

CHAPTER 20

ROSA

Camillo's deep voice rumbles through the room as I continue to polish the wooden bookcases.

Ethan is nestled beside him, focusing on the colorful pages in front of them. The sight alone brings tears to my eyes. But it's more than that. It's watching them interact that squeezes my heart so often and makes my throat run dry.

As if he can feel me looking at him, Camillo's eyes rise above the book. The smile on his face turns my body to a molten pool. It's the same smile he gave me before our dinner date—the one that transforms his face and turns me to goo on the spot.

He continues to read softly, and I turn back to my work before my heated cheeks can give away where exactly my head is drifting.

What is it about seeing Camillo with my son that ignites some part deep inside of me? There's something so unknowingly attractive about how soft he is with Ethan that it makes my heart race.

I try not to eavesdrop on their conversations—the fact that Ethan even talks to him, brief as it is, shocks the hell out of me—but I can't help it. I lean back, trying hard to make out all the words and relishing the fact that Ethan is getting more and more comfortable.

I know it's a dangerous line to walk, but I want him to feel as safe as I do here—regardless of how temporary it all has to be.

“Swimming?” I hear Ethan's voice pipe up.

I whirl around, nearly knocking the lamp to my left over. I catch it just in time and let out a soft sigh.

Ethan's looking right at me, his big brown eyes pleading to go.

A tentative smile pulls my lips up, and I nod.

The smile on his face lights it up, and my heart clenches. This is my little boy again—the one he should have always been.

“He’s never gone swimming before,” I tell Camillo.

I can’t quite hear what he says, but Ethan bobs his head up and down and heads upstairs, leaving Camillo and me standing in the room.

“You don’t have to do this,” I start. “I can watch him while I clean.”

“It’s hot, and I could use the exercise. It’s not a problem.” His eyes travel along my body, leaving a heated wake in their path. “You can join us. You can spare some time, right?”

I shake my head. “I’ve, um, got a lot to get done.”

The idea of anyone seeing me in a swimsuit, exposed to the world, makes bile burn the back of my throat. And as tempting as it would be to sink into the crystal blue water and relax, I’m supposed to be working.

Camillo nods and heads up the staircase too.

I make a beeline for the kitchen, a perfect window to the estate’s yard and the pool within eyesight. I’m not too busy that I can’t watch, but I don’t want to be caught slacking on my job either. Despite Marco effectively dismissing my resignation, I don’t want to risk it. I owe them too much.

A while later, the sound of a splash has me jerking my head up, anxiety gripping me. Ethan stands on the pool deck, life vest and swim trunks bulking him out.

Camillo shakes out his head, pushing the damp strands back from his eyes. Even from here I can see the water dripping off his sculpted muscles and sloping down the valley of his chest. All his tattoos are on display, the ink crawling along his back like smoke surrounding a beast. The vivid lines and arcs highlight the dips and valleys of his broad back and bring his whole body to life.

His large hand reaches out toward Ethan before gently guiding him down to the deck, so that his legs dangle in the water. They’re talking, but I can’t hear their words despite the window being open.

Ethan’s being well taken care of, so I drop my gaze back to the fruit before me. The platter is nearly done, and pitchers of juice and lemonade sit on a serving tray. The

laundry is the last thing I have to finish, and it's running a cycle now. I could, if I wanted, go out there and dip my feet in.

I gnaw the inside of my cheek. I'd made the fruit platter and drinks assuming the others would join eventually. But so far, it's just the two of them.

Bonding.

The word slips into my mind, coating with honey. I don't hate it. In fact, I could fall into the sensation and never resurface. And that alone is a scary but tempting thought.

Shaking my head, I carefully balance the drinks tray in my hand and push out the door toward the yard.

Ethan's soft peel of laughter is like a piece of beautiful music. I set the tray down. He's splashing on the step, making small waves like he does in the bath. Camillo's large body looms next to him.

My knees wobble when Camillo's dangerous smile floats my way. His dark brow is raised in a silent question for me to join them.

I shake my head and dash inside. I can feel the heat crawling up the back of my neck and cheeks. The thought alone of being near him like that... it's more tempting than I want to admit.

When I emerge again from the kitchen with the fruit tray, Ethan is kicking his legs and bobbing in the water before they're both climbing out, dripping wet. Ethan rushes toward me before I can stop him.

Camillo gently grips his hand, and he murmurs something about running with wet feet. I melt a little at how caring he is toward Ethan.

