

CHAPTER 38

CAMILLO

It's been a couple of hours since Rosa told me that she's staying with her mother until the funeral. The groans of the man beneath my boot echo around the darkened warehouse. The single construction light illuminates his body and the mess I've made, getting the answers we need.

The moment I'd felt my phone vibrate, I'd pummeled him to the ground. Now I wish I'd ignored the call all together. I'm more wound up than ever, knowing that Rosa is by herself and without me.

My hand throbs every time I flex it, but it's a welcome sting. Anything to keep the taunting laughs replaying in my mind and pit in my stomach from swallowing me whole.

"You look pissed," Alessio tells me.

"Thanks for pointing out the obvious," I snarl. "Anything else you'd like to comment on, or do you want to get this shit handled so we can get home?"

"Was that Rosa?"

"No, it was Jesus. And he said that nosy brothers don't make the cut to see the pearly gates."

He tilts his head to one side. "Bad news?"

"Nah, it was like a warm fucking hug. What do you think?" Surely, he can tell from my expression that it wasn't good news—and that I don't want to fucking talk about it.

"Camillo—"

"Unless you wanna go a few rounds with me, don't start, okay? I don't want to deal with Cate getting on my ass about messing up your face or some shit."

Picking a fight with Alessio isn't going to make this go away. It isn't going to make Rosa decide to come back home where she fucking belongs. It isn't going to get rid of the black pit that's devouring me little by little the longer I let my thoughts run wild.

"Look, Alessio, you can finish this off. I've got other stuff to do." I shove past him and toward the busted door of the warehouse. Abandoned and forgotten, somehow the building and I have too much in common for me to want to stay much longer. The clean-up crew will sort the place up after Alessio finishes what he needs to do. My job here is done.

"Millo."

"What?" I whirl on my heel to face him.

"Don't go back to her like this."

"I didn't ask for your advice."

"I mean it..."

My shoulders tense. "She's not coming home today, so no problem there. Any other questions you wanna ask, or am I free to go?"

His sigh fills the vast area, and I take my leave without another word. My body thrums with adrenaline and emotions I don't know what to do with. My already battered fist connects with the sheet metal on the outside of the warehouse as a curse flies from my lips.

My phone pings.

Quickly, I scan the text. My body wilts against the wall, and the anger bubbling through my veins cools with a single picture. Ethan. He's wearing the extra black T-shirt we packed earlier in case he got his clothes dirty, staring back at me with Rosa's shy smile behind him. The caption makes my heart stop: Dressing like Uncle Millo.

A slow smile creeps across my face as I save it to my phone. The goodnight text lights up my screen, and my chest turns into a vise.

I want to believe that it's only for a few days. But some part of me knows that's wishful thinking. And that voice grows louder and louder until all I can think is that she's slipped right through my fingers. I don't belong in her world. I don't deserve someone like her—and it's clear I'm not the only one who thinks so. I saw the looks

everyone was giving me. I saw the talons of her sister's hand digging into Rosa's shoulder and the disapproval etched into her sour expression.

Would she disapprove even more if she knew what really was going on between me and her Rosa? Would she turn her nose up if she knew what Grayden had done—and would do again—to her sister?

My hands tighten on the steering wheel further as I zigzag recklessly through traffic to the estate. I haven't been back since Rosa and I left this morning. I ignore the soft conversation coming from the kitchen.

“Camillo?”

I pause on the first step of the staircase at Marco's voice. “I'm tired.”

“Look—”

And I know from his tone that an interrogation is coming my way. I love my brothers dearly. I appreciate them having my back, but right now, sticking their noses where they don't belong is the last thing I want to deal with.

I don't give him a chance to say what he wants to, jogging up the stairs and into my room. The door slamming behind me echoes in the stillness. The flowery scent that clings to her fills my lungs when I take a deep inhale. It stings and soothes all at once.

The man who stares back at me from the mirror is a familiar stranger I haven't seen in months. My hair falls in loose waves from the knot at the crown of my head. A fresh bruise decorates my jaw, and there's blood all along my collar and neck. Eyes wild and hands clenched, the man before me is every bit of the monster I wish I wasn't.

“Fuck!” My voice comes out as a roar.

My knuckles slam into the mirror. And I spin on my heel, disregarding the pieces that clink to the ground.

The knock at my door isn't surprising. But I don't answer. Ripping the shirt from my body, I crumple it up into the corner and head to the bathroom.

Another louder pound on the door keeps me from starting the shower I so desperately want.

“What?” I growl, yanking it open.

Cate and Juliana stand before my door. Cate's hand is raised to pound on the wood again. They blink, and my tongue runs along my teeth. I'm going to get a fucking earful for waking the kids, but I can't bring myself to care. "Is Rosa okay?" Juliana asks.

"Fine."

"Are she and Ethan hungry? We saved food," Cate adds.

"No. They're not here."

