

CAHILLS vs. VESPERS
A KING'S RANSOM



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For Albert Blundell,
who loved words
and raised a writer.
— J.W.



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CHAPTER 1

Florence, Italy

Dan Cahill didn't realize just how many policemen there were in the world until he became an international art thief.

At this early hour, the Santa Maria Novella train station was crammed with travelers. Businessmen with briefcases, students chugging espressos, tourists with too much luggage, and two teenagers, one with a stolen priceless thirteenth-century book in a backpack.

That would be him.

Dan hung his thumbs on the straps of his pack, hugging it closer to him. He almost felt that Marco Polo's original manuscript, *Il Milione* — the one that had been lost for centuries until he and his sister had found it hidden in the Colosseum in Rome — was actually emitting heat. Was that why he was sweating so badly?

Or was it the fact that there seemed to be a policeman every five feet?

"*Polizia* everywhere," his sister, Amy, murmured.



"They're checking passports at the boarding platforms," Dan noted. He watched as a uniformed officer stopped two young students about to board a train. They were older than he and Amy, but the girl had brown hair to her shoulders like Amy, and the boy was wiry like Dan.

At least he and his sister had fake passports and disguises. He couldn't get used to the sight of Amy in a blond wig, and his heavy framed glasses screamed *DORK*, or whatever that was in Italian. *Il Dorko?*

"What we need is a distraction," Amy murmured. "If they look at our passports too closely, we could be in trouble. We've got to get on that train to Switzerland!"

"Because when a deranged psycho gives you orders, it's important to snap to," Dan said.

The text had come only a few hours before.

Perhaps you notice that your loved ones continue to accept our Vesper hospitality. This is due to your previous treachery. They will remain our guests until you complete four more tasks. The first of these will be in Lucerne, Switzerland. I suggest you get yourselves there immediately, lest the number of our little party dwindles.

Vesper One

Their enemy Vesper One was a big fan of the mocking taunt. Every word was a thrust to the heart, letting them know that he was holding members of their family hostage and was prepared to kill them.

Dan stared up at the train departures board as if it would hold all the answers. Why was he here, desperate and scared, instead of back in Massachusetts, trying to scam himself out of math homework like any normal thirteen-year-old?

Wherever they turned, headlines screamed the news: *IL CRIMINE DEL SECOLO!* The crime of the century. They had stolen a Caravaggio from the Uffizi Gallery, and now they were on Interpol's most-wanted list. Which would have been sort of cool if he didn't have to be afraid of going to jail for ten thousand years.

Lives were on the line. Lives of people they had become close to, including Reagan Holt, Ted Starling, and Natalie Kabra. Twelve-year-old Phoenix Wizard. And people they loved—their Uncle Alistair Oh and their guardians, Fiske Cahill and Nellie Gomez. That was the hardest thing to bear. Fiske had disappeared in California, and Nellie had been kidnapped right off the streets of Paris.

The destinations on the board blurred, and Dan rocked on his feet with weariness. He heard the hiss of an espresso machine. Over his head the loudspeaker announced a track change in Italian



and English. Everything seemed to fade a little. "I'm so beat I could lie down right on the floor," he told Amy. "When was the last time we slept?"

"Day before yesterday?" Amy asked with a frown. "I know what you mean. This is some jet lag. Let's get a coffee while we make a plan."

"Oh, yeah, jet lag. That must be it," Dan agreed as he trailed after her to the espresso bar. "Not the fact that we pulled off a museum heist, went without sleep and food, and oh, yeah—did I mention this—almost got killed? Jet lag. *That's why we're tired.*"

"Well, if you want to get *technical*," Amy said, but she summoned up a smile for her brother. She pushed balled-up paper money at the counterman and held up two fingers for coffee.

"I wonder what he wants us to steal next," Dan said. "I think I maxed out my museum heist skills."

"If we could just get one step ahead of them . . ." Amy murmured. She took the change from the counterman and handed an espresso to Dan.

He took a sip and his face turned red. He let out a series of explosive coughs, stamping his foot with each one. Passersby turned and stared, and Amy saw a policeman's gaze sweep the crowd, looking for the source of the commotion.

