

## Chapter 26

By Thursday afternoon, William had stopped trying to understand what was happening between them.

That was unusual for him.

He usually needed things arranged properly in his mind. Classes. Plans. Responsibilities. The future. He liked knowing where one thing ended and the next began. There was comfort in order, and William had always been drawn to comfort, not because he was afraid of the world, but because so much of his life had been shaped by people trying very hard to keep him safe.

Claire made order difficult.

Not in a chaotic way. Not in the way Antonio made order difficult simply by walking into a room. Claire made order difficult because she moved through the world as though everything in front of her deserved attention. A crooked windowsill. A poster peeling from a brick wall. A woman arguing into her phone outside a corner store. A dog tied to a bike rack who looked, Claire insisted, like he had seen things no dog should ever see.

William found himself noticing things because she noticed them first.

They had spent most of the day together without ever formally deciding to do so. Morning had become coffee. Coffee had become walking. Walking had become lunch neither of them finished. Lunch had become wandering back toward her apartment, then away from it again, then eventually settling on a bench beneath the low shade of a tree in a small pocket of green space that looked as though the city had forgotten to develop it.

Claire sat beside him with one leg tucked beneath her, her shoulder resting lightly against his arm. She was quiet in a way that did not demand to be filled. That was probably why William began talking.

At first it was nothing important. He told her about Central New York, about lake-effect snow and long gray winters, about the bookstore Rocky owned and the way it smelled like coffee, paper, and old wood no matter how often anyone cleaned it. He told her that Rocky had recently started building houses too, which still seemed strange to William even though it also made perfect sense. Rocky had always been a builder in one way or another. If something was broken, he fixed it. If something was missing, he made it. If someone needed a place to land, Rocky somehow became that place.

Claire listened without saying much.

That helped.

William told her about Antonio next, which was easier because Antonio stories did not require the same care. Antonio had once been a scuba instructor, which made him sound far more exotic

than he actually was, and had somehow become a cybersecurity professional, which made him sound far more responsible than he actually was. William explained that Antonio had strong opinions about everything, especially subjects he knew very little about, and that he could make an ordinary dinner feel like a hostage negotiation if someone accidentally disagreed with him about a movie.

Claire laughed at that.

Not politely.

Actually laughed.

William liked the sound so much he kept going longer than he meant to.

He told her about being raised by two men who were not technically his fathers, and one man who had been almost impossible to categorize. He told her that when he was little, he had never thought it was strange. Other children had parents. William had Rocky and Antonio and Mario. They came to school events. They argued over who packed the worst lunches. They taught him how to ride a bike with three completely different instructional philosophies, none of which were helpful. They loved him so thoroughly that it took him years to realize his life was unusual.

Mario's name changed the shape of the conversation.

William felt it happen even before Claire did.

He looked down at his hands.

"Mario was different," he said.

Claire did not ask how.

That was probably why he answered.

"He was around all the time when I was little. Or at least that's how I remember it. He was fun. Loud. Always joking. Always making things into games. Rocky was the one who made sure I brushed my teeth. Antonio was the one who taught me inappropriate songs in the car. Mario was the one who made everything feel like an adventure."

William smiled, but it did not last.

"Then something happened."

Claire shifted slightly beside him, not away, just enough to look at him more fully.

"I don't really know what," William continued. "No one ever explained it clearly. Not when I was young. By the time I was old enough to ask better questions, everyone had gotten very good

at avoiding them. Mario had a falling out with Rocky and Antonio. Maybe with all of them. I don't know. He moved away. For a while I thought people did that all the time. Just left. Then I got older and realized people usually have reasons."

He swallowed.

"He died a few years ago."

Claire's hand found his.

William let it.

"Then one day we found he out died. No explanation. Or maybe everyone knew and nobody told me. That's possible too. Adults always think they're protecting children by leaving out the worst parts, but kids feel the shape of what's missing. They just don't know what to call it."

Claire's fingers tightened gently around his.

William stared ahead at nothing in particular.

"My real parents were Vinnie and Jasmine. I know that probably should have been the first thing I said, but it's not where the story starts for me. That's the strange part. My story starts after them."

He gave a small, embarrassed laugh.

"That sounds terrible."

"It doesn't," Claire said.

He looked at her.

She meant it.

So he kept going.

"They died when I was very young, with even fewer details than Mario's death. Too young to remember them the way I want to. I remember impressions more than memories. My mother's voice, maybe. My father's hands. The smell of something warm in the kitchen. I don't even know which parts are real and which parts I've built from photographs and stories."

He paused.

"Rocky never let me feel unwanted. Antonio never let me feel forgotten. Mario never let me feel bored. Between the three of them, I had everything. But still..."

He searched for the right words.

"There are questions you carry even when everyone loves you."

Claire looked at him with an expression he could not quite read. She was not pitying him. That would have been easier to resist. She was measuring the weight of what he had said, turning it over carefully in her mind, refusing to make it smaller just so he would feel better.

William loved her a little for that.

The realization startled him.

Not because it was dramatic.

Because it was calm.

