

CHAPTER 36

CAMILLO

My hand slams onto the nightstand, blindly looking for my ringing phone.

A growl of displeasure rumbles through me when it clatters to the ground. It's too fucking early for this.

Rosa stirs beside me. Blinking back sleep from my eyes, hand tightening around her waist, I try to keep her nestled in my arms as I reach down for my phone. But the screen staring back at me is blank. "What the fuck?"

The ringing continues, and Rosa looks at the other nightstand, confusion knitting her brows. Because her phone vibrates against the polished wood surface, the screen lighting up.

I loosen my grip on her as she scrambles across the bed to reach it. "Hello?" Her words are a groggy, barely-there whisper.

At four in the morning, her sleep-laced voice is a new kind of drug. My fingers tingle to touch her skin. I've made it my personal mission to make sure Rosa knows just what she does to me at all hours. To see herself through my eyes every fucking chance I get. Watching her break before my eyes shredded me in a way I don't want to admit. Any ice between us thawed in an instant, and I was left on my knees ready to pay whatever price was needed to save her.

I want to show her that I'm not the brute I've made myself into, despite every instinct telling me otherwise. I don't want her looking at me like that again. I rub at my chest, the hollow feeling yet to dissipate.

A sharp gasp snaps my attention back to her.

The smooth sheet gathers at her waist, exposing my T-shirt she threw on before we fell asleep last night. The sight of her in my clothing nearly undoes me, but I zero in on the tremble of her hand.

"Rosa?"

The phone hits the bed, and she gives me her back, inching toward the edge of the mattress.

“What’s wrong?”

Silently, she stands.

I jump out of bed, my feet tangling in the sheets. “Shit,” I mutter as I stumble toward her. Gently, I tug her toward me, watching her shoulders shake in a silent sob. “Rosa, what happened? Who was that?”

“My mother.”

“Did something happen?”

She nods. The tears rim her eyes, but she doesn’t shed them as she looks up at me. “I have to go home.”

“What?”

“I have to. My dad—I just...” She doesn’t get a full sentence out.

“Something happened with your dad?”

“He passed away.”

I freeze. From the bits and pieces of her home life she’s shared over the months, her relationship with her parents is still a mystery to me. It’s a hard topic for her to broach. A sea of confusions that leaves me wondering if she even knows herself. Numbly, she walks toward the ensuite.

“When do you need us to leave?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. My mother said to come then.”

“Okay,” I nod.

“Wait, us?”

“Where you go, I go,” I say in a strong voice.

“I—”

“I’m not going to let you deal with this alone, Rosa. And I’ll make sure while we’re there, my men discreetly monitor your family’s mansion and the immediate vicinity to make sure that you and Ethan are safe from Grayden.” Her body is framed by the light of the bathroom, but even shadowed as it is, I can tell she’s gnawing on her lip. I step closer, kicking the sheet from my feet. I tower over her, tilting her chin up. “And I’ll be by your side. You have me to support and protect you. All of us will.”

“Thank you,” she whispers.

“Not needed. I’ll take care of everything on our end.” She doesn’t move, her mind elsewhere. I know that look. I know that feeling eating her alive. I brush her lips, breaking the spell her thoughts have on her. “It’ll be okay.”

And she gives the smallest nod as she turns from me.

I tug at the sleeve of my dress shirt, leaning against the SUV outside the Davis mansion where Rosa’s family resides. But it’s a useless gesture to make myself presentable, not that it matters.

It hasn’t changed in the five years since I last saw it. The semi-circular drive leads to sprawling grounds with manicured grass and a Victorian era mansion. Everything about it is grandiose and meticulously kept—yet ice cold and unwelcoming.

We’re here so that Rosa can see her family. The black dress she wears hugs every inch of her body. It’s modest and elegant, the neckline cut in a square line, exposing the beautiful freckles of her skin that have come out since she started spending more time in the backyard with Ethan and me. Her blond locks are glossy and full as they shine where they’re caught by the weak rays of sun.

She smiles softly down at Ethan. “Okay, honey, we’re here now. Let’s go in and see Grandma and Aunt Reagan.”

Ethan’s round eyes look at me, and I wink, extending my hand to him. He grasps it tightly and nestles into my leg.

I look to Rosa. “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me, baby.”

Steeling herself, Rosa takes a deep breath and lifts her chin. Emotions shutter over her face before she clears them away.

I lace her fingers with mine as we walk up the stone steps.

She stops in front of the grand door. I bring our joined hands to my lips. But the small smile on her face slips off as soon as an elderly man opens the door.

He wordlessly escorts us in. The foyer is grand and dotted with elaborate floral bundles. Men and women adorned in black and dark grays, their tailored suits and Chanel dresses screaming their wealth, fill the space. They've obviously all come to pay their respects having heard the news.

