

Chapter 23

"Nico?" I say, as the sun starts to go down.

He flicks his eyes to me. I flick mine to my cell phone.

"I know I'm not supposed to ask," I say quietly, "but can you please just tell me if my brother texted me? He's...he's not well. You don't even have to tell me what it says – just...if he texted?"

Nico studies me for a second and then sighs, reaching for my phone as I tell him that the text would be labeled Damon. He flicks through my messages and shakes his head, and I'm filled with relief. Damon – he's kind of in a delicate place these days, and he leans on me when things get dark.

"Thank you," I whisper to Nico, who nods to me before murmuring something about ordering groceries and getting up.

"Why aren't there any groceries here?" I ask, taking my eyes away from the gorgeous sight of the sun going down over the city and turning it to Frankie, who yawns next to me. "What, does the chef just like, bring all the food and take it with him when he goes?"

Frankie smirks at me. "No, we just don't use this place a lot."

I blink at him, confused, and then look around the sparse apartment. This place could be a gorgeous AirBNB for all the personality it has. "Wait, this isn't Christian's apartment?"

Frankie laughs, digging into the tub of caramel popcorn for another handful. "No, this is one of his flop houses. It's always empty in case we need it, and off the books, technically, so very few people know it belongs to the Romano family."

"This," I say, waving a hand around in shock, "this multi-million dollar apartment is your flop house!?"

"I know, nice, right?" Frankie says, laughing harder now and relaxing back into the couch that probably cost ten grand. "Sometimes it is very nice to be connected to the Romanos."

"Wait so," I say, curling my legs up beneath me and pitching my voice lower. "Where does Christian actually live?"

"In the family house, obviously," Frankie answers passively, his eyes fastened on the tv. "Though, I guess house is kind of an understatement – it's a huge mansion just on the edge of the city –"

"Stop!" Nico shouts from the kitchen, making us both turn towards him. "Quit spilling secrets to the prisoner, Frankie, just because you think she's pretty."

Frankie rolls his eyes and looks back to the tv. "Nothing she couldn't read in the newspapers, Nic! All of this was posted in that New York Times expose four months ago – don't get your shorts all twisted over it."

I grin at the mobster next to me, a little cat's smile. "You think I'm pretty, Frankie?"

"Bambi," he says, flicking his eyes to me, "I am not allowed to think you're pretty. Don't listen to Nico, he was just born in a bad mood."

"Wait, so," I say, lowering my voice again, eager for more insight into Christian's life. "Do they really all live there? Even though they're like, grown up?"

Frankie nods. "Don Antonio likes to keep the family tight – thinks it's

important. Of course, everyone's got their own places all over the city in which they live their actual lives," he says, popping another kernel in his mouth, "but, they've also all got suites at the house as well. It's very busy all the time, and very locked down."

I sit quietly, a thousand more questions cropping up every time Frankie gives me even a tiny sliver of information. "So, how many people are in the family? Christian said something about...brothers..."

"Do you seriously not know any of this?" Frankie says, turning his head towards me. "If you are a spy, you're a very shitty one."

"I'm not a spy!" I insist through gritted teeth, punching him on the shoulder and making him grin. "I knew Christian from the neighborhood he grew up in – when I knew him his last name was Allen, not Romano. So no, I don't know any of this."

"Wait, seriously?" Nico says, walking over to us, suddenly interested. "You knew Christian from his dark days?"

"His dark days!?" I ask, a little aghast. "That's a little dramatic, Frankie. We had a very nice childhood, I'll have you know."

"They're not dark because they're bad, they're just dark because Christian doesn't tell anyone anything about them – only his father knows anything about his mom and his childhood."

"Oh," I say, my eyes going wide as I sit up straight and realize that...well, that I guess I actually do have secrets that other people don't know. I mean, not big or interesting ones, but I certainly know everything about the years before Christian left abruptly in the night.

"You just got much more interesting, Iris," Frankie says, turning to me

with an eager smile. "So, spill. Where the hell did you actually meet the Boss?"

"He grew up next door," I say, shrugging, because it's not some deep dark secret.

"Wait, holy shit," Nico breathes, coming suddenly around the couch to stare at me. "Are you...are you Daisy?"



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