

CHAPTER 42

ROSA

“Now, Rosa, we need to talk about some things...” My mother’s voice barely registers as I sit at the dinner table.

I push the food on my plate around. Each day passes slower than the last. The gnawing of my stomach makes my sip of water taste sour.

“To start, the Botanic Garden Board will be here for a luncheon tomorrow. I expect you to be present in my time of need and to help out where I need it, Rosa.”

I watch Ethan from the corner of my eye as he silently finishes his plate. “Do you, er, think it’s appropriate to be holding so many events so soon after the funeral?”

“These women were there for me in my hour of need,” she snaps. “It’s the least I can do to thank them.” But I know that the real reason she’s having all these events is to gloat over how much money our father left in his will. “Now, we’ll have to gloss over the whole thing with you, Rosa.”

I lift my gaze, unable to help the pucker of my brow. “What thing?”

“You being with that thug,” Reagan replies. “It’s all anyone is talking about. We certainly don’t need to add any more embarrassment to our good name.”

My mother nods. “And the fact that you were his servant as well as sleeping with him. It reflects poorly on us. With your stooping so low, people will think we’re broke or something.”

“And Ethan will simply have to disappear—we can’t possibly have him at the luncheon.”

“I’m sorry?”

The harshness of my tone snaps my mother’s eyes to me. “You simply can’t watch him when you’re supposed to be helping me. I would have thought that much is

obvious. Hildie can watch him for a few hours, so you'll be free to see to the list of things I need you to do today."

"I can do both," I grit out, my knuckles white as I grip the glass in my hand. Anger simmers within me. "Ethan's no trouble," I say firmly, "and his place is by my side." I look down at my little boy and give him a reassuring smile and a comforting squeeze to his hand.

My mother's eyes narrow at me. But I'm not backing down when it comes to Ethan—ever.

And silence stretches between us until my mother and Reagan rise from the table and leave.

Ethan watches me as I stand in front of the mirror, smoothing my skirt down for the millionth time.

The soft knock on the door has me sucking in a deep breath. "Come in."

I expect to find Hildie with a tray of Ethan's favorite snacks, but when I turn around, I'm met with my mother's pursed lips.

"You're not wearing that, are you?"

I look down at my knee-length skirt and fitted blouse. It's smart and elegant.

"Change."

"W-what?" I say, unable to stop the stutter. I hate that the backbone I've gained over the last few months disappeared so quickly almost as soon as I returned here.

"If you insist on not taking care of your body and embarrassing this family because of it, you'll dress in something that is a lot more suited to your shape—something that will cover up all your flab and rolls of fat."

The familiar burn at the back of my eyes makes me drop my gaze, and the sigh of my mother feels like a slap. "You should have brought more appropriate clothing with

you instead of what you've got used to wearing as that thug's whore." She steps into the room, giving Ethan's little body a wide berth with a disdainful curl of her lip. "And have you been following the diet I gave you?"

A harsh laugh strangles itself in my throat. The diet in question is nothing but the loss of anything joyful about food. A small crumb-like portion that's just shy of starving me compared to the opulent dishes my mother and Reagan dine on.

"Or are you sneaking food? If you're not going to care about what you look like, Rosa, how on earth can you expect anyone else will treat you with respect?"

My mouth opens and closes.

"Hurry up and get changed." She wrinkles her nose as she runs her gaze over me. "Something that isn't so tight and trashy. And not that hideous T-shirt you insist on wearing around the house either. The thought that someone will know it's his is unacceptable."

Camillo's black T-shirt is my lifeline. Mixed into my clothing, it's the last thing I cling to as a glimmer of hope. It doesn't smell like him anymore, but sometimes I delude myself into believing it does while it clings to my body in sleep.

"Just find something. Tomorrow, I'll make sure the chef knows you're on a new, stricter diet and get a trainer in. If you won't fix the problem, I will."

