

DARK VALENTINE

A DARK VISTA ROMANCE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

The survival instinct eclipsed all. Perception. Reason. Despair.

Rhianna Lamb knew the feeling. Dangling a cocktail napkin into her wine, she collected the insect flailing in the ruby liquid and lifted it to safety. As she gently shook the napkin beneath the table, she felt someone behind her.

In a throaty bass, a woman asked, “If I tell you I’m drowning, will you save me, too?”

Rhianna looked up and met bold, dark eyes the color of wet shale. They were a little creased in the corners, like the owner’s mouth, and just as shamelessly sensuous. The face did not belong to the woman she’d expected to meet here.

“Well, that would depend,” she responded.

A sigh. “That’s cold.”

“It’s a harsh world.” Rhianna could easily expand on that topic, but she was not sitting here wearing a slutty dress and dangerously high heels to have a deep and meaningful dialogue.

She stole a look at the clock above the bar. Her date was an hour late. Louise was supposed to be driving over from Los Angeles that afternoon. Maybe she’d been held up along the way. Rhianna had tried her cell-phone number several times, but all she got was voice mail. She supposed she should have known better than to plan a face-to-face with someone she’d met online. Anything could go wrong, and obviously had. She and Louise—if that was even her name—had exchanged pics three weeks ago and had spoken on the

phone several times, planning this meeting. If Louise had cold feet, why not say so? How rude to simply not show up.

Rhianna let her gaze travel slowly over the stranger who had unknowingly taken her place. She had already decided not to have unrealistic expectations about her date. She would have settled for a seven out of ten, maybe even a five with decent manners and clean fingernails. But the woman standing at her table was fantasy material. A ten, and then some.

Rhianna glanced at the hands held loosely at her sides. No nervous fidgeting. They were streamlined and beautiful, the nails short and perfectly manicured.

“I have other pickup lines if you would like to hear them,” the woman offered.

“Well, since I’ve been stood up,” Rhianna smiled at her, “why not?”

The stranger promptly pulled the two spare chairs out from the table, asking, “May I?”

“Be my guest,” Rhianna invited.

The woman pushed one chair into a gap at a next table before occupying the other. “How to score. The second rule—discourage rivals.”

Rhianna laughed. “You got rid of the extra chair to stop anyone else from joining us?”

“Absolutely. And my proof...ball cap and attitude at nine o’clock?” She indicated an athletic brunette with her back propped against the bar counter. “I think she got the message.”

Rhianna had noticed the woman at the bar just before the insect episode. She’d felt someone watching her but had paid her prickling nerves no mind. She hadn’t come this far to be undone by her own paranoia. “Okay, if the second rule is to scuttle the competition, what’s the first rule?”

Without batting an eye, the stranger said, “She who hesitates masturbates. I’m Jules, by the way.” She stretched out her hand.

First names only. Good idea. Rhianna took the hand. As her cool palm connected with warm, firm flesh, she offered the name she’d been using for the past six months. “I’m Kate.”

“That’s my mother’s name.”

“It must be a sign,” Rhianna said with a dry edge.

“Spoken like a true cynic. How about this—I buy you a drink without a bug in it, and you tell me why you’re as romantically disenchanted as I am?”

Rhianna grinned. She had no plans to go down that track. Keeping their conversation strictly superficial, she teased, “What will you disclose in exchange?”

Jules smiled lazily and her eyes dropped to Rhianna’s breasts, earning a taut response from her nipples. “My room number.”

“Very smooth.” Rhianna’s belly took a nosedive and she realized she no longer gave a damn what had happened to her online hookup.

Jules moved her chair a little closer, and Rhianna caught the scent of her. Subtle. Mildly spicy with a trace of something mouth-watering, like rich chocolate. “When I’m hitting on a woman who could have anyone,” Jules said, “I try harder.”

Was such determined banter the norm in this type of situation? Rhianna did not usually meet women in bars, so she had no idea. Even attending the occasional lesbian fundraiser, she had never encountered anyone who could flirt as slickly as this woman. She decided Jules had probably done speed dating.

Trying to sound more lighthearted than she felt, she replied, “I take it the third rule involves paying insincere compliments.”

“On the contrary.” With earnest deadpan, Jules said, “My most brazen flattery is reserved for women who rescue fruit flies from their wine. Everyone else just gets a comment about their great shoes.”

Rhianna burst out laughing, surprised to find herself charmed by this unsubtle pickup technique. “I have to tell you, the drinks aren’t that good here. No one should have to die for one, not even an insect.”

