

CHAPTER THREE

ROUND ONE

It was a false alarm. The man looked past her, on his way to the men's room. Fine. From the dour look on his face, he probably didn't have much of a sense of humor anyway.

She took another sip of her donated drink, not knowing where to look. It had been at least five minutes since she'd received the mystery note. *Do I glance toward the bar, searching for my benefactor so that I can hold up my glass and mouth the word "thanks" like a graceless idiot? Or do I sit here playing with my fingers, as if I'm the ugliest duckling at the junior high school dance, hoping that any moment he'll spring to my side, gently lift my head and gift my mouth with true love's kiss?*

She sat for another minute, avoiding looking at the note that she'd already read one too many times. *Hey, why not turn a spotlight on me and make me do a Karaoke version of "Someday My Prince Will Come"?*

Georgie knew he was doing this on purpose. She felt it. *Screw this. I'm not going to play his stupid game. I'll go to the ladies room, and if he doesn't reveal himself by the time I get back, I'm outta here.* Standing up, reaching over for her purse, a male voice behind her said, "You changed your hair."

It was a self-assured, sexy voice. *Let this be a good one, please?*

She straightened, turning her body toward the sound.

He leaned against a nearby club chair, holding a three-quarter length, black lambskin leather jacket that he'd slung over his shoulder. A small, knowing smile tugged

at the corners of his sensuous mouth. *He's looking at me as if...as if I might be lunch.*

How rude. How exciting.

For the second time, she recalled Simon's description. Dark wavy hair? Check. Thick, short and well-styled, almost black. Looks like he works out? Double check Even under his Armani charcoal-gray cashmere sweater, she could see he had a strong chest and broad shoulders. A good dresser? Yes, indeedy, this man fully understood how to make an appetizing first impression. Georgie stopped staring, realized that she'd probably been looking at him as if he, too, might be lunch.

His gaze met hers. She clutched her purse a little tighter. *Oh my, would you look at those eyes.* Close-set, probably too close-set, just another pair of deep brown eyes. Nothing unusual. No, it wasn't their shape or their color that was arresting, but the power behind them. Something animal seemed to glow internally, some energy that Georgie found mesmerizing. *And then there's his mouth...*

Oh shit, he's talking. Damn, I missed it.

"Excuse me?" she said.

He smiled courteously, with the air of a man unaccustomed to repeating himself. With a slightly exaggerated effort, he said "Though I'm not usually a proponent of unnatural blonde streaking, at least the color works well with that fetching red satin blouse of yours."

Quick, say something witty. Make a brilliant first impression. "Unnatural? I thought that going blonde was the most natural thing a girl could do in L.A."

His eyes sparked to life.

"Besides," she continued, "I did it for you."

"I'm touched. Shall we continue this conversation gawking at each other vertically, or would you care to sit?"

A rhetorical question, since he'd already pulled out her chair, indicating with an authoritative wave of his well-groomed, masculine hand exactly where she should place her behind.

She stood a minute, wavering. *This is your chance, Georgie. Leave now and you'll be able to look Tee in the eye.*

She thought of her empty bed. Of the ache deep inside for the connection, that stupid, sexual connection.

Maybe I'll just stay for a drink. Just one. She sat.

Doing her best to stop the rising tide of recrimination, she busied herself by checking him out as he walked over to the other chair. *Black corduroy trousers, not too baggy. Hmmm...nice ass. That black alligator belt circling his waist looks tasteful. And expensive. He certainly doesn't scrimp on himself.*

She'd have to check out his footwear when she had the chance. Shoes were often a great indicator of character.

He sat easily, folding his frame into the cushiony club chair.

As opposed to me, inelegantly tugging at my skirt, wishing I'd chosen something longer and looser. Tee's right. I've got to stop wearing skirts that start and end at my neck.

She posed on her chair with some effort, making sure that although her legs were visible, the area due north of her thighs was not. Upon his momentary glance down to her legs, she felt her stomach flip.

