

# PART ONE

“‘The time has come,’ the Walrus said, ‘to talk of many things.’”

LEWIS CARROLL

### *Chicago, 1994*

It was a moonless midnight in Chicago, but to Deanna, the moment had all the makings of *High Noon*. It was easy to see herself in the quietly dignified, stalwart Gary Cooper role, preparing to face down the canny, vengeance-seeking gunslinger.

But damn it, Deanna thought, Chicago was *her* town. Angela was the outsider.

It suited Angela's sense of the dramatic, Deanna supposed, to demand a showdown in the very studio where they both had climbed ambition's slippery ladder. But it was Deanna's studio now, and it was *her* show that garnered the lion's share of the ratings points. There was nothing Angela could do to change that, short of conjuring up Elvis from the grave and asking him to sing "Heartbreak Hotel" to the studio audience.

A ghost of a smile flitted around Deanna's lips at the image, but there wasn't much humor in it. Angela was nothing if not a worthy opponent. Over the years she had used gruesome tactics to keep her daily talk show on top.

But whatever Angela had up her sleeve this time wasn't going to work. She had underestimated Deanna Reynolds. Angela could whisper secrets and threaten scandal all she wanted, but nothing she could say would change Deanna's plans.

She would, however, hear Angela out. Deanna thought she would even attempt, one last time, to compromise. To offer, if not friendship, at least a cautious truce. There was little hope the breach could be spanned after all this time and all the hostility, but hope, to Deanna's mind, sprang eternal.

At least until it dried up.

Focusing on the matter at hand, Deanna pulled into the CBC Building's parking lot. During the day, the lot would be crammed with cars—technicians, editors, producers, talent, secretaries, interns. Deanna would be dropped off and picked up by her driver, avoiding the hassle. Inside the great white building, people would be rushing to put out the news—at seven A.M., noon and five and ten P.M.—and *Let's Cook!* with Bobby Marks, the weekly *In Depth* with Finn Riley, and the top-rated talk show in the country, *Deanna's Hour*.

But now, just after midnight, the lot was nearly empty. There were half a dozen cars belonging to the skeleton crew who were loitering in the newsroom, waiting for something to happen somewhere in the world. Probably hoping any new wars would wait to erupt until the lonely night shift ended.

Wishing she were somewhere else, anywhere else, Deanna pulled into an empty space and shut off the engine. For a moment she simply sat, listening to the night, the swish of cars on the street to the left, the rumble of the huge air-conditioning system that kept the building and the expensive equipment cool. She had to get a handle on her mixed emotions and her nerves before she faced Angela.

Nerves were second nature in the profession she'd chosen. She would work with them, or through them. Her temper was something she could and would control, particularly if losing it would

accomplish nothing. But those emotions, the ones that ran so strong and so contradictory, were another matter. Even after all this time, it was difficult to forget that the woman she was about to face was one she had once admired and respected. And trusted.

From bitter experience Deanna knew that Angela was an expert in emotional manipulation. Deanna's problem—and many said her talent—was an inability to hide her feelings. They were there, up front, shouting to anyone who cared to listen. Whatever she felt was mirrored in her gray eyes, broadcast in the tilt of her head or the expression of her mouth. Some said that's what made her irresistible, and dangerous. With a flick of her wrist, she turned the rearview mirror toward her. Yes, she mused, she could see the sparks of temper in her own eyes, and the simmering resentment, the dragging regret. After all, she and Angela had been friends once. Or almost friends.

But she could also see the pleasure of anticipation. That was a matter of pride. This bout had been a long time coming.

Smiling a little, Deanna took out a tube of lipstick and carefully painted her mouth. You didn't go one-on-one with your arch rival without the most basic of shields. Pleased that her hand was rock steady, she dropped the lipstick back in her purse, climbed out of the car. She stood a moment, breathing in the balmy night while she asked herself one question.

Calm, Deanna?

