

CHAPTER 12

CAMILLO

I'm drawn to the kitchen as the scent of something delicious wafts through the house. As I come closer, I hear the clatter of pots and pans and hear the sizzle of something frying. Bacon.

Lingering by the door, I watch Rosa work. She's concentrating intently, like she's cooking for someone she cares about...

And then, my arms crossed, I watch as she fusses over Mr. F like he's the king of this household. Her soft voice coos as she scratches the dog behind his ears, and the sly mutt leans into her touch with a contented groan. She's completely absorbed in making sure Mr. F is comfortable, happy, and utterly spoiled.

A feeling twists in my chest. When was the last time someone fussed over me like that? Sure, I get laid often enough, but it's just not the same. And now, here Rosa is, but all her attention is focused on the dog.

"Mr. Fluffy, you're such a good boy, aren't you?" she murmurs as her fingers work magic into his fur. "And you definitely deserve a treat, don't you?"

My shoulder muscles bunch up, and I feel like yelling that I'm the one in this house that deserves a treat.

She crouches down onto her knees, practically now on the floor with him, as if there's nowhere else in the world she'd rather be.

I clear my throat to draw her attention. But she's too absorbed in fussing over him. And I can't help feeling annoyed at how easily she ignores me. I'm the one who hired her, I'm the one paying her salary, and yet she's lavishing all her attention on him. I just don't get it.

She puts some bacon on a plate and sets it down on the floor in front of him. His tail wags at a furious speed, and his snout dives in as he devours it with relish. I bet it's delicious...

Smiling down at him, she pats his head, and I'm struck by how beautiful she looks when she's happy. "Good boy, Mr. Fluffy," she praises, patting his head as he eats.

I let out a small, involuntary sigh, and her head snaps up, finally noticing my presence. Her cheeks flush a little, and she stands quickly, brushing her hands on her apron. "I didn't see you there. Is there anything I can get you?"

Is there something I need? How do I even begin to answer that? Because I know that I need a lot of things, and most of those I didn't even realize until she walked into my life. "It smells good in here," I say, gesturing vaguely toward the stove. "I'll have some bacon too. In a sandwich please." My stomach growls in anticipation.

Her eyes widen as she glances at the stove, then back at me. "Oh, that was the last of the bacon. But I can make you something else if you're hungry?"

I suppress the growl building at the back of my throat. As if fur face getting spoiled by her isn't bad enough, now he's eaten all the fucking bacon as well?

"Sure," I say, trying to keep my voice even, like it's no big deal. Like I'm not desperate to stay here a little longer. Why can't she give that sort of attention to me? Why can't I be the one she's fussing over? And why can't I be the one to make her smile...?

After Rosa moved in, I thought it'd be easy enough to ignore her and go on about my business. I thought I'd be able to do what I've always done when it comes to pretty maids in the house. Ignore them and stay the fuck away. But that's a fucking joke now.

I'm uncomfortably aware of where Rosa is in the house at all times. Of what she's doing at any given moment. I track her constantly as she slaves away, busting her gorgeous ass to meet the demanding orders of my brothers.

Even now, as I watch her stretch to reach for something that's too high, I'm honed in on her.

And it pisses me off. I shouldn't care.

Inserting myself into anything to do with her is a dangerous move, not to mention stupid. There's still so much I don't know about her. So much that could bite me in the ass.

But ever since she helped me stitch up Alessio and Marco, I haven't been able to stop watching her. I keep telling myself that it's because I'm just checking on how she's processing the whole thing—and watching for if she bolts.

She'd been terrified that night. And yet, she'd carried on the next morning as if nothing happened.

I'm simply looking to make sure she doesn't leave us high and dry. That's what I'm telling myself.

It has nothing to do with how my body reacts when she's around or how frustrated I am that I can't seem to escape that sweet rose fragrance that follows her around. Even in my own goddamn room or shower, it follows me. My nostrils flare, taking in a deep huff of the smell, cursing myself to the deepest parts of hell. It's quickly becoming a problem.