Eyes wandering, I take him in. The broad expanse of his chest, the hard lines of well-earned muscles glistening with water. My tongue runs over my lips subconsciously before I can avert my eyes.

"Having fun?" I ask.

Ethan nods as he gives me a big grin.

"You didn't need to do this, Rosa." The smile on his face says he's thankful, though. "We're going to see if the others want to join in."

“I figured you’d be hungry and thirsty.”

Ethan settles himself in a chair and reaches out for a piece of fruit before stopping.

“Go for it, buddy,” Camillo encourages, toweling off his hair. “Have as much as you want.”

Ethan settles back with a slice of apple. “Momma swim too?”

I can feel Camillo’s gaze zero in on me without having to look. It makes my skin tingle and my stomach flutter. “Not today. I have to finish my work.”

“After?”

“I won’t be done until late, honey.”

“You can take the time off,” Camillo interjects, sounding just as hopeful as Ethan does.

“No, that’s okay,” I start, shifting my weight from foot to foot. “I need to get some clothes ironed. Anyway, I’ll have some time before dinner to spend with Ethan.”

“Rosa.”

The firm sound of my name makes my knees shake. Locking them in place, I plaster on a smile. “Honestly, it’s fine, I promise.” And turning on my heel, I dash into the house.

The time passes slowly after that. Camillo and Ethan meander into the house after a while, and Camillo tells me that he’s taking Ethan out for an ice cream.

I watch them leave, their laughter ringing in my ears, as I swipe a bead of sweat from my forehead.

It’s so tempting to change and go for a quick dip in the pool. The muggy heat is stifling now. With a lack of central air, thanks to its maintenance today, the kitchen feels boiling.

Indecision races through me. If I’m quick, no one will even know. I can change and be back to the laundry in no time. It’s all I have left to do before dinner.

With a quick glance over my shoulder and down the hall, I let my nails bite into my palms as I rush up the back stairwell to the bedroom.

I get changed into a black one piece that cuts high along my hips. The back is cut open, dipping low on the small of my back. It's the only one I've found left behind by the previous maid, and so I put it on despite how much skin it shows.

I tiptoe down the stairs, stopping at the laundry room to check the machines. There's plenty of time for a quick dip.

I carefully lay the towel I've brought with me onto one of the lounge chairs and dip my toe. The cool water is like a balm to my heated flesh. My ankle, calf, and knee follow, and before I have any second thoughts, my body is submerged into the cool water.

The water drips from my hair, now mostly blond with just a bit of faded brown at the ends, before I smooth it from my face. It feels wonderful and better than I could have imagined. Sinking beneath the surface, I let my limbs fall heavy at my sides before breaking the surface once more.

This is the perfect way to stave off the heat. Just a few minutes longer, and then, I'll go back inside.

A short while later, after enjoying the water and feeling refreshed, I climb out of the pool.

My foot meets the decking.

And a shadow looms over me.

My heart chokes.

My gaze darts up to follow the towering lines.

And his broad chest fills my vision.

"I forgot my wallet," he says as he picks it up from the table by the sun lounger.

Heat crawls up the back of my neck. "Sorry," I mumble. I drop my gaze.

"For what?"

Humiliation bubbles to life in my gut. Curling inward, I clear my throat. "I have laundry to finish."

"Rosa—"

I plaster on a fake smile, meeting his gaze. “I’ll just get dressed...” I edge past him a little, praying he’ll let me go and escape back to the safety of my bedroom.

Gently, Camillo’s large hand wraps around my arm. “You don’t have to go. You’re allowed to be out here if you want. It’s practically a sauna in the house while they work on the AC.”

My anxiety soars. The world spins, and each breath comes in small little pants. I need to get out of here.

Tears sting my eyes, but I shove them away as I take off toward the door back to the kitchen, my towel forgotten as I run to the safety of the house.

A quick glance over my shoulder makes it feel like I’ve been punched in the gut.

His dark brows pull together, and his jaw ticks before something darker slides over his face. He takes a step closer.

The door to the kitchen is so far from me.

If I can just...

But I’m not going to make it before he gets to me.

I know he’s not going to hurt me, but dread swells in my stomach.

My reflection in a window catches my attention. I’m paralyzed looking at it. My fists tighten, and I drop my gaze. It’s better if I don’t look. Quickly, I swipe at my eyes. How could I be so stupid? What was I thinking, wearing a bathing suit like this? And even worse, how did I think I’d be able to sneak around unseen?

Cover up, no one wants to see your rolls.

What is wrong with you? No one wants to see that!

