

CHAPTER ONE

I snuck through the back door of Purgatory Palace hoping to avoid Mother, but it wasn't to be.

'Where have you been until this godforsaken hour?' she bellowed, champagne glass in hand, drunk as usual and reeking of Chanel No. 5.

Mother loved using words like *godforsaken*. Any word that referred to God was top priority in her vocabulary.

'I've been with Troy, *Mother*.'

Then it began.

'What are you doing with your life, Georgina? Spending all your time with that loser; are you having intercourse with him? You are, aren't you? You are eighteen years old and your only ambition in life is to be a pizza deliverer. What sort of career is that for a daughter of mine? And when are you going to take out that ridiculous nose ring? You look like a punk!'

And on it went.

I was already skipping through Purgatory Palace's kitchen as Mother's wailing continued and was soon joined by the love of my

life, my red and tan kelpie, Chocky. My pooch and I had been together for three years, since she was a pup, and were inseparable. I loved her more than anyone else in this world.

I spied my soon-to-be-step-dad watching TV in the living room. The old, bald fool. He peeked up at me through his specs and shook his judgmental head. I hated his guts. We had absolutely nothing in common yet I was forced to live with him because Mother had found ‘true love’ again. Vomit. I could never forgive her for bringing a creep like that into my life.

I couldn’t move out of Purgatory Palace though, as much as I wanted to, because if I left this hellhole before my twenty-first birthday I would lose my inheritance. Mother insisted on it.

Great, huh?

‘Hello there, Mr Peters.’ I smirked. ‘Mr No Personality Peters,’ I continued under my breath as I climbed the stairs, tripping over my own feet.

Purgatory Palace’s stairs were always a mammoth task to climb, especially when drunk. To my right, the eyes of my dead relatives looking sombre and miserable watched my every move from their faded black and white portraits framed in gold. There was one in particular that gave me the utter creeps. An old man with a bug-shaped head and huge Coke-bottle glasses who was the spitting image of my nun-nemesis, Sister Catherine.

Shudder.

A gaudy 1920s chandelier hung from the ceiling above the stairs. It would slowly move back and forth as my bored dead relatives took turns pushing it. I’d always hurry when directly under the Devil’s Light, fearing the decrepit contraption would fall on me. I would usually keep my eyes fixed on the golden candlesticks that sat purposelessly on a table at the end of the stairs, knowing when I reached them I was safe, but tonight Mother was distracting me.

I turned to look at her as she staggered after me, spilling champagne everywhere. Her dyed yellow hair was always worn in a 1960s beehive but was messy, like Patsy from *Ab Fab* after a three-day bender. She wore a white silk dressing gown with her trademark pink feather boa draped around her turkey neck like she was about to do a number from *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*. There was something very drag-queen-like about Mother.

‘Remember, you are coming to our engagement party at The Hilton tomorrow night, young lady, no excuses! And don’t you dare wear black!’

I locked my bedroom door and put Nirvana’s *Bleach* on my record player to drown out her noise. I jumped up and down on my bed for a while, playing air guitar, before catching my reflection in the mirror and winking at it.

I certainly wasn’t the sort of daughter Mother had expected. Always clad in poor clothing, black hair askew and totally ambitionless. I loved playing the rebel. After all, it was the only thing that kept me sane in my horribly rich and upper-class family.

I also knew that I could get away with almost anything.

One smile was usually all it took.

Mother needn’t have worried.

I was definitely planning on going to the engagement party.

CHAPTER TWO

I stepped out of the elevator and strolled into The Hilton's pretentious penthouse with my head held high in an attempt to out-snob Mother and Mr No Personality Peters' guests. I wore black as usual, but this time it was a knee-length dress with a white collar I had found in an op shop. I only decided to buy it after the shopkeeper assured me it had been worn at a funeral. The dress went perfectly with my long black socks and scuffed Doc Martins, so lady-like.

I wandered past a gaggle of old biddies only to be tapped on the shoulder.

'Oh, waitress!'

I turned sharply, spying an old crow, complete with tiara. 'Can we please have some champagne? We seem to have been forgotten about!'

I summed up the situation. Should I, shouldn't I? Would it enrage Mother?

'Certainly ma'am,' I said with a bow. As I headed towards a real waitress, I smiled when I noticed how similar my dress and the

waitress' uniform were. She smiled back and offered me a glass of champagne. I took the whole tray.

I headed back to the old biddies.

'Why, *thank you.*'

They huddled around me like vultures, grabbing at the glasses, leaving only one on the tray.

'Well, lookie here.' I grinned. 'A glass for me!'

I sculled the champagne, burped and sauntered off, hearing the faithful words, '*Oh really! I never!*' behind me. Mrs Tiara wouldn't leave things there, though. She wanted vengeance. I followed her as she scuttled off to find Mother.

'Alicia! Alicia!' she yelled in her near-heart-attack state.

'What is it? What's happened?' Mother asked.

'One of the waitresses was so rude. *I never!* She drank one of the glasses of champagne right in front of us. You need to reprimand her immediately. I don't know where you got your catering staff from but...'

