



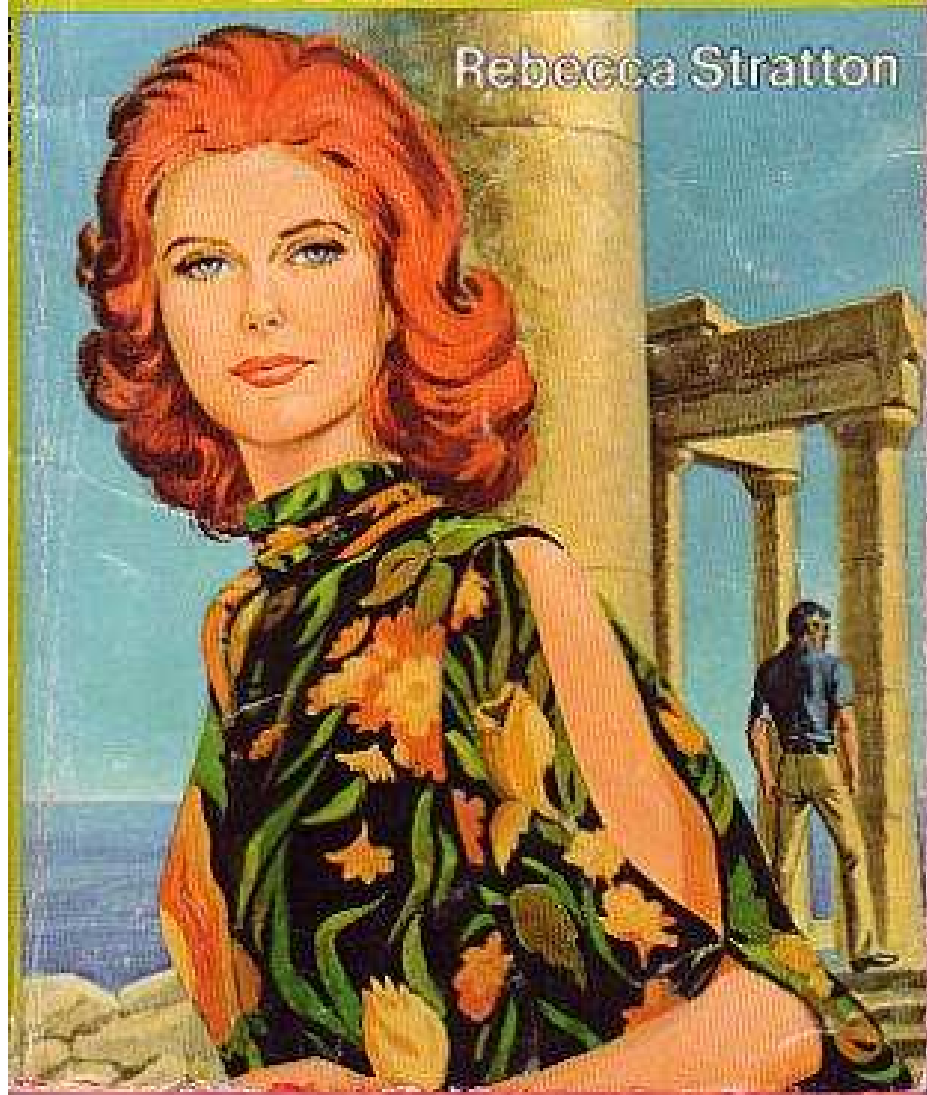
1898

A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

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# FIREBIRD

Rebecca Stratton



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Rona's uncle was very dear to her, and when he got into serious trouble she was determined to go to any lengths to get him out of it--even when it meant going out to an island in the Aegean to tackle her uncle's boss, the formidable tycoon Damon Leonides. Her task was unnerving enough, even before she learned about the Firebird--a redheaded woman who would arrive on the island and alter the destiny of its master. Surely no one would take such a legend seriously, though?

## CHAPTER ONE

RONA had never travelled so far from home before and she admitted to being nervous, but the sense of cold panic that clutched at her stomach like a physical assault was due not so much to the fact of being alone in a foreign country for the first time, as to the prospect of meeting Damon Leonides.

Ever since the plane left London she had felt the ever-increasing panic until now, as they came in to land at Athens airport, her legs felt almost too weak to bear her and her hands were shaking like leaves. She barely noticed the bustle of the airport buildings or the bright warmth of the sunshine, for she was frightened, and for the first time she admitted it to herself.

Back in England the idea of appealing to Damon Leonides personally on her uncle's behalf had seemed much less terrifying, but now that the prospect was more or less imminent her courage was failing her.

Rex Forbes, her uncle, had managed the English branch of the Leonides shipping line for several years and, quite unknown to Rona, had been systematically defrauding his employer of several thousand pounds over the past few years. The discovery of his theft, or 'borrowing' as he insisted on calling it, had come as such a shock to her that she had at first refused to believe it. He had pleaded with her to understand, not to blame him too harshly, and eventually she had been obliged to recognise her own unconscious liability.

When her parents died she had been only ten years old and her uncle was her favourite living relative. No one else offered to take the orphan, but without hesitation Rex Forbes had taken the little girl under his care and lavished every kindness on her—expensive schooling, lovely clothes and everything else a young girl could possibly want, not least of which was a warm and gentle love.

Rex had never married, although he had had many opportunities to do so, for he was an attractive man. It was simply that he had never found another woman whom he adored as much as he had Rona's mother. Caring for her daughter seemed in some way to console him for losing the girl he wanted to marry, to his brother, and Rona had always liked him best of all her few relatives.

They seldom saw any of their other relatives, but they did not mind that, they were happy as they were. Rex approved or disapproved of her boyfriends, as her father would have done, gave parties for her on her birthdays and only grudgingly allowed her to learn shorthand and typing as a standby, in case she should ever have to go out to work. It had not even occurred to Rona that his salary as manager of Leonides' London office would not anything like cover the expenses of living as they did.

Then a few weeks ago the awful fact had come to light. Only a week ago her uncle had told her, his voice edged with panic, that the company secretary was coming over from Greece to visit the office and check on its running. He was bound to discover the discrepancies in the books and disgrace, probably even prison, were almost bound to follow.

Rona remembered vaguely seeing Damon Leonides some years ago when he had visited London and she was still a schoolgirl. He had not seemed such an ogre then that he would not listen to reason—or so she told herself. He had seemed older to her then than in fact he was, for from her tender fourteen years a man of twenty-nine, as he had been, seemed already mature and ageing.

He had been acting on behalf of his father then, of course; now the old man was dead and Damon Leonides was not only head of his family, in the Greek way, but also of the vast shipping enterprise his father had left to him. An elder brother, she recalled from newspaper articles, had also died, leaving Damon the eldest son.

An appeal to him personally had been her own idea, and one which her uncle viewed with doubt and apprehension, but Rona had used every asset she had to raise her fare to Greece, selling every scrap of jewellery she had ever owned. The investigating secretary had forecast a prosecution as inevitable, but Rona still had hopes that she could avert disaster by a personal approach.

She looked around at the busy air terminal and shivered. Never in her life had she felt so alone, so isolated among strangers, and she had yet to discover how she could get to the island of Polyxena where Damon Leonides and his family lived.

There were any number of taxis and private cars about, leaving and arriving, but nothing gave her any clue as to what she should do next, and she felt the despair of helplessness.

It was while she stood, lonely and anxious, by her suitcase that she noticed a private car parked close by. It was a huge, gleaming black limousine and its front passenger door had a device emblazoned on it that struck a familiar note so that her heart gave a great leap of hope when she saw it. She recognised the proud crest of the Leonides Line and if someone from the Athens office was at the airport there was hope for her yet.

After only a brief hesitation she walked towards the car, but there was only a middle-aged man in chauffeur's uniform seated at the wheel, and she hesitated to approach him. Probably a short, curt dismissal was all she could expect if the man suspected she was merely trying to invade the privacy of the Leonides family. Someone with more authority was what she needed, and at that moment a man emerged from the airport buildings and strode across to the car.

He was already half way into the vehicle when Rona called out to him, and she hesitated when he first paused, and then stepped back and stood looking at her for a second with eyes that missed not a

single feature of her small pale face, the thick copper-red hair that lay like wings either side of her cheeks and wide blue eyes, dark with anxiety and nervousness, that gazed from between thick brown lashes.

Her mouth trembled anxiously. 'I'm—I'm sorry.' She found it alarmingly hard to find the right words now that he was giving her his full attention, and she realised she did not even know if he spoke any English. 'I wonder—I wondered if you could help me,' she ventured, and to her relief he smiled.

It was a very attractive smile and he was very good-looking. She did not expect to be lucky enough to see Damon Leonides, but this man was much younger and not as dark as she remembered. He could have been no more than twenty-one or two years old, whereas Damon Leonides must be at least fourteen or fifteen years older, and this man had dark brown hair rather than black, also his eyes were blue. A bright glistening blue that smiled appreciatively at what he saw.

'But of course,' he said in excellent English. 'How can I help you, *thespinis*?'

Rona glanced at the crest on the door of the car, aware of the chauffeur's dark and disapproving eyes on her, and licked her lips. 'I see that you're from —that is, I noticed the crest on the car door,' she said.

The young man was still smiling and he nodded his head, although there was more than a hint of curiosity in the gaze he fixed her with. 'The crest of the Leonides Line,' he said, and inclined his head in a brief bow. 'I am Demetrius Leonides, *thespinis*.'

Rona blinked nervously in surprise, then hurried on before she quite lost her nerve, her voice small and shaky and inclined to huskiness because she was so nervous. 'I've flown all the way from England to

see Mr. Leonides—Mr. Damon Leonides,' she amended hastily. 'I—I don't quite know how to get to see him. I know that he lives on an island, but I don't know how to get there, or even if he'll see me, but it's *very* important that I see him. My name's Forbes, Rona Forbes.'

For a moment she thought the blue eyes looked a little less friendly and she feared he had recognised the name and guessed who she was, but then after a swift and rather unnerving scrutiny of her from head to toe, Demetrius Leonides smiled again. 'How old are you, Miss Forbes?' he asked, as if it was the most natural question in the world.

Rona stared at him, curiosity and indignation briefly replacing her earlier fear. 'I don't see what -' she began, but a definite gleam showed in his eyes and he shrugged broad shoulders under an impeccably tailored jacket.

'If you refuse to tell me, Miss Forbes,' he said, 'I am afraid I cannot help you.'

'Oh no, please!' Seeing her only chance slipping away Rona hastily shook her head. 'I'm twenty-one, I'll be twenty-two in three months' time.'

'Ah!' He nodded his head, apparently satisfied, and the bright, expressive look he exchanged with the chauffeur did not go unnoticed. He was smiling again too, and he stepped back as he spoke, one hand indicating the cool, air-conditioned interior of the car. 'I do not know if I can do as you ask, Miss Forbes,' he told her, 'but if you will accompany me to my next call we will discuss your reasons at greater length.'

'I don't know if—if I can do that,' Rona said, her eyes wide and anxious as she saw her chances going again.



One dark brow flicked briefly upwards, but he still indicated that she should join him in the car, one hand extended to assist her. 'We will decide as we talk,' he said, smiling. 'If your mission intrigues me sufficiently, then I will fly you out to Polyxena myself.'

'Oh!' Rona was too stunned to speak for a moment, but she glanced at the chauffeur uneasily, for it was obvious that the arrangement did not meet with his approval at all and, before she could say anything at all, he spoke to Demetrius Leonides in his own tongue.

The young man replied curtly and briefly in the same language and the chauffeur subsided, but it was obvious that the situation not only did not meet with his approval, but also made him distinctly uneasy. Demetrius Leonides, however, seemed to have no such qualms and he saw her into the car while the chauffeur put her suitcase into the boot.

He was attractive, very definitely so, and for the first time since she began her journey from London she spared some thought for something other than the prospect of facing Damon Leonides and the even worse one of her uncle's future. Demetrius Leonides was obviously a man of some force and if she could only keep him on her side, perhaps things would go more easily for her.

So far she had given little thought to his place in the Leonides family, but she was not left long in doubt, for he suddenly extended a slim brown hand, and excellent white teeth gleamed at her in a smile. 'We did not properly introduce ourselves, Miss Forbes,' he said. 'I am the nephew of Damon Leonides whom you wish to see.'

Long fingers curled around hers and Rona was immediately struck by a stunning sense of awareness that set her pulses racing. 'I—Mr. Leonides will know me, or at least he will know who I am,' Rona told him, fearful of saying too much in case he sent her packing there and then, before she had even a chance to see his uncle.

A frown appeared briefly between his brows and she wondered if at last he recognised the name. 'Damon knows you?' he asked, and she hastily shook her head.

'Oh no! At least,' she qualified cautiously, 'he met me some years ago, but I doubt if he remembers meeting me.'

'Ah, but I am sure he must!' he insisted in a quiet but infinitely seductive voice that shivered like a warning along Rona's spine. 'How could he forget meeting you, Miss Forbes?'

'I was a schoolgirl at the time and the meeting was very brief,' Rona told him, and he smiled.

'Then perhaps he may not remember,' he allowed. A warm and very expressive gaze turned on her and swept over her slowly, then he shook his head. Although I cannot imagine you are easy to forget, Miss Forbes.'

The flattery was outrageous in the circumstances, but it did wonders for Rona's morale, and she already felt more sure of herself, despite that underlying fear of meeting his uncle. 'I hope in a way he hasn't forgotten me,' she admitted. 'It will make things a little easier for me.'

Demetrius Leonides eyed her speculatively. 'Forgive my curiosity, Miss Forbes,' he said, 'but I cannot imagine what it is you wish to see my uncle about. You have demolished the only reason I could think of by telling me your age, and I cannot yet fit you into another category.'

Only briefly curious about his reference to her age precluding her from some category or other, she looked at him through her lashes, a surreptitious study that merely confirmed his devastating attraction, but he still puzzled her to some extent and the - delicacy of her mission made her ultra-cautious.

'I must see Mr. Leonides about—about something very personal,' she told him, and again that small frown drew his brows together.

'Miss Forbes,' he said, 'who *are* you? I know that you are a very lovely girl, and I am delighted to ride with you in my car, but I cannot, I *dare* not, take you to my uncle until I am quite sure you are not attempting to get to him for some ulterior motive.' The slim hands spread wide and he shrugged his shoulders, trying to probe deeper. 'Does he know you or not? Why is it so important that you see him, and what are you to him?'

The last question startled Rona into staring at him, and her heart was thudding uneasily at her ribs. 'I—I don't understand you, Mr. Leonides,' she said. 'I'm nothing to your uncle, how could I be?'

In the dim coolness of the car, the blue eyes surveyed her steadily for a moment and there was a glitter in them that could have been laughter. 'You could be several things to my uncle, Miss Forbes,' he told her in that same quiet and attractive voice. 'But you are too young to be here for what appear the obvious reasons, for my uncle has tastes that run to women of his own age, and you are obviously not to be employed as a servant, therefore, lovely Miss Forbes, you puzzle me!'

'I—*I'm* sorry.' There seemed little else she could say, and she was afraid of saying too much.

'You will not tell me?' he asked, and Rona eyed him anxiously.

'I *can't* tell you, Mr. Leonides,' she said, her voice barely above a whisper. 'But please—please believe me it's very important that I see Mr. Damon Leonides very soon.'

'Important to you personally?'

The probing was relentless and yet she felt sure he wanted to help her, but something, perhaps awe of his all-powerful uncle, was making him cautious. She looked down at her hands clasped tightly over the top of her handbag. 'It affects me—indirectly,' she admitted, and for a moment he said nothing.

Then he looked at her again and half smiled. 'Does it perhaps more closely concern your mother?' he suggested softly, and Rona stared at him in confusion.

'My mother?' she echoed, and those eloquent shoulders shrugged again carelessly.

'My uncle has a penchant for beautiful women, as any newspaper will tell you,' he said wryly. 'And if your mother is as beautiful as you are, then it is quite possible-' He spread his hands to convey the rest of his meaning, and Rona followed his reasoning easily enough.

It was true what he said about Damon Leonides, of course, she had even heard stories from time to time from her uncle, although she had sometimes taken them with a pinch of salt, but the papers often carried pictures of him with various women. All of them had beautiful looks in common, as his nephew - claimed, and her own mother could well have qualified for his attentions when she was alive, despite the fact that she would be a few years his senior.

'My mother died a long time ago, Mr. Leonides,' she said in a small, soft voice. 'This has nothing at all to do with her.'

'I am sorry.' The blue eyes gazed at her for a moment with a bold appreciation of her own looks, and she found herself not averse to the sensations he aroused in her. If only she could get him to take her out to the island where his uncle lived she felt sure he would be a valuable ally.

'A woman of mystery!' he said in that quiet and seductive voice. 'I have never before been accosted in public by a beautiful girl asking for my help, but I am a romantic, lovely Miss Forbes, and rescuing maidens in distress appeals to me. Also I would like to know you better, much better, and it therefore follows that I would like to help you, but-' He shrugged and spread his hands as if in regret, and Rona's heart sank dismally. 'Your reasons for visiting Polyxena still elude me and even for a beautiful woman of mystery I hesitate to anger my formidable uncle!'

'You—you mean you won't take me to him?'

He shrugged his regret, but was obviously moved by the misty look in her eyes. 'I mean I cannot,' he said.

Rona bit back the tears that threatened, a breathless urgency in her voice as she sought for words. 'Do you know anything about Rex Forbes?' she asked huskily, and he shook his head.

'Your father?' he guessed.

'My uncle,' she said. 'He works—he worked for Mr. Leonides for quite a long time.'

'Ah!' Realisation came with a sudden bright glitter of understanding in his eyes. 'Your uncle was —dismissed from our employ, and you wish to plead his case, yes?'

Rona bit her lip anxiously. It was so near the truth and yet not as bad as the real reason, and she hesitated to have him guess further in case he refused to carry out his promise to take her to the island himself. Once she was there she would feel more satisfied, as if her fight was already half won.

'Something like that,' she agreed cautiously. 'My uncle brought me up when my parents were killed eleven years ago, he's been—everything to me and I feel I owe him something for that.'

'So you have flown all the way out here to see Damon,' he said with a hint of a smile. 'That is devotion indeed, Miss Forbes, it must have cost you a great deal.'

She knew he was not only referring to the expense of the trip and she appreciated his understanding, but she could only shake her head helplessly. 'It will all have been for nothing if I can't see Mr. Leonides.'

He regarded her for several seconds before he spoke again, and then he shook his head as if he did not hold much hope for her success. 'My uncle is not an easy man to plead with,' he warned. 'I do not hold much hope for your appeal, Miss Forbes.'

'Oh, but I *must* see him!' She was suddenly desperate, terrified of being sent back immediately, her journey wasted and the precious expense of it gone for nothing. '*I-^I have* to put my uncle's case, Mr. Leonides, please! I promised I'll take no for an answer, if I have to, but I must try—I owe Rex so much, there's nothing I won't do to help him!'

'He is a very fortunate man,' Demetrius Leonides said softly, and one hand reached over to encompass hers where they lay clasped, desperately tight, over her handbag. 'If I can help you plead his cause I will, for I cannot believe he is a bad man, this uncle of yours.'

'Oh, he *isn't*, he *isn't*!' Rona insisted breathlessly. 'Very well!' He seemed to have made up his mind. 'I will take you with me with an easy conscience! You may plead with Damon and I-' The blue eyes glittered at her speculatively in the interior of the car. 'I would like to plead my own case, if you will allow me.'

Realising for the first time that there could be strings attached to the offer of help, Rona looked at him through the thickness of her lashes, her heart fluttering uneasily. 'Mr. Leonides-' she began, but the enveloping hands squeezed tightly and he leaned towards her, his voice quietly persuasive. 'If you are to fly with me to Polyxena,' he told her softly, 'you will find there are three of us answering to the name of Mr. Leonides. Would it not make things much simpler if you were to call me Demetrius?'

Rona felt as if the world was spinning at twice its normal speed and she wondered what on earth she had let herself in for by appealing to this particular man. Her head was whirling and her pulses chaotic as she met the blue-eyed gaze of her tempter.

'I—I'm not sure, Mr. Leonides,' she said in a small husky voice. 'I mean, I've only just—'

'You asked for my help,' he reminded her. 'I willingly help my friends, Miss Forbes—Rona, no?— and it is such a small thing to ask, is it not?'

Rona swallowed hard. Getting to Polyxena was the most important thing in the world to her at the moment, and if it meant going along with Demetrius Leonides' flirting then she would do just that. 'Demetrius,' she said softly, and smiled.

The flight from Athens to the island of Polyxena was something Rona would not easily forget. The sea below them was like silk in the bright sun. Rumpled, flowing silk in colours of deepest blue and gold with a smooth placid look that was like a smile.

The lush vegetation along the coast looked dark and solid from the cabin of the luxury executive plane she flew in with Demetrius Leonides, but she felt not a little sick as they came down again

towards the tiny landing field on the Leonides island of Polyxena. A glimpse of glittering white sand and a sprawling white villa made her realise that down there, now only minutes away, was Damon Leonides, and he knew nothing of her coming.

For a second, panic welled up inside her again and she swallowed hard, her face paler with sheer fright. Beside her in another of the deep and comfortable armchair seats Demetrius Leonides stirred and reach over to cover her hands again as he had in the car.

'You are afraid,' he said softly, and squeezed her fingers gently. 'I do not think you have told me all, even now, lovely Rona, have you?'

'I—I can't.' She turned again to the window as the pilot brought the plane down carefully on to the small landing field.

The tiny speck that had sat so exquisitely in the bright sea was now much larger and somehow more menacing as they sank downwards, and she had the feeling that she had been swallowed by the lush greens, and the more violent colours of the vegetation that now grew all around them.

It was beautiful, she was forced to acknowledge that, and in other circumstances she would probably have exclaimed in delight at the sight of it, but she was now in a state of panic and her legs felt incapable of holding her as she was assisted from the plane by her host's solicitous hand under her elbow.

'I—I shouldn't have come,' she whispered, and he looked at her for a second with one dark brow expressing surprise.

'You wish to go back?' he asked, knowing full well she could not, she recognised ruefully, and she shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'I must see him now.'



'Courage!' His hand squeezed her arm gently, and he nodded to the pilot as they walked off across the grass, his hand still guiding her. 'A short drive and we will be at the villa, you will see Damon, and it will all be over.'

As easily as that, Rona thought in panic. It could not be as easy as that, not when Damon Leonides knew who she was and why she was there. She followed her guide to where a long shiny sports car stood parked, and allowed him to see her safely into it, her face as pale as cream as she faced the coming ordeal.

The drive to the villa was beautiful, and she even found a moment to appreciate it, despite her cold panic. Vivid blooms of purple and red, blues and yellows, with here and there clusters of trees, heavily scented and recognisable as oranges and lemons, with even some palms. Oleanders, hibiscus, bougainvillea, all the names that spelled warm climes and exotic countries and all here on this little island.

The villa itself, when it appeared suddenly around a final bend in the road, looked even more huge than it had from the air. A great white rambling place whose windows and doorways were framed with the rambling blossom of bougainvillea and red and gold roses.

A broad paved area in front of the main doors was softened by tubs of flowers, roses again and geraniums tumbling over the edges of their containers in a riot of scent and colour. Tall cypresses and the more-broad shade of plane trees sheltered the back of the villa and curved protectively round another paved area that surrounded a tiled swimming pool.

Demetrius Leonides helped her from the car, one hand under her elbow as if he suspected she might run now that they were actually in the domain of his formidable uncle, and she hung back when he would have taken her straight into the house via those wide and impressive open doors.

'I—I can't just walk in,' she said in a voice that quivered with nervousness, and her companion smiled.

'But how else can you enter the house?' he asked reasonably. 'Come, Rona, I will be with you, have no fear!'

The entrance hall he took her into was like something out of dream, and Rona stared around her in wonder, her fear briefly forgotten. The villa was not an ancient monument by any means, but it had been designed with some of Greece's most beautiful architecture in mind and its graceful proportions were enhanced by a small fountain actually in the hall.

Luxury was the keyword and for a moment Rona felt almost bitter that a family with such wealth could ruin a man for robbing them of no more than it must have cost to construct the hall she stood in. But even in her bitterness she had to be fair and she faced the fact that her uncle had taken money that did not belong to him, and dismissal and prosecution would have followed his action, whoever his employer had been.

'I will see if I can find Damon for you,' Demetrius said softly against her ear, and Rona looked up at him in alarm. To be left alone in this great hall would be like being abandoned altogether, and she was already dependent upon Demetrius for what little courage she had left.

'Please-' she begged. 'Please don't leave me!'

He took her hand in his, felt its coldness and impulsively lifted it to his lips and kissed her fingers, warming them with his mouth. 'But we cannot stand here in the hall for ever, lovely Rona,' he told her softly. 'I will not be gone very long and then you will have your meeting with my uncle as you wished.'

'Demetrius-'

Her own soft pronunciation of his name was drowned in a far more forceful call from across the hall, and they both swung round as if caught out in some wrong-doing. For a moment Rona feared she would faint, her heart was beating so heavily, and she closed her eyes for a second to recover herself.

There was no doubt who the man was who came striding across the hall towards them. Her instinct told her it was Damon Leonides, the man she had come far to see, but she was not sure whether to be glad or even more fearful now that she saw him.

Certainly he looked every bit as formidable as his nephew had forecast, and she felt her own case already hopeless when she saw his expression. He was even taller than she remembered from their last brief meeting and as lean as a panther with the same animal grace and hint of danger about him.

Black hair, not merely dark as Demetrius' was, grew thick and heavy above a broad brow and was lightly touched with grey just above his ears, and black eyes took in the small, tight intimate look of his nephew and a strange red-haired girl standing so close together. The eyes had a strange, luminous glint, almost as if they doubted what they saw.

His features had a carved, bronze look that was more startlingly attractive even than Demetrius' good looks and he exuded a kind of smouldering virility that was both exciting and unnerving. It was evident, too, that his sudden appearance had unnerved Demetrius, for she could feel his hand trembling as it held hers.

'Damon!' He smiled broadly and turned towards his uncle, as if everything was normal. 'I was just coming to look for you!'

