

Chapter 31

The Uber smelled faintly of vanilla air freshener and fast food.

William noticed this because he was trying very hard not to notice anything else.

He was trying not to notice Claire sitting beside him with her backpack between her feet and her notebook resting on her lap. He was trying not to notice the way the passing headlights moved across her face in brief, golden flashes. He was trying not to notice that they had been mostly quiet since leaving West Philadelphia, not because they had nothing to say, but because too many things had happened too quickly and words seemed too small for all of them.

He was also trying not to notice that somewhere ahead of them, outside West Chester, in the dark, there was apparently a private jet waiting to take them to London.

London.

That still did not feel like a real destination.

It felt like something people said in movies when the plot had run out of ordinary options.

The driver followed the navigation without interest. He had no idea who they were. No idea where they had been that morning. No idea what had happened in the alley. No idea that the young woman in the back seat had reconnected with him at the most supernatural moment of fate, or that the young man beside her had nearly collapsed under the weight of something that seemed to know his name before he knew its. To the driver, they were just two college students taking a weird late-night ride to a private airfield.

William envied him.

Claire looked out the window as the city gave way to the darker, quieter roads beyond it. The farther they drove, the fewer lights there were. West Philadelphia had been noise and brick and sidewalks and human density. Out here, the night opened. Houses sat farther apart. Trees leaned over the road. The world began to feel less like a place and more like an approach.

Finally, Claire said, “Have you ever been on a private jet?”

William turned to her.

He almost laughed.

“No.”

“Good,” she said.

“Good?”

“Yes, I was hoping one of us would know how to behave, but if neither of us does, that feels more democratic.”

William smiled despite everything.

“I’m pretty sure Rocky doesn’t know how to behave on a private jet either.”

Claire looked at him. “Antonio?”

“Oh, Antonio will act like he owns it within thirty seconds.”

That made her laugh, and the sound loosened something in William’s chest.

He wanted to say more. He wanted to ask if she was scared. He wanted to ask if she regretted getting into the Uber. He wanted to ask if she understood what she had stepped into, because he certainly did not. He wanted to ask whether she still planned to go to Europe after graduation, whether this counted as an early start, whether any part of her still believed this was all some elaborate mistake.

Instead he said, “You don’t have to come.”

Claire turned from the window.

The lights from the dashboard glowed softly against her face.

“I know, honey.”

“I mean it.”

“I know you do.”

“I don’t know what’s happening.”

“I know.”

“I still don’t fully know what Mission Master is. I know Mario signed them up for something years ago, I don’t know what happened this morning, but I know somehow that something has turned into this.” He gestured vaguely at the road, at the night, at the invisible jet waiting somewhere ahead. “But I don’t know what they know. I don’t know what Rocky and Antonio know. I don’t know why any of this is happening now.”

Claire studied him for a long moment, and put her hand on his to soothe him.

Then she said, “That’s a terrible sales pitch.”

William laughed once, quietly.

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.” Her expression softened. “William, I’m not coming because I understand it. I’m coming because you don’t.”

That should not have meant as much as it did.

But it did.

He looked down at his hands.

Claire let him.

The Uber turned off the main road and followed a narrower drive toward a gate. Beyond it, William could see low buildings, hangars, pools of white light on dark pavement, and the tail of an aircraft rising above everything like an accusation.

The driver slowed.

“Is this it?” he asked.

William checked his phone, though he did not need to. “Yeah.”

The gate opened before anyone pressed a button.

That did not make him feel better.

The Uber rolled through.

On the far side of the airfield, under the bright, clean lights beside the jet, two figures stood at the bottom of the stairs.

Rocky and Antonio.

They looked cold.

They looked tired.

They looked exactly like themselves.

Rocky had his arms crossed and his shoulders hunched against the wind, staring toward the approaching car with the focused irritation of a man who had already made the round trip from Syracuse to Florida to Philadelphia and yet somehow was ready to spring into action at the faintest sign of danger. Every twenty-minutes exactly Joel would send him a reassuring text message that everyone was safe. It was one of the few things keeping his sanity together. Antonio stood beside him with his hands in his pockets, rocking once on his heels, looking

everywhere except directly at the plane, as if refusing to acknowledge the aircraft would make it less ridiculous, trying not to let his own anxieties match the tension from Rocky.

The Uber stopped.

For a second, William did not move.

Then Antonio spread his arms.

“See? Everything turned out exactly as we originally planned” Antonio said trying to relieve some of the night’s tension.

William climbed out and Claire stepped out on the other side.

Rocky’s eyes went to William first, scanning him quickly in that way he had always done when William came home sick, or injured, or too quiet. Only after Rocky seemed satisfied that William was still standing did he look at Claire.

“You okay?” Rocky asked.

The question could have been for either of them.

Claire answered first. “I think so.”

Rocky nodded.

Antonio looked at her and offered a small bow that was somehow both charming and completely inappropriate for the temperature. “Claire.”

“Antonio.”

“Welcome to whatever this is.”

“Thank you. That’s very reassuring.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.”

