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The Artist's Touch

A Gentlemen's Guild Novel

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“Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.”
-Edgar Degas

Preface

For the love of art.

That was their motto – their passion – their purpose.

The Gentlemen’s Guild, as they are collectively known, is a group of three world-renowned, yet anonymous, artists. All billionaires in their own right, the Guild was formed out of their exceptional talent and love for art.

It all began nine years ago as friends, Tristan Black, Sloane Peterson, and Pierce Lane, left school and took the business world by storm, and the rest of the world took notice. However, it was the other half of their partnership that had developed since then that kept the world enthralled. Being owners of some of the largest corporations in the world was a boring accomplishment compared to being members of the Gentlemen’s Guild and here’s why:

Being young, successful, and confident in their skills, they boldly shook the art world with their unannounced and brazen arrival. They’d planned and prepared their entrance for almost a year, working through every option, every scenario, to make sure that it would make a statement and would make them known in the most dramatic way – because when you aren’t doing it for the money, why would you try to play by the rules? Why would you want to?

The Gentlemen’s Guild paid, exorbitantly, to host a private exhibit at the Met with only three pieces listed to be displayed – Michelangelo’s “The Birth of Adam,” Bernini’s “David,” and Da Vinci’s “Last Supper.” The invitation challenged the world’s top art critics, analysts, curators, and professors to find a flaw in any one of them, with a reward of one million dollars to the person who could prove that the pieces weren’t the originals, but were in fact forgeries. It was a dare to the entire art community, and the potential participants were more than intrigued; weren’t all these pieces already in museums? Was this ‘Guild’ planning on stealing them? Were they a guild of thieves or were these artists just that good?

Banking on the presumptive over-confidence of the critic community, so assured in themselves that a forged artwork would never pass as authentic under their inspection, and with just the right amount of publicity, the art world was on edge as to what was actually going to be shown at this exhibit. Museums went on high alert as all of the experts flocked to New York City to prove their worth, that no forger was too good for them, especially when it came to some of the most iconic artworks of all time.

Clothed in skepticism, the experts came, astonished by what they saw – the pieces were there and without any tools or tests, they looked to be the originals! A few minutes of hectic chaos ensued, mostly on the part of the handful of curators frantically trying to reach their museums where these pieces were *supposed* to be currently residing. To their surprise, all of their associates assured them that the original works were still safe and secure, that these must be forgeries.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” came an authoritative voice over the speaker system, “my name is, well, you can call me Michelangelo and I apologize for your confusion. The pieces that you see in front of you, I assure you, are not in fact the original works, but copies that myself and other artists in the Gentlemen’s Guild have created. I invite you to examine the works, touch them, test them, and see for yourself if, with all of your

knowledge and skills, you are able to discern that, aside from my assurances, these are fakes.”

With that announcement, the back of the exhibition hall lit revealing desks, microscopes, lights, radiographic machines, and the standard chemical tests used to authenticate any and all great works of art. Enthusiastically, the invitees descended on the paintings and sculpture, determined to find flaws in these seemingly perfect reproductions.

After an hour, with no one able to find a single piece of evidence to suggest that these were not the originals, and unable to personally confirm the presence of the masterpieces in their own museums, anxieties began to raise at the thought of the two possible explanations – either the pieces were real, meaning that there were fakes hanging in the museums, stolen out from underneath them, or they had been unable to identify a forgery and failed at their job.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your cooperation and expertise. I can see that none of you have been able to indicate any errors in the works to prove that they are fake. I now invite you to turn the paintings over. There is a man coming around with a vial of solution that I want you to paint on back of the canvas and then place the work underneath the UV-light.”

Again, the experts did as ‘Michelangelo’ requested. A gasp of astonishment spread throughout the crowd. With the solution on the canvas, the black-light clearly showed the words, ‘The Gentlemen’s Guild’ woven into the thread of the canvas; something that was a clear impossibility of being found on the original. In shock, they stood, acknowledging their failure to detect such an accurate forgery.

Bernard Park, the curator of the Met stepped forward, demanding into the quiet of the room what the point was of this demonstration? Asking what they are trying to prove with this exercise and lastly, questioning the sculpture as there had been no instructions on how to examine that.

“I’m glad you asked. The answers to all of your questions lie in David’s left hand,” the voice of Michelangelo answered.

They examined the sculpted hand again, finding nothing in it or on it, just as the man who had brought the vial of solution entered again; this time, he returned with a mallet in hand. Bernard stared in horror as the man handed him the mallet, realizing what the voice now meant by ‘in his hand.’ There was a moment’s hesitation, the thought that he could be destroying the original sculpture by Bernini probably making him nauseous. Encouraged by the other spectators that the other works had turned out to be fakes so this one must be too, Bernard picked up the mallet and smashed the hand of the sculpture. When the pieces and dust had settled, there was a rolled-up paper that had been placed in David’s arm, again something clearly only possible to do just as the artist began the sculpture.

Removing the paper, he unrolled it to read a letter of introduction from the Gentlemen’s Guild.

“Thank you for participating in our exercise. Rest assured, we have no intention of publicizing that you were unable to identify these works as forgeries. Our intent wasn’t malicious; we love art and the beauty and importance it brings to the world, and our mission is only to preserve and expand that.

We invite you to request our services in the future for restorations and replications as you need. Our fees are substantial but, as you can see, are well worth it.

If you choose to partner with us, there are two stipulations; you will allow us to hold an exhibit for charity in your museum each year to auction off original pieces of ours, with all proceeds going to your institution and two, our true identities will continue to remain anonymous.

We anticipate your hesitancy at our offer so, in good faith, each of the institutions that are represented here today will be given a donation of one million dollars; they will also receive an original piece of artwork from each of the members of the Guild and instructions on how to contact us in the future.

We look forward to working with you.

- The Gentlemen's Guild

They were hesitant at first, and just a little resentful for being so well fooled, but one thing had led to another and soon the Guild was *the* first choice for restoring or completely replicating famous masterpieces; Da Vinci, Monet, Rembrandt, you name it, the chances were that it had been touched by one of them. Their first 'exhibit' had garnered the attention of news outlets around the world and so when their art began to selectively surface in museums, the crowds descended, curious to see who had intrigued and surpassed the expectations of all of the experts in the field.

One auction, one exhibit, one museum.

That was what they committed to each year. Business owners by day and artists by night, they kept up their public personalities as business owners that liked to invest in art – not uncommon among their circles. They would pick a museum and a day for the auction and prepare their pieces accordingly. The museum was chosen at random, the timing of the event varied from year to year so that nothing became too predictable; predictability led to discoverability and yet, the people still came in droves. Sometimes they themed the exhibits, sometimes they didn't; it didn't matter, whatever they did was a sensation.

After their second year of success, they'd hired a manager, Morgan Wells, to handle the business end and all of the scheduling for the Guild – whether it was for restoration requests, or whether it was to set up the exhibit for that year. He handled the timing and coordination, he was the spokesperson for the Guild, and he handled the money that came in and then went right back out in donations. He was their connection to the world, their last barrier of anonymity. They let him assume the face of the Guild, and he stepped into the position with alacrity.

From the start, they agreed to never work on commissioned pieces for specific donors – *never*. It was their art; they would choose the subject, they would choose how to portray them. It had been tempting at first, especially when the requests were offering hundreds of millions of dollars for a portrait of someone's wife or family or child, but they didn't need the money which meant refusing on principle was easier.

It also became quite clear just what type of art that the Guild preferred to produce – specifically, classical-type interpretations of the female face and form, though the expressions and poses of some of them were not something you would too-commonly find in most classical art; no, the highly seductive and suggestive nature of their original pieces really caused a stir.

