



CHAPTER ONE

Laura Martin wasn't even meant to be in Rome that June.

She should have been back home in Bloomington, Indiana, not hanging around the lobby of a cheap hostel with eleven other kids from Riverside High. The school's annual Classics Trip had almost been canceled that year due to low enrollment in the class. This irritated Laura. Classics was her favorite subject, and she was planning on studying ancient history in college. Her best friend, Morgan, on this trip as well, always said that Laura only liked old things—vintage clothes, vinyl records that had to be played on a turntable, used books that smelled of dust, black-and-white movies . . .

Thankfully, their teacher, Mrs. Johnson, had petitioned the principal and the Classics Trip was saved. Every student had to

pay his or her own way, which was no problem for Morgan's family. Laura had had to babysit hyperactive toddlers, save every penny of birthday money, and work as a camera elf in Santa's Grotto in the mall over Christmas. But it was worth it—she had made it here. Twelve days, three countries—Turkey, Greece, and Italy—and every day more interesting than the next, despite the muggy heat and a succession of crummy hostels.

Rome was the final stop. They'd spent the past two days here, touring the Forum, the Pantheon, and the Colosseum. Now, on their last morning, Mrs. Johnson told the group they could do anything they liked.

"Anything you like *within reason*," she cautioned, her voice hoarse from playing tour guide. "Everyone stay out of trouble. And be back here by six, please, for our special last-night dinner."

She winced and gripped her stomach, leaning against the lobby wall, as if the lurid orange wallpaper would give her support.

"I think we may be killing POTUS," Laura murmured to Morgan, trailing the other kids out the glass doors into the swampy heat.

"And that, after all, is a federal crime," said Morgan, mock-earnest. All three teachers on the trip shared last names with former US presidents—Mrs. Johnson, Mr. Harding, and

Ms. Wilson. But only Mrs. Johnson, Laura and Morgan had decided, was worthy of the title of President of the United States. Sometime during the long, hot overnight boat ride from Greece to Italy, the whole group had started using the nickname.

“Though *we* were the ones who came up with it,” Morgan liked to complain, annoyed that most of the other kids on the trip ignored them. This was mainly because she and Morgan were the youngest; they would be starting their junior year in the fall, and everyone else was going into their senior year.

It was obvious to Laura that there were three factions among the seniors: the cool kids, the shoppers, and the geeks. The cool kids were the best-looking, and liked to brag about the sports they excelled at and the colleges they’d be applying to. The shoppers had the most money, or just the most obvious desire to spend it: they preferred haggling for scarves in the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul to exploring the ruins at Pompeii. The geeks were two boys, Dylan and Jack, who wore *Star Wars* T-shirts and complained about stupid things, like the absence of lettuce in Greek salad. When POTUS talked about Virgil—one of the famous poets of Ancient Rome—Dylan asked if she meant the Pokémon character of the same name. Laura didn’t know why he was even on this trip.

Ryan Kray and Dan Sinclair were the handsomest of the

cool boys. Dan had messy dark hair and chiseled cheekbones, and seemed incredibly aloof. Ryan was blond and loud, and wore skinny yellow jeans because he thought they looked “European.” On one bus ride in Greece, Ryan had tried to get Laura’s attention: The sun was in his eyes, and he wanted her to close the pleated window curtain next to her seat. “Hey, Mutant Girl!” he’d shouted.

Laura had dark hair and olive skin, and really, she thought, her eyes should have just been a nice, ordinary brown. Instead they were gray, and sometimes seemed a grayish shade of blue, or sometimes even a dull green. That’s why Ryan called her Mutant Girl. At least, she *thought* that was why. She wished he’d bothered to learn her actual name.

“He’s a guy who wears banana pants,” Morgan had pointed out, trying to cheer her up. “Who cares what he thinks?”