Nope, she thought. What she was, was revved. If the energy was fueled by nerves, it didn't matter. Slamming the car door behind her, she strode across the lot. She slipped her plastic ID out of her pocket and punched it into the security slot beside the rear door. Seconds later, a little green light blipped, allowing her to depress the handle and pull the heavy door open.

She flicked the switch to light the stairway, and let the door ease shut behind her.

She found it interesting that Angela hadn't arrived before her.

She'd have taken a car service, Deanna thought. Now that Angela was settled in New York, she no longer had a regular driver in Chicago. It surprised Deanna that she hadn't seen a limo waiting in the lot.

Angela was always, always on time.

It was one of the many things Deanna respected about her.

The click of Deanna's heels on the stairs echoed hollowly as she descended a level. As she slipped her card in the next security slot, she wondered briefly who Angela had bribed, threatened or seduced to gain entry to the studio.

Not so many years before, Deanna had rushed down that same route, wide-eyed and enthusiastic, running errands at the snap of Angela's demanding fingers. She'd been ready to preen like an eager puppy for any sign of approval. But, like any smart pup, she'd learned.

And when betrayal had come, with its keen-edged disillusionment, she might have whimpered, but she'd licked her wounds and had used everything she'd learned—until the student became the master.

It shouldn't have surprised her to discover how quickly old resentments, long cooled, could come rolling to a boil. And this time, Deanna thought, this time when she faced Angela, it would be on her own turf, under her own rules. The naive kid from Kansas was more than ready to flex the muscles of realized ambition.

And perhaps once she did, they would finally clear the air. Meet on equal terms. If it wasn't possible to forget what had happened between them in the past, it was always possible to accept and move on.

Deanna slipped her card into the slot beside the studio doors. The light blinked green. She pushed inside, into darkness.

The studio was empty.

That pleased her. Arriving first gave her one more advantage, as a hostess escorting an unwelcome guest into her home. And if

home was where you grew from girl to woman, where you learned and squabbled, the studio was home.

Smiling a little, Deanna reached out in the dark for the switch that controlled a bank of overhead lights. She thought she heard something, some whisper that barely disturbed the air. And a feeling stabbed through that fine sense of anticipation. A feeling that she was not alone.

Angela, she thought, and flicked the switch.

But as the overhead lights flashed on, brighter ones, blinding ones, exploded inside her head. As the pain ripped through them, she plunged back into the dark.

SHE CRAWLED BACK INTO consciousness, moaning. Her head, heavy with pain, lolled back against a chair. Groggy, disoriented, she lifted a hand to the worst of the ache. Her fingers came away lightly smeared with blood.

She struggled to focus, baffled to find herself sitting in her own chair, on her own set. Had she missed a cue? she wondered, dizzy, staring back at the camera where the red light gleamed.

But there was no studio audience beyond the camera, no technicians working busily out of range. Though the lights flooded down with the familiar heat, there was no show in progress.

She'd come to meet Angela, Deanna remembered.

Her vision wavered again, like water disturbed by a pebble, and she blinked to clear it. It was then her gaze latched on to the two images on the monitor. She saw herself, pale and glazed-eyed. Then she saw, with horror, the guest sitting in the chair beside hers.

Angela, her pink silk suit decorated with pearl buttons. Matching strands of pearls around her throat, clustered at her ears. Angela, her golden hair softly coiffed, her legs crossed, her hands folded together over the right arm of the chair.

It was Angela. Oh yes, there was no mistaking it. Even though her face had been destroyed.

Blood was splattered over the pink silk and joined by more that ran almost leisurely down from where that lovely, canny face should be.

It was then Deanna began to scream.

# Chapter One

*Chicago, 1990*

*IN FIVE, FOUR, THREE . . .*

Deanna smiled at the camera from her corner of the set of *Midday News*. “Our guest this afternoon is Jonathan Monroe, a local author who has just published a book titled *I Want Mine*.” She lifted the slim volume from the small round table between the chairs, angling it toward Camera Two. “Jonathan, you’ve subtitled this book *Healthy Selfishness*. What inspired you to write about a trait most people consider a character flaw?”

