

SPINSTERS & CASANOVAS SERIES

WANITTA PRAKS

Baby Be *Mine*



Baby Be Mine
(Spinsters & Casanovas Series Book 1)
Wanitta Praks

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Baby Be Mine
Spinsters & Casanovas Series: Book 1

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For Alexia & Wannasa,
SUPPORTERS, MOTIVATORS, & SISTERS

Thanks guys for your support and motivation, even when I have an emotional breakdown
with my characters.
You guys are the best.

PROLOGUE

It was during the summer of her eighth birthday when Clarice met her two best friends, Whitney and Elise. The three little darlings were destined to share the same fate—spinsters who would ultimately meet their Casanovas in their very own weird ways.

On this particular day, they were out on the playground of their elementary school, swinging on the monkey bars. Clarice, who had never really had any real friends before, asked this very odd question that had been boggling her mind for a little while. “Friends. What are they for?”

Pretty Elise, with her sunny blond hair and bright sky-blue eyes, chimed in eagerly, “Friends are your teddy bear. He comforts you when you cry. He’s like your cozy pillow or your favorite blankie. He’s warm, like Mummy and Daddy.”

“They’re your Kleenex tissue,” Whitney said, nodding her dark head. “For wiping your runny nose and teary eyes. You get that when you cry. He’s like Mummy and Daddy, all warm and cozy.”

“Is that all?” Clarice asked in wonder, her dark-brown eyes large.

“There’s more! There’s more!” Whitney said, hopping in her spot, eager for her friends to listen to her very wise words, her braided hair bouncing about. Then she proceeded to dance and clap her hands like a monkey. “Friends are always there with you, always around you, like right now. I’m happy. I’m clapping my hands because I have my friends with me. Clap with me, Clarice.” She grinned widely at the half-Kiwi, half-Cambodian girl. “Clap with me, Elise.” She urged them to clap and dance with her. The clueless two happily followed her lead and began clapping their hands and dancing silly dances, like clowns in a circus.

“See, friends make each other look like fools, but they still have fun,” Whitney said wisely.

“So will you promise to be my teddy bear, my comfort pillow, my favorite blankie, and Kleenex tissue, then?” Clarice asked her two friends.

“Sure,” Elise said.

“You bet on it,” Whitney replied.

“Promise?” Clarice wanted to make sure they weren’t going to run out on her. After all, she knew no one else wanted to be her friend, since she was so different.

“Promise?” Elise and Whitney said in unison.

“Let’s pinky swear, then,” Clarice suggested.

“Yes, pinky swear,” Whitney said, grinning.

Elise nodded in agreement.

Clarice entwined her left pinky with Whitney’s. On the right side, she entwined with Elise’s left, while Elise had her right pinky with Whitney’s left. In turn, the three friends formed a circle, an endless unity of friendship.

“We promise to be great friends. We promise to pick each other up when the other falls. We promise to be your teddy bear, your favorite blankie and your Kleenex tissue. We promise to laugh with you when you laugh. We are sisters as well as friends. From now on, we are one.” Then they leaned forward until all three foreheads touched.

“Friends,” they all said in unison. Then they pulled back and smiled their cheesy, toothy smiles at each other.

CHAPTER 1

When the door opened, a naked torso faced Clarice. Not just any old torso, but a hot, muscled, six-pack naked torso. She blinked and blinked, and then she blinked some more. She couldn't understand why a grown man would be wearing a towel, just a single white, fluffy towel wrapped around his waist, to answer the door.

He was leaning against the doorframe, one hand supporting his tall, lean, muscular body that, Clarice noted, any female would want in her bed, including her. Not that she'd bedded any male, of course, since she was still a bloody virgin, for God's sake.

As her eyes traveled up to his face, her heart decided to do a disco dance, moving in time to the sound of the very popular music currently playing in the background somewhere inside the man's house.

She felt a little breathless and lightheaded. Her cheeks flushed the same shade as the bouquet of scarlet roses in her arms. Not that she was florist or a delivery person or anything. No, the florist was one of her best friends, Elise, and the delivery person was too sick with influenza. So being the great best friend that she was, Clarice offered to help.

Elise had begged because this was her VIP client. Elise herself was too busy preparing for the many orders for Valentine's Day, which was tomorrow, so the job was thrust upon her with little room for argument. And Clarice herself had succumbed to Elise's bribery of free roses, which she really loved.

Now here she was, knocking on the door of 99 Summerson Street in Herne Bay, one of the wealthiest suburbs in Auckland. At the moment, her eyes were busy blinking rapidly at the half-naked male specimen standing before her. But my oh my, did she almost forget she was holding on to the bunch of roses because, heaven help her, this man was G-O-R-G-E-O-U-S. That slightly wet, dusted-corn hair had a sparkling golden sheen beneath the afternoon sunlight. The man looked so hot she couldn't help ogling at him.

Putting all the symptoms together, which included the pronounced asthma-induced breaths, the after-the-marathon heart rate, and the light-as-a-feather feeling inside her head and stomach, Clarice concluded this condition was due to the fact that she had never seen a naked man in the flesh in her whole twenty-nine years of life. If she had counted the time she had seen her young nephews during their bath time, however, then yes, maybe she had seen the male species displaying their valued male anatomies. But for the likes of men like this one, so well toned, so well made, and with so much testosterone, then the answer would be a definite no. Those arms looked so strong, so muscular, so—

"Can I help you?" he asked, drawing her senses back to reality, breaking the spell, and making her blink a few more times before she became aware of the mission she came to accomplish.

"Umm." Suddenly, she realized she'd lost her voice. Her throat was dry as dust. She tried to speak, but the only sound that came out was, "Umm..." again. Knowing any attempt to speak again would only make her sound like more of a complete idiot, she resorted to using hand gestures.

Clarice practically shoved the bouquet right in his gorgeous face. That took him by surprise and he moved backward.

“So... sorry,” she croaked. There, finally, she’d found her voice. Even though it didn’t sound anything like her natural voice, at least she could pass her message across verbally.

“No, that’s fine. Just a little startled, that’s all.”

Gosh, this man has such a nice voice, she couldn’t help thinking.

“Darling, what’s taking so long?” A singsong voice traveled from somewhere inside the house. “Come back to bed.”

The hottie turned to smile at whoever it was, then said softly, “Be back soon.”

He has such soft eyes, Clarice thought when he turned to smile at the woman she assumed to be his wife. They were azure blue, like a clear, cloudless summer sky.

Dear heaven! Why are all good and handsome men taken? They were like car parks. All the good and available ones were taken, whereas the ones that were available were the ones you had to parallel park to get. *Damn my parallel parking.*

His attention suddenly shifted back to Clarice, and what she saw written on his face she did not like. His once soft and subtle azure eyes that had spoken of gentleman breed had now completely vanished. In its place shone a glittering spark, those pupils exuding a strong, wicked gleam, like the devil about to play with his toy. His once broad and friendly smile had also been completely wiped away. Instead, the corners of those lips quirked up to form a devilish grin.

Danger! Danger! Playboy alert! Clarice’s radar screamed at her when those wicked eyes started undressing her, causing her scarlet cheeks to burn even more. But before she could take a step back to assess her situation, the man caught hold of the bouquet, capturing her hands in the process.

“Hey, let... let go.” She struggled, trying to remove his tight grasp.

“Naaaooohhh.” He shook his head, that devilish grin still plastered on his face, his eyes still sparkling with mischief.

Clarice tried harder to release his viselike grip, but it was no use. His fingers were like dental clamps, wrapped around her hands so securely one would require pliers to release them.

“I said...” Clarice couldn’t finish her sentence, as she almost stumbled backward when the man suddenly released her.

“Why—” She was about to give him a piece of her mind when he interrupted her yet again, and she was struck speechless.

“You like what you see?” he asked, posing even more seductively on the threshold of the doorframe, contorting his body as if he were a model out of *Vogue* magazine.

“Huh? Excuse me?” Clarice asked, puzzled.

“Obviously you came here to give me these roses,” his voice drawled out huskily. “You must like me; otherwise you wouldn’t be here. And Valentine’s Day isn’t until tomorrow.”

“I...” Once again her speech was interrupted when she saw a blonde entering her field of vision, striking a pose as fashionable as the man before her.

The woman leaned onto the man and gave him a peck on the cheek, oblivious to Clarice’s presence. The woman proceeded to move down to the man’s lips, making a

sucking sound like a fish out of water, then to his Adam's apple, until the man cleared his throat, drawing her attention to the fact that they had a guest.

Clarice's eyeballs almost dropped to the floor when the blonde turned to face her. She too was only dressed in a loose towel, covering just enough for her breasts not to spill out.

The woman eyed her briefly. Then sensing Clarice had the same significance as the potted plant displayed on the front porch, she turned back to her man.

"Hunter, honey," she whined and then kissed Hunter right in front of her again. "You took way too long, so I had to come and get you."

Hunter didn't look like he was interested. His eyes were roaming elsewhere, and Clarice just happened to be their target.

Gosh, get a room, you two! Clarice wanted to yell at them for being this intimate in broad daylight. *And why am I still here anyway?* Her job was done. She should get going. But somehow, though, she wanted to get even with this blasted Hunter, who was still grinning at her flirtatiously.

As if on cue, the blonde turned to her, giving her an evil glare. She said, "Why are you still here? Who are you and what are you doing here, *kid*?"

KID? All right, that did it. Clarice snapped. Who was this chick calling her a kid like she'd just been born yesterday? She was almost thirty, for God's sake. This bimbo was clearly her junior by almost a decade and had no right whatsoever to insult her. After all, she was very sensitive about her age, and her pride just couldn't take it when someone called attention to it.

Clarice wanted to growl. This younger generation, they just didn't show respect to their elders. She really needed to set the record straight.

With that thought in mind, she clenched her fists tight in self-determination, lifted her head to meet their eyes, and said, "I'm here—"

"To give me roses for Valentine's Day." Hunter grinned.

That did it.

"You bitch!" the blonde screeched, like an angry cat running its claws across a chalkboard, grating her eardrums. If Clarice were to stay around listening to this bimbo for another second, she could guarantee she'd lose her auditory senses.

What to do? she thought. That was when she saw Hunter's eyes again. There was that wicked gleam. That was when it came to her. She knew why he'd said all that stuff before about the roses and Valentine's Day. This blasted man wasn't this bimbo's husband. They were merely playmates. Oh, what was she saying? Why use euphemism? They'd practically just had sex moments before she knocked on the door, and now, if she suspected right, Hunter wanted to break up with the blonde and he was using Clarice as his outlet.

Not so fast, you handsome beast. You're not getting away this easy. Before the blonde could do further damage to her eardrums and before her hot temper exploded like a boiling kettle, she threw the bouquet in Hunter's face, grabbed both their towels, one in each hand, and yanked them off their bodies, exposing his and her anatomies to the black cat sitting on the fence, birds in the trees, the bees sucking nectar from flowers on the porch, and whoever happened to glimpse them at that moment.

The blonde screamed, the man growled, and Clarice twisted on her heel and ran for her life, sprinting like the devil had taken chase. Of course, she knew the devil would

never come chasing after her in his naked state. But she did stop to catch her breath when she was halfway down the block because her limbs refused to take another step for fear of her lungs collapsing.

Wow! Clarice couldn't believe she'd just done that, yanking off their towels like that. Then she began to laugh—so hard her stomach hurt. Once she managed to calm down, she thought it was a shame she'd been too busy making her escape to clearly see his male glory.

Stop thinking stupid thoughts this instant!

What was with her and her sudden fascination with the male anatomy anyway? Was it because her biological clock was ticking, telling her it was almost time for her to start thinking about producing some babies? Good Lord, she wasn't looking forward to her big three-zero.

How was she supposed to make babies if her forbidden door downstairs had yet to be unlocked? And worse yet, where was she supposed to find the right key for her door? A naughty thought ran through her head. *Maybe Hunter had a secret key to unlock my door.* Then her heart did a little somersault.

Ah! She messed up her hair in her thought process. *Calm down, my dear heart.* She placed her hand upon her chest to stop the thrashing beat of her heart. Otherwise, she might have gone into cardiac arrest, and there was definitely no hospital near this part of town.

Once her heart settled again, her thoughts returned to the blond-haired, azure-blue-eyed Hunter. What was she thinking that he might have the right key for her door? That beast was a playboy, a Casanova, who saw women as nothing above a piece of bacon. That shaggy dog man-beast, eyeing her like a steak, wanting a piece of her. Well, he wasn't getting a piece, even if this steak was getting old—like tough leather old.

Clarice sighed in defeat. There was no point in sulking over matters like this now. She must call Elise tonight to apologize for the turn of events. Elise might lose one VIP client, but it was better for her staff not to be harassed or taken advantage of by that Casanova Hunter.

Shelving the thought for later use, Clarice turned to walk back to her car, her shoulders slumping, mentally counting down the days until she would meet her doomsday.

But that particular day came faster than she expected.

CHAPTER 2

Clarice wanted to cry. Right in front of her was a cake, a beautiful, delicious white chocolate and strawberry cake, topped with thirty candles—no more, no less—just thirty straight candles illuminating the entire room that was once shrouded in darkness.

The sound of her family and two best friends, Elise and Whitney, singing that birthday song should have turned those tears into streams of joy, yet the one that came trickling out of her eye right now was of sadness, of a sense of failure, as her entire thirty years of life was reflected right before her eyes, like an open storybook.

*

“Clarice, darling. Let go of your mother’s skirt and come over here.” Her father called her over to him, speaking to her in fluent Khmer, her mother tongue. But she didn’t budge from her spot, her little fingers still clinging to her mother’s skirt for dear life, too afraid to look at all the strangers’ faces staring at her.

Who are these people? she thought, eyeing the many strangers through her small spectacles perched upon her nose. They came to welcome her when she got off the plane. They looked just like papa, with blond hair and blue eyes, the likes of which she had never seen before in the Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand.

“Welcome to New Zealand, my dear.” One lady leaned in, smiling.

Then another one came and crouched in front of her and asked her with a pretty smile, “How old are you, little missy?”

Clarice didn’t know what to do. They were talking to her, but she couldn’t understand them.

Her father came over and translated in Khmer. She held out both of her hands and made the number six to the strangers.

“Does she not know English?” the old lady asked her father.

“It’s my fault. I only taught her basic greetings. We conversed in Khmer all the time in the camp,” her father said.

“Well, I’m sure she’ll adjust and come to fit in school just fine with all the other children,” the young lady said.

School! Now that word she knew. Papa had taught her that word in the camp.

*

“Go back to your own country, you four-eyed monster.”

“Yeah, pancake face. Go back to where you came from.”

“We don’t want you here. Go away.”

Clarice cried when the others at school wouldn’t stop their bullying. She couldn’t understand what they meant, but the physical abuse they bestowed upon her, pushing her and pulling her pigtails, sure hurt her little wee heart. That night she cried on her mother’s lap.

“Chantee, my dear, don’t cry.” Her mother smoothed her hair while she cried her eyes out. “You have to be brave and strong.”

“But they pulled my hair on the first day of school,” she complained. “I hate those people. Why can’t they be nice? I don’t like this place. I want to go back to the camp.”

“Chantee, I know you’ll meet nice people soon. And who knows? You might even be friends with them for life. There are many great people here in New Zealand. And when you meet them, you’ll know how lovely this country is.”

Clarice’s mother was right, because the very next day at school, when she was in the middle of being bullied again, a girl appeared, jumping off the monkey bars and announcing to the whole school that from now on, this little Asian-Caucasian girl would be under her protection. The girl who saved her was named Whitney, a boisterous girl that was like a hot air balloon.

Clarice’s first real friend was a sight to behold, dressed all in black, with the palest skin, like a sheet of paper. She was a little witch, casting deathly spells on anyone who dared hurt her and her little friend. And now that Whitney had taken her under her wing, Clarice was no longer afraid of anyone.

*

“I’m afraid I can’t let you participate in today’s sport, Clarice.”

Clarice wasn’t happy. She’d been looking forward to this day for ages and now that it had finally arrived, she wasn’t allowed to participate because of her shoes.

What could she do? It wasn’t her fault her shoes had more holes than the number of craters on the moon. Her PE teacher said it was unfit for sport. Simply speaking, it may cause her injury.

“You can use my spare pair,” a quiet little blonde said beside her.

Clarice turned and smiled.

This little girl, who was three years younger than her, was called Elise. She was a quiet, methodical girl who hardly spoke but had a heart the size of an ocean. She was a charming, innocent, and pure-hearted girl, much like a cherry blossom on a nice spring morning.

With Elise’s spare shoes, Clarice was able to participate in school activities along with Whitney. From that point on, the three girls were now like the three musketeers, sticking together like glue.

*

“Honey, I’ve been made redundant.” Clarice heard her father speak to her mother in their bedroom.

“Oh no, Michael. What will happen to us?”

“Don’t worry, Montha. I’ll make sure you won’t starve.”

That night, Clarice sat forking her rice and tuna. Yes, she was starving. That small portion wasn’t enough to supply the fuel for her growing teenage body, but she didn’t say anything. She told her parents she was full and went off to bed.

At that point, Clarice made a life-changing decision. She would never go hungry again. She would do anything to support herself and her family.

“Don’t worry, Papa. I’m going to get a job. You don’t have to pay for my education anymore,” Clarice vowed to herself.

The next day she applied for the paper run. She got accepted on the spot because she was good at running. From that point on, she saved her money like her life depended on it, which to her it did, because she knew she wasn’t born with a silver spoon in her mouth. And if she wanted to get into University, then she would have to work hard.

*

It was on Clarice’s thirteenth birthday that she was able to attend high school, along with her two best friends. That night while her friends were sleeping, preparing for their new adventure ahead, she was still slaving over the iron, trying to press the secondhand uniform she had bought with her own money.

Clarice knew her friends would arrive with newly pressed uniforms that had been serviced by professional launderers because her friends’ families were far better off than hers, but she’d never complained about her station and worked hard to achieve a level of comfort for her parents and herself. In order to achieve her goal, she must be frugal and mindful towards everything.

*

“Mum, I want to go to Cambodia to help out the children and adults,” Clarice said to her mother one day after she turned sixteen. She was watching the documentary about Cambodian kids not having enough dental care, leading to poor oral health and losing their teeth at such a young age.

At that moment, Clarice had made a lifelong decision. She was going to become a dentist so she could help provide dental care in her mother’s homeland, Cambodia. It wasn’t until ten years later that she and her team of dental professionals accomplished that goal, setting up a practice in the heart of Battambang Province, donating free dental care for all who would utilize their service. She usually frequented Cambodia on her holiday at least once a year to check on the progress of the children there.

On her twenty-fifth birthday, Clarice went into the world of periodontology, wanting to further study the subject of gum disease, so she could provide more service to the community. And she did that within three years.

*

Clarice stared at the flickering candles, her mind flitting back to reality. All the goals she had planned she’d accomplished. Everything she had wanted she’d received.

But now Clarice, aged thirty, was lost.

She bit her lip and stared at the candlelight dancing in front of her, those flames providing just enough light to illuminate the many smiling faces that now stared back at her—the faces of her many nephews, eyeing her weirdly, not understanding why their aunt would be fabricating mass saltwater production down her cheeks; her cousins and their husbands, holding each other’s hands, eyeing her with mixed feelings of sadness

because they seemed to know what she was going through, since they were of similar age; and then her mother and father, hugging each other at their ripe old age, looking at her worriedly.

Clarice took all of this in. And then a painful cord struck through her heart and she reached a moment of epiphany, that single moment when she finally realized what everyone was talking about for the past two decades.

Love. Marriage. Family. Children.

Too busy was she trying to achieve her status, her career, and her reputation that she had totally forgotten all about that other important aspect of her life: love.

Sifting through her memories, Clarice tried to place any fond memory where she was actually in love with someone. Her mind drew a blank. There was none, nothing, a big fat zero, just a single goose egg. She had never had her first kiss, never had her first dance at a formal during high school, never went to a nightclub, never had a boyfriend, never had or experienced anything that a girl her age should have done while growing up.

In her entire thirty years of life, she had been working. In high school, she spent her days working, if not studying. When she finally entered university, again she was so busy studying and working she had forgotten to go to the annual dental ball, forgot to look around her as her other classmates eyed each other across the room and asked one another on dates. And even after she graduated from dentistry, she still forgot to have fun, forgot to go out and celebrate her success at achieving such a high degree. And now she was about to enter the big three-zero zone. By midnight tonight, she would be officially a spinster, on the shelf, tough as leather

Who would want to chew this tough beef anyway, when everyone at the supermarket would go for the veal?

To say she never had *any* interaction with the opposite sex was also preposterous, because she had. Growing up, she had always been surrounded with her many nephews, cousins, her male classmates, and now her patients also, but to associate them with the L-word, now that would be preposterous. Although she did have many proposals, ranging from eight-year-old boys to eighty-six-year-old men, namely her patients, how could she take any of them seriously?

Her biological clock was screaming at her. Her hormones were on rampage as tears streamed down her face and all those thoughts spun through her mind. She couldn't suppress them. She hadn't hit menopause yet, but here she was having an emotional breakdown because she was turning thirty and wanted a family of her own. That sudden feeling of wanting another person there at night, lying close to you while you rest. Yes, that strong yearning suddenly hitting her like a ton of bricks, and she couldn't help but burst out and cry even harder.

Clarice's mother, Montha, sensing something was horribly wrong, came to comfort her daughter.

"What's wrong, Chantee? Why are you crying on your birthday?" she asked, patting her daughter's back. Whitney and Elise came to her side also. Their singing faltered and they stared dumbfounded when they saw her in this state.

How could she tell her mother and the rest of her family and friends that she wanted her own family, that she wanted love? But it was too late now. No man would even look at her. She had passed her prime.

But she couldn't tell them that now, could she? Well, not when they were all smiling before her. To tell them the truth would ruin the whole mood. So she lied.

"I'm just so happy you did all this for me. And you both, coming all the way here from Dunedin, just for my birthday." There, now the smiles were back, except for her two friends who eyed her, clearly broadcasting, *We'll talk to you later about this.*

"We wouldn't miss it for the world, darling." Her mother hugged her.

Just then, her little five-year-old nephew came and tugged at her skirt, asking in his little high-pitched voice, "Aunty Reece can I open your presents?"

Children and their presents, she thought, smiling as another sob erupted. She tried to hold back but almost choked on it, so she let nature take its course and more waterworks escaped her eyes.

"Why are you crying, Aunty Reece?" Timmy asked her.

Clarice lifted her nephew to straddle her hips, then hugged him tightly, feeling that warmth emitting from his small body.

"Because I'm so happy to be here, celebrating my birthday with you," she replied.

"I love you, Aunty," Timmy said, wiping away her tears. "So don't cry anymore."

"I love you too, Timmy." She hugged him again. Then after she released him, she walked to the present table. "And which one would you like to open first?"

"That one!" he said, pointing to the largest on the table with his little wee fingers.

So cute, so adorable—her motherly instinct cried out to her.

After she finished cutting the cake and everyone got a piece each, they all said their congratulations, and a little while later, they all left her apartment. Her mother and father were the last to leave.

"Chantee, are you sure you're okay?" her mother asked her worriedly.

"I'm fine. Just tired from work, I suppose, and then when I came home, I got a full-blown surprise." She laughed drily, hoping her mother would believe her excuse.

"I didn't want to surprise you too much, but Elise and Whitney suggested it," her mother replied, hugging her warmly.

Clarice eyed her friends as they both eyed her from the couch. She knew they were waiting for her to explain what happened before.

"Thank you for today, Mum, Dad." She went to hug them both, then led them out the door. "When are you heading back to Dunedin?"

"Tomorrow. Max will drop us off. You take the day off too. You work too hard."

"I don't work too hard. I'll drop you off instead. Speaking of Max, where is he?" Clarice suddenly realized her favourite cousin wasn't present during her birthday party.

"Not a clue, Chantee. You just make sure you look after that boy, though," her father said, rubbing his temple.

Clarice knew her father had a lot to deal with when Max was in Dunedin, since both of his parents were away overseas, but now since he was here in Auckland, her father grew even more worried. That little cousin of hers was more robust than a rodent. There was no way of knowing when he would explode and cause trouble for them all.

"I will. I don't understand why he can't study in Dunedin when you're both there to look after him."

"It's because he's worried about you and wants to make sure that you're fine," her mother answered her instead. "He's a boy, Chantee. He can look after you until Mr. Right comes along."

“Yes, Mum.” Clarice kissed her mother and father, then closed the door as they departed. She sighed heavily, leaning against the door, glad everyone had left. But as soon as the door was closed, both Elise and Whitney rushed to her side.

“Explain!” was all Whitney said.

Clarice knew immediately what Whitney was referring to, but she didn’t want to elaborate about her dilemma tonight. Tonight she just wanted to drown in self-pity, maybe do something bad, like drink a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice without even waiting thirty minutes to brush her teeth, or better yet, flag the whole brushing of her teeth altogether so they would rot away in that acidic environment in her mouth.

“I...” she began but then choked on her word.

“I’m going to get some tissue.” Whitney sighed, patting her back. “I have a feeling we’re going to cry over this.” Whitney jumped from the couch, motioning for Elise to follow.

All alone now, Clarice brooded in self-pity. What could she say when the others came back? That she was scared midnight would strike in two hours and when she woke the next morning she’d have white hair and wrinkly skin, with no one beside her but a walking cane as her only companion.

“Cuz,” a deep voice said from behind her, startling Clarice out of her thoughts.

Clarice turned around and saw her cousin Maximilian, the subject of her earlier conversation with her parents. She smiled, seeing her favourite young cousin, all dirty-brown hair and dimples.

Maximilian was her cousin on her father’s side. She didn’t have any relatives on her mother’s side, as they did not survive during the war. Her mother was the only one that had made it alive. She lived in the Khao E Dang camp for many years before meeting her father.

Maximilian had full-on typical European-Kiwi features, fair skin, with a few sprinkled freckles dotted on his nose and cheeks; while she had the typical Asian features in her genes, making her traits stand out more than her other cousins, with thick black hair and fair porcelain skin. When the two were seen out and about together, no one would even believe they were related.

“Happy birthday, you.” He hugged her from behind, almost strangling her neck in the process. “And I’m not going to congratulate you for turning thirty, but I’m definitely gonna get some of that cake on the table over there.” He laughed cheekily, eyeing his favourite white chocolate cake.

“Max, you rascal.” She swatted his hand and stood up, facing him. “Don’t think you can come to my birthday party without congratulating me. Now be a good boy and say your part.”

“Nah.” Max shook his head, smiling.

“Maximilian Henry Christopher Mason!” Clarice warned him, knowing Max hated it whenever anyone used his full name.

Max screwed up his face in disgust. Why his parents had decided to name him Maximilian was beyond him. Clarice did mention his mother was a historical romance fanatic since reading that book from her favourite author Alexia Praks, called *The Duke’s Revenge* or something along those lines, with the hero being called Maximilian. His mother had become so addicted to the story that she had declared if she ever had a baby

boy, she would name him Maximilian. Then lo and behold, just three months later she was pregnant. And now he was stuck with the name.

“Not going to,” Max said, determinedly stubborn.

“Fine then. I’ll just grab Sweet Elise and Madam Witch, who will tear your ears down.”

“What? They’re both here too?” Max asked in fright.

“Why wouldn’t they be? They’re my best friends.”

“But...”

“What’s wrong, Maxy boy? Scared of us?” Whitney asked from behind him.

Max was already shaking in his boots.

“Yes, Max. You better say your congratulations to Clarice or I might have to sweet talk you into doing it,” Elise added.

Max wasn’t looking forward to Elise sweet-talking him. The last time he got on Clarice’s wrong side, he ended up doing his cousin’s chores for a whole week, and he didn’t even know he had agreed to the deal in the first place. And as for her other friend, Whitney, the one he liked to secretly call the Wicked Witch of Oz, was no better either. If Elise used the sweet approach, then the Wicked Witch used her spells to torment him, which mainly involved painful words that eventually led to punishment, not by her hands, but by his very own cousin Clarice.

Both of them were wicked, and if he didn’t know any better, Clarice was also. But out of the three, he had to admit he had great affection for Elise, the sweet one. But then again, he couldn’t help hanging around any of them. It was like they produced this spinster’s pheromone that attracted him to their clan. Not that he was in love with them or anything. It was more along the lines of a sibling relationship whereby every time he hung around them, he felt safe and happy, like they were his long-lost sisters. That was why he made it his mission to make sure they were all safely married and never remained the Three Spinsters for too long.

“Now where were you when the others were here?” Clarice eyed her cousin’s attire. “Why are you all dressed up?”

“Not telling,” Max teased.

“Maximilian!” Clarice warned him again.

“Just out and about with friends,” he said cheekily, trying to avoid the hidden truth.

“Where?” Whitney asked in her serious tone.

“Mmmm, a nightclub,” he finally admitted.

“Maximilian,” they all said simultaneously.

Right now was one of those times Max thought he was their little brother, with their eyes staring at him like any big sisters would, before laying out the ground rules and punishing him.

As for Clarice, she couldn’t believe her young cousin would attempt to do such a thing. Never in her mind had she ever thought he would attend a nightclub. When she was his age, all she’d ever do was work and study. She didn’t even have time to admire the view around her, let alone go clubbing.

“There was hardly anyone there, though. It was too early and I didn’t even get a sip of alcohol. So there, I didn’t do anything wrong.” He rambled his confession.

“But, Max, you’re only in high school,” Elise said.

“But I don’t want to grow up not being able to experience drinking alcohol. I’ve only got one life,” Max whined to Elise. “Plus, I want to experience it before I turn twenty.”

When Max said this, Clarice felt her world spin around, her tears almost overflowing again. Before they could escape, though, she wiped them clean while the others were too busy with their argument to notice her change of expression.

Since growing up, Clarice had never had a chance to get drunk. In fact, she had never even been near to or tasted alcohol since the moment she was born.

No, wait. That was a lie. She had been near alcohol. In her life as a dentist, she had been near the Bunsen burner many times, with its purple spirit, making impression trays for the molding of her patients’ teeth. But that’s the alcohol required for lighting flames, not the drinkable sort.

“You’re underage, Max,” Elise said, cutting her thoughts.

“More importantly, Maximilian, you broke the law.” Whitney topped it off.

“What, Whitney? Are you gonna tell my mum?” Max challenged. “Phone her in Dubai?”

“I think I might,” Whitney answered, walking towards the phone.

“You wouldn’t dare.” Max gasped. “It’s gonna cost Clarice a fortune to phone Dubai. Plus, you don’t know her phone number.”

“Oh, I would, Maximilian.” Whitney nodded to show she meant business and picked up the phone. “I could always ask Clarice for your mum’s phone number. Plus, I’ll pay for the phone bills.”

“You witch.” Max gasped, head bulldozing at Whitney.

“Now, now, you two, stop it. It’s Clarice’s birthday, after all.” Elise interrupted their feud, catching Max’s head just in time before he made contact with Whitney’s stomach. “I don’t want his mom to know Max has gone out. It would look bad on her behalf.”

“Oh, thank you, Elise.” Max forgot all about his anger and went to wind his arm around Elise instead, resting his head on her shoulder like a little puppy asking for affection. “You’re the best, not like my cuz and that Wicked Witch of Oz.”

“Excuse me?” Whitney huffed at Max.

“No, nothing, I didn’t say anything.” Max pretended to zip his mouth. “Elise, you didn’t hear anything, right?”

There was a look of sadness and longing on Elise’s face that Max couldn’t understand. It only appeared for a fleeting second before it disappeared again.

“I didn’t hear that,” Elise said, smiling at Max with affection.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that, then,” Whitney finally said, letting the subject go.

“All right,” Elise said, smiling too enthusiastically this time. “Now, Max, say your congratulations to your cousin.” And that was when they all noticed Clarice had gone completely silent and a sad look was plastered on her face again, just like the face she had made when she blew out the candles.

Whitney was the first to react, folding her arms around her friend to comfort her, while Elise went to grab some green tea, with Max following blindly behind her, having not a clue as to what had just happened.

Once Clarice and Whitney were on the couch and Elise and Max came back with the steaming green tea, they all sat in a circle, giving Clarice their undivided attention.

“That’s it. I’m not going to cry over what’s already been done, or hasn’t been done,” Clarice declared with her head held high. “We are going out tonight.”

“Wherever you’re going, can I come too?” Max asked enthusiastically.

“Not unless you have a death wish,” Clarice said, eyeing her cousin sternly while the two friends pondered Clarice’s declaration.

Yes, Clarice thought. She might be old and yes, she might be on the shelf, but it wasn’t too late yet to find her own family, her very own husband, and find love. Starting tonight, she was going to reverse the clock. Tonight, they were going clubbing!

CHAPTER 3

This is definitely my scene, Hunter thought as the loud beat of music rushed through his bloodstream, pumping him up with adrenaline. And he wasn't the only one that felt this way. Everyone around him was gyrating to the nonstop music, their bodies rubbing up and down each other to the sound of the beat, crushing, pushing, swaying, moving until they didn't look like individual dancers out to enjoy themselves, but one gigantic mass, melting together on the dance floor.

The atmosphere was high, as if they were all addicted to this infinite drug. As the music increased in tempo, so did their energy level. The air itself was a mixture of sweat and perfume, intoxicating and overpowering his olfactory sense. But, man oh man, did he love it. He felt so alive, so happy, so carefree.

Looking around him, all he saw was a sea of blurry faces, each consumed in their own world of passion. He tried to keep to the centre of the dance floor, where all the action took place, but as more people clamored into the throng, the others got pushed to the side. Himself included.

As he took a side step to avoid another wave of bodies hitting him, he collided with something soft. Turning to see what he'd damaged, he found the sexiest girl he'd ever laid eyes on. She looked up at him and at that very moment, as if they sang the same tune, she gave him a seductive smile. He, in turn, smiled at her.

Liking what she saw, the girl moved towards him. Her hands immediately went to capture his neck, and as the music changed from Lady Gaga's "Applause" to J.Lo's "Papi," she was butt-swinging around him, arms and legs assaulting him at every turn, and man was he turned on.

The mysterious girl suddenly leaned into his lips, nipping and sucking at him like there was no tomorrow, until he was puffed out of energy, his lungs starved for oxygen. There was no electricity shooting through his body, just a lapping, distasteful kiss, the amount of saliva flooding the floor of his mouth almost drowning him alive.

How can someone so hot be such a bad kisser? Hunter thought as his libido got crushed. Pushing the girl away gently, he went in search of water for his parched throat. How ironic when just mere moments before he was almost drowned in her saliva. The girl looked slightly wounded for a second but then was off galloping to her next victim like the trollop she likely was. Hunter felt sorry for the poor sod who would experience the same predicament he just did.

Paving his way to the bar was an incredible mission that required more than strength and stamina. Standing at almost 1.9 meters tall, he still had to squeeze past those high-craze, energetic animals, like raging bulls, their heads bumping into him at every turn. The more he tried squeezing between them, the more he was pushed back, like a rag doll tossed about.

Summoning his energy, he willed himself forward, pushing among those sweaty bodies until he was safely on the other side of the dance floor. By then he realized he needed more than just the standard drink to get his energy up and pumping again. Again, he cursed himself for not eating beforehand. Dancing really was a strenuous exercise in itself.

When Hunter reached the bar, he eyed the bartender, slamming his hand down on the counter and shouting for a pint of Speight's, but the bartender was blind to his request, as he was currently in an argument with a couple of women. Inching closer, he heard them speak.

"She's thirty," one of the women said to the bartender.

"Thank you, Whitney, for clarifying," the other one said, smiling. And turning to the bartender, she shouted, "I'm thirty. My friend just confirmed that fact."

"No," the bartender said, looking a bit flustered.

Who in their right mind wouldn't be flustered when faced with two gorgeous women demanding his attention like that? Somehow, for that split second, he envied the bartender.

"Can't you see? I'm not a twenty-year-old kid," the woman whined.

Obviously, this must have had something to do with fake IDs. Kids these days wanted to drink alcohol way before their time. Even though he considered himself a kid still, he was way over twenty-one and looked well over twenty-five, so there was no need for a fake ID there.

"Don't show me that face," the girl yelled at the bartender. "You want to see my ID? Fine, I'll show you my ID."

The scene playing out before him was starting to become humorous, and Hunter couldn't help but continue to tune in as the drama unfolded before him. It wasn't every day he got to see a beautiful young girl, looking not a minute older than nineteen, claiming to be thirty just so she could get a sip of alcohol into that gorgeous body of hers.

Hunter chuckled and shook his head. He could only recall one other time when his life was this amusing. It happened about a week ago, when a girl gave him a bouquet of roses the day before Valentine's Day and then ran off after yanking his towel, exposing his naked state.

He could still remember standing there, butt naked and all, gazing at her as she scrambled away in fright, oblivious to the sound of whatshername, the girl he'd just had sex with, screaming loudly, making threatening remarks about wanting to kill that girl if she were to see her again.

He could still remember the exact image of her black hair fluttering about in the breeze, tossing, turning, and gliding through the hands of the wind. He so damn wanted to be the wind that day, to feel those strands through his fingers, to see if they were really soft to the touch. He was mesmerized by that beautiful girl, at the nerve she imparted upon him when she dared tear off his towel and at the fading image of her escape. At that moment he was tempted to follow her.

Dear Lord, he would have definitely followed her if he weren't butt naked. He would have run after her and made love to her right there against the next available tree. But goddamn if it weren't for his neighbor Macy, always hanging about on her front porch, looking to catch a glimpse of him with his next woman, then he would have been off after her already.

Hearing ruffling, his eyes danced back to the scene in front of him. He watched as the girl rummaged through her bag but could not produce anything.

"Miss, I can't serve you alcohol if you don't have ID with you," the bartender rephrased.

"I have it in here somewhere," she grumbled while she continued searching for her card, her shoulders slumping in disappointment. Then she turned to the other girl he assumed to be her friend, who was dressed all in black, like a goth, complete with coke bottle glasses.

"Go get Elise. I think I left my wallet in her bag," she instructed.

The friend looked reluctant to leave for a minute, but then she was off to the other side of the club, disappearing into the crowd. Now the girl was all alone, but she still continued to stare at the bartender like she was on death row.

At this point, Hunter couldn't help himself. Being a Casanova, he just needed to ruffle her feathers a bit and rescue her from her moment of distress. This girl definitely needed some lifting up, and he made sure he was the first one to offer her that service.

Hunter couldn't help but marvel at her long hair that shone brightly under the many colorful disco lights. She was of petite frame, perching on the stool, her legs dangling like a little kid's. *Definitely my cup of tea*, Hunter thought.

Not wanting to prolong the wait any longer, Hunter inched himself closer to her, his stool now very near. And while she was so consumed with her conversation with the bartender, he took action.

"Hello, sweetheart," he whispered into her ear.

As if heaven had opened up, she turned her head and God help him, but his mouth almost hung open for a full minute. It was that exact same girl who had made that confession to him just last week, the same girl he couldn't get out of his head.

No way could he have mistaken her. Those same pupils shone a molten black. Those same cheeks, just like that day, were scarlet in color, but this time it wasn't from the embarrassment over his lack of dress, but instead, they were puffed out in anger due to the argument with the bartender.

This beauty sure was a sight to behold. She was hot and heavy and, hopefully by tonight, ready for him—once he'd worked his seductive charm on her, of course.

"You!" she said, her cheeks blazing under the rainbow-colored lights.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the sweetheart who confessed to me last week," he drawled out seductively. "Did you enjoy the view before you ran off like the devil was on your tail?"

* * *

This is definitely not my scene, Clarice thought as a raging headache settled in nicely at the back of her skull. The music drummed so loud in her ears that she thought if she frequented here often enough, she was sure to have an auditory deficit by the time she reached forty.

She was so not looking forward to midnight, but here she was, in a nightclub, with midnight itself clearly approaching faster than Lighting McQueen. And then she would officially turn thirty. Yay! And to top it all off, the argument with the bartender over her desire—no *need*—for *one* alcoholic drink wasn't helping either.

Oh, heaven help her! Was it too much to ask? She wasn't asking to conquer the world. It was one drink, one small, bloody drink. *Dear Mother and Father, please forgive me for swearing like this, but this is just too damn much*. She was on the verge of bursting into tears again. It was her goddamn birthday, for Christ sake, so just let her

have that one sip, a lick, at least to know what it's like to taste alcohol before bloody midnight rolls around and she officially ended up being a spinster forever.

A spinster who had never tasted alcohol on her tongue? What would the dental team at her practice say if they found out? She could imagine them gossiping and writing on their weblog already. *Clarice Mason, highly trained gum specialist, sourly turned thirty without a lick of alcohol to her name. Oh the shame.*

No. She could not bear it. This MUST call for desperate measures.

"Look, please, you've got to believe me," Clarice pleaded. When the bartender looked unmoved, she resorted to using reasoning. "I'm working now. I'm not a little kid anymore. I'm a periodontist." Still nothing. "I bloody worked as a dentist for two full years before applying to study in the gum field." She'd started shouting now. The bartender didn't even blink an eye at her reasoning. At that moment she felt like yanking all his teeth out, gum disease or not, and jabbing them right into his eyeballs, wanting to hear him whine in pain. Oh, she wished she were a witch like her friend Whitney. Then everyone would be freakin' scared of her and she wouldn't have to resort to begging for a small drink.

"Have you any idea how long both degrees took me? A full eight years, plus my three years out practicing, that equates to eleven!" By this stage, she was on full rampage, slamming her little fist onto the bar to intimidate him, so mad at her current situation that she could feel her cheeks growing red. As each word was spoken, her voice notched up an octave. "So if you think I'm under twenty-five, you must be a bloody idiot."

In return, the bartender just continued to blink lazily, staring at her oddly, like she was a psychotic patient just out of a mental hospital, rambling on about her profession.

"How do you think I got into this freakin' nightclub in the first place?" She rambled on. "I'm well over twenty-five, I assure you."

"I'm sorry, miss, but I really need to confirm with your ID," the bartender repeated indifferently.

"Are you a broken record? I told you my friend is going to find my wallet." She fumed in frustration. "It must be in her bag or something."

"Well, I'm happy to wait." The bartender smiled at her.

"Well, I'm *not* happy to wait. I've only got five minutes left until midnight. Now are you going to serve me that drink or not?" she challenged.

"No!" the bartender said simply, not backing down.

Her shoulders sagged in defeat. *Dear Lord, you will have me become a spinster without allowing me to drink alcohol, is that right? You want me to die a spinster? Well, I'm happy to oblige with that request, but why must you deprive me of alcohol too? I want to experience drinking before I turn thirty. So please, if you would just grant me this wish, then I would be happy to die a happy spinster.* And just like that, her strength was back in her shoulders and she lifted herself, sitting much straighter.

What was she giving up for? There were still a full five minutes left before midnight. So she put on her best intimidating stare, the one she normally used when her patients refused to listen to her oral hygiene advice, the one that meant business, wishing and praying at the same time that Whitney and Elise would come back with her wallet in hand so she could get a swig of that drink.

Just then, she heard someone whisper something into her ear, and like electricity shot up her spine, she startled and turned her head to the direction of that voice. And God

did answer her prayer because right there in front of her was that Casanova she had delivered the flowers to on the day before Valentine's.

Her eyes took in his azure irises. There was that same wicked gleam as that fateful day. She redirected her gawking stare away from his penetrating gaze, her heart thumping to the rhythm of the loud music. Big mistake! It landed on his lips instead, and heaven help her, but he flashed that devilish grin again, the one that made her legs turn to jelly. If not for her sitting on the barstool, she would otherwise be on the floor by now.

But tonight, though, that smile held an extra special meaning, as if he were happy to see her again after that embarrassing stunt she had pulled, yanking off his towel. Tonight it was fully displayed, for her viewing only, his perfectly straight white teeth, probably a product of orthodontic work, many years of wearing braces, and bleaching—yes, bleaching to reach that level of whiteness on his enamel. Suddenly, that image of his semi-naked body danced right before her eyes, clouding her cheeks in a beautiful pink blush. So surprised she was seeing him right there in front of her, her face just mere inches away from his own, all she could utter at that moment was, “You!”

Why was it every time this Casanova was around, all she could do was stutter? It wasn't like she was born with an impediment or something. In fact, she was quite the talkative person. Once she learned how to speak English, her cousins and friends couldn't shut her up. So why now? Why all of a sudden couldn't she string a simple sentence together?

“Well, well, well, if it isn't the sweetheart who confessed to me last week.” He spoke seductively, close to her ear. “Did you enjoy the view before you ran off like the devil was on your tail?”

What could she say? How to respond? She was tongue-tied. Then a thought struck her. “Buy me a drink.”

“What?” he asked, flabbergasted. She was sure he wasn't expecting her to reply like that. But what had she to lose by demanding this request?

“Buy me a drink,” she repeated.

No way was she giving this up. This man looked like he was over twenty-five. He could buy a drink for her.

“Sure, sweetheart,” he said, smiling.

And as simple as cheese melting on toasted bread, Hunter ordered her a shot of whatever it was in that small cup, or glass, or something that looked like a portion cup in her dental practice. Clarice immediately started to question whether that brown murky liquid was actually alcohol at all.

She picked up the small portion cup in her hand and turned it about, eyeing it at close quarters.

“Are you sure that's alcohol? It sure looks murky,” Clarice asked Hunter.

Hunter simply smiled, then replied, “It's spirit, sweetheart. Drink up.”

“Why is it not purple like in the Bunsen burner?” Clarice queried.

“It's definitely spirit, sweetheart. Now drink it up.” He confirmed and then urged again.

Looking at her cellphone, she had but thirty seconds left before midnight hit. Not thinking any further, but with one mission to accomplish before Cinderella had to leave her glass slipper behind, she chunked the whole contents down in one go... and, my oh my, did she regret it, because at that very moment, her eyes watered, her breath caught,

her face bloomed red, and all she wanted to do was one thing—spit that disgusting liquid right back out. But twenty seconds, dear heaven, twenty seconds to go before midnight struck. She could hold it in. Yes, she could.

Hunter, who was on the other side of the scene, observed her face blowing up like a puffer fish, her cheeks bowed out and her eyes bulging, as if she were holding the drink inside her mouth. Surprised, he suggested, “Drink it up. Don’t hold it like that.”

All Clarice could do was shake her head vigorously. Her eyes stung furiously as jets of tears streamed down her cheeks, the alcohol in her oral cavity burning her alive. The foul liquid continued to kill her taste buds one by one, her mouth becoming numb.

Feeling sick to her core, she couldn’t contain the liquid anymore. Thirty or not, spinster or not, she didn’t want to die just yet. If she didn’t do something fast to rid herself off this foul burning liquid in her mouth, she would surely meet her maker.

So out it went. She spit out the entire shot, in the process spraying a stream in Hunter’s direction, who now sat facing her with a mixture of spirit and saliva all over his face and shirt.

And for the second time that night, Hunter’s libido deflated once more.

CHAPTER 4

A thousand bulldozers could not compare to the stomping headache that was drilling inside Hunter's head as he was forced to peel open his eyes when the sunlight leaking through the light curtain became too bright to bear early the next morning.

"Bloody Virgin Mary, help me!" He groaned while massaging his temple to dispel the ache.

"Virgin Mary will help you if you ask her politely," a female voice whispered seductively in his ear.

"Jesus Christ!" he blared, jerking up from bed, startled at seeing an unknown woman beside him, clad only in bed sheets. "You're Virgin Mary?"

The woman giggled and winked at him. "Not necessary a virgin, but my name is Mary." Then she winked at him again, licked her lips, and asked, "Wanna go for another round?"

Hunter looked at her like she'd just grown a pair of horns atop her head. *Someone please kick me in the ass. Did my taste run that dry?*

The woman lying next to him was definitely not his type. She was too big, too tall, and too bulky. Definitely not his style. What was he thinking going for her? Then his memory of the night before came flooding back to him.

The cute petite woman sitting on the stool!

That's right. The small woman who had him hooked from the first moment he saw her, that pixie who'd brought him the roses just a week back. It was that same woman who spat on him because she'd asked him to buy a drink for her.

Damn that woman. What was she thinking spitting all over him like that? And it had to be on his new baby-blue shirt too. At that moment, his hands wanted so much to wring her neck, but she was just too much his type to truly hurt her. If he saw her, next time he would surely strangle her, or maybe kiss her, depending on his mood.

Hell! No woman had ever treated him that way before. It hurt his ego. And because he got so mad with her last night, he had literally grabbed the first woman that made him an offer. And that was how he'd ended up with this not-so-virgin Mary in his bed and this raging headache.

"Well, baby, are we gonna go for another round?" Mary asked, her arms and legs draped over his body like an octopus' tentacles, sucking its favourite prey.

Of course not, Hunter was about to say, but before he could reply, his cell phone rang. He signaled for the girl to stop speaking for a bit, then removing those long tentacles of hers from his body, he sat up again and retrieved his cell phone on the bedside table, then flicked it open.

"Bloody hell." Hunter let out another groan. It was from his goddamn cousin Anton.

AGAIN!

Anton had been relentlessly calling him nonstop since last night. He had to shut off his phone before he went mad and checked himself into Cherry Farm, aka the mental institution. Again, Anton was reminding him about the upcoming merger meeting between his father's company, Silverton Enterprises, and The Bass Ltd. later this morning.

Hunter rubbed his jaw in frustration. What role did he play anyway? He didn't actually have a part in the decisions of the company. All he ever did was entertain people and party. It was Anton who had to deal with all the merging.

Anton had been nagging him nonstop about work since the discussion of the merger came up. If he didn't know Anton any better, he would have assumed he was a woman. He'd tried escaping a few times just so he could get some peace and quiet (although his definition of peace and quiet usually meant squandering women at night, doing vigorous bedroom exercises with them), but Anton had always seemed to catch up to him.

Flicking the phone closed again, he got up, shuffled on his dirty clothes from last night, and made his way out the door while saying, "Sorry, Maisy, gotta go."

"It's Mary!" he heard her shriek as he pulled the door closed.

Hunter chuckled. God, he loved one-night stands. Even if those women got pissed with him, he would never have to face them again anyway. That was the beauty of it. He didn't have to deal with the heartbreak, heartache, or midnight blues.

Hunter had just one rule. Girls were like bed sheets—best changed every night. With the world at his fingertips, he got a chance at any girl he chose. It was like a variety of women presented to him on a silver tray. Chuckling at the thought, he slid into his red Ferrari, slammed the door shut, and drove off at a dangerously high speed. He owned the road.

Driving on the open road cleared his head a bit. When he saw the gate to Silverton Estate, an isolated area protected by guards all around, he swiveled the car to a brief stop to say hello to Chase, their security guard, then slowed to park outside the main entrance of Silverton Mansion after a further five-minute drive in.

Silverton Mansion was a colossal estate, covering many thousands of hectares. There were vineyards and orchards all around and a stream in front, boasting a scenic view year round.

The Silvertons owned many businesses. Under the parent umbrella, Silverton Enterprises, founded by his father Clinton Silverton, they owned department stores, farmlands, and various real estate, but his father's specialty was hotels. At the moment, they owned one in every city of New Zealand and Australia.

But Hunter couldn't understand his father's mind. With the amount of wealth he owned, why did his father choose to live in New Zealand, a country that was even smaller than the state of California? Not to mention the weather could sometimes be temperamental too.

Breathing a sigh of satisfaction after having not been to Silverton Estate for a good month, since most of the time he was cooped up in his private apartment in Central Auckland, Hunter stepped out of the car. Before he could fully straighten, a big golden terrier ran and tackled him.

"Hey, Dori." Hunter scratched the dog's ear as he rolled around on the ground. "Long time, no see, little bro."

In response, the dog just lay near Hunter's feet, wagging his tail, his tongue lopped out on one side in satisfaction.

"Hunter!" A deep voice sounded from inside the house.

"Crap!" he uttered. When he looked up, he saw his father heading his way. "Hey, Dad. How's life on this side of the equator?"

“Hunter, I’m going to strangle you,” Clinton Silverton said by way of greeting his only son. “Why did I send you to the States? You wasted my fortune!”

Hunter’s father, Clinton, had wanted him to go to the US to negotiate a deal. But his son had failed him. Not only that, but he had partied each night away and spent all the money meant for the expenditure of the deal on his midnight pleasures. He didn’t report back until Anton told him the news about the deal being off.

“Come on, Dad. People make mistakes. I’m sure we didn’t lose much.”

“We didn’t lose much?” Clinton’s face fumed with madness and he pulled at his hair in frustration with his no-good son.

“We lost a good three hundred grand,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Holy shit! That much?” Hunter asked, surprised. Surely he didn’t spend all that much. He knew the negotiation didn’t go well, so he assumed they would lose the deal anyway. Instead of coming home immediately, he stayed in the States a few days extra for some much needed holiday—the last one over two weeks prior. Plus, it was an extra bonus to see Fern, his best friend from college, too.

“That much,” Clinton confirmed.

“Look, Dad, I’m sorry. How about if I make it up to you somehow?” Hunter asked. He didn’t like to disappoint his father; the old man did fund his living expenses. Anything to make him happy.

“Good. You will go to the meeting today,” Clinton declared.

“No. Not the meeting,” he moaned. “You know how boring it is. The last time I was there, I fell asleep.”

