

CHAPTER 18

ROSA

“Is this...really necessary?”

I’m in the backseat of a black SUV driven by Alessio, with Marco in the passenger seat and Camillo sitting beside me. And as I look around us, I can see a convoy of half a dozen identical SUVs filled to the gills with their armed soldiers. And while I’m extremely grateful for their support, I can’t help worrying that I’m putting them to a huge amount of trouble.

“I’m not taking any risks when it comes to your son,” Camillo growls. He takes my hand and gives it a tender squeeze. “Ethan’s too important to take any chances,” he adds in a gentler voice.

We pull up outside Kori’s house. I’ve rung ahead to let her know that we’re on our way, so she’s expecting us despite the late hour.

Camillo and Marco accompany me to the front door, one either side of me. Their soldiers are keeping watch, eyes and weapons trained in every direction. Please God, can Kori’s neighbors all be asleep and no one look out their windows...

I ring the doorbell, and a few moments later, the door opens.

Kori, dressed in her pajamas, gives a slow whistle as she sees the SUVs lined up on the street and the armed men. Ethan is clinging to her leg, hiding as best he can until he sees me.

“Momma!”

My heart stutters as I scoop him up, plastering kisses to his face and forehead repeatedly as tears leak from my eyes. He’s whole. He’s untouched. He’s safe. Grayden hasn’t got to him yet.

“Thank you,” I say to Kori, still clutching Ethan in my arms. “I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to repay you for what you’ve done for me.”

“As soon as I woke Ethan up with the news that you were coming to get him, he’s been so excited, but we’re going to miss him.” She squeezes me tight after she hands me Ethan’s backpack and stuffed bear. “If you need anything, call me. And keep in touch.”

“I will.”

“Nice to meet you.” Kori nods at the stoic statues of Camillo and Marco before we take our leave.

On the way back to the estate, Camillo rides in the front passenger seat, leaving Ethan to sit with me in the back.

My heart is in my mouth as we drive. Does Grayden know what we’re doing? Are his men in the shadows, watching and waiting to grab me and Ethan? Even with the Marchianos and their soldiers surrounding us, I can’t help thinking that this isn’t over.

During the drive, Ethan holds my hand and snuggles tightly into my side, not wanting to let me go, and I relish the feel of his tiny body against me.

When we get back to the mansion, I breathe a small sigh of relief. As the puff of air leaves me, the tension in my body starts to recede a little. This is happening. It’s actually happening.

I carry Ethan into the living room, and gently, I set him down, kneeling before him. “Are you okay? Did you eat? Are you tired?”

He startles as he catches sight of someone behind me, and his eyes widen. I know who it is without turning around. I can feel him every time we’re in the same room. The air turns electric and wild. My body has a mind of its own when he’s around. Camillo.

Ethan’s tiny fists grip at my pant leg as he jumps up and cowers behind me.

“It’s okay, honey,” I soothe. “They’re not going to hurt us.”

I look over my shoulder to where Camillo leans against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. Imposing and domineering as ever. But the way his shoulders fall and the slight upturn of his lips tell me this is him relaxed. He’s giving me space, but he’s still close enough for anything I might need.

“These are Momma’s friends. We’re going to be staying with them for a while.” My hand soothes over the back of his head. “Okay?”

Ethan bobs his head. I press a kiss to his forehead and stand back up.

“Are you hungry?” I ask Camillo. He and his brothers are up at this late hour because of me. “Do you want me to make something to eat or get you a drink?”

He shakes his head. “Not for us. But if Ethan is hungry, go ahead and fix him something. Then you can put him to sleep in my bedroom.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” I say quickly. “He can come in with me.”

“You’ve only got a single bed.”

“I can sleep on the floor. I don’t mind.”

“I would put you in one of the guest rooms, but the only furnished ones are in the north wing of the house. I want you near us so that we can protect you.” Camillo’s voice is insistent.

“But—”

“I’m not taking no for an answer,” he says firmly.