“Well, Deanna.” He chuckled, a small man with a sunny smile who was sweating profusely under the lights. “I wanted mine.”

Good answer, she thought, but it was obvious he wasn’t going to elaborate without a little prompting. “And who doesn’t, if we’re honest?” she said, trying to loosen him up with a sense of comradeship. “Jonathan, you state in your book that this healthy selfishness is quashed by parents and caregivers, right from the nursery.”

“Exactly.” His frozen, brilliant smile remained fixed while his eyes darted in panic.



Deanna shifted subtly, laying her hand over his rigid fingers just under camera range. Her eyes radiated interest, her touch communicated support. “You believe the demand of adults that children share toys sets an unnatural precedent.” She gave his hand an encouraging squeeze. “Don’t you feel that sharing is a basic form of courtesy?”

“Not at all.” And he began to tell her why. Though his explanations were delivered in fits and starts, she was able to smooth over the awkwardness, guiding him through the three-minute-fifteen-second spot.

“That’s *I Want Mine*, by Jonathan Monroe,” she said to the camera, winding up. “Available in your bookstores now. Thank you so much for joining us today, Jonathan.”

“It was a pleasure. As a side note, I’m currently working on my second book, *Get Out of My Way, I Was Here First*. It’s about healthy aggression.”

“Best of luck with it. We’ll be back in a moment with the rest of the *Midday News*.” Once they were into commercial, she smiled at Jonathan. “You were great. I appreciate your coming in.”

“I hope I did okay.” The minute his mike was removed, Jonathan whipped out a handkerchief to mop his brow. “First time on TV.”

“You did fine. I think this will generate a lot of local interest in your book.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. Would you mind signing this for me?”

Beaming again, he took the book and pen she offered. “You sure made it easy, Deanna. I did a radio interview this morning. The DJ hadn’t even read the back blurb.”

She took the autographed book, rising. Part of her mind, most of her energy, was already at the news desk across the studio. “That makes it hard on everyone. Thanks again,” she said, offering her hand. “I hope you’ll come back with your next book.”

“I’d love to.” But she’d already walked away, maneuvering

nimbly over snaking piles of cable to take her place behind the counter on the news set. After slipping the book under the counter, she hooked her mike to the lapel of her red suit.

“Another screwball.” The comment from her co-anchor, Roger Crowell, was typical.

“He was very nice.”

“You think everyone’s very nice.” Grinning, Roger checked his hand mirror, gave his tie a minute adjustment. He had a good face for the camera—mature, trustworthy, with distinguished flecks of gray at the temples of his rust-colored hair. “Especially the screwballs.”

“That’s why I love you, Rog.”

This caused snickering among the camera crew. Whatever response Roger might have made was cut off by the floor director signaling time. While the TelePrompter rolled, Roger smiled into the camera, setting the tone for a soft segment on the birth of twin tigers at the zoo.

“That’s all for *Midday*. Stay tuned for *Let’s Cook!* This is Roger Crowell.”

“And Deanna Reynolds. See you tomorrow.”

As the closing music tinkled in her earpiece, Deanna turned to smile at Roger. “You’re a softy, pal. You wrote that piece on the baby tigers yourself. It had your fingerprints all over it.”

He flushed a little, but winked. “Just giving them what they want, babe.”

“And we’re clear.” The floor director stretched his shoulders. “Nice show, people.”

“Thanks, Jack.” Deanna was already unhooking her mike.

“Hey, want to get some lunch?” Roger was always ready to eat, and countered his love affair with food with his personal trainer. There was no disguising pounds from the merciless eye of the camera.

“Can’t. I’ve got an assignment.”

Roger rose. Beneath his impeccable blue serge jacket, he wore

a pair of eye-popping Bermuda shorts. “Don’t tell me it’s for the terror of Studio B.”

The faintest flicker of annoyance clouded her eyes. “Okay, I won’t.”

“Hey, Dee.” Roger caught up with her on the edge of the set. “Don’t get mad.”

“I didn’t say I was mad.”

