

CHAPTER 35

ROSA

The conversation around me is light and airy. Plans to take the kids out to the park after breakfast are being made, but I'm only half listening.

The last few weeks have turned everything inside out and upside down, leaving the ground beneath my feet unsteady and unsure.

“What do you think, Rosa?” Cate’s smile startles me back into the conversation.

“I’m sorry?”

“We thought we’d leave in about an hour or so, try to beat some of the traffic. Are you still joining us? It would be great to spend some more time with you.”

I shouldn’t. Despite how helpful everyone’s been, I have a job to do—if you can consider cleaning an already clean house a job.

“It’ll only be for a few hours. Just to get the kids to run off some energy and to kill time while Mr. Fluffy is at the groomers nearby,” Juliana adds in a friendly voice. Her brow puckers. “Not hungry again?”

“Are you sure it’s not my cooking?” Cate laughs as she gathers the empty dish of scrambled eggs to drop off at the sink.

“No!” I rush to assure, clearing my throat as heat crawls over my cheeks and neck. “You’re both great at cooking. It’s just, I’m...” My tongue feels heavy in my mouth, but I plaster on a smile. “I’ll grab something in a bit before we leave.”

Guilt gnaws on my insides at the lie. The thought of eating turns my stomach sour as I remember what my mother used to say to me: You’re better off not eating. It’s not like your body can’t handle it.

“I’ll finish clearing the dishes,” I offer, jumping from the table. Anything to banish the words that worm into my subconscious. Dizziness rolls through my body, and I grip the table.

“Rosa, are you okay?”

“Fine. Just, um, I just stood up too fast.” I smile off Juliana’s concern.

She and Cate exchange a look, but thankfully, I make it to the sink before either of them can protest. I’ve made it a point the last few days to always volunteer to do the dishes. I make myself useful rather than idly sitting by.

Black hedges my vision, and I hastily blink it away.

Three days.

I’ve gone three days without eating much. A glass of water. A stick of gum here and there to try and curb the awful pangs and cravings as I try to trick my body and mind. Longer sessions in the gym on the treadmill—which is really hard when the lack of food is causing headaches and making me feel so fatigued and sluggish. It’s hard to hide at dinner what I’m doing. It’s hard to find excuses as to why I’m picking at my plate even though the food always smells and looks delicious.

My stomach clenches in on itself, and I double over at the sink. Three sharp breaths hiss through my teeth until the feeling subsides. Hunger pains.

Tears prick my eyes as I right myself and quickly finish cleaning.

The tremble in my hand worsens, as do the dots along the edge of my vision.

I end up getting to the park an hour after the others.

I sit at the picnic tables with Juliana and Cate as we watch the children run around in the sunshine, climbing up the slides and relaxing on the swings.

"It’s been really great that the guys had you to look after them," Cate says softly.

"We were worried sick when they kept going through one maid after another," Juliana adds. "It was already stressful having to flee to Italy and be separated, and it was made worse thinking that the guys weren’t being looked after back here in Chicago. They can get a bit intense when the pressure’s on. Marco can get a bit...aggressive," she says carefully.

I keep quiet about my own initial experiences with her husband.

Cate sighs. "He sure can. And Alessio, when he's stressed, he gets pretty controlling. But it sounds like you made the mansion feel like a home for them while we were away, and we're truly thankful for that."

I flush a little at their words. "It was no problem, really. I needed the work, and I was just doing the job they hired me to do."

"Working for the Marchiano brothers is more than just a job," Juliana giggles. "And after Savona left, I thought they were going to be without a maid until we came back."

Cate bites back her grin. "Alessio told me about the agencies laughing in their faces when they asked them for a maid. It was the men who were lucky to get you."

Camillo's told me a little about Marco and Alessio's relationships which started out as arranged marriages. Although Marco and Juliana's wedding turned into a bloody wedding, while Alessio forced Cate into marriage with him.

It sounds as though things didn't start well for either of these women. Which is hard to believe when I see the couples now. But from what Camillo's said, politics in the mafia world are complex and fraught with power plays.

