

Chapter 169 The Truth

Iris was all smiles and pleasantries when I met her at our dining room. I'd instructed the staff to serve coffee, tea, and snacks for our little meeting. I sensed Iris's energy in a small, hazy way when we sat down across from each other at the table, but it was difficult to read.

Each individual I interacted with, it seemed, had a different pattern to their emotions.

Alexander, for example, felt his feelings deeply and intensely. His touch provided incredibly clear information to me, and was overwhelming in its capacity to inhabit my body. Whereas Nina's emotions were more... swirly and uncertain.

Iris was the first stranger I was trying out my gift with. And as I expected, trying to understand her inner world felt like attempting to read a foreign language. I also hadn't touched her yet, and wasn't sure if I could or would do so. Touch helped a lot, and certainly made the perceptions much clearer.

"So," Iris mumbled down into her teacup. "You want to talk to me about Alexander's thing, right, about his mother?"

"That's right. Are you ready to talk about it now? I have just a couple questions I want to ask you. That's all."

She set down her teacup and cleared her throat. "Sure, sure. Yeah, I'm ready. Go ahead."

And then she smiled and made eye contact with me, and I perceived a blast of emotion from her. I felt it like a surge of adrenaline. And I saw a black, chaotic aura begin to buzz around her. Panic. Anxiety. Nerves.

She was bracing herself to start lying to me.

"Iris, before I ask you any questions, I want to tell you something about myself."

She tilted her head, curious. "Alright..."

"I have been blessed with a skill. It allows me to tell when someone I am speaking with is being untruthful. Or even... planning on doing so."

Now her face flushed bright red. And another surge of panic flooded through her.

"Please don't worry, Iris. I only want to help. Before we talk about the case, will you just tell me... why are you so anxious right now?"

Her jaw slackened, and her round eyes went wider than wide.

"I promise you I am not judging. Just tell me why you're afraid. Please. Let's start with that."

Iris looked down at her hands. "Hm. Alright. It's just... if I tell you guys everything... will I have to leave? I'm afraid that I will no longer be useful to Alexander and then... I have been so comfy here, and the doctors help me a lot..." She trailed off.

"Iris, please look at me." She hesitated, but warily met my eyes.

She looked spooked. And felt even more afraid and scattered than before.

"Alexander is not going to kick you out tomorrow if you tell me the whole story about this today. He's grateful for the care you took for his mother years ago, and if you need medical care here, then we will have you stay until you have recovered. I promise you."

She gave me a long, hard stare. But I felt the panic and anxiety start subsiding.

Too bad I needed to swing back in the other direction now.

"I do need you to tell me the truth though, Iris. Whatever it is you've been holding back. We're doing this today. And I do not want to sound like I am threatening you or anything like that, but just know – I will know if you are lying."

Iris gulped, nodded again, then said, "Alright. I'll tell you."

"At the time, I didn't know who she was. I didn't even put it all together till I was back here again, and watching TV news, and saw her face..."

"It was Scarlet, though. Alexander's stepmother, she's the Queen now. Well, I don't know about now. Now she's a fugitive or something. But I saw her on the TV and realized – that's the lady. The one I started seeing around the palace all the time, when Alexandra was getting sick. I didn't know who she was. She was just... around. She was pretty, in a scary way. Red lips, dark hair, and the whitest teeth. She looks different now of course, she's older now, but... that's her..."

"And you saw Scarlet do something?"

Iris nodded up and down in slow motion. "Yes. Mm-hmm. That was when it started."

"What did she do?"

"I was going to fetch some lunch and tea from the kitchen. Scarlet – she stopped me just outside the kitchen doors. I, um... I took the tray right from her. I knew she was not a servant. I didn't know why she was doing that, but she was bossy and said, 'Here it is, and off you go—' or something like that. I shouldn't have done it. But I gave it to Alexandra. I think she only drank some of the tea, so that has to be what made her sick. It was after that... just a few minutes, maybe, I'd only turned my back... Alexandra said, 'I feel strange,' and then... she was throwing up blood..."

Iris put her elbows on her knees and let her face fall down into her hands.

I got the sense that she was stalling.

"What else, Iris? What happened after? We need to know that, too."

"Mm-hmm. Alright. I... There's a second dumb thing I did. I probably should've run to get help, that's a thing I've thought about. But I was frozen for some reason. I couldn't bring myself to touch her. But I kept calling her name, hoping she'd wake up. And then I stopped doing that. But I just stood there and stared at all the blood. I didn't wanna see it, but there it was, and I couldn't look away. I don't know how long I stayed. But then the key turned in the door, and I was still frozen, frozen in place, and then in they came..."

"They?"

"Scarlet. And she had a man with her."

"What did the man look like? Had you seen him before?"

Iris frowned. "No. Never. And I don't know... Um, not tall-tall like Alexander, but tall. Dark hair. I do remember... he had blue eyes. That, I saw later, when he was, um, holding me..."

"What did the two of them do – they must have seen you?"

Iris nodded. "Yeah. They saw me." Her eyes flicked up and down my face now, giving me some kind of appraisal.

"What?"

"You say that you can tell if I am lying, right? Can you also tell if I am not lying? Cuz there's not a lot more of the story, but it's... I don't know, I don't want you to think I am still keeping something secret. I promise I'll tell you. I just... either I remember it wrong, or the things they said I just don't understand. It doesn't really make sense, but it's all I know, I swear."

This was an opportunity.

"Iris, if I touch you – like, just place my fingertips on your wrist or hand – I would be able to tell something like that with more certainty. Contact helps me to perceive emotions more clearly. If you would like, you could tell me the story while I touch your hand, and if you tell the truth, I will know and I will believe you."

Iris juggled this thought around in her mind, squinting at me with critical eyes. I thought she was going to say no. But she surprised me, leaning across the table and reaching out her hand.

Before I could hesitate, I took hold of it.

And – WHOA – Iris was an absolute tornado of emotions.

I was very grateful when she started speaking again. And got through the rest of the story fast.

"Scarlet said, 'Well, get her,' and finally I un-froze. I ran in the direction of the bathroom. Like that was going to get me anywhere. But the man got me, he took hold of my dress from the back, he hooked his fingers into the collar, and pulled me around to look at him. That's when I saw his eyes, that's why I remember them being blue. Then I heard a metal clinking sound.

"But then, Scarlet said, 'Wait...' and he said, 'No time to wait.' Then she said, 'Red.' Who knows why. But then the man got crazy loud and said something like, 'DON'T CALL ME THAT,' and then there was the gunshot. It was so loud, and ringing, but I still heard Scarlet screaming, too. Just the voice, not words. And then footsteps. And... I think I was being dragged, maybe, by my ankles..."

"And then I woke up at the hospital. I promise that is all I really can remember. And... I'm sorry. That... that I lied before. I just didn't want... um..."

I pulled my hand away from Iris's, and felt immediate, immense relief as I distanced myself from her strange and dark energy. "It's okay, Iris. Really. It's fine."

I did believe that Iris wasn't lying with this story.

And I believed she really didn't know who the man that shot her was.

But I did.