“You don’t have to.” They walked down the single wide step from the glossy set to the scarred wood floor, skirting around camera and cable. They pushed through the studio doors together. “You are mad. It shows. You get that line between your eyebrows. Look.” He pulled her by the arm into the makeup room. After flicking on the lights, he stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders as they faced the mirror. “See, it’s still there.”

Deliberately, she eased it away with a smile. “I don’t see anything.”

“Then let me tell you what I see. Every man’s dream of the girl next door. Subtle, wholesome sex.” When she scowled, he only grinned. “That’s the visual, kid. Those big, trust-me eyes and peaches and cream. Not bad qualities for a television reporter.”

“How about intelligence?” she countered. “Writing ability, guts.”

“We’re talking visuals.” His smile flashed, deepening the character lines around his eyes. No one in television would dare refer to them as wrinkles. “Look, my last co-anchor was a Twinkie. All blow-dried hair and bonded teeth. She was more worried about her eyelashes than she was punching the lead.”

“And now she’s reading the news at the number-two station in LA.” She knew how the business worked. Oh yes, she did. But she didn’t have to like it. “Rumors are, she’s being groomed for network.”

“That’s the game. Personally, I appreciate having someone at the desk with a brain, but let’s not forget what we are.”

“I thought we were journalists.”

“*Television* journalists. You’ve got a face that was made for the

camera, and it tells everything you're thinking, everything you're feeling. Only problem is, it's the same off camera, and that makes you vulnerable. A woman like Angela eats little farm girls like you for breakfast."

"I didn't grow up on a farm." Her voice was dry as a Midwest dust bowl.

"Might as well have." He gave her shoulders a friendly squeeze. "Who's your pal, Dee?"

She sighed, rolled her eyes. "You are, Roger."

"Watch your back with Angela."

"Look, I know she has a reputation for being temperamental—"

"She has a reputation for being a stone bitch."

Stepping away from Roger, Deanna uncapped a pot of cold cream to remove her heavy makeup. She didn't like having her coworkers pitted against one another, competing for her time, and she didn't like feeling pressured into choosing between them. It had been difficult enough juggling her responsibilities in the newsroom and on set with the favors she did for Angela. And they were only favors, after all. Done primarily on her own time.

"All I know is that she's been nothing but kind to me. She liked my work on *Midday* and the 'Deanna's Corner' segment and offered to help me refine my style."

"She's using you."

"She's teaching me," Deanna corrected, tossing used makeup pads aside. Her movements were quick and practiced. She hit the center of the wastebasket as consistently as a veteran free-throw shooter. "There's a reason Angela has the top-rated talk show in the market. It would have taken me years to learn the ins and outs of the business I've picked up from her in a matter of months."

"And do you really think she's going to share a piece of that pie?"

She pouted a moment because, of course, she wanted a piece. A nice big one. *Healthy selfishness*, she thought, and chuckled to herself. "It's not as though I'm competing with her."

“Not yet.” But she would be, he knew. It surprised him that Angela didn’t detect the ambition glinting just behind Deanna’s eyes. But then, he mused, ego was often blinding. He had reason to know. “Just some friendly advice. Don’t give her any ammunition.” He took one last study as Deanna briskly redid her makeup for the street. She might have been naive, he mused, but she was also stubborn. He could see it in the way her mouth was set, the angle of her chin. “I’ve got a couple of bumpers to tape.” He tugged on her hair. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” Once she was alone, Deanna tapped her eye pencil against the makeup table. She didn’t discount everything Roger said. Because she was a perfectionist, because she demanded, and received, the best for her show, Angela Perkins had a reputation for being hard. And it certainly paid off. After six years in syndication, *Angela’s* had been in the number-one spot for more than three.

Since both *Angela’s* and *Midday News* were taped at the CBC studios, Angela had been able to exert a little pressure to free up some of Deanna’s time.

It was also true that Angela had been nothing but kind to Deanna. She had shown Deanna a friendship and a willingness to share that were rare in the highly competitive world of television.

