

Chapter Two

Amanda Hale Young, Esquire, as she referred to herself in her musings, had been at her desk since seven that morning. A good lawyer, she worked hard to become even better. If that meant getting to the office before the furnace was fired up, so be it. She was proud of her profession, proud of how her skills had improved in the six years since her graduation from law school. While her personal life, which was nearly nonexistent, could use some improvement, she wasn't one to forget her blessings. When she compared herself to her law school classmates, she was doing very well indeed. She was living her career dream, and it would only get better.

Sandy, her legal assistant, called out a greeting as she opened the reception door. Amanda rose from her desk with her empty Styrofoam cup and met Sandy in the hallway at the door to the snug storage room. Sandy was shorter than Amanda, but just as thin. Her eyes were too large for her face, and she was perpetually darting from place to place as if merely walking was too slow.

With one hand, Sandy indicated the half empty coffeepot in the corner of the storage room. "I see you got an early start." She removed her raincoat and stepped behind the door where

the coat hooks were mounted. Amanda eased through the narrow opening to refill her cup.

Sandy said, "Hey. Have you seen that new guy over at Cantrell Properties? I saw him in the hall on my way in. What a hunk."

"As a matter of fact, I did meet him. At Hank's party. His name is Preston Smith."

"Hmm. Kind of a common last name," Sandy said. Amanda smiled. Sandy's last name was almost unpronounceable. "But," Sandy continued, "if he'd ditch those goofy glasses, he'd be a real catch. If I weren't married . . ."

Amanda stepped toward her office, paused, and turned to give Sandy a sprightly smile. "You're right. He *is* good-looking. And sweet." Her voice softened. "Kind of a shy Gary Cooper type."

"Gary Cooper? Who's Gary Cooper?"

"Gary Cooper was . . ." Amanda squinted at Sandy. "Forget it. No one should be that young. Look in the black and whites at the video store. Grace Kelly. *High Noon*. You'll see." She smiled. "You're a good judge of men. Preston does seem very nice."

Sandy sloshed coffee into her own cup and gave Amanda a pointed look. "More important. Is he single?"

"I think so. He came to the party alone."

A muffled buzz came from Sandy's office. She cocked her head in an attitude of alertness and raced to her desk, catching the phone on the second ring. Amanda reached her office just as the call was transferred.

Hank Cantrell's voice greeted her gruffly, and she replied in kind. "Hello, yourself. Yeah. I'm here." She hung up, wondering what, if anything, had Hank Cantrell in such a foul mood. Sometimes he just started the day cranky. She closed the file folders on her desk and placed them in a Red Rope binder only moments before Hank, grunting in response to Sandy's cheery acknowledgment, breezed into her office.

Amanda stood and indicated one of the Jacobean chairs across from her desk. Hank sat in one. "Why couldn't you

spend some money on chairs that don't kill my back? Hell, I feel like I'm resting against spools of thread."

Amanda had deliberately purchased the most uncomfortable chairs she could find. She wanted no lengthy meetings that wasted her time and that clients were reluctant to pay for. And with Hank, who had a habit of dropping in unannounced, the chairs served her purpose especially well. She wasn't getting rid of them as long as her office was within walking distance of his.

"All right." Hank held up a hand. "All right. You told me you like them." He squirmed for a moment. "Next time I'm bringing a pillow."

Amanda overlooked his comments. "Nice party. Thanks for inviting me."

"It *was* a nice party." With his right hand he made the motion of brushing away a gnat, and the two-carat diamond ring he'd acquired the previous year flared in the light from her desk lamp. It was ostentatious enough to get him knocked in the head. Hank continued, "Kate ordered all that last minute fashion food crap that drives me crazy. I think the damn caterers talked her into it just to jack up the bill." He glanced at a Rolex with diamond pavé covering the dial.

"Kate has grown into a lovely woman. You must be proud of her." Hoping to head off any further criticism of Kate, she asked, "Is that a new watch, Hank?"

"Yes." Hank swung his wrist across her desk. "Ordered this custom from Switzerland. Ain't another one like it in the whole United States."

Amanda doubted that was true, but she didn't mention her reservations. The thing was beyond gaudy, and it had to have cost a fortune. She raised her hands. "I'm glad you dropped by. Saved me a call. I need to tell you I'm closing down my office between Christmas and New Year's. Sandy and I are both taking off that week."

