

CHAPTER 9

Rosa

After the men leave for the casino and I finally calm myself down, I tidy up the rest of the breakfast dishes. The sight of Marco and Alessio bare-chested, bloody, and scarred was utterly terrifying, reminding me too much of when Grayden used to stalk toward me with that crazed look in his eyes and his fists bunched, ready to take out his anger on me.

I'm puzzled why they said breakfast was delicious though—I tried really hard, but the pancakes were all burned, and I know they must have noticed.

As I start on the cleaning, I can't help my mind drifting back to yesterday at the hair salon. I thought I'd feel embarrassed when Camillo, Helen, and Derek saw that some of my hair had been ripped out. But their reaction—it was unexpected...

They didn't blame me or say that it was my fault. They didn't make me feel any less for it.

I twice confided in my mother about what was happening with Grayden—how he treated me badly and hit me.

I still remember her words: "You must have done something to upset him. Can't you even do this one thing right? Don't ruin things for your father—he married you off to Grayden to help their business relationship, not to wreck it."

And the second time, her reaction was even worse when I told her that Grayden had beaten me after I refused to have sex with him when he was drunk: "Did you think that your marriage was just going to be about wearing pretty dresses and spending all of Grayden's money? Of course, he expects to have marital relations with you. Don't ever bring such a vulgar topic up again."

I still shudder when I remember her sneers at me. Her blame. Her disgust that I was her daughter.

But after what happened at the salon, another thought skitters through my mind: maybe, just maybe, I'm not to blame for everything that's happened...

I'm holding a notepad and paper to make a shopping list as I stand in the pantry. I should be writing, but instead, my senses are drawn to the far shelf, looking for just a little snack to keep me going until dinner. I'll just get something like a rice cake—that'll be fine because it's something that won't upset my perpetual diet.

But then I see them, sitting there innocently on the shelf. Lemon sponge cupcakes.

Automatically, my mouth waters just thinking about them, especially imagining the soft spongy cake melting on my tongue.

I tell myself to walk away, firmly shut the pantry door behind me, and find something else to do.

But my feet stay rooted to the ground. My hand reaches out as if it has a mind of its own. I pick up the box and crack open the lid. Just a sniff of their delicious scent will be enough to tide me over...

As soon as the lemon and sweetness waft up, my resolve crumbles. I'll just have one. It's just so I can satisfy my sudden craving for something sweet, and it'll mean that I stop obsessing about food for the rest of the day.

I take the first bite of deliciousness, and that's when I know I'm in trouble. The cake is soft, moist, and has the perfect balance of tart and sweet. The frosting is perfect with its creamy texture, and before I know it, the first cupcake is gone. I stare at the empty rippled paper in my hand, feeling the guilt start to creep in. I should stop now.

But I don't.

I reach for another cupcake, my hand trembling slightly as I peel it from the paper. The second one disappears even faster than the first. I know I should stop. I know I'll regret this later. The pull is too strong, the need too intense.

My heart is racing with the third cupcake, my body going into a sugar high. And the addictive taste makes me snatch a fourth cupcake, barely tasting it as I shove it into my mouth.

When I've finished all four cupcakes, I'm left staring at the empty paper scattered on the shelf in front of me and feel a tsunami wave of self-loathing come crashing down, taking with it some of the pleasure I've just felt.

How could I let this happen again? How could I be so weak and so greedy? My stomach churns, and it's not just from the cupcakes but also from the sickening realization that I've failed myself once more. This week, I'd been doing so well, counting every calorie, sticking to my plan, and being strong. But all that hard work is undone in the space of a couple of minutes.

I'm left wanting to cry and scream at the same time. But instead, I just stand there and look at the crumpled paper cups in front of me as I feel utterly disgusted with myself. I've always been the fat one, the girl who couldn't say no, and I've proven it once again.

I wish I could turn back time, just go back a few minutes so that I could choose the right path and undo the damage I've done, but I can't.

Tomorrow, I'll start over. I'll be good again, I tell myself. But today, the bitter taste of regret lingers, and I can't escape it.

Marco comes into the kitchen about an hour before I expect the brothers home.