'Calm down, dear. Point her out to me. I will fix her.'

Mrs Tiara grabbed Mother's arm and led her off to find the *rude waitress*.

'That's her!'

I turned around, pretending not to have heard their entire conversation. 'Hello, Mother!'

'What?' Mrs Tiara was dumbstruck.

'This is my daughter,' Mother said through clenched teeth.

'What? Your daughter is a waitress?'

'No, actually I'm a pizza deliverer but my ambition in life is to become a waitress when I grow up!' I quipped before fleeing.

I headed towards the kitchen, leaving Mother to clean up my mess as usual.

On my way there, I noticed a figure in a heavily starched black nun's habit standing by the window. I began to freak, thinking it was my nun-nemesis Sister Catherine, but it was only the lesser of two evils, her sidekick Sister Virgilius. What the hell was she doing here? I couldn't believe Sister V was still alive, actually. She must've been older than Granddad by now. I remembered the story the girls a year above me had told of her falling into the bushes, legs askew. When the girls asked if she needed help, she had said, 'No, I am fine.' And there she stayed. I guess nuns have weird hobbies.

I looked away before Sister V noticed me and before my breathing was affected, as my fear of nuns had escalated, resulting in nightmares that plagued me relentlessly. I was also worried Sister Catherine was here.

I pushed open the kitchen door and smiled as I spotted Troy sitting on the counter, sipping a green drink with an umbrella while the catering staff gave him evils.

'My platonic boyfriend Troy!' I yelled, throwing my arms around him.

Troy and I had been friends since primary school. We'd never hooked up, never really wanted to. There was an awkward moment in our early teens when we kissed but both of us burst out laughing and never did it again. It was kind of like the whole kissing-your-brother thing; too creepy. We were far too similar and it would never work, so best friends for life it was. He was easy on the eye though. Long dark hair, deep brown eyes, tall, slender and a smartarse. He would be a real catch for some girl one day. I hoped that day was far away though. I didn't want to lose him.

He pushed me away. 'Now, now, dear, do not rumple the suit. I need to get it back to the funeral parlour before midnight.'

I smiled at how similar we were.

He looked amazing as usual in his black suit, shirt and tie but on his feet were his trademark red Converse sneakers.

‘Troy, you’re so dapper!’

‘Indeed. So, Grasshopper, have we caused any mayhem yet?’

I grabbed Troy’s drink, taking a sip. ‘Well, my new pal Mrs Tiara thought I was a waitress so I played along until *Mother* caught me. I did see Sister V though...’

Troy grabbed my arm in concern. He was well aware of my nun phobia.

‘And Sister C?’ he asked.

‘No, not so far, I don’t think she’s here. It’s okay, I’m fine,’ I said, forcing a smile. ‘This pompous farce is actually a really good opportunity to cause mayhem, as there’s hardly anyone here I know. It’s mainly Mother’s posh friends who I avoid like the plague, and Mr No Personality Peters’ posers. We could have a lot of fun – are you game?’

Troy stood up, outstretching his arm. ‘Let us do what we must.’

We snuck out of the kitchen, managing to avoid Mother, and headed towards our prey.

I put on my snootiest voice. ‘Good evening. I am Georgina Appleby, daughter of Alicia, whose fine engagement ceremony you are attending. I’d like to introduce my platonic boyfriend Troy, who has been looking after me since I left therapy. I was in therapy because I have issues with my mother. I’d wanted to kill her many times but I feel the episodes have somewhat lapsed recently. Have a grand evening!’

The shocked looks on their faces almost made me lose it, but not quite. I grabbed Troy by the tie and headed back to the kitchen. A cliché-ridden food fight ensued until the catering staff threw us out.

CHAPTER THREE

I didn't go home for a couple of days after that, fearing the inevitable fallout. Troy let me crash at his flat. He shared it with his mum but she didn't mind. Mrs J loved me; thought I was hilarious. She was just one of those typical late-40s, mid-life-crisis-types, trying to fit in with young folk by acting all cool and funny. She was all right, I suppose. I mean, I liked the attention, but it did get a bit much. Sometimes I thought the only reason she fussed over me was because of my rich, snooty family. I hated thinking that.

Troy's clan weren't well off like mine. Mrs J was a single mother trying to make ends meet after Troy's dad did a runner when he was a baby. I know Troy had issues with not knowing his dad and here I was with two of them. Not that Mr No Personality Peters was my dad. He was my fake dad. My real dad lived in Sydney. I loved my dad heaps but I didn't think he loved me as much as I loved him. It's hard to explain. Like I always had to make that first phone call, make the effort. Would he even call me if I stopped calling him? He was there for me sometimes, though, like he never forgot my birthday. I guess

that was better than nothing. It was sure better than what Troy had anyway.

Troy and I went to the same Catholic primary school in Prahran, but after that he was off to a public school in Richmond and I was incarcerated at Saint Patricia's College, more commonly known amongst the girls as Satan's Prison Camp.

