

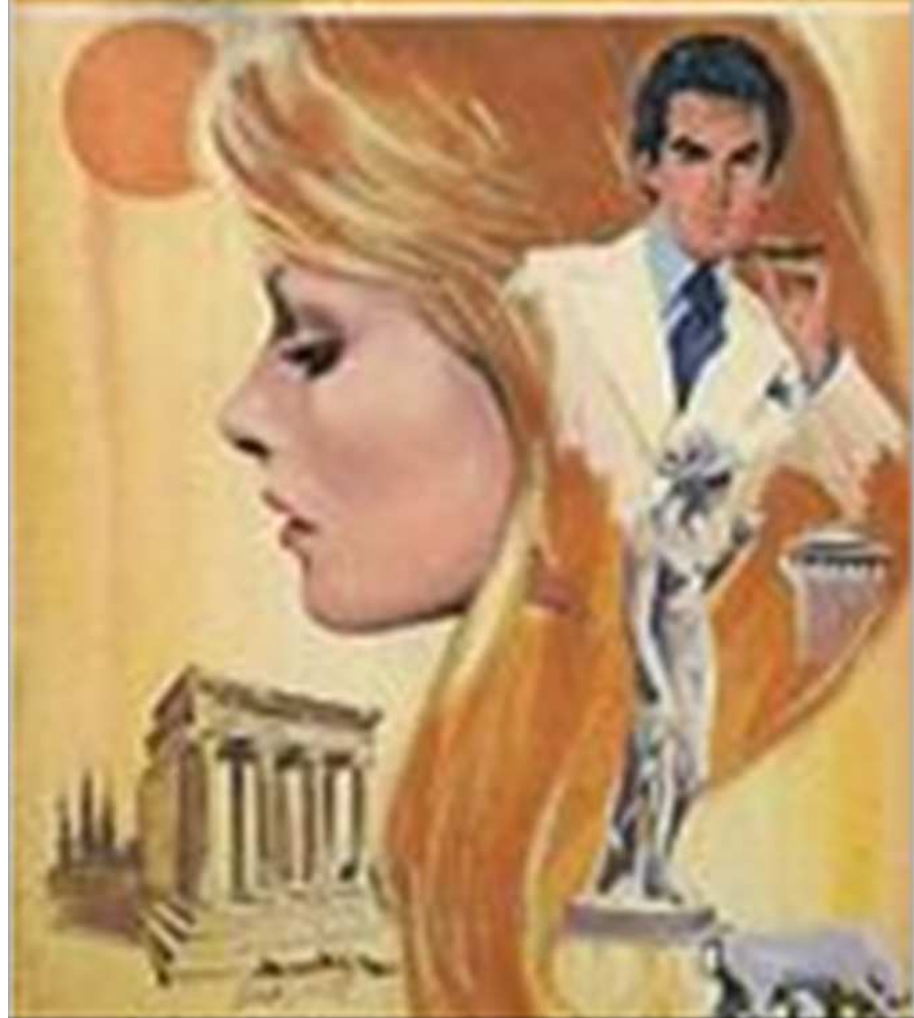


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31

Gemini Child

REBECCA STRATTON



GEMINI CHILD

Rebecca Stratton

Michelle was 22 years old before she learned that she had a twin brother. Apparently he was living in Greece where he had been brought up. She traveled post-haste to meet him there, and Georgi welcomed her with delight. The same, unfortunately, could not be said for Georgi's stern stepbrother Andrea....

CHAPTER ONE

MICHELLE felt nervous and excited at the same time as she looked down at the tiny speck in the ocean that was the island of Savra. There were many similar small islands in the Aegean, and few of them looked big enough for a plane to land on, but she had been assured that Savra had its own landing field and, after some initial apprehension, she felt she could safely leave the problem of landing to the pilot, and she gave her attention to the island itself and the problems that were likely to be facing her after she landed.

She had seen little of Greece so far, but what she had seen she liked, and she was completely enchanted by the scene that spread out below her now. The Aegean lay like a piece of crumpled turquoise silk, shot with gold and gently swelling into movement, with little islands scattered across it like jewels, all the way between the Greek and Turkish mainlands. The sky was more clear than any she had seen at home in England, and the sun bright and gleaming like burnished brass, making it incredibly hot inside the small aircraft, despite air-conditioning.

Ever since Michelle left Athens she had felt a growing sense of doubt that by now almost amounted to panic as the journey to SAVra drew to an end, and it gnawed at her confidence as the aircraft circled the island before coming in to land. Maybe she should not have come—maybe it would have been wiser to have left things as they were instead of revealing secrets that had been kept closely guarded for so long.

It was still unbelievably exciting to suddenly realise that she had a twin brother, and Michelle had set off in such high hopes to find him, but the nearer she got to this tiny island in the Aegean, the more she realised what a step in the dark she was taking.

The man she had come so far to see would not be Michael, her twin, as she had envisaged him ever since she first learned of his existence, but a young Greek who had been Georgi Davolos for almost twenty of his twenty-two years. Michelle hoped they looked something alike, for it would make her feel easier somehow if they did, but she had no idea what he was like, because the photograph she had asked for had not been forthcoming, and more and more she wondered what was in store for her when she landed on Savra.

She knew little about Georgi Davolos or his family, except that they were incredibly wealthy, much more so than her own quite comfortably off family. It was true that Aunt Faye's legacy had made her an unexpectedly rich heiress, but even her fortune dwindled to nothing beside the immense wealth of the Davoloses.

Michelle thought once more about Aunt Faye, as the light plane turned and manoeuvred to land on that speck of land in the ocean below, pondering again on the almost unbelievable revelations that Faye Cassidy's death had brought to light. For one thing it had been a distinct shock to Michelle to learn that the woman she had for so long thought of as a cousin of her mother's was in fact her own natural mother.

The family had always been quite proud of Aunt Faye because she had done so well, although Michelle always somehow got the impression that her mother disapproved of her in some way—discovering her true identity explained it. Michelle had thought it was perhaps because Faye Cassidy was an actress, albeit a successful and well-known one, but there had never been any hint or suspicion that everything was not exactly as it appeared to be—until Faye Cassidy died, prematurely and tragically, during a very successful West End run, and the truth came out.

She left Michelle everything, and the amount was considerable, for she had never lived as extravagantly as some of her contemporaries,

but it was the staggering news of her own parentage that had stunned Michelle. After the will was read, Aunt Faye's solicitor had handed her a letter in which his famous client had revealed not only her true identity but the further news that Michelle was, in fact, one of twins.

As a young actress Faye Cassidy had married briefly, a fellow actor from whom she parted after less than three months, and twins were born to her several months after the break-up—a boy and a girl who were christened Michael and Michelle. A busy stage and film career left little time for motherhood, and Faye Cassidy had agreed to let her children go for adoption while they were still very tiny babies.

A cousin of Faye's, and her husband, had willingly taken the little girl, but they already had two boys of their own so, reluctantly, it was agreed that the babies should go to different homes. Michael was adopted by a Greek couple living in England, and his mother apparently never saw him again.

For twenty-one years Faye Cassidy undertook to play her most difficult role, that of courtesy aunt to her own child, with Michelle none the wiser until the letter which revealed not only her true identity, but a hitherto unsuspected sense of loss for her children.

All her money and jewellery came to Michelle, but with it went a plea that she use some of her new-found wealth to try and trace her brother, so that they could meet at last. It had taken almost a year, and made quite a hole in Michelle's fortune, but eventually her solicitor came up with the information that Michael had been found.

His adoptive mother had been widowed very shortly after he was adopted, and had returned to Greece, where she remarried. Takis Davolos was a widower with children of his own when she married him and he willingly took his new wife's adopted child into his family circle. So that for more than nineteen years now the young man who had started life as Faye Cassidy's son, Michael, had lived with his

Greek family on the small island of Savra, scarcely remembering that he had ever been other than Georgi Davolos, a member of the rich and powerful Davolos family.

It was rather like plunging into an exotic jungle when the little plane landed on a grassy strip that ran longways, for almost a quarter of the island's length, and Michelle's heart missed a beat when the engines were cut out and the pilot turned briefly and gave her a politely inquiring smile. He had informed her when he met her at Athens that he was employed by Mr Davolos and she knew he spoke excellent English-

'I hope that you have enjoyed the flight, *thespinis*?'

Michelle nodded. She had enjoyed it, even though she was so preoccupied with other things. How could, anyone not enjoy flying over the smooth beautiful Aegean to an island that promised to be a veritable- Eden, if the present surroundings were any guide? She smiled and accepted his help to free herself from the v safety belt.

'It looks beautiful!'

He smiled and nodded without speaking, then left his place to come round and assist her from the plane, glancing round as he did so, as if he expected to see someone there to meet her, and Michelle too glanced curiously around her.

It was so quiet, and after the noise of the plane's engines she appreciated it, but the clearing seemed deserted at first glance and once more she felt that sense of misgiving. She had half expected to be met at Athens airport, but she had accepted the fact that in view of the brevity of her stay there, it was perhaps not the best place for a first meeting with her brother. rBut she *had* expected someone to be there when she landed on the island, and the fact that there was no one there aroused every doubt and misgiving she had ever had.

A riot of flowering bushes and trees surrounded the clearing and the warm soft air was filled with their scents, her eyes dazzled by the yellows and pinks and purples of flowers she could only vaguely identify. It was as she looked around at them, scarcely believing them to be real, that she caught sight of a car, half hidden by the lush undergrowth.

The pilot saw it too and murmured something in Greek as he turned to lift her suitcases from the plane. A car door slammed softly on the still air and a young man came across the clearing towards them. He too said something in Greek that apparently dismissed the pilot, for he put down Michelle's luggage on the sun-browned grass and briefly touched the peak of his cap before he moved off, leaving them alone.

Michelle had no doubt who the newcomer was and her heart was beating hard and fast as she met a pair of eyes as clear and blue as her own and felt a flutter of excitement at something uncannily familiar in the good-looking features.

Her own features were small and pretty, with a slightly tiptilted nose and a wide soft mouth that at the moment was smiling a little uncertainly. Her blue eyes were fringed with lashes that were several shades darker than her long, golden blonde hair, and she recognised at least two of the same features in the young man who for the moment stood regarding her steadily.

His skin, instead of being fair as hers was, was tanned to a deep golden brown by the Grecian sun and contrasted stunningly with a thatch of hair that was even more fair than hers, bleached by the sun to almost white. He was several inches taller than her five feet three inches, but not really tall, and the eyes were unmistakably the same, as was the wide mouth that on him somehow looked more sensual and was not, at the moment, smiling. It was almost as if he was seeing something he could not quite believe and Michelle felt a momentary

flick of fear in case he should decide at the last moment to disown her.

'Michelle.' He said her name as if he was trying it for the first time and she noticed that he had an accent, something she had not anticipated, although it was reasonable enough in the circumstances. Then his face broke into a smile suddenly, and it was as if a curtain had been drawn back. The blue eyes warmed and he reached out his hands for her, pulling her into an embrace that was almost fiercely enthusiastic. 'You *are* my sister, I can see that it is so!'

So he had doubted it! Secure in her own conviction, she had never considered he might have doubts about her claim, but she could see that he had grounds. Being a member of such a wealthy and influential family trust make one subject to any number of fraudulent claims, and understandably suspicious.

He was saying something in Greek which she had no hope of understanding, but it mattered only that whatever suspicions he might have had were obviously allayed and he was ready to welcome her as his sister. The relief she felt made her come close to tears, but she managed to smile a little uncertainly when he held her at arms' length at last.

He studied her for a second with undisguised interest, then kissed her solemnly on both cheeks. 'You are very pretty, my sister!'

It was only then that Michelle realised she had contributed nothing at all to the conversation so far, and she smiled at him a little shyly. She had grown up with two brothers, but somehow it was difficult to see this very attractive young Greek in the same light as John and James, and she laughed a little unsteadily.

'I—I'm not quite sure what I should call you,' she confessed. 'I've been thinking of you as Michael, but --'

'I am Georgi—I have been so for all my life, far too long a time for me to recognise any other name, even for you, Michelle.'

'Yes, of course.' She looked at him again, studying him from the shadow of her lashes. 'I'm so—excited I scarcely know what I'm doing! I never really thought I'd see you, Georgi; I *still* can't quite believe I'm actually here! It's very good of your mother to let me come and stay, and I hope she realises how much I appreciate it.'

It seemed to Michelle that a slight frown drew at his brows for a second or two, and he lifted his shoulders in a barely perceptible shrug. 'It is not to Mamd that you owe thanks for your being here,' Georgi told her. 'Andrea is responsible for your being invited, my sister, it is he whom you should thank?'

'Andrea?'

Michelle sought rapidly among her sparse knowledge of the Davolos family and remembered that Andrea Davolos was Georgi's stepbrother. Madame Davolos had been widowed for a second time some years ago, and Andrea Davolos was now head of the immense business built up by his grandfather and his father. Also, in the Greek tradition, he was head of his family and as such would have a very definite say in family affairs.

No matter if Madame Davolos had agreed to Michelle coming, and something in Georgi's manner suggested that she had not, Andrea Davolos would have had the last word, and she could only be grateful that he had favoured the idea of her visit. She must remember to thank him when they met.

'Andrea Davolos, your stepbrother?'

'My brother,' Georgi corrected her gently but firmly. 'He is a very understanding man.'

'And I'm very grateful to him for letting me come and see you.'

Georgi smiled, and she noticed how strong and white his teeth looked in his tanned face. Her twin brother was a very attractive young man, and she had every reason to be proud of him—it was such a pity that Aunt Faye could not have seen him just once before she died.

He picked up her suitcases and walked with her across the clearing to where his car was parked. 'If I do not bring you soon, it will be thought that you have not arrived after all,' he told her. 'We have so much to speak of, Michelle, have we not?'

'Twenty-two years to catch up on,' Michelle agreed with a laugh. 'We shall never stop talking!'

'The island must have been larger than it looked from the air, she thought, for otherwise Georgi would surely never have used a car to fetch her, and she took the opportunity to look around as they drove. The idea of actually owning an island and living on it seemed a privilege in itself, but when it was a veritable paradise like Savra it was surely the last word in luxury.

Hibiscus and oleander bordered the narrow, dusty road on one side, and on the other tall dark cypresses grew almost to the water's edge, where the Aegean lapped gently on to a small white-sanded beach that was dazzling in the sun and completely deserted.

Orange and lemon trees grew in clusters of shade and scented the air with their perfumes as well as offering their ripe fruit to anyone who cared to reach out and take it, and palms cast fern-like shadows across the road. It was all breathtakingly beautiful and Michelle saw no reason to disguise the fact that she found it absolutely enchanting.

'It is pleasant.'

Georgi's offhand acceptance of something he had known for most of his life made her smile, and she pulled a wry face as she glanced at him. 'You'd be a little more enthusiastic than that if you spent your life in London,' she told him, and he glanced at her curiously over his shoulder.

'You have never travelled from London?'

Michelle hastened to correct the impression that her life had in any way been restricted, and she shook her head and laughed. 'Oh, I've travelled a bit on the Continent—to France and Italy and a couple of times to Spain, but never anywhere like this. This is—paradise, Georgi!'

'Andrea will be pleased to hear you say so, he is sometimes angry that I do not—how is it?—appreciate my good luck.'

'Well, you're certainly lucky to be living here permanently!'

'So Andrea tells me!' His smile was pure mischief and for a few seconds Michelle felt something of that mysterious rapport that, is supposed to exist between twins. 'But he has spent so much time away, you understand, and to him it was good to come home for good, even though it was because Pateras died.'

'Your stepfather?'

'My father.'

As he had once before, Georgi corrected her gently, but left her in no doubt that he saw the Davolos family as his own, and Michelle felt for a moment as if she had been firmly excluded. It was silly to feel that way, of course, for she would just as firmly insist on counting herself as much one of the Dorset family as John and James were, even now that she knew she was no real part of them. Both she and Georgi had

the need to cling to what they knew and loved, no matter what new conditions evolved, or perhaps because of them.

The surprise of suddenly being confronted with a huge white villa that literally spanned the end of the road reminded her that this was an island that needed only to serve the Davolos. The fact that the only road petered out at their door denied anyone who was bold enough to land and drive along it access to any other part of the island.

From road to driveway was a barely noticeable transition, except that the bordering shrubs and trees suddenly opened up to make way for gardens that were in every way as beautiful and exotic as the wilder parts of the island she had seen.

Smooth lawns and mosaic terraces led to wide steps .ami the impressive front door of the Villa Davolos, and once more Michelle experienced an almost sickening sense of anticipation as Georgi drove straight up to the house and stopped the car.

Somewhere she caught the sound of voices in the open air, and laughter that sounded like that of a child, but the villa was quiet when Georgi took her up those wide shallow steps and into a house that once more left her breathless with admiration.

The floor was patterned with mosaic tiles in soft, beautiful colours and scattered With Turkish rugs, but almost everything else in sight seemed to be white—the walls and the ornately embossed ceiling, the wide, curved stairway and even the urns that stood by the walls and at the foot of the stairs, embossed with mythical figures and filled with fringed palms and various flowering shrubs.

To Michelle, used to the conventional comforts of a suburban villa, it was palatial, but Georgi did not even give her time to look around and presumably accepted it, as he accepted the beauties of the island itself, as a matter of course. He put down her suitcases, then led the

way to a door at the far end of the hall, pausing to smile down at her before' he turned the handle.

'First I will introduce you, and then you would like to refresh yourself after your journey, yes?'

Michelle nodded without speaking. Her heart was hammering hard as he opened the door and she had never before known her legs to feel as if they were about to let her down because they were too weak to hold her.

The room he took her into was big and cool and every bit as palatial as the hall, but at the same time unexpectedly comfortable-looking. The furniture was obviously very old and heavy, and it was beautifully carved, and polished to a gleaming finish that went perfectly with white walls and high curved windows, half-shuttered for coolness.

The sound of laughter she had heard from outside sounded louder in here, and Michelle realised that the half-open louvred doors at the opposite end of the room led out into the gardens. There were two people in the room already, as Georgi led her across to the windows, and one of them was getting to his feet unhurriedly, and watching their approach with the most fiercely dark eyes she had ever seen.

The woman remained seated and was obviously less curious than disapproving, a fact her expression did little to conceal, so that Michelle's heart beat anxiously as she anticipated opposition from Georgi's adoptive mother. She appeared to be quite tall, although it was difficult to be sure while she was sitting down, and her black, hair was liberally streaked with grey. Her age could have been anywhere between fifty and sixty and she was the most discouraging person Michelle had met so far.

The man was neither easy nor encouraging to look at and Michelle preferred to make her first assessment from the concealment of her lashes. Tall and lean, he nevertheless looked to be powerfully built, for the fine silk shirt he wore showed the rippling smoothness of muscular shoulders and there was an almost aggressive air about the way he stood with his hands clasped behind him, pulling the shirt taut across a broad chest.

He was black-haired and black-eyed and his complexion was a deep bronze that was stunningly effective with the white shirt. Light fawn trousers showed lean hips and long, muscular legs, with the feet set slightly apart in a stance that suggested arrogance and authority, a combination that she felt unable to cope With in her present state of mind.

Georgi bent and kissed the forbidding matron in the armchair with a lack of diffidence that implied that her present manner was not her usual one, then he turned and smiled at Michelle. 'Mama, .this is Michelle, my sister from England. Michelle; my *mama*, Madame Fedra Davolos.'

Michelle smiled in the face of discouragement, and shook hands, murmuring polite greetings, but she was dismayed at the obvious lack of welcome in the eyes that looked at her narrowly and suspiciously. The greying head nodded briefly.

'Hero poli, thespinis.'

Being greeted in Greek rather surprised Michelle, for surely Madame Davolos must speak moderately good English after having spent some years in England with her first husband. Neither had she given her her name, which was surely not polite in any language, and the Greeks prided themselves on their good manners. It was plain that one person at least did not welcome her reunion with her twin brother.

'And my brother, Andrea.'

Andrea Davolos's greeting was very little warmer than that of his stepmother, but it was not hard to guess that he was a man who preferred to judge first before he committed himself to being either friendly or not.

He took her proffered hand and strong fingers gripped hers warmly, almost engulfing them. The black eyes made no pretence of doing other than study her boldly, noting everything about her from her small blue shoes to the top of her fair head. It was a steady, speculative survey that seemingly satisfied him, for he nodded briefly as he released her hand, and his wide mouth showed a ghost of a smile as he looked down at her.

His English proved to be more precise than either his stepmother's or Georgi's. - You are welcome to Savra, Miss Dorset, I hope you had a pleasant journey.' It was not a question and he did not really expect an answer, Michelle thought, but his voice proved yet another asset to a man who was already stunningly attractive in a rather austere way, being deep and quiet and very faintly accented.

Michelle remembered Georgi's advice to tell his brother her opinion of the island if she wanted to please him, and she smiled at him despite a small niggling sense of doubt. 'I found the flight from Athens really lovely, Mr Davolos—your island looks beautiful from the air and even better from the ground.'

His swift glance at Georgi suggested that he knew the source of her attempt to get on the right side of him, and he inclined his head briefly but did not smile. 'We think so, Miss Dorset.'

Georgi put an arm about her shoulders and his blue eyes issued a challenge as he looked at his mother and his stepbrother. 'We are the

same, are we not?' he demanded. 'The eyes, the hair—two alike, hmm?'

The black gaze once more turned on Michelle and she found herself hastily avoiding it while he did as his brother demanded and compared them. 'There is some likeness,' Andrea Davolos conceded cautiously. 'But since you are claiming to be twins that is only to be expected.'

Michelle looked up quickly, struck not only by his words, but by something in his voice. Her heart was thudding hard and she felt a cold warning flutter in her stomach as she held those black, frankly appraising eyes for a second or two.

'We *are* twins, Mr Davolos, there's no doubt about it.'

'I have conceded a definite likeness,,' the quiet voice allowed.

'But you have doubts?'

Her cheeks were flushed and she looked at him earnestly. If she was honest, she had expected a certain amount of opposition from Georgi's family, for upheavals of this nature were discomfiting to say the least. What she had not expected was that it would come quite so early on, or from the man who, according to Georgi's word, had sanctioned her visit.

Their unwillingness to have their family unity threatened was something she could understand, but having allowed her to come and see Georgi it was difficult to see why they should be so reluctant to recognise her for who she was.

She looked round at Georgi instinctively, seeking an answer, and that alone suggested that there was no doubt in her own mind at all, for she felt closer to Georgi, her twin, at that moment than since she arrived. If they doubted her identity, why had they let her come?

Unless—the alternative ran wildly through her half believing mind—it had been the alternative to letting Georgi come to her.

'I don't quite understand why you should doubt me,' she said when no answer was forthcoming, only a strangely pregnant silence. 'You saw the proof that we were born twins, didn't you?'

'We saw proof that Georgi had a twin sister when he was born,' Andrea Davolos told her quietly, 'but that was something that we already knew.'

Thoroughly confused, Michelle looked from one to the other, then shook her head. Georgi was no help at all; he was fully aware of what lay behind these disconcerting doubts, she knew. That from his expression, but she found it hard to imagine what the doubts were and why they should exist.

'But—you don't think—you don't *believe* I'm that sister?' --'Madame Davolos would have said something, Michelle thought, but her autocratic stepson denied her the opportunity. He looked at Michelle steadily and for a moment his eyes narrowed, as if he was debating with himself whether or not to impart some item of information.

'There are reasons why we doubt your identity, Miss Dorset, family reasons which we need not explain at this point. Perhaps you are who you claim to be, and now that we have seen you, we shall have less difficulty deciding, I think, but it was thought better for you to come here for a few weeks rather than that Georgi should go to England. I hope you will understand, and I hope that you will enjoy your stay with us.'

Michelle's brain was still reeling from the unexpected, and she looked at Georgi once more, seeking guidance. His good-looking young face was flushed with embarrassment beneath the golden tan and it somehow made him look very much more English. His blue eyes

were downcast, but it was surely anger that gave his wide mouth that tight look and she could feel how tense he was as he slowly let his arm slip from her shoulders and ran one hand through his white-blond hair.

He said something in Greek which was obviously angry and forceful despite its quietness, and he looked at his stepbrother with a glowering passion that could only have been acquired in his country of adoption. Andrea Davolos's reply was short and surprisingly gentle, and it further surprised her to realise just how fond he was of the brother they both laid claim to, although she could not think why it should.

Glancing at Michelle, he reverted to English, his voice still quiet and reasonable, unaffected by the same passion that consumed Georgi. 'Would it not be polite to have your guest shown to her room?' he suggested.

and Georgi held his steady gaze for a moment, then nodded.

'I wish that you would trust me,' he said, and turned once more to Michelle. 'Would you like to see your room, my sister?'

That rather, touchingly possessive 'my sister' had struck her as no more than quaint when he first used it, now she could see that it had a certain defiant insistence about it, and she smiled at him, fully in sympathy with anyone who had to live in permanent proximity to a character as forceful as Andrea Davolos.

'I'd love to,' she said.

He took her arm and as they turned to go, Andrea Davolos called after them. 'When you are refreshed, Miss Dorset, Georgi will introduce you to the rest of our family—and to his fiancée.'

She looked back over her shoulder, her eyes blank with surprise, for she had heard nothing of that piece of news, and Andrea Davolos's black eyes held her uncertain gaze steadily until she hastily looked away again. Georgi said nothing, but that faint flush was in his face again and his hand on her arm tightened as he walked beside her. There seemed no end to the surprises that were in store for her on this beautiful little island.

CHAPTER TWO

IF only Michelle had not had so much on her mind she could have been more appreciative of the true beauty of the little island. The view from her bedroom window suggested that it was rather bigger than it had looked from the air, and the sea was only glimpsed at between the towering plumes of cypresses, with a seemingly endless' panorama of flowering bushes and trees beyond the gardens.

Her bedroom was well in keeping with the luxury she had found in the palatial hall and the *salon* downstairs. It was big and far more exotic than anything she had ever slept in before, and it had its own bathroom, equally luxurious in green marble and gleaming white and gold porcelain. The windows had slatted shutters to keep out the heat of the sun but still admit the soft warm breezes that came in off the sea, laden with scent from the garden below.

The gardens below looked beautiful, as much as she had seen of them so far. When she ventured to take a more positive look she caught a glimpse of several people sitting around a tiled pool, relaxing in the gardens that surrounded it, shaded by the wide spread of plane trees, and she drew back hastily rather than be seen.

She could hear friendly-sounding voices and laughter, and she dared to hope that when she came to meet the rest of the Davolos household, she might be welcomed more warmly than she had been by her host and his stepmother.

She bathed and changed into a simple rose pink dress' that made her look very English, and enchantingly fragile and youthful. She chose it not only because it suited her, but because it was the best thing she had, and she was going to need every scrap of confidence she could muster to face the rest of the Davolos family. She brushed her hair until it shone like silk, then left it loose about her shoulders in the style that suited her best.

Downstairs once more, she stood in the hall trying to remember which was the door into the *salon*, a small, lone figure in the emptiness of that huge hall. She had been there several seconds when a toy aeroplane came skimming over the marble balustrade and brushed the top of her head before landing at her feet.

Startled, she turned swiftly and saw a small inquisitive face watching her from about half way down the staircase, then smiled. There was no response to the smile as yet, but the boy watched her steadily as he came down to join her. He was about six years old, she guessed, and very slightly built with huge, almost black eyes in a small dark face, and he was far more curious than, shy, it seemed.

'Hello!' She had no idea if he spoke English, but in any case he would understand a smile.

Without hesitation he came across to where she was standing and retrieved his toy before he spoke. Then he looked up at her with a questioning frown, and absolutely no sign of shyness. 'You are from England?'

'That's right!' Michelle smiled encouragingly. 'You speak very good English.'

'I have a tutor.'

He accepted the compliment coolly, taking it in his stride. He was a disconcertingly self-confident child, she thought, and wished her own confidence was as un-shakable. As it was she felt rather helpless standing there with a strange child, and not even knowing which room she wanted.

'Maybe we'd better introduce ourselves,' she suggested. 'My name is Michelle Dorset.'

The hand she proffered was at first regarded with a certain amount of suspicion, but then he grasped it suddenly with surprising firmness for one so small, 'I am Pondikos.'

'Pondikos?' she queried.

It sounded unusual, even for a Greek name, but the boy was nodding and regarding her still with that curiously adult speculation. 'I am called Pondikos—my name is Dimitri Takis Pavlos Prasinis.' He reeled off his impressive list of names with such an air that Michelle would have been tempted to smile, except that she felt sure he would take offence as easily as a grown man would have done. 'Are you the one that Thios Georgi expects?'

He was obviously well informed, so she concluded he must be one of the family. She had a vague recollection of hearing a child's laughter among the voices she heard when 'she first arrived. 'Yes, I'm Georgi's—visitor.'

She hesitated to claim relationship with Georgi, for fear he might find the situation too complicated to understand properly, although he was nodding solemnly, as if he knew all about it. He had been about to ask questions, Michelle thought, when someone opened a door across the hall, and they both turned as one to see who was coming.

Michelle, for one, heaved an inward sigh of relief when she saw it was Georgi. Coming across the hall, he took her hand in his, a movement that the observant Dimitri noted with interest, then looked down at the boy with an expression that spoke more of exasperation than affection.

He said something to him in Greek, and the youngster evidently did not like what he said, for he frowned over it. 'I do not wish to go back,' he declared firmly in English, and from the way he looked at Michelle it was pretty clear that he had chosen to speak English in the hope that

she would lend her support. 'I am tired of being in my room, Thios Georgi, and I wish to come down now.'

'You will wait until you are sent for!'

Michelle would not have believed he could look so alarmingly fierce, although the boy was not in the least deterred. His small dark face looked stubborn and there was a set, determined look about his mouth that told of a strong will, quite at variance with such a diminutive stature.

Firmly in sympathy with anyone who was confined to his room when there was bright warm sunshine outside, Michelle looked at Georgi appealingly, at a loss to understand why the child should have been excluded from the family gathering. 'Oh, but surely he can be allowed to come down now, Georgi! It seems a little hard to keep him in his room on such a lovely day,' she added, and Mt a flush of colour in her cheeks when both Georgi and the boy looked at her in obvious surprise.

She was probably being far too presumptuous in taking up sides in a purely family matter, but despite his precocious manner, she felt a curious liking for the small black-eyed boy who watched her with such disconcerting steadiness as she pleaded his cause.

Georgi looked down at him once more, and then back to Michelle, obviously in doubt as to what he should say and do. 'He is not one to give a good first impression, Michelle,' he told her. 'It is better that he stays in his room.'

'Oh, but that seems very harsh!'

