

CHAPTER 19

CAMILLO

I get up this morning after spending the night sleeping outside Rosa and Ethan's bedrooms, just as I have every single night since Rosa first brought Ethan here.

While Marco and Alessio go for a workout in our mansion's gym, I have breakfast with them both, and as we eat, I can't help but notice Rosa and Ethan flinching at the slamming of a door down the hall.

As soon as breakfast is over, I text both my brothers. "Meet me in the office. It's important."

They arrive immediately. "What's wrong?" Marco barks as he slams the door shut behind him.

"That." He looks at me in confusion. "And all the other door slamming the pair of you seem to do all day long."

"You're just as bad, especially when you're a grumpy ass first thing in the morning," Alessio retorts.

"No, I'm not. I've stopped slamming doors since..."

I don't finish what I'm saying, not wanting to admit to my brothers that I've been making an effort to be quieter around the house for the sake of Rosa and Ethan.

"And it's not just the doors. It's all the shouting down the phone," I say as I look at Marco. "And all the stomping around the house," I add as I switch my gaze to Alessio.

I scowl at my brothers. Irritation licks through me, bubbling through my blood. "I get everyone's wound up with the feds still being all over our asses and the women and kids having to remain in Italy for the time being. But you need to be a little more conscious of the loud noises you're making around here."

"Here? What, you mean like in my own home?" Marco snarls.

“Yes. I want...” I take a deep breath. “I want Rosa and Ethan to be comfortable.”

Marco just continues to glare at me. He’s not very good at taking into account other people’s feelings.

I drag my hand over my hair and try to make them understand. “They scare easily. You know, after everything they’ve been through. I just want to make things easier for them.”

The only thing I care about right now is Rosa and Ethan not being scared and not flinching. And once I explain this to my brothers, they get it.

“Okay,” Marco says with a nod.

“Got it,” Alessio adds without further argument.

And I know that my brothers will do this because they can sense how important it is to me.

A week. It’s only been a week since Rosa was reunited with Ethan. The change is palpable in her. She hums more often now, singing when she thinks the house is empty and it’s just the two of them.

But the moment one of us enters the room, Ethan’s smile drops from his face and Rosa only flashes a tentative smile before getting back to work.

I fucking hate it.

I hate how much I crave seeing her smile and hearing her sing. Anything from her is a glorious gift, and I spend the rest of the day thinking about it over and over. It’s a distraction I can’t afford right now, but one that won’t go away.

Ethan sits across from me this morning, finishing his pancake, eyes downcast.

I’ve tried to talk to him, but he simply blinks at me, his chest rising and falling too rapidly. Worse is when he hides behind Rosa or the furniture in the house when I enter the room.

It’s not personal, I repeatedly tell myself.

It’s his fucking fault. Grayden fucking Devlin.

And just like that, another reason to skin him layer by layer is added to the ever-growing list. Marco's warning still swirls in my head, stopping me from doing something too rash—because I don't want to ruin what I have with Rosa, although I'm not sure exactly what that is.

“Was something wrong with breakfast, Camillo?” she asks.

“Huh?”

Rosa stands beside Ethan, fingers brushing back the soft waves of his hair from his face. She's motherly and affectionate, and my chest warms as I watch her with her son.

She looks down at my plate. “You've hardly touched your food. Was there something wrong? Do you want me to make you something else?”

“No.” I look down at the half-eaten pancake. My mind's too preoccupied to even enjoy the fucking perfectly cooked breakfast. I rub at my jaw, managing to put a smile on. It feels strained and fake. “It's great. It's just work stuff.” I shovel a few more bites into my mouth to prove the point.

I've got too much going on in my head. And I can't tell her what's bothering me even if I wanted to. Because I don't even understand it myself.

As I walk away, I try to formulate in my mind what's going on. It takes me a while. And when I figure it out, the realization bowls me over.

I want Ethan to like me. I want him to laugh and relax in my presence.

Rubbing at my sternum, I hope I can make the tightness in my chest go away. Since when do I give a shit about anyone who isn't my family?

