

# CHAPTER 1

## *On a bus to Berlin, Germany*

“Bluetooth earpieces are so geeky,” Dan Cahill said.

“But they free up your hands for surfing the web, stealing priceless jewels, and eating pastry,” Atticus said, taking a huge bite out of an apple strudel.

“And picking your nose,” Dan added, which caused Atticus to blow a mouthful of strudel all over the seat in front of them occupied by Dan’s sister, Amy, who was trying to sleep.

Amy had heard the entire lame exchange — and felt the half-chewed pastry chunks splatter the back of her head — but she resisted the strong urge to turn around and tell the boys to shut up. She was happy that the old, goofy Dan was back, acting like a complete idiot. He had grown up way too much in the past few weeks, and she hadn’t liked what he was turning into. Dan had seen too much, too fast, and lately she’d caught glimpses of something dark inside him.

And the pressure on the two of them was growing.

Vesper One was not just a step ahead, he was miles ahead of them. He not only knew what they were going to do before they did it, he even seemed to know what they were thinking. *But so far, no hostages have died, she reminded herself. We have handled every ridiculous and dangerous task Vesper One has thrown at us. Our friends are still alive.*

She wondered how much longer it could last.

Seven members of the Cahill family had been kidnapped and a man known only as Vesper One was threatening to kill them one at a time unless Amy and Dan delivered a series of bizarre ransoms. He was pulling their strings like a puppet master, teasing them, commanding them, and they had no choice but to obey. Which is why Amy found herself on a bus, in a snowstorm, moving doggedly toward their next target even though their flight had been canceled.

“I’ve discovered that Berlin is not the only place having weird weather,” Atticus said to Dan.

Their long flight from Samarkand had barely landed in Heidelberg when the airport was closed due to the earliest snowfall in Germany’s history. The airline company put the grumbling passengers on buses for a slushy six-hour drive to Berlin.

“There’s a heat wave in Attleboro — upper nineties. In the Pacific Northwest, where some places get one hundred twenty-plus inches of rain, they’re having a drought. Climatologists are scrambling to figure out the strange weather shift.”



Dan wasn't paying attention. "You strudel-chunked your laptop!" he said.

This started another round of hysterical giggling, causing several other passengers to curse in German and "Shh!" them, which the boys completely ignored.

Amy shook her head in wonder. Listening to the two boys, you wouldn't know that a couple days earlier, Atticus had almost been murdered. She pulled a strudel chunk out of her hair. *It's as if none of it ever happened. But it did happen. Worse things have happened. . . .*

Amy looked out the window at the blowing snow in the gray waning light and pushed the worries firmly out of her mind. They were just entering Berlin, the site of their current assignment. Vesper One had sent them yet another cryptic ransom note on the satellite phone he had so kindly provided for them. Every time it chimed, Amy felt dread surge deep in her belly.

Well, time to celebrate. And what better place than the cheerful city of Berlin? Home of a priceless jewel, in a heavily guarded museum. I trust you have heard of it. Because your next assignment is to liberate it. And deliver it to me.

Thanks in advance. And a jolly "Guten Tag!" from Uncle Alistair.

Vesper One

*The puppet master at work, Amy thought bitterly. No mention of the name of the museum, which jewel, or how long we have to steal it before he murders one of our friends.*

Jake Rosenbloom, Atticus's older half brother, was sound asleep in the window seat next to her. He was an arrogant jerk, but she had to admit he was easy to look at, even with his brown eyes closed, his lips half open, and a tiny drop of drool leaking from the corner of his mouth. Looking at him, she found her lips fluttering upward into a smile until she caught herself and abruptly frowned.

*There's nothing to smile about!* she reminded herself.

The boys were uncharacteristically silent. Amy leaned out of her seat and looked back to see what trouble they had found. Dan had the window seat and was looking at his smartphone. Atticus was hunched over in the aisle seat, his dreads dangling over the laptop screen as his nimble fingers flew over the keyboard like a virtuoso pianist.

"Any luck figuring out which museum we're supposed to . . ." Amy didn't want to say "rob" for fear of being overheard.

Atticus shook his head. "There are over a hundred and seventy museums and galleries in Berlin. It's impossible to say which one of them has—"

"What we're looking for," Amy interrupted. Atticus was a genius, but he was only eleven years old. He sometimes forgot that anyone could be eavesdropping.



“Uh . . . right,” he said, darting a quick look at their fellow passengers.

“We’re here,” Dan said, wiping the fog off the window with his hand. He looked at Amy. “What’s your plan?”

“I don’t have a plan, uh, Frederick.”

