

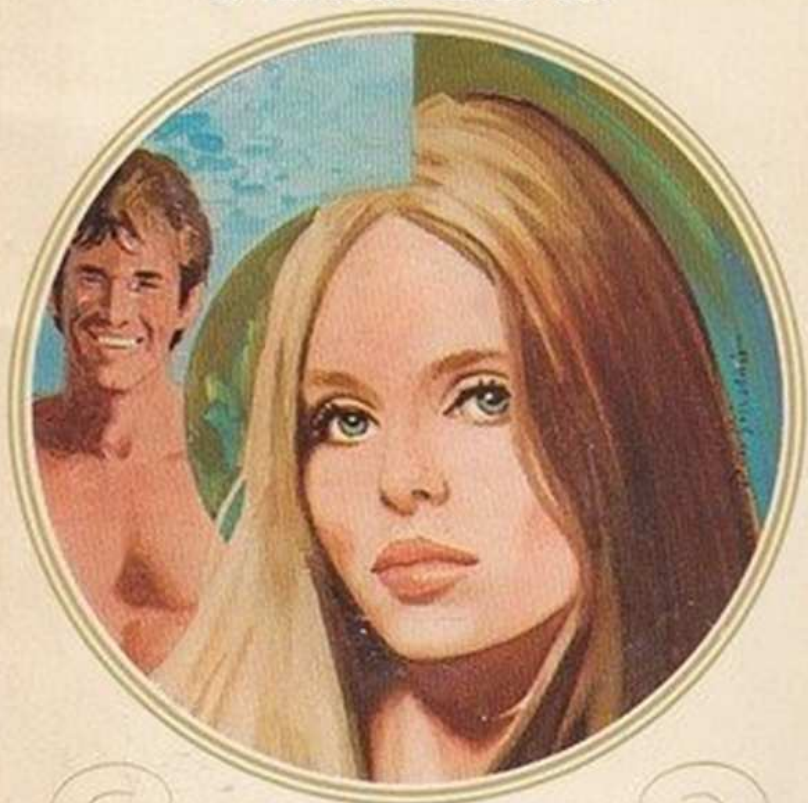
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Harlequin Presents..

ANNE
HAMPSON

the fair island



THE FAIR ISLAND

Anne Hampson

As different as possible in character from her identical twin, Alaine Marsland was persuaded to take Estelle's place on a cruise to the Greek islands. Away from the drudgery of her work, relaxing in the sun, enjoying the sightseeing, Alaine blossomed--and learned that life could be beautiful. Cimon Duris, boarding the ship at Pireaus, added the perfect romance...

Then, along with the realization of her love for Cimon came an equally disturbing discovery. It was Estelle who had sown the seeds of the trouble -- but it was Alaine who was about to reap the harvest of revenge!

CHAPTER ONE

AUNT SUE sat back on the horsehair couch and regarded her niece through pale grey eyes.

'I can't say I approve of these visits to Estelle; they seem to unsettle you. Are you really going next Tuesday?

'Of course, straight from work, so I won't be home for my evening meal.' Alaine smiled and added, 'After all, Estelle is my sister, and different though we are I wouldn't like to lose touch with her.' How close they had once been, mused Alaine, her lovely blue-grey eyes shading with regret. And what fun they'd had playing tricks on their friends!

'Identical twins—' A click of Aunt Sue's tongue accompanied the sudden frown appearing on her white and wrinkled brow. 'So alike in looks yet so different in disposition. It scarcely seems possible. Estelle's a little baggage!' Alaine said nothing and the old lady added, 'I know you don't like my using that word, but in my opinion even that isn't strong enough!'

'Things have changed since you were young, Auntie. It's normal to have lovers these days.'

'In the plural?'

'Yes, in the plural.' Alaine was repairing a ladder in her tights and a small sigh escaped her. 'If I had a lover he might treat me to some new clothes - and I certainly wouldn't have to do this. I hate mended stockings!'

Her aunt seemed troubled all at once. 'This isn't the first time I've heard you speak in this way. I hope you're not serious?' She shook her head

and added before Alaine could reply, 'No, I can't imagine you with a lover; your ideals are too high.'

'But so out of date.' Alaine frowned at her darn and gave another sigh. 'They'll have to do me till next week. Jinx takes all my money.'

'You should have had her adopted, before you became too attached to her.'

Alaine glanced up, the needle idle in her hand.

'You don't mean that, Auntie. You love her just as much as I do.'

'Unfortunately, yes. And so we keep her. Men!' she ejaculated, banging a tiny fist on the arm of the couch.

'Keith's dead, so don't let us start condemning him.'

'You're too soft-hearted. What other girl would have allowed a man to dump his child on her like that? But perhaps it was your age that had something to do with it. You were only seventeen - and a youthful one at that.' The old woman became lost in thought for a space before she continued, 'It's over five years ago; how time does fly,' but, strangely, there was not the faintest hint of regret in Aunt Sue's quiet voice. 'Five years ...'

Alaine said nothing, but an odd little fear assailed her. Aunt Sue had told a neighbour that she was quite ready to die. The old lady winced as she moved her back, but soon she became comfortable and, with a curious glance at Alaine, she asked if she had ever really cared for Keith.

'I don't think so. I was sorry for him when Rebecca died on giving birth to Jinx, and that's why I took the child. Keith paid me to stay off work, as you know, and he asked me to marry him when a decent period of time had elapsed. I said yes because of the babe. She was such a

darling and as soon as I held her I was lost. I've always adored babies, as you already knew at the time. I just had to promise to marry Keith ...' Alaine allowed her voice to drift away to silence as she fell into a mood of retrospection. Seventeen ... a soft-hearted girl shocked by the death of her dearest friend who was only eighteen months her senior. Keith, grief-stricken - or appearing to be; and she, Alaine, trying to comfort him.

'Will you look after Jinx?' he had begged, tears rolling down his cheeks, and Alaine, her heart almost wrenched from its moorings, unhesitatingly agreed to care for the child. 'You'll have to stay off work, but I'm earning good money and I'll make sure you don't lose financially,' Keith had promised.

'I got the baby but not the man.' Alaine's sweet and softly-modulated voice took on a bitter edge. 'I never expected Keith to run out on me like that. I swore, at the time, that if ever I had the opportunity of making some man pay for Keith's treachery, then I'd not hesitate to do so. The idea faded, though, with time.' Alaine's eyes were soft as a fawn's, her lovely mouth quivering slightly. Self-pity was an emotion in which she would never indulge, but inevitably she would on occasions dwell on the raw deal she had received from Keith, who had not only deceived her, but his wife also, because he was having the affair even while Rebecca was carrying Jinx.

'That girl he went off with was a bitch; she knew he'd left Jinx with you!' Aunt Sue was working herself up into a fine fury and Alaine tried to interrupt, knowing how harmful this could be, but the old lady was speaking again. 'He knew what he was about, was sure he'd found a mug who wouldn't go to the police!'

'He knew you wouldn't, either,' Alaine couldn't resist reminding her. 'You talked a great deal about doing so, once we knew that Keith had gone off with that girl, but that's as far as you got. You were just as

afraid as I that if we reported the matter Jinx would be taken away and put in a home.'

'Well,' began Aunt Sue defensively, 'she was such a fetching little mite - not pretty—'

'She was, Auntie!'

'You've always said so, dear, but those freckles! And that little snub nose. Her eyes are a delight, I must give you that - so large and trusting, and the way they slant at the corners . . . Well, so much for that; what was I saying? Ah, yes, she was a fetching mite, and so good. We didn't know we'd a baby in the house.'

'Not until she began running around,' grimaced Alaine. 'We're certainly aware we've a child in the house now.'

'If only we'd known of that crash, and that Keith had been killed, we could have, done something about obtaining an allowance from the State for the child,' mused Aunt Sue, 'but unfortunately we never heard of his death until three years after it had occurred.'

Alaine had been shaking her head even as her aunt talked.

'We could never have put in a claim, Auntie. You know as well as I that we're breaking the law in keeping Jinx. She isn't adopted and we should by rights have informed the police - or the local authority - immediately Keith went off. We had no right to remain quiet as we did. Had Keith and I been married the position would have been different; I'd have had a right to keep her.'

'The position would have been different in more ways than one,' retorted Aunt Sue grimly. 'You'd have been in receipt of a widow's pension, and money for Jinx. The injustice! You're working your

fingers to the bone to keep the child, going without yourself, and daren't venture to make a claim! It maddens me, Alaine—'

'Don't work yourself up, darling.' Alaine scanned the lined face anxiously. 'The decision was made - perhaps I was too young at the time to make it - but I don't regret it and I know I never shall.'

'It doesn't help when you come home from these visits to Estelle and describe to me all the luxuries she has,' continued Aunt Sue, ignoring the interruption. 'But you always were the little stupid one who made all the sacrifices. It's never done you any good, but I suppose you can't help the way you're made.' She stopped and her frown deepened as she looked at her niece, - sitting in the high-backed chair, her attention on the long disfiguring darn running down the leg of her tights. Her head was bent and Aunt Sue's gaze rested on the beautiful arch of her neck; in the sunlight streaming through the window the fine gold hairs gleamed like minute points of light. Her honey-gold hair, thick and shining and slightly curled up at the ends, dropped caressingly on to her face, partly hiding it from view. The old lady sighed and lapsed into a pensive mood.

Alaine had come to her when she was sixteen, on the death of her father, her mother having died five years earlier. Estelle, on the other hand, had moved into a friend's flat in London and although she kept in touch with Alaine they now had little in common.

Alaine glanced up; her aunt's eyes were shadowed and she was shaking her head almost imperceptibly.

'What is it, darling?' Alaine looked affectionately at her and added before giving Aunt Sue an opportunity of replying, 'Never mind, I might just catch that rich man I sometimes talk about. Gosh, wouldn't it be marvellous to have a few comforts!'

A frown again appearing on the old lady's brow, she told Alaine in her forthright way that nice girls did not speak about 'catching' men, and she also recommended a complete dropping of the idea of acquiring a rich husband anyway, simply because rich men invariably married rich women.

'In any case,' continued Aunt Sue in a rather troubled tone, 'what opportunity do you have of meeting any man, rich or poor? You never go out except on these odd occasions when you visit that hussy, Estelle.'

'I just can't afford to go out, Auntie, you know that. For one thing, I'd need decent clothes and for another I'd have to have money to spend. I can find a better use for mine than wasting it like that.'

'Jinx!'

'She's worth it.'

No comment from Aunt Sue, who despite the angry exclamation was staring with a softened expression at a small snapshot that was stuck in the corner of a picture frame on the sideboard. 'Perhaps I'll meet a rich man through Estelle,' Alaine added with a smile, but her voice lacked optimism. Estelle was always alone when Alaine visited her, and although Estelle often threw parties her sister was never invited to them.

'I sincerely hope you don't!' snapped Aunt Sue. '*Her* sort won't marry you. Seducers, every one of them!'

Alaine shrugged.

That's true, I suppose.' Estelle did not want marriage, so it mattered not at all to her that all the men she knew were merely bent on seduction.

'What you want is a nice steady boy who'll be faithful to you.'

'Faithful?' Alaine shook her head a little sadly. 'Can one expect to find a faithful man these days - with all the temptations that are continuously put in his way?'

'The right man can resist temptations,' Aunt Sue firmly declared. 'The one you'll get, dear, will have sown all his wild oats and be ready to settle down.'

Alaine had to smile.

'High ideals and wishful thinking,' she teased, but the old lady was shaking her head.

'Whoever finds you will thank his lucky stars that he's discovered a good girl, and if he's any sense he won't take chances.'

Putting the needle and thread into the sewing-box Alaine said, 'I have a feeling I'll never marry, so perhaps I shan't ever have any anxiety over faithfulness.' Yet for a brief space she allowed her fanciful thoughts and ideas to intrude. Had she never known Rebecca and Keith she would have been free like any other teenage girl; she would have gone about with a happy carefree crowd of young people and, following the course which most of her school-friends had taken, she would have become engaged and got married. Two of her old friends had babies, another was married to a Canadian and lived an interesting life on a ranch, while yet another was having a rather exciting time in Egypt, her husband being an Embassy official there.

'Never marry?' Aunt Sue was saying. 'Nonsense! You're only twenty-two. You really must try to get out more, dear. I've a little jewellery that I'm intending to sell. You can have that money—'

'I won't let you sell your treasures just to give me money to squander.'

'I do detest that word,' returned Aunt Sue almost irritably. 'Anything that's not spent on me or Jinx or the house is squandered. You used that word the other week when you bought yourself a new pair of slippers. It's time you spent more on yourself.' Alaine rose without a word and put away the sewing box in the cupboard on the wall. 'I want you to get out and meet people,' Aunt Sue went on, and a slight frown touched Alaine's forehead. Was it imagination or did she detect a note of desperation in the old lady's voice? Several times lately Alaine had gained the impression that Aunt Sue was becoming exceedingly anxious about her niece's future. 'I'll look to Jinx, Alaine dear. She never wakes once she's gone to sleep.'

Alaine still made no response. Her aunt had done almost everything for Jinx in the beginning, for Alaine had been obliged to return to work immediately Keith stopped the money, which was less than two months after Alaine had taken the child. Since Jinx started school six months ago, when she was just four and a half, things had been much easier for Aunt Sue, and for this Alaine was fervently thankful, since the old lady was by no means as fit now as she was even a year ago. She suffered greatly from arthritis and all she now did was to give Jinx something to eat when she came in from school at half-past three each afternoon.

'Just because you're in at night it doesn't mean that I should go out. I agree with you about Jinx; she does sleep soundly, but she could wake, and I'm not having you troubled with her.' On hearing a sound from the back garden Alaine stopped speaking, her eyes lighting up. Dejection fell from her like a cloak, the dejection that had hung all day, ever since the postman dropped all those bills through the letter-box just as Alaine was going out to work this morning. It was her half-day, and usually she felt a little more cheerful than on other mornings, but as she opened her mail on the bus she felt she did not know where to turn, or which bills to pay and which to leave. The electric iron had been the first thing to go wrong, then Jinx had broken a window. The very next day a fall of soot necessitated having the chimney swept. Added to the

bills for these things was the electricity account and one for the rates. Aunt Sue had only her pension and the rent took half of that, so every penny Alaine earned was spoken for almost before she drew it. 'Here is my daughter,' she said, turning with a welcoming smile as the door shot back with a thud against the corner of Aunt Sue's sideboard.

'*Your* daughter!' disgustedly from Aunt Sue, yet her face, like that of Alaine, lit up as the child burst into the room, a veritable whirlwind, her hazel eyes brimming with mischief, her freckled face daubed with chocolate, her little snub nose turned up at what seemed the most ridiculous angle.

'Mummy! I've made you an Easter card! Teacher said it was better'n everybody else's and Margery Ker-shawe cried because she wanted hers to be the best. There! It's got ducks on it - I mean chickens,' she corrected, a huge grin spreading before her tongue shot out, to make a series of rotary movements as Jinx endeavoured to remove the chocolate from around her mouth.

Taking the card, Alaine allowed her eyes to wander over the child's small figure before finally settling on her face.

'How do you come to have chocolate? You hadn't any money.' Sitting down on the edge of the chair she had a moment ago vacated, Alaine examined the card she held in her hand.

'Paul Haddon gave it to me because I said I'd kiss him, but I didn't. I ran off with the chocolate, but he can run faster 'an me and he caught me and kicked my ankle. He didn't get the chocolate back because I shoved it in my gob—' Jinx was stopped by a darkling frown from Alaine, but her eyes twinkled as she then said, 'I put it in my mouth quick.' Bending down, she tugged at the top of her ankle sock, stretching it out of all shape. 'Look at that bruise! I'll scribble all over his sum book tomorrow and teacher'll make him stand in the corner and all the kids - children will laugh at him.'

'He'll be in a corner, will he?' from Aunt Sue, whose brow was sternly furrowed. 'You'll be the one in the corner, miss! Paul's not going to take the blame for something you've done.'

The great eyes became enormous.

'You mean he'll split? No, he won't do that or every- one'll call him a tell-tale.' The brown tongue sought for more chocolate and the old lady shuddered.

'Her manners and her speech will have to be attended *to*, Alaine. We can't allow her to go on like this.' As she was absorbed with the card Alaine merely nodded and her aunt's attention returned to the child. 'Where are your hair ribbons? - as if I didn't know! Which boy was it this time?'

'David Curbishly. He dragged them both off and put them down a grid.' Her eyes blazed and her fists tightened. 'I tugged his hair till he screamed blue murder and a lady came along and told me to let go, but I didn't and she called me a naughty little girl, so I put my tongue out at her and she said I wanted my bottom smacking, so I put my tongue out at her again. She was a funny lady - Are you listening, Mummy?'

'Yes, dear, of course I'm listening.'

'This lady - she had a great big nose and teeth what made a clatter when she talked and went up and down like this - Like this - Ooh, I can't do it. Can you do it, Mummy?'

'No, darling. I can't.' She tapped the card. 'This is lovely. You've done it very well indeed.'

Jinx's hazel eyes sparkled at the praise. Moving over to Alaine's chair, she slid an arm around her neck, resting her cheek against hers.

'Do you like what I've put in it?' "For my mummy because I love her." And there are forty-seven kisses!' A grubby finger traced the crosses running along two sides of the card. 'You can count them if you like.'

'I'll take your word for it. Why are there forty- seven?'

'I was going to put a hundred, but my pencil broke and teacher said she wasn't sharpening any more pencils today. I was going to pinch Susan Foster's, but she'd been sucking the end and chewing it and it was all sopping wet! Ugh - it was horrid! So I didn't pinch it and I couldn't write the rest of my kisses. I'll give you a real kiss if you like—'

'No, you don't, not with that chocolate all over your mouth. Go and wash it off.'

'Yes, okay.' Jinx turned cheerfully away, but stopped before reaching the door. 'I forgot to tell you. Janice Pitts was ill—'

'Janice? Your teacher's little girl?'

'Yes, she had di - di—' Jinx's freckled cheeks inflated like balloons before she blew out exasperatedly. 'I can't say, the word, but she kept putting her hand up, and then Mrs. Pitts had to keep changing her - her - It's a rude word, but you know what I mean, don't you?' Alaine nodded, trying to keep a straight face, and Jinx continued, 'Mrs. Pitts washed them and put them on the radiator to dry and the headmaster came in and saw them and wanted to know what was the matter, so Mrs. Pitts told him and he said she must take Janice home, so she did and a big girl came in and minded us - Oh, it's a long story, isn't it?' Jinx gasped for breath but was talking again within seconds. 'She was nice, this big girl; she had lovely black hair and it was shiny. She said I was a beautiful drawrer - she was a beautiful drawrer as well. I know because she drew a picture to let me see, and she's going to the art school when she's sixteen because her brother goes to the art school to learn drawing—' Jinx stopped again for breath and the two adults

exchanged glances, Alaine's amused, Aunt Sue's one of near despair which only served to force a laugh from Alaine, who had been trying to keep a straight face because Jinx was a dreadful show-off if she thought she was making anyone laugh. 'Can I go to the art school when I'm sixteen?'

'You'll be working, my girl, bringing your mother some money into the house.'

Alaine frowned at this. Jinx was a wretch at times, but she was highly intelligent and always Alaine cherished the hope that she would be able to keep Jinx at school for as long as the child wanted to stay.

'I don't want to go out to work,' Jinx was saying to her aunt. 'I'm going to get married, because then your daddy gives you lots of money, and you've only got to look after the babies and wash the pots. We play at mummies and daddies in the Wendy house at school and it isn't very hard work at all. You have to kiss the daddies, though, and I don't like that, so I told Mrs. Pitts I didn't and she said to Paul and David that they needn't bother about the kissing, but just get on with the game— Oh, there's something else I forgot to tell you. Avril's got a new baby and we had to write about it in our news. It's a girl, but Avril wanted a boy. Ooh, but she did swank! She was swanking all the time and I got fed up, so I said my mummy was having a baby. Mrs. Pitts looked surprised and said was I sure and I said of course I was, and Mrs. Pitts looked at me sort of funny and then shrugged her shoulders - like this.'

'You're a very naughty girl for telling stories,' admonished Aunt Sue. 'You can tell your teacher tomorrow that your mummy isn't having a baby. Do you hear me?'

The child's face creased.

'I want a baby, very much I want one. Nearly everybody in our class has a baby.' Jinx looked at Alaine. 'Why can't I have one?'

'Because, darling, you haven't a daddy. You see, mummies can't have babies unless they have husbands.'

Jinx fell silent, trying to sort this out.

'Can't you get a husband?'

Alaine shook her head, but she laughed as well as she said, glancing across at her aunt,

'Here we go again! I shall have to go husband-hunting, if only to please you two.'

'Darryl Soames has a lovely daddy now.' Jinx lifted a hand to push hair out of her eyes and a great black smudge was left on her face. 'He didn't have him before, but his mummy got married. I went home with Darryl once and his daddy smiled and sat Darryl on his knee? I wish I had a daddy to sit me on his knee.'

'On it?' Alaine raised her brows. 'You'd be across it, every day of your life.' A chuckle was Jinx's response before she said, 'I wouldn't, because I'd be good. You always are for daddies, aren't you?' She turned to Aunt Sue for verification of this; Aunt Sue merely fixed her pale eyes on the black smudge on the child's forehead and cheek and drew in her breath sharply, releasing it more slowly in a long-drawn-out sigh of exasperation. 'You are,' Jinx added, undaunted by her aunt's manner. 'You have to be good for daddies because they're men. When Darryl's mummy says stop it he doesn't stop it, but when his daddy says stop it he always stops it—'

'For goodness' sake go and wash your face and hands,' interrupted Aunt Sue. 'Your mother would allow you to chatter on until Doomsday! Off with you to the bathroom. And give that tongue a rest!'

A sudden pained expression settled on the little girl's face and a hand went to her stomach.

'Ooh ... I am hungry. We had courage and rice for school dinner and I couldn't eat it.'

'Courage?' laughed Alaine, shaking her head. 'You mean curry. That was a strange thing to give to children,' she added, with a glance at her aunt.

'I thought Mrs. Grey called it courage. Mrs. Grey's the new dinner lady. She's nice and she smiles when she gives you your dinner. Did I tell you about her dog what got run over? It wasn't killed—'

'No, you didn't tell us about the dog, nor do we want to hear it!' Aunt Sue was beginning to get really angry, and Alaine stood up and gave Jinx a helping little shove towards the door.

'The courage and rice was all covered with yellow gravy. It was awful. What's for tea?'

'Poached eggs on toast.'

'Goody! Can I have two eggs and one piece of toast?'

'No,' answered Alaine. 'You can have one egg and two pieces of toast.'

'All right.' Jinx turned at the door and wagged a forefinger. 'But I want jam on my other piece of toast.'

'Well,' breathed Aunt Sue as the door slammed behind the child. 'Thank heaven for a few minutes' respite!' Her small spurt of anger had died, but humour did not take its place. Her face was serious as she said, 'We really must take her in hand, Alaine; she's getting worse. She does need a man behind her and no mistake. If she's like this at five what's she going to be like at ten?'

'I sometimes dread to think,' admitted Alaine. And after a moment's pause she added, 'I just couldn't smack her, and words are not very effective. Perhaps she'll improve naturally, though?' She looked hopefully at her aunt, and saw her begin to shake her head.

'No, Alaine, she won't improve naturally. You'll have to be more firm with her. Just imagine her putting her tongue out at that woman. Wonder who she was?'

'Sounded rather like Mrs. Arkwright, and if so she'll add a good deal to it and spread it all over the neighbourhood.'

'What do we care?' Aunt Sue did not seem to be aware of her inconsistency as she continued, 'The woman had no right to condemn the child without knowing the whole story. If the boy pulled off Jinx's ribbons and put them down a grid then Jinx did right to pull his hair. Wretched scamp! And the price of hair ribbons!'

'Did you notice the new injury on her knee?' Alaine still held the Easter card and she automatically passed it over to her aunt. 'She must have tumbled again today.'

'I've given up noticing,' sighed Aunt Sue impatiently as she looked down at the card. 'She has about half a dozen permanent scabs, all in different stages of healing. I did see the tear in her dress, though, and the mud on her pants. She's been sliding down that hill again and landing in that filthy ditch at the bottom.' Aunt Sue handed the card back to her niece, who put it on the sideboard. 'Oh, well,' sighed the old lady as she watched her, 'as someone said at the time you took the child, she'll be a great comfort to you when you're old.'

When she was old... Alaine felt old already.

With a stir of memory she recalled the days when there was a sort of radiation about her, and Estelle. They were vitally aware of life, and

the fun it held. They used to laugh a lot, often at the expense of their friends who could never tell them apart, for they were always dressed alike. They were happy carefree days which had fled all too quickly, and for the past few years Alaine had been ever conscious of the weight of the burden she had voluntarily shouldered. She often wondered what the future held and could imagine herself only as an old maid, ending her days like Aunt Sue, who listened to the radio, read a great deal, and now walked with the aid of a stick. Yet even when her spirits were at their lowest ebb Alaine never for a moment regretted taking Jinx, and keeping her.

But something must be done about her manners and her speech; Alaine was in full agreement with her aunt about this. The child's innate high spirits must never be crushed, but in some way they must be toned down. How was this to be done? As Jinx herself had said, children took more notice of their fathers than their mothers. A man's word seemed to be sufficient to obtain instant obedience, whereas a woman's seemed to carry no weight at all - not with a child as high-spirited as Jinx, that was. Jinx ... Was ever a name more suited to its owner?

'I like Wednesdays,' Jinx was saying later as they all three sat down together at the table, 'because my mummy's in when I come home from school. I wish you were in every day.'

Alaine smiled and Aunt Sue pursed her lips at this childish lack of tact. Alaine at sixteen had been forced to leave school and find a job, for although her aunt could offer her a home she could not afford to keep her. Alaine had taken the first job that came along, and she had never changed, being fortunate enough to be taken on again after leaving on Keith's persuading her to hayp Jinx. She worked in a big store in town - the sort of place where there was no room for advancement as the people in the top positions had all been young when Alaine went, and not one of them had left. Often Alakie had thought of trying something else, but the town was not very large and, therefore, opportunities were

scarce. She would have liked to be a private secretary but lacked the money for the training, and so she remained in the dead-end job, working five and a half days a week and having no more than fifteen days' annual holiday.

This was usually spent in catching up with work in the house which had been neglected, as her aunt naturally could not do very much. Curtains and covers would be taken to the launderette; carpets would be lifted and taken outside to be beaten. Sometimes Alaine would wallpaper a room, or spend some time on the sewing machine, patching worn sheets or threadbare covers. At these times her thoughts would invariably go out to Estelle, and the easy life she led. The friend whose flat she had shared in the early days had introduced Estelle to one of her men friends who had immediately found Estelle a job modelling, at which she earned as much in a few hours as Alaine earned in a week. Estelle now owned her own apartment, lavishly fitted out - garish to Alaine's taste, but everything was of the most expensive. And when Estelle's holidays came round they were usually spent in some exotic place, where she and her current lover would stay for three or four weeks, or perhaps even longer than that.

CHAPTER TWO

AT eight o'clock the following evening Alaine was ringing the bell of her sister's flat; she had rather a long wait before Estelle appeared, clad in a dressing gown which she had hastily slipped over her nakedness. Her hair was tucked under a bathing cap and her lovely face flushed and shiny.

'Hi! Come on in. I've just jumped out of the bath. Forgot you were coming, as a matter of fact. Go into the lounge; I'll not be long.'

'You'd forgotten I was coming?' Alaine had rung only four days previously and Estelle had made a gushing declaration that she would be delighted to see her sister. 'You weren't going out?'

'No; it's my "in" night. I do have one a week, as you know. Life's so hectic that I need it, believe me.' Closing the door, she made a gesture towards the lavish apartment where rose-coloured carpet and curtains set the scene for modern furniture consisting of large armchairs and a long low settee to match. An ornate cocktail bar occupied a large area of a recess, while at each side of the bar ornamental stone arches formed the setting for two nude figures, one male, one female, their lines and curves highlighted by subtle illumination coming from somewhere behind the arches. On a flashy inlaid table stood a silver cigarette box and matching lighter, ashtrays also in silver and a huge box of expensive chocolates. Sprays of flowers were everywhere - presents from Estelle's boy-friends, Alaine knew, because every time she came there was an abundance of flowers and Estelle had told her that they arrived nearly every day from some man or another. 'Sit down,' invited Estelle with another flourish of her hand. 'I'll be dressed in a jiff! Help yourself to a drink and a ciggy. Stuff as many chocs as you like - I daren't!' Automatically she held out a hand for Alaine's coat and on receiving it she disappeared in the direction of the bedroom.

After taking possession of a chair Alaine helped herself to a chocolate. A book lay open and face downwards on the settee and, reaching over, she picked it up. One glance and she put it back, rather quickly. Alaine had believed that only men read *those!*

'Any news?' Estelle was asking ten minutes later as she drew up a chair and perched herself on the arm of it. 'Why do I ask? It would be a nine days' wonder if you had any news to relate.'

Alaine was smiling and shaking her head and Estelle inquired about Aunt Sue.

'She's still troubled with her arthritis, I suppose?'

'Yes,' rather sadly from Alaine. 'And she's getting worse.' A small pensive silence and then, 'Recently she told a neighbour she was ready to die. The neighbour repeated this to me and I'm beginning to get worried. Sometimes the pain is awful. She tries to hide it from me, but I can tell.'

