

Chapter 29

"Where are you going?" I ask, confused and surprised as he heads around the coffee table, aiming for the kitchen.

"I'm getting us refills, Iris," he replies, his voice tired. "Because if we're going to have the family chat, I'm going to need another drink."

And, despite myself, I laugh.

Christian turns in the kitchen, looking at me over his shoulder, and the smile on his face when he hears me laugh...

Damn, but if it isn't a balm to my little sad heart.

Christian – making him smile. It had always been the best part of my day.

He brings the bottle of wine over with a second glass and sits quietly down on the sofa. Then he fills my half-full glass again, pouring a second for himself as he raises his eyes to mine.

"You still have to answer the question about your boyfriend," he says quietly, and before my heart can sink too deep he qualifies that statement. "But you can take until the morning to think about it. All right?"

"All right," I whisper, taking the glass he hands to me and staring down into the pretty golden wine.

"Now," Christian says, leaning back against the couch cushions and resting an arm over the back of the couch, raising his glass to me in a little toast. "Fill me in. What's Damon been up to?"

I look at him curiously for a moment, and then feel my lips turn up into a

smile.

Because Christian – he's being very sweet right now, isn't he? He knows I'm a wreck, and that I need to get my mind on something else for a minute so that I can relax and breathe. Christian's giving me that space by allowing me to talk about the thing I care about most: the people I love.

So, I launch into the story of my life with Damon – how sad we were the morning we woke up to find Christian gone, how bored we were in the weeks following when we didn't have anyone to play with all day. Christian laughs when I tell him about how the neighborhood girls tried to bribe me for his email address too, but I wouldn't give it.

Things are a little darker, though, as I tell of Damon's high school years. Of how he fell in with sort of a dark crowd once Christian wasn't there anymore, seeking the kind of connection the two of them had. Unfortunately, the only place Damon found that connection was in drugs and alcohol.

"It wasn't bad at first," I say, looking down into my empty glass as Christian refills it – the story is taking some time to tell, after all. "Just smoking weed after school and going to some parties on the weekends. But then he...he met more people, who got him into harder stuff. He did a semester at community college before he...fell off the map a little bit."

"That must have been really difficult," Christian murmurs, his eyes on me through every word of the story. "Did he...find his way back out?"

"Eventually," I say, glancing at my phone on the table, worried again that I'm missing texts from him. "He's been clean and sober for two years now. But...it's not always easy. He's in the restaurant industry too, which I know he loves, but I think drugs are more...available to him in his world than mine."

"Iris," Christian murmurs, leaning forward to look at me with a smirk. "You work in a strip club."

Suddenly I burst out laughing, realizing the truth of his statement. "Yeah," I say, cocking my head to the side and giving him a real smile. "But only part time, and I don't hang out with the bad girls."

Christian tilts his head back and laughs at this – really laughs. "Don't tell Frankie that not all strippers are bad girls," he says a moment later when he lifts his head to smile at me again. "You'll break his heart."

"What," I say, grinning and sipping from my glass of wine, starting to feel the alcohol do its work and bring a little buzz of cheer to my worn and weary heart, "you guys never met a stripper with a heart of gold?"

"Not until last night," Christian murmurs, shaking his head and smiling at me.

"Well," I say, leaning forward a little more, "you aren't looking very hard, then. A lot of really nice girls work at the club – it's good money! And hard work!"

"Iris," Christian sighs, tilting his head to the side, "I have a feeling that you view most things in the world like that. Even in the darkest cloud, you can find the silver lining."

"Yeah well," I say softly, resting my head against the sofa and gazing at him, "what's life without a little hope, Chris?" I observe him for a second, taking in the sharp lines of his face which look...honestly so weary for his young age.

He doesn't reply, just holds my gaze for a long time.