

CHAPTER 21

CAMILLO

The image of Rosa in that little black one piece is burned into my mind.

The way it hugged each and every one of her curves, cutting high on her hips, and exposing a mouthwatering expanse of creamy thighs haunts my dreams nightly.

But it's the yellow and purple that decorated the slope of her back that prompts me into the gym today. My knuckles are bruised from where I slammed them into the brick wall of the house after she fled inside. The sting of it is dull now as it collides again and again with the bag.

Anger is a different beast altogether. It festers and sinks, settling deep down inside me. An old friend roaring to life once more.

As badly as I want to storm over there and repay him for every fucking mark on her body, I restrain myself. He's connected in a way that would be bad for us. There are ways around it—especially given where I sit in the organization. But with the FBI breathing down all our necks, it's not a risk I can take. Yet.

And it's this thought that keeps me going.

My heavy breathing fills the room as I wipe the trickles of sweat from my brow and gulp water from a glass. My imagination works overtime, conjuring different images of Rosa. Curled up on the floor of that alley with tears running down her face. Cowering beneath his hands. Struggling to free herself from his hold.

Memories of it still affect her. She was quiet and subdued after she came back with Ethan from her evening off—it's clear she finds it difficult to relax even when she has time off and should be relaxing.

The sound of shattering glass fills the room.

I look down, and I realize I've smashed my hand with the glass into the wall, blood trickling from my battered knuckles. The sting of it brings me back into the room. The haze of red fades, and in its place is something else, crystal clear.

Never again.

I won't allow it to happen ever again to her. She's going to learn how to defend herself. I'm here to protect her, but it's just in case for when I'm not around. My jaw ticks. The idea of her having to use it at all settles like a lead brick in my stomach.

Quickly, I clean off my hand and wrap it. Jogging into the kitchen where Rosa's busy chopping for a vegetable platter, I pause in the doorway. And leaning against the frame, I watch her. She never fails to take my breath away. To calm the demons prowling deep inside me.

"Rosa."

She looks up at me.

"How much do you have left to do today? And what's Ethan up to?"

that might prove a problem out of the way. "Just something basic you'll practice every day from here on out."

"But I don't know the first thing about any of this."

"That's why I'm here."

Her eyes drop, and she tugs at the hem of her shirt. "Do we have to do it here?"

"Is there something wrong with the gym?" Is this some trigger I don't know? This is my sanctuary. The only place where the world fades, and I can just be me.

I watch as she tugs once more on the oversized shirt, pulling it and twisting the fabric between her fingers.

"Rosa, you can tell me."

Her bottom lip trembles before she clamps her teeth down upon it. "It's nothing."

The muscle in my jaw ticks. "No one else will come in here. It's just going to be me and you—if you're worried about that."

"It's not that." Her voice shakes, and my heart squeezes. "It's just..." Another firm shake of her head and the fisting of her hand at her side. "Nothing."

“It’s not nothing. You can tell me—you can trust me.” Do those words sound as desperate to her as they do to me?

“I don’t want you to be…” The words barely reach my ears, too muffled at the end, as I strain to listen. “With all the mirrors and stuff. It’s just going to be worse.”

“They bother you?” I’m stunned as I suddenly understand the issue. She doesn’t like the look of herself in the mirrors. Fuck, I don’t want her to feel uncomfortable.

Gently, I tilt her chin up to me. Tears rim her eyes, and I bite back the snarl of anger rumbling in my chest. What do I have to do to make her feel beautiful? “Don’t look at them. Focus on me. You can stay this way around, so you don’t have to look at them, okay?”

She worries her bottom lip but nods. The battle isn’t over by a long shot, but a spark of pride shoots through me before I can tamper it down. It’s a step in the right direction.

“Good.” Clearing my throat, I step back, my hand dropping down to my side.

Silence fills the room, and I desperately want to ask her the burning questions on my tongue, each one harder to swallow than the last.

Rosa has secrets, each one deeper than the last. And I have no right trying to pry them from her. It’d only fuel the obsession I have with her. And then she’d wake up to the monster that lurks beneath my skin and flee.

Slowly, I walk her through a few quick stretches, taking my time to admire the way her body bends and contorts.

Every muscle of my body heats. I tug at the loose collar of my tank top, watching the curve of her ass as she bends forward, finishing up the last rep.

Fuck. The image of me behind her, hands on her hips, watching as I drive into her... Get a fucking hold of yourself.

