

Chapter 4

Within ten minutes of Antonio and Rocky leaving, William realized he had forgotten something after all.

Melatonin.

Of course. It wasn't that big of a deal, but Rocky would be insufferable when he found out.

Not because William had forgotten.

Because Rocky had reminded him twice.

Possibly three times.

William stared at the empty bottle sitting on his desk.

Then at the gray Philadelphia sky outside his window.

Then back at the bottle.

The nearest CVS was only a few blocks away.

Twenty minutes later he was walking back toward campus with a small plastic bag, and a receipt the size of his leg, dangling from one hand.

The trip had been uneventful.

Which was surprisingly disappointing.

Not because William *wanted* excitement.

Because a small part of him was beginning to suspect that excitement had permanently forgotten his address. He wanted to be like his father, or at least the stories he had heard about him, but instead he was just boring, sheltered, and overly-safe. Just once in his life he would like something to be serendipitous and magical.

As he passed a coffee shop near campus, movement inside caught his attention.

He stopped.

Flaxen hair caught his eye.

He knew that hair. He knew *her*.

Not particularly well, but he stared at the back of the head from his seat in Art in the Dark for an entire semester Sophomore year.

She had sat directly in front of him and while he tried his best to keep his attention on the ever changing slides of post-renaissance paintings, he found himself constantly staring at her.

Most students took the class because it fulfilled a requirement.

She had actually cared.

William remembered finding that both admirable and exhausting. One day he recalled her arguing with the professor over a missed question on a quiz; the missed points probably didn't matter much to her overall grade but the principal was that she was right and not afraid to stand up for what she believed in.

That was so admirable.

He found himself staring at her as the girl casually looked up.

Recognition crossed her face immediately.

She waved through the window.

William pointed at himself, assured that she had to be waving at someone else.

To his surprise, she nodded and excitedly directed him to come in.

He shrugged. A moment later he found himself inside.

The coffee shop was crowded. Students occupied nearly every table. William felt particularly overdressed in a button down shirt and a sweater. He may as well had a flashing billboard that said "NERD".

He scanned the room to catch his bearings; he was very much out of his element. A small sign near the counter advertised a poetry reading that had apparently just ended. He found himself walking to the table with the blonde haired girl, as if some other force was guiding him.

"You came," she said.

William looked confused.

"I...I was just walking by when you-"

"Still counts." She motioned toward the empty chair across from her.

William sat. He was completely under her spell.

He tried to find some words, anything to keep himself from sounding like a dufus. "What was the poetry thing?"

"My girlfriend was supposed to read."

"Supposed to?"

The girl laughed. "Yeah, she chickened out."

"Stage fright?"

"More like existential dread." She laughed.

"That's a thing?"

"For poets?" She nodded. "It's practically a requirement."

William smiled. He was getting lost in the girl's beauty again; the same thing that happen two years earlier when he couldn't concentrate on anything else but her.

The girl extended her hand.

"I don't think we've actually met. I'm Claire."

"Uh, I'm William" he stammered.

"I know."

That caught him off guard.

"You do?"

"You sat behind me for an entire semester, silly."

"That's slightly creepy."

"You remembered me, too, y'know."

"Good point." William replied. The heat in his chest and face were equal parts nerves and excitement. This was unusual for him.

A waitress appeared.

Claire ordered another cappuccino.

William ordered one as well despite not particularly wanting it. He grew up working in a bookstore/coffee shop, he had made more than his fair share of café lattes, cappuccinos, and americanos let alone drank them. Often times just the smell of espresso beans was enough to make him want to vomit.

The coffees were served and were surprisingly good. For the first time William found himself...relaxing. He was honestly considering undoing the top button of his shirt. Scandalous.

The conversation just carried on naturally.

Books. Obviously. Which William was well versed.

Classes. Of course. Although amazingly they have both been on campus the same length of time, took many of the same classes, but only overlapped once.

Professors. Who they liked. Who they disliked. Who were clearly only teaching because they weren't good at their professions.

