

CHAPTER 1

ROSA

FIVE YEARS LATER

Chopping the vegetables, I watch Ethan from the corner of my eye where he silently colors. And my heart aches.

He should be out there running around, playing like all the other four-year-old boys. Instead, he makes himself small and quiet every chance he gets—even when Grayden isn't at home.

Once dinner is in the oven, I wipe down the counters and the table, laying a gentle kiss on Ethan's head. The only good thing to come from this hell has been him. He's a gentle boy who deserves the world.

"I'll be back in a bit, honey. I'm going to tackle the hallway and foyer before dinner."

Ethan nods slowly, holding my gaze.

"I'll only be just outside the kitchen door."

Grabbing the rag and duster, I set to work. In no time, sweat trickles down my spine as the cotton shirt plasters to my back. My hair is tied from my face in a ponytail, but I have to push away stray strands that keep falling into my line of vision.

I lift my head to glimpse at the enormous grandfather clock down the hall. And I wince. I have an hour, if that, to finish all this. The banisters are still in need of dusting. The floor has to be polished. The stubborn juice stain on the rug has taken up far too much of my time. The rubber gloves squeak as I grip the bristled brush, doubling down on my efforts. If I can't get it out... I cringe at the thought, pushing it aside.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. My father insisted that at the age of eighteen, I marry a man over twenty years older than me in front of society's upper elite, and the day when I became Mrs. Grayden Devlin should have been a happy new chapter of my life. Some hopeful part of me, long since broken and forgotten, dreamed that marriage would set me free.

But that day, when the words and vows tumbled from my painted lips, my fate was sealed, and I was sold—in the most legal and business way possible—to a cruel man. A man who's transformed this mansion into a cage where nobody can help me.

Despair rolls through me at the thought of what my life has become. I've long since given up any hope that there's something better out there or that leaving is a possibility. The flame of hope was extinguished years ago. Where could I go where he couldn't follow me? Where he wouldn't follow me?

There's no help from the man who calls himself my father. And there's no support from the rest of my family and the people who paraded themselves as my friends.

Sinking back onto my heels, I study the dark spot on the rug. Better, but not good enough. It's never good enough for Grayden...

I chew my lip, squinting at the minuscule speck of purple still staining the rug. Rising to my feet, I silently send up a prayer to whoever's listening that my husband won't notice. But I know it's a fruitless prayer. He always notices. And I always pay the price for what he calls my sloppy work.

I dump the water down the drain and discard the yellow gloves quickly as the buzzer for the oven sounds. I have to do better than last night's debacle, and my hands tremble as I take out the chicken.

It's dinnertime, but I know I shouldn't eat.

Are you really going to eat that?

You've already had more than enough, don't you think?

Put on even more weight huh, sis...?

The words I heard so many times growing up tumble around my head before I can force them back. I see my reflection in the glass of the oven door, and quickly look away, unable to stomach the creature that stares back.

I make up a plate of food for Ethan and put it in front of him.

While he eats, I move into the bathroom. My feet ache, and my hands are blistered along the side from scrubbing so hard.

This is not the lifestyle I'd been accustomed to when I was growing up. In Grayden's mansion, there's no help—no butler or maid to tend to the large house and no help beyond the elderly gardener who shows up twice a month to maintain the grounds.

Everything else is my job. It's my responsibility to tend to the house, to the laundry, to the cooking, and to his needs at the drop of a hat.

I wouldn't mind the work if he was happy with what I did, but he always manages to find fault with every single thing I do.

The slamming of a door startles me. I fumble to keep the scrubber in my hand.

My heart roars in my chest as I strain to hear which way he'll go.

There's a crash and a curse from the kitchen.

I'm on my feet in a second, cleaning supplies forgotten. I'll regret it later.

“Fucking hell!” Grayden's voice travels through the empty house like thunder.

My stomach twists. I will my knees to stop shaking. Checking the clock, I realize he's late.

“Where the fuck are you?” he slurs as I rush toward the kitchen.

Dread makes bile rise in my throat. Dinner has been under the warmer in a foolish attempt to keep it warm for him.

“Stop hiding, you pathetic excuse for a wife!” he yells.

I'm in the kitchen in the next instance, my gaze at my feet.

“There you are, bitch.” He may look on the outside like a gentleman with unlimited wealth, a refined voice, and impeccable manners, but it took only the duration of my wedding night to discover that he's really a drunken predator with a hair trigger.