She grabbed the now-empty espresso cup and put it back on the counter, pushing Dan forward and quickly maneuvering him through the crowd.

"I said *distraction*," she hissed. "Not *pandemonium*."

"I couldn't help it," Dan wheezed. "Dude, what was that sludge I just inhaled?"

"Just Italian coffee," Amy said. "Look, the train to Lucerne leaves in fifteen minutes. We have to take a chance."

Dan scanned the crowd. "You know what we need? A—tuba!"

"A *what*?"

Dan pointed with his chin. Off to their right, a tuba seemed to be floating through the crowd. Dan began to follow it, with Amy trailing behind. Suddenly, it dropped out of sight. Amy and Dan skirted a family running for a train and saw a slender young woman slumped on a suitcase, holding a tuba and crying. A large sticker on a small trunk read WILMINGTON WOWZABELLES EUROPEAN TOUR.

"Distraction!" Dan crowed.

They moved forward, not knowing what they'd do or say but knowing they had the perfect opportunity for . . . something.

"Need a hand with that?" Dan asked the girl. "I happen to have experience as a tuba wrangler."

She looked up, startled. Her eyes were a warm brown behind her delicate wire-rimmed glasses. She smiled. "Thanks, but I think I have it covered." Dan detected a slight Southern accent. Suddenly, her eyes filled with tears. "Actually, I don't! I missed the train, and I have the tuba and all the costumes! It's all Heather's fault. She just had to get her last Italian gelato before the train. She *told*

me to just watch the tuba for *two seconds* and she'd come back. If I don't make it to Zurich in time, I'm doomed!"

"Hey, we're going to Switzerland, too!" Dan said.

"You are?" She swiped at her tears. "I'll miss the concert. My suitcase is with Ms. Mutchnik, and my charger's in my bag, so I can't even call them. And I c-can't speak Italian!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide, as though this was the final awful thing that had happened.

"You can borrow my phone," Amy offered. "And you could take the train to Lucerne with us and then go to Zurich from there. We can travel together."

"Really? That would be so awesome! Europe kind of freaks me out, y'all, to tell you the truth," the girl confided, leaning toward them. "I've never traveled much." Awkwardly, the girl struggled to her feet. She stuck out her hand. "Vanessa Mallory, from Wilmington, South Carolina."

"Mark Farley," Dan said, remembering the name on his fake passport just in time. "This is my sister . . ." His mind was a blank.

"Caroline," Amy supplied. "But you can call me Carrie! We're from Maine," she improvised.

"It's so awesome that I bumped into you," Vanessa said, shouldering one of the bags.

They hurried to the track and got in line behind a wealthy-looking woman with a large trunk and several suitcases. She was dressed in a fur coat and hat, even though it wasn't that cold. She spoke sharply to the police

officer at the train door in rapid Italian. He shrugged.

Finally, the line moved forward. Amy pulled the Wowzabelles trunk, and Dan grabbed the tuba.

“On your way to a concert?” The policeman smiled.

Vanessa nodded. “We’re on a European tour,” she added proudly.

“And what is a Wowzabelle?” he asked.

“Awesome singers,” Amy said, handing over her passport.

Dan waited while the policeman scrutinized the photo, comparing it to Amy. Then he reached for Dan’s.

It seemed to take long seconds before he handed back the document. He ticketed the trunk. “This will go in the oversize compartment—pick it up in Zurich. Welcome aboard.”

Only Dan heard Amy’s long sigh of relief as they boarded the train and found their seats, stowing the tuba overhead.

Dan glanced out the window. A man in a raincoat was talking to the friendly policeman. He had a nose like the beak of a raptor, and his dark hair looked as though he’d blow-dried it with an airplane propeller.

Dan looked away, checking out the station, but his gaze snapped back. He didn’t know why, exactly. Maybe because the man wasn’t showing the officer a ticket or a passport, he was just leaning in, talking to him. And all the while his gaze swept the station.

Detective, Dan thought, as the policeman pointed to the Lucerne train.