Visitors wondered if the models were their wives; that thought was ruled out after the second year when there had been too many different women for the subjects to be spouses. Then, the search began for the women themselves – the "Guilded Girls", as they were referred to – the women who got to know the artists, who *really* got to know

the artists, or so the rumors suggested. Regardless, they would certainly know who the artists were after sitting for someone, most times in the nude, for up to three months.

Rumors also began to spread as to who these anonymous artists were. Many assumed that Morgan was one of them, in spite of his insistence that his artistic ability was deplorable. His denial was always half-hearted though; the fan base of women eager to meet and 'get to know' a potential member of the Guild was a temptation that he just couldn't completely pass up. As long as their true identities remained a secret, they didn't care if Morgan didn't refute the assumption by certain females that caught his interest.

The consensus though was that they were obviously very rich men, to be able to donate all proceeds from their exhibits as well as the income from their restoration work to museums and schools around the world. Maybe they were princes, royalty from Europe or the Middle East; maybe they were children of wealthy parents who had all the money and time in the world to perfect their talent and put it on display; or maybe, they were wealthy men in their own right just looking to support the world of art without wanting to take any credit. The last wasn't the most common assumption – the truth rarely is.

So, the fans decided that they were rich, handsome, and single; even though no one had any confirmation for these suppositions; they were rich because they kept none of the money, and they were handsome because, well, Morgan was incredibly good-looking and therefore must either be one of them or by translation, they must be of the same caliber of man. They enjoyed hearing the rumors, reading the tabloids, seeing who had found the latest clue on their identity – full well knowing that such a thing was impossible. However, not all the rumors were false; they did thoroughly enjoy getting to know the women who modeled for them, there was no denying that.

The hype to find out their identity, to become the next model, the next lover of a wealthy, gorgeous, sought-after, and anonymous artist was too alluring not to pursue and it had quickly reached the point where their next exhibit couldn't even be publicized until just a few weeks beforehand otherwise, women would flock to the cities months before the show, just trying to figure out where the model auditions were taking place. They'd learned that the hard way, almost having to cancel their exhibit because they were being 'hunted down,' as Sloane liked to recall it, by women who wanted to sit for, and sleep with, them. After that fiasco, their auditions were held under false pretenses, the models sworn and signed to secrecy, and eventually, the masses came to accept that the mystery was part of the attraction.

Eventually, they confirmed that there were three members of the Guild and gave their fans pseudonyms in order to be able to sign their works and differentiate between who produced what; Tristan became Titian, Pierce became Picasso, and Sloane, well, Sloane got stuck with Michelangelo and was forced to sign his works with the initial of his middle name, Michael, rather than an 'S' – a task he'd balked and bemoaned about for months. Unfortunately, Tristan had given the name Michelangelo originally, and Sloane was the only one of them that had an 'M' in a part of his full name. This also managed to fuel the belief that Morgan was one of the three, lucking out with a name that also began with an 'M'.

In a few short years, they had taken the world by storm. Their reputation had only grown, inflated by the secrecy and anonymity surrounding the member artists, to this point where they were a world-wide sensation. Now, entering into their seventh

year, into the peak of their popularity, they were on top of the world. They'd mastered their love of art and now, unbeknownst to them, it was their turn to be mastered by the art of love.

Chapter 1

This was not a good idea.

Tristan's mouth thinned into a hard line as he immediately regretted his decision. He knew better than to entertain a wager with Pierce and yet here he was, standing at the Met, absorbing the energy of their annual charity exhibition. He would have rescinded his answer if Pierce hadn't disappeared so quickly into the crowd that was growing around them.

It had been seven years since they'd first displayed their art here, and they hadn't been back since. A chill crept up his spine; he'd like to think it was nostalgia, but it felt more like the memory was marking the beginning of the end. Walking through the crowd, Tristan observed in silent anonymity the excitement and speculation going on around him. A small smile broke on his face as he heard two women discussing his piece from last year's auction, speculating as to the cause of the young woman's expression of extreme pleasure.

Oh, he'd given her good cause.

It had been won by an older gentleman in Florence, the second piece of Tristan's – or Titian's, that the gentleman had purchased. He paused when the two women abruptly stopped their conversation catching sight of him. It never even crossed his mind that they realized he was eavesdropping on them; he knew how he looked and how far his striking good looks had gotten him in the past, his wavy, golden hair tamed back away from his face, emphasizing his strong jawline and warm hazel eyes. Plus, he cleaned up well in a jet-black tux. Tristan gave them a dazzling smile, waiting exactly one and a half seconds for their jaws to hit the floor before moved forward further into the crowd. His brow began to furrow thinking about what he was going to do about Pierce.

The last few years, their auctions had become predictable and gone off without a hitch. Tristan was grateful for the continuity and control of routine, but Pierce, well, he was always looking to liven up their time together, always looking for a little bit of adventure. At last year's auction, he'd snuck in the model for his painting; he'd had her stand next to it to see if anyone realized that it was her. Thankfully, Tristan had realized who she was the moment he walked into the gallery and spotted her, quickly telling Pierce, in no uncertain terms, that she needed to leave immediately or he was out of the Guild. If she was there, there was a chance she could lead someone back to one of them. Or worse, if she was there, attendees might realize that the artists themselves were there as well.

They hadn't spoken for weeks after that. Tristan had been irate; they created the Guild for a specific purpose, and to maintain their life and their sanity, their identities needed to stay concealed and Pierce had jeopardized that. If he wanted to go public, Tristan told him, that was his choice, but he would be doing it alone. Begrudgingly, Pierce had apologized, admitting that he was getting bored with their auction routine, that he wanted something to change. That was months ago.

This evening, Pierce had approached him before he even made it in the gallery, deviousness glinting in his eyes.

"What did you do?" Tristan exclaimed on seeing his partner striding purposefully towards him, immediately fearing the worst.

If Tristan was a golden God, Pierce was a dark Devil. Always dressed in all black, the fitted tux accentuated his jet-black hair and his even darker eyes. The high collar on his silk black shirt hid a scar that ran down the side of his neck onto his collarbone; he always wore high collars to any event. Even though, if you asked him about it, he would say that he ‘doesn’t give a fuck’ who sees it; when you’ve been to enough social gatherings with him, it was clear that the high collars were chosen for a specific purpose.

He liked to test the limits and push Tristan’s buttons. He was always plotting something, craving endless sources of entertainment to distract him from his fucked-up past. Most times, those somethings turned out to be harmless jokes or pranks, but sometimes there was an edge to him, a darkness that he kept inside, kept hidden from the rest of them and that is what usually got him into trouble.

“Nothing!” Pierce insisted, throwing his hands up in mock innocence.

“I know that look...what do you want?” Tristan questioned his friend again, the skepticism in his voice ringing loud and clear demanding to be answered.

“Well, I just happened to come across something on the way in that I thought would be fun for the three of us to do,” Pierce began, a sly smile creeping onto his face. “Sloane already agreed to it...”

“Of course, he did. Sloane will do anything that you tell him to,” Tristan responded a little too harshly.

The third member of their group was the quietest and most easily swayed out of all of them. Sloane was brilliant when it came to real estate and he was a master sculptor, but socially, he wasn’t as outgoing or controlling as either of them; which is why it was usually Tristan and Pierce who butted heads, and Sloane just tried to stay out of their way.

“Don’t be a Negative Nancy before I even finished telling you,” Pierce scolded. “The Met is hosting a competition.” Tristan cut him a sharp glance as they began to walk slowly into the gallery, not wanting to miss the start of the auction. “In six weeks, they are hosting the travelling exhibit called the Art of Love. Fifteen artists, fifteen pieces. Exhibit opens for a Saturday for visitor voting and winner gets \$5 million.”

“No,” Tristan replied flatly, “we don’t do competitions.”

“Says who?” he countered. “Just because we haven’t before doesn’t mean that we can’t. C’mon Tris, we need to branch out. People are going to start becoming bored if we keep doing the same thing every year.”

