

Chapter 3

Rocky would never admit it out loud, but he had been looking forward to being alone. He loved his wife, and his family, and would do anything for them. He truly hated to be away from them, but once every couple of months he looked forward to the idea of being truly isolated and alone.

At least, he thought he had.

The room was quiet.

Wonderfully quiet.

No kids arguing.

No television blasting from another room. No screens blaring whatever God awful song from a game that the kids were playing.

No wife reminding him that the cabinet hinge in the laundry room still needed fixing.

Something always needed fixing.

A door.

A dryer.

A sink.

A fence.

A shelf.

A light fixture.

Why did he feel the need to take it personally when something broke?

Rocky wasn't sure.

Yet every time a door didn't close properly or an appliance made a strange noise, he reacted as though the object had insulted him directly.

Maybe that was just part of getting older.

Or maybe he was weird.

Either explanation seemed perfectly acceptable.

He sat on the edge of the hotel bed and looked around the room.

Nobody needed anything from him.

For one evening.

No bookstore.

No inventory.

No construction plans.

No investors.

No spreadsheets.

Despite a general decline in reading physical books, the Two in the Evening had somehow managed to stay profitable for the last 20+ years, mostly from his generous but still reasonable markup on espressos and cappuccinos, yet after a complete and total renovation to the store, Rocky realized he was actually great at building things and that people would pay him a lot of money to do that for them.

The concept still felt ridiculous.

Twenty years ago, he had been stealing holy relics in Canada. Then smuggling illegal weapons.

Now investors wanted to be part of his construction company.

Life was strange and he just wanted it to be normal.

His stomach growled.

That at least was a problem he could solve.

Rocky picked up the room service menu.

He hadn't eaten since they stopped along the Northeast Extension.

Another injustice.

Why weren't there more Roy Rogers restaurants? Every time he found one, it was hidden inside a highway rest stop like some kind of protected species.

He picked up the phone.

A few minutes later he had ordered:

- a steak
- two baked potatoes
- a dinner roll
- cheesecake
- and a bottle of red wine

Rocky was known to be the only man who seemed capable of losing weight while consuming almost nothing except meat, bread, and stubbornness.

Satisfied, he hung up the phone.

The room suddenly felt quiet again.

Too quiet.

Rocky picked up a book from his overnight bag and settled as best he could into the uncomfortably high back chair near the window. Why do hotels even offer these? Does anyone honestly give a 5-star review because the room included a high-backed chair near an unusable table by the window?

He pushed the distracting thoughts out of his head and tried to focus best on the book in his hand.

A few pages later there was a knock at the door.

That was fast.

He glanced at his pocket watch.

Room service had apparently become remarkably efficient. Probably didn't even cook his steak.

The knocking came again.

Harder.

More urgent.

Rocky frowned.

That didn't sound like room service.

The knocking became pounding.

BANG.

BANG.

BANG.

Rocky sat upright.

A voice exploded from the hallway.

"I know you're in there, you son of a bitch!"

The book slipped from Rocky's hand.

His heart immediately accelerated.

No one knows I'm here.

The thought arrived instantly.

Followed immediately by another.

*Could it be **Him**?*

The pounding continued.

BANG.

BANG.

BANG.

Rocky stood.

The voice sounded angry.

Very angry.

He looked around the room.

No weapons. He'd have to improvise.

The lamp seemed inadequate.

The chair seemed cumbersome.

His eyes landed on the iron in the closet.

Perfect.

Rocky grabbed it and immediately regretted how ridiculous he felt.

Still, ridiculous was preferable to dead.

"Listen!" Rocky shouted.

The pounding stopped.

"I don't know who you are, or what you're doing, but you'd better leave me the hell alone!"

Silence.

Then:

"Open this door right now, Esteban!"

Esteban?

Rocky blinked.

Who the hell was Esteban?

The voice continued.

"You hear me, Esteban? Open this damn door!"

Rocky moved toward the bathroom doorway, gripping the iron tightly.

The position offered decent visibility and acceptable cover.

At least according to absolutely no military training whatsoever.

"Listen," Rocky called. "My name isn't Esteban."

Silence.

Then:

"No?"

"No."

"What is it then?"

Rocky hesitated.

For some reason the answer suddenly felt ridiculous.

"I'm...Rocky."

Silence.

A long silence.

Even the stranger seemed confused by that one. There was something utterly inane about using the name Rocky. In Philadelphia.

Then the voice spoke again.

"Oh."

The pounding stopped.

Thirty seconds later Rocky heard the same voice farther down the hallway.

BANG.

BANG.

BANG.

"ESTEBAN!"

A door opened.

Muffled shouting followed.

Then a door slammed.

Silence returned.

Rocky stood motionless in the middle of the bathroom doorway...holding an iron.

Eventually he set it down.

Maybe, he thought, thinking of the wine that would soon arrive...

Maybe one bottle isn't enough.