I look down at Ethan. “Are you hungry? Do you want something to eat first, or do you just want to go to sleep?”

“Just sleep, Momma,” he says in a soft voice.

“Okay, come on, honey, let’s get you cleaned up and settled in bed.”

We follow Camillo up to his bedroom.

He starts to move some of his things out of the way.

“I’m sure we’ll be just fine in the spare room,” I start to say.

He pauses, a box of his gym equipment braced against his shoulder. “No.” He’s being oddly stubborn about this. “You’ll have this bedroom from now on. And tomorrow, I’ll set up the spare room next door for Ethan.”

“I can’t take your room.”

“You’re staying in here. End of story. We can’t keep tabs on you if you’re in another wing of the house.”

“But this is your room.”

“And now it’s yours.”

I grab his arm, watching the muscles flex beneath my touch. I drop it quickly. “This isn’t fair to you.”

“This is for the best. My room is central to the house. Someone trying to break in has to climb to the second floor and go past Marco’s and Alessio’s bedrooms. It’s the safest place for you and Ethan. Plus, there’s nowhere next to your current bedroom where we can set up a bedroom for Ethan, and he’ll want to be close to you at night.”

The guilt of kicking Camillo out of his own room is still nagging at me.

“Rosa.” He stands before me, the box settled down by his feet. “There’s no point in arguing, okay? It’s fine. I promise.” He leans down a little, meeting my gaze. “Just sleep in here. Please?”

The way his voice softens makes my legs turn to jelly and my stomach flutter. He’s not like this often, and those fleeting moments are usually reserved for his family. “Okay,” I whisper.

Bringing Ethan into Camillo’s room, I help him with a quick rinse of his hands and face, and then settle with him into the bed. The sheets are clean because I changed them this morning.

As I lay there, stroking Ethan’s forehead as he falls asleep, I look around at the room that I’ve cleaned and tidied so many times. It’s spotless now—very different than how it was the first time I saw it. Camillo still struggles with tidiness, but a daily once-over by me has been keeping the room looking good.

As I stretch out in his huge bed, I feel guilty that Camillo will be in my cramped single bed tonight. He’s huge, and there’s no way he’s going to be comfortable.

I stay awake until I hear Ethan’s breathing even out. And only then can I relax and let myself fall asleep as well.

The next morning, I dress Ethan in one of the spare outfits the clinic had given us that Kori packed into the backpack. It’s shabby and a little small, but it’s clean and will do until I can sort something else out.

I open the bedroom door to take Ethan downstairs. But I'm startled to an abrupt halt.

Because our way is blocked.

By a huge, muscled body.

Camillo is on the floor outside the door.

He's instantly alert, springing to his feet, his gaze darting into the room behind me.

"What's wrong?" he blurts out. "Is everything okay?"

"We're fine. But did you sleep out here last night?"

"Yeah." He shrugs at my surprised expression.

"But—"

"I had to make sure that you and Ethan stayed safe," he says firmly.

I felt bad before when I thought he'd be spending the night in my cramped single bed, but now, I feel awful knowing that he spent the night sleeping on the floor. And I also feel something else—because he did this to keep Ethan and me safe.

"I feel bad that you slept on the floor," I say softly.

"Make it up to me by making my favorite pancakes for breakfast," he says in an easy tone, and I can't stop myself from grinning.

The pancakes and bacon are ready by the time Camillo and his brothers come down to the kitchen and sit around the table.

Ethan only met the men briefly last night. And this morning, he clings to me, his tiny hands grasping the edge of my skirt, his brown eyes big and wide.

I bend down beside him, brushing a strand of his fair hair out of his face. I can feel his grip tighten, his small body pressing closer to mine "It's okay, honey," I say softly.

He nods, though I can see the fear lurking in his gaze. He's only four, and everything about this arrangement is unusual, new, and overwhelming.

"Are you hungry, honey?" I ask, rubbing his back soothingly.

He shrugs, still holding onto me as if letting go might make everything around him disappear.