Well that was true.

His jaw clenched, he hated it when Pierce had a point. He’d begun to wonder if they needed to do something out of the ordinary; if their yearly exhibits, while still doing well because of the hype and secrecy surrounding them, had begun to feel stagnant. Maybe it was all in his head, then again, Pierce was quite skilled at getting inside his head.

“We don’t produce art for money,” Tris countered, “and no matter how much you whine, *that* is part of our mission statement.”

“So then just give the money away! Or back to the museum! Who gives a shit?” he argued. “We just need to do something different, *fuck*. Remember how we got started? Shock-and-awe is what got us noticed; we need to bring some of that back.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, Pierce,” Tristan replied firmly.

“Why? Afraid I’ll win again?” Pierce taunted.

That got Tristan to stop in his tracks and give Pierce a cold stare. That was another thing that happened between Pierce and him – a healthy rivalry on good days...*a fight to the death on bad ones*. Since Sloane was a sculptor, he worked in a different medium than them and it was probably for the better. Pierce and Tristan, on the other hand, both worked on sketches, drawings, and paintings – all the same mediums; it was hard to not compare them and their talents.

Over the years, they'd fought over restorations that museums had requested the Guild to perform, each claiming that they could do the job better, and over reproductions as well. They'd battled to the point where they had begun to each send their own version of the masterpiece to see which one the museum liked better. When that got to be too time-consuming and petty because naturally, whosever's version got picked held it over the other's head for months, Morgan finally stepped in and began making the decision as to who would handle each request. It had cut down on *most* of the arguments and the time spent *not* talking to each other. Their competitiveness is what had made them so successful in their respective industries, and was so deeply engrained in their personalities that it was impossible to extricate it from their artistic work.

"What happens to the pieces?"

A slow smile spread over Pierce's face, knowing that he'd won the argument.

"Nothing, it's still yours to keep or to donate or whatever you want."

"I'm only agreeing to this because I know I will win," Tristan clarified calmly, trying not to seem like he was just easily caving to Pierce's persistence.

Pierce let out a bark of laughter, "Well, I've already signed us up so there's no backing out. I should point out though that that's what you said the last time, and we all know how that turned out," he then responded with a wink.

Fucker.

The last time they had both submitted paintings to a museum, which was probably at least five years ago, the museum had picked Pierce's work. Although, Tristan knew there was a reason it had ended up that way.

"Yes, and we all know why she chose yours," Tristan replied, sarcastically. "It's a little sad that you were so sure that you were going to lose that you needed to sleep with the curator in order to secure your win. I mean, she was pretty, but still – definitely not your usual type. Don't worry, there's no doubt that I'll win this one. Unless you decide to sleep with Bernie, that is..." He returned his friend's mocking wink.

Tristan watched with pleasure as the black depths of Pierce's eyes flared in rage at his insinuation that he would sleep with Bernard Park, the curator of the Met, to win this competition too. Pierce could be so easily provoked sometimes; it was almost too easy to be fun.

"I think I'll just submit the portrait I brought of my mom; if that doesn't show true love, I don't know what does," he mused out loud, blindly enjoying the irritation growing over his friend's face. "Plus, you wouldn't know love if it came up and punched you in the face," Tristan concluded with a sarcastic laugh. After a moment, he stopped, wondering if he had gone a little too far. Pierce still hadn't replied and it looked like Tristan was the one who was about to be punched in the face.

"We'll see," Pierce finally said, his voice clipped and harsh, as he turned and stalked away. Tristan just stood there for a moment, watching him go.

This was not a good idea.

He wasn't as bad as Pierce when it came to letting his emotions get the best of him, but he was still far too easily susceptible to them. Pierce didn't care about winning, Tristan knew that. All he cared about was the thrill, the competition, the strategy of outsmarting the other person. Tristan, on the other hand, cared about winning, about being the best, and Pierce knew just what to say to get Tristan to play right into his hand.

At this point, he wasn't concerned about the competition; he was more concerned about the white-hot rage that had flared in Pierce's eyes when Tristan called him out for rigging the competition in his favor, and then proceeded to tell him that he had no knowledge of what love was. It was a low blow, he knew that; he'd been annoyed at himself for giving in to Pierce's game and had wanted to just poke him in the eye a little bit for playing the competition card. But he might have poked just a little too hard.

Tristan began to move through the crowd trying to find him and offer a semblance of an apology. He was concerned that Pierce was going to take that rage and do something stupid to level the playing field; that's what Pierce did, he acted on emotion with no forethought and rarely any regret. Most of the time, what he did was essentially harmless but, with that edge, you just never knew.

He shouldn't have told him about his mother's portrait; he'd given Pierce the upper hand with that information. Tristan's mother, Viola Black, had died ten years ago from leukemia. Not long before she passed away, just before she'd gone into the hospital for the last time, she'd asked Tristan to draw her – at home and happy, just how she had wanted him to remember her. She'd told him that when he looked at it, he would remember just how much love she had for and wanted to give him.

He hadn't had much formal training at that point, but even to this day, he was pleased with how well his younger self had done. For several years after her death, he couldn't bring himself to pull the portrait out; it was too painful because she'd been his biggest supporter in everything that he'd done. Finally, a few years ago, he'd managed to open the drawing and hang it in his studio. Looking at it, it hadn't felt complete, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to alter it until recently. This year, he'd fine-tuned the drawing, adding in all the finishing touches to make his mother's memory complete. It had been truly a work of love and that is why he had no doubt it would win a competition focused on the art of portraying that emotion – one he had only this singular experience with.

Pierce had never, to his knowledge, created anything of that caliber, anything that personal. He was a player in every sense of the word. The excitement, the competition, that's what held his interest. They all had gone through things in their respective pasts that shaped them, but Pierce, well, he had just gone through a little more than most and it made him come off as callous. Deep down, Tristan believed that he cared, just about very few people, and it took a long time for him to let you in that deeply.

Which is why what he had said struck a nerve with Pierce, not that Pierce wouldn't forgive him, but there was definitely going to be some sort of retribution involved first.

He scanned the crowd again, but Pierce was nowhere to be seen. Finally, he spotted Sloane standing off to the side of the room, watching the announcer make his way up to the podium to begin the auction. That was typical Sloane, always off to the side, in the background, never wanting to draw attention.

Of the three of them, Tristan and Pierce definitely had the most striking features – light and dark. Sloane, on the other hand, was neither; his hair was wavy and a nondescript light brown. He kept it longer than theirs, to the point where he needed to pull it back when he was working. Without Tristan or Pierce to be compared to, he was very good-looking; when they were around, he tended to fade into the background, although that could have been on purpose. The only thing striking about him was his eyes; they were the clearest, most brilliant blue you'd ever seen.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you so much for coming tonight. On behalf of the Gentlemen’s Guild, I’d like to welcome you...” Tristan ignored the auctioneer’s booming voice, making his way swiftly over to Sloane.

“Have you seen Pierce?” Tristan leaned in and said into Sloane’s ear so that he could hear him.

“Earlier, why? Did he talk to you about the competition?”

“Yes. I’m surprised you agreed to do it before talking to me,” Tristan responded.

Sloane’s crystal blue eyes widened for a moment before he let out a laugh. “You should know better than to believe everything that Pierce says,” he responded wryly. “I told him I would do whatever you two decide.”

“That fucker,” Tristan spat, not truly angry; it was his own fault for believing him.

“The first piece that we have for auction tonight is by Mr. Titian, from the Guild...”

Tristan looked up at the mention of his pseudonym just as the auctioneer paused, looking momentarily flustered as the audience watched Morgan come up behind him and hand him a piece of paper.

Tristan and Sloane shot each other confused expressions. Looking back to the podium, Tristan glimpsed Pierce standing well-hidden, off to the side of the stage, a satisfied smile on his face; and that’s when Tristan realized that Pierce’s revenge was beginning to unfold right in front of him before he could do anything to stop it.