The college was in Brighton on a side street property so huge it could be used as a cattle ranch. The surrounding concrete walls were grey, depressing monstrosities of ridiculous height, with broken pieces of coloured glass sticking out the top. I remembered staring up at those ominous walls when I was a kid, terrified of the glass. Obviously, it was to keep out the unsavoury, but to me it always felt like it was to keep the girls from escaping.

Saint Patricia's College was the last remaining convent of its kind, an archaic abomination that hadn't moved with the times. As soon as you walked through the imposing metal gates you felt like you were stuck in a weird time warp. The macabre mansion that housed the nuns reminded me of the house from *Psycho*. I used to fantasise about Norman Bates sitting up at the window dressed in his mother's clothes, clutching a sharp blade against Sister Catherine's throat; that always brought a smile to my face. Most of the buildings were Gothic and quite beautiful. Troy did love them. I always thought they could have filmed an episode of *Buffy* there, but alas there was no mausoleum for Spike.

My school was the only one left that still had nuns. Its sister schools only had teachers these days. I figured the last of the sadistic nuns had been deliberately hand-picked by Sister Catherine to live and teach at Saint Pat's. It was the school Mother and her mother had gone to so I had no escape. A nauseating tradition. Mother always used to say, 'School years are the best years of your life!' But they weren't. My school was like living in a tiny hierarchy five days a week, bar weekends and holidays, with its own rulers (priest, principal and vice-

principal) princes and princesses (teachers and nuns) and peasants (students). When you're at school it becomes your whole world and everything is just so important. Then you get out into the real world and realise how unimportant school really was in the scheme of things.

Whenever I played up, Mother would threaten to institutionalise me as a boarder or send me to a Swiss finishing school. I was terrified of both prospects so I would be good for a while and then the whole thing would repeat until I became older and realised Mother was crying wolf. From then on, I just kept playing up. Luckily, I got to go home after school. The creepy boarders could only go home during holidays.

The flashbacks could not be contained.

Shelley walked into class confidently. She was smart; she knew she was smart but she was still considered weird because she was a boarder and what's worse, she looked like a sheep.

Her white blonde hair was thick like wool and piled high on top of her head. She wasn't very attractive either. She had a weird-shaped face. It was both long and round at the same time and her thick neck had wrinkled lines across it. She spoke in a posh accent and said things like 'nonchalant' and 'debauchery', which didn't help matters.

I couldn't stand Shelley The Sheep Girl. She played a prank on me once. My friend Mel put her up to it but still, the fact that Sheep Head was in on it at all made me very uncomfortable.

I was sick and had a day off from school. Mel made Shelley ring me at home. Shelley told me I'd won a competition to meet some musician I was really into at the time. Her voice was unrecognisable. She put on this English accent and sounded really old. I got sucked in. The next day at school I rushed over to Mel to tell her. The Sheep Head just happened to be standing next to her, of course. Mel's reaction to me telling her I was going to meet my idol was strange, and when they both burst out laughing, I felt like I had been slapped in the face by

the smelliest wet fish ever. I felt deflated, like a balloon that had just popped. I never entirely forgave Mel, and the fact that Sheep Head played a prank on me and got away with it was the most distressing thing ever.

I even had to go on holidays with her once, when Mel invited her along. It was the worst two weeks of my life. On the way home, when we were on the bus from Adelaide to Melbourne, I could hardly control myself from throwing her off the bus and into a paddock filled with her own kind. We always used to wonder whether it was her mother or father who had had sex with a sheep.

I was snapped back to reality as Troy walked into my temporary bedroom, his lounge room, clutching a bowl of cocoa pops. His hair was slightly dishevelled, but his black pyjamas were immaculate.

‘That phone call was your mother,’ he said mid-chew. I rolled my eyes. I’d vaguely heard the phone ring but was too deep in Shelley The Sheep Girl dung to register.

‘She wanted to know when you’re coming home.’

‘Did you tell her never?’

Mrs J walked past the lounge. ‘You can stay as long as you want, Georgie!’

‘I fear your mother will kill you if you do,’ Troy continued, his eyes narrowing.

‘Let her.’ I sunk deeper into the couch, my huge Snoopy slippers stretched before me. I always kept a spare pair at Troy’s. My feet couldn’t live without them. In fact, I pretty much kept a spare wardrobe of clothes at Troy’s, I stayed there so often.

‘But what about Chocky?’ Troy asked a little too innocently.

My heart began to race as my thoughts returned to my beloved kelpie. I’d only thought of her a hundred times over the last few days. But I relaxed, knowing Mr No Personality Peters would have looked

after her. He loved that dog, but the feeling wasn't mutual as Choc hated him as much as I did. As for Mother, she would have had her eye on Chocky for a fine red and tan fur coat by now.

'I better go. Have to see my Chocky and I'm working tonight, anyway.' I stood, stretching.

'Do you think you should change first?' Troy asked, looking down at my monstrous feet.

'Hmmm, maybe.'

'Goodbye then.' With that, Troy and his cocoa pops were gone.