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Chapter One

Preston Smith placed the slender Waterman fountain pen that was engraved with his father's initials on top of a lined yellow pad containing several pages of his own cramped handwritten questions. The pen had been given to him the day he was inducted into the Texas Society of Certified Public Accountants, and the feel of it in his hand brought comforting memories of his father. He removed the gold-toned wire-rimmed glasses he'd bought to achieve a look of seriousness, rubbed the tender points on either side of his nose where the glasses had rested uneasily, and reminded himself again that he needed to get them adjusted.

He placed his calculator on top of the financial reports he'd spent the last hour reviewing and looked again at the reports for the Caruth Landing Apartments, punching several numbers into the calculator and peering at the result. He put on his glasses, glanced at the number to confirm it, and recorded it on the yellow pad.

It was his second week on the job and he already knew that Hank Cantrell had understated the degree to which Cantrell Properties needed someone to impose structure and control over it. Assuming the report was accurate, the numbers did not

make sense. They pointed to either out-of-control expenses or a shortfall in collections. Or both.

He hadn't statistically sampled the Properties. There was nothing scientific about his methods. He'd simply selected Caruth Landing for detailed analysis on the basis of proximity: it was near the highrise he lived in. He intended to visit each of the Cantrell Properties in the next few months, starting with this one. Preston would throw his energy at streamlining operations. He planned to exceed the expectations Hank Cantrell had voiced when he'd hired him away from Hamilton Winstead Consulting. Preston tried to live up to his father's advice: "To be successful, you must work smart." The words had become Preston's motto.

Caruth Landing was the perfect first step in Preston's plan. The rent receipts there were seven percent lower than they should've been.

His thoughts were interrupted when Hank Cantrell thrust his head through the open doorway. Preston rose from his chair but was stopped midway by Hank's dismissive hand.

Hank had once told Preston he was fifty, but the short, gray, curly hair that retained no more than a hint of auburn and the paunch straining at his burgundy polo shirt made Preston wonder if sixty wasn't more accurate. Hank adjusted his girth into one of the flame-stitched wing chairs across from Preston's desk. His beefy chest pulled at the Turtle Creek Country Club logo embroidered onto his shirt. He crossed an ankle over a knee, bringing into view a shiny tasseled loafer marred by a smear of gray mud, the kind frequently found on construction sites. Hank chewed his gum, and the faint odor of wintergreen swept across the space that separated them. "You look kind of grim, son."

Preston cringed inwardly. He was sensitive about how young he looked and hated anyone's referring to it. He worked in a profession where mature looks brought respect, and where, despite his proximity to thirty, his youthful appearance often caused his advice to be ignored.

Hank looked at his watch. "Anything I should know about before I quit for the day?" He popped his gum in a manner Preston found irritating.

Preston quashed his annoyance and pushed the report on Caruth Landing toward Hank. "This might interest you."

Hank glanced at the paper and raised his hazel eyes to Preston with an expression of mild curiosity. Preston rapidly explained what he'd found in the report.

Hank chuckled. "That complex is always slow. Hell, it's falling down around the tenants. For years all I had were maintenance bills and headaches from it." His eyes narrowed. "So I got smart. I reduced the rent by the amount it would've cost me to do the repairs."

"But . . ."

"The tenants can use the money to do the repairs or not. Whatever. I don't worry about it." He champed his gum and stood, giving Preston an intense look. "And neither should you. Hell, boy. Everybody's happy." He winked confidentially. "I'll see you at the party tonight. I have someone I want you to meet who'll be sure to distract you."

Preston decided to head Hank off. He was tired of the plentiful matchmakers he'd run into since he'd gotten out of college. Everyone knew someone, it seemed. "It's very nice of you to introduce me to . . . to someone you think I might like, but it's not necessary. I have plenty of . . ."

"Nonsense, my boy. I'd never do that. I only want you to meet my *daughter*, Kate. She's just in from Milan." He tossed the report toward Preston and strode out of the room.

Preston shrugged. He knew Hank had a daughter. Hadn't he said she was in boarding school? She was probably home for the holidays. In his experience, fathers were often a little unrealistic about how charming their daughters were.

He placed his glasses on the yellow pad and rubbed his nose again. Hank's response was odd. Seven percent over the past year was a lot of money. Enough money to do major repairs, not the ones Hank had considered optional. Hank seemed blasé about potential embezzlement. If Preston had been hired to

straighten out Hank's operation, why then, the first time he pointed out a concern, did Hank brush it off?

