

Chapter 5

Antonio turned around. It took him more than a second as his eyes adjusted on the woman in front him; he knew her from somewhere, but where?

Of course. The hotel clerk.

For a moment he simply stared at her, because there were only so many humiliations a man could suffer in one evening before he began to suspect the universe had developed a personal interest in him.

She was no longer wearing the blazer from the front desk. Instead she now had on jeans, boots, and a dark leather jacket that made her look considerably less like someone paid to be polite to strangers. She held a beer in one hand and wore the expression of a woman who had just witnessed something she intended to enjoy for as long as possible.

“You,” Antonio said.

“You,” she replied.

“That’s generally how recognition works,” Dennis said from behind the bar.

Neither of them looked at him.

The woman slid onto the stool beside Antonio as she nodded toward the pool table.

“Do you always pull knives on people playing pool?”

Antonio looked back toward the two men, who were now very deliberately avoiding eye contact with him.

“Only when the situation calls for it.”

“And did this situation call for it?” She asked?

“In hindsight? Absolutely” Antonio took a sip of whiskey. “Ok, maybe not.”

“That’s comforting.” She said, taking a sip from her beer. A strand of hair fell in her face, it took all of Antonio’s will power to not casually slide it back behind her ear.”

“Most people appreciate fast reflexes.” Said Antonio, trying his best to be cool.

“Most people aren’t almost stabbed over a scratch.”

Dennis leaned forward. “Imagine the...implications.”

Antonio ignored him.

The woman ignored him as well.

Dennis looked wounded.

Antonio studied her for a moment. She had been pretty at the hotel, but in the polite, professional way hotel clerks often were. She had the typical straight long black hair and clear rimmed glasses of any hotel clerk who appeared to take their jobs seriously. Here, away from fluorescent lighting and the burden of customer service, she was prettier and significantly more dangerous. Not physically dangerous. At least not obviously. But there was something in her eyes that suggested she was accustomed to saying exactly what she thought and rarely regretting it later.

Antonio respected that.

He also disliked it immediately.

“So, you followed me?” Antonio asked

“Get over yourself; I just got off work.” She responded.

“And came to the same bar?” Antonio asked.

“Well it *is* the closest bar to the hotel.” She immediately retorted.

“That’s...suspiciously reasonable.” Antonio was flummoxed; he had clearly met his match.

“I try.” She said with a sly smile.

“What’s your name?” Antonio asked.

“Dana.”

“Antonio.”

“Trust me, I know.”

“Because of the hotel?”

“Because you said ‘two rooms this time’ loud enough for the entire lobby to hear.”

Antonio smiled. “That was for Rocky.”

“Is Rock...the husband?”

Antonio nearly choked on his whiskey.

“No.”

“Boyfriend?”

“No.”

“Ex?”

“No.”

Dana paused. “Complicated?”

Antonio considered that.

“Yes. Of sorts.”

Dana laughed.

It was a real laugh, not polite and not forced, and Antonio found himself smiling before he could stop it.

“He’s my best friend,” Antonio said. “One of them at least.”

“One of the complicated ones?”

“Well considering the others are all dead, I’d say they’re all relatively complicated.”

“That tracks.”

For the next hour, Antonio learned that Dana was from Rochester, had gone to Cornell to study Hotel Management, moved to Philadelphia six years earlier, hated hotel guests as a category but liked some of them as individuals, and believed most men became interesting only after they stopped trying to be impressive.

Antonio immediately tried to be impressive.

It was instinct.

“I used to tour you know,” he said.

Dana looked at him over her beer.

“Tour? Like houses?”

“No, like the country. I was in a pretty awesome band.”

“You *were* in a band?”

“Original band.”

“That makes it sound surprisingly less successful.”

Antonio paused. She was right; his lines weren’t working. He decided to take a page out of Rocky’s book and be...humble.

“How does anyone really measure success...other than money, fame, and notoriety. Of which, we had none. But we did record some great albums though.”

“Albums?”

“Ugh...CDs.”

“CDs?”

Antonio could see this was going nowhere.

“We recorded music, our own songs.”

“Were they good?”

“That depends on who you ask.” Antonio responded.

“I’m asking you.”

Antonio paused. Should he be honest? Should he be smug or try to be like Rocky. What would Vinnie say? Ugh, what the hell would Mario say? Does anyone have a freaking clue?

