What she gives me doesn't keep her—'

'Well, I give you plenty, don't I?' Bill Langham's eyes had blazed and Judi expected for one horrified second that he would strike his wife.

Alice had gone off into the kitchen, slamming the door between it and the sitting-room with such force that a treasured ornament of Bill's had crashed to pieces as it fell from a shelf to the floor.

A frown crossed Judi's wide brow as she recalled how her father had looked as he bent to pick up the pieces. The ornament, a lovely 'cottage' group, had belonged to his first wife, and had been passed to her from her grandmother.

'I must find a way of getting myself a home, Father.' Judi broke the silence at last, rising from the bed and moving into the middle of the room. 'Alice is right of course when she says I don't contribute enough. I can't help my low salary, or the high fares I have to pay each day, but I've been thinking that if I could get a room close to my work I could manage very well.' She looked down into eyes that were shadowed with pain and remorse. 'There's no pleasure for any of us in this present situation, Father. Alice isn't getting enough from me, while I on the other hand have nothing over when I've paid her - and the expenses I've mentioned.'

'I give her plenty; I said that just now.'

'You'd still give her the same if I weren't here.' Like her, he gave practically all, leaving himself with little more than bus fares and a few pence for a daily newspaper.

He put his head in his hands, and Judi's heart went out to him. What a price to pay for the mistake of marrying Alice Smith, the pretty, fair-haired part-time typist who had come to work at the firm of builders' merchants where Bill was employed as clerk. As he had said, he and Judi had been

happy together for all those years. And even with his marriage it could have been so wonderful, Judi thought, as there had been room in her heart for a mother and a sister. And there had been room in the house, with its three pretty bedrooms and two sitting-rooms, one facing south and one looking right down the garden to the brook and the green wooded slopes beyond. Hannah had not stayed long at the cottage, having been offered a flat in London by a friend who was going abroad for a year.

'Are you quite serious, my Judi?' Bill Langham's voice quivered and so did his lips. He looked so sad, and yet resigned. 'You really want to leave here?'

'I don't want to, darling, but I must. You do see this? If I go you and Alice will have a chance of making something of your lives—'

'You don't believe that, Judi.'

She bit her lip. She was reluctant to talk about her stepmother in this way because, despite all that had happened, she still hoped that things might work out right if the couple were left to themselves.

'This situation is impossible for us all,' she said at length. 'I must go, Father.'

He nodded, though reluctantly. 'I'll come and see you regularly, dear,' he told her huskily. 'And - and you will come home sometimes, won't you?'

'Of course, just as Hannah does.'

'Hannah!' bitterly again. 'She seems to have everything, while you have nothing. There's no fairness in this world, Judi.'

'I don't envy her,' she returned softly, her hazel eyes wide and frank. 'Hannah's a success and I'm a failure. We have to admit that.'

Her father looked at her, then stood up and placed his hands upon her shoulders.

'You've a long way to go before you can say you're a failure, my dear - a very long way. And in any case, by what standard of values do we assess our

failure or success? Worldly goods? - fame?' He shook his head. 'No, my Judi, success in this life has been achieved if we make others happy, and you've made me happy for a very long while. Whatever my lot happens to be from now on I have my memories—' He broke off and Judi stiffened as the door was flung wide open. Neither she nor her father had heard Alice coming up the stairs. Bill's hand dropped from her shoulders and Judi moved away, unwilling to look at her stepmother, whose face, she knew, would be purple with fury.

'Talking about me, I suppose!' The harsh voice seemed to desecrate the pretty pink and white bedroom which had been Judi's for as long as she could remember. 'Plotting how to get rid of me? Well, you can conspire till Doomsday, but you shan't move me out of this house. It's my home, and if you don't like me in it then you can get out - both of you!' and the door slammed behind the irate woman as she flounced from the room, leaving Judi trembling and her father pale with rising anger.

'Us get out? Does she really believe she can take our home?'

'Go down to her,' begged Judi, tears filming her eyes. 'I'm the one who's causing all the trouble, Father, and the sooner I leave the better.'

He nodded reluctantly and with a shrug of sheer dejection he left the room.

Something must be done, and quickly, Judi decided, and for the next few days she spent her lunch breaks searching hopefully for a room in Dorchester, where she worked. But by the end of the week she was fast losing her optimism, and when a fortnight had passed and she was no nearer than at the beginning she had lost hope altogether. The rooms she had seen, were all too expensive; she would never be able to manage the rent, and the added expenses. Her father would look anxiously at her when she came in from work, and his expression when she told him of her failure to find suitable accommodation would invariably be a mingling of relief and disappointment as the two emotions struggled for supremacy.

'I must go,' she said determinedly one evening when Alice had gone to see her sister in Bridport, and Judi and her father sat together in the cosy little sitting-room, as they had so often done in the past. 'I know that we both feel

upset at the idea of a parting, but it will be for the best. If you and Alice are ever to agree - and you must make some attempt, Father, because you're both so young - then I must get away and leave you to have the house to yourselves.'

'But you say you've searched the whole town,' he reminded her.

'I've thought of something else; I can try for a post as a housekeeper to some widower. One often sees adverts for housekeepers in the newspapers, and the very next time I see one I shall apply for the post.'

Her father was silent for a long moment and then, with an unhappy shake of his head,

'Alice will certainly say you're a failure if you take that sort of a post. It's no more than being in service.'

Judi went pale; it would appear that she herself was not the only one who had mentioned the word failure. Alice had obviously done so as well.

'It will be honest work,' she said quietly, 'and there's nothing to be ashamed of in that.' She glanced at the clock as she spoke. Hannah was coming for the weekend. She had rung Judi that morning at work, and although Judi had informed her stepmother of this Alice had still gone out to visit her sister. 'Hannah said she'd be here around eight,' Judi mentioned when her father did not speak. 'I wish Alice had stayed in, for I have no wish to entertain Hannah.'

'I expect Alice went out because she doubted very much whether Hannah would keep her word. Look at the number of times she's promised to come and then not turned up. If you take my advice you'll not go to the trouble of making sandwiches and getting a tray ready as you usually do.'

But Hannah did come, and Bill, short of money though he was, excused himself and went off to the local.

'Your dad doesn't like me,' from Hannah contemptuously as the door closed quietly behind him. 'I don't know what Mother was thinking about to marry

him.' A disparaging sweep of a beautifully-manicured hand covered the entire homely scene; the log fire and slate hearth, the thick oak beams and bulging lopsided walls, the bow windows with their leaded panes and brightly-flowered curtains. 'Mother's been used to better than this, and if she wanted marriage so much then she should have looked for someone more like my father. He was an architect,' Hannah added with emphasis, and a hint of colour rose in Judi's cheeks. With the utmost difficulty she kept her temper as she said, going over to the sideboard drawer and taking out an air-mail letter,

'This came by the late afternoon post. Your mother was going to re-direct it and send it on to you, but when I told her you were coming this evening she didn't bother, naturally.' The letter was addressed to Miss Judi Langham, but Judi knew it wasn't for her, and so did Alice, who was always talking about her daughter's bravery in rescuing a Greek child from drowning, and telling Judi that the boy's uncle was a wealthy shipowner and that he had, owing to the rescuing incident, become very friendly indeed with her daughter. Handing it over to her stepsister, Judi could not help but be struck by the strong firm handwriting which seemed at once to give character to the writer.

'Oh ... thanks.' Hannah relaxed against the cushions, crossed her long elegant legs and began to slit open the envelope with what could only be described as an air of boredom.

'I'll get a drink. Would you prefer tea or coffee?'

'I'd like something stronger, if you have it?' purringly and with a slanted glance from under long dark lashes. 'Whisky . . .?'

Judi's mouth compressed.

'You know very well we don't have whisky. We can't afford it.'

'How sickening to be so poor! Oh, well, give me a cup of coffee - black.' She withdrew the single sheet of paper and began reading it. Judi went into the kitchen, where she busied herself with sandwiches and coffee. Only half-past eight. How could she converse in a friendly way with the girl for

another two hours? A glance in the tiny mirror over the sink revealed a frowning countenance and Judi allowed her facial muscles to relax. The result was a beauty surpassing even that of Hannah. Clear peach-bloom skin, tightly spread over high cheekbones and a wide intelligent forehead. A small *retrousse* nose and full generous lips. Honey-gold hair flecked with auburn, hazel eyes widely-spaced and almond-shaped. Judi received her fair share of male attention at her place of work, but she had not yet met any man she would like to cultivate even as a friend, much less as anything more romantic. She should get out more, her father repeatedly told her, but this took money, and as Judi had barely sufficient to keep herself neat and tidy for work, going out for pleasure was quite impossible.

With the tray in her hands she returned to the sitting-room; Hannah had tossed the letter on the couch beside her, but as Judi put down the tray on a small table she said,

'You can throw that away when you've read it.'

'Read it? You want me to read it?'

A smile of triumph hovered on lips that were just a little too thin for perfect beauty.

'My Greek admirer, Vidas Theron. I've learned recently that he's a millionaire. He wants to marry me.'

Judi swallowed saliva collecting in her mouth. A millionaire ... and he wanted to marry Hannah. Success ... and failure. Yes, as Judi's father had said, Hannah had everything, and Judi nothing.

'Your mother will be pleased.' And she would lose no single opportunity of reminding her stepdaughter of Hannah's added good fortune.

'Naturally. Wouldn't your father be pleased if it were you to whom a millionaire had proposed?'

Ignoring that, Judi bent over the tray, taking up the coffee jug and proceeding to fill Hannah's cup.

'Why do you want the letter thrown away? One usually keeps a thing like that?'

'What for, for heaven's sake?'

'It should be of sentimental value,' replied Judi, and Hannah gave a short, amused laugh.

'Funny little country wench, aren't you? These West

Country villages do produce strange folk. Sentimental value—' She broke off, laughing again. 'Read it,' she said, 'and then throw it behind the fire.'

Glancing at it as she handed her stepsister the coffee, Judi left it where it was for the present

'Are you going to marry him?' she asked, passing Hannah the sandwiches.

'Of course - but later, when I've made my film.'

'He doesn't mind waiting?'

'He'll not have to mind. My career comes first and always will; I expect he'll become resigned to that.' She took a sandwich from the plate and eyed it before putting it to her mouth.

'Men usually want their wives to put them first.'

A hint of amusement touched the violet blue eyes.

'I expect you'd not think twice about putting your husband before a career?'

'If you want happiness, Hannah, you have to put your husband first.'

'That's an antiquated idea, Judi. Men don't put their wives before their careers, so why should wives put their husbands before theirs? What's the use of fighting for equality if you're not going to put it into practice once you've won it?'

'In Greece there isn't the same equality. Men are always superior there.'

'Rubbish! In any case, Vidas would have to live where I wanted him to live - and that certainly wouldn't be in Greece. So if he lived in England he'd naturally have to do what the English do ... and that is, treat his wife as an equal.'

'If he'll let you have all your own way like that then he must be a weak sort of man.' Judi allowed her eyes to stray to the letter - one single sheet lying unfolded on the couch. Surely only a strong man could write with that particular hand. She saw the name at the bottom - Vidas T. 'It seems very strange to me that a man of that standing would marry a girl he's never seen.'

'I must admit that I myself am extremely puzzled by this fact.' Hannah nibbled thoughtfully at her sandwich. 'I feel there's some sort of mystery.'

'Mystery?' Sitting down on the couch, Judi picked up the letter. 'How do you mean?'

'Like you, I feel only a weak man would propose marriage to a girl with whom he's only corresponded, and never met. He hasn't even got a photograph of me; he's never so much as asked for one.'

'He knows who you are, though. He knows you're a film actress?'

Hannah shook her head.

'I haven't ever mentioned it. You see, my letters have been short, simply because I felt we weren't gaining anything by corresponding at all.' A small pause and then, 'From his letters I've gathered, somehow, that he's very far from being the weak type. On the contrary, he seems inordinately strong. And his business - this friend who told me that he's a millionaire also told me that he has a marvellous business brain. He's also quite out of the ordinary in the way of looks,' added Hannah with a sudden smile as, leaning forward, she picked up another sandwich from the plate on the tray. 'I don't believe I've ever told you the whole story of how we came to correspond in the first place?'

'No; in fact, it was your mother who told me about your saving his nephew's life.'

'It was nothing really. The kid got into difficulties and I went to his aid. As you know, I've won several medals for swimming, so it wasn't anything heroic.' Hannah spoke matter-of-factly, and it was clear that, whatever her character in other ways, she was certainly modest about the rescue. 'The child's parents were on holiday in the United States and Vidas was looking after him. The nanny was there, on the beach, but she was having a little flirtation with one of the English tourists instead of looking to her charge, hence the kid's getting into trouble. He'd gone too far out. You can imagine how deep the uncle's gratitude went, and I believe he tried to contact me before I left the island—'

'It was Corfu - I think your mother said?'

'That's right. Vidas lives there in some magnificent villa. Well, as I was saying, he tried to contact me, but although I had left my name, and that of my hotel, with the nanny, I wasn't on the island long after the incident because the package tour I was on provided for one week only in Corfu and the other was spent in Athens. However, Vidas got my address in England from the hotel people and when I arrived home there was a letter waiting. Perhaps you remember it?'

Judi nodded, but asked why it hadn't gone to Hannah's London address.

'You were living there at the time you took that holiday.'

'Yes, but not at the time I booked it. I gave the travel company this address, and that's why Vidas's letters always come here.'

Judi sipped her coffee thoughtfully.

'Why didn't you give him your change of address?' She had no idea why she should have asked a question like that, for it was not in the least important that Vidas sent his letters to the cottage and not to Hannah's London flat.

'I didn't bother,' carelessly as Hannah put down her cup and saucer and leant back elegantly against the cushions. 'As I said, I didn't see there was anything to be gained by corresponding at all.'

'But you have gained.' Absently Judi allowed her gaze to linger on the thin sheet of paper in her hand. 'A millionaire .. .' She glanced up. 'Every girl's dream.'

A smug expression settled on her stepsister's face.

'Envious, Judi?' she queried, slanting her a look of well-feigned pity.

The paper fluttered in Judi's hand. She thought of her own future. Perhaps the housekeeper's post, or she might just find a small room after all and be able to remain at her present job. But at best it was going to be a meagre existence, devoid of luxuries, and certainly there never would be the opportunity of a holiday such as Hannah had spent in Corfu.

'I must admit that I should be feeling most elated if a millionaire sent me a proposal of marriage,' she confessed at length, aware of Hannah's small impatient

sigh as she awaited an answer to her question.

'Mystery or no mystery?' supplemented Hannah with interest.

'You're sure there is a mystery?'

'I feel there is. Read the letter.' Judi leant back and read, 'Dear Judi,

Thank you very much for your letter in reply to mine, in which I thanked you once again for saving the life of my young nephew. But an even greater tragedy than that averted by your timely action has in fact occurred. Davos and both his parents - my brother and his wife - were killed in a recent train disaster of which you must have read in your English newspapers. This family who have been wiped out were my only relatives, and now I am entirely alone. Judi, we do not know each other at all, but I am asking you to marry me, because I know by your letters that you are a nice person. You are

also courageous, and in addition to these things I am still filled with gratitude towards you for saving Davos's life. As I said in my first letter, I had to go to Athens that day on business, and in any case, I could not be with the child the whole time. Had anything happened to him while he was in my care I should never have been able to face my brother and his wife when they returned to Corfu. Perhaps, Judi, you think this gratitude I feel is exaggerated, but if so, then just put it down to the Greek way; we have a much deeper sense of gratitude than most people, and we always try to repay in full when an occasion occurs where we find ourselves owing a debt such as I owe you. It is for this reason that I am offering you marriage. Please let me have your answer as soon as you have reached a decision.

Yours,

Vidas T.'

The long wide sheet of paper remained in Judi's hand a long while before she spoke. The sadness of the man's mind ran through the letter - but Judi *felt* something else. It was a sort of intuition, a certainty that there was another ache in this man's heart, an ache that had nothing at all to do with that concerning his lost relatives.

'It's awful - about the tragic deaths of his people.' Judi looked up, blinking rapidly as tears struck the backs of her eyes and threatened to escape on to her cheeks. How calmly Hannah had taken the contents of the letter! So indifferent she had been when telling Judi to read it and then burn it. How could anyone be so insensible to the man's deep sorrow? 'Hannah, I feel so sad . . . and yet I don't know this man.' Bewilderedly she looked down at the writing again, but saw nothing, nothing except the vision of a dark man with typical Greek classical features, a vague image that seemed to have eyes brooding and dark, and in whose heart was some terrible ache.... 'I don't know him, and yet I can *feel* for him It's so - so strange.. . '

Hannah laughed, a cold heartless laugh that caused Judi to shudder and glance away, as if by so doing she could shut out the laugh as well as the cold hard face of the girl who had emitted it.

'What an oddity you are, Judi! Crying for people you've never known and who are now dead - dead, Judi! What a softie you are! Do you realize that millions of people are dying every single day? Are you going to shed tears for them all?'

Speechless for a moment, Judi flicked a finger under her lashes, and found that it was wet.

'It wasn't for these unknown people - not really. It's for the man - Vidas. Hannah, can't you *experience* his great sadness? And don't you notice something else? - something not at all concerned with his family?'

Hannah frowned, and regarded her stepsister as if she were slightly deranged.

'What are you talking about?'

Judi opened her mouth to speak, then shook her head. She could not explain the way she felt; all she knew was that she regretted reading the letter since she knew for sure that its contents would remain with her for a very long while and she would be engulfed in a deep depression. Why should this be, when she had no idea who this man was?

'He's all alone,' she murmured at last, although she had no idea why she should say this.

'So what? Many people are alone.'

Swiftly Judi looked up. How very mistaken this Vidas was in the girl to whom he owed such deep gratitude. '. . . I know by your letters that you are a nice person. . . .' he had written. Judi could imagine Hannah writing a charming letter, though, so Vidas could be excused for being deceived.

'There is a mystery, as you suspected.' Judi's eyes strayed to the letter in her hand. Vidas spoke of the debt and then went on, 'It is for this reason that I am offering you marriage.'

'You think so? Any clues?'

Judi shook her head, still bewildered by the way she felt. It was almost as if she knew this man . . . almost as if the letter had been for her and not Hannah. Shaking off these chaotic thoughts Judi experienced a sudden impatience with herself. What on earth was the matter with her that she should go on like this? Vidas Theron had nothing to do with her, nothing at all!

'Why does he offer marriage? Why not offer you some reward if he feels so greatly in your debt? Why marriage, Hannah? Why?'

A shrug and a sigh of asperity was Judi's only answer for a while. Then Hannah said,

'That's the mystery, Judi. Why marriage?'

Judi nodded mechanically.

'Yes, Hannah, that's the mystery.'

CHAPTER TWO

HAD the 'mystery' anything to do with the 'other' ache which Judi had sensed on reading Vida's letter? Often she asked herself this question during the following days, and just as often she would make an attempt to put the whole wearisome business from her, telling herself that she had quite enough on her mind without worrying her head about some unknown man who lived in a land she would never even visit, a man whose sole object appeared to be the acquiring of Hannah for his wife.

Eventually she did manage to push the matter into the far recesses of her mind and concentrate once more on finding herself a home. This resolve was strengthened when, about a week after Hannah had spent her week-end at the cottage, another row occurred, and this time Alice actually told Judi to get out. Judi's father was not present this time, and of course Judi made no mention of the scene, which had left her trembling and completely drained of energy. Alice had gloated over her daughter's recent offer of marriage, had spoken of her success in being chosen as the star of the film, had taunted Judi with being a failure and told her that she would be lucky if she managed to get an offer of marriage from a labourer. There was no reason for this, as Judi's beauty was not to be denied. It was mere spite on the older woman's part, but it went deep, and it hurt. Judi went off to her room sunk in depression and overwhelmed by the sure knowledge that she really was a failure.

And her efforts at removing herself from the woman's virulence were also a failure, for no matter how much she renewed these efforts she could not find either a post offering accommodation, or a room close to her work. To make matters worse, her father had begun making regular visits to the local inn, where he would remain until closing time. In order to do this he determinedly kept back some of the money previously handed over to his wife, and this served only to increase the woman's vindictiveness towards her stepdaughter. Judi found life at the cottage becoming more and more unbearable.

One week-end, in desperation, she went off to London to see Hannah, spending money which she had saved for a much-needed pair of shoes. Supposing Hannah were not at home? The idea had not hit Judi until she was

on the train, having failed twice during the afternoon to contact her stepsister by phone.

'Why am I going anyway?' she asked herself miserably. 'It isn't as if we get on together. I shall only come back feeling more unhappy than when I left.'

Hannah was at home; she started with surprise on seeing Judi, but invited her into the sitting-room of the flat.

'What's wrong?' she asked, and Judi made no attempt to hide anything. She told Hannah that life with her mother was unbearable and that she was trying to find a place to live so that she could leave home.

'Give me your coat.' Hannah sighed impatiently, but after hanging up the coat she said,

'They should never have married. They're totally unsuited. I suppose Mother's still bothered about money. There's nothing like a shortage of it for breaking up a marriage. "When poverty comes in at the door love flies out of the window." There's an awful lot of truth in that old saying. Thank heaven I shan't ever know poverty.' A wave of her hand indicated the settee. 'Have a seat. Would you like something strong? Whisky - brandy?'

Accepting the invitation to sit down, Judi declined the offer of a drink, saying she would like a cup of tea. She hadn't eaten, but she suspected Hannah had, so she resigned herself to being hungry.

'I thought that, if you weren't doing anything tomorrow, I might stay until then.'

Hannah shrugged; it was a cool and rather irritated gesture and Judi almost said she would have the cup of tea and then leave. But she could not bear to return to the cottage, not with her stepmother in the mood in which she had been when Judi left.

'You can stay if you like.' But she added, 'Don't make a practice of coming, though, because normally I have engagements, or else friends come and visit me here. I've only one spare bedroom, so there wouldn't be anywhere for you

to sleep - not if I had another guest, I mean.' She went off to the kitchen and Judi put cool hands to her burning cheeks. How stupid it was to come; better to have spent the week-end upstairs in her bedroom at the cottage. 'In any case,' Hannah continued on returning with two cups of tea on a tray, 'I shall be preparing to leave here shortly. We're going to the island in three weeks' time.'

Judi said, after a strange hesitation which she could not herself understand,

'Vidas - you answered his letter?'

'Of course.'

'You accepted his offer of marriage?'

'Well, what do you think? Certainly I accepted.'

Judi moistened her lips. That poor man, so unsuspecting about Hannah's true character.

'He's willing to wait until you've finished the film?'

'I didn't mention the film.'

'No?' blinked Judi. 'But why?'

A slight frown appeared on Hannah's forehead.

'That's another mystery. You see, I haven't mentioned my career - there really hasn't been much opportunity, as only about half a dozen letters have passed between us all told—'

'Half a dozen?' Alice had talked as if a very intimate relationship had developed between the wealthy Greek and her daughter. 'Three each?'

'That's right. So, as I said, I've never mentioned my career - and now it's - well, awkward to say the least. I don't want to lose him, but I have an awful suspicion that he definitely won't like the idea of my being in the public eye.'

A pause and then, 'Yes, it's another mystery, because I can't for the life of me say why I'm so reluctant to reveal what I do. He's offered marriage, but if he doesn't like what I do he can always retract.'

'You just said you don't want to lose him,' Judi reminded her.

'Naturally I don't want to lose him, so I prevaricated, saying that certain private problems prevented my immediate marriage, but that I definitely want to marry him.'

Judi was thoughtful, and exceedingly puzzled. Something was not at all right with this situation. Firstly, it was incredible that a man in the position of this Vidas would marry a girl to whom he had sent a mere three letters, a girl whom he had never met, whose photograph he had never seen. It was beyond the bounds of what was feasible. And yet it was a fact. ...

'You'll marry him, without having seen him?'

'I shall see him. If I don't fancy him then I can change my mind.'

'There's a possibility of that?'

'He'll have to be pretty awful for me to turn him down,' laughed Hannah. 'A millionaire . . .?' One eyebrow slanted in a gesture of amusement. 'A girl doesn't turn *that* kind of money down in a hurry!'

'You're only marrying him for his money, obviously?'

'Obviously. He must know that, so you needn't feel sorry for him.'

'I still don't understand why he's offering you marriage,' frowned Judi, but Hannah merely gave an impatient shrug, as if tired of that particular question, and said,

'There must be a good reason, which he'll give me when we meet.'

'He could have given it to you in the letter.'

'Perhaps it's not the sort of thing one puts in a letter - Good heavens, Judi, do forget the thing, will you? I'm not troubling my head about a reason, so why should you?'

But Judi was to discover the reason, and before very long.

She and Hannah were sitting chatting the following afternoon when the bell rang and, answering it, Hannah brought in a young man of about thirty years of age. After introducing him to Judi Hannah went to make him a cup of tea.

'You're Judi too?' David Payne looked her over admiringly. He had an open honest face and Judi liked him on sight. 'How do you spell it?'

She told him, and although he expressed considerable surprise Judi did not enlighten him as to how Hannah had got the name. Her surname had not been mentioned, so the matter faded after a few moments and David was saying,

'Isn't Judi lucky, being chosen as the star for *Twilight Fanstasy*?'

'Yes, indeed.'

'It's the sort of lucky break that could lead to lasting fame—' He broke off and glanced swiftly at the door. 'If she doesn't do anything silly,' he added in a whisper.

'Silly?'

He hesitated a moment.

'You're her stepsister, so I expect she's confided in you. You know about this fellow Vidas, who wants to marry her?'

'Yes.'

'She might be tempted. Has she given you any sort of a clue as to whether she intends to marry him?'

Judi paused before saying,

'Well... she did give me to understand that she will marry him, when the film's made.'

'When—?' He stopped and stared a moment. 'So...'

She doesn't know the whole, that's evident. Now I wonder why he hasn't told her, because obviously that's the reason he wants to marry her.' He spoke musingly. Judi said in an urgent tone, her eyes on the door,

'You know Vidas?'

He shook his head.

'Not from Adam. But a friend of mine's acquainted with a business associate of his; it was he who told me that Vidas Theron is a millionaire. I told Judi, and I expect she told you?'

'Yes, she did,' still in an urgent undertone. 'You spoke of a reason for his wanting to marry her?'

'Perhaps I oughtn't to tell you, seeing that Judi herself doesn't know—'

'Tell me, please,' she urged. 'I won't say a word to Han— to Judi.'

'Vidas Theron has no relatives—'

'I know that.'

'He has no blood relations, I should have said.'

'Well?' Again Judi darted a glance at the door.