“Well, you’ve got to learn somewhere. You’ll be taking over this empire pretty soon. I’m not going to be here forever,” Clinton said, persuading his son.

Clinton knew his son loved him and would never intentionally disappoint him. Sure, he was a little bit of a rotten egg once in a while, but the boy just needed some responsibility to toughen him up and straighten his path. This time he was sure to make his son take full responsibility, and good practice starts with having a good mentor. He was certain Anton would be his perfect mentor.

“Come now, Dad. Don’t talk like that.” Hunter led his father to the azalea trestle that shaded the roof from the sun, where there were a few outdoor seats. “Here, sit down.” He gestured for his father to take one of the seats and started massaging his father’s arms. “A young man like you will live up to a hundred years.”

“Only a hundred?” Clinton smiled at his son, a sparkle of love in his eyes, no longer angry.

“Okay, a hundred and fifty, then.” Hunter smiled, happy his father was no longer mad at him.

“I don’t need to live that long. I just want to see you and Anton get married, settle down, and have a family.”

“Well, for Anton, there won’t be a problem, but for me, well, let’s just wait and see how the future pans out.” He scratched his nose.

“Can’t you do this much for your old man?” Clinton asked in desperation.

Clinton knew he was getting old. He wanted his son to have a family. More importantly, he wanted a grandchild. He was way over sixty. His first wife, Andrea, conceived Hunter when she was in her early thirties, while Clinton was in his forties.

Once Hunter was born, his beautiful wife had passed away, due to cancer, leaving him to look after their baby.

He missed his wife dearly, still holding on to their cherished memories, but he really regretted having his son at such a late age. But Clinton was the type of man to look towards the future. He would not let his past gloom affect his judgment for the future. That was why it was imperative his son look for a girl now, to stop the cycle of conceiving a baby at an older age.

"Dad, I can't just go up to some random girl, ask her to sleep with me, then marry her. It doesn't work that way with me." Hunter interrupted his father's train of thought.

"You've been doing that already. So just ask the question once you've done with the sleeping bit." Clinton half-heartedly argued with his son's statement.

"Dad, I told you I can't. I need to love the girl. When my time comes, I'm sure I'll find the right one for me."

"But if you get the girl pregnant, wouldn't you *have* to marry her?" Clinton took in his son's suggestion, smiling at the thought. "Yes, that could be a very strong possibility. Then you could marry the girl."

"Dad, I won't get a girl pregnant. I practice safe sex, so don't dream about that," he declared.

"Well, how do you propose to go about getting a family, then? I'm not getting any younger. I want to see my son married." Clinton was back to square one again.

"I can't answer that for you." Hunter folded his arm and relaxed into the chair next to his father, having had enough of the massaging now, since his tactic of sweet action didn't work on his father. The man was just so adamant on finding him the perfect girl.

"You're not making this old man happy." Clinton moaned like a child whose toy had been taken away.

"Ah, come now, Dad. Stop acting like a kid." Hunter patted his father's hand in comfort. "I'll call Betty to make you your favourite chocolate cookies. Okay?" He turned towards the main house and shouted, "Betty, make Dad something to eat. He's upset again."

Betty was Hunter's stepmother, or more precisely their housemaid who had turned into his stepmother. His father had remarried when Hunter turned sixteen. No woman was like Betty. She was amazing. In fact, she was the only woman he could tolerate living in the same house. She was a sweet soul, and he was glad when she agreed to marry his father.

Betty, upon hearing Hunter's shout, came rolling out of the kitchen door at the back of the house, dressed in an apron, a rolling pin in her hand. Her face was white, covered in flour. *She must be baking again*, Hunter thought.

"Betty, what are you doing? You have flour all over your face," Hunter said as Betty got closer.

"I was cooking something for Clinton," she said, waving the rolling pin in her hand.

"Right," Hunter said, nodding his head.

Betty came closer and sniffed him.

"Master Hunter, did you bathe in alcohol? You stink. Go and clean up." Betty pushed Hunter towards the house entrance.

"I didn't bathe in it, Betty, but a maniac woman suddenly thought it would be fun to spray me with the alcohol she was about to ingest."

"Serves you right, Master Hunter, for always changing your women like you change your clothes."

"She's not my woman, Betty," Hunter retorted.

"I'm sure you'll be chasing her up until she becomes your woman. Am I right, Master Hunter?" Betty teased.

"Argh, all right, all right, enough with the master," Hunter said, wanting to shake his stepmother. She had been his mother for over six years now, and not once did she ever call him her son, always referring to him as *Master*. Maybe she was scared he might be like one of those kids who would resent her for marrying his father. Well, at first he did resent her for coming into his father's life, stealing away all his attention, but after seeing how Betty had lightened his father's life, he'd given in.

"If you want me to stop calling you master, then go get changed. Your odor is not so becoming here," Betty said, pushing Hunter even farther up the stairs after they all made it inside the grand foyer.

"All right, all right, enough, woman, enough," Hunter laughed, then made his way to his suite. "I'll get back at you for this, Betty."

Hunter smiled, watching his stepmother wind her little hands around his father's waist in a loving way, leading his old man to the main lounge. He shook his head, then went inside his room to wash away the stench that was staring to corrode his nostrils.

Life for me right now is beautiful, he thought as he stepped into the glory of the hot jet of water spraying from the showerhead. *Good food, good life, and not a worry in the world*. He had enough money to last him a lifetime, without having to work. What more could he ask for? He was blessed to have this gifted life, and he appreciated every bit of it.

Once clean and donning new clothes—Armani suit and a black silk tie—gelling back his blond hair, he surveyed himself in the tall closet mirror, identical to the one in his apartment in Central Auckland.

Hunter was dressed to impress, a sweeping image from head to toe. All the girls at the company would swoon at the sheer sight of him. He was completely sure even old Mrs. Crood, the moody cafeteria lady, would compliment him. He was ready to face the death-inducing boredom of the merger meeting at Silverton Enterprises.

An hour later, Hunter's prediction rang truer than a high-priced clairvoyant, as not fifteen minutes into the meeting, he found his eyes closing of their own accord. Everyone was speaking in jargon that he hadn't a clue as to its meaning. And then to top it all off, the tone of the speaker was so monotone it literally acted as more of a catalyst to lull him to sleep. A few times Anton had to wedge him in the stomach to jolt him awake.

"You fell asleep during the meeting," Anton hissed when they went out for their coffee break. "How could you do that? Uncle asked you specifically to attend this meeting so you could learn, and here you were sleeping. Where is this going to put his head now?"

"Where it always is. On his shoulders," Hunter said, sipping his coffee casually, not realizing it was piping hot until he took in a good gulp and ending up scalding his tongue, spitting the entire contents out, and hanging his tongue out like Dori.

"Serves you right, Hunter," Anton said, giving him some tissue to wipe the coffee off his face.

After blotting away the remaining liquid, Hunter picked up the cup again and glared at his cousin. "What do you mean serves me right?"

"For sleeping during the meeting," Anton said. "It's karma, Hunter, karma."

"Karma my ass. What am I supposed to do? The meeting was so damn boring. Why can't they hire a better guy to speak?"

"Hunter, stop being a kid and start acting like an adult," Anton lectured his cousin. "Boring or not, you're here to listen to what the other side says. Uncle needs you to carry on the line here."

"He doesn't need me. He already has you." Hunter blew his steaming coffee now.

"I'm only his nephew, not his direct offspring. Plus, I'm not fit for this." Anton resigned to his fate as only second in charge despite being named the best CEO of Silverton Enterprises in *E Magazine* twice in a year.

Anton was Hunter's only cousin. When both of his parents passed away, Clinton became his guardian. He worked hard to repay his debt, thus working nonstop to help gain his uncle's respect while his little cousin grew up. Now the time was right for Hunter to step forth and take the role of CEO, but looking at his cousin's behavior now, lying back on the chair like he hadn't a care in the world, like he was some sort of prince waiting for his next consort, it would be a long way yet before the throne was acceded.

"If you're not fit for this, then I'm worse off," Hunter confessed, stopping Anton's train of thought.

"You need to step up your game." Anton offered Hunter his advice. "Stop partying and start taking things seriously. Money isn't always on our side. We have to work for it."

"We have all the money in the world." Hunter laughed casually. "I won't have to worry about working for the rest of my life."

"Don't you have any goals, any responsibility?" Anton questioned his cousin.

"Yeah, I do. And that is to have as much fun as possible before I reach your age."

"Hunter, I'm only thirty one."

"That's right. That's why I still have a good eight years to go yet before putting my head down to work."

"But I started working way before your age."

"That's because it was old time. Now it's the new age. I don't need to slave and work for money. And besides, you guys can support me."

"We're not always going to be here for you, you know. You have to learn to earn your own money too."

"Until then," Hunter said, folding his arms behind his head and relaxing further against his chair, "this Hunter here will only have one goal in life. And that, cousin, is to have as much fun as possible."

"God, there's no getting into your head, is there?" Anton said, frustrated.

"Not at all, cousin, not at all," Hunter said, his eyes drifting closed, fully relaxed now, taking in the glory of the afternoon sunlight.

Hunter loved coming into the company at this time of day. There were hardly any employees around and no office girl peeking at him like he was some sort of Greek god. Oh, wait, he did resemble a Greek god, but that was beside the point. He loved the

cafeteria best, with its large skylight that allowed sunlight to pour in. Whenever he had to frequent the company, he would make sure to sit here to get the maximum amount of sunlight.

Anton sighed at his cousin in defeat. "And where were you last night? I called many times. Were you clubbing again?"

"You read my mind, cousin. You read my mind," Hunter murmured in reply.

"Hunter, I don't know what to do with you."

"You don't have to do anything. Just let me be myself."

"Obviously I can't. Here, for you," Anton said, extracting a card from his coat pocket and placing it on the table in front of Hunter.

"What's that?" Hunter asked, opening his eyes and gesturing to the card.

"Uncle arranged a meeting for you with this woman," Anton said.

"A woman?" Hunter asked, sitting up straighter, his interest now piqued. "Is she hot?"

"Don't know. But Uncle wants you to meet her."

"Don't tell me Dad wants to match-make me. I'm not ready for that shit yet."

"I don't know. Uncle didn't say more."

"I just bloody saw him this morning. Why didn't he say anything?"

"Again, don't know," Anton answered. "But will you go?"

"Well, yeah. If she's hot," Hunter stated as if it were the most obvious answer.

Anton just shook his head, giving up entirely on trying to change his cousin's behavior. He only wished something would befall his playboy of a cousin so he could learn his lesson and step up to the real world.

CHAPTER 5

It was a disaster from the very moment Clarice walked through the door of the dental surgery. Firstly, there were loud popping sounds, making her nervous to the core. Then there was that birthday song, followed by the firing of questions like, *What are you going to do now that you've turned thirty?* and, *Will there be a ring anytime soon?*

A ring? Why would there be a ring on her finger. She had never even gone on date, let alone known anyone who would want to put a ring on her finger. Who were they asking, a supermodel with a size-two figure?

Once she managed to escape the clucking dental assistants, she headed towards the reception desk.

"Why are you looking all gloomy today, Clarice?" Gracey, the receptionist, asked. "It was your birthday over the weekend, wasn't it? Did you get lots of presents?"

"Yes, lots." Clarice smiled.

"Your patients left a few for you too." Gracey gestured to the staff table where there was an abundance of wrapped gifts.

"Really? Not again." Clarice went to the table, and sure enough, presents ranging from flowers to chocolate hearts sat on the table, all from the patients that regularly attended their dental surgery.

"Do you have a man yet?" Gracey asked.

"No," Clarice answered glumly.

"Then my suggestion is to pick one of those," Gracey said, referring to Clarice's patients.

"No way. They're my patients. We know the policy of patient care. Do not date your patients while they are under your care."

"You could always date the man, then let him change practices."

"I'm sorry, but I love money too much." Clarice giggled. "I wouldn't want him to change practices, now would I? I might lose all that money he spends on his gum treatments."

"Yeah, yeah. But happy birthday, Clarice. I wish you all the best now that you're thirty. All the wiser for the next ten years."

"Thank you." Clarice nodded, smiling.

"Do you feel wiser, more experienced in love... I mean life?"

"Yes, I am very well experienced in life, regarding working for money and owning my own business, but for that love bit... I admit I'm as rusty as a box of nails left out in the rain."

"You, girl, have to go out more."

"Oh, but I did!" Clarice grinned at Gracey, as if she were hiding some sort of secret.

"Before you turned thirty?" Gracey asked.

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"I went to a nightclub."

"Really?"

“Yep.”

“And...?”

“It was a disaster.” Clarice frowned.

“Disaster, like how?” Gracey gasped in horror.

“Not telling,” Clarice said cheekily. “I’ll let you think on that one. Now what’s today’s schedule like?” She changed the subject, not wishing to discuss how embarrassing it was to spit that spirit onto that man’s face and shirt. She couldn’t help admiring his baby-blue shirt, though. From her early days as a sales assistant working in the menswear department in Farmers, she knew the material must be very expensive.

“Clarice, you meanie. I’ll find out for sure from one of your friends, just you wait.”

“Aye, aye.” She just winked at her.

If Gracey wanted to find out about what happened to her after the embarrassing episode, then even Elise and Whitney couldn’t answer her question. After she spit on the man, she ran away to the restroom and stayed there until she texted her friends to collect her. What a pleasant way to spend her special day. Leaning against the wall between the sinks and the paper towel dispenser, she swore she would never, ever drink again.

“So what’s on the agenda?” Clarice asked again.

“Today’s schedule is packed. As always. The patients just love you.”

“Why thank you. Always good to hear.”

“At 9:00, Mrs. Bennett is coming for a suture removal from that crown lengthening procedure you did last week. 9:15 a.m., Mr. Bronze is coming in for an implant consult. I scheduled him for forty-five minutes just in case you want to do the advance periodontal charting and all that. Then Miss Brown is coming in for a gum graft consult at 10:00 a.m. Says she’s not happy with her roots showing. From what I know, I think she uses a firm toothbrush to scrub her teeth,” Gracey whispered to Clarice.

Gracey had never worked in the dental field before. She got very upset when everyone started speaking in dental terminology. She said she felt like an alien being dropped on Earth, as she was the only one who hadn’t a clue what the *one-one* or *three-six* was. She had made it her mission to learn every single term the dental team used. Now she knew the tooth denotation and even told her back in laymen’s terms that a one-one was an upper right central incisor and a three-six was a bottom left first molar. And for every surgery that was spoken in dental terms, she would translate it back in laymen’s terms. And it was Clarice’s job, being the big boss and the specialist of the practice, to always correct Gracey if she ever made a mistake.

“That’s why a majority of the time, patients having gum recession tend to want a gingival graft,” Clarice added.

“Again, I gave her forty-five minutes so you could talk to her properly. You get a break at 10:45. Then at 11:00, you have Mrs. Beanstalk coming in for her deep scaling. She said she’s allergic to adrenaline local anesthetic, so I asked Molly to stock up on some Citanest cartridges for you. You know how fussy she is.”

“Not *the* Mrs. Macy Beanstalk.” Clarice whined and rested her head on the reception countertop. She was getting a headache already just hearing the name.

Mrs. Macy Beanstalk was nothing like her name. She wasn’t tall or stalk-like. If Clarice were able to rename Mrs. Beanstalk, she would call her Mrs. Muffin because the woman was just so round. And she talked a lot. There were many subjects she talked

about, so Clarice just wished today's topic wouldn't linger on husbands and babies, because she didn't want to hear it at the moment.

Husband + babies + over thirty = a bad combination for Clarice.

"It's all right. You could always shut her up with a suction in her mouth. Or even better, just drown the woman. Give her a lesson in not talking too much," Gracey suggested.

"I would love to shut her up, as you say, but we can't go around drowning our patients, now can we? I might lose my practicing certificate."

"You are right, Dr. Clarice Chantee Mason."

"Thank you, Gracey, but tell me this. Why do all my patients' names start with B today?"

"I have no idea. Probably fate," Gracey suggested.

"Aye, aye, maybe fate," Clarice said. Maybe fate would lead her to her future husband too.

The first thing Clarice did when she crossed the threshold of her surgery was to close her eyes and inhale the fresh, clean scent. It smelled of sterile equipment and alcohol. The scent still lingered even after the cleaners had done their job.

Clarice really liked coming into the clinic at this time of the morning, when everything was so peaceful. The tick-tocking of the clock drew her attention. She gave a sigh. Another thirty minutes to go before Mrs. Bennett was due for her stitch removal.

Just then, Molly popped her head into the door.

"Good morning, Clarice," she greeted cheerfully.

"Good morning, Molly," Clarice replied, smiling at the young girl.

Molly was her dental assistant. She was very young, only nineteen. She decided at seventeen that she wanted to become a dental assistant. Now her dream had come true.

Good for her, Clarice thought, for already deciding what she wants out of life.

"Has Gracey briefed you yet on today's schedule?"

"Only for the morning." Clarice logged on to the computer system and clicked on Mrs. Bennett's name. Her file came on the screen, and she started reading it.

"Would you like me to get some Savacol for Mrs. Bennett? She might have run out already," Molly asked.

"Yes, thanks," Clarice said without tearing her eyes off the screen. "Oh, and bring me the interdental brushes too. I might need them for Mrs. Beanstalk. We have to make sure she's cleaning between her teeth."

"Sure," Molly answered, then disappeared into the storeroom to retrieve all the necessary equipment.

The day was as uneventful as chalk and cheese. Time crawled by like a snail race, and soon Mrs. Macy Beanstalk arrived. Today the subject of their conversation was women over thirty having no family, the one subject Clarice had hoped to avoid.

"So, you know, my friend, she's thirty-six and not a single baby coming her way."

"Why?" Clarice pretended to sound interested. That was one part of her job that she disliked. To pretend to be interested in her patients' conversation when in reality, her mind was in La-La Land.

"Too old, that's what. If you want a baby, you've got to have them before you turn thirty-five."

“Is that a fact?” Clarice asked just in case Mrs. Beanstalk was lying to her. She needed to do some research first before believing in what this patient said.

“Of course it is.” The lady continued.

Against her better judgment, this conversation was starting to scare her. She knew she wanted a family, but what if what Mrs. Beanstalk was saying held truth? She’d already turned thirty. Not too long now before her body could no longer conceive a child. But she couldn’t just go to some random person and ask them to donate sperm for her, right?

The more she thought about it, the more it seemed true. Then an idea struck her. Oh, what a perfect solution to her problem. She couldn’t wait to get home and ring Elise and Whitney.

All right, enough talking, Mrs. Beanstalk, Clarice thought. Time to put that suction to good use.

CHAPTER 6

"I'm going to find a partner?" Clarice announced to her friends on a three-way phone call.

"What?" Both Elise and Whitney said in unison.

"You're looking for a partner? Like a business partner for your dental clinic or a life partner?" Whitney asked, while Elise listened in the background.

"No, a partner to help me create a baby... and maybe to become my life partner," Clarice answered proudly.

"You're saying you want to meet a guy and get him to sleep with you in hopes that he will see you as a potential life partner?" Whitney asked again, thoroughly shocked at Clarice's declaration.

"That's precisely it, Whitney. That's why *E Magazine* has made you president of their company. You're so genius." Clarice giggled nervously.

"You're kidding me, right? Tell me you're kidding me," Whitney asked. She couldn't believe her friend would utter something like this. This wasn't April, so no April Fools' jokes here.

"I'm not kidding, Whitney," Clarice said.

"What brought all this up?" Elise interjected for the first time.

"It was because of Mrs. Beanstalk."

"Who's Mrs. Beanstalk again?" Elise asked.

"Clarice's patient who talks a lot, a colleague who works under me. She always babbles on about some really weird subjects. Even at work," Whitney answered.

"So what did Mrs. Beanstalk say?" Elise asked.

"That women over age thirty-five have a harder time conceiving a baby. Plus, there are other complications. I knew this from my pre-dentistry studies, but had never given it much thought until now. I'm actually quite scared about the whole prospect of living by myself for the rest of my life. If I have a child, then the child will be with me for at least the next two decades. Then if my child decides to have children, all the better for me, as I will have grandchildren to keep me company. Now I know how Mum and Dad felt when they thought I would die while being delivered in the refugee camp."

"Will you tell your parents, though, about your plan?" Whitney asked.

"I'll tell them when I find the right guy for my baby," Clarice declared. "So would you guys help me out?" she pleaded.

"Since you've put it that way, of course."

"We'll be right over in a jiffy," Elise threw in.

"Thanks, guys." Clarice put the phone down and sighed in relief. She just hoped her splendid idea wouldn't backfire. She really wanted to meet someone nice and have a good future together, if not for herself, then for her baby.

An hour later, the girls congregated at Clarice's house, deep in discussion mode.

"So what are your criteria?" Whitney asked, getting straight to the point.

"Handsome, sensible, not a flirt, loyal, intelligent, tall, an IQ over 150, treats a woman well, and is over thirty," Clarice listed.

"Wow, that's an impressive list," Whitney said.

"How are you going to find someone like that?" Elise asked.

"You should go on a dating site." Max spoke from behind them, giving them a good fright.

"Maximilian!" all three said at once.

"What?" Max asked, gawking at their startled faces, and laughed.

"Warn us if you're going to visit like this." Clarice slapped her cousin's arm.

"Oww." Max feigned pain, then went to Elise and rested his head on her shoulder.

"Elise, help me. My cousin is abusing me again."

"That's because you surprised us," Clarice yelled.

"If I don't come in like that, I won't get to catch your great facial expressions. That doesn't include you, Elise. You're my favourite. I wouldn't do that to you."

All Elise did was smile, while the other two fumed.

"All right, all right. I'm sure Max didn't mean you any harm. It was a pleasant surprise after all," Elise soothed.

"Yes, a pleasant surprise indeed. Maybe next time I'm going to surprise *you* with a potion that makes you so sick you won't be able to attend school," Whitney suggested.

"For real, Whitney? Make me a potion now. I could use a little break from classes." Max went from Elise's shoulder to tugging on Whitney's sleeve, like a little puppy begging for affection.

"No, Max. Now, stop acting like a five-year-old and start acting your age. We're in the middle of a discussion here."

"What? About finding you a partner, cuz?" Max asked.

"Yes, Max," Clarice said.

"Why?"

"Because I need the sperm," Clarice answered, deadpan.

"Yep, I think a dating site would be perfect," Max responded, jumping up to get the laptop from his cousin's office.

"Really, a dating site?" Whitney asked in disgust, watching Max carry the pink laptop into the room.

"Yep. Have you girls heard about it?" Max said while firing up the laptop inputting passwords and everything."

"How did you know my password, Max?" Clarice asked suspiciously.

"I know everything about everything, cuz," Max responded cheekily.

"I'm changing my passwords after this," Clarice added.

Once the laptop was booted up, all the girls came to sit around Max while he typed furiously in the address bar, navigating to the website.

"Most of the time these days, soul mates meet this way," Max explained. He loved it when all his sisters, as he liked to call them, gave him their undivided attention. He felt special. "Plus, they have lots of intelligent guys too, so plenty of good sperm for you to choose from."

"A dating site." Clarice pondered. "Doesn't sound too bad."

When Max reached the site, he gestured for Clarice to look.

"Youandme.co.nz?" Clarice read the name of the website. "Is that it?"

"Yep." Max typed again, going from one page to the next. "It's pretty popular at the moment."

All Clarice and the others could do was watch while Max continued to enter this and that until it came to a particular page.

"All right, here we are. Okay, cuz. Now you take it from here." Max swapped places with Clarice so now she was sitting in front of the screen. "Type your name."

"You want me to register on this website?" Clarice asked, not quite convinced.

"Yes. If you don't do this, then you're not going to meet anyone," Max remarked. "Unless you want to turn into a sour old grape, then that's no problem."

"All right, I get it. No need to be sarcastic." Clarice huffed in annoyance. She started entering her details.

"There, go there." Max pointed to the criteria icon. "Put your list of criteria here. It matches you up with your desired person."

Clarice did as she was told. She typed in her list, one by one. Then it popped up with the age group she wanted to date, ranging from twenty all the way up to sixty.

Clarice selected the two age groups from twenty-five to thirty-five. She didn't want to date anyone over thirty-five. Their sperm might not be functioning properly. Selecting anyone younger than twenty-five would be bad as well. She didn't want to date a kid straight out of high school. By the time he grew up, her ovaries might not be functioning properly anymore.

Max, on the other hand, took matters into his own hands and selected the twenty to twenty-five age group as well, then pressed submit.

"Max! I am *not* dating anyone under twenty-five." Clarice swatted her cousin's hands off the keyboard.

Elise dropped her apple with a thud, which in turn drew everyone's attention to her.

"Sorry," Elise said, fully aware of the many eyes staring at her. "I'll just throw this one away and grab another one. Is that all right, Clarice?"

"Sure, Max can get one for you," Clarice offered, easily brushing aside the incident.

"No, I'll get it myself. Max needs to help you with the site," Elise said, rushing to the kitchen.

While Clarice and Max went back to typing, Whitney eyed her friend's strange behavior with suspicion. Elise, the calm and collected one, was never like this, not since she returned from Australia three years ago anyway. What happened there? Why would she act like this? Whitney would sure drum the answer out of Elise once she had the opportunity.

"All done," the other two shouted in Whitney's ears, cutting off her thoughts.

"Calm down, you two. It's only a man," Whitney said.

"Yes, yes, I know. I know you don't mind being a spinster, but I do. My maternal instinct is yelling out to me to find myself a man and have a family. But I'm not dating anyone under twenty." Clarice glared at her cousin.

"I'm starving," Max said, rubbing his stomach. "All that talking and typing about soul mates and babies made me famished. Anyone up for pizza tonight?"

"No thanks. Please grab Cambodian instead. I want my usual rice rolls. Make that prawn, please," Whitney said, not taking her gaze from the laptop screen.

"Why are we having Cambodian again?" Max whined. "I want pizza. Clarice, say you want pizza too."

"Sorry, Max, but I don't feel like pizza tonight. Cambodian it is," Clarice said, bursting Max's bubble.

“You two, sticking together like glue. Fine. Elise?” Max shouted.

“Yes.” Elise came from the bathroom.

Where’s the apple from the kitchen? Whitney thought.

None of the others paid her any heed, but Whitney was very aware of her surroundings. Elise looked upset, like she had been crying or something. She needed to talk to the girl tonight, since Clarice was too preoccupied with her baby talk and all that. The only way to clear the air would be to suss it all out.

“Elise, tell me which one you like.” Max went to wind his arm around Elise again. “Cambodian or pizza?”

“I...” Elise spoke, tossing up whether to go for the healthy option of Cambodian, their favourite cuisine, or pizza as Max wanted.

“Elise, we need your answer,” Max urged. “You’re the last vote. I’m losing right now, two to one. You’ve got to choose pizza, please,” Max pleaded, making his signature puppy dog eyes at her. Elise felt a sting in her chest but pushed it away again.

“We could always get both.” Elise finally spoke. “It’s hard for me to choose. Why don’t we go together, Max? I’ll drive,” Elise suggested, taking her keys out of her bag.

“No, I want to drive.” Max took the keys from Elise’s hand.

“But you’ve only got a restricted. I have a full.”

“All the more reason for me to practice driving with a fully grown, licensed adult beside me.” Max smiled cheekily. “Now let’s go. I’m dying of starvation here.”

“Okay, okay.” Elise turned to Clarice and Whitney. “Be back in a bit.”

“Yes. Please grab me the char noodles with seafood,” Clarice shouted, her face now glued to the screen also.

“I know, your all-time favourite.”

“Okay, everyone already told us what they want. Now let’s go. I’m dying here.”

“Yes, yes, Max, let’s go.” Elise ruffled his hair playfully. Then they both headed out the door.

As soon as the door closed, Whitney turned to Clarice right away.

“We need to talk.”

“I’m all ears.” Clarice had always been more in tune with Whitney, but all three needed each other; otherwise, they wouldn’t be called the three musketeers in high school or the three spinsters now. No, wait, at the moment, she was the only spinster who had turned thirty. Whitney’s birthday was coming up soon. As for Elise, she was a good three years behind at only twenty-seven.

“About Elise...” Whitney started.

“What about her?”

“She’s not happy.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“Of course you wouldn’t notice. You were too consumed with finding the man to give you a baby.”

“I’m sorry. Am I being too forward with my desire for a family? So much that it’s impacting you? I’m sorry. I sound quite selfish now.”

“Look, Clarice, I don’t mind you looking for a life partner. Stop apologizing, for God’s sake. I want to talk about Elise, for you to keep an eye out for her. She doesn’t seem too happy these days.”

“Yes, I suppose she’s still not over her parents’ deaths.”

“That could be it.”

“We should do something to cheer her up.”

“We could. But we need to clear the air first. See what’s bogging her mind right now. See if she wants to tell us what the problem is.”

“Yes.” Clarice agreed.

That night after they finished their delicious meal of pizza, char noodles, rice rolls, and char satay, Max left, saying he needed to head back to his apartment to finish his homework. Once all was silent, Clarice eyed Whitney silently, signaling whether it would be the perfect time to speak.

With Whitney’s confirming nod, Clarice began her enquiry.

“Elise, we need to talk.”

Elise looked startled, dropping her chicken nibble into her peanut sauce.

“What about?” she asked, avoiding Clarice’s eyes.

“Why you’re always so easily startled like this,” Whitney said simply.

“What’s wrong? You can tell us.” Clarice reassured her friend.

“It’s nothing,” Elise said without looking at them.

“Nothing? Then why are you like this?” Whitney asked in frustration. The last time she saw something resembling this was after her parents’ death, and she didn’t like the outcome at all. Elise had almost committed suicide, saying there was no one left in Australia for her, as she was an only child. It was only when Clarice and Whitney went to help Elise and told her to move here that she even resembled a human being again.

Elise stayed silent again. Expelling a deep sigh, Clarice went to hug her friend.

“Look, I respect you, Elise, and if you want to keep it to yourself for now, then that’s fine too. We just want you to know you have us,” Clarice said, hugging her friend. She knew the feeling, having refused to speak up when people bullied her when she was young. Clarice didn’t want to pressure her friend into confessing anything until she was ready.

“We’ll stay by your side no matter what happened,” Whitney added. “And we’ll give you our undivided attention.”

“Yes, when the time comes, we’ll all be here for you,” Clarice said. “Max included.”

“Thank you, guys. I love you so much.” Elise hugged both of her friends. Somehow it would be a long time yet before she could tell her friends what she had been storing in this heart of hers. But it wasn’t the time yet, and she prayed it would never come, hoping and wishing she would never have to face that moment, hoping and wishing this feeling within her heart would one day fade away.

“I miss my parents,” she finally said, just to stop their curiosity for now.

“I miss them too. Just know we’ll always be there for you,” Clarice said.

“Same here.”

And then they all went into a little emotional downpour, with tears and snot mixed together. Three boxes of Kleenex later, Elise finally broke the silence.

“Enough about me. I can’t wait to see who’s first on your dating list,” Elise said, jumping to the laptop. Whitney followed, sitting on the other side.

“There’s a list of potential suitors already?” Elise eyed the screen.

Clarice, interested now and eager to see that list, squeezed herself between her two friends. She looked at the different profiles of the many males on display.

“They sure matched it fast,” Clarice exclaimed at the staggering number that appeared on screen.

“Life is all about living in the fast lane now,” Whitney said. “Here, let’s see. Mmm, looks impressive.”

“That one looks nice. Pleasant, with glasses,” Elise suggested, pointing to a man with mousy brown hair. “What’s his name, Darcy or something?”

“No, too dorky. He needs to be professional-looking. I don’t want Clarice’s man to be dorky,” Whitney said.

“Well, how about this one? He seems nice.” Elise pointed to another profile on the screen.

“Elise, you can’t judge if someone is nice or not by their looks,” Whitney said.

“But you just judged that man by his looks. You said he was dorky,” Elise countered.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” Whitney apologized.

“Enough, you two. It’s *my* man we’re looking for. He needs to be attractive to me. Not you two,” Clarice shouted at both of them. She was getting a headache again. Dear heaven, all this talk about babies and partners was really draining her energy.

“Okay, okay. Calm down, Clarice,” they both said. They both knew when Clarice got mad not to go near her. It was like a gentle pig transforming into a wild bore right in front of their eyes.

“Now we just have to wait until tomorrow to see which one they pair you with first,” Elise said simply, sitting back to watch the laptop screen as more profiles popped up.

“Yes,” Clarice said, looking forward to her very first date with the man that could potentially be the father of her baby... and maybe more. She was looking forward to tomorrow indeed.

CHAPTER 7

Hunter stared at the rigid woman in front of him, sitting straight like a jukebox with palms folded on top of each other, her eyes looking intently at the tablecloth, as if finding the embroidered fabric so fascinating. He took his time to eye her. She was of reasonable height, thinly built with glossy blond hair parted to the left of her face, displaying dangling silver earrings. If he could describe her, she would be classified as pretty but definitely not his type. Hunter's style would be petite, with voluptuous breasts that would fit right into his hands. This woman couldn't be more than an A-cup.

"So," he said, trying to think of any topic at all to converse about, but none came to his mind. They'd been in the restaurant for well over fifteen minutes, but all she said in that amount of time was her name, Caroline, and her order to the waitress.

Where did his dad find these women? What kind of deal were they thinking of doing? And why must he play a part in their stupid arrangement anyway?

Hunter tapped his finger on the tablecloth. If he didn't say anything soon, he was sure his brain would combust from boredom. He needed a distraction. His eyes glanced around the restaurant.

It was a beautiful construction, a classic red, gold, and white theme. Anton had booked the reservation, boasting that the food was fantastic. He had never been to a Cambodian restaurant before, but Anton had an excellent palate, so Hunter trusted his judgment.

The area they sat in was a very secluded spot, nestled up on the second level overlooking Auckland Harbor. *Must be the VIP section*, Hunter thought. At this time of evening, the sun kissed the sea, showing off a brilliant yellow-orange hue on the calm water below. The quiet melodic music and the dimly lit lampshades created a romantic atmosphere. But he didn't feel romantic in the least. Well, not with the jukebox lady anyway. Now if it were a beautiful petite woman sitting in front of him, then it would be a different story. Heck, even the woman that spat on him last week would be better than the jukebox now.

Hunter continued to eye his surroundings. There were only two other occupied tables—one with an elderly couple eating noodles and another with a young man, slightly younger than him, holding a pink rose.

Pink rose? Blind date maybe. In fact, he was intrigued now as to who might be this mysterious girl who would soon make her appearance. He was glad he was sitting facing the entrance, as this gave him ample opportunity to glance at the door every few seconds without twisting his neck in the process. But after a good five minutes, he grew bored again. Trying to think of a way to make time go faster, he decided to go to the bathroom and clear his head a bit. The chair made a screech as he pushed it out.

"Where are you going?" Caroline asked, looking nervously up from the table.

What was her problem? Why was she so afraid to speak to him?

He took in the sight of the jukebox in front of him, her eyes scattering from left to right. She definitely reminded him of a timid mouse desperately wanting to steal the cheese but afraid the cat would get her. Well, obviously he would be the cat, but come on. It wasn't like he was going to bite her if she came after his cheese. But maybe he

would, if she were his type. Then he would nip her on the neck and take her straight to bed. But in this case, it wouldn't happen.

"Bathroom," he answered. He eyed her mischievously before further saying, "Wanna join me?"

Hunter couldn't help it because he wanted to check her response, whether she would jump out of her chair in fright or just timidly look down again at that tablecloth like a scared mouse.

Both didn't happen. Caroline looked shock instead to hear him say this. What could he say? Of course she should be shocked by his suggestion. Then again, most sensible girls would be shocked to be in his presence anyway. So her reply was a vigorous shake of her head.

"Thought so," he commented. "Be right back."

* * *

Through the restaurant window, Clarice stared at the young man sitting near the large flower arrangement, twisting a pink rose in his hand. The man had shaggy brown hair that would benefit from a cut. His face was adorned with square-framed lenses.

It was him, the one youandme.co.nz had emailed to her last night. Her very first date.

He looked... young. Very young.

Would he find her repulsive if he knew her true age?

No, he looked pleasant. Yes, pleasant. That was what Elise would say. Pleasant men would never hold a grudge against age.

Staring at the man again, Clarice's heart did a little jump, not because she found the man beautiful and handsome, but because she was so nervous. Was this the man who she wanted her baby to look like? Would he be the one? As more thoughts clouded her mind, she began shaking all over again.

"Get a grip of yourself, Clarice." She shook herself. "You will not behave this way. This is your first date. I expect a good turnout."

Her eyes reverted back to the man through the window. What was she saying? This was her first date; that was why she was feeling out of sorts. She had to go to the restroom first. Clear her head and compose herself before showing herself to him.

Clarice knew the layout of the Cambodian restaurant like the back of her hand since she frequented it so many times with her friends, so her escape through the door and to the bathroom without anyone even spotting her was an easy task. Just as she was about to make it to the women's door around the corner, though, she unexpectedly collided with a large body mass, exerting enough force that it sent her toppling onto the floor. Before her body made impact with the dark tiles, she saw an arm and hung on to that arm for dear life, hoping it would provide her with some support to stop her fall, but in the end, she ended up sprawled on the floor anyway. A second later, she felt her lips smashed against something soft, and that was when she lost all sense of herself.

Clarice's heart went into a horse gallop before ending at the finish line at a sprint, and then her head decided to go on a roller coaster spin. Swarms of butterflies fluttered inside her stomach and her lungs were once again seized by an asthmatic attack. While all of this was happening, she kept her eyes closed tight.

Clarice realized that whatever had smashed against her lips must be other lips. Those soft, supple lips moved slowly along the contours of her own mouth, nipping softly here and there. She felt she was on cloud nine. Was this what a first kiss should feel like? Because even though she was inexperienced, she wanted to try out some more. It was thoroughly addicting.

Was this chemistry? Who was this man that just kissed her? Would he be the father of her baby? Would she be brave enough to ask for his sperm? All of these questions buzzed in her head without any answer. Curious, she opened her eyes slowly and was once again at a loss for speech as the person who had just kissed her was actually the one person she had wished she would never see again.

“You!” Clarice finally uttered in shock, shame, embarrassment, and surprise.

She tried to push Hunter off but was unsuccessful. When she was about to scramble out from underneath him, he toppled over backwards and in turn pulled her along with him too. Now she was lying on top of him, kissing his cheek.

Clarice’s cheeks warmed in a bashful pink flush. Embarrassed, she swiftly got up from the awkward position, straightening out her clothing to resemble some form of normality.

“Did you enjoy that?” Hunter asked with a smirk on his face, his eyes twinkling in wicked amusement when he got up to straighten his clothing too.

Hunter couldn’t believe his luck when he saw the woman from the club the other day. And here he just kissed her. Man, that was amazing. Not like that sloppy kiss from the other girl at all.

Clarice, who saw Hunter smirking at her, just wanted to shout at him for causing her this much distress. No one had ever been that close to her before. No one had ever kissed her before. In actual fact, that was her very first kiss, and it had to be in front of a goddamn bathroom.

“I…”

“Wait. Don’t talk,” Hunter interrupted when an idea popped into his head. “Stay right there,” he instructed her.

Clarice was too stunned to react, as in the next second, a white flash blinded her vision, making her blink a few times until it returned to normal again. And then she realized Hunter had just taken a picture of her with his iPhone.

“What was that for?” she asked, aghast.

“Evidence,” Hunter stated simply, saving the image to his phone.

“Evidence?” Clarice asked.

“Yes.”

“For what?” she asked, flabbergasted at the whole outcome.

“So I can sue you.”

“Sue me? Why?” Clarice was confused.

“Because A: you just kissed me without my permission, and B: you spat on my shirt.”

Was this Casanova for real? *She* kissed *him* without permission and now *he* was suing *her*? Shouldn’t she sue him because he stole her first kiss?

Clarice wanted to curse herself. After a restless night, dreaming about her first real date—which hopefully would lead to something more, aka husband and/or father of her child—she couldn’t believe she had to meet this Casanova again.

“Okay, let me make this clear. A: I did not kiss *you*. It was an accident. Obviously, you needed glasses because you can’t see where you’re going. You bumped into me, and then *you* kissed me.”

“Not from my perspective,” Hunter interjected. “A: you were walking like you were dawdling with the fairies. When I saw you, I was gonna talk to you about my ruined shirt, but then you had to bump into me first. Then you even dragged me down and kissed me without my consent.”

“I didn’t kiss you without your permission,” Clarice argued.

“Oh, like I’m gonna give you permission to kiss me, then. You’re not my type,” Hunter lied. He didn’t need to give her permission to kiss him. She could smash those lips into him again and he wouldn’t give a fig. In fact, he wouldn’t mind doing it all over again, right here, right now, in front of the women’s restroom. This woman was so definitely his type.

“You are so not my type either,” Clarice retorted. “Arrrgghhh, how come every time I see you, you always managed to embarrass me?” she grumbled to herself, dusting invisible specks off her clothes.

“You’re one to talk. You spat at me when last we met. Remember? Not to mention yanking off my towel when you delivered those flowers. In fact, I should sue you for that too.”

“It was to the wrong address. I didn’t confess to you or anything. And regarding the spitting incident, you were in the wrong,” Clarice explained.

“I was in the wrong?” Hunter questioned. “How am I in the wrong when you were the one that spat on me?”

“You were in the wrong because you were the one who bought me that stupid drink. It tasted so disgusting. What was I supposed to do with that foul potion in my mouth? Swallow it? Of course not. I had to throw it up somewhere. If I died from that poison, then you would be the number one suspect on the list. And if I got sick, then you would be held responsible.” Clarice jabbed at Hunter’s chest to show she meant business.

“People don’t die of drinking spirits. And look at you. You seem healthy enough to me.”

“I wouldn’t be if I didn’t throw up,” Clarice argued.

“All right, why on me, then?”

“You were right in my face.”

“Well... well...” Hunter thought. Shit, he needed a good comeback. This woman was throwing him into a corner. He’d never lost a verbal battle before. When he couldn’t think of any other accusation or retort to stab back at her, he went back to the beginning. “You were the one to ask me to buy that drink, remember, acting all cute and innocent.” There, surely he was in the right now. *Can’t argue with that one*, he thought, grinning.

“Ha-ha-ha, I want to laugh. I did not act all cute and innocent. You were the one who came on to me. You came and sat next to me first,” Clarice challenged.

“Well, that’s because you were all alone, sitting there by yourself, looking so miserable that I had to rescue you,” Hunter rebutted.

“From what? From hungry predators looking for nice, innocent prey for dinner that night? I bet you were that hunter, you Casanova!” Clarice shouted.

Thinking they were both on an even score now, she grinned secretly.

Oh, how true her meaning is, Hunter thought. This Hunter, acting like a hunter, did prey on innocent young girls some nights—oh, who was he kidding—almost every night actually.

“You’re wrong, sweetheart. I was only there to protect you. You looked so innocent sitting there by yourself. What could a gentleman like me do? Leave you as easy game for the others.”

“Mister, I had friends there so there was no need for your protection. And for your information, I am well over the young and innocent age,” Clarice explained.

“Still claiming to be thirty, sweetheart? You don’t look anything over twenty to me.”

“You think I’m lying?” Clarice asked in disbelief.

“I’m just stating what I see,” Hunter said, eyeing her body.

“Fine. If you don’t believe me, I’ll prove it to you.” Clarice rummaged through her bag, searching for her wallet.

She needed to clean out her bag someday. It was seriously a dangerous place to poke her hand into. One time Elise emerged with a bleeding finger when the needle of her name badge stabbed her.

Hunter stood resting against the women’s entryway, eyeing the girl in front of him, his gaze running up and down her body. Thank God she was busy rifling through her bag because the hungry look pasted on his face right now would definitely scare her if she saw him.

No matter how much she insisted she was thirty, Hunter would never believe it. She had the body of a woman under twenty, properly a virgin, since she was blushing the whole time they had their little bickering session, which he thoroughly enjoyed and found endearing.

Today she wore a nice pink sweater and black skinny jeans, with medium-length heels. Still, at that height her head just managed to reach past his shoulder. Hunter had a thing for pink, especially on women; it just made them look super hot. He wouldn’t mind sharing a bed with her at all, actually.

Just then her eyes met his and man, was that a punch to the stomach. He just couldn’t seem to get enough of those eyes. Then that face was replaced by an ID card shoved right in his line of sight. It took him a moment to adjust to the closeness of the picture, but once he took hold of it and moved it away to a good distance so he could focus on the picture, it became clear. His eyes almost popped out of their sockets when he saw her date of birth printed on her driver’s license.

“Shit! You really are thirty!” he spat out.

Hunter couldn’t believe this beautiful woman who looked way younger than him was actually thirty.

“I told you I didn’t lie.” Clarice smiled at her small victory.

“God, you’re so old,” Hunter said, when an idea popped into his head.

Clarice’s smile dropped.

“What does that mean?” she asked, not so sure of her triumph. Here she thought that by proving to Hunter her true age, he would respect her a bit, not remind her again that she was old. Why did she show the man her driver license? Because he was riling her up too much; that’s why.

“That you’re old now,” Hunter stated, suppressing the urge to snicker at the whole situation. How he couldn’t wait to tease her now, but still, he couldn’t believe how this woman could appear this young when she just hit thirty. He had never dated a woman in her thirties before. If he decided to go for her, would that make him her boy toy? The thought sounded a little tempting actually.

“But you said I looked young and innocent just a moment ago. Like a twenty-year-old woman. Now I look thirty? How can I have aged so fast in a just a few minutes?” Clarice asked for clarification.

“Woman, do avocados look old to you?” Hunter explained, using the only analogy he could think of. *Time to have some fun with her now*, he thought.

“What are you on about? I don’t understand.”

“See, can you see this?” Hunter showed Clarice her driver’s license, tapping at her picture while trying very hard to suppress his laughter.

“I’m seeing my picture,” Clarice stated seriously.

“No, you’re seeing an avocado,” Hunter said again.

“An avocado?” Clarice questioned Hunter in confusion. The look on her face just made Hunter want to tease her even more.

“Yes. An avocado.”

“I don’t see an avocado. Just me.” No matter how many times Clarice looked at her image on the ID, she still could only see herself. What was this Casanova on about?

“Look, let’s look at it this way.” Hunter began his explanation. “All avocados look the same on the outside, right?”

Clarice nodded in agreement.

“They’re green, maybe a little rough and wrinkly on the outside, but once you peel off the skin and check the meat, that’s when you know they’re old and soft.”

“So what you’re trying to say is that I’m an avocado?” Clarice reiterated.

“Yes, you’re an avocado,” he confirmed.

“I still don’t get it. I don’t look that old. You said so yourself a minute ago.”

“God, woman! It’s the inside that counts. You know, the mechanics.”

“What are you on about? I still don’t understand you. Speak English.”

“I am speaking English. It’s you who’s acting all dense.”

“Who are you calling dense?” Clarice had had enough of this man. Who was he to call her dense? She was a smart woman who had accomplished so many things in her thirty years.

“You, woman. You!” Hunter said again, poking at her forehead to press his point.

“Stop calling me woman,” she shouted, brushing his finger from her face and snatching back her license. “You just called me a sweetheart before.”

“That was before you said you were thirty, acting all innocent and that.”

“Now I’m acting all innocent? I tell you, mister, I am neither dense nor am I playing innocent, beca—”

“It doesn’t matter now.” Hunter butted in. “And even if you were acting all innocent now, I wouldn’t believe you. A woman like you should act well and refined, like aged wine, matured to perfection. But you, now that I know your age, you don’t act like wine at all. You’re an avocado.”

“Stop with the avocado. My name is Clarice. Not avocado or woman or even sweetheart.” She fumed.

“Sorry, avocado it is for me. Avocado. Avocado,” Hunter repeated, just to make sure Clarice was mad. He loved her angry face.

“Clarice! Clarice!” Clarice repeated, her cheeks turning a bright pink.

“Avocado. Avocado. Actually, I kind of like the sound of it now. Nice and smooth on my tongue.”

“Arrgh, you insufferable man. I’ve had enough of you. Why am I even arguing with you anyway? A waste of my time. I’m leaving. And I pray to God that if I see you again, I’ll bite off my own tongue,” Clarice vowed.

Hunter felt a little disappointed when Clarice said she was going. He was having so much fun with the bickering and the teasing. He didn’t want it to end yet.

“I’ll wager you on that, Avocado,” he said, just so they could continue with their bickering a little more. “If I see you again, I swear on my life that I’ll never look at another woman again. Which is hardly likely since I love my girls too much. And just for the record, my name is Hunter. You know, the mysterious Hunter that likes to *hunt* down innocent girls.” Then he winked at her.

Come on, give me a good comeback, he challenged.

“Arrrrgh, you Casanova. I hope you marry a woman who holds an iron rod in her hand. Then she’ll beat you into shape.” Clarice growled, then stormed off, leaving Hunter to laugh in her wake.

CHAPTER 8

Clarice was still fuming and a little rattled when she approached the man holding the pink rose. As if sensing she was approaching, he stood and tugged his shirtsleeves into place, then glanced at her and smiled. It looked like she wasn't the only one who was nervous after all.

"Clarice?" he asked, unsure whether she was the same as his match on the dating site.

"Yes." She tried mustering up a smile, but her emotions were still boiling from her encounter with that Casanova near the restroom, and all she could achieve was a slight slant of her lips. And speaking of Casanova, she spotted him right near their table, his eyes following her closely.

Blast! She should've known he would be dining here too. Feeling his eyes boring straight at her, she reverted hers to the man sitting before her.

But how did he get to his seat so quickly? Clarice's thoughts drifted back to Hunter again. *Clarice, shut up and look at the man in front of you now!*

Hunter, on the other hand, couldn't believe the woman he named Avocado was actually the young man's date. This wasn't good at all. Somehow he felt a little irritated.

Clarice was busy eyeing the young man in front of her, still holding the pink rose, unsure of what to do.

Up close, the man was pleasantly handsome, but nothing that made her heart jump like that Casanova over there.

Stop it, Clarice. Stop thinking like this at once. You are here to see this nice man. Talk to him. Now!

"Sorry for the wait. I got waylaid coming here," she said, hoping her heart would calm down a bit.

"Oh, it's all right. I was just enjoying the view outside." He smiled at her. "Oh, here, your rose," the man said, handing the bloom to her.

"Thank you." She smiled. He seemed nice.

"Here, have a seat." The man moved to her side and pulled out the chair for her. *Oh, how sweet, she thought. Such a gentleman. One brownie point for my date.*

"The view is very beautiful at this time of evening, don't you think?" he asked, flashing his pearly white teeth at her.

She mentally increased his score. A man that showed emotion definitely deserved another point. Plus, those clean white teeth warranted extra credit. She couldn't imagine dating a man with bad oral hygiene, let alone asking for his sperm.

She was quite pleased with the turn of events, actually. The man was almost halfway there already. Just three more points to go to fit her criteria, and then she'd ask him for his sperm. Just perfect.

"Hello. Welcome. Have you decided on what you would like to order yet?"

Clarice looked up to see the waitress holding a pad of paper and pen in her hand. She smiled at her, then turned to look at the young man—

Chocolate chippy, she forgot his name. It was in the profile on her laptop. Why couldn't she remember? What was it? Hunter, was it Hunter? Wait, that was that Casanova's name.

Why did she remember Hunter's name and not this handsome man's? *Useless, Clarice, useless. How are you going to find the perfect genes for your baby if you can't even remember the guy's name? And here you have the gift of memory, recalling all your patients' names even when they've told you only once. How disgraceful,* she yelled at herself.

Oh, just shut up. She told herself off. *You're driving me crazy.*

"It's Darcy," the man said when he saw her expression that literally translated to, *What was your name again? Because I forgot it already, even when I had just read your profile last night.* "My name is Darcy."

Oh, how polite. How adorable. Four points now. Maybe she could have a future with him after all.

They talked about this and that. He was twenty-three. A seven-year difference, but they say love holds no barrier. Plus, Casanova did say she looked nothing over twenty. At least until she proved her true age. She hoped this wouldn't be the case for this lovely young man here.

They also talked about his hobbies. Apparently, he was just freshly out of university, gaining a bachelor's degree in journalism at Massey University in Wellington. He was currently looking for a job, but hadn't found the right one yet. So at present, he was working as a librarian, since he loved books so much, just like her. *Ding! Ding! Ding!* Another big thing in common. She could brag all day about Agatha Christie, her favourite mystery author, or Alexia Praks, her favourite romance author. She could see they could get along quite well together in the future.

Clarice was having so much fun dining with Darcy that she almost didn't hear the sudden screeching of a chair being pushed back from across the dining room. When she turned to look at the sudden commotion, she saw that Casanova had deserted the woman across the table from him and was now stalking towards her, his face a brewing storm about to erupt.

Clarice felt sorry for the girl, getting ditched like that. She must be so sad and embarrassed by that Casanova's actions. Her eyes were fully concentrated on examining the tablecloth, as if she were looking for staining. But then again, she felt a little relief because at least the girl didn't fall prey to Casanova's charm, unlike most women.

Clarice was about to breathe a sigh of relief when Hunter stopped right at their table. Her body went rigid and she became aware of every single particle in her form. She felt him leaning in close to her, and not a breadth of hair was separating them when he spoke.

