

Chapter 33

Rocky woke to the sound of small objects striking the carpet.

One.

Two.

Three.

Then something rolled beneath his bed.

He opened one eye.

Antonio stood in the doorway of the bathroom wearing a white hotel robe, his hair still wet from the shower. In his arms he carried every complimentary toiletry the hotel had provided.

Soap.

Shampoo.

Conditioner.

Body wash.

Lotion.

A sewing kit.

A shower cap.

Two vanity sets.

Even the small cardboard box containing cotton swabs.

“What are you doing?” Rocky asked.

Antonio tossed another bar of soap onto the floor.

“Sanitizing.”

“By throwing everything in the room?”

“Removing potential contaminants.”

Rocky sat up. “They’re unopened.”

“That’s what they want you to think.”

“Who is ‘they’?”

Antonio looked at the miniature bottle in his hand.

“Big Hotel Soap.”

Rocky stared at him.

Antonio turned the bottle over and read the label suspiciously.

“Have you ever considered how little we know about these companies?”

“It has the hotel’s name on it.”

“Exactly. A hotel is not a soap manufacturer. That raises more questions than it answers.”

He threw the bottle over his shoulder. It bounced once and landed on Rocky’s open suitcase.

“Could you stop throwing them at my clothes?”

“I’m trying to protect you.”

“From moisturizer?”

“You don’t know what’s in it.”

Rocky picked up the bottle and read the ingredients.

“Water.”

Antonio pointed at him.

“In England.”

Rocky closed his eyes.

“Do you have your own soap?”

Antonio opened his toiletry bag and proudly removed a full-sized bottle wrapped in two plastic bags.

“I’m not an animal.”

Rocky looked toward the pile accumulating on the floor.

“You threw away the shower cap.”

“Gateway product.”

“To what?”

“Hotel scalp disease.”

“That isn’t a thing.”

“Because I take precautions.”

Rocky threw the pillow at him.

Antonio ducked.

The pillow knocked the remaining toiletries out of his hands.

“Now you’re thinking defensively,” Antonio said. “Good.”

In the suite two doors down, William stood beside the window and watched London emerge from the rain.

The storm had passed while they slept. Water still clung to the glass, bending the buildings beyond it into streaks of brick, slate, and pale afternoon light.

The city seemed different after rest.

Closer.

Possible.

Behind him, Claire sat cross-legged on the bed, drying her hair with a towel. She wore an oversized dark sweater and jeans. A single strand of damp hair had fallen across her cheek.

She tucked it behind her ear.

It fell forward again almost immediately.

William smiled.

“What?”

He turned back toward the window.

“Nothing.”

“That was definitely something.”

“I was looking outside.”

“You were looking at my reflection.”

He glanced at the glass.

Her reflection was watching him.

“I could see both.”

“Convenient.”

Claire stood and walked toward the table, where their two dark green Mission Master boxes remained exactly as they had left them.

They had slept beside an unopened mystery.

For Antonio, this had apparently constituted an act of spiritual discipline.

For William, it had been strangely comforting.

The boxes had arrived.

Mario’s final gift was real.

Nothing required them to understand it immediately.

Claire rested her fingertips on the embossed compass rose.

“You ready?”

William looked toward her.

She held her coffee with both hands, drawing warmth from the cup even though the room was comfortable.

He noticed that too.

“I think so.”

“You think?”

“I’ve had poor results with adventures recently.”

“You survived.”

“Barely.”

“You also flew to England on a private jet.”

“That part went better.”

Claire smiled.

“Then perhaps your average is improving.”

A knock sounded at the door.

Antonio’s voice came through from the hallway.

“Mission Master meeting. Also, does anyone need hotel soap?”

Rocky added, “Do not encourage him.”

Claire opened the door.

Antonio stood beside a housekeeping bag filled with toiletries.

“You took the bag too?” she asked.

“They left it unattended.”

“It was in the closet.”

“Exactly.”

Rocky stepped into the suite.

“I apologize on behalf of America.”

“You can’t speak for an entire nation,” Antonio said.

“I can when you’re overseas.”

The four Mission Master boxes sat on the low table between them.

Rainwater glittered on the windows. Somewhere below, a taxi sounded its horn and was answered by another.

