

CHAPTER 29

ROSA

Frosting dots my cheeks, and the sweet smell of freshly baked cakes fills the calm night air of the kitchen.

The house is peaceful—in a way it isn't during the day. Despite the quiet that seems to engulf the estate while the Marchianos are busy doing whatever underhanded deals need to be made or taking care of their businesses, the house still feels lived in and bustling. But now, at two in the morning, it's a different kind of quiet. One that used to unsettle me, but now only brings a soft sense of belonging.

We are safe here.

Camillo and his brothers make sure of it.

I'm in their debt for something I can't possibly pay them back for, ever. But this is a small step in the right direction, as insignificant as it feels. A smile tugs at my mouth as I finish scripting the frosting across the top of the cake.

The large island in front of me is covered with cupcakes in various flavors. I know better than to bake the favorite flavor for only one of the brothers. It's childish how they fight and pout over it, but it's also harmless—I've learned a lot about these terrifying men since I started working here.

After everything they've given Ethan and me, the least I can do is bake a birthday cake.

The clock down the hall chimes loudly, and I stifle a yawn. Swiping the back of my hand to my forehead, smearing more frosting there, I admire my handiwork. The mount of dishes looms behind me, reminding me of what staying up so late has produced. But it'll be worth it to see the surprise once everyone is up.

Ethan's tiny body is curled up on the bench of the breakfast nook, fast asleep. He didn't want to go to sleep without me upstairs with him, but he soon fell asleep when I tucked him up on the cushions with his stuffed bear and a warm blanket.

A yawn escapes from me as I continue to, as quietly as possible, clean up the mess I've made. If I can finish soon, I can still get a few good hours of sleep without anyone the wiser.

As quickly as I can, I wipe down the counter, having hidden the surprise birthday cake in the pantry for the morning.

It's the closing door that alerts me that Camillo is finally back from whatever assignment he was given to deal with. We don't talk about that often. It's not my business to poke and prod him when he comes back, lips drawn into a grim line or exhaustion etched into his features, his knuckles almost always sporting some kind of fresh bruises and blood.

I know he thinks I don't see it or notice. But my eyes are wide open to the darkness that swallows him whole. Yet, he doesn't scare me the way Grayden's violence always did.

My lips tug up into a smile. Beneath that hard exterior is something vulnerable only I can see. It's revealed in flashes here and there—something broken that fits perfectly with all my own jagged pieces.

“Rosa?”

I straighten, putting the spatula back in the drawer before turning to face him.

“What are you doing up?”

“Ethan couldn't sleep,” I lie smoothly, hoping he won't see through it or the frosting crusted along my hairline, and hoping that for once, my voice doesn't falter. “I got him a glass of hot milk. I was just cleaning up.”

I can feel his body heat even before his arms encircle my body from behind. His distinct sandalwood scent fills my nose, and I lean further back. He pulls me closer, breathing in deeply. The way he clings to me mends something within me I can't quite understand.

“Tired?” he murmurs.

I melt against him and nod. Without another word, Camillo steps back and carefully lifts Ethan's sleeping body, then carries him up to bed.

The excitement of tomorrow running through me causes a smile to tilt my lips as I climb the staircase behind them.

After we tuck Ethan in, we tear off our clothes and climb into bed. And it takes less than a second for his body to wrap around behind mine. His lips find the juncture of my neck.

Despite my exhaustion and sleepiness, one brief touch of his lips and glide of his tongue across my skin makes it all vanish. Desire races through me.

“Mmm...why do you taste like frosting?”

I bite my lip to keep my smile from spreading. “You’ll see in the morning.”

He hums against my skin, his large hands gripping my hips and dragging me further against him. “You made something?”

“Maybe.”

“I can always find a way to make you tell me.”

I smile into the dark. And a thrill of need and want rushes through me at the idea. “Oh?” The warmth from his mouth washes over my throat and makes goosebumps pebble my skin.

His lips part as he continues to kiss against my jaw, my neck, up to my ear. “You sure you don’t want to tell me?”

