

CHAPTER 1



Cas

The lights of the casino are dazzling from afar. A blanket of diamonds twinkle in red, yellow, gold, and white. The picture is like one of those snowy Christmas card scenes with the tree draped in tinsel and fairy lights, but in reality, it's just a cardboard fantasy. I've never seen snow. It doesn't snow much in South Africa. Definitely not around Rustenburg.

Inside, the noise is infinite. Day flows into night and night into day. Whether there's a sun or moon outside, under the dim lights glowing in the ceiling, all the hours look the same. Slot machines ring out tinny, and over-dressed billboards parade showgirls in fake ostrich feathers. Women feed the machines coins and spin the reels, their concentration on the payline. Men drinking rum or brandy at their stations—the favorite mixes with Coca Cola around here—lift their eyes as we pass.

One of them hollers, "Nice ass." He pumps his fist, making a

gross sign. “Come over here and let me show you who’s your daddy.”

Next to me, Mint glowers, but he avoids eye contact. I’ve already told him we’re not having sex. Maybe he thinks without the extra on the side I’m not worth the fight.

I flip off the guy and am about to pass when he says, “If you don’t want the attention, honey, you shouldn’t dress like that.”

That makes me stop in my tracks.

Mint grips my shoulder. “C’mon, Cas.”

Taking a wide stance in front of the guy, I prop my hands on my hips. His smile slides, the corners of his mouth drooping like an ice cream cone in the hot sun. The blotchy skin of his cheeks turns red. Bullies never think you’d take them on when they’re bigger than you.

A few men wolf-whistle. The attention makes my *admirer* snarl. The man criticizing my choice of wardrobe wears a khaki shirt with a fat stain on the stomach, creased Bermuda shorts, and long socks with sandals. To round off the ensemble, a comb is tucked into his sock.

Leaning closer, I say, “Here’s a tip, cowboy. Bad pickup line. If you want some *ass*, try to be a decent human being.” I run my gaze over him. “Since you obviously do want the attention, I’ll share another secret with you. Dress the part.”

Laughter erupts. Our spectators whistle through their teeth. The guy clenches his coin cup so hard it dents in his fist.

“Let’s go,” Mint says, pulling on the sleeve of my jacket.

I shake off Mint, and the crude fat guy doesn’t exist any longer. The minute I turn for the exit, he’s not worthy of my energy or thoughts. I don’t waste my anger or time on scum. All I want is to get out of there. I hate the noise, and I’ve never been a fan of gambling. It’s not that I have anything against it in principle. I just find it boring.

“I still have chips left,” Mint says. “How about another go at the poker table?”

I hasten my steps. “No, thanks. I have to be up early for work.”

The red carpet with the golden sun imprints smells like stale popcorn. Outside the fast food court, I step on something gooey.

Cursing, I lift my foot. A blob of chewing gum is stuck on the sole of my sandal. Great. This date was a mistake. I never should’ve let Mint wear me down. It took him a year to talk me into it. Why did I accept? Because everyone deserves a fair chance. There’s something attractive in everyone. However, if tonight taught me anything, it’s that there are always exceptions.

After rubbing the gum off on the carpet as best as I can, I continue on my way.

“So,” Mint says, running a step to catch up with me, “my new jewelry store is going to whack another million in less than a year. I reckon I’ll buy a house in Durban.” When I don’t reply, he says, “On the beach.” Still not getting a reaction, he adds, “Frontline beach.”

We hit the cashier desk where the aircon blows at full force. Goosebumps run over my skin.

“Yeah.” I zip my leather jacket up over my camisole. “I’m happy for you.”

“Jeez, that’s so decent of you. Most people are jealous of my success.”

For crying out loud. Doesn’t he get I was being sarcastic?

Rubbing the sore muscles of my neck, I make a beeline for the closest register. I’m dead tired and broke. I volunteered for overtime, doing double shifts of filing at the bank archive where I work as a cashier, and I still feel the strain in my back

from being bent over boxes of papers for hours. I wasted precious sleep in lieu of veggie burgers and fries with Mint at Sun City, ominously called Sin City by the folks in our town who condemn gambling. Which is why the gambling happens on what was previously the other side of the South African border, on the Bophuthatswana side. Sol Kerzner didn't have a choice. When he built the casino, gambling had been illegal in South Africa. Bophuthatswana had since been reintegrated into South Africa.

