

Chapter 17

William woke slowly.

For several long moments he couldn't remember where he was.

The ceiling was unfamiliar.

The room smelled faintly of vanilla, cedar, and coffee.

An old clock ticked somewhere beyond the kitchen.

Rain tapped softly against the windows.

Then he felt warmth.

He looked down.

Claire.

She slept peacefully beside him beneath the blanket.

The couch was much too small for two people, yet somehow neither of them seemed to mind. She had curled naturally against him sometime during the night. One arm rested lightly across his chest while his own remained wrapped around her almost instinctively. Her cheek rested against his shoulder, her slow breathing warming the front of his shirt.

William smiled.

He studied her face.

In sleep she looked younger somehow.

And older.

There was something strangely ageless about her.

The soft curve of her mouth.

The loose strands of flaxen hair scattered across the pillow.

The faint crease between her eyebrows that somehow remained even while she slept.

She was beautiful.

Not because she was perfect.

Because she was...

Claire.

William realized he had missed her more in three days than seemed reasonable.

That thought should have frightened him.

Instead...

it filled him with gratitude.

Carefully he shifted his arm, trying not to wake her.

The movement disturbed her anyway.

Claire murmured something unintelligible and slowly turned over.

Now her back rested against his chest.

Almost without thinking William wrapped both arms gently around her.

She instinctively settled closer.

A soft contented sigh escaped her lips.

William closed his eyes.

Antonio would've put his hand under her shirt.

Rocky would've pulled the blanket a little higher to make sure she stayed warm.

Mario? Well, William wasn't entirely sure based on the stories he had heard.

Vinnie...

He wished he knew.

The thought caught him off guard.

His father.

Immediately his head began to ache.

Not sharply.

Deeply.

Like pressure building somewhere behind his eyes.

William squeezed them shut.

Darkness.

Then...

Green.

A faint emerald glow flickered behind his eyelids.

The alley.

The footsteps.

The breath on his neck.

William's body tensed involuntarily.

He began to shake.

Claire stirred immediately.

She turned to face him, still half asleep.

"William?"

He opened his eyes.

She reached up and gently touched his cheek.

"Are you okay?"

He forced a small smile.

"I..."

He hesitated.

"I think so."

"What happened?"

"I just..."

He looked past her toward the rain-speckled window.

"...had a strange thought."

Claire smiled sleepily.

"The worst kind."

"What?"

"Thoughts."

She yawned.

"They're almost always the problem."

She nestled back against him without another question, trusting that if he wanted to explain, he would.

William held her a little tighter.

Whatever waited inside his own mind...

Whatever had followed him into that alley...

He couldn't stop it.

Not yet.

But he could do one thing.

He could keep Claire safe.

He rested his chin gently against the top of her head.

Outside, the rain continued to fall.

Inside, for one perfect moment...

the world was quiet.