

CHAPTER 23

CAMILLO

It's still early when I walk into the lounge, the sun just starting to come up. I'm on my way to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water before I work out, and I'm definitely not expecting anyone else to be up yet, so I'm surprised when I hear the faint sound of music.

Getting closer to the kitchen, I recognize the tune—it's Gilded Shelter, a band whose music I always seem to hear whenever I switch on my car radio. The music gets louder the nearer I get, and I see something unexpected as I reach the doorway.

Rosa is up earlier than normal, and she's moving around the kitchen with a relaxed and carefree rhythm. She doesn't spot me as I stand there, so I just stand back and rake my gaze over her, realizing that she's actually a really good dancer.

As I'm watching her dance like nobody's watching, I can't help the grin that tugs up the corners of my lips because she seems different like this—there's a lightness about her right now.

I stand in the doorway, not wanting to disturb her as she dances across the kitchen, collecting things for what I'm assuming is breakfast. She's multitasking and making it look effortless—chopping mushrooms and stirring a pot on the stove, all while keeping in perfect time with the music.

With some reluctance, I clear my throat quietly. She stutters to a stop in the middle of a spin, her eyes widening as she realizes she's been caught, and for a few moments, she looks mortified, and her cheeks flush a deep pink.

“Don't stop,” I say softly with a smile as I step into the room. “You've got some moves there.”

“I didn't realize anyone was awake,” she blurts out. “I sometimes dance while I work because it makes the chores go by faster...”

“It's fine, Rosa,” I reassure her. “More than fine, actually—I like seeing you dance.”

She smiles shyly. “They’re my favorite band. I couldn’t help myself when their latest song came on.”

After collecting my water and giving her a long, lingering kiss on her lips, I head for the gym, thinking how this woman makes me so happy every single fucking second of the day.

I’m listening to the radio in my car a few days later when they mention that Gilded Shelter is in town for their sold-out concert. And I get an idea...

I know tickets will be nearly impossible to get for such a popular band, but I have connections—people who owe me favors, people who can get things done. I make a few calls and ask around, and within the hour, I manage to get two tickets for tonight. I get them couriered to the casino, my insides lighting up at the thought of surprising Rosa.

Late afternoon, I return home earlier than normal and walk into the kitchen.

“Hey,” she says. “You’re early.”

“Yeah.” I don’t even try to hide my grin. “I’ve got something that I want to give to you.”

She watches me pull out the tickets from the pocket of my jeans and hold them out for her to see.

“Are these...?” she starts to say before her voice trails off.

“Tickets to the Gilded Shelter concert tonight,” I finish for her. “I thought maybe we could go together.”

She gasps, and her hands fly to her mouth. “I can’t believe this! How did you get these?”

I shrug, trying to play it cool. “I have my ways.”

Her eyes are sparkling as she throws her arms around my neck, and I find myself hugging her back, enjoying the warmth of her embrace.

“Thank you, Camillo.” She giggles, a bright happy sound filling the room.

I pull back and look at her, feeling a strange sense of satisfaction at her reaction. “You deserve it,” I say simply. “Now go and get ready. The others can have takeout tonight, and Alessio said he’ll look after Ethan. We leave in an hour.”

The energy in the arena is electric, and I can see the excitement radiating off Rosa as we listen to the warmup act. She’s practically bouncing, her eyes wide with anticipation. When Gilded Shelter finally takes the stage, the crowd erupts into cheers, and Rosa joins in without hesitation. She sings along to every word and does more of those sexy moves of hers.

I find that I’m watching her more than I’m watching the band, and I like this side of her that I’m seeing, and I’m drawn to it in a way I hadn’t expected.

After a while, I notice that she’s stretching onto her tiptoes as she strains to see over the heads of the people in front of us. And without giving it another thought, I reach out and put my hands around her hips and start to move her.

Her head swings to me. “What are you doing, Camillo?”

“Lifting you onto my shoulders so that you can see better.”

Her eyes widen in alarm. “You can’t carry me on your shoulders. I’m too heavy…”

My brows knit together in confusion. “Of course you aren’t,” I say.

“But—”

“But nothing,” I growl. She’s nothing compared to the weights I lift each day, and I raise her up as if she’s as light as a feather.

