

Isaac's holiday is about to take a wrong turn ...

SAM SEDGMAN



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THE GALILEO HEIST

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HEIST



SAM SEDGMAN

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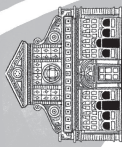
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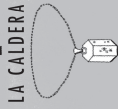
'You cannot teach a man anything. You can only help him find it within himself.'

Galileo Galilei

FLORENCE

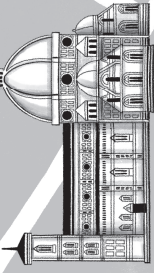


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LA CALDERA

PIAZZA DEL DUOMO



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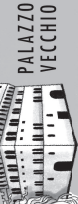
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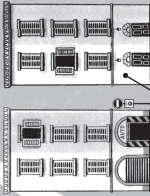
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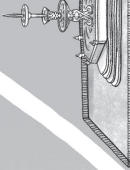
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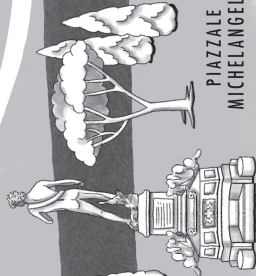
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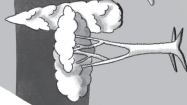
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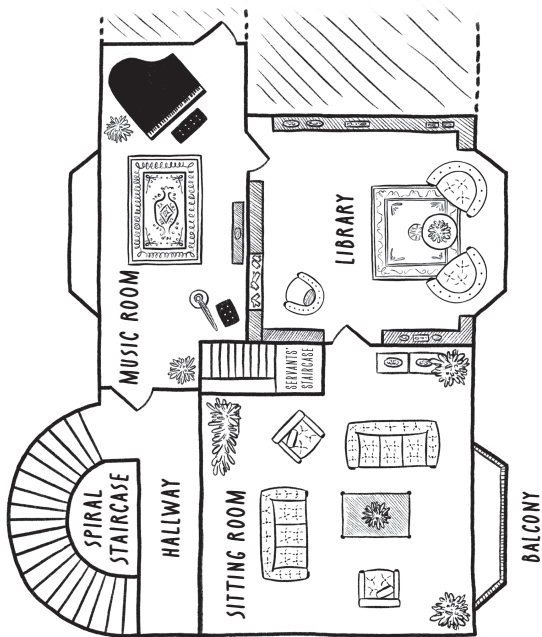


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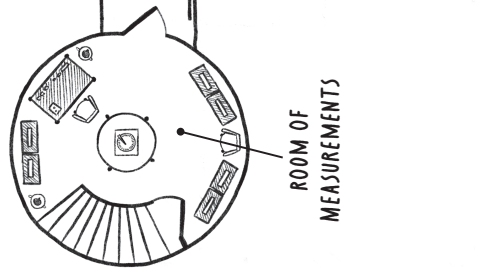
RIVER ARNO

LA CALDERA

THIRD FLOOR



FOURTH FLOOR





PART ONE

Yellow

CHAPTER ONE

Sixteen days to the Solar Eclipse

Isaac peered through the window of the aeroplane at the undulating hills of the Tuscan countryside, spread out beneath them like a wrinkled rug. The vivid green landscape of sprawling vineyards and winding roads seemed to turn gold in the afternoon sunlight, and bright cotton clouds hung lazily above them in the sharp blue sky. The world looked freshly painted in Italy. Colours were brighter. Isaac noticed it every time he came to visit.

‘Does your grandfather live in one of those villas?’ Hattie leaned across him to look out of the window, pointing down at the tiled roofs of the grand houses nestled like beauty spots among the plump cheeks of the hills and valleys. ‘You said he has a pool, right?’

‘Yes, he has a pool,’ said Isaac, smiling as the plane banked and continued its descent. ‘And vines you can eat grapes from and an oven he makes pizzas in. It’s a bit run-down but there’s loads to explore. In the wood, there’s a tree that pokes above the others. I tried to make a lookout there last year but I couldn’t do it on my own.’

‘We’ll do it together then,’ said Hattie. ‘And spy on all his neighbours.’