A flash of creamy skin catches my eye as Rosa stretches further onto her tiptoes, trying to grasp the silver mixing bowl from the shelf. The edge of her shirt rolls up just enough that I'm privy to a tease of her skin there. My body jumps into action, sending blood pumping in the wrong damn direction before I can stop it.

A good person would go over there and help. A good person would offer to get a step stool or something before she breaks her neck.

But I'm not a good person. I sit there at the counter and watch, pretending to be preoccupied with the paper and the breakfast pancakes she's made.

I sit there and take in my fill of her openly. She's all curves and softness. Just enough weight on her that she fills out her clothes and makes my mouth water. The slope of her neck is tantalizing in a way I don't understand, but I want to wrap my hand around it and feel her pulse thrum frantically beneath my fingers.

The bowl tips forward, and she catches it, settling back down to her feet with a triumphant smile.

The smile on her face sucks the air right out of my lungs. It's rare and lights up her entire face so that I'm instantly hooked. It's almost as sweet as the soft humming she does when she thinks no one is watching. It's another item on the list of things about Rosa that shouldn't interest me but does.

She puffs out a breath, blowing a few strands from her eyes. Her cheeks flush with color, a delectable hint of rose painting her skin and highlighting the soft freckles on her nose. Hastily, she readjusts her shirt and gnaws on her bottom lip.

My eyes zero in on the action.

This is wrong. Bad. And exactly what I don't want to do. But fuck it if I don't want to replace her teeth with my own and see what kind of wicked sounds she'd make for me. Would she whimper? Would she moan? Would she be submissive and let me have my way with her?

I shouldn't be having those thoughts. I shouldn't be entertaining them at all.

Never in my life have I wanted to make small talk with anyone as badly as I do with Rosa. Never in my life have I wanted to unravel someone the way I want to unfurl the layers around her to find out what makes her the way she is.

It's wrong. And yeah, I'm so fucked.

"There you are." Alessio's voice sounds from behind me.

"Here I am." I take a long sip of the orange juice Rosa squeezed fresh this morning.

"We need you to go solve a problem."

"Right now?" I motion to my food and the newspaper with its pristine pages that I've clearly been ignoring. "Or are you going to allow me to finish my breakfast first?"

"Shove it in your mouth, and let's go. Marco is waiting."

"Morning to you too," I mutter.

I swallow the last mouthful of my pancake and down the rest of my glass.

"Thanks, Rosa," I say in a low voice as I pass.

Then I try to clear my mind and focus on the task ahead. As nice as it's been having a tidy room, clean house, and amazing home-cooked meals, I need to stay the fuck away. I've never had this problem before. I've never felt so out of control. Like I'm spiraling, and I can't stop. I'm pissed. At the world. At Rosa. At the way her perfect curves fill out her clothes.

But more so I'm pissed at myself. For letting my dick run the show. For letting that little voice of hope I thought burned to a crisp years ago flicker back to life and convince me someone like Rosa would find a man like me worthy.

It's temporary, I tell myself over and over with each step away from the kitchen. The fixation will pass in a few weeks like it always does, and it'll be back to business as usual. She's new and intriguing, and my body sees it as a challenge. Something new to sink my teeth into.

My anger flares. Because I can't be responsible for someone else. I can't have something as heavy as that on my shoulders. But watching how she yelps, cowers, and tries to make herself small in every interaction, it makes me want to protect her in every way possible.

She's temporary. That's what I have to keep reminding myself of. She's only here until Marco sends her packing. He says she passed the trial, but we all know how volatile he is. He'll end up firing her—one way or another—just like he has everyone else.

I need to get her out of my head.

I need to hit the gym. Do something to distract me from the flood of arousal pumping through my body. And then, I'll take the longest cold shower known to man. Or I need to kill someone—in the most brutal way possible

Because I need to distract myself so that I stop thinking about doing depraved things to her that will only fuck up my carefully laid out life.

But do I? That small annoying voice in the back of my head whispers as I slide into my SUV. My hands curl around the steering wheel, and I shudder out a deep breath. That's the problem with hope. It flickers to life and refuses to fucking die.