I pick him up, his little arms wrapping around my neck, and lower him onto the seat next to mine.

He keeps his eyes downcast, his tiny fingers fiddling with the hem of his T-shirt.

“This is Mr. Camillo, Mr. Marco, and Mr. Alessio,” I say as I point to each of the men in turn.

“Mr. Camel?” Ethan murmurs very quietly with a scrunch of his brow. “He’s a camel and has two humps?”

Camillo’s not known for being easygoing, and I’m pretty sure that if anyone else had just called him a camel, he’d be seeing nothing but a mist of red. But hearing the words from this tiny person in front of him just makes his lips tug up in the corners with a grin.

“Yeah, Camillo is a bit hard to say. But my nephews and nieces call me Uncle Millo, so you can call me that as well.”

“Oh no,” I say quickly. “He’ll get used to Mr. Camillo with practice—”

“I insist,” Camillo says firmly. Then he jerks his thumb at his brothers. “And you can call them Uncle Marco and Uncle Alessio.” Then, he thinks of something else. “And Rosa, please cut the ‘Mr.’ and sir thing with us all; we’re just Camillo, Marco, and Alessio from now on.”

My eyebrows shoot up, but his brothers simply nod in agreement.

“Do you like pancakes?” Camillo continues.

But Ethan doesn’t say anything and instead huddles into my side.

I give an apologetic look to Camillo.

Camillo’s brow furrows as he outright ignores the food on his plate—a complete first for him. I can tell he’s trying to think of a way to break the ice with Ethan.

“Here comes Mr. F,” he announces, giving his best attempt at a friendly smile. But for some reason, it comes out more like a grimace—and makes him look a little scary. And Ethan must think the same because he buries his face into the sleeve of my shirt.

But Camillo's not one to give up easily. "He's a Chow Chow dog," he says, gesturing to the huge dog who's approaching. "And he might look like a grizzly bear, but he doesn't eat people—the only thing he eats is everyone else's food which, by the way, he's always stealing."

Ethan's gaze widens in panic, and he clutches at my arm.

"It's okay, honey," I reassure him. "The dog is friendly and won't hurt you."

But Ethan won't be comforted, and he spends the whole meal clinging to me and refusing to eat.

"Camillo," Marco barks, startling not only me but also Ethan. "Let's go. We've got stuff to handle at the casino."

"Now?" Camillo says.

A silent exchange between them happens, and Camillo's posture changes instantly. He nods at his brother before turning back to me. "We'll be back before dinner, Rosa. Our men have got the whole estate guarded and monitored. No one can get in or out without us knowing. You're safe here. But if you need me—for whatever reason—just call my cell."

I nod at him, grateful for everything he's doing.

"See you later, Ethan," he says more gently.

And I can't help noticing the hurt that flickers over Camillo's face when he doesn't get a response from Ethan. I try to explain. "It will just take Ethan a little time to get used to being here."

After breakfast, I bring Ethan through the house with me as I clean. As I tackle the kitchen first, he sits at the counter, legs swinging. "Here, honey. Momma has to do some cleaning and housework, so I need you to be on your best behavior for me, okay?" I hand him some paper and a pen for him to draw with.

Ethan spares me a small tentative smile. And throughout the day, I don't dare move away from his line of sight, instead taking him with me from room to room as I work.

In the late afternoon, I'm back in the kitchen and preparing dinner. My knot of anxiety and worry loosens, and something inside me melts, seeing Ethan here with me.

I heard the men return a couple of hours ago. They must be working in the office or be down in the gym because they haven't come into the kitchen. No doubt they'll wander in once they start feeling hungry.

I find myself sitting at the counter beside him as I chop vegetables, just soaking up that he's here with me again. My lips press to his forehead before I turn back to my job. I refuse to let the Marchianos think that my son is a distraction. If they did, they might send us packing.

Ethan's tiny hands keep touching my arm, as if he's making sure that I'm still there next to him. My heart aches when I think of how much he must have missed me when I had to leave him with Kori.

