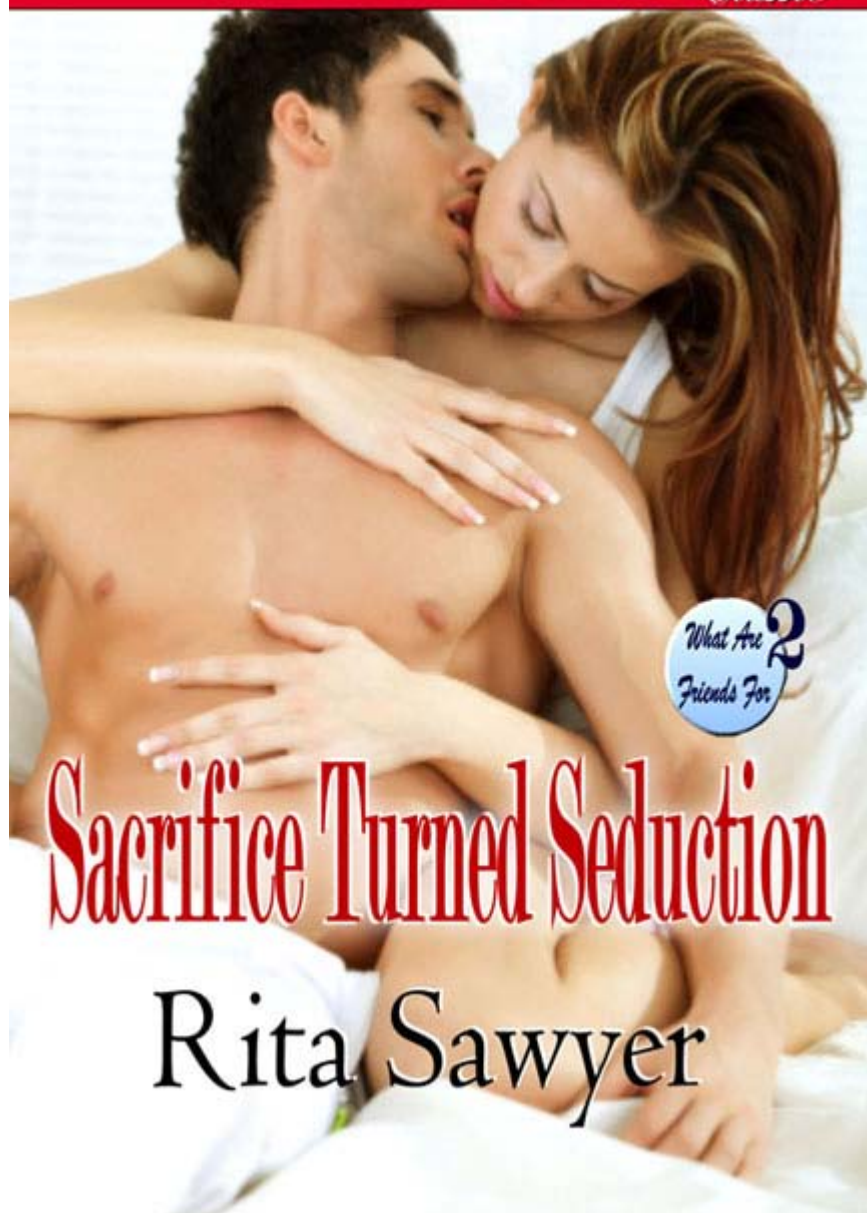


SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*



What Are ²
Friends For

Sacrifice Turned Seduction

Rita Sawyer

What Are Friends For 2

Sacrifice Turned Seduction

Dianne Killbrew made a deal with Gage Dillinger. He did his part, and now she has to spend a week being wined and dined by him. She'll have to make sure his smooth sexy ways don't get under her skin and hope he doesn't see past her sparkle and glitz to the shy girl hiding beneath. There is a lot at risk, but she's made a deal, and she's going to stick to it.

Gage can't ignore how much he wants Dianne. It is more than physical desire. He wants to get to know everything about her. The problem is she avoids him whenever possible. So when he is given the chance to put her in a position where she owes him something, he chooses her. Now he's going to do whatever it takes to get her to see he's not the player everyone thinks he is.

Genre: Contemporary

Length: 26,802 words

SACRIFICE TURNED SEDUCTION

What Are Friends For 2

Rita Sawyer

EROTIC ROMANCE



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DEDICATION

As always, I want to thank my family for their support.

SACRIFICE TURNED SEDUCTION

What Are Friends For 2

RITA SAWYER
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Chapter One

Dianne gazed across the yard at Gage, careful not to let him catch her. She tried to ignore his sexy smile and his good looks, but it wasn't easy. He stood six feet tall and had dark brown hair and matching brown eyes. She grudgingly admitted he looked like a man who could handle himself in any situation. Thankfully, she wasn't close enough to hear the rough timber of his voice. At this distance she just might be able to keep her senses about her.

"Are you going to tell us what's going on between you two?" her friend Karen asked.

"You know what's going on." She quickly turned away as Gage glanced their way.

"Please. The way he looks at you, no one believes that line." Her other friend Jillian winked at her, and Dianne groaned.

"Look, we worked together to help Lainey get everything ready for the wedding before Jace found out, that's all." Dianne wasn't ready to tell her friends about the bargain she'd made to get him to help just yet.

“Just how closely did you two work?” Dianne shook her head and kept her mouth shut, letting Jillian think whatever she wanted, especially since she wasn’t too far off.

She looked back over at Gage. He had his back to her now, so she let her guard down and enjoyed the enticing view. Even though he wasn’t her type—he was too charming, too handsome, and too damned aware of it all—he kind of grew on her. Like a fungus she just couldn’t get rid of. Maybe once she had some time to purge him from her system, she’d be able to ignore him the way she had before her friends had nominated her to be the one to approach Gage for help.

She’d learned three things over the past few weeks. The first thing didn’t come as much of a shocker. She and her friends all knew it would be difficult to throw a surprise wedding for a groom. Of course, when her friend Lainey asked their small group of friends for help, they instantly agreed. What else could they say? The six of them had grown up together and were always there when one of them had a problem. It hadn’t been easy to get everything organized in such a small amount of time, but they pulled it off with Gage’s help, which is how Dianne learned her next lesson.

The second thing she now knew beyond a shadow of a doubt was that Gage was a man of his word. If he said he could and would do something, he did it. Not half-assed, either. He’d been efficient and creative, much like her and her friends, so she had to admire him for that. How he managed to get himself and the groomsmen to the wedding without Jace finding out was still a mystery to her.

The third thing she learned was probably the most important, and one she was still working on. Gage always got what he wanted, which meant she needed to figure out the best way to deal with him. He’d fulfilled his part of their bargain, and now it was her turn. The only things he asked—well more like demanded—in return for helping them with the wedding was for her to be his escort, and if he pulled off his part, she would date him for real. He pushed it by suggesting

they pretend to be dating in front of his friends so none of them would think they were up to something. With no other options available, Dianne agreed to his request, adding a few terms of her own.

They'd spent the past three weeks in almost-daily contact going over little details. Thankfully, most of their conversations had been on the phone, keeping a buffer between them. When they were together, he insisted on pretending to be a happy couple, so it was much harder. Luckily none of her friends had witnessed any of that. What mattered was that she'd gotten through the wedding, just barely, without letting his charms or kisses sway her.

Just the thought of spending a whole week letting him wine and dine her had her heart and stomach fluttering. The man had a way of make her nerves go haywire. She would have to do something about that, and pretty damn quick. Dianne hoped Lainey appreciated the huge sacrifice she was making on her behalf. Of course, most women probably wouldn't consider having to spend time with a handsome and very charismatic man a sacrifice, but they didn't know the risks it presented for her. Hell, everyone who looked at her saw whatever it was they wanted to see, but most of them never got past the surface.

Dianne knew that was partly her fault, but that was the way she liked it. Her grandmother, who'd raised her and her sister, had always said Dianne could have tried to be friendlier. When she was younger, right after she came to live with them, Dianne had forced herself to try just to please her grandmother. At times she felt like she was being tortured having to smile and talk about stupid stuff. She'd been lucky enough to meet Lainey, Amy, Sadie, Jillian, and Karen.

It hadn't taken long for her to become part of their little group. Without them, the little creativeness she'd inherited from her parents would have shriveled up and died. She probably would have become a librarian or something equally as tame. Right from the start, her friends had refused to let that happen. They had dragged her along on all their adventures, making sure she took part in the schemes they devised.

The fact that parts of her were plastered on billboards and in magazines could be laid at their feet. Dianne remembered the auspicious start modeling career as if it had only been yesterday. Sadie had been writing an article for the high school newspaper about prom fashions. One of the boutique owners she had interviewed had been so impressed by the questions she had asked that she offered to let Sadie and her friends be a part of an upcoming fashion show. Dianne tried to get out of it, but her friends wouldn't let her. Once she'd slipped on the pink-sequined, hip-hugging dress, she'd felt like a different person. Still, Sadie and Amy had to practically drag her onto the runway that first time.

The photographer had started snapping pictures and Dianne had gotten swept up in the moment. A few months later out of the blue a talent scout had called her grandmother about Dianne doing some modeling. Dianne had been nervous at first, but once she learned to be something she wasn't for the camera, it got a lot easier.

People had no idea that behind her smile hid a very private and sometimes shy woman. All they saw was the sparkle and glitz she hid behind, which was just what Dianne preferred. Now faced with the fear that Gage might see through her act, she was starting to freak out. What she needed was some space to clear her head before she had to deal with him.

"I'm going to get a drink." She heard Jillian clucking as she walked away, and Dianne couldn't help but laugh herself.

* * * *

Gage knew, behind her sparkly sunglasses, that Dianne was watching his every move. He almost caught her staring a few times, but she managed to look away just as he turned around. It was as if they were playing their own private game, and he loved it. He knew she'd do whatever she had to do to keep her end of their deal, even

though she wasn't happy about it. She didn't like waiting for him to make his next move, but a little suspense might do her some good.

If things had gone as he hoped over the past few weeks, she would have warmed up to him at least a little by now. With all the stupid excuses he'd made up just so he could call her, and with the two of them sitting side by side for the flight to Vegas, his plan should have worked. Her stubbornness almost had him giving up. Then he'd catch her looking at him like she was now, and he knew she couldn't be as uninterested as she pretended.

From the way her friends looked at him he could tell they knew he was interested in her. They were a tight-knit little group of really hot women, and he hoped they would approve of his attempt to start a relationship with Dianne. When Jace first met Lainey he'd been worried about the same thing, but they all seemed to accept him without making him jump through too many hoops. The difference between him and Jace was Lainey had fallen for Jace right from the get-go. Gage, on the other hand, had the sorry luck to be attracted to someone who probably wished she'd never laid eyes on him. The pisser was, he didn't even know what he'd done to make her feel that way.

"You know one of them is bound to take matters into their own hands if you two don't work things out soon." Jace had been around them enough to know what he was talking about, so Gage didn't argue.

"Dude, I'm doing my best. Has Lainey ever mentioned what I could've done to piss Dianne off?" He figured the littlest clue might be a huge help.

"No, but I've never asked, either. Do you want me to?"

"Fuck no. The last thing I need is Dianne thinking I'm going behind her back and asking her friends for help." For cripes sake, they weren't in high school and he wasn't going to revert back to the dork his sisters had often accused him of being back then.

Jace's shoulders shook with the laugh he let out. "Then what are you going to do? You do have some kind of plan, right?"

"Yeah." He nodded, not ready to go into the details just yet. "I just hope it doesn't backfire."

"With five of them to get the hots for, why did you pick the only one who avoids being alone with you? She's not your normal type. I would've laid odds on Jillian or Sadie." Jace asked the same question that he'd been asking himself.

Jace had been his best friend since elementary school, and he could tell him anything, but he couldn't answer that.

"They're both nice, but neither of them have Dianne's curves or spirit. I guess I'm a glutton for punishment." Gage sensed something in her that just drew him in.

"You know the guys are getting a huge kick out of this. You've always been the ladies' man and now you've met a woman who doesn't even want to give you the time of day. She's taking playing hard to get to the extreme." Jace didn't know the half of it, and when he found out, Gage was going to be in deep shit.

"That's where you're wrong. Dianne and I have come to an agreement." A crazy man had taken over his mind when he cornered her into it, but it was a done deal.

"Do I want to know the details?" Jace looked over his shoulder at the house where Dianne had disappeared just minutes ago.

"Probably not. Just wish me luck and leave it at that." Gage wanted Jace to be able to deny knowing anything in case Lainey got mad when she found out what Gage was doing.

Gage decided Dianne had avoided him long enough. He headed for the house, ready to launch phase two of his plan, even though the first part had failed miserably. A few of Jace and Lainey's other guests stopped him along the way to say their hellos, so it took him a good five minutes to reach the house. He figured his delay had given her plenty of time to escape if she wanted to, but he knew she was still there. He'd been to enough get-togethers to know Lainey's

friends always stuck around to help clean up and pass on any gossip they might have heard.

“Are you following me?” Dianne’s accusation came the second he stepped in the house.

Gage took a second to look her over. She had on black skintight pants and a yellow halter shirt. It was a damn sexy look, but he thought the best part was that she had pushed her yellow sunglasses up on top of her head.

“Yes.” Surprise flashed in her eyes, and he wondered if she’d expected him to make up some excuse.

“Well, what do you want?” She opened the fridge and put in the covered bowls she’d been holding.

Gage walked up behind her and waited for her to turn around. When she spun, he could tell she hadn’t expected him to be so close. She hid the little jump and gasp by crossing her arms over her chest. The way she leaned back against the counter her position should have looked relaxed. Instead, it just looked silly, because her shoulders were stiff as a board. He ignored the urge to reach out and rub the tension out for her.

“I wanted to discuss our plans.”

“Your plans.” Her sarcastic tone made him smile.

She wasn’t the least bit intimidated or impressed by him. Maybe that’s one of the reasons why he couldn’t ignore the desire he felt for her. Jace was right. Most of the women Gage found himself interested in usually came to him pretty easily. Knowing she wouldn’t made the thrill of the chase even stronger. The thing he was most afraid of was that once he caught her, he wouldn’t want to let go.

“Fine. My plans are to enjoy the time we spend together over the next week. So I thought I’d ask if there was anything special you’d like to do. Or would you like me to surprise you?” He took a step forward as he spoke, and her breaths came a little quicker.

Dianne’s hands shot out and pressed against his chest, keeping him from getting any closer. “Surprise me.”

He covered her hands with his and softly said, "I'll do my best."

They stood there staring at each other. Neither of them spoke or moved. Her green eyes sparkled. She really didn't need to speak, because they said so much. He could see excitement and anger staring back at him. At that second, he decided if she was going to be mad, he was going to give her a reason for it. He lowered his head, and though she stiffened a little, she didn't turn away. Her next breath sounded labored, and he felt a sense of anticipation surge through him.

His lips touched hers softly. She sighed, and he felt her lips slightly part under his. That was all the encouragement he needed. He deepened the kiss as he slid her hand to his shoulders. Their tongues dueled as he put his hands on her hips and backed her against the counter. He held her in place with one hand and slid the other up her side. Just as his hand covered her breast, he heard laughter right outside the door.