There's no world in which I can taste the forbidden fruit and not get addicted. I wish that little voice would just go for good. Leave me in peace for once in my life.

She's off-limits. She's a reminder of everything I want but can't have. And the sooner my body fucking gets with the program, the easier this is going to be.

Because it's wrong. It's so very wrong to want something I can't have. To taunt myself with the idea of what it could be like to have her and taste her the way my body wants to.

Yeah, I'm well and truly fucked.

But I'm not even sure I care.

I feel like a fucking teenager. My palms are sweaty, and my heart is racing like I've just run the estate twice over. I hate this feeling, and yet, the rush of adrenaline pumping through my body is hard to ignore.

This is stupid.

Of course, it is. But I can't stop now.

I think of Rosa's nervous, scared look every time she looks at me. It's burned into my brain, and it only makes my blood boil. I don't want her to look at me like that, even though she should.

I'm the monster the devil's afraid of, but I don't want to be like that with her. I want to be something else—something I don't think I can be.

I knock at her bedroom door before I can chicken out and stop myself.

With one quick check down the hall to ensure none of my siblings are lingering to witness what I'm sure will be a dumpster fire of a disaster, I wait. It's early, and they're probably still asleep.

I inhale sharply, impatience swimming through me.

"Mr. Camillo?" She still won't drop the Mr., but maybe she will in time.

The air from my lungs seizes in my chest as Rosa's body fills the small gap in the door. She's wearing that oversized T-shirt that just brushes the top of her thighs again.

I can just make out the outline of the curves of her breasts which are bare beneath the fabric. She looks beautiful early in the morning. She looks beautiful all the time, but something about seeing her sleepy-eyed does something to me.

Something I'm ready to acknowledge.

"Is something wrong? Did I do something?"

I shake my head, “No. Uh... I...” This is so much harder than it sounded in my head twenty minutes ago when I came up with this plan.

The urge to know more about her has been clawing at my insides. It’s a compulsion almost as bad as needing to feel my knuckles wrapped and bloody. “Go for dinner. With me.” My words blurt out.

Her brown eyes widen, and I watch as her tongue darts over her lip. “I’m sorry?”

“I mean, er, would you like to go to dinner with me?” I take a big gulp. “Um, please?”

“Me?” she squeaks.

I nod. “Yeah.” This is where I should tell her that I want to get to know her, spend time with her... “You’ve been, er, working really hard. I figured it was the least, um, we could do for you.”

Christ, why do I sound so fucking feeble? I’m used to telling my soldiers every single day exactly what I want, so why can’t I just tell her that I fucking want to take her on a date?

“I...” That bottom lip of hers is sucked beneath her teeth, and my gaze zeroes in on it. She’s going to reject me. Of course, she is. A woman like Rosa doesn’t want to be seen with a man like me. My body goes rigid in the doorway as I shove my hands into my pockets. “Okay. Sure.”

I blink slowly, trying to process what she’s just said. “I’ll make arrangements to have takeout ordered for everyone else,” I say quickly before she can change her mind. “So, you don’t need to worry about anything tonight except going out and enjoying the meal. I’ll meet you downstairs at seven. Okay?”

A tentative smile graces her face, and I can feel my heart stutter. She should smile more often, and the fact that she doesn’t is a crime against humanity. She mumbles a thank you and closes the door.

The entire jog up the stairs to my room feels like I’ve won the lottery.

It’s selfish. It’s the wrong thing to be happy about. But I need to know her more. I need to crack into the hard shell around her and find what makes her tick.

I know it’s foolish to indulge myself when nothing will come of it. When it’ll only lead to a crash and burn. But I can’t help it. Not with Rosa.

After finishing work for the day, there's still about three hours until I take her to dinner. I pass the time in the gym, allowing my nervous energy to pour out into each jab and punch against the canvas bag.

Eventually, the world around me fades, and it's just me and my demons wrestling for dominance, the darkness pulling me under.