"You're what?"

"I'm going to D.C. to visit my parents."

Hank scowled and rose from his chair. "You'll be gone the whole damn week? What if something comes up?"

Amanda pulled out a three-by-five index card and wrote her parents' names and phone number on it with a bright yellow fountain pen. "You can reach me here."

"That's not good enough. I may need you for something."

Amanda raised a querying eyebrow.

Hank's face was turning red. "Hell, who knows what I might need you for. I pay you a substantial retainer to insure you'll be here when I want you to be here."

Amanda was floored by his outburst. What could he be thinking? Less than a year ago he'd suggested that she move into his building and work for him on retainer. The agreement they'd struck stipulated he'd pay her a monthly fee based on the average of what he'd paid her over the previous two years. She'd have a steady income, and he'd have priority on several hours of her time each month. Up until this moment the arrangement had been mutually agreeable.

"What's up, Hank?"

"Nothing's up. I just don't like being taken advantage of."

Amanda felt the heat of indignation climb up her throat to her cheeks. She reached for the oversized three-ring checkbook she kept in her left hand desk drawer. "Well, Hank. How about if I write you a check for a fourth of this month's retainer? Would that square things?"

Hank drove his fist onto the top of her desk. "No, damn it. That won't square things. I don't want the goddamn *money*. I want the *time* I paid for. What you lawyers call specific performance." Hank knotted his jaw muscles.

Amanda reached for her cup and swallowed some of its now cold and bitter contents. "Undoubtedly you would," she replied. "But that's not possible. I've already made arrangements. My parents are expecting me."

Hank slapped the back of the chair he'd been sitting in. "Next time *ask* before you *arrange*."

Amanda rose, bracing her open hand against the cool page of checks. Her heart was hammering, but she kept her voice in

control. "Hank. I'm not accustomed to asking anyone how I should run my practice. I sincerely hope you don't expect me to start now. If you do, you'll be disappointed."

Hank headed to the door. At the threshold he turned, his face scarlet. "I already am." He barged out the reception door.

Sandy was at Amanda's door in the next instant. "What the heck was that all about?"

Amanda closed her checkbook with a thud. "Beats the hell out of me."

Preston removed a stack of unbound computer printouts from the less encumbered of two chairs facing Richard Orr's desk and put them on the floor before he sat in the chair. Orr was a big man with hands like hams. He reminded Preston of all the clichéd descriptions of Germans he'd ever heard. Blond with massive shoulders. Preston wouldn't have been surprised if he'd seen *lederhosen* beneath Orr's suit jacket when he'd stood to welcome Preston into his office.

"Did you enjoy your vacation?" he asked Orr.

"I did. Took my wife and daughters to Disney World. The girls had been after me." He exposed stained, irregular teeth in what Preston assumed was meant to be a friendly smile. "They're getting big. Next year they start school." Orr pointed to a photograph on his desk. Two dark-haired girls with contented, chocolate-stained faces beamed at the camera. Twins, Preston noted, their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders. Orr was a lucky man.

Preston spoke of things he thought would interest Orr for a few minutes before he delved into the topic that interested him. "When I reviewed Caruth Landing, the collections for the months I looked at seemed a lot less than they should've been."

Orr's expression grew guarded.

"Have you ever noticed that?" Preston asked.

Orr leaned back in his chair, opened his mouth as if to answer, then closed it, and fixed Preston with a thoughtful look. "Yes. When I first came."

"You mean it's been going on for . . .?"

“Ten years at least,” Orr supplied with a shrug.

Orr was stonewalling him, and Preston wanted to raise his voice, but he resisted. “And you never mentioned it?”

Orr’s expression turned wary. “I did.” He leaned forward, crossed his forearms on the desk and began. “When I first came to work here, I pointed out the shortages, but I could never get Mr. Cantrell’s attention.” He smiled ruefully. “In fact, he made it clear he wasn’t interested in what I’d found. Implied I was making it up.”

Orr rose from his chair and crossed over to a filing cabinet on the wall nearest his desk. He squatted on his haunches and pulled out a folder from the bottom drawer. Opening the folder in front of Preston, he said, “Read this.”

