

**A sneak peak look at the first two chapters of...**

# **THE WAR OF MORTAL BLOOD**

**By Harold Hodge, Jr.**

## Chapter One

### Jaylen

“We ain’t lost!”

We were definitely lost. The drive from Naples International Airport to our resort was meant to take less than four hours, but six had already passed in the sweltering car. Leaning my head on the hot glass, I eyed the passing trees. “If we ain’t lost, are we almost there?” I asked Dad with a groan.

Believe me, I was aware that the are-we-there-yet whine was not a good look on a seventeen-year-old, but stuffing a family of six into a car so small was cruel and unusual punishment.

No doubt it saved Dad money to get the smallest car the rental garage had available. If he had the option, I’m sure he would have preferred to get bicycles and make us pedal around Europe like an ethnic Von Trapp Family. Dad would sooner part with his teeth than a cent of his money, and if having all six of us play body-jenga to fit into a *Kia Soul* saved a couple of dollars, then that’s what we were going to do.

“You pay an arm and a leg for a fancy phone with a built-in GPS and the damn thing don’t work overseas,” Dad hissed. He gave his phone a few forceful taps, as if to beat it into submission. “When I was a kid, we always planned a route on a map and never got lost!”

“When you were a kid, you had Harriet Tubman to plan your route,” I added with a smirk. If looks could kill, I would have dropped dead from the expression Dad jerked his head to give me. The vein on his temple began to throb and that only happened when he was furious or when he got the electric bill.

“Can you *please* just let me look at the GPS,” Emma called from the back seat. If anyone could navigate us through these mountains, my Einstein of a stepsister could. Dad held us all to

pretty high standards when it came to school, but Emma was on a whole other level of book smart. Only fourteen, Emma was like a child prodigy and retained almost everything she read. I was prone to ask her something before taking the time to Google it.

“I told you I got it,” Dad hissed in reply. I’m sure he knew that Emma could lead us to the resort in a heartbeat, but feared for his pride. Dad was the type of man that would rather be lost for hours than have his stepdaughter best him at something like navigation.

Emma rolled her eyes as she reached over her seat into the back of the car. She lunged within her seat belts restraints to a small blue cooler and yanked out a water bottle. After lazily plopping back in her seat, she placed the bottle on her collarbone. Condensation dripped down, offering her a moment of relief from the heat.

“Can we at least turn on the Air Conditioning?” she groaned.

“Roll the windows down, that’s free,” Dad replied.

The heat wasn’t anything we weren’t used to. Back home in North Carolina, Dad kept the Air Conditioning off, heatwave or otherwise. “There are freezing kids in the Arctic that would be grateful to have this heat,” he would say with a wag of his finger.

The windows were already down but with so many bodies in the car, the heat was tangible, a weight in everyone’s lap. Luggage tucked under each limb made it impossible to shift for comfort. All we could do was sit and roast.

“Dad, even you’re drenched in sweat,” I pointed out. His salmon polo was ringed with damp stripes. “At this point, it looks like you’re wearing tie-dye. Maybe people will think it’s just an American look.”

Emma shook her head. “From an international viewpoint,” she began in her tone of voice that meant she was about to give an entire thesis, “Tie-dye hasn’t really been globally representative of America since the hippie protest against the Vietnam War in-”

Dad cranked the radio volume up to a blast. Emma took the hint and folded her arms in silence. I looked down at the aux cord that was plugged into Dad’s phone.

*Heaven knows why he has music dibs.*

He only had one album on downloaded and circled through the same eight songs the entire six-hour drive. I loved *New Edition* as much as the next guy, but if I had to hear “Candy Girl” one more time, I was going to throw myself from the moving car and down the mountainside.

I took a glance in the rearview mirror at the backseat. My knees may have been screaming for mercy from the dashboard, but I was thankful not to be sitting two to a seat like the others. Rarely was I glad to be freakishly tall, but it was the only thing that gave me shotgun and kept my stepmother in the back.

Sara was barely five feet tall, so she fit in the back easier than I would. She didn’t seem to mind in the slightest, babbling gleefully about the new country we explored. “Italians grow a lot of their own foods; olives, grapes, and things like that. I think they make their own cheese too! Oh, let me check this magazine article. It’s in my purse somewhere.”

Emma shot me a look through the rearview mirror, sure there was no way of stopping her mother from reading the article once it was found. Even I knew her mother well enough to predict that one article would lead to another, and another, and another.

