

Chapter 8

At two in the afternoon, dressed in a pleated white skirt and Nikes, Jill headed for Tennis Court One, as printed on her day's assignment. She traipsed along, hardly noticing the outbuildings and flower gardens, her thoughts anxious over Coco's non-appearance at lunch and afterward. Had the outing with Thornton gone so badly her friend hid somewhere in shame or wept private tears? Glancing up at her surroundings then at the map, she realized she'd passed her destination and doubled back.

The gate squeaked as she opened it. Before she could walk onto the court, a sleek gray cat flashed amber eyes at her and scampered under the fence and through a hibiscus. "Hi, Kitty, bye, Kitty."

She looked around and frowned. Where was the coach and the other three players? She double-checked her watch. Had she set it correctly? Yes, otherwise it wouldn't have matched Coco's during yesterday's wild ride.

"Good afternoon." A bronzed, tawny-haired man, lugging a bulging bag over his shoulder, emerged from behind a shed. Impeccably dressed, he looked more like a cruise ship purser than a jock. He set the bag down and held out a muscled arm. "I'm Matt Spafford. Which one of the handpicked princesses might you be?"

She felt her face heat under his mischievous blue-eyed scrutiny. "Jill Evert." "Okay, Jill, let's trade a few volleys so I can observe your swing and footwork." His purr made her feel that he would assess more than her prowess in tennis.

Flattered, she could not hold back a smile. Nor could she serve the first ball over the net. "Sorry."

He chuckled. "Relax. Get a feel for the racquet and ball. No rush. Your teammates are doubtless on Jamaican time, so it's just you and me for a good twenty minutes. That's better." He sailed the ball back to her for an easy forehand shot.

After a few volleys, he caught the ball and came to her side of the net. Placing one hand at her midsection and another on her right wrist, he adjusted the way she "addressed" the ball. Never having been coached before, Jill wasn't sure how necessary or professional his contact was—only how seductive it felt.

"Don't tense up," he said with his second demonstration. "That's better. You've got the hang of it. Okay, give me five or six returns like that."

To her relief, Veronica and the two unknowns on her list—Ruth Bitterly and Sandra Herron—showed up before Matt could find another excuse for a hands-on demonstration.

With hardly a glance Veronica returned Jill's greeting then addressed all her remarks to Matt. "What a privilege to meet you in person. I looked up your stats on the Internet. Can't believe you retired so young, but wow—what a break for us. I need your help on my backswing..."

Yada, yada.

Matt's coaching of Veronica reminded Jill of cabaret dancing, bull fighting, and soap opera all choreographed together. Jill wondered who was coming on to whom, and whether she could absent herself without jeopardizing her twenty-five thousand. From Ruth and Sandra's glances and whispers, Jill guessed they felt the same.

Suddenly Matt stopped and looked at his watch. "Okay, match time. Veronica and Jill against Sandra and Ruth."

Veronica aced her first serve and went on to dominate the game. With little help from Jill,

she won the first set six-two. Matt applauded then hefted the equipment bag back onto his shoulder. "That's all for me. I've got to check on Courts Two and Three. But you ladies carry on."

It was Sandra's turn to serve, but she held the ball and watched Matt leave then huddled with Ruth. Veronica paced like a caged lioness and picked at her racquet strings. Jill expected Veronica to quit—or her opponents—but after a minute's consultation Sandra motioned Ruth into position and lobbed a serve over the net. Veronica returned it with such force that it bounced between Ruth and Sandra and rattled the fence.

Placing her hands on her hips, Ruth glared at Veronica. "Lighten up. You've already proven you can wipe the courts with us."

Veronica shrugged. "So quit and I'll square off against my roomie."

Roomie? Jill cast a startled glance at Veronica and wondered what this sudden chumminess might mean. Veronica did not return her look—only sneered at the other two. Color rushed into Ruth's cheeks. Her nostrils flared and chest heaved.

For the second time that afternoon, Jill contemplated escaping, but Sandra pulled on Ruth's sleeve and murmured something that brought smiles to both their faces. Intuiting the reason, Jill looked over her shoulder. Sure enough, Thornton strode their direction with a wooden contraption under his arm.

Smiling, he opened up the folding chair and lowered himself onto its cloth seat, then stretched out his legs and joined his arms behind his neck. "Don't mind me. Continue your game. I'll watch."

Everything changed. Veronica's serves slowed and took on a ballet-like grace. Sandra gained her share of points and smiled sweetly. Ruth stumbled over herself and missed more

returns than ever. And Jill marveled at the irony—her first dramatic role on stage—played to an audience of one.

“My turn.” Thornton walked onto the court and relieved Ruth of her racquet. “If you don’t mind.”

Ruth nodded.

He pointed toward the lawn chair. “Wait there, if you like, and we’ll dine in the penthouse after the game.”

Veronica’s game intensified, sweat soaking her tank top. Thornton matched her ace for ace, charge for charge, bravo for bravo. Jill had less to do than before and Sandra next to nothing. After choking on a ball jamming her position, Sandra motioned time out. “Jill and I will watch—” She glanced at Jill. “If that’s alright with you.”

“Good idea.” Glad to escape Thornton’s scrutiny, Jill eased off the court and onto the grass next to Ruth. Although Thornton had addressed few words Jill’s way during their play, he had from time to time flashed her a secretive smile—as if they knew one another—which threw off her timing and concentration. Now she had a chance to study him and think.

How had they met? Had God erased her memory of a former classmate, co-worker, or business contact? Or was he simply testing her reactions—as his every move seemed calculated to do with each contestant?

Ruth repeatedly sighed and shifted her body. Finally, she leapt up and cupped her hand to Sandra’s ear. Jill couldn’t make out her words but caught the mood—plaintive. Ruth’s buttermilk skin flushed pink and eyes flitted nervously. Sandra patted Ruth’s arm and spoke in a soothing tone, as if to reassure her.

