

Chapter 20

Vinnie wandered through Piazza Bologna without any particular destination.

The morning was quiet by Roman standards. Scooters passed in short bursts, their engines echoing between the buildings before dissolving into the distance. Shopkeepers raised metal gates and swept the pavement outside their doors. A bus exhaled at the curb, collected three passengers, and continued toward the center of the city.

There were no tour groups here.

No raised umbrellas leading clusters of visitors through crowded streets. No vendors selling miniature monuments or plastic helmets. No one posing for photographs.

This was simply Rome.

A neighborhood waking up.

Vinnie preferred it that way.

He crossed the piazza slowly, both hands tucked into the pockets of his coat. The morning air felt cool against his face. A familiar café occupied the corner ahead, its narrow doorway already crowded with men standing shoulder to shoulder at the counter.

For years, he had started his mornings there.

He would order a latte and drink it standing at the counter, watching the barista work with the speed and efficiency of someone performing a routine that had become instinct. Glass. Espresso. Milk. Saucer. Receipt.

The barista knew him now.

Or at least recognized him.

They rarely spoke beyond the few words required to complete the transaction.

Vinnie stepped inside.

“Buongiorno.”

The man behind the counter nodded.

“Il solito?”

Vinnie hesitated.

The usual.

He understood the words, but for a moment he could not remember what his usual was.

The barista waited.

“Si. Un latte, per favore,” Vinnie said finally, the words chimed melodically by their very own nature.

The man nodded and turned toward the machine.

Vinnie stood at the counter, unsettled by the delay.

It was nothing.

A tired mind.

An old man forgetting a simple word.

Except he was not old.

Not really.

His face suggested otherwise. Gray threaded through his hair. Lines had formed around his mouth and eyes. His body carried twenty years of wear that did not belong to it.

The latte arrived.

He wrapped both hands around the cup and took a sip.

Warm.

Familiar.

He could remember drinking one here yesterday.

He could remember drinking one the morning before.

He could remember hundreds of mornings arranged in an indistinct line stretching backward through the years.

But the first one—

The first one would not come.

He knew there had been a first.

There had to be.

A man did not simply appear in a café with twenty years of routine already behind him.

Vinnie closed his eyes and tried to reach for it.

Nothing.

Only a faint pressure somewhere behind his thoughts.

A door he could no longer open.

It does not matter.

The voice moved through his mind without sound.

Vinnie opened his eyes.

Farloh.

He had stopped reacting to the voice years ago. At first it had terrified him. Then angered him. Then exhausted him.

Now it was simply there.

A second presence occupying the same narrow room.

Vinnie lifted the cup again.

“It matters to me,” he whispered.

The barista glanced toward him.

Vinnie looked down and drank the rest of the latte.

He left a coin on the counter and stepped back outside.

Across the street stood a bakery.

Small.

Ordinary.

Its front window displayed rows of bread, pastries dusted with sugar, and sandwiches wrapped neatly in white paper.

Vinnie stopped.

Something stirred.

He had eaten his first panino there.

Twenty years ago.

That memory still remained.

Barely.

He could see himself standing near the window, younger and frightened, holding the sandwich in both hands. Prosciutto folded between slices of bread. Pink. Glossy.

Raw ham.

He had been convinced it was raw.

Convinced he would become violently ill.

The memory arrived as a series of dim images rather than a complete scene.

The sandwich.

The bakery window.

A voice laughing.

Whose voice?

Vinnie frowned.

There had been someone beside him.

No.

Not beside him.

On a telephone, perhaps.

Or in his memory.

He could hear laughter, but no face accompanied it.

He tried to follow the sound.

It slipped away.

The details receded toward the edges of his mind, leaving behind only the faint outline of embarrassment.

He smiled despite himself.

He had eaten the entire sandwich.

He remembered that much.

The rest is unnecessary.

Vinnie continued walking.

The stationery store was two doors down.

He had always liked the window.

Beautiful papers arranged in careful stacks. Cream. Ivory. Pale blue. Sheets with heavy texture and rough edges. Fountain pens placed inside velvet-lined boxes. Bottles of ink so dark they appeared black until the sunlight passed through them.

He stood outside longer than he intended.

Paper.

Pens.

A black notebook.

Something tightened in his chest.

There was a young woman.

He knew that.

Or thought he knew it.

A café.

A notebook resting on a table.

