

## Christian

I lean against the wall as I study the woman by the bar. Sticking a new toothpick between my teeth, I cross my arms over my chest and fight the urge to give this shit up and get a smoke anyway. If someone had told me how miserable I'd feel quitting, I'd have punched the guy who gave me the first cig instead of greedily taking it. For fuck's sake. Life is never easy.

She's at her third shot and is definitely getting tipsy. Her long ringlets of red hair is thick and silky and I've been hypnotized the whole night by how it caresses the skin on her lower back where I can just about make out the little dimples. Her ass-hugging jeans are cut low, and the white blouse, that looks so demure and innocent from the front, has a long vertical slit in the back that shows enough for me to want to sneak a hand in there and find out just how smooth that ivory skin is.

My cock twitches and I grit my teeth. I'm not here for that, for fuck's sake. My job is to drug the kid and get rid of her. Apparently she's seen, or heard something she shouldn't have. Too bad. She's totally fuckable. Maybe I can postpone it a day? Or a few hours at least.

Spitting out the toothpick, I push away from the wall and slide up next to her, in the gap that just opened.

"Drowning your sorrows, sweetie?"

She jerks violently. "Jeez, you scared me!"

The expression in her dark green eyes almost floors me. It twists my guts as if someone have stabbed me. I don't know when I've seen anything so sad, and yet so fiery at the same time. I swallow hard. "So I noticed," I say softly, suddenly afraid to scare her off. "I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention."

"All right," she says as her beautiful eyes scan my face. She actually leans back a little and takes in the rest of my body as well. "What *is* your intention then?" Snapping her mouth closed, she suddenly blushes and puts a hand to her cheek. "I'm—I'm sorry, I'm not myself tonight."

I can believe it.

"Can I get you something?" I nod toward the bartender, catching his attention.

"Gimme two more of these." She gestures to the shot glasses in front of her. I raise an eyebrow. This will be a walk in the fucking park. Whether I want to fuck her, or kill her. Or both.

"What will you have, sir?" asks the bartender. A tired man in his fifties who has long since stopped being curious of his guests. Suits me perfectly.

“Give me a beer. Anything.” I shrug. I don’t drink a lot of anything and have no preferences.

Our drinks arrive in no time and I raise my bottle. “What’s eating you, then? And cheers.”

She tilts her head, flips back a few strands of hair, empties the glass with an absolutely adorable grimace, and wipes her glistening wet, lush lips with the back of her hand. The sight alone makes me semi-hard in an instant. I exhale shakily and grin at her.

“It’s a thing at work. I can’t... It’s nothing. Or, it’s not nothing, it’s a lot. I shouldn’t think about it. I don’t know if I’m stupid or... But I’ve got this really strange feeling, and I feel so sorry for the boy. It crushes me. I want to die!”

I blink. I doubt she really wants to die. Sadly, she’s about to get her wish fulfilled. “That’s... You’ve got a lot in there.” I gesture to her chest. “Got someone to talk to?”

“M’got friends.”

I look around us without seeing anyone who seems the least attentive to this girl. “Where are your friends then? I don’t see anyone here.”

She waves in the direction of the dancefloor. “They’re out there somewhere. I think I broke them.”

That makes me laugh. “What?”

“I can talk. A lot.”

“If you need a fresh new set of ears...”

She downs the second glass and sways. I catch her by the elbow and steady her. She’s so light, like a little bird. Her skin is warm and damp. A scent of musk and flowers wafts up as she grabs my arm.

“Thank you,” she says on an exhale. She studies my face again and squints. “You’ve got so black eyes. They’re... They’re like voids. Have you hypnotized me?”

I’d say it’s the other way around, but I don’t tell her that. “You shouldn’t drink more, sweetie. You need buckets of coffee and some fresh air.”

She shakes her head and looks like she’s trying to gauge the situation. I chew on my lip and wince. Did I lose her there? Too much too fast? I take a light hold of her chin and turn her head toward the street. Right across is a night-open cafe. “Not gonna kidnap you, love. Go tell your friends you’re leaving. I’ll be outside. Do as you like. It’s just...” I lean closer, cheek to cheek, reveling in the warmth that radiates from her skin. “It’s a lot easier to talk over there than it is here.” I hope by giving her the choice, and that I seem nonchalant about it, will give her courage to follow through.

I have no interest in her friends seeing me, so I sneak out as she makes her way to the deeper recesses of the venue. Murderous thoughts race through my head as I glare at a kid with a smoke, standing on the sidewalk a few steps from me. Why am I quitting again? I can't remember.

"Hey, you got—"

"Heeeeere."

Her unmistakable light voice singsings from behind me. Well, I'll be damned. I forget the kid with the cigarette in an instant, offer her my arm and look left and right before pulling her with me across the street. This is almost too easy. She stumbles a little in her military-style high-heeled boots and lean heavier on my arm. A thrill runs through me. I don't mind it. At all.

