



Surrendered

COLOURS
of
LOVE

KATHRYN
TAYLOR

remorseful smile plays about his lips. “When you’re a child, you see a lot of things from your own point of view. But she was very patient with me, and at some point we talked things through. And now I understand why she had to leave back then — and couldn’t come back.” He shrugs. “Not that it was a particularly pleasant experience at the time.”

For a brief moment, I see something alight in his eyes — something I know all too well and which has drawn me to him from the very first time I saw it. That darkness and sadness behind his smile that cuts me right to my heart again now. So I abruptly turn my head away because I’m in danger of losing myself in his eyes again.

He hasn’t completely coped or come to terms with everything that’s happened to him in his life. There are things he doesn’t want to talk about, subjects that can’t be broached — his wife’s death, for example, and the accident that caused his scar. There’s some kind of unfinished business there and, as long as that’s the case, neither I nor any other woman stand much of a chance of becoming close to him.

So he’s likely to move on again, I remind myself. As soon as the appraisal has been completed, he’ll disappear out of my life once more. And that won’t be a particularly pleasant experience, either ...

“Mr. Bertani!” a deep bass voice suddenly exclaims from behind us as Lord Ashbury enters the library.

He’s in his late fifties, the same age as my father, with brown, but rapidly greying, hair. His conservative outfit — a brown suit with a brown-and-white striped shirt and a beige tie — complements the library’s dark wooden furniture perfectly.

He approaches Matteo smiling, but at the last moment he remembers his manners and reaches out a hand to me first.

“How nice that you were able to bring Mr. Bertani, Miss Conroy.”

His smile, so radiant just a moment ago, is now at half strength. I feel his coolness toward me, and it makes me swallow hard. Of course I knew our relationship would be a different from the way it had been up to now, but seeing the mistrust in his eyes hurts me more than I thought it would — especially since it appears doubtful whether that loss of trust can ever really be regained. We may have lost him for good as a loyal customer, even if we manage to prove that we didn’t deceive him.

I can’t say a word. I suddenly feel self-conscious. I’m happy that Lord Ashbury has now turned to Matteo, whom he greets much more warmly.

“I’m very happy to be able to meet you in person at last, Mr. Bertani!” he says, beaming again. “Harriet has been describing you in such glowing terms!”

Matteo frowns. “You know my mother?”

Lord Ashbury nods. “We both volunteer with the National Trust,” he explains. “I remembered that she told me Enzo di Montagna was your speciality a while back. So I’d be very happy if you take on this appraisal.”

So that’s why he was adamant Matteo should do the appraisal, I think, a little astonished at the connections linking the two men. For me, Matteo is so closely associated with Rome and the southern way of life that I tend to completely forget he’s half English.

“Well then, I hope I can live up to the expectations you formed upon hearing my mother’s opinion,” Matteo replies. His self-confident smile reveals that he’s quite certain

he can. “May I take a look at the painting?”

“Of course.” Lord Ashbury can no longer conceal his excitement. “I’ve had the blue room specially prepared for you, so you can examine it in peace.” He hesitates briefly. “You don’t mind doing it here, do you? It’s just that I’d feel more comfortable if it all took place under my own roof, so I can be updated on your progress as you go along.”

“Of course,” Matteo assures him and I swallow apprehensively. Lord Ashbury’s mistrust is all too evident — and, to be honest, it’s quite justified. Suddenly I can just imagine our clients’ reactions if these suspicions about our auction house should become public knowledge. I have to give Lord Ashbury considerable credit for the fact that he’s remained silent up to now and was willing to wait for the appraisal. Which seems to be almost entirely due to his high regard for Matteo.

Lord Ashbury walks toward the door ahead of us, and we follow. But when he opens it, a pretty blonde woman is standing there, just about to enter the library. It’s Ashbury’s wife, Rebecca. I know her from previous visits. She’s in her late twenties, only a little older than I am. She’s wearing perfectly fitted riding gear, and is in a seemingly bad mood.

“Robert, darling! There you are. I’ve been looking for you everywhere!” she says in an irritated voice. But she instantly switches on a radiant smile when she sees that her husband isn’t alone. Or rather when she sees that he’s in the company of an extremely attractive man. She doesn’t pay any attention to the fact that I’m here too. She only has eyes for Matteo.