Warm indulgence flooded Jules’s expression. “You sound like a Jain, although I guess you wouldn’t be sitting here imbibing alcohol if you were.”

“I’m impressed. Most people have never heard of the Jain.”

Jules gave a self-effacing shrug. “I knew the comparative religion studies would pay off one day.”

This was how it was done, Rhianna thought, no pretence that anyone was going to exchange a life history or even talk about their pets. Some amusing verbal sparring, then sex. They both knew what they were negotiating, and Jules was clearly at ease with the transaction. Rhianna wondered if she had any idea that she was flirting with a woman who was faking it. Probably not. The trashy dress had turned out to be a good investment, making up for her lack of natural charisma.

Rhianna had left the more elegant clothes she owned back home in her closet for this trip. In her last job as a fashion buyer, she had accumulated a wardrobe of carefully chosen high-end garments that were more subtle than sexy. None of them had seemed appropriate for the occasion she was planning when she set out for Palm Springs.

Striving to send the right signals and not to allow her body language to betray her, she tilted her head back just enough to emphasize her breasts. Then she slid a finger slowly around the neckline of her dress as if to loosen it a little, a laughable idea for a bodice so skimpy she might as well be wearing lingerie.

“Tell me honestly,” Jules said. “Is there a line you *haven’t* heard tonight?”

“Actually, I’ve been sitting here for more than an hour and you’re the first woman who’s talked to me.”

“Seriously?” Jules glanced around the room with an expression of incredulous derision. “That’s the best news I’ve heard all day.”

“Brazen flattery again?”

“There’s plenty more where that came from if you want to hang out with me. But first, are you taken?”

Rhianna hesitated. She hadn’t been “taken” for almost a year, and hadn’t wanted to be. “Not lately.”

The stone-dark eyes glittered. “I would be honored to end that, er...dry patch for you. Interested?”

“Hmm...let me think about that.” Rhianna hoped her stalling tactic sounded mischievous instead of dubious.

Her companion responded with a knowing smile. “Oh, don’t be coy. You’ve been thinking about it ever since this afternoon. I saw you cruising me by the pool.”

Rhianna stiffened in surprise. “You’re staying at Casitas Laquita, too?”

“As luck would have it.” Jules’s stare burned so hot Rhianna’s skin felt flushed. “Convenient, huh?”

The woman she’d seen lounging under a shade umbrella earlier in the day had been wearing dark glasses and a visor. Rhianna pictured Jules in a tankini. Yes, hers could definitely be the body that had made reading impossible. Rhianna had fantasized about stretching out alongside that body, letting skin slide against skin. She had even imagined a kiss. Now, incredibly, she was just inches away from the lips that could deliver on that daydream. She promptly froze with anxiety.

I need a stiff drink. Several, in fact. “I didn’t recognize you fully dressed,” she said unevenly.

“That’s easily fixed.”

Here it was, the offer she’d been waiting for; and here she was, stranded at the same impasse that made her turn back every time. Rhianna drained her wine and reached for the tumbler standing to one side. She gulped down some water and let an ice cube slide into her mouth to soothe the rough tension clamping her throat. No matter how hard she tried to move forward, sex stopped her in her tracks. That’s why she was sitting here in this bar, feeling self-conscious in a dress any porn star would be proud of, with her flaxen hair cut short, dyed Titian red, and thinned so the ends were wispy.

She had come to Palm Springs with this exact scenario in mind, a hookup with a desirable stranger she would never have to see again. No-strings sex with someone who knew zero about her other than a few details exchanged online. The plan had seemed brilliant when she first hatched it, the perfect solution to her problem. It was time to reclaim her body and rid herself of the sense memories that haunted her. She would maintain complete control, dictating all the terms for the encounter so she would be touched only as she wanted to be touched. Now, thanks to good luck rather than good management, the perfect opportunity was sitting across the table from her. All she had to do was say “yes” but paralysis had set in.

All of a sudden, her expectations seemed completely unrealistic. Only the most robotic person would patiently await a partner’s cues

and commands and behave like a toy. The woman hitting on her didn't seem the passive, obedient type. How was this ever going to work? Rhianna had thought it would be easier to sleep with a stranger than someone she knew. But without trust, how could there be physical intimacy? How could she explain what she needed?

Masking her unease with what she hoped was a playful, sexy look, she said, "You don't waste any time. What happened to verbal foreplay?"

"I can go there," Jules drawled, "if it's a prerequisite."