The black eyes did not even look at Demetrius, even briefly, but remained riveted on Rona, and on her copper-red hair in particular, so

that she instinctively put up a hand to brush it back from her face. The scrutiny was prolonged and steady and Rona found it infinitely disturbing rather than annoying.

'You have just arrived?'

Demetrius nodded, and it was obvious that he found his uncle's manner strange, for there was a small curious frown from between his brows. 'Yes, I —we have just arrived, we flew from Athens, as I always do.'

'Of course!'

Demetrius, still frowning, looked at him curiously. 'Damon-' he began, but his uncle was quoting softly something in Greek, and Demetrius turned his head swiftly and looked at her again. 'Oh. but no,' he said after a moment, and laughed, shaking his head.

Damon Leonides disliked his laughing, that much was plain from the sudden drawing of black brows into a frown that would have discouraged the boldest of spirits. He removed that compelling gaze from her at last and looked at his nephew. 'Then perhaps you will introduce me,' he said coolly.

It was plain that now that it came to the point Demetrius was far less willing to introduce her. He had promised his support, but Rona could see that possibility slipping away now that he was face to face with this stern and dangerously disturbing man.

'Damon-' He hesitated, his eyes shifting uneasily from his uncle to Rona and back again. 'This is Miss - Forbes, Miss Rona Forbes. Miss Forbes—my uncle Damon Leonides.'

Rona saw it happen. The recognition of her name, the hard, flinty look in the black eyes that not only guessed her reason for being there but scorned her for coming, and dashed any hope of her appeal falling

on sympathetic ears. Her heart turned cold suddenly and she was almost overwhelmed by a sense of despair that brought a threat of tears in its wake.

'I believe I have met Miss Forbes before,' the cool, hard voice informed him, 'but I cannot imagine why she is here now, in my home—uninvited!'

'I invited Miss Forbes!' Demetrius made a gallant try in the face of what Rona recognised as hopeless odds. It would do no good at all to plead her uncle's cause with this man, he was hard and relentless and he would probably not even give her a hearing.

'Then you will be responsible for seeing that she returns to wherever she came from!' Damon Leonides told him harshly, and turned about, striding off back the way he had come.

'Damon!' The almost anguished cry from his nephew must have had some effect, for he turned again, although there was no hint of relenting in the black-eyed gaze that looked at him steadily, challenging him to produce a good reason for bringing her there.

'I do not know very much about the circumstances,' Demetrius said in a clear but not quite confident voice, 'but Miss Forbes has flown out from England especially to see you about her uncle.'

'I know everything there is to know about Miss Forbes' uncle,' Damon Leonides said coldly. 'I have nothing to say on the matter.'

'But after such a long journey,' Demetrius insisted, his brow beaded with perspiration in the effort of trying to outface this formidable man, 'I for one do not have the coldness of heart to simply send her all the way back to England without at least stating her case! Can you do less?'

It was plainly a challenge, and it was equally plain that Damon Leonides disliked the situation, but he nodded his head after a moment or two, though he still addressed himself to his nephew, something in their own tongue that sounded terse and angry, but which evidently satisfied Demetrius.

He gave a great sigh of relief and the hand that still held Rona's squeezed her fingers gently in assurance. 'You are to stay,' he said as Damon Leonides strode off across the great hall again, anger and pride in every step and in the angle of the dark head.

'Stay?' Rona blinked.

'It is not only due to my efforts, I think,' Demetrius told her with a faint smile. One hand touched her red hair lightly with the finger-tips. 'There is much working for you here, lovely Rona.'

Her mind was in a daze, trying to grasp the meaning of his words, trying to realise that Damon Leonides had relented, at least for the time being. 'I don't understand what you mean about my staying,' she said in a small tired voice. 'I didn't intend--'

'It is late,' Demetrius reminded her. 'Someone would have to fly you back to Athens if you were to return this evening, and Damon has consented to speak to you about your uncle later this evening.'

'Oh! Oh, thank heaven!' Her eyes looked wide and shiny with tears in the cool dimness of the great hall, and her heart was throbbing with an urgent beat that almost took her breath away. It was hard to believe that she was not only in the house of Damon Leonides but was actually going to be allowed to put her uncle's case to him.

It suddenly all seemed too much for her and her head began to spin crazily round and round. She had had almost nothing to eat since she left London, her normally healthy appetite had deserted her, and the

excitement, the unaccustomed emotional strain, combined with an empty stomach, was catching up with her at last.

The marble columns, the cool white walls all spun around her, blurred into a haze of sound and vision with the anxious voice of Demetrius and the soft tinkling voice of the fountain. Unable to resist any longer, Rona closed her eyes and did not even know that Demetrius broke her fall, looking down at her pale face with an expression of blank dismay.

## CHAPTER TWO

WAKING up in a strange bed in a strange room startled Rona when she first opened her eyes, but then she remembered where she was and her reaction was a kind of apprehensive excitement. Someone, and she assumed it had been Damon Leonides, had had her carried upstairs to one of the bedrooms after she fainted, and the first person she saw when she came round was a small, elderly woman who regarded her with kindly but speculative dark eyes.

An attempt to discover exactly what had happened to her had drawn blank, for the woman spoke no English, and it was not until another servant brought her a meal on a tray that she was able to ask questions and have them answered.

Demetrius had accompanied the maid who brought her food and she suspected he had done so without his uncle's knowledge. He informed her that Damon had decided she was in no fit state either to discuss her uncle's business or to leave the island until she had eaten and had a night's rest, and of course no one had dared to disagree.

Her suitcase had been brought and she had been allocated a bathroom as well as the luxurious bedroom. She had never slept in such luxury in her life, and she could not help but get pleasure from it even though her stay would be very brief, and a traumatic interview with Damon Leonides lay ahead of her.

She bathed and dressed quite early, putting on a simple, short-sleeved linen dress in pale blue, wondering as she dressed if she would be given breakfast as well. So far she felt as if she had been confined in an extremely comfortable and luxurious prison, for she had seen no one but Demetrius and his uncle apart from the two servants. Whisked away upstairs as if she was to be hidden from the rest of the household, she got the impression that Damon Leonides intended whisking her away from the house with equal swiftness.



Her unspoken question of whether she was to be given breakfast or not was answered sooner than she expected, when a soft tap on the bedroom door admitted the younger maidservant of last night. Smiling shyly, she informed Rona in strongly accented English that Mr. Leonides was expecting her to join him for breakfast.

'Now?' It was perhaps a silly question to ask, and she saw the slight lift of the girl's brows as she answered, but the invitation took her by surprise.

*'Ne, thespinis,'* the girl told her, 'Kirio Leonides waits for you.'

Rona licked her dry lips nervously, well aware that the girl was probably curious about her, wondering who she was and at whose invitation she was there. 'Very well,' she said. 'Thank you.'

Mr. Leonides, the maid had said, so presumably it was Damon Leonides himself who had sent for her, and the thought of meeting him again made her tremble. Not only had she to face the possible scorn of his anger when she tried to plead her uncle's cause, but she had to recognise that he was a formidable man in more ways than one.

Neither newspaper photographs nor her own youthful recollections had prepared her for the sheer, blood-stirring masculinity of the man, and she found herself almost anxious to see him again, despite the fact that she feared his reaction to her pleas. He was mature, sophisticated and ruthless, and quite unlike any man she had ever met, and he had disturbed her strangely in those few moments last night.

Following the girl downstairs she was once more made aware of the luxury of her surroundings. A great curved staircase led down into the hall, and white alabaster statues occupied specially constructed niches in the curving walls that followed its shape. The house w<sup>as</sup> quiet and she wondered if whatever other members of the family

there were in residence were still in bed. It was after all, quite early, and perhaps Damon Leonides wanted her safely out of the way before anyone else saw her. Breakfast was apparently to be taken on the wide, mosaic-tiled terrace that surrounded the pool, and Rona could think of no more beautiful setting for the first meal of the day. The protective sweep of cypress and plane trees that hid the sea from view at this point were fronted by every kind of shrub imaginable, headily scented even this early in the day, and the longer shadows of morning cast shade over everything but the glittering blue of the swimming pool.

A long white table was set out beneath a heavy-headed wisteria whose pale mauve blooms stirred lazily in the cool morning breeze. The coolness surprised her until she remembered that Polyxena was an island and there would almost always be a breeze off the sea. It was idyllic and Rona spent a wistful moment wishing she could spend some time there in happier circumstances.

As she expected, Damon Leonides was alone, and in the few seconds it took her to walk across the terrace towards him, she took fresh stock of him from the concealment of her lashes, finding that her initial impression was reinforced rather than diminished.

His lean sinewy body was closely fitted in a dark blue silk shirt that was open at the neck and showed a strong brown throat and the first suggestion of dark hair across the broad chest. Slim-fitting cream trousers emphasised the cat-like movement of long legs as he got to his feet at her approach, and she felt her heart already beating frantically hard as she came closer.

'Good morning!' The greeting was abrupt and scarcely welcoming, but the situation was hardly normal and in the circumstances she could not expect him to be any more effusive.

'Good morning, Mr. Leonides.' Her own voice sounded small and much too shaky, but there was nothing she could do to control it, and a large hand indicated that she should sit down, facing him across the long narrow table.

'You are recovered from your—faint?'

The brief hesitation seemed to Rona to imply some doubt that the faint had been genuine, and she flushed, looking at him with wary blue eyes as he reseated himself. Another brief indication with that large and commanding hand and a young manservant, immaculate in a white jacket, brought rolls, butter and honey and a pot of Turkish coffee with tiny cups to drink it from.

'I'm quite all right now, thank you,' Rona said, waiting until the manservant had departed before she answered. 'I'm—I'm sorry I made such a fool of myself.'

'You had eaten little or nothing on your journey, I suspect,' he suggested, and she thought that some of that cold hardness was missing from his voice this morning. 'It is foolish to neglect yourself in that way, and quite unnecessary.'

He was lecturing her as if she was a child, Rona thought a little dizzily, and wondered if that was how he saw her—as a rather foolish and headstrong child who had travelled all the way to Greece to plead a lost cause.

'I—I had a lot on my mind,' she said in a small and betrayingly unsteady voice, 'I just couldn't eat.'

'This morning you can and you will,' he said firmly, and indicated the food in front of her. 'I hope you have a taste for Turkish coffee, if you prefer—'

'Oh no, no—this is fine! Thank you!'

She broke one of the little rolls and buttered it, then added a smear of honey, but her hands were trembling and she felt quite incredibly clumsy. Presumably his intentions were the best, but she found it hard to face eating breakfast when there was so much she had to say, and she scarcely tasted what she was eating.

'Surely you are hungry?' he said, seeing her lack of appetite, and she shook her head. 'Tell me,' he added in a voice that was so much more gentle that her heart lurched in surprise, 'does your uncle know that you are here?'

'Yes.' She did not meet his eyes, but spread more butter to give her trembling hands something to do.

'But it was my own idea, I—I have to ask you—'

'You will have breakfast before you ask anything,' he insisted.

'But I must—'

The black eyes glittered at her across the table in a way that showed his dislike of being crossed. 'I will discuss nothing until I have breakfasted,' he informed her sternly. 'When you have eaten, *thespinis*, I will see you in my office, but until you have eaten your breakfast I refused to discuss anything.'

'But I can't eat!' Rona insisted, her voice more shaky than ever. 'Not when I think of—'

'If you refuse to eat your own meal,' he interrupted harshly, 'at least do me the courtesy of allowing me to have mine in peace, Miss Forbes.'

'I'm—I'm sorry.' She could not have said what inspired it, but she suddenly felt confident that he was going to not only hear her appeal, but give it some consideration, and she gazed at him for a second with a hint of the hope she felt showing in her eyes.

'Eat your breakfast!' The order was short and unmistakable, but somehow that feeling of anticipation would not be subdued, and she almost smiled as she obediently picked up her knife again and helped herself to another roll.

They ate their meal in almost complete silence, and at first Rona found it rather unnerving, but after a while the beauty and tranquillity of her surroundings began to affect her, and she understood her unwilling host's desire to have his breakfast in peace. It was an idyllic setting and should be enjoyed to the full—also, what else could they have talked about but the very subject he had forbidden her to mention?

They were almost finished before anyone else appeared, and Rona was surprised to see a child come running across the terrace towards them. It was a little girl of about eight years old with a small oval face and large dark eyes. Long dark hair streamed out behind her as she ran and she came straight to Damon Leonides, flinging herself on him, climbing on to his knees and kissing him soundly while she chattered ceaselessly in Greek.

Her sudden appearance startled Rona, although heaven knew why, for she knew from her uncle of the closeness of the Greek family. It was quite possible that several members of the Leonides family lived in the big villa, and that this little girl was a young niece or a cousin. Unless—Rona gave herself a hasty mental shake to dismiss less charitable possibilities. Whoever she was, the child obviously adored him.

'Ssh! Ssh!' A long finger was laid gently on the child's lips and her prattling stopped while she gazed at Rona with huge, curious eyes. Damon Leonides put an arm round her and hugged her close. Anna-Maria,' he said in carefully pronounced English, 'we will speak in English, yes? Miss Forbes is from England and she does not speak our language, so it is polite that we speak hers, do you agree?'

The child nodded, but it was evident that she found the strange tongue much more difficult, although she seemed prepared to try. 'Good morning,' she said shyly. 'How are you?'

Enchanted both with the child herself and her charming manners, Rona smiled and would have replied, but before she could say anything Damon Leonides decided to introduce her more fully. 'Anna-Maria is my niece, Miss Forbes,' he told her, and from the glint in those unfathomable black eyes he might almost have suspected her less charitable thoughts regarding the child. 'Miss Forbes is here to see me about business matters, Anna-Maria,' he explained. 'Now! Will you have breakfast alone or wait for your papa?'

The little girl looked at his empty plate and pouted reproachfully. 'You did not wait for me,' she accused. 'I do not like to eat alone, Thios Damon!'

'But I wished to have my breakfast early, *pethi mou*,' he told her, plainly not at all disturbed by her reproach. 'I have to speak privately with Miss Forbes now, so if you will excuse us.' He gently lifted the child from his lap and deposited her on her feet as he stood up. 'Your papa will breakfast with you very soon, I am sure.'

Taking it as her cue, Rona too got up from the table and once more felt a sickening sense of apprehension curling in her stomach as she prepared to follow him back to the house. The little girl's dark eyes were frankly curious as she watched them go, and she tilted her head to one side as her uncle smiled down at her before turning away.

'Thios Damon,' she said in a clear childish voice that had difficulty in choosing the right words in a strange tongue, 'is Miss Forbes—is she your—lady?'

Rona felt the hot colour flood into her cheeks and she dared not look at Damon Leonides, although she was heart-stirringly aware of that

lean, panther-like body standing close beside her, and the brief scrutiny of those black eyes that she did not actually see.

'No,' he said quietly but firmly. 'And you do not ask such questions again, Anna-Maria. Do you understand?'

Rona's instinct was to defend her, for with Damon Leonides' reputation such a mistake on the part of a child was surely understandable. Instead she said nothing, but curled her fingers into her palms to stop them trembling, and saw Anna-Maria's dark eyes resent the scolding, no matter how mild.

*'Parndon.'* Having apologised, Anna-Maria subsided and the last Rona saw as she followed Damon Leonides into the house was her small rather disconsolate figure sitting alone at the long table.

In the coolness of the vast hall again he turned and looked down at Rona with one brow slightly lifted. 'I must apologise for Anna-Maria's mistake,' he said coolly, and Rona shook her head.

'Oh, it honestly doesn't matter,' she said hastily. 'It's quite understandable in the circumstances.'

He opened a door leading off the hall and stepped back to allow her to precede him into a big, cool room furnished as an office, but much more luxuriously furnished than any office she had heard of.

A dark red and gold Turkish carpet deadened their footsteps and covered the floor from wall to wall and a big, dark wood desk gleamed richly in the same way the huge leather armchair did, and the two other chairs in the room. Arched windows stood open and let in the cool breeze off the sea, with the ever-intrusive vines of bougainvillea and jasmine poking scented heads past the shutters and filling the room with their perfume.

'Please sit down.' She was directed to a big leather armchair on one side of the desk and Damon Leonides seated himself behind it. He leaned back in his chair, seemingly quite at ease, which Rona most definitely was not. 'You were not surprised that Anna-Maria implied a—liaison between us?' he asked, using one hand to convey the delicacy of the meaning, and the question was so unexpected that Rona stared and wondered what on earth he expected from her by way of an answer.

'I—I simply meant that I couldn't really be—I mean I couldn't blame a child for putting a wrong construction on my being here,' she explained.

Long fingers were steeped under his chin and he regarded her steadily for a second. The soft shadows that filled the room emphasised the strong, carved look of his features and gave infinite depth to those black eyes. 'And why are you here, *thespinis*?' he asked softly.

Rona held his gaze for as long as she could, then looked down instead at her hands clasped tightly together in her lap. Her heart was beating so furiously hard that it made her head spin, for now that she was faced with actually making her plea she seemed bereft of the right words to make it. Whatever it was she had expected, it was nothing like this —facing a man like Damon Leonides across a desk, with those disturbing black eyes fixed on her with such intensity.

'I—I have to tell you about my uncle,' she began.

'Your uncle betrayed a position of trust, Miss Forbes,' he said in the same quiet voice. 'He stole from the company that employed him—he stole from me and my family.'



'Oh, but he didn't *mean* to steal!' Rona cried desperately. 'You—you don't understand the circumstances, how could you? You don't know him!'

'I have met your uncle on several occasions,' he argued, though without malice. 'I would have trusted him—I *did* trust him, and my trust was misplaced. I do not often misjudge a man, but in this instance I did.'

'But don't you see?' Rona insisted. 'It was for *me* that he did it! It was for me that he—he borrowed the money, so that I could have all the things he wanted me to have! He meant to pay it back—he isn't a thief, he just wanted things for me!'

Damon Leonides sat, still as a statue, with those long fingers steepled and his strong chin with its deep cleft just resting on the finger-tips, a deep fathomless look in his eyes. 'You are saying that the blame is yours?' he asked quietly, and Rona nodded, hope again stirring in her.

'In a way—yes! I was the one who reaped the benefit, so I'm as much, or more, to blame as Rex is! I should have realised that we couldn't live as we did on Rex's salary!'

It seemed an interminable time before he spoke again and Rona almost held her breath, her heart pounding relentlessly at her ribs while she waited. 'So what would you have me do, Miss Forbes?' he asked softly at last. 'Punish you instead of your uncle? Would that suit you better?'

The suggestion startled her and Rona gazed at him for a moment uncertainly, her mind in a turmoil. Nothing was going the way she had visualised it. He was not furiously angry and neither was he sarcastic or coldly indifferent. He was quiet and cool and quite dismayingly reasonable.

'I—I wish there *was* some way I could take his punishment,' she told him shakily. 'If—if only you'd give him a chance to—to make up for what he's done, Mr. Leonides. Give him the chance to pay back the money he—he borrowed, and clear himself. I'd help, I'd do anything as long as Rex doesn't have to go to prison!'

'Anything?' He echoed the word softly, and for some reason she could not quite understand a sudden shivering chill of warning ran through her like a cold wind. 'How literally may I take that, Miss Forbes?'

Rona curled her hands into her palms to stop them trembling so and licked her lips nervously. There was something about this situation that disturbed her and at the same time aroused a tingling sensation of anticipation. 'I—I don't understand,' she said.

The black eyes were glittering like live coals and there was an aura of excitement about him that somehow communicated itself to her, making her shiver and curl her hands even more tightly. 'I am asking if you are prepared to expiate your uncle's wrong-doing,' he said quietly, and she looked across at the strong, dark features with wide and wary eyes that had a slightly dazed look.

She had expected a fierce verbal battle in her own and her uncle's defence, and instead she was apparently being offered the opportunity to do something concrete about rescuing him, and almost without argument. Only some deep, disturbing instinct warned her that all was not as easy as it appeared at the moment.

'Of—of course I am,' she said, her voice shakily husky as she hastily raced through a thousand possible forms of retribution. 'I'll do anything to prevent Rex going to prison.' She looked at him across the width of the big desk and her mouth was suddenly dry. 'How—what must I do?' she asked.

He said nothing for a moment, but got to his feet and strode across to the window, standing with his feet apart, his long legs braced and tautly muscular, his back turned to her. His hands clasped one another behind his back and pulled the broad shoulders back in a stance that was oddly defiant in the circumstances, and Rona found her pulses racing uncontrollably as she looked across at him.

He was an alarmingly disturbing man and she felt both fear and excitement mingled in her tangled emotions as she sat there looking at that broad back, waiting for him to tell her what she had to do to help Rex.

'Tell me, Miss Forbes,' he said, his voice having an oddly detached sound as he spoke without turning round, 'what do you know of Greece and the Greeks?'

Startled by the question and completely in the dark about his reason for asking it, Rona hesitated before answering. 'Not very much,' she confessed. 'I know more about ancient Greece than modern Greece, I suppose, like a lot of people who've never been here.'

'Ah!' He nodded, but still did not turn round, and Rona began to wish she could see his face even if it was only to give her some clue as to what was going on in his mind. 'We have our customs,' he said after a second or two. 'Customs you may find strange, Miss Forbes, but which suit us well enough. Polyxena, this small island, tiny as it is, has its own customs and traditions even. Its own—beliefs.'

'Yes, I see.' More confused than ever, she shook her head, seeking something that could possibly concern her own problem among the talk of Greek customs. 'But I—'

'You think, of course, that our beliefs do not concern you, hmm?'

She nodded, then realised the futility of the gesture while he still had his back to her, and licked her dry lips before answering. 'I—I don't

quite see how they do,' she agreed. 'I shan't really be here long enough to—to be affected by them, and I—'

'Would you agree to stay, if I requested it?' he asked, and Rona stared at him in bewilderment. She was so long in answering that he turned at last and faced her, a swift, smooth movement that again reminded her of the dangerous grace of a cat. Black eyes regarded her steadily and she shivered at some deep but as yet indefinable meaning in their depths. Well, *thespinis*?' he prompted softly.

Rona shook her head slowly, as much in confusion as denial, as he probably realised. 'I—I don't know,' she said huskily. 'If you—'

'I have excellent reasons for asking you to remain on the island,' he interrupted shortly. 'Reasons I cannot reveal at the moment, but important ones.'

It was difficult to know just how to reply to such an unexpected request, and she sought desperately for words, and for reasons why he should have asked her such a thing. 'It—it's very important to me to know what's going to happen to Rex, my uncle,' she told him at last. 'I can't undertake to stay here, without even knowing *why* I'm staying, not until I know what's going to happen to Rex, Mr. Leonides. I couldn't possibly desert him, not when I came here to help him.'

The black eyes continued to watch her with that same disconcerting steadiness while he answered her. 'If you agree to stay on here, Miss Forbes,' he said quietly, 'of course your uncle has nothing to fear. No action will be taken against him, and the money he—' Wide spread and expressive hands delicately suggested a suitable verb. 'Nothing will be said about it, if you consent to stay on here.'

Unable to understand or find reasons, Rona was completely bewildered, but the promise he held out that no action would be taken against Rex was the one thing that really mattered to her at the

moment, and almost without realising she was doing it, she nodded her head.

'Very well,' she said in a small, bewildered voice, 'I'll—I'll stay, Mr. Leonides, although I can't think why you-'

'My reasons will be made clear in good time,' Damon Leonides informed her quietly. 'And you may trust my word that your uncle has nothing to fear.'

'But—but what do I tell him?' Rona asked. 'I mean, I can't just say that you've agreed not to press charges against him, if I stay on here. It—it doesn't really make sense.'

'Then tell him that you are remaining here to work for me,' he suggested matter-of-factly, and Rona blinked.

'Is—is that what you have in mind?' she asked, not at all averse to the idea when she considered it.

'But why did you-?' She shook her head. 'I didn't realise that was why you wanted me to stay,' she said, smiling a little dazedly.

'You like children?'

Again he startled her with an unexpected question, and she looked at him curiously. 'Yes,' she said, cautiously, and he nodded as if the answer satisfied him.

'You like Anna-Maria?'

'The little girl I saw at breakfast?' This time she could answer with less hesitation and she thought she followed his train of thought at last. 'I liked her very much, the little I saw of her,' she said.

He nodded his head and drew back his clasped hands behind him so that the dark silk skirt was stretched tautly across his chest, looking at her steadily for a long and infinitely disturbing moment. 'Then for the moment,' he said quietly, 'you can consider yourself as in charge of my niece; she has a tutor during the mornings, but you will take charge of her at other times.'

'I—I can't-' She tried to think of words to say, words to express her unutterable relief that he was demanding no more of her than that she should care for his niece in return for her uncle's freedom. It was so much more, so much easier, than she expected and she could not quite believe it. There seemed no words capable of conveying what she felt and he completely misunderstood her uncompleted sentence.

'You dislike the idea?' he asked, an edge of harshness on his voice, and Rona hastily shook her head to deny it.

'No, no, of course not!' she assured him unhesitatingly. 'I—I just can't believe it, that's all.'

'You wished to take on the burden of your uncle's punishment,' he reminded her quietly. 'I am merely giving you the opportunity to do so.'

'Caring for the little girl?' Rona asked, still dazed at the outcome of the interview she had faced with such dread. 'I can't believe you mean that as a punishment, Mr. Leonides.'

For a moment he said nothing, then he shook his head and that deep, fathomless look was in his eyes again. 'When you have been here for a while, *thespinis*,' he assured her softly, 'then you can decide whether what I require of you is punishment or not.'

## CHAPTER THREE

RONA emerged from Damon Leonides' office in something of a daze. She could still scarcely believe that he had given her the task of taking care of his little niece as a way of paying for her uncle's wrongdoing. It seemed such a mild, ordinary thing to ask her to do when she had expected to find him ready to extract the last ounce of justice from the situation, and something about the whole thing made her very uneasy.

Seeing Demetrius outside the office door did not altogether surprise her, although she thought he had not expected to find her closeted with his uncle quite so early in the day. It was difficult to remember that she had met Demetrius Leonides for the first time less than twenty-four hours before and had seen little of him since. He was charming and polite and she felt a desperate need for someone to turn to in the strange and complex situation she found herself in.

