

Chapter 27

Anticipation had a peculiar way of changing time.

Sometimes an hour disappeared before anyone noticed. Other times an entire week refused to move.

For William, the week moved slowly, and he was grateful for it.

He had expected the news about England to consume him. It should have. Normal people did not receive phone calls informing them that a dead family friend had arranged some kind of legally binding adventure across the Atlantic. Normal people did not hear the words Mario, England, contract, and green button in the same conversation and then attempt to return to ordinary life as though any of it made sense.

But William had never been particularly normal.

Neither, apparently, was Claire.

She had accepted the invitation with a brightness that made the entire situation seem less impossible. She offered to pay her own way immediately, not dramatically or defensively, but as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. William relayed the offer to Rocky, who refused so quickly William barely finished the sentence. That did not surprise him. Rocky had always been generous. He was generous with time, with food, with a place to stay, with rides, with advice, with second chances, with anything a person might actually need.

He was also, somehow, one of the cheapest men William had ever known.

Rocky would spend any amount of money on someone else and then complain for fifteen minutes about the price of a fountain drink. It was one of the many contradictions William had grown up accepting as simply part of the structure of the universe. Rocky would cover Claire's trip without hesitation, then spend the flight quietly irritated that airport coffee cost six dollars.

The week passed slowly enough for William to enjoy it.

That was what surprised him most.

He did not count the days with impatience. He counted them with a quiet gratitude, because every day before England was another day with Claire in Philadelphia. They walked together whenever their schedules allowed it, and whenever they did not, William found ways to make his schedule less important. He would finish class and somehow end up outside whatever building Claire was in, waiting with a backpack over one shoulder and an expression he did not realize made him look exactly like a golden retriever who had learned the sound of a car pulling into the driveway.

Claire noticed.

Of course she noticed.

She noticed everything.

The first time she came out of class and saw him standing near the steps, she smiled as though he had done something both ridiculous and wonderful. By the third time, she stopped pretending to be surprised. By the fifth, she simply walked straight to him, slipped her hand into his, and continued whatever thought she had apparently been carrying since the end of lecture.

William loved that.

He loved the ease of it. The lack of announcement. The way something enormous could happen without either person having to define it out loud.

They ate nearly every meal together. They studied together. They sat across from each other in coffee shops with laptops open and textbooks spread between them, neither saying much for long stretches of time. William had always thought silence between two people meant something had gone wrong. With Claire, silence became another form of closeness. He liked looking up from an article he was supposed to be reading and finding her lost in her notebook, brow slightly furrowed, pen moving across the page as though she were trying to catch something before it escaped.

At night they would lie beside each other, sometimes talking until they were too tired to finish sentences, sometimes falling asleep almost immediately. William discovered that being near her while she slept made the world feel less threatening. He also discovered that sending her amusing Instagram reels while she was asleep, knowing she would wake before him and retaliate with several of her own, gave him an unreasonable amount of joy.

Neither of them said boyfriend.

Neither of them said girlfriend.

Neither of them said love.

The words hovered nearby, unnecessary and obvious.

Some things became true before anyone named them.

Back in Syracuse, Antonio prepared for England with the seriousness of a man training for an Olympic event, assuming the Olympic event involved alcohol, daydreaming, and a complete misunderstanding of British culture.

He began with beer.

Not just Guinness and Harp, though Rocky repeatedly pointed out that neither of those made him more prepared for England. Antonio ignored him and expanded what he called his cultural research. Fuller's London Pride. Young's Double Chocolate Stout. Caffrey's Irish Ale, which he purchased mostly because it amused him. Old Speckled Hen. A few bottles with labels he could not pronounce but trusted because they featured either crests, animals, or old men who looked like they knew things about pubs.

He also bought a forty-ounce bottle of Olde English because, in his words, "it seemed disrespectful not to."

Rocky told him that was not the same thing.

Antonio said that was exactly the sort of narrow-mindedness that had held America back since the Revolution.

The truth, though Antonio would never have framed it so cleanly, was that he felt alive again.

Not drunk alive. Not distracted alive. Not the cheap temporary aliveness that came from buying something online at midnight or arguing about wrestling with strangers on the internet. This was different. This was anticipation. This was possibility. This was the feeling that somewhere beyond the shape of his daily life, something strange and wonderful was waiting for him.

For years, Antonio had felt as though the best stories of his life were behind him. He had not admitted that to anyone, least of all himself. He had hidden it beneath jokes, beer, complaints, work, pornography, wrestling, and the kind of restless boredom that made him pace his apartment without knowing what he wanted.

Now he knew.

Adventure had been missing.

Not danger.

Adventure.

Mario, dead five years and still somehow inconsiderate, had given it back to him.

Antonio was also excited to meet Claire. William had been frustratingly vague, which was very William. He said she was smart. He said she was beautiful. He said she noticed things. He said she wrote. He said she wanted to see the world. He did not say much else, but he did not need to. Antonio could hear it in the boy's voice. William was gone. Completely gone. Head over heels, no practical defense available, young-love gone.

Antonio remembered that feeling.

