



## Chapter 12

I study Christian as I undo the clasp at my back, pulling my bikini top away and tossing it on the bed. God, I think, studying Christian as his back is turned, he got tall, and so broad.

I bend my knees, dipping down to undo the clasps of my shoes as I think that his size is not the only change. In so many ways Christian is a complete stranger to me. The way he talks to Frankie and Nico, for instance – he's so icy. I mean, they're all good-looking guys the same age, but it's completely obvious who the boss is.

How does he manage that, such raw power? It's so different from the charismatic, funny, easygoing guy I knew growing up.

I straighten up, stepping out of my shoes and quickly shimmying out of my g-string bottoms. Onto the bed they go as I grab for the shorts, stepping into them.

"So, if Nico's your cousin and your bodyguard," I ask, pulling the shorts up and smirking when they go up past my waist, "what's Frankie?"

"Frankie's not family," Christian replies after a moment, as if deciding how much he wants me to know. "But he's as good as. His family is... connected. And I've known him basically as long as I've been out of touch with you."

"Oh," I say, my eyebrows going up as I grab the sweatshirt and pull it over my head. "So...they're like...your friends."

"I don't have friends," Christian says, fast. My heart sinks to hear him say that.

"You've got me," I say, and I don't miss the way his shoulders go a bit



stiff. "You can turn around now," I add quietly.

Christian does turn, looking me up and down before a smirk finds his face. "You look..."

I shrug, laughing a little. "Like I'm drowning in fabric?" I hold up my arms to the side so he can see that they're not long enough to stick out the ends of the sweatshirt.

He laughs, stepping forward and beginning to roll up one of the sleeves so that my hand emerges. "You look like a tiny mouse," he corrects, his voice soft. "Why didn't you grow more?"

"Oh, I think you did enough of that for both of us," I say, grinning as I have to literally bend my head back on my neck to look up at him. He smirks again, but it doesn't last long – almost like his lips can't hold the smile.

Christian moves to my other arm and I let him, even though I'm obviously capable of rolling up my own sleeves. Just...something about letting him do it for me.

I don't know. I like it.

"Christian," I say softly, and he hums a little in the back of his throat, inviting me to ask. "Do you ever check your old email?"

He goes still for a second before he gives the fabric one last roll and drops my arm. "No," he says, definitive, a little abrupt. "Why?"

I shrug, looking down at the floor. "I sent you...a couple of emails when you first moved away," I say, which is...a massive understatement. "We missed you, you know. Why didn't you ever write back?"



Christian is silent for a long moment, and I look up again, meeting his eyes.

"I don't know what you think my life has been like since I left home, Iris," he says quietly, his voice so melancholy that it breaks my heart. "But it has not been...easy. There was no part of me that wanted any of my new life to touch you, or Damon. It's not that I didn't care – I just..."

He shakes his head, staring at me. I don't blink as I look into those familiar blue eyes, wishing he'd never gone away and built these new walls between us.

"It's okay," I whisper, nodding to him and pushing the sleeves of the sweatshirt up above my elbows. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Christian sighs again like that's not the whole story, his eyes falling as he takes a step towards me. But then he goes still and frowns, leaning forward again to stare at my arm. "What's this?" he murmurs, gently taking my wrist and turning my arm so he can peer at the inside of my elbow.

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