

Chapter 35

The afternoon had disappeared almost without anyone noticing.

That seemed to happen in London.

One museum became a cathedral.

The cathedral became a side street.

The side street became a bookshop.

The bookshop became tea.

Tea became another hour.

Before long the city had quietly convinced them that clocks were merely polite suggestions.

By the time they returned to the hotel, all four were pleasantly tired.

Antonio dropped onto the sofa dramatically.

“I have walked...”

“...every street in England.”

Rocky looked out the window.

“We covered maybe four miles.”

Antonio nodded solemnly.

“Every important street.”

Claire laughed.

“I liked the mews.”

“The little houses?” William asked.

“They felt...”

She searched.

“...borrowed from a story.”

William smiled.

“I thought you’d like those.”

Antonio looked at Rocky.

“I found the greatest bookstore I’ve ever seen.”

Rocky raised an eyebrow.

“You bought nothing.”

“I exercised extraordinary restraint.”

“You stood in the doorway reading for forty-five minutes.”

“I was browsing aggressively.”

Claire smiled into her tea.

“And the church?”

William asked.

“You disappeared for almost half an hour.”

Claire looked toward the window.

“I liked how quiet it was.”

“You didn’t photograph anything.”

“We weren’t allowed.”

“I know.”

William smiled.

“I don’t think I wanted to.”

Rocky loosened his shoes.

“I liked the food market.”

Antonio looked offended.

“You spent twenty minutes talking to a cheese vendor.”

“He knew what he was talking about.”

“He sold cheese.”

“Exactly.”

The room settled into a comfortable silence.

Nobody reached for the folios.

Mission Master had earned the evening off.

Claire stretched.

“I’m going to bed.”

William looked surprised.

“It’s only…”

He checked the clock.

“...nine.”

“I’ve been awake since six.”

She smiled.

“I’ve climbed enough stairs for one day.”

William laughed.

“I think I’ll join you.”

Antonio looked horrified.

“You’re voluntarily ending the evening?”

“I’d like to remember tomorrow.”

Rocky nodded approvingly.

“A wise decision.”

Antonio waved them away dramatically.

“Go. Rest. Dream of architecture.”

Claire smiled.

“Goodnight.”

William nodded toward the other two.

“Don’t stay up too late.”

Antonio looked insulted.

“When have I ever...”

Rocky stood.

“Goodnight.”

The suite became quiet.

Only Antonio and Rocky remained.

Antonio looked toward the door.

Then back at Rocky.

“One drink.”

Rocky smiled knowingly.

“One.”

The hotel bar occupied a quiet corner overlooking the street.

Dark wood.

Brass.

Soft jazz.

Just enough conversation to remind them they weren’t alone.

Antonio lifted his pint.

Rocky settled for another British ale.

They sat in companionable silence for several minutes.

Finally...

Antonio spoke.

"I really like Claire."

Rocky smiled.

"I noticed."

"No..."

Antonio looked unusually thoughtful.

"I mean..."

"...I really like her."

Rocky took a sip.

"She's smart."

"Very."

"Funny."

"Definitely."

"Clever."

Rocky nodded.

"All true."

Antonio stared into his glass.

"I don't think William realizes how lucky he is."

Rocky smiled faintly.

“I think he does.”

A longer pause.

Rocky looked toward the window.

“You know what worries me?”

Antonio looked over.

“What?”

“Maybe...”

He hesitated.

“...she’s too perfect.”

Antonio frowned.

“Nobody’s perfect.”

“I know.”

Rocky swirled the beer slowly.

“But maybe she’s hiding something.”

Antonio waited.

“Or...”

Rocky sighed.

“...maybe she’s just...”

“...too good for him.”

Antonio looked genuinely surprised.

“You think she’ll break his heart.”

Rocky nodded.

“I’ve watched him.”

“He follows her around...”

He smiled.

“...like a puppy.”

Antonio chuckled.

“He does.”

Rocky looked down at the condensation on his glass.

“I don’t want to watch him get hurt.”

Antonio took a long sip.

Didn’t answer immediately.

For perhaps the first time all evening...

He actually thought before speaking.

“You know what?”

Rocky looked up.

“Good.”

“What?”

Antonio leaned back.

“If she breaks his heart...”

“...good.”

Rocky blinked.

“What?”

“We got the absolute shit kicked out of us by love.”

Rocky stared.

Antonio continued.

“Over.”

“And over.”

“And over again.”

He shrugged.

“It made us stronger.”

“Not weaker.”

The words settled between them.

Rocky genuinely had no reply.

Antonio looked toward the bar.

“We’re still here.”

“We’re still laughing.”

“We’re still dumb enough...”

“...to try again.”

Rocky smiled.

Slowly.

“I didn’t expect that from you.”

“I know.”

Another sip.

Then...

Antonio grinned.

“Plus...”

“There he is.”

“The kid should probably get a little more tail...”

“...before settling down with one chick...”

“...for the rest of his life.”

Rocky burst out laughing.

“There he is.”

Antonio raised his glass proudly.

“I was wondering when you’d recognize me.”

Rocky clinked his pint against Antonio’s.

“I was getting worried.”

Antonio smiled.

“So was I.”

The two old friends sat quietly.

Outside...

London continued without them.

Upstairs...

William and Claire had long since gone to sleep.

Tomorrow...

Mission Master would undoubtedly ask impossible questions again.

Tonight...

Two men who had survived enough heartbreak to joke about it...

...quietly toasted the possibility...

That perhaps...

This time...

The boy might get lucky.

And even if he didn't...

He'd still become someone worth knowing.