His low voice caressing my ear only heightens the feeling building in my belly. A part of me wants to cave in—but another is far more interested in finding out his methods for making me spill my secret.

My heart pounds in my chest and thunders against my ribs as his fingers skim lower and lower.

What is it about this man that makes every rational and reasonable thought flee from my head? It makes me feel reckless and in control all at the same time. But I only feel like this with him—like Camillo is slowly but surely mending something in me, putting me back together kiss by kiss.

“I can be really persuasive,” he whispers against the side of my neck.

“I don’t want to ruin the surprise,” I manage to gasp out.

And the haze in my head takes over as his rough hands trace a path down my body, igniting the heat within me.

Reaching my legs, he pushes his palms between them, forcing my thighs apart.

And his fingers skim over my skin as he nuzzles my neck.

The anticipation grows as I feel his warm breath on my ear, his deep voice sending shivers skittering down my spine.

"I've been looking forward to this all day," he whispers against me. "Looking forward to having you in my arms and stroking your sweet pussy..."

Pressing myself against his mouth, I hold my breath as I feel his fingers start to inch their way closer to where I need them.

My body trembles with each touch from him. And my eyes flutter in blissful anticipation as I silently beg him to touch me where I need it the most.

I let out a moan as he traces over my slick outer lips and growls at what he finds there. "So wet. You're such a good girl for me..."

My breaths are shallow as he keeps one hand there while the other moves over my throat, then down to cup my breasts.

"Such perfect tits," he exhales as he rolls a nipple between his rough thumb and finger, making it instantly harden into a peak.

With every touch, I gasp and tremble with pleasure.

He pulls me tighter into his embrace, his muscled body spooned around me as his hands keep playing with my body.

My head presses back against his shoulder. And I let out a small whimper as his finger swirls around my clit for the shortest second before returning to caress my inner thighs.

I close my eyes in anticipation, willing his hand to return to where I want it, needing it so desperately.

"You're already dripping wet," he rumbles into my ear, his tongue teasing a trail down the side of my neck as he licks and nips at the skin there.

My breath hitches as his fingers dive between my lips again and circle my clit.

I can feel the tension building from within. My panting intensifies.

And I reach behind and grab onto his thighs for support.

His forearm is grasped around my waist, so tight that I couldn't escape even if I wanted.

One of his hands is massaging my clit with firm fingers while the other pinches and tugs at my hard nipples, making my nerve endings scream out for release.

And as a powerful orgasm rushes through me, I start screaming out and try to push his hand away.

But he refuses to stop until every last drop of my pleasure has been wrung out of me.

Gasping for air, I collapse back against him as he wraps me in his strong arms and whispers to me. "Perfect, Rosa. You're just perfect."

While Camillo helps Ethan to dress, I get things ready for breakfast. I want everything to be perfect for Marco's birthday.

When Ethan comes down, hand in hand with Camillo, he lets out an excited squeal when he sees not only the birthday cake but also the cupcakes I've baked in everyone's favorite flavor.

Camillo, however, has a different expression as he watches Alessio and Lorenzo digging in. He grunts, his lips pursed. "I get you baked for Marco since it's his birthday and for Ethan because he's a kid, but why did you also bake for them?" he asks as he lasers a look at his brother and cousin and jabs a finger in their direction.

"Jealous, are you?" Alessio asks with an arched eyebrow.

"No," he says a little too quickly.

And I can't help but bite my lip to keep from giggling as he grumbles under his breath.

As we settle down around the table, his hand comes to rest on the top of my thigh.

“Are you going to make all our favorites on everyone’s birthdays?” Alessio asks, a hopeful look in his usually serious eyes.

“If you want, of course.”

“I’m glad I’ve got a meeting here this morning,” Lorenzo adds as he picks up another cake.

“Camillo mentioned you’d be joining us for breakfast this morning,” I say in a shy voice.

“It was really nice of you to think of me and bake my favorite flavor too,” Lorenzo smiles.

Heat creeps into my cheeks at the praise being flung my way this morning. It shouldn’t affect me like it does, but still, I can’t quite wrap my head around it. Or the fact that Ethan and I now fit so seamlessly in with them. It feels like a dream I haven’t woken up from—one I’m not certain I want to.

