

Chapter 32

Arrival

The landing was gentler than William expected.

He felt the subtle change in pressure before the wheels touched down, followed by two soft bumps and the low mechanical whine of the aircraft slowing against the runway.

Outside the window, England emerged through a veil of thin gray cloud.

Not gloomy.

Muted.

The fields beyond the airport were divided by hedgerows and narrow roads, everything arranged with an order that appeared natural rather than imposed. Low buildings stood beside the runway. A line of private aircraft waited beyond them, clean and motionless beneath the morning sky.

William looked down at Claire.

She was still asleep against his shoulder.

She had shifted sometime during the final hour of the flight, her head finding him without either of them acknowledging it. Her black notebook rested open across her lap, the final line of handwriting trailing toward the bottom of the page.

He considered waking her.

Instead, he watched England pass slowly outside the window as the jet taxied toward the terminal.

For the first time since Philadelphia, nobody was talking.

Rocky sat across the aisle, staring out his own window. Antonio had fallen asleep with his mouth open and one earbud still lodged crookedly in place.

The cabin felt suspended between two worlds.

Behind them, everything they understood.

Ahead, everything Mario had prepared.

William looked again at Claire.

“Hey,” he said softly.

She stirred but did not open her eyes.

“We’re here.”

“In England?”

“No. Farnborough.”

Her eyes opened.

“What?”

William smiled.

“England.”

Claire straightened slowly, realizing where she had been resting.

“Oh.”

“Good morning.”

She brushed a loose strand of hair from her face and looked through the window.

For several seconds, she said nothing.

Then she smiled.

“It looks exactly how England should look.”

William glanced outside.

“How is that?”

“I don’t know yet.”

The jet came to a stop.

Across the aisle, Antonio snorted awake.

“Did we win?”

Rocky looked at him. “The flight?”

“I had a very competitive dream.”

“You were drooling.”

“That’s how committed I was.”

The cabin door opened, admitting a rush of cool air.

Antonio stood and stretched.

“England,” he announced in a terrible accent. “We have arrived.”

A member of the flight crew looked at him with the practiced neutrality of someone who had already heard enough.

Rocky retrieved his bag.

“You’ve been here thirty seconds, and you’ve already offended the country.”

“International relations are my gift.”

“No one has ever called them that.”

They descended onto the tarmac.

The air smelled faintly of rain and jet fuel.

William paused at the bottom of the stairs.

The sky seemed lower here. The light softer. It flattened nothing, but it sharpened no edge either. Everything existed in a kind of quiet diffusion.

Claire stopped beside him.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

She followed his gaze.

“You’re noticing.”

He smiled.

“I’m trying.”

They continued toward the terminal.

The formalities were discreet and efficient. Passports examined. Questions asked without suspicion. Bags transferred without a carousel or crowd. Within twenty minutes, they were standing outside Farnborough Airport with their luggage arranged beside them and the damp English morning settling into their clothes.

A black Uber van waited at the curb.

Antonio stared at it.

“I thought we’d get one of those little taxis.”

Rocky opened the rear door. “You mean a black cab?”

“No, the tiny ones from the movies.”

“They are black cabs.”

“I thought that was just a nickname.”

“For what?”

Antonio considered the question.

“I don’t know.”

Claire climbed inside before the conversation could continue.

William followed her into the second row. Rocky and Antonio took the seats behind them, where Antonio immediately began investigating every button within reach.

The driver introduced himself as Malik, confirmed their hotel, and pulled away from the terminal.

For the first few minutes, nobody spoke.

The roads curved through stretches of green broken by villages, brick walls, and old homes set close to the roadway. Roundabouts appeared with alarming frequency. Cars moved on the wrong side with complete confidence.

Antonio leaned forward between the seats.

“I’m not going to lie, this is making me uncomfortable.”

Malik glanced at him in the mirror.

“The driving?”

“The entire country is backwards.”

“We prefer ‘different.’”

Antonio nodded thoughtfully.

“That’s fair.”

He sat back.

A moment later, he leaned forward again.

“Do you guys call an English muffin just a muffin?”

Rocky closed his eyes.

Malik smiled despite himself.

As they moved closer to London, the landscape tightened. Fields gave way to neighborhoods. Detached homes became terraces. The streets narrowed as the buildings rose higher around them.

William watched through the window.

A woman walked a small dog beneath a transparent umbrella. Two children in dark school uniforms waited at a crossing with their mother. A delivery cyclist moved between buses as though he had accepted death as a professional risk.

The city did not announce itself all at once.

It accumulated.

A red double-decker bus.

A glimpse of the Thames between buildings.

A row of white townhouses.

A church spire rising behind glass offices.

William found himself leaning toward the window.

Claire noticed.

“So?”

He looked at her.

“So what?”

“First impression.”

He returned his eyes to the city.

“It feels like it’s been here a long time.”

“That is generally how history works.”