"Mind if I add my coat to yours?" he asked, not bothering to wait for an answer.

It wasn't the throw, so much as the resulting tableau. His jacket's leather arms had arranged themselves around her overcoat's soft woolen body. Her coat faced up, black silk lining exposed, leaning over the back of the chair as if in acquiescence—his faced down, covering hers. Together, the coats almost looked animated, as if they were...

Lord help me. I've only taken a few sips of vodka all night, yet I'm operating under the impression that my coat's getting more action than I am. Please, Georgie, don't make a joke about coitus coat-us. Control yourself. She took a quick look at his face and saw the flash of a small, but definite, smile. Yep. He'd noticed the accidental composition, too. .

Georgie opened. "And you would be..."

"How are we doing here?" said Ms. Perky the Waitress, with an enthusiasm that she hadn't displayed when it had just been women sitting at the table. Looking only at Adrian, she revealed a big toothy smile. "Hi, I'm Dierdre."

Suddenly she has both a smile and a name? What next? Free pie?

"Diedre. What a charming name. Well, Diedre, I'll have a Glenlivet on the rocks and for my lovely guest...?"

"I'm still working on this one, thanks. But I'd like a cup of coffee, black." Sobriety was suddenly necessary. "And water too, please."

Once Dierdre bounced away, her blond corkscrew curls waving a farewell, Adrian turned his extraordinary eyes back on Georgie. *Good for him, he just passed the first test. Never cruise another woman when you're with me.*

She tried again. "So you said your name was Adrian?"

"Though I haven't actually verbalized it, yes, my name's Adrian."

What an arrogant putz. But a damn good-looking putz, maybe even with brains.

Now all he needs is proof of full-time employment and though he's obviously not Mr.

Right, he could certainly be Mr. Right Now.

"That's an unusual name. Brings to mind Rocky Balboa," said Georgie, and without thinking, attempted a Sylvester Stallone accent. "Yo! Adrienne!"

He gave her a sickeningly polite smile. "How clever."

Could I have said anything more idiotic? Reaching for her martini, she felt an apologetic grin freeze on her face. Horrified, she realized that her top lip was stuck to the broad expanse of her front teeth.

She thought of using her stock line about her smile: "Too many teeth, boys, gotta let 'em out for exercise," but on second thought, decided against it. Adrian would need a subtler approach if she chose to win him over. That is, if she decided he was worth the effort.

Diedre returned. She served. Georgie mused.

She'd always loved the challenge of a difficult man. She'd often told Teresa, "Working for a primarily male gaggle of attorneys is no accident. Give me a cold bright man, a man who dares me to care. The harder to get, the hotter the prize."

"George, I swear, sometimes you act more like a man than they do."

"And you wonder why I'm having such a rough time."

Therapists told her she'd had abandonment issues since she'd been deserted by her father during infancy. Tee said it was a fear of real intimacy. Self-help books expounded

on theories of lack of self worth. But all the rationale in the world ultimately meant nothing. Everyone had a button. Impossible men happened to be hers. End of story.

She watched him pull out a platinum American Express card, telling, no actually ordering Dierdre to run a tab. Yep, she'd met a good one. Condescending as hell, with his you-know-you-wanna-fuck-me stare. And charming, with that quick-flashing smile, come and gone too fast. And hopefully somewhat deep, with a brooding air that she imagined would be almost impossible to read. Power and sex, sex and power. She'd seen this particular combo before, but maybe with this man, there'd be something more?

"So you've been asking Simon about me?" she said, swirling her cocktail spear around in her drink.

"Of course," he said smoothly. "If you were in my shoes, you'd be asking too."

Perfect. Now that she had a bona fide invitation, she made a show out of looking down at his feet. Oh yes. Dolce & Gabbana Italian calfskin leather dress boots, immaculate. Another test passed with flying colors.

Off of her inspection, he said, "Yes, my boots are representative of my impeccable taste. I assume the latest dating manual mentions the importance of excellent footwear?"