When the alarm on my phone sounds, I snap back to reality. The nerves that I managed to ease now return tenfold. I run up the stairs, shirt yanked over my head before I even make it to my room. I kick the pile of clothing from my path as I toss my shirt onto the floor. I know I should try to be tidier after all the efforts Rosa's made with my room, but today, I can't help it as an agitated feeling skitters through me.

After showering, I jog down the stairs while buttoning the sleeves of my dress shirt. It's suffocating despite the breathable fabric. If we weren't going somewhere so public, I wouldn't have bothered.

My foot hits the last step, and I inhale deeply, checking my reflection in the mirror. The top layer of my hair is tied back, and the edges of my ink peek out from under my collar.

I hate dressing up, but it'll all be worth it. I need to put to rest whatever hold Rosa has over me. That's the only way I'll be able to think clearly with her around. Once the distraction is gone, I'll be able to focus on whatever the fuck I need to.

"You know, don't you, that you don't have to dress up to take your hand on a date?"

I whirl to face Alessio who is leaning against the archway.

"Fuck off. I thought you were still working."

"I am. The question is, Millo, what are you doing?"

"I'm going out. Not that it's any of your business."

His gaze drags over me in a way that makes me feel like a kid again. I hate how he and Marco can do that so easily to me. I arch a brow. Shaking his head, he disappears further into the house. And I exhale a breath.

I'm not trying to hide anything from my brothers, but they don't need to go poking around into my private life. I'm a grown ass man, for God's sake.

I glance at my watch, and the nerves choke me as I pull on my suit jacket, hiding the concealed gun in my holster. I can do this. Employers take their beautiful, curvy employees out to dinner all the time. Right?

"Hi." Rosa's soft voice hits my ears, and I whirl around. "I hope this is okay. It's all I have."

My eyes rake over her body before slowing down to enjoy the view. Wrapped in a velvety thin-strapped jade green dress that just hits her mid-thigh, she looks like sin.

The dress hugs each of her curves like a glove, accentuating the way her body tapers in at the waist before flaring over her wide hips. It doesn't hide the fact that she's got meat on her bones, and that alone makes my mouth water.

The heels she wears elongate her legs, and the urge to touch them nearly overtakes me. Her hair has pretty waves in it, and I can't help my gaze trailing over her cute, rounded cheeks and freckles. Her lips are painted a soft pink, giving them a natural and glossy look. Venus rising from the ocean has nothing on the vision in front of me.

She fiddles with the strap of her watch, her gaze dropped.

"You look beautiful," I breathe.

That delicious color spreads across her fair cheeks, and my body stiffens. She shifts from foot to foot, still not meeting my eyes, but I can't take my eyes off her.

"I know I have some weight to lose..." Her voice is a low murmur.

My eyebrows shoot up. "No, you don't," I say quickly. "I like a woman with proper curves."

A look of confusion flickers over her face. "You don't have to say that."

"I mean it." I clear my throat, pulling at my collar. "Shall we?"

Mutely, she nods when I motion to the door. I hold it open as the hint of her scent billows past me. My mouth waters for another hit. Her rose scent with a hint of lavender is better than any drug out there.

With a shake of my head, I curl my fist. I can look, but I can't touch. That's not what this is.

"I hope you're hungry," I say as I open the passenger door to my SUV.

She gives me a tight smile in return.

The car ride is filled with mostly silence while I observe her fidget slightly in her seat. I can't quite decide if it's nervousness or something else. Thankfully, the ride isn't long.

"Have you ever eaten here?" I ask as I pull us into the valet line at the best Italian restaurant in the city.

"No."

"Oh?" I figured everyone in Chicago's upper elite had dined here at least once in their life. I nod, unsure what else to say.

I notice a shiver run through Rosa. It's cool in my car, but I know from experience that this particular restaurant always has its AC on even higher.

I hand my keys off to the valet before moving around the SUV, unbuttoning my jacket as I go to open Rosa's door. I don't miss the curious eyes of those milling around the building, all too eager to see who's out on the town and hoping to catch a glimpse of the rich and famous who often frequent this establishment.

As she climbs out of the car, I quickly cover her shoulders with my jacket. I don't like seeing her shiver.