Was it naive to trust kindness? Deanna didn’t think so. Nor was she foolish enough to believe that kindness was always rewarded.

Thoughtfully, she picked up the brush marked with her name and pulled it through her shoulder-length black hair. Without the cover of heavy theatrical makeup necessary for the lights and camera, her skin was as elegantly pale as porcelain, a dramatic contrast to the inky mane of hair and the smoky, slightly slanted eyes. To add another touch of drama, she’d painted her lips a deep rose.

Satisfied, she pulled her hair back in a ponytail with two quick flicks of her wrist.

She never planned to compete with Angela. Although she hoped to use what she learned to boost her own career, what she wanted was a network spot, someday. Maybe a job on *20/20*. And

it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that she could expand the weekly "Deanna's Corner" segment on the noon news into a full-fledged syndicated talk show of her own. Even that would hardly be competing with Angela, the queen of the market.

The nineties were wide open for all manner of styles and shows. If she succeeded, it would be because she'd learned from the master. She would always be grateful to Angela for that.

"IF THE SON OF A BITCH THINKS I'm going to roll over, he's in for an unpleasant surprise." Angela Perkins glared at the reflection of her producer in her dressing room mirror. "He agreed to come on the show to hype his new album. Tit for tat, Lew. We're giving him national exposure, so he's damn well going to answer some questions about his tax evasion charges."

"He didn't say he wouldn't answer them, Angela." The headache behind Lew McNeil's eyes was still dull enough to keep him hoping it would pass. "He just said he won't be able to be specific as long as the case is pending. He'd like it if you would concentrate on his career."

"I wouldn't be where I am if I let a guest dictate my show, would I?" She swore again, ripely, then wheeled in the chair to snarl at the hairdresser. "Pull my hair again, sweetie, and you'll be picking up curlers with your teeth."

"I'm sorry, Miss Perkins, but your hair is really too short . . ."

"Just get it done." Angela faced her own reflection again, and deliberately relaxed her features. She knew how important it was to relax the facial muscles before a show, no matter how high the adrenaline. The camera picked up every line and wrinkle, like an old friend a woman meets for lunch. So she breathed deeply, closing her eyes a moment in a signal to her producer to hold his tongue. When she opened them again, they were clear, a diamond bright blue surrounded by silky lashes.

And she smiled as the hairdresser swept her hair back and up

into a wavy blond halo. It was a good look for her, Angela decided. Sophisticated but not threatening. Chic but not studied. She checked the style from every angle before giving the go-ahead nod.

“It looks great, Marcie.” She flashed the high-powered smile that made the hairdresser forget the earlier threat. “I feel ten years younger.”

“You look wonderful, Miss Perkins.”

“Thanks to you.” Relaxed and satisfied, she toyed with the trademark pearls around her throat. “And how’s that new man in your life, Marcie? Is he treating you well?”

“He’s terrific.” Marcie grinned as she gave Angela’s hair a large dose of spray to hold the style. “I think he might be the one.”

“Good for you. If he gives you any trouble, you let me know.” She winked. “I’ll straighten him out.”

With a laugh, Marcie backed away. “Thanks, Miss Perkins. Good luck this morning.”

“Mmm-hmmm. Now, Lew.” She smiled and lifted a hand for his. The squeeze was encouraging, feminine, friendly. “Don’t worry about a thing. You just keep our guest happy until airtime. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“He wants your word, Angela.”

“Honey, you give him whatever he wants.” She laughed; Lew’s headache sprang into full-blown agony. “Don’t be such a worrier.” She leaned forward to pluck a cigarette from the pack of Virginia Slims on the dressing table. She flicked on a gold monogrammed lighter, a gift from her second husband. She blew out one thin stream of smoke.

Lew was getting soft, she mused, personally as well as professionally. Though he wore a suit and tie, as dictated by her dress code, his shoulders were slumped as if pulled down by the weight of his expanding belly. His hair was thinning out, too, she realized, and was heavily streaked with gray. Her show was known for its energy and speed. She didn’t enjoy having her producer look like a pudgy old man.

