

Tempt Me

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At some point during her going away party, people Nina had never met began arriving. Which was fine, since she hadn't been in New York long enough to acquire a roomful of friends. Even the people she did know were more Stacy's friends than hers. But it was sweet of Stacy to throw the party just the same.

Nina was standing by the iPod dock in the corner, fooling around with the music, when Stacy walked over, a wicked grin on her face.

"Nina, I have someone I'd like you to meet," she said, turning halfway around to smile at a man who'd followed her across the room. "Ian Sinclair, meet the woman of honor, Nina Valentine."

Stacy winked at Nina and disappeared back into the group of people standing around the drinks table.

Six foot something of gorgeous manliness stood before her in perfectly tailored suit pants, crisp white shirt rolled up to his elbows and unbuttoned at the throat, and a loosened lavender tie at his neck. Early-thirties, dark wavy hair and Paul Newman eyes, not to mention the lean body of an athlete.

Were men like him even allowed into BYOB parties at rundown fifth floor walk-ups in the East Village? She only hoped he wasn't some Wall Street guy. Corporate types left her cold.

"Nice tie," she said, then immediately worried her attempt at sassiness would be taken as sarcasm.

"You think?" he asked, looking down at the article in question. "I wasn't sure about it at first, but in the end I decided to subvert the usual masculine color paradigm."

Nina grinned, already charmed. "I'd say you're pulling it off."

"I appreciate the compliment, especially coming from the guest of honor. I wondered whose party I was crashing. I came with my buddy Phil straight from work," he said, gesturing toward the only other man in the room wearing a button-down shirt and tie.

"Most of these people are Stacy's friends, or people she works with at the restaurant she manages. I haven't been in the city long enough to fill a room, so it's just as well we have crashers," Nina said, laughing ruefully. "Where do you work?"

"At a law firm uptown."

A lawyer. Nina's heart sank. What would she have in common with a lawyer? Then again, what did she need to have in common with him? They were just talking after all.

"Not too impressed with lawyers, huh?" he asked, and Nina wished she weren't so transparent. But he was smiling good-naturedly, so he must not have been too offended.

“Sorry, I guess I’ve just been around artistic types too long. I’m not sure I’ve ever spoken to an actual lawyer.”

“Well, don’t judge us too harshly. Some of us can be pretty good company,” he said, winking at her before taking a sip of his beer.

A frisson of heat ran through her at his flirtatious reply. Nervously she started to take a sip of wine, only to discover her glass was empty.

“Can I get you a refill?” he asked.

“That would be great. Something red, please,” she said, relieved he’d broken the tension.

Smiling, Ian took her glass and headed across the room to the makeshift bar outside the galley kitchen door. Quickly, darting a look to make sure he wasn’t watching, she moved over a few steps to check her reflection in the mirror hanging across the room.

She’d arrived in New York with the same long, slightly wavy hair she’d had for years, but a few weeks ago her hairdresser had sat her in the chair and met her gaze in the mirror.

“I have women who pay hundreds of dollars a year to get your gorgeous sable color, but you need a style. Let me make you look like you belong in Manhattan.”
Nina had nervously acquiesced, and when Sharon was finished, Nina had gone from an attractive duck to a swan, or at least a sexier duck. Sharon had given her long layers and bangs that just brushed her eyebrows.

“There,” the hairdresser had declared, spinning Nina around in her swivel chair until she faced the mirror. “Now we can see your pretty heart-shaped face. It’s the Zooey Deschanel look, and you’re at least as pretty as her.”

“No need to go overboard, Sharon,” Nina had laughed, but she’d loved it.

Feminine yet sophisticated, her new look made her more confident, especially tonight in her black pencil skirt, silvery silk halter top and black knee-high boots with three-inch heels. This was the best she ever looked, so it would have to be good enough for Ian.

Quickly she returned to where they’d been standing and watched as Ian made his way back to her with her wine and a fresh beer for himself. He had an athlete’s physical ease with his body, and even in his professional clothes she could see the play of muscles as he moved.

“So when do you leave our fair city?” he asked, handing her the glass.

“On Wednesday. Somehow I have to get everything I own into a rental car. Then it’s back to New Hampshire for me.”

“What’s in New Hampshire?”

Nina couldn’t help making a face. “My hometown, my mother. Grim reminders of my high school years. The usual.”

“Nina!” Her friend Kelly from the frame shop was suddenly beside her, laughing and hugging her.

“I didn’t think you’d make it,” Nina said, forcing herself to pay attention to her co-worker, though she remained utterly aware of Ian. He continued to watch her, his gaze dark and intent.

“I had to come,” Kelly said, excitable as always. “I was afraid I wouldn’t see you before you left. You would not believe the people who’ve interviewed for your job. I’m going to hate whoever takes your place.”

Nina introduced Kelly and Ian, hoping Kelly would leave gracefully. No such luck.

