

## **Chapter 18**

Antonio had just reached for his phone when someone knocked at the door.

He stared toward the ceiling.

"Seriously?"

Another knock.

He sighed dramatically, slid the phone face down onto the couch cushion, and shuffled toward the door.

Joel stood outside holding a small FedEx envelope.

Joel was Rocky's dimwitted, long-time friend and former employee at the Two In the Evening's backroom. Now he had a more respectable job as Rocky's groundskeeper. Somewhere along the way he'd quietly become property manager, snow remover, occasional dog sitter, and the unofficial mayor of Rocky's property. He had also somehow managed to remain one of the most genuinely confused people Antonio had ever met.

"This came in the mail today," Joel said, extending the envelope. "Wasn't sure who to give it to."

Antonio accepted it.

The front read:

### **Antonio & Rocky Saltine**

Antonio frowned.

"Your name was first," Joel explained proudly. "So I brought it here first."

Antonio blinked.

"...That's actually pretty sound logic."

Joel smiled.

"I didn't make any sounds but it was a good idea."

Antonio ignored him, turned the envelope over.

### **MISSION MASTER**

No logo he recognized.

No company name that rang any bells.

Just a return address:

P.O. Box

City of Industry, California.

"The fuck is Mission Master?"

Joel shrugged.

"How would I know? I didn't buy it, just brought it to you."

Joel was two for two. Antonio gave the envelope another look.

Small.

Light.

Probably advertising.

Or one of those scams pretending somebody had won a free cruise.

"Thanks, Joel."

Antonio started closing the door.

Joel stuck his head forward.

"So..."

Antonio sighed.

"So...what?"

"What's in the package?"

"I don't know."

"You gonna open it?"

Antonio looked at the envelope again.

"Nah."

Joel frowned.

"You sure?"

"It's probably junk, Joel."

"I could take it over to Rocky's."

Antonio shook his head.

"I'll bring it over later."

Joel nodded.

"Okay."

Antonio closed the door.

Then immediately heard Joel from the hallway.

"...Wonder what's in the package..."

A few slow footsteps.

"...Maybe it's important..."

More footsteps.

"...Could be coupons..."

Antonio smiled.

Joel was probably going to spend most of the night thinking about the package and what was inside of it.

There would be no resuming his previous activity.

Not now.

Antonio tossed the envelope onto his desk.

The whole thing was strange.

Nobody called him Antonio Saltine.

Not officially.

His driver's license had his real last name.

So did his passport.

His tax returns.

His mortgage.

His cybersecurity certifications.

Only four people had ever really called him Saltine.

Two were dead.

One was probably eating meatloaf across the driveway.

The fourth was currently pretending not to miss him.

Antonio shrugged.

Maybe he'd ordered something online while drunk.

Honestly...

that seemed far more likely than mystery mail.

He decided a shower was the better use of his time.

There were very few pleasures in life Antonio considered genuinely underrated.

A shower beer was one of them.

The hot steam.

The cold beer.

The nakedness.

The complete absence of responsibility.

It bordered on spiritual.

Unfortunately, Antonio was blind as a bat without his glasses.

The entire experience amounted to standing inside a warm cloud while hoping he wasn't accidentally shampooing with body wash.

He finished the beer.

Finished the shower.

Grabbed another beer from the refrigerator while pulling on a clean shirt.

Just enough.

He didn't want to show up drunk around Rocky's kids.

Buzzed was acceptable.

Drunk was irresponsible.

Antonio was many things, but irresponsible around children wasn't one of them.

He slipped on his shoes and opened the apartment door.

Silence.

Joel had finally wandered off.

Antonio started down the stairs.

Halfway across the landing he stopped.

"...Eh, what the hell."

He climbed back upstairs.

Grabbed the FedEx envelope from the desk.

If he had bought something spectacularly embarrassing while drunk then at least Rocky would appreciate it.

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Rocky sat at the kitchen table watching his family.

He felt guilty.

He almost always made it home before five.

Today a new client had insisted on a late meeting.

Then dinner.

Then drinks.

The man owned a large estate on Skaneateles Lake that he wanted completely restored.

Money, apparently, was no object.

He'd even offered to let Rocky and his foreman live on the property during construction.

Rocky politely declined.

Being away from home wasn't worth any amount of money.

The client hadn't missed a beat.

"I'll just have my private jet fly you back and forth, and anywhere else you want to go."

Rocky appreciated the generous offer, but he had nowhere to go. He still wasn't entirely sure what the man did for a living. Something involving technology.

Whatever it was...

he cared about quality.

Integrity.

Craftsmanship.

Rocky could work with people like that.

Dinner had ended only a few minutes earlier.

His wife stood at the sink washing dishes.

Rocky started to get up.

She gently pressed a hand against his shoulder and kissed the top of his head.

"I've got it."

"I can help."

"You already did."

"I was late."

"You were working."

"I still feel bad."

She smiled.

"That's one of the reasons I married you."

The kids excused themselves and disappeared into the family room, immediately launching into whatever game children considered life-or-death this week.

Rocky picked up his glass of wine.

The house was warm.

The fire crackled softly.

His wife hummed while loading the dishwasher.

Laughter drifted in from the next room.

Everything felt...

right.

He exhaled slowly.

For just a moment...

the entire world made sense.

Then right on cue the back door opened.

Antonio walked in carrying two beers under one arm and a FedEx envelope under the other.

"Of course," Rocky muttered.

Antonio grinned.

"I missed you too."