Isaac beamed. He couldn’t believe his best friend was getting to spend the summer with him. For the first time, a trip to his grandfather’s house felt like a real holiday, and not an excuse for his dad to get him out from under his feet for a few weeks.

‘We could watch the eclipse from there too,’ Isaac suggested.

‘Sure, nerd.’ Hattie rolled her eyes. ‘When is it, two weeks?’

‘Sixteen days,’ said Isaac, excited. He’d been counting down to it all year: a solar eclipse, when the moon would pass briefly in front of the sun, blocking out the daylight.

The plane screeched on to the runway and taxied to the terminal. A smiling air steward waited with them while the other passengers disembarked. As Isaac and Hattie were thirteen, they weren’t allowed to fly on their

own without a grown-up looking out for them. This was only Isaac's second time making the flight without his dad, and it still felt special. Beside him, Hattie flicked through a book. Her mother lived in Hong Kong, her father in London and she went to school in Switzerland. To her, flying must be quite boring, he thought.

The hot Italian air smacked them in the face as they were led down the steps from the plane, heat rising off the tarmac and making the air squiggle.

'I'm already sweating,' said Hattie, slinging her rucksack over her shoulder. 'I can't wait to get in that pool.'

They picked up their suitcases from the rumbling conveyor belt in the air-conditioned terminal, and followed the steward through a security gate to the arrivals room. Isaac looked about for his grandfather.

Ferdinand Greenwood waved like a windmill over the heads of the crowd, pushing towards them with a big toothy smile. He was a very tall man with suntanned skin and rakish grey hair swept back like breaking surf. He tackled his grandson into a hug, the overpowering scent of his spicy aftershave washing over Isaac as he kissed him on the top of the head.

'Hello, Smartie,' he said. 'Missed you. And you must be Hattie!'

‘Hello, Mr Greenwood,’ said Hattie. ‘Thank you for having me to stay.’

‘It’s my absolute delight.’ He shook her hand vigorously. ‘Isaac’s told me so much.’

The air steward politely cleared her throat, and Ferdinand straightened up, patting the pockets of his leather satchel for his ID.

‘Got to make sure I’m not kidnapping you.’ He winked at Isaac.

They thanked the steward for looking after them, and Ferdinand steered them towards the exit.

‘I’m *so* excited you’re both here,’ he said, taking the handles of their wheeled suitcases. ‘I’ve got plenty of plans for our summer. Castles to visit, ice creams to eat, beaches to drive to, and I’ve just had the most *enormous* projector screen put into the old wine cellar.’

‘You finally made it into a cinema?’ Isaac asked, excited.

‘I came into a little money recently.’ Ferdinand smiled. ‘So you can stay up late and watch any film you like.’ He glanced behind them. ‘Best get moving! How was your flight?’

‘Fine,’ said Isaac. ‘Dad says hello.’

‘Mm,’ said his grandfather, nodding politely as they left the terminal and headed for the car park. ‘That’s nice.’

Isaac had always known his dad wasn't the biggest fan of Ferdinand. They were polite to each other – but much too polite, Isaac thought, for two people who actually liked each other. He had never understood why.

'Are you looking for someone?' asked Hattie, as they crossed into the shade of the multi-storey car park. Isaac noticed his grandfather was looking left and right as he hurriedly dragged their suitcases towards his tomato-red convertible.

'What? No!' Ferdinand chuckled. 'I'm just excited to get back home. I don't like airports. Hop in!'

'I call the front seat!' Hattie yelled, vaulting over the passenger door. 'This is *nice*,' she added, bouncing on the leather upholstery.

'I've had it since I retired,' said Ferdinand, popping open the boot of the vintage car and wrestling their suitcases inside. 'I'm sorry there's not more room in the back.'

'It's OK,' said Isaac, squirming into the tiny back seat. 'Grandad, are you sure you're all right?' He watched Ferdinand fumble his keys and glance furtively around the car park again with suspicion. 'You seem ... distracted.'

'I'll be much better when we're home.' Ferdinand hopped behind the wheel and the engine coughed into

life. They reversed out of their parking spot with a splutter of petrol fumes. Isaac turned round to hunt for his seatbelt, and noticed a woman in dark glasses watching them from behind a white minivan. She was talking into a phone. When she spotted Isaac watching her, she darted out of sight.

