

ELLORA'S CAVE

*Blush*

MARIANNE  
STEPHENS

*Second Sight*  
DATING

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Second Sight Dating

ISBN 9781419909245

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Second Sight Dating Copyright© 2007 Marianne Stephens

Edited by Helen Woodall.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication May 2007

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing Inc., 1056 Home Avenue, Akron, OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

# ***SECOND SIGHT DATING***

**Marianne Stephens**

## Acknowledgement

Loving thanks to Steve (my computer wizard husband), my family, and wonderful friends in MRW, MARA, and my critique group for their support.

## Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Boy Scouts: Boy Scouts of America Corporation

Cheesecake Factory: Great World Foods, Inc

Honda Accord: Honda Motor Co., Ltd

Macaroni Grill: Brinker International

Mazda: Mazda Motor Corporation

Ouija: Hasbro, Inc.

Sprint: Sprint Communications Company L.P. US Telecom, Inc.

Zio's: Mazzio's Corporation

## **Chapter One**

"I want him, not that other one you just showed me. Look at this guy," Miss "K" rattled on with a pout, a blue-polished fingernail pointing at a picture of Mr. "Thirty-six". "He's a hunk."

Thirty-year-old Serena Xavier, owner of Second Sight Dating, listened to her female client's whiny demand while silently cursing her clumsy trip over the slippery office rug. The unexpected dilemma and now cog-in-the-wheel of her usually perfect operating system, irked her.

Miss "K" had sniffed indifferently at the bio and picture of Mr. "Twenty-five", the first-choice match presented to her. With hesitation, Serena offered to try a second number.

She'd grabbed a few folders from her desk to lessen the clutter and, in a hurry to reach her filing cabinet in the backroom, tripped over the rug, sending three folders scattering on the floor. A picture of Mr. "Thirty-six" had slid from its folder and Miss "K" riveted her attention on it like a lioness spotting her prey and eager to pounce.

"He's not the one for you." As Serena took her seat again, she did her best to present a sincere, efficient and credible explanation to match her words. "I don't just consider looks. I analyze everything. You came here because you wanted someone right for you. Yes, he's handsome, but there's more to it than that."

"What more do I need? For Christ's sake, he's wearing a lab coat and stethoscope so I'm guessing he's a doctor." Miss "K" raised her head up a notch as if ready to make an important point. "I'm in the medical field. How much more compatible do we need to be?"

As far as Serena was concerned, the twenty-nine-year-old bleached blonde client promptly massacred any semblance of credibility she'd hoped to display by twirling a loose curl and cracking her gum...again...for about the fiftieth time since entering the office. With one leg crossed over the other, she repeatedly tapped her foot. All three actions—the curl twirling, gum cracking and foot tapping—ceased every time Miss "K" spoke. Apparently the woman couldn't talk and do those at the same time.

A quick glance at Bachelor Thirty-six's application indicated that the ditsy, gorgeous, leggy, Miss "K" possessed some qualities topping his "What I'm Looking For" list. Unfortunately, not much else, including their backgrounds, came close to signaling a match. His degree from Harvard and hers from Wayne's Quick & Easy Business School, pushed them further apart from being compatible. "Miss Sight", Serena's name at the business, realized the two singles wouldn't work.

That's what her job was all about—pairing couples she knew would match based on her numbering male clients and lettering female clients system. Love connections

took more than resorting to resumes and lists of wants and desires, in spite of what most people thought. They needed Serena's expertise to guarantee compatibility. They needed assurances of matching innermost thoughts and finding a true soul mate. In short, they needed her second sight—the one she couldn't explain—that told her if two people were meant for each other.

Mentally counting to twenty since ten wouldn't come close to what was needed, Serena geared herself for battle, although fully prepared to eventually back off. The few times a client didn't opt for Serena's first choice, she'd offer a refund or another less compatible match, minus a guarantee of success.

"Miss 'K', I haven't forgotten that you're a clerk in a medical center's administration department. But you came here knowing I do this by intuition, a gut feeling I get. Your friend, Miss 'Z', followed my advice and that's why you're here, right?"

The woman pouted again. Serena could almost imagine hearing the sounds of wheels turning in her client's head if she didn't already know Miss "K" was a few checkers short of a game.

"So, you helped Jennifer. But I really think you're wrong about him." She pointed again to the glossy photo and licked her lips. "Match me with him. He's drop-dead gorgeous. We'll make a great-looking couple. Your radar must not be working today."

Resigned to backing off, Serena let out a deep exhale as she rummaged through her papers and handed one to Miss "K". "I strive to please my customers. If you'll just sign here releasing me from my guarantee, I'll get a meeting arranged for the two of you. Assuming, of course, he agrees to meet with you." She offered a pasted-on smile.

Her client frowned, but grabbed the paper and signed. "Fine. He will, once he reads my résumé and sees my picture. So, do I wait for you to call?"

Serena nodded and got up, leaving the woman no choice but to follow suit. "As stated in the contract, I'll arrange your first meeting somewhere surrounded by other people so neither party feels obligated to continue the evening if things don't work out. Nothing fancy, just a quick dinner somewhere nearby for both of you. You pay your own way and then it's up to you two how the evening ends."

"Great. He'll wanna meet me. I'm not worried."

That said, the soon-to-be-disappointed client popped her gum one last time as she sashayed out the office door. Serena had no option but to pick up the phone and place a call asking Mr. "Thirty-six" to come in for another interview.

He'd already rejected the first bachelorette she'd offered and now would get her honest opinion of matching him with "Miss "K". If he ignored her warning, he'd sign a guarantee waiver and the two would meet. Their disastrous relationship would begin and soon end with an equally miserable breakup.

That, she could guarantee.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm here to see Miss Sight."

A sexy-looking man, framed by her doorway, jolted Serena's heart. Beating an overtime rhythm, she chalked it up to the fact that he'd startled her. It had nothing to do with his being the proverbial tall, dark and handsome.

"I'm, uh, Miss Sight. Welcome to Second Sight Dating. May I help you?"

"I got this gift certificate from some friends." He gave a quick cursory glance around the office. "How legitimate is this business?"

He sounded skeptical, ill-at-ease and completed that appearance with the defensive stance of a definite nonbeliever. Too bad he'd be someone she'd find difficult to deal with. The man could be appealing if he'd only stop frowning.

"I've been in business for two years. Check out the licenses on the wall to the left of the door before you decide if you want to go any further. If you have any questions, I'll be happy to answer them." Unwilling to make any further comment, Serena purposely lowered her gaze to her desk, feigning interest in whatever she'd been reading.

He coughed, catching her attention. "That won't be necessary. What do I do first?"

*Smiling would be a good start. I know there's a dimple there somewhere.*

"Why don't you have a seat? You can fill out the application form. I tell everyone up front that I check places of employment and look for police records. Do you object to my doing that?"

"No. Why? Do you sense I do?"

Man, this one would be a challenge. Strange. Other than her pulse slightly racing, Serena didn't get any initial "vibes" from him at all. Only once before had her "sight" not worked. Her disastrous attempt at finding a match for herself had turned out to be a doozy of a failure.

The well-built hunk left the doorway and strolled in. The closer he got to her, the more the light scent of his aftershave mingled in the air. Serena recognized the fragrance as one she adored and tried to halt breathing in too deeply. He lowered himself into the seat opposite her, giving her ample time to survey his features. Wavy, jet-black hair, the type women loved to run their fingers through, topped his head. His grayish, steel-colored eyes commanded her attention as they became darker the longer she stared at him.

He filled out his form-fitted shirt to a "T", muscles bulging and hinting at a well-toned body, maybe thanks to exercise. Serena let her mind wander for a few seconds, contemplating how he'd look in gym clothes doing push-ups, toe touches, sit-ups...

"Do I pass inspection?"

Heat careened up her neck to her face. What the hell was wrong with her, ogling a client?

"Oh, sorry. I was trying to get a 'feel' for you. That's what I do here. Let my intuition, what I call my 'second sight', take over. It tells me about a person."

The man's mouth turned up slightly in each corner. He tilted his head, as if angling for a better view of her. Yep, there was a dimple, just on the left side. The one she knew would be there.

"So, explain exactly how this works. Do you gaze into a crystal ball and conjure up dead spirits?"

Ice water flooded her veins. It figured. In front of her sat the sexiest man she'd met in a long time. His strapping physique and wonderful aftershave had clouded her insight. A momentary loss of mind control had allowed her brain to maneuver a slight detour from sanity, but that was over.

Annoyed with his remark, she stiffened her spine and readied herself to dismiss him and his irritating attempt at humor. To hell if he was handsome. She wasn't in the mood or business to tolerate skeptics.

"I'm sorry you came all this way in the hopes of finding entertainment. You're no comedian and I don't perform, either. I'll be happy to refund the amount of your certificate."

Serena rose quickly from her seat and stepped around her desk. She tripped over her blasted rug again as she approached the man in his chair, losing her balance. She reached out to steady herself but faster than she could imagine, he jumped up and caught her before she hit the floor.

His arms surrounded her in an effort to break her fall. Heat cascaded through her body the closer he tugged her to him. Letters popped into her head, over and over again.

That's the pattern her "sight" followed. When she touched a man, she'd see a letter for a woman listed in her files. When she touched a woman, she'd see a number for a man who'd be a good match. But never before had three letters or numbers materialized for anyone. It had always been one letter or number per person.

This stud, and he definitely fit the category, filled her with conflicting thoughts of warmth, security and irritation as he squeezed her tighter into his embrace. Her heart beat in double-time rhythm.

Serena fought to regain control of her senses. He was a client. She ran a business. Professionalism and composure needed to be employed.

"Are you okay? Sorry about my lousy attempt at humor. Just trying to calm my nerves. I'm kinda having a hard time admitting I need help. Please, I want to do this." His voice, barely above a whisper, tickled her ear, the one his lips lightly grazed as he spoke.

Do what? Lord, she could imagine lots of things two people locked in an embrace could do that weren't remotely related to her job. Forcing herself to breathe normally, she focused her unnervingly wayward thoughts on a key word, job. She did have a job to do.

He needs help finding women? Was he some type of genius business geek who'd been locked away but now ready to test the waters of the dating pool? With her last



shred of strength, she pulled away. Contact gone, the letters stopped their unending dance in her head.

"Apology accepted. I'm fine. Thank you." While swearing under her breath to fix the damn rug, she straightened her clothes. A slight chill covered her body. Short of putting on a jacket or sweater, neither of which she had, not much could be done. Serena quickly crossed her arms in front of her, chiding herself for letting him affect her. No other client had come close to messing with her body chemistry.

"Let's start over. I'm Dan Reese and I'd like to use this certificate."

His smile undid her. The chilly sensation in the air disappeared and Serena relaxed her stance.

Dan sat again in his seat, a sensation of loss without her in his arms frustrating his body. *I hope you're on my list.* She fit so perfectly next to him, her long, leggy body lined up against his. She had to be just a few inches shorter than his six-foot height. Her shape? Men would crave to touch that body.

Everywhere.

Her auburn hair fell freely around her face, framing it with short, delicate curls. Those lips, full and painted some shade of dark pink, begged for attention. Light, chocolate-brown colored eyes sparkled with flecks of green and changed in intensity the more he stared at her.

She'd captured his attention all right, if the prickly hairs on the back of his neck were any indication of sparking his interest. A lower portion of his body hadn't missed responding to the delightful sensation of having her pressed against him.

Sitting gave him the edge in getting his libido and all visible signs of it, under control. His undercover job required a cool head and level thinking. Any hormonal reaction would have to take a back burner.

"What do I do first?"

Serena nodded, accepting his willingness to start anew. She offered him a handful of papers. "Fill out these forms. If there's anything you don't want to answer, let me know. Some information is vital, other stuff is optional."

Dan quickly scanned the forms and noticed they asked standard questions he'd come across on everything from car loan applications to job searches. He began writing, but stopped at the preference list.

Eyeing her, he decided to list her physical qualities as to what he wanted in a woman. Career and education requirements could vary, although he did hope to be paired with someone who could carry on an intelligent conversation.

For this case, gritting his teeth while posing as an insurance salesman needing help to find a love match got the detective through the door. He used his standard choice of names as a cover, that of Daniel Reese. Easy enough to remember as Dan was his first name and Reese, his middle name. To ensure his sanity remained intact, complications

and headaches involving simpering, clingy, self-centered women had to be avoided at all costs.

"Here." He handed her his form. "I guess I've done my part. Now what?"

"If you'll stand over by the door, I'll take your picture."

"Be sure and get my best side," he quipped as he grinned for the camera.

"And, that would be where?" Serena shot back, making a mental note that the man could display a sense of humor when he wasn't challenging her. After taking two quick shots, one close-up and one full-length, both returned to their seats.

Her eyes roamed the questionnaire before she spoke. Silence, except for the ticking of a cuckoo clock, reigned in the small office.

"Now," she voiced with a slight quiver, "I need to touch you."

"Anywhere in particular?" Dan drawled, blood pumping faster through his veins at the mere thought of her hands on him.

"Your hand will do. For now." Her lazy grin pushed his sex drive button again...the one that seemed to be permanently switched on since he'd walked through her door.

Dan held out his hand, palm side up and rested it on her desk. Her fingertips traced a line from his wrist to his fingers then back again. His breathing sped up while he watched in fascination at her slight touches. Her eyes closed and he detected a low sigh, almost like a moan, escape from her lips.

The same letters as before rampaged through her head. Hmm. She had women with those letters, but none of them would be a match for him, from what she could remember of their resumes.

Touching him sent shivers up and down her body. Usually, just one tiny jolt would accompany her first contact with a client. This man was different. This man revved up her system. This man could undo the "no man in my life now" code she'd followed for the past year.

Getting her business up and operating while forgetting Alan and his betrayal had steeled her resolve to forgo any form of love life. Her self-imposed "one year, no dating" sentence had ended, but Serena avoided looking for a man. Distance from Dan would be vital. He would test her determination to fly solo if he got too close.

Clearing her throat, she offered, "I'm seeing three letters for you." She broke their contact by removing her hand and placed both her arms on her desk.

"Letters? I thought your application said you'd provide one match."

The fingers of her left hand began drumming a cadence on her desk. "Well, usually I only see one letter. But you seem to be different."

"So," he leaned in closer, "is that good or bad?"

"Maybe it's your lucky day. I guess there could be three women out there just perfect for you, waiting for an introduction."

Serena got up and walked into her outer office. She shuffled through her files, collecting those of his three possible future dates. She retained the files, but pulled out the short, unnamed and non-letter identifying bio for each woman along with their pictures. She returned to her desk and handed them to Dan. "Here are the ladies who match your letters."

He studied the bios and photos. An uneasy twinge of disappointment over his interest made her uncomfortable as the seconds passed before he spoke. What was wrong with her?

"What about them? Do I come up as a match for any of these ladies?"

"I won't know for sure until I give you a number and interview them again. I need to touch them too in order to 'feel' the connection. I'll contact them today and see when they can come in for a session. Do you, uh, have a problem with any of them? I'll need to know that up front."

"No. You're the expert here. If you say we're compatible, I'll give it a shot. When will I hear from you?" Slouching in his seat, her latest client smirked as if he still doubted the whole procedure.

Perhaps speeding up his case would make him a believer. Maybe the sooner she hooked him up with one of the eligible women in her files, the quicker she'd get past the magnetic pull he seemed to cast her way. Her mind wanted to ignore the feeling, but her body was more than willing to be charmed by Dan Reese.

"I'll get on this right away. Let me just give you a number. Uh," she shuffled through papers on her desk, "my list is here somewhere."

Embarrassment panicked her as each second passed during her frantic search for her numbers list for men. Where the hell was it? She'd always kept papers pertaining to men on the left side of her desk and ones for the ladies on the right.

Peeking at him, she noticed his fixated stare, never wavering from her desperate quest. Having already displayed doubts about her business, he now probably assumed her to be nothing short of an unorganized fortuneteller. Great way to do business, Serena. Finally, one paper materialized from the heap, but only one number appeared on it. Strange. Where did it come from?

"So? Is that mine?" His question came out in an impatient tone.

"Yes." The number was as good as any and she was positive no one else had it. "You're Mr. 'Four-eighteen'."

His eyes widened. "You have that many clients? Now I am impressed."

Now? Did he say now? The heck with worrying about the source of the number. Four-eighteen would do.

"You'll be known as that number until you meet your date. If you decide to exchange names, then it's up to you."

"You won't even call me by my name?"

"Makes it easier if I don't. Then there's no chance of a slip-up on my part."

He shrugged. "Okay. So, do you have a letter? Are you in the files?"

His questions caught her off guard. No one else had ever asked. The one time she'd gone with her intuition for herself, her "second sight" had made one hell of a blunder. Matching herself with a man from her client list remained her biggest mistake.

"No. I just do this for others. This is a business. I'm not trying to find a match for myself."

Mr. "Four-eighteen" edged his body closer to lean over her desk. "I'd think matching someone for yourself would be an easier challenge than handling strangers."

On the defensive, Serena quipped, "I could if I wanted to."

"Would you object to proving that to me?"

Damn. Caught in a lie. She had to go open her mouth and say she could do it when she knew it wouldn't work. Dating Alan had proved that.

"Look, I know you're uneasy about being here and my arranging a date for you, but I'm running a business and I..."

Dan interrupted, "Are you afraid to be your own client?"

"Of course not." His question irritated the hell out of her. Surely there would be one man in her files she could date a few times without worrying about anything long-term developing. She knew that wouldn't happen.

"Fine. If it'll make you feel more at ease, I'll do a number search for myself. Now, let's get back to you."

"No." He shook his finger at her and laughed. "That's not enough. How will I know you actually go through with this?"

Jerking to her feet, Serena rose to her full height and placed her hands on her hips. "What do you suggest?"

He got up, leaned slightly forward and rested both hands on her desk. As he stared at her, he answered, "We'll double-date. I won't be so nervous about all this with you there and you'll see how things go for me since I'm not your usual client."

A brain freezing sensation took control of her mind for a second or two. Her mouth opened, but no words popped out. Double-date?

"I can't go out on other clients' dates."

"Why?"

That one simple word had her thinking. He was right about his being different from all the others. Maybe she should be around to see how her matchmaking went for him—her very unusual case.

She would arrange his date and one for herself.

And, watch him.

Very closely.

Out of curiosity.

For research on her gift.

The sound of the cuckoo clock interrupted the silence between them once again. Grateful for the reminder that another client was due in five minutes, Serena put on her best business-like front.

"Mr. 'Four-eighteen', I'll contact one of your letters and interview her. Then, I'll get back to you about a meeting. I'll set up something for myself so we can be a cozy foursome as you requested."

One eyebrow quirked up, but other than that, his face remained unchanged. "Good. I feel better about this already. I guess I'll just wait to hear from you. I'm looking forward to our dinner."

She stuck out her hand to shake his. Instant heat raced up her arm and through her system as his warmth invaded her body. Letters danced again in her mind, swirling faster as her blood pumped swiftly through her veins.

The man was dangerous, a threat to her sanity and self-control.

"I'll wait for your call." He gave her a half-smile, turned and strolled out the door.

Serena dropped into her chair, listening to the squeaking sounds emanating from the old rocker as the chair swayed back and forth. She rested her head against the cushioned back and closed her eyes.

Four-eighteen, four-eighteen. Why was that paper in her pile with that number on it? She only had male clients numbered into the one-hundred range. She massaged the spot between her eyes. Dwelling on this would do nothing except give her a migraine so she decided to move on. Enough about him. She had other things to worry about now.

Her eyes flew open as she wondered what letter she could choose for herself. She had just started double-lettering new female clients. Maybe she could choose a state and use those letters. Nothing common like KS or MO for the two local states. She needed something that would "flow". Hmm.

She began rocking, soothing her innermost thoughts with visions of her travels around the country. Miss "VA" made her sound like a veteran's group. Miss "NY" or Miss "CA" really didn't feel right. Miss "MD", "OH" and "OR" had obvious drawbacks.

Sighing, Serena's eyelids fluttered closed. She let her mind drift, like fingers lightly touching a Ouija board, waiting for vibrations from fingertips and "spirits" to "magically" move the planchette and answer the users' questions. She could see letters swimming before her, some by themselves, some coupled together.

Suddenly, she sat ramrod straight, stilling the movement of the rocker. Letters flashed in her head, ones that must be meant for her to use.

Yes, they'd fit into how she felt about herself. She'd been there and enjoyed her trip with all the sights and sounds of the area. Not a place she wanted to settle in, but definitely somewhere exciting and full of mystery and intrigue.

"Miss 'DC'. That's me." Serena spoke her words with the assurance of someone harboring no doubts. She'd put her plan of action into motion after the next client left. Operation "find Dan Reese a match" was about to begin.

## **Chapter Two**

Serena scrutinized the woman about to leave her office. "Thanks for coming in, Miss 'S'. I'll get back to you about dinner arrangements."

In an almost apprehensive tone, the client answered, "Yes. Well, uh, I did mention that I won't eat much, right?"

With a smile, Serena replied, "That won't be a problem. I'll talk to you later."

Serena escorted Dan's first future date to the door. The hazel-eyed blonde fit some of the descriptive qualities on his list.

Except for hair color.

Then, of course, he liked baseball and she didn't.

And, there was her notion that hard rock or rap beat out country music, Dan's listening choice.

Well, everything didn't have to match exactly. They both did like Italian food. That could be a starting point.

An irritating doubt poked through her composure. Would Miss "S" really fit in Dan's life?

When did he become Dan and not Mr. "Four-eighteen"?

Damn, he'd gotten under her skin, bypassed her warning barriers and head alarm blaring "watch out for this one". His name, now firmly implanted in her head, wouldn't change back from Dan to a number without any major effort on her part. And even then, it wouldn't work.

She knew he had to be called Dan. Period.

Serena rubbed her temples, trying to ward off a troubling headache. The more she denied a "sight", the worse her head throbbed. Resigning herself to calling him Dan would start the blood flowing happily in her veins again, wiping out all traces of pain. She'd been this route before and knew the unavoidable consequences. Better to go with the option firmly implanted in her brain. She couldn't win a battle with her gift.

Miss "S" had seemed somewhat enthused about meeting him. He satisfied most of the qualifications on her list.

Except for the age thing. At twenty-five, she preferred someone younger than thirty-three-year-old Dan.

And, she had wanted someone shorter.

In addition, she hoped to be a model and wanted to stay on her diet, but would eat Italian food. A little. To be sociable.

"Stop overanalyzing this," Serena chided herself aloud. Miss "S" matched one of his letters. His number didn't exactly come up for her, but "four" did. It was part of his number. Maybe that would be close enough.

Serena put aside their files after leaving messages for both of them to see if seven on Friday at Zio's would work. Two days' notice should be enough for them to decide.

Now, she had to work on her own case and find a date. Numbers were needed. Should be easy enough to do if she'd just make herself relax and let them come to her.

Realizing she expected no more clients for the day, Serena decided to stretch out on the couch in her office and relax. She kicked off her shoes and eased herself down into a reclining position. She took a few calming breaths, hoping to ease the tension in her body.

"Okay numbers. Start dancing."

She closed her eyes and tried to wipe extra thoughts from her mind. Numbers. She had to allow only numbers to filter through.

Dan's face plastered itself squarely in her head, surrounded by the number four-eighteen. Scores of tiny groups of four-eighteens swirled around his smiling face. The one with the sparkling eyes, trying to look into her soul. The face highlighted with a strong, chiseled jaw and dimple on one side. The face showing a five-o'clock shadow surrounding kissable lips.

She opened one eye, then the other, deciding to focus one at a time on the ceiling above. It was vital to wipe him out of her head in order to get on with her number search.

Her eyes closed again and this time she took more deep intakes of breath and exhaled them as slowly as possible. After doing this a few times, Serena decided to try the numbers search again.

Nope. Still didn't work.

Damn.

Maybe she would have to just read each of the male clients' profiles and choose someone that way. She snorted. Heck, she couldn't do any worse than dating Alan. And she'd thought they were compatible. This would only be someone to have dinner with and get through a session of chaperoning Dan's date.

He'd find a match and then leave her alone.

Maybe.

Maybe he'd find his match or maybe he'd leave her alone? Both thoughts didn't appeal. Why did her heart feel as if it had just hit bottom?

She closed her eyes one last time and placed her arm over her forehead. She needed a short power nap. Mentally setting her head alarm to wake her up in twenty minutes, she fell into peaceful slumber.

\* \* \* \* \*



Dan noticed the door to the office was ajar, so he pushed it open. On the couch was "Miss Sight", fast asleep and resembling Sleeping Beauty. A very gorgeous one at that.

He watched the rise and fall of her breasts as they strained against her top in a slow, rhythmic sleep-related pattern. Her hips were slightly turned in toward the sofa. Her skirt, deliciously hiked up around her thighs, offered him a great view of her long, elegant legs.

Anyone other than a gentleman would take advantage of the scenario and tiptoe around the end of the couch for a better view of those legs. But, his mother had taught him proper respect for women and he'd stay put. However, the desire to see her, touch her, sent a message of need straight to his groin.

Clearing his throat, Dan called out, "Hello? Are you still open?"

Serena's body twisted abruptly at the sound of his voice. She sat up then stood, smoothing down her skirt and pushing back wayward curls from her face.

He longed to reach out and help, but kept his hands planted firmly by his sides. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

Sleep lines and rosy red cheeks highlighted her face. She looked adorable, loveable and kissable. Dreamy-eyed after just having awakened. She'd fit into his arms so easily.

"Uh, sorry. I guess I was tired and... How did you get in?"

"The door was open. Maybe you should make sure it's locked before you sleep."

"Oh. I thought it was." She coughed. "Why are you back here?"

"I forgot to ask you something."

Serena walked over to her desk and sat. "Okay. Fine. Have a seat."

He waved a hand. "No, that's not necessary. I'm not here to disturb you, just curious about something."

"Sure. How can I help you?"

Dan took a step forward then stopped. "I just wanted to know what letters came up for me."

Without hesitating, she replied, "'E', 'S' and 'X'. Those are the ones I keep seeing for you."

Dan gave her a quizzical stare. "Don't you find that odd?"

"Like I already told you, seeing three letters veers off my normal pattern, but I guess we can work with it."

Dan folded his arms. "You don't see anything weird about those three particular letters?"

Serena frowned, giving him a confused look. "What are you getting at?"

"Those letters spell out 'Sex'."

Long seconds ticked by before Serena could unscramble the thoughts rampaging through her brain. He put the letters together to make the word "SEX"?

"I can assure you that I just saw them as separate entities in alphabetical order. You know, E, period. S, period. X, period. I never considered putting them together to form a word."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Seems odd to me."

"This is the first time I've ever gotten more than one letter." She frowned. "I'm as confused as you are."

"Maybe I could sit down so we can talk this over."

"Sure."

Dan took the same seat opposite her that he'd occupied earlier. Despite the desk between them, she sensed his presence surrounding her.

What was going on? A strange irritation swept over her. If she looked at the letters in a different order, they'd spell out something other than sex...like her initials. That, however, he'd never need to know.

She cleared her throat before speaking. "I can't explain it to you. Those are your letters. You need to stop thinking of them in any particular order so they spell out a word." Another word formed in her head using those same letters and she decided to test his reaction. "You know, it could also say 'exs' like in ex-wife."

She noticed him shifting in his seat. He didn't have an ex, or at least he hadn't marked that on his application. Had he been truthful in filling out his form? Could that be why the letters had come to her? Maybe he had some ex in his past and she'd picked up on it.

"Do you have an ex?" She narrowed her gaze at him. "That could be why I see all those letters."

Play this cool. Keep your voice level. Dan leveled a determined gaze at her and aimed for a nonchalant tone to his answer. "Nope. Never been married. Guess that brings us back to square one again."

"Let me get your file and we'll review what you wrote. I'm really sorry for this confusion."

Dan watched as she eyed him with suspicion. He returned the stare.

Taking this case hadn't been his idea. His boss, Morgan, was using this assignment as a revenge tactic and there wasn't a thing he could do about it.

Serena handed him his file and suggested, "Why don't you check what you've written. See if there are any changes you'd like to make. Then I'll try to see letters for you again."

He took the form, fully intending to appear engrossed in doing as she requested. Instead, he let his mind wander as he cursed the circumstances that brought him there in the first place.

When the mayor complained to the department about his daughter's horrible experience with Second Sight Dating, Morgan had yelled Dan's name and issued his

assignment order without hesitation. Dan would be the “plant” in their investigation, a guinea pig entering the fiasco dating game using this agency. Serena’s brochures, advertising and sales pitch alleged it dealt strictly with matchmaking.

The mayor was convinced it was more than that, some type of prostitute/gigolo “dating” service his poor daughter had stumbled across. The woman had gone out with Mr. “Eight” a few times before he’d started hinting that money for his services would be needed to ensure his continued interest.

Embarrassed, the woman had confided in her father but didn’t want any publicity surrounding her almost venture into the shady world of paying for male attention. Hence, Morgan got a call from the mayor and Dan had been made the nerd needing help finding a love match.