In the folder was a report showing shortages in smaller percentages but otherwise similar to the ones Preston had seen. Preston looked up to see a lopsided smile on Orr’s face. “As you can see, I wasn’t making it up. In the last five years more and more of the Properties in the north central section of the city have shown similar shortages.” Orr raised his open hands. “Still—the last time I brought it up, Mr. Cantrell would not hear of it.”

Orr’s look confirmed Preston’s own suspicion of embezzlement. He rose. He needed more information if he was to pinpoint the culprit. Phyllis Cooper, the general manager of all the Cantrell apartment complexes, was the next person he needed to talk to.

Hank Cantrell held up an empty glass to Lou, the bartender. Mel’s was a dimly lit watering hole frequented by well-heeled singles, many of whom appeared to be in the process of seeking company for the night. Hank breathed a thankful sigh that he was not in their number. His arrangements with Phyllis Cooper had been made a few years after his wife had died. He was out of the dating rat race for good.

Lou placed a fresh Stolichnaya on the rocks in front of Hank and picked up the neatly folded bills lying there. “Where’s your companion?” Lou asked and pocketed two of the dollars. “She on the way?”

Hank didn't like other people knowing his business, but he made an exception for the burly bartender. Hank shoved his empty glass toward the man. "Yeah. She's probably hung up in traffic. The malls must be a madhouse. Women. Who understands 'em? I only go to the mall under threat of death."

"I hear that." Lou shrugged agreeably and, nodding toward the door, moved toward another patron. "There she is now."

"Sorry I'm late." Phyllis placed cool lips on Hank's cheek. Her scent filled him with longing. "I'm glad I left the office at noon. The crowds are awful. I thought the rain would keep them away. Boy! Was I wrong about that." She sat on the stool next to Hank and rested her umbrella against the bar. "I sure am glad to find a quiet place to sit down."

Hank gestured to Lou, and he prepared and brought her a vodka gimlet. Hank shoved a bowl of peanuts toward her. "You hungry?"

"I am, but not for those. I want a *steak*."

Hank picked up her drink along with his own and headed to the maitre d's station. In another moment they were seated next to each other within the intimate confines of a curved red leather booth, examining the menu.

Hank placed his menu on the table. "So, how's Sarah doing?"

"Pretty well, I think. I'm only her mother, so naturally I don't know, but her grades are good." Phyllis placed her menu on top of Hank's.

"So, she's studying hard. How's her money situation?"

"Tight. Baylor is expensive. You know that, and those kids she goes to school with aren't poor. Sometimes that's hard for her. Did I tell you her roommate has her own plane?"

"Damn. Are her parents crazy?"

"Probably. But when you're that rich, you're eccentric, honey. Not crazy."

"Well, I'm that rich, and I think they're crazy." Hank, reaching for the sizable roll of bills he carried in his pocket, chuckled at his own cleverness and removed the rubber band from around the roll. "I want you to give Sarah a little

something to buy Christmas presents with. Tell her to buy something real nice for *you*.” Keeping his hands hidden by the table, he peeled off a thousand dollar bill and placed it in Phyllis’s hand.

“Hank. This is too much.”

He pulled out several more bills from the roll and handed them to Phyllis. “And these are for you. I want to see you in something real, real pretty. Something expensive. Something you’ve been wanting.”

“Hank, honey, there’s enough here for a mink jacket. Lord how you spoil me.”

“Not nearly enough.” He closed her hand around the money. Her slender fingers were as small as a young girl’s. He was again struck by how a grown woman could be as tiny as Phyllis Cooper was. She was a head shorter than he was and weighed half what he did. At times it was hard to remember that she was not a girl, but he’d learned Phyllis was a self-reliant woman. And when he forgot, she took pains to remind him.

He was grateful she put up with him. He was more an old bear than the pussycat a fragile-looking woman like Phyllis deserved. Amazingly, she managed to coax him out of the fits of impatience that marked his existence, that spewed out of him without warning like the one in his meeting with Amanda that morning.