Antonio sat on the edge of the sofa with both hands pressed against his lid.

“I would like it formally recorded that I have not opened mine.”

“You attempted to steam the seal in the bathroom,” Rocky said.

“That was theoretical.”

“You turned on the shower.”

“I needed data.”

Claire looked at William.

“This is why they’re sharing a suite.”

Rocky shook his head. “Nobody consulted me.”

William lifted his box.

“Together?”

Rocky nodded.

Claire placed both hands on hers.

Antonio inhaled deeply.

“On three.”

“No counting,” Rocky said.

“Why?”

“You’ll open yours early.”

“I have demonstrated extraordinary restraint.”

“You stole the housekeeping bag.”

“It was a tactical acquisition.”

Claire broke her seal.

The others followed.

Four lids lifted.

Inside each box rested a dark leather folio embossed with the same compass rose. A small brass token sat beneath it, heavy and cool, with an **M** stamped into one side and four lines extending outward like the cardinal points of a compass.

Beneath the token was a pocket-sized notebook, a black pencil, and a cream envelope.

The envelopes were identical.

YOUR JOURNEY BEGINS WHEN READY.

Antonio picked his up.

“Now?”

Rocky looked around the room.

They were rested.

Showered.

Dressed.

The late afternoon waited beyond the glass.

“Yes,” he said. “Now.”

Antonio tore his envelope open.

Rocky winced.

“What?”

“You could have opened it like a human being.”

“I’m excited.”

“You open cereal like that too.”

“Cereal doesn’t contain destiny.”

“It sometimes contains toys.”

Claire carefully lifted the seal on her envelope. William did the same.

Inside was a single sheet of heavy paper.

The printing was crisp and impersonal.

No handwriting.

No message from Mario.

Nothing sentimental.

That somehow made his presence stronger.

This had not been created by him.

It had been chosen by him.

Paid for.

Scheduled.

Set into motion before any of them knew they would need it.

At the top of the page was the Mission Master compass.

Below it:

MISSION ONE: ARRIVAL

Antonio looked up.

“We already did that.”

Claire continued reading.

You have reached London.

You have not yet arrived.

For the duration of this mission, you must remain together. You may not divide responsibilities, separate to save time, or send one member ahead.

Phones may be used for navigation and emergencies only. No photographs.

Carry your notebook. Carry your token. Carry only what belongs to you.

Before leaving this room, privately observe the three people traveling with you. Write down one detail about each that you believe the others may not have noticed.

Do not share your observations.

Not yet.

The room went quiet.

Antonio turned the page over.

“That’s all?”

Rocky read his again.

“That’s all.”

“There’s no address?”

Claire pointed toward the bottom.

A smaller line of text waited beneath the instructions.

When all four observations have been recorded, place your brass tokens together.

Antonio looked at the tokens.

“A puzzle.”

His entire posture changed.

Rocky sighed.

“We’ve lost him.”

“No, you’ve activated me.”

Each opened a notebook.

William looked at the three people around him.

Rocky sat with the pencil resting against his lower lip. His face remained lean from everything his body had endured, but there was something different in him now. Not health exactly.

Presence.

Antonio had stopped joking. He studied the room with an intensity normally reserved for restaurant menus and arguments he intended to win.

Claire had already begun writing.

Her fountain pen tapped twice against the page before the first word appeared.

William lowered his eyes before she caught him watching.

He wrote beneath Rocky's name:

He touches the side of his temple before answering difficult questions.

He paused.

Antonio.

That should have been easy.

It wasn't.

Beneath the noise, Antonio carried an attentiveness he disguised so thoroughly that people mistook it for chaos.

William wrote:

He always watches Rocky when everyone else is laughing, as if confirming Rocky is still there to hear it.

Then Claire.

The strand of hair had fallen forward again.

Too obvious.

The coffee held with both hands.

Also obvious, at least to him.

He thought about the plane.

The hotel.

The way she had taken the keycard without making his nervousness larger than it was.

He wrote:

She gives people time to become comfortable without announcing that she is waiting.

He closed the notebook.

Across from him, Claire's pen continued moving.

She looked at Rocky first.

Then Antonio.

