

CHAPTER 40

ROSA

“Camillo!” I shriek. His body freezes. And rough hands yank him back.

“You animal!” a woman yells. “Harold! Oh, Harold, are you okay?”

“You’re psychotic!” another man says. “He just attacked him!”

“You’re going to regret this,” Harold wheezes, gripping at his throat. “Not even your thugs can protect you now.”

“Throw him out of here!” my mother demands.

I start to rush toward him, but Reagan snatches my arm, her nails digging into my skin. “Just let him go. This is Daddy’s funeral, for God’s sake. If he can’t behave, of course he’s going to be thrown out. Don’t cause any more of a scene by running after him, Rosa.”

My step falters, and I’m frozen in place, unable to know what to do for the best.

Everyone is speaking in shocked whispers, and my mother is dabbing at her eyes.

Camillo’s eyes drop from my wide eyes to the ground. And he doesn’t protest as he’s hauled away from the scene.

The last few days since the funeral have been exhausting. I’m in the kitchen, doing the washing up. For someone who’s grieving, my mother seems to be throwing quite the event tonight.

“Hurry up, Rosa. We don’t have all night, and we’re running out of clean dishes.”

I wince at the sharp voice of my sister, and I can’t help the bitter thoughts from skittering through my mind. This is why my mother has staff. Why am I doing this? But that’s done nothing to stop my mother and sister from coming in every ten

minutes with a new demand. As I scrub at a stubborn stain on a coffee cup, my mind wanders over what's been said since the funeral...

"You should be thankful we've haven't disowned you after what he did."

"You can't be thinking of leaving, surely? Mother needs your support while she's grieving."

"Well, if you really want to make up for what that thug did at the funeral..."

The porcelain cup clatters into the sink as I startle.

"Rosa! I heard a crash! Is everything okay?"

"Yes, i-it's fine."

"Those were a gift from your father!" My mother's cry fills the kitchen as I wince. "You stupid girl! Do you know how hard it'll be to replace it? How could you be so thoughtless?"

I swallow as my eyes drop to the ground. Her heavy sigh reminds me of when I was a child. One wrong step and I'd be met with a lecture about how no one would love me if I couldn't do and say the right thing.

"I see some things haven't changed," she snaps. "See that it's tidied up and replaced. I have guests to deal with."

Sagging against the counter, I make a start on the next stack of cups.

After finishing all the dishes an hour later, I make my way up the stairs. Each step feels like I'm being dragged down, like overcoming a mountain with rocks attached to my ankles.

Softly, I open the door and scan the room for Ethan. His small body is engulfed by the blankets, the teddy bear brought by Camillo snuggled close.

My heart clenches. My phone sits on the nightstand, untouched. The text I sent Camillo after the funeral still remains unanswered. The small little check mark tells me he's read it at least—read that Ethan and I have to stay here a little longer as my mother still needs me. The ache inside me as I stare at the phone, willing it to light up, is too pronounced, too physical as I rub at my sternum.

For days now, I've wanted to call him. To hear what happened at the funeral to cause him to act like that. To know if he's okay. But that unanswered text has stopped me, and I don't know how to fix this thing between us.

Whatever rift has grown between us is wedged in place. A short time away from him, and he's probably realized he's better off without such a mess up like me. So, despite the despair that shreds my insides, I flip my phone over.

There are a few texts from Juliana and Cate asking when we'll be back and talking about setting up activities for Ethan to do with the other kids once we've returned. But I can't answer them right now.

I squeeze my eyes shut as I curl up on the bed, careful not to disrupt Ethan. Hugging the pillow, I feel the emotions drag me under.

"How Grayden ever put up with you is beyond me."

"How selfish can you be? Mother is grieving, Rosa, and you're just worried about some thug."

"Are you sure you want to have another piece of cheese? Everyone's watching..."

The words swarm around me, each slicing against my skin until I'm bleeding raw. Every single one tearing away whatever armor I've built up over the last few months.

Of course, they're right.

I am nothing.

Not to them. Not to Grayden. So, why would someone like Camillo see me differently?

Smothering a sob into the pillow, I press my face into it further.

The fantasy of what I thought I could have with him shatters into a million pieces before I can stop it. The foolish brief flicker of hope that Camillo would want me snuffs out like a precarious candle in a hurricane.

The radio silence is enough for me to take a hint. All those tender moments with him, the way he accepted me and Ethan so completely, are blown away. The soft whisper of needing me, wanting me, swirl around me before stabbing at my heart repeatedly.

I always knew it would happen. A man like Camillo would never want something so broken like me for long. I'm not the person who soothes those demons that roar to life in his head; I cause reasons for them to flare up instead. It was only a matter of time until he realized this.

I wanted to believe he didn't think like that. But another painful stab squeezes my heart.

Pulling my head away from the pillow, I stare up at the ceiling. Loneliness gnaws at my stomach, sharpening the bile and acid that bubbles within. I haven't eaten much since the funeral. I'm trying so hard to remember to use the techniques I learned at therapy, but the tutting responses from my family every time I so much as sip a cup of tea are making it so hard. Not talking to Camillo only adds to the anxiety, turning anything that touches my tongue into ash.

For once, I thought I was enough. He made me feel like I was worth something.

Just Rosa. As is.

But I'm wrong.

A bitter laugh leaves me as I swipe at my eyes. If there's anything I'm good at, it's being wrong, being inadequate, being the problem. At least there I excel. It's the only thing everyone can seem to agree on.

I press a kiss to Ethan's forehead and lie back down, trying to distract myself from the darkness sinking into me as my eyes drift close.

Maybe in another life, things could have worked out. Maybe if I'd had more time to win him over, to transform myself into something he wanted to keep, to show him just what I have to offer, and to tell him I'm not afraid of him the way others are...

But what good would that do? The thought in my head doesn't sound like me, but its hold on my mind is too hard to ignore.

It wouldn't change anything.

"Rosa!" It's Reagan's voice. I furiously swipe my tears away. Any sign of weakness, vulnerability from me, and they'll pounce like the vicious animals they are, ripping my already tattered and worn away shield to shreds. "You're needed downstairs, Rosa!"

Slowly, I open the bedroom door.

“Finally! I thought I was going to break a nail pounding on your bedroom door. You can’t just sneak off like that. What if someone needed something?” She tuts loudly. “You can’t expect me or our poor mother to deal with anything while we’re grieving. It’s really quite selfish of you, you know. So, hurry up.”

I spare Ethan one more glance before I slip out the door and past Reagan without a word. Seen and not heard, that’s how I survive here. That’s how I please them. Take up as little space as possible and hope I can melt into the walls.

And I hate myself for it. I hate myself for not being stronger, for not being able to stand up for myself. But it’s so hard. It’s not just a case of thinking it and doing it. Because every time I try to defend myself, my mother and Reagan make it seem like I’m being selfish and self-centered and only thinking about myself. And anything I say in my defense just makes their barbs worse.

I just can’t win with them. Deep inside me, I know what they’re saying isn’t true, but that they think it in the first place stabs at me and makes it so difficult to stand up for myself. I know it’s what the therapist terms as self-esteem issues, but right now, I don’t know how to get back on track—back to a place where I’m stronger again.

It’s like flipping a switch. The routines of the woman I once was click back into place. And the woman I was becoming with Camillo and his family vanishes like she never existed at all.