



Harlequin Romance

Bond of Fate

Jane Corrie



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"I need a wife," Julian Cridell stated It was not quite what Melanie had in mind when she applied for the position. As a newly graduated teacher, without a job or a home, the advertisement for a companion to a teenage girl had seemed made for her. Julian's proposal was strictly a business arrangement with a limited time frame. So she agreed. And it might have worked out all right except for one thing. Melanie had not even considered the possibility that she would foolishly fall in love with the man she called a husband.

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CHAPTER ONE

MELANIE GREENSMITH sat disconsolately gazing at the dregs in her coffee cup in the small café a few yards down from the college where she had just graduated. Her future—and the same could be said for her fellows—was not exactly brimming over with hopeful anticipation of employment. She was a fully fledged teacher, yes, and so were the fifty others who only a few hours ago had climbed up those imposing steps to receive their diplomas, but after the congratulations and the back-thumping had come the certain and sure knowledge that only a very privileged few of them would actually be doing the work that they had trained for.

Melanie knew that her chances were very slim in this respect, even though she lived in London where jobs were at a premium. If she could afford to take part-time work, things might not have looked so black for her, but she couldn't, for her first consideration was to find herself lodgings of a sort. A flat was way beyond her slender means, but she had managed to scrape a few pounds aside out of her allowance for this contingency. But the high cost of lodgings in that area would soon leave her with no alternative but to accept her aunt's kind offer of living with her and her new husband.

She was very fond of her Aunt Alice, and had her aunt stayed a widow, Melanie would have been only too happy to join her in her little mews cottage on the South Bank of the Thames, but now there was Arthur

Makin to contend with, the man who had married her aunt within weeks of their meeting. A stout, florid and thoroughly repugnant man, with a jovial manner that had apparently fooled her aunt from the start of their acquaintance, he was clever enough to go on fooling her while he had the comfort of a nice home and good food.

It hadn't taken Melanie long to get his measure, and on the one and only occasion she had stayed with them, she had had to think up various tactics to keep out 'of his way when her aunt was out either shopping or visiting a sick friend a few doors away.

The loss of her mother, Melanie's only surviving parent, had been bad enough. She had been an invalid for years, but Melanie had been able to cope with her debilitating illness through the kind help of a neighbour of twenty years' standing who had been a hospital matron before her retirement; this woman had shared the task of caring for the elderly lady and thus had enabled Melanie to get qualifications for work, not only for the sorely needed income, but also to ease her mother's worries over her daughter's future.

Her mother had died during Melanie's last term at college, and she hadn't been able to keep the flat on that they had been living in; she couldn't afford to, for after all the bills were settled there was nothing left.

Up until now, Melanie had managed to put off her aunt's constant insistence that she make her home with her. It had meant countless little white lies. She was busy. It was her last term, and she had to qualify. She had visited them on the odd occasion, but had only taken tea with them, and then had slipped off on some excuse or other.

She was well aware that her aunt was of the opinion

that there was a romantic attachment in the background that would account for her lack of dutiful attendance on her only surviving relative, and as this suited Melanie's purpose she neither admitted nor disclaimed such a state of affairs. Anything was better than to be the cause of her aunt finding out what sort of a man she had married,

and as he himself would be extremely careful not to queer his pitch, the onus rested on Melanie; things would have to be bad before she landed herself in that unenviable position.

She sighed. Things were bad. She had made several enquiries regarding the work situation, but to no avail. All her student friends were doing the same, and getting the same results. Her thoughts turned to Jane, her room-mate, who was getting married in a week's time. She and Chris had got it all worked out. Two could live as cheaply as one, etc. There were others who were on the same bent—it didn't always include marriage, but they all had someone to go to or somewhere to go.

It hadn't fallen to Melanie's lot to find someone to want to share with her. She had been so anxious not to fail in her exams that most evenings had been spent swotting, and if the truth were known she would have been most upset had such a suggestion actually been put to her by a member of the male fraternity.

It wasn't that she was unattractive. Her features were comely without being beautiful. Her eyes pansy-blue, were perhaps her best asset, and her mouth was appealing too, though perhaps a little too generous for classical tastes. Her tawny brown hair was always worn pulled back severely into a bunched conglomeration at the nape of her neck because of its wiry nature. These attributes all added up to the nickname of 'Bluestocking' that had been given her during her

early days at college and which had since stuck.

At this moment, Melanie could only be grateful that her aunt was away on holiday and had missed her 'coming out' ceremony, for she would have insisted on dragging Melanie back with her afterwards. As it was, Melanie had precisely one week to find herself somewhere to live and, which was more important, the means to pay for her board.

As she debated whether to get herself another cup of coffee, Melanie's eye lighted on a newspaper lying on the next unoccupied table, opened at the job vacancy section, and as she went back from the counter with the coffee she picked it up and sat idly perusing the lists of vacancies. All vacancies, as her situation was not one to encourage fussiness.

Her eye caught one advertisement that held her attention. A well-educated lady was wanted as a companion for a child of thirteen. The age required ranged between twenty-two and twenty-eight years old, and applicants had to have a current passport. Interviews, she read, were to be held at the Savoy Hotel from two p.m. to four p.m. on the seventh.

Melanie frowned. But that was today, she thought, and looked at the publication date to find that the paper was two days old.

She wasn't one to give much credence to what might be considered the hand of fate, and no such thoughts were in her mind, but it did occur to her that this was a living-in situation, which was precisely what she needed. A glance at her watch showed that it was a quarter to two. If she was to stand any chance of obtaining the post, she ought to get a move on, so grabbing her shoulder bag and taking the paper with her, she was on her way to the Savoy.

Several rather off-putting thoughts came into her

head as she made the journey, and she almost talked herself out of going through with it. She had heard some hair-raising tales of English girls who had taken work that took them abroad, and eventually found themselves stranded in foreign lands. Only the

thought that there would be so many applicants that she probably wouldn't even get an interview kept her going.

This premise turned out to be accurate, at least the fact that there would be many applicants for the post, as Melanie found on entering a room to the right of Reception to which she was directed on enquiry.

She felt highly exposed as she took the last seat in the row and suffered the critical examination of the other hopefuls, who seemed, after a short survey, to feel that they had nothing to worry about, for they resumed chatting amongst themselves.

As each girl left the inner sanctum where the interviews were being held, all eyes were on her, and necks craned forward to hear what she said to the girl she had been chatting with before she entered the lion's den. A general sigh of relief would echo down the line as the words, 'They'll let me know', were repeated, and interpreted by all and sundry as the famous old adage, 'Don't call us, we'll call you'!

It seemed to Melanie that the time each applicant spent in the interview room got briefer as the line dwindled in front of her; she had moved up several chairs since her arrival, but as applicants were still arriving there were no vacant seats.

At this rate it did look as if she was going to get an interview, and she didn't know whether to be pleased or worried about it. She had noticed that there were some very lovely girls in the line-up, who had taken particular care over their appearance, whereas she

was wearing her old windcheater with the college colours on one arm, under which she wore a serviceable light jumper and skirt, and sensible, well-worn brogues that suggested that she would be more at home tramping the Downs than attending an important interview.

These thoughts hardly gave her confidence as she watched each applicant in the line, which had now, frighteningly, dwindled to three in front of her, preen herself, brushing imaginary specks of fluff away from her smart suit before presenting herself for inspection.

To take her mind off such thoughts, Melanie concentrated on the advertisement, particularly the passport bit. Whether it was the sight of so many pretty girls in the room, or her own highly coloured imagination, she couldn't tell, but the thought that some Eastern potentate might be considering taking a few new recruits back to his harem did occur to her, especially as it seemed that they were all being given the same non-committal comment at the conclusion of the interview. Perhaps little asterisks were put against the names of the prettiest?

One more move up the line, and Melanie was the next to go in. She had no fears of an asterisk being put against her name; it was more likely to be scrubbed out, and this thought certainly steadied her nerves. Either way, she had nothing to lose, she told herself stoutly, as the girl in front of her came out and it was her turn.

When she walked into the room she found herself facing a desk, behind which sat a man who barely glanced at her before asking her in a well-modulated, polite voice to sit down. He asked her her name, which he carefully wrote down below other names on the sheet in front of him. Melanie's eyes went to the sheet,

and she was slightly disappointed to note that there were no secret signs against the other names, although there was nothing to stop the interviewer having a second list somewhere, she mused.

At this point, she became aware that the man was studying her, and had probably been doing so while she was off on her flights of fancy. She felt annoyed with herself for not attending to the matter in hand.

'Why did you answer this advertisement, Miss Greensmith?' he asked quietly.

Slightly surprised, Melanie said bluntly, 'Because I need a job.'

His grey eyes went straight to the right sleeve of her windcheater. 'You're at college?' he asked.

Melanie blinked. 'I've just graduated,' she replied. 'Of course I would prefer a teaching job, but as things are ' she gave a light shrug; there was no need to finish the sentence.

The man gave her another hard look, and Melanie could tell nothing from his expression. 'I can see no objection to a teacher filling the post,' he said thoughtfully.

'You do realise that travel is involved, don't you?' he added.

'Yes,' Melanie replied, her pansy-blue eyes meeting the grey inscrutable ones. 'I've got a passport.'

'What about your people?' asked the man. 'Won't they mind your taking off into the blue, as it were?'

Melanie's mind floated inevitably back to the Eastern potentate. Perhaps they weren't fussy, she thought, and wondered if it would be wise to tell the truth. Girls of no immediate family were more likely to find themselves in trouble than those that had. Her frank look at the man sitting opposite her while she debated on her reply triggered of a tired, somewhat aggrieved response from him.

'I do assure you, Miss Greensmith, that I have a good reason for asking these questions. If you have family ties, or a young man who would object to your taking up employment which may result in a lot of travel abroad at short notice, then now is the time to say so.'

There was something about the weary way that he had made that last statement that made Melanie decide to tell the truth. 'I have no immediate relations,' she said firmly. 'I haven't a young man, either. I do have an aunt who wants me to stay with her until I find employment.' As she said this, a picture of Arthur Makin's fat features and thick lips leering at her came to mind, and it was all that she could do to suppress a shiver. But there are reasons why I don't want to take her up on her offer,' she ended lamely. Had Melanie known how much of her feelings had shown in her eyes as she had spoken she would have been most embarrassed, but as she had no idea of the perceptiveness of the man interviewing her, she was able to relax in ignorance.

The man was silent for a moment or so, then said quietly, 'I see.'

Melanie then waited for the inevitable, 'I'll let you know,' and gathered up her shoulder bag that was lying across her knees in preparation for leaving, but she had a surprise coming.

'How soon can you start?' he asked abruptly. Melanie blinked at him. 'You mean, I've got the job?' she asked incredulously.

The man relaxed his rather harsh features for a moment and said mildly, 'I should have thought that that was obvious.'

I—well, as soon as you like,' Melanie got out

breathlessly.

'Where are you staying at the moment?' asked the man.

'At the college, although I shall have to leave tomorrow,' replied Melanie, her mind still in a whirl.

'No reason why you shouldn't leave today then, is there?' he enquired. 'Or have you arranged for some sort of farewell do?'

Melanie didn't consider spending an evening in the local pub listening to Jane and Chris billing and cooing all evening as a particularly unmissable celebration. 'Well, not exactly,' she said. 'I sort of half promised my room-mate that I might join her and her fiancé for a drink.'

'But you're not all that keen,' he said drily, correctly interpreting Melanie's thoughts on the matter. 'So, in that case, I suggest you go back to the college and pack your luggage. I'll provide the transport, and then take you to Oaklands to meet my daughter,' he said abruptly.

Melanie sat in a daze, and saw the man lift the receiver of the telephone on the desk and say, 'Cridell here. Will you please inform the rest of the applicants that the post has been filled. Oh, and thank them for attending.'

In the midst of her daze, Melanie realised that this was the first time that she had known her new employer's name. It didn't mean anything to her, but it would have done if she had been acquainted with the ranks of high finance, for Julian Cridell was a very successful stockbroker, who commanded the respect of the City in no small degree.

The first intimation of the kind of circles she was entering came on sight of the imposing car that Julian Cridell ushered her into. He gave instructions to the

chauffeur to carry his passenger to the college, leaving Melanie to give precise directions as to the location, and told the man, whom he called Jenks, to pick him up after the errand, when they would be returning home.

Jane was out when Melanie got back to the college and, going to their room, she sat down and scrawled a quick letter to her explaining that she had been lucky enough to get a living-in job, and would write a longer letter to be forwarded to her by the college when she had settled in.

It was like a dream, and even as she wrote to Jane, Melanie could hardly believe that all this was actually happening. But one glance out of her window and down to the forecourt of the college, where a big, imposing car sat awaiting her reappearance, confirmed that it was true and that she was not dreaming.

She didn't have to spend much time gathering the rest of her things together, for she had already packed most of her belongings in readiness for her departure the next morning, and she was soon being assisted by the kindly Jenks who relieved her of her luggage the minute she appeared.

Only when the smooth car swept out of the college gates did it occur to Melanie that she could have changed into more presentable clothes, for she did own a nice lightweight jersey wool suit of a deep rust that suited her colouring. It wasn't new, but it always looked fresh. She hadn't been able to afford much in the way of clothes, so what she did have had to last a long time, and was chosen with this in mind. But that suit had stayed nicely packed at the bottom of her case, and what with writing to Jane and making sure that she had everything, clothes had been the last thing on her mind. Considering that she hadn't really

come out of her dream state, it wasn't really surprising.

Soon they were back at the Savoy, and Mr Cridell, complete with briefcase, stood waiting to be picked up. Then they were off to Oaklands, wherever that was, but at this stage reaction was setting in in Melanie's mind, and she was doing her best to quell a rush of panic. She didn't know where she was going. No one knew where she was.

She had calmly accepted this stranger who sat beside her on the well-upholstered interior of the car and who was whisking her off to goodness knew what destination, and again she wondered if she had been wise to tell him her circumstances.

She cast a quick, apprehensive glance at the silent man beside her who seemed lost in a world of his own, his strong, well-moulded features gazing out at the passing scenery. He was an exceedingly handsome man, Melanie conceded, making herself stay calm while her mind kept trying to present her with scary notions of what she might be letting herself in for. Panic got no one anywhere; she despised any show of emotional hysteria in women, and she certainly wasn't about to become hysterical now.

So she concentrated on the man beside her. At least, he would be handsome if his features weren't so hard. Perhaps it was his eyes, she thought, recalling their grey, steely colour, and the no-nonsense set of his mouth. She wondered what he would be like when he smiled, if he ever did.

As this thought entered her mind. Melanie felt a spurt of surprise. She hadn't realised that she had made such a complete study of the man at the time. She had been so bowled over by the ensuing events that her impression of him had been pushed to the

back of her thoughts.

By the road signs, Melanie saw that they were heading out of London and towards Guildford, and she wished that the silent man beside her would talk to her, if only to quell her uneasiness. But she could sense that he was tired, and when she recalled the bevy of women that he had interviewed that afternoon, she wasn't surprised. She did wonder if he had had enough when it came to her turn and had decided to plump for the next applicant, no matter what!

At last they reached journey's end; after skirting along country lanes the car swept into a long drive bordered with rhododendrons. The entrance proclaimed that this was private property; it was marked by two huge stone pillars that flanked wide ornamental gates.

When the house appeared in view, Melanie's eyes widened, for it was more in the nature of a small mansion, and looked so respectable that she almost gave a sigh of relief. She hadn't known what to expect, but there was something so comforting in that old stone structure that any thought of malpractice was a slur on its authenticity.

As the car came to a smooth halt below the stone steps that led to the entrance of the house. Mr Cridell broke his silence and spoke to Melanie.

'I expect you'd like to get settled in first. You can meet my daughter at dinner, which we usually have around six-thirty.'

This was said as they got out of the car, and Melanie gave a nod of thanks at this thoughtful kindness on his part, for it allowed her a good hour to get her breath back. As they entered the spacious hall, a plump, rosy-faced woman in a neat navy-blue dress stood waiting

for her employer's orders, casting a quick, not uncurious look at Melanie, and then back at Jenks who was carrying her luggage.

'This is Miss Greensmith, Mrs Soames,' said Julian Cridell. 'Put her in the blue room, will you. Where's Celia?' he queried.

'Down by the lake, if I'm any judge,' replied Mrs Soames, with a twinkle in her eyes. 'She thought she saw that pike yesterday.'

`I suppose I'd better check on my fishing gear,' Julian Cridell said with a hint of amusement in his voice, then frowned, as if he had forgotten something. `Oh, could you let Miss Greensmith have some tea? No doubt she'll be glad of some refreshment.' Melanie was whisked away up an imposing stairway carpeted in deep maroon, along a corridor to the right of the staircase, and through a short gallery hung with interesting-looking portraits. Another turn to the right brought her finally to her destination as Mrs Soames opened a door to let Jenks go ahead of them with the luggage.

`I'll send you a tray up,' promised Mrs Soames and, casting a last, almost proprietorial look around the room to assure herself that all was in order, she left.

Melanie, now blissfully alone, wandered around her domain. A small bathroom adjoined the bedroom that had once, she presumed, been a dressing-room, for the house was very old, and such refinements wouldn't have existed in the original building.

The bedroom was large and airy and, as its name proclaimed, its predominating colours were blues of different hues, all softly intermingling, making Melanie feel that she had landed in Wonderland. From her unpromising start that morning, when she

had sat in the café wondering how on earth she was going to find work and somewhere to live in the space of a week, she had not only landed a job but living-in quarters as well, in surroundings of a luxury that she had never before experienced. As she unpacked her few belongings, her mind, now gradually settling down to the salient fact that she was now employed, lingered on the child she had been engaged to look after, and she wondered what she would be like. A small cloud appeared on her blue horizon as it occurred to her that she might well be one of those awful brats who made life almost impossible for their luckless guardians—and perhaps there had been a steady flow of them in the past!

The more she thought of this likelihood, the more certain she became that this was the case. Mrs Soames, apart from showing a natural curiosity at her appearance, didn't seem in any way put out, which she wouldn't if it was a regular occurrence, a natural turnover of staff in that particular employment. They were probably taking bets below stairs right at this moment on how long she would last the course !

Melanie wandered to the window, and gazed out on immaculate lawns flanked by flower borders, and beyond that to woodland. She was not going to look a gift horse in the mouth, she told herself firmly in an attempt to quell these unsettling thoughts, but nevertheless, she did have a little niggling feeling that it was all a little too good to be true, and there must be a catch in it somewhere.

Perhaps the child was ailing, and needed constant vigilance? But as soon as the thought was there she had to throw it out again. She would surely not be allowed to dawdle around a lake by herself without causing some anxiety to the household?

Melanie gave it up. She would have to wait and see, and there was no sense in worrying over something until you knew where you were. She was meeting her fences before she came to them, she told herself sternly.

Her tea-tray then arrived, brought in by a young housemaid in a coffee-coloured dress that was obviously a uniform of sorts, although the material, of a nylon lightness, took away any pretensions of regalia.

Melanie, who had never been waited on during her whole life except for her occasional visits to a restaurant, felt slightly embarrassed by this attention, and thanked the girl profusely; she was rewarded with a large welcoming grin from the girl, who then said that her name was Amy and that she would be looking after her.

This simple statement hardly helped to alleviate Melanie's embarrassment. She was just as much an employee of the family as the maid, but as she felt that time would soon make this clear, she contented herself with 'That's nice,' an inane remark, but one which apparently gratified Amy.

On the tray was a plate of thinly cut salmon and cucumber sandwiches which a by now ravenous Melanie, who remembered that she had not had any lunch, soon demolished ; fully replete, she sat back to enjoy her second cup of tea.

After a quick shower she changed into her russet-coloured suit, and, feeling more able to cope with whatever fate offered her, sat down to do her hair, debating whether to leave it loose. However, because of its wilful habit of looking like a bird's nest even though she had brushed it, she pulled it back off her face again and into its familiar bunched arrangement,

muttering, 'That's better,' as she surveyed the result in the mirror.

Once she was ready, she anxiously watched the clock. Her settling-in period seemed to have flown; she was due to go down to meet her charge, and she did not feel at all up to the occasion. There were collywobbles in her stomach, and she wasn't at all sure that she wouldn't lose herself in that big house before she eventually discovered where the dining-room was; in her mind's eye she went over the direction they had taken when she had been shown to her room.

In the event she need not have worried. There was a discreet tap on her door as she was preparing to leave, and on answering it Melanie found Amy smiling at her. 'Mrs Soames thought you might want some help in finding your way around,' she said. 'Mr Cridell and Miss Celia are in the lounge,' she added, as she led Melanie back down the corridor and towards the main staircase, chatting brightly about how she never thought she would find her way around when she first came there, but it was easy when you had your bearings.

Melanie really didn't hear much of this. All she knew was that she was dreading meeting the child, who was, she was now convinced, a real little horror who got through the appointed guardians like a scythe cutting grass. Feeling like an offering about to be placed on the sacrificial altar, she reluctantly followed Amy's confident stride towards their destination.

CHAPTER TWO

ON entering the lounge, it seemed to Melanie that she was confronted not by one stranger, but by two, until she realised that the man standing beside the slim fair-haired girl with unusual black eyebrows and black eyes who was now frankly surveying her was, in fact, Julian Cridell. The fact that he had changed from his sombre city suit into a grey turtle-necked sweater with light grey trousers had so altered his appearance that Melanie hadn't recognised him.

'Celia, this is Miss Greensmith. I think you'll get along together. Miss Greensmith doesn't stand on ceremony either,' he remarked drily, as his daughter held out her hand to Melanie.

'How do you do?' said Celia politely, but there was an imp of mischief lurking in her dark eyes that belied her demure greeting.

Melanie took due note of this, but her mind was occupied by Mr Cridell's remarks about her not standing on ceremony, and she felt a slight flush stain her cheeks as she

suddenly got his meaning, particularly when she recalled the ultra-smart appearance of the other applicants for the job. Had she been chosen because she hadn't bothered to dress up for the interview? she wondered, for that was what it must have looked like. He did not, of course, know that she had only seen the advertisement less than thirty minutes before she had applied for the job !

`Dad says you're a teacher,' Celia said. 'I could do with some coaching, you know.'

`Celia's set on entering the medical profession,' Julian Cridell remarked, with a fond look at his daughter.

Dinner was then announced, cutting short the rest of this discussion, but Melanie was relieved that the first hurdle had been so easily met. Whatever Celia Cridell was, she certainly was not a pert miss out to make trouble for her companion.

During dinner, while thoroughly enjoying the good food in front of her in spite of her late tea, Melanie had ample opportunity to study her charge. The first acknowledged fact was that she was a lovely child, and would soon grow into a beautiful woman. Her dark winged brows, and wide dark eyes fringed by long black eyelashes, that were nature's gift and owed nothing to artifice, contrasted vividly with her blonde hair, and would, no doubt, cause a flutter of interest from men whatever profession she took on. Melanie also noticed the close bond between father and daughter, and wondered when Celia had lost her mother. It was a bad time to be without a mother, Melanie thought : a girl needed a mother's guidance in her early teens.

She was particularly grateful for the way that both father and daughter didn't attempt to ply her with questions but included her in the conversation on topics that were not personal but general.

Tomorrow, Celia told her, she would take her down to the lake. Then she turned to her father. 'I'm sure I saw that pike, Dad.'

Mr Cridell lifted an eyebrow at this. 'Pikes usually keep to lurking under a bank,' he said.

`That's just where I saw it!' cried Celia. 'Old John swears it's along where those rushes are.'

`Yes, and if old John hasn't been able to land him, I

don't think you've much chance,' her father commented with a smile. 'He's the finest fisherman for miles, If anyone's going to get him, it will be him, and I don't think he'll take too kindly if you beat him to it.'

Celia grinned back at her father. 'No, I don't suppose he will, but wouldn't it be fabulous if I did? Are you going to town tomorrow?' she asked, suddenly changing the subject.

`Afraid so,' Julian Cridell replied as he finished the gorgeous sorbet sweet. 'I ought to be through by three though.'

`Oh, good,' said Celia. 'Only Jim Enson's got a pony he thinks might be my size.'

`Well, in that case I'll make a point of getting back early,' her father commented.

'Where is it?'

`At the farm,' Celia told him. 'He's only just got it.' She turned to Melanie. 'Do you ride, Miss Greensmith?' she asked.

Melanie shook her head. 'I'm afraid not,' she said, 'and to tell the truth, I've never wanted to, even if I could have afforded it.'

`You don't know what you're missing,' said the girl. 'I've been really miserable since I lost my old Poll. I had her for years, didn't I, Dad?'

Her father nodded. 'Since you were two, if I recall,' he answered.

For a moment, it occurred to Melanie that if Celia was that fond of riding, her father ought to have got someone who could have accompanied her, but as if Mr Cridell sensed her thoughts, he said abruptly, 'Celia only rides around the paddock, and has the occasional trot out with the Pony Club perhaps once a week. You can no doubt use that time for a break yourself,' he added kindly. Celia hastily endorsed this. 'Good gracious, yes! I

wouldn't expect you to trot behind me, you know.'

The thought that this picture conjured up struck all three of them as comical, and somehow from that moment, Melanie felt part of the family. Early in their acquaintance as it was, she knew that everything was going to be all right, and that her previous fears had been groundless.

It also occurred to her that where Julian Cridell's daughter's happiness was concerned, no holds were barred. Anything, it seemed, was hers, just for the asking, and again she wondered how long ago Celia had lost her mother, for, to Melanie's way of thinking, she was a most sensible girl for her age, and somewhat frighteningly grown up for a thirteen-year-old. She could now understand why her father had sought an older person as a companion for his daughter.

By the time a week had passed, Melanie had settled down with an ease she wouldn't have thought possible considering the luxury of her surroundings.

Everything, from her point of view, was wonderful. The salary was more than she would have earned if she had carried out her chosen profession, but in a way she was teaching, by helping Celia in her studies. The girl's wish to become a doctor was no idle whim on her part. Her mind was made up to a degree that proved this beyond all doubt to Melanie.

As far as Melanie could ascertain, there had been no previous companion, and this puzzled her a little, particularly as no mention had been made of Celia's mother. That suggested that whatever had happened had happened a long time ago. She also sensed a reserve in Celia on the subject, which, considering her natural openness about everything else, was strange, but this convinced Melanie that Celia had no past recollections to recall.

At this time, Celia was on her summer vacation from school, a high-class establishment only a mile away from Oaklands where she was a day pupil—as most of the other girls were boarders this put her apart from the rest of her class.

However, as Melanie came to know her better she realised that this wasn't the only gap between Celia and her class. It was on a much wider spectrum than that. At thirteen she had the outlook of a girl at least five years older, and there were times when even Melanie felt that she was the pupil, and not her charge!

A fortnight after Melanie's arrival something occurred that revived her earlier reservations about everything being too good to be true. Somewhere there had to be a snag, she used to tell herself in her early days at Oaklands, and in an interview with Mr Cridell she discovered precisely what that snag was.

When Julian Cridell invited her into his study for what he called a 'Little talk on how she was settling down', Melanie had no warning of what was to come, and there was no suggestion of anything out of the ordinary in his opening, 'Well, you appear to have found your feet,' remark as soon as they were alone.

Melanie was only too happy to confirm this statement, adding honestly that she considered that she had been extremely fortunate in obtaining such a position with as pleasant a charge as Celia.

Julian Cridell listened politely, but his eyes were enigmatic as he heard Melanie's earnest answer to his question. Then walking over to his desk, he sat down and indicated that she take the chair in front of the desk. Melanie, a little surprised by the formality, wondered if her trial period was over and he was going to dismiss her—for what, she had no idea, for to all

intents and purposes things had worked out very well. He could, of course, have had a change of mind about employing a companion for his daughter, and her spirits dropped at the thought. It meant starting the dreary business of finding another job.

'I realise that what I'm about to ask you will come as a shock to you,' Julian Cridell said in his well-modulated voice, his grey eyes meeting Melanie's startled pansy-blue as she glanced up at him, certain now that he was going to give her notice. 'I need a wife, Miss Greensmith,' he said calmly, and there was a hint of amusement in his normally austere look as he surveyed Melanie's reaction to this statement.

Never one to hide her thoughts, she blinked at him, wondering if she had misheard, then, as a possible solution came to her, she said dully, 'Oh, I see. You mean that once you're married you won't need a companion for Celia.'

'There wouldn't be any need, would there?' he replied in his precise voice. 'Not when you get on so well together.'

Melanie felt that somewhere she had missed out. Perhaps she ought to go out and come back in again, and they could start over again. 'You mean, I'm to stay on after your marriage?' she said, trying not to sound a simpleton.

A wry twist of his mouth acknowledged her bemusement as he said, 'I don't seem to be doing this at all well; we seem to be at cross purposes. I am asking you to become my wife,' and at Melanie's amazed stare at this cool but utterly devastating request, he went on, 'I am aware that you must be of the opinion that I have taken leave of my senses, and I can't blame you for that, but I can put your mind at rest on one point. The marriage will be in name only.'

A business contract, if you like, for an unspecified period. It could be for two years, even one, if things work out. Either way, you'll have no cause to regret accepting my offer. On the annulment you will receive a handsome settlement that will ensure a future free from monetary worries. What do you say?' he asked abruptly.

Melanie was bereft of speech, but it did cross her mind that Julian Cridell had a nasty habit of taking the wind out of her sails. This was the second time in their relatively short acquaintance that he had completely floored her.

While she was still gasping for breath, another thought presented itself, and she was back in that line-up at the Savoy. 'Did you have this in mind when you carried out the interview?' she asked, as she came up for air.

A grim smile appeared on Julian's face. 'Yes,' he replied; his eyes, now devoid of any amusement met Melanie's incredulous ones. 'I did, and until you turned up, I thought that it was going to be a complete waste of time.'