"You're early," I blurt out in panic. "I was just about to start on dinner, but I thought it didn't have to be ready until 8 p.m."

"I'm not early," he growls.

I swallow the knot in my throat. "But—"

"Rosa, explain to me why your cooking is so shit."

My stomach drops.

And I can't catch my breath as his gaze lasers into me.

Deep down, I should have known this moment was coming.

I'm standing in his grand kitchen and trying to find the right words to get me out of this. But my mind is racing. Even the pots and pans seem to glare at me—as if they, too, are disappointed.

His stare at me is ruthless. Calculating. He's waiting for an explanation. I know he's not the kind of man who tolerates incompetence.

I have to keep this job. Oh God, what will I do once he fires me?

"I... I'm sorry," I finally manage in a voice barely above a whisper.

I hate how small and shaky I sound. I'm trying to inhale through my nose to steady my racing pulse. My hands are trembling. I clasp them together in front of me in a futile attempt to hide the state I'm in.

He's still glaring at me with those piercing dark eyes. But I can't quite work out what he's thinking as he stares. His expression is unreadable. And that only makes things worse.

I wish he would say something, anything, to break the tension. But he doesn't.

He's waiting for me to continue. And I know I have to explain myself.

"I'm just not used to...this kitchen." I gesture vaguely around the room.

"Bullshit," he snaps.

I'm taking shallow breaths. But my lungs can't get enough oxygen.

He takes a deliberate step toward me.

My heart is thudding louder and louder as he gets closer.

He's going to tell me to pack up my things and leave.

"You make these." His fingers jab at the cupcakes I've made on the cake stand.
"Which means that you are used to our kitchen."

My cheeks burn with embarrassment. How do I explain that I know that I'm useless? How do I tell him that he doesn't need to say anything more because I get the message?

"If you can bake cupcakes, muffins, and all that other sweet stuff, you clearly know how to use kitchen appliances, read a recipe, and tell the time. So, why the fuck can't you make a single meal that isn't burned, undercooked, or soggy?"

"I...uh...I...uh..."

My thoughts are in freefall, and I don't know what to say. How to explain. But I know I have to try if I've got any hope of keeping this job.

I swallow down the lump lodged in my throat. "It's not that I can't cook, sir. I can, really. I just...get nervous."

"Why?" he demands.

I close my eyes for a second. "When I've cooked in the past, no one...else ate the sweet things." What I really mean is that Grayden never ate the cakes I made because he hated desserts. "I was baking the sweet treats for myself." And for Ethan, who loved my cakes—but I can't mention my son. "I got confident at baking because I had plenty of practice and no one to judge me." Because I didn't have Grayden criticizing every single aspect of it. "But I never gained confidence at cooking dinners and meals—I always knew other people would eat them and judge my cooking skills." Because Grayden made sure to knock me down every chance he got.

Marco continues staring at me. "What makes you relax when you're in the kitchen?"

"Relax?"

"Yes," he grits out with impatience. "Relax."

"I, um, like music. And dancing to it." I can't believe I'm admitting this to anyone, let alone to the fierce man who employs me.

"Dance then."

"What?"

"I said dance. Listen to music, dance, and pretend you're the only one who's going to eat the dinner you're cooking."

"But I can't do that—"

"Yes, you can. And I'm going to stay here and make sure you cook our dinner properly for once."

I shake my head. "I can't dance and cook while you watch me," I exclaim in horror.

He narrows his eyes at me and gives a small sigh. "I'll sit in the breakfast nook, facing away from you. I'll do some work on my phone. But I'll be able to smell if anything's burning." He glares at me. "Because you've managed to burn something in every single meal you've made so far. And as you're staying, you need to stop ruining every fucking meal."

I take a big gulp. “I’m staying?” I murmur. I can’t have heard that right.

He gives a sharp nod but still doesn’t smile. “You helped us the other night—getting the bullets out and stitching the wounds. You proved your loyalty.”

“I really wasn’t trying to kill you with the raw chicken,” I blurt out. Shit, why did I bring up the disastrous chicken?

“I know.”

“You do?” I’m holding my breath. He could still change his mind.

