



Chapter 21

"Pencil's smudged left to right," Nico murmurs, pointing at Steven's notebook, which holds who-knows-what. "Frequently happens in leftie bookkeeping."

"Tris is right-handed," Christian murmurs. He sits up then, handing the notebook to Nico, who explores it further.

"Just because you didn't write it," Nico says, looking at me over the notebook's edge, "why should I believe you haven't seen it?"

"What!?" I gasp, leaning forward and staring between Nico and Christian, shocked again that they still don't believe me. "I don't know what it is! I wish I didn't have it! That tiny notebook is ruining my life, if it's as important as you say!"

"Come on, Chris," Nico says, turning to Christian and speaking to him alone now. "This girl is full of shit – if we buy this story we deserve whatever's coming for us!"

My mouth pops open, a loud huff of protest slipping from my lips.

"She's in this big time, of course she's lying her ass off!" Nico insists, gesturing vehemently at the notebook. "Plus, she's a stripper – they know how to lie to people, it's their job, how they get paid – every single girl in that club could pass a polygraph in a second –"

"Enough," Christian snarls, his word low enough that Nico scowls and folds his arms over his chest. Both of them turn their attention to me, glaring.

"Christian," I say, locking eyes with him, tears in my own. "I am not lying to you – I have nothing to do with this. Whatever's in your head – that I'm some kind of spy? Remember what you know about me. You know that I would never do that. Especially..." I bite my lip now, shaking my head at him, "especially not to you."



Nico studies me for a long moment like I'm some kind of puzzle he can solve, but Christian is unreadable. I just stare back at him, my jaw clenched, wondering what kind of awful things must have happened in his life if he doesn't even trust me anymore.

Me – the last person in the world that would ever hurt or betray him.

But as I stare at him, I consider that maybe he has been through something so harrowing that he doesn't trust anyone in the world anymore.

And I think it's that that does it – the pity on my face at the idea that Christian has no one that convinces him that I just might be telling the truth.

His face goes hard and angry, maybe even a little embarrassed to have me the homeless stripper, his helpless captive – pity him.

"All right," he says, glaring at me and then glancing up at Nico before he gets to his feet. "I'm heading out – I'm doing recon on this all god damn day."

Nico nods, tucking the notebook under his arm and moving after Christian as he starts to cross the room. But to all of our surprise, Christian turns and puts a hand on Nico's chest. "No," he says, shaking his head at him. "You're staying here."

"What!?" Nico gasps. "You're taking Frankie!? I'm babysitting!?"

"You're both babysitting," Christian snaps, turning to glare at Frankie too.

"Christian, you can't go out alone," Nico protests. "Please, I'll help you –"

"Bruno and Silvester are already downstairs," Christian says, heading towards the kitchen. "Your top priority is studying that book for details



and making sure that absolutely nothing happens to Iris while I'm gone."

My heart swells a little when he says that, because...if he's still worrying about protecting me? Maybe that means that even a small part of him trusts me.

Christian grabs an Ipad off of the kitchen counter and walks over, handing it to me over the back of the couch. "Order yourself some clothes, rush the shipping – have it delivered today or tomorrow, if you can."

I stare at him in surprise, but my fingers fold around the tablet.

"No email, phone calls, or texts," he says, narrowing his eye. My heart sinks and he must see it on my face. "Actually...just, don't do anything at all without running it by Nico. He's in charge."

"Nico?" I ask, hesitant, glancing over at the black-haired young man who glares at me with his arms crossed. "Not Frankie?"

Christian, despite himself, can't help his smirk as he shakes his head. "Not Frankie."

I sigh, but nod, and he looks around at all of us before he strides for the door. "I have my phone!"

And just like that, I'm alone with two mobsters I've barely known for twelve hours.

"Want to shoot more aliens?" Frankie asks, offering me the game controller as Nico slumps back on the couch.

But neither of them are fast enough to catch me when I leap over the back of the couch and streak for the door, shouting Christian's name.