

Prologue

He preferred Rome in the winter.

Tourists crowded the city during the summer months. They filled the narrow streets and cafés, taking photographs of buildings older than their countries and spending small fortunes pretending to be Italian for a week. Winter belonged to the locals. Winter belonged to the people who actually lived there.

Rain streaked the windows of the café in crooked lines while a fire crackled lazily in the stone hearth. The scent of smoke mingled with espresso and damp wool coats. Outside, pedestrians hurried beneath umbrellas while scooters splashed through puddles on the cobblestone streets.

He sat alone near the fire, nursing a glass of coffee that had long since grown cold.

His hands tightened around the arms of the chair.

The feeling had started again.

It always started the same way.

A whisper.

A pressure.

A thought that wasn't entirely his own.

The flames danced inside the fireplace.

The smell of smoke filled his lungs.

For a brief moment he wasn't in Rome anymore.

He wasn't sitting in a warm café while rain tapped against the glass.

He was somewhere else.

A different fire.

A different night.

Screams.

Smoke.

A bonfire reaching toward the heavens.

His fingers dug into the wood of the chair until his knuckles turned white.

No.

Not today.

The pressure grew stronger.

He closed his eyes.

“What you resist, you empower” he told himself.

He could feel it pressing against him.

Searching.

Waiting.

Patient as ever.

Twenty years.

Twenty years and it still waited.

Slowly the sensation receded.

The man exhaled.

The episode had lasted only seconds.

It always felt like hours.

When he opened his eyes again the fire was still crackling peacefully and the rain still fell beyond the windows.

Rome.

Just Rome.

Nothing more.

Nothing less.

His coffee was cold.

He could see his reflection in the window; he looked virtually nothing like his younger self. Brown hair that was now down to his shoulders, not as thick on top as it used to be, but he believed it still had decent coverage – as long as it wasn't windy. His beard was wooly and grizzly; brownish with shades of red, and the occasional gray hair that seemed out of place. The wrinkles around his eyes were more prominent, aged, as were the dark circles under his eyes. Sleep was getting harder to find lately yet he was always so tired.

Across the room sat a young woman.

He wasn't certain when she had arrived.

Perhaps she had been there the whole time.

She sat alone near the window with a hardcover notebook resting on the table before her. It was black and pristine, the sort of expensive journal given as a graduation gift by someone who imagined great things for its owner.

The notebook was open.

The page was blank.

He smiled.

Every young writer looked the same.

She couldn't have been more than twenty-three years old. Blonde hair hung just past her shoulders and a pen rested nervously between her fingers. Every few moments she would lower the pen toward the paper only to stop before making contact.

Then she would sigh and start the process all over again.

Terrified.

He knew exactly what she was feeling.

The first words were always the hardest.

The first sentence wasn't much easier.

If you wanted to finish something, eventually you had to begin it.

The thought made him laugh quietly.

Inside him was twenty years of trying to finish something he wished had never started.

No.

That wasn't true.

Not entirely.

He regretted the way things had happened.

He regretted the years.

He regretted the people who had been hurt.

But he did not regret them.

A woman.

A child.

Three friends.

Those memories remained.

They were the only things that kept him from surrendering to the darkness.

The young woman closed the notebook.

He felt disappointment.

Not for himself.

For her.

A journey not taken.

A story not told.

He stared at the closed notebook for several moments before shaking his head.

Antonio would have already walked across the room. Probably with a cigarette hanging from his mouth and some ridiculous line prepared.

Rocky would've spent twenty minutes convincing himself not to bother her.

Mario would've opened with a pickup line so terrible that security would've escorted him into the street.

He chuckled to himself.

Fucking Mario.

The sound caused the young woman to glance in his direction.

For just a moment their eyes met.

She looked away quickly.

He remained seated.

This wasn't his business.

He wasn't here to save anyone.

He wasn't here to offer advice.

He wasn't here to start another story.

Yet he found himself standing anyway.

His leg muscles which had settled nicely into their space on the chair declared their discontent with readjusting immediately.

Everything complained these days.

He crossed the room and stopped beside her table.

The young woman looked up.

Confused.

Curious.

Not frightened.

Just surprised.

"The first words are usually more right than we believe."

She blinked.

"What?"

He nodded toward the notebook.

"The first words."

The young woman looked down at the journal and laughed nervously.

"You've been watching me?"

He just shrugged. "You looked stuck." He said, trying to ease her mind.

"I *am* stuck."

"Ah yes, that's usually how it starts."

She studied him for a moment.

The old black coat.

The tired eyes.

The face of someone who had seen more of the world than he cared to remember.

"You sound like you've done this before."

He looked toward the rain beyond the windows.

Once.

A very long time ago.

"I've started a few things."

The young woman smiled.

"How did you finish them?"

He stared at the fire again.

That, he thought, was the question.

That was always the question.

"The question isn't how," he said quietly.

"It's why."

The young woman tilted her head.

"What does that mean?"

He smiled.

Outside, the rain continued to fall over Rome.