Well, that was honest, anyway, thought Melanie. Especially when she remembered the other applicants. He wouldn't have wanted to put the offer he had just made her to just anybody. She also recalled his remark to Celia about her not standing on ceremony, and felt somehow deflated. He had recognised a bluestocking, and knew he was safe from any feminine wiles that might be attempted at a later date.

'Well?' he asked again, this time a little impatiently.

Melanie tried to marshal her thoughts, and she felt a little annoyed at his calm assumption that she would jump at the chance of becoming his wife, if only in name, with a rosy promise of riches to follow. She

might be a bluestocking but she did have some values. You couldn't play at 'Mr and Mrs' as if you were children.

Seeing her obvious reluctance, Julian, who had thought that he had correctly assessed his chosen actress for the role he had in mind, found that a little more persuasion would be needed to carry the day. 'I see I shall have to put you into the picture,' he said, in a tone that suggested that she really ought to have trusted him and not sought further assurance. 'I divorced my first wife twelve years ago,' he stated flatly. 'It was a disastrous marriage, entered into when both parties were too young to know their own minds. As you see, I have custody of Celia. I've always had custody, and I mean to keep her.' His mouth twisted sardonically as he added, 'It didn't suit my ex-wife to have a child about the house, and she was only too willing to waive her rights.

'However, that was then, and now it appears that she's contemplating matrimony again, and is set to contest my right to keep the child. Her one strong point will be the fact that I haven't remarried—in other words, that Celia is being brought up in a one-parent situation. She feels that if she can convince the courts that she can offer Celia a good home in a two-parent family, she will regain her right to have her. I don't intend that that should happen,' he said grimly. 'Not even on a once-a-week-visiting basis.' He looked at Melanie, and she was amazed by the ferocity in that look; although she knew it was not directed at her, nevertheless she felt that Julian Cridell would make a powerful enemy if one happened to be on the wrong side of the fence.

'And that,' he said harshly, 'is the full sum of it. I suppose,' he added reluctantly, 'you'll need time to

come to a decision, although under the circumstances, my word ought to have been enough for you. Perhaps you'll think it over and give me your answer this evening.' Melanie blinked. This evening! He wasn't really giving her much time, was he? Still, it was something, she thought, as she nodded her approval of even this short notice. As she left the study her thoughts were in a whirl, and all she wanted was to go somewhere she could come to terms with the startling proposal that she had just received. But she hadn't reckoned on meeting Celia, who had obviously been on the watch for her.

'Come and watch Popsie jump a hurdle I've fixed up for her,' she said coaxingly, giving Melanie no chance of escape by linking her arm in hers and all but dragging her out of the house.

While she watched Popsie, Celia's new pony, giving her display, Melanie's thoughts were still buzzing with the extraordinary event that had taken place in Julian Cridell's study. One thing kept going through her mind. In his determination to keep Celia, he was not really being entirely fair to her mother—or to Celia, come to that.

No matter what had happened in the past—and he did say that they had been very young when they married—she was still Celia's mother, and surely it was natural that she would want Celia with her, particularly when she was at a stage when a mother's guidance was needed. What right had he to deny her that? To not even allow her access on a once-a-week basis seemed very hard to Melanie, and entirely unfair to Celia.

Melanie sighed inwardly. She had thought there must be a catch in the job somewhere, and what ;

catch! And to think that Julian Cridell had sat so composedly behind that desk in the Savoy, interviewing not only for a companion for his daughter, but for a wife as well ! Her earlier imaginings of a harem potentate hadn't been all that far out, she thought as she saw Celia trotting towards her on Popsie, and she gave another sigh. It had been nice while it lasted, but no way could she lend herself to a situation like that; she would now have to look for another job.

'Well?' demanded Celia. 'Don't you think she's good? I shall be able to raise that bar a bit higher as soon as she gets a bit more used to it.'

Melanie nodded absentmindedly. It was hard to concentrate on something as unimportant as Popsie's jumps while her mind was elsewhere.

Celia took the saddle off the pony, and with a light tap on her rump sent her off to graze in the paddock, then settled herself on the paddock fence next to Melanie. 'What did you say to Dad's proposal?' she asked, with one eye on the browsing pony and the other on Melanie's reaction.

Melanie stared at her. She couldn't possibly know, she thought. Perhaps her father had made some excuse for wanting to speak to Melanie in private.

'Oh, come on!' Celia said coaxingly. 'I do hope you agreed. It will get us out of a hole, you know, and we do get on, don't we?'

Melanie was still not certain that they were talking about the same thing, so she played it by ear. 'So you know what your father was going to ask me?' she said.

Celia nodded. 'We don't have any secrets from each other,' she replied frankly. 'At least, not on something as important as this. Well, what did you say? You didn't turn him down, did you?' she demanded incredulously.

Melanie looked away from her accusing eyes. 'I'm going to think about it,' she said, then added quickly, 'Look, I'm not sure that you do know the whole of it, and I'd rather you asked your father about it.'

Celia grinned, and suddenly she was a thirteen year-old again, and not the all-too-serious adult she so often seemed to be. 'Dad asked you to marry him, right? Because Mother's decided she wants me with her.'

Melanie looked at Celia. Well, that was clear enough, she thought. Celia certainly did know. 'Don't you want to see your mother?' she asked, her blue eyes searching Celia's dark ones.

Celia shook her head in no uncertain manner. 'No, thank you,' she said firmly, and at Melanie's raised brows, added, 'I'll tell you something that I never told Dad. I spent a term at a school in Switzerland two years ago, and Mother found out and came to see me. She lives in Italy, you know. Her mother was Italian.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'Of course I wanted to meet her. I didn't remember anything about her, you see. Dad never mentioned her, so when she suggested I spend some of my free time with her, I jumped at it.' Her black eyes narrowed as she went back in time. 'She's an actress, you know, and quite famous, really.' She scuffed her sandals on the lower paddock rail. 'I suppose that was why she didn't want to be bothered with a baby, and certainly didn't intend to stay at home and look after me. Well, as I said, I did stay with her at her hotel, and the first day or so, it was wonderful, everyone bowing and scraping to her, and men falling over themselves to escort her to whatever party she'd decided to go to. She's beautiful, of course—and she knows it.' The last statement was made in a cynical tone that surprised Melanie.

`She didn't want people to know that I was her daughter, and luckily we weren't that much alike. I take after Dad in looks, but I suppose everybody more or less guessed, because she's not the sort of person to take to a child. Too much competition, of course,' added Celia, this time with an engaging grin that took the cynicism out of the statement.

Even more so in a few years' time. Melanie thought inwardly. Celia was a lovely child. As a woman she would be devastating.

`I never told Dad about seeing my mother, let alone staying with her,' Celia went on, 'but I'm glad that I did go, because I found out a lot about her. Enough to know that it's not me she's after, it's Dad. She never got over the fact that he divorced her. She's so used to adoration, and having everything her way, that she really thought she could keep him and all the glamour of her work as well.'

Melanie was beginning to understand, but one thing puzzled her.

`I don't see how my marrying your father will alter anything,' she said frankly. 'I mean, if your mother is set on making life difficult for your father by trying to get you back, marriage wouldn't change anything, would it?'

Celia gave her a pitying look. 'It changes everything, from her point of view,' she said firmly. 'This story about her getting married again is just Scotch mist. It's meant to force Dad into taking her back again. Don't you see. She's still in love with him. Goodness, she could have got married any time during the last twelve years! There's an old Count—well, I don't suppose he's all that old,' she amended, 'who's crazy about her and follows her around all the stage locations, and she could have him by lifting her little

finger, but no, it's Dad she wants. She kept telling me how happy we would all be together if he'd only give her another chance.'

Some of Melanie's thoughts showed in her face, for Celia said indignantly, 'It's true, I tell you! She keeps having a go at him to take her back. That's why we take off on those trips abroad. Dad has someone who tips him off when she's due to come over here to do some work, and it saves a lot of emotional scenes if we keep clear of her. I told you she was half Italian, didn't I, and they go in for big scenes. Dad hates them, and you can imagine what life would be like if he was ever stupid enough to take her back, but he won't. Whatever he felt for her vanished when she took off with a film director when I was barely a year old.' She caught Melanie's hand. 'Do say yes!' she pleaded. 'You'll never regret it. She won't give up until Dad does marry again. She's convinced herself that he's not married because he's still in love with her and all that trash. Surely you can see that that threat of hers to get me back is just hogwash. She doesn't stand a chance—not after the way she deserted us all those years ago. All she can hope for are a few odd visits of mine to her now and again, and she won't take that on when she realises that she has no hope whatsoever of Dad taking her back.'

Celia jumped off the fence in an impatient action that said more than words for her distaste for the subject of their conversation. 'Besides,' she said quietly, 'she's nobody's fool. She's getting a bit past the young heroine roles she usually plays, and she's not exactly a character actress. It's the future she's looking to. Dad's a very rich man, you know, and she likes expensive things, I don't suppose she's saved much all these years; her life-style is too extravagant.'

When Melanie did eventually get back to her room, she had plenty to think about, and not a great deal of time to play with.

CHAPTER THREE

MELANIE CRIDELL, née Greensmith, listened to the monotonous drone of the plane's engines, and closed her eyes. Although she ought to have been lulled into sleep, as indeed her charge was one seat away from her, her mind was too active to allow her such luxury.

If she opened her eyes just a slit to glance at her hands resting on her lap, she would see a wedding ring of fine gold filigree on the third finger of her left hand, and on top of that an imposing cluster of diamonds on an engagement ring.

Her sleepy glance caught a movement on her right, and landed on the strong, lean hand of the man seated next to her as he turned over a sheet of a sheaf of figures he was studying. Melanie's glance stayed on that hand with its strong wrist, noting the fine, dark hairs that slightly overlapped his gold watch.

That man was her husband. He went with the rings on her left hand, and with a lucrative job that would pay a large dividend when the extraordinary contract that she had entered into was terminated, in two years', or maybe only one year's time.

Melanie tore her glance away from Julian Cridell's hand. She had to remember to call him Julian, and not Mr Cridell, but it wasn't going to be easy for her, she thought, considering that she had been addressing him as Mr Cridell up until the register office wedding a day ago.

Of course it wasn't real; nothing was real, she told herself. She had entered a dream world from the

moment she had joined that bevy of women who had answered the advertisement in The Times for a companion for a thirteen-year-old girl.

But Aunt Alice was real, she told herself drowsily, and if anything, it could all be laid at her aunt's door for being silly enough to alter her widowed status and marry that awful Arthur Makin, whose image could still give Melanie the shivers when she recalled it.

Oh, yes, he was real enough!

Perhaps, Melanie mused, too tired now even to open her eyes, it was all Jane and Chris's fault for deciding to get married and use the flat she had hoped to share with Jane. She shifted restlessly, and felt rather than saw a slight movement on her right; not wanting to cause Julian Cridell any trouble, she kept still until he had settled back to his previous occupation.

It was extraordinary, she thought, how a man who barely knew her, even though he had asked her to marry him within a fortnight of their acquaintance, could be so attuned to her misgivings—and there had been plenty of those when the proposition was put to her.

She felt a light touch on her arm and opened her eyes to meet Julian's grey, enigmatic eyes.

'Do you want some refreshment?' he asked, in his well-modulated voice.

Melanie shook her head.

'No, thank you,' she replied, and glanced at the sleeping form of Celia on her left.

At this point the girl stirred in her sleep, and suddenly woke up, her dark eyes with their astonishing black winged brows twinkling wickedly at Melanie as they went off to sleep again.

Melanie's glance went back to the rings on her left

hand. Rightly or wrongly, she had succumbed to Celia's entreaties, and had agreed to accept Julian Cridell's proposal. As Celia had so saliently pointed out, 'We get on together, don't we? All of us? And Dad wouldn't have asked you if he wasn't sure that we'd all suit. It could well be a permanent arrangement, you know,' she had ended meaningfully, to Melanie's embarrassment.

That, Melanie thought with a small ironic twist of her lips, was Celia. At times so grown up it was difficult to realise that she was only thirteen : Melanie had wondered if it was because she had been brought up entirely by her father that she had such an adult outlook on life. The fact that she heartily disliked her mother was sad, but then she had had an opportunity during her earlier years of observing her and making her own judgment on the matter. There was also the fact that she adored her father, and fiercely guarded over his interests, as indeed Julian Cridell did over his daughter's. Melanie was not too sure that Celia's biased opinion that her mother was still in love with her father, was strictly true, although it did point that way; why else should she bother to make those harrowing visits to Oaklands each time she was in the country? If Celia's descriptive reports on the emotional scenes that occurred were only half true, it was small wonder that the Cridell's went to some lengths to avoid them.

'She would start off by being the long-suffering spurned wife, who still cared for her family,' Celia had said, during one of her persuasive bouts to get Melanie to accept her father's offer, 'and when that didn't work, out would come the fireworks.' Melanie recalled the bleakness in Celia's eyes when she had told her this. 'I was always terrified that Dad would give in to

her, if only to avoid those ghastly scenes, and frightened of all the misery we'd have to put up with if he did,' she had added.

At this point Melanie must have fallen asleep, lulled at last by the inducing throb of the plane's engines, and the next she knew, she was being touched on the shoulder by Julian, who told her to fasten her seat belt because they were landing in Miami.

As Melanie found herself being ushered into a taxi and on the way to the Holiday Inn, where they would be spending the night before taking another plane out to one of the privately owned islands in the Bahamas the following morning, she wondered if she would ever be allowed to come down to earth.

The sudden change from having to count her pennies, and constant worry over her future, had been a little too fast for her to assimilate. She was still in that dream world, but one had to wake up some time, and it wasn't going to be easy after what had happened to her.

The light plane that had taken them out to the island made a smooth landing on a small airstrip and, judging by the size of the island seen from the air by a still jet-lagged Melanie, it was a wonder space had been found for such a feat, for the island seemed tiny, with pink and white dots that denoted houses seemingly crowding all available space. 'Looks like an iced cake, doesn't it?' Celia murmured in her ear, and Melanie had to agree that it was a very apt description.

As soon as they had landed, a car swept into view and drew up beside the plane, and as they got into it, Melanie glanced back at the small runway, then wished that she hadn't, for it was on a high plateau

that looked directly out to sea.

Seeing her look, Julian, correctly assessing her thoughts, said, 'Of course, there are times when the plane can't land. High winds, etcetera.'

Melanie would rather not have known that, and she only hoped that the weather was good when it was time to leave the island, for as the car swept away from the airstrip she got a better look at the landing area perched high above ragged cliffs with the ocean below.

It was only a fifteen-minute run to the hotel, which was more in the nature of a private mansion to Melanie's way of thinking, with ornamental palms lining the long driveway, and balconies from which hung glorious blossoms in bronze urns, the bronze, gleaming in the morning sun, setting off the pale blues and lilacs of some kind of wisteria plant that grew as luxuriantly as daises on an English lawn. A doorman, resplendent in a uniform that would have vied with an Admiral's for splendour, opened the car doors as soon as they arrived.

'Morning, Mr Cridell,' he said cheerily, as he motioned a waiting porter to take their luggage, adding, 'Miss Cridell,' with a nod of familiarity, and favouring Melanie with a glance, as if to place her for future reference.

There was no signing-in to be done here, Melanie found with a slight spurt of surprise as they were ushered in to a lift by yet another employee of the hotel with what almost amounted to a kind of deference by a young man who could well have been the deputy manager. He accompanied them to the penthouse suite, and then left them, saying, 'I think you'll find everything to your satisfaction, sir,' to Julian. From her husband's abrupt nod and dismissal of the man,

Melanie could see that this treatment was not unusual—was, indeed, expected by Julian Cridell. -

The suite was large and roomy, with three bedrooms, and Melanie found herself allotted the one next to Celia's with a communicating door. Julian's room was further down the passage, with a room used as a study in between, and this pleased Melanie, who was grateful for the distance and privacy this arrangement would provide.

The girls left the communicating door open while they unpacked—at least, Melanie started to unpack, while Celia flung herself on her bed, declaring tht she was too tired to bother with that right now, and suggested that they went down to the beach to cool off. But having half unpacked, Melanie said she would finish that first, and join Celia later. 'Go out of the side door, next to the dining-room,' Celiatold her, 'and follow the path round to the left. The beach is hotel property, and you can't miss it,' she added as she gathered up her beach bag and towel and left Melanie to it.

Melanie continued with her unpacking, and as she hung each garment up in the spacious wardrobe, her mind went back to that hectic shopping expedition she had undertaken two days before.

Armed with strict instructions from Julian to put everything on his account, she had shopped with inborn conservatism, feeling like a thief each time she signed a chit from the various departments, torn between her natural inclination to spend as little as possible on each garment, and her wish not to embarrass Julian Cridell by wearing off the peg clothes. Not that that was possible from the establishment she had been sent to, for it was where Celia went. Most of the well-endowed daughters of their social class shopped there, but Melanie had been scanda-

lised by the prices, even though she had no choice but to accept them.

It was perhaps as well that Celia had accompanied her, and Melanie suspected that this had been arranged by the astute Julian, who had surmised that she would put price against need, as indeed she would have done if Celia had let her. But she didn't and, having a good sense of dress, insisted on this and that outfit being bought,

regardless of price. Evening gowns were also purchases, as Celia said that they dressed for dinner in the Bahamas, and she insisted on Melanie taking five of the lovely dresses presented for inspection.

By now Melanie had got to the smaller of her cases, the one where she had put things that might be needed sooner than the rest of her luggage, and she took out her sun-dress and swimming costume. The sun-dress was the only thing that she and Celia had really fallen out over, 'It's much too old for you,' Celia had said caustically when Melanie had plumped for a sedate navy-blue and white dress with a wide sailor-type collar at the back, and Celia had picked up a skimpy green and sea-blue two piece. 'That's more like it,' she had said, but this was one fight Melanie had won, although she noticed that Celia had flung in the other one when they were wrapping up their purchases, with a comment that she might change her mind. Melanie had given her a schoolmarmish look that caused the unrepentant Celia to giggle.

It definitely didn't look too old for her, she thought, as she studied her reflection in the full-length mirror, and it did suit her, she told herself as she gathered up her beach bag and towel and left to join Celia on the beach, seeing no sign of Julian as she went through the apartment.

Once on the beach, a long strip of glorious white sand, Melanie sank down on to a deep, comfortable beach-lounger with a matching parasol, several of which were scattered around the beach for the use of the guests. No hunting for deckchairs in this establishment, and no ticket collector demanding payment the minute you had accomplished such a feat, Melanie thought with an inward smile as she glanced across at Celia sitting beside her and at that moment searching in her beach bag that contained books as well as the usual paraphernalia one takes down to the beach. 'You're not going to study, are you, Celia?' she asked, as Celia dragged one of the books out.

Celia's dark eyes met hers contemplatively. 'I get bored, you know,' she said. 'When Dad joins us, I'll have a swim,' she ended, as she settled down to the book.

At that moment, a girl's voice cut across the white sands. 'Celia Cridell! I didn't know you were here!'

Celia and Melanie both glanced up to see a dark, chubby girl of Celia's age bounding towards them, and Celia looked pleased to see her. 'Hi, Podge,' she said disrespectfully, but the girl grinned.

'Thank goodness you've come!' she said. 'I was getting bored stiff on my own.' She glanced back at a blonde woman a little behind her, and who now joined her. 'It's Celia, Mother,' she said. 'Now you can go off to your bridge if you want,' she told her happily. The mother gave Celia a nod, and looked around. 'Isn't your father here?' she asked, as her glance flickered over Melanie.

Celia smiled. 'He'll be around later,' she said. 'Business as usual, you know. Oh, this is my mother—well,' she corrected herself, 'stepmother, Melanie Cridell. Melanie, this is Mrs Winsome and Podge—I

mean Diana,' she amended quickly, seeing the look of annoyance this introduction brought from Mrs Winsome.

Celia's offhand introduction had caught Melanie by surprise, and she found herself undergoing a swift and calculating appraisal from Mrs Winsome, who looked as surprised as Melanie felt. 'Good gracious!' she said, then, suddenly collecting herself, murmured something on the lines of it being nice to meet her and took herself off back to the hotel.

Melanie noticed with a touch of exasperation that Celia was very amused at Mrs Winsome's quick departure from the scene. Her guess at the reason was cemented by Celia's light, 'Well, that saves us a lot of introductions,' giving Podge, as she called her, a wicked grin; at Melanie's look of rebuke as she glanced apologetically at Podge, Celia replied, 'Oh, Podge doesn't mind, do you, Podge?'

By the answering grin her friend gave her, it appeared that she didn't, and the two friends wandered off towards a group of teenagers watching the preparations of a team of canoeists entering the races that were to be held the following day, according to the notices put up in the hotel lobby.

Melanie, still a little disturbed by the quick introduction and the ensuing results, settled back in her lounge, glad of the parasol over her head, for the rays of the sun were really strong. She would have to get used to that sort of thing, she told herself. Things would soon settle down again, she thought. It was only the initial stage that would be uncomfortable for her. Whether it was her imagination or not, she wasn't sure, but it did seem to her that she was attracting a lot of notice from the passers-by as they went down to the shore for a swim.

She was just drifting off into a sun-soaked doze when Julian's voice awakened her, asking why she hadn't gone in for a dip, and casting an experienced eye over her neat sundress.

Melanie sat up, now fully awake. 'Oh, I'm afraid I can't swim,' she said. 'I never learnt, you know,' she added apologetically.

Julian's grey eyes, half closed because of the sun rays, looked beyond her to where Celia was now in animated conversation with one of the boat crew. 'Well, we shall have to teach you, won't we?' he said.

Melanie thought about it. She wasn't sure that she wanted to learn to swim. She had got on very nicely without that particular art so far in her life, and thought that it was a bit late to indulge in it. Besides, she didn't particularly want to look stupid in front of those all too sophisticated people. 'I'd rather not, if you don't mind,' she said firmly. 'I'm perfectly happy just sunbathing.'

Julian glanced down at her briefly, and Melanie had a feeling that her reply had irritated him, and she was a bit puzzled by this. She was, after all, only stating her preference in the matter, not challenging his authority.

'I do mind,' he said abruptly. 'Everyone should learn to swim. Particularly on these islands. It can make the difference between life and death. I'll teach you.'

It was not a suggestion but an order, and a surprised Melanie watched his tall lithe figure in swimming trunks stride away from her towards Celia, and a few minutes later saw them take to the water together.

So far, Melanie was not having a very restful morning. She felt vaguely uneasy at the change in Julian's attitude towards her, which smacked of male

domination over his charges, and this was a new experience for her, for she had been mistress of her own destiny for many years. She wasn't too sure that she appreciated this situation, well meant or otherwise!

At that moment, her all-too-short period of peace was shattered by the arrival of a grossly fat woman, followed by a meek-looking maid who placed her lounge beside Melanie's at the woman's imperative bidding. Then the woman settled down to engage Melanie in conversation.

This sudden invasion of her territory was startling enough to Melanie without finding herself bemusedly staring at the woman's apparel, for she wore a black lacy dress

complete with a diamond choker—aptly named in this case, as the folds of her triple chins almost hid the sparkling jewels, and, as if this weren't enough, rings and bracelets to match. In fact, she looked like a walking bank, and a fascinated Melanie found herself wondering if she had a tiara on under that huge sun-hat she was wearing!

'I'm Lydia Hounslow Holmes,' said the woman in a deep, gruff voice, holding out a fat, heavily ringed hand towards Melanie. 'I understand you're the new Mrs Cridell.' Melanie swallowed back an urge to giggle at the unorthodox introduction, and, managing to quell her amusement, took the proffered hand. 'How do you do?' she said politely, then found herself undergoing a hard, cynical examination. 'Hmph! Not what I would call Julian's taste at all,' the woman murmured, half to herself. 'Looks more like a games teacher to me.'

Melanie again felt that awful urge to laugh. Really, the woman was eccentric!

'Not much to say for yourself, have you?' Mrs Hounslow Holmes commented.

'Daresay you'll do. Don't take any notice of the cats around here. Been holding out for Cridell for years. Met Zara yet?' she suddenly flung out at Melanie, who recovered in time to realise that she was referring to Julian's ex-wife.

'Er—no,' she got out, wondering just who this imperious old woman was.

'You will!' the old lady commented with what Melanie felt was a certain amount of pleasurable anticipation. 'Just remember to duck if she's anywhere near a moveable object,' she added, chuckling hugely at this unasked-for advice, then she turned to the maid, still hovering in the background, who assisted her off the lounge with well-practised ease. Leaving the utterly bemused Melanie gazing after them, as the small procession made their regal way back to the hotel.

She was still gazing after them when Julian and Celia rejoined her, and Julian, his eyes following Melanie's, asked acrimoniously, 'What did that old devil want?'

Melanie blinked. She had still not recovered. 'Oh, she just wanted to meet me—I think,' she added doubtfully.

Julian started to dry himself with his towel, and flung Celia's towel to her. 'No doubt,' he said ironically. 'She's the island gossip. You'll have to watch out for her in future,' he added meaningly.

That wasn't all she had to watch out for, Melanie thought sardonically, recalling the old woman's comments on his ex-wife!

'Well, she lost out this time,' said Celia, throwing her towel down after drying herself, and flinging herself down next to Melanie. 'Mrs Winsome beat her

to it. She couldn't get back to the hotel fast enough,' she added with a chuckle.

Julian dropped his towel back on the sand and settled down the other side of Melanie, making her in some odd way feel surrounded. 'They've not much more to do,' he said, glancing up at Melanie in an almost apologetic way. 'Too much leisure and money to go with it.'

'Was the Duchess wearing her jewels?' Celia asked. 'Not that I could imagine her without them,' she mused, as she searched in her beach bag for some suntan lotion, which she then started to apply to her arms and legs.

Melanie, watching her, nodded. 'Are they real?' she asked. 'I was completely dazzled!' Celia, having finished oiling her arms and legs, handed Melanie the lotion and turned over to have her back done. 'This used to be Dad's job,' she said. 'It's yours now. Oh, they're real enough. She doesn't believe in hiding her treasures away. It's a way of

intimidating people, I suppose; everybody falls over themselves to give her good service,' she added.

Melanie, carefully applying the lotion to Celia's already honey-coloured back, replied thoughtfully, 'I should think she would be afraid of being robbed. I know I would.'

Julian's deep voice interposed with, 'Not here. No one would dare. The staff are hand-picked, and paid well enough to prevent dishonesty.'

Melanie was surprised that Julian had heard the conversation, for she had thought that he was asleep. Having finished Celia's back, she started to put the top on the bottle ready to return it to the holdall.

'Dad next,' Celia said, as she turned round and settled back comfortably on the white sand.

Melanie was about to hand the lotion to Julian when Celia said in a drowsy voice, 'I do his back, so you'll have to do his, too,' and opened one eye to observe Melanie's startled expression.

Really, Celia could be infuriating at times, Melanie thought, and she could have smacked her for placing her in such an embarrassing position. All she could hope for was that Julian would let her off the hook, as she ignored Celia's words and handed him the bottle, hoping that he would feign sleep.

Her hopes, however, were short-lived, for she found him regarding her with what looked suspiciously like a twinkle in his grey eyes. 'If you would be so kind,' he said gravely, and turned over to present her with his strong, powerful shoulders.

Gulping down her nervousness, Melanie had no choice but to apply the lotion to his already reddening skin.

'You've a nice touch,' Julian remarked gratefully when she had finished, and totally embarrassed, Melanie hid her confusion by busying herself with putting the top on the bottle and stowing it away in the holdall. This slight but discomfiting incident was only the beginning of what Melanie had in store, had she but known it, and the next few days proved even more trying for her.

At her husband's insistence, she had to mix in the company of people she had nothing in common with. She could understand his wish for everything to appear as normal as possible, but it did put her in an unenviable position, and she found conversation difficult in such sophisticated company, more so since the topics consisted only of diversions and distractions to what seemed a pointless existence. Too much money, and too much time on their hands, and

Melanie suspected that she was the one that was supplying most of their entertainment.

In a way this was understandable; the hotel was like a small village community. Everybody knew everybody else's business, and a newcomer was a source of avid interest until everything was known about him or her. Under the circumstances, it wasn't easy for Melanie to take things in her stride, but she was much too sensible a person to let them get her down. Even so, there were times when she wondered if Julian was putting her through a commando training course by dropping her in at the deep end and seeing if she could survive!

It was the only answer that made sense to her. She was sure that he was well aware that she hated the evening after-dinner sessions when they circulated among the other guests, all personal friends of his, and didn't attempt to shield her from their natural curiosity, making her feel if she had been pushed out to sea on a small raft to brave the heavy waves of the ocean as they swept over her.

She certainly had cause to be grateful for Celia's insistence on her purchasing several evening gowns, all of which stood up well against the richly dressed women around her. She was well aware that, as Julian Cridell's wife, she had to accept more than her fair share of interest in her appearance. She was also conscious of the fact that she didn't wear make-up. Her skin was clear and unblemished, and she had never used lipstick, hence Mrs Hounslow Holmes's remark about her looking like a games mistress, which was not so very far from the truth, Melanie had to concede later when she had had time to recall the remark. She would have been more gratified to have heard another of that astonishing lady's remarks,

which had likened her to a rambling rose set against a variety of hot-house orchids! At first, she wondered what she should tell the more curious ones who enquired how she had met Julian, and on putting this to him, got the reply that the more they kept to the truth on these matters, the better it would be in the long run. She was to say that she had been employed as tutor to Celia, and let them take it from there. Melanie recalled herself flushing at the picture this was sure to present to most of the sophisticated women around them of a love at first sight, entailing a whirlwind courtship!