He didn't get a chance to back away on his own, because Dianne shoved him away. The move took him by surprise, and he stumbled. She turned to the sink, putting her back to him and whoever was about to come through the door.

Gage quickly slipped into the living room to avoid being seen. He hoped she understood why, because he sure as hell didn't. If he stayed, would it have helped or hurt him? He'd never know for sure. Yeah, he may have made people wonder whether or not something was going on between them. On the other hand, if everyone was watching them, she would be more on guard.

He was smart enough to realize that would only make it harder for him to get to her. So for now, she could keep pretending there wasn't anything between them. Just knowing she'd kissed him back with equal passion said otherwise. He hoped that little tidbit kept eating away at her until he called her tomorrow. It would only be fair, because he knew it would be rolling around in his mind.

Chapter Two

Dianne crumpled the sheet of paper in her hand and tossed it toward the trash can. It hit the rim and bounced off, skittering across the floor. She looked at the crinkled balls all over the floor and groaned. Her lack of sleep was obviously taking its toll. This illustration should have been easy, but her happy little dancers all wanted to snarl instead of smile. It shouldn't have mattered so much since it was just a really rough draft, but not being able to get the look she wanted pissed her off.

The phone rang and she glared at it. Her friends and sister all knew better than to call her before noon. Heck, even her agent didn't disturb her in the morning because she hated to interrupt her creative flow, so she figured it was probably Gage calling. If she didn't answer, he'd probably assume she was avoiding him. Then he'd probably stop by or do something equally annoying. She tossed her sketch pad onto the coffee table and stomped across the floor.

She snatched up the receiver and stabbed the button. "Hello."

"Good morning, sugar."

"Morning, Nanny. How are you doing today?" She let out a sigh of relief upon hearing her grandmother's voice. She carried the phone back to the couch.

"Darling, I'm fine. It's you we should be worrying about." Her grandmother didn't sound worried, more like excited.

"Why?" Dianne asked, her curiosity piqued.

Her grandmother tsked. "You have read your horoscope today, haven't you?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Dianne answered anyway. “Nanny, you know I don’t believe in all that hooey.” Not that it mattered. Her grandmother believed enough for all of them.

“Be as that may, you might want to know I’ve been keeping track, and what I’ve noticed is a bit disconcerting.” Her grandmother had an odd sense of what concerned her and when.

Dianne knew the only thing she could do was humor the old woman, or they’d be debating her worries for hours. “What is it that you’ve interpreted that made you pick up the phone and call me instead of waiting to tell me when I come for dinner Sunday?”

“A man.” Dianne rolled her eyes at the dramatic tone her grandmother used. “Every day for the past two weeks there’s been a mention of a handsome man in your future. Have you met him yet?”

Gage’s handsome face, with that sexy smile of his, popped into her head, but she pushed it right back out. “Sorry Nanny. I haven’t met a handsome stranger who’s going to sweep me off my feet.”

“Go ahead and mock me. You’re probably too busy working on your books or playing dress-up to notice a man, even if he was right under your nose.”

“Nanny, I have to work, just like everyone else.” She really didn’t want to have this discussion again.

“I know that dear, but you need more in your life than work.”

“I know, and I promise to be open to the possibilities.” She hoped that would appease her for now.

“That’s all I ask, sugar. Now if you do meet someone soon you be sure to bring him to dinner.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Dianne flopped onto her back and tossed the phone onto the table.

Maybe Gage had connections at the paper and paid them to add to his torturous plan? Unlikely, but it was better than having to blame it on coincidence. She lifted the sketch pad and flipped back to the first page. A group of six young girls stared back at her with merriment in their expressions.

She saw what most people probably didn't. After all, her pictures and the stories that went with them were all inspired by her friends and the mischief they'd gotten into growing up. Of course, she'd changed their names. And to protect the innocent, not that any of them were, she exaggerated or toned down some of the details. Switching their nickname had been the hardest thing. She couldn't call a group of eight-year-old girls "Sin Sisters," so with a little brainstorming, she'd come up with "Stone Sisters."

Each of the girls wore a piece of a stone with purple crystal running through it. They'd begged their parents until they had it broken, polished, and made into jewelry they could all wear. Three of them had it in a necklace. The others wore it in an anklet, bracelet, and a ring. It was the plot of the first story she wrote.

Even with all the changes she made, her friends took one look at her original drawing and instantly knew exactly which one each of them was. Thankfully, they enjoyed being her muses. Karen had actually been awesome enough to build her a collage of them over the years. She had it hanging beside her desk for inspiration, but today, nothing was working.

"You guys would scare him off in the blink of an eye. Why can't I?" she asked the girls in her drawing.

If you started talking back, I am in big trouble. Then she realized what the problem was. She just wasn't devious enough to think of a way to get rid of him, but together with the girls, she knew they could come up with a plan. First, she would have to give him this week like she promised. If after that he kept sniffing around, she'd call in the big guns, and they'd chase him off.

The phone rang, and without really thinking, she picked it up. "Hello."

"Hi, it's me, Gage. I thought if you're free we could go out for lunch?" She could practically hear the smile in voice.

"I'm far from free, but lunch is doable." She agreed since she really couldn't say no.

“Good I’ll be there in about five minutes.” He hung up without giving her a chance to say anything else.

She dropped the phone onto the floor and groaned.

* * * *

“You’re pushing your luck” had been a mantra Gage had heard over and over as a kid. His mother, father, aunt, and sisters had accused him of it at least twice a day. Unlike most kids who would have calmed down and learned to behave, Gage hadn’t. Instead, he tamed the wildness enough to channel it into being organized. Okay, maybe a little too much at times. Unfortunately, there were still times when his impulsiveness totally took over if he didn’t rein it in. Right now was obviously one of those times.

Gage blamed Dianne, since she had managed to throw his normal boring routine into a tailspin. Last night he’d stayed up late trying to think of things she would enjoy doing with him. He’d been so fucking torqued up by the time he fell asleep, his dreams had taken some crazy turns. To top it all off, he overslept this morning, which put him at risk of missing a very important meeting.

By a stroke of luck every light between his apartment and his office had been green. He got to work with five minutes to spare. The meeting had gone well, and once the clients left his boss had made a point of thanking him for doing such a great job. He left the office with his head held high and big hopes for his afternoon off. Before he could really enjoy it, he had a couple of things to do. The most important thing on his list was to find an awesome birthday gift for his eight-year-old niece.

He had special bond with Tabitha. Like him, Tabby was the youngest. Instead of having three older sisters like he did, she had two older brothers, and three older male cousins. Being the only girl, Gage knew she felt left out, so he tried to do little special things for her, especially on her birthday. He usually had her gift bought and

wrapped at least a month in advance, but this year he was stumped. She had moved into a new stage in her life. His sisters thought she was getting too old for dolls, but she wasn't ready for big ticket items, either.

So now he had to spend the day trolling the mall, hoping something popped out at him, since he didn't have time to order anything online. He stopped at a red light and watched a group of people walk through the intersection. Gage replayed the call in his head.

If he wasn't wrong, Dianne's voice held a hint of hostility. His invitation hadn't been the smoothest, but he couldn't take it back now. Her sarcastic comeback had made him smile. He hung up before she could change her mind. The call just proved how badly his impulse control needed some help when it came to her. Hanging up without saying good-bye, well, that was just chicken-hearted.

There had to be someplace nice to eat near the mall, so he'd make it up to her with lunch. Then, if he could talk her into accompanying him for some walking at the mall, it would make it even more enjoyable. All the women he knew liked shopping, so the odds were fair to good that she'd probably enjoy it, too. Best of all, he'd be able to get a woman's point of view on possible gift choices.

He pulled up in front of her apartment building and climbed from the car. Before he reached the stairs that lead to the door, she came out. Staring was rude, so he figured he only had a minute to take her in without offending her in some way.

Her fire-engine red T-shirt that peeked out from under her black jacket had jewels across the top where the shirt clung to her breasts. She had on black pants that hugged her legs and ended at her calf muscles. Her red shoes matched her shirt, but unlike the normal high heels, these were much lower. Still, the straps that wrapped up her ankles gave them a certain sexy flair he associated with her. She looked down at him, her eyes hidden behind a pair of red sunglasses.

He stopped and watched her walk toward him. The sparkly gems on her glasses and shirt twinkled in the sunlight as she moved. The way she walked went beyond graceful. She didn't really walk—it was more of a strut. Not in an arrogant way, but more like a natural confidence she just oozed.

"I would have come in to get you," he said as they walked back to his car.

"I figured it was easier for me to meet you." She shrugged like it wasn't a big deal.

"Do your other dates pick you up at your door?" Gage hated that he sounded childish, but he wanted her to take him seriously.

"No. I prefer to meet them at the restaurant, or wherever we're going."

"I like to pick my dates up, so can we compromise and try it both ways?" He wasn't going to push her too hard on this, but he hoped a firm nudge would be enough.

"Let's see how lunch goes." Dianne stepped out of the way as he opened the passenger door for her.

Gage closed the door and walked around the back of the car. He always thought you could tell a lot about a person by seeing where they lived. Neat freaks were usually uptight, while people who lived in homey houses were more easygoing. Now slobs like his cousin Joe just didn't care about anything. He'd bet a week's pay that Dianne's place was spotless. He kept his tidy, but only because it had been drilled into him along with his manners. Another part of him he'd like to get a chance to show her.

He got into the car and headed for the mall. His attempt at small talk wasn't going very well. Every time he asked her something, he got a one word answer in response. It became brutally honest that she didn't want to be with him and only was because of their arrangement. His hopes of changing that were pretty slim, but he wasn't a quitter. Gage planned on doing everything in his power to sway her opinion of him.

“So I was thinking after lunch maybe we could take a stroll around the mall,” he said as if the idea just popped into his head.

“Okay.” She shrugged again, and he wondered if she kept doing it because she knew just how much it annoyed him.

If so, this was going to be a long afternoon. Gage didn’t care as long as he got to spend it with her.

Chapter Three

Dianne climbed out of her car and slid her bright pink sunglasses from her eyes onto the top of her head. Two nights of tossing and turning had her ready to snap. She held it together long enough to order a latte and pick a table. Her friends would be there soon. She just hoped the caffeine kicked in before then. With her brain this sluggish she might slip up and tell them about spending yesterday afternoon with Gage.

She knew they'd be thrilled she was dating someone. Hell, anyone would probably do, since it had been so long. Once they found out about her and Gage—and she wasn't dumb enough to think they wouldn't find out—they were going to go ballistic. She should probably just tell them and get it out in the open before they heard it from someone else. It didn't take long for her to make a decision. While she waited, she pulled her notebook out and started making some notes for a new story idea that just hit her.

This one was about a secret admirer. The girls were going to try and figure out who had sent a mushy Valentine to one of them and not signed it. Now that she had the main idea she needed to decide which of the girls would be the lead character. Dianne had gotten so swept up in the details that she lost track of time. She felt the table shake a little as Amy and Lainey placed their drinks on it.

"Who's in trouble now?" Amy leaned forward to peek at her notes, but Dianne shoved the notebook in her bag.

"I'm not telling." Dianne never let them read the story until it was finished.

Lainey laughed and shook her head. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

“About that, and a lot more.” Dianne’s comment had both of her friends staring at her.

Luckily, before they could ask what she meant, Jillian and Karen walked in the door. As they made a beeline for the table, Jillian motioned for the waiter. He arrived at the same time Sadie rushed in through the door. Dianne added Sadie’s customary mocha latte to their order before she got there. Sadie dropped into the chair with a huff, staring at the waiter as he walked away.

“I ordered you a latte,” Dianne said.

“Thanks.” The huffiness in Sadie’s tone didn’t come off as very thankful.

“What’s wrong?” Amy asked.

“I found something out this morning that I should have already known.” Sadie didn’t look at her, but Dianne couldn’t think of anything else she might be talking about.

“Well, I guess now is the best time to tell you all.” Everyone’s head turned to look at Dianne.

“Tell us what?” Amy and Karen asked at the same time.

“Gage and I are sort of dating.” Her short and straight-to-the-point comment had the effect of a bomb being dropped on the table.

First, loud gasps filled the air, followed by about thirty seconds of shocked silence. Then came the flurry of questions. Dianne did the only thing she could. She leaned back and waited for them to wind down.

After a few minutes she couldn’t take their babbling anymore. “If you’ll all kindly shut up, I’ll explain everything.”

“She’s dating a guy she can’t stand, even though he’s beyond sexy, and she wants us all to relax.” Amy crossed her arms over her chest and glared at her.

"I never said I can't stand him. I just know he's not the guy for me, so I don't see a point in encouraging him. Besides it's only for a week." Not that it made much of difference at this point.

"Why?" Sadie wanted to know.

"Because that's the deal." And she had to stick to it.

"Deal?" Lainey and Karen both said. Lainey's came out high-pitched and kind of panicky. Karen sounded more solemn.

"Look, you all decided to send me to Gage for help. In exchange for helping us, he made a few request."

"You actually agreed without discussing it with us?" Karen wasn't afraid to let her know she wasn't happy about it.

"I, we, didn't exactly have time to look for other options." Not that they would have found any.

"Still, you should have told us," Amy said, her glare fading a bit.

"We needed his help." Dianne shrugged her shoulders, trying to downplay the whole thing.

"Damn it, we could have found another way." The serious tone sounded alien coming from Jillian.

"Look, it's too late to argue now. We needed a sacrificial lamb and I was it." She often wondered if she hadn't fought harder when they asked her to go to Gage because deep down she wanted an excuse to talk to him.

"Oh my God!" Lainey's wail caused some of the other patrons of the cafe to look their way.

"Lainey, I didn't mean it like that." Dianne had made the bargain willingly.

She'd sacrificed herself to make sure one of her best friend's wedding dreams come true. Dating Gage for a week couldn't be any harder than pretending to date him for the benefit of the other groomsmen. She'd gotten a taste of his charm, and though she couldn't say she was immune, she could say she knew what to expect.

"I'm a pimp!" Lainey's comment came out soft, but harsh.

“Pimps sell sex. Trust me, things won’t be going that far. And even if they do, you won’t be getting paid unless he’s really good.” She nudged Lainey’s shoulder with hers and got a small smile.

“How far are you willing to go?” Sadie waggled her eyebrows, and Dianne laughed.

“I promised him one week. That’s it. Once the week is over, we go back to the way things were.” Then she planned on forgetting this whole thing ever happened.

“You really think you can spend a week with that hunk and just walk away?” Amy would ask her something like that.

“Yes. He asked for one week, and it’s all he’s going to get.” Dianne hoped by the end of the week he’d see how wrong they were for each other.

“I don’t know. If it was me, I might take full advantage of the week and enjoy every minute and inch of him.” Jillian smiled at the waiter who placed her iced caramel mocha coffee in front of her.

He blushed and quickly distributed the rest of the drinks before fleeing back to the counter. Everyone laughed, even Lainey, which was a relief. They were going to have to leave him a big tip.

“So is there anything we can we do to help?” As usual, Karen was the first to try and come to the rescue.

“Not yet, but believe me, if I need help I know who to call.” Hopefully it wouldn’t come to that, but it helped her knowing they were there if she needed them.

