

CHAPTER 8

CAMILLO

After getting Alessio into his bed, I quickly shower, and then head down for dinner. Not much puts me off my food, and a delicious smell is wafting from the kitchen.

Getting back downstairs, I see that dinner is chicken parmesan—one of my favorites.

Rosa is creeping around Marco as she dishes up dinner at the table.

“For God’s sake,” Marco growls, “stop tiptoeing around. Just put the food on the fucking table.”

“Marco,” I say in a warning tone.

We start to eat while Rosa washes the pans. I try not to wince, not wanting to draw Marco’s attention to how bad the food is. As if there’s any chance of him not noticing...

“This chicken is raw in the middle!” he yells, clearly forgetting everything I said to him last night about being nicer to her. “Are you trying to fucking kill us?”

“N-no...” I see the moisture in her eyes before she ducks her head down and rushes to her room.

“Cut it out,” I snap. “She’s had a shock. We should be grateful that she helped and didn’t faint.”

“If she’d fainted, she would have definitely been out,” he growls. “Next to criers, the next worst thing I can’t stand is fucking fainters.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes at my brother.

“She did okay tonight,” he grudgingly concedes after a few moments.

I wrinkle my nose at the meal in front of me. The chicken is bad, and the vegetables are soggy from being cooked for far too long. Maybe the salad would have been okay had I not slung it out of the bowl for the bullets.

The whole thing is a disaster. Except for the garlic bread—that is absolutely heavenly. Crispy perfection on the outside, melt in your mouth deliciousness on the inside, and the perfect amount of garlic. I'll definitely be filling up on this.

After eating what I can, I clear the dishes, not wanting to leave it for Rosa to do. I hide the uneaten food under some cartons in the trash—no need to hurt her feelings any more than Marco already has.

By the time I've finished, she still hasn't come out of her room. I walk to the door and listen.

I can't hear anything.

I knock softly.

There's no response.

“Rosa?”

But still no answer.

Some emotion bubbles up in my throat—I'm not sure what—and it makes me open the door a crack.

From there I can see her in the attached bathroom, scrubbing furiously at her hands.

And as I take a few steps closer, I see the expression on her face.

“Is everything alright?” I say, trying to sound casual, but there's a jolt through my chest. Ever since she arrived, she's been reserved and quiet, almost physically shrinking into herself to make herself as inconspicuous as possible.

Her gaze darts up and meets mine in the reflection of the mirror over the basin. There's no response to my question, just a shuffling of her feet as she reaches for the towel that is already stained with vivid red.

Her eyes are wide, unfocused, and she looks lost, like she's somewhere far away from this room. I glance quickly at her hands, at the crimson stains still smeared across her pale skin.

“Rosa.” I keep my voice low, not wanting to scare her any further with the state she's already in.

Her eyes meet mine briefly, and she sucks in a sharp breath, but she still doesn't say anything. She can't stop looking at her hands, and it's like the blood on them is finally bringing home the reality to her of what's just happened.

As I watch her, it's obvious to me that I'm seeing only one thing in her right now: terror.

Without thinking, I step closer, my own heartbeat quickening. "Let me help you." My voice is gentle yet firm.

She doesn't resist when I reach for the towel, slowly loosening it from her grip.

I set it aside and let my arms guide her toward the basin. "Let's get you cleaned up," I murmur.

She follows my lead, her movements stiff. I turn on the tap, adjusting the water until it's hot, and then, very carefully, I take her hands in mine. Her skin is clammy and ice cold. Holding them under the water, I start to rub at them with gentle caresses, watching as the blood begins to wash away and swirl down the drain like thin red ribbons. This is nothing to me, but as Rosa sees the crimson in the water, a whimper escapes her lips.

My fingers whisper over her skin, and I can feel her eyes on me, confused and uncertain. She watches me with a sort of disbelief, like no one's ever shown her this kind of care before. The thought makes something twist inside my chest.

I rub my thumb over the back of her hand. "It's alright," I say softly. "The blood is coming away now. Hot water is better when it's started to dry."

When her hands are finally clean, I turn off the water and reach for a fresh towel. I pat her hands dry, taking my time, being as gentle as possible. I find myself thinking about what kind of life she had before coming here—what's left her so fragile and withdrawn.