"Have fun, Avocado," he whispered huskily into her ear, making the hair at the back of her neck stand up and the nerves along her spine tingle. Then he strode past her, leaving her mouth gaping open, while Darcy just looked confused at the whole scene played in front of him.

"Avocado?" Darcy asked. "Do you know him?"

That beast of a Casanova, Clarice thought. How dare he embarrass her in front of her future partner? If she saw him again, he was going to get a taste of her medicine. Give him a shot of the strong local anesthetic to make sure he wouldn't be able to talk. That would serve him right for being a smart mouth.

"Ahh, no, not at all. I don't know him at all." Clarice tried to deny the truth.

Well, it was the truth. She really didn't know him. They'd only just met, even though it was three times in the span of a few weeks. But that still made them strangers. She didn't know anything else about him apart from his name and that he was a playboy.

"Oh, I thought he was a boyfriend or something, the way he was whispering in your ear and all that," Darcy remarked leisurely, then returned to his plate of Cambodian pancakes.

Clarice almost choked on her rice rolls. How could Darcy think he was her boyfriend? She would rather have all her teeth extracted without anesthetic than be called that Casanova's girlfriend. Yes, she did admit he had attracted her in the beginning with the whole towel thing, but when she heard the first word that came out of his mouth, she had sworn him off. She and Hunter did not belong in the same sentence.

"He must have saw us enjoying ourselves, whereas his date didn't go so well," she stated firmly.

"I guess so," Darcy said, then went back to his meal.

Thank the Lord, because after this event, everything went back to normal again. Darcy questioned her about her occupation. She told him she was a periodontist. Darcy didn't know what kind of profession that was, so she had to explain to him. Then he said he hadn't had a professional cleaning since he arrived here in Auckland. They even had a bit of a laugh about flossing and interdental cleaning.

Everything was great, Clarice thought as she dug into her char noodles, savoring the flavor as she bit into them. Darcy was nice; the restaurant was nice; everything was nice. She couldn't ask for a more perfect date. Just then, her phone rang. *Must be Max trying to keep a tab on me.*

Clarice dug into her bag, trying to retrieve her phone hidden among the other junk. Her hand landed on her driver's license. Meaning to put it in her wallet again, she placed it out on the table and continued to search through her bag, when an outcry from her date startled her, making her head jerk up to look at him.

Darcy jerked up off his chair like a fire had been lit up his butt. He started pulling on his jacket, then slammed a fifty-dollar note on the table.

"Do you need to be somewhere else? You look like you're in a hurry," Clarice asked, quite concerned when Darcy started acting so strange. It didn't make sense. They got along just fine a few minutes ago. What changed?

"Sorry, I have this rule. I don't date any woman older than me." Darcy said while placing his wallet back in his pocket.

"What?" Clarice burst out, jumping from her chair, shocked that he would say something like that.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done this. I should have ticked the age range group in the survey. I wasn't aware the system would pair me up with you. Look, I'm sorry. But I can't date you. I have to go now," Darcy said, and then he left, just like that.

One minute he was here and the next gone.

Poor Clarice sat back down in the chair while everyone eyed her. And here she had felt sorry for that girl that Casanova had left behind not half an hour ago, when she herself was now in the same boat.

Argh, all men are the same. Clarice wanted to scream. *First that Hunter guy and now Darcy. Jerks and Casanovas. I wish I would never see them again.*

And then she saw her driver's license. So that was the cause of all the commotion. Her driver's license again. *Oh, how pathetic can life get?* Clarice finished her meal, gloomily staring at her ID.

Thirty, still single, and she'd just gotten ditched on her first date.

CHAPTER 9

Clarice woke one week later with an ultimatum for herself. She was going to have a baby. Forget about love. She had all the love she needed right here. What she wanted was a family, and what better way than to have a baby?

Being a single mother was perfect. She could give all her love to the baby. She had enough to spare and enough laughter to share around the world. She didn't need a man. What with every single man around her acting like jerks and Casanovas, she hadn't time for the emotional rollercoaster of love and heartbreak. And thank the Lord, because when that glasses guy Darcy, or Rarcy, or whatever ditched her, there was no heartache. Yes, it was better to have no feelings involved at all, just a clean and sterile transaction, like her dental instruments.

But where to find this sperm that wouldn't involve relationships and heartache? Then the proverbial light bulb flashed above her head, and she scrambled off her bed in her pink pajamas and went straight towards the phone.

A few minutes later, Clarice had an appointment for a consultation at the fertility clinic.

"Yes, thank you. I'll pop in at lunchtime. Thanks," she said before placing the receiver down.

At last, her first goal had been decided. By the end of this year, she was going to get herself pregnant by way of artificial insemination.

* * *

Fluffy blue coats or fluffy pink coats? Blue socks or pink socks? To scan or not to scan? Which room should she put the cot in? How long should she breastfeed? What color should the blanket be? What name should she give her baby? Dorian? No, too Casanova-like, like that Dorian Grey from that movie. Dori? No, too much like Nemo. Sally? No, too simple. Cassandra? *Hmmm, sounds nice.*

"Clarice?" A voice poked through her thoughts.

"Yes." Clarice jerked up her head, realizing she had just walked into the dental surgery.

"Clarice," Gracey said, shaking her head at her little boss who was once again daydreaming about who knows what. "Wake up from your daydreaming, dear. We have a new representative from the Silverton Hotel asking to speak with you about the upcoming hygiene conference being held in Queenstown this year."

"Conference? Queenstown?" Clarice asked, not registering what Gracey had said.

"Clarice, my dear, are you getting any sleep at all? Where are you today? Off to La-la Land again?" Gracey asked.

This was the usual case for Clarice. If she had a certain thought in her mind, it showed right on her face. She had never been good at hiding emotions.

"Sorry, I was thinking about some things."

"Mind telling me? I'm all ears." Gracey loved hearing gossip from her colleague, but Clarice wasn't ready to spill the news yet. Well, not to Gracey anyway. No matter

how good the woman was, she was like a wildfire. Give her one small piece of bacon, and she'd turn it into a full-on roast pork.

"Ah, not at the moment. Still sorting stuff out. When I'm ready, I'll let you know," she said.

"Great, darling. I'll be waiting, then. Now for this..." Gracey turned her attention back to the information at hand, which was the Dental Hygiene Conference being held in Queenstown, and all the representatives. "The representative of the Silverton Hotel wants a word with you about the conference."

"Why would the representative of the Silverton Hotel want to talk to me? I'm only one of their guest speakers," Clarice asked.

"Because you're the all-time important guest speaker, that's why. He said he needed to go over some stuff with you about the layout and things."

"But the event is being held in Queenstown. Why am I going to the Silverton Hotel in Auckland, then?"

"Because they also own the Silverton Hotel in Queenstown and it's exactly the same layout. Plus, it's just to meet the representative."

"Right, fine then. Where do I meet him?"

"At the Silverton Hotel," Gracey told her again. "Dear, where has your head gone? It feels like we're talking around the table here. Get back to Earth, dear."

"Yes, Gracey. I'm sorry for being away with the fairies."

"Well, I blocked you out for the afternoon so you could suss out all the details involving the conference. Happy?"

"Yes, happy, Gracey. Thank you," she said, then walked into her surgery room with the patient's files in her hand while her head was once again swimming with her baby thoughts.

The afternoon rolled around faster than Clarice could say cheese, and by one p.m. straight on the dot, she was at the entrance to the fertility clinic.

Nervous and palms sweating, she held on to the doorknob and drew forward. *No backing down now, Clarice*, she told herself. *You are ready to become a mother. You are ready for this.*

"What?" That was her first reaction when the consultant came back to her. "You mean to say I can't even see the man that donates the sperm?" she asked when the consultant outlined their guidelines.

"Yes."

"Why not? How do I know he looks nice if I can't see his face?"

"I'm sorry. It's part of our policy here. We value our donors' privacy, so to show their pictures to potential clients would pose a risk to their lives."

"I don't understand how seeing the man would make me go out and kill him."

"Well, let's just say if you don't like the look of your baby, you might feel differently."

"I wouldn't do that. Isn't that why I asked to see his face first? If he's handsome, then surely my child would be handsome too."

"That's not generally the case with babies."

"Ah, this is so frustrating. This is so not happening." Clarice wanted to scream. Here she was thinking that everything was going the way she had planned, but now this. Was God trying to stop her from having a family? She tried reasoning with the consultant

one more time. "If I can't even see his picture, how am I supposed to decide whether he would be the right one for me? After all, I am bearing his child. What if you lie to me that he's intelligent, gentle, and sensible, then I ended up getting the wrong sperm from someone else? How do I make sure that doesn't happen?"

"We always make sure it does not happen again."

"Again? Are you saying it happened once?"

"Yes, just once."

"This is crazy. I'm going crazy." Clarice felt like tearing her hair out of her head.

"Miss, please calm down. Why are you so flustered?"

"Why am I not out of my chair, screaming right now would be a better question. Have you any idea how old I am? Thirty. I've never had a baby before, and I am scared if I wait any longer, I won't be able to conceive at all. And right now I want a baby. One good, healthy, and beautiful baby that has all the traits I've listed on that piece of paper there. Smart, intelligent, kind, etc. And now you tell me I can't even see the person who will donate the sperm. I want a baby. I want a family. I want a companion when I grow old." There, she lashed out everything that was bearing on her chest.

"You could always get a dog," the consultant suggested nervously.

"I don't want a dog. I'm scared of dogs."

"How about a cat?"

"I'm allergic."

"A goldfish, then. They live in the water, have no fur, and aren't as scary as a dog."

"No, no goldfish, no cats, and no dogs. I want a *baby*."

"Perhaps you need a sedative to help you relax?"

"I am not mad and screaming at the top of my lungs!" Clarice went mad and screamed at the top of her lungs. "I am merely frustrated with my life right now. So you don't need to give me any sedatives. I'm leaving."

After a good long, aimless walk around the area, munching on chocolate chips, Clarice calmed down a bit. Her mind was still bogged deep in thought when she heard the blast of a horn jolting her awake.

* * *

"Why you no-good bastard of a son. You're making me crazy," Clinton shouted, newspaper in hand, running around after Hunter like they were playing chase.

"Calm down, Dad. You don't want the whole department to know you're fighting with the future heir," Hunter said when his father stopped to rest on the armchair, out of breath. Hunter came to comfort his father, patting him on the back to help him with his breathing.

"Future heir? Hunter! What am I going to do with you?" Clinton said once he recovered, swatting his son's arm as a consequence for defying him yet again. "That one simple task and you couldn't even do it for me."

"What do you want me to do, Dad? She was practically a mannequin. She didn't even speak to me for fifteen minutes. The only time she said anything was when the waitress came to order our meals."

"She's shy," Clinton explained.

"Shy my ass." Hunter snarled.

"Don't you speak with that tone, young man!" His father rang his ear.

"Ahh, Dad, I'm sorry," he yelled until his father let his ear go. "But why are you so persistent in matching me up with some random girl anyway? You know I don't like it."

"She's not random. She's the daughter of the CEO of one of our most important client's here. And I am sick and tired of you behaving like a Casanova. Get real. This girl, she would be good for you."

"Why does it have to be her?" Hunter asked. Surely his dad could pick up someone better than the jukebox, aka Caroline. Caroline was more his cousin's type. Quiet, mature, tall, skinny. Yep, it was everything Anton would desire in a woman.

"Because she likes you." His father gasped.

"But she doesn't even know anything about me. And for the record, I don't like her," he declared.

"What don't you like about her?" Clinton asked. He couldn't understand why a girl as beautiful as Caroline would not catch his son's eye. She was the epitome of beauty, the perfect wife for his wayward child.

"Because she's too quiet. Too boring. She doesn't hold my interest. She's not my type. And the list goes on. You get the gist, Dad." He listed his dislikes of Caroline to his father.

"You have a type?" Clinton asked, astonished that kids these days had *types* they went for.

"I do, Dad," he said to his father, whose cheeks were puffed up like a helium balloon. "Look, stop. You might have an aneurism, and then what's Betty going to do?"

"The question is what are you going to do if that happens?" Clinton asked. He wasn't sure if he could rest in peace if his only son continued to behave like this, like a boat without a sail, floating on the sea, being carried by the wind in any direction it blew.

Clinton didn't like the thought of his son having no prospects ahead of him. But looking at the past twenty-three years, his son hadn't improved at all; in fact, his behavior was getting worse. All day, his son played around, having no responsibility, only increasing his horrible attitude. He was sure Caroline would be his savior. He got so mad when Anton informed him of the outcome, that his son had just left the table without as so much as a proper explanation. How could he make his son be a gentleman? What could he do to make him learn? His son needed to take responsibility.

"I'll become the heir of the company, of course," Hunter stated simply. Actually, he should have said Anton would be the heir, but he just wanted to piss off his father, since his ear was still throbbing.

"Hunter, you're going to make me die early here." Clinton smacked his palm against his forehead in frustration.

"Oh, Dad, calm down. Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to just up and leave her like that. I did tell her I had some business to attend to."

"That's the same thing as ditching the girl."

"I said I'm sorry," Hunter whined like a little kid.

"Yes, you should be," Clinton said. "I had to ring Caroline's father and apologize on your behalf. Do you know it could cause a strain between our companies?"

"It's that serious?" Hunter asked.

"Damn right, it's serious, Hunter."

"Sorry you had to apologize on my behalf. I hope I didn't cause a rift between you two."

Saying sorry doesn't pay for what's already been done, Clinton thought. His son would still be a playboy, ditched on the side of the road, where no one in high society would acknowledge him. Why couldn't he be like Anton? Reserved, intelligent, and a good team leader. Clinton had to think of a way to reform his son. And that must include Caroline.

Then an idea struck him.

"Look, all is forgiven, but you must pay me back," Clinton said to his son.

"Pay you back?" Hunter asked, his face a mask of confusion. "Dad, I live off your money. You're basically saying you're using your own money to pay yourself."

"No, I don't mean payment in monetary terms. I mean in the form of action and consequences," Clinton said, smiling, as the plan formed inside his head. He couldn't wait to see his son all grown up and responsible.

Hunter didn't like where this conversation was heading. He recognized the smirk on his father's face, the one he'd inherited and often pasted on his own face when an evil idea popped in his head. He even dreaded asking, "How?"

"Go to Queenstown next week."

"Choice!" Hunter slammed his palm on the table in happiness. And here he thought his father was going to come up with some ridiculous idea, like another matchmaking scheme.

Queenstown meant skiing, and he loved skiing. Plus, there was also an abundance of other dangerous sports the South Island had to offer—jet skiing, sky diving, abseiling. How crazy! He just couldn't wait any longer.

"With Caroline," his father finally added.

Hunter's excitement died down like a flat battery. He knew it. And here he thought he could have another fun holiday. What a way to take the candy from a child.

"What? Why?" Hunter whined in disappointment.

"You are going to escort Caroline to Queenstown. She's never been to that part of the country before, so I think you could be the perfect candidate for it."

"I'm not perfect, Dad. Why don't you ask Anton? I'm sure he would be happy to escort such a lovely lady like Caroline," he suggested.

"No, Anton has to work. He's too busy organizing the Dental Hygiene Conference over there. So you're the only one left. Unless you want to help organize the conference and leave Anton free to entertain Caroline." Clinton pretended to ask his son, offering the choice of whether to have another holiday or work. In the end, the choice was his son's alone. And whichever he chose, his son would fall into his trap.

"No, I'll entertain her," Hunter interjected before his dad could come to a decision for him. Escorting Caroline around Queenstown would definitely be boring, but not to the extent of death, which was sure to be the result of organizing the conference. That was definitely not his cup of tea.

"Just as I thought," Clinton said. *Right into the trap*. "So we're settled, then?"

"Yes," Hunter grumpily agreed.

"Now, get out of my sight before I have a heart attack for real," his father shouted.

“Yes, Dad,” Hunter grumbled under his breath as he closed the door of his father’s office.

Hunter hated being told what to do. And right now, he hated being forced to go to Queenstown with Caroline. And his mood just got worse when he saw Winton, his father’s secretary, out near the elevator.

“Master Hunter. How are you today?” Winton spoke, rubbing his hands together.

“Foul!” Hunter said in gloomy monosyllable, putting on his D&B shades, even inside the hotel lobby because it just made him look cool, while he continued heading to his car. Winton’s little feet trailed after him like a little servant’s.

Hunter didn’t like Winton. The man always had this sneaky look about him, as if he were hiding some secret or something. But because Hunter hardly came into the company, he didn’t know what the man was up to. Maybe he should be more careful. Come into the company more often—if not to work, at least to get the free chocolate bar that was out for the guests’ indulgence.

“Foul mood? Can I do anything to help alleviate it?” Winton asked, hoping to please Hunter, but it only had the opposite effect.

“Yes,” Hunter said, turning to face Winton. And with a loud voice, he ordered, “Get out of my sight.”

“Oh, Master Hunter, I would very much like to get out of your sight, but Master Anton would like a word with you,” Winton pointed out as the reason he had been following him.

“Don’t speak like you’re my teacher, Winton,” he said, then stalked off, leaving Winton to stare at his retreating back.

“I wonder what’s wrong with Master Hunter,” Winton said, scratching his head in confusion, then made his way back to his desk.

“What do you want?” Hunter chimed in the middle of the meeting being held between Anton and his associates, regarding the upcoming Dental Hygiene Conference in Queenstown.

Anton looked at his cousin, poised in mid-speech, when Hunter burst into the meeting room. Shaking his head in resignation at his cousin’s usual behavior, entering the meeting room like a five-year-old in the middle of a tantrum, he gestured for Hunter to seat himself near the corner, where there were a handful of toys and books.

What does he think I am, a kid? Hunter thought, fuming as he slouched himself down on the plush black couch. Now he really felt like a little kid who’d been grounded. Why was everyone treating him like a child these days? First his dad ordering him around and now Anton gesturing for him to sit in the corner like a disobedient little boy.

Blast this! He stood from the couch and slammed the door so loud it almost vibrated off the hinges, then stalked off to his car, leaving Anton apologizing to his associates for the racket he had created on his way out.

After driving for a full ten minutes, Hunter’s mood still did not improve. In fact, it only deepened his already foul temperament because there were traffic jams every three seconds. The one time he got stuck in traffic for only fifteen minutes, he ended up cursing the lights and nearly went insane until the cars began to move again at their snail’s pace.

What the hell is wrong with Auckland today? he cursed. *It’s only goddamn two o’clock in the afternoon.* Rush hour wasn’t until five, when most everyone headed home from work.

After successfully moving away from the main highway, Hunter found himself in a part of town that wasn't quite the area he would normally populate. There, many houses were too small for his liking. How could people live in such cramped spaces?

Because Hunter was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he didn't understand. Even his apartment in Central Auckland boasted more than the usual three bedrooms, and the square footage was beyond ample.

In this area, the houses were too small, the footpaths too small, and the road was also goddamned small. It only fit one car. As for the scenery, there was hardly anything to look at, just some random bushes here and there. It wasn't worth a second glance.

Where was he, anyway? In a dump?

And then he miraculously saw her, the avocado woman, aimlessly walking down that narrow road, ambling towards town like she had amnesia.

What was she doing? Did she want to kill herself? What if a car came zooming past? She would surely die. If not, then she would at least suffer some internal injury that would require weeks in the hospital.

Wait! Why was he even concerned about the welfare of this avocado anyway? Shouldn't he be teasing—

Ahhh. Hunter gave an evil smirk when a brilliant idea emerged in his head. Just the perfect person on which to vent his anger and frustration. Then with a blast of his horn to its full capacity that was sure to awake even the dead, he alerted her attention to his presence, announcing to her that the Greek god had finally arrived.

CHAPTER 10

Clarice, who was the targeted person at hand, almost had a heart attack when she heard the horn blast. It shrilled in her ears, awakening her from her zombie-like state.

She stared in the direction where the blast had come from, when the driver suddenly made his appearance, striding towards her like he was modeling for Calvin Klein clothing on a catwalk, wearing D&B shaded glasses. His long legs swallowed up the distance between them, and in an instant he stood facing her, his shades still covering his roguish eyes.

Who is this man? Clarice thought, slightly alarmed, as her heart began to race. He sure looked familiar. Then the man took off his shades, and she almost bit her own tongue.

"My, my, my, if it isn't Madam Avocado." Hunter smirked. "Are you so desperate to die that you choose to end your life on the road?"

"You Casanova!" Clarice seethed under her breath. She couldn't believe that at the time when her life was at its lowest point, she had to keep running into this man. And it wasn't just once or twice; it had to be three times. Way too many times for her liking.

"Yes, Hunter's the name, remember?" Hunter said slyly. "But if you prefer to call me Casanova, I don't mind either way. Right, Madam Avocado?"

"Stop calling me Avocado! My name is Clarice."

"I think it suits you. Madam because you're old, and Avocado..." Hunter pretended to rub his nose like he was in the process of thinking. "Because you're old," he finally said, teasing at her.

"Arrrgghhh..." Clarice gritted her teeth. "I should just bite my tongue right now."

"I don't think it's a good idea. There's no hospital near here," Hunter said, then started following her when she walked away from him.

"What are you doing blasting your horn like that? You almost gave me a heart attack."

"I did? Wow, I would love to see it in action. The hot and handsome Hunter causing you to have a heart attack because I'm just so damn good-looking."

"Good-looking?" Clarice scoffed. "More like a showoff. What do you want anyway? Why are you here? Go away. Stop following me."

"Even if you pay me, Avocado, I wouldn't be seen following you, but since I ran across you here, I might as well just get it off my chest," Hunter said.

"What is it?" Clarice asked, stopping in mid-stride to face him, annoyed at his presence.

"I came to ask for compensation," Hunter stated, thinking on the spot as to the reason he was following the avocado like a loyal puppy.

"For what?" Clarice asked. "What compensation?"

"For ruining my shirt when you spit on it at the night club."

"That baby-blue shirt?"

"Yes, the one that cost me \$500."

"\$500? You're kidding, right?" Clarice's eyes almost bulged out of their sockets. How could a shirt cost \$500? Was he playing a joke on her?

“Not kidding. It’s branded,” Hunter said. “Now, how are you going to pay for it? I don’t take cheques or bank deposit. I prefer money on hand.”

“I don’t have that much cash on me right now,” Clarice said, clutching her wallet.

“It’s fine, then. Give me your business card,” Hunter said with his palm held out.

“Why?” Clarice eyed him suspiciously.

“So I can phone to remind you to pay me back,” he said. “Surely you don’t want me to add in the interest as well, do you?”

“For business purposes only, right?” Clarice said, rummaging through her bag to find her business card. “Not to annoy me, okay?”

“Fine, fine,” Hunter said, brushing her question aside, palm still extended for Clarice to deposit her business card once she found it.

“Clarice Chantee Mason,” he said. Then with a quirk of an eyebrow, he asked, “Are you half Asian?”

“Yes,” Clarice said proudly. “I’m half Cambodian.”

“I’ve been to Cambodia. It’s a lovely country,” Hunter said.

The truth was Hunter had much involvement with the Khmer people. Every year his father would hand out large amounts of funding for different charities. One particular year, when he turned twenty, he had a very strong desire to go to Cambodia. He didn’t know why, but he had to go. His dad and Anton went with him. When they set foot on the land, they immediately loved it.

Cambodia was breathtakingly beautiful, with rice fields covering hectares and hectares of countryside that looked like blades of grass from the distance, grass that reached up to touch the sky like the ocean here in New Zealand, spanning from one horizon to the next, as far as the eyes can see.

Wherever there was beauty, there was also destruction. And that was what happened to the people of Cambodia. Due to the lack of resources and outside support, the Khmer people suffered much loss after the destruction of the Khmer Rouge War from 1975 to 1979. There were many orphans as a result of this, and the healthcare system was in shambles.

At the conclusion of their visit, his dad had said he would build a foundation there in Cambodia for the underprivileged. Upon setting up a charity, further support was also provided by way of education for small children, building schools, orphanages, and housing for the families who needed extra care.

Silverton Enterprises’ motto was this: “Help the people to help themselves.” His father valued firmness and honesty in any kind of business. Their foundation was not meant to simply give the residents money. They provided the basic necessities such as education and healthcare so they could in turn earn or provide a living for themselves. His father liked to think of their foundation as a stepping-stone, giving the citizens the tools needed to help themselves and future generations. His father had even begun trading goods with the Cambodians.

Truth be told, Hunter knew his wayward ways were really just a façade. He had seen so much in Cambodia that it affected him, a scar engraved in his heart, refusing to be healed. So why did he continue to act like a Casanova and pretend to have a carefree life? The truth rested in the fact that he wanted Anton to inherit his dad’s empire. He had already planned this from the start.

Anton had been orphaned at a young age. He had worked so hard to help his dad build up his empire so there was no way in hell he, Hunter Silverton, would be named the heir when he didn't really do anything to contribute to its wealth.

Anton was an amazing person and he was glad to have him as a cousin, although he saw Anton as more of a big brother. He could remember when he was still in his teens, Anton was already helping out his dad with the business. So Anton deserved to be the heir, not him. He knew he had made the right choice. And so he must keep up this stupid façade, sleeping with random women, frivolously spending his father's money, and most of all, refusing to take any responsibility in the business.

Some nights he wondered when he would find the right woman who would actually help him fall asleep for real, without the help of sex or alcohol. After his mum passed away during his birth, he had always slept alone, being bottle-fed instead of breastfed. Therefore, there was always this niggling need to be loved and feel loved, to have a body lying next to him, to comfort him when he cried, to pat his head when he did well, to soothe his pain when he was hurt, or to comfort him simply for the sake of comforting him and loving him. Betty was nice, but she was his stepmom. And she didn't come into his life until much later, when his father spotted her among the other maids.

"It is," Clarice said after a while, bringing his thoughts back to the present. "We went there a few years ago to create a dental practice for the children in Battambang."

Hunter gazed at the avocado. She held an expression of nostalgia. He smiled and was lost there for a minute as she gazed out into some faraway place, her thoughts in another time.

Hunter felt a little gutted that he didn't get to go to Battambang. Their foundation was set up in the Kendal Province, or Central Province, near the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh. Maybe if he went at the end of this year, he could explore that part of the country and check out her clinic.

"Have you been to Angkor Watt?" Clarice asked all of a sudden, forgetting about their bickering.

"Yes, I have. It's beautiful."

Now both of their faces held that faraway look, both casting back to the time when each stood in front of the ancient intricate stone temple that stood so majestic, surrounded by a scenic moat covered with lily pads. From afar, when the sun set on the far horizon behind the temple, the whole scenery was transformed by the glowing reflection of the bright-orange light on the moat, giving the temple an ambient glow that looked so picturesque, like a painting on canvas. This would be the kind of image Hunter would treasure forever.

"I know it is," Clarice said, reflecting Hunter's thought. "Apparently the country had some Indian influence, followed by the French. When I was there, they served a lot of baguettes."

Why was she telling Hunter about her heritage? Why was she even having this conversation with this man anyway? They were not friends. Her nostalgic expression transformed dramatically into a scowl when she realized this.

"Cambodia is beautiful," Hunter stated. Then his eyes turned mischievous as he gazed at her. "Lovely country with lovely people, unlike here. The one Cambodian I've met had to spit on me on our first meeting."

“Why back to the spitting incident again?” Clarice fumed again. Here she almost thought he was a pleasant man to talk to, what with both of them liking Cambodia and whatnot, but now he was back to being that annoying man again.

“Well, that is why I’m here,” Hunter said simply with a shrug of his shoulder.

“You... arrggh. I’ll personally deposit that money into your bank account tomorrow. And don’t ask for cash because I don’t carry that much. Just text me your bank information later. Now I’m leaving. Don’t follow me.”

Clarice turned to walk away. But it was only a few seconds later when she heard footsteps beside her, and turning around, she saw Hunter smiling his seductive charm towards her again, the same he used with her at his house when she delivered those roses. This time, though, she was not fazed.

“Now what?” she shouted at him.

“I was just thinking why we always seem to run into each other like this.” Hunter walked in front of Clarice and blocked her way. “Don’t you think the wheel of fate is playing a hand in this?” he asked with amusement.

“No. I don’t think the wheel of fate has a hand in this. I think it’s more like the wheel of misfortune,” Clarice said, then turned on her heel and walked around Hunter while he just burst into a fit of laughter.

“Really?” he managed to say after he caught his breath. “I like to think of it as fate. Like we’re meant to be rivals or enemies for life; that’s why I keep seeing you everywhere,” he said as he took off after her again.

“What are you doing? Go back to your car. Stop following me.” Clarice shooed Hunter away as if she were shooing away an eager Labrador.

“I’m not following you. I’m only taking a leisurely walk. It’s a nice day for a walk.”

“In this part of town? Like this?” Clarice gestured to their surroundings.

“Yes, in this part of town. Like this,” Hunter said simply, then continued on walking, pretending to admire the view around them.

“I wouldn’t expect a guy like you to be seen walking on a footpath like this.”

“What? Can’t a Greek god like me walk on this footpath too?” He inched closer to her.

“Yes, you can, but not near me,” Clarice said, feeling a little intimidated as he stood so close. She walked faster, trying to outdo him, but no matter how fast she walked, her short legs could only take her so far, and his long stride dissolved more distance than hers.

“The footpath is quite small. Of course I have to stand near you while walking,” Hunter said.

Clarice ceased her power-walking and stood facing him. She almost craned her neck just to see his face. Hell, from this distance, she felt so small standing next to him. In the afternoon sunlight, his long, dusty corn silk hair shone as if spun gold atop his head, and her hands yearned to run through it. *Clarice, how could you?* She mentally slapped herself for feeling this way towards this Casanova.

“Are you going this way for your walk?” Clarice asked in her serious tone, pointing to the right.

“Mmmm.” Hunter nodded.

“Good. Then I’m going that way,” Clarice thumbed to her left. “Away from you. Good-bye, Hunter. I hope I never see you again,” Clarice said, summoning all of her energy for her power-walk retreat, no looking back. Then she glanced at her watch and cringed. Yikes, only half an hour to go before she had to meet up with the representative at the Silverton Hotel.

Clarice hastened her pace, but once again she felt his presence next to her. Why was her body so in tune with him? She didn’t even need to see him at all. Her body could just tell her he was near. It was like he released some kind of pheromone that only her body responded to.

“What are you doing now? Going back to your car?” Clarice asked as Hunter followed her yet again.

“Yep. I’ve had enough walking,” Hunter said, stalking after her.

“Good. I’ll make way for you.” Clarice paused and stepped to the edge of the footpath so Hunter could bypass her, but instead, he just stood next to her.

“Mmm, the view looks nice from here,” Hunter said, pretending to look around again.

“Hunter, are you trying to annoy me here?” she asked.

“Am I annoying you? I’m just enjoying the view by standing here.” He turned to see some bushes that needed cutting. It was very unappealing, and some of the branches even snaked out onto the footpath.

“You are literally wedged to me like we’re sardines in a can,” Clarice said when Hunter drew himself closer to her, almost imprisoning her with his body.

“Am I? I didn’t know.” He feigned ignorance.

“All right, enough of this.” Clarice’s temper shot through the roof. “You go back to your car and I’m going back to mine. End of story.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“What are you laughing at now?”

“I was just betting with myself how long before I could make you lose your temper.”

“And?”

“And it didn’t even last five minutes.”

“That’s because you rile me up, on purpose.”

Hunter turned serious all of a sudden, making her heart thump unevenly again. He leaned closer, making sure she couldn’t escape, and whispered, “You know, my tastes don’t usually extend to older women, but for you, Madam Avocado, I’ll make an exception.” Then he smiled at her, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Get off me.” Clarice pushed at Hunter’s chest, but he wouldn’t even budge, keeping her wedged between him and the bushes. “I said get away from me.” She shoved him again, and this time he moved back easily. Composing herself now so her breath would behave, she said, “I don’t need you to make an exception for me. I’m not interested.”

“Oh, what kind of men are you interested in, then?”

“None of your concern.” She turned away her face in annoyance.

“Fine. Just curious, because a girl in her thirties cannot always be selective. You know the saying: beggars can’t be choosers. For now, Avocado, you’re a beggar.”

“How?”

“You’re thirty.”

“And would you be so kind as to elaborate?”

“You know how it goes. Women in their thirties are old, while we men in our thirties, we’ve just reached our prime.”

“And the point of this whole conversation is...?”

“That you can’t always wait for the right person for you. When the offer comes up, you have to grab it, because, Avocado, your time is running out fast. Dare I say that your mechanics might not be functioning properly downstairs?”

“Downstairs?”

“Yes, downstairs.” Hunter nodded, eyeing her pelvic area.

When the meaning sank in, she slapped Hunter’s shoulder with her bag. “You bastard! Mother, Father, please forgive me for swearing, but you bastard, incompetent human being. How could you say this to a lady? Just how old are you?”

“Twenty-three.” Hunter laughed while being slapped around by Clarice, pretending to defend himself with his arms. Oh Lord help him, he really enjoyed teasing and tormenting this woman. He hadn’t had so much fun in ages.

“Only twenty-three and you’re saying things like that to your elders. God, if I were your mother I’d smack your bottom right now.”

Those words coming out of Clarice’s mouth suddenly made Hunter hard. He stood still, staring at her. God, he was turned on by this woman, who was a good seven years older than him. How was this possible? He’d never found older women attractive before. Yes, she was very attractive and did catch his eye in the beginning, but now knowing her age, he still felt this lustful effect from her.

Clarice, noticing Hunter had gone quite still, stopped thrashing him and stood quietly staring at him with her big black pupils.

Hunter didn’t like this. He didn’t like it one bit. He wasn’t used to these feelings. He was used to chasing women and then throwing them away, never to have any deeper involvement with anyone. This was foreign territory. He wanted to hold her and smash his lips against hers right there and then, on the damn, tiny, suffocating footpath. Feeling as if he were going to give in to this brewing temptation and with the hardness that was growing downstairs, he uttered a breathless, “I gotta go,” and then made a dash to his car.

Clarice continued to stand right there, silently watching Hunter in confusion, wondering why he had suddenly run off and drove away like a criminal pursued by a cavalcade of police officers.

Only when Hunter was out of her eyesight did her mind bring back the uncooked soup of thoughts. Extracting her last bag of chocolate cookies, she nibbled away, walking aimlessly, unaware she had made her way to the colossal Silverton Hotel until she realized she’d finished the whole bag.

The Silverton Hotel boasted five-star accommodations, with head chefs flown all the way from France and Italy. Not her type of food, but a five-star hotel sounded exciting enough when she heard she would be staying there for the conference in Queenstown.

Clarice walked through the double glass doors that opened into a cavernous foyer and reception area. The Silverton color theme was red, gold, and white. According to fêng shui, those were the perfect colors for success. Feeling her surroundings had changed, she was now somewhat quite relaxed and not so agitated.

As Clarice made a turn to walk to the reception area, she slammed into a hard chest. Running her eyes upwards, she saw the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes on, excluding the Casanova, of course.

Criteria number one: handsome. Check.

She almost fell, but he held her in place before she toppled over backwards.

Criteria number two: a gentleman. Check.

“Are you all right?” the gentleman asked her.

Clarice nodded her head. “Yes, I’m fine. Thank you.”

Criteria number three: sincere. Check.

“Are you one of the guests here? I can escort you to your room.” the gentleman asked.

Clarice looked at the stranger in awe. “No, I’m not a guest here. I’m here for an appointment. My name is Clarice Chantee Mason, the periodontist who is to speak at the Dental Hygiene Conference in Queenstown.”

“Miss Mason,” the gentleman said. “Thank you for coming all the way here. You are one of our special guests. My name is Anton Silverton. I believe one of our representatives is expecting you.”

“Anton Silverton,” Clarice repeated. “Like the name of this hotel?”

“Yes. I am the CEO. My uncle owns the hotel, though. I am his nephew. Perhaps you have heard of him, Clinton Silverton, born in America.”

Anton Silverton, nephew of Clinton Silverton, who owned a massive chain of hotels all over the world. Anton Silverton, CEO of this hotel.

Reputation. Check. Smart. Check. Rich. Check.

What more could she say? She had finally found the perfect sperm donor.

CHAPTER 11

"I've found the perfect sperm for my baby," Clarice announced to her two best friends and cousin while drinking her green tea in the sidewalk dining area of their favourite coffee shop later that afternoon.

As soon as Clarice uttered this sentence, three things happened at once. Max choked on his freshly squeezed orange juice, which required a thump on his back to recover. Elise, who was drinking her fruit juice, just left the straw hanging from her mouth. And Whitney, who was about to say something, dropped her already gaped jaw like a Venus flytrap waiting for its next meal.

"All right, you guys, I'm sure my news isn't all that exciting," Clarice said, thumping her cousin on the back before pulling down Elise's straw and nudging Whitney's chin so her mouth would close.

"You mind repeating that again, cuz?" Max asked when he'd recovered. "My mind is a bit boggled with midterm exams right now. Can't think properly. And then you have to drop this bomb on us like that."

"Max, my dear, if my news is causing your brain cells to dysfunction, then you should've stayed home to study for your exams instead of coming here to entertain us."

"I'm just a kind cousin." Max grinned mischievously from ear to ear.

"No, you're here because you want to drink and eat free food," Whitney said.

"Okay, that could be the reason too," Max said, shooting a death glare toward Whitney, then wound his arm around Elise. "But anyhow, you were saying you found the *perfect sperm* for your baby? Who is this bro all of a sudden? I thought you were going to report back to us about your date last week."

"Yes, Clarice, I thought that was why we'd decided to meet up here," Elise agreed.

"Well, regarding that candidate, he dumped me on the spot," Clarice announced simply, like she was commenting about the fine weather today.

"What?" Whitney stood, an angry look on her face. They all knew when Whitney had that look on her face, it meant death.

"Whitney, calm down. Don't be drastic. Let Clarice explain first," Elise said, pulling on Whitney's sleeve, all too aware now of the audience they were gaining. Elise didn't like audiences. She avoided being the center of attention at all costs.

"Explain, then," Whitney stated, sitting back down, readjusting the glasses she wore for her *outside* persona.

"He saw my age and dumped me," Clarice told them.

"Why that no-good piece of crap. If I see him, I'll kill him for sure." Whitney seethed, standing again, while Max slammed his fist down on the table so sudden and forceful that it made the table shake, along with both Clarice and Elise too.

"No one dumps my cousin," Max fumed and stood too. "Only she is allowed to dump them first." Then he turned to Clarice and said, "Who is the bastard, Clarice? Tell me so I can give him a taste of my fist."

Max was all hyped up, rolling up his sleeves to reveal his underdeveloped muscles to prove he could protect his cousin. "Even better yet, I'll give him a full face reconstruction. What do you say, cuz?"

“Brilliant, Max, brilliant. I agree with you wholeheartedly. We should give him a leg reconstruction too,” Whitney added.

By this time, their commotion had alerted the other patrons in the café. Now all eyes were on them, which made Elise sink even lower into her chair.

“God, you two, will you both calm down? You’re like a bunch of clowns. Sit down right now. We’re not in a circus, you know.” Clarice stood also, to calm them down.

“I’m not a clown. I’m a school kid,” Max said, grumbling under his breath, sitting back down in his chair obediently like a good schoolboy would.

“I know, but the way both of you are acting, you’re more like clowns to me. Now sit,” Clarice said sternly.

“Yes, Whitney. Please sit down. You’re making a scene,” Elise said, tugging on Whitney’s sleeve.

“I can’t help it,” she said in irritation.

“Of course you can’t help it. You can never help it.” Elise started giggling all of a sudden.

“What’s so funny?” Whitney asked with a heated glare.

“You never change, Whitney. Not since intermediate school,” Elise said, still giggling.

Elise was thinking of the episode when Whitney punched a boy in the nose so hard he ended up bleeding and taken to hospital, all because that boy badmouthed Clarice about being *half-blooded*.

Whitney seemed to know what Elise was referring to, so she just smiled. “Gotta defend my BFF.”

“And I thank you both for that,” Clarice said, remembering that particular occasion also.

“What are you guys on about?” Max asked at the sudden change of subject.

“Just about friendships and protecting each other, Max,” Elise said, smiling.

“Anywho, back to the present topic, then?” Max suggested, uninterested in their mysterious conversation. Was he even born then? He didn’t care. What was more interesting was that bastard that dumped his cousin and the sperm she wanted so badly.

“Yes, the present topic,” Elise prompted Clarice.

“Right,” Clarice said, taking a deep breath before revisiting the subject of sperm, babies, the faults of artificial insemination, and her bad date. “He’s perfect, guys. The textbook genetic makeup for my baby.”

“Is this bro someone else?” Max asked.

“Indeed, Max, indeed.” Clarice smiled, clasping her hands together, so happy with the prospects panning out before her eyes. Soon she would have her baby. She must start thinking about clothing, putting money aside for education, and how to tell her family. So much to do and so little time.

“What’s he like?” Max asked, his curiosity piqued about the kind of man that would thus capture his cousin’s attention. Clarice wasn’t ugly so he couldn’t understand why no guy would fall for her. Perhaps she was just a little naïve; that was all. When people looked at her, she assumed they were looking at the girl walking next to her. When men said she looked beautiful, she assumed it was the clothes she wore, not her

true self. Low self-esteem, that's what his cousin's problem was. All that bullying when she was younger really had an impact on her ability to view herself positively these days.

"Are you telling me you only want his sperm and not him?" Whitney asked.

"You are so right, Whitney. So smart. That's why you're the president of *E Magazine* at such a young age."

"Would you stop saying that already? I got the position six months ago. It's old news now anyway," Whitney said, embarrassed.

She hated when her friends mentioned anything about her workplace. She didn't want her personal life mixed up with her professional life, especially portraying two personas. It was already hard enough to distinguish which role was which. Tilting her coke-bottle lenses back up on her nose, she glared at Clarice.

"Still, out of all of us, you're the smart one," Clarice said, smiling at Whitney.

"You're the intelligent one. I could never get into dentistry and become a periodontist like you," Elise said.

"And you're the pretty one, Elise," Max said, smiling and wrapping his arm around her again. "Now, can we get back to the present subject? I want to know who this bro is. And if he's as smart and hot as me."

"Handsome, smart, kind, gentle, sincere. Everything like you, Max. And everything I've listed, guys. And to top it all off—you guys won't believe this—he's the CEO of Silverton Hotel."

"You've got to be kidding me, Clarice." Max slammed his palms on the tabletop again. "How did you bump into that god?"

Max did a lot of internet blog reading, and in New Zealand and Australia right now, the top business in the blue chip industry was Silverton Enterprises, which also owned and operated Silverton Hotel. Whoever was behind that corporate structure, he admired.

"The god is in fact his uncle. He's the nephew," Clarice explained.

"What's his name? I could do a little detective work for you," Max suggested.

"Anton," Clarice said.

"Anton," Whitney and Elise both parroted.

Max typed Anton's name into his phone while sipping the last of his orange juice. Glancing up from the glass, he eyed his cousin, using his big puppy dog eyes.

"Clarice, cuz, be a dear and give me another ten bucks for some juice."

"You just had one," Clarice said, eyeing Max's now emptied glass.

"I know, but I like it. I want to drink another one. This time apple," Max pleaded.

"You know drinking too much juice isn't good for your teeth. Didn't I tell you this already?" Clarice argued.

"I know... it causes my teeth to rot *if* I sip it instead of drinking it all in one go. God, you're so annoying sometimes. I'm drinking with a straw, aren't I? So there shouldn't be any problem, right? Please, just another one. They make good fresh apple juice here. I like it. And when will you be free again to take me out?"

"No, Max, I won't allow it." Clarice didn't give in to her younger cousin's plea.

"Fine, meanie," Max said, poking his tongue out at Clarice, then turned to Elise. He gave her his biggest and cutest puppy dog pleading eyes.

"Don't fall for it, Elise," Whitney warned.

“Clarice, can I?” Elise asked, pulling out her wallet, while Max was smiling with glee at the money he was about to receive.

“Ahhh, if you come to my clinic with rotten teeth, I will *not* be held responsible.” Clarice took a ten-dollar note out of her own wallet and handed it to Max instead.

“Thank you, cuz. I knew I could count on you,” he said, jumping out of his chair. “And that’s what you call reverse psychology, ladies,” he added before smiling and turning his full attention to Elise. “And thank you, Elise, for helping out.”

“You shouldn’t do this, Elise. Always spoiling him,” Clarice said, watching her cousin enter the café.

“I adore him. He’s a good kid,” Elise said, smiling after him. “Anyway, I want to talk to you seriously about your plan for the future, with this man. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes. I’m sure,” Clarice said.

“You won’t get lonely after having the baby with no father?” Whitney chimed in.

“No, I’ve been thinking about this a lot, guys. I know I’m old, and I know no one would consider me at this age.”

“Not that again, Clarice. You know you’re beautiful. You don’t need some guy to tell you that or to make you feel like an angel every morning.”

“I know. That’s what I’m getting at. I’m over being called ugly and teased in the past. I don’t care about that anymore. It doesn’t concern me. What I want right now is a baby. No room for love. I only want to give my love to my baby. But I don’t have time to wait. I feel like this is the perfect time. I need a baby now. If I choose Anton, then my chances are high. I can get pregnant before I turn thirty-five. I don’t want to wake up one morning and realize I’m too old to have a child.”

“You’re right there, but the big question is, how do you plan to go about capturing him?” Elise asked.

“Yes, obviously you can’t just... ask him.” Whitney gave her opinion.

“And that, guys, is where it all stops,” Clarice confessed. She knew she wanted Anton’s sperm, but the thing was she just didn’t know how to go about collecting that sperm. “I have absolutely no idea how to go about this.”

“Would it be better if you just go to the fertility clinic? It saves you from thinking of all these weird ways to capture his sperm,” Whitney suggested.

“I’ve just been to the clinic today. They won’t allow me to see the man’s face,” Clarice said. “I can’t have that. I need to see his face.”

“Clarice, wouldn’t it be better not to have a face to go with the sperm? I mean, what if you ended up liking your sperm donor and hunting him down, only to find he already has a family?” Elise said.

“That’s what the doctor said, but I kind of made a scene already, so I don’t think I can go back there,” Clarice said sheepishly.

“There are other clinics, you know,” Whitney suggested.

“I know, but my mind is set on this one,” Clarice spoke.

“Okay, how to go about it, then?” Elise asked.

“Go about what?” Max butted in when he returned with his apple juice.

“About capturing the perfect sperm for Clarice,” Elise explained.

“Why are we on to capturing sperm now? What did I miss?” Max asked.

“Nothing much,” Whitney explained. “Just that. To find a way to capture that sperm so Clarice can fall pregnant before the end of the year.”

“Oh, that.” Max laughed as if he were possessed by some unknown spirit. His eyes shot up and he stared at the three older women, suddenly serious. “Easy,” he said, “just pounce on him.”

“What?” Clarice was flabbergasted at her cousin’s suggestion. “Max, I’m not a lion stalking my prey.”

“What I mean is seduce him,” Max clarified.

“Seduce him? Like how?” Clarice asked in confusion.

“You know, so that one plus one equals one.” Max wiggled his eyebrows.

“No, one plus one equals two,” Whitney and Clarice both said at the same time.

“God, why are you two so naïve? You’re both mature women, but you don’t even know what one plus one is.”

“Max, I know my mathematics. One plus one equals two,” Clarice told her younger cousin.

“Mmm. I was good at maths,” Whitney said, nodding. “Even I can work it out.”

Elise began giggling on the sideline. “You guys, what Max said has nothing to do with mathematics. He means for you to sleep with Anton so you can have the sperm to make you pregnant.”

“What?” Clarice’s face bloomed pink.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t think about that avenue?” Elise asked with a quirk of her eyebrow.

“Of course not. I was just planning to ask him formally,” Clarice said.

“You could and see what he says,” Whitney added, because even she herself couldn’t even imagine Clarice sleeping with anyone. Love was a deal-breaking factor in that department.

“Obviously, he would say no, cuz.” Max provided his opinion. “Who in their right mind would donate sperm to a woman just because she asked for it? Unless you sleep with them, of course. And how is he supposed to deliver the live sperm to you anyway, if, hypothetically speaking, he agrees on your terms and conditions? Like when he gets his thing up and hard, then...” Argh, how could he explain this analogy to his cousin? Then he finally said, “You know that thing, and then he puts it in a petri dish for you.”

“Thing? What thing?” Clarice asked, looking even more confused.

Max sighed. “You know... his little brother, ding-dong, willie?”

“Urrgh, Max, that’s gross terminology.” Clarice winced in disgust.

“What am I supposed to say? Co—”

“Don’t even say it. I’ll make you wash your mouth out when you get home,” Clarice warned.

“Enough about the terminology, then. What I’m trying to say is the best way is just to sleep with him. Get it once and then it’s done. Just make sure he doesn’t wear a condom, that’s all.”

“Max, I’m going to smack your head in a minute. Stop suggesting such foul ideas.” Clarice’s cheeks burned even brighter.

“You don’t have to be shy, cuz. I know you’ve never done it before.”

“That’s it. Elise, switch seats with me. I’m going to give this no-good cousin of mine a full-blown punishment.”

“Elise, help me.” Max hugged himself closer to Elise.

“You know, what Max said is also true. I think he has a point,” Whitney said after pondering his suggestion.

“Whitney, how could you agree with him? You never agree on anything he says.” Clarice glared at her friend like she’d just grown a pair of devil’s horns.

Whitney and Max hardly got along, but now it looked like the ray of friendship was shining upon them.

“That’s because I didn’t want to admit he’s smart. This time, he really is smart,” Whitney said.

“Whitney. I love you. I am now officially your friend. Give me a hug.” Max got up from his seat and went to hug Whitney from behind.

“All right, enough now, little puppy. Let’s get back to business.” Whitney patted Max on the hand that he’d wound around her neck. “Now, be a good boy and go back to your seat,” she instructed.

Once Max went back to his seat as Whitney had ordered, she turned to Clarice. “You should listen to Max’s advice.”

“No, no. I’ve never done it before.” Clarice shook her head, not wanting to acknowledge the truth.

“If you want his sperm that much, then you’ll have to do it. I’ll help you,” Max added.

“No!” Clarice said. “I want a baby, but that doesn’t mean I have to beg someone to sleep with me. I still have my dignity, you know.”

“Fine,” Max grumbled as he slid back into his chair.

Meanwhile, Whitney and Elise watched their friend’s sad face and wondered what they could do to help with her dilemma.

CHAPTER 12

“Yahooo!” Max shouted out to the pristine lake below, standing on the balcony, his arms wide apart like he was Moses parting the Red Sea. The wind blew cold upon his face, messing up his already brown mop of hair. “I am here, Queenstown. Wait for me. I’m coming for you tonight.”

“Max, shut up, will you?” Clarice hushed him while unpacking their luggage.

Clarice couldn’t help being upset. That talk she had with her friends and Max the other day was still rolling around in her head. She really wanted Anton’s sperm, but there was no way in heaven she was going to sleep with him. She guessed her next best bet would be to go back to the fertility clinic and apply for that sperm donor again.

“Hmm,” she sighed in sadness.

“Why are you so down, cuz?” Max asked, coming back from the balcony. “We’re in Queenstown. The air is fresh, the lake is as clear as the sky above, and we are breathing. We are alive. I am alive, Queenstown. Can you hear me? I am alive,” Max shouted again.

Somewhere down below their eleventh-floor hotel suite, they could hear a distinct shout of, “Yeah, we can hear you. Now shut up!”

“See, even the people downstairs are annoyed with your hyperactive mood.”

“So what? They just don’t know how to have fun.”

“Yeah right.” Clarice eyed her cousin, who didn’t seem to be affected by anything. Sometimes she just wished she could be more like him. She shook her head to dispel this dreary dilemma of hers and continued to unpack her bag in silence instead.

“Cuz, don’t say you’re still upset about that talk we had the other night.”

“I’m fine,” Clarice said to reassure him. She really didn’t want to think about that subject just now. They were here in Queenstown for her talk at the Dental Hygiene Conference and for a well-deserved break, so no talking about unhappy issues.

“You don’t look fine to me.” Max came to look at his cousin’s face. “Look, I’m sure all will work out. I promise. I have a good feeling about coming here. I feel all your dreams will come true.”

“What? Like having a baby?” Clarice jested.

“I don’t know,” Max said, quirking his eyebrows. “Just know it might happen if you really want it.”

“Really?” Clarice asked her sweet cousin. He always managed to put a smile on her face.

“Let me hear you say it.” Max teased her.

“Say what, you rascal?” Clarice smiled, shaking her head at her cousin’s childlike behavior.

“That you want your Mr. Anton’s sperm so you can make the perfect baby with your egg.”

“Max!” Clarice jerked her head up from the folded clothes to stare at her cousin, who still had that mischievous look on his face. “Shut up. I’m embarrassed.”

“Oh, come on, say it.” Max tempted Clarice to confess her desire for wanting a baby.

"No." Clarice just shook her head and turned away from Max, but he was being persistent as he followed her around and around until she couldn't take it anymore.

"Max, stop it. You're starting to piss me off. If you continue to do this, I might not take you out for dessert. Remember your favourite gelato?" she warned.

"No, I don't care about that gelato. I want to hear you say it. Say it, Clarice. Otherwise, I'll continue to annoy you." Max blackmailed his cousin.