“Wait.” Sadie slapped her hand on the table with enough force to shake all their drinks. “You said *are* dating, not *will be*. When did this start?”

“We pretended to be dating so the groomsmen wouldn’t think there was anything odd about us being together.” She paused and took a sip of her coffee, letting her friends digest that before she told them the rest. “Yesterday we went out for lunch. Then we spent the afternoon at the mall.”

Dianne wanted to laugh at the mix of expressions on her friends' faces. Surprise, confusion, and disbelief stared back at her. She could only imagine what would have happened if she told them she went to dinner with him. There wasn't a chance in hell she would tell them he'd walked her to her door and kissed her goodnight. The kiss had started off innocent enough, but if she hadn't caught herself it could have turned serious. That's what had kept her up all night, and now she thought she had a plan to deal with him.

"How was it?" Amy finally managed to ask.

"Not bad." She shrugged her shoulders, downplaying the whole thing, even though the trip had given her a glimpse at another side of Gage.

"But you hate the mall. Hell, you hate shopping period!" Lainey's voice reflected the shock on her face.

"I know, but Gage was searching for a birthday gift for his eight-year-old niece. I guess I found his struggle to be a good distraction."

Soon the conversation turned to how men could be so clueless. Strangely, she found herself wanting to defend Gage. She held back, of course. The last thing she wanted was to give her friends a reason to think her feelings might actually be involved in her bargain with Gage. Her body would be, but not her heart.

"You know, maybe Gage is suffering from TOTCS," Sadie said in her professional reporter's voice.

"What is TOTCS?" they all asked.

"Thrill of The Chase Syndrome. A lot of guys, and even quite a few women, suffer from it," she explained, and Dianne laughed at the seriousness of her tone.

"I think she may be right. Women seem to flock to Gage. Dianne's resistance could be a challenge he's been missing," Karen said.

"You guys don't show any interest in him either." Dianne pointed out the slight flaw to their assumption.

“That’s because he barely notices us when you’re around,” Amy said with a smile, and Jillian and Karen nodded.

“It sounds like a load of bullshit to me,” Lainey said. “Besides, I think Gage really likes her.”

“Me, too, that’s the problem.” Jillian giggled, and Dianne rolled her eyes.

“Guys, none of this matters,” Dianne claimed, though she knew it did.

Sadie ignored her protest and went on. “Actually, if we wanted to put to put my theory to the test, we could.”

“Don’t keep us in suspense. Tell us how you’d do it.” Jillian’s excitement didn’t pan out well for Dianne, and she knew it.

Before Sadie could say anything else, Dianne held up her hand and said, “I don’t want to know.”

For crying out loud, she already had enough ideas rolling through her head. She knew imagination, like knowledge, could be a dangerous thing in the wrong hands. With an imagination like hers she was bound to find trouble if she gave it free rein. Adding her friends ideas would no doubt encourage her to do something she’d most likely regret.

“Relax. I’m not going to suggest you do anything drastic. Jillian had it right when she said she would enjoy him.” Sadie tipped her head at Jillian, who nodded back. “Why not let yourself have some fun? After all, Lainey did dare us to pick a guy and have some fun.”

“So you all think Gage should be my guy?” she asked, wondering if they were serious about this.

Her friends filled the air with a resounding chorus of, “Yes.”

* * * *

Gage had decided not to plan anything too intense for their second date. He wanted her to see he could be the one for her, but that wasn’t going to happen overnight. She didn’t seem the type to be easily

swayed, so he had his work cut out for him. He had a strong feeling flowers and an expensive dinner weren't going to impress her. Hopefully what he planned instead would.

If it did, he was going to owe his mother. She had always told him the lessons she taught him would come in handy when he met the right woman. So far none of the women he'd dated had lived up to her expectations, but deep down inside he knew Dianne would if she ever got to meet her. The way his plans were going, he wasn't confident that would happen. Maybe tonight would change things.

Then again, his plan had a fifty-fifty chance of backfiring. Gage refused to think negative thoughts. When he called her and made their date for dinner and a movie, he'd given her the option of him picking her up, or her driving herself. As he assumed she would, Dianne opted to drive herself. Once he gave her the address, his plan had been set in motion.

She'd be there at six thirty, which gave him plenty of time to get everything ready and jump in and out of the shower before she arrived. He tossed the movie on the table and stuffed the food in the fridge. His mother had bought him a new set of dishes for good luck when he'd moved into the townhouse. Up until now they'd just sat in the cupboard, but tonight he hoped they'd work whatever magic his mother thought they held.

Table set, movie in the DVD player ready to go, he headed for his bedroom. He hit the radio as he walked by and a steady beat filled the air. The song reminded him of the night Jace and Lainey got married. Dianne and her friends had danced most of the night. He stripped and climbed into the shower, remembering the way her body had swayed and shimmied. Naked, standing under the hot spray, his muscles should have started to relax, but thinking about her had certain parts of his body growing tight. He looked down at his cock, which was demanding his attention. Maybe being naked and thinking about Dianne wasn't such a good idea. Especially not when she would be arriving soon.

Gage figured he had two choices. He could take care of himself, which might take the edge off his desire. Or he could suffer, which was nothing new. Since he doubted the relief would last past the minute she stepped over the threshold, he took the quickest shower on record and got out of the bathroom. He dried off, slipped a pair of boxer briefs on, and was stepping into his jeans when he heard the doorbell ring. A quick glance at the clock had him wondering who the hell it was, since he figured Dianne would either show up right on time or make fashionably late arrival. He slung his T-shirt over his shoulder and headed for the door, rubbing his wet hair with the towel.

Gage peeked through the peep hole and saw Dianne. She had her back to the door and was looking around. Her wavy auburn hair was up in a ponytail that swung along her shoulders when she moved her head. The black shirt she had on made her hair look a lot redder than normal. She'd tucked the shirt into a pair of leopard print pants that came to her knees and hugged her curves. The black high-heeled slip-on sandals brought only one thing to mind. She turned around to face the door, and his jaw dropped. Her shirt was low-cut, showing off an ample amount of cleavage.

She looked like one of the pin-up models his grandfather had hung up all over his garage. It took him a minute before he could look away. He raised his gaze to her face and got another shock. Normally she wore her makeup light and natural, if she had any on at all. He still wasn't sure about that. Tonight though, her lips were painted a red shade that matched her belt. What didn't surprise him was that her eyes were hidden behind sunglasses, though the sun was already setting.

These were leopard print like her pants. They looked good on her. She must have at least a dozen pairs, because he didn't think he'd seen her wear the same ones twice. Not that it mattered, because he hated them all. Gage wanted to look into those beautiful green eyes and see what she was thinking. They were the shield she used block the world out unless she wanted to let someone in. He wanted in, and

he planned on doing whatever he had to do to get there. Gage saw her lift her hand to ring the bell again.

He yanked the door open and said, "You're early."

"Lucky me." Dianne smiled, looking him up and down.

Her gaze lingered on his bare chest, reminding him he hadn't put his shirt on yet. The heat that flashed through him at her appraisal made him consider leaving it off. If he had to use his body to woo her, it would be a sacrifice he was more than willing to make. The problem was he wanted more than her body, and he knew he wasn't going to get to her heart by falling into bed with her.

"Come on in." He opened the door and stepped aside, but she managed to brush her shoulder along his chest as she passed him.

He laid the towel on one of the dining room chairs, and as he slipped his T-shirt over his head, she said, "You don't have to get dressed on my account. I'm in no rush to leave."

"That's good, because I thought we'd have dinner here instead of going out. I even rented us a movie for later." He figured he should spring it on her right from the start so that if she refused, they'd have time to go someplace else.

"Are you actually going to cook, or are we ordering in?" Her question took him by surprise since he was expecting more of a reaction than that.

"I'm cooking." He wanted to show off for her.

"I hope you're good, because I'm starving." She dropped her black purse on the coffee table and looked around the living room.

"I've never had any complaints." He wished they weren't talking about food.

"Is this your niece?" she asked, pointing to a young girl's picture, which was mixed in among the others that lined his bookshelves.

"Yeah, that's her." He walked over and stood right behind Dianne, giving into his desire to be near her.

She turned, bringing them face to face. It would have been real easy to kiss her, but Gage held back. Tonight he had to stick to his

goals and not let his hormones run the show. He needed to take things slow and show her he wanted to get to know her, not just sleep with her. Oh, he wanted that, too. So badly that he couldn't sleep without dreaming about it, but he'd suffer gladly if it got her to see they could be a real couple.

"Have you found her gift yet?" Dianne asked, pushing her glasses up onto her head as she turned back to the pictures.

"No. I've been searching online for ideas, but nothing seems right." Even though he was getting discouraged, he wasn't ready to give up just yet.

"You're running out of time, aren't you?" He wanted to believe she wasn't purposefully rubbing salt on the wound so to speak.

"Yes. Her party is this Saturday."

"Just think, by the time you have kids of your own you'll be a pro at shopping for them."

Gage could tell something was going on, though he couldn't pinpoint just what it was. He got the distinct impression Dianne was being too nice. Normally she was civil enough, but she usually kept an odd distance between them. Tonight the remoteness seemed to be gone. It was nice to be around her without it, but he couldn't help wondering why the sudden change. He had no choice but to let things play out and hope he could handle whatever she threw his way.

"I'll take that as a compliment. Why don't we head into the kitchen and get you fed." He held out his hand and waited to see whether or not she took it.

Chapter Four

Dianne slid her hand into his and said, “I don’t cook.”

“You can just keep me company.” He chuckled as he tugged her along behind him.

He led her into an amazing kitchen which put hers to shame. First off, it was double the size. Normally, she never gave it much thought, since she really didn’t spend much time in there. Second, he had all sorts of appliances on the counter. Seeing his setup kind of made her wish she did cook. He turned the oven knob as he walked past. Looking strangely at ease in the kitchen he slid a sheet pan with little things on it inside the oven. Then he walked over and started pulling all kinds of stuff out of the fridge, giving her a minute to gather her thoughts.

As she took a seat at the counter bar she told herself again for the thousandth time since she left her apartment that she was doing the right thing. Gage wanted her, and he didn’t know, but she’d finally admitted to herself that she wanted him, too. So she decided to give them both what they wanted. A short affair might be just the thing she required. She just needed to keep things light so neither of them got hurt when she walked away at the end of the week, because she would definitely walk away.

“So what are you making?” She put her elbows on the counter and leaned forward to see what he was doing.

His eyes landed on her breasts. She couldn’t blame him since she practically stuffed them in his face. Hell her whole outfit had been chosen because she wanted to turn him on. She hoped it might knock him off balance a little, which would put them on even footing. Most

of the men she knew didn't think clearly when they were concentrating on a woman's body. It was sad, but she was willing to use any advantage she had when dealing with him.

"Alfredo pasta primavera with shrimp."

"Really?" She hadn't been expecting something so upscale and complicated.

"Well, the other day at lunch you seemed torn between it and the shrimp scampi, so I thought you might enjoy trying mine." His cocky smile should have pissed her off, but she couldn't be mad when he was making one of her favorite dishes.

"And you just happened to know how to make it?" She hoped this wasn't his first time, since she didn't like the idea of being the one to taste it if he was experimenting.

"I have a little Italian in my family." If he thought that was going to help, she might be in serious trouble.

"How little?" Dianne asked as she watched him deftly chop the veggies.

"About five-five." She groaned, and he laughed as he explained. "My mother's aunt lives in Italy."

"And she gave you the recipe?" Things could be looking up.

"No." He shook his head, dashing her hopes. "She taught me to make it when I visited her a few years ago."

"I would love to go to Italy." She loved the rustic countryside she always saw in the movies. "Ireland and Scotland are on my list, too."

"I've never been to either of them, but my sister has been to Scotland."

They slipped into an easy conversation. She let him do most of the talking, but she asked plenty of questions. The more he talked, the more she learned about him and his family.

After about thirty minutes, Gage must have decided he'd talked enough. "Why don't you tell me about your day?"

"There's not much to tell." She shrugged even though he had his back to her and couldn't see it. "I had lunch with the girls."

“Did you have a good time?” He smoothed a butter concoction on two halves of Italian bread.

“I always have a good time with my friends, but I’m not sure we’ll be heading back to that particular café any time soon.” She couldn’t hold back her smile remembering how they’d behaved.

“Why not?” Gage asked as he stuffed his hand into an oven mitt shaped like a hot pepper and lifted the sheet pan off the counter and opened the oven.

“Jillian and Sadie may have spooked the waiter.” That was putting it a bit mildly.

“What did they do?” He slid the pan into oven and reached for the one on the rack below it.

“Actually it was my fault. I told them about us and our deal—”

He glanced back at her and the hot pan slipped. Gage reached out and grabbed it with his bare hand. It was probably instinctual, but stupid all the same. He hissed, not letting it go until it hovered over the counter.

Dianne was already rounding the counter before he started waving his hand around and shouted, “Shit!”

She grabbed his hand, stuck it in the sink, and turned on the cold water, holding it under the spray. He hissed as she turned it and stroked his hand. There were some red marks—mostly on his finger tips—but they weren’t blistered or anything. She realized how intimate the moment was and did her best not to avoid looking him in the eyes. Her hands stilled long enough for him to slide his fingers between hers before she pulled away.

She smiled up at him as she reached to shut the water off. “I think you’re going to live.”

“Until your friends get a hold of me, you mean?” He took the towel she handed him.

“Actually they all thought us spending the week...um...getting to know each other better is a good idea.”

“Have you considered that they just might be right?”

“Not yet, but I’ve agreed to have an open mind.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem. So are you going to be able to finish cooking my dinner?” she teased as she headed back to her chair.

“I’ve been declared fit to return to duty, so I guess so.” He used the towel to move the pan onto the top of the stove.

“Good, because I really am hungry.” Again, she deftly avoided making eye contact.

She’d been told numerous times her eyes expressed whatever she was feeling. He’d even mentioned it once, and she didn’t want him to see what she really thought. If he did, they may never get around to eating. That would be a pity because she truly was hungry, and for more than just food.

* * * *

“Well then, I should get back to work. I wouldn’t want you to starve, now would I?” He turned back to the stove, basking in the smile she sent his way.

“I have to say, so far I’m impressed.” She sounded surprised.

“You’re not one of those women that think if a guy is single he can’t cook, are you?”

“Hell no!” She laughed. “I’m one of those women who tends to burn boiling water. So your kitchen skills are something I will consider a positive.”

“Would you like me to list my other skills?” he joked.

“I’m more of a hands-on, visual kind of girl, so we’ll just have to wait and see what you show me.”

“Will this be an I’ll-show-you-mine-if-you-show-me-yours type of thing?” He hoped so.

“Not really. You’re the one on the hot seat, not me.”

“So you’re saying what I see is what I get with you?”

“Wrong again.” She shook her head, which sent her ponytail swaying. “A woman, well a smart woman, knows she should never reveal all her secrets. If she did what would keep a guy interested?”

Gage wanted to tell Dianne that even if he knew everything about her he’d never get tired of them spending time together. But he didn’t think she wouldn’t believe him. And he was afraid it would turn into some kind of debate.