“No.” He smiled. “I mean it knows it has.”

Claire considered that.

“I like that.”

The overnight flight began catching up with them before they reached the hotel.

Conversation dissolved into silence. Rocky rested his head against the glass. Antonio stopped asking Malik questions and stared out the window with the slack expression of a man who had temporarily exhausted himself.

Claire folded her coat between her head and the window.

William watched her eyes close.

She opened one again.

“Don’t let me miss London.”

“We’re already in London.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t.”

“Wake me if anything important happens.”

William looked outside at a man carrying flowers beneath one arm while arguing into his phone.

“I think everything important here happens quietly.”

Claire smiled without opening her eyes.

“That sounds like something you’ve been saving.”

“I just thought of it.”

“Even worse.”

She fell asleep.

William continued watching.

The city unfolded without asking for his approval.

He liked that.

The hotel stood on a quiet street in South Kensington, close enough to the museums that Claire noticed the signs before the van had fully stopped.

She sat up immediately.

“We’re near the Victoria and Albert.”

Antonio blinked at the building.

“Who are they?”

Claire turned toward him.

“The museum.”

“I knew that.”

“You absolutely did not.”

The lobby was warm, elegant, and smaller than William expected. Dark wood. Brass fixtures. A long desk beneath a clock showing London, New York, and Tokyo.

Their rooms were ready.

Rocky and Antonio would share one suite.

William and Claire had another.

The receptionist delivered the information without reaction.

William attempted to do the same.

Claire accepted the keycards.

“Thank you.”

She handed one to William. Rocky and Antonio looked on, amused.

“Try not to look terrified.”

“I’m not terrified.”

“You’re holding your suitcase like a shield.”

He loosened his grip.

Antonio leaned toward Rocky.

“This trip is already worth it.”

Rocky pushed him toward the elevators.

Their suite was on the fourth floor.

Claire opened the door and stepped inside first.

The room contained a sitting area, a narrow desk, two armchairs beside the window, and a separate bedroom beyond an open doorway.

William looked toward the bedroom.

One bed.

Claire followed his gaze.

“They do that in England.”

“What?”

“Beds.”

“I know what a bed is.”

“Good. That saves us time.”

She carried her bag into the bedroom and placed it beside the luggage rack.

William remained in the sitting room.

He could feel himself thinking too loudly.

Claire reappeared.

“You can breathe.”

“I am breathing.”

“Intermittently.”

She smiled and disappeared into the bathroom.

A moment later, the shower began.

William stood alone in the suite.

He walked to the window.

London stretched below him in slate roofs, chimneys, brick walls, and narrow streets still wet from an earlier rain. People moved along the sidewalks carrying coffees and folded umbrellas. A black cab paused at the light. A bicycle leaned against an iron railing.

Nothing happened.

He watched anyway.

His phone vibrated.

A message from Rocky.

Shower. Sleep. Regroup at noon.

A second message arrived.

Antonio wants to find a pub immediately. I have denied his request.

William typed back.

Good leadership.

Three dots appeared.

He has appealed the decision.

William smiled.

Behind him, the shower stopped.

He moved away from the window and began unpacking.

Not completely.

Just enough to make the room feel temporarily theirs.

His toiletry bag beside the sink.

Two shirts hung in the wardrobe.

Passport placed carefully inside the room safe.

Claire emerged from the bathroom, a towel wrapped comfortably around her, drying her hair as though she'd forgotten anyone else occupied the room.

She stopped when she saw his belongings arranged around the room.

“You moved in quickly.”

“I like knowing where things are.”

“I know.”

William looked at her.

“You know?”

“You reorganized the seat pocket on the plane.”

“It was chaos.”

“There were two magazines and a safety card.”

“The safety card was upside down.”

Claire smiled.

“I stand corrected.”

She opened her suitcase and began unpacking with no system William could identify.

Her black notebook landed on the desk.

A sweater over the armchair.

Shoes beside the bed.

Within five minutes, the room looked as though she had occupied it for a week.

William preferred it that way.

“I’m going to shower,” he said.

Claire collapsed onto the bed.

“I’ll be unconscious by the time you’re done.”

“You said to wake you if anything important happens.”

“I’ve revised the policy.”

He paused at the bathroom door.

“What qualifies as important?”

She closed her eyes.

“Fire.”

“Anything else?”

“Mission Master.”

William looked toward the unopened suitcase containing the compass folio they had brought from Philadelphia.

Nothing inside it had explained what would happen next.

Mario had paid for an experience.

Beyond that, they knew almost nothing.

“I don’t think it starts today.”

Claire opened one eye.

“That’s exactly when something usually starts.”

When William returned from the shower, Claire was dressed and asleep diagonally across the bed.

He considered moving her.

Instead, he sat in one of the armchairs beside the window and closed his eyes.

Just for a minute.

The knock came forty-five minutes later.

William woke abruptly.