'Good morning, Rona.' His blue eyes flicked briefly in the direction of the office door behind her, and Rona smiled, though somewhat blankly.

'Good morning, Mr. Leonides—Demetrius.'

The frown that almost formed when she addressed him by his formal title vanished in a smile when she corrected herself, and she was reminded how good-looking he was. His features were cast in the classic mould, clear-cut and handsome and quite unlike the sterner more lean look of his uncle. He glanced at the closed door behind her again, and raised an enquiring brow.

'What happened?' he asked, and Rona shook her head vaguely, at the same time thanking heaven that he was still prepared to take an interest in her mission.

'I—I'm not sure,' she confessed.

'Did you have the opportunity to put your uncle's case to him?'

'Yes, I did, but-' Again she shook her head and looked at him uncertainly. 'I'm a little confused,' she confessed. 'I—I don't understand why he wasn't more angry—more scornful, even. I expected it, I was prepared for it, but he—he simply asked me if I was prepared to expiate my uncle's-' She stopped there, hastily, biting her lip and glancing up at him through her lashes.

'What *did* he ask of you, Rona?' he asked, anxiously she thought. More anxious than curious at the moment, and that puzzled her rather.

'Just that I look after Anna-Maria, the little girl I met earlier,' she said. 'But—I don't know, it seems such a *little* thing to ask when I asked for so much.'

'The reinstatement of your uncle?' It was obvious that he now guessed there was something more than that at stake, and Rona wondered if she would now have to tell him the truth about why she was there. 'Is that so much to ask, Rona?' he enquired softly.

She looked down at her hands, reluctant to speak of her real reason to anyone who did not need to know, but realising that Demetrius had as much right to know as anyone. He was, after all, one of the family that had been wronged by her uncle, and he had brought her to Polyxena, risking Damon Leonides' wrath to do so.

'I-I wasn't asking for him to be reinstated,' she told him. 'I can hardly expect that, but I hoped that he wouldn't have to be—punished.'

'Punished?' The blue eyes watched her steadily, curiously, and she swallowed hard.

The words did not come easily to her, and she hesitated for a long time before she spoke. Somehow she felt alien and very small and vulnerable suddenly as she stood there in the big hall with Demetrius



Leonides. And if she told Demetrius the truth he too would probably desert her, leaving her quite alone in this luxurious but curiously discomfiting world.

'Rex—my uncle, took money that belonged to his —your company,' she said. 'The company secretary, when he came to London, told him that—that he would almost certainly be convicted of theft and sent to prison.'

'I see.' He did not immediately grow angry, as she half expected, and that at least gave her some cause to hope, but there was a cooler, more distant sound to his voice, she thought, and she felt her heart beating anxiously as she sought for words. , 'I—I know it was wrong,' she said in a small, wistful voice. 'I'm not trying to excuse him or what he did, but only to explain why he did it. It wasn't for his own benefit that he took the money, but for mine. Oh, don't you see?' she pleaded. 'He gave me everything I wanted, he always has, and I—I didn't realise; I should have done! I should have seen what was happening and not gone on taking!'

'You love him very much,' Demetrius said softly, and from his voice, Rona knew he would not judge either her or Rex too harshly.

'He loves me,' she whispered. 'That's why he did it—he isn't a criminal!'

Tears stood in her eyes as she looked up at him, and Demetrius reached out and gently stroked them away with the tip of one finger. 'To steal for love is still wrong,' he said softly. 'But it is understandable, although I cannot imagine that Damon would take the same view.'

'I expected him not to,' Rona admitted, shaking her head as the old confusions came back to her again. 'But he was quite—oh, I don't

know! I don't understand it at all! I said I wished there was some way that I could take the blame, be punished instead of Rex.'

'You said what?' The fingers holding her arm had a clasp like an iron band and she flinched from the look in his eyes. 'What did he say to that, Rona—for the love of heaven, did you have to present him with a ready-made reason for—what he has in mind?'

'I don't understand!' She looked up at him again, her blue eyes dark with doubt. 'He—he simply asked me if I was prepared to take care of the little girl, and I said I would. It seems such a little thing to do in exchange for my uncle not being sent to prison.'

Demetrius' blue eyes looked down at her steadily and something in his expression caused a strange little curling sensation in her stomach. 'Are you sure that is all he asked of you?' he insisted. 'He mentioned nothing more?'

Rona shook her head vaguely, Demetrius' blue eyes on her anxiously still. There had been something else, of course, although she had chosen to forget those remarks about customs and traditions, dismissing them as nothing to do with her own position. Damon Leonides had not been specific, merely hinted at something less palatable than caring for his niece, and until now she had refused to read anything into those last enigmatic words.

Now Demetrius was implying something more sinister, judging by his reaction, and she felt an involuntary shiver run cold through her whole body when she remembered them. 'He—he did say something about me having to decide, later on, whether or not I considered what he had in mind for me was a punishment or not,' she said, and Demetrius swore softly in his own tongue. Harsh, virulent words that startled her with their vehemence, x.. 'What did he say to you?' he demanded. 'Tell me, Rona—what has he told you?'

Her heart was thudding painfully hard at her ribs, and she licked her dry lips before she answered. 'He asked me first what I knew about Greece,' she recalled, husky-voiced. 'Then—then he spoke about customs and traditions. He said even a little island like Polyxena had its own traditions and beliefs, he didn't say what they were, but—'

'He will not tell you yet,' Demetrius said harshly, and Rona felt cold suddenly, shaking her head and looking at him with unbelieving eyes.

'Tell me,' she begged, but he too shook his head.

'I am sorry, Rona,' he said, sounding as if he had suddenly made up his mind. 'I should not have brought you here. I must take you away again—quickly.'

He looked so serious that Rona shivered, even though she told herself she was being foolishly apprehensive. 'I asked you to help me,' she reminded him. 'And you did—I'm grateful to you for bringing me here.'

His hand on her arm was tight, his voice urgent. 'I must take you away again,' he insisted. 'Please, Rona, I must put you on a plane for England, where you will be safe!'

'Safe?' She echoed the word breathlessly, and every nerve in her body was quivering with anticipation of what would come next. 'I don't understand,' she said in a small, soft voice that trembled alarmingly. 'Why do you want me to go away again, now that I'm here?'

Demetrius shook his head slowly, his hands on her arms, his good-looking face frowning and uneasy. 'I have known you only a few hours, Rona,' he said softly, 'but I would not willingly have brought you here if I had only stopped to think what I was bringing you into.'

'You don't know about this island, about its legend, its—its customs.' He sighed and shrugged his shoulders resignedly. 'I had forgotten about the legend when I agreed to bring you here, and that was foolish of me when the family lay such store by it. It is primitive, ridiculous and outdated,' he said, his brows drawn. 'But they still believe in it! Even Damon—and it is because it is Damon that I- Please, Rona, let me take you back, now, while there is still time!'

Rona was almost too stunned to speak. Her eyes were wide and anxious and her heart was hammering violently at her ribs as she looked up at him. 'Had this—has it anything to do with your asking about my age?' she asked huskily, and for a moment Demetrius stared at her uncomprehendingly, then he shook his head.

'Nothing at all,' he said firmly. 'If only you were a few years younger there would be no reason for me to worry about the legend, or at least not where Damon is concerned. Had you been his daughter you would have been safe enough!'

'His daughter!' Rona stared at him, the colour warm in her cheeks as she shook her head. One thing on top of another seemed to be happening to her since she came to this exotic and isolated island, but the very thought of being taken for Damon Leonides' daughter was the most disturbing idea so far.

Demetrius seemed to find her shock surprising, for he flicked that expressive brow upwards again and looked at her for a moment steadily. 'Why do you look so shocked, lovely Rona?' he asked. 'Your mother must have been beautiful too, surely, and Damon is a man of the world. He has his pick of lovely women and such a thing *was* possible until I discovered how old you were. Even Damon was a little young, I think, at fifteen years old to have fathered you!'

'You—you believed-' She shook her head dazedly, and a hint of smile showed in Demetrius' blue eyes for a moment.

'I did not mean that you should be shocked, Rona,' he told her. 'I thought you familiar with my uncle's reputation, although of course I have never heard of there being—offspring. I was merely seeking to fit you into a category, and that was a possibility, however remote!' He took a firmer hold on her arm and led her across the huge hall to the door beyond which lay the terrace and the swimming pool where she had breakfasted earlier.

The terrace was warm and sunny and the growing warmth of the day drew the heady perfume of the shrubs and flowers and filled the air with them. 'It's beautiful,' she said softly, almost to herself, as they walked on to the terrace, and Demetrius looked down at her, a hint of resignation in his eyes.

'You will not let me fly you back to Athens and put you on a plane to England?' he asked, and Rona shook her head.

'I can't, Demetrius,' she said. 'I have to do what I can to help Rex, and if staying on here and looking after the little girl is what it takes, then that's what I'll do.'

'And if there is more?' Demetrius suggested, soft-voiced.

Rona felt a curling coldness in her stomach again, but she shook her head. 'Whatever else there is for me to do, if it helps Rex, I'll do it,' she said. 'I must!'

He murmured something in his own tongue and his hand on her arm squeezed gently as he drew her across the sunlit terrace where the white table was still set for breakfast, although it seemed like hours ago since she had sat there with Damon Leonides.

The man sitting there now, with a woman and the same little girl who had interrupted their breakfast, was enough like Damon Leonides to betray their relationship, but he was perhaps a year or two younger

and less aggressively masculine and virile, although he was attractive for all that.

When Demetrius brought Rona to join them, he immediately got to his feet. 'Miss Rona Forbes,' Demetrius introduced her, after greeting them briefly in Greek. 'My mother, Madame Demeter Leonides, and my uncle, Constantine Leonides.'

'Miss Forbes! Welcome to Polyxena!' Constantine shook her firmly by the hand and smiled so pleasantly that Rona felt sure he knew nothing whatever about her uncle. Also, she realised, it was the first time she had actually been welcomed to the island, and she smiled her thanks.

Constantine Leonides quite openly appreciated the combination of copper-red hair, blue eyes and a soft creamy skin with just a hint of flush in the cheeks, but Demeter Leonides was quite another matter. Her welcome, such as it was, was grudgingly given, and she seemed much more intent on noticing Rona's riot of red hair.

She said something in Greek to her brother-in-law, apparently drawing his attention to it, for a moment later Constantine Leonides also looked pointedly at her hair, a slightly dazed look in his eyes. Then he shook his head slowly, and he too spoke a few words in Greek, which his sister-in-law greeted with open scorn.

'Please sit down, Miss Forbes,' he said, again giving her his attention. 'I know that you have breakfasted, because my daughter has told me so, but will you have some coffee, perhaps?'

'No, no, thank you.' Rona sat down, feeling nervously uneasy and glancing at Demetrius as he sat beside her.

'Damon has asked Miss Forbes to take care of Anna-Maria,' Demetrius announced, taking the onus on himself, and Rona did not

miss, the swift, meaningful look that passed between Madame Leonides and her brother-in-law.

'You are staying on the island, *thespinis*?' Constantine asked, and it was plain from his expression that he was not exactly in favour of the idea, so that Rona wondered if Damon Leonides often made arrangements without consulting the people most concerned.

'Only if you agree, of course, Mr. Leonides,' she said. 'Anna-Maria is your daughter, and naturally I assumed-'

'Someone is needed, of course, to take care of Anna-Maria,' Constantine hastened to assure her. 'But I did not know that my brother had engaged you, Miss Forbes. I am sorry if I appeared less than willing for you to have the post. I am not, of course.'

Rona smiled and decided it wasn't hard to guess that such surprises were quite frequent. 'I haven't much experience with children, I'm afraid,' she confessed, 'but I like them and I usually get along very well with them.'

'My brother-in-law sent for you, *thespinis*?' Madame Leonides asked, and Rona eyed her warily, sensing a trap but not yet sure what it was, or why it should have been set.

'Not—not exactly, Madame Leonides,' she said.

'Then I am at a loss to know why he should have taken an untrained woman into his household to care for his niece, of whom he is very fond.' The dark eyes of the older woman glittered with suspicion, and Rona felt her hands trembling as she sought desperately for reasons to be there. 'How did you get here, *thespinis*?'

'I brought Miss Forbes from Athens, Mama!' Demetrius once more came to her rescue and Rona looked at him gratefully. 'Miss Forbes was seeking assistance in getting to Polyxena to see Damon on a

matter of business, and by good fortune I was the one she asked to help her.'

'Business matters?' Madame Leonides almost spat out the words. 'When did Damon ever do business with a woman?'

'It is true, Mama,' Demetrius told her firmly. 'I can assure you of that. I too know something of the matter.'

That was true and Rona could not deny it, but she saw the puzzled look on Constantine's face as he looked at his nephew. He said nothing, however, and for that at least Rona was grateful. She needed all the breathing space she could get.

'So,' Madame Leonides said in her deep and harsh voice, 'we have a business woman to care for Anna- Maria! You are very versatile, *thespinis*!' A meaningful tightening of the rather thin lips lent harshness to an otherwise good-looking face, and Demeter Leonides' dark eyes glittered. 'So you literally descended upon us from the skies, hmm?' she asked, and Rona saw Constantine move to protest.

'Demeter, it is of no concern of ours,' he said in his quiet voice. 'Damon has-'

'Damon knew nothing of her coming, I suspect,' Madame Leonides interrupted harshly. 'Am I not right, *thespinis*?'

'Yes, Madame Leonides, but-'

'Who arranged this for you?' Madame Leonides demanded. 'Who knows the legend and seeks to make the prophecy come true by arranging matters to suit themselves?'

Rona was completely confused. Her head was spinning with every conceivable possibility and she looked from Demetrius to his mother with wide, uneasy eyes. 'I—I don't understand,' she said in a small,



husky voice. 'I know nothing of any legend, except that-' Again she glanced at Demetrius. 'You said something about a legend just now,' she reminded him. 'But I still don't know what it's all about.'

Rona thought Demetrius would have enlightened her, but his uncle shook his head, obviously uneasy about the whole incident. 'I think we are being very inhospitable,' he said in his quiet, reasonable voice. 'And we are surely letting our imaginations run away with us if we think that Miss Forbes has anything at all to do with the legend.'

'Not so, Constantine,' Demetrius argued softly, his eyes on his uncle. 'Damon has—pressed Rona into staying, more or less made it impossible for her to leave.'

'So!' The word was long-drawn and sounded almost like a sigh, while Constantine shook his head slowly.

Madame Leonides said more, much more, but all of it in Greek and very harsh and unfriendly, if her tone was anything to judge by, and her dark eyes glittered maliciously at Rona. It was Demetrius, yet again, who came to Rona's defence, and he looked almost as angry as his mother as he spoke.

'I will explain to you about the legend, Rona,' he said, after several minutes of angry exchange with his mother. 'But not at this moment, for Damon is expecting me in his office and he does not like to be kept waiting.'

'Demetrius,' his uncle suggested gently, 'I think you should leave it to Damon to tell Miss Forbes—if he wishes her to know. If he means to follow the-' An expressive shrug left Rona imagining all manner of sinister things, and she wondered what on earth she had walked into when she came to plead for her uncle.

Demetrius again gave vent to his anger in his own tongue, and both his uncle and his mother looked at him in some surprise. Constantine

was plainly disturbed by what he said, but Madame Leonides looked harshly angry still, and she turned her virulent gaze on Rona once more.

'It will not happen,' she vowed in her harsh voice. 'I will not allow it to happen!'

The last two days had moments that Rona would rather forget, but also she had enjoyed them in some ways. It was beautiful on the island and taking care of Anna-Maria was no trouble at all.

She found mealtimes rather an ordeal, although both Constantine and Demetrius did their best to put her at ease, and even Damon replied to his sister-in-law in English when she spoke Greek. His support in this way was somehow unexpected and therefore all the more welcome, although she was far less at ease with him than with either his brother or his nephew.

She had heard no more mention of the mysterious legend since her first day there, and its sinister implications had receded to the back of her mind for the time being. The little girl proved a delightfully bright and intelligent child, and Rona enjoyed visiting the beach with her, and exploring the thick lush vegetation near the house. They had not so far ventured too far afield.

Anna-Maria informed her that she could swim quite well, but that her Uncle Damon had forbidden her to swim from the island beaches because of strong currents. Damon Leonides, Rona decided, seemed to rule his idyllic little island with a rod of iron and no one, not even his brother, seemed disposed to question his absolute authority.

It was while she was on the beach with Anna-Maria on her fourth day there that she noticed another, and much smaller house, built at the far

end of the island and only just visible from where they sat because it was built on a slight hill among a thick growth of trees.

Her curiosity was aroused, because she had thought the Leonides villa the only residence on the island, and the presence of another intrigued her. She decided against questioning Anna-Maria about it, but made a vow to ask Demetrius at the first opportunity.

While Anna-Maria lay sprawled in the sun after an energetic game, Rona sat beside her, hugging her knees and gazing at the creamy roll of the sea where it licked the whites and gently. At Damon Leonides' insistence she had telephoned her uncle on her first evening there and managed to convey at least the gist of the idea that all would be well with him, if she stayed with the Leonides family as a kind of nanny to little Anna-Maria.

She thought Rex was dubious about the whole thing, but her reassurances must have done something to lighten the awful sense of impending doom that had haunted him since the discovery of his theft. She had promised to keep in touch and felt very close to tears when she replaced the receiver.

She had never been so alone in her life before, and even the quick, impulsive friendship she had with Demetrius could not compensate for the company of her beloved uncle. Perhaps, she thought ruefully, Damon Leonides had been right in stating that staying there in such circumstances and cut off from life as she knew it would be more of a punishment that she had first realised, whether he had anything else in store for her or not.

No matter if she was to be an employee, it seemed her treatment was to be little different from that of a guest, and she was still occupying the same luxurious room with her own bathroom that she - had been given on her arrival.

The bedroom was large and cool, decorated in pale green, white and gold, and its windows shaded by slatted shutters round which red roses pushed their heads and filled the room with their scent. If this was her punishment and that room her prison, then it was surely the most beautiful prison anyone could wish for.

'Rona! Rona!' Constantine Leonides' tolerant gentleness toward his little daughter allowed her to use her christian name, as Demetrius did, although Madame Leonides did not approve of either.

She looked up hastily in answer to the child's cry and followed the direction of her pointing finger. A car was drawing up on the road just above the narrow beach and it took only a second to recognise Demetrius. With a cry of delight Anna-Maria was off across the sand towards him and Rona, powerless to stop her even had she wished to, got slowly to her feet.

She watched him walk towards her with Anna- Maria hanging on to one hand and chattering incessantly, and felt a tingle of pleasure at the sight of him. Demetrius was everything the classical Greek god should be and yet he was not at all aloof and unapproachable, but warm and friendly, which only made him even more exciting.

He-smiled as he came closer and the warmth in his blue eyes encompassed the brief yellow and brown dress she wore approvingly. 'This is an unexpected pleasure,' he said, taking her hand in his and raising it to his lips. 'I should not have noticed you, perhaps, had it not been for your hair.'

'My hair!' Rona put up a hand to touch the soft, copper-red silkiness beside her face. 'I can't hide it, can I?'

'It is beautiful,' Demetrius said softly, heedless of Anna-Maria's interested gaze. 'But I wish it was some other colour, lovely Rona. I would be so much happier about you being here then.'

Rona frowned and shook her head. She had not thought of the consternation caused by her hair for days, and now she recalled all too clearly both Madame Leonides and Constantine being impressed by it. 'I don't understand,' she told Demetrius. 'If you think it's so beautiful, why do you wish it was another colour?'

Demetrius smiled and brushed her hair back from her forehead with one hand. 'I do not wish to change you at all, lovely Rona,' he said softly. 'But the legend-' He shrugged and Rona felt a trickle of ice shiver along her spine at the mention of the mysterious legend again.

'The legend?' she echoed, and little Anna-Maria answered her, her eyes round and wise as she nodded her head.

*'Fotya to pooli,'* she said. 'You are the Firebird, Rona, it is like the legend.'

Demetrius shushed her hastily, but Rona was already much too curious to simply leave the matter there and she looked to Demetrius to enlighten her further, although her heart was hammering anxiously in her breast as she looked at him. 'Tell me,' she said. 'Tell me about it, Demetrius—you promised, and you've never said a word about it again until now.'

Demetrius shook his head, kicking at the hot, white sand with one foot. 'Perhaps Constantine is right,' he said slowly. 'Damon will tell you in his own time, if he wishes you to know.'

'I wish to know now,' Rona insisted, her eyes bright with determination, and for a moment Demetrius looked at her uncertainly, then he nodded, a hint of a smile on his mouth.

"Very well,' he told her, 'when Anna-Maria is with her tutor tomorrow morning, I will take you to the temple of the Firebird, and tell you our legend.'

'You promise?' She smiled, half teasing, it appeared, despite the anxiety she felt at the prospect of learning at last what seemed to be so important about the island legend and its effect on the Leonides family.

'I promise,' Demetrius said softly.

## CHAPTER FOUR

RONA took a last look at her reflection in the mirror and nodded her satisfaction. A brief, fairly full-skirted dress in pale green silk complemented her red hair and soft creamy skin and flattened her shape—a dress that had cost far more than anything she would be able to afford from now on, and a gift to her from Rex.

She sighed as she walked down that impressive curved staircase again and prayed she wasn't so early that she would find herself breakfasting alone with Damon Leonides as she had the first morning. As she passed Constantine's room she could hear Anna-Maria's voice chattering as usual and probably telling her father about Rona's proposed trip to the temple with Demetrius. She had supervised the little girl's bathing and dressing before attending to her own, and then left her to come down to breakfast in her own time as she liked to.

To Rona's relief Demetrius was sitting alone at the long table under the cool shade of the wisteria, and he got to his feet hastily, smiling a welcome, when he saw her approaching. 'Good morning, Rona!' Blue eyes approved the pale green dress, and he bowed his head briefly over her hand in a way that was far more European than Greek. 'You look very lovely this morning.'

Rona smiled, responding to the flattery as a woman inevitably would with Demetrius. It was incredibly good for her morale having him so attentive, and she appreciated it far more than he probably realised. 'Thank you, Demetrius,' she said, taking the seat beside him. 'You're very good for me first thing in the morning!'

'You are good for me,' he countered swiftly and gallantly. 'You are good for any man's eyes, lovely Rona.' He poured coffee for her when the young manservant brought it, and sat watching her while she sipped the strong sweet brew cautiously. She was in two minds about

her liking for Greek coffee, but she had not so far had the nerve to declare a definite dislike of it. 'Are you ready to accompany me to the temple?' he asked as she spread butter on a roll, and Rona nodded.

A strange curling sensation in her stomach seemed to warn her that the promised visit to the temple of the Firebird was more than a mere casual way of passing a pleasant hour in the company of Demetrius, and she hesitated a moment before venturing a question. 'Is—is it very important?' she asked, and Demetrius shrugged, a little uneasily, she thought.

'My family think so,' he said.

'It's not still in use?' He shook his head and she found herself heaving an inward sigh of relief. 'A ruined temple—it sounds quite romantic.'

'In one way it is a ruin,' he conceded, 'but it is well cared for also. Thia Alexa makes sure that flowers grow there always and are well tended.'

'Thia Alexa?'

A smile revealed his excellent teeth and made him even more good-looking. 'Aunt Alexa,' he explained. 'She is as old as—oh. sometimes I think she has been here for ever. But the temple is very beautiful and I think you will enjoy seeing it, Rona.'

Rona shook her head, a thousand and one misgivings causing a fluttering curl in her stomach that she could do nothing about. She felt tense with a sense of excitement that made her head spin and she could find no real reason for such extreme reactions.

'I'm—wary,' she confessed, watching him through her long lashes. 'I don't really know why, but something—I don't know, I have a—a premonition about this visit to the temple, and it bothers me.'



'Rona-' He reached out a hand and gently touched her cheek, then slowly shook his head as he drew back his hand, as if he had been about to say something he feared he might regret.

'There *is* something, isn't there?' Rona asked, and looked at him appealingly. She had to trust Demetrius, there was no one else she could turn to. 'Tell me, Demetrius, please tell me what's behind all the talk about the legend and—and the temple!'

'I will,' Demetrius promised, 'as soon as you have breakfasted. No one will know where we have gone, so no one will try to stop us.'

'Stop us?' She looked at him, only half believing. 'But why on earth should anyone want to stop us from going, Demetrius? It doesn't make sense!'

His only answer was a few words spoken in his own tongue, softly, and Rona forgot for the moment, as he obviously had, that Anna-Maria knew of their plans and was highly unlikely to keep the knowledge to herself.

The road rose slightly as they travelled along in Demetrius' car, with the sea on one side and the lush vegetation with which the island abounded, on the other. The sea was a deep, shiny, silken blue glinting with gold where the sun touched its restless surface, and ruffling cream foamy edges where it rolled lazily on to the sand.

On their right a riot of oleanders, hibiscus and the sweet fluffiness of mimosa thrust their way to the very edge of the road, while taller trees like orange and lemon crowded in behind them. The scent as they drove past was as heady as wine, and Rona felt her heartbeat quicken even more as she sat close beside Demetrius and took it all in.

Who would have believed, even a month ago, that she would be living here on a beautiful little island in the Aegean and driving in the company of one of the all-powerful Leonides family? She could scarcely believe it herself.

Their approach to the temple was sudden and unexpected and she caught her breath when it appeared suddenly among the lushness of flowering trees and shrubs. At the very summit of a green-clad hill she could see the white house she had glimpsed at from the beach when she was with Anna-Maria, standing in solitary splendour amid a riot of colour and scent, with tall, dark cypresses standing guard against the encroachment of the rampant vegetation, while just below it, on a small grass plateau, stood the temple, or to be more accurate, the remains of it.

'The temple of the Firebird,' Demetrius said softly as he braked the car to a halt on the surrounding plateau. 'Will you get out and look at it, Rona?'

The grass was soft and cool underfoot, and Rona gazed around her with an ever-mounting sense of occasion as she walked towards the ruined temple. Slim, fluted Ionic columns stood tall and white against the blue sky, but most of the roof was missing and probably lay somewhere among the moss- grown mounds of crumbled stone on the remnants of a tiled floor.