He knew better than to pick a fight over something so stupid. Then again, arguing with a woman was usually an exercise in futility, especially a hungry one. Not that he hadn’t tried. He just hadn’t won very often. His father had taught him the finer points of conceding. Unless it was something he’d felt really strongly about, it wasn’t worth pissing his wife or daughters off. Gage had taken the lesson to heart, which is probably the reason he had such good relationships with his mom and sisters. It probably helped him connect with his niece, too.

“Does that mean you have secrets? Are you a spy? Do you use your travels as a model to covertly gather intelligence?”

“Please. Most of my work has been local. I’ve only done a few national campaigns. I’ve never gone international.”

That surprised him. From the way she dressed and her flashy sports car, it was obvious she was making plenty of cash. And though he’d be the first to admit he knew nothing about the modeling industry, he did know enough about market campaigns to know the bigger the account was, the more she would make. She could be unique enough that people were willing to pay for her look.

“I remember Lainey saying you went to Kentucky a few months ago for work. Was that for a national ad?”

“No, it was for a charity event.”

“You’re philanthropic, huh?” If he kept her talking, maybe she’d spill a few more tidbits about her that he didn’t already know.

“At times, but if you burn that garlic bread, I won’t be.” She sniffed the air, and he laughed.

Gage was no fool. This woman wasn't going to let him in until he proved himself. He took the garlic bread out of the oven without burning himself like he had with the tart shells he'd taken out earlier.

"So tell me about this charity event."

* * * *

Dianne had to be careful just how much she told Gage about her trip. She managed to skirt a lot of his questions while he finished cooking. Once they sat down to eat she decided to change the subject all together. By the time they were sitting on the couch ready to watch the movie, she was sure Gage had forgotten all about their earlier conversation.

The second he dimmed the lights, Dianne slid her shoes off and leaned against his side. She let Gage wrap his arm around her shoulders. The move was so natural that neither of them commented on it. It was five minutes into the movie before Dianne was actually able to focus on anything but how good it felt being pressed against his side. She turned and looked up at him, surprised to find him staring at her instead of the TV.

He didn't make a move, so she decided it was up to her. She reached up and pulled his head down to hers. Their kiss was electric, literally. She gasped and pulled away from the static shock.

"Wow! Let's try that again." He chuckled, easing his mouth back to hers.

There was no zap this time, but it was replaced with an urgency she just couldn't ignore. She twisted her body as he plundered her mouth until she had straddled his lap. His cock bulged behind his fly, forming a thick, hard ridge that pressed against her pussy. Dianne rocked her hips, creating a delicious friction that had her pussy growing wetter. Gage lifted his hips and flipped her onto her back, coming down over her.

Dianne tried to squeeze her hand between them to undo his pants, but he grabbed her wrist, stopping her. "I want this more than I can say, but I planned on taking things slow."

"Do I get a vote? Because though there are times for slow and steady this isn't one of them." She pushed her heel into the couch cushion and raised her ass, pressing her crotch against his dick.

He groaned and let go of her hand. Dianne dropped her hips and slid it between them. She struggled with his button. Before she could get it undone, he lurched to his feet and held out his hand. She put her hand in his and let him pull her to her feet.

"Where are we going!" she squealed as he scooped her into his arms.

"To my bedroom where I plan to ravish you until you can't take anymore. And then I'm going to do it all over again."

She wrapped her arms around his neck leaned in and whispered, "Promises. Promises."

He carried her up the stairs and down a hall into a room. She lifted her head and looked around. Her eyes were drawn to the huge bed, but she only had a few seconds to take it in before she found herself tossed onto it. She couldn't hold back her giggles as she bounced. They died instantly when Gage stripped his shirt off. His jeans were quick to follow. He stood there in his boxer briefs, looking sexier than any man she'd ever been alone with. Granted, there hadn't been many for her to compare him to.

She realized he was waiting for her. Not wanting to be outdone, Dianne yanked her shirt over her head and threw it at him. He caught it midair, crushing it in his fist. His gaze was locked on her bare breasts, thankful he hadn't realized she wasn't wearing a bra early. That little tidbit of knowledge would have driven him crazy. He stared until she started to slide her pants down over her hips. He dropped her shirt and strode to the bed. He slid his hand up her legs and grabbed the pants and tugged them off.

Dianne felt a little self-conscious sitting there in just her black lace panties, but she didn't have much time to worry over it. Gage knelt on the foot of the bed and quickly covered her body with his. His hands teased and taunted as he kissed her senseless. She was just as ruthless. Somewhere during their wrestling match, her panties got stripped off and thrown aside. They were both breathing heavily by the time she got his boxers down to his knees. She used her foot to push them the rest of the way off.

Gage reached into the nightstand beside the bed and pulled out a condom. She helped him get it on and he instantly settled between her thighs. She felt the head of his cock press at her opening. Their moans mingled in the air as he slid into her. They met each other stroke for stroke, and Dianne hoped he didn't think she was too eager.

"Come on baby, just let go and enjoy it," he murmured in her ear.

The sound of his voice pushed her over the edge. She clutched his shoulder and her inner muscles clenched around his thick cock. He kept pumping into her over and over. She gasped for air as the tension began to build again.

"Oh my God!" she moaned, tossing her head from side to side.

Her nails dug into his shoulders and she didn't feel a bit of guilt that she was marking him. She wrapped her legs around the back of his thighs and tried to pull him closer. Her reactions to him seemed to spur him on. Gage's strokes got deeper and harder. Dianne told herself not to scream as she came for the second time, but she couldn't stop herself from making noises all together.

"Fuck me!" Gage shouted as plunged into her as deep as he could.

Her legs were shaking, and her breasts heaved as she tried to breathe under his weight. He groaned and dropped his head to her shoulder for just a few seconds. Gage rolled them both on their sides, pulling the comforter over them.

"I'll be right back." He climbed from the bed and disappeared into a doorway that either led to a bathroom or walk-in closet.

She heard the water turn on and decided it was a bathroom. Dianne closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths, trying to steady herself. She'd just had the best sex of her life, but wasn't going to let it affect her heart. Sex was sex, not love.

Chapter Five

Gage hung up the phone knowing he should be feeling pretty damn good, but deep down he was unable to shake the feeling Dianne was just playing with him. Last night they had made love—maybe more like had sex, in her opinion—until the sun came up. She left before he woke up, which pissed him off, until he found a note written in red lipstick on his bathroom mirror.

CALL ME was scrawled with a flourish he recognized as hers.

Following her orders, he'd called, but there was no answer, so he left a message. Even though he didn't expect her to call him back, he couldn't stop himself from checking his phone every few minutes. If anyone found out what a pathetic fool he'd become, he'd never live it down.

"I can't believe you're blackmailing her." His best friend Jace hadn't stopped expressing his disbelief all morning.

"I would have let her off the hook if she balked, but it was worth taking a chance." Gage knew that Jace might not understand, since he wasn't a big risk taker.

"She's one of my wife's best friends. This could backfire in a huge way, for all of us." Jace sounded way too serious.

Gage gave his shoulders a shrug, trying to act calm when he was anything but. "Or it could all work out."

"Yeah, well, if doesn't, my wife and the rest of her friends will probably make you wish you never met them."

"After all I did to help with the wedding, I'm hoping Lainey will cut me some slack." Gage knew she could probably sway her friends if she wanted to.

Actually, since they all knew what was going on, there was no reason why he couldn't explain his side of things to Lainey. Still, he decided to stop by and see her at the bakery where he'd have the safety of her display counter between them. Jace grabbed the file they were supposed to have been going over and stuffed it into his bag.

"Dude, relax. I promise that Dianne has complete control of the situation. She might not want to admit it, but she knows it." Gage wished there was something else he could say to reassure his friend.

He didn't think it would be wise to tell him about last night. What happened between him and Dianne needed to stay between them until she was ready to say otherwise.

* * * *

"Are you going to call him back?" Amy asked.

"Eventually. You know work comes before play." Normally Dianne was the one to try and mix a little play into her friends' workdays, but not today.

Today Dianne needed to be focused, and she knew once she talked to Gage that was going to be damn near impossible.

She slid the calendar back to Amy. "Okay, so Karen already called the last three. They're up near where her grandmother lives, and we're going to squeeze in a visit. I figured maybe you could come with me to the first three readings. And maybe Jillian could handle the next three since they're local."

"When we said we'd be with you every step of the way, you took that pretty literally," Amy teased as she read the itinerary.

"Since you guys talked me into doing this book tour I decided you can hold my hand and keep me from running away." Dianne wished they'd be able to keep her from throwing up.

Just the idea of getting up and talking in front of a crowd made her stomach churn. Her publisher had pretty much insisted she do it, but she'd been ready to balk until her friends talked her into going.

Now she had no other choice, or she'd be letting down a whole bunch of little kids who wanted to meet her. That was something else she didn't think she'd ever get used to.

When she modeled there was never any talking involved. Modeling let her hide behind a façade. Heck, in most cases, the companies that hired her only used specific body parts. Her most popular features were her eyes, feet, and silly enough, her ears. She doubted that anyone—other than the people who really knew her—would even guess it was her in the ads.

There had only been a few times where her whole body was used at once. That had been when she was much younger. Modeling was a young woman's game, which is why her grandmother had insisted she get an education like her sister. Unlike her sister, who had decided to get a nursing degree, Dianne had tried to steer away from any field of study that would lead to a job where she would have to interact with sick or loud people. Instead, she'd decided to get her degree in library sciences. The quiet calmness of a library was a better fit with her personality, and that way she could indulge in her love of reading.

A few of her professors had noticed her flair for writing and suggested she take a couple of creative writing courses. It had been a turning point in her life she hadn't known was coming. She'd gone on to get her degree, but she found herself unable to stop writing. Who knew that all the stories she'd been making up since she was a child were a sign that she was meant to be an author?

"We'll be there with you," Amy's cheerful tone eased some of her fears, "but I don't know what you're so worried about. You're great with kids, and they love you."

Any other time, Dianne would have basked in the compliment. "I'm good one-on-one. Heck, even five-to-one, but an auditorium full of kids is a little over my limit."

"Still, every kid is going to be so excited to see you and ask you questions. They'll probably be just as nervous as you."

"I doubt it," Dianne scoffed.

“Just think, if you barf, all the boys will think you’re cool. Just kidding.” Amy held up her hands in surrender.

“Yeah, well, it’s not funny. What if I start reading then throw up all over them? I may never sell another book again.” Dianne really wasn’t worried about that, but she’d die of embarrassment, so it would be a moot point.

“Oh come on, you’re going to be fine. All those little girls, and probably half the boys, would give anything to get an autographed copy of your book. Now can we talk about what happened between you and Gage?”

“That’s it!” Dianne almost shouted.

“What’s it?” Amy asked.

“The gift for Gage’s niece.” Dianne didn’t know why she hadn’t thought of it before. Most likely because she was enjoying watching him struggle to find a gift. “Amy, you’re brilliant, did you know that?”

“Of course. My brothers tell me all the time just how smart I am. Especially my ass.” Amy flashed her a cocky smile.

“Honey, when they call you a smartass, I don’t think that’s what they mean,” Dianne teased.

“Sure they do. They just don’t know it.” They both laughed. “Now stop stalling and tell me about last night.”

“There’s not much to tell. We had dinner at his place. He cooked. And we watched a movie.” Dianne did her best to sound casual.

“Did he try to make a move? Did you?”

“Amy!” Dianne chided her friend, but she couldn’t help but laugh.

“Come on, I’d tell you.”

“Really? I heard Jace’s friend Slade called you the other day. Want to tell me what that was all about?” Dianne countered.

Amy narrowed her eyes, and Dianne thought for sure she would concede, but instead she growled and said, “He didn’t call me. His sister did. Her car broke down and he was out with Jace when she called him. Jace told her to call the garage. Then Jace drove her home

while he waited for one of my brothers to get there. But it was Wednesday so I had to go, because it was their bowling night. Okay, now it's your turn."

"I made the first move. And that's as much as I'm saying for now. You'll find out the rest when we all meet for lunch tomorrow, because I'm only going through the story once." Dianne knew her friends were going to have plenty of questions.

Her phone rang again and this time she answered it. "Hello."

"Where are you?" Gage asked.

His brusque tone had her ready to hang up, but something made her hesitate. But she didn't respond either.

"Shit." She heard him mutter.

She decided to cut him a break, but just this one time. "I'm at Amy's. Where are you?"

"I'm at work, where I just got the third degree from Jace, again." She figured that was supposed to account for his earlier harshness.

"About what this time?" She already had a pretty good idea.

"Whether or not I was going to break your heart. Then he figured it was his job to set me straight on what would happen if I did."

She knew she shouldn't laugh, but there was no stopping it. "What did you tell him?"

"I told him you were the one in charge, so if anyone's heart is in danger it's mine."

"Sure it is." She laughed harder.

"Well, just to show him and all your friends they can't scare me away, would you like to go out tonight?"

"Sure. What did you have in mind?"

"Something fun."

"You're not going to tell me?"

"I want it to be a surprise."

"Okay. Pick me up at seven." This time she did hang up on him, and it served him right.

She started counting in her head and only got to three before Amy said, “I take it that was Gage.”

“Yup. We’re going out tonight.”

“I gathered that much. He makes you laugh.”

“Actually, I was laughing *at* him. It seems Jace is giving him a hard time about dating me.”

“What did you expect? He thinks of all of us as an extension of his wife. Gage may be his best friend, but even that isn’t going to stop Jace from letting him know he’s watching him.”

“Where did that little pearl of wisdom come from?”

“Being the only girl with four brothers and an overprotective father has taught me a lot. And you might want to remember the conversation my brothers had with Jace when he first started dating Lainey.”

“Not going to happen!” Dianne said with a shake of her head. “This is only going to last a week, so by the time they find out, they won’t need to talk to Gage.”

“That’s if you don’t change your mind. Once you sleep with him, you might decide to keep him around for a while.”

Dianne felt the heat bloom on her cheeks. This morning when she’d slipped out of his bed, there had been a brief moment of indecision. When she quietly crept out of his house, she was still considering what it might be like if they were in a real relationship. Once she got home, took a shower, and had something to eat, she’d gotten her wits back. She and Gage were having a fling, and come Sunday— just four and a half days from now— they’d be through. She didn’t see any reason to remind Gage of that fact.

She did, however, need to have a talk with Jace and find a way to explain the situation to him. Hopefully without her coming off as a tease, or worse, a slut. The last thing she wanted was to feel uncomfortable around one of her best friend’s husbands. Of course she didn’t want him to think badly of her, either.

“Oh my... You’ve already slept with him. I can’t believe it only took him two dates to get in your pants.”

“I didn’t say that. And we pretended to date for three weeks, remember?”

“You didn’t have to say it. All of a sudden you’re way too quiet, and your cheeks are the reddest I’ve ever seen them.” Amy’s teasing tone just made her cheeks hotter.

“I told you, we’ll talk about it tomorrow at lunch. Right now I have a few errands to run before my date tonight.” She gathered her things and tucked them into her tote bag.

“Dianne, you know I’m eventually going to get all the juicy details,” Amy called out as Dianne walked out of the room.

* * * *

Gage was about to walk into the bakery totally unprepared but determined to find a way to get Lainey to talk to Dianne. Maybe Lainey could give him some ideas on how to make Dianne understand it wasn’t just her body he was after. He opened the door and froze.

