

CHAPTER 13

ROSA

It's my half day off, and my hand presses to my chest as I lean against Kori's door after closing it behind me.

The sounds of the bustling Chicago neighborhood are a distant echo, and my lip wobbles as I will my feet to move down the porch steps—and away from Ethan again.

I didn't think leaving him would be so damn hard this time, but each step feels like someone carving my heart out.

Video calls and phone calls only do so much, and I really needed to see him today. I wanted to hold him in my arms and remind myself that he's safe. But all I can feel is a renewed surge of guilt as my vision blurs with tears.

Despite the money I've saved up—neatly stashed in an envelope under my mattress at the Marchiano estate—I've only squirreled half the amount I'll need for a deposit, and it's still not enough to get us out of the state and away from the horrors that haunt me around every corner.

Despair squeezes my chest at the thought, and I fight to keep the sob falling from my lips. I need to get myself together before I get to the estate. With one last parting glance over my shoulder, I fist my hand, forcing my eyes to drop back to the sidewalk.

Weaving in and out of the bodies that line the street, I walk to the bus stop. I stifle a yelp as a car backfires. As much as I want to enjoy the fresh air and freedom of being in the city, it's too risky. The longer I'm outside the estate, the easier it is for someone to see me. The easier I am to find. And if that happens, it's over.

I need to get off the streets and back to the estate to some semblance of safety. At least the monsters that roam there don't pretend to be anything less.

Getting to the bus stop, I jump onto the bus that is just about to depart, pulling the hood of my jacket over my head and face as the doors close behind me.

Restlessly, my knee bounces as I'm in my seat. As the movement of the bus lulls some of the tension from my body, my mind drifts back to the way Ethan's face lit up when I met Kori and the two boys at the park. I sniff quickly, pushing back the tears that threaten to fall.

I reach the stop where I have to change buses. And after taking the second bus, I finally arrive at my stop.

It's still a walk back to the estate, but I need the time to compose myself—and I also need the exercise. I wince at the thought, staring down at the curves of my body.

I shudder, knowing exactly where this line of thinking is leading. Nowhere good, but I can't help my thoughts. Like a beast prowling inside my head, the words pounce upon me.

You should think about working out more.

Don't you think that shows a little too much skin...you know, for someone with a body like yourself?

No one could love a fat pig like you...

The voices of my sister, my mother, and Grayden tumble around my mind—and they slash into me until I'm raw and bile burns the back of my throat.

I swallow it back and focus on making my way down the street and up the hill toward the Marchiano estate. I ignore the way my vision swims and the painful cramping of my stomach from lack of food and force my thoughts to something else. Anything else...

The image of Ethan at the park fills my mind. The way his clothing is worn thin but his cheeks are fuller. He's a shell of the boy he should be. He's reserved when he should be as boisterous as the other young children at the park.

He was permanently glued to my side, and yet I selfishly soaked it all up. Even now, the phantom warmth along my leg lingers. Blinking quickly, I try to keep the tears from my face.

"Everything okay, Rosa?" a guard asks as I pass through the gate.

I should know all their names by now, and I should make an effort to be friendly, yet I can't even meet their eyes when they speak to me. I nod and scurry away toward the mansion, my purse clutched to my chest and my gaze downcast.

Even though I'm supposed to also have the evening off, I'm back in time to prepare dinner. I'll squeeze in a quick stop at my room. The house is quiet when I enter, and I tiptoe my way toward my room. The less I'm seen like this, the better it is for me.

I try to distract myself with thoughts about my work. I like to think I'm doing a good job. The state of the house itself is pristine, including Camillo's bedroom. I've yet to ruin a dinner or dessert since the day of Marco's pep talk. I've nailed down Alessio's closet system. Things have gotten better, if anything. I've made their lives easier—I hope.

My mind drifts to the dinner Camillo took me to. He said it was a thank you for my work, but after everything he said that night, I realize that it was actually meant as a date.

He called me gorgeous, sexy, stunning. And he said he likes a woman with proper curves. And the way his thumb brushed my bottom lip...

Those definitely aren't things that an employer would say.

As I pull out a fresh T-shirt to change into, my gaze catches the photo album with Ethan's baby photos. Pulling it out, I sit on the edge of the bed and leaf through it. And the ache that is never far away rushes back into my heart.

