



WICKED
MASQUERADE

KENYA WRIGHT

WICKED MASQUERADE

KENYA WRIGHT

Wicked Masquerade by Kenya Wright © 2023

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means such as electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the authors of this book.

This is a work of fiction. Any characters, names, places, brands, media and incidents are used solely in a fictitious nature based on the author's imagination. Any resemblance to or mention of persons, places, organizations or other incidents is coincidental.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2023

To My Diamond Divas,

There's an unspoken magic in knowing that I have a team standing by my side, a group of sparkling gems, each unique, strong, and brilliant.

My Diamond Divas, this is my heartfelt tribute to you.

You understood the passion, the chaos, the artistry, and the heart that went into weaving this tale. Every word I penned was bolstered by your support and encouragement. You were my muses, my critics, and my cheerleaders, all rolled into one.

L. Nichols

N. Chatman

T. Cleaver

S. Cohen

C. Carbon

A. Burgett

A. Hush

T. Paten

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

PROLOGUE

TRUE PLEASURE



TRISTAN

In my art studio—my sacred sanctuary—every passionate brush stroke that danced across the canvas, every sculpture that blossomed under my touch, was an intimate sonnet from my shattered soul, where the words bled and the sentences screamed with raw emotion.

This was my Eden.

My paradise.

Shirtless and barefoot, I stood before a virgin canvas, ready to turn her into a nasty, panty-dripping whore.

The world around me dissolved into an intimate cocoon.

I picked up the brush, dipped it in crimson red, and made love to the canvas. My biceps pumped and flexed. The brush lapped at the surface, getting it wet.

Yes.

My heart pounded in my chest.

So many sensual possibilities.

I dipped the brush in black, then white, and even passionate blues, caressing every inch of the white expanse.

Ever so slow.

Ever so patient.

And, the canvas shivered.

And, I teased and drew out the desire some more.

Fuck yes.

My body hummed.

Pulling back, I grunted, dipped the tip in blushing pink, and then returned, moving my brush faster, harder.

Heat rose within the space.

I gathered other colors and let them spill and spurt onto the canvas until it was slick and dripping.

Shit. I'm going to need to fuck after this.

The tip of my cock vibrated with this intense need.

Lust raced through me.

Meanwhile, my brush shuddered and shook, and I swore the canvas moaned.

I grew rock hard, my length pushing against my pants, wanting to bust through the fabric and fuck something.

Anything.

This was *true* pleasure.

Ecstasy.

Sensual bliss.

I had no idea how long I'd been at it.

Time did not exist when I was in the throes of rapture.

But, when my brush finally stilled, what stood before me was a pulsating hedonistic scene.

Perfect.

A ragged breath escaped my throat.

I put the brush up, stepped back, and admired my work.

The canvas showed a mysterious party where all the guests were enraptured in a hot orgy. Men and women were entangled in passionate, tantalizing poses. Their bodies shimmering. Ripples of arousal ran like silent whispers across their bare skin.

And, there was a sense of wild abandon and primal need.

The colors were bold and vibrant, mirroring the unleashed passion burning within my veins.

I stared at the scene before me, unable to look away.

It was so real I yearned to jump into the painting and join them.

This is a masterpiece.

It was so intoxicating, desire pulsed deep within my core.

Each curve of their bodies on the canvas called to me. So damn carnal, it fanned the embers of my own need.

My cock throbbed with so much pulsing desire that I considered ripping my clothes off and rubbing it against the canvas.

Could you truly make me cum?

Just as I reached out to touch the painting, a loud knock reverberated through my studio.

I frowned.

My cocoon of peace slipped away.

I called out, "Yes?"

My butler spoke on the other side, "Mr. Truett has arrived."

With a heavy sigh, I ran my fingers through my hair. "Let him in, Spencer."

The door swung open, and it was as though the studio itself took a sharp breath at the sight of the figure standing in its threshold.

I grinned.

Dominic stood there, dressed to kill in a designer suit that looked as if it were created just for him. Charcoal gray with black outlines. He was the very embodiment of sophistication and taste.

Today, he had his dark hair stylishly combed to the side.

Back when we were scrappy kids navigating the world of foster care, our counselor used to lovingly refer to us as twins.

Perhaps, that was always why they tended to place us in the same homes over and over.

We were each blessed with the same deep green eyes. No matter what age, we kept similar heights, too, that always set us apart from our peers.

As we matured, that parallel growth never stopped. Adulthood found us both surpassing six feet, our frames filling out into muscular silhouettes that reflected our dedication to the gym.

And of course, there was our mutual and very expensive addiction to designer clothes. The luxury armor served as our statement to the world that we were not just survivors, but conquerors.

And standing there in my doorway, Dominic looked every bit the victorious warrior as he held a wrapped present in his hand. The box was mid-size with black, shiny paper and a large gold bow.

I grinned. “Dom, are you going to come in or are you just going to stand there?”

“I’ll come in, when you are done checking out my new suit.”

“I’m done.”

“Good. It is a hard job, but I wear these things for your enjoyment as well as mine.”

I snorted.

Dominic carried the gift inside. “I’m surprised that you are painting right now.”

“Why?”

“You have your big art showing tonight. Or did you forget?”

I groaned in annoyance. “I didn’t. I have another hour before it’s time to get ready, and go to the dreadful thing.”

“I would think that for an artist, showing the work to greedy, rich buyers would be the best part of the process.”

“It’s not. The business side of art always makes me fucking violent.” I pointed to the present. “Who is that for?”

“Oh. This.” Dominic glanced at the box. “It is for my successful artist friend.”

“Oh. I didn’t know you had one of those.”

“I do.” Dominic nodded. “In fact, he’s considered the Bad Boy of art.”

“Oh no. Why would they call him that?”

“I think it is because of his tattoos.” He gestured to my chest and arms.

While he had kept his skin untouched, I had made my body a personal homage to my favorite artist, Salvador Dali.

Beginning from the tips of my fingers and snaking up my arms, my tattoos were a surreal journey through Dali’s artistic universe. One could trace the melted clocks from *The Persistence of Memory* slithering around my forearms, distorting time in their fluid path.

On my left bicep, the haunting eyes from *The Face of War* stared back with an unnerving intensity.

My chest served as a canvas for one of Dali’s most enigmatic pieces, *The Elephants*. The spectral creatures with their impossibly long, spindle-like legs stretched up towards my collarbone.

Then on my right arm, the disintegrating figure from *The Anthropomorphic Cabinet* decorated every inch.

I held in my laughter. “Just because a man has tattoos doesn’t mean he is bad.”

“Correct. I guess my friend is also a bad boy due to punching a few critics here and there at his art showings.”

“Aww. Now that makes more sense, but I’m sure they deserved it.”

“Probably, but his artwork is pretty controversial also.”

I shook my head. “How has that worked for him?”

“He’s filthy rich.”

“Yet, he sounds pretentious.”

“He is, but I would never tell him that.” Dominic handed me the gift. “Congratulations on your tenth showing.”

I gritted my teeth, always unable to deal with too much showing of love and affection. “Hmmm.”

“I’m sorry that I unable to attend your showing tonight.”

“You never have to come, and you damn sure didn’t have to do this.”

“You don’t celebrate yourself, so someone must do it for you.”

“Is that how it works?” I grabbed the box, slipped the gold bow off the top, and placed it near my table of paints.

“On another topic.” Dominic dove his hands into his pockets. “Have you found a woman yet for the masquerade?”

I tore through the shiny black paper. “I’m not really interested in going this year, Dom.”

“What the fuck?!”

I snapped my view to him.

With his shocked expression, one would have thought I was confessing to murder.

Here we go.

I sighed.

His eyebrows shot up. “Please, tell me that you are not serious?”

Billionaire Blake Meade only invited the world’s elite to his yearly masquerade party. The tickets started at twenty thousand dollars each, while the VIP packages reached well beyond a hundred thousand dollars. And the party wasn’t a *night* event. It was a *week* of high-end, luxurious, out-of-this-world, erotic debauchery.

Dominic and I started going five years ago, but now...I just didn’t know anymore. There was just this expanding emptiness in my soul—my core, that had made me...less excited for things like this anymore.

How could I get him to understand, when I don’t even know what’s going on with me?

Dominic frowned. “Tristan, what the fuck? You have to go. It’s the bloody Masquerade!”

“I don’t know.” Sighing, I returned to opening the present. “What’s the point? It’s just sex games, orgies, lavish surroundings, and expensive food.”

“Hell fucking yes!” Dominic bobbed his head. “Those are the reasons why we go to the Masquerade.”

“Yes, but I’m tired of figuring out the right woman to go with me.” A hollow sensation crept within my heart. “The woman is always fun on the first day. Then after my cock has had its fill, I’m stuck with her and absolutely bored.”

Even more, my female guests never made it past the party. Once done, I didn’t call them anymore. They were fleeting, transient moments that never truly lasted. Always, I was a hunter in an endless pursuit for something, or someone, who could provoke more than a temporary fascination. Yet, never did I capture exactly what I yearned for.

Because she does not exist. I give up. Now, only my art will soothe me.

“Listen, man.” Dominic pointed at me. “You are going, if I have to pick the woman for you myself.”

“You pick? Your taste in women is horrific.”

“It is not.”

“You like big boobs with no brains.”

“Well, don’t we all?”

“No.” Finally, I slipped the paper away from the gift and revealed a book.

What?!

My breath caught in my throat. “Shit.”

The paper fell to the floor.

He didn’t. He couldn’t have.

But, he had.

The book was a masterpiece, bound in rich, oxblood leather, the kind that held a distinct, heavy scent of age and wisdom. The texture was supple yet firm. Its edges were tinged with gold leaf that shimmered under my studio’s dim lighting.

The title was elegantly embossed on the cover in bold, gold foil lettering.

“What. The. Fuck?” I slipped my fingers over the title and read it, “Fenway’s Foresight: Art, Murder, and the Inescapable Unknown.”

“Exactly.”

Stunned, I looked up at him. “I was just telling you about trying to grab this book two months ago.”

Dominic nodded. “Yep. You said some anonymous asshole kept outbidding you in the last Sotheby’s auction. You were close to rushing over and slamming the phone out of his assistant’s hand, and then you spent this past month trying to figure out who he was.”

I widened my eyes. “Yes.”

Dominic winked. “That was me.”

“You are fucking insane!”

“I am.”

I frowned, not liking the deep emotion filling me. “You did all of that for me?”

“You are as close to a brother as I will ever have, and you never let me get you anything. So this time, I decided to cock block you from buying yourself yet another gift, so that I could get it.”

I deepened my frown. “Thank you.”

“You love the surprise?”

“Of course I do.” I opened the book, and the spine creaked ever so slightly.

The pages were thick and textured. The inky black words that covered these pages spoke of Fenway’s artistry, the horror of the tragedies his paintings foretold, and the tantalizing enigma of the women’s unsolved murders.

Included within, were high-resolution, full-color images of Fenway’s most infamous paintings. These were rendered with such detail that I could almost touch the despair in the eyes of Fenway’s subjects, and could almost hear the whispers of the unknown murderer.

It wasn’t just a book.

It was a sensory experience, a tangible connection to the eerily beautiful world of Fenway, a tragic artist.

I lifted my view back to him. “You fucking paid \$2 million?”

“To surprise you? Yes.”

“That is a lot to surprise me, Dom.”

He bobbed his head. “But, we have always known that I am crazy.”

“Goddamn it.”

“I can afford it.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“If you want to make it up to me,” Dominic held his hands out. “Make sure you come to that damn masquerade next month. We made plans.”

I groaned in annoyance.

“It would be boring without you.”

I glanced back at the book again. “Fuck.”

“Come on. Find a woman. You have less than a month to find her, and make sure she has a passport. It’s in Budapest this year.”

I carefully closed the book. “Fine. I’ll go.”

Pure joy lit up on Dominic’s face. “Thank God! Without you, there would be no point.”

I let out a long breath. “I’ll find a woman that won’t bore me enough to be around her for a week.”

“Again, I can help—”

“No. Your women are always dreadful. I’ve got it.”

Dominic turned to the painting of the orgy. “Oh wow. This looks like last year’s masquerade.”

I blinked and studied the image. “I guess it does.”

“See. You wanted to go deep down inside.”

But was it that? Or was it something more happening within my soul?

A decorative frame with ornate, symmetrical scrollwork and flourishes. The frame is rectangular with rounded corners and a central opening. Inside the frame, the words "ACT ONE" are written in a bold, black, serif font, centered horizontally and vertically.

ACT ONE

CHAPTER ONE

THE HUNT FOR A WOMAN



TRISTAN

Would she be here? At my showing? That would kill two birds with one stone.

In the art gallery, I leaned against the wall, pulled out my platinum gold lighter, and gazed at it.

A diamond-encrusted rose decorated the front. Sharp thorns etched the stems.

This lighter was a reminder of the darkness inside of me. The destructive tendencies. The possibility of chaos. The allure of danger.

Hello, old friend.

It was the sole memento from my dead mother, and the only tangible piece of her existence that I possessed.

I couldn't help but wonder why it had been in her purse when she died.

Did she smoke? Had someone she loved given it to her?

In the end, it never mattered.

Even if I knew the answer, I would never know *her*.

I checked my watch and sighed.

Only ten minutes had passed since the beginning of my opening.

How I wish this part weren't needed in art.

It was like standing naked in a room filled with countless strangers, feeling their critical eyes dissecting every curve, every mark, every secret, every flaw.

Torture.

If I had not been under contract by the gallery to attend the opening, I would have been in my studio brooding and thinking about the next collection I would create.

But, part of the six-figure exhibition deal was to be present when it was revealed.

I flicked the lighter on and sent a spark through the air, dazzling my senses.

A small flame rose, swaying back and forth, twirling and dancing.

Perhaps, I can spend the time finding a woman for the masquerade. Then, the night won't be so brutal.

I flicked the lighter off and looked up.

The gallery buzzed with a hysteria only found amongst a crowd with deep pockets and a voracious appetite for the contemporary.

A sea of suits and designer dresses.

Hundreds of people strolled along the space.

My latest exhibition, *Burning Desire*, was the focus of attention.

Sculptures of beautiful nude women rising up from flames provided a stunning visual display. Each woman's figure was illuminated and accentuated by flickering light.

The sculptures were made from a variety of materials—bronze, steel, glass, and marble. I carefully crafted each piece

to capture the intensity of the female form.

I needed the feminine curves and contours to come to life.

The effect of mimicking fire had been challenging and difficult to achieve. I'd spent two years testing options and battling with techniques.

Finally, I settled on various components of specially designed glass flames filled with translucent reds, oranges, and yellows. Special lighting built around each sculpture continued the illusion of fire. Then, mini smoke machines enhanced the experience.

Stop it. Don't think of all the work you put into this collection. Think of the hunt.

Sighing, I scanned the massive space.

Where could she be?

I spotted a man sauntering by me, dressed in a designer gray suit and pink tie.

A black server brought over a glass of champagne, he rudely waved her away.

Three steps later, a white server carried over a similar tray of champagne.

The man grabbed it immediately.

I quirked my brows.

Is he racist? Or did he simply realize that now he wanted champagne?

Regardless, I could tell he was an art snob.

Pretension radiated off him.

Soon he would be spouting off pompous critiques due to my sculptures not fitting his narrow definition of art.

I watched him gaze at one of my sculptures. Greed glinted in his eyes.

No. He isn't a critic. He's a buyer.

My disdain for him rose.

Men like him purchased art because they anticipated the value increasing over time. This would allow them to sell it for a profit. To him, my sculpture didn't transcend his mind or make him think deeper about the world.

For him, it was stock or real estate.

He didn't care about the blood that bled to create the work, it was all about buying low and selling high.

Another black waitress, juggling a tray full of drinks headed his way.

A devilish smile spread across his face.

I quirked my brows.

He checked around him, and when she began to pass by, he patted her ass.

What the fuck?

A surge of rage boiled within me.

I witnessed the waitress's startled expression, the momentary pause in her stride before she quickly rushed away.

Fucking piece of shit.

No one else noticed.

But I did.

And I couldn't stand idle.

Angry, I placed my lighter back into my pocket and stalked towards him.

The room seemed to blur, the voices around me turning into a distant hum.

All I saw was him, the grin still stuck on his face, already scanning the room for probably his next target.

I stopped in front of him, blocking his view. "Enjoying the show?"

He squinted at me for a moment, trying to place me. "And you are?"

“The artist,” I replied, my tone ice cold. “One who doesn’t take kindly to sexual assault at my showing.”

“Sexual assault?” His eyes widened slightly, but he quickly recovered, plastering on a fake laugh. “Let us not be so... woke. It is all fun and games.”

“Not for her,” I growled. “And not for me.”

“Look here—”

“You are lucky I am on probation due to hitting another idiot at my last showing. I apparently have to prove to the court that I am not a mad man with an anger problem.” Seething, I stepped closer. “But, if I ever catch you when no witnesses are around, I will be creative.”

He opened his mouth in shock.

“Leave.” I commanded. “Before I decide that I don’t care about consequences.”

My threat hung heavy in the air between us.

Trembling, he stepped back. “I-I was going to buy a lot. You are losing several potential sales—”

“Some things are more important than a fucking price tag.” I glared. “Get the fuck out of here!”

His face was a mask of shock and embarrassment as he slinked away.

I turned around and scanned the gallery.

Now to return to the grueling process of finding someone that won’t bore me to death at the masquerade.

On the left several women giggled and took hors d’oeuvres from one server.

One glanced my way and winked.

Hmmm.

She had silky long blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes. A white dress hugged her slim frame. She wore silver stilettos.

Pretty, but she didn’t intrigue me.

My whole being ached with a longing I could not name. Every fiber screamed for something that only existed in my wildest dreams, an uncharted desire that had yet to be fulfilled.

But, I had no name for it and not one description.

Where is she? What type of woman could meet my goal?

I strolled on.

Another group of women spoke on my right.

Their excited words flowed to my ears.

"This collection is thrilling."

"No. I think it's alluring."

"Jenny, those are all big words that are basically hot and sexy."

"Well, it doesn't matter. Tristan has done it again."

While the words represented understanding and appreciation of my art, an odd emptiness rose within me.

Even worse, I couldn't put a name to it.

What is it, Tristan? Get your head in the game.

I maneuvered through a thickening crowd in the center of the gallery. Soon there would not be enough space to walk.

As more and more entered, many gasped, others shrieked, and many took selfies by the pieces.

I spotted a woman gesturing to one of my sculptures.

"The attention to detail in this artwork is impeccable. This is groundbreaking."

"I'm not sure about that. Are the women not simply set on fire?"

"It's more than that. It's a provocative nature imagery."

"But is it more shock, rather than a deep exploration of theme?"

I put my focus back on the hunt. It was better to do that, than swim in the admiration and criticism.

I'd learned long ago to ignore other's opinions on my art.

To care was a fickle, weary move that could harm not only my art, but my life.

"Captivating."

"He's a genius of our time."

"Yes. Perhaps, our Van Gogh."

"The way the artist plays with light and shadow in this sculpture is truly stunning."

"So provocative."

"I think it's exploitative."

"How?"

"Burning naked women? This is crossing the line."

"Is there a line in art?"

I gritted my teeth and stopped, needing to see where this was going.

"The use of fire in this collection is really striking. It creates a sense of danger and passion that really draws me in."

"I think he's trying to say something?"

"What do you think the message is?"

I turned to the two critics—a man wearing black and woman donning white.

"I'm not sure what the message is, but it could be problematic."

"How could these pieces be a problem?"

"Fire has long been associated with destruction and chaos. It's difficult to reconcile that with the sensual and erotic nature of these sculptures."

"But that's exactly what makes these pieces so powerful. They're challenging us to embrace the darker aspects of desire and passion."

I groaned in annoyance and headed off.

“Still, I’m not convinced that the merging of sex and fire is a healthy or productive one.”

“I can’t believe you’re being so harsh.”

Aggravated, I headed further away, needing to get back to the hunt.

Soon, I navigated my way through a small group of women.

I could sense they were fangirl art enthusiasts, probably art tockers and vloggers. They had their phones out, recording everything and constantly speaking into their devices. Maybe, they were talking to live viewers.

One of them gazed my way, blushed, and prolonged her perusal of me. Lowering her phone, a flirtatious smile spread across her face.

As I got closer, she grabbed the end of her red hair and twirled some of it around her finger.

When I approached, she winked at me.

Not you, sweetheart.

Again, she was missing the thing that I yearned for, but couldn’t name myself.

Goddamn it. This hunt is becoming useless.

I passed by her, not interested in fucking a nameless stranger yearning for clout.

But then someone caught my eye on the right.

Hmmm.

I turned that way as if being pulled by this invisible, divine source.

I stopped in my tracks.

Who is that?

She had dark brown skin. Her thick curly hair twisted and coiled around her head and fell a little bit past her shoulders.

And her body...

She should have been a model for my sculptures. Her frame boasted curves in all the right places.

She wore black heels that dazzled my eyes. Dark blue dress pants hugged her ample ass and thick hips. Meanwhile a conservative bright blue shirt attempted to hide those full breasts, but were doing a horrible job. Even buttoned all the way up to her delicate neck, I could make out the soft mounds under the fabric.

Who is she? What's her name?

She studied one of my sculptures, her eyes tracing the lines of the naked form.

What does she think?

I watched her for a moment, my gaze traveling over her body, imagining what it would feel like to touch her, to taste her.

Heat rose within me.

My cock jerked in my pants, and with that came the desire to claim this woman that I didn't know.

I want her.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MOTH AND THE FLAME



TRISTAN

I nstantly, I became the predator hunting the unsuspecting prey.

I walked over to her with a slow, deliberate movement.

She should be in my bed tonight.

My steps were measured and controlled.

No. Remember the goal. She is meant for the party.

My gaze remained steady on her.

Don't forget the process. First she must pass all the tests to tell me that she could be ready for the event.

When I stopped a foot from her, she looked up. Curiosity filled her eyes. And I swore there was something else that sparked in her gaze too.

Was that a hint of attraction?

Silent, she curved her lips at the edges and returned her view to the sculpture in front of her.

It had been the first piece that I'd completed.

The moment I knew that this collection could happen.

What is going on in her mind when she looks at my art?

I studied the piece.

Bright bronze and steel formed the woman's body, giving her a sense of strength and durability. Her curves and flowing hair were depicted with a delicate, almost fragile quality.

The use of glass and translucent colors in the sculpture added a delicate, ethereal quality to it, making it seem as though the woman was emerging from a dreamlike world of fire.

In the background, the smoke machine hummed around us. Smoke swirled along the sculpture. The scent of burning wood rose with it.

I'd wanted to push the sensory experience of the art as much as I could.

I turned my view back to the gorgeous woman next to me. "Have you touched it yet?"

She didn't look my way. A sweet voice left her lips. "I saw the signs that said we could, but..."

"You're scared to get burned?"

She grinned. "No. I'm terrified to accidentally break something so breathtaking."

She likes it.

I licked my lips. "Touch it."

She widened her eyes. "I don't know."

"If you break it, I'll take full responsibility."

She turned my way and chuckled. "You'll tell the artist that you did it?"

I raised my eyebrows.

She doesn't know I am the artist?

A wicked smirk appeared on my face.

Interesting.

“Yes.” I nodded. “I’ll tell the artist it was me.”

She raised her hand in front of me. “Pinky promise?”

It had been a few decades since I’d heard words like that. Not since my childhood days at Serenity House group home.

Still, I brought my hand close to hers. “Pinky promise.”

She curled her delicate finger along mine, and an electric charge traveled through my body.

What?

A deep shudder rumbled through me.

Heat seared my flesh.

I did everything I could to stifle the groan of pleasure trying to escape my lips.

When she moved her hand, I couldn’t help but frown.

And I doubted she even noticed.

“Okay.” She turned, slowly extended her hand, and touched the top of my sculpture.

“What do you think?”

“Wow.” She slipped her fingers along the woman’s twirling hair.

I grunted, feeling like she was caressing me.

She slid her fingers across the woman’s cheek and then lip.

I want her tonight. No. You can’t. Remember all of the tests.

Her voice was a soft whisper. “This is surprising.”

Intrigued, I muttered, “What is?”

“The sculpture is cool to the touch, despite the almost real flames surrounding it.”

“Almost as if that was intentional on the artist’s part?”

“I think it was.” She slipped her hands along the curve of the sculpture’s neck.

I could feel the heat radiating off her body like a flame beckoning me to get closer.

A shiver ran through me. “What do you think about the artist’s choices?”

“Perhaps...this contrast between the heat and the coolness is a metaphor for the tension between passion and restraint.” She slowly pulled her hand away. “Desire and control.”

I widened my eyes. “Really? Tell me more.”

“If I had to guess, I think the artist is talking about...” She looked at the hand that had touched the sculpture as if in a daze. “The intensity between restraint and release when it comes to sex...”

I parted my lips.

“And...”

I quirked my brows. “And?”

“The delicate balance between heat and coolness that is at the heart of sensual emotions.”

I blinked. “Some see the message of showing desire as destructive.”

“I think it’s more complex than that.” She moved her gaze away from her hand and back to the sculpture. “Sure, our desires can be destructive, but they can also be creative and transformative.”

Yes.

She lowered her hand. “Fire is a symbol of both destruction and rebirth, and that duality is present in these sculptures.”

My body ached for her.

My cock hardened.

I placed my hands in front of my groin, not wanting to scare her with the bulge. “But...does this artist not push too

far out of the box?”

“I think it’s important for artists to push boundaries and challenge our assumptions about desire and humanity. These sculptures are doing that, whether we like it or not.” She gestured to the piece. “At first look, one would say that these women are being burned alive. Yet, a deeper look would see that...they are *phoenixes* rising out of the flames?”

Yes. She’ll be mine. Tonight. No. Stop it. Not yet.

She turned to me and shrugged. “But, I’m no art critic. What do I really know about something so amazing?”

“Everything.” I leaned my head to the side. “However, what *do* you think you know?”

“The human mind.”

I blinked. “Explain?”

“I’m a psych graduate student going after my PhD.”

“Very interesting.” I nodded. “And how did you end up here this evening?”

“My advising professor for my dissertation found me in the library a few hours ago and demanded I leave.”

I grinned. “Why?”

“She thinks I have been spending too much time on my dissertation and not enough time on life.”

“I agree.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “In the library on a Friday night? Very bad girl.”

She chuckled. “Anyway, my professor placed a flyer for this event on my desk and came up with the assignment to use psychoanalytic theories, such as Freud’s theory of the unconscious and Lacan’s theory of the gaze, to analyze tonight’s artwork.”

I blinked. “How would that help?”

“I assume it will get me to understand how this artwork might be addressing issues of sexuality, power, and desire.”

Then, she rolled her eyes. “But, honestly, my professor is trying to get me out of the library and...”

“And?”

“Laid. She has been adamant about my needing to get laid.”

Another groan threatened to escape me. “No husband or boyfriend?”

Not that it mattered.

I would get rid of him.

She shook her head. “I’ve been focused on my dissertation.”

“I’ll have to change that.” I extended my hand to hers. “My name is Tristan Russo. What is yours?”

“Tristan Russo?” She opened her mouth in shock. “Like... the artist of this collection?”

“Yes. I love your analysis of my work. Your professor would be happy. You mastered the assignment.”

“Oh my God. You *really* are the artist?” She placed her hand in front of her mouth. “I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

“I like that you didn’t know who I was.”

“Still.” A nervous chuckle left her. “What if I hated it and told you?”

“Then, clearly, I would have set you on fire.”

Those brown eyes sparkled as she laughed. I loved the musical sound leaving those sexy lips. It filled the space around my head, deliciously rippling down my spine and making my cock jerk.

How does she sound when she moans?

It was hard not to keep the hunger out of my voice. “Perhaps, to further complete your professor’s assignment, you should let the artist take you out?”

A spark of need flickered in those eyes.

It was fast, but I caught it.

She cleared her throat. “My name is Nova Williams.”

“That is a beautiful name.”

“Thank you.”

“But, that is not an answer to my requesting a date.”

She smirked. “Was that truly a question? Or was it more of a suggestion?”

“I would say it was a *soft* demand.”

“Which is interesting because you seem more like a *hard* demand type of person.”

My voice lowered. “Very hard.”

She swallowed and turned back to the sculpture.

Had she ever been approached by a man like me? Had she ever been pursued? Hunted? Was her heart racing with fear or anticipation? Was she nervous?

She should be.

I continued to watch her.

Nova Williams.

She didn't look my way as she spoke, “Why did you name your collection *Burning Desire*?”

My wicked grin deepened. “That's what I was hoping to achieve within the viewer.”

She turned to face me. Those sexy brown eyes locked onto mine. “And is that what you felt when you created these pieces? A burning desire?”

Already, she was different than the usual women I fucked.

She may not bore me.

I could see the challenge in her eyes, the invitation to reveal my innermost thoughts. And for some reason, I found myself wanting to confess things I'd never said out loud.

But, could she go to the masquerade? Would she be ready for something so...hedonistic?

My voice grew husky. “Yes. I would say...desire ran through me as I made the sculptures.”

“But...not just desire for the sake of desire.” Those brown eyes seemed to cut open my chest and dissect the emotions spinning in my heart. “Was it a desire to push *your* limits?”

You’re damned right.

My body hummed with the need to be inside her.

Could I fuck Nova right here?

What would she do if I grabbed her arm, guided her to the private bathroom in the back of the gallery, yanked down her pants, tore off her panties, and licked her pussy?

Those thoughts consumed me as I watched her.

My pulse raced with a desperate longing. “There *was* a desire to push my limits.”

Nova tilted her head to the side. “And?”

“And,” I stepped closer, towering over her. Only a few inches ran between us. “There was also a desire to explore the darkness that lies within us all. To find pleasure in pain, and pain in pleasure.”

Heat radiated off her body.

This sensual, electric tension rose between us.

“Pain and pleasure.” She gazed up at me. “And do you find those things in your creative process?”

“Sometimes.” I licked my lips. “Or, I find pain and pleasure in other ways.”

Her voice was barely a whisper, but the softness of it filled me with hunger. “What...other ways?”

“I plan to show you.”

Her breath caught.

Weird movement hit my peripheral view, I looked to the side.

My manager Christian waved at me, trying to get my attention. A man in a suit stood next to him, pointing at one of my sculptures and wildly talking. I could tell by Christian's excited expression that the man must have been a top buyer ready to purchase that piece.

Christian waved me over again.

Sighing, I put my view back on Nova. "Speaking of desire. I can't pretend I don't want to rush this between us and taste you immediately."

She blinked again.

"But, I won't rush this." I dropped my gaze to her breasts safely hidden by the buttoned up blue shirt. "However, I will see you tomorrow for our date."

"Tomorrow? Well...a date? I don't know. I have a lot of research to—"

"Be ready at 8 pm."

She parted her lips.

Hunger rippled through me.

"And, wear red." I headed off.

She called back, "But...you don't have my address."

Heading away, I smirked.

She still has no idea who I am, and what I am capable of.

I was the moth.

She was the flame, drawing me closer and closer.

Already an overpowering need surged through me.

Once she passed my tests, her fate would be sealed.

I would have her in every way I desired, and nothing would keep me away.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SEXY ARTIST



NOVA

I texted my twin brother, Dylan.

Me: I met someone.

Me: An artist.

Me: He was super sexy.

Me: You would like him.

I put my phone in my purse and sat in the back of the Uber.

Wow.

I couldn't stop thinking about Tristan. The way his eyes pierced through me. The way his dark voice caressed my skin.

Irresistibly handsome, he was tall with broad shoulders and a lean muscular built. Dark hair and bright green eyes. Intense and mysterious.

Although a short conversation, our back and forth had told me that he was a charismatic man.

Where the hell did he come from?

After talking to Tristan, I was feeling hot and lusty, the kind of feeling that I hadn't experienced in a long time.

Erotic thoughts consumed my mind. The way his eyes had smoldered with intensity. The way his words had set my body ablaze with desire. The way he exuded confidence and power.

And that sculpture collection of his...

It was stunning.

Thrilling.

The very embodiment of desire.

In fact, looking at just one piece made me feel like I was about to orgasm. Only a genius could cause such a reaction through glass and metal.

Therefore, Tristan had to be a highly sexual being who was unafraid to explore his desires and fantasies.

He would...rip me apart...and I would love every second...

Surely, dating him would be exciting.

An adventure.

Plus, I'd done some quick research on Tristan, and could only find information about his art career. He'd gone to Rhode Island School of Design and earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Sculpture and Painting.

After that, Tristan was an Artist in Residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

Then, he did his first solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. There, he created an installation that merged sculpture and painting together and explored themes of identity and memory.

The older he became, the more his works shifted to provocative and controversial.

One collection called Pissy Country, presented tons of upside down urinals shaped like America. He'd painted the historical horrors of our country on each one—scenes of slavery, images of Native American Genocide, scenes of

Japanese Internment camps during World War II, and even visions of African Americans being experimented on in the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment.

Then, there was his temper.

At his last art showing, an art critic screamed that he was the Anti-Christ of Art. Tristan beat the critic until he passed out, and then wiped the man's blood on his nearest sculpture which ended up selling for over a million dollars that night.

Yet, there was absolutely nothing about his childhood or where he'd come from.

His past represented a complex mystery that I instantly yearned to uncover.

I had a thing for a tortured man, someone in desperate need of fixing.

No. No. Stop thinking about this man. You have bigger problems. Focus on a solution to your own life.

I glanced at the driver—a red headed woman. She was probably college age and doing this for extra money.

She turned up Taylor Swift's song, *Anti-hero* and tapped her fingers on the steering wheel.

Maybe I can get a car and do uber or something. That might fix my money problems.

I gazed out the window as the car passed through Paradise City's bustling downtown. The buildings that lined the streets stretched towards the sky, casting long shadows on the ground below.

Think about getting money and independence. Not the sexy, mysterious artist.

I had to finish my PhD and find job opportunities.

Unfortunately, my mother represented a textbook narcissistic parent. For her financially supporting my academic career, she expected me to call three times a day and tell her how amazing she was, even when she was being cruel.

Meanwhile, she could be as overly critical of my life as she desired. And the only acceptable response was silence on the matter.

That stuff I could deal with.

How she crossed the line was that I was now in my third year of my PhD in a rigorous program that focused on the study of human sexuality. It covered many topics— sexual development, sexual behavior, and kinks.

This involved advanced coursework, a significant amount of time conducting research, a dissertation, qualifying exams, and finally I had to complete clinical hours.

I'd been working my ass off, forgoing any real social life.

No partying.

No vacations.

No dating.

No sex.

Then, yesterday, my mother called and decided that I would need to change my PhD to Biblical Studies or she would not pay anymore.

Just like that.

I'd dedicated my academic career to studying human sexuality, receiving honors, awards, and scholarships.

And my mother went to her country club yesterday afternoon, hung at the bar with her golf buddies, and told them what I studied.

Apparently, some laughed.

Others joked.

Regardless, she drowned in embarrassment.

I thought back to that exhausting phone conversation from yesterday.

“Nova, it would be more respectful—”

“Mom, what I'm doing now is respectable—”

“Studying sex? After your brother?”

“Mom don’t say that—”

“Biblical Studies is also taught at Paradise City University. Just go to the office and change everything—”

“I can’t just switch it over like that. Every PhD program has an application process—”

“You’re wasting your life away, and I won’t allow it. Janine didn’t even know what one does with this PhD.”

“Well, tell Janine to call me so I can explain—”

“And be embarrassed more? No.”

“Mom, after the program I will be able to help people who are struggling with sexual dysfunction, or issues related to sexual orientation—”

“Oh, God. The gays?”

I sighed. “I could also be an advocate for promoting policies that support women’s sexual health and well-being—”

“Patricia says you’re basically studying orgasms on my money. I was ridiculously embarrassed.”

“Mom, I can’t just change my PhD because your friends made fun of you—”

“You can, when it is my money—”

“It’s actually the education fund that Daddy put in place for me—”

“His will made me trustee—”

“Mom, I’m twenty-five years old. I’ve done everything and more to show you that I am responsible—”

“This is giving me anxiety. Now, I won’t be able to go to the Black-tie Gala tonight.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Fix this. I expect you to change everything by next week and send any documentation to me.”

Of course I hadn’t changed anything.

There was no way I would.

The research of sexuality had been my life.

People like my brother had struggled with this very concept.

I would not deviate from my life's purpose.

Not for my mother.

Not for anybody.

Professor Brown may have some solutions.

The car entered the south of Paradise City and glided through the quiet, tree-lined streets of the residential neighborhoods.

When I have kids, I'll never be like my mother.

My gaze drifted to the houses and the windows that dotted the landscape. I couldn't help but peer into the lit-up interiors of the homes, catching glimpses of strangers' lives in the glow of their warm, inviting living rooms.

I'll be different and truly support my kids.

In one window, I saw a couple watching TV together. Their bodies were curled up against each other on the couch. They seemed content and at ease, comfortable in each other's presence.

My heart warmed.

I'll have to work. Two jobs if necessary. I'll do anything—flip burgers, teach kids, admin...hell...sell my body even...

In another window, I spotted a couple kissing passionately in their kitchen. Their bodies were entwined as they leaned against the counter.

A pang of longing hit me.

I cleared my throat.

I can do this. I just need faith and determination and...

I glimpsed a family dancing in their living room. Children laughed next to what I assumed to be their parents.

Deep longing throbbed through me.

Tristan's face flashed in my head.

My body hummed with desire.

At the art showing, the spark between us had been impossible to ignore.

I couldn't deny the attraction I felt towards him. He had that raw, sexual energy that would make most women rip their clothes off and volunteer to be his sex slave.

No. No. Remember. You have a crisis that's more important.

The car stopped at a red light.

I tried not to look, but in another window, a woman cradled a newborn baby in her arms. That sight tugged at my heart.

I turned away.

I might have been driven and focused on my career goals, but my truest desires lay in the simple moments of human connection—true love and creating a big family with a special person.

Soon...but...when? And with who?

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DESIRE



NOVA

The car pulled up to my apartment building.
Tristan's face returned to my mind.

Fuck. He's so sexy, but probably dangerous...in the most delicious ways.

My driver waved at me. "Have a good night."

"Oh. Yes. Thanks. You too." I stepped out of the Uber and closed the door.

I'm supposed to be saving my life and Tristan wants a date. Should I even go?

Any other month I would have gladly said yes. But, this month I had to get out of my mother's clutches and become independent.

Still...how could I say no to him?

There was something undeniably sexy about this man. He had that raw magnetism that would draw any sane woman in.

Surely, his height and muscles certainly added to his sex appeal, but it was truly his *confident demeanor* and *mysterious past* that made him so irresistible.