Sara rapidly dove into her purse to search for the article clipping, completely oblivious to the fact that her audience couldn't care less. She scrounged in the black-hole-of-a-bag until she snatched out a wrinkled page from a magazine.

"I can't believe we all get to see it in person," Sara chuckled. She reached toward the driver's seat and patted her husband on the shoulder. "We really lucked out in the sweepstakes!"

"Lucked out" was a hell of an understatement. Any time we asked to go somewhere, whether it was to the movies or a waterpark, the response was always the same. "Why go somewhere and pay, when a book could transport you for free? Go read something!"

It was no wonder each member of our family were avid readers. We would have never dreamed of going on a vacation down the street, let alone to Italy. When Dad got the phone call saying we had won a trip out of the country, he was just about to hang up when he heard the words "all-expense paid." Although, as Dad quickly realized, "all-expense" only covered our roundtrip flights and resort stay. Food, rental cars, gas, and any other expense came from Dad's shoestring budget.

"My book club is going to be so jealous," my stepmom said with a giggle. Sara's giddy laughter was cut short when our youngest brother, Jake, bounced on her lap. The woman gave out a low grunt as the two-year-old threw himself into her stomach. "I really wish you had spared a few dollars to rent a car seat," Sara said in sing-song while she tickled Jake.

"Honey, you *are* the car seat," Dad replied. Sara opened her mouth in response, but he continued and cut her off. "If holding a kid in your lap is good enough for Britney Spears, it's good enough for me!"

Sara rolled her eyes and brought her attention to her middle child, James. My five-year-old brother was upside down in his seat, feet kicking in the air. “*Anak*, what are you doing?” she asked.

“There’s a bunch of cool stuff under the seat,” James replied. He returned right side up holding a hardened piece of gum he had scraped from the cushion. He gave it a sniff. “Strawberry!” he exclaimed before throwing it into his mouth.

Sara pulled down her designer shades as if to block the disgusting behavior from her view. The only thing that seemed to be able to bend Dad’s iron budget was my stepmom’s lavish tastes.

James turned his attention to Emma and began to rapidly poke her in the elbow. It seemed that our annoyance was sustenance to that boy the way he constantly irked us. I assumed without our frustration, he’d wither away.

“If you want to leave Italy with the same amount of teeth you had when you got here, I suggest you stop,” Emma growled, eyes closed.

James gave a malicious grin that lacked two front teeth, chuckling at Emma’s annoyed expression. He followed up with a sharp pinch to her arm for an extra laugh.

“What good is a vacation if I don’t get a vacation from *you!*” Emma snapped as she turned abruptly towards the window, ensuring her elbow clipped her brother in the shoulder. James shrunk back momentarily, rubbing the place he’d been hit with a pout.

“That really hurt,” he whined, clearly overdramatizing his pain.

“Emma, don’t hit your little brother!” Sara scolded.

“He started it!” Emma retorted. She broke into a bicker with her mother. All the while James and Jake added to the noise by singing “She’ll Be Coming Around the Mountain” on an offkey loop.

Then the icing on the cake, “Candy Girl” came on again.

To drown out the chaos, I snatched my headphones from the bag that rested between my knees. After nestling the headband over my coiled twists, my thumb scrolled across my phone screen in search of the “Family Is Being Extra” Playlist. It was composed of the few songs that could drown out the noise of the Halo family; trap music, heavy metal, and such.

In the corner of my phone, the Service Icon caught my eye. I had three bars for the first time since we landed. The opportunity to call Mom to let her know that I had landed safely had yet to present itself. Despite the noise in the car, I figured the sooner I called her the better.

“Hello?” Mom answered groggily. She struggled to sit up in her bed. The light of her phone illuminated her face in the darkness.

“Oh, what time is it there?” I asked, getting a glimpse of her silk bonnet. I forgot to take the time difference into account.

“About six in the morning,” Mom replied with a yawn. She smiled as she turned on the bedside lamp. “I’m glad you called though. You made it safe?”

Missing her already, I nodded. I had grown accustomed to the strange feeling of guilt whenever I was visiting my Dad. The fear that it could hurt my mother if I had too much fun without her.

“Did you have time to look at those college brochures on the plane?” Mom asked.

I tried not to frown, but from her reaction, I could tell my annoyance flashed on my face. I know she didn’t mean to cause my heart to race with anxiety, but the damage was done.