He loved how she listened. He loved that she did not rush to fill his pain with pretty words. He loved that she seemed to understand that grief was not always a wound. Sometimes it was architecture. Something everything else had been built around.

"I don't usually talk about this," he said.

"I know."

"How?"

Claire looked down at their hands.

"Because you're choosing every word like it matters."

William laughed softly.

"It does."

"Then I'm listening correctly."

For a while they said nothing.

The city continued around them. A bus sighed to a stop at the corner. Somewhere nearby a car horn blared, followed by someone shouting something unintelligible. Students passed in pairs and clusters, wrapped in their own lives, unaware that William had just handed Claire more of himself than he had given anyone in years.

He did not feel exposed.

That surprised him.

He felt lighter.

Then the feeling changed.

At first it was only a pressure behind his eyes, faint enough that he thought he could ignore it. He had felt it before. In dreams. In the alley. In flashes that came and went so quickly he could pretend they meant nothing. But this time it did not pass.

The world seemed to draw inward.

Sound thinned.

Color drained.

Claire's hand was still in his, but it suddenly felt far away, as though she were holding him from the other side of a deep pool.

"William?"

He tried to answer.

His mouth did not work.

The pressure became a pull.

Not pain.

Invitation.

Something dark opened at the edge of his mind, vast and patient, and within it was the same green glow he had seen in the alley. It was not light exactly. It was recognition. Something had found him again.

William stood too quickly, or tried to. His legs failed beneath him.

Claire caught him badly, because neither of them expected his body to give out. They went down together, her arms around him, his shoulder striking the ground hard enough to knock the breath from his lungs.

"William!"

Her voice cut through some of the darkness.

He could hear her, but only barely.

The green glow pulsed once.

Closer.

Claire shifted him onto his back and knelt beside him, one hand on his chest, the other against his face. She was trying to stay calm. He could see it in the tightness of her mouth, the forced steadiness of her breath. She was not a girl panicking over a boy who had fainted. She was someone suddenly realizing that the thing in front of her was larger than she understood.

"This isn't from last night," she said quietly.

William wanted to tell her she was right.

He wanted to tell her he was sorry.

He wanted to tell her not to be afraid.

Instead he stared up at her while the darkness reached again.

For one terrible moment, he thought he saw another face behind hers.

Not replacing her.

Waiting.

Then the pressure broke.

Air rushed back into his lungs. The city returned all at once: traffic, voices, wind in the leaves, Claire saying his name over and over as though she could anchor him with it.

He blinked.

She leaned closer.

"William?"

"I'm okay," he managed.

"No," she said immediately.

Her voice was soft, but there was no uncertainty in it.

"You're not."

He tried to sit up. She helped him, though one hand stayed firmly on his arm as if she thought he might vanish if she let go. For a few seconds he focused only on breathing. In and out. Real air. Real ground. Claire beside him.

Then his phone began to ring.

The sound was absurdly normal.

Claire looked toward his pocket.

William pulled it out with an unsteady hand.

Rocky.

Something about seeing the name made him feel younger than he had a moment before.

He answered.

"Hey, Dad."

There was noise on the other end. Movement. A car door maybe. Antonio's voice was in the background saying something William could not make out.

Then Rocky spoke.

"William, how have you been. How have classes been. Is everything alright? We haven't heard from you."

William looked at Claire. "Um, actually, I'm doing really good. I missed some classes today but I had a very good reason."

Claire blushed and looked away trying not to eavesdrop but still tending to him to make sure he truly was ok.

William looked at Claire again.

She was watching him carefully.

Rocky continued, his voice controlled but tired, the way it sounded when he had already made a decision and did not intend to waste time pretending otherwise.

"Antonio and I need to talk with you."

"About what?"

Another pause.

"Mario."

William went still.

Rocky seemed to know what that name would do.

"He left something for us. Before he died."

William closed his eyes briefly.

"What kind of something?"

"The complicated kind."

Antonio's voice came faintly through the phone.

"Tell him about England!"

Rocky covered the phone badly.

"I'm getting there."

William blinked.

"England?"

Rocky sighed.

"Yes. We're all going to England."

William stared at Claire. She mouthed, England?

He shook his head slightly, because he had no better answer.

"When? And why are we going to England?"

"Because Mario apparently signed us up for one last adventure."

William did not respond.

Rocky continued.

"And because Antonio clicked something he should not have clicked."

Antonio's voice erupted in the background.

"It was green!"

Rocky ignored him.

"It's a lot to explain all at once."

William looked down at Claire's hand still holding his wrist.

"Pack a bag," Rocky said. "We leave in six days."

"That sounds great," William said, "But I kind of want to stay here in Philadelphia. I, met someone."

"You met someone?" Rocky said, "That's amazing!"

"Is she hot?" Antonio asked in the background. Claire looked away as William felt embarrassed.

"Uh, yes," William responded, "She's pretty much perfect in every way, and while going to England sounds very cool I'm not sure that I want to be away from her just yet."

Rocky thought for a minute. "William, ask her if she wants to come to England."