The Uber driver had already opened the trunk. William grabbed his bag. Claire grabbed hers. Antonio moved to help her, then stopped when she already had it over her shoulder.

“Independent,” Antonio said.

“Capable,” Claire corrected, as she handed her bag to Antonio, “But grateful for the assistance.”

Rocky turned toward the plane. “Come on, everyone. It’s cold and getting late.”

Antonio looked up at the aircraft. “And apparently we’re doing this now.”

“You already did this twice today,” William said.

Antonio held up one finger. “Once from Syracuse to Florida. Once from Florida to here. This is different.”

“How?”

“That was domestic mysterious. This is international mysterious.”

Rocky started up the steps. “Just get on the plane.”

The cabin was warmer than the tarmac and smaller than William expected, though not in a cramped way. It felt less like a movie version of wealth and more like an expensive room that happened to have wings. Cream leather seats faced one another across polished wood. Small lamps glowed softly from the side panels. A narrow sofa lined one section of the cabin. The shades were open, showing mostly darkness and reflections.

There was no flight attendant.

No one waiting with champagne.

No calm professional voice telling them what would happen next.

Just the four of them and a plane that apparently expected them to figure it out.

Antonio stepped inside behind William and gestured toward the front of the cabin. “Bar’s there.”

“You found that fast,” Claire said.

“I have certain talents.”

Rocky took the forward-facing seat nearest the aisle. He buckled himself immediately, then checked the belt twice, then looked toward the cockpit as if considering whether to introduce himself to the pilot and ask for credentials.

Antonio dropped into the seat across from him, trying to maintain the façade of a relaxed man.

William hesitated.

Claire took the window seat and set her bag beneath it. Then, without looking at him directly, she patted the seat beside her.

William sat.

He tried not to look grateful.

He failed.

The cabin door closed with a heavy, sealed sound. That was when it became real. Not the jet. Not the luxury. Not the absurdity of it. The leaving.

They were leaving Philadelphia.

They were leaving the alley.

They were leaving whatever version of the story William had still believed could be contained by familiar streets and familiar buildings and the fragile idea that supernatural things only happened in specific places to specific people who had already survived them once.

The engines began to rise.

Claire looked out the window.

Antonio crossed himself.

Rocky looked at him. "You're not Catholic."

Antonio fastened his seat belt. "I'm diversifying."

The jet began to move.

No one spoke while it taxied.

There was something strange about leaving from a private airfield. No boarding groups. No overhead announcements. No babies crying. No one trying to cram an obviously oversized suitcase into a bin while holding up sixty-seven passengers and the entire social contract. Just movement. Smooth and quiet and expensive.

William watched the lights slide by outside the window.

Claire's hand rested near his on the shared armrest.

He did not know whether to move closer or away.

So he did neither.

The plane turned.

Paused.

Then the engines deepened into a sound William felt in his ribs.

Rocky closed his eyes.

Antonio said, “Everybody act natural.”

William looked at him. “Why?”

“I don’t know. It felt appropriate.”

Then the jet surged forward.

The runway lights became streaks. The cabin pressed against them. William felt Claire inhale sharply beside him, “This is my favorite part” she said as the wheels lifted of the ground and there was a momentary feeling of weightlessness.

For a few seconds, no one spoke because leaving the earth still demanded some respect, even from Antonio.

The plane climbed through the dark.

Philadelphia did not spread beneath them in one great cinematic reveal. They were too far out, the wrong angle, the wrong night. Instead there were scattered constellations of roads and neighborhoods, small towns and parking lots and moving headlights, the human world reduced to evidence. Somewhere behind them was the city. Somewhere behind them was Penn. Somewhere behind them was the alley where the green light had wrapped around William like memory and warning.

Claire watched until the clouds took the ground away.

The cabin settled.

The engines became steady.

For a while, they let the silence live.

It was not peaceful exactly. Peace required trust, and none of them had enough of that yet. But it was quiet. A floating kind of quiet. The kind that made every small movement seem more intimate than it should have been. Rocky shifted in his seat. Antonio unbuckled too early and received a look from Rocky that would have grounded a lesser man.

Across from them, Antonio watched William and Claire with open delight as they spoke quietly to one another, their conversation carrying the private rhythm of two people who had already begun building a world together. William had not oversold her. Claire was striking, certainly, but there was something else about her that held Antonio’s attention. Something familiar. Not a

resemblance he could name, exactly. More like an expression he had seen long ago, tucked somewhere in the inaccessible corners of memory.

Rocky noticed Antonio watching and sighed before Antonio even spoke.

Antonio leaned back, folding his hands over his stomach. "So."

"No," Rocky said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You were about to."

"I was about to make polite conversation."

"You don't do that."

Claire looked between them. "Does this happen all the time?"

William said, "Yes."

Antonio said, "He loves me."

Rocky said, "I tolerate you because of history."

"That's considered love after you turn forty."

Claire laughed.

The sound changed the cabin. Only slightly. Only for a moment. But it made the space less sealed. Less heavy. The jet was still crossing into the dark, and the questions were still waiting, and everyone knew they were waiting. But laughter made room around them.

Antonio turned toward the young women.