A while later, my thoughts are interrupted. "Rosa?" Just the sound of my name from Camillo's lips makes my heart gallop in my chest. It's like it's something decadent and forbidden. I shouldn't like it as much as I do. But for someone so intimidating, he's only ever shown me kindness and gentleness. "Smells great," he says as he and Marco enter the kitchen. "Can you take a second? I need you upstairs."

"Yes, of course." Wiping my hands on my apron, I look at Ethan, but seeing him there, I'm unable to move my body away from him.

"He'll be fine. I'll stay in here with him to make sure," Marco says.

As comforting as Marco's offer should be, I still find myself hesitating. He wouldn't hurt my son. I know that deep down. But after everything that's happened, I worry each time I let Ethan out of my sight, fear sinking its icy claws into me.

Ethan's body goes rigid, and I swallow hard. The wide, fearful expression on his face keeps me rooted in place.

"It'll only take a few minutes," Camillo assures me. "Ethan can come too, actually."

My brow puckers as I look up at him, the harsh angles of his face softening. Reaching my hand out for Ethan, I grip it tight, not sure what to expect as we go upstairs.

The fleeting feel of Camillo's hand on the small of my back calms the nervousness that swims through my veins. But it does nothing to stop the frantic beating of my heart or the butterflies that have taken flight. If anything, it causes them to accelerate.

I freeze in the doorway to the room next to Camillo's. Alessio is putting a final screw in a bed that resembles a red racing car. Until today, this room has always been

empty. But now there's also a dresser, nightstand, a toy chest, bookshelves, and a small cozy couch.

"You should have listened to me in the first place," Alessio complains to Camillo. "I told you that you had this piece the wrong way around, but as usual, your stubborn ass refused to listen to me. There, it's all done now. I swear it would have been quicker to put all this furniture together myself instead of having your and Marco's clown-like input."

"You and your brothers did all this?" I murmur in a small voice.

"Yeah."

"But why...?"

Camillo shrugs. "For Ethan."

"I'll see you at dinner," Alessio says over his shoulder as he takes his leave. But all I can do is look in stunned silence at the room they've set up for my baby boy.

Then I also see several bags and a handful of boxes, just waiting at the side of the room. I step toward them. "What are these?"

"We... I..." Camillo rubs the back of his neck, looking away. "It's some toys and new clothes for Ethan. Shoes too. Marco and I thought he could use them."

"What?" The word tumbles from my trembling lips. It's too much.

"He didn't come with anything but a backpack and his stuffed bear."

I spin to face Camillo. "This is too much," I choke out. I watch his throat work over a lump as his gaze moves over me, something vulnerable shining in his dark eyes. My heart stutters.

"It's nothing."

"I'll pay you back. Every cent."

"Absolutely not."

"You can deduct it from my pay, plus something for Ethan's rent and food."

Camillo's brow lowers, shadowing his eyes. "No."

“Please. This is very generous, but you didn’t need to do any of this.”

“I know. But we... I wanted to.”

Why does that make my insides turn to jelly? What is it about seeing this hardened man soften that makes my insides come roaring to life?

The urge to pull his face down to mine and plant my lips against his grips me tightly. I make a small step forward before catching myself.

I watch as his muscles tighten beneath his shirt, his sleeves rolled up like usual, showing his strong wrists and forearms. It’d be wrong to move closer. He’s just being nice. He’s always just being nice.

“I don’t want to be a charity case or some sort of leech on you.”

“The fuc—” He pauses, eyes bouncing between Ethan and me. “The duck you are.”

I chew the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling at his correction. Since moving in with these men, I’ve yet to hear them censor a single one of the curses that come flying out of their mouths with alarming regularity. It’s endearing to see the effort he’s making in front of Ethan.

“But where are you going to sleep?”

“The bedroom I mentioned in the next wing.”

“You’re already letting me bring my son to stay here with me. We don’t need any more. You didn’t need to go to all this trouble...”