'And he has only six months to live, so there you have the reason for his wanting to marry. These other distant relations are a pretty grim lot, from what this bloke told me, and Vidas is marrying only so that he can bequeath

his money without the risk of subsequent squabbles and graspings by this shower, who are merely cousins about half a dozen times removed.'

'Six months to live. ...' Judi heard the rest, but only this held her attention - all of her attention. 'Six months to live.' So that was the added sadness running through that letter! That was the 'something else' which Judi had sensed but which Hannah had not. He was going to die in six months' time - and he was only thirty-one; Hannah had told Judi that. 'How - awful!' She felt her eyes fill up, just as they had done on that other occasion. 'What's wrong with him?'

'A rare disease of the spine. No cure as yet. A lot of work going on, but it's a mysterious disease - found only among natives of a group of islands in the Far East. Vidas was there - he'd given the money to build a hospital and he went to open it. Caught the disease; ironical, wasn't it?'

'So much is explained,' she said huskily at length. 'Up till a short while ago he had a brother.'

'And a nephew. Yes, there was no need to worry about his money then, as he had willed it to them.'

'You seem to know a great deal about him?'

'As I've said, a friend of mine is acquainted with a bloke who does a good deal of business with Vidas Theron, and all the information I've given you came from him. I'm glad Judi's ignorant of the fact that Vidas has only six months to live. If she knew she'd almost certainly be tempted to marry him - and that would mean throwing away this opportunity of becoming a great star.'

'You have some reason for not wanting her to throw away this chance?'

'Are you asking if I'm in love with her?' and before Judi had the chance to reply, 'The answer's no. My only interest is monetary. I've made a rather large investment in the film company.'

'I see.'

'You promised not to tell Judi.'

'I shan't say a word to her.' She was thinking of Vidas, who had probably received Hannah's letter telling him she could not marry him for another twelve months. What would he do? - look around for someone else?

'Have you any idea what he's like?' she asked, looking at David through a film of tears.

'I believe he's quite out of the ordinary - tall and good-looking; very dark-skinned - as all Greeks are, of course. And to look at him no one would ever believe he had anything wrong with him. He looks the picture of health - so this bloke says. Apparently this disease works slowly for a while and then accelerates. The end then comes quite swiftly.'

'How dreadful - to know you have such a complaint.'

'Personally, I think I'd have to end it if ever I found myself with anything like that. I couldn't stand the mental agony of knowing I was dying — that six months hence I'd be dead and forgotten.'

'It must take a great deal of courage to carry on,' she said. David nodded in agreement, but nothing more was said, for Hannah was entering with David's cup of tea.

'Do you take sugar? I've forgotten.'

'Two, please, Judi.'

'Help yourself, then.' Hannah put a sugar bowl in front of him. 'What have you two been talking about?' She glanced at Judi who, aware of the brightness of her eyes, swiftly looked away.

'You,' promptly replied David. 'We've been saying how lucky you are.'

Hannah gave him a charming smile.

'Yes, I am, aren't I?' She allowed her gaze to rest on Judi's profile. Several months on a lovely South Sea Island; the thrill of making the film, and then - marriage to a millionaire!

Less than a week later Hannah rang Judi up at work and informed her that she was leaving for the South Pacific immediately.

'It's come sooner than expected,' she went on, 'and I can't possibly get over to say good-bye to Mother. Tell her I'm sorry, and also tell her not to expect too many letters as I shan't have the time to write them. So long - and I hope you manage to get the room you're looking for.'

Alice was upset, or appeared to be, and for once she was in a softer mood.

'I thought she'd have made the effort to come and say good-bye. Children! They're no good to you at all

these days!'

'She must have been too rushed,' said Judi soothingly, although she also felt that Hannah should have made an effort to see her mother before departing for the island in which the film was to be made. 'There's such a lot to do when one is moving practically everything one owns.'

'You needn't make excuses for her,' returned Alice, on the point of tears. 'There isn't any excuse.' Tears actually did fall and Judi looked at her father.

'Don't cry,' he said, adopting the same soothing tone as his daughter. 'It isn't a lifetime; Hannah will be back almost before you know she's gone.'

'I'm so utterly fed up with everything! I feel like going off on my own somewhere!'

It was not the first time they had had this, and usually it was ignored, but this seemed to be an occasion when they all three felt softer, somehow, and Bill said impulsively,

'Look, Alice, let's you and I go off for a few days to the seaside. I've a pound or two saved up and I'm willing to spend it.'

Alice dried her eyes, staring at him in disbelief.

'You mean it?'

He nodded.

'I can arrange to have time off work - they owe me some holidays from last year. How about it?'

Alice hesitated, but Judi, only too happy at the change, supported her father, and so it was arranged that they go off the following Wednesday, staying away until the next Wednesday.

'Will you be all right on your own?' asked Bill on the morning of their departure. Judi was washing up the breakfast things before she went to work, and she smiled as she turned her head.

'Of course, Father. Off you go, or you'll miss your train.'

A small pause and then, hesitantly,

'This little break can't alter anything, Judi. Alice was in one of her moods again this morning and I began to think that we might not be going after all.'

Judi bit her lip; she had heard Alice's raised voice quite early - long before anyone of them was up in fact.

'I know what you mean.' She glanced compassionately at her father. 'I'll continue searching, because I'm quite sure you'll be better on your own.'

It was Saturday afternoon, and Judi was sitting quietly by the fire when she heard the car stop outside the window. Someone having made a mistake, she concluded on noting the size of the car. Colonel Pratt lived just along the

lane and people often stopped to inquire where his house was. But they did not normally come right up to the front of the cottage. Rising, Judi went to the door and she had it open almost before the driver had got out of the car. He straightened up and she stared. So tall and distinguished, so very dark, with black hair and eyes of a deep metallic grey. Not English, obviously - Good heavens - he couldn't be—!

'I'm looking for a Miss Judi Langham.' His eyes took in everything at a glance. His surprise was a pleasant one, judging by the quick change of expression. 'You are Judi? I'm sure you are.' He smiled as he answered his own question. 'I'm Vidas Theron - but I expect you've already gathered that. May I come in?' he added when Judi made no move.

'Er - y-yes, of c-course,' she stammered, feeling small and insignificant before such poise and perfection. She thought, gazing up into his eyes - eyes that smiled in the most attractive way - she thought... he is going to die.... It did not seem possible; he was too *alive*, possessed of a vital personality, and a body that might well have belonged to an athlete. Judi swallowed hard, but something seemed to have lodged in her throat, and her voice was husky and broken when at last she managed to continue, 'Yes, Vidas, do please come in.'

'Thank you, Judi.' No strain with him at all; he and she might have known one another for years. 'Can I sit here?' A sweep of a long brown hand indicated the sofa and Judi nodded, coming to life at last as she asked him if she could get him something to drink.

'I wouldn't mind a cup of coffee. Black, please.'

She managed a quivering smile and disappeared into the kitchen. Her heart was thudding and her nerves were playing her up. Why? But more important was the question: why hadn't she told Vidas at once that her stepsister - the girl he had come all this way to see - was not here. She must, the moment she returned to the sitting-room, since it was too unkind to allow him to go on believing her to be the girl he wanted to see.

'Your coffee.' Judi spoke haltingly, fully aware of her heightened colour, but certainly not aware of how attractive she appeared to this man from Greece -

from the enchanting island of Corfu. 'I'll p-put it here.' She drew up a small table and placed the tray upon it. 'Would you like something to eat?'

'I've had my lunch very late, so I'll not have anything until dinner.' His eyes swept over her as she stood there; she noted the fine lines of his face, the typical high cheekbones and out-thrust jaw of the Greek. His mouth was full, but although it was soft now, as he smiled, she knew for sure that it could be hard - that the man himself could be more than hard, he could be ruthless. 'You don't appear to be in the least surprised at my descending on you like this?'

'I am - most surprised.' She could have said that she had been too overawed by his magnificence to make a show of her surprise. In any case, she was not quite so surprised as Hannah would have been, since Judi knew that, on reading the contents of her stepsister's letter, Vidas would be forced to make some sort of move. Either he would have to look round for someone else to marry, or he would come to England and endeavour to persuade Hannah to change her mind about waiting twelve months, simply because he would not be here in twelve months. He had chosen the latter course, which, when Judi thought about it, seemed by far the most obvious one he would choose, seeing that he had no idea why Hannah should want to delay the marriage. 'The letter,' she began when he interrupted her, saying in his soft rich tones that he had read it carefully but did not understand why she should want the delay.

'It's imperative that we marry right away,' he went on. 'I don't intend to give you the reason, Judi, but do believe me, it is a good one.'

Right away. ... Judi supposed the reason for the hurry could be that although he had been given six months to live, it was possible that he could die sooner. Strangely, this reason did not seem to carry much weight; Judi felt intuitively that he had an altogether different reason for his haste . . . and that the reason had come only after he had met the girl whom he believed to be the one who had saved his nephew from drowning.

Now of course was the time to put him in possession of the truth - but although she opened her mouth to do so she promptly closed it again. What madness was this? She who in the whole of her life had never committed a

dishonest act. Failure. . . Failure. . . The word hammered at her brain. If she married Vidas Theron she would be a failure no more. In six months she would be a wealthy woman— Swiftly she stemmed such wicked thoughts and again attempted to tell Vidas the truth.

'I'm so sorry, Vidas—' How easily the name came to her lips! '—b-but you've made a mistake—'

'No, Judi,' he softly interrupted, his eyes all-examining - and so soft they were, and sad. No, not exactly sad . . . but regretful. 'I haven't made a mistake. I truly want to marry you. As I've said, there's a reason - a reason which need not trouble you at this stage. Just accept that I'm marrying you in order to pay the debt of gratitude. Please accept that, Judi, because that is quite an important part of my reason for wanting to marry you. I can't wait, there - there isn't time—' He broke off and she saw with rising compassion that his brow had become damp. 'Say you'll marry me now, Judi. Say it, my dear.'

Trembling, she stood there, her heart overflowing with pity even while another part of her was saying, 'Hannah won't know until she returns, and by then this man will be no more.'

No more! It was frightening. How could a man with such apparent health and fine physique be on the point of death?

'Debt of gratitude,' she murmured, her lips quivering, her whole nervous system working in the sort of way that made her feel quite ill. 'Debt. ...' Impossible even to think of allowing him to make a mistake such as this. It was to Hannah that he owed gratitude, to Hannah alone.

'You don't like my saying this? Nevertheless, I do owe you this debt, Judi.' He put down his coffee and took one of her trembling hands in his. 'Let me repay you in the way I wish.' A small pause; she noted that the dampness had become pronounced beads of perspiration and she had the almost irrepressible urge to take out her handkerchief and wipe them away. 'Some day you will understand, fully. And that day will not be long in coming. I don't know the reason for your saying you can't marry me straight away, but unless you marry me now - at once - then it will be too late.'

'Too late?' In a sort of dazed and automatic way Judi found herself saying what it would be natural for Hannah to say in these circumstances. 'Why, Vidas?'

He shook his head.

'Dear Judi—' His hold on her hand tightened to a grip that hurt: for a fleeting moment she knew again that intuitive impression of his having an altogether different reason for his haste, a reason which had come into being only after seeing her - the real Judi Langham. Could it possibly be that he - he liked her? Breathlessly she waited for him to continue, feeling herself caught inescapably in a net woven long ago, a net that had been moving towards her through eons of time. So unreal became the situation that she could scarcely think clearly, for her brain was numbed. 'Dear Judi', he said again, 'don't ask any questions, just say you'll marry me - at once.'

She glanced down at his hand, clasping hers so strongly that she could see clearly the blue veins standing out beneath the taut brown skin. Her big hazel eyes lifted, to his face and then to his temple, where more veins stood out, revealing the intense strain under which he laboured. She knew she ought to say,

'I'm not the Judi Langham you've been writing to. She isn't here; she's not even in England.' Instead she said, in tones so low and halting that he had to bend his head in order to catch her words, 'I'll marry you, Vidas - at once.'

CHAPTER THREE

VIDAS took her out to dine at a lovely old-world inn situated a short distance from the village, and they ate by candlelight in a crimson-carpeted room, low- ceilinged and beamed, and with a great Portland stone fireplace at one side of which a piece of the wall had been cut into and covered with glass, so that those interested could view a section of the wattle and daub with which the fifteenth-century building had been constructed.

Judi's mind was in a state of tension; she experienced a feeling of terror at what she contemplated doing, and several times made an attempt to blurt out the truth. But, strangely, as she sat there opposite to this charming and handsome man from the East, she became more and more drawn to him and the idea of the inheritance faded entirely from her mind. It was unimportant; what seemed vitally important was that this man should be made happy for the remaining six months of his life. The prospect of living with him as his wife brought no feeling of trepidation, a circumstance which amazed her, for by nature she was shy, especially with men, and she would never in her wildest dreams have imagined herself feeling so calm and untroubled at the idea of marrying a stranger. For Vidas was still a stranger - and so grand a stranger. Far different from any man she could have visualized as her husband. He and she had talked for a long while before Vidas's suggestion that they should go somewhere and have a meal. He had told her about his business and although he had not mentioned his great wealth, naturally, Judi was nevertheless told the truth about his house and gardens, his town apartment in Athens and his small holiday villa on the enchanting little island of Kalymnos.

'We shall go there for our honeymoon,' he had said. 'You will be delighted with the island, Judi.'

She in turn had told him about herself, speaking guardedly at first as she had no idea what had been told to him by Hannah. Apparently it was not much, and Judi soon learned with relief that Hannah had made no mention at all of relatives, her letters to Vidas being rather short. So Judi was able to tell him about her father and stepmother. She refrained from mentioning Hannah, whom he would never know existed because of course there would be no more correspondence between them. Vidas knew only Judi Langham;

Hannah Smith's name would not mean a thing to him. He would not now write to her and she would conclude that he had accepted the terms of her last letter and was waiting patiently for her to contact him again when she was ready to marry him.

By that time Vidas Theron would be no more. . . .

This thought returned to Judi now as she and he sat in the lounge drinking coffee, and a sudden terrible feeling of dejection swept over her. For the first time she allowed all her imagination to run free; she saw herself with Vidas at the end, imagined herself facing life without him after six months of being his wife and constant companion. It was a marriage without love, of course, and yet Judi could not but help feeling that the wrench would be dreadful, the gap in her life open for some considerable time after the death of her husband.

'My child,' he was saying in an anxious voice, 'what are you thinking about to make you look like that?'

She managed to smile. In fact, it seemed imperative that she should smile, simply in order to assuage his anxiety.

'Nothing important, Vidas,' she began when he interrupted her, asking if she were troubled about leaving her father and stepmother. 'No, not at all,' she answered, and went on to tell him about the dissension existing and saying she had already decided to leave home.

'I must come and see your father,' he said, and as he was picking up his cup at that moment he did not notice the start she gave.

So much had happened in so short a time that she had not yet got down to thinking about the actual marriage. How could she carry it through without her stepmother finding out? Alice was not going to allow Vidas to remain in ignorance of the fact that he was marrying the wrong girl.

'I've been thinking,' she murmured after a long and deliberative silence, 'that as I don't get on with my stepmother she might not wish to meet you. My father . . . I could arrange for you to meet him - perhaps at a restaurant?'

His face clouded.

'It's as bad as all that?'

Judi nodded her head, and although it was quite unintentional her mouth quivered at the memory of the rows which had occurred recently.

'It is bad, Vidas, yes.'

'Then it's most opportune - my wanting to marry you?'

'Yes, it is.' This much she could tell him with complete honesty, and her eyes were open and expressive as they looked into his.

'Then you must arrange for me to meet your father somewhere other than at your home. The best place would be,' he continued after a small moment of thought, 'the hotel in which I stay. I haven't booked in anywhere yet; perhaps you could recommend somewhere?'

'The Bull at Bridport,' she said at once. 'It isn't large, but it's very comfortable. I'm sure you'd like it.'

'And there's somewhere where we could talk?'

'Of course. And it's only a few miles from my home, so it would be easy for Father to get there.' She looked a trifle worried and he said with a reassuring smile,

'Your father knows I've asked you to marry me, I suppose, so it won't be so very bad bringing him to meet me, will it?'

She swallowed convulsively. So many difficulties attending this deception, this escapade on which she had embarked with as little thought as if she were going off on a day-trip somewhere. 'Yes, Father kn-knows you've asked m-me to marry you, so it won't be so bad bringing him to - to see you.'

His smile deepened, while his eyes lit with amusement.

'When I decided to come to see you, and persuade you to change your mind about the delay, I little knew what an enchanting young lady I was to find.' A pause and a distinct softening of his mouth before he added, 'You know, Judi, had I chosen my wife in entirely different circumstances I could not have found anyone more charming and unaffected than you.'

She blushed, naturally, and averted her head. But although guilt was strong within her it was by no means her chief emotion. Her chief emotion was pleasure at his praise, since it was the first occasion on which such praise had been offered, and it seemed entirely to erase the feeling of inadequacy, of failure, which had been with Judi almost from the moment of her stepmother's arrival at the cottage.

'It's kind of you to say so,' she managed at last, lifting her head.

'It's only the truth,' was all he returned to that, and in a little while they were in the big car he had hired on landing at the airport, and Judi was directing him to Bridport, where he managed to get a room at the hotel. He then took her home and she invited him in for a few minutes. But he stayed a long while and she knew that he was reluctant to leave, and her heart twisted as the reason leaped to her mind. He was grasping at every single moment of life. But this staying with her also meant that he was happy; a great compassion surged within her and she vowed to give him every second of the six months he still had. Not one cross word would ever pass between them, not one tiny interlude of un-happiness should he receive at her hands.

At last he said he really must leave and she accompanied him to the door. Moonlight shone on the garden; spring flowers spread their perfume over the still quiet air and moths gathered in the light emitted from the small hallway beyond the open door.

'Good night, Judi.' Soft the words, caressing as a summer breeze; something stirred Judi's senses and even before he took her gently to him she felt her heart begin to beat over-rate. His kiss was as gentle as his touch and when presently he held her from him he looked deeply into her eyes and she felt that he searched for some sign that she had liked his kiss ... and in the fullness of what at this stage she assumed to be her generosity she went on tiptoe and offered her lips once more. He caught her to him then, in a sort of

avid desperation, and this time a measure of ardency took a little of the gentleness from the kiss. 'Dear little Judi,' he whispered. 'Good night, until tomorrow.'

'Good night, Vidas,' she returned, and it was with the greatest difficulty that she managed to keep the emotion out of her voice. 'We'll have a lovely day together.'

Vidas had suggested they had a day out, driving in the country and stopping for meals. On the Monday he proposed taking her to Dorchester to arrange for the wedding, and afterwards they would spend the rest of the day in Bournemouth.

'I'll call for you about ten,' he was saying as he slid into the car. He lifted a hand on driving away; the tail lights flashed off and on as he took the bend before being lost to sight. Slowly, Judi went back into the house, and only then did the whole episode appear like a dream, vivid enough, but totally unreal. And as the moments passed it became more and more unreal, with Vidas Theron taking on a shape and form as nebulous as the gods and heroes of ancient Greek mythology.

Her father just stared and stared when she unfolded her story to him on his return from the short holiday. When at length she had finished speaking she watched as, still dazed, he began shaking his head. She listened as he told her she was crazy to think she could pull off such a deception without its being discovered.

'Why,' he exclaimed, 'the moment you sign the register he'll know you're not the girl who signed the letters!'

Judi's eyes went to the photograph on the sideboard.

'I've been practising,' she said and, following the direction of her gaze, Bill's eyes opened wide.

'Copying her autograph from that on her photo!' For a moment he seemed bereft of speech as he stared at his daughter, appearing so calm and unaffected by his astonishment. 'Judi, I don't know what's come over you! This is fraud - I expect you know that?'

For a long moment she remained silent, her mind going back to the day in Bournemouth. So unbelievably wonderful it had been; and she and Vidas might have known each other for months. He took her arm as they walked along after parking the car. He bought her a beautiful diamond engagement ring which he slipped on her finger in the garden of the hotel to which he had taken her for lunch; the wedding ring he kept in his pocket. They strolled on the promenade, hand in hand like true lovers; they sat and stared at the sea, or passed a remark now and then about people on the beach. And the sun came out for them and remained warm and bright for the whole of the day.

'I consider the fraud justified, Father. Vidas can't marry Hannah because she isn't here. She chose her career, believing she could marry Vidas later, but of course she can't. He needs someone, Father ... he needs me.'

He shook his head from side to side, staring wordlessly at her. She had told him everything, even to her own feelings for Vidas - her compassion and resolve to make him happy while he lived. There could be nothing wicked in sentiments such as these, she firmly maintained, but her father then said,

'The money he's going to leave you? Are you trying to tell me that it means nothing? - that it hasn't influenced you in this unbelievable decision you've made?'

She hesitated before admitting in all honesty that, in the very beginning, the money had in fact influenced her.

'But very soon I knew it was not the money,' she added, a little hurt and angry by the sudden cynical lift of his brow. 'I don't expect you'll believe me, but the money doesn't matter any more.'

'Are you trying to say you've fallen in love with the man?' he asked, and now his cynicism had disappeared, replaced by an expression of deep anxiety.

'Of course not, but I'm sorry for him. It hurts me to think of his dying so young, and you'll also feel that way once you've met him,' Judi assured her father.

'Probably I will. One would feel sorry for anyone in a plight such as his. But I must say I'm relieved to hear that you're not in love with him.'

'You'll come and see him this evening?' Her voice was low, anxious. She had earlier told her father that she meant to marry Vidas with or without his approval, but she loved her father and she did in fact desire his approval. Alice had been told that Judi had found a post in the north of England, and that she would be leaving the cottage in two days' time. Alice received this news without emotion; she had known that Judi was unsettled and would leave home at the first opportunity. She hadn't even reminded Judi that she must write, so in the absence of letters arriving at the cottage Alice would correctly conclude that Judi's letters to her father were addressed to his place of work.

'Yes, certainly I'll come and see him.' Her father nodded as he spoke, and listened to his wife moving about upstairs. 'Alice will be catching the seven-thirty bus, I expect.'

'She usually does when she visits her sister. We'll catch the eight o'clock.'

Judi and Vidas were married on the Friday, Judi having 'left home' the previous day to take up her post in the north of England. In actual fact she had stayed the night at an hotel in Dorchester. Her father, won over immediately on meeting Vidas, left home early as usual, but instead of going to work he came to the hotel, where he changed into the suit he had previously smuggled out in his daughter's luggage.

'You look nice,' she said when, having left him for twenty minutes or so, Judi returned to her bedroom and looked him over with approval.

'And so do you.' He said no more, but Judi knew as her father's glance wandered over her that he was secretly assessing what her outfit had cost. Vidas had insisted on paying for it and Judi had made no demur, fully aware that to buy her the outfit would afford him immense pleasure.

Vidas himself was immaculate in a dark grey suit of superlative quality and cut. So tall he was, and appearing to be in perfect health. Judi caught her breath when on meeting her at the register office he smiled almost tenderly as he allowed his critical gaze to wander over her, taking in the small slender figure and tiny waist — the straight proud shoulders. A blush enhanced the peach-bloom beauty of her cheeks, delicately-contoured and with bones prominent in the most attractive way. Her big almond-shaped eyes were shining as they looked up into his, her lips parted slightly as a responding smile fluttered.

'You look very sweet, Judi,' he murmured softly, and he swallowed hard, as if speech had become difficult. 'Very sweet indeed, and happy. Are you happy?'

She nodded, but suddenly her heart contracted. She said swiftly,

'Yes, Vidas, I'm happy. And you ... are you happy too?'

'Just about as happy as it's possible to be.'

As it's possible. ... What a wealth of meaning was contained in those words. And yet immediately the short civil ceremony was over Vidas seemed a different person. He took his wife and father-in-law to lunch, then the good-bye came, and all the while Vidas was in the highest of spirits. Her father must come for a holiday, he said, and to her surprise her father readily agreed. He would save somehow, for the fare, and would visit them later in the year.

A glance passed between Judi and Vidas at that, but almost imperceptibly Judi shook her head. Receiving the message, Vidas made no offer of the fare, realizing at once that it would instantly give away the fact that Judi had confided to him the whole plight in which her father stood.

By eight o'clock that evening Judi and Vidas were in Rhodes, largest of the Dodecanese islands and faintly Asiatic in character, lying as it did close to the shores of Asia Minor. They were to spend the first night of their honeymoon here before boarding a ferry to take them on the final stage of their long journey to Kalymnos.

'Island of roses,' said Vidas, amused by Judi's little gasps as the taxi took them to the Hotel des Roses. 'The loveliest of the Greek islands, so some people think.'

'And you?'

'I prefer something a little less touristy. Cos is delightful in that it possesses all the floral myriad of hibiscus and jasmine, of roses and bougainvillea which the Italians gave to both these islands, but it has not yet reached the apex of tourism which we find here.'

'Kalymnos - what of that?'

'Ah, Kalymnos! There we have a Greek island not touched very much at all by tourism. The cruise ships call, and a few people do choose it for a longer stay, but one can still have a beach practically to oneself, even in the summer.'

'It sounds wonderful.' She was becoming a little nervous and shy, thinking of the night and that her husband was a stranger still despite the closeness which had developed between them in an amazingly short space of time. Lights surrounded them as they drove along, for the brief twilight had faded and a musky, balmy darkness had taken its place.

'It's a wonderful place for a honeymoon,' he returned softly. 'I'm sure you're going to like it very much.' He glanced through the window as the taxi slowed down. 'Here we are. Tired of the long journey?'

'I've enjoyed it, Vidas. It was exciting. You see, I haven't been anywhere very much up till now.'

'Just lived in your little village?'

'That's right. As I told you, Father and I lived alone for over twenty years.' She was recalling how guardedly she had told him things about herself at first; but it very soon became evident that although Hannah's letters had made a favourable impression on Vidas they had certainly not been expansive, as he knew nothing at all about her private life. In one way this

was strange, as Hannah liked to talk about herself, but in another way it seemed quite feasible that nothing much had been imparted to the uncle of the boy whose life Hannah had saved. He was totally unknown, a nebulous figure, and one whom she would never meet. The last letter from him had of course changed all that, but it had come at a time when Hannah had on her mind more exciting things even than marrying a man as wealthy as Vidas Theron, and so although his offer was accepted Vidas was still left without details of Hannah's life.

'You are twenty-one. ...' Vidas spoke to himself, glancing through the window again as the taxi pulled up at the hotel entrance. 'A delightful age for a woman,' he added, and she did wonder if he were recalling the time when he himself was that age ... with a long life ahead of him, or so he believed.