Estelle shrugged her elegant shoulders.

'Old age; you can't do a thing about it.' Slanting her sister a glance she added, 'The house - you won't be able to stay in it when anything happens to Aunt Sue?'

'I think the landlord would let me stay on.'

'You're an optimist. A house within commuter distance of London and you expect the owner's going to rent it to you? That'll fetch a bomb in the auction.' Estelle was looking rather pityingly at Alaine. 'He must have wished the old lady gone long ago.'

'I'm sure he wouldn't be so heartless.' But even as she spoke Alaine with a switch of memory was remembering that Aunt Sue had recently written to the landlord. She had asked Alaine to post the letter. Could

Aunt Sue have been asking about the probability of a transfer of tenancy? If so, and she had received an unfavourable reply, then that would explain the anxiety which had settled on her during the past few weeks; it could be the reason for Aunt Sue's keeping on about Alaine's getting out more so that she could meet people of her own age. People ... Men, so that she could perhaps manage to find a husband. Aunt Sue had even been willing to sell her jewellery ...

The colour slowly receded from Alaine's face. She was beginning to suspect that her aunt was more seriously ill than she would have Alaine believe. If she should die, thought Alaine with a catch of pain at the idea, where would she and Jinx end up? The more she considered her sister's words the more she became convinced that the landlord would turn her out, simply because his house was worth a small fortune, being situated where it was, within reasonable distance of the capital. Alaine's heart was thudding and, anxious to discard these troublesome musings, she asked her sister to tell her all the latest news.

'About my life?' Estelle grinned at her. 'It'll shock you; it always does.' Reaching out, she took a cigarette from the box and picked up the lighter.

'I hadn't thought you'd noticed,' returned Alaine, a hint of humour creeping into her voice despite the way she felt.

'Course I've noticed. You fairly squirm when I describe some particular brand of lovemaking. Lord, you haven't a clue, have you?'

'Afraid not,' admitted Alaine, and then, watching Estelle from behind the smoke-cloud she was creating as she lit her cigarette, 'Your latest? Tell me about him. It was James last time I was here—'

'James?' Estelle frowned in concentration, but presently her face cleared. 'I couldn't remember which James, not for the moment,' she laughed, then went on to say it was James Crestley. 'He was a fool.

Lost a lot of money gambling, so that was him finished as far as I was concerned. Can't stand a man who doesn't know how to look after his cash.' A small silence ensued; Estelle was deep in thought and what was in her mind brought an angry expression to her face. 'I've recently been stringing along with a Greek—'

'A Greek?' broke in Alaine interestedly. 'How many nationalities is that?'

'The Lord knows! I've had South Americans - they know how, I can tell you! And Yanks and Aussies and a Dane and a couple of Spaniards - they also know their stuff— She stopped, responding to Alaine's laughter. 'You used to be so shocked. What's happened?'

'I suppose I'm getting used to you.'

'Glad of it. I hated you to be embarrassed all the time. Now, where was I? Ah, yes, this idiotic Greek. Only young - just twenty-one. Comes from a fantastically wealthy family who are in everything from olive groves and tobacco to hotels and even shipping. When I met him he hadn't long been out of the care of the man who had been his guardian for the past ten years. This guardian's his uncle and is thirty-five. Sulas didn't talk much about him, but from what little he did say I gathered that this uncle had kept the reins pretty tight, so on Sulas reaching the age of twenty-one he hopped it from this island - Crete, it was, where they kill each other in feuds - and kill anyone else who does them or their family an injury. Barbaric, they are, with their own laws for punishment of the wrongdoer.' Estelle paused to draw on her cigarette and Alaine said sceptically,

'You're exaggerating; people don't take the law into their own hands these days. I'm sure they don't kill each other.'

Estelle shrugged.

'Have it your own way. That's what Sulas said, and I do seem to have read about these people who have their own barbaric methods of reprisal for injuries done. However, to return to Sulas. He decided to set up an establishment here in London and so he buys himself a fab flat. This flat of mine is a slum in comparison, believe me.' Smiling at her sister's expression of surprise, Estelle hesitated a moment and then, carelessly extending a hand, she moved one beautifully-manicured finger up and down. 'Ever seen a sparkler of that size?'

'Is it real?' breathed Alaine, blinking at it in disbelief. She had noticed it, naturally - impossible not to - but she had surmised that it must be paste. 'Sulas bought you that?'

Estelle nodded.

'It was such fun at first because he spent and spent, making up for all the years when he's not been allowed to, he said, and it did seem that this uncle was dreadfully stingy with Sulas, which was ridiculous, Seeing it was Sulas's own money.'

'Yes, but if this uncle was his guardian he was only doing his duty.'

'Matter of opinion.' Estelle was twisting her finger about so that the light caught the magnificent stone in its rays. 'Be useful on a rainy day,' she murmured to herself. 'I'm making a collection; got seven already - not of this quality, of course. Never manage one of these again as long as I live. I'll show you the mink coat he bought me in a minute, but I'll get us something to eat first. I did manage to get Sulas to make a nice little investment for me before the whole thing folded up. Was I mad when it did! To think I got all this in a couple of weeks. What would I have had could I have gone on for a couple of months or so?'

Alaine stared at her sister in disbelief.

Two weeks, did you say? Only two weeks?'

That's right. We were together all the time. Then the tragic ending—'

'Tragic?'

'For me, I mean. Fell in love with me, the fool! Was I furious! Asked me to marry him and took it for granted that I would. Said something about having seduced me and in his country no one else would have me. Said he only did it because he loved me and he believed I was in love with him, or I wouldn't have done it. He just refused to believe me when I said I wasn't in love with him and never could be. Raw, he was; too sheltered by this uncle, I reckon. Well, much as I hated letting Sulas go I had no alternative because he insisted on marriage. I'd had visions of lots more of these little rocks coming my way, all made up into necklaces and bracelets and whatnot.' Estelle spoke softly, her beautiful features twisted into a deep and prolonged scowl. 'I'd expected lots more cash too, and a few more valuables for the flat—' She shrugged and after a little while her face began to clear. 'The luck of the game, I suppose. I had an awful time with Sulas at the end. He threatened to commit suicide, saying he couldn't live without me.'

'Suicide?' exclaimed Alaine, horrified.

'He didn't succeed - oh, yes, he had a try. You see, he came here after I'd told him I was finished, that marriage was the last thing I had in mind, to him or anyone else. I was having a cosy little dinner with Stan Mawsfield - he's my latest - when Sulas rang the bell and the fool of a maid let him in. He went mad and started begging me to have him back. Cried, he did, actually sobbed. What a scene! I never want another like it. In the end I told Stan to throw him out, but the man was strong and it took my help, and the maid's, to eject him in the end. It was then that he threatened to take his life.'

A small silence followed. Alaine looked across at her, appalled by these admissions. She could picture that poor boy, giving all these presents because he believed Estelle was going to marry him. And Alaine could actually feel the boy's pain on seeing his loved one with another man, having dinner in the flat ... and to throw the boy out. How could Estelle be so utterly callous?

'You shouldn't have led an innocent young man on like that, Estelle,' she protested. 'It was a wicked thing to do.'

'If you don't do a man down then he'll do you down. Look at the deal you got! Left with a kid who's not even yours and his. You're too soft, Alaine, and that gets you nowhere when you're dealing with the male sat. They deserve all they get and if you ever have the opportunity of doing one down then you'll be an idiot if you let the chance go by.'

Alaine had to smile at that.

'I can't imagine that sort of opportunity coming my way. I never meet any men.'

'But if you did?" Estelle looked curiously at her. 'Just supposing that you had the chance of getting a few sparklers and a mink from some man - would you?'

'No, I couldn't.'

Estelle laughed and sat erect on the arm of the chair.

"Then more fool you! Rather live in poverty, would you?"

'I must be true to myself, Estelle. Perhaps I'm stupid, as you suggest, but you see, it's my troublesome conscience.'

Another laugh from her sister.

'Consciences always are too troublesome by far - and yours has always been rather a nuisance to you, I seem to recall. However, the time might come when you'll change; I hope so, because I don't really like you living the way you do.'

Inwardly Alaine smiled. She knew her sister, and there was not one iota of sincerity in that last remark.

'This uncle,' she said, changing the subject. 'Does he know what happened?'

A tense moment of silence. Estelle crushed out her cigarette but immediately lit another, not answering until she had inhaled deeply and allowed the smoke to escape as she blew rings into the air.

'On being thrown out Sulas swore he'd leave a suicide note, telling his uncle everything - all about the presents and the money, and that I'd had other men as well as him. He said that his suicide would bring a terrible disgrace on his family and that as I was responsible I'd be punished by this uncle. He said I'd wish I were dead by the time Thios had finished with me.'

'Thios,' repeated Alaine, for the moment diverted. 'Is that a man's name?'

'It means uncle. Sulas has never called him anything else. They don't, it seems, not in his family. An uncle must always be called Uncle - or Thios, which is the Greek for uncle, as I've just said.' Estelle laughed, dispelling the impression of fear she had conveyed a moment earlier. She went on to say that Sulas got hold of some tablets, but he had only just taken them when his maid came on duty. She thought he was ill and rang the doctor, who happened to come right away. Sulas was rushed to hospital and as there was no real harm done he was out again in no time at all. His uncle had been sent for and he took him straight back to Greece.

'Did this - Thios get hold of the note?

Estelle nodded.

'The maid was rather quick on the uptake in the end, suspecting that Sulas had made an attempt on his life, and she looked around, found the note, and kept it for Thios, so there was no 'scandal. Thios let it be known that Sulas took the tablets by accident, although I know differently, of course. I had a letter from Sulas telling me that I was for it.'

'For it?' Elaine went a trifle pale, dwelling for a moment on what Estelle had said about the barbaric tendencies of the Cretans. They meted out their own punishments to those who injured their families. Estelle had certainly done a great injury to Sulas, and this would reflect on his family, for even though Sulas had been saved, and scandal avoided, he had made the attempt on his life and that in itself was a disgrace which would be with his family for a very long while.

Thios had told him I would suffer for what I'd done - for robbing Sulas, as he put—' She broke off and her eyes glinted. 'He got value for his money!'

Value! All that - and in a mere fortnight. Elaine felt a little sick, but at the time it struck her that by the time they were both thirty Estelle would be an exceedingly wealthy woman whereas she, Elaine, would still be as poor as she was today. And all because of an ideal that was totally out of date.

'Aren't you scared?' she queried at last, watching her sister's expression with interest.

'I've never been afraid of men in my life. If this barbarian from Greece wants to subject me to some form of vengeance he's first got to get hold of me, and that's most unlikely. He can't kidnap me, can he?'

'Well... no, I suppose not.' Alaine was beginning to feel afraid for her sister's safety. Estelle laughed and said,

'You don't sound too sure.'

'What's this uncle's name?' For some reason which she could not fathom Alaine wanted to know more about this Greek who had threatened her sister. - 'Haven't a clue. As I've said, Sulas always referred to him as Thios.'

A frown settled on Alaine's forehead.

'So you don't know his name,' she mused. 'And he probably knows you don't?'

'Sulas mentioned this in his letter. He said, "You neither know his name nor what he looks like, so you can't take measures to protect yourself. How glad I am that I never talked much about Thios." ' Estelle gave a grimace. 'Sulas's love has obviously turned to hate.'

'So if you ever met Thios you wouldn't have the least idea who he was?' A little more of the colour had left Alaine's face. She failed to understand how her sister could treat the matter so lightly. 'You know absolutely nothing about him?'

'I do know a little.' Estelle was clearly amused by Alaine's anxiety and for one smiling moment she stared at her, shaking her head as if to convey the message that Alaine was troubling herself quite unnecessarily. 'He's a bachelor and a womanizer. Has a secret contempt for the female; takes a lot and gives little, so no one would get a sparkler like this out of him.'

'Is that all you learned about Thios - ,in a whole fortnight?'

'Not a long time,' grinned Estelle. 'Not really when there's so much to do. The Greeks are among the world's most amorous men, remember,

and a girl can't expect diamonds and mink for nothing. In any case, Sulas never seemed inclined to talk about this uncle and as I wasn't interested I didn't bother to ask questions. As for him asking about me - well, as you know, I never own to having relatives. It's simpler to say I'm alone in the world - and more profitable,' she added significantly.

Alaine's frown deepened. She still felt that Estelle was treating the matter far too lightly. Also, she always thought it foolish of Estelle to deny having relatives. This Thios, for instance, he would think twice about revenge were he to know that Estelle had a sister and an aunt.

'He knows your name, and what you look like. I expect Sulas has told him that you're a model?'

Estelle nodded, and went on to say that in any case Sulas had lots of snapshots of her.

'Took me in every conceivable pose - and a couple of times in the nuddy.'

'In the—?' Brilliant pink fused Alaine's cheeks. 'Oh, Estelle, you didn't allow him to take you like that!'

'Don't be a prude, Alaine,' laughed Estelle. 'Your lover sees you in the nuddy, so why shouldn't he have a snapshot of you like that?'

Alaine swallowed. She had listened to some tales since coming on these visits to her sister's flat, but what she had heard this evening capped them all.

'Sulas will have shown him some of the snapshots, then?'

'Some?' Estelle's brows shot up in a gesture of amusement. 'He'll have shown him the lot. You know what men are.' She threw back her head and laughed loudly as Alaine squirmed and went hotter than ever. 'You are funny, Alaine. When are you going to get with it?'

'Don't you care that this other man has seen you in - in the— That he's seen all the photos?'

'Why should I? In any case, I couldn't do much about it even if I did dislike the idea.'

A troubled sigh left Alaine's lips; she shook her head, saying she did not feel that Estelle should take this attitude of complete indifference to the threat contained in Sulas's letter.

'Where is Thios now?' she added, and experienced a small amount of relief when Estelle said he was in Greece, as far as she knew.

'He took Sulas back, as I told you, and I saw a friend of Sulas the other day who'd just received a letter from him. Sulas is in Corfu, where he owns huge estates, and Thios is in Crete, I expect, because that's where his home is.' Estelle's lips twitched as she added, deliberately to embarrass her sister, 'You look quite per-turbed. I do believe you're afraid this Thios will carry me off to this barbaric island and - er - rape me or something?'

Alaine could have said that this would not, in Estelle's case, be a very effective form of punishment, but naturally she refrained.

'Is it true that these people kill?' she murmured not nearly so sceptical now as she was when Estelle first mentioned it.

Leaning back, with her legs spread on the arm of the chair, Estelle regarded her sister with considerable amusement, obviously still enjoying Alaine's anxiety on her behalf.

'They do; quite literally they believe in an eye for an eye... and a life for a life. They seem to be a lawless lot and in some remote places they're forever engaging themselves in feuds. According to Sulas - and

he did remind me of this in his letter - they deal ruthlessly with anyone who does them an injury.'

'I'd be afraid if I were in your place, Estelle.'

'I didn't know you cared so much,' her sister returned with the merest hint of sarcasm, but then added, 'I'm going away quite soon, so if he wants to try he'll have to wait.' Her blue-grey eyes shone with anticipation, and it was easy to see that the Greek had suddenly vanished from her mind. 'I'm invited to have a long holiday on a yacht!'

'A yacht? How exciting. Whose is it?' Alaine was also diverted, glad to discard the matter of Thios - or whatever his real name might be.

'You wouldn't know the owner. I don't, for that matter, but he's a rich American whom Stan knows. There's quite a crowd of us invited and we'll be away for several weeks at least.'

'But your work? Can you get all that time off?' Alaine thought of her own fifteen days, spent in catching up on household chores. 'You've been away once this year and it's only April now.'

'My job's flexible. But in any case my boss is one of the guests.' Her eyes flickered over Alaine's shabby dress. It had been bought very cheaply as 'soiled' from the place where Alaine worked. 'You're crazy, you know. You're as attractive as I - must be, mustn't you?' she added with a laugh. 'What are you doing with your looks? Is that brat of Keith's still with you?'

'You know very well she is - and she's not a brat!'

'All right, all right,' soothingly. 'Calm down. But you're a fool to have her. Are you resigned to living in poverty all your life?'

'I don't expect I'll ever be much different from what I am now.' But Alaine sighed inwardly as she glanced around. Estelle had everything money could buy ... and she still had a long way to go.

Rising, Estelle went over to the cocktail cabinet.

'What can I get you? You can't ask for the wrong thing,' she added proudly.

'I'd rather have coffee.'

'All right; I'll have the same. Come into the kitchen and talk to me while I get it ready. We'll have some sandwiches with it.' She went into the kitchen and Alaine followed. What she saw made her gasp - and think of her own kitchen with its brown sink, forty years old because the landlord would not put them a new one in. The cupboards were of wood and the floor of rough uneven tiles.

'You've had it all done since I was here last. It was lovely then, but now ...' Her voice trailed away as she stared at the magnificent fittings. 'I'd never be out of it if it were mine!'

'More fool you, then. The kitchen's the last place I'd want to be. I've a maid now who comes in every day.- She goes at six but stays when I have parties.' Estelle reached for the coffee percolator and Alaine inquired if there was anything she could do. She could make the sandwiches, her sister said, and showed her where everything was. 'You could have all this,' she added a short while later on seeing Alaine's eyes wandering around again. With an impulsive gesture reminiscent of the old days of comradeship Estelle slipped an arm round Alaine's slim waist and led her into the hall where they stood side by side before the long gilt- framed mirror. Eyes the same, that delightful colour between blue and softest grey - and limpid and large with long curling lashes to add even more enchantment to them. Clear skin, peach-bloomed and tightly-drawn over delicately-contoured

cheekbones; full generous mouths and high intelligent foreheads; honey-gold hair, shining and long.

'It's fascinating how two people can be so exactly alike.' Estelle's glance met Alaine's through the mirror and both girls smiled, their eyes reflective as memory brought a return of those days when the two girls had delighted in confounding their friends.

'I'm not Alaine, I'm Estelle,' Alaine would say, and likewise, Estelle would tell a fib, just for the sheer mischief and enjoyment of laughing at the one who had addressed her.

'Which one are you?' the teacher would ask. 'Are you Estelle?'

'No, Miss, I'm Alaine.'

'It was such fun,' murmured Alaine, speaking her thoughts aloud. 'We're still the same; I wonder if we always will be?'

'Shouldn't think so. Care and all the worries of poverty and bringing that child up will prematurely age you - unless you listen to advice and start living.' Naturally Alaine said nothing to this and after a small moment of silence Estelle said with a slight frown, 'Not identical, really. It wasn't fair that I had the birthmark and not you.'

Estelle had always said this, yet it was not important, not in any way at all.

'It isn't as if you can see it.' As Alaine spoke she noticed her sister's hand go automatically to her left side.

'Sulas was crazy about it,' she murmured reflectively, smiling at Alaine through the mirror. 'He used always to be wanting to kiss it - because, he said, it was right over my heart. His uncle will see it,' she added with a return of the frown. 'If I'd thought anyone else was going to see those snapshots I would have turned, so that the birthmark was

hidden, but Sulas wanted it on the photos.' Her frown went and she laughed. 'The sister it was who blushed,' she said, turning away towards the kitchen again.

It was as they were eating their sandwiches that Estelle mentioned the cruise she should have taken, had not the yacht trip come up. The ticket was bought and on hearing about the yacht trip Estelle had written to 'the travel company asking for a refund of her money.

'Refused to give me back a penny!' she said with a sudden rise of anger. 'All that money gone to waste. I could take the cruise, but I'd get home only the day before I'm to be on the yacht. I don't want that sort of a rush.'

'When were you supposed to go on the cruise?'

'In two weeks' time.'

'Two weeks? Then you couldn't expect them to make you a refund. They wouldn't be able to fill your place at such short notice.'

'It wouldn't have done any harm to have had the cabin empty.' Getting up from the small table at which they were eating, Estelle went to a drawer in her desk. 'Here,' she said, flinging a large envelope on to the couch beside Elaine. 'See if you can flog it to someone at work. You can have what you get.'

Elaine stared at the envelope beside her, her heart suddenly giving an inexplicable lurch. Labels had fallen out as Estelle tossed down the envelope, exciting, brightly-coloured labels bearing the name of the cruise ship, *Cassillia*.

'How l-long is it for?' she stammered, struggling to cast off the idea forming in her mind. She could not leave Jinx with Aunt Sue...

'Two weeks, that's all. It was to be in the nature of an extra,' explained Estelle airily. 'Not my real holiday by any means. A fortnight's no good to me, as you know.'

Something appeared to be sticking in Alaine's throat and she swallowed in order to clear it.

'Where does the ship go?' She picked up the labels almost as if they were hot, her hand trembling visibly. Aunt Sue could not possibly look after Jinx for two whole weeks. Or could she?

'Greece—' Estelle broke off, laughing as Alaine gave a little start. 'No connection with what I've been telling! you. I went on a Greek cruise last year, as I think I mentioned, and as I liked it I thought I'd go again. I liked going on my own, too. Lots of scope on a cruise and I got in with a super Brazilian. Think you can flog it to someone at the shop?'

Alaine shook her head, reminding Estelle that her name was on the ticket, which Alaine was now holding in her hand.

'It couldn't be used by anyone else,' she said. Except me ... I could easily call myself Estelle, just for convenience, thought Alaine.

'I never thought of that. Drat it! I do hate wasting good money.'

Swallowing again, Alaine said, 'I could use it myself.'

'You?' Estelle stared, amazed. 'Of course you could, but I never even suggested it before, knowing you, I didn't think you'd leave Aunt Sue and Jinx.' A small pause. 'I thought you said she was becoming worse?'

'She is.' Alaine's spirits dropped. It had been a nice idea while it lasted. 'No, I can't go. In any case I haven't a passport,' she added as the fact registered.

'That needn't trouble you. You can have mine, so long as you bring it back immediately you get home.' Alaine was shaking her head firmly, but Estelle went on to say that the small matter of the passport must not influence her. If she thought her aunt could manage Jinx then Alaine ought seriously to consider taking the cruise. Estelle would lend her some clothes, she said, and in fact, everything she would require.

'The name on the passenger list is Estelle, so you'll have to be Estelle all the while, even to the friends you make on board,' Estelle was saying an hour later as she and Alaine were in the bedroom sorting out sun-suits and cocktail dresses and shoes and beach wraps, and various other items which Estelle said Alaine would need.

Alaine was a trifle worried about the passport, but as she would not be having another trip abroad in the foreseeable future she felt it would be a waste of good money to get one of her own. The photograph was *her*; the name was Marsland. As Estelle said, there would be no difficulty at all.

Aunt Sue was still up when, weighed down by two smart but heavy suitcases, Alaine arrived home. Her news tumbled out and after recovering from her surprise Aunt Sue was as enthusiastic as her niece.

'You must go, my love,' she declared without any hesitation. 'I'll look after Jinx.'

'You don't mind? I wouldn't go if you feel you might not be able to cope.'

'I want you to go.' That anxiety again and an odd inflection in the old lady's voice. 'I definitely want you to take this trip, Alaine. Forget all

about me and Jinx and your work. It's six years since you had a holiday - or is it more? I can't quite remember.'

'It's seven. Daddy took Estelle and me to Bournemouth just before he died.'

'Then you more than deserve this break.' Aunt Sue's eyes wandered to the suitcases which Alaine had put down on excitedly entering the living-room where her aunt was sitting, reading her book. 'I'll take a look at your pretty things tomorrow while you're at work—' She broke off, the hint of a frown appearing between her eyes. 'They'll let you change your holidays?' she said anxiously.

Alaine nodded, saying that there would be plenty of people who would willingly change with her, as Alaine had been given two weeks in August, the most popular month, especially for those women with children of school age.

Aunt Sue, despite her obvious tiredness, wanted all the news relating to her as usual and she listened avidly in spite of the frequent disparaging grunts she gave as Alaine's narrative continued.

'Poor lad!' she exclaimed when Alaine had told her about Sulas. 'She's a bitch, and it would serve her right if this uncle did meet up with her some day and give her what for!'

'Estelle's not afraid. In any case, he's now in Greece and if he has all these business interests he'll probably not have time even to think about it.' Alaine sincerely hoped he would not, but even now she knew a tingling fear for her sister.

'I don't know,' mused Aunt Sue. 'I've read a bit about these Cretans and they're darned cunning. They're up to tricks no one else would think of. They're a race apart. It's said that they are different in appearance and physique, too. Cretans are prouder than 'most other Greeks ...' She

tailed off thoughtfully and then quoted, ' "... eagle-like men, prouder, fiercer, taller, straighter than all other Greeks, walking with long strides, moving like kings through lanes which other men intuitively clear for them.'" A shake of the white head and then, 'Yes, I read that description somewhere once and I've always remembered it. Eagle-like men, living in a land where eagles nest on the high plateaux.' A rather self-conscious laugh escaped her as she noticed Alaine's half-amused expression. 'Not much wrong with my memory; it's my body that's playing me up. However, to return to Estelle. I shouldn't care to be in her shoes if their paths ever happen to cross, because she won't come off unscathed. In my opinion she'd better watch out.'

CHAPTER THREE

ALAINE'S excitement had been mounting with every day that passed, but eventually the moment of departure arrived and with the taxi at the door Alaine kissed her aunt goodbye, thanking her again for agreeing to look after Jinx.

'And thank you very, very much for all the spending money you've given me. I didn't like you selling that gold necklace—'

'Rubbish! It was for a good cause. I would have left it to you in any case, and I'm sure you'd never have worn it; you'd have considered it too old-fashioned. Remember, though, that you haven't a fortune. You'll have to be careful with it - but spend it, mind! No scrimping with the intention of bringing some of it back.'

'No, I won't. Oh, Auntie, I'm so excited I could sing at the top of my voice!'

Aunt Sue merely smiled affectionately at her niece, noting the heightened colour adding to the beauty of her face, the lovely eyes, sparkling with anticipation, the small but beautiful hands making nervous movements with the clasp of the new handbag which the old lady had bought for her.

'Off you go, dear. The man's put in your luggage and he's waiting.'

'Goodbye,' repeated Alaine, giving her aunt a little hug. 'I'm glad Jinx is at school. She'd have cried to come with me and I'd have felt awful. Tell her I'll send lots of picture postcards and I'll bring her back a present.'

'I'll do that. Have a wonderful time, dear.'

The next few hours were like a dream. First the airport, from where Alaine flew to Venice where a sightseeing tour of the city had been

arranged by the travel company, after which Alaine and her party were taken by water-bus to the quay where the *Cassillia* gleamed in the sunshine, massive and immaculate. Each passenger was received by smiling officers as he or she stepped off the gangway on to the ship. Alaine was conducted by a steward to her cabin, which had a porthole, naturally, and the luxury of a divan bed instead of a bunk. There was a private shower and a roomy wardrobe and a dressing-table.

As it was half-past six in the evening she had time only to unpack and prepare for dinner, and as she did these things in the luxury of her first-class cabin she thought again of Estelle. She certainly did herself well. No second class accommodation for her. Revelling in this borrowed luxury, Alaine could not help wondering if this would be her one and only experience of it.

A young married couple were already seated at her table when she entered the dining saloon. They introduced themselves as Jim and Donna Wilding and, remembering her temporary name, Alaine told them she was Estelle Marsland. They all chatted for a moment or two, Donna predicting that they would have a young man as the fourth occupant of their table.

'They always fill up like that,' she smiled. 'Jim and I met each other in this particular way.' She stopped and looked up as the table steward showed a dark-haired young man to the spare seat. 'Told you,' laughed Donna as the man sat down. His name was Hal and as he was a friendly sort the four chatted together throughout the meal and when it was over Hal suggested they keep together for the rest of the trip, making a foursome. Jim and Donna instantly agreed, but Alaine experienced a twinge of annoyance, as she had no wish to have this young man hanging around her for the duration of the cruise. Aunt Sue had warned her about such an eventuality.

'I once went on a cruise,' she told Alaine, 'and I found myself stuck with a woman who wanted to be friends and pal up with me. I didn't

like telling her I'd rather she found someone else and so I had no opportunity of becoming friendly with anyone else. You mix, my dear. Don't get yourself stuck with one - at least,' she amended, 'not until you've had a look around and made up your mind.'

The other three were looking inquiringly at Alaine and as she was unable at this stage to avoid an affirmative reply to Hal's suggestion she presently found herself seated with them at a table in the nightclub where, under softly-shaded lights, they danced, drank, and watched the cabaret. The air became stuffy and misty with smoke and eventually Alaine said she was going up on deck for a breath of fresh air.

'I'll come with you,' eagerly from Hal, and Alaine bit her lip.

Donna winked and Alaine had the depressing conviction that there was to be no escape from Hal, who had held her far too close when they danced and who even now had slipped a possessive arm about her waist. Was it shyness on her part that made her unwilling **to** accept this man's company for the rest of the trip? she wondered. She could not honestly say she disliked him, so it could perhaps be shyness and inexperience that were responsible for the way she felt.

After only a few moments on deck Alaine announced her intention of going to bed. Hal's protest faded as she went along the deck and descended the stairs. She felt impatient with him because he had talked stupidly while they stood on deck, asking her to share a chair with him and jokingly saying, 'Two can go into one.' How was she to get rid of him? Alaine could discover no way at all - not without being downright rude to him.

