

CHAPTER 10

CAMILLO

Rosa's cooking has improved by leaps and bounds lately. I don't know what's changed, but she's less nervous when she's in the kitchen.

It's still early as I sit at the island with my coffee while Alessio is flipping through the newspaper. Not much goes on at breakfast except for some business talk usually. But today is different because the tension in the air is thick. And it's all about...

Cupcakes.

Yesterday, Rosa made chocolate brownies, all rich, soft, and gooey. The day before, it was a peach pie that nearly made me weep. But today is cupcake day. And cupcakes are my absolute favorite.

"Rosa, I think you should make banana chocolate chip cupcakes," Alessio says, trying to sound casual, but I can hear the underlying edge in his voice. As his arms lean on top of the kitchen island, he stares at Rosa with that intense look he gets when he really wants something. And things with banana or chocolate chips are his favorites, but when they're both together, he feels like he's won the lottery.

Rosa, standing by the oven, nods politely. "Banana chocolate chip, okay."

"Wait," I grit out as I slam my coffee cup down, the liquid sloshing out onto the counter. "Rosa, if you're making cupcakes, I think your peanut butter cupcakes with the special frosting are the way to go." I can already taste the decadent frosting with the special drizzle of honey that Rosa adds at the end. "You know, a little something rich and satisfying, not just predictable banana chocolate chip."

Alessio rolls his eyes. "Banana isn't predictable, and chocolate chips are a classic and the foundation of all good desserts."

"Foundation, maybe," I shoot back, "but it's boring. Peanut butter has depth, it's—"

"Boring," Alessio cuts in. "Everyone's doing peanut butter cupcakes right now."

Food is an important part of my life; when it's something made by Rosa, however, I just turn into a crazy person. I don't know why but I want her to cook and bake only for me, and I don't want to have to share her with anyone else. I want to be the one showering her with compliments, I want to be the one building up her confidence—and I want to be the one making her smile.

“I could make a small batch of both?” Rosa suggests carefully. “That way, you can both have your favorite.”

My head automatically shakes, my freshly washed locks swinging from side to side. “No, no, no. Nuh uh. That won't work. If you're making banana chocolate chip for him, that means less peanut butter cupcakes for me.”

Rosa raises an eyebrow at us both.

“A small batch of both flavors sounds a good compromise,” Alessio says with a scowl.

“Although, if you don't have enough chocolate chips, then you can make all of them in peanut butter flavor,” I add.

“And why exactly would she not have enough chocolate chips?” Alessio growls.

But I keep my mouth zipped. I'm not about to tell him that I hid all the chocolate chips last night, knowing that he would probably ask for banana chocolate chip cupcakes today. Like I said, he's predictable.

He opens his mouth and starts to snarl a response when his cell rings, and taking the call, he has to leave for the casino on an urgent matter.

I give Rosa a wink. And when she smiles shyly at me as she starts to pull out ingredients, I can't help it and smile back at her. And it's not just about the cupcakes...

The next morning, I've just come in from a run around our estate; sweat sits slick against my skin as I yank out my earbuds. I ran an extra three miles today in an attempt to compensate for the three peanut butter cupcakes I had after dinner last night. They were fucking delicious, and I would run an extra fifty miles daily if Rosa made them every single day for me.

Conversation comes from the kitchen, and the smell of something delicious moves me in that direction. Lingered in the doorway, I observe my older brothers. The very people I'd do anything for. Cross any line as long as it ensures their protection.

It's a loyalty engrained in me that only they deserve.

The reason I became the monster I am...

"This is delicious," Alessio says to Rosa.

"Best meal yet," Marco adds.

The words are complimentary enough, and I'm glad my siblings are starting to behave as they should. But it's not them who I watch now. It's her.

My eyes linger on her as she chops up fresh pineapple for breakfast. Her hair is tucked behind her ears, with a few loose strands escaping to frame her face. Her full body fills out the dress she's wearing, the curves of her breasts and hips flaring out like a tantalizing tease.

I drop into the chair and pour myself a cup of coffee.

"Nice of you to join us," Alessio drawls.

"If you want to spend more time with me, you should try getting up earlier."

He glares at me, although he knows I'm right—I've been up two hours already, getting in my gym workout and run. "Did you handle it?" He changes the subject, referring to the situation with the runner trying to double dip into our profits.

The cup pauses halfway to my lips. I sigh, thumping my cup back down. "This conversation can't wait until I've at least had some fucking coffee?"

And until we're not in front of Rosa. Because even though she knows exactly what I do, I find myself not wanting to talk about it in her presence—and not wanting her to see me as just a monster.

"Look, it's handled," I tell Alessio. "He won't be a problem for us anymore."

"Better be."

The fresh bruises and split skin of my knuckles are enough to signify what's happened to the runner. He's dealt with. But then, my brothers already know that. It's why I was sent.

"We have a few more people who you need to make a house call to," Marco says, not bothering to look up from the email he's reading on his phone.

"Why me?" It's a stupid question. It's my role in the entire operation. My brothers are scary fuckers, but I'm the boogie man the soldiers and runners whisper about.

"Have other plans?"

My eyes flicker to Rosa, but I shake my head. "No."

Rosa sets a plate down in front of me, a large omelet filled with cheese and mushrooms, with a stack of bacon at the side—crispy on the edges which is exactly how I like it.

"Thank you," I say with a small smile at her.

She stares down at me, that beautiful flush on her cheeks spreading before she drops her gaze and nods. She turns and heads out of the kitchen. With her back to me, I follow the bounce of her ass with each step she takes until she's out of view.

