

## CHAPTER 28

### CAMILLO

The sound of my footsteps echo around the hall. I've struck out in each room I've gone in search of Ethan.

I pause, catching sight of Rosa sitting on the floor, knees tucked beneath her. Her brow is puckered in concentration, and that delectable bottom lip of hers is sucked between her teeth. I could watch her all day if I didn't have work to do or a promise to keep.

I gently clear my throat before entering the room—a soft signal to both Rosa and Ethan that I'm here. It's the best way to announce myself without either of them spooking.

Ethan's smiling face meets mine before his brow scrunches in a way that is nearly identical to his mom's.

“Hey, you two.”

“What's that?” Ethan asks.

I look down at the mitt in my hand with a smile. “It's a mitt. Am I interrupting you?”

Rosa shakes her head. “No. We were trying to figure out this game. It's supposed to help prepare him for kindergarten or something, but...”

I step closer, peering over her shoulders, but all I can do is grimace.

Her soft lyrical laugh fills the room as she stares up at me. That sound alone could make me die a happy man.

“What?” I ask a little self-consciously.

“You look as confused by it as I am,” she giggles. “I'm glad I'm not the only one who thinks it's too complicated.”

“I’m not the smart one of the family. You’re better off asking Alessio if you want help with that.”

Rosa shakes her head. “I think we’ll just stick with the good old-fashioned ABC memory games. And you’re plenty smart. You were the one who figured out that thing with the oven last week.”

Hearing her call me smart feels weird. A good weird. A weird that I could get used to.

But deep down, I know it’s just idle flattery, even from Rosa. I’m the brawn, the muscle. No one comes to me for plans or ideas unless it involves busting someone’s kneecaps. But when Rosa says something like this, I almost believe it. Almost.

“What’s a mitt for?” Ethan interrupts with a quizzical look.

“Baseball, of course.” I smile. “I remember you said you wanted to learn the game. Since I’ve got the day off, I figured maybe we could spend some time together and I’ll show you. I promised, after all.”

New things have the potential to be hit or miss. Ethan’s come out of his shell around me, laughing and asking to do things or play games, but I can see still the trepidation in his eyes every time. “But you can say no and spend the day with your mom if you want.”

“It’s okay, Ethan,” Rosa encourages. “If you want to go outside with Camillo, you can. I’ll be inside for a bit to finish some work. I can always join you both outside after.”

“Is it hard?”

“Baseball? Nah, in fact, I think you’re gonna love it. But we can do whatever you want while your mom works.”

Offering to watch Ethan flows effortlessly off my lips. It’s some compulsion I’m not sure I want to fight. Spending time with him is important. Not just to Rosa, but also to me.

I watch as he tentatively moves to grasp my hand.

“Why don’t you go slip your shoes on, and I’ll meet you at the back door?”

“Okay!”

Ethan dashes off toward the mudroom, leaving Rosa and me alone. I step closer, closing the space between us, before capturing her lips. Waking up with Rosa in my arms every morning is better than any fucking work out or drug on the market. Nothing makes me feel like she does.

Her breath, labored from just one kiss, warms over my face as I pull back.

“Come out when you can?” I whisper.

She nods, and I capture her mouth once more, taking her bottom lip between my teeth. The small sound from her is swallowed by me while I fight the urge to throw her over my shoulder and show her just what she does to me without even trying.

Instead, I step back, exercising some herculean control over my dick and body. Her glazed expression sends my body thrumming with need. Soon. Not soon enough, but soon, I can sink into her once again.

“Don’t overwork,” I order, capturing her lips once more, before breaking away with a smirk and a playful swat to her ass as she moves away. Without seeing her face, I know that delicious pink color is painting her cheeks, and her beautiful lips are slightly parted. My girl knows what she’s missing.

I walk with Ethan toward the back of the mansion and the mudroom, the little boy bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Ready?”

“Ready,” he chirps.

I guide Ethan toward the side of the house where Marco, Alessio, and Lorenzo are already setting up. Ethan stops beside me, gripping my sweatpants nervously.

“Hey,” I start, bending down to be eye level, “they’re just here to have fun with us. They’ll set up while we go over the basics. Is that okay?”

“Are they going to play with us?”

“Yeah, if you want.”

To my surprise, Ethan nods. I stand with a smile and lead him on.

A tight nod is all I give the guys as we get closer.

“Okay, buddy, you ready?”

“Uh huh...” He’s nervous, rocking on his small feet as my brothers and cousin approach, sporting our red family baseball jerseys.

“Okay, first, safety.”

Marco moves slowly behind me, extending the helmet and jersey for Ethan to take.

The little boy glances at them, then at me.

“These are yours.”

“Mine?” he squeaks.

I nod. “You can take them. I’ll help you put them on.”

“Does Momma have one?”

“I think I can persuade her to wear one too.” The thought of Rosa in a jersey with ‘Marchiano’ on the back does something to me. And the image of her alone in it with nothing underneath does something even more. I clear my throat, reminding myself that I have an audience who can clearly see everything going on.

His fingers move over the threaded embroidery of his name on the back. “That’s my name,” he says in awe.

“Sure is. Now you’re one of us.”

The look Ethan spears me with nearly knocks me over. It’s like a sucker punch to the gut, and I’m left hanging on for dear life to stop me from falling apart.

No one has ever looked at me the way he is—like I’d just given him the world on a silver platter. Like I’m some sort of superhero.

Suddenly, little arms shoot up and wrap tightly around my waist.

Awkwardly, I kneel, unsure what to do.