Now, as she and Morgan headed down the narrow alley behind their hostel, Laura decided to stop caring about *any* of the other kids. It was her last day in *Rome*. Beautiful, ancient Rome. Laura had been dreaming about this city since she was a little girl, when her grandfather would tell her stories from the end of World War II. He had been stationed here as a young soldier, just eighteen years old, and he said even with the rubble and the rats, it was his favorite city in the world. Laura saw why; Rome felt like a mythical place, not at all part of any real

world familiar to her—the world of strip malls, highways, and drive-throughs back home.

Now everything she'd studied and read about in Classics class this year was alive around her, in all its fragmented and decaying beauty. It was all so *old*, Laura kept thinking, though not daring to say it out loud. Before they'd left Indiana, POTUS had issued them with a What Not to Do list, and anyone transgressing had to pay a two-euro fine toward the official "Teachers' Gelato Fund."

Prohibited behavior included saying "Everything is so *old*" or "This is awesome," as well as persistent dawdling, wearing earbuds during tours of ancient sites, or complaining if there wasn't air-conditioning. There were so many possible transgressions that the teachers were pretty much able to buy themselves ice cream three times a day.

Laura's own What Not to Do list would be slightly different, she decided. Ryan wouldn't be allowed to call her Mutant Girl. Students couldn't sit in their usual cliques every single night at dinner. Of course, various items of clothing would be banned: *Star Wars* T-shirts, banana pants, and the Ugg Fluffie sandals that the shopping girls insisted on wearing, even though they kept complaining about aching legs. Most important, Ms. Wilson—aka Woody, after her namesake Woodrow Wilson—

couldn't sing the theme music from that old movie *Three Coins in the Fountain* ever again.

"Follow me!" Woody called now, leading them along another narrow street. She was the school's art history teacher, and kind of chaotic, in Laura's opinion. When they hit a main road, Woody—blinded by the brightness of the sun—almost stepped into the path of a speeding Vespa.

"Why is Woody with us?" Morgan whispered. "Isn't it supposed to be our free time?" She pulled her shoulder-length blond hair into a high ponytail, to avoid what she called the "neck sweats" when the heat of the day got too intense.

Laura wished she'd gotten her long hair trimmed before they left Bloomington. During this trip, Morgan had insisted on trying out various "Greek goddess" styles on Laura's hair, and all that braiding and twisting just made it wavy and crazy.

"Woody's obsessed with the Trevi Fountain," Laura explained, brushing a stray dark curl out of her face. "She wants to throw a coin in to make sure she'll return to Rome one day."

"She could just buy a plane ticket, like a normal person." Morgan made a face, and Laura grinned.

Although they were all given to eye rolling behind Woody's back, most of the students were following her lead today and heading for the Trevi Fountain. Maybe, Laura thought, they

were so used to doing everything together that going off alone seemed radical and strange. Just two of the shopper girls had broken ranks by going to the busy Via del Corso, and Ryan Banana Pants had stayed back at the hostel, complaining that he felt sick and achy.

Laura and Morgan walked together, Laura snapping photos and Morgan posing. Their roommates, Nicole and Courtney (enthusiastic members of the “shopper” camp), were doing their best to incur fines for persistent dawdling, stopping to gush over fake Prada and Gucci bags spread out on blankets in the street.

The rest of the seniors walked in their usual clusters, engrossed in their usual private conversations. Occasionally Laura thought she saw Dan look back at her, as though he was about to ask her something. But maybe this was just wishful thinking. He probably thought of her as “Mutant Girl” as well.

Walking up ahead alongside Woody was a strange girl named Maia, who’d joined them the day they arrived in Rome. She had sleek, short black hair and a catlike face that would have been pretty if she didn’t spend so much time frowning.

Apparently Maia was going to be a new student—a senior—at Riverside High School in the fall. Her parents—professors of some kind, in Italy for an academic conference—had managed

to talk the principal into letting Maia crash the end of the Classics Trip.

