

Chapter 28

Suddenly, quite suddenly, it's all too much.

I burst into tears, burying my face in my hands again, sobs shaking my shoulders as I blubber against my palms. I start to cry so hard that I can't even catch my breath, and then I panic because I know these tough mafia guys are looking at me like I'm an idiot. But honestly, I can't even care – because Christian is asking me whether or not I want to save Steven's life, the man who tried to sell me into sex work, who is the whole reason I'm being held captive for my own protection...

Some part of me hears Christian saying something to Nico and Frankie, telling them to make themselves scarce for a moment while he has a word with me. But the majority of me is so focused on my disaster of a life that I jump when I feel a soft blanket settling around me.

I look up at Christian in surprise as he sits down next to me on the couch, slipping an arm around my shoulder. "It's all right," he murmurs, reaching a soft hand out to wipe the tears off my cheeks. I look around a little, but Frankie and Nico are gone.

I turn my face back to Christian, leaning into him a bit, still crying but shaking my head now because –

Because he's back. The Mafia King mask has been lifted away and my Christian is here now, his arm around my shoulders, softly wiping the tears from my cheeks. "I'm sorry," he murmurs, shaking his head at me, true grief on his face for everything he's making me give up. "I'm so sorry, Daisy. But it won't be so bad here. You'll be comfortable, and I'll take care of you."

"I don't want to be comfortable, Christian," I murmur, hiccupping

through my words as my tears start to subside. "I want to work – Steven aside, I liked my life. I liked going to school – I had dreams –"

Christian's face truly falls now, guilt in every line. And I don't have to say it, because he's realizing that he's taken those dreams away from me now.

"I'll make it up to you," he whispers. "But – you get it, right? Why I can't let you go out there?"

And I sigh, and lean against him, and rest my head against my old friend's chest. Because I do realize that he can't help it – that he's actually saving my life, when Steven is the one who destroyed it. Slowly I nod, letting him know that I understand.

But still...it's such a loss. Everything, my whole life, just wiped away.

We stay like that for a long time, Christian softly petting my hair as I cry myself out.

A few minutes later, when my tears subside, I sniff and pull myself up a little. I grimace when I look down at Christian's shirt. "I got you all wet," I murmur.

"I've survived worse," he says, a little twist of humor to his words as he offers me a tissue from the box on the coffee table.

I accept it, wiping at my nose as I study him, frowning a little. "Why are you only nice to me when those two aren't around?" I say, lifting my chin to gesture to wherever they went in the Penthouse.

Christian smirks, looking down the hallway towards the bedrooms. "Am I?"

"Yeah," I say, leaning forward and staring at him like it's obvious when he turns his attention back to me. "You're all big macho mafia guy when they're around," I say, and his smirk deepens. "But when they're not..." I turn my head to the side, considering him. "You're Christian again."

His smile fades away and he looks away from me, towards the windows. "I'm a different person in this world, Iris," he says quietly. "They expect me to be like this – the world expects, needs me to be like this. There is... a lot riding on me keeping it all together."

Grief sweeps through me then at the idea that I'm just another burden for his shoulders to bear.

But beyond that grief, real curiosity burns.

"Do you like it?" I ask quietly, and Christian turns to me, not understanding. I bite my lip. "Frankie told me...a little bit. About your world."

Christian frowns, clearly pissed that Frankie told me anything – but I reach out and put a hand on his arm.

"He didn't tell me anything big, Christian," I say, rolling my eyes. "Just – you know, where you've been for the past thirteen years. That you have ...brothers now? And a...a dad?"

A little bit of hope comes into my voice now, because Christian – he always mourned the fact that he didn't have a father like Damon and I did. And now he does.

"Is it everything you dreamed?" I ask quietly, hoping desperately for his sake that it is.

Christian stares at me again, his face unreadable, before he sighs and

scrapes his hand down over his face and starts to stand up.



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