"Okay! Okay! I want Anton's sperm," Clarice said just so he would shut his mouth. "Happy now?"

"Very happy," Max said, then went to the door. "I'm going out exploring. Let's have dinner at The Burger tonight at six after the conference, okay? Then we can go sightseeing and get that gelato."

"Yes, sure. And be careful exploring. If you need anything, just call my cell."

"I know. And, you, don't forget to smile," Max said, smiling cheekily at her through the cracked door. "Be happy now. Keep studying those notes. You don't know when that cupid will arrange for your wish to come true."

"Aye, aye." Clarice nodded her head. When she heard the door shut, she lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. Suddenly, something Max had said struck her.

Notes? What notes?

Ah, the presentation notes for her appearance this afternoon.

Clarice took out her stack of notes from her bag. Except, along with the presentation notes came flying the lists and doodles she'd written for her "quest for sperm research."

Clarice's face bloomed red as she shyly picked up the papers that had dropped to the floor.

How did these notes appear in her bag? Didn't she hide them in the safety of her locked drawer?

Clarice cast her mind back to the time when her friends were deep in discussion mode on the hot topic of "mission capturing Anton's sperm." After that conversation, despite being truly adamant about not going down the path of the devil, her mind would not stop thinking about it. She'd bit her lips and flung all caution out the window to study the art of seduction, just so she could get Anton to sleep with her.

So the research was underway, without anyone knowing of course. She started reading romance novels, her favorite genre, but that didn't really explain how to get a guy into bed at all. So she resorted to reading erotic romance, which was definitely not her genre, but for the sake of research, she had to take one for the team. It was her habit to read every night before going to bed, and she'd been doing so for the past week. In total, she'd read five books and had even taken comprehensive notes.

But dearie, did it give her a nosebleed when she got to those scenes. When she read the first line, she almost threw the book across the room, but her curiosity for the unknown prevented her from burning the whole stack of books in the log burner. Her mind had now been corrupted with those steamy, jaw-dropping scenes, but they did give her a clearer understanding of what she must do.

Sitting on the bed and making sure she was comfortable, she started skimming through the contents again.

"First step," she started reading, "to lure him in."

She chuckled and shook her head. Yeah, it was so like her to lure Anton into bed. She could not, in a million years, see herself luring *anyone* into her bed, least of all Anton.

“Step two: say sweet things to him in a seductive tone, dripping with honey, to turn him on.”

Clarice pondered this statement. Sure she could muster the “sweet things.” Max mentioned she said sweet things to him all the time, so that wasn’t a problem at all. But to say sweet seductive things dripping with honey, she’d never done that before. Did she even possess such a voice?

“Step three: kiss him,” she read out.

Kiss him? Clarice shook her head. How does one kiss someone? Then the image of that Casanova popped into her head, like an uninvited gatecrasher at a party, of that one episode when they’d accidentally smashed their lips against each other’s outside the bathroom at the Cambodian restaurant.

No, no, no. She shook her head to dispel the image. Definitely not, most definitely, definitely not. But she couldn’t help remembering the feel of those lips resting upon her own, so soft, as he tasted her, teased her, as if searching for something.

She touched her own lips, remembering the feel of Hunter’s on hers, tracing her index finger softly along. Yes, right there. Those lips touched hers right there, so silky smooth, so velvety, like the taste of a plum, ripe and juicy, deli—

“Clarice, stop it right now.” She snapped out of her delirium and slapped herself on the cheek when she realized she was fantasizing about Hunter. “Why are you fantasizing about that Casanova kissing you? Step four, step four, read step four.” Her hands were fluffing around in nervousness, trying to grab hold of the notes in front of her, and then when the words came into focus again, she read, “Step four: have seeex with him.”

Not used to saying the word, her mouth just wouldn’t cooperate with her.

“Sex?” Clarice asked herself. “Have sex? How does one do that without love?” She pondered. Surely they needed to love each other.

What other reasons could drive someone to seek another person’s bed? Money? Boredom maybe?

Oh, what was she thinking? Clarice slapped herself again. What she-devil had possessed her to write this stuff down? It wasn’t like she was going to act out any of it. She was a woman, a woman with morals and dignity. She couldn’t go around seducing harmless hot guys like Anton for the sake of sperm. She would find other ways to get that sperm.

Happy with that thought, she quickly shoved the notes in the drawer out of her sight before she started thinking about it again. Then, picking up her presentation notes this time, she started reading.

It was only a one-hour presentation, so she should have plenty of time to dress up then meet Max at The Burger by six.

The Burger was a restaurant next door to Torque, one of the most prestigious nightclubs in all of New Zealand. She didn’t know why Max would want to eat there. It was just burgers anyway, and to get to The Burger, she’d have to walk past the nightclub.

She so wasn’t looking forward to it. The last nightclub she went to turned out sour. Then her dilemma about Anton, the art-of-seduction notes, and the potential baby

sperm resurfaced in her mind again. She felt a nervous shudder run through her. She shook her head to free herself of this feeling. She was here in Queenstown anyway, the land of fun, so there was no use sulking and having panic attacks over these issues. She'd sort it out once she was back in Auckland.

Yes, let's present this talk with dignity, poise, and confidence.

Who was she kidding, presenting the talk with dignity, poise, and confidence? Pah! There was nothing confident or poised about her right now as she eyed her audience, her nerves a shivering mess. Her hands shook like she was having an epileptic fit. Thank God she was standing behind the podium and her mini episode was unseen. Otherwise, an ambulance would be called and she would be admitted into Queenstown Hospital. And it wasn't because she was scared of public speaking. No, far from that. She was actually nervous because Anton was here, at the Dental Hygiene Conference, sitting near the exit, talking to a few of the other hygienists.

What in heaven is he doing here anyway? was the first question that came into her mind. Yes, he was the owner of the hotel chain, but did he have to make an appearance now of all times? She didn't even know he was here in Queenstown. Just when she was thinking about him this afternoon, he suddenly appeared.

She was about to make her presentation and she didn't want to think about him just now. It just reminded her of how perfect the man was for her baby. To be so close yet so far away. She should just muster up the courage to ask him for that sperm. Just one single sperm. That's right. It would be her goal when she got back to Auckland to just ask for his sperm. At that moment, while her mind was still mulled up about that prospect, Anton turned his eyes toward her.

Anton couldn't help admiring the woman standing on stage before him, exuding a look of poise, confidence, and dignity. She was about to present her talk on dental implants. She was so beautiful, well mannered, delicate and small, like a china doll that needed to be treasured or else it would break. He wanted to be the man that would treasure this china doll.

Clarice had to swallow to wet her dry mouth because that staring contest with Anton was making the back of her throat feel like sandpaper. Turning to her audience, she finally broke eye contact with Anton and began to speak.

"Dental implants..." She began, eyeing the dental hygienists and dental therapists who flew from all over New Zealand to Queenstown for this particular conference. "How do we go about caring for implants for our patients...?"

Once she got going, she realized she lost sight of time, place, and even Anton, who was sitting there watching and admiring her from afar, her focus solely on her presentation.

After an hour presenting the many cases of implants she had preformed and the many ways the hygienists could help care for them, Clarice found herself with a bottle of wine in hand as a parting gift and claps and applause on all sides.

The wine, Clarice knew, she would dispose of through Gracey, since she herself couldn't drink even a lick of alcohol, what with her memory still fresh from that embarrassing episode from that night at the club on the day of her thirtieth birthday. She

could still remember that foul taste of liquor on her taste buds, and no thank you, she would *not* be repeating that experience ever again.

As the applause continued, Clarice basked in the glory of her audience for an extra full minute before she was led offstage to find Anton patiently waiting for her.

He hadn't left yet? Suddenly, her heart thumped nervously. Could he have known about her plan for asking for his sperm? She cringed. But she didn't have to worry herself long, because Anton walked toward her, then made his intention clear.

"Can I speak with you in private, Miss Clarice?"

Private? Why would Anton want a private meeting with her? What was he planning on doing to her? No one had ever requested a private meeting with her before. Not ever. Was he one of those playboys too, like that Casanova Hunter? Did he have evil designs on her? Or was this her God-given opportunity? Was she supposed to take the opening and ask him nicely now? Clarice found herself shaking once again. What to do? What to do? She must calm herself. *Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out.*

"Clarice?"

"Yessss?" She almost jumped into midair, she was so startled at hearing Anton's voice next to her ear. Then she came to realize they were now in very close confinement in an empty office with the door shut. Her pupils grew larger than a golf ball.

Anton gave her a warm smile when he realized he startled her. "I just want to say that I was really impressed with your presentation today."

"Ugh... thank you," was all Clarice could say.

"Would you be willing to give a presentation about your cases to our guests at the hotel in Auckland? We want to provide the extra service for our VIP guests, and since they are of the older generation, I thought dental implants and oral care would be perfect to entertain them."

Oh, is that all? Clarice thought. Phew! She wiped her forehead that was dotted with sweat droplets. Then she turned to Anton.

"That would be a splendid idea." Clarice agreed, hyping up all enthusiastically. "As health professionals, we always thrive to encourage our community to take care of their oral health," she said proudly, and even suggested, "I could even ask our hygienist in our practice to come along too so we could collaborate."

"That's an excellent idea. Thank you. We would really appreciate that."

Anton smiled warmly. He had never seen a woman this enchanting before. The first time he saw her was when she accidentally bumped into him. And he was smitten. Then when he realized she was the guest speaker for the conference, he had planned to come along too, just to see her again.

She was professional when she spoke on stage. Now he wanted to know her even more, so he'd come up with this plan, for her to present her work to his guests back in Auckland. That way he could continue to liaise with her and see her.

In all of his thirty-one years, Anton had been searching for the right woman to become his wife, to bear his offspring. He was disgusted with women these days, what with their lack of respectable wear and their provocative nature. Yes, he was sure. He was really sure his search for the right wife would end soon, because he had a really strong feeling that woman would be Clarice.

"Well then..." Anton smiled at her again. He wondered if it was okay to ask her out tonight, but then he remembered he needed to entertain his guests at Torque. Feeling

that neglecting his responsibility wasn't the way to go, he decided to see her back in Auckland instead. "Here are my contact details. I'll see you when you get back in Auckland," he said, his voice shaking with nerves.

"Oh, you can have mine too." Clarice offered her card to him, then paused and wondered if it was best to ask Anton now, but she shook her head. No, she didn't know him well yet. It was best to know him first before asking. That way she had a higher chance of getting that sperm.

As they both exchanged business cards, Anton's hand couldn't help shaking a bit when he accidentally brushed against Clarice's.

"Have fun for the remainder of your stay, Miss Clarice," Anton said all too quickly. After glancing back one more time, he walked briskly out the door.

"Yes. Thank you," Clarice said, smiling as she watched him leave.

CHAPTER 13

By tonight, he would score himself a hot babe to warm his bed, Hunter thought as his eyes scanned the crowd in one of his favourite bars. Torque was an established high-class bar set on the busiest street of Queenstown. He frequented there quite a bit when he was in this part of New Zealand. Not that he wanted to be in Queenstown in the first place, but his dad managed to con him after he ditched Caroline at the Cambodian restaurant.

Since arriving in town, Hunter had felt like he was trapped in a cage, with Caroline sticking to him like glue. Now that she'd gotten over her initial stage of being shy, she was such a hyperactive person, grabbing his arm here and dragging him along there as if they were a couple in love.

Well, at least his dad would be happy now. Caroline could report his behavior as being the perfect host, even though he'd wanted to grind his teeth many times at her tactics. It was like she was bipolar, undergoing a one-eighty change from that timid mouse to a sly cat with sharp claws. Where was the quiet girl from before? He just hoped she wasn't the clingy type.

Hunter almost gasped when he had a look over their itinerary upon arriving. Their day was filled to the brim with activities, like jam-packed sardines in a metal can. At this rate, he wouldn't have any room to breathe at all. In the morning, Hunter took Caroline up to the Gondola, and for lunch they ate at a fancy restaurant, followed by the Earnslaw boat lakeside viewing along Lake Wakatipu, and in between they went shopping at all the high-end boutiques in the area.

Hunter felt like his arms were about to fall off his shoulders, what with all the bags he had to carry for her. He couldn't believe a girl could spend that much money on clothing and accessories. All the time, he was cursing under his breath as he followed her from one shop to the next. If not for his father, he wouldn't be seen holding anyone's baggage like a bellboy and following her footsteps like a damn loyal dog. But now, as the sun set along the horizon of Lake Wakatipu, showing off its brilliant orange hue on the lakeside, Caroline had finally voiced her tiredness and asked to retire to her room.

At last he was free, he thought, almost weeping with joy. At last, tonight he could enjoy before dawn appeared and he would be dragged into Caroline hell again.

Where was the best place to enjoy, to wind down for the night, but at Torque? But he soon came to the realization that his joyful night would once again be ruined when Anton came to his suite and asked him to stand in as the face of Silverton Enterprises for his VIP guest social gathering at Torque, the same place he planned to have fun.

Yeah, he wanted to go to Torque to have fun, but not as the face of Silverton Enterprises. He didn't want to deal with business right now. Why did Anton have to come and ruin his night like this? Wasn't it enough already to be punished by Caroline?

Bastard, he wanted to yell at Anton. Just because he didn't have the social skills to entertain people like Hunter, now he had to take over. He wanted to tear out his hair. He'd never been so utterly frustrated before. But if he didn't go in Anton's place, then Anton would simply cut off his credit card spending spree, since his dad had given Anton full authority over his spending. What a way to blackmail him.

Anton must have something up his sleeve to ignore his responsibilities like this. Hunter couldn't think of anything Anton would be doing if not work. Could he have

caught a maiden here in Queenstown? Unlikely. Anton was the type to work at all hours around the clock. The only woman who would attract his old-fashioned cousin would be someone boring and old.

“Anton, you bastard.” Hunter couldn’t help cursing his cousin under his breath. Now he was sitting here grinning like an idiot, with his facial muscles aching from all those fake laughs and smiles, pretending to crack up at any lame joke those old croons came up with, like he was having the time of his life, when in actual fact he just wanted to kick the backsides of all of them to get the hell out of Torque so he could have some real fun with the ladies and maybe end this miserable day on a more pleasurable note.

After a grueling two hours of entertaining the old croons, though, they all managed to disappear, much to his relief, without a lot of fuss. If they started moaning and groaning like fifty-two-year-old ladies who have gone through menopause, then he would surely kick their backsides for real.

Finally, Hunter sighed in relief as the last guest left the bar, feeling free for the first time since arriving in Queenstown. His eyes scanned his playground from where he stood on the VIP platform.

So many foreigners, he thought. What was he thinking anyway? Of course Queenstown was the land of tourists, so all kinds of people would frequent here. From Asian to Caucasian and from African to Americans. You name it, Queenstown would have it. Definitely a multicultural country, New Zealand. *They even let Asians serve liquor now*, he thought when he saw the Asian bartender tending drinks.

“A Speight’s, mate,” Hunter barked when he got down to the lower floor where a majority of the people were. “And put it on the tab,” he instructed.

“Under who, sir?” the bartender asked.

“Anton Silverton.” He was forced to play this role, so there was no way he was going to pay for all the liquor he consumed tonight. The least Anton could do was this.

“Yes, sir,” the bartender replied, then handed over a pint of Speight’s.

After taking a gulp, he realized his foul mood wasn’t going to get any better. There were people dancing and the music was melting in his eardrums. His blood was thick with the beat of the music, yet his body just wouldn’t move. Instead, he just sat at the bar, sulking, drinking his beer, thinking about the night he met that *avocado*. He wondered why he started thinking of her all of a sudden. Probably because the bar was playing J.Lo’s “Papi,” the same song playing on the night he met her.

Truth be told, they’d only met four times, so Hunter shouldn’t have any lingering feelings for her. All he knew was her name and her occupation. He took out her business card from his wallet and looked at her name again.

“Clarice Chantee Mason, Periodontist, Happy Smile Dentistry.” He read it, then glanced over at the picture he took of her on his iPhone. She looked ridiculously cute, despite being surprised. Her face looked like she had just sucked a lemon. It was hilarious and it made him laugh aloud. His first real laugh since he’d gotten to Queenstown.

Mmm, maybe he should pay her a visit at her clinic when he got back to Auckland. Not that he had any dental or gum problems, though. His teeth were in perfect health. He just wanted to ruffle her feathers again, he supposed. It was mighty fun teasing her.

Mighty fun teasing her? What the hell was he thinking? Hunter shook his head. It didn’t seem right to think about that avocado now. She was too old by his standards. He

never dated older women. He didn't like to be called a boy toy by anyone. After all, his reputation as the hottest bachelor and Casanova was very hard to maintain, so he wouldn't want to taint his reputation that easily by being seen out and about with her.

All that thinking about the avocado was making his throat parched, so he gestured for the bartender to come over.

"Another beer, Mr. Silverton?" the same bartender asked, smiling.

"You read my mind, mate," he bawled.

As he was about to down his beer, a soft whisper entered his ear. Hunter glanced to his side.

"Hello, you. What's a hot hunk like you doing here all alone?"

Turning around, Hunter plastered on a huge grin. At last, a babe. And a hot one too.

All thoughts of the avocado were pushed to the back of his mind as he took in the sight of the hot blonde sitting before him, exuding her sexual allure. She sat there sexily with her long slender legs crossed, revealing a large amount of bare skin, and her blouse unbuttoned dangerously low.

Cough!

Hunter nearly choked. The top was almost see-through, a white creamy color, displaying her lacey bra underneath that he guessed would have to be a D-cup to support those voluptuous breasts.

Thank the Lord!

"Yeah, I'm alone." Hunter acted all poised again. "For now. Can I buy you a drink?"

The woman nodded. "Make it a Cosmopolitan," she said, and her voice, God, it oozed sex.

Hunter was so excited. Really, really excited. He tapped for attendance again.

"Put it on the tab again, sir?" the bartender asked.

"Yep." He spoke without looking at the man, his eyes still on the beauty before him.

When their drinks arrived, they both cheered.

"Your name, sweetheart?" he probed.

"Mystery."

"You want to keep it a secret?" Hunter asked, intrigued.

Everything about her was perfect—perfect legs, perfect face, perfect lips. And her breasts, those breasts were like watermelons, thrust forward for his viewing, tempting him to taste their delicious sweetness. But looking at her body, he wasn't so pleased. A little too thin for his liking. He liked his women with a little meat. But what the hell! He was desperate to have a good time, so anything would do right now.

"I don't know you yet," she spoke softly, eyeing him seductively through long, shaded lashes, her fingers automatically moving to trace the outline of his collar. "I'm not in the habit of telling my name to strangers." By this time, her fingers were playing along his jawline, tracing over his short stubble.

"I get a feeling we might not be strangers long," he huskily whispered in her ear, eyeing her lustfully, sending out sexual signals.

"You think?" she cheekily asked.

"I don't think," he stated. "I know, sweetheart."

The mysterious woman laughed and then they started chatting like she was his long-lost lover. They had a lot of fun chatting, and just when he was about to make his move on her, she excused herself.

Damn! Looked like he wasn't going to get any hot babe to warm his bed tonight.

"Are you looking for Mr. Silverton?" the Korean waiter asked Max.

"Yep, hyung." He used the honorific *hyung* as a form of saying older brother in Korean to get in the waiter's good graces. "Where is he? I was told he would be here tonight."

"He's right over there." The waiter pointed to the man sitting alone at the bar, drinking Speight's. "What's with everyone? Why is everyone looking for Mr. Silverton? A minute ago I was told to deliver a note to Mr. Silverton by this blond-haired lady," the waiter grumbled. "And I have so much work to do right now."

"Did you deliver it yet?" Max asked as a plan formulated in his head.

"No, not yet. I'm about to do it right now."

"Jackpot!" Max shouted.

"Jackpot?" the waiter asked.

"Don't worry, hyung, about the jackpot, I mean. About the message, though, I'll take care of it for you instead, okay?" Max asked, hoping he could deliver the message to Hunter, whom he thought was Anton.

"You sure?" he asked, unsure whether it would be wise to let a young kid who wasn't even legal remain in this bar. If the law ever found out, he would be hung for sure. Plus, the kid didn't even work here. Just because he knew the big boss who owned Torque... Guess if he didn't speak a word about this episode, then no one would be the wiser.

"Sure, hyung," Max said. "You said so yourself. You've got lots of work to do, so I'll sort it out for you, okay?"

"Well, I suppose it wouldn't do any harm. Thanks. Please pass the message to Mr. Silverton, then." Then the waiter left the note in Max's care.

"No problem, hyung," Max said, smiling in triumph. "Mission one complete. Mission two is now underway." He then made his way to Hunter, reading the note on his way.

Meet me in room 46 at Night Love Hotel in 10 minutes.

Your Mysterious Lady,

Tiara.

"Tiara," Max said once he finished reading the note. "Sorry, but you have to wait for another opportunity. Tonight, Mr. Silverton needs to donate sperm for someone in need." Then he crunched up the note and shoved it into his jeans pocket and straightened his white pressed shirt and black bowtie that he borrowed from the boss of Torque, his friend's father.

Taking his plan into action, he strode as if he were one of the waiters towards the so-called Mr. Anton Silverton.

"Sir," Max said, bowing once he approached Hunter. Should he bow? He never waited before so he didn't know.

"That's me," Hunter said, swinging around to face the waiter. After a few pints of Speight's, he was starting to feel fuzzy, but he maintained his alcohol toxicity well. But the waiter looked exceptionally young tonight.

"I was told by a lady to give you this," Max said, handing his own note to Hunter.

"A lady?" Hunter perked up like a dying flower after it is watered. He unfolded the paper and started reading, a smile appearing on his face.

Thank you, Lord. I thought you'd forgotten about me. It must be that mysterious woman from before.

Hunter scrunched up the folded paper and shoved it into his pocket. When he remembered Max's presence, he looked up again, wondering why the kid didn't leave.

At this point, Max was rubbing his fingers and thumb together, a gesture that indicated a tip would be nice. There was no way Max was going without a tip. He needed something as incentive for doing this for Clarice.

"A tip?" Hunter asked with one quirk of an eyebrow. This kid sure reminded him of himself at that age, always asking for handouts from his dad.

"You read my mind, sir," Max smiled cheekily.

He even speaks like me, Hunter mused.

"Sure, sure," Hunter said, handing him a twenty since he felt quite generous tonight.

"If you don't mind, sir," Max spoke. "I was asked to escort you to her suite."

"Really?" Hunter asked in amazement. "She's that eager?"

"You could say that," Max said, smiling, hiding his snarky smirk.

"All right, then," Hunter said, dusting himself off as he stood. "Never delay a lady if she requests you, I say. Lead the way, boy."

"This way, sir," Max said, leading him out of the bar and into the hotel next door.

"We're going into Night Love Hotel?" Hunter asked in interest. All the surprises were really rallying him up, and he couldn't wait to just jump at her when he got in. His nerves were like a bowstring now. He never acted like this before. This really surprised him.

"So you work in the bar?" Hunter asked, trying to string together some sort of conversation, hoping to calm his nerves. "You sure look really young."

"I'm over eighteen," Max lied, a little irritated.

"You're really small," Hunter further prodded the already bruised boy.

Max wanted to punch Hunter at that moment. He was very sensitive about his height. He was sure his growth spurt hadn't been activated yet, but hopefully soon this bro wouldn't dwarf him anymore.

"All right, here we are," Max said, stopping in front of a door. And to compensate for making him angry about his height, Max literally shoved Hunter into the room as his form of revenge. Poor Hunter was caught so unaware that he simply stumbled head first, unprepared into the darkness. Then Max closed the door behind him and locked it from the outside.

“Job well done,” Max said, dusting his hands in victory. Then he texted his cousin. *Hey, cuz. Cupid has brought you Anton. Get that sperm.*

CHAPTER 14

Where is he? Clarice wondered about Max, standing alone on the balcony of the Night Love Hotel room, with only the moonlight to light the darkened room. Max had told her specifically to wait in his friend's bedroom with the lights off for a few minutes while he and his Korean friends went to get some midnight snacks, promising her they would then all go to the Gondola together to view the beauty of Queenstown at night from the high mountain above.

But why must she turn off the lights? He said she should take this time to view the immaculate beauty of the city during the dark. And it was true. Here on the sixth floor, the view of Queenstown was so enchanting it literally took her breath away.

Queenstown was a little town in Central Otago of the South Island of New Zealand. The town lay embraced by many majestic mountains, shrouded with forests from all sides, most of it pine trees. Then nestling right in the middle of their arms was their very own exotic jewel, Lake Wakatipu, a fresh, crystal clear lake where one could see the freshwater fish swimming around, if one were to look close enough.

These forests hid their most prized jewel, their lake, as if waiting and teasing for the world to find it. And the world did find their precious jewel, as hundreds of thousands of tourists from around the world flocked to this little town each year, just to feast their eyes on their exotic lake and the serene beauty that seemed to enchant the eyes, be it in summer when the flowers all bloomed to their full beauty like a maiden ready for her lover to come and pluck her, winter when the whole town transformed into a winter wonderland, including the peaks of the mountains with a casting of white icing sugar, spring when the buds of plants called out to the bees to collect their nectar, or autumn with the golden-yellow leaves carpeting the entire floor, making the whole town look like the land of gold glitter in the autumn sun.

Their prime season, though, would be winter when the snowflakes were still fresh atop the peaks of the many mountains that entertained the tourists with their many extreme sports like skiing on these, buggy jumping, and skydiving.

The strong wind sent a little chill up her spine, but she didn't want to go back inside the room yet. This town was too enchanting to let go. She wanted to marvel over it a bit longer.

Perching herself on the edge of the railing, she saw the many tourists milling around Torque, the high-class nightclub next door. They reminded her of tiny ants waiting in line to deposit the food they found during their search.

In the faint distance, she could hear the disco music floating up to her level and the sounds of people laughing. They seemed to have so much fun, unlike her with her uncooked soup of dilemmas, what with being thirty and wanting a baby, but more specifically, wanting Anton's sperm.

Someday she knew she would have her baby... and that sperm. Yes, she made it her mission when she got back to Auckland to get that sperm. Maybe ask for him to sell it to her. She had enough funds. If that didn't work out, she could always go back to the fertility clinic and ask for a consultation again. So there. She didn't have to be down. Like Max said: *Always be positive*. This was Queenstown after all, the land of freedom, of inspiration, and of revitalization. She was alive, she was breathing, and that's all that

mattered. Anything else could be dealt with tomorrow. Tonight, no more baby thoughts. Tonight they would be going to the Gondola.

Yes, the Gondola. She couldn't wait to see the full town from above. She had been up there once, but it was during the day. So to view the sight at night would be a different story. She'd been told by others that the small tourist town of Queenstown looked like little wee fireflies lighting up at night, creating a spectacular view due to the nightlife. Yes, she was happy once more as she breathed in the fresh pine scent around her. She loved it. She loved this scent. She loved her life.

Clarice felt a little yawn escape her lips and lit up her cell phone to check the time, wondering why Max was taking so long.. If he didn't come in another minute, she would phone him. That was when she realized she'd missed three calls from Anton.

What could Anton want with her at this time of night? The calls were lodged at about seven p.m. There was another text message from Anton as well. She opened the message and read: *Can I see you tonight?*

Dear heaven, Anton wanted to see her. She checked the time on her phone again. It was now past eleven p.m. Should she call him back to apologize at this hour? He would be asleep by now; if not, then he might be out sightseeing, like she would if Max were to turn up of course.

Clarice's subconscious mind heard a tiny crack of a door opening, followed by muttering under breath inside the room, but her thoughts were so consumed with Anton and the text that she simply missed it. Then her phone buzzed again indicating there was another message. This time it was from Max. *That rascal*, she thought. Where had he been? Then she read the message: *Hey, cuz. Cupid has brought you Anton. Get that sperm.*

"Max?" she whispered, when she felt strong arms embrace her from behind, enveloping her within a muscular body, and a soft whisper that almost made her knees go weak. "My mysterious goddess. Were you waiting for me?"

Golly God, what the hell is wrong with that waiter kid? Hunter thought as he stumbled head first into the room, only to mumble more curses under his breath when he realized the room was completely shrouded in darkness.

Hunter fumbled around to find the light switch on the wall, and that was when he saw her, the mysterious woman who had asked him to come to this room. She was like a mystical goddess of the night, out on the balcony, viewing the late-night city below.

Shrouded in the beam of the moonlight, her slender silhouette was displayed for his eyes to feast upon. By golly, but she was so beautiful, so beautiful and so petite standing there looking so serene it literally took his breath away. But did she shrink in size? She looked awfully short compared to when she was at the bar. But then again, she was sitting on the barstool, so that must account for his lack of judgment. Then again, he didn't remember her being this beautiful at the bar either. Maybe he did drink too much.

Hunter stalked closer, lured by the exotic scene, a mixture of fresh pine scent and orange blossoms, his footsteps absorbed by the soft carpet. She was so beautiful that he didn't even realize he was holding his breath until his arms were wrapped around her.

“My mysterious goddess. Were you waiting for me?” he whispered softly into her ears.

Dear heaven, it was Anton. Anton was here. Anton was standing right here in the same room as she was. She just couldn't believe it. So Max had planned everything behind her back? And then there was Anton. Was he a willing participant in Max's plan too, because he had texted her that he wanted to see her tonight? Those two men, they were planning things behind her back all along.

Did Anton like her? Was that why he'd agreed to this charade with Max? But why was Anton hugging her from behind. He'd even called her goddess. *Oh, it's all that little rascal's fault.* She had to teach her dear cousin a lesson in messing with people's lives. For now though she needed to get out of this predicament. But the more she struggled within his arms, the tighter he held her.

“Is my little goddess pretending to struggle to heighten our mood?” Hunter asked when he felt his mysterious goddess struggle within his arms, his voice slurring a bit, altering the resonance of his speech.

Why is Anton being like this? Clarice thought. No, she didn't want to sleep with Anton just for the sake of getting his sperm. She was planning for him to donate via artificial insemination, not through live sex. She simply couldn't imagine herself sleeping with anyone if not for love.

Hunter's pupils were a black whirlpool beneath the moonlight, heated with nothing but desire for her. God, she looked so beautiful. He couldn't help himself, but pinned her to the wall, imprisoning her within his arms and kissing her hungrily.

Clarice could feel those lips crushing onto hers, tasting her, pulling her into a trance then sucking out her entire soul. Her knees felt weak and her heart felt like it was about to explode.

This kiss, it felt so familiar. Suddenly, an image of that Casanova kissing her on that fateful night of her date with Darcy popped into her head. Those lips, the way he moved around her, felt so similar it scared her. Wanting to erase that image from her mind, she clung to Hunter's neck tighter, draping her body closer and sealing her lips once more to him, allowing him to indulge in his carnal pleasures.

Where was this intense desire coming from? Hunter never acted like a crazed animal before. He was always the one in control of their game, the one who was always leading, but for this particular goddess, his mysterious goddess, he was at a loss. And it wasn't just his behavior that was affected. It was also his body's responses to her. She was so beautiful and enchanting that he found it hard to take each breath.

Finally, he pulled away, watching her under the thin light of the moon. Her long, dark hair played with the night breeze, some even flirting with his face, as if to caress his cheeks, wanting to know how he would react to its teasing.

It was very hard to distinguish her features in the darkness, but with the low beam of moonlight providing just a thin sheath of light, he was able to see her delicate swan neck and succulent pouty lips he had just ravished. He so wanted to see his mysterious goddess again. The image of the blonde in the bar somehow didn't do justice to this beauty of a goddess in his arms right now. Suddenly, standing before him in his mind's eye he could see Clarice, the avocado, staring at him with her large midnight eyes molten with desire, mirroring his.

No! No! No! His heart thumped faster, as if in a desperate race to cross the finish line. It couldn't be. His mysterious goddess was most definitely, definitely not the avocado. She was the blond woman from the nightclub. It was her. She had planned and coerced him to come here so they could play their game together. It was just his mind conjuring up images of that avocado because she had been the constant subject that had plagued his mind since the last time they met.

Hunter gave himself a mental shake to dispel the image of the avocado. He wanted to fill all his memories with this mysterious goddess. He didn't want to think about someone else. Then he felt this sudden overpowering need to caress her cheek, to prove to himself that she was the real thing, that his mysterious goddess was going to be all his for tonight.

"This isn't how I want it." Clarice struggled to maintain her speech after that intoxicating kiss, but it was very difficult, as Hunter's hug was crushing her. And then it hit her. His scent. "You've been drinking."

"Yes, I have." Hunter spoke with so much passion while one of his hands moved to caress that soft, supple cheek that shone so beautifully in the moonlight. "I thought you didn't want me, so I drank a bit too much," he confessed. Then like a moth to a flame, so attracted to that swanlike neck of hers, he parted a few strands of her hair that cascaded to her neck and sealed his lips onto that pulsating beat, making his goddess suck in her breath. She was so alluring, so captivating that he was going insane.

"Do you want me too?" Clarice heard Hunter ask, his lips so close they nipped at the tip of her ear, one of her most sensitive spots. She could feel the pounding of her heart. *Thump, thump, thump*. She had to control herself.

So Anton wanted her. Why didn't he say so in the beginning? Was this her opportunity to ask him about his sperm? It was now or never.

"But I do want you... well, your sp—" Clarice was about to confess when Hunter cut her sentence short by capturing her plump lips and indulging in his hunger for her once again, drinking in her sweet nectar to sate his sweet craving. She was intoxicating, all that sweetness, like a flower dripping with syrup, and he was the bee.

"That's all I need to hear," Hunter whispered huskily near her ear. And then he carried his mysterious goddess like a bride to the bed. He promised himself he would make it a night neither could ever forget.

CHAPTER 15

"I'm sorry for surprising you before." Hunter apologized while trailing small kisses down Clarice's neck as he laid her on the bedspread. "That damned waiter. He shoved me in here. If only I knew you were waiting for me, I would have come right away."

Clarice kept her eyes closed, feeling this overwhelming sensation inside her body that she couldn't describe as each touch of Hunter's lips teased the skin of her neck. But before she could work out what it was, she felt his body shift. She opened her eyes and saw he was already on the floor, about to turn on the light switch.

"No, don't!" Clarice shouted, jumping off the bed and winding her arms around his body, preventing him from reaching his destination.

"But my goddess, it's dark in here." Hunter smiled, loving the feel of his mysterious goddess wrapping her arms around him. "You sure you don't want me to turn on the light?"

"No!" Clarice gasped in panic, plastering her cheek against his back, her heart thumping wildly. She wouldn't know what to do if Anton saw her now. What would he call her? An easy woman? One who lured men into bed for the sake of sperm? No, she couldn't have that. This transaction, this thing that was happening between them tonight must be kept anonymous, a secret, until she was sure Anton liked her.

Hunter turned and embraced his woman, holding her close. God, she was intoxicating, strange but so damn adorable that it was driving him insane. No woman had ever filtered into his thoughts before he took his pleasure. This woman was different. He respected her wishes.

"Okay, we won't turn on the light. We'll just do it in the dark. That way it'll be more exciting."

Hunter saw his goddess nod her head. God, and now she had to be alluring too? There was no ending to this woman's gifts.

"Please do me a favour?" Clarice spoke softly, interrupting Hunter's thoughts.

Never in a million years could she ever have imagined herself doing this, but here she was, going against her morals, all for one single sperm. She tried to pull herself together, but it was just too much. The need to be consumed was so overpowering that she lost all ability to think rationally. But wasn't this what she wanted? It was only for one night. At least she would know what it was like to feel love. Plus, she'd get her sperm from Anton too. Killing two birds with one stone, wasn't that the philosophy she abided by?

Hunter chuckled and cupped her cheeks. "What is it, my goddess? What do you want me to do?"

"I... I'd like to keep this transaction between us anonymous. Can you do that for me?" Clarice uttered nervously, using the best seductive voice she could muster.

Damn! How did she sound like that? It didn't sound anything like her normal voice at all. Blame it all on the erotic romance novels she'd read lately.

"Transaction? Anonymous?" Hunter chuckled even louder. In all his life, he had never met a girl who called a one-night stand a transaction. "You mean our one-night stand? You want to keep things between us mysterious?" God, he wanted to turn on the

light right now and see her face. His mysterious goddess intrigued him more by the second.

One-night stand, Clarice thought. Was this arrangement a one-night stand?

She heard the man chuckle again. He had a nice chuckle. It made her stomach do a little crazy dance. And then he went in for another plunge, sucking her lips with no small appetite. This was beyond passionate. This kiss put out so much emotion that it made her moan.

“Okay, I promise we’ll keep this night anonymous,” Hunter vowed, relishing in the moan from his mysterious woman. It sounded a little like that avocado, and Clarice’s face popped into his head.

No, get out! Don’t think about the avocado tonight.

Hunter pushed Clarice’s image to the back of his mind again. *Tonight, you are going to get laid and have the time of your life.*

But still, that voice from his mysterious goddess definitely sounded different from when they were at the bar. Probably it was the loud music that was affecting his hearing, which was why in this quiet and intimate environment, she sounded different.

Anyway, having his mysterious woman with him right now was definitely better than brooding about that avocado. And since she wanted to keep things between them anonymous, he was only too willing to oblige.

If the liquor didn’t taint his ability to think properly, Hunter would have thought his mysterious woman was trying to seduce him, now standing on tiptoe to wrap her cute arms around his neck and whispering soft words into his ears, which when the message was relayed put a huge grin on his face and his eyes sparkled with heated desire. Guess she did want to play the mysterious girl and go along with their plan all along.

“Come to bed.” Hunter heard her speak.

Come to bed? Clarice shivered mentally. Where did she learn to spout out that line? She sounded like a dutiful wife awaiting her husband after he’d been away for a long day of hard work.

“Anything you say, sweetheart,” Hunter crooned huskily, sending sparks to her fingertips.

Sweetheart? That sounded like something that Casanova Hunter would say. Then Clarice smacked herself in the head, mentally of course, because Anton would never use the word sweetheart. *What kind of endearments would Anton use?*

Not one to disappoint his woman, Hunter immediately took charge of the whole situation and carried her to the bed again, then heaved himself on top of her. With one arm supporting his weight, he gazed into her pupils.

Shit! He couldn’t see a damn thing, save the light of the moon that didn’t illuminate much but that speck of heated pupils that shone brightly. But since his sight wouldn’t be useful in this situation, Hunter relied on his other four senses to make sure he got the best out of this experience.

With his olfactory sense, he inhaled her peach and orange blossom scent, which drove him mad, making him crave her even more. With his haptic perception, he gently caressed her smooth skin, slowly undressing her until she was completely naked and under his mercy. And with his gustatory perception, he licked her, sucked her, tasted her, always hungry for more, and his auditory senses picked up all her moans, her groans, and the gentle writhing of her body, begging him to give her more.

Clarice, who was not used to this situation, only blinked rapidly and tried to stay still like a doll. Hunter chuckled and proceeded further with his seduction. Feeling this wasn't enough, he started searching for her crooks and crannies, kissing underneath her chin, on her cheeks, and up her forehead again, before he released her with a haggard breath. Gulping enough air into his starved lungs, he plunged in again, this time leaving slower, gentler kisses. Since he had all night anyway, he began by caressing his mysterious woman's cheek and playing with her hair before kissing her lips subtly again. Then he realized he wanted to know more about his mysterious woman, eager to know her real name, intoxicated with everything about her. Before, at the bar, it was just two consensual adults playing the game of carnal pleasure, but now, now it was a different story. This wasn't just pure sex. This was something else entirely, and he thought he really needed to know something about her, even a little bit.

"What's your name?" he asked, his voice shaking with so much passion.

Name? She should lie.

"Your goddess," she replied, not realizing what she was saying until it left her lips.

"My goddess!" Hunter chuckled again, enjoying the game they were playing. He never laughed this much during his midnight exercises. This would have to be the first, but by golly, he loved it. But come morning, he'd surely get her name.

She started nibbling at his lip. When she was at the bar, he did notice she had the perfect lips, but to experience them firsthand like this was another matter. And her voice, God, her voice was laced with such thick desire it was driving him insanely hot.

It is hot, so hot, Clarice thought. She was boiling. It was like she was a chicken roasting in an oven. Was this what sex felt like? She was thirsty. She wanted a drink. Another kiss? She wasn't sure anymore what she wanted, but something needed to give. She felt a tightening in her middle.

Hunter felt drunk too, not because he'd been drinking such an absurd amount of alcohol. That he could tolerate, but this, this sensation, this excitement incrementing in his stomach, felt like he was a virgin again, having sex for the first time.

He kissed her again, this time devouring her lips and tongue, wrestling and sucking until he was out of breath. Then he resumed his journey of nibbling along her nape down to the edge of her jaw and to her collarbone.

Hunter was rewarded when Clarice offered him a sensual moan, which to Clarice was an honest response, as she'd never felt like this before. Hunter smiled and knew his woman was ready.

Clarice enjoyed being seduced. It felt like she didn't need to do any work at all. Anton was an expert in this field. She felt like she wanted more, needed more, but she didn't know what. So she just let Hunter do as he pleased until he started wedging her legs apart, which was so foreign to her that she yelped in response.

"Wha... what are you doing?" she cried in panic, her voice shaking.

"Baby, you sound like a virgin. Calm down. It's going to be all right. My snake here just wants to find your Garden of Eden."

"Your snake?" she asked in confusion.

"Uh-huh," Hunter said, since she wouldn't be able to see him nod. "You wanna touch it?"

"What? No."

“You should try it sometime.” He chuckled again when he heard her frightened reply.

“Where... where is this Garden of Eden your snake wants to find?” Clarice asked, a little interested in all the fluffy words Anton used during their exchange.

Somehow Clarice couldn’t picture Anton using such words for anything. He looked like the type to rely on more technical terms. Flowery terms came more easily to Hunter, Clarice imagined. Then she shut her eyes even tighter.

What was she doing imagining that was Hunter instead of Anton? *Get a grip of reality, Clarice!*

“Right here,” Hunter said seductively, breaking her train of thought, and then her breath was knocked out again as his finger probed into her forbidden passage.

“Whaaat... are you doing?” she screeched in panic when Hunter invaded her.

“Loosening you up. You’re so tight. Are you a virgin?” Hunter asked, probing his way farther into her canal.

“What? No, no, of course not,” Clarice lied, shaking her head. All that heat, all that moisture radiating from the space where Hunter’s finger had delved, it filled her to the core.

I’m already halfway, though. If Anton found out now that I’m a virgin, there’s no telling if he might reverse the process and stop the deal. I must get his sperm.

“Okay then, just relax. You’re going to enjoy this. I never disappoint my lovers.”

Lovers! Clarice thought. Of course Anton would have previous lovers. He wasn’t in love with her. She just wanted his sperm. So why did she feel like smashing his head against the headboard and stomping on his body until he yelled for mercy? Still, even if her heart wanted to do just that, it did irk her that she found out too late that he had previous lovers when she thought he was a pure man.

A bit too late now to turn back the clock since you’re already in the middle of doing it.

Oh, what the hell? What was Anton doing now, feeling her hips? This was just too much. Way too much for her to handle. She could hardly breathe, and her heart was beating so loud she was sure even the people downstairs could hear it. When was this seduction going to finish and the transaction going to take place? She didn’t know how much longer she would last at the rate she was going now. Anton was still feeling her lips, collarbone, hips, and her forbidden canal. It was driving her crazy. And her heart was doing that stupid crazy dance again.

“Just do it,” Clarice puffed when Hunter’s finger drove deeper into her core. She was twisting all over.

“All right, baby, but let me just get the condom out first,” he said, getting off her again, but he was caught by Clarice before he could move.

“Condoms? No, no condoms,” Clarice yelled. If Anton wore his condom, how was she going to get that sperm? This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. She couldn’t afford to lose that sperm.

“But, baby, I practice safe sex,” Hunter said.

“I... I already take contraception so it’s fine,” she lied. If Anton could see her now, her face would bloom redder than a tomato.

“I think it would still be safer to wear a condom.” Hunter stood his ground.

“Please, I’m desperate. I want you now,” Clarice said, and because it felt like Anton wouldn’t budge, she pulled him over her body again and kissed him on the lips.

Dear Lord, how could she say this? Clarice was mortified with herself. But for the sake of her baby, she must let Anton forget all about the condom.

“If you’re sure, baby, then here goes. Hold on tight because I’m gonna give you a ride you will never forget,” Hunter said, then laced Clarice’s fingers together around his neck, making sure she had a firm grip. Then he plunged in. And Clarice felt her breath knocked out yet again.

“Baby, are you okay?” Hunter asked in concern. “You’re so tight. Do you want me to take it out?”

“No!” Clarice shouted in Hunter’s ear. If Anton took it out now, then how was she to make sure his sperm travelled all the way to her egg?

“Just do what you have to do,” Clarice demanded through gritted teeth, bearing the pain and all. Dear Lord, how could people enjoy sex? The process itself was so painful. But she must endure this for the sake of her baby.

“All right, baby, here goes.” Then Hunter started to move forward, slowly pushing in and out. Each time Hunter moved, she felt a little tension release. Then when his “snake” was all in, he started the process all over again, but this time instead of pain, there was a tingling mixture of pleasure. A little butterfly started fluttering around in her stomach and with more movements, there were more butterflies.

Clarice closed her eyes, too embarrassed and shy for feeling this way. The pain, the thrill, the excitement were all centered on that spot. Even the painting of the rose petals displayed on the wall seemed to hide itself shyly from the low beam of light when both the occupants had their bodies locked in their tight embrace.

With each stroke, Clarice felt like she was travelling higher and higher into the clouds, her body writhing from within, until both felt like they were floating in midair, their bodies wrapped around each other’s, legs and arms tangling together. For Clarice, the moment of climax came when she saw a flash of white light and then she felt like she was falling, and what seemed like centuries later, she woke, her body all saturated with sweat. For Hunter, that moment of intense utopia came like a turbulent storm, robbing his heart and soul, shattering even his core, which he never let anyone into before. And under this blanket of night, both came back to Earth, embraced in each other’s arms, swimming back to the surface of reality.

CHAPTER 16

Exciting, invigorating, sensual, and heartwarming—that was the list of words Hunter would use to describe the best sex ever. But what Hunter had just experienced last night with his mysterious goddess didn't even come close to that list. In fact, it was better, so much better that it superseded the list and should be classified in its own category as the most intense and heartfelt sexual experience ever. The kind that made you cry, smile, and go all giddy in the stomach at the same time.

This experience wasn't just the mechanical process of putting it in, climaxing, then taking it out again. No, this went beyond that. This was like a soul connection, like he'd just found his other half. And he thought he didn't have another half.

They did it twice last night. Both times she submitted without fail, which just excited him even more. And both times he admitted that he'd floated to heaven and back.

Hunter had never felt so much joy as when he sensed the orange light touching his eyelids. At last he could see her face. Last night, the curiosity to see her was so strong that he almost turned on the bedside lamp, but because he was so hungry for her again after round one, he went to indulge her sweet nectar once again. And by the end of round two, he was so exhausted that he had fallen asleep.

That was a first for him because usually after his midnight exercises with women, it would take at least three to four rounds before he could be induced to sleep. But his goddess had put him to sleep only after round two. And the peculiar thing was when he woke, he felt so refreshed, which never happened before in his whole life.

Hunter laughed in giddiness, happy that after what they'd experienced last night, he would get to see the one woman who could actually put him to sleep, and sleep soundly too. He couldn't wait to nestle himself beside her; in fact, he wanted to spoon her right now.

Hunter promised to himself this morning that he'd make it his mission to see her face and know her name. Just the image of her blond hair in the nightclub wasn't sufficient enough to embed that image in his memory. It was so mundane that his brain discarded it into the junk department. No, the image he wanted to embed in his mind would be her sleeping face with her blond hair cascading like a paper fan on the pillow, spilling out in disarray. He wanted that image to stay glued in his mind for all eternity because he felt such a strong connection with her. So come heaven or hell, he would at least get to know that much about her. Hell, he'd already decided since last night that he was going to propose she become his girlfriend. Now that was an honor most girls wouldn't be willing to pass up. Perhaps once he'd seen her face and knew her name, they could go for round three.

Yes, round three, Hunter thought, as he could feel himself going hard with just that idea alone. He wanted to see her cry out his name when she floated to heaven and then back. He wanted to see her expression when she hugged him after their intimate moment. With that thought in mind, he felt around for the warm body lying beside him, only to jerk upright and swear vigorously when the warm body was nowhere to be found.

Hunter felt hot and cold all of a sudden. He pulled at his hair in frustration. More curses gnashed out of his mouth and he smashed his fist violently against the pillow. He

was always the one to leave first, not the woman. Now the role had been reversed. He didn't like this feeling at all.

Where was she? Where did she go? He needed to find her. And find her fast, because he wasn't sure if he could sleep with another woman again, what with the memory his mysterious goddess had imparted on him.

Ahh, damn shit. Why did she have to leave so fast? Just when his morning wood was up too.

* * *

"Who are you after, Mr. Silverton?" the Korean waiter asked Hunter, who came stalking into their club at exactly seven a.m. in the morning, sporting a hairstyle that resembled a sparrow's nest, with his dusty-corn tresses spiking in all directions.

"One of your waiters, a kiwi boy to be precise, about yea high." Hunter got straight to the point, indicating the height with his hand up to his shoulder. The so-called waiter he was after was in fact Max. "Did you see him? Last night."

"I don't think we have anyone that short working here." The waiter shook his head, replying blandly, then felt a little afraid at the sudden flare that appeared in Hunter's eyes. Okay, that was definitely the wrong answer.

"Look, I just need to find him so he can help me look for a certain woman, the one who—" Hunter stopped short. Should he tell this waiter about his circumstances last night? Surely he didn't need to elaborate all that much, but he was at his wits end here. He really needed to find his mysterious woman fast. The morning wood he sported earlier was only appeased thanks to her faceless memory and a long shower. How pathetic could he get? It was that blonde. But try as he might, he just couldn't picture her in his goddess's place.

"Oh, are you talking about that blonde from last night?" the waiter asked, suddenly remembering the woman who had asked him to hand the note to Mr. Silverton, the man standing right in front of him now. In fact, she had come in again bright and early at exactly 6:30 a.m.

"Yes, yes, that was the one." Hunter nodded.

"Oh, she came in here this morning and gave me a note for you." The waiter went to the back office, muttering, "I'll just grab it for you. She looked really pissed by the way. I tell you, Mr..."

Hunter ignored the waiter's comment and just tapped his foot impatiently, waiting for him to extract the note from his office.

Grabbing the paper and thanking the waiter, Hunter rushed outside and dialed her number.

"Hey," Hunter said soothingly, using his best flirty tone.

"Who's this?" came an angry voice.

Hunter frowned. That didn't sound like his mysterious woman from last night.

"Your mysterious guy..." Hunter sapped all his energy on perfecting his voice so he could seduce her and hoped she would run straight to a taxi with her lingerie on, straight into his arms so they could commence round three. "From last night. We had the best sex. Remember?" he added. "Listen, I was thinking we could—"

"You bastard!"

Hunter was struck speechless when his mysterious goddess interrupted his speech. “I waited for you last night,” she shouted through the phone, causing his eardrum to ring. “All night, in fact. All by myself. You didn’t even turn up. You playboy. Don’t ever call this number again.” Then the line went dead.

Hunter stared at the phone blankly, confused about the turn of events.

He scratched his head. If his mysterious woman was waiting for him last night and he didn’t turn up, then—

Just who the hell did I sleep with last night?

* * *

Anton had wanted her. Despite his being a bit drunk last night, she was certain he had clearly confessed as much. But just to succumb to his advances because he’d confessed and called her his *mysterious goddess*? She just couldn’t believe she could be this lewd and naïve.

She remembered her heart beating a thousand beats per minute when he kissed and hugged her. It felt so wonderful and so beautiful that she was lost in an endless world of pleasure and magic, and when she woke again, the next thing she knew, she had already walked out of the hotel and was now wandering around the streets aimlessly like she’d lost her mind.

Why did she behave like this? Why didn’t she wait until morning to confront him about what they’d done? She could discuss it, explain to him her problem. Then maybe they could form a real relationship.

But she knew she couldn’t. The truth was she was afraid when morning came, all the magic would disappear and the spell would be broken. She didn’t want that. She wanted to cherish that memory forever. And as a bonus, she also had Anton’s sperm, even though it would seem she had stolen it. Then again, he had stolen her innocence, so that made them even.

So here she was, still in her own reverie, wandering around Central Queenstown with many tourists milling around her, going in and out of the many cafes and breakfast bars at the early hour of seven a.m.

The sun was starting to crawl slowly from behind the majestic mountains in the east, sparkling mountain peaks like white crystals.

She checked her phone. She’d been walking for two hours now. Spying a park bench, she decided to rest for a bit. Her gaze turned toward the direction of Silverton Hotel. She didn’t want to go to her suite yet. She didn’t want to see Max yet. She could deal with him later. For now, she just wanted to relish in those memories a little longer, because she knew if she returned to the hotel, reality would hit when she saw the real Anton, all somber.

How would he react when he saw her next? Would he remember last night? Did he text her only because he wanted to sleep with her? So many questions, not enough answers. What should she do if she saw him again? How should she react? But to tell the truth, she felt a bit in love with the Anton of last night, more than the daytime Anton. He felt so very different, so close and so intimate, unlike the cool and collected man who only meant business.