“After all these years, Lew, you should trust me.”

“Angela, if you attack Deke Barrow, you’re going to make it tough for us to book other celebrities.”

“Bull. They’re six deep waiting for a chance to do my show.” She jabbed her cigarette in the air like a lance. “They want me to hype their movies and their TV specials and their books and their records, and they damn well want me to hype their love lives. They need me, Lew, because they know that every day millions of people tune in.” She smiled into the mirror, and the face that smiled back was lovely, composed, polished. “And they tune in for me.”

Lew had worked with Angela for more than five years and knew exactly how to handle a dispute. He wheedled. “Nobody’s denying that, Angela. You *are* the show. I just think you should tread lightly with Deke. He’s been around the country-music scene a long time, and this comeback of his has a lot of sentiment behind him.”

“Just leave Deke to me.” She smiled behind a mist of smoke. “I’ll be very sentimental.”

She picked up the note cards that Deanna had finished organizing at seven that morning. It was a gesture of dismissal that had Lew shaking his head. Angela’s smile widened as she skimmed through the notes. The girl was good, she mused. Very good, very thorough.

Very useful.

Angela took one last contemplative drag on her cigarette before crushing it out in the heavy crystal ashtray on her dressing table. As always, every pot, every brush, every tube was aligned in meticulous order. There was a vase of two dozen red roses, which were brought in fresh every morning, and a small dish of multi-colored coated mints that Angela loved.

She thrived on routine, at being able to control her environment, including the people around her. Everyone had their place. She was enjoying making one for Deanna Reynolds.

Some might have thought it odd that a woman approaching forty, a vain woman, would have taken on a younger, lovely woman



as a favored apprentice. But Angela had been a pretty woman who with time, experience and illusion had become a beautiful one. And she had no fear of age. Not in a world where it could be so easily combated.

She wanted Deanna behind her because of her looks, because of her talent, because of her youth. Most of all, because power scented power.

And for the very simple reason that she liked the girl.

Oh, she would offer Deanna tidbits of advice, friendly criticism, dollops of praise—and perhaps, in time, a position of some merit. But she had no intention of allowing someone she already sensed as a potential competitor to break free. No one broke free from Angela Perkins.

She had two ex-husbands who had learned that. They hadn't broken free. They had been dispatched.

“Angela?”

“Deanna.” Angela flung out a hand in welcome. “I was just thinking about you. Your notes are wonderful. They'll add so much to the show.”

“Glad I could help.” Deanna lifted a hand to toy with her left earring, a sign of hesitation she'd yet to master. “Angela, I feel awkward asking you this, but my mother is a huge fan of Deke Barrow's.”

“And you'd like an autograph.”

After a quick, embarrassed smile, Deanna brought out the CD she was holding behind her back. “She'd love it if he could sign this for her.”

“You just leave it to me.” Angela tapped one perfect, French-manicured nail along the edge of the CD. “And what is your mother's name again, Dee?”

“It's Marilyn. I really appreciate it, Angela.”

“Anything I can do for you, sweetie.” She waited a beat. Her timing had always been excellent. “Oh, and there is a little favor you could do for me.”

“Of course.”

“Would you make reservations for dinner for me tonight, at La Fontaine, seven-thirty, for two? I simply don’t have time to deal with it myself, and I forgot to tell my secretary to handle it.”

“No problem.” Deanna pulled a pad out of her pocket to make a note.

“You’re a treasure, Deanna.” Angela stood then to take a final check of her pale blue suit in a cheval glass. “What do you think of this color? It’s not too washed-out, is it?”

Because she knew that Angela fretted over every detail of the show, from research to the proper footwear, Deanna took time for a serious study. The soft drape of the fabric suited Angela’s compact, curvy figure beautifully. “Coolly feminine.”

The tension in Angela’s shoulders unknotted. “Perfect, then. Are you staying for the taping?”

“I can’t. I still have copy to write for *Midday*.”

“Oh.” The annoyance surfaced, but only briefly. “I hope helping me out hasn’t put you behind.”

