

Chapter 6

Rocky had been trying to relax for nearly two hours.

The room service had arrived without incident, which was somewhat relieving considering how the evening had gone so far. The steak was overcooked. The baked potatoes were dry. The wine was not dry enough.

At least there had been no vegetables. Not even a spare shred of parsley or kale hidden under the steak.

Rocky considered that a victory.

Under normal circumstances food, wine, and a quiet room should have lulled him to sleep by now. But it didn't.

Something felt wrong.

Not dangerous.

Not urgent.

Just...wrong.

William?

Rocky immediately thought about it.

No.

William was safe. He was in his dorm room. Probably reading.

Possibly asleep by now.

William was many things, but reckless was not one of them.

Rocky poured another glass of wine; emptying the bottle.

Then froze.

Antonio.

It was definitely Antonio.

The realization arrived with the certainty of sunrise.

Antonio was doing something stupid.

The question wasn't what ... but where?

Rocky checked his phone; no calls, no texts. Something was definitely wrong. He sighed heavily and stood. It was much colder out, he needed his coat.

His wife had bought it for him two Christmases earlier.

It was enormous.

It was puffy.

It was far too warm.

It was absolutely embarrassing.

Yet, Rocky wore it constantly.

Because it was from her and she loved him.

He learned a long time ago that life is fleeting. There is no time to worry about how someone upsets you or embarrasses you. Everyone always assumes it's the happy moments you'll miss most when someone is gone, but that's not true. It's the honest moments that linger the longest.

And of course he wore it because she would absolutely ask if he had worn it and would somehow know if he hadn't.

Minutes later he stepped out into the dark West Philadelphia night.

The cold air hit him immediately. There was a strange buzz; the streets were generally quiet around the hotel but the neighborhood felt alive. Not dangerous. Not boisterous. Alive.

His senses tingled.

Rocky scanned the street.

Coffee shop?

No. Too boring.

CVS? Not even if he needed condoms.

Then he saw it.

The dimly lit sign of Paddy's Pub.

Of course.

Antonio was many things.

Unpredictable was not one of them.

Rocky approached the bar. It was confusing because the lights were very clearly on but the sign in the window said “closed”. Rocky carefully pulled the door handle and peaked inside; he was hoping to see his friend sitting at the bar safely so he could go back to the hotel room.

The bar looked exactly how Rocky imagined it would.

Dark.

Sticky.

Questionable.

Antonio-less.

A bartender stood behind the counter wiping down glasses looked up at the doorway as soon as the opening was made. Rocky was stuck; he had to go inside now.

One lonely patron sat at the far end of the bar drinking something that very clearly looked like paint.

Rocky approached.

"I'm looking for a friend. Have you by any chance seen a guy in here tonight?" he asked.

The bartender stared blankly. "We had a few. Can you be slightly more specific?"

Without hesitation, Rocky responded "5'-8". Beard. Kind of annoying."

The bartender reacted immediately.

"Oh. *That* guy."

Rocky sighed. "Yes. That guy."

"He left about fifteen minutes ago."

Do you know which direction?

Dennis shrugged and said, "No, but I think the girl he was with said something about an apartment a few blocks away."

Rocky's eyes closed.

Of course.

"Do you know which way they went?"

The bartender shrugged.

"Somewhere into the night."