With my senior year of high school approaching in the fall, every adult in my life expected me to have a sudden epiphany about how I wanted to spend the rest of my life. To make it worse, all of my friends seemed to have gotten some top-secret email that revealed the secrets to adulthood and already picked and toured their college choices.

“Yeah, a few of them have nice campuses,” I lied. I couldn’t even bring the brochures out of my bag. The thought of them made my thumbs tremble and my limbs turn to lead.

I could see Dad’s eyes flicker to me, hungry to join in on the conversation about college. My Mom and Dad hardly talk after their divorce, but they always find a way to overcome their awkward silence when it’s time to ask me a thousand questions about college.

Dad was determined for me to go to an HBCU, join one of the “Divine Nine” fraternities, and play a sport, because he did. Any time I mentioned “college,” Dad would all but appear out of thin air and start telling stories of his glory days. “The world was at my finger tips ‘til I busted my knee.”

His face would always fall when he said that. Then he’d look at me, and the light would come back to his eyes. I could see the hope that I would finish what he started and live out his dreams of being in the *NBA* or *NFL*. Most people expected me to play sports when they saw me. I’ve been six foot and two inches since I was *thirteen*, and I’ve been sporting facial hair since I was fifteen. I’ve always looked old for my age.

If height was all it took, I’d dominate in sports. But I hated sweat. I hated running. I hated how I looked in red, and all our sports uniforms at my school were red.

Needless to say, going off to college and becoming a sports star didn’t seem like it was in the cards for me. It would help if I was passionate about something else. Then I could replace Dad’s hopes for me with dreams of my own.

All my other siblings had such clear goals. My older sister, Jayda, knew for a while she wanted to join the military. “I want to travel the world on the government’s dime,” she’d always say. Emma often asserted that she will be needed either in climate science or the political sphere. “Whichever is calling me more when I graduate,” Emma often said. Even James had said he always wanted to be a racecar driver since he was little.

They always seemed so sure. I wasn’t like that at all. Any time I tried to picture my life after high school, I came up blank. At one point I wanted to be an actor, but after only being casted as Starfish #4 in *The Little Mermaid*, I started to consider that I may only be of middling talent. I thought of being an astronaut until I realized how much math you had to do. Doctor’s make good money, but I couldn’t pull off a white lab coat every day.

I could see myself as a lawyer, but I like to spill tea too much for that. If I had a high profile client that was in the news, I’d be on the phone every night with my friends divulging confidential information like it’s high school drama. “Girl, you didn’t hear this from me...but no matter how many times I get up in court and say he didn’t do it, I know his lying ass is guilty!”

“Earth to Jaylen,” Mom said as she waved her hand over the camera.

“Who is that, Shae?” a voice asked groggily.

“Jaylen,” Mom replied with a smile. Suddenly, my stepdad leaned into view. Even at the crack of dawn, Charles had a smile from ear to ear. “Hey, man!” he said with a wave. “Make sure you have fun and stay safe over there! Take lots of pictures!”

“Yes sir,” I replied with a nod.

“Try not to take *too* many pictures?” mom added quickly.

I knew exactly why the request was being made, but I couldn’t believe Mom would ask so blatantly. I instinctively looked over at Dad, who was struggling to simultaneously steer and

do the *New Edition* choreography. I lowered my volume, knowing all too well what my mother was about to say.

“Think of how it would make your sister feel,” Mom said in a whisper. “To see a bunch of pictures posted of you galavanting around Europe with...with them.”

“Mom!” I hissed. We both knew that Dad had invited Jayda. Like every invitation my Dad gave, Jayda declined.

When my parents divorced nine years ago, Jayda seemed to take it personally. Every time we had our court-ordered visitations with Dad, Jayda would lock herself in her room. I don’t think she’s ever said a word to Sara nor Emma when Dad remarried. She didn’t even acknowledge the two sons Dad and Sara had, and they were our brothers by blood.

The second Jayda turned eighteen, she cut Dad off completely. She never went to his house, picked up his calls, or opened his birthday and Christmas cards. I often asked her what was her personal vendetta against Dad. After all, I was front row and center for the divorce too and I didn’t treat Dad like a leper.

She always said I would understand when I was older. Nine years later, I still couldn’t understand why Jayda was so hellbent on holding a grudge.

“You know how your sister feels whenever-”

The car screeched to a sudden halt. I jerked forward, nearly dropping my phone. Something stood in front of the car. If Dad hadn’t slammed the breaks, it would’ve been roadkill for sure.