I don't even enjoy my nieces and nephews this much. I love them and will spoil them rotten during the holidays and birthdays, but this need with Ethan is different. I feel protective of him as I do his mother. Some urge to stand between him and the world nags in the back of my mind constantly.

But I don't know what to do.

I don't know how to connect with Ethan—or with kids in general. They're breakable and small. Worse, Ethan is so quiet and timid that I'm not sure I know how to break through to him.

I rise from my chair and freeze in the doorway. “It was delicious, Rosa. Thank you.”

I school my features before entering the office. Marco is behind the desk, while Alessio lounges in a chair with a laptop open in front of him. They look engrossed in whatever it is they’re dealing with.

“What do you need?” Marco clips.

“Advice?” I don’t sound too sure.

His eyes lift from the paper, a dark brow arched. I never come to my brothers for advice.

Alessio’s eyes bore into me before he jerks his chin to the free chair beside him.

“Uh…” I wasn’t expecting to talk to both of them at the same time.

“Out with it. I don’t have all day,” Marco barks.

“This was a bad idea,” I say, starting to rise from the chair.

“Sit,” he growls.

“Gonna call me a good boy if I do?” I fire back.

Alessio’s lip twitches, but Marco’s fierce expression has me looking away as I sink back into the chair.

“Now, what is it?” he says in a terse tone.

My lips move, but I find it hard to get the words out. “How…” I wince, shaking my head, unable to look at either of my brothers.

Alessio sighs with impatience. “How what?”

“How do you get kids to like you?” I blurt out.

Alessio snorts, looking at me like I’m a freak—as if I don’t already know that.

“What kind of question is that?” Marco grits out.

“A serious one?” I try.

“How do you act with our kids when they’re here?” Marco clips.

“I don’t. Or not well. You guys are usually there most of the time. I don’t have to do much around them.”

“You literally babysat them for us before they left,” Alessio interjects.

“Yeah, but for what, a couple of hours? I bribed them with a shit ton of candy and sat them in front of the TV. Anyway, it’s not as if they all really like me.”

“Of course, they like you,” Alessio says in a confused voice.

“I’ve got three words to say to you,” I reply. “Maximo. Shampoo. Superglue.”

Marco sighs. “My son likes your sense of humor. He thought you would find it funny in the same way he did. I get that his actions were a bit misplaced, but I’m telling you, the kids all like you.”

“I don’t know.” I shrug with a heavy sigh. “This feels different, somehow...”

Marco cocks a brow. “You mean with Ethan?”

“Yeah,” I say with a large exhale. “So, any advice?”

“Well, for one, stop doing those smiles at him,” Alessio advises.

“Huh?”

“Yeah,” Marco agrees. “It makes you look like a serial killer. And it’s creepy as fuck.”

I scowl at them both. “You’re fucking with me, right?”

“No, we’re not,” Alessio adds with a straight face.

Breathing through my nostrils, I rub the back of my neck. I’m not a big smiler at the best of times, but my nerves in front of Ethan are making it difficult to even smile properly. I don’t want to fuck things up, but things really aren’t looking promising for me so far. “Okay, stop with the weird smiling. What else?”

“Quit with those jokes that aren’t even funny.”

“What jokes?”

“Like when you said that Mr. F is like a grizzly bear and steals everyone’s food. Ethan looked terrified at the prospect.”

“Oh, come on,” I say as I glare at them. “I was just trying to break the ice.”

“Do you want our fucking advice or not?” Marco growls.

“Okay. Fine. I’ll stop with the jokes. But what else...?”

“Play a game with the kid? Watch a movie? It’s not that hard.”

I bite back a groan. “It is that hard when the kid flinches every time something unexpected happens. I want him to like me, not to have a fucking heart attack each time I speak to him. It’s just not that easy with him.”

Marco considers what I’ve said. “What’s the kid actually like?”

“No clue.”

“So, find out, and go from there.”

“I know a few shows the kids watch all the time and don’t shut up about,” Alessio adds, his eyes lighting up with a soft smile. It’s not the hardened expression I know him to wear daily. It’s something else—a rare sight, and something that only appears when he’s talking about his wife and kids.

