

## Chapter 19

Neither of them moved very much that morning.

They woke with the sun filtering softly through the apartment windows and, after exchanging the sort of sleepy smile that somehow said everything necessary, quietly settled back beneath the blanket.

The couch was still far too small.

Neither seemed interested in correcting the problem; and Claire wasn't the kind of woman to invite a man into her bedroom so quickly.

Claire rested against William's chest while listening to the slow rhythm of his breathing.

Safe.

She hadn't felt safe in...she honestly couldn't remember.

For years she had convinced herself she didn't need anyone.

Books had been enough.

Museums had been enough.

Travel had been enough.

Adventure had been enough.

People complicated things.

Love complicated everything.

She preferred movement.

New cities.

New countries.

New ideas.

Anything except standing still long enough for someone to matter.

Then William happened.

The rooftop.

The conversation.

The kiss.

She had panicked.

Not because of him.

Because of herself.

Three days earlier she had deliberately avoided every coffee shop, every path across campus, every place she thought he might be.

Not because she didn't want to see him.

Because she desperately did and that frightened her.

But she also feared the opposite; what if he never came looking?

What if she'd imagined the connection?

Or worse...

What if he turned out to be like every other college boy she'd already learned to avoid?

The kind with perfect hair, perfect confidence, and absolutely no interest in anything happening inside her head.

Claire had once believed there were many categories of men.

Experience had simplified the taxonomy considerably.

There were men worth talking to.

And there were fuck boys.

Most were the second.

William, unfortunately, seemed determined to complicate her system.

He didn't stare at her as though she were something to be conquered.

He listened.

Actually listened.

He asked questions.

He remembered answers.

He looked at her as though she were a book written in a language he badly wanted to learn.

Claire was beginning to realize she didn't know what William was.

But whatever it was...

she liked it.

More than she probably should.

She smiled.

Then snuggled a little closer beneath the blanket.

His arm tightened around her instinctively.

He was still asleep.

Even unconscious...

he held onto her.

The thought warmed her more than the blanket ever could.

They finally climbed off the couch sometime around midmorning.

William insisted he felt much better.

Claire insisted he still had a concussion.

The compromise consisted of skipping class.

"We're seniors," Claire said while starting the coffee.

"We've earned at least one irresponsible decision."

William laughed.

"I don't think Rocky would agree."

"Fortunately Rocky isn't here."

That seemed to settle the matter.

Coffee became breakfast.

Breakfast became conversation.

Conversation became hours.

Neither seemed interested in keeping track of time anymore.

At some point William showered.

At some point Claire showered.

At some point he emerged from the bathroom wearing jeans and nothing else because his shirt still had blood on it and Claire had insisted on throwing it in the wash.

She had not considered the consequences of that decision.

William wandered barefoot through the apartment, stopping in front of every bookshelf, every painting, every photograph, and every plant as though each object were waiting to be introduced properly.

"What's this one?"

"A pothos."

"And that one?"

"Monstera."

"Why is that painting sideways?"

"It isn't."

He turned his head 90 degrees.

"...Huh."

Claire laughed.

She had spent years telling herself she wasn't the kind of woman who noticed things like broad shoulders or defined muscles. That sort of shallow thinking belonged to women with low self-esteem, high credit card debt, and an affinity for men with protein powder collections.

And fuck boys.

Especially the fuck boys.

Then William turned toward her, shirtless and slightly damp-haired, holding his coffee mug with both hands while genuinely waiting to hear why she owned four different houseplants that looked nearly identical to him.

Claire noticed.

Immediately.

It irritated her.

Not because he looked good.

He did. With his wet hair down he looked like Jim Freakin' Morrison.

But because she had spent years telling herself she cared more about what was inside a man's head than what was underneath his shirt.

It turned out a woman could appreciate both.

That seemed wildly inconvenient.

At first she'd assumed he was simply being polite.

Then she realized something.

He genuinely wanted to know.

Not because he cared about plants.

Because they belonged to her.

He wanted to understand her world.

That realization caught her unexpectedly off guard.

William wandered into the small corner she used as a writing desk.

A black leather notebook rested beside a chipped coffee mug.

He picked it up.

"What's this?"

Claire looked over.

"Oh. Nothing."

"Sketchbook?"

She smiled.

"Sort of."

"What do you sketch?"

"Ideas."

William looked confused.

"Ideas?"

She nodded.

"I keep telling myself I'm going to write the next great American novel."

"Really?"

His excitement sounded completely genuine.

Claire laughed.

"No."

Then she shrugged.

"I mean...yes. But I have absolutely no illusions it'll be the next great anything."

He opened the cover.

"What's it about?"

She thought for a moment.

"A girl."

"What kind of girl?"

Claire smiled.

"One who's completely lost."

William nodded.

"Does she find her way?"

"I hope so."

"Can I look?"

She hesitated only a second.

Then nodded.

William began leafing backward through the notebook.

The last pages were crowded.

Arrows.

Character names.

Fragments of dialogue.

Little sketches in the margins.

Maps.

Plot diagrams.

Questions she'd written to herself.

Entire paragraphs crossed out.

The farther backward he turned, the emptier the pages became.

Tentative ideas.

Single sentences.

Half-finished thoughts.

A Baci wrapper taped to a page with hearts around it.

Tiny beginnings.

He smiled.

"You got braver."

Claire looked up.

"What?"

He turned another page.

"Your writing."

"The farther I go..."

He looked down at the notebook again.

"...the more confident you become."

She hadn't noticed.

Until now.

William reached the very first page.

Only one sentence had been written.

**The question isn't how. It's why.**

He read it twice.

Then looked at her.

"That's..."

He smiled.

"...really profound."

Claire felt warmth rush into her cheeks.

The words weren't hers.

She had carried them home from Rome.

For some reason, she'd never forgotten them.

She walked over quietly and rested her head against William's chest.

He wrapped his arms around her without hesitation.

She closed her eyes.

There it was again.

That ridiculous feeling.

Safe.

Found.

Completely inconvenient.

She had no idea how any of this had started.

Not really.

But for the first time in years...

Claire didn't feel stuck.