Well, there was nothing to do now anyway. Best just let nature take its course. Not long to go now before she fell pregnant... she hoped.

The smell of freshly baked bread and brewed coffee filled the air, reaching her olfactory senses and sending a signal to her stomach, which gave out an embarrassing growl just to let her know it was past time to break her fast. Having nothing else to do, she stepped into one of the cafés and ordered her breakfast. Nothing like pancakes and a fresh pot of aromatic green tea to start the day and face reality.

When the food arrived, her mouth salivated on its own accord. She took a bite of the yummy-looking pancake dripping with strawberries and honey, topped with banana on the side. It was amazingly delicious. The honey on her tongue was so sweet it reminded her of the kiss last night before Anton... before Anton... Clarice couldn't finish her thought as her cheeks grew hot, blooming red as the strawberry on her plate. She guessed the feeling of them being together would be forever ingrained in her mind.

Clarice stored this thought at the back of her mind, and she promised she would revisit it and tell her baby that she or he was a product of their love, even if Anton was under the influence of alcohol.

Yes, she would do that she thought as she continued to chew her breakfast slowly, when a sight not three tables away almost caused her to choke on her meal, breaking into her thoughts.

Clarice blinked and then she blinked again. *No, it must be an apparition*, she thought. The person sitting three tables away from her, all consumed in chomping away on his steak, face masked with anger like someone had stolen his beloved Ferrari, looked just like that Casanova from back in Auckland.

No, this was Queenstown. Surely she wouldn't be running into him again. So she rubbed her eyes twice to fend away the illusion. But no matter how many times she rubbed them, Hunter's image was still sitting there eating his steak.

Yikes, it really was him. What was that Casanova doing here anyway? Horrible, this was horrible. Why of all places must she run into him here? Why did heaven decide for her to see him now?

Hiding behind the oversized menu so Hunter couldn't spot her from this distance, Clarice ate her meal like she vying for the Guinness World Record of who could eat the fastest. Almost choking a few times because her mind was no longer on her food and too consumed in looking at Hunter to make sure he wasn't looking her way, she poured some piping hot green tea into her mug and automatically chucked the whole contents of the cup down her throat, and dear heaven, she almost screamed in pain when the scalding hot liquid scorched her throat.

Serves me right for eating like this, Clarice thought, but she had to make her escape ASAP. She knew if he saw her, he would ruin her day again, like all the previous times they'd met. Today, though, she didn't want to see him. She wanted to be alone, to replay the scene of last night, so escape she must.

Without further ado, she got up from her chair and paid for her meal, then briskly walked away from the café, heading back toward Silverton Hotel. She didn't breathe a sigh of relief until she was in the elevator, coming face to face with a painting of red roses.

Examining the painting with the intricate petals and vines winding around each other, Clarice felt a sudden desire well up inside her, which in turn made her cheeks burn.

Remembering last night, she shyly turned away from the painting, thinking about Anton and herself, bodies entwined together like those rose vines. Eager to get another sneak peek, she turned back to the painting, then was suddenly reminded of Elise and Whitney. Clarice mentally noted to herself that she must pay a visit to both the girls when she returned to Auckland, to inform them of her adventure through Max's scheme.

Behind her, Clarice heard the elevator ding, indicating the door was closing. Suddenly, a yawn overcame her. With her eyes closed and her body slouched against the wall, she suddenly realized she was tired. Luckily, she still had today to spend in the hotel before flying back home tomorrow.

She wondered what Max was up to last night, but her thoughts were cut short when the elevator door dinged open again.

Clarice opened her eyes again and straightened herself, not wanting anyone to see her in such a state. It wouldn't be right for a gum specialist to act like a child, closing her eyes and slouching around like she could sleep anywhere.

Once she got her posture together, she waited patiently for the other occupant to appear, but when he did appear, she realized heaven was never going to be on her side when it came to that Casanova.

CHAPTER 17

“You.” Clarice squeaked, then clamped her mouth shut before she started cursing Hunter, who in fact was the occupant she had waited for. But before Hunter could turn his face to look at her, she pretended to dig into her large bag, hiding her face.

Oh dear, why all of a sudden must she have an itch in her throat? Trying to hold it in, she couldn’t help releasing a massive cough, which alerted Hunter to her presence.

Hunter was a bit taken aback when he turned to see a petite woman holding a bag near her face, huddled in the corner of the elevator like a scared mouse. And here he thought he was all alone when he entered. He supposed he was too depressed over losing his mysterious goddess that he didn’t give a thorough look at his surroundings. He couldn’t get a good look at her face, but man, was her body definitely his type. Kind of reminded him of the avocado.

Clarice cut her eyes a bit so she could take a sneak peek at Hunter when she was sure his attention was elsewhere. She lowered the bag a little more to get a better view.

He looks horrible, she thought, absolutely horrible. In fact, even worse off than when she’d first seen him at the café. That hair was even more messed up than before. And his clothes... What was he doing last night, all wrinkled up like that? Then a scenario of the Casanova’s activity of last night swam into her head.

He must have bedded a woman, and by the looks of things, she must have kicked him out. Otherwise, that Casanova would never appear in anything other than pressed and branded clothing. *Serves him right.*

At that very moment, as Hunter was about to push the eleventh floor button, he turned to face Clarice, who almost jumped in fright, automatically smacking her bag right in her face just so Hunter couldn’t see her, resulting in a loud thwacking sound.

The price of keeping one’s identity anonymous was very painful indeed. *Dear heaven, that hurt like hell.*

Damn you, Casanova. It’s all your fault.

“Hey,” Hunter asked somberly, eyeing the woman who was acting strangely. “Which floor?”

Crap, he wants me to answer him? In order to keep her identity safe, she decided to use her best impression of an old lady’s voice.

“Eleventh floor,” she said seductively.

Shit, that sounded like his mysterious goddess. Hunter’s eyes immediately jerked toward the woman who still held that bag blocking her face.

“Say that again?” Hunter asked, which came out more like a demand, piqued at the woman’s voice. *Could it be her?*

Heaven help her! Was she so affected by last night that her voice was still laced with that seductive passion? She had to use her hoarse voice if she wanted to fool Hunter into believing she was an old woman. *Muster up that croaky voice, Clarice. Muster up that voice now.*

“Eleventh,” she said seductively again.

Oh deary me, it came out wrong again.

By this stage, Hunter was convinced the woman who shared the same lift was actually hiding something from him, and he bet his life that he was not wrong.

Moving closer, he tried to sneak a peek at her face, but whichever direction he turned, she would counteract, as a result, hiding her identity from him.

Clarice could feel his gaze on her. Hunter was standing so close. If he saw her face, she was sure she'd die. Hunter would annoy her again. She didn't need this. Not at all. *How to get rid of him?* she thought.

Obviously, standing with the bag in front of her face for the duration of the lift's journey would not be successful because she could sense at any minute now, Hunter would advance, demanding to see her.

Then an idea struck her. She pretended to cough profusely, indirectly telling him to stay away or she might pass her virus onto him. Then she dug into her bag and donned the clinical mask that she usually kept in her bag for times like this. Extracting her pair of dark-shaded sunglasses, she donned those too. Her stage was set. So when Hunter's hand landed on her shoulder, pulling her around to face him, the look on his face almost made her burst out laughing because it was just so hilarious.

Hunter almost jumped out of his skin when he saw Clarice all dressed up like she was infected with a deathly virus, complete with clinical mask and glasses.

"Sorry, young man. Don't mind me. I just got a wee bit of a cold," she put on her old lady's voice. Finally, it came out right. She just hoped she sounded sick enough to halt his suspicion of her. "Best to stay away."

Clarice's plan worked, for Hunter was now wedged all the way to the other side of the small elevator, his back pressed against the wall, gaining as much distance from the infected lady as possible.

It must be his imagination. He must be really thinking about his mysterious goddess so nonstop that her voice continued to play inside his head like a broken record. That was why he found this lady with the mask so fascinating. But try as he might, despite her saying she had a cold, he still couldn't keep his eyes away from her. Sure he could keep his distance, but his eyes just wouldn't listen to him. She reminded him of that avocado so much. They were practically the same height, with the same color hair. Apart from the voice that at first sounded so much like his goddess, this lady screamed avocado. But how could the avocado be here? This was Queenstown, not Auckland.

Through her shaded sunglasses, Clarice could see Hunter gazing at her again. "You like what you see, young man?" She couldn't help teasing. That was usually the line he used to lure his female fans into his bed. Now let's see how that Casanova would react being hit on by an old lady, she thought grinning at her idea.

Hunter tried to stop himself from imagining anything erotic with the lady. What the hell was wrong with him? He was being hit on by an old lady with some sort of virus.

Instead of telling her to stay away, he just smiled a gentle smile and turned back towards the elevator door.

He smiled at me. Hunter, that no-good, annoying man she constantly called Casanova actually smiled at her, and a very gentle smile at that. Not that flirty "I want you in my bed" smile, but the gentle, genuine kind one would give someone they loved. Suddenly, she realized she didn't like him smiling at her at all. She found it hard to breathe with her mask on and in that small, confined elevator.

Clarice was trying so hard to control her breathing pattern when a sudden stop in the elevator caused her body to crash against Hunter's. He in that instant captured her

within his arms to stop her from hitting the wall. Clarice was so scared of the turn of events that she held on to Hunter's neck for dear life.

"What was that?" she asked, her voice shaking, losing its disguise.

"Shit, it must be the elevator stopping again," Hunter said, looking at that masked face with the sunglasses, all too aware of the sudden change in pitch and tone. It was like she was speaking in a different voice.

Their eyes suddenly locked together and then nothing else seemed to exist. Something in the atmosphere seemed to shift.

Peach scent. Peach and orange blossom. The lady smelled of peaches and orange blossoms just like his mysterious goddess from last night.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Hunter felt his loins warming up again. Shit. That was twice this morning. He mentally cursed himself, then gently placed her down on the floor. He needed space. He needed to get away from her. This lady was really playing with his mind.

Hunter let her go when she found her footing and immediately escaped to the panel of buttons so he could somehow control his urges. Trying to distract his mind from thinking about his mysterious goddess, the avocado, and this lady with an infected virus, he decided to fix the problem at hand.

Hunter pushed the activation button, but that didn't seem to awaken the elevator. He rang for emergency, but no one picked up.

Hunter muttered something along the lines of, "I'll fire all of them when I get out," then turned to look at the lady again. With her huge black shades on, he couldn't tell whether she was afraid or not, but looking at her posture, her fingers twisting together, he could see she was nervous.

"It's all right, ma'am. The elevator will run again soon," he said to reassure her. All she did was nod her head, then turn to look at the rose painting on the wall.

Shaking his head at the peculiar lady, he called Anton, who should be in his office working by now.

"Goddamn it. Pick up the phone, you old lout," he shouted when voicemail picked up.

Then the elevator gave another shake, and before he knew it, the lady was in his arms once more, gripping his neck like he was her lifeline.

God, he couldn't shake the feelings that overcame him as his nose inhaled her scent once again. But his mysterious goddess was a... Dammit, he hadn't a clue, but his goddess was most definitely not some black-haired loony woman who wears a mask and sunglasses just because she has a cold.

Somehow at that precise moment, they locked eyes again, and just when Hunter was about to tear the glasses off her face to satisfy his curiosity, to see whether she was in fact the avocado or his mysterious lady who had dyed her hair black or just some lady who really was infected with a cold, the elevator door dinged opened.

"Oh, thank heavens," Clarice shouted, using her natural voice, so happy to be out of this tight confinement that she forgot to feign her old lady's voice. She literally made a dash out the door to her room, which was on the other side of the hotel, as fast as her little legs could take her, before Hunter could even blink an eye.

But Hunter's reaction was fast and his feet were faster. This was no sick old lady. Who was she and why was she hiding behind that mask and sunglasses?

Clarice, realizing now that she was being pursued, ran as fast as her legs could take her, passing her own room and turning into the exit door, taking the stairs back down. But Hunter being Hunter, having won the university short-distance race, was able to catch up to her in no time at all. And when he did catch her, he pinned her to the wall and tore off her mask and glasses.

"I knew it. Avocado? What are you doing here? Stalking me?"

"What?" Clarice almost burst out laughing. "I don't have any stalking genes in me, thank you very much," she said. "Now, would you please back off a bit? You're squeezing me into the wall here."

"Ahhh, I'm so happy, Avocado. Must be my lucky day to see you all the way out here," Hunter said teasingly, his mood lightened up all of a sudden. He couldn't believe his lovesickness with his mysterious goddess could be cured in a matter of seconds when he saw the avocado.

"Let go," Clarice yelled when Hunter refused to unpin her from his body, but he also gripped her hands too. "And give me back my mask and glasses."

"No. Why were you wearing these?" Hunter asked, suspicious. "Were you planning on stealing something?"

Hunter knew thieves these days came in all shapes and forms. He knew Clarice wasn't one to steal, but he wanted to ruffle her feathers a bit.

"I am not a thief. I just don't want to see your face, that's all."

"Really? You don't want to see this handsome face?"

"Handsome?" Clarice scoffed. "Have you checked yourself in the mirror yet? You look like a sparrow just decided to house her babies in your hair. Did you even brush it this morning?" she retorted.

"It's style, avocado," Hunter said smoothly, running his hand through his short hairstyle in a cool posture. "It's new fashion. Old people like you wouldn't know."

"Really?" Clarice quirked one of her eyebrows as a challenge. "Young kids these days sporting that kind of hair style?"

"Yeah. You got a problem with that?"

"No, just asking, since it looks really good on you," Clarice replied. "Just add a week's worth of stubble; then you have yourself a barbaric caveman."

"Hah? A barbaric caveman. That's a good one." Hunter laughed. "And you look like a medieval old woman who just had a roll in the hay." He motioned to her crinkled blouse, which he had just noticed for the first time. What had she been doing last night to be in this condition?

"Hunter!" Clarice had enough of this bickering. Of course her clothes were all wrinkled because of what happened last night with Anton.

"What? Giving up your verbal fight already?" he asked slyly.

Clarice was fuming underneath her cool demeanor, but since she was the older one, she had to compose herself like a responsible adult would when the younger party refused to back down.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you not to argue with adults?" she asked.

"I don't consider you an adult. After all, you're just an avocado," Hunter said.

"You!" Clarice clamped her mouth shut again. She knew if she continued to converse with Hunter, she could guarantee colorful profanity would come gushing out of her lips. There was no use talking to him at all.

"I'm leaving," she said.

"Wait! I haven't finished playing with you yet," Hunter said, holding her in place.

"I'm not a toy, Hunter. Go and find someone else for your amusement." She struggled within his grasp.

"I don't want to find another. You're amusing enough already. I want to continue playing with you," Hunter confessed, not really understanding what he meant by that himself.

"Dear heavens, let me ask you something." She stopped her struggling and took a deep breath, then turned her eyes toward Hunter.

"What is it?" Hunter asked, surprised.

"Don't you have anything to do in life?" Clarice began her lecture. "Why are you constantly annoying me all the time like this? Why don't you take your time to help society or contribute to the community or something? You have a job, right? Why do I always see you wandering around like you have nothing to do? I'm telling you; stop this wayward style of yours. It doesn't benefit anyone, especially yourself."

"Clarice, stop." Hunter didn't like hearing about his wayward, Casanova life. It just hurt. He knew he was stupid. He knew his behavior was beyond repair, but how could he stop? He just needed a human body to make him go to sleep. Last night was the very first night he had sleep soundly, after sharing intimate moments with his mysterious goddess.

"No, you need to hear this." Clarice continued. "I know we're still strangers, even though I feel like I've known you like a lifetime already, but please, just stop it with that ___"

"Clarice, stop!" Hunter repeated.

But Clarice didn't pay Hunter any heed as she continued with her lecture. "I mean, what happens if you get someone pregnant?"

"Clarice, stop talking now!" Hunter demanded, his voice increasing another octave.

But Clarice didn't notice his temper darkening, so she just continued lecturing him. "Will you marry her? Will you change your Casanova ways? How are you going to support her? I'm only telling you this as a big sister would because you are younger than ___"

Hunter snapped. And to shut her up, he crushed his lips onto hers, forcing her to stop talking, forcing her to stop lecturing him. But by God, it was delicious. It felt like last night with his mysterious goddess all over again.

The taste, the scent, the heat of those lips, it was all turning his mind to a puddle. He couldn't think, couldn't speak, but just continued to take and enjoy while he punished her with his tongue, invading her territory. His mysterious goddess, this was his mysterious goddess. Oh God, he was kissing his mysterious goddess again.

"Shit!" Hunter pulled back when reality came crashing back into him. This was not his mysterious goddess; it was actually Clarice, the avocado woman who was older than him by seven years.

He saw Clarice staring up at him with a blank expression like she was in some sort of trance. Her lips were all swollen from his invading kiss.

Then he saw her long, beautiful, slender fingers caressing her own swollen lips, moving ever so slowly on those lips he had just ravished with his hungry kiss. Hunter swallowed, wanting very much to kiss those lips again.

“You kissed me,” she said blankly. “Why did you kiss me?” Then, as if she had awakened from her stupor, she fluttered her eyes open and stared at him as if she just saw him for the first time. The situation finally sank in, and she fled the scene.

“I... I...” Hunter couldn’t form a cohesive sentence. He was confused at the moment. He couldn’t understand why he was kissing the avocado. The first time at the restaurant was an accident. This time it was not.

Wracking his brain for a simple explanation, he just couldn’t come up with any as he watched her once again flee down the stairs with her hair tossing behind her, just like the very first time she had fled from him when she’d delivered those flowers to his townhouse the day before Valentine’s.

For once, the king of Casanovas was at a loss for words.

CHAPTER 18

Max tiptoed to the door of the hotel suite he shared with his cousin, then turned the door handle slowly. He poked his head in first. His eyes scanned the lounge. All clear. No traces of his cousin anywhere. *Must be busy making babies.* He grinned at his own thought.

It was actually Max's plan all along when he had begged Clarice to come to Queenstown after finishing all his midterm exams. He really wanted to help her get that sperm. He loved his dear cousin very much, and to see her so upset because she was aging and might have no prospect of a husband and family just shattered his heart.

Max knew his cousin wouldn't take the first step in seducing Anton. She was too well mannered, so he'd resorted to this tactic instead.

When he mentioned to Clarice earlier yesterday that he was going out exploring, in actual fact, he went to do some networking. Max knew he was going to be a big businessman one day, with lots of influence from around the world, and so he went to start his networking then. And the information he found just slotted right into his plan. Anton Silverton would be holding an entertaining party at Torque for his VIP guests that night, so he knew he must take action then.

During dinner at The Burger, he had informed his cousin that she should wait at his friends' suite in Night Love Hotel so he could get some midnight snacks before they all headed off to the Gondola to check out some nightlife. But what she didn't know was he'd planned to take Anton to her room and lock them inside together so they could do their business.

Afterwards, he had stayed out all night, checking out the night scene with his friends until he was so exhausted that he stayed over at their place. Now it was approaching 10:00 a.m., and it looked like his cousin still hadn't returned to their suite yet.

They must really be having fun, Max thought. At last her dream had come true. She must be really happy now. He was happy for her too. Soon he would have another nephew or niece to play with—even better, twins. He wondered what prize he would receive for being a cupid like this.

Still grinning like an idiot, Max closed the door and made a turn when—

Smack! A pillow flew into his face.

"Max, you rascal. Why did you do that?" Clarice came charging out of her bedroom with another pillow in hand, which she threw at Max also.

"Aaaaahhhhhh. Cuz," Max screamed at his cousin who had now been transformed into a wild boar.

He had heard many times from Elise and Whitney that his cousin had a tendency to turn into a boar when she's upset, but he'd never experienced it firsthand. But now he really didn't want to experience it at all as he made dodges and turns just so he could escape her flared temper. "I'm sorry, okay. I thought you would be happy that I arranged it for you," he managed to say through his escape.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me? You set me up, you rascal?" She ran after him again.

They both stopped for a few minutes to catch their breath before proceeding with their chase again.

“Clarice stop,” Max shouted at her. He was puffed out of air. This was ridiculous. Why were they running and screaming at the same time? What a waste of energy. They should just talk civilly. “Let’s just talk like adults, okay?”

“Fi... fi... finne.” Clarice was also puffed out air. She walked to the couch and collapsed. Max did the same.

“That was exhausting. I haven’t run like that in ages,” Clarice said.

“You should exercise more, cuz,” Max said. “Exercise is good for you.”

“Don’t try to change the subject.” Clarice glared at her cousin once her breath was intact again. “You want to talk like an adult? Let’s talk like adults, then.”

“Fine. I’m sorry. I thought you would be happy I did that for you.”

“Max, I just don’t understand how you would think it would make me happy. Yes, I have a desire to have his sperm. I was going to ask him nicely for it, so he could donate it to me. If he says no, then I’ll just look for another option. I don’t want to steal it.”

“I’m sorry, okay,” Max said sadly. “I just want you to be happy, that’s all. I love you, Clarice. You’re the only one that’s very close to me, despite our age difference. And I moved all the way to Auckland just to look after you.”

Clarice couldn’t help giving in to her cousin when he talked about his life like that.

“Oh, Max. Stop it with the sad face. Come here.” She hugged him. “I appreciate that you care and love me. I love you too. But this is very important. We’re talking about a person’s life here. I don’t feel it’s right to do this. Plus, I have my own value. I don’t want to devalue myself just for the sake of the sperm. Perhaps it’s my fault too for putting my problems into your hands. I’m sorry for that, so next time, if you have some elaborate plan that involves messing in other people’s lives, I think it’s best to talk to that person first. Do you agree?”

“Okay,” Max said, still looking sad. “Do you forgive me, then?” he asked with unshed tears in his eyes. He knew after Clarice had said all that, it did make some sense. He was being too hasty in helping his cousin that he forgot to take into account her feelings. He just assumed she would be happy that she got her sperm. But he should have known that Clarice had class and dignity. She valued her innocence more than anything. So he was wrong and he admitted it.

“I forgive you. But promise me before you start interfering in other people’s lives, ask their permission first.”

“I promise.” He smiled. And then they both hugged each other again.

Later that night after dinner, Clarice was sitting at the dining table, rubbing her lips profusely.

“Urrr? Cuz?” Max asked from behind when he noticed his cousin rubbing her pouty lips all red and raw.

“Mmmm?” Clarice answered while still unconsciously rubbing.

“Why are you rubbing your lips like that?” he asked in concern. “Did you eat something wrong? Or did a bee sting your lips?”

“Huh? Huh? What? Of course not. No, nothing.” Clarice turned away from Max’s prying eyes. “I’m going to bed now.”

“What? Cuz.” Max stepped in her way to block her path, drawing his eyes forward to examine her lips. “They look really red, cuz. It looks like someone kissed you.” Then his eyes popped wide open at the realization. “Shit, did Anton eat your lips or something?”

“Max!” Clarice clamped his mouth shut. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Did he? Did he kiss you?”

“Max, I am not having this conversation with you. I’m tired. Would you just go to your room now? I’m going to sleep.”

“Don’t give me that excuse,” Max said. “Your face is all red. He kissed you. didn’t he? And he gave you that sperm!”

“Of course he did. You set us up, didn’t you?” Clarice let her tongue loose, and before she realized it, Max had dragged her to the comfy couch and demanded she tell him the whole story.

“Aren’t you too young to listen to this kind of story?” She was about to leap off the couch again, but Max’s arms were firmly on her shoulders, holding her in place.

“Come on, cuz. Just spill a bit,” Max pleaded with puppy dog eyes. He knew Elise and Whitney couldn’t resist those eyes so he was sure it would work on his cousin too.

“There is nothing to tell. I’m going to bed,” Clarice said quickly, then ran off to her room, but Max’s voice still drifted into her room when she’d closed the door.

“Someone’s shy right now,” Max teased her from the other side. “Ooo-la-la.”

“Shut up. Don’t make that stupid noise. You are so annoying. Go to bed now,” she shouted. “We’re leaving early tomorrow morning, so go to sleep.”

“Aye, aye, Clarice cuz. See you tomorrow morning all bright-eyed and fluffy-tailed. Hope you have a good dream about that baby of yours. I so can’t wait to have a nephew or a niece,” Max said.

Once she was sure Max had gone off to his room, she sank to the floor, her knees weak.

Dear heavens! So many things had happened to her in the last twenty-four hours. Getting confessed to by Anton that he wanted her, sleeping with Anton, and then getting kissed by that Casanova Hunter.

“Urrggggg...” Clarice moaned as she felt her heart beating for both men. “Why oh why did that Casanova have to kiss me?”

CHAPTER 19

The slim woman in the four-inch heels strode along the hallway to the head office of Silverton Hotel like she was parading on a catwalk, her gait sly like a panther stalking her target. She dismissed anyone who got in her way, only heading toward her destination, which lay hidden in the private sector of the hotel. Her target: the young heir of Silverton Enterprises, Hunter Silverton.

Winton, who was busy dashing between errands for Anton Silverton, just stood in the hallway, watching her glide past him, his mouth gaping open in awe as he admired her beauty. She was a sight to behold all right, with her long, glorious fiery red hair cascading all the way down to her waist.

Winton didn't realize he was gawking and drool was forming on the corner of his lips until she slid past him toward the restricted staff-only area. Blinking a few times for his wayward mind to return back to reality, he clamped his mouth shut, swiped the drool off the side of his chin, and raced to catch up to the beauty that had caught his eyes.

"Miss, I'm sorry, but you can't pass this area. This is a no patron area. Only staff is allowed in here," he said sweetly by way of blocking her passage with his body.

The woman gazed at him under her lashes. "But Fern has someone she needs to see. Can't you just let her in? It's very important to her."

Winton couldn't handle being spoken to like this. He felt his legs turning into jelly. He always had a soft spot for sweet beauty like this woman here. Especially if she was referring to herself in the third person.

"I'm sorry, miss, but I can't."

"Really?" she asked, her eyes twinkling with sadness, her lips pouting. And she even batted her eyelashes again just for effect.

"I... I could get that person for you." Winton tried to woo her and stood a little straighter so he could look manlier.

For someone who was on par with Anton Silverton, the same age and everything, Winton couldn't help feeling inferior to the man. Where Anton was blessed with thick brown hair, Winton was starting to turn into a silvery grey fox, what with the silver lining on his temple already. And it didn't look good either when there was a potbelly on its way too. He needed to get those extra pounds off if he wanted to attract any woman at all. He just needed a beautiful woman to motivate him to do this. And he just hoped this woman in front of him here would be his prize for losing all that extra weight.

"I... can't." Winton still stood his ground. "Who do you need? I can call for him. You can just—"

Blue blazes, the woman was winding her arms around him, and Winton almost peed in his pants. He had never been this close to a beautiful creature before. He couldn't even think straight, let alone react. This was outside the bounds of their office rules. No sexual conduct in Silverton Enterprises between strangers or office workers. She was a stranger, but he had no doubt he'd just broken the rules.

"What is going on here?"

Winton turned to the voice and there was the CEO of the hotel, all serious-looking, Anton Silverton. Winton tried unwinding the arms of the beautiful creature, but she was like a leech, sucking him until he was out of energy.

The woman turned to the man and ran her eyes down the length of his body. Smiling as she saw the man who interrupted her, wearing a suit that was not as expensive as this gentleman with the growing potbelly, she assumed immediately that he must be the underling of Mr. Potbelly.

"Fern is here to see Hunter," she announced. "Are you the secretary here? Please bring Hunter to Fern," she instructed.

Anton almost gaped in horror at the sight of the woman before him. She was like the devil, dressed all in red with red sharp claws and lips that were so scarlet it hurt his eyes to look at. And the gall of her to even assume he was a secretary.

"I..." Anton couldn't pretend to speak; in fact, he was that speechless.

"Fern would like to speak with Hunter." She came to stand in front of Anton and with her heels, her head was level with his.

Eye to eye, nose to nose, and lips to lips, Anton couldn't help feeling a slight thump in the rhythm of his heart. There was no denying there was some sort of electric shock running through his being.

Fern cocked her head to one side. This man, why was he not having any reaction to her? He looked so serious and still, like a mannequin.

Anton couldn't take his eyesight off this woman; he just couldn't. So he continued to stare at her, putting on his serious and businesslike face.

"What in the grasshopper is going on?" came Clinton Silverton's booming voice, breaking the two's eye contact.

The red-haired woman gracefully turned her head to look at the old man, which in turn made her coppery mane sway past Anton's face, and he couldn't help sucking in her sweet, exotic scent. When she saw the man with the silvery grey hair and the Armani suit, with the round chin and chubby cheeks, Fern knew immediately who this person was.

"Are you by any chance Senior Silverton?" she went to ask Clinton, grabbing both of his hands to hold within hers. "You look just like him in the magazine."

Clinton was a bit awestruck. "Yes, I am. And you, my dear—*cough*—beauty, who are you?" he asked, also struck by her attractiveness.

The woman smiled at the three men before her.

"This is Fern." She indicated herself. "And she is pregnant with Hunter, Senior Silverton's son."

Clinton Silverton almost collapsed, Anton looked so shocked that he couldn't even utter a single word, and Winton's motivation to lose those extra pounds deflated like a helium balloon.

* * *

"You did what?" Hunter stared at the woman before him, who was busy giggling on the couch. "Fern, stop laughing. I'm being serious here," he yelled.

"Oh, Hunter darling, stop yelling at Fern. What a way to welcome your beautiful best friend from America, yelling like that." She giggled again, brushing him off.

"Best friend my ass. Why the hell did you tell that kind of joke to my family? You know Dad almost had an aneurism."

“Look, Fern is sorry. Stop being mad at Fern. Are you still upset because Fern wouldn’t visit you sooner? Hummmm?” She wound her arm around Hunter’s neck, bringing him closer. “And would you remove your sunglasses? Fern wants to see you.”

“I’m not upset with you. You’re like my long-lost sister,” Hunter muttered. “And no, I will not remove my glasses.”

“I thought so. This long-lost sister of yours does apologize. Fern didn’t mean to make everyone so upset. But please do remove your glasses. It’s like Fern can’t even tell if she’s talking to Hunter or not.”

“You have to go and apologize. And no, for the last time, I am not going to remove these glasses,” Hunter said, straightening his sunglasses again.

“Why not?” Fern asked, moving to remove those glasses, but Hunter backed away fast, preventing her from doing so.

“Look, would you just go apologize?” Hunter said, a little upset. “You’ve caused a commotion in the workplace, and it will not dissipate until you go and apologize.”

“Okay,” Fern said finally. “Fern will go to apologize. It is to Senior Silverton, is it not?” she asked. When Hunter nodded his head, she smiled. “Of course, for you, my darling, Fern will do anything.”

Fern was about midway to the door when Hunter’s added comment froze her on the spot.

“And Anton.”

“What? No, no. Not that mannequin,” Fern grumbled, coming back to the couch and sitting down.

“Mannequin?” Hunter asked, wondering whom Fern was referring to.

“Yes. The mannequin,” Fern said, explaining her serious dislike of Anton. “You didn’t see it, Hunter darling, but he was the only man there that didn’t drool or bat an eyelid at Fern. Even Senior Silverton commented on how beautiful Fern was, but that mannequin, that mannequin... Fern’s beauty didn’t affect him. Fern is very disappointed.”

“For the first time, you realize your beauty will not affect all men.”

“You, my darling, are excused since you are this beautiful creature’s best friend,” she said while gesturing to herself, “but that mannequin... I can’t let it go. He hurt Fern’s ego.”

“You sure have a huge ego, Fern.”

“Not as huge as yours, Hunter darling,” she replied, then smirked as if interested to see what he’d been up to since the last time they meet. “Tell Fern, how many have you bedded lately, my darling Casanova?”

“None,” Hunter confessed, nudging his sunglasses again.

“None?” Fern uttered in shock. “What do you mean none? You’re like the number one Casanova from our university days.”

“I can’t seem to get it up these days,” Hunter confessed quietly, but Fern had excellent hearing so she was able to pick it up.

“Really? Why? Wait! Does this have something to do with why you’re wearing the sunglasses?” Fern asked.

“Well, you could say that.” Hunter began his pathetic story. “I had this experience with this mysterious goddess once, and now I can’t seem to sleep with anyone else.”

“Was she really that good?”

“Beyond anything you can imagine,” Hunter said gloomily.

“Since she’s that good, why are you feeling so down? Why don’t you ask her to be your girlfriend, then? That way you can sleep with her every night.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? Fern doesn’t understand.”

“Because she’s the mysterious goddess, that’s why. I don’t even know her name or where she is now. Hell, we had sex once and then she just left me. I tried searching for her everywhere, but I can’t seem to find her.”

Hunter didn’t want to tell Fern that his ailment was also due to Clarice, the avocado. Both the avocado and his goddess were doing his head in.

Fern came to sit beside Hunter and began rubbing his back like she always did when Hunter was upset.

“Have you hired a private detective? Fern knows some really good ones, just like Hercule Poirot in Miss Agatha Christie’s books.”

“I did, but none could help me. Apparently, they’re still searching for the woman.”

“Poor Hunter darling.” Fern hugged her friend then. “I guess she doesn’t want you to find her. Maybe she just wanted a one-night stand with you. You know, since you’re all hot and everything.”

“I guess so but... arrrgggg,” Hunter growled and ruffled his hair even more in frustration. “I just can’t sleep. I’ve tried sleeping, but I just can’t. It’s like this woman put a curse on me. I slept with her once and now I can’t sleep ever again. I feel if I don’t get to sleep with her again, I might die of insomnia. And if I do manage to sleep, I dream of her. That’s why I have all these dark shadows under my eyes.” Hunter tore the sunglasses off his face, exposing the many bags and bags of dark shadows underneath his eyes that he was trying to hide.

Fern let out a shudder.

“Oh, poor Hunter baby,” Fern said, then went to sit on his lap and examined his eyes.

“Ka, you do have bags under your eyes. They could hold many lollies,” Fern said, trying to cheer up her friend.

“Fern, my eyes can’t hold lollies,” he said, getting annoyed. Why must she tease him like back in their university days? He was starting to get really upset and annoyed. He wasn’t an immature guy like before. He’d changed. He thought.

“Fern is very sorry. Please forgive Fern. She just wants to cheer you up.” She smiled, then gently touched his eyes. “But still, having these bags, you can’t go around like this. What happens if someone sees you? You’d be tainted for life.”

“I know. That’s why I’ve been wearing those glasses. Then Dad yelled at me to come to the hotel, saying it was a life and death situation. You know I had to take the back stairs so no one could recognize me. I feel like a criminal coming to steal something from my own hotel.”

“Ha-ha. Poor Hunter. It must have been tiring trying to escape from all the employees who know you.” Fern laughed. “But it doesn’t matter now. Fern will help you. She has this eye cream that just came out. Fern will give some to you. You just need to apply the eye cream on these spots here if you don’t want to have more ba—”

“Ahem.”

There was a clearing of the throat sound at the door, which alerted both Hunter and Fern, turning their gazes towards the sound. There stood Anton Silverton, his eyes sharp as he took in the sight of his playboy of a cousin and the provocative woman sitting on his lap with her arms around his neck. Somehow his heart was beating fast and he wasn't sure why, but it must be seeing that unpleasant scene before him.

"Hunter, Uncle needs to see you." He spoke sharply, then turned on his heel and left.

"Did you see that, Hunter?" Fern asked her friend. "That mannequin looked scary and he didn't even look at Fern when she was sitting on your lap. He's really bruising Fern's ego here," she whined again.

"Fern, maybe you should go and apologize to him," Hunter said, lifting her up. "I think you should clear up the misunderstanding. Anton is a very traditional man, after all. He's not like me. He doesn't like to see skin."

"Skin?" Fern looked at Hunter in confusion.

"Yes, skin."

* * *

"Knock! Knock!" Fern said, then opened the door without permission. "Fern's here to see Junior Silverton," she announced.

"Is there anything you need?" Anton asked indifferently, surprised when he heard a musical voice instead of the sound of knocking, followed by the opening of his door.

Fern stood like she owned the place, then came to perch her elegant bottom on the swivel chair facing Anton. With one hand underneath her chin, elbow resting upon Anton's desk, she glanced at him through her thick eyelashes, putting on her best seductive smile, and said, "Fern is here to apologize for playing a joke on Junior Silverton." She glanced up to observe the effect her voice had on him.

Anton didn't even bat an eye. His face was as impassive as ever before. It looked like he was stone cold. Fern tried even harder to get the man to react to her beauty.

"Fern apologizes again. Would Junior Silverton be willing to grant Fern a private audience at lunch? Fern can buy Junior Silverton lunch?"

Anton would have to react now since Fern had never had to use this tactic before. In all of her life, she had never had to lift a finger to get any man to react to her, but this one was proving to be a challenge. No matter, she could handle anything. A bit of a challenge was nothing to freak out about.

Anton, who just listened to Fern talk, couldn't believe she had the gall to ask him out. He disliked this kind of woman. What was his cousin thinking hanging out with a woman like that? But the more he looked at her, the more he couldn't suppress his beating heart.

But he hated her. He hated the way she behaved, the way she wore that flimsy material that barely covered her skin. He just wanted to grab a blanket out of the first aid cupboard and wrap it around her. Even if she died due to the suffocation, at least it was better than to die with the humiliation of having that much skin exposed for the male species to feast their eyes on. Even he, Anton Silverton, who was usually unaffected by anything, was starting to feel a niggling sensation running up his spine. God help him, but

the more he looked at her form, the more she resembled a fiery goddess out to seduce all men on Earth. But Anton vowed to himself that he was not going to be one of them.

“Well? Junior Silverton? What do you say? Would you grant this beautiful Fern a lunch with you?” she asked, staring at him alluringly.

Anton turned away but accidentally caught her sight, in turn, locking their eyes together for a split second, but by God, he almost suffocated from the lack of oxygen in his lungs, just from that gaze. But he composed himself. His ideal type of woman was Clarice Mason. She was the epitome of beauty, sensible and unique. She would make a splendid mother to his baby and a fine wife for him. He’d already made up his mind to woo her. This reminded him that he must phone her for the meeting since it had been a week already since he’d gotten back from Queenstown. Regarding this fiery woman though, sitting in front of him, smiling like she was about to seduce him, he had to control himself. And so he said, “Sorry, but I have a meeting.”

“Well, how about dinner? Fern can wait,” she asked sweetly.

God, that musical voice. It was driving him insane.

“I have work to do,” he said.

“You’re so busy, Junior Silverton. When are you going to have time for Fern so she can apologize to you properly?”

“Listen. I accept your apology. So can you leave when you’re done?”

“Is Junior Silverton asking Fern to leave?” she uttered in surprised. No one had ever asked her to leave before. NO ONE. This man was proving to be more than a challenge, but she must venture forward if she were to save her face and regain her ego.

“Yes.”

“Junior Silverton?” Fern came around to sit herself on Anton’s desk, right beside where he was typing on his computer, her short skirt riding up so high it exposed her bare legs. Anton couldn’t help but fidget in his chair when his eyes saw her sitting in this position.

Fern was smirking and decided to up her game a bit more so Anton would come begging for her forgiveness. And so she draped her arms around his neck and said, “How can you treat Fern like this? Fern is wounded.”

“Look!” Anton shouted. He’d had enough of this nonsense. He shoved her arms from him and stood up to his full height. He was definitely sure now that he wouldn’t get any work done with this creature disturbing his mind. “It’s unrespectable for a woman of your age to dress and drape your arms around men like that if you have no designs on them. I don’t care what your relationship is with my cousin, but to spout out lines like you’re pregnant with him just so you could surprise him is definitely not appropriate. I am telling you this as an older brother would. Stop behaving this way. It’s you who will end up being tainted.”

“Junior Silverton!” Fern stood immediately to the insult that Anton imparted upon her. “How dare you criticize Fern’s behavior? She is nothing but true to her feelings around the people she loves.”

“True to your feelings?” Anton couldn’t believe he was behaving like this. Where was his quiet and businesslike demeanor, the one that always uses logical reasoning to handle everything? He didn’t know, but he guessed his other personality might have just flown out the window now. This woman needed someone to kick her in the backside. “You were hugging Winton when I arrived, and then you sat on Hunter’s lap. And now

you drape your arms around me and tell me your actions just reflect your true love for the people around you? How is that appropriate?"

"Fern, Fern..." Fern didn't know how to respond. This man was beyond a challenge for her. He was... was...

"And stop speaking in third person. It's not proper English," Anton said.

"Fern... Fern... Fern can speak whatever way she likes." Fern lifted her nose high in the air to show she was pissed off at Anton's behavior toward her.

Fern was born in Thailand, despite her parents both being Americans. So growing up in the Thai culture, she spoke both Thai and English, intermingling the two languages together, and more often than not, tended to slip her tongue by speaking in third person when referring to herself, as that's what Thai people tend to speak when referring to oneself. When she spoke to Hunter in her bilingual language, he had no problem understanding her. So why was Hunter's cousin making so much fuss over her speech?

"This is how Fern speaks." She continued to challenge him. "So if you don't like it, don't talk to Fern."

"Good, because I don't find talking to you amusing either. So if you're done with your apology, just leave it at the doorstep and go," Anton instructed, then went back to his computer, typing away furiously, his hands shaking at this sudden confrontation.

Good God, he just had his first verbal fight with a female and it sure felt good.

"Junior Silverton," Fern shrieked, but Anton didn't give heed to her outburst as his eyes continued to clue to the screen.

"Ugggggh," Fern said, fuming by the time she left Anton's office. "Fern swears she will make that Junior Silverton look at her. In fact, even beg for her love. Just wait and see."

CHAPTER 20

“Hunter, my darling Hunter,” that musical voice sang sweetly to him. “Come to me, Hunter. I’m waiting for you. I’m waiting for you to see me, to see only me. Come to me, Hunter. I’m waiting for you.”

It was his mysterious goddess. She was calling out to him again with her sweet, seductive voice that never failed to lure him in, like a wasp to nectar.

He was in the woods, running up to catch her. All around him, the scent of pine trees and orange blossoms intoxicated his nose. The sky was so blue and the wind blew a nice gentle breeze, cooling his already drenched skin.

He could see her in the near distance, her long black hair tossing behind her, those long strains cascading in the wind. He reached his hands out, his fingers only millimeters away from the silk of her white scarf that floated behind her, when she turned around the bend and skipped away. She hid behind a tree, her face partially hidden from his view, trying to catch a glimpse of him as he was running to get to her. A single giggle escaped her lips, and then she ran off again before disappearing deeper into the thick of the woods.

“You’re too slow, Hunter.” He heard her voice echoing in the scenic forest. “Run faster. Find me, Hunter.”

He tried to run as fast as possible to catch up to her while she skipped at her own slow, melodic pace, but no matter how fast he sprinted, he was never able to catch up.

He wanted her; he wanted to catch her. He wanted to be with her. His heart was telling him he needed to catch up to her, so it thumped faster to keep pace with the speed of his feet. Then he came to a clearing, a beautiful meadow dotted with a few trees and lots of lush flowers.

There she was, sitting on a swing made of vines, with her back to him. He walked silently towards her and crouched down. Wrapping his arms around the small of her waist, he nestled his head in her soft scented hair, inhaling the orange blossom and pine that was driving his desire.

“Hunter, my darling Hunter,” his goddess said. “You’ve found me.”

“Yes, my mysterious goddess. I’ve finally found you,” he replied.

His mysterious goddess, she was so beautiful and so sweet that his hand shook when he parted her hair to reveal her swanlike neck. Then he kissed her there, gentle, small kisses along the nape of her neck, until she offered him a soft moan.

He couldn’t control his desire for her anymore. He wanted to tell her, needed to tell her of this feeling hiding inside his heart. So he placed his hand underneath her chin and slowly turned her around, only to come face to face with—

“Clarice?”

* * *

“Shit!” Hunter cursed, jolting wide awake, his pores covered in perspiration and his heart beating like African drums. “Not again.”

It was that dream again. Since he’d arrived back from Queenstown, he had been continuously plagued with that dream of chasing his mysterious goddess, her calling out

to him to find her. Then when he finally found her, it was only to find out his mysterious goddess had somehow transformed into Clarice, the avocado.

It was always the same every time he woke up. That sweaty feeling that made him feel horrible, those bed sheets drenched in his perspiration, and the feeling of tiredness and exhaustion, like he'd been running a marathon in his sleep.

In his dreams, there were many variations of his goddess, from her wearing a white dress to a red dress, with her having her long hair cascading down to her waist or her hair styled in a chignon. Even the scenery changed according to her dress, from her being in the woods to her on the beach and in the cities. But the concept nonetheless remained the same; he would continuously chase after her.

Hunter rubbed his sleepy red eyes and two weeks of stubble. Horrible. That was the word he would use to describe himself. Horrible and awful. He felt like a caveman. The dream was definitely wearing him down. He had to do something about it. And to top it off, he hadn't been home for over two weeks. His dad and Anton had been calling him constantly to visit their estate in the North Shore, but he preferred to stay hidden in his townhouse in Central Auckland.

The dream wasn't the only thing that was to blame, though, although it did play a part in his facial appearance and lack of energy, but the other reason would be Caroline. She had called him constantly since they left Queenstown, and here he thought she was a quiet, subtle girl. She was like a stalker, tailing him at every turn. Thank God she didn't know where he lived; otherwise, this house would be infested with her scent again.

God, that perfume, Hunter thought. He almost gagged every time she came near. It was so powerful that it literally bashed all his little olfactory receptors to death. His poor receptors would require days, or even weeks, to recover. Although, he must admit if he could smell that perfume from twenty meters away, he could always make his escape just in time before she reach him.

He shook his head and scuffled his hair again. It was getting longer. Maybe he needed to cut it. He took the hair tie out of the top drawer and tied it up in a ponytail atop his head, then got out of bed, remembering that today he could not avoid going into the hotel, since Anton wanted to see him for some sort of meeting.

He'd been in the other day when his best friend Fern decided to surprise him with the news that she was pregnant with his baby. He knew that could never happen because he'd never had any intimate relationship with her, but it sure affected his dad and Winton. But he guessed the person who immediately took a strong disliking to Fern would be his traditional, old-fashioned cousin Anton. He wondered what Anton would say if he knew Fern was at their hotel for the duration of her stay, which was a good two months.

After feeling somewhat refreshed by that cold morning shower, Hunter was all ready to face the day. Before he left, he picked up his cell phone, then flicked it open and stared at his wallpaper.

"Avocado, what are you doing to me?" he asked, then closed it again and went to his red Ferrari and drove to Silverton Hotel. Except he didn't get as far as his garage when the head of his nosey neighbor, Macy Beanstalk, came out of her house, intercepting his path.

"Why, good morning, Hunter darling," Macy greeted her neighbor. "A fine day is it? Would you like a muffin?" She came over to lean on the fence that separated their

territory and offered him some of her baked goods. If that fence didn't exist, Hunter was sure she'd be on his front doorstep by now.

"No thanks, Macy." He smiled. "Have to hurry. Got to meet Anton over at the hotel."

"Oh, sweet and sensible Anton. He is such a hard worker, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is." Hunter was glad everyone looked up to Anton.

"And you? The captivating Casanova? Have you caught any new female species yet with those lasso looks of yours?"

My business, Hunter wanted to tell her. But he couldn't, so instead, he just smiled and said, "None." Then he dashed off before she could question him more about his life or offer him her homemade muffins again. If Macy were to continue to eat any more muffins, Hunter was sure she'd needed to change her last name from Beanstalk to Muffins.

Safe now that he was in his car, Hunter drove for a bit when he suddenly slammed on the brake and stopped, not because he ran through a red light or anything. It was just... it was... God help him, was he fantasizing again? Did he dream about her so many times that she just ended up appearing in front of his face now? *God... it-it's that avocado*. And what the hell was she doing caressing her lips like that on the sidewalk like she was in some sort of trance? *Oh shit!* The image of that kiss with Clarice came back into his mind again and his heart began sprinting wildly.

"My goddess, where are you? Stop my thinking about this avocado. I need to see you again." Hunter slumped his head on the steering wheel as if begging his goddess to appear before him. After some time of calming his heart rate, he glanced back up and—

"Shit! She's still there. The avocado," he growled. There was no use getting away from her.

Hunter looked heavenward, asking why must he see her now when he was still in his confused state.

Disgusted at his own reaction to this woman who he had clearly vowed he would never fall for, Hunter slammed his foot on the accelerator and, without looking at her still in her delirious state, tenderly touching those lips, he zoomed past her.

A few more minutes of driving had him stopping again. He parked in front of a park and sat looking at the children playing with their parents, their voices echoing with laughter, seeing but not seeing, hearing but not hearing because he was lost in his own world. For once in his life, he hadn't a damn clue as what to do next.

Shit, what was wrong with him? He cursed himself. And what the hell was wrong with her? What the hell was she doing in his neighborhood anyway? He asked himself these questions again and again, but he could find no answers. There was only one way to find out. And without even realizing what he was doing, he ignited the engine again, pulled his gear into reverse, and did a U-turn.

CHAPTER 21

Worrying isn't going to do you any good, Clarice told herself. And neither was chewing her lips, because at the end of the day, they would just be swollen and ugly. But she just couldn't help herself. What if she didn't conceive? It was only one time.

Should she ask to sleep with him again? She knew all the symptoms of pregnancy and she hadn't experienced any yet. Then again, it hadn't been over two weeks yet. She was scheduled to meet up with Anton today to discuss the presentation she was going to give to his elderly guests. She wondered if he would talk to her about that night, or even if he could remember at all.

A sudden cough from her car drew her attention away from her mulling thoughts.

"What's wrong, Red?" she asked. In reply, her car just continued to spatter and cough.

Was it playing up? *Oh, please, don't play up now*. Not when she was already halfway to Silverton Hotel.

"No, no, not now, Red. Why must you get sick now?" Thank heavens it wasn't a busy road and she was able to park on the curbside just before it released a final hacking cough. Sadly, Red died a sudden death, smoke drifting from its bonnet.

"I just took you for your six-month checkup. They said you were fine, and now you do this to me? Just when I need to meet Anton too," she grumbled and stepped out of the car.

She lifted the hood and more smoke came billowing out. She stood back before it could make its way into her lungs. Once it dissipated, she went back to look at the engine. She saw all the wires and containers, but having no knowledge of cars, she just couldn't diagnose the problem.

"What am I supposed to do with you? Replace you?" she asked in frustration. But inside, she knew she could never replace her beloved Corolla, or Red, as she so lovingly named it.

She had bought Red during her final year of dentistry, after working so many different jobs, as a kind of reward for finishing her degree. Now, almost eight years had passed, and Red was still with her, through thick and thin, through sadness and happiness. She had money now, which could easily afford her a brand new car if she so wished it, but it was the sentimental relationship she had with Red that had stopped her. Red meant a lot to her. But looking at its condition now, with its brand new door—some unknown person had crashed into her a few months back—and its sickness, she wondered just how much longer her Red would last.

Sighing with resignation, she checked her whereabouts with her cell phone GPS and found it was an hour walk to Silverton Hotel. Deciding a car would be better, she decided a taxi should pick her up, but first she rang her car insurance company to have Red picked up. Once all that was done, she phoned the taxi company.

"Hello. This is Efficient Taxi. How may I help?" she heard the operator say.

"Hello, I would... Hello... Hello?" Clarice looked at her phone and wanted to drum her head against poor Red's bonnet. Oh dear heavens, why didn't she charge her phone? Just when she needed to call the taxi too. She'd never been careless like this

before, well, before coming back from Queenstown anyway. Lately, she seemed to miss so many things.

Glancing at her wristwatch, she saw she had but an hour left before her meeting with Anton.

She glanced around. The scenery looked picturesque, like the houses from *The Stepford Wives*, starring Nicole Kidman. This was Herne Bay, the suburb where the rich lived. Dear heavens, it was exactly the same suburb where that Casanova Hunter lived. She just hoped she wouldn't meet him today, what with that kiss he'd imparted on her that she just couldn't stop thinking about it. If he were to appear, how would she face him?

She could still remember the feel of his lips resting upon her own, so soft, as he tasted her, teased her, as if searching for something. She touched her own lips, tracing her index finger softly along. Yes, right there, those lips touched hers right there, so silky smooth, so velvety, like the taste of a plum, ripe and juicy, deli—

"Clarice, stop it right now." She lightly slapped herself on the cheek when she realized she was fantasizing about Hunter. "Why are you fantasizing about that Casanova kissing you? Why are you comparing Anton's kiss to that Casanova? Start walking now."

Yes, she should start walking. Walking was good exercise. It makes you fit and strong... like that Casanova, so big and strong and... and... that kiss... ahhhhh, so sweet. He was tormenting her, but she liked it.

Clarice gently caressed her lips again, not realizing she was doing so, until a car zoomed past her, snapping her out of her delirium.

Clarice, start walking, you airhead. It brings about positive energy. With this said, she smiled as she made her way to the hotel. *Always have a positive outlook on life,* she told herself. That was how to succeed in life. But her outlook on life wasn't all that positive some ten minutes later when she moaned, groaned, and constantly stopped at every available bench to rest her feet.

"You stupid heels. Why do I continue to wear you?" Clarice moaned again when she felt the ache intensify. It was definitely a curse to wear heels, especially when one had to walk.

