

## CHAPTER ONE

"WHAT THE HELL is this all about?" demanded the blue-eyed giant who loomed in the doorway of the Conservation Department of the Tri-City Art Museum. "What's this foolishness about 'The Lady of Dordrecht' being a forgery?"

Paige Fenton rose abruptly to her feet, ready to defend her allegations, a flush of indignation rising in her cheeks and a crackle of unexpected physical response to the man licking through her.

But before she could answer, Arthur Franklin, the museum's director, stepped forward. "Mr. Hamilton, I'm so glad you could come right over."

"This had better be as serious as you claimed, Franklin. It caused the cancellation of an important business meeting," Hamilton growled.

"I assure you, I wouldn't disturb you if there was any question about our findings."

In spite of Franklin's calming manner, the newcomer's anger was evident to Paige in the rigid set of his broad shoulders and the harsh lines that marred his handsome face.

"All right, Mr. Franklin, let's not waste time with empty assurances. I want to know why you believe the painting the Hamilton Corporation sold you is a fake and who is responsible for these ridiculous accusations."

Turning to Paige, Franklin made the necessary introductions: associate conservator to infuriated patron.

Though Paige had steeled herself for this confrontation with the portrait's former owner, she was unprepared for the open hostility in Grant Hamilton's sapphire-bright eyes. She bristled as she felt them sweep over her, taking in her severe auburn topknot, huge tortoise-shell glasses, and conservative dark clothes visible where her lab coat hung open. That his gaze was measuring, calculating, and at the same time contemptuous fueled the instantaneous dislike she felt for him. Determined not to be intimidated either by his sun-drenched good looks or the derisive gleam in his eyes, she stared back with equal intensity, noting the faded plaid shirt and

well-washed jeans that clung to his muscular body like a second skin. Judging from his rugged build and rough demeanor she decided he looked far more like the tight end for the local football team than a patron of the arts.

"Well then, tell me, Miss Fenton, how did you come to the mistaken conclusion that the Hals my company sold the museum is a forgery?" There was such blatant condescension in the visitor's tone that a sharp retort bubbled to Paige's lips. But Arthur Franklin forestalled it.

"Please, Mr. Hamilton, let's sit down and discuss this rationally," he offered.

"Perhaps, Arthur, if I could show Mr. Hamilton what I found while I was cleaning the portrait," Paige suggested coldly, "he might be more inclined to believe what we say."

She'd issued a challenge, and Grant Hamilton rose to meet it, the hint of a sneer in his smile. "Very well, Miss Fenton, let's see what you've discovered."

Paige led the way across the studio to where the portrait lay on one of the worktables. It was a truly breathtaking piece, allegedly painted by Frans Hals, the old Dutch master, who had practiced his art in Haarlem during the mid-seventeenth century. The portrait, known as "The Lady of Dordrecht," was of a young Burgher woman and had been carefully painted to reveal her pale beauty above severe dark clothes and beneath a prim Brussel's lace cap. It was as fine an example of Hals's technique as Paige had ever seen, rich with character and vibrant with quick, clean brushstrokes that typified the artist's work.

Adopting her best lecture-hall voice, Paige began to explain. "Before I decided on any kind of restoration for the portrait, I made a careful examination of the painting to determine its condition. The work was in excellent shape, due, I thought, to the care the Hamilton family has always taken with its acquisitions. At any rate, the only conservation necessary at this time was the removal of a protective overcoating of darkened varnish and its replacement with one of the new non-yellowing polymers."

"As fascinating as all this is," Grant Hamilton observed caustically, "what does it have to do with determining that 'The Lady' is a forgery?"

"As I began to remove the varnish," Paige continued, ignoring the provocation in his tone and the tremors of reaction that raced along her limbs, "I became suspicious of the painting's origins. In testing for the correct solvent to remove the overcoating, I realized the varnish was of a modern formula. That in itself is not unusual since paintings of this age have often been cleaned and resealed several times, but as I used the solvent I'd decided on, it became evident that a toner of some sort had been used to give the painting a patina of great age. Also, the pigments beneath the tinted overcoating were too strong and fresh to have been applied more than three hundred years ago."

