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DELL PUBLISHING

SECRETS

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A DELL BOOK

To the best and dearest

gift of my life,

to John,

with all my heart and love.

d.s.

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Chapter 1

The sun reverberated off the buildings with the brilliance of a handful of diamonds caught against an iceberg, the shimmering white was blinding, as Sabina lay naked on a deck chair under the heat of the Los Angeles sun. She lay sparkling and oiled, warmed to a honey brown by the relentless sun. Later she would go down to the pool for a little while, just to cool off, but before there were a dozen rituals she had to perform first. First she lay on her back every morning, her face creamed, her body oiled, the spectacular mane of blond hair shielded from the sun, her eyes covered with pads dipped in witch hazel, a damp washcloth framing her face so as not to leave the unseen scars of the year before unprotected in the sun. The breasts similarly protected by small, damp gauze pads for the same reasons. The three surgeries she had endured had served her well and didn't show. The first, at thirty-eight, later than she would have thought, just to smooth a small furrow from between her brows, and raise her eyelids to the exact location they had been ten years before. The second at forty-one, to enhance her breasts, and give them a fullness and upward tilt they had never really had, even at sixteen. And the last surgery a year before, a repeat of the first one, with only slightly more emphasis this time, and a few tucks above her ears. On a good day she looked thirty-five, a great one thirty-one, and in the camera's eye, she looked younger than that sometimes ... sometimes ... if the cameraman was any good. Sabina Quarles was forty-five years old. And her body was honed to perfection. She exercised every morning for an hour, was massaged three times a week, swam every afternoon, and walked two miles if it was cool enough. Not jogged, walked. She was no fool. She hadn't spent five thousand on her tits to shake them down another three inches jogging along the concrete of Beverly Hills.

She was given to low-cut dresses that revealed the cleavage she was so proud of, the perfect expanse of honey-colored flesh that showed no signs of age. And she wore her skirts slit up high along her thigh as well. And with good reason. She had the kind of legs most women would have died for. Surgery hadn't given her those. God had. And He had endowed her well. In fact, he had been more than generous with Mary Elizabeth Ralston, born in Huntingdon, Pa., almost half a century before. Her father had been a miner, her mother a waitress at a truckstop lit with a blinking neon sign that flashed all night and was called "The Cafe." Her father had died when she was nine, her mother had married three more times in seven years, been widowed twice, and had died herself when Mary Elizabeth was seventeen. There nothing left to hang around for, there hadn't been anyway. And Mary Elizabeth swung her long, shapely legs onto a Greyhound bus and headed for New York. Mary Elizabeth Ralston, for all intents and purposes, died that day. In New York she became Virginia Harlowe, a name she thought glamorous at the time, as she tried out for small modeling jobs and finally wound up in a chorus line in a show that was very much off Broadway. She thought it was the high point of her life, until at twenty-one, someone offered her a part in a movie. Her hair was jet black in those days. She carefully dyed it to hide the paler roots so it would set off her wide almond-shaped green eyes. She was not given a wardrobe for the movie but told to go to a freezing cold warehouse on the Lower East Side with two other girls and a man. It was a role she no longer ever thought of. Ever. Virginia Harlowe's life was even shorter than Mary Elizabeth Ralston's. There were a few more similar parts, a job in a str

joint on the West Side, and she was smart enough to know a dead end when she saw one. The name Sabina Quarles leapt at her from the pages of a magazine someone had left in the communal dressing room one night, and the money she had managed to save paid for a ticket to L.A. She was twenty-four and she knew it was almost too late. Almost, but not quite. She left the black hair dye in New York, and became a blonde when she hit California. Within three weeks, she found herself a rented room and an agent, and there was no mention of the film work she had done in New York. It was part of another life, a life she no longer chose to remember. Sabina Quarles, as she became and stayed after that, had a knack for forgetting whatever it was no longer convenient to remember, the life of coal mines, the strip joint in New York, and the small budget ugly porn films she had made in the warehouse on the Lower East Side. In L.A., she became a model, and was cast in a few commercials, had a screen test at MGM and another at Fox, and in less than six months, she had landed a part in a very decent movie. There were three more small parts after that, and finally a decent role, and by twenty-six, Sabina's face was one that a number of directors knew and remembered. Her acting didn't set the world on fire, but she was good enough, and her agent found her a coach who helped her over the rough spots. He also helped her to get a few more parts. By twenty-eight, people knew her name and face, and her press agent saw to it that her name appeared regularly in the papers. She was linked with a number of male stars, and at thirty she had an affair with one of Hollywood's hottest stars. And she was more in demand after appearing with him in one of his movies. It was a career that had been hard earned, hard won, by the flesh on her back, her willingness to take off more clothes than some of her colleagues were at the time, and the fact that eventually she really did learn how to act. In her early thirties she disappeared for a while, and then reappeared with a bang in a hotly touted film everyone vowed would make her a star. It did not, but it etched her name in people's minds a little more firmly, and won her some better roles than the ones she'd had before.

Sabina Quarles had worked hard to get where she was, and where she was at forty-five was no pinnacle of success, but her name was known in Hollywood, and with a moment's thought she was known to moviegoers all over the country ... Oh, I know ... wasn't she in ... a moment's blank stare and then a smile, a leer, a look of desire on men's faces. She was the kind of woman men had fantasies about going to bed with, although with age she became surprisingly selective. Sabina Quarles had staying power and a body that just wouldn't quit no matter how old she was. She saw to that, to all of it, she kept up all her contacts, called her agent every day, worked hard when she got a part, and was surprisingly easy to work with.

Sabina Quarles was not a prima donna, she movie star ... more or less ... one of those second-string bright lights who sometimes outlive the really big names who come and go and die every day in the studios of Hollywood, replaced by younger, fresher faces. Sabina Quarles's face was still well worth looking into, and her name didn't mean money in the board office, but it meant happy men when they left the theater. She still had the same quality she'd had at twenty-one. Men wanted to reach out and touch her. And she liked that, whether she chose to let them or not. That wasn't the point. Her body was her vehicle to success, and it always had been.