“Yes, they were fucking awesome.”

Dana smiled.

“That pause did a lot of work.”

“So did we. We toured the country,” Antonio said.

“Uh huh.”

“And Japan.”

Dana blinked.

“Japan?”

“Yes.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

She studied him. “That is unfortunately kind of cool.”

Antonio leaned back, satisfied.

“We were also extremely popular in Estonia.”

Dana stared at him. “Now you lost me.”

“It’s true.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“That doesn’t make it less true.”

“It makes it less useful.” She replied.

Antonio frowned.

He was beginning to understand something.

Dana was annoying.

Not mildly annoying.

Profoundly annoying.

She interrupted his stories, questioned his best lines, refused to laugh when he expected her to laugh, and laughed when he expected her to be impressed. She was sarcastic, sharp, and seemed to take personal pleasure in making him work for every inch of ground he gained.

Worse, he actually liked it.

Now he knew how Rocky felt and this troubled him.

Somewhere around his third whiskey he realized what the problem was.

Dana reminded him of...himself.

Not exactly.

She was smarter.

And had better hair.

He was obviously funnier and much more impressive; but the general effect was the same.

He found this upsetting.

“So,” Dana said, “why are you in town?”

Antonio swirled the whiskey in his glass.

“My kid goes to Penn. His final semester.”

“You have a kid at Penn?”

“Sort of.”

Dana waited. “More complications? Let me guess. Baby mama? Divorce? Aliens abducted and impregnated you with one of theirs?”

Antonio sighed. “Somethings are not even that simple.”

“Nothing about you seems simple” she sighed.

“That’s fair.” He took another drink and gave her the short version.

“What’s not fair is that I find myself wanting to keep learning more about you.”

Antonio suddenly felt quite good inside, as her hand stretched across the bar to touch his. “Please, tell me more about your friends.”

He had learned a long time ago that when telling his story it was always best to keep it short. Very short.

A friend had died.

A son had been left behind.

Three friends had made a promise.

Another friend had also died, though in a way nobody discussing in public.

Twenty years had passed.

Life choices were made. Marriage. Divorce. But the boy was all that mattered.

Now the boy was a man.

Dana listened without interrupting, which Antonio both appreciated and deeply distrusted.

When he finished, she was quiet for a moment.

Deep down he expected a natural rejection.

“That’s actually kind of beautiful,” Dana said.

Antonio shrugged. “It was mostly exhausting.”

“Beautiful things usually are.”

Antonio looked at her. Maybe it was just the multiple rounds of whiskey coursing through his veins but he was starting to find her captivating.

Surprisingly, for the first time that evening, he had no immediate comeback.

Dana took a sip of beer.

“What were their names?”

“The friends?”

“No, the cast of Rugrats. Yes, your friends.”

Antonio smiled.

“Vinnie and Mario.”

Dana’s expression changed.

Not dramatically.

Just enough.

Antonio noticed.

“What?”

“You’re from where again?”

“LaFayette, NY.”

Dana stared at him.

“No.”

“What?”

“No way.”

Antonio set his glass down.

“What?”

“I once dated a guy from LaFayette.”

Antonio laughed.

“No you didn’t.”

“I did.”

“Recently?”

“Several years ago.”

“What was his name?” Antonio scoffed.

Dana hesitated.

“He was raising a son with two other guys.”

Antonio stopped laughing.

The bar seemed to grow quieter.

Even Dennis appeared to sense something important had happened, though he wisely chose not to speak.

Antonio leaned slowly toward her.

“Mario?”

Dana nodded.

“Medium build. EMT. Thought he was way more important than he was.” Antonio stared, looking for a response.

“That doesn’t narrow it down as much as you’d think.”

“He had spikey blonde hair and was kind of gay about his clothes?”

“That narrows it.” Dana gave him a suspicious look. “But not completely”

“Uncircumcised?”

Dana immediately blushed and looked away.

Antonio looked down at his drink. This night went from amazing to incredibly awkward.

Dana dodged the answer.

“He was your friend?” she asked.

“Best friend. Or at least one of them.”

“I thought you said he died.”

“He did.”

“Oh.”

Dana’s smile faded a little.

“Well, I’m sorry.”

Antonio waved it away. Not because it didn’t matter. Because it did. Too much.