Both women stare at me, and I swallow. I don't like that look. "What?" I ask slowly, very aware that my knuckles are dripping onto the dark wood floor and the mirror behind me is in a cracked mess. What's seven years of bad luck when I'm already living a nightmare?

"Nothing. We'll let you clean up," Juliana says, steering Cate away with her. Their hushed whispers don't carry as they make their way back down the hall.

My door clicks shut, and I sink to the ground. I drag a hand down my tired face, feeling all the pent-up emotions slink out of me, leaving me utterly deflated.

My phone pings again. But something tells me it's not Rosa. And yet the hope that flares within me is the only thing that gets my ass off the floor to check. But the hope that's flickered to life withers into ash in seconds. It's a simple confirmation that the job is done and Alessio is on his way back home. Tossing my phone to the bed, I move into the bathroom. Each movement is tight and controlled.

By the time I've showered, exhaustion pulls at my body, and I flop onto my bed to sink into the bliss of oblivion.

"You'll tell them if they need anything to call?" Juliana says.

"Yes."

"And you'll tell Rosa not to worry about anything here?" Cait says quickly.

"Yes."

"And you're sure...everything is okay?" Juliana adds.

“For the millionth time today, yes. Are we done?”

Both Cate and Juliana cross their arms. And I have to remind myself that my brothers would kill me if one single hair was out of place on their heads. As frustrating as having them in my business is, knowing Rosa has their support means the world to me.

Before either can come up with another list of things for me to tell Rosa, I make my escape out into the garage. The drive back to the Davis mansion is far from easy.

Rosa’s text came in bright and early, asking if one of the soldiers could drop off more clothes for her and Ethan, including more black outfits for her. They obviously need more stuff in addition to what I sent over two evenings ago. I decide to take the bag myself. And the mere thought of seeing her and Ethan clicks something into place for me. But I don't dwell on that because she’s not back...and she might never be.

The Davis drive is lined once more with cars and drivers in pristine outfits. I park and stride up the steps to be met with a quiet nod and direction of where to find Rosa.

“No. Not like that,” I hear Reagan criticize as I approach.

“Sorry,” Rosa murmurs. Her apology to her younger sister grates on my nerves as I hear Rosa stutter the words out. My fist clenches tighter at my side as I clear my throat.

“Why are you here?” Reagan hisses.

“Rosa asked for some more clothes.”

Rosa’s by my side in an instant.

“Why on earth did you ask him here?” Reagan sneers down her nose at me. “You could have just purchased more clothing from the store. That would have been preferable.”

The heat of Rosa’s hand on my body calms me like nothing in the world. It’s terrifying and yet exactly what I’ve needed ever since she decided to stay here. She ushers me down the hall.

“Everything okay, Rosa?”

“Yes. It’s nothing. Thank you.” She smiles, taking the duffle bag from my shoulder. She presses in closer, smiling at me. Her usual beautiful rose scent is missing as I drop

a kiss to the top of her head. In its place is something else. Something high end and expensive. It's not Rosa at all.

"Of course," I murmur.

"I miss you. Ethan does too."

Something frayed and raw inside me calms, and I pull her closer. "I miss you too. It's not the same at the mansion without you."

"Juliana and Cate are probably managing just fine without me."

"I wasn't talking about the house cleaning, Rosa." My voice drops, and I lean closer, pressing into her. "I'm talking about you. The house feels empty with you here and not next to me. So does my bed."

That delicious blush creeps across her cheeks, her tiny smile telling me that she's pleased by my words. And the beast inside me roars with victory, some primal neanderthal part puffing my chest out with pride. It's only ever like this with her...

"Where's Ethan? I figured I could spend a little time here with you both before I have to head to the casino."

The ease that lights her face flickers. Her hesitancy gives me pause. And the delight I just felt freezes in its tracks.

"I don't have to stay, Rosa."

"It's not that. I mean, I'd love for you stay but..."

I drop her chin and move back so that the air seeps between us. I try not to let it sting too much. "Got it. Was there anything else you needed?"

She takes my hand. "Camillo, I—"

"Could you two not do that right here?" a nasal voice snaps. "We have guests, and no one needs to see that."

My muscles bunch, and I remind myself that despite the kind of man I am, I'd never hit a woman. Though Reagan's grating demands are pushing me closer and closer to reevaluating that sentiment.

"Reagan, can you please just give us a minute?" Rosa grits out in a firm tone.

“Fine. But don’t take too long. You know there are more important things to deal with.”

I exhale as I listen to the sound of her heels clicking on the floor as she walks away. When I glance back to Rosa, her bottom lip is caught between her teeth, and I can see her body shake just slightly. Rage surges to life inside me.

“Rosa?”

“It’s fine. C’mon, we can talk on our way to the backyard. Ethan’s there.”

