



## Chapter 20

Christian breaks our gaze first, clenching his jaw and glancing down at his phone. "I have work to do," he murmurs, pushing off the counter and brushing past me, already dialing and lifting his phone to his ear as he walks through the door to his room.

"Come on, Bambi," Frankie says after a long moment. He nods towards the couch, his voice kind. "Don't overthink it. Do you like video games?"

"You don't have to call me Bambi," I murmur, following him over to the sofa, bringing my coffee with me. "My name is Iris."

"Oh, I know your name," he says, giving me a grin as he hands me a paddle. "I just like Bambi better. Now, this game is very violent, but all you need to do is shoot the aliens in the head..."

About an hour later, I am no better at killing aliens. My heart starts to pound with relief and anxiety the moment Nico comes back through the door.

"Got it!" he shouts, my duffel held high in his fist as he strides over to the couch.

"Oh, thank god," I say, reaching for the bag.

"Not so fast," Nico says, smirking at me and pulling it out of my reach. "Boss gets first dibs."

"It's my stuff," I protest as Christian finally comes out of his bedroom, having heard Nico's loud arrival.

"Give it here," Christian says, taking the bag and walking it over to the other side of the L-shaped couch, far out of my reach. I click my tongue in



protest, but I am universally ignored.

As I watch, Christian unzips my bag and begins to unpack it. The first thing to appear is my cell phone. I squeak eagerly, dying to see if Emi texted, but Christian immediately hands it to Nico.

"Password?" Nico says, glancing up at me.

"Private!" I snap, aghast.

Christian just glances up at me for a single moment, the expectation to be obeyed in every line of his serious face. "Tell him, Iris."

I sigh and then list the four numbers. Christian pauses for a moment. "Your birthday?" he says, looking up at me with a dubious eyebrow raised.

"I don't live a complicated life!" I say defensively, sitting up straight. "I do not need high security passwords!"

"You do now," Frankie murmurs, turning the game console off and paying attention as Christian starts to take more stuff out of the bag.

My clothes come first, and Nico goes over them with the metal detector. I roll my eyes, a little annoyed by the insane level of security here. I mean, seriously, I'm a student and a stripper – not some kind of super spy.

When the clothes pass muster, Christian starts to pull out my books.

The textbooks he passes over pretty quickly, though he raises an eyebrow at my subjects of study, either surprised or derisive. I wrap my hands around my elbows, anxious.

When he gets to my notebooks, though, I lean forward in surprise. "That one," I say, raising my chin a little towards the stack in his hand. "The



one with the brown cover – that's...not mine."

"It's not?" he asks, glancing at the others.

"No, I color code for my subjects –"

They all look at me fast, and I can see another geek stripper joke forming on Frankie's lips, so I just talk fast. "And brown is not a color that matches any of the subjects I'm studying, okay? That one is not mine."

Christian nods, opening the notebook and beginning to page through.

It only takes a few seconds of page turning before everyone but me realizes that this is something...significant.

Nico stands up straight, his eyes wide, a fluid stream of curses slipping from between his lips.

Frankie just looks over at me, his eyes sweeping over me from top to bottom, scared or impressed – I can't tell which.

Christian lifts his eyes to mine, and I can see that he is entirely the Mafia King now – every piece of my childhood friend tucked away. He leans back in his chair and nods to Nico, passing the interrogation on to him.

"You have this in your duffel," Nico says quietly, "and you expect us to believe you know nothing about why Bonetti wants you? And every other god damn mob boss on the eastern seaboard?"

My eyebrows go wide and I sit stock straight. "What? Why? What is it?"

"You're pretending you don't even know what this is!?"

"It must be Steven's!" I protest, throwing a hand out. "I must have



swiped it when I was gathering my notebooks – we only have one desk!”

Christian studies me, his expression cold.

My mind works fast.

“Look,” I say, pointing towards my other notebooks. “Look at the other notebooks. I guarantee the handwriting doesn’t match – I swear I didn’t write a word in that one.”

Christian takes my advice, flipping open the notebook for my marketing course. Nico leans over his shoulder and they compare the two.



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