Grant Hamilton looked plainly unconvinced as he turned to the museum director. "Do you mean to tell me the accusation that 'The Lady of Dordrecht' is a forgery is based solely on this woman's subjective judgment?"

Anger rocketed through Paige, and she glared at him.

"You must understand," Franklin defended her, "that a great deal in the art world is based on subjective judgment. But in this case our experts concur with Paige. I would never have contacted you if we weren't convinced that this work is not all it seems."

Bless you, Arthur, Paige commended him silently as she beamed at the dapper little man, who handled the complex operations of a nationally known museum with great tact and aplomb.

"Of course, Mr. Hamilton," Paige added, "there are a number of scientific tests that we will run on the portrait now that a question of its authenticity has arisen. Perhaps you will find those objective results more convincing than my evaluation. Either way, the findings will be the

same: 'The Lady of Dordrecht' is a forgery."

Grant Hamilton's face hardened at the quiet arrogance in her words, and a flare of mistrust passed between them.

Then he gave a feral smile. "You may be right, Miss Fenton, but be assured that if 'The Lady of Dordrecht' is authentic and you are wrong, I intend to see to it that you resign your position."

Turning to the museum's director, he continued, "Tell me, Mr. Franklin, how is it possible that when we had the painting examined at Riverview prior to the sale, no question of its authenticity was raised? And what about the picture's documentation, which dates back a full one hundred years before my great-grandfather acquired the piece? Is all that invalid if this portrait turns out not to be by Hals?"

"Those are all good questions, Mr. Hamilton, and I'm not sure how to answer you," Franklin conceded. "Unfortunately, Mr. Argenta, the man who examined the work at your brother's estate, is out of the country at present, though we are trying to contact him."

"I'm sure you realize how important it is that we resolve these questions quickly," Franklin went on. "The Northern Light exhibition, featuring both Dutch and Flemish painters of this period, is due to open in just a week, and publicity has already begun. Since we're using 'The Lady of Dordrecht' as a signature piece for the show, both the museum and Hamilton Corporation will suffer great embarrassment if the portrait proves to be a fake."

Grant Hamilton's expression was grave. "Does this discovery jeopardize the authenticity of the other pieces included with the purchase of the Hals?"

Paige could see that Arthur Franklin felt uncomfortable with the question and its ramifications. "It seems to me that the museum would be negligent if we didn't run a few basic tests on the other pieces, especially considering the huge sums of money involved."

Hamilton stiffened. "Then you're insinuating that someone has attempted to defraud you."

The usually self-possessed Arthur Franklin fumbled for a reply. "That conclusion seems premature, Mr. Hamilton. We really don't know enough about the forgery yet to assign blame."

The younger man took a deep breath. "Then get those damned tests done! I want to know where Hamilton Corporation and I stand in all this." His narrowed eyes swept up from the portrait to the museum director and came to rest on Paige. In these past few minutes they had become enemies, and she felt his antagonism keenly.

Still, Paige managed to stare back, determined not to be bullied by either this man's intimidating physical presence or his family's power.

Arthur Franklin broke the uncomfortable silence. "Rest assured, Mr. Hamilton, we'll be running those tests as soon as possible. The museum is as anxious as you are to get to the bottom of this unfortunate incident. Now, why don't you let me show you out?"

"No, thank you, Franklin. I can find my own way," Hamilton said stiffly, and he slammed the door behind him as he left.

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After Grant Hamilton's thunderous exit Paige retreated to one of the huge leather wing chairs in the lab's windowed alcove to regain her composure. The encounter with the portrait's former owner had deeply upset her. That a man like Grant Hamilton, who obviously knew nothing about art, could question her judgment and threaten her job enraged and frightened her.

She was very much aware of the power money could wield at an institution that existed

primarily on bequests and private or corporate gifts. Nor did she underestimate the importance of the Hamilton family in providing, both directly and indirectly, for Tri-City's small but impressive collection of art.