There was also the bald fact that her sudden appearance among them as Julian's wife had doused many hopes in that direction, particularly a few rich, bored divorcees, who consequently looked upon Melanie as an outsider who had had the temerity to plunder on their preserve. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, her unsophisticated manner and unadorned features must have caused much irritation, and seemed a positive insult to their beauty salon expenses.

After her first debut, Melanie could see how right Julian had been when he had advised her to tell the truth about their association. That way she couldn't be expected to have a lot in common with his friends, and the conversation would automatically drift on to other channels, making life a lot easier for her.

There remained only one little matter to worry her, and that was the fact that so far, no one had actually asked when they had married, and she could see a wretched time ahead should the actual date be known, for although Julian was attentive to her in company, it was hardly the kind of attention a man would give his new bride at such a time. Whatever else she felt able to

seek advice on, this question was certainly not one of them, and she was only too grateful that he hadn't thought of it himself, for should he make any attempt to act the lover, Melanie didn't know how she would cope. Basically honest, she could no more go through that stage of deception than she could put up with the detestable man her aunt had married. Not that she put Julian Cridell in that class, but the state of miserable embarrassment that would ensue in such a situation would be just as acute. The days of that first week on the idyllic island drifted by, and each day, Melanie and Celia would go down to the beach. Now that Celia had teamed up with her friend Podge, Melanie had nothing much to do except get a good sun-tan, for Julian had business connections on the island, and was also part-owner of the hotel, and spent most of his time at various board meetings, joining them only when he was free from other commitments.

Melanie wasn't sure how it had all begun, but within two days of beach lounging, she found herself obliging several of the mothers by keeping watch over their children. At first it was a case of a mother forgetting to bring something out from the hotel, and

asking Melanie if she minded her leaving her small son with her while she went back to collect the missing article, and of course, Melanie had no hesitation in agreeing. Soon, no excuse was given by the mother, who automatically made a beeline towards Melanie with little Michael in tow, and would, after a brief chat to her drift off on some errand, leaving the child with Melanie. Human nature being what it was, it wasn't long before other mothers started taking advantage of this very useful method of dumping their offspring for

most of the morning while they enjoyed a complete break.

Celia, after coming back to join her on the third day, and finding seven little ones grouped around Melanie while she told them a story, asked in amusement if she was starting up a kindergarten on the island, and Melanie had smiled, and replied that it was an idea that was worth thinking about. To tell the truth, she was enjoying herself. The children were no bother at all, and she supposed it must be her teacher's nature that made her feel so much at home with them; it never occurred to her to look on the task as anything but enjoyable. For the first time since her arrival on the island, she felt useful, and actually began to look forward to the mornings and taking her 'class' through the adventures of old-time favourites, the stories of which were brought by the grateful mothers for Melanie to read to them.

She was in the middle of a particularly rousing story the following morning when she happened to glance up and saw Julian striding towards them, and she caught her breath for an instant in time at the sight of the tall, well-tanned man, whose physical stature dimmed all other males in the vicinity. She felt a peculiar sinking sensation in her stomach at the thought that this man, although still a stranger to her, was her husband.

His cold glance went from her to the children squatted around her as he reached them. 'Celia's over by the canoes,' said Melanie helpfully.

Julian didn't even bother to glance in that direction, but concentrated his hard stare at her. 'What is this?' he demanded, sweeping an imperious hand over the collection of tots around her.

'Oh.' For a moment Melanie was nonplussed at his obvious displeasure, then, collecting herself, she said brightly, 'Well, this is James, and his sister Tina,' she nodded towards the two smaller children in the group, 'Mr and Mrs Salmon's children, and this is

That was as far as she was allowed to get before Julian interrupted with a cold, 'I believe I know who they belong to. What I want to know is why you've been landed with them.'

Melanie blinked. 'I don't mind,' she began to explain, 'and it does let their parents have some free time,' she added with a smile.

'Well, I do!' Julian said grimly. 'I'm not having my wife made into a stand-in nanny. They can get someone else to watch over their children,' he stated emphatically.

It was unfortunate for Melanie that Mrs Hounslow Holmes happened to be within earshot, and seeing her nod of agreement with Julian's remarks, Melanie felt extremely cross. What did it matter what she did? Julian had been too busy with his business affairs to worry over how she had been occupying her time—not that she had expected him to keep her company, but she did object to what she felt was just a show of male arrogance over his domain.

Celia then strolled up—she had seen her father approaching—and joined the group, and his next words were directed at her. 'Couldn't you have done something about this?' he demanded angrily.

Celia looked as surprised as she felt, and blinked at her father. 'Melanie doesn't mind,' she said vaguely, and cast a speculative eye at her, wondering if she had complained. 'And I don't,' Melanie got out. 'They're no trouble at all, honestly, Julian.' She still felt uncomfortable

using his Christian name, and no matter how hard she tried there was always a slight hesitation when she was forced to use it.

She knew that this irritated him, and it did again, and didn't help the situation at all, for he glared at her. 'No trouble or not, I'm not having it. Is that clear?' he ground out harshly, and stalked off in high dudgeon back to the hotel.

Out of the corner of her eye Melanie saw Mrs Hounslow Holmes gather up her numerous belongings and thrust them at her maid as she sidled off her lounge, as they, too, made off for the hotel. Hotfoot, no doubt, to report that little scene to all and sundry, Melanie thought angrily. There was no love lost between James and Tina's mother and the old woman, who would lose no time in passing on Julian's angry comments.

Celia's attention was on her father's stiff retreating back. 'What's got into him?' she asked Melanie with raised brows. 'It's not like him at all to act that way. Perhaps he's been overworking?' she suggested.

Melanie was just in time to stop James from crowning his little sister with his spade, and then she looked up at Celia and sighed. 'I don't know,' she said. 'I wouldn't have thought that it mattered all that much.'

With a shrug that echoed Melanie's words, Celia gathered the children up. 'Come on, you lot,' she said, 'let's see if we can get some ices,'—a suggestion that immediately took their minds off the uncompleted story that they had been hoping that Melanie would finish. But before they left, Celia turned back to Melanie. 'Well, I suppose it was getting a bit much,' she commented. 'I mean, at this rate you could qualify as the Pied Piper, couldn't you? They have rather

loaded them off on you. I should, as Dad said, have kept an eye on things.'

Melanie didn't see it that way at all. She was feeling distinctly mutinous as she walked back to the hotel.

CHAPTER FOUR

BACK in the hotel, Melanie's ruffled feelings slowly petered out as she acknowledged the reason for Julian's annoyance. The trouble was that she had forgotten her position, and, looking at things from his point of view, it was small wonder that he had been so put out.

She sighed as she waited for Celia to come out of the shower so that she could take one herself. She still didn't really think the incident warranted the arrogant display that Julian had put on, but he was an important person with a social position to keep up, and she was being no help at all.

Her blue eyes wistfully caught her reflection in the mirror opposite her. In spite of her smart sun-dress, she was still plain Miss Greensmith acting as Mrs Cridell, and she

didn't look the part at all. No wonder she had caused such a stir among this grand assembly of socialites! Even Julian Cridell must be regretting his somewhat impulsive action in taking her for the part.

At this point, Celia emerged from the shower and, rubbing her hair dry, said brightly, 'Cheer up! You look as if it's the end of the world! Dad will forget all about it, you'll see.' Melanie wasn't so sure. 'Well, he was right, wasn't he?' she said slowly, and sighed.

'Do I look like a doormat?' she asked.

Celia burst out laughing. 'Of course not!' she said, and gave Melanie a hug. 'You're kind, you see, and

everybody takes advantage of kind people, didn't you know that?'

Melanie looked at Celia; here was another of those profound remarks that was so much at variance with her age, and that constantly surprised her. She gave a light shrug, collected her towel and went in for her shower, coming out a few minutes later, her hair springing out in a thick mop of waves and curls.

'Why don't you leave your hair loose instead of tying it back the way you do?' Celia asked. 'It's really something, you know.'

Melanie sat down at the dressing table and surveyed her hair. 'Wait till it dries properly,' she said. 'It looks like a walking bush. I'll never be able to do anything with it, but I can keep it tidy if I push it back.'

Celia studied her with her head on one side. 'Why not have it cut close to your head?' she suggested. 'It would be manageable then, wouldn't it? The hairdressers here are really top class,' she added.

Melanie considered this but wasn't too keen. She had always worn her hair this way.

'Oh, I don't know,' she replied slowly, although she had to admit that it did need some attention; it was getting a bit too long.

'Go on!' urged Celia. 'Be a devil! It will suit you, honestly, and a little make-up won't hurt,' she added thoughtfully.

Melanie looked hard at her. 'Are you trying to tell me something?' she asked with raised brows.

Celia broke into a delighted gurgle of laughter. 'No, silly! I was just trying to cheer you up a bit, that's all,' she said.

Melanie wasn't convinced. Perhaps Celia was of the opinion that she ought to make some effort to play the part of her father's wife in looks as well as clothes!

The final result of that conversation was a hair

appointment being made for her in an hour's time with a not too confident Melanie deciding to take the plunge.

If Celia's, 'That looks great,' comment on Melanie's arrival back in their room later was anything to go by, Melanie had done the right thing. She felt almost naked, shorn of her thick tresses, her hair now cropped close to her head. It gave her a boyish appearance, to her way of thinking, but Celia's judgment had been right. It did suit her and, far from her own opinion on the matter, gave her elfin-like features a prominence that highlighted her large pansy-blue eyes. But Melanie saw none of this; she only knew that she felt distinctly un-'Miss Green-smith', and that like everything else that had happened to her, this wasn't really happening at all!

The only consolation that she could give herself when she dressed for dinner that evening in a white sheath-styled dress was that Julian Cridell would at least see that

she was trying to fulfil her side of the bargain after her lapse of the afternoon, and she had to admit, when she had put a little colouring on her lips, that she did look more the sort of woman he would have married.

When she was ready to leave the bedroom and join Julian in the lounge of their suite where he always waited for her before they went down to dinner, she wished Celia was there to give her approval of her final preparations, but Celia was with Podge in the hotel's recreation room listening to music after a high tea, which they preferred rather than waiting for the late dinner hour.

At first, Melanie's arrival in the lounge went unnoticed by Julian, who was immersed in mail that he hadn't had time to look at earlier owing to a heavy

work schedule. Becoming aware of her presence at last, he looked up briefly to say 'hello', but his greeting stopped suddenly as he took in her appearance. 'What on earth,' he began, his lips tightening in anger, 'have you done to yourself?'

Melanie's eyes widened. She had been so sure that he would appreciate her attempt to look the part of his wife that his sudden, almost ferocious attack took her breath away. 'Don't you approve?' she asked timidly. 'I just thought '

That was as far as she got. 'In future leave the thinking to me,' he said harshly. 'I have no wish to see you turn yourself into a caricature of the other lounge lizards. You couldn't compete, anyway,' he added cruelly, 'and you can wipe that stuff off your face as well. You look like a painted butterfly. It's too late to do anything about your hair, but that's as far as it's going, do you understand? I don't ever want to see you like that again. Your job was outlined to you, and I advise you not to overstep your position. I realise it's hard for you in this company, but I should have thought you would have had enough sense not to let things go to your head !'

Melanie stared back at him. She was shocked to the core. He had never spoken to her like that before, and she really didn't think she deserved such treatment. Her only wish was to play her part, not to ingratiate herself with what he might just as well have called her 'betters', but she said nothing, simply turned on her heel and went back to the bedroom to wipe off the offending make-up. She hadn't used much anyway, she thought dully, her mind still whirling from his hard words. Ought she to change her dress, too? she thought, as she stared down at the silky sheath that clung to her slim figure, but at that moment Julian's

impatient voice asked her to hurry—he was hungry and wanted his dinner—so with a heavy heart she decided she had no choice but to wear the dress, and she rejoined him directly.

As Melanie walked silently beside the man she had married barely a week ago, and stood at the dining-room door to be conducted to their table, her emotions were held on a tight rein. She had gone into this arrangement with open eyes, and it was small wonder that Julian had torn her off a strip. She had overstepped the mark, foolishly listening to a child of thirteen's advice against her better judgment. That was the last time that would happen, she thought firmly, and wished that she could somehow explain her actions to the stern-faced man seated opposite her, now studying the menu and ordering for both of them.

She drew in a deep breath. He was in no mood for explanations, that was certain, and surely he had summed it up pretty accurately anyway, only he hadn't given her much benefit of the doubt that she had meant to be helpful and not to ape the society beauties around them.

When the starter, a prawn cocktail, was placed before her, Melanie tried hard to put all thought of that devastating scene behind her, but she failed miserably, and her appetite deserted her. However, not wanting to cause any more tension between them, she struggled gamely on with it, and very nearly choked as it came to her that more could be read into Julian's anger than first met the eye. His cold advice against her not overstepping the line now had another and more intensely embarrassing meaning. No wonder he was furious, she thought unhappily as she managed to finish the starter and stared down at

the plate of veal chops nestling in juniper, rosemary and vermouth sauce. The appetising dish would have awakened her taste buds were it not for the fact that she didn't see how she could be expected to enjoy a meal with a man who had thought fit to give her a lecture on keeping her distance, and who had told her that if she had any other ideas on improving her position, to forget it; she just wasn't in his class! In a desperate move to push these unwelcome thoughts away from her, Melanie glanced around the room, and caught the eye of Mrs Dalton, one of the socialites that Julian no doubt thought she was attempting to copy, and who had made an effort to join them at meal times, saying how much she hated eating alone. Julian had positively vetoed any such arrangement, but she was not so easily discouraged, and now waved a careless, heavily ringed, manicured hand in greeting towards Melanie. This small incident somehow underlined Melanie's position, and she looked away hastily after giving her a slight nod in greeting, not daring to give the woman an opportunity to find some excuse to join them, even though she would have preferred her company—any company, come to that—to this uncomfortable atmosphere she was forced to put up with from a man who seemed even more of a stranger to her than at their first meeting. But then, she thought dully, that was before he had begun to entertain the suspicion that she was trying to capitalise on her good fortune and was hoping, perhaps, to make it a permanent arrangement. By this time, all Melanie wanted was to get the meal over with and get back to her room, and she hoped that Julian would accept her request that she skipped coffee in the lounge afterwards; there would be plenty

of his friends to join him there, and he would surely welcome her absence. This, however, was not the case, and her request was greeted by a lift of his autocratic eyebrows as he said, 'I'd rather you stayed,' and left it at that, giving Melanie no choice in the matter.

In the lounge, Julian made the usual detour to a table slightly on its own away from the general conversation of the other guests, and made polite conversation to the distinctly uncomfortable Melanie, who listened just as politely, managing to keep her inner thoughts to herself. She wondered what the rest of the guests made of them, for they must have looked an extremely odd couple, she thought—or maybe she was imagining things, she didn't know any more, for this was a world beyond her comprehension, and she no longer felt she could cope with it. Somehow she had to.

All she could hope for now was a return to more normal surroundings back home, and maybe to be able to persuade Julian Cridell that the whole thing had been a mistake right from the beginning. She felt sure that, by now, he must have come to the same conclusion.

'Coming to Dad's party tonight?' Anna Misting, a young, lovely brunette, the daughter of a friend of Julian's, called across to them.

Melanie, confident of what Julian's answer would be, was dismayed to hear his casual, 'I don't see why not.'

'Thought you would !' replied Anna loftily, darting a quick, triumphant glance in Mrs Dalton's direction, and Melanie, well aware that Julian had made a point of keeping away from the normal festivities until now, couldn't help wondering why he had suddenly chosen to attend this particular one.

She had a nasty suspicion that this might be his way of punishing her for daring to presume on their relationship, and that he meant to show her how ill equipped she was to hold her own in such company, for she was sure that that had been the reason why he had refused earlier invitations for evening amusements, meaning, no doubt, to foster the supposition that he was content in his new wife's company, whereas in reality, Melanie would spend the evening either reading or searching out suitable material for a lesson with Celia to help her to gain good exam results, and Julian would be in the study perusing the Financial Times, and keeping up to date with the latest news from London.

A little later, on their way back to their suite, it occurred to Melanie that Julian might not be considering taking her to the party; after all, Andrew Misting was his friend, and it was his party. This somewhat cheered her, until Julian, as they entered their rooms, said casually, 'We shall be going down around ten,' halting Melanie in her tracks as she started to make for her room.

She turned round slowly to face him. 'You mean both of us?' she asked, realising a little too late how ridiculous that had sounded; he had said 'We', hadn't he?

Julian's lips twisted in exasperation. 'Of course,' he said abruptly, managing to stem his irritation at her stupidity.

'I—couldn't you go alone?' asked Melanie pleadingly. 'You could say I've got a headache, couldn't you ?'

'I shall do no such thing!' Julian exploded. 'I don't have to remind you again of the terms of your employment, do I?' he asked pithily. 'There is a little more to it than lazing in the sun.'

Melanie swallowed. Now she was being made to feel like a society drone, a hanger-on. She took a deep breath. A little more of this unfair treatment and she would hate this man, she thought grimly. 'Very well,' she replied quietly, 'I shall be ready,' and went to her room.

A glance at her watch showed that she had exactly thirty minutes' grace, and she wondered if she ought to change into another dress for the party, but recalling Julian's anger at her previous attempt to act the part, she decided to stay as she was.

The communicating door between her room and Celia's was open when Melanie got to her bedroom, and Celia called out a greeting to her, forcing Melanie to go in and see her.

She found Celia propped up in bed reading a large volume on human anatomy, and gave a grimace as she met Celia's dark eyes. 'Not quite what I'd recommend for bedtime reading,' she said.

Celia laughed. 'It's absolutely fascinating,' she replied. 'Do you realise ?'

'Not now, thank you,' said Melanie hastily, seeing that the page open showed a detailed drawing of the gullet. 'I've just had dinner.'

Closing the book, Celia put it down carefully on the bedside table and turned her attention to Melanie. 'You look smashing,' she said, 'and that dress is just right for you. I'll bet they stared, didn't they?' she asked.

`It wasn't exactly a hit with your father,' said Melanie drily. 'In short, he was very angry indeed.'

Celia stared at her. 'Are you sure?' she demanded. `Perhaps he was just bowled over?' she suggested helpfully.

Melanie shook her head emphatically. 'No, I was the one who was bowled over, or perhaps I should say bawled out. I got a lecture on keeping my place,' she added, then, realising that Celia was still a junior, and in her charge at that, although it was difficult to remember this with her totally adult outlook on life, she added with a grin, 'I think he's afraid that it's all gone to my head—and don't worry, I didn't tell him it had been your good idea that I have my hair cut.'

For once Celia didn't rise to the intended assurance that she had nothing to worry about, but sat with knitted brows, and then shook her head slowly. 'It's not like him at all,' she said. 'I do wish he would ease up at work. It's not as though he needs the money.'

`Perhaps it's the sun,' Melanie commented drily.

This time Celia did laugh, but her expression soon resumed its earlier doubts. 'I'll have a go at him to give it all a rest,' she said, then snuggled down in bed. 'Night, Melanie,' she murmured, and was asleep before Melanie had reached her room.

The thirty minutes' grace before she was due to join Julian for the party had now been whittled down to a mere ten minutes, and Melanie wandered aimlessly around her room to while away the time. She didn't want to think too much about her changed circumstances, but of course she did. It had never once occurred to her that the man she had got to know and respect in that short three-week period could have changed to this extent. She could appreciate how difficult it was for him, but surely he should have foreseen how difficult it was going to be for her?

As she recalled the beach incident, and his anger at finding her with the children, Melanie's depression deepened. Even Celia had been puzzled by his

reaction, and if Celia was puzzled, then what chance had Melanie to reach the right conclusion?

When the hands of her watch reached the hour, Melanie left her room and went to the lounge, and was slightly surprised to see that Julian had changed out of the dark evening suit that he had worn at dinner into a white tuxedo that emphasised the tan that he had already acquired from their few days in the sun. He was, she thought absentmindedly, one of those few lucky people who tanned easily.

You could have changed,' he said abruptly, as he looked her over.

Melanie felt her hackles rise. Of all the disagreeable men ! 'I would have done, if I had known I was expected to,' she replied, letting a cold hint of her feelings creep into their association for the first time.

She saw his lips tighten as he acknowledged the truth of this bold statement, but he hadn't liked having it pointed out to him. 'I beg your pardon,' he said stiffly. 'I should have thought of that. Are you ready?'

Melanie nodded, and clutched her evening bag with fingers that trembled. He should have known how ignorant she was of these niceties, was what he had meant, she told herself, and she really couldn't see how they were going to get through the evening when for two pins she would have a blazing row with him.

There would be at least three women at that party who would go through hoops for him—Podge's mother, a rich divorcee whose pale blue eyes never attempted to hide her feelings when Julian was around, included—so why on earth had he picked on

her? Melanie wondered angrily as they descended in the splendid hotel lift that was large enough to hold a few gilt chairs for the convenience of the older residents. Because he could squash her, that was why !

she thought grimly. She was a little Miss Nobody where he was concerned, convenient in two capacities. One, a teacher for his daughter, and secondly as a shield from the attentions of these avaricious women. Melanie suspected that the second convenience was more important to him than the first, as it stood to reason that he could have settled for a tutor for Celia without the added complication of taking a wife. He hadn't been strictly honest about that side of the affair either, and had chosen to drag his ex-wife into the scene to make it more plausible.

By now, Melanie had completely disregarded Celia's views on the matter concerning her mother's character and determined pursuit of her ex-husband. Celia was biased, of course; she adored her father, and not surprisingly, after witnessing the way their society women friends unashamedly pursued him, she was of the opinion that no woman could resist him.

Well, this one could, she thought sourly, and if he had treated his first wife in the manner that he had recently adopted towards her, then Zara Cridell could be forgiven for taking off the way she had !

The large hotel ballroom was crowded when they entered, and a doubly miserable Melanie realised that she was going to be in trouble again very shortly, for she couldn't dance, at least not in the way the couples on the floor were dancing, for this was not a disco affair where all you had to do was look as if you were keeping in time to the music. The couples on the floor were whirling about, all following a step pattern that they knew by heart, and for a second thing, even if she had been able to dance, her sheath-like dress was not going to give her much freedom. She felt another surge of anger towards the proud man at her side for not explaining this to her. He could have told her that

there would be dancing, couldn't he? A party didn't necessarily mean dancing in Melanie's experience, limited as it was to her student days.

Her courage failed her at the door of the ballroom. 'I can't dance,' she said in a stiff voice. 'You really will have to make some excuse for my absence,' she added, as she began to turn away in readiness for a flight back to her room.

'You're staying,' Julian said softly as his lean hand caught her wrist before she could complete the turn and clamped a hold that gave her no option but to stay right where she was. 'I won't be doing much dancing either, if it comes to that,' he added smoothly. 'Lees circulate.' He drew her hand through his arm in what must have looked like a possessive gesture, but which was, in fact, a very firm grip indeed on the wretchedly nervous Melanie.

It wasn't easy for her having to nod and smile at people as they passed down the long room towards a gathering of people near the buffet and bar section, where several tables had been placed for certain invited guests and where the host, Andrew Misting, and his daughter were holding court. At the appearance of Julian and Melanie a ragged cheer went up, making Melanie feel awful, as it must have called the whole attention of the room to their arrival. She felt Julian's casually placed hand tighten its grip on her, as if he sensed her wild urge to escape.

Two chairs were quickly placed at their disposal at their host's table, and Melanie found herself holding a glass of champagne almost before she had had time to sit down.

`My wife doesn't dance,' said Julian drily, as he accepted his glass of champagne.
`You're really pushing the boat out this time, aren't you, Andrew?'

he added, with a smile, and a nod at the crowded ballroom, then lifted his glass in salute. 'All the best,' he said, and Melanie followed suit, thinking as she swallowed a sip of the awesomely expensive beverage that it was overrated.

`Decided to retire before I became an old man,' Andrew Misting said with a hint of satisfaction in his voice, and looked towards his lovely daughter who had just slipped across the room to have a word with someone. 'Anna says she doesn't see enough of me, and I guess she's right, so I've decided to play the part of the country squire.' Melanie couldn't help wondering what Celia would have had to say to that if she had been present, for she was of the same opinion as Anna, that her father should ease up as well. As she took another sip of her champagne, she stole a look at Julian, who appeared to her to be looking thoughtful, though she really couldn't tell; she had been wrong before about him.

`You should do the same,' Andrew Misting advised Julian.

`What should Julian do?' queried Anna as she rejoined them, sitting down in a haze of soft pink gauze that floated around her.

`Retire,' her father replied.

`Oh, I'm all for that!' said Anna with enthusiasm. `Aren't you, Melanie?' she asked. 'It can't be much fun for you having to fill time in while his lordship's adding more chips to that great pile he's already made.'

Melanie swallowed, and quickly took another sip of her drink. Really, it wasn't so bad, she thought, when you got used to it. In the end she managed a rueful smile. 'I suppose it depends on the man,' she said, not daring to look at Julian. 'I mean, if he's happy in what he's doing

Anna chuckled. 'You've got her well trained, haven't you, Julian?' she commented, 'but I suppose it's early days yet. Still, you mark my words, she'll soon be thinking up ways and means to keep you at home, if I'm any judge. Oh, that's a waltz,' she glanced appealingly at Julian, who had no option but to ask her to dance with him, and to Melanie's relief they took the floor.

Her eyes stayed on them as they danced to the lilting strain of the waltz. Anna's dreamy dress floated around her, and really, one had to admit that they looked the perfect couple. Julian, tall and handsome, bent his dark head every now and again to hear what Anna was saying to him.

`You'd better take good care of him, young lady,' Andrew Misting said, his eyes, as Melanie's, following the pair on the floor.

Melanie, surprised, looked back at him.

`You've stolen the man of her dreams,' he said, in answer to her look, and took the sting out of the words with a rueful smile at her. 'Anna's had her eye on Julian for years, ever since she was a teenager,' he added, and offered to fill up Melanie's glass, which she allowed; the liquid seemed harmless enough. 'The trouble is,' he continued, 'that she's not had much chance of meeting many reliable males. I do too much globetrotting. It's the reason why I've decided to put down roots. I want to see her settled with a good man.'

Melanie didn't know how to reply to this, and fortunately for her she saw Mrs Dalton approaching them, dressed in a green velvet dress that she must have been poured into.

`Here's another of them,' said Andrew Misting under his breath just before she reached them. `Personally, I can't stand the woman.' Social etiquette

forced him to give her a cordial welcome, but he did not offer a seat at their table, so it was fortuitous that she was able to join someone else's a few tables away, after wishing her host all the best for the future.

Julian and Anna came back after their dance, and soon their small party was joined by other friends of theirs. It seemed their policy not to put in an appearance until the party was well advanced, and Melanie was able to relax into some semblance of obscurity in the midst of the celebrations, while old memories of past occasions were recalled. As Julian did not take the floor again in spite of several pleading looks from the wives of the other men in the company, Melanie was spared the embarrassment of having to refuse any offers to partner anyone, should such an offer be made.

By two o'clock, Melanie was more than ready for bed; she felt distinctly light-headed, and had wisely refused a fourth glass of champagne as she was beginning to realise that it was not quite the innocuous beverage that she had thought it was.

It seemed to her that the party got louder and the music accompanied by native drums began to beat incessantly on her reeling senses. She was not inebriated in the strict sense of the word, only extremely tired, and longed for the peace and quiet of her room, and while the men's conversation turned inevitably back to business matters, leaving their women folk to chat about this and that, Melanie slipped away from the company and stood just outside the ballroom windows that opened on to a large verandah, drinking in the pure night air.

It was a moment of perfect peace for her, and her wondering eyes went slowly over the dark blue velvet sky with its myriad lantern stars. She had no other

thought in her mind but the beauty of the Caribbean night.

`What the devil are you doing mooning out here?' Julian's hard voice cut into her reverie like a crack of lightning in the lull of a storm, and Melanie blinked at the suddenness of his appearance. She had stood near enough the window to be seen if Julian had suddenly wondered where she had got to, for on several occasions many others of the company had done the same thing, only to get a breath of fresh air, and she didn't understand why her following their example should have aroused his annoyance.

`I was just getting some fresh air,' she began, and would have gone on to ask if he was ready to leave, but his next action prevented any such question for, to her complete amazement, he jerked her into his arms and began kissing her in a very businesslike manner.

For one wild moment, Melanie thought that he was drunk, and as soon as his lips left her stunned ones, she attempted to free herself from his embrace only to find that he had no intention of releasing her, and looked as if he was moving in for another session after giving her breathing space from the first.

As she tried to regain some sort of composure, realising that they were in view of some of the guests, she had the sense to work out that this was probably his way of settling all doubts as to their relationship as far as the others were concerned, but she also recalled his promise that she had nothing to fear from him, and felt very angry at his breaking what was for her a very important rule. She knew that she could do nothing about it then and there, but she meant to say plenty when they got back to their suite! At this point, however, a woman's husky voice intervened in her indignant musings.

'Darling ! How

wonderful! I didn't know you were here.'

Melanie felt herself released and found her eyes meeting a pair of dark eyes, incredibly like Celia's, but there the resemblance ended, for this woman was a very lovely brunette, whose white ball gown provided the perfect setting for her dark beauty.

'Didn't you?' Julian's voice held a definite touch of irony as he surveyed the woman.

'Melanie, this is Zara

'His ex, dear,' Zara Cridell said in an attempt at levity that didn't quite come off, for her dark eyes were staring hungrily at Julian, and then rested speculatively on Melanie.

'Not quite what I would have said was your style, darling,' she murmured, looking back at Julian, then to Melanie, 'We must get to know one another, we've apparently a lot in common.'

'I wouldn't advise taking that tack if I were you,' Julian said softly, yet somehow menacingly. 'I trust you're not staying long?'