Footsteps echo down the hall. My body automatically freezes in response, my breath lodging into my throat.

It takes me a moment to remind my body that Grayden isn't here. It's someone else. But my body refuses to relax even though I know I'm safe here—as safe as someone can be.

The heavy, deliberate cadence echoes off the walls. Each step is a solid thud, bearing the weight of the body, making the floorboards creak just enough under his imposing posture. Camillo.

It took me less than a week to distinguish between the footsteps of the brothers. A habit built over the years from the will and need to survive.

There's a knock at my door. I shove the album under my pillow before slowly opening it.

"Back so soon?"

My hand trembles around the doorknob. I can't look at him, and I don't trust my voice.

"Rosa?"

"Yes, Mr. Camillo?" I mumble, looking down at my sneakers. I don't want him to see my puffy eyes or the lingering redness from crying on the way home. He'll ask unwanted questions.

He steps closer to me, filling the hall with his masculine scent. It lulls some part of my brain and causes my tight shoulders to drop. I swallow thickly, praying he'll just walk away.

He doesn't. "Did something happen?"

I shake my head.

"Are you sure? You didn't rush back just to make dinner, did you?"

"No," I lie, my voice thick with tears. I clear my throat as quietly as possible. "Everything is fine, Mr. Camillo."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

His hand twitches at his side, and I hold my breath, waiting to be grabbed or worse. This is exactly the kind of questioning I can't handle.

"Did you go anywhere fun?"

I flinch as if I've been struck and stare up at him. Why does he want to know that? The alarm bells in my head sound.

I try to school my features, to keep the frantic worry off my face. He's just being friendly. He doesn't know anything.

"I'm sorry?"

“Did you do anything fun? While you were out.”

“No.”

His dark brow arches as he tilts his head. For once, his hair isn't tied back at the crown. Instead, the thick, glossy strands tumble around his face, framing the sharp angles. He's as menacing as he is beautiful.

But it's the flicker behind his dark eyes that makes my insides flutter in a way I can't quite pinpoint. He's watching me, observing me, and my skin prickles on high alert.

Each slow passing of his eyes feels like an embrace heating my skin.

My palms are sweaty, and my tongue feels swollen in my mouth as I stand there dumbly, watching him. I shouldn't enjoy the way having his eyes on me makes me feel.

“So, you just walked around the city all day?”

I suck my lip between my teeth. I don't want to deliberately lie to him. There's no telling what will happen to me and this job if he finds out everything. But I need to protect Ethan. I need to protect myself. “Yes. That's what I did.”

The half-truth sits heavy in my chest, but I know what these men are capable of. They're monsters wrapped in attractive packaging. Beautiful, yet deadly. And I've learned my lesson so that I trust no one but myself.

Camillo and his brothers may have warmed up slightly to me being here, and they may have not raised their hands to me, but there are worse ways to destroy a person.

“Oh,” he responds.

His hand moves, and I step back on instinct, flinching. I watch as his hand flexes, and his gaze hardens for a brief second before he drags it through his hair, pushing it back.

“Are you sure nothing happened?”

“I'm sure.” I hear the waver in my voice. “I just need a few minutes before I start dinner.”

He rubs the back of his neck and nods. “Sure, yeah. Of course.”

I dart into my room and close the door behind me, sinking to the floor. My heart is racing under my T-shirt. I need to get a hold of myself before I start on dinner.

With a wobbly exhale, I stand on shaky legs. Collapsing on the bed, I stare at the ceiling, trying to calm my frantic heart. ‘What ifs’ bounce around my head before I can stop them.

What’s going to happen if they learn about Ethan? What happens if Grayden finds where we are? I can feel the stuttering breaths and the tightness in my chest. Each inhale is shorter than the last, and I can’t quite fill my lungs.

I squeeze my hand tight enough that my nails bite into my palm. And as the sting of pain slices through the panic, I finally manage to gulp down a lungful of air.

Once my hands stop shaking and I can properly stand back up, I make my way to the kitchen. I just need a distraction from my thoughts, and I’ll figure the rest out later.

I stop in the doorway, my brow puckered. Camillo is sitting at the island and tapping away on his phone. Usually at this time, he’s gone, arriving back just in time for dinner to be served.

