

A man and a woman in formal attire are shown in profile, facing each other and about to kiss. The woman is on the left, wearing a blue dress with a pink rose on the back. The man is on the right, wearing a dark suit. The background is a warm, indoor setting.

MODERN

DAPHNE CLAIR

The Determined Virgin

Mills & Boon Modern

Daphne Clair

The Determined Virgin

«HarperCollins»

Clair D.

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Gabriel Hudson is one of the most successful entrepreneurs in New Zealand—and he's not used to being turned down. He's determined to seduce cool beauty Rhiannon Lewis, whatever it takes. Gabriel has every means at his disposal to pursue her and woo her.... But his instincts tell him that a different approach is needed if he's to win Rhiannon. He's got to do something no self-respecting alpha male would normally do—slow it down. The result is surprising: Rhiannon lets down her defenses. But she also reveals to Gabriel something he just didn't expect....

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Gabriel raised his head, the glitter in his eyes making her pulse race even faster.

Taking her other hand, too, he drew her inexorably closer, until their bodies lightly touched, his thighs against hers, her breasts brushing his shirt.

“Rhiannon?” His breath stirred tendrils of hair at her forehead.

Her eyes felt heavy-lidded but she made herself look at him. She raised her eyes to his, and saw herself reflected in the dark centers.

“Rhiannon,” he said again, “would you like me to kiss you?”

Alarm flared and died. She was suddenly very calm and sure. His mouth was close to hers, its contours beautiful in a wholly masculine way, firm but not narrow, decisive yet promising tenderness.

Scarcely above a whisper, against the thunder that was the sound of her racing heart, she said, “Yes.”

DAPHNE CLAIR lives in subtropical New Zealand, with her Dutch-born husband. They have five children. At eight years old she embarked on her first novel, about taming a tiger. This epic never reached a publisher, but metamorphosed male tigers still prowl the pages of her romances, of which she has written over fifty novels for Harlequin®. Her other writing includes nonfiction, poetry and short stories, and she has won literary prizes in New Zealand and the United States.

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The Determined Virgin

Daphne Clair



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CHAPTER ONE

RHIANNON hated elevators, but the parking building's lower floors had already been full when she'd driven in this morning, and carrying a box of ceramic tiles up four-and-a-half flights of stairs wasn't sensible. Any normal person would take the easier option offered by the invitingly open doors.

She'd spent five years trying to be a normal person.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped inside and pressed the button for level four, relieved she was the only passenger.

As the doors were about to meet, a strong masculine hand parted them and a tall, grey-suited man stepped through the gap. Rhiannon quickly moved back, her spine coming up against the far wall.

The newcomer glanced at the lit number on the keypad and the doors slid together.

It's all right, she told herself. He's just an ordinary man. Needing reassurance of that, she sent a covert glance at him, and discovered with a shock that, leaning against a side wall with his arms folded, he was giving her a lazily interested inspection, lids half-lowered over silvery eyes that roamed from her chin-length, dark brown hair to her cream shirt and moss-green skirt.

Rhiannon's nape prickled, every tiny hair standing on end, and her heartbeat increased. She tried to breathe steadily, remain calm. But even as she tightened her grip on the box in her arms and concentrated her gaze on the changing numbers over the doors, her brain registered that her companion didn't look ordinary.

The suit, and the blue-striped shirt worn with a dark silk tie were conventional enough, perfectly fitted to a lean body that seemed to arrange itself naturally to his casual stance. But his face belonged on some ancient statue in a sunlit Grecian setting—not half a world away in the rather dingy surroundings of a parking building in downtown Auckland. Thick, almost-blond, sun-streaked hair added to the impression, its incipient waves tamed by a conventional but expensive-looking haircut.

Number two came up on the display, then three, four. The man let Rhiannon out first, following as the doors whooshed shut behind them. She hoisted her box a little higher and quickly headed for the half-flight of concrete steps leading to 4-B.

As she reached them he touched her arm. 'That looks heavy,' he said. 'Let me help you.'

Her foot, already on the first step, slipped as she instinctively pulled away, turning her head to refuse the offer. She lost her balance, falling onto the stairs, and her elbow hit a concrete edge, the box slid from her grasp.

Tiles spilled, smashing against each other. Dizzy with pain, she scarcely heard the explosive word the man let out before she twisted upright on one of the steps and sat nursing her elbow, teeth gritted and eyes squeezed shut to stop herself crying out.

'I'm sorry!' The deep male voice was very near, and her eyes flew wide, to see the Greek-god face only inches from hers, the man hunkered down before her, one knee on the not-too-clean concrete floor. 'I didn't mean to startle you,' he said.