Or, the stud women would barter for. Or, the man given choices of three women who’d be more than willing to service him...for a price.

None of the options appealed to him. Acting as if he needed help in finding someone to date made him bristle with annoyance. Hell, he could arrange his own love life but this woman staring at him probably deemed him short in the “How to Attract a Woman” category. She looked at him as someone who needed her guidance to lead him on the path to true love and happiness.

Yeah. Right.

He knew from past experience, his own failed marriage and a witch of an ex-wife, Laura, that real love, the forever kind, only existed in the minds of fools. No such animal roamed the face of the Earth. Even his parents’ rocky and distant relationship had proven that.

Dan only sought out affairs, ones without clingy, starry-eyed women reaching for that brass ring of matrimony. Mutual flings suited his outlook on love. His heart, as well as his soul, would remain safe, hidden away from further damage.

Crap. He had Morgan to thank for this mess. Shows what can happen if you beat your best friend repeatedly at poker. This revenge was a doozy. And since Morgan was his superior, Dan could do nothing but play the dating game.

Morgan and the guys back in his department probably enjoyed laughing at his expense over his unwanted assignment. They’d all taken turns trying to “fix him up” with “nice” girls, the ones with commitments in mind. Nice for some guys, but not for him. He had no heart to give anyone. Certainly not to “nice” women.

Getting his fuzzy brain back to the present, he focused on the application form, verifying the information he’d written, per his boss’s orders. Yep. He’d done his job. All was as it should appear.

“There’s nothing more to add. Unless you want me to say something about pets. I noticed nothing’s here asking if I have one.”

Serena’s pert little mouth formed a perfect “O” and he watched in amazement as it then transformed into a smile. “You’re the first person who’s brought that up. I have to admit, I never considered that particular question.”

Dan read aloud what he'd written across the bottom of the last page, "I like dogs but not cats." He looked up at her. "Don't have one, though. Think that might make a difference?"

She took the form and tilted her head as if pondering his question. "Hmm."

Dan placed his arm across her desk, stretching out his palm for her to touch. He waited for her warm fingers to send shivers through his body as before. Dating her would be interesting, if she wasn't a suspect in his department's investigation and on the mayor's wanted list.

Serena lifted her hand and brought it close to his open palm, an instant burst of heat radiating from it. She hadn't touched him, but letters already started racing in her head. Blurred ones, but seemingly larger than in her normal letter visions, swam in a furious dance pattern.

She lowered a finger and traced a path up and down his fleshy palm. The static charge caused by their contact jolted her body and should have had the effect of making her hair stand on end. Her other hand flew up to feel her head in an effort to convince herself that she didn't look like a wild woman after a very bad perm.

Letters became clearer, more pronounced and vivid in color. Most times, her visions would only appear in black and white. Rarely did color enter her "sights".

Hmm. Color. Shades of green, pink and blue, outlined the letters...the same three she'd seen the first time she'd touched him. S. E. X. Now she'd read them in that order, regardless of how they appeared to her, alphabetical order be damned. Dan's letters were sex.

Maybe adding information about pets made some difference, at least in the addition of hues. And, the letters were bolder, bigger and further spaced apart to give definite distinction to them as individual entities.

He was still going to meet Miss "S", Miss "E" and Miss "X". Unless he and the women found some reason, or excuse, to deny fate.

Serena's breathing raced with every stroke she feathered on his palm. Too bad men were off-limits in her self-proclaimed celibacy. Anyway, she still wasn't convinced he was a true believer. Staying far away from that type was an absolute necessity.

She broke their contact, blinking as she tried to refocus on his face.

"So? Any new letters for me?"

"No. The same letters came again, only stronger this time."

Dan frowned as he slumped back into his seat. "Is that good or bad?"

"Probably a good sign. We must be on the right track if the letters are the same. Like I said, this is new territory for me. Having the three letters, I mean."

"Fine. I got your message about dinner. It's okay with me. Do you have your date set up?"

"That's what I'll be working on as soon as you're gone." Her cheeks heated as she regretted her brusque manner in an attempt to get him to leave.

"Oh. Sorry. Didn't mean to overstay my time."

"I'm...I didn't mean that the way it came out. I just have lots to do before Friday."

Dan stood then headed for the door. He winked at her and said before leaving, "I'm looking forward to our date."

She watched his retreating back as he walked out her office door. Nice view, even from the rear. His full, masculine frame strolled, almost strutted, away from her, displaying a swagger of confidence with every step. A man in control. Someone comfortable with issuing orders. Self-assured in the world around him.

Why did he need her help to find a date? Did the qualities she assessed him to possess not translate to interacting with a woman? His friends gave him a certificate to her agency. They thought he needed help?

What about his "Please. I want to do this" comment? Maybe he was shy around women. Hard to believe, since he didn't seem to have any trouble talking with her and stirring her interest, but it could prove to be true.

He was sexy and charming in a smooth, polished sort of way Serena figured came natural to him. Maybe, from experience. Lots of experience. Yet, he wanted her help in finding the perfect woman.

With a giant mental shake of her head, she decided to focus on what he'd said as he left moments before. Our date? He meant his date and her date. No "our date" existed because they weren't dating. Sure, they'd be together, but not with each other.

It was time to find herself a date. Procrastinating wouldn't make it any easier. The sooner she settled on Mr. Number whatever, the quicker she could get back to running her business.

Closing her eyes, she rested her head in her hands as she willed a number to appear. Foggy at first, then numbers started spinning in circles through her mind. Dan's face was no longer there, but the same numbers appeared. Four, one, eight. Four-eighteen. His number. And, this time, the damn things were in color. Same shades as his letters. Same boldness. Same bigger size.

Damn.

"Fine. I give up." Serena spoke aloud as she threw up her hands and flopped her head back against the headrest of her comfy desk chair.

If those were her numbers, so be it. She'd look at Mr. "One", Mr. "Four" and Mr. "Eight". One of them had to be available for dinner on Friday, someone with whom she'd have at least one thing in common. A man she could parade in front of Dan, watch him interact with his date and get him off her case about dating.

Full of anxiety, resignation and doubt, she looked forward to Friday like a teenager looked forward to going back to school after Christmas break.

## Chapter Three

"So? Seen any ghosts yet? Is she a gypsy fortuneteller? Wart on her nose?" Morgan bombarded ridiculous questions at Dan the minute he entered the department.

Eyeing his boss/ex-best friend, Dan cocked his head toward Morgan's office. "Mind if we discuss this in private?"

"Sure thing."

The men entered the office and Dan noted the sly grins from coworkers and curious glances. He paid particular attention to shutting the door before he said anything.

"You do know that we'll never play poker again. I won't live through more revenge tactics like this."

"Hey, you're my best investigator. Everyone else is either married or in some type of relationship. You're the most likely candidate since you're not attached to anyone."

"Fitzgerald isn't involved."

"Sending a gay guy might not work. If she is psychic—and personally I don't believe any of that mumbo-jumbo stuff myself but my orders come from higher up the food chain here—she could see right through his act. Hell, even Fitzgerald admits going undercover like this wouldn't work for him. I've got to go with whatever I think will work. You're the most likely, convincing guy we have available."

Dan flopped down in a chair, annoyed at his fate. "I suppose everyone's been talking about this."

Steve Morgan eased into the oversized leather chair behind his desk. "Dan, you know you give us plenty to talk about, on or off the job."

In a sarcastic tone, Dan replied, "Thanks for being my friend."

Steve laughed. "Boy, this case is really bugging you. What happened? Is she a real witch?"

"Nope. That's the problem. She's a knockout. If I wasn't a 'plant' there, I'd be tempted to ask her out, weird abilities or not. And, for the record, I'm not saying I believe this ESP stuff either."

His boss got out of his seat and walked over to Dan, shaking his friend's shoulder. "Rein in those hormones, Casanova. You're supposed to be a nerd needing help. If you let loose with any of that Daniel Reese Carrington appeal women seem to fall for, you could compromise this case."

Dan shrugged. "I know I need to be helpless. She's not making it very easy. I don't seem to be her ordinary male client."

"How so?"

"She has this system using numbers and letters for her male and female clients and then matches them using her 'sight'. Apparently, I'm an unusual case. When she touches me for letter matches to her female clients, I only spell one thing to her. Sex."

Steve leaned forward in his seat, a frown creasing his forehead. "Your letters spell sex? Maybe that Carrington charm's out already. Enlighten me about this 'touching' procedure and spare no details. I didn't realize you'd be subjected to bodily contact, but it looks like you survived." A grin spread across his face.

The next ten minutes were spent with Dan explaining his encounter with Serena. It included their plans for double-dating, a ploy to cover his keeping an eye on her and her business.

Whatever it really was.

"Now you know how crazy this whole thing is. Are we sure the mayor's daughter went through this dating service? Did she really meet this guy through Second Sight Dating?"

"Yep. You read and heard what I did. Who else would call their date Mr. 'Eight'? Miss Sight gives numbers to the guys, right?"

Dan's cell rang, the special one he'd been issued for this case. "This has to be her. I haven't given out this number to anyone else."

He plugged a wire into the bottom of the phone, connecting it to a recorder before answering. "Dan Reese."

"Mr. Reese, or I should say, Mr. 'Four-eighteen', this is Miss Sight. I wanted to let you know we're all set for Friday night."

"So, who's my first date with?"

"You'll be meeting Miss 'S'. You might remember her as the blonde who lives in Overland Park."

"Yeah, I remember her. Fine. I'll be at the restaurant at seven. You gonna be there, too?"

"I'm still working on that."

Time for some feigned begging. "I'll feel a whole lot better about this if you do come."

"Yes, well...uh...I'll be there."

"Good. I'll really feel more confident with you by my side. See you then."

Dan ended the call as he watched Steve turn off the recording device.

"Guess I'm having dinner on Friday with date number one. Or, should I say, Miss 'S'."

"What about Sight? Will she really show?"

"I think so. I assume I sounded needy enough to want her to come along."

Steve shrugged. "Sounded that way to me. What do you know about Miss 'S'?"

"Blonde, wants to be a model. Real easy on the eyes. Practically falling out of her untied top in her picture. Probably a publicity shot."

"Or invitation to check out future offerings. For a price."

Dan rubbed his hands over his face before replying. "Yeah, well, I guess I'll find out."

"The insurance company's on notice to field calls about your 'new' job. Good thing my wife's a VP over there and they cooperate with us."

"Thank her for me."

"So, all you have to do is make sure you play up the drooling, shy guy role." Steve slapped him on the back. "Practice in front of a mirror or something."

"I'd wipe that grin off your face if you weren't my boss. I've got work to do. Mind if I slam your door shut when I walk outta here?"

Steve's laughter echoed throughout the room. "Hey, be my guest. That's better than bloodshed. Especially if it's supposed to be mine."

Dan exited the office, swinging the door closed with a half-hearted but audible whack.

Once back at his desk, he reviewed the short glimpses of information he'd studied for his three possible dates, the ones "head-picked" especially for him by Serena Sight. Hell, he knew her last name was just for show. The department was checking into her background although everything seemed to be in order and all legal.

She'd given him mini-bios for each woman. Good thing he had an almost photographic memory and could remember practically everything he read.

"Miss 'S', soon to be his first date, was eager to be a famous model. Younger than him. She'd written down that she loved to entertain and help people have a good time. Could be interesting if she didn't expect to be paid and included sexual forms of entertainment as good times on her list of favorite things.

Yep, that body could be an entertainment center all by itself. So much for his first bachelorette candidate.

His next candidate, closer to his age, was a bright, red-haired beauty, looking for a career change. Now a dog groomer, she looked toward enriching her life, meeting new people and making more money. Her words, not his.

Hmm. He'd noticed her long, elegant fingers on the hand she'd demurely splayed by the open "V" of her blouse. Those fingers washed dogs, but would do a hell of a massage and more, for a man. Sex for money was a lucrative way to increase her income. His bachelorette second date.

And, his last future date was also a younger woman. The sultry-looking woman had light brown hair highlighted with blue and purple streaks. One year of college before she decided to become an actress. Worked with some local theatre group and studied colors, costuming, all things to fantasize and create the allure that acting encompassed. Again, what the lady wrote.



She could be well-equipped with outfits to suit anyone's desires. Another great body to deal with. Lots of men would pay plenty to act out their sexual fantasies. And she would be his third and final bachelorette date.

Thinking of the fantasies he might enjoy, Dan realized one woman came to mind and none of his future dates were involved. Right at the moment, they seemed to star his prime suspect, Serena, "Miss Sight".

Damn.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Just pick up the freaking phone." Serena ordered herself to call Sean, her Mr. "One". Getting this over with as soon as possible would be the best way to deal with it.

As she dialed his number, she looked over his picture and application once more. There had to be something she could label as a common interest for them.

He was blond, an Adonis by the standards of some women, but just too pretty for her tastes. He reminded her of a preening peacock. She'd caught him gazing at his own reflection in her office mirror many times and considered him vain.

Mr. "One" wanted someone petite, maybe someone he could tower over. Serena's matching his height didn't exactly place her on his choice list.

Music. She liked country and rock. He liked rap and heavy metal. She shrugged. Probably wouldn't be time to listen to any of their desired types of music at dinner in an Italian restaurant.

There was one common interest. Maybe they could talk about books instead since they both liked to read, although he hadn't listed what type of books he preferred. Surely they could find something to say to each other concerning literature that would be enough to build one night's conversation on.

After five rings, Sean's answering machine turned on. Serena's eyes rolled to the ceiling and she groaned as she heard his phony French-accented voice spouting off a series of "Bonjours". It went downhill from there.

Closing her eyes, she willed her voice to hint at some microscopic shred of enthusiasm instead of dripping of the sarcasm that hung on her lips. Maybe some women found his charade alluring. It just made her want to barf and stay a few chosen states away.

"Hi, Sean. It's 'Miss Sight' from Second Sight Dating. I'd like to have you come in for a quick session. I think I have someone you'd be interested in meeting for dinner on Friday. Please call back and I hope to see you tomorrow."

She hung up the phone, less than eager to receive his return call. But, she said she'd go to dinner and Dan expected her to show.

Serena would meet with Sean and convince him to have dinner with her as a foursome. She knew he'd go to dinner and might ask her out again, just as she knew he wasn't the one for her.

She could “see” it.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I had no idea you were looking for a date. We could have saved a lot of time if you’d told me that when I first came in here.”

Sean’s preachy comment matched his sly grin. One that Serena wished she could wipe off his face with one well-placed smack. The man made her skin crawl.

“Yes, well, I just decided to do some looking and your number matched what I came up with. I know neither of my letters are a first-choice match on your list. Anyway, should we try for Friday night?”

He gave her a leering look that said it all. Yep, he wanted the date. “Sure. Sounds interesting.”

“We’ll be with another couple. I hope you don’t mind. They would like to meet but have others around. Since we all like Italian food, I thought....”

Sean put up his hand as if to stop her reasoning explanation. “Hey, the more the merrier. Do I pick you up or will you meet me there?”

“I’ll meet you there.” *That’ll leave me the opportunity to make a hasty retreat.* “We’ll all pay our own way.”

He got up and paraded toward the door. “Hey, remember what my list says? Wear something red. See you then.” After pointing at her and winking, he swaggered out of her office, reminding her of a damn male peacock strutting his stuff.

Serena slumped in her chair. What the hell was she getting herself into? A date with a charmer who fancied himself a French-speaking playboy? Who loved red?

She’d be sure to wear something more demure and avoid French wine. Heck, in an Italian restaurant maybe there wouldn’t be anything but Italian wines available anyway. As an extra precaution, she should avoid wine altogether so she could stay focused and make that quick getaway.

She imagined her date, hair slicked back, an air of playboy charm and superiority oozing through. Lord, she prayed he didn’t try to use another phony accent and attempt to speak Italian to their waiter. The image made her shudder.

Hopefully, he wouldn’t try to speak the language. She rubbed the back of her head where a real headache now formed. Damn. If Sean decided to switch gears and try the Italian Casanova approach, she’d be totally mortified.

What would Dan and his date think? That she was a loser and hooked herself up with some genuine idiot of a date? What kind of confidence would they have in her and her abilities then?

The headache spread to the front of her head, threatening to become a full-blown migraine. She needed to confide in the one and only person who understood her “sight” and possessed a special ability himself.

Her mother's "woman's intuition" was as close as Serena could label either of her parents as possessing a second sight. Although ten years older, her brother sensed her ability at an early age and helped nurture her talent. The two remained close, more so as the years went by and they'd realized how complicated and special their gifts proved to be. Hers involved reading people.

Michael's ability was both similar and different, something he considered a curse rather than a gift at times. His talent was more in tune with his chosen profession, although he tried hard not to advertise it. Only selected individuals knew of his "sight".

Even at work, his peers never realized his special ability. His boss and one coworker knew how he could snatch glimpses of the past and see into a crime scene by touching victims or something that belonged to them.

Michael's gift wasn't a pleasant one, but provided vital information and usually the important missing key to unlocking an unsolved crime. When the police department in Wichita was stumped, his boss would quietly authorize Michael to use his "sight" and help solve a mystery.

So far, he'd been accurate in ninety-nine percent of his cases. But there was just one time where he couldn't help. Serena knew the case involving that missing child haunted him even now.

That one case had caused her brother to back off, resorting to good, old-fashioned police work. He felt happier knowing he could succeed in his chosen line of work without any special gift and tried now more than ever not to use it.

Talking to Michael would help her.

She dialed her brother's number, eager to hear his reassuring voice again. He'd boost her morale, tell her to go with her feelings and not fight her "sights". He'd always said her failed relationship with Alan had nothing to do with her gift. She'd ignored the warnings buzzing in her head about him because she'd been so overwhelmed by the charmer.

"Michael? It's me. I need my big brother."

"Hi, sweetie. What happened? Did word get out about how good you are at matchmaking and now you have too many clients beating down your door? Did you match up two love-starved lunatics and now they want you to plan their wedding and name their children?"

She could hear his laughter over the telephone. "No and you can stop laughing. It's nothing as tame as that. It's worse. I matched myself up with an idiot and I know it'll be a disaster."

## Chapter Four

"Can I come in? I don't want to disturb you."

Dan poked his head through the door of Serena's office, offering her a smile that curled her toes. After the way she'd practically tossed him out the day before, he probably lacked the enthusiasm and courage to boldly walk in. She chided herself on her lack of customer courtesy, but damn, the man messed with her mind...and body.

"Please, come in. I promise not to throw you out. Unless, of course, you say something like you're searching for a fortuneteller." Hopefully, he'd see the humor in her comment and take it as an offer of truce.

He held up his hand in an "I promise" gesture while crossing his heart as he walked through her door. "No, ma'am. I know my place and no more jokes about your business. Hey, you're working hard to set up my dates. I wouldn't want to spoil our relationship, now would I?"

"I hope you're not mocking me." She frowned, trying to get a "read" on his true feelings. Nothing but honest vibes emanated from him. Maybe he was being on the level with her.

"Any negative thoughts giving me away?"

His seductive tone caused her skin to prickle while his glance warmed her. Heat rushed from her toes to her head and Serena's burning face indicated an unplanned flush stained her cheeks.

She cocked her head to one side. "No, you seem friendly enough. You're hard to read. Some people are. Unless I touch you, I don't seem to get many hints about you."

"So? Do you want to?"

"Want to what?"

"Touch me."

Every nerve in her body screamed, "Hell, yes" as her breathing rate doubled at the thought of body-to-body contact with Dan. Even the lightest caress would satisfy her urge to feel him.

No. No men in her life. She didn't need any now and, maybe, not for a long time. Dating Sean, sham date that it would be, was enough to get her out and have Dan meet his first mystery woman. Let them have their fun, with her as a witness, chaperone, whatever.

She had to keep him interested in his dates. And, not let him get under her skin, creating the itch she desperately wanted to scratch.

"No need to touch today. I have your ladies in mind. We're good to go tomorrow night."

His face clouded over with...what? Regret? Disappointment?

"Sure. I'm ready to start. Say, could I look over the three ladies' bios again?"

Businesslike in her response, Serena answered, "Of course," and shuffled through the folders on her desk.

"I have the first two here, the ones for Miss 'S' and Miss 'E', but I think I put the last one in my back office filing cabinet. Would you excuse me for a moment?"

"Of course."

Before she completely moved out of her main office, Serena noted that Dan had picked up his first two "date" briefs from her desk. His concentration focused on them and not on her exit.

As soon as she was out of sight, he glanced at the papers covering her desk. Turning a few to give him a better look, one in particular caught his attention. On it was written Mr. "Eight". The mayor's daughter's alleged date had that number.

He quickly scanned the information listed, noting that basic information his department had uncovered about Gino Conti almost duplicated what the man had written on his application form. Dan moved in closer to glimpse the "goals in life" section and read how Gino hoped to have many friends and become very wealthy.

Hmm. The address he'd written on this form didn't match the one Dan remembered seeing at the office. He'd have to check on that discrepancy once he returned to work.

Maybe the man wanted lots of female clients and figured charging them for his services would make him rich.

But did that make Serena part of the scam? A madam, setting up clients with sex partners for a future cut in the profits? Second Sight Dating, prostitution ring? A gigolo service?

Dan glanced at the door to the office Serena had entered. Not seeing any sign of her, he shoved the papers back into their original spots, relying on his memory to retain the information he'd look into later.

What's he looking for? Serena peeked at Dan through the crack between the door and the doorframe, careful not to let him see her. She'd noticed him eyeing the papers on her desk and not really paying any attention to the two information sheets she'd given him.

Was he trying to find other women to date? She'd agree to set him up with three. Did he need more? Why would a man need more access...?

She slumped sideways against the filing cabinet. Could he be looking for women to approach...like a gigolo? Offer himself to women wanting to pay for his services,

services Serena couldn't deny assuming he would readily, and with satisfaction, supply?

Why hadn't she thought about it before? How could such an incredibly sexy, virile, charismatic man, not be able to get himself a date?

God, she'd have to keep things light and friendly once she went back into the room. Crazy thoughts swam through her head. She had trouble separating truth from fiction, things that appeared logical and ideas that could be coming from her own creative mind.

It all could have been an innocent scene with Dan just being curious, looking to see if she had more paperwork on his dates. Willing her breathing to return to normal and to keep her suspicions under control, she walked out to her main office.

"Here's Miss 'X's' bio. Sorry to keep you waiting." She plastered a smile on her face, hoping to remain calm.

"I've read over the other two. Both seem fine to me. Give me a minute to read this last one and then I'll be out of the way."

He busied himself with the last brief as she sat down. Fighting the urge to rifle through the papers scattered across her desk, Serena cooled the desire to figure out which files he'd studied. She'd be sure to lock her door when he left and do a thorough scrutiny of every piece of paper on her desk. She jumped slightly as he interrupted her planning session.

"I guess I've taken up enough of your time. Thanks for the second look at everything."

"Sure. No problem."

He got up and opened the door. "See you tomorrow. Will we be a foursome?"

"Yes. See you there."

Dan winked, smiled and walked out, closing the door behind him. Damn. It looked like taking him up on his request to get herself a date would prove to be a good reason to be there and watch him. No telling what the man was up to. She'd analyze his every move. If he tried anything funny, she'd drag his ass to the police so fast he'd think a tornado had swept in, funneled him up inside it and taken him for a ride.

Could he really be a con artist, trying to take advantage of her business? None of the negative vibes she'd expect to sense about a dishonest person roused her. He still came across as just another client...except for the three-letter thing.

She rushed over to the door, locked it and hoped for no further interruptions. Time was needed to gather her thoughts, sane ones and calm the panic building inside her. Plopping down onto the sofa, she rubbed her face with her hands and wished for a soothing, inner peace to invade her system.

Instead, one annoying thought after another flooded her head. Dan. Women. Didn't he say he hoped to meet someone who shared his interests? She'd stepped right in and offered him three potential matches.

Or, perhaps, potential victims?

Money. He'd written that his goal in life, to live comfortably and retire early, propelled him to excel. Hmm. How many insurance salesmen hit it big at an early age and exited the job market before the dreaded four-zero birthday rolled around? An insurance salesman. Dan. Hmm, again.

Niggling doubts paraded in her head, all centering on his application and how many items would indeed prove truthful. Hell if she could tell. Her head still registered "nothing wrong with him". Was she losing her "sight"?

A groan escaped her lips as Serena thought about his letters. S. E. X. Yep, they spelled sex. Could be a warning of some kind, screaming for her to pay attention and beware. Should she rein in her impulse to cancel his business as she waited for neon lights glaring at her with the words "He's looking for sex from these women"? Or, she shuddered, did he plan to offer that to them, for a price?

Talk about being paranoid. *Get a hold on yourself, girl.*

Serena inhaled and let out a few, deep breaths with a whoosh. His number, four-eighteen, the one that appeared from nowhere, still bothered her. Then, she realized that April eighteen, what his number could imply, would occur the following week. She hadn't made that connection before. Could his number prove to be a sign, a harbinger of some event soon to happen?

She closed her eyes, longing to regain control of her rambling thoughts. One thing saved her sanity...knowing her brother would arrive Friday night and stay the weekend. Michael had figured she'd had some minor problems when she'd spoken to him the night before. Wait until he heard the mess she found herself in now.

Having a big brother who happened to be a cop might prove to be a godsend.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Steve, this Gino guy doesn't appear to be who he says he is, at least according to what he wrote on that file at Second Sight Dating." Dan threw out his comment as he entered Morgan's office and took a seat across the desk from him.

"I didn't think he would be. From what we've uncovered, he's connected to the syndicate on the West Side. Not a big player but enough ties to make us wonder if the mob's somehow involved."

Deep in thought, Dan tried to envision Serena with mob connections. It just didn't make sense. "The address he listed is phony. Our records show he lives in the same neighborhood as the Napoli brothers. Within walking distance to Mario Napoli's estate."

"Conti lives in one of those old tenements down from Napoli?"

"Yeah. Been there twelve years. Implicated in some minor stuff, but nothing we could ever pin on him."

"Right." Dan sank deeper into his chair and swiped his eyes with one of his hands. "This whole scenario is weird. If the mob were in on this, would they put a loser like Conti out in the open as a main player? They've got plenty of other smooth characters running around. This jerk's already made a wrong move. For Christ's sake, he was stupid enough to pick the mayor's daughter – what's her name?"

"Julia."

"Did she tell him about herself and who her father was?"

Steve nodded his head. "She says he knew. Even brought her home one night. Made a joke about her dad fixing parking tickets."

"Then how the hell could the mob use him?"

"We need more information from Sight's files. You need to get on her good side and get names we can check out."

Dan held up his hand to stop Morgan. "Whoa. I just about got her to come on my date Friday. I can probably force her hand and ask her for repeat appearances on the next two introductions." He shifted in his seat. "Snooping through the files might be difficult. I think she's already wondering why I keep popping up at her office."

"Well, Romeo, you'll just have to come up with a case of the jitters about meeting your date. Get her maternal instincts to kick in. Smile and tell her you need to discuss your upcoming date."

Jumping up from his chair, Dan paced the room. "Shit. I'll sound like a wimpy loser. Should I ask her to help me pick out what to wear? Stutter a little? Seek advice on table manners?"

"Hmm. Might be a way to get you through her door a few more times."

"This is nuts. She can't be involved in this. I just know it."

"Oh? You psychic now, too? Wanna read my palm or something?"

Dan's fists curled at his sides in frustration. His only answer came in the form of a calculated glare aimed in his friend's direction.

Steve quickly held up his hand in a "stop" motion and grinned. "Just kidding. We did get some more background stuff on her. Serena Xavier lives in Overland Park. Nothing fancy. Decent apartment complex. Pays her taxes on time. Drives a four-year-old Honda Accord. Pays her bills, no negatives in credit rating. In short, a model citizen who doesn't appear to be making tons of money."

"So she doesn't make tons of money from this. Maybe the mob's making her take a measly cut."

Steve rocked back in his chair. "Or she's good at hiding the dough."

"Fine." Dan rose from his seat, stretching the aches from his muscles. "Anything else I should know before I call her and make a fool of myself?"

"Yeah, there is. You'll love this. Her brother's a cop in Wichita. We'll have to be extra cautious about any inquiries about you from outside PDs or cops, especially anyone named Michael Xavier."



## **Chapter Five**

Serena played her office answering machine as soon as she arrived for work the next day. She froze at the sound of Dan's voice on her very first message.

He'd asked her to contact him about their dinner that night. Was he getting cold feet...a nerd unsure of his capabilities in attracting someone?

Then again, maybe he didn't want to meet the women she'd envisioned for him. Perhaps Dan, the womanizer, figured they wouldn't live up to the monetary caliber he sought so he wanted to try greener pastures.

She forced herself to listen to her next two messages, neither of significant value, then got out Dan's file. Her fingers slid over the form, hoping to feel some type of vibration, good or bad, from something he'd touched.

Nothing.

