

Chapter 11

Back in Central New York, Antonio paced the length of his apartment for what had to be the hundredth time.

The apartment itself was nicer than he needed.

Spacious.

Comfortable.

Well-appointed.

It sat above one of Rocky's detached garages overlooking the woods beyond the property. Originally it had been intended as little more than a flop house—a place to crash when Antonio separated from his wife. A temporary arrangement. A couch with walls.

Temporary eventually became convenient.

Convenient eventually became permanent.

Being only a few steps away from Rocky's house made helping raise William easy. Before long he was around almost every day anyway, and somewhere along the way nobody questioned why he never really moved back out.

Life had a funny way of making permanent decisions while pretending they were temporary.

Antonio stopped beside the kitchen counter.

Cybersecurity.

Who would've guessed?

Turns out there wasn't much demand for scuba diving instructors in Syracuse, New York. One thing led to another. A couple certifications. A couple contracts. Before long he was making a respectable living testing websites, finding vulnerabilities, and telling companies all the ways strangers might steal their information.

It paid well.

He hated it.

There wasn't anything wrong with the work.

There just wasn't anything...

alive...

about it.

Antonio opened the refrigerator.

Closed it again.

He wasn't hungry.

Just restless.

That was becoming the story of his life.

Restless.

He wandered into the living room where an old guitar leaned in the corner beside scuba gear that hadn't been used in years.

A framed concert poster.

Boxes of old CDs.

Artifacts from lives he'd already lived.

He realized something that unsettled him.

His greatest missing piece wasn't romance.

It wasn't money.

It wasn't purpose.

It was passion.

Somewhere between bills and responsibilities and passwords and software updates...

he'd stopped looking forward to tomorrow.

He still loved William.

Still loved wrestling.

Still loved whiskey.

Everything else felt...

gray.

Even dating.

Dating apps were torture.

How many times could a grown man ask someone what their favorite color was before deciding loneliness wasn't all that bad after all?

Antonio smiled to himself.

He genuinely preferred being alone if it meant he didn't have to pretend to be someone else.

Then Philadelphia crept back into his mind.

Not Dana.

Not even the balcony.

The feeling.

The bar.

The ridiculous knife.

The impossible coincidence.

The realization that for one night...

he'd felt twenty-five again.

Adventure.

That was it.

Adventure was missing.

Not danger.

Adventure.

They used to fight impossible enemies.

Steal relics.

Drive across countries because somebody had a stupid idea.

Now he spent his days smoke-testing websites and writing reports explaining why "Password123" wasn't an acceptable company password.

How had that become his life?

Antonio laughed quietly.

God...

he missed good trouble.

Across town Rocky organized the papers on his desk.

Again.

For what had to be the fourth time.

Everything was already organized.

He simply couldn't convince himself it was.

He glanced toward his phone.

Nothing.

No texts.

No missed calls.

Not even William's usual "Good morning."

He immediately scolded himself.

William was twenty-three years old.

He didn't need to text every morning.

He didn't need permission.

He didn't need protecting.

Rocky leaned back in his chair.

So why did something feel...

off?

No.

Everything was fine.

William was simply growing up.

That was the goal.

Wasn't it?

He opened his browser.

Typed the name of the coat.

Nothing.

Different color.

Wrong stitching.

Wrong zipper.

Wrong everything.

He sighed.

Sooner or later he would have to explain to his wife how her favorite Christmas present had exploded while cushioning a naked Antonio falling from a third-story balcony.

He was not looking forward to that conversation.

Rocky minimized the browser.

Emails.

Change orders.

Time sheets.

Construction drawings.

Focus.

Work.

His eyes drifted toward the office door.

His assistant wasn't there.

Slowly...

almost guiltily...

he opened the bottom drawer of his desk.

His fingers searched the very back.

Eventually they found it.

A four-inch pewter cross clip-on earring.

Vinnie's.

Somehow...

some way...

Rocky had managed to keep it after everything.

He stared at it for a long time.

Then carefully clipped it onto his left ear.

He turned toward the reflection in the dark computer monitor.

Badass.

Absolutely badass.

He narrowed his eyes.

Folded his arms.

Tilted his head just slightly.

Yeah.

Still had it.

The office door opened.

"Your four o'clock is here."

Rocky's entire soul left his body.

Without looking away from his assistant he quietly unclipped the earring and dropped it into his pocket.

"...did you need something?" she asked.

"No."

"You sure?"

"...yes."

She nodded slowly.

"I'll send them in."

The door closed.

Rocky sat frozen.

Did she see it?

Of course she saw it.

He buried his face in his hands.

Forty-five years old.

Successful businessman.

Still pretending to be Vinnie when nobody was looking.

Three days.

Three entire days.

No Claire.

William had searched everything.

Facebook.

Instagram.

TikTok.

LinkedIn.

Nothing.

No Claire.

No photographs.

No accounts.

No digital footprint whatsoever.

She lived off campus.

She wasn't listed in the university directory.

William sat staring at his laptop.

Had she imagined him?

Or...

had he imagined her?

The thought refused to leave.

Then there was the dream.

Rome.

The older man.

The blood.

The voice.

The impossible drop of blood on his own finger.

Was that real?

Had the extra melatonin done something to him?

Was he slowly losing his mind?

Three days earlier his biggest concern had been his future.

Now he wasn't entirely convinced about his present.

Tuesday evening finally arrived.

Urban Economics.

Seven o'clock.

The one class he regretted scheduling.

The subject fascinated him.

The time ruined his week.

Reluctantly he pulled on his coat and stepped outside.

Campus felt...

wrong.

Too quiet.

Students were around.

Cars moved.

People talked.

Yet somehow everything felt distant.

Muted.

As though someone had quietly turned the volume down on the world.

Then it happened.

That same strange pulling sensation.

Not in his body.

In his mind.

Almost...

like someone gently tugging on a string tied somewhere behind his thoughts.

William stopped walking.

The feeling intensified.

Halfway down Chestnut Street he noticed it.

An alley.

At the far end...

a strange green glow.

Not bright.

Not blinding.

Just...

there.

Every rational thought screamed at him to keep walking.

Go to class.

Stay safe.

Ignore it.

Instead...

he took one step toward it.

Then another.

Then another.

Somewhere inside him...

something had changed.

Or perhaps...

something had finally awakened.

By the time William reached the alley the light was gone.

Silence.

Brick walls.

No people.

No sound.

Dead end.

William slowly turned in a circle.

Completely alone.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

Something wasn't right.

