

Clarice's Baby

"I'm going to have a baby."

Clarice's mother, Anne, started, then thumped a hand over her left breast. "You're pregnant?"

"Well no, Mum, not yet. But I'm going to be."

Anne clutched the back of a chair for support. "Don't do that. For God's sake, Clarice, you frightened the living daylights out of me."

"Mum, it's nothing to be dramatic about. People do it all the time. You did."

"Yes I did, but I wasn't unmarried, forty-one and always denying I wanted babies. Besides, I had a husband. Which reminds me," Anne said. "Have you a sperm donor in mind?"

"I have a man in mind."

Anne looked at her daughter. "And does this man know you have him in mind?"

"You know me so well."

Anne laughed shortly. "Forty years of bringing you up. So, who is he?"

"You don't want to know."

The silence was calculated for both mother and daughter. Finally Anne spoke, the years of motherhood demanding notice.

"If it's this married man, Clarice, I have to say that you will do irreparable damage to—"

"He'll never know."

Anne gasped. "You'd bring a child into the world – deny its father the knowledge of its existence, and - and the child its father? Oh, Clarice, that's appalling. Thank God it hasn't happened yet. I can still talk you out of it."

"I don't think so."

"What do you mean?"

"Mum, I'm forty-one. The door slams in my face about now. I'm an elderly primate or something – even if I'm still classed as *primate* at my age. I haven't got much time left to do this. I doubt even IVF programmes would give me a look."

"A child needs its father, Clarice," Anne scolded.

"I can't wait any longer—"

"But you never wanted to do it before," her mother cried. "What will your father think?"

Clarice shrugged. "Guess he'll just have to think about becoming a Grandpa. Besides, better late than never. Right?"

Justin looked at her sleek body, satiated and glowing with good health. "You're beautiful, Clar."

She purred and rolled on to her tummy, stroked his face with her finger. "So are you."

He turned on to his side, his weight on her hip. "When are you in the city next?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe in a couple of days. The conference is ready to go and I've really done as much as I need to do prior."

"Jenny and the kids go on holiday in a week. I was hoping you could get away for a weekend." He ran his finger over the dip of her waist.

Clarice did a quick calculation. If she was right, she was already nearly three months pregnant. One more weekend with Justin wouldn't hurt. She wouldn't show for a little while yet.

Then she would end their relationship. It couldn't go on for much longer, no matter what they felt for each other.

Justin spoke often of his children even though Clarice didn't want to hear of them. Yet, he loved her, as well as them. It was enigmatic. Strange. Touching. When he spoke of his children, littlies who were his greatest love, her heart warmed. Opened. But suddenly she didn't want to love them through him. She wanted her own. And more frightening, Justin never knew how much his talking about his children drew her to his family.

Clarrie knew it had to end. She wasn't about to be someone's side dish for the rest of her life, no matter how strong her feelings for him were.

But Justin had opened her eyes to something she never thought she'd want – to experience the joy of her own baby, the feel of that velvet skin, to marvel at its perfection. A mirror image of her and its father.

If having a child gave Justin another dimension, would it do the same for her? Would it bring out the love in her she so craved to give but could not? Would it open her soul to the world so she could love unconditionally?

What was it in life that so many discovered early, that she'd never wanted to experience before now?

Their unusual relationship had continued, deepened, despite all good sense.

Justin always wanted to know who she saw in her day-to-day job, who took her to dinner, who may have been invited to the secluded shack by that private beach she'd inherited. He felt he could ask her these things, but she felt she could not ask him the same.

All she wanted from him initially was the companionship of a non-demanding relationship. No strings, no ties, no heartache, no lies.

Oh, Clarice.

She shrugged to herself. She'd never been comfortable in comfortable relationships.

Well, if he wanted another weekend, he could have it. But it would be the last.

“Clarrie, I have to see you.”

“I can't.” Clarice bent over the large plastic dish, cradling the phone against her shoulder, her stomach heaving.

“What's the matter?”

“Tummy bug.”

“Are you all right?”

“I will be soon. We have to finish this, okay? It may as well be over the phone, because we don't know when we can see each other next, and to be honest I can't go on like this.” She retched over the bucket. “Sorry.”

“Clar, don't do this. It's not necessary. You know how I feel about you – we'll work this out because Jenny—”

“You see? You can't not mention her name *even* when I'm telling you it's over. Now please, let me go. Besides, I'm so damned miserable now, I'd rather die than talk. Goodbye Justin,” she managed to get out before a huge heave ripped her guts.

Could a person die from morning sickness at night? At least she blamed morning sickness. But nothing could disguise the sinking feeling in her heart.