The cashier asks for our table number and produces the tab. Mint takes it gingerly. "Shall we split it?"

I gape at him. I told him I couldn't afford to eat out. He was the one who nagged until I gave in. He's the budding billionaire.

Know what? He's not worth my pride. Let this be a valuable lesson in not trusting my gut. I'll just cut my losses and run.

"Yeah," I say, fishing a bill from my purse.

He takes out his phone and opens the calculator app. I can't believe it.

"It's two-hundred and something," I say. "Let's just give one-fifty each to cover the tip."

He grins at the cashier to gauge her reaction, at least having the decency to look somewhat embarrassed.

After punching the total into his phone, he holds the screen up for me to see the divided amount.

One hundred and ten rand and fifty-one cents.

I watch dumbfoundedly as he hands the cashier a credit card and tells her to take that amount. Stingy bastard. I pay my part and leave my last hundred for a tip. I've waited tables. It's a tough job. Plus, I feel sorry for the waitress who's constantly pulling down her skimpy casino uniform to cover her ass.

"While we're at it," he says as he waits for the credit card

machine to connect, “we should probably split the petrol and wear and tear.”

My jaw drops another inch. “Wear and tear?”

“For the car,” he says, taking back his card. When I frown, he adds, “You know, for the wear on the tires and the engine.”

“I know what the hell wear and tear is.”

His smile is all teeth. “Good. I reckon fifty should cover it.” He must’ve seen the disbelief on my face, because he continues in an uncertain tone, “For driving you here. The upkeep of my car is expensive.”

My cheeks turn hot with anger as I ask the cashier for a fifty’s change. She hands it to me with a sympathetic look. Mint takes the fifty and slides it neatly into his wallet.

I don’t wait for Mint to get the receipt, which he says he needs for tax purposes. He’d probably lie on his tax return and say it was a business dinner. I steamroller out of the fast food area and into the lobby, walking faster than what my high heels allow. I’m already at the train that commutes to the parking lot by the time Mint catches up with me.

Luckily, a train pulls in straight away, and we get on with the other two pathetic and out-of-their-luck people leaving at two in the morning.

“That was fun,” Mint says. “We should do it again.”

I scoff and look out of the window. It’s summer, but the breeze is cool, and there’s dew on the roofs of the cars. I shiver as we get off at the third parking lot and cross the quiet, almost-empty space to his Porsche.

He unlocks the car and hops in, waiting for me to follow suit. I’m still buckling my seat belt when he drives down the lane of palm trees to the exit.

The silence between us is awkward, but I’m knackered and

grateful he's not talking. Leaning my head against the headrest, I close my eyes.

"Hey." He nudges me with an elbow. "You should probably talk to me to keep me awake."

The road to Rustenburg is dark and quiet. It runs through a rural area and is infamous for fatal accidents due to drunken drivers or cows crossing the road. We'll hit the old border in ten minutes, and then it's another thirty to town.

"I'll talk if you prefer," he says.

Sighing, I open my eyes. Getting home alive is in both our interest, so I let him brag about his latest investment, a horse that's going to win him a fortune at the next Durban July race.

A pair of headlights flash in the rearview mirror. I squint at their brightness.

"The asshole is driving with his brights on," Mint says, adjusting his rearview mirror with a scowl. "People don't know shit about driving these days. You'd swear they all *buy* their licenses on the black market instead of passing exams."

I keep my eyes on the lights. They're advancing too fast. We're on a single road with no shoulder and a ditch on the side. My insides clench as the vehicle behind us closes more distance.

"Let him pass," I tell Mint. The driver is reckless. Having him on our tail is dangerous.

"Like hell." He glances in the mirror. "I'm respecting the speed limit. He needs to slow down."

The vehicle is close enough that I can make out it's a red Hilux truck.

"Mint." I grip the edges of my seat as the driver comes so close, I swear he's going to hit our bumper. "This isn't a cock fight. Slow down and let the guy pass."

