

Chapter 28

Rocky woke before the alarm.

For several seconds he lay perfectly still, staring at the ceiling, waiting for the familiar pressure of obligation to settle onto his chest. He expected guilt. He expected anxiety. He expected the nervous energy of a man who had spent an entire week planning a trip he still did not fully understand.

Instead, he felt rested.

That almost worried him.

The night before should have kept him awake. The anticipation alone should have done it. England. Mario. William. Claire. Antonio. The bookstore. The jobs. His wife. The kids. A half-dozen moving parts, any one of which could fall out of place and take the whole impossible arrangement with it. But the exhaustion of preparing had finally overpowered the guilt of leaving. Rocky had gone to bed with lists still moving through his mind and had slept as though someone had switched him off.

Everything was ready.

That helped.

The confirmations were printed. The passports were packed. The bags were lined up. The tickets were on his phone, backed up in email, printed in a folder, and copied once more because Rocky did not trust any system that depended entirely on a battery. His wife had teased him for it, but gently. She knew him well enough to understand that paper was not paper to Rocky. Paper was control.

Downstairs, the house moved with a slight frenetic energy that everyone pretended was normal. Breakfast. Coffee. Toothbrushes. Shoes. Backpacks. Last-minute reminders. The children asked questions about England as though their father were heading to the moon. Rocky answered them as calmly as he could, kissing heads, checking locks, looking twice at everything.

People traveled all the time, he reminded himself.

People left for a week.

People got on planes.

People went to England.

This was not crazy.

It only felt crazy because Mario had arranged it from beyond the grave and Antonio had accidentally made it legally binding by clicking a green button.

By the time Antonio arrived, Rocky had expected at least one problem.

There was none.

Antonio was early.

Not just on time.

Early.

He stood outside with a duffel bag slung over one shoulder, sunglasses on despite the soft morning light, looking slightly hungover, deeply tired, and more excited than Rocky had seen him in years.

"I know," Antonio said before Rocky could speak.

Rocky raised an eyebrow.

"Know what?"

"That you're impressed."

"I'm suspicious."

"That's just how you express being impressed."

Rocky shook his head, but he smiled despite himself.

Antonio climbed into the passenger seat with the self-satisfaction of a man who had achieved adulthood by arriving seven minutes early for a flight. Within five minutes he had already made two jokes about Hancock International Airport, one of which was exactly the same joke he had made the night before, and had asked whether it would be culturally inappropriate to drink an English beer before boarding the plane.

"It is eight in the morning," Rocky said.

"That wasn't my question."

"It was my answer."

The drive should have been simple.

It was not.

Construction on I-81 slowed traffic almost immediately, forcing Rocky into the rerouting he had anticipated but hoped to avoid. He had built enough cushion into the schedule that the delay did not initially bother him. For once, traffic did not send a spike of panic through him. He had allowed for this. He had planned for this. The whole point of buffer time was to absorb the ordinary stupidity of the world.

They crawled forward in fits and starts, surrounded by commuters, delivery trucks, and the steady mechanical frustration of people who had somewhere else to be. Antonio talked through most of it. About England. About pubs. About whether Stonehenge would look bigger in person. About whether he could say "bloody" without sounding like an idiot. Rocky answered when required, but most of his attention remained on the road, the clock, and the thin margin of time he had so carefully protected.

Then the feeling came.

Faint at first.

Not fear exactly.

Awareness.

Something was wrong.

Rocky glanced at the mirror.

Nothing.

Traffic loosened. The road opened ahead. Vehicles began spreading out, picking up speed now that the bottleneck had passed. Rocky accelerated with everyone else and told himself he was being ridiculous.

Then he saw it.

A black SUV.

Not directly behind them. Not close enough to be obvious. But there.

Rocky changed lanes.

The SUV changed lanes.

Not immediately. Not theatrically. Just enough.

Rocky kept his eyes forward and his face still.