The door closes, and as Ethan continues playing on the bed with his teddy bear, I slump against the dresser, staring at my reflection in the mirror opposite.

"You know, if you really cared about this family and our image, you'd have taken Mother up on that surgery. Then, we wouldn't be dealing with your problem right now."

"Why are you so selfish, Rosa? It's embarrassing having to explain to everyone why you look the way you do..."

A part of me whispers that she's just doing what she thinks is best for me. That it's justified because of how I look.

But the other part knows that's a load of bullshit...

"You're beautiful, Rosa."

“Everyone was staring because you’re stunning. Probably questioning why a knockout like you is with me. Not the other way around.”

“Fuck me, Rosa. How am I supposed to focus right now when you’re dressed like fucking perfection and looking sinful...?”

The words jumble together. The harsh jabs are vicious. But it’s the soft soothing balm of his voice that wraps around me. A comforting armor, not without its holes, but it’s a shield that makes the other words fade away.

My gaze looks blindly at the woman who stands before me.

Weeks flash before my eyes in a matter of seconds. Weeks of Camillo’s arms wrapped around me as he whispers how breathtaking I am while his hands grip at my hips and body like he can’t get enough. Weeks of sincere compliments from Juliana and Cate about a new pair of jeans or shirt I bought. Weeks of feeling welcomed and embraced as I sat around the dining table with the whole Marchiano family. Weeks of my son and I being loved by people who were, until recently, strangers to us.

The ache in my chest throbs as I continue to stare. Wishing more than anything that I was in a room with dark walls and dark wood floors. With a bed that’s too big even for me. With the bright windows and the gym bag tossed in front of them. With the scent of sandalwood wrapping around me and welcoming me home.

That’s what it was. Home.

I cover my mouth before slumping down onto the bed.

Why can’t I just ignore what everyone else wants? Why do I always feel guilty for disappointing my family? And why can’t I just put myself first for once? It’s been ingrained in me my entire life that I need to put other people first—my parents, my sister, Grayden. But what about me? What about what I want—what I need?

Ethan’s tiny arms circle around my neck, and he clings to me. “I don’t like it here, Momma,” he whispers. And the only things I can see are Ethan’s fallen face and slumped shoulders.

And as I see this all, my heart breaks and shatters into a thousand pieces.

Fire rises in my chest as I watch the little boy who’s blossomed over the last few months shrink back into his shell. One I fought tooth and nail to coax him from, and one that Camillo and his family helped to bring him out of.

When I compare how Ethan is now to how he was amongst the Marchianos, I know which boy I want him to be. I want to see my son laugh. I want to watch him bloom and run around the house like a child should. I want him to be somewhere where he doesn't have to tiptoe around or make himself small. He deserves to be loud and laugh whenever he wants. He deserves better than whatever scraps I was given as a child.

And I find myself comparing the cold demands and awkward silences of the Davis mansion with the loud laughter, warm conversations, and love of the Marchiano estate.

That's the sort of childhood and upbringing I want for my son. That's the sort of life I want for myself. I don't know why I always find it so hard to stick up for myself and put myself first, but I know that I can't let myself or Ethan suffer by staying here any longer. Ethan deserves better. He deserves so much more. And knowing that gives me the strength to do what I do next.

"I don't really like it here either," I admit softly through a sheen of tears. "We just had to be here to help Grandma and Aunt Reagan." I can now see that as each day goes by, my mother and Reagan's actions are sapping away his confidence—just like they've done to me my whole life.

I have to be strong for Ethan. But also, for Camillo... If I can't be strong for myself, I have to be strong for the people inside my heart.

I pick up my phone and dial Camillo.

He answers after half a ring. "Rosa? Are you and Ethan okay?" His voice rushes out in concern.

"I'm sorry I didn't stand up for you against my family, Camillo—"

"What are you talking about, Rosa? I should be the one apologizing—I've caused a scene at your family's home twice now. And in front of Ethan of all people. I'm so sorry. I would have rung, but I thought you wouldn't want to talk to me...especially after you didn't come back to me after the funeral."

