

CHAPTER 37

ROSA

Every bone in my body is exhausted. Ethan's compact frame is sprawled out on the covers of the bed, and his suit, the one he picked to match Camillo's, is rumpled.

I sigh, shaking my head as I brush the blond strands from Ethan's forehead. I don't quite know how to tell him we'll be staying here.

I eye my phone on the table next to my purse. I want to text Camillo. To tell him to come back and pick us up now. My fingers itch to dial his number, but I know it'll cause problems with my family.

"Rosa!"

I wince at Reagan's sharp knock on the door as I glance at Ethan. One beat, then another, and I push from the mattress and to the door. "Shh," I whisper to my sister, closing the door behind me. "He's taking a nap."

"Good. He won't get in our hair. You're needed downstairs."

"Ethan's been perfectly behaved today, and he always is," I clip, irritated at her implied criticism of him. But she's not listening, and I sigh and watch as she struts down the hallway toward the stairs. I stiffen my spine and hold my head up high. The crowd of family, friends, and acquaintances—people who would have found it a personal snub not to be invited today—still linger among the lower level of the house. People who sat by and watched with their fake smiles and pleasantries while my life was sold away years ago.

I enter my father's old office. The smell of cigars lingers in the air, the smoke woven into the imported rug like a second layer. It's a smell that haunts my nightmares, alongside Grayden's rancid breath. My mother dabs her eyes as she leans into my sister's embrace.

"You need me?"

“Yes.” My mother lifts her chin, though it wobbles. “We have so much to do before the funeral at the end of the week. I just—” A sob breaks her voice.

“What can I do to help you?”

“Well, you can start by getting everyone out,” Reagan clips. “I can’t do it—I have a nail appointment. And it’s clear Mother’s distraught.”

I blink.

“Then you can call the relatives to inform them of the funeral date. Then you need to contact the lawyer about the will Daddy left.”

“Mother hasn’t done that yet?”

“Rosa,” Reagan admonishes when my mother once more makes a strangled sob, “This isn’t easy for her or me. You left the house, so you wouldn’t understand the pain we’re going through right now. Try to look at it from our point of view. Stop being selfish.”

“What?” It’s Camillo’s voice in my head that spits the words back. Selfish? Me? A fire ignites in my belly, knowing just how he’d want me to stand up for myself, to call them out on their bullshit, as he’d put it.

“It’s the least you can do after causing such a scene earlier.”

“I didn’t mean to cause a scene.”

“But you did. It’s so very typical of you. What in God’s name were you thinking bringing someone else here today?” Reagan hisses. “You’re married, or have you forgotten that? How do you think that makes us look? Makes me look? Did you think about that before you invited him here?”

“I’m sorry.” I wince as my apology comes out quickly. I’ve become so used to apologizing all my life that it’s hard to not do it automatically like I just have. “I just—”

“And look how you’re dressed,” she spits. “You might as well put a sign on your back to announce to everyone that you’re hooking up with a common criminal. It’s all anyone could talk about today. And now, people are going to think I’m like that too—and I can say goodbye to getting a good marriage proposal, all because of you. You know, there’s a reason Daddy was so reluctant to do business with them.”

I feel like pointing out that Camillo told me that our father had been easily persuaded when they increased the financial incentive—our father had morals unless there was a large sum of money involved. But the words lodge in my throat because our father’s just died, meaning it’s not appropriate to be arguing like this.

“You only ever think about yourself. The very least you can do is help Mother out now.”

My mouth gapes open. “Is that how you both feel?” My gaze swings to my mother as she sits behind my father’s large cherry wood desk.

“We have an image and reputation to maintain, Rosa,” Mother sighs. “I thought you understood that. All that time with Grayden and you still haven’t learned anything. Everyone saw that thug with your son today. What kind of role model is that for your boy? I know you and Grayden are having problems—he came to see your father about it after you ran off—but it all reflects so poorly on our family. Anyway, your help is needed here right now. You can’t possibly expect me to see to everything myself...”

My mother has never appeared small in my life. But looking at her right now, she looks like a shell. Self-medicated, her eyes are hazy and lined with unshed tears. She’s lost in her grief. As much as I want to defend Camillo and my life with him, now is not the time. But I’m determined to sit down with my family once the funeral is over and talk to them about everything and set the record straight.

“Okay. I’ll stay if you need me to.”

“Start with the lawyer,” Reagan orders. “Aunt Annette is getting antsy to see if Daddy left her anything.” Reagan’s chin is held high as she moves past me toward the door. “Oh, and make sure you find something more appropriate to wear for the funeral. I’m sure there’s something more suitable in your closet. You can’t carry off something so clingy, not with your big size and all.”

I bite back the retort on my lips as the sound of her too high heels on the wood fills the room, and I watch her leave the room before I sag into the chair across from my mother.

Her eyes laser in on me. “What’s going on between you and that Marchiano, Rosa? The truth.”

He’s the man for me, but saying that right now seems like it’ll cause more problems than it’ll fix, and I can tell my mother’s not in the mood to really listen to anything I have to say. “It’s complicated.”

She lets out a terse huff of air. “So, the rumors are true then. Whatever did I do to deserve this? And from my own daughter.” She stands with a dismissive shake of her head. “I need to lie down. See that the guests are taken care of.”

There are a million things I want to say to her. There are a million things I need to say to her. But it’ll have to wait until after the funeral.