With a glance at the alarm clock she kept on her terrace for exactly that purpose, she turned from her back to her stomach with a graceful flip, and with a familiar, reflexive flick

of her wrist toward a large jar of cream, she creamed her face again and her arms. They were as young and firm as the rest of her. There was not a millimeter of droop or sag to Sabina.

The phone rang just as she was about to get up anyway. It was almost time for two bottles of mineral water, before she went downstairs to the pool for a swim. She glanced instinctively at her watch, wondering who it was. She had already called her agent.

“Hello.” Everything about Sabina Quarles was as smooth as honey. Her voice was deep and soft, a sexy voice that made men want to hold themselves as they sat staring at her in a darkened theater.

“Sabina Quarles, please.” A twenty-two-year old secretarial voice chattered at the other end. The voice was unfamiliar to her.

“This is she.” She stood long and tall and beautiful in her living room, holding the phone, and she smoothed the blond mane off her shoulders with her other hand. No one would have guessed that the color was not entirely hers. Everything about Sabina was beautifully done and carefully thought out, and well maintained. She had spent a lifetime becoming who she was, and she had done it well. It was only too bad that she hadn’t gone further in her career. She wondered about it sometimes, but she hadn’t given up. She was well known, if not the hottest item in town. But she never felt it was too late. There was nothing old or tired or middle-aged or defeated about Sabina. She was still a woman on her way up, even if she had hit a plateau in the last year or so. The lack of important parts was not something that fazed her as long as the money kept coming in. She had done an ad featuring a sable coat only a month before. She was willing to do any number of things to keep her income flowing at a steady pace ... as long as it wasn’t TV. Television was something she would never stoop to.

“This is Mel Wechsler’s office,” the voice said, full of self-importance. Melvin Wechsler was the biggest producer in Hollywood, and whoever worked for him shared in that limelight, and at least his secretary sounded as though she believed that. Sabina smiled. She had been on with him two or three times a few years before. Mel Wechsler, aside from everything else, was an attractive man. And she wondered why he was calling.

“Yes?” There was laughter in the golden voice now, as she cast a glance around her living room. The apartment was modern, spare, on Linden Drive, in a slightly less than fabulous slice of Beverly Hills. But the address was good, and the apartment was furnished mostly in white, with two mirrored walls. She saw her naked image now, the breasts high and firm just as she had paid for them to be, the legs still long and beautiful. She liked looking at herself, there was nothing in her image to worry or frighten her, and if something appeared she didn’t like, she knew just how to have it taken care of.

“Mr. Wechsler was wondering if you could have lunch with him today. At the Bistrò Gardens.” She wondered why he hadn’t called himself, and why it was on such short notice. Maybe it was for a part in a film, although he made fewer movies these days. In the last ten years, Melvin Wechsler’s biggest hits had been on TV, although he did still make films. And she knew she didn’t do TV. Everyone knew that about Sabina. Television was crap, and she said so every chance she got. She was Sabina Quarles, she didn’t have to do TV. That was what she told her agent every time the subject came up, and it didn’t come up very often anymore. He had better luck talking her into ads like the one with the sable coat. That had some class, as far as she was concerned, television did not. But Mel Wechsler did. And she had nothing to do for lunch. It was ten forty-five. “One o’clock?” It never occurred to the girl

that Sabina would say no. No one ever did. Or damn few people anyway, and never actors.

“One fifteen.” Sabina looked amused. It was a game everyone played in Hollywood, and she was tougher than this girl and they both knew it.

“That will be fine. The Bistro Gardens.” She repeated as though Sabina would forget.

“Thank you. Tell him I’ll be there.”

You bet your ass you will, sweetheart, the girl thought to herself as she hung up, and buzzed through to Mr. Wechsler. The secretary at the other end took the message that Sabina Quarles would meet him at one fifteen and Wechsler looked pleased when she handed him the note.

At her end, Sabina looked pleased as well Mel Wechsler. Now that she thought about it, she realized that she hadn’t seen him in ages. He had even taken her to the Academy Awards ten years before. She always thought he’d been attracted to her more strenuously than he showed, but somehow they’d never gotten around to doing anything about it.

She walked into her dressing room, a mirrored cubicle that led into a tiny bathroom, and stepped into the shower, flipping the knobs with practiced hands. The tingle of hot water felt good on her well-oiled flesh, and she washed her hair at the same time, wondering what she should wear for lunch with Melvin Wechsler. It all depended what he had in mind, a job, or something more personal. She wasn’t quite sure which persona to be for him, hot star on the way up, or sultry woman of the world, and then she laughed. The two were one and the same. She was Sabina Quarles after all, long and lean and blond and beautiful. He could do a lot for her, in number of ways, and she knew it.

She ran the water ice cold over her flesh before she stepped out again, and her whole body tingled as she dried herself and then ran a comb through her long blond hair. If you didn’t look too carefully, she decided, she could have been twenty-five ... twenty-eight? ... twenty-nine ... she smiled. She didn’t give a damn. Fourteen or ninety-eight suited her just fine. She was having lunch with Melvin Wechsler.

Chapter 2

Sabina rode down in the elevator of her building with a look of ease. She pressed the button for the garage and the small metal cage shook as she headed down. Only now and then did she worry about getting accosted or mugged, and the only thing she would have worried about was someone hurting her body or her face. They could have had anything else she had. She rarely carried much cash, and didn't own any jewelry of great value. Whatever she had gotten over the years, she'd sold. She had other, more important uses for the money.

Her car was a small silver Mercedes 280 SL, a model no longer made and no longer in much demand. It was racy, but no longer new by any means, like many of Sabina's things. Her clothes suited her well, and she bought them for what they did for her. She wasn't interested in the latest fashions. She was wearing a white silk skirt slit high up her thigh, and a deep blue silk shirt that set off her tan and the color of her hair. The first four buttons were left open and the cleavage she revealed was enough to weaken any man and reduce him to near incoherence. Her hair had been dried, well brushed, and swept out behind her in a healthy mane. Her nails were perfectly manicured and lacquered bright red, just like her toenails. She was wearing high-heeled white sandals, and as the car roared into gear and out of the garage, she sped toward the Bistro Gardens.