"Did she eat already?" The words are out even before I can stop them. In the time she's been here, I've yet to see her eat anything that she's cooked. Maybe she eats in her room when we're all gone. But that thought doesn't sit well with me.

I'm met with a shrug from my siblings. I make a sound in the back of my throat before taking a large bite of the omelet. It's delicious, just like I knew it would be.

Ten minutes later, looking up, I meet Alessio's arched brow. His arms are crossed over his chest, and he leans back against his chair. We're the only two left at the table now.

"What?"

"First, where the hell do you put all that food? Second, really?"

"Really...what?"

"How long has that been a thing?"

Oh shit, he's on about that again. Deflect, just deflect. "Has what been a thing?"

He shakes his head. "I'm not blind. I saw the way you were looking at her and then at her ass. You got a thing for Rosa?"

I force a laugh. "Of course not."

"Uh huh, so that look was just what?"

"I don't know what look you're talking about. I was just being polite—you know, since neither you nor Marco can seem to muster it."

His eyes narrow, and he leans forward. "Uh huh."

Fuck, fuck, fuck. "Look, I'm just being nice. She looks like she could use a little kindness. Plus, she's a skilled cook and baker. Even you have to admit she's the best one we've had for a while." But I don't sound as confident as I intend.

She's a mystery I still can't figure out.

"That's it? You just like her cooking?"

"Yeah." I won't admit to him that Rosa interests me—and beyond just her gorgeous body. She's quiet and keeps to herself. She's submissive and obedient and doesn't talk much in our company. Occasionally, I hear her on the phone in her room late at night. But we don't know who Rosa is as a person. Maybe it's her keeping it professional. But fuck that—I want to know her.

Because if I know her, I can protect myself from her. I can better ignore what she does to my body and the frantic confusion going on in my head.

He doesn't say anything, just tilts his head like he can unweave the lies that are coming from my lips.

"What else would it be? She's not my type. I'm not into the innocent type." I'm not a gentle kind of lover. I rarely bring women back to the estate. I take care of my needs in other ways—quick fucks in the casino. Rough and fast to satiate my needs, and when it's over, I walk away. It's that simple. Rosa deserves better. She deserves to be worshipped, and I'm not the man to do that. I'll bend and break her into a million pieces.

"Good. Keep it that way."

“Yes, sir,” I grit out sarcastically with a mock salute as I push my chair back from the table with more force than is necessary.

He adjusts his suit jacket as he stands. “You have a job to do for us. For the family. Don’t let some doe-eyed maid complicate things.”

My jaw ticks as I grind my teeth together. “I heard you the first time.”

“Just making sure it gets through your thick skull.”

I flip him the bird before letting a breath whoosh from my lungs. My hand drags down my face. My body is so wound up now that the work out I did this morning feels meaningless.

This is the second time since Rosa started that Alessio has brought this up. I need to fucking get my shit together, and fast.

I rub at my jaw where I know a fresh bruise is blooming. It’s late and dark, and once I’ve updated Marco, all I want to do is to sink into the sheets of my bed.

The estate itself is quiet. Which is what I need after a shitty day of playing bad guy. It never used to bother me before—doing these things and watching these so-called men weep and cry in my presence. But now I don’t want to come home and accidentally stumble upon Rosa while looking like I went a few rounds with a rottweiler. I don’t want her to see this side of me yet...

I yank open the freezer and rummage around for something, anything, to press to my face. My hand fits against a bag of frozen peas, and I press it to my tender jaw before snagging a water bottle as well.

A soft laugh trickles down the hall, stopping me in my tracks.

It’s a beautiful sound.

Every muscle in my body tightens. I tread softly through the hall and toward the sound. Toward Rosa’s room.

A soft yellow glow spills out into the hall from a crack in her door where it’s not fully closed. Again, her soft laugh sounds, making my heart drum against my chest. God, nothing has ever sounded so fucking perfect. And it reminds me of when I first heard

her laugh when I took her to the hair salon—just before I found out a little bit of what she’s been through before she became our maid.

“I miss you too,” I hear her say.

My blood freezes.

I shouldn’t be listening to this.

I should turn around and give her privacy and respect. But I can’t move. I’m rooted to the spot.

Who the hell is she talking to at this late hour?

“No. Soon, I promise.” Her voice is tinged with some emotion I don’t like hearing her use toward someone else... It strangles my chest, and an uncomfortable feeling settles in its place.

I lean forward to peer between the crack in the door and the jam. She’s sitting cross-legged on her bed. A phone is settled onto the pillows in front of her. She’s in a baggy T-shirt that hides most of her full body, but it’s the bare creamy skin of her thick thighs that takes my attention.

Fuck, is that what she wears to sleep? She’s fucking perfect.

My hand tightens on the bag pressed against my cheek when she swipes at her eyes as if she’s crying.

What the hell is going on?

“I know. I love you too.”

The world stops. My nostrils flare, and my blood pumps loudly in my ears. Who the hell is she saying that to? And why the hell do I even care?

She’s obviously left her husband, but does she have a boyfriend now?

As the information trickles through my brain, the anger boiling up in my chest is nothing compared to the feeling twisting in my gut.

Maybe Alessio is right; maybe I’m getting too distracted by her—and maybe that means I’m not doing my job as well as I should be.

“Goodnight. I love you.”

I love you. The words repeat over and over in my head. My body kicks into motion before she can spot me.

I'm down the hall and up the stairs, fuming. What did I think was going to happen? That she'd get to know me and not run the other way? That a woman like her, used to the finest the world has to offer, would give a man like me the time of day?

I need to clear my head and head to the gym before I lose my shit.

And as I try to work the anger out of my system, I tell myself that I'm not jealous—because that would mean that I care more than I should.