But as soon as the fabric wraps around her, her gaze snaps to mine. She takes a sharp inhale, and her eyes widen with a look of alarm. Her body goes ramrod straight with tension and something else I can't identify.

Alarm bells ring in my head. What just happened?

Offering her a soft reassuring smile, I gently press my hand to the small of her back, guiding her inside.

Warmth radiates from her, and the thought of her smelling like me does all kinds of bad fucked up things to my thoughts. She fits perfectly into my side, tucked away from the nosy vultures of Chicago. I like her protected like this.

Some primal part of my brain roars to life, and I clench my fist to keep from growling at the men who openly ogle her as we pass. One glare from me is enough for them to pale and turn away quickly.

I usher Rosa straight past the bodies waiting in the queue, and it isn't until we hit the hostess stand that Rosa lifts her gaze to take in the elegance.

We're immediately seated, much to the chagrin of some other well-to-do nobodies. Rosa slides into the chair across from me. The particular table I requested is tucked in a corner, private and exclusive.

"Do you want wine?" I ask.

Rosa shakes her head.

"Something else? Beer? Or a cocktail? It's my treat, Rosa. Order whatever you want."

But she shakes her head again and lifts the menu, hiding her face from me.

I swallow thickly. How is this already going so wrong?

I mimic her and let my gaze roam the list of items. The light airy feeling that bubbled through me at the start of this has slowly sunk into something else.

Though she declined the wine, I get a bottle just in case and a beer for me. Marco and Alessio would be smacking me on the back of the head for the lack of class, but I'm here to enjoy myself with her, not put on a show.

"See anything you like?"

"I'm not sure," she murmurs.

The quiet, timid response makes my stomach churn. Is it so bad to be seen with me? Did I cross some line I can't quite see? My hand tightens around the bottle as I bring it to my lips.

Without another word, Rosa and I order when the server arrives at our table. And after ordering, once more, an awkward silence fills the air.

The soft hum of chatter around us fills the space. But I don't want that. I want to ask her questions. I want to peel the layers of her back, one by one, until whatever spell she has on me breaks and I can move on.

But I can't seem to find the words. I'm not a small talk guy. I'm not suave like my siblings.

I take a long swig of my beer, letting my gaze fall to the bar on the other side of the room.

"This is...a very nice place," she says in the faintest voice.

I barely hear her words, but it's all the encouragement I need. "Although kind of loud. I prefer more relaxed and casual places usually."

She nods. "Do you come here often?"

"Not really." I sit back into my chair a little, watching as she tugs my jacket tighter around her, hiding more of her creamy skin.

"You didn't have to bring me here."

"You deserve it, Rosa. What you've done in such a short time is a miracle."

"It's nothing. It's what you pay me for." She fidgets with the rim of her glass, eyes darting around quickly before dropping back down to the tablecloth. The dismissiveness of her response bothers me. Did I say something wrong?

"And here we are." Our waitress smiles, setting out the food before us. "If you need anything else, please let me know."

"Thank you," Rosa murmurs.

The waitress looks at me, and I nod, dismissing her. I want to be left alone with Rosa.

I should try to carry on the conversation with her. Say something. Instead, I shove a forkful into my mouth. It's exactly what I remember. Rich and decadent—but overpriced for the portion size. How anyone can be full after a meal like this, I'm not sure.

I swallow my mouthful and wipe my napkin across my mouth—I can be civilized if need be. "This is nearly as good as your cooking."

"That's very kind," she hums in response.

My head tilts, and I watch as she pushes her pasta around the plate. Has she even taken a bite?

“Do you not like it? We can order something else?”

“No,” she rushes, shaking her head, “It’s fine. Really.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She lifts a single piece of pasta to her mouth as if to show me.

I nod slowly, taking another gulp of my beer.

This evening was meant to fix my problem, not make it worse. And yet, spending this time with her has made me even more intrigued and beguiled by this gorgeous woman.

“So, how are you adjusting?” I broach, hoping to find something, anything, to talk about. “At the estate. I know the first few days were rough.”

“It’s better. I’d like to think I’m doing well.”

