

Chapter 26

There's a long, tense moment when I do seriously wonder if Christian is going to punch someone.

But he shocks us all, I think, when Christian flicks his eyes to Nico's beer. "Is there more of that?" he asks, his voice dry.

"Yeah," Nico says, immediately jumping out of the chair and heading for the fridge, pulling out a bottle. A little frantic, and I think wanting to make up for being caught unawares, Nico looks around anxiously for the bottle opener.

But it's already in my hand, stretched out towards him.

Nico scowls at me as he snatches it and opens the bottle, carrying it over to Christian. As he does, I slip my eyes back to the Mafia King, who I'm surprised to see watching us carefully. He accepts the bottle from Nico as he looks at me, taking a calm and observant sip.

"Looks like you made some inroads here, Iris," he says quietly when he lowers the beer.

"Not really," I say with a casual shrug. "Frankie threatened to put my ankles in chains if I wasn't good." Frankie sputters in protest and Christian smirks. "And what did you do?" I ask, putting my hands on the countertop and leaning towards him, quirking my head coyly.

"I did my job," Christian replies, his voice vague. Then he turns, heading for the living room. "Come on," he calls. "The four of us are going to have a chat."

I look between Frankie and Nico, curious. Nico ignores me, immediately following, but Frankie gives me a little shrug as he follows too, snagging

his beer on the way. I sigh, lifting what's left of the plates and taking them to the sink, turning on the hot water and quickly rinsing it over the porcelain –

"Iris!" Christian snaps. "Get in here!"

"Just let me rinse the pizza sauce off before it dries!"

"Now!" he shouts, and I jump a bit before I scowl and drop the plates in the sink, turning the water off before I head for the living room. I snatch my glass of wine on the way, taking a bitter little sip. I'm not used to being bossed around like this while I'm trying to help, and I'm not at all sure that I like it.

I move around the coffee table, sitting primly down and turning towards Christian with Nico and Frankie between us. Silence reigns for a second and I just take a long, calm sip of my wine, waiting for Christian to start. He called this meeting, after all. He's in charge.

Christian studies me for a long second before he reaches over to the far side of the coffee table and lifts the brown ledger, turning it over in his hand. "You maintain," he says quietly, his words clearly directed at me, "that you don't know what's in this?"

"I swear it, Christian," I say quietly. "I must have slipped that into my bag by accident, and even if I did look through it, I don't know what any of it means – Steven has an MS in accounting, I'm studying Hotel Management."

Frankie looks at me with a bit of surprise.

"That checks out," Christian murmurs, setting the ledger down and sitting back on the couch, focusing on me again. "I did more research on

you today – you've got an impressive 3.9 GPA in that major. And I do believe you when you say that you were naïve, until yesterday, of everything that your boyfriend was into. Bonetti's people confirmed it – he did sell you for half his debt, and if Bonetti actually believed you were a useful criminal accountant he wouldn't have marked you for the cat house. Unfortunately, none of that matters anymore.”

“It doesn't?” I ask, surprised. What on earth could have changed?

“This,” Christian says, tapping the ledger. “Contains information on the deep finances of almost every Mafia family in the city. Whatever your boyfriend was doing for Bonetti, he also had his fingers deep into the other families' pockets too. He must have some sort of...specialized hacking knowledge. He was amassing a great deal of information, and keeping it on paper so no one else could get their hands on it.”

I sigh, nodding as I hang my head. “Steven is something of a...savant with computers. Even though he did end up being absolute shit at trading crypto, when it came to navigating the web, even the dark web? Yeah. He could get you anything you wanted.”

“He was planning big shit, Iris,” Christian says, the seriousness of his tone making me lift my head again. “He didn't make his move yet, but this book?” he says, leaning back and running a hand through his hair, “it looks like he was planning to blackmail everyone and then bail with a great deal of cash.”

“Until,” I sigh, putting it together now, “his girlfriend accidentally stole the records in her hurry to get to work on time.”

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"Exactly," Christian says.

"Are you seriously buying this?" Nico hisses, gesturing towards me but keeping his eyes on Christian. "That she knew nothing – that she just lived with this guy, handing over her paychecks to him, oblivious to the fact that he's not only Bonetti's secret accountant that he's planning to make a move to blackmail five families?"

"Yes," Christian snaps, snapping his head to turn his menacing glare on Nico now. "I did my homework today, Nico, and everything Iris has said checks out. So, unless you want me to believe that my childhood friend teamed up with Bonetti's accountant and was at once stunningly good at covering her tracks and stunningly bad at navigating this world?"

My mouth falls open a little at the assessment of me but...well, then I just snap my jaw shut, because he's not wrong.

"If I knew Steven was going to blackmail the five families," I whisper, spreading my hands out, "why would I strip? He was probably seeking to get millions –"

"To cover your tracks," Nico protests, shaking his head at me, back to being convinced that I'm a spy despite everything today.

"And then why would I take the leger – the one thing that showed our cards – and leave it at the strip club!?"

"I don't know," Nico groans, putting his face in his hands and leaning back against the cushions. "I haven't put it all together yet! But there is a way that this makes sense!"

"You're working too hard to make it make sense," Christian says, his

voice firm. "The simpler answer – that Iris was just actually stunningly naïve – is the better answer." He turns his eyes to me now and I just give an exhausted shrug, admitting it.

"Fine," Nico says, dragging his hands down his face and staring up at the ceiling. "If you tell me to trust your pet stripper, Christian, I'll do it –"

"Enough!" Christian barks out, and Nico turns to him in surprise. "Iris," Christian says, correcting the way that Nico refers to me, "is under my protection. All of our protection. Even though we understand that she had no role in this, she has moved immediately to the top of the most-wanted list of every crime family in this city."

My eyes go wide and the blood rushes from my face at his words. "What?!"

"The possession of this book," Christian says, tapping his finger on it. "Was shit luck for you, Iris, even if it is very useful to me. I'm grateful that it's now in my hands, and in exchange for it I will ensure your protection. But you absolutely cannot leave this penthouse for a very long time."

I sit up dead straight and feel my lip tremble a little in despair. "How long?" I ask my voice soft.

"Weeks, at least," he says, holding my gaze. "Maybe months."

I go completely cold as I stare at him, unblinking.

He sighs, clearly feeling sorry about it. "We may have to move you around, but the story doesn't change. You'll be kept under our very secret care until the other families either figure out that you're not connected, or they forget you exist. But be aware, Iris, that you get to take no risks. Every single one of those families believes that you know the

information in this leger, and they've all ordered you shot dead on sight."

"Oh my god," I murmur, tucking my head in my hands, my shoulders slumping as my already-shattered world collapses even further.

"We'll contact your school," Christian says softly, "have you withdraw from this semester without penalty. And anyone else you need us to get quietly in touch with to let them know you're safe and cared for...we'll do that too."

I just shake my head, unable to comprehend it.

What...what the fuck am I going to do now? Just live in this stale penthouse, playing video games with Frankie for the rest of my life?

How did everything go so completely to pieces in twenty-four hours?

The men are quiet for a moment, letting me process the horrible news.

"There's one last thing you have to decide, Iris," Christian says quietly, and I lift my head, still shocked.

Christian waits in silence.

I sigh and shake my head. "Fine. What is it?"

"You need to decide," he says quietly, "whether you want to ask me to protect this boyfriend of yours. Because if you do, I need to act soon. If I don't...he's going to get taken out."

All of my breath leaves me in a woosh.

Seriously, Steven's life is in my hands now?

How the hell did I get here?

