

One Step Forward

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One Step Forward

by [revancequeen](#)

Summary

She and Roberto are happily in love--but then he uncharacteristically ghosts her. She descends upon Villa Altaria seeking answers, only to discover her prince in an unexpected spot. They haven't come this far together for no reason, and she refuses to give up on him so easily... But why is he so reluctant to explain himself?

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

She trailed after Alberto as he led her through the halls of Villa Altaria. Normally she didn't need him to guide her around the place, but this evening was an exception. She was looking for Roberto, which wasn't terribly unusual. What was unusual was that she'd shown up completely unannounced and uninvited, and though she'd looked for the prince herself he hadn't been in any of his usual spots.

Not in his office.

Not in his room.

Not in the dining hall, or the gardens, or the lounge, or the entertainment center, or...

Finally, Alberto had spotted her marching around with furious (but aimless) purpose, and when she'd half-ranted to him about her mission he had simply said, "If you would follow me, Miss, I believe I can locate His Highness for you."

Now Alberto was headed through a nondescript door at the back of the Villa that she had never gone through before--if the Head Steward hadn't deliberately led her to it, she probably would never have noticed it was even there.

She followed him through a narrow, brick-lined corridor until they came to a more open, outdoor space. This area didn't seem to be as impeccably maintained as the inside of the Villa or the gardens. Not that it was rundown by any means, but...there was stray, straggly grass growing in-between the paving stones that marked their path, and though the stones were mostly smooth she was pretty sure there had been a distinctive design etched into them at one point.

If she had to put her finger on it, this back area just seemed more *lived in* than the rest of the Villa she'd seen so far. Like time was allowed to flow here.

As they walked, she heard an odd, very distinctive noise. It sounded like something striking metal, quick and clear.

The sound kept repeating, over and over, louder and louder, and she realized that they were drawing closer to its source.

Then Alberto turned a corner, and so did she--

And there was Roberto, back turned to them, wielding a metallic baseball bat.

It took her a second to realize that they were separated by mesh webbing--he was inside a batting cage.

Alberto drew to a halt, clasping his hands smartly behind him, and she slowed for a moment, staring at the prince in the cage. Roberto clearly hadn't registered their arrival, and kept his back to them. Baseballs automatically shot out of a machine beside him at regular intervals, and he hit each one into a net on the opposite side of the batting cage without fail. Sharp, smooth, accurate to the last.

It was impressive enough that she temporarily forgot the whole reason for her surprise visit as she looked on. But all too soon, Roberto started to miss. His swings came too fast, or too slow. Too aggressive, not quick enough. Too high, too low.

She couldn't see his face, but she could tell he was growing more and more tense by the set of his shoulders, more *agitated* as his movements grew increasingly choppy and clumsy. Strike after strike missed its mark, until finally, the machine stopped pelting out baseballs and he threw the bat down into the dirt at his feet with a harsh, low grunt.

Roughly shoving a hand through his hair, Roberto finally turned around with a scowl.

His gaze fell on Alberto, standing there impassively.

Then he saw her, just behind the Head Steward.

His eyes widened even as hers narrowed.

It felt like it had been ages since she'd last seen Roberto...and it might as well have been. The last time they'd met up in person had been nearly several weeks ago. The last time he'd contacted her had been...

"What are you doing here?" he blurted.

She had intended to approach him calmly, with her emotions perhaps not entirely in-check but at least under control. Even as Alberto had led her to this spot. Even as she'd seen the prince's batting technique gradually unravel before her eyes.

But with those words, all plans of composure were out the window.

Her eyebrows snapped together, and she stalked over to face Roberto directly, though the netting of the cage still separated them.

"Really? *Really*? Is that all you have to say?" she demanded.

"I--"

"Why haven't you answered my calls? Or my texts? I know you've at least *seen* them, but in the end all you do is just leave me on read."

He finally dropped his shocked gaze from hers, staring at the ground between them. "...I was busy."

Curt and quiet, a reply completely unlike him.

This realization did nothing to pacify her.

"Busy enough to ghost me for a whole week?! You didn't even *tell* me anything like that, you just--"

“I *did* tell you, though. Didn’t I?” He met her eyes once more, his expression now distant and closed-off. Also unlike him.

“Yeah, I got this *ridiculous* text from you, and it went--Oh, you know what, let me pull it up--”

She jerked her phone from her pocket, swiped a finger over the screen, shoved it towards him.

He read the offending text as if reciting the number of a stranger from the phone book.
“*Please don’t contact me again. It’s over.*”

“Yeah! That!” She laughed, too high-pitched. “And then I ask you for an explanation and all I get is radio silence. I deserve better than that. *We* deserve better than that. Talk to me, Robbie--”

“There is no ‘we’! Not anymore!” Finally, his voice rose, and just as quickly he lowered it again to something more controlled. “I meant exactly what I said. I don’t want to see you anymore.”