Feeling she couldn't tolerate any more, she took off her shoes and walked on bare feet instead. It felt much better, but the hot concrete began to bruise her soles after walking for another five minutes.

There's no winning, is there?

Just when she was putting her heels back on, she heard a loud honk blasting her way.

"Oi, Avocado?" The shout was followed by another honk. "Out and about on a warm sunny day? What are you doing in this part of town?"

Clarice turned to see Hunter, his head sticking out the car window like a dog testing the wind, his ponytail flying against the cool breeze.

When did his hair get this long? Then she smacked herself and gritted her teeth. Why was she even thinking about his hairstyle? And she wasn't in the mood to see him today.

Hunter's heart thumped heavily as he drove closer to her. Once he got next to her, he pretended there was nothing wrong with him and started acting like the jerk he always was.

“Well?” he asked when Clarice didn’t react. “Are you going to bite your tongue today?”

“Piss off, Hunter. I’m not in the mood to see you today,” Clarice said, staring ahead.

“So will you be in the mood to see me tomorrow, then?” Hunter asked cheekily.

“Piss off. I don’t want to see you tomorrow either,” Clarice said as she continued to walk faster, ignoring his persistent comments.

“What’s wrong?” Hunter asked, concerned when he noticed Clarice wasn’t in her usual playful mood. “Aren’t you glad to see me?”

Of course I’m not glad to see you. That kiss he’d imparted still left her wanting more. But of course she didn’t say that. Instead, she said, “Nothing. So will you please leave?” Then she motioned him away with her hands and walked faster.

But Hunter didn’t listen. He just kept on following in his car.

Clarice had had enough.

“What do you want?” she snapped, turning towards him. “Stop following me.”

Hunter stared at her, wide-eyed. Clarice had never snapped at him before. Well, not in that serious tone of voice anyway. This really concerned him. Was she affected by that kiss too?

“Where are you going?” he asked seriously, driving slowly to keep to her pace.

“None of your business.” Clarice fumed. She didn’t want to be any more confused

Crash!

Clarice was so busy thinking about Hunter’s kiss that she didn’t look where she was going. In turn, she tripped over a crack in the concrete and now had even managed to twist her ankle. *What a stupid idiot!*

Hunter opened his car door, leapt out, and was cradling her in three seconds flat.

“For Christ sake, Avocado, would you watch where you’re going?” Hunter shouted in fright and concern. He’d never been that afraid before. He thought his heart was about to leap out of his throat. “Are you hurt anywhere?”

“I don’t know,” Clarice answered. She was too shocked to react, as she was now within Hunter’s embrace. And it felt like... like... Anton’s hugs, when they were together in Queenstown that night.

“Here, let me help you.” Hunter was about to lift Clarice when she pushed him away.

“What are you doing?” she asked when she woke from her shock.

“Lifting you up so I can look at your legs properly.”

“I don’t need your help,” she said. “I can get up myself.”

“Fine. Suit yourself.”

Hunter stood back and folded his arms, watching the woman who thought she could get up without his help. It looked as if she’d injured herself quite badly. And he hadn’t even finished thinking about it when Clarice almost fell over backward as she tried to stand.

“Clarice!” He wrapped his arm behind her before she toppled to the hard concrete again. “Why don’t you let me carry you?”

“No. Don’t carry me. I can walk!” she shouted in panic.

“Goddamn it. Don’t be such an annoying woman. I’m not going to kiss you, so you don’t have to worry about it.”

Oh shit! There was silence all around him. Why did he have to mention that?

Clarice swallowed. Now with him this close to her, she couldn’t think of anything else.

Hunter could feel Clarice’s trepidation. He knew she must have been thinking about that episode too.

“Wind your arms around me,” he said instead. “I’ll put you inside the car. Then I’ll have a look at that foot of yours.”

This time Clarice was obedient, letting Hunter do his job. Once he placed her in the backseat, he lifted her left foot so it rested on his bent knees. He started folding her trousers back and feeling for any broken bones.

“Owww! That hurts,” she cried.

No, she mustn’t cry in front of this kid. He was a kid after all. By seven years. But a single tear slid down her cheek. The pain was so unbearable. Then she felt a soft hand flick away that teardrop, and she opened her eyes, coming face to face with Hunter. Her breath was immediately knocked out of her chest and in that split second, she could feel the tension weighing down upon her, constricting her lungs, preventing her from inhaling enough oxygen.

“Does it hurt?” Hunter asked softly, dropping his eyes to her ruby pouty lips.

Clarice couldn’t answer so she just nodded and looked away, taking deep, slow breaths.

“Do you want me to take you to the hospital?” Hunter asked.

Oh, no, she must go to Anton. She had a meeting with Anton today. She must see him.

“No. No.” Clarice shook her head. “I should be fine now. Could you let my foot go?”

“Wait, not yet. I’ll check if your soles are all right first.” Then Hunter proceeded to remove her heels gently.

“Jesus, Avocado!” He swore when he saw her soles covered in blisters. “What the hell did you do to yourself? Why are your feet blistered?” Then Hunter lifted her other foot and removed the other heel. “For Christ sake, and here you tell me you can walk? What did this?”

“Those shoes. They’re too high for me. Plus, I didn’t expect to walk that far.”

“Where were you going?”

“Somewhere.”

“Where is somewhere?” Hunter reiterated, starting to get irritated with Clarice’s monosyllable answers.

“A hotel,” Clarice said, looking away.

“A hotel!” Hunter sputtered.

A hotel? What would Clarice be doing at a hotel? And about this hotel, was it like a normal hotel or a *love* hotel? He was very curious. By this stage, his heart was almost leaping from his throat.

“Why?”

“I’m meeting with someone.”

Shit. It must be a love hotel, then. No way was he taking her to a love hotel.

“Who is this someone?” Hunter asked again, almost bursting at the seams when she wouldn’t give him a straight answer. “Older than me or younger than me? A man or a woman?”

Clarice stared at Hunter, wide-eyed. What was with all these grilling questions? And why was he so interested in the person she was going to meet anyway?

“He’s older than you, if you must know.”

“So it’s a man, then,” Hunter said, looking directly at Clarice like he was accusing her of having an affair. “And older than me too. Ha! Must be some old grandpa, then.” He pretended to laugh. “What does he do? Where does he work?”

“That’s my personal business,” Clarice yelled when he refused to stop firing questions at her. Dear heavens! What was wrong with him today? Why was he acting so strange and being so nosy?

“Fine. Then what kind of business do you have at this hotel?” Hunter couldn’t help asking.

“Also my business,” Clarice said again.

“I’m not taking you, then, if you won’t tell me.” Hunter gave out his ultimatum. He refused. He refused straightforwardly. If she wouldn’t tell him, then he wouldn’t take her. There, no negotiation at all. See how she would get to this *love* hotel now. What was she going to do? Walk? He doubted it.

“Suits me just fine.” Clarice grinned when an idea popped into her head. She smiled and then said loudly, “I’ll just call a taxi, then.”

There! Let’s see if this Casanova is willing to let a casualty go even when that casualty is in pain. And to test her theory, she took out her uncharged phone and pretended to call a taxi.

“Hello. I would like to order—”

“Give me that phone.” Hunter snatched it from Clarice and pocketed it in his jeans. Then he jerked his azure eyes to meet her round black ones. He ground his teeth in irritation and clicked his tongue in frustration before saying to her, “I’m confiscating this for now. Until you’re well again.”

Who was she playing with? Did she think he was stupid enough to allow her to call a taxi? Over his dead body. He preferred to take her to this hotel himself. At least this way he could see this bloody old grandpa too.

“I’m not sick,” Clarice yelled. What was wrong with her? Why was she yelling constantly?

“You look sick to me. Now, I’m not going to argue with a child who lives in an adult’s body. Let’s go.”

“Hunter! Arrrggghhhhh.” Clarice screamed when Hunter lifted her again. “What are you doing?” she shouted, her hands wrapping around his neck for dear life. “Put me down right now. I’m scared of heights.”

“Oh, really?” Hunter’s sky-blue irises lit up with mischief. “You might want to hang on tight or my hands might accidentally slip.” And then he pretended to loosen his grip, in turn making Clarice scream in fright and grip his neck even tighter, her body snuggling closer to his chest. Hunter laughed when he saw the lovely result he’d produced.

“You... you...” Clarice wanted to swear at him, but no profanity came to her head at that moment, so she sent a simmering death glare at him, which in turn just... just...

“What? Trying to think of a swear best suited for me?” Hunter smiled. Happiness radiated from his chest, the likes of which he had not experienced in the past two weeks. This happiness made him grin, contorting his lips until he couldn’t stop smiling. He turned to face the woman in his arms and then he just...

Hunter froze. God, she looked majestic. He couldn’t breathe.

Clarice was also experiencing a lack of oxygen. Hunter just smiled. That smile that had captivated her and made her heart go *thump, thump, thump*, just like in the elevator when she’d pretended to be a sick old woman.

Both Clarice and Hunter swallowed, trying to appease their dry throats. Their eyes continued to stare at one another as if they were fighting a battle to see who could stare the longest. There was definitely a spark, a thread of electricity blazing between the two, as they continued to gaze at one another. Until a random car zoomed past them and broke the spell.

Hunter recovered first. He cleared his throat, trying to regain some dignity.

That felt like an eternity, he thought, when in actual fact it had only been mere seconds.

“Let me put you in the front,” he said, moving to the other door. He dropped her off, then went back to his seat.

Hoping to lighten their mood a bit, he started teasing her again.

“God, you’re so heavy, Avocado,” he commented cheekily. “My arms almost broke. What did you eat this morning? Roast pork?”

“I had rice porridge, thank you very much,” Clarice said, fidgeting in her seat, clearly uncomfortable with the whole topic of weight.

Clarice didn’t want to tell Hunter about her ailment this morning. She had resorted to eating rice porridge because she just couldn’t seem to take down any proper food. She tried to eat her normal cereal, but she just wanted to gag every time she was about to take a spoonful. She suspected it was because she was so nervous about the prospect of seeing Anton today and having to face their unknown future together. Plus, there was also the possibility that he didn’t remember their night of passion in Queenstown. But for her current conversation here with Hunter, she still had her pride, so she said, “I am *not* fat. I am within the range of my ideal body mass index.”

“Fine, whatever you say,” Hunter said, grinning at her. Then he realized she still hadn’t put on her seat belt. “Are you not going to do up your belt?” he asked, quirked one eyebrow in question. “Or do you want to feel the thrill of having your stomach contents jumping about inside you?”

Clarice couldn’t retort. She didn’t know what to say. She was being careless again. Seatbelts. Of course she needed to fasten her seatbelt before Hunter started the car. She’d never ever driven anywhere with her seatbelt unbuckled before. That was way too dangerous. And this situation was dangerous. She seriously needed to check her mental status. This was definitely unhealthy.

“God, Avocado, why are you being so difficult?” Hunter sighed and shook his head when he saw Clarice still struggling to pull the belt from the side.

"It's too tight. I can't extend it. Clearly, you need to fix your seatbelts. It's dangerous and not functioning properly," she said, tugging on the belt again, but it just wouldn't budge.

"Let me do it for you," Hunter said. Then he leaned over her, pressing his own body mass into Clarice's small frame so they were practically molded together.

Clarice tried to press her body back into her seat as much as possible to avoid touching Hunter, but his body was just so close to her that she was literally crushed tight, like a ham sandwich. Dear heavens, she could feel his rippled abs. And his heart, his heart was beating so fast. He wasn't sick, was he?

Clarice didn't know what Hunter's ailment was, but she sure did notice her own. His face was so close that it made it hard to breathe again. She had to turn and look toward the steering wheel just to avoid her face touching his.

"What's taking so long?" she asked, squeezing back into the seat farther.

"It's really tight Avocado. I really need to get this belt looked at."

After a few more tugs, Hunter got it to work. Then he buckled it around her. But accidentally, his nose brushed against her cheek when she turned to the sound of his voice.

Hunter sucked in his breath, just as his lips touched her. Again.

"You, you kissed me again." Clarice touched her cheek.

"That's not a kiss. It was an accident," Hunter said, wanting to caress that soft cheek again, inhaling her sweet orange blossom scent.

"Get off me, then," Clarice shouted, pushing him away. Then she folded her arms and turned to face the window.

"Fine," Hunter said, now back in his own seat. "It's not that spectacular anyway."

"If it's not spectacular, then stop kissing me," she yelled, jerking her head to give him another death glare, which was supposed to make her look scary, but it just had the opposite effect on Hunter.

God, she was so adorable. He wanted his lips on her again. And this time he wanted to make sure it was *not* an accident. But his big mouth had a mind of its own and just couldn't help teasing her. So it decided to open of its own accord and speak without his brain even registering what it said.

"It wasn't intentional anyway," he said. "The first time was an accident. You bumped into me, remember? At that Cambodian restaurant? The one in Queenstown, I had to shut you up by kissing you because you just wouldn't stop yelping, and the third time it was an accident. See, unintentional."

So that was it? She wasn't someone special enough to receive his kiss.

Clarice, you dork. Why would you even think something would come of it? Here you've slept with Anton, but all you constantly do is replay that kiss Hunter bestowed upon you. You even imagined Hunter was the one that had slept with you. You're really pathetic. How could you feel like this towards this person?

She wasn't replying to his teasing. Had he gone overboard? If he could take back his words, he would have done so. Maybe he should stop teasing her for a bit. She really didn't look like she was enjoying it at all.

"Clarice... I..." He wanted to apologize, but he really didn't know why. He guessed he just didn't like it when she wasn't talking or getting mad at him. This was another tension altogether. It looked as if she were really upset with him.

"Clarice... I..." he repeated.

“Just start driving,” Clarice shouted, then turned her face towards her window, avoiding his gaze.

“Okay,” he said passively, then obediently put his car in drive. The car roared to life, and soon they were in the fast lane, heading towards Central Auckland.

Hunter stole a few glances at Clarice during the trip. Once or twice, she would look straight ahead and give out directions. For the rest of the time, her eyes were directed out the window, her back facing him.

It was so strange. Maybe she was really upset with him. The Clarice he knew never behaved like this. Maybe she was in pain because of her blistered feet. He came to the only conclusion he could think of. Her face sure looked pale.

That thought sparked his anger, so he started grinding his teeth again. How did she manage to walk thirty minutes with those torture devices on her poor feet? Stupid woman! Who would do that to themselves?

He'd have to ask the receptionist for the first aid gear when they reach the hotel. But five minutes later, when they reached their destination, Hunter didn't know if he would be brave enough to venture to the front desk at all.

Oh shit! “Silverton Hotel?” Did Clarice give out the wrong directions? Who was Clarice planning on seeing at his family's hotel?

“Thanks for the ride,” Clarice said swiftly, then opened the door and proceeded to walk herself into the hotel.

Hunter suddenly snapped out of his thoughts, jumping from the car, leaving the keys in the ignition for the valet. “Where do you think you're going?” he asked, grabbing her hand just in time. He was so perplexed at the moment that he really needed answers.

“Didn't I just tell you that I have an appointment?” Clarice said, shaking his hands loose. Then she started hobbling slowly to the large entrance.

“You are not going anywhere in your condition,” Hunter said as he swiftly scooped her into his arms again.

“Hunter, put me down. I'm embarrassed,” Clarice said, her eyes nervously scanning all the people milling about in the foyer.

“If you're embarrassed, then just snuggle your head into my neck. That way no one can see you.”

“Just... just put me down. Please...” she begged. She wasn't feeling too well. Maybe she should have postponed the meeting. But she thought it would be fine. And then when Red started acting up and she had to walk in her blasted high heels, she couldn't shake the exhausted feeling. And now, just being carried within Hunter's arms really did her in. She wasn't comfortable at all and just wanted to faint.

“Say one more word and I'll kiss you. Not a peck on the cheek, but the mouthwatering kind.” Hunter blackmailed her. “You choose, Avocado.”

“You. Urgh,” Clarice groaned softly, clearly out of energy, and then snuggled her face in the hollow of Hunter's neck and closed her eyes.

Hunter grinned like the Cheshire Cat.

“Which floor?” he asked just to stop himself from grinning like an idiot.

“Third,” Clarice said quietly, her eyes still closed.

This must be his lucky day, getting to carry Clarice three times. And he'd even get to carry her up to the third floor. But that thought soon evaporated like hot air when

not a few meters from him, coming out of the elevator, were three people who were sure to ruin his day if they were to spot him carrying a woman in his arms.

From this distance, Hunter could see they were in some sort of argument. So being the smart and mischievous Hunter he was, he took this opportunity to make his escape before they could see him.

“Are we there yet?” Clarice asked when he was about to make his move.

Like dogs on the hunt, the three looked up, their eyes already locked on him.

“Hunter!” they all said in unison.

“Oh shit!” he muttered under his breath. *Here comes trouble.*

CHAPTER 22

One long hallway, just like a runway. Two beautiful, life-sized supermodels. What would happen when both hot models had to share the same catwalk at the same time? A competition, of course.

And that was what happened when Fern stalked her runway, the hallway of the hotel, walking elegantly towards Anton's office. There she spotted another beautiful species, those long legs glamorously nibbling away at the distance.

They glared at each other, two female hyenas protecting their own territory, then swiftly turned their heads the other way, as if finding the other was of no importance. Thus, they briskly walked towards their destination again, not forgetting to glide as they went.

Onlookers, especially Winton, who was once again out and about running errands for Anton, couldn't stop their mouths from gaping in awe of the two women, gliding side by side as if they owned the world.

One blond, with her hair piled high, letting a few tendrils fall gracefully to the side, and her blue dress leaving almost nothing to the imagination. Winton could only describe her as a cool beauty that outshined all others. He was sure this beauty would remain sketched in his heart forever, frozen in time. Although Winton wasn't sure who she was, he sure hoped she would be his next muse to motivate him to lose those extra pounds.

The other woman, Winton saw, was the fiery redhead, Miss Fern, the one who was responsible for making him *lose* his motivation to lose those extra pounds by sprouting out that she was pregnant with Master Hunter, when in fact, they were simply the best of friends.

Again, she was a sight to behold. Dressed all in yellow, she was definitely the devil's daughter out to rip out his heart with her scythe. And he sure wouldn't mind if that happened either.

Side by side, red and gold, fire and ice, so hot and so cold—one would burn his heart while the other would cool him.

Winton felt all giddy inside. He couldn't decide which one should be his prize muse. He was like a little kid in a candy store, having to pick the strawberry licorice or the banana taffy when both were his favorites. But once again, his mind was quick as he made haste to block their paths as both attempted to once again infiltrate the headquarters of Silverton Enterprises.

"I'm sorry, but no patrons are allowed farther."

Immediately, Fern wound her arms around Winton and said, "But you know Fern, Winton. Fern isn't some stranger barging into this place." Fern directed her comment at the newcomer, clearly her competition. She hadn't a clue as to who this newcomer was, but with that blue skintight dress, that softly styled hair, and that pale lipstick, she was sure this woman was a monster in disguise. And Fern didn't like monsters. She was direct, yes, but she did not hide.

"You must be Winton," the blonde said. Then she stretched out her elegant hand to shake with him.

Winton turned his head to stare at the beauty in surprise. He sure must be famous, he thought, smiling to himself. Even a guest in the hotel knew his name.

"My name is Caroline Bass. I believe my father is a great friend of Senior Clinton Silverton. I am also Hunter's friend, his very *close* friend," she said, eyeing Fern subtly through her thick lashes.

"Wh... wh... what?" Winton's mouth gaped open when the blonde announced herself, feeling his motivation once again sinking to the bottom of the sea. "Miss... Miss Bass. The daughter of Mr. Steven Bass, who holds shares in the new joint venture with Silverton Enterprises?"

"Yes." Caroline pretended to smile pleasantly. "So I'm not a stranger at all, right?" she said, her glare still on Fern.

"You said you're Hunter's friend. How come Fern didn't know he has a friend named Caroline?" Fern came to stand in front of Caroline now.

"I am his *new* friend. We had a great time in Queenstown. He took me there, you know."

By this stage, all Winton could do was stare at them, lost for words as his two favorite licorices fought each other, not with hands and swords, but with words, sweet, gentle words like knives cutting into each other's skin.

"No, Fern didn't know this, but maybe you should know that Fern has been a friend of Hunter's for so long now that all his other friends pale in comparison."

"I do admit that I pale in comparison to his other friends, but at least I don't shine to the point it hurts Hunter's eyes," Caroline sarcastically retorted, running her eyes along the length of Fern's body, who was indeed so vivid today with her bright-yellow dress. Combined with her coppery mane, Fern looked like an elegant parrot on parade. "Does he often wear his sunglasses around you?" Caroline feigned innocence.

Fern had realized Hunter had been wearing his glasses when she first met him here in New Zealand, but that wasn't because of her. It was because he was hiding his dark circles. This girl was really playing with her head. So what if she wore her bright-yellow dress? She just wanted someone to notice her, someone in particular.

"Fern will not waste her breath on the likes of you. Fern has more important things to do." And with this, she swiftly turned and headed towards Anton's office, only to stop when a sarcastic comment was thrown her way.

"Some people only have words but no substance. It's like there's a brain in that head somewhere, but there's no intelligence to be found. I understand now why Hunter keeps begging me to call him." Caroline lied through her teeth.

The fact was Caroline knew Hunter did whatever he could to get away from her, but this girl in front of her now was a threat to her goal of attaining Hunter. She admitted when she had that blind date with Hunter at the Cambodian restaurant a few weeks ago, she was so stunned that she couldn't utter a single word. She couldn't believe her father would grant her that wish. She had always loved Hunter, watching him from afar, even in their university days. But Hunter had never known she existed. She'd bumped into him a few times too, but he never looked her way.

She told her father of her goal, of wanting to marry Hunter. So her father schemed to do a joint venture with Clinton Silverton. Both would gain an advantage because Hunter was the heir to Silverton Enterprises. As for Anton, he was nothing but a pathetic nephew who abided all the work of his uncle. He would amount to nothing. So that was

her plan. Once she got Hunter, her father would also gain half of Silverton Enterprises' shares, which were worth billions.

And now she was staring at the woman who claimed to know Hunter more than her, which unleashed a sudden anger within her. Her hands itched to slap that woman's cheek until it turned as red as that hair on her head.

Oh, the sudden urge to do so was so strong. But she controlled herself. She was, after all, the daughter of a high-class businessman, so to do this would only taint her father's reputation and destroy the sensible façade that took her so long to perfect.

Caroline smiled slyly, only for Fern to see. For Winton, it was just an innocent grin, but Fern was sharp. She charged all the way back and glared at her competitor.

"Are you saying Fern has no brain?"

"You said that yourself," Caroline said, lifting her eyebrow in mocking form. "I didn't put those words into your mouth."

"Why you..." Fern was shocked to hear Caroline say this. No one had ever insulted her before. Especially to say she hadn't a brain or intelligence. She so wanted to slap Caroline right now, but she composed herself. To show she had a brain, she would not succumb to violence.

"What, no reply?" Caroline walked closer to Fern, forcing her back until she pressed against a door. Standing in front of Fern like this, Caroline prevented Winton from seeing her true actions. "Or is your brain so dumb you can't seem to find a simple word?" She snarled quietly only for Fern to hear.

"Fern has a degree in business," Fern spoke, seething while she tried to contain her fists by her sides. "You look to Fern to be the one that has no brain cells and intelligence in that skull of yours."

"A degree in business, yet you speak like a child, in third person. You are worse than a five-year-old."

"I *choose* to speak like this," Fern said, eyeing Caroline sharply. "I can change my pattern of speech anytime I wish."

"A trait you must be so proud of," Caroline said sarcastically. "Are there any other traits you're proud of?" Then Caroline ran her eyes along Fern's tight-fitting dress. "You are very provocative, aren't you? How many men have you slept with? Oh wait, you must be in the hundreds now."

"You!" Fern's face grew red. "How dare you accuse me like this?"

"You want to get physical, then?" Caroline threatened.

Fern only looked on in shock as Caroline pushed her backwards, somehow turning the doorknob behind her. Having no hard surface to back her now, Fern fell slowly backward, seemingly suspended in midair for eternity. She knew then that when she hit that hard floor below, she would earn herself a concussion or at least a huge bruise on the back of her head. How was she going to look pretty for Anton if she had a bruise on her head?

* * *

Anton couldn't seem to get any work done. All his thoughts were consumed with that fiery red-haired woman who dressed like a seductress. He tried checking the agenda of

their elderly program again, the one he'd asked Clarice to do her oral health presentation for, but he still couldn't concentrate.

What in God's name had that woman done to his peace of mind? All he could see was her stretching out on his desk, her arms tightly winding around his neck and those kissable lips asking him why he was so busy with his work that he couldn't spend a little time with her.

Anton shook his head again, trying to break away from his fantasies. Cursing himself for feeling this way about that woman, he settled back into work mode. Except this time it wasn't his wayward mind corrupting his work, but the noises outside his door.

What in God's name is going on? he thought, standing up. He could hear shouting, then whispering. Who was outside his door? Didn't they know not to interrupt him when he was working?

Anton had enough and stormed to the door, about to confront whoever it was that had dared to break his concentration, when he saw the door miraculously open on its own accord. In fell the woman that had his mind turned into a puddle of soup, landing right in his arms.

They had their eyes locked and... and... My God, she was bright. What in God's name was she wearing? It hurt his tired eyes. Maybe he should start wearing those sunglasses Hunter had bought him.

"Junior Silverton?" Fern uttered when she saw his upside-down face gazing at her from above. "You saved me."

"Uh..." Anton was speechless. *What did she say? And did she just speak in first person?*

"Anton!" Caroline cried out innocently when she realized it was Anton's office Fern had fallen into.

Drat! She failed. She knew Anton hated to be interrupted when he was working. Though, right now, he didn't look mad as he stared at that parrot woman. She knew she must say something to hide her true motive.

"Miss Fern here accidentally opened your door. I tried to tell her you were surely busy, but she wouldn't listen. I know how you hate to be interrupted while working."

"What?" Fern was flabbergasted at that accusation. It was that Caroline woman who had turned the doorknob, shoving her like a petty schoolgirl. She'd had about enough of this woman playing innocent, the sly fox, so Fern jerked her head forward, in turn banging into Anton's forehead, which led to Anton stumbling over backwards, falling onto his butt.

But the train didn't end there as Anton gripped onto Fern's arms as he fell, leading to both being sprawled, tangled with the other, ending with a growl and a whine of pain from Anton and Fern respectively.

"What in the pickle just happened?" Winton asked, coming in at that precise moment. "Are you making out with Miss Fern, boss?" Winton asked stupidly.

"Winton, you... Arrgghhh!" What to call his brainless fool of a secretary? He wasn't making out with this woman. He was in fact being crushed. Good God, she was heavy.

"Get off me," Anton yelled when he began to feel the niggling sensation running up his groin. Oh God, oh God. What was wrong with him? He was getting turned on. And by none other than this fiery woman he swore was not his type.

“Fern is crushing you?” she asked innocently, wiggling her body more, trying to get untangled.

“Please, just get off me.” He gritted his teeth in frustration, trying to suppress his desire, which was about to burst in his pants.

“Fern is sorry,” Fern said when she crawled off him. “Fern didn’t mean to make Junior Silverton mad.”

When Anton was able to contain his desire again, he stood and confronted the two women and Winton.

“Why are they in my office?” Anton shouted at Winton, which just sent his poor underling into shock.

His boss... Master Anton Silverton had never raised his voice before. Why was he behaving like this?

Anton questioned himself too. What in God’s name was wrong with him recently? He couldn’t understand it.

“I... I...” Winton couldn’t reply. He was shaking in his shoes.

Caroline too was shocked to hear Anton shouting like this. She had accompanied him to Queenstown, and he was fine. Always calm and soft spoken, never like this. She was starting to see a little potential in him, something she didn’t see before. Was he becoming a man now, not be overshadowed by his uncle’s name? If that were the case, then she must get rid of him too. But then again, there was no way he could become the heir of Silverton Enterprises.

It was Fern who didn’t react to the beast since she’d never known Anton’s behavior before, so she was the one that answered his question. “Fern is looking for Hunter. Where is he?”

It was like a spell was broken when Hunter’s name was mentioned. Winton stopped shaking and Caroline recovered herself. Anton, on the other hand, immediately turned to his wristwatch and cursed under his breath.

He’d totally forgotten about Clarice. She was supposed to be here fifteen minutes ago. They were supposed to have their meeting on her presentation. And he was supposed to ask her out to lunch too. Just the two of them. But now... Anton turned his icy glare on Fern, and a shock of electricity ran through his body again. That woman, she’d really corrupted his mind. He needed to see Clarice. Now! Clarice, the smart and sensible woman, would calm down his heart.

And so without looking in Fern’s direction, ignoring her completely, he strode past her and headed towards the elevator, when suddenly he was bombarded by the two women on either side of him, both winding their arms in his.

“Caroline, what are you doing?” he asked.

“Are you not going to go find Hunter?” Caroline asked sweetly. “I’m looking for him too. Let’s go find him together.”

“Fern will go as well. Junior Silverton will take Fern to see Hunter. Fern will *not* be the last one out.”

Winton trotted along like a dog following its master, but Anton shouted for him to stay behind and prepare the meeting room. Like a good dog, he raced away to please his master, all the while grumbling under his breath about how once again his boss had managed to snatch away his prize motivation for losing those extra pounds.

Back in the confinement of the elevator, it was as if *America's Next Top Model* broadcasted live before Anton's eyes. The competition was between the two women as they posed this way and that to see who could be more seductive, alluring, and captivating to their judge—Anton.

When the two women stood in their many fashionable poses, the “arms stretched out” pose, the “tilting of the chin” pose, and the “staring over their shoulder” pose, both were quite astonished because they could not detect any reaction on Anton's face.

It was Caroline who gave up first. Fern, though, was reluctant to let it go. There was no way she was losing Anton to that woman. What both women didn't know was Anton had his “hiding his inner feelings” skill mastered to perfection. He'd learned ages ago that showing his emotions wasn't going to benefit him in anything.

When his parents died at a young age, he had to grow up fast. He knew he didn't have his parents to rely upon, so he learned to do everything himself. His uncle had saved him and he was thankful for that. Yet he still didn't express his desires, thankful enough that his uncle had brought him into his household and raised him like a son.

To Anton, his uncle was his father and mother. He was his everything, and Hunter was more than his cousin. He was like a little brother that he cared for very much. He knew ages ago that even if he had been named the CEO of Silverton Enterprises, achieving so much at this young age, in the not-too-distance future, the new heir would take his place and he would be willing to step down. Everyone was just waiting for Hunter to grow up, Anton included. And when that time came, he would then marry Clarice and live with her. The sensible couple, they were a pair matched by fate.

But why then did his heart thump when he saw Fern posing herself in one corner? This elevator was too small. He struggled for air. And Caroline, what had gotten into her? He understood Fern acting this way since she was a bit weird, what with speaking in third person and all that, but to see Caroline, the quiet and sensible girl, posing like some seductress, somehow it just didn't fit.

Finally, the bell dinged, the door slid open, and both women wound their arms around his again. Just as he was about to step out, Caroline said something to Fern, which made her cheeks leap into a full pink blossom, and before he knew it, they were both shouting at each other again.

He was sick of this. He was only trying to get to Clarice, who might be waiting for him down in the lobby, when these two women decided to follow him like two hens fighting over a rooster.

As he was about to make his escape to the main foyer, he was pulled back into their bickering again. Suddenly, a sweet, sensual voice floated their way, nudging through the fight, and at once they all turned. And the sight before them almost had their eyeballs dropping to the floor. Hunter, his Casanova of a cousin, was carrying a woman in his arms.

Anton's heart sank to the pit of his stomach.

Clarice!

“Oh shit!” Hunter muttered under his breath when he saw Anton, Fern, who was dressed to impress, and—*shit, shit, shit*—Caroline, the stalker.

“Are we there already?” Clarice asked again, turning her face to look at Hunter. “I need to see Anton.”

Hunter's eyes snapped back to Clarice.

Anton! Anton? Which Anton? His cousin Anton, or someone else named Anton? How many Antons did they have here in the hotel? Only one. There was only the Anton he knew, his own cousin. Unless she planned to meet some old grandpa named Anton. Yeah, that would make more sense.

Except reality didn't make a lick of sense when Anton approached him and then called out Clarice's name, which made the once sickly pale girl brighten up once again.

"Anton." Clarice lifted her head from Hunter's chest and smiled, then turned to him again. "Please, put me down, Hunter."

He didn't like the idea of another Silverton knowing his avocado. In fact, he felt quite possessive over this woman, so he just continued carrying her. His excuse was, "You have blisters on your feet. I'm not letting you walk."

"Hunter, let her down," Anton demanded. "I'll take over from here."

CHAPTER 23

Lips! Those kissable lips, dripping with honey on one corner, so sweet and so succulent. That little quirk at the corner, curving into a smile, a smile that would lighten up a dark room or brighten up a dull day.

Oh how she just wanted to lean forward and... and...

“Yooo, Avocado! What are you staring at? Want a bite of my pastry?”

“Ah?” Clarice was jolted awake, gazing around once more.

Oh, right. They were in a restaurant outside, having lunch. And “they” referred to Anton, Fern, Caroline, Hunter, and herself.

After their surprise meeting at the elevator, Anton had asked Hunter to hand Clarice over to him, which in turn made her fall due to her weak status, which made Hunter burst out that she must be hungry. All five of them sat wedged together in a booth, like a can of sardines, staring at each other as if they were strangers in a jail cell.

But what made the whole situation worse was Clarice spacing out, sitting there staring at those lips that were busy munching on that pastry. Yes, those lips she wanted to touch with her own, those lips that didn’t belong to Anton, but to that Casanova Hunter.

What was wrong with her? Had her hormones gone haywire, wanting things so out of her reach?

Not really. Hunter wasn’t out of her reach, but it wasn’t sensible, not sensible at all. Kissing Hunter would be scandalous. Here she had slept with Anton, the man sitting right in front of her, but now she was lusting after Hunter, which she’d just found to be Anton’s cousin and one of the Silverton’s. So that must mean he was one of the heirs to Silverton Enterprises too.

Oh, Clarice, get real, she told herself, silently whacking some sense into her brain. What in the world was she thinking?

“Hunter, who are you calling an avocado?” Anton asked, eyeing him sharply while cutting up his lasagna.

“This woman here,” Hunter said playfully, indicating Clarice, edging himself closer to her.

“Avocado?” Fern said, cocking her head to one side as if to see why Hunter would name this exotic beauty Avocado. After a moment of studying Clarice’s face, she smiled, which caused Anton to almost have a heart attack. He quickly turned back to his lasagna and shoved more into his already full mouth.

That’s it, Fern thought. She now understood why Hunter would name this beautiful porcelain doll with jet-black hair an Avocado. “You are very beautiful,” Fern said, smiling at Clarice, taking both of her hands within hers. “Only a beautiful creature like you should be called an avocado by Hunter.”

Hunter gave out a hacking cough, his drink having entered the wrong pipe, when he heard his friend say this. And if that weren’t enough, he even managed to make a fool of himself by spilling his entire drink on the wooden table too.

Caroline, who was sitting on his other side, immediately came to his rescue, wiping his mouth with a napkin, hoping to gain some brownie points in his eyes, while the others were in a haste to clean up the table.

“Hunter?” Fern asked once the table was clean again. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Hunter said. But obviously he wasn’t. He was red in the face.

Good God! Beautiful? How did his friend deduce that from the name Avocado? He didn’t know how an avocado could be beautiful. And what was Caroline doing wiping his mouth for him? He wasn’t a goddamn baby. So he pushed her hands away from his face, slightly annoyed with her interference. He didn’t need anyone to look after him. He was capable of looking after himself. Although, he wouldn’t mind if someone else, who was sitting on his other side, were to wipe his mouth for him. Subconsciously, he turned to his other side and saw Clarice looking lost.

She was confused. How could an avocado be beautiful? When Hunter explained the name to her, he said the plant was old and wrinkly, just like her. She just couldn’t understand it, but when she saw Fern give her a genuine smile, she returned the gesture. Fern seemed like a very nice person. Maybe she could get along very well with this girl.

Caroline was genuinely angry because Hunter had pushed her hand away, which really hurt her ego. So in retort, she pushed that anger towards Fern instead.

“Miss Fern, what planet are you from, saying an avocado is a beauty?” Caroline pretended to laugh innocently. “Avocado is merely a fruit. Plus, it’s old and wrinkly.”

Bang on again. Clarice wasn’t happy the blonde was saying she was old. She knew already that out of all three women sitting there, she was by far the oldest. So it shouldn’t really have this much effect on her, but somehow, she was feeling too sensitive today. She didn’t like Caroline.

“Fern thinks an avocado is a God-given beauty. Isn’t that right, Hunter?” Fern asked her friend again, to which he merely replied with a grunt and another cough. Fern shook her head and turned back to Clarice to smile at her before moving along to face Caroline. “An avocado is the elixir of beauty. Women use avocado for facemasks and everything. And Fern thought you would have known this. What planet are *you* from, Caroline?”

Caroline didn’t know how to respond. She was at a loss for words.

“No words?” Fern smirked at Caroline, knowing now that she’d beaten her enemy by one point.

Clarice wasn’t comfortable eating lunch with people she didn’t know. And why were those two fighting anyway? More importantly, though, where was her appetite today? The food didn’t taste horrible or anything. She forked the contents on her plate, feeling a sense of nausea coming on, but she closed her eyes and breathed slowly. She supposed she didn’t like Hunter sitting so close to her like this.

Hunter was unintentionally edging himself closer to Clarice still, as he could feel his seat being taken over by Caroline on his other side.

But the fact that his cousin was constantly looking at his avocado in an admiring and worrying way throughout their whole conversation didn’t sit well in his stomach. So to counteract this feeling and to lift the strained tension between Fern and Caroline, he asked, “So how did you two meet?”

“We met when she came to meet with one of our staff to talk about the conference in Queenstown,” Anton said, eyeing Clarice’s pale face with concern.

Clarice didn’t want to be reminded of how she and Anton had met. She just wanted to be alone with him to ask him about their time in Queenstown, if he could

remember at all of course. But taking in his reaction now, all he showed was his normal icy face, the same he had on before they went to Queenstown.

"Do you know how I met Clarice?" Hunter teased, looking around at his audience.

Oh, dear heavens, Clarice prayed, jolting her thoughts to Hunter's comment. *Please don't let that Casanova tell everyone about how I—*

"She confessed her love to me," Hunter finished her thoughts.

This statement had Anton dropping his fork, which hit the plate, then dropped to the floor.

Caroline fisted her hands beneath the table. Another challenge. Another target. When would Hunter stop seeing these women and start seeing the perfect woman right in front of him?

"Confession? What kind of confession?" Fern asked, not realizing the tension happening inside their small circle.

"I accidentally delivered flowers to his house." Clarice intercepted Hunter just in time before he started opening his big mouth and spouting out more lies about how she was delivering those flowers just to confess her undying love for him.

"Oh, I thought you were... Owwww," Hunter howled when Clarice stamped on his foot to shut him up.

"Hunter, what's wrong?" Fern and Caroline asked at the same time.

"Mosquitoes," Hunter muttered under his breath, glaring at Clarice.

"Yes. They must be swarming." Clarice forced a smile, agreeing with Hunter as she eyed him threateningly.

Hunter just nodded his head, a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. Oh, he would gladly return the favour. When his foot was about to land on hers, his eyes caught sight of Winton trotting their way.

Like a dog being pulled by a leash, Winton jogged to their table and only came to a complete standstill when he reached Clarice's side, gawking at her like she was a piece of sweet candy.

"I want black licorice. I choose black licorice. I don't want strawberry or banana. I chose black licorice," Winton said by way of announcing himself.

"Winton, what are you doing here?" Anton asked his subordinate, who was still lost in his dreamland.

"Black licorice. Winton wants black licorice."

"Winton!" Anton shouted at his subordinate again.

"Wh-what?" Winton came back to reality. "Ah, boss. Sorry. What did you say?" he asked, but his eyes were still fixed on this exotic beauty. There was no need for a confused decision anymore. He'd made up his mind. He wanted that black licorice there, sitting next to Master Hunter.

"Winton!" Anton shouted again.

"What?" Winton shouted back. Ah, blue blazes, did he just shout at his boss?

Winton turned around to see Anton glaring at him.

"What are you doing here?" Anton shouted.

"You didn't turn up at the meeting so I thought you might be in the restaurant since it's lunchtime," Winton said to Anton, but his eyes and body were automatically turned towards Clarice. "Can I have my lunch here too?" he asked.

“No, we don’t have room for one more per—”

“Thanks, boss,” Winton said, shuffling Anton to the middle seat so he could take his place sitting right in front of his favourite black licorice.

All Hunter could do at this point was stare wide-eyed at Winton. How dare Winton treat his avocado like this? Winton needed a lesson in who belongs to whom.

“Winton... I—” Hunter began.

“I’m Winton,” Winton said, stretching over the table so he could shake hands with Clarice.

Winton felt all giddy inside. He wanted to feel that soft hand within his grasp so he could embed the feel of her skin into his memory forever.

“Clarice.” Clarice smiled at Winton. “Very nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all minnnnnnee—ooooohhh.” Winton howled when he felt someone step on his foot.

“Oh, must be those mosquitoes again,” Hunter said, pretending to act all innocent. “Very annoying. Just be careful. It might bite you too, Anton,” he said, turning to his cousin, who hadn’t a clue as to what was going on.

“Mosquitoes?” Winton said, jumping up out of his chair. “I don’t like mosquitoes. They suck blood. The doctor said I have sweet blood. I can’t afford for those mosquitoes to drink my blood.”

“That’s right, Winton. Mosquitoes love sweet blood. What are you going to do now that it has a taste of you already? I think it’s best if you go back insiiiiiddeeeeeee...” Hunter howled again when he felt Clarice stamping on his foot. But he ignored the pain and said through gritted teeth, his eyes sending a death glare to Clarice, “This way you won’t attract more.”

“Oh, I should be fine,” Winton said happily, brushing aside the comment.

Hunter wasn’t happy that his plan backfired. He was starting to get pissed off with this whole situation. In fact, the person he was getting pissed off with the most was Clarice. She was like a dead flower that had been revived by water just by having Winton and Anton staring at her. Sheesh! And what the hell was with Caroline? She was like bubblegum glued to his side. He wasn’t comfortable sitting next to her at all. So to vent his anger, he started stamping his foot on Caroline’s too when she edged closer to his side.

“Owwwww!” Caroline shrieked, unladylike.

“Did the mosquito bite Caroline too?” Fern asked, laughing.

Caroline was mad, and because she thought the one who stamped on her foot was Fern, she stamped on Fern’s foot too.

Fern let out a squeal, which led Anton to look strangely at the redhead beside him. This made Fern mad because Anton just saw her in a very unladylike position, so she exacted her revenge by planning to stamp on Caroline’s foot, except Caroline was quick and it ended up being Hunter who had to face the unpleasant wrath of Fern’s four-inch heel.

And before Anton could comprehend what was really going on, everyone ended up moaning and groaning about having sore feet, with Winton rushing off back inside the restaurant, not wanting to experience another attack of the vicious mosquito that had everyone in so much pain.

When the table was vacant of Winton, Anton still stared quizzically at the people around the table, wondering if there really were mosquitoes in New Zealand, but his thought was interrupted when the waiter came over with their coffees.

"Sorry for the delay, sir," the waiter said, giving the coffee to Hunter, passing it under Clarice's nose.

The sudden strong aroma wafted into Clarice's nose, making her gag all of a sudden, and before she knew it, she raced to the women's bathroom and spewed the entirety of her meal.

What was wrong with her? She must really be sick. Was she really that nervous about talking to Anton that she couldn't keep her food down? Maybe she was a little upset because Anton didn't seem to know anything about that night, even when they'd mentioned their stay in Queenstown. Then she felt someone rubbing her back and handing her paper towels.

"Thank you," she managed to say after she wiped her mouth. Then she turned to face—

"Hunter!" she shouted in fright. "What are you doing here? This is the women's bathroom."

"So?" Hunter said, clueless as to why this would cause Clarice so much distress.

"So get out," Clarice said through gritted teeth. Sometimes Hunter could be so dumb.

"You're not well. I just want to make sure you're fine," Hunter said, coming closer, placing his palm on her forehead. "Your temperature is okay. So why did you vomit? Was it the food?" he asked, concerned. His face was so close to hers that she found she was having trouble breathing again.

"I'm fine. I don't think it's the food. I hardly ate anything," she said, turning the other way.

Please, don't look at those lips, she told herself. *Just please don't look at those lips.*

"You don't like it?" Hunter asked, nudging her chin to face him, and they locked their eyes together. Then her eyes had a mind of their own as they inadvertently drifted to Hunter's lips.

"It's nice, but I just can't eat it," Clarice said, forcing herself to look at his chest instead.

"Your stomach is playing up?" Hunter asked innocently, tilting up her chin so he could look at those dilated pupils again. "I'll take you to the hospital. You might have the flu or something."

"No, I'm fine. I'll just go back—"

And then she hunched over the toilet again as another strong urge came welling up to her throat, making her vomit once more.

"Clarice, God." Hunter started rubbing her back again.

After the sudden urge died down, she stood and rested against the wall, but her body was just so weak that she slumped against Hunter instead.

Clarice, oh my God. Hunter's heart pounded, crying out for the woman in his arms. He wanted to continue to hold her like this forever, to feel this warmth transmitting to his own body. What was wrong with him? How come she felt so perfect in his arms? He couldn't understand what was going on.

“Clarice?” His voice shook a little. “You’re clearly not well. I’m taking you to the hospital now. Let’s go.”

“Hunter, what do you think you’re doing?” Clarice asked hoarsely, pulling back from him, but she was just so tired, so out of energy that she let him carry her all the way to his car. But Anton, Fern, and Caroline intercepted them before Hunter could complete his mission.

“What’s going on?” Anton asked, turning to Clarice. “Are you all right? You don’t look well. I should take you to the hospital.”

“Fern will come too,” Fern offered. “It’s good if Junior Silverton has someone else to look after her while he drives.”

“It’s fine. I’ve already decided to take her,” Hunter said, tugging Clarice’s head close to his chest again. “And didn’t you say you have another meeting after lunch?”

Shit, Anton swore to himself. He’d totally forgotten about that other meeting. “Then you take good care of Clarice,” Anton demanded. “I’ll call you later.”

Anton watched his cousin leave with Clarice and Fern in tow. After the car disappeared from his sight, he quietly went back to his office to prepare for his meeting.

Caroline watched the entire exchange with fists clenched by her sides. *This cannot be*, she thought. She must get rid of this girl. No one else would get Hunter.

CHAPTER 24

"Please pick me up. I'm at Auckland Hospital." Clarice left a message on Max's cell phone from the pay phone, then went back to her seat in the waiting area. She closed her eyes, feeling so exhausted.

She felt so sick. She didn't know her nerves could get this bad.

"Clarice," a soft voice whispered in her ear. Anton, it sounded like Anton that night they were together.

Clarice opened her eyes, then immediately shut them again. She felt her heart hammering within her chest and her breathing became labored. It was Hunter. He was so close to her that she could feel his warm breath. Suddenly, a hot rush of lust hit her like a ton of bricks, smacking her right in the face.

"You haven't gone home yet?" she asked, turning away to stop this yearning. She opened her eyes again and stared at the grey linoleum.

"Are you okay? I bought you some juice. I thought the sugar might help," Hunter said, eyeing Clarice, wondering why she was so intent on staring at the linoleum.

"Do you have a straw?" she asked quietly.

"No. Why do you need a straw?" Hunter had enough of Clarice looking at the linoleum. Did she find that grey floor more interesting than his handsome face? He nudged her chin around to face him.

"I don't want to drink anything acidic that can cause my teeth to rot. I want a straw." Clarice closed her eyes again.

"You, Avocado, and your oral health," he said. Then she felt his presence disappear again.

Thank heavens! She could now rest in peace. She didn't know whether she could handle looking at Hunter any longer. The more he stayed with her, the more she was reminded of Anton that night. It just wasn't right. And then there was Anton. He acted like he didn't know her at all. Which she admitted hurt her a little. She really must talk to him and get it straight, out in the open.

And when would they call her up? She was so tired. She just wanted to go to sleep.

Just then Fern returned from getting her coffee, which made Clarice want to gag even more.

"Fern is sorry. Fern didn't mean to make Clarice sick again. Fern will throw this away." Fern apologized and threw her cup of coffee into the trash bin.

All Clarice could do was shake her head.

"I'm sorry. I'm not sure what's wrong with me," Clarice replied weakly. "I'm sorry about your coffee too."

"It's nothing." Fern smiled to reassure her new friend. "Fern can always get another one later." Then she looked around the waiting room. "Where is Hunter?"

"I don't know," Clarice answered, closing her eyes again. "He just disappeared."

"Hunter seems to be quite attached to you, is he not?" Fern asked, still smiling.

Clarice didn't know how to answer. "I don't know what you're talking about, Fern."

"It doesn't matter." Fern shoved aside the subject.

She had a niggling suspicion that Hunter must like Clarice. Hunter had never acted like this before. He'd never cared for any woman as much. Clarice was the first. She really hoped Clarice might be the one to tame his wild ways. And if it did happen, she would offer her friend her full support.

"The doctor should call your name soon," Fern said instead. "Fern is very glad to meet you, Clarice. Fern believes we can be great friends from now on."

"Mmmm." Clarice nodded her head in agreement. Being with Fern had a calming effect on her, just like being with Whitney and Elise. Just then, her name was called and she went in, smiling a bit to reassure Fern she would be fine.

After a series of tests, which included the urine test and blood pressure, she was escorted back into the doctor's office. She really couldn't wait any longer for the diagnosis.

The flamboyant doctor that greeted her had a grin from ear to ear.

"I just love my job when I have news like this," he said, practically bouncing in his chair. "My name is Dr. Flint, by the way."

Clarice couldn't understand. Surely being sick wasn't something to be so happy about.

But strangely, he giggled. "Oh, I don't even know how to say this." He waved his hands in front of his face to cool his already red cheeks. "I'm so excited and giddy inside. This is my first day here. I don't even know how to respond to the news."

"Maybe you should just calm down before telling me, Dr. Flint." Clarice offered her advice, speaking in a soothing voice just like she would with her patients when they were anxious or excited about their dental treatment. "Just take deep, slow breaths and then tell me."

"Yes, yes, of course," Dr. Flint said, calming down a bit, but then he got all flustered again and started flapping his arms about when he thought of the news. "Oh, I can't help it. I want to tell you straight out, but I don't know where to begin," Dr. Flint said, slumping back in his chair in defeat.

"You could start from the beginning," Clarice offered. "Start with my test results."

Clarice admitted she was ready to bolt out the door at any moment if Dr. Flint were to carry on with his weird behavior. She felt more like she was the doctor and he her patient.

"Okay, here goes," Dr. Flint said after taking a few deep breaths to relax. "Congratulations, Ms. Mason, you're going to be—"

And then the door just had to open, interrupting Dr. Flint's speech, revealing Hunter looking around the room like a little lost lamb searching for its mother. When his eyes landed on Clarice, he smiled and came to her side.

"There you are. When I came back from getting your straw, you were gone."

"I was in taking tests," Clarice said, embarrassed. "What are you doing here anyway? You should be outside waiting," she whispered.

Dr. Flint was about to diagnose her condition. She didn't want Hunter hanging around while he explained her condition. This information was strictly confidential.

Hunter thought Clarice was having one of her mental moments again, so he ignored her outburst and turned to the... very colorful doctor.

He'd never seen a doctor dressed like a clown before. What was with the bright polka-dot bowtie and the yellow-and-green striped shirt and bright-orange glasses? The doctor looked more suited for a circus than a hospital.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. I was just worried about her. Is she all right?" Hunter asked.

"Oh, you have the right to worry." Dr. Flint grinned again, gesturing for Hunter to sit himself down beside Clarice before he announced her condition.

Clarice just stared at Hunter like she wanted to murder him. "No, Hunter," she said. "Go back out now. Dr. Flint is about to diagnose my condition. I don't want you here."

"But I want to stay," Hunter whined.

"No, go," Clarice repeated.

"No. I'm staying." Hunter remained in his spot.

"I—"

"Please, Ms. Mason." Dr. Flint interrupted their bickering. "Let him stay. He's needed here as much as you are."

"Ah?" Clarice asked. "I don't understand why he needs to stay."

"All shall be explained soon," Dr. Flint said, then turned to Hunter, gesturing for him to sit next to Clarice.

Hunter was only too happy to oblige.

"All comfortable?" the doctor asked.

"Yeah," Hunter replied coolly.

Hunter wasn't sure why the doctor was paying more attention to him than to Clarice, who was the patient. Maybe he was gay, hitting on him. He cringed at his own thought.

Dr. Flint just smiled at them both like he'd just won a million dollars. If only he and his partner were approved for adoption, he thought.

"I congratulate you both," Dr. Flint said finally. "You are about to be proud parents!"

"Come again?" Hunter said. *Proud parents? What's this doctor talking about?*

"In simple terms, Mr. Mason, your wife is pregnant."