She exhales a yelp of surprise, but then, she’s laughing, her hands gripping my shoulders as she balances herself on me. From her new position, she’s got a perfect view of the band, and I can tell by her reaction that it’s the best seat in the house.

As the band continues playing song after song, even I start to enjoy the music and let go a little. Everything about the night is amazing, but the best thing by far is the woman on my shoulders who’s singing her heart out with sparkling eyes. With her, I feel something I can’t quite put into words, but it’s there, growing stronger with every passing minute.

When the concert finally reaches its end, the band take their final bow and give a last wave to all the fans, and I lower her back to the ground. She's buzzing with excitement, and her face is flushed with happiness. We're about to turn to leave, but before we do, I find myself stopping her, my hand gently grasping her arm.

She looks up at me, and her eyes sparkle in the dim light of the arena. For a moment, I just drink her in, taking in the way her hair falls in soft blond waves around her face, the way her lips curve into a smile, and leaning down, I press my lips to hers.

She kisses me back, her hands coming up to clutch at my shirt as she leans into me.

And when we pull apart, the way she looks at me makes my heart race.

My labored breathing and trickling water fill the air as I brace my hand against the shower wall.

Every one of my muscles is tense and pulled taught. An image of Rosa trapped beneath me against the wall of the gym, her eyes wide, fills my mind. It's quickly replaced with the image of her pressed against the kitchen counter, the thought of her parted lips beneath my thumb sending a wave of electricity rushing through me. Attraction, need, hunger.

This woman is an addiction I can't quit. A problem that I shouldn't be indulging in, but I'm helpless to stop myself. The way she looks at me. Like I'm something more, something reverent almost, beckons the beast inside me all the more.

Even now, as the water runs ice cold over my body, I picture her soft smile and the feel of her lips against mine. My fist slams against the tiles of the shower as my release tenses every muscle in my body. This was supposed to clear my head, to make it so I didn't spiral into madness. But all it's done is wind me up further.

Head bowed, I let the water drip down my hair, my panted breathing filling the air. Whatever spell Rosa has me under has sunk its claws into me hard and deep.

Dragging my hand through the wet strands, I brush them from my vision as I shut the water off.

She was determined to brush off that first kiss as a mistake, believing some misguided notion that I could find her lacking—that she's not a handful of lush skin and heat beneath my fingers in all the best fucking ways.

Quickly, I dress, choosing a pair of dark jeans and a shirt, rolling up the sleeves as I make my way into the kitchen. The lack of humming from the other rooms tells me that Rosa is there, cleaning the oven, counters, or God knows what else. The entire mansion is spotless. How she continues to find things to occupy her time, I don't quite understand. My skin tingles the closer I draw, my hardness jutting against my jeans already, when the heady mix of roses and floral scents hits my nose.

Acutely aware of where she is at any given moment in the mansion, that scent clings to me. Wrapping around me, like some siren call. It's concerning how well I know her patterns in the house, how aware I am of her every moment of the day.

As I step into the kitchen, she's busy prepping lunch. Her body is turned so that she can watch Ethan who is playing quietly outside with some new trucks Marco got for him.

She's mouthwatering. Oblivious to my stare as I lean against the doorframe, my arms crossed over my chest, she's relaxed and at ease—and it does something to me. I rub at my chest, trying to make the sensation go away.

“Hey,” I say in a low voice, pushing from the threshold toward the counter.

The spoon clatters to the countertop, and Rosa whirls to face me. The terror melts off her face, and some of the tension building in my chest goes with it.

“Hey,” she breathes.

“Busy?”

Her gaze moves to the stove and back to me with a smile. There's that spark. Beneath that timid shell, deep down, there's something that wants to fight for whatever this is. “I...”

“I'm not taking no for an answer,” I murmur. I'm closer now, nearly close enough to cage her beneath me. To put my fingers on those plump hips and bring her against me. My skin tingles with just the thought. “I was hoping”—my voice is lower, softer as I close the distance—“that you'd sit outside with me until dinner.”

“Why?”

“Figured you, Ethan, and I could enjoy the backyard a little. You're working too hard.”

“But I’m here to work.” Something about that grates at my skin.