“Sorry, everyone, just making sure I have all of the correct information here. As I was saying. Mr. Titian’s piece for auction this evening, is something very dear to him...” Tristan began to shove his way through the crowd, even though there was no way he would make it over there in time to have Morgan stop the announcer. His heart was pounding, rage making his vision blur. *“This piece is entitled ‘Mother,’ we will start the bidding at two million, going once...”*

Tristan’s hands fisted.

He was going to kill Pierce for this.

Chapter 2

The sound of the mallet cracking down halted Tristan dead in his tracks. It was over. Just like when he had lost her the first time, the feeling of helplessness began to suffocate him. The drawing wasn't the only thing that he had of her, but it was certainly the most valuable, the most meaningful to him, and out of anger and spite, Pierce had switched it for the piece that was *supposed* to be auctioned off today. All to level the playing field.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and he quickly spun around coming face-to-face with Sloane. "What happened?"

"Pierce happened. That sonofabitch switched my mother's portrait in for the piece I wanted to be auctioned today," Tristan spat, his jaw clenching forcefully.

"Why would he do that?"

"Because I told him that I was going to submit it to this stupid fucking competition that he wants us to do and I told him that, with it, there was no way I could lose."

"So, he did this just to win?" Sloane asked in disbelief.

"I also might have told him that he could never win because he has no idea what love is..." Tristan trailed off, frustrated at having to admit his role in what had just transpired.

"Shit..." Sloane responded, "let me talk to him."

"Yeah, whatever. I don't even give a damn about him right now. I need to find Morgan to find out who the fuck won my drawing and tell him that there's been a mistake."

"I'm sure whoever won it will be fine taking the other work," Sloane tried to calmly reassure him. Tristan just acknowledged his friend with a barely perceptible nod before turning and stalking towards Morgan who was standing off behind the stage.

"Woah, buddy, what happened?" Morgan asked as Tristan approached him, seeing the anger written all over his face.

"Who won the drawing of my mom?" Tristan demanded, not even bothering to answer Morgan's question.

"Ahh, shit. I should have known Pierce was up to no good. *Dammit*," Morgan replied in frustration, "I don't know why I trust that ass sometimes."

"Because he's a friend, that's why; he might be a terrible one at the moment, but it's who he is. I just need you to point me in the direction of the guy who purchased my drawing." Even though Tristan was pissed off as fuck at Pierce, he knew that Pierce had only done this in a darkly entertaining form of retaliation, under the complete assumption that whomever won the piece would be more than understanding enough to switch it with the one that was supposed to be auctioned.

"Yeah, of course. Do you want me to talk to him? Seemed like a nice enough guy. I can explain that there was a mistake," Morgan kindly offered.

"No. In the off-chance that he decides to be a pain in the ass, I want him to know who I am, and why it's important to me," Tristan answered impatiently.

"Alright, well his name is Jack Carter and, let's see..." Morgan trailed off as he scanned the crowd just in front of the stage to try and spot their target. "Alright, there he

is,” Morgan nodded towards an older gentleman, garbed in a very expensive suit watching the auctioneer finish up the bidding on the last piece.

“Thanks.” Tristan barely got the word out before he was off again, heading towards the man who had just mistakenly won one of the most important things in his life.

Tristan took a good look at the man who was now the proud owner of his mom’s portrait. *Jack Carter*. This better be as easy to get back as Pierce was expecting it to be, otherwise he really might have to murder the bastard.

“Excuse me, sir, are you Mr. Carter?” Tristan addressed the older gentleman cordially, with his most people-pleasing smile.

“Yes, yes I am. Who is asking?” the gentleman responded, his eyebrows raising in question.

“I’m with the Gentleman’s Guild, if I could speak to you in private for a moment about the painting that you have just won,” Tristan explained as he motioned towards the gallery exit, for where this conversation could take place. Mr. Carter nodded, looking intrigued, yet pleased to be speaking with someone from the Guild; he followed Tristan through the crowd and out of the gallery where they could speak privately.

“Mr. Carter, I do apologize for any inconvenience, but it seems that there’s been a misunderstanding about the drawing that you just won,” Tristan began his explanation, watching the other man’s face alight with surprise. “In fact, that piece was not the one that was supposed to be up for auction tonight. There was a miscommunication and there is actually another drawing should have been auctioned in its place.”

“I see...” Mr. Carter responded, waiting for Tristan to continue.

“If you would like, I can escort you to the back and show you the other piece that you have actually won,” Tristan offered.

“I see, except I like the drawing that I won; it’s the one that I bid on and I’m not willing to exchange it. I’m sorry about the mishap, but I don’t quite see how it’s my problem.”

You fucker.

Of course, he wasn’t going to make this easy. Fine, Tristan thought, at this point he didn’t care what it took, he was going to get that drawing back.

“I understand. I’m willing to return your money to you, so that you can take home the intended piece at no cost to yourself.”

Money always worked.

“Who are you? I’m sorry, the only contact I know representing the Guild is Morgan Lane. Do you even have the authority to offer something like that?” Mr. Carter responded, suddenly concerned that someone was trying to swindle him out of his prize.

“Believe me, sir, I have every authority,” Tristan said firmly, his facial expression leaving no doubt as to his ability to make this decision.

“I’m sorry, it’s not about the money though. I want this drawing,” Mr. Carter insisted.

“I see,” Tristan replied, coldly.

Looks like we will have to move on to Plan B.

“Well, I’m going to have to talk to the auction company then and see what can be done because unfortunately, I can’t let you leave with that drawing,” Tristan continued, coldly, giving the stubborn man a curt nod before turning back towards the gallery.

“Young man...” Mr. Carter called after him, “one moment.”

Tristan didn't even bother to respond to him, he just turned and raised an eyebrow, waiting for whatever Jack Carter was about to say next.

"I would be willing to consider giving back the drawing," he began.

"What do you want?" Tristan interjected bluntly, knowing where this conversation was headed.

"I would be willing to consider it, if I could speak to the artist who drew it for a moment." Tristan was taken aback for a moment; he was expecting a request for money or for some sort of compensation. Not that this was any better; *no one* knew their identities, especially not their patrons.

God, because of course he'd just been yelling at Pierce about this, and now, here he was, the one about to break the Guild's cardinal rule of secrecy. Then again, what choice did he have? He needed to get this drawing back and if that meant revealing who he was to some fan who would do God-knows-what with the information, then that is what he would do.

"Fine," Tristan clipped out.

"Wonderful!" the man exclaimed, his whole demeanor changing. "When can I meet him?"

"Right now," Tristan answered, running his fingers through his hair, completely destroying its styled appearance.

"I don't understand," the man replied, perplexed, looking around the hall.

"Mr. Carter," Tristan began, his voice as cold as ice, "My name is Tristan Black, or as some in this circle prefer to call me, Titian. I am the one who created the drawing that you won and I am the one asking for it back."

Jack Carter just stared at him for a moment, in complete shock at that turn of events. "Mr. Black... Titian... it's a great pleasure to meet you," he finally responded, extending his hand in greeting. "This piece... it's not typical of what I've seen of your work in the past few years, but as soon as I saw it tonight... it's just so moving. The love and happiness that you've managed to capture and portray is just astounding. Truly moving."

Tristan refused to take his hand or acknowledge the praise of his work. Even though he was the one asking for something, he'd already gone above and beyond all of the rules that were carefully crafted and put into place, all at this man's request; he would do no more.

"I apologize. Thank you for revealing yourself to speak to me. I was hoping that by purchasing this drawing I would have the opportunity at some point to make my request to speak to the artist, I just didn't expect that it would happen so soon or in this manner. I've never bid on one before so I wasn't sure how this all worked."