An hour later, Preston hung up the phone and glanced at his watch. His mother's call had run longer than he'd hoped, and he needed to get to the tailor if he expected to wear the first custom-made sports jacket he'd ever owned to Hank's party. Since the call had come that morning telling him it was ready, he'd been eager to see how it would look. He'd tried to convey a sense of his urgency to his mother, but she was intent on some silly little spat she'd had with Mary Anne, his brother's wife, and hadn't taken the hint. His mother could stretch a five-minute conversation into a half hour without pausing for breath. An elaborate doodle covered the center of his desk pad before his attempts to hang up bore fruit.

A few minutes later he was sitting in the candy apple red Porsche Hank had given him as a company car, snarled in traffic, reviewing the conversation with Hank. Something did not add up. No one would blow off fourteen thousand dollars a month. That wasn't pocket change, not even for a man of Hank's wealth and flamboyant temperament. He pulled into a parking spot in front of the tailor's shop.

Preston entered tangible luxury with his first step onto the thick carpet of the tailor's showroom. It was designed to attract the well-dressed, moneyed Dallas male, but more importantly to Preston, his father's clothing had been made here. The shop brought back memories.

In the center of the oak paneled room was a mahogany circular pedestal table with heavy ball-and-claw feet. Silk ties formed a fan before a display of Egyptian cotton dress shirts. Preston fingered an Italian silk tie with longing and discretely examined the price tag. He gasped.

The proprietor, a tall, good-looking man, approached carrying two garment bags. He hung them from a hook mounted on the door that led to the fitting rooms. The man smiled and unzipped the bags. "Why don't you try these on?" He pulled one off the hanger, and Preston slipped into it.

The new jacket fit like nothing Preston had ever worn before. “This looks great.” He looked at the burgundy silk lining. “I’ve always wanted a coat with *my* name in it,” he said, more to himself than the tailor.

“Your father loved fine clothing. He was a good judge of fabric. Appreciated the hand of fine piece goods. You favor your father a great deal—but I suppose everyone tells you that. Around the mouth, I think.”

“No. Actually, no one ever says that. My family thinks I look like my mother.”

The proprietor picked up two ties from the display and motioned for Preston to join him in front of a cheval glass in the corner of the shop. The man adjusted the mirror. “You’ll need to order some shirts,” he said and draped the ties across Preston’s new jacket. “But this will give you the idea.”

A half hour later, after buying four ties and ordering a dozen shirts, Preston placed his credit card on the counter. He signed the charge slip and said, “You know, this is more than I spent as a down payment on my first car.”

“To be successful, you have to look the part,” the proprietor said. “The right clothes breed confidence.” He smiled in a way that looked as if it had been practiced before a mirror. “Your father understood that.”

The men shook hands and Preston walked out of the shop, shocked at what he had just spent, but pleased he could now afford to do so. He put the garment bags in the trunk of the Porsche. Taking this job had been the best move of his career.

The invitation for Hank’s party had been for seven and Preston was, as usual, early. He’d driven past the Cantrell house to be sure he knew where it was located and was surprised to find that it was only a few blocks from the home he’d grown up in, which was now occupied by his brother and his family.

His brother had bought the house when his mother could no longer manage it. At the time, Preston had been in college and barely able to meet his own expenses, much less help her. As a result, his mother had practically given the house to Cliff.

The old house had suffered from neglect and had grown shabby after his father's death. Preston had to admit that Cliff had made some elegant improvements. He'd remodeled and expanded and given their mother her own apartment in the back, separated by a narrow expanse of grass from her noisy grandsons. Although his mother took most of her meals with his brother's family, she had an efficiency kitchen with a breakfast nook overlooking the back lawn. She also had a sizable bedroom with a luxurious bath and a living area roomy enough to accommodate a couch and two chairs. It was larger than the apartment Preston had had before he had gone to work for Hank Cantrell.

Tonight, outlined in twinkling lights—obviously the handiwork of his sister-in-law Mary Anne—the house looked as stately as it had when his father had been alive.

Despite his mother's occasional complaint, everyone living in that house seemed happy, especially Cliff. He'd married the most beautiful and talented woman Preston had ever known. His sons went to the best public school in Texas, the same one he and Cliff had attended as children. Through the efforts of the lovely Mary Anne, Cliff held lavish parties for his company. He had everything. Even Preston's share.