With a sigh, she dropped into her chair. It was time to read, really read, each and every word he'd written. And, speculate on all the meanings between the lines. Surely she could let her instincts lead the way and come up with something. There had to be more to Dan Reese that led to such uneasiness in her gift.

First, however, she'd call him and discover the basis for his urgent message. She dialed his number and waited.

"Dan Reese."

"This is Serena Sight. You called?"

"I, well, I hate to bother you but I'm a little nervous about tonight's meeting."

Him? Why? Handsome, shy guy, totally lacking dating skills with women? Could be. Charming con artist seeking sympathy while trying to take advantage of her business? A possibility.

"There's nothing to worry about. I'll be there with my date, too."

"Would you have some time today to maybe go over a few things I might say to my date? I mean, she's so beautiful and I, well, I don't know what to say."

Picturing a tongue-tied Dan around women never crossed her mind. Sure couldn't tell by the way he openly talked to her. Maybe he just panicked around blondes, busty ones at that?

"You want to practice things to say to her?"

"That would be great, if you don't mind helping me."

"No. I mean, of course not. Why don't you come by at five-thirty? We can go over a few things before going to the restaurant."

"That makes me feel so much better. You're an angel. See you later."

Serena held the phone away from her ear, wondering which Mr. "Four-eighteen" she'd just promised to give flirting lessons to. Mr. "Too good to believe" or Mr. "Wiseguy playing a game".

She glanced at the clock. Only eight hours until one of them showed up.

"Satisfied? She thinks I'm some loser she has to tutor on how to speak to a woman." Dan was none too pleased with his boss.

"Sorry, friend. Had to be this way. Get in there and act the part. Maybe she'll give you some time alone in the office and you can check through her files. At least learn more about how the business is run."

"Yeah, well, I'll have to leave from there for dinner. Maybe she and I will drive to the restaurant together. Wouldn't make much sense for us both to take our cars and then have to drive back past her office to get home."

"Whatever it takes, Dan. Whatever it takes."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Am I too early?"

Dan stood in her doorway, almost whispering his question to Serena.

She glanced at him, then her clock and then back to him again. "Oh, sorry. You're right on time. I was busy, uh, sorting through some files. Come in."

He walked in and sat on her couch. "I appreciate your helping me out. I get shy around beautiful women."

Serena leveled a disbelieving look at him. "You don't seem to have a problem talking to me. Do I assume that means you're not shy with me because I'm not what you consider beautiful?"

Surprise registered on his face as his mouth opened and no words came out. She'd put him on the spot...on purpose. Now maybe the real Dan Reese would appear.

"Well?" She crossed her arms and walked over to the sofa where he sat. "I'm waiting for what should be a fascinating answer."

His mouth closed and he ran his finger along the inside of his collar. Was the man speechless, desperate to create an excuse he figured she'd fall for?

"You are beautiful. But you're helping me find a date. I can talk to you because I don't get panicky thinking I have to impress you." His eyes pleaded his case along with his explanation.

"Hmm. You only panic if you try too hard, is that what you're saying?"

"Yes. Yes, that's it. You don't scare me."

With a shrug of resignation, Serena planted herself on the sofa and resolved to play out the scenario his way...for the time being. "Glad to hear I pose no threat to you. Fine. Let's practice for tonight."

They sat a few inches apart. She couldn't ignore the prickling sensation warming her body along her side closest to Dan. The man made her system dance, even without touching her.

"So, should I start out with some kind of pickup line? Do women want that?"

Serena couldn't stop the arching of her eyebrows as disbelief paraded through her head. Could Dan really be so dense and inexperienced? Left to his judgment and obvious made-for-failure guidelines, he'd actually resort to a stupid, overused line, something all women hated. Warning bells would immediately sound the alarm inside the head of his intended target, accompanied by a flashing message titled "Time to lose this creep". Miss "S" would seek a speedy escape.

"Hmm. I don't think you want to use any line. You should just relax and be yourself." Whoever that is. "Start with something honest like your name, or, compliment her on how she looks."

Dan fidgeted in his seat. "How about something like this." He gently took her hand in his. The letters started rolling in her head, but in a slow, flowing pattern. "Hi. I'm Dan. You look wonderful."

Her eyes focused on his. In reality, his eyes commanded her full attention in a mesmerizing way. Serena had to admit that his comment sounded sincere. Maybe he understood how important it was to ease into conversation with a date and make her feel special. She sure did, even if his practicing on her wasn't real.

"Thank you. I'm Serena. You look just like your picture."

Dan inhaled then spoke. "You too. And, you smell great. Reminds me of something my grandmother always wears. White Roses, right?"

Again, she couldn't halt her eyebrows rising or mouth opening, minus any words. Shaking her head, Serena wondered if he'd ever tried the grandmother comment before. He knew what White Roses smelled like?

"The, uh, remark about the perfume is fine, but lose the comparison to your grandmother. Women don't like to be compared to anyone. We like to feel unique, different, special."

A contrite look came over his face. "Oh, sorry. I love my grandmother and thought this would be a compliment. See how bad I am? Now you know why I need your help."

Serena stood up abruptly and began to pace, trying to break the spell he cast over her. She needed distance to clear her head and stay focused on her job.

"Look. Talk about the things you have in common. You read her file. You know what she likes. Tell her what you like but don't leave her out of the conversation. Ask her opinions on things."

He ran a hand over his face. "Wow. So much to remember. Promise me you'll stick close tonight. I don't want to come off like an idiot. If I say something stupid, give me a signal."

Serena abruptly ended her back and forth movement across the carpet to face him. With her hands on her hips, she replied, "Like what? Blink twice? Wrinkle my nose?"

"No. Make sure you sit next to me so you can tap my knee or something."

*Oh, no. Touching him anywhere on his body is a definite no-no.*

Still not sure if he was on the level with her or if this was some type of game, she offered, "How about if I step on your toes?"

Dan patted a spot on the sofa next to him. "Please sit down again and let's practice."

Hesitant to sit near him again but finding no logical reason to deny his request, she dropped into the cushioned seat next to him. "All right. I'm sitting. Say something stupid."

Dan flashed her a huge smile, showing off that one fascinating dimple she'd admired when she'd first met him. "Tell me your secret fantasy and I'll tell you mine."

His comment, made in such a sexy, suggestive tone, had Serena's body blazing with heat. Let's run this line of conversation a little further. At least, that's what her heart said even if her head shouted for her to smash his toes.

Serena gave him a questionable look. "Is that a promise?"

"What?"

"If I tell you mine, you'll tell me yours?"

"Absolutely."

"Fine. I've always wanted to make love in a bubbly tub for two, complete with champagne and glowing candles."

Dan's arm snaked around her back and pulled her closer to him. "Funny. That's my fantasy, too."

The spell broke the minute he uttered his agreement. He'd been playing and not serious about being honest. She stomped down on his toes.

"Ow!"

Warmth crept up her face. "Sorry. Was that too hard?"

He stood, hobbling around the room, only stopping to shake his foot. "What the hell did I say wrong?"

"For starters, it's probably a bit too soon to ask about fantasies, although I don't know how fast you usually come on to your dates."

He halted and stared at her. "I never rush a woman into anything, if that's what you mean."

"Okay. You want to take things slowly. And, you weren't being honest with me."

"In what way?"

"Please. Don't tell me your fantasy just happens to be the same as mine."

His gaze became more intense as he answered. "But it is. I wouldn't lie about that. Not to you."

"Dan, it sounds phony. I'd suggest not trying that tonight."

"Fine. I won't. But do you believe me when I say it's not a line? What do your vibrations tell you? Do they say I'm being honest?"

Damn. Every sensation emanating from him screamed with honesty. Could he really have the same fantasy she did?

"Maybe you are being honest." She cleared her throat. "Let's move on. Talk about something else."

Dan eyed her with caution. "When I sit down again, do you promise not to break my toes if I screw up?"

Irritated, Serena answered, "Of course."

For the next twenty minutes, they talked and very few of his answers initiated a negative response from her. Trying to appear more accommodating, Serena raked a fingernail on his leg if his comment seemed out of place. The movement caught his attention and he'd quickly change the topic. The gesture sent shivers throughout her body, causing her heart to beat faster at their contact.

A quick peek at her watch indicated their practice session needed to end and their date to begin.

*Not our date, our dates.*

"I think we should leave." Without thinking, she rested her hand on his knee.

Covering her hand with his, Dan gave a tiny squeeze. "Anything you say."

The door to her office opened and a man strolled in. His gaze went to Serena, then to Dan, finally focusing on their intertwined hands resting on his knee.

"Sorry. Am I interrupting something?"

## Chapter Six

Serena eyed her brother with a mixture of gratitude, comfort and anxiety. It was a blessing to have Mike by her side, there for his sibling in her time of need. Now, however, things had become more complicated than when she first issued her distress call to him. Dan had become a major player in the mixed-up saga of her life.

Should she introduce the two?

No. Bad idea.

She shouldn't let Dan know Mike was her brother and a cop.

Yes. Good idea.

Force Dan to show his true colors. Put him on the spot. If he were nervous around Mike, her suspicions would be confirmed.

Hmm.

Giant knots twisted in the pit of her stomach as the two men shifted their glances from her and began eyeballing each other. Great. Mike had that "I'm protecting my little sister" look on his face and Dan aimed a possessive stare right back at him.

Serena's heart skipped a beat as she scrutinized the expression on Dan's face. Could he be jealous? Or, was he worried some other male planned to cut into his future group of "clients"?

Her mind spun with confused scenarios of their uncomfortable threesome. With shattered nerves and her heart beating a rapid tattoo against her chest, she decided deception would be best. For now. Only good vibes came from Dan, regardless of the irritating "I was here first" glare he aimed at her brother.

Her sense could be all wrong about him. She'd been wrong before. And that mistake went by the name of Alan.

The awkward silence screamed for her to come to a decision. Serena decided on a compromise.

"Mr. 'Four-eighteen', this is Mr., uh, 'Eight'." Even as she uttered the introduction she winced, hoping both would accept her peace offering and behave like gentlemen. She prayed her brother played along without gawking at her.

Dan's head swung from her to Mike, then he offered his hand to the new arrival.

"Nice to meet you. My name's Dan."

Oh-oh. She hadn't counted on him being so friendly. Serena figured keeping Mike's identity from Dan was crucial. Before Mike could speak, she said, "This is Gino. He's another client of mine."

Her brother's face glazed over as if trying to decipher what the hell she was up to. He shook Dan's hand, nodding to him as he did. Grateful for her brother's silence, the butterfly rampage in her stomach ceased. They evolved into minor flutters and eased into a slow, flittering pattern.

Why Gino, Mr. "Eight"? The guy was a playboy, considered himself God's gift to women. After a complaint from a female client two weeks before about him, Serena had quickly notified Gino that he was no longer a client. Whatever possessed her to pick that number? And, use his name?

Clearing her throat, she broke the silence once more. "Uh, Dan? Gino and I need to discuss something so why don't you go ahead and leave for the restaurant."

Dan's expression changed to one of a wounded puppy. "Oh. I thought we could go together so I could practice some more in the car." His eyes pleaded his case.

"Umm, okay. You relax here and Gino and I will go to the back room. When we're done, I'll leave with you."

"Thanks." A warm smile beamed at Serena.

She turned to Mike and gently pushed him into the back room.

"What the hell's going on here?" Mike hissed as soon as they were inside her file room.

"Shh." Serena closed the door. "I don't want him to know who you are or that you're a cop."

Mike eyed his sister with curiosity. "What kind of mess are you in? Nothing dangerous, I hope?" His hands balled into fists. "If this guy's been giving you trouble..."

"No, no. It's not like that. I'm just, well, not sure who he really is or if he's out to meet women or find clients for himself."

"Huh?"

"I mean, his background checks out, the kind of checking I do and I don't get any weird vibes from him, although he is different..."

Mike took hold of his sister's arms and gave her a gentle shake. "Earth to Serena. Calm down. You're rushing through this and I can't make heads or tails of what's coming out of your mouth."

Serena slumped against her brother's body. His warm bear hug gave her a sense of security she'd always cherished. Although, she didn't feel like she needed to be protected from Dan. Damn. He also made her feel protected, safe.

"Sis, start again but go slowly this time."

"I think he may be out to find women to fleece as a gigolo."

Dan squinted as he peeked through one of the beveled glass panels leading into the back room. He tried to stay out of sight, sneaking up to the door and crouching in an effort to remain hidden from Serena and her so-called Mr. "Eight".

*Mr. "Eight", my foot.* What was she up to?

He knew for a fact that the man he'd just shaken hands with wasn't Gino Conti. The real Gino's picture lay in a folder on his desk back at the office. So, who was this guy and why had Serena resorted to playing games?

Anger raced through his system as he glimpsed "Gino" hugging Serena in a warm embrace. Obviously they knew each other pretty well and that didn't make him happy. Damn. What kind of vibes did she get from "Gino"?

A more disturbing train of thought to question his sanity and logic would be why it mattered so much to him that they appeared so chummy together. Why should I care?

Giving himself a mental smack on the back of his head, Dan decided it was time to get back to work, the reason he'd been led into this mess to begin with. Be a detective, do your job. Find out what's really going on at Second Sight Dating. Getting jealous over a beautiful woman's choice in lying to him and being real friendly with some shady character needed to be bumped to the back burner of his mind.

Work.

Job.

Paycheck.

Boss.

He had priorities to consider.

But hell, Serena was now the itch under his skin and Dan wanted desperately to scratch. All over.

Another thing bothered him. "Gino" couldn't possibly be her date for the evening. Could he? Wouldn't she have said so right away?

No. She said they had something to discuss so he couldn't be her date.

Something about "Gino" and the protective way he held her made Dan wonder if they might be involved. He couldn't mistake the male signal the man had given him when they were introduced. The "I take care of her, you better watch out, she's mine" message got across to Dan loud and clear. Funny. He thought he'd sent out a "caution" signal to "Gino", too.

He took another peek at the two. Why was the guy still holding her?

"Should I come to dinner with you?" Mike released his hold on his sister, frown lines appearing on his face to match his worried words.

"No, you better not. I have a date arranged already. Maybe I can use you another time, depending on how this plays out." She moved away from her brother and



slumped against a file cabinet. "I know this'll sound crazy, but I still get nothing but good vibes from him."

"Yeah, well, you felt that way about Alan. Maybe this Dan character is on the up and up and then again, maybe he's another loser."

Serena winced at her brother labeling Dan a loser. In her heart, she truly sensed more to him than womanizer on the prowl. *Am I losing my gift? Will Dan Reese be my downfall?* An uneasy feeling landed in the pit of her stomach, especially since, regardless of her suspicions, she couldn't deny her attraction to him.

She handed her brother the key to her apartment. "Grab his file off my desk as we leave while I distract him and rush him out. There's not much to go on and like I said, I did all the preliminary checks and he seems legitimate."

"Sis, will you be all right? Sure you don't want me to follow and wait outside for you?"

Her brother's concern touched her heart, but she sensed no need for protection. "I'll be fine. I'll meet you back at my place in a few hours."

Serena leaned toward her brother and planted a kiss on his cheek.

Dan hadn't missed the final kiss shared by the two in the back room. With one stealthy maneuver, he backed away from the door and returned to his original spot in her office.

His insides churned after watching her hand a key to "Gino". Had she planned some late-night rendezvous with him? He almost expected her to come out and suddenly reveal new plans she had for the evening, making an excuse why she couldn't go to dinner.

*Just try that, sweetheart. I won't let you get away from me that easily.*

Serena and Mike walked back into the office, turning their full attention to Dan. With a slight blush, she apologized.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Gino is ready to leave and so should we."

She smiled, took Dan's arm and led him away from her desk. "Uh, Gino? Don't forget the papers on my desk," she mentioned as they reached the door.

Dan turned to see what "Gino" picked up from her desk, but Serena's body blocked his view. Files on other women? Was this man working with the real Gino and setting up women for stud service?

Serena—a madam doling out potential, vulnerable clients for a bevy of guys? Was the mob involved? Did this new guy have mob connections like Gino?

Or, Serena—honest businesswoman, tantalizing beauty his body reacted to while his head swam with fantasies only she seemed destined to fulfill?

His mind whirled with questions as he wondered whom the real Serena would turn out to be.

Outside, Mike bid Serena and Dan good night and left them standing in the parking lot.

After a brief conversation, Dan somehow managed to convince her that they should drive together. Actually, Serena welcomed the suggestion. It gave her more time to scrutinize his every word and move.

"Dan, stop worrying about this. You'll do fine. What can go wrong if you just be yourself with Miss 'S'? Show her the real you. After all, you two do have some things in common."

Serena's stomach clenched as she spoke. What she'd just said wasn't exactly true. Dan and his date had very little in common. She'd stretched the truth because their letter and number matched.

Sort of.

"What if she doesn't like me? I mean, even you found me annoying when we first met."

"I, umm, wouldn't say that's true. You're a likeable guy. Really. You just need to relax and take cues from what she says."

"I'm so glad you'll be there."

Serena shifted her eyes from the road to Dan. Was he telling the truth? If he were out to recruit clients for his own purposes, why would he want her there? Wouldn't she just hinder his plan of action, mess up his usual routine?

Hmm. Maybe having her there offered a sense of legitimacy to the women she introduced him to, putting them at ease thus rendering them easy prey for his future moves.

"Don't worry. I'll keep my eye on you—I mean things—all night."

Dan stretched in his seat. "You have no idea how comforting that is."

## Chapter Seven

"Mr. 'Four-eighteen', this is Miss 'S'." Serena did the introductions inside the restaurant's lobby as they waited to be seated.

The blonde eyed Dan up and down and extended her hand to him. "Hi. You can call me Monica." Her smile couldn't hide the bored, unhappy greeting Serena immediately picked up on.

Damn. She should have seen this coming. Well, she did, in her own way of knowing. After all, more things didn't match than did on their lists, even if their number and letter matched.

Sort of.

In Serena's sight.

Damn again.

"Hi, I'm Dan." He grabbed the woman's small hand in his and pumped as if priming for water.

This wasn't going well. Serena envisioned a quick evening if this beginning were any indication. She watched Monica pull her hand away from Dan and cross her arms. The blonde made some excuse about checking out the restaurant's lobby entrance area and walked away.

"Dan. You're trying too hard. Relax." Serena said these words just as a voice in her head screamed out something entirely different. *Idiot. This is good. He can't take advantage of her if she hates him.*

"Sorry. I'll go over and talk to her." He walked away, leaving Serena to wonder when her own date would make an appearance.

Ten minutes later, she had to admit the evening would be a disaster. Monica barely spoke to Dan, circling the small lobby as if utterly absorbed in scrutinizing the décor. Serena watched the woman avoid contact with him by moving away every time Dan headed in her direction.

Dan didn't seem to get the hint. He kept following her around, making Serena more convinced than ever that he was on the level. No man could be so pathetic and clueless about his lack of charm unless socially challenged and weird to begin with. How could poor Dan really be a cad?

And, where the hell was Sean?

Serena decided not to prolong the night. Better to have dinner and get the evening over with as soon as possible, regardless of whether or not her date showed up. She, Dan and Monica would make an uncomfortable threesome, have dinner, then part company. With any luck, she could be home commiserating with her brother by nine.

The hostess brought them to a semicircled booth. Serena slid in, leaving ample space for her clients. Monica eased in next to her leaving space for Dan. Dating Disaster Dan pushed in next to Serena on the other side, causing both women to glide over the booth seat to make room for him.

*Great. Sandwiched in the middle.*

Monica declined a drink or appetizer and complained about what she perceived to be only fattening food on the menu. Dan gushed over the menu selections, excitedly pointing out all the wonderful choices available. Serena, attempting to squelch any stomach knots, tried to sound pleasant and interested in the many dishes he discussed as her brain glazed over at his one-sided conversation.

She and Dan had wine and shared two appetizers. Monica stared off into space, refusing any offers to taste foods after telling the waiter to be sure and bring a box for her leftovers.

As their meals were served, Sean rushed in to join them, an overdone smile covering his face and a hand placed over his heart. "Sorry I'm a little late. Got tied up at work." He delivered his greeting with a curt nod to Dan and brief smile to Serena. His eyes then focused on Monica and remained there as he took inventory of the woman seated next to Serena. "I'm Sean."

He leveled a very long look at Monica, one of a man sizing up his next date. Totally ignored, Serena slouched in her seat, witnessing a definite unplanned and mismatched "love at first sight" scenario unfolding before her eyes.

Monica's grin accompanied her batting eyelashes as she held out her hand toward Sean. Serena knew that "I'm interested" stare Monica aimed at Sean meant Dan didn't stand a chance.

"Well, hello there. I'm Monica. Why don't you sit down right here next to me. You must be exhausted after a long day at work." The woman practically purred with interest.

Serena almost choked on her forkful of linguini. Sean? Work? The man worked as a security guard at some corporate office and sat on his rear end all day, watching monitors.

Sean grinned at the blonde and slid onto the seat next to her. Serena couldn't help but notice how the woman scooted away from her and closer to the new arrival.

Curious to note how Dan processed the scene between his date and hers, she casually glanced at him. The man continued to eat his meal with gusto, seemingly oblivious to the budding interest between the other two clients. As he chewed he smiled at Serena, never hinting his date's behavior bothered him in the least.

"Hey, I'm Dan." He offered a greeting to the other man then slid closer to Serena. "How am I doing?" Dan whispered to her.

Like a brick wall. Dense. Off in left field, more interested in your food than the fact that your date is getting chummy with Sean.

How could she still wonder if he was out to meet women for his own agenda? Mr. Nerd?

*Thanks, Morgan. I feel like an idiot.* Dan kept shoveling food into his mouth, regardless of how much his stomach churned from aggravation over continuing his little charade. Keeping up the pretense of being clueless about Monica's interest in Sean and obvious revulsion over him, caused his insides to clench.

No point in making a scene since the blonde ward off any and all moves he tried at catching her attention. Maybe he wasn't her type.

He eyed his rival, noting how he himself might look to a woman in comparison to the new arrival. Hmm. Dressed casually, there was nothing fancy about his own attire. Sean, on the other hand, wore a suit and tie, presenting a "richer" image. Maybe the guy was out to lure a wealthy customer and fingered the blonde as someone who had money.

Dan guessed it could be a possibility the woman was a target although her file didn't indicate her monetary status. As a model, or an aspiring one, she dressed expensively. Could have a fortune hidden away somewhere that only Serena might be privy to. Maybe the woman wanted to keep that part of her life a secret and off her file info.

If her interest demanded finding someone with money to burn, there remained the possibility that Monica channeled her attention on Sean because he seemed a more likely candidate. Although he came across as a slick loser, maybe the guy was really a rich idiot in disguise and Serena knew this.

Then, what the hell was he there for?

To play chaperon?

Make the meeting look legit?

Could be.

Dan returned his attention to the conversation going on between Sean and Monica. Neither seemed interested in including the other two people at their table.

Serena's head ached. Although she'd hoped for some success for Dan if he truly wanted to find someone and wasn't a con artist, the evening wasn't going as planned. She couldn't deny a tiny twinge of jealousy over Monica being his date, then relief when the blonde dismissed him for Sean. The night would end quickly if Serena moved fast.

Sean hadn't ordered a main dish, only a dessert that he shared with Monica. Dan and Serena chose decaf coffee.

When the bill was presented, the foursome split the tab. Dan and Serena exited the booth while the other two stayed seated.

"Uh, hope you don't mind but Monica and I want to finish our discussion."

Grateful for some type of closure and the ability to exit gracefully, Serena smiled. "Not a problem. I don't know much about hard rock music anyway. You two enjoy yourselves."

She then directed her attention to Dan, wondering how he'd take the news. After all, the man had just been dumped.

*Like me.*

He had the air of someone not at all affected by his date's snub. "Sure. I don't much care for that kind of music. More of a country music fan myself. Nice meeting both of you."

With a humbling graciousness Serena wished she could portray, Dan shook hands with the happily seated couple. He then escorted her out of the restaurant.

"Nice couple. Sorry your date ignored you." Dan's comment came as they settled themselves inside the car for the ride back to her office.

Serena bristled at his comment. "He wasn't really my date. I mean, uh, we just went out to make up the foursome. Sorry Monica didn't work out for you."

"Well, I know I made lots of mistakes tonight so I can't blame her. You'll just have to give me more help in getting ready for my next dinner date."

Neither spoke during the rest of the ride. Dan tried to review the evening's disastrous scenes. First, he'd made a fool of himself by hounding Monica in the lobby and following her around like a lovesick puppy. Then, he'd acted the complete buffoon and talked incessantly about food, something his date obviously had no interest in. His switch in gears and rambling on about the insurance business only succeeded in gaining yawns from everyone at the table.

The only spark of interest developed when Sean joined the group trying to speak Italian. Dan's only dilemma—figure out if the airhead blonde's goal pushed her to chase Sean or if Mr. Phony Italian Accent was putting the moves on Monica.

Hmm. Either one of them might have viewed the other as a potential target with money. Monica had talked about all her lucrative modeling jobs in the works. And, Sean did mention an inheritance becoming available in a month.

So, who was Serena setting up? Her plan all along must have been to get the two together. Maybe their number and letter didn't match initially and using the guise of a foursome gave her the chance to throw Sean at Monica...or the other way around. After all, she had said she and Sean weren't actually on a date.

This whole "sight" thing didn't sit right with Dan. Hell, Monica had nothing in common with him. She wasn't his type at all. He preferred someone like, well, Serena.

But, how could he fall for a fraud?

\* \* \* \* \*

Serena thanked Dan for the ride when they parked next to her car. A near-blinding headache would only subside as soon as she could put the disastrous evening behind her. She opened the car door and scooted out of the seat.

"I'm sorry the night didn't go as planned. I'll call tomorrow to set up your next dinner date."

"That'll be fine, as long as you tag along, too. Now that you've seen me in action, you have to admit I need help."

*Maybe. Maybe not if it's just a game.*

"We'll practice again before going out. And, don't worry. I definitely will bring a date and make it a party of four."

With a fake smile, Serena slammed the car door shut, purposefully staying rooted to the ground while waving to Dan as he drove away. Maybe now the pounding in her head would stop.

Instead of going right home, she'd make a quick stop into her office. There she'd pull out the file for Miss "E".

Serena reviewed their evening, wondering how it had gone from anxious to flop. Could Dan be so much of a loser he just didn't have any charm to throw at women?

He'd been more interested in his food than the blonde, who happened to be a model. Didn't he find her attractive?

Hmm. Maybe beauty didn't interest him. Perhaps his mode of operation dictated he approach and dazzle plain-looking women, ones who might be thrilled at his attention. He was, after all, a handsome man. Someone she found herself attracted to.

He came across as tongue-tied, unable to dish out any credible compliment to a female date. Then again, he did say some nice things to her. But, that could just be part of his devious plan, a ruse to win Serena over and throw her off from following his true agenda.

Mike. She had to talk to her brother about the whole situation. Serena took the file already in hand, then hurried into the back room. Once there, she picked out files for Miss "X" and Gino, Mr. "Eight". Mike might need to read about the women Dan would be meeting. He'd probably find it important to know about his alter ego, Gino, just in case he and Dan ever appeared in the same spot again.

Her mind kept replaying the events of the evening as she drove home. While pleasant and attentive to her, Dan acted like a naïve clod when it came to his date. He welcomed Sean, never hinting he'd viewed him as a rival.

As she drove home, Serena inhaled a deep, shaky breath, speculating over whether or not Dan could be unbelievably dense but legit. Her body and soul urged her to trust him. Alan's betrayal came to mind, but somehow Dan never gave out the same type of negative vibes her former lover sent her way.

Those thoughts kept swimming in her head as she entered her apartment, searching for her brother's comforting aura and the reassurance of her sanity.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan crouched down in the driver's seat, certain that Serena hadn't spotted him. He'd found her sweater in his car and driven back to the parking lot just as she'd driven away. Following her, he decided to use returning the garment as a ruse to maybe check out her apartment.

He peeked out just as she'd knocked on her own door, only to have it opened by "Gino". The man had smiled and planted a kiss on her forehead.

Strange. A kiss on the head. Didn't seem to be the passionate type of kiss he'd give Serena if given the chance.

Grabbing the sweater, Dan exited his car and headed for her first floor apartment. The blinds were partially opened so he glanced inside, curiosity and a tinge of jealousy getting the better of him.

Jealousy crept through his body. He wanted her. She couldn't be involved in any crime ring. Desiring a woman on the wrong side of a case wasn't an option.

Never happened before. Couldn't be happening now. He'd always been a good judge of character except, well, when it came to his ex-wife. Dan snorted. Real piece of work.

Serena wasn't like her. Right? He marched to the door.

The door swung open after his rapid knocking. "Gino" appeared. "Oh. You. We met in the office, right?"

Dan glanced around him, trying to locate Serena. "I came to return Serena's sweater. She left it in my car."

With a shrug, the man offered, "Fine. Come in. She'll be right out."

Dan's head swiveled toward a hallway as Serena appeared, dressed in a bathrobe. She stopped short, surprise masking her face.