Rhianna's stomach hollowed, and her nipples scraped against the thin silk knit of her dress. "Then let's go there."

"An invitation to talk dirty...there is a God."

Pushing her empty wineglass aside, Rhianna said, "It's time to buy me that drink. Gray Goose, please. Make it a double."

Normally she didn't mix spirits and wine, but she thought something stronger would calm her nerves. She felt disoriented. It wasn't like her to have one-night stands; in fact, this would be her first. But the old rules no longer applied, and the woman she once was no longer existed. All she needed to do was switch off her mind and allow her body to react naturally. It was happening already, unless stress was to blame for her pounding heart and the heat in her cheeks.

She watched Jules saunter to the bar. The walk said it all. She was stunning and she knew it. Her look was plain. White tee, casual black pants, black loafers with the same matte finish as the belt at her waist. Her build was lithe, her movements graceful, her height a little taller than average. She was the only woman Rhianna had ever seen who could wear a ponytail without looking girly. Her hair was dead straight and just long enough to be clubbed back at her nape with a thin satin ribbon. The style flaunted a face that lodged insistently in memory, the lines cleanly sculptured, the nose and jaw strong, the eyes set deep.

She was handsome more than beautiful, Rhianna thought. Nothing was quite perfect. Her mouth was slightly uneven. A small scar bisected her left eyebrow, creating a slight quirk. Her cheekbones weren't prominent enough for classic beauty, and the planes below seemed muscular, not soft.

When she returned, she placed their drinks on the table and bent so that her mouth drifted by Rhianna's ear. "Like what you see?"

"Very much." Rhianna turned her head, but did not allow her lips to graze the cheek so close to her own. She felt Jules shiver.

"But you're going to make me work for it?"

Rhianna felt something soft on her cheek, and turned to find Jules blowing on it. Warm breath teased a path down her neck, making her body ache. She had not realized how desperately she missed touch. So much had been spoiled for her, so much taken away.

For the past nine months she had lived each day, one at a time, with an overwhelming sense of loss: Her peace of mind. Her job satisfaction. Her sense of herself as a full and functioning person. Her confidence as a woman and a lover. Her hopes and dreams. Everything. Werner Brigham had robbed her of the self she was, leaving a crippled ghost to inhabit her skin.

Physically she had changed too, so much that sometimes she almost failed to recognize herself as she walked by windows and applied lipstick in restroom mirrors. Stress made some people eat; Rhianna had lost her appetite instead. She had dropped over thirty pounds in the past year and every soft line seemed sharp now, her face angular, her jawline emphatic, her eyes bigger because everything else was smaller.

There were days when she wondered if she would ever feel fully alive again, if the woman she had been would ever return, or if this was it and she would have to reinvent herself. Rhianna stole a darting glance toward the exit. She could leave now and forget this whole crazy plan. It had been a big mistake to imagine she could pull this off. She stared down at the liquid swaying back and forth in her glass. A hand firmly closed over her own, arresting its trembling.

"What's wrong? Is it something I said?" Jules tightened her grip. The hand beneath hers felt small, she thought, and unexpectedly square, suggesting a practical nature.

A pair of bright, expressive eyes lifted to hers. They were not exactly green. Nor were they brown. They were dappled, like sunshine spilling across foliage. A delicate feathering of dark

eyelashes screened them just enough to suggest shyness. There was something else in the wide-eyed stare, too. Distress.

Jules glanced around, almost expecting the looming figure of a jealous girlfriend, fists swinging. Before she could be certain of what she'd glimpsed, Kate's expression changed.

"I'm fine. I was just thinking...To be quite honest, I don't normally pick up women in bars."

Cold feet. Jules knew she should have bought that drink sooner. Keeping her tone light and noncommittal, she said, "Feel free to hone your technique on me."

Everyone had their sorrows and inadequacies, herself included. Jules could sense the woman opposite her retreating by the moment. In fact, she half-expected her to leap up and scuttle away into the shadows. She was as nervous and tightly coiled as a trapped animal, sitting rigidly in her chair as though chained to the table. She was probably planning her escape, rehearsing some lame excuse she would make as soon as she'd finished her vodka. Not exactly the willing sexual accomplice Jules had hoped for.

She stole a glance around the bar and concluded that Kate might be a shaky possibility, but she was the *only* possibility. The place was jammed with retired women out socializing with their friends, bisexuals hitting on each other while hubby looked on, and youngsters who probably lived at home with Mom and Dad. Jules had stopped sleeping with the early twenties when she was in high school.