I tremble but don't say anything.

Because nothing I say will do any good.

“What the fuck did I say about keeping the house clean?”

A small sound escapes my throat despite how hard I squeeze my lips together.

“And what the fuck is this? Chicken, again? I thought I told you I don’t want to eat that dry shit anymore!” he roars. His yells echo around the kitchen before his large hand clamps onto my arm and drags me out of the room.

My blood roars in my ears and blocks out any other sound except the terrified thump of my heart.

“What the fuck is this?”

He shoves me forward into the banister as I frantically search for what he’s talking about. It’s polished just the way he likes it. The wood gleams with not a single speck of dirt on it.

“You’re a useless piece of shit!” He shoves me harder into the banister.

And I see it. On the wooden stairs is the large paperweight from his study. Ethan must have been playing with it on the staircase earlier in the day.

“I-I…” I try to find my voice as his harsh grasp squeezes my jaw.

“You what?” His breath reeks of alcohol as it brushes against my face. “You’re a fucking waste of space. Can’t cook. Can’t clean. You can’t even keep yourself in shape, you fat bitch.”

I whimper as his hand squeezes harder.

He grabs my hip and pulls me into him. “Who would want to fuck someone like you? It makes me sick every time I even think about your naked body.”

He releases me. And for a second, I think it’s over. I think the worst has passed.

Grayden bends down to pick up the glass paperweight. When I see it clutched in his fist, I brace for the impact, cursing myself for flinching.

Nothing.

I blink. And I see fury ignite his eyes as he stumbles down the hallway.

I’m rooted to the floor, trembling, before my mind can process what’s happening.

A strangled sound lodges in my throat as I scramble forward. No. No. No!

He lumbers into the living room.

And I can just about see the paperweight raised in his hold before it sails through the air, smacking into the wall just behind Ethan and shattering.

I hear the snarl in his voice. But it's the tiny whimper that spurs me into action. He's never gone for Ethan like this before.

Desperation flings me down the hall behind Grayden. And love causes my arms to wrap around Ethan, bowing my body over his.

He picks up the paperweight again and hurls it at me.

A crack reverberates through my entire body. And the pain splinters me in half.

I curl over Ethan, shielding him as a polished loafer kicks out and beats the oxygen out of my lungs.

His fingers rip through my scalp as he drags me up by my hair.

I don't struggle. I don't fight.

I simply focus on my son cowering in a ball with tears streaming down his face.

Out. We need out.

My body is flung into the side table, toppling a vase which shatters to the ground. But I make myself grab at Grayden's trouser leg. Anything to stop him from getting closer to Ethan.

Each breath feels like I've swallowed glass. But I shove myself up, trying to find the strength to move.

Grayden shakes me from his leg and staggers toward his study—no doubt to get more alcohol. I hold my breath as I watch, hoping that his need to drink will eclipse his need to beat me.

I count to ten before I crawl to Ethan. Soothing back his hair and kissing his temple, I want to tell him that it's over, that it won't happen again. But I won't lie to him.

Sucking in a sharp breath, I gather my baby boy into my arms. His body shakes against mine, and I squeeze him all the tighter.

The pain in my ribs makes me gasp, but I bite my cheek. Softly, slowly, I make it down the hall. Every creak and groan of the house has me on edge.

My breath stutters out of me in pained puffs as we silently climb the stairs. I stop outside Ethan's room, ushering him inside quickly.

Then I sit in a guest room, hunched over on the edge of the bed, waiting for the drunken summons into our bedroom...

I wait for the cursed bellowing that he does when he's like this—demanding and insistent that I pleasure him exactly how he commands me to.

He tells me that I'm a hole for him to fill as he pleases, but he also tells me that I'm useless in bed. His constant reminders of this only add to the darkness that swallows me up when I'm alone.

The slamming of a door inside our bedroom makes me jump. I try to listen to the sounds through the wall.

One heartbeat, then another.

I creep out of the guest room and move to the master bedroom's door, cracking it open just a peep.

Relief floods through my body as I sag against the doorframe.

Asleep. The bastard is asleep.

Clumsily, his body lays across the bed. With another sharp inhale, I quietly pad over to him, pulling the loafers from his feet. He'll expect them cleaned and polished to perfection before the morning.