"What are you doing here?"



## Chapter Eight

Dan's insides roiled with disappointment. This didn't look good. Serena, in a bright pink fuzzy bathrobe, freshly scrubbed face, bare feet. The man with his jacket off, tie undone and some opened buttons on his shirt. Nope. Not good at all. The scene played out as a picture of lovers about to embark on some wild night of passion and that rankled his innards.

Did he care so much that she apparently had a lover or that the man wasn't who she said he was? Or, both?

Deep in his gut, he had to admit his trust in her dropped a few notches. Bottom line, she lied about "Gino". What possible excuse for that could she offer? Only a guilty person, someone with something to hide, would resort to this charade.

Dan found his voice and finally answered. "I, uh, came to return your sweater." His eyes roamed from her to "Gino", carefully scrutinizing both.

Nose tilted up slightly and eyes narrowed, Serena replied in a clipped tone, "How did you know where I live?" He detected a slight hint of pink coloring her cheeks.

Hell. Her question, tone, accused him of...what? He had nothing to feel guilty about. Her shrinking innocence image just ditched down further into the murky waters of suspicion and probable guilt.

In a stern but calm voice, he responded, "I tried to catch you at the office, but you were in your car so I followed you here." He glared at her then at "Gino". "Sorry if I'm interrupting something."

Serena panicked as Mike took a tentative step toward Dan. Oh, no. Although her brother probably wanted to defend her, this wasn't the time for a battle. She quickly moved to her brother, resting her hand on his arm.

"Would you wait in the kitchen for me, Gino? I'd like to speak to Dan in private."

Her brother's warning stare before he reluctantly strode away spoke volumes. He wanted to deal with Dan his own way, but to appease her, he'd back off for now. She'd better handle her client, send him on his way and spend the rest of the night soothing Mike's ruffled feathers. Satisfying his curiosity later and appealing to his detective skills couldn't hurt either.

Serena turned her attention to Dan. "You shouldn't have come here. I like to keep my personal life private from my work."

"Isn't Gino a client, too?"

*Damn. Think fast.* “Actually, we’ve been talking about him becoming my partner.” Even as she uttered those words, Serena wondered at her own sanity. It even sounded phony to her, but desperation made people say stupid things.

Surprise registered on his face. Did he buy her excuse?

“You need a partner? Are you in financial trouble or just expanding your business?”

Now even more annoyed, her nerves danced on the brink of shattering at his game of twenty questions. Hands on hips, she glared at him. “Business is booming and I’m considering adding a partner. However, I don’t see where that’s any of your business.”

He relaxed his stance. “Oh. I see.”

She shivered as a mixture of senses bounced off Dan back onto her. Strange. All she deciphered pointed toward disappointment and relief intertwined. Did he dislike the fact that her business was booming and she sought a partner? Or, happy and relieved at her success?

Dan eyed the entry into her kitchen then aimed an embarrassed peek at her. “Sorry for the intrusion. I’ll go now.”

Huh? Could he have gotten a completely different idea when Mike opened the door and she appeared in her bathrobe? Could he be jealous?

Hmm. She’d encountered that green-eyed monster herself back in the restaurant. At first jealous over Dan’s date with size two, model-goddess Monica, relief had settled in after he’d been dumped. No matter how hard she tried to tell herself otherwise, his failure pleased her.

It could have been because she still wasn’t convinced of his honesty at wanting to meet women. Then again, Dan had a way of causing her body temperature to jump a few degrees every time he looked at her with those bedroom eyes.

A tiny niggling of remorse replaced her anger. So did curiosity. Was he jealous?

Serena quickly padded over to the door, opening it for Dan. “Look, it’s been a strange night for both of us and it’s late. Neither of our dates turned out the way I thought they would.” *Not true. I knew they wouldn’t work.* “Come to my office at noon tomorrow. Let’s work on what you’ll say to Miss ‘E’ for your next date.”

His face brightened a bit as he said, “You’ll still help me? Can we set up a date soon? Like Sunday?”

Desperate Dan, on the prowl for a date? Or, a woman to fleece?

“I’ll, uh, try for that. For myself, too. See you tomorrow.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Steve, I still can’t believe she’s involved in shady business, but there’s no doubting Serena comes across as someone with something to hide.”

Dan's night had been anything but restful after leaving Serena's apartment. He'd lingered outside for awhile, hunkering down in the driver's seat of his car, keeping a close eye on her front door and window.

After an hour of spying, frustration set in and he'd made the decision to leave. Why the hell had she let "Gino" stay but kicked him out?

"What happened?"

Over the next few minutes, Dan related his evening's trip into the dating world of Serena's making. Not a pleasant sight, no pun intended. Things had gone from bad to worse.

"Romeo, turn on the charm. You've got to get her away from this new Gino guy. Make her think you're interested in being her partner."

Dan rubbed his face with both hands, then aimed a dubious look at his boss. "Her even considering me as a partner has to be a long shot, but hey...all she can do is say no. I'll have to have some bankroll behind me for this if she somehow wants to check my finances. Are you authorizing funds? How much?"

Steve shrugged. "See what she's asking. We'll go from there. Tell her you have a trust fund you can dip into for a good investment. But keep working on the dating thing and meet these other two women."

"Why? If I get her to take me on as a partner, why do we need the others?"

Steve shrugged. "Witnesses, part of her stable of women, who knows what we'll come up with."

Hands balling into fists by the sides of his legs, Dan trudged out of Steve's office after uttering an audible, "Hell."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sis, I'm not sure I understand what's bothering you about this Dan guy. Quite honestly, I'd say he's jealous and has a crush on you."

Serena scrutinized her brother as he sat across from her at the kitchen table, ready to do verbal battle with him.

She'd looked like an undesirable fool with playboy Sean. Did Dan take pity on her? Commiserate with a fellow dumpee? Dan? Jealous? Maybe he really thought she and Mike, newly named Gino, were an item.

"I told you already. I watched him snooping around my paperwork, checking out bios. And, come on. How could such a handsome, sexy man need help in finding women? Wouldn't women line up outside his door, fighting each other for a chance at him?"

"Oh, little sister of mine." Mike laughed as he waved a finger at her. "You've got it bad for this guy. Admit it. This is me you're talking to. I've always been able to read you like a book."

Serena jumped up from her chair and stomped over to the coffee machine. She proceeded to slosh the brown liquid into her cup and onto the counter. "You're so wrong. He means nothing to me." She sniffed. "Just another client. A very suspicious one at that."

"Sure. And all those crazy things that seem to happen since he entered your life don't mean a thing."

She pivoted to face her brother while trying to calm tiny rumblings bouncing in her stomach. Mike was so off-base on this one. Or at least, she wanted him to think so.

"All right, older and smarter brother of mine. What things are you talking about?"

"Sit down before you spill coffee all over the floor. Jeez. This is the first time I've seen you get so wound up over a guy since Alan. Actually, more with this guy."

Willing her breathing to convert to a more normal pattern, Serena fought hard to control her every movement, every word. She took slow and deliberate steps to the table, ensuring a steady stride. Thankfully, her hands remained calm, neither shaking like her insides. She sat once again, waiting for her brother to explain his theories.

Mike smiled at her and said, "Much better. Okay, here goes. First, he doesn't fit into your usual range of client."

"Right. That's why I'm leery of his motives."

"Let me continue, okay? Second, you've never had someone give you so much trouble with your number-letter match-ups."

"So?"

"Third, I've seen how he looks at you and, more importantly, how you look at him." He rocked back in his chair and smirked at Serena. "Do you think I'm blind?"

"You have this all wrong. He's up to something. Why all the sneaking around? He peeked through my files. He followed me here. He acted the complete loser with his date in the restaurant. No, he's not real."

Michael inhaled and exhaled with a loud sigh. "Okay. I know you did your own background check. I don't have the same connections here I used to have so I can't do too much, but I sure can check out where he works."

"And you're out in left field if you think there's anything between us." Serena tipped her head up to give credence to her statement.

"Sis, I'm not trying to get into a fight with you over this. There's something between you two." He shrugged. "I can tell. It's our curse, being blessed with this extra power of 'sight'. We can't shake it off or ignore it."

Serena's head dropped and she exhaled a loud "whoosh" sound. "Damn our powers. You and I never could fool each other, could we? I want so much to trust Dan, but why all the subterfuge? What's he hiding?"

"Like I already told you, I'll check on him. Who knows? We may luck out and uncover something."

"Thanks, big brother. You're always there for me."

"Now don't go getting mushy on me. I may not be able to do anything until Monday."

"You'll be back in Wichita then."

"Nope. I'm staying put for the week. I have some leave time coming and you're a good, desperate enough excuse for me to use it."

Serena grabbed a nearby dishtowel and flung it at her brother's smirking face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan entered Serena's office the next afternoon, unsure of his sanity. Half of him, the spontaneous "follow-those-urges" side, wanted to seduce her and spend the rest of the day making love with her. His analytical, suspicious other half reviewed everything that had transpired in her case and kept coming to the conclusion that she was a fraud.

*Get a grip, man.*

Primly seated at her desk, she looked up at him as he walked in, offering a smile of welcome. If only it could be one of genuine interest in Dan as a man, not Dan as a client. That last part had two different spins to it and one of them could get her thrown in jail.

"Ready to try again?"

Dan heard her words as he surveyed her appearance. Although neatly dressed, she looked different. Even without any makeup, she was a beauty. Her curly hair held a rumpled look and he imagined Serena chose to run fingers through her auburn tresses rather than use a comb or brush.

Her brown eyes shone, glazed over just enough for the tiny green flecks to glisten. Her eyes looked puffy, in need of sleep. Dan wondered if she'd just rolled out of bed and dragged herself into the office.

*Just to meet me.*

*After spending the night with "Gino".*

*Damn.*

He cleared his throat then answered her. "Sure. Awake and anxious to get started."

"I'm glad one of us is awake. I had a hard time sleeping last night."

"Stay up too late?"

"Not really. I just had a lot on my mind. And the numbers and letters kept merging in my brain."

"You see them in your dreams?"

Serena shook her head. "No. Just when I'm still awake."

Dan began to pace the office, pretending to be interested in her choice of wall décor.

"Maybe having me and Gino show up at your apartment threw your night off."

He glanced at her, trying to gauge her reaction to his comment. Only a cold stare gazed back at him.

"You left early and Gino is none of your business."

Michael could be right. Maybe he is jealous.

Serena's heart fluttered with hope, although bothersome doubts hindered her euphoria. His jealousy could evolve from his suspicion of an involvement between her and "Gino". That could be looked at as a positive reaction. If he feared competition in his ploy to gain customers for his own operation, that would place his jealous reaction in the negative, unwanted response.

Dan rubbed a hand over his face and through his hair. "Look, besides wanting to continue with having you match me up with someone, I'm interested in your business."

Huh? The bottom fell out of Serena's world as her heart sank into the pit of her stomach. "My business?"

Dan strolled over to her desk and leaned over it toward her. "Didn't you say you were looking for a business partner? Isn't that what you and Gino talked about last night?"

"Um, yes. But why would you be interested?"

Straightening up, Dan hooked both hands into his pockets. "I've got a trust fund I can dip into. Maybe a business like yours is something I want to invest in."

"Why this? Why don't you look into something you've watched operate more than a few days? Surely you don't just jump into things without really checking them out."

An unpleasant smirk on his face annoyed Serena. She stared back, praying the hurt and doubts merging inside her didn't reflect in the cold look she hoped she was giving him.

"You don't know me at all. Maybe it's time for me to take a chance on something. I like your business. Matching people gives joy and comfort to others." He shrugged. "I want a piece of something profitable."

Serena sunk back into her seat. There were just too many ways to interpret his comments.

"I...I need to know you better before I consider letting you buy half of my business."

"Reasonable request. I have questions about the business too. How about dinner tonight? Then we can concentrate on getting to know each other while you tell me about Second Sight Dating."

"Dinner? Tonight? Uh, I'm not sure I can." *What about Mike?*

"I figure tomorrow won't work if I'm supposed to be meeting Miss 'E'."

Damn. Mike would have to fend for himself and let her do some detective work on her own. Dining alone with Dan would give her the opportunity to uncover any secret agenda he had hidden up his sleeve for her business.

She smiled. "Of course you're right on target. I did contact your date already and tomorrow will be fine with her. I set it up for seven at The Cheesecake Factory on 119 Street. Will that work for you?"

A momentary sense of confusion clouded his face, but then he agreed enthusiastically. "And do you have your date set up, too?"

With the brightest smile she could muster considering her quaking insides, she replied, "Not yet. But, I will. I wouldn't leave you alone with anyone, knowing how much you need me." *And how much I need to watch you.*

Dan's smile faded. "And, our dinner tonight? Where and when?"

"The Macaroni Grill on Metcalf. Is six okay?"

He nodded in agreement. "Shall I pick you up?"

Thinking quickly, she rushed out, "No. I mean, meet me here."

Dan quirked an eyebrow and answered, "Sure. I'll be here at five-thirty."

Serena dropped her gaze from Dan and searched the files on her desk. "Here's...no. Wrong bio. Here's the file for Miss 'E'. In case you want to review it before tomorrow."

Dan sat opposite her and took the file. "Will she be in to review mine?"

"No. I spoke to her and she seemed satisfied with what I relayed over the phone."

He took less than a minute to check his date's information before tossing the file onto Serena's desk. "Fine. What should I say to her?"

"Maybe you could try to be more personable. You know. Tell her some interesting things about yourself. She works with dogs. Talk about that. Find some common ground and go in that direction."

Dan rubbed his chin and glanced up at the ceiling as if pondering Serena's words of wisdom on dating and making an impression.

"Dogs, huh? I guess I can come up with something to say."

"Good. You think about it. I hate to throw you out, but I have some work to do before we go to dinner tonight." To add credence to her comment, she busied herself with shuffling files strewn across her desk.

"Oh. Sure. We can spend some of our time tonight going over stuff I can say tomorrow night."

"Great."

Dan rose and headed to the door. "And the rest of the night, we'll spend talking about us. Who knows? Maybe we'll find out that we're compatible."

*Us? Compatible? For what? "Huh?"*

He grinned and Serena noticed that dimple forming...the one she'd first noticed on him days earlier.

"You know. Us. Able to get along other than in a business-client relationship. Like, maybe becoming partners?" Dan turned and strolled out the door.

After a full minute of staring at the door, Serena swung into action. First, she had to secure herself a date for the next night. Then, she'd have to have a long conversation with Mike.

Serena got up and walked into her back room. She opened her filing cabinet that housed all her clients' files. She needed a date.

Sean had been number one. Number one date and Mr. "One". She quickly read through files number two and three and dismissed them. Both had met women through her matchmaking technique and were blissfully happy. Their files had been labeled "Inactive".

Mr. "Four" was still up for grabs, so Serena decided to give him a call. A professor at nearby Johnson County Community College should be able to handle some type of conversation with her for an evening. Interested in sports and the arts, Jason would do.

She could find something to talk to him about for one night. And it would only be for one night. They didn't match, wouldn't be compatible. She dialed his number planning to make the necessary arrangements.



## Chapter Nine

"Mike, you can't go to the restaurant."

With a surprised look, her brother opened his mouth to speak and then snapped it shut again. Deep down inside, she knew he wanted to protect her, but he'd have to back off this time and give her some space.

Serena dropped her head back against the headrest of her recliner. This would be a battle. "Please, stay home."

"Why? You can say you're inviting me along so you can tell both of us about your business at the same time. Sorta saving time by not having to do it twice or showing favoritism."

She closed her eyes, panicking at the images of an unhappy threesome glaring at each other over what should be a digestible meal. "No. I need to do this myself. Don't you see? He doesn't like you. He won't be himself if you're there."

"Oh, now I get it." Mike walked over to her and ruffled her hair.

"I don't think I'm gonna like where you're heading with this, Michael Patrick Xavier."

"Hey," he shrugged, "I can take a hint. You want to be alone with him."

Irritation rising inside her, she pointed a finger in her brother's direction. "Stop that right now. Yes, I want to be alone with him, but only because I think I can find out more about him without you bothering us."

Hand held over his heart, Mike offered, "C'mon, little sister. You know me. I'll be very friendly and ask the right questions. He'll never realize how much information he's giving us."

"No." Serena shook her head. "You'll turn into 'Detective Man, Protector of Little Sisters' and turn our dinner into an interrogation complete with thumbnail screws. Badgering Dan isn't the way to get him to talk."

"And your plan is?"

"I'll just turn on the charm and flirt with him. You tell me the questions to ask and I'll throw them into our conversation while I bat my eyelashes a few times and wiggle my hips."

With a frown on his face and his hands in his pockets, Mike rocked back and forth on his heels. "You really think he'll respond to that?"

Annoyed, she answered, "Yes. Why? Don't you think I could interest him? If we weren't in this mess, he could be someone I'd match for myself. If I was looking for a match. Which I'm not. But we have things in common."

"You definitely have all the right stuff to catch the interest of any man, not that you ever seem to use it. I still feel like I should lurk around the restaurant, maybe..."

"Don't you dare. If he sees you snooping around, he may act completely different. I want to root out the real Dan so you stay far away. Write down the questions I should ask, then stay here and eat me out of house and home or go out for the night."

Mike smiled at her, offering a resignation shrug. "Okay. You win. We'll do tonight your way."

"Thank you." The tension in Serena's body ebbed away, then escalated again. She'd have to use all her vast knowledge on dating, seduce Dan and get him to play twenty questions with her commanding the inquisition.

"I'll write my list of questions. Maybe I'll go see if Annemarie's around."

At the mention of his former girlfriend's name, Serena glanced at her brother, full of curiosity. "You still hung up on her?"

He shook his head no and walked briskly toward the window. Serena realized he was feigning interest in the great outdoors. "I just thought I'd check on an old friend. Any problem with that?"

Smothering her laughter, Serena answered, "Certainly not. Go for it. I happen to know she's still single and carrying a torch for a lost love."

In one quick movement, he pivoted to face her. "Who's the guy?"

Serena's laughter couldn't be contained any longer. "You idiot. It's you. It's always been you."

Mike's shoulders slumped. "How do you know that?"

"She stops in my office almost weekly to ask how you're doing. Need any more evidence, oh, great detective?"

"You know what happened. I couldn't ask her to move until I got myself settled. Then, time just kept marching by until I figured it was too late to expect her to wait around for me. And this cursed gift I have can make life complicated." He dragged himself over to the sofa and plopped down.

Serena moved over to her brother and sat next to him. After taking his hand in hers, she said, "Listen to me and consider I just may know more about the two of you than you think. Mike, she loves you. She's waited for you and will be more than happy to move and accept your 'sight'. You don't give her enough credit for adapting."

Mike squeezed her hand. "You really think so? God, I hope she still loves me. Not a day goes by that I don't think about her."

Serena reached over to grab her phone. She handed it to him. "Here. Call her. See her tonight and straighten out your life. I'll take care of Dan. All you need to do is check out where he works on Monday."

Mike grabbed the phone and grinned at his sister before punching in Annemarie's number. "Thanks for the pep talk. After I speak to her, I'll write your list. Go get

yourself ready for tonight. I have some private talking to do and I don't want you standing here listening to my conversation."

"Tyrant. Hey, this is my house. I can stand where I want to."

"I'll pick you up and lock you in your room if I have to." Mike made a fake menacing move toward Serena.

"Never mind. I'll go quietly. Tell her I said hello."

\* \* \* \* \*

At the office parking lot, Serena sat in her car and reviewed the questions Mike had listed and rattled them off.

"How often have you dated?"

"How long has your longest relationship been?"

"What do you find interesting about my business?"

"What part in the business do you intend to play?"

"How will you relate to clients?"

She shook her head sideways, trying to ease the tightness forming in her neck. So many questions. Were they all necessary? Some of them seemed, well, more personal than important to her investigation. But, maybe Mike knew the way to get people to talk and throwing in all the personal stuff was a way to get Dan to relax.

Relax. Ha! How was she to relax with all the cloak and dagger stuff going on? Maybe a few glasses of wine would allow both of them to be more comfortable with each other.

The silky red dress she'd chosen for the evening clung as she'd hoped. It was cut low in the front, showing enough cleavage, thanks to her long-forgotten, rarely used push-up bra. Flirting, seducing, whatever, had never been her *forte*.

She'd worn higher heels than usual, opting for the three-inch, black-strapped beauties she'd bought on a spending spree without a clue as to what they'd match with and when she'd have the courage to try them. Tonight seemed like the right time to break them in.

She'd carefully made up her face and fixed her hair, both done in close fashion to her usual style. Her fire-engine red lipstick emphasized the color of her dress. Flame-colored earrings hung delicately by the sides of her face. Even her nail polish screamed "Red".

Serena glanced at her watch. Where was he? Here she was, ready for someone to start singing about "The Lady in Red", memorizing her list, hoping her brother was patching things up with Annemarie and Dan...

"Hello. Sorry I'm late."

Serena jumped in her seat as Dan appeared by her driver's side window. "I didn't see you coming."

She followed the direction of Dan's pointing finger and realized he'd parked next to her, exited his car to walk up to her and she'd neither seen nor heard him.

Opening her car door, she apologized for not getting out sooner. "Sorry."

"You really were off somewhere. Going over conversation suggestions for me for tomorrow night? Or, weren't you thinking of me at all?"

"Uh, maybe, but mostly just daydreaming. A woman needs to keep some secrets to herself, right?" *Flirty enough? Should I bat my eyelashes?*

His eyebrows quirked at her comment, then he smiled. "I like unraveling mysteries. I wrote that in my resume for my bio. Keep your secrets...for now."

He walked to his car and opened the door for her. It took a great deal of restraint on his part not to pull her into his arms and squeeze her between him and the car frame. Kissing her wildly, fiercely, came to mind. Hell. Not even out of the parking lot and his hormones itched to march out of control.

He'd seen her sitting in her car, staring off into space, her lips partly open, begging for attention. The shimmering glow of her dress, highlighted by the streetlight near their cars, wouldn't allow his eyes to stray. The closer he got as he walked to her car window, the more he could witness the rise and fall of her breasts, encased but not completely covered in the same shiny material. The urge to kiss the spot between them triggered his heart to beat faster.

No doubt lingered in his head. He wanted this woman. Needed her. His body craved Serena.

Too bad she could be a criminal he'd have to arrest.

*Damn.*

## Chapter Ten

"Is it warm in here or is it me?" The temperature in the restaurant's dining room had Serena fanning herself with her hand.

It could just be the closeness of the tables, too many people giving off body heat. It could be the wine. She'd chugged down a glass while casting aside any resemblance to ladylike grace, triggering her body to warm up with a wonderful, cozy feeling of tranquility. Then again, it could be Dan's never-ending stare, raking her body up and down since they met for dinner.

With one eyebrow quirked up in a definite arch, he riveted his attention to her face. "Seems fine to me. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just commenting on being hot."

In a sensual voice he suggested, "Is my being here a problem for you? Am I too close?"

*Dan...a problem?*

*Yes.*

*No.*

Serena debated which answer to give to either question.

*On one hand, her brain screamed out a resounding, "Yes!" My body reacts to your presence, regardless of every effort I make to treat you like just another client.*

*On the other hand, she'd have to give a defensive answer, "No." Don't flatter yourself. I'm nervous about being here with you because I'm not sure I can trust you.*

Dan...too close?

No. Come closer, take me in your arms and to hell with the consequences.

Yes. Move your butt across the table from me, instead of sitting next to me.

Dizziness settled in from the contradicting opinions warring in her head. Serena opted for the coward's way out. "Never mind. It's just me. Too much wine on an empty stomach."

"Then let's eat. I'm starved. We can discuss your business after we order."

He transferred his gaze to the menu, allowing Serena to breathe a sigh of relief as his attention drifted from her to something, anything, else. Dan made a few comments about some of the entrees, mentioning ones he'd had and rating their quality.

Handsome. Striking. All-male. Sexy.

Hell, any of those descriptions would fit him to a "T". Her eyes were drawn to him and the more she stared, the more entranced Serena became. His pale blue shirt created

the perfect background for a blood red tie, it blazed with the word “coordination”, as if they’d planned to match his tie with her dress.

She’d always adored men in suits. The classy, elegant look accentuated his features. Dark blue suit, even the smart red handkerchief hanging slightly out of his top pocket, announced his presence.

Lord, keep my hands where they belong. Touching him would turn her world upside down. Combining that craving with his nearness and looks would launch her mind to spin farther and farther from sanity.

One word came to mind...lust. The depth of desire for Dan shook her to the core. Never had she experienced a wanton passion with Alan. He’d held her back from making her needs known, convinced her any real desire on her part labeled her a nymphomaniac.

With Dan, restraining her sexual cravings tested her control. The word lust had many synonyms and Serena could use all of them to describe her amorous need for Dan. She needed to refocus her attention elsewhere before she jumped him right then and there.

She grabbed her glass, now full again after Dan had refilled it and swirled the liquid slightly before sipping her wine. Serena focused on the light reflecting off its shiny surface. Clearing her throat while regaining control of her thoughts, she offered, “I know what I want to order. Here comes our waiter.”

Only occasional comments between them interrupted their dinner, most of their conversation concentrating on their meals. Chiding herself for forgetting the real reason for being there in the first place, Serena resolved to put her plan into action.

She was a woman on an undercover mission to unveil the true Dan Reese and needed to unleash her sex appeal and unveil her seductive charms. Serena tried her best to bat her eyelashes now and then, smiling a cute, sickening kind of smile she’d mimicked after observing another obviously amorous couple two tables over.

The woman simpered and sighed at her date and he reacted like a lovesick puppy basking in her adoring sunshine. Trying not to choke at the lovers playing their game but emulate the woman’s actions at a less intense level tied Serena’s stomach in knots. The food had to be wonderful, she just hadn’t tasted it with her full concentration diverted elsewhere.

Dan ate with relish, obviously enjoying and savoring his meal. He’d eyed her with a look of surprise at her attempt at flirting, but quickly presented a charming smile accompanied by a wink. Flirting and aiming attention in his direction had affected him, although Serena couldn’t be sure it would be a positive notch for her in scoring points.

“So, tell me about yourself and your business.” Dan had finished eating, wiped his mouth with his napkin and now directed his full attention to her. His timing wasn’t impeccable...she’d just shoved a forkful of dessert into her mouth.

Swallowing too quickly, she began to cough. Dan poured more wine into her glass and she welcomed its cool, calming effect on her throat.

"I didn't mean to make that sound stressful. How about we just talk about ourselves first, business later."

His quick, nonchalant comment lulled her senses. Flowing into any kind of conversation with Dan would seem as natural as breathing. His eyes mesmerized her, his voice soothed her nerves.

Or, maybe it was all that damn wine.

Serena needed a momentary mental shake to bring her back into the here and now, ready to deal on an equal level with Dan. She was supposed to be doing the interview, asking the questions. When did he gain control?

Clearing her throat, she replied with confidence, "You start first. I only know what you put down on your information sheet. Wait a minute. I have some questions written down..." She rummaged in her purse and came up with the list Mike had given her.

"Uh, have you dated a lot? What kind of women?" Serena's face warmed at these questions as she rushed out the words and wondered whatever possessed her to agree to Mike's line of questioning in the first place. She shifted in her seat as a twinge of curiosity spurred her forward. "How long has your longest relationship lasted? Any serious commitments?"

She refolded her list, slumped back against her chair and focused on Dan.

"This sounds more like a laundry list of questions coming from a jealous would-be lover." His voice held a sensuous tone as he uttered his comment. His hand slipped over to one of hers and covered it in a warm, masterful protective squeeze.

Totally embarrassed, Serena wrenched back her hand. Too many letters danced in her head, all spelling out the word "sex". He had to stop touching her even if her body craved each and every stroke.

"I, umm, want things to be open and honest between us. If you answer my questions, I'll answer yours. If we decide to become partners, we need to know and trust each other. Since this is a dating service, I want to know your experience in relationships, even, say, if I do all the matchmaking."

"Can I trust you, Serena?" His eyes narrowed and he whispered, "Don't you trust me?"

Trust. Every instinct, sense, yearning in her body screamed in unison, "Trust him." The only thing holding her back from grabbing him and planting one hell of a passionate kiss on his lips was an annoying curiosity that flickered in her brain. He didn't seem genuine. Something about him didn't ring true.

"I'd feel more comfortable if you'd answer my questions. I can't just latch onto anyone who walks into my office as a client and then decides he wants a piece of my business. I worked very hard to get where I am now and I don't want to make any mistake, even if you'd only remain a silent, financial partner."

"You need to relax more. I'm a reasonable guy, once you get to know me. I'm not a total loser where women are concerned."

Irritation edged his comments. Serena pressed forward, her own annoyance at his uneasiness with her line of questions making him appear more suspicious. "I'm just asking these questions because you're the one who came to me, looking for a match." She rolled her shoulders. "I don't want a partner interested in trying his hand at matchmaking, the premise of my whole business. That part's my domain and I won't allow anyone else to butt in."

