

Chapter 37

The next Mission Master envelope waited for them beneath the brass rail outside Westminster Station.

Antonio saw it first.

This did not surprise anyone.

He had developed an instinct for Mission Master envelopes that bordered on predatory. He spotted them beneath benches, behind menus, tucked inside guidebooks, and once beneath the wing of a stone lion while the other three were still debating whether they had reached the correct square.

He pointed toward the rail.

“There.”

Rocky followed the line of his finger.

A black envelope had been secured beneath the lowest bar with a narrow strip of red ribbon.

“Subtle,” Rocky said.

“It was subtle until you announced it,” Claire replied.

Antonio crouched and pulled it free.

William looked around the station entrance. Pedestrians moved around them in both directions, carrying umbrellas, briefcases, paper cups, and the particular impatience of people who knew exactly where they were going.

“Open it,” Claire said.

Antonio turned the envelope over in his hands.

“Maybe we should savor the moment.”

“No,” Rocky said.

Antonio broke the seal.

Inside were two cards.

He read the first aloud.

Four travelers have moved as one.
Now progress requires division.

Two paths.
Two pairs.
Two halves of a single answer.

Choose incorrectly, and you will understand only what you already know.

Antonio stopped.

“That last line feels personal.”

“It probably is,” Claire said.

William took the second card from him.

Four names had been printed in two columns.

On the left:

ROCKY
CLAIRE

On the right:

ANTONIO
WILLIAM

Antonio looked at William.

William looked at the card.

Rocky looked at Claire.

Claire smiled faintly.

“Well,” she said. “Apparently Mission Master has opinions.”

Antonio clapped William on the shoulder.

“This is excellent.”

“For the mission?” William asked.

“For several reasons.”

William removed Antonio’s hand.

The card contained separate instructions for each pair.

Rocky and Claire were to travel east toward the river and locate a place where an argument had once changed the fate of a nation.

Antonio and William were to head west and find a room built for silence, where a king had once waited for an answer that never came.

Each pair would receive one word.

The two words, combined, would reveal their final destination.

“No phones between groups,” Claire said, reading the last line.

“No messages, no calls, no tracking,” Rocky added.

Antonio folded the card.

“What about emergencies?”

William pointed to the bottom.

“Emergency contact through the Mission Master app only.”

Antonio nodded.

“That seems responsible.”

“Your sudden respect for rules is unsettling,” Claire said.

“I respect useful rules.”

“You respect rules that create drama.”

“I respect those most.”

Rocky studied the directions again.

“How long?”

“Two hours,” William said. “We meet at the location identified by the combined words.”

“And if we fail?” Antonio asked.

Claire took the card from him.

“We don’t.”

Antonio smiled.

“That’s the spirit.”

They separated outside the station.

William and Antonio disappeared into the crowd heading west.

Rocky and Claire turned toward the river.

For the first several minutes, neither spoke.

The wind moved between the buildings and carried the damp mineral smell of the Thames toward them. Buses passed in flashes of red. The towers of Westminster rose behind the gray sky, ornate and solemn, as if they had been constructed for the sole purpose of making everyone nearby lower their voices.

Claire walked beside Rocky without trying to fill the silence.

He noticed that.

Most people became uncomfortable when he grew quiet. They interpreted silence as disapproval and rushed to defend themselves against accusations he had not made.

Claire did not.

She simply looked ahead.

“You’re not nervous?” Rocky asked.

“About the mission?”

“About being separated.”

She glanced at him.

“From William?”

“From the others.”

“No.”

Her answer came easily.

Too easily, perhaps.

Rocky kept walking.

“Antonio will make him crazy.”

“He already does.”

“You sound confident.”

“I’ve observed them together.”

Rocky smiled despite himself.

“That’s a diplomatic answer.”

“I’m practicing.”

“For what?”

“Surviving your family.”

The words were playful.

Her tone was light.

Still, Rocky felt something inside him tighten.

Not because she had said family.

Because she had said it as though she already understood the shape of theirs.

He told himself that was unfair.

Claire had spent enough time with them to recognize patterns. Antonio was loud. William was guarded. Rocky watched everything and pretended he did not.

There was nothing mysterious about any of that.

They crossed toward the Embankment.

Claire unfolded their clue.