He was lucky to have Phyllis in his life and even more fortunate knowing that she was far too independent to consider marrying again. The relationship remained satisfactorily uncomplicated, but at the same time it rankled him in a way he found difficult to explain to Phyllis. He’d always taken care of the women in his life: his mother, his wife, his daughter. Why did Phyllis insist upon being the exception? Hank finished his thought out loud. “Honey, I wish you’d let me set up a bank account for you. Let me help you a little. You know I can afford it, and you’ve got the world strapped to your back.”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle. Nothing I’m not glad to handle.” She patted his hand. “It’s sweet of you, but I do fine.”

Hank doubted that. Besides her daughter, Phyllis supported her mother. He didn't know how she managed. He did know, however, that she had pride. Lots of it. He'd run into it often enough. It would be so easy for him to pass some of his profits from the Properties on to her. After all, as humbling as it was to admit, much of his success came from her efforts. But, no matter how frequently he offered, she always refused the money.

The waiter appeared and took their order, and Hank set aside his concerns and fantasized about what he knew would later follow beneath the pink satin coverlet on Phyllis's bed.

That same afternoon, Preston Smith left the office shortly after three-thirty, gauging his departure to what he hoped would be the best time to accomplish the most disagreeable task of the season—completing his Christmas shopping. Or beginning it, since thus far he'd done nothing about it whatsoever.

The only gifts he enjoyed buying were for his young nephews, so he decided to do those first. He spent half an hour in a remarkably deserted toy store, the welcome result of astute timing, and filled a cart with things he'd have enjoyed at their age. He loaded what little would fit in the trunk of his Porsche, hid the rest under his trench coat in the back seat, and headed for NorthPark Mall with the resignation of a condemned man.

Despite its being the hour when he had expected most mothers would still be picking up children from school and preparing dinner, the parking lot was so full he had to park at the farthest corner. He opened his umbrella against the steady drizzle that had begun drenching the city, but he left his trench coat over the toys as a precaution against any smash-and-grab thief who found convertibles easy targets.

The umbrella proved inadequate. By the time he reached the covered entrance to the mall, his clothes were damp, his shoes were sodden, and he was even more disgusted with the prospect of finding anything for the rest of the people on his list. He briskly shook the umbrella, folded it, and entered the mall.

At first he couldn't believe what he saw. Was it really Kate Cantrell seated at a wrought iron table in front of a candy store, eating an ice cream sundae and reading a book? And alone? He walked to her table. "You'll spoil your dinner." Kate looked up with a startled expression, which melted into a compelling smile. He returned the smile and felt his sour mood evaporate. "Not only that, but I'll bet that book is for someone else and you're reading it before you give it to them, aren't you?" Preston made a *tsking* sound. "Two demerits."

"Well, hello to you too," she said. She moved two bulging shopping bags from the other chair and motioned for him to sit down. "Yes, I'm afraid you caught me."

He pointed at her book. "That's a very bad habit," he said, taking the chair.

"I know, but, I'm being very careful." She marked her place with the front flap of the dust cover, placed the book in a shopping bag, and held up both hands. "See. All clean." She picked up her spoon and drawled in a poor imitation of a movie sheriff, "What brings you to these parts, mister?"

"Necessity."

"Um. That bad?"

"Worse. You have no idea how much I hate shopping . . . especially Christmas shopping."

"Poor Preston. When I face a chore I hate, I usually try ice cream. Do you want some?"

He shook his head. "Is that what you're doing now?"

She gave him her smile again and finished the last of the ice cream. "No. I'm rewarding myself. I use ice cream for that too. You see, I'm all through with *my* shopping." Her features settled into a mocking expression, and Preston felt the same urge to kiss her that frequented his daydreams. "And I'm feeling pretty darn smug about it," she concluded.

"I can tell."

"This is my favorite place at Christmas. The crowds, the music, the excitement. I just love it."

"Oh, me too. I just love it when I can't find what I want, and I'm jostled everywhere I go. Let's hear it for the crying babies,

and, my personal favorite, the lines at the cash register. By the way, where do all the sales clerks go for the winter?"

"You're not being a good sport." She waved the long-handled spoon in the air. "Are you prepared? Have you armed yourself to the task? Have you got a list?"

Preston tapped his temple. "Right here."

"How organized." She pursed her lips for a moment. "And who are you buying for? Anyone special?"

Preston thought he'd caught the slightest shading of jealousy in the last question and his heart leaped at what that implied. "Very special."