Isn’t that a little...tight on you?

Maybe you should stay inside, sis...

Hot breath tickles the top of my head as a warm hand wraps around my wrist, halting me. I’m frozen, paralyzed with fear.

“It’s just me,” he says softly.

The heat of him spreads over my body like a soothing hand running along my skin. My body wants to melt into his, but instead, I tense again. “I need to change.”

I don’t want him to see me like this. Skin all exposed. The curves of my body filling out the stretchy, wet material. The way my thighs touch and how much cleavage is showing are already mortifying enough.

“Look at me.”

I close my eyes, turning around to face him.

“Rosa.”

“Please,” I whisper. “I need to change.” I don’t want to cry in front of him. But I know what I look like. I know how undesirable I am like this.

His calloused finger hooks under my chin, lifting my face.

Squeezing my eyes shut tighter, I plead with my breathing to even out and for my pulse to go back down.

“Did he do that to you?”

Opening my eyes, I blink. “What?”

“Your husband.” The words growl between his clenched teeth. “The bruises on your back and arms. Are they from...before?”

Confusion sweeps through me. That’s what he’s upset about?

Although he’s called me gorgeous before, that little voice in the back of my head keeps telling me he didn’t mean it and was just being nice.

But right now, he’s only zeroed in on the faded yellow and purple marks that are exposed on my back. He’s not looking at the rest of my body—nor the size of me.

“Did he do this to you?”

The ferocity in his voice, the spark of anger in his eyes, makes my body tremble. Not from fear, but from something else.

“How could he mark something so fucking beautiful?” The warm breath of his words caresses my face as he leans closer, his forehead pressed against mine. I’m not sure he

even realizes he's said them because the hardness of his face remains. "Tell me. He did this, didn't he?"

I nod, unable to find my voice.

But I know I don't have to be afraid of this man. The face he wears as the Marchiano enforcer is just a mask he wears to prove to the world he's the monster everyone thinks he is. But behind it is a man who's gentle with a broken boy...and even more so with me. A man who coaxes these feelings in me and makes me cling to every compliment that falls from his lips.

When his hold on me loosens a little, I take my chance and dash inside and up the stairs. My hands are trembling as I hastily pull on my clothing.

Then, as I lean against the closed door, I lock eyes with my reflection. Revulsion tears through me, followed by shame.

Who would ever love a fat pig like you?

The words Grayden said to me whisper again and again through my mind.

Since leaving Grayden, my parents have left me a number of voicemails and text messages. And although they were angry at first, my mother's been messaging me more lately, asking how Ethan and I are. I haven't dared tell her where I am, but I can tell that my parents' attitudes are softening—and, quite honestly, it's nice to have someone in my family care about me. Camillo and Marco refused to decrease my wages to take into account Ethan's bed and board, and every day I'm worried about what will happen to us because their charity can't last forever—and eventually, Grayden will catch up with us. He's already found me once, and I know it's impossible to stay hidden while I'm still in Chicago.

My mother's persuaded me to come for dinner at the family home tonight. I deliberated long and hard about whether I should go, but they're my family, and they're the only ones I can ask to lend me enough money to get away for good and start afresh.

On my evening off, I drop Ethan at Kori's house for a play date with Kristopher. He's so excited to see them again, and I want to talk to my parents without Ethan there.

At the agreed time, I arrive at the Davis family mansion, my palms sweaty as I climb the steps up to the front door. The maid shows me into the drawing room where my parents and my younger sister, Reagan, have gathered for drinks. “There you are, Rosa.” My mother greets me with a kiss on each cheek, her familiar expensive perfume wafting through the air. “I’m glad you’re here so that we can help you. We’re your family, and we just want to support you to get your life back on track after recent events.”

I breathe out a sigh of relief. I was so afraid that they would refuse to help me. “I’m so grateful for your help. I just need enough money to get Ethan and me away from Chicago and Grayden, and I promise I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

My mother’s gaze slides from me to my father and back again. “Don’t you think it would be better to return to Grayden so that you can give things another go? Grayden’s been sick out of his mind with worry after you up and left in the middle of the night and took his son with you.”

“He’s my son as well. And Grayden hates both of us.”

“Nonsense,” Father grits out. “He’s been looking everywhere for you, wanting to bring you home.”

“He’s even said he’s prepared to forgive you this one time,” Mother adds.

“I’ve told you that he beats me and the last time he went for Ethan as well. How can you think that I would ever return to a man like that and take my son back to live in that environment?”