“An argument that changed the fate of a nation.”

“Parliament.”

“Too obvious.”

“Westminster Hall.”

“Possibly.”

“Churchill War Rooms?”

“That was more than one argument.”

Rocky glanced at her.

“You know British history?”

“Some.”

“How much is some?”

“Enough to know when you’re testing me.”

“I’m not testing you.”

Claire smiled.

“Of course not.”

They continued toward the river.

Rocky watched her from the corner of his eye.

She moved through London with confidence but not familiarity. She checked signs. She paused at crossings. She looked up at buildings the way visitors did.

Nothing about her suggested she had rehearsed the city.

And yet there were moments.

Small ones.

A turn taken before the sign appeared.

A name pronounced too naturally.

A pause that felt less like uncertainty than calculation.

Fatherly intuition, he told himself.

That was all.

William had always been intelligent, but intelligence did not protect a person from wanting to believe something.

Sometimes it made belief easier to defend.

Rocky had no evidence that Claire was anything other than what she claimed to be.

A university student.

A traveler.

A young woman who had become important to his son with astonishing speed.

That alone was enough to make him cautious.

“You don’t trust me,” Claire said.

Rocky looked ahead.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“William says the same thing.”

“About you not trusting people?”

“About me communicating without speaking.”

Claire waited.

Rocky appreciated that she did not press immediately.

They reached the river wall.

The Thames moved below them, broad and brown beneath the clouded sky.

Across the water, the London Eye turned slowly.

“I don’t know you,” Rocky said.

“That’s fair.”

“And William likes you.”

“I know.”

“He doesn’t like many people.”

“I know that too.”

Rocky stopped walking.

Claire took another step before turning back.

“How?” he asked.

“How what?”

“How do you know that?”

She considered her answer.

“He pays attention to everyone but offers very little of himself. People mistake that for distance. It isn’t. It’s selectivity.”

Rocky studied her.

“That sounds rehearsed.”

“It isn’t.”

“You’ve thought about him.”

“Yes.”

There was no hesitation.

Rocky almost preferred one.

“He trusts you,” Rocky said.

Claire’s expression changed.

Not much.

Just enough.

“I know.”

“That matters to me.”

“It matters to me too.”

“Does it?”

“Yes.”

The wind lifted a strand of her hair across her face. She tucked it behind one ear.

Rocky saw no fear in her.

No defensiveness.

But something passed behind her eyes.

Regret, perhaps.

Or guilt.

He could not tell.

That bothered him more than if she had simply become angry.

Claire looked toward the river.

“You’re trying to protect him.”

“I am.”

“You should.”

Rocky frowned.

“You say that like you agree with me.”

“I do.”

“Even if I’m protecting him from you?”

She met his eyes.

“Especially then.”

The answer stopped him.

Claire turned back toward the walkway.

“We should keep moving.”

Rocky followed.

He did not trust answers that were too perfect.

He trusted them even less when they were the answers he wanted to hear.

Antonio waited until they were three blocks away before beginning.

“So.”

William continued walking.

“No.”

“I haven’t asked anything.”

“You were about to.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

Antonio increased his pace to stay beside him.

“You and Claire.”

William looked at the clue card.

“We’re looking for a room built for silence.”

“Yes.”

“Where a king waited for an answer that never came.”

“I heard the clue.”

“Then focus on it.”

“I am capable of solving a clue and helping my friend simultaneously.”

“I don’t require help.”

“That is exactly what someone requiring help would say.”

William stopped beneath the awning of a closed café.

Antonio nearly walked into him.

“I am not discussing Claire with you.”

“You discuss Claire constantly.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You say her name more than you say anyone else’s.”

“That is not the same thing.”

“You watch her when she enters a room.”

William resumed walking.

Antonio followed.

“You move closer to her without realizing it.”

“Antonio.”

“You touch her back when crossing streets.”

“People drive on the other side here.”

“That does not explain the hand.”

William’s jaw tightened.

“There are no salacious details.”

“I did not ask for salacious details.”

“You were going to.”

“I was going to ask whether you had kissed her.”

William walked faster.

Antonio smiled.

“So you have.”

“I didn’t answer.”

“You answered with velocity.”

William stopped again.

“This is not a conversation.”

“It is very clearly a conversation.”