Jill revised her theory. Psychological pressure, not sabotage, had kept thirteen contestants

from showing. Fearing humiliation, even suspecting Thornton played these cat-and-mouse games, they decided twenty-five thousand and a week in Jamaica wasn't worth it.

Thornton held up his serve and turned. "Problems, ladies?"

Sandra approached him and spoke in a low voice. He knit his brows and waved to Ruth. "Maybe another time."

Veronica made a poor pretense at patience—juggling the ball with her racquet and scowling at Thornton's back. But he ignored her and watched Sandra and Ruth amble away.

When he did turn, he faced Jill. "How about you? Would you be interested in joining me for dinner?"

"M-me? What about Veronica?"

"We'll be done in a moment. So what do you say? Shall we grill some conch steaks on the roof?"

With Veronica's laser-beam glare slashing at her, Jill gulped and replied, "Sure, sounds fun."

A blistering attack on Thornton followed, Veronica finishing him off with ninety-mile-per-hour serves and deep-in-the-corner returns. Winded, Thornton walked to the net and thrust out his hand with a wide grin. "Great game. Congratulations."

"Humph." Veronica thrust the racquet into his hands and strode off, the gate hurled against its latch and bouncing back.

Thornton's gray-blue eyes locked onto Jill's, his smile mischievous. "Guess it's just you and me."

Jill nodded, her theory confirmed—Thornton loved devastating his opponents with unexpected, carefully calculated moves. But that meant he regarded all eighty-seven women as

opponents. Was his motive revenge against womanhood for some imagined slight?

“Care for a game first or shall we go shower and eat?”

“I—I—” Jill knew she was no match for Thornton—in tennis or psychological games—but she feared returning to her room and facing Veronica.

With a wink, Thornton gently removed the racquet from Jill’s hand, laid it on the court beside the others, and nudged her toward the exit. “I wasn’t suggesting showering together. The guest room has its own facilities.”

His nearness affected her more than Matt’s had. She offered up her last excuse, her resistance crumbling. “I didn’t bring a change of clothes.”

“Don’t worry. Something in the closet will fit you.” He guided her off the court and onto the path.

Left behind by how many females? She stole a troubled glance at his untroubled face. “You’ve got everything solved, don’t you?”

Thornton’s jaw muscles clenched. “Hardly.”

“Sorry—” She groped to understand why her glib remark offended him. “I didn’t mean to suggest that you lead a trouble-free life.”

“Didn’t you?” He stopped and faced her. “What do you know about me, Miss Evert?”

His change of moods caught her off guard. “N-nothing. I don’t know anything about you.”

“No? Didn’t you try to find out?”

Not wanting to offend further, Jill chose her words carefully. “Yes. I checked on the Internet. I learned that you own Mimas Enterprises, buy and sell properties on five continents, and develop luxury hotels named Saturn Satellites—like this one.”

He pursed his lips and studied her a moment, granite-faced. “That’s what I do. What about who I am?”

“Uh...” What could she say? “You’re a reclusive man who guards his secrets well.”

“You didn’t read the tabloids—pore over the photos—parse every word of gossip?”

Softening her voice, she begged for mercy with her eyes. “Please, Mr. Applegate—”

The corners of his mouth twitched upward. “Thornton.”

“Thornton, forgive anything I said that offended you. I don’t read tabloids. And wouldn’t believe their lies if I did.”

He smiled, all trace of hostility vanishing. “Good for you. Then allow me to tell you what part of the scandal is true.”

She shook her head. “You don’t have—”

“Sh.” He held up a hand in front of her mouth. “Indulge me. Since you’re bound to hear all kinds of lies and exaggerations, let me give it to you direct.”

“I’m listening.”

Thornton resumed his walk but at a slower pace, his head down. Clumps of walnut hair fell over his forehead, giving him a brooding look. “I loved Eve Ransom with all my heart. Ambitious, beautiful, rising star of the advertising world, she seemed imminently suitable from the moment Margot introduced her.”

“Huntington?”

“Ah, you’ve researched well.” Before she could correct him, he went on. “Yes, Max recruited Margot in the mistaken belief I’d want a replacement as similar as possible to the original. Which she’s not—I know Margot better than he does—but that’s neither here nor there. The crux of the story is Eve.”

Jill waited, quieting her step.

“Two months before our wedding, I learned of her ongoing passionate—uh, liaison, shall we say—with the soccer player who’s grabbed all the headlines.”

The pain in his voice tempted her to reach out and comfort him, but timidity held her back. “I’m sorry.”

“Not as sorry as she will be when she learns how much more she could have gained if she’d simply confessed her love for him and returned my ring—rather than continue her cold-blooded charade. Freaking fate, when I think I could have married the—” He chopped off the expletive.

Jill winced.

“Anyway, there you have it. The rest of the media melodrama is pure fabrication. She’s not pregnant by me, or had an abortion, or hired a lawyer to sue for breach of promise. For half a million I got her to waive all claims.”

He brushed back his hair and looked at her as if awaiting her reaction. What else could she say? She could hardly tell him she feared his present hundred-million-dollar gambit would not bring him love—only more heartache and disillusionment.

“Well?” he asked.

“I know something of your pain—”

His narrowed glance looked skeptical.

“No, nothing nearly so devastating. Except to me. The guy strung me on for two years and never got close to proposing.”

His expression softened.

“I hope you find the love you’re looking for,” Jill said.

“Mm.” His brooding silence continued until they came within view of the hotel, where he smiled and waved at two contestants.

The doorman saluted. “Good evening, Sir.”

“Evening, Jean-Charles.” Still smiling, he ushered her into the lobby.