‘Grandad,’ he said. ‘Is something going on?’

‘What? Nothing’s going on,’ Ferdinand said as the car purred towards the yellow barriers.

‘I’m going to call my dad,’ said Hattie, pulling out her phone. ‘Let him know we arrived OK.’

‘Best wait until we’re back home!’ Ferdinand chirped, rummaging around his seat for the parking ticket. ‘You won’t be able to hear anything over the roar of the road once we’re driving!’

Isaac looked over his shoulder and saw the woman in dark glasses emerge from behind the minivan, marching towards them.

‘It won’t take a second,’ said Hattie, scrolling through her contacts. ‘By the time we’re on the road I’ll have ... Hey!’

Ferdinand snatched the phone from her and tossed it into the footwell. ‘No phones.’

Hattie stared at him in shock as he fed the ticket into the machine by the barrier.

‘Grandad?’ Isaac tapped him on the shoulder.
‘Behind us.’

Ferdinand turned and saw the woman in the dark glasses approaching them fast. He gulped.

‘Hold on, kids,’ he said. As the yellow barrier lifted, Ferdinand revved the engine and their car lurched forward with a screech of tyres.



CHAPTER TWO

Sixteen days to the Solar Eclipse

‘**W**hat are you *doing*?’ Hattie braced herself against the door as Ferdinand accelerated on to a roundabout amid a din of honking car horns. ‘Careful!’

‘Sorry, kids!’ Ferdinand spun the wheel and changed gears. ‘We’re in a bit of a rush.’

‘Who was that woman?’ Isaac asked. ‘Were you looking out for her? Is she after you?’

‘Don’t worry about any of that,’ said Ferdinand breezily. ‘Soon we’ll be in the Tuscan hills and we can all relax.’

‘Well, I’m calling my dad,’ said Hattie, rummaging in the footwell. ‘I promised I’d tell him when I got here and you can’t tell me what to do.’

‘Please!’ Ferdinand clutched her arm as he changed lanes. Isaac rocked sideways and grabbed his seatbelt. ‘No phones. Turn them off. Just till we get home.’

‘Why?’ asked Isaac.

‘Trust me?’ Ferdinand begged.

‘No offence,’ said Hattie, raising her voice as they hared down a main road, ‘but I don’t know you. If you want me to turn off my phone, you’re going to have to tell me why.’

Ferdinand was quiet, clutching the steering wheel with both hands.

‘I’m in a spot of bother,’ he said. ‘I’d prefer it if nobody knew where I was.’

‘And what’s my phone got to do with that?’ Hattie asked.

‘They can trace phones,’ said Isaac, a cold dread prickling his chest.

‘Who’s “they”?’

‘The police,’ Isaac said. ‘Grandad, what ... what did you do?’

‘I didn’t do *anything!*’ Ferdinand protested. ‘There’s nothing to worry about, just please turn off your phones and I’ll explain everything when we get home.’

Isaac glanced behind him, the hot Tuscan wind ruffling his long hair.

‘Grandad, I don’t think you have to worry about our phones,’ he shouted.

‘What? Why?’

‘Because we’re being followed!’

The white minivan from the car park was accelerating up the dual carriageway, weaving between taxis and hire cars.

‘Oh f—igs.’ Ferdinand slapped the steering wheel. ‘I’m really sorry about this, kids.’ He glanced in the rear-view mirror, watching the van get closer.

‘If you didn’t do anything, just stop and talk to them,’ said Isaac.

‘I wish it were that simple,’ said Ferdinand, changing gears and swerving into the right-hand lane to undertake a tourist coach. The van behind them followed suit, approaching fast. It honked its horn at them. Isaac looked over his shoulder and saw the woman in dark glasses in the driving seat.

‘Kids?’ Ferdinand adjusted the mirror. ‘Are your seatbelts on?’

‘Er ... yes?’ said Hattie, glancing at Isaac nervously. ‘Why?’

Ferdinand yanked the steering wheel to the right and slammed on the brakes. Isaac lurched against his seatbelt as the car spun out of the fast-moving traffic

and on to the hard shoulder, the minivan swooping past them with a blare of its horn. The convertible slid along the tarmac, turning back on itself, and Ferdinand revved the engine again, turning on to a slip road and dodging out of the way of an oncoming motorbike.

