

Chapter 30

For Antonio, everything after the gunshots became a blur.

Not the kind of blur that meant he had forgotten it. He remembered everything. That was the problem. He remembered too much, but none of it arranged itself properly in his mind. The black SUV. The chase. Rocky driving like a lunatic through parking lots and over medians. The Ritz. The knife leaving his hand. The gun falling before it could fire. Rocky's face when the shots came through the phone.

That was the image that stayed.

Rocky's face.

Antonio had seen Rocky angry before. He had seen him tired, annoyed, disappointed, amused, drunk, worried, and, on at least one unfortunate occasion, wearing a four-inch pewter cross earring while trying to look like a man who had not just been caught by his assistant.

But he had never seen Rocky look like that.

Everything drained from him at once.

Then Joel's voice came through the phone, and the world started moving again.

Not back to normal.

Normal was gone.

But moving.

Rocky drove home like a bat out of hell. Antonio sat in the passenger seat with one hand braced against the dashboard and the other working furiously over his phone. His fingers did not feel steady. That annoyed him. He was a cybersecurity professional. He dealt with threats all the time. Granted, most of those threats involved passwords, servers, phishing campaigns, and idiots who clicked suspicious links.

He decided not to think too hard about that last one.

The first message to William took three tries.

Too much detail.

Delete.

Too casual.

Delete.

Too alarming.

Delete.

Finally, he sent:

Change of plans. Still going to England. Need to switch flights. We'll explain in person. Don't go to airport. We're coming to you. Switch to WhatsApp.

He stared at the message after sending it and wondered if that was too much.

Or not enough.

There was no good version of the text. There was no casual way to tell a college kid that an ancient order of bitter, exiled Ritz had tried to murder his fathers on the way to the airport, and that the entire travel plan had to be rerouted because their commercial itinerary was probably compromised by the same digital trail Antonio had accidentally created when he clicked the friendly green button.

So he kept it sparse.

That was the right call.

Probably.

Rocky said nothing as they drove.

That worried Antonio more than if he had been yelling.

The roads back to the property felt longer than they should have. Every dark vehicle mattered now. Every turn seemed too exposed. Every driveway looked like somewhere someone could wait. Antonio watched mirrors, side roads, parked cars, and the spaces between trees. His cybersecurity instincts had finally arrived, which would have been more impressive if they had arrived before he clicked the green button that apparently summoned a twenty-year-old revenge cult out of the internet.

Growth, he supposed, was not always timely.

Thankfully, they reached Rocky's property without another incident.

Joel had handled things.

That was the phrase Antonio chose and immediately decided not to examine too closely.

Handled things.

The two men who had tried to sneak onto the property were no longer visible. Antonio did not ask where they had gone. He did not ask how Joel had moved them, what he had done with the guns, whether the police had been called, whether they had not been called, or whether anyone had used the word self-defense in a way that would sound convincing later.

There were questions a man asked.

There were questions a man did not ask.

Antonio decided this was a proud day for not asking questions.

Rocky's wife and kids were waiting inside, pale and quiet and packed with the strained patience of people who had been told to be ready before they had fully understood what ready meant. The children were frightened but trying not to be. That broke Antonio's heart in a way he did not have time to process. Rocky's wife kept one hand on the younger child's shoulder while listening to Rocky explain only what needed explaining. Not everything. Not even close. Just enough.

They were leaving.

Now.

Florida first.

Her parents' place.

Gated community.

Safe.

Joel would go with them.

That part had apparently not been negotiable.

Joel stood near the door looking both shaken and oddly proud, like a man who had just done something terrible and useful and was not sure which part he was supposed to feel first.

As bags moved toward the truck, Joel looked at Rocky and asked the question quietly enough that Antonio almost missed it.

"So..."

Joel swallowed.

"And I'm still a Saltine right?"

The house went still for half a breath.

Rocky turned to him.

There was no hesitation.

“Yes, of course.”

He put a hand on Joel’s shoulder.

“I owe you more than you’ll ever know.”

Joel nodded once, hard, like he was trying to keep the words from hitting him too deeply.

Antonio looked away.

Not because it was funny.

Because it was not.

And because if he did not look away, he might have felt something, and there was simply no time for that.

Instead, he did the practical thing.

He decided it was early enough to start drinking.

This was not a decision made lightly. Actually, that was a lie. Antonio made it immediately. The situation had crossed several thresholds at once. They were no longer flying commercial, which meant he no longer had to worry about airport security confiscating anything. They had been attacked. Rocky’s family had almost been killed. Joel had become a Saltine. They were about to board a private jet like the villains in a movie, except hopefully with fewer murders after takeoff.

