

CHAPTER 16

ROSA

The piece of paper feels heavy in my hand.

And each step forward feels like my feet are tied to lead bricks. But I keep on walking.

This is the right thing to do.

This is the only thing to do.

I thought things were back on track after that awful Sheena dinner.

A bitter laugh chokes at my throat.

Sheena—if only someone like her was the cause of my worries now.

The day after the dinner party with Sheena's family, my mind started working overtime. And I haven't been able to think about anything else since.

Because the worst thing happened.

I spotted one of Grayden's men, Kane, staring at me from his car as I waited for the bus.

Just the thought of the sly smirk on his face sends an icy chill rushing down my spine.

It's happened again and again over the past week—Kane's balding head and leering eyes catching my gaze in the supermarket, his looming figure watching me from across the street as a cigarette lights his face. Nausea sweeps through me at the memory.

If they've found me, then it's only a matter of time until they find Ethan.

And I can't let that happen.

I won't let that happen.

I can't stay here anymore.

They can't protect me—despite how desperately I wish they could. Despite the flutter in my stomach whenever I catch Camillo's eyes roaming my body in the kitchen. Despite the memory of him calling me gorgeous.

I remember the way his gaze held mine after he took me out for dinner, how his heat surrounded me, how his sandalwood scent filled my senses. He'd been so damn close.

But it's all the more reason to leave.

I won't bring trouble to their doorstep.

My hand trembles as I knock on the door.

“Come!” It's barked just as all Marco's orders are. A command to be followed with no objection or hesitation.

I crinkle the paper in my hand before I can take a calming breath. I have to do this.

“Sit.” He doesn't even bother looking up from the papers on his desk—and I don't think I want him to.

I slide into the chair and will my body to stay still and keep from fidgeting.

My eyes are unfocused as I stare at the polished wood of the desk.

He collects the documents he's looking at into a neat stack and sets them aside. His eyes flick up to mine. “What do you need, Rosa?”

Somehow, I find a buried nerve of steel in my body. Because I know that this is what I have to do.

My gaze lifts. I extend the piece of paper toward him. “I appreciate everything that you've done for me—that you've all done for me. For giving me a chance.”

His gaze skims over my letter before snapping up at me. “You're resigning?”

The shock on his face startles me. I've only ever seen Marco less than collected once before, and that was when he was bleeding from several places.

“I'll be leaving in one week,” I say quietly. Even though I wish I could just flee straightaway, after everything they've done for me, I know I have to give them time to

find a replacement. I just have to be extra vigilant for the next week—and pray that Grayden doesn't find Ethan.

Marco leans back in his chair. His arms are crossed over his broad chest. He doesn't say anything. And I'm not sure if that's worse than him yelling. "Why?" he grits out.

"I'm sorry?"

"Why do you want to resign?"

The calm mask of his face makes me shiver. It's a calmness before the storm. I can see the fury etching into his face. The way his hands tighten under his arms and his jaw clenches. My mouth opens and closes soundlessly.

"I asked you a goddamn question, Rosa!" he yells, finally snapping.

I wipe my palms on my jeans. My chest rises and falls rapidly, and I can't meet his gaze anymore. I can't tell him. I can't tell any of them. "I'm not the right fit," I mumble.

"And?"

"I'm just trying to save us all the trouble of this not working out—"

I jump out of my skin and leap out of the chair as the door bursts open and crashes back against the wall.

Camillo and Alessio rush in, both wide-eyed and panting.

"What the fuck is wrong with you two?" Marco snarls.

"I tried to stop him," Alessio rasps as he grabs Camillo's arm to hold him back.

"And why is he barging in anyway? Forgotten how a door fucking works? Or you know, knocking? I know we taught you manners when you were growing up."

"You can't fire her." Camillo glares at his oldest brother.

I know I should leave and let them handle this privately. But I can't move. I'm rooted to the spot, spine straight and heart pounding.

"And why should I care what you think?" Marco demands.

“Get the fuck off me!” Camillo shakes off Alessio. “I’m not going to do anything.” Camillo strides closer. My chest twists painfully as his scent envelopes me. “She’s the best damn maid we’ve had,” he snarls, only just keeping his voice from yelling. “She cleans this place so that it looks like a palace, she cooks the best food and bakes the best cakes I’ve ever eaten, and she’s even memorized Alessio’s anal closet system—”

“It’s not ana—”

“Enough!” I flinch at Marco’s raised voice and the loud thud of his fists coming down on top of the desk, rattling the wood, as he tries to regain control over the whole derailed conversation.