I don’t know how long I sit in the office. I don’t know when I throw that awful picture of my father and Grayden shaking hands at our wedding against the wall to watch it shatter. I don’t know how long I numbly move through the motions of contacting my family’s lawyer, setting up for the reading of the will, and ushering the last guests out.

Finally, when I trudge back upstairs, I find Ethan sitting on my bed, quietly drawing with a pencil on some random papers left in my old bedroom. I walk over and sit by him, placing a kiss on top of his head.

“Are we going home, Momma?”

Home. That’s what the Marchiano estate felt like. My heart squeezes in my chest as I shake my head. “Not yet. We’re going to stay here for a bit. Grandma needs some help for a while.”

His brow furrows, and his lips draw into a small line. “What about Uncle Millo?”

“We can call him if you want.”

“But he was supposed to read the end of Alice in Wonderland tonight.”

“We might have a copy in the library downstairs.”

“But it won’t be the same, Momma. We were going to play baseball again and go in the pool as well.” Tears well in his eyes, and his lip wobbles. “We have to go back.”

“It’s only for a few days, honey.”

“But what if…” His gaze drops. “What if…something happens?”

“Happens?”

“To you? Uncle Millo isn’t around to look after you and me.”

My heart breaks into tiny pieces as I clutch Ethan to my chest. He’s still affected by what happened with Grayden—and I’m not sure if it’s something that he’ll ever get

over. And I feel so damn guilty for that. “We’ll be okay for a few days, baby. I promise. We can call him every night if that’s what you want.”

“Now, Momma?”

Exhaustion weighs every bone of my body down as Camillo’s face flashes into my mind. My chest squeezes, and I rub at my breastbone to ease the feeling. I saw the brief flicker of hurt in his eyes when I told him that he didn’t need to stay—and it gutted me. I just didn’t want for anyone to be uncomfortable, including him. “He’s probably working still.”

“Can we try?”

I nod, grabbing my phone. “Okay, but if he’s busy, we’re not going to interrupt him. Then it’s time for dinner, bath, and bed.”

Ethan nods as he huddles up to me. “With video?”

“We’ll see.”

The phone rings once before Camillo’s gruff voice fills the room. “Ready to come home, Rosa?”

“Momma, video,” Ethan urges, tugging at the sleeve of my dress.

“Are you busy?” I ask in a small voice.

“For you? No.”

“Ethan would like to video call. Is that okay?”

“Give me a minute.” I’m not sure where he is, but he seems to be walking into another room. Then his face fills my phone screen, enough that I can’t really see his surroundings. There’s a fresh purpling to the left side of his jaw as if he’s been hit.

“I can be there in twenty minutes, Rosa; we didn’t need to video call.”

“Momma,” Ethan says, and I angle the phone toward him. “Are you going to do baseball without me?”

Camillo gives him a smile over the screen. ““No, buddy. I wouldn’t do it without you.”

I let them talk for a little while and then interrupt. “Ethan, baby, why don’t you go wash your hands before dinner? I’ll make sure you can say goodbye before I hang up.”

“But I—”

“Please.” I level my best mom-gaze at him.

“Okay, Momma.” I watch as he scampers off.

“Rosa, shall I come and get you both now?”

I can’t look at his face. I can’t watch that shutter fall back into place again. “I need to help my mother with the funeral preparations.”

“Okay...?”

“I have to help here. We have to stay here until then.”

“Oh.”

“Just until the funeral. Mother’s a wreck, and, well, Reagan isn’t much help either. They’re my family. You understand, right?”

He clears his throat. “I get it. Of course. I just—” He shakes his head, dismissing whatever he was going to say. “Can I help anyway?”

“Thanks, but we’ll be okay.” I let out a breath. “I appreciate it, though.”

Ethan rushes back from washing his hands. “Is Uncle Millo still there?”

“Yeah, buddy, I’m still here.”

“Can we call again so you can read when I go to bed?”

“Ethan, he might be busy...”

Camillo’s laugh fills the room. But it’s not his usual laugh. It’s different. “Sure, I can do that. But I’ve got some work to finish. I’ll send you a text when I’m home if it’s not too late. And Ethan? I’m not going to forget you or do anything I promised without you, okay?”

“Okay. Bye, Uncle Millo.” Ethan waves.

“Bye, buddy. I’ll talk to you when I can.” He sounds strained, though he’s putting on his best mask. “Rosa, I’ll get one of my men to drop over a bag with clothes for you and Ethan. And my soldiers will keep watch over things while you’re staying there. I have to keep you safe.”

The silence beats between us. “Camillo?” I say quietly.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. For everything.”

“Of course. I gotta go.” He pauses, dragging his hand down his face. His knuckles are wrapped, but I can just see the fresh bruise peeking out. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Both Ethan and I wave Camillo goodbye, but I can’t help the pit that forms in my stomach. The undeniable sense that there’s far more I should have said to him weighs my limbs down as I lead Ethan down to the kitchen.

Reagan’s words swirl around in my head. She’s never been one to pull her punches. And if she sees Camillo in the way she described—as a common thug—then most of the world we reside in does too. But they don’t know Camillo like I do. Except even I can’t deny that there’s a darkness that lingers around him. Around all the Marchianos. Something that should scare me and tell me to stay away. And yet, I can’t.

Even as we make our way down the staircase, I can’t shake the feeling that something’s wrong. The way he looked at the end of our conversation—it was slightly off.

Maybe it’s better that Camillo’s not here after all. I can blend in until this is over. I can take up as little space as I can and hope it all goes so fast it won’t even matter. Except it always does matter, and it always will...