"All right," he said. "Claire."

William stiffened.

Antonio pointed at him. "Relax, Romeo. I'm not interrogating her."

Claire's eyebrows lifted. "Romeo?"

William closed his eyes.

Rocky rubbed his forehead.

Antonio continued, "I'm simply acknowledging that we are now several thousand feet in the air, headed over an ocean with a person we met approximately twelve minutes ago, and some introductions may be appropriate."

"I think it's been longer than twelve minutes," Claire said.

"Emotionally, no."

That earned another smile.

Claire shifted in her seat so she could see both of them better. "What would you like to know?"

Antonio considered this with theatrical seriousness.

"Nothing serious, just the usual questions like...Who are you?"

Rocky turned toward him. "That's your opening question?"

"What?"

"Who are you?"

"It's broad. Gives her room."

"It sounds like customs."

Claire tucked one leg beneath the other as much as the seat belt would allow. "It's all right."

William looked at her, suddenly protective and embarrassed by how protective he felt.

Claire noticed.

She always noticed.

"I'm Claire," she said. "I'm a senior at Penn. Literature major with a minor in public administration. I'm supposed to graduate in a few months, assuming I survive whatever this is and finish several papers I have made the mistake of ignoring."

Antonio nodded. "Relatable."

"You were a literature major?" Claire asked.

"No, but I've ignored responsibilities. So what are your life's goals and ambitions?"

Rocky shook his head, "Nope, not heavy at all."

Claire smiled, “The current plan is to graduate, travel, which by the way thank you for this head start – although I may never be able to fly commercial again. Teach English as a Foreign Language for a year, while trying to write the next great American novel. When that ultimately fails, I’ll do what all good writers do and probably go to law school.”

“A writer?” Antonio asked, “Don’t they just have AI for that now?”

“Don’t they have AI for cybersecurity?” Claire retorted immediately.

“Touche, counselor” Antonio smiled, “You know I went to law school?”

“Really?” Claire’s eyes widened.

Rocky said, “Not even remotely. He’s a SCUBA instructor turned cybersecurity professional.” There was something about the word “expert” he just couldn’t get his mouth to say.

Claire blinked. “Really?”

Antonio placed a hand over his heart. “You sound surprised.”

“I am surprised.”

“Fair.”

William smiled. “He likes when people are surprised.”

“I like when people appreciate depth,” Antonio said.

Rocky stared at him.

Antonio looked back. “SCUBA joke.”

“We got it.”

“I don’t think everyone did.”

“We got it and chose not to reward it.”

Claire laughed again, and William thought, not for the first time, that she was braver than she realized. She had entered their orbit in the middle of madness, but she had not let the madness define the room. She could sit with impossible things. She could also laugh at a bad diving joke. That combination seemed suddenly important.

“Nevertheless, I love traveling,” Claire continued. “That’s probably the more relevant answer. I’ve been to Italy. Rome, mostly. I wanted to go everywhere after that. Or maybe I wanted to become the kind of person who went everywhere.”

“That’s different?” Rocky asked.

“I think so.” Claire looked out the window, though there was nothing to see now except darkness and her own reflection. “Sometimes you travel because you’re curious. Sometimes you travel because you’re trying to outrun being ordinary. I haven’t decided which one I was doing.”

Antonio’s face softened in a way William almost missed.

“That’s a good answer,” he said.

Claire looked back. “It’s not a very practical one.”

Rocky said, “Most honest answers aren’t.”

That surprised her.

It surprised William too, not because Rocky was incapable of wisdom, but because Rocky usually disguised it as irritation.

Claire studied him for a second.

Then she said, “OK, my turn. Fair is fair.”

Antonio narrowed his eyes. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“You asked who I am.”

“I did.”

“So who are you?”

Antonio looked at Rocky. “See? This is how they get you.”

Rocky settled deeper into his seat. “You started it.”

“That was before I knew she was going to be a lawyer; I guess its time to start the deposition.”

Claire waited.

That was one of her gifts, William was beginning to understand. She did not rush to fill silence just because someone else was uncomfortable. She allowed people to answer the question they had been asked.

Rocky lasted longer than Antonio.

Then he exhaled.

“I’m Rocky,” he said.

Claire waited.

“That’s mostly it.”

Claire’s eyes brightened. “William tells me you own a bookstore?”

Rocky nodded humbly, but Antonio gave him a look.

“Don’t let the general contractor arms fool you. This man has spent most of his career surrounded by novels and dust jackets; he’s read more books than I’ve ever seen and throughout it all created a community of book lovers.”

Rocky sighed. “People came in looking for one thing and left with something else. I liked that. I liked knowing where things were. I liked that every shelf made sense if you understood the system.”

Claire smiled. “That sounds like you.”

Rocky looked at her, then looked away.

Antonio pointed between them. “Careful. That was intimate.”

Rocky’s mouth twitched, almost a smile. “Remodeling turned into construction. Construction turned into more construction. You learn pretty quick that every house is lying about something. Water where it shouldn’t be. Wiring done by someone’s cousin. Joists cut by a man who believed optimism was structural.”