"Really?" Her eyes narrowed to slits, confirming his hopes. "Anything I should know about?"

"Why should *you* care? You've got Clark Kent."

She looked thoughtful and said, "True. True."

"And I've got . . ." He counted off on his fingers. "My mother, my brother, and his wife. The most particular people on earth."

"You'll get your brother . . ."

"A tie."

"Of course." She smiled. "And his wife?"

"Something wonderful."

"And your mother?"

"Something even more wonderful."

She pointed her spoon in his direction. "You're right. This *is* bad."

"I'm desperate."

"I can see that. And *the day* approaches. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock," she said with relish.

"Yes," he replied. "And I'm helpless."

"And seemingly hopeless." She reached for a purse with the insignia of one of the more exclusive Paris designers and pulled out a wallet with the same insignia. It was another reminder that she was, after all, Hank Cantrell's daughter. He placed his hand over the tab. "Let me pick this up."

"I don't know. I've heard about men like you. A girl lets them buy her a little ice cream and the next thing she knows,

they want something in return.” She gave Preston another smile, flustering him with its warmth.

“Actually, I *do* want something,” he said.

“I knew it.”

“A little help with this list.”

“You mean your non-list?”

“I’d be most appreciative.” Preston placed money on the table and picked up Kate’s shopping bags with one hand.

“Okay, then. But you’d better not be an indecisive shopper. I hate it when a man can’t make up his mind.”

“I was *born* to make up my mind.” He snapped his fingers. “I can do it in a split second.”

Kate rose from her seat and looked at her watch.

“Have you got a date?”

“No, as a matter of fact, I’m on my own this evening. Daddy’s got a late meeting.” She gave Preston a severe look. “A don’t-wait-up-for-me late meeting. I was just checking my watch to time you.”

Preston laughed and put his arm on Kate’s elbow. “Get ready for lightning then.”

She laughed too and he felt very clever, only realizing much later, on the cold, wet trek back to his car, how clever he’d been to leave his umbrella under the table.

When Hank picked up his new Callaway driver from the pro shop and signed in for his Saturday morning match, he was reminded by the pro that Bob Cavanaugh, his regular golfing buddy, wouldn’t be playing with him.

“Oh, that’s right,” Hank said. “I’d forgotten. He’s out of town. Who am I playing with?”

“I’ve paired you with Mr. Frederick. Will that be all right?”

“Norton Frederick?” Hank asked, identifying the man he knew by reputation but had met only once when Frederick was the president of the board and Hank had been applying for membership.

“That’s right.”

Gloating at his good fortune, Hank walked to the area where the carts were kept. His clubs weren't on a cart, and he stopped one of the attendants. "Have you pulled my bag?"

"Yes, sir. It's on Mr. Frederick's cart." He opened his hands with a shrug. "Mr. Frederick said it would be okay."

"Yeah. Sure, kid." Hank gave the boy a smile, but he wasn't pleased. He always drove the cart when he played with Cavanaugh, but, if Frederick had arrived before him, no doubt *he* would be driving. That meant Hank would be doing the majority of the walking.

Hank headed for the practice tees, soothing his irritation with thoughts of all that golfing with Frederick might mean. Norton Frederick, Jr. was legendary in Dallas real estate development. He'd built several shopping complexes and at least one sprawling business park.

Frederick, a tall angular man, was on the practice range warming up. As Hank approached, Frederick blasted a ball in a perfect, straight arc. It rolled to a stop just short of the three hundred yard marker. Hank felt a pang of envy. He walked up to Frederick, waited for him to complete his next shot, also nearly perfect, and held out his hand.

Frederick's handshake was firm, his smile pleasant, but without warmth. "I don't believe we've met. Are you new to the club?"

Hank didn't expect Frederick to remember the day they'd met, but surely Frederick had seen him around. The club had been almost a second home to him after his wife died. Well, he could play that game too. "No, I've belonged about ten years. And you? Are you new to the club?"

Frederick snorted. "No. Been a member about thirty years. Great day to chase the little white ball around, eh?"

Hank smiled briefly at the worn joke. This was going to be a long day if that was any indication of Norton Frederick's humor. He felt Frederick's appraising gaze and reminded himself again of the possibilities this round of golf could provide.

