

Chapter 34

I smirk a little, turning back to my work, turning the churros over as they turn a nice golden brown. "Do you have any chocolate in your room, Frankie?" I ask, knowing the answer already.

"Of course I do."

"Go and get it – I'll make a dipping sauce."

He hesitates for a second, but I laugh and give him a little kick on the calf.

"Learn how to share," I tease, grinning at him. "We don't need all of what is sure to be your entire stash."

"Fine," he says, narrowing his eyes at me. "But I give you this boon once, in the name of churros. Otherwise, get your own chocolate."

I laugh to myself as Frankie hurries back to his room.

"Plate?" I say, gesturing for Christian to come close. He does as asked, bringing forward the little paper-towel covered plate that I prepared. He holds it out as I use tongs to lift the churros out of the oil, placing them one by one on the plate.

"You're good at this," he murmurs, and I smile as I look up into his face, my stomach twisting when I see that he's standing closer than I thought he was.

"I'm good at everything," I reply, my voice deeper than it usually is.

He smirks. "I believe you."

We stand there, staring at each other for a little too long, and we both jump when Frankie comes stomping back out of his room with two

Toblerones in his fist. "This had better be good, Iris," he says, handing them to me like they're a great sacrifice. "This is top quality chocolate that –"

I just laugh, snatching the candy from him and waving him towards the plate of churros that Christian has placed on the counter. "Go, you're my cinnamon-sugar man," I say. "Get to dipping."

Frankie moves where I tell him to, but frowns at Christian as he goes. "Why isn't he doing anything?" Frankie asks, bitter.

"Because I'm the boss," Christian says, a playful twist to his lips.

Frankie scowls and I laugh again as I lift out another pot, setting it onto a low flame before breaking chocolate into it and adding a little half-and-half from the carton in the fridge. Then, I pipe more churros into the hot oil, wanting a full batch for sampling.

"It's nice having you here, Iris," Frankie says, grinning over at me as he dips the churros into the cinnamon-sugar combination I mixed into a bowl according to Francisco's precise measurements. "We needed a girl's touch to make this place more homey."

"Francisco wasn't enough for you?" Christian asks, dry, his arms folded.

"Francisco makes a manly omelet," Frankie replies, his eyes on his work, his voice deepening. "Lots of bacon and sausage mixed in. Iris is gentler, like a mom. Or a good girlfriend." He sends me a little wink, turning his head away so Christian can't see it, though when I glance at Christian I see that he missed absolutely nothing.

"She's not a girlfriend, Frankie," Christian sighs, his voice still dry. "Don't get your hopes up."

"Oh, I would never, boss," he says, turning to Christian with a mock seriousness. "Besides, it's not like any girlfriends that come here stay very long anyway."

I twist my head towards them, distracted from the fried dough, wanting to hear more.

"There haven't been any girlfriends here, Frankie," Christian says, glaring at his bodyguard but smirking a little. "And there isn't going to be, either. Any women you saw in this apartment must have been figments of your imagination."

"Yeah," Frankie says, nodding like he believes him, "really hot figments. That stayed just for one night."

I can't help but laugh at this, and Christian fights his smile. I return my gaze to the next batch of churros, curious. Christian brings girls back to the apartment, then? Just for one night.

Interesting.

"Girls, girlfriends, they don't matter, Frankie," Christian says, his voice stern, and something about the way he says it makes me think it's some kind of mantra – something they've definitely said to each other before. "Only family. And Iris is family now."