

Chapter 12

Vinnie sat alone in the darkness.

The room was small.

Simple.

Functional.

There were apartments throughout Rome with marble floors, vaulted ceilings, and terraces overlooking the city. Had he wanted, he could have afforded any of them.

Instead, he had chosen this.

A modest room.

A modest life.

A modest existence.

Sacrifice had become comfortable.

Martyrdom had become routine.

No one knew.

No one was supposed to know.

Three empty wine bottles sat on the table.

A fourth stood half-full beside his chair.

He poured another glass.

The wine wasn't helping anymore.

Neither was the music.

Neither were the routines.

Neither was Rome.

The sensation had become unbearable.

It wasn't pain.

Not exactly.

It was pressure.

Like a toothache buried somewhere inside his mind.

A slow...

constant...

throbbing.

Every pulse carried another whisper.

Every whisper lingered longer than the last.

Vinnie closed his eyes.

"What you resist, you empower," he whispered to himself.

He let the feeling wash over him.

Acknowledged it.

Accepted it.

Waited.

Usually...

it passed.

Tonight...

it didn't.

Something had changed.

He reached for the bottle again.

Maybe more wine.

Maybe sleep.

Either one seemed acceptable.

Anything to dull the sensation.

Anything to keep thinking.

Because he knew exactly what the darkness wanted.

It wasn't searching for him anymore.

It was searching through him.

Searching.

Listening.

Hunting.

He could feel it probing memories.

Faces.

Names.

Twenty years of careful discipline strained beneath the weight.

No.

Not William.

Please...

not William.

The pressure exploded.

A sharp ringing filled his ears.

Like a church bell struck somewhere inside his skull.

William.

Vinnie opened his eyes.

The room doubled.

His glass slipped from his hand and shattered against the stone floor.

He collapsed onto one knee, catching himself against the edge of the table.

This was new.

Very new.

And very bad.

His vision blurred.

His stomach twisted violently.

The voice came again.

Closer.

Clearer.

No longer a whisper.

A command.

Bring him.

Vinnie squeezed his eyes shut.

"...bring who?"

Silence.

Then laughter.

Cold.

Patient.

Certain.

The answer came one word at a time.

The...boy.

Vinnie's blood ran cold.

"No."

Bring...him.

"No!"

The room trembled around him.

The pressure intensified until he thought his skull might split apart.

For twenty years he had carried the darkness.

For twenty years it had wanted only one thing.

Freedom.

Now...

It wanted William.

And for the first time since the bonfire...

Vinnie was afraid.

Not for himself.

For his son.