However the next day, Saturday, was spent quite pleasantly in playing deck games or swimming in the pool and, of course, partaking of the marvellous meals which were put before them by the smiling steward. On Sunday they hired a taxi which took them on a sightseeing tour of

Athens, and the following morning they went to Cape Sounion and bathed in the sea, returning to the ship for lunch.

'I didn't know they took passengers on at the ports of call.' Alaine expressed her surprise as she stood by the rail with the other three. It was about an hour before the ship was due to leave Piraeus and several people, mainly Greeks, were coming aboard carrying suitcases.

'They do sometimes take on passengers,' said Jim. 'Some disembark, you see; I noticed this when we arrived here.'

Alaine seemed not to hear; her whole attention was arrested by one of the passengers coming up the gangway. How tall! Was he a Greek? She saw his face only in profile as he came with a kind of feline grace up the long gangway, his whole bearing giving the impression of arrogance and nobility, of a man accustomed to the role of authority, of giving orders, and having them obeyed on the instant. As if to strengthen this impression the two officers at the top of the gangway appeared to stiffen to attention as he drew closer to them. And then he lifted his head and for one brief moment his eyes met those of Alaine before he glanced away, continuing his languid ascent of the gangway. But in that brief instant something incredible happened to Alaine. It was as if she had received some stunning impact that had sent her senses reeling; every nerve-end in her body tingled with a sort of ecstatic expectation, and her heart pulsated so wildly that when she automatically put a hand to it she could actually feel its throbbing disorder.

'I'm terribly sorry.' The apology, spoken in a rich vibrant tone and with the merest hint of an accent, came from the man immediately on his bumping against her as she was making her way to the lounge for afternoon tea. Had it been an accident? wondered Alaine. There was ample room in the passage.. .

'That's all right.' She looked up into the most handsome face she had ever seen - and yet the most formidable too, for the facial lines, etched like something in granite had the severity of early Greek sculpture and carried a harshness and implacability that seemed to brand him as a man totally without feeling or compassion. His eyes, black and arresting, looked hard into hers and she felt there was no single thing about her that they had not taken in. His forehead was lined and low, his black brows very slightly curved, as they were in classical Greek sculpture; his cheekbones were high and prominent beneath a taut and rich mahogany- coloured skin. The thick black hair waved attractively and even as Alaine watched a slender brown hand slipped through it, removing a lock that had strayed on to the lowering brow.

'I'm afraid I wasn't looking where I was going. I hope I haven't hurt you?'

'Of course you haven't.' Alaine smiled up at him, remembering the impact he had made upon her only an hour or so ago. 'There's really no need to apologize; it was a pure accident.' She tried not to feel shy, but she knew her colour had risen, and that she wasn't being at all poised and assured as, for instance, Estelle would have been in such an encounter. The man stared down into her face and she became puzzled by his expression. He seemed surprised and a little nonplussed, she thought, but it was only a fleeting impression, because he was now saying,

'You're very kind.' A pause, during which his charming smile had the effect of increasing her heartbeats to an almost uncomfortable thud. 'Were you going in to tea?' the man inquired politely, and she nodded in a dazed sort of way.

'Yes,' she replied breathlessly. 'Yes, I w-was.'

'Then perhaps we might go together? You're alone?'

She nodded again and said yes, she was alone, but even as he spoke she had the strange conviction that he knew very well she was alone.

On entering the lounge, where soft *bouzouki* music drifted from a small dais on which were seated four musicians, the man guided her, with an almost imperceptible touch of his hand on her back, to a table over in a secluded alcove and pulled out a chair for her. Alaine had not looked round on entering the lounge, for although she had made no promises she knew Hal would be expecting her to join him for tea. Jim and Donna did not take tea, preferring to remain out on deck in the sunshine.

Tea and cakes were brought on a tray and Alaine picked up the teapot, feeling very much overwhelmed by this tall Greek who was leaning back in his chair and regarding her through half closed eyes. He seemed puzzled, she thought, although she could find no reason for this impression. She also felt that his rather languid pose was assumed and that he was in fact on the alert. She handed him his tea and he thanked her before saying, rather slowly, his gaze fixed intently on her face,

..My name's Duris ..A small hesitation, as if he would ascertain whether or not there would be some reaction on her part. But she merely smiled and waited and had then seemed to draw a deep breath before telling her that his first name was Cimon. 'What's yours?' He smiled, but she had the impression that something other than humour lay behind that smile.

Forgetful, she almost made a slip and her lips had actually formed the name Alaine when she checked and said,

'Estelle Marsland.' As soon as the name left her lips she felt a sudden regret that lying was necessary. Somehow, she did not like the idea of lying to this man; also, she wanted to be herself at this moment - not Estelle, but Alaine. However, an untruth was absolutely necessary

because of the passenger list. Many people stopped to scan it; she herself had done so and probably Cimon had too - or would before the voyage was over.

'Estelle Marsland..,' He seemed to be repeating the name over to himself, while he continued to subject Alaine to that intense regard, this time from over the rim of his teacup, and after a silent moment an enigmatic smile came to his lips and hovered there. He was remote, a long long way from her, she thought... and yet his eyes were still fixed on her face. She lowered her lashes, faintly perturbed by this concentrated interest. 'How do you come to be cruising alone?' he inquired at length.

She shrugged with assumed carelessness.

'I like travelling alone.'

'You do it often?'

'This is the first time,' she answered, giving him a frank look, and only then did she realize her inconsistency.

'But you just said you liked travelling alone.' Soft tones, yet containing some obscure element that brought a prickling sensation to the base of Alaine's skull. An uneasy silence followed his words, which were half question, half statement.

'There was no one to come with me,' she said lamely at last, and to her puzzlement and surprise his fine lips curved in a manner that could only be described as one of contempt. He said, still in the same soft tones,

'I suppose you knew you wouldn't be alone for long?'

She frowned at him, her face fusing with colour.

'I'm afraid I don't understand you.' Although she injected a coolness into her voice she knew a sudden loss of spirit at the trend of conversation. Cimon seemed cynical, and faintly patronizing. His black eyes held a light she did not particularly care for, although she could not have explained what it was she saw there. She glanced away, and picked up a scone. Cimon appeared to notice her dejection and, to her intense relief, seemed anxious to undo any damage he had done, for when he spoke again it was with the charm of manner exhibited when, having knocked against her, he graciously apologized.

'You're so very beautiful that it is quite impossible for you to be alone for long. Surely you're aware of this?' His voice flattered even by its softness; his eyes glimmered with unconcealed admiration, and the smile on his lips was so obviously friendly that Alaine found herself responding with her own ready smile.

'I expect you talk like this to all the women,' she said with assumed flippancy after searching for something more original to say to him.

He laughed, revealing two rows of even white teeth, strong and gleaming.

'I expect I have made similar remarks on various occasions,' he admitted, leaning forward in his chair to help himself to a pastry. 'But I'm quite sincere when I say that my remarks have never been passed to a more beautiful girl than you.' His black eyes laughed a little because of her blushes and the rather tremulous movement of her lips. He seemed to understand her slight nervousness and lack of confidence, and she wondered if he were used to women behaving like this on first becoming acquainted with him. There was about him so superior an air, a certain inherent *savoir vivre*, that unless a woman were herself endowed with a high degree of confidence she must surely find herself floundering a little, for he really was rather overpowering. Alaine fumbled with her pastry fork and, noting his change of countenance, she had the impression that in addition to the

humour displayed by the gleam in his eyes and the curve of his lips he was possessed of some secret from which he derived a great measure of amusement. 'I expect you'll be dancing this evening?' he said as if desiring to put her at her ease.

She nodded eagerly, her heart giving a little jerk of excitement.

'Yes, of course.'

'Then I shall claim you for every dance,' he responded with a kind of smooth mastery that set her nerves tingling in a delicious sort of way.

'Oh ... will you?" She was trembling, and angry with herself in consequence. No wonder he was amused; she acted like a shy and gauche little schoolgirl.

Cimon laughed and, leaning forward in his chair, he picked up the cakes and handed them to her.

'Most certainly I shall. I haven't run into a girl like you merely to let her go again.'

She sent him a startled glance, wondering at the idea of some subtle implication in those words. Was he typical of the race? she wondered, thinking for one fleeting moment of Sulas, who apparently had no confidence at all. Certainly he hadn't had the poise and self-assurance that this man possessed, but of course, Sulas was much younger - only twenty-one, whereas this man looked to be in his mid-thirties. There were many Greeks on board the *Cassillia*, but Alaine had spoken to only one or two in passing, so she had no means of comparing Cimon with any others of his nationality, but somehow she did not think he was typical. He seemed a man apart, more dignified, more noble. He still held the plate of cakes and she took one, thanked him, and put it on her plate. Replacing the cakes on the table, Cimon straightened up, then leant back against the blue moquette upholstery of his armchair.

'You came aboard at Piraeus,' murmured Alaine with a look of inquiry. 'Are you taking the rest of the cruise?'

'I did come aboard at Piraeus. I'd been in Athens on business, and now I'm on my way home.'

'You live on one of the islands?'

'Yes, I live on the island of Rhodes.' Was there a fleeting hesitation before he mentioned the island? she wondered, and then decided it was her imagination.

'So, you'll be leaving the ship?' Disappointment flooded over here - disappointment out of all proportion. 'We're due to arrive there six days from now.'

'I believe so,' stifling a yawn. He appeared to be lost in reverie and Alaine was reluctant to intrude and she sat there sipping her tea and wondering if he were married and had a family. It seemed impossible that such a devastatingly attractive man could have remained single, yet the next moment she was telling herself that he was not the marrying sort, that he probably indulged in numerous affairs— Putting a break on her meditations, she allowed herself a smile. Of what importance was it to her whether or not he was married? - or if he indulged in numerous affairs?

'Have you always lived on Rhodes?' she inquired conversationally when at last his attention ceased to be occupied with his own private thoughts. 'It's a very beautiful island, isn't it?'

'It is indeed. No, I haven't always lived there. I lived for a short while in Arcadia when I was a child.'

'Arcadia? That name conjures up visions of pastoral peace and simplicity; one thinks of shady trees and murmuring streams and lush

green hills and water- meadows—' Alaine stopped on noting her companion's changed expression. Puzzlement was there, but it faded presently and the quizzical lift of an eyebrow portrayed his dawning amusement.

'And nymphs and shepherds,' he supplemented with a laugh that sent delicious tingles running the whole length of her spine. 'I'm sorry to disillusion you, but nothing could be more wrong than the impression given by the poets. Arcadia is a region of fretted mountains and dark defiles; its climate is severe and its soils stony and barren - for the most part, that is. Romantic Pan dancing with his nymphs to the accompaniment of the syrinx forms an attractive picture, but it's entirely mythical, as you obviously know.' He fell silent for a moment before quoting, ' "Nymphs and Shepherds dance no more, By sandy Ladon's liliated banks ..." '

Alaine laughed, but her voice assumed a plaintive note as she said,

'You've spoiled my lovely picture, and I've had it since I was at school.'

'How long ago is that?' he asked unhesitatingly.

'Since I left, you mean?'

Cimon tilted his head to one side in a mannerism she had previously noticed, and she was quick to catch the satirical inflection in his tone as he said,

'Don't prevaricate, Estelle. I'm asking you your age?'

Lowering her head under the clear rebuke, she told him she was twenty-two. He received this with a faint nod - which was not very flattering to Alaine, as people invariably expressed surprise on discovering her age, saying she looked much younger.

'Tell me some more about Arcadia,' she urged, once again experiencing a small access of dejection at the pronounced change in his expression. What were his thoughts that they should bring so dark a frown to his brow?

'What do you want to know?' His voice changed, swiftly reverting to its former half-humorous tones. 'About the nymphs and shepherds? Yes, you do see the shepherds - prematurely-aged men with crooks and care-lined faces. And the nymphs? Well, you'll find women working with spindles, their brown hands gnarled and work-worn, their bodies weighed down by voluminous black robes.' His eyes flickered over Alaine, sitting sideways at the table, her shapely legs crossed and one slender ankle moving in time with the music. Her pretty cotton dress, flowered and sleeveless, did everything for her figure, the neckline having been cleverly cut to the near-revealing limit. A mass of honey-gold hair spilling in enchanting abandon over one shoulder added to the tantalizing impression of delightful curves hidden from view.

'Oh, dear,' sighed Alaine, slightly disconcerted by his all-embracing regard, 'my picture's totally blotted out now.'

'You asked me to tell you more,' he reminded her, and she nodded ruefully. 'So sorry, Estelle.' She merely smiled and he said unexpectedly, 'Tell me about yourself. Your parents,' he added, watching her closely. 'And what do you do for a living?'

'My parents are dead.' She stopped, for some reason not wanting to tell him all about her work at the store, or the drabness of her life - and she certainly did not want to tell him about Jinx, for the simple reason that she was reluctant to afford him amusement by acquainting him with the fact that she had been made such a fool of by the man who had quite literally parked his unwanted baby on her.

Strangely, he expressed no surprise that her parents were dead. Most people did because of Alaine's youth. Not many girls of her age had lost both parents.

'Your work?' The merest hesitation and then, 'You do work for a living, I suppose?'

She looked swiftly at him. Could it be mere imagination, but had she really detected a note of sarcasm 'on the word 'work' ?

She hesitated, still reluctant to tell him she was a shop assistant. Not that there was anything wrong in that, it was honest work ... and yet she had an urge to be Estelle now, and not herself, not Alaine.

'I model,' she said, rather quickly so as to get the untruth out before it caused her too much trouble.

'You model.' His glance seemed to strip her naked and she blushed. 'What do you model? Clothes? - or do you merely - er - model?'

Her blush deepened. She felt anger rise, but dejection also. This man from Greece could hurt.

'I model clothes,' she replied quietly, avoiding his gaze.

'I'm sorry,' he murmured across the table. 'I should not have implied that you modelled in the nude. Forgive me.'

Alaine raised her eyes, wondering at the sudden prick behind them. Cimon appeared to be genuinely regretful of his implication. She gained the impression that he had no wish to antagonize her.

'It doesn't matter.'

'I'm sorry,' he repeated. The apologetic way was totally unsuited to his personality, to his bearing and his powerful physique which in itself

gave him the mark of superiority and arrogance. It was a little while before he spoke again, not in fact until Alaine had finished eating, when he asked her if she would like to go on deck. He himself had eaten very little, and he had drunk only one cup of tea. Alaine was not surprised by this lack of indulgence. Despite the tallness of him and the wide shoulders which spelt great strength, his body was all muscle; Cimon Duris was obviously one of those people who had no intention of being hampered by superfluous weight.

'Yes, I'd like to go on deck now.' All dejection melted under his smile and the tingling sensation was there in her spine again. As she and Cimon were about to stand up Alaine glanced around. Hal was sitting by a window watching her, and although she could not read his expression at this distance she somehow knew he was angry and hurt. But she could not waste pity on him. This was her holiday of a lifetime and she meant to take advantage of all it had to offer. Already three days had gone - three days spent in the company of Hal, with whom she had no desire to be anything except polite. He had deliberately pushed himself, and Alaine had begun to feel trapped, convinced that she was to be restricted to his company - and that of Donna and Jim - for the entire duration of the cruise. But now ... Here was excitement; Cimon had stated his intention of dancing with her for the whole evening, and she knew he meant it. It looked as if he wanted to be her companion for the six days while he was aboard, and if after that she found herself alone, unwanted by those three, then she would not mind. It would have been well worth it. Already girls who had come in for tea were- giving Cimon their attention - and no wonder, he was so arresting. Glances came Alaine's way too . . . glances of undisguised envy. Cimon eased himself unhurriedly from his chair, smiling down at Alaine from his superior height as she picked up her small bag and rose from her chair. His hand automatically fell on to her shoulder and she quivered under its touch. Was this the start of a shipboard romance? Her mind and her nerves and in fact her whole being was affected as she and Cimon walked the full length of the lounge,

watched by many eyes, as they made for the door and stepped out on to the deck.

'Shall we sit down?' Cimon opened up the chairs without waiting for Alaine's reply. They had strolled to the end of the deck, away from the more crowded area, and Cimon put their chairs close to the rail. They sat down and Cimon's hand came across so that it covered Alaine's as it rested on the wooden arm of the chair. She turned her head, overcome with shyness; her eyes met his and she saw an expression that set her heart racing. Was he really attracted to her? she wondered, asking breathlessly - because she had to,

'Do you - do you live alone? - or have you some - relatives?'

There was a distinct edge of sardonic amusement in his voice as he replied,

'If you're asking if I'm married - as I presume you are - then the answer is no—' He broke off and his lip quivered as she coloured. 'You're probably of the opinion that I wouldn't admit it if I were. I don't know whether I would or not,' he told her with candour, and added thoughtfully, 'I expect it would depend on what sort of woman my wife was. However, as I'm not married the question doesn't arise.' No comment from Alaine; she was too put out by the fact that he had seen through her question. 'Would it have mattered to you had I been married?'

She turned her head then, not fully understanding his question.

'I don't know what you mean? Why should it matter to me whether you are married or not?'

'We're going to be friends, aren't we?' Soft tones, persuasive yet almost arrogantly confident. He was certainly sure of himself, this dark Greek with the superlative looks and physique. What would be the outcome

of this friendship, as he termed it? Alaine was no simpleton with dreams of high-speed romance and marriage as the end-product. Cimon Duris was not that type of man - just the reverse, in fact. He could be dangerous, Alaine had no illusions about that... yet wasn't danger often exciting? Her life had been drab up till now and excitement in any form was alluring. Friendship, he had implied ... but Alaine foresaw for herself risks and temptations, but the prospect was thrilling because of the very unpredictable nature of the situation. It must of course end in goodbye, and their paths would never cross again ... but the goodbye was six days hence. In the meantime Alaine meant to live - without of course going to any perilous lengths. She was not Estelle, and although she had on occasions, usually when too many bills arrived or some other expense cropped up, told her aunt she would not be averse to taking a lover, never for one moment had she been serious about what she said.

'I've asked you if we're going to be friends?' Cimon's rich clear voice cut into her thoughts and she smiled at him and nodded her head.

'Yes, we're going to be friends,' she replied, and hoped she did not sound too eager - or too cheap.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALAINE opened her eyes and through the first shaft of consciousness the vision of Cimon appeared. She and he had danced until two o'clock this morning, and even after that they had remained out on deck for another half hour or so. Cimon's caressing voice lingered, and so did his smile; his kiss had been gentle and his manner towards her respectful. Had she been mistaken in her first estimation of his character? After having been held in his arms for so long, in the romantic setting of the dimly-lighted night club, Alaine had been half expecting Cimon to make a suggestion of sorts; instead, he had held her merely by an arm around her waist when they came on deck, and even when he kissed her good night his hands remained on her arms - except for one delicious moment when he had taken her face between his long brown fingers and, looking deeply into her eyes, had told her how beautiful she was. He had seen her to her cabin and there stopped just long enough to raise her hand to his lips before, with a smile and a promise to be at the swimming pool at seven-thirty the following morning, he had turned and left her, the feel of his lips still warm on her hand.

Seven-thirty ... The sun was streaming into her cabin and, startled from her pleasant reverie, Alaine reached for her wristlet watch, which lay on the cabinet by the side of her bed. A quarter past seven. She jumped out of bed, determined not to lose one precious moment. She smiled into the mirror. Was this starry-eyed girl the tired assistant whose working life was spent behind a shop counter, where her time was occupied in pandering to customers' needs?

'I could have danced all night..Alaine hummed the tune as she whirled round the small space between wardrobe and wash-basin. 'This is *living!*'

Cimon was lying on the water; she stood looking down at him - at the noble head and wide shoulders, at the lithe brown body with its mass

of black hair on chest and legs. He saw her and in his eyes a smile dawned, then deepened as the silent moments passed, just as if he knew all about the wild uncontrolled beating of her heart.

'Come on in,' he encouraged. 'The water's warm.'

Responding to his invitation, she slipped on her cap and dived in. Cimon swam towards her, his lips touching hers the moment she surfaced.

'Oh,' she said, flustered yet thrilled. 'Someone will see.'

'Let than! You're my girl, so I've every right to kiss you.'

You're my girl... Vibrant words, and meaningful. The fluttering of her heart increased. He sounded so sincere, and yet she sternly took command of herself and directed her thoughts into more practical channels, remembering that in less than a week's time he and she would have said goodbye, for ever. Yet as she turned her head and noted his expression she could not miss the tenderness portrayed in his smile. A small sigh escaped her; she wished she had more experience of men, so that she could differentiate between sincerity and careless flirtation. Aunt Sue was right when she asserted that Alaine should get out more.

'You blush more enchantingly than any woman I know.' Whispered words, spoken close to her ear as she and Cimon floated side by side on the pool. From overhead the sun streamed down from a flawless Aegean sky and the deck became a blaze of colour as its rays shone on the brightly-covered chairs, the blue pool and the gay attire of the people strolling about or standing by the rail, staring out towards the island just appearing on the horizon.

'You know lots of women?' The forced lightness failed to achieve its objective for a shrewd light flickered in Cimon's eyes.

'What man doesn't - these days?" No answer from Alaine as the implication shot home. Was there an edge of contempt to his voice as he added, 'And you, Estelle? Don't tell me you aren't acquainted with lots of men, because I wouldn't believe you.'

She turned from him, hurt in a way that drove fear into her heart. Should she tell him about her life? - that she knew no men simply because the opportunity of meeting them never arose? Should she tell him about Jinx? - reveal how Keith had made a fool of her? Wavering on the brink of giving Cimon her confidence and confessing she had lied in saying she was a model, she" twisted round, and was instantly deterred by his taut features and the unfathomable expression in his eyes. He would not be interested in details of her private life, so dull and uneventful. To him she was just another girl - a pleasant companion with whom to swim and dance and stroll on deck, passing the time in trivial conversation - as they were doing now. Falling in with his own mood, she answered flippantly, 'Of course I'm acquainted with lots of men. What woman isn't?' Twisting like an eel in the water, she would have swum away from him, but his hand shot out and captured her wrist. Almost roughly she was brought back to his side. He seemed furious all at once, but Alaine sensed this rather than saw it.

'Are you boasting of your conquests?' he asked harshly, and a stab of fear shot through her. She stared at him, bewilderedly. Had their acquaintanceship not been of so short a duration she could have believed his anger stemmed from jealousy.

'No - I'm not.' His grip was like a vice. 'You're hurting me, Cimon,' she complained, and the pressure on her wrist was released but not removed.

'I didn't mean to hurt you.' His anger faded and his face softened. Once again she had the odd conviction that he had no wish to antagonize her. 'Come, let us get out of here; we've had enough. In any case, it's time we went in to breakfast.'

With his swift change of mood Alaine's heart lifted and she was singing softly as she showered in her cabin, and dressed in a pair of bright blue shorts and a sun-top. She brushed her hair till it shone; her eyes sparkled like stars and as she left the cabin and made her way towards the restaurant she felt as if she were treading on air.

Cimon was waiting for her as she reached the door and they went in together, Cimon leading the way to a small table in an alcove by the window. Breakfast was an informal meal, with passengers coming in at various times, so they were not obliged to keep to the tables allotted to them.

'We'll have to do something about getting together for all our meals,' said Cimon firmly as their breakfast was being served to them. 'I'll see the chief table steward.'

Pleasure, and full agreement with this suggestion, was revealed in Alaine's swift smile and the sparkle entering her eyes, but she had to say,

'I'm with three people. I've been going about with them ever since we came aboard.'

'Well, you'll be going about with me for the next five days, so you'd better tell them. What's the number of your table?' She told him, and even though there was nothing more she desired than to spend every possible moment with Cimon she opened her mouth to protest again, for it did seem wrong to desert the others. In fact, to request a change of table seemed to constitute a slight. However, she never voiced her protest because Cimon prevented her from doing so.

'I'll see the steward while you run along for your bag and whatever else you want to collect.' Glancing at his watch he added, 'We'll be docking in a few minutes and if you want to see the most of Mykonos we must leave the ship as soon as possible after breakfast.'

On her way to her cabin half an hour later Alaine bumped into Donna. Before she could speak the other girl said with a grin,

'High romance? Okay, we don't mind, so don't trouble to apologize. You're under no obligation to stay with an old married couple like us. And Hal isn't much - not compared with your Greek. You should have seen the envious looks you got last night! He's the sort of man you can't take your eyes off, though, so I expect every single girl aboard is jealous of the attention he's giving you.'

The colour naturally tinted Alaine's face, but she managed to retain her composure as she said,

'Cimon wants me to share a table with him, Donna, so I might not be with you this evening for dinner.'

'Oh... well, of course you must please yourself, but we'll miss you. You said dinner - what about lunch?'

'I expect we'll be having that on Mykonos. We're not due back on the ship until half past one.'

'No, that's true. Well, enjoy yourself - and don't forget the old warning; if you can't be good...'

The island shone white in the sunshine, a mosaic of cubes and domes. Typical Cycladic architecture, Cimon had informed her as they had looked on the island from the deck of the ship. They were now aboard a small boat, being ferried across the bluest sea in the world - the beautiful Aegean. The tiny harbour was alive with brightly-coloured craft, the gay little caiques floating alongside the more dignified white yachts, stirred by the rhythmic undulations of a swell moving over water undisturbed by the wind.

'*I lefki Mykonos*,' murmured Cimon in low but rich and vibrant tones. 'Mykonos the white.' The inhabitants whitewashed their houses twice a year, he went on to tell her. 'All islanders take an exceptional pride in their homes, especially the outside appearance.'

'Do they get a lot of tourists here?'

'More than any other of the Cyclades; but at this time of the year it won't be crowded.'

'It's so calm,' Alaine said with a puzzled frown. 'Out there we had quite a breeze.'

'The *meltemi* - wind of the islands.' Cimon smiled at her and for a split second her heart stood still. Be careful, a red light warned; already you're on slippery ground. 'Mykonos is sheltered from this northerly wind by the mole you see out there. That's why the swell's so gentle.' His voice was low but rich and strong; the accent was decidedly an added attraction for Alaine and she felt she could have listened to him indefinitely. But he was pointing and she looked towards the harbour, beyond which the town straggled the hillsides. Windmills turned; dovecotes and farmhouses and tall campaniles were touched with translucent gold as they caught the sun, and everywhere exotic flowers flaunted their springtime glory. It was a fairy-tale island, and so lovely that it was difficult to believe that it was practically barren - a huge rock which in Greek mythology had been picked up and hurled at the Giants by an enraged Poseidon, god of the sea. The little caique on which Cimon and Alaine were being ferried was close to the shore now; Alaine turned impulsively, to pass some remark to her companion, but the words died on her lips. She saw him in profile - the clear, finely- etched features and aquiline nose, high prominent cheekbones and out-thrust jaw. His expression had halted her tongue and some particular disturbance filtered through her whole being as she continued to stare at him. He turned; his deep-set eyes were hard and dark as basalt. What were this man's thoughts?

Alaine recalled that once before she had asked herself that question, and on that occasion also his expression had been the cause of some inner and unfathomable disturbance. Charm he undoubtedly possessed, and the sort of good looks and self-assurance that attracted like a magnet ... but what lay beneath that irresistible veneer? True, his expression could be soft, his smile reassuring, his voice toned almost to a caress, but Alaine was beginning to suspect that underneath he was a cold man and merciless.

'What's wrong?' He frowned on examining her face. 'You've gone quite white - Lord, you're going to be-?'

'Of course not! It's like a millpond.' Alaine managed a shaky laugh and humour lit her companion's eyes. Why, she asked herself, should she suddenly experience this fear? Cimon rose as the boat was drawn to the side by the men waiting there; his arm slipped about her as they stepped ashore and all her fears vanished as if by magic. They had been stupid, anyway, and totally inexplicable and without foundation.

'You're quite sure you feel all right?' Cimon stopped to look down at her,, his expression anxious, she thought. 'Your colour's returned, but if you feel like a drink we'll get one before we begin tramping around.'

Alaine shook her head, thrilled by his concern for her. This sort of attention was so new, so unfamiliar, that she naturally derived a quite disproportionate amount of pleasure from it - not like Estelle, who would have accepted it as her due.

'I'm fine,' she returned, lifting a hand to remove a lock of hair that had fallen over her face. She smiled up at him, her eyes large and limpid and reflecting the happiness within her. How fortunate she had been to find someone like Cimon ... and how lucky that he had preferred her to any other girl on board. He could have had his choice of any one of them, of this there was no doubt at all.

'Then we'll begin our perambulation.' His arm slipped around her again and she felt his fingers caressing her waist.

They strolled along the waterfront, or esplanade, where dusky men invited them to look at exciting wares of all kinds. The women of the island, clad in russet and cream or white homespuns, smiled and offered Alaine lovely hand-knitted sweaters at a quarter the price she would have paid at home. Leatherwork, too, was exquisite, and cheap. Embroidery was also offered and Cimon stopped.

'What would you like, my dear?'

'Nothing - thank you . . .'

'Choose!' An imperative, uncompromising command spoken so sharply that she almost jumped. 'Of course you want something.' And now there was the merest hint of cynicism in his voice and she came to the conclusion that he was a man of swiftly-changing moods, since this was by no means the first time such a change had occurred.

The embroidery's nice,' she returned, wishing she had not uttered that refusal which had resulted in his thinking she was acting a part. Obviously the women with whom he occupied his leisure time were eager to collect all they could - from men like Cimon Duris.

'This traycloth.'

'You also use as table mats,' smiled the young woman, who immediately brought more to show them.