A flask seemed not only reasonable but responsible.

He ran up to his apartment, grabbed the bourbon, filled the flask, reconsidered, topped it off, and returned before anyone could accuse him of slowing down the evacuation.

The plan, by then, had taken shape with alarming speed.

First, Ithaca-Tompkins Regional Airport.

Not Hancock.

Hancock was burned. Not literally, although Antonio thought the phrase sounded cool. Their commercial flights were no longer usable. Too many people knew too much. Maybe the Ritz

knew the flight numbers. Maybe they only knew enough to wait at Syracuse or Philadelphia. Maybe they knew nothing. Maybe everything was fine.

Nobody believed that anymore.

Rocky's wealthy client had made calls. Antonio did not understand how people like that made things happen so quickly, and, for once, he had no interest in learning. A private jet would be waiting at a hangar in Ithaca. From there, they would fly first to Florida, where Rocky's wife and kids would stay with her parents inside a gated retirement community full of people who drove golf carts with more confidence than most adults drove cars. Joel would stay with them. After that, Rocky and Antonio would continue to Philadelphia, pick up William and Claire at an executive airport outside the Main Line, and then they would all settle in for the overnight flight to London.

It sounded insane.

It was also the most reasonable plan available.

That seemed to be happening a lot lately.

Antonio had never flown on a private jet before. He had thought about it, obviously. Everyone had thought about it. Anyone who claimed otherwise was either lying or too boring to be trusted. But thinking about private jets and walking toward one under emergency circumstances while carrying bourbon, a duffel bag, and the lingering sensation of having killed a Ritz before breakfast were very different experiences.

The drive to Ithaca-Tompkins felt tense but controlled. Rocky drove differently now. Not wildly. Not like during the chase. But with a sharper attention to every car around them. Antonio could tell because he was doing the same thing. Neither of them said much. The kids were quiet in the back. Rocky's wife kept checking her phone. Joel sat with the posture of a man who had decided that if danger appeared again, it would have to go through him first.

Antonio found that comforting.

He also found it completely insane.

Joel.

A Saltine.

The world had changed.

When they pulled into the airport parking area, Antonio felt his body go cold.

A black SUV sat near the hangar.

Waiting.

His hand moved before he thought about it, reaching toward the place where his knife should have been. Then he remembered it was gone, lodged between the eyes of a Ritz somewhere behind them in a morning that already felt like a different lifetime.

“Rocky,” he said.

“I see it.”

For two seconds no one moved.

Then the driver stepped out.

He was not Ritz.

He was too calm, too professionally dressed, too clearly employed by someone who used words like aviation and ground transportation without irony. He raised one hand in polite greeting, as though he were welcoming guests to a hotel and not collecting fugitives from a parking lot.

Rocky exhaled first.

Antonio exhaled second.

“Private driver,” Rocky said.

Antonio nodded.

“Of course.”

The walk to the hangar was not far, but apparently the client had arranged transport anyway. That fact alone impressed Antonio more than the airplane at first. This was the sort of wealth that solved problems before a normal person had finished identifying them. There was a driver because someone decided there should be a driver. There were hangar doors already open because someone had made a call. There were people moving bags because Rocky had finally accepted help from a man whose casual favors looked like logistics miracles.

Antonio could get used to this.

The jet itself was beautiful.

Smaller than he expected, but beautiful.

That was his first private-jet lesson. In his mind, private jets were basically flying mansions, perhaps with a staircase, a lounge, and a woman in sunglasses drinking champagne for no clear reason. This was not that. This was sleek, compact, polished, and expensive in a way that did not

need to announce itself. Leather seats. Wood veneer. Soft lighting. A small galley. A bathroom that looked too elegant to use comfortably.

Antonio stepped inside and immediately understood how people became morally compromised.

A person could get used to this very quickly.

Soon they were moving down the runway.

The children pressed their faces toward the windows. Rocky's wife held their hands. Rocky stared straight ahead, jaw tight, as though he could keep the plane in the air by being personally responsible for it. Joel looked out the window with the expression of a man who had accepted that the day no longer planned to make sense.

Antonio buckled in and tried not to appear too delighted.

Then the wheels lifted.

Syracuse, Ithaca, Central New York, the roads, the property, the dead Ritz, the morning itself—everything fell away beneath them.