“Carol and Stan are here, too,” Kelly added, gesturing toward the bar.

Nina pasted a smile on her face. Obviously she had to go say hi. God willing, she’d be able to pick up again with Ian in just a few minutes.

“Sorry, I’d better go play hostess,” she said, smiling apologetically at him. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“Oh, I won’t,” he replied, and his smile was enough to make her believe him.

Ian watched Nina get dragged away from him and tried to quell his frustration.

Taking a long pull on his beer, he contented himself with watching her while he considered whether he’d be able to get her to come home with him. Was it possible to steal a person away from her own going-away party?

She was laughing with a group of people now, her glossy, dark hair occasionally obscuring her face. Then she’d turn toward the guy standing to her left and he’d see her expression, her eyes bright with humor. Every so often she glanced over at him and smiled, as if to say she hadn’t forgotten him, so he was pretty sure they’d be able to pick up where they left off, sooner or later. He just had to be patient.

Christ, her body was unbelievable. Curves in all the right places, incredible shoulders. If she wasn’t leaving so soon he’d have considered restraining himself tonight and asking her out for dinner, but there wasn’t time for the usual dating rituals. Besides, he’d probably explode sitting across from her through an entire meal, pretending he wasn’t thinking about getting her naked.

His friend Phil, a junior partner in another law firm, sidled over, beer in hand, and smirked at him.

“You realize you’ve been standing here for fifteen minutes, watching that woman like you’re about to drag her off to your cave?”

“That’s exactly what I’m hoping to do,” he said, reluctantly shifting his gaze away from Nina. “Dude,” Phil said, with a pointed look, “just relax and try not to look like you’re gonna take out every guy that talks to her. You need to try to pass for a civilized human being or you’ll scare her off.”

“What? I’m not...” he began before trailing off. He let out a long sigh. “Point taken. But in ten more minutes I’m moving in.”

“God speed, buddy,” Phil said, clinking his bottle to Ian’s before draining his own. “Need another?” he asked, his body already turned toward the bar.

“Thanks, I’m good,” Ian replied. He needed to stay sharp tonight.

Nina finally broke away and headed back through the crowd, which had gotten crazier as people drank and danced. Ian stood watching her from the back of the room, and her heart beat a mile a minute at the hungry look in his eye. This guy was hers for the taking, if she had the nerve to follow through. She wasn’t sure she did yet. He was so much more than she was used to – insanely good looking, confident, outrageously sexy. In other words, out of her league, though the way he was looking at her, he didn’t seem to know it.

“Sorry about that,” she said when she’d reached him. “I didn’t think I’d be gone so long.”

“No worries. This is your party after all.”

“True, but I think that about does it for the people I know here, so we should be safe.”

He smiled at that and his gaze drifted down, taking her in with one thorough, appreciative glance, and suddenly she didn’t feel so safe. She felt as if she were on the brink of something deliciously dangerous.

“So, you were saying something about leaving Wednesday in a rented car?”

“Oh, right,” she said, relieved he was taking the conversational lead. “Well, everything but my paintings,” she said, gesturing at the walls. “I’ll come back and get them next time I visit. The ones I haven’t given to Stacy, anyway.”

Ian looked at the painting nearest to them, then at the others around the room.

“You did these?” he asked, moving closer to the one behind her.

One of her moodier pieces.

“Yes, this is from my mad as hell period,” she said, making a sweeping gesture, like a tour guide in a museum. “Note the frantic brush strokes, the bright slashes of red.”

He looked at her speculatively. “You don’t need to joke about them. I’m no expert, but even I can see these are the real deal.”

Nina ducked her head, embarrassed by his straightforward compliment. Her art meant everything to her, but lately she’d begun losing faith in herself. She was only twenty-seven, and already she felt washed up.

“Oh, thanks. I guess I’m a little too quick with the self-deprecation. I’m just a little worn down,” she admitted. “Being a starving artist gets old after a while. But I’m not sorry I came. New York always seemed like the ideal place to paint, and I still think that. Maybe my timing was just off.”

“Looks like mine is too. Just my luck to meet you right before you leave.”

“I’m not gone yet,” Nina replied, the words leaving her mouth before she realized what she was saying.

Mortified, knowing her face was blazing, she looked down at her wine with utter concentration. What was wrong with her? She was practically throwing herself at the man and she’d known him less than an hour.

Ian said nothing. When she dared look at him again she saw he’d gone utterly still. His gaze moved from her eyes to her mouth.

“No, you’re not gone yet,” he repeated, his low voice sending a shiver along her spine.

It was the bedroomiest voice she’d ever heard, and the sound of it affected her like a touch. Just like that she was fully aroused, her nipples tightening, her pulse racing.

Slowly he walked toward her, pressing her back against the wall, his hands on her hips as his mouth descended.