He was the kind of man who commanded attention without even trying—an aura of power and intensity that was impossible for me to ignore.

I can't say no.

But, could I balance my desires and responsibilities? Or would the temptation of passion and desire be too much to stay focused?

I headed toward my building, entered the small lobby, and pulled out my keys.

Yeah. There's no way I can say no to him.

Was it the thrill of the unknown? Was it the danger of being pursued by someone so sexy and alluring?

I entered the lobby, waved at Raymond the night security guard, and pressed the button to the elevator.

Damn. I should be thinking about solutions, but all I can think about is Tristan.

Why couldn't I focus? Was it some deep, primal instinct that drew me to Tristan on a subconscious level?

The elevator doors opened.

I stepped on and considered what could be going on in my head.

As a fierce academic, I was well aware of the many theories and concepts that tried to explain the psychology of desire.

Evolutionary Psychology claimed that we were drawn to partners who signaled reproductive fitness. For example, humans were attracted to partners who smelled good because scent was an important signal of genetic compatibility.

Also, many women loved men with deeper voices. But in a biological sense, a deep voice was associated with high

testosterone levels, which was important for male reproductive health.

I could go on and on.

But reproductive reasons seemed too simplistic to explain the complexity of my desire for Tristan.

I could look to Attachment Theory, which suggested that our early relationships shaped our patterns of desire.

That couldn't be it.

I didn't have much of a relationship history. Lots of sex and not much commitment.

However, those past guys couldn't have influenced my attraction to Tristan—someone so mysterious and aloof.

But in the end, the truth was even crazier.

I didn't really care about the *why* of my desire for him.

All I knew was that Tristan had awoken something in me, something primal and wild, something that felt like a force of nature. It was like a fire that burned within my core, threatening to consume my body if I didn't act on it soon.

On the elevator up to the fourth floor, I imagined myself standing before Tristan.

The flames of my desire licked at my skin.

He was a dark soul.

I could see it in his art.

Twisted and Tortured.

To date Tristan would be to play with fire.

Yet, the heat of it all was too tempting to resist.

The elevator stopped.

The doors opened.

I left it, headed to my apartment door, and pulled out my keys.

But, before I could put the key in the hole, the door opened.

Scarlett's excited face greeted my eyes. Her long pink braids bounced around her shoulders. And her usual bright pink eye shadow made her dark brown skin pop more this evening.

"Girl!" Scarlett raised her voice. "Paradise has a serial killer!"

I opened my mouth in shock. "What?"

"Okay. Okay. Let me calm down." Scarlett grinned and backed up so I could enter. "I shouldn't get too excited. For now, it's only one victim, but all the details and showmanship screams serial killer."

"Hold up." I stepped inside. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh my God." Scarlett shut the door. "Where do I even start?"

I placed my purse on the table. "Perhaps, start at the *victim* part."

"Yes. Yes." She hurried into our small living room. "I recorded everything. Let me show you the different news reports. I'm chronicling all of this."

Of course you are.

Smirking, I followed her into the living room where blue and pink dominated the space.

Shades of blue covered the walls—the palest baby blue to the darkest navy. I loved that color. Meanwhile, Scarlett's favorite color, pink was scattered throughout the space, from the bright fuchsia throw pillows on the sofa to the pastel pink curtains that adorned the windows.

"I shouldn't get so excited." Scarlett picked up the remote control. "I mean...it may only be one murder."

"Uh...let's hope. We don't want more people dying."

"Oh." She let out a nervous chuckle. "Well, yeah. We don't want innocent people to die for the sake of improving my

dissertation which is beyond boring right now.”

Scarlett was a PhD student studying criminology with a specialization in serial killers. We’d met in college due to having many of the same psych classes.

Unfortunately, my roommate’s interest in psychology began at a young age, when her father was arrested and convicted for the murder of several young women in their hometown.

Growing up, she struggled with the trauma and shame of her father’s actions. A strong desire to understand what led him to commit such heinous crimes was what drove her academic career.

Her dissertation was titled “*The Role of Childhood Trauma and Social Isolation in the Development of Serial Killer Behavior.*”

Through her research, she hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of serial killer behavior and ultimately find ways to prevent it.

“How was the art showing?” She pressed the remote.

I grinned. “Very hot.”

The TV turned on.

Scarlett went to our recordings on the menu and pressed play, but muted the TV. “Speaking of hot.”

Instantly, fire blazed on the screen. Then, a news correspondent stepped in line of the camera view.

Behind him, the object still remained ablaze while fire fighters hosed it down.

I stepped over to the couch. “What is going on?”

Taking a deep breath, Scarlett started talking rapidly. “It’s so crazy and gruesome. They found a woman in the middle of downtown’s shopping square, naked, secured to a metal platform by wire and set on fire by some remote control mechanism in the platform.”

“What the hell?” I turned to her. “Are you serious?”

“I am.” Scarlett widened her eyes. “The news footage was horrifying. As you can see, the flames are so intense. They completely engulf her. It took them hours to put it out.”

“Oh my God.” I turned away from the TV. “Are you telling me that the fire on the screen is a woman being burned alive?”

“Well...she’s dead now, but yes.”

My heart raced. “Oh God.”

“It’s a serial killer.”

“Scarlett.” I held up my hand. “Don’t even put that energy out there in the universe.”

“I get it, but with all the showmanship. There’s no way this will be his only victim.”

My stomach twisted.

“This is someone sending a twisted message.”

My bottom lip quivered. “To whom?”

“I have no idea, but I am about to be up all night looking into this.” Scarlett raised the remote. “Let me show you some of the footage—”

“Hell no.” I headed off to my bedroom. “I would like to have no nightmares this evening.”

“Well...the footage is a bit disturbing.”

“I want no parts of that.”

Here I had just seen breathtaking sculptures of women rising from the flames of desire, and now I would have an unimaginable, cruel, and inhumane reverse reflection of that same image in my head the rest of the night.

Wait.

I paused in the hallway.

Naked women and fire at the art showing, and now the a woman was burned alive. That’s an odd coincidence.

A cold shiver ran down my spine.

Just a weird...coincidence.

Suddenly, something rubbed against my leg.

“Ah!” I jumped back and looked down. “Oh. I’m sorry, Freud.”

Slipping his long body against my leg, our cat purred.

I let out a long breath. “Are you hungry?”

The purring increased.

“Must be.” I turned around and hurried to the kitchen. My thick and fluffy white kitty trotted behind me, swishing his shaggy tail back and forth.

We’d discovered Freud hiding on our fire escape one night. Back then, he’d been a little kitten. I had no idea where his mother was or what had happened to him.

We brought him inside, gave him milk, and have taken care of him ever since.

I entered our kitchen, opened the blue cabinets under the sink, and yanked out food. “Here you go, buddy.”

Scarlett strolled into the kitchen. “I’m telling you. This is a carefully planned intentional act of violence.”

“Could you not?” I carried the bag of food over to his bowl. “You’re completely terrifying me.”

“Come on, Nova. I listen to your sex stuff all the time. Listen to my stuff.”

“You listen to my stuff because studies on sexuality and kinks are a lot less horrifying than serial killers.”

“Still, you’re my bestie.”

“Fine. I’ll listen.” I groaned in annoyance. “But, if I have a nightmare, I’m sleeping in your bed.”

“And I will let you hold my teddy bear, Gordy.”

“Fine.”

“What I want to know is why would this killer set the victim on fire *tonight*.”

Chills ran through me.

Scarlett leaned against the counter. “What was it about this night? Is it due to childhood trauma? Does this date mean something to him?”

I tried not to think of the woman burning alive. The pain. The fear. The all-consuming horror of it all.

Scarlett continued, “Is it a message to someone in particular? Is it just because it’s Friday? And how long was he watching her? Did he follow her home? Lay under her bed while she slept? Did he—”

Someone knocked on the door.

I shrieked.

Scarlett jumped.

Jesus!

Slowly, I got ready to grab a sharp knife from the drawer closest to me.

But then, our security guard Raymond’s voice sounded from the other side of the door. “Sorry, to bother you so late ladies, but Mrs. Williams received a package.”

Oh.

I cleared my throat. “Coming.”

Scarlett grinned. “Package? Delivered at night?”

I went over to the door and opened it. “Thanks, Raymond.”

He held a huge black box in his hand. A gold bow sat on top of it. “The guy that brought this over rode in a Bentley Mulsanne.”

Scarlett came over. “A what?”

“Mulsanne. It’s a prestigious car. Super impressive.” Raymond handed me the huge box. “Handcrafted and customizable. He kept the vehicle red on the outside, but it was all black on the inside. Very nice. The chauffer wore a suit and even had a hat.”

I carried the box over to the kitchen counter and set it down. “But, what did *the man* look like? The one dropping off

the package.”

“Oh. Tall. Some muscle.” Raymond remained in the hallway. “Black shirt and pants. All designer I’m sure.”

Scarlett crossed her arms over her chest. “And could you give a proper description for a police sketch?”

“Scarlett, relax.” I shook my head and returned my view to the box.

“You want me to relax?” Scarlett sighed. “You have not talked to a guy this year, so who could this be but some psycho crazy—”

“I met someone tonight.” I grabbed the top off the box and lifted it.

Tissue paper fluffed up.

“Thanks, Raymond. I’ve got it from here.” Scarlett shut the door and rushed to me. “Who did you meet, and why am I just hearing about this?”

“You greeted me, yelling about a serial killer being in Paradise. I felt like that was way more important.” I moved the tissue paper to the side and spotted a white card lying on top of red fabric. It had black letters written in cursive.

“Forget about the serial killer.” Scarlett grinned. “I want to hear about the rich guy you just met.”

I picked up the card and read it.

Nova,

I am thrilled to see you tomorrow night at 8pm. Be downstairs. My driver will pick you up.

By the way...the mere thought of being in your presence ignites a fire in me that cannot be contained.

As a symbol of my burning impatience, I have enclosed a small gift for you.

Inside, you will find the most exquisite red dress that I have personally selected for your breathtaking body.

The color will perfectly match your alluring beauty.

I cannot wait to explore...

I raised my eyebrows.

Explore what? Us? Or...is he talking about something else? Maybe...I'm over thinking it all.

Scarlett held her hand out. "I need to read this card. I'm super nosy and also on guard. Nobody better not ever mess with my girl."

I gave her the card and reached my hand into the box.

Scarlett shook her head. "I am shocked you gave him our address. That's not like you."

"I didn't tell him where we lived." I pulled the red dress out.

"Wait. You *didn't* tell him?"

"I didn't." I assessed the dress.

It was an explosion of red as if someone took a vat of red paint and threw it on a blank canvas and then added every shade of red imaginable.

I checked the size and confirmed that it would fit.

How did he guess my size? So odd.

This dress would perfectly hug my curves. Plus, the garment screamed super expensive. Never had I worn something so nice.

Scarlett finished reading the card. "Wait. You have a date tomorrow?"

"I do."

"Well, damn."

I turned the dress around. "And...apparently, I am wearing this."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE BURNING WOMAN



TRISTAN

Sitting in the back of my Bentley, I watched as Paradise City slowly retreated into the distance.

The neon lights and towering skyscrapers passed by like ghosts in a dream. The bustling streets gave way to small homes and sleepy suburbs, where the dim glow of street lamps marked the spaces between houses.

For miles and miles, nothing but darkness consumed the landscape, showing no sign of the serene countryside that lay ahead.

Charles, my loyal chauffeur, steered us through the darkness. His reflection shimmered in the rearview mirror.

My thoughts, however, were fixed on Nova and what her reaction would be to the surprise I'd left at her building.

It was a simple gesture, nothing grand—a note and red dress.

I could almost feel Nova's hands trembling as she opened the box, her eyes widening at the sight.

The dress was breathtaking. The ruby red fabric was stunning. I'd admired its plunging neckline, the flattering silhouette, and its folds falling gracefully down.

And although the dress was beautiful, on her it would be flawless.

I should make her cum while she wears it.

I imagined Nova draped in the lush red of the dress. In my mind, her dark hair swirled around her exquisite face, and her brown eyes gleamed with a passionate intensity that shimmered brighter than the fabric surrounding her.

Surely the red would accentuate her radiant brown skin.

Did she like the gown?

And more important, did she understand that she was to wear it for our date tomorrow night?

And that wearing the gown would be her first test in obedience?

I was a dominant man, and I expected her full submission.

Will she pass my tests?

My heart raced with anticipation.

My cock twitched as I considered what I planned to do to her tomorrow.

The thought of peeling away the fabric, finding her naked and vulnerable beneath it, filled me with a hunger that could not be contained.

I wanted to ravish her, to make her gasp with pleasure in all the ways I knew how.

To make her body quiver and tremble for my every touch, my every command.

The idea of tasting Nova's sweet skin sent shivers down my spine, making my cock harden even further with lusty excitement.

I craved to feel the heat of her body against mine in the dark of night, our bodies intertwined like a single entity under

a blanket of stars.

Exploring each other's inner depths.

Tomorrow will be interesting indeed.

I moved my gaze to the window.

Outside the suburban landscape transformed into dense woods.

We're close to Peiter's fortress.

Getting Nova's address had been a straightforward task for my meticulous personal assistant, Penelope. She had a knack for handling things with grace, and typically navigated through the maze of social connections and information sources with ease.

Yet, knowing where Nova lived was one thing; understanding who she really was, however, was a challenge of an entirely different nature.

That was why I was heading to the outskirts of Paradise City, towards the secluded lair of my childhood friend, Peiter.

He better let me in.

Peiter was an enigma, a recluse living in the world of code and ciphers, thriving in the digital chaos that confounded most. We grew up together in the same harsh foster care system, along with Dominic.

We were misfit souls that found solace in each other's company. Dominic was the executor of our survival. He always did the things that we never wanted to. I was the tough one, knocking out any bullies who bothered us. Meanwhile, Peiter was the smart, socially-awkward member of our little tribe. He came up with plans that not only kept us safe, but fed.

However, too much occurred in those days to him. It made him terrified to deal with strangers. His fear of the outside world had only grown since then, and he'd retreated further into the safety of his digital fortress.

Over the years, his affinity for computers and knack for unraveling complex codes had morphed into something much more formidable. He'd become one of the most accomplished hackers in Paradise City—a digital ghost capable of extracting information from the deepest, darkest corners of the virtual world.

If anyone could dig up information about Nova, it was him.

And after meeting her, I had many questions.

Who was she beneath the polished exterior she presented to the world?

What were her dreams?

Her fears?

Most importantly, what were her secrets?

After all, Paradise City wasn't just a place of extravagant pleasures and glittering lights. It was also a city of secrets, where every person had a story hidden beneath the surface.

Unraveling Nova's story was a mystery I suddenly found myself eager to solve.

Smirking, I checked the bag on my right, making sure the meal was still warm.

Peiter's food tastes were a blend of nostalgia, comfort, and a sprinkle of eccentricity.

And his absolute favorite dinner was a kid's meal from *Star-Crossed Diner*—a local gem in Paradise City.

However, it wasn't just any kid's meal. It was their signature *Little Gourmet*, a perfectly sized double bacon cheeseburger with extra pickles and their special Caviar lime sauce.

Caviar limes, also known as finger limes, were a delicacy in Paradise City. The local chefs had mastered the art of utilizing their pearls to create an array of sauces, but it was Paradise Diner that really hit the spot for Peiter. Their secret

blend of ingredients mixed with the caviar lime gave the burger a unique, irresistible flavor.

The meal came with a side of crisp, golden fries, and a special edition toy that Peiter had grown quite fond of. The current collection featured miniature models of vintage arcade machines, a throwback to the simpler times we'd often reminisce about.

To wash it down, he always opted for an old-fashioned root beer. The diner was one of the few places in the city that still brewed their own. The complex, sweet-sassafras flavor was a perfect complement to the meal.

Meanwhile, keeping Peiter's food warm during the journey from the city to the outskirts was no small task. I had a custom-made insulated bag for this purpose, a gift from a fan who also happened to be a materials engineer. It was a sleek, matte black bag equipped with a high-tech thermal lining capable of maintaining the food's temperature for several hours.

He won't turn me away once he sees the Star-Crossed logo on the bag.

I chuckled to myself.

My phone vibrated in my pocket.

Who is this?

I grabbed it and checked the screen.

Huh?

A new message came from an anonymous number.

To my shock, it was a video link.

Intrigued, I clicked on it.

My heart stopped.

On the screen was a woman being burned alive in some odd contraption.

What is this? It can't be real. Right?

My blood ran cold.

The camera zoomed in on her face as she screamed in agony. The sound was a ghastly symphony of her shrieks blending with the crackling inferno.

Nausea rose in my throat.

My grip on the phone tightened.

The sight was horrifying, disgusting, a vision so cruel and savage it was nearly impossible to watch.

I stared in horror at the video, my stomach turning in revulsion.

No. This...isn't real.

I stopped the video, unable to watch anymore.

But...why would someone send this to me?

I pressed on the sender section, and of course couldn't get any information since it had been delivered from an anonymous number.

I'll have Peiter look into this. Even if it is fake...I want to know who sent it and why they thought it was a good idea to deliver that to me.

I took a deep breath.

Then suddenly, the video disappeared.

I blinked.

What?

In one second, the terrifying footage was there.

In the next second, it vanished.

What is going on?

A sense of unease crept into the edges of my mind.

My heart pounded in my chest.

I frantically tried to pull the video link back up, my fingers fumbling on the screen. But it was as if it had never existed, vanished into the ether from where it had cruelly emerged.

Questions multiplied in my mind like a knot of venomous snakes, each more overwhelming and sinister than the last.

I looked back out the window, the darkness of the forest suddenly more threatening.

But...was that real?

I returned to my phone, quickly typed in *woman set on fire*, and hit enter.

To my dismay, the results that flooded the screen were predominantly about my art collection. Headlines such as “*Tristan’s fiery art sets the world ablaze*” and “*Burning Desires—Tristan’s sensational fire.*”

My heart pounded in my chest as I scrolled through the news, trying to find something, anything that could relate to the video I’d just seen.

My breath hitched when I saw an article about a woman set on fire. But upon closer examination, it was a story from thirty years ago.

Nothing recent.

Okay. This isn’t real. At least...I don’t think so.

Just as I was about to put my phone away, a notification popped up.

My arch-nemesis, the insufferable Landon Wolfe, had just gone live on Instagram.

I frowned.

The man was a self-proclaimed art critic and famous youtuber that had made it his mission to undermine my every accomplishment.

In fact, he despised me with a passion that often bordered on obsession.

I clicked on the video, and there he was in all his unpleasant glory, ranting in front of his hundreds of thousands of followers.

“Yes. Yes, My Lovelies!” Landon bobbed his head. “I was at *Tristan the Fake*’s showing tonight and can I stress that he is a sham.”

Landon pressed a button on his keyboard.

A horn blew.

“He is a disgrace to the art world!”

The horn blew again.

“And his fame is undeserved!” Landon shook his head. “Honestly, the only reason why he gets press is because he’s gorgeous. But sorry, Tristan. Your looks aren’t enough for me.”

Then, Marilyn Manson’s song, the Beautiful People began to play in the background.

Landon snapped his fingers. “Think for yourselves, Lovelies!”

Not caring about his rant, I shut the phone off and couldn’t help but hear the woman screaming in my head.

It wasn’t real. It wasn’t.

Still, I was rattled.

My driver Charles’s voice cut through my shaken thoughts. “We’ve arrived, sir.”

I glanced out the window and saw the dark woods. “Thank you, Charles.”

He hurried with getting out of the car, rushed to my door, and opened it. “Do you want me to stay by the car as usual, sir?”

“Yes. Peiter will truly not let me in if I bring anyone else.” I pocketed my phone and stepped out into the chill of the night. “I’ll be back, Charles.”

While I was exhausted from the art showing earlier, I had a rendezvous with a reclusive hacker, a woman to learn more about, and an ominous video to decode.

This night was far from over.

CHAPTER SIX

SHADOWS, ALIENS, AND MYSTERY



TRISTAN

The forest was dark, not much moonlight filtered through the canopy of leaves above. Here, the shadows were hungry, devouring any sense of brightness.

Frowning, I gripped Peiter's food in one hand.

In the other hand, I held my phone's flashlight to guide my way.

Sounds of twigs snapped.

Leaves rustled.

Wind whispered.

The air tasted of untouched greenery and quiet desolation.

Mud began to cake on my Testoni shoes, making the expensive leather look less pristine.

Damn you, Peiter. Why couldn't you have taken me up on my offer to stay in one of my condos?

I deepened my frown.

Unfortunately, my destination was not some fairy-tale elven home nestled in the woods, but an old relic from a time when the fear of nuclear destruction was very real.

Peiter's domain was a goddamn bomb shelter.

And it served as a fortress of concrete and steel, hidden away in the natural camouflage of the woodland.

Finally, I arrived in front of the place.

From the outside, it looked abandoned, another forgotten ruin lost to time and the encroaching wilderness. Its door was rusted, and the surrounding ground blanketed with a layer of moss and decaying leaves.

However, I knew better.

I stepped up to the entryway, and a crackling voice echoed from unseen speakers. "Not a step further, Tristan."

"Let me in, Peiter."

"Whatever you want me to do, I am not doing."

"It's two small tasks. Very simple."

"Two small tasks? Nothing is small with you."

"Very simple. Open the door so I can—"

"No way! It's all out now." Fear laced his voice. "The government can't keep it hushed up anymore. Aliens! They're real. I told you!"

"Okay. You did." I nodded. "Let's talk about that some more with my coming—"

"I can't risk exposure!"

"What do you mean?"

"You could be an alien that has figured out how to transform into—"

"Peiter, come on. I'm not an alien. You've known me since we were kids."

Silence.

Sighing, I unzipped the bag and pulled out the *Little Gourmet* meal.

The scent of freshly cooked burgers and fries filled the air around me.

I whistled. “I’ve got your favorite. Double bacon cheeseburger, extra pickles, crispy fries, special dipping sauce, root beer, and don’t forget the apple pie.”

Silence.

“When’s the last time you had food from Star-Crossed Diner?”

More silence.

“Alright.” I looked at the bag. “You have less than five minutes to let me in. If not, then I will sit in front of this door and lovingly eat this in front of you.”

The speakers crackled again.

There was a note of longing in Peiter’s voice. “Apple pie too?”

“Of course.”

“Fine, but remember, this is a one-time exception. I can’t be too careful these days.”

I curved my lips into a big smile. “Thank you.”

The rusted metal door groaned in protest before it creaked open, revealing Peiter’s lair.

It was a jarring contrast to the outside world.

Flickering neon lights revealed rows upon rows of computers, servers, and monitors casting an artificial glow upon the vintage propaganda posters adorning the walls. The hum of electricity and occasional beeps, clicks, and soft keyboard strokes were the only sounds punctuating the quiet that shrouded his haven.

I stepped in, greeted by the familiar sight of Peiter’s anxiety nest, appreciating the strange yet comforting blend of the past and future it offered.

In the end, this was Peiter's universe, a place where he felt safe and in control.

The rusted door swung shut behind me with an echoing clang.

Standing in the middle of the digital pandemonium was the man himself, Peiter. His physique was gaunt, a byproduct of a lifestyle that seldom saw sunlight or physical activity. His unkempt, shoulder-length hair formed a wild halo around his head.

A pair of large, thick-rimmed glasses covered his eyes.

Peiter had a strange habit of twisting his hands when he was anxious.

As I approached, his fingers writhed together, creating an odd dance of nervous energy. His clothes were mismatched and looked more like comfortable sleepwear than anything else—a green and brown flannel shirt paired with faded yellow jeans and worn gray slippers.

I scowled. "I have sent you boxes and boxes of clothes."

"I received them." Peiter pointed to the right where a pile of boxes leaned against the wall. "I have told you time and time again, that I have no need for clothes. But, thank you for all of the supplies of food. When the apocalypse arrives, I will be prepared, my friend."

Sighing, I walked forward.

He held out his hand. "Stop."

I paused.

His gaze darted back and forth between the bag of food in my hands and then, the door behind me, a silent struggle playing out across his features. "If you are Tristan, then which Teenage Mutant Ninja turtle is your favorite?"

"First of all, I *am* Tristan, and as you know, to pick one out of the Four as a favorite would be absolute blasphemy to me."

Peiter exhaled. "It is you. Thank God."

"Do you want the food or not?"

He smiled. “Set it down on the table.”

I did and then headed away, knowing he wouldn't come too close to me.

Once there was ample space between the food and me, he rushed over to the bag and began pulling everything out. “The government is in cahoots with the aliens, you know.”

I strolled over to one wall of monitors. Pre-recorded reports flashed from news outlets all over the world. Each one ran with some sort of alien-related headline.

“And not just the government, Tristan. Major corporations. Tech giants. They're all in on it.” He took a large bite into the burger. “Ummm. Just like back in the day.”

I dove my hands into my pockets. “I need two things from you.”

Peiter chewed on the burger as his eyes nervously darted around the room, settling on a particularly large monitor that showed blurry Pentagon footage of what I guessed must have been a UFO.

I pulled out a piece of paper with Nova's name and address on it. “I want all the information you can get on this woman, along with any video, including any monitoring within her apartment.”

“That's it?”

“I don't know if she has security cameras in her place, but ___”

“Doesn't matter.” He shoved fries into his mouth. “I can get some footage on her in the apartment, whether she has security cameras in there or not.”

“You can?”

“Imagine your home as a castle, Tristan.” Then, his eyes went wild as he raised his voice. “Now imagine a castle that is peppered with tiny invisible doors!”

I quirked my brows. “Okay.”

“Your smart TV? A potential door. It has a camera. It has a microphone, and it’s connected to the internet. It’s not just for your video calls, you know.”

Next, he pointed to his refrigerator. “Your smart refrigerator? Another door. You’d be amazed what someone can infer from the data it sends out. Eating habits, shopping patterns, times of activity. It’s all valuable information.”

He paused, took a bite of the burger, and spoke in between bites. Bits of food flew everywhere. “But let’s go even further. Your smart speakers, your virtual assistants. Siri, Alexa, all of those. They’re always listening. Always. Sure, the corporations say that their devices only start recording after they hear the wake word. But to recognize the wake word, they need to be listening in the first place.”

Shaking his head, he added, “And let’s not forget about your smartphone. Apps, Tristan. Some apps ask for permissions they have no business needing, like a gaming app asking to access your microphone or your location. It’s all a conspiracy of mega proportions.”

He dipped his fries in sauce. “Wi-Fi enabled washing machines, thermostats, security systems, even light bulbs. They’re all potential doors. And don’t get me started on webcams.”

I widened my eyes.

“All of these, every single one, could potentially serve as a door for someone who knows how to pick the locks.” His voice rose. “That’s the reality we live in! That’s the price we pay for convenience!”

“Okay.” I held up one hand. “I understand.”

“And the aliens.”

I blinked. “What?”

“They’re not just visiting, Tristan. They’re here, among us, disguised as us. Could be anyone...your driver, your assistant, your butler. Watch out.”

“I will be careful.”

“You must.”

“Back to the woman.”

“I can get anything—blood type, weight, prescriptions, bank account information, credit card purchases. Even, videos of her showering, masturbating, her bra size—”

“Hold on.” I tensed. “Videos of her masturbating?”

He mumbled through food, “Yep.”

Deep in my core...lust curled. While I would have loved to see those videos, especially the ones of her masturbating...I didn't want Peiter watching them too.

I shook the rising lust out of my head. “If you get feed from her room and bathroom, can you send it to me without looking at it?”

“I could.” Peiter raised his eyebrows. “But, I can't watch?”

“No.”

“So, you like her?”

“No. I just met her tonight.”

“But you came all the way out here to have me check on her.”

“I am on a mission to find a woman to bring to a party. This is short notice, so I want you to do a thorough look.”

“But for a woman? This has to be more—”

“It's not more—”

“But, you need her to be monitored? That doesn't make sense. Usually, you don't care that much about the women, she must have really got your mind and heart going—”

“Don't over think this.”

“But, it doesn't make any sense why you would want me to look into her.”

“It doesn't need to make sense, just help me out.” I winked, pulled out my phone, and set it on his desk. “Also, I need you to do something else for me.”

He placed his burger on the table and rummaged through the bag. “Ooo. Silver Inspire!”

I blinked. “What?”

He yanked out a silver plastic toy shaped like an odd arcade machine. “I didn’t have this one. I’ve been waiting for years to get this.”

“Good.”

“Better than good. This completes the collection.”

“Awesome.”

He kissed the toy. “Let the aliens come if they want to, I can finally die now—”

“No. No. No.” I waved my hands. “Don’t talk like that.”

“I was just saying—”

“I don’t care.” I placed my hands back in my pockets. “Dominic and you are the only family I have. You are to stay alive until the ripe old age of 100.”

Peiter lovingly put the toy next to his burger. “What’s the second thing?”

“Someone anonymously sent a disturbing video to my phone. I want to know who it was.”

“What was the video?” He leaned his head to the side. “Aliens? Dear God! Did they get to you too?!”

“No.” I frowned. “Surprisingly, it was not aliens.”

“Good.” Calming down, Peiter looked at my phone. “I won’t touch it now. I’ll have to do some tests to make sure the device wasn’t intercepted by the government. So...leave it here. I’ll have a number, name, and location by tomorrow.”

“Perfect.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “However, I have further information. Something odd happened. When this anonymous person sent the video, it disappeared after I watched it.”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“That’s easy to do.”

“How could that be easy, Peiter.”

“So…” Peiter went back to his burger and took a generous bite, “it’s like this.”

His voice was muffled by the mouthful of food, but his tone was that of a seasoned professor settling into a well-known topic.

“Instead of actually ‘sending’ you a video file, right,” he wiped his greasy fingers on his shirt, “you received a sort of… link. Or more precisely, a code.”

He grabbed a fry and made a wild gesture with it, sending a few crumbs flying onto the table. “That code, when activated, connects your phone to a server and the video is streamed from there. It’s more like streaming Netflix or YouTube —the video isn’t really stored on your device, just played on it.”

Pausing from his explanation, he bit more of the burger and swallowed. “Now, the clever bit is that the server is set up to delete the video or block your access once you’ve watched it.”

“O-kay?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “So even if you wanted to, you can’t find it again. It’s gone from the server and it was never on your phone to begin with.”

“Honestly, I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

Peiter frowned.

I swallowed. “But, the main thing I understand is that someone went through a lot of effort to make this video untraceable.”

He nodded.

“Can we track where it came from?”

Peiter swallowed the last bite of his burger, his gaze turning back to the myriad of screens. His face looked serious,

almost grim, in the blue light. “Perhaps, but it won’t be a walk in the park, Tristan. Whoever did this knows their game.”

“Well, you get this done and you’ll get a lifetime supply of Little Gourmet meals delivered to your front door.”

He looked back at me, a wicked grin spreading across his face as he crumpled the burger wrapper. “Lucky for you, I’m on it.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

A MIND-TWISTING START



NOVA

The next night, excitement—pure, endless, and unquenched—surged through me.

I was dressed in this stunning red gown, feeling like a princess. The tightly fitted bodice hugged my torso like a second layer of skin, while the skirt flared out in a fancy circle of silk.

My heart pounded with anticipation.

A wicked smile spread on my face, knowing that Tristan would be unable to resist seeing my curves.

On my feet, I wore red, six inch rhinestone heels.

Although Tristan wouldn't be seeing what I was wearing under the dress, I still wore the sexiest lingerie I could find in my drawer—black French lace with ribboned garters.

His driver arrived on time.

The expensive car shimmered in the moonlight.

Every step I took toward the shiny car filled me with more thrilling excitement.

I felt like a queen ready for her throne.

“Good evening, Ms. Williams.” The driver opened my door. “My name is Charles.”

“Good evening and nice to meet you, Charles.”

Smiling, he helped me inside.

Once I entered the vehicle, slight disappointment hit me.

Tristan wasn't there.

I'd been ready to be near him all day.

Be patient.

I settled in.

The driver shut the door.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the window.

Oh my.

I smiled at the sight of the red gown, my cleavage, and even face perfectly done up with the help of my bestie, Scarlett.

For these past years, I typically wore yoga pants, an oversized t-shirt, and sneakers.

If it was cold, I threw on my favorite Paradise City University sweater. That faded crimson and gold garment had kept me warm for many months.

While I had dresses and gowns in my closet, there'd been no need to put them on.

The life of a PhD student involved more time in the library than in a ballroom.

But, not tonight.

The driver started the car.

The engine roared to life.

I took in a deep breath, feeling the excitement and nervousness of this upcoming date.

This is going to be fun.

The driver sped us away.

Bring it.

This night would be an adventure. The moment where I would be yanked out of my boring life of study to embark on an exhilarating journey.

What does Tristan have planned?

Soon, the driver had us entering Caviar Lime Highway and heading North.

Anticipation built with each passing minute. My mind raced with thoughts of what this night might hold.

Stop being so nervous. Tonight will be amazing.

I checked my appearance in my small purse mirror, smoothing my hair and adjusting the top to not show too much cleavage.

Okay. Perfect.

As we approached Downtown, the skyline came into view. Buildings towered over everything like sentinels, guarding this city of endless possibilities.

We passed the exit for the West and didn't take it.

Oh. Not heading West? We're still going North.

I'd guessed that Tristan would be bringing me to one of the many fabulous restaurants in the West. It was where the bustling energy of the city faded away, replaced by a sense of refined luxury and sophistication.

The West was a world of ultimate extravagance, where every sense was heightened.

Sleek, high-end hotels lined the streets. The air was always thick with the scent of freshly brewed coffee and baked pastries, emanating from the chic cafes that lined the sidewalks.

Well-dressed shoppers crowded the blocks with their arms full of stuffed bags from designer shops.

But when it came to dining, the West of Paradise City also did not disappoint. It was the only place in the city that had Michelin-starred restaurants. These places boasted inventive cuisine and elegant atmospheres.

But...we're going to the North.

I pulled out my phone and texted my brother real quick.

Me: You know that guy I just met?

Me: I'm going on a date with him RIGHT NOW!

Me: I'm excited.

A little bit of pain entered my heart as I texted the last lines.

Me: I wish you could have helped me get ready.

Me: I love you.

Putting up my phone, I leaned closer to the window and checked out the signs.

Where could we be going?

The North was a very different beast. It represented a world of temptation and decadent gratification. There, the rules of society and decency were left behind. Pleasure reigned supreme, and every desire could be explored without judgement or inhibition.

This really will be an interesting date.

The only time I went to this part of the city was to collect data for my thesis. I'd conducted many interviews of people with intriguing kinks.

There was more to gather this year. Once I had it all, I would then need to analyze the data and draw conclusions about kinks and alternative sexual behaviors.

But...a date in the North? Where?

As we ventured northward, the energy of the city changed dramatically.

Even with the window up, I could feel the air thickening with a heady mix of sweat, perfume, and arousal.

Every time I came to the North, a tangible energy pulsed through the streets. I felt that same energy tonight throbbing through my veins and making my heart beat faster.

Many of the yellow buildings became darker in shade, shifting to gold or even black at times. Their neon lights cast an otherworldly glow over the sidewalks.

The clubs and bars were the stars of the North of Paradise City, each one more enticing than the last.

I guessed that the swinger clubs were the main attraction, where couples and groups indulged in their wildest fantasies in private rooms and dark corners.

And for those seeking something more daring, the North's kink spots served as the perfect destination.

I spied tons of people strolling the blocks.

Wow.

Many dressed in revealing outfits, oozing an unmistakable sensuality. There were glimpses of leather and lace. For most, lots of skin was exposed.

We left the highway and continued heading more North than I had ever ventured for my research.

My eyes wildly went from side to side, drinking it all in.

The driver continued to navigate through the streets. The headlights of other cars passed by in a blur.

Finally, we pulled up to an imposing building.

I leaned forward and had no idea where we were or what this place was about.

My nerves tingled with excitement.

I looked at the building more, trying to make a guess of what could be inside.

It seemed pretty normal.

Sturdy brick and mortar made up the exterior. Tall windows and a grand entranceway invited people to step inside.

Alright.

Charles parked us in front.

Butterflies spun in my stomach.

Soon, Charles appeared at my door and opened it.

I took a deep breath and stepped out of the car, ready to embark on whatever adventure Tristan had planned.

I see that he truly is going to be a puzzle.

Charles gave me a half bow. “I am to take you to Mr. Russo.”

I wore a nervous smile. “Thank you.”

Charles guided me further.

What is this place?

As we approached the building, I noticed the manicured lawn. The bushes near the entrance were also trimmed and tidy.

To my surprise, I spotted men and women with kids, heading inside. Some carried books. Others had on book bags.

More people entered the building or left with stacks of books in their arms.

This is...strange.

In fact, there were a lot of people coming and going. And all of them wore casual clothes. The sound of their footsteps echoed, punctuated by the occasional rustling of leaves.

O-kay. What is going on?

We got closer.

Impressive columns flanked the grand entranceway.

Wait a minute.

I read the letters etched in elegant script above the building's double doors.

North Paradise Library.

I widened my eyes.

What?

The driver led me up the stairs.

We're having a date in the library?

First of all, I had no idea the North even had a library. There were very few residential areas in this part of the city.

Okay. A date in a library...I guess.

Charles held open one of the double doors.

Smiling, I strolled through. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, Ms. Williams."

We continued forward through the dimly lit library.

Cool air wrapped around me like a welcoming embrace.

The scent of aged books and polished wood filled my nostrils, triggering memories of the countless hours I'd spent exploring shelves at my University library.

Why would he pick this place for our first date?

Was Tristan trying to show me that he was interested in my academic pursuits?

By choosing a library which was a meaningful location to me, he could be demonstrating that he valued my career goals?

Hmmm.

If that was true, I found the gesture fantastic...and odd. It showed that he was willing to put in effort to make a connection with me.

Very surprising.

We went further into the massive library.

The seating areas looked cozy and inviting, with plush chairs and sofas. The tables appeared sturdy and uncluttered,

perfect for studying or working on a project.

But a date?

The sound of footsteps and quiet conversation filled the space. Next, a hushed murmur from a librarian added to the ambiance.

My heart warmed.

Or...Tristan could have chosen the library to create a sense of familiarity and comfort for our first date?

By bringing me to a place I knew well, Tristan may want me to be utterly relaxed.

How thoughtful?

Yet, we kept on moving toward the shelves that stretched high overhead, lined with books of all shapes, sizes, and colors.

To my shock, Charles led me down a row of these high shelves. I checked the sign and read what section we were in.

Mystery.

I almost laughed.

Was I not inside of a mystery right now, currently trying to figure out my date and his intentions for tonight?

I couldn't help but gaze at the books, searching for clues.

Some books were new. Their pages appeared crisp and unblemished.