Zara gave a trill of amused laughter, and Melanie thought she must be a wonderful actress, though she hadn't been able to keep her true feelings out of her eyes. 'I'm not really sure, darling,' she said sweetly. 'I've got a few weeks off from filming, but there's always a chance that they'll want a reshoot of a scene, and I shall have to go back. I do hope I can see something of my daughter while I'm here,' she added meaningly.

'That,' Julian said harshly, 'is up to Celia. You didn't exactly endear yourself to her the last time you put in an appearance,' he added in a low voice.

This time, Zara Cridell's training left her, and her eyes flashed in temper. 'And whose fault was that?' she demanded. 'I only want what's best for all of us.'

Julian caught hold of Melanie's hand in preparation

to enter the ballroom. 'You know the answer to that one,' he said coldly, and before any more could be said, he all but dragged the totally bemused Melanie back to their host, and, making apologies for their departure which were accepted by a knowing nod from Andrew Misting, they left, with Julian still holding on to Melanie's hand as if to ensure that she stayed right with him.

Only when they had entered the lift did he release her, and then stood in dark contemplation, his eyes on the thick carpet at their feet. 'Blast the woman!' he said explosively, and then turned his wrath on to Melanie. 'Keep out of her way, do you understand?' he barked at her. 'And see that Celia's not pestered by her either. You'll have to arrange to go out for a day somewhere tomorrow, a day trip or something.'

They left the lift and walked the few yards to their suite in the hotel's quiet late-night atmosphere. 'I can't get out of my business appointments today. I could have done, if I'd had any notice of her arrival; however, if she does intend to hang around, I shall make arrangements to be on hand,' he concluded, as they entered their suite.

During all this time, Melanie hadn't uttered a word, and perhaps it was her silence that annoyed him, for before she had a chance to go to her room, he said pithily, 'And the next time you're expected to put on a show of affection, I sincerely hope you succeed better than you did tonight. You couldn't have looked more horrified if I'd been trying to ravish you!' and on these stinging words, he flung off to his room, leaving Melanie staring after him in amazement.

How was she to know that he had spotted his ex-wife coming towards them, and decided to put on a show for her benefit? She wondered indignantly as she

prepared for bed. For goodness' sake! What other reaction had he expected from her? There had been no mention of sudden embraces in their contract. Indeed, homeless or

not, Melanie would never have countenanced such an agreement. There was a limit to what she was prepared to do, and Mr Julian Cridell had just reached it!

CHAPTER FIVE

MELANIE was still seething when she slipped into bed. Her indignation flared as she recalled Julian's sarcastic remarks on her failure to respond to his embrace. Just who did he think he was? Had the fact that women fell over themselves to gain his attention gone to his head? Really, she thought angrily, he should have married another actress capable of carrying out all that was required of her!

She thought of the way that he had stalked off, leaving his ex-wife to make what must have been an embarrassing re-entry into the ballroom, for in spite of the music, dancing and general chatter, Melanie was certain that from the moment that Zara Tobin, as she was known by millions from the big screen, had entered the ballroom, her every move had been sharply monitored by the rest of the guests.

She lay back on her pillow and closed her eyes. Well, she had now met Julian Cridell's ex-wife, and she had to admit that Celia had been right when she had said her mother was still in love with her father, and was using her as a counter in the game to gain her objective.

Melanie sighed. She could see nothing but trouble ahead. It was all very well for Julian to tell her to keep out of Zara's way, but she was staying at the same hotel, and was apparently determined to seek her daughter out.

All she could hope for, thought Melanie sleepily, was that she would be recalled for a reshooting of a

scene of the film she was making, or, failing that, that Julian decided to take off himself, perhaps back to England.

The following morning, Melanie found that she didn't have to bother to look for day tours of the island to take Celia and herself out of Zara's vicinity, for Julian had already made the arrangements for her, and they were to start out at nine o'clock—early enough, Melanie surmised, to be well out of the hotel precincts when Celia's mother chose to put in an appearance at the breakfast table. If she took breakfast, that was, for remembering that dark beauty's sylph-like proportions, Melanie guessed it was probable that she had to watch her figure to stay that way.

Celia, of course, had to be told of her mother's arrival.

'Well, if that isn't just like her! You bet she knew Dad was here. Did she make an awful scene?' she asked Melanie indignantly later, when her father had gone to his meeting.

'No,' Melanie replied, purposely avoiding telling her of her father's astounding reaction on sight of his ex-wife. 'She just said hello, and I was introduced to her, and then we left the party.'

'Before she could get her claws into you,' said Celia, nodding sagely. 'I didn't think Dad would hang around after that.'

Celia was all for the day out, and Melanie couldn't make out whether it was a wish to avoid meeting her mother herself, or simply to save Melanie any embarrassment, for she seemed to be of the opinion that Melanie needed protection.

The tour, like everything else on this island, was carried out in grand style; even what Melanie had

presumed would be a coach turned out to be a Rolls-Royce complete with chauffeur for just the two of them, plus a picnic hamper in the boot.

As the island wasn't a large one, the morning was spent in various out-of-the-way coves, watching the native fishermen repairing their nets, and then they settled down for lunch on a bluff overlooking a beautiful bay that reflected bright blue and lilac tones as the sun played on the water. The lilac mauve tints denoted where the coral reefs lay, and though Melanie couldn't swim, she thought how wonderful it would be if she could catch a glimpse of that undersea wonderland.

There was no such thing as taking their picnic as ordinary people did, with their tablecloths spread out on the ground around them; this picnic was carried out in keeping with their mode of transport, with the chauffeur now acting as waiter, setting up a small table and chairs which had been packed away in the copious boot of the car. After seeing to their wants, he discreetly withdrew to see to his own meal somewhere near the car, and as Melanie sipped the deliciously cool wine kept in an iced flask, and tucked into cold chicken salad, she hoped the chauffeur was just as well provided for.

Melanie's complexion soon turned a warm peach colour with the sun and the cool breezes coming off the ocean caressing her as she lazed beside Celia on that bluff, and time slipped away on the whispered breezes; for a while her troubles left her. They had tea further up the coast, with yet another picnic basket being unloaded. Julian, it appeared, was making sure that they did not return to the hotel until his business was concluded and he would be free to keep a watching brief on his ex-wife's activities.

'Well, if it's done nothing else, it's made Dad ease up on the business front,' commented Celia, as they settled down to enjoy their tea. 'He's probably arranging all sorts of excursions for us, and it will be nice to have him around,' she added pensively. Melanie looked at her. Celia's complexion, like her father's had turned a deep honey colour practically overnight. She thought she caught a wistful note in her words, but said nothing. Celia would hate her, or anyone come to that, to feel sorry for her, but it couldn't have been easy for her for all those years, denied as she had been a normal upbringing, and with a father, fond as he was of her, absolutely wedded to his work. She was about to take a second sandwich when it occurred to her that she hadn't really liked the first one. She had thought it was crab, but it must have been some kind of pâté; whatever it was, it wasn't to her liking.

Seeing her frown at the plate, Celia, who had settled for a large red apple, asked, 'Anything wrong?'

Melanie pushed the plate of sandwiches away and poured herself some coffee. 'It's some kind of pâté, I think,' she replied. 'I didn't like it.'

Celia leant over and inspected the sandwiches, pushing one open with an exploratory finger. 'It's crab,' she said. 'I thought you liked crab?'

'I do,' replied Melanie. 'Perhaps they've added something to it. Anyway, it didn't taste right, and I shouldn't have any if I were you,' she advised Celia.

'This will do for me,' Celia replied, contentedly munching her large rosy apple. 'Oh, look, Melanie,' she pointed out to the bay, 'that's the opposition of those canoeists we were talking to yesterday, and they're getting in some crafty practice by the look of

things,' she added with a grin.

They arrived back at the hotel just as dusk was beginning to fall, and one hour before dinner would be served. Melanie had begun to feel queasy as the hotel lights came into sight, although she couldn't be sure if it was a case of nerves on her part, for she wasn't looking forward to another confrontation with Zara, and dinner was an occasion that she would be certain to attend.

Nerves or not, by the time she had changed into her evening wear, Melanie knew she couldn't go down to dinner. It was all she had been able to do to stay and talk to Julian on their arrival back at the hotel when he had enquired if they had enjoyed their day out, and Celia had satisfied him on this count, before declaring herself tired out, and ready for bed. 'All that sea air and sunshine,' she had remarked with a yawn, and added that Podge would have to find someone else to keep her company in the teenage social club that evening.

Melanie left them to it and made straight for her room, obstinately refusing to give in to what she was sure was only nerves, made an effort to dress for dinner, and, having accomplished this task, found that that was as far as she was going to get. She stood in the middle of the room and closed her eyes, while she waited for the dizzy spell that had suddenly overtaken her to pass over.

She felt awful. She had been sick once, but felt that any moment now she would have to make another rush to the bathroom. Luckily Celia, true to her word, was out to the world.

When she emerged white and shaken from another spell of retching, she went to find Julian, who sat waiting to take her down to dinner, dressed immacu-

lately in his white tuxedo, and told him she couldn't possibly go down to dinner.

That much should have been obvious, she thought afterwards, as she staggered back to her room. He had not looked over-sympathetic, and seemed to think she had no right to go down with anything at this particular time, but he did say that he would get the hotel doctor to have a look at her, and that it was probably a touch of the sun; she had obviously not, he had said irritably, taken precautions about protecting herself. It was small wonder that he was put out, Melanie thought wretchedly as she crawled into bed, and really she couldn't have chosen a worse time to go down sick. It meant that he would have to sit alone at their table, and from what she had seen of Zara Tobin, there was no doubt that she would seize the opportunity of occupying the vacant chair.

Not long afterwards, there was a discreet tap on her bedroom door, and a short, rotund, merry-looking man entered her room carrying a case; he introduced himself as the hotel doctor and asked her what the trouble was.

Melanie gave her symptoms, believing Julian's diagnosis had been the correct one, and the nice doctor said it could be that, or something she had eaten, and gave her medicine to quell the queasiness in her stomach which acted as a sedative, too. Within ten minutes of his leaving, Melanie was asleep.

The next morning she woke with a heavy, heady feeling after her drug-induced sleep. She still felt far from well, and to her annoyance found that she was still on the queasy side. She had some tablets that the doctor had left her, but if they had the same effect on her as they had had the previous evening, then the

only thing was to stay put.

When Celia saw her, she endorsed this thought. 'It must have been those sandwiches, Melanie!' she exclaimed. 'You said they tasted funny, didn't you? It must have been the

heat that sent them off. Thank goodness you only had one of them! You stay put; don't worry, I'll tell Dad you're not so good.'

'You'll go out, won't you?' Melanie asked anxiously, not wanting to get herself any more black marks from Julian. He hadn't been too pleased last night when he had had to go down to dinner alone, and if they had to hang around the hotel all day because of her, he would be even less pleased.

'Are you sure you'll be okay?' Celia queried. 'I expect Dad has some plan to entertain us.'

After Melanie assured her that she would be fine, and that she would be taking one of the tablets that the doctor had left her, Celia went to find her father to give him the news.

To Melanie's intense embarrassment, Julian called in to see her shortly after Celia's departure, and stood for a moment surveying her before he asked how she was, giving her the nasty suspicion that he hadn't believed Celia's news that she wasn't well, and that he thought it was just a ploy to keep out of his way, which was not at all surprising when one considered what had happened the last time she had spent the evening with him.

Melanie felt almost certain that those were his thoughts on the matter. In other words, she was ducking out from under. Well, it was true that she herself had at first suspected that it was nerves that were causing the queasiness, for she had certainly not looked forward to the evening, and even less to what might ensue should he re-enact the part of besotted

lover for his ex-wife's benefit!

The very idea made Melanie's stomach start to churn again, and although Julian had said something about having a light breakfast tray sent up to her before he had left, she very much doubted her ability to swallow anything at all, except perhaps a cup of tea.

After a brief visit to the bathroom, she returned to the bedroom, determined now to take a tablet. It would be better to feel doped than to have to put up with this inconvenience, she told herself, and when she heard a tap on her door, she thought it must be the breakfast tray and the welcome cup of tea. She was disappointed on hearing a woman's voice call out before the door was opened, 'It's only me. I heard you weren't too well, and wondered if there was anything that I could do for you?'

Lydia Hounslow Holmes lowered her great bulk down on the bedside chair and stared sympathetically at Melanie's white features. 'No,' she said, summing up her findings.

'You're not too good, are you?'

'It was something that I ate, Mrs Hounslow Holmes,' said Melanie, wishing the woman would take her leave, for she didn't think it was kindness that had made her make the call on her. A notorious old gossip, she must have been disappointed at their absence the previous day when, no doubt, all the guests were agog to watch what they thought was going to be a very entertaining sideshow put on courtesy of the ex-Mrs Cridell; Mrs Hounslow Holmes liked to be the first with the news.

'I'm not up to entertaining, I'm afraid,' said Melanie meaningly, hoping her unwelcome visitor would take the hint and go.

'Of course you're not,' soothed the old woman, 'so if there's nothing I can do for you, I'll leave you in peace.'

Did the doctor leave you something?' she asked.

Melanie felt relief flow from her as she watched the woman heave herself off the chair, which also gave a whisper of relief as its springs were freed from their load. 'Oh, yes,' she replied quickly. 'I'm taking a tablet with my tea. I won't be able to keep anything down otherwise,' she added, managing to give a weak smile.

'I don't believe in these new-fangled ideas,' Mrs Hounslow Holmes snorted. 'It was taken for granted in my day.'

When the door had closed behind her and the rattle of the numerous bangles the old woman still wore in spite of the early hour of the morning had dwindled away, Melanie wondered if she actually slept with her fortune on her person. She wouldn't have been at all surprised to hear that she did. And what on earth had she meant by that odd remark of hers that she didn't believe in new-fangled ideas? However, the arrival of her breakfast tray at that point put all this out of her mind.

For the rest of that day Melanie dozed, and by the early evening she felt capable of taking a light tea. In between her wakeful sessions, which seemed extremely brief to her, she recalled Celia popping in to see her, and had a vague recollection of Julian's presence in the room at one time, but whether this was so she couldn't be sure. When she awoke fully she was dismayed to realise that they had done precisely what she hadn't wanted them to do, and stayed in the hotel all day. Goodness knew what misery that would have brought on Celia's head, with her mother determined to make her presence felt, and her father equally determined to keep them apart.

A fat lot of good she was, she thought miserably,

and Julian Cridell must have wondered what evil genius had been at work to make him settle on her as a likely candidate to act as a buffer between the two warring factions. There was little doubt, she thought pithily, that the hotel guests would have got their money's worth at some time during the day, as she recalled Celia's words about her mother revelling in big scenes.

The least she could do was to give in her notice, she thought wretchedly, and give Julian Cridell the opportunity of taking another candidate for the job. However, a few sober recollections soon quashed this grand gesture. Zara Cridell had actually met her as his wife, and to introduce another Mrs Cridell would be a little beyond the realm of credulity. Melanie shook her head; she was obviously not thinking straight yet, but she was certainly not looking forward to seeing either Celia or her father after the mess she had made of things!

When she heard Celia's voice call out cheerfully, 'Are you compos mends yet?' she had a cowardly urge to feign sleep, but then Celia was in the room and it was too late for any such pretence.

'I say, you'll never guess,' Celia chattered brightly. 'It was the funniest thing I've seen for ages. Can you imagine it? Mother's cleared off in a whiff of perfume, absolutely routed! This time it's really over!' she declared with shining eyes.

Melanie sat and stared at her. 'Was there an awful scene?' she enquired worriedly, thinking of Julian's coming fury that was about to land on her head at any moment.

Celia shook her blonde mane. 'Honestly, it was hilarious!' She frowned slightly.

'Although Dad didn't look all that pleased, which was odd, really, because it

worked, you see, better than anything else could have done.'

Melanie felt like shaking her head. 'What are you talking about?' she asked. 'What worked?'

Celia's black eyes danced mischievously as she regarded Melanie. 'I tried to keep you informed,' she said, 'but you kept nodding off, so I don't suppose anything got through to you. You had a visit from the Duchess, didn't you?'

Melanie thought back, then recalled the visit. 'Yes; I can't think why. She wanted to know if there was anything she could do for me,' she added with a frown.

Celia chuckled. 'Well, that's it, you see. The nosey old so-and-so put two and two together and came up with five!'

Again Melanie had lost her place in the script, and she looked blankly at Celia.

'Oh, dear,' the girl said, patting her arm with an almost maternal gesture. 'see I shall have to spell it out for you. Mrs Hounslow Holmes thinks you're pregnant, and has told everybody else,' and at Melanie's horrified look upon this news, she burst out laughing. 'If you could see your face!' she said merrily. 'But it's done the trick, don't you see?'

She couldn't wait to tell Mother—she hates her, you know, because she once told her she looked like a walking Christmas tree, and she's never forgiven her!

Melanie closed her eyes. Would Julian ever forgive her? she wondered. No wonder he hadn't looked pleased! He must want to strangle her!

'Look, it's all right,' Celia insisted. 'Of course, it was a bit of a shock to Dad, but he'll be so pleased that she's gone for good that he'll soon see the funny side of it. Oh, if you'd only been there! Mother walked right up to us in the dining-room and declared outright that

there were some things that one couldn't contend with, and this was one of them. She tried to make a tragedy out of it by wishing Dad happiness and she hoped that it was a boy, and said that she would never forget Dad.' Celia chuckled. 'It was like a stage play, and I'm sure she hoped Dad was going to stop her before she reached the door, and a big reconciliation scene would take place, but he was so stunned by what she had said, and I couldn't work it out either, that he didn't say a word. But as soon as the rest of the guests started congratulating him, I caught on.'

Melanie wished she could somehow sink through the bed and the floorboards too. It was getting worse by the minute. 'It's not funny, Celia,' she managed to get out, but the enormity of the situation was closing in on her. 'We'll have to leave,' she said, almost babbling in her anxiety, and flinging the clothes aside, leapt out of bed.

'Now don't start acting like Zara Tobin,' said Celia sternly, as she steadied the now wobbly-kneed Melanie who was not quite up to leaping out of anywhere. 'It's going to be all right, I tell you. I expect we'll leave now just to save you embarrassment, and you could always have a miscarriage, couldn't you? she added in wicked amusement. Shocked, Melanie stared at her. 'You've chosen the right profession!' she said crossly. 'Only a medical student could make light of such a situation. For goodness' sake, Celia, it's frightful! The first thing I'm going to do is to rout out that wretched Mrs Hounslow Holmes and put things straight.' She gave Celia an accusing look. 'You could have stopped it all by telling them what caused my sickness, couldn't you? Why didn't you? Think of your father's embarrassment, let alone mine!'

'I could have done, I suppose,' Celia replied unrepentantly, 'but I'm jolly glad I didn't, because we won't have any more of those ghastly scenes with Mother—and it just goes to show, doesn't it?' she added heatedly. 'You didn't really believe me when I said she didn't care two hoots for me, did you? Well, she took off fast enough when she heard the news. I could have been Scotch mist for all the notice she took of me. It was Dad she wanted, just like I told you. All right,' she conceded grudgingly, 'blow the gaff if you want to. I don't suppose Mother's left the island yet; I only know that she's left the

hotel. She won't be able to get a flight before the morning, anyway, and she's probably staying with some friends of hers.'

She looked so miserable that Melanie was made to feel mean and ungrateful, which was hardly fair. 'I'll have a word with your father,' she said quietly, 'and see what he thinks.'

This somewhat brightened Celia's depression. 'And you promise not to say anything to that woman until then?' she demanded persistently.

Melanie reluctantly gave her promise, and then shooed Celia out of her room while she dressed and got ready to face what she was sure was going to be the worst interview of her life, only remembering to ask Celia where her father was before she took herself off. Celia informed her that he was, 'Probably in the "men only" lounge receiving large whiskies to go with the congratulations,' and only just managed to shut the door between her and the pillow that an irate Melanie flung at her.

Melanie wasn't sure whether it was a general weakness on her part or the thought of the coming interview she had to have with Julian that made her knees seem to have turned to jelly, but she had to go

through with it rather than have the sword of Damocles hanging over her head, and she didn't know what she would do if she happened to meet any of the guests on her way to the hotel lounge.

This, however, was an ordeal she was spared by the arrival of Julian just as she got to the door of their suite, and for a moment their eyes met. Hers with an anxious enquiry in them, and his cold grey ones with an expression that sent her spirits pivoting down to an all-time low.

'I suppose you know the result of your slight indisposition?' he asked coldly.

Melanie looked away from him, and nodded. 'Celia told me,' she said quietly. She knew how embarrassed he must have been by the congratulations, and could only hope he had managed to deny them. 'I hope you were able to put the record straight,' she got out, forcing herself to meet those cold eyes of his.

'How the hell could I?' he demanded exasperatedly. 'Whatever you told that old besom Hounslow Holmes, it did the trick, didn't it?' he added with meaning.

Melanie stared back at him. The colour that had come back into her face since she had been up and about now left her, and the white look was there again. 'Would you please explain just what you mean,' she queried icily, completely losing her earlier apologetic manner at the enormity of the implied innuendo.

'I should have thought that that was obvious,' he said harshly. 'A wedding ring on a woman's finger can go to her head.'

'Are you suggesting it's gone to mine?' Melanie broke in indignantly.

'I can't think why else you should have bothered to put such a tale around, can you? If you've some idea of playing for keeps, I suggest that you forget it. Our

arrangement still stands. The only good thing about this whole wretched business is that my ex-wife's seen the light, and I know her too well to have any worry that she'll persist in her quest. News travels fast in the movie world, and she won't want any adverse publicity; she's got her fans to consider. Her touching farewell in the dining-room will do marvels for her image. And that, my dear Miss Greensmith, means that our little arrangement can be concluded much earlier than I'd supposed. You could not, of course, have foreseen that in your calculations. You can at least be assured that your future is rosy, for I shall stand by the original arrangement and settle my debt.'

He gave her a contemptuous look. 'I suppose, really, I ought to thank you for the expediency of the conclusion, but I have just had to put up with the most distasteful, not to mention embarrassing few hours of my life. I abhor play-acting in any sense of the word. I am not about to repeat the error that I made in my youth. We shall, of course, have to leave the hotel, and I shall make arrangements for us to take a villa here for the remainder of our holiday as it would look extremely odd if we were to take of back home. I advise you to make the most of your stay in the Caribbean while it lasts,' he ended harshly, before turning on his heel and leaving her.

Melanie felt her senses reeling as she watched Julian's tall straight back leaving the room. Whatever else he might have accused her of, it had never occurred to her that he would brand her as a scheming gold-digger who would sink so low as to capitalise on an agreement—and in that way!

Her mind whirled as she tried to come to terms with her position. What had she done to deserve such treatment? He wasn't even prepared to give her the

benefit of the doubt! In fact, even before this disastrous happening, he had shown his displeasure of her altered appearance, tearing her off a strip when she had had her hair cut, and accusing her of stepping out of line, warning her not to ape her betters! It was as well, Melanie thought, that she did get good and mad over the injustice of it all, for she would have sunk without trace if she had allowed herself to take everything he had said to her to heart.

As it was, she felt a distinct urge to arrange to have an announcement put out over the hotel intercom that Mrs Cridell was not, and never had been, pregnant, and leave the rest to Providence, which up to now had had a whale of a time at her expense anyway! The following morning they left for the villa that Julian had managed to rent owing to his not inconsiderable influence in those parts, and a chatty Celia, who hadn't seemed to notice a particular coolness between her father and Melanie, said how pleased she was that they were leaving the hotel. 'Podge is okay,' she said, 'but a bit on the silly side sometimes. Kept wanting me to go to one of their disco dances because the boys were there. I can't see what she sees in that spotty son of Mrs

The villa was roomy and cool and, which was more important, in its own grounds, a fact that it would ensure privacy for its occupants. After their luggage had been seen to by the resident houseman, whose wife did the housework and cooking, Melanie and Celia explored the grounds, while Julian made a few telephone calls giving his new number to his business confederates.

When a swimming pool was discovered at the back of the villa, Celia was delighted. 'Now you can learn to swim, Melanie,' she said.

If any such lessons took place, then it would be Celia who would do the teaching, Melanie thought wryly; she was not exactly on cordial terms with her father, who at that moment was probably hoping she would drown herself and save him the trouble of seeking an annulment. However, she kept these thoughts to herself, and replied lightly, 'Too much bother, Celia. I'd rather watch you,' and left it at that.

Their removal from the hotel gave Melanie some relief from the unenviable position she had found herself in, but it also presented other problems, such as finding herself constantly in Julian Cridell's company.

She was able to find something to keep her occupied some of the time, such as walking in the extensive grounds of the villa, which overlooked a bay, but meal times were a different proposition altogether, and she had no hope of taking her meals on her own, besides which, from the first day onwards, Celia had a distressing habit of

expecting them to spend all their time together, and there was a limit to the various excuses Melanie had had to think up to avoid these outings. Sooner or later, she would have to be told that Melanie's presence was to be of a shorter duration than at first envisaged, and Melanie only hoped she would be able to do this without certain uncomfortable facts coming to light.

Really, she thought angrily, when she had just made yet another excuse as to why she couldn't accompany them to the pool that afternoon, it was up to her father to explain things to her instead of persisting in putting up a front in Celia's presence. So far, she had managed to avoid their afternoon visits to the pool, and she was aware that Celia was of the opinion that she was afraid of being made to learn to swim and, being fond of Melanie, hadn't pressed the matter. For her part,

Melanie was content to roam the grounds, and she found a leafy bower where she could sit and look over the bay. Most of the time she would be thinking of her future, and what she would do when she left the Cridells.

It was true that she would have no financial worries and would be able to find herself a nice flat wherever she decided to settle, and it certainly wouldn't be anywhere near her Aunt Alice, that much was certain. No, she would go somewhere near the coast, she thought, maybe have a dog for company, that she could take out for exercise. This was always as far as Melanie would get in her imaginings, and where she always stopped, for she didn't want to go any further into what looked like an extremely dull and very lonely future.

Like everything else that had happened to her since she had applied for that advertisement, it simply wasn't real ; nothing was real, and the sooner she came down to earth the better.

The thing that really troubled her was the large amount that she would receive for services rendered, for the way things had turned out, she couldn't truly claim a successful outcome, although her mission had been accomplished through _methods totally outside her contrivance—a fact that Julian Cridell had not accepted.

Melanie's brows creased as she watched a yacht with a bright orange sail sweep into view across the bay. Under the circumstances, she didn't feel that she had any right to claim such a large recompense as had been agreed upon at the start of her employment.

All she could do, she thought, was to agree to accept a much smaller amount, enough to keep her going until she found other employment, and then, she told

herself with a feeling of relief, she would pay back what she could consider as a loan on account, providing she didn't borrow too much.

She wouldn't tell Julian Cridell of her decision to pay back what she was given. He was too proud a man to accept this condition, but she had her pride too, and that was something he hadn't bargained for. She had tried to play her part in the agreement, but she owed him far more than he owed her by settling what had been for her a very unpalatable problem concerning her immediate future, when she had been without a home and without a job, and, in spite of her vehement determination to keep her distance from her aunt and her obnoxious husband, would in the end have had to accept her aunt's offer of a home.

CHAPTER SIX

ON the third morning after their arrival at the villa, Julian announced at breakfast that he had some business back at the hotel, and a disappointed Celia accused him of not keeping his promise to take a real holiday with them. 'You promised!' she said crossly. Julian's brows lifted at her vehemence. 'And I shall keep my promise,' he said. 'I'm only going for a morning. You've usually got your head in those books of yours, haven't you?' he added adroitly. 'I'll be back for lunch, and we'll have a picnic by the bay. How's that?' he finished.

Celia, slightly mollified, nodded her head, but she wasn't entirely convinced. 'I know you, once you get embroiled in those meetings,' she said. 'It'll be "something's come up" and off you go!'

'It will not!' Julian replied with a gleam of amusement in his grey eyes. 'I have to go because my signature is wanted on some documents; that's all I'm letting myself in for.' Celia looked across at Melanie, who, as usual, took no part in these discussions. 'You heard him, Melanie,' she said. 'What shall we give him as a forfeit if he lets us down?' Embarrassed, Melanie didn't know what to reply to this, but murmured something on the lines that she wouldn't be going to the picnic anyway. 'You know I can't take the sun,' she said.

Celia stared at her. 'What's the sun got to do with it?' she demanded. 'It was that crab sandwich that

made you sick.' She turned to her father. 'It was off, you know, and I'm jolly glad Melanie warned me not to take one. I wouldn't have wanted to be as sick as she was.'

Julian gave Celia a sharp look, 'What sandwich?' he asked abruptly.

Celia blinked at the sharpness of the question. 'That day we went out,' she said. 'You know, the day before Melanie was sick. It was food poisoning, you see.' She looked across at Melanie. 'Didn't you tell him?' she asked.

Julian's eyes stayed on Melanie, who wished she was elsewhere. He must have been remembering the way he had gone for her, she thought uncomfortably, and she said quickly, 'Well, to be honest, I hadn't connected the sickness with that sandwich. I don't believe I remembered to tell the doctor about it, either, even though he did say I'd probably eaten something that didn't agree with me. I wasn't feeling up to much, you see,' she ended lamely, wishing that Julian would turn his attention elsewhere.

She was relieved when breakfast was over and she could spend some time to herself. The news that Julian had decided to spend more time with them came as much of a disappointment to her as it was a delight to Celia, and she wasn't looking forward to it one bit. Somehow, she had to have a word with him when Celia wasn't around, and that was not going to be easy.

That also went for the talk that she would have to have with him, but it had to be done, for there had been something in the look that he had sent her before he had left for his business appointment that suggested a hint of an apology, and aroused her suspicion that he intended to make up for his lack of

perception over the cause of her indisposition.

