

# IN SAECULA SAECULORUM

by Keith Massey

## Chapter One

Will's eyes shot toward the open classroom door. His heart leapt to the sound of approaching footsteps. There were only four students in the class. The faint click sounded feminine, so it couldn't be Jonathan. And that guy always came late anyway. Not Carmen either. She'd be walking more quickly. A smile exploded onto his face at the only logical conclusion.

"Layla."

He suddenly realized he had spoken her name out loud.

The delicate steps grew closer. His mind reeled with the possibilities of what she might be wearing.

*"Oh, Jesus, please let it be that red and orange dress she had on last Tuesday!"* This was an actual prayer from his pious heart.

As Layla approached the door, she saw that the lights inside the room were already on.

*"Please let it be Will—and Will alone!"* she thought.

He was the reason she tried to get there early every day. Pausing before the entrance, she looked down to double-check her appearance.

*"He didn't even notice that red and orange dress from last week,"* she thought with a sigh.

Today she had selected a white—and tight—dress which, she believed, pleasantly contrasted with her coffee-colored skin. She made a minor adjustment about the bust. With a nod of approval, she stepped into the room.

*"Salve, Will,"* she said, greeting him in the Latin they studied together. *"Quid agis hodie?"* Her eyes caressed a vibrant purple shirt she thought nicely complimented his light brown hair.

*"Bene, Layla,"* he answered, smiling broadly and sitting back. *"Et tu?"*

Her heart stirred with delight at how his British accent invaded even his Latin pronunciation.

*"Quoque bene,"* she said, taking the desk on his right.

Will, Layla, and Carmen always sat in the front row; Jonathan usually sat in the back of the wide classroom. Several tall windows faced the front

door and poured sunlight into the space. A single long chalkboard filled the wall behind the large wooden desk at the front of the room. The other walls were bare. The various posters their Latin teacher Dr. Valquist annually put up with weak tape had again fallen and formed a pile in the corner by the door.

“Are you ready for the test today?” he asked, continuing in Latin. They were required to speak only that language in their Latin and History classes.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I always feel like I could have studied a bit more.”

“You’re probably the only one who’s going to get an A+. We all speak pretty well at this point, but you’re just on another level, Layla. Didn’t Dr. Valquist himself say that your abilities surpassed his sometime during Junior Year?”

She felt a blush come over her at his compliment. “I already spoke Spanish and Arabic before I came to this school.”

“You’re so lucky,” he said. “An Arab family growing up in Brownsville, Texas. It’s a linguist’s dream.”

She smiled. “That had a lot to do with it. Anyway, today’s going to be so strange. A normal day here and then we leave tonight for Rome!”

“I know it. Like they couldn’t give us the day off to get ready?”

“And you’ve known about this trip for how long, Mr. Stanhope?” Layla said, imitating the voice of their Latin teacher.

He laughed. “I’m actually almost done packing. How about you?”

“I just need to double-check with Carmen on what she’s bringing. You know, we want to avoid the disaster we had at the awards assembly.”

Will recalled the fact that Layla and Carmen had both shown up to that event wearing the exact same blue dress. In his mind, he saw them standing beside each other that evening. Carmen’s long straight platinum-blonde hair and fair skin were a stark contrast to Layla’s jet-black curls and dark complexion. The dress was tight to Layla’s body, the skirt just above the knees. Slender straps left plenty of her skin visible at her shoulders. The front plunged such that he had exercised extraordinary discipline to maintain eye contact with her throughout the event. That night she had worn her curly black hair down. He imagined running his fingers through...

“*Bona Dies!*” Carmen shouted in his ear, dropping her neon-green backpack on the desk to his left.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, shaking his head to return to the classroom.

“I’ve said ‘good morning’ to you five times, made fun of your ridiculous purple shirt, and all you do is stare into space.”

“Let’s start over,” he said. “*Salve, Carmen.*”

“*Salve, Domine,*” she giggled.

Will rolled his eyes. He hated it when she called him “Lord.” Yes, he was the only British student at the school and his father was actually a duke, hence her use of the title. Even so, he had never asked for any special treatment.

Carmen unzipped her bag and took out a piece of paper. “Let’s review one of the passages I just know we’ll see on the test,” she said, heading for the blackboard. She began copying from the sheet in large letters across the entire length of the wall.

Will curled his eyebrows as she wrote. “We’ve done three hundred lines of Vergil since the last test. You really think you can guess one of the passages he’s going to throw at us?”

Layla watched the lines emerge and began to nod. “Carmen’s on to something. Don’t you remember? That’s the passage where he made a special point of telling us about the rare use of a dative of direction.”

Will rubbed his forehead. “I actually don’t remember that—at all. And now I suddenly feel a whole lot less prepared. Even so, I’ll bet an ice cream at lunch that you’re wrong.”

“Agreed,” Carmen said.

From down the hall, the students heard loud whistling and rapid footsteps.

“What is it today?” Will asked.

“*Eine kleine Nachmusik*, by Mozart,” Layla replied.

Their teacher entered the room, but finished the musical bar he was on before taking a deep breath. “*Salvete, discipuli,*” he said with a kind smile.

“*Salve, Magister,*” the students said in unison.

He set a burgundy leather bag on the desk at the front of the room. While most of their teachers carried briefcases or even pushed around carts covered with files, Dr. Valquist seemed to live out of that simple satchel. The students assumed it was a quirk he had picked up during his days as a linguist with the National Security Agency, a period of his life he only occasionally discussed. As with all days, the headmaster of the Fairfax Classical Academy in Virginia was dressed in khaki slacks and a white dress shirt. Today’s tie was maroon. Premature gray hair made him look a bit older than his actual mid-forties. After extracting a pile of papers from his satchel, he set them face down on his desk.

“When the bell rings, you can take ten extra minutes to study,” he said, looking at the lines written on the board. “Your handwriting, Carmen?”

“*Sic, Magister,*” she replied.

“I love this passage,” he said.

Carmen smiled and looked at Will.

“It means nothing,” he whispered.

“Game on,” she returned.

The bell for period one rang and Dr. Valquist sat down at his desk. “*Ubi est Jonathan?*” he asked.

Carmen, Will, and Layla looked back at the empty desk where their classmate should have been sitting by now.

“Ten minutes,” Dr. Valquist said.

They began to study. A few minutes after the bell, Jonathan entered the room silently and was heading to his usual seat. His reddish hair was tussled as if he had just gotten out of a bed in the next room.

“Mr. Drake, do you have a late pass from the office?”

Jonathan put his book bag on the desk and left the room without a word. Five minutes later, he returned with a bright yellow slip of paper and handed it to Dr. Valquist.

“How about I give everyone a few more minutes to study?”

As the other students furiously started back into their notes, Jonathan walked to the back of the room, took his seat, and put his forehead on the desk.

Dr. Valquist sighed as he watched the young man. When Jonathan had made no motion to study for a full minute, the teacher stood from his chair.

“Time’s up,” he said, erasing the board behind him. “Let’s get started.” He placed several stapled pages face down on each student’s desk. “You’ll have the rest of the period. You may begin.”

As each turned the sheets over, Carmen laughed out loud.

“I think I’ll have strawberry, Will.”

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Near the end of the period, Dr. Valquist again stood from his desk. “Just a few minutes left. Make any final marks on the test and be prepared to hand it in as you leave.”

With the bell still ringing, Jonathan shot from his seat and slapped his test on Dr. Valquist’s desk before bolting out of the room.

“How do you think you did?” Carmen asked Layla as the two handed in their papers.

“Thanks to your intuition, pretty good,” she answered.

Will stood back and waited for the young women to leave.

“Mr. Stanhope, you should be getting to gym class, right?”

“Yes, sir, but could I speak with you a moment?”

Dr. Valquist had a prep period before Freshman Latin. He nodded.

“What’s on your mind?”

“What’s going to happen with Jonathan?”

“Well, he’s going to graduate no problem, if that’s your worry.”

“That’s not what I’m asking, I guess.” Will looked at his teacher seriously. “Sir, what’s happening to him? It’s like he’s totally shutting down.”

Dr. Valquist reached into his satchel and took out a pad of late passes. “I’m giving you safe transit into your gym class,” he said, filling out the form. “Mr. Cole will probably still punish you somehow.”

“I know. But, sir, I— I miss Jonathan.”

