

Chapter 40

The final evening in London settled over the city with the kind of quiet confidence only old cities possessed.

The urgency of the past week had softened into contentment. Mission Master had one final surprise waiting somewhere beyond tomorrow, but tonight belonged to them.

No riddles.

No museums.

No impossible questions.

Just London.

The four stood beneath the hotel awning while the evening crowd flowed past in every direction. Double-decker buses rumbled through the wet streets. Lamps reflected off the rain-darkened pavement, and somewhere farther away church bells announced the hour.

Rocky slipped his hands into his coat pockets.

“So.”

Antonio looked around.

“So.”

Claire smiled.

“I think we deserve one evening that isn’t scheduled.”

“Agreed,” William said.

Antonio looked almost offended.

“Mission Master would never schedule free time.”

“Exactly,” Claire laughed. “That’s why we’re taking it.”

Rocky nodded toward William.

“You two go enjoy yourselves.”

William looked at Claire.

“Dinner?”

She smiled.

“I’d like that.”

“And maybe...”

William hesitated.

“...just walk?”

“I was hoping you’d ask.”

Antonio watched them disappear into the evening before looking over at Rocky.

“You know...”

“What?”

“I think they’re going to be just fine.”

Rocky watched until the pair disappeared around the corner.

“I hope so.”

He exhaled.

“Come on.”

“A proper pub?”

“A proper pub.”

They avoided the brightly lit places overflowing with tourists.

Antonio dismissed one immediately.

“Too many televisions.”

The second had laminated menus displayed in the window.

“No.”

“What?”

“If they laminate the menu...”

“...the food’s already given up.”

Rocky wasn’t entirely sure that made sense.

It somehow felt true anyway.

Nearly fifteen minutes later they found it.

A narrow brick building tucked between a tailor and an old tobacconist.

A faded sign swung gently overhead.

Paddy’s Pub

Antonio stopped walking.

“Huh.”

Rocky looked up.

“Looks promising.”

“It really does.”

Antonio reached for the handle.

He opened the door.

The inside was dim, narrow, and smelled faintly of beer, fryer oil, wood cleaner, and old regret.

A few people sat at the bar.

Two men played pool in the corner.

A television above the shelves showed a cricket game nobody appeared to be watching.

Behind the bar stood a lean, sharp-featured man who carried himself with the confidence of someone who had either never doubted himself...

...or never survived doing so.

Antonio froze.

The bartender looked up.

“Evening.”

Antonio blinked twice.

Slowly closed the door.

Turned around.

“Nope.”

Rocky frowned.

“What?”

“I’ve been here before.”

“You’ve never been to London.”

“I know.”

“But I’ve absolutely been there.”

Rocky looked back toward the pub.

“You mean...”

“...exactly there.”

Antonio nodded emphatically.

“Exactly there.”

“Impossible.”

“I agree.”

“So why are we leaving?”

Antonio had already started walking.

“Because last time I walked into Paddy’s Pub I almost stabbed somebody playing pool.”

Rocky stopped.

“...what?”

Antonio kept walking.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You absolutely have to talk about it.”

“No.”

“Antonio.”

“It wasn’t my finest evening.”

“You’ve had several.”

“Exactly.”

Rocky laughed as he hurried to catch up.

“I don’t understand how that’s even possible.”

Antonio shrugged.

“I’ve stopped asking.”

The second pub was smaller.

Warmer.

There were no televisions.

No loud music.

Just quiet conversation, polished wood, and the smell of shepherd’s pie drifting out from somewhere beyond the bar.

“This,” Rocky said.

“...is exactly what I wanted.”

Antonio nodded.

“It feels...”

He looked around.

“...earned.”

They found two empty stools near the center of the bar.

Rocky ordered an ale.

Antonio ordered a whiskey.

Neat.

The bartender nodded approvingly.

“You Americans?”

“Guilty.”

“Holiday?”

Antonio smiled.

“Sort of.”

The bartender poured the whiskey.

“Welcome to London.”

“Thank you.”

Rocky raised his glass.

“To Mario.”

Antonio lifted his whiskey.

“To Mario.”

They drank.

The first sip settled warmly.

The room settled with it.

Rocky looked around.

“You know...”

“What?”

“I could stay here awhile.”

Antonio smiled.

“I thought you wanted to go back to the hotel.”

“I did.”

“What changed?”

Rocky looked into his glass.

“I think...”

“...I finally stopped trying to get somewhere.”

Antonio nodded.

“That’ll happen.”

A woman’s voice interrupted them.

“’Scuse me...”

Antonio turned.

She stood beside him holding a pint.

Early thirties, perhaps.

Chestnut hair fell loosely over one shoulder, and the smile she wore suggested she found the entire world faintly amusing.

She said something else.

It sounded vaguely like English.

Antonio smiled confidently.

“Absolutely.”

She blinked.

“...Ah wis askin’ if ye were usin’ this stool.”

Antonio nodded.

“Yes.”

She frowned.

“Ye are?”

Antonio looked at the stool.

Then at her.

“Oh.”

“No.”

“I misunderstood.”

“Aye.”

She sat.

Rocky bit the inside of his cheek.

Antonio ignored him.

Several seconds later she looked back over.

“So...”

“...where aboots ye frae?”

Antonio nodded enthusiastically.

“Very much.”

She stared.

“...Whit?”

“Yes.”

“I agree.”

She laughed.

Not politely.

Genuinely.

“I’m askin’ where ye’re fae.”