Laura had tried talking to her a few times, but “Mystery Maia,” as the other kids called her, wasn’t exactly forthcoming. There were rumors that her parents were either exiled nuclear physicists or spies. Laura didn’t know about that, but she did know that Maia had a long, multisyllabic Russian last name, that she was born in Vladivostok, that both her parents—Russian father, Korean-Russian mother—were starting jobs at the Indiana University, and that Maia tended to talk like a professor herself.

“The movie didn’t make up the tradition of throwing coins into a fountain, you know, Ms. Wilson,” Maia was saying, marching down the street alongside Woody. “The ancient Romans threw coins into rivers and lakes, as an offering to the gods, to request a safe return from a journey.”

“We’ll be throwing our own coins in soon.” Woody sounded almost breathless with excitement. “Should we sing the song?”

Maia ignored her. “And the Trevi Fountain was built on the site of an underground Roman aqueduct,” she continued. “Well, the end of one, where it opened into a public square.”

Laura knew this: The aqueduct was built by Agrippa to supply water to his baths near the Pantheon. She wished those

baths were still there. But like so much of ancient Rome, they had been stripped or built over, until only pieces were left.

“Someone make her stop,” Morgan whispered to Laura, fussing with her ponytail.

“Woody or Maia?”

“Both. This is supposed to be our day off. One last chance to have fun without having to *learn* anything, or get asked the difference between . . . I don’t know. Trajan and Trojans.”

“Trajan’s an emperor,” said Maia, shooting an *are you stupid?* look back at Morgan. Laura hoped she hadn’t overheard *all* their conversation. “And Trojans were the inhabitants of ancient Troy.”

“Oh yeah! Silly me,” said Morgan. She raised her eyebrows at Laura as soon as Maia’s sleek dark head was turned.

“Be nice!” Laura whispered.

“You know that stuff, too,” Morgan hissed. “But you don’t blab on and on about it, do you?”

“I could recite the names of emperors for you again,” Laura teased. Morgan had told her once that it was the best-known cure for insomnia, Laura’s chronological list of Roman emperors.

“You can really do that?” said a boy’s voice to her left, and Laura realized it was Dan. She felt her cheeks burning.

“Don’t encourage her,” Morgan groaned. She didn’t seem intimidated by Dan at all, maybe because she claimed he wasn’t that cute. “It’s the world’s most boring party trick.”

The walk signal flashed at them, and everyone set off across the street. Dan strode ahead with some of the others from his group, not waiting for Laura to reply. It was just as well, Laura thought. She didn’t have anything particularly interesting or witty to say. Better to lose herself in the sights of the city.

Rome looked like a stage set, with its pale buildings, shuttered windows, and huge wooden doors with handles shaped like lions or snakes. When she looked up toward the bluest of skies, she saw lush roof terraces lined with vine-covered trellises. Every narrow street seemed to lead to a cobbled piazza or to a serene stone fountain carved with dolphins or nymphs.

And now, quite suddenly, they were approaching the most amazing fountain of them all. The famous Trevi Fountain, white and enormous, its tableau of muscular men and giant horses wedged against the wall of a palazzo like a multistory altar. Its gushing spouts drowned out the chatter of the huge crowd of people around it, everyone taking photos and tossing coins into the frothy pale water.

Laura had seen pictures of it before, but it was much larger and more impressive than she’d expected. More beautiful, too,

as though it was carved out of the purest vanilla ice cream, with such lifelike detail—seaweed, grapes, and reeds—petrified in bleached marble.

“Man, this is awesome,” said Jack, plucking at the neck of his T-shirt. Luckily, Woody was too distracted to fine him for using a banned word. She was already charging down the crowded stairs, making for the rounded rim of the fountain. It was entirely lined with people sitting with their backs to the water, throwing coins in over their shoulders.

“Carved by Pietro Bracci!” Woody shouted, waving a spindly arm in the air. “Such strong lines! Such movement!”