“Me too,” Dr. Valquist said. “After his parents died that summer—the boy we knew Freshman Year—he just never came back.”

“But he seemed okay for the next two years,” Will said. “Why would he be having so many problems just now?”

“Have you asked him about this?”

Will shook his head. “We don’t talk anymore outside of classes.”

“That’s too bad. I know you two were close friends once.”

“Carmen and Layla and I—we’ve all tried so hard to get him to open up.”

Dr. Valquist smiled gently. “Then don’t quit now. Graduation is a time for celebrating with your families. All Jonathan’s got is his uncle. And every time he sees your parents at school events, it’s probably opening old wounds for him.”

“I guess.”

“So be his friend right now, even if he can’t yet be one in return. Go on to your gym class.”

“Yes, sir.” Will walked briskly from the room.

Dr. Valquist sat back down at his desk and turned the papers over to grade them. He looked at Jonathan’s test first. There he saw a fully accurate translation only of the first passage, as well as a description of Vergil’s rare use of a dative of direction. The rest of the test was left blank.

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Will raced through the wide double doors of the gymnasium. The sprawling space held two basketball courts. A large blue mat was in the center of the broad polished wood floor. Large banks of light bulbs hummed loudly from the ceiling. The other three seniors were already seated on the mat, dressed in shorts and t-shirts.

Mr. Cole was standing in front of them, crew-cut black hair, arms crossed, and wearing a gray t-shirt straining to contain his advanced musculature. Will slowed to a stop a few feet from the teacher.

“Here’s a pass from Dr. Valquist,” he said, lifting the yellow slip of paper up to the well over six-foot tall man.

“That only lets you in this gym,” he said in his low and gravelly voice, taking the paper and crumpling it in his fist.

“So I’m good?”

“*Tace!*” Mr. Cole shouted, telling Will to be quiet in Latin. It was one of the few phrases he had asked Dr. Valquist to teach him. “You have exactly one minute to be out here ready to work out.”

Will turned and sprinted for the boys’ locker room.

“We’re going to review some of the defensive moves today,” Cole said, turning back to the other students. “That way you’ll be ready for your trip.”

“You really think we’ll need them over there?” Carmen asked.

“Americans on vacation are always a target.”

“Have you been to Rome yourself?” Layla asked him.

Mr. Cole made the faintest smile. “Not yet, but I plan on visiting it soon.”

“It’s too bad you couldn’t be a chaperone, along with Dr. Valquist and Miss Maple,” Carmen said.

“Well, someone has to stay and help run the Academy for the lower grades,” he said. “And our baseball team plays St. Benet’s next week. The boosters want to see a win over our biggest rivalry.”

Will emerged from the locker room, hopping on one foot as he struggled to put a gym shoe on the other.

“One minute!” he shouted. “I made it!” He walked toward the group and plopped down beside Jonathan.

“Being ready to work out means being seated with your fellow students,” Cole said, looking at his watch. “You were two seconds late.”

Will huffed. “Alright. What’s my punishment?”

“Fifty push-ups, after class,” he said. “Let’s go back to basics. First lesson I taught you in Freshman Year. What’s the most basic defensive maneuver?”

Carmen, Will, and Layla’s hands all shot up. Jonathan sat, his eyes focused on a point a hundred miles away.

“Stay with us, Mr. Drake!” Cole barked.

Jonathan turned toward him, startled. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“You can join Will for sixty push-ups after class.”

“I still only have fifty, though, right?” Will asked.

“It’s seventy now. Do I hear eighty?”

“Tace,” Jonathan whispered to Will.

“Miss Ramzy, remind us all about the most basic defensive maneuver.”

“It’s to avoid danger in the first place,” Layla said. “If you suspect a conflict, you consider yourself as standing on top of a large X. And you need to get off the X.”

“Exactly. The most stupid thing you’ll ever hear someone say is that only cowards run from a fight. Avoid fighting at all costs. But even despite your best efforts, you can still get into a situation where you do have to fight. Miss Mattila, come forward and prepare to defend yourself.”

Carmen jumped up and assumed a position several feet from her teacher.

“Now, why have I chosen Miss Mattila for this demonstration? Speak freely.”

“Because she’s the best fighter in the group,” Will replied.

“You’re half right,” he said. “This is an exercise on defensive techniques. She’s the best fighter among you primarily because she has mastered defense. A final reminder. If possible, always let your opponent throw the first blow. To attack, your opponent will have to go off balance. And that’s when your counterattack will be the most effective. Let’s begin.”

He took a casual step forward and Carmen instantly moved a foot backward.

“Did you all see that?” he asked loudly. “She has chosen the distance she intends to fight me from. And just because I moved forward, she didn’t surrender that gap.”

Mr. Cole assumed a stance, squatting slightly at the knees and raising his hands in fists before him. In one lightning motion he had bounded forward and shot a foot toward her. Carmen stepped sideways and blocked the attack with her forearm. Spinning around, she again assumed her defensive stance.

“Nice,” he said, turning toward the other three students. “Now, who here can tell me when...”

He turned and lunged again at Carmen. She dropped to the floor, shooting both feet upwards and kicking her teacher squarely in the chest. He flew through the air above her and landed in a somersault several feet away.

Mr. Cole laughed and stood up. “Excellent work. Notice, even as I spoke to the rest of you, she never let her guard down. You can take a seat, Miss Mattila. Mr. Drake, it’s your turn.”

Jonathan reluctantly stood and walked forward.

“Obviously Carmen is in a class of her own when it comes to combat,” Cole said. “The thing to keep in mind is that the typical thug you’ll face is nowhere near the fighter she is. And that means that all of you should still be ready to do your part.”

Jonathan took a deep breath and released it. “So you pick on me as the example of the worst in the class, is that it?”

Mr. Cole looked at him puzzled. “That was not my intent. I only wanted to...”

“You can’t all be Carmen, but even Jonathan can do something, right?”

“That’s enough now,” Mr. Cole said sadly.

“You know, I’ve had it with this school,” he said. “We learn to actually speak Latin, a stupid dead language no one knows anymore.”

Carmen, Will, and Layla sat breathlessly watching the scene, afraid to even move.

“Assume a defensive stance and prepare to deflect a simple blow,” Mr. Cole said sternly.

“How about ‘no’?” Jonathan returned. “And all our other classes are just one worthless history lesson after another. Horseback riding. Ancient geography. Even sword fighting. And the kicker—literally—is that in gym class we get beat up on by some Army wannabe.”

Mr. Cole stepped forward and kicked Jonathan’s legs out from under him, dropping him squarely onto his back. Jonathan released a loud moan as his lungs were suddenly emptied of all their air.

Cole turned in the direction of the other students. They could see a genuinely pained look on his face.

“Don’t ever let your guard down like that in the field,” he said loudly. “You three break off and practice defense and offense while I talk to Jonathan.”

They walked quickly to the other side of the gym.

“What did he mean by ‘in the field’?” Layla asked.

“Our trip to Rome, I guess,” Will said.

Mr. Cole squatted beside Jonathan, who was now curled in a fetal position and gasping.

“I...can’t...breathe...” he managed, gulping for air.

“You’ve just had the wind knocked out of you,” Cole said gently. “Press your finger against the muscles on your bottom right rib.”

Jonathan reached up and did as told.

“Now you’ll feel a bit more braced. Slowly draw air back into your lungs.”

Jonathan took a deep and painful breath.

“Release it gently.”

As he followed his teacher's instructions, he felt well enough to sit up. "I'm really sorry," Jonathan said. "I was very inappropriate, I know." "Don't worry about it. I think you said some things you needed to let out."

"But it wasn't fair to insult you."

Cole chuckled. "I was in the Navy, not the Army. But at least you didn't call me Air Force."

Jonathan smiled and felt a spasm return.

"Keep breathing slowly," Mr. Cole said. "Listen, I know you've had a tough hand dealt to you in life. Graduation coming and everything—it must be kinda depressing."

Jonathan nodded. "I just want these last six weeks of school to be over."

"Well, before they're done, you're going to go through some very dark places, Jonathan."

"What do you mean?"

"The world can be cruel and dangerous. Remember your training and lean on your friends as well."

Jonathan looked at him in confusion. "I will, sir."

Mr. Cole stood. "Alright, students!" he bellowed. "Get ready for your next class."