They were shown up to a rose and gold bedroom with adjoining bathroom that was a dream of modern decor. Excitement welled up within Judi and she felt her shyness slipping away. And when Vidas, having come close, took her into his arms she found herself lifting her face for his kiss as unhesitatingly if a courtship and engagement and marriage had followed one upon the other in a purely conventional way.

'You're not afraid, little Judi?' Vidas shook his head in a gesture of wonderment as the words were spoken. It was as if he knew what her answer would be and was evincing a sort of bewildered disbelief that this could be so.

'I'm not afraid, Vidas,' she returned, and to prove her words she lifted her face, inviting his kiss, just as she had done a moment ago. Gently his lips touched hers, without passion or demand. It might have been the kiss of a brother for a sister - platonic - but she knew that it was no such thing. Vidas was naturally holding his ardour in check - for the time being.

'We shall not dine at the hotel,' he decided when after washing and changing their clothes they were feeling - and looking - greatly refreshed. 'We'll go to a Turkish restaurant that I know of. It's called Regep Spartali.' He rang for a taxi, which came at once and took them through squares and streets, grey-purple in the shadows, and then through the more brilliantly- lighted

centre of the town. The restaurant was outside the town of Rhodes and was noted for the excellence of its food and wines.

'What would you like?' They were seated in a secluded corner and Vidas handed Judi the menu. She shook her head, smiling a little deprecatingly as she said,

'I don't know these dishes. You choose, Vidas.'

He ordered a variety of salads and roast meats, and *anguri* in yoghurt. The wine was 'Chevalier de Rhodes', a rose for which the island was famous.

They took a taxi part way back and then walked, strolling through cobbled alleyways, dimly-lit, but perfumed by flowers tumbling over mellowed sandstone walls. From *tavernas bouzouki* music floated on the stillwarm air, and laughter flowed as tourists sat outside these cafés, drinking *ouzo* and eating the *mezes* of salad and cheese and meats and octopus. *Kebabs* turned on a smoky spit outside one of these cafes and Vidas and Judi stopped for a moment or two and watched it cooking. To Judi it was all so new and exciting that she would often utter a small sigh of contentment and now, as she stood with Vidas by the spit, she added to her sigh with the declaration that she had never been so happy and so excited in the whole of her life. The words were spontaneous and almost unintentional. But they seemed to please her husband who slipped an arm about her shoulders, and bent his head to say, close to her ear because the cafe proprietor was rather keenly interested in the striking couple standing there - the beautiful English girl and the tall handsome Greek,

'You'll be more happy still, Judi, when we get to know one another better.'

She blushed adorably and his arm tightened. What dazzling, unreal world was this into which she had entered? On agreeing to marry Vidas she had been forced by something stronger than her own will; from the first moment of meeting him she had been drawn to him, perhaps subconsciously, she thought, but very soon his vital personality had affected her and she had surmised - quite reasonably under the circumstances - that all that enveloped her was a great compassion for a man whose end was so heartbreakingly

close. But what she now experienced was not in any way akin to pity; she had in the last few hours risen to dizzy heights of happiness and expectancy.

Expectancy... She smiled with her eyes as she saw Vidas's lips curve with amusement at her blush. Expectancy. ... Was she really looking forward to his love- making?

CHAPTER FOUR

SHE stirred in his arms, and turned her head. He still slept, and so tranquil was his face, so filled with peace and contentment! Judi's heart contracted. But seconds later, with very little doubt in her mind as to her own feelings for her husband, she made a solemn and silent resolve to live every single moment of the most precious interlude in her life which had been so unexpectedly given her. That devastating hurt and everlasting sorrow would be her lot at the end she had no doubt at all... but there was the precious in-between, a time to be lived, and remembered through all the lonely years to come. Yes, there would be her memories, and Judi determined they would be happy, every single one.

'My love. . . Her husband stirred now, but he merely rested against her breast and began breathing evenly again. She cradled his dark head in her arm and closed her eyes. No sounds yet of activity; Xenagos and Antigone his wife could possibly be up, as they were early risers, but they would remain quiet until they heard their master and mistress moving about in the bedroom they shared, the large and lovely room that looked out on to the calm aquamarine waters of the Aegean Sea. Through the other window towering mountains rose to the clear azure sky, dark basaltic heights born by volcanic activity a long long while ago. Closer to, in the gardens of the stately white villa with its bright blue shutters, tropical and semi-tropical flowers blazed a gay profusion against a backcloth of neatly-trimmed cypress trees beyond which ancient olive trees and carobs spread away in a sea of silver and grey and shiny green. Lemon trees and oranges and walnuts grew in the *perivoli* at the side of Vidas's villa. This land he had only recently acquired, he told Judi.

A swift smile leapt to her face as he wakened, moving his hand to encircle her slender waist.'

'My dear sweet wife ... how long have we been married?'

A laugh escaped her, tinkling like the gentle sound of goat bells on the hillside.

'A whole week! Don't you feel like an old married man?'

He moved his head in the circle of her arm.

'I should hate to feel like that - with so young and beautiful a wife. Kiss me, my sweet.'

She obeyed ... and for a long while they lay close. ...

'Judi,' he was saying when at last they both shared the bathroom, Vidas shaving by the wash-basin and Judi enveloped in foam, 'has it struck you, as it has me, that a miracle has occurred?'

She sponged her shoulders for a long moment, dwelling on these words, spoken with such a solemn inflection to her husband's deep strong voice. She knew exactly what he meant.

'So swiftly, and so easily, we've fallen in love with one another.' A statement, answering his question, and

also spoken with deep solemnity. 'Yes, Vidas, it is indeed a miracle. I feel I've known you such a long time.*'

'That goes for me too.' The electric razor became idle in his hand as he looked down at her, love in his eyes and a tender smile upon his lips. Tate is so strange; you had to go to Corfu for your holiday; my nephew had to be in difficulty at one specific time - when you were there to rescue him. Naturally I wrote thanking you and expressing the deep gratitude I felt. But at that time I little knew what was to be the outcome of it all.' He fell silent and she looked down, hiding her rising colour - guilty colour - that rapidly fused her cheeks. And yet why should she keep this guilt complex? She was giving Vidas far more than Hannah ever could, Hannah who was shallow and selfish, who had said to Judi, when they had been talking about this Greek who had proposed marriage to her,

'It mightn't turn out a success, but never mind; I can't lose, can I? - not marrying such wealth as that? I mean, if we decide to part, he'll have to make me an allowance - and there'll be all the jewellery and furs and so on that he's bound to buy me. No, I can't possibly lose.'

'Tell me, my dear love, just when did you realize that you cared?'

She glanced up, shedding her guilt as his words broke into her thoughts.

'It's difficult to say, but somehow, I feel it was there almost at the beginning.'

He nodded, without the least sign of surprise.

'I sensed it too. I had no qualms, not one, Judi. I knew we should be happy together.' His voice was edged with contentment, with tranquillity. She realized that he also lived for the precious interlude which had so miraculously been given him. He spared not a moment for anything other than the happiness of the present and the immediate future. Judi wondered what his reaction would be were he ever to discover that she knew the truth. But he never would know, since she herself would flinch from mentioning it even were she in a position to do so - which she was not, for the simple reason that she would then reveal her deceit.

Would the day ever dawn when he himself felt obliged to tell her of his condition? She shuddered and faintly shook her head. Judi sincerely hoped he would remain silent to the end.

'Vidas,' she said with sudden lightness, 'I want to come out.'

'No one,' he returned, flicking on the shaver again, 'is stopping you. You can't say we're short of room in here.'

Judi pouted.

'I'll use the other bathroom tomorrow!'

'I suggested you use it today,' he reminded her, his eyes on the mirror. 'But you could not bear to be away from me even for fifteen minutes or so.'

'Pompous man! What a good thing you never wish to wear a hat!' Vidas merely laughed and she added, peeping at him from under those incredibly long dark lashes, 'You didn't offer to use the other bathroom, I noticed.'

'Not I.' Placing the shaver on a shelf, he turned. 'A man would be crazy to miss a picture such as this.'

She blushed and said,

'You're incorrigible, Vidas.'

'No, darling.' He shook his head, eyes wandering to the large blue bath towel on the rail. 'Like you, I couldn't bear to be away, even for one short quarter of an hour.' Reaching out, he picked up the towel. 'Out you get,' he ordered in a changed tone as he spread the towel between his outstretched hands. 'The water must be getting cold.'

She looked at the towel and said,

'It isn't at all gentlemanly of you to remain here while I dry myself.'

Vidas gave a light laugh at the assumed censure in her eyes.

'You're not drying yourself. I am drying you. I said, girl, out you get! Have you not yet learned that in Greece the husband is the master? Has no one informed you that wives are as slaves - to be kept under?'

Responding to his laugh, Judi hesitated no more than a mere second or two before, replacing the laugh with a meek, 'Yes, Vidas, I have heard that the husband is master ... and so I do as I am bidden,' she allowed herself to be enveloped in the towel, felt the warmth and strength of his hands through it as he brought them round to the front and kept them on her waist for a moment before attempting to rub her down. Leaning back, she felt his chin on her hair, his cool breath on her cheek, his lithe hard body close to hers. Slowly he turned her round and she looked up and saw the light in his eyes that amounted to nothing less than adoration. Pressing close with an access of love and longing, she released her arms from the enfolding drapes of the towel and flung them round his neck.

'My husband ... I love you.' Whispered words, husky, and quivering with emotion. Judi was brought still closer to that hard possessive body.

'Judi,' he said, shaking his head after several moments of intimate kisses and caresses, 'if you tempt me in this way we shall be having lunch instead of breakfast.' And because she blushed he spared her by briskly rubbing her down and, after handing her the talcum powder, he turned away into the bedroom and she was left alone for a brief space - left with her happy thoughts and a glow of warmth rippling through her entire body.

Breakfast was taken on the sun-drenched patio where violet and orange bougainvilleas climbed the trellis and the building itself. Shading the south aspect was a profusion of vines, and along the edge of the patio brown earthenware pots of all shapes and sizes spilled perfume and colour from the myriad exotic flowers blooming within them. Beauty abounded on this most idyllic of all Greek islands. Mountains and sea and a warm golden beach, pure scented air and clear sapphire sky; the rocky island of Leros to the north, just across a narrow strait. Like Kalymnos, it was the home of the brave sponge-fishermen. To the south lay the large and fertile island of Cos, birthplace of Hip-

pocrates, the 'Father of Medicine'.

Antigone, beaming and flashing her gold fillings, served them with grapefruit and eggs on toast and delicious home-made marmalade, with crisp brown rolls of peasant bread and thick creamy butter. Both Judi and Vidas were in shorts and open-necked shirts, their feet in open sandals, as their intention was to spend the morning sunbathing in the garden and the afternoon in the sea. Judi, only a moderate swimmer, had from the first been on her guard; she would stay close to the shore and admit she was too lazy for vigorous swimming. Vidas only laughed and teased, and she fervently prayed that she could manage to keep from him the knowledge that she was not a very good swimmer.

The morning passed swiftly and they ate a midday meal of meats and salads and sticky pastries which Antigone had made, and at which she excelled.

'I've never had such marvellous food,' Judi said when, after lunch, they sat outside and had coffee brought to them in the garden. 'I shall put on weight and Father won't know me when he comes.'

'You're too young to put on weight.' Vidas allowed his flickering glance to wander over her, noting the legs already tanned, the arms, also tanned, and with fine gold hairs catching the sun's high rays. Her hair, such an unusual colour of honey-gold flecked with a rich deep auburn, had become bleached at the front and at her temples, enhancing the beauty of her delicate features and dark almond-shaped eyes. 'My Judi . . . you are the most lovely woman I've ever known.'

Faint colour rising and heartbeats racing; shy glance and hands that fidgeted suddenly. Her husband smiled in some amusement and said,

'Forgive me, darling if I disconcert you. In time you'll get used to my flattery - and take no notice of it.' The merest hint of a question lay in that last addition and Judi shook her head vigorously.

'Never. I shall always be thrilled with it.' And she looked lovingly at him as he watched her from above the rim of his cup. 'How could I become used to it, so that it becomes ineffective, as you are suggesting? It isn't possible, not when I love you so.'

Vidas made no comment on that, but sat there in the silence of deep reflection. At length he said, in tones of disbelief and wonder,

'A week. ... We've been married only a week, and this great love has come to us. Do you realize, darling, that less than a fortnight ago we had never even met?'

She nodded and her own eyes reflected the wonder she saw in his.

'We didn't think, when we decided to marry, that it would be a love affair at all, did we?' But Judi frowned a little in voicing those words, and she noted the strange flickering in her husband's eyes, just as if he also were questioning the truth of what she had just said.

'I suppose not. . . . But if you remember, I said that, judging by your letters, I formed the impression that you were a very charming girl.' She glanced down. Hannah was adept at giving the impression of charm, and had she actually met Vidas, and married him, she could have charmed him had she

wished. But if the glamour should have worn off, then Vidas would assuredly have seen her in her true colours. Judi felt cold suddenly as this idea occurred to her. For Vidas to marry, hoping to be happy in the last precious months of his life, and then to discover that the girl he had married fell far short of his expectations. ... Surely that would have been the cruellest blow he could possibly have been dealt. Deceit had been practised and inevitably there would be occasions, like the present one, when the fact of her deceit would be brought forcibly home to her, but Judi had no regrets. She and Vidas were in love it was meant that they should be, they both knew this. Vidas had called it a miracle and she knew why he had so described the wonderful thing that had happened to him. When he proposed to Judi Langham - who was really Hannah Smith - he had hoped to find friendship, and perhaps a small measure of love, for as he said, he had deduced from her letters that the girl he wanted to marry was a charming girl. Yes, he might just have hoped for love - but never had he hoped for the perfection that had been achieved by the incredible growth and fruition of a seed of love so recently planted as that between Judi and himself.

She glanced up, suddenly aware that Vidas waited, expecting some comment from her.

'I'm glad you weren't disappointed in me,' she murmured, and as it was obvious that she could find nothing more apt, her husband gave a light laugh and told her to finish her coffee, as it was time they were going down to the beach.

They strolled hand in hand over the pale gold sands towards the beach hut which belonged to Vidas, being situated on his private part of the sands. Changing first, Judi presently emerged clad in a gay towelling beach wrap which Vidas had bought for her in Rhodes. Vidas came out a short while later clad only in trunks. How perfect in physique he was! Brown and sinewed, he appeared so superbly fit and healthy that it seemed impossible that he could have so serious a complaint.

He took her hand and together they ran into the sea.

'You make me feel about sixteen!' she gasped when at length he let go of her hand and began swimming strongly, watching as if he expected her to keep alongside him.

'You look it!' He beckoned and called, as the distance between them began to lengthen, 'Come on; I'm not allowing you to be lazy today.'

'Please let me, Vidas,' and she turned on her back and floated, under the hot sun, the sea scarcely moving beneath her. 'I love just doing this.'

'Very well. I'll be indulgent — seeing that you're on your honeymoon.'

Relief! She began to swim. Practice was what she needed — just practice, that was all.

She came out at the same time as he and they sat on the sands drinking lemonade which Vidas had brought from a bottle he kept in the beach hut.

'How brown you are.' He touched her arm with the back of a finger, bringing it up to her shoulder with agentle caressing movement. 'And so smooth - Judi, what have I done to deserve this? By what unfathomable act of providence did we come together? Love like this is for eternity ... and y e t . . . He tailed off, but she would not look at him lest she give away her secret. For eternity ... Yes, so wonderful it was that it could not end so soon - that was what he was thinking. But when he turned she saw no sign of regret or brooding in his eyes, as she would have expected, because he knew that she would be left - alone and weeping. His hand clasped hers in a strong possessive grip; she knew then that he was encompassed in sorrow which he also must not reveal. Just as she had resolved to make him happy, not thinking of any future but the immediate one, so it was with her husband. He also had resolved to make *her* happy, determined that she should have memories to treasure and to help her along the lonely way.

And so from that moment neither of them thought of anything but living for the day, giving all to each other, with never one single cross word, no glance or look that was not a loving caress, no touch that was not a tender revelation of all that was underneath.

For another idyllic fortnight they remained on the island of Kalymnos, strolling its tree-lined lanes or climbing into its olive-clothed hills. They swam and sat in the sun; they dined at *tavernas* and hotels, and sometimes at home, in the candlelit lounge, as the villa was small and had no real dining-room. The lounge faced west, and the sun's slanting rays would lend an amber radiance to it as they sat on its verandah with their pre-dinner drinks. By the time they went in the colour would have changed to deep bronze and in a little while the great sphere would drop below the rim of the world and the soft shades of twilight would envelop the mountains and sea and the quiet scented gardens in its cloak of purple and lilac and grey. After dinner they would wander in the garden, under the moon in whose light it was not difficult to pick out marigolds and roses and geraniums, or the more exotic oleander bushes and poinsettias. Maple trees lined the private road down to Vidas's section of the beach, and a short distance away to the left could be seen the gentle curve and sweep of another beach, that of Kandooni, with its three little cottages and its church on a headland, shining in the moonlight. So still it all was; Judi thought that if the lovely bay had been anywhere else in the world it must suffer the fate of progress, and become backed by high white masses of concrete that people called luxury hotels. As it was, its backcloth was the natural dark outline of the high hills, and the scattered villas lower down, nestling in the green-clothed pockets of the friendly heights. Lower down still, the road wound parallel to the shore before twisting up into the hills; its course could be discerned by the high palms along its sides, swaying softly as a zephyr touched their slender trunks and spiky foliage.

On the day of their departure they arrived early at the picturesque harbour where every spring a solemn ceremony took place as the sponge-divers prepared to sail away to the coast of North Africa, where they would remain for five months, diving to the bed of the ocean for the sponges from which they earned their livelihood.

'Darling,' said Vidas as he and Judi sat down at one of the tables outside a *taverna* on the waterfront, 'today I'm going to make you taste octopus.'

She grimaced.

'I couldn't; don't make me. I shall be sick—'

'No such thing,' he cut in hastily. 'You don't know what you're missing. When once you've tasted it you'll order it over and over again.'

'I don't care for the way they bang it about on the rocks,' she complained, absently picking up the menu and staring at the unfamiliar words. 'It's cruel.'

'The animal's dead before they do that to it.'

'Well, it still seems cruel to me. And so hard they bang it, and rub it until it has a frothy lather—' She stopped and shuddered. 'It's no use, darling; I can't eat octopus.'

She had meat and vegetables, but when Vidas took up a piece of octopus on his fork and held it out to her she opened her mouth - although she did close her eyes at the same time, making her husband laugh.

'It's good,' she murmured in some considerable surprise. 'Very good indeed.'

'I told you,' with a hint of satisfaction in his tone. 'I knew very well you'd like it.'

'I'll have it the next time,' she promised. 'I really had no idea it could taste like that.'

They drank *ouzo*, sampled the local delicacy of aromatic jam which, like many of the preserved fruits and nuts, was served with a glass of water; they finished off with cheese made from goat's milk, and brown crusty peasant bread.

With fingers entwined they strolled along towards the landing-stage and soon were aboard the *Knossos* which with its sister ship, the *Lindos*, plied between the islands on a regular run.

'Our honeymoon's over.' Standing beside her husband at the rail as the ship pulled out of the harbour, Judi spoke the words softly, looking rather sadly at the receding shore and the men standing there, clad in black trousers and thick hand-knitted jerseys. They were the fishermen who had been left behind when the sponge-fishing fleet had sailed just after Easter. Perhaps

they were tired of the risks involved in that hazardous occupation, or they might be maimed in some way and so were now unfit for the work.

'Not over, my love—' Vidas lifted a hand and put it on her shoulder. 'It will continue, Judi, for as long as we are willing to call it a honeymoon.'

Her smile dawned then and she pressed a loving hand on to his.

'It was just a tiny sad feeling, leaving the island,' she said, her dreamy gaze returning to it for a while. 'It's been so wonderful, Vidas. No one has ever had a better honeymoon than ours.'

'I heartily agree,' with fervency and deep emotion as, bending his head, he caressed her temple with his lips. 'No woman has ever made a man so happy as you've made me these past three weeks.'

She said, after a small hesitation,

'We could have stayed, of course?'

'Certainly, but I do have a great many things to attend to, Judi. My business is time-consuming, and although I have recently made provision for much of the work to be taken off my hands I do still have some to do.'

'You won't be - be leaving me very much?' She could not bear it, so precious was the time.

'Not now, my dear sweet wife,' he replied without hesitation. 'How could I?'

'I worked in an office. Can I come and work with you?'

'You'd do that? You would prefer that to being parted from me - if only for a couple of hours a day?'

'Of course; you know I would.' She spoke without a moment's hesitation, and added with a laugh, 'You teased me about the bathroom, but it was quite true. I want to be with you every single minute, Vidas. Let me, won't you?' Serious her tones now, the laugh having died. For it suddenly struck her that

the 'things he had to attend to' were really being done for her. He did not want any complications for her when he had gone. ...

Gone! Sudden excruciating pain tore at her heart, and struggle as she might to remember her resolve not to think of the future she was quite unable to brake her thoughts and her imagination. How was she to live without him?

'I want to go too,' she whispered through a mist of aching tears that rose to block out her vision. 'Let me go too.'

As if he sensed some emotion within her Vidas slid his arm until it was around her waist. She looked down, but pointed a finger towards the island, transferring his attention, and said, amazed that she could manage to keep her voice steady,

"The cafe where we lunched, Vidas! Isn't it small? And the hills - they're indistinct now. Perhaps - perhaps,' she went on hoping to keep his attention on the island until her tears had been driven back, 'we'll return one day? Let's come back, Vidas; let us come back soon.'

'If that is what you want, my love, then we shall come back.' But he went on to say that she had not yet seen Corfu, or his home. She would love the island, he felt sure, telling her that it was more lush than Kalymnos, having a higher rainfall. 'It's a green island,' he added, 'and it's also a little un-Greek.'

Her eyes dry now, and her composure fully restored, she could lift her head without risk.

'Un-Greek? I don't know what you mean?' She knew Corfu was a Greek island, and she knew where it lay, but that was all.

'It has a rather Western influence; it's sort of - Itali- anate.'

'Oh, I see. Because of its position. It's between Italy and Greece.'

'That's right; and its climate is more like that of Southern Italy. We have wet winters, hence the semi- tropical jungle of trees which cover the hillsides.'

Vidas's home was close to the calm and delightful village of Lakones, high above Palaeocastritsa, on the north-west of the island. They arrived there when the sun was setting behind the bay of Palaeocastritsa, having driven from Corfu town, where Vidas's car was waiting for him to pick it up. As everything was new to Judi she found it exciting and would exclaim at some lovely scene or particular formation of the Tertiary limestones which in the upheaval of that age had formed the massif of Pantocrator which covered much of the northern part of the island. Caves and caverns and streams disappearing underground being characteristic of limestone scenery, the vista was often breathtaking, especially as the pass was approached. At the pass Vidas turned off the road and took the one leading to Lakones. After leaving the village behind there was a superlative view of the shore and the smooth velvet sea, fiery now with the crimson glow stolen from the falling sun.

'Vidas!' Judi turned to him, breaking the intimate silence which had invaded the car a short while ago. 'You didn't tell me it was like this!'

'I did say you'd love it,' he responded, negotiating an acute bend round which his sparkling white and blue villa could be seen, nestling on a plateau high above the sea, and with another sea at the rear - a vast sea of olives, ancient as time, occupying the rest of the plateau. Into the wide gateway he drove, slanting his wife an amused glance as she once more gave a little gasp of appreciation. 'Dearest,' he said when at last the car had come to a standstill, 'I have brought you home.' Edged with emotion the voice, and a slender brown hand resting for a fleeting moment on hers as it lay in her lap. 'Come, I must carry you in.'

Shy all at once, Judi stepped from the car and looked up into the dark face above her. Lean it was, yet strength was there, and character lines portraying probity and dignity, and even compassion - although the prominent jawline and metallic grey eyes offset this impression to some extent, for though Judi had seen only a tender gentle side of his nature she was not deceived into assuming that these facets were the only ones he possessed. Indeed no. Right at the beginning she had gained the impression that he could be hard to the point of ruthlessness, and as she continued to stare up at him Judi once again owned to herself that her husband had an entirely different side to his nature . . . a side at complete variance with the loving care and indulgence with

which he had showered her from the moment of their marriage and which of course he would continue to shower upon her.

Carrying out his intention, he lifted her off her feet and strode with ease from the car to the house. The door was opened as he reached it and a smiling stocky Greek manservant swept a hand and made a slight bow.

'Welcome, Mr. Vidas! And your lady. See,' he added as Vidas passed him, 'I say lady as you tell me in your letter, and not woman. Although, Mr. Vidas, I not know what is the difference? Welcome, Mrs. Vidas. Corfu you will very much like—' Breaking off, he raised cupped hands ceilingwards. 'We have the sunshine, but also we have the rains. Rains bring moist air all the time to Corfu and so the fruits grow by themselves!'

'Spyros,' interrupted Vidas as his servant would have continued, 'some other time. We are tired and hungry.' He put his wife down, but retained one of her hands in his. 'I trust Leda has a meal ready for us?'

'She cook the English meal, Mr. Vidas, as you say in your letter— She here now!'

The small stout woman had appeared from somewhere at the end of the long, carpeted hall; she smiled, her black eyes wandering to the clasped hands of Vidas and his wife. A benign expression crossed her face; she spoke with difficulty but with obvious sincerity as she said,

'You are welcome to our island, Mrs. Vidas. I hope you will be very happy with your husband, and that your husband will be very happy with you.'

'Thank you, Leda.' Judi and Vidas spoke together, Vidas's voice edged with amusement at the prim little speech which had plainly been rehearsed by the order of Spyros, Leda's husband. The woman then spoke to Vidas in Greek and several times he nodded and put in a few words. His eyes glimmered with amusement as he turned to his wife.

'Leda and all her female relatives wanted to decorate our mattress,' he explained. 'Spyros put his foot down, because you are English. Leda was a trifle worried about the matter, but I've explained to her that we are by no

means newly married, and that the decorations would have been out of place.'

'You mean, the decorations are only for the first night?'

'That's right. In the villages the bride's girl friends do this and then the mattress is carried by the bride's father to the house which the couple will occupy.'

'What a charming custom!' Judi spoke to Leda, but instantly realized that the Greek woman did not understand. Spyros translated and his wife then flashed her white teeth in a smile.

'She still a bit troubled,' Spyros said when a murmured comment in Greek had come from his wife. 'She come from small primitive village in the Peloponnese. There they believe it bad luck if bed not have bows stitched on and other decorations. They think very bad thing happen to the bride—'

'Spyros,' cut in Vidas in a voice so stern that it actually caused his wife to give a start, 'take up our luggage. And then prepare the dinner!'