Close up, his eyes were blue—ice-blue but not cold, and filled with guilty concern. 'Are you hurt?' He looked at the hand cupped about her throbbing elbow. 'Let me see?' His bent head came even closer, so she could see the parting among the glossy waves of his hair. A pleasant, slightly astringent aroma hinting of citrus and spicy manuka leaves came to her.

He extended a hand to touch her again, and Rhiannon instinctively shrank back, shaking her head. 'It'll be okay in a minute.'

'You're pale,' he said abruptly.

Not surprising; she felt pale. But the dizziness was wearing off. 'I'm all right.' To prove it she tried to lever herself up.

'Don't move!' A large hand reached out to hold hers against the cold concrete. 'You'd better stay there a while,' he said. And as she resisted his hold, 'Take it easy.'

She didn't know if the last remark was a continuation of the first, or a reaction to her attempt at escape. But his soothing yet authoritative tone helped to still her panic.

This man is not attacking you.

Making an effort to relax, she realised that the hand imprisoning hers was warm and, to her surprise, almost comforting. Then he took it away, and began picking up the tiles and replacing them in the box.

'Some are broken,' he said. 'I'll replace them, or pay whatever it costs you.'

'You needn't,' she told him. 'I was going to break them up anyway.'

About to place two jagged pieces in the box, he gave her a smiling glance of inquiry. 'Stress relief?'

'They're for a mosaic,' she explained reluctantly. Talking might help relieve the throbbing ache at her elbow. 'Most of them are already damaged.'

'Mosaic... a hobby, or do you do it for a living?'

Rhiannon hesitated. It's just an idle question, don't be silly. 'Not entirely.'

'Would I know your name?'

'I doubt it.'

When she didn't volunteer it, he sent her another glance, his sculpted lips taking on a slightly wry curve, then closed the flaps on the carton and asked, 'How are you feeling?'

'I'm fine.' She adjusted the strap of her shoulder-bag, starting to rise again, and winced.

The man frowned. 'Are you sure you haven't broken a bone?'

Rhiannon moved her forearm, testing. It was uncomfortable but she said, 'I'll have a bruise, that's all.' Carrying the tiles would be a problem, though.

He said, 'You go first—I'll bring this along for you.'

With no real choice, she mounted the steps, conscious of his footsteps behind her.

When he'd stowed the box in the back of her station wagon he asked, 'Anything else I can do for you?'

'No. Thank you, you've done enough.'

'Ow!' he said softly.

'I didn't mean...'

He laughed, and Rhiannon said quickly, 'It was kind of you and I appreciate it.'

'That's generous, since I caused you to get hurt.'

'No, it wasn't your fault.' Considering his spectacular good looks, any other woman would surely have gracefully accepted his initial offer of help. Instead of falling over her feet in an effort to get away.

'Is there someone to help you unload them?' he asked her, indicating the tiles.

'Yes.' Not giving any more information, she opened the driver's door and climbed in.

His expression rueful, he closed the door for her, raised a casual hand and stepped back.

Glancing in the rear-vision mirror as she entered the ramp to the lower level, she saw he was still watching.

As the station wagon disappeared down the ramp, Gabriel Hudson shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked briefly on his heels.

Nice one, Hudson. Not up to your usual style.

Not that he was in the habit of picking up females in car parks, but he'd seldom been brushed off so unequivocally. Even before he'd bought out a failing business for a song, changed its name and built it up to the rank of one of New Zealand's top private companies, he'd been spoiled for choice as far as female companionship was concerned. His looks were both an asset and an occasional embarrassment. They didn't usually scare women off.

The instant he'd stepped into the lift this one had scurried into a corner without making eye contact, allowing him to study her for a moment or two before she looked up and caught him.

She'd seemed startled then—large green eyes, slightly almond-shaped but enormous and wary as a cat's, fixed on him for a long second, unpainted lips parting on a quickly indrawn breath. Tempting lips—their outlines very feminine and well-defined, the tender flesh blush-pink.

Shining mahogany hair cut in a deceptively simple style kissed petal-smooth skin with a faint dusky-rose bloom that had disappeared alarmingly into a deathly pallor when she hurt herself. The box she'd carried had partly hidden her figure, but her plain skirt had been just short enough to reveal nicely shaped legs.

She'd looked away again immediately, the soft lips firmly pressing together, and he'd seen the taut line of her throat ripple as she swallowed, her eyes fixing on the lighted floor numbers as if she could will them to change faster.

He'd felt a throb of desire, surprising himself with the adolescent reaction to a passing stranger. His impulse to help carry the heavy box wasn't entirely altruistic. He hadn't planned seduction on the staircase, but he'd had an odd reluctance to just let her walk away. That single glance in the elevator had intrigued him.

He shouldn't have touched her. That was what had made her jump like a startled fawn and trip on the stair.

Remembering her white face, the green eyes darkened with shock, the lovely mouth pale and tight, he swore under his breath.