Camillo’s warm hand cups my face, turning me toward him despite the presence of his family. The heat crawling up my neck is only partly because of embarrassment. His dark eyes search mine as if he can see straight down to the broken shambles of my soul. I squirm a little beside him, uncomfortable with the idea of him seeing how broken I really am inside.

I know he won’t judge me, but what I am is unfixable, and I want to hide that part of me a little longer. He’s seen too far down as it is.

“I still can’t believe you made us cupcakes too,” Alessio says around a mouthful of cake. “You spoil us, Rosa.”

“What’s all this?” Marco’s voice cuts through our chatter.

“Happy birthday!” Ethan pipes up, scampering around the table to give Marco a shy hug.

“Thanks, buddy,” he says.

“Momma. I’m full now. Can I go play and tell Bernie Bear all about the yummy cupcakes?”

“Sure, honey,” I say with an indulgent smile at him as I watch him skip away.

I watch as the others give birthday greetings to Marco. It's an open display of affection and warmth. And it sends a jolt of longing straight through me.

"Happy birthday, bro," Camillo says.

"Thanks," Marco murmurs as he heads for the hot pot of coffee before freezing. "What the fuck is that?"

My hands shake at the growl in his voice.

"A birthday cake?" Lorenzo mumbles over the rim of his cup, his brow arched. "Rosa made it."

Marco's body spins to face me.

And I fight the urge to sink against Camillo.

Fury is etched into Marco's dark eyes, his upper lip curling in a snarl.

"I..." I swallow hard. "I wanted to surprise you with a cake."

Eyes narrowed, he strides toward me.

Camillo jerks up and stands between his brother and me. "Marco."

"Move," Marco orders.

"No."

The temperature in the room plummets.

No one dares move as Camillo and Marco clench their fists.

"Move, Camillo."

"No."

"This is a shit time for you to grow some balls."

The hard clap of Camillo's hand into Marco's chest makes me wince.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, easing from my chair gradually.

My breathing is coming in small pants.

Anxiety winds tighter and tighter around my chest.

“I just wanted to do something nice for your birthday,” I whisper. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

My chin wobbles, and I bite down hard to keep my lips from trembling. Tears blur my vision.

Why is he so upset? Does he not like cake? Have I messed up and misunderstood something important here? And now, to make things worse, Camillo is squaring off against Marco. I’ve ruined it all.

My hands tremble against me, my coffee cup long forgotten on the table. I stand with my eyes downcast.

“I’ll—excuse me,” I stutter, moving past the looming figures in the middle of the kitchen.

Guilt claws through my body, tearing me apart with its talons, shred by shred.

“Rosa, wait—”

But my feet carry me into the hall before Camillo can even finish his sentence.

Nausea swims through me as I try to keep the tears from falling. Hands braced on my thighs, I bend forward, trying to get as much air into my lungs as I can. It’s futile, like sucking through a broken straw.

Why am I even crying? He didn’t say he hated it. But it’s clear I’ve overstepped some mark. I just wanted to do something for his birthday. To provide Marco with a small thank you for everything he’s done.

But I can’t even do that properly. And now I’m responsible for messing things up between Camillo and Marco. Me.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Camillo’s bellow in the kitchen rouses me from my stupor. My breathing turns frantic, small gasps peppering the air.

A muffled reply hits my ears, unintelligible over my gasping breaths. My arms wrap around my body tightly as I try to stop the sob that clogs my throat.

“Rosa?” I hear the echo of my name. I don’t know if one or several moments have passed, still frozen to the spot and unable to move.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, my words soft, barely above a whisper.

“Hey.” Camillo’s face fills my blurry vision, and concern battles rage as he scans my face. “There’s nothing you need to be sorry about.”

I will the tears back, clearing my throat. “I didn’t mean to upset him. Or for any of that to happen.”