He'll also be furious if he wakes up to find that he's slept in his clothes, leaving the expensive fabric creased and rumpled.

I pull off his slacks and then unbutton his dress shirt before I struggle to get it off him. Thank God he's passed out—anything's preferable to when he's yelling and beating me.

I gather his clothes into a ball to place in the laundry basket. And before I leave him, I fill a glass of water and place it beside him on the nightstand—if he wakes up without water beside him, it'll be yet another reason for him to come for me.

With a soft click of the door, I make my way back downstairs to clean up the shattered vase and mess he's made in his fit.

Each step feels like someone's pressing an iron to my lungs. I try to draw a breath in but can't seem to do it enough.

The pattern of this isn't new to me. We've been through this far too many times.

But tonight is the first time he's gone for Ethan—gone for the little boy who's his son.

In a daze, I move from the kitchen to the living room. The sound of my cleaning and glass clinking into the trash doesn't quite register as I continue to replay the image of Ethan on the floor, hands thrown over his head. And the smell of the furniture polish does nothing to remove the foul smell of Grayden's alcohol-laced breath as he sneers in my face.

I drop the polish and rag into my basket. Each breath isn't bringing enough oxygen to my lungs. My chest heaves, but it's on fire with every movement.

Gently, I push against my side, ignoring the loathing that washes over me whenever I feel the plumpness of my figure.

And when I reach a particular area, I nearly scream when my fingers gently push at the rib. White hot pain blinds me, and I grasp at the counter to stay up. Something is wrong. Very wrong.

I need a doctor. One who won't ask the wrong questions. One who doesn't report back to my husband. One whose help won't mean that my husband ends my life before it ever really gets to begin.

I've been bruised and beaten so many times, but always in places that won't draw attention. My stomach, my back, my arms, my thighs. Anything to keep prying eyes from asking too many questions.

I fumble with a bottle of aspirin, watching as the bottle rattles from my grasp and tumbles to the counter. Sucking in a sharp breath, I gather the pills I can reach, trying to put them back into the bottle.

Swallowing two pills, I stumble up the stairs, praying I don't wake him up. Praying that I can make it to Ethan's room.

By some miracle, I do, slowly edging the door open and closed without a sound. Ethan is in a ball under his covers, his favorite stuffed toy, Bernie Bear, clutched to his chest as his face buries into the fur.

My heart breaks for him. And a pained sound escapes me before I can stop it.

His big brown eyes, which are so like mine, widen as he wakes.

I grit my teeth, putting on my best smile. But the image of him recoiling away from his father flashes before me.

My mind moves before my body. Instantly, a checklist forms in my head.

I hold Ethan's watery gaze before turning toward his closet and throwing it open. Frantically, I pull out the small backpack we bring to the park and hastily shove what I can fit into it. A few outfits, a spare blanket, a book or two. I grab another empty bag, put in a few more items, and sling it over my arm despite the way my body protests.

I wish I could get some of my own clothes too, but I can't risk going back into the master bedroom and waking up Grayden.

I press my finger to my lips and motion Ethan to me, unwilling to make a single sound that might lead to us being caught.

My plan is hazy and wild. It's only partially formed, but I hang on to it for dear life.

Ethan slips his arms into a light jacket and then into the straps of the backpack.

Kissing his head, I clutch his tiny hand in mine, pull the hood over his head, and move as fast as I can to the door.

Ethan stares at me, his brow puckered and confused.

I squeeze his hand in reassurance as I let the door click softly shut behind us. Moving despite the agony in my ribs, I will myself to make it down the stairs without a sound.

In the kitchen, my fingers fumble with my purse as I hastily throw it over my shoulder. Each step sends another wave of pain through me. But if we don't leave, we'll both end up dying here.

Outside, the chilly night air energizes me. I hurry down the long winding drive, through the gate, and into the luxurious neighborhood. It isn't until I'm gasping for breath that I pause for a moment, bracing myself against the wall of the nearest building.

Taking a deep breath, I clutch my side and keep walking, Ethan's hand firmly in mine.

I wish I could run back to my family. But my father will be furious when he discovers I've left Grayden—he married me off to him because he wanted an alliance with the powerful Devlin family.

Should I try to appeal to my mother? I shake my head. She will only tell me that we have to do what Father wants—and he'll order me to go back to my husband.

