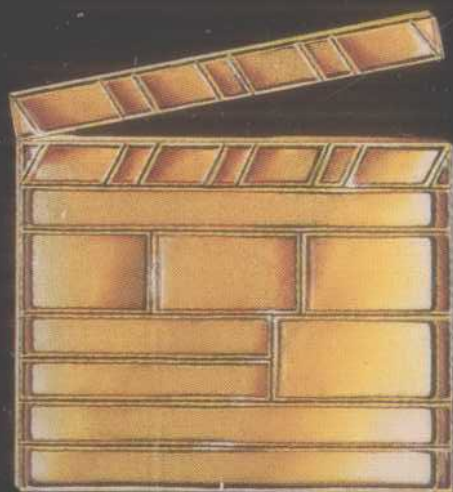


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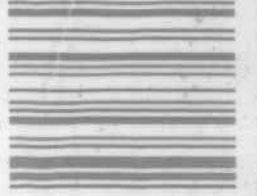
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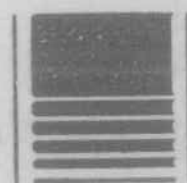
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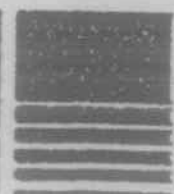
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To the best and dearest
gift of my life,
to John,
with all my heart and love.

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Chapter 1

The sun reverberated off the buildings with the brilliance of a handful of diamonds cast against an iceberg, the shimmering white was blinding, as Sabina lay naked on a deck chair in 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 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

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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

Secrets

had endowed her well. In fact, he had been more than generous with Mary Elizabeth Ralston, born in Huntington, 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 was 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 this 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

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life was even shorter than Mary Elizabeth Ralston's. There were a few more similar parts, a job in a strip 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 the 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 remem-