“Okay, that’s good.” My voice comes out hoarse, and I clear my throat. “Have you ever done anything like this?”

A firm shake of her head.

“We’ll take it slow. If I do anything that makes you uncomfortable, you need to tell me.” I hold her gaze, searching the brown depths of her eyes. “Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

I gently lift her hands up and slowly walk her through a few defensive maneuvers. How to ball her fist so as not to break her thumb. How to stand so she isn't easy to knock over. How to best use her body against someone twice her size. And how to use the heel of her hand to debilitate her attacker. There are so many things I need to teach her so that I know she'll have a chance if anyone ever comes after her again.

“Thank you,” she pants, wiping the back of her forehead with the edge of her shirt, exposing her stomach just a little. It's a tease.

“For what?”

“This.”

“Don't thank me yet. We're not even close to me being done.”

She takes a step closer. The distinct scent of roses that follows her around envelops me. The softness in her features, the gratitude in her eyes, slices at me. Her hand freezes halfway between us before dropping down. “What's next?”

“The hard part.” My body reverberates with excitement and fear. Putting my hands on Rosa shouldn't elicit such a feeling. But since that dinner date, since seeing her in that dress, my mind hasn't belonged to me anymore.

Slowly, I wrap my arms around her loosely, coaching her through how to break various holds. Again and again, we practice it, and every wiggle of her body against mine only fuels the fire within me.

When she masters a move, we switch it up and move onto another. The holds become firmer and tighter until she's struggling in my arms. Two taps of her hands mean I'll let go, but she powers through every hitch of her breathing to maneuver her body out of each hold.

My body's on high alert, continuing to examine her expression for any missteps on my part. Her lovely features are set, determined, and zeroed in on the motions we've gone over.

My hand circles her arm, and I inch her backward, looming over her. Her skin is soft under my calloused fingers as they grip just firm enough to make it a challenge.

She does all the right moves, but I've still cornered her. My hand circles her throat in a soft hold—one I fear is an overstep as her pulse races beneath my fingers.

She knows how to get out of this. We've practiced dozens of times now. But she's frozen.

Her chest labors against mine, her back flush against the wall where we've ended up.

Her tongue darts out over her lips, and my eyes zero in.

She's so damn close.

Right there, ripe for the taking.

Her panting breath fans over my heated skin.

Just a few more inches, and my lips would brush hers...

Would she taste as sweet as I imagine? I swallow loudly, watching as her tongue wets her lips again, slower.

Her pulse jumps under my hand. Her pupils bloom, and it's not fear eliciting this reaction. It's something else.

The grip on my hand slackens. And her body leans forward.

Fuck it. Pressing my lips against hers, I swallow the gasp of surprise that leaves her. And tongue tracing the seam of her lips, I dive in, claiming my taste of victory.

The hand on her throat moves to cup her jaw, angling her head into just the right position. My other hand cups her hip, pressing her into me.

Every nerve in my body explodes as I lean my hips into her. I know she can feel me, feel what she's done to me, and I don't give a damn.

Hungry for more, I devour her.

Gone are the gentle strokes of her tongue against mine, replaced by a claiming of her own. The spark that's so buried beneath everything flickers to life within her.

My fingers bury into the back of her hair, threading through the silky strands.

Her own nails drag tentatively up my arm, drawing a deep rumble from my chest. My teeth tug on her lip, capturing it, and sucking it between my own teeth.

Fuck.

I need more. I press closer, fitting my body against hers, my hardness pressing into her softness. Seeking more, needing more.

My fingers grasp her, holding her against me before they drift up under the hem of her tee. Toying with it as my thumb brushes the side of her rib gently, inching higher still.

She's addictive. From the taste of her to the feel of her body against mine. Nothing tastes or feels as good as she does.

I groan against her jaw as my lips trail down the column of her smooth throat.

Laughter from the hall makes me freeze. I can just make out the soft voice of Ethan beyond the door.

Wide eyed, Rosa looks horrified.

I pull back, gently dropping her back to the ground. Searching her face, I tried to find some inkling as to what's going through her head. Something to tell me that I wasn't the only one drowning just now—that it's not just me.

"I..." She clears her throat, pulling at her T-shirt to adjust it back into place.

"I...uh..." She looks at the door and then at me.

And like the bambi she is, she skitters out of the door.

Braced against the wall, I let out a deep sigh. I'm well and truly fucked now.

Because one taste wasn't enough.

And I want more...