'In that case we'll have half a dozen.'

'Oh, but-'

'And that sweater.' Cimon pointed upwards and the girl brought it down. It was bright green, heavy and done in cable stitch.

'It's lovely.' In spite of her shyness, and the reluctance to accept these presents, Alaine could not help but enthuse. 'Do you knit these?'

'In three days, madam,' responded the girl proudly.

'Three days! But how long do you work?'

'Many, many hours - right into the night. And you get tired,' she added, 'and your eyes go weak when you are still young.'

A look of distress swiftly lit Alaine's eyes and Cimon's head lifted and an odd expression crossed his face. She had the extraordinary idea that her concern for the young woman's eyesight more than surprised him.

'Why don't you charge more and take longer?' she asked the girl. 'Your eyesight's the most precious thing you have.' She spoke softly, looking at the girl to ascertain whether or not her advice was being taken in.

'Plenty people will not buy if we charge more.'

'They're four times this price in Britain. I'm sure you could charge a little more.'

'This is the price we want to charge.' The sweater was put up against Alaine and Cimon nodded his head.

'Yes, we'll have it.' He said something in Greek and the girl went to the end of the stall and brought an evening bag from somewhere underneath. Alaine had no evening bag, but the fact that Cimon had noticed this amazed her. 'This is hand-woven material,' he said to her. 'The women of all these islands weave their own materials.'

The bag was beautifully made from a strong white material with interwoven threads of gold and silver.

'Thank you, Cimon,' was all Alaine could find to say as she watched the drachmae changing hands. 'You're very kind to me.'

'I hope you will always think so.' Soft words, and edged with banter... and yet that fear shot through her again. What was the cause of it?

'And now, that drink.' Cimon carried the parcel, a quite unusual procedure for a Greek who, if walking with his wife or even his sister, would invariably have one hand in his pocket and the other occupied either with a cigarette or a string of worry beads. 'A small *taverna* I know of,' Cimon was saying, almost to himself. 'Now which alleyway was it in? Ah, yes!'

'You know this island well?' asked Alaine, doing a little skip now and then to keep pace with him.

'Not well, exactly. I've been several times. My mother used to like coming - but that was a few years ago, before it became so popular as it is now.'

'Your mother? Is she still living?'

'Why? Do I look too old to have a mother living?'

'No, of course not. I don't know why I asked. Perhaps it was just for something to say.'

'She isn't living, unfortunately.' Silence ensued, a silence that seemed almost reverent and one that Alaine could not have broken without feeling she must anger him. What a strange man! Quite unfathomable. A man of moods, of pagan ancestry.

Alaine allowed her thoughts to stray to the parting between them, when the ship docked at Rhodes. He would go his way... and she would do her sightseeing alone. How would they both feel when that moment of finality arrived? Goodbye. A kiss - yes, there would be a

kiss. One last embrace on the quay, and then Cimon walking away, his long easy strides rapidly lengthening the distance between them. And Alaine would stand there, watching his tall magnificent figure. Would he turn? Ives, she was sure he would, and they would wave to one another until he was lost behind some building or other obstruction, or until each was a mere speck in the great distance that separated them. This was the fate of most shipboard romances; it seemed impossible, and yet it was so. A sigh escaped her, unconsciously, and Cimon glanced down, his black eyes inquiring.

'What ails my fair *kore*?' he wanted to know, and' Alaine's hint of dejection dissolved into brightness as she gave a small laugh.

'If you really want the truth—'

'By all means, my dear.'

'I was thinking of the goodbye - five days hence.'

Silence ... so profound that even the bustle of the waterfront seemed submerged by it. Yet activity went on all around; the sailors parading jauntily, laughing together, the fishermen drying their nets or mending them, the tourists and stallholders, the donkeys crying a protest at their loads of fruit and vegetables, as they had cried from time immemorial when first man ill- used and exploited them.

"The goodbye ..Cimon's voice at last, quiet yet somehow containing an odd mixture of amusement and satisfaction, and Alaine stared up at him, wishing she could understand him. He appeared to have descended into some depth of thought which could never be penetrated by anyone else. He seemed almost inhuman - not in savage sense, but in some Way that set him apart from her. 'Here's our *taverna*,' he said, jerking to an abrupt halt and breaking the spell that had almost imperceptibly drawn them both into its power. 'You must

try an *amygdaloto*; it's a speciality of this particular island. What do you want to drink?'

They sat down under the trellised vines; from somewhere at the back quiet *bouzouki* music could be heard, and there was the sound of children laughing. Alaine's thoughts went to Jinx. How the child would have loved this! Alaine made a mental vow to bring her if ever the opportunity should arise. 'I must look for a better job,' she thought, deciding that she had spent quite sufficient time behind that shop counter.

Alaine had lemonade and the *amygdaloto*, which turned out to be a delicious sweetmeat made of almonds, while Cimon drank *ouzo* with which was served a *meze*, of olives and *haloumi* and bits of smoked octopus. The young man waiting on wove between the tables, his flashing smile in evidence all the while; he stopped and spoke to Cimon in Greek and both men laughed as if at some huge joke. Following the direction of their gaze Alaine saw a stout and middle-aged Greek, thick-set and oily, fondling a girl as he strolled along the alleyway with her. She was a platinum blonde of indeterminate age, though the clothes she wore were suited to a seventeen-year-old. Alaine blushed because she now half-guessed what the laughter was about; noticing this heightened colour Cimon looked at her in some amusement.

'A drachma for them,' he said with banter, and her flush became even more pronounced. 'All right, I shouldn't have made the offer. Finished - or do you want some more of the figure-destroying pastries?'

'No, thank you. Where are we going now?' She rose as Cimon eased himself from the chair.

'We'll have a wander round these little alleys - just so you can get the picture - and then we'll go off to Delos.'

The network of alleys behind the harbour was like a bewildering maze, with many of the passages so narrow that Cimon and Alaine had to press against a wall if a donkey and rider should have to pass them. Other streets were wider, and all the houses had exterior staircases leading to the porch; flowers grown in pots trailed down the sides of the steps, spilling colour and perfume for the pleasure of every passer-by.

'These alleys mostly come to dead ends.' Alaine glanced up fleetingly, her expression puzzled.

'Not mostly, but often,' he corrected, and then went on to explain that originally they had been made this way as traps for pirates.

'Did they have pirates?'

'The Greeks have always loved piracy.' He stopped abruptly and Alaine was left with the impression that he could have expanded on that but had decided against it. And for the next few minutes he was silent, and somehow guarded. But when eventually they came to a *taverna* where men were dancing he stopped and while they watched the agile performers Cimon explained what the various movements were meant to portray.

'It all goes back into the darkness of paganism,' he said with a smile. 'These dances have evolved from the more orgiastic performances put on to honour one or other of the gods - but perhaps you know these things?'

She shook her head.

'No; I expect I should have read more about Greek mythology.' He said nothing and they strolled along in silence after leaving the *taverna*, each deep in thought, their footsteps turned towards the quay. Alaine fell to speculating on Cimon's home, and his work. She felt that he was

rich although she had no real reason for coming to this conclusion. He was cultured, his English was excellent. Perhaps he was a ship-owner, or maybe he grew tobacco or owned olive groves. Glancing up, she was half tempted to broach the subject, but seeing his set face she desisted, for his expression seemed to forbid such familiarity.

From Mykonos they went by small boat to Delos, entering the open sea after passing the tiny isle of St George, and less than an hour after leaving Mykonos they were wandering among the ruins of what to the ancients was the island of light, Apollo the sun-god having been born there. This god's temples, three in number, lay in ruins, with spring flowers blooming in wild and gay profusion from every nook and cranny. Broken columns and marble bases, scraps of statues and fragments of pediments were all that remained of the glory that in ancient times belonged to Delos, a prosperous trading centre. The most beautiful and famous monuments were the sacred lions, but of the long row that had once guarded the sanctuary by the Sacred Lake only five remained, weathered but still inordinately impressive, standing, lean and graceful, on their marble bases.

'It's exciting being on an uninhabited island.' Alaine was staring around her in breathless wonderment; they had climbed the slopes of Mount Cynthus, they had seen the city where were situated the famous House of the Dolphins and the House of the Trident and the House of the Masks. 'This is the most wonderful place!' There were marble tables and chairs, beautiful mosaics and of course the great theatre which could seat five thousand people. The wind had risen and it blew Alaine's hair about; she looked right for the setting, Cimon remarked, taking her hair in his hands and sweeping it back from her face. A swift glance round telling him they were alone for the moment, he bent his head and kissed her on the lips. She stared at him, bright-eyed and lost in the magic of the island, and the situation in which she found herself. Be careful, her heart again warned, but she was in a state of excitement she had never known before . . . and which she felt she would never know again, once she had said goodbye to Cimon.

'How lovely you are.' His whispered words were soft and tender, caressing as the most gentle zephyr. 'I'm glad I met you, Estelle.' His hands slid down to her waist and spanned it. She quivered, automatically lifting her face for his kiss. 'Are you glad you met me, my love?'

My love ... Did it mean anything? Sternly Alaine reminded herself that she and Cimon had known each other less than a day. He was playing, and it was a game at which he was an expert, simply because he had played it so often before. His partners had no doubt been equally experienced, knowing full well how the game should be played.

'Yes,' Alaine answered at last. 'I'm very glad I met you.'

His lips found hers again; she sensed their triumph and a tremor of fear passed through her. Should he make a suggestion, then this lovely dream would be at an end - and Alaine felt convinced that the suggestion would come before this day was over.

CHAPTER FIVE

THROUGH the haze across the sea a purple ridge of mountains appeared.

'Rhodes.' Cimon's voice in her ear and Alaine turned, smiling a welcome. 'You were up before me this morning.'

'I wanted to see the sunrise.'

'In a moment... see, here comes the first tip of the crimson ball; the world is turning into it.' He was behind her now and his arms slid round her, his lean brown hands covering hers as they rested on the rail, Alaine leant against him with a little tender movement and thrilled to the feel of his thin resting on the top of her head. 'Look this way, darling. Rhodes - island of roses.'

She could only nod, for her throat was tight and blocked by an ache of desolation at the coming parting between her and Cimon. She and he were the sole occupants of the deck. Everything was quiet except the murmuring sea; everything slept but the sun, rising in the east, to waken the world.

Alaine looked broodingly through the distance to the island that was Rhodes ... Cimon's home. The place where their last goodbye was to be said. She had not slept very well and she wondered if he also had lain awake. These were their last few hours together.

With a stir of memory she recalled the night when from Cimon had come the suggestion she had expected; softly-tempting words as they both stood on deck in the moonlight, with the ship skimming the waves and soft music floating out to them from the orchestra playing in the night club. Her refusal had come hesitantly as with a sinking heart she told herself that this was the end, that Cimon would find himself a more co-operative companion. To her utter amazement her

refusal was received with surprise but not with anger. His surprise had been out of all proportion; obviously he had expected a swift and eager surrender. Her own answer to his persuasions had caused her a sleepless night during which she told herself that she had been a fool, that her ideals were totally out of date. Why put a premature end to her pleasure by losing Cimon when she had only just found him? Why wasn't she more like Estelle? Life would be so much easier.

Cimon, she told herself during those wakeful hours, would not be waiting at the pool for her in the morning. They would not go in to breakfast together; there would be no more dancing together, or sunbathing, or kisses under the stars with Cimon's strong arms about her, holding her close. Short and immeasurably sweet it had been - an interlude she would never forget - but now it was ended. Cimon would turn his attention to someone else.

How mistaken she had been! He *was* waiting for her at the pool the next morning and they did go in to breakfast together. And they had been together ever since, visiting the islands of Patmos and Kos on their way to Rhodes. On each island they had been together, sightseeing. Cimon had bought her things which she would never have bought for herself, even though she still had most of the money her aunt had given her. With each succeeding day Cimon's manner had become more tender, his lovemaking deep and meaningful. It now seemed impossible that they could say goodbye without arranging to meet again - some time, somewhere.

But one circumstance greatly troubled Alaine, stripping her of all confidence: Cimon had never made any further inquiries about her home or her job or her life in England. He knew nothing about her and he did not appear interested. Several times she had made a halfhearted attempt to tell him the truth about her job, to talk about Jinx and Aunt Sue. But no real occasion had arisen and words that rose to her lips had been held back by the sheer lack of interest on Cimon's part. Had he wanted details about her he could have asked, knowing she would

have answered his questions without hesitation. And because of Cimon's indifference Alaine had refrained from inquiring about his life, so after six idyllic days neither knew anything about the other.

'How long before we land?' Hesitant the question, spoken in trembling, husky tones.

'Not for a couple of hours or so.'

'Two hours ...' She still had her back to him, still felt his chin on the top of her head.

'Why so forlorn, my love?' His hands caressed the backs of hers before, turning her round to face him, he took them both in his and stood for a long while looking down at them, not expecting an answer to his question, apparently, because her silence brought forth no interrogating glance from him. 'No rings ... Have you none, Estelle? - not a diamond for your finger?'

Her heart seemed to turn right over; she scarcely heard her own voice say,

'No, Cimon, I haven't any - any rings.' A very strange silence ensued before Cimon said, the most odd inflection in his voice,

'Pretty hands like these and no diamond. You should have a diamond, my love.'

Her mind spun. Could he possibly mean - an engagement ring? Surely he must, for why else should he mention a diamond ring? She shone up at him, and without giving herself a moment's thought she murmured shyly,

'You mean you - you are going to give me one—?' She stopped then, squirming as she realized what she had said. What would he think of her? In a situation where a man was on the point of a proposal it was

his prerogative to do the talking. Surely he must consider her forward, she thought, biting her lip in anger at herself for speaking so impetuously. However, to her intense relief Cimon appeared not to have noticed her eagerness - or he successfully hid it - as he smiled that attractive smile and, drawing her attention to the sun again he changed the subject with an abruptness that startled her.

'See, Estelle,' he said softly, into her hair, 'it's become, pear-shaped.'

She turned in his arms, not feeling as happy as she should because it seemed very odd that he should talk of a ring before proposing to her. And there was still the puzzling matter of their total ignorance concerning each other's lives. Alaine thought about the lie she had told him; she thought about Jinx and Aunt Sue and all at once the whole situation became fraught with problems so great and unsurmountable that she did not even wish to think about them.

'Yes, it is pear-shaped.' Alaine stared at the sun. 'It's just as if the sea's trying to pull it back, reluctant to let it go.'

'An optical illusion, of course.' Cimon's lips touched her hair fleetingly before he exclaimed, 'There, it's up!'

The glory took Alaine's breath away, even though it was by no means the first time she had seen the sun rise like this. For the first three mornings she had been up and on deck before anyone else, but since meeting Cimon there had been very late nights, he was so reluctant to let her go, and she herself had not the least desire to do so. In consequence she had not wakened in time to see the sun come up. Last night had been one of wakefulness, with the odd hour of fitful sleep, and at four o'clock she had put on her light and made an effort to read. But concentration was impossible and her thoughts inevitably reverted to the parting between Cimon and herself. That she was in love with him she had to admit, although she had valiantly fought against such folly. Strange it was that one's heart and mind could act differently

from what their owner desired. Cimon's behaviour towards her, his tenderness and endearments, the presents he had insisted on buying her at every island they visited ... all these had given her hope that he also might be falling in love. But as the days passed his complete lack of interest in her background had hit her forcibly. Were he in any way serious then surely he would have been eager to learn all about her and in turn to tell her things about himself.

The sun climbed higher as they stood there, its crimson effulgence flaring in an ever-widening arc, touching the wispy clouds and turning them from pearl to saffron; the burnished sea quivered! with a million points of light, emphasizing the grandeur and impressiveness of the Eastern sunrise. Far from this glorious spectacle the sky was a soft periwinkle blue, promising a perfect day.

'Are we taking a swim this morning?' Cimon broke the silence, looking at her in that particular way that set her heart racing. How devastating his charm was when he looked at her like that! Did he know? Was he aware of the ease with which he could stir her feelings? Always she attempted to put a stern rein on them, but they invariably ran riot for all that.

'Yes, I'll go and change.' Together they moved from the rail; when they reached her cabin door there was no one about and, taking her in his arms, Cimon kissed her tenderly on the lips.

'See you in a few minutes, darling,' he told her, and was gone.

She stared after him, puzzled in the extreme. What were his intentions? Surely he could not look at her with such tenderness were he intending to say goodbye to her in a few hours' time. Dwelling on his words about a ring she now sensed a strangeness about them - some underlying meaning which he had deliberately kept to himself. Elaine entered her cabin, confused in mind and conscious of some inner warning which clamoured to be heard. But such was her love for

Cimon that she could not bring herself to probe her own mind, searching for flaws in his character. He was her ideal, a man who, having made an impact on her when first her eyes had met his, would have remained in her thoughts for a very long while even had she and he never become the friends they now were. Slipping into her swimsuit, she dismissed all thoughts from her mind except the coming couple of hours. Whatever the outcome, she had Cimon for that precious period of time.

Alaine and Cimon were among the first to leave the ship, and although the harbour of Mandraki blazed with a floral myriad Alaine could not appreciate it, for there was something so final in the suitcase which her companion carried. She would return to the ship alone this time - not with that strong arm around her and footsteps so light that she might have been treading on air. No dancing tonight after a delightful meal taken together under softly-shaded lights; no stroll on deck beneath that enormous moon, no kisses and tender good nights whispered by her cabin door. A terrible ache gripped her throat. At the start of all this she had told herself that although she would be on her own in six days' time it would all have been worth it ... but now that the time had arrived ...

Cimon had not made any further reference to the ring and she now decided that his words were not meant at all, but spoken because he happened to be holding her hands at the time, and so such words would come automatically to his lips.

'Are - are you g-going home right now?' she faltered, unable to tolerate the silence as she and Cimon stood there on the waterfront, under a clear blue sky from which the sun poured down on to the enchanting town of Rhodes. Roses and angelica and numerous exotic blooms showered the warm air with perfume, colourful boats bobbed about in

the water, with here and there a few stately yachts moored, flying the flags of the countries to which their respective owners belonged.

Cimon glanced down at her and hesitated a moment.

'I have a yacht here, Estelle. I'll dump this suitcase on it and then we'll have a stroll round the town.'

'A yacht!' she exclaimed, for the moment forgetting her misery. 'One of these?' So they were not to part yet, not for another hour ... two hours? How precious was every single second! Tears pricked her eyes as she looked at the gleaming white vessel indicated by the gesture of Cimon's hand. How could she say goodbye - for ever? 'It's beautiful,' she breathed. 'You're very lucky, Cimon.' She thought of the yacht on which her sister would soon be taking a holiday. Surely it could not be as grand as this. Cimon must be a very wealthy man to own such a splendid vessel.

'It is rather nice,' he owned with the merest hint of pride in his rich vibrant voice. 'Come, darling, and I'll show you over it.'

Her eyes sparkled; Cimon tucked her arm into his and together they walked towards the place where the yacht was moored. Two men were on deck, lowering the white sails. They saluted and then gazed curiously at their employer's companion before continuing with their task, talking together in Greek as they did so.

The interior of the yacht was a dream, all fittings and furniture having been the most costly obtainable when the vessel was built. Thick carpets covered the saloon and another smaller lounge; there was a cocktail bar and a dining-saloon; there were luxuriously-fitted cabins with their own showers. Elaine just continued to gasp, again thinking of Estelle and how lucky she was to be having a holiday on a vessel something like this.

'A drink, dear?' Cimon had left his suitcase on deck for one of the men to move and he and Alaine were now in the saloon. He seemed tensed, she thought, and could not help wondering if he too were unhappy about the parting. But he was the one who could do something about it - Alaine checked her thoughts as she gazed around her. A man who owned a yacht like this would not want a girl like her. She told him what she wanted to drink and he gave it to her. They sat chatting for a while and then Cimon rose and excused himself, saying he would be back in a few minutes.

"There are some English magazines there - in the rack," he said, and went out.

She stared at the door, which he had closed behind him. Was there a slight difference in him? she mused. Or was she merely imagining it? Never before had she seen him so tensed, or so deeply absorbed in thought as he had been a moment or two before leaving the saloon. She shrugged after a while and sat back in her chair thinking, naturally, of the goodbye which was drawing closer with every minute that passed. She glanced at her watch. She had to be back on the *Cassillia* at three o'clock, so if Cimon remained with her until it sailed they would have only another five hours together.

Five minutes passed. Alaine picked out a magazine but left it open on her knees. Ten minutes ... precious wasted minutes. Rising, she moved to the door, but after standing by it for a few seconds she sat down again. She would look foolish if she went in search of him. Besides, he had mentioned the magazines, so obviously he knew he would be away for a while. Another glance at her watch. Twelve minutes; it seemed an eternity since he left the saloon. She looked through the window at the boats in the harbour, riding the calm blue sea. She frowned. It was very odd indeed that Cimon should leave her this long - Suddenly her heart gave a sickening lurch. The engines! Her pulses began to throb in unison with them. Swiftly she rose and went to the door, scarcely knowing the reason for this fear because she trusted

Cimon implicitly. Seconds later she was staring at the door handle, unable to believe the evidence of her own action. She pulled it again, then used two hands in a frantic endeavour to get the door open. It wasn't locked! No, she would not believe that Cimon had locked her in. It had only stuck and she called out, keeping her voice steady only with the greatest effort.

'Cimon! Cimon - the door's stuck. What's happening?' He was taking her for a sail - yes, that was it. He hadn't told her because it was to be a surprise. 'Cirtion - where are you?' Turning her head even while she continued to tug at the door handle, she saw the harbour receding, saw the other yachts being left behind, Alaine came from the door to the window, a trembling hand to her throat. What was this all about?

The harbour of Mandraki was becoming smaller and smaller. Tears streamed down Alaine's face as she again stood by the door where, for the past quarter of an hour, she had hammered and called with all the desperation of the great fear that now engulfed her - but to no avail. She might be the only living soul aboard for all the results she derived from her efforts.

What had she done? Flooding in on her was the sure knowledge that she had been duped, and she admitted she had only herself to blame. A shipboard acquaintance, and she had put her full trust in him. What an inexperienced and innocent fool she was! Estelle would never have found herself in a position like this ... or would she? Perhaps Estelle would not have minded. She would have known what Cimon was about the moment he suggested she come aboard the yacht. Alaine shook her head dazedly. She still could not assimilate the fact that Cimon was not genuine. And yet the next moment her imagination, wildly sweeping out of control, carried her all the way. It was no use pretending; she had been brought on board for one purpose only ... and yet why had Cimon not returned? And how far out would he go before anchoring? She assumed he intended anchoring, for he knew she had to be back on board the *Cassillia* a few hours from now.

After hammering on the door again she resorted to screaming in an endeavour to attract someone's attention. Were those two men still on board? If so, they had been given their instructions and she obviously could expect no help from them.

'What is going to happen to me?' she cried, pressing a hand to her heart as if she would ease the pain of its wild uncontrolled thudding. Every nerve was in a state of disorder; clear thinking was impossible. 'Supposing I d-don't get back in t-time to catch the ship.' Sobs shook her as she sat down, putting her face in her hands. 'What a fool I've been - b-but I never th-thought he'd do this to m-me.' She scarcely knew what she said and in tones of desperate pleading she went on, just as if he were here with her, in the saloon, 'Let me go, Cimon. Please let me go. Take me back to Rhodes...' Her voice trailed away into a hopeless silence and the tears flowed again.

For a long while she sat there, on the edge of the chair, her mind numbed, her blood seeming to have turned to ice, so cold and shivery did she feel. Chaotic thoughts coalesced ... the possibility of missing the ship, Aunt Sue, Jinx, Estelle's expecting her passport to be returned promptly. But stronger by far was the thought of what was about to happen in the next few hours. She found her confused mind giving back fleeting images - Cimon's unemotional acceptance of her refusal to allow him to stay in her cabin that night, his changing moods, his reluctance to antagonize her - a circumstance which had puzzled her, and still did. She recalled his generosity, his small attentions that had thrilled her simply because she had never before known these things. All had been designed to mislead her, to give her confidence in him, so that he could lure her aboard his yacht. She shook her head suddenly. Her deductions were at fault, somehow. Why should he go to all that trouble to gain her confidence if all he had in mind was seduction? As she had told herself at the time of her refusal, he could have had any girl on which he fixed his attention; there was not the slightest need to go to these lengths simply to satisfy his desires. No need to take the

risks he was taking, for by abducting her like this he must be aware that he was breaking the law.

Alaine became tensed on hearing heavy footsteps outside the door. Leaping up, she shouted loudly and began hammering on the door. A key turned and she stepped back as the door swung inwards. A lean swarthy Greek stood there - one of the men she had seen when coming aboard the yacht. His eyes were almost black, and they made a lascivious sweep of her slender, trembling body; his lips were thick and coarse beneath coiled black moustaches; in one podgy brown hand he held a cigarette, while from the other dangled his *komboli* - amber-coloured worry beads from which hung a long silk tassel.

'Let me out of here!' she cried, flinging herself forward and to one side of him. But she was caught and held a moment before she twisted away, back into the saloon. 'Where's your master?' she demanded fiercely. 'Go and tell him I want to see him. Don't stare at me like that! Don't you understand English?'

He continued to stare, his eyes fixed on her tear- stained face with a puzzled expression before moving to the curve of her breast. She felt stripped, and in that moment her first spark of hatred for Cimon was born.

'I speak a little Anglais, yes.' The voice was slow, the words uttered in very broken English. 'You very beautiful girl for my master's pillow friend,' he went on appreciatively but with a decided snigger underlying his words. 'He have many beautiful womens as pillow friends, but you the best. The figure - and the lips to make kissing!'

She went hot all over, but her eyes glinted as her temper flared, rising even above her awareness of the danger which faced her.

'I am not your master's pillow friend, as you so delicately term it! Where is Mr. Duris?' The man's bulk filled the doorway, so she made

no further attempt to get past him. That he would welcome the opportunity of handling her she had no doubt at all.

'What is this you say? - you not my master's pillow friend? You not like my master for lover?' The man looked amazed and a hint of aggressive indignation entered his voice as he continued, 'All the womens like my master for lover. He hot man - not like your Englishman? who so cold. The Swedes cold also, and their wives come to Rodos to find lovers. My master have beautiful Swedish lady for long time—' He spread his podgy hands and the worry beads clicked. 'I not understand what this is you say. You not like hot mans?'

Alaine's colour heightened, and so did her temper,

'Go and fetch your master,' she ordered, injecting a note of icy command into her tone. 'Immediately!'

A shrug and a small silence and then,

'My master not on board the *Leto*—'

'Not on board?' Her eyes opened wide. 'Certainly he's on board. Go and fetch him, I say!'

The man shook his head.

'He have business in Rodos and he tell Mavris and me to take you in the yacht to his home. He fly there later this day.'

'Fly? He lives in Rhodes.'

'My master live in Kriti.'

'Crete?' Her throat contracted. 'He's a Cretan?' With the swiftness of a lightning flash the whole incredible situation was explained. All this was meant for Estelle!

'He a Cretan, yes. Cretans not like other Greeks; they savage mans. You not tell my master that I speak to you about love?'

'I might,' she said vindictively, although her mind was occupied with other matters as she looked back at those six days and realized just how cleverly Cimon had gone about gaining her complete confidence - or Estelle's...

'No! He knock me across face and send me off from work!'

'So he doesn't allow you to insult his - er - pillow friends. How very gallant of him!'

'Gallant?' A blank expression spread across the man's swarthy face. 'What is this - gallant?'

She ignored that, endeavouring to collect her thoughts into some sort of order so that the situation could be viewed with a little more calm than previously.

That she was now safe was, naturally, uppermost in her mind. But she felt the aching drag of her own feelings for Cimon. By a mockery of fate she had fallen madly in love with the man bent on punishing her sister for the wrong she had done to his nephew. He had laid his plans well, having a prior knowledge, .obviously, that Estelle was intending taking the cruise. Probablshe had mentioned this to Sulas at some time or another. Yes, Cimon had laid his plans well, but fate had been more than generous in its help. Even the name ...

That Cimon was going to be furiously angry on learning of his mistake went without saying, but this was not what troubled Alaine at the moment. What did trouble her and set her heart racing again was the fact that she must inevitably miss sailing on the *Cassillia* when it left Rhodes. This man would not free her - he dared not, she was quite certain of this.

'Why didn't your master sail to Crete in this boat?' she asked, puzzled by this circumstance. If only he had! She could have explained, and she would have been allowed to go. Go ... She thought for a space of her hopes that she and Cimon might not say goodbye after all, that they would arrange a further meeting, some day, somewhere. Now she knew just how ridiculous those hopes were. Cimon's only interest in her had been as an object of vengeance for a wrong done to a member of his family. He cared nothing for a girl called Alaine.

'I tell you that my master have business in Rodos - urgent business. And he say he not want the *Leto* to stay in the harbour, and we must take it to Kriti.'

A bitter smile curved her lips. Certainly he did not want the *Leto* to remain at Mandraki - not with his victim aboard. She might manage to draw attention to herself and his plans would be ruined.

How was he to get over the question of the investigations that would be made when she did not return to the *Cassillia*? It would not sail on time if a passenger were missing, and the purser would know she was missing because her cabin key would still be hanging on the board, the rule being that when a passenger left the ship his or her key must be hung up. It was to be taken down immediately on the passenger's return and if any keys were left when the sailing time arrived the passenger's name was called over the loudspeaker, just in case the key had been left there by accident. If no response were forthcoming from this broadcasting of the name then the ship waited, the purser knowing that the passenger was still ashore.