"Rosa?" We hear her name called, and Rosa freezes beside me.

The hand that grips mine tightens before she plasters on that fake smile. I hate it. I hate when she uses it, but I know when to keep my mouth shut. Now is not the time. And I know from what she's said that seeing her family again is going to be difficult for her.

A woman bursts into sobs as she embraces Rosa. "I..."

"I know," Rosa murmurs, dropping my hand to wrap her arms around her mother.

They linger for a moment before breaking apart, and the woman's gaze drops to Ethan, although she doesn't bother to greet her grandson. She dabs at her eyes while her gaze skims over Rosa quickly. A flicker of something—judgment, perhaps—flittering over her before her sharp eyes land on me.

I stand at my full height, chin lifted. I have nothing to prove to any of these people.

And yet I want to.

I want to prove to the world that I belong here for Rosa's sake.

"You..." Her mother mutters at me, shaking her head, dismissing whatever she was about to say. Turning on her heel, she beckons onward. "Rosa, you and Ethan can follow me. Your friend can mingle."

My jaw ticks at the slight snub. Rosa nods quietly, her mouth set in a firm line.

It shouldn't dredge up that taunt in the back of my head—but it does. It's like the last few months haven't mattered, and I'm back sitting in the church pew watching the world slip through my fingers.

Ethan's hand tightens on mine, and I can feel him cling to my leg all the more.

Anger, red hot and boiling, fills my veins, and the room full of high-society sneers and whispers only makes it worse. Something roars to life in my chest.

Protect him.

Protect Rosa.

From what I'm not sure, but I'm almost certain it's from the people that surround us.

I kneel, not caring that my pants touch the ground and the fabric is dirtied.

The murmurs swirl around us, but my focus zeroes in on Ethan as he buries his head into my sleeve. "You're okay, buddy. Your mom will be right there with you. And I'll be right here waiting."

"Rosa, come now," her mother admonishes in an impatient voice.

"Ethan, it's okay, honey." Rosa's voice is gentle toward her little boy.

I give Ethan's hand a squeeze. "As soon as you're done, I'll be here, and we can find somewhere else to go without so many people, okay?"

Ethan very slowly drops my hand and moves to his mom's side. She takes a breath and mouths thank you.

After watching them turn a corner and disappear from sight, I drag my hand down my face. I need a fucking drink. My eyes narrow on a large group of men and women, older than me by at least a decade, who stare at me wide-eyed.

They jolt and turn away quickly as I arch a brow.

Hushed whispers fill the air from their little group, the sneers and mocking laughter only prickling my skin more.

Playing with the cufflinks of my shirt, I squeeze past the bodies. Not a single person seems to be affected by the passing of the man. A testament to what kind of person Conor Davis really was. I'm certain of the fact that the world is better off without him.

Leaning against the bar, I throw back the whiskey, letting the burn soak up some of the fire gutting me now. Now and then my gaze lingers on a group too long. The difference between them and me is a blunt reminder that I don't belong here.

I tower over most of the people in attendance, making it impossible for me to blend into the crowd. Their appearances are immaculate, adorned with pocket squares and worn expressions. I slouch while they stand straight; their voices come out refined while mine is only able to rasp and rumble as I order another drink from the bartender.

I pick up the new glass and give the crowd my back. Watching them makes me sick. Picking up my whiskey, I move away from the crowd.

"And she showed up with some thug instead of her husband." A cluck of a tongue is followed by a soft laugh. "Conor was right to marry her off—even if it didn't do her any good."

I freeze to the spot, my hand tightening around the tumbler.

"And to think, Cyndie has to deal with that on top of Conor's passing. What was Rosa thinking? Has she no shame?"

"I'm just hoping Grayden doesn't show up. Imagine."

Each sentence curls my fingers tighter around the glass until I feel it shatter in my grip, sending ice and liquid dripping onto my hand.

The gossipers gasp, eyes wide as they gaze at me with unabashed horror.

The room closes in. My chest tightens.

Freak.

Monster.

Animal.

Murderer...

Each label is a bullet in my armor. Another crack in the chain of my restraint.

"Sir."

I snap my eyes to the attendant who is holding out a towel. Snatching it from his outstretched hand, I notice the way he gulps thickly, his eyes avoiding mine.

I swallow back the comment that burns my tongue, tossing the bloody towel back at his chest. He's just a kid working at some fancy ass party for the elite.

I glare at the women gawking at me, my lip curling into a snarl. They're lucky it's public and daytime; otherwise, I'd show them just how thuggish I can be. I've never raised a hand to anyone who didn't deserve it, especially not a woman, but I'd gladly make the exception to prove my point. I stalk toward the door.

