

Chapter 24

Antonio refused to believe it.

Not because he understood contract law. He absolutely did not.

But because he understood enough to know that something about the whole arrangement felt wrong.

For nearly an hour he sat at Rocky's kitchen table with two laptops open, four empty beer bottles between them, Mario's video paused on the television, and Claude offering increasingly detailed legal opinions that Antonio barely understood.

"Claude says they probably can't do this."

Rocky didn't even look up from his own screen.

"Who's Claude?"

"The AI."

Rocky slowly lowered his reading glasses. "You asked artificial intelligence whether we're legally obligated to go to England?"

"It was faster than finding a lawyer."

"So...your legal strategy is robots."

Antonio shrugged. "Worked for Terminator."

Rocky sighed. "I walked right into that."

Antonio returned to his laptop. Every few minutes he'd mutter another legal phrase he'd copied directly from Claude.

"Lack of consideration."

"What does that mean?"

"No idea."

"No mutual assent."

"What does that mean?"

"Also, no idea."

"Questionable formation of contract."

Rocky finally looked over. "Do you know what *any* of those mean?"

Antonio thought about it. "...Collectively?"

"No. But Claude seems pretty upset about them."

Rocky shook his head and returned to reading.

The strange thing was that Mission Master's website gave them almost nothing.

It was beautiful. Professionally designed. Rolling green hills. Grecian beaches. Pyramids. Stonehenge. Happy people smiling beside swords and armor. Every page invited them to imagine the adventure. None of them explained how they had apparently become legally obligated to participate in it.

The more Antonio searched, the more suspicious he became.

"This is intentional."

"What is?" said Rocky.

"They buried all the legal stuff."

Rocky nodded. "They absolutely buried it."

For the next half-hour they searched every menu, every hyperlink, every page footer, every privacy policy and cookie notice. Antonio even inspected the website source code, convinced hidden links might exist somewhere beneath the polished marketing.

Nothing.

Finally Rocky found it.

Not on Mission Master's website.

On Facebook.

He frowned.

"...Well that's interesting."

Antonio looked up.

"What?"

"There are..." He squinted. "...thirteen thousand members."

"Of what?"

Rocky slowly turned the laptop.

The page title read:

Mission Master Legacy Recipients (Unofficial)

The cover photo featured four exhausted-looking adults standing in front of what appeared to be Stonehenge wearing matching shirts that read:

WE SURVIVED.

Antonio burst out laughing.

Rocky clicked.

The very first pinned post read:

Before anyone asks...

YES, clicking the green BEGIN QUEST button constitutes acceptance. No, you cannot undo it.

Yes, almost everyone clicks it accidentally.

Antonio stopped laughing.

"...Huh."

Rocky looked at him.

"What?"

Antonio suddenly became very interested in his bourbon.

"There was..." He cleared his throat. "...a green button."

Rocky didn't move.

"What green button?"

"The text message."

"The congratulations text?"

Antonio nodded. "Yes, the one with the link."

Rocky stared at him for several long seconds.

Then very quietly asked,

"You clicked...a random hyperlink...inside an unsolicited text message"

Antonio nodded once.

"...Yes."

Rocky blinked.

"You." Another blink. "A cybersecurity professional."

Antonio held up one finger.

"In fairness..."

Rocky folded his arms.

"It said congratulations."

Silence.

Rocky stared.

Antonio shrugged.

"People generally enjoy congratulations."

Rocky leaned back in his chair.

"I cannot believe this."

Antonio tried one last defense.

"It was green."

Rocky laughed.

Not because it was funny.

Because it was so perfectly, unbelievably Antonio.

"You spend your entire professional life teaching companies not to click suspicious links."

"I know."

"And then you clicked one."

"I know."

"Without thinking."

"It was green."

Rocky covered his face with both hands.

"You're the reason phishing training exists."

Antonio nodded solemnly.

"...That's actually fair."

Their laughter slowly faded.

Neither man spoke for several minutes.

Rocky continued reading through the Facebook group, where hundreds of recipients had documented nearly identical experiences. Every story was some variation of the same theme:

"I thought it was just opening the itinerary."

"I didn't realize I'd accepted."

"Read the green button before you press it."

Buried in one particularly long thread was the answer they had been looking for.

Not from Mission Master.

From a retired attorney in Arizona who had apparently spent six months trying to unwind his own wife's Viking package.

Rocky read silently for several minutes.

Then handed the laptop to Antonio.

"Read that."

Antonio skimmed.

Then slowed.

Then read it again.

Mission Master intentionally delayed all Legacy Invitations for five years following the purchaser's death. The waiting period had been challenged repeatedly over the years, but the company successfully argued that recipients were no longer acting under immediate grief and therefore made a voluntary election when accepting the quest. Clicking **BEGIN QUEST** wasn't merely opening an itinerary.

It was accepting assignment of the legacy package.

The attorney ended his post with one final sentence.

The company isn't selling vacations. They're selling legacy experiences. The vacation is merely how they perform the contract.

Antonio looked up.

"...Those sneaky bastards."

Rocky nodded. "They're good."

"They're evil."

"They're both." Antonio poured another bourbon.

"I hate when lawyers get creative." Said Rocky.

"Claude agrees."

"Claude needs to shut up."

For another hour they searched for loopholes.

Every one closed.

Every argument ended in the same place.

Sometime after two in the evening, the legal research gave way to travel videos.

Neither of them consciously decided to stop fighting.

They simply...did.

Antonio watched a drone fly over the English countryside.

"That actually looks incredible."

Rocky didn't answer.

He was watching a video about Stonehenge.

"I always thought it'd be smaller."

Antonio grinned.

"You know...I haven't been anywhere in a long time."

Rocky smiled.

"I know."

"I mean...really anywhere."

"I know."

Antonio leaned back in his chair.

"I think..." He looked around the kitchen. "I'm actually excited."

Rocky didn't answer immediately.

He clicked another video.

An old English pub.

Low ceilings.

Dark wood.

People laughing.

A man carrying four overflowing pints.

Without realizing it, Rocky smiled.

Antonio caught it immediately.

"Oh...There it is."

"What?"

"The smile." Said Antonio, himself starting to grin widely.

"I didn't smile."

"You absolutely smiled."

Rocky sighed.

"...It does look kind of amazing."

Antonio lifted his beer.

"I say, Gov'nah..."

Rocky threw a pretzel at him.

It hit Antonio squarely in the forehead.

Antonio laughed so hard bourbon came out his nose.

For the first time in years...

they weren't talking about the past.

They were talking about where they were going.