On Wilshire, she made a sharp right, and then another almost instantly, passing between the tall iron gates of the driveway of the Beverly Wilshire, and she lodged herself between two buildings like a diamond between two breasts, sparkling in the sun, as she sat waiting for her car for the doorman to come and see her. He did so with a warm smile. He had known her for years. He liked keeping her car for her, she tipped well and she was one hell of a beautiful woman. Just watching her always made him feel good. He opened the door with his broad ivory smile, and she unraveled her legs from the tiny car. As usual, she had driven with the top down.

"Afternoon, Miss Quarles. You having lunch here today?"

She smiled the smile that made men forget every word she said. "Not too far from here. Can you keep the car for me?" It was a rhetorical question. He always was pleased to hear from Sabina Quarles. And he enjoyed the opportunity he got just to drink her in.

"Sure thing. See you in a while." He handed her the ticket stub and she walked away with a smile that made him feel sexy and important. He kept his eyes on her back until she turned right out of the driveway and he couldn't see her anymore. It was like watching fine ballet, and he watched her behind undulate in the white skirt. She would have been pleased had she seen the effect she'd had on him and four other men, who had simply stood admiring her, silently staring. Only one of them had recognized her, but that wasn't the point. Men just watched Sabina, no matter who she was, because of the way she looked, and the way she moved, and the enormous presence she had about her. Actually, it was a damn shame her career had been stalled since that last film. All she needed was the right role. And the right producer.

She waited for the light on Wilshire Boulevard, and crossed over to where the Brown Derby had been when she first came to Hollywood. She walked quickly past it, with her destination in mind. It was already ten to one and she knew she had to hurry. But the outfit she needed something more, and she knew precisely what. Almost everything Sabina did was based

careful calculation.

It was only a few steps from the corner to the yellow-and-white-striped canopy everyone knew on Rodeo Drive, the sacred emporium to all the most glamorous women in Hollywood. Sabina Giorgio. She swept into the door on the corner, and walked straight to the hatracks across from the bar, as the bartender eyed her appreciatively.

"Would you care for a drink, madame?" His accent was French, and he should have been jaded by the beauties he frequently saw. But Sabina was among the best of them. She smiled and declined the drink, as she tried on two hats and found precisely what she'd had in mind just as a salesgirl approached her. She eyed Sabina for a moment, knowing that she should know her name, but not quite sure who she was. She knew she'd seen her there before, but Sabina stayed away from Giorgio most of the time. It was expensive for her, and she only bought dresses there when something major came up, like the time she'd gone to the Academy Awards with Mel, but they didn't see her there more than once a year, if that. And then suddenly the salesgirl knew who she was. It was exhausting remembering who the women were. Not all of them were faces one recognized, but she knew Sabina now.

"May I help you, Miss Quarles?"

"I'll take this hat." Sabina looked pleased. It pulled low over her face, just low enough to give her an aura of unbearable mystery, and it enhanced her innate sexiness, but it was not so low as to obscure her remarkable emerald eyes. In fact, it allowed her to play with them. It was a large natural straw hat, with a big brim, but its shape suited her perfectly. It was just the accessory she'd had in mind, and that, along with the deep blue silk blouse, the high slit skirt, and the aura of perfume she wore would serve her well. It was now five minutes after one.

"May we show you something else? Some beautiful silks just came in, and some wonderful evening dresses for the fall." A mere fifty-dollar sale wasn't what they had in mind, but it was exactly what Sabina had planned. Mel would spend more than that on lunch. And who knew what he had in mind. Fifty bucks was not too much to invest in her career. She could afford that.

"That's all, thanks."

"Our Jacqueline de Ribes are in ..." Sabina smiled, easily able to repulse the woman, who would get nowhere with her.

"I just bought three at Saks last week." Three Jacqueline de Ribes would have represented half her income for the previous year, but the salesgirl looked undaunted by the blow.

"We have a few exclusive ones, just for us. In fact, Fred picked them out of her line in Paris himself." The illustrious Fred Hayman, impresario of Rodeo Drive's finest emporium, but even the mention of his sacred name didn't impress her. Sabina glanced at her watch. Or ten.

"I've got to go. I'll come back after lunch." Or next year. Or maybe next week, if he has a big part for me in his next movie. Her eyes had a look one couldn't argue with. They said give me the goddam hat or I'll walk out of here. But she wanted the hat for her lunch with Mel, needed it. And the girl knew when not to push.

"Of course, Miss Quarles. Shall I put some things aside for you?" Christ, they never give up, she thought to herself as the girl finally disappeared with the hat to a hidden cash register. It was one fifteen when she returned, and Sabina carefully put it on, set it at the

right angle, and shook back her hair. The effect was spectacular, and more than one head turned as she left the store and hurried from Rodeo to Beverly and then one more block to North Canon. It was exactly one twenty-one when she reached the Bistro Gardens, and sweet in, looking powerful and beautiful, and her eyes stayed just above the fascinated stares of the people turned to look at her. It was a habit people had, to make sure they weren't missing anyone ... Gregory Peck ... Elizabeth Taylor ... Meryl Streep ... look, Jane, over there ... the whispers were constant. But this time, people only stared at her, and then looked away again as the headwaiter walked swiftly toward her, threading his way through the tables outside. The riot of colored flowers added to the elegance of the decor, as the brightly striped umbrellas protected each lunch table from the midday sun.

"Madame?" It was a question and a statement all at once as he smiled at her.