Bright white pages.

A question.

The memory remained just beyond reach.

He pressed his fingertips against the window.

Who was she?

Why did she matter?

A face almost formed, then dissolved before he could see it.

She does not matter.

Vinnie's jaw tightened.

"She mattered."

You do not remember her.

"That doesn't mean she didn't matter."

Farloh said nothing.

Vinnie remained at the window, staring at the papers and pens.

He could feel the memory somewhere inside him.

Not gone.

Disconnected.

Like a book shelved in the wrong section of a library. The words remained intact, but he no longer knew where to find them.

He moved on.

The bookstore stood near the corner.

Its green awning had faded badly over the years. The gold lettering above the door had begun to peel. Books filled the window in uneven towers, some new, others old enough that their pages had yellowed beneath the glass.

Vinnie stopped again.

The reaction was immediate.

A warmth.

A sadness.

A name.

He reached for it.

Nothing.

There had been a bookstore.

Not this one.

Somewhere else.

A man behind a counter.

Dust.

Wooden shelves.

Coffee, perhaps.

Or remodeling.

The memory made no sense.

He saw hands covered in sawdust.

He heard someone complain.

He heard laughter.

He saw a face without features.

The absence frightened him more than the voice ever had.

“Who are you?” he whispered.

A woman leaving the bookstore glanced at him before hurrying away.

Vinnie remained where he was.

The memory had once belonged to someone important.

He knew that with certainty.

Someone he had loved.

Someone who had annoyed him.

Someone who—

The thought ended.

Not faded.

Ended.

As though a wire had been cut.

Vinnie staggered slightly and caught himself against the side of the building.

You are tired.

“No.”

You have carried these things long enough.

“No.”

Let them go.

Vinnie pushed away from the wall.

He continued down the street, walking faster now.

The corner restaurant was preparing for lunch. A waiter unfolded tablecloths over the small outdoor tables while another arranged silverware and glasses. The smell of garlic and tomatoes drifted from the kitchen.

Two carabinieri stood outside the bank across the street, rifles held loosely against their chests.

Vinnie remembered them.

Not those men.

Others.

Always others.

Uniforms changing. Faces changing. The bank remaining.

Time moved forward in small replacements.

He passed the bus stop.

Then stopped so abruptly that a woman behind him nearly walked into his back.

“Scusi.”

Vinnie stepped aside.

Rain.

He could hear it.

Heavy against the pavement.

He could feel water running through his hair and down the back of his neck.

The morning around him remained dry, but the memory arrived with such force that he almost lifted a hand to shield his face.

Twenty years ago.

He had stood at this same bus stop in a downpour.

No umbrella.

Soaked through.

A young woman had approached.

Beautiful.

Dark hair pulled back from her face.

She had looked at him for only a moment before stepping closer and extending her umbrella over both of them.

She spoke in Italian.

Vinnie had not understood.

“English?” he had asked.

She shook her head.

They stood together beneath the umbrella in silence.

Close enough that their shoulders touched.

Waiting for a bus.

He remembered the sound of rain striking the fabric above them. The smell of her perfume.
Water gathering along the curb.

Then the bus arrived.

She boarded through one door.

He boarded through another.

He never saw her again.

The memory was complete.

Almost painfully so.

Vinnie closed his eyes.

Why could he remember her?

A stranger.

A woman who had shared an umbrella with him for perhaps ten minutes.

Why could he remember the rain, the perfume, the sound of her voice—

But not the man in the bookstore?

Not the woman with the notebook?

Not the laughter beside the sandwich?

Because the memory has no attachment.

Vinnie opened his eyes.

The realization did not come from Farloh.

It came from somewhere deeper.

The woman at the bus stop had remained untouched because she had no place in his life. No history. No thread leading to anything else.

She was simply an image.

A self-contained scene.

The others were being severed from him.

Not erased.

Detached.

The memories remained, but their meanings were disappearing.

Farloh was not destroying the pages.

He was removing the labels.

Vinnie lowered himself onto the bench beneath the bus shelter.

People passed around him.

A mother pushing a stroller.

An elderly man carrying a bag of groceries.

A teenager staring down at his phone.

Across the street, a small boy sat on the interior windowsill of an apartment building. He held an action figure in one hand and a toy vehicle in the other, crashing them together while making explosion sounds.

Vinnie watched him.

The sound pulled at something.

A little boy.