“Mom, I’ll have to call you back,” I said in disbelief as I hung up the phone.

A white wolf stood in the middle of the narrow road, eerily still. I'd never seen a wolf in person, but I was positive that this one was larger than a wolf should be. The sunlight made its white fur and golden eyes gleam.

The wolf's gaze caught mine through the windshield and a strange feeling rose in my chest; an odd clenching. The wolf's head fell as if it were disappointed and, as quickly as it had appeared, it trotted into the woods. We watched as it disappeared behind the trees.

"What the hell was that?" I muttered. My hand massaged my chest where a strange warmth rested.

"I know one thing," Dad said, "This resort better not be crawling with no damn wild dogs." Dad apprehensively put the car in drive, continuing to ascend on the winding road. "There was nothing about wolves in the brochure. It had a four and a half star rating!"

I kept kneading my chest as if I could push the strange warmth out. Perhaps it was heartburn. The meal on the plane had already ignited World War III in my stomach, keeping me in the lavatory for most of the flight. Perhaps the Kung Pao Pork was coming back for vengeance in my chest.

"Wolves are actually protected here," Emma said. "They were endangered so a law had to be passed to keep them safe."

"Apparently they are safe and well-fed," I retorted. "That thing was giant!" Emma agreed that the creature seemed abnormally sized. I started to tune out when she began to theorize about Darwinism.

I tucked my headphones into the top of my bag, trying to ignore the shine of the glossy college pamphlets. Slowly exhaling, I tried to steady my pulse.

“Stop bouncing your leg,” Dad barked. I hadn’t realized that my jitters were shaking the car.

*Pull it together, Jaylen. You’ll have to decide eventually.*

Ripping off the band-aid, I reached into my bag and yanked out the stack of college pamphlets. I spread them out in my lap with clammy hands. Most of the pamphlets were for schools in North Carolina, where I would receive in-state tuition. I did have a few for schools in New York, California, and Florida.

All of the pamphlets had calculatedly diverse faces smiling back at me. I was sure I’d have the same toothy smile once I made a decision. At this point, my plan was to apply to all of them and make a decision based on which schools accepted me.

My fingers rubbed the growling mascot of one of the colleges, a wolf. Instinctively my hand went to my chest again, the strange warmth still present.

The car jerked to a stop. “What, now?” James groaned dramatically.

“Deadend,” Dad snarled as he flung his door open. He unbuckled his seatbelt and climbed out of the car. The rest of us followed his lead, exchanging wary glances.

*Lord, we are going to be a special on Dateline. “Family of Fools Lost In Mountains.”*

All six of us stood in front of the car and analyzed the forest that waited ahead. The asphalt road came to an abrupt halt.

“Maybe you made a wrong turn,” Emma suggested in a tone that sounded more like an accusation.

“What the *hell* is going on?” Dad snapped, “Who makes a resort so hard to find!” He ripped out a folded map from his pocket and unfurled it on the hood of the car. We congregated around the foreign map of the mountainous terrain.

The only time I had ever seen a printed atlas map was Driver's Ed Class. I wished I had paid more attention to latitude and longitude...or whatever it was.

"Daddy!" James yelled, "I have to pee!" A sigh escaped everyone as we rolled our eyes. Typical, James needed to use the bathroom at the most inconvenient time.

"Suppose it's best you go now," Dad said as he scratched his head, "Who knows when we will finally get to the resort."

"I'll take him," I volunteered with a groan. I took my brother by the hand and led him into the woods, while the rest of the family continued to eye the map. The hairs on the back of my neck suddenly stood as I remembered the large wolf.

*What if there are more in these woods?*

James and I stepped over a large dead tree. After walking a few yards, I released James's hand and pointed to the nearest bush. James hastily scurried to it and began to relieve his bladder.

Looking around the forest, I turned my back on James to grant a pinch of privacy. Sunlight trickled through the trees, creating shining streaks that cut through the shade. Birds chattered and flew overhead. The humidity was bearable, but sweat ran down my face.

There was a sudden sound of rustling leaves behind me. I spun around so fast, I almost lost my balance. A brown hare jumped from a bush and dashed up a narrow dirt road winding onward through the woods and up the mountain.

*The damn thing just about gave me a heart attack.*

"I'm finished," James said, zipping his pants as he ran up to my side.