“It is noise happening near me.”

Antonio folded the clue and tucked it into his coat pocket.

“You need dating advice.”

“From you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Experience.”

William stared at him.

Antonio lifted both hands.

“I have dated.”

“You have survived dates.”

“That still counts.”

“I’m not dating Claire.”

Antonio's expression became almost sympathetic.

"Oh, William."

"Don't."

"You are walking around London with a woman you think about constantly, protecting a relationship you refuse to define because defining it would require admitting that you want something."

William looked away.

A black cab passed through the intersection.

"You don't know what I want."

"I know exactly what you want."

"No, you don't."

"You want her to choose you without you ever having to risk asking."

William turned toward him.

For once, Antonio did not smile.

The truth of the statement hung between them.

William looked down at the pavement.

"That isn't fair."

"No."

Antonio's voice softened.

"It isn't."

They began walking again.

For several minutes, Antonio allowed silence.

William pulled the clue card from his pocket.

"A room built for silence," he said.

Antonio nodded.

“A chapel?”

“Possibly.”

“A confessional?”

“Kings did not usually wait in confessionals.”

“One might have.”

“Not for an answer that never came.”

Antonio looked toward the buildings lining the street.

“Cabinet War Rooms?”

“Too far east.”

“St. James’s Palace?”

William slowed.

“A king waiting for an answer.”

“Marriage proposal?”

“Political decision.”

“Execution order.”

William glanced at him.

Antonio shrugged.

“Kings did a lot of waiting around executions.”

They reached Parliament Square and turned toward Whitehall.

William studied the statues and façades around them.

Antonio resumed more carefully.

“You don’t have to tell me anything.”

“Good.”

“But you should tell her.”

William sighed.

“We are not doing this.”

“I’m serious.”

“That is what concerns me.”

Antonio stepped around a family consulting a map.

“You think silence protects things.”

“It often does.”

“No. Silence delays things.”

“Sometimes delay is useful.”

“Sometimes.”

Antonio glanced at him.

“And sometimes someone else says what you were too afraid to say.”

William looked over.

“Is that advice from experience?”

Antonio gave a small smile.

“Possibly.”

William waited.

Antonio did not elaborate.

That surprised him.

“What happened?” William asked.

Antonio looked ahead.

“We are focusing on the mission.”

William almost laughed.

“That’s my line.”

“It’s a good line.”

They crossed toward Horse Guards Road.

A sign pointed toward the Churchill War Rooms.

Antonio noticed it first.

“Room built for silence.”

William followed his gaze.

“Underground.”

“A king waited for an answer that never came.”

“George VI?”

“During the war?”

William considered it.

“No. Churchill waited for answers there, not the king.”

“Maybe the room wasn’t built for literal silence.”

“What else?”

“Secrecy.”

William looked at the clue again.

A room built for silence.

Not quiet.

Silence.

The suppression of information.

A place where words were controlled.

“Cabinet room,” he said.

Antonio nodded.

“Churchill War Rooms.”

They headed toward the entrance.

Antonio waited until they were nearly there.

“For the record, my advice is not to force anything.”

William looked suspicious.

“That is unexpectedly reasonable.”

“Let her know you’re interested. Then give her room.”

“That sounds like forcing something more slowly.”

“It isn’t.”

“And what exactly am I supposed to say?”

Antonio smiled.

“There we are.”

William immediately regretted the question.

“You could tell her you enjoy being with her.”

“She knows that.”

“Does she?”

“Yes.”

“Because you said it?”

“No.”

“Then she knows nothing.”

“She is observant.”

“Women should not have to solve men like Mission Master clues.”

William looked at the entrance ahead.

“Claire is not waiting for a declaration.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

“How?”

William did not answer.

Antonio watched him.

There was something in the silence now.

Not modesty.

Not discomfort.

Concern.

“You’re afraid of something,” Antonio said.

William’s face closed.

“I’m trying to solve the task.”

“That wasn’t a denial.”

“No salacious details,” William said.

Antonio nodded.

“No salacious details.”

They entered the underground rooms.

Rocky and Claire reached Westminster Hall after circling twice and rejecting three more obvious possibilities.

The ancient stone interior rose above them with a timber roof so vast it seemed less constructed than suspended.

Their footsteps softened instinctively.