Claire laughed. “Optimism was structural?”

“I’ve seen things,” Rocky said.

Antonio lifted a finger. “That should be on his tombstone.”

The joke landed, and then did not. Not because it was cruel, but because death had followed them too closely to remain abstract. Antonio seemed to realize it a moment later. His hand lowered.

Claire, mercifully, turned to him.

“And you went from SCUBA to cybersecurity?”

Antonio brightened. “Yes. Finally, a normal career path.”

“How?”

“The ocean and the internet are basically the same thing. Dark, full of predators, and if you don’t know what you’re doing, you’ll drown.”

Rocky said, “That’s actually not bad.”

“I have layers.”

Claire leaned back, amused. “Were you really a SCUBA instructor?”

“I was. Certified. Charismatic. Look excellent in neoprene.”

William made a sound halfway between a laugh and a groan.

Antonio pointed at him. “Jealousy is ugly.”

Claire asked, “Why did you stop?”

For once, Antonio did not answer immediately.

He looked at his hands, then toward the dark window beyond Rocky.

“Life again,” he said. “Same as him. You can only float around for so long before bills find you. I was good with systems. Good with risk. Good with staying calm when other people panicked. Cybersecurity rewards all of that, except the wardrobe is worse.”

“You miss it?” Claire asked.

“Diving?”

“Yes.”

“Sometimes.” He smiled faintly. “Not enough to go back. Enough to remember who I was before I became whoever this is.”

That line settled.

Not heavily.

But deeply.

William looked at Antonio and wondered how many versions of him there had been. SCUBA instructor. Cybersecurity professional. Divorced father. Best friend. Guardian. Survivor. The man who made jokes too quickly. The man who apparently had once clicked a green button and changed all their lives. The man who never let silence win unless silence deserved to.

Claire asked, “Do you have children?”

Antonio nodded. "One biological, one by a promise."

William felt the unspoken part of the sentence move toward him and stop.

Antonio did not look at him.

Neither did Rocky.

Claire did.

Just briefly.

William looked down.

One biological son.

And then William.

Something in his chest tightened, but he did not know what to do with it yet, so he left it there.

Antonio cleared his throat.

"Divorced," he added. "Before you ask. It's fine. Everyone survived. Some of us even developed personalities. Hers just happened to get more crazy. I on the other hand have matured well and gracefully."

Rocky muttered, "That's debatable."

Claire studied him for a moment, "Is there a Mrs. Antonio in the works?"

Antonio immediately shook his head, no. "No thank you. I date sometimes. Poorly, according to people who think they get a vote."

Rocky looked at the ceiling.

Claire asked, "Do they?"

"Absolutely not."

"That was fast."

"I'm very modern when it benefits me."

William expected Rocky to say something. He did not.

Antonio leaned back, looking more comfortable now that the subject had moved onto ground he could control.

“You kids are lucky that you found each other. Here’s what nobody tells you,” he said. “Starting over sounds romantic when you’re young because you think every new person is a new universe. And sometimes they are. But after a while, it’s also just a lot of learning favorite colors. Favorite movies. Childhood traumas. How they take their coffee. Whether they believe texting back within three business days is a human right or an act of emotional terrorism.”

Claire laughed.

William did too.

Antonio continued, “And I’m not afraid of the awkward first kiss. I’m not afraid of the first anything. That part’s easy.”

Rocky closed his eyes. “Please stop before you make this worse.”

Antonio ignored him. “The hard part is deciding whether you want to do the rest. Whether you want to merge lives. Schedules. Families. Holidays. Explanations. Histories. Whether this person is worth bringing into the blast radius of everything you already are.”

Claire’s laughter faded into something quieter.

Antonio looked at William then, not long, but long enough.

“So yeah,” he said. “Sometimes something imperfect works because it doesn’t ask you to rebuild the whole damn house.”

Rocky opened his eyes.

William wondered how much of this was an argument they had already had in some other room, on some other night, long before Claire entered the story.

Claire did not push.

That made William grateful.

The cabin hummed around them.

Antonio reached toward the small cabinet beside his seat and opened it. Inside were glasses, napkins, bottles arranged with the unnerving precision of people who knew exactly what four exhausted travelers might require at altitude.

“No flight attendant?” Claire asked.

“Apparently we’re self-serve peasants,” Antonio said.

Rocky said, “You managed fine from Syracuse.”

“Syracuse to Florida was practice. Florida to Philly was a warm-up. This is the big leagues.”

“You poured bourbon into a coffee mug over Georgia.”

“It was turbulence.”

“There was no turbulence.”

“There was...emotionally.”

Antonio removed the bourbon and four glasses.

Rocky looked at the fourth with the realization that William and his companion were of age and not in need of protection from alcohol.

Antonio poured carefully, which somehow made the act funnier. A small amount for Claire. A small amount for William. A normal amount for Rocky. An Antonio amount for Antonio.

He handed the glasses around.

William accepted his and stared into the amber liquid.

It seemed ridiculous.

All of it.

The plane. The bourbon. The night. The fact that he was sitting beside Claire while Rocky and Antonio performed a version of themselves that was both familiar and newly strange.