A statue, much better preserved than anything else in sight, stood tall and graceful on a plinth at one end of the temple. Skilfully carved features suggested cool, immortal beauty and a very definite female form had exquisite marble drapery covering only half the well curved bosom.

One slender arm extended over what had probably once been an altar, and on one slim wrist perched a bird, its wings outspread, as if it was about to take flight. The dazzling whiteness of the statue told of good

care, and a small stone canopy supported on slim columns in the front and a curved wall at the back protected the goddess from the elements, while a riot of jasmine and hibiscus grew like offerings at her feet.

'She's beautiful,' Rona said, standing before the goddess, as many must have done in the past. 'Who is she, Demetrius?'

'Why, Polyxena, of course,' Demetrius said softly, gazing up at the tall white marble goddess. 'This is her island as much, or more than, it is ours. We are inseparable, thanks to the legend.'

'The legend you promised to tell me about?' Rona asked, and he nodded, though she thought she detected a hint of uncertainty in his manner now that he was faced with the actual moment. 'Demetrius?' she prompted him gently, but he walked over and stood in the shadow of a tall cypress, its shade lending dark curves and hollows to his good-looking features as he leaned against its trunk.

He took a cigarette case from his jacket and for a second held the slim tube between his fingers, then, almost hastily, put it back in the case and thrust both hands into his pockets instead. It was almost as if he had suddenly remembered it was a temple they stood in, one of the ancient holy places, and Rona was jolted into wondering if the Leonides, in their powerful isolation, still worshipped one of the old goddesses.

'Thia Alexa would not approve of my smoking here,' he explained, catching her puzzled look. 'To her, as to the rest of my family, the temple of the Firebird is still a very special place.'

'The Firebird?'

Again Rona prompted him and at last he looked as if he was going to explain. With one hand he called her over to stand beside him, curving the extended arm about her shoulders so that she was pulled

close against the warmth of his body, her heart beating breathlessly hard in her breast as his long fingers curled over her arm.

Anna-Maria had referred to her as the Firebird and Demetrius himself had mentioned it more than once since her arrival, so that she could easily attribute some significant meaning to it. Also there was a bird perched on the extended arm of the goddess.

'Polyxena is—was, an hospitable goddess,' Demetrius explained, gazing across at the marble statue on her plinth. 'Many, many years ago she had this island to herself, except for her maidens, but anyone who touched on this island was made welcome and cared for, in return for which they offered a prayer and made a small sacrifice to Polyxena, then went on their way again.

'The story goes that she grew very lonely after a time, and that Zeus, the father of the gods, promised her a mortal man for a husband, the handsomest he could find. His name was Zeno, and Zeus had him washed ashore on Polyxena's island where he was rescued and cared for by her maidens. Polyxena fell in love with him at once, but unfortunately Zeno, in the way of man, fell in love with one of her maidens, and declined to marry the goddess.

'He knew that he was taking a chance, for the old gods did not like being crossed in their plans, but before Zeus could strike him dead as a punishment Polyxena threw herself into the flames of the holy fire and destroyed her human form while Zeno looked on.'

Rona looked across at the cool marble goddess and tried to imagine passion enough in that chillingly beautiful face to drive her to kill herself because a mere mortal rejected her love. 'She looks much too cool and sure of herself to die for love,' she remarked, and turned to look up at Demetrius' dark handsome face. 'Do you—your family *really* believe the legend?' she asked.

Demetrius said nothing for a moment, but he too looked at the statue with a strangely helpless look in his eyes. 'The legend only really begins to concern us at that point,' he told her. 'Zeno was appalled at what he had witnessed and he begged Zeus for another chance, to restore the goddess to her human form and he would marry her. When the flames of the altar fire died a small red bird flew from the ashes, and before it flew away Zeus told Zeno that Polyxena would return time and again, but if he ever rejected her again, the island would disappear beneath the waves and no one would ever see it again.'

Demetrius' blue eyes looked at her steadily and Rona could feel her heart beating so hard that her head throbbed with its clamour. 'No one knows how long the Leonides have been here,' he told her quietly, 'but some say ever since Zeno.'

Rona shook her head slowly, finding such fancies unbelievable and yet facing the fact that in this lush paradise, almost anything seemed possible. 'I—I don't know how much to believe,' she said. 'It's an ancient legend, of course, and most old places have legends and stories based on fact, but—'

'Believe it or not,' Demetrius said softly. 'But some time in the seventeenth century a beautiful red-haired woman was found wandering on the shore just below here and, according to the family records, no one knows where she came from or who she was, but the eldest son of the family married her because it was believed she was the reincarnation of Polyxena. Having no name of her own she was called Polyxena, and apparently everyone was quite happy about it.'

'Including that poor woman?' Rona asked, and Demetrius shook his head slowly, as if it was a question he had considered many times before.

'I do not think her reaction to the situation is recorded,' he said. 'But it is almost certain she was shipwrecked and she would have been

thankful not to have her throat cut. They chose to see her arrival as an omen, and the Leonides do not take chances with their inheritance—she would not be asked, but told what she was to do.

'Also,' Demetrius went on, 'that seventeenth- century Polyxena was almost certainly not the first one to be used to perpetuate the legend, although the records only go back as far as there. She certainly was not the last, for seventy years ago my own great- grandmother arrived in similar circumstances.'

Stunned with dawning realisation, Rona stared at him, her eyes wide and unbelieving. 'Tell me,' she said huskily, and Demetrius shrugged.

It was a shrug of resignation rather than careless and Rona watched him closely as he brought the Leonides legend almost up to date. 'My great-grandmother was Austrian,' he said, 'although you would never guess it to look at Damon.' He moved restlessly away as he spoke, leaving her alone by the shadowy cypress. 'Her name was Gerda von Leitzen and she was one of the earliest lady balloonists— she too landed on Polyxena, and she also had red hair and was very lovely, if the stories about her are true.'

'You—you never saw her?'

Demetrius shook his head. 'She died when my grandfather was born— Damon's father— and my great-grandfather married again.'

She was afraid to ask, but she had to know. Although nothing had been said about such a thing, she had the strangest feeling that her own destiny was Wing laid before her and it gave her a breathless sense of panic suddenly. 'Was she—did she willingly marry your great-grandfather?' she asked, and Demetrius again shrugged his shoulders.

'I do not know, Rona, such things are not recorded.' He came back to her suddenly and took her hands in his, his blue eyes darkly serious

and his handsome, Greek god-like face marred by a frown as he looked down at her anxiously. 'Rona!' He bent his head, but as his lips brushed hers she became aware of someone else in the clearing besides themselves.

With stories of gods and goddesses still fresh in her mind, and surrounded by the trappings of ancient cults and beliefs, she was tensely alert and thought for one moment that one of the ancients had joined them, perhaps to remind them of the sanctity of the place.

She pushed Demetrius away with her hands on his arms and looked past him to where Damon Leonides stood at the edge of the clearing, tall and lean and dangerous-looking as a big cat and surely the most virile and exciting man the goddess Polyxena had ever seen in her temple.

Light fawn trousers fitted smoothly over those long legs and, unlike Demetrius, he wore no jacket, only a light blue shirt that showed the dark, golden shadow of his body through its thin texture, and had short sleeves that revealed strong brown arms. One wrist was encircled by a heavy gold watch that gleamed richly in the sun and his face was half in shade, so that its strong contours were deepened and darkened by the shadows, and only those glittering black eyes remained undimmed as they looked down at her.

'How did you know we were here?' Demetrius' voice had an oddly resigned sound as he looked at his uncle and Damon's wide, stern mouth curved briefly into a hint of a smile.

'Anna-Maria knew,' he said, and did not need to explain further.

Demetrius shrugged. 'Of course!'

The black eyes had scarcely left Rona's face and she knew that her normally creamy pale complexion was flushed pink as she bore the scrutiny. 'How much have you told Rona?' he asked Demetrius

quietly, and his casual use of her christian name sent her heart lurching in panic again.

'I have told her the legend,' Demetrius admitted.

'No more?' The black brows expressed disbelief, and Demetrius' eyes flashed resentment.

'I also told her about Polyxena and my great- grandmother,' he said shortly. 'It is not a secret, Damon, unless you have—a conscience about it!'

The jibe not only went home but was resented far more violently than Demetrius had resented being questioned. There was a cool hardness about that chiselled face and his eyes glittered angrily. 'I have no conscience about any of our traditions,' he said harshly. 'If you are squeamish, Demetrius, you should not have made yourself the means of serving the legend!'

Rona, the helpless centre of the argument, could only stand and stare at the two men who were both so intent on making their own point that they neither of them seemed to be giving a thought to her at the moment.

'I did not even *think* of the legend!' Demetrius insisted angrily. 'You know I do not take it as seriously as you do! I would never have brought Rona-'

'*Arketal*' Demetrius stopped obediently, and Rona herself started almost visibly at the sharp command. The black eyes were on her again and she shivered as she held their gaze for a brief moment before she hastily looked away. 'I would like to take you to meet an old aunt of mine,' Damon said, so quietly in contrast to his brief command to Demetrius that she blinked for a moment. 'You will come?'



It sounded like a question, but Rona did not stop to consider what he would have done if she had declined. Instead she found herself nodding her head, almost instinctively, glancing at Demetrius as she did so. 'Will you be coming too, Demetrius?' she asked, and he glanced uneasily at Damon.

'You may come if you wish,' Damon told him, although it was obvious from his tone that he would have preferred him not to.

Demetrius half smiled and reached for her hand again, his fingers curling tightly round hers, as if to reassure her. 'I will come,' he said softly.

They did not return to the car, as Rona expected,, but went through the trees, the way Damon had come, and in a few minutes were in the lush, overgrown garden of the house on the hill. It was smaller than the Leonides villa, and less opulent-looking, but it had an air of tranquillity about it, and the door stood open, like the shuttered windows, as if in welcome.

Straight through into the hall they went and Rona was struck by the differences in the two houses. Here there was no sign of luxury, but of age and mellowness. The tiled floor was worn by many feet and uneven in places, and the walls were stark and white without benefit of decoration.

One of several doors leading from it opened as they came in and an old woman came through, paused for a moment to stare across at them and then murmured something in Greek which had Demetrius shaking his head in silent protest.

'Thia Alexa,' Damon said gently, taking Rona's hand in his, 'this is Miss Rona Forbes from England. Miss Forbes, my great-aunt, Miss Alexa Leonides.'

The hold of those strong fingers sent a curling sensation all over Rona's body and she felt the colour warm in her cheeks at the suggestion of possessive-ness it conveyed. The old lady's eyes were sharp and almost as black as Damon's, and she looked at Rona for a long moment, taking the hand that Damon gave her and holding it gently.

*'Fotya to pooli,'* she said softly, and Rona looked at Demetrius with wide appealing eyes.

Regardless of Damon and his usual air of caution in his presence, Demetrius shook his head. 'No, Thia Alexa,' he said quietly. 'Miss Forbes is not staying. I am flying her back to Athens in the morning and she is leaving for her home!'

The old lady's wrinkled face looked shocked and she looked at Damon as if he alone could avert the disaster, as she obviously saw it. 'Such a thing cannot be!' she said firmly, her aged eyes as fierce as her great-nephew's could be. 'You will explain the situation, Damon, and Miss Forbes will change her mind!'

Damon's black eyes looked down at her steadily and Rona felt her heart beating so hard that she could almost believe it was audible to the men who stood either side of her. 'Miss Forbes will not be leaving, Thia Alexa,' he said quietly. 'There are reasons why she will remain here, and she will not go back on her promise, I think.'

'You have no right!' Demetrius glared at him above Rona's copper-red head, his eyes blazingly angry. 'I shall take Rona away! You shall not make her a part of your barbaric ritual, I will not allow it!'

'Demetrius!' The old lady's voice was remarkably strong for one so obviously ancient, and she could have cowed a stronger man than Demetrius, Rona was prepared to believe. She spoke to him shortly

and harshly in Greek and he defied her in the same tongue, but it was evident from the start, that he would lose to the indomitable old lady.

'Please!' Rona put a hand on his arm and glanced at Miss Leonides briefly as she shook her head. 'Don't—don't quarrel on my behalf, Demetrius,' she begged him huskily. 'I—I can't go back. As Da— Mr. Leonides says, I can't break my promise, there's too much at stake, and I can't see Rex-' She bit her lip when it trembled and drew a breath in surprise when it was Damon's strong fingers that squeezed hers reassuringly, not Demetrius'.

'Blackmail!' Demetrius said bitterly, and Damon was shaking his head.

'A bargain,' he argued quietly. 'Rona is being sensible and you are making much of nothing, Demetrius. I will not hold her to the bargain for ever, as I think she will understand, and when the purpose has been served, then He shrugged his broad shoulders, and once more Rona felt that her future had been taken out of her own hands and handed over to these arrogant and autocratic people.

She fought hard to keep her voice from trembling, and hoped she succeeded, addressing herself mainly to Damon, as the main character in the drama that seemed inevitably to involve her whether she wanted it or not.

'I—I don't yet know what you're all talking about,' she reminded him. 'I know you want me to remain on the island and that it has something to do with your legend, but if someone—*if* someone would tell me exactly what is expected of me-'

She knew, she told herself, she knew well enough what they expected of her, but she could still not quite believe that a man like Damon Leonides, a hard-headed business man, a man of the world, was prepared to marry the niece of an employee who had defrauded him

of several thousand pounds, simply to keep up the beliefs of an ancient legend.

Marriage was what they all had in mind, she felt convinced, and she had known it for some time, ever since Demetrius had told her about the legend, about his great-grandmother, but somehow she had managed to detach herself from the idea, remain untouched by it as a possibility. Now as she faced Damon Leonides in that cool and ancient hall, she saw it for the first time as a definite thing.

The black eyes were watching her still, they seldom left her whenever he was in the same room with her, and she had never really wondered why before. Standing close beside him she was again touched by that inescapable aura of masculinity about him, the sensual awareness he aroused in her, and she kept her own eyes lowered.

'Demetrius has told you of the legend?' he asked, and she nodded without speaking. 'You know that every so often the story seems to come true for us?' Again she merely nodded, and he seemed to find her silence irritating, for he lifted her chin suddenly in one large hand and looked down at her. 'And you think us foolish, no doubt?' he demanded. 'Or perhaps barbaric, as Demetrius says, hmm?'

Rona raised her eyes at last and looked at him steadily for a second. 'If I refuse to—to do as you want me to,' she said in a small, shaky voice, 'you will send Rex to prison. Wouldn't you say that such a—a bargain was barbaric, Mr. Leonides?'

The black eyes glittered at her for as long as she found herself able to hold their gaze, and the fingers on her chin were cruelly tight as he held her firm, but surprisingly his voice was soft and almost gentle when he answered her. 'I ask a few years of your life in exchange for your uncle's freedom,' he said. 'Is that so unreasonable a bargain, Rona? Will you find it so unbearable being married to me for a while that you would rather run away and see your uncle imprisoned?'

Aware that Demetrius was watching her as anxiously as the old lady was, although for quite a different reason, Rona looked up again at the dark, chiselled features for a second and saw something other than anger and impatience. She remembered the tolerance and gentleness he had shown to the little girl, Anna-Maria, and saw it again for herself.

'I'll marry you,' she said huskily, and heard the soft moan that Demetrius gave as he turned away.

## CHAPTER FIVE

It was the hottest day Rona had ever experienced, and she was thankful for the cool shade of the cypresses that cast their elegantly slim shadows across the terrace as far as the edge of the pool. Even the artificially blue water in the pool was so dazzling that it hurt her eyes in the few moments she was without her sun-glasses, and she hastily replaced them.

She had been writing to Rex, her uncle, trying to find words that would make sense of the bargain she had contracted with Damon Leonides. Five days ago, when she had agreed to marry him in exchange for her uncle's freedom, Damon had insisted that she ring Rex and tell him the news first-hand. He had the right, he told her, to be informed of the situation as soon as possible, but for the first time in her life Rona had been reluctant to speak with her uncle.

Rex had hated the idea, of course, and had begged her not to go to such lengths for his sake, but she had assured him that the situation was nowhere near as unhappy for her as he seemed to think, and that she was really quite willing to marry Damon Leonides in the circumstances.

Rex had believed her eventually to some extent, she thought, but it was now, when she came to put it all down on paper, at more length, that she found it much harder to explain. Damon Leonides was a very attractive man, she could safely assure him of that without contradiction, but she knew that her uncle would be thinking about all those reports in the press of his erstwhile employer in the company of many and various beautiful women.

Women older than Rona by some years; sophisticated and glamorous women who could match the worldly-wise Greek in every way. Women he could amuse himself with for a few weeks or months and then move on to pastures new with no broken hearts to reproach him.

Rona was young, and in some senses very inexperienced. She had always had boy-friends of her own age, young men well within her scope, but never a man as mature or as sophisticated as the man she had promised to marry after knowing him for only a few days. It would be difficult to make Rex see that she was perhaps under less duress than she appeared to be, for it was something that she herself recognised with some surprise.

Constantine Leonides had accepted the news with an air of resignation, although Rona could not help noticing the half reproachful look he gave his brother when he made the announcement at dinner that same evening. Constantine's wife had died only two years before, and he had never ceased to grieve for her, even though he did so mostly in private, so he could not entirely sympathise with his brother's determined efforts to abide by the legend, regardless of love or affection, although he said nothing within Rona's hearing.

Madame Demeter Leonides, on the other hand, had been loud and uncompromising in her condemnation, although mostly in Greek, so that Rona had at least been spared her virulent words. Demetrius had taken it quietly, his prior knowledge preparing him for the announcement, but he was obviously unhappy about it and not least, Rona suspected, because of his own part in it.

It was about Demetrius that she worried most, because she felt a genuine affection for him, although as yet nothing more emotional. She could see him now, coming across the terrace towards her, and she put down her pen and writing pad almost with relief. Sooner or later she must write that letter to Rex, but at the moment she was thankful for anything to distract her.

Looking more god-like than ever in only a pair of brief white swim shorts, Demetrius smiled as he joined her, covering her hand with his own in a light gesture of affection, where it lay on the arm of the

lounging-chair. His tall, slim body was bronzed and smooth, glowing with health and stunningly attractive in the brief costume, so that Rona felt her pulses respond excitedly to the sight of him.

Such a man, she thought, the god Zeus might have chosen as a husband for the goddess Polyxena, and who could blame her for falling in love with him? He bent his head and brushed his lips lightly across her forehead, his blue eyes smiling warmly.

'Am I disturbing your letter-writing?' he asked, and sat at her feet on the tiled floor. 'Shall I go away again?'

His attitude suggested that he had no fear of being asked to leave, and Rona smilingly shook her head. 'No, of course you won't go away again,' she told him. 'I'm writing—I was trying to write to Rex.'

Demetrius' blue eyes looked up at her steadily. 'You find it hard to explain how you can marry a man you barely know?' he suggested. 'You should not try, Rona. Your uncle will know you have been blackmailed into this—this travesty of a marriage.'

Rona shook her head slowly, unsure what her argument could be, but wishing there was something she could say that would make her agreement with Damon sound less bizarre. She pleated the hem of her bathing robe between her fingers and looked down at what she was doing without really seeing anything.

'I'm trying to explain that things aren't as bad as they might be,' she said quietly, and saw Demetrius' head jerk up enquiringly.

'No?' he asked. 'You do not mind being sacrificed on the altar of Polyxena? For that is what it is, Rona—you are as much a sacrifice to that cold stone image\*as any of those other helpless creatures were in the old days, and I hate to see you walk into it so —so willingly!'



'Demetrius, please!' She leaned forward and put a hand on his shoulder, the smooth golden flesh warm to her touch and bringing a swift flush of colour to her cheeks.

'Oh, Rona!' He took the hand from his shoulders and pressed its palm to his lips, while Rona bit her lip hard, foreseeing complications she had not anticipated until now. 'I found you,' Demetrius said in a deep, husky voice that reminded her of the first time they met when he had been bent on persuading her into his car with little else on his mind but to flirt with her. 'He has no right to take you from me!'

For a moment Rona was not quite sure how to react. She had met Demetrius only a few days ago, but she was already very fond of him, as a friend, perhaps even more in time, but that would have to be something carefully thought about in the circumstances. That he felt anything serious for her, she could not believe, but he sounded so intense, so serious.

'You—you don't mean that you—you can't mean anything serious, Demetrius,' she said in a small and very unsteady voice. 'No one falls in love in such a short time—it isn't—it isn't feasible.'

'I love you, beautiful Rona,' he insisted, his mouth pressed to her palm again. 'It could be such a paradise here with you if it was not for Damon!'

'Demetrius-'

'Such nerve to take my girl and marry her!' Demetrius declared indignantly, and she realised at last that his own plans for her would never have included marriage, or not in the immediate future anyway. Demetrius' mind did not take in marriage at the moment, but he objected to his uncle laying claim to a girl he considered he had prior right to. When she thought about it, Rona felt almost like laughing, despite the fact that he looked so serious.

'I don't think I was ever your girl, Demetrius,' she told him quietly. 'You were merely instrumental in bringing me to Polyxena, and I'm grateful to you for that because it enabled me to help Rex far more than I dared hope.'

'By becoming a sacrificial lamb?' Demetrius asked sullenly. 'I *care* what happens to you, Rona!'

'I know you do,' she told him softly. 'But I'm not being sacrificed, Demetrius—nothing so dramatic as that. It—it's simply an arrangement with advantages on both sides.'

Demetrius looked up at her with one brow raised, as if he doubted her. 'That was not your first impression,' he said with certainty. 'You were horrified when you realised what it was that Damon expected of you in return for your uncle's freedom.'

'I know!' She admitted it readily enough, but she wondered just when she had stopped being horrified, as Demetrius said, and accepted the situation, even faced it with a certain excitement, although she still could not quite believe that it would ever actually happen.

'You are no longer horrified?' he asked, and there was a hint of speculation in the blue eyes that regarded her.

Rona shook her head slowly, not looking at him as she spoke. 'I—shall we say that I've decided to accept the inevitable?' she said with a faint smile. 'I might just as well, Demetrius, there's no other way of making sure that Rex stays out of prison, and that is the most important thing in the world to me.'

'Of course!'

'Please don't-' Reaching out a hand to touch him again, she hastily drew back when she caught sight of Madame Leonides walking slowly in their direction, her handsome features distorted by a frown

as they so often were. Madame Leonides made no secret of her dislike and for some reason Rona always felt guilty whenever she was in Demetrius' company and his mother saw them.

Seeing her expression, Demetrius followed the direction of her gaze and smiled ruefully. 'Mama,' he said wryly. 'One who would cheerfully see you sacrificed in earnest, lovely Rona, but not if it meant you marrying Damon, of course. This arrangement has confirmed her worst fears, and she will not easily forgive either you or Damon if this marriage takes place.'

'But why?' Rona asked, genuinely puzzled, and Demetrius laughed shortly.

'Why?' he echoed. 'Why, because, my lovely, my father was the eldest son and Mama expected me to inherit the Leonides Line when he died. She did not realise that the Leonides do not do things that way—when a son dies he ceases to exist and the next son becomes the eldest and the automatic head of the family and the business—but she still hopes I'

Rona shook her head, still frowning over the puzzle. 'I still don't see how my marrying Damon can affect anything,' she said, and Demetrius swept his blue gaze swiftly over her features before he answered.

'If neither Damon nor Constantine marries and produces sons,' he pointed out quietly, 'then my chances are still pretty good, hmm?'

'Sons?' Rona stared at him, a small pulse throbbing urgently at her temple when she looked at the implication he was making. 'The question of—of anything like that doesn't enter into it where I'm concerned, Demetrius. I have agreed to marry Damon for as long as he thinks is necessary to establish whatever it is he needs to establish to satisfy that goddess of yours.'

'Not mine,' Demetrius argued quietly. 'I prefer my goddesses of flesh and blood!'

'Well, Damon's goddess, then,' she allowed, her head still spinning with new and discomfiting prospects. 'Whatever happens, as soon as I've—I've served my purpose I'll be leaving here and when I find someone, I shall marry whom I choose, regardless of the likes and dislikes of any wretched goddess I'

Demetrius was looking at her steadily, his blue eyes speculative and a faint curl on his lip as he shook his head slowly. 'You do not know Damon Leonides at all,' he said, 'if you think he will let his wife go to another man once she has belonged to him—the Leonides hold what they have! Why do you think I am so anxious that you do not go on with this, Rona? You will only be released from the marriage if and when Damon decides he will let you go, and no Leonides has ever divorced his wife yet!'

With so much on her mind of late, Rona sought the peace of her favourite little cove one morning while Anna-Maria was busy with her tutor. It was only a short distance from the house, but it could have been a hundred miles distant for the sense of isolation it gave. Palm trees clustered right to the water's edge and the shore here was more rugged, with the waves breaking over low outcrops of rock and shattering into a shower of jewel-like spray.

It was accessible only by foot and Rona had found it one day while out with Anna-Maria and agreed that it should be their secret cove. Only by leaving the road and making one's way through the thickness of the vegetation could one reach the narrow curve of sand, shaded by its guardian palms, and today its quiet and isolation were just what she needed.

For several days now, ever since Demetrius had raised much more complicated prospects than she had ever imagined, she had wanted some time on her own to think and today Demetrius was in Athens on some business or other for the firm.

She had worn a bikini under her dress with the intention of doing no more than sunbathe, but the lure of the water was becoming too much for her to resist, and she got to her feet at last, shading her eyes against the glare of the sun on the water. She remembered that Damon had forbidden Anna-Maria to swim from the beaches because of strong currents, but the warning would surely not apply to an adult who was a fairly strong swimmer.

She had no bathing-cap with her, but her hair would soon dry in the sun, and she could wash the salt water from it as soon as she got back. Tossing it back from her face in a gesture that was partly in defiance of Damon Leonides' instructions, she walked down the shallow curve of sand to the water's edge.

Her swim-suit was emerald green and with her copper-red hair loose about her shoulders she was as bright and colourful as any of the exotic blooms that surrounded her secret cove, especially against the silken blue of the sea and the glittering white sand.

Submerged rocks presented a hazard as soon as she entered the water, but she managed to avoid anything more serious than a stubbed toe by treading her way carefully. The water was incredibly warm, but cooler than the intense heat on land, and she revelled in its buoyant softness as she swam lazily out from the shore.

