

Chapter 16

Frankie and Nico move quickly around the kitchen, assessing the supplies as I just stand here, looking down at my feet, trying to put the pieces of my reality back together.

Apparently, I stand there for a long time, because before I know it Frankie's pressing a hot mug of coffee into my hand. "Cream and sugar?" he asks, his voice quiet.

I look up into his face as my fingers close around the cup. "How did you know that?"

He smiles at me, and I can see the real sympathy in his eyes. "You seem like a cream and sugar kind of girl," he says. And then he winks at me and turns back to the kitchen. "I hope you like dry cereal! It's all we've got, until we can get some milk." 1

There's no time to reply, though, before Christian walks out of his room again, dressed in what looks like an incredibly expensive black suit. My lips purse a little in surprise, because I honestly hadn't realized that he'd dressed down last night. But today? Today he looks so handsome, and fashionable, and rich –

Honestly. It's...impressive.

Christian either doesn't notice my admiration or doesn't comment on it, moving past me into the kitchen and taking his own cup of coffee from Frankie's waiting hand. Black, of course.

He says a low word to Frankie and Nico then, and they look at him in surprise for a second before dropping what they're doing mid-task and moving out of the kitchen, heading down the hall towards their



bedrooms.

Then Christian turns and fastens his eyes on me, lifting one hand and beckoning me forward in a way that he...definitely learned from someone very, very powerful. I obey, stepping forward into the kitchen, nervous despite myself.

"Who knows that you're missing, Iris?" he asks quietly, taking a sip of his coffee. "Who is going to notice that you're gone?"

I look down at my coffee, a little surprised by the question. "How long am I going to be gone?" I ask.

"Let's start with today. We'll go from there. Who's going to notice today?"

"My professors will mark me absent," I answer honestly, still looking down. "Though...that's fine. I haven't missed any classes yet this semester."

"Who else?" he asks, his voice blank.

"My friend, Emi. She's probably already noticed something is up – we talk every day, and she'll have noticed that I didn't text to say I got home."

"Good," he says, and I look up at him now, suddenly worried that she's going to get wrapped up in this. But he moves on. "Who else?"

"Anthony," I say instantly, moving down my list of friends. I shift uncomfortably. "But, um...he was there last night. He's the bartender at the club."

"The one with the champagne?" Christian asks, quirkling an eyebrow.



I nod, solemn, and Christian nods too. "Who else?"

I blush a little with embarrassment that my social circle is so small. "That's it."

"Not Damon?" Christian asks, turning his head to the side.

"Damon is...busy," I reply. "He's a chef downtown. It's not like we're on bad terms or anything, he just won't notice today, at least. Over time..." I shrug, letting him know that he would notice eventually.

"And what about your –" he stops himself suddenly, glancing down at his coffee and taking a quick sip before starting again. "Do you have a boyfriend, who is going to notice?"

Slowly, I shake my head. "Not anymore."

Christian narrows his eyes at me. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that he already knows that I'm gone, Christian," I say quietly. "And that he's not my boyfriend anymore." I blush, already embarrassed, already dreading telling him what an idiot I am for loving a man who sold me to the mafia.

"And this boyfriend," Christian says, his voice derisive as he leans closer to me, studying my face. "Did he know you worked as a stripper? Did he let you?"

"Let me?" I snap, flicking my eyes up to him in a little glare. "I do what I want, Christian – at least until now, when you locked up in a penthouse. Steven didn't let or not let me do anything."

Christian smirks a little, I think pleased to see a little fire in me as he takes a long sip of his coffee. I do the same. "What I meant by that



question is, was he aware of the risk that you were putting yourself to in order to make money? And he didn't take any steps to make your situation any easier, so that you didn't have to work at a place like that to support yourself?"

"I needed the money, Christian," I say, defensive. Even after everything, I still refuse to look down on stripping as a profession. But I carefully sidestep mentioning what I needed the money for. "Dancing is lucrative, and it's the best thing I could find that brought in a lot of cash while still letting me attend school full time."



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