

CHAPTER 44

ROSA

Things have started to improve ever since I returned to the Marchiano estate. I'm seeing the therapist again, and talking through my anxieties and insecurities is helping. It's going to be a long road, but I'm learning to not see myself as being defined by what I eat, what I look like, and what work I do around the house for the family. There's more to me than those things. I'm worth more, and I deserve more.

It's not an easy shift of mindset to make, but I'm determined to keep on with this journey I've started, and with Camillo and the others behind me, I feel stronger than I have in a long time. I want to be healthy in not just my body but also my mind.

I check my phone again. Camillo's lack of response to my last text to him is making a weird feeling gnaw at my belly. A dismissive shake of my head sends my blond strands from side to side. I'm safe here.

The house is quiet without Juliana, Cate, Ethan, or the other kids around. Despite their begging for me to join them at the movies, I had to take a raincheck because the lawyers for the divorce will be calling this afternoon to go over how things are proceeding.

It should make me feel at ease knowing that there's nothing that Grayden can do to ruin this for me. There's nothing he can take from me anymore. I'm out from under his thumb.

But an uneasiness I can't shake grips me tightly.

I tell myself that Camillo's at the casino with his brothers, and he's just busy with work. I must just be missing him—as if waking up, limbs tangled together, these last two weeks hasn't been enough time for us to catch up.

I pause as I pass the small den where board games and other toys litter the place. The kids had been so excited to go to the movies they'd left it a mess. A soft smile tugs at my lips as I start to gather the toys and neatly stack them back on the shelves.

I might not be the hired help anymore, but cleaning and doing things for the people I now call my family makes me feel needed.

The soft pad of footsteps down the halls isn't an unusual thing anymore. The security here has always been quiet and unseen, but they've beefed it up since everyone returned home. A safety precaution.

It should scare me. These men are every bit of the monsters the world makes them out to be. Ruthless, with blood on their hands, they've earned their reputations. But behind closed doors, they're different. A good different.

But the sound of those footsteps is slightly off. Enough that it tickles my mind and sends the hair on the back of my neck rising.

I shake my head again. It's just my old habits resurfacing.

As I focus on finishing the den, I hum to myself and let my mind drift to the man who's helped me rebuild my life. The way he looks at me. The way he looks at Ethan. Like we've hung the moon and stars, and he can't believe we're his.

I dust my hand on my jeans as I straighten.

Hot breath brushes the back of my neck.

And my blood turns to ice.

“Did you really think I'd let you go?”

My stomach plummets.

“Nothing to say, whore?”

How? Why? When? My heart hammers against my ribs.

And every piece of self-defense Camillo taught me blanks from my mind.

“If I can't have you, Rosa, I'm sure as fuck not going to let him have you. And when I'm done with you, I'm taking my goddamn son.”

His powerful hand grabs the back of my neck.

I struggle against his hold.

But he only tightens it. And the cold wood floor crashes into me.

Grayden's face is red. He looms over me. His lips are curled into a sneer. And the acidic smell of alcohol wafts from him.

The bile inches higher up my throat. I scramble back, hitting the back of the couch. "Please—"

"Please?" His hard laugh fills the room. "Please what? You think I'm going to fall for your fucking waterworks?"

His boot connects with my ribs. And the air pulls from my lungs in a harsh gust.

"You're a worthless fat bitch."

Another slam of his leather clad foot connects with my stomach.

I roll to my side. But two powerful hands grab my arms.

I kick and wildly try to create some distance between us.

I just need to get into a room. Somewhere I can lock the door and wait for help.

My heel connects with his jaw. There's a satisfying crack.

His hands drop. And I crawl across the floor as fast as I can.

But a hard yank on my ankle sends me sprawling back into the hard floor.

"I'm going to send you and that Marchiano fucker a message. He thinks he can beat me? That he can have what's mine?"

"P-please," I plead. But it's no use.

Another quick kick to his shoulder, just like Camillo taught me. I scramble back up.

My bare feet slip along the floor.

And I knock over the lamp as I scramble down the hall.

I rush to the kitchen. I just need a weapon—something until security comes.

If they come.

My frantic breathing fills the room. I duck down to hide behind the island. The butcher block of knives gleams like a saving grace just feet from where I crouch.

But the thud of his boots down the hall means I freeze.

The salty taste of tears hits my tongue as I lick my dry lips.

“Come out, whore. No one’s coming to save you. My guys took care of them all.”

All of them?

