

Chapter 13

Spring had finally returned to Central New York.

Winter never surrendered easily. Even after the last of the snow disappeared, the trees stood bare for weeks as though waiting for permission to wake up. Then, almost overnight, the world remembered it was alive. Tiny green buds appeared on branches that had seemed dead only days before. Freshly tilled fields stretched across the countryside. Farmhouses opened their windows. The smell of damp earth drifted through the air.

Life insisted on returning.

Vinnie drove with one hand resting comfortably across the steering wheel.

The windows were down despite the cool air.

He preferred it that way.

Fresh spring air filled the Toyota Celica carrying hints of lilacs, wet grass, and freshly turned soil. The sun sat comfortably overhead, warming the dashboard just enough to make the whole car feel alive.

Beside him, Jasmine smiled quietly as she watched the countryside pass.

Neither of them felt any need to speak.

Some silences were conversations.

A small voice floated forward from the back seat.

"Daddy?"

Vinnie smiled without taking his eyes off the road.

"Yeah, buddy?"

"Are we almost there?"

Jasmine looked at the dashboard clock.

"Almost."

William accepted the answer immediately.

For approximately thirty seconds.

"Daddy?"

"Yeah?"

"Can Mario pick me up?"

"I'm pretty sure he can."

"And Antonio?"

"He'll probably try."

"And Mario?"

Vinnie laughed.

"Definitely Rocky."

William nodded solemnly, apparently satisfied that the adults had finally addressed the important issues.

He went back to sliding a battered plastic action figure along the window while making enthusiastic engine noises.

"Brrrrrrrr..."

The toy climbed invisible mountains.

Defeated invisible monsters.

Saved invisible kingdoms.

The imagination of a three-year-old required very little assistance.

"Daddy?"

Vinnie chuckled.

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

Vinnie looked into the rearview mirror.

William was grinning at him.

"I love you too, buddy."

William smiled proudly.

Then, after thinking about it for a moment...

"...can we get ice cream?"

Jasmine burst out laughing.

"It's ten-thirty in the morning."

William considered this information with the seriousness only toddlers possessed.

"...okay."

Three seconds passed.

"...after breakfast?"

Vinnie looked over at Jasmine.

"You've created a negotiator."

She smiled.

"I think he gets that from you."

Vinnie shook his head.

"No."

He glanced at the mirror again.

"He definitely got that from Antonio."

Jasmine laughed.

"I don't know. Antonio would've asked for the ice cream first."

"That's true."

"And then argued that technically it counted as dairy."

Vinnie laughed louder.

"And somehow convinced everybody else he was right."

The car rolled through another small town.

A hardware store.

A church.

A gas station.

A diner advertising homemade pie.

The sort of places most people drove past without ever remembering.

Vinnie remembered all of them.

Ordinary had become beautiful.

He never expected that.

There had been a time when he'd believed life needed to be extraordinary to matter.

Adventure.

Mystery.

Purpose.

He had spent years chasing those things.

Now...

He found himself looking forward to mowing the lawn.

Making pancakes.

Reading bedtime stories.

Arguing over which movie they should watch.

Helping William build blanket forts in the living room.

The ordinary moments had quietly become the extraordinary ones.

Jasmine rested her hand gently on his.

He looked over.

"You okay?" she asked him.

He nodded.

"I was just thinking," Vinnie said.

"Dangerous."

"I know."

"What about?"

Vinnie looked into the rearview mirror again.

William had grown quiet.

His action figure now rested beside him as he watched trees blur past outside the window.

He looked so...

safe.

So completely certain that tomorrow would arrive exactly as today had.

"I don't remember ever being this happy."

Jasmine followed his gaze.

She watched William for several moments before speaking.

"I do."

He looked at her.

"When?"

"The first morning after we brought him home."

Vinnie smiled.

"He threw oatmeal at me."

"He did."

"You laughed."

"I did."

"You said it was the cutest thing you'd ever seen."

"It was."

"He ruined your favorite sweater."

"I know."

"You still said he was perfect."

Jasmine squeezed his hand.

"He was."

Vinnie felt something tighten in his chest.

Not sadness.

Gratitude.

Somewhere along the way he had stopped falling in love with Jasmine.

Not because he loved her less.

Because he loved what the two of them had become together.

They had built something neither of them expected.

A home.

A family.

A little boy sleeping peacefully in the back seat after insisting he wasn't tired only five minutes earlier.

Jasmine looked over her shoulder.

William's head had slumped gently against the window.

The action figure remained clutched in one tiny hand.

She smiled.

"He's getting heavy."

"He'll always be small enough."

"You know that's not true."

"I know."

"But let me believe it a little longer."

She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"I'll believe it with you."

The car continued down the familiar highway toward home.

Toward friends they hadn't seen in far too long.

Antonio undoubtedly had something ridiculous planned.

Rocky would pretend he didn't.

Mario would insist none of it was his fault regardless of what happened.

Some things never changed.

Outside, the trees shimmered in brilliant shades of new green.

The whole world seemed to be waking up.

Vinnie looked at the road ahead and smiled.

He honestly believed this feeling would last forever.

He had never been happier.

Vinnie looked outside at the verdant world opening up before him and for just a little while...

He was right.