

Chapter 21

Without a word, Antonio strode into the kitchen and dropped the FedEx envelope onto the table in front of Rocky.

"Here," he said. "Apparently that's for...us."

Rocky looked down at it.

Antonio & Rocky Saltine

He frowned.

"What is this? Publisher's Clearing House finally find us?" Rocky laughed at his little joke.

Antonio stared at him.

"I don't know, man," Antonio replied, "It came in the mail today. It could be something really cool..."

He shrugged.

"...or something incredibly stupid I drunkenly bought off the internet."

Rocky looked up.

"You don't remember buying it?"

"Rocky, I don't remember buying lots of things."

Rocky nodded.

"This checks out."

Antonio slid the envelope closer.

"Either way...I want you to open it."

Rocky blinked.

"Why me?"

Antonio leaned back in his chair.

"You saved my life."

The words came quietly.

"And..."

He hesitated.

"...I trust you."

Rocky looked at him for a long moment.

Then down at the envelope again.

"This is stupid."

"Most likely."

"You don't find it weird it's addressed to the Saltines?" Rocky asked.

Antonio snorted.

"Of course I find it weird. That's why I brought it over here, numbnuts. It could be really embarrassing. It could be really dangerous and I didn't particularly want to find out alone."

He pointed at the envelope.

"Besides...Your name's on it too."

Rocky's fingers rested on the FedEx envelope, tapping slowly.

His shoulders tightened almost imperceptibly.

Danger.

He hated that word.

He hated how quickly his mind still went there.

He shook his head, his hair falling forward into his face.

He hoped that Antonio hadn't noticed that the man-bun had conspicuously disappeared the last three days.

His wife liked his hair down anyway.

Rocky picked up the envelope.

"What if..."

His voice dropped.

"...it's from Farloh?"

The name barely escaped his lips.

Antonio's expression changed immediately to that of a man about to vomit.

He'd had the same thought.

He simply hadn't wanted to say it aloud.

"It's...probably not." Antonio whispered "He hasn't come after us in twenty years. Why start now?"

Rocky never looked up from the envelope.

"Maybe...he waited."

Antonio frowned.

"For what?"

Rocky looked at him.

"Until we're a couple of old farts who can't defend ourselves anymore."

Antonio immediately reached into his pocket.

"Oh, speak for yourself."

His knife flashed open across the table, a flourish of steel, reflecting off the overhead light, twisting and dancing in his hand.

Rocky's arm shot forward instinctively.

He caught Antonio's wrist before the blade had fully cleared the tabletop.

Antonio winced.

"Damn, man...you always have to squeeze that hard?"

Rocky slowly released him.

Antonio rubbed his wrist dramatically.

"I swear you bench press dump trucks for fun."

"I don't."

"You've considered it."

Rocky ignored him.

"This is stupid. Let's get this shit over with." He pulled the cardboard tear strip across the FedEx envelope.

The room fell quiet.

He tipped the contents onto the table.

A single thumb drive slid onto the wood.

Nothing else.

No letter.

No brochure.

No instructions.

Just a black thumb drive embossed with a silver logo.

MISSION MASTER

Antonio leaned forward.

"...Well. That was anticlimactic."

He reached for it.

"C'mon get your laptop, let's see what's on it."

Rocky immediately pulled it away.

"My laptop?"

Antonio blinked.

"Yeah."

"I'm not plugging a random thumb drive into my computer. What if it's got ransomware? What if it's a virus? What if my computer gets messed up?"

"Rocky," Antonio looked genuinely offended. "I'm in cybersecurity. My job is to keep everyone's laptop's safe."

Rocky folded his arms.

"So?"

"So, do you think I would honestly let you do something that may harm your computer?" Rocky considered him, "Besides, everybody knows modern thumb drives come with built-in antivirus software."

Rocky stared.

"...They do?"

"Absolutely." Antonio lied. But they really should.

Rocky studied his face.

Antonio didn't blink.

Didn't flinch.

Didn't smile.

Finally Rocky sighed.

"...Fine."

He disappeared into the next room and a moment later he returned carrying his laptop.

He placed it on the table.

Opened it.

Inserted the thumb drive.

Antonio watched carefully.

Then, almost as an afterthought, asked,

"You do have a backup of your hard drive...right?"

“Antonio!” Rocky's hand immediately shot toward the thumb drive.

Antonio burst out laughing. "I'm kidding! I'm kidding!"

Rocky glared at him but before he could retrieve the thumb drive a folder appeared on the screen.

One file.

Nothing else.

A single video.

"See?" Antonio exhaled. "Nothing to worry about."

Rocky hesitated. “Coud be porn.”

“Well shit, man, don’t let me stop you from having a good time.” Rocky pushed the laptop away. “Dude, I’m kidding. Just open the damn video. Its probably something lame anyway and we’re going to feel like a bunch of idiots letting this build up so much.”

Rocky relented. Then clicked.

The screen faded to black.

A loading circle spun once.

Twice.

The silver Mission Master logo appeared on the screen then faded and was replaced by a face.

A face neither had seen in what felt like forever.

Older than either of them remembered.

Smirking.

Alive.

Rocky grabbed one of Antonio’s beers and started chugging it.

For one impossible moment...he was back from the grave.