“Yeah. If you really wanted to kill one of us, you would have let Alessio bleed out...or at the very least, put poison in one of our meals by now.”

It’s my turn to narrow my eyes at him. Is he mocking me? Does Mr. Marco Marchiano have a sliver of a sense of humor lurking beneath his steely exterior?

“You better get started,” he drawls. “My brothers will be home in fifty minutes.”

I watch him walk to the breakfast nook, and as promised, he sits with his back to me, taking out his phone and dealing with what looks like emails.

I collect the ingredients I’ll need and stand in front of the kitchen counter while my fingers grip the edge as I stare at the things laid out in front of me. Beef, mushrooms, onions, garlic, sour cream, plus a few other things I’ll need.

Despite what Marco’s just said to me, my nerves are winning by a landslide.

My hands tremble as I tie the apron over me, delaying starting by smoothing down the crisp fabric to steady myself. I have to keep reminding myself to breathe, in and out, deep and slow. But whatever I do, my stomach’s still in knots.

“Forty-five minutes, Rosa,” Marco says in a terse tone, unhelpfully reminding me that the time is ticking by. “Imagine that you’re the only one this meal’s for. And for God’s sake, get some music on.”

I clear my throat and grab my phone. Scrolling through the screen, I choose an upbeat playlist—something that will keep my mind off my anxiety.

As the music fills the kitchen, I chop the onions. I keep peeking up at Marco, but true to his word, he’s staying faced away from me.

Biting my lip, I start to move a little, just a sway of my hips and a tap of my foot here and there, all the time making sure that Marco doesn't go back on his word. As each song finishes, the next one on the playlist starts automatically.

After a while, I'm confident that he meant what he said, and I let the rhythm take over. My feet shuffle across the tiled floor, my body swaying, turning, twisting to the beat. The tension in my shoulders melts away, and my hands become steadier, more confident.

The sizzle of the beef hitting the hot pan blends with the music, and I stir the pieces around, browning them to perfection. I can feel myself smiling, my earlier nerves starting to fade as I focus on the task at hand. The music is like a shield, something that can block out my worries and my fears of making a mistake.

The scent of garlic and onions fill the air around me as they sauté. I put on the rice to cook and make a salad. I move to the fridge, still dancing after grabbing another quick peek at Marco, and select the mustard. Twirling around, I return to the stove, and I'm in my own little world. I don't even think about who's going to eat this meal. It feels like it's just me in the kitchen, cooking, dancing, and feeling free.

The stroganoff is coming together beautifully, the sauce thick and creamy as it should be, while the meat is tender and flavorful. I add a few finishing touches with a sprinkle of parsley and a dash of pepper, all while moving and spinning in time with the music. The kitchen feels alive, full of warmth and energy, and for a moment, I forget about everything else.

As the current song reaches its final notes, I glance up, and my heart nearly stops. He's looking at me, a slight smile playing on his lips.

I put my hands on my hips. "You said you wouldn't watch." My tone is indignant, forgetting for a moment that he's my employer.

He walks over to the counter and chuckles softly. "I only looked up at the end to make sure you had everything under control."

I relax ever so slightly. "And?"

He takes a plate and puts a small taste of stroganoff, rice, and salad on it.

I'm holding my breath as he eats it, my eyes glued to his face for any signs of a grimace or wince.

But he smiles. “Delicious. I knew you could do it.”

My brow crinkles. “You did?”

He looks up. “Look, Rosa, I don’t know what happened to you before you got here—”

“I-I...” My words stutter out in horror.

He puts his hand up to stop me. “I don’t care about your past.” He looks at me carefully. “But you can’t let fear take you over. You’re more than capable—you proved it the night we were shot. Sure, you were a little shaky, but you managed to hold your own. Your confidence is in there somewhere, buried under all the doubt and anxiety. You just have to let it out.”

We hear the front door open, and Alessio and Camillo’s voices drift toward us. And with that, Marco turns and walks away.

Later that week, I’m in the kitchen and hum softly as I finish putting the oat and honey flapjacks on the cooling rack. The house is quiet. The Marchiano brothers have gone to do whatever it is they do. I try my hardest to keep my mind off that very topic.