“Well don’t just stand there.” Dianne’s friend Amy called out.

Gage step inside and let the door close behind him. “Is Lainey around?”

“I’m right here.” She came out of the other room carrying a tray of goodies.

“Gage, come sit down and help us taste test some of Lainey’s new creations.” Sadie pulled the chair out between her and Jillian.

It was too late to turn tail and run, so he walked over and sat down. “Will Dianne be joining you?”

“No,” Karen said. “She had a meeting.”

Lainey placed the platter of treats in the center of the table. It was covered with little square cakes, brownies, and chocolate covered pastries. The girls didn’t waste any time. Each of them reached forward, grabbed something, and took a bite. Gage followed suit,

picking up a brownie. He bit into it and was surprised by the chocolaty mint flavor.

“Oh man. This is fabulous.”

“Thanks.” Lainey smiled. “So Gage, what brings you by today?”

“I was hoping to talk to you about how things are progressing between me and Dianne.” He paused and took a deep breath. “Honestly, I could use a little advice.”

“You’ve already gotten her into bed so you must be doing okay.” Amy gave him a smile and waggled her eyebrows.

That got everyone’s attention. Karen and Jillian both bobbed their heads. Lainey held hers in front of her gaping mouth. Sadie was the only one who didn’t seem shocked by Amy’s comment.

“Good for her.” She popped the last piece of her little pink frosted cake into her mouth.

“You had sex?” Lainey’s question sounded more like an accusation.

“We made love.” He nodded. “Now, can we talk about what I should do next?”

“You’ve conquered her body. Now you need to go for her heart and mind,” Karen said.

She was right, but that’s where his problem lied. “She won’t give me access to those.”

“We’ll see what we can do about that, but you need to answer some questions first.” Sadie’s conditional offer was risky.

It was a risk he was willing to take. “Ask me anything.”

Chapter Six

Dianne didn't know why she felt so nervous. She'd talked to Jace, and once she reassured him she knew what she was doing, he seemed more comfortable. As she suspected, Lainey had told him all about the bargain she'd made with Gage. Jace, being a gentleman, offered to make Gage back out, but Dianne was having none of it. She'd agreed to his demands with her eyes open, and she was going to see it through.

The funny thing was, the whole time Jace had been offering to protect her from his best friend, it seemed he couldn't help but defend him. Their loyalty came naturally. Their bond was just as strong as the one between her and her friends. Jace probably didn't even realize he was singing Gage's praises.

Dianne looked at the clothes strewn about her bed and floor. It was reminiscent of how she kept her bedroom when she was a teenager. So were the butterflies she felt fluttering around inside her stomach. It felt a lot like first date jitters, which in this case was absurd. Hell, as Amy pointed out, they'd already had sex. She should have known from the way she was attracted to Gage that sex with him would be combustible. Maybe she'd been hoping that that's where their connection would have fizzled out.

Okay, so that may have been wishful thinking, but it had been lurking around in her mind in some subconscious form. Now that she knew just how incredible he was in bed she was going to have to look for some other major flaw that would give her a good reason to stick with the plan to end things. Not that he'd mentioned keeping them going after Sunday, but she wanted to be prepared if he did.

So far, she everything she'd listed ended up in the pro column and the list just seemed to keep growing. He was gorgeous, had manners, he's a family man, can cook, looks just as good naked as he does in jeans and a T-shirt, lives alone, has a good job, and drives a nice dependable car instead of something flashy.

The only con she had was that he practically blackmailed her into dating him. She could blame herself for that one, since she hadn't given Gage any other choice. If she kept thinking about this instead of getting dressed, she'd still be practically naked when he knocked on the door. Though that might not be such a bad thing, she thought as she yanked another shirt off the bed. Without knowing where they were going, she had no idea what the hell to wear.

She grabbed a pair of black leggings and tugged them on. The sleeves of the blue and gold silky tunic she chose to go with them came to her elbows, and the hem stopped mid-thigh. The effect was a loose, flowy style that should work with whatever he had in mind. Now her shoes were in a completely different category. They were shiny black leather four-inch spiked heels that said one thing. And it wasn't *let's go for a walk*. She hoped he was smart enough to see the outfit for what it was and adjust his plans accordingly.

If they turned out not to be enough of an incentive, then she might drop a few not-so-subtle hints about how she'd like to spend the night. One last look in the mirror told her she was good to go. She glanced at the clock and noticed she had five minutes to spare.

* * * *

Gage hated being late, but after what he'd just been through, it was worth it. When he ducked out of work early to go see Lainey at her bakery, he hadn't considered the possibility that the rest of the Sin Sisters would be there, too. He'd once laughed at the moniker, thinking how ill-fitting the name was for her little group. After they grilled them, he thought it was quiet apropos. Hell, they were

relentless in their questioning to the point of practically barring him from ever seeing Dianne again if he didn't tell them what they wanted to know.

Luckily for him, he must have given them the right answers, because it seemed they were now his allies. He wasn't clear of trouble just yet. He figured Jace wasn't going to like that he'd gone to speak to his wife without him there. Not that he had anything to be worried about, but he'd told Gage he needed to be careful when dealing with Lainey and her friends. It was too late to second-guess himself now.

He pulled up in front of Dianne's apartment building and spotted her sitting on the front steps, waiting for him. She didn't look happy, but she did look beautiful. Well, except for the gold sunglasses she had on. He got out of the car and walked over to her.

"I'm sorry I'm late, but I got hung up," he said as he neared the steps.

"It's fine." She held out her hand, and he grasped on to it and helped her to her feet.

"Actually, it might not be." He figured the best way to handle the situation was to be totally up front.

"Why?" She stopped walking, but she didn't pull her hand away.

"I went to see Lainey this afternoon."

"Why?"

"I thought maybe if I explained my side of things, she could get Jace to stop acting like bulldog and back off a little."

She smiled and gave a shake of her head as she started for the car. "And how did that go?"

"It could've gone better," he admitted as he opened the door for her.

She laughed as she slid into the car. Gage didn't know what she saw funny about the situation. She was still laughing when he got in the car.

"I could have told you Lainey wasn't going to go easy on you just because you're Jace's best friend."

“I wasn’t expecting her to. I also wasn’t expecting Amy, Jillian, Karen, and Sadie to be there.” He started the car and pulled out into the light stream traffic.

“I can imagine the reception they gave you. I’m sorry. They can be a bit overprotective at times.” Her apology was unnecessary, but nice to hear.

“Your friends love you. I know they aren’t going to just let me or any other guy force you to do something you don’t want to.”

“Sadie, right?” She guessed.

“Yeah, she made sure I could repeat it word for word.” It was just one of the reasons he was late.

“Well, you’re still in one piece, so where are we going?” Her abrupt change of topic surprised him.

“You don’t want to know what we talked about?” He couldn’t believe she wasn’t pressing him to tell her more about the meeting.

“More like what they made you tell them,” she countered with a shrug.

“Okay, yeah, they made me talk.”

“Don’t feel bad. Between Amy, Sadie, and Karen you never had a chance. I’m guessing you told them we had sex.”

“Made love.” He dared a quick glance, happy to see her smile. “I confirmed it, because according to Amy, you already told them.”

She chuckled as she shook her head. “She played you, because I didn’t admit anything.”

“That’s what I figured, but it was too late to take it back. Anyway, they all had their opinions on whether or not I’m good enough for you. In the end, it was Karen who decided that it was up to you.” Gage at least deserved the chance to prove they might be good for each other.

“Well for the next four days, you are.” Her teasing tone fostered the slightest hope there was a chance he could find a way into her heart.

"I need to make a quick stop before your surprise, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind," she said just as he spotted the store up ahead.

Gage pulled into the parking lot. He had to drive through the lot twice before he found an empty slot and eased his car into it. Dianne didn't say anything as he shut the car off and climbed out. He walked around the car, opened her door, and held out his hand to help her out.

Unlike when he walked her to the car earlier, this time she immediately released his hand and walked in front of him. He was fine with that, but when they got to the door he reached for it before she could. He laid his hand on the small of her back as he ushered her inside the building. An older woman instantly appeared in front of them.

"Welcome to Solitaire's. My name is Charlene. Is there something I can help you with?" Her perky tone and smile couldn't be phonier.

"Well I'm, looking for something special for a special young lady." Gage glanced at Dianne, not realizing that he was giving the woman the impression he was interested in buying something for her.

"Of course, sir. Our selection of engagement rings are right over here." The woman held her arm out indicating they should go that way.

"Whoa! Back it up," Dianne squealed.

"I'm sorry, I thought..." The lady waved her hand between the two of them.

Gage laughed until Dianne stuck her elbow in his side. "It's my fault. I was a little vague. What I meant is I'm looking for a gift for my eight-year-old niece."

"Oh, I see. Do you have something specific in mind?" The woman's earlier excitement had disappeared.

"I do. Can you show me what you have in the way of lockets?" The idea had struck him late last night.

They followed the woman to a counter located near the back of the store. Gage watched her remove a maroon velvet tray out of the

glass display case. It held a row of nine lockets, each on a gold chain. She lifted each individual locket off the tray and told them about it. Though they were all pretty, only one of them really stood out. It had an etched vine design, with little hearts instead of leaves. In the center there was a heart where he could have her initials engraved. He was sold, but he still wanted Dianne's opinion.

"What do you think of this one?" He ran his finger over the front of the locket he liked.

To his surprise, Dianne took off her glasses and tucked them into a pocket on the front of her purse. She picked up the necklace and let it hang from between her thumb and index finger. With a rub of her thumb she had the locket twirling. She stopped it just as quickly as she had started it. After she opened and closed the clasp on the chain a few times, she moved on to the locket itself and did the open-close test.

She laid it down on the tray and picked up another down the line. The necklace had a locket of similar in size, but it wasn't as decorative. She gave the chain and pendant the same treatment as the other one. Gage looked from Dianne to the sales associate, who seemed unconcerned by Dianne's actions. He, however, was at a total loss. Finally, she laid the locket back on the tray. She rested her finger just below the locket he originally asked about.

"Definitely this locket," She slid her finger to the other one. "But with this chain."

"I think they come as a set," he said.

At the same time the sales woman said, "Yes, ma'am."

She set about making the switch and filling out a sales sheet. After Dianne helped him chose what to have engraved, he made the arrangements to pick up the necklace the next evening. When they were finally ready to leave the store, Dianne reached out and slipped her hand into his. Gage was so surprised he didn't notice another customer reaching for the door as he did. Not noticing him either, the young girl pulled the door back and it crashed right into his hand.

* * * *

Gage's grunt of pain was followed by some muffled curses as he tugged his hand from hers and cupped the one that had been hit by the door. Dianne reached for him to see just how bad the damage was. He pulled away, cradling his hands against his chest. The girl who had hit him was standing nearby, as was the lady who had waited on them.

Not comfortable with the scene he was making—thought she knew it wasn't his fault—Dianne leaned in close to him and said, "Gage let me see how bad it is."

He hissed and cringed as she reached forward and peeled his fingers off his injured hand. His whole hand had already started to swell. She could see that his pinky and ring fingers were also starting to bruise. Her sister had trained her in basic first aid, but she didn't need it to know he needed to see a doctor.

"All right, let's get you to the hospital." She put her arm around his waist and gently propelled him through the door.

On the way to the car, she wondered how the hell she was going to get the keys out of his pocket, because he wasn't going to be able to drive. When they reached the car she tossed her purse onto the roof. He stood there staring at her, his pain evident in the tight lines around his mouth. She had no other choice than to just bite the bullet.

"Which pocket are your keys in?" she asked, hoping he'd pull them out for her.

Gage stuck his right hip out. Taking a deep breath, she walked over and tucked her hand into his pocket and fished around until she felt the keys.

He groaned and stiffened. She stilled her hand, afraid that she was hurting him. Then he shifted his hip and she felt the real cause of his discomfort.

"Another time I would suggest you keep going, but I think you should hurry." He gave her a smile that looked more like a grimace.

She grasped the keys with her fingertips and yanked them out of his pocket. With a press of the button, the headlights flashed and the doors unlocked. She opened the passenger door and watched as he eased himself into the seat. The seat belt was another matter. She leaned into the car and stretched herself across him. Dianne snapped the belt in place and got out as fast as she could. She tugged her cell phone from her bag as she rounded the car and pressed her sister's number on the speed dial.

"Hey, Di, what's up?" Her sister's cheerful voice instantly eased her fears a little.

"Jackie, are you working today?" She glanced over at Gage as she slid in behind the steering wheel.

He had his head resting back against the seat and his eyes were squeezed shut. Somehow she managed to get her seat belt on without dropping the phone.

"Yeah, I'm actually on my way in right now. Why?" her sister asked.

"That's great. A friend of mine hurt his hand, and I'm driving him to the hospital."

"You have a male friend? Does Nanny know? She called me about your horoscope. Is this guy the one you were supposed to meet?" her sister rambled excitedly.

"Concentrate. Gage is Lainey's husband's best friend. His hand got hit by a heavy glass door." She pressed the speaker button on the phone and laid it on her purse.

"How's it look?" Jackie asked.

"Swollen, and two of his fingers are bruising," Dianne said as she backed out of the parking spot.

"Is he in a lot of pain?"

Gage nodded and Dianne said, "Of course he is. Can you meet us in the emergency room?"

"Yeah. I'll call the desk in case you get there first."

“Thanks. See you soon.” She ended the call and dropped her phone back into her bag.

“You know someone who works at the hospital?” he asked.

“My sister. She’ll make sure you’re taken care of quickly.” Or at least Dianne hoped she would.

Gage groaned when she hit a huge bump in the road. She had no idea how bad the damage was, but she would bet something might be broken. She slowed down as she took the next right, which would take them to the hospital. Dianne wondered if she should call someone else.

“Do you want me to call one of your sisters or Jace?” She figured Jace would know what to do.

He gave a slight shake of his head. “No. I don’t want to worry my sisters, and Jace would call them.”

“Okay.” She pulled into the emergency room parking lot and grabbed the first open spot she saw.

Gage let out another loud groan when she stepped on the brake hard enough to send him slightly forward. She didn’t bother to apologize as she reached over and undid his seat belt. Once she got out of the car she raced around to help him out. On the way across the parking lot, she saw her sister standing by the entrance. Her heart stopped racing and slowed to a still-quick but steadier beat.

“Gage, I’m giving you a fair warning. Your hand is hurting now, but your ears will probably be aching by the time we leave.”

“Why?” He turned and looked at her.

“My sister’s a talker. Like, nonstop.”

“Can we come back when I’m not hurt so I can dig up some dirt on you?”

She was glad his injury hadn’t affected his sense of humor. “Nope. Gage, this is my sister, Jackie. Jackie, this is Jace’s best friend, Gage Dillinger.”

They exchanged hellos as Jackie led them to an exam room. Dianne took a seat in the corner out of the way. Jackie opened a

cabinet and pulled out an ice compress. With a twist and shake, the pack cracked and instantly turned cold. She helped Gage wrap it around his hand and asked what him what happened.

Gage flinched at her touch, but managed to explain. He started where he picked her up, and then going to the jewelry store. Right up to the point where the chick had whacked him with the door. Jackie wrote it all down. She'd probably call their grandmother and fill her in before the night was over.