CHAPTER FIVE

A QUIVERING blue-grey haze hung over the sea which separated the island from Albania, whose mountains could be seen across the Bay of Gouvia. Judi and her husband had driven across the island, and then northwards along the coast road to have tea at the Hotel Castello, which lay in a beautiful forested park where, Vidas had told her, thrushes and nightingales sang so incessantly that it had been known for guests to leave the hotel because of this.

'Leave - because of birdsong?' Her eyes opened wide. 'How very strange. I love the birds, and used to stand at the door very early in the morning to listen to them. We had a great number of birds in Dorset.'

'I too love the birds. . . .' His voice faded momentarily and his attractive dark grey eyes took on the shadows of some inner pain. Judi's heart contracted. Three months gone. . . It had flown, so blissfully happy she had been with the husband who adored her. It was reasonable to assume that the next three months would pass with equal swiftness . . . and then....

The shadows lifted and her husband smiled at her, that indulgent smile that was in itself a caress, a manifestation of what he felt for her. Her own tremulous smile broke and across the table their hands touched.

The terrace on which they sat faced the sea - an incredibly blue sea, smooth as a pond and rippled with sunlight. Palm trees on the sapphire skyline swayed in the breeze, graceful and slender, while in the gardens of the castle itself masses of semi-tropical flowers embroidered the immaculate lawns. The castle, once a private palace was built on baronial lines, with dark rich woods and wide sweeping stairway. Luxurious carpets covered the floors and the former owner's trophies still adorned the walls.

'What a marvellous place in which to live,' Judi said, gazing across at the magnificent view. Her husband nodded his agreement and asked,

'Would you like to live in such a place, Judi?'

Instantly she shook her head.

'I adore our villa. I liken it to heaven.'

Understandingly he smiled.

'It is heaven - since you came. What you've brought to it is something which defies comprehension. What is it, Judi?'

'Just love,' was the simple reply, and her husband echoed softly,

'Yes, just love, my Judi, but what an abundance of it.' He glanced up as the waitress came for the order. 'Teas and cakes—' He looked at Judi. 'Sandwiches?'

'No, thank you, Vidas. Tea and cakes will be just right.'

They ate and drank and chatted lightheartedly, and sometimes they would pause to become fleetingly interested in a party of elderly tourists who, having been shepherded to the hotel by a Greek girl with bleached hair and a bored expression, listened to her giving a resume of the island's history while waiting for their tea to be served.

'The guide is supplied by the shipping company,' explained Vidas. 'These people are from a cruise ship.'

'So their stay on Corfu is only brief?'

He nodded.

'That's right. As several islands are visited by these ships there isn't time to stay very long at any one of them.'

'Will this be one of yours, Vidas - the cruise ship that's in now, I mean?'

'No; one of mine did call today, but before ten o'clock. It would have left by three this afternoon.'

'Do you always know where your ships are?'

'Indeed no. I used to at one time, but now there are too many.' He seemed amused by her look of astonishment and went on to say that some were very small ships, light cargo vessels.

Judi then said on sudden impulse,

'Could we go on a cruise some time?'

'You'd like that?' and instantly she had nodded, 'Then of course you must have what you like, my darling.'

She fell silent for a space, thinking of the things she had at various times heard about Greek men - and especially about Greek husbands. They were arrogant and domineering with their wives; they were brought up to consider females inferior; by tradition they were the complete masters, and by tradition their womenfolk not only obeyed, but also - in the acceptance of their own inferior status - desisted from expressing any wishes of theirs and meekly followed where they were led by their superiors.

'You, Vidas,' she said at length, aware of the faint lift of her husband's brow in a sort of inquiring gesture, 'will you enjoy a cruise?'

'If you are there,' he returned quietly, 'then I cannot help but enjoy it.'

She laughed, a tender laugh, and softly caressing. Nevertheless she asked him anxiously,

'Thoroughly, Vidas? I don't want you to go merely to please me.'

'I shall enjoy it thoroughly,' he assured her, and as she examined his expression her small tinge of anxiety dissolved.

They drove back across the island, leaving the lovely town of Corfu through whose narrow streets they had wandered earlier in the day. Judi had been delighted as always with the gaiety and colours, the high arcaded houses with their gay shutters and air of quiet indolence. Barrows bright with fruit stood under colourful awnings; there were wide spaces and gardens and trees, there was the broad harbour and the arcaded elegance of the

Esplanade, and there was the distant intricate shape of the mountain against the vivid blue vault of an Ionian sky.

Passing through a village as they neared their destination they came upon a group of Corfiot women in their workaday costumes - white blouses and headdresses and flowing grey skirts. They carried a variety of items from fruit and vegetables to a young newly-killed lamb. The women waved at the occupants of the car, laughing gaily when the salutes were returned.

'I love your people, Vidas.'

He slanted her a look, swift and teasing.

'All of them?'

She laughed.

'All of them!'

'Oh....'

'But one best of all.'

Another slanting look; taking her hand in his he gave it a little squeeze before placing it on the steering- wheel under his own, where it remained for the rest of the drive.

The sun was going down when at last they reached the white and blue villa on its platform on the hill, and the whole landscape was changing, becoming cooler and paler as if by some magic hand it was stripped of most of its heat and colour. The mountain took on a grey tinge which soon invaded the lower flanks; shadows tipped the smooth green undulations and darkened the valley beyond its leafy edges. But on the horizon the last dying rays of the sun as it sank lower and lower beneath the rim of the tilting earth sprayed the smooth Ionian Sea with iridescent bronze and rose- brown and amber, criss-crossed with lilac and purple as the shades of twilight spread their infiltrating fingers into the splendour of an Eastern sunset.

Having brought the car up to the house Vidas twisted in his seat to kiss his wife before getting out of the car. It was routine now, this kiss he always gave her, and he never forgot, and so she would wait with quivering expectancy, alive to the touch of his lips even before they had actually met hers.

A short while later they were in their lovely lilac and white bedroom, having spent one more blissful day together. The room was cool, and perfumed from flowers which Leda had put in a vase on the wide window-sill; the white net curtains billowed into the room, caught on the gentle zephyr riding in from the west. Closing the door behind him, Vidas stood for a long moment with his back to it, his eyes running possessively - and oh, so tenderly! she thought - over her slender dainty figure. He smiled; his outspread arms invited and gladly she melted into them, lifting her face, inviting his kiss. And for a long while they stood there, in wordless ecstasy at their nearness to one another. Over and over again she had vowed not to allow her mind to dwell on the future, but it came to her now, flooding her whole being with darkness, and she drew away from him, breaking into the blissful interlude, and a shudder passed through her. How could she go on - and on - and on . . .? Life without her husband must stretch through an eternity of torture.

'My dearest . . .?' The question was in his gaze; she looked apologetically at him and pressed close once more.

'It was nothing, darling. Hold me again.'

Willingly he obliged, his tender arms embracing her. Was that an indrawn sigh of regret she felt against her heart? she wondered as the spasm passed through him. What would she see in those dark metallic eyes should she choose to raise her head at this moment? She did not raise it; she had no wish to see what was written on her husband's face. She also knew that he would not wish her to see it.

'Dearest,' he murmured at last, 'it is time we were thinking of changing for dinner.'

As usual they shared the huge bathroom adjoining the bedroom. Vidas shaving while she bathed, and then she would leave him and dress while he used the bath.

As usual they sat outside on the patio before dinner, and Vidas poured her a drink. They talked in low tones, fingers entwined, each grasping at every precious moment, but Vidas in all ignorance of Judi's knowledge concerning his illness. Leda announced dinner and they ate it in the high wide dining-room with its damask furniture and rose-shaded wall lights. Flowers were everywhere, for nothing pleased Leda more than to be arranging flowers taken from the garden. After the meal they strolled in the grounds, then went out to the lane. Always they would do this, sometimes taking a short stroll and at other times walking for a couple of miles or so. They would stop to listen to an owl, or to the music of a rivulet as it cascaded down from its indeterminate source somewhere in a gully high on the summit of Mt. Angelo, rising above Lakones. They would retrace their steps, strolling homeward, to the shining white villa set amid its delightful sub-tropical gardens.

And so the idyllic days continued with, as Vidas had once said, their honeymoon lasting just as long as they cared to call it that.

Once or twice a week Vidas would retire to his study to work for a couple of hours and sometimes Judi would go with him. But there were occasions when he would request to be left alone and she would leave him, understanding that there were things he wished to do in private.

A week after their trip to town and the Castello Hotel where they had taken tea, Judi was writing to her father when Vidas came from his study sooner than she had expected. She was on the patio, seated at a small table, and he would have looked over her shoulder; but with a swift jerk born of fear she folded up the sheet of paper on which she had been penning her thoughts, telling her father of the wonder of her marriage and the love that had so miraculously come to Vidas and herself. It was not the first time she had written thus, but she could not refrain from mentioning it in every letter she sent.

'Not for your husband's eyes?' A lift of his brow but tenderness in his gaze.

She was filled with trembling, but a laugh broke, forced from her by the sheer necessity of allaying any suspicions that her urgent action might have aroused. She need not have worried; her husband's manner was one of amused indulgence, so implicitly he trusted her.

'I'm not wasting my time writing when my husband is with me. You've finished working for today?'

He nodded.

'I couldn't concentrate,' he owned ruefully. 'So I came out to find my wife. The work can keep.'

Her face coloured delicately at his words; he noticed this and a tender smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

'Not used to me even yet?' with a hint of amusement in his tones. 'How very enchanting you are, my sweet Judi,' and, coming closer to where she sat, he dropped a light kiss on the top of her head. 'Talking of writing, dear,' he then said as the thought occurred to him, 'I expect you picked up the letter from your father?'

'Yes, thank you, Vidas. But you knew. I gave it to you to read.' Faintly bewildered, she looked at him. He had been there, in the hall, when she took up her father's letter from the table. It had come while they were out swimming at Paleocastritsa Beach.

'Not that one, Judi. There's another today. You were upstairs when it came and I was going to my study. I called but guessed you hadn't heard, as you made no answer. However, I assumed you'd see it when you came down. I'll get it for you.' He left the patio as he spoke and quickly she slipped the half-finished letter into her pocket. A narrow escape, that had been, and a great sigh of relief broke from her. Supposing he had asked to see what she was doing? If ever he should see her handwriting. . . .

She had risen from her chair when Vidas returned with the letter, which he handed to her.

'Thank you, darling.' She slit the envelope, noticing that Vidas had moved away to a chair, where he sat down, relaxed, but continuing to watch his wife with interest, and, she thought, looking exceedingly attractive in his light grey denims and olive-green shirt, a present from Judi, bought a fortnight ago when they flew to Athens for the week-end.

Why had her father written two letters so close together? she wondered, drawing out the paper from its envelope. Her brow furrowed as she read, and Vidas spoke, asking why she frowned like that.

'Read it, Vidas.' She had no hesitation in handing it to him, as it had previously been arranged between Judi and her father that nothing should be included in his letters which could not be read by her husband, one reason being the risk of discovery should one of them happen to come into his hands, the other being that she wanted to be able to show Vidas the letters, which she felt was only what Vidas would have expected.

'He wants to come over for a holiday.' A small nod of approval and an inquiring glance at his wife.

'There doesn't appear to be anything here to make you frown?'

'I'm puzzled as to how he can come so soon,' she admitted. 'He can't possibly have saved sufficient for the return fare - not yet.'

'Well, he obviously has the means to get here,' Vidas observed reasonably, and Judi nodded in an abstract way, reluctant to voice to this rich husband of hers what was in her mind. However, she did voice it in the end, telling him that she feared her father had resorted to one of those schemes whereby one could take a holiday now and pay later.

'But this is so out of character,' she added. 'Father hates debt even in cases of necessity, and this visit is certainly not a necessity.' Nevertheless, she was happy at the idea of seeing her father, whose letters had contained very little of what his life was now that he and Alice had their home to themselves, and Judi rather thought that his avoidance was a reluctance to give his daughter any worry at all during the brief period which her marriage was to cover.

'If this is so then there must be some specific reason why he wants to see you,' said Vidas, once more perusing the letter in his hand. 'I must see you....' He glanced at Judi. 'Is there more to that than appears on the surface, do you think?' He too had produced a frown and Judi thought how very sweet it was of him to concern himself like this, for there was no doubt at all that he was concerned.

Absently she shook her head, but crossed over to where Vidas sat and looked over his shoulder.

'I must see you,' she echoed, nerves suddenly tingling as it did seem that there should have been a line under the word 'must'. 'There *is* something urgent about it—' She broke off, swallowing hard. 'Vidas, do you suppose he's more unhappy than ever now? Do you think things could have become worse between him and Alice?'

'I don't know, darling. Wait until he comes; worrying won't do an atom of good.'

She agreed, but the matter remained with her until the evening when, with a sternness she knew her husband possessed but that she had never before witnessed, Judi heard him say,

'That'll do, Judi.' His voice was firm, but by no means unkindly so. 'I've said that worrying is useless until you've seen your father, and you must stop it, understand?'

'Yes, Vidas,' she replied, feeling meek for the first time since she had known him. 'I'm sorry.'

Her father arrived the following Friday; Judi and Vidas took the car to the airport to meet him and on seeing his haggard expression Judi would instantly have asked him what was wrong, but even as she opened her mouth to speak he was shaking his head, almost imperceptibly so that Vidas would not see, telling her to keep quiet for the present. If Vidas noticed anything unusual about her father's appearance he tactfully refrained from

commenting and during the drive to the villa he chatted amicably, while Judi, sitting in the back of the car, fretted and worried so much that she feared *her* face must be as haggard as that of her father, so she had to make a determined effort to show a smiling countenance when at length they arrived at the house and all got out of the car.

For a moment Bill just stared, then turned to Vidas.

'How very beautiful this all is—' But suddenly he broke off and his face took on a greyish tinge. Judi and her husband exchanged glances. Vidas said gently,

'Take your father to his room, darling. I'll be on the terrace when you come back.'

'Father,' she began urgently as soon as they entered his bedroom, 'what on earth's the matter? It's Alice, of course, but what has she been doing .. .?' Her voice trailed away to a perplexed silence as he shook his head from side to side. 'No?'

He seemed to be trying to clear some blockage in his throat and for what seemed an eternity there was silence in the room.

'It's not Alice,' he managed at last. 'Judi - prepare yourself for a shock—'

'Father, please tell me!'

'Hannah,' he said slowly, his expression becoming more haggard than ever, 'is on her way home.'

'Home?' For one fleeting moment Judi failed to grasp the significance of her father's communication and her only reaction was one of bewilderment. 'Why should she come home? Is she ill, or something?'

'Judi,' he said after waiting a moment expecting her to be suddenly struck with the full impact of his previous words, 'Hannah is coming home *to marry Vidas*.'

The colour drained from Judi's face and a hand crept to her cheek. The quiet that fell on the room was more than silence; it was the hush of sheer terror, a terror that gripped Judi like the jaws of some monster, a terror that so clouded her mind that she was unable to think clearly. Vainly she strove to conjure up a vision of what exposure was to mean both to herself and her husband. She tried to appreciate his disillusionment, the terrible pain which would envelop him, but she failed.

She looked at her father, standing there, his face pinched and pale, his eyes fixed upon her forehead, where beads of perspiration gave evidence of the dampness which had spread over her whole body. Some voice within her was saying, over and over again,

'He loves me, and although he will condemn me, and despise me and probably throw me off, he can never hate me.' She closed her eyes tightly. Assuredly her misery would be her husband's also, for his love was deep and strong; he had declared it to be the sort of love that should last into eternity, and he had been right.

Her father was speaking and she tried to concentrate - she must concentrate, she told herself, so that she could learn everything. She heard him say,

'I knew something was wrong on seeing Alice's face when she was reading one of Hannah's letters. But we'd had a dreadful row the previous evening and I couldn't ask her about it— In any case,' he added in a hard tone she had rarely heard him use before, 'Alice would never repeat anything that would discredit that paragon of a daughter of hers.' He paused as Judi opened her mouth to speak; she thought better of it, leaving her father to explain in his own way, even though he was being slow about it.

'Another letter came and this time Alice had read only part way through it when she got up from the breakfast table and went out of the room. I knew I must see those letters, Judi. Something nagged at me. warning me and urging me to find out what was going on. So when she went off to see her sister I looked into the drawer in her bedroom where I know she keeps her private papers....'

He tailed off, realizing that he had given away just how far he and his wife had strayed from one another,

as when Judi was living at home he and Alice had shared a bedroom. However, Judi scarcely heard and he continued, 'The first letter was rather long, and full of complaints about the producer and the other actors. She wasn't getting along with anyone at all, and although she blamed the others it was easy to read between the lines and to gather that she was making herself thoroughly objectionable to all concerned. The producer had told her she was arrogant, accusing her of causing dissension which had never before occurred in the making of one of his films. He assured her she was not indispensable, whereupon she turned on him and threatened to walk out immediately. The letter gave me the impression that she was disenchanted with film-making and that she was in fact almost ready to quit.'

'And the second letter?' Still white to the lips, Judi asked the question. It was out before she realized just how superfluous it was.

'She wrote informing her mother that she was leaving the film company and coming home to marry Vidas. The producer threatened to sue her, but she told him to carry on. Her millionaire husband would foot the bill. Her confidence amazes me,' Bill went on, his own brow as damp as Judi's. 'She seems absolutely sure that Vidas will have waited for her.'

'That's not inconceivable. Hannah doesn't know everything, remember. She was not, at the time, aware of the urgency of the situation—' Judi broke off, a sob catching at her voice. This development seemed, somehow, to bring her husband's end closer, although she could find no valid reason for such an idea.

'Hannah went on to say in her letter that it would take a little time to organize her departure and it might be three weeks to a month before she arrived in England. She'd be staying at the cottage for a short while - until her marriage. Vidas would have to live in England and—' He broke off and his mouth contracted into a thin hard line. 'She promised that Vidas would buy her mother a decent house and she could then leave this pauper whom she had been foolish enough to marry.'

Staring into space, Judi was vaguely aware that she should pay more attention to this last sentence, that she should be extending sympathy to her father, expressing indignation against Hannah, but so clouded was her mind with her own terrible plight that Bill's troubles seemed for the present to be quite infinitesimal. Her terror was now replaced by a black and all-engulfing despair. That she, above anyone, should be the person to cause her husband hurt; she who loved him more than life itself, she whose own life would be worthless when he had gone. Vidas worshipped her; she knew by things he had said that he trusted her implicitly, believed her to be wonderful in every way, was convinced that she could do no wrong. Whenever he spoke about their love he invariably likened it to a miracle. And oh, so many times he had said he blessed the day she had consented to become his wife! His pain would be greater by far than hers, she admitted, tears starting to her eyes as at last she could visualize his terrible disillusionment on learning of her deceit. Yes, his pain must be greater than hers simply because his ideal was to come crashing to the ground, while hers remained on his high pedestal.

'Father,' she cried in anguish, 'what can I do? Vidas has less than three months. He loves me so much—'

'I know, I know. Your letters have been full of him.'

She fell silent, trying to think. There must be some way in which she could protect her husband. Thoughts switched about in her brain; she found herself becoming confused as these thoughts eventually became so chaotic as to be quite beyond her ability to untangle them.

'How did you manage to get here?' she found herself asking in a vague sort of way as her wandering mind continued to pick up threads of thought and drop them again. 'I mean, what did you tell Alice?'

'I told her I'd been off colour for some time and that in the end I'd gone to see the works doctor, who had advised me to take a rest. So I said I was going up to the north of England to pay you a visit. Alice made no demur; I expect she welcomed the idea of being without me for a week.'

Judi wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Her father's own eyes shadowed at the action. He said, a break in his voice.'

'My little girl, I wish you'd never set eyes on Vidas—'

'No, Father,' she interrupted gently, 'don't say that. I wouldn't have it any different - at least,' she amended, 'I wouldn't ever wish I'd not known Vidas. My memories are too wonderful.'

'Wonderful,' he mused, and added, as if he could not hold back words he knew he should not utter, 'Up till now, Judi.'

She swallowed the rising lump in her throat.

'I must think of something,' she cried, pressing a clenched fist to her heart, for its heavy pulsation frightened her. 'I can't let him be hurt - I won't!'

'If you could intercept her letter,' Bill began, but shaking his head even while he spoke. 'No, it wouldn't be possible, would it?'

'Intercept . . . ?' Terror seized her again and her whole nervous system seemed rapidly to become out of control. 'No, as you say, it wouldn't be possible.'

'Then there's nothing you can do, Judi. Hannah said in her letter that she would write to Vidas immediately she got home.' A small pause as her father looked at her long and hard. 'You practised this deception without being unduly affected by qualms,' he continued at length when Judi remained thoughtfully silent. 'You've obviously given Vidas much more than Hannah ever could ... and if you were to practise more deceit in order to protect him from a hurt that would make his last weeks unbearable, then in my opinion that deceit is more than justified.'

'It isn't possible,' she repeated, but this time her tones lacked their previous force. *Was* it possible?

'If her first letter was ignored,' persisted Bill softly, 'then it's unlikely she would write again.'

'She would, Father,' asserted Judi with conviction. 'I'm absolutely sure of it.'

'Then let us suppose she did send a second letter. If or;this was also ignored then surely she'd realize - and accept - that Vidas had no further interest in her?'

But Judi was shaking her head, in a distracted sort of way. Hannah would never give up as easily as that.

'She might decide to come over to see Vidas.' Sheer panic was added to the great fear within her. Hannah here, causing a scene and she, Judi, being denounced before her adoring and trusting husband. In a frenzy of despair she grasped at the front of her dress, quite unknowingly, and her heart throbbed madly again. 'Father, how could I ever have been so sublimely unaware of the possibility of a contingency such as this? It never for one moment crossed my mind that Hannah would come back.'

'Nor mine,' her father freely admitted. 'She was so enthusiastic about the film and becoming a star. She's an enigma, that one; you never know what she's about. Take her attitude towards her mother, for instance. One moment she's all over her and the next you get the impression that she doesn't care whether Alice lives or dies.'

Judi frowned at this digression, but the next moment she was sending her father an apologetic glance.

'I'm almost out of my mind.' She was endeavouring to straighten out the creases in her dress, wondering bewilderedly how she could have allowed herself to get into this state. 'I don't know what to do!' Her mouth trembled uncontrollably. 'I'm at my wits' end. Shall I make a full confession, Father? Do you think he'll understand, and forgive me — because he loves me so?'

He shook his head, not in a negative gesture, but in one of uncertainty.

'How can I advise you, Judi? He might forgive you, but do you think it could ever be the same after you've made such a confession?'

'No,' she murmured after a long and agonized pause. 'No, it could never be the same, could it? He believes me to be perfect in every way, a girl of high

ideals - certainly he could never imagine my committing so perfidious a crime as I have.'

"The only solution, Judi, is the interception of any letters she might send.'

'But as I've said, she might decide to come here and see Vidas. She's given up a career, remember.'

'You believe she'll not pass up the opportunity so easily? She'll pursue him, even after he's ignored her letters?'

'Vidas is not the man to ignore her letters, Father, and Hannah knows this. He expressed deep gratitude for her action in saving his nephew from drowning, and he told her that his proposal of marriage was a result of this gratitude—' Judi broke off, then said, 'You know all this; I told you everything at the beginning. No, Hannah will not be at all satisfied when her letters are not answered.' Judi looked at her father. 'All Hannah was interested in was the money, she told me that. And if Vidas fails to answer her letters then she's going to be furious. And she's going to make it her business to find out why he hasn't answered those letters.'

'I expect you're right,' concluded Bill after a moment's thought about this. 'If only Vidas sent a reply, telling her he was finished—' He stopped as Judi lifted her head sharply, taking an indrawn sigh of impatience as she did so. 'Sorry! I was thinking aloud,' he said, faintly embarrassed at his foolishness. He glanced at his watch; the action jerked Judi from the brooding silence into which she would have fallen.

'We must go down,' she decided urgently. 'Vidas will wonder why we're so long.' Through the mirror she saw her face. 'He'll see I've been crying,' she added frantically. 'Whatever can I say to him?'

'Does he know about Alice and me?' inquired Bill after a slight hesitation, and automatically Judi nodded.

'I told him everything. I hope you don't mind, Father?'

'It's as well you did, Judi; it will suffice as an explanation. I've been telling you how unhappy I am and you've been sympathizing - and having a little weep over it all.'

CHAPTER SIX

'You go down first, Judi, and tell Vidas I'm unpacking. I'd rather not be there when you're explaining away your tear-stained face. It would embarrass us all.'

She nodded, turning at the door.

'I'll tell him you're tidying yourself and changing. You see, he'll have told Spyros to come up and unpack for you.'

'I see.' A small pause and then, glancing round and taking in the luxury for the first time, 'This is all very grand, Judi.'

'It is, Father, but it will mean nothing when Vidas isn't here to share it with me,' and because the burning tears seared the backs of her eyes she left her father abruptly, running to her own room to bathe her face before going to join her husband on the terrace.

Rising as she appeared, he brought forth a chair for her.

'You've been a long time—' He stared a moment. 'Darling, what's happened to make you cry?' So concerned his voice, so tender his glance. 'Your father's in some sort of trouble?'

Judi caught her lower lip between her teeth. How difficult it was going to be to lie to him, but what could she do? It was no help to tell herself that they were only white lies, because her father really was unhappy with his wife. Vidas's question, going unanswered for the moment, was repeated in his glance and at length she began to talk. But her story was halting and she saw at once that Vidas was puzzled by her manner. His concern was patent, however, and when during a pause he expressed his deep sympathy for her father she could not any longer hold back the tears, and she wept on his breast, his tender arms holding her protectively, his voice soothing and a little husky because of his anxiety for her, in this most unhappy mood. It was the very first time, she thought, that they had been like this; both had hitherto been happy and content, despite the shadow which hung so close. For a

while he seemed at a loss as to how he could comfort her, but eventually he held her from him, drying her eyes as he said,

'Darling, we can't do a great deal to help, but at least we can give him a memorable holiday while he's with us. We'll have a talk and make some plans. The cruise you mentioned - we couldn't take a long one, but we could pick up a ship at Piraeus and go off to one or two islands. Then we could fly back here for the last couple of days or so.'

This had the effect of producing even more tears and Judi half expected her husband once again to give her a sample of his sternness. But instead he held her closely, kissed her brow and then just waited until she had collected herself.

'You're so good and kind—Vidas,' she cried suddenly, 'I love you so. Believe that - whatever happens!'

'Sweetheart. . . .' He held her from him, examining her expression through critical eyes. 'What a strange thing to say! How could I ever be in doubt of your love!' Frightened now, Judi merely shook her head, and gave him a deprecating look as if to tell him she was overwrought and did not know what she was saying. 'You've given me proof and more, my sweet angel, of the love you have for me.' Caressing as the breeze at sundown was his voice, his breath cool and clean as his lips touched hers, so lovingly.

