

CHAPTER 22

ROSA

Absentmindedly, I touch the tip of my finger to my bottom lip. The ghost of his lips brushes mine, leaving a wave of arousal rocketing through my body.

My skin tingles at the memory of his hot breath along the sensitive skin of my neck. Every nerve in me exploded when he kissed me, leaving something utterly changed in its wake.

He'd wanted me. Kissed me. What if he actually—

I shake my head, dismissing that line of thought.

It was a mistake.

It had to be a mistake. We were just caught up in the moment from the work out with our adrenaline running high.

I'm getting my hopes up for something that doesn't exist. There's no way that he'd ever find someone like me attractive or interesting enough to keep around.

Camillo can have his pick of anyone. Women must throw themselves at him left, right, and center. Why would he bother with me?

And even if something did happen, he'd find my lack of bedroom skills a complete turn off. I shudder as I remember what Grayden used to say to me about that.

The vase I'm dusting nearly slips from my fingers. Get your head together. For four days now, I've thrown myself into my work, avoiding him at all costs. I've taken to the more labor-intensive cleaning tasks—the things that are probably more seasonal or yearly. I've been deep cleaning rooms that never get used and steam cleaning carpets in rooms on the other side of the mansion where no one will disrupt me.

When I come out of my bedroom in the mornings, he's still there with Mr. Fluffy, both sleeping on the floor outside the bedrooms to keep watch over Ethan and me. I shuffle past him as fast as I can after an awkward “good morning,” focusing on

patting the dog so that I don't have to look at Camillo. I've told him that he doesn't have to do this every night, but he refuses to stop. As much as he pretends to not like the dog, I can tell that Camillo has a secret soft spot for the animal, and I often catch him sneaking treats to him when he thinks no one's looking.

During the day, I'm in and out of the rooms before he even appears, especially at mealtimes. The food sits on the table, waiting for them, as I quietly make my way to another part of the mansion. I hear all about the funny jokes from Ethan later in the night. This is the new routine—I've told Ethan I still have work to do and will eat later.

Setting the vase back down, I quickly wash my hands and set about dinner prep. From a quick glance at the clock on the microwave, I've just enough time to get this done before Camillo comes back from the casino. And it's plenty of time for me to relive the way my body heated against his...

I can't believe how responsive I was to him. It was as if someone touched me with a live wire. His sandalwood scent fogged my brain and made me giddy as my stomach swooped.

I clear my throat. The more I relive it, the harder it is to remind myself that this is all a fantasy—one that continues to keep me up at night, my imagination running wild.

It was just a kiss. But I've never been kissed like that. Consumed so completely and fully that it lingers days later.

Shaking myself, I focus on the task before me. Ethan sits at the table quietly coloring, his legs swinging as he hums to himself, Mr. Fluffy next to him as his constant companion. They're best friends now, and Mr. Fluffy is determined to keep watch over my little boy at all times.

It's the most relaxed I've seen him since he arrived. And for that, I'm forever thankful to Camillo and his brothers. And because I don't want this to change, it's all the more reason to stay the hell away from Camillo until the awkwardness has settled.

I won't ruin things for us here. Not when things are finally feeling like they're right.

"I'll be right back," I say to Ethan, knowing he won't leave the table. Slowly, I make my way into the laundry room. The load still has a good twenty minutes to go. This will give me just enough time to finish prepping for dinner. Determined to finish well before anyone gets home, I hurry back into the kitchen.

“Hey, Ethan.”

The voice freezes me. My hand hovers above the bowl of marinated chicken, and my breathing picks up.

So much for avoiding him. Dread swims in my stomach as I swallow thickly. This isn't happening. Why is he home early? Has something happened?

My heart races as I grab the bowl and pretend that I haven't heard him enter the kitchen. I don't spare a glance at the table where I know he's sitting now.

I quickly wipe my damp palms on my jeans as Camillo and Ethan continue to talk in soft voices—something about the game they played the other day.

I can do this. Just act nonchalant. It's clear we both regret what happened, and it isn't going to be repeated. Despite how much I wish it would.

We're both adults, and we can act grown up about this.

“What's for dinner?”

I glue my eyes to the counter, willing my heart to settle. But the fluttering has turned into a thundering gallop in my chest. “Chicken risotto, green beans, and a side salad.”

“Sounds delicious.”

I nod stiffly, turning back to the meal. Anything to keep my gaze from wandering over to the table.

“Can I help?” He's closer. The sound of his voice is louder, and the scent of him so near to me sends me spiraling back into the gym when his body was pressed against me. I squeeze my legs tighter together. “N-no. That's okay.”

“Sure?”