I have few friends. My family largely kept me sheltered at home while I was growing up, going so far as to having me homeschooled, due to their desire to keep their children out of the public eye—except for when it came to that ridiculously over-the-top wedding. And since my marriage, Grayden has made sure to keep me as isolated as possible.

After what seems like an age, we've walked to the area we need. It's here somewhere, I know it...

My eyes fill with tears as the clinic's sign comes into view. I saw a poster for this place when I took Ethan for his pediatrician check.

I jump at the sound of something tipping over in the alley beside us, but then I tell myself that Grayden will still be out cold and it's far too early for him to notice that we're missing.

This is the right choice. An ER would notify Grayden. And the family doctor is paid by Grayden. Those options won't keep us safe.

Pushing open the door with more energy than I possess, the smell of antiseptic immediately assaults my nostrils.

Carefully, I sit Ethan on a chair in the corner, away from the windows and prying eyes. He holds onto his teddy bear for dear life while I turn to the front desk where a nurse in Snoopy scrubs sits.

Her eyes raking over me makes me tuck a lock of blond hair behind my ear and avert my gaze downward.

"I..." My voice is soft and rasping. "I need to see a doctor."

Her expression melts into concern. Through the small gap in the clear glass, she slides me a clipboard. "Just fill that out as best you can, honey, and we'll get you in to see someone."

I nod and slump down beside Ethan. My handwriting is wobbly, and the sting of fresh tears clouds my eyes.

When my name is finally called, I gather our things as best I can.

The doctor, a gentle-looking redhead with Care Bears all over her scrubs and a bright smiley face pinned on her coat, examines me with care. She doesn't ask unnecessary questions or prod me for answers.

With a soft soothing voice, she moves me from the examining room to the x-ray room and back, all while a nurse follows closely with Ethan in tow.

The look on the doctor's face is all I need to see to know it's bad.

We're back in the examination room now, and wordlessly, she sets down some clean clothing.

I just stare. "I can't... I don't want—"

"You can, and you should. We get a lot of women like you here. Take the pain meds, change your clothes, and I'll be back with an ice pack." She gives me a soft smile. "If you need us to call someone, just let me know. I'll give you a few minutes."

She's right—my clothes are in a state, ripped from when Grayden grabbed me and dragged me across the floor.

I avoid looking at my body in the small mirror as I tug on the T-shirt and hoodie. I do the same with the faded pair of yoga pants, tying them at the waist despite not needing to do so. I've enough in my hips to keep them up.

I toss the torn clothing in the trash just as the doctor returns. "Do you have a place to stay?"

It hits me that I haven't made a plan beyond getting to the clinic. I don't know what I'm doing. We're out on the streets in Chicago in the middle of night. Alone. My lip trembles, and I squeeze my eyes shut. "No."

"There's a shelter on the next block. I'm not sure if they have any spaces left for tonight, but would you like me to ask?"

I nod my head.

With that, she leaves, and I rummage through my purse, counting the measly dollars in my wallet. Enough for one meal—and painkillers. But not enough for a place to stay for the night. The answer she returns with has my body shaking with exhaustion and defeat: the shelter is full.

Gnawing my lip, I thank both the doctor and nurse before I guide us both back out into the chilly air. My body is growing heavy from the pain medicine, and my vision is blurry with tears, but I manage to read the street names.

With a quick stop to make a purchase at a corner store, I orient myself. The park I take Ethan to is just on the next street. Maybe we can sit there while I try to figure something out.

And then it hits me.

Kori.

The walk is long and sluggish, with me having to stop every so often to catch my breath. But I count each small square house as we pass, hoping I've remembered it correctly.

Kori and her son, Kristopher, were a blessing we stumbled upon at the park one day. Kori, a single mother herself, wasn't involved in the world I was in. She was different—and she was stronger for it.

My hand shakes as I knock. I don't know what time it is, but the look of the vacant street tells me that it's extremely late by now.

No answer.

My mouth fills with cotton as I squeeze Ethan's hand, putting on a brave face as best I can. My darling boy doesn't deserve this life; he deserves so much more.

“Rosa?”

I blink, not realizing the door has opened. “Kori...” My voice is thick with tears before I clear it. “I'm sorry to drop by so late. Can...can I ask a favor?”

Her brow is furrowed. “Sure, come in. Is everything okay?”

I shake my head, following her in. I don't tell her the entire story as I sit on her couch, trying to take up as little space as I can; I just tell her that I had to leave.