Turning over on to her back, she rested, floating gently, her eyes closed against the dazzle of the sun on her face. It was idyllic and for the first time in several days she felt utterly and completely relaxed. It was all the more startling, therefore, when she suddenly realised that

her movements were no longer controlled by her own lazy, half-hearted paddling gestures.

She was being drawn by some strong, irresistible force in the water around her and she opened her eyes in stunned realisation. The current pulled and tugged at her body, preventing her from using her arms and legs to help herself, and pulling her downwards until she fought furiously against it.

It was a losing battle and she soon realised it when her limbs grew heavy and tired, and she had difficulty in keeping her face above water so that she could breathe. She heard her own voice, dull and flat, sounding as if from a distance, calling for help, and the water closed again over her head while her tired arms struggled to keep her afloat.

*'Sigha sigha!'* The voice nearby was familiar and blessedly confident, and Rona gave up at last, her body yielding limply to the pull of the current, only half aware of the hands that snatched her from that relentless pull and drew her to the safety of calmer water.

She opened her eyes and found Damon's dark, chiselled features only inches away, his black eyes looking more anxious than she would ever have believed possible. He trod water for the moment, needing his strength to take her back to the beach, for her own was completely spent. Both hands under her head, the long, strong fingers held her safe while he swung his head sharply to clear the wet black hair from his face.

'I—I can manage now,' she whispered, wishing he looked less stern, despite those anxious eyes, and he tightened his hold on her almost cruelly.

'You are too exhausted to swim,' he told her curtly, his voice dulled and flattened by the water about them. 'Keep still while I take you back!'

She made a desperate effort to prove that she was able to go back by herself, but as soon as she started to move, her arms threshing the water half-heartedly, he made a grab at her, missed her and swore softly in Greek.

It was so much harder than she had anticipated, for she had not realised just how far out she had drifted and before long she began to tire so much that she was forced to tread water again, gasping and shaking her head to clear it.

Damon was close beside her, his own strokes strong and sure, and when she stopped he immediately lifted her head on supporting hands again. Without a word he began to swim towards the shore, using only his powerful legs, his hands holding her head while his body worked below hers, propelling them both along.

It seemed like an eternity before they bumped on the rocky shore and Rona had just enough strength to pull herself up on to the dry sand, her hands clawing at the glittering softness of it thankfully. For a moment she lay there on her stomach, completely spent, her red head lolled to one side, her hair clinging to her face and neck like dark seaweed.

Without warning she was suddenly scooped up and carried like a baby up the narrow beach to where she had left her things, and it was only then that she realised that Damon was more or less fully dressed.

He laid her down with surprising gentleness on the hot sand and knelt beside her for a moment, the black eyes looking down at her with an expression that she could neither interpret nor meet for very long.

One hand ran impatiently through his wet hair and he sat back on his heels breathing deeply.

A white silk shirt clung to his wet body and became transparent so that the broad chest was clearly visible heaving with the effort of both swimming against the tide and carrying her. His feet were bare, but a pair of light trousers clung to his long legs like a second skin and his bare arms glistened like bronze with salt water.

'Why?' he asked at last in a deep, harsh voice. 'I have told Anna-Maria that it is dangerous to swim from these beaches—has she not told you so?'

'Yes.' Her voice was no more than a whisper, and Rona felt suddenly very small and very close to tears with reaction. Being scolded as if she was no older than Anna-Maria was the last thing she wanted, and she wished with all her heart that it had been Demetrius who rescued her.

'Then why did you not heed the warning?' he asked. 'Surely you were not bent on suicide, were you, Rona?'

'Oh no!' She gazed up at him with wide eyes, her mouth already trembling with the threatened tears.

'Did you then imagine that you *were* a reincarnation of Polyxena, and that you could not drown?' he suggested with heavy sarcasm, and Rona shook her head, the tears at last rolling down her cheeks so that she turned herself swiftly over on to her side with her back to him and her face hidden in her hands.

He let her cry for several seconds, her body shaking with sobs, then he put a hand on her shoulder and attempted to turn her to face him again, his touch as gentle as possible. 'Rona!'



'Go away!' She shrugged off his hand and refused to be moved, refused to look at him, curled over like a weeping child, her copper-red hair rapidly drying in the hot sun and wisping into soft curls on her neck.

'Will you not at least look at me?' he asked with surprising gentleness, and she shook her head. 'Rona?'

The pressure of the strong fingers on her shoulder persuaded her at last and she turned over, looking up at him through wet lashes, her mouth still quiveringly unsteady. 'Why couldn't it have been Demetrius who saw me?' she said huskily, and saw the swift, angry glitter in the black eyes that looked down at her.

He hesitated only briefly, then got to his feet in one of those swift, panther-like movements that always seemed to make him appear so dangerously primitive in her eyes. 'Get up if you are as able as you appear!' he commanded sharply. 'I will take you back to the villa!'

For a moment Rona thought of defying the order, but after a second's hesitation she sat up and, before she could rebuff their help, two large hands reached down and pulled her swiftly to her feet so that she was standing a bare inch away from him, those black eyes still regarding her angrily.

He still held her hands in his and his grip was so tight that she felt her fingers growing numb. Making futile efforts to free herself only seemed to anger him further, and he pulled her sharply against him suddenly, putting his hands to the small of her back and holding her firmly, spanning her bare flesh.

'Your contract is with me, *thespinis*,' he said in a dangerously soft voice, his breath warming her lips as he spoke. 'As my future wife you will not enter into a relationship with my nephew, do you understand?'

'There *is* no—relationship!' Rona objected, trying again to free herself but finding it even more difficult now that his hands were spread against her back and forcibly keeping her in contact with him.

The contact was firm and disturbing and once again she was made aware of that undeniable aura of virility about him, the sensual promise in the lean, firm body and strong hands. She raised her eyes at last and met that steady black-eyed gaze, then slowly lowered her long lashes when she found it too unnerving.

'There is no relationship,' she said again in a husky whisper, and he made no reply for a moment, simply holding her close and looking down at her until she shivered with a sense of anticipation.

'I hope you will continue to use such good sense,' Damon told her in a quiet but firm voice. 'I would not like there to be any scandal either before or after we are married, Rona.'

'Of course not, Mr. Leonides, you have your good name to think of!' Heaven knew what made her react with such childish malice, but she found some satisfaction for a moment in the swift, flaring anger that showed again in his eyes, and the grip on her tightened, her flesh bruised by the hard fingers on her back.

She half expected him to berate her about her own good name, and the loss of it through her uncle's actions, but he did nothing of the sort. Instead the hands on her back swept her even closer to him and his mouth came down with angry hardness on hers, one hand moving to grasp a handful of her red hair and pull back her head.

Rona first struggled, then yielded to the urgency of the assault and her body moulded its softness to the steel hardness of his, while her hands spread, moist-palmed against the wet shirt, rapidly drying in the sun. Never in her life had she been kissed in such a way, and she felt as if

she was drowning all over again as she fought to retain her self-control.

Then suddenly she was free, held at arm's length, her mouth tingling, her skin burning from the strength of those long hands. He looked down at her for a moment, then shook his head, moving away to stand with both hands in his pockets, looking stirringly piratical with his bare feet and his clothes still damp and clinging to him.

'I apologise,' he said in a cool voice that fell oddly on her ears in contrast to her own chaotic emotions. 'I have made you a promise that our—arrangement will demand no more of you than that you become my wife in the eyes of the law.'

Rona was trembling, her legs felt barely able to hold her and her hands shook like leaves as she stood facing him, shivering a little despite the heat of the sun. 'I—I don't really know what promises you've made to me,' she said in a thin husky voice that shook alarmingly, and she sensed rather than saw the swift way he lifted his head, as if in anger.

'Do not play games with me, Rona,' he warned softly. 'You do not know what situations you invite.'

You are very young and I will honour my promise that this marriage is for the sake of our traditions only, but I am a man and I can be provoked, even by such a youthful beauty as you. If you provoke me you can expect no quarter—do you understand me?'

The black eyes drew hers irresistibly and she felt the warm colour, in her cheeks as she nodded her red head slowly. 'I understand,' she said.

He stood for a moment longer, his eyes on that riot of copper-red hair, then he half smiled and she again experienced the lurch of surprise his smile always invoked because it was so rare. 'You have your red hair to thank for much, Rona,' he said softly. 'Not least your life, for it was

your hair that I saw and recognised from the road. No one else would have been foolish enough to venture into the sea here and I tried to call you, but-' Broad shoulders shrugged resignedly.

'I—I haven't thanked you for saving me,' she said in a small voice, and looked up at him again, her heart beating rapidly when she met his eyes. 'I should have been more grateful—I'm sorry.'

He said nothing for a long moment and it seemed to Rona that they might have been isolated from the rest of the world by millions of miles as they stood there on that tiny beach, like castaways. Then he shook his head slowly and reached out a hand for hers.

'I will take you home,' he said.

## CHAPTER SIX

ANNA-MARIA was no more inquisitive than most little girls of her age, but sometimes Rona found her questions difficult to cope with. The child's English was improving rapidly, for not only did she speak it every afternoon in Rona's company, but her family also used English far more often than in the past now that good manners decreed they should do so for Rona's sake.

Not the least embarrassing of her questions was when she asked why she had been forbidden to speak of Rona being Uncle Damon's lady when it seemed that was exactly what she was. Recognising her confusion, Rona had done her best to explain without going into too much detail, but she could see that the child was still puzzled.

'Will you enjoy to learn Greek?' Anna-Maria asked one afternoon, and Rona looked at her curiously.

They were sitting beside the swimming pool, although only Anna-Maria was dressed for the water, and had been happily tormenting Demetruis by splashing him, until he drove her from the pool with a slap on her bottom. She now sat curled up like a little dark kitten on a cushion by Rona's feet, her dark eyes big and curious.

'Learn Greek?' Rona frowned curiously. 'What makes you think I'm going to learn Greek, Anna- Maria?'

The inquisitive little face was tilted sideways and she glanced anxiously at Demetrius, as if she half feared she might be speaking out of turn. 'I have heard Thios Damon saying so,' she confessed. 'Did you not know about it, Rona?'

'No, no, I didn't.' Rona too looked at Demetrius in the pool, wondering if he was aware of this newest idea, and if he was, why he hadn't mentioned it to her.

Anna-Maria raised herself to her knees and gazed at Rona for several seconds with her great dark eyes. 'You are not happy about this?' she asked anxiously. 'I am sorry, Rona, if I have made you unhappy.'

Gently Rona took the child's face in her hands and smiled at her reassuringly. 'I'm not unhappy about it, pet,' she told her softly. 'It's—it's a surprise, that's all, but it doesn't make me unhappy.' She ran her fingers through Anna-Maria's dark hair, brushing it back from her face and neck.

She could imagine very easily that this waif-like child with her great dark eyes and black hair was just as Damon's children would be when he had daughters. A moment later she shook herself hastily back to reality, startled to discover the way her thoughts had been wandering.

'It would be—nice, if you spoke Greek,' Anna-Maria told her, carefully choosing her words as always. She rested her arms on Rona's lap and looked up at her for several seconds, thoughtfully, then nodded her head as if she had suddenly made up her mind about something. 'I shall ask Thios Damon to allow Papa to marry you,' she said solemnly.

'Anna-Maria!' Stunned at first by the unexpectedness of it, Rona recognised a moment later the touching loneliness of the little girl. Madame Leonides was surely no company for a tiny girl and there was no other female except the servants. Since her mother's death she must have been achingly lonely at times for the gentleness of a woman's comfort.

She put her own hands to cover the childish ones resting on her lap, and her own eyes were hazy when she saw the wistful look in the child's. 'I like your papa very much, Anna-Maria,' she told her gently, 'but—well, it simply isn't possible for me to marry him.'

Anna-Maria's head cocked sideways again, her frown in evidence. 'Because you have love for Thfos Damon?' she asked, and Rona bit her lip anxiously, faced with yet another difficult question.

'Because—because I've promised to marry your Uncle Damon,' she explained. 'It—it isn't really necessary to love a person when you marry, Anna- Maria.'

Briefly Anna-Maria glanced over her shoulder at Demetrius, still lazily swimming in the pool. 'Do you have love for Demetrius?' she asked, and again Rona shook her head, though this time less certainly.

'No,' she said. 'Not in the way you mean, Anna- Maria, although I love lots of people in a different kind of way.'

'My papa loved my mama,' Anna-Maria told her wistfully. 'Thios Damon wanted Papa to marry some other lady, but Papa refused, that is what Thia Demeter says, I heard her. She was very beautiful, my mama,' she added solemnly, and Rona's instinct was to hug her consolingly. Only a woman as hard and unfeeling as Demeter Leonides could say such things about a child's mother within her hearing.

She lifted Anna-Maria on to her lap and cuddled her close for a moment. In some ways her own situation was similar to Anna-Maria's and she felt a rapport with the child that she felt with no one else on this paradise isle at the moment. Impulsively kissing the solemn little face, she smiled. 'Shall we swim?' she asked, and Anna-Maria clapped her hands.

'*Ne, ne, Rona!*' she cried delightedly. 'We will splash Demetrius, yes?' She looked at her cousin, swimming lazily around and shouted something to him in Greek, something that apparently pleased him, for he tossed back the wet hair from his face and his white teeth gleamed in a smile.

'Hurry and change!' he called to Rona. 'Come in and join me!'

Getting to her feet, Rona hastened to obey, walking across the terrace with both Demetrius and Anna-Maria watching her and urging her to hurry. She was nothing loath to leave that still unwritten letter and splash around in the pool with Demetrius and his little cousin, and the water would be blessedly cool despite the sun's glare on its surface.

She waved to them as she walked into the house, laughing and completely unaware that anyone was near until two strong hands gripped her arms above the elbows and brought her to a halt just short of collision.

Laughing still, her eyes bright with pleasure, she let out a cry of surprise, her lips parted as she gazed up at the owner of the hands. Damon's black eyes looked back at her with a glitter that could well have been laughter, and there was a hint of smile about the wide mouth too, but the grip on her arms remained as firm as ever and she was reminded of those few emotionally violent moments on the beach when he had kissed her.

The memory shook her swiftly from laughter into a moment of blood-tingling anticipation and she gazed up at him, her head shaking slowly in confusion. 'I'm—I'm sorry,' she said.

'You are in a great hurry,' he said quietly. 'Where are you hurrying to so urgently, Rona?'

She glanced over her shoulder in the direction of the pool, strangely unwilling to tell him that she was changing for a swim with Demetrius, but seeing no way of avoiding it. 'I'm—I'm just going to change for a swim in the pool,' she said, and he too followed the same direction as her eyes.

'With Demetrius?'



'With Anna-Maria too,' she told him hastily. 'She's expecting me.'

'Then she will be disappointed,' Damon informed her coolly. 'I have arranged for you to drive out to see Thia Alexa with me. You remember her?'

It was the flat, unarguable way he informed her of his plans for her that made her react the way she did, and she lifted her chin the way she did purely by instinct. 'I remember her very well,' she said meaningly. 'It was in her house that I learned what you had in store for me!'

The fingers on her arms tightened briefly as if in warning and there was no suggestion of humour now in the set of his mouth. 'You promised to marry me in exchange for your uncle's freedom,' he said coldly. 'There are surely much worse fates for a young woman in your present position!'

Rona could feel the weakness growing in her legs and her pulses were reacting with breathless urgency to those strong hands holding her firmly. His statement, however ruthless, was unarguably true, and she could not in all honesty claim that she found the idea of being married to Damon Leonides at all repugnant. Her reaction was one of half-fearful excitement rather than repugnance, and she did not meet his eyes as she spoke but looked instead at the column of brown throat where it emerged from a white shirt, a small pulse throbbing steadily at its base.

'I'm sorry,' she said in a small voice.

One large hand lifted her chin gently but firmly and the black eyes studied her face for a moment with a scrutiny that made her tingle. 'You will *not* be sorry, Rona,' he promised softly. 'I know that you see me as ruthless and unreasonable at the moment, but I will keep my

word to you. No action will be taken against your uncle, and you need have no fear that I will go back on my word. Will you believe me?"

'Yes, of course, Mr. Leonides.' There seemed little else she could say in the circumstances, and the hand holding her chin jerked her head up suddenly, tilting her face up to him.

'Damon,' he corrected her softly. 'Why do you not use my name, *pethi*?'

Rona glanced up swiftly and met that disturbing gaze again. 'I—I don't know,' she confessed.

'Then try, hmm?' His voice was deep and persuasive, almost seductive, and Rona's every nerve responded to it violently.

'Damon,' she repeated obediently.

'*Kalia*,' he said softly. 'Now please get yourself ready, *pethi*, we will leave as soon as you are prepared !'

She was already half turned to go on her way when she remembered Anna-Maria telling her about his arranging for her to learn Greek. Prompted by his unaccustomed mixing of Greek and English in the last few minutes, she turned back and called after him. 'Damon!'

He paused in his stride, heading for the pool probably with the intention of telling her erstwhile companions she would not be rejoining them. One black brow questioned her and she bit her lip in hesitation for a moment now that she had his attention. 'I—I hear that you expect me to learn Greek,' she ventured, and the black brows drew swiftly together in a frown.

'Demetrius?' he guessed shortly, and she shook her head hastily.

'No, it wasn't,' she denied.

He half smiled, wryly, his eyes warmed with brief amusement. 'Then it must have been the other indiscreet member of the family,' he said quietly. 'The child hears too much, and says too much.'

'You didn't think I had a right to know what you have planned for me?' she asked, and Damon looked at her steadily for a moment before he answered.

'I meant to tell you in my own time,' he said coolly, and Rona felt a warm flush of colour in her cheeks as she faced him.

'Like you did about the visit to your great-aunt?' she asked. 'I'd feel far more like a fiancée if you consulted me now and again about what I am to do!'

She ignored the anxious beating of her heart and held his gaze with far more boldness than she felt, the pulse in her forehead throbbing wildly until her head spun with it. It was the first time she had ever spoken or even thought of herself as being his fiancée, and it gave her a strange sense of elation suddenly to face the fact.

The black eyes held her gaze steadily, deep and unfathomable, until she could bear their scrutiny no longer and hastily lowered her own eyes. 'Very well,' he said, coolly quiet. 'Since you appear to be taking the role of fiancée seriously, I will see to it that you are informed—consulted, about matters to do with your future. Will that satisfy you, Rona?'

'Thank you.' She stood for a moment in the huge empty hall, feeling smaller than she had ever done in her life, her senses reacting uncontrollably to the man who faced her, and wishing with all her heart that she need not always be so on the defensive with him. She raised her eyes again and looked at him. 'I—I wasn't trying to lay down the law,' she said in a small husky voice, and Damon shook his head slowly.

'No one—lays down the law here except myself,' he told her softly. 'Now please go and get ready to come with me, *pethi*, if you will be so kind.'

She hated his sarcasm because it put her firmly in her place and she knew she had fooled no one, least of all Damon Leonides, with her stand for independence. Whatever he decided for her she would do, because she had little choice in the matter, and trying to assert her own personality would simply result in more frustration for herself.

She sighed as she turned and crossed the hall, feeling angry with herself for refusing to accept the inevitable.

The sun was so strong that even in dark glasses Rona had to narrow her eyes against its glare, especially where it skimmed the tops of the waves with gold and dazzled her. She sat beside Damon in the big car he drove and realised with a start that this was the first time she had ever driven with him.

He wore a jacket today, despite the heat, and a tie as well, although he must have been much too hot in both. The visit to Thia Alexa, she thought with a flick of apprehension, must be a very formal one. The last time he had taken her there he had been in a short-sleeved shirt and no jacket or tie.

When they passed the half-hidden temple of Polyxena he turned his head and looked at her, one black brow raised in question. 'Would you like to visit the temple again ?' he asked, and Rona, almost without thinking, nodded her head. 'We can park the car here and walk through the trees to Isichi'a.'

He drove the car on to the edge of the plateau, as Demetrius had done, and with the cutting of the engine the quiet was almost unbelievable.

The scent of flowers lay heavy on the warm air and the sense of anticipation she felt gave her a curling sensation in her stomach.

Damon opened the car door for her and helped her out on to the grass, its spongy moss-like shortness absorbing their footsteps silently. Over the mounds of crumbled stone he lent his assistance and each time he touched her Rona felt her senses respond to him.

The goddess Polyxena stood on her plinth in solitary splendour and Rona stood before her for several minutes, her mind absorbed with the ancient legend that Demetrius had told her. It seemed somehow not quite real to think that the Leonides family saw her as the reincarnation of this cool marble goddess and she took advantage of his preoccupation to study the man beside her perhaps more critically than she had ever done before.

Dark chiselled features, with a hint of hardness about their contours, and a wide, firm mouth below an arrogant nose. The eyes were perhaps the most striking feature if one saw him face on, black and unfathomable with lashes as long as any woman would envy, thick and black against the smooth tanned face.

Her heart began a rapid and uncontrollable beating in her breast when she reminded herself that this was the man she was to marry. This man had demanded that she give him several years of her young life in return for the freedom of her beloved uncle. She had agreed to the arrangement more or less without argument, but she had never until now stopped to consider if she would have been so willing to make such a sacrifice for her uncle if Damon Leonides had been other than the man he was.

He turned his head at last and looked at her, drawn by the intensity of her scrutiny, perhaps, and he raised a querying brow. 'Rona?' he said softly, and she shook her head, not prepared to let anyone into her secret soul at that moment, least of all this dark, disturbing man.

'How—how soon does your great-aunt expect us?' she asked huskily, moving away from the shrine and stepping carefully over more mounds of moss-grown stone and marble. She had worn fairly tall heels as she had not expected to do any walking and sooner or later they were bound to let her down in these surroundings.

She was slightly ahead of him, edgily nervous about the impending visit and missing his helping hand over the uneven ground, and suddenly she missed her footing. With a cry of surprise she slipped, her arms clutching wildly at thin air trying to regain her balance or find some means of support.

None of the slender Ionic columns was near enough, but she did not go crashing to the ground as she expected, instead strong hands prevented her ! fall and a second later she was held tight in his arms, her face pressed close to the smooth cloth of his jacket, her heart pounding uncontrollably while she clung to him.

Even through his clothes she could feel the heavy, pulsing of his heart beat under her hands and she closed her eyes on the head-spinning sensation that threatened to envelop her completely. His hands pressed her against him, and she was helpless to do anything about the weakness that made her shake like a leaf in his hold.

'You are all right?' His voice sounded softly against her right ear, and she shivered when the warmth of his breath touched her cheek.

'Yes—yes, I'm all right,' she said in a husky whisper.

He held her a moment longer, then eased her to arm's length and for a second looked down at her with glittering black eyes that sent shivers along her spine like icy fingers. 'Thia Alexa is expecting us,' he said quietly, and one large hand brushed the bright copper hair from her forehead gently. 'Shall we go, *mikros mou*?'

Rona nodded and, as by mutual consent, he took her hand as they went across the temple, insuring against another slip, his fingers strong and firm curled to envelop her hand completely. The overpowering scent of jasmine was as heady as wine as they made their way along the path through the trees.

Heavy-headed hibiscus, red and white oleander, bougainvillea—it was like being in some exotic jungle, and Rona felt a strange sense of isolation as she walked beside Damon, with his hand holding hers. Neither said anything, and yet it was not an uneasy silence, and she realised suddenly that never in her life before had she been so content in anyone's company without a word passing between them.

When the old house appeared ahead of them among the trees she felt her heart miss a beat, not knowing quite why she was so uneasy about meeting Miss Alexa Leonides again, but sensing that somehow the old lady was to play a big part in her life from now on. It was Alexa Leonides who had called her the Firebird, even before Damon had introduced her, and the old lady gave her a strange sense of unreality.

The wide pathway leading to the house was well cared for but much less formally neat than the gardens at the villa, and there was an air of agelessness about the place that somehow added to her uneasiness.

As on their previous visit, the doors stood wide open as if in welcome and their hostess appeared in the hall as they walked in. Taking more note of her this time, Rona wondered just how old Miss Leonides was. Her face was incredibly wrinkled and her thin body bent at the waist, supported by a stick held in one small, bony hand.

Only the eyes looked vitally alive, bright and gleaming with pleasure at the sight of Damon, and Rona guessed he was her favourite among her various relatives. She had welcomed Demetrius when he came with them last time, but not with the same warmth.

Damon held her briefly in his embrace, her frail body almost enveloped by his height and strength, and Rona's nostrils tingled with some heavy, spicy perfume. Heavy gold ear-rings hung from her ears, glinting dully in the cool, indoor light, and her thin fingers were heavily laden with rings.

*'Kolos irthate,'* she said in her firm, thin voice, smiling as he bent his head and kissed her lightly on both cheeks. *'Kolos orisate!'*

*'Kolos sas vrikame, Thia Alexa.'* He returned the greeting, then turned and looked at Rona, a hint of smile on his mouth. 'The traditional greeting, Rona, you must learn it.'

'I'll try,' she promised, and smiled at the old lady.

Her fingers were taken and squeezed with surprising strength, while the bright eyes looked at her speculatively. 'Your husband will teach you,' Alexa Leonides told her firmly. 'You will learn Greek, of course!'

It was not a question but an unarguable statement, and Rona felt a tingle of resentment. She would have told the old lady that she would not have thought it necessary for her to learn Greek since she did not intend becoming Greek, merely being married for a while to Damon. Before she could say anything at all, however, Damon took her hand in his again and gave the fingers a brief but firm squeeze.

'I am attending to that in good time, Thia Alexa,' he told the old lady. 'Rona will be learning a little Greek.'

'I don't quite see that it's necessary,' Rona put in, determined not to be organised into anything without her consent—the very thing she had complained about before they left.

Damon raised a brow, obviously meant to be a comment on the tone of her voice. 'Do you not feel it would be a good thing?' he asked



quietly. They were both following the old lady across the hall and into a salon that opened off it, and he spoke in a voice quiet enough for his great-aunt to barely hear.

'I suppose it could be useful,' Rona admitted, and again that black brow was flicked upwards.

'You do not sound very enthusiastic,' he said shortly. 'Have you something against learning our language?'