"I need you to fill out some forms. My sister can help you with that. Do you have an insurance card?" she asked, still scribbling on the chart.

He nodded. "It's in my wallet."

"I'll get it." Dianne lunged to her feet and he started to slide off the exam bed.

He leaned to the side, and she reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. She flipped it open, feeling oddly intrigued about what she might find inside. Her fingers quickly flipped through his license and credit cards until she found the insurance card. She pulled it out and handed it to her sister, who was standing there smiling.

"I'll go take care of this while you fill out that paperwork." Her sister left them alone.

Dianne knew there would be questions later, but right now getting Gage's hand taken care of was more important. "How are you doing?"

"I'm still alive," he grouched.

"Let's hope you stay that way," she teased, hoping for a smile, and he didn't disappoint her.

They had just finished filling out the forms when Jackie returned with a guy dressed in scrubs and a long white jacket. Jackie took the chart from her and passed it to him, so Dianne assumed he was a doctor. He flipped through the pages then handed it back to Jackie.

He walked over to Gage. “Well Mr. Dillinger I’d shake your hand, but I don’t think you’d like me very much after that. So let me take a look at it instead.”

Dianne cringed as the doctor pulled back the ice pack. Just the guy’s touch had Gage hissing. The doctor turned Gage’s hand the slightest bit and Gage cursed. As the doctor moved each of his fingers, she saw Gage’s eyes water. Dianne fought the urge to tell him to stop. She knew the probing was necessary, but damn, couldn’t the doctor be a little gentler?

The doctor nodded at Jackie. “Okay, we’re going to need to send you down for some X-rays to be sure, but I think you may have a broken bone or two. I’m going to give you something for the pain that should kick in before you get down there.”

“Good!” Dianne and Gage said at the same time.

He looked over at her and she smiled. Just because she didn’t like seeing him in pain didn’t mean she was falling for him, or at least that’s what she told herself.

* * * *

Even with her sister pulling strings—which saved a lot of time—the trip to the ER took them about three hours. Gage had in fact broken not one, but three bones. His cast went from the middle of his fingers to mid-forearm. The doctor had assured her that the bruising and swelling looked worse than they were. Groggy from the pain meds they had given him, Gage probably wasn’t going to remember the doctor’s instructions, so he had written them down for him.

Dianne had assured the doctor someone would be there to care for him. For tonight, that someone was going to be her, though she didn’t dare say that in front of her sister. Jackie offered to stay with Gage by the door while Dianne went to get the car. She pulled up to the door and climbed out of the car. He walked the few feet to the car on his

own, but they each walked by his sides, ready to catch him if he stumbled.

He caught Jackie's hand when they reached the car and tugged her close. "You know, you're beautiful, but your sister is a goddess. And she smells like sugar cookies. She makes me hungry."

"Wow, you guys must have given him some really good drugs." Dianne hoped her sister would chalk his comment up to drugged-up ramblings.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow when you call me," her sister said.

It took the two of them to get him into the passenger seat, where he leaned back against the headrest and closed his eyes. In the short amount of time it took for her to get out of the parking lot, Gage had twice told her how pretty she was. When he didn't say anything else, she looked over at him. He seemed to be dozing like her sister had said he would. She wanted to get him right home, but she needed to stop and pick up the pain relievers the doctor had given him a prescription for.

Her sister promised these would be much milder, but still strong enough to take the edge off his pain. She pulled into the parking lot for a strip of stores close to his house. Dianne spotted the pharmacy where her sister called in the prescription. She hadn't known there was a Chinese takeout in the same plaza, but she was thrilled to see it since she hadn't eaten yet. Gage's light snoring was filling the car, so she decided to take a chance. She parked in front of the restaurant, dashed inside, and placed a quick order for two.

Then she ran three doors down to the store and picked up his prescription. She peeked into the car before going back in the Chinese place to pick up their food. Her plan was to feed him, then get him into bed.

Chapter Seven

Dianne tried to ignore the emotions that bombarded her as she slipped into the back of the cab. Last night, things between her and Gage had taken a major unexpected turn. She spent the night lying in his bed snuggled up to his side just listening to him breathe. It hadn't gone the way she thought it would. Somehow it felt even more intimate than when they had spent the night making love, dozing off, then waking up and doing it all over again.

She sank back against the cold vinyl seat and gave the driver her address. Gage had insisted she take his car for the day since he wasn't going to be using it, but she refused. As she unrolled the window to get some air that didn't smell like stale cigar smoke, she wished she hadn't. The problem was, even though she'd driven his car last night, she wasn't comfortable driving it without him sitting right there next to her. Besides, if she did take his car, she was afraid it would mean more to him than it should.

She added inner turmoil to the list of unwanted feelings she was experiencing. Hell, it was her own fault she found herself in this predicament, though she'd love to find a way to blame Gage. It had been her choice to agree to his bargain. Again, she agreed to keep her word when she knew with a little pressure from Jace she could have gotten out of it. She'd been the one to allow things between them to get physical, and maybe even a little emotional, too. And last night it had been her decision to stay over, just in case he needed something.

No matter how hard she tried to assure herself that she was reading too much into things, she couldn't deny that her feelings about him had changed. She thought she had enough walls built

around her heart to keep him out, but the more time she spent with him, the weaker the wall got. Gage's sexy looks only took him so far. She found out he had the personality to carry him the rest of the distance. Dianne was still searching for that big flaw she could use as an excuse to keep from admitting he might be the guy for her.

She had been using his playboy persona as a reason to keep her distance. Now that she gotten to see past that façade, she couldn't use that as a deterrent. She didn't know how he'd earned the reputation—and didn't want to know, either—but it didn't fit him at all. Not once when they were out did she catch him looking at, flirting with, or even acknowledging the looks directed at him from other women. No self-respecting playboy would focus on only one woman.

Then there were the other qualities he displayed. The way he loved his family showed her he wasn't as cavalier as he wanted people to think. Just thinking about how much time and effort he put into finding the perfect gift for his niece was a reminder that when he cared, he did it with everything he had. She'd thought her books and a poster or two would be a great gift, but she had to admit his idea was even better, since it was so personal.

The taxi pulled up in front of her building, and she couldn't get out of the car fast enough. She walked around to the driver's window and handed him the fare. A quick glance at the pink, rhinestone-encrusted watch on her wrist made her groan. She ran up the stairs and into her building. Luck must have been on her side or something, because the elevator doors opened just as she stepped into the foyer. Within minutes, she was in her apartment. She hoped that luck would last long enough for her to make it to lunch with her friends on time.

* * * *

Gage was tempted to ignore the pounding on his front door, but if it was one of his sisters, the knocking wouldn't be going away any time soon. Of course, the only way it would be one of his sisters was

if Jace had gotten word about why he was out today and called one of them. He lifted his hand off the stack of pillows, grimacing as he slid his elbow into the stupid sling. Dianne had told him the doctor said he needed to wear for at least the next three or four days.

When he balked, she threatened injury to a more vital body part if he didn't follow the doctor's orders to the letter. He opened the door and his three sisters brushed past him, leaving him and Jace standing there.

"You just had to call them," Gage whined. It was manly of course. Still, he knew it was a pitiful sound.

Jace held up his hands in defeat. "Self-preservation. If they found out I knew and didn't say something, I'd be wearing a body cast by the time they got done with me."

"I don't suppose Lainey would appreciate that."

"No, she wouldn't." Jace leaned in closer as he closed the door and said in a softer tone, "I didn't tell them everything. Like how you got to the hospital and who took care last night."

"I'm guessing because you don't want to have to answer any questions about what's happening between me and Dianne," Gage tossed back.

"You got that right. There's no way I'm telling them you blackmailed her into dating you." Jace plastered a smile on his face as they walked down the hall.

"Gage, why don't you sit down and tell us what happened, since Jace seemed to be a little shy with the details." His sister Natalie held the pillows in place while he lowered himself onto the couch.

"I went to the store to pick out Tabitha's birthday present and as I was leaving, the lady in front of me whacked my hand with the door."

"It must have been pretty hard to have broken a bone," Tabitha's mother Toni said.

"Three actually." He instantly realized his mistake and rushed to fix it. "But according to the doctor they're minor and should heal quickly."

“Well, it was a good thing you weren’t alone when it happened.” Sarah, his oldest sister, always looked at things pragmatically.

“True. I was lucky that I was out with a friend.”

“You should bring your friend to Tabby’s party this weekend. I’m sure mom would like to thank him.” Toni’s offer was more of a challenge, and they all knew it.

“Sure, why not.” Gage almost laughed at the way Jace’s chin dropped in shock. “You and Lainey are coming too, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. Wait until you see the cake she’s making. I’ve only seen the sketches, but it’s going to be amazing. A true one-of-a-kind featuring The Stone Sisters.” Jace’s animated tone caught his sister’s attention.

“They’re her favorite. She’s going to be so surprised,” Toni said.

“Who are The Stone Sisters?” Gage wondered aloud.

“They’re characters in a very popular book series for kids.”

His sister Sarah’s tone made him feel like it was something he should have known. “And Lainey is able to make a cake with them on it?”

As always, when it came to talking about Lainey, Jace lunged right in, which was what Gage had been counting on. Gage figured Jace’s bragging should get his sisters off his case for a little while. About an hour later, Jace and Gage’s sister Natalie left to go back to work. Toni and Sarah, however, decided to stick around a little while longer to keep an eye on him.

He spent most of the time neatly avoiding talking about his love life. Unfortunately, it was a subject his sisters loved to converse about, with or without his participation. They didn’t bother to take his not-so-subtle hints to change the subject either. So he settled back on the couch and let them talk amongst themselves. Two hours later, when they finally left, he was exhausted. He closed his eyes, feeling he deserved a nap after the morning he’d just had.

* * * *

Dianne walked into the little café bistro Sadie had chosen for lunch this week. She wasn't surprised to find her friends already there. She felt the heat bloom on her cheeks when they all turned and looked at her. If they hadn't known something was up, they did now.

Lainey probably knew about Gage's injury from Jace, but she didn't know Dianne had spent the night taking care of him. Even if he had told everyone else and by some stretch of their wild imaginations they guessed she had been with him last night, she could honestly say nothing happened.

"You're late." Sadie's accusation was delivered in a happy tone.

"Sorry, I had a few things I needed to take care of this morning." She dropped into the only empty chair at the table.

"Did any of those things have to do with Gage?" Jillian asked in her teasing tone.

Dianne decided to be completely honest. "Yes, but not in the way you think. Gage broke his hand last night and he refused to let me call anyone, so I stayed at his place to make sure he was okay."

"Wow. He must have been in bad shape if you were willing to play nurse." Amy was right.

Dianne was afraid there was more to it than that, not that she was ready to tell her friends just yet. "Well, it wasn't like I could just leave."

"I suppose not," Karen said from behind her menu.

"Jace called a little while ago and said he stopped by to check on him, and so did Gage's sisters," Lainey informed her.

"That's good." Dianne felt an odd sense of relief.

"So will you be going back to his place after this?" Sadie's question was one Dianne had been asking herself since she left his place this morning.

She shrugged in a noncommittal way. "I'm not sure. I have a lot of work to get done."

“You know, Gage isn’t really as bad as we all thought.” Amy volunteered, without any one asking her opinion.

Dianne wasn’t sure what type of response her friend was hoping to get from her, so she chose not to give her one at all. Unfortunately, that left the door open for the rest of them to give her their opinions.

“He’s hot as the coals from hell.” Jillian waved her hand in front of her face for effect.

“You guys haven’t seen the sweet side to him yet,” Lainey said with a smile.

They went on and on, telling her things she already knew. She could have told them they were wasting their time, but it wouldn’t have done any good. At least they didn’t know how good he was in bed. That would have been a major topic for them to focus on. Then again, if she told them all the dirty details, maybe they’d be shocked into silence. She looked at each of their faces one by one and knew that wouldn’t work. Dianne sat there and listened to them basically sit there and brag about her boyfriend. The juvenile term didn’t seem to fit his temporary status. She racked her brain trying to come up with a way to change the subject. If they thought she was avoiding talking about him, they would press for a reason why.

Thankfully, Karen laid her menu on the table and brought her gaze to Dianne’s. “Have you thought about how you’re going to end this thing between you two? Is it going to be over quick, like pulling off a Band-Aid? Or are you going to slowly wean off of each other?”

“Karen’s right. You guys only have what, three days left to this bargain of yours?” Sadie added.

“Two days. And we haven’t fully discussed it.” Dianne had planned on bringing it up last night, but the circumstances hadn’t been right.

“Well what if he asks for more time? Is there any chance you’d be willing to keep things as they are?” Lainey asked.

Something inside her wanted to scream *Yes!* Dianne managed to squelch it and shrug again. Not making her response a firm no turned

out to be another mistake on her part because her friends took her indecision as permission to launch into the reasons why she should give him a real chance at a relationship. She couldn't tell them that there was a pretty good chance if she did, she'd end up with a broken heart. He already had taken a big chunk of it, but she didn't tell them that, either.

"Look, if we can stop talking about Gage and get some food, I promise I will think about everything you guys have said." Dianne would, but not the way they wanted her to.

"Better yet, if you promise to just give him a real chance for the next two days, we'll all back off and let you do whatever you think is right." Lainey's proposition sounded even better.

Dianne smiled, knowing whatever damage he could cause in two days shouldn't be any harder to recover from than what he'd already managed to do. "Done."

"Somehow, I feel like we all just got hoodwinked." Sadie waved her hand in the air, and the waiter rushed over to their table to take their orders.

Chapter Eight

Gage nervously paced his apartment. It wasn't that he didn't expect her to show up. She hadn't even balked at his invitation to his niece's birthday party. And he wasn't afraid of her meeting his family. Actually, he didn't have any plausible reason for his nervousness other than the obvious one, which he had been doing his damndest to ignore.

Maybe it wasn't anxiety, but more agitation he was feeling. After all he'd done this was going to be their last day together, unless he found a way to get her to reconsider. She hadn't come right out and said it was over yet, but it hung in the air between them like a little black cloud. After the cookout this afternoon, he was going to bring her back to his place for a nice long talk.

He fought off the temptation to call Lainey and see if she had talked to Dianne. Wasn't it bad enough that he'd gone behind her back to her friends in the first place? Doing it again to see if they had gotten any results would really be pushing his luck. The quick rap on the door had him halting his steps. He rushed to the door and yanked it open.

His smile fell when he found Jace standing on the stoop instead of Dianne. "What are you doing here?"

"It's nice to see you, too." Jace laughed as he followed Gage into the living room. "Lainey asked Dianne to ride with her so she could help with cake. They figured I could catch a ride with you and ride home with Lainey."

Gage wanted to ask why no one had bothered to call and ask him if their plan was okay with him. He wondered if any of them had even

briefly considered the possibility that he wanted to walk in with Dianne. But if Lainey needed her help, who was he to stand in the way?

“Fine. We should get going.”

“Do you need to stop and pick up Tabitha’s gift or anything?” Jace asked.

“No. Dianne picked up her present yesterday on her way over here for dinner. She stopped at the market and picked up the chips and soda I was assigned to bring, too. Hell, she even wrapped the present and put everything in my trunk so I wouldn’t have to carry anything.”