"I'm meeting Melvin Wechsler for lunch," she explained, her eyes combing the headwaiter's face, as though testing the effect of the hat. She knew it was working well. It had added just the aura of mystery and panache she had wanted. She looked spectacular. And in the distance, from a quiet table, Melvin Wechsler was watching her. He watched the long legs striding gracefully, the firm breasts in the bright blue shirt, and the eyes beneath the hair. Christ, she had it. He knew she had. He'd remembered it. She was exactly what he wanted. Exactly. And he smiled to himself as suddenly she stood there, looking down at him, as sexy as she had always been, maybe even better-looking than she'd been before, or was he getting soft? Were old starlets finally getting to him? But this was no has-been beauty queen. Sabina Quarles was a woman to be reckoned with, a 9.9 on the Richter scale, he could feel his own guts give a tug as he looked at her and he was pleased. He stood up and held out a hand. His arm was long and powerful, his handshake firm, his eyes an icy blue, and his hair a carefully kempt white mane. Mel Wechsler was fifty-four, and he had the body of a much younger man, like many men in Hollywood. The lucky ones. He played tennis every day, or at least as often he could, and like Sabina, had a massage several times a week. But there had been no surgery. He just looked damn good for his age, and aside from the white hair, he could easily have shaved ten years off his age, if he wanted, which he didn't.

"Hello, Sabina, how've you been?"

"Sorry I'm late." She smiled, and her voice seemed deeper, sexier than he remembered. And he got a terrific view down her blouse as she sat down. "The traffic in this town is getting ridiculous." Particularly if you stop to buy a hat on the way, she smiled to herself. Mel was watching her, suddenly remembering the feline quality about Sabina, like a long, lean, beautiful cat stretching in the sun. "I hope you haven't been waiting for too long."

His blue eyes reached deep into hers. He was always watching, weighing, as though he had something very important in mind. He smiled a smile that had melted women's hearts for years, and if not their hearts, then their resistance. It was a half smile, a smile that touched his lips, even when his eyes were serious, as they often were, as they were now. "Some things in life are worth waiting for."

She laughed. She remembered now how much she always liked to talk to him and wondered why he hadn't called her in so long. Their paths crossed from time to time, but not often enough. "Thank you, Mel." He offered her a drink and she opted for a Bloody Mary after a moment's thought, and then she noticed he was drinking Perrier. He wasn't in the usual Hollywood mold. There was a great deal of substance to the man, and his success was

built on hard work and an absolute genius for their business. He had a magical touch about selecting people for his television shows and films. He rarely went wrong. It was one of the many things she admired about him. Melvin Wechsler was a pro. And he was also a damn attractive man. She knew he had had a long-standing affair with one of the big female stars of Hollywood a few years before. They had been inseparable, and he had put her in three of his films, but something had gone wrong along the line and they didn't see each other anymore. Like everyone else in town, Sabina had always wondered why they'd broken up, but he never mentioned her to anyone anymore, and Sabina liked that about him too. He was proud. He had guts. And style. He wasn't one to lick his wounds publicly. Even the major tragedy in his life was something he never discussed. Particularly that. Sabina only knew about it from what she had read, and what she had heard from friends. He had been married to Elizabeth Floyd years before, she had been one of the biggest stars of Hollywood in her day, some thirty years before. They'd met when he first came to town and was still crawling his way up at MGM. He had been their golden-haired boy then, or a few years after that anyway. And she had been "it," and she'd fallen for Mel. They'd gotten married a few years after that, and she had retired not long afterwards, ostensibly just temporarily for the birth of their first child. But their first child had turned out to be twins, identical baby girls, who looked just like Liz, and she had stayed home to take care of them.

They'd had a little boy two years afterwards, and once in a while you'd see them at somewhere. He kept them out of the press, even though it wasn't easy to do with Liz. She was so beautiful that photographers had trailed her for years. Sabina remembered her from when she'd first come to Hollywood. She'd already retired by then, but Christ had she been beautiful, a natural redhead with big blue eyes and creamy skin, a dazzling smile, and a figure that made men weep. She'd been involved in women's rights way back then, and she was involved in all sorts of philanthropies. They eventually had a house in Bel Air, and a ranch near Santa Barbara. He had been the perfect family man then, and it wasn't difficult to believe even now, no matter how many young actresses he'd taken out in the meantime. There was something fatherly about the man, and everyone said that working for him was like becoming part of a family. He cared about the people on his shows. Mel Wechsler took care of everyone, and he'd taken care of them. He'd been fabulous, and he'd adored Liz and his kids. They went to Europe together every year, and in 1969 he had taken them all to Israel. It had been an unforgettable trip, and he had been furious when he'd had to go back to L.A., for a network conference they'd called and insisted he attend. He had left Liz and the children in Tel Aviv, and promised to be back in four days. He was just going to fly home for the meeting and come back, but once there, everything got more complicated than he expected. There was a major problem with his biggest show, and he hadn't been as secure then. He had finally given up hope of getting back to Israel, and had urged Liz to come home, but she wanted to stop in Paris for a few days, as they had planned for the end of their trip. She didn't want to disappoint the kids. They boarded an El Al flight, and at the same time they did, Mel had been meeting with the network again, and he had had a strange feeling in his gut. He had looked at his watch, wondering if it was too late to call. He wanted her to take Air France, or another airline, and then he chided himself for foolishly worrying about them ... until he got the call ... the State Department called, before he heard it on the news. Seven Arab terrorists had boarded the plane and blown it to kingdom come, taking with them

all of the passengers and crew. Two hundred and nine people dead for their cause ... and Li and Barbie and Deborah and Jason ... he had been like a zombie for weeks, unable to believe that it had actually happened to him ... that if he hadn't left them ... hadn't come back ... he had only called ... The if onlys of that day haunted him for years. It was a nightmare from which he thought he would never awaken, and all he wanted was to have died with them to. He had nightmares about the flight, and he hadn't flown any where for almost ten years. But there was no recapturing the past. There was no turning back. Barbie and Deb had been twelve, Jason ten. It was the kind of thing you read in the news. Only it had happened to him. His whole family wiped out by a terrorist bomb, and in many ways his life had never been the same again. He had thrown himself into his work, and the actors who worked for him were like children to him. But they weren't his own ... and there was never another Li. Never. There was never anyone like her again, and he didn't want there to be. He lived with their memories, even now. There were other women of course, although it had taken him a long time to come to that. But he had finally, and there had been only one serious affair. But he had never married again, and knew he never would. He had no reason to. He had had it all, and had lost everything. It made him philosophical about life, and wise about the trivia of Hollywood. He couldn't take it to heart, yet he took it seriously. It was a business he cared about, a game he played well. But there was a door to his heart that would never open again. It had slammed shut when that call from Paris came. But he wasn't blind to the beauty that surrounded him day after day, and he enjoyed the company of the women he took out. But there was always that moment of truth, when he went home at night, or when they left him the next day ... that moment when he was alone the next day ... that moment when he was alone with the memories. It was why he worked so hard. It was an easy escape, and one that worked well for him. But a piece of his heart had died with his wife and children.