Caught, she could feel a blush creeping up from her neck. "I wouldn't know. I'm much too busy to stay on top of anything but current events."

"Pardon? You're too busy to stay on top?"

She felt her skin flush hotter. "...on top of anything but current events. You heard me."

"Poor Georgie, you're blushing." And he laughed wholeheartedly.

God, he's gorgeous when he laughs—his whole face lights up. Wait—did I just hear him say my name? She suddenly imagined him grabbing her hair, pulling her head back, hoarsely whispering her name in her ear, wanting her, begging her. Georgie felt a second, stronger hit in the pit of her stomach. Like the pitch and roll movement of a speeding rollercoaster, both staggering and addictive.

"You know my name?"

"I made some inquiry, yes."

He dropped his eyes, obviously caught. She basked in the moment of the upper hand. Playfully leaning toward him, she said, "What else do you know about me?"

He leaned right back toward her, his eyes intense. "I know that you're a bright, beautiful woman. I know that you're bored. My guess is that you haven't had a partner that matches you in wit or passion in some time." He leaned even closer. "Maybe never."

She smiled seductively. "Did the latest dating manual mention the importance of good come-on lines?"

He looked stunned. He obviously wasn't used to a woman with sass. *What's it gonna be, Adrian? Am I worth the trouble? Because if not, there are a thousand Dierdres standing by, pie and all.*

He retreated into the depths of his chair, his arms folded, regarding her. She stared back. His mouth twitched forward and backward in a slow pulsing, pursing motion. How odd. Was this part of his thought process?

As he lifted the glass of Glenlivet scotch to his mouth, Georgie noticed his watch—an antique Rolex with a rose-tinted face. Damn, the man had some high style.

He took a healthy shot, then put his glass back down on the table with conviction.

He must have made up his mind. "Join me for dinner?"

In the first round of Dick versus Ego, Dick won. Good for Dick.

"I'd love to, but you know what the dating manual says about that. Never spend more than an hour with a stranger, tops."

"Seriously, have dinner with me."

Now that she'd hooked him, she felt herself land back on familiar terrain.

"Seriously, I have plans." *Chinese chicken salad leftovers followed by a bubble bath were plans, weren't they?* She checked the face on her Movado watch. "I can only stay a few more minutes."

"How about Friday?"

"I'm busy."

"Cancel it."

Dick and Ego were back for a rematch.

"No promises, but I'll see what I can do." Hell, she had to give him something.

"Now about your name..."

"Excuse me?"

"'Georgie' doesn't feel right."

"How would you know?"

He smiled, this time with sincerity. Ooh. She felt that stomach thing again. "I think I'll call you 'G'."

"G? G?" she said, sipping her coffee, then put the white porcelain cup down in front of her. "That's a name? Why? So you don't have to worry about whispering the wrong woman's name in bed?"

She had forced an unexpected laugh from him. She loved the sound—hearty and ironic at the same time. *Oh, yeah, she thought, continuing the joke, this guy's gonna be trouble with a capital T.*

A busboy had started a fire in the fireplace a little while ago. It wasn't fair. Too much heat blasted through the room. Feeling her face flush once again, she reached for her water glass and tried to change the subject. "Aren't you going to ask me what I do?"

"What you do?"

"For a living."

"Oh, my dear, I don't care."

"I'll tell you anyway. I'm a paralegal at a law firm, specializing in—"

"If I tell you I don't care, I mean it." His sudden strict tone of voice shocked and thrilled her. But it also had a note of menace. *Oh my. Does this man mean to dominate me? We'll see about that.*

Her mind raced. *Georgie, your resolutions! The New You in the New Year, remember? Only real deals need apply, no more wasting time with "confection connections," as Simon might say. But hold on, maybe I'm judging too quickly. Maybe he's the right guy after all. Maybe he's just got a high libido to match mine. That would be okay, wouldn't it?*

She felt herself weakening, bargaining. Maybe she needed to burn out with this one last fling? And after all, four weeks of resolve were better than nothing, weren't they?

