

Chapter 1

The drive from Central New York to Philadelphia was one that Rocky knew entirely too well.

The first trip had been exciting. The second had been memorable. Somewhere around the sixth or seventh trip, however, the novelty had worn off. Now it was simply the drive down the turnpike.

The same exits.

The same gas stations.

The same arguments.

The same traffic.

Especially the traffic.

Rocky gripped the steering wheel as his truck, a black Ford F150 super duty, crawled south on the Northeast Extension. Up ahead, a sea of brake lights stretched toward the Lehigh Tunnel.

"Unbelievable," Rocky muttered. In his head he was calculating how much gas he was using per mile crawling through traffic. He could have taken the Highlander but that would have required transferring the booster seats for his two kids, and Lord Knows his wife hated driving the truck.

"What?" Antonio asked from the passenger seat.

Rocky pointed through the windshield. "That."

Antonio squinted. "The tunnel?"

"No, the traffic."

Antonio shrugged. "Yup. Looks like traffic."

"It *is* traffic."

"So what's the problem?" Asked Antonio. He had become an expert at knowing exactly what to say to needled under Rocky's skin. Not to be a dick, but because it seemed to be one of the few pleasures he had left.

Rocky tightened his grip on the wheel.

William laughed quietly from the back seat.

At forty-five, Rocky still looked imposing. The massive frame that had once seemed indestructible had leaned out over the years. His shoulders remained broad, his hands looked capable of tearing

apart an engine block, and his beard—dark with the occasional streak of gray—gave him the appearance of a man who preferred solving problems himself. For all of his bulk he was surprisingly gentle; intentional. His blonde hair was pulled back into a man-bun that he regretted almost immediately after growing it.

Mostly because Antonio wouldn't shut up about it.

"You know everybody thinks we're gay, right?" Antonio said.

"There it is," William muttered.

Rocky sighed. "What?"

"The man-bun."

"What about it?"

Antonio gestured toward Rocky's head. "The man-bun. The beard. The fact that we've spent twenty years raising a kid together."

"We raised him because we made a promise."

Antonio nodded. "Oh, I know."

Rocky glanced over suspiciously. "Then why do you keep bringing it up?"

Antonio smiled. "Because it bothers you."

Rocky returned his attention to the road.

It did bother him.

Not because he cared what strangers thought.

But because Antonio cared what strangers thought enough for both of them.

Antonio, on the other hand, had aged infuriatingly well.

His dark hair remained thick. His beard was carefully trimmed. His glasses somehow made him look smarter than he actually was. He stayed in remarkably good shape for a man his age, though Rocky suspected vanity played a larger role than discipline.

"You really should use beard oil," Antonio said.

"No thanks, I'm good." Rocky replied.

"It's dry."

"It's winter."

"It's a beard, it requires maintenance."

Rocky shook his head. "Do you carry beard oil with you?"

Antonio looked offended.

"Of course not." He paused. "It's in the center console."

William laughed.

Some conversations never changed.

The tunnel finally swallowed them.

Yellow lights flashed overhead while traffic continued at a pace normally reserved for funeral processions.

The moment they emerged on the southern side of the mountain, the landscape began changing. Farmland gave way to warehouses. Warehouses gave way to shopping centers. Shopping centers gave way to sprawling developments that seemed to have materialized overnight.

Antonio stared out the window.

"When did all this get built?" he asked.

"Twenty years ago," Rocky replied.

Antonio nodded thoughtfully.

"That's what I said."

"No it isn't."

"Close enough."

William smiled.

The closer they got to Philadelphia, the worse the traffic became.

By the time they reached Mid-County and turned toward the Schuylkill Expressway, Rocky's patience had been worn dangerously thin.

"This road should be illegal," he announced.

Antonio looked up from his phone.

"It's just a road. It's done nothing wrong."

"It shouldn't exist."

"You're very anti-road for someone currently driving on one."

Rocky stared at the endless line of vehicles in front of him.

"See that Subaru?"

"The white one?" Antonio asked.

"Yeah."

"What about it?"

Rocky thought for a moment.

"I'd like to pick it up and put it somewhere else."