Claire looked upward.

“This has to be it.”

“An argument changed the fate of a nation.”

“Charles the First was tried here.”

Rocky nodded.

“A trial is an argument.”

“And the verdict changed the monarchy.”

They followed the Mission Master directions to a narrow display near the far end.

A small black box had been fixed beneath the interpretive panel.

Claire crouched beside it.

“It needs a code.”

Rocky examined the keypad.

Four digits.

The clue card contained no obvious numbers.

Claire read the display.

“Trial began January twentieth, 1649.”

“Too many digits.”

“Execution was the thirtieth.”

“Four-digit code.”

“Year.”

Rocky entered 1649.

The box clicked open.

Inside was a single white card.

Claire removed it.

One word had been printed in black capital letters.

TRUST

Neither spoke.

Rocky looked at the word.

Then at Claire.

She smiled without humor.

“Mission Master is not subtle.”

“No.”

“You think it chose this for us deliberately?”

“Yes.”

“Because you don’t trust me.”

“Because trust is the mission.”

Claire turned the card over.

The reverse was blank.

Rocky lowered his voice.

“Who are you?”

She looked up at him.

“Claire.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

“It’s the answer.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

Rocky held her gaze.

Visitors moved quietly behind them.

A guide spoke near the entrance, describing centuries of trials, ceremonies, speeches, and judgment.

Claire stood.

“I understand why you’re suspicious.”

“I didn’t say suspicious.”

“You don’t have to.”

“You appeared in William’s life at exactly the right time.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know.”

“That is not evidence.”

“No.”

Rocky took the card from her.

“It’s instinct.”

“Fatherly intuition.”

“Yes.”

Claire nodded slowly.

“And what does your intuition tell you?”

“That you care about him.”

She waited.

“And?”

“That you’re hiding something.”

Her expression did not change.

That, more than anything, unsettled him.

Most innocent people rushed to deny an accusation.

Most guilty people did too.

Claire did neither.

“Everyone hides something,” she said.

“Not everyone hides something that matters.”

“You don’t know whether mine does.”

“No.”

Rocky looked at the card again.

Trust.

A single word.

A demand disguised as an answer.

“I’m not asking you to tell me your secrets,” he said.

“What are you asking?”

“That whatever you’re doing, whatever you want, you don’t use him to get it.”

Claire’s eyes hardened.

“I would never use William.”

“Good.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“I want to.”

“That isn’t the same thing.”

“No.”

Claire looked toward the high windows.

For the first time since they had separated from the others, she seemed young.

Not frightened.

Tired.

Rocky saw it and immediately distrusted himself for seeing it.

Compassion could be manipulated.

So could suspicion.

He had spent enough of his life learning that certainty was often just fear wearing a uniform.

“I may be wrong,” he said.

Claire looked back at him.

“I know.”

“That was not agreement.”

“No.”

“What was it?”

“Hope.”

Rocky folded the card and placed it carefully in his pocket.

They began walking toward the exit.

He did not feel reassured.

But he no longer felt certain.

That was something.

Perhaps not trust.

But the first condition of it.

Antonio and William found their box behind a reproduction map in the Cabinet Room.

The code required the date of the first meeting held underground after the bombing began.

William located it in the exhibit.

Antonio entered the numbers.

The lid opened.

Their card contained one word.

BRIDGE

Antonio held it up. William read it twice.

Antonio turned the card over.

On the back, a line had appeared in smaller print.

Where trust is crossed rather than spoken.

“Trust Bridge?”

“Bridge of Trust.”

“Trust the bridge.”

William considered the possibilities.

“A location.”

“London has several bridges.”

“The phrase may identify one.”

“Footbridge.”

Antonio nodded.

“Millennium Bridge?”

“Possibly.”

“Tower Bridge?”

“Too literal.”

“Westminster Bridge?”

“Near where we started.”

Antonio looked pleased.

“Mission Master likes symmetry.”

William took the card.

“We need the other word.”

“And the others need ours.”

“Which means both teams must independently identify the same place.”

Antonio pointed east.

“Then we start walking.”

They emerged from the War Rooms into light rain.

William glanced toward the sky.

Antonio opened his umbrella.

For nearly a block, neither spoke.

Then Antonio said, “I meant what I said.”