Will ran up, breathing heavily from practicing the fighting moves. "Can I get started on those push-ups?"

Mr. Cole looked down at Jonathan, still seated on the floor. "You're both pardoned—this time."

"Thank you, sir," Jonathan said. "I probably would've thrown up if I even tried them."

"I wouldn't have to clean it up, so don't think I'm getting soft or anything."

Jonathan and Will looked at each other and could barely suppress a laugh. Mr. Cole chuckled himself.

"Enjoy Rome, if I don't see you before you leave."

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The four seniors walked up a stairwell toward their next class—Roman History with Miss Maple. Sky-blue ceramic tiled walls reflected the sunlight from a high window above them. Underclassmen were coming down the stairs on their way to the gym, slowing their ascent.

"Remember when we had this entire school to ourselves?" Layla asked.

“Yeah,” Carmen replied. “I recall that as the most boring year of our lives. A student-teacher ratio of four to five. Literally, four of us and five of them.”

They left the stairwell and continued down a long hallway. Reflections of passing students danced on the polished floor.

“Hey, Jonathan,” Will said. “Are you excited about going to Rome tonight?”

The other three waited, hoping he would join in their conversation.

“I guess,” Jonathan returned simply.

Will opened his mouth, searching for a follow-on question, but found none as they arrived at their classroom.

Miss Maple stood just outside the door. She was dressed in one of the many brown tweed dress suits the students had observed from her wardrobe. With her thick horn-rimmed glasses and tightly-bunned blonde hair, they had long privately joked that if she weren’t a history teacher, she’d make the perfect naughty librarian.

“*Salve*, Will,” she said.

“*Salve, Magistra*,” he answered. “*Quid agis hodie?*”

“*Bene*,” she replied. “*Et tu?*”

“*Quoque bene*,” he said.

“*Salve*, Layla.”

“*Salve, Magistra.*”

After greeting each of the students, she followed them into the room.

Entering Miss Maple’s class was like stepping back into Ancient Rome itself. While Dr. Valquist’s room was stark, hers was rich in the images of her topic. On her desk sat a model of the three columns from the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the Roman Forum. The walls were covered with Roman period maps of Miss Maple’s native England, as well as ancient Gaul, Italy, and maps of the whole Empire. She had spent the last four years teaching them Roman history and culture using an innovative technique she called “Period Immersion.” Since she herself spoke Latin as well as Dr. Valquist, her class, like his, was conducted only in that language.

Everything they studied was somehow connected to the *Cursus Publicus*, the system of imperial roads, inns, and stables that allowed dignitaries and other approved users to make cost-free and rapid travel throughout the Roman Empire. The students had made the imaginary journey from Roman Britannia to the city of Rome and back a total of twelve times in great detail. They had completed class projects focused on the major cities, towns, and roads along this route. Their trip always took place in what Miss Maple considered her favorite period of Roman history—the reign of Antoninus

Pius, the enlightened civil servant emperor. The students had come to joke that they could probably do the journey for real if they ever had to.

Laptops were already set up on their desks in preparation for the project Miss Maple had in mind for that day.

“*Bene, discipuli,*” Miss Maple chimed. “Today we have the chance to be ancient detectives. Imagine you are actually back in time in the year AD 157. Remember that this is the year 910 *Ab Urbe Condita*, from the founding of the City of Rome. Imagine you’re in the Roman Forum. But before you get there, you have the chance to use the internet to find any information you can on how to solve the problem on the board.”

The four sat down in their assigned seats. Unlike Dr. Valquist, who let Jonathan hide out in the back of the room, Miss Maple made him sit in the front row far left, flanked by Carmen, with Will next, and then Layla on the far right. The four opened their laptops and spied the single sentence written on the chalkboard: “How would you find a book in the Bibliotheca Ulpia, if it were necessary to do so?”

As they began pulling various searches, no one had to look up what the Bibliotheca Ulpia was. As part of their many runnings of the *Cursus*, they had come to know quite well that it was a library in the Forum of Trajan, just west of the Roman Forum itself. They had studied how it consisted of two buildings facing each other across a courtyard. The building on the east housed books in Latin; the western building held Greek works. During the reign of the Emperor Antoninus Pius it was a rival in scope and significance to the more famous ancient library in Alexandria. Today’s research, however, focused on a practical matter they had never before studied.

“Miss Maple,” Layla started. “May I ask the significance of the word ‘necessary’ being underlined in your question?”

“I’m asking, hypothetically, if your very life depended on it, how would you find a book there?”

They all puzzled over the stark importance she had put on the task.

The students explored dozens of websites on the topic given to them. A half hour later, Miss Maple again approached the front of the class.

“What have we discovered, students? I’m not going to call on you. Let’s just have a free discussion.”

Carmen spoke first. “Most scholars believe that the Bibliotheca Ulpia was not really a library in the modern sense. It was more of a book depository.”

“The public couldn’t check things out,” Layla added. “Only approved scholars could enter and ask to look at items.”

“How were the books filed?” she asked.

“By the Dewey Decimal system,” Will said. “But in Roman numerals.” He alone laughed at his joke.

“Very funny, Mr. Stanhope.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Maple. They were arranged in the library by topic.”

“Right. So what would you actually do if you needed to see a book you believed was in that library? Let’s say, for the sake of argument, a specific work on agriculture.”

“Can we make it astronomy?” Will asked. “I just adore studying the stars.”

“We all know you do,” Miss Maple said, smiling. “Back to the question at hand. How do you see a book in that library?”

“You’d need permission to be there,” Carmen said. “And you’d need the name of the work and its author so someone there could help you find it.”

“And what if you didn’t have that information? Let’s say you aren’t even allowed to enter the library at all?”

“Then you’re going to have to break in and find the book yourself,” Jonathan said.

The others looked at him curiously.

“You’re going to get our library card revoked!” Carmen said.

“I’m serious,” Jonathan said. “Miss Maple specifically described this as a life and death assignment. I’m not going to choose death just because someone doesn’t let me enter a library. I’d rather die breaking in than just sitting there and taking it.”

The room was filled with a momentary awkward silence.

“Was that a cry for help?” Layla asked with a smirk.

Jonathan laughed. “No, don’t worry. I’m not contemplating ‘Death by Librarian’.”

“But I guess Jonathan’s right,” Will said. “Short of having permission from an official to view anything you want, getting a look at a whole section of that library is not going to happen.”

“The purpose of this discussion is to make you think about the classical world as a real and complicated place,” Miss Maple said. “Something as simple as using a library probably involved a lot of frustration there.”

“Isn’t it also possible that there are things about the library that we just don’t know today?” Layla asked. “Maybe you could check books out.”

“Possibly, Miss Ramzy,” she said, “but unlikely.” The bell rang. “You did good work today. Obviously there’s no homework. And Dr. Valquist asked me to tell you four that you’ve been given the rest of the day off. Get ready for our trip and I’ll see you this evening. Remember, six o’clock sharp at the circle.”

*“Gratias Deo!”* Will said. “Thank God!”

The students stood and gathered their things to leave.

“Call me when you get home,” Layla said to Carmen. “I want to make sure we aren’t packing the same things.”

“Good idea,” she said. “We don’t want to repeat...”

“The awards assembly,” they said in unison.

“Hey, Jonathan, call me when you get home,” Will said, as they followed the girls out of the room. “We should probably coordinate our wardrobes too.”

*“Tace!”* Carmen said.

## Chapter Two

The assembly of teachers, students, and their parents stood outside the vine-encrusted school building, surrounded by suitcases sitting randomly about. A pink and purple light washed upon the horizon in the gathering dusk.

“The bus is almost here,” Dr. Valquist said, switching off his cell phone and looking over the broad circle of green lawn set inside the road that looped alongside the school.

“Thank you again for organizing this trip,” Mr. Ramzy said.

“Dr. Valquist, will I get a trip to Rome in three years?” asked Marwan Ramzy, there to see his sister off.

The teacher smiled. “It’s our plan to take every graduating Senior Class on such a trip.”

“That’s awesome,” Mrs. Mattila said. “Carmen’s been talking about the Senior Trip to Rome since she first came to the school. God, was that already four years ago?”

“It’s amazing how the time has flown, Phyllis,” Lord Stanhope said.

Miss Maple looked at her watch. “Now, if only Jonathan could show up on time for once.”

