

Chapter 43

I sigh but nod again, agreeing to it.

"And second, you lie your ass off, telling them that you broke up with Steven and had to leave everything behind at your house and that you simultaneously got a really prestigious internship that's going to take up a great deal of your time. You've borrowed this phone and will contact them when you get a new number of your own."

"Emi's not going to buy that, Nico," I say, rolling my eyes.

"It doesn't matter if she buys it," he replies, rolling his eyes right back. "It will work, which is all that matters. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I sigh, and then I take the phone from him. Damon is easy – I just type out the story on the phone and include a little personal stuff about how I love him and I'm sorry I'll be out of touch, encouraging him to contact his sponsor if he needs to. When I show it to Nico, he nods once and I press send. As I suspected, Damon doesn't reply.

Emi, however, is a different story. As soon as I type out the same sort of message and send it to her, a reply comes back instantly.

Emi: What the hell is this, Iris!?

I show it to Nico, who sighs and stands behind me. "Is this going to be like, a long girl conversation?" he asks, already sounding exhausted.

"It suuuure is," I reply, nodding.

"Fine, whatever," he huffs, lifting his chin towards the phone. "Just type – I'll read over your shoulder and tell you if anything is out of line."

I nod, and type my reply.

Iris: I'm sorry, Emi – it's out of my hands.

Emi: So you just – broke up with Steven!? And didn't call me!? Iris I've been looking everywhere for you – I've been so worried! Your whole apartment is trashed!

My eyebrows go up at this and I look up at Nico, who just shrugs, letting me he can neither confirm nor deny.

Iris: Steven must have gotten pissed at me, I guess. He wasn't happy when we broke up. I was scared to go back, but luckily this internship came along right when I needed it.

Emi: As much as I'm happy to have you away from that deadbeat, Iris, we both know that trashing his apartment in a rage is not his style. Tell me what's really going on.

I sigh.

"Tell her that you're telling the truth, Iris," Nico instructs. "And then wrap this up."

I nod, doing as he says.

Iris: I promise, Emi, I'm not lying to you. But the person I've borrowed this phone from wants it back – I'm sorry, I have to go. I love you so much – I'll be in touch as soon as I can!

Emi: Promise me you're safe, Iris. Please. I'm worried you've been kidnapped.

I turn to Nico, raising my eyebrows.

"Clever girl," he says with a smirk. "Send her a picture of you in this apartment, by the window. Show her you're happy and healthy, interning



with a family as a private chef or something." 1

I nod, considering that that will probably work, and then do as he says. When Emi replies, I can almost hear her sighing in her words.

Emi: Something's still fishy, Iris, but I'm glad to see your stupid, pretty face. Please be careful, I love you, message me when you get a phone.

I send my goodbyes back and then sigh, missing her, as I hand the phone back to Nico.

To my shock, he instantly pops out the sim card and snaps it into pieces before dropping them into a glass of water. Then, as I watch, he wipes the phone back to factory settings.

"Wow, so...no contact from here on out," I say, lifting my coffee from the counter and taking a sip.

"You'll get contact privileges back in time," Nico says casually, leaning on the counter and studying me, "when things settle down and you demonstrate that you can behave. Which you did not do last night."

I open my mouth to protest when suddenly the door opens. I turn to it, eager, hoping it's Christian –

But my mouth falls further open in shock this time when I see Frankie come in, looking exhausted and very, very muddy. I take in his bodily exhaustion, the dark circles under his eyes, and realize that Frankie? He didn't sleep at all.

But where the hell has he been all night?

And where is Christian?