They were airborne.

Antonio had never been afraid to fly. He was not afraid now. Not exactly. But he struggled to unwind. His body had not caught up to the fact that no one could ram them off the road at thirty thousand feet. Every sound mattered for the first twenty minutes. Every shift of the aircraft felt like a new kind of warning. He wanted to relax, but his nervous system had apparently missed the memo.

The stocked bar helped.

It helped a lot.

He discovered it ten minutes after takeoff and treated the discovery with appropriate reverence. There was bourbon. Real bourbon. Not airplane bourbon. Not little plastic bottle bourbon. Actual bourbon in an actual bottle, sitting there as though placed by Providence or possibly the billionaire client's flight crew.

Antonio poured himself a drink.

Then, after a moment, he poured one for Rocky.

Rocky looked at it.

Then took it.

That surprised Antonio.

Not because Rocky never drank. Rocky drank. But Rocky usually drank like a man who had already calculated tomorrow morning. Today he took the glass without argument and swallowed enough that Antonio said nothing. Anything that settled the nerves, even a little, qualified as medicine.

For the next several hours, at least, they were safe.

No one knew where they were. Not really. Anyone following the commercial itinerary would be looking at Hancock, Philadelphia International, maybe Heathrow. No one would expect Ithaca to Florida to Philadelphia to London. No one would expect a gated retirement community detour. No one would expect Joel. No one ever expected Joel.

That thought made Antonio smile.

Then, for reasons he did not expect, it made him think of Mario.

Mario would have loved the jet.

No.

That was not quite right.

Mario would have loved being on the jet.

He would have hated hearing that anyone else had been on it without him.

Antonio could imagine the whole thing perfectly. Mario walking aboard like he owned it. Mario immediately picking the best seat. Mario asking whether there was a PlayStation. Mario telling the flight crew about some better private jet experience he had once had, whether real or invented, then reminding everyone for the next ten years that he had flown private before they had.

That was Mario.

Anything good that happened to him became a story everyone else was required to hear forever. Anything good that happened to someone else was an insult unless it was shared with him.

Antonio stared into his bourbon.

He had spent a long time trying not to remember why they had fallen out.

But the airplane brought some of it back.

The entitlement. The arrogance. The infallible nature.

Was that the right word?

Infallible?

Antonio frowned into the glass.

It sounded right.

It also sounded like a word someone smarter might use and then make fun of him for using incorrectly.

There had been one time, years ago, when they were taking William to soccer practice. Mario had been driving and somehow put the car in drive instead of reverse. The car lurched forward, hopped the curb, and rolled up over a grassy median before Mario managed to stop it. Antonio had burst out laughing. William, still small enough that his laughter came from his whole body, laughed too.

Mario did not.

Mario got furious.

Not embarrassed.

Furious.

That was the part Antonio remembered most. Not the curb. Not the median. Not even William laughing from the back seat. It was Mario's inability to survive being laughed at. The way humiliation turned instantly into anger. The way a harmless mistake became everyone else's fault because Mario could not bear for it to remain his.

Antonio had forgotten how exhausting that was.

Or maybe he had chosen to remember only the fun parts.

Grief was dishonest that way.

A person died and suddenly everyone wanted the best version of them to be the only version. But Mario had been both. Funny and selfish. Loyal and impossible. Generous when he wanted to be and brutally jealous when he felt excluded. He could make a room feel alive. He could also make every good thing feel like something you owed him.

Antonio took another drink.

He missed him.

That was the worst part.

Even remembering exactly why the friendship had broken, he still missed him.

Florida came and went in a strange rush of sun, heat, airport pavement, quick goodbyes, and Rocky holding his family longer than the schedule allowed. Rocky's wife was brave in the way that people are brave when they have no acceptable alternative. The kids tried to understand why this detour felt less like vacation and more like evacuation. Joel stood beside them, scanning the perimeter with a seriousness that would have been funny any other day.

Before boarding again, Rocky hugged Joel.

Antonio looked away again.

Some moments belonged to other people.

Then they were back in the air.

North again.

Philadelphia.

By the time they landed at the executive airport outside the Main Line, the day had stretched into something unreal. Antonio felt tired, wired, slightly drunk, sober enough to know better, and emotionally worn thin. The jet taxied near a small terminal that looked nothing like the chaos of commercial airports. No crowds. No security lines. No overhead announcements about unattended baggage. Just quiet pavement, a building with too much glass, and the sense that money had found a way to make travel civilized.