"Mr. Carter, I don't mean to be rude, so let me explain something to you. That drawing that you have, is of my late mother. *I need it back.*"

"Oh, dear. I'm so sorry about that. Well...ahh... the reason that I wanted to speak with you is because I have a request," the old man forged on.

"I'm going to have to stop you right there. In seven years, I've never revealed who I am to any patron, so I hope you appreciate the confidence that I've just given you in order to get my mother's portrait returned to me. I have broken a code, but I will do no more. The Guild has not, nor will it ever take individual requests for work. We have a mission, a purpose, and that is not a part of it."

“I see, of course. I completely understand, but if you would just hear me out –”

“No, I’ve heard enough,” Tristan responded harshly, the enormity of his recent actions really starting to sink in and the resulting anger seeped out of him. “You said that if I agreed to speak with you, you would return my drawing. I have done so. Now, it’s your turn to hold up your end of the bargain.”

“I see,” Mr. Carter responded, his expression becoming shuttered, “I see that you will not listen to reason, which means that I’m left with no choice. I said that if you agreed to speak with me, that I might consider returning the drawing. I did not guarantee its return.”

“Are you fucking serious right now? I’ll just go in there and have the auction company get my drawing back and return your money. Hell, I’ll sue you for it if it comes to that,” Tristan spat, vengefully.

“Or, you could make me a portrait of my daughter and I will return your drawing with no issue upon receipt of it, *and* you can keep the money.” Jack quickly finished before Tristan walked away to make good on his threat.

Tristan stared at the man standing in front of him. For the first time in seven years, he not only revealed his identity to a patron, but was now actually considering creating a piece of artwork on request.

What in the royal fuck was happening today?

He ran his hand through his hair again, angry and frustrated, stuck between a bad and an even worse decision. If he refused, who knows how hard it would be to get his drawing back, or how long it might take, especially if lawyers were to get involved. If he accepted, he would be going back on the promise that he had made to himself and the Guild to abide by the set of rules that they had decided on at the start.

He’s not paying you for the piece, so at least it’s not like you are profiting.

It was still a request.

This is the portrait of your mother; sometimes, exceptions to the rule must be made, even if it is just this once.

Before he could think the better of it, Tristan extended his hand.

“Fine,” he all but spat. “I’ll draw your daughter, but I will have your word that upon completion of her portrait, you will return that of my mother.”

“You have my word,” the older man said, taking Tristan’s hand firmly to seal their agreement.

“She can’t know who I am,” Tristan continued coldly, the potential repercussions of his choice now starting to become clear.

His secrets couldn’t spread any farther after this moment.

“Oh, no. Of course not,” Jack agreed. “In fact, I ask that you do not tell her what I’ve done to acquire her portrait; I want her to know about no part of this deal.”

Tristan stared back, his curiosity only slightly peaked about why Jack would want to keep something like that from his daughter, but it wasn’t any of his business, and he was already far more involved than was a good idea.

“What is her name?”

“Elsa,” he responded. “Do you need her information? How will you contact her?”

With a sharp stare, Tristan pulled out a pen from inside his tux, motioning for Jack to give him his auction handout. He scribbled on the paper a date, time, and address.

“I won’t be contacting her,” he began bluntly. “Have her be there for the audition.” Handing him back the information, Tristan didn’t bother to wait for a response before he turned and stalked back into the gallery to find the devious asshole who had gotten him into this mess.

By the time he got back inside, most of the crowd had cleared out, including the specific Lucifer he was searching for; Pierce was nowhere to be seen in the giant hall.

That motherfucker.

Even though Tristan knew that this whole ordeal was Pierce’s idea of an entertaining revenge for what he had said earlier, as well as an attempt to level the competition for this stupid *fucking* contest that he desperately wanted to win, Tristan still couldn’t believe that he’d done this.

What had Pierce been thinking? Hell, what had he been thinking?

It was his own damn fault for agreeing to the stupid competition – agreeing and then, out of frustration with his own weakness, upping the ante by mocking his friend. After a decade of being friends with the man, Tristan should have known better than to provoke him. The fact was that Pierce couldn’t have known that Jack Carter wouldn’t return the painting; he couldn’t have known that Jack was only there to try to find an ‘in’ with the Guild, to personally request a portrait. He couldn’t blame Pierce for that, no matter how much his anger wanted him to at the moment.

Although, if Pierce did this to make sure that he wouldn’t submit his mom’s portrait to the competition, then he would have had to have known that Jack wasn’t going to give the drawing back, right? Tristan pinched his temples; trying to get inside Pierce’s head was an impossibility. You never knew what Pierce knew and what he didn’t, whether it was all part of his plan or it just magically worked out in his devious favor; that was the entire reason that Pierce enjoyed life, to keep those around him on edge, always guessing about him.

Either way, he was going to lay into the bastard, that was for damn sure – if he could just find him.

“Did you get it back?” Tristan turned, hearing Sloane’s voice approaching from behind him.

“No,” he responded, his eyes shadowing, “but I will. Where’s Pierce?”

“I think he left already, something about a hot date...”

“Dammit,” Tristan spat, pulling out his cell phone to dial Pierce’s number.

“Also, you should know that Pierce had Bernard come up at the end of the auction and announce that the Guild would be participating in the Met competition next month.”

“Of course, he did,” Tristan responded sarcastically. Not that he had even thought about pulling out from the competition, especially now; there was no way he was going to let Pierce win this after everything he had just put him through.

Dialing Pierce’s number, Tristan gave Sloane a nod before walking out of the gallery again towards the museum exit; this wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have anywhere near a group of people.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Confidence,” Pierce answered the phone smugly. “How are you feeling about winning that competition now?”

“What the fuck is the matter with you?” Tristan responded, his voice eerily calm.

“What! Just a little fun; couldn’t have you getting too sure of yourself,” Pierce paused to laugh. “He seemed like a nice enough guy, the one who won your mom. I’m sure he’ll give her back to you if you ask nicely.”

“He wasn’t willing to exchange or give the drawing back,” Tristan bluntly informed him.

Pierce began to laugh on the other end of the line. “Oh, that is fucking rich. Well, looks like we have now both lost an important piece for each other. At least you fucking know who has yours,” he snarled, bitterness creeping into his tone.

Why did he have a feeling that was going to come up? Pierce was never going to let what happened three years ago go, no matter how many times he’d told Tristan it was ‘all good’ and that he ‘didn’t give a shit about the painting anyway.’

“Jack Carter has my mother’s portrait and if I’m unable to get it back from him, I swear to God, you will regret the day that you met me,” Tristan threatened darkly before hanging up the phone.

Let him stew over that for a little while. No need to tell Pierce that he was already working on getting the drawing back.

Tristan climbed into the black car waiting to take him back to his One57 condo, dialing Morgan as he shut the door behind him.

“Hey, did you get the drawing back from Carter?” Morgan answered.

“No. I need you to set up an audition for me – Wednesday of this coming week at three,” Tristan responded, unwilling to elaborate more on what had just happened in the gallery.

“What do you mean ‘no’? What are you going to do? Why do you need another audition?” Morgan persisted with his questions.

“Can you set up the audition or not? I’m handling Carter.”

“Yeah, I’ll do it. Where do you want to have it?” Morgan gave in, exasperated.

“Same location as last time.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit risky? Using the Plaza again?”

“I don’t care,” Tristan responded, knowing that he didn’t have a choice. The meeting room and address that he had given Jack Carter were for the plaza. He didn’t want to jeopardize anything by switching the information.

“Alright, if you say so.”

“Thanks.” Tristan shoved his phone into his jacket pocket as he got out of the car in front of his apartment building. One57, also known as ‘the Billionaire’s Building,’ stood impressively over one thousand feet tall, overlooking Central Park from West 157th street. Tristan had purchased his penthouse condo back in 2012, for a sum that most would consider staggering; he didn’t care. It was a great location and a great space, and therefore, worth the expense.

