

Chapter 2

Moving William into his dorm room did not take nearly as long as it used to.

The first year had been an operation of almost military complexity. There had been carts, bins, boxes, suitcases, extension cords, bedding, fans, lamps, a coffee maker that Rocky was fairly certain violated at least three dormitory policies, a strict itinerary, and enough nervous energy from the three of them to power a small town. Antonio had nearly gotten into an argument with a sophomore over an elevator. Rocky had carried so many boxes up so many flights of stairs that he later claimed Penn should have awarded him an honorary degree in manual labor. William, meanwhile, had spent most of that first move-in day looking as though he were trying to pretend he was not terrified.

Now, four years later, the entire process took less than twenty minutes.

Two bags.

One plastic storage tote.

A backpack.

A laundry basket full of things that should not have been transported in a laundry basket.

That was it.

Rocky carried the tote and both bags because no matter how many times William insisted that he could do it himself, Rocky acted as though allowing another person to carry a heavy object was a personal moral failure. Antonio carried the laundry basket, mostly because it was light, and because he had learned many years ago that the secret to helping people move was selecting the easiest item immediately and then looking busy.

William carried the backpack.

“Pretty sure you brought more stuff freshman year,” Antonio said as they walked across campus.

“I had more stuff freshman year,” William replied.

“You had too much stuff freshman year,” Rocky said.

“You packed most of it,” William said.

Rocky thought about arguing, but decided against it. There was no point arguing against truth. He had in fact packed most of it.

“Your father would’ve brought one duffel bag,” Antonio said.

William glanced over at him. “Really?”

Antonio nodded his head.

“Yes, he would just say ‘whatever I forgot, I can probably buy when I’m there’.”

William laughed.

Rocky smiled despite himself. Vinnie was good at planning ahead, but wasn’t afraid to spend money when it was more convenient.

The dormitory was warm when they entered, too warm in the way old college buildings always seemed to be in winter. The air smelled faintly of dust, floor cleaner, laundry detergent, and whatever somebody had reheated in a microwave hours earlier. Students moved through the halls in various stages of unpacking, reunion, and mild panic.

William’s room was small, but not terrible. Gratefully he had a single. A small perk of being a senior stilling living on campus.

Rocky had said the same thing every year.

Small, but not terrible.

It had become something of a tradition.

William immediately started to make the bed; the one thing Rocky had secretly hoped he would still need help with. The desk was clear. The walls were bare. The window looked out across another building and a sliver of gray Philadelphia sky.

Antonio set the laundry basket on the floor.

“Well,” Antonio said, looking around the room, “this is depressing.”

“It’s a dorm room,” William replied.

“Yeah, a dorm room with three dudes and no women.” Antonio remembered one-time visiting Vinnie in his college dorm room. Vinnie managed to invite over two women; Japanese exchange students, and Antonio spent the whole time talking with them about their boyfriends. Dorm rooms gave him bad memories.

Rocky placed the storage tote inside the small closet and stepped back to survey the room as though he were inspecting a construction site.

“Don’t mind him, he’s never spent more than 12 consecutive hours in a dorm room before.” Rocky chuckled at his little joke before becoming serious again. “Now, do you need anything else before we leave?” Rocky asked.

“No,” William replied.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“You have your chargers?”

“Yes.”

“Laptop?”

“Yes.”

“Medications?”

“Yes.”

“Passport?”

William sighed.

“Yes, Rocky.”

Antonio scoffed. “Passport? The kid barely even leaves his room.”

Rocky just shrugged, “You never know when a birth certificate and photo ID are never going to be enough.”

Antonio nodded thoughtfully. It actually made sense. He was never a fan of bureaucracies and red tape, but for as confident and smart as William was, he would flinch at his own shadow. A passport was a waste of good money and paper.

William stood near the desk and listened to the two men fall into the rhythm he had known his entire life. They argued the way some people breathed. Naturally. Constantly. Without much consideration for whether it was necessary. Yet somehow, beneath all of it, there was a steadiness that William had never seen anywhere else.

He had friends.

Plenty of friends.

At least, he thought he did.

There were people he ate with, people he studied with, people he texted, people he shared Instagram reels with, people he liked well enough to spend time with when time needed spending.

But there was a difference between having friends and having what they had. Antonio and Rocky had spent twenty years annoying each other and would still have walked through fire together without asking why. William knew that because, according to every vague, half-told story he had ever heard, they already had.

He wondered sometimes if people were supposed to find that.

Or if the Saltines had just been lucky.

The thought made him feel lonelier than he wanted to admit.

Rocky walked to the window and looked out.

“You’re still sure about living on campus?” Rocky asked.

William turned toward him.

“Yes.”

“It’s just, well it’s your last semester,” Rocky said. “You could’ve gotten an apartment.”

Antonio laughed. “Now you’re saying that?”