“Becca!” His wife’s sudden appearance seems to have astonished Lord Ashbury. “We have visitors,” he explains, taking charge of the introductions. “You already know Sophie Conroy. And this is Matteo Bertani. He’s Harriet Sanderson’s son, I talked to you about him, remember? He’s going to examine the Enzo.”

“Of course I remember,” the beautiful Becca says, offering Matteo her hand with a delighted flutter of her eyelashes. Which annoys me. Very much in fact.

We didn’t have much to say to each other on the few previous occasions upon which we met. Because, unlike her husband, Rebecca Ashbury has no interest in art, and makes no secret of how unnecessary she thinks it is to spend money on it. She’d rather put it into designer fashion and the other luxuries life with a very affluent man has to offer. I bet — and am not the only one thinking it — that’s the only reason she married Lord Ashbury, who is thirty years older. It wasn’t because he was the love of her life — her shameless flirting with Matteo just serves to confirm that.

All she has to offer me, on the other hand, is a strained smile. I smile back with a similar degree of enthusiasm.

“I was just about to go out for a ride,” she informs us, almost regretfully — she obviously thinks that she could have had more fun here. “But I’ll be back in an hour — maybe you’d like to stay and eat with us?” The hopeful invitation is clearly directed at Matteo. “I’d be delighted to have time to get to know each other better.”

I’ll bet you would, I think. I can’t help looking over at Lord Ashbury. It must bother him that his wife so blatantly makes eyes at another man. But he doesn’t seem to notice. He’s probably used to it.

Matteo smiles back at Rebecca Ashbury. “That’s very kind of you, Lady Ashbury. But I already have plans for this evening. I’d love to, some other time,” he says. I can feel a knot in my stomach which, upon closer examination, will probably turn out to be jealousy. He’d love to some other time? Is he serious? And what plans does he mean?

“Oh, what a shame.” The blonde woman is clearly disappointed. She does that thing with her eyelashes again. She even sticks her chest out a bit further. Now I’m fuming. But luckily this seems to have gone quite far enough even for Lord Ashbury.

“Please excuse us, darling, but I’d like to show Mr. Bertani the Enzo.” He kisses her on the cheek and indicates that we should follow him.

Rebecca Ashbury accompanies us as far as the hall, where we part ways. She leaves with visible reluctance — and not without turning back toward us and smiling at Matteo one more time — while her husband leads us into the other wing of the truly monumental old building.

“I’m very happy that we’ll be able to clear this business up now,” Lord Ashbury tells Matteo. “I still can’t believe that Joseph Conroy sold me a picture of dubious origin.”

The sidelong glance he gives me expresses his disappointment. I can’t let it go unchallenged.

“I’m sure it will prove to be an original Enzo,” I assure him on Matteo’s behalf. Which is a mistake, as I immediately realise. Because, while his British politeness prevents him from making a cutting reply, Lord Ashbury definitely doesn’t seem to appreciate my interference.

“I think we should let Mr. Bertani be the judge of that, Miss Conroy,” he says, and I fall silent when I see the hostility in his eyes.

I wish I could summon up more conviction that this is all just a horrible mistake. But in fact I’m as uncertain about the whole thing as Lord Ashbury, so I follow the two men the rest of the way in silence.

The Lindenburghs, on whose behalf we sold the painting, are rich American art collectors of exceptional repute who would usually be above suspicion. But the fact that they were prepared to sell the picture to Lord Ashbury in advance of the auction, knowing his keen interest in it, clearly speaks against them in this particular case. And it also puts us in a bad light, since Dad permitted the deal to go through without waiting for the auction. Although, he only sought to do one of our oldest loyal customers a favour. But now, thanks to the suspicions about it being a forgery, it looks as if we wanted to hush it up through a quick sale — and, objectively speaking, I can actually understand such fears. Over the past few years, the art market has been rocked by a succession of forgery scandals, which have heightened suspicion of our profession and provided the press with plenty of material. So of course, allegations like this have to be followed up on.