Antonio leaned toward Rocky.

“What’d she say?”

Rocky shrugged helplessly.

“I think she asked where you’re from.”

Antonio immediately turned back.

“New York.”

“Aye!”

“There we go.”

The woman lifted her glass.

“I’m Isla.”

“Antonio.”

“Guid tae meet ye.”

Antonio smiled.

“You too.”

Rocky watched the exchange for another minute before quietly turning back toward his own beer.

Antonio and Isla continued talking.

Or attempting to.

Every few moments she would say something.

Antonio would answer with absolute certainty.

Every few moments she laughed harder.

Eventually Rocky couldn't ignore it anymore.

"You understand any of this?"

Antonio took a sip of whiskey.

"Every fourth word."

"And the rest?"

"I respond with confidence."

Rocky nodded.

"I've noticed."

Isla laughed again.

"I like him."

Antonio smiled proudly.

"What'd she say?"

"I think..."

Rocky paused.

"...I think she likes you."

Antonio grinned.

"See?"

"Confidence."

Rocky shook his head.

"No."

"Charm."

Antonio looked confused.

“What’s the difference?”

Rocky looked at Isla, who was laughing once again at something Antonio had almost certainly misunderstood.

“I don’t think she cares whether you understand her.”

Antonio glanced toward Isla.

“Really?”

Rocky smiled into his beer.

“I think she likes watching you try.”

By the time dinner had ended, London had settled comfortably into evening.

The crowds had thinned just enough that the city seemed to breathe again. The restaurants still glowed warmly behind rain-speckled windows, black cabs drifted through the streets with practiced patience, and the Thames reflected ribbons of gold and white from the lamps lining its banks.

William and Claire walked without destination.

Neither of them seemed interested in hurrying back to the hotel.

Or anywhere else.

Claire slipped her hands into the pockets of her coat.

“So...”

William smiled.

“So.”

“You’ve gotten much better at walking without trying to figure out where we’re going.”

“I’ve had a good teacher.”

“I don’t think that was me.”

“I do.”

They wandered in comfortable silence for another block before the river opened fully beside them.

Tower Bridge glowed in the distance.

A sightseeing boat moved quietly beneath one of the bridges, its wake rippling across the black water before disappearing into the current.

Claire rested her forearms on the stone railing.

William joined her.

For several minutes they simply watched the river.

There was nothing remarkable happening.

That somehow made it remarkable.

“I’ve been thinking,” William said quietly.

Claire looked over.

“I know this trip was supposed to honor Mario.”

He watched the lights shimmer on the water.

“And it has.”

A small smile crossed his face.

“I’ve laughed more this week than I have in a long time.”

Claire nodded.

“So have I.”

William’s smile faded.

“But...”

He took a slow breath.

“...I kept thinking about my dad.”

Claire said nothing.

“I wish I knew him.”

His voice had become almost a whisper.

“I mean...”

“...really knew him.”

He looked down at his hands resting on the cold stone.

“I’ve heard stories my whole life.”

“The funny ones.”

“The impossible ones.”

“The dangerous ones.”

“I know he was brave.”

“I know he loved my mom.”

“I know he loved me.”

He swallowed.

“But that’s still different than...”

He searched for the words.

“...remembering the sound of his laugh.”

“Or knowing what made him angry.”

“What kind of music he listened to when nobody else was around.”

“If he snored.”

“If he burned toast.”

“If he ever got nervous.”

He laughed softly through the sadness.

“I don’t even know if he was ticklish.”

Claire felt her heart ache.

Only a few days earlier, William had learned the truth.

His father had not simply died.

He had chosen.

Chosen to sacrifice himself so that William—and Rocky and Antonio—could live.

There were few acts more noble.

There were few tragedies greater than a son never truly knowing the man capable of such a choice.

Without speaking, Claire stepped closer and wrapped both arms around him.

William leaned into her.

Not dramatically.

Simply because it felt like the safest place in London.

She rested her cheek against his shoulder.

“It’s okay to be sad.”

William closed his eyes.

A tear escaped before he could stop it.

He brushed it away with the back of his hand.

“I’m not sad.”

Claire leaned back just enough to look into his eyes.

“No?”

He smiled.

“I’m happy to have you.”

For a moment she couldn’t answer.

She simply looked at him.

Then she kissed him.

Not like the rooftop.

Not like the museum.

Not like the quiet moments that had slowly drawn them together over the past week.

This kiss carried certainty.

It lingered.

Neither hurried it.

When they finally separated, Claire rested her forehead against his.

“I’ve been thinking too.”

William smiled.

“Dangerous.”

She laughed softly.

“It is.”

She took one of his hands between both of hers.

“I’m ready now, William.”

His eyes widened.

“Ready…”

He blinked.

“...ready?”

The expression on his face made her laugh even harder.

She nodded.

“Honestly…”

She looked down for just a second before meeting his eyes again.

“...I’ve been ready for a few days.”

“You have?”

“I was.”

She smiled mischievously.

“I was just waiting for the right moment.”

William looked as though someone had completely erased every coherent thought from his mind.

“I...”

He laughed nervously.

“...okay.”

Claire slipped her fingers through his.

“Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

She raised one eyebrow.

“Back to the hotel.”

William nodded a little too enthusiastically.

“Oh.”

A beat passed.

“I mean...”

“...yes.”

Claire couldn’t help laughing again.

“You are adorable.”

“I’ve been told.”

“By who?”

“You.”

“Good.”

Hand in hand, they left the river behind.