“You just need to find something to talk to him about,” Marco says.

I chew at the inside of my cheek as I rise from the chair. I don’t think that their advice is going to really help me. But none of their kids are what you’d call mousy, so maybe they’re the wrong people to ask.

“Need anything else?” Marco asks.

“Nope. That was it.”

They share a look, and I can’t quite figure out what it means. I don’t like it, but I don’t have the time to waste here.

“Don’t forget we have a meeting at the casino,” Marco reminds me.

“I know.”

“I’m serious,” he growls.

“I’ll be there.”

“On time.”

“Do you want me to set an alarm? Or maybe you’d like to follow me around all day to make sure? I’ll be there, don’t worry.” It’s important we all present a united front for today’s meeting at the casino. I’m not going to mess it up.

Marco nods, satisfied, and I fly out the door and down to the gym. My body is wound too tight to focus. I need to let out something before I explode. I’m too pent up and worried to be around anyone.

The sweat drips down me, clinging to the strands of my hair that hang in my face as I collapse onto the bench. I inhale sharply before pulling my phone from my pocket. My finger hovers over the name before I bite the bullet and push it down.

“What’s wrong?”

“Uh... Hi to you. Nothing’s wrong. I just...” Fuck. Asking for help shouldn’t be this hard. I should be able to figure this all out on my own. But I don’t know the first thing about kids, and I haven’t got a clue where to start.

“Camillo?”

“Sorry. I just need some advice.”

I hear my cousin, Lorenzo, settle into his chair as the creak of leather sounds over the speaker.

“And you’re asking me?”

“Yeah. I asked Marco and Alessio already, but their advice wasn’t helpful. It’s about kids.”

He pauses for a few moments. “Did you knock someone up?”

“What? Fuck. No!” I drag a hand down my face and lean forward so my elbows rest on my knees. “It’s complicated.”

The next twenty minutes are me filling Lorenzo in on the whole Ethan situation. I purposely leave out the fact that I want to impress Rosa and that I want to show her I

can be there for both of them. From the amused tone as he asks questions, I'm sure he already knows.

“So, any advice? Because I know how Clara was pretty quiet and withdrawn when she was younger.” Clara is Lorenzo’s oldest daughter. He had a lot of issues with her after his first wife died, and it wasn’t until he remarried that things started to improve for his family—although things were pretty rocky with his new wife to start with, especially as it was an arranged marriage. It’s hard to comprehend everything he went through when you see how happy he is with his wife now.

“Yeah, I think I can help.”

I pace, making mental notes as Lorenzo offers some suggestions. Crafts and games. Read stories together so that we have something to talk about. Take it slow—baby steps. Let Ethan dictate the interaction. Talk about what we’re doing instead of asking direct questions. Keep it all low key so as not to increase his anxiety.

It’s all solid advice. I can do this. I hope.

“Is she pretty?”

“What?” I bluster.

“The girl you’re trying to impress, Camillo?”

“Wow, look at the time,” I say in a rush. “I gotta go.”

Lorenzo’s laughter fills my ear, and I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face.

“Good luck.”

“Thanks, Lorenzo. I owe you.”

I make a mad dash to my room, knowing Ethan and Rosa are downstairs still. After a quick shower, I dress for the meeting at the casino, my mind whirling. On the way back, I’ll stop to get the necessary things.

I feel my heart racing in my chest. Because if this doesn’t work, and if this blows up in my face, I don’t know what I’m going to do.

I'm standing in the living room, and I see Ethan hovering in the doorway. His small hands are gripping the doorframe while he looks into the room through his eyelashes.

He's still skittish around me, and I want to make this work for Rosa's sake, but more than that, I want Ethan to feel comfortable around me. I've got Lorenzo's advice now, but I still need to take that first step. And although ways to break the ice keep running through my mind, none of the ideas ever seem quite right...

I look at what's caught Ethan's attention. Mr. Fluffy is lying on the rug in front of the fireplace. Although the dog is a lazy greedy guts, he's also gentle, patient, and cuddly. Could he be the way to reach Ethan?