My heartbeat drowns my ears. I rack my brain to remember the moves Camillo drilled into me. Anything is better than being a victim again.

I just need to buy some time...

The sound of his steps stops.

“I wonder if he has to fake it as much as I had to,” he sneers. “If I’d have known you’d spread your legs for just anyone, I’d have passed you around my friends and made a pretty penny off of you sooner.”

He’s closer now—I can tell by the way his voice echoes off the walls.

I squeeze my eyes shut. It’s now or never.

I lunge for the knives, my fingers curling around a beautifully crafted handle. The evil look in his eyes sends bile racing up the back of my throat. It’s the same look I’ve seen a million times...

“What are you going to do with that?” His head tilts to the side with the taunt. “I’m your husband. You can’t kill me. I own you.”

The butcher's knife wobbles in my hand as I hold it between us. “Leave. Now. I don’t have anything you want.”

“Wrong.”

A step closer.

“You took fucking everything from me. I’m supposed to forget that?”

I tighten my hold on the handle, slowly walking backward. “I didn’t.”

“You took my son. You whored yourself to the men who tried to ruin your father.” His laugh is deranged. “You’ve been a fucking waste of breath since I married you!”

He steps closer.

Then closer.

My back hits the edge of the counter.

I’m blocked in.

“Put the knife down,” he sneers.

“No.”

“I thought I beat that fucking attitude out of you. Put it fucking down.”

I let out a strangled cry and lunge at him.

The sharp edge slices into his shoulder. And his howl fills the room.

The back of his hand connects with my cheek. “You fucking bitch!” Metal clatters on the floor. And the coppery smell of blood makes me gag.

Dizziness makes my world blur. I push from the counter and rush into the foyer.

But I’m too slow. A scream rips from my lips.

Two slippery hands circle my throat.

The polished wood slips beneath my feet. And Grayden’s body clamps down over me.

This is it.

I always knew he was going to take my life. His hands tighten around my throat. I claw and scratch. But darkness blurs my vision. I buck and twist just like we’d practiced. But his hands are too strong.

“You’re a worthless bitch. I should have asked for money when I agreed to marry you. Your father fucking owed me, and I was given a useless whore like you?” His words are hissed. My hands push against his shoulders and into his wound, but it’s no use.

The room floats around me. Like I'm no longer in my body. My eyelids droop with the lack of oxygen. My eyelashes fuse together with my tears.

"I'll take everything once you're gone, bitch."

I can't breathe. Dots take over my vision.

I know this is it. And I make peace with it. I'd finally gotten a taste of what happiness feels like.

And I can die knowing I had it all for just a little while...

My eyes close.

And I know they're not going to open again.

My only wish is that the men come home first. Ethan can't find me, please God, oh please God...

Air rushes into my lungs.

The pressure on my throat vanishes. And I gulp down lungfuls of air as fast as I can.

My eyes crack open. And I barely register what I'm seeing.

A figure in black looms over Grayden's body.

"Camillo," I croak as my eyelids droop.

And as I try to stay awake, all I hear are Grayden's whimpering pleas, alongside the crunch of bones. Again and again. Until the pleas go silent...

The next thing I feel is warm, strong hands around my face.

"Fuck!" Camillo's roar fills the house. "Rosa?"

But I can't answer as darkness pulls me under again.

"Rosa!"

I can't move. I can't speak.

"Fuck! Fuck!"

The heat I felt a moment ago vanishes. And I try to reach out toward it, needing its comfort.

But I'm being dragged under.

Camillo's voice echoes in the distance. "Get home. Now!"

A soothing hand brushes the side of my cheek, cupping it. "Please, Rosa, please! Ethan needs you. I need you..."

His words fade in and out as I'm dragged deeper and deeper into the void...

A warm hand brushes my temple, smoothing the strands of hair away from my brow. "Please...Rosa."

I open my mouth to say something, but the dryness of my throat makes it come out as a raspy sound. My eyelids crack open, and my gaze squints into the soft, warm light of a table lamp. Soft silken sheets are wrapped around my body.

I blink, trying to clear the blinding dots away.

"Fuck." It's a soft, breathy sound of relief, and it's quickly followed by some muttered words in Italian I don't understand. "Nulla è difficile per chi ama."

"Camillo...?" My voice is hoarse, and I rub at my throat, wincing at the sting.

"Shh, baby." Camillo's worn expression meets my face. His thumb brushes away the tears I didn't realize were there. His lips press to my forehead. "It's all over now..."