Antonio lifted his glass. “To not dying.”

Rocky gave him a look. “Rather morose.”

Antonio sighed. “I don’t know what that word means but I’m assuming it is a compliment. Fine. William, any words you want to share?”

William looked up.

Everyone was looking at him now.

He did not know why the toast belonged to him, but suddenly it did.

He thought about the alley. The green light. The pressure in his skull. Claire's hand. Rocky's fear. Antonio's jokes. Mario somewhere behind all of this, dead and still somehow arranging the furniture of their lives.

He raised his bourbon.

"To living," he said.

No one made a joke.

Not even Antonio.

Rocky lifted his glass.

Claire lifted hers.

Antonio's expression softened, and for once he looked exactly as old as he was.

"To living," Rocky said.

They drank.

The bourbon burned more than William expected. He tried to hide the cough. Failed. Antonio smiled but let him keep his dignity, which was how William knew the toast had mattered.

For a few minutes, they sat with that.

The plane moved through the dark.

The first part of the flight had been all motion and logistics, but now time began to stretch. There was nowhere to go. Nothing to do. No next room. No next street. No next interruption. They were sealed inside the question together, and the longer they avoided it, the more ridiculous avoidance became.

William felt it pressing against him.

He looked around the cabin again.

Rocky's bookstore hands wrapped around a bourbon glass.

Antonio, who had once lived underwater and now lived inside firewalls and jokes.

Claire, who had walked into his impossible day and chosen not to walk back out.

The self-serve bar.

The empty sky.

The dead man's trip.

William set his glass down.

"Are we just going to pretend like we're not on a private jet?"

No one answered.

That was answer enough.

He leaned forward.

"I'm serious. What the hell happened?"

Rocky and Antonio looked at each other.

The exchange was brief, but William saw a lifetime inside it. Not agreement exactly. Not permission. Something older than both. The communication of men who had survived things together and learned the terrible efficiency of not needing full sentences.

Rocky sighed.

Antonio reached for the bourbon bottle again.

This time, no one teased him.

Rocky held out his glass.

Antonio poured.

Then his own.

Then, after the smallest hesitation, he topped off William's.

Claire held out her glass too.

Rocky looked at her.

Claire met his eyes.

Whatever he saw there, he accepted.

Antonio poured.

Rocky took a drink before speaking.

Then he looked at William.

Not like a guardian.

Not like a man trying to protect a boy from the truth.

Like a man finally admitting the boy had become old enough to receive it.

“There’s a lot to explain,” Rocky said.

William nodded.

Antonio sat back slowly.

Rocky stared into his glass for a moment, searching for the beginning.

“Years ago,” he said, “Mario signed us up for something.”

William softly interrupted, “Yes, I know that. I mean...how did we get from a carefully planned itinerary to suddenly changing plans, changing planes, and not being able to ask any questions or talk about it?”

Rocky swallowed.

“There’s a lot to unpack, William. But you guys are old enough to know it all.”

The engines hummed.

Claire’s hand found William’s beneath the armrest.

Rocky looked up.

“Actually, this doesn’t start with Mission Master. Or this morning.”

Antonio closed his eyes.

“I guess,” he said, “it starts with four young, dumb kids who wanted an adventure to Canada and somewhere along the way everything just went askew.”

William leaned in, he had heard bits and pieces of the adventures his Dads would go on, but with little details. There was on one occasion that Antonio had a bit too much to drink and told some fanciful story about killing a pimp in Niagara Falls but that seemed like a flight of fancy.

“Your father, Vinnie, met a strange man named Farloh who hired us to do one small errand for

him. We had no idea how dangerous he was; probably still don't. Vinnie always had these big ideas and plans, and had just enough ambition and ability to mostly see them through." Said Rocky.

Rocky rolled the bourbon slowly between his palms.

"I suppose," he said, "it starts in Toronto."

Antonio immediately shook his head.

"It absolutely does not."

Rocky looked over the rim of his glass.

"See? This is exactly why I hate telling this story."

Claire smiled.

"You've said that already."

"I know."

"Then why keep saying it?"

"Because every time I think I've found the beginning..." Rocky shrugged helplessly. "...he tells me I'm wrong."

"I'm usually right."

"You're occasionally louder."

Antonio accepted that. "Fair."

The cabin settled into an easy silence.

The engines droned steadily somewhere beyond the walls.

Outside, the Atlantic had disappeared into complete darkness. There was nothing left to look at except their own reflections in the windows.

William realized he had never actually heard the four of them discussed as young men.

To him they had always simply been...

Rocky.

Antonio.

Mario.

His father.

Finished people.

Adults.

Now Rocky was talking about them as boys.

Twenty-somethings.

Idiots.

The realization alone was strangely unsettling.

Rocky leaned back.

“We were broke.”

Antonio nodded.

“Very.”

“Mario was convinced every problem could be solved by enthusiasm.”

Antonio smiled.

“To be fair...he was right more often than he should’ve been.”

Rocky’s eyes softened.

“Vinnie...”

He stopped.