While other books were well-worn. Their covers creased and their pages yellowed with age.

There were labels on each shelf designating a particular sub-genre of mystery. Cozies to detective fiction. Noir to hardboiled crime drama. Triller to Suspense. I even spotted some Espionage.

As we continued forward, I heard the occasional creak of a chair or the soft rustle of pages turning.

However, I was a little lost at how Tristan was going to make the library romantic.

But I trusted him.

He was a famous artist. Surely, his imagination had taken over for this evening.

Oh wait. There is nowhere else to go.

We stopped at the dead end of the Mystery section. Only shelves of books stood in front of us.

I turned to Charles.

He smiled, stepped up to the shelf, and scanned all of the books' titles.

O-kay. What's going on?

He brushed his fingers against the spines of Agatha Christie novels—Death on the Nile, Murder on Orient Express, the ABC Murders. Then, he stopped on one of her most famous books—*And Then There Were None*. This novel had been on the list of the top-selling books of all time, with approximately 100 million copies sold.

The driver pulled that book from the shelf, and a soft click echoed.

Stunned, I stepped back.

Slowly, the shelf slid open, revealing a black entrance with stairs leading to some underground path.

Oh my God.

Then, a tall man appeared. He wore a black lace body suit with high heeled boots. Also, he did not have anything on under it.

Therefore, I got a nice view of his cock, and it was big, hard, and very difficult to ignore.

A knowing smirk hit his face. "Welcome, Ms. Williams."

I opened my mouth in shock.

The man nodded at Charles. "I will take over."

"Have a good evening, Eros." Charles gave a half bow and headed away.

Ummm...

I watched Charles leave.

“Ms. Williams.” Eros grabbed my attention.

I turned back to him. “Yes?”

“Come in. We would rather others in the library not notice the secret entrance to my club.”

“Oh.” I hurried through. “I’m sorry.”

“No problem.” He pressed a bright white button.

The book shelf wall clicked behind us.

What. The. Fuck?

I was now enclosed with Eros, feeling like Alice in Wonderland falling down the dark void of the wicked rabbit hole.

Tristan...what is going on?

The lights were dim.

I gazed at the black walls and then put my view on Eros.

He kept that knowing smirk on his face.

I cleared my throat. “Eros is a very interesting name.”

“I am glad you approve. Do you know where the name comes from?”

“It is the Greek god of love and desire, and a powerful name that conveys a sense of passion.”

“Which is much better than my real name.”

“What is your real name?”

“None of your business.” He winked and strolled past me. “Let us go downstairs and begin your lovely date with Tristan.”

Alright. Goodness, Tristan.

He wasn’t a puzzle. He was some unsolvable calculus theorem that I could never understand.

What kind of first date is this going to be?

Eros led me deeper into this place.

His heels clicked against the metal stairs.

What is going to be down there?

For a few seconds, I now actually wished the date were just the regular library. At least *that* I knew.

Now I was completely out of my comfort zone.

I should turn around. What am I doing? This is crazy.

But, I gritted my teeth and continued.

Stop being afraid. You can do this. It will be different than the same day-to-day monotonous evening. Didn't you want that?

From a psychological standpoint, I knew that leaving my comfort zone could be an incredibly rewarding experience that would not only help me grow as a person, but it could enrich my life in many ways.

Of course it could be scary and uncomfortable at first, yet the benefits of taking risks and trying new things were well worth the effort.

It increased confidence, triggered greater resilience, improved creativity, enhanced learning, proved a greater sense of purpose in life, and tons of other good shit.

You're doing this. Keep on walking forward.

When we made it to the bottom of the stairs, I gasped.

Oh my.

It was a long fifty-foot hallway with glass walls that showcased naked people having sex on the other side.

This is definitely not the library anymore.

We continued forward.

Oh...my...God...

It was just rooms and rooms of so many naked bodies tangled and intertwined in beautiful erotic embraces.

Soft moans of pleasure filled the air through each kiss and caress.

Just...whoa.

The amount of nudity was sensually jarring and erotically outrageous. Every man or woman in this world was represented in these sexual acts—from skinny to chubby men. White, Black, Asian and more. Very large cocks to really small ones. Fake, engorged breasts to tiny, nonexistent ones.

And lots and lots of pussy. Probably more than I wanted to see in a lifetime.

Well...it won't be a boring date.

I slowed my pace as I headed forward, completely stunned by what was happening around me.

Does he think we are going to be having sex tonight?

I would have to tell Tristan to take it down a notch. While I wanted to have sex with him, I also craved romance—long walks in the park, hand holding while watching the sun set, candlelit dinners, and slow dancing to jazz as we breathed each other in.

Just slow down, buddy.

While I studied sexuality, I had not ever experienced this much of it all in my face all at once.

Holy...shit...Wait until I tell Scarlett.

I glanced to the left and to the right, unable to comprehend it all. Cocks pushed in and out of mouths, asses, and pussies. Breasts bounced here, there, and everywhere. Cum flew in the air, splashing onto faces, asses, and stomachs.

Hey now!! Is this for real?!

My head spun.

Some women had two or more cocks pushing in them.

There was even a woman that sat on a gold throne with her breasts lactating. Men took turns sucking on her nipples.

This is...a lot...

When we finally made it to the end of the hallway, my panties were soaked with my arousal, my nipples were hard, and I was in desperate need of a good fuck.

Had that been his intention?

My heart boomed in my ears.

Was this to get me hot?

My skin flushed with heat.

Or was it a message?

I ran my shaking fingers through my hair, trying to calm myself.

Is he trying to say that there would be no romance between us, just a hot sexual adventure?

Beads of sweat appeared around my forehead. I dabbed at it and followed Eros into the main room.

More surprises came.

My senses were immediately overwhelmed by the sights, sounds, and smells of decadence and desire.

There were no lamps or lights, just lit candles all over the place.

Vintage erotic art decorated the walls—black and white images of nude bodies.

And everywhere, mouths were agape with moans of pleasure.

Cocks penetrated.

Couples were having sex on plush leather couches and velvet armchairs. Their moans and whispers represented a symphony of lust.

It just...keeps on going...

Tables gathered around them, covered in candles and gold dishes stacked with food.

But no one cared about the food or even the wine being carried around by nude male and female servers.

It was like walking into a Roman orgy.

Throbbing jazz music mixed with moans of pleasure. Next came the sound of whips and chains riding the air.

Okay. Where is that coming from?

I spotted a naked woman being whipped by a masked man on my right.

She screamed and then moaned.

Further in the back, a bartender stood behind the bar, mixing drinks with precision and care. His expert hands moved in a sensual dance as he poured and then stirred.

I imagined that even the drinks were aphrodisiacs, concocted to heighten the guests' senses and intensify their desires.

Wait.

I turned to the left and then the right.

Where's Eros?

At some point in my being nosy, I lost my guide.

No. No.

My nerves frazzled.

Come back, Eros. Don't leave me alone here.

I bet Eros still wore that wicked smirk as he slipped away. Was it his intention to push me into this scene?

Or was it Tristan's intention? And...was he close?

Slowly turning around in a circle, I searched for Eros or Tristan, desperate to find them in the sea of lovemaking couples.

Come on. Where are you?

Then, Tristan's dark, sensual voice caressed my skin. "Good evening, Nova."

CHAPTER EIGHT

AN EROTIC INVITATION



NOVA

My heart raced, and a thrill shot through me.
I turned around.

Two feet ran between us.

There Tristan was, standing tall and looking all kinds of delicious. An exquisite black three-piece suit outlined his muscular frame.

He was a stunning vision.

His hair was slicked back and his green eyes glowed with raw passion.

When our eyes met, a wild spark ignited between us, sending a scorching desire through my veins. His gaze was smoldering and intense, as if he could see into my soul.

Before he showed up, I had so many questions and doubts.

But now, I had this consuming need to feel his hands on me. My body responded to the possibility of his touch, and my nipples tightened.

Moans mingling with the jazz music around us, did not help me at all either.

Silent, he caressed me with his eyes, starting at my face and slowly moving downwards. Everywhere his gaze lingered, a shiver ran through me.

My body ached.

Heat pooled in my core.

This shouldn't have been happening so easily.

Was it the setting—this steamy hot sex club pulsing around me?

Was it the fact that I had never experienced the hungry attention of such a gorgeous man?

Or was it simply the chemistry rising between us?

He raised his view to mine. “The way that red dress hugs your curves is absolutely mesmerizing.”

I parted my lips.

“I don't think I've ever seen someone look so captivating in red. You are the embodiment of passion.”

What should I say to that?

How could I even respond?

I blushed and looked away, unable to take the intensity of his gaze any longer.

But then he tenderly touched my chin with his hand and lifted it until our gazes were locked again. When he lowered his hand, I instantly missed the feel of his fingers.

I gathered myself. “Thank you. And you look... irresistible.”

A hint of a smile hit his face. “And what makes me so irresistible?”

I hadn't expected that response.

I swallowed. “I would say it is a combination of your... gorgeous looks and the confidence you exude.”

He moved in closer.

The air suddenly felt electrified.

Nervous, I continued to speak, "It's...that you have this..."

A wicked smirk spread across his face. "Yes?"

"You have this energy, I feel drawn to you, whenever you are close."

He gazed down at me.

My heart skipped a beat when his tongue swept across his lips.

His voice slipped over my skin. "And should I get closer?"

I grew breathless. "No."

His gaze went intense. "Hmmm."

My pulse raced faster as he stepped closer anyway, until his body was mere centimeters from mine.

Of course he was the sort of man to do exactly what he wanted.

He tilted his head to the side. "Were you thinking it would be dangerous if I came closer?"

"Yes."

"Then, you were correct." His voice sent a wave of desire through me, washing away some of my inhibitions.

I looked up into his eyes, unable to deny the powerful hunger surging through me.

Fuck.

"There are two types of women." His warm breath brushed against my skin. "The type of woman that kisses on a first date, and the type that doesn't."

I swallowed.

"Which one are you, Nova?"

"First, I would disagree with the earlier statement." I stepped back.

The wicked smirk deepened. “How would you disagree?”

“There are more types of women than two.”

The smirk shifted to a humored smile.

“And I don’t fall into either of those two types that you listed.”

“No?”

“I kiss a man when I want to.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Prove it.”

“I would have happily kissed you at the art gallery when you asked me for my number, but you didn’t lean forward and capture my lips.”

He blinked. “Oh really?”

“Yes.”

“Then, you owe me a kiss.”

“I actually don’t.”

He raised his eyebrows. “No?”

“Not at all.” I took another step back and scanned the place. “Because now I have too many questions that you would need to answer before I would let you kiss me.”

A dark chuckle left him. “Let?”

He said that as if the very idea of my giving him *permission* to kiss me was beyond humorous.

This was clearly a man that always got his way.

I’ll have to watch him and make sure he stays in line.

“Yes, let.” I crossed my arms and gave him a stern look.

He laughed, and then stepped forward, closing the tiny distance between us.

My lips parted in anticipation as he leaned closer.

But instead of kissing me, he paused just an inch from my face, hovering tantalizingly close.

Damn.

He whispered softly, “What kind of questions do you have?”

I wanted him to kiss me.

Perhaps, he was right.

Maybe, he didn’t need permission to place his lips on mine.

He was too tempting.

I cleared my throat, lowered my hands, and straightened up, ready to challenge him. “Why did you pick this sex club?”

“For our first date?”

“Yes.”

“Three reasons.” He boldly inhaled me and then groaned.

I shuddered.

“On first dates, most people put on a mask to hide their flaws and vulnerabilities.” He backed away and then slowly walked around me as if wanting to get a view of my ass.

I parted my lips and didn’t turn around.

He got closer and brushed his lips against my ear. “On a first date, these masked people present a carefully curated image of what they think the other person wants them to be.”

I swallowed.

He walked around and got right back in front of me. “I don’t like masks.”

“Me either.”

He smirked. “I didn’t think you would, Ms. Psychology Student.”

“So…” I scanned the space.

In the corner, a group of half-naked people engaged in a sensual dance. Their bodies moved in perfect harmony, almost blending together as one. In their graceful movements, it was impossible to tell who was leading who.

I put my view back on him. “So, you are an insatiable man when it comes to sex?”

“I would say that.”

“And...” I looked on the other side.

A man poured champagne all over a woman’s bare breasts. As it spilled onto her nipples, he lapped at the points and the liquid.

She loudly moaned over the music.

I shivered with hunger and turned back to him.

Tristan had been watching me the whole time.

You know what this place is doing to me. Don’t you?

He quirked his brows. “And?”

“You are a man that likes adventure. Maybe...you get bored too easily.”

“Or perhaps, I am on a journey to explore the dark possibilities of desire.”

Heat flushed across my skin. “Perhaps.”

“This club is called The Vault, and it is a world of sensuality. A place where inhibitions are shed and pleasure is the only goal.”

“And does this place...symbolize you? Or...?”

He grinned.

I looked around. “Or does this place symbolize what you want from me?”

“I want a partner to accompany me on a dark erotic journey.”

Oh my.

How would my body feel, to go from not having sex at all to being suddenly in an underground sex club getting penetrated in every way?

Plus, it was insane that after his answering one question, I had even more.

I put my view back on him.

Again, he watched me, studying my reaction to his words.

I swallowed. “And the second reason for bringing me here?”

“I do not want you to have any unrealistic expectations when it comes to me or even *us*.”

“What expectations?”

“I am not looking for love, marriage, or kids.”

I tensed.

“Just a partner for this erotic journey. To think otherwise, Nova, would be to set yourself up for failure.”

“You wouldn’t be my Mr. Right?”

“I’m only your Mr. Right Now.” A sly smirk crossed his lips. “I’m the man that gives you moments you never forget. I’m the man you think about in your future years when you are lying next to your husband, bored and completely unsatisfied.”

I grinned. “If I am marrying a man, then he would be very satisfying.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“For you to outfuck me better than my future husband?” I shrugged. “Challenge accepted.”

That dark chuckle left him. “Then, you want a ticket for the ride?”

I widened my eyes.

There was something so tantalizingly seductive about Tristan’s words, and the way he spoke them made my heart skip a beat.

Although part of me wanted to reject this idea and hope for something more, another part was intrigued by the thought of experiencing pleasure without commitment or expectations.

Tristan stepped closer to me and his warm breath tickled my neck as he whispered in my ear, “Nova, this is all about giving into your desires—no strings attached. We take pleasure from one another without any expectations, and we test our boundaries.”

My heart boomed in my ears.

He looked deep into my eyes.

Part of me wanted to push him away and demand more, but the other part was drawn in by the promise of pleasure between us.

“And...” I swallowed. “The *third* reason you brought me to this club?”

“The third reason is simple.” He brushed his finger lightly over my chin and then took a strand of my hair in between his fingers. “I wanted to make you tremble with pleasure tonight.”

I felt that sentence deep inside my pussy. This was not a typical thing that happened to me. Words always hit my ear and then transmitted to my brain.

But his voice.

Those words.

And the heat coming off them.

They penetrated.

They made me wet.

They slipped in and out.

Breathless, I turned away trying to get control of myself.

The space around us shifted, then grew with this intense power that seemed to vibrate through me.

“And you will feel pleasure.” Those green eyes darkened with hunger. “By the end of the night, every inch of your body will be begging for my touch.”

By the end of the night?

I shivered.

It's begging right now.

As if he heard me, he whispered, “And soon you will be begging me yourself.”

I widened my eyes.

“And, Nova, I will give in to you in every way you desire.”

My breath hitched, and I felt myself arching towards him.

He leaned his head to the side. “Are you ready for the adventure, Nova?”

A million thoughts raced through my head as I considered my answer.

My mind knew that this would be a bad idea. We had different goals and opposite wants. Pure logic warned me against this.

My heart feared that it would get broken if I spent too much time with him.

Meanwhile, my body screamed the loudest. It was tired of sitting in the damned library night after night, pouring over books and never getting any cock.

I could not deny that I had become starved for pure, sensual intimacy—the sensation of skin against skin, the mingling of our scents, the taste of his mouth on mine, the pressure of his hard cock inside of me.

He watched me think this over. And the whole time, sex radiated off him.

Fuck.

This was the type of man that my mother warned me about. The sort that could set my body on fire and burn my heart to cinders at the same time.

But despite his rough exterior, there was a vulnerability to him, a sensitivity that he kept deeply hidden beneath the surface.

I studied him.

While he may not have wanted to wear a mask on our first date, he unconsciously put one on.

Who are you, Tristan?

Had he been hurt before?

What were his scars, the ones he never showed anyone?

I wanted to not only experience the pleasure he could give me, but I also yearned to uncover the mystery of him.

But would there be a price to pay for being with a man like him?

Or could I keep my heart and mind safe?

That wicked smirk reappeared on his face.

I raised my eyebrows.

“Are you scared, Nova?”

“I like to be careful.”

“You will not be careful, if you say yes to me.”

And that was the other reason why I so badly wanted to give in to him.

It was the erotic danger.

The thrill of the unknown.

The promise of passion and excitement.

He licked his lips. “You can’t resist.”

I let out a long breath. “I can’t.”

“Then, say yes.”

My heart ached.

Goddamn it.

I swallowed. “Yes.”

CHAPTER NINE

NAKED TRUTHS



TRISTAN

She said yes.

My heart beat wildly in my chest as my gaze remained on Nova.

No other woman had ever gotten me this excited.

She's passed these first tests, but calm down. There's more.

Nova was breathtakingly stunning, with her brown skin glowing in the club's dim light and her curves pleading to be explored. I wanted nothing more than to take her into one of the club's private rooms and ravish every inch of her body with my mouth.

A primal urge came over me.

It tugged at my cock, telling me to take her away now and fuck her hard.

Calm down.

I had to control my urges.

Her questions kept me on my toes. They told me that she would not be the typical, predictable woman I'd fucked many times before.

What new experience will she give me? And could she last at the Masquerade?

I leaned my head to the side. "Are you hungry?"

She blinked. "We can eat *here*?"

"We can."

She turned her view to a man several feet from us and spilling cum all over a woman's forehead. With each burst of the white liquid, the man grunted and his face contorted with pleasure.

Nova directed her attention my way and hit me with a skeptical look. "*You* could eat around all of this sex?"

I grinned. "Take my hand."

She gazed down at it.

Was she already second-guessing her answer of yes? Did she want to turn around and race away?

It didn't matter.

There would be no escape, just yet.

No place to hide.

Even letting her decide if she wanted to embark on our journey was just a formality.

Had she said no, I would have had her with me this evening anyway.

"Come on, Nova." I kept my hand in front of her. "Let me show you something extraordinary."

Taking a deep breath, she reached out and grabbed my hand. Just like at my art opening, her touch was electric and sent sparks of desire coursing through my body.

My God. Why does she always give me this reaction?

I stared into her eyes as if those brown depths could give me the answer. Her skin was so soft and her touch ignited a fire inside of me that I never knew was possible.

I threaded my fingers through hers and tugged Nova closer.

Her body pressed against mine.

The club's music melted away, leaving us cocooned in a world of our own, filled with only the sweet perfume of her hair and the heat of her body against me.

I leaned forward and brushed my lips against her ear. "You have no idea what you just agreed to."

She shivered in response, but didn't answer.

Tristan, remember. See if she can handle it all. Patience.

It took everything in me to step back.

In that sexy red dress, her curves looked so soft and fine. They were enticing mountains and valleys that I craved to caress with my hands and mouth.

I wanted to savor every moment and ignite a fire between us that would never be extinguished.

Desire blazed in those brown eyes, yet there was grace too.

She will not be easily dominated.

I smiled at the secret challenge.

In some ways, I'll have to take my time.

The yearning inside of me grew intense. So strong that I could feel the need radiating through my body.

"Let's go." I led us away.

I was more than desperate to take her away from this crowd and explore all of her secrets and wants in private.

So far, Peiter had only gotten me footage of her condo. So busy with signing several high contract bids on my sculptures, I hadn't gotten the chance to truly stalk her. Additionally, Peiter wanted more time to rummage through her past.

As far as the anonymous video delivery, he required more time for that too.

I'll have to find out stuff about her on my own.

I typically didn't waste time talking for too long with my dates. We exchanged the basic information and then got right to fucking.

But already I knew Nova would be different.

Hand-in-hand, we walked past a small orgy happening on the right. Over here, the stench of sex and sweat permeated the air.

Nova gazed their way and opened her mouth in shock.

Instantly, I wanted to take her mouth, push my tongue between her lips, and taste her spiciness.

Then, she turned my way and caught me watching her. "Do you need a membership to be in The Vault?"

"You do."

"Then, you are a member?"

"I am."

"For how long?"

I smirked. "Long enough."

If she thought I was a puzzle that could be solved, then she would be highly disappointed. So many pieces were lost and would never be found.

I led her away from the *Community Room* and took us down a red hallway.

Crystal chandeliers shimmered above us.

Gilded mirrors and artwork lined the red walls.

I checked Nova's reaction.

She scanned the space, surely wondering where we would be going next.

Well-dressed men and women strolled by exuding an air of refinement and elegance. But I knew that they had just come

from other paths filled with rooms boasting very dark and inhumane desires. All that refinement was simply a mask to wickedness.

She took them in and shivered.

Can she sense the nastiness on them?

She walked closer to me.

I studied her. “Are you nervous?”

“A little.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea what you will shock me with next.”

I chuckled. “But, do you like the Vault?”

“I’m still assessing.” She looked at me. “If you don’t mind me asking, how much is the membership?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I am thinking about returning on my own.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders. A small bit of jealousy hit me at the thought of her being here by herself.

Few Black women strolled down here. Due to that, the men would swarm on her immediately, doing their best to devour her. I didn’t like the idea of their hands on her—male or female.

Hmmm. That is interesting. Could I share her at the Masquerade? I’ll think about that later if I decide she will come with me.

Guiding us forward, I shook my head. “No.”

“No?”

“You cannot come back here without me. I should be next to you with every visit.”

“Well, you would probably be bored with what I have planned.”

My cock jerked in my pants. “I doubt that.”

She chuckled. “Tristan, I wouldn’t be returning to have sex here.”

Huh?

I eyed her. “Then, what would you be doing?”

“Observations, writing notes, and conducting interviews on the few people that would be willing.”

“Hmmm.”

“What?”

“I think that would still turn me on. Therefore, you do not return without me.”

She chuckled.

We approached the end of the red hallway.

A door appeared in front of us. It had four boxes of color on it—dark blue, orange, sky blue, and green.

I grabbed the knob, twisted it, and opened the door.

Then, I stepped back to let her walk through first. Also, I hoped to get another view of that lush ass pushing against the red dress’s fabric.

As Nova stepped forward her gaze brightened. “Wow.”

I smiled.

“This...” She strolled through. “I wasn’t expecting this.”

A thick canopy of green tree leaves arched over in a dome of branches and tufts of moss. The forest floor was soft loam, covered with leaves, branches, and scattered fallen fruit.

The air was rich with the scent of damp earth, forest, and sap.

A clay path lay before us.

Oak tree limbs covered the walls and ceiling.

The sounds of birds and crickets played in the background.

Nova looked up at the wooden ceiling. “We are not outside, but it feels like we are.”

“Exactly. Currently, we are still under the library.”

She shook her head. “This is amazing. What’s the name of this restaurant?”

“Four Elements.” I followed her inside. “And it is my favorite restaurant in Paradise City.”

The hostess greeted us. “Welcome back, Mr. Russo.”

I nodded.

She guided us down the clay path.

Nova scanned more of the fake forest.

Does she like it?

Usually, it wasn’t important for me to impress a woman. My status and money tended to be enough.

But with Nova...I yearned to enchant and entice her.

She’ll love it. How could she not?

Four Elements was a truly unique and intimate dining experience. The Michelin restaurant only seated four tables, but what it lacked in size it made up in its innovative concept and stunning presentation.

The lighting was dim, casting a warm, intimate glow over everything.

Several feet in front of us, a large circular platform stood. Only one table sat on top of it with two chairs.

I had rented out the entire restaurant, not wanting any distractions.

It was time to truly get to know Nova.

Our host guided us to the table.

I pulled out Nova’s chair.

“Thank you.” She lowered into it.

I went over to mine and sat down.

A waiter appeared with a tray holding two glasses of wine. One by one he placed a glass in front of us.

Then, he put the tray behind him and gestured to the glasses. “We begin with Demeter. This will be your *Earth Wine* for the evening.”

Nova raised her eyebrows.

“Demeter has notes of tobacco, chocolate, and pomegranate. Enjoy.” The waiter half-bowed and left.

I grabbed my glass and lifted it up.

Nova joined me.

“To an amazing adventure, this evening, and many other evenings.”

This thrilling excitement flashed in her gaze. “I love that.”

God yes.

Nova took a sip of the wine and moaned in pleasure. “This is amazing.”

She’s enjoying herself.

I drank some of mine and then set it down. “Let’s play a game.”

She eyed me. “What sort of game?”

“It is called Naked Truths.”

Those brown eyes sparkled with amusement. “And how would we play this game?”

“One person asks a question, and if the other person doesn’t want to answer or lies, then that person has to take off one item of clothing.”

She quirked her brows. “How would you know if I am lying?”

“I would know.” I placed my hands on the table. “And with your inquisitive mind, you would know when I was lying.”

She placed her glass of wine on the table. “Do earrings count as an item of clothing?”

Very smart.

“Yes.” I nodded. “I will be nice this evening.”

“Nice?” She chuckled. “You’re trying to get me out of my dress.”

“Not trying, Nova.” I licked my lips. “I will.”

She gestured at the staff moving around. “We can get naked in here?”

“I rented the place for this evening. And they are surely used to naked guests.”

She eyed me. “Have you ever had another woman in this restaurant naked?”

I tensed. “We are not playing the game yet.”

“It’s still my question.”

“I have not.”

She assessed me. “But, you almost did?”

“I did.”

“Why didn’t it happen?”

“At the last moment, right outside of the restaurant’s entrance, I decided she wasn’t worthy.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t discuss past dates with my current date.”

She studied me. “But I am worthy?”

“Very much.”

“What makes *me* worthy?”

She may be too good at this.

Two waiters arrived with our plates.

A third one stopped at the side of the table. “For your Earth Tasting, you have Wagyu beef with truffle risotto.”

Savory scents rose, teasing and trying to get me to look down at the plate. However, Nova had all my attention this evening.

“This dish represents the Earth Element because it incorporates rich, earthy flavors such as truffle and mushroom. The risotto is made with truffle oil and Parmesan cheese. The beef is cooked to perfection and served with a red wine reduction sauce.”

“Thank you.” Nova smiled at him.

He nodded and left.

Together, we picked up our forks and began tasting it.

Once Nova swallowed, she moaned. Her enjoyment made me pause from eating. The sound was more delicious than the meal.

She moaned again and closed her eyes. “This is... exquisite.”

Fuck. Moan again.

I lowered my fork to the plate and relished in watching her eat.

She blushed. “What?”

“You are absolutely captivating.” I traced the curve of my glass, wishing it were her body.

“Thank you.”

“Let’s begin.”

“The game?”

“Yes. And I ask the first question.”

She shook her head. “Whatever happened to ladies first?”

“The first thing you should know about me, Nova.” I gazed at her supple cleavage, wanting to yank down the top of that red dress and titty fuck her breasts until I came all over her face. A dark groan left me. “I am no gentleman.”

She parted her lips.

“My question.” I leaned back in the chair. “What is the best way to make you cum?”

A wicked smirk spread across her face.

Slowly, she took off one earring.

I frowned. “That is cheating.”

“You said earrings count as clothes.”

“But, that was an *easy* question. Why avoid it?”

She placed the earring on the table. “If we are truly embarking on an erotic journey, then *you* can figure out how to make me cum yourself.”

My frown shifted to a grin. “Let us hope you don’t regret that.”

“Why would I?”

“Already, I am picturing myself locking you in my special room, binding you to my pleasure table, and trying every tool I have on your body.”

“Special room?” She blinked. “Pleasure table? Binding? Tools?”

“Are those all of your questions for the game?”

“What? No.”

I winked. “Then, ask *your* question. I am already eager for my turn again.”

“Okay then. I see what this is.”

“Do you?”

She met my gaze. Determination crossed her face. “Who broke your heart?”

I widened my eyes. “What?”

“You heard me.”

Suddenly, pressure built in my chest. It was the oddest reaction. Something I didn’t feel much.

“Take your time, but remember you can’t lie.” With a wicked smirk, Nova picked up her fork and began eating again.

“I...” My throat went dry. “No one has ever...broken my heart.”

“I think that is a lie.”

“It isn’t.”

“Then, why do you sound so nervous answering?”

“Because...perhaps...it makes me feel odd—”

“Because someone *did* break your heart—”

“That is impossible.”

“Why?”

“Nova, I have never given my heart to anyone.”

“Yet, your body is having a visceral reaction due to the question which points to you at least not *consciously* being aware of your *current heartbreak*.”

“There is no current heartbreak.”

“There is.”

I blinked. “Are you psychoanalyzing me?”

“I’m just playing the game.” She took a bite of her steak.

She’s too smart. I will have to watch her.

What would I do with a woman like her? Not only was she enticing me more than any other woman had, she had already proven to be a force of nature with my game.

“What’s up, Mr. Pleasure Room Owner?” Nova sampled the truffle risotto. “Either give me a name for the heartbreaker or get naked.”

Pursing my lips together, I took off my black jacket and placed it on the back of my chair. “There you go. One garment off.”

She chuckled.

I raised one eyebrow. “You think that is funny?”

“I think that you’ve played this game before.”

“I have.”

“But, I bet you have never had to take off anything before.”

“Never mind that,” I spoke through clenched teeth, “Now, my turn.”

The circular stage that we sat on slowly rose three feet into the air.

Nova shrieked. “What is going on?”

“We are getting ready to move.”

“Why?”

“It is time for our next element.”

With parted lips, she watched as the stage began turning and carrying us into the next setting.

She whispered, “Holy shit.”

There will always be surprises with me, Nova.

I smiled.

As the stage moved us further, the Earth room left and the Water room appeared.

Trees and leaves shifted to a wall made of massive tanks. Tropical fish swam in sparkling blue water.

A mermaid fountain trickled with water near us. More water flowed out of the mermaid’s hands and splashed around her tail.

A salty breeze came by with the sounds of the ocean.

The waiter appeared with a tray of wine.

Nova turned to him.

One by one, he placed them on the table.

Nova gazed at her still half-filled glass of the Earth Wine. Surely, she was thinking the same thing I had when I first came to the restaurant: *How will I finish everything?*

The waiter placed the tray behind him and stepped back. “This is Poseidon. This is your Water Wine for the evening. It is a refreshing white wine made with grapes grown in cooler climates near bodies of water.”

Nova picked it up and gazed at the crystal clear liquid.

The waiter continued, “It has notes of citrus, green apple, and minerality.”

I watched as Nova brought the glass to her lips and took a sip. She smiled with pleasure and gave me a sly look.

Yes. Definitely loving this.

“Enjoy.” The waiter bowed and left.

“This place is wonderful,” she said before taking another sip.

I didn’t touch my glass. “Now my turn.”

She grinned. “I love how serious you are about this game.”

“Very serious.”

“Then, hit me with your question.” She began to take a sip.

“What is the worst thing you have ever done in your life?”

She almost spilled some of the wine on her dress.

Hmmm. What is she guilty of?

A decorative frame with ornate, symmetrical scrollwork and flourishes. The frame is rectangular with rounded corners and a central opening. Inside the frame, the words "ACT TWO" are written in a bold, black, serif font, centered horizontally and vertically.

ACT TWO

CHAPTER TEN

A TASTE OF TEMPTATION



TRISTAN

“Go ahead, Nova.” I studied her. “What is the worst thing you have ever done in your life?”

She cleared her throat and set the glass down. “That is a pretty dark question.”

“And that is not an answer.”

She held my gaze. “It’s also a good question.”

“Then, answer it.”

We were silent for a moment, and then she let out a sigh.

My eyebrows raised in anticipation.

Slowly, she went to the next earring and took it off.

Damn it.

While the intention of the game was to get her naked, I desperately wanted to know the answer. Part of my attraction to Nova was her sweet innocence. She seemed like an overall good person.

So, what could she be hiding?

She placed the earring on the table and moved her plate to the side as if she no longer had an appetite.

It must be pretty bad.

She picked up her glass of Earth Wine and drank from it.

Something truly upsetting to her.

Once she finished the Earth Wine, she put that down, picked up the Water Wine, and sipped that.

Truly intrigued, I continued to watch her. “I am the last person that would judge you.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Then, tell me the answer.”

“I already took off my earring.”

“Forget the game, I want to know what would make you gulp down half a glass of wine.”

She blinked. “Why?”

“I am interested.”

She slowly swirled the white wine in her glass. “It’s too dark of an answer for such a nice night.”

“I’m okay with dark.”

She took another sip and then placed the glass on the table. “My turn.”

“No.” I leaned forward. “I want to hear the answer.”

My words hung in the air and her gaze softened.

“Nova,” I said more softly. “What did you do?”

She let out a deep sigh and looked away.

“It’s okay.” I reached across the table and took her hand in mine. “Understand this. You can tell me anything.”

She met my gaze, and I could see the pain in her eyes. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but then paused and shook her head.

I gave her hand a gentle squeeze of encouragement, willing her to open up to me.

Finally, Nova spoke in a low voice that was barely above a whisper. "I'm a twin."

I leaned my head to the side. "There is another beautiful woman that looks just like you walking on this planet?"

She gave me a sad smile. "Twin brother."

"Tell me more."

"Dylan and I were super close and did everything together. We even told each other everything."

Still holding her hand, I slipped my thumb along her fingers. "Okay."

"When we were sixteen, Dylan told me in confidence one night that he was in a relationship that our parents wouldn't approve of."

"What sort of relationship?"

"He was in love with a man."

I frowned. "Your parents have a problem with homosexuality?"

"Yes." She rolled her eyes. "Anyway, Dylan and I kept this from them."

"When did he know he liked men?"

"I think he was thirteen when he admitted it to me, but honestly I think he knew long before then."

"He could trust you to not say anything?"

"Yes." Sadness rose in her eyes. "But, this new relationship was a problem. It was hard for me to remain silent about it."

"Why?"

“Dylan was sleeping with the pastor of our church. This is a man that was well over fifty years old and who adamantly preached against same-gender attraction every Sunday. Additionally, he was married and had three kids around our age.”

“So, a hypocrite and predatory pedophile?”

“I would say so. And Dylan didn’t want me to tell anyone. Meanwhile, they were hooking up in his office right after church. This man was doing...all types of things to my brother—tying him up, whipping him with a bible, etc. My parents thought he was volunteering for the church. Instead, he was getting laid by this older, married man.” Her bottom lip quivered and I wanted to gather her in my arms.

But, I had to let her get this all out.

“So...” Nova’s voice cracked. “I went to my mother and told her. I thought that...”

I leaned forward. “You thought what?”

“I thought that the pastor would be the one that got in trouble.”

I raised my eyebrows. “He didn’t?”

“My mother is... Something is wrong with her. She... um...so she never really treated my brother right. Since we were tiny kids she always disciplined him the most and said some of the meanest things to him for no reason.”

“Why?”

“It would take years to explain my mother. She’s part of the reason why I was interested in the field of psychology.”

“And your brother was the other reason?”

She blinked. “Yes.”

My heart ached, knowing that whatever she would say next was going to be tragic. I could see it all over her face. “What happened, Nova?”

“After I told my mother, she stormed into my brother’s room with a belt and just started hitting him over and over. She

screamed how he was a demon enticing the good pastor. And Dylan...he just took it...like...he deserved it.” She moved her hand from me and hugged herself. “I was able to get in the room and somehow pull my mother away. Dylan ran off.”

Anger rose within me.

“Then, I let go of my mother and hurried after Dylan...but I never found him.”

“Did you find him eventually?”

“I didn’t.” Her eyes watered. “But the pastor did. Two days later. Hanging from the ceiling beam in his office.”

Nova’s words broke my heart.

I rose from my seat and went to Nova. I didn’t stop to think about what I was doing. Before I knew it, I was on my knees next to her chair and wrapping my arms around her.

“I’m fine, Tristan.” Still, Nova let me hold her close. “It was a very long time ago.”

“I’m so sorry.”

She softened and leaned into me. “I’m sorry too.”

This was not a usual moment on any date I’d ever had. Typically, we talked about sex and some of our past relationships. A little small talk here and there, but nothing too remarkable, nothing that would take me a long time to forget.

But, Nova had somehow tugged at my heart—an organ that I mostly ignored.

She whispered, “Even crazier...”

“Yes?”

“I...” She cleared her throat. “You’re going to think I am insane.”

“Does it matter? Look at where I have you tonight.” I gave her a sad smile. “What is crazy?”

“I text my brother.”

Sadness hit me.

“I umm...I missed him so much that I just...opened a phone account for him and now I just...text him sometimes.”

“I get it.”

“You don’t.”

I thought of the only picture I owned of my mother. During my darkest moments, I talked to that image. Clearing my throat, I nodded. “I get it on some level, and...I think that you should keep texting him if you want to.”

Silence ran between us for a minute.

“Okay.” She leaned away and left my arms. “New topic. See. I told you that was too deep for a first date.”

“I think it was important for me to know.”

She widened her eyes. “Why?”

“I don’t know why.” I rose from the floor and returned to my seat. “But, I’m glad you told me.”

“Either way, I am putting my earring back on because I answered the question.”

I considered my question from earlier. “Hold on. Nova, you think that *you* did something wrong?”

“I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“You had no idea what your mother would have done.”

“Still.”

“And...”

“What?”

“You must also consider that the Pastor may have said or done something to cause your brother to do it, not you.”

She picked up her glass of white wine and gazed back at me. “I’ve considered that, but I still feel guilty for my part in that scenario.”

My breath caught in my throat as I looked into her eyes and saw the depth of sadness within them.

However, I caught a spark of something else that left me feeling like I was seeing the real Nova—a woman of courage and strength who had faced one of life’s darkest moments and kept going.

“Nova,” I whispered, “you’re strong.”

“Stop.”

“You are.”

“Regardless...let’s get back into a more uplifting mood. We were having fun.” She took a sip of the wine. “Therefore, now *my* question.”

“Hmmm.”

She studied me. “You have now made me go deep. I must get you to do the same.”

I smirked. “Many have tried and failed.”

“I won’t.”

“We will see.” I took my glass for Earth Wine and held it up to the light, admiring the deep, ruby color of the liquid.

Two waiters came over with two bowls.

I recognized the scents instantly and got excited.

The third waiter stood next to the table. “For our Water Element, we have Lobster Bisque with Caviar.”

I watched Nova.