“Think about this, Marco,” Camillo growls in a dangerous tone.

“I’m quitting.” But I’m not sure they’ve heard me. I clear my throat and speak louder. “I’ve just handed in my resignation.”

“What?” Camillo blurts out.

Don’t look at him. Don’t break. This is the only way to protect everyone. To keep Ethan safe.

“You mean I chased after his ass for nothing?” Alessio whines.

“Maybe if you worked out more, you wouldn’t be so winded,” Camillo barks before turning back to me. “Why didn’t you say something when we came in?”

“If I could have got a word in, I’d have told you,” I say quietly.

“Rosa.” His voice is soft, begging me to look up at him. Weak as I am, I cave and lift my chin. His eyes search my face. “Is this because of the other night?”

“What happened the other night?” Marco demands.

“Nothing,” Camillo says, his eyes never leaving me.

“I just have to leave...”

“Why?” Camillo asks.

“A great question,” Marco clips. “Again, had you not barged into my office, I’d have an answer to this.”

Camillo gives him a glare before turning his gaze back at me. “Rosa?”

But I don’t have an answer. I was going to figure out what to tell him after I’d spoken to Marco. I’ve been wracking my brains for whole day, scrambling around for a way to explain my leaving to Camillo, but I’ve come up short every single time. “Personal reasons,” I murmur.

When Camillo realizes that I don’t intend to expand on this, he backs up, an icy mask of indifference shuttering in place over his features.

My chest seizes.

But a curt nod jerks his head, and he shoves his hands in his pockets. “Right. Of course.” Despite the coolness of his voice, his eyes swim with disappointment. But as quickly as it appears, it’s shuttered behind another layer of ice. His jaw works before he turns and leaves the room.

Alessio looks toward me. “You should reconsider, Rosa,” he says quietly, and the genuine tone in his voice takes me by surprise.

He turns and also walks away, leaving me once again alone with Marco.

Marco’s intense gaze is fixed upon me. “I agree with Alessio. But if your mind is made up, I won’t stop you.”

“It is.”

He nods with finality, indicating that he’s accepted my decision.

I don’t wait for anything else. I spin on my heel and make for the laundry room.

While some people can’t do anything when they’re upset, I’m the opposite. There’s something about cleaning and housework here that calms me and makes me feel safe.

This is for the best.

Because if Kane follows me here, Grayden will know exactly where I am. And then, he’ll drag me back to hell himself.

After dinner, I need some time alone. My heart gallops in my chest as I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

Sitting in my room, the need to make sure Ethan is safe pumps through me like a compulsion. I could phone to check up on him. But I need to see he's safe. Because Kane following me has sent my anxieties into a tailspin. I'll just have to be extra careful and take more precautions than normal.

An hour later, I'm almost there. I pull the coat I'm wearing tighter against my body, fighting against the chilly air as it whips down the street. There's been a recent rain shower, and it feels like it might rain again soon.

The flickering streetlight cast the area in a soft yellow glow. There's no one on this side of the street, and the silence is deafening.

I'm nearly at the corner of Kori's street when my hair is yanked back by the root.

My yelp echoes around the barren street.

"Found you," a voice hisses into my ear.

Hot, rancid breath washes over my neck and smothers me with the smell of alcohol and cigar.

Every bone in my body locks into place as I freeze with fear. He's found me. Oh my God.

"Do you really think you're smarter than me, you stupid bitch?" Grayden snarls.

Another rough yank. My feet slip out from under me on the slick surface of the alley I'm being dragged into.

"Please," I beg, my fingers clawing at his as I try to dislodge his hands.

But it's no use. He's stronger than me. He's more powerful than me in every way.

"Do you think it's funny to humiliate me?"

I can feel my hair rip from my scalp. "N-no..."

"Do you know what this has done to my reputation? How much you've fucking embarrassed me? After I gave a fat bitch like you a chance?"

His fist collides with my side, knocking the air from my lungs.

I gasp before the hard, dirty alleyway collides with my cheek.

My stomach lurches when the toe of his handmade loafer collides with my gut.

“I’m the fucking laughingstock of the country club! All because of your stupid stunt. People are fucking whispering shit about me!”

“Please,” I mumble, curling into myself. “I wasn’t—”

Another rough yank on my hair.

And I scream before I can swallow the sound.

“Shut the fuck up!” The cold metal of his watch collides with my jaw as the smack of his hand jolts my head to the side.

The metallic taste of blood coats my tongue.

“No one’s coming to save you, you ugly bitch. You belong to me. Remember? You’re fucking mine.”