She lifted the receiver from the cradle. No more calls tonight.

"You know of course, that at your age, we'll have to monitor the foetus carefully."

"Yes." Clarice's heart pounded happily. Fourteen weeks pregnant and so far, so good.

"There's still the tests at sixteen weeks to determine the health of the foetus."

"Yes. I'm not afraid."

The doctor nodded. "You're not putting on much weight, which is good, but you'll need to keep up your intake of folate, vitamins and the like. Has your husband been notified?"

Clarice looked at the bald spot on the GP's head as he bent, taking notes in scribble she wondered he'd ever be able to decipher.

"Notified?" What a strange term to use for letting one's husband know he was about to become a father. "No."

Didn't matter anyway. He was someone else's husband.

"Well, he'll be over the moon. You're very healthy."

Clarice took pages of instruction with her out of the surgery. Leaned against her car before climbing in, and caressed the taut roundness area of her belly.

Well, little fella, you and me are about to embark on an adventure of a lifetime.

She caught herself thinking about Justin. Wondering about him. Her heart twanged. She hadn't realised how much she would miss him.

Deciding it was probably baby-hormones, she shrugged. Some women go ditzy for a while. She knew that because of numerous friends who'd been pregnant. And ditzy.

She refused to believe it had anything to do with the recurring dream she had of Justin calling her name.

"You're looking mighty happy with yourself," Anne said, bustling about Clarrie's apartment. "That growing bump is mighty healthy."

"It is, Mum."

"Are you sure you don't know what sex?"

"I'm sure." Clarrie smiled. "Dad's doing a great job in the baby's room."

"He can't wait." Anne stared wistfully at the door through which she could see her husband painting. "It's a pity we could have only you. He so much wanted two or three."

"Did you have this horrible morning sickness?"

"And fierce complications, prolapses and all sorts of awful things. You're fine, compared to me. Healthy as a horse."

The phone jangled and Clarrie hauled her nearly eight month's pregnant frame out of the chair to answer it.

"Lo."

"Clarice Tasker?"

"Yes, that's me."

"It's John Morphett here. You don't know me. A client of mine has asked me to contact you."

"If it's to do with conferences, I'm actually on leave."

"No, Ms. Tasker. It's not to do with work. Do you know Mr. Justin Cleveland?"

Clarrie's heart thudded.

"What is it?" Anne asked, catching her daughter's ragged breath.

"Yes. Yes I do. Has something happened?"

"Well, yes."

Clarrie was bewildered. "I haven't seen Justin Cleveland for nearly five months. I don't know how I can help you."

"He's asked me to contact you. I'm his solicitor."

Clarice's heart raced. She grabbed her mother's arm. "Solicitor?"

"Yes. Now, please. Don't be alarmed. It's a matter of paternity."

"What?"

"Sit down, Clarice," Anne urged, dragging a chair under her daughter. She glanced at her husband who still slapped paint on the walls, and hadn't tuned in to the conversation. "Robert ...?"

"What are you talking about, Mr. Morphett?"

"You might remember your last meeting with my client."

"Yes. I do." Clarrie reddened. It was the last evening she spent with Justin.

"What is this about?" Her voice rose shrilly.

"His family had gone away on a holiday the week prior."

Clarice's mind raced. "That's what he told me."

"He and his wife separated around that time, Ms. Tasker."

"Oh, Mr. Morphett," she whispered, thinking hard about their last conversation and sank into the chair her mother held for her. "And the children?"

"They're with his wife."

"Oh, Mr. Morphett," Clarice repeated, stunned. "That would be killing him."

"Yes, I think it is."

"What is it?" Anne whispered to her daughter.

"Ms. Tasker, are you still there? I need to make an appointment to see you."

Clarice stared at her bewildered mother. "To see me? Why?"

"Ms. Tasker, Mr. Cleveland loves his children."

Clarrie's hand groped for her mother's. "Yes, of course he does, but what's that got to do with me?"

"Will you tell me what's going on?" Anne ground out, madly waving for her husband to get over to them. Robert waved back and merrily slapped on more paint, whistling his way along the scaffolding.

"Mr. Cleveland wants to be involved in the upbringing of *all* his children." He paused. "Ms. Tasker, are you still there? "

"I'm here," she whispered. How did Justin know?

Mr. Morphett cleared his throat. "Now, will I be able to meet you somewhere?"

Meet her? Mr. Morphett? "No. I don't want to meet you. Why should I meet you?"

"If we can prove paternity—"

"*What?*"

"My client wants—"

"He doesn't have to prove paternity! We both know he's the father."

"Precisely the reason for my call."

"Wait a minute. Where is your client?"