“Hey, Neptune looks like he’s dancing,” said Dylan, nudging Jack, and Maia shot him a bemused look.

“That’s not Neptune,” Maia said. “It’s Oceanus, the son of Gaia and Uranus. But the men holding the horses back—they have fishtails, see? So they’re representations of Triton, Neptune’s son.”

“Class dismissed,” said Dylan, smirking, and Laura felt sorry for Maia. However much Laura and Morgan might feel like outsiders, Maia really was: Even the geek boys thought she was weird. Part of it was her insistence on supplying information all the time; another part was her abrupt manner. Laura’s mother talked about people who “didn’t suffer fools gladly,” and Laura had never understood what she meant. Listening to

Maia, though, she was starting to get the idea. Laura heard people burbling nonsense and she just ignored it. Maia never could.

“That’s right, that’s right.” Woody fumbled in her purse for a coin. “The mighty Triton! Notice that one horse is calm and the other is restless.”

“What does that mean?” asked Nicole, chomping on gum. POTUS would have made her throw it away, but Woody never noticed anything.

“Well, it’s a question of balance and energy, isn’t it?” gushed Woody in her overdramatic teaching voice. “It gives dynamism to the composition . . .”

Laura stopped listening, squinting at the statuesque female figures in their carved draperies, stationed on either side of Oceanus. She checked her guidebook. The woman on the left was Abundance, struggling with her cornucopia. The one on the right was Health, which Laura decided was a very dull name for a woman brandishing a spear and keeping a wary eye on a writhing snake.

The sun was so bright that Laura’s head started aching. She fumbled in her bag for her sunglasses. The heat and the light were playing tricks on her, she decided: For a moment, the snake seemed to be moving, slithering up the shapely arm of Health. Laura shook her head, the way a dog shakes after running out of the sea. Sculptures couldn’t move.

Woody had managed to squeeze into a place on the fountain's edge, eyes shut, a coin glinting in her hand.

"Oh, may as well," said Morgan with a resigned sigh. She pushed through the thick crowd until she was sitting on the edge as well, back to the water, preparing to throw her coin. Most of the students were doing the same thing, Laura noticed—apart from Maia, who never seemed to join in. Maia was frowning, hands shading her eyes, at the Triton brandishing a conch shell.

"Laura, come make your wish!" Morgan called, and Laura waved at her, smiling. It was true that she'd love to return to Rome one day. Ideally without three teachers and eleven other kids.

An insect brushed against her wrist, and Laura instinctively flicked her hand to wave it away. Without meaning to, she smacked the person standing next to her.

"I'm so sor . . ." she began, forgetting to say *scusi* or *permeso* or whatever it was they'd been told to say in Italy. Then she realized, with a start, that it wasn't an insect skittering across her skin; it was another person's hand. The person standing right next to her, whose fingers were closing around Laura's bracelet, tugging at it so hard that the chain dug into her skin.

Someone was trying to steal the most precious thing Laura owned.

“No,” she said, her trembling voice low: She was too astonished to shout. With her other hand she grabbed at her own wrist to try to wrench it away from the mugger, clamping her fingers over the bracelet.

Everything was blurred and hurried: Laura was pulling hard, and elbowing whoever it was in the side. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't; her heart was beating too fast, and all her energy was focused on pulling her arm free.

All of a sudden Maia was there, still frowning, and she shoved the mugger in the chest. With one final almighty effort Laura pulled her arm free, the bracelet's chain broken but still sticking to her clammy arm. And just like that, the mugger melted into the crowd so quickly that all Laura got was the briefest glimpse. It was a woman, she registered. Dark hair, dark eyes, pale skin. A mean expression, as though Laura was the one stealing something.

“Thanks,” Laura managed to wheeze, looking up from the broken bracelet dangling off her wrist. But Maia had already walked away, down the steps toward the fountain, as though fighting off a mugger was the kind of thing she did every day.