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**CHAPTER ONE**

CHICAGO’S MAGNIFICENT MILE—the mad bustle of pedestrians surging in waves down the sidewalks, the constant roar of traffic on North Michigan Avenue, the distant wail of a dozen sirens scurrying in all directions—she had missed it all.

Coming home to Chicago was by far the best part of her frequent business trips, Deborah Ainsley thought as she made her way with the ease of long practice through the rivers of people on the sidewalk until she reached the safe haven of a small sheltered entry. She stopped just inside the glass door of the Ainsley Gallery and swung the canvas bag down from her shoulder, reaching into it for a pair of ultra-fashionable high-heeled pumps to replace the running shoes that had smoothed her walk along the Magnificent Mile from her apartment not far from the lakeshore. She dropped the running shoes into the bag, straightened the paisley scarf at her throat—the only bright accent against her cream-colored dress—and stopped to admire a tiny oil painting that glowed like a jewel against a gray velvet drape on an easel near the entrance.

The gallery was quiet and peaceful, a haven that encouraged the art lover to browse and study and meditate as he would in a library or in a museum or in a church. It was almost dim, except where subtle, spot lighting emphasized a painting here and there, inviting the observer to look deeply and fall in love.

The Ainsley Gallery was not large, but in the three years since it opened, Deborah had carved out a niche among the hundreds of galleries in the Chicago metropolitan area. She had gained a reputation for handling the best new contemporary artists in the region. If a client wanted a Dali print or a Monet poster, the Ainsley Gallery politely suggested a competitor who specialized in those things. But for the Chicagoan who wanted to own an original piece of art instead of a mass-produced copy, but who couldn’t afford the tremendous prices of already well-known artists, the Ainsley Gallery was the best place to go.

The art of tomorrow, Deborah called it. After all, as she had frequently been heard to say, a majority of the paintings hanging in the Art Institute of Chicago had not cost millions; they had been purchased originally by ordinary people, with ordinary pocket money, simply because they were attractive, and only in later years had the judgment of

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the art world made them valuable. And, she was fond of saying, it would inevitably happen again, with some of the very paintings her clients were buying now.

Already, several of the artists whose work Deborah had hung in her early shows had gained a national reputation. That was why she kept seeking out new ones whose work was still affordable to the secretary with a walk-up apartment, or to the couple furnishing their first house in the suburbs. That was why she had been in Michigan all week, and that was why she was so delighted to be home once more.

She ran a practiced eye around the gallery, not even trying to look at each piece, but instead observing the symmetry and grace of how things were hung, how the placement of paintings and sculpture invited the client to wander and observe.

Peggy – who had done the hanging – deserved a compliment, she decided. She was by far the best assistant Deborah had ever had.

A classical melody rippled from the speakers concealed in the walls, playing so softly that it scarcely broke the surface of her conscious mind. It did not drown out the sound of the discreet doorbell, or of the low-voiced conversation at the back of the gallery, where Peggy was telling a client about the person who had created the luscious watercolor he was admiring.

Deborah turned with a professional smile, to greet the customer who had just come in. Then her expression warmed into a delighted glow, and she hurried toward the gray-haired man who had stopped to admire the same tiny oil that had caught her eye as she came in. She slipped a hand into the crook of his elbow. “It’s wonderful, isn’t it, Daddy? Peggy was absolutely right to put it there, where it catches everyone’s eye.”

William Ainsley gave her a wry half smile. “Do you ever take your mind off art, Deborah?”

“Oh—I haven’t seen you in two weeks, have I?” She darted a coquettish look up at him. “I *am* sorry not to have shown you how happy I am to see you. Of course, it’s not my fault that you haven’t changed an iota in ten years. When a man simply stays as handsome as you are—”

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“Watch out,” he warned. “You’re sailing a bit close to the shoals.”

Deborah grinned and leaned her head against his shoulder. Her long, glossy brown hair swung smoothly against his gray linen jacket. “You’re right,” she admitted. “The truth is, when a man stays as handsome as you are, *everybody* notices. I was just too bowled over for words when you walked in.”

“Rubbish. How much are you asking for that painting, Deborah?”

She glanced at the discreet tag on the velvet next to the gold frame. “Nine hundred. But for you, Daddy, I could make a special deal.”