We began to backtrack towards the car. The dirt path seemed to follow us the entire way back. Returning to the same dead log we stepped over before, I paused. The deadwood was

obstructing the dirt path from view. If the log was removed, Dad would be able to continue up the mountain on the dirt road.

“Dad, look at this!” I called.

Dad looked up from his map. Sighing, he made his way to James and me. “This better be important, we ain’t got time to be looking at fancy rocks and stuff!”

“The asphalt road ends,” I explained, “But it turns into a dirt road and continues. We just couldn’t see it because of this log. Help me move it out the way.”

After looking around to concur, Dad bent down to help me move the fallen tree. The deadwood began to crumble at the touch. With one great heave, we sent the log flying into the thicket.

“Good work, I knew I had y’all for something,” Mr. Halo said jokingly, patting me on the shoulder. He reached to pat James as well, who was snatching a flying beetle out of the air. Before Dad could say anything, James shoved the beetle in his mouth.

*Lord, bless his weird little heart.*

## Chapter Two

### Emma

“I don’t know why men don’t just stop and ask for directions,” *Nanay* sighed, tracing her manicured fingers along the lines on the map.

I opened my mouth to explain that it was probably a combination of toxic masculinity and a fragile ego, but stopped myself from speaking. I was sure *Nanay* would give me the same deadpanned blink she gave any time I lectured.

Shrugging, I walked to the back of the car and opened the trunk. After rummaging through the bags, I pulled out a bottle of sunscreen and began to massage it onto my arms and face.

I refused to be sunburned because my family loved to tease me whenever I did. As the only one with a warm vanilla complexion, it also meant that I was the only one who’s skin would become blotchy pink. James and Jake loved to poke me when I burned, taking amusement in each wince from the sting.

I tied my brown hair up to get some of the heat off of my neck as I rejoined *Nanay* at the hood of the car. “Can you figure it out before he comes back, Emma?” she asked, patting me so frantically her gold bracelets sounded like a tambourine. We both knew that Dad would be embarrassed if the answer to our problems came from me.

It only took a quick glance at the map and the landmarks around us to realize we were nowhere near where we were meant to be. In fact, it looked like we went up the wrong mountain. Assisi was a few miles to the east.

“We just have to help him figure it out without us directly telling him,” *Nanay* said. “Jamal Halo is the most stubborn man I’ve ever met.”

Dad was also the cheapest and had the shortest temper. Don't get me wrong, I loved the man to death. *Nanay* married Jamal when I was six, so he'd been there for as long as I can remember. He even adopted me so I could officially be a Halo and carry the last name. That's more than my biological father had ever done for me. *Nanay* never talked about him, so I'd long stopped asking.

I loved Dad, but the man had his flaws. His hubris could rival the Greek legends. "If I say anything at all he'll know I figured it out," I whispered. Dad was walking back to the car, Jaylen and James in tow.

"That dirt road goes up the mountain," Dad said as he pointed to a path ahead, "Maybe we should give it a try?"

*That's the opposite of where we need to go.*

I didn't know how to dispute it. "Maybe we should double back," I suggested, "If the resort was further up the mountain, wouldn't there be a sign?"

*Oops, I pointed out a hole in his logic.*

If there was one thing Dad hated more than spending money, it was being wrong. Especially when a child corrected him. "Let's keep moving up the mountain," he mumbled as he made his way to the driver's seat.

After folding up the map, we clambered back into that ugly, lime green car. "Can we throw James in the trunk?" I joked. "We'd have more room."

"Hey!" James whined.

"Calm down, James. She's only joking," Jaylen replied looking back from the passenger seat, "We all know if you're going anywhere, it's strapped to the roof of the car."

Dad drove us into the forest and onto the dirt road. I tried to bring up the probability of a luxurious resort being off of a shabby dirt road, but *Nanay* shook her head to silence me. She was content to be lost if it kept Dad's temper under wraps. I folded my arms in surrender, knowing that we were adding an unnecessary hour or so to our drive.

My thoughts flew to Marie Anottionette, Catherine the Great, and all the other women of history who had to watch the men in their life charge confidentiality in the wrong direction. "Nanay, what's worse?" I asked casually. "A person with an ego or the people who protect an ego?"

*Nanay* yanked off one of her bracelets and chucked it across the car at me. "*Tumahimik ka!*" she hissed, jaw clenched. As quiet as it's kept, *Nanay's* temper was probably worse than Dad's. I closed my eyes to nap, hoping to sleep until Dad finally realized we were going the wrong way.