I finish drying her hands and meet her gaze. Her expression is a mixture of confusion and something else—something softer, almost like gratitude, but hesitant.

"Why are you doing this?" she whispers.

"Because you needed help."

Her eyes widen slightly, and for a moment, I think she might cry. But she doesn't. Instead, she just looks at me, searching as if she's checking for a sign that this isn't a trick or a test.

I find myself hoping that she can see I really mean what I'm saying to her. "You don't have to be afraid," I say in a low voice. "Not here."

She blinks rapidly, as if trying to process my words, and then, almost imperceptibly, nods. "Thank you." Her voice is so quiet that I almost don't hear it.

And without another word, she turns and leaves the bathroom, leaving me standing there and holding the towel as I watch her go.

I come home mid-afternoon, and straightway, I'm drawn to the mouthwatering smell coming from the kitchen. I follow my nose and find Rosa putting freshly baked muffins on a cooling rack. "What flavor?" I ask as I grab one, not caring that they're still piping hot.

"Blueberry," she says shyly.

"Great." I take a bite, and closing my eyes, I give a sigh of ecstasy. "Absolute perfection."

But it's not just the food that's making me happy. I'm just glad that Rosa is still here and hasn't decided to hightail it out of here after what she saw last night.

Before she can turn back to the dishes in the sink, I know there's something I want to say to her. "Rosa?"

"Yes?"

"I...I'm, er, going to the hair salon this afternoon." I rub the back of my neck. "I wondered if, um, you'd like to come with me?"

She lifts her hand to her hair, a flush rushing up her cheeks. "Are you saying that my hair looks a mess?"

"Oh no, it looks nice. It's just I thought..."

How the hell do I explain this?

I clear my throat. “I thought that you might not know any hair salons around here,” I finish lamely. “I thought I could show you where I go. They do both men and women’s hair...”

“Your hair does always look good.”

I feel my chest swell with uncertainty—but also with hope. Does she like what she sees of me?

“Is it expensive?” she whispers.

“No.” Actually, it is. “They don’t charge me—and they wouldn’t charge you either as my friend. The salon is owned by one of my business associates.” That’s not strictly true, but I don’t want her worrying about the cost and that being a reason for her to say no.

But she’s still hesitating.

“And I can have you back in plenty of time to cook dinner,” I rush on. Jesus fucking Christ, that just makes me sound like a greedy guts who only thinks about his stomach and thinks her sole importance is as our maid and cook.

“Okay,” she says softly after a few moments.

And I let go of my breath, not realizing that I’ve been holding it while I waited for an answer.

I drive us to the salon, the radio on to fill the silence between us. I look across at her, hoping she’s not regretting that she agreed to come with me. I wish I could think of something to talk about, but words escape me. I’m not the biggest talker at the best of times, but today I’m really struggling for some reason I can’t explain.

When we arrive, I tell Rosa to take a seat. Then, I take the manager to one side. “Don’t mention a single fucking price in front of her,” I snarl.

His eyes widen as he nods quickly.

“And make sure you give the bill straight to me, and don’t let her see it, or you’ll regret the fucking day you were born, got it?”

He takes a huge gulp of air and nods frantically.

With that settled, I sit down in front of my usual stylist, Derek.

Derek is what can only be described as flamboyant. He has big hair and bright clothes, but he's one of the best stylists in the city.

Rosa sits in the chair next to me, and another stylist walks up behind her and gives her a warm smile through the reflection of the mirror. "Hey, I'm Helen. What can I do for you today?"

Rosa lifts her hand to her hair and flushes. "My hair's a bit of a mess. I cut it myself last time, but the scissors weren't sharp enough. And the color is fading."

She runs her fingers through the unbecoming faded black and brown-orange. "I think this color is a little wrong on you. I could take it back to your natural blond. It's really pretty, and most women would kill to have hair this color, you know—"

"I want to keep it black," Rosa blurts out in the loudest voice I've heard her use since I've met her. "I...I, er, like it this color."

"I guess it's nice to have a change if you've been blond all your life, right?" Helen says with a relaxed smile.

"Right," Rosa says quickly.

"I'll just freshen up the color and take out the brassy orange tones, if you'd like?"

