

Chapter 41

Sunday afternoon, as instructed, Jill posed in the tangerine silk. Although she'd refused it as a gift her first night with Thornton, she prayed he'd offer again when the painting was finished. Surely he didn't expect another woman to wear it after she had twice. Or would that even occur to him?

"Where'd you go?" Nobolo waved her paint brush in the air. "Please, keep the expression I gave you. You're standing in a room full of people. You spot your lover beyond my left shoulder. He's chatting with a friend, notices you, and turns his head your direction..."

Jill imagined herself in the scene described—Thornton ignoring a business associate to smile at her—the joy of waving, returning his smile, and anticipating him coming over for a chat.

"That's right. Hold it. Just a half hour more..."

She smiled for real. Only thirty minutes more. Even in her weakened condition she could manage that.

Boots sounded in the outer room and Janie burst in. "Special delivery."

Jill reached out and accepted the manila envelope. It felt heavy like a packet of art documents. Nobolo cleared her throat.

"Sorry." Jill fought down her curiosity and tossed the envelope onto the bed, which had been shoved next to the wall to make room for the artist, easel, and herself.

"Aren't you going to open it?" Janie asked.

Nobolo's stormy expression made Jill smirk. Oops. The artist jerked her brush away from the canvas and plunged it into the cleaning jar. "All right, I give up. Take five. I'll be back in fifteen. I hope by then there'll be no more—" She shot Janie a murderous look. "Distractions."

“Oh, don’t wait that long,” Janie cooed. “I’ll be out of here before you can say ‘Rumpelstiltskin.’ ”

Nobolo harrumphed and strode out, slamming both inner and outer doors. The elevator whirred.

Jill snatched the envelope and opened it, expecting a heart-warming message from Thornton or a gift.

“Yep. That’s you. Warts and all,” Janie said from the far side of the easel.

Hardly hearing, Jill pulled a large glossy photo from the envelope and groaned as if kicked in the stomach. There on the sand, like a remake of *From Here to Eternity*, a man lay sprawled on top of a woman, with the surf rolling onto their legs. In Burt Lancaster’s place, Thornton. And in Deborah Kerr’s, Emma.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” Janie bolted from the easel and hugged her. “You look like you’ve seen—” She gasped.

In wounded denial, Jill flung the photo away and yanked out the second. There she beheld Thornton’s face—all two thousand square inches of it—in a rapt expression of awe. In the foreground the apparent object of his awe—Jill saw the back of a woman’s head—hair raven black.

No-o-o-oh. She slumped.

Janie caught her, staggered, and snatched the photo from her hand. “Let me see.”

Moaning in pain, Jill broke free, flung herself on the bed, and covered her head with a pillow.

“I don’t believe it. Something rotten in Rotterdam.” Janie tugged on the pillow. “Jill, Jill, listen to me. My brother—”

“Go away, leave me alone.” Jill clung to the pillow. “I know you mean well, but let me suffer in peace.”

“No, he wouldn’t do this. He’s not that kind of guy.”

“What, make love to a woman?”

With the next yank, the pillow slipped from Jill’s grip and forced her to hear the full force of Janie’s words. “No, break his own rule. He told me himself. He can’t make any declaration of love before the end of the contest.”

Jill beat her fists on the covers. “Well, guess what, surprise, surprise, he’s human. Emma finally—”

“No, you don’t know my brother. Women have tried before.”

“Yeah, like Eve.” Jill groaned.

“Eve didn’t seduce him, she bewitched him. There’s a difference. For all I know, Thornton’s still a virgin.”

In disbelief, Jill turned over and blinked up at her. “A virgin?”

“Maybe. I don’t know but—” Janie snatched up the flung photo and shook it. “This has to be doctored somehow. Thornton wouldn’t kiss a contestant.”

“He did me,” she whispered.

“He did?” Janie grasped her belly, laughed, rolled onto the floor, and laughed harder.

“I don’t mean like in the photo. I mean—”

“Oh, that’s rich.” Janie gulped between belly-laughes. “Big brother breaking his own rules. And you’re the one that got him to do it. Will wonders never cease? I couldn’t ask for a better sister-in-law.”

To counter Janie’s flight of fancy, Jill scooped up the beach photo and examined it for

authenticity, as she would any *objet d'art*. No question about it, Thornton was Thornton. Emma was Emma. But was she imagining things, or did there appear discordant shadings, as if one image had been cut and pasted over another, leaving a discernable border between? Jill rubbed her eyes and studied it closer.

O Lord, show me the truth and don't raise false hopes.

But if it was Photoshopped, someone had done an expert job. She turned to Janie and waited for her cackling to subside. "Where'd you get this?"

"The desk clerk. He asked me to deliver it to you."

"Was anyone standing nearby, like this woman in the photo? Take a look."

"No, no one." Janie examined the photo. "Wait, isn't she? Yes, I passed her in the corridor yesterday. Reeked of perfume but twitched her nose at *me*, as if I were the one smelling bad."