Her face brightened, and I decided I loved to see joy coming from her eyes.

She needs to be spoiled as much as possible.

The waiter continued, “This dish represents the water element because it incorporates rich, indulgent flavors that come from the ocean.”

I looked at the bowl in front of me.

The soup had the consistency of a hearty stew. A red hue ran through the creamy white liquid. Chunks of lobster floated around the black pearls of caviar.

“The bisque is made with fresh lobster meat and cream, and is topped with a dollop of caviar.” The waiter gestured to the side. “The dish is served with warm, crusty bread. Please enjoy.”

The waiters left.

Excited, I picked up the spoon. “This dish is my favorite.”

She grabbed her spoon. “You love seafood?”

I kept the spoon in mid-air. “Is that your question for the game?”

“Tristan, that is not fair. We are having a casual conversation.”

“We are playing a game.”

She chuckled.

Her laugh was so intoxicating.

“Try the soup. You’ll love it.” I tasted mine and groaned in delight. “Perfect.”

She tasted hers and moaned. “Oh my God.”

“Excellent. Right?”

“That may be the best thing I have ever had in my life.”

I raised my eyebrows, “So you like it?”

“It’s amazing.”

We ate in silence.

I watched her sip the soup and close her eyes with pleasure.

Why is she so fucking beautiful?

I returned my attention to her brown skin, staring in awe. It was truly a work of art—a canvas that begged to be explored and admired. Throughout this dinner, I found myself lost in the nuances of her coloring, the way it shifted in the light, the subtle depths that seemed to contain untold mysteries.

That was the biggest problem of being an artist.

We were helpless around beauty.

I found myself transfixed.

Mesmerized.

Struggling to focus on anything other than the desire that was burning within me.

I wanted to taste her skin, lick and bite it.

I wanted to suck on those lips and to feel her body pressed against mine, to lose myself in the passion that I knew we could create together.

Inside my mind was a raging storm of desire for this beautiful woman sitting across from me.

She had an allure that I found irresistible, and I wanted nothing more than to devour her.

Be patient.

She set her spoon down and licked her lips.

I can't wait to taste that tongue.

A wicked smirk spread across her face. "I have a question."

"Finally."

She chuckled. "You are impatient."

"Is that your question?"

The smirk deepened. "Why don't you want kids and marriage?"

Interesting.

I set my spoon down and leaned back in my chair. "It's because I'm already married with kids."

"Excuse me?" She opened her mouth in shock.

I chuckled. "I am married to my *art*, and my *children* are my collections."

A soft sigh left her.

I grinned. “And, I don’t want a family. I want fame. I want my name in the history books.”

“Why?”

“That is another question and it is *my* turn.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Rules are rules, Nova.”

“Fine.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “And what does Mr. Pleasure Room Owner want to ask now?”

“You keep mentioning my Pleasure Room, and you will be in there tonight.” My cock jerked in my pants. “Whether you want to or not.”

She widened her eyes.

I picked up my wine, took a sip, and then swallowed the sweet liquid. “Okay. What’s a secret fantasy you’ve always wanted to try?”

Nova blushed. She took a moment before she finally spoke. “Three gorgeous men ravishing me.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Three?”

She chuckled a little and grabbed her wine. “I’ve never said that out loud.”

I considered her fantasy.

“One pushing into your mouth.” I lifted a finger and then put up the other. “One slipping and sliding in and out of your pussy.”

She bit her lip.

I raised the third finger. “And one penetrating that big, beautiful ass of yours.”

“Are those *your* questions, Mr. Russo?”

“Those are statements.” I lowered my hand.

“Honestly, it might be too much cock for me to handle.” She shrugged. “But, it would be worth it to try.”

In my mind, I saw Nova. With me beneath her, a second man behind her, and a third man in front of her, his cock deep in her mouth.

Hmmm.

As she moaned, her breasts shook and bounced. Her beautiful face contorted in pleasure, and we thrust in and out of Nova—her mouth agape with cock, and her eyes shut tight in ecstasy.

It was a breathtaking and most erotic vision, yet... something tugged at me.

Could I share her with other men? The opportunity would surely come up at the Masquerade, but...

Already, Nova was proving to be quite captivating.

While I had shared other women with many men, I wasn't sure about this situation.

For some reason, that made me uneasy.

I had never felt so possessive over anyone before.

I'll consider this later.

The circular stage that we sat on once again slowly rose three feet into the air.

Nova shrieked. "It's so weird when that happens."

I smiled. "It took me a few visits to get used to it."

"It is time for our next element." She clapped and did a little shoulder sway. "I wonder which one it will be."

I chuckled.

She laughed with me. "Tristan, I am really having fun."

"Good."

"I won't lie. I almost..."

"What?"

"When I first walked down the steps with Eros, I almost turned around and left."

“That was your first test.”

“Test?”

I nodded. “If you couldn’t handle Eros or even the Vault, then you had no business messing with me.”

“Very intriguing.”

“I’m just glad you passed.”

“Me too.” Nova watched as the stage began turning and carrying us into the next setting.

Pure joy rushed through me.

Why is it so much fun to make her excited?

As the stage moved us further, the Water room left and the Air room appeared.

Puffy, white clouds and a vibrant blue sky replaced the tropical fish swimming in water. A warm breeze made Nova’s curly hair flutter.

The atmosphere became lighter and more ethereal.

A heady scent of rain rose in the room. For the life of me, I still had not figured out how they did that.

It felt like we were actually in the clouds, high above the earth.

She shook her head, baffled by the scene. “This is...really amazing.”

The waiter appeared with a tray of wine.

Nova turned to him.

One by one, he placed them on the table. “Now we have Hermes. This will be your *Air Wine* for the evening.”

Nova and I picked up our glasses.

“This is a light, refreshing white wine made with grapes grown in higher elevations with cool, breezy climates.” The waiter placed the tray behind him and smiled. “Hermes has notes of floral and fruit.”

Nova smiled. “Thank you.”

He bowed and left.

“You will like this one.” I raised the glass to my lips and took a small sip, savoring the rich flavor.

Nova tried hers and then groaned. “Oh. My. God.”

“Perfect.”

“In every way.” She shook her head. “And I’m not even a big fan of white wine. I favor red.”

“You will definitely get an exquisite red wine in the Fire Room.”

“I’m excited.”

“Still...” I let my gaze slip down to her cleavage. “I wanted to take you to Four Elements not because it is my favorite restaurant, but because I wanted you to understand that it’s all about trying new things.”

“That’s important to you?”

“You never know what you’ll like until you try it.”

She smiled.

“Now, *your* question.”

“Okay.” She sipped more of her wine and then looked at me. “What’s your biggest turn-on?”

Hmmm.

“This is an easy answer for me. However...” I set my wine down, rose from my chair, walked to Nova, and towered over her.

She leaned back and widened her eyes.

“I’m going to steal a move from you.” I moved my hands up to my collar and slowly undid the knot on my black tie.

“From me?”

“From you.”

She licked her lips. “I’ve had a good bit of wine, but I don’t remember coming over to you and being so sexy.”

“You think I’m sexy?”

She blushed.

My cock hardened.

“While we go on this journey...” I pulled the tie’s silk fabric loose. “*You* will have to figure out *my* turn-ons.”

She parted those sexy lips.

I slid the tie from around my neck. “Do you understand?”

Her voice was barely above a whisper. “Yes.”

My body warmed.

“This journey is not only about pleasure. It is about discovery.” I stared right at her, and with a slow, deliberate movement, I wound the tie around my hand. “Wild and untamed.”

Nova’s chest began to rise and fall as if she had just finished running.

“We’ll lose ourselves together.” The tie’s silk twisted along my fingers.

Nova watched, her eyes dark with desire and fascination.

I brought the tie to my lips, my breath warm against the smooth silk. It would have been better to have my mouth on her pussy, but this would have to do for now.

I slowly lowered the tie. It slid against my chest like a lover’s caress. “And we’ll give in to every carnal desire that we’ve been denying for far too long.”

Finally, I let the tie drop to her lap. “Tonight, your first assignment for me is...”

She whispered, “Yes?”

“Take my tie home and...”

She blinked. “And?”

“I want you to cum from rubbing your pussy all over the silk.”

She widened her eyes.

“Do you think you can do that?”

Nova gulped and then whispered, “Yes.”

A smile tugged at my lips.

This is going to be interesting indeed.

I walked back over to my chair and sat down.

Nova lifted my tie and gazed at it.

My hard cock pulsed, pressing against my pants. I knew hidden under the soft fabric, my cock bulged, the vein throbbing. The tip tinting to a dark pink due to being so ready for release.

She ran her fingertips over the fabric.

The heat in my body intensified.

She looked up at me and lightly bit her lower lip.

My heart raced with anticipation.

We were going to indulge in the darkest corners of our fantasies, exploring desires without inhibitions, being wild, passionate, and reckless.

Breaking all the rules.

I slipped my hand to my cock and gripped it. “Nova.”

She looked up at me.

“Take your panties off and give them to me.” My voice went low and deep. “Now.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WET



TRISTAN

I slowly leaned my head to the side. “Did you not understand my request?”

Her pupils widened and her breathing deepened. “I understand.”

“Then, why aren’t your panties in my hand?”

“I am...”

I quirked my brows.

“I am still deciding if I am going to do it.”

“Oh, you’ll do it.” I grinned. “Or *I* will do it for you.”

She parted her lips.

“Either way, those panties will be off.” I rose.

She widened her eyes.

I could see the realization dawning in her mind as I stalked over to her.

“W-what are you doing?”

I stopped in front of her. “Helping.”

Her gaze went to my hard cock pushing against my pants.

Do you see what you do to me?

I gazed down at her. “Stand up, Nova.”

Slowly, she stood up. Her body trembled.

Was it fear? Excitement? Or a combination of both?

Nova stepped back and placed the chair in front of me.

Did she think that small barrier would stop me from having my way? Did she know that I was barely holding back from touching her?

“So...” Nova took another step back.

The restaurant’s clouds floated behind her, and the warm breeze blew through her curls, making her look like an angel.

She cleared her throat. “Getting to my panties may be a bit difficult.”

“Why?”

“My garters are over them.”

Fuck yes.

I gritted my teeth.

Patience.

“Nova.” My whole body hummed with lust. “What color?”

“Black.”

I lifted the chair and put it to the side.

She blinked those eyes in disbelief.

My breathing was ragged with all the possibilities that were running through my mind.

Fast, I closed the distance between us, slipped my hand around her waist, and pressed her to my body. My cock smoothed against her.

She shuddered and looked into my eyes with an intensity that made me forget all else around us.

I felt her heat and desire, and I wanted it.

My heart raced faster.

With my free hand, I took one finger and placed it against her lower lip before lightly tracing it down the length of her neck until I reached the top of her dress. Her skin was so damn soft. It's warmth tingled against my own.

I slipped my fingers down over her full breasts and went to the side of her body, relishing in the curve of her hip.

Should I tear off this whole dress? Have her naked in the restaurant bent over, and taking my cock?

My breathing became heavy.

The atmosphere between us was so incredibly hot and charged that it was impossible for me to not feel the electricity in the air.

I seized the red dress's silky fabric and inch by inch raised it. "What made you wear garters tonight?"

She whispered, "I wanted to feel sexy."

"And do you?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. You surely are the sexiest vixen I've ever had the pleasure of being around." I slipped my hand under the dress, claiming what was all mine to take.

The silkiness of her stockings enticed me.

Then, I touched the garter and grunted.

She gasped and closed her eyes as I slowly ran my fingers along the edge of her garter belt.

Then, I noticed how wicked she could be when I looked down.

My God.

Nova was wearing nothing but a lace thong underneath the garters.

I bit back a moan at how exquisite she looked.

I am going to do so many nasty things to her.

I pulled her closer and kissed her hungrily, taking in all the deliciousness of her mouth—the taste of wine and passion that spoke to my soul.

My hands moved around to her soft, fat ass, caressing it, gripping it so tightly with longing and desire that it almost seemed like we were one being.

A soft moan left her.

Footsteps sounded behind us.

She opened her eyes and checked. “The waiters are here.”

With my hand still under the dress, I let go of her ass and slid it back to the garter. “Are they?”

She shivered. “Yes.”

I unfastened the garter. “Good.”

Savory scents drifted our way.

The waiter cleared his throat behind us. “For our Air Element, we have foie gras mousse.”

I slipped my hands up her hip and then inch by inch over the mound of her pussy. Only the silk of her lace thong covered what I yearned to taste the most.

She shivered. “Tristan.”

Surely gazing in any direction but us, the waiter continued, “The air element is embodied in this dish through its incorporation of light and airy textures, as well as delicate and subtle flavors.”

I couldn't resist. I had to touch her some more. Slowly, I cupped the front of her pussy.

She gasped and closed her eyes.

“The foie gras mousse is whipped to a fluffy, cloudlike texture, then topped with a sweet and tangy cherry gelee.”

I relished in feeling how moist the lace of her panties was becoming against my fingers. “So wet.”

“The dish is served with toasted brioche and a drizzle of aged balsamic vinegar.”

Tracing my fingers over the intricate lace design, I explored every curve and dip of her pussy. I felt the soft, little bulge of her clit pressing against the fabric.

There you go.

With a gentle pressure, I began rubbing the sensitive bud in small, slow circles.

A soft moan escaped her lips, and I could feel her body tensing up against mine.

“Oh, Nova.” I softly danced my fingertips over her clit, coaxing out more moans of pleasure from deep within her throat. “You are going to be so much fun at the Masquerade.”

Footsteps sounded and then the noise became distant as the waiters must have been leaving.

I moved my hand from the wet lace and raised my fingers to my nose.

“Masquerade?” She opened her eyes and watched me.

“We will talk about that later. For now...” Loudly, I inhaled. The scent of her pussy shoved me over the edge. It was a sweet, delicate perfume with hints of lavender and musk.

I groaned and stared into her eyes.

Arousal coursed through my veins.

Lost in the moment, I wrapped my arm around Nova’s waist, pulling her against me in a tight embrace as I kissed her once more hungrily and passionately.

Devouring her.

Nova moaned in ecstasy.

My tongue explored every corner of her mouth as my hand crept back to the soft, wet fabric covering her pussy.

I continued teasing and tantalizing it with gentle strokes, until she was panting in pleasure.

My fingers slid lower and I could feel how soaked she had become for me.

Unable to help myself, I tore away the panties.

The sound of fabric ripping filled the air.

The torn thong fell to the stage's floor.

I had my fingers back on her soft pussy.

Pre-cum spilled from my cock, making a mess of my boxer briefs.

“Nova. Nova.” I let go and backed up. “Get on the table.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Now.”

She swallowed and like a good girl she went over to it.

Very good.

I stalked behind her.

When she got to the table, she turned around. “On it?”

Without answering, I lifted her up fast and placed her there myself.

She shrieked.

Our glasses of wine spilled from the movement. Liquid trickled across the table and stained some of her dress.

I pushed her down.

She gasped again as her back pressed against the table's surface.

“Spread your thighs.”

Her chest rose and fell. “You're going to—?”

“Spread them.”

She did.

I couldn't help but admire the sight of her vulnerable and exposed to me.

I got closer.

A bowl was next to her right thigh.

I dipped my finger into the foie gras mousse, coating the digit with the pillowy whipped mixture. "Open your mouth."

She parted those sexy lips.

I leaned far over and dipped that finger into her mouth. "Suck."

She did, sucking so hard, my cock almost burst out of my pants.

Yeah. She has skills. I'm going to enjoy pushing her.

I remained bent over her. With my other hand, I found my way back to her pussy, stroking and teasing it.

"Oh." She shuddered with each touch.

I slid my finger out of her mouth. "Do you like the mousse?"

"Y-yes." She moaned.

With the hand on her pussy, I inserted two fingers into her tight opening, pushing deeper and deeper with every thrust.

"Oh!" Her eyes closed in ecstasy as I increased the speed of my thrusts.

She was panting now, reaching out for me with need radiating from her entire body.

I leaned further over and kissed her hard as my fingers pulled out from inside of her.

She gasped in pleasure.

I deepened the kiss. My tongue sensually darted around her mouth hungrily before leaving her mouth and exploring the curve of her perfumed neck and collarbone, tasting saltiness that was a mix between sweat and arousal.

The room pulsed with sexual energy so thick I could almost feel it on my skin like a second layer of clothing caressing every inch of my body.

She released a loud moan against my lips as I increased the intensity of my strokes. With each thrust of my fingers, Nova's body shook uncontrollably.

I pierced her with my fingers again and again.

Her moist walls quivered.

“Open your eyes, Nova.”

She did. Fiery lust blazed in her gaze.

And then, the stage began turning and carrying us into the next setting, but I couldn't have cared less.

My only focus was Nova.

She panted.

“I wonder if I can make you cum tonight.” Slipping my fingers in and out, I massaged her clit with my thumb.

She widened her eyes. “Oh.”

“Could I do it with just my fingers?”

Her body shook with pleasure beneath mine.

“Or will I need to use my tongue or cock?”

“Oh.”

I wanted to find out.

“Let us try the fingers first.” I increased the tempo of my thrusts and massaged her clit in circles with my thumb, pushing her closer and closer to the edge.

She moaned.

“God, you're so beautiful.”

“Oh.”

“Do you like getting your pussy stroked?”

She panted. “Yes.”

The setting shifted from fluffy white clouds to hot flaming oranges. Heat rose in the room as fire crackled and popped around us. The scent of wood burning filled the air.

A swell of excitement coursed through me. “Let go, Nova.”

Slowly, I felt her surrendering completely to me.

And then, the sweet sound of Nova’s moans filled the space as she gripped the edge of the table. “Oh. My. God.”

“Yes.” I was captivated by her. “Just like that.”

“Oh! Oh!” Nova’s moans grew louder as I brought her closer to climax again, her breathing becoming more and more erratic.

She gripped the table harder. “Oh God!”

Then, her body trembled as wave after wave of pleasure engulfed her senses until finally she drowned in an intense orgasm that left even me breathless.

“Ohhhh!”

God yes. She is perfect.

My fingers were still inside of her when she relaxed, panting in satisfaction.

Beads of sweat appeared on my forehead. It could have been from the heat of the Fire Room or energy I’d exhausted from making her cum.

I began kissing her tenderly, and soon she was returning my affections with equal passion. Her hands left the table and moved down my body, running lightly over my chest.

I kissed her deeper and felt her tremble in response.

So fucking perfect.

We kissed for what seemed like an eternity, our bodies pressed together, both exploring each other in a new way.

I pulled away from her delicately and removed my hand from between her thighs. “So damn perfect.”

“That was amazing,” she breathed out between heavy pants as she stared up at me with a stunned expression on her face.

“How do you feel?”

Panting some more, she opened her mouth and took in the space around us for the first time. “I...can’t believe...I let you...do that...”

“Let?” Laughing, I brushed the hair away from her face, tenderly took her hand, and helped her sit up. “You will discover that I will do whatever I want to you whenever I want and however I want to do it.”

Her body tensed at my words, but she kept her gaze locked with mine. Those pupils dilated further. Perhaps, from the pleasure she had received. Or maybe, as a sign of her decided submission.

Yes. She will be a lot of fun.

The waiter entered with a tray of wine.

Shrieking, she hurried off the table and pulled down her wine-stained dress.

The waiter placed our glasses on the table.

She smoothed down her dress, trying to get control of herself.

I smirked.

Her stiff nipples poked the front of the dress. Her curls were this way and that. She looked like she had just experienced the most intense orgasm of her life. There would be no fixing her image up.

The waiter smiled at us. “Our final wine for the evening is Hades.”

She cleared her throat and lowered into her chair.

Instead of going to my seat, I walked over to her torn thong on the floor.

She gasped in horror.

Embarrassed? The waiter already heard you moaning. They all have—the chef and the rest of the staff.

The waiter continued, “This bold, full-bodied red wine is made with grapes grown in warm, sunny climates.”

Nova no longer looked at the waiter. Instead, she watched me in pure embarrassment as I stood in front of the thong.

“This wine has notes of dark fruit, vanilla, and a very rich spice.”

Without taking my gaze away from hers, I slowly lowered, picked up the thong, and rose.

“Enjoy.” The waiter bowed and left.

“I most definitely will.” I brought the panties to my face.

She widened her eyes.

I deeply breathed in the scent of her pussy. A low groan vibrated through my body. With the panties still against my nose, I spoke, “Tomorrow, you will come to my studio.”

“I...um...” She gazed at the panties on my face. “I scheduled...a private room in the library for...I mean to study.”

Never letting my gaze leave Nova, I lowered the panties from my face and carefully placed the thong in my pocket. “The car will be in front of your building at 3pm.”

She blinked.

I headed back over to the table.

“Unfortunately, I must decline.” She gave me a sad smile. “I really want to. Believe me. But, it is difficult to get a room.”

I grinned.

“I was on a wait list for two weeks to get this one scheduled for—”

“3pm.” I dove my hand in the pocket stuffed with the thong and fingered the damp material.

“Tristan—”

“If you are not with my driver at that time, then you will see me in your hard-to-schedule library room, stuffing my cock in your mouth and making you moan and plead in front of all those studious people.”

Her face flushed.

The waiters brought out plates, presenting the restaurant’s signature spicy dark chocolate lava cake with a chili-infused caramel sauce on the inside. Gold leaves garnished the sides.

I licked my lips, but it wasn’t because of the sweetness on my plate.

In my mind, I considered all of the final tests for Nova tomorrow.

So many wicked deeds.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A WORK OF ART



TRISTAN

After our date, I took Nova home.

The car came alive with the lingering electricity of our evening together.

The city lights streaked past us, but all I could see were her eyes, filled with warmth and pleasure.

The whole journey back, our conversation flowed effortlessly.

But beneath the words, a lusty tension surged.

When we arrived at her place, I walked Nova to her building—our fingers entwined.

Time slowed as I turned to face her.

Those brown eyes locked onto mine.

Without a word, we both leaned in, drawn by a force that defied explanation, guided by a destiny that felt as ancient as the earth itself. Our lips met in a deep, soul-stirring kiss, a moment of pure passion, a fusion of two spirits becoming one.

And for me to even think all of this was odd and...insane.

Yet, the taste of her was an intoxicating. Her tongue was a heady blend of desire and vulnerability. Her lips were the gates to a hidden garden, a place of beauty and mystery, where every caress was a discovery, every breath a revelation.

In that goodbye kiss, I swore I could taste her soul, feel her essence. Her warmth spread through me, filling every corner of my being.

The kiss was a symphony.

A dance of flavors and sensations.

And yet, it scared me.

It was a fear that went beyond reason.

In that kiss, I felt my walls crumble, my defenses shatter. I was laid bare, exposed to the core, vulnerable to a longing that was as terrifying as it was exhilarating.

Terrified, I pulled away, breathless and shaken, lost in the storm of emotions that raged within me.

Speechless, I left Nova without saying goodbye.

I just...couldn't.

However, as I headed back to the Bentley, I felt Nova's gaze on my back, a warm embrace that lingered long after the distance had grown.

Once Charles drove away, Nova's face remained in my head along with the taste of her lips and the sound of her laughter.

The night with her was over, but something had begun, something powerful and intoxicating, and it was scaring the shit out of me.

I knew then that Nova had touched something deep within my core, something that would not be easily forgotten.

And...I wasn't sure if I liked it or not.

Regardless of what happened tomorrow, tonight's date would be one to remember.

Now an hour later, I found myself unable to sleep and standing in the studio where the haunting echoes of our date thickened within the space.

In my right hand, I held her still damp thong.

The soft fabric felt exquisitely warm in the cool air.

I closed my eyes, imagining her pussy.

I should have fucked you on that table.

I brought the garment to my nose and inhaled the scent of her desire.

Fuck.

Arousal surged through me like a raging fire, consuming my body with thoughts of what could have been if I had fucked her in the restaurant.

Every part of me ached for her touch, yearned for her warmth, and wanted to explore all she had offer.

But, what is she doing to me? Why is this...so different from the usual women?

I opened my eyes.

An empty canvas stood in front of me.

I placed the thong back in my pocket and turned to my palette.

Tonight, the colors were more vibrant.

Rummaging through all of my tubes of paint, I found the right ones and squeezed the dark browns and earthy tones onto the palette. The colors were like her skin, a rich melodic blend of hues that I longed to caress.

This will get all of the weird feelings out of me. I'll just put them all on the canvas.

My heart beat wildly.

Hot desire consumed my entire being.

Can I truly capture her image?

The scent of oil paints mingled with the memory of her perfume, and stirred up an insane amount of hunger within my body.

Come on. Focus on the art.

Licking my lips, I dipped my brush into the paint, and as it touched the canvas, I could feel Nova's warm presence in the room, her energy wrapping around me, exciting and terrifying in its intensity.

Fuck.

Tonight, I did not make love to the canvas.

Instead, I surrendered myself to Nova's allure.

Why is she still in my head?

Never had I painted a woman that I dated. No one had ever inspired me to do so, but Nova...she was proving to be different from the others.

Each brushstroke brought me closer to her beauty.

So close, but it still does not do her the proper justice.

My heart beat faster and hotter with each passing moment until my entire being was consumed by a raging fire of passion.

On the canvas, her brown skin unfolded before my eyes.

I painted each shade, from the melody of warm sienna to the contours of rich umber and the softest hints of gold that hugged her presence.

My cock grew rock hard in my pants.

I badly yearned to be inside of Nova.

Should I forget the tests and just fuck her tomorrow?

My brush danced across the canvas.

No. Remember the original mission. Calm down.

But, how could I keep my excitement down?

Her moans from tonight echoed in my head.

I groaned and painted with fervor, each stroke a caress, each shade a discovery of her complexity and grace. With every movement of my brush, I could feel the softness of her pussy against my fingertips.

Tonight had not just been a date, it had turned into an experience that I wanted to capture on canvas and remember forever. For the first time in my life, I wanted to paint what *true* desire looked like and make it immortal.

I thought back to the moment she orgasmed.

That had been such beauty.

A work of art.

I began to paint her lips. The lushness of her pout. My brush moved with a will of its own, yet precise and delicate.

Yes.

I could almost feel the warmth of Nova's breath against my skin. The sensation was overwhelming, and I felt myself getting more aroused by the second.

I shouldn't have taken Nova back to her place. She should be in my bed right now.

Her mesmerizing eyes were next, endless wells of brown that held a universe of passion and longing. I lost myself in them, my brush pirouetting and twisting along the canvas. I tried to capture the alluring intelligence that I had seen in those depths.

God yes. That's it.

And then her hair, those black corkscrew curls, wild and untamed. They were a storm I longed to lose myself in.

My body reacted with each stroke, a physical longing that made my hand tremble and my breath catch.

Damn it.

The room grew hot.

Sweat beaded on my brow as I painted.

Hours passed, unheeded, unnoticed, the painting growing under my touch.

When it was done, I stepped back, my body spent, my heart pounding.

Hmmm.

Of course, the painting was beautiful, a masterpiece, but it was also a torment.

Nova was there on the canvas, yet not there.

A dream.

An enigma that I was only just beginning to understand.

I could never truly capture her the way I yearned because in the end, I wanted her right in front of me, not just simply on canvas.

A strange feeling settled in my gut.

It scared me how quickly the intensity of my need for her was rising.

Can I even wait until the Masquerade?

Even more, the bigger question was why the hell she was having this effect on me? I felt like I was caught in a spell woven by Nova, and one that I was helpless to resist.

Then, suddenly a sharp knock on the door jarred me from my thoughts.

Aggravated, I scowled at the closed door. "What is it?"

"Apologies, sir." My butler, Spencer's voice came through the door. "But there's something I believe requires your immediate attention."

I sighed, feeling the magic of the painting slip away. "Come in."

Spencer entered the studio, carrying a silver platter with a new phone resting on top of it. His eyes flickered to the canvas, taking in the painting of Nova, but his expression remained impassive.

I scowled. “What’s so urgent it couldn’t wait until morning?”

Spencer held the platter in front of me. “Your new phone arrived. Before I could finish putting in your preferences, Mr. White called.”

“Oh.” I wiped my paint-smearred hands on my pants, picked up the phone, and placed it against my ear. “Hello, Peiter?”

Spencer slightly bowed and then carried the platter away.

Peiter’s voice filled my ears. “Tristan! Sorry for the late call, but I’ve got some news you’ll want to hear.”

“What is it?”

Peiter’s voice was a mixture of excitement and concern. “Well, I hacked into your mystery woman’s apartment and was able to easily get a feed going for her bathroom and bedroom.”

My body drummed with lust. “Have the feed sent to me immediately—”

“Yes, that’s no problem. But here’s the thing that’s bothering me. Someone had already set up cameras in her place.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What?”

“The cameras were new as if the person just put them in her place this morning.”

Horror poured over me. “What the fuck?”

Peiter continued, “Not only that, this person was monitoring her place while I was hacking into his system.”

My heart skipped a beat. “What? Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” Peiter replied, a hint of paranoia creeping into his voice. “And here’s the weirdest part—I tried to trace who it was, but they slipped away fast. I mean, *really* fast. Almost like...”

“What?”

“Almost like they were aliens.”

I frowned. "It's not aliens. It's something else."

"You know how the government covers things up." Peiter's voice trembled. "It could be, Tristan. You never know what they're up to. Conspiracy theories are not just theories, you know. There's always some truth hidden beneath them."

"Forget about the aliens and government." I frowned, trying to make sense of what he was telling me. "I need you to figure out who could have been trying to spy on her."

"Well if it isn't the aliens, then it could be whoever sent you the video."

I stumbled back. "What?"

"I've been struggling to trace the third server. This person is good. Maybe, it is the same person...or being..."

"Third server?"

"This person didn't use one server to send the video. This was a complicated delivery. Lots of skill involved, just like with the monitoring of her apartment. Very high tech."

"But can you figure this out?"

"Of course I can, but understand this..."

"What?"

"If it is aliens, I am stepping back from this." He raised his voice. "I cannot be involved!"

I gritted my teeth. "It is not aliens."

It's some fucking psycho.

Peiter scoffed. "Tristan, in our world, nothing is ever ordinary. You should know that better than anyone. This could be something big, something we can't even imagine."

I ignored his rant and thought about the woman burning in the video that had been texted to me. Now with this new information, a cold chill zipped down my spine.

Was Nova in danger?

Even more horrible, was I the one who had put her in harm's way?

But why would all of this be happening in the first place?

The painting of Nova loomed over me.

I swallowed hard. “Peiter, I need you to find out who this person is. It must be your top priority. I’ll give you anything you fucking need to get this done. See if you can find out who’s behind this. But be careful. Don’t let them know you’re watching.”

“Don’t worry,” Peiter’s voice trembled again. “I’m on it. Just be ready, Tristan. If this is what I think it is, it could change everything that we know about the universe, aliens, and even the catastrophic evolution of our kind.”

Suddenly, the line went dead, leaving me standing in the studio.

My mind spun with questions and fears.

Who was watching her earlier?

Why?

What did they want?

And what was I going to do about it?

I turned to the painting.

Did I somehow put you in danger? Or was someone already watching you?

Nova’s face stared back at me from the canvas.

Regardless, I will get a whole security team to protect you from the shadows. Nothing will happen to you.

I had to find out who had invaded her privacy.

A dark determination settled over me.

I texted Dominic.

Me: I need your top guys to protect someone for me. When you wake up, call me immediately.

Then, I dialed Peiter back.

My hands shivered.

“Tristan?”

I gripped the phone hard. “Deliver the feed of Nova to my studio television screen.”

“You’ve got it, Tristan.” He hung up again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE TIE



TRISTAN

I hung up and moved towards the far side of the studio, where my massive television was embedded within the wall.

I found the remote on a nearby table. The sleek black device felt cold in my hand. My heart pounded as I pressed the power button, and the screen flickered to life.

A moment passed, then two, filled with tense anticipation.

Finally, the feed began to stream live images from inside Nova's apartment.

He did it.

I leaned forward.

The footage showed Nova's bedroom, awash in different shades of blue, from the azure curtains to the cerulean bedspread.

Hmmm. You like the color blue? Not a bad choice.

The room was decorated with a cool elegance that matched Nova's persona, each piece of furniture and decoration carefully chosen to create a soothing and harmonious space.

Bookshelves lined one wall, filled to the brim with texts on human behavior, psychological theories, and self-help. Among them were classics from Freud, Jung, and Maslow, interspersed with modern titles on mindfulness and emotional intelligence.

Interesting.

A large wooden desk occupied the room's corner. Its surface was organized yet filled with the tools of her academic pursuit. A laptop was open, filled with notes and research, alongside a vintage typewriter that seemed more decorative than functional. Journals and sketchbooks lay nearby.

Always the student, Nova.

The bed, covered in soft blue linens, was neatly made and adorned with a selection of plush royal blue pillows.

On the walls, abstract art mingled with framed diplomas and certificates. There were also photographs of what I assumed was her family. I caught one photo with Nova and her arm over a male that resembled her.

That must be her twin brother.

The camera panned slowly, and I spotted Nova herself, standing by the window.

Fear hit me.

Why did the camera's focus change? Does it react to movement? Or is this person watching too?

Before I could think about it further, my breath caught in my throat at the sight of Nova wearing a tiny nightgown.

Captivating.

A dark groan left me.

The soft blue fabric clung to her curves. She had her hair up in a pony tail. And, she seemed lost in thought. Those brown eyes were fixed on the world outside.

What are you thinking about? Our date? That orgasm? Or are your thoughts just on me?

I watched, mesmerized, the guilt of this intrusion warring with a longing so intense it threatened to consume me.

The camera followed Nova as she left the window and went to her purse on the dressing table.

Intrigued by her, I began to further assess everything in the room.

Her dressing table, with its array of makeup and brushes, was arranged with an artist's touch. The bottles of perfume, the personal touches, all painted a picture of a woman both strong and fragile, confident and vulnerable.

I sat down, my eyes glued to the screen.

My studio closed in around me, the shadows of the studio merging with the blue hues of Nova's bedroom on the screen.

I couldn't tear my eyes away, couldn't escape the spell she had cast over me.

Then, something unexpected happened that made my heart leap into my throat.

Nova reached into her purse, and to my shock and delight, she pulled out my tie—the very one I had worn on our date.

The one that I told her to rub her pussy all over.

Oh.

My breathing grew heavy.

She brought the tie to her face and closed her eyes.

Nova. Nova.

I gritted my teeth and tried to fight against the intense longing coursing through my veins. I had wanted to see the footage of Nova to watch over her, not get off.

Nova inhaled deeply, as if savoring my scent.

I ran my fingers through my hair.

I should have brought you back to my condo.

Then to my utter shock, she rubbed the tie all over her face with a look of pure ecstasy decorating her exquisite features.

Alright.

A wicked smirk spread across my face.

I knew you were a little freak.

I could almost smell her scent mingled with the lingering trace of my cologne. My arousal grew to an almost unbearable level, and I gripped the arms of my chair so hard my knuckles turned white.

What are you doing to me, Nova? Do you even understand? Because I have no idea...

She carried my tie with her as she strolled toward the bed.

I licked my lips.

Her body swayed with a grace that was both natural and hypnotic.

What will you do now, my freaky Nova?

She laid down on the cerulean bedspread, the blue fabric contrasting with her brown skin, making her look enchanting.

Hmmm.

I watched, my mouth dry, as she curled up with the tie, holding it to her as if it were a part of me, as if it were a token of something more profound than just a single night.

Are you going to do as I ordered?

As if in answer, Nova lifted her nightgown.

I leaned forward even further as her petite hands gripped the tie and caressed her mound with the silk, instantly, driving me insane with hot lust and greedy want.

Fuck yes.

I had to admit that she had a lovely pussy. The lips were puffy, puckered, and glistened with a light sheen of moisture.

It looked like a rare flower from a secret garden of perversion and eroticism.

Slowly she began rubbing the silk tie all over her pussy, moving in passionate circles.

I groaned.

And then she moaned as the motions of her hand became increasingly frenzied.

Good girl.

With a sudden burst of energy, she rocked her hips faster and faster.

My cock throbbed, aching and pulsing. It was so hard it felt like it was about to fucking explode.

She arched her body, gliding that pussy all over my tie.

Oh fuck. You can ride cock. I know it.

I had to bite my lip to keep from screaming out in desire.

She moved faster, her moans rising in intensity until they filled the studio and whispered softly against my skin.

Goddamn it. I should drive down to your place right now.

Moaning, she closed her eyes, no longer looking out into the room but into some secret place deep within herself.

The need for her intensified.

“Oh, Tristan.” She writhed in ecstasy.

Rendered completely spellbound, I stood from the chair like some puppet on the strings of her command.

“Tristan.”

So overcome, I moved in a trance towards the screen.

Erotic heat burned through me.

“I need you right here, Tristan.”

Mindless to any rational thought, I unzipped my pants and pulled out my cock.

“Like that, Tristan.”

Yes, Nova.

My hand wrapped around my cock.

Pre-cum spurt from the aching tip and made my grip slippery.

“Oh. I knew you would be so big.”

You have no idea, Nova.

There, I stroked in time with her movements. My fingers moving frantically along the aching tip and then slipping down the engorged length.

God, I'm going to fuck you so hard.

The pleasure on her face mirrored the pleasure I felt as I jacked off to her moans of delight.

I wanted to be there with her, to feel her pussy's tight grip around my cock, making her bed's headboard slam into the wall. My hips moved of their own accord as I imagined the feeling of being inside her warm, wet pussy.

But the image of Nova, all alone in her bedroom, blind to my presence, pushed me even closer to my breaking point.

Nova continued rubbing her pussy with my tie as she cried out in passion.

My cock twitched with each moan, as if just the mere sound of her ecstasy could bring me to the edge.

And then the inevitable happened.

The moment arrived.

Her body trembled with every wave of pleasure as she cried out again in ecstasy, reaching the peak of her climax.

I groaned. “Hell yes.”

The sheer intensity of the moment was overwhelming, making me feel as if I were one with her, experiencing every sensation that filled her completely.

“Tristan.” She gasped and moaned.

I let out another groan too.

My cock jerked as cum shot all over the room. “Fuck!”

Jets of it streamed and splashed across the screen. The heavy sound filled the space. And I came more, jacking the tip faster. Long ropes of white cum stained more of the screen and then began to splatter on my feet and my pants.

“Goddamn it!” I closed my eyes and finished off. My own climax reverberated through every inch of me.

Panting, I dropped my now wet hands to the side.

My heart raced.

My cock dripped.

Meanwhile, my body still quivered from the intense orgasm.

What the fuck is going on with me?

I opened my eyes, put my focus back on the screen, only to find Nova sprawled out against the bed, her breathing still heavy from the experience.

She moved the tie from her pussy. “Oh my God. He’s got me going crazy.”