CHAPTER 25

Hunter was feeling hot and cold at the same time. He could feel his world spinning and tilting on its axis.

It can't be. It just can't be.

Clarice, the Avocado, was pregnant. Pregnant! But how... and with whom?

Hunter could feel Clarice's hand gripping his arm. Oh no! She must have been just as surprised as he was. He turned to Clarice then, ready to comfort her, only to have Clarice hug him instead. Her embrace was very intimate as she hugged him tightly to her body, her head nestling against his shirt.

"Hunter." Clarice pulled back with tears in her eyes. "Did you hear that?" she asked him softly. "I'm pregnant." And then she smiled at him, and it made his heart jump. And he wanted to kiss her again. He wanted to embrace her again. He didn't know where that feeling had come from, but he realized he wanted this woman. God help him, he wanted her. But before he could respond, she closed her eyes and collapsed on him.

"Jesus, Clarice," Hunter yelled, which alerted the doctor, who came running around his desk to help assist Clarice too.

"Deary me," Dr. Flint said, scratching his head. "Must be the excitement of having the little one. Don't you worry, Mr. Mason. I'll look after your wife. If you could just wait in the waiting room for now." And before he knew what happened, Clarice was taken out off his hands and he was ushered out of the room, colliding with the many nurses that came scurrying in.

What the hell just happened? Hunter came stumbling out of the doctor's office. Clarice was pregnant. And she was happy. And now she had fainted.

Hunter could feel a little stabbing pain in his heart. He couldn't understand what it was. He was so confused and so numb. He just didn't know how to react anymore. What was wrong with him? How come he felt this way? Who was the father? He wanted to just bash the bastard's face.

All of a sudden, anger emerged within him and he swore loudly. He ran his hands through his hair roughly. What in the bloody devil was wrong with him? She already had someone. Why did it concern him so much? Shouldn't he be thinking about his mysterious goddess? Why had he stopped searching for her and now focused all his energy on that avocado? For Christ sake, she was pregnant, so why was he still thinking about her? God, he needed to cool himself down. He needed to get some air.

Fern saw Hunter coming out of the doctor's office, looking like he'd just seen a ghost.

"Hunter!" Fern came running over. "What's wrong? What happened to Clarice?"

Hunter couldn't respond. He didn't know how to answer his friend's question. He felt if he said the words, somehow his world would fall apart.

"Hunter!" Fern urged. "Did something happen to Clarice? Fern wants to know."

"She just has low blood pressure." Hunter lied. "She's being looked after now." God, he tried to suppress his emotions. It was so damn hard and so bloody painful.

"You should have said so in the first place. Fern was so worried," Fern said with ease, then went back to her seat with her magazine in hand and started reading again. But not before she took in the sight of her friend's distraught face.

She knew it. Clarice must be someone important to Hunter. Otherwise, he wouldn't look like he'd just been to hell and back. She must ask him how serious his feelings were towards Clarice. But now wasn't the time. She promised herself she would dig into this drama later.

"When will Clarice be going back home?" she asked instead.

"I don't know," Hunter said numbly. "Why don't you go? I'll wait for her."

"Are you sure?"

Hunter nodded, still in shock.

"Okay, you take care," Fern said, looking at her friend. "You sure look pale too. Fern will take her leave now, then."

When Fern left, Hunter slumped back in his chair and shuffled his hair. He really didn't know what to do anymore. He really didn't know how to act anymore. All he knew right now was he was mad, frustrated, afraid, hurt, and most of all shocked. All because of that news.

Clarice is pregnant.

Hunter glanced up, and out of the corner of his eyes, amongst the crowd rushing about the hallway, he could make out the person he was searching for. He jumped out of his chair immediately and raced towards that person but ended up getting caught in a stampede of people rushing towards the elevator instead.

There was definitely no denying it. This time when he caught that person, he was going to get this whole shebang straightened out.

As he fought closer through the cluster of people, his hand reached out and made contact with that shoulder. "Waiter boy!"

* * *

Max walked into the hospital foyer, rubbing his stomach. Why didn't he eat anything before coming here to pick up Clarice? When she had left him that message on his cell phone that she was in the hospital, he was so scared that he couldn't imagine keeping anything down. But why didn't she just text him? Why use an unknown phone number.

Anyway, that wasn't important right now. What was more concerning was Clarice's health and safety. He just hoped she was okay, though, because he didn't know what to do if she was sick. Hopefully, it was just some mild accident.

After receiving the news, he texted both Whitney and Elise. So far, he hadn't received a reply.

As he was about to approach the reception desk, he felt someone touch his shoulder and call out, "Waiter boy!" By instinct, he glanced around and nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw Hunter, who he had thought was Anton, careening towards him at a very high speed. Not sure of what else to do at that instant, Max took off before Hunter could get a good grip of his hoodie.

"Hey, you! Stop!" Hunter called out, running after Max.

But Max didn't stop. He knew he was in trouble. That Anton guy must have found out it was him. He had to escape. Clarice said she wanted his sperm, but she didn't mention anything about wanting the guy, so Max just ran faster. But Hunter was taller and had longer legs, so after only a few seconds, Hunter caught up with Max and gripped his hoodie, halting the boy.

“Okay, I’m stopping. I’m stopping.” Max raised his hands in surrender.

Hunter relaxed his grip then, knowing he’d captured Max, but when Max felt the tension ease, he surprised Hunter again by running off at full speed.

“You rascal,” Hunter yelled when he realized he was fooled.

“Huh, like I’m gonna let you get me, big bro.” Max laughed, then sprinted off again.

“Get back here. We have to talk,” Hunter yelled.

“I’m not talking to you,” Max yelled back.

“You! Arrgghhh, waiter boy.”

Hunter hastened his pace, his legs eating up more distance, until he was so close to Max that he came slamming into the smaller boy, tackling him to the side of the footpath. Getting a good grip on his neck, Hunter pinned Max until he pleaded for him to let go.

“Fine, I promise I won’t run off again,” Max said while trying to catch his breath. And then his stomach had to release an embarrassing growl.

Max looked up at Hunter then, who was about to lecture him, when he raised his hands before Hunter started with the preaching.

“Please,” Max panted trying to catch his breath again. “If you want me to talk, you have to feed my stomach first.”

* * *

“McDonald’s! You’re the heir to Silverton Enterprises and you take your honorable guest to lunch at McDonald’s?”

“Honorable guest my ass.” Hunter wanted to kick the kid in the butt just to teach him a lesson in messing with people’s lives. “McDonald’s is good enough for a kid like you. Now talk. I want to know every single detail. Why the hell did you pretend you were a waiter and drag me into that room? And who was that woman? I’ve been running around for ages looking for her.”

“Well, let’s just say that woman wanted something that belongs to you.”

“Belongs to me?”

“Yeah.”

“What is it she wants? Apart from my handsome body, I can’t think of a reason anyone would want to sleep with me,” Hunter asked Max shrewdly. “Unless she wants my money, but then why did she disappear before I even woke up?”

Oh, so that’s how it was, Max thought, snickering. His cousin must have been so embarrassed with the whole sperm exchange situation that she had to flee the scene before Anton woke up. Max shook his head and laughed. Typical of his cousin.

“What are you laughing at?” Hunter growled, irritated when Max wouldn’t answer his question.

“Nothing.” Max grinned. And then to change the subject, he said, “Man, all that running has really used all my energy reserves.” Then he picked up his Big Mac and started munching on it.

“Hey, kid, you hear me?” Hunter said, getting angrier. “I’m talking to you here.”

“I know. I’m so hungry that I need to eat first. Otherwise, I can’t concentrate.”

Hunter waited for Max to finish swallowing his burger before asking him again. “I want to find my mysterious goddess,” he said. “Where is she? And more importantly, *who* is she?”

“Mysterious goddess?” Max asked, confused. “Who’s your mysterious goddess?”

“The woman!” Hunter slammed his fist on the table to intimidate the smaller boy, but all Max did was give him a sour face, sure Hunter had gone berserk.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, big bro,” Max said, brushing aside the subject, then took another bite of his burger.

Hunter wanted to slam the table again, but he didn’t want to hurt his hand again.

“I’m referring to the woman who was in that room that night you pushed me through that door,” Hunter said, exasperated.

“Urgh...” Max didn’t know how to reply to Hunter. Clarice was already angry with him for interfering with her life. He didn’t know if he should answer Hunter’s question or not. Instead, he took a sip of his ice-cold Coke to calm himself first, then answered, “Even if I tell you who she is, you still wouldn’t know her.”

“I don’t care. I can get to know her after you tell me who she is. I’m dying here. I want to see her again.”

“You like her or something?”

“I... I don’t know. But I want to see her again,” Hunter confessed.

“Really?” Max asked. “You looked really stressed out, big bro. Did this woman really affect you that much?”

“I guess so,” Hunter said, suddenly exhausted. Truth be told, he wasn’t sure if his mysterious goddess was the one that contributed to his sulky feelings right now. He believed it was the avocado that had caused him this infliction.

“Look, I gotta hurry,” Max said, getting up. “I gotta pick my cousin up at the hospital. She’s not well.”

“Look, kid,” Hunter pleaded. “Can’t you just give me a na—”

“It’s Max,” Max said, getting a little irritated that Hunter kept calling him kid.

“You mean her name is Max?” Hunter said, sitting up straight. “Does that stand for Maxine or something?”

“No, I mean *my* name is Max. Maximillian Mason. So call me Max, not kid from —”

“What did you say your last name is?” Hunter shot up from his seat, piqued upon hearing Max’s last name.

“Uh... Mason?” Max repeated, staring strangely at Hunter’s weird behavior.

“You have the same last name as someone I know,” Hunter muttered under his breath, then sat back in his seat again.

“Yeah, Mason is a pretty popular name,” Max said, ready to go.

“The woman I know is in the hospital too,” Hunter continued. And then thoughts of Clarice came swimming into his head again.

Clarice! Pregnant! The shithead who got her pregnant! All of a sudden, that anger he tried to suppress came lashing out again, and he slammed his fist on the table, alerting Max. He stared at Hunter, who had just been transformed into a wild animal who looked like he could tear through anything.

“Look, big bro, if you’re acting like you want to punch me, then I’m outta here. Clarice is waiting for me. Gotta—”

“What did you say?” Hunter grabbed ahold of Max’s hoodie before he took off again. “That name? Your cousin’s name.”

"Hey, big bro, won't you stop that habit of yours?" Max said, breaking Hunter's grip from his collar.

"Would you stop playing around?" Hunter was in no mood to talk about correcting his flawed behavior. He needed to know whether the Clarice he knew was actually the same Clarice as this kid's cousin. "Give me her name. Your cousin's name."

"Clarice," Max said once he managed to break free from Hunter's grip. "My cousin's name is Clarice."

"You're Clarice's cousin? The one who works as a periodontist?" Hunter uttered in disbelief. Could the world get any smaller?

"Yeah, I am. So you do know her after all." Max smiled. "Anyway, we don't look alike, do we?" he said. "Well, if you don't have any more questions, then I'm off. In fact, I'm picking up Clarice. She left me a message."

"I've just been in the room with her."

"You have?" Max asked, sitting down again, then went to pick up his discarded burger and started munching on it. "I didn't know you were that close to her already. Is she all right?"

"She looked pale," Hunter said, sitting down too. "I didn't know. And she vomited too."

"Oh, Clarice sounded sick on the phone. She needs to rest. She works too hard."

"She's pregnant," Hunter said, still in shock, remembering the doctor's news.

"Pregnant?" Max asked, spitting out the remnants of his food. "She's pregnant?"

"Yes," Hunter said numbly.

"She's pregnant. Clarice is pregnant. My sweet cousin is pregnant. Hooray!" Max jumped from his seat and started doing a dance while singing, "Clarice is pregnant. Clarice is pregnant."

"Why are you so happy?" Hunter scolded in annoyance. It looked like even this kid was happy, just like Clarice was when she hugged him and smiled at him before she collapsed. Hunter felt like he was the only one in this world who wasn't happy with this news.

"Because it was always her wish to have a baby," Max said as he continued to dance around their table. "Has she told you yet, Anton? Has she? Has she?"

"What?" Hunter asked, standing up. "What did you call me?"

"Huh?" Max stopped dancing and came back to Hunter, who looked so shell shocked, like he'd just seen a ghost.

"I asked what you just called me," Hunter repeated.

"Uh... Anton."

"The name's Hunter, not Anton," Hunter said, sitting down again.

And this time it was Max who looked like he'd just seen a ghost.

"Cou-could you repeat that again?" Max stuttered nervously as he felt his carefully constructed mosaic of Clarice, her baby, and Anton breaking into tiny pieces. "Your name, repeat your name again."

"Hunter, Hunter Silverton," Hunter said, taking in Max's sudden change of attitude.

"Ho-how are you related to Anton Silverton?" Max asked quietly, not really wanting to hear the answer.

"He's my cousin," Hunter said.

Like a little deer about to be hit by a car, Max's eyes shot up with the realization he had once again interfered with his cousin's life. And this time, the consequence was beyond forgiveness.

"Oh shit! Oh shit! Oh shit!" Max sank into his chair, his head in his hands. "Clarice is going to skin me alive. God, I gave her the wrong sperm. I'm just going to die now. Good-bye. I'll just text my will to my lawyer. Yes, I'll do that," Max muttered to himself in his moment of sheer panic.

"Get your head together, kid," Hunter said when he saw Max's strange behavior. "What's gotten into you?"

"You don't understand. You were a mistake. I don't even know you. I thought you were the one she was after, so that was why I tricked you into that room. Oh God, I might as well die now. I can't face Clarice. Help me. Just bring me a noose. Let me hang myself here. I'll text Whitney and Elise to let them know I'm moving on to the next life."

"Max, what the hell are you on about?" Hunter asked in a panic as his frantic heartbeat chased the rhythm of his breath. "What mistake? Not the one you thought?"

"You..." Max gasped, then gave up and laid his head on the table, wailing like a little lost puppy. "Just kill me already. I can't face Clarice."

"Max, Jesus, get a grip, boy." Hunter pushed Max's head up and looked into his brown eyes. "What the hell are you talking about? Answer me."

Max's lips trembled slightly. "You want to find out who your mysterious goddess is?"

"Yeah." Hunter's eyes lit up. He would get to see her again. Inside, he felt a sudden wealth of happiness.

"She's Clarice, my cousin." Max spoke quietly but clearly.

Hunter was stunned speechless for a moment. "What? You mind repeating that again?" His heart beat faster now. All his focus was zoomed onto Max and those words echoing in his ears. But he was afraid he didn't hear him properly. He needed to hear it again.

"I said your mysterious goddess is my cousin, Clarice. She's the one that slept with you that night in Queenstown," Max cried out. "But you don't get it. She didn't know it was you."

Hunter didn't hear anything. For the second time that day, he was in complete and total shock. First the doctor announcing to him that Clarice was pregnant, and now finding out his mysterious goddess was actually his avocado.

"But this means... this means..." Hunter couldn't finish his sentence.

"It means you're the father of Clarice's baby."

CHAPTER 26

Clarice opened her eyelids slowly. The bright light really hurt her eyes, so she closed them again. Feeling she could now adjust to the light, she slowly fluttered her eyes open again and saw Whitney's and Elise's worried face looking down at her.

"Clarice?" she heard Elise ask. "How are you feeling?"

"We were so worried, Clarice," Whitney said. "Are you feeling better?"

What was wrong with her friends? Why were they staring at her like she was sick?

And then it all came back to her. The doctor, the colorful, flamboyant Dr. Flint, who had diagnosed her condition. Her condition...

She was pregnant.

Clarice jumped out of bed, her hair an untamed mess.

"Guys!" she shouted and hugged both of her friends. "I'm pregnant."

Whitney and Elise were strangled by Clarice's tight grip around their necks.

"Con-grat-u-la-tions," Whitney managed to say, "but-please... let go-of-our... necks."

"Oh, I'm sorry, guys. I'm so happy. I forgot what I was—"

Dear heavens, why does it have to be now? Clarice thought as she raced to the bathroom and vomited what little was left in her stomach into the toilet bowl, which was nothing really because she didn't get to eat anything at all since...

Hunter, where was Hunter? Her memory came flooded back. After the doctor had told her she was pregnant, she was so happy she didn't know what she was doing and literally stood and hugged Hunter. And it wasn't just any normal hug; she had to smash her face in his shirt and cry her heart out like they were lovers or something.

Oh, heaven help her. What was she going to do now? She couldn't face Hunter anymore. Not after she acted like that. She was supposed to be the adult, so why did she act like a kid, sobbing into his shirt upon hearing the news that she was pregnant?

But she was pregnant. She really was. And she was vomiting, which definitely meant "morning sickness." Yes, she was so happy, so very, very happy.

Both Elise and Whitney came into the bathroom and started rubbing her back.

"Thanks, guys," she said, then sat on the toilet seat.

"You need someone to look after you," Whitney said, looking at her friend who was still as cheerful as ever, despite her sickness.

"I'm capable of looking after myself, Whitney. I'll be fine." Clarice brushed aside her friend's concern. "It's only morning sickness, after all. I'm sure I'll get through it."

"I'm not talking about just that. I'm talking about through your whole pregnancy. You need someone to look after you." Whitney emphasized her point again. "You have to go on maternity leave. You have to rest a lot. You'll be tired and moody. You need someone to care for you." Whitney couldn't express her concern enough, so she just reiterated the same sentiment again.

"I'm only pregnant. I'm not disabled," Clarice said, defending herself. "I'm an adult. I'm used to living alone. I'll be fine."

“Have you told him yet?” Elise spoke for the first time, her thoughts in agreement with Whitney’s. For once, she wanted her friend to stop being stubborn and listen to their advice.

Clarice didn’t want to answer.

“Do you like him?” Elise rephrased her question.

“Well, I...” Clarice didn’t need to ask Elise whom she was referring to. The fact was she didn’t know *how* to answer. She liked Anton, but she wanted Hunter whenever he was around. Did that even make sense? Having a baby with one cousin but lusting for the other.

“Clarice, I’m asking you as a friend who cares for you dearly,” Elise said. “Have you told him yet?”

“No.” Clarice finally let out her answer.

“Why not?” Whitney asked. “You are having a baby. Have you thought of the consequences yet? This isn’t all fun and games. You have a *baby* inside you. You must devote all your time and energy to looking after that baby.”

The tension among the friends was evident as Clarice straightened her back and looked sharply at both women.

“Are you guys saying I’m incapable of looking after my own baby, that I need someone to help me care for my child?” Clarice said quietly, angry but most of all hurt.

“I’m not saying that, Clarice,” Whitney said. “All I’m saying is I worry about you.”

“I have Max,” Clarice pointed out.

“He doesn’t live with you,” Whitney negated her reasoning.

“He *could* live with me,” Clarice retorted. “Plus, Mum and Dad would visit me nearer to time too.”

“That’s not the point,” Elise said.

“Then what are you two getting at?”

“We’re worried about you at nighttime,” Whitney said. “What happens if labor begins and you can’t get in contact with us? What happens if Max is out and you can’t get in contact with him? You need to tell Anton, Clarice. It’s his right as the father.”

“But he doesn’t know anything about this. It was supposed to be just a normal transaction, a one-night stand even. I just wanted his sperm, and now I got it. So stop making me feel guilty about this whole situation.”

Clarice really thought she was suffering from constant mood swings. A minute ago, she was so mad she just wanted to turn the whole place upside down, and now she just felt this niggling annoyance with her friends.

“You didn’t ask for his permission, Clarice. It was a one-night stand that resulted in a baby. Shouldn’t he at least know he has a baby too? And if he doesn’t want the baby, then at least we know he’s an ass,” Whitney said.

“Whitney, please, I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Clarice pleaded. She could feel the arrow of guilt digging into her heart. Was she at fault here? She just wanted a baby and now she got it. That’s it. End of story. So why were her friends so damn adamant about her telling Anton?

“I think it’s a good idea,” Elise said. “It’s his right. If he rejects you, then at least you know. Plus, what are you going to tell your baby when he or she grows up? Wouldn’t your child want to know the father too?”

“And you can’t lie to your child that he was conceived through artificial insemination, because that’s just plain mean. It’s a sin to lie,” Whitney interjected before Clarice could make another excuse.

“You guys are making me feel guilty here,” Clarice gasped in exasperation.

“Just offering advice,” Whitney said, patting her shoulder.

“Enough with the advice,” Clarice snapped, then went out into the lounge to sit on the couch. “Where’s Max? I haven’t seen him at all. Shouldn’t he be here to congratulate me too? I called him from the hospital.” Clarice rambled on, hoping her friends would drop the subject of her telling Anton about their baby.

“You were sleeping the whole time we drove you home. Of course you wouldn’t remember. Max texted us to pick you up. He said he had something important to do, so he’ll see you at home,” Elise explained.

And speaking of the devil, Max walked in looking sulky, carrying bags of groceries, which was unnatural for him. It was mainly Clarice who did the shopping for him, or else her cousin would raid her fridge. So to see Max carrying bags into her house was very surprising to all three friends.

“Max, did you hear?” Clarice’s face immediately lit up upon seeing her cousin. “I’m pregnant.”

“Congratulations, Clarice,” Max forced a smile and hugged his cousin. “You’ve got what you wanted. Now I’m just going to put these groceries in the fridge.” Then Max was off to the kitchen.

“That was strange. I thought he would jump for joy or something,” Clarice muttered to herself.

“Maybe he’s starting to feel the jealousy since you won’t be able to give him your full attention,” Elise said, watching Max’s retreating back.

“Mmm.” Whitney eyed his strange behavior. Something wasn’t right and she needed to get to the bottom of this.

Max, on the other hand, reached the kitchen, dropped the grocery bags, and sank all the way to the floor, cradling himself in a fetal position.

“Forgive me, cuz. I’ve interfered in your life again.”

* * *

“Why did you buy so many fruits and vegetables? You want to turn me into a herbivore?” Clarice asked her cousin when she started helping unpack the groceries Max bought for her. And then her eyes grew even larger when she unloaded three bags of red gala apples. “I don’t remember ever telling you I like apples that much,” Clarice remarked.

Max didn’t want to tell Clarice that it had been Hunter who’d forced him to go grocery shopping with him. When Hunter realized he was the father of Clarice’s baby, he just got up from his seat and announced they were going shopping, without showing any kind of emotion. And that’s how he ended up with all these fruits and vegetables. Before he parted ways with Hunter, he’d even drummed into his ears that he must tell Clarice to eat all those fruits and vegetables, especially the apples, and had given him a note regarding the research on apples too.

“Well?” Clarice asked, disrupting his thoughts.

"I thought you might like to eat some fruits and vegetables since you're pregnant now," Max uttered, looking away, knowing he was lying again.

"How did you know I was pregnant before I even told you?"

"Elise texted me before you woke."

"But I just told Elise *after* I woke up."

Shit, how am I supposed to answer that?

"It doesn't matter. Just know that I know. Here, you have to eat this apple." Max thrust an apple in front of Clarice's face. "It's good for you and the baby. Studies have shown that... uh... wait." Max dug into his jeans pocket and extracted the note Hunter gave to him about his research on apples and pregnancy, then read it aloud. "It reduces the chance of your baby wheezing because of asthma," Max mumbled, looking away again. God, the guilt. It was eating him alive.

Clarice smiled. "You really care for me, don't you? Going all out to buy me three bags of apples so I can eat well, plus doing extensive research on apples to make sure I benefit during my pregnancy. Thanks so much, you little rascal," Clarice said, hugging him.

Max was crushed in his cousin's hug. He didn't move, but just let her continue to squeeze him. He was so ashamed of himself, so upset and so guilty. Inside, he prayed all would work out between Hunter and Clarice, because he had a strong feeling Hunter really cared for his cousin.

* * *

That night, Clarice lay in bed, rubbing her stomach.

"I know you're only an embryo right now, but thank you for choosing me as your birth mother. I promise I'll look after you, even if you've been conceived without the permission of your father."

Then what her friends said to her earlier that evening came back to haunt her. What if her child did want to know who the father was? She knew she couldn't lie. Maybe it was best to contact Anton and tell him the truth. If he did reject her, then it wouldn't matter, since she was prepared to raise her child alone anyway. But if he accepted her situation, then maybe she could learn to love him. But she couldn't help thinking about the other cousin, the other cousin who had kissed her.

Clarice reflected on the events that had transpired that day. From first thing in the morning when she'd fantasized about kissing Hunter, to being carried by Hunter because she couldn't walk due to her sore feet, to finding out Hunter was the other Silverton heir, to Hunter sitting next to her during lunch, and then to hugging Hunter when she found out she was pregnant.

Oh, what was she to do with her heart? It began to beat for Hunter and for Hunter alone.

CHAPTER 27

This was utterly and undeniably stupid. Hunter had officially become a stalker, adopting the old-fashioned style of trailing his prey. Even worse, he had to disguise himself as an old blind man, complete with sunglasses and a walking cane. Not to mention the wig he'd bought from the party store. It continued to itch his skull like a plague of swarming locusts. He just wanted to throw the damn thing away.

So she wanted to confess that much, right? Hunter seethed in anger. Over his dead body. She had absolutely no right to date another guy when he, the father of her child, was hiding outside between the many bushes, stalking her, staring at her making googly eyes with his cousin inside the restaurant. His eyes were about to drop out of their sockets.

It had all began after the hospital visit when Hunter and Max had accidentally met. Hunter couldn't control his curiosity when Max told him it was his own cousin she had wanted. So that was what it was? All that time, she was pinning after his cousin. Well, she wasn't going to get him. What a devil she was, pregnant with his baby and still trying to seduce Anton. So Hunter had blackmailed Max into helping him stop Clarice. Hence, they came up with this elaborate plan at the grocery store, where he had forced Max to carry all the many fruits and vegetables he'd bought for Clarice.

He couldn't understand why he needed to stop her, though. Maybe it was his conscience. It was his baby after all. He felt a sense of responsibility. Plus, there was also the fact his avocado was his goddess, which really drummed it in for him. Now he understood why every time he dreamed about his faceless goddess, it ended up being Clarice. And also, there was the added bonus that if he could stop her confession, she might look his way and maybe sleep with him again so he could sleep soundly for once.

Yeah, keep thinking that, Hunter. Because even he couldn't understand this foreign feeling developing inside him. Truth be told, Clarice was the first woman he truly paid any attention to; heck, he'd even volunteered to stoop as low as dressing as an old blind man just to stop her.

And then there was Fern, who had accidentally seen him coming out of the party store with a bag full of accessories. She was curious and asked him for the whole story, not relenting until he told her everything, except for the pregnancy bit. He wasn't ready to spread the news just yet. But now she wanted to join in the fun too. Although, Hunter hadn't a clue as to what Fern's intentions were.

Fern realized she couldn't have Anton getting close to Clarice, since every time Anton was near Clarice, or Caroline for that matter, she experienced a niggling jealousy sprouting within her. She wanted Anton to notice her, and having the other girls near him, he would always neglect her. Although, she would never hate Clarice—the girl was such a kind soul—but that Caroline, no way in hell would she let Anton be with her.

"Are you going to just hide in that bush and stalk her or are you going to take action, big bro?" Max asked, ruffling the bushes.

"Fern says if you two continue to hide behind that bush, someone will find it suspicious and call the police," Fern said, laying a hand on Hunter's shoulder.

"Jesus, Fern." Hunter glared at his friend. "You almost gave me a heart attack." He turned back to Clarice and Anton, his eyes glued to the scene as they smiled at each

other right before him. “Don’t sneak up on people like that. You were supposed to wait in the car until I signaled for you.”

“Fern is too granny. You’re in here too, so you’d be dragged along with us. And stop talking in third person. If you want Anton and Clarice to believe in your character, you have to act the part,” Max said.

“Fe—I got it.” Fern nodded to Max.

“Good. Are we ready, then?” Max asked.

“Yeah, but you go first since you’re the grandson,” Hunter urged Max.

“All right, watch the pro.” Max smirked, wiggling his eyebrows, ready for some good acting. He then donned his dark sunglasses. “This is how you act.” He came out of the bushes, and with his cool gait that he’d perfected in the mirror all last night, he walked to the entrance of the restaurant.

“Wait!” Hunter jumped out of the bush and pulled Max back by the collar.

“What?” Max scolded, turning to face Hunter. “I’m about to perform some magic here.”

“Can’t you just tone your outfit down a bit?” Hunter whispered, staring at Max’s long black wig, baggy jeans, and oversized hoodie. “Why do you have to wear that wig? You look like a punk.”

“Yeah? And you’re supposed to be a blind old man so shut up and act like a good blind grandpa would,” Max said just to irritate Hunter.

The truth to the long black wig was he was obsessed with his favourite anime show, *No.6*. He wanted to be like Rat, with his long black hair tied back in a ponytail. What harm was there in donning your favourite anime character in your daily life anyway? It was only cosplay. It just spiced up his life even more. And God knows how he’d prepared for this day. He’d been practicing his Rat persona since they’d concocted their plan at the grocery store. Now he had to get back in character all over again.

“You rascal.” Hunter seethed. “Wait until we finish this—”

“Grandpa, here we are,” Max shouted loudly, announcing their presence.

Clarice and Anton stared casually at the three strange patrons. With all three wearing sunglasses in the restaurant, they looked like three blind mice standing at the front entrance.

Clarice saw the old man with grayish-white hair, wearing dark shades, with a walking cane, his back bent a bit as if he’d suffered from arthritis throughout his hard years. Beside him was a kid, about Max’s age, wearing sunglasses too, with long black hair tied back in a ponytail. He looked almost half Asian. Then there was the woman. It was so hard to determine her real age, but the grey hair gave off an old vibe. She looked very high class based on her clothes, from her Prada heels to her one-piece dress by Dolce and Gabbana and her Gucci handbag. The old lady exuded elegance, but again, she wore sunglasses like the rest of her family, the lenses so large it was hard to distinguish any facial features. They were a strange family, yet they reminded her of someone, especially that blind old man and that young guy.

“Strange family, aren’t they?” Anton voiced her opinion out loud.

“Mmm.” Clarice smiled, watching the eccentric group still standing at the door.

Clarice didn’t know for sure because of their large, dark glasses covering their eyes, but she had an uncomfortable feeling that all three directed their stares in her and

Anton's direction. Even stranger, when the waitress tried to seat them, they refused outright and opted to seat themselves right next to their table instead.

Clarice turned back to her meal, having seen enough of the strange family. She had a more important task to deal with right now. Her heart drummed a frantic beat. *This is it.* She must tell Anton about their baby. She didn't know if he would be pleased. Heavens, he might not even remember that night in Queenstown at all.

It was all her friends' fault for beating into her head that she needed to tell him. The guilt was eating her alive. She finally succumbed and phoned Anton to have a private meeting during one of this lunch breaks. It was best to clear the air. Then she wouldn't feel guilty or regret anything. Now here she was, perspiration dotting her forehead at the impending event about to unfold before her.

"Anton, I—"

"Would you pass me the salt, Cory?" Hunter shouted.

Clarice glanced to the table next to them again, unable to finish her sentence. They spoke like they were also deaf.

"What, Ojiisan? I can't hear you. Speak louder," Max shouted across the table, adding in the Japanese word for grandpa for effect.

"How loud must they speak?" Anton muttered under his breath. "They sound like they're using a microphone already."

Clarice just smiled and leaned her face closer to Anton's, then whispered, "I think they're a cute family, don't you?"

"Cane, where's my cane, Cory?" the old man shouted. "I feel like hitting someone in the head. I can't help it."

Hunter was gritting his teeth. What the hell was wrong with her? Trying to kiss his cousin right in front of him. So she wanted to confess to his cousin so much that she'd even resorted to kissing him right in front of the man who fathered her baby. No way would he allow it. And Anton, his cousin, he was smiling like the cat who'd just been given a grand prize rat. If only he had that cane in his hand right now, he would bonk the hell out of his cousin's head. "I said where's my cane?" Hunter shouted even louder, angry, as he watched Clarice smiling at Anton.

"Obaasan, help Ojiisan with his cane. I'm busy drinking my lemon juice," Max shouted to Fern, who was sitting closer to Anton.

Fern was also seething through her teeth when she saw Anton and Clarice this close. How was her plan going to work if his attention was elsewhere? She didn't blame Clarice for attracting him, but it was Anton she wasn't happy with. So she picked up Hunter's cane and poked Anton in the ribs.

"Oowww," Anton growled, turning to the high-fashion grey-haired lady. Anton, being the sensible one, only stared at the old lady and forced a polite smile, though his face was flustered. But he thought it must be an accident. She must have eye problems like her husband.

"I think your husband is on the other side of the table," Anton said.

"Oh, Fe—I... I... thank you, young man," Fern said. That was a close one. She almost spoke in third person again.

"Cory, where's my cane?" Hunter wanted to laugh his head off. He'd never seen Anton so flustered before, especially staring at Fern dressed up as an old woman. Then he thought of an idea. He wobbled out of his chair and pretended to find his way to the cane

while grumbling to Max. He knew where he was going since he could see perfectly well, but when he reached Clarice's table, he...

"Ahhhhh." Hunter cried out and fell. "Help me."

And where did he fall? Right onto Clarice, where his head nestled nicely on her lap.

Oh hell! Hunter thought. It was damn comfortable. Even his extra soft custom-made pillow at home didn't provide that much cushion to support his head. Damn, how was he supposed to sleep on his pillow from now on?

"Sir?" He heard her speak, shaking him from his comfort.

"Good God, Grandpa?" Anton said, coming around to Clarice's side. "Are you all right?"

I'm fine down here. In fact, I'm enjoying my time very much, so leave me alone. Hunter kept silent as he felt his cousin heaving him up. But he wanted to stay in this position a little longer, so he put all his energy into trying to make himself as heavy as possible so Anton would give up his task.

"Good God!" he heard Anton say. "This grandpa is heavy."

Hunter couldn't help but smile a sneaky smile.

"It's all right, Anton," Clarice said, smiling.

Clarice looked at the old man in her lap. She felt a connection with him she couldn't describe. She felt she could trust this man. This was odd because he was just a stranger. Maybe she had this trust for him because he was blind. Her hands itched to caress that rough stubble forming on his chin.

This old man was contradictory in all aspects. The blind man had grey-white hair, which was the normal pigmentation for most elderly people, but his skin looked so youthful, like that of a man in his early twenties. Perhaps she needed another eye surgery. But to appease her curiosity, she lightly stroked that cheek.

Hunter just wanted to purr like a cat. Why did Clarice have to touch his cheek? Her finger pads felt just right when they grazed his rough stubble. He could get used to that every morning.

Fern, who was on the other side, saw the whole fiasco and understood immediately what Hunter was doing, so with the goal of helping her friend, she pretended to walk with the fake old lady's gait and when she got near Anton, she swooned right into his arms. Except she miscalculated her distance and fell onto the chair instead and accidentally hit her forehead on the corner in the process.

"Ow!" *God, that hurts.* Immediately, Anton came to her side and rescued her from her embarrassing situation, which put a smile on her face again.

"Grandma, are you okay?" Anton asked in a worried tone, Clarice all forgotten with the grandpa sleeping on her lap.

"My weak knees," she said as she rested her head against Anton's shoulder when he picked her up. "They're playing up again."

Max, who was busy sipping his lemon drink, watched the whole hilarious scenario. It was so entertaining that he almost choked on his drink when began laughing.

On one side was Hunter, trying to gain Clarice's attention by pretending to fall and then practically falling asleep on his cousin's lap. On the other side was Fern, acting like she was a damsel in distress by swooning on her Prince Charming. God, he should pull out his iPhone and film the whole scene just to watch again and again. And then out

of the corner of his eyes, he saw a waiter approaching them. *Oh shit. Game over.* He had to get them out of there fast.

“Oh, I think my grandma and grandpa aren’t feeling well. They must be suffering from their love sickness,” Max said, standing up. “Please excuse them.”

This comment made Fern and Hunter snap up their heads. Hunter woke from his delirium and simply rose out of Clarice’s lap, and Fern seemed to have the strength in her legs to stand again. Hooking his arms around the two people, Max led them out door again, a perfect exit for a strange family.

Hunter gritted his teeth. What was Max on about? He was trying to stop Clarice from confessing to Anton she was pregnant with his baby. He was merely trying to save her and his cousin from utter humiliation. Plus, he wanted to sleep with her so he could get a good night’s sleep again.

“Why did you lead me out? I was distracting Clarice.”

“And you did your job perfectly well, big bro. So let’s finish here,” Max said.

“Why?” Hunter asked again.

“Because the waiter was about to approach us. I can’t have Clarice finding out it’s me who’s helping you. I’ll be dead meat before I even get through my growth spurt.”

“But they’re still in there together,” Hunter argued, wanting to go in there again, but Max kept pulling him back.

“No, look, Clarice is leaving,” Fern said. And then all three hurriedly scrambled to hide in the large bush again.

Through the parted foliage, Hunter watched Clarice walked out of the restaurant first. She got into a red car and then drove off. He was so relieved his mission today was accomplished. As he was about to exit the bushes, he jumped back in again because he saw Anton coming out of the restaurant.

Anton scanned the bushes for a full minute, as if he were a botanist. After another few seconds passed and no more sound or movement came, he turned in the direction of his car and walked briskly away, leaving Hunter, Fern, and Max to sweat in nervousness over almost getting caught red-handed.

CHAPTER 28

“So did you tell the guy he’s the father yet?” Hunter pretended to act innocent and asked Clarice if she’d made her confession to Anton.

Clarice couldn’t look Hunter straight in the face. Not again. Why had she agreed to meet up with him for lunch when she was supposed to be talking to Anton about her future? And why did she have to make all kinds of excuses just to postpone that moment of confession?

The truth was she didn’t really want Anton to interfere with her life. She just wanted to raise her baby alone. But now, even Hunter had urged her to tell Anton. How was she supposed to tell the man sitting in front of her that the man who had impregnated her was his very own cousin? Would he be happy? Would he jump for joy? Or would he look sulky like Max did when she told him her news?

She was a little saddened when Max didn’t show his usual happy behavior. Maybe he was really scared she might not show him her usual love. She had to ring him to tell him that so he wouldn’t misunderstand.

“Not yet?” Clarice said, scanning the array of fruit on her platter. Not again. Why was everyone forcing her to eat fruits? First Max and now Hunter. Did everyone want to turn her into an herbivore or something?

“Good,” Hunter said, smiling. Then he watched Clarice with concern as she just forked around her fruits.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Don’t you want to eat the fruit I ordered for you?”

“Of course not,” Clarice said sharply. “Why did you order me a fruit platter? I don’t like fruit all that much, not enough to eat it all the time.”

“Well, at least eat that apple there,” Hunter suggested. “I’ll cut it up for you.”

“I don’t like apples,” Clarice said, annoyed. “I’ve eaten enough apples to last me until the next life.” Clarice pushed the plate away from her as her gag reflex acted up. She closed her eyes and covered her mouth.

Hunter jerked out of his chair so fast it made a loud screeching sound. He ran to Clarice, and in the next second, he had her in his arms.

“Hey, are you okay? You should rest. You should have rejected my offer to come out to lunch today.”

“It’s only morning sickness.” She laughed, the jingle of her voice doing crazy things to his heartbeat again.

“Stop laughing, Avocado. You’re sick, for Christ sake. Here, sit down.” Hunter led her to the seat beside him.

“Why did you ask me out anyway, Hunter?” Clarice asked, feeling a sense of empowerment all of a sudden.

Well, after that episode of pretending to be Max’s blind grandpa, Hunter was so agitated he had to call Clarice to meet up for lunch, just to ask whether she’d confessed to his cousin yet. Thank God she hadn’t.

When Clarice didn’t hear Hunter reply, she leaned in closer to him and asked again. “I said why did you ask me out? Shouldn’t you be somewhere else, trying to chase up some woman or something?” Dear heavens, this had to be her fluctuating hormones

again. Otherwise, she wouldn't behave like this. "Just because you're the first one to know I'm pregnant, you're not under any obligation to look after me, you know."

As if her behavior wasn't strange and embarrassing enough, Clarice turned to Hunter then and leaned forward until her nose almost touched his. Then she spoke softly, which to Hunter's ears sounded so seductive it made his heart drum so wildly it almost leapt out of his chest. "I am pregnant with another man's child, you know. You shouldn't be staying too close to me. People might suspect you're my... you know, tick-tock, tick-tock." Then she laughed like a silly schoolgirl and moved back to her seat. Heavens, she really was crazy today.

Hunter could only blink randomly at Clarice's strange behavior. He knew exactly what she meant, but damn his past life. Right now, Clarice was more important.

Shit, did he just admit the avocado was the most important thing in his life right now? Yes, he guessed he did. And it felt like a heavy weight had just been lifted off his shoulders. As to the reason he thought of Clarice as his most important, he knew it was a responsibility a father of a child has when looking after its mother, but he was sure that wasn't the only reason. For now, though, he was willing to stay by her side.

Hunter turned his gaze to look at the woman sitting beside him again. Why did she agree so suddenly to see him again? She looked tired, really, really tired, like a little kid fighting a nap.

He released a deep sigh and went to pay for their meals, knowing full well that Clarice would not be eating any more of the fruit he ordered for her. Maybe he should do some more research on what kinds of food were best suited for pregnant women. Clarice needed to eat healthy for their baby to grow up strong.

After Hunter paid for their meals, he helped Clarice into the car.

Once inside, Clarice held a faraway look on her face. She stared into the far distance, her eyes not seeing anything.

"Maybe I should tell him," she said to Hunter quietly when he got into the driver's seat.

Hunter shook when he heard this. *God, please no, not yet.* He hadn't decided yet what was wrong with him. He wanted to spend a little more time with her first. In fact, he needed to confess to her that he was the father to their baby, not his cousin, before she she told Anton.

"When?" was all Hunter could say. "When would you tell him?"

"At the pre-conference ball next week."

No! No! It was only a few days away. That wasn't enough time to compose himself. He needed to confess to her now. Right now. Otherwise, he would never be with Clarice. He could feel his heart pounding and his ears ringing.

"Clarice, I have a confession too," Hunter croaked, his throat dry, and then he turned to face her. "I am the man—"

But he couldn't finish his sentence as he saw Clarice's sleeping form. She was so beautiful, this avocado. She looked so peaceful.

Hunter couldn't help himself as his body leaned itself forward of its own accord and his lips brushed themselves gently across her supple cheek.

"Clarice," he whispered softly into her ear, his heart swelling with an emotion he didn't know existed. "It's me. I'm the father of your baby. Not my cousin."

But she didn't hear him. She was too exhausted to register what he'd said.

Once again, Hunter had to wait. And this time, he would make sure she would stay awake and hear him say those words, loud and clear.

CHAPTER 29

Hunter almost forgot to breathe. Clarice was really his goddess. He had to pinch himself in the arm just to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

His goddess was so beautiful in that one-shoulder white silk dress, draped to the left, like a Grecian goddess. He found it hard to breathe. All his anger, the previous feeling of madness that was there before she arrived, had completely vanished as soon as he laid his eyes on her.

Then he remembered why he was feeling so angry with her in the first place. It was because he'd been standing outside for a damn half hour, shivering in the cold, almost freezing to death.

That's right. Winton had decided to pick her up per Anton's instruction. Hunter himself had ventured all the way to Clarice's dental practice just to wait on her, only to find out later that she'd taken off half the day to prepare herself for the pre-conference ball. And Winton was the one who took her for her full body makeover. That damn shit.

That was over four hours ago. And he'd been waiting for almost half an hour now. The ball had already started, but still Clarice hadn't shown up.

He was standing at the entrance of their hotel, waiting impatiently for her arrival, swearing once or twice as he watched the time tick by. He'd even sworn he was going to strangle Winton when he did show up.

And finally, Winton did show, driving through the throng of people milling around near the entrance of Silverton Hotel. At that time, Hunter couldn't suppress his anger and annoyance so he stalked to Winton's car, opened the passenger door, and dragged Clarice to the side, planning to give her a good scolding before unleashing his wrath towards Winton. Except... when he did see her, he was struck speechless and almost forgot to breathe.

"What took you so long?" he yelled at Clarice, gripping her hand so tight, forcing himself to break out of his stupid reverie.

"Excuse me?" Clarice asked in astonishment. "Has the devil decided to possess you today? I just got here. I want a drink. Now let my hand go." Then she flung away his hand and walked elegantly, like a swan, into the reception area. Hunter saw red as he stared at her retreating back.

"Ah, Master Hunter." Winton came trotting to him.

"Don't Master Hunter me!" Hunter shouted, turning his wrath towards Winton now. "Where the hell did you take her?"

"Ah, to the petrol station," Winton replied, aghast at Hunter's devilish behavior.

"Why did you take her there?" Hunter shouted to the poor man. "You were supposed to come straight here after her makeover, which should have been over half an hour ago."

"My car was about to run out of petrol," Winton replied. "I needed to fill it up."

"Why didn't you fill up yesterday if you knew it was running low?"

"Because the petrol was on sale today so I thought I'd take advantage—"

"You're fired," Hunter said, halting Winton midsentence, turning swiftly to follow Clarice's footsteps.

“Whaaaaat?” Winton shrieked, running after Hunter. “Master Hunter,” he pleaded. “You can’t do this to your number one employee.”

Hunter didn’t listen to Winton’s moaning as he raced after Clarice. He needed to find her. His mission tonight was to stop her confessing to Anton. Come hell or high water, he would.

Once he got inside, though, his eyes searched frantically for that white silk Grecian goddess. Except when he did find her, she was already in conversation with Anton.

He let out an angry growl.

Bloody hell. He fisted his hands tightly. No way, there was no way he would let her confess tonight.

So Hunter made his way to her, but with every single step, someone was always standing in his way, an obstacle he had to somehow bypass to get to Clarice. And it wasn’t just any normal people; it had to be the old crows from Queenstown. God, he just hoped she hadn’t said anything yet about their baby.

“Ah, young Hunter?” one old man said. “How’s life here?”

“When’re you going to go back down south?” another asked. “I have lots of sheep. You can come have a look at them. My woolly one is named Molly; she’s always in need of a handsome young man like you to look after her. She can make you a good investment.”

South Island! Sheep! Investment! What’s so important about sheep anyway? He’d seen so many sheep since he was born it made his head spin, and he was definitely not a farmer. What was more important right now was to get to Clarice so she wouldn’t make a fool of herself. But obviously, Hunter couldn’t say any of those things. Instead, he just smiled and gave his greetings to the old crows who intercepted his path.

“Ah, no,” Hunter replied just out of politeness, though his eyes weren’t on them.

“What’s that?” one of the old crows asked. “Did you say go? When, when would you go?”

Obviously, this old bat was also hard of hearing.

“Look, I’m sorry, but I see one of my friends over there.” He feigned an excuse, no longer wanting to talk to them. “I should go say hello.” And then before the old croons could get in another word, he made his escape, hastening his steps to Clarice. He’d almost reached her side when the host suddenly announced for everyone to take their seats at the dining table, which in turn made everyone stand and block his way yet again.

Damn! He tried to fight his way through the congestion around the many dining tables so he could sit next to Clarice, but she somehow got swallowed in the crowd, disappearing from his sight. When he finally saw her again, she was already sitting next to Anton, smiling. And there were no spare seats left at their table. Could this be the worst day of his life?

Hunter flicked his eyes and saw a few spare seats a few tables away so he seated himself there. Suddenly, he felt someone sitting next to him. Turning around, he found Fern smiling at him.

“Well, Hunter?” she asked, blocking the image of Clarice and Anton together. “Does Fern look beautiful tonight? Will she be able to attract someone’s eyes tonight?”

“Yeah,” Hunter said absentmindedly, not looking at his friend at all, just trying to move his head so he could see Clarice again, but Fern moved in front of his face again, wanting to show off her beautiful green gown.

Hunter became irritated. “Could you just move over there?”

“What’s wrong, Hunter?” Fern asked. “Why do you sound so mad?”

“It’s nothing,” Hunter said, ignoring his friend’s question. God, he wanted to just march over there and shred his cousin to pieces. How dare he smile at Clarice like that? For once, he disliked his cousin for having such a calm demeanor, unlike himself, who was always so irrational and fiery, a trait Clarice disliked. She’d always said he was an immature kid.

Fern directed her gaze to where Hunter was staring, and she too felt something. Although she wasn’t raving mad like Hunter, who wanted to strangle and shred his own cousin to pieces, she felt sad.

Should she give up? Here she had taken a total of six hours to accomplish this look she sported. With her red hair in ringlets and her dress a nice emerald green shade, she was sure Anton would stop to admire her, but he was already looking at Clarice, the goddess.

Gosh, Clarice was so beautiful with her long jet-black hair bundled to the side like that. Who would look at a fiery red-haired girl who always speaks in third person?

At the same time both Hunter and Fern were tormented by their own internal feelings towards their respected interests, both Clarice and Anton were busy conversing with each other about the conference tomorrow.

“Your presentation starts at two p.m.,” Anton said, smiling at Clarice. “Is that all right?”

“Yes. I’ve prepared everything,” Clarice said.

Clarice continued to converse with Anton about her health and that yes, she was fine now after going to the hospital, just low blood pressure. She had to resort to lying to him since she didn’t want to bring up the subject of her pregnancy yet. There were too many people around; she couldn’t shake the feeling that someone’s stare was boring into her back. It was a very unsettling feeling. So she pretended to drop her napkin. While picking it up, she diverted her gaze in the direction that feeling was emitting from and sure enough, her eyes smack landed on a pair of azure eyes.

That Casanova Hunter. He was staring at her strangely, like a fire had ignited in his eyes, a glowing ember within them. His mouth still held an angry snarl, just like when he’d attacked her with his devious words when she’d first exited the car.

Why was he acting like that? She was pretty upset too when she first arrived. She could remember feeling so nervous about her confession tonight and had prepared herself mentally for that moment, even meditating in the car, but Winton had to talk to her, constantly interrupting her like a dog yapping for attention. She was on the verge of snapping at him. And then when Hunter dragged her out like that, she literally cracked, lashing out at him, accusing him of being the devil incarnate.

Tonight she was determined to tell Anton. She wouldn’t let any distraction waylay her like the last time when they were in the Cambodian restaurant together. That old blind man falling on her lap shook her resolve. Well, tonight, she wasn’t going to let it go. Tonight, even Hunter wouldn’t distract her from her goal. She would talk to Anton

and tell him about their baby. If Anton didn't want a part of it, then she would be fine with that too. But she just needed to get this off her chest.

When the song "Sway" by Michael Bublé came on, Anton asked her permission to dance. Finding that sitting in her chair was only making her more uncomfortable with that Casanova's eyes boring into her back, she agreed and took his hand, letting him glide her to the dance floor.

Hunter gritted his teeth in anger. How dare she choose Anton over him, despite knowing full well now that he was the actual heir of Silverton Enterprises, not Anton? And there was also the fact that he was the father of her child. But obviously, he couldn't tell her that, well, not yet anyway. Otherwise, she would freak out.

Watching the pair dance only made his blood boil even more. Hunter grabbed a champagne off one of the trays and downed it in one go, feeling the sting of the liquid burn his throat, but man, he didn't give a damn about his throat at the moment.

"Don't you think dancing is a very intimate art, Hunter?" Fern asked sadly as she watched the one man she'd been thinking about constantly since she arrived in New Zealand, that brown-haired man she realized always made her heart jump whenever he was around, now dancing so intimately with Clarice.

Hunter gripped the empty glass so tight his knuckles turned white. If he applied a little more pressure surely the glass would shatter into millions of tiny crystals. And hearing Fern say this only made his nostrils flare even more. If he were a dragon, he would have breathed fire and burned down the whole damn hotel by now.

"What do you mean intimate, Fern?" Hunter asked bitterly, his eyes glued to the dancing couple as they swayed and laughed like lovers.

"Fern means one can easily talk to one another without letting other people know what they're discussing."

Hunter jerked his eyes to his friend then, his breathing rough.

"You mean to say they could say anything in the throng of people and no one would know?" Hunter asked for confirmation.

"Yes," Fern said, still eyeing Anton laughing with Clarice.

"Even a confession?" Hunter asked in fright, as he could feel his goal crumpling down on him.

"Even a confession," Fern said absentmindedly.

Hunter snapped. "Come on, Fern. Let's dance."

"Wh-what?" Fern was so startled when Hunter dragged her onto the dance floor, standing so close to the other couple, it made her heart jump again.

"Hunter, what are you planning?" Fern whispered close to his ear.

"I need your help."

"Hunter needs Fern's help?" Fern asked, her interest piqued now.

"Mmm." Hunter nodded. Then he whispered something into Fern's ear, which made her eyes light up. Fern looked at Clarice, gave her a smile, and nodded to Hunter.

Fern was only too willing to oblige as she laid her hands on top of Hunter's shoulders and they both proceeded with their dance, swaying to the sound of Michael Bublé's song.

So Hunter was trying to make Clarice jealous, was he? Fern knew Hunter liked Clarice, but she didn't know it went to this extent. Oh, she was glad to be of help. In fact,

Fern also wanted to make Anton jealous. So she hoped by dancing with Hunter, Anton would take notice.

Hunter's plan was to make Clarice jealous, but he also wanted to hear and survey the dancing couple at a closer quarter too. If Clarice planned to confess to Anton, he would make it his mission to annoy the heck out of them, hence preventing Clarice's admission.