Unbuttoning his jacket, he brushed passed the doorman with a quick acknowledgement, heading towards the elevator. He was the only person on the ride up to the eighty-fifth floor. As the doors opened, he yanked off his tie, unable to shake the frustration over the situation that he’d managed to get himself into.

Seven years...blown in one day.

It wasn’t true; nothing was blown, but Tristan had always been the leader; he’d called the shots, proposed the rules, and made sure that the other members of the Guild abided by them. He was the one in charge and he knew that if the shoe was on the other

foot, if Sloane or Pierce had done what he had just done, he would have demanded that they leave the Guild immediately.

Hypocrite.

Tristan couldn't distinguish whether it was the word or the door slamming behind him that reverberated through his apartment. The layout was so open that any sound made at one end of the condo would be heard at the other end. The heels of his oxfords clicked across the dark hardwood floor as he walked past the open-concept living room, with its two large modern couches, that then transitioned into the dining room, complete with a table large enough to seat ten guests comfortably. Rounding the corner put him in the fully stocked, modern kitchen, complete with separate wine refrigerator, two wall ovens, and a Viking gas stove. Pulling a bottle of Fiji water from the fridge, Tristan chugged down a good two-thirds of its contents before setting it on the granite countertop. His palms came to rest on the cool stone as he stared out the giant floor-to-ceiling windows that covered the outer walls of the entire apartment, offering him a complete, unobstructed view of Central Park and the city.

Smacking his right hand down on the counter, he let out a yell of frustration. Stalking out of the kitchen, through the dining room, and down the hall into the master bedroom, he began stripping out of his jacket and shirt, taking them off and tossing them onto the bench at the end of his bed, as if they hadn't cost him what most people would consider a small fortune. Unbuttoning his pants, he let them fall to the ground – *they needed to be dry cleaned anyway*. Stepping out of them and walking into the bathroom, he turned the shower on hot, needing something to relax and clear his head.

Looking out the window above the countertop in the bathroom, he stared out at the setting sun, his brow furrowing ominously as he contemplated how to handle this entire situation without it coming back to haunt him. When the window began to steam in front of him, he finally climbed into the scalding water letting it burn through him, just as the anger did coursing through his veins.

Sloane and Pierce could never know about what he agreed to do. He knew that much. Sloane, well, he wasn't as much of a concern, but Pierce, that fucker would never let this go. Not only would he never hear the end of it, but then there would be nothing to stop Pierce from taking whatever liberties he wanted with the Guild's popularity – not that he didn't try to do that already. But, when it came right down to it, he always respected Tristan's strict adherence to the code that they had all agree upon. A code that he, Tristan Black, the beacon of conformity, had just undermined.

He was going to get his mother's portrait back, and he was going to win the competition in spite of what Pierce had done; that would be enough retribution, on Pierce at least.

Jack Carter, on the other hand, was a completely different story.

What kind of person would refuse to give back such a sentimental piece that was acquired by accident? That was strike one. Then, after asking to meet the artist, insinuating that he would agree to exchange the portrait, and subsequently refusing to when Tristan had introduced himself, that was strike two.

He didn't give a shit what words the man had actually used. The fact was that how Carter said what he did sent a clear message that if he could meet the artist, meet Titian, he would return the drawing. And then he didn't, and that was unacceptable.

Each member of the Guild had their own process when it came to producing pieces for their exhibits. They never went into much detail with each other, but the

rumors weren't completely baseless. They all formed physical relationships with the models that they chose in order to capture and portray that depth of emotion that made their work so entrancing and unique. Not that they forced anyone; well, at least he hadn't, he couldn't speak for Pierce. The models always had a choice to leave, not that they ever did, but they could have and he would have just picked someone else; if you knew of the Guild's work, you knew what you were signing up for as one of their models.

Although, after the first few years of the rumors and hype, the newer fans of their works seemed to be less concerned of what was involved in their artistic process. Tristan was pretty certain that Jack Carter would have *never* requested a portrait of his daughter if he knew what delivering on that request might entail.

The hot shower helped to remove some stress from his toned and muscular form, but it was the promise of vengeful satisfaction that brought comfort to his tormented mind.

True, he could just draw the girl and be done with it, get his mother's portrait back, but the status quo was no longer acceptable. Jack Carter had essentially blackmailed him into going against everything that he stood for, into doing something that he had expressly agreed never to do. No one forced his hand like that without consequences.

Oh, and Elsa Carter, there would be consequences.

Chapter 3

Tristan tapped his pen impatiently on the table in front of him just wanting to get this fucking ordeal over with. Treating this like any other project was a genius stroke on his part. He'd originally done it because in the moment he didn't have time to think of how else to approach it, but now, reflecting on the impulsive move, it made the most sense.

By having an audition, even though the model to be chosen was pre-determined, it threw off any suspicion from Sloane or Pierce; *ok, mostly from Pierce*. To explain to her who he was, what had happened with her father, and why he needed to draw her would have required too many answers that he was unwilling to give, not to mention, he'd assured Carter that he wouldn't. Even though the man had seemed spineless, he'd blackmailed Tristan and Tristan wouldn't put it past him to do something to his mother's portrait if he went back on his word.

No, the best way to have this girl, Elsa, sit for him and do *exactly* what he wanted was to treat this like any other piece that he was beginning; the less she knew, the less she could question. As much as he would have revenge on her father for his obstinate behavior, Tristan couldn't risk endangering the Guild any further. On top of it all, the chosen routine put him in the mindset that she was just like all the others; and she would fall just like all the others. He smirked to himself at the thought.

"Alright, they are all here," Morgan said, pulling Tristan from his plans to the present.

"Fan-fucking-tastic. Let's get this show started," Tristan said as he tossed his pen on the table and leaned back nonchalantly in his chair, arms crossed over his chest.

"Alright," Morgan agreed, setting down the small stack of headshots on the table in front of Tristan.

Tristan made no move to look at the photos on the table. No, he wanted to see if he could guess which woman he was being forced to portray. God, with his luck this past week, Carter's daughter was probably in her forties and had inherited his large nose. Realizing that Morgan was waiting for him to review the photos, Tristan shot him a look that said to just bring them in, he wasn't bothering with the photos today. Reading the message loud and clear, Morgan walked to the door of the conference room that they'd rented for the afternoon and ushered in the line of ten models.

Tristan knew from the second the women walked into the room which would be good candidates and which wouldn't be – if this were a typical audition. Not based on their looks, but the attitude that they carried with them. The first three, a blond and two brunettes, all stunning, walked into the room like they owned it; they knew how good they looked and they each had no doubt that they would be the one chosen. Tristan never picked those because they didn't mind being used. Like him, they would attach no emotion to whatever else happened during the creative process, and that would be devastating to the result that he needed to achieve.

The next three, all blondes, were almost at the other end of the spectrum. They knew they were beautiful, but their dress and demeanor was reserved; they were here for the job, but would treat it as exactly that, they wouldn't be open to any extra activities that might be involved. Tristan's observation was confirmed when he noticed rings on the left hands of two of those models. *Married and off-limits*. If he was willing

to bet money, it would be that the third, non-married woman was Jack Carter's daughter. Her hair color and the shape of her eyes vaguely reminded him of Jack. His jaw clenched as he recalled the reason he was doing all of this; he must have sent a menacing stare, because the third woman's eyes widened in concern, her body moving back slightly in fear.

The next two were ideal candidates – nervous, yet eager. Beautiful, yet not so self-absorbed that they would consider using their looks however necessary to advance their career, like the first three would. Maybe he would even keep one of them on file for his next actual exhibit piece and save himself the trouble of going through the audition process again. The one model in the middle with jet black hair was particularly enticing; he scanned the length of her, his eyes returning to capture her anxiously willing gaze.