“And sell it to me for a thousand, I suppose.” He looked at it again. “I should stay out of here. You know my weaknesses too well when it comes to buying paintings.” He turned his back on the easel with determination.

Deborah smothered a smile. “You’re the one who dragged me to the museums every Saturday,” she pointed out. “And to the galleries after school, and to the art fairs on Sundays.”

“I should get a special deal, that’s for sure,” William Ainsley said a bit grumpily. “You’ll inherit my entire collection and have it all back again someday, anyway.”

“Not for a very long time, I hope.”

“The longer it is, the larger the profit you’ll make when you sell it the second time. Well, beware—if you do, I’ll haunt the damned gallery.”

“Oh, good,” Deborah murmured. “My very own ghost. It’ll be a marvelous advertising gimmick.” She looked up at him through long black lashes.

“Humph.” But there was a sparkle in his eyes, and she couldn’t help laughing in response.

“So why are you here?” she asked. “I don’t often see you on Wednesday mornings, you know.”

“I thought perhaps we’d have dinner at my club tonight.”

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“Oh, I can’t. Bristol’s leaving town tomorrow on a business trip, and we’re going to Coq au Vin tonight.” She saw his face fall, and regretted having to refuse him; he’d been so lonely in the past few years since her mother died, and though she tried to spend time with him, she was so busy and out of town so much that it was difficult. He was also far too sensitive about intruding on her life, she thought, and sometimes when she had to refuse an invitation it was weeks before he asked again. “Why don’t you join us?” she said.

“Oh, no. I’m sure Bristol will want you to himself.”

She laughed. “He won’t mind. Bristol’s an adult, after all. He’s too mature to be jealous.”

“*That’s* for certain.”

It was only a murmur, almost under his breath, and for an instant Deborah wasn’t quite sure she’d heard properly.

Then William sighed and said, “Your mother would probably be stepping on my toes by now to shut me up, I’m sure, but I feel I have to say it anyway. Deborah, I wish you weren’t seeing quite so much of Bristol.”

“I thought you liked him.”

“I respect him,” William corrected.

“Isn’t that what I said? He’s the foundation’s attorney, after all. You hired him, and you introduced him to me.”

“I introduce you to nearly everybody who works for the foundation, Deborah, but that doesn’t mean I want you to start dating them all. Dammit, honey, the man is old enough to be your father.”

“I beg your pardon,” Deborah said crisply, “but fourteen years’ age difference does not exactly make him old enough to be my father.”

“Well, he certainly acts like an antique,” William Ainsley muttered. “You aren’t thinking of marrying him, are you?”

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After a long moment Deborah said quietly, “I simply enjoy his company, Daddy. Shall we leave it at that?”

William stared at his black wingtips and drew a pattern on the carpet with the toe of one of them. “I understand, of course. After the experience you had with that artist, the security that Bristol represents must look very—”

“Daddy, shall we leave it?” she repeated. It was very soft.

He stopped drawing lines on the carpet and looked at her with sad-puppy eyes. “You sound just like your mother,” he said. “Vivien could have stopped an army division with that tone of voice.”

Deborah’s eyes misted. Her mother was never far from her mind, and the longing loneliness in William’s voice could have melted glass. It turned Deborah’s heart, always a bit soft where her father was concerned, into a soggy puddle.

“I’m sorry, darling,” he said unsteadily. “Of course it’s your business, not mine. But I’m so worried about you. All I want for you is what your mother and I had.”

“Oh, is that all?” Deborah asked a bit wryly. “That’s a tall order, Daddy.” She hugged him tightly, her head buried against his shoulder, her nose tickled by the spicy scent of his after-shave lotion. “How about tomorrow?” she whispered. “I’ll even buy your dinner.”

He smiled. “It’s a date, honey.” He kissed her cheek and gently set her aside. “I suppose I should let you get to work, shouldn’t I?”

“I’d better. After a week away, my desk probably doesn’t bear thinking about.” As he put a hand on the doorknob, she called, “Oh, Daddy...” He turned, and she added impishly, with a gesture toward the easel, “Shall I have the painting delivered?”

William Ainsley’s eyebrows climbed. “Of course,” he said, as if there had never been any doubt. “Why do you think I came in, anyway?” Then he winked and ducked out into the maelstrom of North Michigan Avenue before she could retort.