‘OH MY GOD!’ Hattie shouted, as they roared the wrong way down the one-way street. ‘That was *insane!* That was ... *so cool!*’

Isaac watched the dual carriageway vanish behind them. The minivan was nowhere in sight.

‘Grandad?’

‘Just a mo.’ Ferdinand veered around an approaching bus, loudly honking its horn, and turned on to a dirt road. ‘Yes, Isaac?’

‘Are you a criminal?’

‘Ha! What a question.’ In the rear-view mirror, his grandad’s warm blue eyes fixed him with an earnest look. ‘I’ll explain everything. I promise.’

The car bounced along the dirt road until they reached a farm, and Ferdinand swept the convertible through the open doors of a barn. Leaving the engine running, he clambered out of his seat and popped open the boot, digging among the luggage for something.

‘Is your grandad kidnapping us?’ Hattie whispered,

leaning across the back of her seat. 'Should we get out of the car?'

'Don't get out of the car,' said Ferdinand, slamming the boot before Isaac could reply. 'I'm going to take you somewhere safe.'

He began unscrewing the number plate at the back, replacing it with a different one he'd taken from the boot. 'This will fool the cameras, might buy us some time.'

'Why isn't it safe with you?' Isaac asked. 'Grandad, what's going *on*?'

'There's been a little mix-up,' said Ferdinand, briskly approaching the front of the car to replace its number plate too. 'The police are ... very interested to talk to me about something, and I'd much rather you not get involved.'

'Bit late for that,' said Hattie.

'I haven't done anything wrong,' said Ferdinand, dusting off his hands and climbing back into the car. 'It's a misunderstanding. I will clear it up. But until I do, I think it's best that I ask a friend of mine to look after you.'

'What friend?' asked Isaac.

'My best friend,' said Ferdinand, reversing the car out of the barn and into the sunlight. 'She's a hoot. You'll love her.'

‘How long are you going to leave us with her?’ Isaac asked.

‘Just until the police and I reach an understanding,’ said Ferdinand, the gearbox crunching as they rode back along the dirt road again. ‘Don’t worry. It’s not my first time dealing with the law.’

‘You think that’s making me *less* worried?’ Hattie said.

‘It’ll be OK,’ said Ferdinand. He found Isaac in the rear-view mirror, and winked. ‘Trust me.’

Isaac looked away. He’d never seen his grandfather act like this before, and it was making him nervous. He knew his dad was always suspicious of Ferdinand. Now Isaac was starting to see why.

CHAPTER THREE

Sixteen days to the Solar Eclipse

Ferdinand drove at a normal speed into the city of Florence, stopping and starting as they dodged round treacle-like traffic. Isaac kept an eye out for police cars, but his grandfather's winding route seemed to keep them off their tail.

The heat of the city pressed around them like a thick towel, making Isaac sweat. The blazing sun baked into the yellowy, biscuit-coloured stone of the apartment buildings lining the streets. Green shutters and jutting balconies covered the high walls, washing lines and telephone cables dangling over the narrow gaps between them. Isaac was grateful for the breeze that flowed over the convertible every time they edged forward through the traffic.

‘Here we are,’ said Ferdinand, pulling the car up on to the kerb. They were in a small piazza: a wonky square between the buildings. A sinewy olive tree draped itself over the tables of a cafe, whose cherry-red chairs spilt out across the uneven paving towards a statue in the piazza’s heart. Isaac watched his granddad turn off the ignition and hurry round to the boot to unload their suitcases.

‘*Ciao amici!* Hello, friends! *Bonjour mes amis!*’ A boy a little younger than Isaac raced towards them across the piazza, jumping to a halt with his legs together, hands thrust in the pockets of his cargo shorts, a beaming smile on his face.

‘Er, hello?’ Isaac said, glancing at Hattie.

‘Oh, English!’ The boy seemed delighted. ‘You have come far! You must be hot? Would you like a nice cold lemonade? I fetch it for you, only four euro.’

‘No, thanks,’ said Hattie, as Isaac glanced back at his grandfather, who had taken his satchel from the boot before slamming it shut.