She returned her attention to Kate and was struck anew by the perfection of her skin. Its tone was even and lightly tanned. The woman was deliciously touchable. Her chest and shoulders glowed like she'd had some sun recently. Her hair was shot with gold, shimmering in fine streaks through the copper. It was layered and chin-length, its slightly ragged cut calling attention to an unusual face, wide at the cheekbones and narrowing to a small chin. She had dimples when she smiled, and it was a great smile. Warm and real.

Jules had already been stopped dead by that smile several times today. The first of these occasions was still fresh in her mind. She'd just parked her car outside the peach walls of Casitas Laquita, and Kate had been standing a few feet away talking to one of the owners.

When the women went their separate ways, Kate smiled a farewell that transformed her face so completely, Jules could only stare in astonishment and wonder if she was seeing a movie star trying to keep a low profile.

The slender beauty from earlier in the day, wearing the loose linen shirt and rolled-hem shorts, was nothing like the sophisticate sitting opposite her now. Kate's clinging halter dress and stilettos were the last thing Jules would have picked out for her. The flesh-and-flash outfit and the woman wearing it had certainly gotten her attention as she walked in the door, no doubt the desired effect.

But Kate didn't seem comfortable in the kind of trophy-wife clothing Jules was used to seeing at South Beach when she partied with the team from the Miami office. Her body language and micro-expressions were at odds with her seductive appearance, and now that she was paying closer attention, Jules could read between those lines. The only reason a nice girl steps out wearing fuck-me clothes is to prove something. She ran through the obvious possibilities. Recently broken up and trying to get back in the game. Straight and in a lesbian bar on a dare, her friends waiting outside.

Jules sighed. It would be nice, for a change, if she could take something or someone at face value, if she were not trained to read the most subtle cues. Life would be so much simpler.

She watched Kate get serious with her vodka, draining the glass in a series of gulps. Her skin was flushed and her movements were losing their grace.

"Another?" Jules asked.

Kate looked slightly dazed. Her eyes dropped to her empty glass and registered surprise. "Oh, I finished it."

"You did." Jules waited for her to decide she'd had enough, but Kate gave a nonchalant shrug.

"Thanks, I will have another."

Jules was never comfortable sleeping with a woman who'd had too much to drink. But the night was wearing on and she wanted to get out of here, preferably with company. Resigning herself to being the designated driver, she returned to the bar.

Less than five minutes later Kate was downing the next double like it was water.

Jules said, “Whoa. You might want to slow down.”

“I’m not drunk.” Kate giggled. “Okay, maybe a little.”

If she didn’t want to carry this woman out, it was time to leave. “How about this?” Jules suggested. “Let’s go back to Casitas, change into comfortable clothes, and have a nightcap by the pool.”

“Yes, good idea.” Kate fiddled awkwardly with her handbag. It fell on the floor, spilling half its contents beneath the table. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize.” Jules shoveled everything back into the purse and returned it. Any minute the multiple vodkas would kick in and Kate would be *non compos mentis*. Jules wrote her room number on a cocktail napkin and slid it across the table. “This is where you can find me. See how you feel when we get back. If you want to call it a night, fine. If you don’t, just dial the room. And the other thing...”

“Yes?”

“I’m not expecting anything. Do you understand?”

A wobbly smile. “Yes.”

“Come on. Let’s get out of here.” Jules helped her up and escorted her toward the door, a guiding hand at the base of her spine. “I’ll drive you. No argument.”

Kate acquiesced without a word, and Jules let her hand drift slightly lower. The arch of her back was so very tempting, she had to exercise self-control not to caress it, not to slide her hand down to cup the rounded perfection of her butt. However, this was not the time to unsettle her quarry with a hasty move. Jules hadn’t abandoned her plan to spend the night with this woman, but she detected an ambivalence in her that rang alarm bells. Even if Kate wanted to give the impression that she knew the score, Jules had a feeling she was out of her depth.

Women had all kinds of reasons for hooking up with strangers, and Kate’s were none of Jules’s business. But if they slept together, the experience needed to be good for both of them; otherwise what was the point? She opened the passenger door and waited for Kate to get settled. The dress was hitched up over one tempting thigh and as Kate fumbled with the seatbelt, Jules got an eyeful of breasts so beautiful she almost whined.

Whatever this winsome babe's reservations were, Jules hoped she would get over them and decide to call her. As they drove back to the inn, she had her doubts. Kate was obviously a nice woman. *Probably too nice.*