Me? You are the guilty one.

She had done something other women could not do, brought me to instant horniness. Never had I masturbated like this over anyone. Even more, I had never experienced an orgasm quite like this one before.

The intensity of it was far beyond anything I’d ever felt.

This only reinforced how much I wanted Nova at the Masquerade with me.

She’ll still have to pass the final tests, but...

I swallowed.

I won’t be sharing her with the men there. Not her.

Nova’s eyes slowly slipped shut. Her chest gently rose and fell. Sighing, she rolled to her side and gripped the tie in her hand.

My body trembled.

“Tristan.” The word slipped out from between her lips, and then she released another peaceful sigh.

I whispered to the screen, “Goodnight, Nova.”

Despite my words, I couldn’t pull myself away.

Instead of walking off, I stared at the screen, and my eyes continued to drink in every detail of her peaceful slumber.

Meanwhile, my heart pounded with a longing I could neither understand nor deny.

I had no intentions of leaving.

No desire to turn off the feed.

The rest of the world fell away as I watched her sleep.

A part of me ached to reach through the screen and touch her soft skin, to brush the curls from her face, and kiss her cheek.

This is insane.

After several minutes, I left the screen and settled back into my chair.

I had a lot to do tomorrow, but...I couldn’t turn off the television.

Only God knew how long, I continued to watch her chest rise and fall. The rhythmic cadence of her breathing lulled me into a state of intense focus.

More minutes passed.

Her room and my studio filled with the quiet sounds of the night, the occasional rustle of the wind outside, the distant hum of the city.

And her soft snores.

I shouldn’t have been doing this.

It was odd.

Weird even.

Still...a strange peace settled over me, and I remained in my chair...watching her.

What is going on with me?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DECISIONS. DECISIONS



NOVA

This morning, I woke up to Tristan's tie wrapped around my hand.

My body hummed with the memory of the orgasm Tristan's fingers had given me in the restaurant, and then what his tie did to me later.

Two orgasms in one night. Alright girl. You are breaking records.

I brought my other hand to the tie and smoothed out the wrinkles.

But, now it is a new day.

I was no longer in the restaurant, sipping expensive alcohol. Now I had a clear mind. It was time to be responsible and really think this through.

What will I do? The library or a second date with Tristan?

I had truly waited a long time to get that room in the library. Only God knew when I would get that room again.

Meanwhile, Tristan entered my life and simply took over my afternoon's schedule. He'd even threatened to show up at the library and fuck me in there.

I blushed at the thought.

He is insane.

I inhaled the tie and loved how his cologne mixed with the scent of my arousal.

But...Mom is going to take away the funds...now more than ever I should double down on my studies...maybe search around for scholarships...

The decision on what to do today weighed heavily on me, like a dense fog that refused to lift. I was torn between two worlds—the responsible path of my graduate studies and the intoxicating erotic allure of Tristan.

I studied that tie.

For me it was more than a piece of expensive fabric. It served as a symbol of a daring and thrilling date that had been amazingly wild and adventurous.

Last night, I had gone to places I never even imagined existed, from the mysterious sex club under the library with its hidden chambers to the restaurant that served the most exotic and delicious food I had ever tasted.

But more than the places, it was Tristan himself who fascinated me. His touch, his voice, the way he looked at me. It was all so different from anything I had ever experienced.

“Shit.” I bit my lip. “Why are you so tempting, Tristan?”

His skilled touch ignited something deep within me that I never knew existed, an uncontrollable passion that threatened to consume my every thought.

“Tristan.” A shiver of lust ran through me.

But it was more than horniness happening between us.

There was something in his eyes, a kind of understanding and connection that went beyond mere physical attraction.

And yet, there was this nagging thought at the back of my mind. I knew deep down that a relationship with Tristan would not lead to marriage or even a stable future.

He had said so himself.

And when a man told you who he was, one had to listen.

Would spending this second date with him be a waste of time?

I had worked so hard to get into grad school, and I couldn't start slacking due to a man that wasn't even trying to put a ring on my finger.

Be smart.

While Tristan embodied fun, and erotic passion, I had a responsibility to myself and my future.

But...

A part of me longed to throw caution to the wind and follow my heart.

All I could think about was what it would be like if Tristan were inside of my bedroom with me, without clothes on.

I imagined his body pressed against mine, his muscles flexing as he slowly entered me.

Oh my god.

In my head, his hands caressed my breasts.

My pulse quickened.

And, in that moment I knew there was no turning back—all my studies and responsibilities be damned—I had to be with him today.

Fuck the library.

Suddenly, Scarlett burst into my room. “Good morning. Time to get your ass up and talk to me all about last night.”

“What happened to knocking?” I slowly sat up.

“Girl, what happened to getting home, waking me up, and telling me all about the date?” Scarlett frowned. “I've been

waiting all morning to hear this, and you're up in here like sleeping beauty probably daydreaming about Prince Philip."

"No one is in here daydreaming."

Scarlett gestured to the tie. "Is that his?"

I laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing."

"Why do you have the man's tie?" She headed over to me and flopped down on my bed. "Girl, what is really going on? Did he tear off your clothes and choke you with the tie? A little erotic asphyxiation after the appetizer?"

"What?"

"He whipped you with the tie? Didn't he? Slapped that shit all over you, had you screaming and wetting yourself?"

"Girl, why are you such a freak? I can't deal with you this early in the morning." I grabbed my pillow and playfully threw it at her.

She caught the pillow. "I need to know why you are gripping that tie like it is the holy grail of orgasms."

"It's just...so much to explain."

"A lot?"

"A whole fucking lot."

A grin threatened to take over her entire face. "Like...we will need to sit down and eat for this one?"

"It may take two meals."

"Hell yes!" She rubbed her hands together. "Let's go to Poe's. That's the perfect place for me to get all the *tea*, while sipping coffee because you know I don't fuck with tea."

"Okay. I have to get dressed."

"Girl, you need to hurry the hell up too." Scarlett headed off. "You cannot just leave me hanging like this! Spill the tea, girl. I want all the juicy details."

I called back to her, “The details are coming.”

“They better be. You went on that date for the both of us.”
Scarlett shut the door behind her.

I laughed.

Just as I was about to pull out a fresh set of clothes, my phone buzzed on the nightstand. I picked it up, and my heart leaped to see Tristan’s name on the screen.

Wow. He has excellent timing.

I placed the phone next to my ear. “Hello, Mr. Pleasure Room Owner.”

“I already told you that if you keep mentioning my Pleasure Room, you will be in there.”

I grinned.

“Good morning, my enchanting goddess.”

My heart warmed.

“I trust you’re up and already conquering the day?”

“As I said, Tristan, you have great timing. How did you know I was even awake?”

“Perhaps, I have a sixth sense when it comes to you.”

“Is that so?” I responded, feeling a flutter in my stomach.
“And what else does your sixth sense tell you about me?”

“That you’ve probably been thinking of me since you woke up.”

“Hmmm.” My cheeks warmed.

“I hope so...because I’ve been thinking of you.”

Oh, really?

“So, tell me, Ms. Graduate Student, have you decided what to wear for our date this afternoon?”

“No. I was still going back and forth on *if* I was going to the library or the date.”

“And then you made the smart decision of coming to me.”

I shook my head. “Yes. That was my final decision.”

“And now we are back to what you will be wearing? Do you need some suggestions?”

I grinned at his audacity. “I think I can manage, thank you very much. But since you offered, what do you suggest?”

“A smile. Just wear that.”

“Tristan, I would need to wear more than a smile.”

“Why? The smile is all you need to wear to take my breath away.”

A knock sounded at my door.

Scarlett’s voice came through. “Are you dressed yet?!”

I put the phone down. “I’m coming. Give me a few more minutes.”

This girl is going to drive me crazy.

I placed the phone back to my ear. “Sorry. I have to go, but I will see you soon.”

“The car will be there at 3pm.”

“Alright, and as far as what to wear, I think I’ll stick with clothes, thank you very much.”

“Just make sure that you are okay with those clothes getting very wet and torn.”

I bit my bottom lip.

A thrill of excitement, mixed with a touch of nervous anticipation.

“Enjoy your morning, Nova.”

“You too, Tristan.”

He hung up, and my eyes were instantly drawn to his tie, still wrapped around my hand.

My heart fluttered with anticipation.

This afternoon was another date.

Another adventure with Tristan.

I was both excited and nervous, a combination that only he seemed to provoke.

What did he have planned? Would it be as unforgettable as last night?

Scarlett called out, “Girl, will you come on?! The suspense is killing me!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GIRL TALK



NOVA

An hour later, we arrived at Poe’s café, aptly named after the famed writer Edgar Allan Poe.

Scarlett and I stepped inside, and were instantly transported into a world that breathed mystery, darkness, and literary elegance.

The rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingled with the buttery scent of pastries and pancakes. There was also a faint hint of old books and polished wood.

The waitresses at Poe’s were a part of the ambiance. Dressed in period-appropriate clothing—with laced corsets, flowing skirts, and intricate hairdos—they moved gracefully around the cafe.

The host spotted us. “Welcome back, ladies.”

We grinned.

He embodied the very essence of Edgar Allan Poe himself. His dark hair was slicked back with a few rebellious strands falling over his forehead. His mustache and goatee were

meticulously groomed, mirroring the iconic image of the famous writer.

Even more, he was dressed in a tailored black suit, complete with a cravat and a deep red waistcoat.

He gave us a polite, yet dramatic bow. “Luckily, your table is free.”

I grinned. “Awesome.”

We followed him to the back.

Poe’s décor carefully blended Gothic and Victorian aesthetics. Dark wood paneling lined the walls adorned with framed pages from Poe’s works, along with sketches of ravens, black cats, and other haunting images.

Dimly lit black chandeliers cast a soft, amber glow over the space.

Plush velvet curtains in deep crimson hung by the tall windows, allowing only filtered light to seep through.

The air buzzed with the sound of people chatting, punctuated by clanking of plates and a grand piano playing softly in the corner.

Each table had been painted like a book cover from one of Poe’s stories.

We passed one table with a huge, black raven decorated on it, for *The Raven*.

A table towards the back was enshrouded in a macabre darkness, the surface adorned with an illustration of a catacomb and a cask, a clear homage to *The Cask of Amontillado*. For some reason, that one crept me out the most.

Then, there was a table cloaked in rich velvet with gold trim, with miniature pendulums hanging above, swinging ever so slightly—an eerie tribute to *The Pit and the Pendulum*.

A corner table held an illustration of a forlorn woman, her beauty captured in the soft moonlight, representing the melancholy poem *Annabel Lee*.

Yet another featured an intricate illustration of a palace with seven tall windows, embodying the mysterious and symbolic *The Haunted Palace*.

There was even a table bearing the image of an old man's pale blue eye, surrounded by a gilded frame, paying tribute to the terror of *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

However, we rushed straight to my favorite table, showing love to one of Poe's most-celebrated stories, *The Masque of the Red Death*.

The surface glowed a deep, rich crimson red. At its center sat an ornate clock, its face decorated with Gothic numerals, and its hands frozen at the midnight hour.

Around the edge of the table were seven panels, each one representing a different colored chamber from the story—the eerie blue to the violent scarlet.

Even the chairs around the table had been carefully crafted to match the theme, with plush red velvet cushions and intricate black ironwork.

To sit at this table was to be delivered into the world of Poe's creation. Every time I was here, I could almost hear the masqueraders dancing in the seven colored rooms, and feel the presence of the mysterious and inexorable Red Death. All of this with the ticking of the clock echoing in the background.

The host placed the menus down and gave us another bow. "Enjoy."

"Thank you."

Soon as Scarlett lowered into her seat, she chuckled. "Girl, I am getting a library card to this library in the North."

"Oh God." I yanked off my jacket, hung it over the back of my chair, and picked up the menu. "But, that library card won't get you into the Vault."

"Doesn't matter. I like the idea of borrowing books on top of a freak nest." She perused her menu. "So, you're inside this place, walking by orgies and where is Tristan?"

“Of course he sneaks up behind me, all dark and seducing.”

Scarlett shrieked, grabbing the attention of a couple next to us. “Girl, I cannot with this guy!”

“Shhh.”

“How can I keep my excitement down? I am living for this.”

Our waitress showed up. She was a young Black woman with sparkling hazel eyes and dressed in an elegant Victorian gown. “Welcome back.”

We nodded at her.

She set two glasses of water down. “The usual, ladies?”

“No. No.” Scarlett shook her head. “Due to my bestie’s nastiness, I am going to be naughty this morning and do a brunch sort of thing.”

The waitress quirked her brows at me.

I waved my head. “I don’t know what she is talking about. Ignore her.”

“Trust me. She was naughty, and I love it.” Scarlett went back to the menu. “So, I’m about to get crazy too. Let’s go right to dessert with the Masque of the Red Velvet Cake. I need the biggest slice in this place.”

The waitress scribbled in her pad.

Scarlett raised her finger. “But also I can’t forget nutrients, so bring over the Pendulum Sliced Duck Breast, but *after* the cake. I’m eating dessert first today.”

I scowled at her. “That is unnecessary.”

“Don’t be judging me.” Scarlett snapped. “And then let’s add a nice cup of Raven’s Dark Roast Coffee.”

The waitress nodded. “Cream and sugar?”

“All of the cream and sugar.” Scarlett handed her menu over. “I’ll be up all day researching this whole murder of the girl being set on fire.”

The waitress widened her eyes.

“Have you heard of it?”

The waitress shook her head. “No. I’ve been working a lot of double shifts and sleeping in between—”

“Even my professor didn’t know. That’s so crazy. One would think people don’t watch the news or anything. People dying and—”

“Scarlett.” I held up my hand. “Can you let her get our order and stop terrifying her?”

“Oh.” Scarlett shrugged. “I forget stuff like this creeps people out.”

“Yeah. No one wants to hear about that.” I went to my menu. “I’m going to be a bit naughty too—”

“You’ve already been naughty enough this weekend,” Scarlett murmured.

I cleared my throat. “I would love a small cup of Annabel Lee’s Seafood Bisque along with Golden Bug Pancakes.”

“And what would you like to drink?”

“Lenore’s Lament Lemonade.” I handed her my menu.

The waitress nodded and excused herself with a slight bow.

Scarlett leaned forward, propping herself up on her elbow. “So, he sneaks up all sexy and what not?”

There, I recounted the events of the date.

Scarlett listened, her eyes wide with excitement, occasionally interrupting with a shriek of laughter or a gasp of astonishment.

By the time I finished, we were already in the middle of eating our food, and Scarlett had her phone out with Tristan’s pictures glowing on the screen.

“I can’t even believe you returned home. I would have been waking up in his bed this morning.” She took a bite of her cake and scrolled to the next image that came up on her

quick search. “This man is so fine, I bet women *and* men, regardless of sexual preference, stop what they are doing when he walks by.”

I almost choked on my pancakes.

“I mean for real. Like...” Scarlett swiped to another picture. “I bet he could wet a woman’s panties, with just a smile.”

He sure came close to doing that to me.

I chose not to say that part.

“And you were up on that table letting him do all types of nasty stuff.”

“In my defense—”

“You have no defense.” Scarlett laughed. “And no other healthy-minded woman would have a defense either.”

“But, there’s just one thing.” I lowered my fork and sipped my lemonade. “Tristan doesn’t want kids or a family. He’s only interested in this being a sex thing until I guess it gets... boring.”

“Yeah.” Scarlett gestured to his picture. “He looks like that. And why would you want him to commit? This gorgeous man should be shared by the world. Don’t be greedy.”

“Girl.” I rolled my eyes.

“I’m serious. I always hate when women hold on to the handsome men. Give his ass to the world. Why don’t they know that it is Community Dick?”

“I’m not doing this with you.” I grabbed my last bite of pancake.

Scarlett switched her attention to the duck. She had been going back and forth between cake and meat the whole time. “You know, Nova, I can’t understand why you’re so hung up on this idea that a relationship must be leading towards marriage and kids.”

“Girl, that’s all types of normal thinking.”

“Why can’t it just be about having fun and enjoying the moment? Isn’t that what life’s about?”

“Yeah, but it’s not that simple.” I set my lemonade down. “Fun is great, but relationships are about connection, understanding, and building something meaningful.”

“Yeah, but relationships are also about hot, sweaty sex too ___”

“If it’s just physical, then what’s the point?” I held out my hands. “There’s no depth to it.”

“Depth?” Scarlett widened her eyes. “Who says depth can’t be found in physicality?”

“Can it?”

“Sometimes, the connection between two people is expressed best through their bodies. Not every relationship needs to end in freaking wedding bells to be valuable or meaningful.”

“Hmmm.”

“And that’s on Mary and her lamb as well as Jack and Jill with that bucket going up the hill. Facts on facts.”

I shook my head. “But don’t you think that’s a bit selfish?”

“Nope.”

“Just using someone for physical pleasure and then moving on when you’re bored? What does that say about us as human beings?”

“Here’s a secret.” Scarlett leaned forward.

I leaned in too. “What?”

She whispered, “Women like to fuck just as much as men.”

I sucked my teeth. “I know that. *I* am the one studying sexuality.”

“You wouldn’t think so the way you are overthinking this situation. Tristan is not groom-to-be material. He is Mr. Big Dick. And there is nothing wrong with Mr. Big Dick.”

“There is something wrong because good dick can lead to a lot of confusion and hurt feelings.”

“Not if both parties are on the same page.”

I leaned back in my chair. “Tell me more.”

“Focus on making this about exploring *your* desires and learning about *yourself*. Relationships like this can be freeing, and they teach you a lot about what *you* want in life.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “I actually...agree with that.”

“And who says that the goal always has to be marriage and kids for women? That’s a societal construct, Nova.”

“Correct again.”

“Not everyone wants that or needs that to feel fulfilled. Some people find joy in the journey itself, in the exploration, in the dance of human connection.”

“Alright. Alright, Pastor.” I held up my hand. “Amen.”

“And...” She held up another finger.

“And?”

“You need to be figuring out if he has any single friends for me. What is the hold up?”

“I got you.”

Scarlett tapped her watch. “Baby, the clock is ticking.”

“I will ask him today.”

Then, Scarlett’s eyes gleamed with a mix of concern and intrigue. “So, the latest on the manhunt for this murderer...”

“What? The one who set that poor woman on fire?” I pushed my fork to the side, suddenly losing my appetite.

“Come to find out that the woman was Black so...almost no coverage at all.”

“Shit.”

“Girl, if it was Becky there would be all types of helicopters in the sky and units combing the place—”

“Don’t say that, Scarlett. I believe things have gotten better for how the police investigate sisters’ murders.”

“Me too, but I study too many cases like this. The media should have been relentless, with the story appearing in every news bulletin and front page, but naw. Barely, nothing.”

A cold chill hit me. “How can someone be so cruel and burn a woman to death like that?”

“And, he’s still out there, somewhere. The few police on the case are stumped. They’ve got no leads, no clues, nothing. It’s like he’s a ghost.”

I shuddered.

“At least our building is on point.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“A guy came through to our place after you left and checked the locks and put in new security locks for our windows.” Scarlett picked up a napkin and wiped her mouth. “Your window gave him tons of problems. He was in there for a minute, but we are both good to go.”

“I’m glad the building owner is on it.”

“Me too. Everyone should be looking over their shoulders.”

“I sure will be.” With that, I noticed a man watching us from across the room.

He was seated at the corner table that was covered in dark illustrations of a madman’s face. The surface showed a male character with eyes that were wide and wild. It represented Poe’s unsettling story, *The Man of the Crowd*.

There, this strange man sipped his coffee with his face partly obscured by a newspaper.

Scarlett kept talking as my view remained on him.

There was something about this man that struck me as odd, and my attention was inexplicably drawn to him. His cheek was marred with scars, and his eyes seemed to be fixed on me,

watching with an intensity that sent another shiver down my spine.

“Nova? Earth to Nova.” Scarlett’s voice pulled me back. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Don’t tell me Tristan’s fingers have ruined you for all other conversations!”

I forced a laugh, trying to shake off the eerie feeling. “No. His fingers didn’t do that.”

“Anyway, what’s really frightening is the randomness of it all. That poor woman was just an ordinary person, like you or me. It could have been anyone.”

I shivered. The once cozy and whimsical ambiance of Poe’s seemed to take on a more sinister tone as we delved into the dark reality outside its walls.

I frowned. “What do you think drives a person to do something like that?”

“Sure, there’s all types of psychological reasonings. And we can get into nature vs. nurture, but I don’t know, Nova.” She shrugged. “I’ve made this guy my focus, and I know it will be a journey into madness.”

I tried to refocus on Scarlett’s words, yet my mind kept drifting back to the scarred man. His presence felt like a weight, pulling at the edges of my consciousness.

I stole another glance in his direction, and my breath caught in my throat.

His chair was empty, the newspaper left abandoned on the table. But there, still steaming slightly, was his cup of coffee.

I blinked, unable to comprehend what I was seeing.

He had been there just a moment ago, watching me, and now he was gone.

At least, the coffee was proof that I hadn’t imagined him, that he had been real.

“Nova, seriously, what’s going on?” Scarlett’s concerned voice broke through my confusion.

I shook my head and forced a smile. “It’s probably nothing. This topic is just making me paranoid as fuck.”

Scarlett gave me a smile. “Then, enough of this dark talk. Let’s focus on the positive. What do you think Tristan is planning for today?”

“Something crazy and nasty as fuck.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DICK-WHIPPED



NOVA

After brunch, we headed back to our place, and I spotted an art supply store.

The old sign read *Fine Arts Emporium* and looked as if it had been preserved in amber since the seventies.

I placed my hand in front of Scarlett and stopped us.

Scarlett looked at me. “What?”

“I need to go in there.”

Scarlett turned her gaze toward the store. “In there?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“It’s an art store, and I’m dating an artist.”

“But, he’s Mr. Big Dick, not the type of guy you get presents for.”

“What if I’m inspired to get him something?”

She studied me. “Not because you are falling in love with him. Right?”

“It was just one date, Scarlett. I’m not in love.”

“But it was one hell of a date. I bet your ass is already dick-whipped and didn’t even get the dick yet.”

I chuckled. “Just come in the store and help me find something. You always have to take things to the next level.”

“Alright, Ms. Dick-Whipped. I’m coming.”

I chuckled.

“Fingers so good, you get a present. Whew, girl.” Scarlett waved her hand. “I don’t know if I want to mess with fingers like that. Maybe, cancel your research and see if he has a single friend.”

“I’m still asking. Then, you can get hooked and I can make fun of you.”

We entered *Fine Arts Emporium*.

The scent of paint, wood, and old paper filled my nostrils.

However, as I perused the store, it was hard to shove Scarlett’s word out of my head.

Am I being extra with the gift?

I sighed and went with my gut.

The store was a treasure trove of artistic tools and curiosities.

I wandered through the narrow aisles, my fingers lightly grazing items—brushes, canvases, and pallets.

What would a successful artist want? And more important, what is a present that wouldn’t scream...dick-whipped?

“What about this?” Scarlett held up a vintage inkwell. The glass shimmered in the lighting.

I shook my head. “No, it has to be something that speaks to him.”

“And what would that be? You barley know the man.”

“True.” I nodded and continued forward. “Then...it has to be something that speaks to *me* about him.”

Scarlett murmured, “Dick-whipped.”

I rolled my eyes.

Chuckling, she passed me. “Anyway. This is cute seeing you get so worked up over a guy.”

“I’m not worked up.”

“You are, but take your time in here.” She stopped at several books on art. “You’ll know what gift you want to get him when you see it.”

We began to explore the huge space.

Further in the back, the scent of oil paints intermingled with the subtle fragrance of leather-bound handmade sketchbooks.

I caught the quiet murmur of hushed conversations between artists and other store clerks.

Rounding the corner, I spotted brushes of every size and shape hanging on the walls.

I continued on.

“Psst.”

I glanced over my shoulder.

Scarlett pointed to a display of watercolors. “You can get these and tell him to paint you.”

“Girl, I can’t tell an artist of his caliber to paint me. He has more to do with his life.”

“But, wouldn’t it be so crazy if he did?”

“It would be amazing.”

“That’s like the sexiest thing.” Scarlett got to my side and walked with me. “If I’m dating an artist and he paints me, then he’s getting the panties *forever*.”

“For. Ever.” I snapped my fingers.

“The *for* and the *ever*.”

I laughed. “Okay. Stop distracting me. I still can’t find it. I need something that would *resonate* with Tristan’s artistic soul.”

“Resonate with what?” Chuckling, Scarlett shook her head. “I cannot with you right now.”

“Don’t laugh at me.”

“It’s hard not to.”

A woman walked up to us. She had dark brown skin with ebony dreadlocks that were streaked with gray. “Hello, my name is Reba. How can I help you?”

“Thank you so much.” Scarlett pointed at me. “She needs *all* the help. Every bit of it.”

I rolled my eyes.

Reba looked at me. “Looking for anything special?”

I hesitated, feeling an unexpected shyness. “I want to get a gift for a new friend.”

“A little more than a new friend.” Scarlett winked.

“A *special* new friend.”

Scarlett added, “And he has skilled fingers—”

“Anyway.” I shoved my bestie. “She means he is very talented.”

“*Super* talented.” Scarlett chuckled.

With a knowing smile, Reba clasped her hands together. “Ah, a gift for a lover, perhaps?”

I blinked. “Maybe.”

“Definitely,” Scarlett chimed in.

Reba tilted her head to the side. “And he’s a professional artist or is art just a hobby for him?”

“Very professional.”

Scarlett raised her hands in the air. “Like...has had tons of art collections and magazines write about him.”

“Alright.” I shook my head. “She’s got it.”

Reba considered that. “What medium of art?”

“He is known for his sculptures, but he started off painting.”

“Very interesting. I have some ideas that could help.” Reba led us down the aisle. “This store has seen many artists over the years, each with a unique creative journey, but it’s always fun when the artist’s lover comes in.”

I blushed.

“So...most artists like very unique items that they would want to buy for themselves but never get because it isn’t practical.” She picked up this oddly shaped paintbrush. “This is one of those items. Handmade by a master craftsman in Italy. It’s been used to create landscapes that take your breath away.”

“Italy?” I asked, intrigued. “What makes an Italian brush so special?”

Reba’s eyes sparkled. “The bristles were crafted with utmost care. They hold the paint in a way that allows for fluid strokes, capturing the very essence of the landscape. It’s almost like magic.”

“Hmmm.”

“But, a brush isn’t romantic.” Reba placed it back on the shelf and guided us away.

Good point.

We moved on to the stationary section which gave off luxury vibes.

Reba gestured to one stack. “These papers were handmade in Japan. Each sheet is a work of art. I’ve seen them used in magnificent watercolor paintings. The way the colors blend on this paper, it’s like a dance of hues.”

“Handmade?” I touched the sheets’ smooth texture. “Does that affect the way the paint settles?”

“Oh, it’s all about the fibers and how they’re treated,” Reba caressed the paper. “They embrace the ink, allowing it to flow, not just sit on the surface. It becomes a part of the paper, not something separate. A true artist can feel the difference.”

“Hmmm.” I was mesmerized by her knowledge and passion.

Suddenly, Reba frowned. “But for a new lover?”

I raised my eyebrows.

Scarlett shook her head. “Not sexy enough. Where’s the passion?”

Nodding, Reba headed off to the center of the store and stood in front of a glass display filled inks. “Perhaps, these rare inks would be good.”

“Why are they rare?”

“This blue ink,” she pointed, “comes from a flower that blooms once in a decade. Imagine the depth it adds to a piece of art.”

“That is pretty interesting.”

Scarlett eyed it. “A flower that blooms once in a decade? That must make the ink incredibly valuable.”

“Indeed.” Reba bobbed her head. “But more than its monetary value, it’s the emotional connection it creates. The artist who uses it must understand its rarity and pour that understanding into their work.”

Scarlett shrugged. “Yeah, but how much does it cost?”

Reba frowned. “\$1,000 per bottle.”

“Oh no.” I stepped away. “He’s a new lover, not I’m married to him and pregnant with our first child.”

A smile returned to Reba’s face. “Now, I understand.”

“Yeah.” Scarlett waved away the shelf. “We’re looking for gifts under \$20.”

“Not \$20. I can do up to \$100, but I would rather keep it decent.” I gazed around. “I’ve suddenly found myself on a

budget these days.”

“Then, I have an idea.” Reba led us further away.

Right as she was taking us to a new aisle, I spotted all of these sketchbooks. “Oh, wait.”

I walked over to the display and found myself drawn to the leather-bound sketchbooks, touching their covers and imagining Tristan’s hands on them.

“One of these could be perfect.”

Reba and Scarlett came over to take a look.

“Yeah. These are all beautiful.” Scarlett picked up another.

And then I found it—an exquisite leather-bound sketchbook, its cover embossed with intricate designs, its pages creamy and untouched. It seemed to pulse with potential, waiting to be filled with the intimate secrets of an artist’s soul.

I could almost see Tristan’s fingers stroking its pages, his eyes filled with the same passion and intensity he’d shown me last night.

Yeah. This is it.

For some reason, I felt an immediate connection to the sketchbook. “Tell me about this one.”

Reba smiled. “It was made by a local craftsman. Each page is hand-torn and treated to embrace the ink just so. It’s waiting for the right artist to fill it with life.”

I looked at the sketchbook, feeling its pull. “It’s perfect. I think...he’ll love it.”

Reba bobbed her head. “I believe you’re right.”

Minutes later, I was at the counter making my purchase.

And I didn’t want to admit it, but the sketchbook felt heavy in my hands, not with its physical weight, but with the meaning it held.

I didn’t buy gifts for guys after a first date. Nor the second, third, or fourth. Presents were reserved for birthdays and

Christmas.

But, I'd been called to give Tristan something, and I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

What did it mean that I felt this urge to get him something, so strongly?

My thoughts were interrupted when I happened to glance towards the window.

Outside, standing just across the street, a tall man was watching me. His gaze was intense, almost predatory, and a chill ran down my spine.

He looked strangely familiar, his features distorted by the reflection in the glass, but I was certain I'd seen him before.

Where did I see him?

The memory clicked into place.

Poe's cafe.

He had been there, seated at a corner table, his eyes on me then too.

Panic welled inside me.

Oh hell no.

I turned to Scarlett and grabbed her arm.

"Look behind me." My voice trembled. "That man outside, he was at Poe's café earlier. He's watching me."

Scarlett turned, her eyes wide as she looked out the window. "What man?"

I returned my view to him.

The man was gone.

The street was busy, filled with people going about their day, but the tall man had vanished without a trace.

"What man, Nova?" Scarlett put her view on me.

"There was a guy outside that I saw before."

"Are you sure?"

I shivered. “Yeah.”

“Maybe, I’ve just got you freaked out about the whole woman-being-set-on-fire talk.”

“Maybe.” I wanted to believe her, to dismiss the sighting as a product of my imagination, but the fear lingered, gnawing at the edges of my mind.

The joy I’d felt in finding the perfect gift for Tristan had been replaced with an unsettling dread.

Who was he?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LOVE IN THE RING



TRISTAN

Earlier, when I woke up, it took a moment for my surroundings to come into focus.

The glow of the TV screen was sharp against the darkness of the room, and my chair felt stiff and uncomfortable under me.

Clearly, I had fallen asleep watching Nova sleep.

That was when I noticed Nova was on the screen in front of me.

There, she caressed the tie as her eyes held this far-off longing.

I couldn't lie.

Just when I thought I was going to get a round two of her rubbing that sweet pussy against my tie, her roommate rushed in.

I frowned during their whole conversation. It was all selfishness and jealousy. I would have rather been in that

bedroom with Nova, showing her all the things I could do to her body with that tie.

Once the roommate left, I had to call her. I wrongly thought it would satisfy me until we met for our second date.

That call didn't help.

Once I hung up the phone, my mind wandered. I thought about her lips, about the way she would look naked and wearing only my tie, and even about all the things I wanted to do to her.

Was I turning into some drug fiend? Was this what addiction felt like?

I dragged myself out of the studio, talked to Dominic, and caught him up on everything.

Not only did he promise to put people on Nova immediately, he also said he would come over to hang out with me.

Clearly...he must have heard the anxiety in my voice.

An hour later, Dominic and I left my condo's elevator and stepped onto my roof.

A good work out will clear my mind.

I had many properties around the world, but the crowning jewel of my penthouse in Paradise City was the rooftop fitness center that it boasted.

It had a state-of-the-art boxing ring, which was meticulously crafted from the finest materials—custom-dyed Italian leather mat and plush ropes.

Crystal chandeliers hung above it.

Surrounding the entire space was a series of floor-to-ceiling windows, offering panoramic views of the skyline.

Yes. A workout will do it.

This morning, the sun sat high in the sky, casting golden light across the exquisite rooftop garden that enveloped one side of the boxing ring.

Next to that garden, my day chef, Abe cut strawberries right from the vine. It was one of the ingredients for my after work-out drink.

A high-tech juicing station stood by the garden.

Soon, Abe would prepare a special concoction for Dominic and me—a blend of rare and potent elements designed to promote muscle repair and rejuvenation.

On the back wall, a series of large, ultra-thin screens adorned the space, displaying news reports from around the world.

However, all the TVs were muted.

Instead, Nirvana's *Heart-Shaped Box* played on the speakers. The heavy distorted guitar riffs and even Kurt Cobain's haunting vocals gave the space a dark and moody atmosphere.

I climbed into the boxing ring, yanked off my black t-shirt, and flung it on the ropes.

Dominic followed me in, wearing only black shorts and sneakers. His brown hair was combed back into a small ponytail.

"You should tell Abe to have the phone close to him." Dominic stretched those big arms of his.

"Why?"

Dominic grinned. "Because I may put you in the hospital."

"Already bragging on your nonexistent skills?" I smirked, knowing that he actually could put me in the hospital if he wanted to.

"Why are you playing Nirvana?" Dominic leaned his head to the side and cracked his neck. "No heavy rock today?"

I bounced on my toes, warming up my muscles for the fight. "Nirvana keeps me focused."

Dominic swung his arms in wide circles and scanned the space. Every time he moved, a ripple of muscle flexed across

his body. “When it comes to hitting me in my face, you usually don’t have a problem with focus.”

“Very true. After all these years, you’d think I’d get bored of hitting you.” Chuckling, I did high knee lifts and leg swings, making sure each movement was fluid and as precise as possible.

“Tristan, do you know why I always love when you do an art showing in Paradise City?”

“Because we get to hang out together.”

“Yes, but it is deeper than that.” Dominic cracked his neck on the right and then gestured around the ring. “Every time I come up here, I realize how far we have come.”

A strange mix of dread and anger welled up inside of me.

I knew where Dominic was going...down the twisted road of memories. That was the only bad part about staying in touch with him. He loved gazing back at the past, and I only yearned to erase it all from my mind and soul.

“When we were kids, we never imagined our lives would be this good.” Dominic touched his chest. “Personally, I thought I would be dead by eighteen.”

“You almost were.”

“Think of all the trouble we got into as kids. The fights. The drugs. The stolen cars.” Dominic gave me a sad smile. “We went from hard-headed hoodlums to owners of a high tech security firm and a constantly talked about famous artist. It all seems like...a lifetime ago.”

“It *was* a lifetime ago.” Frowning, I stretched my arms.

“Tristan, I survived and live a better life...thanks to you.”

I pushed aside my unease when it came about thinking of the old days and put on my sparring gloves. “I would appreciate less talk, and more fight.”

“Yes. Yes.” Dominic placed his gloves on too. “Let us get to your favorite part—the hitting.”

I smirked.

Getting into his pre-fight rituals, Dominic bobbed and weaved.

“Can we start already?”

“You are just begging for this whipping.”

We circled around each other with our hands raised.

“You went out last night?” Dominic came at me with a right hook.

I dodged it with ease. “Yeah. I met someone at the showing.”

“Someone to take to the Masquerade?”

“I think so.”

“That was fast.”

“Not as fast as this.” I jabbed, hitting him in the ribs.

Dominic grunted, but didn't falter. “Is she like your *usuals*?”

I grinned and stepped back. “And what do *you* think are my usuals?”

“Nice body. Pretty face. Average mind. Down for everything and more in the bedroom.”

Shock hit me. “Average mind?”

“Not dumb, but simply unable to hold a conversation for longer than ten minutes.”

“That can't be true.”

“It is.”

“Yours aren't that smart either.”

“Because I like my women dumber than a doorknob, but for you...I hate when you are pouting at the Masquerade, completely bored.”

I chuckled. “Then, you will be happy to hear that this one is *very* smart.”

“Fascinating. And will I be meeting this one?”

“I doubt it.” I stepped back and shifted my weight from one foot to another.

“Come on. We could double date. I’m messing with Geneva again.”

I grimaced. “Why would you go back to Geneva?”

“I blame it on love.”

“She has been nothing but problems since you met her.”

“The heart sees only love, Tristan.”

“Disgusting.”

He laughed.

We returned to sparring, trading blows and dodging each other’s moves.

For every punch Dominic threw, I had an answer. My quick reflexes and agility kept me out of harm’s way for the most part until he managed to land a solid hit on my shoulder.

“Fuck!” I stumbled back. The force of it sent a sharp pain up my arm. “When did you start hitting so hard?”

“I have the power of love on my side.”

I laughed. “Love is nothing more than a biological trick to ensure the continuation of the species.”

“Biological trick?” Dominic threw a wild uppercut.

I stepped back before his fist made contact with my jaw. “Love is fleeting and unreliable. Why would anyone want to shackle themselves to such an uncertain concept?”

Dominic spun around and smacked me with an elbow strike.

Cheater.

Growling, I lunged forward, throwing punch after punch in a fast blur of movement. My muscles strained and twitched.

He countered with quick jabs that matched me blow for blow.

My senses sharpened.

For a while, we circled around each other, exchanging blows and taunts. The sounds of gloves striking echoed through the gym. Sweat dripped down our faces.

We continued to trade punches.

I lunged.

He blocked.

I dodged.

He attacked.

Our bodies moved in perfect synchronization just like the old days. Harmonized footwork and familiar rhythm.

Energy sparked through the air.

The space heated up.

This was my therapy, my way of forgetting the past and focusing on the present. Adrenaline pulsed through my body, making me feel alive.

I stepped back with an exhausted chuckle. “Not bad.”

Dominic wiped the sweat off his forehead. “Have you ever considered that love is the very thing that elevates us above mere animals?”

Not this again.

I caught my breath. “You think love makes us human?”

“I would argue that.”

“No, Dom. We are creatures of instinct, driven by our primal desires.” I held up my fists. “Commitment and monogamy? It’s all just societal bullshit designed to control our natural urges.”