“I spoke to his uncle an hour ago,” Dr. Valquist said. “They’re on their way.”

A few yards from the others, the three seniors stood together, looking at their school.

“So many memories,” Carmen said. “I’m really going to miss this place next year.”

Will put his hand on her shoulder. “And to think, now we cap it all off with the trip of a lifetime.”

“Trip of a lifetime?!” Layla protested. “I, for one, hope that a week in Rome won’t be that at all. I’m planning to see the entire world some day.”

“But Rome’s a good start,” he said.

Engines roared in the distance. The entire group looked down the long road leading to the school and saw a blue compact, followed immediately by a large yellow bus.

“Jonathan, and then our transportation, I presume,” Carmen said.

The vehicles turned around the circle and came to a stop in front of the group.

“I’m so sorry, Dr. Valquist,” a thirty-something man said, jumping out of the driver’s side of the car. “Traffic was crazy all the way from Adams Morgan.”

“No worries, Mr. Drake,” Dr. Valquist said, stepping toward him and shaking his hand. “I booked plenty of extra time into the trip.”

Jonathan got out of the car and went to the trunk. He slung a computer bag over his shoulder and took out a large black suitcase.

The students gravitated toward their parents and began their goodbyes.

“Have a great time, Willie,” Lady Stanhope said, pulling her son into an embrace.

“We love you,” Lord Stanhope added, patting his son’s back.

Carmen’s mom and dad each put a hand on their daughter’s shoulder.

“Be careful, baby,” her mom said.

“We’re not going to war!” Carmen said with a laugh. “Listen, Snowflake was favoring her front left leg this afternoon. No one rides her until I get back.”

“Understood,” her dad said, smiling.

“And don’t overfeed her.”

“Your dad and I will do our best,” her mother said, pulling her daughter into a hug. “Have fun—but be careful.”

Layla’s mom hugged her daughter and began to cry. “*BaHabbik, yaa binti*. You’ve never been away so long!”

“It’s just eight days,” she said.

“Call us as soon as you land,” her father said, joining the embrace.

Jonathan stood looking at his uncle Frank. “I guess I’ll see you in a week,” he said.

Frank nodded eagerly. “Yeah. Um, have a good time.”

“I will,” Jonathan said. He smiled awkwardly and picked up his bags. He put his large suitcase in the open compartment at the side of the bus and then boarded the vehicle.

“All aboard, folks!” Dr. Valquist shouted.

As students embraced their parents one last time, Jonathan had sat down in the bus. Through the window, he watched his uncle’s car pulling away. “Goodbye, Frank,” he whispered.

Dr. Valquist boarded the bus and took the seat directly behind the Academy’s regular bus driver, Juan.

“*Cómo estás, Señor?*” Dr. Valquist asked.

“*Muy bien, Doctor,*” the driver responded.

Dr. Valquist reached into his satchel and took out a pile of papers. “I still need to double-check that you have a valid passport,” he said, turning around toward Jonathan. “The others all showed me theirs days ago.”

Jonathan smiled and produced the blue document from his shirt pocket.

Dr. Valquist looked at the inside page. “Issued just this week, huh?”

Jonathan nodded. "I lucked out. I didn't even know you could pay more for an expedite, but the thing still came in just a few days."

"Your uncle works at the Department of Transportation, as I recall. Does he have a connection with someone at State?"

"Maybe that's it, sir."

"Even so, it was dangerous putting off something so important until the last minute. You would have missed this trip if you didn't get your passport in time."

"I know it, sir."

Miss Maple came aboard and took the seat beside Dr. Valquist. "This will be how many times in Rome for you, Andrew?"

He looked up in thought. "Seven..." he answered slowly, as if unsure of the number.

"Such a newbie," she said. "This will be thirteen for me!"

The other students boarded one by one. Layla sat down and slid over, making room for another passenger.

Carmen was right behind her. Knowing her friend's unconfessed interest in Will, she slid in next to Jonathan.

"Move over," she said. "*Ego sum* Carmen. Who are you again?"

Will's heart fluttered when he saw the open spot next to Layla. "Is this seat taken?" he asked.

"No," she said, smiling nervously.

Dr. Valquist got up and walked slowly down the aisle, handing tickets to the students. "Before we get on our way to the airport, there's something I want you all to be doing throughout this trip. From time to time, take a moment to make a mental snapshot of the scene you are in. Believe it or not, the day may come in your lives when even the memory of sitting in this bus will be something sweet to cherish."

"I knew he was going to say something to make me cry," Carmen whispered, wiping away tears.

"*Estamos listos para salir, Señor,*" Dr. Valquist said to the driver.

As the bus pulled away from the school, the students looked back at the building with a strange sense of finality, as if they would never see it again. They sat mostly in silence as they watched their progress toward Reagan International Airport. Across the Potomac River, the Washington Monument appeared on the horizon.

Carmen leaned past Jonathan toward the window. "It gets me every time," she said.

"I know what you mean. It just makes you want to serve your country somehow."

“You mean like join the army or something?” Will asked.

“I don’t know,” Jonathan said.

“There are many ways to serve your countries,” Dr. Valquist stated, overhearing the conversation. “You’re all destined to contribute to society even if all that means is that you prosper in your chosen careers.”

“But I want more than that,” Jonathan said quickly. “I want my life to matter somehow. Maybe that’s because...”

The teachers and students looked at him, hoping he would continue speaking. Jonathan finally turned away and looked out the window.

“*Llegamos pronto, Doctor,*” the bus driver said.

“*Muchas gracias, Señor,*” Dr. Valquist said. “Students, check your seats to make sure you have everything.”

The bus pulled up to the international departures terminal. Each of the students grabbed their hand bags and headed to the front exit. The driver had opened the side compartment for their larger luggage. As they each began moving toward the rotating glass doors of the terminal, Will noticed that Dr. Valquist was only carrying his leather satchel and a single small carry-on.

“We’re going to be gone over a week, sir,” he said. “Is that really all you need?”

“Years of international travel have taught me to pack very light,” he answered. “Two changes of clothes, which I will wash in the hotel sink as necessary.”

“This is something you learned in your spy days?” Carmen asked.

“Indeed,” he replied. “One day you may end up doing similar things.”

As they got in the long line waiting to check their baggage for coach travel on the airplane, Will saw a desk attendant answer her cell phone. Immediately after closing the call, she walked up to their group.

“Are you all on a school trip?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Miss Maple answered.

“Let me process you through the First Class check-in, since no one’s there right now.”

“Excellent,” Dr. Valquist said. “I guess there are some perks left for simple school teachers.”

As they walked toward the counter, Will nudged Layla with his elbow. “Does this special treatment seem strange to you somehow?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

Each in turn presented their passports and had their baggage weighed and processed. Once relieved of the burden of their larger luggage, they

were holding their boarding passes and ready to go through security. The group passed through the metal detectors uneventfully and at last were seated by their gate, waiting for a direct flight to Rome.

“There’s no good way to minimize jetlag on a flight across the Atlantic,” Dr. Valquist said casually. “It’ll take a day for every hour difference before you feel completely recovered.”

“So, in other words, we’ll feel normal again just in time to head home,” Carmen said.

“Correct,” Miss Maple replied. “But the good news is that it’s always easier on your body to travel westward. We’ll leave Rome in the morning and arrive back in Washington on the afternoon of the same day. Stay awake until at least nine that night and you’ll normalize very quickly.”

“I didn’t realize you’d also done so much foreign travel,” Layla said.

“Going back to England twice a year to see my Mum is enough to make me experienced,” she said, pushing up her glasses.

“We’ll begin pre-boarding for Flight 543 with direct service to Rome shortly,” an announcement sounded.

“Has anyone else here never been on a plane before?” Jonathan asked.

The group exchanged quick glances to see who might reply.

“I don’t think so,” Dr. Valquist said. “This is really your first time?”

“Yeah, and I’ll admit I’m nervous.”

“You do know all the statistics about it being safer than automobile travel?” Will asked.

“I’ve heard it. But the thought of being thousands of feet in the air over the Atlantic Ocean doesn’t seem safe to me.”

“Let’s stay scientific about it,” Dr. Valquist said. “It is, of course, an inherently dangerous thing to fly. That said, a modern airplane has many safety checks and redundant systems such that in practice it’s not something to worry about.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better,” Jonathan said. “And I’m worried I might get sick during the flight.”