Since that last devastating interview, when he had accused her of 'playing for keeps' there had been no outward sign of his suspicions where she was concerned, but Melanie knew that this was only a front put up for Celia's benefit, and he had succeeded so well in this that there had been times when Melanie might have been

forgiven for thinking she had imagined the whole episode, until she had caught the glacial look in his eyes whenever they rested on her. He might abhor play-acting, she thought, but he was very adept at the art himself.

Her main worry now was that he would take the easy way out, make a swift apology and expect things to go from there, leaving her in a kind of limbo. He would, she was sure, conveniently forget his earlier threat of an immediate conclusion of their contract, particularly now that he had managed to persuade himself that he had nothing to worry about where she was concerned. The fact that Celia was fond of her would weigh heavily in his calculations, quite apart from the fact that her qualifications would ensure his daughter's success in her chosen profession.

Everything, Melanie thought dully, was just dandy from Julian's point of view, and it could, if she let it, go on for several years. She took a deep breath. No, thank you! she thought fervently. No matter what, she wasn't letting herself in for that. Although she had no wish to let Celia down; all things taken into consideration, she had had a rough deal all round. Money wasn't everything, and although her father loved her dearly, he was too busy in his financial dealings to spare much time for her.

It was the thought of Celia that brought an idea into her mind, and somewhat brightened her. She would

need a job after the annulment, wouldn't she? What was there against her carrying on as Celia's tutor?

The more she thought about it, the more she liked it. It was such a sensible arrangement, and one that would certainly appeal to Julian Cridell and settle, once and for all, his doubts about her intentions where he was concerned.

But first there had to be an annulment, and she was sure that he would listen to reason. Basically, he was a fair man, and he must have sensed that she was out of her depth among the rich society she had unwittingly been catapulted into. She was sure that she would manage to convince him that the sooner the charade was over, the better.

Feeling happier about everything, Melanie changed into her swimsuit to get the maximum amount of suntan in her favourite bower while Celia lost herself in her studies. If she had wanted any help from Melanie she would have said so, but since her bout of sickness, she had thoughtfully not made any demands on her time in the studying line, so Melanie was surprised when she met Celia in the hall after emerging from her room.

'Why don't you come down to the beach with me?' asked Celia. 'It's not too hot and there's a nice breeze out there for a change,' she added.

Melanie was tempted to refuse, and then felt mean. Celia obviously wanted company, so she agreed, and the girls made their way to the beach that sloped down from the villa's boundaries.

'I think this would be a nice place for our picnic this afternoon, don't you?' said Celia as she slipped down a sandy bank towards a stretch of white silvery sand where the sea lapped gently against the shore. 'Although I suppose we'd better bring a parasol with

us in case the wind drops,' she added, as she plonked her beach bag, overflowing as usual with technical books, down on the sand.

'Want to do some work?' asked Melanie, as she settled herself beside Celia, slipping off her skirt and blouse and making herself comfortable on the towel that Celia had provided her with.

The girl shook her head. 'No, I feel very lazy.' She sat up and looked around her. 'There should be a couple of lilos somewhere, according to Mario, He said that he put them down here in case we wanted to go on the beach. Oh, there they are,' she exclaimed, looking back to the top of the ridge they had come over. 'We ought to have seen them as we came down.' She went to fetch them. 'There you are,' she said as she put one down beside Melanie. 'Now you can really stretch out. I've a mind to use mine on the water.'

Melanie lay on the lilo and lazily watched Celia carry hers to the water's edge and float it out on the gently lapping water.

'You ought to try this,' Celia called a moment later. 'It's lovely, just like being in a hammock. The waves do all the work, and it's perfectly safe. I could lie here all morning,' she added drowsily.

'Oughtn't you to put some oil on?' Melanie suggested. 'The sun's getting stronger.' 'Can't be bothered,' Celia replied. 'I don't usually burn, anyway. I'm one of the lucky ones as far as suntan's go.'

Melanie lay back and closed her eyes, feeling the warmth of the sun on her eyelids, and the balmy island air caressing her face. Soon, all this would become a memory, part of a dream, she thought, and in the years to come, she would have to try and convince herself that it had all actually happened, and wasn't some-

thing she had read about.

Suddenly the brightness she had felt penetrating against her eyelids went black, and she opened her eyes, wondering how long she had been asleep, although it seemed only a moment or two since she had closed them. The sight that met her startled gaze made her spring up with a beating heart, and a dreadful anxiety for Celia's safety. This fear intensified when she caught sight of Celia's lilo now being tossed about on the mountainous waves sweeping into the bay.

It was a mini typhoon. Melanie had heard about them, and how suddenly they could appear and just as suddenly disappear, leaving a trail of wreckage in their wake, but none of this occupied Melanie's thoughts at that moment. Where was Celia, for pity's sake? Was she still clinging to the lilo?

In her highly over anxious-state, Melanie thought she saw her as one great wave overturned the lilo, but it was so dark, and the wind, now a howling gale, played tricks on her hearing. Was that Celia calling?

Without a second thought, Melanie grabbed her lilo and went into the water. She had some vague idea of using it to help her somehow get to Celia. She had seen bathers using surf-boards to ride the waves, and although she obviously couldn't stand up on the lilo, she might be able to carry out some sort of action lying flat on one. She had to try anyway; she couldn't stand by and let Celia drown. At least she had some strength in her arms, and Celia wouldn't have any by now.

The first great wave that caught the lilo Melanie was clinging to swept her of her seemingly safe anchorage. She hadn't bargained for an early ducking which left her gasping and coughing out water that she had swallowed, and her frantic attempts to grab the

lilo that kept bobbing away from her every attempt as the boiling sea tossed it about like a tiny piece of jetsam reminded Melanie of the time, as a child, that she had tried to get her teeth into an apple in a tub at a party.

She had no idea why such thoughts should run through her mind at such a time, which perhaps was just as well; she was in enough trouble without recalling old sayings about seeing one's past just before the end.

The second time Melanie went under, she knew she wasn't going to make it. Oddly enough, she felt no fear; it was as if another side of her was seeing the green of the water as she began to sink helplessly down to the depths. It was brighter now, she thought hazily, and that was the last recollection before darkness closed in on her.

'Get some blankets, Celia, grab anything, and tell Mario to have some black coffee ready!'

The words seemed to come from a long way off as Melanie found herself face down on the beach and being pummelled with merciless vigour by the owner of the voice. She knew it was Julian's, and she also knew that Celia was safe. He had given her an order, hadn't he? She felt incredibly weary, and too sore all over her body to think beyond this point. The pounding went on. She must have retched it all up ages ago, she thought weakly. 'Oh, do stop pounding me,' she managed to gasp out weakly.

'So you've decided to join us again, have you?' Julian demanded, with a harshness in his voice that touched even the very weak Melanie, who put it down to the fact that she had made a nuisance of herself once again.

She felt herself turned gently over, and supported by his strong arm as he helped her half sit up. He was soaking wet, and Melanie's thoughts turned to the certain ruination of the smart business suit that he had worn that morning when he had left for his business appointment, that now seemed aeons ago. 'Your nice suit,' she said feebly.

'I'll take it out of your salary,' Julian said, with a hint of sarcasm in his voice that made Melanie want to cry, and she did, the tears falling like rain down her face.

She wanted to say how sorry she was-for causing all this trouble, but she really had thought Celia was drowning out there.

Celia then arrived back at a breathless pace, armed with a blanket which Julian wrapped around Melanie, cocooning her like a silkworm's egg, and to add to her misery, he picked her up in his arms and carried her back to the villa. When they reached it, he put her down on the chaise-longue, and arranged the blanket so that she could drink the coffee that was waiting for her. 'As soon as you get some warmth into you, you've to take a hot bath, he said in his autocratic way, 'I'll tell Mario's wife to run the water,' he added, and left to give the order.

'Try and drink it as hot as you can,' Celia said, her eyes showing her concern for Melanie. 'Thank goodness Dad arrived in time! I couldn't reach you; the currents were too strong. I still don't know how he managed it, but he did. What on earth possessed you to go into that sea?' she demanded.

Melanie stared at her. 'I know it sounds mad,' she said crossly, 'but when I woke up, all I could see were mountains of waves and your lilo tossing about on top of them. I had some weird idea that you were still

clinging to it, so, like Tarzan I rushed to the rescue.'

Celia giggled. 'Oh, Melanie, I do like you,' she said, and hugged her, making tears prick behind Melanie's eyes at the thought that at least someone really cared about her.

'I thought I heard you calling for help,' she told the girl, to cover her momentary embarrassment, 'but with that awful racket the wind was kicking up, I suppose I dreamt that, too,' she added ruefully.

`No, you didn't,' Celia said. `Only I wasn't calling for help; I was trying to tell you that I was okay. I got on to a rock and just hung on. I knew it wouldn't last for long; these sudden storms don't. I nearly died when I saw you plunge headlong into the water. I thought you must have had a brainstorm!' Her small hand clutched Melanie's cold one. 'I ought to have known what made you try something daft like that,' she said softly. `Come on, that coffee's gone cold, I'll pour you another.'

Melanie barely had time to swallow the second cup of coffee before Julian, now changed into casual wear, was in the room again, and with a brusque, 'Finished?' he whisked her off the chaise-longue and out of the room, with a surprised Melanie protesting that she could walk.

She thought he was going to take her to her room, but when she realised that their destination was the bathroom, her assertions that she could manage became more adamant. But her companion appeared to have become deaf and dumb until they reached the bath, when he put her down and, first testing the water temperature—as if she were a baby, Melanie thought vaguely through her exhaustion—he coolly commented, `We'll get that wet costume off you, and have you

into this in no time,' as if he were talking about the weather.

Melanie held firmly on to the rim of the bath; she might be exhausted but she was still in full control of her senses, and if he thought she felt the blanket wrenched away from her, and summoned up enough strength to make a last stand against this high-handed treatment. 'I can manage. Just leave me to it,' she said, through teeth that had begun to chatter.

`It looks like it, doesn't it?' said Julian drily. 'You can't even stand up straight,' he added, as his fingers caught the straps of her costume.

`Please!' Melanie pleaded. 'Can't you ask Mario's wife to help me, or Celia?'

`Celia's just a child, with a child's strength,' he replied, still keeping a firm hold on her straps, 'and Mario's wife will naturally expect your husband to do all that's necessary,' and so saying, he stripped the costume off her slim body in one deft movement, leaving the totally embarrassed Melanie entirely bare, the wet folds of the swimsuit clinging round her ankles. But she didn't have time to dwell on this fact, mercifully, for the next moment she was swung up into his arms and lowered gently into the water. 'Now you just let the warmth seep back into you,' he said, as he straightened his tall body, his grey eyes meeting hers with a glint of amusement in them. 'If you can manage to cope when you're ready to come out, okay. If not, I'm in the next room. Just call out,' he told her, and left.

`I'll cope,' Melanie muttered after he had left. 'I'll cope if it kills me!'

Not that it mattered now, she thought, her misery now turning to slight hysteria, and it was all she could do to repress the bubble of laughter that threatened to take over. Only the thought that Julian was on the

alert for any sign of abnormality on her part—and surely, a fit of the giggles would come into that category at this particular time—helped to sober her.

Slowly the warmth enveloped her body, and Melanie felt the strength returning. There was a strong inclination to be lulled into sleep, but she sternly resisted this, afraid that Julian might consider looking in on her to see if she were ready to come out. This thought alone was enough to give her the impetus to get going under her own steam, and, getting out of the bath, she wrapped herself up in the large towel, grateful for its generosity of material, and presented herself for Julian's critical approval before going

to her room. Julian took one look at her totally shrouded appearance and his eyes crinkled in amusement as if to remind her that it was a bit late for prudish proprieties, making Melanie want to hit him. Her colour was high as she swept off to her room to dress.

The sooner she had that talk with him, the better, she thought angrily. She had suffered enough embarrassment for the cause, a cause that was already won, she reminded herself as she slipped on a cool dress and sat at the dressing table to comb her hair. Of course, he would think her pathetic attempt to preserve her dignity was comical, and she supposed it was from his point of view.

It was not so much the fact that he had treated her like a child left in his care for a specific time that hurt so much, it was the plain fact that she was a grown woman, with a woman's feelings, and she had a right to protect those feelings, and what little dignity he had left her. And that wasn't much, she thought angrily, as she recalled the bathroom scene.

She could have managed. Celia could have steadied her until she had got into the bath, couldn't she? But

oh, no, Mr High and Mighty had seized the chance to demonstrate what a little nonentity she was. What did it matter to him if she was embarrassed? She was just a cog in his machinations, a fly to be swatted when it got too adventurous!

She took a deep inward breath. She was tired of being on the receiving end of that swatter. It was time that she did something about it, and there was no time like the present, she told herself, as she took one look at herself in the dressing table mirror and sailed out to meet the enemy, hoping that Celia had gone back to the verandah where she usually spent the mornings lost in her studies.

Melanie had not, however, taken into account the fact that the morning was now early afternoon, and Celia and her father spent the afternoon together, so all her pent-up frustrations had to take a back seat until a more suitable occasion presented itself. Her subdued manner during lunch was put down to the morning's happenings, with neither Celia nor her father making any attempt to draw her into the conversation, on the premise that the sooner that it was forgotten, the better for Melanie.

Now Celia was at it too, Melanie thought crossly. She too was adopting the same attitude as her father, treating her like a child, and anxious not to dwell on anything that might prevent recovery from a traumatic experience.

Had Celia told her father why she had plunged into that boiling sea? Melanie wondered. Or did he think as Celia had first thought—that she had taken leave of her senses? More than likely, she thought dully, as she peeled a peach. What did it matter, anyway? In fact, she hoped Celia hadn't told her father, for with his kind of thinking where she was concerned, he would

have been certain that she had an ulterior motive behind her action, hoping maybe to go up in his estimation.

There was no further mention of the previously arranged picnic on the beach, and Melanie felt piqued about this too. Not that she had arranged to go with them, but she did feel that they could have carried on with the arrangement and left her to her own devices, instead of making her feel that she had upset their plans, although she had to admit that this was not strictly true, and, if she were honest with herself, it was a nice gesture on their part to stay with her.

As it was, she had to fall in with Julian's suggestion that they spend the afternoon by the pool, just taking things easy. Celia could swim if she wanted to, and Melanie could relax in the sun.

It did occur to Melanie that she might be able to have a word with Julian while Celia was in the pool and unable to hear what was said, for she could see no other opportunities occurring in the near future now that he had given his word to Celia that there would be no more business calls taking up his time.

There was no hope of a quiet talk when Celia had gone to bed either. The evenings were spent either watching the television, usually only for the news, then she would settle down for a game of chess with her father, and it was usually around ten when a halt was called, by which time Melanie was ready for bed herself. For appearances' sake, she had had to spend her evenings with them, settled in a corner of the lounge with a book to keep her company, and since her last interview with her employer, most of her time would be spent in going over those harsh accusations of his, no matter how much she tried to forget them and concentrate on the story. As if that weren't

enough, she now had another even more devastating occurrence to add to her memories!

She chose a time when Celia was down at the other end of the pool and set on completing a four-lengths' run, and Julian had settled down with a paperback thriller. 'I want to talk to you,' she said quietly, keeping her eyes on Celia's progress, but she glanced quickly at Julian as she said this, and saw his brows rise a fraction at her low voice. 'I think it would be better in both our interests if I left your employment as soon as possible,' she went on. 'And under the circumstances I hope you won't ask for a month's notice. Two weeks should be ample,' she added firmly.

Melanie now had Julian's full attention, and his eyes narrowed to a slit as he studied her. 'Given up already, Mrs Cridell?' he asked softly.

Melanie's cheeks flamed at the innuendo. 'If that's the way you want to see it, then yes!' she got out furiously. 'Aren't you relieved?' she demanded pithily. 'All my well-laid plans have come to nothing, I'm throwing in the towel.'

'You'll do no such thing!' Julian replied harshly. 'You signed an agreement, remember? You go when I say you go, and not before.' His voice took on a silky note. 'Besides, I'm quite content with things as they are,' and he shot a quick assessing look at the fuming Melanie. 'I'm also a little disappointed in you. I didn't expect you to give up so easily,' he added.

Melanie stared straight ahead of her. Her cheeks had turned from red to blanched white with shock. She felt like shaking her head. She must be imagining all this. He was actually implying—she swallowed. She wouldn't think about that, she decided. She'd probably got it wrong anyway; he was playing with

her. 'Oh, I know when I'm beaten,' she managed to get out. Two could play at that game, she thought.

'And you think you've earned your money?' he asked icily.

Melanie's small hands clenched into fists. She wished she could hit him. He really did punch low, didn't he?

'I've saved enough from my wages to tide me over,' she replied through clenched teeth. 'You can keep the rest,' she flung at him, and felt a rush of relief as she said this. She hadn't wanted his money anyway; she would cope somehow.

‘Temper, temper,’ he said, with a hint of amusement in his voice, as if calming an hysterical child. ‘Why don’t you have a rethink about the whole matter when you’re calmer?’ he suggested.

Celia was on her last lap of the pool, and Melanie knew it was now or never. ‘I don’t need to rethink,’ she said angrily. ‘I’m giving a fortnight’s notice.’

‘And I meant what I said,’ replied Julian with maddening calm. ‘For Celia’s sake, I advise you to accept my decision. She’s had enough to put up with from her mother’s tempestuous nature, and I’ve no intention of putting her through anything like that again. She’s very fond of you, as I’m sure you know. Just let things take their course,’ he added. ‘It will all work out in time.’

Melanie felt she hadn’t got that time! If he was only worried about Celia—but then Celia was beside them, receiving her father’s congratulations on her fast timing. ‘We’ll have you swimming for England at this rate,’ he said teasingly.

Celia accepted this tribute with wide grin. ‘Haven’t time for the Olympics,’ she said, slightly breathlessly, as she flung herself down beside Melanie.

After dinner that evening, Melanie excused herself on the plea of tiredness, and left Celia and her father to their own devices. She couldn’t possibly sit calmly in her corner of the lounge pretending to read a book, not after that talk with Julian, and certainly not with the sort of searching, speculating way he watched her now.

Her decision for an early night was accepted without question, by Celia at least, but Julian had shot her a quick, assessing look that annoyed her, and she was sure that if it hadn’t been for the morning’s events, he would have insisted on her presence.

He must think that she was a wax doll with no feelings at all, she fumed as she made her way to her room, thankfully closing the door firmly behind her. After what he had hinted, she was inclined to place a strong chair against it, as there was no lock to ensure safety.

She stopped suddenly in the middle of the room. What on earth was the matter with her? She was in no danger of being molested by Julian Cridell, now or at any time.

She shook her head. This wasn’t like her. Where was her normally calm outlook?

Julian Cridell had happened, that’s what! she told herself. She had let him get to her, just as he had mesmerised all those other women.

Her soft lips tightened, it was so easy for him, with those good looks of his, to turn a woman’s head, but not this one, she vowed silently. She had better get a hold on herself right here and now before any of that kind of nonsense crept in.

Melanie walked over to her bed and sat down on it. She had been right in one thing.

He had decided to keep her on just as she had suspected he would, simply for convenience’s sake. He was not the kind of man

who would worry about his jet set friends’ reactions to the swift ending of his ‘marriage’, and that was including the bogus pregnancy! All he need say was ‘false alarm’, and the rest was history. The only thing that would surprise them, Melanie thought sceptically, would be the longevity of the marriage.

This was what was worrying Melanie. Why should he seek an annulment when he was content with things as they were? He had company for Celia and a shield against women like Mrs Dalton, not to mention Podge’s mother, and a few others she could think of.

There was also the bald fact that his first marriage had soured his whole outlook on connubial bliss and, as he had so adamantly stated, he had no intention of repeating the experience.

Melanie took a deep breath. It was no use getting worked up about it. All she could do at this time was to take Julian Cridell's advice. She had stated her wishes in the matter, and if it had done nothing else, it had shown him that she had a mind of her own, and she was certainly not going to put up with any more chauvinistic displays on his part. He could have had a discreet word with Celia, who did know the score, and she could have helped her in the bathroom, thus saving Melanie from the most embarrassing experience of her life.

From now on, she vowed, she would keep her distance from Julian Cridell, and hope that the holiday didn't last longer than a fortnight, for it would be easier for her to detach herself from his company once they were back home, when he would take up his commercial life again; then, with any luck, there would only be the weekends to cope with.

As Melanie had come to a decision, so had Julian,

and it was exactly the opposite of Melanie's, for at breakfast the following morning he calmly stated that he intended to teach Melanie to swim.

Melanie was furious. If anyone was going to teach her to swim, it would be Celia, that was if she decided to learn! Her belligerent glare at Julian expressed her feelings in no uncertain way. 'I'm not sure that I want to learn,' she said angrily.

'Oh, but you must!' said Celia quickly. 'If Dad hadn't arrived in time yesterday, you'd have drowned, you know,' she added seriously.

Melanie silently noted that Julian had not attempted to alter her decision on this. He didn't believe in wasting his breath. He had decided that she was going to learn to swim, and that was that. She would learn to swim! It was like coming up against a brick wall, she thought, and the sooner she stopped banging her head against it, the better for everyone. It was just a case of if you couldn't beat them, you joined them !

However, Melanie had her own reasons for dissociating herself from the ménage, brick wall or no brick wall. 'I really feel I've had enough of the water to last me for quite some time,' she said firmly, and applied herself to her breakfast in a manner that suggested that that was the end of the conversation.

She really ought to have known better. There might be a lot that she didn't know about Julian Cridell, but one thing she did know, and that was that he liked his own way.

'Nonsense!' he said crisply. 'You must learn to swim before you develop a fear of the water, so the sooner you start, the better. Celia will keep herself occupied with her books.' He glanced at his watch. 'We'll start in about an hour's time,' he announced grandly.

Melanie, about to swallow some coffee, nearly

choked at this bald announcement, and was just about to come out fighting when she noticed the way Celia was looking at her father, and her expression showed that she was as nonplussed as Melanie was, but for different reasons. She agreed entirely with her father's decision to force the issue on Melanie's learning to swim, but it was quite plain that she had expected to be included in the instruction, in the role of supporter if nothing else, yet it was equally plain that her father had other ideas.

It was this last thought of Melanie's that stopped her from arguing against his decision, and gave her a little ray of hope that perhaps he had thought things over and decided to release her from her commitment. With Celia otherwise occupied, they could talk without fear of being overheard, for the pool was well away from the villa and well screened. With these thoughts in mind, Melanie allowed the arrangement to stand, and was glad to note that after the initial disappointment, Celia took it in her stride, advising

Melanie just before they set off for the pool that she wasn't to worry, she was in good hands.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JULIAN led the way to the swimming pool, his tall, lithe form clad in swimming trunks, with his towel slung over his tanned shoulders. He strode ahead of Melanie, making her feel like a Red Indian squaw keeping a respectful distance from her brave.

As soon as they reached the pool, Melanie, who had expected them to sit down to a pow-wow—she was still playing the role of the squaw—was surprised to see Julian throw his towel down on a chair and dive into the water, and with a few expert strokes make his way down to the shallow end where he waited for Melanie to join him, indicating that she should use the steps to enter the water.

She was not only disappointed that things were not the way that she had hoped, she also felt gauche and foolish, and her temper flared at finding herself once more on the receiving end where this man was concerned. She wondered if he did it deliberately. She had almost reached the last step down to the water when her annoyance overcame her earlier submission in allowing him to teach her to swim. 'I've changed my mind,' she said abruptly. 'I don't want to learn to swim,' and she turned to go back up the steps.

At least, that had been her intention, but she didn't get very far; in fact, she didn't even reach the top step before she found herself hauled back down and into the water by a determined Julian, who kept his hands firmly planted around her slim waist as the movement of the water sent her slightly off balance. 'If you're

trying to tell me you're afraid of the water, then you'll have to think up a better excuse,' he said softly, his eyes holding her angry ones. 'Cowards don't plunge into raging seas on mercy missions, particularly if they can't swim,' he added pointedly. 'Just catch hold of the side of the pool,' he ordered, as he pushed her gently towards the edge.

Melanie knew when she was beaten, and was in no position to put up any further opposition to his dictates.

'Now keep hold of the sides, and let your legs leave the floor of the pool, as if you were lying flat on the floor,' he ordered and, placing his hand against her stomach, lifted her up into position. 'Let the buoyancy of the water support you,' he said.

Melanie was not too sure about the buoyancy of the water; she had sunk before, hadn't she? She was grateful for his supporting hand.

'Now start kicking,' he said, 'but keep your legs straight. That's it. Try to keep to a rhythm.'

After what seemed a very short time to Melanie, she found that she was able to practise this exercise without Julian's supporting hand, and she felt vaguely pleased with herself and a little disappointed when Julian called a halt to the proceedings.

'You've done very well,' he said, 'but that's enough for a start. We'll move on to the next step tomorrow. The main thing is to give you confidence that the water will support you. Now we'd better get back before Celia feels neglected,' he added with a brief smile, as he threw Melanie her towel to dry herself with.

So much for her hopes that he had changed his mind about letting her go, she thought despondently as she followed him back to the villa. It was as if that earlier conversation had never taken place. She could see no

chance now of any private tete-a-tete. Celia wouldn't expect to be left behind tomorrow, and she might just as well have come today, Melanie thought.

In this thought, however, she was proved wrong, for the following morning there was no attempt on Celia's part to accompany them, and Melanie suspected that she had been given her orders to stay behind. Why, she couldn't imagine; perhaps he thought that if Celia were there, Melanie would feel even more gauche than she already felt, but had he but known it she would have welcomed Celia's presence.

This time, Melanie found herself being presented with a rubber float, and was told to hold on to it and make her way across the width of the pool, her kicking legs providing the impetus for the short journey.

All went well until she was half-way across the pool, when she suddenly lost a hold on the float, and in her attempts to retrieve it, felt herself sinking to the bottom, arms and legs flailing in a most undignified manner. But her immediate thoughts were not on deportment, only that she was in the middle of the pool and not at the shallow end. One minute she was fighting for air, the next she was swept to the surface by a pair of very strong arms, and while she gasped for breath, Julian's voice came close to her cheek. 'I've got you. You're quite safe.'

It was then she realised they were standing at the shallow end, and Julian's arms were around her, supporting her while she recovered her breath.

At that precise moment in time, Melanie knew that she loved Julian Cridell. She knew a sensation of wanting to cling to his strong body so close to hers, to receive his love and protection for the rest of her life, but as the thought was there, he stood away from her

and, picking her up, placed her by the side of the pool, then climbed out himself. Melanie felt that she couldn't look at him. If he should even suspect her feelings in that rash moment of hers—she couldn't bear it, and took refuge in raillery. 'I do seem to have a habit of living dangerously,' she commented lightly. 'I suppose now we'll have to go back to the drawing board?' she added, but her voice shook a little, not so much over her unexpected ducking, but over what had ensued afterwards, that sudden surge of emotion towards the man now watching her with those enigmatic grey eyes of his. 'You panicked, that was all,' he said. 'You should have remembered what I told you about the water supporting you. If you had just gone on holding your arms out in front of you and continued to kick your legs you would have got to the end of the pool without the aid of the float.'

Melanie managed to give an offhand shrug. 'I'm not a very good pupil, I'm afraid.' She took a deep breath. 'Look, I really don't care if I learn or not, and I'm sure you must have better things to do with your time. I'll just keep practising what you've taught me, and go on from there.'

Julian's grey eyes narrowed. 'Afraid?' he challenged softly.

Melanie's blue eyes opened wide. Instinctively she knew that he wasn't referring to her fear of water. Had he sensed her feelings earlier? There was a slight flush on her cheeks as she forced herself to meet his eyes. He might have guessed, but he was never going to know for sure. 'Of course not!' she got out indignantly. 'It's just that I feel you're wasting your time, that's all.'

Julian's eyes continued to bore into Melanie's. 'Am I?' he queried gently.

Again Melanie was sure he was quite deliberately misinterpreting her words. He had taken advantage of her, of course; she had no experience to fall back on, only her own common sense, although she could rely on that if nothing else. She got up abruptly and, collecting her towel, started to dry herself. 'Well, it's up to you, of course,' she said, in a matter-of-fact voice, 'I've admitted that I'm not a good pupil,' she smiled, but the smile did not reach her eyes. 'That's a sad thing for a teacher to admit, isn't it? As far as swimming goes, I'm a complete dunce, and that's all there is to it,' she ended flatly as she shook out her damp towel and folded it over her arm as she prepared to leave the pool.

'Giving up again?' said Julian mockingly, yet there was an underlying hint of annoyance in his voice that didn't escape her.

He was so used to getting his own way, she thought angrily, that he turned positively mean when crossed.

'There's a lot to be said for commonsense,' she said quietly, her angry eyes meeting his challenging ones.

'It depends on which side of the fence you're standing,' Julian said casually, giving her a look that made her go weak at the knees. 'You're the one who's building the fence, but I'm afraid you're going to find that it's not quite as durable as you're hoping it'll be. Nor will any barrier be. Not in the long run.'

Melanie stared at him. He most certainly was not referring to any swimming lessons now, as indeed he hadn't been before, but to actually give notice of his intended assault on her defences like that was surely beyond the pale! 'I've no idea what you're talking about,' she got out, trying to inject some indignation into her voice, which wasn't too hard to do, as she was still suffering from shock.

'Of course you don't,' said Julian with a touch of amusement in his voice. 'I was forgetting your commonsense outlook,' he added, as he jumped up and quickly towelled himself down, then, with a wicked side glance at the still stunned Melanie, led the way back to the villa.

When they got back, Melanie was devoutly grateful for Celia's company at the lunch table, and her animated chatter brought back some semblance of sanity after the morning's shocks. 'How did you get on?' she asked Melanie.