“There are twenty-four hours in the day,” Deanna said. “I like to use all of them. Now, I’d better get out of your way.”

“Bye, honey.”

Deanna shut the door behind her. Everyone in the building knew that Angela insisted on having the last ten minutes before she took the stage to herself. Everyone assumed she used that time to go over her notes. That was nonsense, of course. She was completely prepared. But she preferred that they think of her brushing up on her information. Or even that they imagine her taking a quick nip from the bottle of brandy she kept in her dressing table.

Not that she would touch the brandy. The need to keep it there, just within reach, terrified as much as it comforted.

She preferred they believe anything, as long as they didn’t know the truth.

Angela Perkins spent those last solitary moments before each taping in a trembling cycle of panic. She, a woman who exuded an

image of supreme self-confidence; she, a woman who had interviewed presidents, royalty, murderers and millionaires, succumbed, as she always did, to a vicious, violent attack of stage fright.

Hundreds of hours of therapy had done nothing to alleviate the shuddering, the sweating, the nausea. Helpless against it, she collapsed in her chair, drawing herself in. The mirror reflected her in triplicate, the polished woman, perfectly groomed, immaculately presented. Eyes glazed with the terror of self-discovery.

Angela pressed her hands to her temples and rode out the screaming roller coaster of fear. Today she would slip, and they would hear the backwoods of Arkansas in her voice. They would see the girl who had been unloved and unwanted by a mother who had preferred the flickering images on the pitted screen of the tiny Philco to her own flesh and blood. The girl who had wanted attention so badly, so desperately, she had imagined herself inside that television so that her mother would focus those vague, drunken eyes just once, and look at her.

They would see the girl in the secondhand clothes and ill-fitting shoes who had studied so hard to make average grades.

They would see that she was nothing, no one, a fraud who had bluffed her way into television the same way her father had bluffed his way into an inside straight.

And they would laugh at her.

Or worse, turn her off.

The knock on the door made her flinch.

“We’re set, Angela.”

She took a deep breath, then another. “On my way.” Her voice was perfectly normal. She was a master at pretense. For a few seconds longer, she stared at her reflection, watching the panic fade from her own eyes.

She wouldn’t fail. She would never be laughed at. She would never be ignored again. And no one would see anything she didn’t allow them to see. She rose, walked out of her dressing room, down the corridor.

She had yet to see her guest and continued past the green room without a blink. She never spoke to a guest before the tape was rolling.

Her producer was warming up the studio audience. There was a hum of excitement from those fortunate enough to have secured tickets to the taping. Marcie, tottering in four-inch heels, rushed up for a last-minute check on hair and makeup. A researcher passed Angela a few more cards. Angela spoke to neither of them.

When she walked onstage, the hum burst open into a full-throttle cheer.

“Good morning.” Angela took her chair and let the applause wash over her while she was miked. “I hope everyone’s ready for a great show.” She scanned the audience as she spoke and was pleased with the demographics. It was a good mix of age, sex and race—an important visual for the camera pans. “Anyone here a Deke Barrow fan?”

She laughed heartily at the next round of applause. “Me too,” she said, though she detested country music in any form. “I’d say we’re all in for a treat.”

She nodded, settled back, legs crossed, hands folded over the arm of her chair. The red light on the camera blinked on. The intro music swung jazzily through the air.

“‘Lost Tomorrows,’ ‘That Green-Eyed Girl,’ ‘One Wild Heart’ . . . Those are just a few of the hits that made today’s guest a legend. He’s been a part of country-music history for more than twenty-five years, and his current album, *Lost in Nashville*, is zooming up the charts. Please join me in welcoming, to Chicago, Deke Barrow.”

The applause thundered out again as Deke strode out onstage. Barrel-chested, with graying temples peeking out from beneath his black felt Stetson, Deke grinned at the audience before accepting Angela’s warm handshake. She stood back, letting him milk the moment by tipping his hat.

With every appearance of delight, she joined in the audience’s

standing ovation. By the end of the hour, she thought, Deke would stagger offstage. And he wouldn't even know what had hit him.