I crouch down onto my haunches next to the dog, rubbing his ears, and then I look up at Ethan. "Hey, Ethan," I say, deliberately keeping my voice light. "Have you petted Mr. Fluffy yet?"

Ethan barely moves, but his eyes flicker from me to Mr. Fluffy and back again. He follows this with a slight shake of his head, just a tiny movement, but he doesn't take a step forward. I can see the hesitation in him, the uncertainty. "He's friendly, you know," I continue. "He loves meeting new friends."

I bring my hand down to pat Mr. Fluffy's side, and his tail thumps against the floor, his eyes half-closed in contentment. In this relaxed state, I'm hoping that maybe Mr. Fluffy will help put Ethan at ease. "You can come closer if you want. You don't need to be scared of him," I add. "He's just like a big fluffy teddy bear." I make sure not to liken him to a grizzly bear this time.

Ethan still stays rooted by the doorway, not moving a millimeter, and I can tell he's torn between wanting to trust me and wanting to stay as far away as possible. Inhaling a deep breath, I remind myself that this will take time. Building trust isn't something that can happen overnight.

"Do you know what Mr. Fluffy loves?" I say, trying a different approach. "He loves when people give him belly rubs. And I bet he'd love one from you."

Ethan's big brown eyes widen a little. "Really?" His voice is barely above a whisper.

"Really," I say with a nod. "He won't hurt you, I promise. If you want to, you can come and sit next to me."

Ethan stands there, frozen. But then, very carefully, he tiptoes into the room, as if he's not entirely sure this is a good idea. I just stay where I am, letting him come to us on

his own terms. Mr. Fluffy senses the tension, and lifting his head slightly, he wags his tail slowly.

Ethan reaches us, and I can see the uncertainty in his eyes. “It’s okay,” I say in a quiet, gentle voice. “You can put your hand out and let him sniff it. He likes it when people do that.”

Ethan hesitates, but then he reaches out. Mr. Fluffy sniffs the offered hand, his wet velvety nose nudging against Ethan’s fingers. Then, unable to help himself, the dog licks Ethan’s hand with a quick soft swipe of his tongue.

Ethan gives a tiny giggle—a sound that makes my heart swell—and before I know it, he’s sitting down next to Mr. Fluffy, and his tiny hands are running tentatively along the animal’s fur. And as the time passes and Ethan starts to relax, his movements become a little more confident. “Can I give him a belly rub now?” he whispers.

“Sure,” I nod. And I watch as Ethan gives Mr. Fluffy a careful touch on his tummy, the dog instantly rolling over onto his back and wagging his tail with enthusiasm, eager for more.

I sit back and let them bond, feeling a small sense of relief. This is a good start—a tiny step toward something more. I know there’s still a long way to go, but for now, I’m just really relieved and happy to see Ethan smiling.

I sit too straight and too rigid to appear natural as Ethan sits across from me.

His cards are fanned out on the coffee table across from my own, the deck separating the two. Rosa is cleaning somewhere down the hall.

Over the last two weeks, I’ve slowly made progress. I’ve made my steps light and quiet. I’ve lowered my voice, being calm and gentle as I speak to him. I let him decide when and for how long we interact. And today’s the first day he’s allowed Rosa to leave without rushing after her.

“Any blues?”

Ethan shakes his head. He still won’t say much, but I do get his fleeting smiles across the table at mealtimes. Each one knocks the wind out of me, making me feel like I’ve won the fucking lottery. Like mother, like son, it seems.

I draw a card, adding it to the line of cards.

“Any greens?” he whispers.

I slowly scoop the three cards together and slide them toward him. That’s all he needs to win the hand. Did I let him win? Maybe, but the way his eyes light up loosens something in my chest. The raging beast inside me relaxes, and pride eases it back like a balm.

At that moment, Rosa comes in and sets down a plate of crackers and cheese beside Ethan. To my surprise, she also sets down a small plate of cookies—made specifically for me with chocolate protein powder, rolled oats, and peanut butter. It’s become my new guilty pleasure.

“Thanks, Rosa.”