"We were pretty much strangers to our husbands when we married," Juliana says. "It's surprising that out of all the brothers, Camillo is the one to meet someone by himself."

The conversation instantly reminds me of Sheena, but I quickly shake my head to dismiss all thoughts of that awful woman.

"Anyway," Juliana continues, "we just wanted to say thanks for looking after Marco, Alessio, and the house. We really do appreciate it and appreciate you. I know it made Marco happier that he had Ethan to spoil and play baseball with. Our sons are really hyper at times, but he missed them for sure."

Cate's brow furrows. "Alessio was practically going crazy not being able to see the children for so long. The way he talked about having Ethan there and the mealtimes with you guys, it had a calming effect on him and gave him some of that family time these guys really crave and need to keep them grounded in this crazy world of theirs."

I look over at Ethan playing with the children. Maximo is holding out a ball to Ethan with a smile, and Xander is talking intently to my little boy about some cartoon they were watching earlier.

I'd really like Ethan to have siblings one day. Seeing how he is with the other children affirms my view that he needs people his own age to mix with. He needs to be a child and do all the normal things children do. And he deserves to do that all without the weight of the world on his tiny shoulders.

By some miracle, the running around after the kids doesn't make my hunger worse. And by the time we get back to the mansion, the kids are worn out, and the little ones are tucked up in their beds for a nap.

If I can just make it to the gym, I can work in another small run before doing some more cleaning. Sluggish, my feet move down the hall. The room spins, but I push on.

"Rosa?"

My body snaps straight as I plaster on a smile.

"Where are you going?"

"I thought I'd get in a quick run before I start on the bedrooms."

Camillo's eyes are searching, tracking over my body as if he can see the damage within. As if he knows something I've yet to voice.

I tug my oversized shirt subconsciously, pulling it down more to cover the tops of my chunky thighs.

"I was on my way to get lunch, Rosa. Are you hungry?"

Yes. "No. We ate lunch at the park."

"You did?"

I nod and fight back another wave of dizziness.

"Rosa?"

I brace my hand against the wood paneling of the hall.

He's in front of me in two long strides.

"When did you say you ate?"

I mumble something offhand. Shoving three crackers and a single cube of cheese into my mouth hours ago isn't what he's talking about. But it was the smallest amount I could get away with while Juliana and Cate watched me like hawks.

Do the girls know? I shake my head, dismissing the thought. Of course they don't.

"Rosa?"

"It was at the park." I clear my throat. "I think I'm just going to lay down. The heat must have gotten to me."

Camillo doesn't move.

Under his gaze, I squirm. If he looks too long, will he see what everyone else sees?

His eyes narrow, but he steps back, allowing me to pass.

I take three steps before the floor tilts under me.

And a warm hand catches me around the waist.

"Fuck," he growls.

"I'm okay...just dizzy." I wriggle from his grasp, feeling tears prick my eyes. How can he even bear putting his hands on me?

"Rosa."

And the soft brush of my name cracks something in me. I fist my hand into his T-shirt. Burying my face into his chest, I will the tears to remain locked away. How can he be so gentle with me? How can he treat me like this when I look how I do?

"What's wrong? Fuck, baby, I can't fix it if you don't tell me."

He can't fix it.

I'm wrong for him. Always so fucking wrong.

I pull back. "You can't fix it."

“Like hell I can’t.”

“I just...”

Camillo tugs on my hand, guiding me through the hall and up the stairs. The door clicks shut behind us as he gently takes me to sit on the edge of the bed. Kneeling before me, he cups my face. “You just?”

A few moments beat between us. “Aren’t you embarrassed by me?” I whisper.

That I’ve managed to ask the question surprises me. But I cling to it. I need the answer. I need to know if I’m just as worthless as I feel—and as Grayden and my family have always made me out to be. I’m too fat and too short. My thighs touch too much. My boobs are too big. My stomach isn’t flat like the women who fill the rooms of Chicago high society. My hair isn’t the right shade of blond. My eyes are too flat...

“Why would I be?”

