

Chapter 29

The phone struck something hard on the other end, clattering as it fell. For one endless second there was only noise. A child crying. His wife breathing hard somewhere farther away. Movement. Something dragging. Rocky could not tell what was happening.

"Hello?"

His voice came out broken.

"Hello!"

Antonio was beside him now.

Rocky gripped the phone so tightly his knuckles whitened.

"Answer me!"

Another voice came through.

Male.

Breathing hard.

"Rocky?"

Rocky's knees nearly failed.

"Joel?"

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"There were two men coming up through the side yard."

Joel sounded shaken, but controlled in a way Rocky had never heard from him before.

"They had guns."

Rocky could not speak.

Joel continued.

"I stopped them."

Rocky looked toward Antonio.

Antonio stared back.

For once, he had nothing to say.

Rocky swallowed.

"My family?"

"Safe," Joel said quickly. "Scared, yeah, but safe. Everyone is inside. Doors are locked. Should I call the police?"

Rocky leaned against the truck, the bat still hanging uselessly from one hand. "No, Joel. I think we're ok now. No police. Thank you, Joel. You did good."

Joel beamed on the other end of the phone, grateful for the high praise. "Does this make me a Saltine?"

"Absolutely, buddy. You've more than earned it."

His wife came back on the line a moment later, voice trembling but alive.

"Rocky?"

He closed his eyes.

"I'm here."

"What is happening?"

He looked down at the unconscious Ritz on the pavement. Then at the dead one. Then at Antonio, whose knife was gone and whose expression had finally lost every trace of excitement.

The trip had changed.

Everything had changed.

"I need you to take the kids and leave the house."

"What?"

"Now."

"Where?"

"Your parents. Florida."

There was a pause. Not hesitation exactly. Calculation. He knew that sound. He loved that sound. She was terrified, but she was thinking.

"Okay."

"Don't pack much."

"Okay."

"Joel will go with you guys, he'll keep you safe."

Another pause.

"You're not coming?"

Rocky looked toward the road.

Toward the lost schedule.

Toward Philadelphia.

Toward England.

Toward William.

"I can't."

His wife inhaled sharply, but she did not argue.

That nearly broke him.

"I'll explain everything as soon as I can."

"You better."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

The call ended.

Rocky stood beside the truck in the strange quiet that follows violence, the phone still pressed to his ear after there was no one left on the other end.

Antonio finally spoke.

"What now?"

Rocky looked at the dashboard clock through the windshield.

They were late.

Of course they were late.

The commercial flights were impossible now. Even if they somehow reached Hancock in time, the Ritz knew too much. Names. Dates. Airports. Maybe even flight numbers. The schedule Mario had given them was no longer an itinerary.

It was a trap.

Rocky looked at Antonio.

Then at the dead Ritz.

Then toward home, where Joel had just saved everything that mattered.

He took one breath.

Then another.

"I need to make a call."

"To who?"

Rocky was already scrolling through his contacts.

His thumb hovered over the name of the wealthy client with the Skaneateles house, the one who had offered access to a private jet as casually as another man might offer a cup of coffee.

Rocky hated favors.

He hated asking.

He hated needing.

But he loved his family more than he hated anything.

He pressed call.

Antonio watched him.

Rocky lifted the phone to his ear and looked toward the road ahead.

For the first time all morning, the plan was gone.

Only the adventure remained.