After he frowned, his face softened with a half-smile. "I'm not interested in matching people, although I'd be curious to learn more on how you do this."

Serena relaxed at his statement, her mind at ease for the moment. "I'm not sure I can explain the process. It's a gift I have, reading other people's feelings about what type of match they're looking for. It's just a spontaneous thing I've always been able to do." She tried to convey a plea with her eyes and voice. "Can you understand this? The spontaneity of my gift?"

He signaled for the waiter. "I know spontaneous. And, to prove it to you, watch this."

Serena sank back in her chair, wondering what his next move would be. Dan? Spontaneous? His disastrous meeting with Monica showed his lack in charming or interesting a date. Of course, Serena knew Dan and Monica wouldn't really work.

A waiter came to their table and Dan whispered something into his ear that brought a smile to his face. The young man walked away but soon returned with another waiter. He winked at Dan and then startled Serena by breaking out into a song...in Italian.

Serena recognized the tune as one of her favorites, having been brought up by an Italian mother who inundated her offspring with opera music. By the time she was ten Serena could sing the words—albeit off-key—to most of the popular Italian operas.

She found herself humming along, so engrossed in the song that she never realized the moment when Dan took her hand in his.

Captivated by the music, ambiance and the tingle of soft kisses being planted on her hand by Dan, Serena's world tumbled into one of complete compliance. The moment she shared with Dan touched her soul and, with each kiss, his letters slowly ambled across her brain.

Heart beating a rapid tattoo in her chest, Serena reveled in his undivided attention and sweet gesture. Could a man like Dan, so caring and charming, have an ulterior motive? Was she too paranoid to accept the possibility that he might be a great catch just waiting to happen?

One for her and not for a client?

"So," he whispered in her ear, "did I surprise you? I'm a nice guy, if you'd just give me a chance."

"I...I love opera. Thank you." She regained some control of her shaking voice and senses as the waiters bowed at their applause and moved away.



Dan didn't argue when she insisted they split the bill. He just gave an affirming nod and said, "Of course, if that's what you want. We should go somewhere quiet to continue discussing business."

Giving herself a mental kick in the pants, Serena willed her brain to jolt into gear. Business. Of course, business. That's what their dinner and meeting was supposed to be about. Nothing more.

A jab of disappointment worked its way through her psyche. She'd wanted more, allowed her guard to slip and desires to surface. Erotic visions of spending a night with Dan flashed in her head and she savored the fantasy. What was wrong with her?

Serena wouldn't suggest going to his apartment and she couldn't take the chance of running into Mike at hers. She opted on a better choice. "My office is quiet. No one will disturb us there."

\* \* \* \* \*

Serena's head spun from too much wine, frayed nerves and the seductive charm of the hunk sitting next to her. Inhaling a deep breath to clear her thoughts only proved to add to her confusion. His scent, an all-male, woodsy one, screamed his name as it invaded her senses.

Her defenses down, she'd managed to allow him access to her innermost thoughts, the secret ones she'd kept in line and stored away for what seemed like an eternity. The sight, touch, sound and now heady smell of Dan Reese, chipped away at what she'd always assumed were rock-solid barricades used to seal her heart in a safe haven.

"You're awfully quiet." Dan's sideways glance at her spelled trouble, drawing her further under his sexy influence.

"I'm...I'm just compiling a list of what we should talk about. For business. When we get to my place. I mean, my office."

Great job, Serena. Ramble some more and continue making a good impression.

After completing the ride to her office in silence, they exited his car and a shiver consumed her body. Dan eyed her motion, then snuggled her close to him as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

Letters, letters everywhere, filled her head. Flying, dancing, rubbing against each other, creating sparks. His face popped in and out of focus, smiling, enticing her to crave more of him.

The night air swam around her in a soft breeze, lofting the aroma of his aftershave in her direction. Turning her head toward him presented her with the full impact of his nearness, turning the other way still bombarded and intoxicated her senses with his scent.

Surrounded by the wonderful essence of Dan, Serena could not escape the inevitable magnetic pull drawing her closer to him. Her self-control dangled on the edge of nonexistence.

Oh, Lord. Resisting his charm grew less and less like a necessity. She'd played the born-again virgin for so long, trying to forgo sexual pleasure while forgetting Alan and starting her business. Giving in to a basic instinct, to share her love with someone, now paraded foremost in her thoughts, screaming for her to pay attention to her needs.

Dan squeezed her tighter against him and a jolt streamed down her body, warming her from head to toe. Why resist? Why not give in, enjoy what he had to offer, join the ranks of the living, dating, loving again?

A split decision needed to be made. Either go for it, girl, or hide back in your safe, snug, lonely shell of a life. Could she forget the regrets and her brother's disapproving look?

The only serious romance she'd allowed herself to fall into had been with Alan. More of a "wham, bam, thank you, ma'am" kind of guy, his pleasure outweighed her enjoying any of their lovemaking sessions. Or should she call them lessons in how not to show and share love?

The one and only time he'd allowed more foreplay before the act of sex had done nothing to enhance her enjoyment, only his. Alan had done nothing afterward but complain about her not meeting his needs fast enough. He'd belittled her, labeling Serena a nymphomaniac for expecting more and, since he was more experienced than she, they'd do things his way.

Their relationship careened downhill from there, especially when he ran off with his ex-girlfriend. Alan had been sneaking around with Tammy while teaching/conditioning Serena his method of love for almost six months. He'd just left one day, packing his stuff while she was at work. The bastard. He'd even taken her favorite crockpot.

*Good riddance.*

Back to the present, Serena couldn't find similar traits in Dan to suggest he'd be another Alan. Misgivings about his motives washed to the back of her wine-spritzed head. Plain and simply put, she desired a one-on-one session with him, under the sheets, on the sheets...whatever.

And, every sense in her body tingled with the knowledge that he'd take a slow, mutually enjoyable path to fulfillment for both of them. Her second sight screamed with the knowledge that she'd enjoy making love with him.

Their silent progression, filled with unspoken desire on her part while she questioned what his reaction would be, ended at her office door. She unlocked it and uttered, "Let's go in."

In that instant, Serena made the ultimate, no going back, snap judgment to go with her feelings and damn the consequences. With the lights still off, she grabbed his red silk tie and pulled him inside, slamming the door closed behind them with her foot.

*What the hell?* Dan had no time to mentally react to Serena's bold move. Instinct took control of his physical reaction and he enclosed her into his arms, searching for her

lips. His aggressive move met her open, nonresistant welcome to lower his mouth to hers.

How far could she intend this to go? Tasting her slightly wine-flavored lips over and over again only increased his desire for Serena. Dan wanted more of her, much more. Pushing her wasn't his style. He'd gladly take whatever she offered.

Dan's head filled with warring images, those of Steve and his job and those of Serena and her charms. Choosing one over the other caused major conflict between his head and heart.

She'd broken through his defenses, the ones he'd created to safeguard his heart. She sparked his interest enough to allow those barriers to begin to crumble. After what he'd gone through with his ex-wife, Laura, he'd sworn no woman would get close enough to shatter his spirit again.

Serena smelled like roses, the scent of the perfume he'd mentioned to her. Her light, fragrant aroma surrounded her being, drawing him closer into losing all control. He rained soft kisses along her cheek and down her neck, nuzzling a spot near her ear. Her delighted moan spurred him on.

"I want you, Serena," he begged, in a low, husky tone. "It's up to you now, honey."

Yes.

No.

Yes.

No.

Serena shuffled back and forth between decisions. His letters danced double-time in her head, swirling around smiling images of Dan's face. The faster her heart beat, the faster his letters bounced and the bigger his smile became.

*I want him.* No doubt about it, her body prepared to give Dan what they both wanted, commitment or not. Alan was a mistake, but Dan was different. Every fiber in her body screamed with that realization. Alan hadn't loved her...never had. But, Dan...

Serena stiffened in his arms. Love? No mention of the word had been used. What was she thinking? Had insanity taken control of her senses?

His onslaught of constant, urgent kisses softened her heart, made her mind whirl with desire. Heat radiating from his body caused her temperature to rise and every part of her flesh burned for his touch.

Dan broke their contact and led her to the sofa. Moonlight filtering through her non-shaded windows illuminated his face, casting shadows but not hiding his features. A half-smile moved the lips she'd just kissed, drawing her attention and need for more.

His eyes blazed with desire and Serena found herself losing her yes/no battle. Bedroom eyes beckoned her to fulfill a night of mutual passion.

Dan's hands reached out to her, one tenderly grabbing her and drawing her near him while the other feathered light touches on her face. "I've wanted you since you fell into my arms when we first met."

Heart pumping wildly and pulse racing, Serena nodded in reply, the ability or need to speak decidedly absent. All her senses shifted toward one conclusion, she needed to be with Dan, to share themselves as one. There would be no turning away, no regrets later.

"I know," she whispered, her voice edged with an urgency of desire for their upcoming release of consensual bliss. Erotic dreams of her and Dan would soon become a reality, doubts cast aside.

Serena kicked off her shoes, never letting her eyes stray from his. Dan sat briefly to undo his shoes and shed his socks. He stood again and began an attempt to remove his tie, only to have her hands reach out and cover his, stilling his progress.

A flicker of disappointment crossed his face and he asked, "Do you want me to stop?"

"Yes." She almost moaned as she pulled his hands and held them near her face. She kissed each palm and then demanded, "I want to do that myself."

Dan's breathing quickened as she watched his reaction. His hands traveled to her back, then to her zipper. "May I have the pleasure?"

Serena nodded, afraid she might utter the plea, "Hurry," and miss what she anticipated would be a never before, delicious-feeling foreplay experience. Forcing back the niggling doubts trying to rampage forward in her head about throwing caution to the wind and letting her desires charge ahead, she chose to concentrate on pleasure and passion.

In slow motion, Dan let one hand lower her zipper. His other hand pushed the silky material aside, opening her dress and giving him access to her skin. Once the zipper was down to the bottom, he used both hands to slide the dress down her body. She stepped sideways, allowing the dress to puddle on the floor and then she nudged it away with her foot.

Dan's head bent and he nuzzled the tops of her breasts and the spot in between them not covered by her bra. His hands reached behind her again. Deft fingers undid the clasp and the push-up bra loosened around her. Serena allowed the garment to slip down and off her breasts. Uncased, her breasts fell freely, tips hardening in the cool air's onslaught coupled with erotic anticipation of what would come.

"You're beautiful," he muttered, reverently reaching out to rub each protruding bud. Forefinger and thumb rolled each breast tip in slow, circular movements and Serena threw back her head in ecstatic joy.

Her juices already flowing, she resisted rushing him forward, eager to experience every pleasure possible for both of them. When he lowered his mouth to replace his fingers and their unending caresses of her breasts, Serena's knees almost buckled with a lustful need she'd dreamed of feeling but never experienced before.

To regain control of her burgeoning desire and prolong their enjoyment of each other's body, she tenderly lifted his head with her hands. Standing on tiptoes to meet his lips, she first nibbled on Dan's lower lip, then the upper one. Hearing him moan sent a rush of desire through her.

All her willpower focused on stepping back, an action needed to offer him a similar pleasure like the one he'd bestowed on her. Serena loosened his tie, taking extra care to rub her hands up his torso before undoing the knot and skimming it around his neck and off his shirt.

Dan's hands reached for her, but Serena grabbed each one, shaking her head from side to side. Now in control, she wanted no action from him, only his reaction to her wandering hands and lips. She placed his hands at his sides and whispered, "It's my turn to undress you."

His sharp intake of breath indicated he'd be more than ready for her next move. Her heartbeat quickened, pounding out a tattoo in her chest as heat cascaded down her body. With determined fingers, she began to undo his shirt buttons, one at a time in slow, determined steps.

She pushed each button through its buttonhole, gliding her fingers down his shirtfront. Once she reached his belt, she stopped and ran her hands along the leather material. One finger from one hand dipped between his shirt and belted pants area and she ran it back and forth. The other hand landed on the belt buckle and Serena began the process of undoing it.

Fingers of both hands then concentrated on removing his belt, something she'd never done before. A giddiness of having control and loving every minute overtook Serena. She'd never undressed a man before and loved the erotic sensation this step in foreplay unleashed.

Serena's breasts bounced as she turned quickly and tossed the belt to the carpet. Dan's hands closed on her breasts, encasing them in his warmth.

She allowed his caresses to continue as she undid his pants button and slid one hand up and down his zipper. His groan of pleasure, accompanied by his slight squeezing of her breasts, empowered her to become more brazen.

Serena stilled her hands and once again reached for his. She grasped each one and tenderly placed them by his sides. "You're not cooperating. I have a job to do. Or, do you want me to lose my concentration?"

Dan's gravelly voice uttered his reply. "Anything you want, sweetheart. You're in control. I'll do what you want but we may have to move a little more quickly."

"How's this?"

Serena lowered his zipper, unleashing the bulge of manhood now straining against his boxers. She tugged his pants downward, letting them fall to the ground. Dan kicked them away.

She reached up to remove his shirt, rubbing her body up and down his as she stretched to glide it off his shoulders. She tossed it aside and grabbed his undershirt.

Getting it halfway up his body, Dan replaced her hands with his and pulled it over his head.

Serena's fingers traced feathered motions up his chest, stopping at his nipples. She copied the actions he'd made with her breasts and rubbed his nipples between her thumbs and forefingers. Then, standing on her tiptoes, she leaned her body upward so she could nuzzle each one. His arms surrounded her as heat pulsated from one body to the other.

Only a few pieces of clothing separated them from absolute nakedness. Dan planted a kiss on the top of her head and moaned, "Should I reach for your pretty red panties and stockings, or would you prefer helping me get out of these boxers first?"

Serena landed a kiss on his burning skin right above his bellybutton. She felt his body quiver at her touch, sending shivers of passion tumbling through her body.

In a shaky voice she didn't recognize as her own, she answered, "Please. Do me first."

## Chapter Eleven

Every touch, caress, kiss, spun Serena's world out of control. Higher and higher her urges pushed her forward, craving an ultimate union as one with Dan. No thoughts of backing off or pulling away entered her head. The point of no return coupled with no regrets had been passed what seemed like hours ago.

Dan slid her body slightly backward, affording him a better view and heightening her almost out-of-mind anticipation. She looked down and noted how the moonlight bounced off her body, dancing on her breasts and highlighting the silken rose design on her red, flimsy underwear. Her nipples beaded, aching for his renewed attention. Hard, uplifted and pointing straight ahead at his body, they begged for his touch.

No sense of embarrassment crossed Serena's mind. Dan made her feel important, not ashamed of her boldness. Standing in the darkened room by an unshaded window while slivers of light shone inside to brighten their bodies, added an air of naughtiness, intensifying her sensual appetite bordering on lust.

He knelt before her and ran his hands up one leg to the top of her thigh-high stocking. Pulling it leisurely down and off her leg, he then tossed it over his shoulder and removed the second one from her other leg. His fingers skimmed up each leg, dipped under her panties' waistband and, in deliberate, slow movements, slid the garment down her body. She rested her hands on his shoulders as she lifted each foot so he could help her step out of them. Serena then kicked them aside.

Dan remained in place, raining tiny nips of kisses on her, starting with her knees. He moved from one leg to the other, copying each kiss, planting each one in a mirrored location. Tilted forward as she left her hands on his shoulders, Serena heard heavy, rapid breathing and was surprised to realize it was her own.

His hands moved over her rear end, cupping each cheek. His lips reached each thigh and brushed back and forth over each one until Serena thought her legs would buckle beneath her. He found the spot between her legs and worshipped the area with gentle kisses while caressing her bottom and pulling her closer.

"Dan," she managed to moan, full of desperate desire to urge him further but afraid to fall where she stood.

He halted his adoration, squeezed her bottom once more and landed one last kiss below her waist before standing. "I take it you want me to stop?"

"Never. I mean, right now, yes." Heat soared through her. "It's my turn."

Dan gave a ragged sigh, then lowered his mouth to hers for a full-blown, mind-boggling kiss. "Yes, ma'am."

Serena started at his nipples, tweaking them until they hardened. His erection stood at attention, poking through his boxers. She dared to touch him, raking his length with her fingernail.

Even in the miniscule light afforded by the moon, she watched with lust-filled yearning as he grew larger. An unbridled desire to feel him harden under her touch quickened her heartbeat. Dan reveled in it, moaning with each stroke.

"Honey, I can't hold on much longer."

Serena emulated his kneeling stance, placing her face squarely in front of his turgid member. She pulled his boxers down from the front center of his waistband and carefully guided the material over and past his ramrod stiff erection. Once down to his feet, Dan stepped out of them and pushed the garment away.

She began her upward ascent starting at his knees, giving small bites while moving over the soft, crinkly curls of hair covering his legs. When she reached the area near his erection, he stilled her hands with his and commanded, "I want you. Now."

Serena smiled and nodded her approval.

Dan helped her up and she noticed his rapid breathing matched her own. He looked around the office and asked, "Where will you be most comfortable?"

She almost giggled and sensed his urgency matching her own. Serena never thought of her office as a lovemaking site. She took a fast survey of the room. Where to make love? In a matter of seconds she evaluated the possible locations. Feeling like an erotic, sex-crazed Goldilocks, she searched with a totally different purpose in mind other than finding somewhere to just sleep.

The carpet? No. The floor would be too hard. Her sofa? No again. Springs worn, they'd sink into its too soft structure. Her oversized stuffed rocking chair? Just right. It would enable her to ride him sitting up, affording her a wondrous view and more freedom to move.

"I think the chair, but do you have a preference?" she answered in an urgent reply.

Dan lifted her up into his arms. "The chair's fine. I'm guessing it'll hold us and be comfortable." He lowered his mouth to her lips and kissed her with passion. "For the first round, at least."

Sitting in the chair, he cradled her in his arms and snuggled her close. Serena could feel his firm member twitch every time she grinded her fanny into his lap. Dan finally ordered, "Stand up for a minute, please."

Serena rose, legs wobbling with anticipation. He repositioned himself on the chair, legs slightly apart to welcome her onto his lap. "Wait, honey. We need protection. I think I have a condom in my wallet." His voice held a sense of urgency.

"Dan, I'm on the Pill."

"We'll use both." He got up, rummaged through his wallet and said, "Found one."

Filled with a lust to touch him, Serena held out her hand and ordered in a fevered tone, "I'll do that."



He placed it in her palm. She once again knelt in front of Dan. Before rolling the condom down his shaft, Serena feathered light touches on his skin before the engorged member was completely sheathed. She looked up at Dan.

Unbridled need blazed in his eyes as he sat again. "I want you now."

Serena knew the semi-darkness hid what should have been a blush covering her face. "Umm, how will we do this?"

Dan softened his tone as he gave instructions. "Place your knees on my thighs and I'll help with the rest. I'll hold you. You won't fall." He held up one hand in a Boy Scout salute. "I promise."

"I guess I can't argue with a boy scout. I'm ready."

"Honey, I'm more than ready. Just hope I don't go too quickly for you."

As she began her climb onto his knees, Serena purred, "Maybe I want you to."

Dan helped her lift one leg and then the other over the arm rests as he held her bottom up with one, massive spread-out hand. Once she pushed up on his shoulders, he guided his throbbing erection into the waiting wetness between her legs. He eased her down slowly and Serena marveled at his size filling her so completely and her ability to accommodate him. She tensed her muscles around him, feeling his pulsating reaction.

Words were not needed. Serena threw back her head and began an up and down dance, meeting his rhythmic thrusts. He held one hand on her back to steady her and let the other drift to the spot between them and between her legs. The more she rose and fell on his erection, the more frantic his finger strokes became. She gripped his shoulders for more leverage, breathing heavily and wondering if her heart would pound through her chest.

His hand left her back and that arm encircled her waist, pulling her slightly closer. She sensed his teetering at the edge, reaching closer to his final destination. Her own climax built, bringing her nearer fulfillment.

He angled his head to her breasts and she arched her back, affording him better access to her aching nipples. He rolled the buds with his tongue and suckled each one into hardened tips, pushing her over the edge.

She climaxed at the same moment he did. Waves of blissful passion soared through her, something she'd never experienced before. This had to be what sharing love was like and she cherished each second. Serena craved the erotic sensation and heady feeling it gave her. And, she rejoiced in the knowledge she'd given Dan the same kind of pleasure.

Serena collapsed against him, fully encased by his arms. She smelled his aftershave, his body heating it to extremes and mingling with a strong scent of after-sex. Her breasts still tingled and Dan toyed with each one, brushing them with the back of his fingernails. She returned the favor and squeezed each of his nipples then trailed tiny fingernail touches down his torso.

"Serena," he rasped, "I'm not quite ready for round two."

She tweaked his nipple again, noting the bulge still nestled inside her had started to grow. "Hmm. That's not what I'm thinking."

Dan cleared his throat. "I need a little time to regroup. You're some type of wildcat, honey. Thank you."

Serena ended her assault on his body, opting to allow him time to breathe. "Thank you, too. That was wonderful. I never knew lovemaking could be so satisfying."

Dan pulled his head sideways, away from her to stare at her face. "Did I hurt you?"

She heard the concern in his voice and rapidly replied, "No, you didn't hurt me. You fulfilled my every need." She rubbed his cheek. "I haven't had that before."

Dan took her hand and kissed it. With gentle tenderness, he hugged her and rubbed his chin across her breasts. "You're a passionate woman, Serena. You deserve to enjoy lovemaking as much as you give enjoyment."

"I've been led to believe that there was something wrong with women who wanted more and craved pleasure."

"Oh, honey." Dan sighed as he spoke. "Don't ever think wanting more out of lovemaking is something women aren't supposed to want or need. Passion goes both ways. Do you want to talk about it?"

Serena hesitated at first, wondering if allowing Dan access into her past left her vulnerable. No negative vibes beat a path to her head warning her to stop, so she made the decision to share a short version of her shyness around males through school years, thanks to her "gift". Getting too close to a date initiated second sight sensations cramming her head, causing her to back off and she ultimately scared off any would-be sex partner.

Dan made no comments but encouraged her to continue. Serena then explained how she'd ignored warning vibrations buzzing in her head about Alan and had jumped smack into a relationship with him. With Dan's silent attention still riveted on her, Serena found the courage to discuss her one-sided affair with her ex-boyfriend. She experienced the same ease recounting the foolish part of her life involving Alan with Dan as she'd encountered when conveying the same story to Michael.

After her tale of an affair gone bad, Dan helped her up and they ambled over to the sofa. They rested perfectly still and quiet, choosing to sit side by side with his arm around her shoulders as they stared out into the starry night from her window. Serena wondered if she'd told him too much about her former love life. He hadn't mentioned anything about his past loves. Curiosity about women in his life made her speak before thinking.

"Dan? Have you ever been in love?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Even in the darkness, Dan sensed her eyes focusing on him, waiting for him to divulge his past. Guilt washed over him as he faced the realization that Serena would expect an honest rendition, something similar to what he assumed she'd offered him.

They'd just experienced one hell of a satisfying, ultimate closeness a man and woman could hope for. A feeling of dread spread throughout his body, his euphoric high after physically sharing himself with her now plummeted to an abysmal low level.

*Shit.* She asked about love in his life, eager to find out the personal stuff he rarely imparted to anyone since his divorce. Love? He'd tried it once before with Laura and decided no such animal existed. Anyway, Serena, of all people, would be someone he couldn't disclose anything to.

He was on the job. Had been, until he let her charms, allure and his own damn hormones run amok and turn his brains into mush.

Dan could make up some ludicrous tale of a lost love, enormous hurting heartache and hope to gain her sympathy. Maybe she'd even open up more to him about herself and business. Could be she'd let something slip about how things operated at Second Sight Dating, something to turn his case one way or the other.

Would she sense his hesitation in answering or falseness of whatever concocted story he dished out? He'd lie, although padding the truth with some half-truths for his undercover work left him no option.

He ran a hand through his hair and cleared his throat, hoping for some time to get his brain in gear. Even after so many captivating and enjoyable minutes of making love with her, every inch of his body still craved more. Bypassing his body's need for Serena and concentrating instead on his job required monumental strength to avoid her magnetic pull.

Her question caught him by surprise, dousing him with cold, hard facts. As an officer involved in a case, he could easily screw up unless he backed off into his pretend corner and distanced himself from Serena.

He was a cop.

She was a suspect.

Steve would blast him and rightfully so, for mixing business with pleasure. Or in this case, for shoving his job aside for an extraordinary, one-on-one lust-filled night of fantasy.

Time to revert to the proprietor-client façade he'd been ordered to use and solve the mystery surrounding Serena Xavier. His instincts screamed with doubts about her involvement with the mob or any wrongdoing. But, integrity urged him to finish his job to a definite conclusion, one way or the other. Maybe then and only then could he see if a relationship with Serena could be salvaged.

Talk about love with her? Allowing another woman, especially Serena, to penetrate his heart and soul, would never be an option.

*Damn.*

Serena held her breath while her heartbeat sped up. *Why didn't he answer my question? Stupid, stupid, stupid. You mentioned the "L" word.*

It had slipped out before she'd had a chance to consider the consequences. It wasn't what she'd meant to say...or, was it? She'd wanted to know more about his past, now that she'd opened up "the book of love á la Serena" to him.

A shiver worked its way down her spine and she wondered if she'd read all his signals wrong. She'd told him about herself, been honest concerning her past love life and frustration, especially with Alan.

She tensed, wondering if maybe he thought her a fool, an idiotic, immature child who'd allowed someone else to treat her so badly. Or, he could figure she'd used him to satisfy a hunger, a burning desire to experience a different type of lovemaking, something that by her own admission had been unknown to her.

Neither was true. Both might be half true.

Suddenly embarrassed even in the cover of darkness, she rose from the sofa, eager to find her clothes and conceal her nakedness. Ashamed by her aggressiveness in throwing herself at him, old doubts crept into her head about her craving for sexual release.

Maybe all men secretly laughed and were affronted at a woman eagerly displaying a sexual need so they ignored gratifying her desires. Regardless of what he professed and engrossed in satisfying his own sexual passions, a man might label her forwardness, as Alan had, unappealing.

Dan had made her feel special, even commented on her passion. But, in her wanton and sex-starved state, she could have missed his true take on their making love in spite of his seemingly sweet concern for her feelings afterwards. In the height of passion, all her sense of reason and logic disappeared into oblivion.

Sensations of regret tidal-waved through her from head to foot. What the hell had she been thinking? Had she lost all perspective? Sex? With Dan? A client? Someone whose motives she still harbored doubts about?

She found her dress and quickly shimmied her body into it, forgoing the need for undergarments. She prayed no one would see her leave the building or notice her as she entered her apartment. Witnesses to her moment of insanity had to be kept to a minimum.

Dan would know, but there was nothing she could do about that except hope to do some damage control. Then, there would be Michael to contend with. That could present a problem. She rushed the zipper up her back, determined to deal with her brother if or when the need arose.

"What are you doing?"

Serena leveled a stare at Dan, one she hoped would convey an air of nonchalance. "It's getting late. Since you didn't answer my question, I guess you're tired and I know

I'm exhausted." She busied herself with collecting the rest of her clothing. "We'll talk about business another time."

The cold, calm, blasé tone in her voice surprised even her. Dan continued to stare and made no effort to hide the fact that he still remained naked on her sofa.

He finally spoke, breaking the icy silence between them. "Sorry if I offended you. I just needed some time to think. Didn't realize there was a time limit to answering you."

Serena perked her head upward and replied, "I'm heading to the ladies' room down the hall to freshen up. Why don't you dress while I'm gone and then we can leave."

"Fine."

She marched out the door, wishing she'd had on her heels to contribute definite loud and determined clicking sounds echoing in the hallway. She refused to give in to the curious itch to peek behind her and see if he had moved.

Once in the restroom, she breathed a sigh of relief as she turned on the light and blinked a few times to focus in the bright room. Serena stood in front of the mirror, allowing her shoulders to slump while she rested both hands on the rim of the sink.

Swollen lips from being well kissed greeted her as she stared at her reflection. Her curls bounced in disarray and her skin shone with a satiated shimmer of after-sex glow. She bent her head, begging tears not to fall. *Not now. I need to be strong.* Turning on the cold water, she scooped up the chilling liquid in both hands and splashed it on her face.

She dried her face with scratchy paper towels that left her eyes swollen and her face red. Tears would have had the same effect. Hoping to arrange some semblance of order to her hair, Serena raked her fingers through her curls. Would any of this help?

You fool. Making love—no, having sex—was great. Now, forget Dan. Get yourself under control and concentrate on business.

Their whole lovemaking episode was a huge mistake, something caused by too much wine and seductive flirting. Dan intoxicated her, turning her controlled mind into something resembling that of a sex-starved teenager. It was over, done with. Serena frowned at her image in the mirror one last time before pivoting and walking out the door. She'd make it perfectly clear there'd be no repeat performances.

Dan had wasted no time once Serena left the office. Although disheartened over her chilly performance but grateful for the distance now placed between them, he needed to get back to his job. He'd hurriedly located and donned his discarded clothing, threw his jacket over his arm and rushed over to close the door before heading for her desk.