When he saw Clarice drawing her face towards Anton, Hunter took action. Once or twice, he would intentionally bump into them just to disrupt the dancing pair and to annoy the living hell out of Clarice, as if to inform her, *Look, you're not the only one with a dancing partner*. But Hunter's mission only backfired threefold and Hunter gritted his teeth harder, almost breaking his enamel, when he saw Clarice laughing at what his goddamn cousin was saying, his action having no effect whatsoever on them.

Hunter couldn't take it. She was already pregnant, so how dare she treat other men like that, especially his cousin? He was furious, literally pissed off with the whole situation, and he was about to storm away, throwing his usual tantrum like most rich heirs would, but then another idea emerged inside his mind and he took action.

CHAPTER 30

What was he doing? Clarice couldn't breathe with Hunter and Fern this close to her. She tried to concentrate on Anton's steps as he swayed her around the dance floor to the voice of Michael Bublé, but Hunter was too distracting. When she tried to motion Anton away from him, he came swaying their way as well. Then she saw Hunter whispering something into Fern's ear, which made Fern turn to look at her and then smile before turning back to nod at Hunter. A stab of jealousy robbed her heart, and before she knew it she was mad.

You want to play this game, Hunter? Clarice thought angrily. *Well, so be it.* So she held Anton even closer, hugging him even tighter to her body, and even pretended to laugh at something Anton said, which she hadn't a clue as to what it was.

She was enjoying her charade, especially when she saw Hunter eyeing her like he wanted to eat her alive with those molten sky-blue eyes. No, she didn't want to see Hunter. Seeing Hunter only made her condition worse, so she turned back to Anton, but he was no longer looking at her. Who was Anton looking at? Surely not his own cousin dancing with Fern... Unless... Wait... Fern? Could Anton like Fern?

As she couldn't contain her curiosity, she asked him. "Anton, are you—"

"I'm taking over!" Hunter declared darkly, then went ahead without letting Anton or Clarice voice their permission, by wedging Anton to the side and taking hold of Clarice, slamming her body toward his.

What? Clarice asked herself after her sudden change of dance partner.

When she realized Hunter had literally kicked his cousin to the curbside, Clarice wanted to utter her disapproval and terminate the dance, but those words didn't come out of her lips because Hunter just glared at her like he wanted to gobble her alive and then said, "Dance."

Anton was quite surprised by this so he just smiled at his cousin and left to go back to his seat, when Fern stood in his way. His heart did another jump. God, the Emerald Queen. She was so beautiful he couldn't stop blinking. But he must stop this foolish act. Anton's cool demeanor was in charge tonight, not the man who melted into a puddle whenever Fern was around. So with that thought, he pasted on his usual cool, unaffected bearing and tried bypassing her, but Fern kept blocking his path.

"Anton. Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?" Fern spoke in first person.

And before his brain could tell his body what to do, he'd already took action and pulled Fern into his arms and glided her around the dance floor, passing Clarice and Hunter, who still held on to each other like lovers embracing for the first time, standing in the middle of the dance floor while everyone else danced around them.

Oh dear, Clarice thought. And oh dear it was when Hunter grabbed hold of her. Hunter literally mashed his whole body to hers, embracing her so tightly she almost couldn't breathe.

"Could you at least move back a bit? I can't breathe." Clarice voiced her discomfort.

"This dance is supposed to be like that," Hunter said, happily squeezing her even tighter within his hold.

God, it was perfect. Gone was the furious fiery dragon who breathed fire, only to be replaced with a kid that had received his prize candy, Clarice in his arms. He couldn't believe having his avocado like this could make his heart swell up with this much happiness.

"Anton didn't dance like that, though," Clarice struggled to speak as she tried pushing him back a bit.

"Anton doesn't know how to dance," Hunter remarked.

Clarice was about to retort when Hunter swayed her so fast it knocked her breath away. Her head was getting dizzy and her heart rate was now at full speed.

Clarice glanced up at Hunter and into his glittering pupils, smiling at her. Clarice didn't feel happy, nor did she feel like smiling back. In fact, she felt moody. She wanted to get out of this situation. What with being held captive like this on the dance floor while tossing and turning to the sound of the music; it just wasn't right for her body or her peace of mind.

"What are you doing?" Clarice whispered in panic when she felt Hunter's fingers exploring her back. One tap, two taps, drumming on her backside like a horse galloping on a sunny day along the prairie, then those fingers making small circular motions, which caused tingling sensations to run up her spine. This wasn't good. Not good at all. Her breath hitched and butterflies swarmed in her stomach. "Stop Hunter! Stop!" she whispered.

"What was that? I can't hear you," Hunter replied. His voice wasn't helping her either, so husky and seductive.

"I said stop what you're doing right now." She spoke under her breath.

"You want me to stop dancing? But Bublé is still singing. It would look bad to walk off the dance floor like this."

"Arrggh, that's not what I meant," she said, frustrated. She could hear him just fine. How come he couldn't hear her? So in resolution, she went to capture his neck and pulled him closer until his ear was just an inch from her mouth, and then she whispered, "Please stop making those shapes on my back. It's uncomfortable."

"Oh," Hunter whispered, happy they were so close they could almost be melded as one.

While they were whispering back and forth to each other, Clinton Silverton was eyeing his son and taking note of the little beauty who had caught his attention. He turned to Winton. "Who's that young lass?"

"Oh, that's Miss Clarice Mason, the periodontist Master Anton asked to present her case on implants to our elderly clients here tomorrow."

"Oh. So she's a beauty *and* a brain," Clinton said as he continued to watch as the little drama in front of him unfolded. "Take note, Winton. If my son shows any interest in that lass, I want a full investigation of her background."

"Yes, sir," Winton said.

"Good," Clinton said and then turned back to his son with a fat grin on his face. Could this young lass be the one that could change his son's way of life? He hoped so.

"Will you stop it? I said I'm uncomfortable. How many times do I have to tell you? And when will the song finish? I want to go back to my seat," Clarice grumbled to herself when Hunter wouldn't stop making the small circular shapes on her back.

"Missing Anton already?" Hunter asked playfully, his eyes twinkling as he watched his avocado making that sour face.

"Yes. At least he's a better dancer than you," she retorted.

"You..." Hunter couldn't take it. His anger came back full swing. Why must she compare him to Anton all the time? What was so good about his cousin anyway? Apart from their age gap, he didn't see how he could be any different. "I'll have you know I can capture any woman and make her swoon if I want, unlike my cousin."

"I doubt it. Some other woman maybe, but not this one," Clarice said, challenging him.

"Is that a challenge?" Hunter eyed her.

"I'm always up for a challenge," Clarice answered, looking up into Hunter's azure eyes.

"Just be warned that once I attempt to make you swoon, don't go blaming me." Hunter warned Clarice.

"I won't blame you," Clarice said, smiling. What was Hunter going to do anyway? They were in a room full of people. But to her surprise, she almost went into shock because in the next second, she felt her neck captured by long, gentle fingers, imprisoning her in their embrace and then hot breath fanned the nape of her neck. Clarice sucked in her breath when she felt teeth, lips, and tongue, sucking, biting, and licking her soft skin. Clarice couldn't do anything but stand still like a tree stump.

"What... what are you doing?" Clarice asked breathlessly.

I'm seducing you. "Not a word, Avocado. Didn't you say you wanted to challenge me? Keep up the pretense and stay like this until Bubl  finishes his song."

A hundred, a thousand, no, a million bees were stinging her at that moment, all centered around that spot Hunter was busy sucking. He was seducing her... on the dance floor? How could he do this? Her knees felt weak. She felt like she was about to faint again. *Dear heavens, please.* When would the song finish? She really needed to get out of here. Her body was acting all out of sorts. She really needed to get out of here right now.

Dear God, please don't let the song end just yet, Hunter prayed. He was enjoying his time immensely. He wanted to stay like this with Clarice in his arms throughout the night, just the two of them, dancing, embracing, and kissing each other while everyone else faded away in the background.

But sadly, the song ended all too soon, and before he could blink an eye, Clarice disappeared from his arms and was already across to the other side of the hall, then was lost in the large crowd.

Hunter went into the swallowing crowd too and was lost in the midst of chaos on all sides, his eyes flickering in all directions, trying to locate that white gown, but to no avail.

Hunter growled and made his way to sulk by himself. He found a nice spot where no one could interrupt him. A nice spot near the side of the stage where there was a curtain hanging obscuring him from anyone who would want to annoy him. Grabbing a glass of red wine from the waiter, he made his way to his destination.

He thought he could stay in peace, but it was only an illusion because not three seconds passed before someone came to stand beside him.

"Hello, Hunter."

Hunter turned to see Caroline and gave out an annoyed huff.

“What are you doing here, Caroline?” Hunter asked, not so nicely.

“That’s not a nice way to talk to the heir of Bass Enterprises. My father does have a large share of the current business with your father. He might not like it when his daughter is spoken to like that.”

“I don’t give a damn what your father thinks,” Hunter said, gripping his wine glass in anger.

“Dance with me, Hunter.” Caroline changed the subject when she realized Hunter was in no mood to play.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not interested,” Hunter said, his eyes like radar, still searching for that white gown. “Go ask Anton.”

“But I want to dance with you.”

“But I *don’t* want to dance with you,” Hunter spit. “So go.”

How dare Hunter speak to her like that? Caroline fumed. “Are you interested in that old fruit?” she asked.

“Huh?” Hunter turned to Caroline then, giving her his full attention. “Who are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about that girl you called Avocado.”

“Clarice?”

“Yes, Clarice.”

“What about her?”

“You like her, don’t you?”

“Psh! None of your business,” Hunter said, turning back to the crowd, his eyes still scanning.

“You should give up already,” Caroline said, pretending to be kind by offering her advice. “She already likes Anton. I can tell.”

Hunter jerked his head to Caroline again and fire burst from his azure eyes. “Why would you say that?”

“Because she’s walking towards him right now with a determined look on her face.”

Hunter’s head snapped back to the crowd and sure enough, he saw Clarice walking towards Anton with a fierce determined look on her face.

Oh shit. She’s going to confess. And this time, there was no backing down. Hunter still held his wine glass in his hand. He had to do something. Shit, he had to think of something fast. Otherwise, everything would turn into custard. From this distance, it was too far to stop them.

Hunter scanned around the hall quickly, trying to find anything at all to distract Clarice from confessing to Anton. Then he saw the microphone standing on the stand on stage and an idea brewed inside his head. Handing Caroline his wine glass, he told her to stay put and climbed up on stage. Caroline was so surprised by Hunter’s action that she just stared blankly at him in confusion.

Up on stage, Hunter could see Clarice was just a few meters from Anton. Any minute now and she would confess. He hadn’t enough time to stop them. He needed to do something fast. Then he picked up the microphone.

Clarice walked towards Anton with a determined stride and only one purpose: to confess and then go home. She'd had enough of today. If she didn't escape, she could guarantee she would faint into Hunter's arms. Yes, she must get away from him, stop him from distracting her so she could make her confession and then leave. Except she didn't know Hunter was standing right behind her onstage, holding on to the microphone awkwardly, staring at her making her way towards his cousin.

As Clarice neared Anton, she saw him talking to Fern. She really didn't want to interrupt them. She had a strong feeling Anton liked Fern, but she had to tell him, just to get the guilt out of her system. So she tapped him on the shoulder, making Anton and Fern turn around. Without allowing Anton and Fern to greet her, she spoke, "Anton, I have—"

"You can't, Clarice!"

Clarice froze, hearing Hunter's shout, the sound of his voice through the microphone echoing around the main hall.

Shit, what have I done? Hunter thought. He'd just literally shouted out without thinking when he saw Clarice was about to confess to Anton. And now he'd alerted the entire audience who were now standing still, staring at the heir of Silverton Enterprises, who was standing up on stage, holding the microphone like he had a special announcement to make.

Hunter was sweating. The eyes of everyone down below gazed up at him. But his only focus was on Clarice as she turned to him, staring with a confused expression on her face. He felt his forehead dotted with perspiration and his hands felt like they'd been dipped in a jar of water. The microphone kept slipping from his hands.

"You can't, Clarice," Hunter repeated, his eyes still zoomed onto Clarice, not caring and not seeing the sea of faces that continued to stare in his direction, waiting and watching for the event to unfold before them. The many faces that included Anton, who was thinking at that moment just what was his young cousin was up to now. Fern was smiling because she knew what was about to happen, Clinton was in shock, as he had never seen his son act like this before, and Caroline fisted her hands so tightly by her sides, afraid of what Hunter was about to say.

"Don't," Hunter spoke again. God help him. He felt awkward standing onstage like this, but there was no way around it. He needed to stop Clarice's confession; otherwise, Anton would get her.

Clarice was confused. She turned away from Anton and started advancing towards the stage until she stood just at the edge, staring up at him from below.

"Don't confess to Anton," he said, looking down at her, only seeing her.

"Why?" Clarice asked.

"Because... because..." His hands trembled and his voice shook.

"Because?" Clarice worded silently, her heart pounding in her ribcage. And then it hit her. *Oh God! Oh God!* Hunter knew.

"Because..."

Hunter could feel his throat going dry and the microphone slipping from his grasp again. But he had to confess. He had to do it now. He had to say it now.

"Because I want to sleep with you *again*."

THE END

Hunter and Clarice's love story continues in

Baby I'm Yours

Dear my awesome readers.

If you would like the next book to Hunter and Clarice's love story, Baby I'm yours, for free, then subscribe to my mailing address at www.wanittapraks.com

Also, in exchange for an honest review, I would give you Captivated By You, my new fierce love romance series, The Devereux Legacy, as an advance read. This book will be released on 3rd July 2015.

So subscribe to my mailing list and get both Baby I'm Yours and Captivated By You for free now. Just subscribe and sent me a message with 'Baby I'm Yours and ARC Captivated By You.'

Below is a little sneak peek of my new series.

The Devereux Legacy Trilogy

From the author of the comedic series, Spinsters and Casanovas, comes a sizzling and intense new series full of deceit, fierce love, and betrayal. The Devereux Legacy features the story of Julian Devereux, a broken billionaire whose thirst to reclaim his rightful place as heir to the Devereux Legacy leads him to the one woman who can heal his dark past.

Captivated By You

"I want to be scorched by your flame. I want to be enticed by your touch. Let me in. Open the door to your heart so I can save you."

What is it about the enigmatic and taciturn Julian Devereux that captivates me so? His kind and selfless acts towards others ignite my compassionate nature to protect him from the bitter onslaught of his brother, Joshua Devereux.

But is it merely my nature to help the weak, or is it simply to indulge myself in pleasure, watching in delight as two brothers battle for my attention and their family inheritance?

Maybe deep down, I already know I love him and am willing to sacrifice and back him up in every ordeal. But I didn't anticipate the path I chose would eventually spiral out of my control, tearing at my heart and tossing me into a labyrinth of illusion.

PROLOGUE

“Girls, girls, all this talking about summer work is really boring me. Let’s talk about boys,” I announced while sipping my wine. And when three pairs of eyes stared back at me blankly, I could only shrug my shoulder. “What? Can’t a girl have some fun?”

“Kimmy, your idea of fun is to seduce a guy, then leave him high and dry. Am I right?” Joanna accused me.

“Hey, hey, a girl can flirt, but that doesn’t mean any guy can get under her skirt,” I retorted.

“You just like to mess with people’s lives, like the puppet master you are,” Amelia commented, shaking her head.

“I so don’t,” I chided, smiling at my friends Amelia, Joanna, and Theresa, who were busy drinking and eating their meals.

We were out celebrating our end-of-year exam at Italiano, a restaurant in town, and their conversation about their proposed work over the summer holiday really did bore me so much that I had to say something just to change the topic. And now they were all pressuring me into admitting I was the puppet master who enjoyed controlling men, all due to my playful nature.

“Don’t argue with us. We know you, Kimmy,” they all chorused, shutting me off.

I couldn’t negate that last comment. I was always seen out and about with a different guy each month. But that didn’t mean they owned my heart nor my body. It was what I called my game of date selection.

How would I know who my future spouse was if I didn’t go out on dates? Amelia liked to blame it on my playful nature. As for me, I thought this trait could be attributed to my birthright. My father was a highly established businessperson, owning almost half the malls and properties in New Zealand. I always thought this was an important aspect of my life, finding the right man comparable to my status. But unluckily, the end of my journey to finding the right man seemed light-years away. Then again, I was only nineteen and still in college. A long way to go before settling down and finding a suitable man to meet my father’s approval.

“And how is Simon?” I changed the topic again.

Amelia looked a little troubled. She put down her fork and took a sip of water.

Something was up.

“Amelia, what’s wrong?” I immediately asked.

“I haven’t heard back from Simon yet,” she commented.

I thought it was just plain lies.

“Look at me.” I couldn’t help myself and pulled her face to meet mine. It was always like this. This compassionate and justice-seeking nature of mine always unleashed whenever one of my friends was in trouble. “Tell me, did he do something to you?”

“No, of course not.” She shook her head, making me drop my hands.

“Then what is it?” I asked again. By this time, the whole table was quiet. Joanna and Theresa were both looking at us.

“Yeah, what is it, Amelia?” Joanna echoed my thought again.

“Guys, it’s nothing. I’m just relieved our exams are over,” she said and then proceeded to fork another mouthful of spaghetti into her mouth.

I wasn't one to be fooled. I'd known Amelia for two years now and this was the behavior she usually exhibited if something troubled her. While the other two went back to their food and laughed merrily over some joke, I focused all my attention on Amelia.

"Simon hasn't been calling you?" I whispered to her so the other two didn't overhear our conversation.

"He's busy, Kimmy." She sighed, as if not wanting to pursue the subject any further.

Abruptly, a chair was pulled out, and my focus shattered, shifting to Joanna who only beamed her bright smile at me.

"Sorry, got to dash to the loo. Too much water," she said before heading off.

"I'll come too," Theresa said before they both went off in the direction of the ladies' room.

I turned my attention back to Amelia.

"When was the last time he contacted you?" I asked immediately, no longer concealing my voice. In the far distance, I could hear Joanna and Theresa laughing about something.

"Do we have to go through this, Kimmy? We've just finished our exams. Let's just eat, talk, and have fun."

"We are eating"—I held up my own plate of spaghetti to show her—"and talking; about your boyfriend. And the other two are laughing. Hence, they're having fun. So talk."

"Oh, Kimmy," she laughed and shook her head.

I felt much happier at that point to see her smile. But I didn't give up. I urged her on.

"It's been three weeks since I last talked to Simon."

"Three weeks!" I gaped. "Are you kidding me? All my previous boyfriends didn't even give me two hours of peace before they rang my damn phone. I almost give in to my urges to smash that damn phone into smithereens sometimes. Have you tried texting him? Calling him?"

"Don't give me that look of disbelief. I called him before coming here. He said he's busy. He's taking his bar exam after all. He needs to study. I don't want to interrupt him."

"So what? As his girlfriend, you have the right to interrupt him. I say go see him tomorrow."

"That was my intention."

"So what did he say when you called him?"

Amelia was quiet again. She was pushing her food around in her plate with her fork again.

"Amelia! What is it?" I drummed when she refused to answer me.

"Hey... hey, what are you two talking about?"

I looked up to see the other two back in their seats and staring at me. I knew Amelia wouldn't like her problem advertised to the other two since she wasn't that close to them, so I let the subject go.

"No. Nothing." I pretended to wave aside the subject, deciding to dig deeper at a later time. "Oh hey, I heard there's a new club called Moonlight. We should definitely go clubbing there tonight. What do you think, Joanna, Theresa?"

"I'm all for it," Theresa said, agreeing on the spot.

"Joanna?"

"All in. It's been ages since I busted my moves on the dance floor."

"Amelia?" I asked, looking at my friend.

"Sure, why not?" she said after a long moment.

Not knowing she'd fallen into my trap, I smiled mischievously as we all headed out to Moonlight.

Out on the dance floor, the music was loud. Theresa and Joanna were already out shaking their booties. Amelia wanted to join them too, but I held her back and gave her a cocktail.

"We need to talk. Like right now."

"Okay. I'm all yours."

I smiled.

"So..." I got into the mood of things, ready to fire my questions. "Tell me—"

"Hey, can I buy you a drink?" someone said next to my ear. I turned a sour face toward that someone for interrupting my concentration.

It was a man. Who was clearly drunk.

Someone should definitely kick him out of the club.

"No, thank you," I said before turning to my friend again.

"Oh, come on. Just one drink. Want do you say?" He continued to bug me.

"I said no. Now bugger off," I told him in a heated tone. But clearly, he didn't get the message as he took liberty with my bare skin and touched my arm.

"Oh, come on. Don't play coy. With that dress on, you're just begging me to fuck you, right?" he whispered into my ear.

I turned red. Sultry chestnut hair, curled to flirt around my shoulders, and wearing a deep, rich red sleeveless dress, I was a goddess on the dance floor. I couldn't complain when he said I was begging to be fucked. I really did dress to impress. Although, to be fucked was not my intention.

I tore his fingers off my arm, disgusted at the way he degraded me. I pushed him off the stool, pleased when his butt hit the floor with a big thump.

"Don't you dare touch me," I warned him. "Get away from me, you disgusting toad, or you'll be sorry."

I wasn't kidding when I said he'd be sorry. If Papa knew I'd been manhandled by any man, they'd be sure to never get a job in their life. Coming from an influential family with connections, I made sure no man had the liberty to touch me if I didn't wish it.

"Who's a fucking toad, you bitch." He didn't heed my warning and swore at me.

"I'm talking to you, you gutless bastard. Clearly, you don't understand the human language. So get out of my sight."

"What if I say no?"

"No?" I hissed. "How about this?" I threw my cocktail into his face. "Now go!"

His face brewed an evil storm. "You fucking bitch."

He pulled me up close and glared at me. His foul breath threw me off. His touch sent a wave of revulsion through my body.

"I said don't touch me," I yelled, peeling away at his fingers.

By this stage, I was aware many eyes in the club were on me. But I didn't care. This bastard needed to be taught a lesson. But before I could pick up Amelia's drink and toss another dose of cocktail venom at him, he had his palms up in the air. And I felt it before I saw it, that hand advancing towards me. And I knew I couldn't escape.

It was too fast. I closed my eyes, waiting for that palm to slice my cheek, to feel the sting, whatever it was—something at least—but... there was nothing.

I opened my eyes and saw black. No, it was someone standing in front of me, wearing a black suit. I tilted up my head and saw ink-black hair. It was someone coming to my rescue. And it wasn't until that someone spoke that I realized I was holding my breath.

"The lady said not to touch her," that person spoke, his commanding tone vibrating off his back.

At that point, I felt my knees weakening. That voice, it did something to me. And the next thing I knew, toad face bastard ran off like the little rat he was and deep baritone voice man turned towards me.

I froze, suspended in time. My breath caught in my throat and my arms became limp. He was a beautiful man. Large deep-grey eyes, the color of a brewing storm, straight-set eyebrows, inky black hair slicked back in a fashionable style, long Roman nose and a mouth made only for kissing. I swallowed while my heart continued to thump in that odd crescendo, about to explode.

I wanted him to talk again. I wanted to hear his voice again so I could wake up from this delirious state. But it was my friend Amelia's voice that got through to me.

"Kimmy, are you all right?" she asked.

"Huh?" I turned my attention to Amelia, and it was a moment I deeply regretted. It was only for a split second, but by the time I regained my equilibrium, Mr. Baritone-voice had already disappeared.

"Kimmy?" Amelia shook me awake again when she saw my eyes searching for that man in the black suit. But he was gone. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said absentmindedly.

"Kimmy!" Amelia shouted at me again.

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry. Now where were we? Oh yes, we were talking about Simon, right?"

"I don't want to talk about Simon. Come on. Let's go dance. It's safer than hanging out here."

She dragged me out to the middle of the dance floor, where we found Theresa and Joanna. They didn't witness the disturbing event previously, so both didn't notice my troubled state.

We were dancing. My body was shaking, my legs were moving, but I was like a rigid doll, moving along to the beat of "Pound the Alarm" by Nicki Minaj, without a soul and purpose to my step. My head was too preoccupied with the man with grey eyes.

Who was he? He clearly wasn't a college student, judging from the way he was dressed. He could be from overseas, having a business meeting here. He did sound Australian. But it was damned eleven o'clock at night already, and if he clearly wanted to entertain his clients, then shouldn't he pick a club that wasn't ninety percent populated with students?

My mind went around and around in an endless loop. *Why am I thinking about this stranger when I only saw him for less than five minutes? Why am I so captivated by him?*

I didn't want to think about him anymore. It wasn't like I'd be seeing him again. And just like that, I relaxed, closed my eyes, and moved my body as a new song began, "Disturbia" by Rihanna.

"What's wrong with me? Why do I feel like this? I'm going crazy now," I lip-synced, closing my eyes. "Your mind's in disturbia. It's like the darkness is the light. Disturbia. Am I scaring you tonight? Disturbia. Ain't used to what you like. Dis—"

I opened my eyes at that moment and sucked in my breath. Right there, staring right back at me with the same intensity, was the man with grey eyes.

My heart pumped, my throat ran dry, and at that moment, I begged the universe for him to speak again. But the distance between where he sat in his private booth and the dance floor where I danced were light-years away.

How do I show him I'm interested in him?

Remain eye contact. Don't ever waver. Look him straight in the eye. Flirt with him. Toss your hair about. Dance seductively around your friend. And no matter what, remain eye contact at all times.

I did all of the above, tossing my hair, flirting with my eyes, looking at him beneath my lashes while constantly keeping eye contact with him.

He was gripping his flute of champagne very tightly. His lips pressed into a firm sexy line. And his eyes remained focused on me. Did he feel that attraction too?

In the next moment, he placed his flute neatly on the table, stood up, and made his way towards me.

Oh my God. He's coming my way. What do I say? How do I address him? What's his name?

"Simon."

"Simon?" *His name's Simon?*

"Simon's here," Joanna said close to me.

"What? Simon's here?"

I got distracted, turning my gaze from Mr. Baritone-voice, and followed Amelia wedging between the many sweaty people, until my eyes could make out two bodies in the midst of making out near the toilet.

Simon, sweaty and rough, was smooched up to a girl about the same age as us, one hand up her skirt, the other playing with her breast, mouth stuck to her lips like a leech. Simon, blond hair, lean frame. I could recognize that frame from a mile away.

"Simon! You bastard!" I leapt forward and ripped his head from that girl before my mind could formulate a plan.

"Owww, what the fuck!" he screamed, turning to me. That bastard squealed like a girl. His eyes glared at me, but once he saw Amelia, he shut his mouth and immediately went to her. "Amelia, it's not what you think?"

Amelia looked like she was about to cry. Tears were already simmering in her eyes. That soft-hearted friend of mine.

It was all my fault. I was the one who introduced that bastard to my friend. All because he was the son of my father's associate. I thought they made a good match. Good match my ass.

I tugged Amelia behind me and lashed out at Simon. “Not what Amelia thinks?” I reiterated my point. “What does Amelia think, with you smooched up to that girl like that, Simon?”

“Shut up, Kimberly. You stay out of this. I’m talking to my girlfriend.”

“No, you shut up and listen, *Simon*. No boyfriend would bring a random girl out to a night club and eat her face like that when he claims he has a bar exam coming up.”

“Amelia, don’t listen to her. I can explain.”

“What is there to explain?” I shut him off again. “The evidence is there.” Simon seemed to be running low on steam. And when he didn’t reply, I gave him my verdict. “You make a lousy lawyer.”

This only made him more determined to outdo me. But clearly, he hadn’t enough wits in his brain to counterattack my statement. He huffed, and knowing he’d been cornered with no way out, he escaped, dashing after Amelia, who was already backing out of the scene. He pushed me along the way too, gutless thing making me twist on my heel, and I knew then I would collapse on the dance floor.

Shit! Two assaults in one night. What a pleasant night this turned out to be.

Once again, I expected to hit the floor, land on my butt, and be the laughing stock of the whole club. But tonight just seemed to be the night when random knights in black suits came to my rescue. I was held back by a pair of strong arms, embraced from behind by a wall of steel chest.

“Are you all right?”

My heart convulsed. I looked up. *Oh, dear Lord, help me!*

Mr. Baritone-voice, the pure sex god had appeared once again.

His touch scorched me. Every single particle of my being came alive.

“Let my leg go. I need to see to my friend.” I tried to distract him from feeling my foot up and down like he was making love to my leg with his fingers.

He didn’t listen to me. His steel-grey eyes continued to manipulate the tensed muscle at my ankle.

“You twisted your ankle.”

“But my friend?” I tried one more time.

That got his attention, and once again, I was faced with his beautiful kissable lips and mystifying grey eyes. “Your other friends have already followed her.”

“But...” I wanted to say I wanted to follow them too, but those fingers were really distracting.

I tried. Seriously, I tried. When I found myself within his embrace, I was lost for a full minute before my brain kicked back into gear. I stood up, wanting to follow the rest of the party after Amelia had disappeared off into the crowd, only to fall back clumsily right into his arms. And he really was my knight in shining armor, gallantly carrying me off to his private booth, all the other girls glaring daggers at me for being the one to capture this dark knight’s attention.

My mind returned to the present situation when he massaged my leg a little too hard, squeezing it until I yelped.

“Sorry.” He smiled up at me. “Feel any better?”

I wanted to scream right there in orgasm. Did he know how fuckable he looked at that moment? Body crouched in a kneeling position, head below my knees, eyes

assessing my ankle—I could imagine a thousand ways he could make me feel better already. And nothing involved him staring at my ankle.

“Better, thank you,” I rasped, darting my tongue out to lick my dry lips.

That small action made his eyes flick in my direction, flaring something stormy and intense.

The atmosphere changed. Tension brewed in the air. An electric sexual tension that was so virile and raw I could almost feel it and taste it.

Shit! Would this finally be the day I had a one-night stand with a complete stranger?

“Take better care of yourself. A beautiful and delicate girl like you should always have someone to protect her.”

If another man dared use the word delicate to describe me, I would have boxed his ears. But for him, I agreed wholeheartedly. A beautiful and delicate girl like me definitely needed protection against crazy men. And it was almost on the verge of my tongue to utter, *Maybe you can protect me against those men*, when he dropped my foot and looked up at me. I mean really looked at me, focusing all his attention on me.

Once again, my world tilted on its axis, and I couldn’t stop my smile from forming. He was too beautiful, too handsome to be described with mere words. My head became dizzy, too much of his pheromones in the air, intoxicating me until I was no longer talking straight.

“Thank... thank... thank...”

He laughed. That deep, husky baritone voice throbbed against my pleasure spot and instantly made me wet.

I harped incoherently again. “What... is... is—”

Why can’t I just ask him for his name? Better yet, go for his phone number too.

“Would you like me to call a taxi for you?” He cut me off before I could ask anything.

“My friends,” I managed to leak out, indicating they were probably waiting for me somewhere in the club.

He shifted his attention to his watch, an expensive-looking Rolex that must have cost over fifteen grand. Papa wore a similar one.

“I have to go now. Take care of yourself.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to stop him, pull him back and kiss him before he left. But I was too slow because, once again, my brain shut off when he smiled at me.

I watched as he disappeared, leaving me in a wet puddle.

Shit! Now there was nothing to dampen my desire except a cold shower. *I must see to it tonight*. More importantly, I had to see to poor Amelia.

As I got up and went in search of my friend, I wondered to myself, *Will I ever see him again?*

CHAPTER ONE

Three Years Later

The sweltering summer air of Brisbane greeted me in a fierce welcome. I was already drenched in sweat as soon as I stepped onto the tarmac.

“Welcome to Brisbane,” I muttered to myself, checking my cell phone for the current time. “Three hours behind.”

Amelia must be at Dunstan’s funeral by now. Poor girl. Dunstan was like a father to her, but now he’d died, all because of her sister’s cruel act.

What a way to treat a man who’d saved you from living on the streets. Corinne should have never brought that guy she’d met online to her house and hurt Dunstan’s heart like that. Then again, Dunstan was also wrong to be involved with Corinne. He was an old man, even older than Papa. I wondered if he had some problem with his family to actually have an affair with a woman who was as young as his daughter.

I’d never warmed up to Corinne. I didn’t actually know what Amelia saw in her sister to care and protect her like this. Then again, I didn’t have any siblings, so it was quite hard to factor in that part of my personality.

I really should stop thinking about other people and start thinking about myself. That soul mate of mine, the man I saw three years ago, who I dubbed Mr. Baritone-voice because of his ability to conjure up sexual images in my head just with his voice, was nowhere to be found.

Damn me. Countless hot dreams of us lying naked on a large bed, his hot mouth sucking the rose bud of my breast, still made me hot and bothered. Just remembering his six-pack abs sliding across my body and his cock thrusting into me made my skin glisten wet with a longing that could only be quenched with a cold shower.

I firmly shook my head to calm my raging heartbeat and the throbbing of my clit, reminding myself it wouldn’t be long now before I could hit that cold shower. Feeling better, I went to collect my baggage.

One bag.

I traveled light. This was a business trip after all. Papa wanted me to meet his business partner Mr. Devereux from Devereux Enterprises. They owned a majority of the properties here in Brisbane, just like Papa. They both had similar ideas, wanting to join forces to create even bigger and better properties. And their project was a massive mall covering an area the size of three football fields right in Surfers Paradise of the Gold Coast. And it was my job to see to their proposal before accepting the terms of the merger contract.

After graduating from university just a few weeks back, I thought I could have the chance to travel around the world for a bit, right before I settled down to work for Papa, but he was a very persistent man.

“Why don’t you go to visit Beau, my business partner? You remember him, right, Kimmy-berry? He used to come to New Zealand when you were a little girl,” he said while we were having dinner at our favorite Chinese restaurant in Dunedin. “That way you could go sightseeing around Australia, all while getting some work done.”

“But, Papa. The world isn’t Australia. The world is China, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam—not Australia. And besides, I don’t remember Mr. Devereux. Why don’t you go instead? It would be kind of a reunion for the both of you.”

Papa simply ignored my question. “Well, you can start with Australia first.”

“Seriously, Papa?” I rolled my eyes. “I only graduated like yesterday. The ink on my degree hasn’t even dried yet, and you want me to work?”

“Kimmy-berry. This is very important to Papa. If you’re happy with how they run things, then we’ll go ahead with the new venture.”

“Why does it have to be me? Haven’t you already discussed this with Mr. Devereux? I don’t need to be involved in this project.”

“Yes, you do, Kimmy-berry. You’re my only daughter, and in the future, this whole empire will be yours.”

“But that’s like light-years away.”

“You have to be prepared now.”

And that was how it ended, me being prepared for whatever was about to happen.

Being the good girl I was, I could never refuse Papa’s request. How could I? He was my dad and the only living relative in my family. Mum passed away due to breast cancer shortly after I was born. And now two weeks after that discussion, I was here. In Brisbane. Ready to meet Devereux.

But where is he?

I sank onto the couch in the private lounge, folding my legs and casually playing with my tablet like I hadn’t a care in the world. But it was all an act. I was beyond exhausted and irritable to boot. I was so tired from the trip, feeling my muscles in my arms tensing. My temperament wasn’t too pleasant either. During the flight, the turbulence was really bad, rocking my body like a baby rattle.

I looked at the time again. Papa said someone was to pick me up at the private lounge at 5:30 p.m. It was already nearing 6:00 p.m. I was hungry. I needed dinner, a bath, and a facial, like right now.

Just before I attempted to find myself a taxi, a middle-aged man walked into the lounge with my name written on a nameplate.

Finally!

I shook my head and stood.

“Miss Kimberly Henderson?” he asked, unsure. In my messy state, even I wasn’t surprised no one recognized the daughter of multi-millionaire Geoffrey Henderson.

“Yes. I’m Kimberly Henderson.” I tried to smile, but really, this wretched weather was getting to me. And I smelled like a skunk.

“I’m so sorry, Miss Henderson. The traffic is really bad. It took me more than an hour to get here.”

“I understand. Auckland is pretty much the same.” I nodded and picked up my one bag but was stopped by the chauffeur.

“No, Miss Henderson, I’ll carry that for you.”

“Please call me Kimberly.” I smiled. “And your name?”

“John, Miss Kimberly. Mr. Devereux sends his sincerest apologies. He’s been detained at another meeting and won’t get to see you until tomorrow morning. He’s sending one of his sons to greet you at the hotel and take you out to dinner.”

“No. There’s no need. I’m really tired. I’d like some time to myself. Please tell Mr. Devereux I thank him for the suggestion, but I have to decline.”

“Okay then, Miss Kimberly. I’ll pass on the message.”

I nodded, pleased now to have some privacy before I had to meet all these people as Papa requested.

We made our way outside into the boiling sun, once again sweat pouring by the bucket from my body. Oh how I craved a cold shower.

We arrived at the Brisbane Silverton Hotel, one of the many hotels that were popping up like daisies around Australia and New Zealand. Hunter and Anton Silverton, both heirs of Silverton Corporation, had decided to expand their services.

And excellent service they provided. If possible, I always planned to stay at the Silverton Hotel wherever I went.

“The meeting is scheduled at ten tomorrow morning, Miss Kimberly,” John reminded me.

“Thank you, John. I won’t forget.”

After showering and receiving a facial treatment, I couldn’t suppress my hunger anymore. I needed to eat. It was way past dinnertime already.

Although it was going to be a meal for one, I was still dressed to impress, as usual. A strappy summer dress, my freshly washed and dried chestnut hair cascading all the way down my back, and summer heeled sandals. I was quite pleased with my accomplishment since it was a job performed in haste.

“Table for one, please.” I smiled as a waitress approached me. She led me to a table near the window. The restaurant was on the fifteenth floor, so the view outside was quiet breathtaking.

I gazed around the restaurant. Surprisingly, it wasn’t as full as I’d anticipated. Looking at the menu gave every indication as to how expensive and well established this place was.

The waitress came back, and I ordered my favorite spaghetti bolognese dish, accompanied with a glass of pinot noir. Just when the meal was put in front of me and I was about to indulge, I sensed someone staring at me. I looked up and a man with blond hair and a bent nose smiled back at me.

“May I sit?”

I was about to say, *No, I want to be alone*, when he took my silence as an invitation. Maybe I should have taken my tablet with me as a distraction, making me less approachable. I really didn’t want any company tonight.

“Here on holiday?” he asked in his Australian twang.

“On a business trip,” I replied coldly.

“How crazy. You have a kiwi accent. Are you from New Zealand?”

“Yes, I am.” Again, I gave him the cold vibe, but he clearly wasn’t registering the warning.

“So you’ve been to Larnach Castle, then.”

Of course I’ve been to Larnach Castle, I wanted to yell at him. Larnach Castle was the only standing castle in the whole of New Zealand.

“How about Queenstown? Have you bungee jumped? The last time I went there with my ex-girlfriend, she screamed all the way down. It was hilarious.”

"I don't find that funny at all." I put down my fork, my innate sense of justice kicking in. "How can you laugh at someone who's scared? What if I dump you in a pool full of crocodiles? See if you're scared and piss your pants?"

The man held a blank look, unsure of what to make of my comment. Then he burst out laughing, a full belly laugh that showed off his chubby tummy.

By this stage, I was already fed up with him, and a conversation from three years ago flitted back through my mind. "*A beautiful and delicate girl like you should always have someone to protect her.*"

Mr. Baritone-voice. I wondered where he went to after that night.

"I've already organized everything. All you have to do is put forward the presentation."

I froze. My heart increased in beat. Every fiber within my body sizzled alive.

That voice coming from behind me, it sounded so deep, such a rich baritone, reminding me of Mr. Baritone-voice.

He was talking on the phone, I suspected. I couldn't quite hear properly since Mr. Potbelly yapped nonstop.

"Hush!"

That got Mr. Belly-roll to shut up for a minute while I listened that baritone voice continue to speak.

"Father has set the meeting. It will be held at ten in the morning. Can you wake up in time?"

Why was that voice tormenting me? I must have been deeply affected, for I could never forget that voice.

"Okay. That's all. I'll see you tomorrow. Take care."

Take care. That was Mr. Baritone-voice.

I swirled around in my seat, quick enough to only catch a glimpse of inky black hair just as the man took off. I hurried out of my chair, ignoring Mr. Jelly Belly, who moaned like a child when I made a dash to follow Mr. Baritone-voice.

I need to see his face to confirm my suspicion. *Please tell me this isn't my imagination.* I swore if it were him, I'd make sure to get his name and phone number this time.

I caught sight of the man with black hair again as he walked into the main hallway. But there were so many people going in every direction that I couldn't get close to him. Suddenly, he was swallowed up by the crowd. I gritted my teeth and weaved through. But he was already gone. When I thought I'd lost him again, he reappeared before my eyes, stepping onto the elevator.

"Hey!" I rushed up to the lift, waving my hand about, hoping he would see me.

But he didn't. And that damn elevator closed its doors right in my face.

After standing there staring at the stainless steel for what seemed like ages, I blinked and laughed at myself.

Oh God, I must be crazy. After three years, I was still affected by that scorching touch on my ankle, those stormy eyes, those kissable lips, and that rich voice. I was acting like a stalker searching for my prey.

CHAPTER TWO

It was bright and early and the sun was already beating mercilessly down upon me when I arrived at Devereux Holdings promptly before the 10:00 a.m. meeting. Immediately upon arrival, an elderly gentleman of about Papa's age rushed towards me, his arms extended wide.

"My dear." He enveloped me against his large stature. "You must be Kimberly. My, my, look at how much you've grown. Geoff used to send pictures of you from when you were a little girl all the way through to college. And now look at you, all grown up and ready to take on Henderson Corporation and our joint venture."

"Not yet. I still need experience," I said, smiling warmly at him.

"Don't sell yourself short. Geoff must have seen something in you to put you in this position."

"I'm his daughter." I laughed, liking Beau in that instant.

"Tsk!" Beau rubbed my head affectionately like Papa used to when I did a good job. "Daughter or not, he believes in you."

I only nodded, smiling again.

"Now, speaking of Geoff. How is he?"

"Papa's doing great. He sends his regards."

"I miss that man. I have to invite him to my upcoming birthday party."

"He would love that."

"Come." Beau led me inside.

Along the way, many people greeted us. I was introduced as the new temporary intern that would be helping out at the company. No one would know my true identity, except for close parties. This was to help prevent shoulder-rubbing of employees who wanted to climb the ladder faster through me.

"I have to introduce you to my sons. They'll be working on this project too. I thought it'd be a good idea that you next-generation kids work together." Beau laughed out loud.

I joined in his laughter. But our happy mood didn't last long. Entering the meeting room where the presentation was to take place, we found all the staff looking at each other warily, as if something were the matter.

Beau's facial expression changed immediately as soon as he looked at the projector. Nothing was set up.

"What is going on? Why is the presentation not set up?"

"The projector broke down. We don't know what happened. As soon as we came to set up thirty minutes ago, it wouldn't turn on. We're replacing it with a new one now. It's coming in five minutes. I'm sorry, sir," one of the staff explained.

"Kimberly, I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting this." Beau apologized, turning to me.

Time is money in business. And to think I'd come here and nothing was prepared, this was sloppy work. Someone should have checked the projector more than half an hour before the presentation. But there was no point in dwelling on it now. I let the matter slide. "Don't worry, Beau. I'm happy to wait."

I sat down and took out my tablet, reading *A Demon's Wrath*, by Alexia Praks while the staff fussed around with the new projector.

Somewhere in the background, I could hear Beau talking in a frustrated tone to one of the staff. "Where is that boy? He's supposed to be here."

"I'm here." A male's voice spoke. "Sorry, Dad, I came as fast as I could."

"Come here. I want you to meet the representative of the Henderson Corporation. Kimberly Henderson, the heir of Henderson Corporation. Kimberly dear."

When Beau called my name, I looked up and saw the young man standing next to him. He was of medium height with sandy-blond hair and crystal-blue eyes. He looked no more than twenty-five when he smiled at me.

"Kimberly dear, this is my son Joshua."

"Miss Henderson." The man standing in front of me thrust out his hand, his eyes lighting as soon as he saw me.

"Mr. Devereux," I greeted, smiling back at him.

"Mr. Devereux is my father. Please call me Josh."

Josh held my palm a little too long to be considered a professional handshake between business partners. I shook his hand, and he playfully caressed it while his father was looking away. I shook my hand free.

Josh was a natural flirt.

I returned his playful flirtation with a businesslike look. "Maybe you're ready for the presentation now."

Beau looked uncomfortable when he turned back. He pushed his son off to organize the presentation. Ten minutes later, with the arrival of the other members of the board, along with more introductions, the presentation went underway.

The whole room was enclosed in darkness then. Only the light streaming from the projector could be seen.

I had to admit, even though Josh was a natural flirt, he really did know his stuff. Papa would be impressed with all the information and facts he researched. In fact, I was so absorbed in the presentation that by the time it had finished, I was already anticipating calling Papa to move forward with the deal.

When the presentation came to an end, Beau invited me this coming weekend out to his home on the outskirts of Brisbane, where he resided with his wife.

"It would be like a family reunion," Josh said, butting into our conversation.

"Plus, I'm sure you would like my mother."

Beau scrunched up his face at the mention of his wife. But it was only for a second before his big grin appeared again.

"It is rather a long drive. I will have John escort you there," Beau added.

"I'll accompany you." Josh beamed, edging towards me. "It's a long drive. Three hours. You'll get bored looking out at our monotonous Australian scenery. Having a friend to talk to along the way would help make the time move faster, don't you think, Kimberly?"

"I do enjoy a quiet journey, Josh."

"I still think it's better if I accompany you."

"Perhaps it is a good idea," Beau added.

In the end, I couldn't refuse Beau's suggestion, so I agreed to John picking me up with Josh accompanying.

Back at the hotel, as soon as I stepped foot over the threshold, my phone rang.

"How was the meeting? Did you see Beau? And how was the presentation?"

“Papa, your daughter has been away twenty hours, and the first thing you ask is about the meeting? You don’t love me anymore?” I playfully teased him.

“Kimmy-berry, I’m sorry, honey. Let’s start again. How’s everything, my sweet?”

“Beau was very nice. I saw his son Josh. He was the one who presented the proposal.”

“And what did you think?”

“About the presentation?”

“No, Josh.”

Something clicked inside me. “Papa, are you trying to set me up?”

“Kimmy-berry...”

“No, Papa. I’m here to learn the ropes, not get hitched.”

Papa didn’t say anything.

“Papa, are you still there?” I asked when the silence was too long to bear.

“Yes, Kimmy-berry. Papa is here,” he said in his haggard tone.

I knew he must have been upset with the turn of our conversation, but I would never have thought he would scheme to get me hitched. For the life of me, I couldn’t imagine myself getting married until I found the one that made my skin burn with just one touch. And that person was here, in Australia. How could I give in to Papa when my heart yearned for that man?

“If there’s nothing else, I’ll hang up now. Devereux has invited me to visit his home tomorrow. I’m really tired, so I’m going to rest a bit.”

“You do that, then.”

Papa sounded so sad that I had to console him. “Papa, I was really impressed with their presentation. Maybe there’s a chance our families will get to work together,” I managed to squeeze out.

Papa laughed. “That’s my girl. I’m looking forward to hearing your report.”

The drive to the Devereuxs’ household was a boring and trying one. Josh wouldn’t stop leaning into me, talking in his animated tone. Constantly, he would narrate about his high school days, university life, and his life now. Everything, it seemed, was about him.

“That’s the place where I first learned to drive a car.” He pointed to a narrow path lined on either side with eucalyptus trees. “I crashed my car into that tree there.”

His fingers brushed against my shoulder, lingering there for a bit too long. I rolled my shoulder to shake off his touch. But that was only the beginning. Every word, every animated action, he would make every attempt to touch me, disguising it as innocent gestures.

“Josh, you’re a very touchy person, aren’t you?” I had to ask.

A snarky smile appeared on his face. “That’s my way of expressing myself.” Suddenly, the playfulness was gone, replaced with a deep, raw hunger within those blue eyes. And then, only for my ears so John wouldn’t hear, he whispered, “Are you a touchy person too, Kimberly?” His hand came to rest upon my exposed thigh, his eyes staring into the depths of my green irises.

I was caught off guard. I didn’t expect Josh to act this way. A chill ran down my spine. “Only with the ones I *want* to touch.” I tore his hand off my thigh.

Once again, he laughed, lifting the tension in the air. After that, the conversation returned to normal.

Eventually, John stopped the car. I was greeted at the door by Beau's big bear hug, followed by his wife Fiona, dressed like a trophy housewife, a role that could never benefit me. We exchanged a few pleasantries, all the while Josh standing near me, his arm gently pressing the small of my back. I was irked with his behavior, but because we were in front of his parents, I didn't want to embarrass him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a silent onlooker in the background, a man with inky black hair standing by the grand staircase. My heart recognized him as it drummed rhythmically, making my ears ring.

That long Roman nose, those kissable lips, and those strong, straight eyebrows. His eyes, the color of a brewing storm, held a look so haunting they pierced into my soul as he observed me through black-rimmed glasses. I could remember it all. Those fingers rubbing on my ankle, that scorching flame burning into my skin, and the deep, rich baritone voice of his. It was him, the one I'd been dreaming about and seeking for the past three years.

I wanted to speak to him, to ask him who he was, but Josh beat me to it.

"Julian. I didn't expect you to be here."

Captivated By You (The Devereux Legacy Book 1) is available for preorder now at all online ebook stores.

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Baby I'm Yours

Spinsters & Casanovas Series Book 2

The continuation of Hunter and Clarice's story

The Casanova

Hunter's life has never been so perfect, until he meets the spinster Clarice Mason. He accidentally impregnates her, then confesses to the whole world that he wants to sleep with her again.

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The Spinster

All Clarice Mason's thoughts are preoccupied with her unborn baby. When Hunter comes barging into her life, claiming he's taking responsibility as the father, it's like he's grown three heads. She can take care of herself. It is her baby after all. If the father of her baby is this Casanova, then she would prefer he's not involved at all. But when Hunter begins displaying all the traits she so desires in a man, she knows her *heart* is in grave danger.

How can Hunter prove to her that he is utterly and undeniably in love with her? That he's giving her his heart and soul for all eternity? All he wants to say are those three words that will bind him to her forever...

Baby, I'm yours

Baby Love Me
Spinsters & Casanovas Series Book 3
The final book to Hunter and Clarice's story

The Casanova

Cooking, cleaning... List all the household chores a housewife can do, and Hunter can do them better. In fact, his life has made a complete one hundred eighty-degree turn, from being the number one Casanova of Australasia to the number one partner for Clarice. And he loves his new life.

But as the days leading to the birth of their child lessen, someone is planning to tear them apart. Will he ever hear Clarice say, "I love you," or will the forces of his past reputation ruin his chances at this one happiness?

The Spinster

Clarice is basking in her happy glow. Having Hunter by her side on the day of their baby's birth is all she's ever wished for. But when she witnesses Hunter with another woman, her world shatters.

Now she must ask herself, should she risk the heartbreak of losing the man she loves or continue to live as a spinster with her baby forever?

Forbidden Love: Fate

Zac and Ivy Trilogy Book 1

One accidental kiss. One fated encounter. One heartbreaking ending for two star-crossed lovers.

At twelve years of age, Ivy was in a car accident that cost her brother's and parents' lives. The cause was a drunk driver, the man with green eyes. Now five years later, that event still plagues her, traumatizing her even in her dreams.

Vowing to not let the past affect her future, she moves to the city of Dunedin, New Zealand, with her grandmother, sister-in-law, and niece. A fresh start. But memories are hard to bury when one stolen kiss from a mysterious boy with green eyes brings about unwanted feelings, feelings that can only result in destruction.

Books coming soon in 2015

Trapped By You
(The Devereux Legacy Book 2)

Loved By You
(The Devereux Legacy Book 3)

Madam Witch
(Spinsters & Casanovas Book 4)

Totally Captivated
(Maid to the Millionaire Series Book 1)

Recommended books by Alexia Praks

His Hired Girlfriend
Highland Kiss
A Rogue's Desire
The Duke's Revenge
Falling for Sakura

Books coming soon from Alexia Praks

His Crimson Rose Vol. 1
The Daemon's Wrath Vol. 1
When the Sun courts the Moon

All about Wanitta Praks

Thank you so much for purchasing this book. I hope you like reading about Hunter and Clarice, just as much as I enjoy writing about them. Don't forget to read Baby I'm Yours and Baby Love Me for their full story.

If you love this book, please take a little time to write a review on Amazon. Even better, subscribe to my list on my website and like me on facebook and twitter. I'll keep you up to date on new books that are coming out. Of course, you'll get the first sneak preview.

Just a little something about me. I'm a dental hygienist by day (hence, you get where Clarice's occupation came from) and a writer by night. My brain conjures up scenes at random times. Take this for example. When I scale my patient's teeth, Hunter and Clarice's scene popped up in my head. How weird was that?

You might also recognize my last name. Yep, I'm related to that famous author named Alexia Praks. Yep, she's my older sister. She's the one who inspired me to start writing. So all thanks to her, my new goal now is to make people around the world laugh when reading my books. Of course I do want to make you cry too but that can be for another story.

See you all in the next book,

Wanitta Praks

PS. Here's where you can find me.

Webpage: www.wanittapraks.com

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