“More than well. You’re doing fantastic, if my opinion counts.”

That’s all it takes for Rosa to relax a little in her chair. And from there, the conversation flows to other mundane topics. The weather and things that make no fucking sense for small talk, but I don’t care because she’s talking. I even manage a few soft chuckles of laughter as I start to loosen up.

With anyone else, I’d have eaten and walked away by now. But something about Rosa keeps me rooted in place. Enjoying it all, soaking up the atmosphere and the company of the person opposite me.

It doesn’t feel like it does with other women—with them, it feels tedious and fake. It’s like she’s looking at me—and not the brutal man everyone believes me to be, despite the truth in the matter. The feeling is unsettling and arousing all at once.

“Would you like a box, miss?” the server asks when she comes to clear the table and notices Rosa’s plate.

“No, that’s okay,” Rosa says, finishing her glass of water. Her plate has hardly been touched. My gaze narrows. A question burns my lips, but I’ve just started to break through her hard exterior. I’ve slowly made progress, and I can’t risk her clamming up now.

The silence carried home only makes the situation worse. My hands tighten around the steering wheel.

Something is wrong, and I know it's me.

I've done something to upset her. To offend her. Rosa slides from my SUV, and my eyes are fixed on her as she makes her way toward the door that connects to the mansion.

The garage is quiet and dark, but I clock both Alessio and Marco have gone out as their cars are missing.

Quietly, I walk behind Rosa as she shrugs off my jacket and returns it to me. "Thank you. Tonight was lovely."

Her words don't match the expression on her face. The sound is hollow and fake. A platitude meant to appease me. It's not how Rosa acts.

Anger boils through me, and I can't help how my hand slams into the doorframe, cutting her from the doorway and any escape.

I toss the jacket over my shoulder and lean toward her. "What's wrong?"

"What?"

"What's wrong? Was the food bad? Did you want something else?"

"No. It was lovely. Really."

"Then what? You've been fiddling with your watch strap and hands since we sat down at that table. You hardly touched your food. Are you sick? Do you need time off?"

She's cowering beneath me. Trembling like a leaf. I should back off, give her space, but fuck that. I want answers.

"You can tell me, Rosa." I breathe, unable to stop myself from tucking the falling strand of hair behind her ear.

Her gaze jerks to mine, and a million emotions swim in them. But none that I can pick out and identify. Everything about this woman is a mystery to me.

She murmurs something I don't quite catch.

“What?”

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

I jerk back like she’s slapped me. Her? Embarrass me? Who the fuck would be embarrassed with someone like Rosa on their arm? I can feel my brows pull together. “I’m sorry?”

She looks down at her feet and murmurs something else. Gently, I lift her chin to meet my gaze. “I wasn’t embarrassed to be seen with you.”

“You covered me up,” she says quietly.

“You were shivering in the car, and that place is notorious for being cold. I thought you’d be more comfortable.” I don’t understand how she’d ever think I’d be embarrassed by her. “You thought I was covering you up?”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“Because you’re gorgeous?” Isn’t that obvious?

She makes a little sound in the back of her throat but shakes her head. “I’m not.”

“The fuck you aren’t.” I watch her like she’s a wounded deer. One wrong word and she’ll flee. For the first time since I’ve brought her to the house, I feel like I’m seeing the real Rosa. I lower my voice. “That’s why you didn’t eat dinner...”

A piece of the puzzle falls into place, but I’m not equipped to solve it, though I fucking want to. Badly.

Meekly, she nods, turning her head to the side to look away from me. She chews on her bottom lip. “I know I’m not...the right size.”

With my thumb, I guide her face back. Tears rim the edge of her eyes, and my chest squeezes.

Something roars to life inside me. The need to defend her, but something else. Something darker. The urge to make anyone who’s made her feel less pay. To watch the life drain from their faces under my hands. My hand twitches at my side, but I swallow the fury.

I need to be gentle with her. Soft. She’s broken in a way some buried part of me understands.

“I don’t know what that means. But you’re gorgeous, Rosa. Seeing you in my jacket, smelling like me, it was something I liked.”