The night was effortless.

"What are you doing after this?" Claire asked him.

"Ugh...not that question. I feel like everyone and their brother has it all figured out, I have no idea what I'm supposed to with my life."

Claire looked at him quizzingly. "Oh, after graduation!?" she realized. "I'm leaving after graduation," Claire said.

"Leaving where?"

"Everywhere."

William laughed. "That's not a place."

"It should be." She smiled. "Europe."

"Vacation?"

"No."

"Study abroad?"

"No."

"Then what?" William asked.

"I'm taking a gap year and Teaching English as a Foreign Language. I have it all planned out."

"Where?"

Claire suddenly grew even more excited. "Oh my Gosh, I spent three weeks in Rome after last semester and absolutely want to go back. I felt like I got to be a local. So definitely Rome. It was so amazing. Although I have always wanted to see Spain, so maybe Spain. Or Portugal." Another pause. "Definitely Paris."

"The Louvre?" William asked.

"The Louvre."

"The Musée d'Orsay?"

Claire looked offended. "You say that like it's optional."

William laughed. "Good point."

She took a sip of coffee.

"What about you?"

"What about me?" he asked. The sense of dread filling inside of him.

"If you could, where would you go if you could teach English as a foreign language?"

William thought for exactly half a second.

"I've always wanted to go to Ireland."

Claire stared at him.

A smile slowly spread across her face.

"Oh honey." William immediately realized his mistake. "I'm pretty sure they're good on English as a *first* language over there."

"Oh, yeah." William looked down into his coffee. Attends an ivy league school but says the absolute dumbest things.

Antonio would've known what to say. Antonio always knew what to say.

Or at least he always said something.

Fortunately for William, Claire laughed.

To her credit, it wasn't a mean laugh.

Just an amused one. "That's actually adorable."

"I don't think it is." William suddenly remembered why he never leaves his dorm and the meaning of existential dread.

"No," she said as she reached across the table to take his hand. "It really isn't." She paused, "You put a lot of pressure on yourself don't you."

William nodded. It was one of the first times in his life he felt ok being vulnerable. He wanted to open up to talk about his life, his past, his longings, his pain, his searching. He wanted to talk about being orphaned and adopted by three men, about how it feels every day to have to live up to something that he doesn't understand let alone know how to compare to.

He just sighed. He couldn't find the words, but at least he could find her hand.

The conversation became more natural again, they talked for another hour.

Mostly about Europe and her experiences in Rome. There's a funny thing about when people travel to a new country it can consume their every thought, everything new is suddenly compared through that new lens. At first it's interesting, but then it grows to be annoying.

William didn't mind; he hung on Claire's every word as if it were the only thing keeping him from succumbing to gravity.

The conversation veered from places they have been to, which meant pretty much nowhere for William, and about places neither had been but longed to see. The history. The culture. The art. The architecture. Living on a continent where people care more about things other than NASCAR and sitcoms. Not being stuck in the same rut that every other person finds themselves in when life is weird and hard. The usual observations that a 23-year old has when they think they've figured it all out.

The conversation drifted in-and-out; laughter and serious moments. At some point William started to realize something.

Maybe Claire was more like him than he originally thought. She wasn't nearly as brave as he originally thought.

At least not in the way he had always imagined brave people.

She was confident, but she was scared.

Scared of moving.

Scared of failing.

Scared of being lonely.

Scared of making the wrong decision.

Scared of living a life not worth living.

It was everything William wanted but could never find the words.

Eventually a comfortable silence settled between them.

Claire looked at the time on her phone.

Then back at William. He feared this was the end. It's always an end when a woman looks to see what time it is.

"Well, "Claire said, as William's heart sank, "back to my original question. What are you doing after this...cup of coffee?"

William frowned.

"Nothing." He said, feeling like such a loser.

"Good." she said as she quickly stood up.

"What?" William asked trying to figure out what was suddenly happening.

Claire grabbed her coat.

She smiled. "Now, do you want to go somewhere and do something fun?"