Preston circled the block and returned to the Cantrell house. The Cantrell mansion fronted Turtle Creek on Lakeside Lane, one of the most exclusive streets in Dallas. Landscape lighting washed over the front of the house. It was painted a pale pink trimmed in white and resembled a birthday cake for a little girl—not the manor Preston had expected. Given Hank's management style, it was the last home in the world Preston would've imagined for him. Preston chuckled at an image of Napoleon in Italian loafers that darted through his head. Hank Cantrell's resemblance to "The Little Corporal" was unmistakable.

At the front door, Preston dropped his keys in the hands of the valet parker. A string quartet in the foyer greeted guests. He entered an expansive room to his right and a white-gloved

caterer offered a tray containing a variety of drinks. Preston, who wanted his wits about him, selected a sparkling water with lime and moved into the room.

A fifteen-foot Christmas tree decorated in the same colors as the exterior of the house dominated one corner and a heavily carved mantel dominating the other. A small fire brought a hospitable glow to that corner of the room, and notwithstanding the relative warmth of the evening, the other early arrivals congregated before it. Hank, a striking blonde at his side whom Preston assumed to be his woman-of-the-moment, stood in their midst regaling them.

Preston approached the circle. Hank, with a wave of his arm, gave the point of the story. Everyone, including Preston, laughed as if on cue.

Hank's gaze caught Preston, and Hank gestured for Preston to stand next to him. "Listen, everyone. I've got someone I want you all to meet." He paused briefly. "This is my miracle worker. General Manager and Chief Financial Officer. Preston Smith. I expect great things of this boy." He slapped Preston on the back, nearly causing him to spill the sparkling water. "Came from an *international* accounting firm. Imagine Cantrell Properties getting someone with *these* credentials." He proceeded to list Preston's sterling academic record, his master's degree in taxation, and his rapid rise in Hamilton Winstead Consulting.

Preston felt his color rise and the room grow too warm. He made an effort to smile although the muscles in his face were taut and uncooperative. He avoided the eyes he felt focused on him.

When he was through, Hank introduced each person. Preston was too flustered to do anything but mumble, "How do you do?" over and over until he came to the blonde on Hank's other side.

"And this," Hank paused. "This is my darling daughter, Kate."

"K-K-Kate?" Preston, stammering like an idiot, felt the urge to kick himself. His image of a mousy, convent-reared

young woman, who'd wear a white collared navy blue dress to a party, did not square with this shapely sophisticate awash in sequins the color of a summer sunset.

He took her hand and held it a fraction too long, gazing into eyes the color of lapis. Hank had been right about one thing—his daughter would distract anyone from his worries. Kate Cantrell laughed. "It's very nice to meet you, Mr. Smith. Obviously my father thinks very highly of you." She glanced over his shoulder. "Please excuse me. Guests are arriving, and I must greet them."

She touched her father's arm. "Daddy?" Hank and Kate walked away, leaving Preston with a group of people who turned away from him and continued their conversation. He glanced at the thin Swiss watch he'd purchased the day he accepted the job with Hank and wondered how long before he could leave the party without being insulting.

A woman as slender as a boy with eyes that, although willowy green in color, reminded Preston of an alert doe said, "I'm Amanda Hale Young. Hank's attorney. I office down the hall from Cantrell Properties. And you are Preston Smith . . . Any relation to the ex-governor of Texas?"

"Very distant. I think he was one of my dad's cousins. Preston was my mother's maiden name."

"Like the road?" Amanda Hale said, naming one of the major routes through north Dallas.

"Yes. Just like the road," he replied. The street had, in fact, been named after his mother's grandfather who'd owned most of the land on either side of it when it was planted in cotton.

"Then you're one of those rare breeds, a native Dallasite." She smiled warmly. "Shame on Hank," she continued, in an abrupt change of topic. "Do you remember *anyone's* name?"

Preston shook his head.

"I mean besides Kate's."

"Am I that obvious?"

"Don't worry." Amanda laughed. "Kate has that effect on everyone. Always has."