'No, of course I haven't.' She tried vainly to do something about the way her pulse was responding to the firm hold he had on her arm, the strong fingers so tight as to be almost a warning about stepping out of line, a gesture she resented but at the same time found disturbingly stimulating to her senses.

'Then why do you seek difficulties?' he asked quietly, still so quietly that it was obvious he did not intend the old lady should overhear them, and for a moment she had the dizzying notion that they must sound like lovers quarrelling and hoping not to be overheard.

Rona did not reply, merely glancing at him meaningly from the corners of her eyes as she walked with him into the salon. The room was bigger than she expected, and delightfully cool, with its green shutters partly closed over the square windows and the inevitable vines of bougainvillea poking their way round the edges of the shutters and scenting the room as well as shading it.

Unlike the rooms at the villa, this had no carpet on the floor, and after a second or two Rona realised why. It was tiled with an exquisite mosaic depicting the legend of the Firebird, taking up most of the floor space and obviously very carefully preserved.

Noticing her interested gaze, Damon whispered in her ear. '*Fotyed to pooli,*' he said. 'The whole story of the Firebird. My great-great-grandfather had it laid down, over a hundred years ago.'

'It's beautiful,' Rona said, and meant it.

The story of the goddess, Polyxena, was told in the six sections, each part surrounded by a frame of licking flames, brilliantly conveyed by the artist. The goddess, looking exactly like the statue that stood in the temple, was portrayed here as a living woman, moving among her maidens, tending the doves in her temple and finally perishing in the flames of her own altar fire with the handsome mortal man that Zeus had sent for her, standing by and watching in horror as she died.

There was an uncanny resemblance to Demetrius in the man's classically beautiful features, and Damon realised she had noticed it. His black eyes were watching her as she stood looking down at the defiant but horrified figure of Zeno, and he was shaking his head slowly.

'You are thinking that Demetrius is far more like the man Zeno than I am, yes?' he asked softly, and Rona could not deny it. She did not look at him but at the mosaic, her heart beating with alarming rapidity when his fingers curled over her bare arm more firmly and drew her towards a chair. 'I am sorry to disappoint you,' he whispered in her ear as he saw her seated.

She almost denied her disappointment swiftly and instinctively, and only just bit back the words, feeling the colour warm her cheeks as he left her to sit between her and the old lady. In this great, half empty room she felt actually chill after a few minutes, and she wondered if the old lady could possibly live there alone, or if she had servants.

She was obviously of a very great age and surely needed someone to help run the house, but so far Rona had seen no one else. Alexa Leonides leaned back in a huge, ornately carved armchair and ; studied Rona with her bright, alert eyes for several seconds, then she nodded her head, saying something in Greek to Damon, a remark he evidently agreed with, since he nodded his head firmly.

'So you have decided not to run off with Demetrius?' she said, and Rona stared at her, too stunned for a moment to reply.

'I-I have no intention of running away, Miss Leonides,' she said in a small unsteady voice. 'I—I have certain—certain obligations and I intend to honour them.' She glanced briefly at Damon from the corners of her eyes. 'I have little choice but to honour them,' she added for his ears only.

'But Demetrius would have you run off with him, hmm?' the old lady insisted.

'The question does not arise, Miss Leonides!'

Damon noticed the edge of defiance on her voice, even if his great-aunt did not, and he reached out and touched her hand, a gentle touch, but a warning nevertheless, Rona thought. 'Rona will not break her word to me, Thia Alexa,' he said quietly. 'Nor I to her!'

'Ah, *kali, kali!*' The grey head nodded satisfaction and she reached for a small box standing on a table beside her. Holding it in her hand for a moment, she then handed it to Damon. '*Ivera,*' she said softly.

Damon opened the box and looked down at the contents for a moment before tilting it to show Rona, leaning on the arm of his chair towards her, his eyes watching her as she too leaned forward. He murmured something in Greek, presumably seeking approval, and she could only stare at the open box.

On a bed of red velvet lay a thick, heavy gold ring, rather bigger than the conventional wedding ring, but similarly plain and smooth. It looked rich and gleaming on its velvet setting, and she gazed at it for a full minute without saying anything. Then she glanced up at Damon and her cheeks were flushed, her eyes wary and uncertain—somehow, suddenly, everything was going too fast for her.

Its identity seemed obvious and yet she was puzzled as to why Alexa Leonides had it and not her great-nephew. 'Is—is it a wedding ring?' she asked, and he nodded.

'It will be *your* wedding ring,' he told her quietly. 'It will have to be made smaller, of course, for your hands are very small, *mikros mou*, but that is easily done.' He took the ring from its box and held it for a moment in his big hand, gazing down at it as if it fascinated him. 'Do you know where this came from, Rona?' he asked, and she shook her head, a little dazedly.

'It is very old,' he said, turning the heavy gold ring round in his strong fingers, watching its dull gleam catch the softened light from the windows. 'Perhaps some would say it is desecration to use it as we do, but as far as I know, no one outside this family knows of its existence and its use has become traditionally part of the legend.

'The necklace it comes from consists of a series of rings like this one, strung together on a chain, and there are five rings now missing, which should tell you how often the legend has come true for us.' He looked at her for a second while the old lady sat like an ancient statue, content to let him tell the story in his own way. 'How much has Demetrius told you of the legend?' he asked quietly. 'You know there have been others like you—other brides who have come to us as you did?'

'I—I know about two of them,' Rona admitted, scarcely believing any of it was quite real, despite the very real presence of the man beside her who was so soon to become her husband. 'I—I know your own grandmother was one of them,' she said, 'and that there was another poor soul-' She stopped hastily, about to sympathise with that seventeenth-century castaway, and saw the arched brow that questioned her sympathy, and the need for it.

'Do you see yourself as a—poor soul too, Rona?' he asked, and she hastily shook her head.

'In my case it isn't quite the same,' she said. 'At least I had a choice—I doubt if any of the others did!'

Alexa Leonides took a hand again, staunchly defending her family's traditions, as she was almost bound to do. 'I knew Gerda von Leitzen personally,' she said in her thin clear voice. 'There was no doubt that she loved my brother Alexander. At first, perhaps-' She spread expressive hands to convey heaven knew what form of coercion applied to the intrepid lady balloonist who had become Damon's grandmother.

'She was unwilling?' Rona asked huskily, her mind filled with all manner of unimaginable pressures brought to bear and her revulsion showing plainly in her eyes.

Alexa Leonides regarded her with bright, proud eyes. 'No one is unwilling to marry a Leonides!' she declared with confidence. 'In time she loved Alexander and they were very well matched.'

'You actually knew her?' Rona asked, and the old lady nodded her grey head, setting the gold earrings swinging against her lined cheeks.

'I was here when she came,' she said in a thin and vaguely distant voice, a glitter in her eyes as she gazed out of the window at the heavy-headed blossoms outside in the sunlight. 'I saw her coming, as I saw you coming, *mikros pooli*.'

'Saw me coming?' Rona looked at Daman for explanation, her eyes wide and unbelieving.

She half expected him to look embarrassed, make excuses for the ramblings of an old lady in her dotage, but instead he smiled at her

confidently, quite unperturbed by the incredible announcement. 'Thia Alexa forecast your coming almost one month before you arrived here with Demetrius,' he told her quietly, and Rona stared at him. 'You do not believe it?' he asked, as if her reaction did not surprise him in the least.

'I—I don't know,' she admitted huskily. 'I—I find it *hard* to believe that—'

'I saw the signs,' Alexa Leonides told her in her thin, clear voice. 'I said that you would be young and beautiful and that your hair would be as bright as Polyxena's fire. I warned Damon that his bride would soon be here, that he must marry you because it is the tradition!'

Rona's head was spinning with the chaos of incredible fact that was being presented to her, unable to grasp that it could feasibly be true and yet knowing it must be or Damon would never have used the methods he did to make her stay on and marry him. She knew he was watching her too, wondering how much she believed and how much she doubted.

'But a month before I didn't even know I'd be coming here,' she said in a small, shaky voice. 'That was before Rex—'

'Before anyone could possibly have foreseen your arrival on this island,' Damon put in swiftly and smoothly, and it was obvious to Rona that his great-aunt had not been informed of her reason for being there. Any more than Constantine and Demeter had. 'Thia Alexa sent for me and told me of your coming,' Damon went on, and that deep, quiet voice seemed somehow reassuring amid the chaos of disturbing facts she was faced with.

The black eyes held hers steadily for a moment. 'Since it was apparently certain that you would be very young,' he went on, 'I suggested that Demetrius would be a more appropriate bridegroom

for you, but-' He spread his big hands in a gesture of helplessness. 'I am the eldest son since my brother died, and I must therefore follow tradition.'

He picked up the ring again and once more turned it in his long fingers, then looked at Rona steadily, his black eyes unfathomable, then he held out his left hand. 'Give me your hand, *pethi*,' he said softly. 'The ring must be made to fit, for there is very little time until the wedding.'

Obediently, almost automatically, Rona gave him her hand and the warm gold slid on to her finger, - guided by his curved fingers. It felt smooth and almost sensual as he put it on her finger and she shivered, so that he looked at her again, this time in question, but she shook her head hastily.

'You wish it *had* been possible for Demetrius,' he said in a low, soft voice, and she hastily denied it, without even thinking.

'It would never have been possible for Demetrius,' she said. 'Madame Leonides would make sure of that, just as she'll make sure I don't marry *you*, if she sees the opportunity.'

The black eyes held hers for a second longer, his hand holding hers with the heavy ring still circling her finger. 'What I have I hold,' Damon said softly but firmly. 'Demeter knows that!' And Rona again shivered, though not from fear, she was sure of that.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

It was a beautiful night, as so many nights were here, heady with the scent of blossoms and blessedly cool after the heat of the day, with a soft breeze that blew in off the sea. The trees stirred as it passed through them, and the soft whispering rustle of their movement with the sound of the crickets had a sleepy, peaceful effect against the background of the sea.

Rona had seen Anna-Maria safely into bed, then left the house for a solitary walk rather than join the rest of the Leonides family in the salon. She skirted the swimming pool, a small ghost-like figure in her long pale dress, her sandalled feet swishing softly on the tiles of the terrace.

In the moonlight her copper-red hair looked dark, as dark as any of the people she had left behind in the house, and her eyes too reflected the shadows of the trees and appeared more black than blue. The dress she wore was appropriate to her surroundings, its simple style copied from the classic lines of the Greek tunic—swathes of white jersey silk that fitted close over her young breasts with gold ribbons, then drifted down to ground level where her sandalled feet just peeped below as she walked.

Leaving the terrace, she made her way through the trees where it was much darker because the moon was hidden, and the scents of the blossoms were even more heady. It was hard to believe that only four weeks ago she had known the island of Polyxena only as a name, and Damon Leonides as no more than a name and a face in the press pictures. Now, after a month on the island, she felt as if she had known both the man and his island since the beginning of time.

Demeter Leonides had no more liking for her now than she had initially, and she made little more attempt to hide the fact, but Rona had formed a friendship with Constantine that was closer in one way



than that she had with Demetrius, although less emotional. It took a great deal of self-control sometimes not to succumb to Demetrius' blandishments, for he still seemed unwilling to believe that she really meant to marry Damon. His frequent and indiscreet attempts to flirt with her made his uncle angry, she was well aware of it, and sometimes she wondered whether it was possible that jealousy prompted at least part of Damon's anger. It was a possibility that disturbed her not unpleasantly.

There was only another three weeks now until she was to be married to Damon and she was filled with an increasing sense of excitement that she could do nothing to diminish. She saw no more of him than she ever had, and their relationship was exactly the same as it always had been. She still took care of Anna-Maria as if she was simply an employee and no more, but somehow she had a growing sense of belonging with every day she was there.

Reaching the edge of the trees, she rested awhile, leaning against the cool slimness of one of the cypresses, her hands behind her, her head back against its smooth bark, gazing up at the huge full moon. The moonlight on the sea gave it a dark, fathomless look with a long bright finger of silver lying across its placid surface like the beam of a spotlight. It was like something in a dream—something not quite real, and she sometimes wondered if she would wake up one day and find it all gone.

Suddenly aware of movement behind her in the trees, she hastily pushed herself away from the supporting trunk and turned, her eyes narrowed to peer into the darkness. She saw nothing at first but the pale faces of the blossoms below the shading trees, but then someone moved and she almost resigned herself to it being Demetrius. If he had any notion at all that she had come out here alone, he would have come and found her.

She said nothing, but watched the intruder come closer, the red tip of a cigarette glowing like a single eye in the darkness. Still almost certain it was Demetrius, she sighed resignedly, then started suddenly when she realised that it was not him but Constantine.

He came nearer, flinging the cigarette from him as he came, the whiteness of a smile gleaming at her briefly. 'May I join you, Rona?' he asked softly, and she nodded.

'Yes, of course.'

She stood beside the cypress whose support she had sought, and smiled. Constantine was always a welcome companion, and she perhaps needed someone to talk to to bring her down to earth after those daydreams the moonlight had inspired. In evening dress and seen in this light, she could have mistaken him for Damon in the first few seconds, but he lacked that strong, sensual aura of masculinity that was an integral part of Damon, and her senses responded much less violently to him.

'You wished to—escape?' He smiled as he asked the question and she knew that he understood her occasional desire to be free of the essentially overpowering personalities of his family. He would not blame her for it, nor think her weak for escaping, but realise that she sometimes needed to find her own level.

'I like to be alone sometimes,' she told him, and he nodded.

'I know,' he said quietly. Smilingly he raised a brow in question. 'Are you sure you do not mind my company?'

'Quite sure,' Rona assured him. She looked up at the huge full moon again and smiled to herself a little wryly. How many young girls engaged to be married in a few weeks' time would find themselves having to take a romantic moonlight walk with the bridegroom's

brother rather than the bridegroom himself? 'It's a beautiful night,' she said, glancing at his shadowed face, and Constantine smiled.

'Very beautiful,' he agreed quietly. 'And I am surprised that I am able to walk with you like this, Rona. My brother must be singularly lacking in imagination to let you come out here alone like this.'

The remark would have come as less of a surprise coming from Demetrius, but Constantine was usually much less apt to pass remarks, and she stared at him for a moment, unsure what her response should be. 'The situation's hardly—well, hardly the normal one,' she reminded him. 'Damon doesn't mind my coming out alone, or with anyone else, the usual feelings and emotions don't enter into it.'

'Then it is a pity!' Constantine declared, forcefully for him, so much so that Rona blinked in disbelief for a moment.

His strong features, so very much like Damon's in most ways, were set into a more fierce expression than she had yet seen there, and his eyes had a bright, dark gleam in the moon's soft glow that reminded her of his brother. The outburst was so unexpected that she was bereft of words for several moments, and before she could answer he offered an apology, something that Damon would never have done.

'I am sorry, Rona,' he said quietly. 'It is none of my concern, of course, what goes on between Damon and you, but-' His shoulders shrugged briefly and resignedly. 'I dislike seeing a young and beautiful girl treated as no more than a means to an end, it is not—not natural!'

They were walking now, along the narrow white sanded shore where the sea ruffled creamily just inches from their feet, and the soft wind lifted her hair and blew it about her face and neck. 'It's convenient,' she explained, her voice small and cool as she sought for reasons why

she should not let Constantine into her secret too. He was as much part of the Leonides firm as Demetrius and Damon were, and so far he was the only one not to know the real reason for her being there.

'No more than convenient?' Constantine asked softly. He put a hand under her elbow as they walked, his finger tips just touching her soft skin, and she felt a faint echo in her heart of the chaos Damon could arouse there. 'I do not know how Damon keeps you here, Rona,' he said quietly. 'But I know that you would not be marrying him in less than three weeks' time if you had a free choice. Am I not right?'

'In a way,' Rona admitted slowly. 'But there's been no real duress, Constantine. Damon gave me a choice—a choice I could only really make in one way, I admit, but it was a choice and in the circumstances I was grateful for it.'

'I will not press you for explanations,' Constantine said hastily, but she smiled and shook her head.

'I don't mind telling you,' she said. 'You have as much right as Damon and Demetrius to know. My uncle, Rex Forbes, was manager of the Leonides Line London branch and he—he was less than honest.'

She saw him nodding his head, as if the situation was all too clear to him suddenly. 'And it is something to do with your uncle that enables Damon to put you into such a position?' he guessed.

Rona nodded. 'I know it was—criminal, what Rex did, but he did it mostly for me and I can't forget that. It was certain he could have been charged with embezzlement and given a prison sentence, and I came here to try and plead with Damon on his behalf.'

'But Demetrius brought you here?'

'He did,' she agreed. 'Because I happened to spot the Leonides car and acted on impulse. I'd no idea how to get to see Damon—Demetrius was sheer good luck!'

'You really believe so?' he asked, and Rona nodded unhesitatingly.

'Oh yes, of course,' she assured him. 'I'd never have been able to help Rex otherwise. Damon put it to me that if I stayed on here, Rex would go free, although of course he'll work hard to pay back the money he took—he's promised me that.'

'A choice of marrying a man you scarcely know or seeing your uncle go to prison,' Constantine said bitterly. 'What a cruel prospect for a young girl!'

Touched by his sympathy, Rona smiled and shook her head. 'But at least I had a choice,' she told him. 'I never really had much hope of helping Rex when I started out, now I know he won't have to go to prison, and that means a lot to me!'

'I would call such a choice blackmail on the part of my brother,' Constantine said in a firm hard voice, 'but Damon would sacrifice anything and anyone for the old traditions! He is like old Alexa!'

'I've met Miss Leonides,' Rona said. 'She's very old, isn't she?'

'Almost ninety-three years,' he said. 'She is the matriarch of this family despite her single status. She has devoted her life to the cause of this island and its legend—and that wretched goddess!'

'The goddess I'm supposed to represent,' Rona said with a wary smile. 'Don't you support the legend too, Constantine?'

He did not answer immediately, but after a moment he shrugged his shoulders with an air of helplessness. 'I suppose I do,' he admitted. 'We all do in varying degrees, even Demetrius, for all he would have

you believe otherwise. It is born in us, you see. Polyxena must be served and we are her servants!' He looked down at her, his eyes gleaming in the bright moonlight. 'Do you not think us primitive for holding such beliefs, Rona?'

Rona shrugged uneasily. The longer she was on Polyxena's island, the more she felt the influence, spiritual or otherwise, of the ancient goddess, even though she was kept alive only by the Leonides for some deep-rooted reasons of their own. 'I'm not sure what I think about it,' she confessed. 'I know that Damon and Miss Leonides believe in it firmly and I suppose one strong belief is no worse than another.'

'Even when people's lives are sacrificed to it?' he asked shortly, then a moment later shook his head and touched her arm more firmly. 'I cannot pretend that Damon will make a bad husband,' he told her in a more gentle voice that was much more like the Constantine she was familiar with. 'At least he will not neglect or ill-treat you, *pethi*, that much I can promise of my brother!'

'I know!' She smiled up at him reassuringly, her eyes bright and shiny in the moonlight. 'And I don't really mind *too* much marrying him for a while, Constantine.' She sought to lighten their rather sober mood by changing the subject and picked up the endearment he had called her, recognising it as one that Damon often used. 'What *does* that name mean?' she asked, smiling. 'Damon calls me by it, and I've never got around to asking him or Demetrius what it actually is.'

'*Pethi*?' He smiled and shook his head. 'It is child, that is all,' he told her. 'Does Damon call you child?'

'Presumably,' Rona said dryly, rather let down that the name was not really an endearment after all, but merely a reference to her youth. 'He also calls me something like *mikros mou*, on occasion— what's that?'

He shrugged, obviously recognising her resentment. 'I think he sees you as a little one, a child,' he told her. 'Which is rather foolish of him in the circumstances—there are many men who would find other names for you, especially in his position!'

She laughed, shaking her head at the practical, down-to-earth attitude of her prospective bridegroom towards her. 'Perhaps this wedding is as much punishment for Damon as it's supposed to be for me,' she guessed. 'After the kind of life he's used to it must be rather a comedown to be ordered, more or less, to marry the niece of a man who's robbed him!' She laughed again, shortly. 'Poor Damon!'

'Poor Damon!' He echoed the sentiment harshly and turned her to face him, his hands on her arms, ! his eyes gleaming at her in the moonlight with both anxiety and exasperation. 'He is poor only in that he cannot see the opportunity he is wasting!' he decreed firmly. 'Such blindness makes me angry, Rona, and especially when I see it in a man who is to my certain knowledge, clever and intelligent in most other directions!'

'Constantine!' His fervour surprised her, alarmed her in a way, for he sounded so much like Demetrius did when he condemned his uncle, and she had attributed his outbursts to youthful frustration because he could not have the girl he had looked upon as his.

'I am sorry, Rona!' His dark eyes looked at her pleadingly, his face shadowed in the moonlight, woeful with regret for his outburst, and she felt a moment of compassion for him. His own beloved wife was gone and the same brother who had tried to stop his marrying her was now, in his eyes, about to make another unforgivable blunder and spoil Rona's life.

'Please—don't be!' she begged softly. 'I know how you feel, Constantine, and I appreciate your concern for me, but honestly, I don't *mind*!'

'You are a very lovely girl!' He spoke the words softly and one gentle hand reached out and touched her cheek with the finger-tips. 'Much too lovely to be married to a man who is blind to his good fortune.'

Trying to find words to answer him, Rona glanced over her shoulder when some faint movement caught her eye, and almost instinctively stepped back, pushing at his caressing hand when she recognised the long, cat-like stride of the man approaching along the beach. Constantine, quick to suspect the reason for her action, also looked back the way they had come.

They waited there, as if unable to move, two shadowy figures in the bright moonlight, standing on the silvery whiteness of the narrow beach, still quite close together, although now untouching. Rona's heart was hammering wildly in her breast and she felt sure she was about to be called upon to account for her being there.

In a few long strides Damon covered the length of beach they had taken several minutes to walk, and his face was darker than ever in the shadowy light, his eyes glittering as he came close, his hands at his sides looking oddly dangerous, as if he was ready to strike out. Constantine murmured a few words in Greek and Rona could almost believe they were a prayer.

'I have been looking for you,' he said without preliminary and ignoring his brother for the moment. 'When Demetrius was still in the salon I assumed you must still be in the house.'

The jibe about Demetrius was deliberate and unjustified, and Rona resented it whether Constantine did or not. She lifted her chin in defiance of it, almost without realising she did it, and her eyes shone, darkly angry in the pale light. 'I'm sorry I didn't ask permission to come for a walk!' she told him pertly. 'I'll try and remember next time!'



He said nothing for a long moment and neither she nor Constantine moved, then Damon looked at his brother and inclined his head briefly towards the way back to the house. 'Will you please leave us, Constantine?' he asked quietly, and for a moment Rona believed he was going to refuse.

Constantine looked at his brother for a moment, then down at Rona, his eyes dark with indecision, then he inclined his head in a brief nod of agreement and looked at her again. 'I will see you back at the house, Rona,' he told her quietly. Without another word he turned on his heel and walked back the way they had come, leaving her there with Damon.

'You wished to walk on the beach?' Damon asked in a quiet voice, after a moment or two, during which she watched Constantine disappear with mixed feelings.

'I—I felt like walking,' she said, a slight huskiness betraying her sudden nervousness.

'But not alone, obviously!'

It always angered her when he was sarcastic at her expense and now was no exception. She looked up at him angrily, her eyes bright and shining, her soft mouth hinting at temper as she curled her hands into fists. 'There's no need to be sarcastic,' she told him sharply. 'I don't have to apologise to you just because I came for a walk with Constantine, even if *I had* meant to come with him!'

'Explain!'

The short command angered her further and she tightened her fists, ready to defend her independence. 'I don't have to explain,' she declared firmly. 'I'm neither a child nor a prisoner! You can't expect me to explain my every move to you, as if you had some sort of—of feudal rights over me!'

'And you cannot go walking off with any man who takes your eye!' he countered harshly. 'I had warned you about being free with Demetrius, I had not thought of my brother as being of interest to you as well!'

'How dare you! How *dare* you!' She was shivering with temper and almost on the point of hitting out, and yet there was a definite mistiness in her eyes that told how much the jibe had hurt too, and she shook her head angrily to clear away any suggestion of tears. 'I started out for a walk alone and Constantine caught up with me,' she said in a small, choked voice. 'And I can't see that walking on the beach with your brother on the privacy of your own island can cause any scandal. No one's likely to be spying on us here, are they? Except you, of course!'

The jibe was irresistible and she saw the hard tightening of his mouth and the glitter in his black eyes as they looked down at her. 'Demeter will know that you were with Constantine,' he told her harshly. 'That is sufficient to ensure that all Athens knows by next week this time, when she pays a visit to her friends.'

'And you dislike the idea of me being talked about in connection with your brother?' she asked, and wished she was not trembling quite so much, for it was not only with temper, she recognised well enough. 'Well, I'm sorry,' she said, 'but I like Constantine and he's been very nice to me through all this!'

'Constantine *is* very nice,' he said. 'But I dislike Demeter having cause to prattle to her friends about him and my fiancée. I object to being made to appear a cuckold even before we are married. Is that so unreasonable?'

Rona stared at him, her brain spinning chaotically when she thought of the importance he apparently put on her being with Constantine. 'To appear—oh, but that's nonsense! How can *any* one make

something out of a perfectly innocent walk on the beach? You don't know-'

'I know Demeter,' he interrupted harshly. 'Her aim is to stop this marriage at any cost, you have recognised as much yourself; do you not realise that incidents such as this are playing right into her hands.'

'I didn't realise,' Rona admitted softly. Her temper was subsiding as rapidly as it had been aroused, as always. 'And you wanted someone to blame, so you blamed me.'

'I do not entirely blame you,' he denied, his own voice less harsh and angry now. 'Perhaps in this case I should blame Constantine, for he at least is old enough to realise the pitfalls, and possibly you are not. You are very young, Rona, and you do not always think of the effect of your actions.'

'So young that you call me child?' Rona suggested softly. She tilted her chin defiantly, resenting his well-meaning excuses for her and remembering the translations that Constantine had made of the names he called her. 'Child is hardly a suitable endearment for your fiancée, surely!' she said, and again saw the swift, bright glitter in his eyes.