I don’t have a plan to get away from here yet. I should, but it’s moments like this when the estate is at ease that I feel oddly safe.

It’s wrong to feel this way. But my brain doesn’t seem to realize that this house of vipers is just as bad, if not worse, than Grayden’s mansion.

But that’s not exactly true, is it? I’ve adjusted to the harsh commands and tones of the Marchiano men—their barked orders and eccentric way of doing things. They have a ferocious bark, but I’ve yet to see any of them bite. They’re harsh but not insulting.

Maybe that makes me naïve. Grayden didn’t have nearly as bad a bark, but his bite was deadly. I should have learned this lesson already.

But watching how the brothers interact with each other at meals or in daily life, I’ve seen brief glimpses of something different lurking past the hard veneer of these made men. It’s not tender by any means, but it’s there. They fiercely protect and love each other.

Envy crawls through my chest. I want that, but I don't deserve it. That's reserved for someone who's better than me. Someone who's worthy and not unlovable. Grayden never said he loved me, but he didn't hesitate to tell me how much he hated me.

I shake my head of these thoughts, turning back to my next task.

I've come up with a system for dealing with the estate. I tackle the ground level before anyone wakes up, see to breakfast, and then, turn my attention to the first-floor rooms and laundry. From there, the day blurs until I'm setting out the food for dinner.

My stomach churns and clenches every time my gaze lands on the polished wood floor. Phantom splotches of blood linger there, despite having scoured them away.

It should scare me, and it does, but not enough to give up this job.

Pushing the thoughts away, I focus on setting the table. My stomach rumbles, but I ignore it. I don't take breaks unless dizziness sets in, and even then, it's only for a quick nibble of a cracker before I go back to work. I don't want anyone to think I'm slacking. And skipping another meal won't kill me.

The heavy thud of a discarded gym bag hitting the floor echoes through the house. It's early for anyone to be back, but it's not my place to say it.

Camillo strides into the room, his face glistening with sweat, and a few loose strands that have fallen from his usual knot are plastered to his face.

Surprisingly, my small bubble of serenity doesn't shatter even with the intrusion from him.

He's wearing black sweats that hug his muscular thighs and one of those work out tanks with large armholes that show off the ropes of muscles beneath. The black ink that crawls over both his arms is exposed, and I swear the smokey effect moves with every flex of his body.

He makes a beeline to the fridge without a word. And I watch as he guzzles down water from a large bottle. The way his throat works and the trickle of a single drop from the corner of his lips to his chest... My eyes drop to the counter as I feel heat crawl up my neck.

The crinkle of plastic makes me jump. It's too loud and too sudden. And seeing his massive hands curling around the plastic and crushing it makes my heart rate triple.

I try not to look at him, but I can't help a glance as he grabs another bottle. His knuckles are battered and freshly bruised.

Alessio said he needed Camillo to take care of a problem. I'm not stupid enough to forget that Camillo is the muscle and deals with the messier side of things. That much I've been able to figure out.

I can't tear my eyes away from his hands as he crushes the empty bottle again. I'm enraptured by it.

"What's for dinner?"

My eyes snap up to his, holding them for a quick moment. I glance away and clear my throat to keep the words from shaking. "I was planning on making beef ravioli with a pumpkin sauce."

"Sounds great." He goes to walk off but then pauses. "Can you make some of that garlic bread again? It was delicious."

I give the tiniest nod, pleased that my cooking has improved no end since that little pep talk from Marco.

I turn back to the counter where I was chopping. Carefully, I slice the carrots and bell peppers, setting the pieces out on a platter. I realized after my second day that Camillo is a big snacker, and rather than risk accidentally messing up and being tossed out on my ass, I've made it a point to make sure there is a healthy amount of fruit and vegetable platters always available.

Wordlessly, I push the platter toward him and start to wash the board and knife.

"Thanks," he murmurs as he flops onto a barstool. "Can I do anything to help?"

Alarm flares to life inside me. "No!" I blurt out before mustering a weak smile. It's the same one I mastered living with Grayden, the one that doesn't quite reach my eyes. "No, no, it's okay. I've got it under control."