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SHE WAS WRITING notes of thanks to the clients and artists she had visited in

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Michigan when Peggy came into their shared office and dropped into the chair beside Deborah's desk. "He bought the watercolor," she said. "Patience pays off again."

"I seem to remember telling you that if a person doesn't buy something on his first visit, it doesn't mean he won't ever make a purchase at all."

"I know. *A client who does not buy is not a lost sale, but an opportunity,*" Peggy recited. "But he's been an opportunity three times a week for the past month, and I was starting to think he was only coming in to stare at my age spots."

Deborah didn't look up from the jade green envelope she was addressing. "They're freckles," she corrected mildly.

"Yes, but I'm sure he wouldn't agree. When one hits forty-five, you know..." Peggy reached into her top desk drawer for a tiny mirror and studied herself in it. "I'm so terribly average," she said dispassionately. "Not short, not tall. Not fat, but certainly not slender. My hair can't even make up its mind whether to be blond or brown. It's unfair that my sole distinguishing feature is freckles. I should have outgrown them in my teens." The doorbell chimed and she put away the mirror and went out to greet the new client. Then she leaned back into the office to say, "I forgot—it's in your messages, but I said I'd make sure to tell you anyway. Your cousin is awfully anxious to talk to you. Riley—is that his name?"

Deborah sealed the envelope and reached for another one. "That's his name, all right."

"*He* sounded like the sort of man who might appreciate freckles."

Deborah spread a sheet of engraved notepaper on her blotter. "I should hope so," she said. "He certainly has plenty of them himself. But sounds can be deceiving. Especially when it's Riley who's making the noise."

She finished writing her notes and stacked them, stamped and ready to go, on the corner of her desk before she even bothered to look through the stack of messages. But her conscience had started to nag at her long before that. It was hardly fair to assume Riley was still behaving like the annoying teenager who had seemed to find his greatest pleasure in tormenting the life out of her. After all, she hadn't seen him in years. He must

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be thirty by now.

“Thirty-one,” she muttered. “He’s three years older than you, Deborah, and as much as you hate to admit it, you’re going to be twenty-eight soon.”

She found the pink message slip midway down in the pile. It was crammed with tiny, cramped writing, and on closer examination she discovered it wasn’t a single lengthy message but a record of nearly a dozen calls made over the past three days. Peggy was right, she thought idly. Riley *was* awfully anxious to talk to her.

The number listed was a Chicago one, and she was mildly surprised when it was answered by the switchboard at the Englin Hotel, which efficiently put her through to Riley’s room.

He must have come up for a few days of rest and recreation in the city, she thought, and he probably wanted someone to take him to the zoo or something. Not a bad idea. He’d be right at home there with the rest of the animals....

“Yankee Stadium, home plate umpire speaking,” said a voice in her ear.

She wanted to groan. Hadn’t the man even started to grow up? “Shall I call back after the game’s over?” she asked tartly.

The voice warmed. “Debbie, darling! I’m glad to see the natives didn’t get restless in Michigan and do something nasty to you.”

“Peggy actually told you that’s where I was?”

“Only in self-defense, I assure you. She’d never have breathed a word if it hadn’t been me asking.”

“I certainly have no trouble in believing that,” Deborah said dryly. “What brings you to the Windy City, Riley?”

“Research,” he said promptly.

And that, she thought helplessly, gave her precisely no information at all.

“And since I’m here, I thought I’d take you out to dinner and bring you up to date on

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all the family gossip.”

“What now? Has Mary Beth run off with the mailman or something?”

“Of course not,” he said with offended dignity, and then ruined the effect by adding candidly, “my esteemed sister has gained twenty pounds since her new baby came along.”

“Another baby? No one told me.”

“Well, it’s not exactly a *new* baby. I mean the one that’s almost four now. At any rate, the mailman probably wouldn’t have her. He’s rather a handsome guy.”

“Oh? Do you find yourself attracted to good-looking men these days?”

“Not at all.” Riley sounded wounded. “I didn’t notice it myself. Mom told me that he’s one good-looking fellow. How’s tonight? For dinner, I mean.”

“I assumed that was what you meant.” It was cool. “I can’t. I have a dinner date.”