Dr. Valquist laughed. “I’m seated right next to you. And I’ve seen it all. It wouldn’t affect me in the least.”

“That actually does relieve me a bit,” Jonathan said.

“We will now begin boarding rows 20 through 35,” an announcement called.

“That’s us,” Layla said. “Let’s go fly to Rome!”

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The group was more than half way through the flight as Jonathan sat awake in the darkened cabin. He looked at a TV screen jutting from the ceiling of the plane, displaying their location, altitude, and even the temperature outside the aircraft. Pulling open the shade of the window beside him, Jonathan saw nothing but blackness over what he knew was the North Atlantic.

“*Thalassa, thalassa,*” he whispered.

“The sea, the sea,” Dr. Valquist said softly from beside him.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Jonathan whispered back. “Did I wake you?”

“I can never sleep on planes. *Thalassa*, the sea. We taught you all some Greek. Only Layla speaks it with any real ability, I admit. But we never covered Xenophon. Where did you pick up that quote?”

“I did a presentation on it in Miss Maple’s class Freshman Year. What a story! After fighting their way through a thousand miles of enemy territory, the Greeks knew they were finally out of trouble only when they spotted the sea. And so they called out ‘*Thalassa! Thalassa!*’ in celebration of finally reaching home.”

Dr. Valquist nodded. “Very good. And this reference was somehow meaningful to you? That’s why you chose it?”

Jonathan’s face fell.

“I’m sorry. This is evidently something sensitive.”

“No. Well, yes.” Jonathan sighed and shook his head. “I have to stop doing this. I know what I’ve become, sir.”

“And what’s that?”

“The only real problem student you have at the Fairfax Classical Academy.”

The teacher turned himself toward Jonathan. “Now *that* I am going to reject, Mr. Drake. First off, that thing last year with the computer— You served your suspension. That’s over and done with. And if your academic achievement this year was below what I think your true potential is, I am not disappointed in *you*. If anything, I continue to be disappointed in myself that I never found a way to help you more.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Jonathan whispered. “Sometime this year, I just stopped feeling like I had the energy to keep going through the motions. Layla’s the master of languages. Carmen’s the fighter and horse expert. Will’s just good at everything and a science whiz to boot. Me? I don’t excel at anything. So I guess I quit trying to compete with them.”

Dr. Valquist nodded. “So tell me what you want to do from here.”

“I meant what I said earlier today about wanting to be of service somehow. Don’t laugh, but a part of me is seriously thinking about not going to college and instead joining the military.”

Dr. Valquist looked at him and smiled. “When have I ever laughed at you?”

“You haven’t.”

“Then of course I won’t now. There’s nothing wrong with that plan, if that’s really what you want. I spent four years in the Army myself.”

“But then another part of me thinks that everything I’ve learned at the Academy will be wasted if I did that.”

“Wasted? Why?”

“Well, how many other enlisted men in the Army can speak Latin?”

“How many officers in the entire U.S. Armed Forces can speak it?”

Jonathan chuckled. “I suppose none.”

“Speaking Latin is all fine and good, Jonathan,” he said. “But because of Latin you have also acquired functional Spanish, French, and Italian. The Army would probably send you to their language institute and make you into a linguist. That’s what I did for the NSA.”

“But I don’t know if that’s what I really want.”

“One thing I do know about how the world works is that once you sign on the dotted line to something bigger than yourself, like the Army, you have to do things you don’t choose.”

“Maybe I’ll just go to college then.”

“Mr. Drake, do whatever you *want* to do. Go to college. Or join the Army. And good luck not being a linguist, if you do. But take over your life.”

“It sounds easier than it is.”

“Go with me a little ways, Jonathon. I lost my own parents when I was about your age. But I had a twin brother and we helped each other through a lot of things. When your parents were killed, you probably felt like your world had been destroyed and you had no control over it.”

“Yes, but that’s not my biggest problem anymore.”

“Okay, then what is?”

Jonathan pursed his lips. “I just don’t feel like I have anyone in my life to be proud of me.”

“What about your uncle?”

“Are you kidding? He’s spent the last three years telling me that he can never replace my parents.”

“It was proper of him to stress that,” Dr. Valquist said. “But I’ve also seen for the last three years how that man has been as much a parent to you as anyone could be.”

Jonathan's lower lip began to tremble. "And that's the problem. He's the greatest man I know. I love him dearly. And I've never told him that. I miss my parents, but they're gone. And now I kinda wish that I could just...call Frank...my dad."

"What a sad situation," Dr. Valquist said. "You two have no one in this world but each other. You're a family. And you can't admit that's what you've become."

"I've wanted to know if he's proud of me. But if I asked him, I'm sure he'd just say something like he knows my parents would be proud."

"And so..."

"So maybe that's why I'm the underachiever of the Academy," Jonathan said.

"Subconsciously doing nothing to be proud of."

"I don't know, I guess that all makes sense."

"Now tell me about *thalassa*," Dr. Valquist said.

Jonathan nodded. "My dad owned a sail boat."

"Nice. I've never ridden on a boat smaller than a cruise ship. It's fun?"

"It's more. The feeling of the cool air. The mist of the water in your face. The smell and taste of the salt. It's just so calming."

"He taught you how to control the boat as well?"

"Oh yes," Jonathan said. "And I'm damn good at it."

"So..."

"I guess because of what I just said, *thalassa* reminds me of a happier and simpler time. The Greeks saw the sea and knew they were almost home. And for me, it's a home I know I can never get back to. And in dreams sometimes I see the wide open water and I feel like somehow the sea holds my destiny."

"Then it sounds like the Coast Guard or Navy would be a better choice for you than the Army. But let's move back to the present. Who do you want to be, Jonathan Drake?"

"I want to stop being the pitiful orphan," he answered, wiping his eyes.

"Good," Dr. Valquist said, wiping his as well. "That never did get anyone very far."

"And I want my friends back. But I don't think I fit into that group of three anymore."

"You don't fit into that group of three," Dr. Valquist said. "But I know for a fact that they wish they were a group of four again. Make it so."

"You're a very wise man, Dr. Valquist."

“Age and more sins and mistakes than you’ll ever make have created what I am today, Mr. Drake. Now, let’s try to get some rest so we can enjoy tomorrow a bit more.”

Jonathan closed his eyes and sleep instantly found him.

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The plane arrived back in morning light and the group enjoyed a breakfast while gazing down upon European terrain. As they landed in Rome, they saw the Mediterranean Sea just a few kilometers away through the right-hand windows.

“*Thalassa! Thalassa!*” Jonathan shouted with a smile.

The group laughed, as much at Jonathan’s sudden exuberance as at their own knowledge of the obscure reference, still remembering his report in Miss Maple’s class.

“Somehow we have a new Jonathan this morning,” Carmen said smiling. “And I like him.”

As they disembarked, they entered into the large terminal of Rome’s airport and were suddenly assaulted by brightly illuminated Italian language signs. Their linguistically trained minds whirled to translate each of them and soon the whole group was pouring into Italian conversations.

A shuttle picked them up from the airport and they arrived at their hotel after thirty minutes of congested Roman street traffic. They stepped into the lobby and saw a space almost over-packed with potted trees. A dark brown wooden reception counter was at their left, behind which stood a young and smiling woman in a bright green blazer. Dr. Valquist handled the check-in procedures and distributed key cards to the group. In a row of rooms on the third floor, the girls were together, followed by Miss Maple, then Dr. Valquist, and finally the boys.

“We’ve got a big day planned for tomorrow,” Miss Maple said, as they walked toward the elevator. “For today it will be enough to get settled into our rooms and then make a brief and initial exploration of the Forum.”

“So get cleaned up as you wish, and let’s meet back here in the lobby after an hour,” Dr. Valquist said. “We’ll see the Forum a bit and then get a meal at a wonderful little place I know just south of this area.”

Carmen and Layla showered quickly, changed clothes, and arrived back at the lobby, finding Dr. Valquist already there.

“I can’t believe I’m about to see them!” Carmen said.

“You mean the pillars of Castor and Pollux?” Dr. Valquist said.

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “How did you know?”

“I remember you talking about them four years ago when I was showing you slides from one of my trips.”

“Slides!” Layla laughed. “I remember you used to bring in those cartridges and click through them one by one. I’m glad you’ve advanced since then to computer presentations.”