Because of his family's influence, Paige knew that, should Grant Hamilton demand her head on a Paul Revere platter, Arthur Franklin would be forced to comply. It wasn't a comforting thought, but she didn't dwell on it. After all, she was right; the Hals was a forgery. By Monday the tests would be completed and her suspicions confirmed. Then Grant Hamilton would be forced to acquiesce.

Paige was still feeling smug an hour later as she piloted her temperamental Toyota toward her apartment in a newly rehabilitated area to the west of the museum. Once home, she turned up the air conditioner and stripped off her clothes in preparation for a shower. Arthur Franklin was hosting another fund raiser tonight, and Paige knew he expected her to attend. Actually, contemplating victory in her confrontation with the overbearing Grant Hamilton had put her in a fine mood, and she was looking forward to the party.

Paige wasn't sure why she had taken such an instantaneous dislike to Hamilton; she had disagreed with patrons before without feeling such animosity toward them. Perhaps it had been his arrogant manner or her long-standing belief that no man that good-looking could be trusted.

Picking up a sketch pad from her bedside table, she indicated a broad jaw and square chin with a few swipes of her pencil. A vertical line became a straight, narrow nose, while horizontal strokes formed a full, sensuous mouth. Shading in high cheekbones and heavy brows above wide-spaced eyes, she conceded that she had captured a fair likeness of her handsome adversary. She tossed the pad aside in irritation and headed for the bathroom.

Paige prepared for the party with particular care, selecting a dress of deep blue-green chiffon that emphasized the long lines of her body. Strappy black sandals, an antique beaded purse, and her mother's pearl earrings were her only accessories, and as she stood before the mirror she was very pleased with her transformation. This afternoon she had watched Grant Hamilton dismiss her as a woman found wanting, and tonight she had curled her hair, taken time with her makeup, and worn her most frivolous dress to deliberately destroy her usually businesslike demeanor. With her auburn hair waving softly down her back, the sensuous movement of chiffon against her flesh, and the subtle hint of Chanel No. 5 wafting around her, Paige felt arresting and very ready for the evening ahead.

Arthur Franklin's home was a rambling, turreted Victorian perched high on the bluffs that overlooked the river. As Paige maneuvered her Toyota into a space on the circular driveway, she reflected how incongruous her car seemed parked beside Mercedes-Benzes and Jaguars. More from force of habit than necessity she locked her car doors before moving up the walk. Once inside, she was impressed, as always, by the well-researched restoration Franklin and his wife had done on the house. The wide entryhall was a showplace for the rich cherry paneling and intricately carved staircase, which were lighted by a chandelier of brass and cut crystal. The hall opened into a double parlor that skillfully blended ornate period pieces with contemporary furniture and art.

As usual, the Franklins had created the perfect mix of guests, too, including museum personnel, area business and social leaders, and professors and their wives from the local universities. The evening was spiced with just the right number of well-known artists, who always seemed willing to fly in at Arthur Franklin's invitation.

In one corner of the room a flamboyant woman ceramicist was holding court, discoursing on the blatantly erotic nature of her latest stoneware creations. In another area designer-clad

matrons were putting their carefully-coiffed heads together for a bit of gossip while their husbands stood at the makeshift bar comparing notes on the stock market.

Across the way Paige saw Evan Rogers, the museum's conservator and her mentor, decked out in several splendid examples from his collection of Zuni Indian turquoise. Arthur Franklin stood at the center of his own group—whose members, Paige suspected, would write substantial checks to the museum before the evening was over. As always, the party was well choreographed, put together with equal parts good food, fine liquor, mellow music, and sparkling conversation.

Paige was about to launch herself into the festivities when someone touched her arm. The slight, sensual rasp of a palm sliding along her smooth, bare flesh sent shivers chasing along her spine; she was struck by the warmth and intimacy of the contact. She turned slowly to face the tall man at her side, curious to know why he aroused such a delicious response in her. Then, as recognition swept over her, she stood staring at him, mouth agape.

It was Grant Hamilton.