Antonio was half-paying attention to his phone, scrolling through something and muttering about exchange rates as though he had any realistic understanding of international finance. Rocky watched the mirror again.

He changed lanes once more.

The SUV drifted after them.

Rocky looked at the dashboard clock. They had time. Not much, but enough. Enough for him to prove to himself that he was imagining things. Enough for one small detour before he had to return to the schedule and stop letting twenty-year-old ghosts make him foolish.

He took the exit toward Erie Boulevard.

In the mirror, the black SUV followed.

Rocky felt something cold move through him.

Antonio noticed the change before he noticed the car.

"Everything alright?"

Rocky kept both hands on the wheel.

"Not sure yet."

Antonio looked over.

"That is not a comforting answer."

"Probably just a coincidence."

Rocky drove up the road and watched the mirror. The SUV stayed behind them, steady and patient. At the next intersection, the light turned yellow, then red. Rocky accelerated through it.

The SUV stopped.

For one wonderful second, Rocky exhaled.

"Okay," he said quietly. "We lost them."

Then traffic ahead caught him at the next red light.

By the time it turned green, the black SUV was behind them again.

Antonio finally turned around.

"Rocky."

"I know."

Rocky took the next right.

The SUV followed.

He sped up.

So did they.

The road narrowed, then opened briefly beside a row of low commercial buildings and parking lots. Rocky felt the schedule collapsing in his mind, each minute falling away from the plan he had so carefully constructed. It should not have mattered at that moment, but it did. Danger was one thing. Being late was somehow also unacceptable.

"Fuck," Rocky said.

Antonio sat up straighter.

"Yeah, that's the tone I was afraid of."

"We need to lose them."

"How?"

Rocky did not answer.

He stepped on the gas.

The truck jumped forward, tires biting into the pavement as he veered off the road, over a curb, and into a nearly empty parking lot. Antonio grabbed the dashboard as the truck bounced hard enough to rattle everything inside it.

"Holy shit!"

Rocky cut around the side of a building, clipped the edge of a curb, and shot across another lot toward a patch of grass separating two commercial properties. The truck hit the grass median faster than it should have. For one suspended instant, they were airborne.

Antonio shouted with delight.

"Hell yeah! Floor it!"

Rocky did.

The truck landed hard, suspension groaning, tires tearing through wet grass as he shifted into four-wheel drive and cut across the open space. The rear end fishtailed as he took a sharp turn around a tree, corrected, then swung around another. For a moment it felt absurdly possible that he could shake them. He knew roads, lots, service drives, shortcuts. He knew how to move through places other people only drove past.

But every time he checked the mirror, the black SUV was still there.

Closer now.

More aggressive.

Antonio's excitement disappeared.

"Fuck this," he said.

Rocky shot him a look.

"Not now."

"No. Now." Antonio twisted in his seat, staring back through the rear window. "Let's confront them and see what they want."

"That's your plan?"

"We're Saltines, remember?"

Rocky said nothing.

Antonio's voice changed.

"Not a bunch of pussies."

Something in the words hit Rocky harder than it should have.

Not because they were wise.

They were not.

Not because Antonio had a plan.

He did not.

But because there had been a time when the two of them had run toward impossible things without hesitation. There had been a time when fear did not get the first vote. There had been a time when Rocky would not have needed to be reminded who they were.

He slammed on the brakes.

The truck stopped so abruptly Antonio's hands struck the dashboard.

"We're not pussies," Rocky said.

Antonio winced and shook out his fingers.

"Maybe a little heads up next time."

Rocky ignored him.

The black SUV stopped twenty yards behind them.

For a few seconds, nothing moved.

Rocky and Antonio looked at each other.

No jokes now.

No English beer.

No Hancock.

No green button.

Just the old silence between them.

The kind that meant they both understood.

"Ready?" Rocky asked.

Antonio nodded.

They unbuckled at the same time.