“We must keep up with the times.”

Miss Maple now arrived, carrying an umbrella.

“I don’t think there’s any rain in the forecast,” Carmen said.

“This is to fight off street urchins, if necessary,” she said. “The area of the Forum is crawling with beggars, pickpockets, and other swindlers.”

“Just stay close to me,” Dr. Valquist said. “No one will bother us.”

“And why is that?” she asked, pushing up her glasses.

“I have city presence. It’s just an air one develops that makes petty thieves know you aren’t a target to consider.”

“Whatever it is, I’ll be happy for any help you can give.”

The elevator opened and the boys poured out, each dressed in the same clothes they had flown in.

“I do hope you guys plan on changing before tomorrow,” Layla said.

“It just seemed like a waste of clean clothes to wear them only a few hours,” Will said.

“What about putting on new clothes for tonight and then wearing those tomorrow as well?” Carmen asked. “That’s my plan.”

“And won’t your clothes be just as old tomorrow night as ours are now?” Jonathan asked.

Carmen smirked. “*Touché*, new Jonathan,” she said, putting her arm around his shoulder and pulling him along. “Let me show you the Roman Forum.”

As the group crossed the busy Via Celio Vibenna, they looked down upon the Roman Forum, which lay several feet lower than the towering Coliseum ahead of them. Banks of green grass filled the spaces not covered by concrete walkways.

“There’s your first look at the economic artery of ancient Rome, *mi amici*,” Dr. Valquist said.

The students all smiled and looked at each other, hearing him use the word “friends.”

“The entrance to the Forum is on the other side of the Coliseum,” he said. “Follow me.”

The shadow of the tall Coliseum cast a welcome coolness on the six weary travelers.

“Hello, my old friend,” Miss Maple said, craning her neck to look up at the structure.

The four students stood breathless, seeing it for the first time. Above them loomed story after story of ancient gray concrete proudly standing against time and a brilliant blue sky.

“Bloody hell!” Will gasped. “It’s even bigger than I imagined!”

Carmen and Layla looked at each other and smirked. Neither had to say it out loud.

“Let’s move along, lads and lasses,” Miss Maple chimed, holding her umbrella in one hand and pushing her glasses up her nose with the other. “We’ll explore the inside of the Coliseum tomorrow when we’re more rested.”

“Yes,” Dr. Valquist said. “So let’s head down.”

The four students followed their teachers along a busy walkway lined with a metal chain fence on each side. Carmen and Jonathan were directly behind them, each noticing that Dr. Valquist’s gray hair somehow complimented Miss Maple’s blonde bun.

Carmen poked Jonathan in the ribs. “When are they gonna hook up?” she whispered.

A cushion of heat fell upon the group as they stepped out of the Coliseum’s shadow and descended toward an explosion of white marble artifacts. Columns lay randomly beside the path, as if cast to the ground like cigarette butts.

Layla and Will followed next in the procession.

“*Nos sumus in Roma!*” he exclaimed. “We’re finally in Rome. I’ve been dreaming of this trip for four years!”

“I know,” she returned. “Just think, we’re about to see the original of that thing that sits on Miss Maple’s desk.”

“The three columns of Castor and Pollux,” Will said. “They’re at your eleven o’clock.”

She acquired the coordinates. “*Sic!*” she squealed. “Yes!”

“Let me get a picture of you with that in the background,” he said, taking out his phone.

She stepped forward and turned toward him. Running her hands over her head to fix her hair, she smiled broadly at Will.

“*Tu es pulchra,*” he whispered to himself as he pressed the button. “You’re so beautiful.”

They walked quickly to catch up with the group.

“That’s the old Senate building ahead, right?” Carmen asked.

“*Sic*,” Dr. Valquist replied. “Remember, that isn’t where Caesar was assassinated because...”

“They were meeting in the Theater of Pompey,” Will said. “Score!”

“*Sic*, Mr. Stanhope,” he chuckled. “Let’s stop here for a moment, students.”

The group slowly spread out and took in the scene from the center of the Roman Forum. Remnants of once grand buildings stretched to the sky in lonely columns, only hinting at the scale of their original glory.

“Anyone who could ever again see this place in its ancient grandeur would truly be blessed,” Dr. Valquist stated.

“Fairfax Classical Academy!” Miss Maple shouted. “Time for a picture!”

The students quickly reassembled next to their teachers.

“Go over by the three columns,” she said. “I’m going to put this photo on my desk right next to the replica.”

They walked across the open space and formed a tight group, arms around each other’s shoulders and faces full of smiles.

Miss Maple looked through her camera at the four. She sighed to see the exquisite picture they formed. Love and fear surged in her heart. “God help you all,” she whispered.

“Hurry up,” Will shouted. “I’m starving.”

“Smile!” She snapped the picture.

“Let’s go get some dinner,” Dr. Valquist declared.

“Sounds like a plan,” Carmen said, raising her eyebrow as she saw a tall man dressed in a plastic gladiator suit approaching.

“Take picture with gladiator, pretty lady!” the man said in an Italian accent. He put his arm around Carmen’s shoulder, letting his hand dangle well down her chest.

“You have exactly one second to leave,” Carmen said.

The man pressed his face toward hers. “What you say?”

Carmen’s elbow shot into his stomach. He doubled over, gasping for breath. She spun around and kicked the man squarely in the chest. He crumbled to the ground, his plastic armor falling off as he landed on the dusty gravel.

In an instant, a uniformed police officer was on the scene, slapping handcuffs on the stunned man writhing about on the ground.

“We are so sorry,” a second officer said, stepping toward the group. “We do not tolerate harassment of tourists. But how did you...?”

“Thank you, officer,” Dr. Valquist said, walking backward toward the Coliseum. “Come, students. Let’s avoid an international incident and move along.”

“Sorry, sir,” Carmen said, catching up to him.

“You were magnificent,” he returned, suppressing a smile.

The group continued past the Coliseum and soon they were standing back at the Via Celio Vibenna, watching oncoming traffic from the left, followed by a thin median strip and another lane of cars from the right.

“Move fast when we get the walk light,” Miss Maple shouted. “There’s barely enough time to get across.”

“Hold my satchel, would you?” Dr. Valquist said, handing the small burgundy leather case to Carmen.

“Certainly, sir,” she said, looking at it curiously.

The walk light flashed green.

“Let’s go, students!” Miss Maple said, starting across the road.

The young people moved quickly, reaching the median and continuing past the second set of lanes.

Miss Maple’s umbrella slipped from her fingers, sliding backwards on the street.

“I’ve got it,” Dr. Valquist said, turning and scooping up the item.

He stepped with her onto the median strip just as the light changed. The students had reached the other side of the thoroughfare.

“Don’t worry,” Dr. Valquist shouted. “We’ll be with you at the next walk light.”

“Look,” Layla said. “The sun’s setting behind the Forum.”

All of the students except Carmen gazed at the swirls of yellow and orange on the horizon.

“Alert,” Carmen said. “We are a split team. Focus on the other members.”

“This isn’t Mr. Cole’s gym class, Carm,” Jonathan said. “What do you think’s gonna happen here?”

A van screeched to a stop in front of Dr. Valquist and Miss Maple. Two men wearing black ski masks burst from the back of the vehicle. One of them lunged at the headmaster and punched him in the midsection. Dr. Valquist crumbled to the ground.

“What the hell!” Carmen shouted. She stepped into the street toward her teachers.

“Look out!” Jonathan shouted, pulling her back just as a car flew by.

The second man lifted Miss Maple into the air and threw her into the back of the van. A third man scrambled out and grabbed Dr. Valquist’s feet as the first assailant dragged him by the hands toward the vehicle.

“We have to help them!” Carmen said, diving again out into traffic.

A horn blared as a car barely missed hitting her. She reached the back of the vehicle just as the doors slammed shut. Tires screamed and the van accelerated down the street.

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The four students huddled together on a bed in the boys' hotel room. A sudden rap at the door startled them all.

"I've got it," Jonathan said, standing up from the bed to peer through the peep-hole. "Who's there?" he shouted through the door.

"Bruce Harper, from the United States Embassy," came a muffled voice. Jonathan turned to the group. "He looks official."

Will gave a nod.

Carmen got up and took a defensive stance in the middle of the room.