He didn’t seem offended. “Oh? Are you still dating the thing with the beard that you brought to your Uncle Ralph’s funeral?”

“Why do you want to know?” The tone was a little more crisp than Deborah had intended.

Riley didn’t seem to notice. “So I can tell Mary Beth the gory details, of course.”

“I didn’t even know you were at Uncle Ralph’s funeral.”

“I came late and left early. You didn’t exactly stay long in the bosom of the family, yourself.”

“Morgan didn’t—” She stopped. It was certainly none of Riley’s business.

“Morgan? What a name. How about tomorrow night?”

“No. I have a—”

“Dinner date. I’m amazed,” Riley mused. “I didn’t think that something like that would bother to comb the crumbs out of his facial fur in order to go out two days in a

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row.”

Deborah was doing a slow simmer. “If you’re finished, Riley—”

“Deb! Darling Debbie, don’t hang up on me. I’m sorry I made noises about your fuzzy friend. Is that honestly his first name, or did he choose it as a protest statement? Never mind. I won’t do it again, honest. I really do need to talk to you.”

“Family gossip,” she muttered. “I suppose next you’re going to tell me Aunt Ida’s fallen in love!”

“How’d you guess?”

There was a long silence. Finally Deborah said, “You’re not going to say any more, are you? Well, since etiquette obliges me not to be rude to family—”

“Wonderful thing, etiquette. I’ve always believed in it.”

She didn’t bother to counter that one. “I can arrange to be free the day after tomorrow.”

“That’s Friday.” She could almost hear him shaking his head. “I have to go home Friday. How about breakfast tomorrow?”

“Civilized people don’t eat breakfast, Riley. All right, all right. I have to admit I’m dying to find out what sort of tall tale you can concoct about Aunt Ida.”

“No tall tales. I outgrew that years ago.”

“Right,” she said. “And I suppose you really are a home plate umpire at Yankee Stadium, too.”

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IF RILEY’S goal was to intrigue her, Deborah had to admit he’d succeeded. She didn’t even remember eating her vichyssoise at Coq au Vin that night. In fact, as they were finishing their quail Normandy, Bristol said with heavy politeness, “Do pardon me if I’m boring you by talking about my business conference, Deborah.”

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“What? No, not at all. I’ve scarcely heard a word—” She choked back the rest of that sentence and said, “I’m sorry, Bristol. I was thinking about my cousin, you see.”

Bristol Wellington waited until the wine steward had re filled his glass and then said punctiliously, “Your cousin? I thought neither of your parents had siblings.”

“Oh, not my first cousin. He’s. . . I’m not even sure what, it’s so distant. My great-grandfather and his great-grandfather were brothers.”

Bristol looked faintly interested. “Then the two of you are third cousins,” he announced.

“Thank you,” Deborah said politely. “I never could figure these things out. He’s in town, and I’m going to have breakfast with him tomorrow.”

“One should always maintain cordial relationships with one’s family,” Bristol murmured. “I, myself, correspond with—”

“That’s easy to say. Of course, with Riley—”

“Riley?” Bristol sounded as if he’d bitten into some thing sour.

“Riley Lassiter,” Deborah added helpfully. “He is from one branch of the Lassiter family, my mother was from the other. His branch got to keep the ancestral name, but her branch got most of the money. It always seemed like a fair trade to me. You see, what actually happened is that the original Lassiter brothers—the great-grandfathers I was telling you about—had a falling-out, and Riley’s ancestor sold out to mine for a mere pittance, right before the patents they held became valuable.”

“And I suppose he holds a grudge.”

“Riley? I don’t think he has a grudging bone in his body.”

Bristol asked suspiciously, “He isn’t a criminal element or the like, is he?”

“Who knows, with Riley.” She sipped her wine. “You know, it’s almost embarrassing, but I honestly don’t know what Riley does. His parents had a farm near Summerset in southern Illinois, where the Lassiters all started out. Riley was just ready to begin law

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school when his father died. I know he dropped out of school, but I haven't any idea what he did instead, or what he's doing now."

"Raising pigs, probably," Bristol said. "Really, Deborah, must we—"

"It's a shame," she mused. "Mother always kept up with these things. I'll bet she even knew the names and birthdays of all of Mary Beth's kids...." There was a catch in her voice that surprised her.

