

Chapter 16

Haven Kramer POV:

I walked ahead, my steps firm and even. Phoebe followed, her hands shaking slightly as she held the tray with the spoiled food.

"My lady, are we really doing this?" she whispered. "All the servants in there are loyal to Mrs. Villarreal."

"That's precisely why we must do it in front of them," I said without turning. "Some dogs will never learn who the master is until you beat them in public."

We moved through the cold, stone corridors until we reached a set of double wooden doors. From within, I could hear the faint sounds of laughter and clinking silverware.

This was the dining hall for the senior staff. Unlike our wing of the house, it was warm and brightly lit.

I stopped outside the doors. For a moment, I just stood there, letting the muffled sounds of their feast wash over me. The clink of glasses, the murmur of satisfied conversation, the occasional burst of laughter.

In our room, Phoebe and I had shared the last of our dry bread two hours ago. My stomach was empty. That emptiness sharpened my focus.

I closed my eyes. Drew a slow breath. Then opened them.

Once I push these doors open, there was no retreat. No apologies. No pretending this didn't happen.

I gave Phoebe a look, signaling for her to stay behind me. She nodded, her knuckles white around the tray.

I didn't knock. I shoved both doors open with all my strength. The doors slammed against the walls with a loud bang—the sound of a gauntlet being thrown.

Every sound inside the dining hall ceased instantly, as if someone had cut a wire.

A dozen pairs of eyes snapped towards the entrance, their expressions a mixture of shock and confusion. Forks froze halfway to mouths.

A servant mid-pour let the wine bottle tip too far, and dark red liquid splashed across the tablecloth—but no one even noticed.

The long table was laden with a feast: roasted chicken with golden, crackling skin, thick steaks seared to perfection, creamy soups that steamed in the cool air, fresh bread still warm enough to mist the plates, and bowls of glistening fruit.

Mrs. Villarreal sat at the head of the table, a greasy chicken leg in her hand, her fingers slick with drippings.

The scene was a stark, insulting contrast to the filth she had sent us.

When she saw me, her face darkened. She slammed the chicken leg down on her plate. "What are you doing here? This is not a place for you!"

I ignored her. I walked straight towards her, my heels clicking a sharp, rhythmic tattoo on the stone floor. It sounded like a countdown.

I reached her side and took the tray from Phoebe. Then I held it up. I didn't put it down immediately. I let everyone in the room see it first—the congealed slop, the film of scum on the surface, the sour stench that had already begun to drift across the table and wrinkle the noses of the servants nearest to me.

I slammed the tray down on the table, right next to her plate of perfectly cooked steak. The impact rattled the dishes. Foul liquid splashed out, staining the pristine white tablecloth. A greasy brown rivulet ran toward her bread basket, soaking the edges of the rolls.

The smell hit the table like a wave. A young maid at the far end gagged and pressed her fist to her mouth.

Mrs. Villarreal shrieked and jumped to her feet as if she'd been stung. Her chair scraped backward with a harsh screech.

"Are you insane!" she screamed.

I didn't flinch. I looked her directly in the eye, and my smile was sweet. Poisonously sweet. "I simply thought that you might have received the wrong lunch. This one must be yours."

My voice was not loud. It didn't need to be. In the dead silent room, every word carried like a stone dropped into still water.

The other servants lowered their heads. They didn't dare watch directly, but I could see their eyes cutting sideways, their ears straining every one of them desperate to catch every syllable.

I picked up a fork from the tray. It was a cheap, tarnished thing pitted and bent. I used it to poke at the slop in the bowl—pushing aside a limp, grayish vegetable, then stirring the watery liquid. The fork made a wet, sucking sound as it lifted.

"This is the lunch that was served to the Alpha and his mate." I held the fork up, the muck dripping slowly back into the bowl. "Are you telling me, Mrs. Villarreal, that our noble Alpha Demetri deserves to eat pig feed?"

I was using his name, his title, as a weapon again. It was the most powerful one I had in this house. And I could see it landing—the way the servants flinched at the words "Alpha Demetri," the way their eyes widened as the reality of what I was implying sank in.

Mrs. Villarreal's face turned a blotchy purple. She wanted to argue, but she was trapped. She couldn't possibly admit to deliberately mistreating the Alpha.

Her mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. "It... it was for his health! He can only have liquids!" she stammered.

A desperate, flimsy defense. Her voice cracked on the last word.

"Oh? Is that so?" I speared a piece of rotten vegetable with the fork. The prongs sank through its mushy flesh with a soft squelch. I lifted it, held it steady, and extended it toward her mouth. The slimy green lump dangled inches from her lips.

"Then please, for the Alpha's health," I said, my voice almost kind, "be the first to taste this 'healthy' liquid diet to see if it's nutritious enough."

Mrs. Villarreal's eyes went wide. Her face—already purple—paled to a

sickly gray. She recoiled so violently that she stumbled backward into her chair, nearly toppling it over. Her hands flew up to shield her face as if I were offering her poison.

"Get it away!" she shrieked. "Get that thing away from me!"

The room was deathly silent except for her panting, her chair scraping against the floor as she scrambled away.

Her reaction was a confession—a confession everyone in this room had just witnessed.

I let the fork hover for a moment longer. Then I dropped it back onto the tray with a sharp clatter. The sound was loud in the stillness, final. Like a gavel coming down.

"From this day forward, the Alpha's meals and my own will be identical to what is served at this table." I let my gaze sweep over every servant present. I met each pair of eyes in turn—the cook with flour still on her apron, the scullery maid with reddened hands, the footman who had been pouring wine. "If I see anything like this again, I will personally feed it to the one who cooked it."

No one moved. No one breathed.

I turned back to the table. Without waiting for a response, I pulled out the chair next to hers—the chair where Holly had been sitting—sat down gracefully, and picked up a clean piece of bread from the bread basket.

I tore off a small piece, brought it to my lips, and began to eat. My movements were calm. Elegant. As if I owned the place. As if the smell of rotten food wasn't still hanging in the air. As if my heart wasn't racing beneath my ribs.

The dining hall was utterly silent, save for the soft sound of my chewing. I could feel every pair of eyes on me—some fearful, some confused, some beginning to recalibrate their loyalties.

