

CHAPTER 1

The Slow Burn at Le Coup De Foudre (Love At First Sight)



In the heart of pulsating New Orleans, somewhere between the muddy Mississippi and Lake Pontchartrain, between jambalaya and beignets, blues and Zydeco, a 300-year-old wattle-and-daub taproom called Le Coup de Foudre (Love at First Sight) guarded its secrets. Candle smoke clung to the rafters while history pressed close, holding stories of whispered magic, clever competitors, and love stories that scorched rather than soothed, burned rather than burned out.

Behind the counter, the bartender, Dr. Anton Timish, traced the rim of his glass with his thumb, distracted. His research ended and his pending return to Lansing, Michigan waited with the cold patience of inevitability. The thought of departure weighed heavily. One reason

eclipsed all others: an Indonesian woman whose smile haunted him, whose absence unsettled him more than her presence.

Heat pooled low in his chest at the memory.

Regret lingered, sharp, and intimate.

The front door latch engaged, the door creaked open.

Night air rolled through the door, the dampness infused with rain and jasmine.

Anton's thumb stilled.

There she is!

Mawar entered, as though his thoughts summoned her. She walked toward him, the silky fabric brushing against her skin, her gaze lifting until it found him. The room narrowed around the look that only belonged to the two of them—dark, knowing, unhurried. Heavy with the secret hidden within it. Her lips curved slightly, not quite a smile, more a promise withheld.

Awareness crackled between them, thick enough to taste. Want pressed forward, belonged to only the two of them, deliberate and dangerous, carrying the certainty that one step closer would erase every careful boundary he drew.

Mawar, a classic beauty, her presence engulfed him, slowly, sensually, and utterly unforgiving.

ROCKY, the jukebox with a mind of its own, blasted the song 'Pour Some Sugar on Me.'

The music awakened Anton from his trance and he grinned ear to ear as he watched Mawar glided in, stunning as always in a breezy, floral-print wrap dress. *A wrap dress*. The invisible, to Anton anyway, Clyde the so-called fiancé trailed behind her.

A red-haired, blue-eyed, thin man, Clyde wore one of his usual gray-linen-chambray Brunello Cucinelli suits. Clyde thought he looked sharp and knew it adhered perfectly to his wiry, not-quite-skinny frame.

Anton motioned to the two empty seats at the counter barstools where they usually sat. Clyde, barely looked up from the social media on his phone as Anton handed Clyde his high alcohol content 'Ghost in the Machine Double IPA.'

When Anton gave Mawar her usual beer, a lower alcohol 'Abita Amber,' he held on to the glass an instant longer, his fingertips gently caressing the top of her hand, adorned with beautiful red nail polish. Luckily, Clyde did not see the gesture. Anton's heart rate increased just touching her.

Mawar pretended not to notice but her heart pretended too.

Anton spun a tale about owls, but she barely heard.

Mawar swallowed hard as she allowed her eyes to slip down over Anton's shirt. As he moved the shirt pressed tight enough across his chest for her to see his nipples rub against the fabric, the material drawn taut over the muscles. When he turned his back to her, his shoulder blades brushed against the back of the shirt. His muscular arms appeared almost too confined, straining against the sleeves.

She looked away, too aware of the heat rising in her, hoping no one noticed as she watched her favorite eye candy. She should be annoyed at herself for noticing.

At that time, Anton's voice cut gently through her thoughts and pulled her from her visual senses. He loved to talk about animals.

"California spotted owls are found along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada too." He handed a glass of Riverfront Lager to a patron across the bar.

Mawar leaned forward over her beer in fascination, becoming excited at the mental stimulation. “Anton,” she said softly, her eyes flashing with curiosity as she spoke, “People confuse the call of the owl you’re referring to with the sound of the Barred Owl, right?”

That Indonesian lilt in her voice turned each of her words melodic.

“A lot,” Anton said with a know-it-all grin, “Spotted Owl’s range overlaps with the Barred Owl... their calls very similar, but the Spotted Owl’s hoot comes out slower. And the habitat—”

“Swamps and bottomlands,” Mawar interrupted, unable to stop herself. She twirled a strand of hair around her finger, drawing out the word *bottomlands* with a naughty grin.