“Really, Rosa.” Mother sniffs. “It can’t be that bad.”

“Mother, how can you say that?” I cry. My only regret is that I didn’t leave sooner. That I didn’t have the courage to do something before if not for me, then for the sake of my little boy.

Her eyebrows knit together in a frown. “Well, you’ve never looked like you’re suffering. I mean, you’re fatter than ever. Surely, if things were as bad as you claim they were, you’d be looking thin and haggard?”

I’m left utterly speechless and unable to speak for a few long seconds. I thought Mother asked me here today to talk about helping me, but it’s clear that her ‘help’ consists of trying to convince me to return to Grayden. A shudder runs through me. “He doesn’t want us home to be a family together. He just wants us home so that he

can punish us—so that he has someone to bully and beat. But I won't let him get near Ethan or me ever again—”

“For God's sake, she's being melodramatic as always,” my sister interrupts impatiently. “She's always been the same—just an attention-seeker.”

My mouth drops open. Reagan's always had attention lavished on her by my parents and everyone else. She's thin and glamorous; she has the sort of stunning looks that turn heads whenever she walks into a room and makes people want to talk to her. I've never begrudged my sister getting so much attention. But just once in my life when I need some of my parents' focus on me so that they can help me figure a way out of this mess and a way to keep Ethan and me safe, she doesn't even care.

“It's clear that you didn't bother to think about how this will affect Reagan's marriage prospects,” Mother chimes in, instantly taking her side as always.

“And do you appreciate how much trouble we went to in the first place to arrange this marriage to Grayden for you?” Father adds.

“Because the men certainly weren't lining up to ask for your hand as you'll remember,” Mother says. “Not a single man wanted you as his prospective wife.”

I can't help but cringe as I'm reminded of my shortcomings.

“Reagan, of course, has always had lots of interested suitors,” Mother carries on. “But then, she works hard to maintain her beautiful, skinny figure. She would never dream of embarrassing us by looking fat like you. But you just don't care—you let yourself go as soon as you became a teenager.”

I feel like yelling out that I didn't. It wasn't my fault that I suddenly found myself with huge boobs, child-bearing hips, and a big ass.

“Do you realize what an embarrassment it is having to be seen next to you?” Mother says. “Having people think that I have a daughter who's fat, ugly, and lazy?”

I've heard variations of this all my life, but the tears still burn the back of my eyes.

“Grayden may refuse to do business with your father now. Please think carefully about how much trouble this is causing your family. Grayden has told your father that he'll forgive you, so the best thing for you would be to go home to him.”

Tears are threatening to spill. “Excuse me,” I mumble, “I need the powder room.”

Rushing down the hall, I run into the powder room and lock the door behind me.

Taking deep breaths, I try to stop the tears, but they still fall.

I don't care that Reagan's more beautiful or more popular than me. Sure, I felt envious at times when I was growing up, but I've always loved Reagan and wanted her to have nothing but happiness in her life. But it's clear that she doesn't love me back—she doesn't love me as a sister should.

And it's not Reagan's fault. Everyone loves Reagan, right? Not just my parents, but everyone else as well. So, it must be me. I'm the one who's got something wrong with her—something that makes me unlovable. I shudder as I recall the awful memory of my wedding reception...

It's the reception now, and I look around and try to find where my new husband is. Shouldn't he be at my side and celebrating with me?

The day has been going well so far, and although he's been a little distant, I'm sure it's just because of how busy it's all been. But he's been gone for ages now. So many people are approaching me with their congratulations, and I can tell they're wondering like me where he is.

The reception is at my parents' mansion, and I excuse myself to go up to my room to freshen up. And as I pass the guest room, I hear a sound and then a giggle, but I hurry on by.

Someone must have snuck up here, but I don't need to know what my guests are getting up to in there. But then I hear a familiar voice...

“Oh yeah, just like that, oh yeah...”

“You know you won't get as good as this with your new wife,” a woman puffs out...

I don't recognize the woman's voice, but I'd know the man's voice anywhere.

He's the man who I heard say 'I do' to me less than two hours ago...

My world stutters to a stop. It can't be... Despite it being an arranged marriage, I thought he would be happy with me. But then I hear his voice again...

“She's fat and ugly.”

And mortification sweeps over me as I hear what he really thinks about me. How the man I'm to spend forever with really sees me.

And I think it can't get any worse, but then he adds the icing to the cake: "And I only married her for the money..."

And that's when I realized that the only thing that mattered to him was the business deal with my father—an alliance which was going to make them both a lot of money. But the cheating was only the start of what I had to endure with him...