She spoke without thinking, realising only when it was too late that she was implying criticism of the child's upbringing, and once more both pairs of eyes looked at her in obvious surprise. The boy, she

thought, saw her as a possible means of escape, but Georgi was unwilling to take matters upon himself and decide.

Eventually, however, he shrugged. 'I suppose he might be allowed down now,' he conceded. 'If Andrea agrees.'

Michelle blinked, taken by surprise. She had not visualised that austere magnetic man as a husband and father. But when she thought about it, it was to be expected that a man as stunningly attractive as Andréa Davolos undoubtedly would be married.

'Dimitri is your brother's boy?'

Georgi seemed to find the idea amusing, for he was smiling and shaking his head. 'Oh, no,. Michelle! Andrea is not a father, nor is he married, but it was because of Andrea that Dimitri was sent to his room.'

'Oh, I see!'

'I may come downstairs now?'

To Michelle the plea was irresistible, but Georgi it seemed was less affected, and he hesitated. 'I suppose it is possible that you will be allowed to stay, especially as Michelle has requested it, but you must ask your *papa* and Andrea, Dimitri.'

'Ne, *Thi'os* Georgi!'

The child's bright dark eyes gleamed with satisfaction, so that Michelle doubted if he had ever needed an advocate. He was probably quite accustomed to stating his own case, and his self-confidence made it certain that he had never been cowed. Sighing resignedly, Georgi tucked Michelle's arm under his and together they crossed the hall, with the boy following closely behind

them in a manner that suggested he was not too certain what kind of a reception he was going to get.

Georgi smiled at her as he opened the *salon* door. 'Everyone is looking forward to meeting you, Michelle.'

'Are they?'

She could do nothing about the uncertainty in her voice, and the blue eyes that were so like her own scanned her face for a second. Then he covered the hand that lay on his arm, and squeezed her fingers. 'I will be with you, Michelle. You will see—all will be well!'

Michelle had no doubt that his words were meant to be reassuring, but in fact the effect they had was rather the reverse, for they suggested that her fears would be realised. That the rest of his family would be no more warm in their welcome than his mother and his stepbrother had been.

In that moment, as they walked into the *salon*, she would have given anything to be able to take the first available plane back home to England. Only it was much easier to say than to do, when she was virtually stranded in the private domain of the Davoloses.

She was not quite sure what she expected to find. Perhaps that the room was full of people, but whatever she had anticipated, at first glance nothing had changed. The same two people sat in adjoining armchairs with that same curiously expectant air about them and, as before, Andrea Davolos got to his feet when they came into the room and stood watching her as she clung to Georgi's comforting arm.

'You are refreshed, Miss Dorset?'

Although he spoke quietly, his voice was distinct even from the other side of the room, and as they walked towards him the black eyes

missed nothing of the way the pink dress flattered and clung to her shape and enhanced her fair colouring.

It was a bold uninhibited appraisal that stirred some kind of urgent response in her, although on the spur of the moment she could not determine whether it was a pleasurable sensation or a resentful one. Only that it aroused in her a startling degree of awareness of the man who made it.

'I feel much better, Mr Davolos, thank you.'

'Your room is to your liking?'

He indicated a chair and she smiled up at Georgi when he saw her seated, glad to have him close by. 'It's a beautiful room, thank you. I'm really very grateful to you for letting me come, Mr Davolos.'

He barely inclined his head because in that moment he spotted the boy, Dimitri. He had crossed the room concealed behind Georgi, obviously hoping to remain undetected as long as possible, and Andrea Davolos's black brows drew into a frown as he spoke to him sternly in Greek.

Coming round into the open, Dimitri looked up at him with a strangely appealing mixture of pathos and defiance, but it was clear that he realised here was one person who would not be influenced. He replied, also in his own tongue, and Andrea Davolos glanced swiftly at Michelle.

Obviously the child sought to explain his reappearance by involving her, and it became even more obvious when Georgi leapt swiftly into the fray, his hands making violent denials. '*Ohi! Mia stighmi*, Andrea --'He cut short his protest and changed to English, as if he; wanted to make sure she knew what was being said. ? 'Just a minute, Andrea! It was *not* Michelle who gave permission for him to leave his room, he had already!

left it. Michelle merely --' He spread his hands as he searched for words. 'She said that he should be allowed downstairs to join us.'

He had made things worse, Michelle thought, although he did not realise it, and Andrea Davolos's black eyes were regarding her steadily, as if he could not believe she had been so presumptuous. 'Do you not approve of punishing wrongdoers?'

She met the jet-hard gaze uneasily, wishing that she had never become involved. Passions ran too high in this volatile family and she felt completely out of her depth with them. 'I—I didn't realise he was being punished.'

'Why else did you think the boy was confined to his room, *thespinis*?'

The cold formality of the title was curiously affecting in that deep attractive voice, and she shrugged uneasily.

'I simply thought he --' Her voice trailed off, for she hesitated to put into words the suspicion that Dimitri had been shunted out of sight so as not to impede adult conversation. She would never have the nerve to voice such an opinion with those accusing black eyes on her.

'His punishment was for an act of childish savagery, Miss Dorset. We do not punish our children with any less reason or any more harshly than in England, I think!'

To Michelle it seemed scarcely credible that she had become involved in a family matter so soon after her arrival, and she felt far more apprehensive than she would have believed possible as she shook her head without saying anything. It was once more left to Georgi to take up her defence, and he did so with a fierceness that surprised her. He was quite startlingly Greek, this newly found brother of hers, and it could still surprise her.

'You cannot blame Michelle for what she did, Andrea !' he declared, passionately indignant. 'She acted from kindness in suggesting Dimitri be allowed to come downstairs—how could she know what an unspeakable brat he is?'

The insult seemed not to trouble Dimitri in the least, although he regarded his judge more anxiously. Michelle felt she should make some attempt to pour oil on troubled waters, since she seemed to be taking a share of the blame, although she considered the incident had become exaggerated out of all proportion, by temperamental Greek pride.

'I'm sorry if you feel I've done something to offend you, Mr Davolos, I had no intention of doing so.'

She looked at him with a half-defiant sparkle in her blue eyes, and Georgi looked startled. It was hardly the meek effort to appease that Andrea Davolos was probably accustomed to, but she saw no reason to eat more humble pie. For a second she met the full force of those black eyes, deep and disturbing and perhaps vaguely surprised, she thought.

Then Georgi squeezed her arm gently and she looked up at him for a moment, and in that moment the tension eased. Andrea Davolos had a temper that flared with passionate fury and swiftness, but it died almost as quickly, and he already regarded' the small culprit less fiercely, although he still frowned.

'Your papa sent you to your room to punish you, Dimitri, have you now learned your lesson?' The boy nodded earnestly. 'And you will remember that wild 'Creatures are to be protected, not savaged with your toy guns?'

'Ne, Thios Andrea!'

The black eyes glowered at him fiercely. 'If you do *mot* remember your papa will thrash you—or I will if I catch you again, is that clear?'

'Ne, Thios Andrea.'

A barely restrained sigh admitted reluctant surrender against his better judgment, and the stern features remained unrelenting. '*Poli kala*—ask your papa if you may stay!'

A large hand dismissed him, and the boy fled through the louvred doors into the garden beyond, his voice shrilling as he went. It was quite unexpected, to Michelle at least, when Andrea Davolos looked across at his stepmother and made a rueful grimace, shrugging his broad shoulders in resignation—unexpected, but somehow very human.

Georgi, obviously relieved that the incident was over, smiled down at Michelle and reached for her hand. "Shall we now go and find the others in the garden, Michelle?"

'Oh, yes—yes, of course.'

The glance she gave in Andrea's direction was quite unconscious, and she saw the way one black brow arched swiftly in surprise. Her legs felt very shaky suddenly and they were already in the half open doorway before she realised that Andrea was suddenly beside her as well. Looking up with sun-dazzled eyes, she thought she caught a glimpse of a smile, a flash of white in the dark features, but she could not be sure.

'No one will eat you, Miss Dorset, you have no need to look so—apprehensive!'

The levity of the remark was as unexpected as that brief resigned grimace over the boy had been, and she felt a warm flush of colour in her cheeks as she walked out into the sunshine, with him and Georgi

on either side of her. Andrea Davolos was something of an enigma, it seemed, and she wished she did not feel such an irresistible desire to know him better.

The scene around the blue-tiled pool was relaxed and friendly, and it made her feel better that the two women and a man who sat there did not immediately fall silent as they approached. The elder of the two women and the man turned and smiled, albeit a little cautiously, but the younger woman had eyes only for Georgi. Sad, shy eyes that watched him anxiously as they joined the group.

The man got to his feet, waiting to be introduced, and of the three, Michelle thought he was the least reserved. He was short and stout, though probably not much over thirty years old, and he wore white tailored slacks and a striped shirt that made him look even more plump, but he seemed pleasant enough, and to Michelle that was what mattered most.

It was automatic for Andrea to perform the introductions, Michelle thought, while Georgi simply stood beside her with her hand still in his. 'Miss Dorset, may I introduce Pavlos Prasinos, my brother-in-law—Miss Michelle Dorset, our visitor from England.'

'Thespinis Michelle!' A warm soft hand enclosed hers, and she thanked heaven for the obviously genuine welcome in the strongly accented voice. 'It is a pleasure to welcome you!'

'And my sister, Medea Prasinos.'

The mother of the small, waiflike Dimitri was perhaps a little over thirty years old, like her husband, and enough like Andrea Davolos to make the relationship obvious. She was less effusive than her husband, but she extended a hand and murmured politely that she was pleased to meet her, while excusing herself from getting up because her son was sitting on her lap. She was curious, Michelle could see,

much more curious and concerned with her likeness to Georgi than her husband was.

She had noticed that the younger woman got to her feet almost as soon as they appeared, and she stood beside her chair, obviously, uneasy. She would be about twenty years old, Michelle guessed, and possibly a rather naive twenty, if her manner was any guide.

Very short and dark, she had a mass of black hair that was drawn back from her face in the traditional but rather severe style. It was a round, almost childish face, redeemed from actual plainness by a pair of huge and beautiful dark eyes that seemed transfixed on Georgi.

It was not hard to guess that she was the fiancée whom Andrea Davolos had mentioned earlier, and Michelle was startled to recognise a quite unexpected twinge of jealousy. She had known her twin for such a short time that she was admittedly unwilling to share him so soon with an adoring fiancée.

Andrea put an arm about the girl's shoulders, drawing her forward and treating her with a gentleness that was almost paternal. 'Miss Dorset—Natalia Palides, Georgi's fiancée.'

Michelle could feel him watching her as he made the introduction, and she wondered just what reaction he expected from her. Maybe he had detected that slight sense of resentment, although she did her best to stifle it. The Greek girl's reaction puzzled her, for she barely touched her hand with cool fingertips while hastily avoiding her eyes, and she could not imagine why it should be such an ordeal for her to meet her fiancé's twin sister.

Michelle was convinced the betrothal was an arranged one, although she could not have said what made her, so certain. They still happened, she had heard, and she rebelled at the very idea of her twin

being coerced into marriage by an alien custom that gave him little say in the matter, though Georgi seemed to accept it.

Georgi, anxious as ever to convince everyone of their affinity, put an arm about Michelle's shoulders and invited them to see how alike they were, as he had invited his brother and mother earlier. 'You see how much the same we are?' He appealed to his stepsister in particular, she thought. 'Do you not see it?'

Medea Prasinos studied her face carefully without actually meeting her eyes, and it seemed to Michelle that she addressed her answer to Andrea rather than Georgi. 'There is a likeness,' she conceded. 'You see it, Andrea?'

He too was studying her. Black-eyed, and inscrutable as a bronze idol with his features chiselled into non-commitment. 'I have said as much,' he told his sister quietly.

Doubts or not, Medea seemed to make up her own mind, and she gave Michelle a tentative smile as she hugged her son to her. 'I hope you will enjoy your stay with us, Miss Dorset. Do you like Greece?'

In her relief Michelle was perhaps a little too effusive, a little too anxious to please. 'I've seen no farther than the airport at Athens so far,' she said, 'and this island, of course, but I'm thrilled with what I *have* seen.'

It seemed for a moment that she had said something out of place, although why and how she could not imagine. 'You have not been to Greece before, Miss Dorset? Not to Athens, for instance?'

Andrea Davolos's deep quiet voice seemed to be trying to persuade her, and in her confusion she turned once more to Georgi. He said nothing, but there was a flush in his tanned cheeks and a bright gleam of resentment in his blue eyes.

'I've *never* been to Greece until now, Mr Davolos. Neither to Athens nor anywhere else, but I'm hoping Georgi will show me the Acropolis at least before I go back.'

'We will be delighted to show you anything you wish to see, Miss Dorset—any of us.'

Once more she had that strange feeling of being deliberately kept from looking on herself and Georgi as a pair, and it aroused a feeling of resentment and defiance that she sought hard to control. 'That's very kind of you, Mr Davolos, but I'm sure I shan't need to trouble anyone else. Georgi is my brother and I thought --'

'We are his family, therefore you must consider us all as willing to make your stay as pleasant as possible.'

The deep attractive voice was persuasive but adamant, velvet concealing the hardness of iron, Michelle thought, and shivered inwardly at some warning bell triggered in her brain. Natalia Palides with her hands clasped in front of her, unwilling to meet her eyes and looking desperately unhappy about something. The curious, searching gaze of Medea Prasinos and even little Dimitri, and Andrea Davolos's unwillingness to recognise her likeness to her twin.

There must be some explanation for it all, some sane and logical reason why she was not simply accepted as Georgi's twin sister, and she wondered what emotions, what passions, ran below the polite surface of this rich and powerful family that her brother was part of. Perhaps the next few days would show.

It was only when everyone retired for the night that Michelle learned of the existence of another house on the island, a smaller villa quite close by, but almost concealed by the lush growth around it, and

facing thesea. It was where Medea and Pavlos Prasinos lived with little Dimitri, who called himself Pondikos.

Nowadays only Madame Davolos with Andrea and Georgi occupied the main villa, with a number of servants, of course, and the fact of Dimitri having a room there was explained by the amount of time he spent under the benevolent eyes of his grandmother while his parents were abroad. She adored the boy and made no secret of it, a fact that Michelle counted in her favour, despite her own reception.

Breakfast outside was a pleasant thought. Eaten from a table set beside the pool, and with the shady spread of plane trees overhead, nothing could be better. Strong black Turkish coffee, with hot rolls fresh from the oven, butter and delicious mountain honey from Hymettus; it was idyllic. Michelle thought so even when she discovered she had come down rather too early, and consequently found herself in the exclusive company of Andrea Davolos.

Her first instinct had been to turn and go back to the house until Georgi put in an appearance, but the smell of fresh-baked rolls and the shining softness of the morning sun had tempted her, and she had, after all, joined her discomfiting host. He got up from his seat when she came over, and saw her seated before resuming his own breakfast. Whatever faults he might have, his manners were on the whole impeccable.

First impressions remained this morning, for he appeared no less stunning, and Michelle wondered if he , had the same effect on every woman, or if she was particularly vulnerable. A cream shirt took on a golden look where the bronzed body beneath it showed through, and a glimpse of dark hair shadowed the Opening over his broad chest. The shirt had short sleeves and revealed brown, powerful-looking arms, like the big hands that at the moment held nothing more lethal than a breakfast knife, yet still somehow managed to look dangerous.

Black eyes appraised the light blue dress she was wearing, and were frankly approving of what they saw, so that she felt her colour rise as she hastily avoided looking at him. He was a distracting companion for first thing in the morning.

'You slept well?'

The question was more polite than concerned, she suspected, but just the same she answered as if she expected him to care. 'Very well, thank you, Mr Davolos. I was very tired after the flight, and my room's extremely comfortable.'

'Kali!'

From the shadow of her lashes she watched the movements of his hands, fascinated by them without exactly knowing why. He spread more honey, then bit into the warm bread with his strong teeth, and she caught herself up hastily. There was something quite incredibly sensual about this man that she found disturbing— everything he did seemed larger than life, and he compelled attention no matter how small or commonplace the action.

She poured herself coffee from the fresh brew provided by the maid, and he watched her as she sipped it. 'Do you like our coffee, Miss Dorset?'

It was thick and very black and much stronger than she would normally have drunk, but she did not dislike it, which was what he expected, she thought. 'It's a little stronger than I usually drink, but I quite like it, thank you.'

She met his eyes for only a second, but there was a glittering suggestion of amusement there that surprised her, and a hint of it in his voice too. 'Would you admit it if you did *not* like it?'

'Well, yes, of course I would!'

He was playing with her, she felt sure, trying to disturb her so far intact self-confidence, and she felt not only angry about it, but puzzled too. She could not understand why he should go to such lengths to try and unsettle her.

'You are perhaps used to Turkish coffee?'

There was something more than the obvious motive behind that question, she knew, but for the life of her she could not think what he was trying to get at, and before she could answer him, Georgi put in an appearance. Perhaps it was as well, she thought; it was not a good idea to start off her first full day on the island by tackling his formidable stepbrother.

She still had difficulty in recognising that this handsome young Greek was her own flesh and blood, but already that mysterious rapport was growing between them, and she had not yet given a thought to how much harder it was going to be for them to part next time. Georgi put a hand lightly on her shoulder, and bent to kiss her, uninhibited by the black-eyed gaze that observed the gesture interestedly. ~

'Good morning, Michelle, you *are* an early riser!' He nodded to his stepbrother and took a seat between them. '*Kalimera*, Andrea!'

Georgi seemed a little on edge. It only became obvious to Michelle when he had been with her for several minutes, and she wondered if Andrea recognised it as well. There was a sympathy between them that was hardly surprising, for they had been brothers foreclose on twenty years, but she refused to admit that it was anything like the natural rapport she had with Georgi.

Georgi talked brightly enough, and he smiled often, but she thought there was some underlying tension that became more apparent as he talked. It was a remark of her own that revealed the cause and she was

once more made aware of Andrea Davolos's firm hold on his family's affairs.

'If you haven't anything else in mind today, Georgi,' she ventured as he poured himself coffee, 'I wonder if you'd like to take me to one of your lovely beaches and we could sit and talk. We've got so much to say and we could kill two birds with one stone—sunbathe and talk as well!'

Instead of eagerly agreeing with the idea as she expected him to, Georgi glanced at his stepbrother, stirring the coffee in his cup with quite unnecessary force.

'I would enjoy that very much, Michelle, if --' Again that half defiant, half appealing look at his stepbrother. 'If Andrea will --' He did not finish the sentence because Andrea was already shaking his head, slowly but firmly.

To Michelle it seemed that Georgi was seeking permission before agreeing to take her to the beach, and she felt a sudden upsurge of anger, not only against the out-of-hand refusal that the shaking head implied, but at the idea of his feeling he had to ask.

What right had this man to deny her brother a few hours alone with her? They had so much to talk about and yet up until now they had had no opportunity to talk together without , at least one other, member of his family being there. It was wrong that a grown man should seek permission before he acted, like a child asking a favour of a stern parent.

'Oh, Georgi!' Her blue eyes had the brightness of jewels in her small flushed face, and she directed her anger at the man she saw responsible for her brother's humiliating position. 'Do you have to *ask* if you can take me to the beach?' The words were addressed to Georgi, but her eyes remained steadily on his stepbrother so that there was no

doubt who it was aroused her anger, and it was quite clear that Andrea Davolos got the message. 'My brother was about to ask me to take on a duty that is his, Miss Dorset; it is that which I refuse him, not the pleasure, of taking you to the beach. I cannot speak knowledge-ably of your own country's customs, but in Greece it is not customary to delegate the duties of a fiancé to one's brother!'

Michelle's heart was thudding hard when she looked at the dark, saturnine features and realised her mistake. She had misinterpreted Georgi's half-formed question, that was obvious, but that was unlikely to make it any more excusable in Andrea's eyes.

'Natalia is entrusted to the care of Georgi's family only because she is the daughter of a very old friend as well as his fiancée,' he told her. 'He has promised, as he always does on these occasions, to return her to her home this morning and to spend the remainder of the day with her family. It is a promise I cannot allow him to break, even for you, *thespinis*.'

'I—I didn't know.' Michelle almost wished the ground would open up and swallow her, rather than she should have to go on facing that black-eyed scrutiny. Her glance was evasive and half concealed by thick brown lashes as she sought to justify herself. 'You couldn't expect me to know anything about that, Mr Davolos!'

Slowly and deliberately his eyes scanned her flushed Jace, and a sardonic smile eased the tightness of his mouth. 'I did not *expect* to be reprimanded with such fervour either, Thespinis Michelle—you come to the defence of my brother with the fierceness of an angry tigress!'

He sounded as if the idea amused him, but it startled Michelle to realise that she was trembling like a leaf. 'I came to the defence of *my* brother, Mr Davolos—perhaps I was prompted by the affinity that exists between twins!'

'Gemini? The heavenly twins?'

The mocking tone of his voice matched the look in his eyes, but Michelle refused to be drawn. As she faced him across the-table she felt a shivering tension between them that to her confused senses had a kind of excitement. They would seem to have nothing in common and yet for a few moments there existed all undeniable rapport that she could neither explain nor understand.

She was brought swiftly back to reality when Georgi ventured a compromise. 'Andrea, is it not possible for me to take Michelle also when I return Natalia to her home?'

Andrea looked as if the idea was in some way offensive, and yet again Michelle felt irritated that he should have the right to approve or not. 'It would not be diplomatic, I think, to take your guest to Natalia's home—you must see that, Georgi. There will be plenty of time for you to spend with Miss Dorset after you have taken Natalia home.'

Georgi's compliance annoyed her and she would have made her irritation known, but she was here in a strange country and there were different codes of behaviour to abide by, though heaven knew what possible objection there could be to him taking his sister to visit his fiancée's family;

Because she was unsure of her ground, she remained quiet, and, after a second or two Georgi lifted his shoulders in that helpless gesture of resignation and reached for her hand. Tomorrow, Michelle. It shall be tomorrow, I promise.'

Michelle nodded, but when she looked again at Andrea Davolos his eyes were dark and fathomless, and she knew it would be tomorrow only if he allowed it.

CHAPTER THREE

It was disappointing having to contemplate spending her first day on the island more or less alone while Georgi, obedient to custom, was on the mainland with Natalia, and Michelle found it impossible to blame anyone for it except Andrea Davolos. He surely need not have been so adamantly against Georgi taking her with him when he took Natalia home—the Greeks were a very hospitable people and she felt sure they would have welcomed their future son-in-law's twin sister on a brief visit.

As it turned out, the day passed quite pleasantly, for she spent most of the time in the company of Medea and Pavlos Prasinós, and discovering that she had a mutual love of Paris in common with Medea was an unexpected bit of luck. It gave them ground for hours of conversation, and they happily compared notes and opinions while Medea's husband amused his small son and teased them with an easy-going tolerance about their enthusiasm.

Michelle had rather dreaded the prospect of having dinner alone with only Andrea and his stepmother, for she anticipated it as something of an ordeal. It was a tremendous relief when she discovered that the Prasinós shared the meal with them, as they had done at lunch-time, and by the end of the evening she felt she had the makings of a friend in Medea—something that Andrea seemed to view with something like surprise, if his expression was any guide.

Georgi did not arrive home until some time after Michelle went to bed, and when she heard him arrive she vowed sleepily to spend tomorrow with him no matter what Andrea Davolos had to say about it. With Natalia no longer there to be used as an excuse, there was no reason why she should not have Georgi to herself for a while and if Georgi did not say so to his formidable stepbrother, then she would.

She had not anticipated quite so much opposition when she was invited to visit the island and stay with Georgi in his home, and she had certainly not expected to find as formidable a barrier as Andrea Davolos opposing her. His attitude puzzled her, especially when it had been Andrea, according to Georgi, who had issued the invitation, and she wished she could get to the root of the trouble instead of feeling that she was constantly under suspicion.

The bed was huge and comfortable and the scents from the garden below her windows filled the room, lulling her off to sleep even with the enigma of Georgi's unfriendly relatives on her mind. Perhaps it would all look more hopeful in the morning, and at least she had the hope of Medea Prasinos becoming an ally.

It was disturbing to find her dreams that night invaded by the constant recurrence of fathomless black eyes that watched her as steadily as a bird of prey, and by the sound of a deep, persuasive voice that refused to be silenced, and ran through her dreams all night long. Andrea Davolos was not an easy man to either forget or ignore, and she felt she had little hope of doing either while she stayed under his roof.

The following morning she was careful not to come down to breakfast too early. She had no desire to repeat yesterday's discomfiting tete-a-tete, so she waited until she thought Georgi should be about ready to put in an appearance, and then made her way downstairs, crossing the hall on her way to the *salon* and through to the garden.

The door to one of the other rooms stood slightly ajar as she passed and the sound of angry voices brought her to an involuntary halt suddenly. She could understand nothing of what was being said because they spoke in Greek, but it was recognising the voices and the fact that they were quarrelling that startled her.

Andrea's was unmistakable, and Georgi's too—the third belonged to a woman who she thought was Madame Davolos, but heaven knew what they could be quarrelling about so early in the day. One word gave her the clue, just as she was about to move on.

Clear and unmistakable she recognised her own name. Enchantingly accented, unadorned by a title and spoken in Andrea Davolos's fascinating voice, it sounded as it never had before, and she found herself listening almost without realising she was doing so. She hated to think they might be quarrelling about her, but why else would her name be mentioned? *Since* Georgi was involved it was safe to assume that it concerned his desire to spend more time with her and if that was so, she could only agree with him.

She heard him exclaim angrily, and pulled herself up hastily when she realised he was coming nearer the door all the time he was speaking. Almost running, to try and be out of sight before he appeared, she hurried across the *salon* and through into the gardens without knowing just how close behind her he was.

The morning was soft and beautiful, and the scent of the lemon trees in the growing warmth of the sun overrode almost every other scent in the garden. Even so the musky perfume of geraniums and the velvet fragrance of roses spilled in profusion from bordering gardens that were still cool under the sheltering plane trees, and the pool glittered, artificially blue under a sky that needed no artifice added to its reflection.

No one should quarrel in such surroundings, and the thought of being the cause of dissent, especially such violent dissent, made her unhappy. She lifted the heavy head of a crimson hibiscus and pressed its cool petals to her cheek. If only she could have been welcomed to this tiny paradise instead of unsettling Georgi's family so much, she would have been much happier.

'Michelle—good morning!'

Georgi put an arm about her shoulders and kissed her. He managed a smile, but it was not his customary uninhibited beam, and it did not reach his eyes. They looked dark and rebellious, as if he had been on the losing side in that garrulous argument. There must be something in the supposition that environment influenced temperament, she thought, for surely her brother Michael would never have grown into this passionately explosive young man, in his native background.

She said nothing for the moment about the quarrel she had overheard, although she thought she must mention it before long; there was too much to understand that so far confused her. They sat at the table, alone this time, since Andrea had already breakfasted and Madame Davolos seldom did, and the maid brought them breakfast.

'Georgi --' Michelle had watched the maid depart before she ventured to say anything, and her breakfast remained untouched while she tried to find words to 'explain what was on her mind. 'I—when I was coming across the hall just now, I heard—I couldn't help overhearing you and Andrea, and your mother too, I think. You—you sounded as if you were quarrelling.'

Georgi stirred his coffee slowly round and round in his cup with no real idea of what he was doing, she thought, and he did not look at her while he spoke. 'Oh, it was simply a family disagreement, Michelle—you know, these things happen.'

'Georgi!' She stilled his hand with hers and her eyes had a deep anxious look as she tried to make him look at her. 'I—I heard my name mentioned. I couldn't *help* overhearing,' she insisted again when he looked up suddenly. 'I didn't *want* to hear, but, even in Greek, I recognised my own name.' Her fingers curled tightly over his and, disposing of the spoon, he clasped her hand in his. 'Georgi, if it's

going to—to make trouble between you and your family, if you're going to quarrel about me coming here—I ought to go away again.'

'*Ohi*, Michelle!' He searched her face anxiously, seeking to discover if she meant what she said. 'You cannot go before we have had time to talk—it is why you came! I will not let you go now, before we know one another!'

'I don't want to go, Georgi, but --' She looked at their clasped hands for a moment. It was not easy admitting to herself that her twin might after all be happier if she did go back home and let things stay as they had been before Aunt Faye made her disturbing revelations. 'I—I don't like to think of you quarrelling about my being here, Georgi. I find it hard to understand why Andrea and your mother dislike me so much, although—I suppose I can see that they might find it disturbing having someone arrive suddenly who reminds them that you're not really part of them at all, but a—a stranger.'

'Oh, but it isn't that, Michelle!'

'Then what is it? Why are they so—afraid?'

Georgi covered their two hands with his own other one, and they sat like that for several seconds while he sought hard for words to explain. He made no denial of the fear she had suggested, and she suspected that it *was* a kind of fear that prompted that polite but resentful reaction from his family.

'It is not an easy thing to say, Michelle, but—they do not trust me and—the fault is mine. I hate it that they do not trust me, it makes me very unhappy, but --' He shrugged resignedly, a gesture that Michelle found oddly touching. 'I cannot blame them too much.'

She looked at him for a moment, her hand in his, her eyes sympathetic, anxious to understand. 'Tell me,' she prompted gently.

'It is a long story, and you would perhaps not understand.'

'You could try!' Impulsively she leaned across and kissed him. 'I'll understand, I promise. I'm your twin, Georgi, and we have a special understanding of one another.'

He seemed to take heart from her assurance and he even smiled, though even now it did not reach his eyes. 'It started while I was at university—until last year I attended the university in Athens, and I met—someone there. An English girl—Mary Darnley.'

The first piece fell into place, and Michelle looked at him with understanding. 'You met her at the university?'

Georgi was shaking his head, and he still did not look directly at her. 'I was there, she was not. She was very pretty and I—I *thought* I fell in love with her. She was living in Athens with her family, you understand, her - father was a diplomat, a government official of some kind, I am not sure, but we met quite often. It was not simply a holiday affair.'

'But you were engaged to Natalia Palides?'

He looked ashamed to admit it, and Michelle could well understand how he felt, though her sympathy was still with him. 'I know I was wrong; Michelle.'

'I didn't blame you!' She did not blame him, but Andrea Davolos would, of course. He had probably arranged the betrothal between his young stepbrother and his old friend's daughter, since he was so much older than Georgi, and stood in proxy for his father. He would not like to see the arrangement threatened. 'Georgi——' She looked at him earnestly. 'Was this— this arrangement between you and Natalia Palides— organised?' He looked briefly puzzled, and she hastened to explain. 'I mean, did Andrea arrange the betrothal?'

'We have been betrothed since Natalia became eighteen years old, and we are to be married next year. It is an arrangement that is pleasing to both families.'

'But you don't want to marry Natalia?'