Fuck. Even now, the thought has my body tightening. “It was damn sexy. Everyone was looking at you because you’re stunning, not because of anything else. You’ve got curves and fill out that dress like a sin. There is nothing wrong with how you look.”

I hold her gaze and can see that she doesn’t quite believe me. Her lips are slightly parted, glistening after she licks them.

It’d be so easy to taste her, looming over her as I am, holding her chin between my fingers.

All it’d take is one bend of my head.

One taste, and I’d know for sure.

The urge pounds against my chest like a hundred men marching.

“You are stunning, Rosa. You turned several heads tonight because of it. Several women were staring, jealous of you.” My thumb brushes her bottom lip on instinct.

Time freezes for a second before she nods.

“Anyone who says otherwise can go fuck themselves.”

“Okay.” She exhales.

She’s not dismissing me outright at least. It takes every muscle in my body, every ounce of self-control to keep me from claiming her mouth. From making her see just what her body is doing to me. I want her. I want to show her just how beautiful she is.

But there’s something that makes me back off...

My hand drops, and I take a step back, letting the cold air rush in between us.

She pauses in the doorway, her head tilted.

My heart’s hammering in my chest, my cock pressing uncomfortably against my zipper.

Fuck.

“Good night, Rosa.” I breathe out, walking back toward the garage doors.

I hear the soft click of the door behind me as she hurries into the mansion, and I swallow thickly.

Even though it’s late, I fit in an extra workout in our gym, and then head to the kitchen, passing Marco as he arrives home and makes for the office. Rummaging through the refrigerator, I find some lime and coriander chicken drumsticks left over from the lunch Rosa cooked for me yesterday when I unexpectedly dropped back home for lunch. Delicious.

Getting the dish out and setting it on the island, I realize I’ve left my phone in the gym. I sigh as I turn to get it, needing to make a quick call to the casino before I have my snack.

I’m back in a couple of minutes. And looking forward to my first bite of that juicy dish, I hurry into the kitchen.

And I stop dead in my tracks.

Because I can see the chicken.

And I can also see Marco’s stupid dog.

With a smug grin all over his dumb face.

As he eats my chicken and licks his greedy, slobbery lips.

“What the fuck! Why the hell are you eating my food?”

But he just ignores me, his paws all over the drumsticks while his snout digs around in the dish for his next bite.

“Marco, get in here before I commit murder!” I holler at the top of my voice as I clench and unclench my fists.

“What now?” he says as he stomps into the kitchen.

“That,” I snarl, jerking my chin toward the animal. “Your dog is completely out of control.”

“Technically, Mr. F is Juliana’s dog,” he drawls, referring to his wife. When they got married, Juliana unexpectedly brought with her Mr. Fluffy—which has to be the dumbest name for a dog I’ve ever heard. Most of us call him ‘Mr. F’ as a compromise. I mean, can you imagine a made man shouting out ‘Mr. Fluffy’ every time he takes his dog out to the park and needs to call him over? I’d die of embarrassment. Nah, actually, I’d shoot myself before I let myself be humiliated like that by an animal.

“I don’t care who he technically belongs to,” I grit out. “She’s your wife, and she left him in your care. Why the hell couldn’t she just take him to Italy with her?”

“We’re not her fucking dogsitters.”

“You hardly lift a finger to help look after the animal,” Marco points out dryly.

I just glare at him and his dog. The animal seems to have a bottomless pit for a stomach and a fondness for stealing food.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Look, fur face here is eating all my food,” I snap. “Rosa cooked that especially for me. Feed your own damn dog, and leave my food the fuck alone.” I’m not fucking sharing Rosa’s goodies with anyone fucking else.

Marco just stares at me without a single word of remorse or fucking sympathy before striding off and leaving me to clean up after his dog—all on an empty stomach.

First, Alessio tries to get Rosa to make his favorite cupcakes, then Mr. F getting all the bacon and all Rosa’s attention, and now this thing with the chicken. The dog, Marco, and Alessio all just need to leave Rosa the hell alone. Because Rosa is all mine—and only mine...