“Yep,” I squeak as I turn quickly, setting the pan on the stove.

He murmurs something to Ethan, but I can't quite catch what he says. Ethan's tiny footsteps echo as he leaves the room and goes up the staircase, presumably to get something from his bedroom.

The walls are pressing in. My chest constricts. I don't want to be alone with him. I can't face rejection anymore.

“Rosa?”

My fingers fumble with the burner knob, shaking too hard to be of use. Why am I so nervous? So awkward?

“Rosa?” His voice brushes the side of my cheek softly.

“Hmm?”

“Are you okay?”

“Fine, fine.”

Camillo’s warm hand braces my arm, and I freeze. “Is this about why you’re avoiding me?” he asks in a low voice.

The pain in his voice slices through me. I don’t know what to say. I’m being delusional about anything happening between us. I’m broken and useless, and he’s a protective angel who doesn’t lower himself to be with someone like me. “No.”

Gently, he turns me to face him, his brow arched. His mouth opens, then snaps shut before he can utter a sound.

“I’m sorry for letting it get that far,” I murmur. “For not stopping it sooner.”

Something shutters over his face, and the stony mask falls back into place. I’ve seen it too many times when he and his brothers are talking—indifference. And I hate the feeling of it being directed at me.

“What?” he growls.

“The kiss,” I whisper, dropping my eyes. “What I mean is, I get it. We can just pretend it never happened.” I’m rambling. The words just spill from my lips without so much as connecting with my brain.

Confusion knits his brows together as he searches my face.

My eyes hit the floor, and I wring my hands together. “I know I’m not the ideal...anything. And you’re...you. So, it’s okay. We can just pretend it didn’t happen and move on. No need to talk about it.”

The warmth of his palm cups my cheek, lifting my chin so I have to stare into his eyes. The corner of his lip twitches as the shutter of cold indifference melts away. “Is that what you want? To pretend it didn’t happen?”

My heart stutters at the expression on his face. “Don’t you?”

“Fuck, no.”

I blink at him. “What?”

“I don’t want to pretend it didn’t happen,” he says. His words don’t make sense. Why wouldn’t he want that? Why would he even say any of this? To torment me? To mock me? But that isn’t the Camillo I’ve come to know over the last few weeks.

“I don’t understand...”

And that smile, the one that makes my knees turn to jelly, floods his face as his thumb brushes the apple of my cheek. “I can’t and won’t forget it. That’s not happening for either of us. I refuse to let it. You and that kiss are all I’ve thought about for four fucking days, Rosa.”

“Me?” I stutter.

“Yes, you. I don’t see anyone else here I’ve kissed, do you? I mean, I haven’t kissed Mr. Dog Breath over there, thank God,” he says, jerking his chin in the direction of where the animal is slumbering.

I can’t help a small smile, and I shake my head. But it doesn’t make sense. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why can’t you forget it? Why me?” His heat washes over me. His lips are just a hair’s breadth away. It’s so tempting. All it’ll take is for me to rise on my tiptoes to press my lips to his. To claim them as boldly as he claimed mine.

“Because it was single-handedly the best kiss I’ve ever had.”

“But...” I start as his thumb brushes across my bottom lip, his eyes tracking the movement. My cheeks heat, and my body trembles as anticipation flares to life within me.

“But nothing. You, Rosa. You have consumed every thought I’ve had for fucking weeks now. There’s no one who haunts my dreams like you do.” He presses closer,

trapping me against the island. “I’ve had a taste, and I’m not about to let you go. I’m addicted. Don’t make me forget you. Don’t make me pretend. I won’t be able to do it.”

My fingers grip the fabric of his shirt to keep me from swaying. His sleeves are rolled up as usual, and I can’t help my fingers from tracing up the muscles and ink on his beautiful forearms. Please don’t let this be a cruel joke. Please don’t let him shove me away and shatter the fragile shell of hope that’s blossoming in my chest.

Beneath my fist, his heart races, mirroring my own. “I’m not that strong of a man, Rosa.”

I can’t find my voice, but I nod. The way he looks at me, the devotion and hunger that shine in his eyes, makes me shiver with excitement. No one has ever looked at me like this before.

“That’s my good girl,” he breathes. The praise in his words ignites something in me, coiling in my lower stomach. His thumb brushes my cheek again before he consumes my lips, sealing whatever bargain we’ve just struck.

He steps back, breathing just as ragged as mine.

The air is stifling now, crackling to life with electricity.

The smile on his face swirls my stomach, making it flutter and swoop with a myriad of emotions.

Once more, his fingers drift up to my lips, and I feel them pull into a stunned grin.

He wants me...