After calming myself down as much as possible, I splash cold water on my face. I have to convince my parents to lend me the money I need. I have to make them understand how bad things got with Grayden. I'm their daughter—they have to help me.

I stiffen my spine and return to face my family. As I head back to the drawing room, I come to a sudden halt just outside Father's office door when I hear a familiar voice.

A voice that I never wanted to hear ever again.

Ice slides up my spine.

And I can't get enough oxygen into my lungs.

"I deserve a medal for putting up with your daughter," he snarls. "You're lucky I didn't demand that you take the stupid bitch back before now."

I'm terrified as I hear the voice of the man I've been running from...

"She's absolutely fucking useless in bed, you know," he snaps.

I can just about summon up the energy to peek through the crack in the door.

Thank God! He's not actually here. He's only on the speakerphone.

"She can't even suck dick properly." I cringe as I hear Grayden's clear hatred of me spew down the phone to my father. "You won't find another man who'll put up with her ways. She won't be a good wife to me, and she sure as hell can't be bothered to lose weight so that I won't be fucking repulsed by her body. She's a fat fuck, and she's a complete waste of space."

To hear him speak like this—to my father of all people—is absolutely mortifying.

I've tried my best with Grayden, but nothing I do is ever good enough for him.

“And now you're telling me that she's making up stories and lies that I beat her? For fuck's sake, she's a dumb cunt and completely unhinged.”

Father is apologizing profusely for my behavior—I don't understand how he can believe Grayden over me. And he keeps saying that he hopes Grayden won't let my behavior ruin their business dealings. That's all he cares about—money and business.

Grayden says he'll be over in thirty minutes to collect me...

He's coming. He's on his way here. Now.

I know I have to get away. My parents are determined for me to go back to Grayden—but I can never do that.

I hurry to the back door. I can't stop my hands from trembling as I open it.

The click of the latch feels louder than a gunshot in the still night air.

My breath catches, and I freeze, listening for any sign that my parents have heard me.

Silence. My heart pounds so hard in my chest that I swear it's going to give me away.

I have to move. I can practically feel Grayden getting closer. The thought of his arrival—and his anger—sends a shiver down my spine. I can't waste another second standing here.

I tug my jacket tighter around me and step off the porch, my legs shaky and unsteady beneath me.

The night air bites through the thin fabric of my clothes. I should've worn something warmer, but I can't worry about that now. Every second I spend here is a second closer to him finding me.

I hurry forward, forcing myself to put one foot in front of the other. My breath comes in quick, shallow gasps, each one like a knife in my chest.

I need to get away, far away before he arrives.

My feet carry me down the familiar path toward the edge of the woods where the trees stand tall and menacing in the darkness. The moonlight filters through the branches, casting eerie shadows on the ground.

It's darker here, the thick canopy above blocking out most of the light, and it feels safer than the open streets. At least if he follows me into the woods, maybe I can lose him in the tangled maze of trees. Please God, let me get away before he gets here.

I stumble over a root, barely catching myself before I fall. My breaths are ragged, my lungs burning with the effort of running. I can't keep this up. I'm not strong enough, not fast enough. But I can't stop. Stopping means he'll catch me, and if he catches me...I don't want to think about what will happen then.

My thoughts race, frantic and disjointed. Every step feels heavier, harder. I'm not going to make it. He'll find me. He always finds me.

My legs buckle, and I drop to my knees, the damp earth cold against my skin. I press my hands to my face, trying to steady myself, trying to stop the world from spinning out of control around me.

Eventually, I make it back to the main road, and keeping to the shadows, I wait for what seems like a lifetime for a bus to come along.

And once I'm back at Kori's, I confide in her everything that's happened, knowing that I won't tell Camillo about any of this later. As far as he's aware, I've spent the evening at Kori's house, and I want to keep it that way. Because a part of me feels ashamed and embarrassed that my family's unwilling to help me—that there must be something wrong with me for them to treat me this way.

When Ethan and I catch the bus back to the Marchiano estate, I'm hypervigilant. Thank God I didn't tell my family where I'm living. Because today has told me loud and clear that they won't be helping me.

But another thing is also clear: that there's no escape. I know that now. I've known it all along. No matter where I go, no matter how far I run, he'll always be there, just a step behind, waiting to pull me back into the life I thought I could leave.

I'm trapped, caught in a nightmare with no way out. But for now, I just have to get us back to the Marchiano estate without Grayden catching me...