William did not ask which part.

“About not forcing anything.”

“I know.”

“You can care about someone without demanding an outcome.”

William looked at him.

Antonio shrugged.

“I occasionally understand things.”

“Rarely.”

“But memorably.”

William allowed himself a small smile.

Antonio continued.

“Just don’t mistake restraint for honesty.”

William’s smile disappeared.

“That sounds rehearsed.”

“It is.”

“From whom?”

Antonio adjusted the umbrella against the wind.

“Myself, eventually.”

William waited for more.

Antonio gave him none.

They continued east.

Rocky and Claire reached the river as the rain began.

Not enough to require shelter.

Enough to silver the pavement and darken the stone.

Claire pulled her coat tighter.

“Trust,” she said.

“Bridge,” Rocky replied.

They had received the second word through a temporary Mission Master screen at the exit, activated only after the other pair completed their task.

The message had contained no names.

Just the word.

BRIDGE

“Trust Bridge doesn’t exist,” Claire said.

“Not officially.”

“Bridge of Trust sounds like a self-help seminar.”

“Mission Master has done worse.”

They stopped along the Embankment.

Bridges stretched in both directions.

Westminster behind them.

Golden Jubilee farther east.

Waterloo beyond.

Claire studied the clue again.

“Where trust is crossed rather than spoken.”

Rocky looked toward the pedestrian bridges beside Hungerford.

“Crossed rather than spoken.”

“A bridge you cross on foot.”

“All bridges can be crossed.”

“Not all require trust.”

Rocky glanced at her.

“What requires trust?”

“Following someone.”

“Going somewhere without seeing the end.”

“Being suspended.”

He looked toward the river.

The Millennium Bridge was visible farther east, a narrow silver line spanning the Thames.

Suspended.

Pedestrian only.

Known for movement.

Known, once, for instability.

Rocky pointed.

“That one.”

Claire followed his hand.

“The Millennium Bridge.”

“It opened and started swaying.”

“The Wobbly Bridge.”

“People had to trust it after it failed.”

Claire smiled faintly.

“That feels like Mission Master.”

They started east.

Antonio saw them first.

Rocky and Claire approached from the opposite side of the Millennium Bridge, moving through the rain beneath a shared umbrella they had purchased somewhere along the way.

Claire held it.

Rocky walked half outside it.

“Typical,” Antonio said.

William looked up.

His attention found Claire immediately.

Antonio noticed.

He decided, for once, not to mention it.

The four met near the center of the bridge.

The Thames moved beneath them.

St. Paul’s rose ahead through the mist.

Tate Modern stood behind.

Claire looked at William.

“You found it.”

“So did you.”

Antonio held up their card.

“Bridge.”

Rocky produced theirs.

“Trust.”

A small compartment in the bridge rail opened with an electronic click.

All four turned.

Inside was the final Mission Master envelope.

William removed it.

The message inside was brief.

You have completed the task.

*Familiarity reveals what we expect.
Separation reveals what others see.*

Your next destination is waiting where broken things are preserved rather than repaired.

Antonio looked around.

“That is deeply ominous.”

Claire looked at the river.

“Or a museum.”

Rocky watched her.

William noticed.

Only for a second.

But he noticed.

“What happened?” William asked.

“Nothing,” Rocky said.

Claire gave the same answer at almost the same time.

Antonio looked between them.

“Excellent. Everyone is communicating beautifully.”

Rain gathered on the envelope.

William folded it and placed it inside his coat.

Claire stepped closer to him beneath the narrow shelter of his umbrella.

His hand settled briefly at the center of her back as they turned toward the north side of the bridge.

Antonio watched the movement.

Then glanced at Rocky.

Rocky had seen it too.

But where Antonio smiled, Rocky did not.

He told himself it was fatherly intuition.

Nothing more.

A father noticing the way his son looked at someone.

A father wondering whether that person deserved to be looked at that way.

Ahead of them, William and Claire walked close enough that their shoulders touched.

Antonio moved beside Rocky.

“Good mission?”

Rocky watched the pair in front of them.

“Ask me later.”

Antonio followed his gaze.

For once, he did not make a joke.

The four continued across the bridge together.

But the separation had done what Mission Master intended.

They were no longer seeing only what they already knew.

