

The Return of my First Love

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Chapter 10

Emily

As I approached the familiar doorstep of my next door neighbor, Mrs Rodriguez, I could already bear the faint **hum** of a television set and Natalie's cheerful gushing

I knocked on the door, which swung open, revealing the warm, and welcoming expression of **Mrs.** Rodriguez. "Hi, **Emily**," she greeted, her **smile crinkling** the corners of her eyes. Mrs. Rodriguez was a kind older lady who lived alone in the apartment next to **mine**. She was a good person and would often offer to pick up and look after Natalie after school

I trusted her, and it was a kindness I would forever be indebted to.

"I came to pick up Natalie," I spoke, **returning** her **smile**.

"Naty!" The woman turned her head. "Your **mommy is** here!"

As she turned back to face me, I caught her staring at **my** uniform, silently judging me. Knowing **what** was about to come, I fidgeted with the ends of my dress.

"Emily, do you really have to work for that family? Isn't there any other way?" she asked, her tone heavy with concern.

I shrugged, the weight of her words settling heavily on my shoulders. "I have to pay the bills somehow, Mrs. Rodriguez, and the diner just wasn't enough," I explained. "I'd also like to buy something new for Natalie once in a while."

Truthfully, I didn't need much for myself, but I wanted Naty to grow up without a constant cloud of worry hanging over her head.

A sigh left Mrs. Rodriguez's lips, followed by a pitiful frown. "I'm not a big fan of that family, Emily," she didn't mind giving her opinion. "You must be oblivious to the real state of that family since you've only been here for a few months."

Hoping she would drop the conversation, I waved my hand dismissively. "Oh well."

She looked around nervously, so no one could hear us, before leaning in closer. "It's so bad they've even

run the authorities out of the city. Everything belongs to the Fanuccis."

A chill ran down my spine but I quickly pushed the thought aside, focusing instead on the sound of light footsteps approaching.

"Hi, Mommy!" Naty's voice broke through my thoughts, her eyes sparkling with excitement. Her dark

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brown hair was not quite as neatly braided as I left it in the morning, but her rosy cheeks dimpling with her wide smile made up for that mess.

Mrs. Rodriguez patted Natalie's head, showing her affection. Natalie was the spitting image of me, from her long brown hair to her warm brown eyes. I was grateful every day that she bore no resemblance to that monster.

"Naty has already had dinner and taken a shower. She's ready for bed."

"Thank you, Mrs. Rodriguez."

"B—

Bed?" Naty's face fell, a tiny pout forming on her lips. "Awh, but I didn't even get to spend time with you today, mommy!"

I

"Tomorrow, Naty," I reached out, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear before offering Mrs. Rodriguez a final smile. Then I took Naty's hand in mine as we made our way to our apartment.

As we sat at the table, Naty immediately reached to pull a drawing from her backpack. "Look Mommy, I made this at school today!"

She showcased a beautiful and detailed landscape, perhaps a bit too advanced of a drawing for a six-year-old.

"It's beautiful, princess." I took the paper in my hands, but my voice sounded bittersweet

.

I knew she had a gift for drawing and painting. I had high hopes to enroll her in a private elementary academy, with a special art program, in the city. Unfortunately, I almost fainted when I read the fee and accepted that it was just not possible.

Although I enjoyed staring at her art, it also made me feel guilty as it was a harsh reminder of the opportunity I just couldn't afford to give her, despite trying so hard.

"How was school?" I asked, attempting to shift the focus of our conversation.

"Good," she shrugged.

"And what did you do in school today?" I asked further, looking for more than just a one-word answer.

Naty retorted with a playful giggle. "Whatever it is six-year-olds do at school, Mommy,"

I couldn't help but laugh. "Okay, Miss Smarty Pants," I called her out.

With her sassy attitude and snarky remarks, Naty's personality was also identical to mine. The only difference was that she always spoke her mind while I tried to keep it to myself. She was also way better

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at making friends.

"Mommy?" Naty blinked. "Do you like your new job? Are the people nice? Is the house very big?" she bombarded me with questions.

I had made it a point not to share too much about my job with Naty. She was too young, and I didn't want her to bear the weight of my decisions, especially one that had the potential of painting us in a questionable light.

I feared once they would find out I was a Fanucci maid, the mothers at school would tell their children to stop talking to her.

Mrs. Rodriguez had told me it would be like that, and after hearing stories about the Fanuccis, I believed her. People were too afraid to associate with their kind, in fear of crossing them.

Between that, they made no separation between a family member, associate, or a simple worker at the mansion.

"My day was great, Naty, and the people are all very nice. And the house? It looks like a palace!" I replied, trying to sound enthusiastic.

"Wow!" Natalie's eyes widened in awe.

I couldn't help but think back to my earlier interaction with the Fanucci brothers, and how uncomfortable it had made me. I hated cleaning, the job was terrible, the brothers seemed like spoiled entitled brats. It had only been day one, but I was already hoping I would never have to see the Lady of the house or Domenico Fanucci. Those were my real thoughts.

"I know you have to work a lot to pay for big people things, Mommy. But once Daddy is here, you won't have to feel tired anymore," Naty placed her small hand on top of mine.

I nodded, forcing a smile on my face. I felt like a fraud for lying to Naty. She believed that her father

would soon join us. In reality, we hadn't just moved from our previous city, we'd fled.

How could I ever tell Naty that her beloved daddy was a monster?

"Look at the time, Naty. You better get to bed," I said, standing up.

"No," Naty sulked in a small voice, pouting her lips.

Ignoring her protest, I scooped her into my arms and carried her to her room. Not long after, I tucked her under a warm, fluffy blanket and watched as she fell asleep in a span of minutes.

Afterwards, I had retired to the couch and switched on the TV. Although my body cried out for sleep, I refused to let it win. I wouldn't let my life become a never-ending loop of work and sleep more than it already was.

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As I flipped through heat, sudden ring of the phone jolted me. Puzzled, I looked at the screen, and the unknown number which had appeared

I was hesitant, but I picked up the way.

Hello? I greeted,

All I heard was heavy breathing

“Hello?” I tried again, my heart beating out my chest. Once again, there was the same breathing sound.

I wanted to believe it was a prank call, but I couldn’t. I felt sick to my stomach and the anxiety took over as I went through all possible scenarios,

What if it was him?

Jason.

What if he’d found my new number?

It hung up abruptly. In a swift motion, I rushed to close all the curtains and ran to the door to make use of the extra locks I had installed for security.

My breath came in quick gasps, each exhale worse than before as I trembled with panic.

“This isn’t real... this isn’t real.”

It was so bad, I sank to the floor, with my back against the cold, hard door.

“Calm down, Emily,” I muttered to myself, struggling to catch my breath. “It’s nothing, and you’re probably just overthinking it.”

That must’ve been it.

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