He'd blown his chances there, for sure. Making a woman almost pass out with pain wasn't exactly calculated to endear a man to her.

After that there had been little he could do but see her safely to her car and forget about the disastrous encounter.

Rhiannon drove carefully, aware that her rapidly stiffening arm wouldn't stand too much strain. Her shoulder muscles were tense, and when a traffic light stopped the car she snatched the chance to practise a deep-breathing exercise, and deliberately loosened her grip on the steering wheel, flexing her fingers.

Curling them again about the vinyl, she had a clear memory of the stranger's hand on hers, strong yet not threatening. And of his eyes, that seemed to change disconcertingly from glittering silver-grey to the blue of a winter morning sky, promising warmth to come. When she'd first caught him looking at her they'd been idly appreciative, then apologetic and concerned, but later uncomfortably curious and perceptive.

The lights changed and she put her foot down, charging across the intersection before she thought to ease back on the accelerator.

She was...unsettled. On edge. A strange fluttering sensation attacked her midriff, and at her throat a pulse beat erratically. She felt warm all over and oddly weakened.

The fall, of course, had shaken her up. It would take a little while to get over it.

At the old villa in Mount Albert that she shared with another young woman, she removed a few tiles at a time from the box and carried them to the high-ceilinged former bedroom she'd converted to a home studio.

In future she'd be able to do some of her smaller artwork at her new gallery in the heart of the city, but her current commission was for a fairly large triptych. The mesh backing was laid out on the bare wooden floor, the design already partly filled in.

After stowing the tiles, she inspected her elbow and pressed a cold compress to the obvious swelling. Later her housemate, a nurse in a private hospital, insisted on prodding the arm gently and moving it about. 'Nothing broken, probably,' Janette agreed cheerfully, 'but maybe you should get it checked out.'

Rhiannon shook her head. 'If it doesn't get better,' she promised.

After dinner she wrapped the tiles in newspaper and smashed them with a hammer, left-handed, quelling a familiar inner pang at the destruction. As she'd told the stranger in the car park, most of

them were already damaged, scavenged with permission from the demolition team knocking down a city building.

Fitting some of the pieces into the triptych, she soon found regret disappearing in the satisfaction of creation.

The following Friday she was entering the ground floor of the parking building when a man's deep, leisurely voice sent a tingle of recognition up her spine. The Greek god.

'Hello again.' Catching up with her, he slanted her a smile. 'How's the arm?' He looked down at it, revealed by the short-sleeved, easy-fitting beige cotton dress she wore.

'All right, thanks,' she answered warily, before remembering to return the smile.

'You still have a bruise.' It had passed the worst stage but a purple shadow remained. A long masculine finger briefly brushed the faint mark, making her flinch as a curious sensation feathered over her skin.

'Sorry!' he said, surprised grey-blue eyes meeting hers. 'Is it that tender?'

'No.' Rhiannon shied sideways, creating a space between them as he walked beside her.

He sent her a quizzical look. 'Then—I apologise for taking liberties.'

'It's all right,' she said coolly. Such a fleeting, scarcely felt touch couldn't be construed as an assault, or even an advance of any kind. Many people touched casually, naturally, with no suggestion of intimacy.

She headed for the stairs, and he commented, 'Not taking the lift?'

Rhiannon shook her head. Rather than admit to a phobia, she gave her usual excuse. 'Climbing stairs helps to keep me fit.'

He swerved to accompany her. 'It obviously works.' He cast a glinting glance over her.

Every nerve screamed. Rhiannon looked away and didn't answer.

'Another apology?' he inquired softly, climbing at her side.

She shook her head, her throat locked, even though her brain told her she was being ridiculous. Here was an attractive man, letting her know he was attracted to her. Most women would be pleased. Most women would have smiled at him, preened a little, even given him some kind of subtle invitation.

Rhiannon was achingly conscious that she wasn't most women.

After a second he said, 'I feel I owe you some sort of compensation. Could I buy you a coffee sometime? Or dinner?'

'You don't owe me anything,' she said tightly.

'Are you married?' he asked. 'Or in a relationship?'

The blunt question startled her into speaking without thought. 'No!'

'You just hate the sight of me? Well, I can't blame you after that accident.'

'I don't hate you—I don't even know you.'

He said lightly, 'If you'd care to...'

About to tell him she didn't, Rhiannon hesitated. If she was ever to be a normal, functioning woman she had to start acting like one. It was past time.

They had reached a landing and somehow he stopped so that he blocked her further progress though there was at least half a metre of space between them. He pulled a card from his pocket and held it out to her. 'Gabriel Hudson,' he said. 'I'm in the air-freight business.'

A name to be reckoned with. Gabriel Hudson owned one of the biggest and best-known private firms in the country.