I cry out as he kicks me again.

“Where the fuck is my son? Where have you hidden him?”

Another smack. I feel my lip split.

“Fucking answer me! Where did you take him?”

I twist in his grasp, frantically trying to break free from the iron vise he has on my hair.

Dirt coats my knees as I drop face first to the ground. Another kick to my stomach. And I’m gasping.

Broken shards and rocks dig into my palms as I crawl forward.

Everything hurts. I can taste the salty tang of my tears and blood on my upper lip.

A sharp yelp leaves me as Grayden drags me back into the alley by my ankle.

I kick, managing to connect with his jaw.

He hisses, and I scramble away. The hard cement of the sidewalk crashes into my knee. But I manage to get to my feet and stumble down the street.

“Wait!” I scream to a bus. “Please! Wait!”

By some miracle, the driver stops just long enough for me to slip onto the bus.

It’s nearly empty at this time of night. Finding a spot in the back against the window, I sink into the worn upholstery. My hands tremble in my lap as tears leak from my eyes. I curl inward, trying to take up as little space as possible.

The walk from the bus stop back to the Marchiano estate goes by in a blur of painful steps.

I don’t recall if the guards spoke to me or if I slipped past them unseen. I don’t remember walking down the hall and throwing up in the bathroom.

Seeing my reflection in the mirror is what breaks my trance. The woman who stares back at me is filthy and with hollow and vacant eyes. Covered in dirt, tears streaked down her face, and blood crusted down her chin.

I swallow hard and do my best to clean up. Beneath the grime, my lip is cut and swollen, and a bruise is blooming around my eye and cheek.

I think that everyone must be asleep by now, but the murmur of a voice down the hall makes me tremble. I cover my mouth to hold in the sob that burns my throat. I can’t let any of them see me like this.

They’ll ask questions I don’t want to answer.

I press my ear to the door and wait.

When a long time has passed and there’s been no more sounds, I tentatively open the door and rush toward the kitchen in the darkness.

My sigh of relief fills the air as I quickly bundle some ice in a dishtowel.

“Rosa?”

I freeze.

Oh God. Of all the people to see me like this, it’d be him.

“Did you go out?”

I start to shake my head but then suddenly stop because of the pain it causes. “No.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say as evenly as possible. “I just needed a glass of water. Have a good night.”

“Wait.”

I can't breathe, my body trying to shrink into itself.

He looks toward the refrigerator where I was getting the ice from. “Were you getting something to eat?”

I shake my head.

“Have you eaten?” His hand slams against the wall and fumbles as he searches for the switch.

I wince as the bright light floods the area. And I can taste bile in the back of my throat as I try to shift my body away from him.

But his gentle fingers wrap around my arm, making me flinch away with a whimper in pain. He slowly turns me toward him.

But I can't look at him, my gaze looking down at my scuffed sneakers coated with dirt from the alleyway.

“What the fuck happened?” His words are a harsh whisper, and I can feel tears welling in my eyes.

If I open my mouth, I know I'm going to crack and break into a million pieces and never be able to put myself back together again. I fist my hands, ignoring the sting of my nails on the scrapes and cuts of my palms.

“Rosa.”

The single word is harsh. It demands I look at him. But I can't.

His shadow looms over me, cornering me against the island, the hard edge pressing into my already bruised back. I whimper again before I swallow the sound.

He eases back just slightly. “Who the fuck did this?”

The words are a low, dangerous rumble. He's angry. His body coiled tight, like a predator about to strike. This is the man everyone talks about. The beast who prowls the nights.

But his anger isn't directed at me...or I don't think it is.

"Tell me."

I shake my head.

"Rosa." The sound of my name from his lips softens something inside me. He's lifting my chin gently, but I feel the stiffness in his muscles.

I can't help but look up at him.

And the growl that rips from his lips makes the air whoosh from my lungs. "Tell. Me. Who. The. Fuck. Did. This. To. You."

My vision blurs as I look into his dark eyes. A sob strangles me even as I bite my lip to keep it back.

I can't do it. I can't break. I can't shatter. Ethan needs me whole and well. If I shatter now, there'll be nothing left of me.

Camillo searches my gaze, his thumb brushing the tender bruise along my cheekbone. "Please... Please, tell me."

The words crack his voice and, with it, the dam of my emotions. My legs give out, and I sink down onto the hard floor.

Crouching in front of me, Camillo caresses my hair away from my face and cups my cheek. "Tell me who did this, Rosa. I just want to help. Please." His voice is unnaturally soft now, layered with some thick emotion, "Please let me help you."