Kori squeezes my knee and smiles, offering me her couch and a blow-up mattress for Ethan.

She helps me get set up, bringing her spare sheets and blankets, and as soon as Ethan is tucked in, he falls asleep in moments. He's just as exhausted as I am.

Kori makes us both a cup of cocoa, and then, she curls up on the couch next to me. Concern is etched all over her face.

"I don't want to be a bother..."

"You're not. And you can stay as long as you need. What else can I do to help you? I have six hundred bucks in savings that I could lend you if that would help you?"

I shake my head. She's just as strapped for cash as I am right now. "No, I can't take your money. But do you think...your mom could look after Ethan while I work?" Kori's mom helps with childcare when Kori is working. "As soon as I find a job, I can pay her something for it," I add in a rushed voice.

"Oh, Rosa, I know she'll be happy to help."

"I just need to earn enough money to be able to leave Chicago and put down a deposit on an apartment, so hopefully, it won't be for long. My marriage is finally over. I know that Grayden won't allow a divorce, but I will never return to that man."

The one time I mentioned a divorce to him, he beat me up badly before telling me that he'd make sure I'd never see Ethan again if I filed for divorce—that he had the money and power to ensure that he'd get sole custody forever. And I can't risk that ever happening to Ethan. I can't let that monster be the only parent to my little boy. It's better that we just disappear and get as far away from Chicago and Grayden as possible.

"I desperately wish that I'd had the courage before now to leave. That I've stayed for so long and let Ethan witness the violence makes me feel a complete failure as a parent. I'm his mom, and I should be protecting him from all the bad in this world. I've let him down, but that changes from right now. I have to stand up for us both—even though it's absolutely terrifying—because that's the only way things will get better for us."

Kori nods as she hugs me, understanding how bad things are for me.

That night, my sleep is fitful, and I wake up in pain several times, not remembering where I am.

Finally, when dim daylight starts to filter through the blinds, I decide to get up and stumble to the bathroom with my purse in my hand.

Staring at my reflection makes my throat run dry. Too round of a face; too chubby cheeks; brown eyes that are plain and drab. Every insecurity and fault in my body screams out at me.

I grab my purse which contains the box of hair dye I bought from the corner store, and I sprawl the bottles and instructions over the vanity's counter.

I squeeze my eyes shut. It's now or never. Grayden's going to find us if I don't take precautions against being recognized.

Opening my eyes, I lift the scissors from Kori's medicine cabinet and hack at my long blond strands, watching the loose waves fall to the floor in uneven slices.

When I finish, I take my reflection in. My hair dangles in a chin-length bob, a bit jagged at the ends but passable as long as no one looks too closely at it. Next comes the black dye. I do my best, but after washing it out, the color isn't as even as I'd hoped, and the brassy orange undertone makes my skin look a little sickly.

After showering, I head to the kitchen. Kori's mom has arrived, and I explain to Ethan that she'll be looking after him today. "This is Kathleen. She's Kristopher's grandma, and she's going to look after both you boys today while I go out and look for a job."

Ethan's eyes widen with worry, and my heart breaks in two. I desperately wish I didn't have to leave him for the next eight hours, but there's no other option if I'm going to find a job.

"And today, we're making cupcakes," Kathleen adds in an attempt to distract Ethan. "And I'll need someone to help with the mixing. Do you think you could help with that, Ethan?"

He gives a wobbly smile and nods.

The smell of bacon sizzling is all around me, making my stomach grumble. But I push it off, deciding to leave before breakfast is ready. Skipping a few meals won't hurt me. It'll do me good after indulging last week on too much cake.

I kiss Ethan's head, and after promising him I'll be home before dinner, I reluctantly leave the house.

First, I tackle the businesses and stores around Kori's neighborhood, and then, I branch out further.

By the end of the day, my feet are sore, and all I've had to eat all day is the stale roll I snagged from the shelter soup kitchen.

Nothing. Not a single prospect for a job. All I keep hearing is 'we're not hiring.'

What on earth had I been thinking when I thought that I could set up a new life for myself? I don't have any experience. I've never had a job in my life. I'd been raised to be the perfect housewife—and I couldn't even do that properly.

Tears prick my eyes, and I take a shuddering breath to push them away. I have to keep going.

Because whatever happens now, the only thing I know is that I can't let Ethan down ever again...