“You could at least tell me why.” She paused, biting her lip hard. “...Did I do something?”

“No! It...” He glanced away from her again. “It’s not you.”

“Liar.”

“I’m not lying, it’s just...”

“Then what is it?”

For a long moment, he didn’t reply, just looked anywhere except at her. She used the silence to take a deep breath, then one more, trying to calm herself down.

“Robbie, if I hurt you somehow, please tell me so I can try to make this right with you. I-I would never intentionally do something to offend you or anything, so if I did, I’m so--”

“Please, stop.” Again, he met her gaze, and something in his eyes made the rest of her words die away. “I know. I told you, it’s not your fault.”

His words were gentle now.

“But I can’t tell you the reason. I’m sorry.”

Even as he continued to push her away.

“Al, can you drive her home?”

“I’m afraid I cannot do that, Your Highness.”

They both snapped around to stare at the Head Steward standing there, hands still clasped behind his ramrod-straight back, the picture of servile decorum.

“What?” Roberto asked. Then his face tightened. “Al--”

He took a breath.

“Look, just drive her home.”

“I cannot, Your Highness,” Alberto repeated, his own placid expression not wavering a bit.

“What the hell?!” Roberto threw his hands up. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I could ask you the same question.” Alberto’s features shifted to something iron. “What is it you hope to accomplish by driving her away?”

“That’s none of--”

“She will not be leaving this Villa by my hand until you discuss this with her. I will give up my own quarters to her so she can stay overnight if I must.”

“I *order* you to get her out of here!” Roberto’s face twisted, but instead of rage, she only saw grief. “*Al!*”

“Robbie.”

His name fell from her lips gently now, like a memory from three weeks ago. She moved to the entrance of the batting cage.

“No. Stay out!”

She stepped through, and he quickly turned away.

“Just go home! Please...” He broke off with a gasp that bordered on a sob. “Don’t make this harder than it already is.”

“Robbie,” she murmured again. She took a step towards him, but moved no further. “I don’t think you meant what you said in your text.”

His shoulders shook as he hunched forward, wrapping his arms around himself. He looked so lost and *alone*, and she felt the urge to put her own arms around him, but she made herself stay where she was.

“Was this about...what the press was saying back then? Now that I think about it, the timing lines up.”

He didn’t turn around, just shook his head weakly.

“I saw it on the news, but it’s not anything different from what they’ve said about us before.”

“They didn’t... It wasn’t about us.”

Slowly, he turned back around.

“They were talking about you. It’s always about *you*. I can deal with whatever they say about me, I’ve been used to it since I was a kid. But...” He took a deep, shuddering breath. “It’s relentless! They keep coming after you, over and over. You shouldn’t have to deal with that. Not because of me.”

Her brow furrowed as she processed his words. “It’s not like I have an iron-clad will or anything...sometimes the things they say *do* get to me. But--”

“What if it gets worse?” At last, Roberto was looking at her again. “Right now they’re just being dramatic and petty, but what if they actually turn on you someday? The press can be vicious, and people are easily swayed. What if...what if someday, you end up actually getting hurt because things get out of control?”

“You were...that worried about me?”

Her voice was small, and the smile he finally gave her was just as faint, if not even more fragile.

“I always worry about you.”

She smiled back. It was not a strong smile, and it was not meant to encourage or reassure him. But whatever emotion it was supposed to convey, it was real.

“Robbie, I’m not naive, and I haven’t been sticking my head in the sand. They say love is blind, but I knew I couldn’t be with you-- *really* be with you--unless I faced all the facts first.”

She took one step forward.

He didn’t move.

Another step, and he didn’t back away.

“I knew this would be hard sometimes,” she murmured, continuing to draw closer to him. “You may be a prince, but this isn’t a fairy tale. We’ve been together a while now, and it hasn’t all been sunshine and rainbows, but it hasn’t changed how I feel about you.”

She stopped directly in front of him. If he wanted, he could reach out and touch her.

If he wanted.

Looking into his eyes, she saw he had dropped all pretense of the distant, aloof mask he’d fabricated earlier.

“I love you, Roberto, and I still want to be with you. In fact, I’m pretty sure I love you even more than when we first started going out.”

Her words were clear, now. Decisive. There was no rasp in her voice, no waver, no trailing off at the end of her sentence.

“...Are you sure?”

His words were the opposite. His voice came out faint, hopeful, yet terrified of that hope being snatched away forever.