William noticed it immediately.

Even after twenty years...

Saying his father’s name still required a small pause.

“Your dad had this gift.”

“What kind?” William asked.

Rocky laughed quietly.

“He could convince you to do something incredibly stupid...and halfway through you’d realize it had somehow become your idea.”

Antonio pointed.

“Exactly.”

“Manipulative?”

“No,” Rocky answered.

“Charismatic.”

Antonio nodded.

“He believed everything was possible.”

“Even when it obviously wasn’t.”

“Especially then.”

William smiled.

He had spent years trying to imagine his father.

Every story had made him seem larger than life.

These didn’t.

These made him sound...

Young.

Confident.

Funny.

Human.

Claire watched William more than she watched the speakers.

She noticed the smallest changes.

Every mention of Vinnie pulled William forward in his seat.

Every joke relaxed him a little more.

It occurred to her that this might be the first honest conversation anyone had ever had with him about the man.

Not a eulogy.

Not a tragedy.

A friend.

Rocky continued.

“The job itself wasn’t supposed to be anything remarkable.”

“We got hired.”

“Ran an errand.”

“Collected something.”

“Nobody thought we’d still be talking about it twenty-five years later.”

Antonio snorted. “I thought we’d be dead.”

“You always think we’re dead.”

“We’re statistically overdue.”

Claire looked between them. “You really weren’t afraid?”

Rocky answered first.

“Oh, we were terrified.”

Antonio laughed.

“Constantly.”

“The difference is…”

Rocky smiled.

“...when you’re twenty-three, you confuse fear with excitement.”

William laughed.

“So all those stories...They’re true?”

Antonio looked offended.

“Mostly.”

Rocky corrected him.

“Some.”

“Enough.”

“The pimp?”

Antonio sighed dramatically.

“Yes.”

“The pimp.”

Claire blinked.

“There really was a pimp?”

“There was.”

“You...”

Antonio nodded.

“...Killed him.”

Long silence.

Then Antonio shrugged.

“He was having a much worse day than I was.”

Rocky groaned.

“You see?”

“What?”

“This.”

Claire couldn't help laughing.

William stared.

Antonio looked genuinely confused.

“What?”

Rocky rubbed his forehead.

“You can't say ‘the pimp’ like you're talking about somebody who cut you off in traffic.”

“I wasn't.”

“You absolutely were.”

“It happened.”

“It did.”

“So...”

Antonio spread his hands.

“...history.”

One memory rolled naturally into another.

Not chronologically.

Emotionally.

Niagara became Toronto.

Toronto reminded Antonio of the church.

The church reminded Rocky of the Grail.

That reminded both of them of Mario.

Mario allegedly had an orgy with some gorgeous girls that he had met at the bar but Antonio always seemed dubious because of Mario's preference for larger women.

Claire quickly stopped trying to organize the stories.

William stopped trying too.

Instead...

He watched.

Rocky always corrected details.

Antonio always corrected Rocky.

Neither minded.

It was less disagreement than choreography.

They had apparently spent decades refining the rhythm.

Sometimes Rocky would begin a sentence...

Antonio would finish it.

Sometimes Antonio wandered so far off topic that Rocky physically pointed him back toward the original story.

“Canada.”

“What?”

“We’re still in Canada.”

“Oh.”

“Right.”

William laughed harder than he had all day.

“Canada is where we met your mother. She was working for Farloh and sent to make sure we didn’t screw it up, I think.”

Rocky nodded.

“Oh man, did your dad fall in love with her. I’ve never seen him so smitten before; like a love sick puppy dog.”

Rocky tilted his head quizzically as if trying to solve a puzzle, there were familiarities.

“Can’t blame the guy,” Antonio continued “Your mother was very attractive; not my type, but definitely Vinnie’s. Short, blonde. Smart but with some attitude.”

With that all eyes turned to Claire as if subconsciously.

The hours slipped by almost unnoticed.

At some point another bottle appeared.

No one remembered opening it.

Claire spoke very little.

Mostly she listened.

Occasionally asking a question so simple that it unlocked another half hour of memories.

“What was Mario like?”

Both men smiled immediately.

Differently.

Rocky’s smile carried affection.

Antonio’s carried exasperation.

“He could make friends with anybody.”

Rocky nodded.

“He loved attention.”

“He loved people.”

“He loved himself.”

Antonio looked down into his glass.

“He also loved us.”

The cabin became quiet.

William had many memories of Mario, but until then he realized that he had never actually known him.

Eventually the stories reached the end neither man had intended to reach.

The Ritz.

The years apart.

The careful lives.

The precautions.

Joel.

The attack that morning.

England.

The jet.

The silence that followed felt different.

Not empty.

Complete.

William sat very still. Every ridiculous story he'd assumed had grown larger with retelling had somehow been understated.

His entire childhood had quietly rearranged itself.

He finally understood why Rocky had always checked the locks twice.

Why Antonio noticed every unfamiliar face in a restaurant.

Why neither of them liked talking about Toronto.

It had never been paranoia.

It had been protection.

For him.

He looked at both of them.

"I didn't know."