A passing caterer exchanged her empty wine glass for one containing a pale gold liquid. "I think Hank enjoys overwhelming the men who meet Kate." She took a sip of her wine and smiled again. "Of course, he always serves the best chardonnay, and that helps make up for it." Her eyes met his. "Fortunately for those of us who work with Hank, Kate is totally unaffected. We all love her." Her expression grew serious. "She is one of the kindest people I know." She gestured around the room. "Even with all of this."

"Have you known her long?"

"My goodness, yes. I used to baby-sit her, although I probably shouldn't admit it. People tell me I look much younger than I am. It's a curse, really."

"I know what you mean," Preston replied.

Amanda turned back to him and smiled brightly. "What do you think of the Cowboys this year?" Her abrupt topic change propelled the conversation to football, a subject in which Preston felt competent and in which, to his delight, Amanda Young was as knowledgeable. After a few minutes of good-natured sport statistics competition, they were interrupted by Kate.

"I see you've met Mandi," she said to Preston and turned to Amanda. Kate assumed a pleasant Southern accent he hadn't heard earlier, which made him think that Amanda Young might be an intimate family friend. "I'm *so* glad to see you." The cheeks of the two women touched in a display of affection. "Daddy told me you've been doing your best to keep him on the straight and narrow." Kate laughed. "Honey, I know you've got your work cut out for you."

"Yes," Amanda quipped. "I've been trying to keep your inheritance intact. But, without as much success as I'd like."

"Don't give up hope. Now that I'm home, I'll back your corner."

"And don't forget," Amanda said, indicating Preston with a slight inclination of her head. "We've got another ally."

"Yes." Kate gave Preston an appraising glance. Her tone became serious. "I'm glad you're on board. Father needs your help. I so want him to slow down." She gave Preston one of the

most engaging smiles he'd ever seen. It was as if a face, so perfect it seemed carved from marble, came to life in a flash of flawless teeth, making him desperate to say something clever that might make her smile again. But her breathtaking presence had caused any clever thoughts to flee.

Amanda raised a hand in greeting to someone behind Preston and excused herself.

"Father wanted you to meet me, didn't he?" Kate said. "Don't answer that. I know my father." She flashed her marvelous smile again. "He means well, but he puts everyone on the spot."

"Uh . . . No. It wasn't like that at all."

"You're very nice, but it *was* like that. No need to apologize."

"No, I mean . . ." Preston struggled for the words to convince her she was jumping to the wrong conclusion, but he fell silent. What was happening to him? Ordinarily he had no trouble talking to a woman. Why was it he, who never failed to find the words to make even the most convoluted tax law understandable, was failing so dismally at making Kate Cantrell understand he found her attractive?

"Let's leave it like *this*," Kate said, leaning toward him. "I will call *you* sometime in the next few weeks, and when Father asks, you can tell him that." She put a hand on his new sports jacket, "And then you're off the hook. Clever?"

Preston managed to find his voice, but the words came out louder than he intended at the exact moment the babble of the party, that until then had been constant, broke. "No." He looked around and lowered his voice. "I mean. Would you like to have lunch next Saturday?"

"Well, all right. If you insist." Her eyes narrowed in amusement. "We'll have lunch." Preston bristled at her tone, but quickly set a time, before, claiming hostess responsibilities again, she prepared to leave.

Her hand returned to his sleeve. "By the way, this is a very nice jacket. I've always been partial to Italian *sicilienne*." Bestowing her breathtaking smile on him again, she was gone.

Preston watched Kate's shimmering dress mingle into the crowd until he lost sight of it. It seemed as if her last comment had contained an attempt to soften her earlier words, but it didn't change the implication. He set his glass down and moved toward the door. For the second time in one day, he'd been blown off by a Cantrell.

Early Monday morning, Preston laid the report that he'd prepared the Saturday before on the mahogany monolith that served as Hank's desk and planted a hand on its uncluttered surface. "Look. Caruth Landing is not the only property suffering from low collections. It seems more widespread than that."

Hank flipped through the pages of the report in a desultory manner, then shoved it toward Preston wearily. "I'm not going to sort through all this gibberish. What's the bottom line here?"

"I'm not sure. The rental receipts don't jibe with the occupancy rate. Some of these complexes are nearly full. Something's wrong. Seriously wrong." Preston paced in front of Hank's desk. "I know what you said, but this shouldn't be ignored, Hank. Someone might be stealing from you. The indications are textbook . . ."