At last she managed a wan smile, but somehow she felt awkward with her husband for the very first time and it was a relief when presently they were joined by her father. A quick glance passing between them was noticed by Vidas; a frown knitted his brow and he pursed his lips thoughtfully. Swiftly Judi spoke, afraid because of her husband's awareness of that glance and his obvious puzzlement regarding it. An almost physical pain touched her heart as she dwelt on the perfection that had been theirs for three idyllic months, and now. ... She admitted it was imagination and yet she felt that something was creeping into their relationship. Were the days of perfection already gone? Happiness would still be theirs for a little while longer, since her stepsister was not yet in England, but Judi had the painful conviction that by the very presence of her own fear there must inevitably occur some change

in the bond of intimacy which had been their precious shared possession up till now.

Her reverie was broken suddenly by her husband's saying,

'So we're all agreed, are we? You'd like that, wouldn't you, dear?'

'Like—?' She blinked, having not the slightest idea what had been said to lead up to this question. 'I didn't quite catch what you were saying, Vidas?' Her cheeks were red, she knew, and once again her husband's expression frightened her.

'We've been discussing your father's holiday. . . .' He tailed off, casting a half-glance at Bill as if he would surprise another interchange of looks between him and his daughter. 'Are you all right, Judi?'

'Yes, of course,' she said, rallying and at the same time making a mental vow to put Hannah out of her mind for the present. 'I was lost in thought, that was all.'

'I see. Well, we were arranging to take that small cruise which I'd mentioned to you earlier. We can fly to Athens tomorrow and join the ship at Piraeus at noon. This is what we've been discussing. You can be ready, of course?'

'Yes, Vidas, certainly I can be ready.' Clothes were no problem as Vidas had showered her with dresses and suits for every occasion. And she had accessories to go with them all. He had given her some beautiful jewellery too, one or two exquisite pieces which she would treasure all her life.

Her father had travelled during the early hours of the morning, arriving at the airport in Corfu at half past ten after having changed planes in Athens. They had all stopped for coffee in the town of Corfu before driving across the island, heading north-west through a landscape of olives and myrtle and tall stately cypress trees. Bougainvillaea and hibiscus drenched the walls of the lovely villas and roses blossomed everywhere. Bill was appreciative of it all despite the dread news he had come to impart to his daughter. And now, as the three of them sat on the terrace waiting for lunch, he remarked on the

beauty of the island with its soft lush countryside and abundance of flowers and fruits.

'This is the first time I've been abroad,' he confessed, leaning back comfortably in his chair and turning his attention to his son-in-law as he poured him a drink. 'I never for one moment thought I'd ever see a place like this. It is wonderful, Vidas.' His voice held no sign of the strain under which he laboured; like Judi, he seemed to be determined not to make any more slips that could set Vidas wondering what was in the air.

'It is beautiful,' agreed Vidas, and then gave his wife one of those tender smiles she knew so well and yet which never failed to thrill her with the same intensity as at the very beginning. 'Judi was pleased with Kalymnos too,' he added on a teasing note.

'Where you spent your honeymoon?' Bill nodded, and looked affectionately at his daughter. Her haunted expression was gone and the beauty of her face was portrayed in all its delectable aspects - her high cheekbones and clear peach-blossom skin, her small *retrousse* nose which Vidas was so often tempted to kiss, her unusually-shaped eyes, large and soft. Her lips parted as her glance moved to her husband's face, and a smile hovered there, temptingly, and she knew that were she alone with Vidas he would tease her, and also scold playfully, accusing her of flirting with him, and warning her that if she were not careful she would get more than she bargained for. She would blush, then, and find herself in his arms . . .

'Yes,' she murmured dreamily at length, answering her father's query which was in effect only half-question, as he knew that she and Vidas had spent their honeymoon on Kalymnos. 'It was wonderful.'

Her husband nodded his agreement.

'We're going again before - before the winter.'

She looked quickly at him, then averted her head, unwilling that he should read her expression. Had he almost made a slip there? It would seem like it, and yet he was always so guarded, his object being, of course, to keep his wife in ignorance the whole time - just so they could both be able to take

what was offered, acting as if no shadows of darkness were hovering over them. She raised her head at length, and saw the tenderness in his eyes. He was still thinking of Kalymnos.

After lunch they sat in the garden for an hour, and then Vidas suggested they take Bill down to the beach at Paleocastritsa.

'You swim?' he asked, and Bill nodded, but went on to say that he had not brought bathing trunks with him. 'I'll lend you some,' Vidas offered, going on to say he would first do some telephoning, making arrangements for joining the *Erinna* at Piraeus the following day. 'And by the way, Judi,' he added as an afterthought, 'would you do a letter for me? I've written it out and even signed the paper. All you have to do is type it and put it in an envelope. We'll post it when we go out.'

She went along to his study and Vidas used the phone in the hall. The paper was there, and a very short letter written in longhand was on the desk beside it. Judi sat down at the typewriter. It would take less than five minutes, she thought, finding nothing strange in the fact of his signing the letter before it was actually typed. He had done so before, especially if they were about to go out. He would then be able to leave her to get the letter ready for the post, while he himself went off to bring the car from the garage.

She had the paper in the machine when like some blinding flash the idea came to her, from where she would never know. A sort of panic seized her at the same time and her heart banged like a hammer against her ribs. Impossible! But was it? Desperate situations required desperate measures ...

With a tremendous effort she calmed her nerves and, taking out another piece of paper, with the business heading on it like the first, Judi typed out what Vidas had written in longhand. But all the while her mind was on the paper beside her on the desk. Vidas's signature. . . . Vidas Theron. Was this signature to be her salvation . . .? Could she bring it off - this incredible plan that had thrust itself upon her uninvited, and at a time when her mind had for a brief space been occupied with matters other than her terrible predicament?

Her calm amazed her as, a few moments later, she was standing beside Vidas in the hall, looking at him rather ruefully as she held the letter in her hand.

'I'm sorry, darling,' she whispered during a brief lull while someone at the end of the line was obviously looking something up, 'I made a mistake on the other paper;-so I did it again. It was better than rubbing out.' She placed the letter before him on the hall table and handed him the pen she had brought with her from his study. 'Thank you, Vidas.' She gave him a tender smile; bending his head he kissed her on the lips.

'I adore you,' he whispered, then gave his full attention to what was being said over the line. Judi went back to the study and put the letter in the envelope she had already addressed. The folded sheet bearing her husband's signature was put safely away in a cupboard, between the leaves of a ledger, from where she would remove it at the first opportunity.

Bill was rather awed by Paleocastritsa beach, occupying the breathtakingly beautiful bay in a mountain inlet with the steep slope rising as a backcloth, its base a series of terraced olive groves which swept towards the rocky outcrops separating the three delightful little coves that nestled beneath the impressive green and red-brown cliffs.

'What a delightful place!' he exclaimed immediately they strolled on to the beach after having left the car. 'It's just - indescribable.'

Vidas laughed and quoted,

' "... lies in a trance, drugged with its own extraordinary perfection." ' This was Lawrence Durrell's description, he went on to say, while the cove had been described by another writer as, '... shimmering in Nature's golden affluence, on the sunset edge of a sea- tranced isle.'

They swam lazily in the warm pellucid water, then drowsed on the beach, conversing quietly.

'I should put something on,' recommended Vidas on noticing that already Bill's skin was colouring. 'It doesn't do to take our sun in too large doses, not at first.'

Judi handed her father a towelling beach coat lent him by Vidas and he draped it round his shoulders. His eyes were dreamy, fixed on the horizon where the white silhouette of a ship cut into the azure sky. Forgetting her own troubles, Judi gave him all her silent sympathy, deeply regretful that, after so long remaining single, he should in the end make an unhappy marriage. And yet had he not married Alice then she, Judi, would never have married Vidas, simply because she would never even have met him. What a strange and unpredictable thing fate was! Her thoughts running along the lines they chose, they thrust on her the vision of her life in the future ... the perilously near future, now that Vidas had less than three months. Loneliness ... for long, long empty years stretching away to the nebulous void of forgetfulness. Forgetfulness ... ? Never! But memory would fade; it was inevitable, and her beloved Vidas would no longer be with her in imagination, holding her at night, his dark head on the pillow close to hers. He would be there, but out of reach as the pitiless fingers of time drew him further and further away from her imploring arms.

A quivering hand stole to her throat, pressing it in an endeavour to release the blockage there. Vidas looked at her, raised an eyebrow but smiled as her face cleared and her hand dropped idly to her side and she filled it with sand which she allowed to trickle through her slender brown fingers.

She looked away, to the smooth sunlit sea, and watched its colours changing from pale blue to amber and then to soft translucent pearl. And as the moments passed, silently except for the occasional murmur of one or other of her companions as they exchanged the odd remark with one another, Judi made a firm and unbreakable vow to go to any lengths - *any lengths* - to ensure that nothing should come between her husband and herself.

And dominating her mind was the piece of paper, hidden safely away, the paper bearing her husband's signature. . . .

There was a restaurant on the beach and on Vidas's suggestion they went over for tea.

'I don't know about you—' Vidas's glance swept to both his companions, '—but I feel like something a little more substantial than tea and cakes.'

'Yes, so do I.' Judi turned to her father. 'You can have sandwiches, or even a meal if you want it.' But she did then glance at her husband. 'Father can have a meal at this time, I suppose?'

'I should think so.' Vidas beckoned to the waiter. But Bill was shaking his head.

'I don't want a full meal, Judi,' he protested. 'I had a marvellous lunch. No, sandwiches and tea will be more than enough for me.'

Vidas ordered cakes as well, and also a dessert of *fraoules* marinated in a special orange-flavoured liqueur for which the island was famous.

'You'll love the *fraoules*,' Judi asserted, watching as her father took up a spoonful of the delicious fruit that was piled high in his bowl.

'Strawberries,' he said, and nodded. 'You're right, they are very good indeed.'

'They're wild,' she told him. 'Here on Corfu they cultivate wild strawberries and a great many are sent by air to Athens.'

'All sorts of fruit grow here without much trouble,' inserted Vidas not without a hint of pride in his quiet but richly-accented voice. 'Unlike many other Greek islands we have plenty of rain, which is a blessing, for it gives us our lovely greenness and lush vegetation.' He paused a moment, eyes narrowed against the glare as he watched for a space another white liner appearing far out to sea. 'The ground smells rather wonderful after our rains, especially in the cypress woods; it's the resin.'

'And we could smell the thyme growing in the Albanian Mountains once, after the rain. Do you remember, Vidas?' Judi looked across at her husband with a questioning expression and he nodded. How could he forget? his tender glance asked. On that particular occasion they had been strolling after dinner and the rain-washed landscape glistened in the light of an enormous moon; diamonds hung about the foliage, capturing starlight before dropping

to the ground as the night-breeze stirred the branches of the trees. The magic of the Eastern night, the stars and moon and distant purple veil draping the horizon, the asphodels and lavender on the roadside, and the pungent scent of thyme filling the clear sharp air . . . all these conjoined to stimulate their feelings, their desire for one another, and after stopping several times to kiss his wife Vidas had whispered huskily in her ear,

'Do you want to go on, my love, or shall we turn back?'

A quivering smile broke; her shy whisper gave the answer he expected, and hand in hand they returned to the house on the hill that was their home.

'Yes, my darling,' he said, forgetting for the moment that her father was here with them, looking from one to the other, clearly interested in the silent - but very evident - communication that was passing between them. 'I remember . . . very distinctly,' and the last two words were so significant a reminder that Judi coloured delicately and lowered her lashes. With sudden perception her father glanced away, and he was frowning, his heart like lead as his agonized vision put before his consciousness a picture of his daughter's future. But it was her actual loss that troubled him most and although he knew she must be immeasurably hurt he just had to bring the matter up when, just before dinner that evening, she came to his room for a few moments' chat before going down to join her husband.

'I shall get through it, Father,' she told him in clear and surprisingly steady tones. 'I'm prepared, remember, so it won't be a shock. I knew, right from the first, what marriage to Vidas would mean. And I think that even before the actual marriage I had begun to realize that the wrench would be something from which I would never fully recover.' To her consternation tears sprang to his eyes and the hands using the brush and comb became idle. He turned from the mirror, through which he had been looking at his daughter.

'But, Judi . . . my dear, it wasn't worth it— No, it wasn't! You can deny it, and I'm sure that at present you're fully convinced that it has all been worth it, but later, when the time comes—' He broke off and the tears now actually fell on to his cheeks. 'When the time comes, my Judi, I fear you're going to have a complete breakdown.'

She thought about these words, then shook her head.

'I shall be given strength, Father,' she said simply.

He wiped his cheeks with a handkerchief taken from a drawer in the dressing-table.

'What about Hannah?' he said when at length he had collected himself. 'She will make trouble. . . .' He tailed off, becoming deep in thoughts other than those occupying his mind only seconds previously. 'I can't see her being able to cause a complete break between you, though. Vidas loves you far too much.'

'That's the conclusion I've reached, just a few minutes ago, while I was dressing. She can't part us, as you say, but she could cause a gulf between us that would remain to the end.' A pause and then, 'I won't let her come here, Father. I know of a way in which I can stop her ... if I can intercept her first letter, which will of course be her last.'

Bill looked at her with a puzzled expression. 'I don't understand, Judi.' He frowned. 'You're so calm.'

'Inwardly I'm not calm,' she admitted. 'On the contrary I'm scared, dreadfully scared - not at what I intend doing, but at what will happen should it fail.'

'What is it?' Automatically he shook his head as if he had decided there was absolutely nothing she could do despite her assertion.

'I can't tell you, Father, because you'd worry, and fret in case it didn't come off and I was faced with more serious consequences than had I left things to take their course.'

'So what you intend doing could worsen the position between you and Vidas?'

'Should he discover it, most certainly it could - and would.'

'Is it worth the risk, Judi?'

She nodded, pale but composed. Her eyes were wide and clear as she looked at him; they portrayed an almost primitive resolution and he gave a little gasp. There was nothing of the failure about this girl in whose expression shone the light that, time and time again, must have looked out of the eyes of men determined to fight to the death.

'I've vowed to go to any lengths to protect my husband from hurt, and I shall never waver from that vow.'

'You're a wonderful girl, Judi,' he told her in tones edged with deep affection. 'Let me comfort you when the time comes; promise me, my dear.'

She smiled and nodded and, pulling his arm through hers as he finished brushing his hair, she tiptoed up to kiss his cheek.

'Come on, pet,' she said lightly. 'Smile! Remember that Vidas must be made happy for every single minute.'

'Do you really believe he's happy?'

'I know he is,' with such confidence that her father gasped again. 'He's not afraid, you see, Father. He accepts the inevitable and so, because he has me, he can be happy.'

'He never ever gives you the slightest clue of what is to come?' and when Judi shook her head, 'I feel that it's a little unkind, somehow.'

'No. Don't you see that if he did warn me, then our happiness would come to an end.'

Her father inclined his head in agreement.

'Yes, I understand now. He would know that you'd be heartbroken ... so he's allowing you to be happy right up to the end.'

"That's right."

'I wonder if he fully realizes what a treasure he has in you.' Bill spoke after a long pause during which he had obviously been dwelling on the matter and wondering how Vidas would feel were he to know that his wife was already warned of what was in store for her.

'Of course he fully realizes,' laughed Judi, urging her father towards the bedroom door. 'He tells me all the time!'

The following morning they were all up early and after breakfast on the patio they drove to the airport and flew to Athens. As the ship was not sailing for another three hours they took Bill up on to the Acropolis, where, like so many thousands of people every year, he gazed with wonder and admiration on the world's most beautiful building, the Parthenon, mighty Temple of Athena, patroness of ancient Athens and daughter of the king of all the gods, the noble Zeus. They then took a taxi to the palace and even managed a quick tour of the city, a city of teeming millions, of traffic so thick that it seemed quite impossible that accidents would not occur every single second. But by some miracle everything, and everyone, managed to get about quite safely, although undoubtedly the traffic police were the people who had to be thanked for this.

'They're marvellous!' exclaimed Bill when, having dismissed the taxi for a while they walked towards Omonia Square. 'It's incredible!' The policeman was holding up the traffic and seconds after waving on the waiting pedestrians it seemed that nothing less than two mighty armies were advancing on one another, so great and swift was the surge and press of people which left the pavement at each side of the road.

'The only time when Greeks are in a hurry,' laughed Vidas, 'is when they are crossing the road. Otherwise they are a rather indolent people. I expect it's the climate - too enervating for hard work.'

Judi instantly protested,

'I'm sure, Vidas, that you've worked hard in your time.'

'Thank you, my love. Perhaps I have, but not recently,' he added on a teasing note. 'Not since I acquired a wife who cannot bear to be away from me for a single minute.'

'You will notice, Father,' said Judi with well-feigned sarcasm, 'that my husband has an enormously large head!'

But Bill merely looked at his daughter, his indrawn breath sensed rather than heard. He was as good as saying to her,

'I give up trying to understand you two. How can you be so lighthearted?'

Vidas called another taxi which took them this time to Piraeus, the port of Athens, and here was the lovely white cruise ship - one of Vidas's - on which was reserved for them two first class cabins with verandahs and private showers.

'Sweetheart,' whispered Vidas as, taking her arm in the way to which she was used by now, he walked with her up the gangway, 'you're trembling?'

'Excitement,' she replied briefly, and Vidas laughed.

'You're just a little girl,' he said, then stopped to acknowledge the salute of the two officers waiting at the top of the gangway to receive the voyagers.

'I feel a very important young woman - not a little girl,' she told him, smiling at the officers in turn as they inclined their heads as she passed with her husband. 'It's like being the Queen!'

Immediately they were on deck they were taken to their cabins, their luggage being already there as Vidas had sent it on by taxi as soon as they arrived in Athens. 'I'll just pop in and see that Father's all right,' Judi said a couple of minutes after entering the cabin she waif to share with Vidas. 'He'll be feeling strange, and perhaps a little lost.'

Vidas nodded.

'If there's anything at all that he needs, let me know and I'll see to it at once.'

'Thank you, dearest Vidas. It's so kind of you to give my father this lovely treat. He'll remember it all his life.'

'I had to, Judi, as he seemed so unhappy. You see, I feel for anyone whose marriage is a failure, having myself been so blessed.'

She went out, too full to speak, but by the time she entered her father's cabin, which was a short distance from theirs, she was perfectly composed.

'Everything all right?' She glanced around, delighted with the luxury and hoping her father would be able to put everything else but the cruise out of his mind and really enjoy himself.

'Everything's fine. This is a magnificent ship, Judi.'

'I'm dying to look around it. Are you changing first, or are you ready now? Vidas says that lunch is being served at the present time.'

'I'd like to change. I might as well get into something easy. I brought a pair of shorts - do you think I dare wear them?'

She slanted him a glance of admonishment.

Father, why do you persist in thinking you're old? Of course you can wear shorts, everybody wears them.

Vidas will be wearing his, you can be quite sure of that.'

'I'll put them on after lunch, then.'

'Yes - but we might not take lunch yet. We might decide on the second sitting.' She turned to leave. 'Come to our cabin when you're ready, and we'll all have a discussion.'

It was decided that they would take lunch later, and so they explored the ship, with Judi saying that she supposed Vidas knew every nook and cranny already, but he shook his head.

'I've never been aboard this ship before today. It was new only six months ago, and since then I've never had the time to look over it.'

Judi said nothing; she guessed that, at the time of the launching, Vidas had already received his sentence from the doctors, and it was conceivable that he would have little or no interest in any additions to his shipping fleet.

All the public rooms and cabins were air-conditioned; there were two swimming-pools and two night clubs, a huge ballroom and a cinema. There were several lounges, in one of which an orchestra would play while tea was being served under palms and other exotic plants growing in massive pots.

Lunch was served in a spacious dining-room where Judi and her husband and father had a table by the window. They would be taking dinner with the captain, Vidas had said, laughing at the rather awed look that spread over his wife's face.

'He won't eat you, my love. I'll see to that.'

'Where do we dock first?' Bill was asking much later when they were sitting with the captain watching the dancers on the ballroom floor.

'Serifos; we'll be there tomorrow.' The captain, George Halatis, answered him. 'You have visited any Greek islands before?'

Bill shook his head.

'As a matter of fact, this is the first time I've been away from my own country.'

George and Vidas exchanged glances; Judi wondered if the captain were considering it strange that he should have married a girl whose father obviously had not two pence to rub together. She also wondered if George - or any other of Vidas's friends and associates - knew of the disease that was so soon to prove fatal. She did not think so; Vidas was not the man to confide his private affairs to others. Who were his friends? Up till now she and he had lived quite alone, desiring no one else to share their lives, but she felt sure that, somewhere, there were men whom Vidas could call his friends.

True, he had appeared a lonely man when first she had got to know him, but this was, she felt sure, a result of what the doctors had told him. Prior to that he would have friends with whom he passed his leisure time. On learning of his fate he would naturally withdraw - at least, thought Judi, that was what she herself would have done, and so she could quite easily imagine her husband doing the same.

'You'll like Serifos,' George assured Bill, smiling the smile which charmed all the females on board, whatever their ages happened to be. Vidas later told her that all captains of these cruise ships had to be handsome; it was a very important part of the tourist attraction. On some islands he could mention, Vidas had continued with a teasing smile, lovers were even provided for the women from the Scandinavian countries where the men were notoriously cold.

'Lovers?' blinked Judi, disbelieving. 'You're not serious.'

'Greece, my dear, is the most love-conscious country in the world. Greece also desperately needs tourists. Add the two together and there evolves a sort of "lover" service. I believe the name given to these handsome youths whose business it is to keep the ladies happy is "parrot boys". This is because they all follow the same pattern in their method of approach. They appear on the beaches in their scantiest attire and parade before the fair Scandinavian beauties. Then they take the ladies home.'

'It sounds revolting!'

Vidas had only laughed at Judi's outraged expression, telling her she had been so sheltered in her tiny West Country village that she was practically ignorant of what went on in the world, but then he added, his expression a mingling of gravity and thankfulness,

'But stay as you are, my dear innocent little wife, because this is the way I found you, and this is the way I want you to be, always.'

Always... . The one word had seemed to wrench the very heart right out of her. For it was abundantly clear that even though he knew he would not be with her, he wanted her to remain just as she was.

'What is the meaning of that faraway expression?' Vidas's quiet voice brought her from her reverie and she laughed and said that she was miles away. 'Where?' he then asked, noting that the captain and Bill were talking together. 'Where were you straying without your husband? I demand to know.'

'I wasn't without my husband,' she almost whispered. 'I was thinking about those lovers—'

'Good heavens, why?'

'Which islands are they on?' she wanted to know, but her husband shook his head. 'Oh, please!'

'All right, then, Rhodes is one.'

'Lovely Rhodes? What a shame!'

Vidas laughed, and as this brought attention to himself he and Judi could no longer continue their own little private conversation.

'Tell me about Serifos, Captain.' Judi was shy all at once as she put the question to the captain. 'Is it a rocky island? I understand from Vidas that most of the Greek islands are rocky.'

'That's quite true.' A smile for her and a request to call him George, and then he continued, 'Serifos has two high rocky mountains and deep ravines, but it also has very fertile plains and, like all the islands, lovely beaches where one can swim and fish.' George talked a little more about the island, but then he got up and asked Judi to dance. Everyone looked, as they always did when the captain danced, but in spite of not having gone out a great deal, Judi was in fact a very good dancer, having been taught from an early age by her own father. At fourteen she won a medal for her dancing and another a year later. George remarked on it and she flushed at the praise. Vidas pretended to be jealous when, on their return to the table, he rose and took his wife into his arms.

'What flattery was George pouring into your ears to bring about that blush?' he demanded with mock sternness.

'He told me I was an excellent dancer, and so light he might have been holding a doll.'

'He did, did he? Always was a flatterer. I shall see he doesn't dance with you again.'

But of course he did not mean it and George and Judi danced together a couple more times during the evening. Bill also danced with her, and this she thoroughly enjoyed, simply because he was also enjoying it.

'I feel almost young again,' he said as they danced.

'You are young. Really, Father, I do wish you wouldn't act as if you were approaching your dotage. You're in the prime of life for a man.'

'I should be, perhaps, but one is influenced by circumstances, and by the conditions under which one lives. Alice has made an old man of me.'

She hesitated a moment.

'There's no hope for an improvement?'

'None at all, Judi. No two people are less suited temperamentally than Alice and I.' Something in the way he said that made it easy to voice what she had intended to, before the hesitation, but which she had held back, amending it to the question about hope.

'You — you're considering a separation?'

After a brief pause he nodded.

'Yes, Judi. As you yourself have said, we're both young—' He broke off and a thin smile broke. 'In years I'm young and so is Alice. This life could continue for many more years, but I don't intend it to. Already I've hinted to Alice that I've had enough.' Again he paused, glancing down into her

troubled face and waiting for some comment. She just shook her head dumbly; for the first time bitterness swept through her as she reflected on the fact of fate handing out to her husband and herself the perfect marriage, and yet rationing them to a transient happiness, while her father and stepmother had before them many years, years which could have been spent in the full enjoyment of each other's love. It was all so wrong, so unfair . . . and yet had not Vidas been ill he would never have come to England to find the girl who had saved his nephew's life. He would have continued his bachelor existence until, one day, he met the girl whom he desired to marry. 'Alice said very little,' Bill continued when he saw that Judi was not intending to speak, 'and I'm very sure that she also would welcome a separation. The only problem is the cottage. She'll never leave it willingly, and I shall certainly not move out and leave her in possession.'

'So it's stalemate.' Judi glanced up quickly. 'How are you to solve the problem?' Strangely, the fact that she herself would be in a position to provide her stepmother with a house totally escaped her attention, and naturally her father made no reference to it. He would sell the cottage, if necessary, he vowed, and although Alice could remain in the cottage, she would have to pay rent to the new owner, while he, Bill, could establish himself with the money obtained from the sale of the house. 'But you adore the cottage - and you'd never get anything with the same lovely views and the peace and quiet which we always said was so wonderful.'

'The peace and quiet no longer exist,' he stated significantly. 'No, Judy, I shall not stay at the cottage.'