As he watched her twist that strand of hair, Anton recalled how easily the Barred and Spotted Owls often became mistaken for one another. “Both owls share the same dark eyes.” His attention veered to Mawar’s eyes, also dark with a deepness he longed to explore.

Anton turned away to draw a fresh beer and served a customer out on the floor before he forgot everything but her.

Mawar watched him go. As he walked away, her gaze drifted to Anton’s back, the well-muscled slope of it hiding under his jeans as he worked. The fabric just snug enough to outline the powerful rhythm of his buttocks as he moved, one cheek rising, then falling, a hypnotic, rolling gait that held her attention completely. She held her breath, waiting for him to turn around.

When he finally did, she exhaled a soft, disappointed sigh. *Damn, he’s wearing his apron tonight. Can’t enjoy watching the bulge.* But she knew it by memory anyway. The impressive volume of his ... he tucked to the left. She’d seen before when he forgot his apron. Details she filed away in her special Anton data file. A well-guarded secret. Mawar knew exactly what happened down there when his eyes met

hers across the room, that tell-tale thickening just for her. A slow smile touched her lips as she wondered, *Boxers, or nothing at all? Certainly not tighty-whities.* A pleasant shiver passed through her.

Her mind drifted back to yesterday, the glorious afternoon he’d forgotten his apron. She’d spent the entire time watching the confident line of his body, the way that magnificent bulge strained against the denim as he guided the intellectual conversations with patrons, lifting them to the magnificent heights his knowledge always reached. The skill of his mind, combined with the promise of his body. Mawar took a slow, deep breath, letting the feeling wash over her.

Her brow furrowed. *Stop*, she told herself. *I’m engaged to be married.*

Meanwhile the bar hummed with conversation and Anton took a second to focused on what his customers drank tonight.

Many of them preferred “Jucifer” beer, a hazy India Pale Ale. Locally brewed, this beer’s tropical fruit flavor, with a soft, hazy mouthfeel, many patrons identified the mango, grapefruit, and papaya in its profile. Many people ordered nonalcoholic beers as their second beer. The taproom’s owner, Pete, stocked several from local breweries, including ‘Hop’d Tea’—a nonalcoholic beer made with both tea and hops—from NOLA Brewing. Pete also sold a lot of Athletic Wild Run, another nonalcoholic beer. Anton noted the need to chill some more Jucifer.

In the corner of the room sat the 1940s Rock-Ola Magic Glo Jukebox, model 1428, known as ROCKY. Encased in a faded turquoise-and-orange metal shell somehow held together with rusty nails, ROCKY radiated a mid-20th-century vibe, straight from the World War II era. She owned her ROCKY attitude. It took new customers a while to understand to give her a wide berth. All except the taproom’s cat, Amunet, who often lounged on top of the jukebox since her arrival at the taproom.

After eighty years, ROCKY emitted opinions about a lot of things. Mostly, she played either Zydeco—the local New Orleans music—or boomer music, with an occasional *Where'd that come from?* song not listed among her options.

A faded, withered, yellow sticky note taped to the jukebox's front warned: *Customer's risk. No money returned if ROCKY plays the wrong song.* Someone scrawled in red ink, 'she won't play your song anyway.'

One of ROCKY's many dubious claims to fame, nobody'd put a nickel in her for a couple of decades. ROCKY, just one part of Le Coup De Foudre's enigma contributing to the mystery within the French Quarter of New Orleans.

At that moment, the jukebox's volume blasted some wailing guitar riff that bounced off the beams and rattled the glasses, then suddenly stopped altogether in the middle of a song.

Anton gave it a whack. Gibberish came out briefly, followed by an accordion Zydeco tune.

For Mawar, the noise? Just part of the charm.

About a month ago, when the regular bartender quit mid-shift in a fit of dramatic exhaustion, Anton, the thirty-seven-year-old Michigan State Professor, did not hesitate. He jumped up and went to work. Anton worked his way through graduate school slinging beers and still carried the muscle memory from the job. Bartending to him constituted less of a job and more a resurrection. He liked the work, the rhythm, the noise, and the brief intimacies exchanged over beer.

Anton's second favorite reason for bartending at this taproom? The unique intellectual atmosphere. The daily discussions covered all topics. Far from an average pick-up joint, the university students flung topics around like ping pong balls. Dr. Timish now led the pack.