Jonathan unlatched the chain lock and opened the door.

A tall blue-suited man stepped in. "Thank you," he said. "First off, how are you all doing?"

"We're pretty shook up," Layla answered. "I still can't believe this is happening."

Mr. Harper looked between the two boys. "Which one of you is Will?"

"Here," he said, raising his hand.

"I've been in touch with the British Embassy on behalf of you and Miss Maple. They would like us to continue as the lead in this thing."

"Thank you," Will said.

"Now, we've got you all booked on the first flight out in the morning. Have you spoken to your parents?"

"They have," Jonathan said. "And I've spoken to my uncle."

The man nodded knowingly, having learned of Jonathan's situation.

"Can I get a bit more background on this trip you're on?"

Will spoke for the group. "We're the Senior Class at the Fairfax Classical Academy in Virginia. This is our Spring Break trip."

"You're the entire Senior Class?"

The students chuckled in concert.

"We were the only students when they first opened," Layla explained.

"But now there's a hundred more in the lower grades."

"What does it mean that it's a classical academy?"

"It's a normal high school," Jonathan started, "but we focus on Latin and ancient Roman culture."

"Like mythology?"

“Everything,” Carmen said. “We even practice horseback riding and sword fighting.”

“What a strange place.”

“Mr. Harper, what happened here today?” Jonathan asked.

“It seems to be a random kidnapping. It’s not common here in Rome, but it’s also not unprecedented.”

“Excuse me,” Carmen said. “I assume you are aware that Dr. Valquist is a former NSA agent.”

“Yes, that fact certainly popped up when I entered his name in my database.”

“Could that be connected to this?”

He shook his head. “We have no reason right now to believe it is.”

“Any chance these people will come after us too?” Layla asked.

“There are Roman police outside in the hall here and in the lobby downstairs. You’ll be fine.”

“That makes me feel a little better,” Jonathan said.

The man opened the door and stepped into the hall. “An embassy van will pick you up tomorrow morning at six to take you to the airport.”

“Thank you, sir,” Will said.

As the door gently closed, the students exchanged silent glances for a moment.

Layla closed her eyes. “I’m...so...scared,” she managed through broken breaths.

Will took a half and hesitant step toward her and then stopped. Jonathan saw his caution and rolled his eyes. Carmen sat down beside her friend and put her arm around her shoulder.

“It’s alright, Layla,” she said, pulling her into a hug.

“I can’t imagine never seeing them again,” she said.

“I know,” Jonathan said, sitting down on the other side of Layla and adding another layer to the embrace.

Will stood by, wanting to be there but not knowing how at that point.

Suddenly the hotel phone rang as if screaming for attention.

“Who could that be?” Jonathan mumbled, breaking the hug and rolling across the bed toward the dresser. He lifted the receiver. “Yes?”

The others looked on as horror seized Jonathan’s face. He listened carefully for a moment then set the receiver back down.

“What is it?!” Carmen asked insistently.

He shook his head, mouth agape. “Here’s what I just heard. Be ready to deliver the bag to us or your teachers die.”

“Bloody Hell!” Will shouted. “What does that even mean?”

“What bag?” Layla asked.

“Wait a minute,” Carmen said. “Dr. Valquist handed me his satchel when we were by the Coliseum.”

“Where is it now?” Jonathan asked.

“In our room. Just a sec.” She opened the door and disappeared into the hall. A moment later, she stepped back in, holding the satchel to her chest. She set it on the bed between her fellow students.

“Should we really open this?” Will asked. “I mean, this is his private stuff.”

“We don’t have a choice,” Carmen said, undoing the buckle on the leather bag. “We have to figure out why they want this thing.” She emptied the contents onto the bed. An assortment of various nations’ currencies, a stick of gum, a weathered passport, and a single folded piece of paper tumbled and bounced on the bed.

“What’s this?” Jonathan asked, unfolding the paper.

The students gasped in unison as they spotted the header:

TOP SECRET/COMINT/GAMMA/X-1

“Top Secret?” Layla whispered. “This is a classified document!”

“He’s not supposed to have something like this in his bag, right?” Will asked.

“I would assume not,” Carmen said. “What’s ‘COMINT’?”

“Communications Intelligence,” Jonathan replied. “That’s what the NSA does, wiretaps and stuff like that. I would guess that GAMMA and X-1 have something to do with Area 51 maybe.”

“Yeah, right,” Will chuckled.

They all looked into the body of the message, a jumble of upper case letters.

“That’s a lot of question marks and very few vowels,” Carmen said. “Any idea what it says?”

“Some kind of secret code,” Will said.

“This is what alien language looks like,” Jonathan added. “They’re so smart they don’t need vowels.”

Layla laughed. “It’s Arabic, written in an English transcription system.”

“What’s it say?” Carmen asked.

“Greetings, my brother. God willing, soon you will hear news,” she said, running her finger along the page.

“Sounds ominous,” Jonathan said.

“It’s really not,” she returned. “This is the kind of thing my dad would write to my uncle. I don’t see why this would even be classified.”

“We gotta call Mr. Harper back,” Will said. “He has to know about all this.”

“But they’re gonna kill them,” Carmen whispered.

“And we assume that Dr. Valquist and Miss Maple really go free if we give this sheet to the kidnappers?” Jonathan asked.

“Think, people,” Will said, standing up from the bed. “What are our options?”

“Give them the satchel and hope for the best,” Layla said. “That’s one option.”

They looked at each other and shook their heads.

“Doing nothing isn’t really an option either,” Jonathan said.

“Then there’s only one other course of action,” Carmen said. “And we know it.”

“Fight back?” Will said. “We’re a high school group on Spring Break. What can we do about kidnappers?”

“Not just kidnappers,” Jonathan noted. “Probably these are intelligence officers of a hostile nation.”

“Oh, great,” Layla said.

“But we’re not just high school students,” Carmen countered. “We’re pretty well trained in fighting ourselves.”

“Not all of us are as good as you,” Layla said nervously.

“And I’m not the linguist you are. But we’re a team.”

Jonathan stood from the bed. “We really don’t have any choice. We either give them the satchel or go on the offensive.”

Layla sighed. “We can’t trust them to just let our teachers go. I know that.”

The group nodded in the recognition of their growing consensus.

“If we do this, we need a plan,” Will said.

Jonathan walked across the room. He returned with his laptop bag.

“What are you doing?” Layla asked.

“Remember that I have the distinction of being the only student at the academy to ever get an out-of-school suspension.”

“That’s right,” Carmen said. “You hacked into the school’s server. Did you do that to change a grade?”

“Better,” he said. “To get that red-headed junior’s cell-phone number.”

“Celeste?” Layla laughed. “Why didn’t you just ask one of us?”

“Right,” he said. “And then the whole school would know I like her.”

“How did you do it?” Carmen asked. “And what are you doing now?”

Jonathan removed the cord from the hotel phone and inserted it into the back of the laptop. “I used my uncle’s log-on at his job to get into a few

databases.” He took another cord out of his bag and connected it from his computer back into the phone itself.

“He’s at the Department of Transportation, right?” Layla asked.

“Yeah,” Jonathan said, double clicking his way through several screens. “And he’s got plenty of toys at his disposal.”

“How did you get his log-on?” Carmen asked.

“A lucky guess on his password,” he said softly. “It’s the nickname my dad used to call him.”

“Sorry,” Carmen said, putting her hand on his shoulder.

“Those guys are probably going to call back soon to tell us where to bring the satchel,” Jonathan said. “And when they do, I’m going to get some information off that call.”

The phone rang.

“That’s them,” Jonathan said. “Layla, answer it and try to keep the guy on the line as long as you can.”

“Why me?”

“He had an accent of some kind. Only you have a chance of figuring out where he’s from.”

She nodded and picked up the receiver. “Yes?”

The students watched as Jonathan furiously typed on his computer.

“¿Dónde?” Layla asked.

Jonathan nodded and continued to type.

“*Entiendo. Pero, ¿dónde, exactamente? ¿Y cuándo?*”

She pulled the receiver from her ear. “They just hung up.”

“Don’t hang up yourself!” Jonathan shouted. “There are still packets of info that fly back and forth.” He continued typing and then lifted his hands from the keyboard, smiling.

“What is it?” Carmen asked.

“I’ve got their phone number and a location.” He clicked to reveal a map. “That call was placed from a cell just a mile north from here.”