William laughed.

Antonio nodded approvingly.

"That's growth."

"What does that mean?"

"Ten years ago you would've wanted to throw it down the hill."

The river on the left and the hill on the right gave way as the city finally appeared on the horizon.

Gray winter skies hung low above Philadelphia. Buildings rose from the distance while traffic continued its relentless assault on Rocky's sanity.

William leaned his head against the window.

Four months.

Four months until graduation.

Four more of months of everyone asking questions he couldn't answer.

What comes next?

The question followed him everywhere.

Professors asked.

Friends asked.

Relatives asked.

Even strangers asked.

The frustrating part was that everyone seemed convinced he should already know.

Most of his classmates acted as though they had their futures figured out.

Graduate school.

Law school.

Consulting.

Finance.

Medicine.

Careers.

Plans.

Roadmaps.

William had none of those things.

"You know," Antonio said suddenly, turning around in his seat, "your dad would've hated this."

William looked up. "The traffic?"

"No. UPenn."

Rocky groaned. "Here we go again."

Antonio ignored him.

"You come from a long-line of Syracuse alum. Your dad, your great-grandfather. They all believed Syracuse was better than every other school."

William had his choice between several schools, including Syracuse. Columbia and NYU were too daunting; Brooklyn may have been fun but Manhattan was too big and sprawling. For as much as William liked things to feel safe and secure, Dartmouth was too boring. He wanted some fun in his life, not too much, just the right amount between excitement and danger; he just could never find it. UPenn seemed to give him everything, on paper at least. Translating that into real world excitement was harder than it seemed.

"Penn is objectively better than Syracuse," William said, for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Not at basketball," Antonio quickly replied. There was no argument there, but when it came to academics and prestige, UPenn was much better. "Hey, Rocky, a little help here?" Antonio said as he flipped his head casually.

Rocky shook his head. "Leave me out of this, I went to a SUNY school, remember?"

Antonio snorted.

"Yeah. And look how you turned out."

"Wildly Successful?" Rocky asked.

"Old."

"You're the same age as me."

Antonio waved dismissively.

"I am a month younger than you."

For a moment, nobody spoke.

William stared out the window again.

The mention of his father always felt strange.

Not painful.

Not exactly.

Incomplete.

Like reading a book with missing chapters.

He knew the stories.

His father was brave.

His father was funny.

His father was loyal.

His father loved him.

His mother was beautiful.

His mother was smart.

His mother loved him.

The stories were always the same.

The details never seemed to get much deeper than that.

Whenever he asked questions, the answers became annoyingly vague.

Not lies, per se. Just...incomplete.

Especially when Rocky and Antonio were involved. There were all these fragments of adventures and the amazing times the Saltines had together, sometimes over-the-top, often times just mundane friendship. William wondered whether that was normal or if something special had brought the four together.

The truck finally exited the highway traffic and rolled into the part of Philadelphia that most closely resembles an urban campus.

Students hurried between buildings bundled against the cold; heads down, eyes buried in their phones.

Life moved all around them and they didn't even realize it.

For a moment, nobody made a joke.

Nobody argued.

Nobody complained about traffic.

Rocky parked the truck; it was a tight squeeze but an otherwise great parallel parking job. He admired the distancing in the backup camera and mirrors before shutting off the engine. It was a nice distraction.

Silence filled the cab.

Four years.

Four years of move-ins.

Four years of move-outs.

Four years of helping William becoming a young man.

The little boy was gone.

A long time removed from the little boy who asked where his father went.

The boy who climbed onto his shoulders to watch fireworks.

The boy who needed protecting.

Gone.

In his place sat a young man.

And for the first time, Rocky wondered if William needed them at all anymore.

The thought hurt more than he expected.

"Well," Antonio said finally, opening the passenger door. "Let's get this shit over with."

Cold air rushed inside.

William climbed out.

Rocky followed.

The three of them stood beside the truck while students and parents streamed around them.

Nobody paid them any attention.

Just three men standing together on a cold winter morning.

The beginning of something.

Or maybe the end.

None of them were quite sure which.

Yet.