

Chapter 9

He sat alone on a stone bench in a small park not far from the Piazza del Popolo as midday light settled over Rome.

The city had reached that strange hour when it seemed both fully awake and briefly suspended. Scooters still buzzed through narrow streets. Tourists clustered uncertainly outside locked shop doors, studying posted hours and wondering why everything had suddenly closed just when they were ready to buy something. Shopkeepers lowered gates, swept thresholds, and disappeared into the rhythm of an afternoon pause older than any itinerary.

The man ignored most of it.

The warm winter light touched the stone paths, the fountains, the pale walls of nearby buildings. Somewhere beyond the trees, Rome continued in murmurs and engines and footsteps, but for a few moments he felt almost peaceful.

Then it started.

A sensation.

Faint at first. Distant. Wrong.

He frowned.

Not again.

He closed his eyes, but closing them only made the feeling sharper. Something was pulling at him. Not physically, but mentally. Emotionally. Like a hook catching somewhere deep inside his thoughts and drawing tight before he had time to resist.

He stood abruptly.

A photograph slipped from his coat pocket and fluttered to the ground.

For a moment he only stared at it. Four young men looked back at him, smiling and alive beneath the faded gloss of an older life. Antonio. Rocky. Mario. Vinnie.

A lifetime ago.

He bent quickly and picked it up, but his fingers lingered on the image longer than he meant them to. The faces had become both familiar and unbearable.

Then the sensation returned.

Stronger.

His head snapped upward.

No.

Not upward.

West.

Across an ocean. Across a continent. Across thousands of miles.

Something was awake.

Not here.

There.

The darkness felt it too.

Immediately.

The whisper came cold and hungry, threaded with interest.

His jaw tightened.

"No."

The pressure intensified.

Leave him.

"No."

The voice laughed.

He staggered, one hand catching against a nearby wall. A thorn from a sprawling bougainvillea sliced across his finger, and the pain came sharp and immediate, bright enough to pull him back into himself.

A drop of blood struck the stone beneath him.

He swayed.

The Pantheon rose in the distance, ancient and unmoving, as if the world itself had decided long ago that some things could endure anything.

The world tilted.

"Leave him alone."

The words escaped through clenched teeth. He had tried so hard not to resist. For years, resistance had only made things worse. Resistance gave the darkness something to push against.

But this was different.

This was not their first conversation.

Not even close.

Somehow, though, this one hurt more.

Because for the first time in twenty years, the darkness was not looking at him.

It was looking somewhere else.

William woke gasping.

Morning light streamed through the small dormitory window, pale and ordinary, entirely too normal for the violence of the dream still clinging to him.

His heart hammered against his ribs.

For several seconds he remained perfectly still.

Rome.

An older man.

Blood on stone.

A voice.

Fear.

It had all felt impossibly real.

William sat upright, and the room spun slightly around him. He pressed a hand against his forehead and tried to steady himself.

How much melatonin had he taken?

Two?

Three?

More?

His mouth felt dry. His head felt heavy. The dream should have already been fading, breaking apart the way dreams always did once daylight touched them.

But it lingered.

Refusing to dissolve.

William rubbed his eyes.

Then froze.

A tiny crimson drop rested on the tip of his finger.

He stared at it.

The blood looked fresh.

Slowly, he turned his hand over.

No cut.

No scratch.

Nothing.

The room suddenly felt very quiet.

William swallowed and looked toward the window.

Who was that man?