But how long would the ship wait? In any case, she, Alaine, could not possibly board it, because she was on her way to Crete and she knew it would be useless to ask this man to release her.

'My master say that I have to give you food,' the man was saying. 'And that I show you a cabin so you can rest.'

'I don't want your food!' She paused a moment, knowing that all Greeks were afraid of the police. Whether this man feared his master more remained to be seen. Despite her conviction that she wasted her time Alaine explained that she had been abducted and that she would be expected back on the *Cassillia* before it sailed.

'The police will be notified when I don't turn up,' she told him, stressing the word police. 'And those responsible for my disappearance will be in serious trouble. They'll go to prison - do you understand? They will go to prison.' She watched him closely and to her utter amazement a broad grin spread over the man's dusky face.

'My master not take lady by force before. I wonder why he lock door, but I not think it because you try to get off the boat. I think it is a joke of my master, but now you say he take you by force. This is good story to tell my friends! Always the ladies are willing—'

'The police,' she interrupted, glaring at him. '*Polls!* You know what that word means, and you know the trouble you'll be in for keeping me on this yacht against my will. If you turn around and let me off I won't say a word to anyone.' The man just stood there and leered and she raised her voice until she was almost shouting. 'The *Cassillia* - I was a passenger on the cruise. The purser will be told when I don't come aboard, and he'll tell the captain, who will get in touch with the police—'

'But the *Cassillia* belongs to my master,' interrupted the man. 'He will have told the captain you will not be coming back—' He broke off, grinning at her. 'The captain will understand. Besides,' the man added in his broken English, 'your luggage is in the cabin which I have to show you. And my master say I must tell you that he have your passport and he will give you back later on.'

CHAPTER SIX

THE yacht put in at a little bay just to the east of Heraklion, a lonely bay which Alaine knew at once had been purposely chosen in preference to the busy harbour where she would have had an opportunity of enlisting help. Kostos, the man who had spoken to her on the *Leto*, literally handed her over to a uniformed chauffeur who, judging by the bored expression on his face, had been waiting there for some considerable time.

She glanced around as she got into the car. No use making a run for it, not with two men here and not another soul in sight. Besides, it wouldn't be a sensible thing to do, as Cimon had her passport. Also, she had no wish to get him into trouble despite the great inconvenience to which he had put her. On the voyage from Rhodes she had gone over the position again and again, and of one thing she was sure: she would far rather this had happened to her than to Estelle, because for Estelle there would have been no escape; she would have been subjected to whatever punishment Cimon had in mind. Alaine now had Cimon's name and description and she could put her sister on her guard, although Alaine rather thought that Cimon would now abandon any idea of revenge.

She had no need to ask herself why she wished to shield him from exposure. Hate him a little she most certainly did, but her love was greater by far. He was not worthy of her love, but although this knowledge was there, with her all the time, it could not kill her love - unfortunately, since she would have been far happier were she as heart-free as she was when first embarking on the *Cassillia* and looking forward to a wonderful holiday. What a fiasco! She would now have to be flown home because she had no intention of rejoining the ship after what had happened, and with every member of the crew from the captain downwards thinking she had gone off with the wealthy owner of the ship.

'I expected Mr Duris to meet me himself,' she said, opening a conversation with the chauffeur. She was sitting behind him but could see his face in the driving mirror, a good-looking oval face, tawny-skinned and a trifle greasy. His hair was black and curly, his moustache sprinkled with grey. There was a flash of gold teeth as he said,

'Mr Cimon has not returned from Rodos, madam. He telephoned me this morning and told me to meet the *Leto* and take you to his home. He will have returned by the time we arrive there.' The English was good, and his respectful manner towards her was refreshing after the leers of Kostos, and his freely-spoken innuendoes which had tried her temper to the utmost. She could have struck him at times and finally she had kept to her cabin, knowing he would never dare intrude into her privacy there.

'Have we far to go?' Strange how she had fallen into this state of calm after those terror-stricken moments before learning the real reason for her abduction. Now she knew she had nothing to fear. Once enlightened, Cimon would be all apologetic and do everything in his power to ensure that she had an easy passage home.

'It is quite a journey, madam. You see, the *Leto* usually goes to Mr. Cimon's private beach, but it has to go into Heraklion for some minor repair and so we drive.' He made a gesture with his hand. 'The scenery is very good, madam, and perhaps you will not find the journey so long if you take note of it.'

She relaxed, sitting back in her seat, and looked through the window. On first leaving the small bay they had driven into Heraklion, through narrow winding streets reminiscent of a *casbah*, so oriental was their bustling appearance, but now they were travelling through a mountainous region brilliant with exotic spring flowers. They passed through a village where some sort of celebration was taking place. What it was Alaine did not know and she never bothered to ask, but

she was rather startled to see wild fierce-looking men clad in purple bloomers and fringed headdresses clustered together in the village square, in which stood the gleaming white Orthodox church. In their belts the men carried evil-looking curved scimitars with ornately-jewelled handles. So these were the men of Crete, men with dark emotions and intense hatreds, men whose blood had been shed over and over again in defence of their homeland, the place of which Homer had once said, 'Amidst the wine-dark sea lies Crete, a fair rich isle ...' The islanders were steeped in age-old traditions, they were merciless and tough, possessed of loyalties so strong that they could be carried to their deaths by them - and of course there were their feuds.

Cimon Duris was a Cretan. Would she have become so friendly with him had she known? She did not think so, but it was too late for regrets. She had foolishly given her heart to one of these men who were 'prouder, taller, fiercer, straighter' than all other Greeks, a man whose sensitive and uncompromising pride had spurred him to this unlawful act of abducting her, believing she was the woman who had brought disgrace to his family.

These thoughts engrossed Alaine as the chauffeur drove her through the mountains where bloomed dainty rock-roses, and thyme and saxifrage, with spurts of pink and white where the lovely oleanders fringed a mountain pool. Another village was reached, a sleepy village where men lounged at tables in the *plateia*, set out under mulberry and tamarisk trees and other trees shading the square. The men drank *ouzo* and played *tavla*, or clicked their worry beads. A Greek peasant with a donkey stopped at the *cafeneion*, tethered the animal, took something from one of the panniers and disappeared inside the vine-draped building. Another man came into view, dragging along a lovely white kid; in his hand was a knife and, struck with sudden horror, Alaine turned her head and stared out of the other window.

On leaving the village far behind there was yet another transformation of scenery as they entered an idyllic landscape of forested highlands

where the indigenous ilex grew in abundance among the pines and chestnuts and, of course, the olives, their silver-grey leaves catching the sunlight as a faint breeze fluttered through their branches. Winding about, the car crossed a fearsome gorge before descending to lush undulating country bright with asphodels and yellow daisies, blooming along with the pink-clothed almond trees and sweet-smelling oleander bushes. A surf-fringed beach came into view. The chauffeur told Alaine that they were nearing the end of their journey.

'The town you see down there is Sphakia; we are now on the south of the island, as you will have gathered.' Presently he turned his head and Alaine's glance moved from the little town nestling on the shores of the Libyan Sea, to the majestic blue and white mansion standing high above them on a wooded rise. 'This is the house of Mr. Cimon. Over there you have a view of a fortress built by the Venetians. We have many such castles on our island.'

The car rolled to a standstill, and the brakes were applied. The door was opened for Alaine and she got out, and only then, while she stood on the wide forecourt looking up at the grandeur that "was Cimon's home, did she experience a return of her initial fear. Yet how foolish. A very short while from now her explanation would have been given and received - and what then? She closed her eyes tightly because of the pain behind them brought about the knowledge that Cimon had no feelings whatsoever for the girl whose name was Alaine Marsland. She opened her eyes as the chauffeur touched her, indicating that she should precede him up to the wide white steps leading to a patio overhung with vines and bougainvillea and on which numerous other flowers bloomed in brown earthenware pots of an attractive village design.

A dusky maid opened the front door, smiled and asked her to enter.

'Mr. Cimon is expecting you, madam. If you will come this way?'

Excellent English again; Alaine wondered how the girl had learned it so well. 'In here, madam.' Another door opened and Alaine found herself face to face with the man who was waiting to pronounce sentence on Estelle Marsland.

He had been sitting down, but as Alaine entered he eased his long lithe body from the chair and stood looking across at her as she stood just inside the door, inwardly gasping at his expression, for this man with the satanic countenance bore no resemblance whatsoever to the man who had swum with her every morning and danced with her at night, the man whose smile of welcome, appearing the moment she came into view, had sent her heart racing and her spirits soaring into the clouds. This was not the tender gentle lover who had held her and kissed her under a velvet Aegean sky, who had whispered in tones caressing as the softest summer breeze, '*To fengari kay sis einay auraya.*' You're so adorable in the moonlight.

Cimon was the first to speak, in tones so cold that she actually flinched.

'By now you know who I am?'

She nodded.

'Sulas's uncle, yes.'

'So you also know why you are here?'

She swallowed. What had appeared so very simple a short while ago now seemed so difficult that she floundered, searching for the right words, trepidation sweeping over her as she pictured his anger when the truth were made known to him. That he would place a good deal of the blame on her she did not for one moment doubt, for she had deliberately masqueraded as her sister.

'It's not - not as you th-think,' she began, when he interrupted her, his tones harsh-edged and merciless.

'Afraid, eh? People always are when the reckoning comes along. They then wish with all their hearts that they'd acted differently. But it's too late, Estelle Mars- land - too late even for a plea of mercy. You not only deliberately robbed my nephew, driving him to a most disgraceful act, but you humiliated him by having one of your lovers eject him in the most ignominious manner. Such an affront to a member of my family is a folly for which you are going to pay dear.' His contemptuous eyes flickered over Alaine and although she opened her mouth to speak her throat had gone so dry that words just would not come. 'I might as well inform you that lesser insults to a Cretan family have often led to disaster, since we extend neither forgiveness nor even clemency for injuries received. Revenge is indispensable to the retention of our self-respect.'

Alaine was still speechless, looking into Cimon's dark countenance, her mind almost totally absorbed by an overwhelming relief that Estelle had not fallen victim to this man's pagan desire for vengeance, Cimon was pulling gently on a bell-rope. In the utterly dispassionate tones of a judge she was told that she would be kept in solitary confinement until it pleased Cimon to release her.

'Solitary confinement?' She was both intrigued and diverted for the moment, desiring to know more before disillusioning him.

'In a room I've had prepared for you - in a building which once housed prisoners in its dungeons.' A faint humourless smile touched his lips and Alaine shuddered. She sent up a little prayer of thankfulness for her sister's escape. Solitary confinement, for a vivacious girl like Estelle, a girl who loved life as she did! Cimon's eyes were directed towards the window and she turned her head. Thrusts of scarlet hibiscus and purple bougainvillea caught her immediate attention, with a row of majestic plane trees rising at the far end of a sweeping

lawn. But it was the castle at which Cimon was looking. In the dazzling glare of the sun it appeared almost grotesque. Beyond it the shoreline curved away behind the contorted wall of cliffs superimposed on one another, their folds providing evidence of the gigantic upheaval that gave them birth.

'Does that belong to you?' she asked, and he nodded. In imagination Alaine could see her sister undergoing the punishment Cimon had planned for her. How terrified she would have been in the night time, with every whisper of the breeze sounding like the moan of the ghost of some unfortunate prisoner of long, long ago.

Alaine realized that Cimon was staring at her in some puzzlement and she allowed herself a smile. He was obviously expecting her to evince fear, to be all set for a plea for mercy.

'I don't think you fully appreciate the severity of your sentence,' he began. 'You could be there for six months, or even twelve, depending on how I feel as the time elapses. As I feel at this moment I could leave you there for ever, but I expect that eventually I shall consider your punishment has fitted the crime and release you. But I assure you that your life for the next few months is going to be so unpleasant that you'll probably wish, over and over again, that you were dead.' Dispassionate tones. The man had no feelings at all - or no imagination.

And yet, looking at the position from his point of view, Alaine could understand how he felt. Also, it was custom he was following, custom stronger than any law. She stared at him, wondering how she could still care - but she did, despite the remoteness of him, the icy detachment and the eagle-like mask that hid the tenderness she had known, a tenderness which, along with his generosity, was accounted for only by the fact of his fervent wish to gain her complete confidence. Lying dormant beneath this cover was this evil intent of

his to punish the girl who had played such a dastardly trick on his nephew.

'I do appreciate the severity of the punishment—'" She broke off, moving further into the room as the door swung inwards and a manservant appeared in answer to the ringing of the bell.

With a mere glance at the man Cimon returned his attention to Alaine, telling her to continue with what she was saying.

'I am rather puzzled as to how you think you can get away with this punishment. Do you suppose a girl could disappear and no one make inquiries about her?'

'Who is there to make inquiries about a girl like you?' he responded with a swift rake of contempt. 'One or other of your lovers? I think not. Women like you are enjoyed for the moment and then forgotten. You have no relatives; Sulas told me that.'

Alaine said nothing, recalling that Estelle had always said she never owned to having relatives as it was so much simpler to say she was alone in the world - and much more profitable because men were sorry for her.

Cimon was speaking, telling Alaine that she was to be taken to her 'prison' at once by the man who was waiting.

'He will serve you all the while,' he added. 'Your food will be brought to you by him - and you will see no one else at all.'

This naturally spurred Alaine into action, but even as words of explanation rose to her lips Cimon was speaking again, his voice edged with puzzlement as he said,

'Aren't you afraid?' and she sensed also a trace of admiration in his tones, as if he admired her courage, even though she was his enemy, and his victim.

'No—' She managed a thin sort of smile. 'I'm not afraid, but my lack of fear doesn't stem from bravery, Cimon. You see, you've got the wrong sister. Estelle does have relatives. She and I are identical twins. I'm Alaine.' Her smile still fluttered, but suddenly froze on her lips as all she saw was a bronze mask. No surprise, no anger? 'I'm Alaine,' she repeated, fear descending on her like a deluge.

'Alaine? That's a pretty name. So you're an identical twin—' He laughed then, a laugh of sheer amusement. 'And what reaction do you expect to that?' His eyes flickered for one brief moment to the manservant waiting there, his face impassive, his hands to his sides as he stood, almost to attention.

'Cimon,' she faltered, taking a step forward, bringing herself a little closer to him. 'Cimon ... I am Alaine. Estelle told me about Sulas, and - and I didn't approve of the way she treated him.' She extended her hand in a small, involuntary gesture, half helpless, half entreating. 'She couldn't go on the cruise, so she gave me the ticket.' Alaine spoke hurriedly and jerkily, desperation in her tones because through her mind flashed the fact that he had her passport... Estelle's passport. 'She d-did g-give me the t-ticket, Cimon; you must believe me!' Instinctively her eyes moved to the man by the door, and then to the window and the great fortress rising darkly against the clear Aegean sky.

'She gave you the ticket, did she? And her passport?'

'Yes! Yes, her passport as well! Oh, you must believe me— Stop looking at me like that! I'm telling you the truth!' She was trembling with fear now, and acting in the manner for which he had been waiting so long, in puzzlement. Tears filmed her eyes, but mercy found no

place in his. 'You can't put me in there! I won't go! You'll be prosecuted,' she cried, clenching her fists as his brow creased with impatience.

'So at last you are afraid,' he sneered. 'It was a good try, Estelle Marsland, but so weak it's laughable. Identical twins, eh? Well, there really wasn't anything else you could think up, was there?' He nodded to the man who came forward. Alaine's eyes dilated; never had she thought to be so filled with terror.

'You can't! I'm not Estelle - Oh, how can I convince you?' Her confidence - how misplaced it had been. She had told herself that Cimon would be contrite, once his anger abated, and that he would arrange her passage home. The man was standing close, waiting further instructions. Again Cimon nodded, and he said quietly,

'Take her away.'

She backed from the man and he followed. A man almost as tall as Cimon, but much wider. She continued to back away, but all hope had fled as she looked from one to the other of these men. Every vestige of colour had left her face and her legs seemed as if they would soon cease to support her. She thought of her aunt, and of Jinx. The shock; what would it do to her aunt? Supposing ... supposing ... Alaine could not allow her thoughts to dwell on the possibility of her aunt dying and Jinx being taken into a home. Trembling hands were extended; Alaine spoke in a voice scarcely above a whisper, because she merely voiced her thoughts.

'If only I'd g-got my own p-passport ... I could have proved my identity.' She shook her head, aware of the man waiting again, and she wondered if he had received some sign from Cimon, cancelling out the order just given. One hand dropped to her side, the other went to her heart, pressing against it in an effort to calm its wild throbbing. 'I live with my-my aunt and she's ill. The shock c-could—' Alaine looked up

at Cimon; his face was just a blur because of her tears. 'I am" Alaine, b-but I can't pr-prove it to you.' He was regarding her intently through narrowed eyes; they moved after a moment to the hand that was pressed to her heart.

'Leave us,' he commanded curtly, and with a small bow the servant withdrew, closing the door softly behind him. Alaine stared in disbelief. Had she by some miracle broken through Cimon's iron-hard determination to ignore her frantic pleadings?

'Do you believe me?' She brushed a hand over her eyes and across her cheeks, removing her tears. He said nothing, but continued to look at her. She recalled his puzzlement on the ship. She herself now knew the reason for that puzzlement; it was because she had not acted as Estelle would have done - or rather, as Cimon obviously expected her to. He had not expected blushes, or to see her overcome with shyness resulting from his words of flattery or endearment. As Alaine watched him now she did wonder if he were also recalling his puzzlement when on the ship. If so then his own doubts would lend strength to Alaine's assertion that this was a case of mistaken identity. With a deceptively slow and languid movement he was at a desk and, opening it, he brought forth an enlarged snapshot.

'Is that you?' he asked, and she shook her head. 'You haven't looked at it,' he added sharply. 'This dress—' He tapped the picture with his finger. 'You wore it the day we went to Mykonos.'

'It's my sister's,' she informed him, fear rising again.

'She gave you the ticket, her passport, and clothes?' Sceptical tones and Alaine's spirits sank even lower. Then Cimon said, slowly and with his accent slightly more pronounced than usual, 'You and your - er - sister are identical twins, eh—?'

'Yes,' with swift eagerness, 'Truthfully!'

He regarded her through half-closed eyes.

'And do you happen to have identical birthmarks?' Her pulse leapt and the weight lifted completely from her heart.

'No - I haven't a birthmark! Oh, why didn't I think of that!' But she went hot suddenly as she received the full implication of his question. He did know of the birthmark, so either he had seen the photographs or Sulas had told him about them. Well, that wasn't really important. What was important was that she had now convinced Cimon that she was in fact Alaine and not Estelle. But had she? Why was he looking like that? 'I don't have a birthmark,' she began to repeat, and then stopped, her eyes widening. 'You - you believe me?' she said through lips which felt dry and tight.

His head tilted, as she had seen it tilt on other occasions. It was a mannerism that latterly had thrilled her, since it seemed teasingly to admonish her for some small thing she had done wrong.

'Do you really expect me to take your word?' One brow lifted as slowly he shook his head. All harshness had left him, replaced by faint humour. But she sensed that she was by no means safe yet. He wanted to have positive proof that she did not have a birthmark.

'I can't let you see it,' she faltered.

'It? I thought you said you hadn't one.'

She averted her head.

'You know what I mean.' - " A small silence and then, 'Well, Estelle or Alaine, or whatever your name is, do you prove your point or do I ring the bell again?'

She raised her head, revealing her burning cheeks.

'I'm speaking the truth,' she began, but already he was shaking his head.

'Proof,' he said firmly and briefly. 'I - I—' She was plunged into the very depths of embarrassment, while there at the back of her mind was the sure conviction that no amount of argument would suffice as proof of her sincerity. 'I *can't*!'

'Don't be so damned ridiculous. You wouldn't be the first woman I'd seen with her shoulder strap down.' His eye glinted; he seemed not to notice the increased flood of colour his words had produced. 'I'm just about at the end of my patience! All this prevarication convinces me that you are Estelle Marsland, but I shall soon be absolutely sure.' And before she realized what he intended Cimon had grasped her and she was firmly held while the zip fastener down the front of her blouse was slid open.

'Let me go!' But her struggles were in vain, and in any case she was now resigned to the inevitable. 'I hate you,' she whispered even as Cimon was making his apology, seeming to be a little dazed now that he had in fact proved that a mistake had been made. 'I wish I could kill you! I almost wish I were a member of a Cretan family, so that we could drag you into one of your blood feuds!'

'I'm sorry,' he repeated, watching as she drew up the zip. 'Believe me, I'm sincerely sorry. I should not have done that. I should have believed you.'

Tears gathered in her eyes again, and escaped on to her cheeks.

'If ever I have an opportunity of paying you back I shall - with interest!' Stupid words, bom of anger and humiliation... and a deep hurt because of the way she felt about him, her love turning to hatred in that one small moment. 'It seems impossible that I shall have an opportunity, but one never knows.' For some reason Keith's image was before her

eyes. He too had humiliated her, promising to marry her merely in order to gain her confidence so that she would take his child. She had sworn then to be revenged on some man - any man. But now all she wanted was to be revenged on one man, in payment for the two hurts, and that man was Cimon Duris.

He stood there, gazing down at her, clearly put out by what had occurred. Then she saw the swift change of expression', the dropping of a mask that revealed a switch of mood from contrition to anger, and Alaine steeled herself for the impact of it.

'You told me you were a model. That's obviously not true?'

'No.'

His lips snapped together.

'You also said you knew many men. Was that a lie too?'

Alaine averted her head.

'Yes, it was.'

An awful silence followed and after what seemed an interminable period of unspoken censure Alaine ventured to raise her head. His eyes were glinting and darkly accusing, but at least the merciless implacability of a few moments ago was lacking.

'I don't know why I said that about men,' she faltered, twisting her hands together nervously. 'I expect it was just to match your own mood.'

The black eyes narrowed, but she met their penetrating gaze. This Cimon she held in awe but not in " fear; it was the other - the cold unemotional Cimon - who had sent sheer terror rippling through her whole body.

'I could strangle you,' he declared softly at last. 'Deliberately indulging in all that deceit, taking on an unnecessary pose—'

'It wasn't unnecessary,' she was driven to interrupt. 'Surely you're not blaming me for the fact that your intended mischief went awry.'

'Be careful,' he warned softly. 'You're not out of danger yet.' But there was anger only in that threat and she sensed that he must be smarting inwardly at having made such an appalling blunder. He pointed to a chair. 'Sit down and tell me the whole story,' he commanded, still in those softly dangerous tones. 'What were the circumstances of this switch-over? Why didn't Estelle take the cruise?'

Alaine explained, noting his darkling frown when she mentioned the passport.

'Didn't you know that such an action was illegal?'

She nodded.

'Yes, I did, but I felt it would be a waste of money for me to have one of my own. You see, there isn't much likelihood of my ever going abroad again.'

'You certainly take risks, don't you?' A glowering look accompanied the words and Alaine was stung to retort,

'There was not much risk with the passport, and as for the other - the mischief you were bent upon - how was I to know that Sulas's uncle would be on the ship?'

'No, I give you that,' he conceded with an unexpected softening of manner. 'Did your sister tell you all about her affair with Sulas?' he then asked after a small pause. 'Did she give you any indication as to just how badly she had treated him?'

Alaine was reluctant to talk about Estelle, now that everything had been cleared up, but on reading Cimon's expression she was not so imprudent as to hedge; he was in a reasonable frame of mind and she meant to keep him that way.

'She told me everything, and - and showed me the presents Sulas had given her.'

A return of his previous anger was portrayed in the white drifts creeping under the deep mahogany of his skin. She had failed in her endeavours, it seemed, and such was the nervous aftermath of her recent terrifying experience that tears rose swiftly to her eyes. He saw them, yet for a long- moment he merely stared with a gaze dark and impersonal as the distant cliffs she could see out there, high above the unfolding coastline. Filtering sunbeams caught the tears and his expression underwent an immediate change. Alaine brushed a hand across her eyes and he said, with what seemed to be an uncharacteristic shade of emotion,

'Tears are quite unnecessary, Alaine. You have nothing to fear from me—' He stopped as she brushed her eyes again and then asked if she had a handkerchief. She shook her head, amazed at this prosaic question, then became more amazed as, taking his own handkerchief from his pocket, he leant forward and dropped it into her lap.

'Mine are all in my suitcase.' She sent him a glance of inquiry after drying her eyes.

'Both your suitcases are over at the castle.' He rose and rang the bell, ordering the man, when he entered, to go over and bring them to the house. 'Put them in the best guestroom,' he added, faintly amused by Alaine's start of surprise.

'I'm not staying in this house,' she declared emphatically. 'I want to go home - now!'

'Home?' he repeated, frowning. 'You're returning to the ship, surely?'

Alaine shook her head, saying she just wanted to go home. A stir of memory brought back that night when Estelle had given her the ticket and lent her the clothes. A holiday at last! How excited she had been, especially when Aunt Sue had made everything easy by encouraging her and offering without hesitation to look after Jinx. Tears filled Alaine's eyes again and she used the handkerchief to wipe them away.

'It was my first holiday for six years,' she quivered. 'I couldn't believe it when Estelle gave me the ticket - and you've spoiled it all for me. I wish I could pay you back!' she flashed, repeating what she had already said.

Cimon's face was a mask, but behind his eyes she clearly read contrition and self-blame. So he was not quite so unfeeling as she imagined, it seemed. Walking across the elegantly-furnished room, he took possession of a wide upholstered window-seat.

'Tell me about yourself,' he invited. 'You mentioned an aunt with whom you live. Have you any other relatives - other than this sister?'

'No - just my aunt.'

'You live alone with her, then?'

The merest hesitation and then Alaine nodded her head. She saw no reason why she should talk to this man about Jinx.

'Yes, I live alone with Aunt Sue.'

'She's ill, you said?'

'She has arthritis and I think she has something else wrong with her. She hasn't told me, because she knows I'd worry, but I feel that she is having trouble with her heart.'

His eyes flickered strangely.

'You'd worry ...' He considered this before adding, a distinct sneer of contempt curving his mouth, 'So you and your sister are identical only in looks. She would not worry about anyone. In fact, she disowns all her relatives, apparently, as she told Sulas she was entirely alone in the world.'

'It's her own business,' Alaine felt forced to say and then wished she hadn't because Cimon was quick to agree, saying that 'business' was the operative word.

'What is your job?' he then asked, a glimmer of amusement resulting from her sudden flare of colour at his outspokenness regarding her sister. Alaine lifted both hands to her cheeks, wishing she did not blush so easily.

'I work in a shop. I'm a counter assistant.'

'Then why in the name of heaven did you lie?' he demanded after a small frowning silence. 'I fail to see the need for it.'

She moistened her lips in a little nervous gesture.

'I shouldn't have lied,' she admitted. 'I suppose I wanted you to think I had a more glamorous occupation than serving behind a counter.'

'You're a stupid fool!' he declared wrathfully. 'living a complete lie like that! And the name - you'd no need to call yourself Estelle!'

'Yes, I did; it was Estelle on the passenger list.'

'What's that to do with it? Many people have names other than those which might appear on a passenger list - given names, I'm talking about. I must admit I was extremely puzzled in you because you appeared to be so different from what I expected. I could not conceive

of a mistake being made - naturally the idea of twins never for a moment entered my head, and wouldn't have done even had Sulas not told me that Estelle had no relatives. However, in spite of my not being able to guess at a mistake I was so perplexed that I asked you about your job.' He shook his head exasperatedly. 'Do you normally lie so easily - and for no valid reason?'

Indignation flashed into her eyes; she had no idea how attractive she appeared in this state of rising anger and so the sudden flickering of Cimon's eyes completely passed her by.

'Are you trying to find excuses for your conduct?' she asked fiercely. 'You had no right to be planning that fiendish punishment in the first place. If you'd kept out of it you wouldn't have been put to all this trouble, and neither would I!'

Icy detachment spread over him and for one fleeting moment the savage looked out of his eyes.

'I told you - revenge is indispensable to the retention of our self-respect.'

Alaine said nothing and he went on to ask if she agreed with her sister's life, and the way she treated boys like Sulas.

'I've already said I don't agree with her way,' she reminded him. 'But that doesn't mean that I want her to be punished. After all, she's my sister.'

'Am I right in concluding that you have very little to do with her?'

'I visit her about four or five times a year.'

'And she? Does she come to visit you and and her aunt?'

Reluctantly Alaine shook her head; she failed to see the point of all this questioning.

'No; Estelle never visits us.'

He leant back, his face taut but faintly troubled, and once again she reached the conclusion that he was not so unfeeling as he appeared on the surface. Behind him tall plane trees formed a shade for the far lawn, and in a hedge closer to flaring pomegranate blossoms splashed the green foliage with brilliant orange and red. The sapphire sky looked metallic through the haze of pure golden sunlight.

'Your present plans,' he said, at last broaching the subject nearest her conscious thought. 'I see no reason why you shouldn't go back to the ship. It will be back at Piraeus the day after tomorrow and you can pick it up there. I'll arrange for a flight for you, and for a taxi anything else you want at the other end—'

'Thank you,' she cut in with frigid sarcasm. 'You're far too generous!'

Strangely his manner remained calm. -'I do sincerely apologize, Alaine. I know just how you feel, and I understand your anger and indignation.