Georgi looked both puzzled and uneasy. 'Of course I shall marry Natalia,' he said. 'I am not unwilling, Michelle, but there was a time—last year when I saw so much of this girl, that I was not so happy. I told Andrea that I wished to be free of the betrothal and to go back to England with Mary when she went with her family.'

It was all too easy to visualise it, Michelle thought. Georgi would not have stood a chance of breaking that so suitable engagement, Andrea Davolos would make sure of that. Once more she felt that fiercely protective instinct spring up again, bringing a flush of anger to her cheeks when she thought of Georgi being parted from a girl he truly loved for the sake of satisfying old customs. What right had Andrew Davolos to dictate to her brother whom he should marry, yet still remain a fancy-free bachelor himself?

'Andrea refused to let you break it off?'

Georgi kept his eyes on their clasped hands as he nodded. 'I can see now that he was right, of course.'

'He was *not* right!' Georgi looked up in surprise at her bright, indignant eyes and the small flushed face. 'No one has any right to tell someone else whom they shall marry! It isn't—it isn't—civilised!'

'But, Michelle!' He squeezed her hands tightly to bring her back to reality, and she looked at him for a moment, still angry and indignant, so that he half smiled as he sought to reassure her. 'You do not understand, my sister. Andrea was right to refuse me, to make me think more carefully before I stepped into something that --He shrugged lightly. 'I would not have been happy, I think, but at that

time I was so angry that I threatened I would find some way of being with Mary, even if I ran off and never saw my family or my home again!'

That, Michelle realised, would be far more of a serious decision and far more of a wrench for a family orientated Greek, than for one of her own countrymen, and, no matter what his origins, Georgi was a thorough Greek in his outlook.

She looked at the young, good-looking face with its golden tan and the blue eyes so like her own, and admitted to being at a loss to understand him completely. 'Did you try to run away?'

Georgi was shaking his head. 'Andrea persuaded me, and I can see now that I was wrong. I was foolish to let my senses become confused to such an extent, but for a while I was so sure, and we—Mary and I—wrote letters. It continued for several months, but then'—Again that expressive shrug, the resigned spread of his hands—'I began to realise that it was not the same when I could not see her, be with her.' He looked at her and smiled ruefully. 'I think I did not truly love her, Michelle, or I would not have felt so, hmm?'

'I suppose not.' She admitted it only reluctantly, for she was still convinced that he had been forced to follow a path laid out for him by his autocratic family, and by Andrea in particular. She considered where, in all this, her own position was concerned. Why it was that she was viewed with such suspicion, unless it was thought that her very Englishness would once more send Georgi hankering after his lost love. 'I can't quite see,' she told him, 'why all that—should make them take exception to me.'

He looked uneasy, watching their clasped hands again rather than look at her directly, and there was a small frown between his fair brows. 'This also is my fault in some way,' he confessed, obviously with reluctance. 'I was so—so insistent that I would one day find a

way to be with Mary that, even though I am now over the—the episode, they do not altogether trust me. When we corresponded about this matter of our being twins, they felt that somehow—somehow I am not being completely honest with them. They are afraid, I think, that if I go to England I will not come home again, but also ---'

He hesitated for so long that Michelle frowned at him curiously. 'Also, Georgi?'

He took several seconds to find words and all the time his fingers moved restlessly over hers, his eyes remained downcast and he seemed quite incredibly reluctant to tell her what was in his mind. 'No one in the family ever saw Mary, you see, Michelle. They know only that she is blonde and very lovely, with beautiful blue eyes.' He took a deep breath and hurried on, blurring the words into one another, his accent far more pronounced than it normally was. 'They cannot be sure that I have not fooled them after all, Michelle—they think that you might be Mary Darnley!'

Michelle stared at him, her eyes wide and incredulous. 'But I never heard anything so—so ridiculous! I've produced proof that we're twins; Mr Evans, my solicitor, sent letters to prove who I was, didn't he? Haven't they *seen* the proof they need?'

She remembered then Andrea Davolos's remark that they had seen proof of Georgi being born a twin, and that he had a twin sister, but that was something they already knew. Georgi must have been very convincing, very passionate in his insistence that he would somehow see Mary Darnley again, if they thought he would go to such lengths to achieve his object.

'Oh, Georgi, surely they can't still believe that, can they?'

He shrugged and his fingers twined in hers as he shook Jiis head slowly. 'I think that by being here you have almost convinced them, Michelle. It is why Andrea wanted you to come here, so that he might see you for himself and decide.'

'And he really believes that any girl would come here, as bold as brass like that?' It was just possible that Andrea Davolos saw her in just that light, Michelle thought a little wildly. Perhaps he saw her as a bold-as- brass English girl determined to follow her wealthy lover even into his own home. 'Does he really see me as —as bold as that, Georgi?'

'Not you, Michelle,' he hastened to assure her, though she was in no mood to be appeased. 'He does not think so badly of you.'

'If he still has doubts that I'm not Mary Darnley, then he must think I have all the nerve in the world!'

Michelle insisted. 'Ooh, Georgi, I could *hate* that stepbrother of yours!'

The violence of her reaction seemed not to surprise him, and she wondered if after all they were so very different in temperament. Or perhaps there was something in this idyllic, hot-blooded environment that was already affecting a change in her normally easygoing nature.

Georgi squeezed her fingers gently and shook hifr head, his eyes anxious still. 'I hope for my sake that you will not hate him, Michelle, but learn to love him as another brother.'

A brother! Michelle thought about those disturbing black eyes that appraised her each time they saw her, and the deep warm sensuousness of his voice, and she doubted very much if she could ever learn to love Andrea Davolos as a brother.

Michelle would have liked to say something to Andrea Davolos about his suspicion of her in the light of what Georgi had told her, but for her brother's sake, she said nothing. During the next couple of days there were opportunities for her to talk to Georgi, and she wondered if, after all, the suspicion was lessening the longer she stayed.

Perhaps the likeness between them was becoming more apparent and would eventually be considered undeniable, she could only hope so for Georgi's sake. In the meantime they swam and dived in the clear silky water of the Aegean, and Michelle seldom gave a thought to the time when she would have to leave the island and once more be parted from Georgi.

It was something she preferred not to think about, and she had a habit, one which her two adoptive brothers had often teased her about, of putting things out of her mind if she found them not to her liking. She did so now, with the problem of once more leading a separate existence from her twin.

It would be difficult not to enjoy herself in such surroundings, and Michelle thought that during the past two days Madame Davolos had begun to regard her with a little less suspicion. She felt sure that she was not an habitually unfriendly woman, and she probably found it hard to keep up her initial hostile and unwelcoming attitude, especially when Medea so readily accepted her.

Little Dimitri could easily wrap his grandmother around his finger, even though he was her grandson only through her marriage to her second husband, and Michelle could well imagine how she would dote on any children that Georgi might father, whoever their mother was. Georgi was the pivot of her existence.

It should not have surprised her that on his twenty-first birthday Georgi had automatically been appointed to a seat on the board of the immense Davolos business empire, but somehow it did. It was not

easy to imagine her own brother being part of that enormous and complex enterprise, it made him more of a stranger and she hated that.

He had taken his place alongside Andrea and Medea's husband, Pavlos Prasinou. Being the daughter of the family made no difference to Medea's standing, and she had no hand at all in the running of the family businesses. The Davolos were far too steeped in tradition still, for a woman to be given an active part to play in business affairs. Georgi was a Davolos son— adopted or not.

Even being involved in the affairs of the businesses did not allow Georgi to travel, for he had the use of an office in the villa and was expected to apply himself - diligently to business affairs for three days each week, so he informed her rather ruefully. The fact that Andrea took charge of the Athens office, with Pavlos's help, rather left him on trust not to play truant, and he was sufficiently impressed by his stepbrother's authority not to flout it, unless he had very good reason.

The fact of his sister being there was not, she felt sure, considered to be a good enough reason, and she was faced with spending virtually all the next three days without seeing him. It was scarcely credible that she had been on the island for almost a week, and the sixth day of her stay began with the same golden softness that heralded them all, a state of affairs she could still marvel at.

She could have spent the day beside the pool with Medea and Dimitri as she had yesterday, but somehow she felt strangely restless as she came down from her room again. Georgi was already working in his office, and she glanced at the closed door a little wistfully as she passed it. She had not heard the light aircraft taking off with Andrea and Pavlos for Athens, but it was possible she had missed it while she was in her room.

The door of the office opened as she crossed the hall, and she turned swiftly when she anticipated seeing Georgi, a half-smile already on her face. A smile that vanished in, a faintly embarrassed flush when she found herself facing Andrea instead of Georgi, and the steady black eyes regarded her for a moment before he spoke.

'Have you arranged to do anything in particular today, Thespinis Michelle?'

The semi-formal title seemed to have become accepted practice, at least with Andrea, and Michelle was becoming used to it, but there was something, so incredibly lyrical about that deep, sensual voice pronouncing her name that she could never control the swift, cold shiver that fluttered along her spine whenever she heard it.

'I—no, I don't think so, Mr Davolos.'

Warning of the question would have given her a chance to sound more sure of what she was saying, but he had taken her by surprise and she felt her heart thudding hard as she tried to imagine why he should suddenly take such an interest in her activities.

He came across the hall towards her, and she felt herself shaking. It was ridiculous to react so intensely to a man who had no good opinion of her, and in all probability saw her as nothing more than a bold-as-brass fortune-hunter who wanted to marry his young brother, but there seemed nothing she could do about it.

He looked no less dangerously attractive in the formality of a business suit than in the more casual clothes she was used to seeing him wear, and she tried not to notice the lithe and easy way he walked. Expensively tailored trousers showed off lean hips, and a cream silk shirt gave a bronze look to those chiselled features that were not quite handsome, but very Greek.

'I have rather an inactive day ahead of me and I thought perhaps you would care to pay that visit to the Acropolis you spoke of.'

Michelle stared. It was quite involuntary and she realised after a second or two that she was being rude in simply staring at him the way she was, but he had startled her so much that she could not believe her own ears. Georgi was busy in the office and would be for the rest of the day, so the invitation must have been made because he seriously thought she wanted to go and was not averse to having him as her guide, rather than to defeat their being together. - ""You mean—go with you?"

'You wished to go, did you not?'

He asked the question quietly, but she detected a hint of impatience behind it, and she nodded. 'Oh yes, I wanted to go, but I thought. --' She glanced instinctively at the office door behind him, and he raised one brow inquiringly.

'You think Georgi a more capable guide, perhaps?' he asked.

'No, of course not!' There was nothing she could do about the breathless quality of her voice, nor the bright flush in her cheeks and she knew he had noted both. 'I—I was just surprised, that's all, Mr Davolos. I thought you were—I mean, I thought you would have something more important to do than show me around the Acropolis.'

She would have thought it beneath his dignity to act as her guide, and she guessed he followed her train of thought judging by the swift elevation of that expressive brow once more, and the glitter in his eyes. How on earth she was going to get on, spending an hour or so in his exclusive company, she could not imagine, for he was quite the most disturbing man she had ever met, and she wished there was something she could do to stop herself being so impressed by him.

'We have promised to make your stay as pleasant and interesting as possible, have we not?' he asked, and Michelle nodded. ,

'Yes—and I'm very grateful—thank you.'

She felt rooted to the spot, not quite knowing what to do next, and the black eyes watched her for a moment, quizzical and speculative, then he half-smiled, showing strong white teeth against the bronze sculpture of his face.

'We leave in ten minutes,' he told her. 'Try to be ready by then, Thespira's Michelle.'

'Oh yes, I will!'

She almost literally fled back upstairs, and knew quite well that Andrea was watching her, probably with one of those half-smiles that were so enigmatic that she never really knew what to make of them. She had very little to do to be ready, but she needed a few minutes alone to put her thoughts in order, and she closed the door behind her and leaned against it for a few moments with her eyes closed.

She hesitated to call in the office and see Georgi before she went, and yet somehow he was her only touch with reality, everything else was going a little too fast for her, and she felt as if none of it was quite believable. Glancing at her wristwatch, she crossed to the mirror and peered at her reflection curiously.

It showed a small flushed face with huge shining blue eyes and a soft mouth that was tremblingly uncertain. An expression that was not quite apprehensive and yet could be taken as so, and she despaired of the change that only a few minutes in "the company of Andrea Davolos could bring about. She was not an impressionable schoolgirl, and yet somehow she felt like one after contact- with Andrea for any length of time, and heaven knew how long it took to look over the Acropolis.

The Acropolis was everything Michelle expected, and from the first moment she saw it, drawn against the summer blue sky with veils of white cloud trailing like draperies, she was enchanted. There was a sense of occasion about the place, even after countless centuries, and it touched her even before Andrea parked the car and they walked up through an avenue of cypresses to the Propylaea.

That masterpiece in timeless marble spanned the Whole western face of the Acropolis, and it was an impressive introduction to the glories to come. Huge Doric columns, deceptively fragile in appearance for all their size, were fluted to give the impression of slenderness, yet strong enough to have survived numberless centuries of abuse by man and the elements, to a remarkable degree.

The view was breathtaking, and Michelle stood on a rocky plateau just outside one of the five gateways, gazing in awe at the golden marble columns of the Parthenon. The effect was dizzying and she could easily forget the crowds of tourists and the jumble of broken marble that littered the once statue-lined approach and imagine herself back among the ancient glories, the pagan rites and ceremonies and the beauty of the complete buildings.

'You art impressed?'

Andrea's voice, soft and deep beside her, brought her swiftly back to earth, and she glanced up at him, her eyes still misty with the effect of her dream. 'Oh yes! It's—it's incredible.' Her voice was hushed and slightly breathless and she did not consider that she might have been too deeply impressed. 'It's unbelievably beautiful arid so—so impressive.'

Andrea smiled. Not the enigmatic half-smile that she was accustomed to seeing, but a full smile that lent warmth to the black eyes, and

softened the chiselled features, making them look suddenly younger. It was a face that fitted somehow among these ancient marbles and fragments of the ancient gods.

'It is always a pleasure to bring someone here for the first time, and to see the look of pleasure it inspires.'

'Is that why you brought me?'

The question was probably provocative, she realised too late, but Andrea was still smiling, though perhaps less fulsomely. 'Of course,' he said. Briefly the black eyes held her gaze steadily. 'Do you mistrust my motives, Thespinis Michelle?'

She shook her head hastily, for the very last thing she wanted to happen was for them to quarrel. It would seem almost like sacrilege somehow, among so much beauty and endurance, to suspect him of anything other than a genuine desire to show her the classic treasures of his country.

'Oh, no!' she said, huskily earnest in her anxiety. 'Please don't think that!'

He murmured something in Greek, but apparently felt as she did about keeping the peace, and when she turned away at last he tucked her arm firmly under his, his hard strong fingers pressing into her soft skin, and she felt the sudden more urgent beat of her heart as he walked beside her. Admittedly the ground was uneven in places, but it was such an unexpectedly intimate gesture that she wondered at his making it, and it gave her a curious sense of satisfaction to realise how considerate he was being.

To the parties of tourists, they encountered they must have looked a stunning couple as they walked arm in arm among the temples of honey-coloured marble, Andrea so dark and herself so fair, and she found the whole prospect of the Acropolis even more exciting

suddenly. Not that she would have enjoyed the things she saw any less in Georgi's company, but as she walked beside Andrea she wondered if she would have experienced quite the same feeling of excitement and exhilaration.

It was incredible how quickly the time passed and it was not until Andrea suggested they had lunch that _ sfee realised how long it had been since they left the island that morning with Pavlos. Lunching with him was not something she had anticipated, but it was a logical end to their tour, she could admit, and she was hungry now that she realised the time.

Driving back down into the city again they said little and it occurred to Michelle as they walked into a restaurant that she had not yet thanked him for giving her so much of his time. The waiter departed with their order and she looked across at him through the thickness of her lashes.

'I'm—I'm very grateful to you for sparing me so much of your time, Mr Davolos, thank you..'

He inclined his head gravely when he accepted her thanks and she thought how very Greek he was, and yet suddenly she felt strangely at ease with him as she never had before. It was as if she had got closer to him without quite knowing how, and it gave her a satisfying sense of belonging that she never thought to question; as if she had suddenly been accepted.

'I, am pleased that you enjoyed it, Thespinis Michelle.'

'Oh, please,' she spoke impulsively and almost before he had finished speaking, 'won't you just call me Michelle, as Georgi does? He is your brother and—I mean, we both claim him as a brother, and that means --'

He came to her rescue with a faint smile that barely touched his mouth but showed in the dark depths of his eyes. 'If you are suggesting that I see myself as *your* brother also, *pethi mou*,' he told her quietly, 'I cannot see myself in that role, I am sorry. I have no objection at all, however, to using your very attractive first name, Michelle.'

The effect of that fascinating voice pronouncing her name affected her as it always did, and she felt the inevitable shiver of sensation trickle along her spine, but at the same time it was difficult to know how to respond to such a statement. She had no idea whether or not he meant her to be equally free with his own first name, and she hesitated to try it until she was sure.

She had thought herself closer to him, only minutes ago, but now she was not so sure any more. He was as ; much an enigma as ever and she was no nearer to knowing whether he believed she was Michelle Dorset or Mary Darnley. Oh well—she sighed inwardly while the waiter served them with the substantial lunch Andrea had ordered for them and set about it with a certain air of resignation.

Prawns in tomato and cheese sauce whetted her appetite for an excellent *moussaka*, which was followed in turn by a sticky *kadaff* of nuts and honey bound with shredded pastry. Not normally a wine drinker, she was persuaded to try a *Pallini* and found it light enough to enjoy without making her feel too heady. It was while they sat sipping the inevitable dark thick coffee that she felt Andrea watching her, and she looked around her rather than meet those disturbing black eyes.

His gaze was too intense to be borne for too long without responding to it, and she suspected he was well aware of the fact as she reluctantly gave him her attention. A half-smile gave a slightly crooked look to his wide mouth and his eyes glowed; as if something was amusing him.

'Parndon, Michelle.' He put down his coffee cup-and shook his head slowly. 'I was'—a large hand sought the word he needed—'speculating—hmm?'

Her heart was thudding hard at her ribs and Michelle felt oddly lightheaded suddenly as she met his eyes for a moment. 'There *is* such a word,' she agreed, knowing he was fully aware of the fact, 'whether it's the one you want --'

'It is the word I seek—to wonder, hmm? To wonder why it is that such a lovely young girl is still unmarried.'

The very personal remark stunned Michelle for a moment and she could only stare at him with bright, unbelieving eyes. Then she shook her head slowly, the tip of her tongue relieving the dryness of her lips. 'I—I haven't met anyone yet that I *want* to marry,' she told him.

A dark brow questioned the wisdom of allowing such freedom of choice and he once more half-smiled in that disturbingly enigmatic way that always puzzled her. 'If you were indeed my sister, *pethi mou*, I would have found you a husband by now—there would have been no difficulty!'

'There is no difficulty, I simply haven't met the right man so far!'

Michelle's blue eyes sparkled indignantly. Not content with marrying Georgi to Natalia Palides whether or not he wanted it, he now had the temerity to hint that she would be-better off married off in the same way. She had learned that an avid interest in the private life of one's friends was not considered outrageous by the friendly, outgoing Greeks, but it was the motive she suspected was behind his remark that angered her. He still did not trust her.

'I can't think why you're so keen to see everyone married off, Mr Davolos,' she told him in a tight little voice, 'when you're still happy to stay a bachelor!'

Andreas helped himself from the little *briki* of coffee and did not look at her while he answered, his voice smooth and deep and infinitely affecting. 'I am not, as you appear to believe, a bachelor, happy or not, Michelle. My wife died in childbirth more than twelve years ago, so did our child.' He gave her no time to speak, even had she felt capable of doing so after such a numbing statement, but looked up at her suddenly. 'If I ever consider marrying again, however, I will keep *you* in mind, for you offer a challenge I find hard to resist!'

CHAPTER FOUR

CHOOSING the right moment to broach the subject of Andrea's ill-fated marriage was not easy, and it was possible that Georgi would not see any reason for her to concern herself with it. It was more than a week now since the visit to Athens and, while it had certainly not monopolised her thoughts by any means, Michelle experienced a small but persistent niggle of curiosity that kept cropping up every so often regarding Andrea's unfortunate wife and child.

She and Georgi had been swimming and they now lay stretched out side by side on the hot white sandy beach. Behind them, the tall plume-like cypresses-that lined the road to the villa strode like dart guards against the china blue sky, almost to the water's edge, and in front of them, lapping just short of their recumbent brown bodies, the silky blue Aegean rippled creamy lace over the sand, never quite reaching them. It was an idyll that Michelle refused to see an end to, her mind firmly closed against the prospect of leaving Georgi behind when she went home to England.

Two weeks in the Grecian sun had tanned her skin to a delicious pale gold and added a lighter touch to her fair hair, making the physical likeness between her and Georgi much more evident. Not that she could hope to achieve in a couple of weeks the same wonderful bronze colour that it had taken Georgi almost a lifetime to acquire, nor was her hair bleached to that silvery blond that his was, but the increasing similarity pleased her, and she took every opportunity available to be in the sun and deepen her own colouring.

By just turning her head a little she could see her brother's lean bronzed shape, clad in brief red swimming trunks, his hands clasped under his head, as hers were, his eyes closed against the full glare of the sun, even though he wore sunglasses. She could still experience a jolt of surprise every so often when she looked at the handsome

young Greek beside her and realised he was not only her brother, but her affinity.

Gemini, the heavenly twins, Andrea had once rather mockingly referred to them. But no matter what Andrea said, how much doubt he cast, there was some special feeling between them that even twenty-two years apart had not completely obliterated.

It was possibly that special sensitivity that made Georgi turn his head suddenly and look at her, smiling lazily. 'What are you thinking of, Michelle?'

The little trill of laughter she gave was because, yet again, he had what she privately termed walked into her mind. 'I was wondering what I'd have done if I'd ever come to Greece on holiday, and met you without knowing who you were,' she confessed, and Georgi laughed.

Rolling over lazily on to his stomach, he propped himself up on his elbows, and pushed his sunglasses up and over his thick forelock of blond hair as he Smiled down at her. 'Am I not your alter-ego?' he teased. 'We are so much alike, my sister, that I think you would have found me irresistible, hmm?'

'Quite probably,' she admitted, and believed it was true. 'Although I prefer dark men as a rule.'

'So?' The blue eyes that mirrored her own twinkled with mischief. 'Men as dark as Andrea, perhaps?'

She had not stopped to consider when she spoke, what she could be letting herself in for, but now Georgi was quizzing her with such affectionate amusement, she felt a warm flush of colour in her cheeks, and turned her head away.

'Hardly!' She spoke lightly and laughed as if the idea was quite unthinkable. 'I said dark men, but I didn't specify anyone in particular,

certainly not Andrea! There are a lot of dark handsome men in Greece who I'm sure would be far more easy conquests than your autocratic stepbrother!'

Georgi looked at her for a moment with a frown drawing at his brows, shaking his head slowly. 'You still do not understand Andrea,' he told her, almost accusingly. 'He is not the—the unfeeling man you see him as, my sister. He is strong, that is true, as our father was, but he is also gentle and sensitive. You misjudge him, Michelle, and that makes me sad.'

Lying back with her hands clasped under her head and her fair hair spread on the sand behind her, Michelle considered for a moment just how true that could be. Georgi's hasty defence of him was not always easy for her to accept, and she had to allow that jealousy played some part in her reaction, and probably coloured her opinion of Andrea.

'Maybe you're right,' she conceded after a moment or two. 'I shouldn't judge too hastily when I've-known him such a little time. My trouble is that I so often seem to put my foot in it with Andrea.'

Georgi frowned. 'Put your—*then sas katalaveno*, Michelle! I do not understand you—what is this, put your foot?'

She laughed good-naturedly, as she often did when he tried to cope with colloquial English. 'I always say the wrong thing,' she explained, and recalled the most recent and the most embarrassing occasion that she had said the wrong thing to Andrea. 'For instance, if only you or someone else had told me that Andrea was a widower and not a bachelor, I wouldn't have made such an awful gaffe when he took me to Athens last week.'

He looked interested. 'How so?'

Michelle explained, briefly, exonerating herself as far as possible. 'I practically accused him of marrying off everyone else except

himself—I said he had a cheek to try to marry you off, and—well, never mind; while he was happy to stay a bachelor himself 1 And when he told me about --' She shook her head as the moment came back to her. 'I felt terrible, Georgi.'

'You did not know that he had been married?'

'Of *course* I didn't know, Georgi! How could I?' She sat up suddenly, seeing this as the right moment to broach the subject she had puzzled over for more than a week now. Swinging her hair back and forth a couple of times to shake out the sand, she sat hugging her knees, her bare feet wriggling into the sand. 'I felt awful making such a remark, when he'd lost a wife and baby. But I didn't know—I only wish I had.'

'Perhaps I should have told you.' Georgi trickled sand through his fingers and did not look at her.

'Perhaps you should,' Michelle echoed ruefully. 'I'm so—so incident-prone where Andrea's concerned. For heaven's sake, if there's anything else about him that I'm likely to stumble on accidentally, tell me about it, Georgi, before I make another mistake like that.'

Georgi's blue eyes were brightly curious when he looked up at her, and one brow was cocked in a fair imitation of Andrea's quizzical look, so that she once more realised how much alike they were. Not physically, of course, that was where Georgi was like her, that was his Englishness. But in character he was as Greek as Andrea or Medea and it was something she did not like to admit.

'What did Andrea tell you about his wife?' Georgi asked, and she brought herself hastily back to earth.

'Only that she died in childbirth about twelve years ago—and the baby too.' She turned her head briefly and looked down at him before

resuming her study of the ocean. 'What was she like, Georgi? You must have known her.'

He considered for a moment, seriously. 'A little,' he admitted. 'She was pretty and about twenty years old, I believe. I was no more than ten years old myself, you will understand, I was not so observant of such things.'

She must have been no more than ten years old herself, Michelle realised, when Andrea was already a married man. Hastily, she shook her head to clear it of intrusive and discomfiting thoughts—it was of no possible concern to her what Andrea Davolos's wife had been like, nor how mature he was compared to herself and Georgi.

'I shouldn't ask such—such personal questions,' she told Georgi with a short laugh. 'I'm sorry, Georgi I'

He regarded her for a moment, she knew it even though she did not turn and look at him. 'But you are interested, Michelle, are you not?' he asked, and she turned hastily to deny it, met his eyes and turned as hastily back. He did not wait for her to confirm or deny his suggestion, but went on talking. 'Her name was Litsa, and she came from Athens—but we saw very little of her before Andrea married her, although Papa and Andrea called, of course, and later Andrea used to call upon her, when all was settled.'

A small chilling shiver slid along Michelle's spine, and she knew the answer to her question well enough, even before she asked it. 'Was she—did Andrea— choose her? Did he love her?'

Georgi gave it serious thought for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders lightly, apparently unsure of the answer. 'I think she was very anxious to marry Andrea, and he saw the advantages of such a marriage, for Litsa was an only child and her father was a very wealthy man.'

'And the Davolos fortune *needed* more added to it?' She spoke bitterly, though heaven knew why she was taking it all so much to heart.

'It was a good match,' Georgi assured her, obviously not following her reasoning, 'and they seemed to get along very well together, as I remember. Papa and Andrea were pleased with the outcome, especially when Litsa was having a child.'

His matter-of-factness stunned her for a moment, although she had to admit that Georgi was hardly likely to see things in the same light as she did herself. Her own reaction was to reject such practicalities as unacceptable, but to Georgi, who was as Greek as any of his adopted family, it was the accepted way of things.

She shook her head urgently, ostensibly to remove more sand from her hair, but in reality to dismiss the idea that anyone as passionate as she believed Andrea Davolos could be, would choose a wife for the sake of good reason alone.

'So it was all arranged! Neatly cut and dried! Like you and Natalia!'

Her voice betrayed something of the way she felt, and Georgi was looking at her steadily, his blue eyes regarding her strangely bitter reaction gravely, as if he sought some deeper reason for it. 'Not exactly like Natalia and me, Michelle. I have known Natalia for most of my life, we saw each other as children.'

'But Andrea married a stranger!'

'He was very sad when she died,' Georgi assured her solemnly, 'and the child was a son—it was very distressing for him.'

Michelle looked ahead at the bright, glittering blue of the Aegean, and tried hard to see things as Georgi saw them. 'I don't think I'd ever

understand, Georgi, not if I lived here for a thousand years! It seems so practical, so—so unfeeling.'

'Ah, Michelle!' He sat up beside her and put an arm around her shoulders, so anxious that she should accept the things that he accepted, but unable to realise how hard it was for her. 'Many people—*most* people, marry for love, but if it is possible also to make a good match, is that so bad? To choose carefully; one's life partner is surely not to be condemned —someone who meets with the family's approval.'

'And suppose they *don't* approve, Georgi?'

Perhaps it was unkind to remind him of his own lapse from family approval, and his brief love for Mary Darnley, but it was a point in case, and surely relevant to his argument. He pulled down the Concealing dark glasses again and looked straight out to sea, his arm still about her shoulders.

'It is usually with good cause, Michelle. I would have regretted leaving my home and my family, I know it now, and I am grateful to Andrea for being—firm.'

'Andrea!' Her sigh was deep-and exaggerated. 'Everything on this island seems to revolve around Andrea, doesn't it?'

'But of course.' He seemed surprised that she should ever have doubted it. 'He is Andrea Davolos—the elder son and the head of our family.'

He spoke with as much pride as if he had been born into the family, and in that moment Michelle realised that he would never see himself as anything else, no matter how determinedly he claimed her as his sister. 'Only until you and Natalia marry and have sons, surely,' she guessed with a wry half-smile. 'It will be *your* sons who eventually carry on the name, won't it?'

'Oh, but no!' Georgi looked surprised. 'It will be Andrea's sons. He is not yet thirty-six years old, a man in his prime, my sister, and he will undoubtedly marry again when he finds a suitable wife. Oh no, Michelle, it will be Andrea's sons who inherit Savra and the Davolos tradition, not mine.'

She said nothing for a moment, but in the events of the last week or so she recalled a brief cool, statement made by Andrea while they were lunching in an Athens restaurant, and she smiled a little uneasily, glancing at Georgi from behind the dark lenses of her sunglasses.

'Would it surprise you to know that Andrea has declared his intention of keeping me in mind if he ever considers marrying again?' she asked.

She expected him to share her amusement at the idea, but instead he seemed to be considering it quite seriously, and after a second or two he nodded. 'It would be very suitable,' he decided gravely, 'and I would like very much to have you here for always, Michelle.'

'Georgi!' She stared at him, hardly able to believe he could be serious, and yet there was nothing about him that suggested he was not. 'You—you're not seriously suggesting that—oh no, I don't believe it!'