“They’re asking us to drop the satchel in a trash barrel on the north side of the Coliseum in exactly two hours,” Layla said.

“Where was he from?” Carmen asked.

“He was pretending to have a Castilian accent, but he’s actually Latin American.”

“So who could these people be?” Will asked. “Cubans?”

“I said Latin American. Not Caribbean.”

“Sorry, Miss Linguist,” he chuckled.

“Listen,” Carmen interrupted. “I guess all we can do is hope that our teachers are being held where the call was placed from. But if they’re planning to pick up that satchel in two hours, we have to move.”

“You’re right,” Will said. “Are we really going to do this thing?”

Each one nodded in turn.

“Every operation needs a leader,” Carmen said. “I nominate our Senior Class president.”

“I concur,” Jonathan said.

“Ditto,” Layla added.

“Thanks for your vote of confidence,” Will said. “I think.”

“Alright, leader. What do we do about the guards in the hall and downstairs?” Jonathan asked.

Will looked up in thought. “Here’s the plan. When we step out of this room, Layla will explain to the guard in her best Italian that we are going to the lobby for snacks. But when we get down there, we will walk casually out of the hotel and then run to the right and lose the guards stationed down there.”

“And what if the police talk about losing us on their radios and the kidnappers hear about it?” Jonathan asked. “Wouldn’t that broadcast the fact that we aren’t going to the drop-off point in two hours as instructed?”

“Possibly,” Carmen said. “But not necessarily. Maybe we left early just to make sure we could find the place. I mean, we had to leave anyway, if we were going to deliver the satchel.”

“It’s all suspicious,” Jonathan said. “But it’s a risk we’ll have to take.”

“What’s our plan when we get to where the call was made?” Carmen asked.

“One crazy scheme at a time,” Will replied. “I’m making this up as I go.”

They all nodded in agreement.

“Let’s do this thing,” he said.

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Their escape from the hotel had gone exactly as planned. It was just after midnight and the group was walking along a dimly-lit boulevard lined with tall apartment buildings.

“We turn right at the next corner,” Jonathan said. “From there it’s three more blocks. Remember, all I have is a location based on the closest cell tower.”

“Understood,” Will said.

“Is anyone else’s heart about to explode out of their chest?” Layla asked.

“I think that’s a unanimous feeling,” Carmen said. “Six hours ago we were sightseeing in the Forum. Now, our teachers have been kidnapped and we’re on our way to try and rescue them. Take that, St. Benet’s Academy!”

“No more talking,” Will said, feeling uncomfortable at giving an order he felt was necessary.

The group complied and walked in silence until they approached the area of the caller.

“Well?” Will asked softly.

Jonathan pointed forward. “It’s that tall apartment building.”

Their eyes all locked on a seven-story structure with separate sets of apartments on the front and back of the building.

“So they could be in any one of those?” Layla asked.

“Here’s where I would be open to ideas, team,” Will said.

“I got the location off the cell tower,” Jonathan said. “But it’s accurate down to about fifty feet. From the range of the signal, it has to have come from an apartment on the back alley side of the building. Past that, I have no further information.”

“Think, people,” Will said. “There’s always a way.”

Carmen raised her hand.

“Yes, Miss Mattila?” Will said, smiling. “Thank you for raising your hand and not speaking out of turn.”

“Sorry,” she said. “Instinct. We have the number of the phone that called us. The kidnappers are probably keeping the apartment lights off while they wait.”

“Why do you think?” Will asked.

“I would,” she answered. “Whenever you’re doing something illegal or clandestine, you try to reduce your visibility.”

“You’re probably right,” he said. “Later on you can tell us all about your illegal and clandestine activities.”

“So we call that phone from one of our cells. They don’t know we have their number, since they called our landline at the hotel. They’re going to look at their phone to see who’s calling them.”

“And maybe turn a light on in the process,” Jonathan said. “It’s as good a plan as any.”

Will turned toward the group. “Alright, people, listen carefully. We are going to set this in motion and fast. After I finish talking, we will proceed, without any further words, to the back alley. I will place a call to that phone from my cell. We will all be watching the building for any possible sign of the apartment where that phone might be ringing. If we’re lucky, and we get a location, we will enter the building and immediately storm that spot.

I'm assuming a locked front door of a regular apartment can be compromised by you, Jonathan, running against it and hitting it with all your force. Carmen, as the best fighter in this group, you will be the first through the opened door. Your only directive is to disable anyone you can. The rest of us will enter as follows. I am after Carmen, then Layla. Jonathan, you come in as you are able, but depending on the strength of that door, we may not be able to count on you."

They all nodded.

"We have no back up coming, so all we can do is defeat the enemy and rescue our teachers. That's if they're even in there."

"Permission to speak," Carmen said.

"Yes."

"I love you all," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

Will smiled. "Alright, let's go."

The other students followed him to the back alley behind the building. The group spread out into the shadows, their eyes scanning the darkened wall of windows. Will took out his cell and gave it to Jonathan, who entered the number and handed the phone back.

"On three, I place the call. One...two...three."

He pressed the button and lowered the phone, training his eyes across the building with the rest of the group. Everyone saw a single light suddenly appear in the corner apartment on the fourth story. Will closed his phone.

He raised his hand with four fingers and presented it for confirmation of the floor. They all nodded in silence.

Walking closely beside the building, they returned to the main street. The students entered the lobby single file, in the order of their planned assault. On their right was a wall of mailboxes. Passing an elevator on their left, they started up a set of stairs. A rush of adrenaline surged through each of them as they bounded up the steps and arrived at their destination.

Jonathan leaned out of the stairwell. Looking down a hallway dimly lit by a single ceiling lamp, he saw the door of the target apartment. He scanned the floor for obstacles and saw none. Turning around, he spied Carmen directly behind him. She smiled with sad eyes. Will was behind Carmen and held up his open hand. He began closing his fingers one by one, signaling for the assault to begin.

Jonathan turned back and stepped out into the hall. He mentally counted down the final three seconds. On the mark, he began a sprint. He could hear Carmen following closely behind. Knowing that the entire group depended on him getting through that door, he somehow found even more

speed. Jonathan came at the door faster than he had ever moved and at the last instant turned his shoulder into it.

Carmen saw the door explode open. Jonathan fell stunned to the ground just inside the apartment. She leapt over him and into the darkened room. Silhouetted against the city lights seeping through curtains on the window, she saw a human form. Carmen heard, not saw, a kick coming toward her and barely dodged it. Punching forward, she struck her target squarely in the face and followed with two quick jabs to the stomach.

Will ran into the apartment. In the faint light, he made out the blackness of a hallway leading straight ahead from the first room. He thrust himself into that darkness and immediately took a sharp punch to his stomach. Doubling over, he shot his fist up in the direction from which he had been struck. He felt his blow drive into the assailant's chin.

Layla followed quickly behind and joined the fray, sending another sharp fist into Will's now off-balance opponent.

Carmen turned and saw Jonathan getting up from the floor. Sounds of a commotion in the next room told her that Will and Layla were in a fight. She made a rapid scan of the area to see if her opponent had dropped a useful weapon. Seeing nothing, she raced to follow her friends.

Just as she entered the hallway, all the lights in the apartment went on. The students squinted in pain as their eyes adjusted.

"Well done, students," Dr. Valquist said, stepping out of a bedroom.

Carmen sunk into a defensive stance. "Get down, sir. We're here to rescue you!"

An athletic whistle blew from the front room. "Stand down!" a familiar voice called out.

"What's going on?" Will asked.

"Stand down, all of you," Mr. Cole said, stepping into the hallway.

"I see that our pupils have passed their final exam," Miss Maple said, emerging from yet another bedroom.

Jonathan stumbled into the hallway himself. "Someone needs to explain what in the hell is happening here."

Will and Layla's opponent stood up slowly from the floor, rubbing his jaw. "You've trained these lads and lasses awfully well, Nick," the man mumbled in a thick Scottish brogue. "MI-6 assassins aren't supposed to get beat up by a couple of teenagers."

"Thanks," Mr. Cole said. "My protégée got the better of me as well."

"MI-6?" Will said loudly. "Please, Dr. Valquist. What's going on?" He looked at his students and smiled. "This will require more explanation than I can give standing in a hallway in Rome. So let's go to England."

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