“Momma, I won against Uncle Millo.” Ethan smiles up at her.

“You did?”

He beams at her, showing her his winning pile of cards.

“Great job, honey. Eat up now. It’s gonna be a while until dinner.” She bends down, giving me a perfect view of her plump ass, to press a kiss to Ethan’s head. My eyes track her as she walks back out of the room to finish up whatever chore she was doing.

“Would you like to stop for the day?” I ask Ethan. This the by far the longest we’ve interacted, and I don’t want to push my luck.

His lips purse, and his forehead wrinkles in thought. “No.”

I blink. I bite back the smile that threatens to pull my lips up. Progress. It’s slow, but it’s progress.

“A different game?”

Instead of answering, his eyes fall to the plate of cookies, and my brow arches. “You can have one if you want.”

He doesn’t move, and I slowly push the plate toward him. “I won’t eat them all,” I tell him. I would, but he doesn’t need to know that. I’ll just grab a bar on my way to the casino tonight. “It’s okay.”

He tentatively picks up a cookie, adding it to his plate. That uncomfortable feeling in my chest burns, and I rub at it, clearing my throat. I take a cookie myself, giving what I hope is a comforting smile before popping it into my mouth.

He nibbles on his, testing it out. I hate how tentative he is with his food. How unsure he is.

Silence fills the space. This is normal. I've come to accept it. Ethan continues to munch on his food, and I watch him as I polish off another cookie.

"Can we..." He stops, looking down.

"Can we?" I prompt, my voice as soothing as I can make it.

"Can we walk around?"

"The house?"

He nods.

"Sure. You didn't when you first got here?"

Another shake of his head.

"Well then, you've missed the best part." I slowly stand from where I've rested on the floor for the last hour. "We've got the best playroom for miles."

My knees and joints are stiff from sitting so long, but it was well worth it. My hand extends down to his small figure, and I wait for him to decide if we're going to hold hands or not.

He frowns. "What's that?"

"What?"

He points to the back of my hand.

"It's a tattoo. It's like a drawing on my skin."

Luckily, the hand that faces him doesn't display the more macabre of the artwork that crawls up my wrists and arms.

He stares at my hand for a minute before his tiny fingers latch onto mine. My heart stops in my chest, and I'm not breathing.

Something warm and sweet slides through my body. Some emotion I can't put into words but want to as Ethan squeezes my hand tightly. Damn if it doesn't feel so right.

I catch Rosa's soft smile and a shine in her eyes as she passes the room and sees us together.

Soon, I can tell that Ethan is getting tired. I suggest that we watch a movie, something calm and quiet so that he can relax, and he agrees.

I pick Ethan up and gently put him on the couch, tucking him up with a blanket as he curls up against the cushions.

Mr. F lumbers up and settles down next to Ethan, while I sit on the other side, keeping a little distance to give Ethan his space.

As the movie plays, after ten minutes, I notice that Ethan's eyes are drooping, and before long, he's fallen asleep, his head resting on Mr. F.

His little body is completely relaxed, one hand still tangled in Mr. F's fur. And the dog stays perfectly still, as if he knows that his job right now is to keep Ethan safe and warm. He's even taken to spending every night sleeping outside Rosa and Ethan's bedrooms with me as if he's reluctant to let Ethan out of his sight, and a part of me realizes how much the animal wants to take care of the little boy and make him feel comfortable here.

Maybe I was a little harsh before when Mr. F ate my lemon and coriander chicken—plus when he finished all the bacon before Rosa could cook me any. I know I'm a grumpy fucker at times, but there are also plenty of times when I buy toys for Mr. F and take him for walks, and maybe I need to up that a bit to show him my appreciation. Because I do appreciate Mr. F—he's a part of this family now, and it wouldn't be the same without him here.

At night, the animal even wants to snuggle up with me when we're both sleeping outside Rosa and Ethan's bedrooms. Maybe I'm going soft because I find myself looking forward to having his soft fur next to me.

And as I sit there and watch them both, I can't help but smile. Ethan's trust is still fragile, but this is another step in the right direction.