Then, finally, William.

Her eyes remained on him for a second longer than he expected.

He tried not to adjust his posture.

"You're making that very difficult," he said.

"I haven't said anything."

"That's the problem."

She smiled and returned to the page.

Rocky finished next.

Antonio wrote for another minute, frowned, crossed something out, and began again.

Claire glanced at him.

"You're taking this seriously."

"I take people very seriously."

Rocky looked up.

"Since when?"

Antonio pointed his pencil at him.

"You're getting hotel soap for Christmas."

"I'm throwing it away."

"You're learning."

Eventually Antonio closed his notebook.

“Done.”

They placed their brass tokens on the table.

At first, nothing happened.

Antonio rearranged them.

“Maybe the M faces up.”

Claire rotated hers.

The tokens were not circular, as William had first assumed. Each had one slightly flattened edge.

Rocky noticed it next.

“They fit together.”

They brought the four flattened edges inward.

The tokens formed a single compass rose.

A soft magnetic click held them in place.

At the center, the four separate lines became an eight-pointed star.

Antonio leaned closer.

“Okay. That’s good.”

A vibration came from inside Claire’s box.

She looked at the others, then lifted the leather folio.

Beneath it, a slim device had illuminated.

Not a phone.

Not exactly.

A black screen with only the Mission Master compass and a line of white text.

ARRIVAL CONFIRMED.

The message disappeared.

A map replaced it.

One destination pulsed less than half a mile away.

Claire read the accompanying instruction.

Travel on foot.

Speak to one another.

Do not discuss the observations you recorded.

Your first destination contains more than two million objects. You are looking for only one.

It cannot be purchased.

It cannot be owned.

It becomes more valuable when given away.

Begin at the museum named for two people whose partnership became an era.

“The Victoria and Albert,” Claire said.

Antonio looked impressed.

“You knew that immediately?”

“We passed it on the way here.”

“I was sleeping.”

“You asked Malik who Victoria and Albert were.”

“I was testing him.”

Rocky stood.

“Shoes. Coats. Let’s go.”

Antonio remained seated.

“What’s the object?”

Claire reread the clue.

“Something that can’t be purchased or owned but becomes more valuable when given away.”

“Respect,” Rocky said.

“Knowledge,” William offered.

“Herpes,” Antonio said.

Three faces turned toward him.

“What? It meets most of the criteria.”

“No,” Claire said.

“It becomes more widespread when given away.”

“That is not the same as more valuable.”

“Depends on the pharmaceutical company.”

Rocky pulled Antonio to his feet by the sleeve.

“We’re leaving.”

The air outside was cool and clean after the rain.

London moved around them without ceremony.

Buses exhaled at curbs. Cyclists slipped through traffic. People walked with folded umbrellas beneath their arms, apparently confident the weather had finished making its point.

The four stayed together.

Not simply because the instructions required it.

Because the rule had changed the way they moved.

Normally Rocky would have walked ahead.

Antonio would have stopped at every pub window.

Claire would have paused to read plaques.

William would have drifted between them, trying to keep everyone in view.

Instead, they adjusted.

Rocky slowed.

Antonio kept pace.

Claire pointed things out without stopping the group.

William noticed.

At the first crossing, Antonio started forward as the light changed.

Rocky caught the back of his coat.

“Other direction.”

Antonio watched a car pass from the right.

“This country is malicious.”

“It’s a road.”

“It knows what it’s doing.”

They crossed.

Claire walked beside William.

Her hands were tucked into the sleeves of her oversized sweater, only her fingertips visible.

“What did you write about me?” she asked.

“We’re not allowed to discuss it.”

“I’m not asking you to discuss it.”

“You asked exactly what I wrote.”

“I’m testing your commitment to the rules.”

“You sound like Antonio.”

She looked offended.

“Take that back.”

“I can’t. We’re on a mission.”

She smiled.

For several steps, they said nothing.

Ahead of them, Rocky and Antonio argued over whether a pub could reasonably be considered historic if its television was showing soccer.

Claire glanced toward William.

“You know what I noticed?”

“You’re still trying.”

“Not what I wrote.”

“What?”

She looked ahead.

“We’re walking at the same pace.”

William followed her gaze.