'Would you not agree?' Georgi asked, obviously surprised at her response, and Michelle shook her head firmly.

'Andrea Davolos is the last man any free-thinking girl would consider marrying!' she told him. 'You certainly don't know me very well yet, Georgi, if you think I'd even think of such a thing!'

He turned his head and regarded her gravely for a moment, pushing the concealing dark lenses up on to his brow again and narrowing his blue eyes thoughtfully. There was a hint of smile on his mouth and the confidence with which he spoke was somehow oddly disturbing.

'But I *do* know Andrea,' he reminded her, 'and if he is considering you for his second wife, then sooner or later you will accept him, my sister! Andrea does not let slip what he has a mind to have!'

'But it was a—a joke! He wasn't serious, he couldn't have been, Georgi, he was just—just paying me back for what I said about him being a bachelor.'

Georgi, she discovered, was not easy to discourage, and his blue eyes gleamed mischievously, while strong even teeth showed whitely in the tanned gold of his face. 'Andrea does not joke either, not about such things as marriage! Be warned, my sister!' He laughed and the arm about her shoulders tightened to a hug as he put his face close to hers. 'Andrea has earmarked you for his bride—there will be no escape for you!'

'Georgi! Will you stop it!' She shrugged away from him, hoping he would not detect the hard, breathless beat of her heart that made her feel strangely lightheaded. 'I've been here exactly two weeks, and even Andrea doesn't make up his mind that quickly!'

He laughed, his eyes watching her, wickedly teasing. 'Do you not know my brother's reputation in the islands, Michelle? Do you not know that no woman is safe from him if he decides she is for him?'

'Georgi!' She took off her own dark glasses and looked at him for a moment with a flush in her cheeks and a glimmer of uncertainty in her eyes. 'I don't believe you for one minute,' she told him, 'but even if I did, I can assure you that unlike—whoever she was, I wouldn't allow myself to be led like a lamb to the slaughter!'

Georgi shook his head, then, still smiling, he flopped back on to the sand again and closed his eyes against the sun, his hands under his head. 'We shall see,' he said. 'Andrea cannot resist a challenge!'

And that, Michelle thought a little wildly, was exactly what Andrea himself had told her. That she was a challenge he found hard to resist. Hugging her knees tightly, she gazed at the glittering surface of the ocean and tried to still a small fluttering sensation in her heart that conjured up Andrea's black depthless eyes, and the stirring timbre of his voice.

Maybe she should not have come to this small exotic paradise at all, maybe she should have stayed where everything was safe and familiar. Safe, but not nearly so exciting, she had to admit, and once more shook her head to dismiss ideas that were discomfiting in their insistence.

Time seemed to have passed so quickly that Michelle could scarcely believe it was getting on for three weeks since she came to Savra. It had all seemed much more strange and uncertain to her then, and she had even thought of leaving within the first week, because it had seemed she would never convince Andrea and his stepmother that she was indeed Georgi's twin.

Thank heaven the uncertainty was over now, and the past few days had been more relaxed for everyone. Even Madame Davolos had seemingly convinced herself that Georgi had simply wanted to see his twin, and had no plans to leave with her when she went home. Michelle could understand her feelings, now that she knew her better, and she knew Madame Davolos trusted her too to induce her beloved son to leave the home he had known for the past twenty years.

The sheer peace and beauty of the island induced a state that amounted almost to lethargy, and blinded her to the passage of time, so that when one day she realised just how long she *had* stayed and thought she should consider leaving before she exhausted her present welcome, she found it unbelievably hard to suggest it.

Sitting with, Georgi in the *salon* one night after dinner, she mentioned it to him and, as she half expected, he frowned his dislike of the idea. 'So soon, Michelle? Must you go so soon?'

'But I've been here for nearly three weeks now, Georgi, and I really think it's time I went home.'

They were not alone in the big *salon*, but it was doubtful if anyone else could hear what they were saying even though they made no attempt to keep their voices down. Georgi, seeking support for his cause, looked across at Medea, then back at Michelle again, an anxious look in his eyes that she found infinitely touching.

'I wish that you would stay longer, Michelle—are you not happy here? Do you not like my country?'

She looked at him for a moment and was more than ever convinced that there was no trace of Englishness left in his. make-up at all. He was one hundred per cent Greek, and those blue eyes and the blond hair that made them look so alike were a mere fluke of nature. She would like to have recognised some other characteristic that made them of the same race, but apart from their similar colouring there was nothing, and it saddened her somehow.

'Of course I like your country, Georgi,' she assured him, 'and your family too, but there's a limit, even to Greek hospitality.'

'Medea!' He called across to his stepsister and, seeing Medea's smile of indulgence, pressed on. 'Medea, will you not help me to persuade Michelle to stay for a little longer with us?'

It was not Medea who answered, however, but Andrea, and his black eyes rested on Michelle with a disturbing steadiness from across the room, narrowed slightly behind the smoke from a thin black cheroot. Relaxed and at ease among his family, he even so had that aura of sensual excitement about him that she found infinitely disturbing, and

the black-eyed gaze was inescapable, steady and fathomless in the yellowness of artificial light.

'Are you not happy here, Michelle?'

The effect of his voice trickled along her spine and she found it easier not to look directly at him, but through the concealing thickness of her lashes. 'I love it here,' she told him, 'but I can't stay for ever, Andrea!'

'No?'

It sounded loaded with meaning, that one softly-spoken word, and instinctively she flicked a swift anxious glance at Medea. Medea's dark eyes, however, showed only gentle inquiry and perhaps a hint of speculation, and Michelle slid the tip of her tongue over her dry lips and laughed a little unsteadily as she shook her head.

'Well, you wouldn't want me as a *permanent* guest, Andrea, and I'm afraid I could all too easily get used to all this sunshine, and the wonderful lazy life I've had for the past three weeks!' -

'Ape- you required to return to your home for any special reason, Michelle?' Medea asked, and she shook her head.

'Not immediately, but --'

It w^{as} quite automatic to glance in Andrea's direction and she Was caught once more in that black-eyed gaze, so that she hastily looked away again. '*Have* you any special reason for returning home at once, Michelle?'

Her heart fluttered anxiously as she tried to find the right answer. She could stay as long as she cared to, as far as her family in England was concerned, but she could not forget Georgi's lighthearted warning the

other day about Andrea's intentions. It was nonsense, of course, and yet there was something about the very idea that was irresistible.

Looking down at her hands in her lap, she shook her head.

'I've no special reason, no.'

'No special——' Large brown hands swept outwards in a descriptive gesture there was no mistaking, and she felt the colour that flushed her cheeks as she glanced up to deny it.

'No one!' she denied swiftly, and Andrea's mouth twitched for a moment into one of those enigmatic half- smiles.

'Then why do you not stay?'

She was not prepared for such a direct invitation from him, and she looked at him for a second with a slightly dazed look in her eyes. Georgi, reaching for her hand, squeezed her fingers and his voice brought her back to earth. 'Michelle?'

Madame Davolos speaking up when she did decided it finally, for it was an invitation she could not resist. 'Michelle, you have perhaps not had such a happy stay as you could have wished,' she said in her firm quiet voice. 'Some of this blame I must take upon myself, but now that is past, will you not stay and give us the opportunity to make amends?'

'Oh, Madame Davolos!' Michelle looked across at her gratefully. It meant a lot, somehow, to be trusted at last by Georgi's doting adoptive mother, and she appreciated the effort of making such an admission of blame in front of her family. 'I'd love to stay on for a while and—thank you!'

Seated next to his stepmother, Andrea caught her eye for a moment and half-smiled, the smoke from his cheroot making a screen in front

of his dark strong face. 'It seems you are more adept at persuasion than I am, Mama,' he told his stepmother, and Pavlos Prasinos greeted the admission with a hoot of laughter.

'Do you say so, Andrea?' he teased him. 'That is something for the record books, hey, Medea?' He too looked across at Michelle, and his plump face beamed good humour as he winked one eye at her.

Medea, it seemed, preferred not to comment on her brother's prowess, but she leaned forward in her chair and smiled. 'In five weeks from now, Michelle, Pavlos and I will be flying to Paris for business reasons, can you not stay until then? We would be pleased to take you with us, and from there to London is not so far, is it?'

'But that is excellent, *agape mou!*' Pavlos applauded his wife's suggestion with another beaming smile. 'And in the meantime we have another guest joining us shortly who might be of—interest, eh?' He caught Medea's eyes and raised his brows meaningly. 'Dale Carter is very handsome and I am sure that Michelle will find him excellent company, hmm?'

A broad wink made it easy enough to follow his meaning, but Medea frowned at him in half-serious reproach, then glanced apologetically at Michelle. 'Pavlos !' She scolded him softly in their own tongue, and Pavlos shifted a little uneasily in his chair and looked at Andrea, but said nothing.

Geerrgi, however, apparently took a different view, for he was frowning. Squeezing her fingers, he shook his head. 'But you do not *need* this handsome Englishman, do you, my sister?' He glanced at Andrea as he said it, his meaning as obvious as Pavlos's but far more embarrassing.

Michelle, despite her embarrassment, did her best to ignore both attempts, and smiled across at Medea. 'I didn't know you had English friends to stay, Medea. It's quite an English invasion, isn't it?'

'Dale Carter is merely a business acquaintance,' Andrea's soft, deep voice informed her, and she felt he was relegating the expected visitor to his proper place. 'I did not know you were bringing him to the island, Pavlos.'

It was obvious that Pavlos had spoken impulsively and had revealed something that he did not yet want his brother-in-law to know, so that for a moment Michelle felt rather sorry for him. Nice, plump, friendly Pavlos was impulsive and outgoing, and certainly no match for Andrea when it came to a battle of wills.

It surprised Michelle to see Medea leap to her husband's defence with all the fierceness of the strong protecting the weak, and she recognised suddenly that Medea was more like Andrea than anyone. She could, on occasion, even outface him, though the occasions were rare, and on the whole she allowed her autocratic brother to rule their island without argument.

'We have invited Dale to stay in our home, Andrea,' she told him, with a hint of his own autocratic coolness, 'because he is also a friend, but you will not see him unless you wish to.'

'I do not propose to see him,' Andrea told her tartly. 'I do not expect to meet business acquaintances in my home—it has never been our way to admit strangers to the island, Medea, as you well know. Since you see DaleCarter in the category of a friend, however——'

'He is!'

'As you will, Medea!'

He added something in his own tongue that made Medea blink and look at him in surprise, and Madame Davolos also appeared startled, glancing briefly at Michelle before frowning at her stepson, though Michelle felt the frown was more curious than angry. Georgi, she noticed had a small and rather discomfiting smile on his face and he winked one eye slowly at her.

It seemed Medea already regretted her brief exchange with her brother, and she pulled a wry face as she got to her feet, smoothing slim hands down over her dress. 'I believe I am very tired,' she said, as if she sought to ex-plain her previous sharpness. 'It would perhaps be a good idea to go to bed and sleep. Pavlos?'

He took her hand as he got to his feet, and squeezed her fingers murmuring something in Greek that was obviously an endearment. Looking down at Michelle he smiled, only a little less broadly than his usual beam; but none of them like crossing Andrea, she thought; 'Goodnight, Michelle; Georgi.' He went with his wife to kiss Madame Davolos and Michelle saw the way the older woman squeezed her stepdaughter's fingers, as if in encouragement and the glance they exchanged when Andrea could not see. '*Kali nikta*, Mama!'

Michelle too was tired. She was not yet accustomed to keeping quite such late hours and she sometimes wished that dinner could have been earlier than the customary ten o'clock at night. She glanced at Georgi and smiled. 'I think I'd better go too,' she told him. 'I'm rather tired.'

She got up from her chair and felt Andrea was watching her again as she smiled down at Georgi. '*Kali nikta*, MicheUe!' Georgi took her face between his hands and kissed her gently, holding her for a moment while his blue eyes searched her face. 'You will stay, as Medea suggests, until she and Pavlos go to Paris?'

'I'd like to.'

He kissed her again, and smiled. 'Then stay, my sister!'

Madame Davolos had urged her to stay too, but she was still uncertain about Andrea and it was purely by instinct that she turned to him as she left Georgi. A cloud of blue smoke rose before his face, half concealing the strong, stern features and the shadow of black lashes hid the expression in his eyes, but as she looked at him she saw the corner of his mouth twitch into a smile.

'Do you wish me to persuade you too, Michelle?' he asked, and a warm thread of laughter added dimension to the deep, soft voice, making her -shiver inwardly at the effect of it.

She blinked-at him for a moment, her brain slightly slowed by the need for sleep, and her blue eyes with a heavy, sleepy look in her flushed face. 'Not—not if you don't mean it, Andrea,' she told him huskily, and gave him no time to answer, but smiled instead at Madame Davolos. 'Goodnight, madame.'

She left a silence in the big room when she left it, and it was only when she was half way up the stairs that she began to wonder if she had not perhaps been too pointedly rude in not saying goodnight to Andrea too. It was too late to go back, but she did not like the way it stayed with her as she undressed and got ready for bed.

She was brushing her hair in front of the dressing- table mirror when she realised that the small gold cross that she wore on a chain around her neck was missing from its chain. She put up a hand and gazed at her reflection in dismay. One of her brothers had given it to her for her birthday a couple of years ago, and she would hate to lose it.

Since she remembered having it when she went down to dinner it was fairly sure to be somewhere in the house, and she stood for a moment wondering if she should wait until morning or go and look for it on the stairs and along the gallery. She raised her head when voices

reached her from the gallery and a moment later she heard doors closing.

At home she would not have hesitated to go there and then to look for the cross, but this was not home, and she could not be certain whether she had heard three bedroom doors close or only two. The more rapid beat of her heart and the slight tension she felt made her less sleepy than before and she stood facing her own reflection for several minutes before she made up her mind.

There was nothing too revealing about her robe, in fact it was almost Victorian in its style, with a high neck, fastened with a bow, and long full sleeves, yet she hesitated a moment behind the closed door, then opened it and slipped out swiftly on bare feet that sank silently into the deep pile carpet. It was not Georgi or Madame Davolos she hesitated to meet, but Andrea, and she hoped, as she made her way along the gallery, looking at the floor as she went, that he too had gone to bed.

She reached the top of the stairs without finding anything, and was about to turn and go back when a large hand thrust itself into her line of vision and brought her swiftly upright with a breathless gasp of surprise. Andrea was leaned against the wall at the very top of the stairs, looking incredibly tall and shiveringly attractive as he watched her with that glimmer of laughter just discernible in the shadow of black lashes.

The little gold cross lay in his palm and he held it out to her as she stared at him, lips parted in surprise and the wide brightness of consternation in her eyes. 'You are looking for this?'

She nodded, reaching for the cross as it lay in his palm, but before she could touch it he closed his hand, his strong fingers enclosing it, and she looked up at him. Her heart was thudding at her ribs and she

licked lips that were suddenly dry, her hand still extended for the cross.

'It's mine, Andrea, I must have dropped it earlier. Please may I have it?'

'Of course!'

She glanced up once more, still puzzled, and yet vaguely aware that this had to do with that snub earlier on. She held her hand palm upwards, and for the first time the all-concealing robe felt flimsy and inadequate as she stood there with him, the black eyes unflinching, challenging, until she put a hand to her throat and shook her head slowly.

'Andrea --'

'I am not accustomed to being snubbed, Michelle, not by anyone.'

Glancing up briefly, she felt the flush of warmth in her cheeks and made no pretence of not knowing what he referred to. 'I'm—I'm sorry, Andrea, I didn't mean to be rude to you, but --'

He glanced behind her along the empty gallery, and she was made aware suddenly of how quiet and still the whole house was around them. He reached out and pressed the little gold cross into her palm, folding her unresponsive fingers over it and holding them there. 'Goodnight, Michelle.'

She opened her mouth to answer him, but found herself suddenly drawn into his arms, slowly but irresistibly, and his hands slid around her, drawing her closer until the hard firm touch of his body sent a shaft of flame through her. His arms wrapped her to him, strong and fierce but oddly gentle too, and his mouth was on hers for a moment, lightly like the promise of a kiss, then hard suddenly and breathtaking, spinning her away from reality and into fantasy.

She clutched the little cross almost desperately tight, her hand against his chest, and the gold pressing into her soft palm. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, she was standing alone and her body felt oddly chilled, as if its source of warmth had been withdrawn. Andrea was standing with his hands thrust into the pockets of his slacks and there was a dark, fathomless look in his eyes, so that she wondered if she had merely dreamed that brief kiss.

'Andrea- --'

Her wide, sleepy eyes looked up at him uncertainly, and he half smiled. One big hand reached out and curved about her cheek and he bent his head once more to brush her lips lightly with his mouth; a gentle but evocative touch that stirred her senses.

'Goodnight,' he whispered, and strode along the gallery to his room.

CHAPTER FIVE

MICHELLE met Dale Carter for the first time when she walked over to the Prasinos villa one morning some time after breakfast: She had quite forgotten that their expected visitor from England had been due to arrive the night before, until she found Medea and Pavlos in the company of a tall, brown-haired man. They were sitting out in the gardens talking, and laughing at the antics of Dimitri who was dressed in a Robin Hood outfit that the visitor had apparently brought for him from England.

After a month on Savra, Michelle felt quite at home there, and lately she had got into the habit of slipping across to the smaller villa to see Medea. Seeing that their visitor had arrived, she was ready to turn back rather than intrude, but then she realised she had been seen and there was nothing to do but carry on and join them.

It was the newcomer who spotted her, a second or two before either of his hosts, and he got to his feet as she emerged from the exotic growth of shrubs that hid the house from the main villa. Pavlos followed suit a moment later and turned to her with his customary beam of welcome, his dark eyes gleaming with friendly warmth and a hint of mischief.

'Michelle!' Pavlos's plump hands urged her forward with extravagant gestures of encouragement. 'Come and meet our friend from England!' He took her hand as she came near enough, squeezing her fingers as if trying to convey a message—a message that she feared she was all too well aware of. 'This is Dale Carter from London—Dale, my friend, this lovely young lady is the twin sister of our dear Georgi—Michelle Dorset!'

He made the introduction with the flamboyance of a circus master, and Michelle could not restrain a smile; it would be impossible not to be affected by Pavlos's exuberance and good humour. Also it was a

heavenly morning and she felt her best in a pretty dress of soft blue cotton shantung, so what better to complete a sense of well-being than to be introduced to a good-looking visitor?

And Dale Carter was undoubtedly good-looking. Light grey eyes in a curiously pale face expressed appreciation when he shook hands, briefly and courteously, and it took her a second or two to realise that her own colouring had been similarly light when she first arrived on the island a month ago. Since then she had become so used to the golden tanned complexions of the Davolos family that she had forgotten how light-skinned her own countrymen could be.

He had light brown hair that could possibly become quite fair after a week or so in the sun, and a high broad forehead which suggested an intellectual rather than a physical man, but he had good looks enough to attract most women and Michelle smiled as she took a seat next to him. He might not have the same stunningly virile attraction that Andrea Davolos had, but he was attractive in a different and very English way.

'Whereabouts are you from, Miss Dorset?'

She brought herself sharply back to earth and smiled. 'Oh, from Surrey; just outside Guildford, actually.'

The brief survey of her sun-tanned features was just long enough to be appreciative but not long enough to give offence, and Dale Carter smiled. 'You've acquired a marvellous tan since you came to Greece—it evidently suits you.'

'Oh, it does!' Her blue eyes shone enthusiastically. 'It's a wonderful place—I adore it!'

Once more that momentary scrutiny led to a smile. 'Not so much that you're thinking of deserting the old country, I hope!'

Michelle caught Pavlos's brief but telling glance at his wife, and only just prevented herself from frowning. She liked the newcomer well enough on first acquaintance, but, seeing that meaningful glance, she was reminded of Pavlos's broad hints when he had first mentioned Dale Carter's expected arrival, a week ago, and she disliked having him hurry matters along with such indecent haste.

Matchmaking seemed to be a favourite occupation of the Davolos family that even their in-laws indulged in, and she found it curiously inhibiting. What startled her most was to realise how she was, almost unconsciously, comparing Dale Carter's very Anglo-Saxon good looks with the more darkly brooding sensuality of Andrea Davolos, and she gave herself a hasty mental shake when she realised.

Dimitri came running to show her his new game, and she gave him her attention thankfully. His small thin face always looked more animated and childlike when he was involved in purely childish pastimes, and it brought home to her once again just how lacking he was in company of his own age.

He was a lonely child rather than a naughty one as his two uncles seemed to think, and it was not the first time that she felt sorry for Dimitri in this childless paradise. He did not even have the normal child's opportunity of making school friends, for he had a tutor instead and, knowing him as she did now, it was easier to understand why he seemed so curiously adult when she first met him.

She admired the Lincoln green suit with its feathered cap, and the bow and quiver of arrows that went with it, but could not help noticing how curiously alien the familiar costume seemed in this exotic setting. 'Do we call you Robin now, instead of Pondik6s?' she teased, and Dimitri looked puzzled.

'I am still Pondik6s,' he insisted. 'Am I not, Mamd?'

Medea smilingly agreed, but Dale Carter drew the boy to him and adjusted the green feathered cap to a more jaunty angle. 'You'll soon be too big to call a mouse, won't you?' he asked.

'Is that what it means?' Michelle laughed at her own- lack of knowledge. 'I never knew! I've been here for a month now, and I've never thought of asking what *Pondikos* means—I simply thought it was a nickname with no special meaning.'

'It's Greek for mouse,' Dale Carter assured her, and smiled directly at her for the first time. 'It's not derogatory in this instance—just affectionate.'

'It was Mama who called him so first,' Medea told her, drawing her son to stand beside her. 'Dimitri was such a tiny, delicate baby and he looked so like a little *pondikos* sometimes that we used it more often than his own name when he was very young.'

'It's rather cute.' Michelle looked at Dale Carter with undisguised curiosity. 'You speak Greek, Mr Carter?'

'A little—I meet a lot of people in my business and I find a smattering helps.'

His deprecating answer brought a guffaw of laughter from "Pavlos" and he was shaking his head, waving one hand to deny the smattering as an understatement. 'You are too modest, my friend Dale! His Greek is very good, Michelle, so much so that we can converse with him in our own tongue! Is this a smattering?'

'And I don't speak a word of it, even after a month here,' Michelle confessed, 'Everyone here speaks such good English that I haven't had to make an effort.'

'Oh, but one or two words, Michelle, surely,' Medea hastened to claim loyally, and Michelle smiled at her ruefully.

'One or two words,' she echoed. 'Easy things like good morning and goodnight, but you couldn't converse jvith *me* in your own tongue, Medea, could you?'

'One wouldn't expect to learn in such a short time, Miss Dorset. I spent three years studying it, so you wouldn't expect to know more than a few words in a month.' Dale, Carter's smile encouraged her, and once more she caught that swift meaningful glance that Pavlos sent his wife.

'You would help to improve the good beginning, eh, my friend?' he asked, and the smile Dale Carter gave her apologised for the heavy-handed efforts of his host, but at the same time did not dismiss the idea but of hand.

'I'd be pleased to do anything I can to help,' he said, 'but with a Greek twin brother I can't imagine there's much call for *my* services as a teacher!'

It was almost as if Georgi made his entrance on cue, and Pavlos beamed his usual welcome, his exuberant greeting sounding incredibly raucous on the still morning air, so that Michelle wondered if he ever did anything quietly and discreetly. It was impossible not to like him, but he was as boisterous as a schoolboy sometimes, and not at all like his more sober relatives. Medea adored him, and for the first time Michelle Wondered if their marriage too had been arranged, or if Medea had followed her own inclinations.

'Hey! Georgi, *kalimera, kalimera*.'

Georgi accepted his brother-in-law's enthusiasm with a tolerant smile and came across to shake hands with Dale Carter, whom he had apparently met before since no introduction was made. He turned to Michelle, perching himself on the arm of her chair and putting the

now familiarly possessive arm about her shoulders, and Dale Carter noted the gesture with a nod.'

'You and your sister are very much alike, Ki'rie Georgi.'

The formality of the address surprised her at first, until it occurred to her that Georgi would almost certainly follow Andrea's example and dislike having business men visiting his home. Not since her own first few minutes on the island had she come across the strictly - formal side of Georgi's character, and he seemed very much a Davolos suddenly, accepting the deference due to him as a matter of course. Not Mr Davolos, naturally because Andrea was the head of the family, but Mr .Georgi, the second in line.

Pavlos's manner suggested defiance and it was in his dark eyes also, when he looked at his brother-in-law. 'You are here to welcome our guest, Georgi?' he asked, although it was certain he did not for a minute believe it.

The arm about Michelle's shoulders tightened fractionally, and Georgi smiled down at her without committing himself to a welcome. 'I am here to remind Michelle that she has a date to go swimming this morning,' he said. 'Are you ready to go, my sister?'

It was news to Michelle that she had made a date to go swimming with him, but she hesitated to say so in frprrt-of the others. Instead she got to her feet looking rather bemused. 'I'm ready when you are, Georgi.' Smiling at Dale Carter, she held out a hand. 'I'm sorry to rush off so suddenly, Mr Carter, but maybe I'll see you again before you go.'

He nodded, taking her hand and retaining his hold just a fraction longer than was necessary, while Georgi still kept his arm about her. 'I hope so, Miss Dorset; I shall be here about two weeks, so it's quite likely we'll bump into one another again.'

She saw the swift frown on Georgi's face, as if the proposed length of the visitor's stay was greater than he expected, and he glanced at Pavlos quickly. He spoke to him in Greek, quietly and rapidly, either unaware or forgetful of the fact that the visitor could follow what was said.

Pavlos had no time to reply for Dale Carter spoke first, speaking in English, but smiling ironically at Georgi's brief discomfiture. 'I hope your brother doesn't take *too* much exception to my spending two weeks here with my friends, Kirie Georgi. I speak a little Greek,' he added mildly, 'I thought you knew.'

Georgi's arm about her shoulders felt taut, and she could sense the sudden tensing of his muscles, when he resented the reminder, his arm dropping from her shoulders suddenly. As he looked directly at Dale Carter his blond head had the same arrogant poise she had seen so often in Andrea, and she felt a curious thrill of pride when she looked at him.

Then he inclined his head in a ^lightly stiff little bow of apology; 'I apologise if I have offended you, Mr Carter—I had forgotten that you speak our language.'

'Oh, I'm not offended.' Dale Carter was smiling faintly, as if he knew exactly what was going on. 'But please assure your brother that I'm here as the guest of my very good friend Pavlos, and not in my capacity of a business man. I certainly have no intention of intruding upon his privacy.'

Once more Georgi inclined his head in that incredibly formal little bow. 'As a friend of Medea and Pavlos I am sure you will be made welcome, *kirie*.' Another brief nod seemed to indicate that he considered the conversation closed, and he once more put his arm about Michelle's shoulders, smiling across at his sister. 'We will not be seeing you and Pavlos for lunch today, of course, Medea?'

It was as good as saying that Dale Carter was not invited, nor likely to be, Michelle thought, and wondered what happened to Greek hospitality in Dale Carter's case. Medea accepted the fact with a solemn inclination of her head, and Georgi shrugged lightly as he turned again to Michelle.

'Will you now go for your swim, Michelle?' he asked, and she nodded, feeling slightly dazed by the events of the past few minutes.

'Why not?' she said.

Georgi stood looking at her with a hint of laughter in his eyes when she came downstairs again, and Michelle frowned at him, puzzled and not altogether happy about what could be amusing him. The blue shantung dress now covered a swimsuit, although she was quite sure she had not arranged anything with him, and she eyed him suspiciously as he took her hand.

'I *didn't* promise to go swimming with you this morning, did I?' she asked, and he laughed.

'No,' he agreed quite readily. 'But this is Sunday, and it is a lovely time for a swim—also you have changed into your costume quite happily, have you not? You did not deny this date you have!'

'Only because I didn't want to make you out a liar!' she retorted. 'What's the matter with you, Georgi? Have you got something against Mr Carter?'

He shrugged lightly, and his answer was evasive, she felt. 'Only that he is—in the way.'

'In the way?'

He chose to ignore the question and asked one of his own instead. 'Do you not wish to go swimming?'

'Yes, of course I do, but I don't expect you to come rounding me up like a lost sheep. Why was it so important to get me away?' She gave him no time to answer, but spoke the question that came into her mind suddenly. 'Andrea isn't trying to stop us fraternising with the unwelcome English visitor, is he?'

'Andrea did not know where you were or he might have come for you himself,' Georgi informed her blandly, and she stared at him.

When they walked outside into the sunshine, the sudden dazzling change of light made her reach hastily for her sun-glasses. 'I think you're letting your imagination run away with you,' she told him as he made a way for her through the thick growing oleanders to the road. 'Andrea's unlikely to bother his head about where *I* am, and he certainly wouldn't object to my calling on Medea, I've been doing it for a couple of weeks now without anything being said.'

Georgi turned and looked at her over his shoulder, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief. 'Ah, but then the handsome Mr Dale Carter was not there!'

'Oh, Georgi, for heaven's sake!' She glared in exasperation at his unconscious back, and felt suddenly as if she was in some kind of exotic trap. 'Everyone on this island seems preoccupied with matchmaking,' she complained. 'Pavlos seems determined to make me fall for his good-looking English friend, you seem equally set on marrying me off to Andrea, and Andrea—well, heaven alone knows what he has in mind for me, but he assured me it would be easy to find me a husband! Don't you people ever think of anything else but organising each other's marriages?'

They were walking through the shadowy tall plumes of cypress, and Georgi took her hand again, smiling down at her with affectionate tolerance. 'Is it so bad to wish to see our loved ones happily married to

suitable partners?' he asked. 'We wish everyone to find love and happiness, my sister, is that so bad of us?'

'Not bad, no, it's rather nice that you care so much, but --'

She broke off when they emerged from the shadows with startling suddenness into the dazzle of white sand and the silky blue shine of the Aegean, and her legs were strangely weak suddenly when she caught sight of the lone figure at the water's edge. At that point, had she been alone, she would have turned and gone back the way she came, hoping to remain unseen, but Georgi's fingers held hers tightly and his smile when he looked down at her had a glint of triumph in it.

'Georgi!' Her eyes reproached him, but he was unrepentant, she could see that, and there was nothing to do but follow him, as he led her like a lamb to the slaughter, to where his brother was.

Andrea stood thigh-deep in the glistening water and he turned as they approached, his eyes narrowing slightly for a second, as if the sight of her surprised him, flicking his black gaze between her and Georgi. His hair had the glossy blackness of a raven's wing, and there was a taut, exciting suggestion of authority about him even dressed as he was, in the briefest of swimming trunks.

She had never before been quite so aware of him as she was at that moment, tall and lean with his powerful arms Mid shoulders rippling smoothly when he put his hands to his hips as he stood looking at them for a moment before he spoke.