"Stop right there." Hank's face had turned an alarming shade of red. He shot to his feet and his chair banged into the credenza behind his desk. "You're making some damn serious allegations. And I don't like it. None of my people would *dare* steal from me. They've all been with me for years. There's got to be some other reason." His next words conveyed an unmistakable threat. "You're the bright boy. You find it."

"Hank, I appreciate your loyalty to your long-term employees, but surely you don't expect me to just stand by when I find something like this. You hired me to help you. I have to tell you what I see."

Hank's fist slammed the surface of his desk. "You need to know something about me upfront. You got proof, you come to me. You got nothing, you keep your mouth shut." He picked up the report and slapped it against his desk blotter.

“You got *nothing* here.” He dropped into his chair. “Not a damn thing.”

Preston felt the color drain from his face. He’d never had a client or a supervising partner speak to him this way. His heart was beating faster than usual. He put his hand out for the report.

“Sit down,” Hank said, giving Preston a tight smile. “I’m sorry, kid. Sometimes I’m a little rough around the edges. You go ahead and take a look around, if that’s what you want to do. But you’re barking up the wrong tree. There’s so much more you could be doing for me if you’d concentrate on the improvements in operations instead of chasing around after a phantom thief.

“I pay you a lot of money, kid. And if you can fix me up in the operations area, you’ll get a lot more. I got great plans for you, but I don’t pay you the big bucks to have you waste your time and mine. And . . .” His eyebrows formed a harsh line. “I don’t want you spreading dissension among the troops. I spent a lot of time in the infantry fighting gooks. Morale is everything. Got to be careful or you can fuck that up pronto.”

Preston picked up the report and returned to his office, wondering what could have turned what had begun as an exploratory discussion into such a heated one. Hank was being sarcastic, but he’d unwittingly spoken the truth. Preston *was* a bright boy, and he would find the source of the problem. Even though it was obvious Hank didn’t understand, improving operations was impossible until he found what was causing cash to leak out of the company. He walked toward the office of Richard Orr, the man in charge of all the accounting.

Kate Cantrell handed her keys to the parking attendant reluctantly. In Milan she’d mastered public transportation rather than risk the vagaries of Italian drivers and had nearly forgotten the pleasure of being at the wheel of a fine automobile. But the fifteen-minute drive to Patrizio’s reminded her how much she loved her Mercedes convertible.

She walked past the patio of the trendy Italian restaurant, waving to Hank who was seated under a blue and red umbrella

emblazoned with “Pellegrino.” A moment later she crossed the uneven bricks of the patio, and Hank, first rising to kiss her cheek, settled her into the chair.

“How nice that it’s warm enough to sit outside.”

“Hard to believe, isn’t it?” Hank said. “I guess bringing you to an Italian restaurant is a little like bringing coals to Newcastle. I didn’t think of that when I suggested meeting here.”

Kate laughed. She enjoyed her father’s efforts at gallantry. He wasn’t always so accommodating. She was especially grateful because what she was about to tell him would test his good mood. They picked up their menus and ordered.

As soon as the waitress departed, Kate began. “I know you’ve been waiting to hear this from me for years . . .”

“Are you trying to tell me you’ve met someone? An Italian count? A Mafioso?”

“No.” Kate smiled, although she had grown tired of the topic her father brought up increasingly. He wanted grandchildren and made no secret of it. “But, I do know what I want to do when I grow up.”

“How can you? You’re not grown up.”

“One minute you want to marry me off, the next minute I’m too young for a career.” She covered her lap with a snowy napkin so stiff with starch it seemed unable to bend, something, she mused, it had in common with her father. A smile softened her words. “You can’t have it both ways.”

“So, what is it? Do you still want to be a fireman?”

“Sort of.” She laughed. “Only with a twist. I want to be an interior designer.”

He gathered his forehead into a series of grim lines, then spoke in a voice that became loud enough for other diners to glance their way. “I did not pay for an expensive education in fine art for you to cater to fat old women with vulgar tastes.” Raising his little finger and extending his hand, he left no doubt what he meant by the words that followed. “Or to associate with *flitting* men who don’t appreciate women. You are far too talented for that.” He struck the surface of the

wrought iron table to emphasize the word that followed. “No.”

“Oh, Daddy, it’s not like that . . .”

“No. Pick something else. That’s final.”

His face grew florid. Further conversation would be useless. Kate changed the topic. “I like the new man you hired. Preston . . . Smith?”