Turning on the desk light afforded him a better view of what lay strewn on her desk. Nothing much caught his eye, except for the information folder for the real Gino Conti. He grabbed it and tucked it into his folded jacket as he spotted what had rested under it. Another folder, one labeled "Mr. A", had been stacked under Gino's.

Mr. "A"? Dan raked a hand through his hair. That didn't make sense. Hadn't the men been given numbers and the women, letters?

What was going on? Perhaps she had two filing systems, one for legitimate clients and another one for some shady scam she was running. With a sense of dread looming over him, Dan snatched that folder and shoved it with Gino's.

He let out a whoosh of air that had been pent up in his lungs as suspicions about her honesty crept back into his head. Serena could prove to be a resourceful and underhanded schemer, running a seemingly harmless business and portraying the image of a highly respectable company while covering for some devious sex-for-money ring. The two folders now tucked under his jacket could spur his investigation, causing her downfall while supplying evidence to work against her.

Nothing else on her desk gave the impression of useful information, so he turned off the light and trotted to the door. Dan opened it and peeked out, then closed it before jogging to her back office. Removing his keychain equipped with a tiny flashlight, he ascertained a minute or two still existed before Serena's return. He needed to check out the filing cabinets but wouldn't dare turn on the light for that room.

Serena stopped by the door, wondering why it was now closed. She had left it opened, figuring no one else would be wandering around the building at such a late hour. With a careful twist, she turned the doorknob, straining to keep the knob from squeaking and the door from creaking as she pushed it open.

With her office still blanketed in moonlit darkness, Serena strained to find Dan's frame silhouetted somewhere in the room. Her eyes then focused on her back office, the door ajar and a tiny light shining inside it.

Waves of anger drenched her heart and soul. Dan, the man she'd given herself to, who'd brought her to oblivious satisfaction, was nothing but a phony. He'd used her for whatever purpose lurked in his sinister brain.

She backed out of the room, carefully pulling the door closed again without a sound. Her head spun with furious thoughts, even though her heart made an inexplicable last-ditch effort to hold her back from seeking revenge.

Revenge. Setting things right. Catching him in his own game and hauling his ass to jail would be rewarding. Serena would find a way to prove his guilt and turn him over to the police.

Determined to play along and nab him as soon as she had all the facts, Serena traced her steps back to the restroom, then yelled out, "Dan? Are you almost ready to leave?"

She then strode back to her door. Dan opened it before she could, guilt or sadness covering his face. She smiled, hiding the desire to pounce on him and smack both of his cheeks clear of whichever look he portrayed.

"I, uh, just need to get on my shoes and socks." He turned away, found those items and put them on.

Serena didn't respond but donned her shoes, minus the hose. She kept her voice level and asked, "Shall we go?"

He followed her out the door and she locked it behind them. They walked outside in total silence, neither offering a comment about their evening. A cool breeze made her shiver with a slight chill.

Dan reached out to put his arm around her, but Serena wanted no contact. She quickened her steps, assuring no part of his body touched hers. No more of his letters racing through her head could be tolerated. At her car, she unlocked the door and remarked, "Thank you for a lovely evening. I'll plan on seeing you for your next date. Maybe after your three dates, you'll get a better feel for how my business operates. We can talk about a possible partnership then."

She extended her hand, gearing herself for the onslaught of his dancing letters. She'd control herself. She had to make it clear that Serena Xavier had no interest in kissing or making love with him ever again. Their relationship would be "business only" from now on.

Her heart, her Achilles' heel and a weakness she'd have to work on, made a feeble attempt to soften her resolve and grant one last mind-blowing embrace, but Serena's head won over. No expression of closeness or weakness could be allowed if she planned to maintain her sanity and determined plan of action.

Control. Serena had to stay focused and stay in command of her senses. Her "second sight" didn't work for her with Dan. Just like with Alan, she'd made a terrible mistake.

Reality had to overcome fantasy. Wanting Dan to be someone else, someone honest and wonderful, was a whimsical daydream her heart craved. The cold hard facts before her, filling her head, told her otherwise.

He frowned, but took her hand and briefly shook it. She got into her car, never turning back to look at him. Eyeing Dan in her rearview mirror, she watched as he stood perfectly still, his figure growing smaller and smaller the further away she drove.

Dan Reese needed to be taught a lesson. And she was just the woman to do it.

## Chapter Twelve

"Have a good time?"

Serena cringed, body frozen in place at the sound of her brother's voice. Damn. Caught in the act. She'd tiptoed into her apartment, silently creeping across the floor and praying to manage a hasty retreat into her bedroom without waking him. She'd hoped Michael would sleep soundly, never hearing her early morning arrival.

"No. Goodnight. I'm going to bed now." She pulled herself up vertically, straightening her back in an effort to appear totally in control. It was then that her thigh-high stockings slipped from her hand and wafted to the floor. No sound accompanied their free flow movement to the ground, but the visual image spoke volumes.

Michael eyed them, then glared at her. "You're out until early morning and come home half-undressed. So, what? Did he force you? 'Cause if he did, just say the word and I'll kill him."

The night's pleasantries at the restaurant, overwhelming expenditure of passion in her office and Dan's turning cold, threatened to explode Serena's already pounding head. Now, to add to her misery, here stood her brother, fists clenching at his sides, both chastising her and ready to do battle with mystery man, Dan.

In one unladylike and definite lack of grace movement, she flopped down onto her sofa, letting out a whoosh of air from her lungs. Serena dropped her purse onto the cushion next to her, making a mental note to be careful and not open it in front of her brother. Her underpants and bra still remained crumpled up inside it.

"Michael, calm down. No. He didn't force me to do anything. If you must know, I'm the one out of control. See? You don't know everything there is to know about your horny sister. I'm the one who jumped him."

Michael's stance drooped and a confused look covered his face. "Oh. I thought you wanted to wrangle information out of him." He shook his head from side to side. "I've been telling you to get out and date. See what happens when you're love-starved? You grab the first guy you're attracted to, warts and all and go at it."

"Michael, let it be," Serena snapped. "I did get information. Well, sort of." She placed both hands on her temples and vigorously rubbed. "Look. I'm tired. It's late. I have good reasons to still not trust him even though I sense no negative thoughts from him." She threw her hands up in the air in a moment of disgust. "Oh, hell. What do I know? I was wrong about Alan. Dan's probably just like him."

"All the more reason I should get to know him."



Serena shook her head no. "While I'm happy to have you here for support, I need to work on this myself a little longer. If I get bogged down, I'll let you do whatever you think needs to be done."

Her brother remained silent for a minute, then said, "Let's get some sleep. We can talk more about this in the morning. Deal?"

"Deal. Now, leave me alone. Please." Her plea came out in a whisper as she tried to hold back the tears building up and near falling.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning and with stomach clenching, Dan stomped into work and threw both folders on his desk, disgusted with himself and the whole operation. He'd screwed up and allowed his body to overrule sanity and logic, spurred on by one beautiful, sexy woman.

After an hour in Steve's office, anger at himself burned in his brain. Rightfully so, his boss/friend had nailed him, chewed him up and down with one blowout bomb of a reprimand. Warning Dan to end the case one way or another, Steve had slapped him on the back and called him a horny womanizing bastard. He'd then softened his tone, stating Dan had let Serena get to him and maybe that fact had some other meaning in his life, especially if she proved innocent.

Yep, she'd wrangled her way under his skin, in his dreams, toyed with his common sense, but any scenario including her other than job-related would have to take a long-distance hike. Serena had to be kept in her place...that of a suspect, not a love interest triggering his body's reaction, minus brain cells functioning in full gear.

He slapped open Gino's folder, reading and rereading every line. At one point, he unconsciously read out loud. Raising his head around the office, Dan noted quizzical stares aimed in his direction from other detectives and realized what he'd done. Embarrassed, he forced his lips closed and made a point not to open them again while engrossed in his file perusal.

Staring off into space after the words began to blur before him, Dan weighed the misinformation Gino Conti had written against what he knew to be the truth. He puzzled over a comment Serena had written on the inside cover in big letters.

"Client removed".

What the hell did that mean? Dan knew for sure it was her handwriting. Was it some type of code? Removed? To where? Did it mean the real Gino had been moved to another level? Maybe from her business-front façade to a more sinister, lucrative venture?

He swung back in his seat and let out an audible rush of air from his lungs, frustration mounting with each passing minute. Flinging that folder aside, Dan decided to tackle the next mystery from *Second Sight Dating*, the other folder he'd snatched from her desk.

Who the hell was Mr. "A"? He began reading the file's contents, realizing this one sounded like Serena had been more personally involved in this case. This character received more attention from Serena than she'd indicated anyone else received. Hell, she'd made a point of mentioning how she hadn't dated clients before.

She wrote of misgivings in keeping this guy interested. Reading further, Dan examined Mr. "A's" wants and desires, all mapped out in front of him in black and white. She couldn't keep him happy? With what? Who was she? Had Serena passed him on to another, more eager-to-please female in her files?

He slammed the folder shut. This client might not be around her agency anymore, but Gino seemed to still be a player. Dan knew full well that the Gino he'd met was a phony. Nothing about him came close to resembling Gino Conti's actual description. The file for the "real" Gino left too many unanswered questions. And now this other file pointed to some possible shady dealings.

Dan rubbed his face, hoping to make some sense out of all of this. His case-related phone rang, shaking him out of his miserable thoughts. He attached the phone to a taping device and answered.

Serena's voice resonated and she quietly asked to rearrange his next date. Miss "E" wondered if he wouldn't mind going to a dinner related to her job instead of the restaurant they'd selected. Serena would also attend and she mentioned the moderate price for each ticket since Dan would pay his own way.

He'd assured her it would be fine with him and waited an agonizing few seconds for her to say something else, maybe make a personal comment.

In a complete businesslike voice, she gave the time and directions, no hint of wanting to see him before or offer to help train him for the upcoming date. Dan figured he'd played the "I need your help" card already and Serena wouldn't fall for that again.

After assuring her he'd arrive on time for their next double-date, he'd hung up and reluctantly focused his attention back to the two folders on his desk, the mystery men from her files.

Somewhere in those files had to be the answer, the true story behind Second Sight Dating.

\* \* \* \* \*

Serena snuck out of her apartment before Michael had gotten up, avoiding a confrontation she wasn't ready for. No way did she want to relive the events from the previous night, at least not until she could do so without pain. She'd taken the coward's way out, the only way to regroup and hope to stay sane.

She'd done a background check on Dan, reviewing the county's online criminal records. His name didn't appear. Next, she'd called the number for his insurance agency, a well-known business. The personnel director assured her Dan was employed there. Michael could look into that part of Dan's life a little further.

Letting out a heavy sigh, she figured nothing could lead her to believe he wasn't as he appeared...except for the sneaking around in her files. She'd have to avoid having him in her office. Mentally cringing at the connotation "having him in her office" held, Serena's face warmed with memories of their heated lovemaking session. Trust was important and she didn't, couldn't, trust him.

She called Mr. "Four" and rearranged their meeting location for dinner, praying for a better night. How bad could the evening get? A dinner titled "Awesome Pawsome Friends" sounded relatively harmless. It would probably turn out to be some type of fundraiser for a local pet charity. Mentally perusing the outfits stuffed in her closet, Serena wondered what type of dress code she needed to follow for a dog-related evening of whatever.

Jason, her date-to-be for the gala event, sounded sincerely enthused, causing her to wince with a smattering of guilt at using him for an escort/chaperone. She didn't need any complications with him trying to involve himself in her life. She calmed down after her instincts assured her they wouldn't possibly find enough in common to convince him to attempt a second date.

Soon she'd be shuffling through another first and only date with no future. Although these were business-only ventures from her standpoint, it still made her wonder at her appeal.

Serena wanted to stick close to Dan and watch his every move so these dates were vital. But, why hadn't Sean even tried to call her for another romp out on the town?

*Great dating record. How many other men will run screaming from me as fast as they can? Alan had.*

*And so has Dan.*

If his sudden coldness after hours of wondrous foreplay and lovemaking were any indication, something was definitely wrong with her. She just didn't have what it took to keep a man interested. Tears welled in her eyes, but she refused to allow them to fall.

Channeling her resolve once again, Serena banished her love life, or, lack of one, to the back of her mind. She had the here and now to contend with so she concentrated her energy into getting through the day. Nothing else could be done but to sit on the sofa and stare out the window while she braced herself for an evening of uncertainties.

At noon, her brother marched into her office, startling her out of a daydream of days gone by. He held up two bags of fast food, the kind he knew she liked. Plastered on his face was the unmistakable "now we'll talk" look she'd encountered a few times before. There'd be no wiggling her way out of postponing their inevitable discussion.

"Eat first, then talk. I'm not leaving here until you do," he commanded. He dropped one bag of food onto her lap then planted his bottom on her desk and opened his bag. Short, sweet and to the point, but she wouldn't have expected anything different from the brother she knew so well.

Resigned to get something solid in her stomach while she had time to formulate a brief summary of her night's folly, Serena answered, "Works for me." In a move to gain more time, she asked, "By the way. How did your night go?"

Getting her brother to talk about a safer topic would prolong Serena's rendition of her night with Dan. Michael stopped chewing his burger, narrowed his eyes and frowned.

"Don't think I don't know what you're up to. But, to satisfy your curiosity, I'll tell you." He gave her a no-nonsense stare. "Then we'll talk about you."

"How's Annemarie?"

He relaxed a little and swallowed. A wide grin spread across his face. "Fine. Wonderful. It was like old times. She seemed really glad to see me."

"I told you she would."

"We're gonna talk some more today."

"Great. I always liked her."

"Now, eat up. It's your turn to talk."

Serena gulped down her drink, the cool liquid chilling her insides as she screwed up the courage to tell her brother an outline of her disastrous, sex-frenzied night out.

She'd leave out most of the sex part.

After Michael left, Serena dragged herself over to her sofa and plopped down onto it. Dan's image plastered itself everywhere she looked around her office. The sofa reminded her of him and what they shared. The chair did, too. Ditto for the desk and the carpet.

Inhaling deeply hadn't helped. His scent, the one that filled her with a heady, lusty urge the night before, still lingered in the room. Dan's physical being wasn't there, but everything else about him was, tormenting her heart. Her damn pulse quickened, just at the mere thought of Dan's last appearance in her office and their overwhelming surrender to temptation.

Her brother had been patient and listened to her tale, only interrupting a few times to verify information and ask a few pointed questions for more descriptive facts. While not immediately concluding Dan's motives as sinister, Michael acknowledged and agreed with her suspicions. The sneaking at her files worried him as much as it did Serena.

After bickering back and forth as to what her brother's role would be in any future investigation of Dan, Michael agreed to step back and let her handle the upcoming night out by herself. Confident she wouldn't relinquish control of her senses again, she'd convinced Michael to spend another evening with his former girlfriend instead.

With no more clients expected for the day, Serena decided to close early. Getting some additional sleep before partying at night seemed crucial. She had a big night

ahead, one sure to be filled with anxiety and doubts. Serena geared herself up to be alert and keep a close eye on Dan.

Dinner for four, coming up. Her life was in the doghouse anyway, so, bring on the dogs. The fates had reduced her to dining with a maybe false client, whom she most likely mismatched with another client and she was dragging someone else along for the ride as her escort.

How much worse could her life get?

## Chapter Thirteen

“Don’t you just love this?” Miss “E”, Ramona Simms, dog groomer extraordinaire, shouted her comment over the incessant noise of one hundred excited dogs echoing in the massive dining hall. “I can’t wait for the best-dressed contest.”

The gala event, unknown to Serena and a complete surprise to the two male escorts for the evening, not only offered dinner for those paying to attend, but dogs were admitted free, too. Of the two hundred guests crammed into the banquet hall, half of them brought their pampered pooches along.

Brightly colored floor mats, coordinated with doggie water bowls and food dishes, were doled out upon arrival. Each pooch also received his or her own dog treat bag, courtesy of a local gourmet dog bakery.

Ramona had greeted Serena at the entrance, dog in tow and both had waited for Dan and Jason to arrive. Other than Dan’s eyebrows arching to surprising heights, he never expressed any sign of emotion at the chaos greeting him.

Jason, Serena’s non-real date for the evening, took the frantic scene in stride. He commented on his appreciation for all four-legged canine friends and expressed his disappointment over not knowing he could have brought his dog along. Jason immediately fell into step with Ramona, probably both dazzled by her charms and pumping her for hints and strategies on caring for his golden retriever.

Actually, at least that’s what Serena assumed they mumbled about with each other. Deafened by the howling sounds of both happy and unhappy dogs, she wasn’t sure what anyone was saying. Dan, however, smiled at everyone and yelled out a comment here and there. Serena marveled at his ability to decipher any topic of conversation.

Ramona motioned for them to head to their table, one set up for the four of them. Located in a corner, it provided space for one dog mat on the floor between two of the chairs. Her dog, Queen Sheba of the Nile, a prissy-looking white toy poodle adorned with hot pink bows, yipped and pranced around their feet, entangling them with her leash. Ramona unhooked her leash, wound up the strap and placed Sheba on the mat. To her credit, the dog sat perfectly still, one of the few creatures not moving in the hall.

The foursome took their seats, Dan and Serena crammed into the back area of their tiny corner. Jason and Ramona had a wider area between them, space big enough for Sheba’s pink and purple mat.

Two sets of eyes focused on the dog, while the other two sets, belonging to Dan and Serena, glanced at each other for a few seconds before each turned to stare intently at the scene of people and dog pandemonium before them.

Dog owners spread across the room, tracking down their tables. Distracted and preoccupied pets trailed behind them, although some didn't appear to be on leashes. Big, small, dogs of all sizes and breeds strutted their stuff.

Some canines even sported outfits. Most noticeable were the tuxedo-garbed males and fluffy evening-dressed females. Dogs wore top hats and tiaras, not to mention the fancy studded collars.

Sheba pranced around in her bows with a matching sequined gown in hot pink, totally coordinated with Ramona's choice of wardrobe color for the night. Matching rhinestone and ribbon collars bonded the two and screamed, "we're together" ...just in case anyone doubted Sheba belonged to Ramona. Of course, the hot pink nail polish on the woman's hands and Sheba's four feet completed the picture.

For a weird split second, Serena addressed the possibility of being underdressed amidst the fashion display surrounding her. She and Dan wouldn't stand a chance at the best-dressed human award, even without a dog in tow. They'd dressed comfortably, not anything near the formal attire donned by over half the diners.

Jason, however, fit right in, dressed in suit and tie, an outfit Serena deemed expensive. The scene blurred before her eyes and she questioned her sanity and stamina to get through dinner.

Dan tapped her thigh under the table. The contact shook her out of shock mode and caused her to jump. She pushed her hand under the tablecloth and over his, covering it in an effort to still his fingers.

Warmth spread from her thigh up her body and in seconds, heated her cheeks. His letters danced in her brain until she lifted and removed his hand from its location. She raised her face and moved closer to his, wondering if the noise level had diminished enough for her to hear what he wanted to say.

"I don't think she's interested in me."

Serena's heart sank, another failure on her part. However, that tiny part of her, the one that still craved Dan's attention, shouted, "Good. I don't want her to be." Serena admitted total control over her emotions needed work.

She moved her mouth near his ear. In a testy tone, more irritated at her own niggling reminder of a desire for him than his remark, she replied, "We just got here. Talk to her. You said you like dogs. Say something relevant."

*Take your own advice, girl. Talk to Jason.*

She watched as Dan tapped Ramona on the shoulder and moved his chair closer to hers. He placed his arm around the back of her seat and said something in her ear. At first, Ramona pulled back and stared at him. Giving a giggle Serena managed to hear, Ramona then leaned over to Jason and made a comment.

Dan kept smiling while the other two spoke back and forth between themselves. Serena's mind whirled, disaster a sure outcome.

Music began playing and Serena watched in awe as people got up to dance, taking their pets with them. Some danced with human partners while trailing their dogs on a leash. Others opted to dance only with their dogs. Some dogs were actually scooped up into the arms of their owners and carried into dance steps.

Jason stood up and Serena geared herself to tackle the dance floor, dogs and all. But, her date for the evening didn't ask her to dance.

No, her escort, unknowing chaperone helper for Dan and his date, never even looked her way. He asked Ramona and Sheba to dance. All three drifted away from their table and onto the dance floor, disappearing into the sea of gala celebrants bobbing to music. Serena couldn't tell if they'd held Sheba in their arms as they danced to a slow number.

That left Serena and Dan stranded at their table. She grabbed for the carafe of table wine, hoping to pour a glass full of the red liquid and give her something to do. Dan intercepted her target, pouring her a glass and one for himself. Without a word, he reached over and tapped her glass with his, raised it in a salute, nodded and chugged it down.

Serena followed suit. Maybe the wine would help her get through the next hour or two.

Dan grabbed her hand after she placed her glass back on the table. Pulling her up with him, he shouted over the hubbub, "Let's dance. I don't want to just sit here."

Great. She was deemed a better choice than wallflower companion duty. Her arm went limp as Dan led the way onto the dance floor.

They stopped in a semi-opened area and began dancing to a rock tune that had just started playing. Everyone did their own thing to the music and Serena took the opportunity to glance around her at the other dancers, both human and canine.

Some dogs definitely possessed more rhythmic qualities than their owner counterparts. Not far from them she spotted Ramona and Jason, twirling with Sheba, all three completely out of sync with the music. Dan, however, danced like a pro, someone very comfortable with his movement style and steps.

Impressive dancer, lousy at talking to dates, excellent sex partner, clueless as to his date's interest in another man. All these rolled up summarized Dan's outward appearance. The puzzle pieces of his appearance didn't quite fit, really didn't gel.

The song ended. Before Serena could make her escape back to their table, Dan caught her arm and drew her into his embrace.

"Our dates are still dancing, so why don't we do the same."

Serena glanced over at Ramona and Jason, deep in conversation, holding Sheba between them as a slow song started. "Dan, it's probably not a good idea for us to be doing this."

She tried to break free from his grasp, but his arms only tightened around her. Heart beating rapidly, she ended her struggle and sank into his hold.



"Why are you doing this? Can't you see we shouldn't be together?"

He spun her in a turn, grasping her closer as he did so. "Serena, all we're doing is dancing. Obviously my date isn't the least bit interested in me. Yours," he nodded in the other couples' direction, "hasn't spoken more than ten words to you since he got here. I came to eat and enjoy myself, so we'll dance. You owe me that, at least."

Serena's body sagged against his. He directed their steps, leading the way into their slow dance. She had no more energy to argue with him. He expected to be entertained and she was available.

Ramona had probably been another disappointment for him. Perhaps she didn't fit the type he was really looking for. Not wealthy, dog groomer, a little overboard in the pet-loving category. And, she hadn't given Dan more than a cursory once-over.

Maybe he felt crushed. Maybe he felt relieved. Maybe he felt a better catch would still materialize.

Serena sniffed in a deep whiff of his aftershave, the one that had jumpstarted her heart the night before. Shivers of delight rushed through her body, making her tingle with desire for him. And, of course, his letters bobbed into her head.

No. She wouldn't give in, no matter how much she craved to have him satisfy her needs.

She looked at her watch. Dinner would be served in ten minutes and the whole blessed mess of an evening would be over soon. She'd zoom out as quickly as possible, go home and let the tears fall.

*I don't want to let her go.* Dan's heart warred with his brain, the one telling him to stick to his job and ignore Serena's mesmerizing charms. She felt so good in his arms, coconut-smelling, shampooed head resting under his chin on his chest.

Heated sensations thrived and burned everywhere her skin touched his. Giving himself one swift mental kick, Dan shoved all thoughts of lust into the back recesses of his mind. Serena. His job. No combining work and play.

Ramona, her "expert" match for him, was as far out in left field as he was in right field. What match? She held no interest for him and seemed perfectly content to entertain Jason's attentiveness.

Here again, an insurance salesman didn't hold a candle to the professor, an impeccably dressed one at that. He'd caught the remarks Ramona had made about Jason's expensive suit and his first-rate judgment in using the most prominent and pricey dog trainer in the county.

Maybe Ramona looked at Jason as a potential source for her to increase her income. Dan couldn't compete with a wealthier catch like Jason.

Or, maybe Ramona just preferred Jason, the knowledgeable dog owner, someone she could relate to on a higher, dog-loving level. Had Serena set them up on purpose, using Dan as a front, or had her gift, as she called it, screwed up again?

Dan twirled Serena around the floor once more until the music stopped. Noticing that their dinners had been delivered to their table, he wordlessly led Serena to their seats.

Ramona and Jason returned, laughing with each other and paying more attention to Sheba than to the others seated at the table. Dan began eating and smiled at Serena while his insides clenched. Spurned again, still unsure of the true reason for his rejection, he swallowed hard.

Serena spoke with Jason and he explained his desire not to hurt her feelings but to pursue Ramona's attention. She agreed with his assessment of their mismatched evening selections and planned to make a hasty exit after once again facing a turned-down Dan.

Dan's acceptance of the evening's unplanned ending needed no discussion. He'd already evaluated the situation and commented on Jason and Ramona's interest in each other.

Was he being very accommodating, hurting inside, or relieved, not wanting to waste time with someone unsuited to his goals?

After an almost tasteless meal, Serena thanked all for attending and rose to make her exit. Dan got to his feet, made his goodbyes to the two remaining table guests and backed away to allow Serena to precede him out of the hall.

They traversed through rows of tables, wandering around yelping dogs and seated humans. As they exited the hall, the host for the evening's gala announced the upcoming best-dressed categories. Serena and Dan glanced at each other and quickened their steps.

Once outside, Serena inhaled deeply, grateful for a calm night sky and head-clearing air. Faint noises from the hall broke through her thoughts. Faster, determined steps took them further away from the building, the sounds from inside fading away.

Dan kept pace with her, only once reaching for her arm but never touching her. She'd pulled her arm closer to her body, then hugged both arms near her chest. No contact with Dan was vital to her sanity.

She reached her car, eager to get in, drive away and arrive home. The businesswoman in her made her stop short in her tracks, the requirement for discussing the evening's failure, her mismatching him again, needed to be accomplished.

"I'm sorry about tonight. We still have one more match for you to try. Look, Dan. If this doesn't work, I'll refund your money."

Dan frowned, then said with a shrug, "I don't blame you. You said I was different. I'll try once more." His look turned serious. "Look. About last night..."

Serena interrupted. "There's nothing to discuss." Embarrassed, she looked away as her cheeks heated. "You're a client and I will keep the boundaries straight from now on. I forgot that last night, but it won't happen again."

She looked at his face and willed herself to meet his stare without flinching. "Maybe I should let you meet this next date alone. Maybe four isn't a lucky number for you on a date."

"And maybe it's a good thing you and two others have been with me. Could be I'm a catalyst for you matching the others somehow."

Taken aback, Serena quipped, "I never thought of it that way." Could he be right? Was he only there for her to match the others? Had her sight moved to a different level, one that required help or channeling through a virile, sexy, charming man like Dan?

Dan broke through her mind's wandering. "Who knows? Perhaps there's not really a match out there for me." He gave her a half-smile, nodded and walked away.

*I thought I was last night.* Serena couldn't help the words flashing in her head, over and over again. How stupid could she be? He didn't want her. Made it very clear the night before after their lovemaking session.

They'd shared a night of sex, incredible and full of passion. They hadn't shared a night of love, the one thing Serena craved.

He hadn't asked more questions about her business, but she'd more or less quashed further discussions about that until he'd finished his dates. Perhaps Dan was content with just soaking in the inefficient way she seemed to be running things since his appearance. Could be he figured he'd come up with some plan of action to organize Second Sight Dating, using his financial backing as a huge, motivating incentive.

After becoming her partner, Dan might think he'd run the operation his way, possibly using it as a means to carry out whatever ulterior motive was firmly lodged in the back of his mind. Something helpful? Innocent? Sinister? Illegal?

She'd have to be careful. Dan wasn't the man for her. Why couldn't she shake off her desire for him? Any relationship other than a legitimate business one would only lead to heartache.

He could very well be someone she'd have to turn over to the police.

## Chapter Fourteen

Serena kicked off her shoes as soon as she entered her apartment, weary after a night of dogs and doubts. She eased her body back to lean against the wall closest to the door. Curling and uncurling her toes, she hoped to ease the cramps that had settled in.

Dragging herself to a cushiony armchair, she plopped down into its softness. Minutes later, Serena looked up as the door opened. Michael strolled into the apartment, followed by a smiling Annemarie.

"Hi, sister of mine. How'd it go?"

Cautious about how much to divulge at the time, Serena replied, "Very noisily, actually. Be grateful you weren't there. What should have been a quiet dinner for four turned out to be a mismatched foursome dining with dogs event."

Her brother and friend laughed, despite the evil looks Serena assumed she glared in their directions.

"What about your matchmaking? What happened?" Michael wasn't about to let her slide over his question with some witty comment.