'Georgi,' he said, 'should you not have left for the mainland by now?'

Michelle turned swiftly, fully understanding at last, and met her brother's bright, amused gaze with a quick frown. 'You tricked me,' she accused, trying to keep her voice low in the hope that Andrea would not hear. 'You'd no intention of swimming with me, had you, Georgi?' She felt herself caged between the two of them and

uncertain what to do next. 'Oh, you just don't stop at anything, do you?'

'But you wanted to swim, Michelle!' He indicated the ocean behind her with an extravagant hand, and the tall, disturbing figure of Andrea who, as yet, had made no other move. 'Andrea will enjoy your company, and I am sure you will enjoy being with him more than with the Englishman.'

'*You're* an Englishman!' She flung the challenge at him in desperation, but Georgi merely laughed and reached out with one hand to stroke her flushed cheek soothingly.

'*Oh*, my sister, I am Greek!'

'And you don't mind offering me to the husband *you* want me to have, whether I want it or not, do you?'

'Ah, Michelle, *ligho athelfi mou*, would I be so cruel?' He bent swiftly and kissed her cheek. 'I must leave you, my little sister, I have to visit my fiancée on the mainland!'

'And leave me here with Andrea?'

He glanced at his stepbrother with a raised brow, and laughed. 'There are much worse fates, my sister— *adio!* Enjoy your swim!'

His laughter made a mockery of her hesitation as she stood and watched him until he disappeared from sight among the shadowy cypresses once more. It was so quiet; so tranquil and so lovely, and behind her the ocean lapped gently and lazily on the white sandy beach, silkily soft and inviting.

Inviting too, though in a much more disturbing way, was the tall bronzed figure who watched her from the water, like the god Poseidon might have watched Thetis. She turned at last and looked at

him, meeting the black eyes only briefly, and he neither smiled nor frowned, only waited patiently to see what she would do.

'Are you coming in, Michelle?'

She hesitated for only a moment. She was quite capable, she told herself, of taking care of herself even with someone like Andrea Davolos, but she nodded her head, almost without realising she was doing it. With an upward sweep of her arms she pulled the blue dress off over her head, tossing back her hair from her face as she stepped out of her sandals.

The brief white bikini she wore seemed much more revealing-than usual with those steady black eyes watching her, and she walked with an unconsciously provocative grace down to the water, once again swinging back her hair from her face.

'You can swim?'

The soft-voiced question reminded her that even after a month he did not know that much about her. She had swum with Georgi, often, and in the pool with Medea and Dimitri, but she had never before shared such an occasion with Andrea, and she felt strangely shy of him suddenly. Her laugh when she answered him had a husky and slightly unsteady sound that fluttered out after a second.

'Not expertly—Georgi always manages to leave me standing—he's very good.'

A slight nod admitted Georgi's prowess, and she wondered how much better he was himself. When he reached out a hand to her she put her own into it, allowing herself to be drawn further into the water until it lapped about her, almost as high as her hips.

By silent consent they slid away into the silky smooth ocean, their bodies cleaving creamy echelons through 'the blue water, side by

side. Across the narrow distance that separated them she caught the black eyes watching for her each time his head turned and the long powerful arms swept up and over, glistening like bronze in the sun, and her heart felt incredibly light suddenly.

It was only when she found it impossible to keep up the pace any longer that either of them paused, and Andrea's eyes narrowed as he looked at her. 'You are all right, Michelle?'

She smiled to reassure him, and tossed back her hair. 'I'm fine, but I can't keep up the pace! You go on, Andrea, I'll swim back to the beach.'

'You will wait?'

The question was unexpected, and she took a moment or two to consider, then she nodded. 'I'll wait,' she promised, and dived down out of sight for a moment while she turned, hiding the flush in her cheeks.

When she got back to the beach all she could see of Andrea was a distant black dot, but all the time she dried and dressed again she kept him in sight. Even if she had not promised to wait, she thought, she would probably have done so, for the temptation was there, too much to resist.

He had not taken it for granted that she would want to wait for him, and somehow that pleased her. There was a curious suggestion of intimacy about the situation that she did not fully understand, but she felt a kind of warm contentment as she sat hugging her knees, and watching Andrea's gleaming black head coming slowly nearer all the time.

She had not put on her sun-glasses again when she dressed, so that when she looked up at him as he came ashore she could not help narrowing her eyes against the dazzle. Dropping down beside her, he

ran his hands through his hair, his arms glistening with salt water, then he glanced down at the sun-glasses lying between them on the sand. With one finger he traced a tiny line at the corner of one eye, where the sun had made her squint against its dazzle, and she felt the fluttering response of her pulse when he touched her.

'You should put on sun-glasses,' he told her, 'you will ruin those lovely eyes, *ligho ena*.'

Picking up the sun-glasses, he offered them to her, but before she could take them, they slipped from his wet fingers and dropped back on to the sand between them. With the same intent in mind, their two hands reached down swiftly, with Andrea just a fraction slower, so that instead of the elusive sun-glasses, his hand covered hers.

Michelle caught her breath involuntarily. Glancing up, her eyes had a wide and slightly dazed look while her pulses raced hard and fast as the long strong fingers closed over hers. His black eyes gleaming darkly, he held her uncertain gaze for a breathless second before they came even closer, his face and head blocking the brilliance of the sun as he leaned over her.

His hands on her shoulders pressed her downwards until she was cradled in the warmth of the sand and his mouth, light and searching at first, became firm and hard suddenly, like the broad chest that pinned her firmly to the shifting sand, and for a few dizzying seconds Michelle scarcely seemed to breathe.

The breathless excitement of Andrea's kiss was like nothing she had ever known before. Even that brief kiss, when she went searching for her missing gold cross, had not prepared her for this, and the hard strength of his body, the big gentle hands that held her so firmly where he wanted her, were a dizzying experience, new to her. Her hands slid over the smooth dampness of bronzed shoulders, his skin

like fire to her touch, her fingers stroking and smoothing, like someone in a dream—a dream she was reluctant to awake from.

When she opened her eyes at last it was to find herself looking directly up into the darkly passionate face of a stranger, and she felt the first shivering tremor of uncertainty. Her mouth trembled, tingling and warm from his kiss, and the soft skin of her arms and shoulders was damp with salt water.

She neither moved nor spoke for several seconds, but looked up in a kind of hazy disbelief at the strong, dark face that hovered above her. Bending his head once more, Andrea lightly kissed her forehead, and her eyes briefly closed at the caressing touch of his mouth.

'Michelle --'

The rest of what he said was in Greek and it sounded incredibly beautiful spoken in that wonderful voice that stroked like a caressing hand along her spine, even though she could not understand the words he said. She shook her head without in the least knowing why she was doing it, and he drew back after a second or two, taking her hands in his and helping her to sit up, watching her with that black, intense gaze until she hastily looked away.

Her heart was beating so hard and fast that she could hear it, like a drum pounding in her ears and, venturing an upward glance, she sought the truth in his face. 'Did—did you know that Georgi was going to bring me here, Andrea?' she asked, and the shivering unsteadiness of her voice dismayed her.

He got to his feet and reached for a towel in the same swift, easy movement, his long shadow falling across her, looking down at her while he removed sand and salt water with hard, vigorous use of the towel. He said nothing for a moment, then she thought she caught a

glimpse of a smile that just touched his mouth and briefly softened its firm straightness.

'I am not flattered, *pethi mou*, that you think I need my brother to—procure young women for me!'

'Oh no, Andrea, I didn't think --'

His wording, his bluntness startled her, but he was of no mind to be interrupted, and he went on as if she had not tried to make her protest. 'Why Georgi brought you here when he would not be staying is something I can only guess at, but no doubt you will raise the matter with him as soon as he returns from the mainland!'

'Oh, I *know* why he brought me here!'

Andrea paused, his eyes half concealed by thick black lashes but disturbing nevertheless. 'Then I wish you would enlighten me, Michelle, since you seem to be in his confidence and came with him quite willingly!'

'Oh, but you don't understand at all!' She shook her head earnestly, horrified to think that he saw her as Georgi's accomplice in his efforts to bring them together. 'I—I didn't *know* he wouldn't be staying himself, he didn't tell me that!'

He still held her gaze and it was difficult to think clearly when she remembered the way he had kissed her only moments before. 'If you did not know he meant to bring you here to swim and then leave you, how can you be sure what was in his mind, *pethi*?'

She felt dismayingly small and helpless, sitting there on the sand while he towered over her, and she got to her feet a little unsteadily, brushing sand from her dress, her cheeks flushed when she found it clinging and damp over the soft curves above her waist.

She could not simply stand there where she could see him, for she was still far too aware of him, of the strength and sensual vigour of him, and she wanted to think clearly. Walking off a few paces, she stood at the water's edge with her back to him and looked instead at the ocean, her eyes narrowed because the sun-glasses still lay somewhere on the sand—forgotten.

'Michelle?'

She lifted her shoulders uneasily, trying to think of words that would explain Georgi's plans for them both, without giving the impression that she in any way went along with them. Since she had stayed and gone swimming with him, he might be even harder to convince.

'Georgi—Georgi has the ludicrous idea that he wants —that --' It was no use, she could not put it into words, not to Andrea, and she bit her lip anxiously when she heard him move behind her.

His hands rested on her shoulders for a second before he turned her round to face him, and she registered a little hazily that he was dressed again, in dark slacks and a shirt of such dazzling whiteness that it seemed to cast a reflected light up into his dark features. One hand raised her chin gently and she thought he was half smiling in the way he so often did.

'Georgi is what you call turning the tables, is that what you are trying to tell me, Michelle? He wishes to see me marry again and he would like it to be you that I marry, is that his plan?'

Once again his frankness startled her, and she felt the colour that flooded into her face as she tried to avoid the hand under her chin. 'I—I told you it was ludicrous,' she reminded him breathlessly, but Andrea said nothing for a moment, only stood studying her face with that inscrutable gaze.

Then he bent his dark head and pressed his mouth to hers in a ghost of that head-spinning kiss earlier, looking down into her face for a second before he let her go, and she thought she had never seen him so unbelievably gentle. Without speaking, he took her hand in his, holding it while he bent and picked up the towels and her sun-glasses, handing her the latter with a slight tilt of one black brow.

'Do you find it so ludicrous, Michelle?' he asked, and without giving her time to answer, led her across the beach to the shadow of the cypresses, and the road back to the villa.

CHAPTER SIX

MICHELLE found it difficult to be sure exactly what Andrea's true reaction was to Georgi's determined efforts to pair them off. When he had spoken of it so frankly to her on the beach that day, he had given the impression that he found it less unlikely than she did herself, and yet she could not believe he found the idea acceptable.

Nevertheless, with the idea of avoiding another such disconcerting incident, she had taken care to, avoid being alone with him again during the past week or more. He made her feel more shy and uneasy than any man had done before, and she was not happy about it—avoiding him, she felt, was the best solution.

There was no shortage of opportunities to enjoy herself and she made the most of them. She could swim and sail with Georgi on the days he was not working, and she had visited Marathon with Dale Carter, as well as swimming and sunbathing with him by the pool. She found him good company, and he was a much less demanding companion than the volatile Davoloses, though, she had to admit, less exciting too.

Several times, when she found herself comparing him with Andrea, she pulled herself up sharply, but it was discomfiting to realise just how often it happened. Georgi made no secret of the fact that he did not like her being with Dale, but she simply laughed at his objections, telling him that she was perfectly free to make her own friends. Dale Carter, she felt, helped to keep her feet firmly on the ground. Her friendship with Medea continued too, and they had paid a couple of visits to Athens to replenish Michelle's wardrobe, an extravagance they both enjoyed enormously, although in the privacy of her room she had been stunned to discover just how much she had spent.

The sophisticated versions of traditional Greek styles sold in some of the smarter boutiques so suited her that she bought several, including

one or two long dresses. Made in the classic, softly draped styles, they had Georgi in raptures of enthusiasm, and brought a dark gleam of appreciation to Andrea's black eyes whenever she wore them to dinner, so that she felt both the effort and the expense had been worthwhile.

Now that everyone accepted without reservation her status as Georgi's twin sister, she found Natalia Palides more readily receptive during the couple of brief visits she made to the island, although she was still a quiet and rather shrinking partner for someone of Georgi's extrovert nature, she felt, and said as much to Medea.

Medea smiled, her gentle and resigned smile, and shrugged her elegant shoulders. 'Natalia is not the bright, happy bride I would have wished for our brother,' she admitted, reluctantly Michelle guessed, 'but she is a—sweet girl, Michelle, and I do wish Georgi would show more affection for her.'

'Maybe it's because he's been forced into becoming engaged to her,' Michelle suggested, and watched Medea's face for signs of confirmation.

Instead she shook her head and frowned. 'No, you are mistaken, for he loved Natalia dearly until --'

Dark eyes flicked a swift glance from below shadowing lashes. 'You know of the English girl?' she asked, and Michelle nodded.

'Majry Darnley? Yes, Georgi told me about her, Medea. When I first came here he thought—he had the idea that you all thought I was Mary Darnley, and if you did, it explained quite a lot.'

Medea met her eyes with a frankness that was disarming, and smiled ruefully. 'Andrea was more certain than Pavlos and I, but most of all Mama was convinced that you had come to take Georgi away from his home and his family.' Her eyes asked for understanding of her

stepmother and she shook her head to deny arty suggestion of unreasonable prejudice. 'Georgi is Mama's whole world, Michelle. You would perhaps not understand how she felt, but when we first heard about you; that Georgi was thinking of going to England to see you and—we did not know for certain, you see.'

'And you really thought Georgi would be—*could* be so devious?'

Medea's shaking head lacked certainty, but her eyes had that irresistible appeal still: 'It was so hard to decide, Michelle. If Georgi had gone—Mama --'

Michelle nodded. 'Yes, I think I understand how she felt, although I couldn't make sense of the—the antagonism when I first arrived here.' She sighed in genuine relief. 'Well, thank heaven that's all over now, and you *know* I'm Michelle Dorset and not Mary Darnley.' She thought for a moment about Georgi's assurances that he no longer loved the English girl he met in Athens, and remembered the way he spoke of her. 'Medea—did Georgi *really* get over her, do you think?'

Medea took a moment or two to reply, and while she watched her dark, thoughtful face, Michelle felt her heart begin to thud hard at her side. Suppose Georgi still loved Mary Darnley and it had simply been pressure from Andrea that made him give her up? He had denied it when he spoke to her, but he was loyal to Andrea before anything else, and she trembled to think of it being true, as Medea's hesitation seemed to suggest it might be.

'I think it is all over between them,' Medea said at last. 'But—she was so different from Natalia, you see. So bright and—and golden, like Georgi himself. I think perhaps he misses that—brightness in Natalia.'

Michelle was looking at her curiously. Georgi had said that none of the family ever saw Mary Darnley and yet Medea was speaking as if

she knew her, at least by sight. If she did it would account for why she had so much more readily accepted her as Georgi's twin.

'Did you know her, Medea? Did you ever see her?'

The dark eyes were hidden for a moment by lowered lashes. 'I did not know her, but I was the one that Georgi talked to—you understand? He told me everything about the girl and about how he felt for her—he sought my advice.'

She did not want to believe it, but she had to know for sure. 'Was it you who talked him into giving her up, Medea?'

The denial was much more firm this time. 'I could not carry such a responsibility alone,' she said, 'so I spoke to Pavlos. He forbade me to have anything to say on the matter at all, and to leave it to Andrea—and so, of course, I did as he said.'

It was not easy to visualise Pavlos, plump amiable Pavlos, laying down the law to the extent of forbidding his beloved Medea anything, but she supposed that even he, when it came down to it, was as traditionally Greek as any of them, and his word was law in his own house. He would be unwilling to let Medea act in direct opposition to his formidable brother-in-law, of course, and Medea would be happier not to do so.

'So it was left to Andrea,' she said, 'who put his foot down on the romance without even considering Georgi's feelings.'

'Oh no, Michelle!'

It was amazing, she thought, how they all came to his defence, even those who had the most reason to blame him, like Georgi, and she pulled a wry face and laughed. 'I should have known better, than to criticise Andrea, shouldn't I?'

Medea was looking vaguely uneasy, trying to understand why their close, unquestioning loyalty to one another should seem Unacceptable to her. 'If you knew Andrea better, Michelle, you would see that he is a wise man as well as a strong one. This—feeling that Georgi had for the English girl was no more than a passing fancy and he would have regretted not staying with Natalia, whom he loves. It was necessary to appear —ruthless, is the word I mean?—in order to prevent him taking a step that would have lost him to us and broken Mamd's heart.'

'You don't think it broke Georgi's heart?'

The jibe was irresistible, but Medea seemed not to take it amiss, and she shook her head as if she was quite sure of what she said. 'Oh, Michelle, does Georgi seem to you like a young man with a broken heart?'

'I suppose not—but then I'm not an expert!.'

'He and Natalia are well suited in almost every way, and I am sure they will be happy in their marriage.' There was something reminiscent of Georgi in the way she glanced at her before she spoke, as if weighing up her reaction to what she was about to say. 'Did you know that the marriage is to take place in four weeks' time, so that you can see Georgi married before you leave, Michelle?'

Michelle stared, so startled by the unexpectedness of it that she could not really have said what her true reaction was. Next year, Georgi had said, and now Medea was telling her it was to be in four weeks' time. 'It—it seems so—soon.'

'We have postponed our business in Paris for a week, so that we can all be here,' Medea went on, apparently quite excited by the prospect. 'You will wish to see Georgi's marriage, will you not?'

'Oh, yes—yes, of course!'

If only she could be sure, she thought, whether Georgi was so happy about being rushed into marriage or if, as seemed likely, he was simply going along with what was planned for him. One way was to ask Georgi himself, of course, but since he had not said anything to her about it maybe even he did not know yet.

Whatever happened, she felt she must, make it her Business to see that he was not forced into something he was likely to regret for the rest of his life. No matter how often the Davolos family, and Georgi himself, claimed that he was Greek, and had no existence except as one of them, he was still her twin brother, and she could not stand by and see him made to do something he did not want to do.

It was one of Georgi's working days and the little aircraft that was used to fly Pavlos and Andrea to the Athens office had long since gone, so that Michelle fully expected to find the villa quiet,, and only Madame Davolos about at that hour of the day. That was why she stared in surprise when she opened the door of the *salon* and found Andrea there.

He was reading a letter, standing with one elbow resting on the high marble mantel, and a thumb and forefinger pulling thoughtfully at his lower lip, and he seemed not to notice her at first. Then he looked up suddenly and eyed her curiously, a hint of smile on his mouth, as if he knew all about the efforts she had made lately to avoid him.

Her heart was thudding heavily, and she almost. turned and went out again, but it was not so easy now that he had seen her, and she hesitated instead in the doorway. She seldom saw him or Georgi on the days that they worked, and she had not expected to today, his being there was disconcerting and unexpected.

'*Kalimira*, Michelle!'

It was his habit now to greet her in his own tongue, and she murmured an answer as she stood for a second, undecided whether to stay. The decision was made for her a moment later, when a large and vaguely impatient hand waved her further into the room, a command she obeyed instinctively.

'Come in, *pethi*,' he invited, and there was a hint of laughter in his eyes as he watched her cross the room. 'I promise I will not bite you I'

Colour flushed her cheeks and she felt a swift flick of resentment at his teasing her, when they both knew full well what was behind his remark. He could not have done other than realise how and why she had been avoiding him, and she hated the idea of him finding her evasion amusing.

'I expected to find Madame Davolos in here,' she explained, and he shrugged.

'Mama is busy at the desk in her study—she has quite a lot of writing to do.'

'Sending out invitations for Georgi's wedding?' She spoke in haste and left her opinion in no doubt, so that Andrea looked up sharply. 'I've just learned about it from Medea,' she told him. 'Does Georgi know he's to be married in four weeks time?'

'Of course he does, you silly child—what kind of people do you think we are?'

'Sometimes I wonder!' The brusque rebuke was as much to blame for her flush of resentment as any fears she had that Georgi was being pressured into marrying Natalia, and she objected strongly to being called a child in that patronising way. 'Why are you in such a hurry, Andrea? You can't still think I'm a danger to your plans for him, surely?'

There was a deep and infinitely disturbing glitter in his eyes, but he spoke quietly still and his voice was steady and controlled, though she doubted if the man himself was as cool as he appeared. 'You never were a danger to any plans of mine, Michelle. I wanted you here, it is true, where I could judge you for myself, but having seen you I knew that you were not Georgi's lover and I simply dismissed you as a threat to his marriage to Natalia.'

She was trembling like a leaf, and she could not truthfully have said why she was so angry, although she was certain it was not entirely on Georgi's account. Perhaps it had more to do with that almost scornful dismissal of her, and his obvious contempt for her as a threat.

'If that's true,' she said, 'why did you treat him as if he was a prisoner when he wanted to take me out in the first instance? And when he wanted to come to England to see me you stopped him—you always keep a tight rein on him, don't you, Andrea? You treat him as if he has no mind of his own, and he *has*. He's English and --'

'*Ftani pya!* That will do!' His voice cut her short and it was no longer quiet and soft as she was used to hearing it, but hard and angry like the bright glitter in his eyes so that she felt herself trembling. 'You speak without knowledge of what you are saying—express opinions on something you know nothing about!'

He moved from his place by the mantel and stood instead, by the open windows, a tall vibrant figure that was somehow menacing in its brooding anger. She had seldom felt so disturbed by another's mood, and yet she could not explain what it was that disturbed her so much as she looked across at his broad, unresponsive back with a curious sense of anticipation.

When he spoke he did so without turning round. 'You think because Georgi has not told you of the wedding date that it has been arranged without his knowledge or consent?'

'I—I'm sure he'd have told me if he knew.'

She wished he would turn and look at her so that she could at least see his face and try to guess what was going on in his mind as he questioned her. But he kept his back to her, and there was a dismaying suggestion of relentlessness in its straight, stern posture.

'Have you seen Georgi this morning?'

Michelle shook her head, realised he could not see it and hastened to make a verbal reply. 'No—no, I seldom do on working days, I have breakfast later than you and Georgi as a rule.'

The raven-black head nodded, as if to drive home some point he was making. 'And you returned from a walk with Dale Carter to go straight to your room last night, did you riot?'

It was beginning to dawn on her at last just what he was trying to tell her, and she flicked the tip of her tongue over her lips as she realised what must have happened, when that important family decision must have been made. 'I—it was fairly late when we got back, and you were all in here, talking. You seemed—engrossed in something and I didn't like to --'

He turned at last, swinging round swiftly and suddenly, his black eyes fixed on her like glowing jet. 'Exactly!' he said, soft-voiced.

Michelle hastily lowered her gaze. Her heart was thudding painfully hard and she spread her hands in a curiously appealing gesture, the palms uppermost. 'I—I didn't know, Andrea.'

For a moment he did not speak, but he studied her narrowly with his face shadowed, away from the light outside, then he shook his head slowly. 'How often have you said that to me, Michelle *ligho ena?*' he asked, and she raised her eyes at last and looked at him.

'I'm—I'm sorry, Andrea. I know,' she added hastily, 'I know I've said that before too, but—' Her shrug was neither careless nor despairing, but simply resigned to something inevitable. 'I just always seem to do and say the wrong thing where you're concerned, I don't know why it should be.'

'You think I am to blame for that?' The question was not seriously asked, she felt sure, but she hastened to deny it for all that. 'Oh no, of course you're not! It's just that --'

She had not realised even that he had moved from the window, but he was in front of her suddenly and regarding her with a half-amused, half-resigned expression that she was uncertain what to do about. His hand lifted her chin, the long fingers firmly insistent, and he held her for a second or two before he spoke.

'I had thought to please you by suggesting that Georgi and Natalia should be married while you are still here, so that you can see the wedding, Michelle, but it seems that I too have the misfortune to do the wrong thing for *you*, hmm?'

'Oh no!' She looked up, holding his gaze for a second or two, her own eyes a deep and shining blue between thick brown lashes and she tried hard to steady her voice. 'You—you suggested bringing it forward for— for *my* sake?'

A slightly crooked smile tilted his mouth at its corners and a brow arched above the jet-black eyes. 'Not altogether for your sake, *ligho ena*, although your being able to see Georgi married was my first consideration. But I do not think you will find Georgi any less willing to have his wedding date brought forward than any other young bridegroom!'

It was the very subject on which she had been in doubt, the matter on which she had been prepared to challenge him on Georgi's behalf,

only somehow it was different from when she had talked about it with Medea. Now, suddenly, she had fewer doubts, found it less hard to accept that Georgi really wanted to marry Natalia, was even anxious to do so if that broad hint was to be believed.

Almost as if he guessed what had been on her mind, Andrea raised her face to him and his voice was soft and questioning. 'Do you doubt that, Michelle?'

'I did, but --'

When she put up her hands to ease the fingers that cupped her chin, he turned his hand quickly and enclosed hers, holding them to his chest while he studied her face, the faint flush of pink on a pale gold skin, and the shadow of her lashes on her cheeks.

'But?' he prompted, and she shook her head.

'I—I have to believe you,' she confessed. 'You seem so sure, Andrea.'

'I am sure, Michelle.'

The situation had a certain familiarity, a curious sense of repetition, and she could feel her heart pounding like a drum-beat, her legs, weak and trembling as she resigned herself to the inevitable. No matter how long she had managed to avoid being alone with Andrea, sooner or later this same situation was bound to arise again, and she stood with her hands in his, a churning sense of excitement and anticipation curling in her stomach.

'Thespini's Michelle, Thespini's Michelle!'

Andrea turned, his eyes glittering blackly, his brows drawn in to a straight black frown and he swung round swiftly at the very moment little Dimitri ran straight from the garden into the *salon*, his small,

sharp face flushed with exertion. He came to a sudden halt when he saw Andrea, and looked a little uncertainly from him to Michelle.

By now he was quite used to her and indeed looked upon her as an ally against Georgi's sometimes malicious teasing, so that he came across to her after a second or two and looked up, with his huge black eyes looking incredibly knowing.

Andrea said nothing, but Michelle put a hand on his head and smiled down at him. Her heart was still pounding hard, but she could not help -but wonder what Dimitri would have reported to his mother if he had Come in a moment later.

'Ki'rios Dale asks that you come with him to see a *theatro*,' he told her, and she caught sight of Andrea's swift dark scowl when he heard the invitation.

'Tell Ki'rios Dale that Michelle has already arranged to come with me to Athens, Pondikos,' he told the boy before she could answer for herself, and Michelle stared at him.

He sounded abrupt, almost possessive, and she was at a loss to know what to do for a moment, then gradually, as Dimitri stood looking at her, she remembered telling Dale Carter that she was going to be free today. It was a temptation to go along with Andrea's deceit, much more of a temptation than she would have believed possible, but she resisted it for reasons she was not even sure of herself.

'Andrea --' She looked at him uncertainly, and there was a small tilt of smile to his mouth that she found curiously disturbing.

'You do not wish to come with me?'

The appeal almost disarmed her, but then she thought of the speculation it could cause if she was to break a more or less firm date

with Dale Carter and go instead with Andrea, and she shook her head, though with obvious reluctance.

'It isn't that I don't want to go with you, Andrea, but I remember, I *did* tell Dale I'd be free today, and I arranged to go with him to see the theatre of Dionysus,'

'So?'

It was difficult to know just what interpretation to put on that non-committal, single-syllable response, but she found it infinitely disconcerting. Searching his face from the shadow of her lashes, she frowned uncertainly. 'He—Dale seems to know Athens quite well, Andrea, and he says I'll find the theatre quite interesting.'

Andrea's black brows expressed a not very complimentary opinion of Dale Carter's abilities as a guide. 'I think he does not know Athens quite so well as he would have you believe,' he told her frankly, 'or he would suggest taking you to see the Herodes Atticus instead. It is much more interesting, and in a much better state of repair, and no more than three hundred metres from the Dionysus.' Broad shoulders shrugged carelessly, but still somehow managed to convey a suggestion of contempt. 'However --'

To Michelle his attitude was puzzling, though no more so than it was to Diinitri, judging by his expression. Andrea was still frowning, she noticed, and a curious little shiver of sensation slithered along her spine for a moment as she shook her head.

'I'm—I'm sorry, Andrea.'

For a second only she held the steady black gaze that seemed to see right through her, then inevitably lowered her eyes when she felt the faster more urgent beat to her heart. 'You have no reason to apologise, have you?'

'No, but I --'

'Or perhaps you were not apologising?' he went on, soft-voiced. 'Perhaps you were rather—expressing regret. Which was it, Michelle?'

If only Dimitri had not been there, she thought, she would not have felt quite so inhibited. But he was standing there beside her still, his interest undiminished, like some small, dark goblin of folklore, the *kallikanzaroi*, small and mischievous and incredibly knowing.

'Thespim's Michelle,' he said, apparently tired of waiting, 'shall I tell Ki'rios Dale that you will go with him to Athens?'

'I --'

'Tell Ki'rios Dale that Thespim's Michelle will be going with him to Athens, please, Dimitri I' Andrea's deep, firm voice cut across her own half-formed answer, and Michelle flicked him a swift uncertain look from the turners of her eyes. He held her gaze for a second, his own bright and jet-black below straight brows, and unfathomable enough to defy any attempt to guess what was going on behind them. 'The aircraft is returning home for me at eleven, Michelle, I suggest that you and Dale Garter fly over with me to the mainland.'

It was an unexpected invitation when she thought of his barely disguised opinion of Dale as a visitor to his island, and she viewed it with some suspicion, taking a moment to try and guess the reason behind it. 'You—don't mind giving us a lift?' she asked.

'Should I?'

Once more an enigmatic half-smile questioned her reasoning and she hastily shook her head. 'Oh—no reason, Andrea, it's very good of you, thank you.'

'It will be my pleasure, *ligho ena!*'

It seemed to Michelle there was a hint of laughter in the deep, soft voice and it sent trickles of response along her spine once more, so that she looked down at Dimitri, seeking a distraction. 'Will you ask Kirios Dale if he will meet me about eleven o'clock at the landing-field, please Dimitri—tell him that we shall be flying over to the mainland/

Dimitri's puckish little face weighed up the situation for a moment, then he cocked his head to one side and regarded her with big, dark eyes. 'Do you wish that I also tell Kirios bale that Thi'os Andrea will also be flying with you, Thespinis Michelle?'

There was nothing she could do about the smile that camp unbidden to her lips, but she hastily stifled it, and instead shook her head at him. 'Thios Andrea has kindly offered to fly us over, that's all,' she told the boy. 'If you will tell him that, Dimitri.'