The cafe is brightly lit and the fluorescent light casts hard shadows on her face. She's completely au naturel. No makeup. Her long, naturally wavy hair hangs heavy over her shoulders. She pouts her lower lip and blows a stream of air up along her face. She is flushed and looks a bit unsure, cautious. She also looks very young. If I recall correctly, she's twenty-six, but right now she looks like she's not even out of college yet. Suddenly, I feel old as fuck. I'm only thirty-seven, but I've seen things, done things, that makes me feel like a hundred. With a twinge to my heart, I also feel oddly protective of her. Which is of course a conundrum. I've actually, in all my years, never had a woman as a target. I've never even hung with anyone like her for any reasons. The women I hook up with are all hardened, hot for my body, and if they care about me at all, it's because they're intimidated and gets off on it. This one is nothing like it. She reminds me a little bit about my sister when she was younger, before she got jaded.

"Two coffee, please," I say to the kid behind the counter, a gangly teen with a few stray strands of dark hair on his chin. I drop some coins on the counter, grab the white sturdy cups and turn to Kerry. Who, I have to remind myself, I don't know the name of yet. She has fallen into a booth at the back and is leaning her head on her arms, taking up half the table. I slide into the booth and sit on the red worn-down plastic couch in front of her as I put down the cups.

"Coffee for the lady."

She jerks up and stares at me, her eyes a little bit unfocused, the whites tinged red. "I think I fell asleep. Didn't sleep much last night. What time is it even?"

I pull up the cuff of my shirt sleeve and glance at my watch. "It's almost one a.m."

"Oh my god," she groans.

"Need to be up early?"

She nods and takes a careful sip of the coffee.

I reach over the table and give her my hand. "I'm Christian, by the way. Russo. I'm so smitten I didn't even introduce myself."

She takes it and shakes it vigorously. "Kerry. Smitten?" She narrows her eyes, her small hand still holding mine.

I wrap my other hand around hers as well. She was warm in the club, but now her skin is a bit chilly. I lick my lips and her eyes dart to my mouth. Pushing down the predatory need to pull her little body to me, I smile. "Yeah. Smitten. Now, what's making you drink the night away and have you talk to strangers because you broke your friends?"

"Oh... work stuff. I can't really—" A tear wells up and trickles down her cheek. I reach out and stroke it away.

"What do you work with?"

"I study behavioral science, and I do voluntary work at a centre in a less fortunate neighborhood, a centre for autistic children. It's a sort of daycare setup, but most of them aren't there every day. Some are, but some come by like once a week. We help train them with language, and simple tasks that the rest of us take for granted."

"That's admirable, Kerry."

"Well, it's where my heart lies. I couldn't do anything else. We also have courses for the parents. Anyone is welcome. If you know anyone, I'll give you the contact information. I always want people to spread the word. Do you have your phone? I can let you know the phone number."

I have to force myself not to gape. She met me a few minutes ago, and she's already letting me know where I can reach her. She doesn't need to give me her phone number, or address, I know it anyway. I know her home address, and her parents' address as well. If I was the average Joe, though, and an ass, she'd just have given herself on a plate. Oh, girl. Too naive.

"I really don't know anyone who'd need it... but sure."

She gives me a phone number and an address I dutifully tap into my contact list. A list stock full of mobsters, and then an address to a community centre for autistic children. I shake my head, amused.

"Thanks. So, do you like your work? Doesn't it wear you out to study and work?"

"I have very little free time."

“And yet here you are...”

She sighs. “I should have been in bed. But I had to numb my head. I felt like absolute shit today.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t wanna go there. I already nagged holes in my friends’ heads. Please let’s talk about something else..”

“What do you wanna talk about then?”

“Who are you, Mr. Mysterious, who are so interested in what I do?”

“I’m just a boring stock broker who happened to need to numb his head too. Too much shit at work to even begin to describe.”

“You’re not married?” She glances at my left hand and then smacks her forehead. “I’m sorry, foot in mouth.”

I laugh and flex my hand. “Nothing for me.” I nod at her own left hand. “Neither are you.”

She rolls her eyes. “Let’s move on.”

I decide to steer the enticing little Miss Curious back to the matter at hand. “Tell me about your studies. Are you gonna work with kids when you grow up?”

She lets out a sigh and shoots me an embarrassed smile. “Yeah! Better topic. Again, sorry.”

“Don’t sweat it. Studies?”

In the next half hour I learn everything there is to know about the centre, her studies, autism, and working as a volunteer. She’s passionate, clearly intelligent, loving. I wince, and the heart I’ve considered blackened beyond repair suddenly aches a little. The difference between us couldn’t be greater. I kill people for a living. People run when they hear the name Christian Russo. I kill for the mob. I almost only kill trash, and feel no remorse, but sometimes someone else gets in the way, and I take no pleasure in that. I also can’t back out, or I’ll be the one someone comes for. If it stands between me and some chick I don’t know, however sweet she may be, I’ll always choose me. There’s no need to be cruel, though. There can be pain, and there can be no pain. Of course I’ll let her go without pain.

“Sounds like you love what you do.”