Ethan’s never hugged me before.

And I’m paralyzed with fear of fucking this up.

“Help,” I mouth to Alessio, who only shakes his head while miming a hug.

My heart races in my chest like a fucking racehorse. Slowly, I pat his back gently with a shaking hand before giving him a slight squeeze.

“Thank you,” Ethan exhales.

“Anytime, buddy. Anytime...” My feet are frozen in place, and I’m too shellshocked to do or say anything else.

Marco, seeing this, clears his throat as he steps up toward Ethan. “Now that you’re properly dressed, let’s get your helmet on,” he says gently.

Ethan tentatively lets Marco lead him to the bench, where my brother swiftly clicks his small helmet into place before flashing me a thumbs up.

I clear my throat, trying to dispel the tightness in my chest. “You good, Ethan?”

“Yeah,” he nods.

Alessio claps me on the shoulder. “You’re getting there, Millo,” he says quietly. “Just keep on with what you’re doing. He’s opening up to you as you win his trust.”

I give my brother a grateful nod, and then, I walk to stand beside Ethan who’s now fully prepared for his first swing.

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A few hours later, I turn to the little boy. “Okay, Ethan, ready for something new?”

With a nod, he moves to the marked spot. His hand tightens around the plastic bat, which only hours ago trembled. We’ve spent nearly all afternoon practicing with him, hitting ball after ball. But now, it’s time for a few low and slow lobs to really step it up.

“Remember,” I start from where I’m crouched beside him, “eye on the ball, and swing when you’re ready.”

“What if I miss it?”

“Then, we’ll try again.”

“But...”

“But?”

“No one is gonna laugh?”

“No one is gonna laugh,” I promise him. “In fact, I bet you we’re all gonna cheer for you, regardless. And I’ll tell you a little secret.” I lean closer to him. “Uncle Alessio over there can’t swing for shi—um, salt. He’s got a lousy swing.” And Ethan’s soft giggle nearly has the same effect on me as his hug did.

I give Marco the signal and watch him slow pitch the plastic ball toward Ethan. His eyes squeeze shut as he swings. The crack of plastic on plastic splits the air, and Ethan’s brown eyes widen with surprise.

“I hit it?”

“You hit it.”

“I hit it!”

An eruption of cheers follows with a few whistles.

“Let’s try again.”

Repeatedly, Ethan hits ball after ball, the smile on his face growing with each cracking sound of the bat making contact. They only roll a few feet from where we’re positioned, but that’s not what matters. It’s the fact that he’s doing it.

Pride and something else moves through my body. Something I’m not sure I even know how to describe.

Affection.

Warmth.

Family.

Another crack of the ball hitting the bat snaps me out of my thoughts, and I smile. A new lyrical cheer hits my ears as Rosa’s voice mingles with the guys’ cheers, pulling my attention from Ethan’s little dance. The look she sends me makes my heart race.

“Did you see that, Momma?” he squeals.

“I sure did.”

“Kid’s a natural,” Alessio chimes in.

“We’ll have you running bases in no time,” I add.

“Really?” he says with wide eyes. The pure joy on Ethan’s face as my family continues to praise him settles into something hot and thick in my stomach.

We continue practicing with Rosa watching us. And Ethan’s tense, tiny shoulders relax more and more as time passes. And his laugh bubbles through the air when Marco hauls him up and runs the bases piggyback style, high-fiving Lorenzo once he’s back on solid ground.

Comfortable. He’s comfortable—or more comfortable—than he’s ever been in the last few weeks. And that makes standing out in the blistering heat, burning my neck to hell, completely and totally worth it. The smile on his face is worth it alone, and the hot, syrupy feeling through my body is something I’m not ready to give up.

But beneath the joy simmers my anger. How could anyone ever make such a small, precious person feel so fearful and distrustful? How could anyone ever take someone so sweet and break them like they’re worthless?

My fist clenches at my side. But I don’t have time to think about that. Right now, I just need to focus on Ethan. “Do you want to keep going?”

“Please?”

“As long as you want, Ethan. As long as you want.”

“Do you think Momma will try?” he asks with hope in his voice.

“I can ask her.”

And his wide grin warms my gut as I make my way to where Rosa sits.

“He’s laughing,” she says in a voice full of wonder. “Actually laughing.”

“Yeah, he is.”

She shakes her head with a small, dreamy sigh.

Tugging her closer, my arms wrap around her waist as I stand behind her, watching Ethan hit another ball a few inches further than the last time. His fan club goes wild, causing him to break out into another little dance.

“He wants you to try,” I say softly.

“To try? What, baseball?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know the first thing about what to do.”

“I can show you.”

“Okay, but in a few minutes. This is his moment to shine.”

With my chin resting on her head, Rosa leans into my chest like she belongs there. She does, whether either of us will admit it or not. Her fingers thread with mine.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For trying with him. For just being you.”

Yet again, this woman slices me to my knees without even trying. To be seen as something other than some bloody-knuckled brute is rare—nonexistent, really—and yet, Rosa sees something.

I squeeze her tighter. I don’t know how to tell her what I want...

To tell her that I’d do anything in my power to keep her and Ethan with me forever. Even when I know they’re not mine to keep.

To tell her that I want her not just to warm my bed, but also for something else—something that would heal the broken and damaged bits of me.

The words lodge in my throat.

I’ll only fuck it up if I try.

Things are going so well right now. The thought of losing her or Ethan is enough to make me pause. To make me swallow the emotions bubbling inside me.

I won’t risk messing it up. Not until I know for sure that she feels the same way about me...