Here sat this creature, this Adrian, with more sexual energy in his deep brown eyes than she'd ever sensed before, beckoning her to adventures that she'd yet to experience. He hadn't said all that much. He hadn't even kissed her yet. But his sex was so potent, so absolute, that she had a hard time simply sitting in that club chair without sliding off.

Maybe I'll go out with him. Maybe—oh, Georgie, at least tell yourself the truth. You know you fully intend to have him. Everything else is just a lie.

He was speaking. "Simon didn't know your age."

"Nor should any man."

"Nonsense. How old are you?"

"You're asking, just like that? And you expect me to 'fess up?"

"Actually, no. Since most women lie, the least I can do is get a baseline, and go from there."

He speaks as if he thinks he's an expert in all womankind. She offered up a smile. *The poor ignorant fuck.* "Though you're right in the fact that most women lie, I'm much less obvious in my deception. If ever I lie to you, trust me, you won't know it."

"Nice turn of phrase, but you're stalling. Age please."

"I'm thirty-four. And your honest self?"

"Thirty-eight."

"Yes. You look about thirty-eight."

"So do you," he said, a little chuckle escaping his delicious lips.

Pretending shock, Georgie gasped. "You're a horrible man. You think to win me over with this kind of sweet talk?"

"I've already won."

"Such delusion for one so seemingly bright." She reached for her purse. "Hey, do you hear that? It's my pumpkin pulling up. How about I leave you a glass slipper, and you can search high and low throughout the kingdom for me on your rusty steed?"

"You mean trusty."

"Depends on the speed of the –"

"—and with you as the prize," he took her hand and brushed it with his lips, "I'd gladly search the land three times over."

The hand kiss seemed showy. Yet, damn it, still charming. *Whatever you do, don't let him know he's getting to you.*

"Only three times? I'm insulted." She snatched her hand back. "Till Friday night. If I'm available. But keep your hopes down to a low simmer; our next meeting will probably be nothing more than tolerable." Georgie pushed her chair back and attempted to rise, one hand struggling to keep her skirt down, the other grabbing for her purse.

In one swift move, he stood over her, and took her arms. He pulled her up to her feet. "Friday night," he said, his eyes focusing on her mouth, "will be incredible."

I'm in this man's arms, looking up at him...what is he, about five foot, eleven?...and I'm doing my best to keep from falling out of my high heels. Or falling, in general.

"Shall I walk you out?"

Gently breaking his embrace, she said, "No, I'd rather you not." She doubted she'd be able to hold him back without the bright lights of a public place playing chaperone. As for her own behavior, well, self-control could sometimes be a bit of a problem.

He brought her coat over to her, draping it around her shoulders. He stood behind her, close enough to smell. Close enough to cause her to forget all about the onion soup. She closed her eyes for just a moment to breathe in his intoxicating scent of citrus and musk, spicy and arousing. *Adrian, how I want this man Adrian...*

"One last question," he said, his mouth close to her ear.

He wouldn't dare try a kiss right now, would he? "Yes?"

"Are you afraid of intimacy, G?"

Lord, will I ever be able to relax around this guy? She turned to face him. "Why do you ask?"

He smiles That arrogant smile again. He imperiously waved his hand, indicating her side of the table. "You've erected quite a wall."

She followed his hand down and realized she'd created a barrier dead across the middle of the table: two water glasses, a coffee cup and saucer, the sugar container and the drained vodka martini glass. She tried to think of something witty to say but came up empty. The evidence spoke for itself. She shook her head and laughed. "I gotta go."

But he was right beside her.

"A gentleman always escorts his companion to her pumpkin. It's the rule of the land."

She knew further arguing would be futile. Besides, a gentleman should always walk a lady out. What if there really was some guy lurking in the corner with a gun in his hand?

The gust of cold air felt like a wake-up call on her overheated skin. Nearing her car, she rifled through the bottom of her purse for her keys.

"Afraid of standing in the dark with a strange man?"