"That sounds great, thank you," she replies softly.

"I take it I'm doing the usual for you, Camillo?" Derek asks.

"Yep," I nod. I catch Rosa's eye in the mirror. "I mean, why mess with perfection?"

And that makes her giggle, and it's a sound that lifts my soul. When she laughs, it's almost magical. Gone is the careworn woman, and in her place is a lighter, freer girl.

Helen is running an eye critically over Rosa's hair. "To get all the uneven ends level, I'll need to take it up into a shorter bob. The new length will be around the bottom of your ears—"

"No!" Rosa blurts out, her eyes widening. "It needs to reach my chin at least!"

Helen looks surprised, but she gives Rosa a reassuring smile. “Of course, we can keep it that long for sure. You have the sort of face that would look great with either length, but I’ll keep your hair chin-length.”

A look of relief washes over Rosa. I guess she doesn’t like her hair too short, although it’s a little strange that she doesn’t want to get all the uneven ends off.

“We should get the head massages,” I say to her. “They’re, um, divine.” I don’t know why I just said that, but I once heard a customer in the salon say this to her friend.

“Okay.” She smiles. And I can’t help smiling back at her.

We sit side by side in the reclining chairs as we get our hair washed and our heads massaged. And to my surprise, the massage feels heavenly—or maybe it’s because of the woman who’s sitting beside me.

I sneak a peek at her, her eyes closed in bliss and a smile settled on her beautiful lips.

And I realize this is the most relaxed I’ve seen her since the day I met her. I don’t know why, but she always seems as if she’s carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders.

I know she’s probably just naturally timid and nervous, but sometimes, it seems like there’s something else going on with her.

My thoughts are interrupted when the massage comes to an end and we’re ushered to sit in front of the stylists.

Derek and Helen chat away as they see to our hair, and Rosa even appears to let her guard down as she talks with them.

Helen is talking away as she lifts another section of Rosa’s hair to cut. But then, Helen suddenly stills, and her unfinished sentence hangs in the air.

I look across at them. And I see that Rosa’s face is frozen in horror.

“Oh, honey...” Helen says softly. “Is this why you didn’t want your hair too short?”

Rosa nods slowly, her eyes shining.

And I look down to see what Helen is staring at.

It’s at the base of Rosa’s scalp—it’s a large bald patch.

“Have you suffered some hair loss?” Derek asks after a quick glance. He’s concentrating on my hair and isn’t really paying attention to Rosa and Helen, and he hasn’t noticed Rosa’s expression.

When Rosa doesn’t say anything, Helen reaches forward and grasps her hand tightly. “I’ve seen patches due to hair loss,” she says quietly, “but I’ve also seen patches like this—I can tell that someone ripped your hair out... I’m so sorry, honey.”

Derek’s eyes instantly gleam with sympathy, and he pats her arm. “Don’t worry, sweetie,” he says in a kind tone, “no one can even see it, and it looks like it’s already growing back. You’ll be back to your old self in no time.”

While they comfort her, I give her a small smile, hoping that this won’t make her feel too awkward in front of me. “I’m sorry you had to go through that,” I murmur in a low voice, and she shoots me a grateful smile.

The rest of the appointment passes with some casual conversation, and when we’re back in the SUV and driving home, I look across at Rosa. But the only thing I can see is red.

And I know that when I find out who the fuck did this to her, he’s going to be really fucking sorry...

As I dig into my stack of pancakes, I hear the heavy footsteps of my brothers echoing down the hallway. The scent of sweat and the faint metallic tinge of blood hits me even before they step into the room, telling me that they’ve just done their morning boxing training in our gym.

I barely spare them a glance as they stride to the kitchen counter, both bare-chested, wearing only their gym shorts.

Rosa looks up as they sit down, and her eyes widen as she takes in the sight of them. Her face pales as she stares at the blood on them, and I can see the fear in her eyes, the kind that’s raw and instinctual. She’s scared.

My eyes watch the way she’s shrinking into herself and trying to make herself inconspicuous.

I glance back over at my brothers. Their muscles are gleaming perspiration, and the tattoos stretching across their broad chests each tell a story of the countless fights

they've been through, the battles they've won, and the enemies they've made along the way. Them turning up to breakfast like this is nothing new to me, but it's crystal clear that it's making Rosa uncomfortable—more than that, it's outright terrifying her.