Frederick picked up a black cigar with a well-chewed end from the grass near his tee and placed it between teeth so white

they had to be the result of dental bleaching. Hank was immediately aware that his own teeth could use similar treatment. He also felt a longing for a cigar of his own, but he'd told Katie he'd given them up, and he had—the day before he'd picked her up from the airport.

Frederick spoke. "What's your handicap, Cantrell?"

"Ten. And yours?"

"Seven." Frederick placed his driver on the stand and picked up his three wood. He smacked the ball down the middle of the range.

Hank set up a ball on a tee and swung his new driver. The ball scudded along the ground. He tried again with the same result and checked to see if Frederick had noticed. Fortunately, Frederick seemed intent on his own game.

Shaking the tension out of his shoulders, Hank let out a deep breath and hammered the ball. It shot into the air, true and straight, and brought a stirring of pleasure as it struck the ground in nearly the same place Frederick's first drive had fallen. Surely Frederick noticed *that* ball.

The starter announced the on-deck call for them, and Hank headed toward the cart with Frederick right behind him. As they waited for the foursome in front of them to tee off, Frederick spoke. "You want to play a thousand a hole?"

Hank took care not to inhale too sharply. He'd heard about high stakes games where as much as twenty thousand dollars changed hands in a round, but he'd thought they were exaggerations. Obviously, they weren't. Well, if he wanted to play with the big boys, he'd have to show Frederick he was in his league. "Sure. Why not?"

Two hours later they passed the clubhouse again, even money. Hank had won four holes, Frederick four. The ninth hole had ended as a tie when Hank sank a very difficult twenty-foot putt. He was playing the best game of his life.

"Let's add some excitement. Let's play the back nine on its own," Frederick suggested, "double the stakes with carryover."

Hank's regular partner hated to gamble, and they never had, but Hank could feel the excitement it generated, could feel his

skill rise to the occasion. He unwrapped a stick of gum and folded it into his mouth. It was a poor substitute for what the redolent smoke from Frederick's cigar reminded him of. How he loved a good cigar. "Okay," he said.

Now two thousand dollars rode on the next hole. He took a deep breath and swung. The Callaway-driven ball dropped mid fairway no more than a hundred feet from the pin. It was Hank's best drive of the day, but Frederick was able to match it. His drive landed right beside Hank's. Two more strokes and both men holed out. Another tie.

Frederick picked up his cigar from the edge of the green and laughed. "Great hole. Carryover?"

"You bet," Hank said without hesitation. The next hole was for four thousand dollars, but he was untouchable. Soon he would emerge the victor, and Norton Frederick would never again be able to pretend he didn't know who Hank Cantrell was.

But both men birdied the hole. Once again Frederick confirmed the bet and Hank agreed before they drove to the twelfth tee box. Both men parred this hole. Approaching thirteen, Frederick said, "We're up to four skins on this one, I believe."

Hank agreed, waiting to see if Norton Frederick would press, making the hole worth sixteen thousand instead of eight. He would've accepted the challenge. He was ready. But, Frederick left the stakes where they were. Was it possible the great man was beginning to feel the pressure?

Thirteen was ranked the most difficult hole of the course, a long par five with pothole bunkers down the left side that Hank found nearly impossible to hit out of. Halfway to the flag was a limestone gully hidden by a gentle roll in the fairway. Trees lined the creek bed to the right and past the bunkers; houses narrowed the fairway on the left. White out-of-bounds markers left only a twenty-yard swath of fairway for most of the distance to the green. It was a nearly impossible hole, the one Hank usually dreaded, but not this day. Today he would take it.

Hank shook his shoulders and stepped up to the tee box determined to nail his drive, but instead the ball rose high and sank out of sight near the creek. Was it wet or dry?

Frederick's ball soared splendidly, then fell with a splash of sand into one of the deepest bunkers. If his own ball had remained out of the water, Hank could take the hole. All Hank had to do was hammer his second shot to make up the distance his disappointing drive had cost him.

Frederick wheeled the cart down the center of the fairway and parked. Hank got out and walked to the creek. The shallow water was clogged with thick, green moss. If his ball had landed in it, he'd never find it, and he'd lose the hole—and the eight thousand dollars. He looked up the hill where, head down, Frederick was lining up his shot.