“Frederick?” Dan said.

“Frederick Wimple,” Amy said. It was just the latest of a series of fake identities, counterfeit passports, and forged birth certificates cooked up by a team of Cahills at their command center in Attleboro. *Where is Sinead coming up with these names?* Amy wondered.

“Just kidding,” Dan said loudly, trying to cover his lapse. “You know I hate it when you call me Frederick. Call me Fred. If you don’t, I’ll start calling you Fi instead of Fiona.”

“Sorry, Fred.” Amy rolled her eyes.

The bus stopped and the interior lights came on.

Jake’s eyes snapped open and he flinched in his chair. “Where are we?”

“Brandenburg International Airport,” Amy answered.

Atticus stuck his head between the seats. “Berlin, bro. It’s still snowing.”

“Great,” Jake said, wiping the corner of his mouth and working the kink out of his neck.

Amy smiled again, but when Jake caught the look and smiled back, she frowned and glared at him.

Dan narrowed his eyes. “What’s with you, Fiona?”



"I'm just happy that we're getting off this bus," she snapped.

"Right," Dan said.



They found their rented Mercedes SUV deep inside the parking structure.

"I'll drive," Dan said.

"In your dreams, Frederick," Amy said. "You don't have a license."

"Shotgun!" Atticus said, jumping into the passenger seat.

"I didn't want to sit up there anyway," Dan claimed, climbing into the backseat next to Amy.

Jake settled into the driver's seat and started the engine, but before he could adjust his mirrors, flashing blue lights appeared behind them. A police car was blocking them in.

Amy's stomach lurched. *Interpol?* They were caught already. She met Jake's eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Maybe they're just checking out the rental cars leaving the parking lot," he suggested.

"And maybe they're not," Amy spat. "If we get arrested, a hostage will die!"

Two gigantic policemen got out of the car. "Exit the vehicle!" one of them shouted. "*Schnell!*"

"Remember, your name is Fred Wimple," Amy whispered to her brother as they climbed out of the SUV and lined up beside it.



“Passports!” the larger policeman snapped.

“They’re in our bags,” Jake said, keeping his voice calm and steady.

“Get them!”

“Sure. No problem. No need to shout.” Jake popped the back hatch open, but as he reached in to grab his pack, the second policeman pushed him roughly aside.

“Hey!” Jake balled his hands into fists.

Amy signaled him with a small shake of her head. Something wasn’t right about the two cops. *If they know, why don’t they just arrest us? Why are they hassling us like this?*

Jake took a deep breath.

The second policeman pulled their things out onto the ground and turned to Amy. “Which one is yours?”

Amy pointed at a small blue backpack.

The policeman grabbed it, turned it upside down, and shook everything out.

Jake stepped forward, but Amy gripped his arm.

“Let it go,” she whispered.

The policeman found Amy’s fake passport, then rummaged through the other packs until he held all four in his hand.

“Your business in Berlin?”

“We’re tourists,” Amy stammered, her knees going weak.

“Name of your hotel?”

“We . . . we were just on our way to find one.”

The policeman looked at Dan. “Frederick Wimple?”



“Right,” Dan answered.

“Wrong,” the policeman said. “Your passport is a forgery. Your name is Dan Cahill.” He pulled his pistol from its holster. “And you are all under arrest!”

Amy let out a gasp of horror. Dan’s head jerked toward the nearest exit. She followed his gaze. It was a hundred feet away. They’d never make it.

The second policeman pulled four sets of flex-cuffs off his belt. “Turn around and put your hands on your heads.”

Jake stepped in front of the pistol, shielding the others.

“There’s some kind of mistake,” he said, trying to stall for time.

“No mistake. Turn around. All of you!”

There was an agonizing pause as they calculated their options and realized they didn’t have any.

“We better do what he says,” Amy said in defeat.

Reluctantly, Jake turned around with the others. Amy leaned against her brother, waiting for the plastic cuffs to squeeze around her wrists. Barely two steps into Berlin, and they’d already failed.

*Which hostage will die? Which hostage have we just killed?*

“Something’s not right,” Jake whispered.

“I’ll say,” Dan hissed back. “We’re in a parking structure with two giants with badges, guns, and no witnesses. We need to get—”

Two doors slammed behind them, followed by



the screech of rubber on cement. Amy whipped her head around to see the police car barreling through the exit. For a second, the four kids were too stunned to move.

“Quick! Let’s get out of here!” Amy said.

Just then, the Vesper phone chimed.