Rocky looked at him. “What?”

“Four years of ‘the dorms are safer,’ and now you’re acting like you are the cool one.”

Rocky’s jaw tightened. “I never said I was the cool one.”

“Don’t worry, no one has ever accused you of that,” Antonio laughed.

William smiled.

The campus housing arrangement had not been entirely his idea. Rocky’s wife had never liked the thought of William living alone in Philadelphia, and Rocky, who was very brave in many areas of life and absolutely hopeless when disagreeing with his wife, agreed. Antonio had pushed back a little, mostly out of principle, but even he had admitted that the dorms made sense.

William had gone along with it.

That was what William did.

He went along.

He took the safe option.

The responsible option.

The option that made everyone breathe easier.

Most of the time, he was fine with that.

Lately, though, he had begun to wonder if safety was just another word for waiting.

“Thank you for helping me. But I understand if you guys wanna go,” William said.

The room went strangely quiet.

Not dramatic.

Not uncomfortable.

Just quiet.

Rocky nodded. “Right.”

Antonio clapped his hands once. “Well then.”

Nobody moved.

William looked at them both. “Guys, I’ll be fine. Really. What could possibly happen to me?”

“I know,” Rocky said too quickly.

Antonio looked at Rocky, then at William.

“He knows,” Antonio said. “He just doesn’t believe it.”

Rocky ignored him.

“Call if you need anything,” Rocky said.

“I know.”

“And not just for emergencies.”

“I know.”

“Even if it’s something small. But please don’t have any emergencies, ok?”

“Rocky.”

Rocky nodded again. "Right."

Antonio stepped forward first and hugged William. It was quick, but not casual. For all of Antonio's jokes, he hugged like a man who meant it and was slightly embarrassed by how much he meant it.

"You get in any trouble and you call me," Antonio said quietly.

"I will," William replied.

"No, I mean it," Antonio said. "Not him. Me. Remember I am the cool one."

"I heard that," Rocky said.

"You were supposed to," Antonio replied. "Seriously, get in some trouble. Drink some beer, find a girl. Have some fun, just don't knock her up and don't hurt her. It's your last semester; you have an entire life to be lame like us."

William smiled and hugged Rocky next.

Rocky held on a little too long.

Not much.

Just enough.

When he finally let go, Rocky placed both hands-on William's shoulders and studied him with the same expression he used when examining something important for damage.

"You're good?" Rocky asked.

William nodded.

"I'm good."

Rocky seemed to accept the answer.

Mostly.

A few minutes later, William stood at his window and watched them cross the sidewalk below. Antonio said something that made Rocky stop and turn toward him. Rocky pointed a finger. Antonio laughed. A passing student glanced at them, then quickly looked away.

William smiled.

Then they were gone.

The room felt larger after they left.

Not physically.

The walls remained where they were.

The bed remained too narrow.

The desk remained too small.

The window still looked out across the same gray city.

But somehow, with Antonio and Rocky gone, the room felt larger and emptier at the same time.

William sat on the edge of the bed.

For the first time all day, no one was asking him what came next.

He wished someone would.

The hotel was only a few blocks away, close enough that Rocky insisted they walk and Antonio insisted that walking in January was proof that civilization had failed.

By the time they reached the lobby, both men were cold, irritated, and quiet for very different reasons. Rocky wanted to call home. He wanted to hear his wife's voice, ask about the kids, tell her the drop-off went fine, and then sit in a room by himself where nobody could ask him anything meaningful. Maybe he would watch television. Maybe he would read. Maybe he would simply go to bed early and pretend that the strange emptiness in his chest was exhaustion.

Antonio, on the other hand, wanted a drink.

The desk clerk was young, polite, and far too cheerful for someone working at a hotel on a winter evening in Philadelphia.

"Welcome," she said. "Checking in?"

"Yes, please" Rocky replied.

Antonio leaned casually against the counter. He was debating whether to act super gay to make Rocky feel more uncomfortable. Vinnie wouldn't have hesitated to do that in a heartbeat.

"Two rooms," Antonio said. Choosing civility.

The clerk looked between them.

Rocky closed his eyes. *Phew; he didn't act gay.*

"Two rooms this time," Antonio repeated loud enough for the other guests to hear. "Remember last time?"

Rocky opened his eyes slowly. *Ugh, close enough.*

The clerk's smile faltered just slightly.

Antonio grinned.

Rocky stared at him with the patience of a man who had considered violence and chosen Christ instead.

"Please ignore him," Rocky said to the clerk.

"I get that a lot," Antonio said.

"No you don't," Rocky replied.

"Right but I probably should."

The clerk typed quietly.

Rocky looked straight ahead.

Antonio looked delighted.

