

Chapter 8

William still wasn't entirely sure how they had gotten up there. One minute they had been walking through Philadelphia. The next they were riding an elevator they probably weren't supposed to be riding. Then climbing a staircase they definitely weren't supposed to be climbing.

Now they stood on the upper levels of the Cira Centre with the city stretched out beneath them.

Philadelphia glowed in every direction.

Headlights.

Streetlights.

Office towers.

Apartment windows.

The city seemed impossibly alive.

Claire stood near the railing with her hands shoved into her coat pockets.

The wind whipped strands of flaxen hair across her face.

"This...is amazing," William said.

"I know."

"You come up here often?"

"Never."

"Then how did you know about it?"

Claire smiled. "I just had a hunch."

That seemed like cheating.

For a while they simply stood together.

Watching.

No words, just silence.

The city below looked different from up here.

Smaller.

Less intimidating.

Like something that could be understood.

William found himself watching Claire more than the skyline.

Not intentionally.

It just kept happening.

She pointed things out.

Told stories.

Talked about Europe.

Talked about Rome.

Talked about art museums and trains and hostels and bad decisions and adventures she planned to make.

Every sentence felt like an invitation.

William realized something.

Claire wasn't in love with Europe.

Claire was in love with possibility.

And somehow that was contagious.

The cold eventually drove them closer together.

Not much.

Just enough.

The city stretched endlessly before them.

The moment stretched too.

William wasn't sure who moved first.

Maybe neither of them did.

Maybe both.

The kiss was brief.

Awkward.

Perfect.

Then a loud alarm exploded from William's pocket.

BEEP.

BEEP.

BEEP.

William immediately threw both fists into the air.

"YES!"

Claire jumped.

"Is that some kind of app that goes off when you kiss someone?"

William blinked.

The alarm continued.

BEEP.

BEEP.

BEEP.

"No, not at all" he said as he fumbled his phone silencing it.

Claire stared.

"So, what was that?"

William blushed; "Nothing."

"That was definitely something."

He looked out across the city.

"Just a little tradition."

Claire folded her arms beneath her breasts.

"You set an alarm for a tradition precisely at 2 in the morning?"

"When you say it like that it sounds weird."

"It is weird."

William laughed.

"Fine. One of my dad's owns a bookstore called 'Two in the evening' and its customary to shout at 2am. I don't know why they just do it for some reason I set an alarm so I wouldn't fall asleep behind the counter and its stupid and I---"

Claire shook her head and put her finger over William's lips.

"You are a very strange person, William, but you are not stupid."

William smiled.

The strange thing was that he didn't mind hearing it from her.

Not at all.

A few minutes later he started to realize the time. It was past 2am.

The smile faded.

"What?"

"I should probably head back."

Claire nodded.

"Morning class?"

"Unfortunately."

"Tragic."

They started back toward the stairwell.

For a moment neither spoke.

Then William stopped.

Claire turned.

"What?"

William took a breath.

He wanted to tell her that for the first time in as long as he can remember he felt alive; that *she* made him feel something he didn't know what even possible. He wanted to tell her all about his dad and his mom, at least the parts he knew or gleaned together, to show how they – intentionally or unintentionally - formed him and made him who he was today. About his “dads” Antonio and Rocky and Mario, kind of. About his step brothers & step sister. How prior to tonight the idea of taking a chance seemed not only ridiculous but impossible and dangerous beyond measure.

Now the only thing that was ridiculous as the word “What?”.

William paused, regained his composure.

"Claire I am so glad that fate brought us together tonight. Can I see you again?"

Claire smiled.

Not a big smile.

Not a teasing smile.

Just a genuine one.

"If fate allows."

Then she turned and started down the stairs.

Leaving William standing beneath the Philadelphia skyline wondering whether fate truly was a real thing.

And hoping it was.

