

Chapter 42

It was the final morning.

By that evening, they would be somewhere over the Atlantic, watching England disappear beneath the clouds as the aircraft pointed west toward home.

The private jet had already been returned.

Commercial tickets, purchased before unexpected events nearly upended their vacation, would finally serve the purpose for which they'd been intended.

Rocky tried to convince himself that was satisfying.

At the very least...

The return tickets wouldn't go to waste.

He sat alone in the hotel restaurant with his third cup of coffee, watching waiters weave effortlessly between tables as sunlight poured through the tall windows.

The dining room buzzed with quiet conversation.

Everyone else, it seemed, had made breakfast on time.

Everyone except his traveling companions.

Antonio being late wasn't unusual.

Antonio occasionally treated clocks as gentle suggestions.

He had at least sent a text shortly after sunrise.

Alive. Be there for breakfast. Don't panic.

Rocky hadn't planned on panicking.

William and Claire, however...

That was different.

They'd been the dependable ones all week.

Always ready.

Always downstairs before everyone else.

Rocky took another sip of coffee.

A thought whispered softly in the back of his mind.

I just don't trust her.

He shook it away.

A few moments later, Antonio wandered into the restaurant.

He looked entirely too cheerful for someone who apparently hadn't slept in his own hotel room.

He was smiling.

Whistling softly to himself.

He poured a cup of coffee, sat down opposite Rocky, and immediately picked up a menu.

"I'm starving."

Rocky looked over the top of his mug.

"Bangers and mash?"

Antonio grinned.

"A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell."

Rocky stared at him.

"No, I mean do you want sausage and potatoes for breakfast?"

Antonio blinked.

"Oh." He paused. "Yes."

Rocky couldn't help laughing.

"I walked right into that one."

"You really did."

Their breakfasts arrived only a few minutes later.

Before either had taken more than a bite, William and Claire appeared together.

Rocky looked up.

Then immediately looked at Antonio.

Antonio looked back.

Neither said a word.

William pulled Claire's chair out for her before taking his own seat.

The moment he sat down, Claire reached for his hand beneath the table.

Then, almost absentmindedly, scooted her chair a little closer.

Not dramatically.

Just enough.

Rocky watched the exchange.

William smiled without realizing he was smiling.

Claire looked positively radiant.

Rocky slowly lowered his fork.

He looked from one of them to the other.

Then back again.

Finally...

He sighed.

"You know..."

Everyone looked at him.

"I'm beginning to notice a trend."

"What trend?" William asked.

Rocky pointed around the table.

"Everyone on this trip is getting laid except me."

Silence.

Then Antonio laughed so hard he nearly spilled his coffee.

Claire buried her face in William's shoulder.

William turned a remarkable shade of red.

Rocky remained completely serious.

"I don't understand what's funny."

That only made Antonio laugh harder.

Breakfast settled back into its comfortable rhythm after that.

The conversation drifted naturally toward their final day.

Mission Master had somehow accomplished the impossible.

Every destination on the itinerary had been visited.

The Tower of London.

Tower Bridge.

Kew Gardens.

Hampstead Heath.

Buckingham Palace.

Hampton Court.

Westminster Abbey.

The Royal Albert Hall.

The Victoria and Albert Museum.

The West End.

The Royal Observatory.

Even The Shard.

Antonio looked around the table.

“I still can’t believe I managed not to make a joke about The Shard.”

“You showed remarkable restraint,” Rocky admitted.

“I was growing as a person.”

“No.”

“You were asleep in the taxi.”

Antonio considered it.

“That’s probably true.”

Not only had they seen everything on their list, but they took their time to truly appreciate each and every one, to notice the small details, to work together as a team, to enjoy their time together.

William unfolded the small city map one last time.

“So...”

“We’ve seen everything.”

Claire traced a finger toward the southwest.

“Almost everything.”

All four looked at the same place.

Stonehenge.

Nobody argued.

It had somehow remained untouched all week. Just far enough outside of the city to make it difficult for Mission Master to include.

“Concierge?” Rocky suggested.

A few minutes later, the concierge joined them.

“I believe I may be able to help.”

He explained that the Vernal Equinox had drawn enormous crowds to Stonehenge that day.

Private transportation would be difficult.

Public transportation even worse.

“But...”

He smiled.

“I may be able to pull a few strings.”

The group gratefully accepted.

Breakfast continued while arrangements were made.

Rocky once again declared British breakfasts vastly underrated.

Antonio agreed, although he admitted he still wasn’t entirely convinced about black pudding.

William sliced his with a pocketknife.

Rocky did the same.

Antonio reached into his jacket and produced his own.

William looked at his hand and without thinking, he handed his to Claire. She accepted it with a smile and used the opportunity to hold his hand a little longer than normal relationships would have found acceptable. Rocky rolled his eyes. *Ugh. This was going to be painful to watch.*

The concierge returned.

“I’ve arranged a private coach.”

“When?”

He checked his watch.

“It should be here within twenty minutes.”

The group thanked him enthusiastically.

Antonio leaned back in his chair.

“A two-hour drive?”

“Approximately.”

Antonio smiled.

“Perfect.”

“What for?”

He yawned.

“Catching up on sleep.”

The hotel agreed to store their luggage until they returned.

Soon they found themselves standing together outside beneath a bright spring sky.

Claire nestled comfortably in front of William, his arms holding her close to his chest.

Rocky tried to ignore them and quietly calculated flight times, driving distances, and every possible delay between Stonehenge and Heathrow.

Antonio leaned against a nearby telephone box.

Within moments...

He was asleep.

Rocky looked over.

“He’s unbelievable.”

William smiled.

“I think he’s efficient.”

Right on cue, a coach rounded the corner and pulled smoothly to the curb.

The driver stepped down and opened the boot, though there was nothing to load.

The four climbed aboard as London slowly gave way to villages, fields, and open countryside.