Ha-ha. Scared you! A bag within your bag. Replace the paste with the real one at the Pergamon Museum. Because of your late arrival you only have a couple hours before closing time. If you fail, it’s Death-Oh-Clock for Uncle Alistair (per Dan’s request), and perhaps I’ll include the youngest as a special bonus . . . Cousin Phoenix. Oh, and speaking of dead things, I’ve wiped the phone you swiped from Luna. You can no longer get in touch with me. I’m very unhappy with you. I’ll let you know what your punishment will be. Have a nice day. ☺

Vesper One

Dan slammed his fist into the car. “He’s going to punish us through Alistair!”

Amy put a hand lightly on her brother’s shoulder. “We don’t know that.”

“Amy’s right,” Jake said. “He’s just messing with us.



The only way to keep our heads straight is to ignore him and stay on task."

Amy didn't like the look on Dan's face as he turned on Jake. "Easy for you to say. You don't even know Alistair!"

"Stop!" Amy ordered. "I've had enough testosterone in the past five minutes to last me a lifetime. We need to focus."

She picked up Luna's pink cell phone and tossed it to Dan. "Check the phone." She looked at Jake and Atticus. "Help me get this stuff back in my pack."

"Phone's toast," Dan said after a second. He threw it against a cement pillar and it burst into a hundred pink pieces.

"Was that necessary?" Amy asked.

"Probably not," Dan answered, "but it felt good."

Amy shook her head, then noticed something in the pile that hadn't been in her backpack earlier. It was a small black velvet bag. She picked it up.

"What's that?" Dan asked.

"A bag within your bag,'" Atticus said.

Amy loosened the drawstrings and dumped a diamond the size of a marshmallow into her palm.



## CHAPTER 2

### *Pompeii, Italy*

V-1: Contact established with the Cahills.  
Exactly where you'd expect. Will track.  
Can kill. Awaiting instructions.

—V-4

V-4: The trap is baited. V-5 is in place.  
Proceed.

—V-1

Erasmus Yilmaz sat on the edge of a stone fullery in the city of Pompeii, wishing he didn't know that in ancient times, slaves used fulleries to wash their masters' clothes. In urine.

The fullery was indoors, but it gave him a good view of the square outside. Across from him was a large opening. He'd picked the spot so he could watch the crowds without being seen.

*Pompeii is a dead city, he thought. And coming here was a dead end. But where do we go next?*

Erasmus felt a rare grin cross his face.

We.

He hadn't thought in terms of a team since he was a boy.

*On the run with Mom . . .* The grin vanished.

When Erasmus was just three years old, his father was murdered by Vespers. Japan, Russia, India, Canada. Erasmus and his mom never spent more than a few months in any one location. Erasmus did not go to school, but he learned nine languages and read a thousand books during their run.

We.

They had almost started to believe the threat had faded when the Vespers finally struck. He was at his dojo when the fire broke out at their apartment complex. Several people had died, including Erasmus's mom. The Vespers were only too real.

Erasmus turned his attention back to the crowd on the square where at least a hundred people had gathered. A smoking Mount Vesuvius loomed above them, but no one was looking at the volcano. Their attention was focused on the *Disaster Watch!* television van and its famous meteorologist, Sandy "the Breeze" Bancroft.

Erasmus had no problem picking his partners out of the crowd. Hamilton Holt was a foot taller and wider than anyone else there. Jonah Wizard was



wearing a black hoodie, even though it was a beautiful day. He had to be hot with the hood pulled over his famous head and the fake beard Erasmus was making him wear.

Erasmus hadn't been pleased when Amy teamed two teenagers up with him, but to his surprise he'd grown fond of them. They were both dedicated to the fight and willing to do anything—even travel with each other. The two boys were completely different. Erasmus grinned again. *Jonah has rap playing in his head, Hamilton wants to rap people on their heads.*

Erasmus had sent them into the crowd and told them not to speak to anyone. Their job was to mingle and listen. He knew that they wouldn't hear anything worthwhile, but that wasn't the point. He was training them, thinking that maybe one day, one of them would take his place.

He was about to call the boys in when a text came from Jonah.

Luna Amato is here.

What's she doing? Erasmus typed back, feeling a tide of anger well up in his chest.

Watching the weather dude.

Did she recognize you? Erasmus asked.



The response came immediately. Nope. And I'm standing five feet away.

What about Hamilton?

He's standing right next to me. He's hard to miss. She hasn't even looked at him.

Another text flashed across the screen. Wait! She's on the move.

Just five days before, William McIntyre, an important Cahill adviser and one of Erasmus's few friends, had been murdered in Rome. Luna was either in on the murder, or knew who did it. And Erasmus was determined to squeeze every bit of information out of her.