"My mother needed me to stay for longer and help out with some other things."

"Are those things...finished now?"

"No."

“Oh.” And I can tell his disappointment—and his want for me.

I’m fed up with doubting myself—and I decide to throw caution to the wind. “But I don’t care, Camillo. She can manage without me. I’m coming back today. Do you think, um, you could give me a ride?”

“I’ll be there.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “Just tell me when and where, baby.”

“I’ll be ready to leave at 4 p.m.”

“I’ll be waiting with my car outside the house.”

“No, Camillo. I want you to come inside.”

There’s a stunned silence from his end.

“Camillo?”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been surer of anything in my life. I want everyone to see the man I’m with—the man I’m proud to have at my side.” And for the first time ever, I toss aside what my family might think. I’m doing this for me. For me, Camillo, and Ethan.

“I’ll...be there, baby.” His voice breaks, and I feel myself tearing up at the thought of seeing him soon.

After hanging up, I shoot a grin at Ethan. “Come on, we’ve got to pack...”

When it’s time for the luncheon, I make my way downstairs with Ethan and lift my chin as I enter the garden.

Nerves threaten to make me hurl the tiny amount of food I ate earlier. I’ve been feeling weak, dizzy, and downright terrible. And I know I can’t go on like this. I have to get my eating issues under control again. For me, and for Ethan—so that I can be a good mom to him.

It's now or never. My feet freeze on the patio for a second. Doubt tugs me under.

But Camillo's words block them all out like some bullet proof shield. If I don't do this now, I'll never do it.

As soon as my mother sees me, she marches up. "What are you wearing?"

"You told me to change."

"Yes, but..." An approaching guest means there's no time for her to finish what she was about to say.

My hand smooths down the front of Camillo's black T-shirt which I'm wearing with a belt and over a pair of capri pants Juliana helped me pick out. It hugs my body and curves, yet it's smart and classy.

For the first time since I arrived here, I feel powerful and in control. I don't risk losing my nerve as I turn on my heel. If I let her jump in, she'll tear me down.

I find my place on the seating plan and find a spare chair to pull up beside me. We're sitting in the corner of the garden, practically hidden by the large plants surrounding us. I really don't understand why my mother even wants me here if she's determined to keep me as out of sight as possible. But I know the answer—she wants me here in case she needs to quash any potential rumors that I've returned to my maid job.

Over the luncheon, not a single person has said a bad thing about my outfit. A few of the younger ladies even compliment me—although it's to the tutting disapproval of a couple of the older ones. But for once, I brush off the negative comments and let myself focus on the positive ones. That's the sort of people I want to surround myself with—people who are kind and encouraging. And as I do this, I keep on repeating to myself the messages that I've learned in therapy.

The therapist talked to me about cognitive restructuring through addressing my negative core beliefs. She said that I should build my self-esteem by broadening my definition of self-worth to include non-appearance factors like my achievements, skills, and moral values. I've learned so many other things from her as well, and I need to get back to focusing on those techniques.

And I need to get back to surrounding myself with people who will help me in this journey. Because that's what it is—a journey. Things aren't going to change for me overnight or at the click of my fingers. But to be strong enough to make this journey, I have to take these first steps.

I look down at my empty plate where a few crumbs from the finger sandwiches I'd nibbled on remain. Pride over something so small and insignificant rushes through me like a bullet. It's more than just defying my mother or eating something small. It feels like the chains that are strapping me down have loosened just a tiny bit.

It's not fixed. I'm not fixed. But it's Camillo's voice in my head that pushes me on. That leads me through the darkness.

At 4 p.m. on the dot, I see Camillo arrive and walk over to me.

And a small smile spreads across my lips, unable to be contained. Because he's the man I've been waiting for my whole life...