Rocky opened the back door and grabbed his son's baseball bat from the rear seat. It was aluminum, worn at the grip, familiar in his hands in a way that made him suddenly and painfully aware of how many years had passed. Antonio stepped out on the other side, one hand already in his pocket. The knife opened with a clean metallic snap, flashing briefly in the morning sun.

Two men emerged from the SUV.

Only two.

If it was going to be a fight, at least it would be fair.

The one on the driver's side smiled.

"Remember us?"

Rocky tightened his grip on the bat.

Antonio tilted his head.

The man took a few steps forward.

"I've been waiting two decades for this."

"Two decades?" Rocky asked.

The man laughed without humor.

"One night, over twenty years ago, we fought. You assholes cheated. You stole our girlfriends. Farloh banished us."

The name landed like a stone dropped into deep water.

Rocky felt the ripple move through him.

Antonio's expression hardened.

The man smiled wider.

"But now we found you."

He raised a monkey wrench in one hand.

"And we want payback."

For a moment the only sound was distant traffic.

Then Antonio exhaled.

"Bloody Ritz."

He seemed almost surprised by the word himself, as though the English preparation had escaped at exactly the wrong time.

Then he said it again.

This time, he meant it.

"Bloody Ritz."

The four men moved at once.

The first Ritz came for Rocky with the wrench high. Rocky met him with the bat, metal striking metal with a violent crack that shivered up his arms. He was not as fast as he used to be. That became obvious immediately. His body did not move with the easy certainty memory promised him. His knees were older. His shoulders tighter. Every motion required more effort than it once had.

But he was still strong.

And strength mattered.

He blocked another swing, stepped inside it, and drove his free fist hard into the man's ribs. The Ritz staggered. Rocky caught his wrist, twisted, and used the man's own momentum to pull him off balance. They hit the ground together, Rocky landing heavily on top of him. The wrench clattered away across the pavement.

The Ritz tried to roll.

Rocky hit him once with the bat.

Not in the head.

Across the upper back.

Enough.

The man gasped and went still beneath him.

Rocky pushed himself up, breathing harder than he wanted to admit.

Antonio was moving differently.

For all his complaints about age, boredom, and back pain, something in Antonio had awakened. He slipped around the second man's attacks with a smoothness Rocky had not seen in years. The knife flashed and vanished, flashed and vanished, not wild, not panicked, but precise. Antonio dodged a punch, cut across the man's forearm, pivoted away from a counterstrike, and laughed once under his breath as though some forgotten part of him had finally remembered the steps.

For one brief second, Rocky thought they had won.

Then the Ritz smiled.

And pulled a gun.

"No!" Rocky shouted.

The gun came up.

Antonio saw it.

And grinned.

Not because he was brave.

Not because he was reckless.

Because some ancient, stupid, unkillable part of Antonio Saltine knew, with absolute certainty, that today was not the day he died.

He dove.

The knife left his hand.

It turned once in the morning light and struck the Ritz squarely between the eyes.

The gun fell.

No shot fired.

The man dropped beside it.

Antonio hit the ground, rolled badly, and came up coughing and swearing.

"What the absolute fuck?"

He looked from the body to Rocky, then back again.

"Where did these assholes come from?"

Rocky had no answer.

Not a good one.

Mission Master. The texts. The travel information. The dark web. Antonio clicking the green button. Any of it. All of it. The old world finding a seam in the new one and crawling through.

Now was not the time to badger Antonio about cybersecurity.

Now was not the time to talk about blame.

Now there was only one thought.

His family.

Rocky stumbled back toward the truck, phone already in his hand. His fingers felt clumsy as he called his wife.

She answered on the second ring.

"Hey," she said, warm and ordinary and alive.

Rocky nearly collapsed from relief.

"Are you okay?"

A pause.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"The kids?"

"Yes, they're playing in the living room."

Rocky closed his eyes.

"Listen to me very carefully."

"What happened?"

"Just listen."

Then two gunshots cracked through the phone.

His wife's scream tore through the speaker.

The sound froze Rocky in place.