I fucking hate it. I hate how they look down their noses at me. I hate the disdain they don't bother to conceal.

Turning on my heel, I move through the house and to the front entrance where a few lingering guests dot the stone steps.

I inhale deeply through my nostrils. What the fuck was I thinking? Coming here now?

I don't belong in this world. I don't belong near her. I don't belong with her.

The ugly truth of it settles against my skin, its barbs sinking in and ripping at me. My gut tightens. It's nothing I don't already know.

Knowing that Rosa is caught up in the crossfire of their unpleasant gossip makes my body shake with anger. My fists curl tightly, the scars on my knuckles whitening.

Fucking snobs.

I sink onto the cool stone step, head in my hands. But the cool air does nothing to keep the demons at bay. It does nothing to chase the inferno rising in my chest.

I suck in a breath, then another, willing myself to calm the fuck down.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I gladly take the distraction.

I read through the text. It's a loose end that needs dealing with. And I realize it's the perfect way to let off the dangerous steam boiling inside me. It's a fucking fairytale ending to this shit show of a day —because it's a safe way for me to let the beast out. I quickly fire off a reply.

“Camillo?”

Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I stand to meet Rosa in the doorway. She lingers in front of another woman. She's taller than Rosa by a few inches, but younger in her appearance. And she has the same shade of blond hair, perfectly styled, and the same nose. Her sister, no doubt.

But that's where the similarities end. This woman is much thinner, lacking the mouthwatering curves her sister has. But the biggest differences are the pinched, unsatisfied look on her face and the bitter curl lacing her lips. Besides Rosa, she barely warrants another glance.

I'm in front of Rosa in an instant. "Everything okay?" I cup her cheek and tilt her face. Tears line her eyes, and my heart squeezes.

She opens her mouth, but the woman behind her speaks first. "This is a private event—for relations and select friends of the family." The way she speaks makes it clear that I'm neither of those things.

I search Rosa's eyes, trying to find the answers, ignoring the woman behind her. "I'll go, Rosa, if that's what you want. And I'll be back when you're ready to leave. But only if you say so."

"She doesn't need you lingering around. You've stirred up enough trouble as it is."

Nostrils flaring, my eyes snap to the woman. "I'm not fucking talking to you."

The indignant gasp she gives makes me roll my eyes, but I can't help but notice I'm attracting unwelcome attention from people standing nearby.

Rosa trembles beneath my hand, pulling my attention back to her.

"Rosa?" I say quietly.

Her fingers curl around my hand on her jaw, squeezing me tightly. "I'm okay, Camillo."

"Rosa." Her sister speaks in a warning tone, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to shove the woman into the house and slam the door so Rosa and I can be alone.

Dread swells in my chest. I know what comes next. Bracing for the impact, I straighten my spine, trying to reinforce the walls around my heart.

“We’ll be okay, Camillo. We have to stay here for a few more hours, just to help my mother. I don’t want to cause trouble for anyone.”

My stomach dives, and a small breath shudders out. Forehead pressed into hers, my eyes close. I suck in a deep breath of her scent.

I’d hoped she’d do the opposite. That she’d put up a fight—do anything to keep me here. But I should have known better. A bitter laugh bubbles in my chest, but I push it down before it can escape. “Okay,” I mumble.

My hand drops. I force myself to let her step back from me.

The manicured nails of her sister curl around Rosa’s shoulder like claws. She gives me a slow once over before her lip curls again.

“Call me when you’re ready,” I clip before lowering my voice. “My men are keeping an eye on the mansion and grounds so that you’re safe from Grayden.” And turning on my heel, I don’t give Rosa a chance to take her words back—to keep me here.

My body vibrates with rage. Hazy red flares to life in my vision as I cross the lawn in a few quick strides to the SUV. Yanking the door open, I drop into the driver's seat.

“Fuck!” My hands tighten around the steering wheel. It feels like someone has put my heart into a vise. It stings, watching her turn her back on me like that. Knowing that no matter what I do, no matter how hard I claw myself up, it doesn’t matter.

But it’s my own damn fault for thinking I could have something more. Isn’t this what I deserve?

The tires squeal as I tear from the curb, dialing Alessio’s number as I go. It rings twice before he picks up. “I’m heading there now. I’ll deal with the fucker. Have him ready.”

“Camil—”

I hang up before Alessio can protest or pester me with questions. Torturing a snitch is just the type of therapy I need right now.

And it’ll take my mind off the fact that they’ve all been right. Every voice that haunts my nightmares and subconscious was right about me. I am a monster.

And monsters don’t get happy endings...