I couldn't help but compare myself to Cassandra of Greek Myths, gifted with the ability to see the future but cursed that no one would ever believe her. It's how I often felt. It was rare that I was wrong. Yet, no one ever listened to what I had to say.

*That's because no one cares about you or about what you have to say.*

My eyes snapped open. My therapist said that I needed to always address intrusive thoughts head on. I knew in my next session, Joleen would tuck her red hair behind her ear and ask, "How did you cope with these intrusive thoughts, Emma? Did you remember the steps?"

I took a deep breath.

*Identify the trigger.*

I looked around. Dad was rambling about how we would be at the resort soon, all while driving in the wrong direction. James was licking my elbow and talking about it being salty. Jake

was in *Nanay's* lap, crying. Jaylen was blasting music, and flipping through his college brochures again as if the words would be different this time.

*Identify the trigger.* My family. My family ignored me, when they all knew I was probably right. It wasn't so much that I wanted to *prove* I was right. I only wanted to be heard. A double barrel shotgun would struggle to be heard in the Halo family.

It was one of many ways I differed from the rest of the Halos. The family was boisterous and exuberant, while I was docile and calculating. An introvert among the most extra of extroverts.

Personalities aside, I looked nothing like my family either. Any time we went somewhere, people asked if I was adopted or a friend of the family. I didn't have the same dark features as every other Halo. The airport security held us up when we landed, sure that I had been kidnapped.

*That's because you don't belong with them.*

Deep breath. I could all but hear Joleen telling me to fight "those intrusive thoughts." Use the tools. Use the tools. Use the goddamn tools

*Step 2: map what's reality and what's not.* The Halos were my family, no matter how much of blacksheep I was. *Nanay* was my mother and she married Dad, that was that. I was a Halo, whether I felt like it or not. As a Halo, it was my duty to let Dad drive us in the wrong direction until he realized he was wrong, all for the sake of staying his temper. Letting Dad think he was right was the Halo way.

Something about the stillness of the trees felt eerie as we made our way up the mountain. The clock on the dashboard went dark and the radio that had been blasting "Candy Girl" cut off.

"Thank goodness," I heard Jaylen mutter.

The dirt road led to a large wall made of white stone. The circular enclosure only had one entrance; a huge, wooden double-door, standing several yards tall. The dirt road halted at the foot of the entrance. The car stopped in the wake of the gate. “See there,” Dad said smugly, “That’s the resort!”

“Well, how do we get in?” *Nanay* questioned. As if she were heard, the wooden doors opened with a loud roar.

“Must be a buzzer or a camera,” Dad muttered.

*This can’t be right.*

The map made it clear that there shouldn’t be *anything* on this mountain, resort or otherwise. Although, Dad probably got the cheapest map that he could find. It wouldn’t be surprising if the map was so dated the resort we were searching for wasn’t even depicted on it.

I didn’t dwell on the notion. The only thing I cared about was being free of the car. I could read my books by the pool. We would see Rome and the Vatican, as much as we could for free. I spent every second immersed in books, but I would finally get to see the world I read so much about and experience the rich history of Italy.

“Let the vacation begin!” I said as I clapped. The whole family began to cheer and hoot. Jaylen began to drum on the car roof. “Boy, you better not put a dent in this roof,” Dad said quickly, his infamous vein bulging, “This is a rental!”

Dad drove us through the gate. Everyone was dying to be freed from the lime-green prison. Once the car was beyond the wall, the wooden doors closed behind us with a mighty thud.

“I don’t think this is a resort,” Jaylen said in a shocked whisper.

The space within the stone walls held primitive stone buildings. None of which had doors or glass windows, only uncovered openings. The little dwellings were erected around a cobblestone square, where Dad put the rental car in park.

I didn't spend much time eyeing the buildings, my attention was diverted to the crowd of strange people that walked about. A few men conversed idly in the cobblestone streets. Several women toiled in gardens, shouting and speaking to each other in a foreign tongue. Children played in the streets, running in swarms after a ball of leather.

The men were clothed in white tunics and sandals, while young boys were dressed in loincloths. All of the women wore simple dresses of white and gold. The younger girls were dressed similarly but lacked the same elegance. All the people had dark features, olive-toned skin complemented their dark hair and dark eyes.