Unfortunately for Anton, Mawar recently committed herself to a man Anton could only think of as a corporate clod. Clyde, the thirty-seven-year-old attorney at the Russian company next door to the bar, who'd parked his butt on the stool beside her.

Her exotic persona lingered in that intensity, a mix of mystery and confidence that emerged when she spoke or laughed, drawing people in without trying. It set her apart, making every interaction with her almost fierce, unexpected, and impossible to ignore.

Mawar captivated him from the second he'd laid eyes on her weeks ago.



The next night Anton dressed in his usual jeans and a crisp white shirt, with the finishing touch of a red diamond clip-on bow tie. He considered his tie his signature, the final flourish of his bartender-as-showman persona, equal parts professor, speechmaker, and entertainer. A few months ago, Anton started frequenting the bar during his sabbatical. Since then, he'd heard both facts and rumors about Le Coup de Foudre, a place where they say love flowed as freely as the beer. A man of science, he planned to debunk the stories.

Anton paced behind the counter barely containing his impatience. His thoughts, as always, drifted to Mawar. He went over some of her sharp comments from the bar's earlier exuberant conversations that grew out of the discussions he usually kicked off. Often, bar patrons also found Mawar's comments fascinating. Anton let himself drift into the memory of her of her captivating musical flow her rare Indonesian accent gave her.

Drawn in by the way Mawar's eyes flashed when a conversation got heated only intensified his attraction to her. He watched her magnificent lips shape every thought as they left her mouth, felt the pull and the heat, imagining what those lips might do to him.

The intensity of her exotic persona persisted. Even without her in front of him, the professor pictured her jet-black hair bouncing ever so gently on her shoulders. He longed to feel it, play with it. Only Mawar could ease the yearning and restlessness clawing inside him.

But... she's committed to Clyde, he reminded himself.

Anton sighed as he continued to check the front door every few seconds. He pinned. HE did. He wanted Mawar to stop by alone tonight. He filled beer nut bowls and served alcoholic and nonalcoholic beers to some newly arrived regulars.

Park, an international businessperson, one of Anton's occasional regulars, who stepped up to the counter. Anton welcomed this interruption as he took the order. "I'll take a nonalcohol for now," Park looking serious, "I need to work on a contract." He opened his phone and became intensely focused on it. After a minute, he took a sip of his beer, looked around, scanning the bar. "Is Clyde around? Might have a legal question for him."

Anton rolled his eyes and looked at where Clyde usually sat. "He'll likely be here soon." He wiped down the counter, keeping his gaze lowered to hide his disgusted expression regarding Clyde.

Park hesitated, then added, "Off the record, do you trust his legal judgment?"

Anton didn't answer right away and scrubbed the counter as he composed some honesty. "Let me put it this way, he acts like he loves his job, and that level of engagement usually means a person cares about what they do and how well they do it."

Park nodded in understanding.

On cue, having parked the car, Mawar and Clyde walked across the parking lot toward the bar.

The thought of seeing Anton quickened her steps.

She thought back to another day when Anton, busy with customers, wore that subdued, friendly grin as he greeted everyone by name, what Mawar called his "customer face." His dark, intelligent eyes darted quickly from face to face and beer to beer as he made sure everyone received their orders.

As if sensing her presence, Anton's anxious eyes scrutinized the entrance. This evening, the first, and most important, reason he took the summer bartender job presented herself at the door. The beautiful, intelligent twenty-nine-year-old Indonesian graduate student, Mawar.

She peered into his face for a millisecond, as before, then, this time, blushing, quickly lowered her gaze to the floor.

Anton rejoiced that she sought him out, still her first impulse upon arrival. He basked in the satisfying knowledge that Mawar still responded to him.

Anton's head—and other body parts—buzzed with anticipation as he imagined her dress as it brushed against the curves he could not touch, flowing into all that hid under those wonderful fabrics. Mawar, beautiful no matter what she wore, preferred dresses. Her femininity shone when she wore those silky dresses that caressed her skin with every movement.

Boris, a coworker of Clyde's, held a bag of tobacco pointed to the door to vape outside. Leaving Anton to chat with Mawar.

She leaned forward looking at his lower apron, "I'll take a nonalcoholic beer," and smiled coyly.