Melanie sent a quick glance towards Julian before replying, 'Not so well. I got a ducking after losing one of the floats.'

Julian interposed here, with, 'She's giving up. How many times did you go under, Celia?' he asked.

'Heaps of times!' said Celia with a grin. 'I wanted to chuck it in too, but Dad wouldn't let me. He won't let you either, Melanie, you'll see,' she added earnestly. 'You won't want to sit on the beach all the time when everybody else is in the water, will you?' Her argument was reasonable.

Melanie felt she was being pushed into a corner from where there was no retreat. She knew that Julian was watching her with those all-knowing eyes of his, and wanted to protest that Celia didn't know the half of it. She sighed inwardly. It was no fault of hers that her father had some devious plan in his head to keep her with them until such time as he deemed her presence unnecessary, and that could be a very long time indeed. If she stuck to her guns, and said she was quite prepared to sit on the beach, she didn't see what anybody could do about that. It was up to her, and she was fighting for her future. 'I shall do very well on the beach,' she replied primly. 'I'm not the sporty type,

you know,' she said to Celia, with a smile to soften the disappointment.

'She's a coward, I'm afraid, Celia,' said her father in mock solemnity.

'She is not!' Celia leapt to Melanie's defence like a tigress defending her young.

'You're not a coward, are you, Melanie? You show him by learning to swim. If you still want to sit on the beach afterwards, then it's your choice, isn't it?' she demanded fiercely.

There couldn't have been many occasions when Celia ganged up against her father, but this was certainly one of them, and Melanie could feel the net being drawn tighter around her. Celia was playing directly into her father's hands, as he had known that she would. It was a case of no holds barred where this man was concerned, she thought despairingly. 'Perhaps I need some support from a friend,' she said lightly, conquering the impulse to scream in frustration at the easy way Julian had got what he wanted. This time he wasn't having it all his own way. 'Come and hold my hand tomorrow, Celia,' she said, darting a baleful glance towards Julian, whose bland expression of self-satisfaction made her want to retract her words.

Celia blinked and stared at her father. 'You've been bullying her, Dad !' she said accusingly, and looked back at Melanie. 'He bullied me, too, you know, but you're different,' she added with an indignant look towards her father.

Julian's brows shot up, and his handsome features took on a pained expression. 'I hardly think "bullying" is the word. Firmness would be more apt. How far do you think you would have got if I had turned soft when you tried to throw in the towel?' he asked his daughter.

Celia's dark eyes acknowledged the point, then she laughed 'Okay,' she said, and turned to Melanie. 'What he means is, it's all for our own good,' she explained with a twinkle in her eyes. 'Don't worry, Melanie, I'll come with you tomorrow,' she promised. 'You'll do nothing of the sort!' Julian said firmly. 'The last thing Melanie needs at the moment is an audience, and I'm certainly not having you two ganging up on me when she gets faint-hearted again.'

Celia opened her mouth in protest. But I only was as far as Julian let her get.

'I think we'll take that belated picnic on the beach this afternoon,' he remarked casually as if Celia hadn't spoken, but both girls knew that that was the end of any intended opposition to his wishes.

While Celia and her father spent the afternoon swimming and sunbathing, Melanie stayed on her lilo, protected from the heat by a large sunshade. Although she had a book with her, her thoughts were too chaotic to allow her to make any sense of the words in front of her eyes. Her sudden realisation that she loved Julian had come as an unwanted complication in her already muddled state of affairs, and as she had tried to come to terms with this unpalatable fact, she had found herself facing the even more worrying one of Julian's determination to enmesh her in the family, by fair means or foul.

His excuse, of course, was that he was only thinking of Celia, but there was no getting away from the fact that he was also providing himself with an insurance policy against any further involvement in the marital stakes,

What if he should meet the one woman who could satisfy his high ideals of femininity? Melanie sighed inwardly. There would be no problem there for him,

for Miss Greensmith would be given her marching orders, supplied with an annulment and a wad of cash.

As for Celia? Melanie frowned. If Julian ever did fall in love, she was certain that Celia would simply have to toe the line and accept the woman he had chosen.

Melanie moved restlessly, and the book slipped off her lap. The next minute she heard Julian's voice say, 'I'm glad you're getting some rest. You'll need plenty of strength for tomorrow's ordeal, won't you?' as he replaced the book on to her lap.

Melanie started. She had been so engrossed in her thoughts that she hadn't realised that they were back from their swim, but when she looked around for Celia, she saw that she was still in the water, and she felt a surge of anger as his words sunk in. 'I might have second thoughts on that,' she said stiffly.

'You might, but you won't, will you?' Julian answered softly, as he stretched himself out on the white sand beside her.

Melanie's eyes gleamed with temper behind her dark glasses. 'I can't see why you should be so sure of that,' she said coldly.

'Because I know you—a little more, perhaps, than you realise,' he replied quietly.

'You don't know me at all!' said Melanie, indignantly. 'If you did, you wouldn't have accused me of ' Her voice faltered ; she had already said more than she should have done. 'I admit that was a mistake,' he replied, 'and I'll own to it. There are times, you know, when you don't give me the benefit of the doubt either. Why, for instance, do you suppose, that I took such an abhorrence to your altered appearance? I rather liked your hair as it was, you know,' he added casually, ' but

there was more to it than that. One day I'll tell you, but that's enough for now. Go back to your dozing and enjoy the sunshine,' he ended, as he settled back on the sand.

There was little chance of Melanie doing that! Here again he was attacking her peace of mind. She went over his words. It was almost as if he was giving notice. Notice of what? she thought, as she closed her eyes. What an extraordinary man he was !

Melanie might have slipped into a doze at this point had not another thought suddenly come to mind, one that swiftly brought her back to full wakefulness. He liked his own way, didn't he? Enough to force the issue once and for all. She was his wife, business arrangement or not, in the eyes of the law; he was her husband, and husbands expect certain rights—she swallowed. Not that, she thought. He might be capable of doing a lot of things to get his own way, but he wouldn't go as far as that. Not without her consent.

A rush of pure panic enveloped her as she recalled the way she had felt about him that morning at the pool, when she had wanted to cling to him. He was no stranger to the sudden rushes of emotion women showered upon him. So he had known! Hadn't he said that he knew her a little better than she had given him credit for! She closed her eyes. Now she felt like the sacrificial goat waiting for the tiger to pounce, dreading, yet completely hypnotised, in spite of the fate awaiting it. The goat, poor thing, would be tethered to a post, but she was still free, wasn't she?

As she fought to control the waves of panic flowing through her, she told herself firmly not to be such an idiot. It was just relief at finding herself once more snatched from drowning that had produced that sudden rush of emotion where Julian was concerned.

Two sinkings in two days had been just too much for her, and it was little wonder that she had felt such an overwhelming thankfulness towards her rescuer. And that was all there was to it. Purely and simply thankfulness!

No sooner had they got back to the villa, she thought, following through the morning's events, than she had got back to normal, resenting his high handed way of steamrolling through her casual request that Celia should join them during the next

lesson. Surely, she reasoned sagely, had she been in love with him, she would have gone positively gooey-eyed over his adamant ruling against that proposition, but what had she felt? Nothing but extreme annoyance, and a fervent wish to wipe that self-satisfied expression off his too handsome face !

She drew in an inward sigh of relief. So there was nothing to worry about. If Julian thought it was going to be simply a matter of gentle persuasion, and that she would fall in with his plans, he was due for a shock. He was so sure of his attraction, spoilt by adoration on all sides, that it was small wonder that he had taken it for granted that Melanie would fall overboard for him. She would be much more compliant then with his future plans. She got on with Celia, and that weighted the scales against her eventual freedom.

No, it wouldn't, she vowed silently. If he thought she would be content to live a life of infatuation with a man who didn't care two hoots about her, and only suffered her presence because she was useful to him, then he was far off the mark, which only went to prove that what she had said to him about him not knowing her at all had been right.

Celia then joined them, and they packed up the remnants of the picnic and started off back to the villa.

Melanie, listening to Celia asking her father if they could watch a thriller later on television, felt a sense of relief deep down. She felt she had faced all her fears, and come out much calmer and certain about the future. She was just as determined to prevent Julian from reaching his goal as he was to attain it. Had she gone pie-eyed over him, things would have been very different, but as it was, she knew she was in the right, and if she was ever tempted to take the easy way out, her pride would soon put her back on the road again.

Had Melanie needed any confirmation on her earlier thoughts where Julian's plans were concerned, she got them that evening. Celia's suggestion that they watched a thriller had been agreed to and Melanie, sitting in her usual seat across the room from where Julian and Celia normally sat during their chess sessions, found to her intense annoyance that Julian was more occupied in watching her than in the plot being unfolded on the screen before him. She didn't know how long he had been studying her, for she was caught up at first in the story, but eventually she felt this concentration seeping through her absorption in the film.

What was he trying to do? she thought crossly. Mesmerise her? Her chin went out in a gesture to repulse this unwanted attention, and she could have sworn that Julian's eyes had a glint of amusement in them before he turned his gaze back to the screen again.

Melanie's soft lips firmed. Yes, he would think it was amusing, and it must be a novel experience for him to find someone who was immune to his charms. How long would it take to discourage him? she wondered. He wasn't a patient man. She would be doing him a service, she thought sagely, in showing

him that he couldn't have his own way all the time, and she would show him, there was no doubt of that!

The following morning, Melanie found herself actually looking forward to the swimming lesson. In her own way she had declared war on Julian, who was of the opinion that all women could be manipulated to suit his purposes. This time he had made a slight miscalculation.

When they arrived at the pool, Melanie remembered what he had said about her being able to keep afloat by lying flat on the water and kicking her legs should she lose the float again, and she would certainly put that advice to good use this time, she told herself, as she entered the water and looked around for the float, but saw no sign of it. 'I'll take you across,' Julian said. 'Perhaps it was a little too early for you to take the float. Now, come towards me,' he ordered, as he stood a little way away from her and held out his hands for her to clasp. Melanie did as she was bid, feeling all the time that this was a deliberate move on his part to bring her to heel. Perhaps he meant to push her under until she capitulated?

With her thoughts not entirely on the lesson, it was small wonder that little progress was made, for Melanie was intensely aware of Julian's strong grip on her hands, and his grey eyes that seemed to watch her every movement like a hawk.

'Use your legs,' he ordered, as she began to sink again. 'I'm not supposed to be hauling you across.'

'I'm trying,' Melanie managed to splutter out as she swallowed some water.

'Very,' he commented drily, and made her swallow another mouthful as she saw the funny side of things and couldn't help laughing.

'Shades of Celia,' said Julian, his eyes taking on a look that abruptly brought sobriety back to Melanie and made her really concentrate on her lesson.

From then on, she progressed so well that by the time the lesson was over she was able to get across the pool without any aid at all. It was true that her stroke resembled a kind of dog paddle, but she was definitely afloat, and as Julian remarked, all she needed now was tuition in perfecting a good stroke.

Her efforts had left her completely worn out, and as she began to wade back to the steps to leave the pool, Julian called, 'Here,' and held his hands out for her to grasp and be lifted out. Melanie, too exhausted to stand on her dignity, accepted the help offered. She might have been a featherweight by the casual easy way he caught her and lifted her out of the pool, and before she knew what was happening he held her close to him before releasing his hold on her, and, to add insult to injury, gave her a light kiss on the tip of her nose. 'Good girl,' he said approvingly.

All Melanie's exhaustion left her. She was so angry she found it hard to control her voice. 'I'm not Celia!' she got out furiously. 'You have no right.' She paused for breath. Julian's grey eyes travelled slowly over her flushed features and lovely pansy-blue eyes that now shot sparks of fire. 'I have every right,' he said meaningly. 'If I were you, I'd be grateful for the fact that I do treat you like Celia. The time for you to worry will be when I decide otherwise.'

Melanie stared at him. If she could only believe that, but she didn't. Somewhere along the line he had already taken that other decision. This was only a softening-up process, and as long as she was aware of it, she was safe.

'I'd like that in writing,' she muttered fiercely, her slim body still taut with anger, and her chin thrust forward in defiance.

Julian's eyes showed their amusement. 'Which part?' he queried wickedly. 'The first or the second?'

Melanie was no match for him, and she knew it. She also knew that there were times when it was better to remain silent, and this was one of the them, so she shook her head in a gesture that showed that she intended to ignore that provocative remark, and towelled herself down.

`Coward,' Julian said softly as he followed her example and, with a mock bow at the still fuming Melanie, indicated that she should lead the way back to the villa. It all pointed to game, set and match to Julian Cridell, Melanie thought sourly when they got back to the villa, and she made her way to the bathroom for a shower before joining Julian and Celia for lunch, during which time she would have to put up with Celia's queries on her morning's progress, try to keep her mind strictly on the subject in hand, and somehow ignore those mocking grey eyes that seemed to see right through her pathetic attempts to avoid his calculated attacks on her emotions. After her shower, Melanie dressed, putting on a cool silk suit, and sat down at the dressing table to comb her hair. What on earth had she done to deserve landing up in a mess like this? she asked her sober reflection. All she had wanted was a job. She hadn't bargained on finding herself landed with a husband as well! No, not a husband. That was only the wording on the certificate. A business partner who obviously intended to be around for a long time, and who, if he

had his way, would become a sleeping partner in every sense of the word ! Melanie blanched at her thoughts. But it was no good wrapping it up and trying to pretend that there were no such thoughts in Julian Cridell's mind, not after he had gone to such lengths to make her aware of his intentions. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. Any woman would be proud to acknowledge such a man as her husband, or even lover, come to that, so what was wrong with her? Why this stupid coyness on her part? Her fine eyebrows rose as she stared back at herself, then she suddenly blinked and shook her head. `Because fair was fair,' she whispered fiercely. A man like Julian Cridell wouldn't have looked twice at her in any other circumstances. She had no looks, and certainly not the kind of background a wife of his ought to have. They simply had nothing in common with each other, and if anything, she seemed to annoy him by her strict adherence to the rules. She sighed. Used to annoy him, she thought sadly. Now it only amused him that a slip of a girl like her would dare to oppose his wishes.

CHAPTER EIGHT

To Melanie's relief, Celia was included in the next morning's lesson, and it was she who kept correcting her stroke action under the watchful eye of Julian. Within a few days, Melanie was able to swim the length of the pool accompanied by Celia, who timed her stroke to the much slower Melanie's, and declared that it wouldn't be long before they would be racing each other the length of the pool. During this period, most of Melanie's fears where Julian were concerned had faded away, and she managed to convince herself that she had let her imagination run away with her, even to the extent of finding herself actually seeking his approbation in her prowess as much as Celia had done. For the first time since their arrival at the villa, she began to enjoy herself, and it would never have crossed her mind that she was slowly but surely becoming enmeshed deeper and deeper into the very situation she had been so determined to avoid. A week later, Julian announced that they would be leaving at the end of the week for the UK. Melanie, like Celia, felt a slight regret that such a lovely holiday had come to

an end, but they had had three weeks of sunshine, and even her pale features now shone with a healthy tan.

It was only on the plane journey home that Melanie began slowly to come back to reality. Not surprisingly, it was the thought of contacting her Aunt Alice again soon after they had settled back at Oaklands that

started off an uncomfortable trend of thought.

She had written her a short letter to the effect that she had found employment, and that it was a living-in position, and that she was off with her employer and charge on holiday. Then she had posted a card to her shortly after they had arrived in the Bahamas, and said she would contact her again when she got back.

Her frown deepened as she studied this problem. What on earth could she say to her now? She had made no mention of her marriage. How could she? How could she possibly have written a letter to her aunt that went something on the lines, 'Dear Aunt Alice, I have married my boss. It was very sudden, but don't worry, it wasn't a real marriage, and I expect it will be annulled before the end of the year.'

She drew a swift inward breath. There was only one answer—simply to write and tell her that she was back in the UK and would keep in touch with her.

At this point, she felt a light touch on her arm, which gave her quite a start in spite of the gentleness of the touch. She came back from her worries to meet the grey, enquiring gaze of Julian.

'What's wrong?' he asked quietly.

Melanie had forgotten how quick he was to sense her moods, and glanced towards Celia, who was obligingly asleep on the opposite seat. 'I was just thinking about my aunt,' she said, and left it at that.

'She's welcome to pay us a visit any time,' said Julian.

Melanie stared back at him. 'I don't think that would be a very good idea,' she replied in a low voice.

Julian's autocratic brows rose. 'I fail to see why not,' he argued reasonably. 'She'll be anxious, no doubt, to meet her niece's husband, and naturally I shall be interested to meet my wife's only relation.'

Melanie's eyes widened at this cool assessment of the situation, and all the fears that she had pushed to the back of her mind came stampeding back. 'You're not my husband,' she said in a low, furious voice, 'and I'm not your wife, and you know it. It's purely a business arrangement, and I'm certainly not going to put myself in the position of having to explain that to my aunt. She's one of the old school, and has definite views on propriety. I'm very fond of her,' she added icily. 'As far as she's concerned, I have a good job, and that's all she's going to know,' she ended flatly.

There was a tautness around Julian's firm mouth, that suggested that he was not amused; in fact, he was very angry indeed. 'I shall send her an invitation to visit Oaklands,' he announced grandly, as if Melanie hadn't spoken.

Melanie's eyes sparked shoots of fire as she struggled to compose herself. 'So you'll explain everything, will you?' she got out.

'I don't see what there is to explain, as you put it,' he replied calmly. 'These things happen. You're not the first young lady to marry her boss, and you won't be the last,' he added lightly.

Melanie was too choked to give this bland statement the attention it warranted. All she could manage was a stuttered, 'You..I-

Julian patted her shoulder in a gesture that might have been used to calm an hysterical child. 'There, there,' he said soothingly. 'You just think about it. You're crossing your bridges before you come to them, you know.'

They weren't bridges, not in Melanie's opinion, they were deep treacherous chasms, and she had no chance of avoiding them; the odds were too heavily stacked against her!

They landed at Heathrow in glorious sunshine, for it was July, but the hot, sticky atmosphere that pervaded the airport with its scurrying passengers on their outward or inward journeys made the beautiful island they had left a day ago seem aeons away in time.

The car was awaiting them outside the airport precincts, and Jenks was politely enquiring after his employer's health and hoping that they had enjoyed their holiday. After receiving affirmation of this, he went on to say in his smooth, unobtrusive voice that all was well at Oaklands, and that Amy had just got herself engaged to Johnson, the head gardener's lad.

All this Melanie heard, but for all the attention she paid to this innocuous exchange of news, she might still have been on the plane, for her thoughts were centred on that conversation she had had with Julian regarding her aunt.

If Julian said he would invite Aunt Alice to Oaklands, then he would do just that. All she could hope for was time to work out some sort of a solution. Talk to him, plead with him to see things from her point of view, so that when her aunt did visit them she would find her niece carrying out her duties as a companion to his daughter, and nothing more.

On recalling the last few hectic hours before they had left for the Caribbean, Melanie almost winced as she remembered the way the staff had not only accepted her marriage to Julian, but heartily endorsed it!

If confirmation was needed on this, she had only to recall Jenks's deferential treatment on the seating arrangements in the car. Julian, as before, had sat next to his chauffeur after watching his family seated, and it should have been Celia who was attended first, but

it had been Melanie who was given first choice of position.

How could she hope to keep the truth from her aunt with the staff addressing her either as Madam or, worse still, Mrs Cridell?

Melanie swallowed. Somehow she had to dissuade Julian from any idea of inviting her aunt down to Oaklands, and if that didn't work, get hold of the invitation. She knew the post was left for one of the gardener's boys to take down to the postbox in the lane a mile away, and she would have to keep a watching brief on all outgoing mail.

Her misery deepened. It was an impossible task. All her schemes would come to nothing should he post the invitation in London from his office. Supposing he decided to visit her aunt instead of sending her an invitation? Melanie's quick catch of breath at this disturbing thought caught Celia's attention, and she took her gaze off the passing scenery to look back at Melanie. Sensing the look, Melanie quickly feigned sleep.

'Melanie's suffering from jet lag, Dad,' Celia commented.

'It's to be expected,' replied her father, twisting round to look at Melanie whose eyes remained tightly shut. 'In time, she'll become as used as you and I have come to be to readjusting to the time lag.'

Melanie almost gave herself away at this point, and only just prevented herself from grimacing at this bold statement, for it underlined everything that he had said about the future, and that he had no intention of letting her go.

Back at Oaklands, life seemed even more removed from reality for Melanie, who instantly found herself being addressed as 'Madam' by the staff, not in any servile attitude, but in respect for her position and, it

appeared, a genuine wish to help her maintain it.

That this was in accordance with Julian's orders Melanie was in no doubt, but there were ways, she knew, in which such orders could be countermanded by the staff in many small ways without fear of dismissal. But she encountered none of this, and it only increased her fears for the future.

It was as if there was one big conspiracy, she thought wearily as she slipped away to her room two days after their return. She was still the sacrificial goat, now being fattened up for the sacrifice. She winced at this thought. Couldn't they see that she was entitled to a life of her own choosing? They had no right to push her into a pigeonhole labelled 'Mrs Julian Cridell'.

Had no one, for one moment in time, thought about her feelings in the matter? She thought of Celia, now renewing her acquaintance with Popsie in the paddock, and stirred restlessly. Certainly not Celia. Celia considered her father irresistible to the opposite sex, and by the evidence of her own eyes during their stay on the island, Melanie could hardly blame her for taking that view. No doubt the servants were of the same mind, she thought sourly, recalling little Amy's almost fatuous expression when serving at the table when Julian was present at the meal—and she was a newly engaged girl, who should have eyes for no one but her sweetheart!

The same could be said of Mrs Soames, who quite plainly would do anything for the master, and Melanie was sure he could do no wrong in her eyes.

Her dispassionate glance went around her small sitting-room; at least she could be thankful that she still had her private quarters, but even these had been encroached upon by Julian since their arrival back at

Oaklands under the flimsy excuse of wanting to discuss a dinner party that he wanted to give to a few neighbours of his, at whose table he had dined several times but whose hospitality he had never reciprocated.

Thinking about it afterwards, it did occur to Melanie that there was a pertinent reason for the occasion, and that was to introduce her to the local gentry, with whom, she thought depressingly, she would have nothing in common.

She had tried to convey this to Julian at the time, but there had been no 'discussion' as Julian had termed it. That had only been an excuse for his intrusion into her private quarters. Julian didn't discuss things with her. He simply told her, and she was expected to fall into line with his plans.

Her hopes of being excused attendance were crushed by Julian's sharp retort.

'Nonsense. Of course you must attend. I'm inviting Andrew Misting and Anna. I had word from him this morning that they've just bought a property thirty miles away, and will, no doubt, be visiting us as soon as they've settled in.'

There was no answer to that, Melanie thought dully, and no chance of her crying off. Her fingers clenched a fold in her pleated skirt; she might just as well give in. No matter what, she wasn't going to be allowed to win.

Any day now she would receive a request from Julian for her aunt's address. Perhaps she would be invited to the dinner party, too? Melanie closed her eyes; that would undoubtedly include the leering Arthur Makin.

In her mind's eye she envisaged the gathering. She had no fears about her aunt feeling out of her depth among the county élite. As the headmistress of a select private girls' school before her retirement, she would

be more at home in such company than Melanie herself was. No, Melanie had no worries on that score, but she had plenty on another. Aunt Alice might have been taken in by the plausible Arthur Makin, but she wouldn't be taken in where Melanie's marriage was concerned, and it wouldn't take her long to realise that there was something decidedly odd about the arrangements.

The only thing she could do, Melanie thought, was to come clean about everything. Her aunt would be shocked that such an agreement had been entered into, but once that part of it was over, Melanie felt that she would accept the facts as they were, and there would be no further need for evasiveness on her part. Of one thing she was determined, only her aunt would receive this confidence, so somehow she would have to work things so that she got her on her own, for the purpose of enlightening her. She sighed deeply. As Julian had once said, she was probably crossing her bridges before she came to them, and in all probability he wouldn't include her aunt in the gathering, but would settle for an afternoon visit, to include tea.

She brightened a little at this point. There was less chance of her aunt spotting anything unusual in an afternoon visit. Julian's manners were impeccable, one could hardly expect a sophisticated man of his age to act the doting lover around the tea-table.

This thought should have amused her, and normally it would have done, but it only depressed her further. It wasn't that she wanted Julian to act the doting lover. Heaven forbid ! But since their return from their holiday, he had seemed to move further away from her, as if his attention to her on the island had been simply a way of entertaining himself, and he must

since have congratulated himself on the way things turned out, for Melanie might well have fallen under his spell, and given in to that insidious bombardment of her will. She took a deep breath. Thank goodness for sanity, for goodness only knew where such a step would have led them, and by now he would be cursing himself for his own lapse of sense.

Melanie settled herself on the window seat, and glanced out at the panoramic view in front of her, and beyond to the woods surrounding the property. A deep frown settled on her brow. She hadn't been strictly fair in putting the present state of affairs down to Julian, for it was she who had instigated the change in their relationship.

Start as you mean to go on had been her tenet, and right from the beginning of her life as 'Mrs Cridell', she had shown a definite preference for her own company as and when circumstances permitted. They permitted now with Celia in the paddock, and Julian, after Melanie had politely excused herself, having made off to his study to catch up on his business affairs.

As yet there had been no sign of Julian returning to work in the City, but Melanie felt that it was only a matter of time before he would be back to his old routine; he was too immersed in the world of finance to stay away for long. Melanie was annoyed that this hoped-for solution to one of her problems still showed no sign of taking place by the time a fortnight had elapsed since their return, and apart from spending the morning in his study, he began to look ominously as if he had taken Andrew Misting's advice on early retirement.

As long as Celia was still at home—the school term

did not start until September—Melanie managed to arrange things that she didn't have to spend much time in Julian's company, slipping away to her own quarters. When Celia chose to go down to the paddock in the afternoon, the mornings being spent in the old nursery that now did duty as a schoolroom.

If Julian was backsliding where work was concerned, so was Melanie, over that all-important letter to her aunt.

She had made several attempts to write to her, but had always landed up with a pile of unfinished letters in her waste basket. In her inner heart she hoped that some miracle would relieve her of the necessity of involving her aunt in this uncommendable state of affairs.

By the end of three weeks, Melanie felt that things simply could not go on as they were. Julian's good nature seemed to have deserted him, much to Celia's surprise, and Melanie suspected that he was now regretting the whole situation, but shied from actually discussing this with him, as he seemed more unapproachable as time went on. All she could do was to wait until he decided that enough was enough, and came to the sensible conclusion that her presence was no longer required at Oaklands.

The threatened dinner party was due to take place at the end of the week, and Melanie's depression deepened at the very thought. It would be a case of 'Hello' and 'Goodbye' as far as her presence among the county élite was concerned, and she couldn't understand why Julian was going ahead with it. It would be more sensible to delay such a gathering until after she had made her departure, surely? If he hadn't bothered to entertain his neighbours for several years, a little longer wouldn't hurt.

It was at this point that, unfortunately for Melanie, she recalled that the Mistings would be present, and she blinked at the realisation that the last time she had seen them she was supposed to be having a baby! She glanced down at her slender figure—well, one look and that myth would be dispelled. She sincerely hoped that neither of them would comment on the fact; it had been bad enough on the island, but should it leak out to the local gentry—Melanie drew in a swift breath: Julian would be absolutely furious. The only thing to do was to get Anna on her own, and say something about a false alarm.

By the time she went down to lunch with Celia the following day, Melanie's nerves were strung to breaking point.

There was a pile of letters beside Julian's plate that had been opened, as the mail had come that morning, but he brought the letters in for Melanie and Celia's perusal, for they were acceptances for the dinner party. Celia, idly going through them, suddenly exclaimed, 'Leonora's back?' with such a look of pleasure that even Melanie's deep absorption in her troubles was put aside for a moment.

'She will be, by tomorrow,' replied Julian, his eyes resting thoughtfully on his daughter. Celia turned impulsively to Melanie. 'You'll love Leonora,' she said. 'The trouble is, she spends such a lot of time abroad. It's her job, you see; she's an authority on art, and she's always being asked to value someone's old painting that's been found in their attic.'

Melanie nodded. 'It must be an interesting job,' she said.

'Not so interesting when it entails so much travel,' Julian said drily. 'But I rather gather from what she says in her letter that she's thinking of staying put for a while.'

Celia's smile widened. 'So we'll be able to visit her, won't we, Dad?' she said happily. 'I'm sure she'll become good friends with Melanie.'

Julian's grey eyes rested on Melanie as he said quietly, 'Well, we'll have to see how it goes, won't we?'

She was startled by the tone of his voice. It was as if he was giving her an ultimatum—about what, she couldn't think, but what he probably meant was if Melanie was around that long!

Celia took her own interpretation. 'Of course they'll get on !' she replied firmly.

In the schoolroom the following morning, it appeared that Celia's mind was not on work, but on Leonora Talbot's arrival back from her travels.

Melanie knew that she ought to discourage this deviation from work on her pupil's part, but her curiosity was aroused. Whoever this Leonora was, it was plain that Celia was very fond of her, and Celia did not give her affection lightly, so although she didn't exactly encourage her to enlarge on the subject, she didn't discourage her either.

'Do you remember that big white villa-looking place we pass before we turn up our drive?' Celia asked suddenly. 'Well, that's where Leonora lives. We can get through the wood at the end of the garden to it,' she added. 'Dad used to send me over there when he knew that Mother was on her way, to get me out of the firing line,' she added.