Her heart was beating urgently, making her head spin and her body tremble with a blood-stirring surge of excitement. He swore softly and virulently in Greek-and at the same time reached for her with both hands, strong and relentless on the softness of her bare arms. His mouth was even more fierce than on the first occasion he had kissed her, and she struggled instinctively at first against its harsh demands, her hands beating at his chest and her body twisting in his hold as she tried to escape.

His hands slid down from her arms to the small of her back and he pressed her hard against him, lifting one hand again after a moment to cradle her head in his strong fingers so that she could not move, and

she yielded at last. Breathless and with her heart beating so violently hard that she could not control the spinning sensation in her head, she slid her own hands up round his neck and allowed her body to mould softly against his hardness, as if she had no strength of her own.

It was when she felt as if she would never be able to draw breath again that he released her, slowly and with obvious reluctance, but carefully and deliberately putting her at arm's length. His black eyes looked down at her for a long, breathless moment, then he shook his head and there was a harsh kind of smile on his wide mouth that did not reach his eyes.

'I warned you, Rona *mou*,' he said softly. 'I can be provoked, like any other man, and if you behave so then you must take the consequences!' Rona was still too breathless to even protest at being blamed for the incident, and she made no objection when he turned her towards the house.

She went with him automatically, walking back along the silver sand, his sleeve just brushing her bare arm and keeping her heart beat rapping urgently, even at such slight contact. He said nothing, and she wondered if his silence was because he was still angry or caused by some other emotion.

It was after they had turned and started back through the exotic tangle of shrubs and trees that he spoke at last, his voice deep and firm as always but raised in question instead of making a flat statement as was more usually his way. 'You would like to see the ring now that it has been made to fit you?' he said, and Rona took a moment to get her bearings before she answered.

'The ring?' She looked up at him, meeting the black eyes head on. 'Oh yes, yes, of course!'

'You had forgotten all about it, hmm?'

She shook her head to deny it. 'No, of course I hadn't forgotten about it,' she denied. 'But I wasn't thinking straight—I mean I—'

'Do you mean you can be touched by a kiss from your prospective bridegroom?' he asked softly. 'I am delighted to hear it, *mikros eros mou!*'

'I hate you when you're sarcastic!' Rona exclaimed despairingly. 'And I'm not a child, Damon, I don't like being called—little one, or whatever it means!'

'You do not like!' He echoed the words softly, and when she looked up at him there was a hint of smile on his mouth and glittering in his eyes. 'There seem to be so many things you do not like, Rona, but you surely do not object to being called an endearment by your fiance!'

For a moment she looked at him uncertainly as they emerged from the trees and on to the tiled terrace again, making it much more easy for her to see his face. 'I asked Constantine what *mikros mou* means,' she told him. 'So I know it isn't really an endearment at all, not in my case, you're simply trying to put me firmly in my place!'

His mouth tightened briefly and she thought he was going to lose his temper again. Instead he stopped them both in the middle of the terrace and held her by her arms, his fingers hard and strong on - her soft flesh. 'Your place at this moment, the way you are behaving,' he said harshly, 'is across my knee being spanked like the child you claim not to be! And the next time you are learning Greek from my brother perhaps you will ask him to translate *eros* for you, although you should be able to guess that for yourself—you have a statue to the god of that name in London!'

He held her there for a moment longer, his eyes glittering down at her, then he bent his head suddenly and brought his mouth down hard over hers, while his hands pulled her to him and held her there.

Murmuring a few harsh words in his own tongue, he turned and strode off across the terrace and into the house, while Rona stood and watched him go, her legs suddenly too weak to move, and her mouth still pulsing warmly from being kissed hard for a second time in one evening.

It took her a moment or two after he had disappeared to even think of the statue he referred to, her mind was in such chaos, but after a while she recognised the Greek pronunciation of a name she had known all her life and, quite involuntarily, she smiled- Eros, the winged god whose statue stood in the very heart of London, was the Greek god of love.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

DEMETRIUS had obviously been fully informed by his mother about her walk on the beach with Constantine, and Rona suspected he was angry about it as Damon had been, although obviously for different reasons. For two days now she had been given no chance to speak to him alone, but his frequent expressive glances in her direction had conveyed his feelings plainly enough, and there was a maliciously satisfied look about Demeter Leonides that told its own story.

At the moment, however, Rona had more pleasant things on her mind, something to distract her from the more disturbing reasons why she was there. On Damon's instructions she had been given a free choice from a fabulous collection of clothes brought over from Athens specially by Demeter's couturier.

Such generosity in providing her with what amounted to a very expensive trousseau surprised her and also pleased her inordinately. Apparently he wanted to see her well dressed and her own wardrobe was of necessity rather sparse, but it did cross her mind to speculate on his reasons for having the clothes brought to her rather than let her visit the salon in Athens. Perhaps he did not trust her to return to the island once she had left it.

She had always loved beautiful clothes, but her allowance had never allowed her to indulge in any- \* thing quite so expensive, and Damon had given her a free hand to choose as many as she wanted. She had curbed a natural bent for extravagance because of the rather unusual circumstances—no man other than her uncle had ever bought her clothes before.

A couple of Paris-designed suits had proved irresistible and several exquisite Italian silk dresses, with a couple of quite breathtaking evening gowns and she would have been more than satisfied, but the

woman had insisted that Mr. Leonides had said she was to have lingerie and nightwear too.

Ever since the woman and her assistant had departed, Rona had been in her room, trying the things on again and again, and she wondered if she could possibly be dreaming. Once or twice she had caught the two women exchanging looks and she wondered just what interpretation they had put on her being visited on the island instead of going to the salon. Demeter, she felt, would have made some comment, but even she did not argue with the decisions of her formidable brother-in-law.

So far she had not seen Damon to thank him for his generosity, but as she was leaving her room that evening on her way down to dinner she had the opportunity to do so. She closed the bedroom door behind her and whirled round swiftly, knocking into Damon and letting out a small cry of surprise.

She Was wearing a dress she had brought with her, a short, straight-skirted one in yellow jersey silk, and she saw the way he looked at it while he steadied her with his hands on her arms. 'You are not wearing one of your new dresses?' he asked, and she blinked at him for a moment, her heart thudding anxiously at her ribs.

No matter how she tried to control the sensation, he still had the same devastating effect on her and she trembled in his hold while her pulses responded violently, as they always did. It would never do for her to fall in love with her husband when their marriage was to be merely one of convenience and meant to last only as long as was necessary to satisfy his precious goddess and her traditions, and she shook her head hastily.

She looked down at the yellow dress and then at Damon. 'I—I thought the new ones were for—I mean, I didn't think I'd be expected to wear them until after—the wedding.'



'They are for you to wear just whenever you wish,' he said, and the black eyes warmed for a moment with a smile that touched his wide mouth only briefly. 'You must be rather tired of living out of one suitcase, surely!'

Rona looked down at the yellow dress and pulled a face. 'I suppose everyone's tired of seeing me in the same old things too, aren't they?' she asked. She sought for words to thank him adequately, and looked up at the dark, chiselled features through the thickness of her lashes. Why, she thought despairingly, did she always find it hard to talk to him?

'I—I haven't thanked you for all those lovely dresses and things,' she said hesitantly. 'I don't really know *how* to thank you, but I really am grateful, please believe that.'

Broad shoulders shrugged lightly, as if the matter of a massive dress bill was of little consequence, and for the first time, she realised that she was soon to be the wife of a man to whom money meant very little, and who could have afforded to lose the amount her uncle had taken, many times over, without noticing its loss. The irony of him having spent so much on clothes for her did not escape her and it left rather a bitter taste.

'It was necessary to add to your wardrobe before you are seen in public as my wife,' he told her coolly. 'And you are lovely enough to repay buying you good clothes.'

'Oh yes, of course, I have to make the right impression !'

She had not meant to sound quite so bitter, but to her sensitive ears he had sounded as if he saw her as no more than an attractive prop to his public image. Someone he could produce confidently at the kind of functions where a wife was required, and know she would not diminish his reputation for having good taste in women.

Her sarcasm realised an expressive brow and he looked down at her curiously. 'You do not like compliments?' he asked, and Rona almost laughed.

'I would have called that more an approval of goods bought rather than a compliment,' she told him bitterly, and saw the swift angry glitter in his eyes.

He put a hand on her arm and the fingers gripped hard as he swung her round to face him. The lean, bronzed face was set sternly and his black eyes glittered like jet below frowning brows. She could feel the taut, angry tenseness of the lean body transmit itself to her via his restraining fingers and a shiver of sensation ran through her like ice-water, making her tremble.

'I am a tolerant man,' he said in a cold hard voice, 'or I would make you pay for that impudence, *kopela mou*! You will do well to remember that you are not in England! Here a man may still beat his wife and if you drive me too far I might forget my more civilised manners and resort to basic instincts !' The hand holding her arm shook her roughly, then turned her to face the stairs again. 'Now—you will accompany me down to dinner and you will try not to look and behave too much like a spoiled child!'

'I'm not a-' she began, and he shook her again.

'*Tsiho*!' Rona had heard the same admonishment used to silence Anna-Maria many times, and she sighed. He was determined, she thought, to treat her in the same way he did his little niece and she offered no further argument as she was led along to the stairs. One day, she vowed, she would show him whether or not she was a child—if she ever had the chance.

Anna-Maria was busy with her tutor and Rona was taking advantage of her free time, pondering on the present luxury of her wardrobe and remembering how angry Damon had been with her last night over her sarcasm. She had not meant to fight with him, but somehow her wanting to thank him for her new clothes had not turned out at all as she wanted. Her conversations with Damon seldom did, and she wished she could be more cool and self-possessed where he was concerned.

Damon could, she realised, cause her a great deal of heartache if she was not very careful, for she felt less and less like being a bride of convenience, and yet she knew that she could never be anything else to him. Demetrius offered the kind of relationship she would rather have had with Damon, a kind of warm closeness that was not quite love, and she sometimes wondered if she was being unnecessarily unkind in keeping him at arm's length—both for her own sake and his. Yet somehow she instinctively kept up the barriers between them.

At ease on a canvas lounge beside the pool, she was protected from the full heat of the sun by an overhanging bower of red roses, their heavy scent lulling her pleasantly into somnolence, and she started visibly when Demetrius, padding up to her soft-footed, bent and kissed her mouth.

'I have caught you at last!' he said, and smiled maliciously at the uneasiness his kiss caused her. 'Do not worry, lovely Rona,' he teased her, 'neither of my uncles is here to see me kiss you!'

Rona pulled herself upright in her chair and shook back her hair, brushing it from her neck with one hand. 'Sarcasm doesn't become you, Demetrius,' she told him, determinedly cool and matter-of-fact.

He flung himself down at her feet on a pile of brightly coloured cushions, his lean, bronzed body clad only in swimming shorts, as he

so often was, with a white towelling robe flung carelessly over them. He looked incredibly handsome and god-like, even sprawled as he was, and Rona felt her senses respond to him inevitably.

His blue eyes looked up at her broodingly while he reached for her hand. 'You have been avoiding me,' he accused. 'And I do not know why, *oreo mou*, unless it is because you do not want to talk to me about Constantine.'

Being more or less prepared for him to raise the subject of Constantine, sooner or later, Rona was not immediately startled into anger as Demetrius probably expected, but neither was she inclined to discuss it with him. She leaned back her head again and closed her eyes lazily as if the subject was of no interest to her. 'I don't have anything to talk to you about concerning Constantine,' she said quietly. 'And neither have I been avoiding you, Demetrius —you're wrong on both counts!'

But Demetrius was not easily deterred. He held firmly on to the hand he had taken possession of, and looked up at her steadily. 'Do you deny that you went for a moonlight walk with Constantine?' he asked, and Rona shook her head, opening her eyes and drawing her hand away despite his grip.

'No, of course I don't deny it,' she told him. 'Although you make it sound like a secret rendezvous instead of a stroll along the beach. I only deny the right of you or anyone else to object to my going for a walk with Constantine if I feel like it!'

A dark brow flicked swiftly upwards and Demetrius pulled a face at her. 'Did you tell Damon that?' he asked, as if he considered it unlikely, and Rona nodded.

'More or less,' she said coolly.

Demetrius stared at her for a moment unbelievably. 'You did?' he asked, and she nodded. 'But what did he say?'

It took Rona a moment or two to decide whether or not to tell him what Damon's reaction had been, then she shrugged and sat forward in her chair, her hands clasped round her knees. 'He was angry, of course,' she said. 'But it was perfectly innocent, my being out there with Constantine, and he couldn't say it was otherwise.'

'Did he not—tell you off?' he asked, and the unaccustomed slang sounded strange on his tongue and made her smile. 'He left the salon like the god of vengeance when he realised that both you and Constantine were missing and Elani said where you were.'

'Did he?' For a moment she pondered on that, considering yet again the intriguing possibility of Damon being jealous, and dismissing it yet again as ridiculous. 'He was angry because he seemed to think that your mother would be telling the whole of Athens that I was having an affair with his brother.'

Her frankness shocked him, that much was evident, and Rona quite honestly relished his reaction for a moment. If she was to hold her own with the autocratic Leonides, she told herself, she would need to play them at their own game occasionally, no matter what sort of an impression she created.

'He must have been out of his mind,' Demetrius said in a dazed voice, and Rona shook her head.

'I don't see why,' she told him. 'Isn't that much the same as you had in mind when you accused me of avoiding you and not telling you about Constantine?'

He said nothing for a moment, then he shifted his pile of cushions closer to her chair and rested his elbow on its arms, his hands reaching for hers again, and pressing her fingers briefly to his lips.

'Suddenly I feel that I do not know you any more, my Rona,' he said in that deep, seductive voice she always thrilled to, even now when she was thinking more of what Damon would do and say if he came on to the terrace and found Demetrius in a far more compromising position than Constantine had been. 'Are you trying to hurt me, to—to dismiss me from your life?'

'I couldn't do that even if I wanted to, Demetrius,' she said quietly. 'But I'm going to marry Damon very shortly and he would have every right to object to you behaving as you are now. I wish you wouldn't!'

She would have pulled away her hands, but he retained a firm hold on them and there was a bright glitter in his blue eyes as he again pressed the warmth of his lips to her fingers. 'But do *you* object, *eros mou*?' he murmured, and Rona snatched her hands hastily.

'Yes, I do!' she declared firmly. She wished her voice would not tremble so, but there was little she could do about it. Demetrius was a practised and determined flirt and he was very hard to resist in this mood. Her senses were responding to him despite her determination to remain cool and sensible and she sat forward in her chair, her knees hunched and her hands tucked out of reach under her arms. 'I—I wish you wouldn't try and flirt with me, Demetrius,' she told him huskily. 'And—and please don't call me—that!'

'*Eros mou*?' The blue eyes glinted at her boldly, and a smile gleamed whitely in his bronzed, good-looking face, as if he was quite confident that her objections were no more than a front for her real feelings. 'Do you know what it means?' he asked, and Rona nodded.

'Yes—yes, I do, and I'm not your love, Demetrius!'

'Do you imagine you are Damon's?' he demanded with unexpected malice, and she shook her head, hugging herself tightly, defensively.

'No,' she said in a small, wistful voice. 'No, I know I'm not that either.'

Demetrius, as always, was quick to apologise for his impulsiveness. 'Oh, Rona! Lovely, sad little Rona!' He knelt beside her on the cushions, his arms encircling her, one of them along the back of her chair and the other across the chair arms, his smooth tanned cheeks pressed close to hers. 'I love you, *eros mou*, will you not believe that?'

Rona looked at him for a moment, her eyes wide and almost anxious, feeling oddly lost suddenly among her own tangled emotions. 'Do you?' she said softly, and Demetrius kissed her mouth firmly but gently.

'You know I do,' he whispered. 'I love you as Damon never will, for he thinks of you only as that precious goddess of his, not as a woman! If you marry him he will not allow me to come near you, so why, oh, why, my lovely, must you marry him?'

Rona looked down at her hands, now clasped tightly together in her lap, and wondered just how she really felt about Demetrius. He was undeniably attractive and she was very definitely drawn to him, but always when she thought herself more than merely attracted to him, she remembered the feel of Damon's arms around her, and the fierce ardour of Damon's kisses on her mouth. But if Demetrius-

She shook her head hastily. 'You know why I must marry him, Demetrius,' she said quietly. 'And—and I can't really believe that you love me. not seriously.'

'Oh, but I *do* I' he insisted, and turned her face to him again, brushing her lips lightly with his own. 'You know I do, *oreo mou!*'

Half convinced, but still very uncertain of her own emotions. Rona looked at him for a moment uncertainly. 'Enough to marry me?' she asked softly, and watched him as his good-looking face took on a look of blank surprise.

'Rona—lovely, precious Rona,' he said softly after a long silence, 'it is not possible that I marry you.'

'Because of Damon?' she asked. 'If you really mean it when you say you love me, Demetrius-'

He shrugged expressive shoulders and pulled a face as he curved his left arm tightly around her shoulders.

'At this moment,' he said, 'Mama and Damon are —how is it?—negotiating. It is a family we know well, they live in a small place just outside Athens.'

'Negotiating?' His meaning eluded her and her brain was filled with such a chaos of emotions that she could not think very clearly.

Demetrius laughed shortly, leaning over to kiss her on her mouth. 'They are arranging a bride for me, *oreo mou*,' he said softly. 'I shall be married next year if all goes well. I have known Persephone Theodorus for most of my life and she is pleasant enough, it will not be too hard for me. If only it was not Damon that you were marrying, it would have worked well enough for us, but Damon-' He shrugged again resignedly.

Rona, only half believing her own ears, stared at him blankly for a moment. 'You're—you're going to be married?' she said in a small tight voice that caught in her throat. 'To a girl you've known all your life?'

'When the arrangements are complete,' Demetrius said, and looked puzzled. It was obvious that he saw nothing untoward in his announcement nor in the suggestion he had made regarding their own relationship. 'If only you were not marrying Damon-'

Rona shook off the arm that encircled her shoulders and pushed away the one that barred her from getting up from the chair. Shaking back



her red hair, she got to her feet and stood for a moment looking down at a startled Demetrius still kneeling on the cushions beside her chair.

'You have the—the temerity to suggest that I—' She shook her head slowly, anger showing bright and glistening in her eyes. 'You actually tried to persuade me to cancel my marriage to Damon, knowing how much it means to me for my uncle's sake, just so that you can have an—an affair with me and still marry your—whoever she is I'

'But, Rona, *oreo mou*, Persephone knows me, she knows-'

'I thought I knew you!' Rona said, almost tearfully angry. 'It seems I don't at all!'

'But, Rona,' he begged, still sounding as if reason was on his side, 'it was bound to happen sooner or later, that Damon would find me a wife.'

Rona shook her head slowly, her eyes dazed but angry, still not quite believing. 'Oh, Damon's very good at finding the right wife,' she said in a tight, husky little voice. 'I know! But forgive me if I feel sorry for your chosen bride, Demetrius—I feel sorry for any woman who marries into this—this cold-blooded, heartless, autocratic family—including myself!'

Demetrius was on his feet, gazing at her incredulously, his blue eyes puzzled still, while Rona swallowed the bitter truth. She had recognised Demetrius for a practised flirt from the beginning, but his urgent insistence that he loved her just a few moments ago had almost convinced her that he was serious, and she was angry as much with herself for her gullibility as with him. He could not consider her as a wife, merely as a mistress.

'Rona!' He put out a tentative hand, trying to appease her, but still unaware of having done anything to warrant such an outburst. 'Rona, *eros mou*, I-'

'I'm *not* your love,' Rona argued angrily, her blue eyes blazing at him, and quite unaware of anyone else within hearing on the sunlit terrace. 'I'm no one's love—certainly no one on this island, and I wish I'd never come here!'

'Rona!'

Damon's quiet voice behind her startled her, for he must have come from the house unseen by either of them, his footsteps deadened by soft-soled shoes. His black eyes were sharp and curious as he glanced between the two of them, and Rona turned on him angrily. 'Oh, *go* away!' she said shortly, her hands clenched. 'I've had enough!'

She would have run back to the house, but he curled his fingers tightly round her arm and pulled her back sharply. 'What is wrong?' he demanded. 'What has Demetrius done to-'

'Demetrius is no worse than the rest of you!' she told him shortly. 'He made a complete fool of me, but that isn't really very difficult to do, is it, Damon?'

'I wasn't aware that anyone had made a fool of you,' Damon said quietly. 'And if you would tell me what it is that troubles you perhaps I could-'

'Oh, it's nothing!' Rona cried, her whole body trembling with emotions she seemed unable to control. 'It's really nothing at all—maybe I'm just too— too old-fashioned or too English, I don't know—but as far as I can see Constantine is the only one of you who ever had the courage to marry for love! The rest of you just marry for convenience or because it's expected of you and then—carry on as usual!'

'Rona!' His voice was edged with temper and it was obvious that he was keeping his self-control only ' with great difficulty. 'If you will-'

'You even tried to stop Constantine from marrying someone of his own choice, didn't you?' she accused, before he could finish. 'And I don't imagine that being married to me is going to make such a difference to *your* life style!'

The fingers holding her arm tightened until she cried out. 'That is enough!' he ordered harshly. 'Three times you have interrupted me before I could finish speaking, and each time you have made silly and childish accusations. If you cannot speak sensibly then do not speak at all! Now—sensibly and quietly, tell me what has upset you so much.'

Feeling more tearful than ever, Rona shook her head, her teeth biting hard into her lower lip. As usual her tongue had run away with her and she was already regretting it, as she always did. 'It—it doesn't matter,' she said huskily. 'Please don't bother about it.'

'You are not thinking of leaving the island?'

She looked up hastily, wondering if she could have imagined the hint of anxiety in his voice. 'You —you know I can't,' she said in a small voice, and he nodded.

'But at this moment you would like to, hmm?' he suggested softly, and she did not answer. He turned to Demetrius and frowned. 'And you know the reason for this, do you not?' he asked him.

Rona felt unaccountably guilty when she looked at Demetrius and saw the expression on his good- looking face. It was incredible to see the awe in which his family held Damon Leonides and it never ceased to amaze her. 'I suppose I was to blame in some way,' he admitted, and Damon nodded slowly.

'As I thought,' he said quietly. He still held Rona's arm, although with much less force now, and he studied her tearful face for several seconds before shaking his head. He murmured something softly in

Greek, then turned again to Demetrius. 'I will not have you behaving so badly that you upset Rona,' he told him firmly. 'You will either behave yourself properly when you are with her or you will stay away from her, do you understand me? I will not have you making her unhappy!'

Rona saw the defiance in Demetrius' blue eyes before his uncle did, obviously, for he seemed unprepared for his reply. 'What do you care if she is unhappy?' Demetrius asked in a tight, harsh voice. 'Rona herself knows you do not care for her, except as your—your goddess!'

'Rona?' He allowed the defiance to go unremarked as he turned again to her, turning her to face him, both hands on her arms and a look of genuine concern in the black eyes as they looked down at her. 'You do me an injustice,' he said quietly. 'I am not an insensitive man, nor a harsh one, as most of my family will tell you. Why do you judge me so?'

It was appallingly difficult to even think of an answer, and Rona was trembling like a leaf as he looked at her in that concerned and gentle way. Her senses responded to him far more than they ever did to Demetrius, and she despaired of her own folly in letting him get under her skin the way he did.

'I—I didn't suggest you were insensitive,' she denied in a small husky voice that shook so much she could not control it.

The black eyes watched her so intently that she was almost bound to look up at him and she saw warmth and gentleness there that somehow made her feel oddly helpless. 'I have become—fond of you in these past weeks,' he said softly just as if Demetrius was nowhere in sight. 'Do you not believe that, Rona?'

'As—as you are of Anna-Maria?' Rona asked shakily. 'I'm sorry, Damon, I shouldn't have accused you of being uncaring, it's just that—'

'Hmm?' The gentleness of the wordless question unnerved her and she shook her head, her eyes filling with tears, for no really good reason that she could think of except that it again reminded her that he saw her in much the same light as he saw his little niece.

She thought of the times he had held her in his arms^and treated her like a grown, warm-blooded woman, kissing her fiercely and passionately, not as he would a child. Then somehow the idea of being married to him and being expected to be satisfied with the same rather off-hand affection he showed to Anna-Maria and seeing him go off to other women was unbearable. Having him apologise each time he happened to forget himself and treat her like a wife would make her far more unhappy than anything Demetrius could do or say.

Her own unfathomable emotions were too much for her suddenly and she turned swiftly, snatching her arms free and running across the cool tiles towards the house, heedless of her bare feet. Only her instinct guided her, for her eyes were blinded with tears and she cried quietly as she ran. The original goddess of the temple could have been no more unhappy and miserable when she realised that her chosen husband did not love her, and she could have loved Zeno no more desperately than Rona realised she herself loved Damon.

## CHAPTER NINE

It was not always easy to avoid being alone with Damon, and Rona hated doing it, but she simply could not trust her own emotions where Damon was concerned. She was always so afraid of letting him see how much his kindly, almost avuncular attitude could hurt her sometimes, without his meaning it to.

It was easy enough not to see him in the afternoons, but during the mornings when Anna-Maria was with her tutor and she had time to herself she would have liked nothing better than to spend some time with him when he wasn't busy in the office. Then it was much more difficult and she often went for solitary walks to avoid seeing him.

Demetrius made less demands on her time now, and she could only guess that Damon had spoken to him much more severely than she realised after her outburst. Once or twice when she went swimming in the pool with Demetrius, Damon did not seem to mind, but that was probably because Demeter was there each time to act as chaperone, her sharp dark eyes hating every second they were together.

Demeter Leonides, Rona thought, would have given a great deal to see the wedding plans for her and Damon fall through, but at the moment there was very little chance of that happening. She made no secret of her dislike and she would do almost anything to have Rona leave the island for good, and Damon remain unmarried.

It was easier for Rona in the afternoons, for then she quite often took Anna-Maria to the beach and they relaxed or indulged in long and complicated games which Rona always seemed to lose. Anna-Maria<sup>^</sup> already gave her an insight into the language that Damon had promised she would have to learn, for quite often the little girl would speak to her in Greek and then explain its meaning in English and in that way they progressed quite well, if rather spasmodically. When Damon would decide on more intensive studies for her she had no

idea, but in the meantime she was grateful to Anna-Maria for breaking ground for her.