“Sounds like she’s been taking good care of you.”

“I don’t want her to take care of me. Damn it, I want her to...” the word love tingled on his tongue, but he didn’t say it.

“What do you want her to do? Do you even know?” The harsh edge in Jace’s tone took him by surprise.

Gage spun around and found his best friend glaring at him. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I tried to warn you this was a bad idea.” Jace ran his hand through his hair and groaned.

“Yeah, well you should have known warning me off would only make me more interested in getting to know her.” It was a childish thing to say, but in this case it was true.

“Did you get to know her? I mean the real her, not the pretense she shows everyone except those closest to her.”

He hated that Jace knew her better than he did. “A little. I’d need for her to let me in order to do that, wouldn’t I?”

“If she hasn’t by now, do you really think there’s still a chance she will?” Jace’s point was like a dagger aimed to wound his pride.

“I’m not ready to give up yet.” Hell, he was willing to fight to the very last second if it got her to agree there was something more between them than sexual attraction.

“Dude, you better do something pretty damn quick, or you won’t have a frigging choice,” Jace said with a taunting smile.

“Are you planning to help me, or just stand by and watch me go down in flames?” Gage asked, finally admitting he needed help.

* * * *

Dianne helped Lainey load the cake into the back of her van. Okay, so she held the doors for her, but hey, helping was helping. Then she picked up the gift bag she’d put together for Gage’s niece. She still wasn’t sure about going to the party.

Lainey, on the other hand, had been thrilled when Dianne told her Gage had invited her. Dianne confessed she wasn’t comfortable with the idea, and Lainey suggested she help her deliver the cake. Dianne jumped on the offer. She wasn’t sure what she expected to get from arriving with Lainey instead of Gage. Though she had been shocked by his invitation, she had enough sense to ask him exactly how he planned to introduce her to his family.

His claim that he’d introduce her as a friend wasn’t very reassuring. There were people out there who believed men and women couldn’t be just friends. She wasn’t one of them, but in this particular case they would be one hundred percent right. All she could do was hope that no one sensed the bond they had, which she was afraid had gotten stronger over the past few days. She’d have to do everything she could to keep a respectable distance between them and hope he did the same.

Lainey seemed cool as a cucumber as she drove out of the city. Dianne’s nerves were strung so tight she couldn’t sit still. She kept glancing behind them to make sure the cake didn’t tip over. They finally pulled up in front of a huge house twenty minutes later. Lainey shut the car off, and Dianne practically jumped out of the car.

Lainey grabbed her arm and tugged her around to the back of the van. “You need to calm down.”

"I know. I'm trying." She wasn't going to admit she was less nervous about meeting people as Dianne the author as she was about meeting them as Gage's lover.

"Di, this is going to be perfect practice. All you need to do is be yourself and relax." Lainey pulled her phone out of her pocket.

"No one will probably even know who I am. Just because she likes my books doesn't mean anything."

"Will you stop whining?" Lainey laughed then said into the phone, "No, not you, Jace. We're here."

Dianne took a deep breath and blew it out. Lainey was right. If she blocked out her unsettling relationship with Gage, she could do this. A small group of kids would give her an idea of what it was going to be like facing an auditorium full of the little buggers. It was just like any other job she'd gone on. She rolled her shoulders, adjusted her neon-pink, rhinestone-studded glasses and pasted on a big smile.

She turned back to Lainey and said, "I'm ready."

"Damn, you're good." Lainey nodded approvingly.

"Ladies," Jace said as he and Gage came around the back of the van.

Dianne glanced at Gage as he stepped out of the way while Lainey instructed Jace on how to carry the cake. Dressed in black jeans and a T-shirt with scuffed sneakers, he couldn't have looked better. Lainey could have easily carried the cake herself, but Dianne figured she liked letting Jace help her. Once he had the cake in his arms, Dianne and Lainey closed the doors. Lainey led the way to the house with Jace following behind her. Gage walked right by her side, but luckily, he didn't touch her.

"You look different today." He looked her up and down, and she couldn't help but smile.

Her pink high-top canvas sneakers were the same shade as her sunglasses and had rhinestones, too. Her jeans hugged her curves, but not too tightly. And it was probably the first time he'd seen her in a T-shirt. He seemed to like her toned-down look. After all, it wasn't

appropriate for her to show up to a kid's birthday party in her normal gear.

"Thanks. You went casual today, too." She paused when they reached the bottom of the stairs. "It suits you."

"We make a good pair," he countered with a wink.

"None of that." She winked back and headed up the stairs, hoping he—heck, they—could keep from any flirting until the party was over.

Dianne could feel him right behind her, which meant he was way closer than he should be. She stopped at the door, another little wave of panic crashing over her. His big hand settled on her back and instead of the panic getting worse, a sense of calm came over her. They walked into the house together. She heard a gasp and looked around. A group of around twelve people were standing at the bar that separated the kitchen and living room. They were all staring at her and Gage.

She gave him a slight nudge in his side with her elbow. "Introduce me."

"Sorry. Hi, everyone. I'd like to introduce you to my friend Dianne."

A sudden, high-pitched squeal filled the air, breaking the awkward silence. Dianne looked at the pretty young girl who was not standing, but bouncing from foot to foot a few feet away. She had long brown hair and a round face. What struck Dianne was something she hadn't seen in her photo. The little girl had her uncle's eyes. Dianne gave her a smile.

A lady ran into the room and knelt down in front of the girl. "Tabitha, are you okay?"

"Mom, look who's here." Tabitha put her hands on her mother's cheeks and turned her head in Dianne's direction.

"Holy shit." The girl's mother slapped her hand over her mouth.

Dianne glanced over at Gage, who kept looking from her to his family. If he kept it up, Dianne was afraid he'd give himself whiplash.

Okay, maybe it was wrong of her to spring her secret on him like this. She hadn't planned on telling him at all, but his invitation made it necessary.

"Am I missing something?" he asked softly, and Dianne laughed.

"Oh my gosh. Uncle Gage, I can't believe you're friends with *The* Dianne Killbrew."

"*The*?" he echoed, and his niece nodded.

"Yes, she's the author who writes the *Stone Sister Escapades*. I have every single book and already saved enough money to buy the next one when it comes out in September." Tabitha talked so fast it was a little hard to keep up.

"So you don't mind that your uncle invited me to your birthday party?" Dianne asked.

"Oh, no. I just wish I knew. I would have invited more of my friends," Tabitha said, pink slashes glowing on her cheeks.

"We'll just have to take lots and lots of pictures, if that's okay with your mom." Gage's sister nodded eagerly as Tabitha bounced even more, tugging on her arm.

"I'm going to tell everyone you're here," Tabitha squealed, and ran out of the house.

"Gage, I can't believe you didn't tell us you knew Dianne when we were talking about her books the other day." Gage's sister slapped him on the shoulder then held her hand out to Dianne. "I'm Toni."

"Nice to meet you," Dianne said as she shook her hand.

"I have to admit, I'm as excited as Tabitha." Toni laughed. "Let's go introduce you to everyone."

Dianne followed Toni, mostly because she'd grabbed her arm and practically dragged her along. She glanced back at Gage, who just stood there watching them go. She caught a glimpse of him every now and then, but before she could make her way to him, either he disappeared or she was dragged off to meet someone else. He hadn't said more than ten words to her since his niece had told him who she

was. At least she didn't have to worry about him telling her family they were seeing each other.

As the hours passed, Dianne didn't need to ask Gage if he was mad. When it came time for Tabitha to open her gifts, he avoided Dianne's gaze altogether. Tabitha had shouted out happily when she opened Dianne's gift, but Gage's had produced tears of joy. Dianne had to turn away so no one would see the tears in her own eyes. When she turned back, Gage was gone once again. She figured right about now he was probably glad things between them were going to be over after tonight.

* * * *

Gage walked Dianne to the car. He opened the passenger door for her like the perfect gentleman his family expected him to be. With them all standing on the porch watching, there wasn't anything else he could do. She turned and waved good-bye before she climbed into the car. He closed the door and rounded the car, giving his family a wave of his own before he joined her. They were a few blocks away before he trusted himself to speak, but he still didn't say anything.

"Are you not talking to me?" Her question may as well have been rhetorical, because if he didn't answer, it would be an answer of sorts.

He wasn't about to let her know how peeved he was, but when he spoke his tone held an accusing note. "So you're an author and a model."

"Yes. Does that bother you?"

"No." He shrugged, hoping she'd just leave it at that.

"Then why are you sulking? Your niece loved her gift, so that can't be it. Did someone else do something to piss you off?"

This time he chose not to answer. She settled back against her seat and crossed her arms under her breasts, which just pushed them higher. If she was hoping to distract him with her body it was a nice try, but he wasn't falling back under her spell just yet.

After awhile she said, "Are you taking me home?"

"Is that what you want?" He shouldn't be surprised that she wanted to get away from him with the way he was acting.

"Is it what you want?" she countered.

Was it? He knew the second she left him it would be for good, unless he found a reason for her to want to stay. If he dropped her off, he'd probably just go home and torment himself, thinking about all the things he could have done differently. He'd done this all wrong right from the start. In his defense, she never would let him in if he hadn't blackmailed her in the first place.

He had to wonder if she'd really let him in at all. Today she seemed like a different person. She'd been more open and relaxed. It had nothing to do with the way she was dressed, but he liked that change, too. Which was the real Dianne? The sexy pin-up beauty, or the down-to-earth author? Or were they both just acts she put on? He wanted to get to find the real her, if wasn't too late.

It didn't take him long to come up with an answer. "No."

"Then where are we going?" she asked.

"To my place. To talk." The last of his comment was directed more at himself than to her.

"We can do that on the way. What would you like to talk about?"

It took him a few seconds to answer, because his addled mind started thinking about what they could do if they finished talking things out before they got there.

"Tell me all about you." He paused then added, "The real you."

There was nothing but the sounds of their breathing for a few minutes. If she wasn't going to tell him, then he may as well take her home, because he couldn't have a relationship with a woman he didn't know. He was just about to tell her that when she let out a loud angry-sounding sigh.

"That's a really boring subject, and after today, you know it all."

"Not good enough." He shook his head, smiling at her growl.

“I’m a part-time model, full-time writer. Both of which I stumbled into but truly enjoy. I’m not telling you how old I am. You can try and figure that out for yourself. I’m female. Cancer is my sign. This is my natural hair color, which you can vouch for.” They both laughed.

Gage felt like someone had lifted a boulder off his chest. If her laughter could ease his apprehension, she had to take it as a sign they were meant to be together. He wanted to be there for her when she needed him, too. The problem was she had yet to need him.

“More.” He wanted to keep her talking as long as possible.

“Okay, but just remember, you asked for it. I don’t like spinach, but I love ice cream. Never mix the two.”

“Tell me this. Why the sunglasses?”

She reached up with both hands and adjusted her glasses. “What, you don’t like them?”

“I hate them!” The vehemence in his voice was clear.

“Hate is a very strong word, but it doesn’t matter, because I happen to love them.”

“What’s the story behind your attachment?”

“Years ago I did a job for an up-and-coming photographer. I was supposed to be modeling these really funky hats. His makeup artist got sick. The person he got to fill-in two hours late, and she was horrible. She made me look like a raccoon. He had another shoot scheduled later that day for a sunglasses manufacturer, and the boxes of glasses were just sitting there. I started grabbing them and matching them with the different hats.

He was thrilled. We got so into it we didn’t realize the glasses guy had come in early to ask some questions. He loved what he saw and cancelled his shoot, choosing to go with my photos. Six months later, they had such good results from the local ads the company decided to use them nationally. So they had to rework my original contract. I got a tiny bit of stock in the company as a bonus, but best of all, as long as the company is in business I receive a box of sunglasses every couple of months.” Her explanation made sense in a quirky way.

“That was a nice story, but I think there’s more to it than that.”

“Like what?”

“I think you use the glasses as a kind of shield to hide behind.”

“I don’t hide, but I do use them to my advantage at times. Every smart woman uses whatever she has at her disposal. Back in the Victorian days, women used fans. If they were smart, they never left home without one.”

“When was the last time you left the house without your glasses?”

“I can’t remember.” She laughed.

They seemed to fall back into the comfortable rapport they’d developed over the past week. Not wanting to lose it, Gage stopped pushing. He switched the subject to her family, which was only fair, since she’d just met his. She told him about her grandmother, sister, and her sister’s four kids. By the time they reached his place, she had told him about a dozen stories about her grandmother and sister from when she was growing up.

He noticed she didn’t tell him stories about herself. She may have let him in to a point, but she was still keeping him at a distance. Hopefully by morning he’d fix that.

“Are you hungry?” he asked as they got out of the car.

“Lord no. Your sisters kept feeding me all day.”

“They liked you.” He put his hand on her lower back as they climbed the stairs.

“Lainey said the same thing. She also said Toni asked her if we’re dating.”

“Not surprising, since I don’t bring many women home.” He opened the door and flicked on the light. “What did she tell them?”

“That we’re friends.” She walked over and leaned against the back of the couch. “Can I ask you something?”

He closed the door and looked at her. “Anything.”

In a smooth, fluid movement she pushed off the couch and walked over to where he was standing. She put her hands on his chest, sliding them slowly toward his shoulders. He hoped she didn’t notice the way

his heartbeat sped up at her touch. He let her push him against the door with a little shove. She leaned in so close their bodies touched from knees to waist.

Dianne had to be able to feel the unmistakable proof of his arousal. Gage put his hands on her hips, wanting to pull her closer so he could feel her breasts pressed against his chest. He started to lower his head, intent on kissing her.

“Are we done talking?” Their faces were so close he felt her whisper brush across his lips.

A man could only handle so much temptation before he reacted. His mouth came down on hers harder than he meant for it to, but she didn’t seem to mind. She wrapped her arms around his neck and finally pressed her body to his. His cell phone rang and vibrated in his pocket. She giggled as she wiggled her hip against his.

“That kinda felt nice.” As Dianne eased away from him, she slid her hand down into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

She held the phone up, and a quick glance at the phone had him groaning. “I really should take this.”

Dianne handed him the phone with a smile. He watched her turn and walk away, enjoying the sway of her hips. Gage had to turn away from Dianne so he could focus.

“Hello,” he said, the rough timber of desire evident in his voice.

“Hey I just wanted to remind you to bring my projections to Jace’s tomorrow.” Slade’s normal clipped tone sounded harsher than usual.

“I’ll have them. Is everything okay?” Not much flustered Slade except his sister.

“It’s all good. I just want to get this project underway as soon as possible.” Slade often had a one-track mind.

“Once you approve the final changes, we’ll be ready to go within a week.” Gage turned around in time to see Dianne bend over and put her sneakers on the mat by the door.

As if she could feel him looking she glanced over her shoulder, and winked at him with a smile on her lips. It wasn't just a smile, either. Hell no! Her eyes twinkled and her cheeks got pink. Gage loved when she looked at him like that. He'd gladly spend the rest of his days trying to earn those smiles. First, he needed to make her want to keep him around.