“Is this an Ancient Rome reenactment place or something?” Jaylen asked. It seemed the only logical explanation for a place that appeared centuries old.

“Probably,” *Nanay* beamed, whipping out her camera.

“No, Rome is three hours away,” I recalled from my scan of the map, “This shouldn't have anything to do with Rome. Assisi is nearby, though. Maybe this is some tourist attraction.”

“Sooooooo it's not the resort,” Jaylen said, cutting a glare at Dad. “Is that what I'm hearing?”

“Whatever it is,” *Nanay* said as she looked through her camera, “It's great!” She snapped a photo with a bright flash. At once, every person within the walls stopped what they were doing and their heads snapped to face us.

“Did we set off a silent alarm or something?” Jaylen asked.

“Maybe we aren’t allowed to have flash photography,” I suggested, with an accusing look at *Nanay*.

A bell tolled, sending the crowd into chaos. The women quickly collected their children and took them into the stone buildings. The men circled the car, yelling in another language.

“Um, what’s—” James’s question was cut short as something slammed into the car’s right side.

*WHOOOMP!* Something hit the left side of the car so hard the vehicle rocked.

*WHOOOMP!* Something else crashed into the right side with a force so hard, the car nearly tipped over.

*WHOOOMP!* Something hit the car with the force of a wrecking ball. The vehicle flew through the air and landed upside down with a thundering crash.

The airbags in the driver and passenger seat erupted. Dad and Jaylen seemed blinded from the strike in the face. I heard the snap of Jaylen’s nose and saw the blood running down his face.

We screamed

. Upside-down, the blood rushed to my head. I peered through my broken window. A man just outside of the window aimed his outstretched hand towards the car, his palm glowing. There was a flash of bright light, quickly followed by another crash into the vehicle’s side.

*Impossible.*

I watched even closer, sure I had seen incorrectly. All the men had their hands aimed at us. It appeared that light rushed from their hands and crashed into the car.

*I’m hallucinating.*

Maybe the force of the crash was causing me to see things. This was some elaborate dream or hallucination. Perhaps we had gotten in a car wreck and this was my mind's strange way of dealing with the shock, creating one large mirage.

The car was now violently shaking as it was being hit from every direction by rapid-fire. The windshield shattered, sending glass flying in every direction. Jaylen screamed, as shards of glass zoomed past him and cut him in several places.

*Nanay* fished Jake's blanket out of a bag. With haste, she unbuckled her seat belt and fell from the seat to the car's roof. She proceeded to unbuckle Jake, James, and me, each of us falling from our upside-down positions. "Lay down," *Nanay* ordered. All of us obeyed as she threw the blanket over us as protection from the shattering glass.

I was positive we had been in a wreck. Dad must have driven right off the edge of the mountain. That had to be what was happening, we were rolling down the mountain.

*Or was I already dead?*

Perhaps the strange men outside the car were angels that had come to collect my soul. Maybe this was all part of the afterlife.

*I wish I spent more time studying theology.*

A voice rang out across the courtyard. The car stopped rocking and an eerie silence made me feel as if we were suspended in time. I peered from the blanket and watched as each of the men around the car fell to their knees and bowed to a woman.

In the light, it almost looked as if the woman had golden skin. Her blonde hair was curly and worn up in a crown that matched her golden eyes. She was dressed in a refined gown of white and looked like she could've been a sun goddess.

Her body held much jewelry, but none as attractive as the gold medallion she wore around her neck. Shaped like the sun, its center held a large yellow diamond. She wore it proudly as she slowly approached the car.

After a regal wave of her hand, the men scurried from sight and vanished into the buildings. The sound of broken glass crunched under her golden heels. She had to be an angel, our guide to the afterlife. I could even feel a warmth coming from her direction.

She knelt before the broken window. “*Lei parla inglese?*” the woman asked, her voice soothing. I recognized this as one of the few phrases I memorized before leaving for Italy. The woman had asked if we spoke English.

“*Si!*” I replied in a cracked voice. The woman looked at me and smiled, almost as if she was excited about something. Her smile faltered when she noticed that Jake and James were sobbing.

“I am deeply sorry for the behavior of my people,” the woman said with a heavy Italian accent. “They have been under much stress and fear lately. They have reached the point where they attack first and ask questions later. I assure you that you are safe, for now.”

The woman waited with a smile as if her words were meant to send a wave of relief through the car. *Nanay* pulled me away from the window and we cowered as far back in the car as we could.