“You’ll have plenty of time after to make dinner and do anything else.” I’m desperate for her to say yes. I hate how weak I am around her. How easily I want to fall to my knees and plead for just a drop of whatever she’ll spare. But I can’t stop myself—even when I know I’m playing with fire. Let it burn, for all I care.

“It’d be nice for you to spend more time with Ethan.” I don’t know why, but it makes me ridiculously happy when I see her with her son.

Softly, my hand settles on her hip, feeling her tense beneath my hand before her body relaxes. It’s become less frequent since I’ve started noticing it—since I’ve begun to touch her as frequently as I can. It’s a small step forward. Like Ethan, she needs time. But I’m goddamn desperate to feel her at ease beneath my fingers.

There’s something special about Rosa and Ethan. And I’ll be damned if I let a single person harm them ever again.

That I’m having these thoughts should scare me—should terrify me to the bone.

But it doesn’t. And that itself is far more terrifying than the emotions squeezing me tight at this very moment.

“I’m almost done with this,” she tells me.

“Can I help?”

I know the answer before she even shakes her head. It hasn’t changed since I started asking weeks ago. She’s stubborn at the oddest of times.

“Are you sure, Rosa?”

“Very. It’s nearly done. You two can eat. Then, we’ll play.”

“Us three.”

“No, I’m not…” Her words taper off. “I’m not hungry.”

“You didn’t eat breakfast.”

“I’m fine.”

“Please, eat. Even if it’s something small.”

“I’ll eat later.”

“Rosa.” My breath brushes the column of her neck, making goosebumps erupt on her arms. My hand dips past her hip and into the pocket of her apron.

Her fingers tremble as she wraps them around my hand, trying to stop me. It’s a feeble attempt.

“Crackers are not a meal.” The unopened pack crinkles as I place it onto the counter. “One small plate. That’s all I’m asking.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

I smile against her skin, dropping my lips to her exposed neck. “Good girl.”

She’s so receptive to praise, and I can’t help the smile on my face now. I’d praise her every hour of the day if she’d let me.

“You’re distracting me.” She sounds breathy.

A rumbly laugh leaves me. “That’s the plan.”

I want to make her feel how hard she makes me. My body is no longer my own. I want her to know that I respond instantly and unconsciously to her. That I’m helpless around her. That it’s her body that excites me like this. Because it’s her that I want.

Even when I shouldn’t.

I back up just a bit. The surrounding air is charged and dangerous. Another step back and another, and I slide into a chair.

The flush on her cheeks and the shy smile she tries to hide send another jolt of pleasure through my body.

Whatever game I’ve just started, I’m determined to win.

And something tells me that I’m going to enjoy the prize more than ever before.

For hours, Ethan, Rosa, and I run around the backyard playing various games. The soft giggles from Ethan warm me just as much as Rosa’s hand against my arm as she fights to catch her breath.

The flushed but content expression on her face burns into my memory.

And every bone in my body begs me to guide her into the house and finally take what I'd been fantasizing about for weeks now.

Will she taste as sweet as I imagine? Will she sound breathless, moaning my name?

Sliding into a lounge chair, I watch as Ethan and Rosa continue to construct a castle in the sandbox. Fort Millo, as Ethan had proudly named it with a timid smile my way, is starting to take shape.

The way he and Rosa both jump at any sudden noises burns a fire in my gut. It's getting better, but it's far from perfect. And I want it to be perfect.

Dusting herself off, Rosa tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. The golden halo of the setting sun behind her steals my breath away.

She's a complete goddess, every single curve of her.

Catching her hand, I pull her to me. And settling her body between my legs, I wrap my arms around her middle, dropping a soft kiss to her covered shoulder, then neck.

Her surprised squeak delights me far more than it should. And after a minute, she relaxes against my chest.

"Are you having fun?" I ask.

"Yes. And it's great that Ethan is so happy here."

The soft admission twists something in my gut. Sparking some urge to tear the world down for both of them. I'll enact my vengeance on their behalf before it's all over. They'll never know that kind of horror again. "Good."

Rosa watches Ethan closely. "I don't know how to say thank you."

"For?"

"This. For Ethan being safe and happy."

"You don't need to thank me or any of us."

"I do."

My brow crinkles. “I mean it. I want you both to feel comfortable here. I want you to relax, to enjoy yourselves.”

