

CHAPTER 27

ROSA

Ethan's little body snuggles closer into my side as I flip yet another page of Peter Pan. He's engrossed in the story as always, and I cherish these moments. A warm bed, food in his belly, and a boy whose smiles light up the room once again.

Safety.

A feeling of love.

Two things I didn't think we'd ever get again.

My voice falters, clogging with emotion. I don't want to think about any of this—about what's next, about how we're going to have to eventually move on from the generous offer laid out before us because it can't possibly be real.

Clearing my throat, I launch once more into the perilous adventure of the lost boys, placing a small kiss on the top of Ethan's freshly washed hair. He looks adorable in his white pajamas with pale blue teddy bears all over them—it's one of the sets Camillo insisted on getting for him when Ethan first arrived.

A knock at the door pulls my attention, and I look up to see Camillo leaning there. My breath stutters out as I watch him standing there with his shoulder braced against the doorframe.

His hands are tucked into the pockets of his jeans as a soft smile graces his face. It lessens the harsh frowns and brooding expressions that he normally wears. It makes him look more angelic than monstrous. The real Camillo, the one he doesn't think anyone can see.

“Am I interrupting?”

“We're reading Peter Pan,” Ethan squeals. “Momma was just getting to the best bit.” The body that was just nestled against mine, clambers toward the end of the bed with his stuffed bear as a sword. “Do you like Peter Pan, Uncle Millo?”

Camillo rubs the back of his neck and shrugs. “Haven’t read it. I watched the movie, though.”

“There’s a movie?”

I nod, placing the book on my lap, my index finger saving our spot. This month’s obsession is pirates. Anything and everything pirates. My lips tug up as Ethan attempts to speak like a pirate before falling into a soft pile of giggles.

“Sounds like you’re having fun.”

“Momma’s the best at reading.”

“Is she now?”

“Uh huh.” Ethan nods as he sits back up. While he still sometimes tucks himself behind my leg or tries to be as small and unnoticeable as possible with the others, it’s different when Camillo’s in the room. They have some unspoken connection.

A connection that melts me on the spot whenever I see it.

“You should join our story time,” Ethan announces.

“I, uh…”

“P-please?” But Ethan’s single word is hesitant. Almost as if he’s not sure if he’s overstepped or misspoken and will be admonished for it. Memories of Grayden snapping at him for bothering him before bed, for just wanting a scrap of attention from his father, flash before my eyes, and my fingers tighten around the book in my grasp.

Camillo’s eyes land on mine in a silent question of permission.

“Only if you want to,” I say softly.

And Camillo instantly nods. In two long strides, he’s beside the bed on the other side of Ethan.

Ethan pats the open spot on his left. “You can sit here, Uncle Millo.”

“There’s not a lot of room for me on your bed, Ethan.”

I suck in a sharp breath. It's not meant as a dig at me. I know this. And I know I take up more space than I should. Even the king-size bed Grayden and I shared seemed too small with me in it—something Grayden always pointed out.

The conversation around me fades to the background as my mind tumbles over and over, the darker thoughts being dredged up by something so innocent.

“How about this?” Camillo murmurs.

I blink back into the room. Despite being a twin-sized bed, Camillo's maneuvered the mountain of stuffed animals—more gifts that he and his brothers insisted that Ethan needed—so that all of us somehow fit. His back is braced against the footboard, one leg on the ground while Ethan fits into the crook of his body.

Our legs brush, and Camillo gives me a knowing smile. “Okay?”

I clear my throat. “Yeah. Now, where were we?”

“Can Uncle Millo read, Momma?”

“Oh, I'm not sure if he has time...”

Ethan, his brown eyes wide, tilts his face up toward Camillo. “Will you read, please, Uncle Millo?”

Camillo looks uncomfortable, shifting on the bed, his body rigid. I open my mouth to gently tell Ethan not to push, but Camillo clears his throat and nods. “Sure. But no making fun of me, okay? I'm not going to be nearly as good as your mom.”

I know he means it as a joke, but the way he says it, I can't help but wonder. Did someone used to mock him for not being good enough? Is that why he understands Ethan so well? Is that why he sees me? Why he silently understands how Ethan and I are so lacking in confidence and trust?

Ethan's small hand slips into Camillo's much larger one. “I'm not very good at it either,” he says in a small voice. “But if you try your best, then you can be proud of yourself, and I'll be proud of you too, Uncle Millo.”

