

## Chapter 30

"Christian," I murmur, leaning forward to peer into his face after we sit in silence for a too-long moment. "Do you...do you not have any hope in this world?"

He scowls a little, turning away from me and looking out at the dark city through the wide expanse of windows. "I don't even know what that means, Iris," he murmurs.

"It means...believing that there's good out in the world. That things, no matter how bad they look right now, are going to turn out for the better."

I study his profile as he stares away from me, and am struck again at how like and unlike this man is to the boy I knew. So much is the same – but the harsh lines, the rigid clench of his jaw, the way his mouth turns down in the corner...

He is so, so changed.

He sighs, startling me a little, which just makes me realize the intensity with which I was staring. And then he turns his eyes back to me. "If that's hope, then I guess no, I don't have a lot of it, Iris. This world is a...dirty, harsh place. After everything I've seen, there's not a lot of space for hope left."

My face softens as I stare back at my old friend, and to my surprise he starts laughing.

"What?" I say, unable to help myself.

"Stop pitying me, Iris," he says, shaking his head, still smiling. "You're my captive, I'm supposed to pity you, if there's someone here who's had it rough lately."

I grin, looking down at my wine glass, shaking my head. "I think you're wrong, Chris. I think there's plenty of room for hope in this world – I think you've just spent a lot of time in the dark."

"Ask Frankie and Nico if you don't believe me," Christian says, sighing and refilling his glass of wine. "They can tell you some stories that will knock the faith right out of you, too."

"Speaking of them, and stories," I say, bending my leg in front of me so that I can wrap an arm around it and rest my chin on my knee, "what am I supposed to tell them about me? And my relationship to you? They were surprised when they figured out that I'm...more than just a stripper to you."

Christian raises an eyebrow, looking back towards their bedrooms for a moment before turning his face back to me. "You don't have to tell them anything, Iris. They're not allowed to ask."

I laugh a little, and Christian's brows raise in surprise. "Just because they're not allowed to ask," I say, "doesn't mean they're not curious, and it doesn't mean they're not seeking the information. I want to be prepped. Besides, I live with them – I want to know what story I'm supposed to tell them."

Christian sighs, looking down into his glass of wine for a moment. I bite my lip, wondering what the hell he's going to say. Because, honestly, part of me...liked it a little bit when I found out that the boys thought Christian brought me home because he liked my performance so much.

"If it comes up," Christian says quietly, "tell them that you're my sister, Iris."

I scoff just slightly, which draws his eyes up to mine. "Christian, they

know I'm not your sister," I say, my voice rich with doubt. He smiles a little.

"It's not about whether or not they believe it, or whether or not you're my biological sister, Iris. It's about signaling to them precisely how they should treat you. How you stand with me."

My heart sinks and inwardly I stumble, trying to catch it before it crashes to the ground and smashes into a thousand pieces.

Seriously? A sister?

He views me as his sister?

"Oh," I hear myself say. "Um, why? What does that mean to them?"

Christian starts reply some nonsense about Mafia families and the rules about how they treat members of their family, but I barely hear him, because I'm too busy scolding myself inwardly. I mean, seriously, what did I think I was ever going to be to him? Of course he only views me in a sisterly light.

Besides, what did I...

...well, what did I want him to say? How do I hope he views me?



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