He flicked those huge dark eyes from one to the other two or three times, then turned and ran out of the room, and for a second neither of them said a word, nor made a move to go. It was when Michelle looked up at last that she found Andrea's black eyes watching her, a deep glint of laughter in their depths, and the temptation was too much to resist—she burst into laughter.

'He's absolutely incorrigible!' she said, her voice husky with laughter, and Andrea seemed to agree.

He reached out with one hand and touched her cheek lightly with an evocative finger-tip. 'And you should laugh more often, *ligho ena mou*—it makes you beautiful!'

Her eyes had a jewel brightness in the pale gold of her face and a flush of colour brightened her cheeks, heightened by the drum-beat pulse at her temple. She could not move because somehow her legs

felt too weak to support her, and she was trembling like a leaf as he leaned forward suddenly and bent his head. The mouth she remembered so well as fierce and compelling on her own was gentle and light when it touched her lips for a second only.

'I will see you in a few moments,' he told her. 'Have a good time with your friend, *oreo mou!*'

Both theatres, that of Dionysus and the Herodes Atticus, were on the southern slope of the Acropolis, and both proved interesting, although, as Andrea had said, the Herodes Atticus was much better preserved and indeed was still used through the summer for a festival of drama and music.

The ancient places never failed to thrill Michelle and set her imagination working, and she enjoyed herself immensely, even though she suspected Dale Carter's enjoyment was somehow tempered by the fact that during the flight over from Savra, Andrea had asked them to lunch with him. It would have been difficult to refuse in the circumstances, but it was obvious that could he have done so, Dale would much rather have lunched with her alone.

They were making their way to the restaurant before Dale confessed how he felt about the invitation, taking their time through the tourist-crowded streets, even though they were already a little late for their appointment with Andrea, and Michelle had glanced up at him once or twice, trying to judge his mood. It was unlike Andrea to have issued such an invitation to include a man he had quite openly declared was no more than a business acquaintance.

'I wish there'd been some way of turning down this lunch invitation,' Dale said, confirming her suspicion. 'But what could I do when he'd flown us over?'

'You'd rather Andrea didn't give us lunch?'

'I'd rather I knew what that Machiavellian Greek was up to!' Dale retorted, then grinned a little sheepishly. 'I'm sorry, Michelle, I keep forgetting he's a kind of relation of yours!'

'Not of mine,' Michelle denied, 'of Georgi's.'

'Quite! That's what makes me wonder what he's up to! I get the distinct impression that Georgi doesn't "like the idea of you coming with me, and I'm wondering if there's some scheme afoot to --' He shrugged, as if he drew the line at actually putting his suspicions into words.

Perhaps it was sheer bravado, or perhaps that light, almost teasing kiss was still too fresh in her memory and she felt too uncertain of herself, but she looked up at him and laughed, her eyes a bright defiant blue. 'Oh, Georgi has plans to marry me off to Andrea,' she said, and Dale looked taken aback for a second or two.

'You don't mind?' He sounded as if he found that hard to believe and her laughter once more had the shivering ring of uncertainty.

'Only because I don't take it seriously—it's never likely to happen!' His hand was under her arm as he steered her through the holiday crowds, and he glanced down at her as they turned in to the entrance of the restaurant where they were to meet Andrea—the same one he had brought her to before. 'I wouldn't be too sure about that,' Dale told her. 'It could be what's in that devious mind of his when he asked us to lunch with him—making sure he can keep an eye on you even if you did turn him down to come with me.'

'Oh, Dale!'

Colour flushed into her cheeks, but when she looked across to where Andrea was already seated at a corner table, waiting for them, it

occurred to her to wonder suddenly if it was such a far-fetched idea after all. Andrea had acted out of character, inviting Dale to lunch with him, and then there was—She shook herself hastily, realising that she was venturing along paths that could prove more adventurous than she could cope with.

'You think he treats it as lightly as you do?' Dale's voice spoke close to her ear as he guided her across the restaurant. 'Take my word, Michelle, I've dealt with Andrea Davolos for years in the way of business and I probably know him better than you do, for all he's your brother's family. He's completely ruthless when he wants anything!'

'Well, in my case that hardly applies!' She spoke over her shoulder, a swift, husky whisper, anxiously denying something that she was not entirely sure she wanted to deny.

The voice in her ear persisted, however, as they neared the table where Andrea waited for them. 'He's got the gleam of the hunter in his eye, Michelle, and at this moment it's fixed firmly on you!'

It was true, Michelle realised a little dazedly.

Whether it had the gleam of a hunter or not, Andrea's black gaze was fixed firmly on her as she came towards the table with Dale, and she experienced a curious unsteadiness in her legs when he got to his feet and smiled at her, one of those curious little half-smiles that always confused her.

He greeted them both in his own tongue, then took over the task of seeing her seated before Dale could do anything about it—a neat manoeuvre that Dale noted with narrowed eyes. Taking his seat again beside her, he addressed himself to her, without actually appearing to ignore his other guest.

'You have enjoyed your sightseeing?' he asked, and she nodded.

'Very much—it was wonderful seeing that old theatre, the Herodes Atticus, and realising that it's *still* in use after—ooh, hundreds of years! It gives me a funny feeling when I think I could actually sit there and watch a play today, where someone sat all that time ago and watched the *same* play.'

There was a smile hovering about Andrea's wide, expressive mouth and it gleamed in his black eyes as he looked at her. 'You are very impressionable, *ligho ena mou*,' he told her, and his voice had its usual effect on her senses.

Not only that either, for Dale Carter was looking across at her with raised brows, and she told herself she must find out exactly what *ligho ena mou* meant in English. Laughing a little unsteadily, she picked up a menu, simply as a means of distraction, and to occupy her hands.

'I suppose I must be a—a Grecophile, or whatever the right word is,' she said. 'You shouldn't laugh at me, Andrea!'

There was a curious and unfamiliar air of exhilaration between them that was electrical in its effect, almost heady, like too much wine, and she found it hard to ignore the fluttering urgency of her pulse. The black eyes were more intense in their scrutiny, it seemed, and her heart responded more urgently suddenly.

'I do not laugh at you, *ligho ena*,' he denied, and glanced at Dale Carter, as if he suddenly remembered he was there. 'Shall we order lunch?' he asked.

Michelle nodded only vaguely. At that moment she would have given much not to have Dale Carter sitting across the table from her, and yet it was probably much better that he was there, for she was not at all sure that she could think clearly for herself. The gleam of the hunter

in his eye, Dale had said, and she felt quite alarmingly vulnerable at the moment.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was obvious that Georgi was going to find the whole thing very much to his liking, Michelle thought ruefully, but it was beginning to dawn on her that she had made a mistake in asking her brother to be her interpreter. Perhaps Medea would have been a more discreet consultant, and she would certainly not have eyed her in the same mischievously amused way that Georgi did "when she asked him to tell her what the words meant.

She had long wondered about the Greek names that Andrea called her, and Georgi had seemed the obvious person to ask, except that now she had done so she could see he was going to read something significant into her quite casually asked questions.

His blue eyes twinkled mischievously when she asked for a translation of *ligho ena*, the name that Andrea seemed to use most often, and she already wished she had not asked him. 'Who has called you little one?' he asked, although she was convinced he was well aware who it was.

'Oh, I just heard it and wondered what it meant, that's all.'

She shrugged, but offhand or not, Georgi was not deterred in the slightest and his smile quizzed her quite openly. 'Andrea,' he guessed. 'It is Andrea who calls you little one, is it not, Michelle?'

'Yes, sometimes he does.'

She made the admission grudgingly, but. Georgi was nodding his head in a rather smugly satisfied way as he settled back in his chair. 'It is a beginning,' he declared complacently. 'It is a charming endearment, is it not?'

'An endearment?' She supposed it was, but thought it possible Andrea had not used it as such.

'I would term it an endearment,' Georgi insisted, 'and you cannot dislike such a name, surely, Michelle?'

'I suppose not.' They were stretched out beside the pool, on canvas chairs, and she felt rather pleasantly lazy with the sun on her barely covered body. For several seconds she said no more on the subject, but she was still irresistibly curious to know exactly what it was Andrea called her, and after a moment she probed again, her eyes behind dark glasses staring up at the amethyst sky. 'But—when there's a word like *mou* at the end of it, Georgi? What does it mean?'

Georgi turned his head and laughed. His teeth looked startlingly white in his golden tanned face below silvery hair, and his eyes behind the dark lenses quizzed her for a second before he answered. 'Ah, then, Michelle, it becomes more --' His expressive hands left no doubt of the nature of its meaning and he laughed again at her hastily averted head. 'The *mou* is for—my, and is more, how is it?—More possessive, huh?'

Michelle put her hands behind her head, clasped tightly together as she recalled just how many times in the past week or so Andrea had used that possessive *mou* when he addressed her. 'And *pethi*? she asked, pressing on recklessly. 'What does that mean?'

This time Georgi turned his head and frowned, so that she wondered for a moment if she had inadvertently used the wrong word. '*Pethi*?' he repeated. 'Who has called you child, Michelle? Not Andrea?'

'More than once,' Michelle assured him, and felt quite inexplicably disappointed at being referred to as a child, it was something of an anti-climax, she felt. 'Oh well,' she said, 'it only goes to show that in the long run he regards me in the same category as Dimitri!'

'*Ohi!*' Georgi denied firmly. 'I do not believe that, my sister! Tell me, are there other names by which he has called you? *Agape mou*, perhaps?'

She shook her head, although the words were familiar, for she had heard Pavlos use them quite often to Medea. 'No, he's never used that, but I've heard Pavlos say it.'

'To Medea? *Ne*, of course you have—it means my love.'

'Then Andrea isn't likely to have called me that, is. he? You're on the wrong track again, Georgi!'

'I think not,' he argued blandly, 'but when Andrea does call you his love, then I shall know that my plans are going well!'

'Your plans!' She sat up in her chair and looked over at him reproachfully, trying to understand his single-mindedness when it came to her and Andrea. 'I shouldn't have thought you had much time to spare for planning other people's lives, when your own wedding is less than four weeks away!'

It was impossible to tell what his reaction was to the reminder because of the dark lenses that concealed his eyes, and his facial expression gave nothing away. He stretched lazily, thrusting his arms above his head. 'Being the bridegroom I have less to concern myself with,' he told her blandly. 'The planning and the excitement are for the women—I have plenty of time to think about you and Andrea.'

'Time maybe, but no cause,' Michelle denied. 'You embarrass me, Georgi, with your attempts at matchmaking, and you must embarrass Andrea too—I wish you'd stop it!'

He seemed mildly surprised by her reaction and turned his head a fraction to regard her through the dark lenses. 'You would prefer to do

as Pavlos has been trying to encourage you to do, and choose the Englishman, Dale Carter?'

'I'd prefer it if you'd both stop trying to marry me off, and let me make my *own* choice, Georgi! You really have no right to keep pressing me to marry the way you do!'

He looked rather as if he had been accused unjustly, though only for a moment, for he was not that easily deterred, and it all sounded so logical and reasonable put in such simple terms. 'But if I wish to see Andrea happily married again, and I also wish to have you stay here on Savra, what better way to achieve both than by having you marry Andrea?'

'But suppose I don't *want* to marry Andrea?'

Georgi reached out lazily and ran a forefinger down the length of her spine, his voice quiet and deceptively careless. '*Do* you not wish to marry him?' he asked.

Michelle shivered, and it was not only the effect of that tracing finger on her spine, she suspected. The thought of being married to a man like Andrea Davolos opened up all sorts of prospects that she did not even care to think about at the moment.

'More to the point,' she said, determinedly keeping a steady voice, 'would Andrea want to marry me?'

'But of course!' He sounded so confident about it th[^]t she was silenced for a second or two, and heard the rest of his reply in a kind of hazy uncertainty. 'Andrea needs another wife, and you are young, pretty and healthy—are you not ideal for him?'

Michelle found it hard to find an answer right away.

There was a curious coldness running through her suddenly, and she thought of Andrea in that restaurant in Athens, passing the opinion that if he ever thought of marrying again, he would keep her in mind. She had not taken it seriously in the beginning, but that was before various incidents had led her to the conclusion that Andrea actually found her attractive, even to his sophisticated tastes. Because of that she had been less hasty to dismiss the idea from her friend of late, although she had never admitted as much, even to herself.

Hearing Georgi's cool and calculated appraisal of her as a suitable wife for his beloved stepbrother made her wonder if she would ever really know him as well as she hoped to. It made it worse too to think that Andrea more than likely shared Georgi's views, and saw her as suitable—he had already questioned her lighthearted dismissal of the idea, she recalled. The fact that he had kissed her the way he did meant little in all probability. A man with a nature as passionate as Andrea Davolos's undoubtedly was, needed a woman, and women were in short supply on Savra, this paradise island. She had happened to be handy—presented to him, it might almost be said, by Georgi.

'Michelle?' Georgi sat up in his chair so that he could see her better, his voice bringing her back to reality, and she carefully avoided looking at him. 'Do you not agree that you would make Andrea an ideal wife?' he asked.

Hugging her knees close to her chest, she rested her chin on her folded arms so that her hair slid forward and hid most of her face. 'I suppose it doesn't really matter whether or not Andrea would make me an ideal husband, does it?' she asked, and Georgi looked vaguely startled, as if the idea had never occurred to him.

'But Andrea is perfectly suited to you, Michelle,' he told her, and as if to impress upon her how serious he was, he swung his feet to the ground and took off the dark glasses so that she could see the earnest look in his blue eyes when he spoke. 'He is wealthy and from a good

family, and women find him very attractive. What more could you ask of a husband, my sister?'

She gazed at the dazzling surface of the pool for a moment without answering, and her mouth had an uncharacteristically bitter twist to it as she considered the points in Andrea's favour. It troubled her that she found Georgi so hard to understand, and that he seemed not to understand her at all.

'Would it be too much to ask that the man I marry should love me?' she asked, and Georgi took a second or two to find an answer, for it was obviously some' thing he had not taken into account.

'That would come with time,' he suggested, and to Michelle it sounded far too much as if he was reciting something he had learned by heart.

She took off her sun-glasses with a quick nervous movement, and looked at him with bright defensive eyes. 'Like you hope to love Natalia in time, instead of Mary Darnley?'

It was perhaps going too far to remind him of that so recent past, when there were only weeks to go to his wedding date, but she had spoken hastily and she regretted it almost before the words were "out of her mouth. His fingers toyed for a moment with the sunglasses in his hand, and he did not look at her when he spoke, a fact she noted with dismay, for it suggested her shaft had gone home more deeply than she meant it to. ,,

'It is true that I was foolish about Mary,' he admitted in a voice that was slightly more accented than usual, she thought, 'but you are wrong if you think I do not love Natalia, Michelle. Once I loved her very much, with—passion?—you know? But I hurt her very much too,- because I was thoughtless and foolish. Now— His expressive hands and shoulders admitted perhaps more than words could have

done. 'Natalia is not pretty in the way that Mary was, but now I think that I love her in a—different way that is much harder to explain.'

'Oh, Georgi—I'm sorry! I—I shouldn't have said what I did!'

She took his hands in hers and her eyes had a softly misty look that begged for forgiveness, so that after a second or two he smiled and raised their clasped hands to press his lips to her fingers. 'I understand you, Michelle, perhaps better than you understand me, eh?' The blue eyes were warm and affectionate, and she caught a glimpse of that familiar mischievous smile for a moment. 'Maybe . I am a wise man, like Andrea, hmm?'

'You're a very *nice* man,' Michelle told him fondly, and looked at her handsome twin with pride. 'And I'm certain Natalia will make a very pretty bride, because she loves you very much.'

He was quite serious, and he held her hands still as he nodded his silver-blond head solemnly. 'I know,' he said.

Medea and Pavlos invited her over for dinner the evening before Dale Carter was due to leave the island at the end of his holiday, and Michelle accepted gladly. Pavlos was a firm believer in love at first sight, so Medea had confided one day, ever since he had met and fallen in love with Medea in the space of a few days. He would probably be disappointed when there was no tearful farewell between her and Dale, but that could not be helped.

Georgi, on the other hand, would most likely see Dale's departure as the removal of a threat to the plans he had in mind, although he was not so happy about the idea of her being invited as a dinner partner for the departing guest. She seemed fated to disappoint people, she thought as she dressed for dinner, but she had no intention of planning her life to suit anyone, even Georgi.

In fact it transpired that Dale was not actually leaving Greece, but simply transferring to an hotel on the mainland for a while. His holiday was finished, but he had some business to settle before he flew home, and in view of Andrea's attitude to having business men on the island he had insisted on changing his accommodation for the more usual hotel.

'I hope it means I can see you again, at least once before I go back,' he said, and she smiled agreement.

'I don't see why not, Dale.'

It was fairly late, but Dale had suggested that they take a stroll along the beach before he walked her back to the villa, and she had agreed unhesitatingly. The island always ~ seemed even more beautiful by moonlight, and tonight it was breathtaking.

The sea just ruffled over the white sand with barely a murmur of sound, and they walked against a background of tall, dark cypresses, with the scents of oleander and hibiscus heady as wine on the warm night air. It was indeed a paradise, and Michelle thought she could quite happily settle for living there for the rest of her life, if it was not for the countless personal problems it would involve.

Her sandalled feet whispered across the sand, peeping from below one of the classic styled evening dresses she had bought in Athens. It was a bright, light blue and fastened with pale ribbons that shaped and showed off her rounded feminine curves, then fluttered down like silver streamers in the light breeze. Her fair hair she wore with a jewelled slide on top of her head, then flowing down nearly to her shoulders, and Dale Carter made no secret of the fact that he found the whole effect very attractive.

He held her hand with just the slightest suggestion of intimacy as they walked along in the moonlight, and his eyes smiled down at her when

he turned his head, so that she responded automatically. 'Will you really miss me when I go, Michelle? Or am I simply flattering myself when I hope you will?'

'Well, of course I shall miss you!' She laughed, tossing back her hair in a gesture that her English family would have recognised as slightly anxious. 'I've enjoyed knowing you the past couple of weeks, and maybe we'll meet again some time.'

Dale said nothing for several minutes and she thought he seemed rather preoccupied, so that she prayed he was not going to suddenly become more serious about their parting. It had been pleasant having him around for the past two weeks and she had enjoyed his company, but she had no desire to do anything more than say goodbye to him when the time came and vaguely hope to see him again some time in the future.

She felt pleasantly relaxed wandering along the edge of the tide with him like this, much too relaxed to suddenly find herself involved in something she would rather did not happen. The moon, shimmering across the water gave it the look of dark silk, shot with silver, and she thought the island had never looked lovelier before, even by moonlight. It would be so easy to become involved.

Then Dale turned and looked down at her once more and she noticed the ghost of a smile hovering about his mouth and gleaming in his eyes. He was very good-looking and in the shadowy softness of the moonlight he somehow looked slightly mysterious and very intriguing.

'Will you consider staying on here for good?' he asked, and Michelle's heart gave a sudden hard thud against her ribs at the unexpectedness of it.

'Oh no, of course not!' she denied hastily. 'I shall be staying on for a week or so longer than I planned because of Georgi's wedding, but I'll be going back after that.'

Obviously there was something about her answer that had struck him as meaningful, for he seemed to be quizzing her for a moment, then he laughed and shook his head. 'I notice you say you'll be going back,' he pointed out, 'not going home—is there anything significant about that?'

Michelle did not even realise she had made the distinction, but it struck her suddenly that perhaps the slip had been a subconscious expression of the way she felt about Savra as well as her reluctance to leave Georgi. Not that she thought any less of her family in England, she thought of them with as much affection as she always had, and she was in regular touch with them.

If was simply that during the past weeks she had been on Sdvra she had come to think of the island as a kind of second home. It was Georgi's home and perhaps she had absorbed some of his love of the place, for love it he undoubtedly did, for all his remarks about wishing he could leave it more often. She did not look forward to leaving, even to go home to England, and she had put the thought of doing so firmly out of her mind, as she was in the habit of doing with matters she preferred not to think about.

'I suppose it's because I feel so at home here,' she said. 'I don't think there's anything significant in it.'

'I see. I just wondered if perhaps you and --' He stopped short, using his free hand with just as much expression as his Greek friends would have done, and he glanced at her in a half-apologetic way that suggested he knew he was venturing on to delicate ground. 'You know that Andrea Davolos won't like you leaving, don't you, Michelle?'

Once more her heart gave a sudden breathtaking lurch, and she said nothing for a moment. Had he not appeared so obviously serious about it, she would have simply laughed at the suggestion and treated it as an attempt to tease her. As it was she did not quite know how to react. He was obviously not teasing her but firmly believed what he said, and she could feel her heart thudding away at her ribs as she sought for the right answer, trying to keep her voice steady.

'I hardly think so, Dale! You and Georgi seem to have the same misconception about Andrea and the way he feels—or thinks—about me, but you're both quite wrong, you know!'

'I don't think so, Michelle, he --' Once more he shrugged, shaking his head as if to deny himself the right to comment. 'But it isn't really any of my business, is it?' he remarked with a wry smile. 'After all, I've known you for only two weeks, and you must have quite enough of that kind of suggestion from Georgi. I hardly qualify for the right to make such personal observations!'

'Oh, please, don't feel badly about it, Dale!' She smiled uneasily. 'As you say Georgi's very insistent on the subject, so there's no reason why you shouldn't have your say too.'

'Maybe you'll even start believing it!'

Michelle shook her head firmly. 'Oh no!' When she laughed it sounded dismayingly unsteady, and she did her best to hide the fact. 'It must be something in the air here,' she said. '*Everybody* tries their hand at- matchmaking, and unfortunately I seem to be the favourite target!'

'Maybe because you're such an obvious choice,' Dale suggested, and pulled a face when he smiled at her. 'Maybe if I wasn't quite so—so English, I'd have given Pavlos more cause for encouragement, but there you are! I'm sorry, about all that eye-rolling and those

heavy-handed efforts of Pavlos's to make a passionate romance out of our very pleasant friendship—you must have found it terribly embarrassing at times!'

'Oh, please, don't worry!' She laughed, remembering just how embarrassing she *had* found it at times. 'It was no worse than Georgi's efforts to marry me off to Andrea—rather less, in fact!'

He looked down at her steadily for a second, and she thought he looked more serious suddenly, stronger and older somehow in the shadowy moonlight, but no less attractive. 'Georgi won't give up until the very last moment, you know, Michelle:—he's a thorough Davolos ! I'm sorry,' he added hastily, 'but you know what I mean.'

Michelle nodded without speaking. She shook back her hair and looked across the shimmering silver and purple ocean, at the fat silver moon like a benign god looking down at them from Olympus. Georgi never would give up, she knew, but her main concern was **just** how far Andrea went along with his schemes. If Andrea was firmly and definitely uninterested then she would know just where she stood and nothing Georgi did would make any difference, but there was something about his manner on occasion that suggested he was not completely indifferent, and that was what she found so disturbing about him.

She glanced up at Dale and smiled, a slightly rueful smile because there was so much she did not understand. 'Sometimes I find Georgi's family a little more than I can cope with,' she confessed. 'I feel as if I'll never understand Georgi, even though we're twins.'

'And he, I imagine, feels rather as if he falls between two stools. He has a natural affinity with you, and yet you're so completely unlike the family he's known all his life.'

'You like Georgi ?'

She sounded quite anxious that he should, and Dale smiled. 'Yes, I like him very much, Respite the fact that he'll be glad to see the back of me tomorrow!' He laughed and shook his head when she would have denied it simply for politeness' sake. 'Oh, I know wh"y, of course, Michelle, and I don't hold it against him—in fact I'm flattered that he considers me any sort of competition for someone like Andrea!'

She liked Dale Carter, Michelle decided impulsively; she really liked him a lot, and maybe they *would* meet again. 'You're very understanding,' she said.

His hand tightened over hers and he smiled down at her, one brow slightly raised. 'And you're a very lovely girl,' he told her. 'So lovely that I don't intend saying goodbye to you without kissing you at least once!'

There was nothing intense or forceful about it. Dale took her in his arms and held her only lightly, while his mouth pressed firmly but almost dispassionately on hers in a kiss that lasted several seconds. When it ended he held her for a moment with her head against his chest and his face resting on her hair—a gentle unemotional embrace that was pleasantly undemanding, and certainly nothing like the emotional assault of Andrea's kiss.

'I *shall* miss you,' he told her, his voice slightly muffled by her hair. 'If you ever do tear yourself away from this garden of Eden, Michelle, I'd like to see you again—very much.'

She raised her head, her eyes dark and jewel-bright in the moonlight. 'Oh, I shall be leaving here—once Georgi and Natalia are married and away on their honeymoon, there'll be nothing to keep me here!'

Dale said nothing for a second or two, but stood looking at her with a faintly quizzical look that she found rather disturbing, then he turned

her around and put an arm about her shoulders as they began to walk along the beach again.

'That's not for another month yet,' he reminded her, and laughed shortly, shaking his head. 'The Davolos brothers are a pretty formidable pair, Michelle, and I wouldn't give much for your chances if they've both decided you'd make Andrea a good wife!'

She did not look up at him when she spoke, but watched the fleeting glimpses of her toes as they slipped in and out of sight below her dress with every step. 'Georgi thinks I'd make Andrea a *suitable* wife; I'm not sure what Andrea's view is, but Georgi seems to think he considers I have most of the right attributes. I'm in .good health and I'm young and passably good- looking, which is apparently what is required for a Davolos wife.' She laughed, an alarmingly unsteady sound that shivered uncertainly on the warm air. 'I ^ feel a little like a thoroughbred, horse at times!'

'Oh, Michelle!' The arm about her shoulders hugged her briefly, though with what intent, she was not quite sure until he spoke. 'I can't believe that Andrea is that cold-blooded, your brother was teasing you!'

'I rather hoped he was,' she confessed, 'but he was quite serious, Dale, and I can't help wondering if Andrea looks at me with the same ideas in mind.'

He looked down at her, saying nothing for several seconds, then drawing her close again for a moment when he answered her, his voice quiet and serious. 'Would it hurt very much if he does, Michelle?'

They walked through the cypresses and, into the clustering scented shrubs that surrounded the garden and the pool, and she took quite a

long time to find an answer. 'I don't know,' she said, shaking her head slowly. 'I wish I did.'

They emerged into the moonlight again beside the pool, and she stopped him there. No need for him to come to the villa, for nothing could happen to her on this peaceful, quiet island, and she was curiously averse to either Georgi or Andrea seeing Dale bring her to the door, if indeed they were still up.

He took her hands in his and kissed her mouth before she could say goodnight to him as she intended, and he smiled at her faint look of surprise. 'I'm very reluctant to say goodbye to you until I have to,' he told her, 'but I'm flying over to the mainland with Pavlos and Andrea in the morning, and you probably won't be around then, will you?'

'Probably not—they leave quite early.'

He held her hands, his hold firm without being in the least possessive, and his eyes swept over her shadowed face for a second before he spoke. 'I'd like to ring you some time next week, Michelle, if I may.'

'Of course I'

'At Pavlos's!' He laughed shortly. 'I don't want Andrea Davolos taking exception to my calling you.'

'Oh, but he wouldn't, Dale, really he wouldn't. How could he?'

'He could and he *would* if he has got those particular ideas in his head about you,' Dale said wryly. 'As soon as I can organise a free evening, or afternoon, Michelle, I'll give you a ring, or get Medea to give you a message. O.K.?'

'You let me know, and I'll hitch a flight over too. I'll look forward to it, Dale.'

'No more than I do!' He bent his head and kissed her mouth once again, for longer this time and more firmly, almost as if he sought to make some kind of lasting impression. 'Goodnight, Michelle, and—*au revoir!*'

He seemed to disappear almost at once among the dense lushness of the shrubs below the trees, and his passage through them brought their scents wafting back to her on the soft warm air. It was still and incredibly quiet with only the remote sound of the surf whispering over the sand beyond the barrier of cypresses.

It was romantic too, she thought, with the pool a deep purple-blue, scattered with silver and smooth as glass in the moonlight. As she walked along its edge towards the villa she caught sight of her own reflection suddenly in its mirror-like surface, and paused for a moment to examine the rather exotic stranger who looked up at her from the depths.

Her hair had almost the same silvery sheen as Georgi's in the moonlight and fell forward either side of her face, casting shadows and making dark pools of the eyes that looked back at her. Her bare arms and shoulders appeared much paler than they did in the daytime sun and there was an ethereal shimmer about the slender figure that suggested it, might disappear at any second.

The classically styled gown fastened close at her breast, then drifted about her, softly diaphanous and suggesting another age, another time, and she felt a curious sense of elation suddenly so that she smiled down at her reflection—a small, secret smile that glowed warmly in her eyes for a second or two before changing to a look of startled disbelief.

Another, darker face appeared behind her, looking over her shoulder, the eyes a glowing black that gleamed with such brilliance that even their reflection made her catch her breath and draw back hastily from

the edge. She turned so swiftly that she might have fallen if two strong hands had not taken her by her arms and held her firm.

Her pulse was drumming wildly as she looked up into those all too familiar features that smiled, faintly sardonic, as if her surprise amused him, and her legs felt so weak that the wonder was they could still support her. 'You—you frightened me,' she accused, husky-voiced, and Andrea's black unfathomable eyes flicked in a quick, brief survey of her features before he spoke.

'Startled you, perhaps, *ligho ena*,' he said, and the deep, quiet voice had never been more affecting. A glimpse of white in the dark face betrayed a smile, and he made no move to release her arms. 'I hope the sight of me does not frighten you, does it?'

'No, of course not.'

'You are trembling.' The sensual softness of his voice went shivering along her back, and she shook her head, a denial that brought another brief smile. 'I can feel you trembling, Michelle. If it is because I appeared so suddenly and frightened you, I am sorry.'

His hands on her arms had a light stroking touch suddenly, as if he would calm her fears that way, and she felt her heart beating so hard her head reeled with it. 'I—I wasn't expecting to see you—anyone,' she said in a small and very unsteady voice. 'I wasn't thinking.'

'Only about that beautiful creature in the pool?' he suggested with a smile, and looked down into the purple-blue water at his own reflection. 'Did you imagine that it was Pan come for his Syrinx?' he asked, and smiled over her obvious puzzlement.

'Pan? The god who was half-goat?' She tried to think about the old legend of mythology, but her mind was racing too fast, she was too aware of the man with her to keep her mind on the old gods, and Andrea was smiling again.

'You remember that he fell in love with the beautiful nymph, Syrinx?' he asked! 'But she was so frightened of his appearance that she fled from him and was transformed into a reed—the reed from which he fashioned the pipes upon which he played so beautifully and so plaintively. You remember?'

'I—I don't think I ever heard the story in full before,' Michelle confessed, her eyes concealed by the lashes that drew dark shadows on her cheeks. 'I always thought he was a wicked, or at least a—an unsympathetic creature. It seems he must just have been sad and—and unhappy.'