For a moment, he did not know where he was.

The second knock brought the room back into focus.

London.

Hotel.

Claire asleep on the bed.

He stood and opened the door.

A hotel attendant waited in the hallway beside a small brass cart.

On it rested four dark green boxes.

Each was rectangular, slightly larger than a hardcover book, with a compass rose embossed into the lid.

At its center:

M

“Mr. Caffrey?”

William hesitated.

“Yes.”

“These were delivered for your party.”

The attendant checked the labels.

“One for you. One for Ms. Claire Morgan. The other two have been delivered to your companions’ room.”

William looked at the boxes.

“Who sent them?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know, sir. They were received by the concierge this morning with instructions to deliver them after you checked in.”

The attendant handed him a small clipboard.

William signed.

The boxes were placed on the entry table.

“Thank you.”

The attendant nodded and left.

William closed the door.

He stood staring at them.

Behind him, Claire spoke from the bed.

“Fire?”

“No.”

She sat up slowly.

“Mission Master?”

William looked at her.

“Yes.”

She was awake immediately.

Claire crossed the room and stood beside him.

The boxes were identical except for the names printed beneath the seal.

WILLIAM

CLAIRE

No handwriting.

No personal note.

No indication Mario had ever touched them.

Only the polished precision of something professionally designed and carefully timed.

Claire ran one finger along the edge of her box.

“He really did this.”

William nodded.

“He arranged it.”

“For all of us.”

Neither opened one.

A knock sounded against the connecting wall.

Then Antonio’s muffled voice.

“Do not open anything without us!”

Claire laughed.

William picked up his box.

“Rocky must have restrained him.”

“Temporarily.”

They carried the boxes into the hallway.

Rocky and Antonio were already waiting outside their room.

Antonio held his own box against his chest.

“I have shown incredible discipline.”

Rocky looked at William.

“He tried to use a butter knife on the seal.”

“It was available.”

Claire examined Rocky’s box.

“Same design?”

He nodded.

“Individual names. No sender.”

William looked between them.

“Do we open them together?”

Antonio stared at him.

“That is the first intelligent thing anyone has said since we landed.”

They returned to William and Claire’s suite.

The four boxes were arranged on the low table between the armchairs.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

The city continued beyond the window.

Traffic.

Footsteps.

A distant siren.

Rain beginning again against the glass.

Rocky rested both hands on his knees.

“Makes you wonder how long he had this planned.”

Antonio looked at the box bearing his name.

“I try not to.”

Claire glanced at him.

He gave her a small smile.

Not enough to hide what the moment meant.

William studied the embossed compass rose.

Mario had not written the instructions.

He had not built the boxes.

He had not designed the experience.

But somewhere, before the illness had taken too much from him, he had chosen this.

He had paid someone to create one final adventure for the people he loved.

The thought settled over them.

Not grief.

Presence.

Rocky looked at William.

“Ready?”

William looked at Claire.

She nodded.

Antonio placed both hands on his lid.

“On three?”

“No,” Rocky said.

Antonio frowned. “Why not?”

“Because you’ll open it on two.”

“That is insulting.”

“It is also accurate.”

Claire smiled.

“Open them.”

Four seals broke almost simultaneously.

The lids lifted.

Inside each box rested a dark leather folio embossed with the same compass rose. Beneath it sat a brass token, a small notebook, and a sealed cream envelope.

Printed on the envelope were five words:

YOUR JOURNEY BEGINS WHEN READY.

Antonio reached for his.

Rocky caught his wrist.

“What?”

Rocky looked toward the rain sliding down the window.

Then at the four exhausted travelers gathered inside the hotel room.

“We just landed.”

Antonio stared at the envelope.

“But it says ready.”

Claire tucked one leg beneath herself on the sofa.

“I don’t think we are.”

William looked around the room.

At the luggage still half unpacked.

The damp windows.

Claire’s notebook on the desk.

The city waiting beyond the glass.

For once, he did not feel rushed.

Mission Master had arrived.

That did not mean they had to begin.

He placed his unopened envelope back inside the box.

“Lunch,” he said. “Then sleep.”

Antonio looked genuinely wounded.

“And after?”

William smiled.

“After, we meet England.”

Rocky closed his box.

Claire did the same.

Antonio held out for another three seconds before reluctantly lowering the lid.

“Fine.”

He stood.

“But I’m choosing lunch.”

“No,” Rocky said.

They began arguing immediately.

Claire leaned toward William.

“You know he’s going to open it in the elevator.”

“I know.”

“We should probably stop him.”

William watched Antonio carry the box toward the door while Rocky followed close behind.

“No.”

He smiled.

“Let England handle him.”

Claire laughed.

Outside, the rain continued softly against the windows.

The Mission Master folios waited on the table.

Unopened.

Patient.

The experience had not begun with a clue.

It had begun with permission.

They were allowed to arrive before deciding where to go next.