ANGELA WAITED UNTIL THE SECOND half of the show to strike. Like a good host, she had flattered her guest, listened attentively to his anecdotes, chuckled at his jokes. Now Deke was basking in the admiration as Angela held the mike for excited fans as they stood to ask questions. She waited, canny as a cobra.

"Deke, I wondered if you're going by Danville, Kentucky, on your tour. That's my hometown," a blushing redhead asked.

"Well now, I can't say as we are. But we'll be in Louisville on the seventeenth of June. You be sure to tell your friends to come on by and see me."

"Your *Lost in Nashville* tour's going to keep you on the road for several months," Angela began. "That's rough on you, isn't it?"

"Rougher than it used to be," he answered with a wink. "I ain't twenty anymore." His broad, guitar-plucking hands lifted and spread. "But I gotta say I love it. Singing in a recording studio can't come close to what it's like to sing for people."

"And the tour's certainly been a success so far. There's no truth, then, to the rumor that you may have to cut it short because of your difficulties with the IRS?"

Deke's congenial grin slipped several notches. "No, ma'am. We'll finish it out."

"I feel safe in speaking for everyone here when I say you have our support in this. Tax evasion." She rolled her eyes in disbelief. "They make you sound like Al Capone."

"I really can't talk about it." Deke shuffled his booted feet, tugged at his bola tie. "But nobody's calling it tax evasion."

"Oh." She widened her eyes. "I'm sorry. What are they calling it?"

He shifted uncomfortably on his chair. "It's a disagreement on back taxes."

“‘Disagreement’ is a mild word for it. I realize you can’t really discuss this while the matter’s under investigation, but I think it’s an outrage. A man like you, who’s brought pleasure to millions, for two generations, to be faced with potential financial ruin because his books weren’t in perfect order.”

“It’s not as bad as all that—”

“But you’ve had to put your home in Nashville on the market.” Her voice dripped sympathy. Her eyes gleamed with it. “I think the country you’ve celebrated in your music should show more compassion, more gratitude. Don’t you?”

She hit the right button.

“Seems like the tax man doesn’t have much to do with the country I’ve been singing about for twenty-five years.” Deke’s mouth thinned, his eyes hardened like agates. “They look at dollar signs. They don’t think about how hard a man’s worked. How much he sweats to make something of himself. They just keep slicing at you till most of what’s yours is theirs. They turn honest folk into liars and cheaters.”

“You’re not saying you cheated on your taxes, are you, Deke?” She smiled guilelessly when he froze. “We’ll be back in a moment,” she said to the camera, and waited until the red light blinked off. “I’m sure most of us here have been squeezed by the IRS, Deke.” Turning her back on him, she held up her hands. “We’re behind him, aren’t we, audience?”

There was an explosion of applause and cheers that did nothing to erase the look of sickly shock from Deke’s face.

“I can’t talk about it,” he managed. “Can I get some water?”

“We’ll put the matter to rest, don’t you worry. We’ll have time for a few more questions.” Angela turned to her audience again as an assistant rushed out with a glass of water for Deke. “I’m sure Deke would appreciate it if we avoided any more discussion on this sensitive subject. Let’s be sure to give him plenty of applause when we get back from commercial, and give Deke some time to compose himself.”

With this outpouring of support and empathy, she swung back toward the camera. “You’re back with *Angela’s*. We have time for just a couple more questions, but at Deke’s request, we’ll close the door on any discussion of his tax situation, as he isn’t free to defend himself while the case is still pending.”

And of course, when she closed the show moments later, that was exactly the subject on every viewer’s mind.

Angela didn’t linger among her audience, but joined Deke onstage. “Wonderful show.” She took his limp hand in her firm grasp. “Thank you so much for coming. And the best of luck.”

“Thank you.” Shell-shocked, he began signing autographs until the assistant producer led him offstage.

“Get me a tape,” Angela ordered as she strode back to her dressing room. “I want to see the last segment.” She walked straight to her mirror and smiled at her own reflection.