Just as Tristan began to send her a sultry and seductive smile a crash off to the right startled him as the last model in line seemed to have dropped the clipboard that held the information sheet and questionnaire all the models were required to fill out. For a second, Tristan couldn't really see her; she had turned around and knelt down to gather the board and papers scattered on the floor behind her. He watched intently, only semi-aware of the few models who had begun to snicker at her clumsiness.

She wasn't dressed like the rest of them; she had on jeans and a blazer that were fitted onto her toned form, as far as he could tell, and she was wearing a hat, underneath which seemed to be tucked all of her hair. She awkwardly stood back up and turned to face him again, her vibrant green eyes catching his.

Tristan felt the air being pulled completely out of his lungs. *She was exquisite.* He couldn't even see all of her face or her hair because it was hidden, but the way she looked at him made his heart stop. He couldn't help but stare and soak in every detail about her.

She wasn't as tall as the rest of them, but then again, she hadn't worn heels to the audition like them either. While the rest of the models seemed to be either quite voluptuous or the typical runway tall-and-skinny, this woman was the only one who seemed to fall right in the middle. She had on a white t-shirt underneath her blazer, both of which partially obscured the shape of her torso from his assessment. She fidgeted when his gaze slowly returned up her body to capture hers.

"Oh, shoot, I'm so sorry," she mumbled as she quickly reached up and pulled off her hat, having forgotten that it was even on. She must have assumed that's why he was staring at her, because he was waiting for her hat to come off.

If he had known what it would reveal, he would have asked her to give him a moment to recover his breath, but he was afforded no such luxury. He watched in torture as the removal of her hat let her warm, messy, red waves fall, cascading down her shoulders and back. Before, he'd been blown away; now, he felt like the wind had been completely knocked out of him.

God, he hoped Morgan didn't realize what was going on, or that he probably needed to call an ambulance; his brain couldn't even register if he was remembering to breathe.

He should have suspected that she was a fucking siren. Her skin was so fair and her face was sprinkled with freckles. Her vibrant hair set his desire for her on fire. She would be incredible to capture. He could barely read her demeanor; he was so distracted by how exquisite and unique her beauty was. She hadn't put on any make-up like the rest of them and she hadn't worn something slinky and provocative, like the first few.

She was nervous, that was obvious when she dropped her clipboard and even now as she bit her lip, still uncomfortable under his stare; he knew he could break through that though.

Fuck. He knew he would enjoy breaking through that.

He was here for a reason, and the reason wasn't his choice, wasn't up to him.

He would still use her though, for his next project, he had no doubt. Once he got his mother's portrait taken care of, she would be his.

Breaking his gaze from her, he looked down at the photos in front of them, shuffling them for a moment to compose himself and get on with this farce. He looked up again, unable to control his eyes and stop them from going back to the siren on the end.

"What's your name?" he asked her pointedly, before he could stop himself.

"Ellie," she replied softly, her words registering in slow motion as he found himself enthralled by the movement of her mouth.

"Ellie..." he repeated slowly. In retrospect, he could see that how he repeated her name made it sound like a question, as though he didn't recognize it or why she was here, instead of the statement of awe that it was, which explained her subsequent response.

"I'm so sorry; It's Elsa. My name is Elsa Carter," she nervously elaborated, "but you can call me Ellie."

And just like that, the giant bucket of reality dumped ice water over every fiery thought that had just run through his mind. For a instant, his mind went blank with rage for the second time this week; Jack Carter had screwed him once, and now again, the man had managed to unintentionally fuck with his mind. The beautiful, albeit slightly awkward and clumsy, woman standing in front of him was mesmerizing. Everything about her had ensnared him from the second he saw her, and now, again, the joke was on him. This stunning siren was Jack's daughter; she was the reason he wasn't in possession of his mother's portrait, even if it was all Jack's doing, and she was going to pay.

"Elsa Carter," he drawled out slowing, testing her name on his lips, "it's a pleasure to meet you." The smile that he sent her was enticing and alluring, but if she had looked closely, if she had known what to look for; she would have seen the danger hiding behind the friendly facade.

"It's a pleasure to meet you too, Mr. ahh... Shoot. I'm sorry, I don't know who you are," she rambled on, her face flushing as her mouth clearly worked faster than her brain could think.

Tristan couldn't help the chuckle that escaped him at her awkwardness, kicking himself for how easily she was able to get underneath his skin without even trying.

No, this was unacceptable.

She was dangerous – not that he could imagine it based on her demeanor these past two minutes, but then again, he would never have expected a man of Jack Carter's stature and personality to blackmail him either. No, no one in this family could be trusted that was for damn sure. Who knows what their plan was? Maybe it was to blackmail him even further now that they, or at least Jack, knew his identity? For what, he couldn't fathom... more pieces? Money? Fame? It didn't matter; he needed to be on his game and he couldn't afford to be distracted by this woman no matter how much he wanted to be.

Acknowledging that want had him shifting in his seat, trying to adjust how uncomfortably tight she'd made his jeans feel.

Dammit, Tristan, you're a fucking pro at this, so start acting like it.

His lips thinning into a hard line, his eyes narrowed on string of women in front of him as he stood up, relieving the pressure on his annoyingly physical response to *her*. Walking over to the beginning of the line, he stood directly in front of the first blond who had entered the room, looking her up and down. Normally, he would be assessing the models to see if they were the right fit for his piece and to see their response to being in such close proximity with him, except this time, it was just for show. He eyed the voluptuous blond, who not only enjoyed the attention, but craved it, her breathing becoming deeper to accentuate the rise and fall of her chest. Normally, he would have been paying attention, if for no other reason than to be amused by the blatant attempt to seduce him into choosing her; this time, he couldn't help but find the woman tacky. The only thing that he could focus on was in the periphery of his vision, watching Ellie's reaction, out of the corner of his eye, to every move that he made.

He could see that she had stepped out a little farther from the line to see what he was doing, unconcerned with her blatant curiosity of his interest in the other models. In comparison, the two brunettes next to the blond number one, just stared straight ahead at Morgan, intentionally ignoring the attention he was giving to the first model. Moving down the line, those same two brunettes responded in the exact same way to him – by subtly trying to emphasize their physical attributes, or catching his eyes with a look that said they were eager to give him more.

So far, Ellie had done nothing but watch; she'd given no hint that she was as affected by him as he was by her and that pissed him off. The third woman in line, one of the brunettes, was particularly suggestive with her body language, so Tristan decided to take his assessment a little farther to see if he could get some reaction out of the siren. His hands came up to thread his fingers through the model's hair. For a moment, even she seemed surprised by his action, but she transitioned quickly into an eager player. She licked her lips, giving him a sultry smile before letting her head fall back against the slight pressure of his hands; she played the part perfectly for what he'd wanted to see. She looked enraptured by his touch, and he began to lean in close. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ellie's jaw drop slightly, her mouth parting slightly and eyes widening.

God, he wanted nothing more than to kiss that innocent look of surprise right off of her face.

Ellie's tongue darted out to lick her lower lip before pulling it in to bite on lower lip anxiously. The unconscious movement making his erection painfully hard against the firm denim of his Rag & Bone jeans. Tristan had to bite his own lip from groaning out loud.

What he wouldn't give to taste her, to pull that softly plump lower lip into his own mouth.

Shit, he was such a moron. The shot of anger that ran through him at his apparent lack of control pushed him farther than he would have normally gone in an audition. He closed the space between his face and that of the model, whose head he was still holding. Leaning in, he was about to let his lips graze the model's jawline, when a split second before he kissed her, the damn siren dropped her clipboard. Again.

The noise and her embarrassment shattered the moment. Tristan immediately stepped back from the woman in front of him and watched with pleasure as Ellie

chaotically tried to gather everything back up from the floor; finally standing, to reveal that her face had turned beet red with mortification.