"Let's just say two of the four people at our table hit it off and the other two of us went home. Alone. As in, separately, to our individual abodes." She dropped her head behind her to the high back cushion.

"I get the feeling our night couldn't compare in a 'fascinating details' category with yours."

Serena closed her eyes. "You never can tell. Any dogs yelping along to music where you went?"

Michael snorted. "Uh, I can't say we had that pleasure, did we, Annemarie?" He glanced at the woman next to him and she shook her head no. He continued, "Want to know how our evening went?"

"Sorry. I'm still suffering from high-pitched ringing in my ears. I'll be lucky if the blaring racket from tonight hasn't left any hearing loss. Lots of dogs howling and people yelling at each other or for their mutts to quiet down."

Serena's eyes widened as she straightened her head and attempted to focus her attention on the two other people crowding her living room. "So, you two. What's new?"

"We had a pleasant dinner – very quiet I might add – and we've done some serious talking." Michael winked at Annemarie and grabbed her hand.

"I think he finally realized I'm not going to wait forever for him to come to his senses," Annemarie added.

"And?" Serena questioned, hoping for some happy news.

Michael grinned. "You'll be happy to know we can't and won't live without each other."

With a broad smile overtaking her face, Serena ventured to ask, "Are congratulations in order?"

Michael pulled Annemarie into his arms and kissed her. "See, sweetheart? My sister really is psychic."

Serena grabbed a pillow and tossed it at Michael. "Very funny. It didn't take any special abilities to see you two should be together. If you weren't so pigheaded, Michael, you guys wouldn't have wasted so much time. Count your blessing that Annemarie never gave up on you."

"I know, I know. Anyway, we're together now and we'll go from there."

Annemarie joined in, saying, "We're thinking of getting married in June. Nothing really big, just family and some friends."

Serena caught the sparkle in the woman's eyes as she spoke and the look of pure joy on her brother's face. "Can I do something to help? Tie my brother down so he doesn't change his mind?"

Michael let go of Annemarie and approached his sister. Towering over her where she sat, he teased, "Not very nice, Serena. Hmm. What can I do to convince you I'm serious and get you to handle your own love life?"

"I believe you. Really I do. Now, you two lovebirds, go away. I need to collapse and gather my strength again. I've had a crazy night."

"Annemarie and I are heading to see her parents. I'll be in later. I'll wake you so we can talk."

His comment and the look on his face left Serena with no snappy comeback. She would have to discuss Dan and the evening's disaster. Déjà vu. That's all she seemed to be doing lately.

She couldn't stop a yawn from escaping. "I love you dearly but please go away. I'm exhausted and need to space out for a while. I promise we'll talk later. And, congratulations. It'll be nice having a sister in the family. We'll be able to gang up on Michael when he's bad, Annemarie."

With a smile and a wave, Serena watched the two lovers leave her apartment. It took monumental effort to get out of the chair and drag herself into the bedroom. But, after the night she'd had, she'd earned some self-pity time and a good cry.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan watched from his car as Gino and a woman left Serena's apartment building. He'd planted himself within view of her door from a location across the street after following her home. He knew she'd entered the apartment earlier and assumed she'd been alone until Gino and friend had waltzed in without knocking but by using a key.

So, now what? Who was the woman appearing so chummy with Gino? They'd kissed a couple of times before entering Serena's apartment. Only stayed a few minutes, then left like lovebirds again.

Gino had smiled and laughed at the brunette all the way to what Dan figured was his car. They'd practically tumbled in while still embracing and let loose with more passionate smooches once inside.

Dan eyed Serena's door and the windows he could see. Lights were being turned off one by one and from his glimpse of her apartment's inside the other night, he figured she was heading for the back rooms. Maybe even going to bed while Gino hit the town with—whom? His date? Someone Serena set him up with?

Making a snap decision to follow the man parading around as Gino Conti, Dan started his car's engine and pulled out of the parking lot, planning to tail the lovers. He knew enough to stay within sight but well behind the tan Mazda. Too many nights of surveillance work keyed his brain to act on instinct.

After a twenty-minute ride, the Mazda pulled off the highway and onto residential streets in Leawood. Dan followed them into an older subdivision, one called Twin Timberlake Estates. They parked outside a modest two-story home so he drove down to the corner to avoid suspicion.

Dan turned the car around and drove past the house, keeping his speed low so he could copy the license plate number and view the house number as well. He then turned the car around once more so he could park behind the Mazda but a few houses down and facing in the same direction.

Hunkering down for comfort and to stay out of sight, Dan planned to stay put for however long it would take for the lovers to emerge. He hoped this wouldn't take all night. Sleep beckoned him as a means of escaping the howling dog sounds still echoing in his head.

Dan grabbed his phone and called his department. He needed to convey the license plate and house numbers so names could be revealed. He hoped to find out Gino's true identity.

What the hell was going on inside? Some type of love fest? Innocent fun? Was Gino trapping an unsuspecting Second Sight Dating client into a sinister game, or was the woman baiting him as one of Serena's sex-for-money beauties?

A call from Johnson in his department interrupted his thoughts. The house belonged to a family named LaRosa. And, the car was not registered to Gino.

The car's owner, Annemarie LaRosa, had to be related to the occupants of the house. Hmm. Wasn't there a LaRosa in Napoli's organization? Was the LaRosa family actually mob members living/hiding out under the guise of average residents in a quiet suburb of Leawood?

Maybe they carried out Serena's true business *modus operandi* from a modest home in a thirty-year-old housing subdivision. Sure. Could be. Gino and Annemarie

could get info from Serena, relay it to the LaRosas in the house and either they called the shots, ran the scam, or reported to Napoli and the mob.

Dan's brain accelerated into high gear. What if the real Gino relinquished his name to phony Gino under mob pressure? Could be Napoli wasn't too happy with Gino's getting involved with the mayor's daughter. Maybe he figured putting in a replacement, a smooth character the new Gino appeared to be, would tone down any ripples of trouble that could develop.

Napoli wasn't stupid. He'd been around long enough to know that skirting the law, staying under the radar, made his operation run more easily. The real Gino threatened his business.

Shit. This Gino, the one he'd been tailing, could be anyone.

After waiting an hour for the lovers to emerge, Dan finally noticed them coming out of the house, arm in arm and get into her car. He followed them back what appeared to be the reverse route they'd taken before as they headed for the highway. Dan did likewise.

Confused, Dan found himself right back at Serena's apartment. Both got out of the car and glued themselves together body to body and mouth to mouth for what seemed like forever. Gino opened the driver's door for Annemarie, she got in and then drove off while Dan and Gino watched.

Gino then walked to Serena's door, took out a key and let himself in.

Huh? Frustrated, Dan sat for a solid minute wondering what the relationship could possibly be between Gino and Serena. He'd never seen them kiss like lovers would, but, did the guy live with her? Gino lip-locked with Annemarie like a desperately in love couple would, but she'd let him leave her car to return to Serena's apartment.

Did Gino have two affairs going? One? None? What had his high-school-aged niece called it? FWB? Friends with benefits? Sex but no strings? Nothing? Totally open arrangements for his ménage à trois?

"I need sleep." Dan spoke out loud, trying to keep himself awake for the ride home. He rubbed both hands over his face. Exhaustion was taking its toll. Maybe in the morning his head would clear and he could fit the puzzle pieces together.

Or, they'd multiply into triple the amount of pieces and screw with his brain even more than before.

*Damn her.*

## Chapter Fifteen

The next morning Serena's head still buzzed with the relentless sound of barking dogs. She poured herself a cup of coffee, hoping massive doses of caffeine would wake up her sleepy mind. She'd need a clear head to tackle the day before her.

Michael had come back around eleven and woke her for their next discussion. He'd been lenient on her, listening to Serena ramble on about her latest dating fiasco without passing a quick judgmental comment. He told her that even though she'd verified his employment and no police record appeared on the county's listing, it was time for her to let him step in and do some background checking of his own.

He also insisted he be her next date when Dan met Miss "X". He was fully prepared to take on the role of private investigator and tail her troublesome client if needed.

Serena had resigned herself to accept any decision Michael offered. She'd done all she could think of doing and was still no closer to unraveling the mystery surrounding Dan's true motives. Resorting to putting her brother's expertise to use loomed ahead as the only viable solution in finding out if Dan was a fraud. Her heart skipped one tiny beat and she knew the outcome of Mike's investigation might not be to her liking.

She'd set up Dan's final matchmaking date for the next evening. No doubt existed in her mind as to whether or not Justine, his Miss "X", would agree to meet him. The woman had pestered her for a month about finding a match. Trouble was, no male client Serena had tried to fix her up with had shown any interest in meeting the slightly offbeat, eccentric lady.

Yep. Justine would jump at the chance for an introduction to Dan, sight unseen, as soon as she understood there was a match ready and eager to meet her.

Sight. Strange word for Serena to use. It used to flow freely in her conversations, a staple part of her identity, a word in the name of her business. It now seemed unclear, awkward, not something descriptive about her. "Sight" now tumbled off her lips like an unfamiliar entity. Her sight was being tested and she was failing miserably on all levels.

Maybe her gift was fading.

*There goes the business.*

Serena shuffled over to her coffeemaker and poured a steaming cup of coffee. Stress made her jumpy, nervous about her future and work. She could be losing it all, sight, job and confidence in doing anything right. How could she trust her own judgment about whatever came up?

She didn't trust Dan and now couldn't depend on herself. Michael might find something sinister about her unusual client, or he could determine nothing was wrong with him. That would leave her...where?



Questioning her gift, the very basis for her business, could lead to an unhappy ending. Why was this happening? Was Dan the catalyst to her sudden change in fortune? Fate, something she respected and swore no power over, now ran her life and all she could do was go along for the ride in whatever direction it took her.

She slammed her half-empty cup down on the counter. Damn. A powerless feeling invaded every inch of her body, something she hadn't been accustomed to. She hated allowing fate to control her destiny, but vowed not to go down without at least putting up a fight. And take a possible two-faced man named Dan with her if he proved to be a fraud.

Energy level revived and geared for battle, Serena marched into her bedroom to dress and plan for the day. She had some serious mind games to arrange for Dan. Maybe playing up to his charm would get him to reveal a darker side. Putting temptation in his path, namely, more of her files or made-up information about clients, could show his true colors.

She could doctor records as well as anyone else, if needed. She'd allow him to sneak peeks at files written to tempt him, make him display his real motives in coming to Second Sight Dating. Dan would find files for a woman or two of his dreams, complete with all his interests and wealthy enough to fascinate any gigolo looking for money.

Let's see how well you do with temptation, Dan Reese.

\* \* \* \* \*

As expected, Justine, Miss "X", gushed over the opportunity to meet Dan. Serena out and out lied about Dan's enthusiasm in drama and theatre arts, something he'd listed in his profile as having only a faint interest in. His next date's life revolved around theatrical work and although assigned only minor speaking parts in ten productions, she'd busied herself with backstage work.

Justine's current job—that of waitress/actress/stage helper—kept her tied up almost every night at work. She'd suggested the foursome meet at her current job's location, a dining hall where her dinner theatre group performed. Food, entertainment, blue-and-purple-streaked-haired Justine would be present. What more could Dan ask for?

Serena agreed to Justine's suggestion, planning to pay Dan's way if he balked at the unusual meeting place. She snorted. At least no four-legged pets would be involved this time.

She placed a call to Dan, eager for his reaction.

"Dan, your next date would like to meet at a dinner theatre show. The whole thing shouldn't last longer than three hours. We'll get time to talk, eat and be entertained. It's not a musical so maybe it won't get too loud. I think it's a mystery of some kind."

Dan's hesitation in replying pinched a few raw nerves in Serena's body, causing her to tap her foot as a way to expel any anxiety building inside her. How could he not agree? What would she do if he didn't?

A calming sensation relaxed her as he gave his blessing for the next date encounter. He added how he hoped only human diners would be around this time and gave a quick laugh over the phone. An attempt at humor?

After reassuring him theirs would be a people-only dinner, he'd hung up, no further conversation offered. She hadn't mentioned how their dinner meeting would be a venture into the world of interactive theatre where staff, actors and guests got involved and participated in the play. He'd find that out soon enough.

The combined number of people involved with the actual acting parts would be under fifteen, but not all guests would be given a character to play for the evening. Luckily for Serena, she, Dan and Michael would be there as Justine's special invitees. The wannabe actress promised to take extra special care in assigning them roles in the upcoming murder mystery dinner they'd sit through the next evening.

A cringe of uneasiness tensed her body as she tried to seek contentment with the peculiarities enhancing the upcoming date. Justine had asked for guesses at their sizes and said it had something to do with "costume props" Michael, Dan and Serena would don as part of their roles.

She prayed for minor garment additions. Michael would go with the flow for the evening, as would she. How would Dan react to playing dress-up for his acting debut role?

Acting. Roles. Everyone was already involved in playing a part in her life. She was running a business, but had taken on the role of detective where Dan was involved. Soon, she'd be throwing temptation in his way, testing his honesty with falsified, made-up files. But, she'd have to resort to dishonesty to accomplish her plan.

Dan still made her feel like he might be telling the truth. She just couldn't account for his snooping around her files and that made her uneasy. And, the thing about his cringing when she asked him about exes in his life made her wonder. Had he hidden something from her? What role was he already playing in his attempt to gain her approval?

Then there was Michael, her policeman brother. He was playing the role of Mr. "Eight"...that Gino character she'd dismissed from her files after Julia filed a complaint about him. She'd thrust Michael's cover as Gino upon him and it would work to their advantage in the quest to out Dan's true motives.

No one was as he or she appeared. All the players had something to hide, some reason to hold back truthfulness and function at some level of dishonesty. This night of make-believe might bring out Dan's true nature. She knew her brother and she had nothing to hide, but Dan could reveal something while pretending to be someone else.

Actually, he could be deeply entrenched in doing that already and may have been ever since he walked through her office door.

*Bring on the mystery. I'm ready.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"You and dogs. Should have called me. I'd pay to see that." Dan's boss laughed and waved him into the office. "I got your message and wondered if you'd need a day off to recover."

"If this woman is legit, her business savvy stinks. How could she come up with two mismatches and get me on some supposedly quiet date that turns out to be a nightmare of an evening?"

"Don't know, friend. Any more info turn up?"

Dan shifted in his seat opposite Steve. "Yeah. I followed 'Gino' and a woman from Serena's house to a home in Leawood. She's Annemarie LaRosa...got her name from her license plate...and the house apparently belongs to her parents."

"And?"

"She and 'Gino' are real friendly, more than he was with Serena. Aren't there LaRosas in Napoli's organization?" Dan shrugged. "Could be a connection between Napoli, the LaRosas and Serena related to her business." He ran a hand across his face. "I've gotta get into that house and talk to the LaRosas somehow. Maybe take Fitzgerald with me. I could always use the excuse that we're investigating reports of thefts in the area."

Steve gave a nod. "Go for it. See what you can find out."

"One more thing. I'm working on two files I accidentally picked up at her office the other night. One's for Gino, the other's for some unnamed guy but he doesn't have a number, only a letter. Could be a slip-up on her part."

Morgan frowned. "You think maybe she forgot to give him one?"

Dan let out a loud exhale. "Shit. I don't know. He had to be important, though. She wrote lots of intimate stuff in his file, more than what I've seen in Gino's."

"But you really haven't seen many of her files on clients, just the stuff she gives dates to view about other clients."

"True. I don't know. This Mr. 'A' might have been turned over to another female from her list, someone who could act on his list of wants. All I know is, no number and she wrote down his laundry list of desires and the fact she couldn't handle him."

Morgan joined Dan in silence for a moment before speaking. "Dan, maybe he was a first candidate for her side venture from legitimate matchmaking. Gino's doesn't follow suit?"

"She removed him from her client list. But maybe that means he was switched to a second book of clients, ones doing a different type of business."

"Going out again tonight?"

"Yep. Last match."

"Maybe you need to play the interested pay-for-hire Casanova and catch the operation red-handed. Or, see if this date offers something for a fee and make arrangements. Either way, it's time to tie this one together and get some answers."

Dan rose from his seat and reassured his boss of his intentions. "I'll do both approaches. One way or the other Serena Xavier and Second Sight Dating will show their true colors and I'll be ready to solve this case."

"Need any kind of backup?"

"No. We're going to a new dinner theatre show tonight, some downtown group called 'Entertainer Showcase'. Ever hear of it?"

Steve shrugged. "Can't say I have. Must be one of those smaller, outta the mainstream groups."

"I'm heading to the King's Hotel for this. My date's a part of this local talent group, I guess and wants to show off her stuff tonight. I can't imagine this getting out of hand. Christ. One of these dates Serena sets me up on has to be halfway plausible."

"Keep me posted." Steve grinned. "At least you've been eating out more lately."

Steve's smile irritated Dan. "Yeah. But the only enjoyable meal I've had was when Serena and I dined alone. The other two have been real acid inducers."

"Maybe this one will be okay."

Dan smirked. "I doubt it. But, I survived the dog dinner fiasco, so I'm ready for anything."

## Chapter Sixteen

"I'm Detective Carrington and this is my partner, Detective Fitzgerald. We're canvassing the area for information on recent reports of thefts in the area. Can we speak to you for a few minutes?"

Both detectives flashed their badges and had used a police car to add credibility to their request. Their plan was to start with the LaRosas and then question a few more people in the neighborhood to avoid suspicion.

Thomas and Maria LaRosa welcomed the men into their home and offered coffee. Dan felt a tinge of guilt at the ruse being played, but getting information was vital to his case.

The home's interior boasted modest furnishings, not ornate and expensive stuff Dan would have expected from one of Napoli's henchmen. The mantle held family photos, one displaying Annemarie's apparent college graduation.

After Dan discussed crimes in the neighborhood and gave vague information about suspected thefts as not to alarm the couple unnecessarily, he turned the topic of discussion to keeping families safe and inquired about the LaRosas.

Maria was more than happy to show off her children and grandchildren. She mentioned all the names, stating that Annemarie, her youngest, had recently gotten engaged.

Totally confused, Dan processed the information. Annemarie. Engaged. Was "Gino" the fiancé? That would leave Serena as...what? He squashed the urge to ask Annemarie's future husband's name, figuring that would seem odd.

After thanking the LaRosas for their time, the men left with more unanswered questions than Dan had hoped for. Puzzle pieces in the mystery of Serena's business fit and didn't fit. The LaRosas couldn't be involved with Napoli's mob. Tom worked at Sprint and Maria just retired from twenty years as a teacher. Not mob material or the type of people that hung around Napoli.

*Shit. Back to square one.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Serena, her date/brother, Michael, Dan and his date, had agreed to meet at the front entrance of the well-known hotel's banquet hall. As soon as they were a foursome, Justine whipped out character cards for everyone.

"What's this?" Dan glanced at Miss "X" and then aimed his question in Justine's direction as she handed him an index card with the name Clive emblazoned on the front.

"This will be so exciting." The woman actually sparkled with enthusiasm, a huge smile plastered on her face. "I arranged it so that all of us take part in our murder mystery play tonight. Mr. 'Four-eighteen', you'll be known as Clive. I'm Rosalia, Miss Sight, you're Jezebel and Mr. 'Eight', you'll be Percy."

Striving to appear as surprised at the card-playing roles as Dan and Michael would be, Serena lowered her head immediately and studied the words written on the card handed to her. She dared not so much as glance at the faces of the two men she'd dragged along to dinner, unaware of the evening's acting obligations. Convinced both Dan and Michael would have looks of murder on their faces staring in her direction, she opted for the coward's way out.

Jezebel. Wonderful. Serena focused on her information card. She would play the flirtatious wife of Michael/Percy, striving for male attention in the room while employing all her seductive charms. The card instructed her to wiggle her hips when moving around, smile brightly and wink at the men.

In particular, she was to seek out Dan/Clive's attention, a longtime lover for whom she harbored a jealous obsession.

Justine, AKA Rosalia, sprinted off after informing them she needed to help greet guests in her playacting part. "And," she'd instructed, "head over to the coat check area. The wardrobe staff will help you with your costumes." She then giggled and suggested they try out their roles at the table and then mingle.

Serena managed to raise her eyes level with her brother's, only to view the amused look on his face before he spoke.

"Costumes? You never mentioned playacting, but, what the heck. I'm game. So, I'm to be your husband and it says here while you flirt around, I get to sneak away with the main hostess of our dinner, a widow named Mrs. Worthington." Michael read his card to the others.

Serena decided to chime in with her instructions to motivate the men and keep up the levity of their trapped need to perform. "I guess we'll have a few props to wear so we stand out from the other diners.

"As for me—Jezebel—I'll have to chase all the men but concentrate on you, Dan...I mean, Clive. Seems we have a history together and I can't take no for an answer. We need to end up behind the palm plants over there after our appetizers but before salads are served."

Dan's face showed no emotion either way about the costume necessity or involuntary push into the acting area. He could be furious or fascinated, but Serena couldn't tell.

In a calm, monotone voice he informed them, "Clive desperately loves Jezebel but gambles and needs money so he's after wealthy Mrs. Worthington. He's a charmer who also chases and seduces his ex-wife, Rosalia."

Serena threw caution to the wind and ventured to say, "I guess this will be fun. We each get to pretend to be someone else and maybe act out some hidden alter egos."

Michael looked around the room and then suggested they return to the foyer where the coat check was located. The threesome maneuvered their way through the other guests and greeted the costume supplier, Susan.

She handed both men jackets with outlandish colors and patterns, guaranteed to be attention getters. Serena tried in vain to stifle the laughter building inside her, but finally lost the battle for control.

"You two won't be hard to lose in a crowd." She hoped they'd see the humor in their apparel.

Dan smirked but removed his conservative, dark blue blazer and replaced it with a pastel-colored plaid jacket. To top off his outfit, he was handed a walking stick and sailor-worthy captain's hat.

Michael gave a frown as he contemplated his jacket. "Uh, pink's not really my color." He'd been given a pink jacket, checkered pink, white and blue tie and huge false mustache to wear.

Serena placed her hand on his arm. "Please. Put the stuff on. For me?" She hoped she sounded desperate enough to coerce her brother to forget his sense of style.

Michael shrugged off his jacket and whispered to Serena, "You owe me big-time for this."

Now dressed as Clive, Dan glanced at Michael and gave Serena a bewildered look before speaking. "I'm off to chat with Rosalia, seeing as the whole purpose of our dinner was supposed to be my getting to know her.

"As my ex-wife, another female I can't seem to get enough of, we've got to get together for a chat. I'm about to attempt charming her out of bickering over back alimony payments before appetizers appear. Excuse me." He pivoted and walked away.

"I guess he doesn't want to practice at our table," Michael offered as he rubbed his mustache in place.

Susan interrupted their conversation. "Here's your dress. You can change in back." She pointed to a doorway behind the check area.

Serena took the sequined, feathery red dress and wondered if it would fit. It was made from some type of stretchy material, but looked like it would cling and fit like a glove.

In the back room, she removed her functional little black dress and wiggled her way into Jezebel's attire for the night.

Serena twisted and turned in front of a door-length mirror to give herself a full view of the dress. She pulled up and down repeatedly, trying to stretch out the material to cover more of her body. Nothing helped. It would remain low-cut to emphasize her top and very short showing off a major portion of her legs. "Great. All I need is a street corner and I'm all set for a new career as a hooker."

The dress accentuated every curve of her body, making her extremely self-conscious. The guys had it easy. Pastel colors were nothing compared to clingy, miniscule, fire-engine red.

"Oh," exclaimed Susan, "I forgot the bow for your hair." She placed the headband with bow attached on Serena's head.

Anxiety and embarrassment turned Serena's body to mush. Could she hide in the coat area all night? Would anyone miss the lady in a slinky red dress, seductress of all male diners?

Michael wolf-whistled as she exited the room. "Man. I'll have to forget you're my little sister and try not to protect you. Got to keep in mind you're my ex for the evening and watch you wiggle your way around the room." He ended his statements with loud laughter.

Serena gritted her teeth and felt a blush creep up her cheeks. "Enough already. Remember, we have a job to do here. C'mon...follow me to our table."

Serena smiled and tried to ignore the guffaws and stares as she made her way to their table. She would definitely have to kill Justine first chance she got. No wonder the woman wanted her dress size. However, she wondered if Justine had ordered her dress a size or two smaller than required.

Serena and Michael found their table for four but were missing the other two people who were both off and mingling with other guests. All around them, laughter permeated the room, none of it coming from her table.

She eyed her brother. He'd stopped laughing at her.

"As fetching as you look, I believe some of the stares aimed in our direction are focused on me. Men in pink probably attract attention."

She shook her head in resignation and decided to allow the night to progress. "Let's look at the bright side. This might be fun. You missed the whole doggy dinner night. I'm hoping this is actually a step up in disaster dating scenarios."

Michael smirked and said, "Once I get over the pink thing, I'll probably be fascinated by all this." He shrugged. "Solving murder mysteries is a full-time job for me anyway. How much worse could this get?"

"What do you think? Does Dan seem worried about any of this? Maybe angry at the clothes? Not having more time with Rosa—I mean, Justine?" Serena asked.

"Hard to tell, although he did try to follow her whereabouts and appeared eager to find her."

"Where is she? I lost track of her after she waltzed away from us."

Michael pointed to a location near the main entrance. "She's over there...lady in the banana yellow dress and fruity hat...with Dan and I can only guess the other woman's my mistress. I'll head over to join them. Clive's supposed to be trying to move in on Mrs. Worthington so I should keep tabs on him and invite myself into his conversation."



He twisted his mustache and sighed. "I hope I get the hang of this thing. Never had one and it's itchy. Anyway, dear loving wife of mine, I have to leave your side so you have time to flirt around the room."

Serena rolled her eyes up to the heavens and inhaled deeply before letting out a calming breath of air. "Yeah, right. Something I'm normally an expert in." She aimed what she hoped was a serious glare at her brother.

"Hey. Strut you stuff, sis."

"Let's concentrate on Dan, okay? I think he's aiming to try out his charm on Justine. When I called to suggest he arrive ten minutes early, I let it slip that she would be real happy tonight since she just sold stock certificates from a diamond mine. I figured that'll catch his interest."

Michael pulled his head back in surprise, then bellowed with laughter. "Diamond mine? Are you serious? You couldn't come up with something better? Oh, Serena. You watch way too many TV shows."

"Shhh. Do you want everyone to hear you?"

"Tell me you really didn't say that." Laughter again exploded from his mouth.

Annoyed, Serena offered as an explanation, "Hey, I just said it at the spur of the moment. He never questioned what I said. Just replied he'd be sure to congratulate her. See? I planted a seed of interest."

"More like a germ of a complication. Fine. You do whatever you need to do. I'll get over there to hear what he says to Justine. Then I'll follow him over to Mrs. W.", Michael winked, "since I've got the hots for her."

"Hang on. I'm coming with you. I'm your loving wife, remember? I've got some prowling to do and Dan's my main target. Looks like both of us should head in the same direction."

As they approached Dan and Justine, Serena did a double take. She thought she recognized three people sitting near a piano. Squinting for a better view, she realized Annemarie and her parents were there to witness the Xavier siblings' performances.

"Ow! What are you doing?" Michael rubbed his arm, the one Serena had just pinched and gave her an inquisitive look.

"Did you invite Annemarie and her parents? This could get complicated if they try to talk to us and Dan gets nosy."

"Calm down. Yikes. If I'd known you'd go ballistic, I'd never have asked them to come."

Serena gritted her teeth and quipped, "They can't let on that they know us, Michael."

Her brother leveled a no-nonsense glare at her. "Stop worrying. I planned to meet them after dinner. Annemarie explained that I'm here to help you with your clients so they won't interfere. I didn't figure we'd get a chance to talk to them, but now that

we're part of the show, I plan to head over there later and talk." He lifted his shoulders. "Don't see why not. We're supposed to mingle."

Serena glared right back at her brother but decided to relax. He was right. What harm could talking to the LaRosas do? Speaking to other dinner guests wouldn't jeopardize their watching Dan. How could it?

Serena gave her brother a "move along" signal and made a beeline to where Dan and Justine were standing, just in time to catch part of their conversation. Dan had remarked, "Rich women are better suited to my tastes." Justine laughed and stroked his cheek with one long fingernail, responding, "I'd pay very well."

So, was he attempting to sweet-talk his ex-wife, Rosalia? Or, seduce the newly wealthy Justine? She wasn't his type at all. Their interests didn't jive, he was to the right where she was off to the left. Music, likes, appearances, all screamed these two wouldn't work as a couple.

But, here they stood, eyeing each other, oblivious to all others around them. Justine wasn't good enough for her Dan.

*Whoa. What the hell is wrong with me? My Dan? When did jealousy enter the picture? Idiot. Keep focused on Dan, the possible con artist who's after your unsuspecting clients.*

"You didn't wiggle on your way over here." Justine whispered her comment in Serena's ear.

Trying to sound enthused, she replied, "Oh. Guess I forgot. I'll keep that part of my character in mind."