She bit her lip, frowning at his words. But the music stopped and no more was said on the matter; nor was it mentioned later, since no further opportunity arose for Judi and her father to talk in private. In addition Bill seemed, as the cruise progressed, to lose his dejection altogether, and he even assumed a most lighthearted and happy manner when, after being introduced by the captain to a Mrs. Brookes who was travelling alone, and whose husband had been a friend of the captain, he found that she was more than willing to join him and his daughter and son-in-law, making a foursome who were to remain together for the rest of the cruise.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER leaving Serifos, with its attractive harbour backed by the most delightful old mansions and smaller island villas set in gardens deep with flowers and shrubs, the ship sailed tranquilly on to Naxos, where, as they entered the harbour, the impression was one of whiteness flooded with blue - the vivid blue of sea and sky, and the whiteness of houses straggling the hillsides and of the marble gateway of an ancient temple standing on the islet of Palatia.

'What a delightful scene!' It was Bill who spoke; he and his three companions were standing by the rail as the ship slowly approached the harbour.

'Ariadne's Isle,' murmured Vidas, glancing oddly at his father-in-law, who was standing more than ordinarily close to Mrs. Brookes, whom he was already calling Gillian. 'This is where - according to legend - Theseus abandoned Ariadne after spending the night with her.'

'Oh. .. .' Judi turned swiftly and in so doing came against her husband's shoulder with her cheek. In a flash he had kissed her and she blushed and lowered her lashes and tried to collect herself so that she could continue with what she was saying. 'Did he leave her - after she had saved his life by leading him out of the Labyrinth?'

Vidas tilted his head in a gesture of teasing admonition.

'You don't know your Greek mythology, that's for sure.'

'No,' she confessed, shaking her head. 'I ought to read about it - but you can tell me instead,' she added with a touch of mischief in her voice. 'It will be so much easier for me that way.'

'Lazy child! Well then, yes, Theseus did leave the beautiful Ariadne, sailing away and taking not the slightest notice that she was weeping, and tearing her veil to shreds in her anguish.'

'Horrid man!'

'But you need not pine over Ariadne,' he said with a growing smile of amusement at his wife's expression. 'She very soon found consolation with the handsome god Dionysus, who married her and gave her a crown of stars. And so, you see, the story does have a happy ending after all.' His glance strayed again; Bill and Gillian were talking together and obviously had not heard the legend of Theseus and Ariadne.

'I hope,' Judi was saying a short while later as they all strolled about the harbour town, with Bill and Gillian lingering a long way behind, 'that Father is not going to complicate his life further by an involvement with Mrs. Brookes.'

'They are certainly attracted to one another,' Vidas commented rather anxiously. 'I should hate your father to be unhappy by having met someone to whom he could become attached, and then having to say good-bye to her at the end of the cruise.'

'She's nice, don't you think?' mused Judi, comparing her with Alice. Gillian was small and slim with greying hair which was short and inclined to be curly. Her round face was small, with well-defined character lines and a clear smooth skin. She was forty-one and had been a widow for almost three years. Her home was in Northampton - which after all was not too far for Bill to visit her sometimes, but Judi felt he would not do that while he was still living with Alice, however strained their relationship might be.

'She's charming,' agreed Vidas, and added after a pause, 'I wonder if your father has told her that he's married.'

'I don't think so.' She hesitated. 'Vidas, Father was saying that he's thinking of leaving my stepmother.'

'He is?' A long moment of silence ensued. 'He's considering divorce?'

'I have an idea he has that in mind, although he didn't say so. He merely spoke of a separation, but that sort of situation is not very satisfactory, is it, Vidas?'

He frowned heavily.

'In Greece we don't favour divorce, Judi. Marriage here is still sacred and when entering upon it we know it is for always—' He broke off with such knife-edged abruptness that she actually started ... but then a slight shiver ran through her and the muscles round her heart contracted. She knew what he had been about to say in continuation of that sentence '—till death us do part. ...'

She suddenly thought, 'I don't even know properly what's wrong with him, or whether he'll be in pain at the end, and I can't ask him.'

Aloud she said,

'Yes, I know about how the Greeks look upon marriage, but if a couple are dreadfully unhappy, do you feel that they should still stay together?'

For a long while Vidas considered this; at length he said,

'It's too difficult a question for me to answer, darling, being so perfectly happy myself.' And his arm slid lovingly around her, bringing her close. She was small beside him, with her head against his shoulder, and her hand touching his as it rested on her waist, warm and tender and strong.

She sighed, and happiness flooded over her. She was lucky, because she had known the rare and sweet fulfilment that so many strive for but which so very few attain.

It had been agreed that after a stroll around the town they would take a taxi and tour the island - or as much as time would allow before the ship sailed away, heading for yet another island. So Vidas and Judi stopped, waiting for the other couple to join them.

'Are we hiring the taxi?' he asked, half suspecting that they might want to go off somewhere on their own. But both Bill and Gillian were eager to do some exploring, and so the original arrangement was followed, and after traversing narrow streets where balconies and patios spilled exotic flowers from brown earthenware pots, the taxi took them through lovely green countryside, where the roads were lined with agave and oleanders, and the hills were terraced for the cultivation of the vine and olive. Reaching

Apollona, the taxi driver stopped and they were guided along a path cut through the forest of cypress trees and eventually came to an abandoned quarry not used since ancient times.

'Here you have *homos*' The taxi driver indicated a massive stone figure lying among the trees. The colossus had never been finished, but had most certainly been carved in the marble quarry close by. Over thirty feet long, the figure was covered in parts with lichen; its face was weathered, but other parts of the body were starkly outlined.

Awed, not by the size or the fact of its lying there, forgotten, neglected by the archaeologists, unwanted by any museum, but by the loneliness of the figure, Judi stared and stared, unable to comment or to move. The glade itself seemed enveloped in a sort of haunting mystery. Time. . . . What was time? Who, so long ago when the gods ruled with pagan arrogance, had carved this gigantic figure? And who - or what - was the sleeping figure? - a humanized god, perhaps, or a deified athlete?

Judi sighed at last, and turned to look up at her husband.

'It's . . . sad,' she murmured. 'How long has he been lying there, I wonder?'

Vidas was gazing down into the growth of vegetation among which the colossus lay.

'The pose - with the arms straight and the body rigid - is suggestive of Egyptian influence. I should say this was carved somewhere about six hundred B.C. all *kouroi* of that period have this lack of movement.'

'Six hundred B.C.' Bill shook his head as if trying to grasp the fact of this figure lying here all that time. 'Egyptian, you say?'

'This was carved here—' Vidas made a gesture indicating the quarry. 'But the Greeks at that time were trading with the Egyptians, and were, naturally, influenced by them.'

'Have you any idea who it could be?' No sooner had she asked the question than Judi realized how ridiculous it was. However, Vidas did not seem to think so as he answered,

'Many *kouroi* were identified with Apollo, but some were of athletes.' He paused and gazed down again. 'The dimensions again give us a clue to the period,' he said musingly. 'Later, we have the figures approaching human size.'

'And movement develops?'

'That's right. It's a fascinating subject, the development of Greek art. The Ionians came, teaching the Athenians to use Cycladic marble rather than the yellow porous limestones of Piraeus which they had been using. The Ionians also taught the Athenians how to carve statues in sections and then put them together.'

'So when we get statues in sections,' said Bill, 'we know they are later than, say, this one.'

Vidas nodded, glancing at the taxi-driver who was standing a small distance away, looking decidedly bored as he twirled his worry beads and then let them fall, one by one, so that they produced a clicking sound that set Judi wondering how on earth his wife could put up with it. She smiled at her thoughts; the man had not said he had a wife. He might be single for all she knew. But as she listened, with the clicking appearing to be getting louder with every bead that dropped to join the others, she felt exceedingly glad that her husband did not use these worry beads.

More of the island was explored, then Bill and Gillian wanted to shop for souvenirs, so Judi and Vidas crossed the breakwater to where the white marble gateway stood, all that was left of some mighty temple, but now leading to nowhere at all. The tiny islet, no more than a hill in the sea, had been the very spot on which Dionysus had found the weeping Ariadne after she had been deserted by her lover.

Judi and Vidas sat down on a piece of fallen masonry, part of the temple that had long since disappeared. They had the islet to themselves and all was still and quiet, with the sun blazing down from a clear periwinkle sky.

'How perfectly peaceful it all is.' Judi found herself whispering the words and a soft laugh escaped her husband's lips. How strong and well he looked, she thought, vitality and vigour portrayed in every line of his body - in the muscled brown forearms and the wide expanse of his back, in the high straight shoulders and the proud way in which his head was set, in the fine character lines of his face, and even in the expression of firmness and resolution in his grey metallic eyes. But there was an odd sort of tenseness in the extended lower lip; it moved, faintly and yet spasmodically, and with an overwhelming access of love and compassion she entwined her arm in his and twisted her face to kiss him on the cheek. The smile she knew so well appeared at once; she was in his arms the next moment and his kisses warmed her eager lips as they had so often done before.

'Come, my sweet,' he urged at length. 'We don't want the ship to have to wait for us.'

A faint breeze rose as they left the harbour, stirring the indigo sea and setting the foliage of the trees fluttering against the sky. Small fishing craft bobbed about in the sunshine; their smiling owners waved to the departing tourists as they stood by the ship's rail and watched the harbour receding in the lengthening distance, the shimmering white villas diminishing to dolls' houses and the backcloth of heights taking on the shape of mere hills, vague in outline and grey in colour.

All too soon the cruise ended, and so did the rest of Bill's holiday. On the last day, just before they all set out for the airport, he confided in Judi that he liked Gillian a lot, and that on saying good-bye to her he had made a promise to get in touch again when he got home.

'It'll cause further complications,' Judi said, and her husband nodded automatically in agreement. He was driving the car, with his father-in-law sitting beside him.

'I suppose so, but life is full of complications anyway. And at least this is something pleasant in my life.' As he was not at all loath to talk before Vidas, it was his son-in-law who asked if he had told Gillian that he was married. 'I did, yes, Vidas. There was nothing to be gained by putting off the information; she was bound to know soon.'

'If it's your intention to continue seeing her, yes, I suppose she would have had to know.'

'It is my intention to continue seeing her.' Quiet tones, but resolute. Judi thought of Alice, and the opportunity she had had of a happy marriage. It looked certain that she was soon to be on her own again - on her own because of her stupidity, for even now Judi could not bring herself to believe her stepmother was wicked. She was just so irritable and bad-tempered that to live with her was sheer misery.

The good-bye was a little sad, but both father and daughter promised to continue writing regularly. A short while earlier, on the pretext of helping him to pack, Judi had managed to have a fairly long conversation with her father. They had talked of her position, with Bill expressing amazement that she could appear so happy. She had no alternative, she reminded him, as she was not supposed to be in possession of the knowledge of her husband's end being near.

'In any case,' she had continued, 'these months are far too precious to spoil by looking into the future.' Nevertheless, her voice broke and she was for a moment engulfed in black despair. But it passed, and she again entered into that strange haven where only the present mattered, a haven from where the future could not very clearly be viewed. Her fears had even vanished, as she had her plan ready, should Hannah's letter fall into her hands. Should it not fall into her hands then all was lost. But, ready as she was to fight for Vidas's happiness, Judi refused even to contemplate failure. She would be so vigilant, and so clever, that she would not miss that letter when it arrived - and any others which her stepsister might send. Not that it was very likely that she would send any more, not after the reply she would receive to the first....

'Whatever you do, Father,' she had finally emphasized as, the packing finished, they prepared to join Vidas on the terrace, 'you must sound convincing when you tell Hannah that you can't give her my address in the north of England because I've firmly expressed that I'm finished both with her and her mother. It's very fortunate indeed that Alice never asked for my address, otherwise it could have been awkward for you. As things are at present between you she won't want my address, but Hannah might ask you for it.' At first it had never for one moment crossed Judi's mind that Alice would ask for her address, but, later, she had wondered if in a softer moment Alice might just wish to send some small communication. Had this been the case, as Judi had just declared, it would have put her father in a most awkward position.

'Personally, I don't think Hannah will want to get in touch with you,' Bill said after a frowning, thoughtful hesitation. 'However, you can rely on me to sound convincing, should she happen to want your address.' He looked at Judi. 'She'll never suspect, if that's what you're thinking,' he said reassuringly. 'Neither Hannah nor her mother would believe you had the nerve to do what you have done.'

She smiled at that. It had not really taken much nerve, she recollected. Marrying Vidas had been so simple an operation; it was like taking part in some event which had been preordained; this had struck her at the time, she remembered.

'Well, here we are.' Her reverie was broken as Vidas spoke. 'We're home, my love, and you've been daydreaming all the way from the airport.'

She turned to him.

'You should have talked to me.'

'I didn't want to talk, strangely. I felt sad about your father. He looked rather lonely and a little lost, getting on that plane, all by himself.'

'Yes, I thought so too. But he thoroughly enjoyed his holiday,' she added in tones edged with gratitude. 'It was so very kind of you to make it so memorable for him. He was worried about paying for the cruise, but I told

him he could scarcely offer to pay when it was his son-in-law's ship. In any case,' she added almost in- audibly, 'he hadn't the money to pay.'

'I wanted to make good his air fare,' confided her husband, but went on to say that it was so indelicate a matter that he could not even broach the subject. 'But if I give it to you perhaps you can let him have it?'

'I have sufficient, darling,' she assured him with a smile. 'And I've told Father that he must accept it.'

'Good girl. That at least is one worry off my mind.'

Judi often wondered during the days that passed after her father's visit if Vidas considered it strange that she should have begun going downstairs a few minutes before him. They had always gone down together, but now she had to be before him, in order to examine the mail which Leda or her husband invariably left on the table in the hall. Vidas made no comment and it would appear that he thought nothing of this change of habit, but Judi herself felt a slight hurt at what she was forced to do; coming downstairs together was part of that routine which was giving them both so much happiness. They were never away from each other if they could be together. Of necessity Vidas had to work in private occasionally, but apart from that he and Judi were always together.

When at last Hannah's letter did arrive Judi could only stare at it, fascinated, and quite unable to pick it up. It was almost as if, despite the certainty that it must come, she had subconsciously decided that it would not. Slowly, reluctantly, she did at last take hold of it, gazing at the handwriting as if it were a threat in itself . . . a threat of danger.

Yet Judi was perfectly cool and self-possessed when a few moments later she was handing Vidas his mail as he came downstairs.

And she was perfectly cool and self-possessed when, having her husband's study to herself while he was taking a bath, she sat down at the typewriter and wrote out a letter on the paper bearing Vidas's signature. No girl, she decided on reading through it, would bother any more after receiving a letter like this. The envelope typed, Judi slipped the letter into it.

Posting it was not difficult; Judi had usually managed to drop her letters to her father into a box without Vidas getting a glimpse of the handwriting and when they went to the beach in the car later that day she asked him to stop so that she could post the letter to her stepsister. He never commented, taking it for granted that it was being sent to her father.

Despite her conviction that Hannah would not trouble to write any more Judi kept up her vigilance for another three weeks. At the end of that time she felt secure. Her plan had worked. Vidas was safe from hurt, and so was she.

How was Hannah feeling? she wondered, then dismissed her stepsister from her mind. She knew neither guilt nor remorse at her action in taking the letter and replying to it in the only way which would serve her purpose. Vidas was her husband and she had vowed to protect him from hurt; she had protected him, and her only emotion was one of triumph at her success.

The next fortnight passed in tranquil sublimity. They spent their days swimming and sunbathing, in eating delicious meals in cafes or at home, in strolling along the tree-shaded lanes, their fingers entwined. Sometimes she would look carefully at her husband's face, wondering, with a fearful dread rising within her, whether she would soon detect a difference in him. 'I can't bear it,' she would then whisper fiercely to herself. 'If he should suffer - I couldn't bear to see him in pain.'

Would he tell her before the end? She had asked herself this question once before and had at that time felt sure that he would not. But now, she couldn't imagine how he could keep silent - not if he became ill and had to take to his bed.

'Sweetheart,' he said one day when, these thoughts having refused to be dismissed, no matter how she tried to resume her lighthearted manner, she felt her face go white, 'what on earth's the matter? You look quite ill?' His concern pulled her up with a jerk and she managed to assume a happier front.

'It was nothing, darling.'

'You were deep in thought. Your father?'

She nodded, glad of his assumption. But she did not voice a lie, and as she succeeded in preserving her happier mood her husband did not pursue the matter, much to her relief.

The following day Vidas told her he would have to work for about three hours, saying, as he anticipated her request that she should work with him, that he had to be alone.

'Sorry, pet, but you do understand. There is nothing you can do to help, and I shall concentrate much better without the distraction of my lovely wife.'

She smiled and colour rose to tint her cheeks.

'I understand, darling - but all the same, three hours is a very long time.'

'It's only for two days - today and tomorrow, and then I think we can have the rest of the week together.'

She sat in the garden, trying to read, but the book was at last dropped on to the grass beside her chair. And at the same moment Leda appeared, acting most furtively as she glanced around her on her way to the place where Judi sat.

'Mrs. Vidas,' she whispered, 'there is a lady here - she came in taxi to the front door and ask for Mr.

Vidas. But I think it strange when she give me her name, because it Judi Langham, and I know this your name before you marry - the Langham, I mean - because I see the name two - three times, on papers which you throw into waste-paper basket. And also *I feel* this lady bad - oh, much bad - in the eyes, you know! I see this— Madam, are you ill?'

How she managed to get to her feet Judi never knew, for her legs seemed ready to give way any minute. She did know she was white, and that her heart was thumping madly against her ribs.

'This lady, where is she?'

'I not put her in the sitting-room, Mrs. Vidas, but in the saloon, which is away from Mr. Vidas's study. I say to myself that I tell you first, because I have this *feel*—" Breaking off, Leda pressed a hand to her heart. 'Here, Mrs. Vidas - oh, very much I feel it is bad that this lady here, so that is why I say to myself that I tell you first.'

'Thank you, Leda. . . .' A small respite, but what good could it do? Unsteadily Judi walked towards the house, entering by the front door and pausing a long while outside the door of the saloon. How did one greet the girl whose husband one had deliberately stolen? - for that was what it amounted to. At last she opened the door and stood there, waiting for her stepsister's start of surprise and her bewildered exclamation of inquiry. But instead, the surprise was Judi's, as Hannah merely looked at her through hard and narrowed eyes, her mouth compressed, but the muscles at the sides of it working spasmodically. With a flash of perception Judi knew that, somehow, Hannah was in possession of the truth.

'Hannah, I-'

'Where,' interrupted her stepsister in soft yet frightening tones, 'is Vidas?'

Judi moistened her lips, wondering why her father had not warned her. A few simple words in his letter would have sufficed, 'I hear that Miss Smith - remember her? - is going to Greece.' He could have been sure that, should Vidas read this, Judi would quite easily been able to invent some feasible explanation of his words. But perhaps Bill was in ignorance of Hannah's intentions.

'You aren't surprised at seeing me here,' began Judi, playing for time as she endeavoured to collect herself and recover from this shock.

'Surprised! No, I'm not surprised,' viciously as Hannah's teeth snapped together. 'But I didn't come here to see you. Where is Vidas .. . your husband?' The last word was practically spat out and Judi, who had come into the centre of the room, took an involuntary step backwards.

'Vidas is working, Hannah, and can't be disturbed—' She broke off, her throat so blocked that she could scarcely get the words out. 'I must speak to you about him. You see, we love each other—'

'Love!' A harsh laugh, devoid of all humour, rang through the room and Judi took a fearful look at the door. 'Love! I like that!' Black hatred mingled with the undisguised frustration in Hannah's face. 'Did you honestly believe you could carry off such a fraud? You knew full well that I intended marrying Vidas when I came-back. But I supposed you planned to get all you could out of him while the going was good, then run out just before I returned to England. Was that it?'

Judi swallowed, but let that pass as she said,

'How did you discover that I was married to Vidas?'

'You have your father to thank for the exposure that's coming to you—'

'My father?'

'He isn't very clever - nor are you, for that matter. A couple of novices trying to get away with such a conspiracy—' Another harsh and humourless laugh and then, 'Yes, Judi, you have him to thank. I asked him to change me a pound note and in my change I later found a foreign coin ... a Greek coin.' A couple of steps reduced the distance between her and Judi who, white and trembling, tried to move backwards, but found her legs refused to function. 'Of course, your father might himself have had the coin passed on to him, but somehow I didn't think so. He'd been away for ten days, Mother had told me, ten days during which she had received not a line from him, not a postcard saying he'd arrived or that he was enjoying his visit to his daughter ... in the north of England.'

A slanting, invidious look and another advancing step towards Judi, who was standing frozen to the spot, appalled yet fascinated by Hannah's expression and even in this dire situation sparing herself a moment of thankfulness that her beloved Vidas was not married to this woman. 'Your father had acquired a tan one doesn't associate with our climate, a fine tan - in a mere ten days. Added to this was the incident of my mother having a

little grumble, saying your father prowled around when she was out. She said he'd been in the drawer where she kept my letters; she knew this because a couple of bills which she had dropped on top of my letters had been pushed to one side. All these incidents added up to something significant, and I suddenly realized that there was also something phoney about the letter I had received from Vidas. Fortunately I had kept it and I brought it out again. Typed. Would Vidas type a letter to the girl to whom he had expressed such gratitude over the rescuing of his nephew from drowning? Only when I gave the matter a great deal more thought did it occur to me that to type a letter was completely out of character - judging that character by the previous letters I had received. Then the wording—'

She stopped and her mouth twisted in a sneer. 'Yes, you might well tremble, but what you're going through now is nothing to what's coming to you when I see Vidas and tell him how he's been fooled, by both you and your father. How much is Bill getting out of it, by the way? A commission or a percentage?' Judi flinched, but no words passed through her quivering lips and Hannah continued, 'As I was saying about the wording of that letter — but you remember it, don't you, Judi, because you wrote it?'

Still the silence on Judi's part. Without the least difficulty she recaptured the contents of the letter she had sent, deliberately inserting a curtness into it in order to put Hannah off once and for all, but now realizing her mistake.

'I want to talk to you about Vidas,' she began at last, but was immediately interrupted as Hannah herself spoke of the contents of the letter.

'Vidas was now married, and I would understand that further correspondence between him and me was both impossible and unnecessary. Married! How very strange, I suddenly thought. Married already. .. .' Hannah took yet another step which this time brought her sufficiently close for her to put her face right up to that of her stepsister. 'Married so quickly ... to whom, I began to wonder, having been fobbed off by your father when I asked him for your address in the north of England. There was also in the letter another thank you for what I had done, but the whole thing was too abrupt, too offhand for a man who had several times expressed his gratitude. In a flash I saw it all - saw that Vidas must have come to England, that your father had come over here to warn you because he could scarcely put it all in

a letter which Vidas might read. I made it my business to find out if you were married—' She broke off and fury blazed from her eyes. 'I knew you wouldn't go to Bridport to be married, so I made my inquiries further afield. But I didn't tell your father what I had discovered - oh, no. I wasn't having you warned a second time! I expect you forged the signature on that letter, as you must have done when you got married.'

Dazedly Judi shook her head, not troubling to explain about the signature when so much else was occupying her mind. Hannah had put the pieces together with amazing accuracy - and all from the unconscious action of Bill in passing her a Greek coin. Undoubtedly Hannah was clever, far more clever than either Judi or her father.

'Where is he?' The soft inquiry cut into Judi's thoughts and she gave a slight start. 'You say he's working and can't be disturbed, but if you don't fetch him at once then I shall go out into that corridor and call him. I presume he'll hear me.'

Managing at least to move away from her stepsister, Judi put half the length of the room between them before saying, her accents low and pleading,

'Don't act yet, Hannah, not until I've explained several things. Do you know why Vidas wanted to marry you? If you remember we both felt there was some mystery regarding the reason for the proposal?'

'Yes.' Momentarily Hannah's attention was arrested. 'Why did he want to marry me?'

Judi swallowed convulsively.

'He had only six months to live, and he wished to leave you his money—'

'Six months!' Hannah stared. 'How did you discover that? Did he tell you?' She seemed a trifle dazed now, on hearing this news. Judi wondered if she were trying to visualize what Vidas looked like, and whether his appearance portrayed evidence of his illness.

'No, Vidas didn't tell me. . . .' Judi continued speaking for some time, putting Hannah in possession of all the facts, even telling her again that she and Vidas were deeply in love with one another, and reminding her that Vidas now had only a few weeks left to him.

'When Father came with the news that you were returning to England and that it was your intention to contact Vidas,' Judi continued when Hannah, still a trifle dazed but clearly seething with fury as well, remained distantly silent, 'I vowed to go to any lengths to protect my husband from hurt, and when the idea of writing to you came to me I carried out that idea.' Judi went on, this time pleading with Hannah to go away, to keep silent, and she, Judi, would make over to her the entire fortune which Vidas would leave his wife. 'I know it's yours by rights,' Judi admitted, her eyes wide and honest as they looked into the hard eyes of her stepsister. 'You can trust me, Hannah. The money is rightly yours, because you are the one Vidas wanted to marry, and so you shall have it - all of it.' She stopped, horrified to see that her last words, the promise made in all sincerity, had fallen on deaf ears. Crimson with fury, Hannah seemed to be on the border of hysteria as for a moment she moved about, seething with rage.

'Six months! Six months only to live! If only I'd known before I went away! Six months and then I'd have had his fortune. Why didn't David tell me? Why - why!' She was talking to herself and Judi could only watch in frightened silence, and wait for the storm to abate so that she could continue with her pleading. 'Why did David tell you instead? Oh, I could kill him! Putting you in possession of information like that! I hate him! And I hate you—!'

'Hannah,' Judi interrupted at last, 'it doesn't matter about the money. I don't want it. Haven't I just said it's really yours?'

'You don't want the money? You're trying to tell me you'll let me have it—?'

'*I am* telling you.'

Hannah's eyes narrowed and her mouth twisted into malevolent lines.

'You expect me to believe that? You love him so much that you're willing to give me his fortune in return for my silence? What sort of a fool do you take me for?' Her face was purple and her hands opened and closed with the fury that raged within her. 'Lost - all that money. Six months is all I'd have had to give up - six months! It doesn't bear thinking about!'

The last vestige of colour drained from Judi's face, but she was white with fury now, and she turned on Hannah, forgetting that only seconds ago she was willing to plead for her husband's happiness.

'How dare you speak like that - about my husband! Have you no feeling, no imagination? He's young, and strong, and you'd never dream he was ill. He knows he's going to die - and yet you can talk like this about money. You can have the money, I've tried to convince you of my sincerity. I love my husband and when he's gone from me nothing will matter any more. I shall be alive, but not living; I'll have no use for the money anyway— Oh, I'm not talking about it! It's yours, and all I ask is that you go away and leave us alone!' Realizing she was raising her voice, Judi cast another fear-ful glance at the door. 'Please go away,' she cried in anguished tones. 'I beg of you, if you have any feeling at all, *please* go away!'