But,' he added in a voice suddenly edged with harshness, 'you have the one supreme consolation of having saved your sister. I make you the promise that, with your departure from Crete, the whole business will be finished with.'

She sat looking down at her hands. Her feelings of hatred were still strong, but fighting them was the love which had been so swiftly born during those idyllic days on board the *Cassillia*. She had no wish to care for him; on the contrary, she wanted to hate him... and to have her revenge for what he had done to her.

'Are you waiting for me to thank you?' she queried with the same sarcasm, as she noted his rather questioning gaze.

He shook his head. Was there a hint of regret in the action? she wondered, catching her breath at the idea of this possibility.

'No, Alaine, I'm not. And as I've just said, I fully understand how you are feeling at the present time. I'm sorry you were frightened like that, very sorry indeed.' He stopped and gave a small impatient sigh. 'But you do have yourself to blame, in some small way. All that stupid masquerading - and the lies about your work and about men.' He looked at her and added, an odd inflection in his tone, 'Don't you have a boy-friend?'

She shook her head.

'I don't go out very much - and that was why I so looked forward to this holiday,' she just couldn't help adding, and was profoundly gratified to see a sudden frown appear between his eyes.

'Can I pay for another for you?' Deep sincerity lay in the offer, but again she shook her head.

'I want nothing from you,' she told him quietly and with bitterness. 'I just want you to arrange for me to go home. I haven't the money to pay my own air fare, or I wouldn't even accept that from you.'

A long and uncomfortable silence followed; Alaine found herself screwing up his big handkerchief in her hands, while Cimon seemed lost in the depths of thought. His dark head was outlined against the window and, glancing over it, Alaine could not help but appreciate the beauty she encountered there. The sunlight in the fluttering leaves of the trees transformed them into a cascade of gold, with shadowed pools through which loomed the indistinct outline of the cliffs.

Cimon spoke at length, asking if his arrangements suited her. She repeated that she preferred to go home, but it was when he said something about her aunt that she realized how awkward it would be to explain the curtailed holiday. Alaine had no wish to upset her aunt with an account of what had taken place, so she reluctantly agreed with Cimon's suggestion that she rejoin the ship at Piraeus. There would be only three more days after that and then she would be back home.

'Don't forget to give me my passport - Estelle's passport,' she said as the thought occurred to her.

'No, I'll give it to you now.' Rising, he went to the desk and while he was there Alaine had her first proper look round the room. Luxurious furnishings not in the least oriental in character. No ikons or such things as votive offerings. On the contrary, the Western influence was outstandingly illustrated in the taste and style of the decor, and in the delightful modern design of carpets and window drapes. With a flash of memory; she recalled her jokes about finding herself a rich man ... and here was one. She glanced at his back, so broad and straight, with an arrogant dark head, tilted slightly now, and she knew he was looking at the passport in his hand - looking at the photograph of Estelle Marsland. He moved and his head came up; no doubt about it, there was something singularly attractive even in the arrogant superiority of him.

Turning slowly, he allowed his gaze to settle on her face; his expression had softened and she had the odd conviction that he was recalling her unhappy comment about looking forward to the holiday. She looked away, because she felt that her eyes would reveal something in complete contradiction of what she wanted to convey - her hatred of him and her deep desire to pay him back, to make him rue the day he had given her his attention solely in order to win her confidence so that she would become his easy prey. She forgot that it was all meant for Estelle and in fact it would have made no impression

on her if she had remembered, simply because it was she, Alaine, who had been hurt, and not Estelle.

'There's the passport, Alaine - and another time get your own. Apart from anything that has happened on this occasion, it's an offence to use another person's passport, even if that other person is an identical twin.' He handed it to her and she reached for her handbag which she had put on the floor beside her chair. But before putting the passport away she opened it, and looked long and hard at the photograph. Estelle had prophesied that they would not always be alike; hard work and worry would prematurely age Alaine - and Alaine now felt that her sister was probably right.

'Tell me,' she said, looking up at Cimon as he stood by her chair, 'what did you think would happen on Estelle's release? Surely it struck you that she would denounce you - report your conduct to the police?'

A faint smile touched his lips - a smile totally devoid of humour.

'On her release she would have received a warning,' he informed Alaine in tones that sent a ripple of fear running all along her spine. 'She would have been told what to expect should she so much as mention what had happened to her. I feel sure she would have heeded that warning, Alaine ... very sure indeed.'

She shivered, wondering if Estelle would fully appreciate what she had escaped, when, on returning her passport, Alaine informed her of these momentous happenings.

After putting the passport in her handbag Alaine stood up.

'What must I do?' she asked, and to her amazement a shadow crossed his face.

'There isn't anything you can do except remain here as my guest—'

'No,' she interrupted fiercely, her hand clenching on the strap of her bag. 'I want to go somewhere else! If you'll have me taken to Heraklion I can stay in an hotel there until you arrange the flight for me.'

Again a shadow crossed his face. Could he possibly be distressed at her wishing for a swift escape from his - company? The idea was absurd ... and yet it persisted in spite of all Alaine's efforts to throw it off.

'It's understandable that a couple of days in my company is not over-attractive to you,' he admitted in quiet unfathomable tones. 'Nevertheless, you will have to endure them, simply because I must extend hospitality to you. This is an unalterable Greek custom- No, Alaine, don't interrupt with that sarcastic remark that is so plainly hovering on your tongue. Sarcasm is out of place in you because you're not the kind of girl who normally uses it.' He paused a moment, to receive unsmilingly the startled little gasp she gave at this accurate comment on her character. 'I own that I deserve it all, and that is why I must make amends. Not only do I wish you to be my guest, Alaine, but I also want you to know that if at some future date you find yourself in need of help, then you have only to contact me and that help will be forthcoming. You must also leave me your address.' He looked at her. 'Have I your solemn promise that you will remember the offer I've just made - and not be too proud, or too stubborn, to take advantage of it?'

Instinctively she opened her mouth to reject the offer, but then desisted, for what reason she could not tell, for surely she would never require this man's help. And yet she said, as if obeying some inner force of which she was scarcely aware,

'Yes, Cimon, you have my promise,' and he smiled at her in a way that seemed to spread warmth and vitality throughout her whole body, and his voice was oddly gentle as, ringing the bell, he said,

'A maid will show you your room, Alaine. You'll find there's everything you need. It has its own bathroom and the balcony has a pretty view. I hope you'll be comfortable. Dinner is served at nine, usually, but perhaps you'd prefer it earlier?'

She shook her head, dazed by his disarming manner which had the effect of halting the words of protest that had risen to her lips. He was clearly very conscious of the enormity of the error he had committed and was anxious to make some sort of reparation.

'No, nine o'clock will suit me fine,' she heard herself say as the trim, dark-skinned Cretan maid entered the room. The next minute she was being taken through a beautifully-proportioned hall flanked by high arches built in the Turkish style. Wide stairs faced her and she ascended them. The maid, whose name was Kyria, smilingly opened a bedroom door and stepped aside for Alaine to enter.

'Please ring if you want anything. The bell is beside the bed, madam.'

'Thank you.' Alaine forced a smile as she moved further into the room and glanced around. Satin-effect wallpaper in rich glowing rose; white carpet and curtains. An enormous bed with a beautifully-embroidered coverlet; white and gold furniture. The door closed and Alaine sank down on the bed, allowing her mind to dwell on all that had happened to her since she left home ... was it only ten days ago? So much had taken place that it seemed like an eternity. Aunt Sue Jinx seemed almost to be strangers, and Estelle was a mere image. The only person with any reality was Cimon Duris, the man of dual personality, the Cretan with his own laws who, even when forced to apologize, after receiving cogent evidence of his blunder, had managed to retain his pride and superiority of bearing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

No sooner had the taxi pulled up than Jinx was there, shooting from the house, her freckled face aglow, her hazel eyes shining a welcome.

'Mummy! You've been gone a long time! I didn't like it without you, and Aunt Sue didn't either!'

'My pet ...' Alaine lifted her up and kissed her, oblivious of the smiling taxi driver standing there, patiently waiting for his money. 'Have you been a good little girl for Aunt Sue?'

'Awful good. Ask her!'

Alaine paid the man and he drove away. Picking up her suitcases, she went up the steps into the house, experiencing a tug of emotion at the way Jinx had greeted her. The child had missed her and so had Aunt Sue, apparently. 'I should have stayed at home with them,' thought Alaine. Yes, she should have stayed where there was love and affection - and safety. How was she to assume the bright front her aunt would be waiting to see? She must, Alaine decided; she must convey an eagerness to relate all that had happened. An account must be given where even a mention of Cimon Duris was omitted, although his name would be poised on her lips the whole time, and his image hovering before her eyes. As she entered the sitting-room where her aunt was waiting to greet her the first thing that struck Alaine was the paleness of her, and the skin on her face seemed to have shrunk so that it was tight and transparent, and fine blue veins had appeared underneath it. Alaine caught her breath and said,

'Auntie darling, are you all right?'

'Of course, my love. Come and sit here, and tell me all about it.' Her eyes searched; Alaine thought it must be quite beyond her ability to deceive the old lady, and yet she seemed to be helped by some

impalpable power,; for miraculously she managed to convince her aunt that she had had a wonderful time on the cruise and that she felt a great deal better for it.

'I'm so glad, dear.' Again that searching gaze before Aunt Sue said, 'You didn't meet anyone - special, apparently?'

Alaine shook her head, taking Jinx on her knee as the child indicated that this was where she wanted to be.

'No one special,' she answered with forced humour. But inevitably Cimon's face rose up before her. 'Sorry to disappoint you.' A laugh hung suspended as pain clawed at Alaine's heart, but then it fell, tinkling and convincing as it rang round the room.

Jinx had been listening quietly as Alaine talked about the cruise and now, with her arms wound tightly round Alaine's neck and her freckled cheek pressed to hers, she asked about these three people with whom Alaine had said she kept company.

'What were their names?' she added, planting a rather damp kiss on Alaine's cheek.

'The lady's name was Donna and her husband's was Jim. The other young man's name was Hal.'

'Hal?' frowned Jinx. 'I don't like that name. I've never heard of it before. Why didn't you get a nice man with a name like Darryl?'

Affectionately Alaine held Jinx away and looked at her, taking in the scratch on her forehead which she had previously missed owing to its being covered by the child's hair.

'There wasn't a Darryl about,' she laughed, and then asked about the scratch. Aunt Sue broke in before Jinx could reply.

'Fighting again, naturally. I don't know why you ask!' A small pause. Jinx slid off Alaine's knee and sat on the floor, looking down at her hands. A sudden jerk of Alaine's heart was accompanied by a frown. 'You've an irate father to face,' Aunt Sue reluctantly continued. 'Suzanne Haggerty's father said Jinx nearly killed Suzanne.'

'Nearly—?' Alaine stared. 'What's he talking about? Suzanne's twice the size of Jinx.'

'Perhaps, but she's only half the aggressiveness. Jinx, tell your mother what you did to Suzanne.'

Jinx swallowed convulsively ... a circumstance that immediately set Alaine's nerves tingling, for the simple reason that very rarely indeed was Jinx in any way subdued, no matter for what mischief she was being admonished.

'Well, it was her own fault,' Jinx said at last in defensive tones. 'She said that her mummy said to her daddy that my mummy was no good, because she had got me without having a husband.' She glanced up; Alaine's colour had receded a little. Most of the neighbours knew how Jinx came to be with Alaine, but the Haggertys had moved into the district only a couple of months ago, and Mrs. Haggerty had obviously got the story all wrong. 'I clouted—' Jinx braked and began again on seeing her mother's sudden dark frown. 'I hit her - a lot of times, and I kicked her as well.' The hazel eyes, so often full of laughter, were like something seething in a cauldron and the tiny fists were clenched. 'I told her I'd bash her head in if her mummy said it again!'

'But she didn't understand what it was all about.' Alaine spoke to her aunt, her brow creased in puzzlement.

'All that seemed to trouble Jinx was that someone had said you were no good. Obviously she didn't understand, but you know Jinx. She gets into these blazing tempers if anyone dares say a word against you.'

Alaine gave a deep sigh.

'It's gratifying, but what are we to do with her?' She directed a stem look at the child, sitting there on the floor, cross-legged, and decidedly grubby in appearance. 'You said you'd been good, when I asked you just now. Is that being good - fighting with other little girls?'

Jinx shook her head, one finger drawing a line round the shape of the sole of her shoe.

'She shouldn't have said it,' she murmured sulkily at length.

'Suzanne didn't say it; her mummy did.'

'Yes, but I couldn't hit her mummy, could I? So I hit Suzanne instead.'

'You had no right to hit Suzanne,' Alaine scolded sharply. 'It wasn't her fault if her mummy said something you didn't like.'

'And now her daddy's coming here, and he's going to tell Mummy off for something that isn't *her* fault,' put in Aunt Sue.

'If he shouts at my mummy I'll hit Suzanne again—'

'You'll do no such thing!' Alaine pointed to the door. 'Go and stay in your bedroom; you're a very naughty girl. How could you hurt Suzanne like that?'

Two big tears rolled down the chubby cheeks as Jinx stood up.

'I was only sticking up for you. It's right that you should stick up for your mummy.' Slowly she moved to the door, but her eyes were alert for the effect of her words on Alaine. Alaine instantly looked away and Jinx went out of the room. A second later she returned. 'You said you'd bring me a present back from your holiday,' she began, when Aunt Sue interrupted with,

'Do you deserve a present - causing your mummy all this trouble? Do as you're told and go to your bedroom at once!'

'Is my pr-present in one of your c-cases?' Tears dropped freely now, as Jinx pointed to the suitcases where Alaine had left them, in the hall.

'Yes, Jinx.' Despite all attempts to remain stem Alaine found herself softening. But she would not allow the child to remain, not after Aunt Sue had given her an order. 'You can have it at tea time, when you come downstairs again.'

'Something must be done with that child,' declared Aunt Sue the moment the door had closed behind Jinx.

This can't go on, Alaine.'

'I'll try to be more firm with her. When is Mr. Haggerty coming to see me?'

'This evening. I told him to come tomorrow, as you wouldn't be pleased at having him come when you'd just returned from your holiday, but he was in a rare temper and said he had no intention of putting the matter off any longer than was necessary.' A small pause. 'I tried to pacify him, my dear, so that you wouldn't have all this the moment you got back, but it was no use. He wanted to see Jinx's mother, he said.'

'Oh, well, he can't eat me,' sighed Alaine, her spirits in her feet. Life seemed to hold nothing and she did wonder why all this should happen to her. To add to her dejection there was Aunt Sue, who was unwell, no; matter what she herself said to the contrary. A marked change had taken place during this past fortnight and more than ever Alaine wished she had not gone on that fateful cruise.

'I wish you had found yourself a nice young man,' the old lady was saying, her face twisting as she moved on the couch. 'I'd like to see you with a husband before - before anything happens to me.'

Alaine shook her head in a little gesture of desperation and hurt.

'Don't talk like that, Auntie. Is your pain very .bad?'

'It does happen to be one of my more uncomfortable days,' she admitted. 'But it isn't quite so bad as it often is. But to get back to you, dear. I've decided you shall get out more, and have the opportunity of meeting a young man. You're very attractive - No, dear, I won't have you interrupting. I've a little more jewellery and the same man called the other day and made me a very fair offer for it. I promised to let him know, and this I intend doing. You're to have the money to buy yourself some pretty clothes and to go out, to dances and the like.'

Alaine got up and went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, her heart heavier than ever. There was something so significant in her aunt's behaviour and Alaine wondered just what the doctor had told her. For a moment she pondered over the idea of contacting the doctor herself, but should Aunt Sue come to hear of it she would be angry. Aunt Sue liked her privacy over such things, and Alaine had never once infringed upon that privacy.

Estelle sat on the couch and stared at Alaine, seated on a chair at the other side of the room. Alaine had unfolded the whole story of the cruise after handing over the passport. She saw her sister's face gradually whiten as she continued with her narrative and now it was without colour at all.

'What an escape I've had!' She spoke at last, leaning forward to take a cigarette from the box on the table. The lighter flared and smoke rose

and curled. The man ought to be put in prison!' She paused, expecting some comment, but Alaine remained silent, brooding on her own hurt and deciding that she would be a very long while getting over the encounter with Cimon Duris. 'You didn't happen to fall for the bloke?' inquired Estelle curiously, wondering at the expression on her sister's face, which was almost as pale as her own.

'Don't be silly!' A shaky laugh from Alaine, but she lowered her head. 'I don't happen to fall in love so easily as that!'

'What was he like?' A little of the colour had returned to Estelle's face, but she was still far from calm.

'Handsome, and taller than most of the other Greeks I saw.' Alaine spoke cautiously, her head still bent.

Estelle inhaled deeply, her lovely eyes dark and solemn. Alaine experienced some gratification at her sister's display of emotion at having escaped the punishment planned for her.

'He definitely promised to let the matter drop?'

'I've already told you he did.'

'Does he appear to be the sort of man who'll keep his word?'

'I'm quite sure he'll keep his word.'

A sigh of relief from Estelle. She leant back on the couch in an attitude of relaxation and stared at the sinuous curl of blue smoke as it rose thinly from the tip of her cigarette. After a long while she said,

'What an opportunity! Were I in your place I'd exploit that situation. I'd make that fellow pay for his mistake.'

'Pay?' Alaine threw her an interrogating glance. 'What do you mean?'

'You haven't seen the marvellous piece of luck that's dropped right into your lap? Alaine, what an idiot you are! If Cimon Duris is as rich as that then he's obviously well known in his own country, and looked up to. If I were in your place I'd make him compensate me or else ... !' Estelle's eyes glinted; she appeared to be distant and remote, mentally calculating. 'He's in big business, that's for sure... and if he wanted to keep the respect of his business associates and his friends, then he'd have to pay me a nice little sum in compensation for what I'd suffered. Little sum, did I say?' added Estelle through lips gone suddenly tight. 'No, a large sum - if he wanted to buy my silence.'

Alaine blinked, scarcely able to believe her ears.

'That would be demanding money with menaces,' she gasped.

'No such thing; you'd merely be asking for compensation for what you'd undergone at his hands. If he makes a blunder like that he can't expect to get away with it scot free! Didn't he offer you something in reparation?'

'He did offer to pay for another holiday for me. I refused it; I didn't want anything from him. I just wanted to get away.'

Estelle caught her breath in a long-drawn-out sigh of exasperation.

'You're a fool, Alaine! That cruise cost over four hundred pounds. You could have had that amount at least, it seems. What on earth possessed you to refuse his offer?'

'Pride,' answered Alaine briefly, and another sigh escaped Estelle.

'That's as outdated as your idiotic ideas about chastity! You could have used that four hundred, if only to buy yourself some decent clothes. Mind you, four hundred wouldn't have satisfied me. I'd have wanted five thousand at least as silence money.' She paused and humour lit her

eyes. 'Just imagine modest little you having to prove you hadn't the birthmark. I'll bet you blushed!'

Alaine looked at her.

'It wasn't a very pleasant experience, Estelle, and it's nothing to be amused about. I wish I'd never gone on the cruise.'

'Nonsense. You've the opportunity of collecting a nice little nest-egg, if only you'd exploit the situation.'

Alaine made no answer to that, her one and only desire being to forget Cimon Duris and to return to the peaceful - if humdrum - life she had known before she had foolishly decided to make use of that ticket her sister had given her.

But she was to dwell incessantly on Estelle's words - and before very long. She was also to connect with those words her own desire to make Cimon pay for the trouble and humiliation he had caused her.

For only a month after her return from the cruise her aunt died, and less than a week later the landlord served Alaine with notice to quit. She spent a little of the money her aunt had given her on obtaining advice from a solicitor, but she only wasted her money. She was not the tenant and, therefore, she could not expect to remain in the house. She had a full month's notice and after spending the first week off work, searching for a flat or apartment, she began to realize that no one wanted a child of five in their house. She was offered a flat in a large block, but when she mentioned Jinx the offer was withdrawn.

'All our tenants are either elderly couples or single people,' the caretaker said. 'They come here because we guarantee quietness.'

Alaine was forced to return to work, a neighbour agreeing to take Jinx in when she came from school, but although Alaine stressed the

necessity of being exceptionally good, Jinx soon fell into disgrace and Alaine was told to get someone else to look after her.

'Why doesn't Mrs. Brown want me?' Jinx took hold of Alaine's hand and put it to her cheek. 'I didn't do anything.'

'You were naughty. She didn't want you sliding through her hall—'

'But it was so shiny on the floor. It sort of *made* you want to slide - like when we have ice.'

'And did you have to hold your finger under the tap in the bathroom - and splash all the walls?'

'I shouldn't have done that,' Jinx owned, but her eyes glistened. 'It was nice, though. I couldn't help it. Ooh, it squirted all over the place!'

Heaving a deep sigh, Alaine looked at her. She had just collected her from Mrs. Brown's, and the woman had expressed regret, but said she wasn't willing to have the child any more. Alaine glanced at the clock. Half-past six. Jinx had been given her tea, but she had said she was hungry again, so Alaine cooked some bacon and eggs and they had the meal together. It was strange without Aunt Sue, and now that there was no one to have Jinx Alaine felt she did not know where to turn. The last straw was when, just after bathing Jinx and putting her to bed, Alaine answered a knock on the door and was confronted, for the second time, with Suzanne Haggerty's father. Her heart skipped a beat; she felt she could not endure any more. But she said politely,

'Will you come in, Mr. Haggerty?'

He stepped inside, but made no effort to go any further.

'That child of yours,' he began in blustering tones. 'If you don't do something with her then I will! She's kicked our Suzanne again today. I'm seeing the headmaster in the morning, but as I've said - *Miss*

Marsland - I'll do something with her myself! She wants a damned good walloping, and if she had a father she'd probably get one, but you obviously let her do exactly as she likes. You've no control over her at all, and I'll tell you this: she'll be a little criminal before she's very much older—'

'Criminal? How dare you say a thing like that?' Alaine was well on the way to losing her own temper, owing to the stress the man had put on the 'Miss'. However, she did not lose her temper because she freely admitted that Jinx had been naughty to kick Suzanne again, and Alaine apologized for this, saying she would see that it didn't occur again.

'And how do you propose to prevent that unbridled little brat from attacking my daughter?' the man demanded to know.

'I'll give Jinx a good talking to—'

'Talking!' blazed Mr. Haggerty, going red in the face. 'That's your failing, woman! It's action that's needed.' He wagged a forefinger in Alaine's face. 'And I myself will act if this happens again, mark you that!' And he turned and strode through the door, slamming the gate as he reached the end of the path leading out on to the pavement.

Drained, and so utterly unhappy that she could have wept where she stood, Alaine quietly closed the door and, turning, went upstairs to Jinx. The child was not asleep and after snapping on the light Alaine stood just inside the door, watching Jinx as she sat up, blinking in order to accustom her eyes to the light. Alaine took in the freckles, the ridiculous little snub nose ... and the smile of affection that came suddenly to the child's lips. Alaine sighed. She loved this little scrap, found beauty in the features which her aunt had insisted were not in any way beautiful - except for the eyes, of course, which were large, and expressive as Alaine's own. Soon, decided Alaine, Jinx must gradually be given the truth; she must know she was not Alaine's daughter ... but not yet. No, not yet. How must it be done - when the

time did arrive? Gradually. But how did one impart that sort of information gradually? And yet to tell her outright would be too great a shock, decided Alaine. It would be easier were Jinx not quite so intelligent, for then facts would sink in more slowly, and so the shock would be lessened.

'What's the matter, Mummy?' The voice broke into Alaine's consciousness; she came further into the room and stood by the bed.

'Mr. Haggerty has been to see me again. He says you were kicking Suzanne. Is this true?'

'Yes, it is, but she pulled my hair first. It was awful — and it did hurt! I had a headache all the time since playtime, so when we came out of school I kicked her. It was because she pulled my hair, though, Mummy. I wouldn't kick her for nothing.'

'Why did she pull your hair?'

'It wasn't for anything at all. I was playing with James in the playground and she came up and tugged at my hair.'

Alaine looked searchingly at her. She had never found Jinx out in a lie and now the child was meeting her gaze unflinchingly.

'Very well; lie down and I'll tuck you in.'

'Are you cross with me?'

Alaine shook her head. Suzanne had a father to come and make complaints, to stick up for her. Jinx had no one. Alaine did not doubt that Suzanne had tugged Jinx's hair, even though Aunt Sue had maintained that Suzanne was not aggressive. And had Jinx had a father he would have met Mr. Haggerty, and probably he would have had Jinx down, just so the matter could be sorted out fairly. As it was,

Alaine had been browbeaten, and so the matter had not been sorted out fairly.

'No, darling, I'm not angry. But you must try to be a good little girl, and not fight so much with everyone.'

'But I had a headache, Mummy. It was hurting all the long time till we went home.'

Alaine said nothing, but tucked Jinx in and, bending down, she kissed her on the cheek.

'Are you sad because of Aunt Sue?' Jinx asked, looking up into Alaine's face.

'Yes, darling, I'm sad because of Aunt Sue.'

'It's lonely without her, isn't it? Never mind, though, we'll see her in heaven. Michael Booth's baby sister died, and Michael said he'd see her in heaven. He said you always do see people in heaven - so don't be sad, Mummy. When you and I go to heaven well all be together again.' Yawning, Jinx closed her eyes. Alaine walked to the door and put out the light. Then she went slowly downstairs, washed up the dishes and then sat down before the fire, staring into the flames and thinking of her sister's words about reparation from Cimon Duris, of making him pay for her silence. ... She also thought of her own desire for revenge which, although having died almost on her leaving the island of Crete, seemed to spring to life again now, and even as she sat there, lonely and alone, it grew and grew like some entangling weed that could not be thrown off. She recalled also Cimon's making her promise that, should she ever require help, she would contact him.

Yes, she would contact him. Life was becoming too much of a burden, Jinx's behaviour having added further complications, since she, Alaine, would now have to find a part-time job so as to be at home

when Jinx came from school. Alaine could scarcely manage as it was and she foresaw Jinx and herself actually going hungry if even less money came in than at present. There was the question of where they would live, and long before the evening had passed Alaine had made a firm decision to demand sufficient from Cimon to enable her to procure some sort of a home for Jinx and herself.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IMMEDIATELY the letter had been posted Alaine began to have tremors of apprehension. Cimon Duris was not the man to be intimidated, either by her or anyone else. Not that she had given any intimation of what she had in mind. On the contrary, she had made a polite request that he should come over to see her, reminding him of the promise he had exacted from her. But there was no doubt that her wording was firm, and on reading between the lines he must surely realize that she had no intention of being put off by an insignificant bribe. Probably he would be so furious at this subtle threat that he would completely ignore the letter. Should he do this then Alaine felt she would be at her wits' end, since she had not the slightest intention of going to any extremes in order to obtain money from him. If he did appear, however, she had every intention of acting in the most mercenary manner, threatening him with prosecution for abducting her in the way he had.

He arrived just after half past one on the Wednesday; Alaine had just come in from work and was in the kitchen making herself a sandwich when the front door bell rang. A neighbour, she concluded with a sudden frown. She had no time for gossip, as there were the bedrooms to clean, and then there was a little more sorting out of her aunt's things, many of which Alaine had reluctantly decided would have to be thrown away.

Ota seeing Cimon standing there on the step she gaped uncomprehendingly, her mind trying to grapple with dates. It was a mere three days since she sent the air letter, so how could he be here already? Besides, Alaine had expected that, if he did intend coming to see her, he would reply to her letter informing her of the time of his arrival. It was most fortunate that it was Wednesday afternoon, she thought.

Amused by her blank stare, Cimon smiled and said, not at all in the sort of tone she would have expected,

'No wonder you're surprised, Alaine. Aren't you going to ask me in?'

'Of c-course.' Still dazed by the inexplicable promptness of his arrival, she opened the door wider and stepped to one side so that he could enter. 'In here.' To her dismay she found herself trembling and knew it was owing to the lack of preparation she'd had for this visit of his. She had intended having a long and repeated rehearsal once she received word that he was coming. Now, she had not the faintest idea how to begin. 'Please sit down.' She gestured towards the couch and he walked over to it, his glance embracing everything - the shabby carpet and faded curtains, the cumbersome Victorian furniture, hideous as only furniture of this period could be. He sat down, his eyes settling for a space on the photograph above Alaine's head, a photograph of Aunt Sue's parents with their younger daughter, a girl who had died in her teens. 'Would you like a cup of tea?' Alaine was suddenly filled with a sense of inadequacy, wondering just how she was to take even the first step towards demanding money with menaces, which was what her intention amounted to. 'I don't expect you've had any lunch? She thought of the corned beef sandwiches there in the kitchen, and had a shrewd suspicion that he would not be very partial to those.

'I did stop for something on my way from the airport,' he smiled, leaning back comfortably and crossing one long leg over the other. Alaine sat down on the edge of a chair and folded her hands in her lap. Frowning all at once, Cimon looked at her long and hard before saying,

'Aren't you going to ask me why I'm here?'

She gave a start.

'I know why you're here,' she returned when she had collected herself sufficiently to be able to speak. What was the matter with him, asking a question like that?

'You do?' in a sort of astonished way. 'You expected me to come?'

'I wasn't quite sure you would, but I thought you might. What puzzles me is how you managed it so quickly.'

