

Chapter 25

Antonio woke to the smell of coffee.

Not good coffee.

Family coffee.

The kind brewed before sunrise because children didn't particularly care whether adults had stayed awake until three in the morning researching international contract law.

He opened one eye.

The couch.

Rocky's living room.

His neck hurt.

His back hurt.

His mouth tasted like bourbon and pretzels.

Worth it.

Children's voices drifted in from the kitchen.

Cabinets opened.

Someone laughed.

A television quietly played cartoons in the next room.

Antonio smiled.

He had missed this.

He sat up slowly and immediately regretted moving.

Rocky stood at the kitchen island making lunches while simultaneously answering questions about dinosaurs, missing shoes, and whether Pop-Tarts counted as breakfast.

Somehow...

he made it all look normal.

Antonio watched quietly for a moment.

Rocky had always wanted normal.

The funny thing was...

he'd gotten it.

Eventually Rocky noticed him.

"Morning."

Antonio looked at the coffee pot.

"...Please."

Rocky silently slid a mug across the counter.

Antonio accepted it with the gratitude usually reserved for organ donors.

He took one sip.

"That's terrible."

"I know."

Antonio nodded.

"It's perfect."

He wandered toward the kitchen table, still wearing yesterday's clothes.

Halfway there he stopped.

"Oh."

Rocky looked up.

"What?"

Antonio glanced toward the stairs.

"Did you tell her we're going?"

Rocky froze.

The peanut butter knife stopped halfway through a sandwich.

"...No."

"You probably should."

"I know."

"You haven't?"

Rocky sighed.

Antonio waited.

Finally Rocky answered.

"I haven't quite figured out how to work it into the conversation."

Antonio frowned.

"Seems simple enough."

"Oh?"

"Yeah."

He counted on his fingers.

"Honey..."

"Our dead best friend signed us up for a vacation before he died..."

"Then this idiot clicked a random link in a text message despite working in cybersecurity..."

"Now we're contractually obligated to go to England."

Antonio nodded.

"I don't see the problem."

Rocky just stared.

"Exactly."

At that moment Rocky's wife walked into the kitchen carrying a basket of unfolded laundry.

"I already know."

Both men turned.

"You...what?"

She smiled.

"I heard enough of your conversation last night to piece together the rest."

Antonio looked horrified.

"...How much?"

"The British accents."

Antonio winced.

"...That's unfortunate."

"The sword."

He winced harder.

"...Also unfortunate."

"And something about scones."

Antonio lowered his head.

"We got a little carried away."

"You think?"

She set the laundry basket on the table.

Then looked directly at Rocky.

"I meant what I said."

"You should go."

Rocky hesitated.

"The kids..."

"I've got the kids."

"The bookstore..."

"I've got the bookstore."

"The construction company..."

"You've got employees."

Rocky looked down.

"I feel guilty."

She walked over and took his hand.

"I know."

She smiled gently.

"But I also know you."

She looked toward Antonio.

"And I know him."

Antonio pointed at himself.

"I feel attacked."

"You should."

She laughed.

Then looked back at Rocky.

"You two have spent, what, twenty years helping everyone else."

Her smile softened.

"I think Mario earned one last chance to inconvenience you."

Antonio burst out laughing.

"There she is."

"I was wondering when someone was finally going to understand him."

Rocky's wife shook her head.

"I don't understand him."

She smiled.

"I understand you."

She kissed Rocky on the cheek.

"Plus, it will be good for William to travel a little bit. He'll have to miss some classes but he'll make them up. Honestly, it will be good for everyone. Seriously. Go."

The word hung in the kitchen.

Not permission.

Understanding.

Rocky looked at Antonio.

Antonio looked back.

Neither man said anything.

Because there wasn't anything left to say.

England had stopped feeling impossible.

It had quietly become inevitable.

Rocky and Antonio looked at the clock; it was probably too early to call William and tell him the exciting news.