Rocky nodded.

“I know.”

“You should’ve told me.”

“We should have.”

Another pause.

“I think...”

William searched for the right words.

“...I think I finally understand why you didn’t.”

Neither man answered.

They didn’t have to.

William looked down into the last inch of bourbon in his glass.

There was only one question left.

He looked toward Rocky.

His voice became very quiet.

“...How did they really die?”

The cabin seemed to shrink.

Rocky closed his eyes.

Antonio set his glass down.

For the first time that night...

Neither man reached for another drink.

Instead...

Rocky took a long breath.

Then finally said...

“No father should ever have to tell his son this story.”

William held Rocky's gaze.

"Maybe not," he said. "But I still need you to."

Rocky looked down at the bourbon resting between his hands. He had spent most of William's life deciding what the boy could survive knowing. There had always been a reason to wait. He was too young. School was going well, then high school. College. Graduation creeping closer. There had never been a moment that felt right because there was no right moment to tell a child that the first great act of love in his life had been a man choosing to die for him.

Antonio did not interrupt.

That, more than anything, frightened William.

"It was a bonfire," Rocky said at last.

The words entered the cabin quietly.

William had imagined his father's death in a hundred different ways over the years. A hospital. A road. An accident no one wanted to describe. Something sudden and ordinary enough to explain why every adult around him had turned the subject into a locked room.

He had never imagined firelight.

Rocky spoke slowly, stopping often, not because he had forgotten but because he remembered too much. William was in great danger; Vinnie had understood that before the others did. There had been shouting, confusion, power none of them understood, and the terrible clarity of a man realizing there was only one choice left.

"He saved you," Rocky said. "He saved all of us."

William stared at him.

"My father died because of me?"

"No." Rocky's answer came sharply enough to make Claire flinch. He leaned forward, the bourbon forgotten. "No. He died for you. Those are not the same thing, and you do not get to carry them as though they are."

William's mouth opened, but nothing came out.

Rocky's voice softened.

"You were a child. He was your father. There was no calculation for him. There was no debate. He saw what he had to do, and he did it."

Antonio looked toward the dark window.

“He was terrified,” he said. “Anybody who tells you courage means you aren’t scared is full of shit. Vinnie was scared. He did it anyway.”

William felt Claire’s fingers tighten around his.

“And my mother?”

The silence returned.

Rocky leaned back. Some truths were difficult because they were painful. Others were difficult because they remained unfinished.

“Jasmine died afterward,” he said. “Not long afterward.”

“How?”

“We don’t know.”

William looked from Rocky to Antonio.

“You don’t know?”

“We found her,” Antonio said. His voice had lost all its performance. “But we never found out who did it. Or exactly what happened.”

The engines continued their steady vibration beneath them, indifferent to the story being told inside the cabin.

William looked down at Claire’s hand wrapped around his. He had spent most of his life believing there had been one tragedy, singular and complete. His parents had died. That was the shape of it. A terrible fact softened by repetition.

Now there were choices inside it. Sacrifice. Mystery. Someone who might still have been hunting them afterward.

“What was he like?” William asked.

Rocky’s expression changed.

The grief remained, but affection moved through it.

“Funny,” he said. “Funniest guy I ever knew.”

“Smart,” Antonio added. “Thought he was the smartest guy I ever knew.”

“Loyal to a fault but man could he hold a grudge. If there was a Guinness Book of Worlds Records for ‘Holding a Grudge’ then Vinnie would be undisputed champion.”

“A giant prick sometimes. So argumentative and insisted that he was right all of the time.”

Rocky laughed quietly. “He had an incredible gift for pissing people off.”

“World class.”

“I’ve never met anyone so polarizing. People either loved the little guy or hated his guts. There wasn’t much in between.”

William laughed, though tears had gathered before he noticed them. The sound came out unevenly.

For once, nobody pretended not to see.

“He sounds exhausting,” Claire said softly.

Rocky smiled. “He was. But he loved Jasmine more than himself, and he loved you more than any of us could ever know.”

Antonio nodded toward William. “You would’ve loved him.”

William wiped at his face with the heel of his hand.

“I hope so.”

“He would be so proud of the man you’ve become.” Rocky said putting a giant hand on William’s shoulder.

The certainty in Rocky’s voice hurt more than the rest.

Antonio reached for the bottle, found it empty, and stared at it as though personally betrayed. He had begun to rise in search of another when Claire spoke.

“What happened to the man who hired you?”

Antonio stopped.

Rocky’s eyes moved toward him.

It was the smallest exchange of the night, but Claire saw it. A locked door discovered behind a curtain.

Rocky continued. “Farloh? We never knew much about him. He dealt mostly with Vinnie.”

Did Farloh kill Jasmine?”

“We believed Farloh was dead,” Rocky said.

“That isn’t what I asked.”

Rocky looked at him.

“No,” he admitted. “It isn’t.”

“And what happened to him?”

“We believed he died that night,” Rocky said.

“Believed?”

Rocky rubbed a hand across his face.

“We saw enough to think it was over.”

“But not enough to know.”

“No,” Antonio said.