The four of them occupied the pavement in an imperfect line.

Nobody ahead.

Nobody left behind.

“I think that’s the point,” he said.

“Already?”

“No.”

He smiled.

“I think that’s how it starts.”

The Victoria and Albert Museum rose before them in red brick and pale stone, elaborate without appearing embarrassed by it.

Antonio stopped.

“That’s a museum?”

“Yes,” Claire said.

“It looks like a castle designed by someone who’d never seen a castle but had received very detailed verbal instructions.”

William looked at the facade.

“That’s strangely accurate.”

They entered through the grand doorway.

Inside, warmth and stone and the low murmur of hundreds of voices folded around them.

The device in Claire’s folio illuminated again.

MISSION ONE CONTINUES.

A new instruction appeared.

Somewhere inside this museum is an object that represents what Mario purchased for you.

You will not find it in a display case.

You will not find it on a map.

You may ask one question of one stranger.

Choose the question carefully.

Antonio looked around the enormous entrance hall.

“One question?”

Rocky nodded.

“To one person?”

“Yes.”

Antonio exhaled.

“This game is aggressively rationing conversation.”

Claire read the clue again.

William looked at the people moving through the museum.

Families.

Couples.

Students.

Tourists.

A security guard offering directions.

A child pulling her father toward a gallery while he tried to study the map.

They were surrounded by objects.

But the clue said the answer wasn't one.

"What did Mario purchase for us?" Rocky asked.

"The trip," Antonio said.

"The experience," Claire offered.

William looked at the four brass tokens joined inside Rocky's palm.

"No."

They waited.

"He purchased time."

The others fell silent.

Not because the answer was obviously correct.

Because it felt correct.

Claire looked again at the instruction.

"An object that represents time, but not in a display case."

"A clock?" Antonio asked.

"Too literal," Rocky said.

William watched the crowd.

A woman helped an older man remove his coat. Two teenagers leaned over the same museum guide. A father knelt to retie his daughter's shoe while she rested one hand on his shoulder.

Then he understood.

“I don’t think we’re looking for an object.”

Antonio pointed at the device.

“It specifically says object.”

“It says an object that represents what Mario purchased. Then it says we won’t find it in a display case.”

Claire studied him.

“What do you think it is?”

William looked at the strangers filling the room.

“A shared moment.”

Rocky smiled slowly.

“That’s not an object.”

“No.”

William looked toward the notebook in his hand.

“But maybe we’re supposed to turn it into one.”

Claire’s eyes shifted to the single-question rule.

“By asking someone for a story.”

The device remained silent.

No confirmation.

No encouragement.

Just the instructions.

Antonio looked around.

“So we have one question to ask one stranger that somehow gives us a shared moment we can keep.”

Rocky nodded.

“What question?”

They considered dozens.

What brought you here?

What is your favorite object?

Who are you visiting with?

Each one felt too small.

Too easy.

Claire’s fountain pen tapped against the notebook.

Once.

Twice.

Then stopped.

She looked at the others.

“What if we ask...”

Her voice softened.

“What do you hope the person beside you remembers about today?”

Nobody spoke.

Across the entrance hall, the child had finished having her shoe tied. She took her father’s hand and pulled him toward the next room.

William looked at Claire.

“That’s the question.”

Rocky nodded.

Antonio said nothing.

For once, he did not improve the moment with a joke.

The four stood together beneath the vaulted museum ceiling, surrounded by centuries of objects people had worked desperately to preserve.

Their first mission had not asked them to find the oldest.

The rarest.

The most valuable.

It had asked them to notice something no museum could keep for them.

Time.

Together.

Claire closed the folio.

“Now we choose who to ask.”

Antonio looked toward the families moving through the hall.

Rocky held the four joined tokens.

William thought about the observations waiting inside their notebooks.

Details no one had shared.

Not yet.

The Mission Master had brought them to a museum filled with everything people refused to lose.

And somehow, standing there beside the people Mario had loved, William understood the cruelty hidden inside the gift.

Objects could be preserved.

People could not.

He looked at Rocky.

At Antonio.

At Claire.

Then toward the crowd.

“Let’s pay attention,” he said.

Together, they stepped into the museum.