In her mind's eye she conjured up an 'Auntie'-like personality, with a no-nonsense attitude, and who probably wore spectacles and good tweeds, and brogues, and who must be nearing retirement age from what Julian had said. In spite of Celia's musings

on a future happy relationship between them, Melanie doubted this; she could hardly see herself being accepted as a suitable wife for Julian Cridell. Perhaps that had been what Julian had meant by that cryptic statement of his.

'We could go over there later,' Celia said. 'She's probably home by now.'

'I don't think that's a very good idea,' said Melanie firmly. 'She'll be tired, Celia, especially if she's just come back from abroad. I'd give her a few days to settle in first. You'll see her at the dinner party tomorrow evening, won't you?' she added.

Celia pulled a face. 'Yes, but only for a few minutes. You know what Dad's like and how strict he is, and he won't let me stay up for that.'

'Well, there's always the next day,' Melanie pointed out reasonably. 'If she's retiring now, you'll have plenty of opportunity to see her.'

Celia gave Melanie an odd look, her head, framed by its bright halo of golden hair, held on one side. 'You talk as if Leonora were old,' she said. 'She's only a few years older than you,' she added, with a mischievous look.

Melanie raised her brows at this. 'I'm only going by what your father said about her thinking of giving up her job,' she replied calmly, though feeling a spurt of surprise at Celia's news.

Celia shrugged. 'Oh, that. Well, she doesn't really need to work, but she's not the sort to sit around doing nothing. She learnt all about antiques from her father, who was also an expert on the subject.'

'Oh,' was all Melanie could reply.

Celia grinned at her. 'So, as I said, you'll get on with her. You are very like her, you know,' she added seriously.

Melanie blinked. 'In what way?' she demanded.

Celia took a while to sort out her thoughts. 'Well ' she began. 'I don't mean in looks,' she added hastily. 'She's not at all the sort of person her looks suggest.' She frowned, and then shrugged. 'You'll see what I mean when you meet her,' she ended, finally giving up the struggle.

Melanie was back to the tweeds and brogues impression. The subject was then closed, and the school work started.

The dinner party consisted of nine guests plus Melanie and Julian, and Melanie found herself consigned to stand beside Julian as they welcomed their guests, and having to withstand the polite and sometimes downright curious stares of Julian's neighbours. Her experience in the Bahamas should have eased this embarrassing task, but to her way of thinking, this was worse, for these people were not casual holiday-making friends of Julian's, but were on their home ground, fixed and immobile, as it were, and again, she felt a stab of resentment at Julian for dragging them into the charade.

Andrew Misting and Anna were the first to arrive, Anna, as usual, looking as if she had just stepped off the cover of Vogue, in a salmon pink off-the-shoulder dress, that was somewhere in the three-figure price bracket. As Melanie welcomed her, it crossed her mind that she wouldn't be the only one to receive extra attention that evening, for, like herself, Anna was a newcomer to the scene, and for this Melanie was grateful.

Melanie's dress of royal blue velvet, with a small pearl necklet at her throat as her only adornment, gave her a quiet authority that she was entirely unaware of,

but Julian's quick approving nod at her appearance earlier had shown her that he was pleased with her choice.

As each of the guests were introduced, Melanie tried hard to recall their names, Colonel and Mrs Hardwick she didn't think she would have any trouble in identifying. The Colonel was a big, bluff, red-faced man, who at first sighting seemed to bully his small, tired-looking wife. Then there was a Mr and Mrs Cornwall, both plump and prosperous-looking, Mr Cornwall being someone in the City, and a Mr Astley and his son, John, with apologies on behalf of his wife who was indisposed and unable to attend.

That left only one guest to arrive, Leonora Talbot, and Melanie had been given strict instructions by Celia to tell her that they would be calling on her the next morning, if that was all right.

Melanie was buttonholed by Anna as soon as the guests assembled in the drawing-room and were fortified with glasses of sherry. Julian was in conversation with her father and Mr Cornwall, with Mrs Cornwall and Mrs Hardwick making a beeline for Mr Astley, anxious to enquire about his wife's health, and on the fringe of the circle, John Astley, quite plainly hoping for a better acquaintance with Anna. His rather sanguine features had showed an eager, expectant look as soon as he had set eyes on her, and what he obviously thought was going to be a very dull dinner party had turned into an occasion.

Anna's polite enquiry about Melanie's health did not at first ring a bell, and when it did, she had to quickly transfer her glance away from Anna under the pretext of placing her glass down on one of the occasional tables, and giving herself time to answer her query. 'Oh, I'm fine, thank you,' she said evenly,

'I'm afraid it was a false alarm,' and left it at that, her glance going over to Julian, in the middle of a business discussion, one part of her seeing how handsome he looked in his dark dinner suit, and the other part hoping fervently that Andrew Misting didn't take a page out of Anna's book ! She hated to think what Julian's reaction would be should he casually enquire 'When's the great day?' or something!

'Oh, dear, I'm sorry,' Anna exclaimed. 'Still, you've plenty of time, haven't you?' and to Melanie's relief she changed the subject, and told her about the property her father had bought. It's what I've always thought a country property should be,' she said

enthusiastically. 'I never thought Dad would settle down, but he's proved me wrong. He's like a boy with a sandcastle, having plans drawn up for alterations.'

At this precise moment Leonora Talbot joined the party; the first Melanie knew of her arrival was Anna's low, 'Wow!' as her eyes went to the door, and Melanie turned to see what had caused such an exclamation.

Her eyes widened as they surveyed the vision—one could only call it a vision—of the woman who was now walking towards Julian, one beautifully tanned arm with long shapely fingers extended towards her host, her tan accentuated by the white Grecian-style dress with gold figuring at the collar, and as Anna's dress was in the three-figure bracket, Leonora Talbot's must have been in the four.

Melanie's thoughts were in a whirl as she stared at the woman, and she almost gave an hysterical chuckle as she recalled her previous thoughts about Leonora. This woman wouldn't be seen dead in tweeds and brogues!

Tor goodness' sake!' Anna exclaimed in a low voice

as she watched Leonora go up on tiptoe to kiss Julian's cheek. 'Who is that? She makes me feel like a peasant!'

Melanie didn't think there were many peasants around who would measure up to this description, but she did understand what Anna was getting at. This woman was sophistication with a capital S. Her white-blonde hair was swept up one side of her lovely classical features, and cascaded down the other. It was not a style that many women could have worn with such effect, she thought, as she replied, 'Leonora Talbot, our nearest neighbour. I've heard about her, but haven't met her yet. She's abroad a lot of the time, I'm told,' she added, as she saw that Julian was leading Leonora towards them.

'I only hope for your sake that she's married,' said Anna in a low voice just before they joined them.

'Melanie, I want you to meet a good friend of mine, and of Celia's, too. This is Leonora Talbot. Leonora, this is Melanie, my wife, and this is Anna Misting; you'll meet her father later. They've just become county residents,' he added, with a gleam of humour in his eyes.

Leonora's eyes, brown with tawny flecks in them, studied Melanie. The look was not resentful in any way, but it was a measuring look, as if wondering how this little mouse of a companion had hooked her boss into marriage. At least, that was Melanie's interpretation of the quick but thorough study she had received.

The rest of the evening went off smoothly enough, but Melanie, carrying out her duties of hostess and listening politely to the various remarks of her guests, found herself completely bemused by the appearance of Leonora Talbot, and, like Anna, wondered if she were married. Here, without a doubt, was the kind of

woman Julian ought to have married, and this, added to the plain fact that Celia was very fond of Leonora, made it all the more bewildering for Melanie.

She almost convinced herself that Leonora's husband was probably still abroad. The fact that Celia hadn't mentioned a husband didn't mean a thing, for it was inconceivable to Melanie that a beauty like Leonora could have sailed through life without some man making it his business to sweep her to the altar. Of course, there was such a thing as a career woman, she thought, but—that usually meant that there was someone in the background, who for certain reasons—Melanie felt like shaking her head.

Her smile had now become a fixture and felt stiff, but she had to keep going, and managed to lend a sympathetic ear to Mrs Hardwick's almost apologetic grievance about the way some people could lap up the sun without looking like a boiled lobster, her gaze resting on Leonora, now deep in conversation with Julian, who at that precise moment threw back his dark head and laughed at something she had said. Melanie felt an unaccountable stab of pure jealousy, and was surprised at her reaction. Why should she care if Julian was enjoying the company of another woman? However, she quickly thrust this thought aside, and told Mrs Hardwick that she too was in the same league. 'It takes me ages to acquire a tan,' she said. 'Such a pity,' Mrs Hardwick said, 'and she's such a nice person, you know.' Melanie blinked, not able to follow Mrs Hardwick's train of thought. 'I'm sorry ?' 'Oh, of course, it's all been a bit quick, hasn't it?' Mrs Hardwick said, then hastily corrected herself, 'Oh, I didn't mean ' She hesitated, then plunged

in. 'I don't suppose you do know much about Leonora, but it's common knowledge, and it will help you to understand her, I think,' she added. 'You see, she'd only been married for a year when she lost her husband. One of those terrible motorway pile-ups, you know. It was only providence that she wasn't with him at the time. Although she took it hard, as you can imagine.' She was silent for a moment, then said slowly, 'We did rather hope—' she broke off here, and laid an impulsive hand on Melanie's arm, 'but that's all water under the bridge now, isn't it?' she ended quickly, then started to talk about something else—anything, it seemed to the sensitive Melanie, to change the previous subject.

CHAPTER NINE

EVENTUALLY the evening came to a close. It had, it appeared, been a successful dinner party, from everyone else's point of view but Melanie's.

As tired as she was, when she prepared for bed her mind was still on Mrs Hardwick's impromptu confidences about Leonora Talbot's past. The woman had tried hard to dispel any worry Melanie might have had where Leonora was concerned; that could have been helpful under any other circumstances, but as it was, the knowledge opened up a whole new outlook.

Melanie climbed between the cool sheets of her divan, and as she lay down, she knew she ought to be experiencing great relief, for here, surely, was the answer to her problem.

Julian and Leonora had at one time aroused speculation among their neighbours about the possibility of their marrying, for both were free, but nothing had come of it; there was no other explanation for Mrs Hardwick's hasty, almost clumsy attempt to assure Melanie that this was past history.

Melanie frowned. Why hadn't Julian asked Leonora to marry him? Was it because Leonora had refused to give up her work? Knowing the kind of man Julian was, this was quite feasible. He wouldn't expect his wife to go rushing off to the Continent, or anywhere else, for that matter, at a moment's notice.

Her frown deepened. Yet now Leonora was seriously considering giving up her job. Why? Had she come to realise that Julian meant more to her than her career?

Did she know that Julian had married? Or did he save that particular news until the evening of the dinner party? Melanie blinked. Surely not! It would have been too cruel for words.

She turned restlessly. Julian could be cruel; there was a core of pure steel under that outgoing charm of his, as Melanie knew to her cost.

With a quick thump of her pillows, she made one last attempt to go to sleep. She was very tired, and ought to have slept the minute her head touched the pillow, but it was no use, and she gave up and sat with her arms clasped around her knees.

So here she was, the pig in the middle again, she thought bitterly. It wouldn't take long for Leonora to spot that her marriage to Julian was a marriage of convenience. His convenience, that was.

Melanie's small teeth caught her lower lip. Not that it mattered—it didn't, not one bit—but she would probably wonder why Melanie had settled for such an arrangement. Oh, no, she wouldn't, Melanie thought with a twist of her soft lips. She was a woman, wasn't she, and like the rest of them, she would find it inconceivable that Melanie was not in love with her husband, paper marriage or no paper marriage.

Her mind went back to the scene of Julian and Leonora, and the way he had flung back his head in laughter, and again she felt that stab of resentment. Jealousy? She shook her head violently. No, no, no! But a little voice whispered inside her, Yes, yes, yes!

Melanie groaned, and thrust a hand through her soft hair. All right, so she was jealous! Horribly jealous, but where did that get her? What chance did she have against someone like Leonora? None, none at all.

She drew in a swift breath. She mustn't let go. Not now, when her hopes of gaining her freedom from this impossible situation stood a chance of success.

What a mess she would have been in now if she had allowed herself to be mesmerised by Julian back on that island. To have come back with stars in her eyes, truly Julian's wife, and to have been confronted by Leonora! And what would have been worse than to have to listen to little Mrs Hardwick's revelations about the past! Melanie shuddered. Well, sense had saved her from that experience, and it would again.

At breakfast the following morning, Celia was impatient to know if Melanie had remembered to ask Leonora if they could call on her that afternoon, and Melanie had to confess that she had not done so, that there just hadn't been a chance to get her on her own, which was true enough. Her natural shyness had prevented her from seeking out her company, particularly to ask a question that might have sounded a bit forward. However, she did not have to explain in detail, for Julian came to her rescue with a cool, 'Melanie had enough on her hands entertaining our guests, and since when have you bothered with protocol?' he demanded. 'You usually just pop over there.'

Celia's eyes danced wickedly. 'Well, Melanie thought I ought to give dear old Leonora a few days' rest first,' she said, peeping at Melanie under her dark lashes.

Melanie could have strangled Celia, and felt the flush staining her cheeks. 'I didn't put it quite like that,' she said indignantly, 'it was only '

Celia broke in with. 'You know what, Dad? Melanie somehow got the impression that Leonora

was in her dotage! And she ought to have known better, because I told her that in some ways she was like her.'

Julian frowned at this. 'I'm afraid I fail to see the connection,' he said, in a voice that spoke of his disapproval of Celia's levity on the subject.

Celia stared at her father, not quite sure how to take this hint of a rebuke from him.

'Well, I only meant ' She gave up and shrugged, then gave her attention to her coffee cup. 'Well, I still think they're alike,' she ended defiantly.

Julian's wry smile at his daughter's bright bent head confirmed Melanie's thoughts on the matter. Of course, she wasn't anything like that lovely creature next door. It was no small wonder that Julian had been put out by the attempted comparison. They were about as alike as chalk and cheese, she thought ruefully.

'You might sound her out on taking you with her on that trip to Venice she's planning.

For pleasure this time, I'm told, and not on business,' he said to Celia.

Celia's eyes widened as she stared at her father. 'Truly?' she asked in a hushed voice.

Julian gave her a mock look of censure. 'As it's not my habit to joke about such things, yes, really.'

Turning to Melanie, Celia said, 'Oh, Melanie, it will be wonderful! Leonora is sure to say yes, you know.'

Melanie's eyes went to Julian, and there was a small silence before Julian said quietly, 'Not Melanie.'

Celia blinked in astonishment at this quiet but firm statement. 'But ' she began, then caught her father's eye and subsided. She knew defeat when she met it.

Melanie was grateful that the meal was over when this rather embarrassing interlude happened, and she

had not had to sit through it with the certain knowledge that Julian had at last made up his mind to release her from the contract.

What she couldn't understand was why she should feel so completely devastated. This was what she had hoped for, wasn't it? Now she could get on with her life, although doing what, she had no idea. She quickly thrust this thought aside. Time enough to think of that in the lonely days ahead, she told herself as she made her way to the old nursery for the morning's lesson, acknowledging Celia's, 'Won't be long!' call, as she disappeared in the direction of her father's study.

Melanie could guess what Celia was up to. She was going to make an attempt to get her father to change his mind about Melanie going on the trip to Venice with her, but she would be wasting her time, Melanie thought dully.

She sighed deeply as she arranged the books for the lesson. Celia ought to have been put into the picture earlier, she thought. As it was, she had no idea that Melanie would be gone by the time she arrived back from Venice.

It was not Melanie's place to tell her, either. Perhaps her father would? Perhaps he was telling her right now? Melanie wondered, and coward-like, certainly hoped he wouldn't, for it would be a very subdued Celia who would return to the schoolroom.

She shrugged. Celia was young. She had the resilience of youth on her side. Give her a few weeks with Leonora back, who, in all probability, would become her stepmother as soon as the annulment was through, and she would soon forget her.

When Celia did arrive for the lesson, she was, happily for Melanie, not a bit subdued, but somehow elated, and this puzzled Melanie. It was plain that

whatever excuse her father had given for Melanie's exclusion from the trip had completely satisfied her.

All through the lesson that morning, Melanie's mind wrestled with this enigma. Had Julian told his daughter the truth? Had he put the plain and simple fact to her that

Melanie was unhappy and never would be happy in an environment that was alien to her?

She almost nodded. This could be the only answer. Celia, for all her youth, was a sensible girl. Told it like that—that Melanie would be happier if released from her obligation—she would heartily endorse her father's action.

Julian was not present at lunch, and Celia told Melanie that he had gone up to town for the afternoon, and wouldn't be back until the evening. Although Melanie was grateful for a little relief from his presence, she was certain that he would be seeking her out that evening to discuss the terms of the annulment.

After lunch, Celia collected her cardigan and called out to Melanie that she was off to Leonora's, and a slightly surprised Melanie advised her to take a raincoat as it looked as if it might pour down at any moment, judging from the darkening sky.

Watching her slim figure disappear around the side of the house, Melanie wanted to weep. Only a day or so ago, Celia had been assuring Melanie that she would get on with Leonora, and how certain she was that they would become friends. If she had been in any doubt of Julian's intentions, this would have settled them for once and for all. It was as if she had never existed! Life would go on at Oaklands, with the arrival and departure of Miss Greensmith treated as that of another member of staff who had given in her notice.

Hot tears stung behind her eyes, but she determinedly held them at bay. This was nothing but self-

pity, and really, she had nothing to moan about. This was what she had wanted to happen, and she was only fooling herself if she tried to pretend otherwise.

She had got too soft. That was what was the matter with her. This environment of luxury had corrupted her. She squared her slim shoulders. This evening it would be all over, and she devoutly hoped that she wouldn't make a fool of herself by showing Julian that she cared for him. That would be absolutely dreadful, for both of them. Her eyes turned to the woods in the distance where Celia was heading. Julian was probably closeted with his solicitor right now, giving him instructions on the terms of the annulment.

She drew in a swift breath. He would be generous. He could afford to be, of course. Well, she would accept some money from him—she would have to, until she found herself another job—but she would repay all of it later, no matter how annoyed this would make him, and to save argument, she wouldn't tell him what she had in mind. Simply send him a cheque when she had saved enough.

Her thoughts went to her aunt at this juncture. Thank goodness she had not sent her that letter. There was no reason now for subterfuge, so that was something good that had come out of the whole charade.

For a while, she simply stood by the drawing-room windows, gazing out, her mind flitting from one thought to another, and not concentrating on anything. It was rather like a state of shock, although Melanie was unaware of it.

At last, she made an effort to pull herself out of the lethargy she had fallen into. She needed action of some kind, and decided to start packing her belongings.

She would make it easier for Julian when he called on her that evening, as he would find her already prepared for the move. It would save him the embarrassment of giving her her notice.

As she passed the hall, she saw a letter on the hall table which must have come by second post. All mail was placed there to be picked up by Julian on his way to the

study, but this letter was addressed to her and, picking it up, Melanie recognised her aunt's scholastic hand. She was probably wondering why she hadn't written, Melanie thought as she took the letter off to her rooms to read.

The contents of the letter, however, had nothing to do with Melanie's tardiness in corresponding with her aunt, and her eyes widened as she read the letter, in which her aunt told her that she had parted company with Mr Makin, the 'Mr' holding a somewhat ominous ring. Melanie surmised that her aunt had found him out at last.

Her first thought was of relief for her aunt, of whom she was very fond, and her second thought was one of relief for herself, for now she had somewhere to go, and would not have to go through the tedious business of finding herself lodgings.

Melanie replied to the letter straight away. Not exactly sympathising with her aunt, for she would not care for that turn of phrase at all, but told her that she hoped soon to be back in London again, as her job had ended, and she would like to take her up on her earlier invitation to stay with her while she looked for other work.

As Melanie sealed the letter, she felt that at last, things were going her way. The blackness had somewhat lightened, and at least she had somewhere to go. After living in a dream world, she needed the

company of someone like her aunt, with her no-nonsense attitude to life; and it wouldn't take her long to get herself straightened out and able to face the real world again.

Melanie started her packing. It didn't take her long. She had no intention of keeping the expensive clothes that Julian had paid for for her use in the role of 'Mrs Cridell', and she would have no use for such finery as evening dresses.

Her wardrobe was sparse, and it didn't take her long to fold the clothes into her suitcase, leaving only the things that she would need for her night's stay, and her light jersey wool suit to wear the next morning if things turned out the way she thought they would. In which case, there would be no need to post the letter that she had written to her aunt, for she would be on her way to see her the following morning.

She then carried her suitcase into the small sitting-room and placed it in a position where Julian wouldn't fail to see it.

Celia returned just before dinner, and Melanie found to her annoyance that Julian wasn't expected back until late that evening. 'I told you so,' Celia sighed. 'I said he'd be late. I expect that he's dining with some of his business colleagues,' she added.

Melanie had to swallow her resentment. All her preparation and mental bolstering up for the evening's showdown had been in vain, and she would have to go through it all again tomorrow.

What did he care about keeping her waiting? She was only his daughter's paid companion.

If Celia noticed her annoyance she didn't comment on it, but chatted away happily about her visit to Leonora. Leonora this, and Leonora that, until Melanie could have screamed, and when she did get a

word in, asked her if she was going to Venice.

'Oh, yes,' Celia said. 'Once Dad said I could go, I knew it would be all right. We're off next weekend.'

Melanie's spirits sank at the news. It looked very much as if she would have to wait until that date, or very soon afterwards, before she would be able to get away from Oaklands. It would be at the Cridells' convenience, not hers!

She was still angry when she went to her rooms early that evening, leaving Celia to watch a serial she had been following on the television, after which she promised to go to bed.

After a while, her anger abated. It was only a week, when all was said and done, and only a very short time ago she had given up all hope of any release from a position that was becoming more irksome as each day went by, so what was one week?

She frowned as a thought struck her. Why should it be that long, anyway? If Julian was seeing his solicitor, there was no reason why she should be kept hanging about. Her frown deepened—there would be if Julian hadn't told Celia the truth!

At last things began to make sense. Celia had no idea that Melanie would be gone by the time she got back from Venice. It was all going to be neat and tidy. No scenes, no tears, no goodbyes!

Melanie sighed. It was better that way, of course; she would hate an emotional scene, and finding herself having to make promises of keeping in touch with Celia that she knew that she couldn't keep.

She ought, she told herself firmly, to be grateful to Leonora, that paragon of all the virtues, by Celia's reckoning—and obviously by her father's, too for her timely arrival on the scene.

The shadows were darkening as she wandered over

to the window seat and sat with her arms propped on the sill and her hands framing her face. There was nothing to stop her from leaving any time she wanted to, she thought, and she wished with all her heart that she was not bound by circumstances that forced her to accept Julian's rules.

As it was, she was in his employment, and had entered into a contract with him, and she would keep her side of the bargain. She could well imagine his taunt of 'Coward' should she revert to any other course of action.

She bit her lip. That was in the past. He no longer taunted her. Just suffered her presence, she thought wretchedly, then straightened her slim shoulders. Only one more week, and it would be all over.

At breakfast the following morning, Julian's previous irritation and occasional tetchiness seemed a thing of the past; he was very attentive to both Melanie and Celia, reminding Melanie of their days on the island.

When Celia gave him the date fixed for their trip to Venice, he nodded in a pleased manner, but made no other comment, sparing Melanie the embarrassment, she presumed, of having to listen to arrangements in which she would be taking no part.

'Did you remember to ask Leonora to dine with us tonight?' he asked.

Celia nodded. 'Around six-thirty, I said, but you know Leonora,' she added with a laugh.

Melanie's attention went to her coffee cup. So she had to sit through another dinner, this time with Leonora, no doubt talking over old times. She couldn't imagine a more uncomfortable evening, certainly one to be avoided if at all possible.

'Don't look so worried, Melanie,' said Julian with a

hint of teasing in his voice. 'You should never judge a person on first appearances. Celia was right when she said you would get on with Leonora. She doesn't usually dress up for the occasion, you know, and she was probably wanting to live up to your expectations last night.'

Melanie stared at him, then looked quickly away. Did he realise how hurtful a remark like that was? In other words, Leonora wouldn't have bothered to wear a Paris creation had she known that Julian's wife was a mouse of a schoolteacher!

'I'm sure there will be another occasion when I can get to know her,' she replied stiffly, 'but I do think that it would be nice for you both to have a cosy chat with her. I have some correspondence to see to, so if you don't mind

That was as far as she got, for Julian was suddenly back to the angry state again.

'Your letters can wait!' he all but shouted at her. 'I'll take no excuse for your ducking out of your responsibilities!'

Celia stared at her father, and there was a small but very pregnant silence following this order, then she said hesitantly, 'I expect Melanie's a bit shy, Dad. Leonora did go to town in the dress line, didn't she? I was waiting to see her, so I peeped over the banisters.'

Julian took a deep breath. He was having some trouble holding his temper, but when he did reply, he had got himself well in hand. 'I thought that I had explained that,' he said coldly, before he slapped his napkin down on the table and rose to take his leave, giving Melanie a look that said plainly, 'You'll do as you're told, my girl, or else!'

A very subdued Celia followed Melanie's stiff back to the old nursery for the morning's lesson, and did her best to pour oil on Melanie's seething emotions.

Various remarks were made at odd times, but they only stirred the cauldron of Melanie's feelings, instead of having quite the effect that Celia was hoping for, 'Dad's got a lot on his mind,' being one of them, and another, 'There was a time when he had some trouble with Leonora.' All very vague, but certainly adding up and making sense to Melanie.

Leonora had turned him down, that much was certain, she thought later that day when dressing for dinner. This, then, was Julian's way of getting back at her, and he could hardly carry out his plan of arousing jealousy in Leonora if Melanie was taking dinner in her private suite. No wonder he had been so angry with her!

There had also been confirmation of another fact. Celia was to be kept in the dark. She didn't know what Julian had in mind, and she wasn't to know, hence all that play-acting at the breakfast table. It was Celia that mattered in Julian's eyes; her happiness came first.

Melanie was in the act of fastening a brooch on the lapel of her silk suit when a thought struck her that made her fingers fumble with the catch, nearly tearing the material.

Surely he wouldn't? Her lovely eyes widened. But he would! What does a man do when he wants to make a certain woman jealous? He makes a fuss of someone else right in front of her!

Her hand groped for the dressing table stool, and she sat down shakily. He hadn't been exactly backward in putting on a show for his ex-wife, had he?

It was the thought of Celia's presence that saved the day for her. Julian was not likely to indulge in any show of affection towards Melanie in Celia's presence. Fortunately for Melanie, it didn't occur to her that Celia's presence would last only until nine o'clock.

As Celia had predicted, the six-thirty dinner took place at seven, owing to Leonora's lateness in arriving, full of apologies and 'Doesn't time fly?' exclamations.

Melanie was now in the position of feeling overdressed, for Leonora wore a simple white blouse over trows, her hair pulled back in a ponytail style that emphasised her lovely classical features.

Her grip, though, on Melanie's hand was firm and welcoming, and proved to Melanie that during the long cosy chat that she had had with Celia the previous afternoon she knew very well how things stood between Julian and his wife. In all probability, she felt sorry for her, Melanie thought, with a spurt of anger towards this cool beautiful woman who could afford to be magnanimous towards the plainer version of womanhood. At last dinner was under way. The delicious courses that were served, beginning with prawn cocktail, followed by cold roast turkey, with salad Romana and jacket potatoes, ending with a mouth-watering raspberry gateau, might have been more appreciated by Melanie had she not found herself the centre of attention throughout the whole meal. Leonora demanded to know all about her. She sympathised with her for being an only child—she was one herself, and had often longed for a brother or sister. She wanted to know about Melanie's family, and try as she might, Melanie simply could not turn the conversation to other matters. Julian was no help to her either, for he appeared as interested as Leonora was in Melanie's background. Of course, he would have to be, Melanie told herself caustically; it would look extremely odd if he weren't, especially if he wished to arouse Leonora's jealousy. By the time dinner was over, it was Celia's bedtime,

and for the first time it struck Melanie that she would be alone with Leonora and Julian for the rest of the evening, and there was nothing that she could do about it. After Celia had said goodnight, they drifted into the lounge. Melanie made for her usual seat over by the French windows, but was halted in mid-stride by Julian's soft but imperative, 'Come on, darling, sit here with me.' He pointed to the chaise-longue, while Leonora made herself comfortable in the armchair directly opposite them. On meeting Julian's eyes while he made the request, Melanie's had held a definite warning in them to watch his step or all his plans would come to nothing. Not, she thought angrily, as she moved a fraction away from his close proximity, that he would take any notice of her wishes. She was just there to make the number up. The conversation drifted on to subjects other than the one that had predominated at the dinner table, much to Melanie's relief, and in spite of herself she found Leonora's accounts of her past travels, prompted by Julian, full of interesting anecdotes. Now she was able to understand why Celia was so fond of Leonora. There wasn't a vestige of cultural snobbery in her comments, and she was apt to play down her peculiar talent where paintings were concerned. Her thoughts on the matter were that it was a happy coincidence that she had taken after her father and had his gift for weeding out the wheat from the chaff, and Melanie felt herself warming to this undoubtedly clever but entirely unpretentious woman. She had been so caught up with the conversation that she didn't notice that Julian's arm had slid unobtrusively along the edge of the chaise-longue and

now rested lightly around her waist, and when realisation did come, she was trapped in the position. Her body stiffened as she felt his arm tighten and draw her towards him. It was at this precise moment that she caught a look of amusement in Leonora's eyes, quickly doused as she met Melanie's eye while she answered a question put to her by Julian about currency matters abroad. All the warmth Melanie had felt towards Leonora was dispelled in that one small but telling look. Melanie had felt miserable enough when envisaging the evening before them, but after having her fears so cunningly laid to rest, and now having to face them before an audience treating her as a beginner and just waiting for her to trip up was too much for her.