Claire absorbed that without reacting. William felt her attention sharpen beside him.

The blackness in his head seemed suddenly closer.

Not present. Not reaching.

Remembered.

He pulled his hand away from Claire’s—not to reject her, but because his palm had begun to sweat.

Rocky noticed.

“What?”

William looked at Claire.

She held his eyes. There was no accusation in her expression, only the quiet reminder that they had agreed he could not keep pretending this was nothing.

“There’s something I haven’t told you.”

Rocky sat straighter.

Antonio slowly lowered himself back into his seat.

William tried to decide where to begin and understood, finally, why Rocky had struggled with the same problem.

“I’ve been having these episodes.”

“What kind of episodes?” Rocky asked.

“Spells. I don’t know what else to call them.”

“How long?”

“A while.”

Rocky’s face tightened. “How long is a while?”

“Rocky,” Antonio said quietly.

“No, I want—”

“Let him talk.”

Rocky closed his mouth, though it visibly cost him something.

William told them.

He told them about the pressure inside his skull. The sudden loss of balance. The darkness that did not feel like an absence of light so much as something alive, extending itself toward him. He told them about waking from dreams that carried the weight and detail of memory. About an older man bleeding from a cut William had somehow carried back with him.

He showed them the finger where the blood had appeared despite there being no wound.

Antonio no longer looked remotely intoxicated.

Then William told them about the alley.

Not only that he had collapsed. Rocky already knew enough to understand something had happened. William told them about the green light. Its impossible intensity. The feeling that it had recognized him. The certainty, however irrational, that something on the other side of it was looking back.

Rocky’s face slowly lost its color.

Antonio looked toward him.

William saw that exchange too.

“You’ve seen it,” he said.

Rocky did not answer immediately.

“Rocky.”

“Yes.”

The word barely escaped.

“When?”

“A long time ago.”

“The bonfire?”

Rocky nodded.

William sat back.

The cabin felt colder despite the steady warmth pushing through the vents.

Claire spoke before any of them could retreat.

“I saw him collapse.”

Rocky looked at her.

“This wasn’t dizziness. It wasn’t a concussion. He lost control of his body, and when he came back, he was frightened in a way I don’t think he knew how to explain.”

“I’m sitting right here,” William said, but there was no irritation in it.

“I know, honey.”

Antonio’s attention remained fixed on William.

“You said you saw a man in your dream?”

William nodded.

“What did he look like?”

“Older. About your age, maybe. Gray in his hair. He had a photograph.”

“Of what?”

“The four of you.”

Nobody moved.

William continued because stopping had become impossible.

“He knew your names.”

Antonio’s fingers tightened around the empty bottle.

“Which names?”

“All of them. Yours. Rocky’s. Mario’s.”

He looked toward the window, where his own reflection hovered over the darkness.

“And Vinnie’s.”

Rocky closed his eyes.

“The man,” Claire said. “Could he have been Vinnie?”

Rocky looked up.

William expected denial. Something immediate and practical. Grief defending itself against hope.

Instead Rocky said nothing.

Antonio stood and walked toward the small galley, though there was nowhere meaningful for him to go. He rested both hands against the counter and stared down.

“If Vinnie survived,” he said, “then whatever happened at that fire wasn’t what we thought.”

“And Farloh?” Claire asked.

Antonio looked back at them.

“If Vinnie is alive,” he said, “I don’t know who else might be.”

The thought remained suspended between them.

England waited ahead.

Behind them were the Ritz, bodies on a road, Joel guarding a family in Florida, and twenty years of careful distance suddenly proven useless.

Somewhere between those two points, a man was fighting a battle none of them knew had continued.

For the first time that night, there were no secrets left to tell. There were still mysteries. Perhaps more than before. But the burden had become communal. William no longer carried the green light alone. Rocky and Antonio no longer carried the bonfire. Claire no longer stood outside the family history trying to understand the shape of its locked rooms.

Antonio eventually found another bottle.

No one asked where.

He poured four modest glasses this time.

Not an Antonio amount.

He returned to his seat and raised his bourbon.

“To Mario,” he said.

Rocky lifted his glass.

“To Mario.”

Claire followed.

William looked at the knife resting on the polished wood between them.

Then he raised his own.

William looked out into the darkness beyond the glass.

“May Vinnie’s soul finally find peace.”

They drank.

Far below them, the Atlantic moved unseen through the night.

Far ahead, England waited.

And somewhere to the south, beneath a Roman sky, an old man opened his eyes.

Soon afterward, the captain dimmed the cabin lights.

No announcement was made. None was necessary.

Blankets appeared. Seats reclined. Antonio claimed the narrow sofa and immediately complained that private aviation had severely exaggerated the concept of luxury. Rocky remained awake longer than the others, staring through the window into the darkness beyond the wingtip, wondering how many ghosts could fit on one airplane.

Claire rested her head against William's shoulder.

He expected sleep to be impossible.

Instead, for the first time in weeks, the blackness inside his mind felt distant.

Not gone.

Waiting.

But no longer his alone.

In the morning, they would have England.

For now, they had the truth.