Brown hair.

A toy.

A voice calling—

The memory flickered.

Vinnie leaned forward.

“Come on,” he whispered. “Come on.”

The boy in the window raised the action figure high above his head and launched it toward the toy vehicle.

An explosion.

Laughter.

Vinnie saw another child for half a second.

Or perhaps the same child.

A car.

A back seat.

Someone playing along the windowsill of a car.

A name formed somewhere inside his mind.

He felt it approaching.

One syllable.

Then another.

Before it could reach him, the connection vanished.

The image remained.

The name did not.

Vinnie’s breath caught.

The child in the window continued playing, unaware that an old man across the street was watching him with tears gathering in his eyes.

You see?

Farloh’s voice was quiet now.

Almost gentle.

There is nothing there.

Vinnie wiped his cheek.

“There is.”

You cannot name it.

“I don’t need to.”

The answer surprised him.

He sat back against the bench.

The little boy disappeared from the window.

Vinnie remained.

A few minutes later, laughter erupted from the café beside the bus stop.

Four young men sat around a small outdoor table, cups of coffee and half-finished glasses of water arranged between them.

One was telling a story with both hands.

Another leaned back, laughing so hard he nearly tipped his chair.

The third struck the table with his palm.

The fourth watched the others with the quiet satisfaction of someone who had already heard the story but still enjoyed watching it land.

Vinnie stared.

The scene pulled at him so violently that he forgot to breathe.

Four men.

A table.

Laughter.

One talking too loudly.

One shaking his head.

One interrupting.

One holding the group together without realizing it.

The images came in dull flashes.

A diner.

Coffee.

A car.

A bonfire.

A beach.

A photograph.

Names appeared and vanished before he could claim them.

He stood.

The four young men continued laughing.

One of them slapped the companion beside him on the back.

“Andiamo, fratelli.”

The others rose from the table.

Fratelli.

Vinnie’s lips parted.

Brothers.

The translation came instantly.

Not learned.

Remembered.

The word struck somewhere beneath language.

Beneath thought.

Beneath whatever Farloh had been taking from him.

Fratelli.

Brothers.

Vinnie reached into his coat pocket.

His fingers found the photograph before he consciously decided to look for it.

He drew it out slowly.

Four young men.

Smiling.

Alive.

He studied the faces.

The first meant nothing.

The second produced a brief ache.

The third felt familiar in a way he could not explain.

The fourth—

Vinnie's hand trembled.

He knew that face.

Or had once known it.

He could not recover the name.

He could not recover the place.

He could not remember what they had been laughing about when the photograph was taken.

But he knew something else.

He had loved them.

Not casually.

Not temporarily.

He had loved them with the fierce, unreasonable certainty of youth.

They had been his.

And he had been theirs.

Faded memories, blending into dull tableaux.

The thought passed through his mind as if it belonged to someone else.

Perhaps it did.

He turned the photograph over.

Nothing had been written on the back.

No names.

No dates.

No explanation.

At some point, he had assumed he would always remember.

Vinnie looked up.

The four young Italians were already disappearing around the corner.

“Andiamo, fratelli,” he whispered.

Brothers.

His vision blurred.

They are gone.

Farloh no longer sounded gentle.

He sounded certain.

Vinnie closed his fingers around the photograph.

“No.”

You do not know who they are.

“No.”

You do not know who you are.

Vinnie looked down at the faces again.

The names were gone.

The stories were fading.

The attachments had nearly dissolved.

But the feeling remained.

He pressed the photograph against his chest.

Farloh could remove the labels.

He could scatter the memories until they felt like the thoughts of another man.

He could reduce a lifetime to fragments.

A bookstore.

A child.

Four men laughing over coffee.

But he could not explain why Vinnie had stopped.

He could not explain the ache.

He could not explain the love.

Vinnie sat alone beneath the bus shelter while Rome moved around him.

For twenty years, he had fought to keep Farloh from taking control.

He had guarded every thought.

Every memory.

Every name.

This morning, for the first time, he understood that he was losing.

Not the fight for his body.

Something worse.

He was losing the map that led him back to himself.

Vinnie slipped the photograph into his coat.

He rose slowly from the bench.

For a moment, he did not know where to go.

Then the bookstore caught his eye again.

The sight produced the same quiet pull inside his chest.

He still did not know why.

That would have to be enough.

He crossed the street and opened the door.