It never ceased to amaze Rocky how in a world where everything was done online so quickly, why it took so long to check-in anyplace. He listened to the incessant tapping by the clerk as she ostensibly entered launch codes into the computer and processing through several screens. He had already made reservations and entered everything in once; why does this always take so long?

A few minutes later they were standing in the elevator, each holding a key card. The ride up was silent until Antonio finally spoke.

"I think she thought we were gay."

"She did not," Rocky said.

"I think she did. I should go ask her."

"While you're at it, ask if she thought you were annoying." Rocky replied.

“Yeah, that too.”

Rocky shook his head. “Why do you enjoy making people uncomfortable?”

Antonio looked offended.

“I enjoy making *you* uncomfortable. People are just collateral damage.”

The elevator doors opened.

Their rooms were across the hall from each other, which Antonio found funnier than Rocky thought it deserved to be. They agreed to meet in the morning, though Antonio made no serious commitment to what condition he would be in, which was fine by Rocky as long as he didn’t have to see Antonio until it was time to leave.

Rocky entered his room, set his bag near the dresser, and stood still.

The room was perfectly ordinary.

King bed.

Desk.

Lamp.

Television.

A chair no person in history had ever sat in comfortably.

For years he had thought quiet was what he wanted.

A quiet room.

A quiet evening.

A few hours without responsibility.

Now that he had it, he found it unsettling.

He called his wife.

Gratefully she answered on the third ring.

Antonio waited exactly seven minutes before leaving his room. Just long enough to make it seem as though he checked-in, freshened-up, settled-into the room and not long enough that anyone thinks he took a dump or jerked-off. Not that he would truly care about either of those things, it just seemed important. Even packing an overnight was a formality; he would in all likelihood sleep-in and wear the same thing he wore today. Having a spare pair of clean clothes was just performative.

He had no further planning beyond finding a bar, which in Philadelphia required very little skill. The city was full of places where a man could sit in poor lighting and make questionable decisions under the comforting illusion of hospitality. After walking less than a block, he found a small neighborhood bar tucked between a pizza place and a laundromat.

Paddy's Pub.

Antonio stopped outside and smiled.

Perfect.

The inside was dim, narrow, and smelled faintly of beer, fryer oil, wood cleaner, and old regret. A few people sat at the bar. Two men played pool in the corner. A television above the shelves showed a basketball game nobody appeared to be watching.

Antonio took a stool near the middle.

The bartender walked over.

He was lean, sharp-featured, and carried himself with the confidence of a man who had either never doubted himself or never survived doing so.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked.

"Whiskey," Antonio replied. "Neat...nothing too trendy like Buffalo Trace and nothing too expensive, either."

The bartender nodded. "I've got you."

Antonio glanced around.

"You Dennis?"

The bartender paused. "How'd you know?"

Antonio shrugged. "Lucky guess."

Dennis poured the drink and set it down.

Antonio lifted the glass.

Finally, he thought, a place where a man could drink as much as he wanted and not be judged for it.

Antonio basked in the quiet warmth of the bar as he drank his whiskey. Then a second. He was unsure of his feelings for the day; he was proud of William, but felt...sad for him? Is that why he tries so hard to make irreverent jokes? Was he trying so hard to be someone else, someone else for William? He knew he was getting drunk by the seriousness of his internal monologue. He had to pace himself or else he'd be likely to take off his clothes and start to recite an off-the-cuff speech of grave importance while standing on the nearest table. It's been known to happen.

His flights from reality were interrupted as shouting erupted from the corner.

Without thinking, Antonio spun on the stool before he realized he was moving. One hand went to his pocket. The knife was out before the glass had finished rocking on the bar. The steel blade reflecting off the neon Miller Lite sign above him, poised ready to strike at the enemy before him.

The two men near the pool table froze.

Dennis froze.

Antonio froze.

For a brief moment the entire bar held its breath.

Then one of the men near the pool table lifted both hands.

"Dude," the man said. "He just scratched. It's cool."

Antonio looked from the man to the pool table.

Then down at the knife in his hand.

Shit.

Slowly, Antonio folded the blade and slipped it back into his pocket.

"My bad," Antonio said. "Force of habit."

Dennis stared at him.

Antonio picked up his whiskey. "Bar games can get pretty intense, y'know. I once saw a man get shot over a game of foosball."

Nobody laughed.

Antonio took a drink. “Not shot, exactly, but he did get a helluva titty-twister.”

For several seconds, he considered whether he should leave immediately or pretend the whole thing had been perfectly normal. He decided on the second option because pride, if nothing else, was a powerful force in a man’s life.

The bar slowly returned to its prior state.

The pool players resumed arguing.

Dennis resumed looking suspicious.

Antonio resumed drinking.

Everything was as it should be.

Then right on cue as if to destroy all that was well enough in the world, a woman’s voice spoke from behind him.

“That was either incredibly impressive or deeply concerning.”

Antonio closed his eyes.

Naturally.