Maybe he’s making sure I’m still doing a good job. I busy myself around the kitchen trying to figure out where to start. Luckily, I prepped some food last night, so tonight’s meal shouldn’t be too hard.

Camillo clears his throat, and I nearly drop the bowl of defrosted chicken at the sudden noise.

“What are you making?”

I take a calming breath before answering. “I thought I’d make that paella you said you liked so much.”

He nods and sets his phone down. “Can I help?”

It’s not the first time he’s offered to help me. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and I can’t help wondering if he thinks I can’t cope with the job. “No. Thank you.”

“Okay.”

An uneasy silence fills the room.

“You didn’t need to come back so soon. We could have just gotten takeout. You should enjoy your day off.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Right.” His deep voice drops off, and he ducks his head, picking up his phone again.

Why is everything so awkward between us now? It’s almost as if our dinner together didn’t happen...

“Rosa?”

“Yes, Mr. Camillo?” I ask over my shoulder as I wash the rice.

“Just Camillo is fine.”

“Of course.”

The sound of the running water echoes around the quiet kitchen. “About earlier.”

I turn toward him, brows pinched. Did I do something earlier? Did I forget something? I run through the possibilities.

“Outside your bedroom.” The way he looks at me sends a jolt of electricity down my spine. My legs squeeze together. I shouldn’t find him as attractive as I do. I shouldn’t think about him the way I do when my mind drifts.

I know what kind of man he is. I should run the other way. But now that he’s shown an interest in me, I can’t seem to move. Doubt plagues me, and I’m almost certain I’m reading too much into the attention he gives me.

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable, Rosa.”

My mouth parts, but I can’t seem to find my voice.

“I just... You see, you just looked...uh...” Again, his hand drags through his hair before he meets my gaze again. “Actually, never mind. I’m just sorry.”

Another pregnant silence fills the kitchen as I stare at him.

I should say something. Tell him something to erase the pained expression that’s creased his face.

“Do you want something special for dessert tonight?”

The smile that lights his face knocks the air from my lungs. Gone is the brooding man, and in his place is something otherworldly. Some dark angel, ethereal and hauntingly beautiful. I lick my lips.

“Do you know any good recipes for lemon drizzle cake?”

“I do, actually.”

“Really?”

I nod, unable to help the small smile that tugs on my lips. He leans closer to me over the counter. “Have you always been this good at baking?”

I shake my head. “No, I’m not very good at it.”

“That’s not true. Do you enjoy baking?”

Do I? No one has ever asked me that. No one has ever considered my feelings or thoughts before. I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear and offer a sheepish shrug before moving back to preparing dinner. “I suppose. Well, yes.”

“Do you have a favorite dessert?”

“I like lemon sponge cupcakes. But I…” I swallow the words back. He doesn’t need to know the tumultuous relationship I have with food, the nausea that builds when I stare at a meal knowing that I’m adding to a problem, or the bile that burns my throat when I slip and indulge too much.

Telling him any of that would just ruin the surprisingly light atmosphere and companionable conversation here in the kitchen. “I like simple desserts,” I add.

“Cool. Is there anything else you like to do? Hobbies or something?”

“No. I don’t have anything like that.”

I watch the confusion on his face. How he draws his brows together before something dark flickers over his face. It’s gone in an instant.

“How about a favorite movie? Or books to read? You don’t have to spend all your time looking after the house, especially not on your day off.”

“Half-day,” I remind him with a smile. “Plus, I don’t mind.”

He hums, and the rumbling sound sends a wave of pleasure through my body.

As I busy about the kitchen, to my surprise, the conversation doesn’t stop. It’s not invasive. Instead, he’s talking about things he enjoys and making small talk.

For every question he asks me, I tentatively ask him one in return—like I can chip away at his hardened exterior little by little. I want to ask him more, pry deeper, but I don’t want to ruin the fragile tether between us with my naivety.

“It smells delicious.” He sighs as he stretches his long legs out.

And for once, I don’t dismiss the compliment. Instead, I watch him, my lips tugging into a shy smile in response as I clean up the counter.

This is different. He’s different. Softer with me than anyone else in this house.

And it terrifies me in the best way possible.