"So," purred Justine to the newly arrived twosome as she latched onto Dan's arm, "I was just telling Clive how I'd love to run off with him, away from the crowd."

Dan grinned. "Now, you know we need to stay put for the time being. I've got people to see, but I'll gravitate back to you later." He turned and winked at Serena.

Playacting? Was that Dan or Clive speaking?

Serena decided to start her performance and grabbed Dan's other arm to pull him toward her. "Clive, dear. You promised me a walk by the palm plants."

Dan removed his instruction card, scanning it while everyone watched. He returned it to his pocket. "Sorry. It's not time yet." He removed her hand from its position on his arm and gave a lovesick puppy-dog look toward Justine. "We need to talk some more, don't we, Rosalia? You know, honey bunch, maybe you really should consider paying me. I can be real good for you."

Insides ready to explode, Serena had no chance to open her mouth and lambaste Dan before Michael pulled her away. Fuming, she gave her brother what she hoped translated as a look to kill.

"What are you doing?" she asked through gritted teeth.

"You were about to spoil everything. He could be a good improvisational actor playing up his part to Rosalia, or baiting Justine, the now rich diamond mine seller." Another series of laughs flowed from his mouth.

"Where are we going, husband Percy?"

As he escorted Serena to an area to their left, Michael nodded his head toward the outrageously dressed matron, now standing by a piano. Her long orange chiffon dress resembled something from a movie made in the 1930s and the assorted feathers sticking out of her hair drew Serena's eyes upward.

*Oh, Lord. Mrs. Worthington, my rival for Clive.*

After a few confusing moments of chatting with the airhead patroness of "special" dinners, an announcement was made for everyone to take their seats. Relief to have an opportunity to sit once again and be normal...whoever she was now...Serena welcomed the sight of her table and the other two occupants already seated.

An appetizer tray had been placed on their table. Their host for the evening, "Jake Marshall, retired chief of police of Worthington County", greeted the diners. He encouraged everyone to eat while he explained the plan for the evening.

Characters were introduced, each having to stand up for the others to see. Serena groaned, her stomach twisting in knots, as she realized Justine had done them the honor of being among the top ten players in the mystery. They couldn't have been given the parts of local residents of Worthington County. Oh, no. Justine had made other plans.

Serena half-listened to their host while trying to hear snips of Dan's conversation with Justine. She sneaked a peek at them, realizing they seemed to be clicking together and having a good time.

Part of the show? His plan to fleece her newly found wealth? An honest match? Which was it?

They couldn't be compatible. Nothing about them indicated they'd be well-suited in anything. She ought to know. She'd put them together. They were supposed to be cordial and go their separate, merry ways.

A round of applause for Mrs. Worthington caught her attention and she looked up front to the podium. Mrs. Worthington beamed with delight as the host begged her to play the piano. She agreed, joking how she was rusty and didn't want to bore anyone to death.

More applause followed and the woman sat down and began to play.

Very badly. Painfully amateurish.

Awful didn't begin to describe her talent, or in this case, enormously evident lack of talent. There weren't enough adjectives to express the agonizing way the woman manhandled the piano. Being bored to death wasn't a true possibility. Death by musical misery was.

Michael clapped when the torture was over, then took Justine over with him to congratulate the performer on her butchering rendition of show tunes. Personally, Serena thought thanking God it was over would be a better choice.

Dan grabbed her hand, his number immediately appearing in her head along with his letters. She gazed at him, badly ringing piano notes reverberating in her head.

"C'mon. We're heading for the plants." He pulled her behind him, gliding over the dance floor and through a maze of tables.

Once behind the palms, he backed her into a corner. "You're driving me crazy. I can't keep away from you."

Who was talking? Dan or Clive?

"Huh?"

"We need to talk about your business soon, Serena."

Back to reality. She pushed out of his reach. "I don't think I'll need you."

"Profits must be good then. Or, are you planning on offering Gino a partnership?"

"It's not your concern, is it? I can do as I please and make money any way I want to."

Sadness clouded his eyes. "You're right." He cleared his throat as two other couples approached. In a louder, seductive voice he offered, "So, how long will you keep me waiting? Once wasn't enough for me."

Back to playing? In a confused state, Serena answered, "I-I need some time to think."

Dan drew her into his arms and spoke before his lips touched hers. "Maybe this will help."

The mind-blowing kiss Dan planted on her lips merged reality with fantasy. His number rampaged through her brain, swirling around in bright colors. His letters intermingled with the numbers, bouncing off each other.

Want him, don't want him, echoed through her brain. So did good, evil, yes, no and fool, lover. Serena gave in to the kiss, her tongue seeking his as their mouths slightly parted.

A dinner gong chimed, startling them. Serena's head told her to pull away, her heart urged her to grab him, kiss him again and never let go.

"We need to get back. It's time for salad." Dan's uneven tone would match her own, if she'd had the energy to speak. All she found strength to do was nod in agreement and then she preceded him to their table.

Justine and Michael greeted them as they sat. Her appetite gone, food held no appeal for Serena. She pushed around the tasteless meal on her plate, trying to appear interested in eating.

The host announced that before the main course would be served, the highlight of their evening's adventure would occur. He then ran through the list of characters once again, giving their names and table location, including the mismatched foursome at Serena's table. Jake hinted that one of the main characters would soon be murdered. All the remaining nine main players were to be suspects and anyone could question them before dessert.

Please, Lord. Let it be me.

Serena silently prayed for a chance to be the walking dead body, immune to holding conversations. Or, having Dan grab and kiss her. He couldn't kiss a dead body, now could he?

Mrs. Worthington mentioned that every one of the surviving nine characters had motives for killing the unsuspecting victim. Serena chuckled to herself, imagining people running around, browbeating nine suspects, while she could have the freedom to slip out the door.

Dan and Michael both ate quickly, eyeing each other with suspicion...maybe as Clive and Percy, perhaps as Dan and Michael/Mr. "Eight", and exchanged index card information. After confirming they were both to visit with Mrs. Worthington and stage a heated confrontation about her affections, the men left the table.

Serena watched as Michael made a quick detour before approaching Mrs. Worthington. He stopped by the LaRosas's table and greeted them, giving Annemarie a quick kiss. Happiness flooded her as she reveled in Michael's joy at finding the woman he loved. Sadness then took its place and enveloped her as she figured that same type of contentment would escape her future.

Not wanting to appear rude, she decided to join the happy family. No reason not to share in their joy just because her life fell apart and no love awaited her.

Serena spoke briefly with the LaRosas, then searched the dining room, hoping to spot Justine and spend a few minutes with her. She was anxious to see how Dan's date for the evening viewed their meeting. The woman gushed with joy, happy to have met Dan and loaded with enthusiasm at her tablemates' dedication to their performances.

"He's so charming. Thank you for matching us. I guess you saved the best match for me." Justine reached over and patted Serena's hand. "He's so good at playing his part. That kiss he gave you before? Man, that melted my insides. I can't wait until we go out and he kisses me like that."

"Did you guys talk over a lot of things? Find you have some common interests?"

Distracted, Justine casually tossed out, "We both like having money and spending it." She waved to Jake, motioning him over to where they stood.

Serena checked her index card and realized Jezebel needed to flirt with the retired chief big-time, to the point of gaining the attention of her husband, Percy and lover, Clive. Time to turn on the seductive charm and spur jealousy in the two role-playing men in her life.

Great. Can't someone kill me now?

## Chapter Seventeen

Jake proved to be extremely skilled at making her feel comfortable in her new persona. Soon, even Serena had to admit she thought of herself as the vixen mesmerizing the other men in the room. She joked and laughed with Jake, a charmer himself, flirtatious comments and sexual innuendos bantered back and forth. Others had joined in their conversations, witnessing the exchanges.

From the corner of her eye she saw Dan eyeballing her, a look of disapproval covering his face. She raised her head in an effort to show no weakness at his displeasure. Part of the mystery they were performing? Something related to the real-life drama of their relationship?

Jake whispered something in her ear, a new twist to the play. She was to go to the ladies' room for exactly five minutes, then return to the main dining room. He bowed in gentlemanly fashion and offered to escort her out of the room.

She snaked her arm through his, wondering if she were heading for her sought-after demise. Heated words from Dan and Michael caught her attention and she glimpsed the two arguing while a flustered Mrs. Worthington fanned her face with one hand, the other hand held to her chest.

As she exited the room, she witnessed Justine walking out and turning left toward the phone area. At the ladies' room, Jake took Serena's hand and lifted it to his lips for a soft kiss. He marched away, heading for the front entrance. Two figures strolled outside ahead of him...Dan and Michael.

Checking her watch, Serena decided to enjoy her five minutes of peace. Other women came and left, but she remained behind to savor her time. She hoped, prayed, that someone would come in, point to her and say, "You're dead."

Where the hell is she? Dan gave a quick peek back into the dining room just before stepping outside, searching for Serena. Losing sight of her wasn't in his plans. Watching that Jake guy maul her irked him, although she seemed to be enjoying his company a little too much. Maybe much more than just playacting would warrant.

He'd done his thing, arguing with Gino over their hostess, then both had walked outside. They'd gone to separate sides of the parking lot, as dictated. Obviously, he wasn't the dead body as no one mentioned it to him.

Dan's cell phone rang and he quickly answered. "Reese."

Steve's voice replied, "We have a new development in your case. Gino Conti's here. Came in offering information. Must be looking to earn brownie points for the next time he screws up. Anyway, he says Serena Sight told him to go after the mayor's daughter,

charge her for services and they'd split the money. And, assuming he accomplished that, she'd supply more women for him."

Dan's stomach lurched. "Is the mob involved?"

"Not according to Conti. He says she's the brains of the whole operation."

Dan hung up after assuring Steve he'd bring her in for questioning. Deciding not to ruin everyone else's evening, he opted to finish his date, then nab Serena.

Or, should he call her, Madam Serena.

He took in a deep breath of night air, hoping to clear his head of any illusions about Serena's innocence. Want her or not, guilty was the verdict. And, "Gino"/Percy had to be an accomplice. Too much subterfuge surrounded him. Not to mention the fake Conti. Dan would have to bring both of them in.

After the designated five minutes passed, Serena left the safe confines of the ladies' room and strolled back into the dining area. She searched for the other nine major characters, wondering where her brother ended up. A scream drew everyone's attention to Mrs. Worthington as she placed the back of her hand against her forehead and leaned against Jake. She moaned, "Oh, no," as a crowd gathered closer.

That's when the retired police chief announced someone had been murdered and the distressed, grieving hostess had found the body.

*Damn. It's not me.* Serena resigned herself to being bombarded with questions. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Dan meandering his way through the crowd. He wasn't the dead body either.

A chill covered her body and she realized all the other main players were accounted for, except Michael. Jake asked the guests to take their seats, as dinner would be served. He announced that the dead character was Percy and gave a little more detail about him and his relationships with the other players.

Serena half-listened, wondering if Michael would be allowed to return to their table. Even if he were dead, he still had to eat.

After arriving at their table, Dan spoke to Justine, virtually ignoring her. Although matching the two was what she was supposed to be doing, hurting over his interest hadn't been what she'd expected.

Michael marched in, his steps swift. A look of anger clouded over his eyes as he approached their table and sat down. He wore a sign designating him as "Dead Body...Do not ask questions". No one was to speak to Michael about his murder, but could talk about other things, as long as his conversation didn't involve a one-on-one chat.

The two men glared at each other, then both turned their attention to Serena. Both were mad. At her? The game? Each other? Michael could be angry about being the dead body. Or maybe he'd hoped to spend more time with Annemarie and now figured that wouldn't happen.

Dan could be angry about...what? Part of his act? It could be something other than anger. Maybe he was the murderer and anxious about being caught. The man could possess acting skills she'd never expected.

"I'm starved. We can talk about anything except the murder. How do you guys like this so far?" Justine smiled at everyone, enthusiasm oozing with every word.

Serena, Dan and Michael voiced their willingness to go on with the evening. The three of them agreed they'd never done a murder mystery dinner before but found the experience entertaining.

Justine did the bulk of talking during dinner. Dan paid particular attention to her attempts at being clever, laughing at her jokes and ignoring the others. Michael gave Serena nervous looks. Serena couldn't figure out how to talk to him without the other two privy to their conversation.

Serena dropped her napkin and bent down to pick it up. Michael quickly bent over and whispered in her ear, "His name's not Reese. It's Carrington. And, he's a cop."

Serena's stomach churned and dropped. For just a moment she forgot to breathe. Dan? A police officer? Why was he hiding it from her? What else about him was false?

He could be embarrassed by a lack of dating skills. Maybe he didn't want to disclose his true job, thinking some people shy away from having anything to do with law enforcement. What if he was looking for another source of income, something akin to using her clients for money?

Damn. Did it matter? He'd lied about who he was and probably lied about everything else. She shuddered as a shiver raced down her spine. Her lovemaking episode with Dan the insurance man was a sham. That man didn't exist. Everything about him pointed to only one conclusion...she'd been trying to help a very skilled con artist worm his way into her world.

Furious now over his deception, Serena wondered how to pull the rug out from under him and save Justine from falling under his lying spell. A decision to string him along, make him think she'd changed her mind and wanted him as her partner, popped into her head.

She'd inform him that as her partner, he'd have to back off from any serious dating of clients, just as she'd mentioned she'd shied away from doing. She'd ask about his sneaking looks at files and see what he came up with. Her seeing Gino/Michael could be explained as trying to interview him as a potential partner, not as a matchmaking attempt.

One tiny shred of hope urged her to give him a chance to explain, a way to vindicate his actions. She'd intervene now, during dinner and grab his attention away from Justine. She'd start out as Jezebel, the jealous vixen after Clive.

*Lord, grant me acting skills to get through this.*

\* \* \* \* \*



Dinner ended and the remaining nine players found themselves surrounded by other guests asking questions. Serena watched Dan fielding their questions while keeping a sly charming grin on his face. She started to find the questions bombarded at her annoying, but had the grace to keep her answers in the spirit of the fun evening she was supposed to be enjoying.

Jezebel had motive to kill Percy, her unwanted, boring husband. She'd stayed married to him for money. Clive saw Percy as a rival for his money target, the lovely Mrs. Worthington.

Jake, in love with Jezebel, wanted Percy out of the picture, so could have murdered him and hoped to blame Clive. Rosalia could have murdered him in a fit of rage. She wanted him to divorce his wife, marry her and have all his money. Percy had dumped her once she informed him she was pregnant with his child.

Even the hostess had motive to murder Percy. The other guests had ample time and reasons to want Jezebel's husband dead, so all were suspects in the game.

Grateful when dessert was announced, Serena dragged herself back to her table, head pounding from all the inquiries about her possible part in dispatching Jezebel's husband to the pearly gates and heavens above. Or, fiery gates of hell.

Michael had remained at the table, talking on his cell phone. He greeted his tablemates as they sat down.

Justine suggested they remain in character, trying to solve the mystery. Michael had waved his hand in a "go ahead" manner, indicating he didn't mind their concentrating on the game.

"Fine," Dan spoke first. "Jezebel, I think you killed your husband because of me."

"You? A lying, untrustworthy charmer? Guess again." Serena huffed to add credence to her declaration, something that came very naturally in her frame of mind.

Dan moved closer to her, anger registering on his face. "Me? Untrustworthy? A liar? Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?"

Serena gritted her teeth and seethed. "Just when do you think I haven't been truthful? At the office? Dinner? When we made love?"

"I'm wondering about the last part. You seemed to enjoy it as much as I did. What was it? A ploy to gain my confidence, throw me off track?"

Serena's anger flared. "Listen here, you charming snake. I've been honest about everything. You're the one playing a pretend game and not who you say you are."

Each glared at the other when Justine interrupted. "Uh, guys? This is just for fun. Am I missing something here? Are you talking about this mystery?"

Totally embarrassed and prepared to call the evening a nightmare, Serena jumped up and headed for the door. She looked back to get Michael's attention and found him quickly jogging after her, closely followed by Dan, Justine, Mrs. Worthington and Jake.

Once outside, Serena grabbed Michael and begged, "Arrest him. I just know there's got to be something he's guilty of." She warmed in the security of a bear hug as her brother pulled her closer.

Justine reached them and said, "You can't do this. He's supposed to be dead. We've got to go back inside before the others think they hafta follow the rest of us outside."

Dan stormed up to them and demanded, "Where do you think you're going?"

Jake intervened and ordered, "Everyone stop where you are. I'm about to call the police and nab the guilty party. If you'll all return inside, we'll get to do this in front of the other guests."

Dan, Serena and Michael glowered at each other. In unison Serena yelled, "Arrest him," just as Dan flashed his badge, pointed to her and angrily announced, "You're under arrest."

Sorting out who was arrested, for what reasons and what part, if any, the play had to do with the proceedings would take time. All returned to the dining room, muffled grumblings uttered as Jake begged them to control their arguments until the evening's event was over. Promising a quick solution, that of naming Percy's killer and fast removal of the other diner guests, he swiftly announced the culprit's name...Mrs. Worthington.

Serena's head swam with visions of their scene outside and lovemaking with Dan, interspersed with urges to smack Dan silly. All threatened her sanity and to gel into one massive headache. Her head popped up as the killer's identity was announced and, as ludicrous as it seemed, her curiosity pulled her off-track.

She stayed focused long enough to find out that the elderly matron had dabbled into an affair with Percy, but didn't want him around her illegitimate daughter, the lovely Rosalia. Jealous over his attention to the younger woman and finding out about the pregnancy, she stabbed him in a lover's quarrel. End of story.

The guests applauded and began filtering out, leaving Dan, Michael and Serena standing by the door, carefully watched by Justine, Jake and Mrs. Worthington.

Dan spoke first. "You need to come down to the station with me, Miss Xavier." He turned to give Michael a snide glance. "You too, whatever your real name is. We know it's not Gino."

"It's Michael and," he ripped out his badge and presented it to everyone, "I'm a police officer in Wichita. I'm investigating you."

"What? You're the brother?" Dan asked in confusion.

Michael got right up to his face and challenged, "And, what were you doing, going to my future in-laws' home and questioning them? For what? What asinine charges are you throwing at all of us?"

Serena's head spun. Dan had talked to Annemarie's parents? "Michael, how do you know he spoke to them?"

Michael snapped his head from Dan to Serena. "Because, they recognized him. They saw him here and asked if we knew they'd met Detective Carrington." He returned to stare at Dan.

The men bounced glacial looks back and forth between them, then turned to the others witnessing the scene. Serena wished for a nice quiet hole to drop into. What had happened to her serene, uncomplicated life? Dan walked in and nothing stayed sane after that.

Tension surrounding them charged the air and Serena suggested, "Why don't we go to your office, Dan? The one where you really work? I'm sure we can sort this out there. Or, are you going to arrest me now, put handcuffs on me and drag me off to jail for God only knows whatever reason you dreamed up in that police detective head of yours?" Her voice rose a notch with every word she uttered.

Michael put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "He won't do that. We'll follow you and sort this out. I've got plenty of questions of my own to ask."

A suddenly quiet Dan nodded his agreement. "Follow me." He turned to the bewildered threesome watching the discussion. "Thanks for an interesting evening."

They walked to their cars and Justine yelled after them, "Dan? Have Serena give you my number and call me. I've never had so much fun on a date before!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Gino Conti gave us information about your operation."

Dan and Steve sat in an interrogation room with Serena and Michael. As a professional courtesy, they presented the statement Gino made for Michael to read.

Stomach now queasy, Serena fought for control. "He's no longer one of my clients. I had too many complaints about him and canceled his application."

Michael intervened. "Sis, he said here that you wanted him to go out with women and ask for money. Then you'd split the profits with Gino."

"What?" Serena jumped up and glared at Dan. "You believed this nonsense from that idiot?"

"We heard from one of his unhappy dates and had to investigate. You presented," Dan nodded toward Michael, "him as 'Gino', Mr. 'Eight' and we knew that wasn't true."

Serena bit out, "I had to call Michael something. I didn't want you to know I didn't trust you and called in my big policeman brother to investigate."

Dan jumped up, leaning across the table to within inches of her face. "Me? Why would you investigate me?"

"You snuck peeks at my files. You seemed too good to be true. You came across as too much of a polished playboy pretending to be a nerd who wanted me to set him up with someone."

Dan ran a hand through his hair and turned away. The other two men frowned and Serena's energy drained away as she witnessed the entire bizarre scene. All she wanted to do was go home and forget Dan Reese – no, Carrington – if possible.

Steve interrupted her train of thought. "I think we'll have you both write up statements and get the names of your clients who've had unpleasant episodes with Mr. 'Eight'. Mistakes have been made based on misjudgments and we need to concentrate on the man behind all this – Mr. Conti."

Dan stayed with his back toward them, staring out the window. Michael asked if they could leave after writing their statements and Steve agreed. Serena looked up from her paper to watch as Dan trudged out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Serena, go to work. You'll feel better."

Serena wiped her eyes after yet another episode of crying. Michael had tried his best to cheer her up, even offered to take her with him on his dates with Annemarie, but to no avail.

She wanted the solitude, welcomed the time to reflect on her daring to open up her body and soul to another man, only to have her heart dashed aside and broken in pieces. Alan hadn't been trustworthy and neither had Dan.

Checking her calendar she realized it was April eighteenth and Dan's number magically appeared in her head. How ironic. His number epitomized the day she'd start anew, locking away forever the remaining pieces of her unfixable heart.

No man would ever get this close again. She'd live out the rest of her life concentrating on work, her brother and his soon-to-be wife and any children they'd have. She'd have none of her own.

Maybe Michael was right. She'd done well in her business before Dan. She'd do well after him. With a fierce determination and fresh, though somewhat potentially solemn outlook for her future, Serena figured it was time to get back to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan was going crazy. His gut kept telling him she was innocent, but he had to go along with what the facts suggested and that screwed everything up. She'd never forgive him. When she'd walked out of his department, she'd looked straight ahead, her eyes never straying in his direction.

And, what would he have said? Uh, gee. Sorry? I love you?

He did. Love her. Madly. Passionately. With more conviction and commitment than he'd had with his ex-wife. Serena was the one his heart had waited for all these years.

Dan reread her statement and the one Michael had penned. Noting Michael's cell phone number, he decided it was time to speak to him, man to man. Either Michael

would punch him out or listen to the heartfelt yearnings of a lovesick fellow male. While he preferred the second scenario, if the first happened he'd accept it, if Michael would then calm down and talk.

To his surprise, Michael agreed to meet him at his office. Dan asked to use Steve's office for more privacy. After they were seated, Dan began with, "I'm sorry about what happened. You don't know just how sorry I am."

Michael grinned and Dan wondered if he were about to reach across the desk and take that punch. To his amazement, Michael offered in a nonchalant tone, "She loves you, you know. I'm guessing you love her, too."

Dan stood up and paced the room. "Damn right I do. Are you sure she loves me? After all this? I didn't think she'd talk to me."

Michael laughed. "Oh, she thinks she hates you now, but deep down inside, she loves you. I know my sister. You're the one for her."

Dan stopped his march across the carpet and asked, "How do I get her to speak to me? I've got to be the last person alive she wants to find walking into her office."

"Go back as a client. Be truthful on her application form. Get her to know the real you, the one she hoped to find all along."

"Would you put in a good word for me with her?"

Michael snickered. "Wow. That's a tough one. I might be able to get her to see your side of the picture, but I'm still big brother, trying to protect my little sister."

Dan gave him what he hoped was a sincere look. "I wouldn't do anything to hurt her. Hell. I love her and want to marry her."

"Tall order, but I'll do what I can. It'd be nice to have another man in the family, especially another cop, to keep her in line." Michael let out a deep exhale.

"I appreciate anything you can do. I'll plan to do battle with her this afternoon."

\* \* \* \* \*

Serena fielded inquiries from her messages on her answering machine. She laughed to the point of crying at a message from Justine asking for Serena to give Dan her number.

Pigs would fly first. Hell would freeze over. She'd sleep with him before passing any date information on to Dan.

She grabbed his file, rereading the lies he'd written. Using a bright pink marker, she drew a line through everything she now suspected to be untrue.

Not an insurance salesman received two bold pink marks. She couldn't help wondering how long he'd been a policeman. His preferences in almost everything now came into question.

And, what about his number, four-eighteen? Why that number? Look at all the mess it had caused.

Four-eighteen. Today was four-eighteen, the day of a new beginning for her.

Her dates numbered one, four, eight, could be construed as a play on four-eighteen. Those dates weren't real and led nowhere. Dan, four-eighteen, had been real, amazingly real, in their time together, especially in giving her pleasure. His number, good for her. Another coincidence?

Distracted, she shivered with doubts about her ability to get a true picture of Dan's character. Had he disclosed a flaw in her "sight", one that would further hamper her continuing her business?

Damn. Something else popped into her head. Miss "DC", the name she'd given herself to try for a match with her male clients. DC. Dan Carrington, his real name. The man was everywhere, crowding her psyche, seeping into her brain and toying with her emotions.

Serena rubbed her temples, hoping for a reprieve. None followed, so she took some headache painkillers and reclined on the sofa. The one she'd been on while enjoying Dan's body what seemed like ages ago.

*Damn him.*

Michael barged in, putting a halt to her attempt for headache relief. She glared at him and ordered, "Go away. I need to rest."

"My, you're real pleasant. We need to talk."

Serena threw her arm over her head. "Can't this wait until I'm awake?"

Michael removed her arm and answered, "Nope. This is important."

In a testy voice, she asked, "What is it?"

"I'm glad you decided to join the living again and go to work. Now you need to go on with your love life."

Serena eyeballed him with what she hoped conveyed a look to kill. "There's no such animal. Leave me alone and go marry Annemarie or something."

"No. It's me, remember? Think I don't know what you're going through? You're in love."

Serena knew Michael would know how she felt. He'd guessed about her feelings for Dan right from the beginning. "It's no use. Even if I do love him, he only viewed me as a suspect. How can I trust him?"

Michael squatted down to be eye level with her. "Sweetie, that goes both ways. You're the one telling him about diamond mines."

She groaned. "It's too late for us. Please, go away. I need to sleep."

Michael kissed her on the forehead. "I'm going. And remember...it's never too late."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Can I come in?"

"Serena awoke at the sound of Dan's voice. She had a sense of déjà vu, seeing him framed by her doorway. A warm, comfortable sensation coursed through her body. The man she loved stood before her.

"Dan. I hadn't expected to see you again." Quietly spoken, Serena got up, walked over to her desk, and sat down.

He came in and took the seat opposite her. "I've heard about your business and I need help finding a woman right for me. I'd like to fill out one of your applications."

Serena's heart pounded in her chest. What was he up to? Was this a peace offering of some type? "Oh. Yes. I mean, okay. Are you sure you want me to do this for you?"

His eyes glazed over. "You and no one else."

He took the form and wrote his information. Serena scanned it and noticed his changes. A police officer. Wanted someone quiet, content with staying home and cuddling. Someone to love.

"I need to touch you," she offered.

Dan leaned back in his seat. "Anywhere in particular?" He crossed his arms, grinning at her the entire time.

"Dan, we've been through this before. What are you up to?" She lowered her head. "Please, no more lies."

He got up, walked over to her and gently lifted her head. "I want you to touch me everywhere, Serena. I want you. I always have. I love you."

"Dan, I love you, too." She paused for a second then continued, "Do you realize how my sight was right about us?"

"Why don't you tell me." Dan smiled as he helped her up and took her into his arms.

"Your face, letters and even numbers, swam in my head. I called myself Miss 'DC' when looking for a date. Your initials. But, the letters for you are the final proof."

A quizzical look appeared on his face. "Tell me quickly before I kiss you senseless and never let go. And, you will marry me, right?"

Serena giggled. "Without a doubt. I'm not letting you get away. Anyway, your letters, S. E. X.? They're my initials. Serena Elaine Xavier. So you see, Mr. Carrington, my 'sight' was right. We're meant to be together."

"And, who's Mr. 'A'?"

She raised her head closer to his. "I'll tell you all about that jerk later. Right now, I predict kissing comes next."

Dan smiled, nodded and then lowered his lips to hers.

## **About the Author**

Always intrigued by romance, Marianne started reading Regency novels (Barbara Cartland) then went on to contemporary romances. When her four children became teenagers, Marianne began writing as a sanity outlet. It was the only time she could do something alone, even if it meant writing at midnight.

As a teacher, being creative kept her one step ahead of her pupils. Writing gave Marianne an additional outlet for her imagination. A lover of old movies and love songs, many inspire her writing and lead to story ideas.

Marianne lives in Kansas with her husband, children, and grandchildren. She's a member of Romance Writers of America, Chick Lit Writers of the World, Fantasy, Futuristic and Paranormal, Mid America Romance Authors, and Midwest Romance Writers. She had a nonfiction e-book based on the life of a women's shelter speaker published in 1999.

Marianne welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### **Tell Us What You Think**

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at [Comments@EllorasCave.com](mailto:Comments@EllorasCave.com).





Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer ebooks or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com) for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

**[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)**