"That's her." Jill shook her head at Emma's cunning. *You almost had me.*

"One of the contestants?" Janie asked. "Someone trying to demoralize you?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes tight, consulted her heart, and sighed.

Thornton, though it cost me everything, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt on this one.

Monday night, as the fatal hour drew new, Jill's fears returned with a vengeance. She clung to Mordecai's arm for moral support and watched the auditorium doors come closer. Beyond them sat hundreds of spectators. She could hear their voices, surging like the sea. Dozens of paparazzi, too, no doubt. Plus the original scouts, invited back to watch and take notes, but not vote. And Thornton.

“Not yet.” Mordecai steered her past the ushers and down the sloping corridor to a smaller door. “Stars like you, my dear Esther, enter here.”

He knocked. Jean-Charles peered out and drew them in. Scaffolds, props, electrical cords, and a wealth of unidentifiable equipment cluttered the backstage area. Mordecai guided Jill through a dark passageway to the well-lit stage. “Gather round, ladies.”

Margot lowered a violin from her chin and approached, bow in hand. “Glad you made it. I was afraid you’d lost your strength.”

Or my courage. Jill managed a smile and a hug, careful not to brush into the Stradivarius. Li-Hua and Sara greeted her in similar fashion, but Emma brushed lint from her skin-thin robe and paid her no heed.

Mordecai held out a handful of colored straws. “Pick a straw, unroll it, and read aloud your number. That’s your order in tonight’s program.”

Emma’s hand shot out, hovered over the choices, then pulled out a yellow straw. She unrolled and frowned. “Number two.”

Li-Hua drew number four, Margot one, Sara five, leaving Jill the number three spot.

“Okay, everyone except Margot follow Jean-Charles to your seat. Margot, wait here with me.”

Flashes blinded Jill as she stepped through the curtains. She shielded her eyes, did her best to keep up with Jean-Charles, and made it safely to her assigned seat. After sitting down and fully recovering her sight, she looked left and right. Three scouts sat on her left, the closest being Mr. Watanabe who bowed. On her right sat Li-Hua, Thornton, Emma, an empty seat, and Sara, then the remaining scouts. None of the contestants spoke, nor did Thornton. They all stared straight ahead, where rippling curtains, squeaks, and heavy thuds let them know stage hands

were moving props about.

The audience hushed as Mordecai stepped from the curtains. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the final night of the Check or Mate Contest. One hundred days ago, my employer Thornton Applegate—the reclusive master of Mimas Enterprises—sent out seven scouts to search the globe for a hundred candidates to be his wife.”

Jill winced in embarrassment. *You mean six.*

“He gave them clear guidelines of the kind of woman he sought but also gave them wide latitude in using their own judgment. With the help of his lawyers he firmly bound himself to marrying one of them—whichever is the first to accept his proposal after he’s made his selection and ranked the choices in order of his preference. That final preference will be announced tonight after the five finalists have performed.

“In spite of Mr. Applegate’s best efforts to keep his search private and personal—for the candidates’ sake as well as his own—news leaked out from the start. Sadly my boss had to eliminate one of the scouts—”

A rumble of voices rolled through the audience.

“When it was learned this agent had worked out a secret deal by which all thirteen of his selections would pay him a kickback of thirty percent of their prize money plus act as informants to supply news to sell to scandal sheets.

“Nonetheless, after making acquaintance with the eighty-seven candidates who remained, Mr. Applegate has remained supremely confident that his long awaited bride is found among them and will return his affections. So now, with no further ado, allow me to present you the five finalists in order of their performance.”

From the sound system came a drum roll.

“First, Miss Margot Huntington will play Franz List’s Ave Maria on the violin, accompanied by Mark Hammel on the piano.”

As the curtains opened, Jill heard a hiss and turned to see Emma murmuring something in Thornton’s ear in agitated fashion. When he kept his visage straight ahead and answered not a word, Jill suppressed a smirk and faced front again, not wishing to miss a single note or nuance of expression.

Soft, rich piano notes landed like celestial raindrops. Then sweet violin tones wove the familiar haunting theme of Mary’s exaltation. Jill listened entranced, awed that God would bring into her life a friend as regal and humble as Margot—and even more astounded that Thornton hadn’t snapped up such a prize years ago.

Oh, Lord, grant her a husband as classy and caring as she, if such a man exists on this earth.

The photojournalists seemed awed, too, for not a single flash interrupted Margot’s performance. Then, two seconds before the crowd erupted in thunderous applause, cameramen flooded the front and jockeyed for position to beg smiles and snap photos.

Jill leapt to her feet and applauded, unmindful of her limited strength. A tear rolled down her cheek in happiness for her friend’s flawless presentation. And, for the first time, Margot’s eyes seemed to glisten also.

“And now—” Mordecai said, once the curtains closed and the tumult subsided. “Emma Waters will give a dance interpretation of Ravel’s Bolero.”

Bolero, no!

Jill didn’t need the black-and-white glossies to know what kind of Saloméic seduction Emma planned to inflame Thornton’s imagination.

Lord, blind his eyes.