"What have you been up to these days?" He smiled slowly at Sabina over their drinks. Sabina remembered the tragedy in his life. But it had been a long time ago, and he didn't wear it on his sleeve. He never talked about his wife, or his children, except to very, very close friends. Everyone had been devastated by their deaths. There had been a memorial service at the Stephen Weise Temple on Mulholland that had been attended by literal thousands. There had been no funeral, there had been no bodies for the airline to return. There had been nothing. Only air. And heartbreak. And broken memories. And regrets. "I hear you did a very nice film last year." He had heard more than that. That it had done poorly, dismally at the box office, despite decent reviews. But he knew what Sabina was capable of. He had seen her in enough films. He knew exactly who and what she was. And he wanted her. Far more than she knew. She needn't even have bought the hat, but he enjoyed the effect as he sat watching her with a sparkle in his eye. It was work that brought him to life now, work that he loved, and for which he lived. He had lived with the tragedy of his loss for long enough, he had put it aside, he had made peace with it. It no longer ruled his life. But work did, and he liked it like that, and he was thinking of that now. *Manhattan*, the property was called, and Sabina was perfect for it.

Sabina laughed at the kindness of his remark. Only Mel would have put it that way. He was always a gentleman. He could afford to be. He was at the top. The pinnacle. He owned the world in which he moved, and the network kissed his feet for the sure successes he produced. He made a fortune for everyone, himself, the networks, the sponsors, the actors involved.

most of the time. And he was generous in the way he dealt with all of them. He didn't need to screw anyone. It made him desirable in every way, and Sabina wasn't only thinking of her career as she looked at him over her glass with a smile that showed the generosity of her lips.

"The film was a bomb, A nice bomb, but a bomb nevertheless."

"You got good reviews." He was biding his time.

"That's about it. Good reviews don't pay the rent." Or her other expenses.

"Sometimes they do."

"Tell that to the boys who make the films. They want big box office, no matter what it takes. And screw the reviews." They both knew it was true, to an extent.

"That's the nice thing about TV." There was no change of expression in his face although he knew the minefield he trod as one of Sabina's eyebrows shot up. "The ratings mean a lot more than the reviews do in movies." In fact, they meant everything.

She looked annoyed. "The ratings don't reflect anything real and you know it as well as I do, Mel. They reflect a lot of little black boxes attached to sets in the homes of middle-class boobs. And all of you drool or tremble for fear of what the ratings will do. Give me a theatrical film any day."

"Still feel the same way about TV?" He looked mild and relaxed as he ordered another Perrier.

"It's a world of crap." Beneath the hat, her eyes blazed. She had always hated TV. And she had told him as much every time they met.

He smiled. "But profitable crap."

"Maybe. But I thank God I've never prostituted myself for that." She looked pleased with herself, and he felt mildly dismayed. But she hadn't read the script of *Manhattan* yet. He knew if he could get her to, it would change everything.

"There are worse things, Sabina. And you know as well as I do that a lot of the movies being made aren't worth the film they're printed on. And they're no more satisfying than doing a cameo appearance on a sitcom."

Sabina looked outraged. "That's ridiculous, Mel. You can't compare movies and TV."

"I can, and probably better than anyone, since I'm involved in both. They're both satisfying and they're very different. But there's merit in both. There's nothing better than a really fine long running TV series. It gives the actors more satisfaction than Gable probably got doing *Gone With the Wind*." They both smiled at the comparison. "Now there's a movie for you, Sabina." She laughed at the thought. She took herself seriously most of the time, but Mel made it easier to laugh at herself. He had a knack for loosening people up, making them comfortable, making them laugh ... making them important ... and successful. And he had thought seriously about Sabina before their lunch. She had been around Hollywood for years, twenty years at least, maybe even twenty-five. And having invested that many years in the business, she deserved more recognition than she was getting. And that was something Mel Wechsler, or at least *Manhattan*, could give her.

"You ask any actor in the business, Sabina, who's done a long-run show on TV and ask them how they felt about it. You get a chance week after week to come across with some kind of substance, to hone your character, your performance. Hell, half the actors involved in those shows end up either writing or directing them they get so involved in the guts of the show."

“They probably do it out of self-preservation.” She eyed him from under the brim of her hat and he laughed.

“I don’t suppose anyone’s ever accused you of being stubborn, have they?”

“Only my agent.”

“No ex-husbands?” He had forgotten that about her, but as she shook her head, he remembered. She was a solitary soul, but so were a number of women of her ilk and era in the business. They were too involved in themselves and their work and their appearance to have much time to waste on a husband. And if they did, it was seldom for more than a season. It was something that had bothered him about her when they met, the fact that she had never been married. He always seemed to have a preference for women who had had long-term involvements, and they usually seemed to have children. It filled a need in him that he was no longer able to fill himself. He didn’t want another family, he couldn’t have lived through another loss like the first one, but he loved being around other people’s kids.

“I’ve never found a man I was tempted to stay with.” She was honest with him. Sabina made no bones about who she was, where she was going, or what she wanted. And the truth was that she was content with her life-style.

“That doesn’t speak too well for the men you’ve known.” Their eyes met and held, and they ordered lunch when the waiter returned, as the conversation turned to easier subjects. He had no plans for a summer holiday. He had long since sold the ranch near Santa Barbara and when he felt a need for a few days’ rest, he rented a house in Malibu on the beach and he spent his time reading scripts and relaxing. But he had no time for that now. He had been in meetings with the network for weeks, and now he had some serious work to do. He was casting *Manhattan*, it was going to be the most important show of its kind, a series like no other before it. “And what about you, Sabina, no trips in store?”