“Marco was just...shocked. He’s not used to someone else making the birthday cakes or anything. He’s seen it as his job since our parents died—were killed. He’s always felt guilty about our mom no longer being around. Marco and Alessio practically brought up me and our youngest two siblings after our parents were killed.” His words come out through clenched teeth.

“I didn’t know.”

“I know. He won’t admit it, but he handled it all wrong. But it’s okay, I promise.”

I want to believe him, but I can’t. I nod, not trusting my voice to stay even.

He leads me back to the table. I follow, keeping my eyes down. I can’t look the others in the eye. I’ve overstepped my position here, and I’m the reason Camillo and his brother nearly came to blows. In the months I’ve been here, I’ve never seen them like this with each other.

The atmosphere is charged, and Marco’s seat at the table is now empty. I don’t dare ask where he’s gone so that I can apologize to him—not that it’d do any good to fix all the damage I’ve done.

The morning goes by in a haze, my thoughts tumbling over one another as I absentmindedly clean and do laundry.

As I mop the ground floor, I freeze outside the hallway, catching the brief conversation inside Marco’s office.

“You need to apologize.”

“Since when do you get to tell me what to do, Camillo?”

“You’re being an asshole. More than usual.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

I shouldn’t be listening to this; it’s a private conversation.

“Rosa was just trying to be nice.”

The mop nearly drops from my hand at the sound of my name. I really shouldn’t be listening, but my feet won’t move.

Someone sighs, and I can almost picture Marco and Camillo both dragging their hands down their faces, mirroring each other. There are so many small things like this that always remind me that they’re siblings.

“I just…” Marco starts to speak, and I hear another longer sigh. “It’s hard to forget what happened.”

“I know,” Camillo says more quietly. “They were our parents. We’ll never forget what happened to them and how they left us.”

“It’s even harder to accept we’ve got people who love us now,” Marco continues. “A family who care about us.” There’s another pause and what sounds like drinks being poured. “I know we’ve always had each other—always will have each other—but there’s always something around us. Guilt? Sadness? I don’t fucking know, but it clings to us like a second fucking skin no matter what I do. I’ve tried hard to do what I could for you all.”

“We were dealt a shitty hand…” Camillo’s voice is low. “You did your best.”

“But I didn’t manage to fix it, did I? It was Juliana, Cate, the kids.” Another lingering pause. “Rosa and Ethan too. No. Don’t give me that look. You’re not as subtle as you think you are. We’re also not stupid. I see the way you look at her. They all make us a proper family. They get rid of that shit that haunts us like ghosts.”

Camillo’s reply comes in a mumbled response I can’t quite pick up. Their voices continue softly for a few more minutes.

I shake my head and back away from the door, then wander down the hall. But the sound of the doorknob turning sets my spine tingling, and I hurry my step, mop and bucket handle clenched in my fists as Camillo and Marco leave his office.

But the air around them is different. Less charged. Lighter.

Marco claps Camillo on the back before they part ways.

They seem to have made up. I breathe out a sigh of relief and head back to the utility room to change out the mop water.

“Rosa?”

Startling, I knock over the half-filled bucket into the sink with a small, muttered curse. And my heart lodges in my throat.

I turn to face Marco. “Y-yes?”

“I didn’t...” He clears his throat, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “Earlier,” he grits out. “You making the cake was thoughtful. I didn’t get a chance to tell you.”

Is this his way of apologizing?

My brow puckers, unsure. “No one should have to make their own cake on their birthday,” I say quietly. “I didn’t know. What I mean, I wasn’t aware that making all the cakes was your thing and a sort of tradition for you. I’m sorry I overstepped.”

His jaw ticks, but he nods. “Things change when we bring new people into the family. It’s not a bad thing. See you at dinner.”

All I can do is nod mutely, unsure what the feeling fluttering inside me is. It’s different from the way Camillo makes me feel. This is something else entirely. Something that warms me differently.

Family. This is how a family is supposed to act. Do they really consider Ethan and me as family? Or is he just being polite to make up for what he said earlier?

Family.

The word settles against my skin, leaving me confused and hopeful. And I know that it’s a dangerous combination because danger will always be waiting for me in the shadows...