“Look at me. I mean, really look at me. I’m not...” Anger spikes in me, and I clench my fists in my lap.

Not like them. Not beautiful.

“You’re not what?”

I shake my head, losing my confidence. “It doesn’t matter.”

Calloused fingers grasp my chin gently, and he keeps my face from turning away. “It matters to me.”

“I’m not...anything.” The sneering whispers have followed me all my life. The way I’ve longed to be like the other women in my family. Slim. Lithe. Willowy in ways that fabric drapes from me instead of pulling taught and bunching oddly. The way I long to be smaller and take up less space.

“I don’t understand, Rosa.”

I open my mouth to answer, but I can’t get it out.

“What the hell happened at breakfast? Or was it at the park? Did someone say something? Do something?”

“No.”

“Rosa.” His thumb brushes my cheek. “Baby, I don’t know what’s going on with you lately. I haven’t seen you eat a meal in days. And don’t lie to me—please don’t lie about it. Cate and Juliana have noticed too. I’m worried about you. I just want to help.”

“I’m not...beautiful.”

“You are.”

“I’m not. Look at me!” I push his hand away as some spark of indignation dredges to life from the depths where it’s been shoved down.

“I am looking at you,” he says gently.

“You think this is beautiful?” My hand gestures to my midsection. I hate that I’m still so insecure about my weight. I hate that I sound so needy and weak. “I—”

His lips crash into mine, cutting me off. It’s soft and yet desperate all the same. It sucks the air right out of me.

Pulling back, Camillo looks deep into my eyes. “You are beautiful.” His hands grip my hips and then the back of my thighs. “These are perfect. You are a fucking goddess.”

A bitter laugh escapes me.

“The fact that you have some goddamn curves on your body is nothing to be ashamed of. You, Rosa, are nothing but gorgeous. Just like this.”

I try to wriggle from his grip, but he holds me all the harder. “That’s not true, Camillo.”

“It’s a fucking fact to me.”

His words steal my breath as I look at him. Really look. Heat flickers in his eyes as his chest rises and falls.

“You think you’re heavy? Baby, you weigh less than what I lift on my bad days. You think I want some model who barely eats when we go out to dinner? That couldn’t be further from the truth. There isn’t anything about your body that doesn’t drive me fucking wild. I can’t keep my hands to myself. You make me fucking crazy, baby. You and only you. I fucking love this.” He palms the plush of my hip. “It gives me something to hold on to when I’m claiming what’s mine, when I’m worshipping you.”

And this.” His hand skims down to cup my ass. “I love this too. Every inch of you is mesmerizing.”

Tears are now running down my cheeks.

“What do I need to do to make you see that you’re beautiful? What do I need to do so you believe me?” Because whatever it is, I’ll do a million times over until you believe me.”

My heart is thrumming too fast...

“You skipping meals and starving yourself stops—right here and right now. There isn’t a single thing wrong with how you look. Not to me. I want you just like this. Tummy, thighs, hips, ass, and all.”

I’m unable to comprehend what he’s saying. He wants me? Like this?

“But...”

“No buts, Rosa. I mean it. You are beautiful, breathtaking, exquisite. You are a goddamn goddess.”

I clear my throat, trying to get rid of the tears from my voice. “I want to believe you,” I say quietly.

“Then do it.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“You’re right. It’s not. We’ll get help. You can talk to someone, and I’ll spend every goddamn breath I have in the day reminding you just how beautiful you are.” His head drops to my shoulder. “Just...please stop starving yourself. I just found you...”

“O-okay.”

“Okay?”

“I’ll stop skipping meals.”

“And you’ll talk to someone? We can make it so it’s discreet. No one but you and I have to know.”

Again, I nod. Help. Talking to someone. Is it really that simple?

Camillo's lips brush the juncture between my throat and ear, offering a distraction. But my mind continues to race. It's not easy to change years of ingrained habits and how I see myself. I cling to him tighter, willing the voices that whisper in my head to fade. Because I know that with the support of this amazing man, I'm determined to get better.