

PRIVATE SCANDALS

NORA ROBERTS

G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York

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Publishers Since 1838
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Also by Nora Roberts

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To Pop

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 "Heart-break 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.

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.