Her head bobs, but I can still feel the tension in her shoulders against my chest. I don’t know how to convince her of this. I don’t know how to prove it to her. The words I want to say are buried so deep that I’m not even sure they exist. They’re overshadowed by other things—darker things—things I hope she’ll never have to see from me.

Because the moment she does, it’s all going to come crashing down.

“Still, thank you,” she says softly.

“You’re welcome.”

“This is nice.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she exhales.

I smile, resting my chin on the top of her head as Ethan continues to play. It feels right, having her in my arms like this. Natural in some foreign way I can’t articulate. “Good.”

Silence fills the space. I don’t know how to broach the topic that burns my tongue. It’s there, bubbling to be let out. “Rosa?”

“Yes?”

“Do I scare you?” The words come out in a soft whisper. The urge to know the truth, to know if I’m seeing something here that she doesn’t in fact feel, burns hot through me. And the insecurity of it all makes a bead of sweat trickle down the back of my neck. Is she going along with this because I intimidate her? Or she feels obligated because of some fucked up notion she has after I gave her a job?

“No.”

My heart stops. “No?”

“Well...” A slight shrug lifts her shoulders. “Sometimes. At first, yes. But not for a while now.” She hesitates. “You’re kind—and that’s what really scares me.”

“Me being nice to you scares you?”

Wordlessly, she nods, and I tug her closer. She doesn't elaborate more, and I don't force her. She's a survivor, and the trauma has left too many wounds to heal right now. A sentiment I know all too well. “I don't want to scare you... But I know I scare everyone.”

“Only at first, Camillo.”

A dry laugh leaves my lips. “It's my job to be a monster, to be a beast that keeps everyone in line...” My tongue feels swollen in my mouth as if the words are some buried secrets that I can't pry out.

I know what I am. I know the kind of image I show to the world. I know how others perceive me when I walk into a room. I relish the power it gives me. What I've made myself into over the years is no secret. The world wanted a monster, and I was more than happy to fill that role. But knowing she sees that in me is worse than any words or slurs thrown my way.

“I don't think you're a monster.”

“You don't know me very well.”

“From what I've seen”—her hand squeezes mine on her thigh—“you're not the worst out there by far. You don't hide who you are.” Her nails drag over the lines along my forearm, making my muscles tense. My body jumps at the electricity that swallows me whole whenever she touches me. “You're not a wolf in sheep's clothing. You're just a wolf. Fangs, claws, and all. You don't try to be something else. And I appreciate that.”

Her words ring in my ears. I swallow thickly, letting the soft hum of the world envelop us. Rosa leans against me further, a soft sigh leaving her.

“Rosa?”

“Yes?”

“Will you let me help you in the kitchen?”

It's not what I want to ask. But it's what falls from my lips. It's safer this way.

Her body tenses in my arms. “Why?”

“I like watching you cook. And I was hoping you’d teach me?”

She twists in my arms. Her blond brows are puckered, and her big brown eyes cloud with confusion.

Before I’m even aware of what I’m doing, my hand cups her cheek, keeping her from fleeing from me.

“But why? I’m not that good. I mean, you could have some chef teach you or someone who knows what they’re doing.”

“I don’t want that. I want you to teach me. At least then, maybe I can give you a night off or something. And more time with Ethan.”

I watch the wheels in her mind turn, working over why I’m doing this. I watch it all flash across her eyes. I hate how what’s happened to her has sapped her confidence, making her second-guess and doubt everything. It’s another tick in the reasons why her husband will be a dead man as soon as the moment presents itself.

I brush my thumb over her cheek with the lightest of touches. “Rosa, I just want to help. All I want is for you to have more time with Ethan. And for me to spend more time with both of you too.”

She nods. “We can figure something out.”

“I’d like that, Rosa.”

Turning back around in my arms, her head lays against my shoulder, and I watch her fingers idly drawing along my tattoos, tracing the patterns as she keeps an eye on Ethan. The soft expression on her face warms something in my chest, sliding beneath the blackened bits of my heart to something that beats weakly beneath it.

She’s going to hate it, but I’m determined to step up for her. To step in and help. Not because she needs it. But because I need to be near her like I need oxygen. I need her in my arms, next to me, within reach. And I plan on having my next hit of her very soon.

I smile, the plan formulating in my head.