Slade's call gave him a few minutes to clear his head and come up with a plan. He listened to his friend talk about his project while keeping his gaze on her. She wandered around the room, flashing him come-hither looks. Gage couldn't take it anymore. His desire to touch her couldn't be ignored. He crooked his finger, beckoning for her to come closer. She smiled and walked in his direction, but stopped a few feet away. He took a step toward her, but she took a step back. He cocked his head to the side and took another step forward, which she countered with a step away. Gage reached out to grab her, but she leapt out of his reach and gave him a taunting smile.

"I'm sure you're going to like what I have in store for you," he said to Slade.

"Well, I hope so," Dianne whispered.

"You're sure you included everything I need?" Slade asked.

"Have I let you down yet? Unless you have something you haven't shown me, I'm positive I've got it handled," he replied to both of them.

"I know you haven't seen this yet." Dianne smiled as she grasped the hem of her T-shirt and slowly started to raise it.

Slade went on about surprises that might come up later, but Gage barely heard him. Dianne tugged the shirt over her head and tossed it onto the couch. Her white bra was trimmed with hot-pink lace, and though it looked amazing, he wished she'd take it off, too.

"Are you listening to me?" Slade grouched in his ear loudly.

"Yeah," Gage replied, taking a step in Dianne's direction, stopping when she held up her hand.

She reached for the button of her jeans, and Gage sucked in a deep breath. He watched as she undid the zipper and shimmied the denim material down over her hips to her knees. She let go, and the jeans fell to the floor.

“Slade, I need to go. I’ll see you in the morning.” Gage hung up and tossed the phone onto the couch, where it landed on her shirt.

“You didn’t have to end the call because of me,” Dianne practically cooed.

“Woman, I barely heard a word Slade said,” he admitted as he stalked her around the room.

“From your tone, I’m assuming you feel I had something to do with that.” She popped her hands onto her hips, which only emphasized that she was standing there in just her bra and panties.

“Gee, if I stripped off my clothes while you were on the phone with one of your friends, wouldn’t you find it distracting?”

“No, but if I did, I’d just give them a play-by-play.”

“Really. Should I call Slade back? I’m sure he’d love a color commentary about this.” He moved toward the couch.

“You wouldn’t,” she squealed as she grabbed his arm to stop him.

“I’m pretty tempted, unless you can think of a way to distract me.”

* * * *

Dianne wanted to call his bluff just to see if he would really do it. She didn’t, though. Her friends all claimed she was a little out there, but she wasn’t that crazy.

“If you take me upstairs, I’ll try to distract you all night long.” She walked backward toward the stairs that lead up to his bedroom, tugging him with her.

Thankfully, he didn’t put up much of a fight. Halfway up the stairs, she helped him get his shirt off. When they reached the top, he kicked off his shoes. By the time they reached the bedroom they were

both completely naked. Dianne couldn't keep her hands off him. Gage had his casted hand wrapped in her hair. His other hand was on her hip, holding her tightly against him.

They dropped onto the bed in a tangle of limbs. Dianne rolled over and reached for the light. Gage quickly moved up behind her. He angled himself so that his cock slid easily along her moist folds. Gage used his knee to open her legs just enough to give him the access he wanted. The tip of his erection pushed inside her, and she pushed back against him, wanting more contact. Gage filled her to the hilt and stilled. They both moaned.

Dianne couldn't stay still. She pushed herself back against him and rocked herself back and forth in quick, short movements. Gage managed to fist his hand in her hair again. He pulled her head back as he groaned.

"Go. Take what you want." He grunted, urging her on.

"Oh my God!" She froze as the waves of pleasure radiated through her whole body.

Gage took over. Each push of his hips sent him deeper inside her. She didn't know how much more she could take, but she wanted it all. The pressure started to build again, and she found herself pushing back to meet his thrust. Over and over, he drove into her until she was screaming his name.

When he found his release, it was her name she heard on his lips. He pulled her back, wrapping his arm around her. There wasn't an inch of space between their bodies, and she was totally fine with that. She closed her eyes, trying to slow her ragged breathing. It gave her a sense of satisfaction that Gage was breathing just as heavily. He nuzzled his face along her neck.

"Give me a few minutes and we can go take a shower." His moist, husky whisper fanned her cheek.

"I hope you plan on carrying me." She sighed, and he laughed, making his body rub hers in the most delicious places.

Chapter Nine

It's over, she thought, doing her damndest not to wake him as she eased out of his bed. He'd gotten his week, and she was free to go back to her normal life. Using a stealthiness she hadn't known she possessed, she tiptoed into the hall and got dressed. She called for a cab and told them to instruct the driver not to beep. In the end, she couldn't leave without saying good-bye, so she scribbled a note and left it on the railing where he would find it when he came downstairs.

She spent the taxi ride trying to come up with an excuse not to go to the barbecue at Lainey's. Her grandmother would say, "*what a fine mess you've managed to get yourself into.*" Hell, if her grandmother found out about Gage, she'd set to welcome him into the family. Dianne wasn't about to let things get that far. All she had to do was get through the party. Then she could hide away until she found a way to get him out of her heart.

The cab pulled up in front of her building and she leaned forward to pay the driver. She reached for the door handle, but the door swung open before she got her hand on it. Dianne looked up half expecting to see Gage standing there. Instead, it was Jace, who held his hand out to her. She let him help her out of the car. Dianne had never been more thankful for her sunglasses. She didn't want him to see the surprise she felt at seeing him. Jace wouldn't be there unless he wanted something.

"I'd say good morning, but it would probably be a lie." He walked with her toward her door.

She nodded. "I've definitely had better."

"Want to talk about him?"

“Jace, Gage is your best friend. I don’t think it would be a good idea.” She shook her head.

He pulled her to a stop. “Let’s sit down.”

She practically collapsed in a wrinkle heap on the stoop. He sat down beside her.

“I was going to talk to you yesterday, but I couldn’t get you alone long enough. There’s a few things you should know about Gage before you end this thing between you two.”

She figured she should let him sing Gage’s praises a little. Then he could leave knowing he’d done his best for his buddy. He didn’t have to know she already made up her mind.

“Like what?” she asked.

Jace just sat there for a few minutes. Then he laughed. Not a soft chuckle or a light chortle. No, this was a full hearty laugh. So loud she actually jumped.

“I’m sorry.” He gave his head a shake. “I just realized no matter what I say, or how I say it I’m not going to get it right. Gage is a great guy, and most women love him. I guess the only thing I can say is I’ve never, in all the time I’ve known him, seen him fall for a girl the way he’s fallen for you.”

Now it was her turn to laugh. “Does he know you were going to talk to me?”

“Fuck no. He asked me what he should do to get you to see that he was serious about you. I told him to tell you, but from the look he gave me I didn’t think he would.”

“You’re right. He didn’t.”

“Would you have believed him, if he had?”

“Probably not. Gage doesn’t really talk like that. He’s always trying to impress me, unless we’re in bed.” His cheeks turned red and she realized she embarrassed him.

He cleared his throat and got to his feet. “Um...I don’t need to know about that stuff. I just wanted to make sure you’re okay. And

ask you to think about giving him a chance to show you the normal Gage I know and have grown to love.”

She could have told him that time wasn’t go to help. “I’ll consider it.”

“That’s all I ask.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “I’ll see you this afternoon.”

“I’ll be there.” She nodded and started to get up.

Jace, ever the gentleman, helped her to her feet and waited until she was inside before he left. This might not be as easy to end like she originally thought.

* * * *

Gage knew he should just give up and move on with his life. She didn’t need to tell him they were over. Her letter this morning thanking him for a pleasant week said it all. *A pleasant week?* That one line told him their feelings weren’t even close to being mutual. His strong attachment was obviously one-sided. In her mind they’d each fulfilled their part of their bargain, bringing it to a close.

He could find someone else if he really put his mind to it. They wouldn’t be like her. He was damn sure of that. Gage doubted he’d find another woman that could turn him on with just one look, but that might be a good thing. He didn’t want to risk his heart again so soon. Maybe he’d go back to playing the field. After all, everyone already assumed he did. Nobody seemed to notice that he hadn’t dated more than a few women since the day Dianne walked into his life. He’d wanted her to know he was free for the taking.

She hadn’t gotten the hint, which is why he’d gone to such extremes to get her to give him a chance. It hadn’t worked, though, and there was nothing he could do but let her go. He pulled up to Jace and Lainey’s place, adding his car to the dozen or so lining the road. He pulled the keys from the ignition and climbed out of the car before

he could change his mind. He popped the trunk and grabbed the bags from inside.

He might be making a huge mistake, but Jace was his best friend, and Gage wasn't going to avoid an invitation just because Dianne might be there. Besides, he needed to show himself and everyone else he could handle her not wanting an association with him. He walked around the house into the backyard. Not because he figured the women were probably in the house chatting, but because he was carrying two bags of ice for the coolers of soda.

"Hey," a few friends shouted as he came into view.

"The ice man has cometh." Jace's pitiful joke made him smile.

He held the bags, wishing his heart was as cold as his hands. "Where do you want them?"

Jace's smile fell. "Um...wait here."

Gage watched him head for the house. Obviously, his best friend in the world didn't think he could handle seeing Dianne. Or maybe he thought Dianne wouldn't want to see him. A couple of Gage and Jace's other friends weren't worried. Hell, they probably had no idea what was even going on. He dropped the ice to take the soda one of the guys held out to him.

By the time Jace got back, Gage had been wrangled into a game of Frisbee with the guys and some of their kids. The sound of Dianne's laughter distracted him, and he missed a perfect toss. He glanced over to where she stood by the house with her friends. She was in full pin-up mode today. From the black pants that hugged her curves to the leopard print shirt that showed off much more of her breasts than he liked, her outfit was intended to turn heads.

Damn if her bright red sunglasses didn't match her shoes. She looked amazing. For a brief second he toyed with the idea she dressed that way just to torture him. Most likely not, but he wouldn't rule it out. Just seeing her standing there laughing tore something inside him.

At that moment, he realized whatever was between them wasn't going to end as quietly and simply as she'd like. Keeping a watchful but nonchalant gaze on her, he waited for a moment where he could talk to her alone. He had no idea what he was going to say, but he needed to say something. Even if it was just good-bye.

Finally, her friends drifted over to the food table leaving Dianne standing alone by the gate to the garden. Gage hadn't had a better opportunity all day and he wasn't waiting any longer to make his move. A man driven to extremes, he marched over, grabbed her hand, and tugged her into the garden, out of sight of the rest of the people at the party.

"Gage. Let go." She yanked her hand from his. "You know you could have asked me to come with you."

"Yeah and you could have said no. That wasn't an option." He wished she wasn't wearing those fucking sunglasses.

She walked over to the little fountain, and with her back to him she said, "I wouldn't have."

We'll never know for sure, he thought. "I wanted to talk to you about your note. It was a little curt and vague."

"I don't think so. It was straight to the point." She bent over and picked up a yellow fuzzy tennis ball from the ground.

He had a really hard time keeping his gaze off her ass. There was a real strong possibility that was what she wanted. After all, she hadn't minded using her body to distract him during the past week.

"What point would that be?" Gage hadn't planned on pushing her into a confrontation, but her blasé attitude brought out the bastard in him.

"That since we've both honored our parts of the bargain, there's no reason for us to continue to see each other." She tossed the ball from hand to hand, still not looking at him.

"So sleeping with me was just part of the bargain?" he asked, and she snapped her head in his direction.

Hell yeah, baby. Her glare told him she didn't like him implying the sex between them meant nothing. He'd finally found a weapon he didn't even know he'd had in his arsenal. Gage had always assumed women could separate sex and emotions, but maybe he was wrong. God, he hoped so.

"You're being an asshole." She headed for the gate.

"Maybe, but I deserve to know the truth." He wiped the smile off his face as she turned back to him.

"I had sex with you because it was something we both wanted." Her voice never wavered, not that he expected her to show a kink in her armor just yet.

"Fine. *For now* we'll put the incomparable sex aside. There are other reasons for us to be together and you know it." He slowly closed the distance between them, not wanting her to run.

"I can't think of any." Her shrug seemed a little forced, but her voice had risen quite a bit.

He got so close she had to tilt her head back to look at him, but he was pleased she didn't step back. "How about the fact that I've fallen in love with you? Not infatuation, but love."

"You haven't." Her whole body quivered.

"I have. Since you seem so opposed to the idea, I won't bother you again, but first I need to do this." Gage pulled her into his arms and covered her mouth with his.

Her lips parted under his. As their tongues stroke each other it drove the heat within him higher. He wrapped his arms tighter around her, pressing her against him. His cock lurched in response. Dianne's fingers fisted in his hair. She held his mouth to hers. No woman could kiss a man like this without some damn strong emotions behind it. Knowing he could lose himself in a kiss like this, he forced himself to pull back.

"I really do love you," he whispered as he let her go.

He turned to leave, surprised to see they had drawn a crowd. Gage needed to get the hell out of there. Never seeing her again wasn't an

option, but he hoped he managed to find a way to ignore the way she made him feel. He reached forward to open the garden gate and felt something hit him in the back hard enough to jerk his shoulder.

* * * *

She drew back her arm and let the tennis ball fly before she even thought about it. His grunt had her lifting her foot to take a step back, but she stopped herself in time. He turned and looked at her with disbelief. His head cocked to the side, as if asking if she'd really just done that. Okay, so it surprised her, too, but he deserved it. Dianne looked past Gage to where their friends all stood gaping at them. Having this conversation in front of an audience sucked.

Admitting she was wrong was going to be hard enough, but with all their friends staring at them, it was going to be even harder. There really wasn't any other choice. It was either admit she loved him, too, or lose him. After his heartfelt admission, she wasn't willing to just let him go. Loving someone was a risk, but if they were both willing to take the chance, maybe they could make a go of it.

"Did you have something else you wanted to say?" Anger coated each and every one of his words.

She wanted to scream, so she did. "Yes. You don't just make a declaration like that and walk away. You... you jerk!"

"Sorry, I didn't know the etiquette for telling someone you love them when they don't want to hear it."

"I never said I didn't want to hear it." She took a few steps forward.

He countered, taking a few steps of his own. "From the look on your face you weren't too pleased."

She walked right up to him and poked him in the chest. "Shock. I was in total shock, you buffoon."

"What are you trying to say?" He closed his hand around hers and pressed it to his chest.

She could feel the rapid beating of his heart under her palm. It was almost faster than hers. In a strange way, it was reassuring.

“I’m saying I think I love you, too.” She confessed soft enough that only he could hear.

He smiled. “I’m sorry, did you say something?”

“I love you, too,” she said louder.

“Thank God.” Gage swooped her off her feet and spun her around so he was facing everyone. “She loves me.”

“What are we going to do now?” She sighed as he stood her back on her feet.

“We are going to really get to know each other.” He waggled his eyebrows, and they both laughed as he lowered his mouth to hers.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When it comes to writing Rita has always made up stories to entertain her kids. As they grew up she began writing romances to entertain herself. Luckily she has a wonderful supportive family, and friends that are willing to sit there and listen to her ramble on about what her characters have done, or are about to do.

When she's not totally caught up in getting her characters and scenes fleshed out she can usually be found with her nose stuck in a book, or snuggled up on the couch with her hubby or one of her kids watching a movie. She enjoys spending time with her big noisy family, mostly because they provide her with lots of ideas for her stories. Rita is a proud member of Romance Divas and enjoys visiting the Romantic Times forum.

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