Normally I’d be certain that an investigation like this would work out fine for us. But normally, I’m also much more closely involved in the whole process. This incident happened while I was in Rome, and I simply don’t know enough about it. I’m not even familiar with the painting concerned. Just like Matteo, I’m about to set eyes on it for the very first time.

So my heart starts beating wildly when Lord Ashbury stops in front of a door and opens it. He lets us enter the room ahead of him. It's a small drawing room with chairs arranged around an open fire on one side, and a wide antique desk on the other.

It's a pretty room — if you ignore the fact that, here too, the furniture is a bit too dark and bulky for my taste — but I only have eyes for the painting, which is propped up on an easel in front of the desk.

"There it is," Lord Ashbury says superfluously. Matteo is already heading straight for it — and I'm staring at it, too.

It's different from what I expected. It doesn't depict the Holy Family — Enzo's favourite motif — or any other holy scene. Instead, it features two men deep in conversation. They're turned toward each other and are smiling, discussing something one of the men is holding in his hand, which I can't quite make out from here. But that's not important. What's more impressive is the way the artist captured the atmosphere of trust between the two men. You can tell how fond they are of each other from their smiles. I don't even need to read the Latin title, *Amici*, skilfully painted onto a vignette on the antique frame, to know that it's a depiction of two friends.

The colours and brushwork are definitely typical of Enzo, so that makes sense, I think. I focus my attention on Matteo with renewed hope. He's still examining the painting intently.

"Well?" Lord Ashbury asks, just as tense as I am. "What do you think?"

Please let him smile when he turns toward us, I silently pray. If he smiles, everything's going to be OK. The picture is an Enzo and everything will be fine. *Please*.

Instead, when Matteo looks at us, his face is earnest, and there's that furrow at his brow that only forms when he really doesn't like something at all. Or when he's worried.

Oh no, I think to myself, feeling my throat tighten with despair. Please, please no.

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“This is going to be more difficult than I thought.” Matteo’s gaze is directed at me. His expression is apologetic. He hates not being able to tell me otherwise, I realise. He would have liked things to have been easy, too. But that doesn’t change the fact that we have a problem.

“Does that mean the picture isn’t an Enzo?” Lord Ashbury enquires, voicing my own fears. But Matteo shakes his head.

“I can’t tell at a first look. It was definitely painted in his style. I’m just surprised ...”

“At what?” I urge him.

“At the subject. If it is from 1515, as the signature indicates, then it was produced during Enzo’s later period. That would make sense, he experimented a lot around that time. But I’ll need to do some research first. In any case, it’s a very interesting picture. If it is indeed an original, you’ve made an excellent purchase, Lord Ashbury. This could change a lot of what we think we know about Enzo.”

Matteo smiles at the older man, who’s beaming proudly. He apparently didn’t hear the “if”. But the word is echoing through my head, making my hand tremble slightly as I brush my hair back behind my ear.

“Can you show me your documentation for the picture?” Matteo asks.

Lord Ashbury nods. “I’ve put together everything that might be of interest to you, over here,” he says, indicating the desk. Matteo, who isn’t standing very far away, goes over to the small pile of papers and leafs through the folders.

“The forensic report, that’s good,” he murmurs, setting it aside. I’d already told him that the canvas and paints have been proven to be from the time in question. But as he is leafing through the next folder, he appears taken aback. He looks up, puzzled. “Are there no further proofs of origin?”

My heart sinks a bit further. That doesn’t sound good at all. Lord Ashbury’s expression darkens, too.

“No. That’s all the documentation they presented me with. And it’s not listed in any catalogues either. That’s what aroused my friend Arnold’s suspicions, and that’s why he began to suspect that the painting might not be an Enzo at all.” When Matteo raises his eyebrows quizzically he adds: “Arnold is an art historian at the University of Bristol.”

“Arnold Highcombe?”

“Exactly.” Lord Ashbury looks at Matteo in surprise and with a touch of being pleased. “Do you know him?”

“Only a little. We met at a conference in Florence once,” he confirms, smiling, leaving it unclear as to whether the encounter was a positive experience or not. But since he raised his eyebrows a little, my money’s on the latter.