'His intentions were misunderstood,' Andrea decreed seriously, and looked into her eyes, holding her gaze with a kind of irresistible force. 'It is an unfortunate fact that such misunderstandings frequently occur in matters between male and female.'

It was plain that he meant to convey something by the remark, but for the moment Michelle could not clearly understand what he was trying to tell her. 'Possibly,' was all she committed herself to, and Andrea glanced, briefly over his shoulder at the trees where Dale had recently disappeared.'

'You have said goodbye to your Englishman?'

She glanced up swiftly, ready to deny that Dale was anything as personal as her Englishman, but the thought of his having seen her there with Dale was infinitely discomfiting. 'You were here?' she asked, and left her feelings in no doubt.

'I was close by.' His voice gave no indication that he resented the implied accusation. 'You caught me unawares when you came through the trees—I was sitting in one of the chairs enjoying a last smoke before bed. Everyone else is already in bed.'

He did not actually make it an accusation that she was still out when the rest of the household were retired, but she thought he disapproved just the same and when she lifted her chin slightly it was purely instinctive. 'Oh, were you waiting for me to come in? I'm sorry if I kept you up, Andrea.'

She felt the strong fingers about her arms dig more firmly into her soft skin suddenly, and the black eyes narrowed very slightly in the shadowy darkness of his face. The drumming beat of her pulse vibrated through her body again and sent a shiver running along her spine as he looked down at her steadily.

'I hope you are not being sarcastic, Michelle,' he said, his soft, deep voice adding its effect, and she shook her head hastily.

'You're hurting my arms, Andrea, please don't—don't hold me so hard!'

'I am sorry.'

It was the second time that night that he had apologised to her, and she scarcely believed it was happening. His grip eased and instead his palms soothed her skin, the long fingers stroked with such delicacy that only the tips caressed her arms, and her heart responded with such urgency that she felt the breath caught in her throat, seeking desperately for some matter to bring her back to the level of reality.

'I—I haven't actually said goodbye to Dale,' she said, grasping at the first thing that came to mind. 'He's staying in Greece for another week at least.'

'Not here, on Sdvra?'

She shook her head, noting the harsh demanding way he asked the question. 'No. He's staying in an hotel on the mainland while he settles some business, then he'll be flying home.'

'And you will be seeing him again?'

It occurred to her vaguely to question his right to ask things like that, but instead she nodded and gave him a simple, straightforward answer. 'Yes.'

'You—like him?'

The brief, barely perceptible hesitation gave her a moment of indecision, for she did like Dale, but she doubted if Andrea meant like in quite the same way. 'Yes, I like him very much,' she said in a curiously unsteady voice, 'but I'm not in love with him, Andrea, if that's what you're trying to discover!'

'In two weeks? It is unlikely, I think!'

Suddenly the air between them was tense and electric, although she had not really noticed the change, nor was she sure exactly why it was so. His hands on her arms were tight again, his fingers digging into her flesh, but she made no protest this time, only carefully avoided looking at him, trying to do something about the wild and curiously excited beat of her heart.

'Don't you believe in love at first sight?' she asked in a small breathless voice. 'Pavlos does!'

'Pavlos is a fool!' --'

'He also loves his wife!'

What he said she had no idea, for it was in Greek, but she knew it was both angry and violent and she shivered when his hands held her even more tightly for a second before she was pulled hard against him, wrapped around by his arms while his mouth came down over hers, forceful and impassioned and unbelievably exciting.

One big hand cradled her head, holding hard to a handful of her hair, and she felt as if she was being lifted off the ground and whirled away in to some fantastic other world that left her breathless and uncaring whether or not she ever came down to earth again. His arms yielded a fraction when he released her mouth, but only while he bent his head to brush aside her hair and press his lips to the soft scented skin of her neck and throat.

When she opened her eyes at last, the black eyes were glowing like coals in the dark satyr's face only inches above her own, and she whispered something, she was never sure what it was, then suddenly his hold on her eased and he shook his head slowly. 'If you provoke me so, *ligho ena*,' he said in a low and husky copy of his usual voice, 'you must expect to take the consequences, but I have no wish to hurt or to frighten you!'

'I——' She stared up at him, quite sure that fear was not the reason her heart beat so hard and fast, but unable to think clearly or sensibly at the moment. 'Andrea, you——'

'I am sorry!' For the third time in one evening he was apologising to her, and the small uneasy smile that touched her mouth was quite without conscious effort. 'So,' he added softly, 'you find it amusing, do you?'

'Oh no, Andrea, of course I don't! I wasn't laughing, I—I smiled, that's all, because that's the third time you've apologised to me tonight.'

'And you find that amusing?' 'Oh no! Please stop trying to find a reason to be angry with me! It's just that --' She shook her head, looking down at the place where his dark throat emerged from the whiteness of his shirt, and noticing the small pulse that beat there. 'You don't usually apologise so—so readily.'

'No?'

It was hard to sound matter-of-fact when each time her eyes lifted high enough to see his mouth she was reminded of how he had kissed her. Putting her hands over his, she moved them from her waist and stepped aside, her head down so as not to miss her footing, and his reached out to her when she would have moved even further away, his strong fingers about her wrist.

'Will you now run away from me, Michelle? As Syrinx ran from the goat-god Pan? Did I frighten you so much, *ligho ena mou?*'

My little one—her heart thudded hard at her ribs as she stood there for a moment her head bowed, the silky fairness of her hair hiding her face, then she glanced up suddenly and held his gaze for a second or two. 'You— you don't frighten me, Andrea, but—maybe Syrinx wasn't so much frightened as—as uncertain.'

Briefly his wide expressive mouth suggested a smile, and the glow, in his black eyes warmed and gentled. 'You think it was one of those misunderstandings I spoke of, between males and females?'

'Isn't it possible?'

It seemed slightly unreal somehow to be standing there in the moonlight beside the pool and discussing the feelings and emotions of a mythological creature as if she was real. But they both knew that it was not the nymph Syrinx who was under discussion, but her modern counterpart. Andrea regarded her steadily for several moments, and his black eyes were steady and fathomless, then he took her hand in his, turning her towards the villa and walking beside her along the edge of the shimmering pool.

'It is possible,' he conceded quietly. 'Perhaps gods as well as men grow too impatient!'

CHAPTER EIGHT

MICHELLE found herself looking at Natalia Palides with different eyes when Georgi's bride-to-be next visited the island. She had looks that were basically promising, if only someone took the trouble to show her how to enhance her appearance. Her hair for instance was thick and lustrous and could be quite beautiful, but it was never really seen at its best because it was always confined in that very severe style that did nothing to flatter her small and rather solemn face.

Her clothes, too, were expensive but dismayingly drab. All of them, without exception, were in dark colours and sober styles that were much more suitable for an older woman with austere tastes, suggesting that they had been chosen not by Natalia herself, but by her father's elderly aunt.

Medea had told her that Natalia's mother was dead and that for the last ten years her upbringing had been mainly in the hands of an elderly aunt of her father's - who was known to be something of a harridan. The wonder was, according to Medea, that Natalia was allowed her occasional visits to the island without a chaperone, but her father apparently had sufficient trust in his old friends the Davoloses to entrust them with his daughter's care for brief periods.

With the wedding only three weeks off it was not surprising that the event filled everyone's conversation. It was Natalia's last visit before she became a bride and her growing excitement at becoming Georgi's wife showed in the way her dark eyes glowed, and the soft flush of colour that flushed her cheeks whenever she spoke of him. She radiated such happiness in her quiet way that Michelle almost envied her.

With Medea and Natalia she had spent the afternoon beside the pool talking about the wedding, naturally. Michelle was to walk with other girls in the bridal procession to the church, and her own excitement at

the prospect of a completely new experience was intense. A whole retinue of girls of her own age would escort the bride, carrying tall ribbon-draped candles and with garlands of flowers in their hair, to the big white church where the noisy and elaborate ceremony was to take place.

Such excitement was infectious, and Michelle had never seen her future sister-in-law looking so bright-eyed and excited, so that when she made the suggestion she did, it was because she was caught up in the mood of the moment—carried along on the tide of enthusiasm that made anything seem possible.

'Natalia,' why don't we have a kind of—a kind of rehearsal for your wedding day?'

'A rehearsal?' Natalia frowned at her curiously, and Medea was looking at her as if she wondered what was going on in her mind. 'I do not think that I understand you, Michelle.'

Quite carried away with the idea now that it had come to her, Michelle's eyes shone with enthusiasm, and she used her hands to explain her meaning with as little inhibition as Georgi might have done. 'I'd love to 'do something with your hair, something different,' she explained. 'It's such beautiful hair, but you never wear it loose, and it seems such a pity because no one ever sees how lovely it is. Let me do it for you, Natalia—I'm quite good at hairdressing, and I promise you'll be surprised at the difference it will make!' Natalia's big dark eyes looked frankly doubtful, but Michelle was fired with enthusiasm for the idea and it was bound to be infectious sooner or later. 'You—you feel that I have need to be—different, Michelle?'

Laughingly Michelle shook her head. 'Oh, not *too* different,' she denied. 'You look very nice the way you are, Natalia, but if you were to- --' She broke off hastily when she realised what impression she

could be giving, and Medea was looking far from enthusiastic about the idea.

'You wish to change the way Natalia looks, Michelle?'

Clearly Medea was remembering their conversation of last week, when she had compared Natalia with Georgi's illicit love, Mary Darnley. She had said then that Georgi had found something in the English girl's make-up that was missing in his fiancée. A kind of golden brightness, she had called it, and suggested not only that Natalia lacked the same quality but that Georgi missed it.

But there was no reason why Natalia should not acquire at least a little of that bright quality, all it needed was a little advice and assistance, and she was more than willing to help with both, if Natalia would go along with it.

'I'm not suggesting that Natalia changes completely, of course,' she demurred, 'only that perhaps --' She

waved her hands rather helplessly, realising suddenly that perhaps she was being not only hurtful, but suggesting something that would cause trouble with Natalia's family. 'I'm sorry, Natalia; I'm afraid I got rather harried away and—well, maybe I've given the wrong impression. It was just that—it seems such a shame to hide that beautiful hair always.'

Medea said nothing and it was difficult to guess what she was thinking, but it was only a second or two until

Natalia betrayed the fact that even she had a certain vanity that could be appealed to. The smile on her round childish face was slightly uncertain, but she seemed to have made up her mind.

'I am so happy that you think of me as a sister this way, Michelle. This is the affection that a sister shows, is it not? To help one another to

look well?' She looked down at her hands for a second or two, then smiled again, a little more certainly this time. 'I would like for you to do this for me,' she fold her, a hand to her own glossy black chignon, but her eyes on Michelle's flowing blonde locks. 'You think Georgi will be more pleased if I change a little, *ne* ?'

There was something so infinitely touching about her anxiety to please her future husband that Michelle felt a sudden need to swallow hard before she answered. 'I'm sure he'll love to be able to see your beautiful hair,' she told her, but glanced once more at Medea.

She had never met Natalia's father, and had no way of knowing how he would react to innovations regarding his daughter. He was remarkably tolerant of her visits to the island, but he might not tolerate quite so easily an attempt to change his daughter's appearance, and she looked at the Greek girl a little uncertainly.

'Natalia—your father—he wouldn't object, would he?'

Natalia's hesitation was only momentary, then she shook her head with reassuring confidence. '*Ohi*, Michelle,, I do not think that Papa will object. Thia Leone perhaps --' She shrugged, then laughed suddenly, her eyes shining. 'Soon I will be a married woman, and then I will have to please no one but my husband!'

'Michelle --' Medea was still not happy about it, Michelle could see, and it was the one thing that could deter her now that she was more or less committed. 'Do not make too many changes,' she cautioned. 'Nothing —drastic or too much different, hmm?'

'Ah, Medea, *parakala*!' Natalia was like a child whose treat has been threatened, and she made her appeal in her own tongue, insisting until Medea at last conceded with a cautious smile. Then she turned her bright dark eyes on Michelle once more. 'When will you make me pretty, Michelle?'

It seemed that nothing short of a miracle was expected, and Michelle began to wonder if she had taken on rather more than she was capable of achieving. Georgi, she knew, would like whatever she did. He had declared his love for Natalia and she would not dream of questioning his sincerity, but there must surely be times when he compared the almost nun-like simplicity of his fiancée with the bright blonde girl he had been forced to relinquish in her favour.

'Natalia, having been promised a transformation, however, was not to be denied now. She reached, over and put a hand on Michelle's arm, her huge eyes vaguely anxious. 'Michelle? You will do this for me?'

There could be no going back on her word now, and Michelle smiled. 'Why don't we present your new image at dinner tonight?' she suggested, and Natalia nodded eagerly.

'*Ne, ne,*' she said, and flushed a warm bright pink. 'To surprise Georgi, *ne?*'

Michelle put the finishing touches to her creation, then stepped back to admire. Nothing could make Natalia into a pretty girl, but she had a kind of glowing warmth that was perhaps more than prettiness, and she certainly looked different and very attractive. Whether Georgi would find her just as appealing remained to be seen, and Michelle wished she could be more sure that she had done the right thing.

Natalia's glossy black hair flowed like shiny silk, almost as far as her waist, with a feathery fringe softening her broad brow. Cutting the fringe had been the initial step, and having been taken it inevitably led to other things. Instead of one of her own dark dresses, she had on a long pale pink evening gown of Michelle's that flattered her golden skin with a soft pink glow and also emphasised her young figure in a way that none of her own clothes ever had. When she first caught

sight of herself in the mirror, she gave a swift gasp of surprise and shook her head.

High-heeled shoes gave her a little more height, and Michelle had insisted she use both lipstick and nail varnish in a matching pink, although Natalia had demurred for some time about the nail varnish. The transformation complete, Michelle was rather pleased with the result, despite a small niggling doubt that still persisted at the back of her mind. Catching Natalia's eyes, she smiled.

'Do you like your new image, Natalia?'

Huge dark eyes stared at the stranger reflected in the long mirror for several seconds, then she covered her mouth with a hand in a sudden rush of shyness. 'I do not know this woman!' she said, and giggled in uncontrollable nervousness. 'Oh, Michelle, *then ksero!*' She turned and looked at her anxiously. 'Will it be liked?'

'If you mean will Georgi like it,' Michelle told her with what she hoped was a confident smile, 'I¹ can guarantee he will, Natalia. You look lovely!'

'You think so?'

'I'm sure of it!' She glanced at her wristwatch, suddenly realising how late they were. 'Good heavens, we'd better go, or we shall be in Andrea's black books before we even start!'

Natalia took a last look at herself, smiled a little uncertainly then turned away. They went downstairs together, silent because they were both a little uncertain of the reception that awaited them, and they were less than half way across the hall when Andrea came out of the *salon*. He looked up swiftly as he closed the door and to Michelle his appearance was a signal for the inevitable reaction from her senses—her heart was racing as they walked towards him.

They complemented one another with their colouring. One so fair in a dress of deep jade green, and the other so dark in pale rose pink, they had the brightness and delicacy of flowers as they crossed the big, templelike hall and at first he simply stared as if he doubted his own eyes.

A frown appeared between the black brows as he came across to meet them and Michelle felt a twinge of apprehension. He was going to disapprove 'of the changes she had wrought in his temporary charge and she wished she had a better defence, but for all that, she had no intention of letting him have it all his own way, and she looked up at him, smiling brightly as he joined them.

'You're the first to see the new Natalia,' she told him. 'Isn't she lovely?'

His black eyes had the glitter of jet in the light from the overhead lamps, and his chiselled features a look of determined disapproval as he swept his gaze over Natalia with such intensity that she blushed furiously and hung her head. To Natalia, the experience of being scrutinised in such a way by Andrea was new, and she looked almost ready to turn and run.

'It is not my opinion that matters but that of her fathered her future husband,' he informed Michelle coolly, and she glared at him.

Her own cheeks were flushed and she angled her chin in defiance of his opinion. 'You *could* say how nice she - looks, Andrea,' she told him, 'without committing a social gaffe, surely!'

Once more he surveyed Natalia, but this time there was more suggestion of his usual gentle, almost paternal affection in the appraisal, and he spoke to her in Greek. Something which was obviously a compliment, because Natalia blushed warmly once more

and kept her eyes lowered. Then he looked pointedly at his wristwatch and turned to take Natalia's arm.

'It is late,' he said. 'We are waiting dinner.'

At first Michelle thought he was going to virtually ignore her, but he turned to her just before they moved, and slid his hand beneath her arm, his fingers hard and firm, digging into her soft skin lightly, as if he meant to convey a reprimand. But whether Andrea approved or not, it was evident as soon as they walked into the *salon* that Georgi was delighted with what he saw.

After an initial hesitation, while he recognised the newcomer as his fiancée, he came swiftly across the room and took Natalia's hands in his, raising them to his lips.

'Natalia, *agape mou!*'

He said more, quite a lot more, but all of it in their own tongue, and Natalia was blushing again, her dark eyes hidden by lowered lashes. Evidently, with Georgi at least, the result was a success, and looking around Michelle saw other smiles of approval. Even Medea, who had expressed doubts, was smiling, although Michelle noticed her glance once or twice at her brother, as if she guessed his reaction was less enthusiastic.

Michelle felt she should have been more pleased herself, but somehow Andrea's reaction had spoiled her triumph, and it troubled her more than she cared to admit that he had not been pleased like the rest. He was at her elbow suddenly, and she looked up in startled surprise, her heart racing.

'So—you are pleased with your magic, hmm?'

It was impossible to deduce anything from his expression and she found it oddly discomfiting. 'I—I don't quite see why you think I've done something wrong,' she said. 'Why do you, Andrea?'

He said nothing, but after gazing for a moment at the *citro* in his glass, he swallowed it all in one draught, then shook his head. 'If you do not realise by the time we have eaten dinner,' he told her, 'I will enlighten you, perhaps. In the meantime, it is late and we have not yet had our meal.'

Dinner was always taken at a leisurely pace and talk afterwards was prolonged, so that it could be the early hours of the morning before everyone drifted off to bed. Several times during dinner Michelle had glanced surreptitiously at Andrea, but not once had he looked in her direction so far as she noticed, and she wished it did not matter so much.

At last Pavlos and Medea left and, as usual, their going was the signal for the rest of the party to break up. Madame Davolos retired shortly afterwards, and Natalia followed her, leaving Michelle still talking to Georgi about some trivial matter they had started during dinner, and argued lightheartedly about on and off ever since.

It was when Georgi declared his intention of going to bed that Michelle made haste to follow suit. Whatever Andrea had said before dinner about enlightening her about the reason for his disapproval, she was wary of being left alone with him at this hour of night, and when Georgi got to his feet she did too.

'Michelle!' She paused, part way to the door with Georgi, and turned slowly to look back at Andrea, while Georgi switched his curious and interested gaze from one to the other. 'Will you stay for a few moments and talk with me, please?'

The request itself was unexpected, but the way in which it was worded was even more so, and she felt the thudding beat of her heart as she looked across the room at him. It had to be about Natalia, she thought, but no matter what it was he wanted to talk about, the request had sounded so much like a plea that she could not possibly have resisted it.

Turning to Georgi, she smiled at him a little uncertainly. 'I'll see you tomorrow, Georgi—*kali nikta*.'

Whatever her own feelings had been about staying alone with Andrea at that hour of the morning, Georgi obviously had no such qualms, but found the situation very much to his liking. His blue eyes were twinkling as he bent his head to kiss her cheek, and his voice, threaded with laughter, whispered against her ear.

'You see, Michelle, how he begs for your company?'

It was so close to her own impression that she shook her head hurriedly, pushing him towards the door. 'Goodnight, Georgi!' She waited until the door closed behind him before she attempted to look at Andrea, and her legs felt dismayingly unsteady as she walked across the room. Nevertheless when he suggested she sat down, she shook her head.

'No, I'll stand, thank you.'

He viewed her refusal with a curiously raised brow, then went to stand by the high marble mantel with an elbow resting on it, while a thumb and forefinger pulled - thoughtfully at his lower lip. For the moment he said nothing, but she waited patiently, studying him from the shadow of her lashes while she did so.

His dark features were shadowed by the artificial lights and reminded her of a few nights ago when he had compared himself to the satyr-like god, Pan, and herself to the fearful and unfortunate Syrinx.

Watching him, some of the magic of those few moments came back to her and she watched him with an irrepressible excitement stirring in her breast, her hands tight at her sides. It was so easy to recall how disturbingly that firm straight mouth had kissed her, and she barely suppressed a shiver at the memory of it—Andrea could all too easily arouse unfamiliar and disquieting emotions, and seemed to do so with increasing frequency lately.

'You thought me unreasonable because I frowned on your attempt to—glamorise Natalia.' He was not asking her, she realised, bringing herself hastily back to reality, he was stating it as a fact, and she could hardly deny it.

She took a moment to compose her thoughts then, looked at him as coolly and dispassionately as she was able. 'Everyone else seemed quite pleased with the result,' she pointed out. 'I can't quite see why you had to be different, Andrea.'

'I did not dislike the result—I complimented Natalia, if you remember.' A brief quirk at one corner of his mouth gave her another unexpected glimpse of the humour that he could still surprise her with. 'It was upon your instruction that I did so, you will recall!'

She ignored the gentle dig, and shrugged lightly. 'Anyway, Georgi was pleased, and that was the object of the exercise.'

'To please Georgi?' He was nodding as if some suspicion of his had been confirmed. 'I thought perhaps that Was so. But why, Michelle?' She looked up, frowning curiously, genuinely puzzled by his need to ask. 'Why try to change Natalia? Georgi has been happy with her as she is, until now!'

'But he *wasn't* always, was he?'

She had answered him impulsively and without any conscious desire to remind him of Mary Darnley and his part in breaking up her affair

with Georgi, but he did not like the reminder, that was evident from the way his eyes narrowed. Maybe, she thought a little dazedly, he had a conscience about the girl, although it seemed unlikely, knowing Andrea. He was, however, a man full of surprises, as she knew to her cost.

'And you did not approve of my action in that instance either, did you!' he said in a hard cool voice. 'It is to be expected, of course, since your views on marriage incline more towards the romantic than the practical!'

'I don't approve of anyone who tries to run another person's life for them! And as for my views on marriage—I've always looked upon marriage as the natural sequel to romance. The whole thing becomes little more than a—a cattle market otherwise!'

'What nonsense!'

'To you perhaps—you're a man! But the thought of being—looked over for good points, and approved or not as suitable, would make me physically sick, Andrea —no matter who happened to be looking me over!'

The black eyes swept over her in a swift intensive survey that was at once scornful and startlingly explicit and she hastily looked away from it. He was no longer leaning against the mantel in that seemingly relaxed pose, but stood tall and straight, looking down at her as if he found her even more of a fool than he had feared..

'And what becomes of the women who are less fortunate than yourself, Michelle? The ones who do not have their choice of a husband? Who do not have soft, golden looks that can turn a man's head and bring him to her feet? Are they to go through life without a husband, when they have other qualities, more practical qualities, that make them good wives?'

'You know I didn't mean that!'

'Do you think they are not happy to be chosen as a man's wife? As happy as a woman who is chosen for her beauty alone?'

'I didn't suggest they were—oh, you just never understand, do you?'

That reference to soft golden looks seemingly referred to herself, she felt almost sure, although it was practically the same words that Medea had used to describe Mary Darnley. She could not still the hard, rapid beat of her heart, but the silence between them was taut and electric, almost stunning in its intensity, and she was trembling like a leaf, yet when Andrea spoke next it was in a quiet, soft voice that suggested he was well under control.

'You simply do not understand our customs, Michelle. Things are different here than in England.'

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak for a second or two. 'I know,' she said, her voice small and slightly husky. Somewhere in her chaotic thoughts she recalled the original subject of their conversation, the reason he had called her back, and she glanced briefly and despairingly at the dark, strong face, wondering how it was that they became so inevitably involved in controversy. 'You—we were talking about Natalia,' she reminded him unsteadily. 'Or was it only to yell at me that you called me back?'

'I was not aware of—yelling at you!'

'You've criticised my views on love and marriage, and my efforts to help Natalia! If you didn't actually yell at me, you came close to it—and I don't like being lectured like a naughty child, Andrea!'

She had half expected anger, but instead he simply raised his eyes briefly and appealed to the almighty in his own tongue, then turned and put his arm along the mantel with his head resting on his forearm

for a moment, as if in despair. When he turned back to her a second or two later, there was something in the way he looked at her that made her heart flutter urgently in her breast, and brought a strange lightness to it suddenly.

'Why do you always seek to anger me?' he asked in the deep, soft voice that could do such incredible things to her senses, and she spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness, wishing she knew the answer herself.

'Why do you *get* so angry?' she whispered.

Andrea said nothing for a moment, but stood regarding her with those deep, unfathomable eyes, then he shook his head and a small half-smile plucked at one corner of his mouth as he straightened up. 'Perhaps because you are a woman who always—*always* without fail, tries to make things difficult for me. That is the way it seems to me,' he went on hastily when she would have objected. 'You make me angry because you do not—you do not react in the way I expect you to, but seem always so determined to do the opposite; to oppose my wishes.'

It was a startling confession coming from Andrea, and she could find no answer to it for a second or two. Then she looked up at him again and a smile tugged at the corner of her own mouth and shone in her blue eyes. 'And you're not used to being opposed, are you, Andrea?'

Slowly the black eyes searched her face, bringing a swift and urgent response from her pulse. 'No,' he admitted at last. 'No, I am not accustomed to opposition, nor do I relish the sensation it arouses, especially; when my opponent is a woman.'

She laughed, a small soft and very uncertain sound: that shivered through the silent room. 'But I'm not the type of woman you approve

of, am I, Andrea? I don't take kindly to being organised or moulded to someone else's idea of how I should be—I speak up for myself!"

'And for Georgi, and Dimitri too! Is there no limit to your causes, *ligho ena mou!*'

The softly spoken endearment was unexpected in this instance, and she felt her senses respond as if to a caress, her voice soft and breathless. 'I don't always stop to think,' she admitted. 'Maybe that's why you get angry with me.'

He did not deny it, but the black eyes continued to regard her steadily and, because she could no longer stand the scrutiny, she hastily turned away to perch herself on the arm of one of the chairs. 'And now you have undertaken to provide Georgi with a dark version of Mary Darnley.'

'Andrea!' She got to her feet again swiftly, the uneasy truth recognised at last, and he held her gaze steadily.

'Is that not what you were trying to do?' he challenged.

It was, she realised rather dazedly. She had hoped to give Georgi a girl as like Mary Darnley as possible, although she had scarcely been aware of the full truth until now, and it stunned her for a moment to realise it. She did not deny it, but shook her head slowly, and Andrea's eyes had a curiously gentle and understanding look.

'It will not work, *ligho ena,*' he told her, 'unless it is achieved—gradually. Can you not see that? Natalia is not the same as you, or Medea, certainly not the Mary Darnley, she has been brought up to no other world but her own small and rather restricted one, and new ventures alarm her if they are too sudden. Also,' he added with a wry twist to his mouth, 'how am I to explain to my friend Palides that the quiet daughter he sent to my care has suddenly become a stranger he does not recognise?'

'Oh!' Michelle raised anxious eyes. 'I did think about Natalia's father, but she seemed to think he wouldn't mind.'

'He will mind if the change is too great,' Andrea assured her confidently. 'And she is still his daughter until she becomes Georgi's wife.'

'I see.'

He shook his head, a hint of smile on his mouth as he looked down at her, his elbow resting again on the mantel. 'I do not think you do see, Michelle, but as long as you realise that the process must be gradual, if Natalia is to be changed to suit our brother. Do not suddenly turn our quiet little dove into a bird of paradise, let her' get used to the idea, and her father too, then she will be more confident. Take time, *ligho ina'*

Time was something that was rapidly running out for her on the island, Michelle thought, and wondered if he realised it. 'I—I may have to leave it to Medea to finish the transformation if it's to take time,' she ventured with an uncertain smile. 'She would I'm sure, if I asked her to.'

'Possibly.' He made the response absently, as if he had doubts about his sister's competence in that direction, then smiled faintly. 'One thing is certain, Michelle, Georgi will expect this new image you have created, to be maintained!'

Her hands were clasped together much more tightly than she realised and she felt her heart rapping hard at her ribs as she carefully avoided looking at him. 'Medea will help,' she said, 'until Natalia learns it all herself. There's no other way.'

A large hand slid beneath her chin suddenly and lifted her face and she caught her breath. The overhead lights cast dark shadows where her lashes lay on her cheeks, and there was a slight unsteadiness in the

softness of her mouth which he studied with disturbing intensity for several seconds before he spoke.

'Is there not, Michelle?' She did not answer and, after a moment, he bent over and kissed her mouth lightly and with infinite gentleness. 'Think about it, *ligho ena mou*, when you have slept!'

Michelle moved like someone in a dream until she, got to the door, then she turned briefly and looked back at him, a tall and oddly lonely figure standing by the elaborate marble mantel, and her heart was beating hard and fast while she held his gaze.

'*Kali nikta*, Michelle.' The black eyes glowed warmly in the overhead light, and it startled her to realise how much she wanted to go back to him.

Turning swiftly, she opened the door of the *salon*. 'Goodnight, Andrea!'

It was later than usual when Michelle came down to breakfast the following morning, and she had barely sat down to a solitary meal when a maid came to tell her that she was wanted on, the telephone. It would be Dale Carter, of course. She had been expecting to hear from him for several days now, but apparently he had been busy, for she did not believe his not calling was deliberate.

Follpwing the girl through into the house, she picked up the telephone with no doubt at all in hei mind who the caller was. 'Hello, Dale?'

The silence that followed was enough to tell her how wrong she had been, and her heart was beating hard and fast at her ribs even before Andrea's deep and unmistakable voice spoke to her. 'I am sorry if I disappoint you, Michelle—but this is Andrea.'

'Oh, yes, of course—I mean, I recognise your voice, Andrea!'

'You were expecting to hear from Dale Carter?'

She had been expecting to hear from Dale, but he receded to the back of her mind now that Andrea was on the phone, and she was intrigued to know just why he was calling from Athens. 'I've been expecting him to call me all this week, Andrea, you know I said so.'

'Ah, yes, so you did.'

She hesitated, still intrigued. 'I can't quite think why it is *you're* ringing me,' she told him with a rather breathless little laugh. 'Is there something I can do for you, Andrea? Is something wrong?'

'Unless I have misjudged the timing of this call, there is nothing at all wrong,' Andrea said, and sounded faintly amused. 'As you will know, Michelle, Georgi Will be flying over to the mainland with Natalia this morning some time, taking her home to her father. I had thought perhaps you would like to fly over with them and have lunch with me. Would that please you?'

'Oh yes!'

