

Chapter 31

"Primarily," Christian says, drawing my full attention back, "designating you as my sister means hands off," he says, giving me a significant look. I smile a little, liking to see his protective side.

"Does it also mean I get a share in the Romano fortune?" I ask, dry, and Christian laughs, instantly seeing that I'm kidding. "A time share in any vacation homes? An invitation to the Seven Fishes at Christmas?"

He shakes his head, smiling at me. "No ma'am. Just protection, and great deal of respect. And personal space."

"Shame," I murmur, narrowing my eyes a little and taking a sip of my wine. And then I decide to...push. Just a little bit. "And here I was, thinking Frankie was cute."

Christian narrows his eyes right back at me and something stirs in my stomach. Butterflies? But then he breaks into a smile, leaning forward with a laugh. "You liar," he says, calling my bluff.

I burst out laughing and lean forward to smack him on the arm. "How did you know!?"

"One," he says, laughing with me and sitting back, taking a sip of his wine, "years of mafia training to see through lies. And two," he cocks his head to the side, "Frankie's not your type."

"Oh?" I say, sitting up straight now. "And what's my type?"

"I don't know for sure," Christian replies, contemplative, turning his head to study me. "But it's...not the funny guy. You like Frankie more than Nico, but you see Frank as a friend. Or a pet, something entertaining but not...serious. Which is a mistake on your part, by the way."

I turn my own head now, curious, inviting him to say more.

"Frankie's lethal," Christian says seriously, raising his wine again to his lips. "He won't hurt you but...you should be glad of your sisterly designation. He can tuck that golden retriever side of his personality away in an instant in order to draw upon a very particular set of skills. It's why I keep him by my side."

"Oh," I say, genuinely surprised, my eyes drifting towards the hallway. Frankie...he really did seem so nice. And then, feeling a little mischievous, I let a little interest show on my face. "Well..." I murmur, still peering down the hall. "That might make him a little cuter, actually ..."

Christian bursts out laughing at this, and I turn to smile at him again, pleased. But beneath the pleasure at making him laugh – honestly, I can't deny it, I have to admit that I'm disappointed.

Which is absolutely ridiculous, I know, because I have been in a relationship with Steven for years and we just "broke up" yesterday – how can my heart be so fickle?

But then again...hasn't Christian been in my heart all along? Who did I write to almost every night anyway, when Steven didn't have time for me?

Suddenly quite exhausted by all of the emotional nonsense, I set my shoulders and push it out of my mind, wanting nothing more than to turn my own attention away from myself for a little while.

"So!" I say, making my voice sound perkier than I feel. "I spilled about me. Now your turn."

But to my surprise, Christian just frowns at me. "I can't tell you anything, Iris."

"What?" I say, settling against the couch cushions. "Sure you can, Christian. You know I won't tell anyone any of your secrets. Or, you don't have to tell me any of your secrets – just...tell me what your life is like. I've missed you."

"Iris," he sighs, leaning towards me again, his perfect mouth turning into a frown. And I'm surprised when I see that he's almost...angry. "I can't tell you anything, because every little piece of information I give you wraps you up deeper and deeper into my world. And the last thing I want to do is get you more involved in my world than you already are."

My heart sinks again and I flinch back almost as if I've been struck. God, Christian, I think to myself, first you friend-zone a girl, and then tell her you don't want her to have any place in your world?

Damn, how much harsher can it get?