A long silence ensued before Hannah said, crushing all her stepsister's hopes,

'If I could believe you I'd go away, but I don't believe you. No one would be fool enough to part with a fortune like that. You married him for the money— Oh yes, you did, so you needn't open your mouth to deny it. And your father aided and abetted you.' She stopped and the sudden narrowing of her eyes gave evidence of an idea having occurred to her. 'Get Vidas in here,' she ordered in curt authoritative tones. 'I'd rather have the promise from him than you. I'd rather know he'd changed his will. As you say, I'm the one he wanted to leave his money to, so there's no doubt at all that once he learns of your perfidy he'll waste no time at all in cutting you right out of his will.'

Judi felt sick at this manner of speaking about Vidas. How could anyone be so utterly mercenary, and so completely lacking in feeling?

'Hannah, please trust me,' she begged, adopting an imploring tone when she would much rather have preferred to follow her instinct and give Hannah a piece of her mind. 'I've told you the truth when I say we love one another. Vidas has been happy - very happy - since our marriage, and he's - he's not m-much time left. ...' Tears fell and she swept a hand across her cheeks. 'You can gain nothing by exposing me, as I've already promised to give you everything—'

'I don't trust you!' interrupted Hannah savagely. 'I'd not part with a fortune myself and I'm sure you wouldn't either. I'm seeing Vidas - and letting him know that it is I who rescued his nephew! Taking the credit for that! And you expect me to trust you? Not likely!' She walked to the door, but Judi caught at her arm.

'No, you shall not hurt my husband—' Judi got no further; she was pushed to one side and, reaching the door, Hannah flung it open. 'I beg of you, Hannah, I'll put it in writing, making a full confession. I'll do anything you ask, but please go away.' Her face was wet with tears, her whole body trembling. 'What can I say to make you understand?' Her voice was humble, her arms outstretched, but her stepsister remained unmoved as she said, one hand on the door,

'Trickery won't serve you now, Judi. All you want is for me to go off quietly and lie low until Vidas dies, then you'll tell me to go to the devil, that the fortune is yours.' She stopped, her expression changing to one of amazement as, casually dressed in white shirt and brown denims, and looking the picture of health, with his tan, and tall lithe figure, Vidas appeared in the doorway.

'Are - are you Vidas?' she stammered, unable to believe the evidence of her eyes. Clearly she had not expected to see anyone as attractive as he.

'Vidas,' said Judi, still very white but strangely composed now as a new strength seemed to be given her, 'this is my stepsister ... the girl who saved your nephew from drowning, the girl you wanted to marry,' and without even waiting to see what effect these words had on her husband she went past him and up to their bedroom.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE sunset breeze had died and the purple shades of evening dropped like a velvet curtain on the scent-filled garden and the olive groves terracing the hillsides. The villa, silhouetted against a tapestry of indistinct shapes and colours, stood out as lights flared from several of its windows. Judi and Vidas had been taking a pre-dinner stroll and as they reached the garden Vidas gave a little sigh.

'I love you,' Judi quivered on hearing it, but received no response from her husband. 'I wish I could make you believe that.'

He turned his dark head, to glance down at her from his great height. So well he seemed, even now, and Judi felt that he had more time than his doctors had given him.

'You will never make me believe it,' he told her, curtly but even now not harshly. 'I know why you married me and so do you. Let us continue in the light of that knowledge, without pretence on either side. By your own admission you thought only of the money at first-'

'At first, yes. I had to be honest when you asked me—' She broke off, blinking back the ready tears. The scene returned, filling her whole being with anguish. Vidas coming up to their room, asking her for a full explanation, and never a sign of anger— Oh, howmuch more bearable it would have been than the deep and bitter pain that edged his quiet voice and looked back at her from those attractive grey eyes. He had asked Judi if the money had ever come into it and, unable to lie, she had admitted that, just for a moment, she had thought of it. And he did not seem to hear the swift protest that followed as she tried to convince him that, within a very short space of time - seconds perhaps - she had forgotten all about it and had sensed the existence of something strong and compelling, that had drawn her irresistibly to him. 'I do love you, Vidas,' she cried, reaching for his hand, but he moved it out of her way. 'I do! You said yourself it was a miracle - our love! You said that and it's true!'

'You're kind to me, Judi, because that is your nature, but be honest, you have no real love for me.'

She stopped beside him as he opened the gate.

'If you can't tell,' she said in tones of tiredness and defeat, because she had tried so hard over the past two days to convince him of her love, 'then there's no more I can do.'

'If I can't tell,' he murmured to himself as they walked through the gate and he turned to fix the latch, 'If I can't tell. ...' He looked down into her face again, his gaze all-searching. 'How does one tell with a woman, Judi, especially a woman such as you who would, I'm sure, never deliberately be unkind?' His voice was tinged with bitterness; she knew that he was thinking it was pity she had given him, right from the start.

She opened her mouth to voice a protest, then closed it again. After all that had been said and, on her part, confessed, she felt there was no way of getting close to him again, of achieving the intimacy where he would automatically sense her deep love for him. She had been forced to make so many admissions - not only that about the money, but also she had had to admit to intercepting one of his letters, to admit to lying when she said she had spoiled the paper he had signed. She had been questioned about her father's visit, and the tears she had shed. Lies - so many lies she had been obliged to tell, and Vidas had learned all about them after Hannah's visit. It was no consolation to Judi that Vidas had sent Hannah away, reproving her for coming in the first place, as she knew she could do no good. He told her straight that he would have preferred to remain in ignorance of his wife's deceit, and this was understandable. But it made Judi weep bitter tears when she heard it from her husband later.

Dinner was a silent meal, and afterwards Vidas went to his study. Judi sat in the saloon, thinking and brooding, and cursing the fate that had sent Hannah back instead of keeping her away a little while longer.

That night, as she lay beside her husband, she could not sleep, and she did wonder if she would ever sleep again, for her mind was filled with torment - not just the torment of hurting her husband, but the torment of imagination as, with swift relentless progress, the wheels of time carried her on to the days of loneliness which loomed so terrifyingly ahead.

Vidas stirred against her, and in sleep forgetting all hurt and strife, he put a tender arm around her, and nestled close against her breast. She had been part of him, as always. . . and yet not really close. He accepted what she gave, accepted for desire and for the grasping of every precious moment, but a curtain seemed to hang between them. Scalding tears had fallen when at last Vidas had kissed her good night before settling down to sleep. And now, hours later, the pillow was still damp; she could feel it beneath her cheek.

The next day she and Vidas decided to climb to the summit of Mt. Pantocrator, and they set out early, driving eastwards to Spartilla, where they left the car and took to the path. On all previous occasions when- they had walked like this Vidas's hand would very soon find hers and he would keep it in his all the time. But today he made no such loving move and after a while she glanced up, to his hard profile, and a great shuddering sigh escaped her. For there was a detachment about him now and whenever he spoke his tone was smooth and almost impersonal. How could she convince him that what she felt - what she had felt right from the start - was love, and not pity? To such a man, resigned as he was to his fate, pity must be totally abhorrent.

They continued in silence, not the companionable silence of two people so deeply attached that words were unnecessary, but the silence of brooding on Vidas's part and on hers the silence of frustration at her inability to recapture the closeness that had been theirs. And with both it was the silence of a deep and lasting hurt. However, his gentleness remained and whenever it became necessary for him to assist her he did so with the old gallantry and charm of manner which she knew so well.

'What a lot of olive trees you have,' she murmured, as, stopping for a while, they both gazed around at the lovely vista of lush green cultivation.

'It's our boast that we have the best olive trees in all Greece. They are numerous because the Venetians, during their occupation of the island, gave money to anyone planting olive trees.'

'There's something - well, sort of sacred about them,' murmured Judi. 'They're such providers.'

'Indeed yes. And they are so long-lived. Look at those gnarled specimens over there.' As he spoke he raised a hand; his arm, bronzed and covered with fine dark hair, brushed her cheek. Vidas turned from his indication of the olive trees and glanced down into her wide adoring eyes. Surely he could see, she thought, almost fiercely willing him to do so. He shook his head, and the next moment she was in his arms and he held her very close as they stood there, in the enchanted isolation of the sun-drenched mountainside. A bird chirped and its wings fluttered; from somewhere in the distance a sheep-bell tinkled. 'My Judi,' he whispered in a hoarse and strangled voice which did not suit the strength of his personality at all, 'why did she have to come here? Why wasn't I left in ignorance?' He held her from him, retaining his gentle hold upon her arms, and his eyes searched her face, taking in every lovely detail - the high cheekbones and clear peach-bloom skin, fused with deeper colour at this moment as she fluttered a half smile, imploring him in silent whisper to accept that what she so freely gave to him was love. Her hair, so enchantingly flecked with auburn lights which captured sunbeams to add to their sheen and colour, was a little awry, the result of the frolicking breeze blowing in from the west. 'I was always so filled with gratitude for what she did in saving my young nephew, but now I hate her.' It was a quiet statement, lacking any sign of anger or vehemence. Judi thought: what a waste, for Hannah to come, believing she could cause a complete break between Vidas and the wife who had married him under false pretences. All she had done was rob Vidas of the complete happiness that would have been his right up to the end. 'Come,' said Vidas at last, dropping his hands from her arms, 'this climb takes about two hours. I hope you are feeling quite fit?'

She smiled and nodded.

'Of course,' and, risking a hurt if he should push her away, she slipped her hand into his. A profound moment passed; she felt his fingers stiffen and knew with growing dejection that she had done the wrong thing.

He truly believed it was pity which had prompted her action. And in this unshakeable belief he withdrew his hand from hers.

Judi blinked away the ready tears and she and Vidas walked on in silence again, until the summit was reached.

'Oh, Vidas,' Judi then exclaimed, 'what a fantastic view!'

He nodded, a faint relaxing of his firm mouth finding a response in her own swift smile.

'It is rather wonderful, isn't it?' The whole of the island could be seen, and across the misted blue waters the coast of Albania was easily discerned.

'What is that?' Judi wanted to know, pointing towards the east.

'Epirus, a mountainous region of Greece. There are many remote villages there; I think you'd like it.' No mention of going . . . but there was so little time left now. . . .

'We should have brought a picnic lunch,' Judi was saying a short while later as they began the descent. 'It would have been nice to have stayed up there a while.' Turning her head as she spoke, she took in the shape of the monastery crowning the summit, outlined against the vivid blue of the Ionian sky.

'Are you very hungry?' Concern now in his tone and she quickly shook her head.

'No, but I just thought that, had we brought something, we could have stayed up here as long as we liked.'

Vidas turned his head.

'You like the isolation?'

'You know I do.' When you are with me, she added, but silently.

'So do I.' He glanced around, then looked up at the sky. From here could be seen the stationary fair- weather cumulus clouds above the heights of Epirus; it was all so vast, the wide and spreading panorama of sea and sky and age-old mountains. So much to see, so much in the world to explore, Judi thought as she watched her husband's eyes moving, always moving, from one beautiful scene to another. So much to see and so little time. Was that what he was thinking? With a great surge of love she found herself

resisting an urge to hold him, to reach up and kiss him, to bring him away from whatever thoughts were occupying his mind. He had been so happy before Hannah's visit, living every minute of the life which was left to him. There had been no brooding, no resentment against fate. There was a sort of calm resignation about him, a resignation in which his innate strength was clearly portrayed. He had found perfect happiness at this late stage and he was filled with gratitude because of it. And now that happiness was gone; he was not entirely unhappy, she knew, but the perfection of their union was no more.

'We'll get a proper lunch when we reach the bottom,' Vidas said at last, reverting to what Judi had been saying previously. 'I know of a small restaurant, set in delightful gardens, where we can eat delicious fish and salads and one can also be sure of a variety of fresh fruits.'

The proprietor of the cafe, a smiling stocky Corfiot, brought out a menu card and while they studied it he busied himself with a white tea towel, flicking imaginary crumbs off an equally white tablecloth.

'We'll have fish, please, Spyros,' Vidas told him after consulting Judi. 'And the rest we shall leave to you.'

'Good; I give you excellent lunch!'

'Why are so many of your men called Spyros?' Judi wanted to know, her curious gaze following the man as he went inside the building. 'Everywhere we go we seem to find someone with the name.'

'In every household you will find a Spyros, because the patron saint of the island is St. Spyridon. Parents invariably wish to have a son called after the saint, and that is the very simple explanation of the numerous Spyroses we have here.' He lapsed into silence then and Judi spent a moment or two taking in her surroundings. As usual, the tables were outside the cafe building, and for shade the vine had been trained along an overhead trellis; it grew thickly and just a few bright rays of the sun were able to penetrate where a small gap occurred. Flowers abounded in the gardens surrounding the cafe. Bougainvillaeas grew up the sides of the building and up the thick supports of the verandahs. A pomegranate tree thrust its crimson blooms

towards the sunlight; oleanders flared, pink and dazzlingly white, and all along the far edge of the garden cypresses and lemon trees provided a darker green backcloth and also sheltered the garden from the breeze that blew in from the west. Perfumes filled the air and the incessant whirring of cicadas intruded into the deep hush that lay over the whole breathtaking scene.

'Tell me about St. Spyridon.' Judi spoke at last and her husband gave her his attention. How very handsome he was! So dark and arresting, with that prominent jawline and those grey metallic eyes. His forehead was smooth, unlined, his skin clear and taut. She found her heart turning over, as it invariably did when she gave him an examination such as this, which was quite often. As her thoughts inevitably brought the colour into her cheeks she saw her husband's straight brows lift a fraction in a gesture of interrogation. Judi averted her head and repeated her request to be told more about the island's patron saint.

'He was the bishop of Cyprus and never actually visited Corfu during his lifetime. But his body was eventually brought here from Constantinople, and many are the miracles attributed to him—'

'After he was dead,' interrupted Judi as if to remind Vidas of his mistake in saying the saint had never visited the island during his lifetime. To her surprise Vidas nodded and said yes, after he was dead.

'He was supposed to have saved the island from famine, put an end to a great plague which swept through Europe, and—' Vidas stopped and frowned in concentration. 'Now what else?' He looked at Judi as if for the answer and for the first time since Hannah's visit Judi saw the light of amusement enter his eyes. 'I have an idea he saved us from the Turks at one time - ah, yes. He brought about the defeat of the Turks. I remember now.'

'All these miracles after he was dead,' she frowned. 'The people don't really believe that, surely?'

'Most certainly they believe it, always have. And four times a year his body is brought out from the church and carried in a procession. His church is full of treasures given by people who have received the saint's help in some way or other.' Vidas's eyes were actually laughing at her expression of faint

disgust at the idea of the body, six hundred years old, being brought out and paraded round the town.

'It sounds absolutely revolting!' she exclaimed at last, and as Spyros was approaching with a loaded tray Vidas whispered a 'hush' to her before she allowed her indignation to reach lengths where the smiling Corfiot would be offended or even outraged. 'Do you believe in all these things?' she asked when the man had gone. Vidas shook his head firmly.

'Not I. Most people do, though. Make no mistake, Judi, the saints are of exceeding importance to the devout Greek people.' He went on to tell her how they kissed the icons in church, starting at one end of a long row and placing their lips to each one. With St. Spyridon, they actually kissed his feet, Vidas told her, adding swiftly as he noted her horrified expression, 'Only through the glass, though.' And Vidas laughed then, his eyes seeming for a fleeting second to hold all the old familiar tenderness she had known prior to her stepsister's visit, a tenderness mingled with amusement and a faintly teasing element. Judi laughed with him and for a while the day passed far more pleasantly than the previous one and she did begin to wonder if the harmony was to return to them and they were once more to reach that particular closeness which her husband had likened to a miracle. They went home after lunch, but only to collect their beach clothes, and the rest of the afternoon was spent in the sun, basking on the sandy beach or swimming in the clear warm water. A faint breeze blew in to create white-crested waves that rolled rhythmically towards the shore; the sapphire dome above was clear except for one lonely gold-tinted cirrus cloud spreading its wisps of lace across the eastern sky.

'Do you feel like some tea?' Vidas was lying on the sands, with his hands clasped behind his head and he turned as he put the question, his eyes running the full length of his wife's figure as she also lay there, adding further tan to her body as the sun poured down from the sky.

'That would be nice. Can we have it here, at the cafe?'

He nodded and they both rose to their feet. Picking up a towel, Vidas rubbed her hair. It was the gentle touch she knew so well and unable to resist the impulse she pressed her hand against his chest and, tiptoeing up, she kissed

him on the lips. He stiffened and dropped the towel on to the sand, taking up his beach robe and putting it on over his trunks. Swallowing the hurtful lump in her throat, Judi also donned her beach robe, then picked up the towel. She combed her hair and as Vidas held out a hand for the comb when she had finished with it she gave it to him, watching as he too combed his hair. Because it was wet it fell into waves which ended in half-curls. She saw him trying to straighten them, then he gave it up and handed the comb back to her.

And of course he did not take her hand as they strolled away to the cafe; on the contrary, he put some small distance between them, and although her heart yearned to close that distance, she knew instinctively that she dared not.

CHAPTER NINE

QUITE often now Vidas would remain in his study, and Judi would be left to amuse herself by reading on the patio or sunbathing in the garden, fretting on the lost days and hours; lost memories all, that she had hoped to treasure through the years, bringing incidents to mind over and over again until with the passing of time they would begin to fade and she would then find difficulty in recapturing them. But even when she was old there must still be the last fleeting glimpses of her husband and the love that had been theirs. But, with the visit of her stepsister, these last weeks lacked the wonderful glory of the earlier days and nights when she and Vidas even shared a bathroom because they could not bear to be parted, even for one moment.

She sighed, and stirred in her garden chair - then lifted her head, her eyes flickering and a puzzled frown settling on her forehead. What was wrong with Leda? she wondered, as the woman, having emerged from the french window of the sitting-room, was acting in a manner very reminiscent of that other occasion when she had come to tell her mistress that Hannah was here. She was coming towards Judi now, acting strangely as she kept glancing about her with a rather frightened expression in her eyes.

'Mrs. Vidas,' she whispered urgently, taking another swift glance around her, 'a gentleman give me a message for you, and he say I not to tell Mr. Vidas or my husband or anyone - but you.'

Judi blinked, then her gaze settled on the woman's face as she asked her to explain.

'I must give this message to you. This man is a doctor, he say, and he wants very urg - urg—?'

'Urgently?'

'That's right. He wants very urgently to see you. He say it to do with Mr. Vidas - and he give me two hundred drachmae to say this message to you. You not tell my husband - no! He take from me this money and I want it for my mother, who is old and—'

'I won't say anything to Spyros, Leda,' interrupted Judi in trembling tones. 'This doctor - where is he?'

'This paper....' From the folds of her black dress Leda produced a piece of paper. 'He write down this number and say you to telephone him. He say he not write note because I might lose—'

'His name, Leda,' Judi interrupted again. 'What is his name?'

'He say not give me because strange name and I forget anyway.' The paper changed hands; Judi's dazed eyes stared at the telephone number. Her trembling increased. A doctor ... What did it mean? 'He say to me that I tell you he good man so you not to be afraid. He look good man, Mrs. Vidas - have much white hair and lines on face that make him look good man/

'Where did you meet him?' quivered Judi, wondering if she looked as white as she felt. This doctor obviously knew of Vidas, but was not one of his own doctors, apparently. Why this secrecy - this unorthodox way of approach?

'I work every day in the *perivoli*, as you know, Mrs. Vidas, and this man, he pass one - two times and look at me. Then he go away, but come back and look one - two times again. Spyros in the *perivoli* also and this man wait till Spyros go in house, then he whisper to me, and say he give me two hundred drachmae if I give Mr. Vidas's wife the message and the paper.' Leda glanced round again. 'I go now, Mrs. Vidas, and you not say anything to my Spyros?'

'I've already promised, Leda. Thank you for giving me the message.'

The woman moved off, lacking the curiosity which would have been shown by her husband had he taken the message instead of her. This doctor obviously knew it would be safer to trust the woman rather than the man.

For a long moment Judi continued to stare at the paper in her hand, her heart racing. Was it possible—? Stemming these thoughts and hopes that were running amok in her mind, she went into the house and upstairs into a room used by Vidas before his marriage. But she looked long at the telephone on the bedside table before at last she took up the receiver.

Five minutes later she was sitting on the bed, trembling from head to foot, her forehead damp, her whole body clammy as emotions rioted. Hope . . . hope at this time when Vidas had only about five weeks to live. . . .

On all previous occasions when Vidas said he must work Judi had hated seeing him go to his study, but the following day she felt she could not wait. On pins, she repeatedly looked at her watch as, breakfast over, her husband made no move to go, but sat there, on the patio, looking at the garden and the view beyond, his grey eyes dreamy and terribly sad. He was brooding, she knew, was thinking of all this beauty he must so soon leave behind. She wanted to say, 'Dear Vidas, there is hope,' but she dared not, for Dr. Van Elden had insisted that she say nothing to her husband until he and she had had a talk together.

'Are - are you going to get your work done?' she just had to say at last, and Vidas's head jerked in surprise. She bit her lip and added swiftly, 'The sooner it's done the sooner you will come out to me.' He looked at her hard and long, but she felt convinced he did not doubt her sincerity. 'You did say yesterday that you would have to work every day this week.' She knew a brightness had come into her eyes, because of the time he spent away from her and because of the reason for this. No longer the desire to be with her every single minute of the day and night; no, he wanted to be alone, to think and to dwell on the words of Hannah's, words that had brought his wife crashing down from the high pedestal on which he had placed her.

'Yes, Judi, I did say that,' and without another word he left her, sitting on the patio, and soon disappeared into the house. After waiting a moment to see if he should come back Judi also entered the house, to collect a cardigan and her small handbag from the bedroom. A short while later she was hurrying to the crossroads where the doctor would be waiting with his car. It was there; she saw it from a fair way off and slackened her pace, a tinge of fear entering into her. Supposing this was not genuine? - that the man was a fraud? For one wild moment she saw herself kidnapped, with the consequent trouble and anxiety to which her husband would be subjected. But concern for Vidas was, naturally, uppermost in her mind and she began hurrying on again.

The man got out of the car as he saw her approaching and instantly she was reassured, reflecting swiftly on what Leda had said about him appearing to

be a good man. He stood by the car, waiting for her, with the door opened ready for her to get in. She noticed the shock of white hair and the thick eyebrows practically meeting on the bridge of his long aquiline nose. He looked benign and trustworthy; his smile dispensed with any vestige of doubt that might have lingered.

'Mrs. Theron,' he said when presently she had reached him, 'you must forgive this most unorthodox method I've chosen, but it is necessary, as you will soon agree. Will you get into the car and we can drive to a private place I know of?'

She made no move; she was unable to do so.

'Dr. Van Elden - my husband—' She broke off, breathless all at once and terribly afraid, afraid that, after all, there was no hope for Vidas. 'You s-said on the phone th-that you might be able to - to cure him.' The words were uttered at last, stammered out in accents which clearly told this doctor how much her husband meant to her. His pale blue eyes kindled as they looked into her face; she saw them soften, felt a gentle hand on her arm as she was urged into the car. 'If - if there is any chance at all, please tell me now—' To her consternation she burst into tears. 'I'm sorry. . . .' She was aware that he had entered the car, occupying the seat beside her. He pressed the button that set the engine purring.

'It's been too much for you, Mrs. Theron. You will find a tissue in the glove box there,' he went on to add practically. 'Let us get away from this main road, into a secluded place where we can talk.' He drove along in silence for a while and then, having dried her eyes, Judi said,

'What I don't understand is why you haven't approached my husband instead of me?'

'Because, Mrs. Theron, there is a decision to be made and I believe you are the one to make it.' Short the tone and edged with the merest hint of impatience. Sensing his reluctance to talk while driving Judi fell silent, dwelling on what had just been said. A decision? Surely if there was any hope at all then there could be only one decision, she thought, frowning. What a strange thing for the doctor to say!

Although experiencing the greatest difficulty in maintaining her silence she did manage to do so and presently the doctor turned off the road into a lane that was little more than a bridle path where, having found a clearing in an olive grove, he brought the car to a standstill. All was exceptionally quiet once the engine had been switched off and Judi turned to the doctor immediately, a question in her glance.

'Yes, you're impatient, and rightly so,' began the doctor. 'We shall talk, Mrs. Theron, but first of all let me clarify the position for you,' and he went on to explain that until five years ago he had practised in his native Holland, but then he and another doctor, a lifelong friend, had decided to devote a few years to one or two of the undeveloped islands of the Far East. They had chosen three islands, close to one another, and one of these was that on which Vidas had built and equipped a hospital.

'We made this one our headquarters, because of the very fine hospital in which we could work,' Dr. Van Elden went on. 'This disease which your husband contracted is rife on all these three islands, but at the time we were working we had no idea that your husband had contracted it. The very obscurity of the disease was a challenge and after a great deal of labour we at last found a drug with which we began to experiment. At last we had one success—' He broke off and, turning her head, Judi surprised the light of sheer triumph in the doctor's eyes before, within seconds, it died. 'We were, naturally, terribly excited because this was accepted as a killer disease; there was no cure.' He paused a moment and a deep frown knit his brow. 'The next native to be treated died; you can imagine how we felt. We treated many more natives, most of whom died.' He stopped once more and his frown deepened. He shook his head from side to side in a manner of sheer despair. Looking down at her tightly-clenched fists, Judi felt the cold dampness within them; her body also felt clammy and chill. On Dr. Van Elden's mentioning his success her hopes had broken away from the bonds she was trying strictly to impose on them; they had soared, carrying her away from the darkness into a sunlit future where her husband would be always at her side. But now... .

'You have treated a great number of people?' she managed to inquire at last, her throat painful as the muscles contracted.

'A great number,' briefly and followed by a deep and prolonged sigh.

'How how many successes have you had, doctor?'

'Three, Mrs. Theron,' he answered quietly.

'Out of how many?'

'Thirty-four natives have been treated with this drug.'

'Thirty-four.... And three lived.' She spoke to herself. It would seem that Vidas had less than a one-in-ten chance. White-faced and feeling as if her blood were freezing in her veins, she said,

'How did you come to hear about my husband?'

'From talk among the natives - but only a couple of weeks ago. Although we were working in your husband's hospital we had no idea that he had contracted the disease, but once we did discover this we acted without delay, as we realized that his time was running short. Briefly, Mrs. Theron, we set inquiries in motion, carried out by colleagues in Holland, who found out all there was to find out. They contacted your husband's doctors, but were told to leave the matter alone. Our successes were scarcely impressive; your husband had told his doctors, during telephone talks, that he was married to an angel—' The doctor paused and slanted Judi a glance as these words left his lips. She coloured, but asked him to continue with what he was saying. 'He was so happily married that his doctors considered he should be left to live out the rest of his time in this apparently idyllic state; they stressed that any interference would be cruel. We should merely be robbing both him and his wife of these six or seven weeks of happiness. From the inquiries we also learned that very few people, other than these two doctors, were aware of your husband's situation. He had tried to keep it a complete secret, but one or two of his business associates did get to know about it.'