‘*Bellissima* – for you I give a discount, three euro,’ the boy said with a cheeky smile.

Hattie sniggered. Isaac’s Italian was halting at best but he was sure the boy had called her beautiful.

‘We’re not interested,’ said Ferdinand, propping their

cases by the car and ringing the buzzer of an apartment building with a blue door.

‘You are not hungry or thirsty? No problem! Perhaps you forgot something in your luggage.’ The boy began pulling items from the pockets of his cargo shorts. ‘I have ... batteries, sunscreen, toothpaste ... and this very handsome pair of sunglasses.’ He put them on and grinned. ‘Yours for twenty euro.’

‘He said no.’ Hattie climbed out the car and folded her arms, smiling.

‘They will look good on you, my friend!’ The boy thrust them at Isaac.

‘I don’t think we need anything, thanks,’ said Isaac, as Ferdinand pressed the buzzer by the blue door again, drumming his fingers anxiously on the brown leather satchel.

‘Are you sure? Are you *sure* you’re sure?’ The boy wagged his eyebrows. ‘Anything you like, I can get.’

‘ENZO!’ An older boy stepped into the piazza through the open shutters of a garage on the corner. He wore dungarees, held a spanner, and his arms were covered in black grease. He yelled at the boy across the piazza, a stream of Italian too fast for Isaac to understand.

‘*Arrivederci!*’ Enzo saluted the two of them before turning on his heel and sprinting back towards the garage.

‘She must not be home,’ said Ferdinand, banging on the blue door before taking a few steps back and pressing his hands to his face to call up to the balconies above them. ‘Olga! Olga, are you there?’

The door creaked open, and a woman with a walking stick peered out.

‘I am here and there is no need to shout,’ she muttered, fixing Isaac’s grandfather with a narrow stare from behind saucer-thick glasses. ‘The intercom is broken. You make too much noise. Always so impatient, Ferdinand.’

She spoke with a heavy Eastern European accent and wore a patterned headscarf over her tight bun of grey hair.

‘Olga, my darling.’ Ferdinand swept her into a hug. ‘I’m so glad you’re here.’

‘Oh, now I am your darling,’ said Olga, poking his leg angrily with her walking stick. ‘We don’t speak for three days and now I am your darling.’ She glanced at the children. ‘Now that you need something.’

‘They found me,’ Ferdinand murmured, not lowering his voice enough to stop Isaac from overhearing. ‘I’m going back to the villa to sort everything out, but I need you to watch the kids until it’s done. They’re visiting for the summer, remember?’

‘Ha! Quite the holiday you have planned for them.’

Isaac gave Hattie a nervous look. He’d never met this woman in his life.

Olga gave Isaac an equally sceptical stare, before returning her disdain to Ferdinand. ‘You are a fool,’ she said, adjusting her glasses. ‘A charming fool.’ She sighed. ‘Fine. I will show them cartoons and buy them sugar.’ She shuffled forward. ‘Children, my name is Olga. You are Isaac and Harriet, yes? Ferdinand has told me nothing about you. If you are quiet and not idiots, we will get on well.’

‘Thank you.’ Ferdinand pressed his hands together in gratitude. He pulled the satchel from his shoulder and pushed it into her hands. ‘And this, you *must* look after.’

Olga nodded in understanding.

‘Um,’ said Hattie, raising her hand. ‘I’m not staying with some random. And I don’t think Isaac wants to either.’

‘Random is adjective, it is not noun,’ said Olga, moving her laser-like stare to Hattie. ‘You may say I am randomly selected stranger, but that is also quite wrong. Ferdinand has no other friends, and who else was he to choose? I am his only option. And I believe, I am afraid, also yours.’

Hattie sucked her teeth. ‘I don’t know you.’

‘Please.’ Ferdinand put an arm on Isaac’s shoulder and reached for Hattie’s too, but she stepped away. ‘I won’t be gone more than a few days.’

‘A few *days*?’ Hattie laughed.

‘Grandad, just tell us what trouble you’re in,’ said Isaac. ‘Please.’

Ferdinand’s lips pressed into a line. He looked at Olga.

‘Tell them,’ she said.

But just as Ferdinand opened his mouth to explain, the sound of sirens filled the air, and three police cars squealed into the piazza.