The card confirmed it—the familiar angel-wings logo in one corner, his name centred in flowing script. All the company's ads used the theme of care and speed, featuring angels cradling precious parcels gently in their arms as they flew from one end of New Zealand to the other, and around the globe. Their service was popular because, unlike most such companies, they boasted a door-to-door service, every package remaining in the Angelair system from collection to delivery.

He was a respected businessman, widely admired for his commercial success when still in his twenties, and named last year on the modest national rich-list, but not one of those who were photographed living it up at social occasions attended by the local glitterati. His private life, it seemed, was strictly kept that way—private.

‘I’ve used your service,’ Rhiannon blurted. Who hadn’t used Angelair if they were involved in any kind of business in New Zealand?

‘We carry your mosaics?’

Feeling a need to cover her gauche remark, she said, ‘Other people’s art, too, and books.’

‘Books?’

‘I have a gallery and bookshop.’

His head tilted to one side. ‘Where?’

She’d said too much already. Reluctantly, she told him, ‘We moved a few weeks ago into High Street.’ The lease for the new premises was cheap for central Auckland, though twice what she’d paid for a small suburban shop space. She hoped the extra street trade and a change to more exclusive stock would compensate.

‘What’s it called?’

Pointless to hold back now. ‘Mosaica.’

A young man came bounding up the stairs, and Gabriel Hudson’s firm hand on Rhiannon’s waist moved her aside as the man raced past them with a careless ‘Thanks.’

Her shoulder came up against hard male muscle, her hip just touching Gabriel’s, and she recognised the citrus-and-spice scent she’d noticed at their first encounter.

Even as her skin began to prickle, her throat tighten, he moved away and allowed her to continue hurrying up the stairs.

Reaching the next floor, she paused to let two vehicles sweep past. The elevator disgorged several passengers. Gabriel said, ‘Are you going to tell me your name?’

‘Rhiannon,’ she said, conquering long-formed habit. ‘Rhiannon Lewis.’

‘Ree-annon,’ he repeated, as if trying out the syllables on his tongue. ‘Welsh, isn’t it?’

‘Originally.’

‘I’d like to see the gallery sometime, and maybe we could go out for that coffee?’ His tone was casual, the winter-morning gaze holding mild inquiry.

This was a civilised man, a well-known, respected man, and surely so good-looking and successful that if she turned him down he wouldn’t have to search very far to find some more amenable female. He’d probably write her off without a second thought. Still she demurred. ‘I don’t like leaving my assistant alone for long.’

‘After work?’ he suggested.

‘I have to cash up.’

Gabriel’s head tipped slightly to one side and his eyelids lowered, his mouth quirking downward.

He thought she was being coy. Remembering her earlier resolution, Rhiannon said quickly, ‘That takes about twenty to thirty minutes. We close at six—except on Saturday it’s at two o’clock.’

Had she really said that? Tacitly accepted an invitation from a man? Her heart plunged, then righted itself.

Gabriel nodded, absorbing the information.

He walked her to her car, Rhiannon tongue-tied now and amazed at herself. He didn’t touch her but waited while she got in and fastened her seat belt. Then he closed the door, stepped back, and raised a hand in farewell as she drove off.

Heading for the stairs and his own car, Gabriel wore a preoccupied frown. After their first encounter he’d told himself the woman in the car park haunted him because he felt guilty about her fall. But when he spotted her again today he’d felt a quick leap of excitement, then a weird sensation

of tightness attacked his chest, and his palms had dampened. He hadn't felt that way since the first time he asked a girl out, when he'd been a gawky adolescent. Until today.

He'd wanted to grab her, make sure she stayed at his side until he knew all about her. But, he recalled, pressing the remote button on his key ring as he approached his car, at the first touch of his hand she'd skittered away.

The sight of the name on his card had thawed her a little. Cynicism intervened for a moment, reminding him of other women who had showed increased interest when they learned who he was. But even then Rhiannon had hesitated, so that her subsequent capitulation had surprised him.

He got into the Audi and started the engine. Rhiannon. He liked the flowing syllables of her name, just as he'd liked the look of her from when he'd first seen her.

Checking his mirrors, he backed out of the space, then headed for the down ramp. So she didn't know him, but was that reason enough for her to be so unforthcoming? Was she like that with all men? What would make a woman that cautious?

A couple of things came to mind, and unconsciously his fingers tightened about the wheel. His jaw ached and he realised he had clenched his teeth hard. Consciously he eased taut muscles, telling himself not to jump to conclusions. Just because a woman hadn't thrown herself into his arms at first glance, and seemed unaffected by the curse and blessing of his face, it didn't mean there was something wrong with her.

Maybe that was what intrigued him about Rhiannon. She hadn't reacted as most women did, even though he'd frankly shown his interest, without—he hoped—being crass about it. Her cursory glances held no answering spark of awareness. And she didn't like him touching her.

That was something he intended to change.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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