She shook her head and looked vague as she toyed absently with her salad, and then looked up at him from beneath the hat again. For an instant, she looked vulnerable in a way he had never seen her look before. It was a look that made him want to shout, “Freeze frame,” to stop the action and keep her looking that way forever. But it was gone the moment she smiled and shrugged one of her exquisite shoulders. “I have to go to San Francisco for a few days. Other than that, I’ll be here all summer.” He also knew she wasn’t working, and hadn’t for all intents and purposes since the film the year before. He wondered if she ever got desperate about the fact that she hadn’t made it bigger than she had. Or maybe she was content as she was. That was difficult to believe about a woman like Sabina. And he was hoping that she felt at least a little urgency now about her career.

He waited until their coffee came, and then gently broached the subject. “I was hoping you’d read a script for me.”

Her eyes lit up slowly, with a warm glow. She had hoped it would be something like that. Either that or that he wanted to take her out again. She would have been open to the possibility as well. In fact, she would have liked it, and wasn’t quite sure which she would have preferred, or if she could still have both, Mel, and a part in his next movie. And his movies were rare now, which made it even more flattering that he had thought of her. Either way, she would have been happy, although she needed the work, and wondered if he knew it. Hollywood was a small town, and what people didn’t know, they suspected, or imagined, or whispered. It was a town filled with gossip and rumors and badly kept secrets. “ãd lik

that very much. I take it you're putting together a new movie." "Not exactly." There was no point in lying to her. He had the script in a briefcase under his seat, just waiting to hand it to her after lunch, if she agreed to read it. "I'm putting together a new series."

Her green eyes snapped shut like twin doors to the Emerald City. "That leaves me out of it then."

"I was hoping you'd at least read it, Sabina. There's no harm in that." His voice was powerful yet gentle, and there was something very seductive about him. She could feel the pull of the man, just sitting next to him at the table, over their espresso.

"You're a very persuasive man, but I'd be wasting your time and mine." She attempted to sound polite, but it was obvious that she wasn't interested in his series.

"I can spare the time." He wanted to say, "And so can you," but he didn't. "How long does it take to read a script? And if it's as good as I believe it is, I don't think you'll regret it."

She smiled and shook her head with a look of amusement. "For you, Mel, I'd do almost anything, but I won't do that. I know what you want. You want me to fall in love with it, but I won't."

"And if you did?"

"I still wouldn't do it."

"Why not?"

"Maybe it'll sound crazy to you, but principles, I guess. I just won't do TV."

"You're not acting in your own best interest, Sabina. I wouldn't have asked you here if I didn't know this part is right for you. The character is so much like you that it could have been molded right on your body. I see you and I see Eloise Martin. The series will be called *Manhattan*, and this isn't just any series. It's glamorous, and important, and expensive. It's going to affect the American television industry like no other show before it, and I know that you're right for the part. I could have called your agent instead of inviting you here today. I could have waved dollar signs and contracts at him, but I didn't want to do that. I want you to fall in love with this woman, to see what I do, how much of you she is ... and then we can talk about the rest. I understand your integrity, believe me, I do ... but I see something more. I see the long range, and what this could do for you. For your career. A year from now, you could be the biggest name in this country. It's hard to conceive of it now, but I know that this show has that kind of impact. I haven't been wrong too often in recent years, touch wood"—he knocked on the table and smiled at her—"and I know I'm not this time. I really wish you'd read it. This could put you at the top of your career, and Sabina, you deserve it." He looked as though he meant every word he said, but Sabina still didn't look convinced when he stopped speaking.

"And if it's a flop?"

"It won't be, but if it is, it's no worse than your last movie. So what? You're a survivor, you go on. We all do. But it's not going to be a flop, Sabina. It's going to be a success that will kick the breath out of everyone in this country. It's dramatic and it's tough and it's brilliant. It's not mealymouthed or funny, there's nothing halfway about it. And once a week, six million people could be watching you, Sabina. Watching you and eating it up. Your life will never be the same again. Ever. I'm absolutely certain of it as I sit here." He sounded so convincing, so sure, that for a minute she was tempted to read it, just for the hell of it, just to see what he was cooking up that was supposedly so different. Hell, she had nothing else to do

except lie on her terrace and go down to the pool and wait for the phone to ring. What harm was there in reading it after all? And as she thought about it, she suddenly smiled, and laughed out loud as she looked at Mel Wechsler.

“No wonder you’re so damn successful, Mel, you’re one hell of a salesman.”

“I don’t even have to be on this, Sabina. You’ll see what I mean when you read it. Manhattan is you, from start to finish.”

“Are you working on a pilot?”

This time he laughed. “You don’t flatter me very much, my dear. Even the network isn’t that cruel. No, I’m not working on a pilot.” He was such a sure thing that no one expected Mel Wechsler to do a pilot. “We’ll begin with a three-hour special on opening night, and go on with a sixty-minute show once a week after that. We want to open with big bang and that’ll be it.”

“I might read it. But I don’t want to mislead you, Mel. Nothing has changed about the way I feel about TV.”

“All right.” He reached under his seat and the script for the three-hour special appeared. “That’s fair enough. I would just be grateful to you if you would read it.” Grateful. It was a brilliant choice of words, and so like Mel. Grateful. He was grateful, and she was damn lucky. And they both knew it. “I’ll be very interested to know what you think about it. God knows we’ve both read enough scripts to have a nose for them by now.” He was including her in his expertise and it was no accident. She was suddenly very aware of how skillful he was. In truth, the man was a genius, with people, and in his field. And she had enjoyed her lunch with him. Enough so to hope he’d call her again. At least if she read the script, she’d have an excuse to see him. “I also shouldn’t tempt you, and you probably don’t give a damn, but we’re having the costumes done by François Brae. In Paris. Whoever plays Eloise Martin will spend a month in Paris for fittings at his couture house there, and then she gets to keep the wardrobe.” In spite of herself, Sabina could feel a glint in her eyes. It was a hell of an appealing offer, not to mention the money he would probably pay. It would solve her problems for a long time to come. Maybe even forever.