She had not meant to sound quite so frankly eager, but the invitation was unexpected, and he had taken her by surprise. She could think of nothing she would rather do than have lunch with Andrea, though admitting it, even to herself, gave her a strange excited feeling in her stomach—a kind of heady sensation that she could not quite explain, and she could tell from his voice that Andrea was smiling, perhaps on the brink of laughter, so that she smiled instinctively.

'I am flattered that you make up your mind so quickly, Michelle! I shall meet you at the airport when you arrive.'

'Oh, but you needn't do that. I can find --'

She got no further, for his amusement was more evident now. 'You surely do not think I will allow you to find your own way around Athens, *ligho ena*,' he laughed. 'I will be there to meet you, be sure of it! *Audio!*'

'Goodbye!' '

At some other time she would probably have been annoyed at the implication that she was incapable of finding her way around Athens alone, but she was not in a mood to be annoyed by anything at the moment, - especially anything that Andrea said, and she laughed to herself as she put down the receiver and stood for a moment beside the table.

She almost cried out in surprise when an arm slid around her waist from behind suddenly and she was . hugged close to someone who murmured in her ear. 'Now why are you standing here alone laughing, and with a strange and dreamy look in your eye, my sister?' Georgi asked.

Shaking her head, she moved out of the encircling"; arm and went to stand by the window, looking out into the garden. 'I didn't know I was looking dreamy,' ' she denied, and Georgi laughed.

'You were—and there is always some reason for such a look,' he insisted, his eyes twinkling. 'You— day-dream, huh?'

'I was simply pondering on my phone call,' Michelle told him. 'By the way, Georgi, I'll be flying over with you and Natalia this morning—I hope you don't mind having me along.'

'Of course not!' He was quizzing her, she could tell that, even without turning round. 'You are coming with us to see Natalia's family?'

'No, I'm staying in Athens.'

'Alone?'

She had never been to Athens alone, nor anywhere else since she came to the island, and Georgi must know, or at least guess that she was meeting someone, but she was curiously shy suddenly of admitting that her date was with Andrea. When she did not answer he came across the room to her.

'Who are you meeting, Michelle?' he asked, plainly suspicious, and she thought ruefully how much like Andrea he could sound sometimes. He frowned suddenly and looked at her face dappled with the sunlight from outside. 'It is not your Englishman that you plan to see, is it, Michelle?'

'Georgi, I do wish you wouldn't always refer to Dale like that! He *isn't* my Englishman, and it isn't a very polite way to refer to someone whose name you know quite well!'

His eyes gleamed for a moment at being corrected, but he was smiling again a second later and putting an arm around her waist. 'Whatever he is called,' he said. '*Was* it Dale Carter who called you?'

She walked away from him, back across the room to sit in one of the armchairs. 'It was Andrea,' she told him, as casually as possible. 'He wants me to meet him for lunch.'

'Ah-hah!' His blue eyes beamed with satisfaction and he came and sat in the chair facing her, his elbows resting on his knees and leaning towards her, anxious to learn more. 'So you- are invited to lunch with Andrea, huh? And for this he calls you on the *tilefono*?'

'Yes.' She could sense him watching her, trying to. guess what she was feeling, although it was probably all too evident in her face that she was delighted with the invitation. But she felt curiously vulnerable suddenly, as if every sensation she experienced showed on her face, and Georgi was missing nothing. 'I'm just lunching with

Andrea,' she reminded him a little breathlessly. 'I've done so before, Georgi.'

'Ah-hah! But to call from Athens to ask. --' He broke off when the telephone once more shrilled its summons and Georgi got up to answer it.

'That's probably Andrea again, to say he can't make it after all,' she called after him, and laughed unsteadily, praying it was a bad guess.

Georgi turned after a second or two and frowned across at her. 'For you,' he said, his hand over the mouthpiece, 'but he is too late, you are to see Andrea!'

'It's Dale?' She took the receiver from him, noting the gleam of satisfaction in his blue eyes. 'Hello, Dale?'

'Michelle! At last I have a chance to call you— I've been absolutely rushed off my feet since I left Savra, this is the first opportunity I've had.'

'I guessed you'd been kept busy. Is everything all right?'

'Everything's fine! Look, can you possibly get over to the mainland today?, I rather hoped we could have lunch together—I'm off back to England tomorrow and I shan't have another chance to see you, Michelle.'

'Oh, Dale, I'm sorry! I really am, but I've promised to meet Andrea for lunch. He rang only just before you did as a matter of fact.'

'Oh, I see.'

Somewhere in the back of her mind something told her she could ring Andrea and explain; it was just possible he would understand and

simply postpone their date, but she realised how reluctant she was to do it and rejected the idea without really considering it.

'Dale, I'm sorry.'

'So am I!' He laughed shortly, and she guessed he *had* expected her to put off Andrea to see him. 'Oh well, I'll be back in England when you come home, I'll see you then, won't I?'

'Yes, of course.'

A brief silence followed, then he laughed again, the same short, brusque sound as before. 'Well—goodbye until we meet again in England, Michelle!'

'Goodbye, Dale, and—*bon voyage!*'

'You should say—*kald taksithi*,' he told her. 'And that is as far as I ever got with those Greek lessons we spoke about, isn't it? Goodbye, Michelle!'

She replaced the receiver and turned to find Georgi smiling rather smugly. 'So,' he said with evident satisfaction, 'the last obstacle is removed!'

CHAPTER NINE

It was only when they were already in the air and on their way to Athens that Georgi revealed the fact that they were likely to run into adverse weather if they delayed much longer. It was something that Michelle viewed with some doubt as she sat beside Georgi and Natalia in the comfortable little cabin of the aircraft, with the pilot who had flown her to Savra initially at the controls.

She looked at Georgi doubtfully, finding it hard to believe that the Aegean in August could produce anything but the most perfect of weather. 'Georgi, you're, joking, surely,' she told him. 'We don't get storms in August, do we, not here.'

'Ah, but we do, Michelle,' her brother assured her solemnly. 'The *meltemi* blows, and we have violent storms!'

Still not entirely convinced, Michelle looked across at Natalia, the other side of him, but Natalia too was nodding her head in agreement. 'It is so, Michelle,' she said. 'The *meltemi* blows and sometimes there is much rain and noise. Very bad sometimes!'

Not yet anxious, but a little less sure, Michelle looked out of the window at the sea below. 'And there's one of these—storm winds, forecast?' She asked. 'Should we have taken off, in that case, Georgi?'

'Oh, we shall be in Athens before it is due,' Georgi assured her confidently. 'Do not worry about it, my sister. Think instead of your lunch with Andrea!'

The suggestion was one she had no difficulty in following, for she looked forward to lunching with Andrea with a quite incredible sense of excitement, and she thought no more about the threatened storm, but rather about why Andrea should suddenly have rung up and invited her to lunch.

It was only when the little aircraft gave the first of many hiccup-like bumps that the matter was brought back to mind, and another glance from the window showed the surface of the sea whipped into a flurry of white horses, and the sky around them ominously dark. It was only seconds later that the pilot spoke to Georgi in his own tongue—shortly and urgently.

Georgi looked troubled, and reached for Natalia's hand as he spoke, catching his breath when the little plane lurched with sickening suddenness, and brought Michelle's stomach into her mouth. 'We are going to catch the storm,' he told them, an anxious eye on the pilot. 'It has happened sooner than was expected, and we shall soon be caught in --'

He got no further, for the storm hit them with stunning suddenness and with the force of a huge hand, a loud, ear-splitting roar of wind heralding its arrival that slammed the little plane as hard as if it had hit a solid obstacle, and swept it upwards before smashing it down again while the pilot struggled to regain control.

Georgi looked paler than Michelle would have believed possible, and he drew both girls into his arms, Natalia hiding her head against his shoulder. He spoke to her in Greek, consoling, soft-spoken words, while the pilot cursed the storm in the same tongue, and for a moment Michelle' felt curiously isolated from them, so that she too turned and hid her face as the little craft was bounced helplessly about the stormy sky like a child's ball.

In the few moments when she raised her head, Michelle could see nothing above or below them, but the ragged, raging storm clouds and the jagged brilliance of lightning in startling proximity. The noise was unbelievable, just as Natalia had said it was, and her heart was thudding wildly, appalled as much by their complete helplessness as anything else.

She thought of Andrea waiting at Athens airport. By now he was possibly aware of what was happening, perhaps he was even familiar with the same sense of helplessness as she was feeling herself. He could do nothing, of course, but somehow it did help to know that he was there, waiting.

It seemed like hours, although it could not have been, then the pilot said something to Georgi, shouting to make himself heard above the storm, and Georgi nodded, his mouth set tight, and looking suddenly older. The pilot pointed, downwards, and Michelle again looked through the window, but she could still see nothing but the storm, and the steely glitter of rain hammering at the windows and at the fuselage of the plane as if it would force its way in.

'Costas is going to try and bring us down as gently as possible,' Georgi explained, in English for her benefit. 'We have to come down, there is no choice—the instruments do not work and so we do not know exactly where we are, and one of the engines has gone, but --' He shrugged with a certain fatalistic resignation. 'We can do nothing but pray.'

Michelle took a brief stunned look out of the window beside her and almost unconsciously registered a low hillside among what seemed like an endless mountain range, and in the few seconds that she was aware of anything definite in the flurrying, deafening noise of the storm, her eye caught a glimpse of a house of some kind on the hillside. It was a reassuring sight, somehow, in the fury of the storm.

It was no more than a second's glimpse, though, because Georgi hugged them both to him suddenly and , kissed them in turn before persuading them forward, so that they all three had their heads bowed towards their knees. Costas, the pilot, was still struggling desperately and muttering in his own tongue against the elements that seemed bent on destroying them, and his voice was the last thing Michelle remembered hearing for a while.

She had expected some kind of bump, but not the sudden rending crash with which they hit the ground and for a second or two she lost consciousness, slumped forward with Georgi's protective arm still around her shoulders. She curved her own arms around her head almost instinctively at the moment of impact, and it was probably that which saved her, and enabled her to recover consciousness in a matter of moments.

It was still raining, although somehow the fury of the storm was much less frightening than it had been in the air, and she lay for a moment with her head spinning, trying to realise just what had happened. Apart from the wind it was so quiet, and the arm across her shoulders was curiously and dismayingly limp so that she shrank from it without fully realising what she was doing.

There was a numbing pain in her head and every bone in her body felt as if it had been beaten and bruised, but she was conscious and a few tentative movements showed that nothing was broken. Turning to her brother, she looked at the pale, still face and stared for a moment, her hands hovering above him, not yet daring to touch him.

'Georgi?' She touched his face and realised only then that the roof of the aircraft was caved in and the rain was pouring in on to them. He was wet through and getting wetter every second, but mercifully he was still breathing. 'Georgi!'

He did not move, and neither did Natalia beside him. His arm lay limply across her shoulders and their two heads were close together like sleeping children that even the cold soaking rain could not rouse, although both were alive.

Breathless and only half aware of what she was doing, Michelle clambered over the broken debris of the cabin to where the pilot lay slumped in his seat, unconscious, as Georgi and Natalia were, and she felt the coldness of despair.

'Costas—Costas, wake up!'

He did not stir, although he was breathing, as the others were, and their being out of touch gave her a dismaying sense of loneliness, and made her feel even more helpless. Outside there seemed to be nothing but rocks, barren wet rocks, steeply sloping, stark and gloomy in the storm rain, and there was no sign of another human being.

Her head ached, and she was not sure what to do next, but some instinct reminded her of the house she had glimpsed just before they crashed. A house meant people, and people meant help, so it was imperative that she find that house. No one else was capable of going, so it was up to her to go and find what help she could and send someone for Georgi and the others.

Somehow, she never really knew how, she scrambled out of the shattered aircraft and stood for several moments in the driving rain, trying to get some kind of bearing on that only vaguely remembered building on the hillside. It had been a hillside, she felt quite convinced of that, not a mountainside such as surrounded her now, but a lower hill, if only she could guess in which direction it lay.

The thin summer dress she wore clung to her, soaking wet and useless in the present circumstances. She was shiveringly cold with the driving rain lashing about her, stinging her flesh where the material had torn and one shoulder lay bare and scratched, the grazes washed clean by the downpour. The hem of her dress too was torn, and she tried to tear it free because it impeded her as she scrambled over the rocky terrain, tugging dazedly at it with vague unsteady hands, until it ripped away almost as far as her thigh at one side, and left more of her skin exposed to the chilling wind .and rain.

She must get help, that much she knew, but it was the only thing that was clear in her mind as she set off along the stony ridge, seeing nothing but that small house in her mind's eye, stumbling along on

shoes that threatened to send her rolling down the steep incline if she did not dispose of them, impatiently pulling them off to lie where they fell.

Nothing mattered but finding the house on the hillside and sending back help to the others, it was that that kept her going for what seemed like hours, but she found nothing. No house, no sign of human habitation at all until suddenly, in the distance, a small figure, looking oddly bulky and bowed against the rain, driving a small flock of bedraggled sheep before him:

How she managed to hurry, she had no idea, but she drew nearer gradually, calling to the boy as she came, and she cried with relief when he turned at last and stared at her, his boyish face stunned, his eyes wide in disbelief. He could have been no more than fifteen years old, but even so his reaction was such that her fuddled brain, for all her preoccupation with finding help, registered his reaction with some surprise.

She could have no idea how she looked, with her dress torn, and her bare feet and legs below its tattered hemline; her hair wet and bedraggled, clinging to her face and neck, and as she approached him the boy stood transfixed for a second or two as if he had seen a ghost.

Snug in his sleeveless, bulky sheepskin, he looked so warm and comfortable that she reached out to him appealingly before she actually got within touching distance. The wind had eased slightly and the rain was a little less furious in its downpour, but it was still wild enough to set the imagination working.

It startled the young boy to find himself faced with a wild but curiously pretty creature emerging from the storm like one of the nereids of folklore. The creatures were known to fall in love with handsome young shepherd boys, so who could blame him if he took to his heels and ran, hurrying his protesting flock before him? For

everyone knew that the chosen ones eventually sickened and wasted away.

'Please!'

Michelle's cries followed him, but he ran the faster, and she could not hope to go after him, her strength was spent, and she could only watch what seemed like her one hope disappearing from her sight as fast as he could go.

She stood and watched him go, then resigned herself at last to the fact that she could not go on. Once more she was surrounded by nothing but the inhospitable mountains, and tears ran down her cheeks to mingle with the rain that was still falling, though with a little less fury than before. She felt so utterly tired and hopeless that she could not have gone another step had her life depended upon it.

She had no idea where she was, nor how far she had come from the crashed plane, only that her attempts to get help had been completely without success, and there was still no sign of the house she had set out to find. It had been there, she was almost sure, although in her present state she was not nearly so sure of anything and her head ached unceasingly.

There was a kind of crevice between two of the rocks and it was here that she had slumped after the shepherd boy fled. It gave a certain amount of shelter, and at least it kept the chill wind at bay to some extent, and she leaned back against the cold rock as if it was something soft and comforting.

The last thing she thought of as she closed her eyes was the warmth and strength of Andrea's arms as she remembered them, and the tears once more slid down her cheeks, though they went unheeded now, because she was insensible to everything.

'Michelle!' The voice seemed at first to be coming from a long way off, but it sounded closer every second as she brought her dazed mind back to realities. 'Michelle! ' It was repeating her name over and over again, with a stream of soft spoken Greek words in between. 'Michelle!'

The voice was familiar, wonderfully and excitingly familiar; deep and resonant and seemingly anxious, and the arms that held her close were just as she had been dreaming of them in the seconds before she drifted into unconsciousness. Holding her tightly, close to the comforting, masculine warmth of his body, binding her to him with the strength and reassurance she needed.

Her eyelids fluttered open for a second and she looked up into his face, but scarcely recognised it. It seemed to have become so much older since the last time she saw it, and the dark, golden tanned complexion had a greyish tinge, the mouth drawn with worry. Only the eyes burned with that unmistakable fire, black and shining as jet below the straight black brows, and they looked down at her for a second or two with such intensity that she turned her face and buried it against his chest, and the damp softness of his jacket.

He was on his knees on the wet ground, she realised, and was startled to find such humility in him, and his clothes were damp, as if he too had been out in the storm, although he was nothing like as drenchingly wet as she was herself.

'You are safe now, *ligho ena mou!*' He cradled her in his arms and the voice whispering close to her ear was slightly muffled by the wet, tangled mass of her hair.

She had so far registered nothing else but Andrea's presence, but he turned and spoke to someone behind him suddenly and she realised he had brought help. There were other voices now, speaking quietly

in Greek, then suddenly she was lifted into Andrea's arms and carried a short distance.

Her eyes remained closed because she felt too unutterably weary to open them again, but she did make a brief murmur of protest when the arms that cradled her were withdrawn and she seemed to be put on to a stretcher and a blanket tucked in around her. The gently rocking movement of their progress almost lulled her into unconsciousness again, but she was vaguely aware of what was going on.

The rain had stopped, that much she realised, and the warmth of the sun touched her eyelids at last, and warmed her chilled face. She was so very tired that it was hard to summon the necessary energy to do anything other than simply lie there and be carried over the same rock-strewn trail she had taken on foot, but after a second or two she opened her eyes again.

The heavy lids lifted uncertainly and her gaze instinctively sought out the familiar tall, dark figure walking beside the stretcher. Slipping a hand from beneath the blanket, she reached out to him. 'Andrea!'

He smiled, but it was a tight, tense smile that barely reached his black eyes, though his hand took hers and his fingers closed around hers, strong and reassuring. 'Do not try to talk, *ligho ena mou*,' he said quietly. 'Until we know how badly you are hurt, lie quietly, hmm?'

Her tongue flicked swiftly over her dry lips, and she tried to shake her head, although the effort cost her dearly. 'I—I'm not hurt,' she whispered huskily. 'But Georgi and --'

'They are all safe,' Andrea assured her, soft-voiced. 'If only you had stayed with them, *ligho ena*, you would have been found so much more quickly.'

He was scolding her! Feeling as she was, she was hyper-sensitive to any suggestion of criticism, but it hurt rather than angered her and she

felt the tears start again in her eyes as she looked up at him. 'I—I tried to fetch help,' she said, in a small, dry voice. 'I saw a house before we—before we crashed, and I—I tried to --'

'Ssh! Do not talk, *agape mou*, not now! All that matters is that you are safe!' He squeezed her hand and smiled reassuringly.

'Andrea --' She stopped short, her eyes fixed dazedly on the dark anxious face, her confused brain trying to recall exactly what he had said. *Agape mou*, she felt sure he had said *agape mou*, and Georgi had said—She clung to his hand tightly and licked her dry lips once more. 'Andrea --

'Ssh!' He frowned in mock severity, and gently pushed her hand back under cover of the blanket. 'If you insist upon talking I shall walk where you cannot see me !'

'No!'

'Then do not talk, hmm?' The black eyes warmed with a smile and she felt her heart respond to it, her chilled body glowing suddenly.

With a suggestion of a sigh, she closed her eyes again, gradually sinking into sleep as the gentle rocking sway of the stretcher continued. The rain had stopped, the sun was shining and she knew that Georgi and the others were all right; best of all Andrea was there, although heaven knew how that had come about. Not that it concerned her at the moment, how he came to be there, she only thanked heaven that he was.

Michelle was almost startled to realise how fit she felt when she woke in her hospital bed. Her head ached still and when she moved too suddenly she experienced one or two unexpected twinges of pain, but

otherwise she felt fine, and wished there was someone about that she could tell.

The nurse who came in a few minutes later smiled when she saw her and nodded, as if everything was as she expected. She had an overnight bag in one hand that Michelle recognised as her own and smiled when she placed it on the stool at the foot of the bed.

'Am I to be allowed home?' She sat upright, ignoring a twinge of pain in her head, and looked at the nurse anxiously.

'Ne, thespinis—Kirfos Davolos is waiting for you.'

Andrea! Of course it had to be Andrea who came for her... it was unlikely that Georgi was sufficiently recovered to take her home, but she had to be sure. 'Mr—Kirios Andrea Davolos?'

The nurse had obviously recognised her renowned caller, and she nodded her head with a smile. *'Ne, thespinis.'*

Michelle sat with the sheet held close under her chin for a second or two, then she smiled and turned back the bedclothes prior to getting out. 'Will you tell him that I'm on my way?' she asked, and from the way the nurse smiled it was evident that she thought she knew the way things were.

'Ne, thespinis, I will tell him!'

Michelle's heart was thudding hard, beating with the pounding rhythm of a great drum, and her hands trembled so much that she had difficulty fastening the zip on her dress, and all the time she dressed she was wondering at the depth of her own emotions.

For a moment or two as she stood in the hospital room she felt strangely lightheaded, as if nothing was quite real, then she took out a small mirror from the handbag that had been sent over with her

clothes, and. studied her reflection for a moment with a curious sense of anticipation churning away in her breast.

There were still dark shadows under her eyes and her cheeks were a little pale, but there was something else about her own face that was curiously different and unfamiliar, and it took her a moment or two to realise what it was. There was a certain expression in her eyes, and on her face too, a look of shining anticipation, and it was there, she knew, because Andrea was waiting for her.

She had recognised and admitted for some time that Andrea could affect her in a way that -no man had before, but it was only now, as she looked at the small, pale reflection of her own face, that she realised how deeply she was in love with him. Nothing else seemed to matter to her—she had not even asked how Georgi and Natalia were, because the nurse had told her that Andrea was waiting for her, and once she had known that, it had put everything else out of her mind.

The nurse appeared again, smiling inquiringly as she put her head round the edge of the door. 'You are ready to leave, *thespinis*?'

Picking up the overnight bag, Michelle smiled. 'Yes, I'm quite ready, nurse, thank you.'

Andrea was in a glass-walled waiting room and he got up from his seat when he saw her coming, one of those small, enigmatic half-smiles hovering about his mouth, and she felt her heart turn completely over at the sight of him. It was less than twenty-four hours since she had seen him last, but it seemed so much longer somehow, and it was strangely like meeting again for the first time now that she knew how much he meant to her.

A pale beige business suit threw his dark tan into stunning contrast, and no trace of that dismaying pallor remained. He was far more the man she was used to than the one who had walked beside the stretcher

yesterday when she was carried from the mountain. His manner was one of quiet confidence, of arrogance even—the familiar Andrea Davolos who expected and received obedience, but it was the look she saw in the black eyes between their thick lashes that brought a sudden flush of colour to Michelle's cheeks. A warm glowing look that stirred her pulses into violent response and made her feel suddenly lightheaded.

'Michelle I' He took her hands in his, his eyes sweeping over her face in a Scrutiny that set her heart racing wildly and recalled how only yesterday he had called her his love. 'You are feeling quite well?'

It was only to be expected, of course, that he would be very formal" in front of the nurse, but it struck her suddenly that perhaps that easy, gently spoken '*agape mou*' had been merely a consolation to her anxious spirit, and she felt her legs weaker suddenly, so that • she smiled almost without realising she "was doing it.

'I—I'm fine, thank you, Andrea.'

The nurse departed at last, and she had barely left the room before a hand slid beneath Michelle's chin and raised her face so that the black eyes could see for themselves how pale she was still. 'You look too pale, *ligho ena*,' he said softly. 'I think I shall take you home and let Mama look after you.'

'Oh, but I really am quite fit, Andrea I' She smiled once more, though she did not look at him directly, despite the hand that kept her face turned up to him. 'There's no need at all for Madame Davolos to look after me. I—I haven't heard how Georgi and Natalia are,' she told him. 'Are they very badly hurt?'

'A little concussed, that is all, and Georgi has a sprained arm,' he told her, turning her towards the door. "If you wish, we will see them before we leave, and then you can report to Mama how well they both

are. I fully expect to bring Georgi home tomorrow, and Natalia will be going back to her father.'

'I tried to get help, because I thought—I mean I. know I saw a house on the——'

A finger was pressed firmly over her lips and when she "looked up the black eyes were smiling. 'You will tell me all about it when I have you safely home,' Andrea insisted. 'I will take you to see Georgi and Natalia, and then I will take you home and you may tell me about your—trek, hmm?'

His hand was under her arm holding her close to his side, and she had no inclination at all to argue with anything he said, so she simply nodded. 'Yes, Andrea.'

It had been a wonderful relief to see Georgi and to know for herself that he was only slightly concussed, although heaven knew how they had escaped so lightly. Costas, the pilot, was slightly worse off, he had a broken leg as well as being concussed, but considering the conditions they had crash-landed in, their escape was _ remarkable.

Georgi had been the first to recover consciousness and, realising that Michelle was missing, he had decided to seek help of his own accord without knowing whether she was already doing so or not. He had a better knowledge of the area so that his search for help had been much more productive, and he had insisted that Andrea be told that Michelle was missing.

Andrea had joined the search party, looking for her in the foothills, and it was his finding the torn hem of her dress that gave them their first clue as to the direction she had taken. Her discarded shoes had led them on further, and finally she had been discovered crouching, chilled and unconscious, in the cleft of rock.

'I suppose I should have stayed with the plane and saved everyone a lot of trouble,' she said, looking at Andrea through her lashes, and she saw him smile.

'But it would not have been like you to do nothing, would it Michelle? You were so sure you had seen that house on the hill and you wanted to find it and get help for the others.'

'I'm sure I *did* see it!' Her blue eyes challenged him to doubt her, and he was smiling and shaking his head.

'So did you, *agape mou*, but it was in the opposite direction to the way you took. No wonder you got lost!'

Michelle caught her breath. He seemed to be using that endearment with increasing frequency, and there was nothing she could do about her heart's urgent response to it, or the sense of excitement it gave her each time she heard it. It had surprised her when Medea, Pavlos and Madame Davolos had so readily left them together, but she liked having Andrea to herself, and the fact of their being left alone seemed curiously significant somehow.

'I was so—so fuddle-headed that I didn't know what I was doing in fact,' she confessed.

She had been seated in one of the armchairs, but she found the steady disturbing regard of those black eyes too much for her suddenly, and got up, moving over to stand by the window, looking out in to the garden. Half turning, she looked over her shoulder at him when she heard the deep, soft sound of his laughter.

'Fuddle-headed?' he echoed. The expression was evidently new to him, but he found it amusing and he was shaking his head. 'This I have not heard before, *ligho ena*, but I would not disagree if it means that you were very courageous to set out as you did to get help,

knowing nothing of the country or the language and only half conscious. I know that Georgi will be very proud of you!"

'Georgi?'

She turned her head again, asking the question without stopping to think, and she saw Andrea coming across the room, towards her before she hastily turned back. He came and stood just behind her and the warmth of his nearness was almost like a physical contact that sent a thrill of pleasure shivering along her spine. His breath whispered against the nape of her neck when he spoke, stirring the strands of golden blonde hair.

'I too am proud of you, Michelle *mou*,' he said, and the deep sensual voice had never been more affecting to her senses.

'I—I succeeded in getting myself lost,' she reminded him in a small breathless voice. 'I began to feel there was no one else in the world but that boy who ran away when he saw me.'

'The shepherd boy—but for him, we would have probably taken much longer to find you, *ligho eng mou*, I am grateful to him.' A finger moved aside a tendril of hair and the touch of it brushed against her neck like a caress. 'That little shepherd thought you were a nereid come to take him for your lover. I had to persuade him that he need not have fled in . terror from you, and make him show me where he had seen you.'

'I frightened him?' She turned and looked up at him, finding him so much closer than she expected that she tried to step back, only to find a chair blocking her way. 'I—I don't understand, Andrea. Is that why he ran—because he was frightened?'

'Oh, but of course—the nereids have the reputation of falling in love with handsome young shepherds, but the unfortunate young man, once chosen, quickly wastes away and dies, so the tale goes.'

'And he really thought I was --'

Andrea reached out, lifting the hair from her neck with a gesture of such gentle sensuousness that she briefly closed her eyes on the effect of it. 'But of course!

You were lovely enough, even wet and half-naked as I found you, to deceive a simple shepherd boy—I could not blame him for running from you, *agape mou*, although I would not have done so in his place!'

She felt her legs almost too weak to support her suddenly, and her whole body trembled as if with a fever. The strong urgent beat of her heart made her head spin, and she could not think clearly about anything. She was so tinglingly and irresistibly aware of him—of the arms that could hold her so tightly, and the vigorous, masculine strength of him, that nothing else existed in the world for her but the fact that she loved him.

She said nothing, but she lifted her eyes to him at last, and the truth that she had recognised in her own face via that small mirror in the Athens hospital, Andrea saw and recognised now. He reached out for her, drawing her into his arms until the touch of him was like fire in her blood.

Wrapping her close with his arms, he bowed her slim body to the hard strength of his own, his mouth seeking hers, pressing her lips hard until they parted and she made a small, soft sound as she slid her arms up around his neck. It was like nothing she had ever known before—like something from her most fantastic dreams, drawing from her every ounce of inhibition and caution.

From her mouth to the soft skin of her neck and the small vulnerable pulse at the base of her throat, his kisses were at once fierce and gentle, and with them banished every last doubt she had. When he

lifted his head at last and looked down into her eyes, there was that glowing bright blackness that she had glimpsed at briefly at other times without understanding it, and she held his gaze now with a new and exciting confidence.

'I love you, Michelle.'

It was so simple and yet so exciting that she felt the colour in her cheeks, and her own eyes had a bright blueness that was like jewels. Her arms still encircled his neck, and she wished she need never be apart from him again, even for a moment.

'Andrea!'

With one hand she stroked his cheek lightly, and he snatched it suddenly and pressed his mouth to the warmth of her palm, and then to his cheek, kissing the inside of her wrist, his raven dark head bowed over her. Looking directly at her suddenly, he swept his gaze over her face.

'I said I would keep you in mind for my wife, did I not?' he asked, and she felt her heart skip, briefly reminded of her doubts in the past.

'I—I never thought you meant it,' she confessed. 'I thought—I mean, Georgi had all those ideas——'

'You thought I would marry you because Georgi wanted me to?' he teased gently. 'Oh no, Michelle *mou*, I have to please no one but myself—I choose my own bride!'

The memory of his first tragic young wife arose briefly to disturb her happiness, and she looked up at him, her eyes shadowed for a moment. Andrea, your --'

His mouth on hers silenced her firmly. 'She was a nice, gently child, my beloved, and I cared for her, but not'—*never* as I care for you!

Will you believe me, and marry me? Make me happy, Michelle *agape mou*, as I have never been happy before in my life 1'

Michelle lifted her face, her mouth soft and tremulous in the small golden oval of her face. 'I love you,' she said. 'I can only be happy if you are.'

He drew her close again, a strong possessive hold that there was no escaping, and she knew suddenly that this moment had been inevitable from the day she first saw him in this same room—Georgi had simply been a little quicker to realise it.