Then Hank saw his ball. It wasn't in the water after all. It'd bounced several yards down the fairway, farther from the water than he'd thought, partially hidden by rusty, fallen leaves a few yards from where Frederick stood. Hank strode toward it. With a sinking sensation he realized it was also about two inches on the wrong side of the out-of-bounds marker.

Hank had never put much stock in the theories of fair play that dominated the post club-tournament conversations in the men's locker room. Only losers worried about counting every stroke. He had no patience with men, especially those club members from the old school, who held that golf was an indication of character, who would not admit they sometimes failed to observe every nicety when no one was looking, who admired the professional golfers' adherence to the rules. That was just so much bullshit. Golf was no different than business. It was about winning and making sure your butt was covered.

Hank waited. As Frederick swung his club back, Hank nudged his ball out of the leaves and back into the fairway with his four iron.

Frederick seemed completely focused on his own ball. He'd made an enviable hit out of the bunker, and his ball was now beelining for the green. In a piece of bad luck, the wind rose up suddenly. Frederick's ball faltered midair and dropped into the limestone gully.

Hank suppressed a smile and allowed his imagination free play. Would Frederick pay him in thousands? Hundreds would

be all right, although when the new bills were added to his existing roll and snapped into the rubber band, they might not fit into his pocket.

Hank's reverie was shattered when Frederick's ball, in a fluke, bounced out of the gully and landed on the far side of the fairway. The bastard was too damn lucky.

Hank lined up his own shot carefully, took two practice swings and addressed the ball. But, he clinched on his downswing. The ball skittered fifty yards down the fairway and halted a few heart-stopping feet short of the gully.

Hank selected an eight iron and hurtled himself down the fairway, ignoring any further thoughts of the roll of money that thudded pleasantly against his leg with each step, refusing to consider how much eight fewer bills would lighten it.

He stood over his ball. *Come on, Hank, old Bubba. You can beat this bastard. You got those men out of a smoking jungle village, you can beat this pompous ass. Settle down, Bubba. This is nothing.* He planted his feet and swung. He could hardly believe it. The ball landed on the green within three feet of the hole. He was within birdie range. It was all he could do to steady his hands.

Frederick's third hit landed in a bunker near the green. His face narrowed into a scowl. He struck the ball again, pulling it this time. Hank could barely contain his joy as the ball bounded across the green, landing fifteen feet from the pin. Now Frederick was one stroke behind with a nearly impossible putt in front of him.

Hank calmed himself. He had three feet to the hole, Frederick had fifteen. There was only a one-in-a-million chance that Frederick could take the hole. Hank refused to allow himself the victorious smile that tugged at his cheek. First he would sink his putt.

And oh, how he wanted victory over the formidable Norton Frederick, Jr. Oh, how he wanted to humble him. Oh, how he wanted him to remember who Hank Cantrell was the *next* time they met. Hank searched Frederick's demeanor for some indication of concern, but he seemed suspiciously calm, as if he

believed Hank would screw up. Well, that would be when hell froze.

Frederick lined up his putt. The flag in Hank's hands whipped on its chain in a light breeze that came up without warning, but otherwise, it was as if even the birds, which up until that moment had been noisily celebrating the brilliant winter sky, cooperated with Frederick by falling silent. Frederick's ball began to trickle down the green, gathering momentum, then veering off in the wrong direction.

Hank's lips formed an involuntary upward turn for the instant before he realized he'd underestimated Frederick, who had read the green perfectly. His ball arched and inched its way to the hole, faltering defiantly at the edge. Hank stole a glance at the unruffled Frederick. A strong gust of wind tore at the flag in Hank's hand again, and Frederick's ball toppled in. He had made his par.

Hank dropped the flag, removed his glove, and flexed his fingers. He squatted behind his ball and lined up. It was only three feet, a sucker's putt, but Hank took his time, respecting the difficulty, swallowing the pressure.

Frederick stood to one side, an inscrutable expression on his face. If Frederick was waiting for a mistake, then he was getting ready to learn a little lesson about ex-jungle fighters.