Bristol sighed. He didn't ask who Mary Beth was.

"When I was a kid, I spent a lot of time down there, too," Deborah said. "I thought that Mother sent me down every summer just to get rid of me. Now I'm sure it was because she wanted me to have a close relationship with the little family that's left, Aunt Ida and Uncle Ralph and Riley's parents. Actually, it's too bad that it didn't work out that way." She stopped abruptly. "I'm sorry, Bristol. I didn't mean to bore you to extinction."

He bowed his head. "You could never do that, Deborah. I must confess, however, that I fail to see why—"

"Why I'm fixated on Riley tonight?" She stopped. She hadn't exactly thought about it herself till right now. "I suppose it's just that the whole thing is rather strange... his calling me," she said slowly. "I mean, he must have been in Chicago now and then, but I've never heard a word from him before. Now, suddenly..."

*Aunt Ida's fallen in love*, she had said. And Riley had answered, *How'd you guess?*

No, she thought uneasily. He couldn't possibly be serious. Riley never was.

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HE HAD ASKED her to meet him in the hotel lobby. Deborah was still yawning as she paid off her cab and stepped through gleaming brass revolving doors into the huge reception hall of the Englin Hotel, one of the city's grandest and oldest. But her sleepiness disappeared with a bang as she stopped short under a silver and crystal chandelier that was the size of the average automobile. "Damn," she muttered under her breath. "I forgot this place has about fifteen lobbies." Where, she wondered, was Riley

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likely to be waiting?

“Right here,” a voice murmured behind her, as if he’d read her mind, and she wheeled around to face.. .

*Riley?* she thought in disbelief. *This* was the same person as the gangly teenager with the red hair and the freckles and the ears that seemed too large for his head?

He smiled, and she relaxed a little. Yes, this was Riley, all right. Riley of the dancing hazel eyes and the perpetually mischievous grin. But what had happened to the rest of him?

Well, the hair still had a reddish cast; it was actually a rather wonderful shade of burnished auburn now. But the freckles were gone, and the gangly body was now well-knit and very athletic-looking in a trimly tailored pin-striped shirt and dark trousers. No tie, no jacket, but then what had she expected of Riley?

“You finally grew into your ears,” she said.

He kissed her cheek lightly. “And you’re looking very well, too, Debbie darling,” he murmured. “Much better than you did at Ralph’s funeral. You were so pale then that I wondered for a while which one of you was the corpse.”

Deborah sighed. “I knew it was too good to last.”

“You’re the one who brought up ears,” he chided.

“I’ll remember that it’s a sensitive spot.” She reached up and tugged gently at his earlobe. “It *is* good to see you, Riley.”

He tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and took her across the lobby to the Captain’s Table, where a smiling waiter showed them to a table and poured their coffee.

“Honestly, you didn’t have to make up tales about Aunt Ida to get me to come to breakfast, you know,” Deborah went on. “I don’t hold it against you anymore that you were a terror when you were a kid.”

His eyes started to sparkle. “Remember the time out on the farm when you were

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having a tea party for your dolls and I put the frog in the teapot?”

“Do I remember! When I lifted the lid and he leaped out at me—”

“I haven’t heard such a shriek since. It’s a good thing it was only pretend tea,” Riley mused. “If you’d managed the real thing, we would all have been in hot water.”

Deborah groaned. “Especially the poor frog.”

“And you’ve forgiven me for all that?” He looked somber and serious; Deborah was morally certain that it was only a momentary lapse.

“Certainly. Besides,” she added gently, “you can’t possibly put a frog in my cup at breakfast. This is the Englin Hotel, after all.”

“Do you honestly think that would stop me?” It was very soft.

She looked at her cup, suddenly suspicious.

He laughed. “No, Debbie, I’ve outgrown that sort of thing long ago.”

“I suppose I’ll have to take your word for it. How is your mother, by the way?”

“Happy as a clam. She’s remarried, you know. Or didn’t you?”

Deborah’s forehead furrowed. “I think Daddy mentioned it, yes. She must have sent him a Christmas card or something.”

“She and her new husband have turned the farm into a gigantic truck garden—everything from cabbages to kings, you might say.”