“Rosa,” Marco barks.

“Y-yes, sir?”

“Maple syrup,” he demands.

She grabs the bottle from the shelf, almost tripping over her feet as she rushes to bring it over to Marco. As she sets it down with a shaking hand, she knocks over the glass of juice he's just poured.

“Oh God, I'm s-sorry,” she stutters.

Marco just looks at her with his trademark glare, doing nothing to help matters.

“Don't worry about it, Rosa,” I say quietly.

Her gaze darts downward, and she dashes back to deal with the dirty dishes in the sink.

Marco pokes at his pancakes, scowling as he notices all the burned bits, but thankfully, he keeps his mouth shut for once.

We talk about casino business as we eat, but I find it hard to ignore the tension in her shoulders.

She mumbles something about seeing to the laundry and hurries off.

Marco frowns at her departing back. “I wanted her to make some more coffee,” he complains.

I set my cup down with more force than necessary, the sharp sound making my brothers pause. “Make your own fucking coffee,” I growl.

“What the hell's gotten into you this morning, Millo?”

“You.”

“Huh?” Confusion flickers across his face.

I eyeball my brothers. “Let’s get a few fucking things clear,” I snarl. “One, breakfast isn’t the time to be parading around half-naked like a bunch of savages, so you wear a fucking shirt from now on. We’re having breakfast, not going to a fucking brawl. Two, you say ‘please’ to Rosa whenever you need her to do something. And three, I don’t care if Rosa’s food is fucking burned or if she’s given you salmonella poisoning or if it’s making you puke your guts out, you say ‘thank you, that was delicious,’ after every fucking meal. Got it?”

My brothers just stare at me.

“You were both scaring her.”

“Are you talking about the maid?” Alessio asks with a puzzled look.

“Of course I’m fucking talking about the maid,” I practically roar. And I see the realization dawn on their faces, but they still don’t understand the gravity of it. They never do. To them, this is normal. To them, this is their home. But I see what they don’t.

Marco raises an eyebrow. “Come on, Millo. We just finished training. It’s not like she hasn’t seen a man without a shirt before.” Alessio shakes his head as he chuckles under his breath.

“I’m not fucking joking,” I snap. But they still don’t say anything else. “So help me God, tell me that you both fucking understand me before I punch you both in your fucking faces.”

They hesitate for a moment, the stubbornness that runs through our blood making them want to push back. But they know better than to cross me when I’m like this. Slowly, grudgingly, they both nod. “Sure, if it stops you acting like a bad-tempered bear at breakfast time,” Marco grits out. “But tell me, Millo, why the hell do you care so much?”

I pause for a moment. “She’s new. Be nice to her.” And that’s all I say—because I don’t know how else to explain it.

“She’s caught your eye, hasn’t she?” Alessio clips.

I choke on my mouthful of food and shake my head. “What?”

“I said she’s not terrible to look at. That’s why you want to keep her around, right? It’s been a while since you’ve gotten any ass,” Alessio clarifies.

Marco shakes his head. “Bad fucking idea, Millo.”

“First off, fuck you both.” I take a gulp of my coffee. “Second, she made the best cupcakes I’ve had in fucking months. I’m not letting Mr. Moody Muppet here ruin this for me. That’s all.”

Alessio and Marco exchange a look as I slam my cup back onto the counter. My fucking brothers think they know everything there is to know about anything now that they’ve gotten families of their own. But one thing’s for sure—they couldn’t be more fucking wrong.

As we finish up and are pushing back our stools to stand up, Rosa comes back. She’s still shaking a little, but I can see that she’s trying to compose herself.

Marco and Alessio start to walk away, but I block them, bunching up my muscles and shooting them a glacial glare.

“Uh, thanks for breakfast, Rosa,” Marco says slowly.

“Yeah, it...was delicious,” Alessio adds with reluctance.

And I give them a satisfied nod before letting them pass.

They turn and leave the room, their footsteps heavy with irritation. I don’t care. They need to learn that this isn’t just their home; it’s mine too. And I need Rosa to feel safe here...