“Or you get someone who can deal with those urges—”

“Perhaps, *your* urges are calmer than mine.” I laughed.

“Perhaps. Or maybe you will finally meet someone that matches your urges.”

Could that be true? No. I doubt it.

I gave him a skeptical look. “And are you taking Geneva to the Masquerade?”

“Fuck no. She can’t handle it.”

“So, you’re taking someone else?”

“Of course.”

“Whoa.” I did a dramatic touch to my heart. “You are a powerful example of love.”

“Forget about me.” Dominic laughed. “We are on you.”

“Oh, I bet we are.”

“Maybe, this woman that you just met could be *the one*.” Dominic charged forward.

I ducked, then brought a hard fist up into his gut, making him grunt in pain. “I will never cling to some stupid idea of a soulmate. I would be searching all my life—”

“The searching can be fun.”

“I would rather have relationships with no attachments.” Sweat dripped down my brow as I danced around the ring, fists raised and ready.

“This woman that you met?”

“Yes.”

“Does she have you excited?”

“I wouldn’t be talking to her, if she didn’t have me excited.” I lunged forward, throwing a quick combination of jabs and hooks that Dominic effortlessly dodged.

I’ll get him today.

And then, without warning, the image of Nova’s face flashed before my eyes. The way her brown skin glowed under the restaurant’s dim lighting, the warmth of her smile, the depth of her gaze, the sexy scent of her pussy—it all hit me like a sucker punch.

Nova.

My focus faltered.

Then, I was thinking about her on my screen, masturbating with my tie.

Goddamn it.

Dominic seized the opportunity and struck, landing a quick jab to my left cheek, followed by a powerful cross to my chest that sent me stumbling backward.

Pain burned through my abs and in between my ribs. “Shit.”

I shook my head, trying to shake away thoughts of Nova. I could feel the anger boiling inside me, not at Dom, but at myself for letting my guard down.

Meanwhile, the image of Nova’s face remained.

Dominic watched me. “Are you okay, Tristan?”

I nodded, taking a deep breath to steady myself. “Yeah.”

We resumed our sparring, but it was half-hearted and lackluster.

My thoughts went elsewhere.

What will I do to Nova today?

My mind wandered to the vision of her on the table with her legs spread out.

So warm. So wet.

“Focus, man,” Dominic barked, snapping me out of my thoughts. “You’re letting me land hits. That’s not like you.”

What?

I blinked and tried to push Nova out of my head.

But it was no use.

Dominic sighed, throwing a few more, but no matter how hard I tried, Nova’s beautiful face haunted my focus, distracting me from the task at hand.

My heart pounded, and not just from the physical exertion.

Panting, Dominic laughed and stepped back. “What are you thinking about?”

“You brought her up, so she came to my mind.”

“Remarkable.”

“It’s not remarkable, and my thoughts on her are not about *love*.”

“Then, what is it?”

“It’s all about my cock wanting to be deep inside of her.”

“Wow, buddy. Maybe, you’re doing too much sharing this morning.” Dominic raised his hands in defeat and laughed. “I think this is the perfect time for a break.”

“I agree.” I headed over to my corner, grabbed my towel, and climbed out of the ring.

Dominic followed.

Abe walked over to us, holding two glasses full of a green liquid. “How was the workout, sir?”

“Excellent.” I took one of the glasses. “I won. Beat him until he screamed like a baby and begged for me to stop.”

“Actually.” Dominic grabbed his glass. “I won due to him pissing his pants and weeping in the corner.”

I laughed.

Dominic drank half, groaned, and then licked some of the green juice off his top lip. “So, are we going to talk about why you have Peiter monitoring her?”

“I didn’t tell Peiter to put cameras in her house. Remember. Some psycho did it already.”

“And you have not been looking at any footage?”

“That’s not the point.”

Dominic gave me a sly look. “It’s just interesting.”

“Put your focus on protecting her, not on my...late night viewing.”

“Oh.” Dominic chuckled. “So you spend time watching her late into the night?”

Grumbling, I took a sip of the drink. The bitterness of the kale twirled along the sweet blends of banana and strawberry.

“Don’t worry. Your future wife will be safe. I have several guys on her.”

“Just make sure she can’t see them.”

Dominic widened his eyes. “You didn’t tell her that I have men watching her?”

“Not yet. I need full confirmation that it isn’t all in my head.”

Dominic’s expression turned stern.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m not sure if the texter of that video is also the person that put the cameras in her apartment.” Tension gathered in my shoulders. “But...even more, how do I explain that I know cameras are in her place?”

Dominic nodded. “You can’t say because your hacker friend happened to be invading her privacy and caught someone else doing it.”

“Exactly.” I gazed at the glass. “Therefore, we keep her protected while Peiter gets closer to figuring out who the texter is.”

“And are you compensating our buddy with yummy Little Gourmet meals?”

“Of course.” I took another sip. “In fact, can you take one over. I owe him and he will only open the door for you and me.”

“No problem.” He winked and finished his glass. “I had already planned on going over there this week.”

Spencer stepped onto the roof and walked up to us.

I raised my eyebrows.

Spencer’s expression remained neutral. “Sir, I did not want to interrupt your workout, but—”

“What’s wrong?” I finished Abe’s special potion.

“A Lieutenant Franklin Thornley has been waiting to talk to you.”

Dominic quirked his brows. “A cop?”

Abe nodded his head. “The detective explained that he is working on a case that may be related to your latest art collection.”

That can't be right.

Shocked, I handed him back the glass. “Did he say how it was related?”

“No, sir.”

Dominic and I exchanged glances. Although we were now rich and successful, cops still made us uncomfortable.

Dominic sighed. “Do you want me to be there with you?”

“No. I have it.” I turned back to Spencer. “Send him to my office.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE ART OF MYSTERY



TRISTAN

What could this detective want with me?

I entered my office and realized that I had beat the detective to it.

Whatever it is, it will be bullshit.

I finished drying off my sweat with my towel and then slung it on the back of my chair.

Then, I scanned the unfamiliar area. It had a simple walnut desk and black leather chair. There were no bookshelves. I never spent time in this property's office. It was more of a place to keep my contracts for Paradise City.

A few times, I had held business meetings in here.

The only appealing thing in the space was my Fenway collection. The paintings hung on every wall. There were eight large paintings in all, each one depicting a nude woman in emotional pain. Their faces were twisted with anguish and despair, their backs arched and impossibly curved.

Since twelve, I had been fascinated by Fenway. Perhaps, it was due to our shared childhood of violence. He'd been an orphan, abandoned and unloved. Also like me, Fenway had always been drawn to the darker side of life, captivated by stories of the macabre and the unknown.

And, our fascinations translated into a passion for dark art.

I often wondered if Fenway also found solace in creating haunting images like I did. Even more, did these gruesome images reflect the darkness within himself?

A knock sounded.

I leaned against my desk. "Come in."

The door opened.

A tall, broad-shouldered man entered the room with short black hair and a thick graying beard. Scars slashed his right cheek. He wore a dark suit that fit him perfectly. His piercing blue eyes surveyed the space as he stepped inside.

I had the odd realization that he looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place where I had seen him before.

Slowly, he walked up to me, stopped, and held his hand out. "Mr. Russo, I presume?"

I nodded and didn't raise my hand to shake his.

He dug in his jacket, pulled out his badge, and flashed it. "I am Detective Thornley."

"I heard."

He put away his badge. "I am here to ask you a few questions."

I kept my voice steady. "Sure. What can I help you with?"

Instead of speaking, Thornley scanned the walls and then blinked. "These are interesting...images. Did you do these?"

"These are by a famous artist named, Fenway."

Further taking in the surroundings, Thornley walked over to the paintings on the right wall and assessed them.

I watched with a growing sense of unease as he examined the nude women twisting in pain.

Detective Thornley pulled out a mini notebook and scribbled in it.

What is he writing down? What is going on? Why is he here?

Thornley closed the notebook and studied the paintings some more. “Fenway was famous for this...stuff?”

Stuff?

I frowned. “Yes. Very famous. Fenway is considered a legend by many, including me. He was a phenomenal talent.”

“Unfortunately, I disagree. I think that these paintings should be considered a crime.” Thornley turned to me as if hoping to see my reaction to the comment. “He should have been locked up for these paintings.”

“He actually was imprisoned a few times for his art.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Yet, eventually he was released.”

“Why did they release him?”

“He always had alibis.”

“And why did they lock him up?”

“Because people soon realized that his art seemed to foreshadow actual events of murder.”

Thornley eyed me. “How did they realize that?”

“They recognized the faces of the women in his paintings. In every one, it was a woman who actually became a victim later.”

Thornley frowned. “Fenway killed the women.”

“No. There was never any proof. He always had witnesses and—”

“I would say the paintings were proof enough.”

I eyed him. “Why are you visiting me, detective?”

The man went silent for a moment and tapped his finger against his little notebook. Then, he cleared his throat. “I understand you are a sculptor.”

“I am.”

“And you recently had a big presentation of your new art this weekend.”

“That is correct.”

“I saw pictures of the sculptures.” Thornley studied me. “They showed women being set on fire.”

I tilted my head to the side. “Is that a crime?”

Thornley let out a mocking chuckle. “Lucky for you, this is not a crime just yet. Although...it should be.”

I frowned.

The detective put the notebook in his pocket and placed his view on the paintings hanging on the other wall.

I quirked my brows.

Where is this going?

The detective seemed to be lost in thought for a moment. Then, he dug into his pocket, pulled out three polaroid images, and walked over to me. “Do you know why I’m here?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Have you not been watching the news?”

“I have not.”

The detective’s eyes narrowed. “On the night of your art showing, someone set a woman on fire.”

It happened. For real.

I tensed. “In Paradise City?”

The detective nodded.

Do I tell them about a text that no longer exists?

Even more, if they wanted to go through my phone, they would have to get it from Peiter who would never let them

inside.

It also didn't help that I had a natural distrust for the police.

This distrust wasn't born overnight. It was the product of years of experience, a slow accumulation of doubts and fears that had hardened into a shell of suspicion. Perhaps it started with the way they treated people in my foster homes' neighborhoods, the heavy-handed tactics, the disdainful looks at people of color.

Or maybe it was the constant news accounts of corruption and abuse that were all too common in Paradise City.

Everyone knew that the police weren't owned by the government.

Instead, gangsters had a tight grip on them.

The Diamond Syndicate—a group I wanted no part of.

“News coverage on this victim has not been big.” He walked up. “But the new victim will surely garner more news stations to hover everywhere.”

“New victim?”

“Another woman died last night.”

Stunned, I remained there in shock. “I didn't know about that. That is horrible. I am sorry for the victims and their families.”

“Can you tell me more about your art and why you chose fire as—”

“Hold on.” I uncrossed my arms and held my hands out. “My subject choice has nothing to do with these incidents.”

“But, you must admit that your art may be connected to the murder. Do you happen to have any psychotic friends or associates?” He gestured to Fenway's images. “Surely, the art world is full of them.”

“I keep my circle very small, and none would do anything like this. However...” I let out a long breath. “It could be a sick fan or someone that has a problem with me.”

He opened his mini notebook. “Who would that be?”

“I have no idea who that would be. They’re anonymous.”

“But you have an idea who it is?”

“I don’t, but when I do you will be the first person to know.” He frowned, didn’t make any notes, and shut the book. “Mr. Russo, your sculptures bear an uncanny resemblance to the crime scene. Can you explain that?”

My heart boomed in my ears.

I knew I had done nothing wrong, but the detective’s words still shot terror through me. Never would I want a human to be tortured due to art that I created. In my mind, I knew it couldn’t be true.

What if the killer killed the women first, saw my artwork, and figured that perhaps we both would like the same thing?

But...I knew that it had to be deeper than this.

Peiter, hurry up with this person’s identity.

The detective tapped his foot. “I believe your sculptures have a lot to do with this. It’s almost as if...you placed the women there yourself.”

“Why would you think that?”

“The way she was positioned is very similar to your sculptures.” With no warning, Thornley put the images in front of my face.

I tensed, but looked at them.

On the first photo, a woman’s black crusted body soared from this odd contraption that mimicked the shape of flames. Whatever it was, it held her up.

I couldn’t recognize her face because there was barely any left. Her skin was black, roasted and cracked. Her eyes were gone, her hair singed down to nothing.

What sort of maniac would do this?

Unfortunately, I had to admit that her positioning was similar to my sculptures as well as the contraption and its

flames.

It was almost as if the murderer was mimicking my collection.

But...how would he have seen it before my showing?

He showed me the next one.

This photo was new, but similar. Completely burned up woman positioned in the same way as my sculptures from *Burning Desire*.

He placed the images on my desk. "Very interesting."

I looked at him. "What is interesting?"

"Usually when I show someone a picture like that, they would gasp or turn away."

"I don't gasp, and I definitely don't turn away."

"Others may even have thrown up or dry heaved, but you...you remained calm as if you were checking out a picture of cute puppies." Thornley leaned forward. "You have a strong stomach for things like this?"

"I don't understand the question."

"Have you seen worse in your life?"

I watched him. "I have witnessed the beauty of art and the ugliness of life. Therefore, I have learned to keep my emotions in check."

"Where are you from, Mr. Russo?"

"Am I a suspect to this murder?"

"I am only trying to catch your accent."

"My sculptures have nothing to do with what happened to these women."

"Do you not think it is odd that the woman was set on fire, the same night of your showing?"

"It is only a coincidence."

"I am not big on coincidences, Mr. Russo." Leaving the pictures on my desk, Thornley went to the back wall and

gazed at the Fenway paintings. “I already checked if you had an alibi, and of course many could vouch for your presence at the showing, even hours before the woman appeared downtown, trapped in that metal contraption.”

I remained on edge.

This monster did that...downtown. Was the video of the first victim?

Thornley rubbed his beard. “Still, I wonder if your art has any connection to the killer. It could be a friend? Male lover?”

“Male lover?”

“I’m sure you have one.”

“I don’t.”

Thornley smirked. “Who knew about the collection before you showed it?”

“Many. My agent, the gallery staff, a few art critics.”

“Friends.”

“I keep my circle small, but yes.”

“Your art.” Thornley shook his head. “It is wrong to show women being set on fire.”

“My art is just that, art.”

“But did it inspire a person to commit this crime?”

“You think someone walked into my gallery, saw one of the sculptures, and then got so excited that they raced out of the gallery and set a woman on fire?”

“No.” Thornley turned around and shook his head. “This incident involved long amounts of planning. At least two to three weeks of preparation.”

“I know nothing about any of this.”

“But, who knew about the subject of your collection before the showing?”

“I already told you. It is a small list of people.”

“Please, send that list to my office.”

“I will have my lawyer compile the list and give it to you.” I stopped leaning against the desk and walked over to the door. “Any *further* communication can be handled through my lawyer and she will help you with anything else.”

“Interesting.” Thornley headed over to the door. “Innocent men usually do not involve their lawyer when they help us.”

I looked straight at the detective, my gaze hard. “I have nothing to do with this.”

“I hope you are correct, Mr. Russo.”

I pointed at the pictures on my desk. “You forgot your images.”

“I did not. I want you to keep them. Maybe, some new information will come to you.”

I scowled.

The detective turned back to the paintings. “What happened to Fenway?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did he die a happily married man with tons of kids and a vault of riches?”

“No. Fenway locked himself away in his studio and hung himself.”

“Why did he do that?”

“He thought his hands were evil and that when he painted something bad with those hands, that the bad thing would happen.”

“So in the end, he was consumed with guilt?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me something, Mr. Russo?”

“Yes.”

“Do you feel guilty?”

My scowl deepened. “I don’t.”

“I will be in touch with your lawyer for that list.” Thornley made his way out of the office, leaving me alone with those pictures of burnt dead women.

What the fuck is going on?

A decorative frame with ornate, symmetrical scrollwork and flourishes. The frame is rectangular with rounded corners and a central opening. Inside the frame, the words "ACT THREE" are written in a bold, black, serif font, centered horizontally and vertically.

ACT THREE

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ANTICIPATION



NOVA

Once Scarlett and I returned to our apartment, the excitement of the afternoon ahead began to set in.

I was nervous about what to wear for this second date. Therefore, Scarlett helped me rummage through my closet for the perfect outfit.

Together, we flipped through hangers, tossed blouses, and picked out tons of dresses. A lot of the time, we chuckled at the garments that had been pushed to the back of the closet after one too many wears. The room became a whirlwind of fabrics and colors.

Scarlett playfully critiqued some of my more dated fashion choices, and I shot back with sarcastic remarks.

An hour later, Scarlett's intuition for style and my personal taste merged as we narrowed down the options to a flowing white sundress with a flowered pattern and sandals. The dress was enchanting, lightweight, and whimsical. Its fabric danced with every movement.

Meanwhile, my sandals complemented the dress perfectly. They had a small heel that added just the right amount of height, and their delicate straps wrapped around my ankles in a gentle embrace.

I hope he loves the outfit.

That afternoon, I rode in the back seat of Tristan's Bentley, settling into the luxurious interior as the cityscape began to blur outside the tinted windows.

Today, his driver, Charles donned a perfectly tailored suit and a pair of dark sunglasses.

Without a word, Charles shifted gears and sped us down Caviar Lime Highway. The engine hummed a gentle melody, and the trees and buildings were reduced to mere flashes of color.

As we drove, the sun shined bright. That golden light found its way into the car and illuminated the exquisite details of the cabin—the hand-stitched leather, the polished wood trim, and the soft glow of the dashboard.

However, it was Tristan's cologne that really captured my attention. It lingered on the leather seat, tantalizing my senses. It was a blend of warm spices and subtle woody notes.

I inhaled deeply.

Damn.

I exhaled and then happily inhaled again. Every breath of his scent intoxicated me, winding its way through my veins until I felt hopelessly drunk on his presence.

Tristan.

Charles took us farther down Caviar Lime Highway.

A sense of anticipation surged through me.

In my hand, I had the red gift bag that held Tristan's tie and his sketchbook.

I gazed out of the window and noticed that the car took the exit to go to West Paradise.

What surprises does Tristan have in store for today?

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves.

Fuck. He's got my head and body going crazy.

Insanely nervous, I took out my phone and texted my brother.

Me: I'm ditching my books for a guy.

Me: You totally would be proud of me.

I stared at the screen and all the one-sided texts I had sent. A lump formed in my throat as I scrolled through my old conversations—a virtual graveyard of words.

Sighing, I put the phone up, and the sensation of speaking to my brother brought an unexpected comfort. He was gone, but the act of texting him felt like a ritual—a communion with his spirit.

It was strange but therapeutic. He had always been my go-to person when life threw its curveballs, and even in death, he seemed to be there for me.

I could almost hear his voice, feel his laughter at my adventures in love. In my mind's eye, I pictured him grinning, making fun of me for my naivete, or encouraging me with his infectious enthusiasm.

Thanks, Dylan. I love and miss you.

Soon we were leaving Caviar Lime Highway.

The landscape began to morph into an area that oozed opulence and sophistication.

Driving by high-end hotels, I couldn't help but be entranced by the dazzling display of affluence. The hotels stood like grand palaces. The glittering façades were adorned with intricate designs, and the lobbies visible through the wide glass entrances were a study in exquisite taste.

The Michelin starred restaurants, nestled between the towering hotels, were no less impressive. Even from the car, I could sense the culinary artistry that lay within.

One day I will be able to afford rent in the West.

This was the part of town, where the rich and famous mingled.

Minutes later, Charles expertly rounded the car onto the side of a huge building. This wasn't just any structure, but a monolith of contemporary architecture—glass and steel—that reached toward the sky.

Wow.

The building's enormity was not just in its physical size but in its presence. It demanded attention and exuded an air of power and prestige.

Definitely, says Tristan.

Charles brought the car to a smooth halt at the entrance, where uniformed attendants awaited our arrival, their faces reflecting a disciplined calm.

This is nice.

I thought he would be entering a parking garage or even putting me out in front. Instead, Charles eased us into the entrance of a massive metal box.

Two men in black uniforms hurried over and began to direct him to some odd platform.

What is this?

I leaned forward to get a better look.

So...this is his parking spot? It looks like a big storage unit.

Charles carefully guided the car onto the platform within the massive box, following the directions of the attendants who were giving him precise hand signals.

When the car went fully inside the box, Charles shifted into park and turned off the car's ignition.

O-kay.

Next, metal sliding sounded behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder. Steel doors appeared and closed, encasing us within the dimly lit space.

O-kay...What's going on?

The subtle vibration of the platform beneath me told me that we were moving. In fact...we were rising—the metal box, the car, Charles, and me.

Hold on. Is this a car elevator? Is that a thing?

Completely shocked, I marveled at the silence and smoothness of the car elevator's operation. It whisked us upward with an almost imperceptible hum, making it feel as if we were floating rather than ascending.

Time seemed to blur and lose meaning.

I couldn't tell how long we were in there, cocooned in that luxurious capsule.

Then, the vibration stopped.

The elevator reached its destination.

My nerves flared.

I could sense that we were about to be unveiled to a whole new world. My heart raced. I found myself holding my breath as the heavy steel doors began to part. As they slowly opened, a flood of light spilled into the elevator, illuminating our surroundings.

Charles turned on the car and slowly backed us into a large garage with six other expensive cars inside it.

Oh. My. God.

The space was a millionaire's private showroom, displaying an enviable collection of high-performance luxury vehicles.

Is this...Tristan's garage?

The pristine garage floor gleamed under the soft, strategically placed overhead lights, reflecting the sleek, gleaming exteriors of the cars.

Each vehicle was meticulously maintained. Their paint jobs were flawless and their chrome accents polished to perfection.

Maybe, I should give up my studies and figure out this art thing.

I didn't mean to, but I began assessing the choice of cars and placement, wondering what that could say about Tristan.

To one side of the garage, a gleaming red Ferrari exuded power and elegance. It told me that like most men, Tristan loved speed. Yet, the color red pointed to his hunt for desire.

No shocker there.

Adjacent to the Ferrari, a classic black Rolls-Royce Phantom stood.

Alright. Tristan likes timeless luxury and exquisite craftsmanship.

His decision to get the car in black possibly represented his darker side.

He does naughty things when he drives this car. I would bet a lot of money on that.

I scanned the other cars—a stunning midnight-blue Aston Martin, a sleek, silver Porsche, and a white Bentley similar to the one I was presently in.

Do you really need two Bentleys? I guess so if you're Tristan.

When my gaze landed on the eye-catching canary-yellow Lamborghini, I saw Tristan leaning on the car's hood.

Holy fuck.

Shirtless and barefoot, he leaned against the car, an embodiment of raw masculinity. The sleek contours of the Lamborghini paled in comparison to the sculpted lines of his torso.

Mmmhmm.

Black jeans hugged the thick muscles of his thighs.

This man is too damn fine.

My eyes widened at the delicious sight, my breath catching in my throat. Excitement pulsed through my veins.

Tristan watched Charles park the car, and I ogled his powerful physique.

His skin—bronzed and flawless—glistened subtly in the soft glow of the garage. And it wasn't just that every inch of Tristan was sculpted to perfection.

His body was actually nothing short of a masterpiece—an enticing canvas of art. Tattoos snaked across his arms and chest. It was hard to make out all of the different objects and images he'd had drawn on him.

So hot.

I couldn't wait to get a closer look at each of the tattoos.

Oh well. I guess we are fucking today.

As if he heard me, a faint trace of a smile played on his lips.

Once Charles turned off the car, Tristan slowly pushed off the car's hood and began to walk towards me.

Each step was a graceful dance that hypnotized my senses. The confident yet tender expression in his eyes. The ripple of his muscles as he moved.

Yeah. Mr. Big Dick is a good name. How could he not have one, with the way he is walking?

Tristan opened the car door and my eyes fell upon his cock as it pushed against his black jeans—big and hard.

Damn. I want it.

He curved those sexy lips into a wicked smile. “Good afternoon, Nova.”

“Nice to see you again.” I climbed out of the car and stood near him, feeling the heat of his presence radiating off his skin.

“No. I think it is much nicer to see *you*.” He silently slipped his intense gaze along the contours of my dress,

making me feel like he was going to devour me whole. “Very nice choice.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

“I just hope you don’t mind that dress being torn.”

I bit my bottom lip.

The lusty hunger in the air was undeniable. I swore an electric current danced between us.

My heart beat faster.

Tristan’s gaze drifted to the gift bag that I was holding. A curious glint sparked in his eyes. “I get a present today?”

“It’s a small *thank you* for last night.”

“You already thanked me when you came all over my fingers.”

My body hummed.

Butterflies unfolded in my stomach.

He extended his hand. “Give it to me.”

I quirked my brows. “That’s how you ask to see something?”

“You are lucky that I didn’t take it.” Tristan closed the small distance between us, leaned in closer, and brushed his lips along my ear. “Or do you want me to take it?”

I trembled.

A dark chuckle left him.

He extended his hand to mine. Our fingers brushed against each other, sending shivers down my spine. The warmth of his touch lingered on my skin.

The soft light of the garage cast a romantic glow on our surroundings.

As Tristan’s eyes met mine once more, I could see the reflection of our shared desire. “What do you have on under that dress?”

“You’ll see later.”

“That’s not an answer, Nova.”

“That’s the answer I’m giving you.”

“You are lucky that I am letting you wear that sexy dress at all.”

I blushed, feeling the heat rising to my cheeks.

Fast, Tristan moved his lips to mine and kissed me deeply.

Oh my God. He’s going to give me a heart attack.

So hungry for him, I raised my hands. My fingers slid through his hair.

He deepened the kiss, our lips melding together in a passionate dance that set my entire body ablaze. His hands roamed over my body like a painter’s brush on canvas—caressing every curve with absolute precision.

It was as if he were committing each contour to memory.

Mmmm.

The warmth of his touch sent waves of pleasure rippling through me, awakening a hunger that I had never before experienced.

Moaning, I molded to him. My body surrendered to the magnetic pull of his embrace, ready to give him full access to every part of me.

The kiss deepened.

Our breaths mingled, becoming one as we lost ourselves in the intoxicating allure of each other’s presence.

Finally, when our kiss ended, I leaned back breathless.

Tristan grinned. His eyes sparkled with a blend of desire and tender affection. Then, he took the bag from my hand. His fingers brushed against mine again, reigniting the fire that continued to rise between us.

Nervous about the gift, I whispered, “I hope you like it. This is just...something small.”

He kept the bag on his side. “How did you sleep last night?”

“Very good.”

His gaze bore into my soul, melting me into a pool of unadulterated desire. “Did you dream of me?”

“No, but...” I swallowed. “I thought of you all morning.”

“What did you think of?”

I smirked. “Open your thank you gift.”

“Hmmm. Those morning thoughts must have been nasty.”

They sure were.

Tristan looked down and opened the bag. Next, a smile spread across his face. “Oh my.”

Please, like this.

He dug his hand into the bag and pulled out the leather-bound sketchbook. “This is quite a surprise.”

The sketchbook’s cover was crafted from rich, supple leather, dyed a deep, earthy brown. The texture was smooth. Embossed on the cover was an intricate design featuring the four elements—Earth, Air, Fire, and Water—each represented by distinct symbols.

“Amazing.” He handed me the gift bag, put his attention back on the sketchbook’s cover, and ran his fingers along the embossed elements. “Where did you find this?”

“At an art supply store near my apartment.”

“It must have been a really nice store. This is incredible.” He opened the sketchbook, spotted the quote I had written on the inside, and read it out loud, “*Art, in its boundless expression, serves as a salve for the soul, transmuting the chaos of madness into a harmonious symphony of self-discovery and healing.*”

My nerves flared. I hadn’t intended on him seeing that until after I had left.

“That is beautiful, Nova.” Tristan put his view back on me. “Thank you. I’ve never...”

I widened my eyes. “What?”

“I do not believe any woman has given me something so thoughtful and...directly related to my true passion.”

“I’m just glad that you like it. I was sure that you already had tons of sketchbooks—”

“Not any that are empty.”

I grinned and held the bag out. “Also, your tie is in here.”

He quirked his brows. “You’re giving me my tie back, Nova?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember the purpose that tie was supposed to serve?”

“I do.”

“And?” He licked his lips.

“Mission accomplished.”

He grabbed the bag like it held the secret to immortality within it. Quickly, he pulled out the tie, brought it to his nose, and deeply inhaled the fabric.

I parted my lips.

“Fuck, Nova.” He breathed in again. “I can smell your pussy all over this.”

My body heated.

As he moved the tie from his nose, desire blazed in his eyes. “How did the silk feel on your pussy?”

“Umm.” I swallowed. “Very good.”

“I’m very jealous of this tie.”

“Don’t be. You’ll get a chance to touch her too.”

“Is that right?”

I shivered. “Yes.”

“Then, let us begin our date.”

“I’m excited.”

He pressed his lips together and held out his hand.

I took it without hesitation.

His fingers intertwined with mine, and a gentle warmth spread through my body.

Together, we walked off toward a red door.

This is going to be an amazing day.

Still, I remained nervous. Nothing about Tristan was typical or even predictable. For all I knew, there were tons of naked people in his home engaged in an orgy.

As we continued to the red door, I looked at him. “What are we going to do today?”

A wicked smirk spread across his face. “Today?”

“Yes, Tristan.”

“Well...” He stopped us at the red door. “Today, we push past your boundaries.”

“What boundaries do you think I have?”

“That’s what I will be figuring out today.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

TOUR OF A DARK SOUL



NOVA

To my shock, the red door led to an elevator.

Still holding my hand, Tristan guided me onto a private elevator. “I have to say, I absolutely love the sketchbook you gave me, Nova.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“It was a thoughtful gift.”

Whew. He really likes it.

The doors closed, and the elevators’ walls were super shiny. Plus, the floor was so clean and polished that it looked wet. If the elevator were this captivating, I had no doubt his place would be super opulent.

He continues to impress me.

Meanwhile, I made myself focus on the conversation. “So...are sketchbooks a part of your process with creating sculptures? Or do you just like to sketch for personal enjoyment?”

“Sketchbooks definitely aid the creative process and help me develop ideas.”

“Oh.” I widened my eyes.

“They are *very* important.” Tristan gazed down at the bag holding the sketchbook. “Tonight, I will open it up and start brainstorming ideas and concepts for my next collection of sculptures.”

“The drawings help you visualize the form and proportions?”

“And the composition.”

“I never realized how much a sketchbook would be included in your process.”

He looked at me. “No?”

“No.”

“Then, why did you get it for me?”

“As soon as I saw those four elements, my body shivered and your face came to mind.”

“Hmmm.” His gaze grew intense.

My body heated.

Calm down.

I cleared my throat. “So...you draw your concepts in the sketchbook and then what?”

He quirked his brows. “You want to know how I create my sculptures?”

“I do, but...if it bores you to talk about—”

“My art is never a boring topic. Most just don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“Maybe it is because, I usually don’t spend my time with people who are passionate about the art world. They typically just love sports or sex.”

“Why don’t you hang with more art enthusiasts?”

“Because they are usually snobbish and only care about the *status* and *prestige* that comes with owning art. They don’t understand the true essence of it. The blood that was spilled to create the piece.”

“I can understand that.”

The elevator doors opened, and we stepped into the penthouse.

So overwhelmed, I paused.

Damn. This is a like a...condo-palace sort of situation.

“Welcome to my home.” Not noticing my shock, Tristan led me forward.

My sandals clicked on the marble floor.

I was immediately struck by the sheer elegance of the space. The air smelled faintly of expensive cologne. Soft, ambient classical music filled the massive room that we entered.

The polished marble floors reflected the golden light that poured in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, giving the entire space a warm, inviting glow. I couldn’t help but marvel at the breathtaking view of Paradise City as I walked further inside.

This is just...so...spectacular.

Entering the living room, I was greeted by a sprawling, plush black sofa that beckoned me to sink into its luxurious embrace.

The space was filled with the gentle crackling of a modern gas fireplace. Its flames cast flickering shadows on the surrounding walls. The soft, muted colors of the room created an atmosphere of relaxation and sophistication.

A grand piano resided in the corner.

However, I couldn’t help but notice this one painting adorning the space above the fire place.

What is this?

I let go of Tristan's hand and walked over to it.

He didn't stop me.

Instead, he silently followed me to that wall.

Very... interesting?

On the large painting, parts of a beautifully crafted porcelain doll had been broken in several places and spread across the canvas. A large crack ran down the doll's head. Even more, shards broke away from its arms and legs.

I widened my eyes.

It was such an odd artwork to have in such an elegant living room.

What is going on inside of you, Tristan?

People subconsciously gravitated to certain art pieces based on the inner representation they held. This connection could be linked to their experiences, emotions, or inner desires.

I studied the painting some more.

The whole time Tristan watched me with this intense gaze.

I focused on the delicate fragments scattered under the doll's body.

He had a...fractured childhood. And maybe there was some...shattering of innocence.

Sorrow hit me.

Did he know that this image of the beautifully broken doll pointed to his vulnerability and trauma?

Tristan's voice slipped along my skin. "Are you analyzing me?"

I blinked. "Oh...no. I mean..."

He smirked.

"Sorry."

Stop doing that. Pay attention to the date.

I swallowed down my constant curiosity of him. “You have a breathtaking place.”

He stared at me. “Seeing the four elements on the sketchbook’s cover, made your body shiver and your mind go to me?”

I blinked again. “Yes.”

“Due to that, I will be drawing you on the front page this evening.”

I parted my lips. “Really?”

“Yes. I can already tell that you will end up being my muse for this next collection.”

My heart quickened at the thought of being immortalized in his art.

Tristan’s gaze grew intense. “Already, you are inspiring me in ways that no one else ever has.”

My breath hitched.

“Tonight, every stroke of my pencil will be an ode to your beauty.” He leaned in. His lips met mine in a fiery kiss.

I melted into him, my body pressed against his as his hands roamed over me, igniting a flame deep within my core.

Then, he pulled away, his eyes dark with desire. “Let me show you around.”

I caught my breath and walked with him.

Fuck.

He led us away from the broken doll painting. “Of course this is my living room. Here, I host very small gatherings with my even smaller list of friends.”

I gazed back at the room, wondering what a Tristan-friendly gathering looked like. Was he his true self with them? Did he have someone to really open himself up to?

The painting suggested otherwise. It screamed that he kept his emotions bolted up and far away from his thoughts.

Nova...stop trying to figure him out. This situation is just supposed to be fun.

I shook my head.

He glanced my way. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm just...blown away by your place."

Next, we entered a hallway that almost blinded me with its bright white marble floors. More huge windows lined the walls, their glass panes looking out over the city.

Tristan spoke, "Back to this sketchbook."

I chuckled.

Tristan snapped his view to me. "Why are you laughing at me?"

"It's not really that I am laughing. You are just so... *intense*, and then you keep going back to the gift."

"Perhaps, it is because I am not used to getting one."

"No. That's not it."

"Why not?"

"You must get gifts." I rolled my eyes. "I cannot believe that."

"It is true."

"Tristan, a woman has given you something wrapped in a bow or put in a box."

"Never."

"You are too damn sexy to get me to believe that."

It was his turn to laugh.

I joined him. "I don't know if you are trying to play a sympathy card or something, but I know for a fact women have showered you with presents."

"In my situations with women, we never exchange gifts."

"What? I get that these *situations* aren't relationships, but surely you spent time with a woman on your birthday or for

Christmas? Didn't you get a gift then?"

"I don't celebrate holidays or birthdays."

"What?" I stopped in the center of the hallway. "Why not?"

"It is not a big deal."

"But gifts are fun and celebrating birthdays are even more fun?"

He smirked. "I could find better ways and things to spend my time on."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "When is your birthday?"

"I am not telling you."

"Why not?"

"Because I believe you will try to do something special on that day."

"You are damned right about that. We could have fun. Isn't this journey between us about having fun?"

Tristan gestured for us to go forward. "I'm never telling you when my birthday is. Additionally, I've never wanted presents, and I absolutely never expect them from others either."

"That's interesting. Do you mind if I ask why you feel that way? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"Perhaps, I've always been scared of the expectations that come with gift-giving."

"What expectations?"

"I feel like if I receive gifts, it might lead to disappointment, or maybe I'd feel obligated to reciprocate in a way I'm not comfortable with."

"It sounds like you might have a fear of vulnerability when it comes to relationships. By avoiding gift exchanges, you're avoiding the risk of being hurt or letting someone down."

Tristan frowned at me. “You do know that I am not your patient?”

Embarrassment caught me. “I’m sorry. This is a bad habit of mine. Ignore my musings.”

“I won’t ignore them.”

“Why not?”

“You may be correct.” He led us into a new space. “By the way, this is my reading nook.”

I grinned.

Quite a nook.

The scent of aged leather filled the air. Towering bookshelves lined the walls, filled with an eclectic mix of classic and modern literature. It was a bibliophile’s dream. And I felt a sense of contentment just being in its presence.

A soft, worn leather armchair sat in the corner.

Tristan spoke, “There are times when I sit here with a book and get lost for hours.”

“This is a perfect place to escape with a good book.” I spotted a large photograph at the back of the wall.

Oh, wow. What is this?

Unable to help myself, I let go of his hand and went over to that one. “This is interesting.”

The black and white photo showed the shadows of two people walking with a kid in the middle of them. However, you could only truly see the three shadows of these people on the concrete. It was so distorted, I wasn’t sure if it was parents on a walk with their child, or older siblings with a very young one.

Tristan got to my side. “I could never figure out what to put in this room, so...I settled on this one.”

I looked at him. “Why this one?”

“The black and white goes perfectly with all of the color in the room.”

Or the shadows could hint at hidden fears and traumas lurking beneath the surface of your subconscious.

Was he struggling with confronting his childhood demons and the darkness that still haunted him?

Fuck. Stop it.

I quickly turned away.

Tristan's hand found its way to my lower back, pulling me closer to him. "Are you okay?"

I forced a smile. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Tristan didn't seem convinced. "I have shown my place to many before."

Many women.

He eyed me. "But with you..."

"Yes?"

"For some reason, I feel like I am a magician revealing his secrets of how he did the trick."

"Maybe because to bring a person in your home, is to open them up to the *real* you."

He grinned. "But is that really true?"

"It is."

"People can curate and decorate their homes to represent lies."

"Still, the truth always peeks out in different corners of the room. One can never really hide the truth of themselves, especially in their living space."

"Interesting." He gestured for us to move on. "Then, come on, I still have more secrets to show you."

I laughed.

He led me out of the reading nook and down another hallway.

We passed by several doors.

Then, we continued into the kitchen.

This is nice.

I was immediately struck by the sleek, modern design. High-end stainless steel appliances gleamed under the recessed lighting, and a spacious marble island dominated the center of the room.

The aroma of delicious food wafted through the air.