“Chill. I don’t have to slow down. I’m not over the speed limit.”

No. We’re cruising at eighty kilometers per hour on a dark, deserted road, blocking the impatient driver behind us who can’t overtake on the bend or the solid white line.

The headlights dim and flash.

“He fucking flashed me,” Mint says.

There’s a signpost planted a short distance ahead where the shoulder is wider and we can pull onto the side.

“Just move over,” I say, glancing back, but with the brights blinding me, I can’t make out if the driver is alone.

Mint curses but does as I suggest. He puts on his indicator, slows down, and moves over to the left, driving at a snail’s pace. I hold my breath as the truck overtakes. When the taillights pass in front of us, I almost blow out a sigh of relief, but the truck swerves to the left and comes to a dead stop. Mint steps on the brakes, burning the tires. The sudden stop throws me forward. The seat belt cuts into my chest as I slam my hands on the dashboard for purchase.

“What the...?” Mint mutters, his voice tight with anxiety.

Fear stabs into my ribs. Crime isn’t uncommon in our area. Thieves wait in the dark for people who’ve won big at the casino or for people with snazzy cars, cars like Porsches.

I swallow. We’re fucked. We’re dying here today. Why did I let Mint talk me into a date against my better judgement?

The driver’s door opens. A black boot hits the tarmac. The man who gets out has to fold his body double. The size and broadness of him makes my fear escalate. We can’t go forward. He’s cut us off.

“Reverse,” I say, my voice rising in panic.

Mint throws the car into reverse, but he misses, and the gearbox complains with a squeal.

“Reverse!” I say again, glancing behind me to check that the road is still clear.

The ditch! With the bend in the road, it’s right behind us. If Mint reverses, he’ll crash the car. He seems to realize it at the same time as me. He twists the wheel to the right, but there’s not enough room to turn between the ditch and the truck. The gear slips once more, and the engine stalls.

Shit.

Mint grips the wheel hard as the man stops next to us. He’s wearing dark blue jeans and a black leather jacket. His face is above the window, too high for me to see. For a second, nothing happens, and I stupidly pray the man will just go away, but then he knocks on the window with the barrel of a gun.

My tiredness evaporates and sweat breaks out over my body.

Tap, tap.

I stare at the black barrel of the gun, coming to my senses just as Mint pushes on the button to lower the window.

“Don’t,” I say, shaking so hard it sounds in my voice. “Don’t open.”

“I don’t have a fucking choice,” Mint grits out. “Shut the fuck up and we may just have a chance of making it out alive. Let me handle this.” When he’s wound the window down all the way, he squints up and says, “I’ve got money, man. Take whatever you want and just let us go.”

The man bends down, resting his elbows in Mint’s open window. His biceps are huge and his hands covered with thick veins and a dark dusting of hair. His face comes as a shock. I’ve always imagined criminals to be ugly. This one has a square jaw and a strong chin with a day’s worth of stubble darkening the tanned tone of his skin. On one side of his head, his hair is shaved short, and on the other, it’s longer. His fringe falls in a

messy curtain over half of his face. It's tousled and wet, like he's just had a workout. The color is dark brown with golden highlights.

The headlights of the truck illuminate the road with a foggy light. I can't make out the exact color of his eyes, except that it's dark. It's a disturbing kind of dark. Piercing.

His upper lip is fuller than his bottom lip, making his mouth look sensual, and they tilt in a dangerous way as he looks from me to Mint.

The leather of his jacket creaks as he leans deeper into the car. He doesn't hurry, because both Mint and I are frozen in terror. Leisurely, he takes the key from the ignition. A whiff of leather and tobacco reaches me, a smell that reminds me of my dad and my childhood, but the comfort I associate with the smell is out of place in the situation.

"I've got money," Mint says again in a high-pitched tone.

The man's voice is deep, penetrating through my breastbone and resonating in the cavity of my chest where my breaths come shallow. "That's assuming it's your money I want."

Mint raises his hands. "What do you want, man? I can pay you. Let us go and—"

"Your car," the man drawls.

"My car?" Mint stammers.

The man's smile stretches. "With your girlfriend in it."