“It wasn’t trouble at all. Really.”

The sincerity on his face melts me even more. Those flutters turn into a hurricane, and my stomach swoops as I squeeze my legs tight. “I’d still like to pay you back. Please.”

“Just keep making those cupcakes and all the meals, and we’ll call it even.”

I purse my lips, although I can’t help a smile spreading across my face. Whatever he says, I’m still going to find a way to pay him back every cent.

“Go on and look through it. The associate at the store said it should all fit, but if it doesn’t, we’ll return it and get the right size.” His voice is soft, barely above a

whisper, meant just for me to hear—a tenderness creeping in that he’s only letting me see.

“Thank you,” I exhale.

The corner of his lip kicks up, and I can’t help matching it with a shy smile of my own. I turn and gently guide Ethan toward the bags and boxes. I’ll find a way to pay him back. To show him how much this means to Ethan...and to me.

I knock at the office door to let the men know that dinner is ready. They troop in and take their seats at the dining table.

Dinner is pretty much a repeat of breakfast with Ethan barely looking up and being too nervous to eat. But at the end of the meal, I have to say something before the men leave. “Thank you—all of you,” I say quietly. “For letting me bring Ethan here and for everything you did today for us.”

Marco gives me a nod before pushing his chair back and heading with Alessio toward the office.

Camillo’s dark eyes lock on mine.

And my throat runs dry.

Something lingers in his gaze, but I can’t quite pinpoint what I’m seeing. Warmth and something else...

I’ve just tucked Ethan in when I hear a noise from somewhere in the house.

All the men are out, and they said they wouldn’t be back until much later.

And that can mean only one thing: someone’s in the mansion who shouldn’t be.

My heart starts to race.

I need to ring for help.

But my phone’s in the kitchen.

Should I stay hidden up here?

Should I just hope that whoever it is doesn't come into this room?

Will the guards come before the intruder gets me?

Oh God, what do I do?

I snatch up Ethan's bear for some reason—he's comforting. And I tiptoe back to my bedroom to get some sort of weapon.

But I can't find anything that looks useful. And I just grab the nearest thing.

I take a deep breath. And I step back into the hallway to get to a phone. I need to ring Camillo. Or ring the guards.

But as I turn the corner, I run into him.

His gun is pointed at me.

And I'm about to have a heart attack.

My lungs can't suck in any air.

His eyebrows snap up. "What are you doing?"

"I thought you were an intruder or a serial killer or something," I exclaim with a loud exhale as I realize it's Camillo.

He tilts his head to one side. "I am a serial killer, kind of..."

Jesus, he's right about that. "I mean, I didn't realize it was someone from the family creeping around down here. I thought you were all out."

"I was, but I came back to get something before I have to go back out."

"To do what? Actually," I say quickly, "don't answer that."

He gives me a strange look. "Why are you holding that?" His head nods at the can I have clutched in my hand.

"I thought the intruder might think the hairspray bottle was a baseball bat given that the lights are off..."

He raises a brow. “A baseball bat?”

“Well, it is a jumbo sized can...” I try to make myself sound more convincing than I feel.

“Uh huh.” He tilts his gaze to the side. “And what about the teddy bear? Was he going to protect you when you went up against the intruder?”

“What? Uh, no...” I snatch the bear behind my back. “He was just, er, for moral support...” Could I sound any more ridiculous? “Oh God, just shoot me now,” I mutter.

He looks down at his gun and then back up at me.

My eyes widen. “I don’t mean for you to actually shoot me. I just meant that...” My voice trails off. I just meant that I want to disappear the hell away from this man and the fumbling mess I’m making of this situation.

“It’s okay, Rosa,” he says in a soft voice. He carefully takes the hairspray and bear from my hands and leads me back to my room. “You’re safe here, I promise.”

And there’s something in the way he says those words that makes me feel safe—makes me feel protected. And I see that same look in his eyes as I saw at dinner. And it’s something that has my body heating and my breath picking up.