“Don’t make it too tempting, Mel.” She laughed her sultry laugh, and he felt a strange little thrill, both at the victory he hoped to achieve in wooing her for the part, and at just being with her. She was a very exciting woman, and that was why he wanted her for his show. He had always sensed that about her, and he felt it again now. But for a moment, he had to remind himself that he wanted her for his show, and not just for his own entertainment.

“I can make it a lot more tempting than that, Sabina. But I want you to read the script first.” He was teasing her now, but that was a game she was good at.

“And here I thought you invited me to lunch because you suddenly discovered I was the love of your life.” She was teasing, but her eyes held a caress that almost choked him, and for a long moment he didn’t answer.

“I enjoyed seeing you again, Sabina.” His voice was quiet, and she knew he meant it. And she enjoyed it too, whether she liked his script or not, and whether or not she ever decided to change her iron-clad position about doing television. For the moment, it didn’t really matter. “Give me a call when you’ve read it.”

“I will.”

He jotted his home number down on a card for her, and signaled to the waiter for the check and she was sorry to see their lunch come to an end. She liked being with him.

“By the way, who else have you got for this so far?”

“No one.” He looked her straight in the eye. “I’m starting with the most important part. I have to fill this one before I deal with the others. But I have some people in mind. I’m thinking of Zack Taylor for the male lead, and I think he might like it. He’s free now to take the role. He’s in Greece at the moment, but I’ll be talking to him in a few weeks when he gets back.”

Sabina did not look displeased. Zack Taylor was one of the best-looking actors in the country, and his credentials were good. He had done everything from theatrical films to television to legitimate theater. He had even had a major success on Broadway a few years before. He would certainly be a strong counterpart for whoever took the role, and that appealed to Sabina. “You don’t go halfway, do you, Mel?”

“Never.” He smiled and stood up and guided her gently through the tables until they were outside on North Canon Drive. There was a children’s shop next door, but he never looked at things like that now. He had no need to. He concentrated his gaze on Sabina. “I enjoyed seeing you again ... not just for this....” She had the script in her hand, and he was carrying his now empty briefcase. His car was waiting at the curb, a Mercedes 600, driven by a man who had worked for him for years. The 600 was expensive and important and discreet, like Mel himself. And it had style. Just as he did. “Call me, Sabina.”

Her green eyes held his for a long moment and she smiled, completely forgetting the script in her hand. For a moment, she had completely forgotten *Manhattan* and all she could see was Mel, and how appealing he was. He was someone she would have liked to know better. “I’ll call....” and then her hand tightened on the script and he offered her a ride, but she declined with a smile that made him want her. There was a quality about her that drove him wild, a sensuality mixed with cool reserve that made you want to tear her clothes off, just to see what the rest of her looked like. He suspected that it looked damn good. And he wouldn’t have cared if it didn’t.

She waved as she headed back toward Rodeo Drive, and he watched her as his car pulled away from the curb and too quickly turned a corner, obscuring her from his sight. But the thought of her haunted him all afternoon, and he was no longer sure what he wanted from her. If he wanted her for his new show, or for himself, or both. All he knew was that he couldn’t stop thinking about her.

Chapter 3

Warwick had gone to three auditions on the same afternoon that Sabina was strolling back toward the Beverly Wilshire to retrieve her car and go home to swim in her pool before reading Mel's script for *Manhattan*. And unlike Sabina and Mel, he was not in a pleasant mood, nor was he feeling sensual, or as though life had something exciting in store for him, be it a part or an affair. He had been turned down at all three auditions and the last thing on his mind was getting laid. All he wanted was to get work. Anything. All he had left was eight hundred dollars in the envelope in his desk drawer, a dog that ate too damn much, and a wife who hadn't worked in almost a year, although she'd had a good role in a sitcom when they got married the year before. But she'd gotten canned six weeks later, and she hadn't even tried to get work since then. Nothing. She just sat on her ass Secrets day and night, and got stoned all the time. They hadn't made love in almost two months and she was so thin now she looked anorexic. She had started with diet pills years before, gone to uppers and speedballs and then downers and heroin, and finally cocaine, and these days she was into speedballs, a mixture of heroin and cocaine that kept her high but gave her the illusion of making sense, but the truth was she didn't. And she was so badly hooked, he wondered if she'd ever be free of it.

He loosened his tie, and prepared to wait an hour for the bus, if he was lucky. They'd had to sell their car, a battered Volkswagen, and if he didn't pay the rent soon, they'd be out on their asses, which might be a relief in some ways. Maybe it would finally shake some sense into Sandy. She was twenty-five years old, and her life was going down the tubes in a hurry. And she'd been so damn cute when they met, all long black hair and big brown eyes, like a puppy. She was like a little girl. He still felt a gentle glow of tenderness when he thought of meeting her at a Hollywood party for the first time. She had looked like a lost child, and his heart melted the moment he saw her. She had seemed so helpless, and so unable to cope with the wolves who abounded in the business. The trouble was, she was still unable to cope with them, and in order to deal with the pressure, she got more and more addicted, and she expected Bill to solve all their problems. And now she expected him to make enough money to pay for her habit.

"What do you expect me to do? Street mime, for chrissake?" He remembered the fight they'd had only that morning, and he was sick of fighting with her. They'd been fighting for so long, and he was beginning to wonder if his parents were right. According to them, acting was for children, morons, and totally unstable people. Sandy was certainly no tower of strength, and he was beginning to wonder if he didn't have what it took. His demo reel, which showed pieces of commercials and television shows he'd acted in, had made the rounds of every studio, producer, director, and ad agency in Hollywood, and he wasn't getting anything from it. He had even shouted at his agent that afternoon. He had wanted to put his name on *The Dating Game*, and Bill exploded at the suggestion.

"God damn it, I'm married."

"So who knows that? You two have kept it such a big secret, no one knows. And besides, you think anyone cares?"

