

## CHAPTER 11

ROSA

It's time for my weekly weigh-in. I strip off every single ounce of clothing. I'm not leaving anything to chance.

Taking a deep breath, I make myself take a step forward onto the scales.

And keeping my eyes closed, I psych myself up to face the number.

Cracking one eyelid open, I peek at the digital display.

That can't be right.

I step off and on again, this time with my gaze wide open.

And my heart dives with despair.

Because despite my best efforts, I've gained three pounds. Three whole pounds. All my efforts for the last few days have been totally futile and amounted to nothing. And even worse, I'm heavier than when I started.

But then, I tell myself to stop pretending that I made a real effort. Because I know the real reason for this weight gain. It's all those cakes that I ate. Not just that day with the lemon cupcakes, but also all those other days when I've been stuffing myself with cakes and muffins, each time thinking that I'd get back on track tomorrow.

I'm so stupid. And weak-willed. And greedy. No wonder I'm so fat—no wonder nobody wants me.

I try to shake the memory of the cakes out of my mind. Those small bites of heaven might look like innocent treats, but their sugar-crammed calories are always enough to make me completely lose my way because I can never stop at just one cake.

A rational person might try to put the weight gain down to their time of the month or water retention. But I've used all those excuses so many times already in the past—and I know that it's what I'm eating that's responsible for my weight issues.

Why is it always so hard? It's just food, just a momentary pleasure. But I know it's more than that. It's a symbol of everything I struggle with—self-control and body image. I've read countless articles and joined online support groups. I even tried therapy once. But in moments like this, all that knowledge and all those strategies feel useless and just fly out of the window, leaving me alone, naked, fat, and ashamed of my body.

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A little while later, I decide there's only one thing for it.

The gym. I have to work off the extra weight. And given that the Marchianos have their own fully equipped gym right here in their mansion, there's absolutely no excuse for me not to start straightaway—especially as they're all out, so I know I'll have it to myself.

I hate working out. It leaves me hot, breathless, tired, and looking even more of a mess than usual. Plus, it always leaves me hungrier than normal. But I know I

have to do something. My diet isn't working, so I need to start working out as well.

Getting dressed in a gray T-shirt and black leggings, I go down to the gym, clutching my water bottle like it's a lifeline. My heart races, not only from the thought of exercise, but also from the anxiety that courses through me every time I think about the mountain I have to climb to get to where I need to be—thin and skinny.

My gaze wanders around the stacks of weights and fitness equipment, trying to decide how to start. I choose the treadmill. Even I can't manage to mess that up.

Switching on the radio so that it filters through the speakers, I get to work. Flicking a switch, the treadmill hums to life, and I start with a slow walk, gradually increasing the speed. I try to lose myself in the rhythm of my steps and the music around me.

In no time, I'm working up a sweat, trying to kickstart the process to shed the pounds that have crept on over the last week and the pounds that have stubbornly clung to me for far too long. My cheeks are flushed, and sweat trickles down my back, but I keep pushing myself. I need to do this.

I'm out of breath and struggle to keep going at anywhere near a decent pace. Thank God no one is here to witness my pathetic attempts.

Catching sight of my body in the opposite full-length mirror, I cringe at the blob. I shake my head and try to block out the self-conscious thoughts gnawing at my mind.

I keep thinking about how different things might be if I were thinner, more confident. Would that make me feel less out of place, less exposed? Would it make someone actually want me and love me?

Suddenly, a familiar voice startles me, and my heart races as my head whips over my shoulder.

Oh shit. It's Camillo.

I want to hide behind the nearest weight rack, but it's too late. But who am I kidding? Even that wouldn't be big enough to hide my huge, hideous body.

My heart is thudding out of control as he strides over to me.

I thought I was out of breath before, but now I'm practically suffocating as I struggle to drag a single ounce of air into my lungs.

"Hey," he calls out over the music.

I try to muster a smile, but I think it comes out more like a grimace. "Hi," I manage to squeak, my voice barely audible over the pounding in my chest.

He approaches, looking effortlessly calm and collected in his work out gear. Is he here to use the gym as well? He never normally works out at this time. I feel a flush creeping up my neck. Of all the days for him to change his workout time, why did it have to be today?

His smile at me is tinged with warmth, and for a moment, I forget about my embarrassment.

But then I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror—my face is red, my hair is a mess, and my T-shirt clings to my body like an unflattering shrink-wrapped package. My face burns, and I just want the ground to swallow me whole.

"Didn't know you used the gym here," he says.

I tug at the bottom of my tee, wishing desperately that I'd picked a longer top that would have at least hidden some of my thick thunder thighs.

"What do you think of the set up? I designed it all myself."

“It’s, um, nice,” I say in a feeble voice, unable to think of anything else to say because my mind is a complete blank. All I can think about is how stupid I must look. “I thought I’d try to get in shape,” I mumble, avoiding his eyes.

“You look great,” he says after a moment.

My gaze drops down to my feet. “Thanks, but I’ve got a long way to go.”

He shakes his head, his expression serious. “You really don’t, Rosa. You’re great just as you are.”

His words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I can’t help the tears that sting the back of my eyes. “You don’t have to say that,” I mumble, my voice barely above a whisper. “I know what I look like.”

He steps closer, and I feel a jolt of panic. He reaches out to touch my arm lightly. “I’m not just saying it,” he insists.

I swallow hard, trying to keep my emotions in check. “You don’t understand,” I say, my voice trembling. “It’s not easy, being...like this. People judge. They stare. And I just always feel so out of place.”

His expression softens, and he gives my arm a reassuring squeeze. “I do understand, more than you think. Everyone has insecurities, things they struggle with. You’re doing something incredible by being here, by taking charge of your health. That’s something to be proud of. And whether you work out or not, you always look beautiful to me.”

Beautiful? Me? I’ve spent so long feeling invisible, trying to blend into the background, that hearing someone say that feels surreal.

His words are like a balm to my wounded spirit, and for the first time, I feel a glimmer of hope. Maybe he’s right. Maybe I don’t have to be perfect to be worthy of kindness, of admiration. Maybe it’s enough that I’m trying, that I’m here, sweating and struggling but still moving forward.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “That means a lot.”

He smiles in reply, and it’s like the sun breaking through the clouds.

“I have to go now—”

“Don’t leave just because I’m here,” he says quickly.

“I have work to get done,” I say with a small nod before hurrying away.

As I head upstairs to shower, I keep thinking about Camillo’s words. I’m still self-conscious, still aware of every extra pound, but maybe, just maybe, I can start to see myself through kinder eyes.

It gives me a renewed determination. Because I’m here, and I’m trying. And for now, right at this very second, that’s enough.

And as I wash, there’s another thought that keeps running through my mind—does he really think that I’m beautiful...?