Follow her. Like I taught you.

Erasmus pulled a pair of binoculars out of his leather jacket and watched. Sure enough, it was Luna Amato. His jaw clenched as he zoomed in. The Vesper spy appeared harmless—she looked like a retired schoolteacher on a tour. But that's what made her so deadly. What allowed her to bring down people like William.

Erasmus lowered the binoculars and narrowed his eyes. All that was about to change.

He wasn't going to let the Vespers get away with



## CHAPTER 3

murder again.

Alistair Oh would have given anything for a bite of one of his steak burritos and a sip of something refreshing. Instead he was holding a cold baked potato and a paper cup with four ounces of murky water. The Vespers had shut off the hostages' water and reduced their food ration in retaliation for the recent escape attempt. Once a day, a sack with seven baked potatoes and a single quart of water was dropped down the shaft of the broken dumbwaiter.

"The Irish survived on a mostly potato diet for hundreds of years," Fiske Cahill pointed out, staring grimly at the spud in his hand.

"That's correct," Alistair agreed. "I did a great deal of research while working on my Frozen Peanut Butter-Potato Tot Burrito."

"How'd that sell?" Ted Starling asked. He was sitting near the damaged dumbwaiter, hoping to hear a snippet of conversation from their captors above.

"Not well, I'm afraid," Alistair said. "But I did learn

that the average Irish citizen consumed five to eight pounds of potatoes a day, and they were healthy.”

“We’re getting about a pound a day for seven of us,” Natalie Kabra pointed out. She prodded the shriveled spud on her plate, then stared in dismay at her hands. “Oh, my God! My hands look like monkey paws. I’d give anything for cream and an emery board.”

“Your hands look fine,” Ted said.

“No offense, Theodore,” Natalie said. “But you’re blind.”

Alistair cut in before the kids could start squabbling. “A bigger concern is drinkable water,” Alistair said. “We’re getting dehydrated. We’ll die of thirst long before we die of hunger.”

“Let’s try to think of the positive,” Fiske said.

“Good idea,” Natalie shot back. “Why don’t you start, Fiske?”

“Well . . .” Fiske trailed off.

“Can it, Natalie,” Nellie said. “If they get us fighting among ourselves we won’t have the energy to fight them.”

“In order to fight them, we have to get to them,” Reagan said, out of breath from the crunches. She started doing one-handed push-ups with her good hand, but only managed six before losing her strength.

Phoenix waved Alistair over to where he and Nellie were sitting. “Is everything okay?” Alistair asked quietly.

Phoenix leaned over and whispered into his ear.



## CHAPTER 4

“I think Reagan is going to die.”

As Jake drove the SUV through the dark, icy streets, Atticus’s fingers flew across the laptop keyboard to try to identify the decoy diamond they’d been given.

“I’ve got it!” he shouted. “The diamond’s called the Golden Jubilee. It’s on loan from the king of Thailand, at the Pergamon Museum.”

“Where is that?” Dan said, shifting in his seat.

“We’re three blocks away,” Jake said, pointing at the navigation screen.

They parked the SUV a block away from the Pergamon. They were on the scene, but they still didn’t have the slightest idea how they were going to steal the diamond.

“It’s one of the most heavily guarded museums in Berlin,” Atticus said. He had the Pergamon website up on his laptop. “It’s subdivided into the antiquity collection, the Middle East museum, and the museum of Islamic art. Chancellor Angela Merkel was there last week for the unveiling of the Golden Jubilee



exhibit. The museum is visited by over a million people every year, making it the most popular—”

“We don’t need an audio tour!” Dan snapped. “We need to just get in there and swap the diamonds.”

Atticus flinched, but Dan didn’t care. He reached for the door handle. “We only have two hours left!”

“Hold on,” Amy said.

Dan gave her an exasperated sigh. “What?”

“We can’t just waltz in there and expect to walk out with one of the most valuable treasures on earth,” she said, panic creeping into her voice. “We need to figure out a plan.”

“Fine. But make it quick.” Dan looked pointedly at his watch.

“We’ll each go in at ten-minute intervals,” Amy said. “Interpol has probably sent our photographs to every museum in Europe. It’ll be safer if we don’t enter together.” She pulled a red wig out of her pack.

“I’m not wearing that!” Dan said. When they flew to Samarkand, the Cahills in the Attleboro comm center had made him dress as a redheaded girl named Shirley Cliphorn.

“I’m going to wear it,” Amy said, pulling it over her head and shooting her brother an irritated look.