There was only a week left now until she was to marry Damon and Rona felt herself in a curious state of limbo. Now that she was no longer in any doubt about her feelings for him, the prospect of becoming his wife excited her more than she dared admit. But at the same time she had to face the fact that it would probably make virtually no difference at all to either of their life styles, and that could hurt her far more than Damon would realise.

So far he had never left the island since her arrival, except for a few flying visits to Athens, but no doubt before very long he would be off somewhere more distant, mixing business with pleasure, as he had always done. Rona would be left on the island with the rest of his family, while he would no doubt follow his usual course of escorting beautiful women and getting his picture in the world's press, looking sternly attractive and sometimes faintly bored.

Rona hated the idea of his going with other women, and yet it was not reasonable to expect anything else of him in the circumstances. He had after all promised that he would expect no more of her as his wife than he did at the moment, but she knew well enough that to a man like Damon Leonides the company of women was indispensable. Demetrius had told her so and she had no reason to doubt him —she only wished that it did not hurt so much to think about him with other women and not herself.

Sometimes she wrote long letters to Rex, but always she made light of her position, telling him that she had everything a girl could want, and that her future husband was very kind to her. She gave no hint at all of her own feelings for Damon, or that his kindness was one of the things she found most hard to bear. Sometimes she even felt tempted to deliberately make him angry so that he would show something other than gentle tolerance towards her.

She looked at Anna-Maria, spelling out her name in the sand with the tip of her finger, and smiled. If only she felt no more for Damon than Anna-Maria did she might be content to receive no more in return and everything would be so much more simple. The little girl looked up suddenly and smiled, almost as if she knew she was in her thoughts, then she scribbled out her own name with the palm of her hand and began to write another.

'Rona Leonides,' she spelled out carefully as she wrote. 'Soon that will be you, yes, Rona?'

'Very soon now,' Rona agreed, trying to keep the inevitable tremor out of her voice. It gave her a curious curling sensation in her stomach to see her name written there like that in the white sand, and she shivered involuntarily.

'You will like being married to Thios Damon?' Anna-Maria asked, and Rona nodded. Naturally a child, and especially a small girl, found a wedding in the family very exciting, but it was not a subject Rona wanted to talk about.

'I expect so,' she said non-committally. 'Why don't you write all our names in the sand, Anna-Maria? Make them into one long list, hmm?'

Anna-Maria nodded, putting the name Damon Leonides immediately below Rona's, then looking up at her curiously, her dark eyes crinkled and her head to one side. 'Will I have to call you Thia Rona when you are married to Thios Damon?' she asked, and Rona shook her head. She had no idea what Damon felt about it, but she knew her own feelings in the matter.

'I don't think so,' she told her. 'I'd rather you called me just Rona, as you always have.'

For the moment Anna-Maria seemed satisfied, but she had put only two more names in the sand before Rona saw her look up sharply and



a pout of dislike spoil her mouth. 'Thia Demeter does not allow me to do that,' she said, nodding her head to indicate someone coming.

Rona turned her head curiously, her heart heavy with dismay when she saw Demeter Leonides coming across the narrow beach towards them. It was so unheard-of for the older woman to even come near the beaches that both Rona and Anna-Maria stared at her in disbelief as she approached. It was only when she was almost upon them that Rona recovered herself and hastily got to her feet, half smiling but wary, for it was unlikely that the unexpected visit was a friendly one.

Anna-Maria was much less disturbed and she merely sat back on her heels and watched her aunt with a curious glint in her dark eyes. Tall and slim, Madame Leonides always dressed in a way that made her slimness look almost thin, and she very plainly disliked walking on sand, judging by the expression on her handsome features.

She wore a clinging silk dress that lent elegance to her slender length but looked sadly out of place on a beach and against the background of lush, exotic flowering trees. Her smart town shoes, too, were never made for walking on sand and threw her usually graceful walk off balance.

She did not smile, even at Anna-Maria, but merely inclined her head in Rona's direction and completely ignored the little girl at first. 'I wished to speak with you alone, Miss Forbes,' she said in her cool, heavily accented voice. She added a few words in Greek, directed at Anna-Maria and the child looked at Rona uncertainly.

'Where shall I go, Rona?' she asked, and Rona frowned for a moment before realising that Demeter Leonides had told her to go away and leave them alone. Her reason for wanting to speak to her alone puzzled Rona and made her uneasy, but she smiled at Anna-Maria, and nodded.

'Don't go too far, pet,' she told her. 'Only a little way along the sand, where I can still see you.'

'Nothing can happen to the child in the few moments I need to speak to you, Miss Forbes,' Demeter told her coldly. 'I will not take much of your time.'

Rona would have liked to sit down again on the sand, but it was most unlikely that Demeter Leonides would have done so and she could not very well sit while she was standing. Instead she stood on the little beach, her hands held in front of her in a gesture she barely realised was defensive, her blue eyes wide and wary.

Demeter was the only member of the family who still used her surname, and she felt herself go chill with apprehension as she looked at her. 'It really doesn't matter,' she said, 'I can spare as much time as you like, Madame Leonides.'

Whatever she had in mind Demeter seemed to find difficult to speak about, for she hesitated for several seconds before she spoke again. 'You have not been from the island since you arrived,' she said at last, and Rona frowned curiously.

'No, I haven't,' she agreed. 'But I really don't mind-'

'You must be—bored,' Demeter said, choosing her words carefully. 'Do you not like to see shops and go shopping as other young women do?'

'Yes, of course I do,' Rona agreed, more puzzled than ever. There could be only one reason behind such a conversation, she thought, and Demeter Leonides could hardly care whether or not Rona was bored with being confined to the island.

'Then you would like to visit Athens with me?' Demeter suggested, and Rona stared at her for a moment in disbelief.

'To—to visit Athens with-' She shook her head slowly, her eyes wide.  
'But you-'

'If you would like to go I will accompany you,' Demeter interrupted with an impatience reminiscent of her brother-in-law.

The dark, glistening eyes were watching her closely and Rona tried hard to see the invitation as a perfectly normal one from an older woman to another about to become a member of her family. Something, somewhere, was wrong, she felt sure of it, but at the moment she could find nothing in the invitation to reasonably object to, so she nodded.

'I'd—I'd like to go very much, Madame Leonides,' she said in a small uncertain voice. 'Thank you.'

'There is not very much time,' Demeter said, looking with disgust at the sand seeping into her elegant shoes. 'It might perhaps be as well if we go tomorrow.'

Even the Leonides by marriage, Rona noted dizzily, had the habit of telling her what had been arranged, rather than consulting her about it. But she nodded her head in a rather vague way and looked along to where Anna-Maria was playing a solitary game in the sand, her head turning every so often in their direction.

'Will we be going in the morning or the afternoon ?' Rona asked. 'If we're going in the afternoon I could take Anna-Maria with-'

'No!' The refusal was curt and unarguable, it seemed, but Rona was not so easily over-awed in this instance and she met Demeter Leonides' dark-eyed gaze steadily.

'Until my marriage, Madame Leonides,' she reminded her quietly, 'I'm in charge of Anna-Maria in the afternoons, and I'm quite sure Damon wouldn't mind my taking her with me.'

For a moment Demeter said nothing, then she shrugged her elegant shoulders and almost smiled, a strange expression indeed on that gauntly handsome face. 'I had hoped to evade Damon,' she said with a curiously uncharacteristic hint of humour. 'He does not wish you to leave the island until after you are married, but-' She shrugged again. 'I had thought to make life a little more pleasant for you by taking you with me, but it will have to be without Damon's knowledge.'

More uneasy than ever at the suggested subterfuge, Rona hesitated. Something in Demeter Leonides' invitation troubled her, and yet it was quite true that Damon would not like her to leave the island, he had made that fairly clear by having the couturier visit Polyxena rather than let Rona go to her salon. Also she would enjoy a trip to the mainland to see the shops and perhaps do a little shopping.

'I don't really like going without telling Damon,' she said. 'But-'

'You would like to go?' Demeter's eyes glowed darkly. 'I had thought you would!'

'If Damon expects me to run away as soon as I have the opportunity,' Rona said with a rueful smile, 'it will serve to show him how wrong he is! Yes, Madame Leonides, I'd like to come with you, thank you!'

'Ah, *kali*.' Demeter nodded, evidently well satisfied, and glanced along to where Anna-Maria was playing alone. 'Do not say anything to Anna-Maria,' she warned. 'She will chatter to Damon about it if you do and all will be lost!'

It seemed rather a dramatic way of putting it, but Rona followed her meaning, and nodded. 'I won't say anything,' she promised. 'I'm very grateful to you for being so—so thoughtful, Madame Leonides.'

'I am very pleased to be able to do something to help,' Demeter said softly, and again Rona's sixth sense sent a prickle of warning along her spine.

It was the following morning at breakfast that Rona found herself alone with Damon for the first time since she had so dramatically fled from him and Demetrius on the terrace, and she hesitated when she saw him there alone at the long table under the wisteria. The temptation to join him, however, was too much for her, and she walked across the tiled terrace on legs that trembled and felt almost too weak to support her.

As Sbon as he saw her he got to his feet and she marvelled again at the virile grace of him. He wore a pale blue shirt that was open at the neck, throwing his deeply tanned features into contrast and fitting closely across his broad chest and shoulders. Smooth fitting cream trousers looked elegantly slim on his long legs and over the lean hips.

He stood waiting for her and Rona felt her heart pounding heavily in her breast as she came towards him, her cheeks lightly flushed as she bore the scrutiny of steady black eyes. 'Good morning,' he said quietly, as she joined him, and she smiled, a warm, joyous smile that took no account of what might be but revelled in his company for the moment.

'*Kalimera*, Damon,' she said, and at once laughed softly at her own pronunciation. 'I'm not very good yet,' she added apologetically.

He smiled, seeing her seated beside him, then sitting down again himself. 'It was very good,' he assured her. 'But who has been your tutor, Rona?'

Again Rona smiled, a hint of mischief in the smile because she knew he would be suspecting it was either Constantine or Demetrius and she could deny it was either. 'I'm picking up a smattering of Greek from Anna-Maria,' she told him, and he nodded, apparently not averse to the idea.

'Excellent,' he said. 'I must commend her!'

It was going to be very difficult, she realised as soon as they sat together eating breakfast, not to mention her proposed trip to the mainland with Madame Leonides, and she fell into a rather strained silence after a few moments, so that Damon looked at her curiously, obviously puzzled by her change in manner.

'Is something wrong?' he asked, after a moment or two, and Rona shook her head hastily.

'No, nothing,' she denied.

The black eyes sought hers despite her evasive tactics and he leaned towards her, resting an elbow on the table between them, so close that his breath was warm on her face. 'You are not worried about the wedding?' he asked softly, and she looked up at last, her eyes wide and suddenly shy.

'Not—worried,' she said in a small voice.

One large hand reached out and curled its strong fingers over hers, sending a shiver of sensation through her whole body. 'You are not afraid?' he asked gently, and she shook her head. 'You have no need to be,' he went on in the same soft and gentle voice, and Rona desperately wanted to tell him that she was neither worried nor afraid, but merely longing to be a real wife to him instead of the nominal role he was allocating her.

'I'm all right, Damon, really,' she assured him huskily. She longed for the nerve to clasp that strong hand with her own and press her lips to its warmth, but that would probably anger him, or worse still embarrass him, so she merely sat there and kept her eyes downcast again for fear he should see some betraying expression in them.

'I have a surprise for you,' he said after a moment of consideration, and Rona looked up at him curiously.

His black eyes were warm and glowing and she found herself smiling instinctively in response. 'I know that it is not perhaps usual to have a honeymoon when the marriage is an arrangement such as ours,' he said. 'But I am flying to New York the day following the wedding and I thought you might like to come with me. You have never been to America?' he asked, and Rona shook her head dazedly.

'No,' she whispered. 'No, I never have.'

'And you would like to come with me?'

She nodded again, her mind in chaos as she tried to see things calmly. He was taking her with him when he went, so it was unlikely that he would be indulging his usual activities, and the idea of it was too much for her to take in at the moment. She simply sat there and stared at him, her stunned expression seeming to amuse him, for he was smiling again.

'You seem bemused,' he said softly. One finger brushed a strand of copper-red hair from her neck and its touch was like a caress that sent shivers through her. 'Is it so extraordinary that I should take you with me?'

Rona looked at him for a moment, trying to control her senses, then she shook her head. 'It—it just seemed a little unusual in the circumstances,' she said. 'But I'd love to come with you, Damon.'

'*Kali*,' he murmured softly, and gave his attention to his breakfast again. 'Now eat your breakfast, *mikros mou*, or we will have Anna-Maria here before we have a chance to eat anything!'

'Damon-' She hesitated, wanting to tell him about the proposed trip to Athens with Demeter, whether Demeter approved or not, but he obviously read some quite different intent into her manner.

Reaching for another roll, he looked at her with that gentle, kindly look that he reserved equally for her and Anna-Maria. 'You do not have to worry about anything, Rona,' he assured her quietly. 'This will not be a honeymoon in the usual sense of the word—I will not break my word to you, you may rest assured.'

Every nerve cried out to her to tell him that a honeymoon with him was her idea of heaven, wherever he took her, and that she wanted him to break his word more than anything in the world. She put her trembling hands on the table and looked down at them for a moment before raising wide, anxious eyes to his face. 'Damon,' she began softly, 'I don't mind in the least if-'

'Thios Damon! Rona! *Kalimera!*' Anna Maria's childish treble shrilled across the quiet terrace, drowning her words and drawing his attention.

They both turned and looked at her, Damon with his customary tolerant smile, unaware of what Rona had been saying, and Rona herself with a sickening sense of frustration. Perhaps she would have regretted letting Damon know how she felt about him, perhaps he would have been scornful or even embarrassed, but the time had seemed so right somehow and she could have cried in her disappointment at having their intimate breakfast spoiled.

The child's chattering soon banished any hope of renewing the former topic, and before long both Constantine and Demetrius joined them. Conversation became general, banishing any hope of personal talk between them, and Rona was still feeling sad about the brevity of their moment of intimacy when she got up from the table.



She was ready in good time for her outing with Demeter and set off down the path to where the boat was moored. A small stone quay had been built, not too far from the villa, and a little boathouse, a copy of the villa, sheltered the boat that was so seldom used. It had surprised her rather to learn that they would be going by sea, but apparently Demeter Leonides had a horror of flying and had never been in an aircraft in her life.

The path itself was slightly overgrown by the mass of flowering trees and shrubs that spread prolifically over most of the island, and she plucked a huge red oleander as she passed and tucked it into the top buttonhole of her dress where it made a bright splash of colour against the pale green poplin.

She was preoccupied with the prospect of going to America with Damon as she made her way down the shaded pathway, and she blinked herself back to earth when the luxury motor launch came into sight suddenly as she turned a last bend. Its gleaming white hull was dazzling in the hot sun and its name, *Polyxena*, was blazoned in black and gold along the bow, but she frowned curiously when she recognised Demetrius' familiar figure already on board.

He spotted her instantly and waved a hand, a wide smile showing white in his handsome brown face. White trousers and shirt did wonders for his already incredible looks, and Rona felt the light, familiar tingle in her blood when she saw him. 'You are surprised?' he guessed as she came nearer, and Rona nodded.

She could see no sign of Demeter Leonides, nor of the man who usually piloted the boat for her; instead Demetrius was alone and obviously waiting for her. Her heart was beating with increased urgency as she stepped on to the little stone quay, and she did not immediately take the hand he offered to help her aboard.

'Isn't Madame Leonides here?' she asked, and Demetrius shrugged his eloquent shoulders.

'You can see,' he said. 'I am alone, Rona.'

For a moment she sought for reasons, for some trickery thought up by Demeter, but then such suspicions seemed so silly and unlikely that she dismissed them with a shake of her head. 'I don't quite understand,' she said, seeking to sound matter-of- fact. 'Madame Leonides asked me to come with her to Athens to—to do some shopping and to look at the shops. Isn't she well?' Demeter, she recalled, had not been at the breakfast table.

'Mama is suffering from one of her headaches,' Demetrius informed her with a solemnity belied by the glitter of laughter in his eyes. 'She asks that you forgive her, and begs that you will look upon me as her substitute.' The blue eyes looked at her for a moment bright and challenging. 'I have told my mama,' he added, 'that it is most unlikely that you will come with me, but she does not believe that any young woman can resist such an opportunity.'

The bright silken blue of the Aegean glittered and shone in the hot sun and Rona saw its gently restless motion as an invitation she found very hard to refuse. It could do no harm to go with Demetrius for a few hours, and surely Damon would not mind in the circumstances, although it would have been better if she had told him about going when she had the opportunity.

Demetrius was watching her with his bright blue eyes half closed, waiting and anxious, she thought, for fear she said no. She had admittedly missed Demetrius' company lately and there was really no harm in him, merely a quite blatant thoughtlessness that she could not entirely blame him for.

'I'll come,' she said impulsively, and accepted the hand that offered to help her. 'Though I wish I'd told Damon I was coming.'

'Too late now,' Demetrius told her, glancing up the gentle slope of the path, almost as if he expected to see his uncle's vengeful figure coming for them. 'Shall we go, Rona?'

Resigned to anything that might happen afterwards, Rona nodded. She saw no reason why anyone, even Damon, should find fault with Demetrius standing in for his mother in the circumstances, and Demeter would surely explain, whether she was missed or not.

They had landed at Kalamaki, only nine kilometres from Athens itself, and from there Demetrius was to drive them to the capital in a car he had waiting. It was remarkable, Rona thought, how everything seemed to be on hand and ready for the Leonides family whenever they went anywhere, and she could scarcely believe that she would herself soon be entitled to the same privileges, as Damon's wife.

The car was waiting, just as Demetrius said it would be, and a chauffeur in livery stood beside it. His face was familiar and Rona realised he was the same man who had met Demetrius at the airport the day of her own arrival, the same elderly man who had so obviously disapproved of Demetrius taking her with him when she asked for his help, and she wondered what his opinion would be now if he knew she was soon to marry his employer.

'I will send Milos away for a start,' Demetrius murmured when he spotted the man, and Rona looked at him swiftly from the corners of her eyes.

'Why?' she asked as they walked across the narrow yard where the car was parked, and Demetrius looked down at her and smiled, a wide, knowing smile, one eyelid briefly lowered in a wink.

'Because I have so few opportunities left to me now, *oreo mou*,' he said. 'I must make the most of them!'

Rona said nothing, but doubts came crowding in as she walked beside him across the yard, and she wondered if it was possible to persuade him that she felt unwell after the sea trip and would prefer not to go too far afield.

There was a sign across the top of a low building where the car stood, and she noticed with some surprise that it was apparently a small office of the Leonides Line. The name was on a board above the door in Greek, but also printed, much smaller, in English underneath. The chauffeur, she noted vaguely looked uneasy as they approached, and he did not respond to Demetrius' brief but cheerful nod.

He murmured something in Greek and Demetrius stopped in his tracks, his eyes going swiftly to the door of the building behind the chauffeur, his fingers on Rona's arm tightening. Then he swore softly but violently in his own tongue and shook his head.

'I am afraid-' he began, but stopped short when the door opened and Damon came out.

His black brows were straight, in a frown, and his eyes looked deep and unfathomable as he stood for a moment in the doorway looking at them, and Rona's heart did a somersault at the sight of him. Obviously Demeter had told him about her trip with Demetrius and he was angry enough to come and find her. But when she looked again, she saw not anger but a kind of hurt behind those deep unfathomable eyes, and she held her breath as he came towards them.

He ignored his nephew completely and stood in front of her only inches away, that fierce, sensual aura of virility making her shiver as she was encompassed by it. He did not touch her but looked at her

steadily for a moment, then inclined his head in the direction of the office he had just left.

'I would like to speak to you for a few moments, Rona,' he said quietly. 'If you will please come with me.'

Rona bit her lip anxiously, glancing at Demetrius, still standing beside her and looking quite dazed at the sudden turn of events. 'Yes, yes, of course,' she said. 'But if you-'

'We cannot talk here,' Damon said shortly, and put a hand under her arm, his strong fingers curling tightly about her soft flesh as if he suspected she might flee if he gave her the opportunity.

The office was small and was obviously not normally used by members of the family, but by much lower orders. It was dingy and airless and smelled of dusty paper, and Rona found it infinitely depressing. Damon stood by the small window, looking out at the yard they had just left, although it was almost too dirty to see anything through it at all.

Nervously uneasy, Rona held her hands together in front of her, wondering if she was expected to explain without prompting. 'You flew over,' she said, realised at last how he had forestalled their arrival.

'I flew over.' He did not turn from the window but stood with his hands behind his back, his broad shoulders pulled back under the same pale blue shirt she had seen him in at breakfast. Neither of them said another word for several moments, then he seemed to shake himself, and spoke again over his shoulder. 'Why did you not tell me, Rona?' he asked softly, and she bit her lip.

'I—I tried,' she said in a small, anxious voice. 'I was going to tell you that I'd arranged to come over with Demeter to do some shopping, but then Anna- Maria came out and I didn't have another chance.'

'With Demeter?' He turned suddenly and the black eyes were bright and glittering, challenging her. 'You planned to come over with Demeter?'

Rona nodded. 'Yesterday, when Anna-Maria and I were on the beach,' she said, 'Madame Leonides came and spoke to me—asked me if I'd like to come over to Athens and look at the shops.'

He said nothing for a moment and she felt the black eyes searching her face, looking for betraying signs of untruth. Then he bent suddenly and picked up something from behind the desk the room contained, putting it down carefully on the scratched surface, and Rona stared for a moment uncomprehendingly.

'My suitcase,' she whispered at last, and looked at him with puzzled eyes. 'I—I don't understand, Damon.'

His eyes held hers steadily. 'Don't you?' he asked softly, then he shook his head. 'No,' he said, 'I don't believe you do. Your passport is in it, so I do not think you meant to run away.'

'Run away!' Rona stared at him. 'I—I don't know what you're talking about, Damon. I honestly don't!' She felt very close to tears and her voice trembled almost as much as her legs, which felt as if they could not much longer hold her weight.

He turned right round from the window and faced her, and she stood a couple of feet from him, stirred by the warm closeness of him and wanting to touch him more than anything in the world. 'Demeter came to me with some story of you having run off with Demetrius,' he said, and it was obvious that the cool, quiet voice was due entirely to iron self-control, for fierce anger glittered in his eyes.

'Oh no!' Her voice barely above a whisper, and she put her hands to her mouth, realising at last how easily she had played into Demeter's hands.

'Your suitcase was gone and so was Demetrius and the boat,' he went on. 'It was only when my man found your suitcase hidden in the boathouse that I began to suspect that all was not as it appeared.'

Rona looked at him for a long moment, her blue eyes showing hurt, only concerned at the moment that he had not trusted her not to break her word. 'You—you didn't trust me?' she asked in a small, husky voice. 'You thought I'd break my promise as easily as that—without having the courage to tell you to your face that I couldn't go through with it?'

He looked at the rather battered suitcase on the desk and shook his head. 'I did not know what to think, Rona,' he said quietly. 'I brought your suitcase over with me and decided that I would give you the choice—of going with Demetrius, if that was what you wanted, or of coming back with me.'

She looked up swiftly, searching his face, puzzled by his attitude and half afraid of what he would say. 'You—you'd let me go?' she asked, and he nodded slowly.

'If that is what you want,' he said. 'I could not make you unhappy, *eros mou*.'

Rona's heart was thudding wildly at her side and she could barely breathe with the sudden storm of emotions that surged through her like a whirlwind. She looked up at him with her blue eyes bright and glistening, on the edge of tears or of happiness, so much depended on him. 'Damon,' she said softly, 'I know what *eros mou* means.'

He neither moved nor spoke for a long heart-stopping minute and she stood there in that small dingy room with her trembling hands clasped together, her eyes below their thick lashes anxious and pleading. Then he moved slowly round the desk that stood between them and reached out his hands for her.

'You will stay with me?' he asked softly, his fingers strong but gentle on her arms, and Rona nodded.

'As long as you want me,' she said.

Damon drew her slowly into his arms, his black eyes glowing like live coals as he looked down at her upturned face. 'That will be for a very long time, *mikros mou*,' he whispered.

He drew her still closer to him and suddenly all the doubts she had feared left her as she swayed against him, so close that she could feel every muscle in that fierce hard body straining her to him. His mouth possessed her, parting her lips and drawing every ounce of willpower from her as she was moulded to him by those irresistible arms.

His voice was soft and warm against her ear, his lips caressing on her soft skin. 'I did not dare to hope that you could love me,' he said. 'I did not dare hope for so much, *eros mou*, not when I had demanded so much of you already.'

Rona raised her face, her eyes bright, deep blue in a face slightly flushed as she looked up at him, her arms round his neck and clasped together behind that beloved dark head. 'You demanded nothing I wasn't willing to give,' she told him softly. 'I think I must really be your goddess, Damon *eros mou*—I fell in love with my chosen husband, just like Polyxena did, only I'm luckier.' She searched his face for a brief, anxious second. 'I *am* luckier, aren't I, Damon?'

He smiled and she felt a quickening of her pulses again. 'How could I love anyone else once I had seen you, my little firebird?' he asked softly, and Rona laughed softly, looking up through her lashes.

'Poor Demetrius,' she said. 'He didn't realise what he was starting when he took pity on me, did he?' She glanced through the dirty little window to the sunlit yard outside and then back at Damon, suddenly more serious. 'Damon—you won't be too angry with Demetrius about



bringing me here, will you? I'm sure he didn't know anything about his mother's scheming.'

'I am sure he did not,' Damon agreed, and ran one large hand over her silky-soft, copper-red hair. 'I will not be angry with you either, *mikros eros mou*, but do not run away again or I will not promise to be so lenient! If you want to come to Athens or anywhere else, will you tell me, and not make me suffer the anguish of thinking you have left me?'

'I promise,' Rona said softly, and snuggled back into his arms again, her face against the softness of his shirt, his heart beating strongly under her cheek.

Gently he pressed his mouth to the curved nape of her neck, brushing aside the copper-red hair with caressing fingers. 'Let us go home,' he said.