

Chapter 9

Iris:

My heart raced against my ribcage as I walked out of the building.

I couldn't help the pain that I felt in my chest after our encounter, and the thing was, I hated that it wasn't going to be our only one. The man was my partner, and until my father was well, and I wasn't stupid, I knew that it wouldn't take a day or two for him to completely heal, the two of us were going to have to keep working together. And that was something that I dreaded more than I can dare to admit.

The fact that he was yet to know about Lilian was something, but the fact that he would actually find out about her after years of keeping her away from him was another thing. I didn't even know what his reaction would be, nor did I know whether or not I wanted him to meet her to begin with. I couldn't be selfish, I couldn't deprive her of her father because of our past.

The pain that I felt at that idea was one that I couldn't find myself describing. I was scared of him finding out about her, and that was something that I couldn't admit out loud. I was scared of him getting into a custody war over her, and I was more scared that he could end up taking her away from me after everything that I did to keep her safe.

I got inside my car and let out the tears that I forced myself to contain as I stood in front of him. I was only thankful that he didn't ask too many questions; otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to answer them nor would I be able to actually talk about them without tearing up.

The man not only broke my heart, but he also managed to break my confidence in myself, and that alone took almost a year to rebuild again, and I knew that it was still shaken. I was only forced to keep myself contained and strong because I didn't want to end up hurting my daughter with my emotional breakdowns. She didn't have her father, and the last thing that I wanted to do was break her confidence in herself. Therefore, I forced myself to build a wall in my heart, a barrier that contained my emotions and stood as strong as a warrior for her.

My phone rang, breaking my train of thoughts, and checking the phone, I forced myself to take a deep breath, ignoring the pain that I was dealing with before I answered my mother. I knew that it would be dad

who was calling to check on everything, and I didn't want him to hear me being in pain. The man needed to regain his own strength, and the last thing that I wanted was for him to weaken because of me.

"Hello," I said, answering the phone, forcing my tone to be normal. It pained me that I had to act the way that I was with my own parents, but I couldn't be blamed. On one hand, I tried to protect my father from being in pain, and on another, I didn't want to show myself as weak in front of my mother who was often sure to break me for her simple sense of satisfaction.

"How did it go?" Mom asked, not bothering to greet me. I could hear dad complaining in the background, but she didn't seem to care, not that I expected her to anyway. The woman wouldn't really care whether or not he liked it. As long as things went according to what they wanted, she wouldn't bother. I doubted that she even cared about how I felt about anything or that she cared about how things went. I knew that she simply called because it was dad who asked her to.

"It went well. The meeting went with no trouble though Dean did ask about dad; therefore, I do suggest expecting a call from him." I said, choosing to keep my formality. Our relationship as a mother and daughter has been formal for years now, and therefore, I was rarely ever surprised when I saw that she didn't care about how I felt.

"Thank you for letting us know, we would be sure to take the call in consideration." Mom said and I hummed in response. There was no point in dragging the conversation more than it needed to go. It was a formal relationship based on mutual respect, and that was something that I was grateful for. "Where are you off to?"

"To pick up my daughter. You know, as her mother, it is my duty to care for her as my child." I said, and she took a deep breath, taking in my silent message. "If there is nothing that you called to tell me, mother, I would please like to hang up. I am driving, and I need to focus on the road as it seems to be darkening."

"What do you mean?" Mom asked, and I looked at the clouds, frowning when I saw that they seemed to be growing heavy. The last thing I needed was for Lillian to be at school when it rained. She hated thunderstorms, and judging by what I was seeing, it seemed to me that a storm was going to hit.

"I think we are expecting a thunderstorm," I said, watching as most of the cars slowed down at the sight of the clouds. Some even pulled over, and I shook my head before taking a deep breath as I drove to her school. Thankfully, no rain started pouring just yet, and the school was very close to the company. How ironic was it that he moved his building a few blocks away from my little one's school. But I shouldn't be surprised, the area was one of the classiest, and the school was one of the best in the city, hence why I chose to apply for her here.

"Are you going to be able to drive to the house if a storm hits? If not, you can either come to the hospital or go to our place. I know that it is close to Lillian's school." Mom suggested, her tone genuinely concerned and I couldn't help the small smile that formed on my lips at that. It was moments like this when I knew that despite her harsh behavior, she still did care for me as her daughter. She may not often show it, but when she did, it was in the most genuine situations.

"So far, there has been no signs of rain. But hopefully I will be able to make it home before then. If not, I will come to the hospital. It would be good for dad to see Lillian anyway." I said, and mom hummed in response.

"Alright, stay safe and keep me posted on your arrival." My heart swelled at that, and I couldn't help the nod that I did despite knowing that she couldn't technically see me. But it was an action that happened spontaneously, and that was something that I knew that I didn't want to change. If anything, I knew that it happened simply because I was well aware that she was being genuinely concerned about me.

"Okay, mom, I will." I said, frowning when the sound of thunder filled my ears as the sky lit up for a second before it started pouring. "For now, I need to hang up."

"Stay safe." Mom said, sounding concerned. I knew that she would be calling me in a bit to check on me, it was moments like this when she broke down her walls, if a little, to show genuine concern.

"I will, mamma, don't worry." I said, "bye."

She hung up without responding, though I knew not to be worried. She wasn't the type to like byes and goodbyes. If anything, in her mind, these words often told her that things could end, and that was

something that she didn't like. She wasn't the type to like endings regardless of whether they were happy or sad. And in her mind, a goodbye was an ending, no matter what it was.

I stared at the sky for a few seconds before getting a call from Lillian's teacher.

"Ma'am..."

"I am aware that my daughter might be causing you a fuss right now, but tell her that mama is on her way." I said, assuring her teacher. "I am five to ten minutes away, okay?"

"Yes, Ma'am, thank you."

"You don't need to thank me. I should be the one thanking you." I said, slowing down as I saw that people were slowing down to ten or twenty as they drove, fearing the wind that picked up.

Shit...

"I'll be over in a bit, goodbye..."

"Mama?" Lillian asked, her eyes widening before she jumped in my arms. I wrapped my arms around her as I pulled her in for a hug only to be surprised when I saw Dean walking with the principal a few steps ahead.

"Are the kids all safe?" I heard him ask the principal who nodded.

"Yes, those whose parents managed to pick them up have left, and those who are still stuck are safe here." She said before Dean looked up to see me. He saw me carrying Lillian in my arms before he walked away from the principal to head toward me.

"Iris? What are you doing here?"

"The main question to ask is what are you doing here?" I asked before being able to stop myself. The idea of him having a child with Mariana was not something that I wanted to put in mind, especially not in the same school that my daughter was at.

"I own the school. When I saw the forecasts, I rushed here to ensure an evacuation. It was a bit too late when I arrived though." He said, looking at the window as another loud roar of thunder hit. Lillian hid her head on my chest as a scream escaped her lips. Taking sight of her,

Dean tensed for a second, his eyes showing more pain than I ever remembered seeing before.

"Mama..."

"Shhh, baby girl, momma is here." I said softly, kissing her temple, not wanting her to be scared. It was one of her fears as the sound of thunder was too loud for her liking. I was often the quiet kind of mother who refused yelling, I had enough of it during my marriage and it wasn't something that I wanted to deal with anymore.

"Yours?" He asked, making my heart race. This was not the right place for this. I knew that, but I also knew that there was no other right time for something like this. It wasn't going to be for him. He could easily resent her as a daughter, but at least I would know that he knew about her.

"Ours..." I said, looking down at my little blonde daughter who had her father's stubbornness, attitude, and eyes. "Lillian is our daughter, Dean..."



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