The woman took a breath and her smile became alarmingly large. “If you come with me, we will repair your car and get you some refreshments.”

The woman took a few steps back and waited with her hands clasped. Her demeanor was so casual, one would think she was a hostess at Applebees.

“This is insane,” Dad said with a pant, still hanging upside-down. He unbuckled his seatbelt and fell with a thud. He struggled to sit upright. Reaching to the back of the car, he lifted the sheet off of us to inspect his children.

“I’m scared, I don’t think we should get out of the car,” *Nanay* warned, trembling. The blood and scars on Dad sent a chill down my spine. I peered at the strange woman, who gave an enthusiastic wave as if we hadn’t almost been killed.

“Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” I sighed as I began to climb out of my broken window, “We don’t have much of a choice. The car is destroyed, we can’t go anywhere.”

Jaylen unbuckled himself and fell from the seat, shards of broken glass cutting his knees. He struggled to clear the blood from his eyes with his sleeve. “I think my nose is broken and there’s glass everywhere. Dad, we need to get out of this car.”

A pull on the door handle caused Jaylen’s door to fall off its hinge with the sound of clanking metal. My bloodsoaked stepbrother crawled from the vehicle, ignoring his pains. I helped him to stand, he was hurt badly.

Dad limped out of the car and struggled to help *Nanay* get the boys out as well. We gathered around the car, taking in the wreckage.

Three of the tires were flattened and the fourth was knocked completely off its axis. All the windows were shattered, two of the doors were off, most of the paint was gone, and the car was crushed up so badly, it was hardly recognizable as anything other than a crunched soda can.

Seeing the damage, we were lucky to be alive. We were silent, crippled by fear.

*If they could do this to a car, what were these people going to do to us?*

“This way,” the woman in gold said calmly as she turned in a graceful twirl of flowing skirts. Chin in the air, she walked away with so much poise it was as if she glided over the cobblestone.

*Nanay* and Dad exchanged wary looks. I took note of the wooden gates that had welcomed us. Tall and firm, the structure trapped us with no hope of escape. “We can’t make a run for it,” I whispered.

The woman had not slowed or checked to see if we were following. She knew we only had one option. “Stay behind me,” Dad muttered as he began to follow, all the time muttering angrily to himself. “Look at us, about to die talking ‘bout some damn *sweepstakes*.”

*Nanay* lifted Jake in her arms, resting him on her hip. With her other hand, she grabbed James and began to lead the boys forward. She hesitated, before turning to look at Jaylen. “Make sure no one tries to sneak up behind us.”

*Can’t say Nanay isn’t street smart.*

Jaylen nodded at the instructions. *Nanay* followed Dad, bringing the boys along. Jaylen and I waited for a moment, scanning the area to make sure no people were following to do god knows what. He wore a brave face, but I could see his hand trembling.

“And what exactly does *Nanay* intend for *us* to do if someone does try to come up from behind?” I asked. Unless Jaylen had some martial arts skills he’d been hiding from me the entire time I knew him, I didn’t know what we’d do apart from scream and pee ourselves.

“So what do you think this is?” Jaylen whispered, nodding his head to gesture to the stone wall. “A trap to harvest our organs?”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking, but the notion seemed all too real to me. I could hear my own pace racing as I began to follow *Nanay*, wondering if we were marching to our own graves.

A loud clang startled us both. “Lord, they shootin’ at us!” Jaylen yelled as pulled me down to the cobblestone. The wrecked car was trembling as its bends and dents popped back into the correct place with a bang.

“Sweet Lord, I’m having a nervous breakdown,” Jaylen muttered as the car restored itself.

The car was dent-free with its paint fully restored. The three tires began to refill with air, while the fourth flew over to the car and reattached. The scattered broken glass trembled then flew from the ground and reassembled into full glass panes.

The car stood good as new, tacky green color and all.

Jaylen gaped at me as I racked my brain for some logical explanation. Best I could come up with was that James had finally driven me to insanity. A straight jacket would have to be incorporated into my summer look of florals and pastels.

“You saw it too, right? Jaylen whispered.

“Candy Girl” started blasting from the car at an ungodly volume. My heart felt like it was going to leap out of my throat. A few birds were startled into flight by the upbeat tune. Jaylen put one hand on my shoulder, and the other was clutching his chest.

“Girl, I don’t know about you,” he panted. “But I’m gonna have to check my draws.”