“Er, that's not relevant—”

“The hell it isn't! Does Justin think I would refuse to see him after this? I don't need a solicitor.” Her voice rose.

Her mother mouthed ‘Justin’ at her now attentive father, who raised his eyebrows. “Who's Justin?” he mouthed back and spread his hands in question. Spattering walls and floor with paint bright yellow paint.

Anne's eyes shifted to Clarrie's tummy and Robert's eyes widened. “Oh,” he mouthed. “That Justin.”

Clarrie slammed the phone down. “Justin,” she breathed and tears flooded her eyes. “Oh, God.” What would have been going on in his head all this time?

“What?” Her mother grabbed her. “What about Justin? What?”

“You want a father for your grandchild, you two? Well, I'm going to get me one.”

“Someone you know, I hope, Clarrie.” Dad was bemused and bespattered up the ladder, carefully wiping paint from his face.

“Robert.” Anne watched her daughter grab the keys to her jeep and waddle outside. She followed, scooping up Clarrie's footwear. When Clarrie poked her tear stained face back inside, she simply thrust the shoes at her.

“Be careful, love,” Anne said but Clarrie had already closed the door.

Clarice swiped at her damp face. She knew her nose would be running non-stop, that she'd forgotten her hanky, and that her eyes would be bloodshot and swollen. The dribbles had to be blotted with a chux she kept in the glove-box for something-or-other, she couldn't remember what.

She knew his address off by heart, but had never been there. It was only when she turned into his street that she began to wonder what she was doing.

Stopping the car at the top end of the road, Clarice gazed at the house numbers. His would be half way down on the left hand side.

She put the car into first, then second and crawled down the avenue. Then she got cold feet and quickly turned into a driveway, backed out, cursed herself for being an impulsive fool.

He wouldn't be here, of course not. She would've got the house and everything.

The tears came hot and blinding and she slammed on the brake for fear she'd crash into something behind her. She sobbed on the steering wheel, her protruding tummy straining against the seat-belt, her heart aching over her foolishness. She was being damned ditzy.

A car door slammed and still she snivelled, mopping up with the chux.

“Clar.” An emotion charged voice floated through her misery. She was hearing things again.

Ditzy ditzy ditzy

The hiccups started. She had hiccups regularly now, which didn't add to the indignity of being as fat as a dugong and all.

“Clar.” The voice was insistent.

Hiccups took her voice away, and she hid her face as the car door opened.

“Clarrie, sweetheart, come out of the car.”

Clarice hiccupped her way outside and threw herself into Justin's arms. As much as she could throw herself into anyone's arms with eight months of growing baby sticking out in front of her. “Justin, I didn't know you knew.”

"I know you didn't."

They rocked there in someone else's driveway for a few minutes before Justin brushed her tears away. He spied Mrs Pentwhistle staring at them out of her front window. "Let me drive you to my house. Have a tea or something."

Clarrie hiccupped and cried the half a kilometre to Justin's house. "If you knew about the baby, why didn't you say so?" she asked between hics.

"It seemed pretty obvious you didn't want me to know. And then when I heard you throwing up during that last phone call and you were calling it off, I figured you really meant it." He looked out the car window as they sat in his driveway. "Truth is, it was cutting me up. And then one day, it all came out. Jenny wanted her freedom, too. Jenny had someone else. "

Clarice stared at him. "What?"

"Yes, for all my ego, it totally surprised me. I was over the moon about it, I was free - we both were - except I knew you didn't want to see me again."

"But Jenny—?"

"She fell pregnant just after we met, so we married thinking it was fate and all that. But by the time the second little one had come along we knew we were on the wrong track. Seems she fell in love with Ben's school-teacher. Been in love with the guy for some time."

Clar knew little Ben had been at school for two years. The same time she'd been with Justin. Her head thumped. That didn't matter now.

She turned her tear stained face to his and tried to quell the persistent hiccups.

"I had to get them settled - she hasn't moved in with the school teacher, it'd be too much of a strain for the kids. We - we've worked stuff out, but I needed the time to do it. Do you understand - time to know they were safe, that sort of thing. And time to know I wasn't going to let you get away. I'd already let you go for long enough."

He held her face in both hands. "I love you, Clar. And I want to be with this baby of ours, as much as I want my others, but they're with their mother most of the time. Can you live with me, Clar? Will you marry me and make me a family again?"

Clarice stared at him. For forty-one years she'd avoided babies, and men who could love her. Now she was a pregnant, elderly dugong primate - or something - with the offer of two step-children if she wanted them and a man who loved her as much as she loved him.

She nodded between hiccups and more tears as he kissed her face.

Better late than never. Right?