

CHAPTER 7

ROSA

I purposefully got up at the crack of dawn this morning despite the late night, determined to do better than yesterday. Because I know that it will take just one small thing to make them send me back onto the street.

Things didn't start off well this morning after I knocked over Marco's glass of water at breakfast and burned the pancakes.

However, by the time it's late afternoon, with most of the heavy lifting taken care of, the mansion seems a little less large and overwhelming.

Sure, a couple of rooms have taken me a few hours longer to clean than I hoped, but I managed. It's nearly three now, and I'm finding that there is less and less to do except wait for laundry to be done.

I carefully place one of Alessio's shirts on a hanger and set it into his closet with care. Then I snatch it back out again, worrying that I haven't put it in the right place.

After he said that I'd messed up his system, I'm determined to prove to them all that I can learn and adapt. At first, I have no idea how I'm ever going to arrange Alessio's clothes to his satisfaction. The vast majority of his clothing is black, and although I understand there are subtle differences between the shades, how on earth am I supposed to grade those shades so that his clothes are arranged in a row of perfectly graduated black color?

I sink onto the side of the bed and put my head into my hands. I have to get this right—because it was clear as day that he was far from pleased with me last night.

An idea comes to me. I grab my cell from the kitchen and use it to take photos, one by one, of the clothes in his closet, also taking a picture of each label so that I know exactly what order he likes them hung in. Then, I do the same with the items in his dresser.

This should help me when I need to put away his laundry in future. Because this job needs to work out. There's no backup plan, and with the fear of facing the streets

again, my fingers fumble as I take the last of the photos I need. Nausea sweeps through me at the prospect of failure—what will Ethan and I do when I fail?

When I fail. The words feel like a slap to the face, and I fight back a wince.

I told Kori I'd call tonight, but what will I tell Ethan? I can't get his hopes up yet. The ground under my feet is anything but solid. But if I can last the month's trial and get taken on permanently, then I might have enough money after three months for us to leave Chicago altogether. I just need enough for bus tickets, a deposit, the first month's rent, and something to keep us going until I find myself another job.

I bounce from room to room, my head a spiral of dark clouds. Each item I go to pick up comes with a second guess or a hesitation. Do they prefer it there? Have I messed up yet again? Will I be cornered in the kitchen again tonight when Marco and Alessio inevitably critique my work?

The clock down the hall chimes, and I make my way to the kitchen in a fog. Last night's meal wasn't great. And the unhappy expression on Marco's face told me that I need to do better. Be better. He's the one who'll ultimately tell me to go packing or not. He's the one who holds my future in his hands, though I'm sure the others will have a say as well.

Fear and doubt bubble in my chest as I wash my hands and set to work. I'll do a nice, easy chicken parmesan. I can manage that. I carefully slice the chicken, forcing myself to just focus on the knife and the cutting board—and not the words that utter in the back of my head, the ones that make my hand shake unevenly.

Grayden hated this for dinner, but it's the best option until I can get to the store tomorrow given what's in the fridge and pantry. Grayden always said my chicken was too dry, the sauce too salty, and the pasta too overcooked.

Setting the knife down, I close my eyes and take a calming breath. If this is the last night I get to work here, I'll have experience then. Someone else would hire me after that, right?

But the reality of it is that two days are not any better than no experience at all.

My mother and father are right. I'm useless. I'm just here. Taking up too much space. Far more space than I want to. I wish I could have returned to my family when I left Grayden—I'd wished for that so many times during my marriage. But marrying him is the only thing I've ever done that's made them happy and proud of me. Grayden's bound to go there, looking for me, and I shudder to think what they'll say when

Grayden tells them that I've run away—and I know that my father would force me to return to my husband.

The time passes quickly, and as I'm checking the clock, there's a commotion at the front door before it opens and then slams shut, making me yelp.

I carefully set down the plate I'm holding and try to calm myself. It takes nothing at all for my heart to begin its frantic beating and my muscles to lock up tight in anticipation. I know that any one of them could come marching in here with fire in their eyes and a raised hand—and the smallest thing will cause them to ask me to leave right away.

“Try to stay the fuck still!” Camillo's deep voice hits my ears first.

“Next time you can get shot,” Alessio says in a hoarse voice.

Shot? Did he say shot? Like bullets and actual blood? Oh my God...

“I told you both to fucking wait for me, but you had it all figured the fuck out,” Camillo snarls before his broad body fills the doorway.

Alessio's arm is draped over his shoulder, and he's clutching his red-stained shirt. With a hiss, Camillo lowers him to the chair without so much as a glance at me.

I'm frozen on the spot, my breaths coming in and out, faster and faster.

“I don't need your fucking help.” Marco's deep growl makes me want to hide. I swallow thickly before my body moves to the stove where the sauce sits in wait. None of them have addressed me yet, and I know better than to speak before being spoken to.

“Bullshit. You were nearly Swiss cheese. Now sit the fuck down.”

Camillo flicks a long, glossy strand out of his eyes from where it's fallen out of the half knot at the back of his head. Crimson smudges against his forehead. His blood or his brothers' blood? I can't tell. “I need the first aid kit in the hall bathroom,” Camillo says, peeling off Marco's ruined suit jacket.

Dark splotches of blood make bile run up the back of my throat.

“Rosa!”

I can hear the stuttered breathing from my lips, the clammy feeling of my body.

“Get the first aid kit. Now!”

Somehow, I manage to nod and turn on shaky knees. In the bathroom, my hands flounder with the box under the sink as I grab it. My feet tangle together, and I nearly trip as I move back into the kitchen to the injured men. Blood is seeping from their arms, and Alessio’s side is leaking crimson.

