

Chapter 14

William regretted his decision almost immediately. The first and only time in his entire life he decided to stop being careful...he wandered into a dead-end alley in West Philadelphia.

Every freshman orientation had included the same speech.

Stay on campus.

Travel in groups.

Be aware of your surroundings.

Don't wander off alone.

Now, they never explicitly said: “*Don't chase mysterious green lights into abandoned alleyways.*” But one could safely assume that was implied.

The green glow had vanished.

Not faded.

Vanished.

One moment it had been there.

The next...nothing.

Darkness swallowed the alley almost completely.

Only a faint rectangle of light from Chestnut Street marked the way back.

William immediately pulled out his phone and switched on the flashlight.

The narrow beam swept across brick walls.

Dumpsters.

A fire escape.

Broken bottles.

Nothing.

He turned slowly.

Still nothing.

And yet...He wasn't alone.

He couldn't see anyone.

But he could feel them.

Not one.

Several.

The sensation was impossible to explain.

Every time the flashlight drifted toward one side of the alley...whatever he sensed seemed to move somewhere else.

Always just outside the light.

William's pulse quickened.

His free hand slipped into his pocket.

His father's knife.

It had been a graduation gift.

Not because Antonio expected him to use it, but because he wanted William to carry something that had belonged to Vinnie.

A reminder.

A memory.

Not a weapon.

Tonight...it might have to become both.

William eased the knife from his pocket.

He didn't open it.

Not yet.

He simply held it.

Comforting himself with its weight.

"Get a grip," he whispered.

Nobody answered.

He began walking toward the opening of the alley.

Slowly.

Confidently.

Or at least...he hoped he looked confident.

Every step brought him closer to the streetlight.

Every step made the darkness behind him feel heavier.

Then...Footsteps.

William froze.

Silence.

He started walking again.

The footsteps returned.

One step.

Another.

Perfectly matching his pace.

He stopped.

The footsteps stopped.

His breathing grew heavier.

He started again.

This time...the footsteps were closer.

Much closer.

William refused to turn around.

Whatever was behind him...didn't deserve the satisfaction.

The cold suddenly changed.

Not air.

Breath.

Something exhaled against the back of his neck.

William's entire body locked.

Then instinct took over.

He shoved the knife back into his pocket and ran.

The footsteps exploded behind him.

Not one set.

Several.

The beam from his phone bounced wildly across brick walls as the alley blurred into black and white streaks.

He could feel them closing.

Feel hands reaching.

Feel...

something...

just beyond the edge of vision.

The opening.

Almost there.

Almost in the open air.

And then William crashed into something solid.

His phone flew from his hand.

Stars exploded across his vision.

He hit the pavement hard.

"Hey!"

A familiar voice.

"Watch where you're going, asshole"

Then the voice paused

"...William?"

His head spun.

Something warm trickled down the side of his face.

He looked up.

Claire.

She was kneeling beside him.

Her hands immediately found his forehead.

"Oh my God, are you ok?"

"I'm fine," William managed.

"No, you're not. You're bleeding."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to crash into you...I took a wrong turn."

Claire brushed wet hair away from the cut above his eyebrow.

"You didn't hit me."

William blinked.

"What?"

"Honey, you hit the mailbox."

He looked behind him.

The alley.

Empty.

Silent.

Nothing there.

No footsteps.

No shadows.

No green light.

Nothing.

Claire looked back at him.

He stared at her, trying to find the words.

"Where have you been?"

She smiled softly.

"Fate."

She helped him to his feet.

"Fate has the best timing." William said, laughing despite the blood running down his face.

For the first time since entering the alley...he felt safe.