'Quickly?' He was alert, and his eyes were faintly narrowed. A deep line furrowed his brow as if he also were experiencing some puzzlement.

'I posted the letter only on Sunday afternoon, and so naturally I'm surprised that you managed to get here by today. In any case, I thought you'd send me a reply, saying when you'd be coming.' She paused a moment, wondering if now was the right time to continue, to get the whole thing out and done with. Cimon had come forward and was regarding her with the most odd expression, and also with a measure of perception. 'I know the air mail is quick these days,' she added, feeling she must play fear time, affording herself a moment or two longer in which to think of how she must begin. 'But surely you wouldn't receive any letter before this meaning?'

A small hesitation and then, with an odd inflection in his voice,

'I was fortunate in getting a plane. Flights, too, are quick these days. Er - about your letter, Alaine, perhaps you'll tell me exactly what you meant?'

She swallowed hard. He had not read between the lines, it seemed, for otherwise he would not be adopting this rather friendly manner with her. She fervently wished she had used stronger phrasing, since it was much more difficult to begin now that her preliminaries had been missed by him.

'You - you said that if ever I required help I must contact you. Do y-you r-remember?

He nodded thoughtfully.

'Certainly. But this letter. Tell me what you meant?

'Well --' She tailed off, coughing nervously. 'As I mentioned, my aunt has died, and I have to leave this house. Perhaps you don't know the position here, but houses are never to let; one must buy. I've had a month's notice from the landlord - the house was rented to my aunt many years ago when you could rent property,' she added by way of an explanation as she noted the hint of interrogation enter his eyes. 'I have to buy a house and - and...' Again she tailed off, wishing with all her heart that she'd had warning of this visit. That she would be taken by surprise had never for one moment entered her head. 'I must - must have another house,' she managed to add at length.

'Another house,' he murmured, his eyes opening very wide. 'Are you suggesting I put up the money for one?' So strange his tone. Was it imagination, or was there a curious hint of disappointment in his manner?

Another nervous cough escaped her. But with a fleeting glimpse of what her life must be if she failed to exploit this situation, Alaine rallied sufficiently to say yes, that was exactly what she was suggesting.

'I feel I'm entitled to substantial reparation for what I went through at your hands.'

Cimon leant back, thrusting one hand into his pocket and staring at Alaine through half-closed eyes. How formidable he was all at once, she thought, sending up a little prayer for strength to carry out her intended course of action.

'Are you by any chance threatening me?' he inquired in a very soft tone, and quite unexpectedly anger surged within her. He was adopting an arrogant attitude which she resented. What was the price of a house to a man with his wealth? He should pay, she decided. And not only for what he had done to her but for what Keith had done too. She had to think of Jinx's future as well as her own and she was determined to make a bid for the money which would relieve the anxiety of that future. With a house of her own she would have no rent to pay and, therefore, she could manage with a part-time job, at least until Jinx became older and did not need her to be there on her return from school.

'I suppose it is a threat,' she agreed, in answer to his question. 'I'm telling you what I need - and that is the money for a home.' She stopped, on the point of mentioning Jinx. There was no valid reason for the hesitation and yet she experienced a strange reluctance to tell him of the child's existence. 'You must have meant to make reparation, otherwise you wouldn't be here.'

A very strange silence followed those last words. Once again she had the odd impression that he was experiencing some kind of disappointment. What it was she could not fathom, nor had she any desire to do so. All she wanted was a settlement, and then for him to leave, because in spite of the fact that the urge for revenge filled her mind, it did not do so to the exclusion of all else, not quite. She had cared too deeply for her love to die. It would die in time, or so she hoped, but at present the pain of loving him was a dragging weight round her heart.

'Very true, I expect I did mean to make reparation --' He spoke softly, as if to himself, and she thought a small sigh escaped him and she frowned because of it, so out of keeping was it with his character. 'Yes,' he went on after a long silence, 'I suppose, in a way, one could call it reparation, and yet ...' He threw her a glance and she saw that his eyes had taken on a hard metallic look. 'You obviously want several

thousands of pounds from me? That's what you are asking?' His voice was crisp and, convinced that he had a much smaller sum in mind, she said sharply,

'I'm not asking, I'm demanding. I intend to be compensated for what I suffered.'

'I fail to see how you can give it that description.'

'I was frightened, and humiliated. Also, my whole holiday was spoiled.'

'Your whole holiday?' he repeated, watching her closely. She caught her breath in a little sigh that was almost a sob, and her eyes clouded darkly at the poignant memory of that brief interlude of happiness - the only happiness she would ever experience with a man, as she felt sure that no one would ever affect her as Cimon had during those wonderful days aboard the *Cassillia*.

'Yes, my whole holiday,' she lied.

'I see --' Somehow Elaine gained the impression that her words had produced in him an indecision that was not there before. His black eyes narrowed as they looked into hers and his jaw flexed suddenly. 'Just what are you threatening me with?' he wanted to know, his voice smooth and totally unperturbed. Yet there was an unmistakeable quality of danger about his attitude and it was brought fully home to her that he was a Cretan and, therefore, ruthless and without fear.

'Prosecution,' she managed, and she did wonder how her tone could be so firm and steady. She sounded every bit as calculating and confident as Estelle would have been under similar circumstances. 'I expect you have a certain prestige among your friends and business associates, and you would not want to lose it, would you?'

'Decidedly not.' His eyes widened slightly, giving evidence of some secret deduction he had reached. He did not leave her long in doubt over this as he said, 'I take it that your sister put you up to this?'

She sent him a startled glance. A faint smile came to his lips and hovered there, and his head was shaking slightly, as if he were fully enlightened and his question had been quite unnecessary.

'I must admit that she and I discussed the matter,' returned Alaine with a frank gaze, 'but the decision to exact compensation from you was entirely my own.'

'It was?' smoothly and with the merest lift of an eyebrow. 'You're quite sure about that?'

'Certainly. I've suffered at your hands and I'm determined to have compensation.'

'So it would appear that you are little better than Estelle?' Curiously-toned, his voice; he watched her with alert eyes, his smile deepening as her head jerked. The gesture was involuntary, a clear protest made without thinking; perception was evidenced by a further widening of her companion's eyes. She frowned inwardly, becoming more and more surprised by the way Cimon was acting. The whole situation might have been one huge joke from which he derived considerable amusement. Anger, contempt, and a high degree of hauteur she most certainly would have expected, but this state of amused equanimity was most disconcerting - far more so than a show of fury would have been. She was nonplussed, and supposed her expression revealed this to him. Certainly this interview was not running along the lines she had designed for it. She noticed his set jawline and steeled herself for his flat refusal to take heed of the threat she had made. It was weak anyway, she had to own on pondering over it for a second or two. For she had no idea how to go about prosecuting him. A lawyer would be required and she certainly had not the money

for one. Tell me, Alaine,' Cimon inquired softly at last, 'just how much had you in mind?'

She looked suspiciously at him, wondering if he were enjoying himself at her expense, playing a cat and mouse game with her. Her chin lifted and a sparkle entered her eye. Most successfully she assumed her former mercenary attitude as she said, very much in the manner of her sister,

'It's up to you to make me an offer. You know better than I what your reputation is worth.'

His lips twitched and she waited in some surprise for what he had to say. Little did she know that her surprise was to turn to dumbfounded amazement within the next few seconds.

'An offer, eh?' The merest pause and then, 'My offer is marriage, Alaine.'

'Mar—!' She stared at him, open-mouthed. 'Is this some sort of a joke?' she asked frigidly when she had recovered. Marriage ... to Cimon. How she would have thrilled to the idea only a short while ago! 'If it is a joke, then it isn't in very good taste. I asked you to make me an offer; if it's suitable to me then our business can be conducted without further waste of your time....' Her words fell to silence as the smile hovering on his lips deepened. He commented on the formality of her speech before repeating, his unemotional tones contrasting sharply with the humour in his eye^,

'I don't make jokes about anything so serious as marriage. That is my offer. Blackmail I would not have tolerated anyway, and I don't believe you had any intention of carrying out your threat in any case. Even your clever sister would have found difficulties in doing so, for prosecution is not simple when people live in different countries. Also, any form of retaliation on your part would have been a costly business,

and obviously you're not in a position to spend money like that.' He smiled again and continued, 'These difficulties you're experiencing will be finished once you agree to marry me.' So calmly he spoke, with no evidence of emotion other than the lingering amusement in his eyes resulting from her confounded expression.

She shook her head, utterly dazed, and yet as she examined his face she knew without a trace of doubt that he meant what he said - he did want to marry her!

'I don't know wh-what to say,' she stammered, her mercenary role completely forgotten. 'It isn't as if - as if there's anything between us - any love, I mean.' It wasn't until the words were uttered that Alaine realized she was beseeching him to say one tiny word that would refute the statement. How foolish she was - hoping for a miracle. Whatever the reason for his wanting to marry her that reason had nothing at all to do with love. His attention on the ship, his tender gentle lovemaking and inordinate generosity all compounded to form the lure meant for Estelle, the girl who, through his nephew, had brought disgrace to his family. Alaine Marsland had meant nothing to him . . . and yet he wanted to marry her.

'No love?' He gave her a curious look. 'Are you sure you didn't fall in love with me on the ship?' he inquired baldly, and Alaine stiffened. The utter pomposity of the man! She supposed his confidence stemmed from the fact that most women would fall in love with him. Well, she, Alaine, might have foolishly followed the same pattern, but she had no intention of putting him in possession of the fact.

'Fall in love with you?' Her eyes slid over him with well-feigned contempt and she had the satisfaction of seeing him colour slightly, with temper. 'I don't fall in love so easily as that!'

His eyes glinted like points of steel; that he was piqued was evident and he looked very much as if he would throw her an equally cutting

rejoinder, but if that were so he managed to shake off the temptation, staring at her, searchingly ... almost as if he would read something in her eyes that would prove that she had told him a lie. She met his gaze squarely, all her desire for revenge welling up so that it swamped every other emotion. A small degree of indecision hung over Cimon and, baffled by his unfathomable manner that defied all conjecture as to its cause, Alaine could only wait, not very patiently, for him to speak. This he did presently, by-passing their comments on love and telling Alaine that he was in deadly earnest about wishing to marry her. It would have to be at once, as he had business to attend to in Athens and this he could not possibly leave. His voice was gently persuasive; he seemed confident, though, as if her acceptance were a foregone conclusion.

'Why do you want me to marry you?' Recalling his suggestion on the ship she said, in a voice so cool and crisp that it surprised even her, 'I expect it's desire?'

A mere flickering of his eyes and then,

'Which is as good a reason as any for wanting to get married.'

'Is it?' with an edge of contempt. 'You have no need to go to such lengths.'

'No? You would consider becoming my pillow friend?'

'Certainly not!' she blazed. 'What I was about to say was that you could have dozens of women - without marriage.' He'd already had dozens, she suspected, recollecting that Estelle had declared him to be a womanizer.

'Am I to take that as flattery?' he inquired with some amusement. 'If I could have dozens, then obviously not one of those dozens is worth having. Agreed?'

'So you must have someone - decent, is that it?'

'When I marry, yes.'

'And your desire for me drives you to marriage?' She spoke in tones scarcely above a whisper, for the most staggering idea had occurred to her, an idea which would afford her the satisfaction which she craved. What an opportunity for revenge! - but oh, he could murder her as a result of it! Involuntarily a hand fluttered to her throat, just as if already she could feel those long and sinewed fingers crushing the breath out of her. Cimon frowned and looked interrogatingly at her and she could not help but dwell on his reaction where he to read her thoughts. Certainly he would not be looking so satisfied with himself, and so confident. 'Marriage is a rather drastic step,' she said, anxious to discard the insistent flow of thought urging her to grasp this opportunity of revenge which Cimon was so innocently holding out to her. 'I can't imagine anyone taking it simply for that reason.'

'For that reason ...' He spoke musingly, lost in private thought for a space. 'You've said you won't be my pillow friend, so I've no option. You see, Alaine, I have never desired a woman so greatly as I desire you. I knew it on the ship and, believing you to be Estelle, I was optimistic enough to believe you'd be mine straight away. You can imagine my surprise on receiving a refusal, but, again believing you to be Estelle, I thought you must be playing some subtle game of your own and did not press the matter. I now know how different you are from Estelle, and I came here to ask you to marry me—'

'To ask me to marry you?' she interrupted as, suddenly, perception dawned. 'You never received my letter!'

He shook his head.

'I left yesterday for Athens, from where I flew to England. Your letter had not arrived when I left home.'

She tried to assimilate this. Desire for her had been growing since she left Crete, obviously, and so he had decided to come and propose marriage to her. As she had just remarked, this was a drastic step to take, for that reason only. What would happen when desire waned? Alaine lowered her head to hide the smile that rose to her lips. Desire would certainly wane very swiftly if she decided to go through with the plan that was growing so vigorously that it left little room in her mind for anything else. Desire. ... For one fleeting moment the word was a sword blade piercing her heart; she was a fool to care, but how did one prevent oneself from caring? Did Cimon know of the depth of that insult? - or perhaps he felt she would be flattered. Hate burst through her like a fire uncontrolled, rising to mingle with her love just as it had on a previous occasion, but this time it spread so that the love was lost in the conflagration and the ashes remaining were these of a smouldering desire for revenge. She wanted nothing more than to hurt Cimon as he had hurt her. He should pay dear for that insult, which was added to the score already set against him, and against Keith Hilary, who had duped her so callously, promising marriage and then going off with someone else, leaving Alaine to care for his child without any financial help from anyone. Men! Aunt Sue used often to exclaim, and what a wealth of meaning went into that one small word. Alaine's eyes moved to Cimon; she noted his fixed regard, the half-smile that spelled confidence, the easy way with which he relaxed against the back of the couch. So he wanted a chaste girl when it came to marriage, did he? A rarity these days - and just like him to expect to find one, a man who had probably had a great number of lovers, women who perhaps had been chaste until he got hold of them. Revulsion mingled with her hatred, but she took care to hide her expression from him. Such a wonderful opportunity to get her own back, she thought again. What a shock he would receive! A chaste girl, he was expecting. ..."

Alaine thought for a fleeting space of his desire. But yes, it must surely die a very swift death once he had been disillusioned about her.

Automatically her glance strayed to the small snapshot tucked into the corner of the frame in which was a larger photograph of another of Aunt Sue's dead relatives. Moving, Alaine came to the sideboard; it was behind the couch and, her eyes all the time on the back of Cimon's dark head, she flipped out the snapshot and put it beneath the embroidered runner. He might not be interested enough to mention it, but on the other hand he could just inquire as to who the child was. Jinx would have to be taught to add Marsland to her name. Yes, that was imperative.

Crossing over to the window, Alaine stood looking into the street. She heard a voice, gently persuasive while at the same time fringed with the confidence she had noticed in his smile. How reminiscent his tone of that used on the ship when he had suggested he stay in her cabin! - and she turned, her face pale but composed even though inwardly she quaked as the scene that must surely be enacted rose up before her. There would be one terrifying outburst when he learned that he had been duped, that instead of marrying a chaste girl he had saddled himself with one who had a child born out of wedlock. What a disgrace for any Greek, but more so for a Cretan. Cimon Duris would never be able to live it down. The scene remained before Alaine's consciousness; she saw his smouldering rage and knew that this would be the one terrible interlude which she would never forget as long as she lived. But after that she would not be troubled by her husband's desire; it would be instantly quenched and he and she would each go their own way, he taking women as he always had, - while she would live more quietly, in the lap of luxury - how often she had joked about getting herself a rich husband! she recalled, and now she had succeeded. Yes, she would live in luxury, with her child, the child she had never for one moment regretted taking. Struggles she would have endured for Jinx's sake, but the struggles were not to be, not now. Alaine's only regret was that Cimon would not take any interest in the child. She felt that he would very soon have made Jinx into the kind of child she, Alaine, desired her to be.

'Well, Alaine, what is your answer?' Standing up, he approached her and her hands were taken in his, so gently ... just as a sincere lover would have taken hold of her. She tried to remove the hurt in her throat, tried not to think of what might have been had he fallen in love on the ship, as she herself had. 'Are you going to marry me and come to live in Crete?' So soft the tones, so tender almost, and quite unconsciously she experienced a tingling of doubt that defied her attempts at comprehension. Assuredly there was something extremely odd about this whole situation, and especially about his proposal of marriage. She sighed, telling herself she was bothering her head about trivialities and that the only important thing was to take full advantage of this incredible piece of luck that had so unexpectedly come her way.

She glanced at the clock; Jinx would be bounding in in less than half an hour. It would be the end of her plan for revenge if Cimon should meet the child too soon, and Alaine hoped she could get him off the premises within the next quarter of an hour or so.

'Yes, I'll marry you,' she told him, outwardly assuming a sort of quiet charm, and a resignation. Inwardly, she did wonder at Cimon's readiness to forget that she was adopting a purely mercenary attitude over the marriage, agreeing to it solely in order to attain the comforts and luxuries which he undoubtedly could provide. She supposed he was buying her really; yes, that was how he would consider it... and he genuinely believed he had found a bargain!

CHAPTER NINE

JINX looked down as Alaine indicated the island of Crete, lying there, like a lovely jewel, anchored in the tranquil Aegean Sea.

'Do you think my new daddy will like me?' asked Jinx for about the twentieth time. And, without giving Alaine time to answer, 'Why didn't you let me be your bridesmaid? I didn't like staying with that other lady - my Aunt Estelle - and I wouldn't have done if I'd known you were getting married. Why couldn't I be your bridesmaid?' she asked again.

'Hush, darling,' whispered Alaine, aware of the amused glances of the passengers on the seats nearby. 'I've already told you that I didn't have any bridesmaids.' She patted the seat beside her. 'Sit down and be quiet for a few minutes. We're almost there now, and there'll be a nice big motor car to meet us.'

'A motor car!' breathed Jinx. 'Will my new daddy be driving it?'

'No, pet. He's not at home just at present. He had to go away very hurriedly after we were married, because he had some business to attend to, and that's why you haven't met him yet.' A sigh escaped Alaine. At the time, she was only too relieved when Cimon told her he had to be in Athens on the morning following the wedding. He had wanted her to leave her work immediately and accompany him to Greece, but she refused to let her employers down as they were extremely short-staffed; and in any case, she still had a great deal to do in the house before she could leave it. So reluctantly Cimon had left his bride of a few hours and they were to meet in Crete a few days later. This small respite had seemed heaven-sent, for, with her nerves tensed owing to the swiftness of the wedding and the knowledge of her plan beginning to weigh far too heavily upon her, Alaine felt she could not face up to the scene through which she must pass before life fell into the smooth pattern she had envisaged. But now that the scene was

again looming close she was even more tensed up, mainly because Jinx would now be present at the meeting between Cimon and herself when, a few hours hence, he returned from Athens expecting his bride to be waiting for him - alone.

'Do you think my new daddy will let me sit on his knee?' Jinx sat down beside Alaine, clasping her hands tightly, and then unclasping them again. Alaine had never seen her so excited - but then nothing exciting had ever happened to the child. She had never even been on a holiday.

'I don't know, darling. He - he might.' Somehow, Alaine could not see Cimon totally abandoning the child. There was a certain softness in his make-up that could just come out, for there was no denying that Jinx had a charm that was most endearing and on the plane she had already won everyone's heart.

'It's awful ... waiting. When will he be craning home to us?'

To us ... Sudden tears sprang unbidden to Alaine's eyes. Mad for no reason at all she was remembering something Cimon had whispered to her as he placed the ring on her finger.

'Agapi mou, s'agapo ...'

She had asked him what it meant and he had merely smiled. Something to do with his desire, she told herself afterwards, for that was all it could be.

'Very soon, my pet,' said Alaine in answer to Jinx's question. 'A few hours after we arrive he will be there. You see, he's coming on a boat because some of his business friends are on it and they talk together while they're travelling. He'll be with us at tea time.'

'I'll have to be patient, won't I?' Jinx could not keep still and Alaine very much suspected that she would dearly love to begin jumping up and down, as she invariably did when wishing to express her feelings.

'Yes, dear, just for a little while longer.'

The plane was descending and after an initial bump or two a smooth landing was made. The chauffeur was there; he looked twice at the little girl trotting along beside Alaine, but his voice was expressionless as he said,

'Welcome back, Madam Duris,' and he took her luggage from her and put it in the boot of the car.

Jinx sat very still on her seat, staring out of the window, her face pale, her mouth tight and small.

'Darling, aren't you feeling well?'

'Yes ... but ooh, it's terrible to wait! I've got a big pain in my tummy, but it isn't a poorly pain - just a pain that makes me want to see my new daddy.'

Alaine bit her lip. When embarking on her headlong course of revenge she had not given much thought to Jinx's feelings. The child's future and her comfort had been important factors looming large on Alaine's horizon and had blotted out the psychological aspect. Still, even if Cimon washed his hands of the child she would soon get over it. 'Children do get over these things,' Alaine found herself whispering fiercely. All the material advantages would make up for any small disappointment the child might suffer initially. It was her whole future with which Alaine was concerned, not the next week or two.

Cimon arrived just before tea time; Alaine had unpacked her own things, and those of Jinx. There was no bedroom allotted to Jinx, naturally, and Alaine thought that at first she would have the child sleeping in her bed - the big double bed that was in the room to which Kyria had taken her, and which Cimon was expecting to share. Later, when she got to know her way around this big house, Alaine would choose a nice room for Jinx and have it furnished prettily for her, with the sort of things a little girl would like to have.

Alaine had no idea of her husband's arrival until he knocked on her bedroom door and walked in. She turned swiftly from the drawer into which she was putting the last of Jinx's underwear, and despite the fact of having steeled herself for this ordeal Alaine knew the colour had instantly receded from her face and for one wild panic-stricken moment she toyed with the idea of telling Cimon the truth about Jinx. But she managed to rally, thinking of her revenge and, most of all, of the fact that desire was all Cimon had considered on asking her to marry him. She had no wish to be that sort of wife. She was not Estelle, willing to sell her body for material gain.

'So you arrived safely—?' Cimon broke off, staring incredulously as the small whirlwind emerged from the dressing-room and swept towards him.

'Are you my new daddy?' She looked up at the giant standing there beside her and added breathlessly, 'Mummy didn't tell me you were gooder-looking than Darryl's new daddy. Ooh, but I think you're very nice!' Jinx clapped her hands, sublimely unaware of the shock she was giving the man as he continued to stare at her for a long moment before his gaze moved to Alaine. 'Why didn't you tell Mummy to let me be a bridesmaid? It wasn't fair to make me go to my Auntie Estelle instead of going to the wedding.' The freckled face was wreathed in smiles only seconds after this complaint was voiced, and unable to contain herself any longer Jinx began jumping up and down on the carpet, while Cimon, whose gaze had returned to her, just watched in

dumbfounded amazement, the dark colour slowly creeping up under the tan of his skin. Alaine on the other hand was as white as her blouse and a hard ball of fear had risen to block her throat.

'What's going on?' He seemed incapable, for the moment, of exhibiting the anger for which Alaine was apprehensively waiting. 'This child. ..?' Cimon turned, to regard his wife in a dazed sort of manner. For certain he could not take in the evidence of his ears. This child,' he repeated, 'she isn't yours?'

The movement in Alaine's throat gave evidence of her difficulty in articulating words.

'Yes - sh-she's my daughter.'

'My name's Jinx,' interposed the child brightly, still jumping up and down even though Alaine motioned her to keep still. 'Jinx Hilary!'

'Hilary?' in sharp tones from Cimon and Alaine made an almost imperceptible sign to Jinx who, in the same bright tones, added, 'Marsland. Jinx Hilary Mars- land.' She smiled up at him, her face aglow. 'Mummy said I had to add—'

'Be quiet, darling - and do stand still.'

Jinx did as she was told, pressing her hands together against her chest, a mannerism she had when she was emotionally affected by anything. Plainly she was thrilled with her 'daddy', while he - Alaine could not even bear to look at him, so satanic had his expression become. She had not wanted Jinx to be present at the showdown, but now she found herself being inordinately grateful for it. Her husband would never murder her before the child. A terrible silence had fallen on the room; the dark colour in Cimon's cheeks portrayed the smouldering fury within, and even Jinx appeared to be affected by the atmosphere

because she frowned heavily as she looked from Cimon to Alaine and back again.

'I don't believe it!' declared Cimon at last. 'She can't be your child!' But his mouth was drawn back from his teeth and in the black eyes fury burned. 'Your - *daughter*!' Nostrils flaring, he took a step in Alaine's direction and she backed away, towards the window. 'Say that again - say it!'

'''Jinx is my daughter—' How calm she sounded! She must be numbed by fear. 'I was seventeen when she was born—'

'Her father?'

'He's dead.' Alaine went on to say her piece, which this time had been well rehearsed. Cimon had been duped; instead of the chaste girl he had 'bought' he was now landed with one who had a child. Alaine managed to say that she had never been married to Jinx's father, and she ended by giving Cimon the reason for keeping Jinx's existence a secret. 'I told you I'd pay you back if ever I had the chance, and this is my way of doing so. But you're also paying for what Jinx's father did to me. He promised me marriage and then went off with someone else, leaving me with Jinx. Clever as you are, Cimon, you've been duped—' A couple of strides dispensed with the distance between them and Alaine found her arms gripped so savagely that she cried out. 'Don't - I—' She broke off again, wincing, and in her panic die almost blurted out the truth. But the words were stemmed just in time. Tell the truth and she would not only be denied the satisfaction to which she had looked forward, but, perhaps even more important, especially to a girl with Alaine's high ideals, was the fact that she would not be able to keep Cimon at a distance. She would become in effect his pillow friend, taken for desire alone. No, she told herself again, she was not Estelle. And so she bore up stoically in the knowledge that this terrifying scene must soon pass.

'Duped, have I?' His grip tightened mercilessly. 'Yes, I admit it, but by God you'll be sorry!' He was like a savage as he began to shake her, but he had reckoned without Jinx who, bewildered and with two great tears rolling down her cheeks, bounded across the room and began kicking viciously at Cimon's ankles. Her fingers clawed at his slacks and her teeth tried to bite him through the cloth.

'You leave my mummy alone!' she shouted, having failed in her object of biting him. 'I'll bash your head in if you don't leave go of her. Leave go! You're a pig and I hate you—'

'Jinx! Stop it!' Alaine's voice trembled as, released, she stood there, staring at Jinx, still kicking at Cimon's ankles. He took hold of her, having to drag her from him as she continued to grip his slacks.

'You - brat!' he exclaimed, at last holding her away from him, a valiant little scrap, wildly kicking still, but at nothing.

'That's my mummy and I'm sticking up for her! I'll bash your—'

'That will do, Jinx.' Alaine's voice was scarcely more than a whisper; she felt almost sick with the fear possessing her and with the uncontrolled beating of her heart against her ribs. But it would be over soon. A scene such as this had been expected; she had braced herself for it. Five minutes from now Cimon would have left her and Jinx, and from then on he would go his own way, leaving her to go hers. 'You mustn't use such words ...' She tailed off, tears springing to her eyes as she saw her child crying piteously now and looking up at the mam who held her so firmly but without the ruthlessness with which he had so recently held Alaine.

'Mummy s-said I had a n-new daddy and that he - he "might let me sit on h-his knee l-like Darryl's new daddy—' Jinx stopped, choked by sobs; her mouth twisted, tears streamed down her freckled face and a small jist found its way to the little turned-up nose because it had

started to run. 'I th-thought you'd be a n-nice daddy to me.' Her mouth twisting again, she shook her head in bewilderment, searching his face, a trifle unbelievably. 'I've been waiting such a long time since Mummy told me about you - it was awful - the waiting. And you looked nice at first - but why did you shake my mummy? You hurt her,' she told him fiercely, beginning to kick wildly again but not being allowed to get anywhere near her captor's legs. 'I'll kill you stone dead if you touch her again! And I'll bite your hands—'

'Jinx!' But Jinx had been stopped by something other than Alaine's voice - by a smart slap on the leg and, on being released, she sat on the floor and stared at the red maris which was rapidly appearing. Dazed by this treatment she had never known before, she lifted her head after a while and gazed up at Cimon.

'It's only because you're bigger'n me,' she seethed, her mouth becoming round and small as it always did when her fury was aroused. 'But just you wait till I've growed! When I've growed I'll kill you for hurting my mummy!' After knuckling her eyes she put out a pink tongue and removed the tears which had trickled down to her mouth. 'Mummy, I don't want to stay here.' Standing up, Jinx went to her and clung to her skirt, pressing her damp face against it. 'Let's go home again. *Please*, Mummy. I want to go back to my own house.'

'We can't do that, darling.' Alaine embraced her, not daring to lift her face and meet her husband's eyes. 'This is the only home we've got now and we must stay here—'

'Must you?' harshly from Cimon, whose face had paled slightly now, and his hand clenched and unclenched as if in release of some unbearable hurt within him. 'That might be your idea, but it isn't mine. Neither you nor that unbridled brat of yours is staying in my house. You'll leave just as soon as I can arrange it!'

But of course that threat was made in the heat of the moment and Cimon made no move to carry it out. He was married, and as the days passed it was soon evident that he meant to abide by his mistake. And as Alaine had surmised, he went his own way, leaving her to go hers. He was often away from home for a week or more and on these occasions Alaine would know a certain peace, deriving pleasure from Jinx who, with the resiliency of childhood, had soon forgotten the scene which, owing to her intervention, had not been nearly so terrifying as Alaine had expected.