“Don’t be,” he said. “We had a falling out; I think we just wound up being two very different people.” Antonio thought intently on his words so as not to insult the deceased. “Mario would’ve wanted attractive women discussing him in bars after his death.”

Dana laughed again.

“That does sound like him.” She paused. “wait, you think I’m attractive?” she blushed.

Antonio smiled. He had this strange feeling about him, like something long dormant was opening up. If it was Vinnie sitting there he would have been falling in love. Rocky would have been building her a house. Suddenly a sense of panic overcame him.

“So, exactly how well did you know Mario?”

Dana gave him a look. “Just briefly.”

“That also sounds like him.”

“Not like that.” She took a drink, laughed, and then shook her head. “It wasn’t directly his fault; I just couldn’t go through with it.”

Antonio was intrigued. “With what?”

Dana sighed. “When I first met Mario I was a bit heavier, not taking care of myself. He seemed to be very cool with that. But I wanted to impress him, obviously, so I started dieting and losing weight and he just...lost interest.”

For several seconds no one said a thing.

Finally, Antonio nodded.

“Yup.”

Dana burst out laughing.

“Yup?”

“That’s Mario.” Said Antonio.

“How could you possibly know that?” She asked...”Or do I not want to know?”

Dennis leaned closer in.

“Do I want to know?”

“No,” Antonio and Dana said at the same time.

They looked at each other.

Antonio smiled. “Mario was funny; he always had a thing for...bigger girls. In fact, I used to joke that he died because one of his fat girlfriends took top.”

Dana stop smiling.

“Not you, obviously” Antonio stammered, ugh, Vinnie would know what to say in this mess. “What I’m trying to say is that, he preferred bigger girls but that doesn’t he didn’t’ appreciate beauty in skinnier women – like you.”

He waited with incredible anticipation as Dana studied his every word; poking, prodding for truth. Finally, she smiled.

“Well, too bad for Mario because I like older men who appreciate a fine piece of ass like this.”

Antonio laughed. That was the problem with meeting someone who irritated him. Sometimes they were worth talking to.

The night wore on.

One drink became two.

Two became several.

Stories were told.

Most of Antonio's were true.

Several of Dana's probably were.

Dennis eventually stopped trying to insert himself into the conversation, which was for the best, because neither of them seemed inclined to let him.

By the time the bar emptied out, Antonio felt the old confidence returning.

Not the stupid confidence of being twenty-five.

That was gone.

Mostly.

This was older confidence.

Tired confidence.

The confidence of a man who had been embarrassed many times and survived almost all of them.

Dana checked her phone.

"I should probably go."

Antonio looked toward the window. The street outside was dark and mostly empty.

"It's not safe for you to be alone," he blurted out. "Want to come back to my place?"

Dana recoiled immediately.

"Ew. No."

The words hit him harder than expected. Antonio looked down into his glass.

“Sorry,” he said. “That was too forward and I shouldn’t have assumed.”

Dana frowned. Then stared at him.

Then laughed.

“No, you dumbass.”

Antonio looked up. “‘No’? as in ‘no’ or ‘no’ as in ‘yes’”

“No.” Dana replied. “Because you said ‘your place’.”

“Well, yeah, that’s normally how the phrase works.” Antonio replied.

Dana pointed toward the hotel.

“You’re staying where I work.”

Antonio’s eyes followed her finger. The hotel stood across the street, windows glowing in neat rows.

“So?”

“So I don’t sleep with men where I work.”

Antonio blinked.

“Oh.”

Dana smiled.

He blinked again.

“*Oh.*”

“There it is,” Dana said.

Antonio slowly smiled.

“So what you’re saying is…”

“What I’m saying,” Dana replied, standing from the stool, “is that I have an apartment a few blocks from here and would welcome some…companionship.”

Antonio stood so quickly he nearly bumped the bar.

Dennis looked over.

“Leaving?”

Antonio placed money on the bar.

“Apparently.”

Dana zipped her jacket and started toward the door.

Antonio followed.

He glanced back once at Dennis.

Dennis raised both eyebrows.

“Im-pli-ca-tions!” Dennis said.

Antonio shrugged.

Antonio stepped out into the cold Philadelphia night after a woman he had met twice, a woman who had dated Mario once, a woman who annoyed him almost as much as he annoyed himself.

For the first time all day, Antonio felt young.

This should have worried him.

It did not.

