

PROLOGUE

Cathedral de Sevilla, Sevilla, Spain
Tuesday, July 1st, 12:58 AM

I CLOSED MY EYES, and willed myself not to breathe. My heart beat frantically as adrenaline pumped through my veins. Things like this didn't happen to people like me. Things like this weren't supposed to happen at all.

A faint noise broke the oppressive silence. I pressed up against the wall feeling the deep chill of the stone spread through my body. That sound, while barely audible, was enough to tell me that I was not alone. Somehow, he had made his way into the room without my knowing it. That noise was a mistake. I knew he would not make another.

I had to outmaneuver him. He was good, he was very good, and if he hadn't been trying to kill me I would have admired him for that. The only question now was if I could be better.

CHAPTER 1

Outside of Assisi, Italy
Tuesday, June 24th, 3:05 PM

THE RAILCAR SWAYED hypnotically as it rambled past golden fields shimmering in the sun. Cypress trees lining the road next to the railway reached gracefully for the sky while offering the enticing promise of shade to weary travelers. In an effort to keep my mind occupied, I scrolled to one of my favorite Led Zeppelin songs on my iPod, hit play and began singing the lyrics in my head.

Although I didn't want to admit it, I was trying to keep my brain busy because I didn't want to think about what had been bothering me for several days. I couldn't explain exactly why I felt something was off; I just knew it the same way I knew when I was coming down with a cold. I might not be able to determine why, but I definitely recalled when I started to feel something wasn't right. But I didn't want to think about that either.

Even though I had been backpacking in Europe for over a week, it was still a little hard to believe that I was sitting in a train in the middle of Italy. The day after final exams of spring term, I had boarded a plane in Portland, Oregon with my best friend Anna, and fifteen hours later we landed at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris. While my classmates were spending the summer of 2014 suffering through tedious internships or boring minimum wage jobs, I had a bulging backpack, a Eurail pass, and my best friend with me for twelve glorious weeks of traipsing around the European continent. We were completely unfettered by rules, itineraries or chaperones.

In the seat across from me, Anna grooved to the rhythm of the song she was listening to. We were both easygoing, but where I was more cautious and calculating, Anna was free-spirited and uninhibited. Her sense of humor matched my own with her sly, dry wit and heavy use of sarcasm. She was intelligent, fun-loving and up for anything. We got along very well.

I had been looking forward to this trip not only because I wanted to see Europe, but because of the escape it provided from the completely ordinary existence that was gradually starting to stifle me back home. Life in the small town where I grew up was simple. I played sports and worked a summer job. My dad owned a business and my mom was a teacher. My older brother and I had no serious complaints when we were kids.

As I got older though, things got more complicated. Everybody around me seemed to know what they wanted in life and what it would take to achieve it. Even Anna knew that she wanted to be a veterinarian; she just wasn't in a hurry to get there. I found this very frustrating because I had no clue. I just knew that I wanted something more than to settle for what is expected. The good old American Dream was my parents' blueprint for my life path: earn a degree, get a career, get married and start a family, preferably in that order.

It didn't make things easier that my computer-genius brother, Carter, seemed destined from birth for either the Ivy League or the National Football League. He ended up at Stanford where he was at the top of his class and an All-American in football. Living in his shadow had never been easy.

After high school, I enrolled at a state university and was doing well in my classes. School had never been a problem; more of a nuisance. When I was five years old I discovered that I could recall everything that I read, saw, or heard. At first, I thought it was this way for everyone. When I realized that it wasn't, having a photographic memory made me feel special, as though I had a special super power. While this trait often came in handy, as I got older, people started to look at me funny when I quoted things verbatim, and more than one teacher had accused me of plagiarizing. After several embarrassing incidents, I started to treat my special super power like a dirty little secret that had to remain hidden. I began to downplay my ability

and I never spoke about it to anyone. Once I had figured out that my special talent was better kept under wraps, school became more tolerable.

In the middle of my junior year at university, while my classmates were scrambling for the best internships in business management, I halfheartedly applied for several with no real desire to win any. Meanwhile, Anna had been bugging me for months to forget internships and go backpacking across Europe with her. Eventually, I agreed.

My mother tried to be supportive of my decision to “screw around all summer,” as my dad described it, but they were obviously worried for my future. Practically from birth they have drilled into me the mantra, “always be able to take care of yourself,” because they believed in the importance of self-reliance. To them, this meant a solid career as a doctor or lawyer; a job that they could be proud of and that would have solid income, so they would never have to worry about me. They love me, but they have never really understood why I can’t, or won’t, fall completely in line with “the program.” In their opinion, I questioned them, myself, and my future too much. The fact that Carter followed “the program” with no questions and no rebellions only made things more problematic for me.

Carter was everyone’s ideal. I could have hated him for that, but I didn’t; I adored him. I could always count on my brother to make me smile when I wanted to cry and make me laugh when I wanted to scream. He was the one who kept our parents off my back and helped me see their side of things. I often referred to him as the “hostage negotiator.”

Despite my parents’ concerns, they hugged me goodbye at the airport, and the next day I was in France. Backpacking abroad was the most exhilarating thing I’d ever experienced. I loved exploring the sights and watching the different people. Fascinated by the history and culture surrounding me, I would devour the information in the guidebook on an area before we arrived. I had never felt so free, until that day at Versailles...

As the Italian countryside sped by, I realized that despite my best attempts to mull over trivial things, my mind had looped right back to the very incident that I was trying to avoid. Resigned to the inevitable, I let the memory run its course.

It had been scorching hot that day. Trying to steer clear of the crush of tourists by the palace, Anna and I happened upon a secluded pond

in one corner of the gardens. The half-moon shaped pool was encircled by a lawn border and gravel pathway. Trees and manicured hedges enclosed the spot, making it very private.

“What is this place?” Anna murmured.

As if on cue, a deep, guttural noise followed by a large spray of water shot up from the center of the pond. Enchanted by a water fountain the size of a swimming pool, I dropped my backpack and kicked off my sandals. Relishing the soft tickle of the grass on my feet, I walked to the edge, took a deep breath, and stepped down into the deliciously cool water.

“Jordan, what are you doing?” Anna hissed.

“Come in. It feels amazing!”

“Are you sure it’s ok?”

“Come on!” I said, forging deeper into the water.

She moved to the edge of the pond then stopped to glance around like she was waiting for palace guards to pounce on us from the bushes.

“What are they going to do, put a note in our permanent Versailles security file?” I said mockingly.

She grimaced, but did not move forward.

Abruptly, multiple loud, groaning noises were followed by water spouting from a dozen different points across the pond. The jets twisted in a pattern of arcs, drenching me in an instant.

As water rained down around me, I tilted my face to the sky, flung my arms out and twirled. The blazing sun coupled with the cold water on my skin was intoxicating. Caught up in the moment, sheer joy bubbled out of me in the form of delighted laughter. Standing in the middle of this water fountain was way better than standing in front of the one at the Bellagio in Las Vegas.

I continued to spin until it was stop or fall over. Slowing down, I wobbled a bit from the uneven footing and my own lightheadedness. Anna finally moved, letting out a started yelp as she stepped into the chilly water.

That was the exact moment I had the inexplicable but undeniable feeling that someone was watching me. I quickly scanned the perimeter of the fountain, but no matter how much I tried, I couldn’t see anything strange. Checking again more slowly, my gaze was drawn to an area of particularly dense foliage directly across the pond. It was the perfect