“Besides my studio and reading nook, I can be found in here, bothering my chef, Pierre.” Tristan walked over to him.

The chef was an older gentleman dressed in a traditional, crisp white chef’s uniform.

Tristan gave the man a warm smile. “Nova, this is Pierre, the culinary mastermind behind all the amazing food you will be feasting on today.”

I shook his hand. “I want to say thank you in advance. It smells so good. I already know everything will be amazing.”

“I hope so.” Pierre had a hint of pride in his eyes. “Ah, Tristan always knows how to flatter me. A pleasure to meet you, Nova.”

Tristan watched our interaction.

Pierre studied me. “Do you like to cook?”

“I can make a few dishes, but nothing that smells *this* good.” I smiled. “What’s your secret for creating yummy food?”

Pierre leaned in conspiratorially, as if sharing the most precious of secrets. “Well, Nova, the secret is simple. Passion.”

Tristan chuckled.

“Laugh if you want, my boy. It is true.” Pierre shrugged. “Passion for the ingredients. Passion for the craft. And passion for making people happy through food.”

I was clearly delighted by his response. “Well, Chef Pierre, I can’t wait to taste the fruits of your passion.”

He winked playfully. “I assure you, mademoiselle, your taste buds will not be disappointed.”

“Alright. Alright.” Tristan took my hand and led me away. “Stop flirting with my date.”

Tristan continued the door.

Seconds later, he showed me his private entertainment space. It had a large screen and plush seating. Against my will, I began to envision us cuddling together on a rainy, cozy night, sharing laughter and whispered conversations.

What are you doing? Just relax. This is the second date, Nova.

We left the entertainment area, walked down the hallway, and I caught sight of a bedroom door.

Oh.

My body heated as we headed in that direction.

I glanced up at Tristan. “Is this where you sleep?”

“And do other things.”

I smirked.

I bet, nasty man.

My body hummed as I entered. Soon, my eyes immediately widened in astonishment. Everything in his bedroom—from the furniture to the artwork—was done in an elegant, yet eccentric style.

However, what was interesting about the artwork in this room, was that it seemed the least telling of who Tristan was. Lots of the art on the walls was abstract with dominant slashes of black and white, not really shaping or forming into anything.

Shocking that...his bedroom would be the one place where...he didn't reveal himself in the art. Why is that?

I took a few steps forward and stopped. My gaze fell to the king sized bed. It was surrounded by a thick canopy of velvet and hung with jewel-toned silks.

I went over to the bed. I couldn't help myself as I slowly ran my fingers along the bed sheets.

Tristan's gaze went to my fingers slipping on his bed.

A grunt left him.

Still brushing my fingers along the bed, I walked over to the other side.

Hold up. What the hell is this?

One of those 1980s video recorders sat on a tripod next to his bed. There was also some sort of photography lighting kit—with different colored LED screens. Near the equipment, a four foot shelf stood, filled with glass encased video tapes.

On each spine, a woman's name was written in gold.

O-kay...

I couldn't help but wonder what was on those videos. Surely, it involved his cock slamming into things. Too curious to be silent, I asked, "What are these?"

Tristan met my gaze. "Those are mementos from my past."

I steadied my voice. "Each tape shows a different woman you have been involved with?"

"I like to record certain moments."

"And what moments are those?"

"The moments I make a woman cum."

"O-kay." I walked closer to the shelf and browsed all of the names. There were so many, and in alphabetical order—Amelia, Bianca, Becky, three Clovers, two Cynthias, Emma, Felicia, Harper, Hope, on and on.

Damn, Tristan.

I skipped several more tapes and read the names—Isabella, four Lisas, Mia, Mylah, Olivia, Sophia, Tina.

My oh my.

The names went on and on.

Shocked, I turned to him. "I have so many questions."

“Do you?”

“First of all...how the hell did you meet three different Clovers?”

He laughed.

“I’m serious.”

Tristan shrugged. “I too am shocked with how many Clovers I have dated.”

I held out my hands. “Are Clovers fun women?”

“They are interesting. Usually more on the hipster side. They love to talk about chakras and crystals, tarot cards and clearing spiritual energy.”

“And did they clear *your* spiritual energy?”

“They cleared what needed to be cleared.”

I shook my head and walked off. “I bet they did.”

I had always assumed he was a ladies’ man, but it was difficult to overlook the evidence of his amorous past spread out before me. All the videos indicated that they must have shared many intimate, personal moments together.

As I looked at them, my chest felt heavy and an uneasy feeling crept over me.

I will definitely be careful with you, Tristan.

I strolled away.

He called after me, “And would you ever allow me to film your cumming on my cock?”

I paused, caught in the heat of his question.

Would I?

Running my tongue over my top lip, I turned back to him. “Maybe.”

He studied me. “Has anyone ever filmed you during sex?”

“No.”

He curved his lips into a very wicked smile. “And, it is not a limit for you?”

“It isn’t.” I headed away, not wanting to be in his bedroom anymore. It was drenched in too many sexual memories. And honestly, part of me felt a bit overwhelmed by it all.

We went back into the hallway.

He gestured for us to go right. “This way.”

We headed there.

Soon, the glass walls showing the city shifted to white walls adorned with paintings.

Of course I couldn’t help but glance at each one and assess them.

One painting showed a massive green maze. It was endless and winding with no apparent exit. The walls of the maze were tall and impenetrable, leaving me—the viewer—feeling trapped and disoriented.

He thinks he can't escape the past? Or...maybe it is difficult to find his way through the complexities of his emotions?

I knew I should stop analyzing him. It was all hopeless and stupid. Nothing would come from Tristan and me, besides some extravagant dates and amazing sex.

And apparently some movies.

Still...I wanted to truly know the man that would be moving inside of me.

We walked by one painting and I forced us to stop. “Hold on, please.”

Tristan watched me.

I took it in.

The painting showed the blurred image of a man. Even though the face wasn’t fully distinct, for some reason...I knew it was Tristan. There were small features here and there that

pointed to it being him—the point of his nose, the sculpted view of the cheeks, those full lips.

Yet, the eyes were distorted as well as other parts of his face.

Tristan turned to the painting. “What do you see?”

“It’s going to sound weird, but...”

“What?”

“I see *you*.”

He snapped his view to me. “Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “It just...kind of looks like you.”

He grinned. “But, you can barely see the man’s face.”

“Still...” I shrugged again. “Why? Who is this?”

He nodded. “It is me.”

“Oh really?”

“In art school, one of the initial assignments students are often tasked with is creating a self-portrait.”

I put my view back on the painting. “And this is yours?”

“It is.” He sighed. “I was nineteen.”

“And what did your professor think of your self-portrait?”

“He hated it, citing that the painting was too unconventional, overly abstract, and not adhering to the traditional self-portrait format.”

“And what did *you* think?”

“That he was an idiot, and had nothing to teach me.”

“You sounded like you were very humble at nineteen.”

“It is hard to be humble, when you know how great you are.” Tristan took my hand and led us to a door that stood out from the others.

It was made of dark wood and had intricate carvings etched into its surface.

“We are now at the end of our tour.” Tristan turned to face me. “This is my studio.”

My heart skipped a beat as he opened the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CANVAS OF THE HEART



TRISTAN

As Nova and I stepped toward my studio, I couldn't help but marvel at her beauty. Her brown skin glowed. Her eyes sparkled with excitement. I had looked forward to this second date all morning, eager to reveal a more intimate side of myself through my home.

But am I revealing too much?

Nova walked into my studio with those inquisitive eyes.

It was well past 800sq feet. Shelves and wall dividers rounded here and there, separating the space.

She was the third woman to ever enter this studio. The other two women had only passed through it to get to my secret playroom on the other side.

But with Nova...since we started off with my art, I liked the idea of interweaving the artist side of me within this *situation*.

Usually, I kept my passion for art outside of my erotic adventure with a woman.

Is this a good idea?

Tension gathered in my shoulders.

This space reflected me. It was one of the few places where I could create and be free.

She could see too much of me in this place.

For me, opening my soul to another person was akin to peeling back layers of skin. Each layer revealed too much raw, unfiltered depths of vulnerability. When exposed, my soul was sensitive to the slightest touch.

And now, as Nova stood within my space, I felt her curious eyes prying into the recesses of my very being. It left me on edge.

Yet, in the midst of my unease, a curious part of me ached to know the thoughts that brewed behind those curious, yet enchanting eyes.

I—so used to concealing myself behind the impenetrable fortress of my art—found myself enthralled by the prospect of being seen, truly seen, by Nova.

This had my body teetering between fear and desire.

The moth drawn to the flame.

I shut the door behind me and took a step inside. The polished mahogany floor cooled beneath my bare feet.

And then there was the painting that I had done of her last night.

It was currently hidden behind a draped cloth and tucked away in a quiet corner. It was a painting that I hadn't even meant to create, yet it had flowed from me with an intensity that left me breathless. It made me uncomfortable, this unexpected connection to her that had manifested in colors and shapes.

Why did I paint her? What did it mean?

I could feel her eyes on me, her curiosity probing, and I knew that she would want to see everything. The thought of

her eyes on that painting, of her knowing what I had unconsciously captured, made my heart pound.

Nova scanned the space. “This is where all of the magic happens?”

“One of the many studios that I have all over the world.”

She smirked. “Don’t worry. I will not touch anything.”

“Actually...I might like you to touch some of it.”

“Hmmm.”

I went over to my long work table covered in tons of opened sketchbooks. There, I set my gift bag in the corner.

I can't believe she bought that sketchbook for me. She will never know how much that truly meant to me.

Nova gazed at the various sketchbooks on the table.

I tensed as she perused various anatomy studies where I practiced drawing various poses, muscle structures, and facial expressions to gain a better understanding of how to sculpt lifelike forms.

Then there were the many sketchbooks flooded with tons of notes on the experiences I wanted the viewers to have with my exhibitions.

Other sketchbooks displayed my doodling of different color palettes.

Nova shook her head. “All I can say is...wow.”

I blinked.

“To say you are passionate about art is to...miss the point. Art is your life. It is your...soul.”

Warmth washed over me.

“It is the true canvas of your heart.” Nova looked at me. “Or am I...sounding crazy?”

“You’re correct.” I gestured to the table. “Tell me this. Do you see how none of those sketchbooks are as nice as what you gave me?”

She blushed.

“In fact, yours is so nice. Now, I’m almost scared to draw in it.”

“No. You have to do stuff with it.”

“The sketchbook is too pretty. Too reminiscent of that night.”

“Then, how about I get you more sketchbooks.”

No.

I tensed.

The faint hum of the air purifier sounded in the background.

Nova slowly walked off, putting her gaze here and there. Thankfully, she never noticed my reaction.

Why did it scare me for her to get me another sketchbook?

My nerves flared.

Should I have let her come in here?

All of my art studios were my sanctuaries—breathtaking havens for me to unleash my imagination. Each space served as an awe-inspiring testament to the power of art and the boundless potential of human creativity.

Why did I want to have our date in here?

So smart, Nova neared the corner where the curtain covered the canvas.

How the hell would she know to go over there?

I cleared my throat.

She pointed to the covered canvas. “What’s behind there?”

She’s too fucking good at figuring me out.

I hesitated, my mouth suddenly dry. How could I explain something that I didn’t fully understand myself?

“It’s not finished,” I finally managed to say, my voice betraying the undercurrent of fear. “Maybe you can see that

another time.”

She looked at me, her eyes narrowing slightly, as if sensing that there was more to it. But she simply nodded. “I’m just happy to be in here.”

My nerves calmed.

I followed behind her as she perused everything.

The scent of clay and paint saturated the air.

At this time of day, my spacious studio was filled with natural light due to the high glass ceiling. Huge canvases leaned against the walls, each one showcasing paintings that I had done long ago in my art career.

Old clay models and forgotten sculptures filled shelves and were all in different stages of completion. These pieces ranged from abstract forms to lifelike figures.

“Wow.” She reached her hand out to one and then stopped herself. “I’m sorry. I promised not to touch.”

“No.” My body hummed. “Touch them.”

What was it to have my sacred space invaded by this sexy, inquisitive woman.

Will it ever be the same?

I doubted it.

Nova was inside my studio, putting her scent and memories of her in that white sundress all over the space.

This might have been a bad idea, but I’m fucking loving it.

Nova continued to explore, and then her eyes were drawn to the large screen embedded in the wall.

She gestured to it. “You like to watch television while you create?”

“No. I usually turn it on afterwards.”

“What do you watch on here?”

My throat went dry. Recently, that screen had become a window into my secret obsession of her. “I would say that…”

lately when I turn it on, I've been entertained.”

“But, what entertains you?”

I thought of Nova rubbing my tie over her wet pussy.
“Captivating moments.”

“Okay.” She chuckled.

I took Nova's hand, led her to the left side of the wall, and guided her around the corner.

“Oh. There's more studio.”

“A lot more.”

Once getting on the other side, she gasped.

Does she like my surprise?

The staff had carried out every detail with precision.

More important, Nova appeared absolutely captivated by the romantic and elegant indoor picnic that had been meticulously arranged before her.

A thick, white cashmere blanket—delicate and ethereal—lay on the floor, surrounded by plush pillows in shades of ivory and gold.

I guided us forward.

Dozens of candles flickered gently around us. Their flames cast a warm, golden glow that seemed to embrace the entire room.

As we got closer to the picnic set up, I breathed in the candles' scent of jasmine and rose.

Fragrant flower arrangements bordered the blanket. Lush roses and bright peonies intertwined within cascading greenery. Their petals were a riot of color.

Perfect.

Upon the blanket, an array of elegant picnic foods was artfully displayed on antique lace plate settings and surrounded by gold cutlery and hand-painted porcelain plates.

I checked the food and nodded.

Good job, Pierre.

Each dish symbolized the highest level of culinary skill and sophistication. Delicate finger sandwiches with smoked salmon and cream cheese, caprese salad skewers, rich and decadent chocolate-covered strawberries, and a beautifully arranged charcuterie board boasting an assortment of fine cheeses and cured meats.

They all summoned us to savor their exquisite flavors.

Among the delicious dishes, crystal champagne flutes sparkled in the candlelight. Each one was filled with a fine vintage that sent bubbles dancing to the surface.

“Tristan...” Nova touched her chest. “This is... outstanding. You really know how to blow my mind.”

My nerves calmed.

In that moment, I realized that I had truly *cared* about if she would like my surprise or not. That feeling was somewhat new. Usually, I just...knew that the date would be fine, or maybe I didn't care if the woman enjoyed it or not.

But with Nova...

I shook off the odd feeling and gestured for her to sit. “Let's enjoy this.”

Smiling, she lowered onto the blanket.

Following, I sat down next to her, picked up the flutes of champagne, and gave her one. “Thank you for skipping your studies and spending time with me.”

She took the flute. “I'm glad I skipped too.”

I smirked. “Time with me or books, was it truly a difficult decision?”

A wicked expression hit her face. “I found a way to figure out my choice.”

“Did you now?”

“Yes.” She took a sip of her champagne.

“And what way was that?”

“Your tie helped.”

My cock jerked in my pants as I went back to the vision of Nova on her bed, rubbing her pussy all over the silky fabric.

She spotted the thick, blank white cards next to her and then pointed to the pens by a big jar. “What is this over here?”

“A new game.”

“You *really* love games?”

“I do.”

“What is this one called?”

“Fantasies.”

“Okay.” She smiled. “And how do we play?”

“We both write ten statements that deal with our sexual fantasies or limits.”

“So some statements could deal with fantasies I like and others could be situations that I would never want to be in?”

“Exactly.”

“Which means some of these statements could be a lie?”

“Yes, again.” I grabbed a pen. “Once done writing each statement, we fold the papers and place them in the jar.”

“Alright.” She picked up a pen.

“We will take turns drawing a statement from the jar and reading it aloud. Now this is the part that gets interesting—”

“I would say the whole game is interesting, Tristan.” She chuckled.

“That could be true.” I winked. “However, when the statement is read, the person who did not write the statement must attempt to guess if the statement is true or not.”

“Okay.”

“And, you have one chance to guess the correct answer.”

“So.” She tapped her pen against her leg. “If you wrote the statement: *I love getting my toes sucked*. And I answer...”

I quirked my brows. “What would you think? Do I like my toes getting sucked or not?”

“Hmmm.” She studied me. “Sigmund Freud claimed that people sexualized feet because they resembled penises.”

What?

I widened my eyes.

She grinned. “I’ve always disagreed with that.”

Truly intrigued, I leaned forward. “Why do you think people have foot fetishes?”

“There’s of course the fact that some just find feet sexy, but then there’re the others that can see feet as symbolic for submission, dominance, or power dynamics.”

“I can get that.”

“But, on the other side, the act of caring for or worshipping feet can be seen as an intimate or nurturing experience, reinforcing the emotional bond between partners.”

“And do you think that I love getting *my* toes sucked?”

“No, but...I think *you* would enjoy sucking my toes. But only if you deemed me as a being a *good girl*.”

My body heated as I thought of sucking each of her toes, nibbling on the tasty flesh, and then sliding my tongue between each digit.

Nova observed me, surely having a good idea of the reaction she had triggered in me.

I licked my lips. “And would you be a good girl?”

“Sometimes.” A wicked smile spread across her face.

“And other times?”

She blushed. “I would be bad.”

A dark groan left me.

She cleared her throat. “But...back to your game.”

I moved my gaze to her sandals. Her perfectly manicured toes were polished sapphire blue.

“So, what if I answer the statement correctly in the game?” she asked.

“Then, you earn a point, and if you get it wrong, you get no points.”

“Well, I am always going to get a point.”

I chuckled. “We will see. I may stump you with some of my statements.”

“That would be amazing if you could.”

“I see that you too are very humble.”

“Super humble.” She took a sip of her champagne. “Oh yeah. Will there be prizes for this game?”

“There *must* be prizes.”

She laughed. “What is the prize?”

“The winner gets to decide what date three will be. They choose the activity that both partners can enjoy together, such as a movie night with their favorite film, a spa night with massages, a special dessert that can be shared, or...something much, much hotter.”

“That sounds like a good time.”

“Then, let’s begin.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SPERM COMPETITION THEORY



NOVA

Nibbling on the tasty dishes and sipping champagne, Tristan and I took our time writing down our statements.

During this silent moment, I couldn't help but take a minute to reflect on how much I was enjoying this date with Tristan. Not only was he incredibly good-looking, with his chiseled features and intense gaze that seemed to pierce my soul, but there was also an undeniably deep connection forming between us.

When his laughter filled the room, my heart swelled with happiness.

Additionally, Tristan always listened intently when I spoke, making me feel truly seen and appreciated. I had never felt this way with anyone else before.

It was both thrilling and terrifying at the same time.

Already, I was realizing that I wouldn't want this connection to fade. I hoped that whatever happened between

us, we could somehow still be good friends and stay in touch. The thought of losing the bond we were creating made me uneasy. I knew that Tristan was someone special, and I didn't want to let him slip away.

I silently made a promise to myself to cherish the moments we shared and to do everything in my power to nurture the connection between us. No matter what the future held, I was determined to hold onto the friendship we were building, even if our paths eventually led us in different directions.

“Alright.” Tristan placed all of the folded papers into the jar. “Are you ready?”

I smirked. “I am.”

“Then, you are first. Grab one out of the jar.”

“I hope I get this.”

“I hope you don't. I want to win.”

Chuckling, I picked up the first statement, unfolded the paper, and read it.

Wow.

His gaze never left mine. “Go ahead and read it out loud.”

“*You* definitely wrote this.”

He grinned.

I cleared my throat. “The statement says, ‘I like to watch my lover's pussy being licked and sucked on by another man.’”

Oh my.

Searing heat scorched through my veins, setting a fire of need in my belly that only intensified as I imagined myself on the floor.

I saw my legs spread wide, my most intimate parts exposed to the unknown man kneeling before me, his tongue lashing against my clit like an animal ravenous for water. And beside me, Tristan watched with desire burning in his eyes and his erection bulging unbearably at his pants.

Tristan pulled me out of the fantasy. “What do you think, Nova? Would I want to watch a man lick your pussy?”

Mmmm.

I swallowed hard. “I think...that yes...you would love to watch a man devour my pussy.”

“Hmmm.” He tilted his head to the side. “Did you say that answer due to some psychological breakdown in your head? Or...is that simply wishful thinking on your part?”

“It may be wishful thinking.”

“You want to be feasted on by two men?”

“Yes.”

“Or even more than two men?”

My skin flushed. “Maybe.”

A dark groan left him. “How much cock do you think you can handle, Nova?”

My gaze darted to the bulge in his jeans.

Fuck.

“Nova?”

“I don’t know how much cock I can handle.” I blinked. “But...it would be interesting to find out.”

“We should figure out your limits before introducing another person to one of our sessions.”

“Sessions?”

“That’s what I call a sexual moment with my lovers.”

“If we...invited another man to one of these sessions, would he always come around—?”

“Absolutely not.” No humor flashed on Tristan’s face. “While I can share you once or maybe twice, I am not big on having another man or woman in *our* bed for too long.”

I blinked. “Another woman?”

“One topic at a time, Nova.”

But, a woman?

He smirked. “For now, just imagine yourself, with your legs spread wide open and countless men surrounding you.”

“O-kay.” I leaned forward. “Then...what would happen next?”

“One man slides his cock into your mouth.”

“Mmmm.”

“Next, I slide my cock into your pussy.”

I whimpered. “Oh yeah.”

“One man fucks your ass.”

I wanted to slip my hands along my breast, but forced myself to remain still.

“Two other men spill cum on your breasts as they rub their cocks against your nipples.”

I could already picture myself being passed around by all these men, taken roughly by each of them and used like a toy.

My heart raced with the thrilling idea.

But...could I actually do it?

My body tensed, unsure if I felt comfortable with so many nameless, strange men putting their cocks all over me. “I don’t know if I would be comfortable with so many men around. I might begin wondering about everyone’s sexual history.”

Tristan chuckled. “I have a place that I want to take you to.”

“O-kay.”

“At this place, we could make your fantasy happen.”

“And where is this?”

“Hmmm.” He tapped his finger against his leg. “I was hoping to wait until later to bring up this topic.”

“Why?”

“Because...a lot depends on your answer.”

“To what question?”

“Have you ever heard of a man named Blake Meade?”

“No.”

“He has made a name for himself by holding high-end erotic parties for the uber wealthy.”

I blinked. “Wow. No wonder I haven’t heard of him.”

“He is holding one in less than a month, and I have been looking for someone to go with me.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders. “And you want to take me?”

“I do.”

“It’s in Paradise City?”

“No.” He chuckled. “Budapest.”

“Hungary?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“And the party lasts for a week.”

I shrieked. “A week?”

He nodded.

“That’s a whole lot of...sexing and partying.”

“It is.”

“I have school.”

“You don’t.”

“I do.”

“This party could be a perfect subject for your studies.”

Of course it would, but the idea of just flying off with Tristan to another country to have sex for a week...it shoved me entirely off the edge of sanity.

Tristan continued, “Only the world’s elite are invited to Blake’s masquerade. The tickets for this event are high.”

“I can imagine.”

“Meade’s team requires all attending people to undergo STD tests before they can get final approval to have their names on the guest list.”

“That is seriously efficient.”

“And due to the name, everyone always wears a mask while they are on the property.”

I widened my eyes. “To hide identities?”

“Correct. Only Meade would know that the participants of a particular orgy involve a country’s prime minister, top celebrity actress, and whoever else.”

I couldn’t even imagine attending something so big and wicked. Surely, it would be a once in a lifetime experience.

A profound philosophical conflict arose within me. The allure of the experience was undeniable; the location, the promise of meeting influential people, and the sheer exclusivity of the event made it a *tantalizing* proposition. It seemed a chance to see a different world, to step into a realm of opulence and grandeur that I had only ever read about.

Additionally, that week would provide phenomenal data for my study of human sexuality.

Holy shit.

Yet, intertwined with the excitement was a gnawing uncertainty. I still didn’t know enough about Tristan to just jump on a plane and go out of the country with him.

However, the temptation of the unknown was both thrilling and dangerous.

I exhaled.

Tristan watched me. “You’re conflicted?”

“I am.”

Disappointment flickered in his eyes, but he quickly recovered. “Then, let’s return to the topic of inviting other men or not.”

“Okay.” I blushed.

“What if four men are in the bed room, and they are *not* touching you?”

My interest peeked. “I like this.”

“And they watch as I’m fucking you hard.”

My nipples grew stiff.

“I’m fucking you in your pussy, then pulling out, flipping you over, and slamming my cock into your ass.”

My bottom lip quivered with desire.

“And the men are watching you writhe and moan.”

Heat bloomed between my thighs.

I pictured this.

The four men all stood by the bed, watching as Tristan fucked me, enjoying how aroused I was from having my clit rubbed tenderly and my pussy pounded into.

And they all watched, rock hard and breathless, as I came all over Tristan’s cock.

“I...” Shuddering, I cleared my throat. “I would...be interested in that.”

“Hmmm.” His wicked smirk deepened. “Either way, back to the original statement. You just earned one point.”

“I did?”

“Yes...I would love to watch a man lick your pussy.” Lust blazed in his fire. “However, it may be more devilish for what I am thinking.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I want a man to lick your pussy, relishing in the taste. And then I force him to step back as I take you for myself, fucking you hard in that pussy he has just been licking. There, he is forced to watch you cum hard with me, knowing that he could never have you on his cock.”

“That *is* very devilish.”

He tilted his head to the side. “And what would the psychological basis of my actions be in this situation?”

“I don’t know.”

“But, your mind is working.”

“It is.”

“Then, tell me, Nova. What is wrong with me? Why do I want to put a man through that torture—waving your pretty pussy in front of him and then pleasuring you myself.”

“Well...I am not a licensed therapist, but...” I picked up one of the chocolate strawberries. “I would need to see you in action because it tip toes into so many different possibilities.”

“Such as?”

“You may have some voyeuristic tendencies where you get pleasure from watching your lover engage in intimate acts with someone else.”

“I *do* enjoy voyeurism.” Tristan bobbed his head. “But, do *you* enjoy being *watched*?”

I shivered in desire. “Yes. I think it would be hot.”

“What if I put cameras into your bedroom and bathroom in your apartment tonight?”

I blinked. “What?”

“How much would you let me watch you?”

I parted my lips, unsure of how to answer.

“Would you let me watch you shower every morning? Sit on your bed and study?” His voice deepened. “Would you let me watch you get dressed in the morning? Slipping those thin, soft panties over your pussy? Would you love it if I watched you masturbate at night?”

While he thought of those moments, I was focused on the less sexier times that he would end up capturing.

What would I do if he put a camera in my bathroom, and was able to hear and watch as I peed?

Horrified, I covered my face with both hands. “I couldn’t.”

“No?” He chuckled.

“No.” I dropped my hands.

“Then, let us return to your psycho-analyzing *me*.”

I laughed.

“What are the other possibilities of why I would enjoy a man badly yearning for you and then my fucking you in front of him? Do you think I am cruel for liking that?”

I shook my head. “You’re watching a man lick me...could be arousing yet, also play with the kink of sexual jealousy.”

“Interesting. Tell me more.”

“*Sexual jealousy* can be intense, motivating, and pretty arousing. Some researchers think that jealousy is also a part of what fuels sperm competition and gets a male ready to fight for the fertilization win.”

“Did you just say *sperm competition*?”

“Oh God. You don’t want me to go on about this?” I ate the chocolate strawberry.

“No. Please do.”

“I just don’t want to completely *nerd you out* on our second date.”

“Your mind makes my cock jump in my jeans. Every time you say something smart, I want to take it out and rub the tip all over your face.”

“Oh.” I opened my mouth in shock.

He leaned forward. “Sperm competition...”

“Oh my God.” I laughed. “Are we really going to talk about this? We have a game for me to win.”

“How about this?”

“What?”

“If you successfully get me to understand what the hell sperm competition is, then you earn another point.”

“Really?”

He picked up the bottle of champagne and filled his and my glass. “Give it all to me.”

“Alright. Sperm competition for the bonus point.”

He set the bottle down.

I picked up my newly filled glass. “First, you have to understand that this theory was based on the idea that, in many species, females mate with multiple males, leading to competition among sperm to fertilize the eggs.”

“When did this theory come around?”

“A British biologist named Geoff Parker came up with this in the early 1970s.”

“Leave it to the British to overexplain sperm.”

I laughed. “You are hilarious.”

Tristan raised one eyebrow. “*No one* has ever said that about me.”

“Well, it’s still true.” I took a sip of my champagne. “Okay. So, nowadays sperm competition theory offers a framework for understanding certain aspects of *human* male behavior.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes. Therefore, let’s look at *cuckolding*. This is a kink in which a person gets turned on by their partner having sex with someone else. Many believe that sperm competition theory plays a role in the desire to be *cucked*.”

“Why?”

“When a man watches his partner with another man, it prompts a biological response to happen in his body. The person getting cuckolded will have this immediate need to have much longer and more vigorous sex with his partner for many days later.”

He took a sip of his champagne. “Why would that happen?”

“So the guy getting cuckolded wants to fuck her even more basically because now...biologically, he must impregnate her

before the other man ever gets a chance.”

“What if he doesn’t want to have kids?”

“Not important, that primal drive to have sex with her more still is triggered. There’s this wild voice in his head screaming at him to *flood her* with sperm.”

“Very, very fucking interesting.”

“And.” I slowly twirled some of the champagne in the glass. “This urge often results in the cuck ejaculating *a lot*. In fact, the intensity of the orgasm rises and there’s just so much of it, spilling out all over the place.”

“What’s interesting is that I have often figured cuckolds enjoyed the kink due to *humiliation*.”

“Oh yes. For some it is in fact humiliation that turns them on.” I nodded. “But then, there are apparently levels to cuckolding. Humiliation and submission is one level.”

“And sperm competition is another level?”

“Yes, according to those who study it.”

“You enjoy studying things like this?”

“I love it. I’m always fascinated by everyone’s kinks and why they may need to fulfill these desires.”

“Yet, *you* do not go out there and explore your own kinks?”

“I think it was easier for me to... learn about all of this in a safe place by reading books on it in a library, instead of putting myself out there.” I gazed at the pretty dishes of food all over the blanket. “But...I have met you, and maybe I won’t hide in the library anymore. Perhaps, I will do more...participant studies.”

“Is that why you *truly* skipped the library today?”

I swallowed. “Maybe.”

“Are you nervous about embarking on this erotic adventure with me?”

“I’m...worried that...there will be a moment where something will be *too much* for me sexually.”

“There *will* be those moments.”

I stiffened.

“Perhaps, we should have a safe word.” Tristan shrugged. “We can come up with a term or phrase to communicate to each other that the moment must stop due to physical, emotional, or psychological discomfort.”

My nerves flared.

“I want you to feel safe, Nova, and always I will want *full consent*.”

Calm washed over me. “Then, what do you think our safeword should be?”

“It has to be something that will be easy for both of us to remember.”

“Alright.” A giddy feeling came over me. “You know what would be cool?”

“What?”

“It would be fun if the safeword related to art.”

He studied me in silence.

“What?”

“I have to be honest with you.”

“Okay.”

“I’m really enjoying our time together. I can’t remember the last time I felt this...connected to someone on just a second date.”

“I feel the same way, Tristan.”

“I think this adventure will be phenomenal.”

My cheeks flushed with warmth. “Me too.”

“Say yes to the masquerade party.”

My heart drummed in my chest.

And then he began to speak, looking quite uncomfortable as he spoke one word. "Please."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CONNECTION



NOVA

*W*hat was it about this weird party?

I paused, my throat tight with emotion.

I wanted to go, I really did.

In fact, a part of me longed to give in and experience something completely new and exciting.

But the idea of going to this party and being surrounded by strangers, all dressed in costumes and masks while participating in kinky activities scared me.

I had no idea what to expect, nor how to act.

And it would have been one thing if I knew Tristan for a long time, and he represented a solid anchor for me to hold onto while I navigated this unknown, but...I was still trying to figure out who he was.

I shook my head. "I'm not ready to answer that. Give me time to think about it."

"Time?"

“Yes, Tristan.” I shrugged. “You just told me about the party today. Give me a few days to consider it.”

“I would, but I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because the party is in less than a month, and I need a guest.”

My face twisted in confusion. “Okay. So, now I have to hurry up and figure this out?”

“Yes.”

“No, Tristan.” I chuckled. “That’s crazy.”

He didn’t return my humored expression. “Just say yes.”

“That’s not how I do things.”

He did not appear pleased. He furrowed his brows. “Why not?”

“Because a week-long party in Budapest is a huge trip and a lot of sex and—”

“What could I do to make you more comfortable?”

I parted my lips and tried to think. “A whole lot. Tristan, I still don’t know you.”

He had the nerve to scowl at me. “You’re in my home, sitting right in my studio. You know me more than most.”

“Tristan, it’s barely been three days of us interacting—”

“The amount of days shouldn’t matter.”

“They do when it means grabbing my passport, jumping on a plane, and going off with you to Hungary of all places.”

“You know me enough.”

“But...not really.” I shook my head. “Like...what about your family? Your parents?”

Tristan reared back as if I had slapped him.

O-kay...

This was clearly an emotionally charged topic.

His eyes grew dark.

Dread rushed through me.

I swallowed.

He stood abruptly and walked to the window, his hands clenching and unclenching as he stared out at the sky. His back was as still as stone, yet it radiated with an intensity that seemed to vibrate in the air around him.

My chest tightened.

Instantly, I felt like an interloper in his private world.

His voice was strained when he finally spoke. “I don’t discuss my childhood, family, too many...personal things...all of this stuff is off topic for me. You need to understand and respect that.”

I watched him closely for any more signs of emotion, but there were none. He was a fortress once again, his vulnerability hidden behind impenetrable walls.

A wave of guilt washed over me, and I realized I had ventured too far, pushed him too hard. I had touched a raw nerve, and the connection we’d been building felt suddenly fragile, ready to shatter at the slightest wrong move.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, my voice barely audible. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t,” he cut me off, his voice cold. “Just don’t. Forget about all of that. Let’s get back to the party.”

But...shouldn’t we discuss this more? It’s a clear boundary. What other boundaries do you have?

The whole date had drastically shifted off course.

Just like that he went from sensually hot to furiously cold.

My head spun with this new reality.

The silence that followed was a chasm between us, filled with unspoken words and emotions too complex to name. The distance felt insurmountable, and I wondered if we could ever

bridge it, or if I had irrevocably damaged something beautiful and fun.

Slowly, I rose, watching his rigid back.

A profound sense of loss settled over me.

I had wanted to know him, to understand him, but I had pushed too far, too fast.

And now, I feared, I had lost him.

But was that even fair to me?

Didn't I need to know more about him?

Was I being too damn rational or was this illogical?

Having no-strings attached fun with him in Paradise City was one thing.

I could do that with him. We could explore all the sex clubs and parties in this city all he wanted. If I didn't like something, I could always just grab an uber and head back home to my sacred space. There, Scarlett would be waiting to give me a hug and tell me I was fine.

Going off to Hungary to stay for a week when I had no idea who the hell he was...was another thing. Especially since he had just gone so cold within seconds.

What if he did this shit in Budapest?

We could be at the party enjoying ourselves and then I did what I usually did—delved too deep with some question—and now he would be off somewhere and I would be standing in the center of an orgy of strangers looking like an idiot. I would have to figure out a way to get a plane ticket back to Paradise City. It would be a hot mess.

No.

I could not put myself in a situation like that.

As the silent seconds stretched between us, I began to get angry.

What the fuck? I just asked about his parents, not what his social security number was. And...okay...I kind of knew it

would be a tough topic, but not one that would make him go as cold as ice.

Had I not shared my sorrow about my brother with him?

Couldn't he have just said leave it alone, but not completely put space between us?

Nova...have some empathy.

I placed my hands in my lap. "I'm sorry. I won't ask about your parents again."

Tristan remained steadfastly silent before releasing a heavy breath and then turning to me. This time his face wore an intensity that was both terrifying and captivating. "I want you to come with me to this party, but if you need to delve deeper into my mind, then we should end this here."

I trembled. "What?"

"I'm looking for someone to go to this party." His gaze bore straight through me as if he were daring me to challenge him. "That's it."

"I don't understand."

"The Masquerade."

"Yes. Yes." I shook my head. "The party, but what does that have to do with the grander scheme of things between us?"

"That's why I pursued you."

What the fuck? What the hell is he talking about?

I held out my hands. "So you asked me out on a date to simply see if I would go with you to some *fuck fest* across the world?"

The air between us crackled with emotion and unspoken desire. All my senses were alive and alert in response to the raw energy emanating from him.

"Nova, I told you that I wasn't looking for anything more than fun."

I pointed at him. “But you didn’t say that the goal of our fun was as shallow as a puddle in the summer sun.”

“Shallow?” He frowned. “Does it matter? Whatever we were going to do, it wasn’t going to mean anything anyway.”

My heart ached. “It didn’t have to mean something profound, but...there was still going to be *something*.”

“Something?”

“Some type of connection.”

He leaned his head to the side. “Is that what you think?”

“I don’t know what to think.” My voice shook. “You invite me into your home, share your art, your passion, but draw a line at your past? At the things that might actually help me understand you? And now you’re surprised that I feel like your goal for me to go to this party is superficial?”

A heavy silence descended in the room.

I felt like I was standing on the edge of a cliff, watching him contemplate whether or not to shove me off.

Finally, he broke the silence. “I didn’t bring you here to interrogate me. I brought you here because I thought we were on the same page.”

“I thought so too.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “But how can I be on the same page when I don’t even know what book we’re reading?”

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he sighed, running a hand through his hair.

And, his expression changed, hardening with a pain that couldn’t be disguised even though he tried so valiantly to keep it hidden from view.

His voice held no humor. “You should go.”

What?

Shock vibrated through my body.

I opened my mouth to protest, but no words came out.

He placed his hands into his pockets and put his back to me. “Charles will take you home.”

Are you serious? Just like that? No more date? No more... anything?

I wanted to plead with Tristan to let me stay, but I could see in his face that he had made up his mind.

He didn't want me there anymore and that was the end of it.

And as much as I enjoyed our time...I truly didn't have it in me to grovel.

Pressure filled my chest.

Stunned, I took a deep breath with my eyes fixed on his back. “Fine. I'll go.”

Did I really mess up that much? Or was it him?

Turning, I made my way to the door without looking back. It was the most uncomfortable walk of my life. So embarrassed, I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

But before I left, Tristan spoke. “Nova.”

There was a hint of desperation in his tone.

I hesitated with my hand resting on the doorknob.

Then, slowly I turned to face him.

My heart pounded with a mix of fear and hope.

He was still standing by the window, but now he was watching me.