“Yeah.” Hank raised his iced tea glass in the direction of the waitress. “I think he’ll work out. Like all young people,” he said, giving Kate a look that she recognized as an attempt to convey another meaning, “he’s overzealous, but he’ll work out.”

“I’m glad to hear it. He’s asked me to lunch.”

Hank Cantrell’s face split into a grin and reverted to its normal color. “That’s nice.” The waitress set a Caesar salad before him, and he picked up his fork and stabbed at it. “That’s very nice.”

Kate waited until her father was vigorously chewing an oversized bite of romaine lettuce. “I mailed my resume to Anderson Architects before I left Milan,” she said, naming a firm specializing in nonresidential design. “The Benitos gave me a good recommendation for the work I did for them.” She smiled, pleased her father wouldn’t have time to swallow before she finished. “And Anderson called this morning.”

Her father swallowed and sputtered, “You are the most infuriating woman.” He stopped as if assessing what he’d just said, then shook his head. “Just like your mother. I mean *just* like her. She could worry the pennies off a dead man’s eyes.”

Kate laughed. “I’ve heard that before.”

“Now, honey, you know I loved your momma.” His eyes focused in the distance for a moment. “Sometimes it’s hard to believe she’s been gone as long as she has.”

Kate reached out and touched her father’s hand. “More than eleven years now, Daddy.”

“There are days when I expect to see her in the kitchen when I come home. I can’t explain it.” His eyes met Kate’s. “Having you back home reminds me of . . .” He drained his iced tea. “Of so many things I don’t want to talk about right now.”

He placed his hand over hers. "I'm not for this . . . this career you've chosen. I'd hoped you'd pursue your art. If you want this instead, I won't help you but I won't stand in your way."

"Thank you, Daddy." It was a small victory but a welcome one. She hadn't wanted to cross her father such a short time after her return home. From the elevated tray the waitress had placed on the table, Kate pulled a slice of pizza and placed it on her plate.

Now all she had to do was land the job.

The following Saturday Preston took Kate to Red Bailey's Barbecue Barn for lunch. He liked to bring women here on first dates, especially poor little rich girls, and he'd decided, even though she was the boss's daughter and one of the most beautiful women he'd ever asked out, not to make an exception for Kate Cantrell. As a result, he felt more in control and calmer than he had the night of the party.

Despite the atmosphere, the food at the Barbecue Barn was good. The meal was selected from a hand-chalked menu on a blackboard balanced on the claws of a moth-eaten grizzly. As far back as he could remember, only the prices had changed.

When Preston had opened the door of an old Westinghouse refrigerator with a thick, bumpy coating of brush-marked enamel, Kate had chosen a sticky sweet orangeade. He was therefore mildly surprised when she ordered double jalapenos on her pulled chicken sandwich. Kate Cantrell was, it seemed, a woman of extreme tastes, and that made her even more intriguing than she'd seemed before.

He carried a red plastic tray to the wooden picnic table where Kate waited. He set a scarred Melmac plate, divided into three sections like the ones from his high school cafeteria, and a handful of napkins in front of Kate, then sat across from her at the paint-peeling table.

He snatched a french fry from Kate's plate and popped it into his mouth. She gave him a smile that sent his thoughts skittering, and then she lifted her plate aside. "I was right in the middle of a great poem." In silence she finished reading the

graffiti that ended at the edge of her side of the table before resting her plate over it. "I always like to know what happens in the end. The poet got the girl." Kate patted the grease-slick bun with chicken spilling out its sides and took a sip from the orangeade bottle. "I'm glad you told me this was casual."

Preston followed her glance around the afternoon crowd that filled the tiny dining area. Two men in white paint-splattered dungarees sat less than an arm's length away on one side. A child who picked at his french fries and a mother who mopped at his runny nose sat on the other. A tired juke box played an even more tired recording of a Hank Williams classic.

Kate's eyes displayed a twinkle of mirth. "You sure know how to show a girl a good time."

"Thank you. I try to be considerate. You were gone a long time, and I thought you might have that nearly always fatal disease expatriated Texans suffer from—'lack of barbecue.' "

"And . . ." She examined the top napkin from the pile between them. "Red Bailey's Barbecue Barn has the cure."

"Absolutely. Just like the waters at Lourdes."

"I see." She wiped her hands on the napkin in her lap. "Good thinking. I'm feeling better with each bite. I'm even considering seconds."