"Absolutely not. But I'm terrified of standing in the dark with you."

They reached her fire-engine red SUV, parked at the far side of the lot.

"May I?" He took her keys from her and clicked off her alarm. He opened the door. Once he put the key in the ignition, he reached out for her hands. Holding onto her purse, she gave him the one that was free.

"Both of them, please."

What the hell. It was a busy parking lot, and she knew how to defend herself if necessary. She threw her purse onto the passenger seat of the car, and put both of her hands into his larger, stronger ones.

Oh my. She had to steady herself against the side of the car, against the charge of electricity she felt running directly from him straight into her. *I'm not actually twitching, am I? Please don't let him see it.*

He squeezed her hands. "It's okay, we're going to be great together. You know that, don't you, G?"

She nodded, staring at her hands in his, warming to the intimacy of his new nickname for her. Thoughts flooded her brain so quickly she didn't have time to stifle them. *Is there more to this than sex? Will you someday care for me? Will your heart....* Aghast, she felt a tear rolling down her cheek. "Overactive tear ducts," she said, taking back a hand to quickly wipe the betraying drop away.

Next thing she knew, his arms were underneath her coat, holding her, pressing her up against the side of the car. His head angled down toward hers, slowly coming closer. With one arm remaining firmly around her, he freed the other, his hand tilting her chin upward, moving her mouth into perfect position for his. He didn't ask. He took. As if she were already his property.

Her sudden wave of vulnerability dissolved, all she cared about was the approaching kiss.

Just like the first sip of vodka earlier this evening, it was her first kiss in a month, and well worth waiting for. His mouth fit over hers exactly. At first, their lips lightly grazed each other, and then their mouths opened together, drinking each other in. Adrian made a subtle movement with his tongue, but it was Georgie who wanted more. Her tongue urged him on. He complied.

She felt herself melting, all her icy, smart-ass walls thawing under him, pushing up against her, his erection hard and insistent, as if it could bore a hole through her skirt. Then, oh Lord, she felt the cotton crotch of her pantyhose getting wet. She suddenly longed for an extra layer of protection with panties, telltale lines be damned. . . *OK, enough's enough. I'm calling it a night. Well, maybe one more minute...*

Over the years, Georgie had never ceased to marvel at the craftiness of the male. Given the challenge of the tightest jeans, the trickiest brahook—the best of the male gender were born battering rams, able to break through clothing walls of steel. Maybe it had to do with their collective history: the Maginot Line, the tackling offense of a winning football team, the Walls of Jericho. *Give a man a mission and he's Johnny on the spot. This time, mine.*

Keeping his mouth on hers, suddenly she felt a hand under her ridiculously-tight suede skirt. The hand somehow managed to maneuver up to her waist, and then down under the top of her pantyhose. The hand quickly found its way to her bare crotch, inserted two fingers deep inside her, and as she gasped, the hand stayed there, fingers artfully massaging her.

She broke their kiss, stunned. "Adrian!" Looking into his eyes, she grabbed his arm. And though she meant to push his hand away, she held it on her for just a moment longer, loving what he was doing to her, still wanting it. She continued to keep her eyes on him, unafraid, unembarrassed, matching his sexual power with her own.

She finally pushed him away.

He said nothing. Instead, he made sure that she watched him place his two previously wandering fingers deep into his mouth. He sucked on them, slowly drawing them back out. He then reached out and burying his hand in a hunk of her hair, he took hold of the back of her head and drew her toward him, forcing her to kiss him one more time. Forcing her to taste herself.

He finally released her. She sank into the driver's seat of her SUV.

He took a business card out of his wallet, reached over her and put it on the passenger seat under her purse. "It's got both my cell and office numbers. Call and leave me yours so we can touch base about Friday."

She nodded, finally coming back down to Earth. Managing to return his sly smile of farewell, she said, "Yes. If I can get out of those other plans. Friday."

She sat very still for a moment, trying to remember how to start her car. *If I'm this addled now, what in God's name will be left of me after Friday?*