Judi thought of David, and the information which he himself had been given by someone who knew a business associate of Vidas's.

'This decision—' Judi began, when Dr. Van Elden interrupted her.

'First of all, Mrs. Theron, I wonder if you yourself would like to confide in me? You're English . . . and also, there's something more in your eyes than sadness at your husband's plight. How did you come to meet him?'

She hesitated, then on a sudden impulse confided in him the whole story, from the very beginning to the very end - from the moment of having read the letter which Hannah allowed her to read, and which contained the proposal of marriage, to the moment of exposure by her stepsister, and its consequences in bringing about a rift between Vidas and his wife. As she talked Judi watched her companion's expression change from astonishment to compassion as she spoke of her great love for Vidas and of his for her. She ended by telling the doctor that she now could not convince Vidas that she loved him; he truly believed that what she felt for him was pity.

'What an amazing story!' exclaimed Dr. Van Elden when at last Judi fell silent. 'Vidas Theron married the wrong girl but instantly fell in love with her!'

'And she with him,' added Judi simply.

'Yes, indeed.' A small pause and then, 'And you actually went as far as to offer your stepsister everything in return for her silence?'

'The money was hers by rights,' Judi pointed out. 'She was the one Vidas would have married, had she been there when he came over to England. I impersonated her, remember.' But the doctor was shaking his head, and frowning a little. However, Judi was impatient for the real business to be discussed and she began fidgeting with her hands as the doctor mused on what she had just said. 'The decision,' she prompted, unable to contain her patience a moment longer. 'I still don't see why you haven't approached my husband direct?'

'Naturally we did not do that in view of the opinion of his own doctors. They have no faith whatsoever in our drug, and in all fairness I can't blame them. They have been told by Mr. Theron of his great happiness and their view is that you and he should be left alone and allowed to be happy for these weeks that are left.

The decision is yours. You can leave the situation as it is, or you can talk to your husband—'

'But we have nothing to lose,' she inserted, puzzled by the way the doctor now avoided her eyes. 'You treat him and it fails, then he is no worse off than before.' She stopped, waiting for some response, but the doctor was gazing away into space, appearing to be a long way from her. 'We have nothing to lose,' she repeated, with an added emphasis that brought the doctor round to face her.

'Mrs. Theron,' he said slowly and quietly, 'I believe your husband has longer to live than his doctors have stated.'

'You—?' She stared at him. 'How can you say that, Dr. Van Elden?' Her nerves had been fluttering the whole time, but now they seemed to be quite out of control. Hadn't she herself thought something of the kind? Longer to live. . . . how much longer? 'You've never even met my husband.'

'No, but I've seen him, Mrs. Theron; I made it my business to do so, naturally. I saw him with you yesterday on the beach at Paleocastritsa. I was lying some distance away, but when he went into the water on one occasion without you I swam very close to him. I also followed you to the cafe and sat in a spot where I was hidden by shrubs but from where I had an excellent view of your husband. I'm not sure that he has longer, but I do have much experience of these cases, having worked on this island, among natives who have the disease. His doctors had no experience, remember, so they gave him twelve months to live.'

'Twelve?'

Dr. Van Elden nodded.

'At the time, it was twelve months.'

'I see...' Vidas had not troubled about marriage at that time simply because his relatives were living and it was to them that he had left his fortune. It was only on their death that he had decided to marry, and by this time he had only six months left.

'Your husband knows, of course, that you are aware of his having the disease?' The doctor's voice cut into her thoughts and she nodded her head, saying that he did know now, as Hannah had told him, accusing her, Judi, of marrying him only because she knew that, six months later, she would have his fortune.

'Your husband did not believe you would do that?'

Bitterness curved the fine line of her mouth.

'The fact that I was in possession of this knowledge went against me, doctor. Also, I had kept silent, and that was one more act of deceit added to the rest.'

'But surely he would understand that you could not very well tell him of your knowledge?'

Judi looked ahead, through the windscreen at the olive groves stretching away in the distance, the trees almost meeting over the narrow dusty lane.

'We have not talked about it,' she told the doctor at length. 'I have no idea what Vidas thinks about it all. He was not angry with me - only dreadfully hurt and disillusioned.' Judi turned her head and he saw that her lips quivered uncontrollably. 'He no longer believes he married an angel.' Judi had realized they were digressing and now she asked Dr. Van Elden just how long he thought her husband would live.

'I should say, from observations made among natives of the island, that he has about two months. You see,' he went on to explain, 'in all the cases we've observed the victim of the disease has acquired a blue tinge at both sides of the jaw - in the neck, here - about six weeks before death. This tinge is very pronounced at this time. Your husband has not got this - at least, he has, but it is exceedingly faint. I should never have noticed it if I hadn't been looking for it.' A small significant pause and then the doctor continued, in that slow and quiet tone he had used a short while ago when he said that in his opinion Vidas had longer left to him than his doctor believed. 'If it is, as I think, two months your husband has, then you might feel that you prefer to let things remain as they are.'

She frowned and said, impatience in her voice,

'Dr. Van Elden, I've already said, twice, that in allowing you to treat my husband I have nothing to lose.'

He spoke after seeming to try for a time to find a way of phrasing his words.

'Mrs. Theron, in every single case where the treatment has failed the patient's life is cut short.'

A profound silence descended on the car, ending when Judi said,

'So we do have something to lose?'

'Two months' happiness, Mrs. Theron. So you see, it is a decision which you must think about very carefully. If we decide to treat your husband we would want him in hospital - in Athens, of course; there is no need for him to go very far away. We would want him in at once,"because even with the extra weeks I've suggested he might have, his time is exceedingly short. So this means,' the doctor continued, 'that if you and your husband decide to take a chance - and you already know just how slender that chance is - then it is all or nothing. Should the treatment fail then he will die within a week of first taking the drug; if the treatment succeeds, then. . . .' He did not continue; there was no need.

Judi said, in an agonized tone,

'We can't take the chance, Dr. Van Elden. Three . . . out of thirty-four—' Emphatically she shook her head. 'No, I can't lose him yet, not when there's no need. Two months! It's a long, long time,' she cried, her voice edged with hysteria. 'Two whole months! I want to live those months, not - not be - be widowed before I need be! Thank you f-for contacting me; I d-do appreciate your g-good intentions, but go away! Please go back to the island and leave Vidas and me to - to be happy—' Tears flowed, and the rest of her words were choked back. She was trembling from head to foot and the doctor's arm went round her shoulders.

'Mrs. Theron,' he said gently, 'I'm going to take you home now. Try to relax - that is most important. Relax first, and think afterwards. You'll find that your mind is clearer after sleep, so you must decide that you are going to sleep - soundly—'

'I won't sleep! I know it! What must I do?' Her face puckered, tears streaming down her cheeks. 'Dr. Van Elden, what must I do?'

'I'm very sure, my dear, that the decision you reach in the morning will be the right one, both for you and for your husband. If you decide to turn down my offer, then - for you - this will be right. If not, then you know my telephone number....'

CHAPTER TEN

How Judi concealed the gnawing torture of her mind she would never know. But somehow she did manage it, and although at dinner that evening Vidas remarked on her pallor he accepted her explanation that, earlier, she had had a slight headache.

'Is it better now?' he asked gently, watching her expression change as she noted his concern.

'Yes, Vidas, thank you. It is completely better.' Her fascinated gaze searched for the blue tinge mentioned by the doctor, but she could find no trace of it. Supposing he had even longer than two months; supposing he had six. ... It would be folly to take a chance. No, decided Judi firmly, she intended leaving things as they were.

'Shall we walk?' Vidas was suggesting when after dinner they sat as usual, on the patio, drinking coffee. It was a still balmy night, the sort of night associated only with the East. The great ball of a full moon showered the garden with light, its glow positive and intense; it seemed to be so very close to the earth. From the purple velvet darkness of the heavens a billion stars looked down, and suddenly, as Judi watched, a single star shot across the sky and was lost forever in the blackness of infinity.

'It would be pleasant to walk.' What was this aloof and distant way she was adopting with him? So sweetly intimate they had been, so free in speech and action, so generous with their love. She had to speak. Perhaps it was the strain that had been gripping her ever since the meeting with Dr. Van Elden; perhaps it was the thought that, with two whole months left, there was still time to recapture the wonder of the honeymoon that was to last as long as they wished to call it that. 'Dear Vidas, won't you accept that what I feel for you is love - real love?' Her wide hazel eyes pleaded and he looked into them. But already he was shaking his head. She felt that although he wanted to believe her, common sense told him that she could not possibly be genuine. His voice took on an unfamiliar coldness as he said,

'Your kindness is commendable, Judi. You have a sweet, compassionate nature; you saw, in the beginning, that I had a great need - because you were

in possession of the knowledge that I was going to die. You also realized that were I to marry your stepsister I should not have been happy.' Vidas digressed a moment to tell his wife that Hannah had actually hinted that he change his will, as it was originally intended by him that his fortune should go to the rescuer of his nephew. Judi flinched visibly on hearing this, wondering how anyone could voice such a request, no matter how subtle the manner of doing so, to a man who was going to die within the next few weeks. 'I did not change my will,' Vidas continued impassively. 'You are my wife and it is to you that my fortune will go-'

'Vidas, please! I don't want to hear about the money- what good will it be to me when you've gone?' Her face was paler than before, and her mouth trembled piteously. But her husband regarded her with a cool unemotional gaze as, reverting to his comments about her kindness, he told her, quite firmly, that he was under no illusions as to why she had married him. 'In the beginning it was for the money— No, Judi, please do not interrupt! By your own admission, as we've already said, you thought instantly about becoming an heiress. In your confession after Hannah had gone you talked of being a failure. Your stepmother had told you you were, and the idea of becoming rich appealed simply because you would no longer be branded a failure. Later, I admit, your compassion overruled your mercenary ambitions and it is compassion you have extended to me ever since.' He stopped, his eyes brooding and infinitely sad. 'It is compassion which now prompts you to make this attempt to convince me of your love.' His mouth softened as he added, 'Yes, my dear Judi, you have a sweet, compassionate nature, and had Hannah not appeared we should have continued in our blissful state right up to the end.' He leant forward to take up his coffee cup, saw that it was empty and returned it to the table. 'Perhaps I should have said,' he corrected after a moment's thought, 'that I should have continued in my blissful state right up to the end.'

She looked at him, white-faced and icy cold within.

'I can't make you believe me, Vidas, no matter what I do.' Sadly she shook her head. 'Let's go for that walk,' she added, rising from her chair.

'You'll be cold,' he decided before they reached the gate leading into the lane. 'I'll get you a cardigan.' And without waiting for her to protest that she

herself would fetch it he was gone, returning a short while later and draping it around her shoulders. She was infinitely touched by the simple gesture, and in the ordinary way she would have been able to reveal her feelings by lifting her face and kissing him. What a lot they had both lost by that visit of Hannah's!

On passing through the gate they left behind the glare of the house lights which shed a rich clear glow over the garden, and entered into a world possessed by moonlight, where the air was filled with the pervasive scent of herbs on the hillsides and the chittering noise of cicadas in the olive trees. With poignant nostalgia Judi recalled that other evening when, their desire for one another stimulated by the seductive influence of nature - its scents and sounds, its soft balmy air - Vidas had whispered to her, his mouth close to her ear, 'Do you want to go on, my love, or shall we turn back?' And she had smiled, and given him a shy whisper in reply, and hand in hand they had returned to their home, to become one with each other in all the purity of an unquenchable love. Tears started to her eyes as memory took her all the way, into the realm which heaven itself could not surpass. Judi brushed a hand across her cheek and her husband stopped, glancing into her upturned face for a long moment before, with a gentle tender moment, he too removed a tear from her cheek.

'Don't cry about it, my Judi,' he said in tender tones. 'You've done such a great deal for me that you need have no regrets. I've been far happier with you than I could have been with any other woman. You've been an angel.' That word served only to increase the flow of tears and tilting his head in a small gesture of admonishment Vidas produced a handkerchief. 'I don't want this remorse,' he told her in a voice edged with a stern inflection. 'Haven't I just said you've no need to have regrets?'

'My - my regrets are not what you think,' she stammered between her sobs. 'They're f-for something d- different altogether—' Breaking off, she threw up her hands in defeat. 'What's the use? You're determined not to be convinced.' She wanted to continue, asking if he could really believe that she had been acting all this time; she wanted to mention intimate moments, and to request him to think about them. Surely his eyes would be opened and he would be possessed of clearer vision. But she had already tried so hard, and now she was very tired and dispirited, and defeat lay heavily upon her. Vidas

believed he had the picture; he believed that her present efforts stemmed entirely from pity, that she was endeavouring to convince him of her love only because she knew how deeply hurt he was. It was an impossible situation and one which utterly precluded any effective approach. There was more than a curtain between them now; there was a definite barrier, strong and impenetrable. She began walking on again and as they entered a region where the olive groves were thick the moon's radiance was shut out and darkness fell like some all-enveloping cloak from which there was no escape. 'I want to go home,' she cried suddenly, shivers running along her spine. 'I don't like walking here!'

He stopped again and said,

'Judi, this must cease! You're going to make yourself ill!' Exceedingly stern the voice now; Judi had not heard this tone before and its effect was to produce more tears, but this time she managed successfully to hide them from him, being in the darkness of the woods.

'Can we go home?' she pleaded in a small voice. 'I'm tired, Vidas.'

'Tired and unhappy.' With an unexpected move he took her hand, and he kept it in his until they entered the house. And then he said, striking her a mental blow that brought an almost physical pain to her heart, 'Would you prefer to be alone tonight? - seeing that you're so tired?'

She stared up at him with disbelieving eyes. His expression was an unreadable mask.

'If - if that is what you want,' she answered in soft and quivering tones.

'It isn't what I want,' he returned unemotionally, 'but it's what's best for you. Tomorrow you'll be feeling much different.'

Her mouth trembled.

'Where shall I go then?'

'You shall have our room, naturally. I can sleep next door.'

She lay awake, as she had assured the doctor she would. Vidas came up hours after her and his firm tread on the carpet as he passed the door of their room brought forth the cloud of tears which had been fighting for release. Should she go to him? she asked herself over and over again. But the idea of a rebuff was strong; she sensed, somehow, that he would send her away, and she could not bear that. And so she remained alone, thinking and thinking . . . and thinking--

The first hint of dawn touched the windows at last. Getting out of bed, Judi looked in the mirror. Tears the whole night long had left their mark. She bathed, having the bathroom to herself for the first time. Was Vidas awake? she wondered, and felt sure he was.

Returning to the bedroom, she stood for a long moment, gazing around. How still and lonely the beautiful room seemed to be! It was over-large suddenly, and devoid of atmosphere. It was empty. She thought, 'This is how it will be when my dearest love has gone,' and she bit hard on her lip, stemming the tears. She must try to remove the evidence of her weeping, not increase it. Vidas must not know how she was suffering; it would only make him even more unhappy than he was now. And she desired only to decrease his unhappiness, to get him back at least to the state of resigned contentment which he had assumed after the first shock of learning the truth about his wife. He had seemed to settle into a mood of acceptance wherein he was reasonably happy, though by no means as happy as before.

The perfection had gone for ever, but this did not mean that Vidas must live out the rest of his days in a state of unhappiness. His mood of last night, when he had told her to have the room to herself, had resulted from Judi's own state of mind, which was itself a result of her meeting with Dr. Van Elden. She had been overwrought inwardly; the strain of concealing this from the shrewd eyes of her husband had been too much and she had found an outlet for her pent-up emotions in the tears which had so troubled Vidas that he had suggested she sleep alone. Yes, she decided, giving herself a mental shake, she must make a determined effort to control her emotions, and in so doing to bring her husband back to a state of happiness.

After dressing she sat down on the bed, for it was not yet five-thirty. Was Vidas awake? she asked herself again. But, contrary to her desire of last night, she had no immediate wish to go to him. Instead, she wanted only to reflect, even once again, on what she had learned from Dr. Van Elden. He had stated that she would be able to think clearly by this morning, and that any decision she made would be the correct one — the correct one both for her and for Vidas. During the long wakeful hours she had confessed to herself that although she had considered her husband's side of the situation, her swift refusal of the doctor's offer had stemmed from selfish motives. She saw in that moment of refusal, when the anguished words were pouring from her lips, only her own position, pictured her empty life, her loss and utter loneliness. The result was a blotting out of her husband's position, even of his chances of recovery. They were too remote for consideration and the only thing that mattered was the next two months, precious months when her own life would be worth living. Afterwards it would not be worth living.

But now Judi had no selfish motives left. She must consult Vidas. This was the decision which the doctor had meant her to make. The real decision, the vital decision, Vidas must make himself.

She went to him at seven o'clock, that being the time they normally rose. After knocking she went in; he was propped up on one elbow, his eyes on her instantly she entered the room.

'Dressed already? Are you feeling better?' A hand outstretched and gladly she put hers into it, running across the room to do it.

'I feel much better.' She felt herself pulled towards him, thrilled to the feel of his lips on hers.

'I missed you, my dear darling,' he whispered. 'How I missed you!'

She looked lovingly at him, then looked down at the brown hand covering hers.

'I wonder will you be unkind to me if I say that I missed you too - terribly?'

'Unkind?' he echoed, frowning.

'I wonder if - if you will really believe me?'

His eyes shadowed. He murmured gently,

'I believe you, Judi - yes, of course I do.'

She smiled then and in a little access of gratitude lifted his hand and pressed her lips to it.

'Judi,' he protested, but in a guarded tone designed not to cause her embarrassment. 'You mustn't do that.'

Her smile remained, tranquil and very sweet. There was something about the room that incited peace, she realized, staring at her husband's face in wonderment, and thinking about the other bedroom where she had slept alone. Cold it was, and lonely....

'I shall if I like,' she told him, and added, 'Thank you, Vidas, for not hating me.'

'Hate—!' Faint admonition in his tones as he added quickly, 'How could I ever hate you?'

'You might have done - on learning what I did...'

Vidas was shaking his head even before she had finished speaking.

'No, my darling. You've given me so much, I told you that last night. I love you, Judi, you are well aware of that.' Low the voice now and husky with emotion. How she longed to reciprocate - to tell him that she loved him, but she refrained, purely in the knowledge that he would not believe her. She said, amazed at the calm way the words fell from her lips,

'Vidas, yesterday a doctor saw me and - and told me that there is a chance - a very remote chance - of a cure.'

Deep and profound silence dropped on the room; pulling her hand from his, Judi moved away, to the other side of the room. It was an instinctive move,

as she sensed that her husband would be able to think more clearly if she were not standing there, beside his bed, looking down into his face.

'A cure, Judi?' He was dazed, disbelieving. 'I don't think I understand? Who is this doctor? Why didn't he come to me? How is it that you didn't mention this last evening? And how did you come to see him without my knowing?'

She began to speak, and soon he knew all. His face was a trifle grey beneath the tan; his hand was clenched tightly as it lay on the bedcover.

'You can see why I didn't tell you immediately,' she said when a long time passed and he did not speak. 'It was the two months, Vidas. If - if you have the treatment and it fails then - then. . . .' Suddenly she put her face in her hands and wept bitterly. 'I'm so sorry, I tried not to cry.' He had come from the bed and she found herself in his arms, her face against his chest. 'The two months, darling - they are so very precious, to us both.'

'Yes, yes,' soothingly as his arms tightened around her and his lips touched her hair. 'My little girl, don't cry so. Hush. ...' Lifting her face, he kissed her lips, and her damp cheek. 'Hush, darling. Oh, my dear, forgive me!'

'Forgive?' She blinked at him through her tears. 'What do you mean?'

'This anguish, this fear you have that we might lose those two months, months which you describe as precious—' He stopped and she felt him shudder against her. 'How could I have doubted your sincerity when you swore you loved me?'

'You believe me?' she gasped, filled with wonder as to how this had come about. 'Vidas . . . you believe me, at last?'

For answer he just held her close and she felt the heavy beating of his heart above her own, quivered to the tender nearness of his body, and sighed in thankfulness that he now believed in her sincerity.

He talked after a while, gravely and yet quite practically as he said that the decision would be made after he had seen Dr. Van Elden, adding that it would not be his decision but Judi's also.

'We shall think carefully and long,' he ended, 'and between us we shall decide what course to take.'

'It isn't going to be easy,' she quivered through lips almost as white as her face. 'Dr. Van Elden stressed that it would be all or nothing, and I should have to resign myself to that.'

Vidas nodded; she could see that he was suffering now, but only because of her.

'Let's forget about it until after I've seen the doctor,' he said, and they did manage to talk of other things as they breakfasted together on the patio. Then Vidas himself telephoned the doctor who arrived promptly, having been staying at an hotel in Paleocastritsa since coming to Corfu two days previously. He talked to them both, but there was nothing more than Judi had already told her husband - except that, as he was about to leave after having been assured that he would hear from Vidas within twenty-four hours, he happened to say, with a smile for Judi before he turned to her husband,

'Your wife told me everything, Mr. Theron - everything.' Vidas merely flickered him an interrogating glance and the doctor continued, 'She told me that her love for you was so deep that she had actually offered to make over to her stepsister - in return for that lady's silence - the whole of the fortune which you would leave to her—'

'Dft Van Elden!' interrupted Judi. 'I didn't mean you to repeat that to my husband!'

'You and your wife were - well, slightly estranged, I take it?' The doctor spoke to Vidas, just as if there had been no interruption by his wife.

'I wouldn't put it quite like that,' began Vidas when again Judi interposed with,

'I didn't say that, Dr. Van Elden.'

'Not exactly,' he admitted in tones of faint apology. 'But I did gather, Mr. Theron, that you had begun to doubt your wife's love for you.'

Vidas nodded, and it seemed to Judi that the muscles in his throat contracted because he swallowed hard before he spoke, and when he did his voice was fringed with a huskiness born of some deep emotion.

'You are right, doctor. I was foolish enough to doubt my wife. Thank you for telling me about the money—' He paused and a tender glance was directed at Judi. 'I had already realized my mistake - just this morning.'

Immediately on the doctor's departure Judi turned to her husband and asked a trifle fearfully,

'Did you mind, darling, that I told him everything? It just came out - because of the way I was feeling. And, after all, he is a doctor.'

Vidas gave her a tender glance, but deep contrition was portrayed in his voice as he said,

'Dearest, why didn't I know, by instinct alone, that what you felt for me was love?'

She went to him and became enfolded in his strong arms.

'It was natural that you should doubt me,' she said, untroubled now that all was right between them. 'Don't think any more about it.' And, after a small moment of reflection, 'The doctor - what did you think of him?'

'I like him, but of course that has nothing to do with the decision we shall make. It seems,' he added in calm and even tones, 'that my chances of a cure are indeed slim, and what we must decide is, will the risk be worth it? As things are, my darling, we do have two months - or so it seems, by what Dr. Van Elden says. Two months. It's quite a long time.' He looked down at her, small and slender in his arms. She said,

'Yes, it's quite a long time.' But the tears threatened again. Two months . . . when it could have been years and years....

'We have a full day,' Vidas was saying. 'We shall go off somewhere and think, and talk, and before we return we shall have made our decision.'

They went in the car to Paleocastritsa Beach, where they swam until lunch time. After eating in the cafe there they walked, into the hills and the quiet places. Twilight dropped, soft as thistledown and still they walked, and talked, the spreading shades of approaching night all around them. It was a long day, a day of decision and indecision, of tension and of fear. But at last they came home to the villa on the hillside, came home in a mood of tired contentment. . . .

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Athens, the gay city, lay sprawled before her as she looked out from her high window in the hotel. Cars by the million, it would almost seem - and the noise! She glanced at her watch. Not yet six o'clock. Where did all the traffic come from at this time of the morning? - and where could it all be going? Raising her eyes, she looked on the great Temple to Athena, gleaming in the sunshine, standing proudly on the Acropolis. No use. Judi could no longer keep her mind occupied with other things. Vidas - her beloved - was here, in this city, in the hospital. Two days . . . this was the crucial time. Already he might be--She swallowed convulsively, and turned from the window into the bedroom. This eternity of waiting - what agony it was! Three hours later the phone rang and the desk attendant informed her there was a call for her.

'Thank you.' She listened as the voice came over the line, quiet but clear, and the hand holding the receiver trembled violently as the doctor's words penetrated. She tried to answer, but words refused to come.

'Mrs. Theron - you're still there?'

She swallowed, dislodging the lump in her throat.

'Yes - I'm st-still here.'

'You heard? Your husband is responding to treatment. All danger is past. He's sleeping at present, but you can come to see him at two this afternoon.'

'Thank you, Dr. Van Elden,' was all she could say, for her whole body had become enveloped in a sort of vacuum where every feeling and emotion lay dormant.

'Try to rest, Mrs. Theron, as I'm sure you've had no sleep for the past two nights.' Only now did she grasp the note of sheer triumph in Dr. Van Elden's voice. She wanted to call out to him, to shout! To thank him over and over again, but articulation was still difficult and all she managed to say was,

'Yes, doctor. I'll try to rest... '

Another eternity passed before at last she was at the hospital, being shown into the small private ward where her husband sat up in bed, pillows ranged behind him, and looking exactly as he had looked on leaving her two and a half days previously.

A smiling Greek nurse placed a chair by the bed and then left the room. Judi and Vidas looked at one another in wordless silence for a long, long while after the door had closed, each too full to speak.

Less than three weeks later Vidas was back home. He and Judi had visitors - her father and Gillian. Bill had sold the cottage and with the money he and Gillian were going into business, as she had some money too. But first they were having this holiday-a much happier holiday in every way than the one before. Judi had asked what her father and Gillian meant to do and was told that there would be a divorce eventually and they would marry. Meanwhile, said Bill, avoiding his daughter's gaze, Gillian would be his housekeeper.

'Your father looks ten years younger than when he was here before,' Vidas commented on one occasion when, the pleasant evening meal over, he and Judi were on the patio and Bill and Gillian standing in the mothy darkness at the end of the garden.

'He's happy, that's why,' returned Judi in the gay lighthearted tones her husband heard all the time these days. 'I'm so very glad, Vidas, because there's not one tiny cloud on my horizon now.' Deep tenderness and love looked out from her eyes, and on sudden impulse he stood up, pulling her gently into his arms.

'Nor on mine,' he echoed fervently, and a sigh of gratitude escaped him before, seeking her inviting lips, his own possessed them in a long and tender kiss.