

Chapter 15

William was embarrassed more than anything else. He wondered what Antonio would say. He was pretty certain what Rocky would say. The scolding, the lecturing, the fact that he would be right.

The cut above his eyebrow had bled far more dramatically than it deserved to, but otherwise he was fine.

At least physically.

His pride had suffered considerably more damage than his forehead.

"I'm really okay," he insisted for what had to be the fourth time, trying to free himself from Claire's support. Not that he minded being pressed up against her, he just didn't want her to think he was a sissy.

Claire glanced sideways at him.

"I know, you are." She didn't let go.

"You don't sound convinced."

"I'm not."

She smiled.

"You ran face-first into a mail box at full speed, sweetheart, that's not something you take lightly".

William looked down.

"That wasn't entirely my fault."

"No?"

"There were..."

He hesitated.

"...circumstances."

Claire raised an eyebrow but continued walking, highly intrigued as to what could follow. "I've found that people usually say 'circumstances' right before telling me something unbelievable."

William sighed.

"That's fair."

The two walked quietly through West Philadelphia.

Claire stayed close enough that whenever William drifted slightly, her hand found his arm without either of them acknowledging it.

He appreciated that.

More than he wanted to admit.

And maybe sometimes he lost his balance a little bit just to have a reason to pull closer to her.

A few minutes later she stopped in front of an old three-story mansard house tucked between two brick rowhomes.

It looked as though it had survived a hundred Philadelphia winters purely out of stubbornness.

"This is me."

She unlocked the door and led him inside.

The staircase was narrow.

Steep.

The sort of staircase that had been built long before anyone considered moving furniture upstairs.

William reached for the railing.

The world tilted slightly.

Claire immediately slid beneath his arm, quietly supporting part of his weight.

Neither of them mentioned it.

By the time they reached the third floor William was breathing harder than he cared to admit.

Claire unlocked the apartment.

Warm air drifted into the hallway.

The apartment felt exactly like her.

Small.

Comfortable.

Intentional.

Beautiful.

Books occupied nearly every available shelf.

Framed prints of famous paintings covered the walls.

A half-finished watercolor sat on an easel near the window.

Plants occupied every surface that received sunlight.

A candle burned softly somewhere in the kitchen, filling the apartment with the faint scent of vanilla and cedar.

William smiled.

"I like it."

Claire laughed "Yeah, I do too."

She guided him toward the couch.

He started to sit upright.

She pushed gently on his shoulder.

"No."

"I'm fine." He protested.

"I know."

"I don't need—"

"William."

Her tone wasn't stern.

Just...certain.

He lay back.

She fluffed a pillow beneath his head.

"There."

He smiled despite himself.

"Bossy."

"Very."

She disappeared into the bathroom.

A moment later she returned carrying a bowl of warm water, a clean cloth, rubbing alcohol, and a some bandages.

William immediately frowned.

"I don't think all that's necessary."

"It isn't." She said, dipping the cloth into the water. "But it's comforting."

William couldn't argue with that.

She carefully wiped away the dried blood from his forehead.

The cloth was warm.

Her touch impossibly gentle.

Every now and then she'd pause to study the cut before continuing. Satisfied that his wounds were sufficiently she grabbed the alcohol to disinfect.

"This will sting"

"Can't be as bad as running head-first into a mailbox." He said.

The alcohol touched the scrape.

William flinched.

"Told you."

"I was trying to be brave."

"You were trying to impress me."

William looked away.

"...maybe."

Claire smiled.

"I appreciate the effort."

She pressed a small bandage into place.

"There."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"No stitches?"

"You ran into a mailbox; that usually doesn't require surgery."

William laughed.

The room grew quiet.

He became aware of little things.

The candle.

The ticking of an old clock.

Rain beginning softly against the windows.

The scent of Claire's lotion.

Lavender.

Something else.

He couldn't place it.

He decided he didn't want to.

He simply wanted to remember it.

"Where did you come from?" he asked quietly.

Claire looked up.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean..."

He searched for the words.

"...where have you been?"

She smiled.

"I'm always around, William."

He frowned.

"You are?"

"You just never see me."

William considered that. It somehow made sense.

At least...coming from her.

"Did you see me go into that alley?"

Claire shook her head.

"No."

"Then how—"

She looked toward the window.

"I don't know."

A pause.

"I just..."

Another pause.

"...felt like I was supposed to go that way."

William stared at her.

"That's exactly how I felt."

Neither of them spoke.

The silence felt heavier now.

William suddenly became aware that his head felt...strange.

Heavy.

The room drifted gently around the edges.

He closed his eyes briefly.

When he opened them again Claire was watching him.

"You may have a mild concussion."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

"You'll be alright though."

"I was hoping for a second opinion."

"You're cute, too."

He laughed softly.

Then looked at her.

Really looked at her.

"Claire..."

There were so many things he wanted to say.

How empty the last three days had felt.

How often he'd searched for her.

How impossible it seemed that someone he'd known for such a brief time could suddenly occupy so much of his mind.

How safe he felt sitting here.

How terrified he'd been in that alley.

How grateful he was that she'd been there.

Claire gently placed two fingers against his lips.

"Don't."

William looked confused.

"You need rest."

She brushed a loose strand of hair away from his forehead.

"You're going to be fine" she said, "It's just a scratch." And continued "But you'll probably feel awful tomorrow."

She smiled warmly.

"But tonight....just rest."

She rested her hand on his chest. "William, I'm here."

She leaned forward and kissed his forehead.

William reached up and caught her hand before she could pull away.

His fingers wrapped gently around hers.

"Claire..."

She looked back.

"Please don't leave me."

She laughed softly.

"My apartment is only twenty-five feet long."

He smiled.

"That's not what I meant."

Her expression softened.

"I know."

He swallowed.

"I can't keep relying on fate every time I want to see you."

Claire leaned forward once more.

This time she kissed him.

Softly.

Patiently.

When she pulled away she rested her forehead against his.

"You won't have to."

"I promise."

William felt his eyes growing heavy.

His head still hurt.

His body ached.

Tomorrow would probably be miserable.

But for the first time in as long as he could remember...the warmth spreading through his chest wasn't fear.

It wasn't excitement.

It wasn't uncertainty.

It was...safety.

And as sleep quietly claimed him...

William realized that maybe...

just maybe...

those two things weren't so different after all.