The strained smile on Camillo's face melts, and a genuine one takes its place. My chest grows tight at the sight. I love watching them play in the pool or listening to the gentle conversations they have while I clean or do chores. It's just...perfect.

No, I know that it's more than that. It's love.

I've even been able to eat more lately, and not in that binge and fast cycle I was in before. I'm trying to sit down properly at mealtimes, although I'd be lying if I said it wasn't still a struggle.

"Alright. What happened before this?"

Ethan's expectant expression swings to me, and my expression quickly turns into another soft smile as I recount the previous happenings in the story to Camillo. The way he looks at me, though...

I feel seen.

I feel...wanted.

I tear my gaze away with a flush as he turns the page and picks up the story from where I left off.

These last few weeks have done nothing to slow the pounding of my heart when he's around. To calm the uneasy attachment I feel when it comes to him. And now, is he really reading my son a bedtime story? It's too good to be true.

As I listen to the story, Camillo's deep voice washes over me, sending waves of pleasure rolling through me. It's soothing—but it shouldn't be. It's a slippery slope, and I'm not sure I can stop myself. With anyone else, I don't think I could let go like this—open myself up.

Catching my eye, Camillo smiles, his hand rubbing along my calf in affection. I can feel the tension ebbing from all my muscles. Closing my eyes, I'm so relaxed that I could even fall asleep right now. Because I trust him with my son. I trust him with our lives.

Ethan's sleepy voice fills the room as he asks questions just like he normally does. My eyes close, and I listen to the two most important people in my life just be.

It's foolish to trust him so soon.

And it's even worse to allow him into my life in a way that will crush me when it comes shattering down like everything good ever has.

But I can't help it...

"Rosa?"

I hum in reply, unwilling to open my eyes.

“Rosa?” This time his whisper is accompanied by a gentle brush against my cheek.
“Come on, let’s get to bed.”

“Ethan’s gotta…” My words tumble into something incoherent as I force my eyes open. I blink into darkness which is illuminated only by the dim nightlight sitting atop the dresser.

Camillo’s soft expression fills my vision as he brushes a stray strand behind my ear.

“He’s out cold. I tucked him in and everything.”

“You did all that?”

“I did. I didn’t want to wake you until I had to.”

I nod, pushing from the awkward position I fell asleep in and going into Camillo’s embrace. Despite the sleepiness tugging me under, I smile into his chest. “Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me.”

“Still, thanks.”

“C’mon, sleeping beauty, let’s get into a proper adult bed.”

Fingers laced, Camillo leads me to the door before he pauses. Following his gaze, I see him looking at Ethan as if he’s reluctant to let him out of his sight.

The expression on his face is one I can’t quite make sense of.

It’s vulnerable, open—but in a new way I haven’t seen before. Something like fear etches into the corners of his mouth and forehead.

“C’mon. If we hover too long, he’ll wake up.” This time it’s me who tugs us down the hallway, Camillo’s heat pressing into my side me like a cozy blanket hugging me. I stifle a yawn as he flicks the nightstand lamp on.

He pulls the shirt from his body and exposes the ropes of muscle and beautiful lines of ink to my greedy eyes. I follow his lead in discarding my clothing onto the armchair. Sleepily, my fingers fumble around in the drawer I hope is mine, tugging on the nearest t-shirt, before I lazily walk toward the bed.

The smell of sandalwood fills my nose. And I realize it's not my shirt but one of Camillo's as it hangs off my body in a way mine usually doesn't. Not caring enough to change, I slip into the smooth sheets with a sigh.

The room darkens, and the bed dips.

"Tonight was perfect," I say in a soft voice.

"Yeah?" His large frame cocoons me from behind, pulling me against his chest, making me feel safe and secure. A large hand circles my waist, holding me against the planes of his body. It's a familiar position we've settled into over the last few days.

"Yeah." I nod into the darkness. "You should join us for bedtime more often."

His lips at the back of my neck send a soft shiver skittering through my body.

"Anytime. It was nice. *Nulla è difficile per chi ama.*"

I love when Camillo speaks Italian. I don't understand it, but the rhythm of it is soothing. If I wasn't so tired, I'd ask him what those words mean, but sleep once more pulls me under as Camillo's deep breathing evens out behind me.

I relax into his embrace, feeling some sense of peace I never thought I'd ever feel—and which I know can't last...