Now that was what he was looking for.

He had craved her reaction to him; he had craved to unnerve her like she had unknowingly done to him. A brief glance at the model who he'd just been entangled with showed a smug smile spread over her face, not too much bigger than the smiles on the rest of the women in line, confidently believing that there was one less person that they had to worry about losing this gig to.

With a smile on his face, he walked down to the end of the line, past all the other models, to stand right in front of Elsa.

That was his first mistake.

Being so close to her only made her effect on him even worse. The subtle smell of warm vanilla permeated his nostrils, intensifying his arousal.

God, she smelled delectably sweet.

His gaze captured her vibrant green eyes, and he knew that his desire was etched across his features; he was surprised when she didn't back away; for some reason, he had expected her too. But no, she stood her ground and stared back, even though color flooded her cheeks again, she didn't drop his gaze. Her lips parted again and Tristan's fist clenched as it took every fiber of his being not to lean down and take her mouth, wondering if it would taste as warm and sweet as she smelled.

She was too much, he needed to distance himself before he lost all control.

He just wanted a little more, to be a little closer. Holding her gaze, he leaned in ever so slowly so that he didn't startle her, leaned in next to her ear, feeling the heat or desire and anticipation radiate off of her, unsure of what he was going to do next.

"My name is Tristan Black, but don't worry, Miss Carter, you're going to get to know me very well," he whispered huskily into her ear. Moving his face away from hers, he stepped back, looking down the line.

"Thank you for coming, ladies. That will be all," he said unemotionally, watching the looks of shock and horror cross over their faces, realizing that they had lost the audition to the awkward and clumsy redhead.

The same redhead who didn't even realize that his statement implied that she was to stay. Ellie ducked her head and had barely turned to move towards the door, when Tristan reached out with a vise-like grip on her wrist.

Another mistake.

The softness of her skin underneath the few fingertips that managed to reach underneath her blazer, burned him. She was on fire; or maybe he was. Her breath caught at the first touch of his hand, her face jerking back to face him. Quickly dropping her arm before he really did something that he couldn't control or would regret, he let his gaze sear into her, making what he said next very clear.

"Not you," Tristan said, his voice silky smooth, demanding her presence.

The reserved half of the group walked out in disappointment, the rest, especially the one brunette who had good cause to believe she might be chosen, stalked out of the room, giving him the evil eye as they went. The first blond even had the nerve to wink at Morgan sitting back behind the table, with the hope that maybe he might be able to do something for her – *or that she might be able to do something for him*. Finally, it was just Ellie and him left standing, while Morgan watched the whole scene play out in front of him with intense interest.

“Wonderful,” Tristan said, breaking the silence, taking Ellie’s clipboard from her and strolling back over to the table where Morgan sat.

He made brief eye contact with Morgan as he sat the clipboard down in front of him, choosing to ignore the perplexed and questioning look that Morgan returned. What had just happened wasn’t typical for Tristan; Pierce, maybe, but not Tristan. Usually, he just sat behind the table and watched Pierce make all the models either excited or uncomfortable with his blatantly sexual overtures. Tristan usually kept his distance during the audition, and he definitely didn’t this time, and he was sure that Morgan was going to ask him about it.

“Miss Carter,” he began, turning back to his siren.

She’s not yours. Yet.

The thought brought a devious smile to his face as he walked back over to her.

“We’ll continue the process tomorrow. Come to one fifty-seven west fifty-seventh street tomorrow at noon,” he instructed quietly, keeping some distance from her, and ignoring the cough that came from behind him, from Morgan.

He was already going to be in pain for the rest of the afternoon; he’d already let himself be taken unawares by her. He needed some space.

“Oh, ok. Of course,” she stuttered, “is that it? For today? I mean, do you have any questions for me? Do I need to fill anything out? Well, I mean, I know I filled out those other forms, but... I’m sorry, I’m rambling.”

She stopped and laughed at herself. Tristan wanted nothing more than to be able to silence her with a kiss.

Soon.

“That’s it for today, Miss Carter,” he clarified. “I will see you tomorrow.”

“Of course, thank you so much,” she said, gracing him with a gorgeous smile that lit up her emerald eyes, “oh, you can call me Ellie. Miss Carter is just... well, just call me Ellie.”

Her hand came up to cover her mouth as she realized that she was rambling again. Mumbling a thank you, she turned and walked out of the room and Tristan was pretty sure he heard her stumble as soon as the door shut behind her; he couldn’t help himself from laughing.

“What was that all about?” Morgan’s voice cut through his thoughts.

Morgan was always so damn nosy.

“What do you mean?” Tristan replied, trying to play down his actions.

“All...that...” Morgan responded vaguely, gesticulating with his arms, trying to refer to what had just happened between Tristan and the models.

“It was nothing.”

The look Morgan gave him at his answer said that he didn’t believe him, and Tristan couldn’t afford any questions, or worse, having Morgan tell the rest of the guys how he had just behaved.

“Pierce wasn’t here to make them squirm. How can I judge if they are right for the piece if all they do it stand there? I needed to see some sort of reaction from them, and without Pierce, that left me to provoke it,” he continued with his explanation, coolly.

“I see,” Morgan responded, clearly processing Tristan’s response, wondering if it was just a little too believable.

“What?” Tristan pushed back, daring his business partner to question him.

“Nothing,” Morgan replied, his hands raising in mock submission before continuing. “So, what was up with the girl you picked though? Not usually your style.”

Tristan turned away from his friend, his jaw clenching in annoyance at having to explain everything that he had just done.

“I don’t know. Figured I’d try something different for this stupid competition that Pierce signed us up for. None of the others intrigued me,” he responded casually as he began to gather the minimal things that he had brought with him, including the forms that the models had filled out. His blood fired up at the thought of just how much she had intrigued him.

“Well, she was certainly different than the rest, that’s for sure,” Morgan said with a chuckle, “Elsa Carter...any chance she’s related to Jack Carter? The man who has your mom’s portrait.”

Fuck.

“I have no idea,” Tristan, turned to face Morgan, trying to reply as nonchalantly as possible, “it’s a pretty common name. Who knows, maybe she’s related to Jay-Z and Beyoncé, too.” His sarcastic retort might have been too much of a protest against the connection but he couldn’t take it back.

Morgan and he locked eyes and stared at each other for a moment, each trying to assess the truth of what the other was thinking; Tristan, daring Morgan to contradict him. A few seconds later, Morgan let his gaze fall with a heavy sigh.

“I hope you know what you are doing.”

Well, it wasn’t like he had much of a choice.

“Winning, that’s what I’m doing,” Tristan responded with a confident smile as he started walking towards the door. “Thanks for arranging everything, man. Talk soon.”

“Oh hey!” Morgan exclaimed just before Tristan made it safely through the doorway, “did I hear you give her your apartment address?”

Fuck.

It wasn’t a codified rule, but there was a general assumption throughout the group that models weren’t to be taken to their private residences; too many potential problems, too much information to be gleaned. What if they came back after the modeling contract period was up? No, there was too much that could go wrong which is why they never did it.

Plus, it would have given the women an even greater sense of attachment to them, which was not what they were going for – or, at least he wasn’t.

But, this time, he had. He had asked her to come to his apartment, his home, and Morgan had heard.

“I rented space in the Park Hyatt,” Tristan replied, thinking quickly on his feet.

The Park Hyatt hotel sat below One57 and basically shared the same address.

“I see,” came Morgan’s hesitant response.

Tristan waited for another second to see if Morgan would question him again before walking out of the door, hoping that with some thought, Morgan would choose to believe him and forget about the whole thing.

Hopping in a cab, Tristan anxiously waited to get back to his place so that he could take a cold shower and punish his body for its traitorous thoughts.

The Artist's Touch

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