"I like a woman with a hearty appetite."

"You do? And what else do you like in a woman?"

Preston pushed up the bridge of his glasses with a grease-free knuckle. "A sense of humor."

"And?"

"I like a woman who thinks for herself."

"Ah . . ."

"And it doesn't hurt if she's easy to look at."

Kate rewarded him with her wonderful smile.

"It's your turn."

"What do I like in a man?" She pursed her lips. "I may as well tell you now. It'll come out eventually." She gave him a wide-eyed look meant, he supposed, to convey innocence. "I'm saving myself for Clark Kent."

"Clark Kent? Why not for Superman?"

“Nope. Clark Kent. Superman wears a cape. I’m definitely against the men I go around with wearing capes. Also, he’s far too *flighty* for me,” she said, emphasizing the word obviously meant as a double entendre. “And I’m afraid of heights. Clearly I’m a Clark Kent kind of girl.”

“Have you told him?”

“Clark? Oh, yes. I’ve written.”

“And . . .”

“Nothing. He knows how devoted I am, but he never writes back. He never calls.”

Preston paused. “I’m terribly sorry.”

“Me too. It’s just not fair. I could never have a relationship with anyone else.” She raised a stricken glance to Preston. “Just think. For anyone else who might care about me, a breakup is only a phone call from Clark Kent away. Who could possibly live under *that* sword of Damocles?”

“But in the meanwhile?”

“In the meanwhile, I haven’t thought about it much.” She raised her hands. “Now you know how I feel about Clark. How about you? Who’s the most desirable woman in the world to you?”

“You’re full of odd questions.”

“Come on.” Kate tapped the table with a shiny pink fingernail. “This is scientific. Shape up. Get serious.”

“Serious?” He formed a thoughtful moue. “Okay. Mona Lisa.”

“Mona Lisa? That’s crazy. They’re not even sure she existed. Besides if she did, she’s *dead*.”

“Hey. In the realm of unattainable love, there are no rules. I didn’t make fun of your fascination for wimpy old Clark Kent.”

“Wimpy? Wimpy?” Kate gave him another smile, and Preston felt warmth pass through him. “That’s true. You didn’t. Okay, I’ll bite. Why Mona?”

“She had the guts to be amused by crazy old Leonardo da Vinci.”

“Crazy? How can you insult one of the greatest talents ever . . .” She seemed to catch herself. “You know, I did read he had a curious way of dressing.”

“Practically a cross-dresser.”

“Well, that might be a stretch. Let’s leave it at a free-spirited dresser. Maybe he wanted to get away from all the black they wore.”

“True, they did wear a lot of black back then, but I believe he wore a cape.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You made that up.”

He shrugged, but his eyes never left her face. A troubled look passed over her as if she’d remembered something. “Next Friday I go for an interview. For a job I really want.”

“A job?”

“Yes. A job. To do the only thing I’ve wanted to do from the day I first set foot in Milano.” Her voice softened when she pronounced the Italian version of the famous city’s name. She spread her hands wide. “The interiors of the homes in northern Italy are painted in the ripe shades of yellow and peach. The warm side of the palette. The furnishings have sleek, functional lines. And the woods they’re made from glow in the afternoon light.” She sighed and closed her eyes, as if she were viewing on the interior of her eyelids what she was describing to him. “The fabrics. So rich with texture and interwoven with the colors of the vineyard.” She paused and Preston, unwilling to interrupt her reverie, waited in silence for her to resume. He longed to hold her in his arms and run his hands along the length of her slim torso.

She opened her eyes and held up hands that helped shape her words. “I just want to share that. The flowers. So much a part of the Italian home. Nothing overdone. You know what I mean?”

He knew exactly what she meant. As a boy traveling with his parents, he’d seen what she was remembering. Many of the fine hotels of that region were renowned for being decorated with artistic restraint.

“They leave out the unneeded and leave in only what belongs. Nothing else.” She sat up straight. “Sorry. I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I guess I’m nervous.” She

recounted her discussion with her father. “He doesn’t agree, but I *have* to do this.”

Impulsively Preston placed his hands over hers. “When is your interview?”

“Nine a.m.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed.”

“Thanks,” she said and offered again the smile he’d been waiting for, and he realized in that instant he’d never be in control of any aspect of their relationship as long as she had that smile at her command.