And I yearned for him to say anything to keep me in this room.

Anything!

Couldn't we just...start over with the conversation?

Wasn't there more to our time together than that stupid masquerade party?

There, I remained by the door, yearning for an excuse to not leave.

“I’m sorry, Nova.” He sighed. “I wish it could have worked out, but...we truly are two different people...”

He trailed off, his eyes searching mine, as if trying to convey something he couldn’t put into words.

Damn.

While he wanted me to go to some masquerade in Budapest, he’d already had me participating within his own wicked masquerade right here.

Since the moment we met, he had never taken off his mask to show me who he really was, and never would he dare.

And while in this moment of vulnerability, I saw a little bit of the man he was beneath the mask—the tortured past and secret pain.

It wasn’t enough for me to forget my own value...it wasn’t enough for me to stay.

“I’m sorry too, Tristan.” I walked out the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE SILENT ABYSS



TRISTAN

Hours later, I paced back and forth.

A relentless path wore into the wooden floor of my studio.

My chest ached with every breath I took.

Ever since Nova left, I felt...disjointed.

A moment like that—my being displeased with a woman and having her leave—that had happened tons of times in my studio. It was nothing new.

However...this sense of emptiness was much different.

Women come and go. Get back to the art.

I stopped pacing and returned my attention to the canvas—untouched and pure white.

What will I paint today?

Instead of picking up my paintbrush, I glanced at the blank TV screen imbedded in the wall. Its dark surface seemed to be

a window into my soul, a reflection of all the emotion swirling within and trapping me in its depths.

Is she okay?

Charles told me the return trip was fine, but...

I could just check to make sure she is fine.

The urge to turn on the screen gnawed at me.

No. Dominic's men are monitoring her. I don't need to watch her anymore.

I placed my hand on my chest.

Why is my heart pounding?

Like a mad man, I returned to pacing, but this time I clenched my fists.

Tension thickened in my shoulders.

Okay. What am I going to create today?

I scratched my head.

It could be concepts for the next collection.

I went back to the canvas.

What do I want to say to the world?

Still unsure, I turned my gaze to the paints lying next to the canvas. They called to me—a melody only I could hear—yet I couldn't bring myself to reach for them.

Any other time, there was a dance—a ballet—between my brush, the canvas, and the vibrant hues that spilled from my soul.

But tonight that dance had withered.

I scanned the space, unsure of where I was anymore.

My studio—once a sanctuary of creation—had somehow shifted into a barren abyss, filled with relics of my former self.

I looked at the paint again.

Their colors were still vivid but no longer speaking to me. They were like half-remembered verses from a love poem, and

I was at a loss for words. The red was a passion gone cold, the blue a longing unfulfilled, the yellow a sunshine I couldn't feel.

The smell of turpentine filled the room. It had been a euphoric perfume that used to intoxicate me with inspiration.

Now, it only served to remind me of what was lost.

My hands, once sure and deft, now hung limply at my sides, paralyzed by the void within.

Okay. That's enough. Come on. Paint something anything. A car. A fucking flower. Anything!

I picked up a brush and ran my fingers along its bristles. It was like holding the hand of a lost lover, but the warmth was gone, the spark extinguished.

I could...paint. . the sky.

I dipped the brush into cerulean blue and watched the pigment cling to the bristles.

I couldn't even bring the brush over to the canvas. Even the image of a sky had shifted to a foggy, elusive dream.

And, there the canvas remained...untouched and pure white...mocking me.

What the fuck?!

I set the brush back down.

You have got to be kidding me. I do not have fucking artist's block.

My mind went blank.

Goddamn it.

Unsure of what else to do, I returned to my restless pacing.

Alright. Let's figure this out.

My mind spun into a whirlpool of questions and confusion.

Meanwhile, that damn blank TV screen taunted me.

It's one stubborn woman. Just forget about her.

But, I couldn't.

Nova had done something to me in our brief time together that I could not explain.

My throat went dry.

What was it? Why is she different than the rest?

A million questions filled my mind, but no answers came back.

Once again, I stopped pacing and directed my view to the TV screen.

What is she doing right now? No. Stop it.

With a heavy sigh, I looked away from the dark screen and returned my gaze to the white canvas.

Get back to the art. That has never let you down. But...

There I stood in haunting silence, lost and adrift, on the edge of understanding yet miles away from the truth.

I'll just...paint...and not think of anything. The brush will make the final decision.

I couldn't think of a better idea.

Yes. That's what I will do.

I nodded and picked up a new brush.

Honestly, all I have to do is just touch the canvas. That's the problem. Something will come.

My heart thundered with sudden inspiration.

Alright. What color will I begin with?

The tight knot in my chest loosened, replaced by a rush of excitement.

There we go, Tristan. You are returning.

I chuckled to myself.

No woman could ever take my passion for art away. No matter how pretty.

Grinning, I dipped my brush in brown, coating the bristles with that rich, earthy hue.

Ah yes. I feel the inspiration. Something is coming. It's right there.

Letting out an exasperated breath, I began with bold, sweeping strokes of brown onto the canvas. The contact was electrifying.

Alright. Let's dance, my love. What shall we create today?

Instantly, I felt alive with purpose.

An unseen force guided my hand.

Yes. Yes.

The brown flowed, swirling and dancing under my touch, forming shapes and shadows. It was a whirlwind of creativity, a storm of emotion, and I was lost in it, consumed by the sheer joy of creation.

Fuck yes.

As the minutes passed, I dipped my brush in other shades of brown, going crazy on the canvas. A shape began to emerge, contour and lines converging into a face.

Okay. Good.

I added more brown, mixing it with a touch of red and a hint of gold.

Alright. Finally.

Slowly, I brought the features to life.

My heart raced while my hands were guided by a passion I hadn't felt all evening.

The face was becoming real, tangible, a living entity on the canvas.

I began working on the eyes, and that was when something shifted in my chest.

No. Don't stop. Push the doubt away.

But as I continued working on the eyes, a chill slipped down my spine.

No. No.

I leaned back, my brush suspended in mid-air, my eyes widening with dawning realization.

Nova?

The face I was painting, the eyes that were staring back at me, it was her gaze, her expression, her fucking essence, captured in the brown hues that had spilled from my soul.

Goddamn it!!!

Horror washed over me.

How did I paint her and not realize it? What is going on in my fucking head?

I stumbled back.

The brush fell from my trembling fingers and clattered to the floor.

The room spun.

The initial joy of creation was now replaced by a gaping void of shock and disbelief.

I stood there, frozen, staring at the half-finished portrait, the face of Nova looking back at me.

A silent accusation.

A haunting reminder.

How did I do that?

The questions swirled, but the answers were elusive, hidden in the shadows of my own mind.

I couldn't paint anymore and I damned sure couldn't look at the canvas.

I just need...a break. That's it.

I left the studio. To remain in there would be to force my mind to grapple with whatever Nova had done to me.

I'll try again tomorrow.

The door clicked shut behind me, leaving behind the unfinished portrait and the unspoken words.

I can't believe that.

Outside my studio, the staff moved around doing their usual tasks, each one absorbed in their particular role.

I walked by the large kitchen. The sharp clatter of pots and pans echoed as Chef Pierre barked out orders to his sous-chefs.

In the living room, maids dusted. The soft swish of their cloths was barely audible. Every surface gleamed.

What the fuck will I do now?

My footsteps echoed on the marble floors as I stopped by the floor-to-ceiling windows.

The city stretched before me.

Its lights twinkled like distant stars.

Just fucking admit it. Only you can hear this.

I gritted my teeth.

Nova has changed something within me.

But, what was it? What did she do, and how could I get myself back?!

Suddenly, a distant murmur reached my ears.

The faint sounds of voices sounded further away.

What is going on?

I went off in that direction, recognizing both voices immediately.

Agony rode Dominic's words. "Y-you tell him. I-I can't... do you hear me, Spencer? I can't watch Tristan...break."

"Sir, I should have you sit down." Spencer's voice was calm and steady. "I will get you some water—"

"I-I don't want water. I want answers. I-I want t-to scream at God!"

What's wrong?

I picked up my pace.

My stomach twisted.

“Y-you tell him, Spencer.” Dominic pleaded. “I can’t. Do you hear me?”

I turned the corner, and my breath caught in my throat.

Dominic stood in the entryway. Ash and dirt covered his clothes. His face was pale and stricken. He looked as though he had just climbed out of a fireplace.

Shock hit me.

My butler was at his side, apparently trying to calm him down.

I rushed forward. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

Dominic turned to me. Tears spilled from his eyes. “Tristan...”

“What?”

“Peiter is dead.”

The words hit me like a physical blow, a crushing weight that almost brought me to my knees.

I stopped moving forward and froze right there.

Dominic doubled over and cried. “I t-ried to get him...out of the fire b-but...too much smoke. Too many flames...”

Dead? Peiter? No. That is impossible.

I stared at Dominic.

My mind refused to comprehend the reality of his words.

Dominic sobbed, and the room spun around me.

And still I barely stood...unable to move.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE BLUES & CLUES



NOVA

Melancholy crept over me like a thick, oppressive fog, refusing to lift as Sunday dragged on.

Tristan's face, the way he looked at me with those penetrating eyes that seemed to see straight through to my soul, only intensified the unbearable weight of sadness crushing my chest.

I desperately tried to shake it off, but it clung to me like a parasite, sucking away all my joy until I was left with nothing but the hollow hurt of emptiness.

Not even my cat, Freud could lift my mood as he cuddled on my lap.

For that day, the world lost its color, as if everything were covered in a grey veil.

Additionally, I found myself unable to muster any enthusiasm for even the simplest of things.

My research suffered.

In fact, I spent a large part of the time sitting by Scarlett in my pajamas and eating ice cream.

Once Paradise City news announced the second incident of a woman being set on fire, Scarlett shifted into amateur sleuth mode.

How could she not? Now two women had been murdered, their bodies found burned in a horrifying ritual that sent chills down my spine.

She jotted down details and replayed the news report over and over to the point where I had a lot of the information memorized.

Our living room had been transformed into her personal investigation headquarters.

Gruesome pictures plastered the walls, crime scene photos so explicit they would make most people's blood run cold. And she never told me where she got the images, just that she had met some new person that could hack into the police station. For some reason, she chose not to elaborate.

Regardless, maps of Paradise City marked with the locations of the murders, were spread across the tables, and notes, clippings, and articles were pinned everywhere.

I found myself drawn into her world of murder, fascinated and horrified in equal measure. The images and stories were disturbing, yet they offered an escape from my own emotional turmoil. In the face of such violence and darkness, my problems with Tristan seemed insignificant.

The second victim was a Caucasian housewife which triggered the FBI to rush down to work on the case. This fact brought up a lot of Civic Leaders of color throwing rallies to make sure the first victim would not be forgotten.

This poor woman had been set on fire in the middle of a playground, her body discovered late at night by a passerby who initially mistook the fire for some sort of macabre art installation.

The grisly scene was described with a trembling voice by the news anchor.

Apparently, her husband claimed that she had been missing for three days, but it was odd that he never notified the police that she was missing. This discrepancy didn't escape Scarlett's notice. Her pen paused mid-sentence, and she looked at me, her eyes wide and filled with suspicion. "Don't you find that strange?"

"What?"

"Three days, and her husband never called the police? And now this? What kind of husband doesn't report his wife missing?"

"What if they always have huge arguments and she tends to go off without saying where she was. Of course, I'm reaching."

"They have kids. He would have still wanted to know when she was coming back to help out or something."

The whole situation was terrifying, and this new twist only deepened the mystery.

Scarlett went crazy filling her notebook with observations, hypotheses, and countless questions.

Look at her. Detective Bestie.

Scarlett's determination was contagious, and I couldn't help but become a part of her quest for the truth. Her investigation became my distraction, a way to channel my sadness into something tangible, something that demanded focus and attention.

The connection between the two victims was elusive, and the contrast between them only added to the confusion.

The first victim, Takisha James, was a black prostitute who had run away from home 10 years ago.

Therefore, she had spent most of her life on the streets, drifting from place to place, her family connections severed, her life marked by hardship and despair. She had been known

to the local police, her face familiar in certain circles, but few had really known her.

Which was probably why her death had been treated with a grim inevitability, a tragic but not entirely unexpected end to a difficult life.

Scarlett shook her head. “Takisha deserved better.”

The second victim’s life was a stark contrast to the first. Renee Byrd had been active with her church, devoted to her community, and was the mother of three kids. Her days were filled with family gatherings, school functions, and charity work.

Her husband, despite the suspicious delay in reporting her missing, was known as a loving partner.

Scarlett continued to mutter to herself, piecing together the information.

Renee had no known enemies, no debts, no apparent reason to be targeted in such a brutal way. Her life had been ordinary, perhaps even mundane, filled with PTA meetings, Sunday church services, and neighborhood gatherings.

“Why her? And why the playground?” Scarlett mused, her fingers drumming on her notebook.

I swallowed down ice cream. “What do you think the connection is, Scarlett?”

She looked up from her notes. “There has to be something that links these two women. Something that explains why they were targeted.”

We spent the rest of the night poring over the details, Scarlett’s mind whirring like a machine as she dissected every piece of information.

But it was the husband’s behavior that continued to nag at Scarlett.

I could only watch and marvel at her determination, knowing that she wouldn’t rest until she had found the truth, no matter where it led.

By the evening, I shifted my junk food gorging to chips and guacamole, and joined Scarlett in her internet search on the victims' lives.

The FBI's involvement had brought new urgency, but it had also opened up new avenues of investigation.

That evening, Scarlett reached out to contacts, dug through social media, and even planned to visit the places where both women had been seen in their last days.

While Takisha's life was a maze of dead ends on social media, Renee's life was an open book all over Facebook and Instagram. She even had a cooking tik tok channel where she recorded herself making different meals.

Hours passed with us going over all of Renee's social media posts.

But in the end, Scarlett wasn't exactly Sherlock and I definitely was not Watson.

Nothing really came up.

Therefore, Scarlett shifted her research to past serial killers that used fire in their murders, and I tried to help but... eventually I fell deep into sleep on the couch.

There, I dreamed of Tristan.

We strolled into a grand ballroom, adorned with glittering chandeliers and lush velvet drapes.

We both wore masks.

Mine boasted feathers and sparkling gems.

Pearls decorated Tristan's elegant gold mask.

Though our faces were concealed, our eyes met with an intense connection.

Tristan took my hand and led me onto the dance floor. We moved as one, our bodies swaying to the music, lost in each other.

Soon, the other dancers faded away, and it was just him and me, locked in a dance that was both passionate and tender.

His lips were close to my ear, whispering sweet nothings that made my heart flutter and my cheeks flush with warmth.

Then, something slammed and woke me up.

My heart pounded.

I jumped, blinking my eyes through the confusion.

The dream slipped away like sand spilling through my fingers.

“Nova. Nova.” Scarlett shook my arm. “I think I got it.”

“What the hell?!” I yawned and shoved her away. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“The church.”

I rubbed my eyes and realized that sunlight was now filling the space.

Is it Monday morning already? Fuck. I have a lecture.

Scarlett snapped her fingers in front of me. “It’s the church.”

I looked back at her. “What?”

“The second victim, Renee was active in her church, and the first victim...” Scarlett showed me an image on her phone and then zoomed in. “Takisha is right here waiting in line at the church’s soup kitchen.”

I widened my eyes. “Fuck. That’s her.”

“It is.”

I yawned again. “Do you think the cops or FBI know?”

“I have no idea. I called my little contact, Detective Armstrong. Remember last semester when he let me shadow him for a month?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m meeting him for lunch.”

“Good.” I took in her red eyes and exhausted face. “You should get some sleep before you go.”

“I can’t even close my eyes without thinking of Takisha and Renee.”

“Scarlett, you have to get some rest—”

“They didn’t get any rest—”

“How are you going to help find the murderer if all your energy is depleted?”

She let out an exasperated breath.

I pointed to her bedroom. “Go to sleep. Now, missy.”

“Alright. Alright.” She dragged herself up. “But, you have to admit, the church is a tenuous link, but it is something.”

Slowly nodding, I began gathering up my discarded carton of ice cream, candy wrappers, empty bag of chips, and other trash. “It’s a whole lot of something.”

“This might explain why these two women, so different in their lives and backgrounds, had met the same horrific fate.”

“It could.” I rushed the items into the kitchen to throw them away.

Instead of heading to bed, Scarlett followed me. “The killer targeted these women for a reason, and we are only just beginning to understand why. The pieces are starting to come together, but the picture is still dark and troubling. Somewhere this guy is watching and waiting for his next victim. Will he stick with the church? If yes, then that was the location of some trauma that he experienced—”

“Scarlett.” I dropped the stuff in the trash and scowled at her.

She blinked. “Yes?”

“Go to sleep.” I checked my watch. “Shit. I’m glad you woke me up. I have to get to Hartman’s lecture.”

“Oh.” Scarlett gave me a sad smile. “Are you going to tell her all about your adventures with Tristan?”

“No way.”

“She was the one that started the whole thing. She made you go to the art showing.”

“Still, the whole situation is embarrassing. If we even talk, I’ll just tell her that I went and that’s that.”

Scarlett frowned. “It still sucks that things didn’t work out between you and him.”

I shrugged. “I’ll be fine.”

“I know you will, but...just understand that it is cool to talk to me when you feel down.”

“Of course.”

“Yesterday, I got so obsessed with the murders I forgot to have a whole *Fuck Tristan* fest with you.”

“The murders are more important, but let’s schedule a *Fuck Tristan* fest for dinner.”

“I’m down. We can print out pictures of him and throw darts at them. Oh and by the way,” She gestured to the counter covered with brand new bottles of paper spray, four tasers, Swiss army knives, folded batons, and two GPS trackers. “Don’t forget your *don’t-fuck-with-me* kit.”

“I won’t.”

“There’s a murderer out there. If someone crazy comes up to you, spray first and then ask questions later, preferably with the police near.”

“Got it.”

“You better.” Scarlett headed away. “Also, tell, Dr. Hartman hi.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

NOTES AND NUMBERS



An hour later, I settled into my seat in the massive lecture hall. The cold hardness of the chair seeped through my clothing.

Good. I'm not late. That was close.

The high-domed ceiling made the room feel like a giant cave.

Rows of wooden seats, filled with eager students, descended in neat lines toward the grand podium at the front.

The walls were adorned with plaques and portraits.

All around me, other students talked about the murders.

Leave it to Psych majors to get excited about death.

I grabbed my notebook and opened it, not feeling like pulling my laptop out.

However, my pen was poised to take tons of notes.

I knew that this was going to be a lecture unlike any other. My mentor, Dr. Hartman had a way of bringing her subjects to life and making them relevant and real. While this lecture wasn't something I was enrolled in, she always recommended that I attend them with the hopes of sparking new pathways for research.

Okay. Wake up. Time to learn shit.

As I scribbled down the date and the title of the lecture, my eyes caught a glimpse of a cute guy hurrying in.

Hmmm.

He had tousled brown hair, full lips, and a casual, confident stride.

Nope. Look somewhere else.

To my shock, he entered my aisle, strode my way, and sat right next to me.

Fuck. Come on! All these other empty chairs available, and you put yourself right next to me?

Our eyes met for a brief second, and I felt a jolt of surprise.

His blue eyes were warm, curious.

My cheeks heated up.

Quickly, I turned away.

Part of me wanted to check him out further, but after Tristan...I needed a few weeks without the presence of another guy.

The pain and confusion were still too fresh, too raw.

Back to work, Nova.

I still had the issue of my mother cutting my funds. It was a looming problem that had been haunting me for days. Now it was time to figure out a proper solution and release myself from her puppet strings. I couldn't allow her to control my life anymore.

Soon, the room went quiet as Dr. Hartman stepped onto the stage.

She was a striking figure with dark brown skin and a short gray afro. As usual, she wore a bright yellow pant suit.

Smiling, she walked up to the podium.

A screen lit up behind her.

I was momentarily distracted by the images that appeared on it.

Four little kids played in a park while dark shadows hovered over them.

Dr. Hartman's eyes swept over us. "Good morning, everyone. I know how thrilled you all must be to be here with me so *early* in the morning. I can practically feel the excitement bubbling over!"

Laughter rippled through the room.

I grinned.

She picked up a small remote.

The screen switched to a crying little girl holding a teddy bear.

Dr. Hartman spoke, "Childhood trauma can create deep-rooted fears, trust issues, and difficulties in forming secure attachments."

I began to jot down notes.

She scanned the audience. "Therefore, adults who have suffered abuse or neglect as children might struggle to form intimate relationships, maintain friendships, and trust others."

I held in a sigh, feeling like this lecture would be too close to what I had experienced with Tristan.

I swallowed and continued to listen.

"The inability to develop healthy, supportive connections with others can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, creating a cycle that's difficult to break without therapeutic intervention."

The guy next to me caught my attention as he tapped his pencil against his desk as if auditioning for a band.

When he realized I was watching him, he widened his eyes and stopped.

I returned to Dr. Hartman.

“Fostering healthy relationships can significantly improve the adult’s lifestyle and well-being.”

Although completely intrigued with the lecture, I couldn’t help but notice that the guy kept glancing my way. Subtle, quick looks, as though he were trying to figure something out.

When I noticed him do it again, I turned his way.

Our eyes met.

He cleared his throat and looked away.

I returned my focus to the lecture, yet a strange warmth spread across my cheeks.

Don’t even think about it. You’re still reeling from Tristan.

Professor Hartman continued to elaborate on the long-term effects of neglect, her voice a mixture of empathy and scientific curiosity.

Images on the screen depicted diagrams and graphs, visual aids to understanding the complexities of human behavior.

The lecture wore on, and I took diligent notes, trying to keep my mind focused on the subject at hand.

Yet, the guy next to me kept grabbing my attention as he checked me out some more.

Would you stop that? I am focused this week, and not looking to talk to anyone.

Professor Hartman’s voice continued to fill the lecture hall, her words weaving a complex narrative about the psychological impact of childhood experiences. But as she delved into the intricacies of mental health and resilience, I became aware of a slight movement from the cute guy again.

I turned my head subtly, curiosity piqued once more, to find him scribbling something on the corner of his notebook.

What is he doing?

His eyes were narrowed in concentration, his lips pressed together as he worked on his little project.

This dude is bugging.

Unable to resist, I leaned closer to see what he was drawing. It was a cartoonish depiction of Dr. Hartman, holding a giant magnifying glass and examining a tiny, confused-looking stick figure labeled “Adulthood.”

I chuckled.

He glanced my way and grinned.

I shook my head.

He shrugged.

Okay, Nova. That is quite enough.

I directed my attention back on Dr. Hartman.

Shit. You're missing stuff.

Her words now touched on the importance of compassion in therapeutic interventions. “Understanding the underlying fears and insecurities that stem from childhood trauma requires not just professional insight but also human empathy.”

I jotted that down.

“Therapists must approach their clients with compassion, recognizing the child that *still* exists within the adult.”

I found myself nodding.

The lecture shifted to Dr. Hartman guiding us through various theories and treatments, but unfortunately my thoughts kept drifting back to the cute guy next to me.

Who was he?

Why was he in this lecture?

Was his interest in psychology as genuine as mine, or was he just here for some other reason?

On the screen, the graphs shifted back to the images of children. Their faces were etched with innocence and pain.

Dr. Hartman's voice went gentle. "We've spent this morning discussing the countless complexities of childhood trauma. We've looked at how it shapes minds, how it influences behaviors, how it casts long, haunting shadows that can follow a person throughout their life."

She paused, letting the weight of her words sink in. "But now I want to challenge *you*. I want you to think about your own perspectives. What are your beliefs about trauma? What do you think can be done to heal these deep wounds? And most importantly, how can you, as individuals and as part of a greater society, contribute to this healing process?"

The room remained silent.

Instantly, I felt a stir of emotion, a realization that her words were not just academic but personal, some call to action that reached beyond the confines of the lecture hall.

"You see, we cannot merely study these issues from a safe distance." Dr. Hartman's eyes twinkled with a knowing wisdom. "We must *engage* with them, *feel* them, *understand* them from the inside out. Only then can we truly make a difference in this world."

My heart warmed.

I made several notes and spotted the cute guy doing the same.

"I'll leave you with this thought." Dr. Hartman raised one finger. "Childhood trauma is not just a subject to be studied. It's a reality to be confronted. And each one of you have the power to contribute to the healing, to be a beacon of hope and understanding. Think about it, reflect on it, and let it inspire you to action."

With that, she stepped away from the podium. The screen behind her faded to black, while the faces of the children disappeared but could not be forgotten.

The room erupted in applause, but I sat still as her words echoed in my mind.

It was like she had reached deep into my soul, and I felt a renewed sense of purpose, a determination to make a

difference.

The room filled with the rustle of notebooks closing and bags being zipped.

I slowly began gathering my things, still somewhat lost in thought about the material.

As I stood up, the cute guy turned to me, his blue eyes bright with interest. “Hey.”

My breath caught in my throat.

His voice was mellow and friendly. “I couldn’t help but notice you seem really into the subject.”

“I am.”

He nodded. “Would you maybe want to...grab a coffee sometime and discuss it further?”

I hesitated.

A flicker of uncertainty crossed my face.

Tristan’s face flashed in my mind.

I had just finished dating him, and although small, the wounds were fresh.

Was I ready to take a chance with someone new?

The guy seemed to sense my hesitation and grinned, leaning closer as though to share a secret. “Don’t worry, I promise not to draw any more cartoons.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“My name is Hayden.” He straightened his shirt as if it were wrinkled. “I’m a pretty cool dude, so you really don’t want to pass this invitation up.”

“No?”

“Not at all.” Hayden shook his head. “Additionally, I’m something of a coffee connoisseur so...it will be the best cup of coffee in Paradise City.”

“Wow.”

“Impressive. Right?”

“Very.”

He handed me his phone. “Here you go. This is for your ease.”

I smirked as I held it. “And what do you want me to do with this?”

“Put your number in it.” He nodded at the phone. “This way we can guarantee that you do not miss out on this *very* important conversation over an amazing cup of coffee.”

Hmmm.

I stared at it.

Hayden’s humor—his easygoing manner—it all made the idea of spending time with him appealing.

It wasn’t like Tristan and I had engaged in a long dating spree. It had only been a few days, although...he had blown my mind.

In the end, I had to stop thinking about Tristan, and move on with my life.

I let out a long breath.

Hayden grinned. “Don’t worry. Take your time. I’m willing to stay here as long as necessary, until you put your number into my phone.”

Scarlett would say fuck yes, so...go for it.

I went to his contacts and began typing in my name, aware of his watchful eyes. The keys felt cool under my fingertips, each press a small affirmation of my decision, a choice to be open, to take a chance on someone new.

However, Scarlett is going to have so many jokes about this.

“So,” Hayden said as I began putting my number in, “what made you change your mind? Was it my irresistible charm or my stunning good looks?”

I laughed. “A little bit of both.”

“Fantastic.”

I finished and handed him back his phone. “But mostly, I think it was your drawing skills.”

“Oh.” He leaned his head to the side. “So, you like artists?”

I blinked, shoved off guard with that question. “Umm... yeah.”

“Then, I will work on this newfound talent.” Hayden checked out his screen. “Nova. That is a beautiful name.”

“Thank you.”

He put the phone in his pocket. “I’m looking forward to getting to know you better, Nova.”

Warmth spread through me. “Me too.”

“I will call you later.” Hayden grabbed his stuff.

“Awesome. I can’t wait.”

“You won’t need to wait for too long, Nova.” Hayden walked away.

Alright. Two guys in one month. This has to be some sort of record.

I blushed, gathered up my items, and headed off, only to be crushed by the sight in front of me.

What?

I froze.

There, standing in the doorway, was Tristan, and his gaze was fixed on Hayden.

Rage blazed in his eyes.

Shit.

I hurried with putting my notebook in my bag, glancing up every few seconds.

Hayden walked past Tristan with his eyes down.

Meanwhile, Tristan’s body language was threatening as though he was close to knocking Hayden out.

What the hell?!

Thankfully, Hayden never noticed and left the lecture room.

Then, Tristan directed his gaze to me, practically shooting daggers my way.

A lump formed in my throat.

What are you doing here?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CONFESSIONS



NOVA

Stunned, I strode towards Tristan.

My heart pounded in my chest, and my mind raced. A mixture of surprise, confusion, and an undercurrent of anger swirled inside my body.

No where on today's bingo card did I have Tristan showing up at the end of Dr. Hartman's lecture.

How the hell did he even know I was in this building? This room? What is going on?

Once I got to Tristan, my voice betrayed my surprise. "What are you doing here?"

His eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. "Who is he?"

"What?"

His voice held a dangerous edge and his eyes never left mine. "The guy you were talking to."

I steadied myself. "That's none of your concern."

“What did you put in his phone?”

I quirked my brows. “Are you serious right now?”

“Very serious.”

I held out my hands. “Tristan, what are you doing here?”

His gaze grew dark and intense. “Will he be your new *study* partner?”

I frowned.

“You gave him your number.”

My voice wavered. “Again, none of your concern.”

Tristan closed the distance between us.

I stumbled back.

And, he came closer, forcing me to press against the wall behind me.

More students hurried by, surely wondering what the hell was going on.

Meanwhile, his presence—so damn close—made my body heat. His voice dropped to a husky whisper. “Maybe it’s not my concern, but I can’t help but feel a pang of jealousy.”

“There’s nothing for you to be jealous about—”

“I didn’t like the way you looked at him—”

“I didn’t like the way you kicked me out of your condo—”

“That was a mistake. A huge fuck up. One that I’m hoping to remedy today in any way possible.”

I parted my lips.

He leaned in.

My breath quickened.

Heat radiated off his body.

My heart fluttered inside my chest.

I wanted him to kiss me so badly, but at the same time, a part of me resisted.

I cleared my throat. “So...you’re here to apologize?”

“And take you out to lunch.”

I blinked.

The intensity in his eyes made it hard for me to look away.

The remaining students left, their voices fading into the distance.

“Last time we spoke...I was rude. Dismissive of your feelings and...just...an asshole.” He frowned. “I’m sorry, Nova.”

My bottom lip quivered.

“I was out of line. Probably because...I was...uncomfortable...” He sighed. “But, you have been on my mind since you left my studio.”

My heart raced even more.

He reached out and touched my face. An instant electric current surged through me. His thumb stroked the softness of my cheek. “I know I don’t have a right to ask for anything...but can you give me one more chance?”

I bit my lower lip.

He leaned in closer, his breath warm on my skin. His lips were just a whisper away when I spoke up again. “Just one more chance?”

I could feel the heat of his body, the warmth of his breath, the weight of his gaze. Everything about him drew me in, tempting me, calling to me.

But there was also fear, doubt, the lingering pain of his previous rejection.

I looked into his eyes, searching for answers, for reassurance. What I saw was raw honesty, vulnerability, a man struggling with his own feelings, his own mistakes.

I took a deep breath, steadying myself and gathering my thoughts.

No. No. Don't do it.

Somehow, I slipped out of his touch and went to the side, putting distance between us.

He followed me with his gaze.

I shook my head. “I don’t think it would be a good idea.”

He adjusted his position in front of me as if planning to block my way out of there. “Why not?”

“It would be a waste of time—”

“How?”

“I don’t want to waste my time or my emotions on something that’s just going to be fleeting.”

“Who says this would be fleeting—”

“You don’t want anything, but sex and to go to a party—”

“Honestly, I don’t know what I want.”

I widened my eyes.

“I just know that I want to spend as much time with *you* as possible.”

“Why?”

“Because I enjoy you, Nova. Because you are deep within my mind, embedded within my soul. Because when I pick up my paintbrush, your face appears on the canvas.”

I shivered.

“Because I doubt I will be okay if I don’t spend time with you this week. Because...I desperately need you.”

I tried to push away the emotions rising within me. “You... don’t need me.”

“I do.” His eyes watered. “Now more than ever.”

“Why?”

“I just lost a dear friend.”

“Oh my God.” I stepped close to him. “I’m sorry.”

“I will be okay. I just need time.”

“I really am sorry.” I got on my toes and wrapped my arms around him.

Sighing, he buried his face in my shoulder. His body trembled as he let out another deep sigh of anguish.

We stayed like that for a few minutes.

And the moment between us shifted, becoming something else. Something more than just words and understanding.

When he finally pulled away, he ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know what I’ll do without him.”

I let Tristan go and touched my chest. “If you need anything, I want you to let me know.”

“You already know what I need.”

“Tristan...”

“Come to lunch with me.”

I frowned.

“Yes. I know.” He shrugged. “I’m now playing the *sympathy* card.”

“So...I will be there for you, but...like for if you need a shoulder to cry on or someone to talk to.”

He licked his lips. “I’ll need more than that, Nova.”

“That’s not happening.”

He leaned his head to the side. “Did you think about me?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“What did you think about?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does.”

My voice was barely a whisper. “I’ve been thinking about our first date.”

Hope filled his eyes. “Yeah?”

“Yes. However, that *doesn’t* change anything for me.” I took a step back. My legs were unsteady. I needed to put some

distance between us, to regain my composure.

But Tristan was not so easily deterred. He reached out and grabbed my arm, stopping me in my tracks. His touch sent a shockwave through me. “Let me take you somewhere for lunch.”

“I made a sandwich.” I gestured to my bag.

His expression shifted to skeptical. “Show me the sandwich.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Show it to me.”

I frowned. “Fine. I didn’t make one.”

“You’re bad at lying.”

“I’m not trying to be good at it.”

“Let’s go to lunch together. I know for a fact that you want to go with me.”

I gritted my teeth.

“Say yes, Nova.”

I let out a long breath. “Okay.”

He watched me.

“However...”

He raised his eyebrows.

“Due to us having very different views about dating and relationships, it would *only* be lunch. Eating food. Talking. Nothing more.”

A devilish smirk spread across his face. “Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“No, Nova.” His hand cupped my chin and he tilted my head up as if he were about to kiss me. “This will be *much* more than lunch.”

“Tristan—”

He closed the distance between us until our lips were just a breath apart. His mouth hovered above mine. “Say my name again.”

I shivered.

“Say it.”

“Tristan.”

“Mmm.” He captured my lips, and my body sizzled with sparks of pleasure.

I tried my best, but I couldn’t stop myself from melting into him.

Our tongues danced together.

He tasted like honey and his lips were incredibly soft.

Groaning, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me closer. His hands roamed my body, sending more shockwaves of pleasure through every nerve ending.

The intensity of the kiss felt like a force of nature, too unstoppable to deny. I gasped for breath and he deepened the kiss even further, as if it were necessary for us both to survive.

When we finally came up for air, I could feel myself trembling from head to toe.

He rested his forehead against mine and our breathing slowed down until it matched each other’s rhythm. “Never have I missed anyone...like I missed you.”

My chest rose and fell.

Slowly, he stepped back. “I can’t predict the future, Nova. I don’t know where this is going. But *today*, right now, I want to be with you. I *need* to be with you, and...”

I stood there speechless.

“I won’t take no for an answer.” With that, he offered his arm. “So, come on. Let’s go. Now.”

Fuck.

Although in an absolute daze, I hooked my arm around his. “Tristan.”

“Yes?”

“This is *just* lunch.”

He pursed his lips and led me away.

Together, we left the lecture hall.

What the hell am I doing?

I knew it was probably not the best path to be walking on, but I could not stop.

After those words and that kiss, I desperately wanted to be with him today.

No. No. I won't let him back into my life that easy. We'll just...eat and...I'll be there for him due to this loss of his friends. But...that's it.

Tristan was becoming an addiction. Something about the way he spoke, the way he looked at me, the way he touched me, was triggering all sorts of chemical reactions within my body.

Every time he was near, I felt my heart race, my skin tingle, my stomach flutter.

It was as if he had tapped into something primal within my heart, something deep, powerful, and overwhelming.

And yet, I also knew that this addiction was dangerous.

It was thrilling and intoxicating, but it was also consuming and destructive.

I had already been burned once, already felt the pain of his rejection and the sting of his impatience.

Was I really willing to risk that again?

Was I really ready to put myself out there?

I looked up at Tristan as we walked down the hallway. His face focused and serious. I could see the determination in his eyes.

But was I ready for whatever he had in store?

Was I prepared to take that leap, to jump into the unknown, to embrace this wild, passionate, and chaotic situation again?

Was I strong enough to face my fears, to overcome my doubts, to trust my instincts?

I didn't know.

I *honestly* didn't know.

All I knew was that Tristan was calling to me, pulling me in, taking over my thoughts.

My emotions.

My very being.

All I knew was that I wanted him.

Needed him.

Craved him in a way that I had never craved anyone before.

All I knew was that he was becoming a part of me, an *essential* part of me.

A part that I couldn't ignore.

Couldn't deny.

Couldn't resist.

I looked away, my mind spinning, my heart pounding, my body aching.

This was so complicated.

So confusing.

So overwhelming.

Tristan disrupted my thoughts. "Do you like Italian cuisine?"

Finding my breath, I nodded.

"Perfect." Excitement laced Tristan's voice. "I want to take you to my favorite spot."

Am I really doing this?

We left the building, and when we stepped outside, I was met with a scene I hadn't expected.

Holy fuck.

Tons of students were gathered around a sleek black and gold helicopter that stood, imposing and gleaming. It looked entirely out of place amidst the usual campus scenery, and I could see the excited faces of students snapping pictures and pointing.

Meanwhile, Tristan was leading me right to it with a knowing smile decorating his face.

“Hold on.” I stumbled a little. “Please, say that we are not going on that?”

“Unfortunately, we are.”

“Tristan—”

“The University President didn't want me to land it here, but I promised to have one of my earlier pieces enter the University art gallery and remain for five years.”

“You...talked to President Williamson?”

“Apparently, he's a fan.” Tristan continued to guide us toward the helicopter.

Oh shit.

My voice rose in anxiety. “Where are we going?”

“I'm taking you to a nice restaurant.”

“But, where?”

“It's a surprise.”

I stared at him, my mouth agape. A helicopter ride? To lunch? This was completely beyond anything I had ever experienced, and I felt both thrilled and utterly terrified.

Only Tristan.

“Don't worry,” he added, seeing my reaction. “This time, the place isn't out of the country or state.”

“This time?”

“Yes.”

“But...a helicopter, Tristan?” I stammered. “Really? Isn’t that a bit much? Like we can just drive to a diner or something.”

“After what happened, I need to make a grand gesture.”

Despite the wild extravagance of it all, I felt a tug of curiosity and excitement. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

He chuckled. “You thought you had a *choice* to not go?”

“Of course.”

Laughing, he led me to the helicopter, where the pilot was waiting. We climbed in, and as the blades began to whirl, I braced myself for adventure.