Over?

I struggle to sit up a little. The pillow behind my body helps, but the room spins as I do. Camillo's gentle touch supports me until I'm upright. The T-shirt that drapes over my body isn't mine, and it's not what I was wearing this morning.

"What...?" I grab at Camillo, horror picking up my heartbeat. "Where's Ethan?"

"Safe. He's safe." Camillo covers my hand with his own. "I got to him before he could see what happened here. He's with Juliana and Cate for now."

The questions burn the tip of my tongue, but a soft knock on the door stops me. “Camillo, your brothers want you to eat. Oh, thank God...” Cate’s eyes widen and her voice breaks as she sees me. “I’ll let the others know that you’re awake,” she says softly.

Camillo doesn’t even look at her. His dark eyes roam my face, over and over, cataloging. “Shit, Rosa,” he murmurs, pressing kisses all over my face. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?”

It’s then that I see the dried blood on his knuckles. Mine? His? “What happened?”

“We can talk about it later.”

“No. Now.”

“Rosa.”

“Please? Is he...?” I swallow, my voice dropping. “Did you kill him?”

“Yes.”

I nod, unsure what to say.

“I’ll leave you alone.” He stands before I protest and makes it to the door.

I stumble out of bed after him, my limbs tangling with the sheets. “Wait!” I clutch at his arm. His muscles tense under my hand. “Why are you leaving?”

“You need to rest, Rosa.”

“Camillo—”

“Please don’t do this Rosa,” he says in a quiet, hoarse voice.

The way he talks breaks my heart. I clutch harder. “Don’t what? Tell you that you did what you needed to? That you saved me?”

“But I...” He shakes his head, sending the wavy strands bouncing about. It’s messier than normal. A telltale sign that he’s raked his hands through it repeatedly. He can’t meet my eyes.

“Saved my life,” I insist, willing my voice to stay even. “If you hadn’t shown up, if you hadn’t had stopped him, I’d be...dead.” I swallow the lump in my throat. “If you hadn’t stopped him for good, he would have just tried again. And again. And maybe when Ethan was with me. You’ve saved us both.”

“You shouldn’t want me around.”

My hand cups his stubbled jaw, as I stand on my tiptoes so I can meet his gaze. “But I do. My son and I are safe because of you. You did what you needed to do to protect us. I will never fault you for that.”

His body sags, and exhaustion is visible on his face, along with lines of worry.

My heart aches. “You. Saved. Me,” I repeat, hoping it’ll get past whatever walls he’s left up between us.

“You never should have been in danger. If I’d just got his ass thrown in jail the first time, maybe this never would have happened.”

“He’d have found a way out.”

“I don’t want you to think I’m a monster, Rosa.”

“You aren’t one.”

“I am. I’ve never cared what others thought of me. But I care what you think. Because I’m not sorry he’s dead. I’m not sorry I killed him. I’d have done it months ago if I knew this was going to happen. There isn’t a line I won’t cross for you or Ethan.”

“That doesn’t make you a monster.”

“It does. I don’t care I took his life. But I know you do, and that fucking kills me.”

I’m silent for a few moments before carrying on. “I’ve just been hoping for something that was a fantasy the whole time. I hate violence—hate it with passion. But now, I see that it’s a necessary evil sometimes. It should scare me how easily I’ve come to that conclusion. But it doesn’t. It was wishful thinking that Grayden would ever leave us alone if we fought him in any other way. You did what needed to be done, Camillo, and that’s the end of it. It’s not the only option most of the time—but in this case, it was. I don’t...” My voice breaks. “I don’t think you’re a monster for doing what you did. Please say you understand, Camillo?”

He closes his eyes briefly. “I understand, Rosa. I’m just so fucking thankful that you and Ethan are safe.”

“Me too,” I murmur against his lips. “Now, I’m starving. Can I have something to eat and maybe a cup of tea? Has anyone cooked?”

His forehead rests against mine. “Cate did. It’s not as good as your cooking, though.”

I pull back with a smile and slowly hobble back to the bed. Everything aches, but I’m alive.

“Rosa?”

I snuggle into the bed again, smiling at him. “Yes?”

“I don’t deserve you. But I’m going to do everything I can to keep you.”

I pat the bed beside me. It’s no use arguing that he’s already done enough. Neither of us is completely fixed. We’re both a little broken in our own ways. But together, those broken pieces seem to fit like we were made for each other. “Then let’s start right now...”