What Cimon might have done to her had they been alone was something on which Alaine refused to dwell. He might have come very close to murdering her, she thought on a later occasion when, Jinx having been put to bed, she came out on to the terrace and to her dismay found her husband standing there, looking across to the dark outline of the fortress, the prison in which he had intended confining Estelle. In profile he looked almost fiendish and when he turned, having sensed her presence, his face was a mask of hate that sent quivers along Alaine's spine. She turned to go, but his harsh voice halted her and reluctantly she made a move towards him, stopping a little distance from him, her heart racing abnormally, yet aching too, for this night was typical of those on the ship, with a high round moon spilling light over the sea down there, spangling it with silver stars far brighter than those in the purple sky above. Sweet scents drifted from the garden and the hillsides, carried by the *meltemi*, the summer trade wind breeze on which the ancients relied for the efficiency of their shipping. It rippled through Alaine's hair and fanned her cheeks, cool and caressing, just as it had on the ship when she and Cimon had stood on deck in the first hours of the morning, having danced the earlier hours away.

'How are you for money?' was the totally unexpected question put to her when at last her husband seemed able to speak to her.

'I still have a little from the sale of the furniture,' she faltered, wondering how she had made the mistake of coming out here. She usually knew just where Ctnon was and she had believed him to be working in his study because she had noticed that the light was on.

'I'll make you an allowance. I've some friends coming to dinner a week tonight and you'll require a dress. Go into Heraklion for it. Dendros will drive you there in the car.' A small pause and then, in the same harsh tones, 'I've informed everyone that you're a widow, so take care to remember that. Let me down and by God you'll find yourself crying out for mercy. You haven't seen the worst of me yet.'

Not seen the worst ... Heaven forbid that she ever would, then!

'I'll remember, Cimon.' She had an urge to leave him, but was half afraid of doing so because she felt somehow that he would give some sign of dismissal when he no longer desired her company.

'About your - daughter. Have you arranged for her to go to school?'

Alaine blinked at him, greatly wondering at this sudden interest in the child he had hitherto ignored, as he had ignored the girl whom he believed to be her mother.

'Not yet. I've been teaching her myself.'

'There's a school in Sphakia. You'd better arrange for her to start. Dendras will take her each morning and bring her back.'

'Is it a Greek school?'

'Of course, but English is taught.'

'And spoken? I mean, Jinx can't speak any Greek at all.'

'I don't expect she can,' with a trace of sarcasm. 'But she'll soon learn it.' Cimon looked straight at Alaine. 'If you and she are to remain here then she at least will have to learn Greek. It will be Greeks she'll be mixing with as she grows older; her friends will be Greeks.'

'Yes, I suppose they will.' Cimon seemed slightly less hostile, she thought as she stood there, still undecided about leaving him. He was looking out towards the castle again, the wind in his black hair, the moonlight on his face, brittle and metallic so that the harsh lines were accentuated . . . and yet the rather startling impression Alaine had was that there was a sadness about her husband's features, a sadness and a strange element of loneliness. Her heart seemed to miss a beat as she continued to stare at him, and for the first time she was aware of tinglings of regret that she had been so bent on revenge, on paying him out not only for his own wrong but for that of Keith also. What real good had she done? What had she achieved by her action? True, she was taking all and giving nothing; she had the rich man about whom she had so often joked with her aunt ... but somehow the whole episode was beginning to be as gall to her and she knew she dared not ask herself why this should be so.

On the day of the dinner party Jinx was particularly mischievous and with her customary exuberance she took a flying leap from the third stair on to a mat on which she then slid all along the hall, landing with a crash at the front door. The first Alaine knew of this was when, on hearing the scream, she came running from the lounge where she had been browsing through a magazine. Jinx was bleeding from her nose and head, and her hand was held to her elbow.

'Jinx darling, what have you done?' Stooping, Alaine lifted her in her arms and carried her upstairs to the bedroom and laid her down. 'You silly child! How did you do this to yourself?'

'I was sliding on the mat,' sobbed Jinx. 'Ooh, my arm - it's burning—' She broke off and another howl of pain went up. 'Why should it burn?'

'Because you've rubbed it along the floor.' Sighing, Alaine went into the bathroom where a first-aid box was kept in the cabinet, and after bathing and dressing the child's injuries she gave her a mild drug and let her sleep for the rest of the afternoon. At tea time Jinx woke up and, bright-eyed and smiling, she said she was hungry. Alaine had sat with her, reading, and she was relieved to see that Jinx had not suffered too much from the collision with the door.

'What am I to do with you?' she asked with a little rueful shake of her head. 'You know, pet, you really will have to mend your ways. And about the way you speak - you're not doing as Mummy tells you. All that slang you learned at school in England must be forgotten, do you understand?'

'I try not to say it, but it comes out.' The big eyes shone with roguish laughter, but on noting Alaine's rather unhappy expression Jinx slid towards the edge of the bed and threw both her arms round her neck. 'Shall I kiss you, Mummy? My mouth's clean - look!'

For answer Alaine kissed her cheek and held her close. It was so odd that she could give such love to someone else's child, but from the moment of setting eyes on Jinx Alaine had adored her.

'Come,' she said at length, 'it's tea time, and you've just said you're hungry. We'll have it together on the patio - out in the sunshine.'

'Okay.' Jinx looked at her bandaged arm as she got out of bed, then went over to the mirror to examine the plaster on her forehead. 'I look like a wounded soldier, don't I?'

'You certainly do. *I'd* better dress you—¹'

'Because of my bandaged arm? No, it's all right - *then pirasi!*' Skipping over to the chair where her clothes lay neatly folded, she lifted them up and brought them to the bed. Alaine was staring at her. She said;

'What does that mean?'

'Then pirasi?' Jinx picked up a dainty pink petticoat and slipped it over her head. 'It means: it's all right - it doesn't matter.'

'Did you learn that at school?'

'I think so.' Jinx frowned and fingered her bandaged arm for a moment. 'Carlos Loukia told it me, I think. He's my friend at school. We haven't had a fight yet; he doesn't like fighting, but Andonys does. I biffed him yesterday, jolly hard, because he laughed at me in the class when I couldn't understand the teacher. I'll bet he won't laugh at me again, because he cried like anything when I biffed him.'

'Jinx,' said Alaine sternly, watching her putting on her dress, 'if anyone comes here complaining about you I shall be very cross. Daddy won't like it at all, you know that. So stop this fighting with little boys.'

'He isn't my daddy! I don't like him and he doesn't like me.' Suddenly and quite unexpectedly Jinx started - to cry. And only when she began to speak did Alaine learn that, secretly, the child had been fretting over her relationship with Cimon. 'Why doesn't he like me, Mummy? I haven't done anything naughty - except kicking him when he hurt you. I thought I was going to have a daddy when we came here to live. But I haven't got a daddy. He never lets me sit on his knee and he doesn't take me walks like Darryl's new daddy. He takes Darryl's mummy walks as well. They all go together, down by the river, and collect wild flowers and look at birds' nests - oh, and all sorts of lovely things.' She came and stood by Alaine. 'It isn't like I thought it would be. I'd be good for a daddy - I told you I would, didn't I?'

'Yes, darling, you did tell me that.' Alaine swallowed a painful little lump in her throat. Should she tell Cimon the truth and put an end to what was becoming an unbearable situation for all concerned? If she did tell him the truth then she must be prepared for him to take her as

his wife, because that would inevitably follow. Alaine bit her lip. She could not be that sort of wife to Cimon, not loving him as she did. She would have to give all, simply because she would not be able to resist, while he, on the other hand, would only take, unable to give because all he felt for her was desire for her body. Nothing spiritual, no deep affection ... ingredients essential to fulfilment in its entirety. No, decided Alaine, she could not tell Cimon the truth and enter into that kind of partnership. It must be all or nothing.

'Dendras told me that - that Mr. Cimon has a lovely boat, but he never takes you and me on it, does he? - and I'd like to go on a boat because I've never been on one, not once in all my life!' Jinx rubbed a hand over her damp cheeks, then sniffed loudly. 'Ooh, I need a hanky!'

Alaine got her one and she blew her nose vigorously.

'You mustn't call him Mr. Cimon, pet. Try to think of him as Daddy....' She stopped as Jinx shook her head.

'He doesn't want to be my daddy. I wish you hadn't got married to him. You could have got married to someone else who'd have liked me, and thrown me up in the air and - and things,' she ended vaguely, tears starting to her eyes again. 'Can't you leave him and marry someone else?'

Alaine shook her head, unable to speak for a long moment.

'No, darling, that's impossible. This is our home and we have to stay in it. We haven't anywhere else to go.' Alaine was beginning to admit that she had made a complete mess of her life by following that insane desire for revenge. And yet how could she have refused Cimon's offer of marriage even had she not been interested in revenge? She had no course other than to accept his offer. It had seemed heaven-sent at the time, and Alaine dared not think where she and Jinx would have been now had she turned down Cimon's offer. She would have had to apply

for some sort of assistance and then it would come out that Jinx was not her daughter. That would have been the end of Alaine's guardianship because Jinx would have been taken from her.

'Do you think he might like me when I've growed a bit?' Jinx was asking hopefully. 'You see, he might not like very little girls, but he might like them when they're a bit bigger.'

'I'm sure he'll like you - soon.' Alaine gave a deep and shuddering sigh as she said that. Would Cimon ever take to Jinx? She, Alaine, had believed he would come to take an interest in the child, but up till now the only interest shown was when Cimon had made the suggestion about arrangements for her schooling.

'I'll smile at him, I think, and see if he smiles back.' Jinx became thoughtfully silent. 'Do you think he would take you and me on his boat if I asked him nicely? We could go a long sail to another island, couldn't we?'

'Yes, Jinx, we could. But you mustn't ask him to take you on the boat. He's very busy, you see, and he doesn't have much time.' Alaine just could not bear to think of Jinx asking and being refused.

'I wish you'd married another man,' sighed Jinx, repeating what she had already said. 'I thought I'd have had a daddy like Darryl's.' She stopped all at once and made a swipe at something in the air. 'A mosky! Get it! It's there, high up on the wall!'

Alaine looked at the mosquito but made no attempt to kill it.

'I can't squash it on the wall,' she said.

'Why not?' Jinx's big eyes sparkled with a sort of sadistic anticipation. 'They're all bloody when you squash them - it's because they suck your blood with a long prob - prob—' Her face screwed up and she gave an

exasperated sigh. 'I can't say it, but it's a long thing like a tongue what bores into you and sucks up your blood. Kill it, Mummy - quick, before it bites me!'

Fetching a towel from the bathroom, Alaine managed to get the mosquito into it, but even then she could not kill it and, going over to the open window, she shook the towel, allowing the insect to escape. Her eyes wandered downwards; Cimon stood there, directly below, on the verandah, hands thrust into his pockets, head erect. He was staring down to the surf-fringed coastline, just out from which lay the graceful yacht, the vessel that had played so dramatic a part in her life' and in his as things had turned out. Had Alaine never been taken aboard that yacht she and Cimon would never have married, because they would have said goodbye, on the flower-bedecked harbour of Mandraki in Rhodes. Her eyes returned to the man standing below. How long had he been there, silent and alone? Something twisted in her heart because even though she could not see his face she somehow knew that he was brooding and unhappy.

CHAPTER TEN

ALAIINE had bought a white dress for the dinner party, and as she came from her room Cimon came from his, just a little way along the wide thickly-carpeted corridor. His black eyes flickered over her before coming to rest on her face. Contempt was there, but that trace of sadness too - yes, it was unmistakeable now, in the shadows thrown off by the silver-gilt wall lamps. And the loneliness was also present. How strange, she thought, wondering if, after all, his absences from home were not spent as she surmised - with women. He had fingers in lots of financial pies, Estelle had remarked on learning that Alaine was to marry him. She was doing very well for herself, Estelle could not help adding, although she deplored the idea of marriage which, she maintained, was far too restrictive, apart from the fact of its very rarely surviving these days now that women were not so utterly dependent on their husbands.

Perhaps, mused Alaine as she and Cimon stared at one another, there in the corridor, he was engaged on purely business matters . . . and yet she could not see him living the life of a celibate. Hadn't his man on board the *Leto* implied that he was more than ordinarily amorous?

He spoke to her, cutting harshly into her musings.

'Dop't forget what I said about your being a widow.'

'I'll not forget,' she promised, and with a rush of feeling which was a mixture of tenderness and contrition she came once more to the verge of blurting out the truth. She thought of the occasions lately when, having pondered over the circumstances of his coming over to England to ask her to marry him, she had been left with the baffling conviction that there was much more to it than appeared on the surface. But always she would be brought back to the stark reality of his statement that desire for her had been the sole spur which had led to the proposal of marriage.

'You'd better not,' came Cimon's crisp response, and the moment was lost since she could not now bring herself to confess the truth. 'Let me down and you'll live to regret it; I've already warned you of that.'

Colour rose because of his antagonism. She said quietly, and with a dignity which for no apparent reason brought a steely glint to his eye,

'Shall we go down? Jinx isn't asleep and she might hear us talking.'

His antagonism remained during the small lull which followed, but then the mention of the child seemed to produce a change in him and he unbent sufficiently to ask about her. Alaine told him of the fall, omitting to mention the cause, but Cimon wanted to know exactly how it happened and Alaine had no option than to tell him. He frowned and shook his head, staring straight at his wife for a long moment before informing her bluntly that she had no idea how to bring up a child. Her colour increased at this criticism even while, paradoxically, she experienced a sense of relief that he had noticed just how Jinx was. Perhaps he would take an interest in the child, and see that she was disciplined a little. This would be a great load off Alaine's mind, because she did want Jinx to grow up nicely, so that people would always like her. They liked her now, of course, but as she grew older the same excuses would not be made for her conduct.

'I'm well aware that I'm not firm enough with her,' Alaine frankly owned. 'Aunt Sue always said so - but Jinx needs a man—' She broke off, not having meant to say anything like that - not to Cimon, that was. She had said it to herself, and more often than not she had agreed with her aunt about this.

Cimon watched her fluctuating colour in brooding worldlessness for a space and then, by-passing her involuntary remark,

'Her injuries? Was she hurt very much?'

'It's her head and nose - they were bleeding profusely. Then her arm's burned, by friction. That seems pretty bad.' To her surprise his face clouded as she described these injuries and again he shook his head, in a censorious manner which brought her colour up even more.

'She should be curbed.' A small sigh issuing from his lips filled her with astonishment and she searched his face, endeavouring to read his expression. It would seem that he had been taking notice of Jinx for some time, and not entirely ignoring her, as Alaine had surmised. 'These injuries are very bad, you say?'

'Her head and nose are all right - and she hasn't complained much about her arm, but I have an idea she ingoing to do so before very long.' As she continued to look up at him Alaine found her heart lightening somewhat, for this was the first time he had spoken civilly to her since that afternoon when, convinced that a sense of satisfaction would result from allowing her husband to believe he had been duped, she had baldly lied to him, saying Jinx was hers.

'What have you put on the burn?'

'Something out of a tube I found in the medicine chest. It relieved it right away.'

'I've something very excellent for burns. I wish you'd told me. However, we shall see what happens. She must be kept off school tomorrow; we don't want other children bumping against her.' They had moved from Alaine's bedroom door and were standing at the top of the wide curving stairway, Cimon tall and immaculate in a suit of light grey mohair, Alaine small and dainty beside him and with a stir of memory recalling the description her aunt had given to the men of Crete: '... eagle-like men, prouder, fiercer, taller, straighter than all other Greeks, walking with long strides, moving like kings through lanes which other men intuitively clear for them.' Instantly another switch of memory presented her with scenes on the ship - the envious

glances she had received, the words of Donna as she said, 'He's the sort of man you can't take your eyes off, though, so I expect every single girl aboard is jealous of the attention he is giving you.' What a world of ecstatic illusion had been hers for that brief interlude, Alaine mused, familiar pain throbbing in her heart. Cimon the gentle lover, the attentive companion, the generous friend who bought her all she could have desired, and more. This had been hers, and she would treasure the memory even though, for his part, Cimon had been concerned with nothing more than gaining her confidence sufficiently to lure her aboard that yacht.

As the evening progressed Alaine often felt her husband's eyes on her, and on those occasions when she had allowed her own eyes to lift, and look into his, she invariably met a brooding expression, and once she had surprised a movement of his lips, an emotional movement which he seemed quite unable to control. What were his thoughts as he stared at her like this? Was hatred his overwhelming emotion? The Cretans hated with consummate strength. What about love? she wondered. Did they love with equal intensity?

It was just after dinner, when the three couples were seated on the patio having coffee, that Jinx suddenly appeared, in her frilled nightie, her face puckered, her eyes swollen from weeping. She was holding her arm and small sobs escaped her as she made her way to where Alaine was already rising from her chair with the intention of going to her.

All eyes were turned towards Jinx, and from the four Greek guests came sudden smiles for the child. Only Cimon's face was serious and of course Alaine's.

'What is it, darling?' inquired Alaine softly. 'Is your arm hurting?'

The child's face screwed up as she nodded.

'I tried to bear it, Mummy, but I couldn't. You aren't cross, are you, because I came down when you had friends?' Involuntarily her glance flickered round the silent company. 'It - it hurts awful.'

Alayie murmured an apology to the guests and picked Jinx up in her arms, but to her utter astonishment Cimon had come across and before Alaine realized his intention Jinx was taken from her and, excusing himself, Cimon carried her into the house and upstairs, followed closely by Alaine, bewildered by her husband's unexpected action but happy also at this unquestionable interest shown in the child.

'You'll find a white tube in the medicine chest in my bathroom,' he said briskly to Alaine as she entered her bedroom behind him. He had Jinx sitting on the bed and he was already beginning to remove the bandage Alaine had fixed several hours previously. 'Bring it, will you?'

On her return Alaine stood for a second or two by the door. Cimon was examining the burn, while Jinx, her big eyes open very wide indeed, stared at him with a sort of childish fascination, and even while Alaine watched, the small freckled face came closer to Cimon's and it would almost seem that he was to find a damp cheek pressed to his. But, glancing up, Jinx saw her mother and she gave her a quivering smile and said,

'The bandage was stuck, Mummy, but Mr. - Mr. ...' Jinx's gaze returned to the man who was now holding out a hand for the tube which Alaine had fetched for him. 'My ... my daddy took it off without hurting me.'

Alaine could not speak, for the little scene was so moving that she was deeply affected by the poignancy of it. Her eyes met Cimon's as she handed him the tube; she noted the strange look he gave her and the pulsation of a nerve in his throat.

"The dressings are downstairs,' he told Alaine, saying that Kyria would tell her where to find them. His tones were a dismissal and she frowned in puzzlement. She did not mind at all going down for the dressing, just the contrary, but how very odd that Cimon should not have told her to ring for Kyria so that he could have given her the instructions to bring up the required dressing.

This time Alaine was gone longer and when next she entered her bedroom Jinx was actually sitting on Cimon's knee while he himself sat on the bed. Jinx's uninjured arm was wound round his neck and her small head rested against his chest.

'She's a fast worker, your daughter.' Unemotional tones, so why should they cause this tingling sensation which was suddenly affecting her nerve-ends?

'She - she always seemed to think it was the thing to - to sit on a man's knee,' murmured Alaine awkwardly, with a forced little laugh. 'It's been her ambition for a long while'

'And now she's achieved it.' Without affording her a glance he took the dressing from Alaine's fingers and with a deft application it was fixed. 'There, young miss, is that more comfortable?' Gently he held her away so that he could look at her. The big eyes were glowing; a loud kiss found its mark on Cimon's lips.

'Yes, thank you very much.' She threw a glance at Alaiijg and said, 'I'm going on my daddy's boat tomorrow for a long sail. Are you coming as well? I don't want to go without my mummy,' she told Cimon, returning her attention to him. 'You didn't say if she could come with us?'

'We'll talk about it in the morning. For now you're to go to sleep, understand?'

Happily Jinx nodded; already she was blinking in order to keep awake. Cimon turned to Alaine, telling her to go downstairs to their guests.

'We shouldn't both have deserted them,' he added, and Alaine immediately left the room after saying goodnight to Jinx. But Jinx did not answer her, for she was talking to Cimon, and instinctively Alaine remained just outside the door, which she had pulled to after her but had not closed.

'Yes, I'll go to sleep. I've got to be good now, haven't I? - and not say bash and better'n? You have to be good for daddies because they're men. Darryl's good for his new daddy, like I just told you, when Mummy was downstairs. I told Mummy as well that I'd be good for a daddy, if she got one for me, and I will be good, just you wait and see!'

"You better had be good,' with mock severity that had far less effect on Jinx than on Alaine. Jinx merely gave a sleepy chuckle, while Alaine gave a little astonished gasp, for it was impossible to miss the gentleness underlying those stern tones. What had been happening during her short absences from the room? A miracle appeared to have been worked in a matter of minutes. 'Come, young lady, into bed!' A small silence; Alaine surmised that Jinx was being put into bed. In a short while Cimon said goodnight to the child and Alaine turned towards the stairs.

'Goodnight, Daddy - Ooh, it *is* nice to have a daddy! *Agapi, mou, s'agapo!*' added Jinx, and Alaine stopped dead in her tracks, every nerve quivering. *Agapi mou, s'agapo.* ... The words Cimon had whispered to her as he put the wedding ring on her finger. What did those words mean? A trembling hand went to Alaine's cheek, for she now knew they had nothing to do with Cimon's desire for her, as she had so readily assumed at the time they were uttered.

'Where did you hear that?' Cimon was demanding, and Jinx gave another sleepy chuckle.

'Stavros Demetri said it to me. We're getting married when we've grown—' The child broke off; Alaine could almost see the attractive tilt of her husband's head, denoted admonishment. 'I mean,' corrected Jinx in a voice that confirmed Alaine's suspicions about the admonishment, 'when we're grown up.' A small silence and then, 'My darling, I love you,' rather shyly, yet Alaine was sure Jinx's eyes would be brimming with mischief. My darling, I love you. . . . Alaine closed her eyes tightly, unable to bear her own thoughts. So much was explained now - the loneliness and sadness she had seen in her husband's eyes, her own perplexity whenever she dwelt on the fact of his coming over to England and offering marriage merely for desire; What a fool she had been! Cimon loved her, and all she had done was to hurt him and allow him to believe that he had spoiled his life by marrying her. He would never forgive her, she told herself miserably. He couldn't.

How she got through the rest of the evening she would never know, and yet when at last the guests had left" she could not voice what was in her mind and she bade Cimon a rather stiff goodnight and turned to leave him, standing there, with his back to the open window through which drifted the nocturnal whirring of cicadas, the familiar sound that was all that broke the deep silence of the night.

'You can stay where you are.' Cimon's voice, hard and commanding, halted Alaine and she turned back into the room, her heart giving an uncomfortable jerk. 'You and I have a lot to say to each other.'

She blinked, a puzzled frown settling on her brow.

'Have w-we?'

He wasted no time.

'What do you mean by telling me that Jinx was yours?'

She started nervously, and coughed to clear her throat.

'You know?' She was only half surprised, recalling the odd looks he had given her earlier this evening when they were upstairs with Jinx. Something had come out in her absence from the room, something he wanted to pursue, hence his sending her downstairs for the dressings instead of having her ring for the maid to do it.

Cimon's eyes glinted at her question.

'Do you realize what you escaped?' For a fleeting moment she saw the savage Cretan, the ruthless pose, the black metallic eyes narrowed in a menacing kind of way. 'I'd have strangled you had we been alone.' He paused, inviting a comment by his silence, but Alaine could find nothing to say. 'I asked you what you meant by telling me that outrageous untruth ?'

She moistened her lips.

'It - it was revenge,' she began, when he interrupted her.

'For what?'

'It was because you humiliated me and frightened me. And I always said that if ever I could make any other man pay for what Jinx's father did to me then I would.' Not at all logical; Alaine had no need to note his expression in order to have this revealed to her.

'So I was to pay for that as well, eh?' He shook his head as if totally baffled by her behaviour. 'Tell me about Jinx's father,' he invited unexpectedly. 'How did you come to have the child?'

His voice had taken on a softer tone and, encouraged by this, Alaine left his question in abeyance for the moment, asking how he had discovered that Jinx was not hers. He had been noticing Jinx for some

time, he told her, and gradually he began to feel puzzled by the complete lack of resemblance.

'You were noticing her?' Alaine cut in with some surprise. 'I felt you were ignoring her.'

He smiled faintly.

'One cannot ignore a child like Jinx, Alaine. I saw how attractive she was, and she'll be even more attractive when I've taken her in hand.'

'You're going to?' Gratefully she looked at him. 'I know I've not been as strict as I should, but Aunt Sue always said she needed a man.'

'She seems to believe that she must be good for a man,' Cimon laughed. 'She's a rogue, but a delightful child for all that.' He went on to explain that, only yesterday, he had seen Jinx writing her name. She was talking to herself and saying that she must not forget the Marsland. 'Well, that proved nothing, but it did increase my suspicions. Then, this evening while you were in my room finding the ointment, I noticed a picture book lying on the table by the bed. On opening it while waiting for you I noticed that the Marsland had been added in a different ink. I questioned Jinx, but hadn't finished doing so when you returned with the tube of ointment.'

'So you sent me downstairs for the dressing.'

'Correct. Jinx was chatting away - by this time she knew we were going to be friends - and it was not difficult to get what I wanted out of her. She told me that recently- very recently,' he added rather grittingly, his eyes never leaving Alaine's face, 'you had told her she must add Marsland to her name.' He was looking sternly at her and Alaine averted her head, rather hastily beginning to explain how she came to take Jinx in the first place. When she glanced up at the end of her - narrative she half expected to see a trace of contempt at her

naivety in allowing herself to be deceived, but to her amazement she encountered a totally different expression, and the tones that Cimon used were gentle and compassionate.

'Seventeen. ... Hardly more than a child yourself. Did you not think of handing Jinx over to the authorities, once her father had gone off and left her?'

Alaine shook her head firmly.

'I couldn't. I loved her too much. And although you'll probably consider me immodest, I must say that had Jinx been adopted by someone she wouldn't have been as happy as she's been with me - and Aunt Sue, of course.' Alaine went on to tell Cimon of her very real problem when none of the neighbours would have Jinx; it was by way of an excuse for her conduct in demanding money from Cimon, but if he guessed this he allowed it to pass as he remarked dryly.

'Naturally Jinx has been happy with you. She's been allowed all her own way.'

'Not all,' protested Alaine. 'She isn't too bad - really.'

Cimon smiled in some amusement and Alaine caught her breath, He was almost as charming as he was on the ship - almost but not quite, because there was still a look of censure in his eyes as he said,

'Just how long did you think you could continue deceiving me?'

'About Jinx? Not for ever,' she freely admitted, and was dismayed to note a tightening of her husband's mouth.

'I ought to box your ears for all this damned stupidity. You also lied when you denied falling in love with me on the ship. I knew very well you'd fallen in love with me, so when you denied it I was amazed....' He stopped and a couple of strides brought him into the middle of the

room. 'Come here,' he commanded, but in tones so gentle that sudden tears filmed her eyes. She went to him and both her hands were taken in his. 'Why do you think I went over to England?' He shook his head and called her the world's greatest idiot. 'I discovered I loved you almost as soon as you left Crete, but I felt I'd get over it. I can't say marriage was attractive to me,' he admitted with a rueful smile. 'But very soon, Alaine, I knew that I must have you - Yes, I know what you're going to say. Well, desire it was - but not the sort of desire you had in mind.'

'No, I realize that now.' She went on to tell him what she had overheard and after a shy hesitation she whispered, '*Agapi mou, s'agapo,*' and instantly she was caught to him and his lips found hers.

'My darling ... I love you,' he murmured after a little while, and Alaine said, leaning away from him,

'Why didn't you say it in English, Cimon? In fact, if you came over because you loved me and wanted to marry me, why didn't you tell me at once that you cared?'

One black brow lifted.

'Before I had time to do so you came out with your criminal demands - if you remember?' She blushed and looked down at his coat. 'I eventually sorted it all out to my satisfaction - after deducing that the whole idea was Estelle's, and in fact you actually admitted that you and she had discussed the matter. I was all set to tell you I loved you, but then you denied loving me. I felt you were lying and knew it would be all right once I brought you home to Crete.' He smiled tenderly at her. 'I'd soon have known that you loved me, wouldn't I, Alaine?'

Her colour deepened, but she agreed that he would soon have been very sure that she loved him.

'I've been wanting to confess the truth for a while,' she admitted, but added that so long as she believed his sole interest in her was desire she could not make her confession. 'Because, you see,' she added, 'I could never be that sort of wife.'

He ignored this because it was unimportant, she realized, since she never would have been that sort of wife.

There was still a little explaining to do on both sides, but for the present they wanted only to be close, and for a long while they stood there in the quietness of the room, their arms about each other. But eventually Cimon held her away from him and said with some amusement,

'Why haven't you found a room for our daughter before now?' and, without waiting for an answer, "Do you think she might be more comfortable in my bed? It's smaller, you see. Although she might waken if I move her,' he added on a little anxious note.

'She won't. Jinx never wakens once she's asleep. You can do anything with her - like carrying her - like...' Alaine allowed her voice to trail away into silence, she buried her face in Cimon's coat, because he quite openly laughing at her.