“I’ll wear a baseball cap,” Dan said.

“Dan, you’ll go in first and find out where the Golden Jubilee is. Atticus will go in next and try to figure out what kind of electronic surveillance and alarm security they have in the museum. I’ll come in



third with the fake diamond. We'll stay in touch on our Bluetooths and get together once we have the lay of the place."

"What about me?" Jake asked.

To Dan's disgust, his sister blushed before she answered. "Stay in the car, keep it running, and pick us up if we somehow pull this off."

"So I'm the driver," Jake said flatly.

Dan stared at his watch. "Minute's up. I'm outta here. See you inside."

He opened the door and stepped out into the cold evening, happy to be *doing* something rather than *talk-ing* about doing something. It was still snowing big, sticky white flakes and there was at least two feet of accumulation on the sidewalk. He wouldn't be surprised to find the Pergamon had closed for the day while Amy jabbered their time away, as if Alistair or Phoenix wasn't about to be murdered.

*If it's closed, how do we get the diamond?*

He reached the huge entry square to the museum and his shoulders instantly relaxed. People were still walking through the front doors into the building. A bus pulled up to the curb behind him, and a group of students close to his age filed out. None of them were wearing baseball caps, so Dan took his off and joined them as they hurried across the square. A couple of the kids said something to him in German, which he didn't understand. He smiled and nodded, hoping they weren't asking him if he was the notorious art thief



Dan Cahill, aka Fred Wimple, aka Shirley Cliphorn. Apparently they were just being friendly, because they smiled back and lined up behind their teachers.

Dan inserted himself into the group and walked inside with them. Every security checkpoint had Berliners shaking snow off their coats, hats, and umbrellas as they shuffled through. He tapped his Bluetooth.

"It's packed," he whispered.

"What's security like?" Amy asked.

"Tough." Dan put his pack on the conveyor belt. "X-ray machines and metal detectors. On the bright side, they don't seem to be paying much attention to what people look like. They didn't give me a second glance. Is Atticus on his way?"

"He just got out of the car."

"See you later."



"Dan?" Amy hated it when Dan hung up on her.

Jake turned and looked at her from the front seat. "Well?"

"Dan's inside," she said, keeping her frustration with her little brother to herself.

"Get into the front seat with me," he ordered.

Amy frowned at him. "Why?"

"Because it looks suspicious that you're in the back-seat and I'm in the front seat," Jake said impatiently.

Amy got out of the back, not because he wanted

her to, but because he was probably right . . . again. She didn't know what to think about Jake. Seventy-five percent of the time he was a jerk. The other twenty-five percent of the time he was asleep.

She got into the front seat and closed the door. She could feel the heat from his body and smelled something spicy mingling with the leather of the seats—it was annoyingly pleasant.

“What’s the problem?” he asked. “What’s bothering you?”

“Aside from being wanted by Interpol, trying to save seven hostages, and steal a priceless diamond?”

Jake smiled at her. “Yeah, aside from that.”

Amy gave him a searching look, and then decided to answer honestly. “Dan,” she said. “I’m worried about him. It’s not right that a thirteen-year-old knows as much as he does about stealing things.”

“You’re right,” Jake said. “He should have been at least sixteen like you before he became part of an international crime ring.” He paused. “But I hear you. Atticus already knows more than I will in my entire life. It’s scary. On the one hand he’s a little kid, on the other hand he’s a supercomputer with two legs. And then there’s this whole Guardian thing.”

On her deathbed, Atticus’s mother, Astrid, Jake’s stepmother, had told Atticus that she was a Guardian and that she was passing the responsibility on to him. But what that meant and how to do it was anyone’s guess.



“What do you know about them?” Jake asked.

“Guardians?”

Jake nodded.

“Not much,” Amy answered, not quite meeting his eyes.

This was more *truthish* than true. What she wasn't telling Jake was that she suspected one of the things the Guardians were protecting was a Cahill family relic, a gold ring currently hidden in plain sight on her wrist around the face of her Swiss watch. Only a handful of people knew about the ring's existence. The Vespers wanted it—badly enough that they'd nearly killed Amy trying to get it.

*Time to change the subject.* She looked at her watch. “Atticus should be inside the Pergamon by now.”

“I'm going into the museum with you.”

“No.”

“I'm Atticus's *brother*. He's my responsibility.”

“The best way you can keep him safe is to stay here and keep the car running.” Jake opened his mouth to reply, but Amy jumped out of the SUV before he could argue further.

*That's one way to handle him,* she thought with a grin. Then she realized she was smiling. Again.