I’m going to be sick. I can feel it rising higher and higher.

“H-her-” The words won’t come out of my mouth, but I shove the kit into Camillo’s outstretched hand.

“Fuck!” Alessio snarls.

“Don’t be such a wimp.” He laughs, though it’s strained, forced. The tightness of his muscles beneath his black shirt tells me he’s worried. “And don’t move an inch until I get back.”

I stand there in the middle of the kitchen dumbly. My gaze bounces between the two bleeding men and then to the floor. Drops and smears of deep crimson make a path to where they sit. My knees wobble as I clutch the counter before looking down at the unfinished dinner.

Camillo charges back in and shoves a bottle of whiskey into Alessio’s face, earning him a grunt of what I can only assume to be satisfaction or gratitude.

As he gets to work, Alessio hisses again, a string of curses leaving him.

“Stop moving, and it won’t be so bad.”

“You’re goddamn prodding me like cattle.”

“Do you want the bullet to come out or not? I told you it was going to fucking hurt.”

Numbly, I listen to the exchange. This is their normal life. My normal life now. The thought is terrifying.

“Stop! Christ, I swear to God and all the goddamn saints if you don’t stop—” Alessio’s words fade into foreign curses and grunts as Camillo continues to poke his side.

“Fine! Fine.” Camillo looks around the room, distraught. His hands rake through his hair, dragging his brother’s blood through the disheveled strands. “Fuck. Okay.”

He meets my gaze, begging for an answer. There's something there in his eyes, something that breaks my heart and makes me want to move closer. It's just under the surface of his usual mask—but it's gone in an instant.

“Come here, Rosa.”

He wants me to do something?

“I need your help.”

“Me?” I squeak.

“Yes. Come here.”

Slowly, I move forward. What's he going to ask me to do?

“I need you to get the bullets out. I can't get a good grip.”

I look at the wound oozing, then back to Camillo. My breathing is rushed and harsh, coming in small pants.

“Now, Rosa!” Marco yells as Alessio's head sways and tips forward. “Before he bleeds out!”

My body snaps forward like my brain isn't sure what's going on. I carefully take the forceps from Camillo's hand. I ignore the way his fingers brush mine and the feeling in my stomach before I grab the pitcher of water.

“I'm sorry,” I mumble repeatedly as I flush the wound with water. My hands wobble and shake as I approach the first of several bullet holes. My fist clenches on my thigh as I try to steady my outstretched hand.

“Here, put them in here,” Camillo orders, tipping the salad out of the bowl I prepared for dinner.

The ping of metal against ceramic echoes, and it takes every ounce of my strength to keep from keeling over and puking right then and there.

Once Alessio is done, I turn toward Marco. I don't meet his gaze as I gently poke the wounds, unable to keep my hand steady. I don't want to see what kind of monster is lurking there tonight or what kind of brutal villain I'll see if I lift my eyes.

“Hurry up,” Marco snarls, his jaw clenched.

I bite back a whimper and tell myself that it's no different from patching myself up or helping Ethan when he's scraped his knee. I've seen blood. And I've had it on my fingers... But this time, it's very different.

I take one inhale, then another, and set to work.

Once the bullets are out, Camillo hands me a needle. "You stitch Marco. I'll do Alessio."

Avoiding Marco's dark gaze lasering into me, I work the needle through his skin, watching each insertion and extraction as if I were in someone else's body.

When I finish the last pull, Camillo is wrapping Alessio's wounds and muttering to him about something I can't quite catch over the frantic beat of my heart.

The buzzer for the garlic bread in the oven sounds. I yelp and jump nearly a mile high, almost knocking over the bowl filled with bloody bullets and a few stray lettuce leaves.

My fingers pinch at my thigh in an attempt to distract me from the agitated beating in my chest.

I need to move. To do something. But I'm rooted to the spot. A shaky breath leaves me.

I tell myself I can't burn dinner. I take one step, then another, and feel how unsteady each movement is. My fingers are stained with red, and each finger has a tremor that won't stop.

My hands leave small prints on the counter until I make it to the sink. And then reality crashes into me.

These men behind me are far worse than my father or Grayden. They're the true terrors of the world. Every single one of them. Unphased by the blood that mars their pristine kitchen or the metallic smell of it in the air, they live within it, unbothered by the wounds that are now being wrapped up as if it's simply another day of the week.

And it is. For them.

My father was right when he spoke about them. His words come flooding back to me. He said that they're ruthless, brutal, bloodthirsty. Deadly in a way that sucks the air from the room and suffocates you. I'm nothing to these people. Expendable and

replaceable. And that's never been more apparent than right now. They have enemies, and those people are just as dangerous when they retaliate against them. This is nothing like Grayden or the world I ran from. I've jumped from the frying pan into the fire. I'm trying to make my life safe—but it can never be this while I'm around men who are criminals for a living.

This is an entirely different world.

And I can't stay here for too long...

I willingly walked into the lair of a monster and thought if I worked hard enough, if I just did as I was told, I'd be okay. That I'd make it out of this. That I'd turn a blind eye and ignore whatever happened.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. I can hear Grayden's taunting laughter in my head, echoing the thoughts that continue to beat into me like punches.

Washing my hands, I watch as the red circles the drain, my fingers turning pink from the heat of the water. Tonight, after my call with Ethan, I'll have to figure out my next step.

Mutely, I turn toward the counter and begin to scrub the evidence away. It's not my blood, but it might as well be.

The soft murmurs of the brothers talking hit my ears before Camillo hauls Alessio out of the room and upstairs to his room.

And I'm left all alone with Marco...