I nod as she threads our fingers together, and I squeeze her hand. As we leave the hallway and pass the office, I note the men patrolling the ground like clockwork. Ethan is outside quietly playing in the grass. On the porch, a stern-looking woman watches over him.

“I can take it from here, Hildie,” Rosa murmurs softly.

“Of course, Miss Rosa.”

As she passes, Hildie narrows her eyes at me, and I arch a brow. Is everyone in this damn house so fucking stuck up?

“Momma, when—” Ethan’s question halts as he jumps up from the grass. “Uncle Millo! You came.”

Tiny arms wrap around my leg before I bend and wrap him into a huge hug. “Hey buddy. You’ve been having fun, I see.”

“No.” His admission is small and quiet, and I shoot a confused look to Rosa. “Can we go back home now?” he asks in his small piping voice.

“Not until this weekend, honey.”

“I can take Ethan out of your hair for a few hours if you need me to.”

Rosa shakes her head. “No, it’s okay. There’s not much else for me to do today.”

“Rosa!”

She sighs. “Hold on.”

I nod as she goes and sees what her sister needs.

“I don’t like it here,” Ethan murmurs.

“Yeah, me neither,” I admit, watching Rosa in the doorway as Reagan animatedly waves her arms around until Rosa nods. My eyes narrow when Reagan’s glare lands on me.

Rosa walks back over and slides back into her chair carefully.

“Everything okay?”

“Fine. It’s just that there’s some more stuff I have to handle now. Thank you for bringing the clothes, though.”

“I snuck in a few toys too,” I tell Ethan, smoothing his hair back from his forehead, “including Bernie Bear.”

“You brought Bernie?” He flings himself into my arms and looks up at me with a wobbly bottom lip. “Thank you so much, Uncle Millo. I’ve missed Bernie as much as I’ve missed you.”

His big brown eyes are identical to Rosa’s, and his tiny voice pulls at the fragile strings that are barely holding my heart together.

“Rosa!” Reagan shrieks again from the doorway.

“I should probably go,” I say.

“But—” Ethan starts.

“I’ve got to get going to work, buddy.” It’s a lie, but I say it for Rosa’s sake. Whatever Reagan is throwing a fit over is making the atmosphere awkward for everyone.

Ethan hugs me tightly, and I hate the emptiness crawling into my chest when I let go of him. When the hell did this tiny person manage to sneak inside my heart and wrap himself around my emotions?

I follow Rosa silently until we’re at the front door.

“Thank you, Camillo,” she says softly.

I tilt her chin up toward me. “Anytime. If you need anything, you call me. I don’t care if it’s 3 a.m. and pouring rain. Call me.” That small smile I haven’t seen since I

arrived fills her face. I press my lips to her forehead. “Are you going to be safe here?” Despite my top men monitoring the Davis residence every single second of the day, it’s still weighing on me. “What if Grayden shows up and tries to do something, but I’m fucking across town?”

“We have private security as well as your men watching the place. My father had a falling out with Grayden which led to Grayden punching him and fracturing his cheekbone, so the security guards have been instructed not to let him anywhere near the mansion or our family.”

“You’re sure?”

“My father was the one who’d have sent me back to Grayden, so I’ll be okay here.”

I pull her closer to me, burying my nose into her hair. She might not have that rose scent that drives me wild, but she’s still mine. I hope.

I tighten my hold on her and close my eyes. I don’t want to fucking do this. Leaving her feels like ripping out my heart and losing a limb all at the same time. But it has to happen.

I step back, watching her eyes rim with tears. Without thinking, my thumb brushes against the apple of her cheek. “I’m a phone call away.”

“I know. Oh, I almost forgot. My wages came into my bank account this morning. And I’m very grateful for it and everything else, but...well, I don’t need your family to pay me anymore. My father left me some money.”

I should be ecstatic that she’s finally realized she’s not just the maid to me—or to my brothers. She’s part of our family. And she’s been that since I kissed her that first time. But the money from her father means that she and Ethan can start afresh somewhere if that’s what they want... And I’m left numb as the realization hits me.

I stare down at her. Of course, she wouldn’t want to stay in Chicago. Now that she has the means to get away from Grayden for good, she’ll take it. I should be happy. A better man would be. I should be supportive, but the ability to breathe is getting harder and harder.

“Rosa!”

Her head jerks in the direction of her name. “I have to go. I’ll call you tonight, okay?”

Somehow, I manage to nod. And watching her as she hurries away, I claw at the top button of my dress shirt as if unbuttoning it will allow me to take a full breath. Fuck. The world tilts on its axis, and I struggle to get air into my lungs. They just won't expand. I can't imagine my life without her and Ethan in it. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I stumble toward my car. The moment I slip into the driver's seat, my phone rings, but I don't look at the name on the screen before I ignore it. I'm needed at the casino or warehouse, but the thought of going to either of those places only makes me want to hurl. Turning out from the driveway, I ignore where I'm needed, and instead, I head in the completely opposite direction.