Does he think I'm slacking off? That I can't do all the work they've given me? My breathing picks up, but I struggle to take a full breath. If he thinks that, then maybe so do his brothers. Maybe Marco has changed his mind about giving me the job, and this is their way of telling me to pack up and hit the road...

The screech of his barstool against the wood flooring makes me wince. I can't quite find the courage to look back up at him. "Rosa?"

I hesitate. "Yes?"

There's a long pregnant pause, and I distinctly hear him curse under his breath. "I'll leave you to it. Thanks."

I nod slowly, lifting my eyes back up to his retreating form, the muscles of his back bunching and pulling tight.

It takes me another heartbeat to realize I'm not moving. Instead, I'm rooted to the place, trying to identify the feeling rumbling to life inside me.

But I come up empty-handed.

The rest of the afternoon passes in a blur, and the next thing I know, everyone is arriving home for the evening meal. I'm standing at the counter slicing the garlic bread I've just baked.

"God, it smells like heaven in here." Camillo's low voice rumbles as the men slide into their usual seats around the table.

He's changed from the work out gear he was wearing earlier into what I've realized is his usual attire—an expensive black shirt pulled taut against his giant frame and designer jeans. It's different than the suits his brothers wear, but it suits him. His thick, glossy hair is in a messy knot, a change from the half-up style he usually sports.

I want to brush the compliment away to the side. I want to tell him it's not that fancy or worthy of praise. I want to tell him that he doesn't need to lie to save my feelings. My head dips, and I set the plate with the bread down on the table.

Camillo's large hand catches my wrist.

I freeze. My cheeks heat at the realization that he's so near that he can probably hear the frantic beating of my heart.

Tingles race up my arm. And my hand trembles within his grasp. It's a loose hold, and if I wanted, I could pull my wrist back.

But I can't move.

His sandalwood and sage scent fills my nose, and I fight the urge to inhale deeply. It's warm and inviting—and nothing like the man who wears it.

“Thank you for the bread...and well, dinner.”

His voice is soft yet gravelly at the same time. I want to think that there's something more to what he's saying.

But that's simply wishful thinking in some fantasy land I've been dropped into. I bite the inside of my cheek to snap myself out of it. I'm reading into something that isn't there.

My mouth opens to brush it off, but the words are lodged into my throat.

Camillo releases my hand as if it's burned him and clears his throat. I hear him gulp at his glass of water. His brothers don't seem to have noticed a thing.

But I can't bring myself to look at him. To see if there's something in those deep brown eyes that'll explain what's just happened.

I hurry back to the counter for the rest of the meal. Someone moves behind me, but I don't turn. I don't dare look back—because I know I'm seeing things that aren't there. My stomach is in knots as I quickly finish putting the dishes out.

Afterward, on shaky legs, I manage to make it back to the island and begin cleaning up. It's not quite the distraction I need it to be as my traitorous brain keeps replaying the feeling of his calloused fingers wrapped around my wrist, the heat from his hand permanently seared into mine.

What on earth is going on with me? Maybe I'm coming down with a fever or something. Is that why I'm reading too much into a simple friendly gesture?

Of course, that's it. It has to be. One nice thing was said to me, and I got a fuzzy feeling inside my chest.

He's just being polite. Thanking me and complimenting the cooking. He doesn't mean it in the way I'm taking it.

What can I expect, though, when I learned to lick scraps of love off knives instead of being fed it on a silver spoon?

I shake my head. I need to get a grip and remember why I'm here.

Remember just how important this job is.

I can't mess it up.

And ogling one of my employers or letting myself develop any sort of attachment to him is definitely a step in the wrong direction.

But each time he speaks, his gravelly rumble sends a shiver of something down my spine.

It's messed up and wrong to want a man like him—to hope that he might see me in some way that isn't fat, repulsive, and broken. The words of everyone in my life haunt me like ghosts, reinforcing what I already know. I am nothing. Not to Grayden. Not to my family. Not to these men. And especially not to him.

Yet the little pitter-patter of my heart tries to stoke that crushed and crumbling spark inside me back to life.

And it whispers faintly, but what if...?