Surprisingly, he did not miss it.

He liked the memory of it, the warm stupidity, the way the entire universe once seemed capable of reorganizing itself around one person's smile. But he did not miss being owned by it. He did not miss the panic, the insecurity, the unbearable need to know whether a text meant what he hoped it meant. He was happy for William. Genuinely happy. And if meeting Claire gave him an opportunity to embarrass the boy within the first fifteen minutes, then all the better.

Rocky prepared differently.

Rocky came home from Two in the Evening with every travel book the store had on England, along with two maps, one phrasebook Antonio immediately mocked, and a guide to British rail that looked dense enough to qualify as punishment. He stacked them on the kitchen table with the solemnity of a man preparing for trial.

England was not merely a destination to Rocky.

It was a logistical problem.

He read about airports, rail stations, voltage converters, tipping customs, weather patterns, emergency numbers, and whether rental cars in England were truly as dangerous as every American travel forum made them sound. He printed confirmations even though the confirmations were already on his phone. He made folders. He made copies of passports. He made a schedule, then a backup schedule, then a looser version of the schedule so Antonio would not accuse him of ruining spontaneity before they even left the country.

The plan, eventually, felt clean.

Two tickets from Hancock International to Philadelphia. Antonio giggled every single time he said Hancock, which Rocky endured with the exhausted patience of a man who had accepted certain burdens as permanent. From Philadelphia, they would meet William and Claire, then continue together to London. The timing was tight but manageable. Tight enough to require attention. Not so tight as to be reckless.

Rocky liked that.

He could work with that.

He could make that orderly.

Still, guilt followed him through the week.

It met him at the bookstore while employees assured him they could handle things. It followed him to job sites where foremen told him everything was under control. It sat beside him at dinner while his wife reminded him that the children would survive several days without him hovering

over homework, lunches, showers, and bedtime routines. Everyone encouraged him. That made the guilt both better and worse.

They all seemed to believe he deserved this.

Rocky was not entirely sure he agreed.

He had spent so long being needed that the idea of leaving, even briefly, felt like neglect disguised as opportunity. The bookstore depended on him. The construction company depended on him. His family depended on him. Antonio, though technically a grown man, depended on him in ways that no court would recognize but any reasonable observer would understand.

Yet everyone kept telling him to go.

His wife told him first and most firmly. She did not frame it as permission, which he appreciated, because permission would have annoyed him. She simply said he should go. She said Mario would have wanted it. She said William should have the experience. She said Antonio would be unbearable if left unsupervised in a foreign country, which was both unfair and objectively correct.

Even Joel told him not to worry.

That should have made Rocky worry more.

Instead, somehow, it did not.

Joel stood in the doorway of Rocky's office, nodding solemnly while promising that he would keep an eye on things, that the property would be fine, that the store would not burn down, that the construction crews knew what to do, and that if anything came up, he would handle it. There had been a time when Rocky would have interpreted this as proof that disaster was imminent. But Joel had been around long enough, and had surprised him enough times, that Rocky found himself doing something unexpected.

He believed him.

So Rocky spent the week doing what he always did when he was about to leave something behind.

He held on tighter.

He spent extra time with his wife. He lingered in the children's rooms after saying goodnight. He fixed small things around the house that did not need fixing. He checked in with employees who had already told him they were fine. He reviewed the travel plans again and again, not because they needed more review, but because planning was how Rocky reassured himself that love could be organized into something protective.

Antonio, meanwhile, became more inseparable than ever.

But in a good way.

He appeared at Rocky's office. At the bookstore. At the house. At the kitchen table. Sometimes with questions. Sometimes with beer. Sometimes with facts about England that were either half-remembered, fully incorrect, or discovered from a video narrated by someone with an accent Antonio insisted was "definitely authentic." Rocky should have found it exhausting.

Instead, he found it comforting.

Antonio was excited.

William was in love.

Claire was apparently willing to cross an ocean with people she had never met.

Mario, somehow, had reached across five years and moved them all.

By the night before they were scheduled to leave, Rocky stood in his kitchen looking at the neatly stacked travel documents on the counter and felt, despite every practical objection, a quiet sense that the whole impossible thing might actually work. The flights were booked. The bags were nearly packed. The schedule had enough buffer time. William would be waiting in Philadelphia. Claire would be with him. Antonio had been instructed not to drink before noon and had negotiated unsuccessfully for ten-thirty.

Everything was arranged.

Everything was moving.

Everything, for once, seemed almost under control.

Rocky looked across the kitchen at his wife, who smiled at him as though she knew exactly what he was thinking.

"You're allowed to enjoy this," she said.

He started to answer.

Then stopped.

Because maybe he was.

Maybe that was the strangest part.

Maybe, after all the guilt and confusion and legal absurdity and Mario's posthumous manipulation, Rocky was actually looking forward to it.

A real trip.

A grand adventure.

One last ridiculous gift from a man who had never been able to leave well enough alone.

For one brief, ordinary, hopeful moment, nothing had gone wrong yet.

And because nothing had gone wrong yet, they all allowed themselves to believe nothing would.