"I do." But the question was, did Sandy? Did she care enough to clean up? He w

beginning to wonder. She didn't seem to give a damn about anything, except her connection. All her money from the show had been blown, and she spent every dime of her unemployment on coke. It was a great life. And Harry was right, no one knew they were married because Sandy's agent thought it would ruin her ingenue image. So would the track on her arm, if anyone saw them.

As usual, the bus took forty minutes to arrive, and halfway home, Bill decided he couldn't face her. Couldn't face the unmade bed, the empty icebox, and last night's half-eaten enchiladas still sitting on the kitchen table. He hated going home these days. Even his dog looked unhappy. And he felt so fucking guilty. That was the worst of it. He kept thinking that if he made it big, he could put her in some fancy hospital and get her to clean up. But for the moment that was out of the question. He was thirty-two years old, married to a drug addict, and he was sick and tired of being an unemployed actor. He had been to every audition he'd ever heard of for months, and lately no one wanted him. He'd done two commercials earlier this year, big ones, thank God, but even that money had finally run out. There would be residuals eventually, but not for a long time, and in the meantime, he was going to have to start borrowing money from his agent. He had done it before, and Harry was always a good sport about it, crazy fool that he was. He was the one who always told Bill he'd make it big one day. But when? Christ, he needed the work now. Desperately. It was a word that was real, beginning to apply to him. Bill Warwick was desperate.

He sat staring at the passing traffic as he rode along on the bus, and a mile before he reached the house in the Hollywood Hills, he decided to get off and stop in at Mike's for a quick beer. It was a place where he'd hung out for the last fourteen years, ever since he'd come to UCLA from New York, with all his bright hopes. He knew he was going to make it big then, he only wished he were as sure now. The only one who still believed that now was Harry, his agent.

He blinked for a minute as he walked into Mike's Bar. It was the same as it had always been, dingy, dark, reeking of beer, and filled with unemployed actors. Even the bartenders were actors he knew, including Adam, who was on duty now. He had gone to school with him, and they'd been casual friends for years. He knew Sandy too, although only slightly. Four good-looking young men in cutoffs and jeans were playing pool, and there were clusters of them at various tables, discussing parts they'd either gotten or auditioned for, or had heard about. There were a few women here and there, but the crowd was mostly men, and Bill sat down at the bar and ordered a beer from Adam and told him about his bad luck trying out for three executive roles in commercials. As they talked, Bill stretched his long legs in the khaki suit he was wearing. He felt as though he had walked miles, and for nothing.

"One of them thought I looked too young, the other too sexy, and the third one wanted to know if I was queer. Terrific. I'm beginning to look like a baby-faced sex-crazed faggot."

Adam laughed. He had just gotten a small part appearing once on a series, and they had promised to have him back soon. But he had never been as ambitious as Bill Warwick. Most of the time, he was perfectly happy tending bar at Mike's, but he was amply familiar with the problems of the business.

"And my agent wanted to put me on *The Dating Game*. I'm beginning to think my old man was right and I should have gone into insurance." He rolled his eyes at the thought, and Adam set the beer down in front of him.

“Hang in there, kid. The biggest part of your life may be just around the corner.”

“You know”—Bill took a sip of his beer and looked sobered by his own thoughts—“ã really beginning to wonder. It’s kind of like playing the slot machines, maybe some people never win. Maybe ãm one of them. I just don’t feel like there’s anything out there for me anymore.”

“Bullshit.” The bartender looked good-humored, but Bill looked exhausted and depressed and the heat and rejections had obviously gotten to him. He still remembered summers on Cape Cod when he was a kid, and he had never quite adjusted to the heat of the California summers. Sandy had been born in L.A. and she loved it. Not that she felt the heat anymore. She didn’t feel anything. “How’s Sandy?” It was as though Adam had read his mind. But he could see instantly that the subject was not going to cheer Bill. He looked even more depressed as he shrugged.

“Okay ... the same, I guess ...” He looked bleakly up at Adam then, and their eyes met, “think we’ve about had it.”

“What about methadone?” He also knew she’d been into heroin for a while. He’d seen enough of it to recognize the signs and she’d offered him some cocaine the last time she’d been in with Bill. And Bill had been so annoyed, they left shortly after. Adam was well aware of how much her addiction upset Bill, and he felt sorry for him. He knew what it was like himself. He’d been through it with a girl from Newport Beach several years before, and he’d finally given up on her after a year. Her parents had had her in every sanitarium and hospital in the state, and she’d finally OD’d in a sleazy hotel in Venice.

“I don’t know. ãve suggested everything. She doesn’t want to hear it. The only thing she’s interested in is protecting her addiction. She doesn’t even go to auditions anymore. There’s no point anyway. She nodded out at the last one. Made a great impression on the director.”

“She’s going to get a rep for that if she doesn’t watch out.” Even Adam looked sobered. He knew she already did. And Bill sat in silence, as Adam went to serve someone else. Eventually, Bill ordered a hamburger, and it was eight o’clock before he got on the bus again, and twenty minutes later he was home. He walked in, expecting to find Sandy asleep, nodding out after a fix, or high as a kite after getting some cocaine from her connection. But instead, the house was empty, the usual disorder was everywhere, the bed unmade, the dishes unwashed, their clothes intertwined on the floor and Bill’s Saint Bernard exploding with glee as Bill came through the door and he saw him.

“Hi, old guy ... where’s Sandy?” The dog wagged his tail, pushing against Bill’s legs with his enormous head, hungry for affection. There was no note to explain her whereabouts, but it was easy to figure out that she’d either gone out with her friends, or alone in search of drugs, or to meet up with her connection. It was the only full-time job she had these days and it was more time-consuming than her acting. His eyes met a photograph that had been taken of them the year before, just before he’d married her, and it startled him suddenly to see the difference in her. She had lost at least fifteen pounds, if not twenty, and there was a glazed look in her eyes almost all the time now. Her hair was always unkempt and she didn’t seem to care what she wore. Either she was high, or she was out looking for drugs, too sick to care what she looked like. It was pathetic, and he felt a familiar surge of anger just thinking of her. He began cleaning up the mess himself, as the dog followed him with wagging tail, hoping for something to eat, but there wasn’t even dog food in the house, Bill realized as he

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