“You’re not still on the farm yourself then?” The waiter brought their plates. She eyed Riley’s platter-size Denver omelet with a jaundiced expression. “Someone ought to tell you about cholesterol,” she murmured, as she broke an oatmeal muffin in half.

He cut into the omelet and gave her a soulful look. “Debbie darling, I didn’t know you cared.”

The nickname was beginning to grate a bit, but she had no trouble remembering what had happened the last time she had instructed him that her name was Deborah. She’d been

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almost eleven then and very serious about the fact that she was not *Deb* or *Debbie*. Riley had listened, patiently and perfectly straight-faced, and from then on he had called her Deborah, as she had requested. The problem was that he put the accent on the second syllable, and slurred it a little, until it sounded like a native of Brooklyn referring to a tiresome pest—da bore.

*Debbie darling*, she concluded, however insincere it might be, was certainly an improvement over that!

“Besides,” Riley said without looking up, “I know all about cholesterol. I’m running a restaurant now.”

The statement was blithe, but underneath it she heard... what? Resentment? Self-pity? A sense of shame that the promising law student had come down to this?

She put down her muffin. “Oh, Riley—I’m so sorry,” she said, and then wanted to bite her tongue off. As if he wanted her sympathy. . . as if it could do anything but make him feel worse!

He darted a curious glance at her; Deborah knew it, even though she was studying the china pattern, too embarrassed to look at him. “I’m—I shouldn’t have said that,” she muttered.

“Well, we can’t all be dashing over the countryside discovering artists, can we?” he said reasonably. “Some of us wouldn’t know one if we tripped over him. Me, for instance. As soon as I saw that bearded creature you had on a leash at Ralph’s funeral, I said, there’s an artist if I ever saw one. But for all I know, he really spends his nights as a guard at the hospital for the criminally insane.”

“He was an artist,” she said reluctantly.

“*Was?* Does that mean he’s stopped, or that he doesn’t figure large in your life these days?”

Deborah’s temper snapped. “Uncle Ralph’s been dead for three years, Riley. For all you know, I could be working my way through every man in the Chicago telephone directory by now. So what business is it of yours whether I’m still seeing Morgan?”

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He looked very innocent. “None at all,” he said gently. “But if you’d like to talk about this sexual compulsion of yours, Deb...”

She bit her lip, knowing that once more she had reacted precisely as he had hoped she would.

He relented. “Sorry,” he said briskly. “I don’t see you as a nymphomaniac, actually, but I couldn’t resist the impulse to see your expression. You really must learn to control that tendency of yours to make grandstand statements, you know.”

“The only thing I need to control,” Deborah said with commendable restraint, “is the amount of time I spend with you. And that will be very easy to do.”

He shook his head. “I hope you’ll think it over very seriously before you walk out of here, Deb.”

“Why on earth should I?”

“Because we haven’t even gotten to the problem of Aunt Ida yet.”

“And her supposed lover? Oh, for heaven’s sake, Riley, Ida’s eighty if she’s a day and she’s been a spinster all her life.”

“That’s partly why I’m so worried.” He actually sounded serious. “She must be infatuated or she wouldn’t be acting like such an idiot.”

Deborah stared at him for a long moment. “I suppose you’re going to tell me she’s acquired a gigolo! You can’t expect me to take that notion seriously.”

He was shaking his head. “Not a gigolo, exactly. He acts more like a tame python. Actually, he’s a venture-capital specialist who wants to revive Paradise Valley.”

“The bankrupt resort complex? It’s been sitting there rotting for ten years. I can’t believe Ida would give him a minute, much less any money....” Her voice wavered. “She hasn’t, has she?”

“Ida is in it up to the crook of her Roman nose,” Riley said. “For one thing, her suave new investment counselor is living at Lassiter House these days. And she’s seriously

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considering investing not only her own money in his scam, but the trust's as well."

"The trust?" Deborah said weakly.

He nodded. "The trust. The unbreakable one that your great-grandfather wrote to protect his assets for his descendants—which is to say, you—yea, verily and unto the umpteenth generation. *That* trust."

"But what—"

"You see, he overlooked one weak spot. He put his kids in charge of the money—a sort of balance-of-power arrangement—but after Ralph died, your Aunt Ida was left as the sole trustee." He set down his cup with a firm click. "And now, Debbie darling, Ida can do any damned thing she wants with the cash."