Enough was enough, she decided, and thought that they might as well have their money's worth. Suddenly she didn't care, why should she? Julian wanted to make Leonora jealous, didn't he? He had given her orders. He wasn't going to go for her this time for not showing enough attention to the part he had assigned her, as he had back at that hotel on the island when he had accused her of frigidity.

Without giving herself time to change her mind, Melanie relaxed her body, and she positively leaned on Julian, who, after the first startled realisation of her intention, glanced down at her quickly, to be met by what Melanie hoped was a simpering look of adoration.

She couldn't be absolutely sure, but she had a feeling that there was a glint of something other than amusement in his grey eyes as they passed swiftly over her face, and his grip tightened and was suddenly released as he got up. 'What would you like to drink, Leonora—your usual?' he queried.

Leonora nodded. 'Please,' she replied.

A variety of emotions went through Melanie's mind as both women watched Julian stride over to the drinks cabinet and prepare what looked like a kind of cocktail for Leonora. He hadn't, Melanie thought, asked what she would like, but she presumed he would get her a sherry.

Deep inside her she felt a sense of pure elation. She'd shown him, hadn't she? And he'd asked for it! There was no doubt that she was going to enjoy the rest of the evening, this time at Julian's expense. He probably had it all worked out. A touch here and there, an endearment or two, not too often, but with just the right inflection in his voice.

Melanie felt a compelling urge to giggle, but suppressed it immediately; this was a luxury she could allow herself later, certainly not now. Right now she had a job to do. She wasn't normally a vengeful person, but she would never get a chance like this again to repay all those uncomfortable moments he had given her during their association.

It was her turn now to call the tune and his to dance at her bidding, and how he would hate it! In all probability he would seek an early ending to the evening, and seek the sanctuary of his study to keep out of Melanie's way.

Her spirits soared a little higher when she noticed that he had given himself a stiff whisky, no doubt to counter the effects of shock.

Leonora's quiet, 'Thank you,' when handed her glass was offset by Melanie's 'Thank you, darling,' as she received hers. She got a very sceptical look from Julian's grey eyes.

The conversation then moved on to the Venice trip that Leonora was taking with Celia, and Julian

listened gravely as Leonora outlined the tours she had in mind. He did not attempt to draw Melanie closer to him as he sat down beside her again, and although it was hardly noticeable, seemed to distance himself from any close contact with her.

'You ought to do the trip yourself,' said Leonora her eyes carefully on her drink. 'I'm sure that no matter how many times you visit Venice, you couldn't possibly cover everything. The trick is to know just where to go.'

Julian's eyes were on Melanie, who had assumed a fatuous expression of adoration as she gazed back at him. 'We'll have to see, won't we, Melanie?' he said.

Melanie's lovely eyes opened wide. 'Whatever you decide will be fine by me, darling,' she said in a simpering voice.

Julian, in the middle of swallowing a sip of his whisky, choked, and swiftly directed the conversation to other channels, such as what Leonora was going to do with herself if she had decided to put a stop to her globetrotting.

Melanie felt like the young lady who had taken her harp to a party and no one had asked her to play. It wasn't quite working out the way she wanted it to. She had certainly been successful in spiking Julian's guns, and giving him a few uncomfortable moments. He was going to have a devil of a job convincing Leonora that the marriage was purely platonic now, and she had no regrets on that score. He would succeed, of course, the word failure did not exist in his dictionary.

As she listened to Leonora's reply, she paid little attention to it. It was all play-acting for her benefit. Leonora's future was settled, whether she knew it or not, and Melanie believed that she did.

The evening did break up shortly afterwards, to the

relief of Melanie. Leonora had an early start in the morning, so begged to leave shortly after ten, and Melanie, not quite liking the look in Julian's eyes as he watched her saying goodnight to Leonora, had one foot on the step of the stairs as Leonora walked to the door. But to her consternation she found her wrist gripped by Julian's strong hand, his body preventing the action being seen by Leonora, who called to him as she reached the door. 'Just a few words, Julian,' she said, as she opened the door and went outside.

'You stay right where you are,' he said in a low ominous voice. 'If you go to your suite, don't bother to lock the door. I have a master key, and I'll use it if I have to.'

For a moment, Melanie stood gazing at his tall, straight back as he went to join Leonora, then, as the shock waves shot through her, she hared up the stairs to her rooms, first locking the door then pushing the heaviest chair she could find against it. Only then did she take a deep breath, and try to control her shaking limbs.

As her panic subsided, so sense regained the upper hand. What on earth was wrong with her, rushing up the stairs like a cornered virgin about to be ravaged? She shook her head, calmly pulled the chair away from the door, and unlocked it.

Was it wishful thinking on her part? she wondered. Julian Cridell didn't care one jot about her as a woman. The one he wanted was outside with him right now. As for Melanie, she had exceeded her duties, and any moment now she was going to be told so in no uncertain terms.

Her small chin lifted. Well, she wouldn't be the only one who heard a few home truths. She had asked to be relieved of her post, hadn't she? Ages ago, but it

hadn't suited his purpose. Perhaps now he would admit that it would have been better all round if he had listened to her.

She walked over to the window seat, wishing he would hurry up and get it off his chest. Opening the window, she leaned out a little to see if they had finished their tete-a-tete, and as she did so, Leonora's voice floated up to her. 'Look, Julian, I suppose you know your business, but is it really fair to her?' she said.

Melanie drew back swiftly, and softly closed the window. Her cheeks were red, and her eyes moist, and she swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. She wouldn't give way now. She would not let him see her like this. Somehow she had to face it out.

CHAPTER TEN

MELANIE glanced at the small bedside clock. It was now over twenty minutes since Julian had ordered her to await his return from seeing Leonora of the premises. In all probability he had escorted her home; he must have, she thought, although she had got the impression that what she had heard had been Leonora's final comments on their conversation.

By the time ten more minutes had passed, it finally got through to Melanie that he wasn't going to make that threatened call on her.

She had Leonora to thank for that, she thought mistily. She had obviously calmed the savage breast in the way that women in love had done through the ages. She had pleaded on Melanie's behalf, that much was plain, and although Melanie knew she ought to be grateful for the intervention, she wasn't at all. She didn't want to be beholden to Leonora in any way, and she hated the thought that Leonora was sorry for her. Although after that shameful exhibition of hers, it was small wonder that she pitied her. Melanie had been so intent on getting back at Julian, that she hadn't given a thought as to what Leonora would make of such behaviour. Now that she did, she almost cringed.

Now she hated herself, Leonora, and most of all, Julian !

The following morning, Melanie wasn't looking forward to joining Julian and Celia at the breakfast table; in fact, she was dreading it!

It was Monday, and she had five more days to get

through before Celia would be off on her trip to Venice, after which she would be given her freedom.

Five days, at that time, felt more like five years to Melanie, as she got up slowly from her dressing table after giving her hair a last quick comb through. It hadn't needed it, but she was just playing for time, and a quick look at her wristwatch told her that she had no more time to play with; she was going to be slightly late as it was.

Her slightly breathless, 'Sorry,' as she took her place at the table was accepted with a slight nod from Julian, and a smile from Celia.

'No need to rush this morning, Melanie,' Celia told her. 'I'm playing hookey today. Leonora's taking me up to town with her; we're going on a shopping spree before the trip.'

Melanie forced herself to look interested. 'That'll be nice for you,' she said quietly, as she tried to work up an appetite for the breakfast Mrs Soames served her with.

'I shall be going to town myself, later,' said Julian, keeping his glance on the silver coffee pot he was holding as he poured himself a cup, 'I'd take you with me, only I'm going to be pretty busy, I'm afraid,' he ended, sounding almost apologetic.

Melanie could have screamed. This was all for Celia's benefit, of course, and for a man who hated play-acting, he was doing remarkably well, she thought bitterly. She managed to murmur something on the lines that she would find plenty to do.

'Those letters, I suppose, that you were so keen to get done yesterday evening ?' said Julian, with a trace of sarcasm in his voice, and this time his eyes met Melanie's.

Melanie met that look and the sly insinuation with

dignity. 'Very probably,' she replied quietly.

When they had finished breakfast, a loud hooting in the drive announced the arrival of Leonora, and Celia, with a surprised look at her father, said, 'Good gracious, she's on time !' and made a dash upstairs for her coat while Julian went outside to talk to

Leonora—fixing up an appointment for lunch, Melanie thought. He would find time for that, of course.

What was that to do with her? she asked herself crossly. She was getting paranoid over the whole business, and the sooner she was out of it all, the better for her, she thought, as she made her way to the old nursery. She might as well collect some of the books there and prepare tomorrow's lesson, that was if Leonora hadn't some other occupation in mind for her pupil, she thought angrily.

She pulled herself up sharply. There she went again ! Leonora had every right to Celia's company; she was going to be her stepmother, wasn't she? For Celia's sake, Melanie knew that she ought to welcome this thought, but it hurt.

She heard another hoot as she left the old nursery and walked down the passage towards the stairs on her way to her rooms. They were off, and soon Julian would be too, she thought, and was startled to hear his voice behind her.

'I'd like a word with you, Melanie.'

Melanie's knees felt weak. So much for thinking that she had got off lightly after her exhibition last night! He had only been waiting for Celia's departure, and she ought to have realised that.

'In the study, please,' he ordered.

As Julian preceded her along the passage to his study, Melanie began frantically working out just how she would explain her behaviour. It had all seemed

reasonable at the time, but looking at it in the cold light of day, she had a lot to answer for, and she knew it.

However, by the time they were in the study, her thoughts had changed. She was no longer on the defensive. She had played the part she thought he would want her to play. It wasn't her fault if she had got the signals wrong. If he had put her in the picture in the first place, she wouldn't have muddled her lines. She hadn't had much co-operation, had she?

Julian walked to his desk and settled himself down, and Melanie was reminded of that earlier interview when he had put the terms of the contract to her. This, then, was it! She felt a deep sense of relief. The play was over, and she couldn't say that she had been a great success, but then she had never claimed to possess acting abilities, and if she'd known what lay ahead of her, she wouldn't have touched the post with a bargepole, not even if it meant putting up with that awful Makin man.

'Did you know exactly what you were up to last night?' he asked in a silky voice, throwing Melanie into a spin just as she was ready to receive her cards.

'I ' She swallowed, then collected herself; if he was out for a little bit of fun at her expense then he was going to be unlucky. 'I suppose I did the wrong thing again,' she said, feeling her anger well up inside her. 'I thought that was the way you would have wanted me to behave '

Julian's sharp, 'Why?' cut off the rest of Melanie's explanation, and left her floundering. 'Why?' he repeated harshly.

Melanie drew in a deep breath. All right, he had asked for it! The thought of her packed suitcase, and her aunt's nice little cottage, bolstered up her courage.

'I would have thought that was obvious,' she said coldly. 'I rather gathered that you were out to impress Mrs Talbot.' As soon as the words were out, Melanie knew that she had made a bad mistake. She could have put it a bit more diplomatically, but it was too late now, if the sudden blaze of Julian's eyes, making them look like chips of ice, were anything to go by.

`You did, did you?' he all but growled. 'And where exactly did you get that impression from?' he demanded.

Melanie decided to go the whole hog; she might as well, there was no going back now. He must think her simple if he was trying to deny this fact, but then her observations would be of no interest to him and she was glad to have Mrs Hardwick's to fall back on. 'Mrs Hardwick,' she replied. 'I don't think she had seen Mrs Talbot for some time, and she wasn't really thinking—I mean, she didn't mean to cause me any worry, and it was too late then to take what she had said back

`And that was?' Julian ground out.

Melanie's eyes flashed back at him. He did mean to have his pound of flesh, didn't he? 'That you and Mrs Talbot had been expected to marry—or words to that effect,' she ended crossly.

`So you thought it only needed a helping hand. Trying to make Leonora jealous, were you?' he almost purred, but he was furious, and Melanie couldn't for the life of her see why, unless it was because a guest at his table had dared to interfere in his private life.

`I very nearly took you up on that promise in your eyes last night, did you know that?' he said smoothly. But you didn't think of that, did you?' he went on blandly, as if talking about the weather, and Melanie's eyes widened as the implication hit her. 'I would be

well within my rights, you know,' he added goadingly, 'and what would little Miss Prim and Proper have done then, I wonder? Crawled under the bed, or thrown herself out of the window ?'

Melanie's small hands clenched into fists; she could feel the points of her nails biting into her soft palms. There was no answer to that, and he knew it. Now that he had got that out of his system perhaps he would get back to what was important and give her the date of her release.

`Nothing to say?' Julian mocked. 'No, I don't suppose you have. I wouldn't advise you to play fast and loose with your next employer; he might not have as much patience as I've had.'

Melanie's cheeks flamed crimson at this very unfair accusation. 'How dare you?' she said in a low, vibrant voice. 'For my part, I only hope I shall be spared the indignity of ever again having to pander to a man's ego!'

Now that she had started, she found it hard to stop. She was hurting inside, and wanted to give as good as she got. 'What did you care about me?' she threw at him. 'I was just "available", wasn't I? A little mouse of a schoolteacher no man would have looked at twice, and certainly not you, who could have any woman he chose just by lifting his little finger.' She paused for breath.

`I didn't think mice had claws,' said Julian softly, before she regained her breath, but his eyes laughed at her.

Melanie could see the amusement in those all too knowing eyes of his, and simply couldn't bear it. 'That's right,' she stormed. 'Go on, laugh at me! You can have another laugh with Mrs Talbot when you meet her later. At least I've lightened your day!' she

spat out as she swung around to leave, only wanting to put as much distance as possible between herself and this hateful man.

Her hand was on the door knob when she found herself swung round to face him.

There was no amusement in his face now, but a grimness that frightened her, and it did flash across her mind that he might strangle her as his hands framed her face. The next moment he jerked her into his arms, and the word she was about to utter was

stifled in a kiss so fierce in its intensity that Melanie could only put it down to another form of punishment.

When he did let her go, her breathing was fast and uneven, and her hand swung round in an arc to deliver what she had wanted to give so many times before, a hard slap at his arrogant features. But she never made contact, for he caught her hand in mid-air and forced it behind her back, and before she could attempt to bring her free hand into action, he had caught that too, so that only her blazing eyes showed her feelings at this treatment.

'Where's the little mouse gone now?' he asked silkily. 'I knew that there was a woman somewhere under that placid exterior of yours.'

Melanie tried to free herself from his grip by moving backward, but this proved to be a mistake, because she found herself hard against the door, Julian's lean, wiry form giving her no escape from his suffocating hold.

'Will you please let me go?' she said coldly. 'You wouldn't want me to scream and have Mrs Soames in, would you? I shall if you don't release me this very minute,' she threatened.

'Mrs Soames is too well trained to interfere in a domestic tiff,' said Julian lightly. 'She's had a lot of

practice, if you remember,' he added meaningly.

With a sinking heart, Melanie had to admit that she was beaten. She was no match for him, and never had been. He would enjoy himself and she would have to wait until he felt that he had punished her enough.

'I've seen the claws,' Julian said quietly, 'now let's see if I can make my kitten purr,' and he released one of his hands to catch her chin, forcing her to accept his lips.

This was no time for Melanie to remember that she loved this man, and it was certainly not the time to try and convince herself that she hated him. Not with those firm lips of his gently tracing hers in a soft, insinuating way, demanding her response, a response that she didn't dare give, although her heart was urging her to do so. Only the thought of Leonora gave her the strength she needed to keep her wits about her.

Suddenly Julian let her go, and stood surveying her through hooded lids. 'So I was wrong,' he said caustically. 'Not a mouse, nor a kitten, but an ice maiden.' He stood away from her and opened the door. 'My apologies,' he said stiffly, 'for subjecting you to what must have been a very distasteful exhibition.'

Melanie somehow managed to walk out of the study, although all her instincts screamed for her to run, and once clear of Julian's watching eyes, she rushed up the stairs to her rooms as if the hounds of death were upon her heels.

By the time she reached her rooms, tears were cascading down her cheeks, almost blinding her, and she had to resist the temptation to throw herself down on her bed and weep her heart out. Julian might decide to follow her, and she was not going to let him find her in that state.

Melanie turned her swimming eyes to her case, neatly standing by the wardrobe, and the sight of it gave her confidence, as she had hoped it might do. There was nothing to stop her from walking out here and now. It was what Julian might expect her to do, indeed, hope that she would do, in which case he hadn't been considering Celia. He had been too intent on paying her back for what he considered insubordination from the ranks.

She had defied him right through their relationship, and had withstood every insidious attack, not only mentally, but physically. He just had to have one last go at her, unable

to convince himself that there was a woman who could resist him, and that was her own silly fault, she thought bitterly, recalling the way she had looked at him last night. No wonder he had decided to try his luck!

She drew in a shaky breath when the thought occurred to her that he might have tried last night. She recalled the confident way that she had removed the chair from the door, and her absolute certainty that she would be able to stand up to him.

Well, she now knew the answer to that, and so did he. She had nothing to fear from him now. It would be all he could do to acknowledge her presence, she thought, and Celia would be too caught up with the arrangements of the coming trip to notice anything amiss.

Celia was back by mid-afternoon, and by that time Melanie had got herself well in hand, and was able to listen to her comments on the shopping trip with some degree of equanimity. They had not, apparently, met Julian for lunch, for Celia mentioned snatching a sandwich in a snack bar.

When Melanie had dutifully inspected the result of

her morning's shopping, Celia went off down to the paddock, and Melanie was left to her own devices again.

She decided to telephone her aunt to forewarn her that she would be with her at the end of the week, and she felt that the communication would do her good; she needed to feel that she belonged somewhere, just to ease this terrible ache of unhappiness inside her.

As she was about to make the call, Leonora I appeared in the hall, and Melanie told her that Celia

was in the paddock, to which Leonora replied, 'I know; I saw her. I came round the back way. I wanted a word with you.'

Instantly Melanie was on her guard, for she had a pretty good idea why Leonora had sought this private talk with her. In all fairness, she was going to try to put Melanie into the picture, as if she didn't know the way the wind was blowing, Melanie thought caustically, and vaguely wondered how she was going to go about it.

Leonora's first question, however, threw Melanie off balance. 'Do you love Julian ?' she demanded.

Melanie blinked, then made a swift recovery. Leonora didn't believe in beating about the bush, evidently, and Melanie's voice was low as she replied, 'No,' and hoped to be forgiven for the downright lie.

Leonora's features hardened and the warmth in her eyes died out. 'I thought not,' she said drily. 'So that was all play-acting on your part last night, was it? I rather thought it was. From my own observation, and from what Celia had told me about you, it was entirely out of character.'

Melanie looked away quickly from Leonora's accusing eyes. She couldn't even act the doting wife with any degree of realism, she thought miserably, but

she said nothing; there was nothing that she could say.

'Do you think that was very kind?' Leonora asked.' `And before you ask if it's any business of mine, I'll tell you that I'm very fond of Julian. There was a time when I don't know what I would have done without his help.' She shrugged impatiently. 'But that's beside the point. Let me give you some advice. Leave here. I can't imagine why you didn't do so before. I'm sure Julian will see that your future is attended to; he's a very generous man.'

Melanie looked at her. The advice was good, but there was Celia. 'Celia' she began. 'I'll look after Celia,' Leonora broke in impatiently, 'don't worry about her.'

At this point, Celia joined them. 'I thought you'd come and look at Popsie,' she accused Leonora. 'I saw you go by.'

Leonora promised to do that right away, and Melanie stood gazing after them, remembering the look that Leonora had given her before she followed Celia out of the French windows.

She might just as well have shouted at her, 'Get going!' and Melanie decided to take her advice.

The first thing she did was to ring for a taxi to take her to the station. She had no idea when the trains went, but they should be frequent, and she gave herself fifteen minutes to finish her packing.

Then she went up to her rooms and completed the task she had begun the day before, so that she was ready well before the given time.

Her one fear was that Celia would come back with Leonora before she had left, but she had a feeling that Leonora would prevent this happening.

She didn't give herself time to think about anything else but the need to get away. To be on her own for a

while, just to give herself time to straighten herself out. Her head was beginning to ache, and she felt as if she were in the middle of a gigantic whirlpool and had to make a great effort to reach calmer waters.

Just before the taxi was due, she wondered if she ought to leave some sort of a note for Julian, but on second thoughts, she knew that Leonora would do all the explaining for her.

The taxi was on time, and her furtive look around to see if Celia was in the vicinity before she got in the taxi settled her worries on this score. There was no sign of her, and Melanie decided that she had gone back with Leonora.

There was no fear of running into Mrs Soames either, for Melanie knew that she was in the habit of taking a rest in her room during the afternoon before she prepared dinner, and Amy would have taken the opportunity of sneaking a couple of hours with her fiancé.

When they reached the station, Melanie learnt that she had just missed a train, and would have twenty minutes to wait until the next.

Suddenly she felt that the noise and clamour around her was too much to take, and she picked up her case, and headed out of the station and up the hill to the town. She craved peace and serenity; she had a vague idea of getting a coach to the city. It would be a longer ride, but she was in no state for a rush of any kind; it didn't matter what time she arrived, for she could always take a room at a hotel for the night if it came to that, and see her aunt the next morning.

She asked a passer-by the way to the coach station, and having got directions she made her way towards it. She had almost reached her destination when a bright orange poster caught her eye as she passed a

shop. It was advertising a bird sanctuary, transport provided, and a large red arrow pointed to where the transport was waiting.

If ever Melanie needed a sanctuary of some kind, this was it, and a bird sanctuary would provide the peace she needed. She joined the small queue waiting to board the minibus.

Her case was not too large to be incongruous, and not too heavy for her to manage, and there were plenty of willing hands to relieve her of it while she climbed into the bus.

She sat at the back so that her case wouldn't be in anyone's way, although there was plenty of room on the bus. She was glad of the case, for it prevented anyone from joining her, she was not feeling particularly communicative at that time.

The sanctuary was set in a huge park, in the centre of which was a lake where stately swans glided by to be admired by the visitors.

There were large aviaries that housed tropical varieties, but Melanie elected for the lake, where she could sit in peace, and let time pass by with as much interest in the outside world as the swans that glided by.

Gradually she was able to think clearly. She didn't regret what she had done. Leonora was right, it was time to go. She thought of what Leonora had said about Julian being generous and looking to her future. Those few words had said a lot to Melanie. One, that she had no knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Julian's marriage. If she had known, she would have taken a very different attitude towards Melanie.

However communicative Celia had been with her, she had kept that fact to herself. Melanie's soft lips twisted wryly as she acknowledged Celia's attempt to

protect her, even from Leonora.

Julian hadn't told her either. He had probably mentioned something along the lines that he had made another matrimonial mistake, and things weren't working out. He must have intimated something on those lines to give Leonora the spur she needed to get rid of Melanie. Not that he would appreciate her action.

In point of fact, he would probably be very angry with Leonora, for arrangements would have to be made, and he would have no idea of Melanie's whereabouts.

Melanie watched a family of ducks swim past slowly, with one eye on her in case she had something in the food line to throw to them. She wasn't sorry that it had ended this way. She hadn't wanted to take any money from him, and now she didn't have to.

She had enough to keep going until she found herself some work. It didn't have to be teaching; anything would do as long as it kept her busy and stopped her thinking about Julian.

She bit her lower lip. That was easier said than done. He filled her every thought. She would never forget him. She drew in a swift inward breath. At least she knew he would be happy with Leonora, once his pride had been assuaged over the way she had taken things into her own hands.

'Room for one more?' a familiar voice said, and Melanie swung round to face Julian.

He settled himself comfortably beside her, and stared down at her case on the ground beside her. 'Rather a lot of bird food there, surely?' he asked, his grey eyes lifting to meet her astounded ones.

Melanie wanted to fling herself into his arms and sob her heart out, but she couldn't move. She wasn't

even sure that it was Julian sitting beside her, and not a mirage!

'Going somewhere?' he asked casually.

Melanie looked back at the lake. The ducks had come back again hoping for more luck with Julian. Her eyes were moist, but she managed to reply calmly, 'I'm going home.'

'We're ready when you are,' said Julian quietly. 'Jenks is in the car park.'

Melanie swallowed. 'I didn't mean Oaklands,' she said, then made a swift recovery, and began to get cross. 'How did you know I was here?' she demanded.

His brows rose, as if surprised that she should be angry with him. 'We were doing some shopping in the town, and I saw you by the minibus, so we followed it. You know, you'll have to square things with Jenks; he's not used to following minibuses—felt it was beneath his dignity. It is a Chrysler, you know!'

Melanie swallowed the urge to giggle. How could he act like this? What did he want with her? Was he going to suggest that she stayed on even after he married Leonora?

'I suppose you left me a note,' Julian said, his eyes on a small group of people across the lake. 'What does it say? That you don't care for me and never will?'

Melanie looked down at her hands clasped tightly in her lap. He was being cruel again, she thought. 'I didn't leave a note,' she said in a low voice. 'I think Leonora will explain things.'

'Leonora?' Julian exclaimed. 'What's Leonora to do with you and me?'

Melanie did look at him then. 'As if you didn't know,' she replied angrily. 'At least Leonora's honest. She advised me to leave.'

'She did what?' Julian said in a voice that boded ill

for Leonora's peace of mind. He turned towards Melanie. 'And you followed her advice? I ought to thrash the pair of you!' he growled. 'Would you mind telling me exactly why you took that advice? And don't say it's because you thought that I was in love with Leonora, or I'll put you across my knees here and now, either that, or I'll strangle you,' he threatened her. 'You love me, as much as I love you. No, not as much as I love you. I wouldn't have walked out on you.'

Melanie heard, but was having some trouble in believing the evidence of her own ears. She felt Julian's movement beside her as he felt in his coat pocket and produced a small jeweller's box. 'This is what I stopped off to get in town,' he said quietly, 'I felt I owed you some explanation for my bull-in-the china shop tactics this morning.'

Melanie had no choice but to open the small box, and her eyes went moist as they met the dazzle of small diamonds on an eternity ring. She was in danger of having to beg a handkerchief from him.

'There are two messages that go with that ring,' Julian said softly. 'One, that I love you. Two, that I'll never let you go.'

There was so much that Melanie wanted to say, but all she could get out was, 'I didn't think

'No, that was your trouble all along,' cut in Julian sternly. 'I gave you enough notice, heaven knows, but you kept on keeping me at a distance. I couldn't even begin to court you. Why on earth do you think I arranged for Celia to go on that trip to Venice? I love her dearly, but I also happen to love my wife—at least I would love my wife, if she would only let me.'

The last words were given in a plaintive tone that caught at Melanie's heartstrings. She suddenly saw

that she was the cruel one, not Julian. How right Leonora had been when she accused her of being unkind!

'And Leonora knows?' she asked in a whisper.

Julian looked at her. 'That I love you? Of course. She happens to know me fairly well, and wanted to know if there was anything she could do to help. That's why she agreed to take Celia off our hands.'

Melanie frowned. But why did she say that it was unfair to me?' she asked bewilderedly.

'When did she say that?' Julian asked.

In a somewhat incoherent manner Melanie began to tell him. It wasn't easy, because it touched upon what now had turned out to be a cruel action on her part by baiting him the way she had, but eventually she got there, 'So, as you were so long coming,' she hesitated again, and then felt his arm slide round her waist, at which action she unashamedly nestled closer to him, 'I opened my window to see if you were still talking to Leonora, or whether you were seeing her home, and I heard her say it then. I thought she was telling you that it was unfair to keep me on.'

Julian's grip on her waist tightened. 'Quite the contrary,' he said lightly. 'I remember now. In fact, she had perceived that you were putting on an act for her benefit, and felt that I was wasting my time in trying to arouse your affections. She knew me better than to try and dissuade me. She felt sorry for you.'

Melanie gave a deep sigh. Now she understood why Leonora had asked her if she loved Julian. She had wanted to spare him the misery of another disastrous marriage. She must have thought that Melanie had married him for his money, and that was why she had made a point of assuring her that she would be provided for.

A slight frown marred her smooth forehead. On the face of things that was all quite plausible, but she felt that there was more to it than that. 'Tell me about Leonora,' she said.

Julian looked at her, and the look in his eyes made her knees go weak. 'Still have doubts, my kitten?' he asked. 'You are my kitten, you know,' and at Melanie's answering love light in her eyes, he said, 'Very well, just so you'll understand her actions. Leonora imagined herself in love with me from a very early age. It was just a kind of puppy love, and I was sure that she would grow out of it, and she did. She married. I expect that you heard about that from Mrs Hardwick. Tragically, she lost her husband after only a few months of happiness. She had also lost her father the previous year, so she was absolutely alone. She took to calling over here on the slightest excuse. I didn't mind, she needed help, and for a while she lost sight of reality.'

He was silent for a moment or so, and stared across the lake. 'She got it into her head that her marriage had been a mistake, and that she should have married me. In fact, we were back to the childhood infatuation stage. She tried all she knew to get me to marry her—was convinced that all would come right for her once we were married. It wasn't an easy time, I'm afraid, but I'd already had a taste of the marriage stakes with a woman who was entirely wrong for me. I just didn't happen to care for Leonora in that way, and as much as I felt sorry for her, I refused to be drawn into that trap.'

He kissed the tip of Melanie's nose. 'Well, eventually, she pulled herself together, and began to see things reasonably. She picked up her life again, and took on the work she's now doing.'

Melanie nodded. She knew that Leonora had had one last try to get him, and almost succeeded. If Julian hadn't spotted her in the town—she hastily thrust this thought away. Somehow, some way, he would have tracked her down. Leonora would never have succeeded.

'Shall we go home?' Julian asked. His voice was light, but his eyes spoke volumes. Melanie couldn't speak, she was too full of happiness. She watched Julian pick up her suitcase and hold out his hand to her, and she caught it and held on tightly, her small hand lost in his hard, sure, but loving grip.