“Oh, I do, I really do. Most days...”

“What happened today then, that have you so upset?”

“Well... I don't know if I should but... Well, one of the boys, he's one of the children at the centre—well was—” Her eyes gloss over. “Anyway, he said something yesterday that made the hair at my nape stand. And still I don't know what it means. It's just that it must be something significant because he's so deep in his autism, he rarely interacts with us.”

My heart takes a small leap. “What did he say?”

Kerry hesitates. “I—I shouldn't.”

“Don't mention him by name and you're good. You clearly need to get this off your chest.”

She chews on her lip and fiddles with her purse, then she looks up at me, and again I get this electrical feeling when our eyes meet.

“All right. He, uhm.... Said he'd seen something red.”

“What red?”

“He didn't specify. I don't think he's able to process his impressions.”

“And what do you think?”

She swallows. “It could have been paint, right?”

I cock my head and regard her. “But that's not really what you think, is it?”

Frowning, she shakes her head. “But I'm just stupid. I mean, if he'd only said that but—”

“What else did he say?” I tense up. Here we go.

“I asked him where he'd seen the red. It was such a stupid question. I just wanted to encourage him to keep talking.”

I nod. “And?”

“He said he'd seen it on the floor, and... on a man...”

“Could have been someone who got hurt.”

She nods eagerly. “Exactly.”

I reach over and put a hand over her twitchy hands that keeps fiddling. “Then why are you so rattled?”

"I... don't know. My imagination ran amok. But then I asked his dad and... he gave off this really strange vibe. Like... intimidating. I got the feeling he said, between the lines, 'I know where you live'."

"Did he now?" I can picture it perfectly. Salvatore, with his bodyguards, black suit, tall and broad, staring this girl down. "Who's his dad?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that."

"Confidential?"

She nods. "I think I've told you too much already."

"No, you haven't. You're good. And whatever you say to me stays with me. I promise. So, what do you think happened, Kerry?"

My heart pounds a little harder. *Don't doom yourself now, this is your slim chance.*

"Christian... I can't tell. Mr. Salvatore said—" She slaps a hand over her mouth and her eyes go wide.

"Lots and lots of that name going around. And stays with me anyway."

"Promise?"

I nod and wait for her to go on.

"Well his dad said he'd seen an accident."

"Then it's all good. You got your explanation."

She chews on her lower lip, a vision that makes me want those lips somewhere else. Lush, full lips. I silently beg her not to go on.

"I don't know. It had to be something brutal."

"An accident can be traumatic."

"I can't help thinking he witnessed a—" She leans forward and lowers her voice, "a murder."

My heart sinks to my stomach. "I'm sure it was nothing." I don't know why I keep trying to get her to change her mind, I put words in her mouth to prove she doesn't know anything, when I should in fact do the opposite.

She rubs her hands over her face. I reach out and pull a strand of hair to the side. She blushes and looks down. "Yeah, It was probably nothing," she whispers, her voice breaking.

My chest feels tight. Does she really need to die for this? It's fucking nothing.

"—and then his dad had him removed," she sobs, her cheeks wet.

I pull a paper tissue from the pile on the table, reach over and dab her cheeks, then I grab her hand again, and hold it in both of mine. Her skin is ice cold and clammy. The air condition in this place is brutal.

"Are you cold?"

"A bit," she admits.

I let her go and shrug out of my suit jacket, then I half-stand and lean over the table, wrapping it around her shoulders. "There you go. Wanna go for a walk before we call it a night? I think you need your beauty sleep." Sadly, I've heard enough.

She sniffs. "You smell really nice."

"Well, thank you. So do you."

She stands and maneuver her way out to the aisle. "When did you smell me? That's ten shades of creepy."

"Do you find me creepy?"

She pouts as she regards me, her gaze traveling along my body. "Mnooo, not really. Thank you for listening. Did I wear you out completely? You're a great listener and—and I'm sorry if—"

"No. Not broken yet."

She laughs and wipes the last of the tears off her cheeks. I lay my hand on the small of her back and lead her out on the street. Her little gasp as I touch her doesn't escape me, and pleases me a lot. I like that she hasn't come on to me. I like that all we've done is talk. Few dare to talk with me. Most are scared, and the women I meet only want me between their legs. I'm awed by her trust.

"Let's walk," I say. I'm fucking hesitating. I know what I must do, I just don't want to anymore. There's probably no solution to that, though. What I want doesn't matter to Salvatore.

"I shouldn't..."

"I completely agree. You shouldn't. You don't know me. I could be terribly dangerous." I wink.

“Maybe...”

“Maybe you like danger?”

She stops and regards me, looking around us. Then she smiles a crooked smile that makes me wish I was someone else, and that my reason to be here was something else entirely.

“One block of danger,” she says. “Then you can give me your phone number, I’ll go back to the club, and I’ll call you someday.”

“That’s what they all say.” I sigh dramatically and roll my eyes, shaking off the feeling of a looming disaster. “But fine. I’ll take what I can get.”

One block is all I need. My car is parked right around the corner.