Her heart went out to him as she murmured, “Absolutely.”

And then, again, “I love you, Roberto Button.”

It was just one soft word, but the words that followed seemed to be the catalyst to breaking down the barrier he’d constructed around himself to keep her away. Not to punish her, she now realized, but to protect her.

His so-called protection had been unwanted and misguided, but they could talk about that later.

Speaking of talking, though... She did have one last thing to say.

“You can talk about these things with me. *We* should talk about this sort of thing from now on, okay?”

“Yes. Okay. I promise. I... I...!”

His shoulders trembled, and his hands that reached out were equally unsteady. He grasped her upper arms, leaned forward until his face was buried in her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped out. Sobs wracked his body as she wrapped her arms around him, and he finally pulled her into a tight embrace. “I’m sorry. I love you so much! I’m sorry!”

She didn’t know how long they stayed like that, and it really didn’t matter. She just held Roberto until his shuddering sobs subsided, until he drew in a deep breath and raised his head from her shoulder.

“...I’m sorry,” he said again softly, stroking her cheek. He was calmer now, more relaxed, meeting her gaze head-on. “I just realized, I... I was trying to protect you, but maybe I was also just trying to protect myself. I didn’t know how terrified I was of losing you until you came back to me. I saw you, and... I got scared. So I told you to leave before you could leave me on your own.”

“Well, fortunately for us both, it didn’t really work,” she quipped lightly, and was rewarded with his smile. Not the fake smile he’d worn when they’d first met, and not the smile he’d just shown her that looked like he was about to break.

This was *his* smile, real and warm and bright. She always wanted him to smile like that.

“But again--” She poked him in the chest. “We have to talk about this stuff together going forward, got it? No more of this dramatic high school breaking up by text nonsense.”

“Got it. You’re right.” He laughed, though it was more self-deprecating than anything else. “I really messed that up. I panicked and almost ruined the best thing that’s ever happened to me. What an idiot.”

“Hey now, no talking about my boyfriend like that. I’m sure it won’t be the last misunderstanding between us, but if we communicate we’ll be fine.”

“Boyfriend, huh?” The way he smiled made her heart melt. “What if...”

His smile faded a little.

“What?” she prompted him.

“It’s, um... I’ll tell you later.”

She leveled a pointed stare at him.

“Okay, okay! Well, speaking of talking about things... I know it’s too soon for me to ask this and everything, and now probably isn’t a great time, but what if we talked about maybe becoming...something more than that someday. Something more permanent.”

Her breath hitched in her throat for a moment.

“I mean--I mean, we could,” she said in a rush. “Talk about it, that is.”

“Good.” He pulled her into another hug, and she reciprocated immediately. “I know I have a lot to make up for, and it won’t be right away, but...”

“We don’t have to rush.” She squeezed him as firmly as she could. “From now on, we need to make sure we’re both on the same page. And you know me, I’m pretty patient.”

“Well, you know *me*.” His soft laugh reverberated through her, thrilled her to her bones. “But I learned my lesson about jumping the gun. So I promise: no more running away.”

“Yeah? Maybe not from me, but--”

“Oh crap! All!”

Roberto quickly pulled away from her, head shooting up to look at the Head Steward still standing placidly outside the batting cage...

Or at least, that had most likely been his intention, but when she turned around there was nobody there.

“Wow.” Roberto pouted. “He practically strong-arms me into listening to you, and then he just runs off when we’re not looking?”

“He was *probably* trying to be *considerate*.” She jabbed him in the side with her elbow, but like his words there was no force behind it.

“Yeah. I’ll have to thank him later. And apologize, of course.” He sighed and took her hand. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. Want to grab something to eat? My treat.”

“I hope you mean you’ll be treating me from the Villa kitchens, and to a guest room for the night, because I don’t want to go anywhere else today. And I’d feel bad about getting Al to drive me home after all that.” She leaned against him as they left the batting cage together.

“Why of course, my lady.” She laughed at his exaggeratedly formal tone. “And besides, who said *I* wanted you to go home tonight?”

She smacked his arm. “You’ll give Al an ulcer if he hears you talking like that before we’re even married.”

“So it’s fine if he hears me talking like that after we’re married?”

“You’re impossible.”

“And you’re incredible. I think we make a great match!”

“Your logic is the incredible thing here. But...I agree.”

She smiled up at him as they entered the small back door of the Villa.

“We do make a pretty good match.”

End Notes

Alternate, unused titles:

- "Boyfriends and Batting Cages"

- "Call Me Maybe... Please?!"

- "Comin' Outta My Cage and I've Been Doing Just Fine"

Special thanks, as always, to my friends for their feedback!

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