

THE TRAVELERS

AN EXCERPT

PROLOGUE

Mendoza, Argentina

The door flies open. Bright light floods into the dark room, framing the silhouette of a large man who stands there, unmoving.

“What?” Will demands, raising himself onto his elbows, squinting into the harsh light. “What’s going on?”

The man doesn’t answer.

“What do you want?”

The man remains in the doorway, saying nothing, a big mute looming hulk. He surveys the hotel room, the disheveled bed, discarded clothing, burned-down candles, wine bottle and glasses.

“¿Qué quieres?” Will tries.

Will had been lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, worrying. But not about this, not about an intruder. Now Will’s mind is flooding with competing scenarios and their different levels of emergency: drunk hotel guest, confused night porter, hotel security, jealous boyfriend, burglar, murderer.

Will’s panic is rising, and his eyes flicker toward escape, the French doors that he opened just a few minutes ago, doors facing the vineyard that falls away from the hacienda, with the snow-capped peaks of the Andes in the distance, under the big fat moon.

He pulls himself to a sitting position, uncomfortably aware of his bare chest. “Who are you?” he asks assertively, trying to project confidence. “Why are you here?”

The man nods, takes a step forward, and pulls the door closed behind him.

The room falls into the semi-darkness of flickering candlelight and the bright blue LED glow of the clock, 2:50 a.m. Will’s eyes readjust while his heart races, his breath coming quick and shallow, fight or flight, or both. His imagination hops around the room, trying out different items as weapons, swinging the standing lamp, breaking the wine bottle. A fireplace tool—the poker—would be the best, but that’s on the far side of the room, on the other side of this trespasser, this indistinct peril.

“No,” the man breaks his silence. “Why are you here?”

The man’s hand finds a switch, a soft click and a harsh transformation, Will’s pupils contracting a sliver of a second too slowly. In the light, Will realizes that he has seen this man before. He can’t remember where, or when exactly, but it was sometime recent. This discovery feels more like a defeat than a victory, as if he found out that he lost something.

“Who are you, Will Rhodes?”

The man’s English doesn’t have any trace of an accent, Argentine or otherwise. This is a big beefy American who’s continuing to walk toward the bed, toward Will, slowly, menacing. It takes a while; it’s a large room, luxuriously decorated and extravagantly lined, with superfluous furniture and wine-country knickknacks and signifiers of the Pampas—mounted horns, a cowhide rug. It’s a room designed to remind well-off guests of where they are, and why they’re here, when they could be anywhere. Will has stayed in many different versions of this room, all over the world, always on someone else’s tab.

“Are you robbing me?” Will inventories the valuables he might lose here, and it doesn’t amount to much.

“Kidnapping?” Though no one except the most ill-informed amateur would take the tremendous risk of kidnapping for the paltry rewards that could be traded for Will Rhodes. This guy doesn’t look like an ill-informed amateur.

He finally arrives at the bedside, and reaches into his jacket. Will scoots away from whatever potential threat is being withdrawn from this man’s pocket, in the middle of the night, halfway across the globe from his home, from his wife, his life.

If Will had any doubts earlier, he doesn’t anymore: he’s now positive he made a terrible mistake tonight. The whole thing seemed too easy, too perfect. He’d been an idiot.

“Look,” the man says, extending his arm, holding something, a little flick of the wrist—here, take this—and the smart phone falls into Will’s palm. He glances at the screen, a still image, an indecipherable blur of faint light amid darkness, unrecognizable forms in an unidentifiable location.

“What’s this?”

“Hit play.”

Will touches the touch-screen, and video-navigation buttons appear, the recently invented language we all now know. He hits the triangle.

A video begins to play: a naked woman straddling a man, her hips pistoning up and down, like an out-of-control oil derrick, a dangerous situation. Will watches for two seconds, just enough to figure out who it is in the poor-quality video, low light, an oblique angle, garbled audio. He touches his fingertip to the square button. The image is now frozen, the woman’s back arched, head thrown back, mouth open in ecstasy. Apparent ecstasy.

Of course.

Will isn’t entirely surprised that something bad is happening. He’d always hoped—irrationally?—that his good luck would end with a speed bump, not a calamitous crash. This particular end seems to be an excess of bad, disproportionate bad, unfair bad. Or maybe not. Maybe this—whatever this turns out to be—is exactly the bad he deserves.

His mind runs through a handful of options before he makes a decision that’s by necessity hasty. He considers trying to get on more clothes—“Hey, how about you let me get dressed?”—but clothed, he

might look like a threat; wearing only pajama bottoms, he's a victim, sympathetic to the guard he hopes to encounter. This new hotel takes security seriously, peace of mind for their intended mega-rich clientele, with round-the-clock rent-a-cops and a close relationship with the police.

Will extends his arm to return the phone, rolling his body toward the bedside.

Here we go.

When the man reaches to collect his device, Will hurls it across the room.

The intruder spins to watch the phone's flight—crack—while Will springs up, hurls his body into this man, knocking him over, landing atop him, pajama'd legs astride the guy's bulky torso, a punch to the face, and another, blood pouring from his nose.

Will hops up, barely feeling the engagement of his muscles, his bloodstream flooded with survival-preservation hormones. He flies through the parted curtains. He's out on the moonlit lawn, barefoot and shirtless, sprinting through the cool dewy grass toward the glowing lights of the sprawling main house, toward the security guards and their weapons and their hotline to the federales, who at the very least will detain the intruder while Will has a chance to make a call or two, and now Will is feeling almost confident, halfway across the—

The fist comes out of nowhere. Will stumbles backward a half-step before losing his feet entirely, his rear falling down and his feet flying up, and he thinks he can see a woman—the woman—standing over him, her arm finishing its follow-through of a right hook, just before the back of Will's head slams into the ground, and everything goes black.