

## Chapter 8

"Whoa!" Christian says, catching Iris before she can fall to the ground. He holds her steady, letting her find her feet. She looks up at him apologetically with those wide blue eyes, a perfect pink blush spreading over her cheekbones.

God damn it, why did she have to grow up to be so damn pretty?

"Um," she says, glancing down towards her legs. "This is really embarrassing – but I don't think I can –"

Christian glances down too and realizes that her knees are shaking. He curses and wraps his right arm more completely around Iris's shoulders before slipping his left beneath her knees, scooping her up into his arms.

She gasps a little as he lifts her into the air. "I'm so sorry," she murmurs, "I don't know what's going on with me –"

"You're in shock, Iris," Christian sighs, holding her tight against his chest. "Your first gunfight, first kidnapping, first car chase?" he shrugs and smiles at her, trying to make her laugh. God, he always used to love to make her laugh.

She cracks a little smile.

"You're all right, kid," Christian murmurs. "We'll get you taken care of. Ready?"

Iris nods and Christian strides forward.

Frankie smirks at Christian as he falls in at his side, but he doesn't say anything as they walk towards the elevator. Nico is waiting already, holding the door.





Christian glances down at Iris as he walks, observing the way she curls against him, trusting him completely. He silently considers that Iris has always had a sweet, girlish face – but when they were kids her cheeks had been chubby with baby fat. And her blonde hair had always been cut short. Now, it's grown out into a gorgeous honey mane that falls well below her shoulders. 2

She has makeup on now, too – which she never wore when they were young – but Christian smiles when he thinks that Iris doesn't need to paint beauty on like the other girls at that club do. Sweetness and innocence and joy – it clings to Iris, just as it always had.

It's probably why she makes so much damn money at that club. Iris probably doesn't even know it – but people are drawn to energy like hers. Christian had recognized that energy the moment she came on stage. Even before he saw her features, he'd known it was her.

God damn it, but it was bad timing for Iris to come back into his life. Even as he thinks it, though, he tightens his arms around her, because there is absolutely no way in hell he is going to let Bonetti get his hands on her – not while there is still breath in his body.

But if anyone ever found that out how much this girl means to him?

Damn, but they'll use her as leverage against him.

Which means he has to play this very...very cool.

Christian and Frankie step into the elevator as Nico presses the button for the penthouse. As the elevator shudders into action, Christian adjusts Iris, lifting her a little so that her head is tucked under his chin as she starts to shiver in the cold.



As the elevator rises, Christian thinks back onto this disaster of a night at the club, which he'd only gone to because Ben Bonetti is a god damn pervert who is obsessed with dancers and hookers.

But Ben is a Bonetti – and Christian needed to make a deal, so he'd let Ben pick the spot.

Of course, that deal was in the trash now that Christian punched his lights out. He sighs, frustrated at his lack of control in that moment – but seeing Ben grab for Iris – hell, even seeing the way he'd looked at her –

Christian grits his teeth now just thinking about it.

Not that he could really blame Ben for being captivated. The way Iris moved on the stage – she danced like she was in a different world. Sometimes she even danced with her eyes closed, when she wasn't looking deliberately out at the patrons with that insane come-get-me stare that she clearly didn't know the power of. <sup>1</sup>



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