Hank bent over his putter. He practiced the smooth follow-through that assured accuracy and the right force to reach the hole and fall in. He addressed the ball and stroked it. It dove for the hole, then it swirled tortuously around the lip. He couldn't bear to watch. He closed his eyes and waited. Amid the slamming of his heart was the unmistakable sound of his ball hitting the bottom of the cup.

He opened his eyes. He'd done it. *He'd done it.* The eight thousand dollars was his. Only once before had he *won* more than that—the night he'd won the poker hand that had ultimately launched Cantrell Properties. But, this was about more than money. This was about taking down the mighty Norton Frederick.

This was different in another way too. He'd never before been comfortable playing golf, but now that had changed. He'd never be nervous again. He'd played for big stakes, and he'd won. Against terrific odds. Who knew? Given Frederick's reputation, maybe beating him would turn out to be as significant to his future as winning that poker game had been. A man like Frederick would have to respect a worthy opponent.

Frederick held out his hand. "Not bad. You played well."

He *had* played well. If Frederick had been more observant, he'd have known how well. It wasn't his fault Frederick had turned a friendly round of golf into a battlefield. To hell with him. All was fair in war. Frederick had gotten what he deserved.

They waited in the cart at the next tee box for the foursome in front of them. Inhaling the smoke from Frederick's cigar with longing, Hank said, "I heard you've got a new project starting up."

"That's true. A shopping mall on the Dallas North Tollway."

"You after investors?"

"Might be."

"What would it take to get in?"

Frederick pulled the cigar from between his teeth and gave Hank a tight smile. "Eight thousand dollars, give or take a couple of inches out of bounds."

The following Monday morning, Clifford Smith, Jr., fingering the thick scar that ran from below his right eye to the base of his square jaw, listened to his wife complain.

"I just don't see why we couldn't have discussed this *earlier* when I could have done something about it," he said quietly into the mouthpiece, averting his eyes from the problems stacked on his desk and concentrating on Mary Anne.

His wife's voice was pitched to the tonal qualities he knew could switch to rage at any moment. He was determined to avoid that, but what she was suggesting was impossible to oblige. He had a meeting scheduled with four disgruntled managing regional agents at the same time his mother's eye appointment was scheduled. He couldn't keep them waiting and

take her to the doctor. Mary Anne was being totally unreasonable.

But then, dealing with his mother could make anyone unreasonable. This eye appointment was a perfect example of just how maddening she could be. His mother had scheduled the appointment without consulting anyone, taking it for granted, he supposed, that Mary Anne would take her.

Unfortunately, not only had his mother not consulted anyone before she'd set the appointment, she hadn't informed anyone afterwards. And now, from what he could gather, she was in a royal snit, and Mary Anne wasn't far behind. He sighed deeply and tried to think of the right thing to say, if there was such a thing.

"Honey." He waited until Mary Anne stopped talking. "Honey, I'm sorry this has happened. You'll never know how much I appreciate what you do for Mom. I know she's a handful. I'll call her as soon as we hang up. Okay?"

Mary Anne was silent for a moment. "Will you *please* be careful what you say to her? And how you say it? Remember last time."

How could he forget? His mother had made Mary Anne pay for *his* clumsiness. The last time he'd played referee to an argument he was convinced his mother had started, he'd stirred up more trouble. For a month, his mother refused to eat with or speak to either of them, using the boys as her intermediaries. It had been awful. "I'll be particularly careful."

"Thank you."

"I love you, you know."

Mary Anne's voice softened. "I love you too. And I hate this."

"We just have to be careful that Mom doesn't affect how we feel about each other."

"I know."

"Take care of yourself and have a good time at the Christmas pageant," he said, referring to the school activity that Mary Anne was in charge of and that had brought the scheduling crisis to a head. "I'll be there when the curtain goes up."

Her voice brightened. “Good. Watch for the two best-looking shepherds.”

“You know I will.”

“You’ll recognize them by the cloths on their heads.”

Cliff laughed. “The ones from the breakfast table?”

“The very ones.”

He said goodbye and sat down. After a moment’s musing, he picked up the phone. He’d persuade his mother to take a taxi to the doctor. Afterwards he’d pick her up and take her to the pageant with him. Surely a man with his negotiation skills could manage that. He dialed his mother’s number, confident his clever solution would solve the problem.

