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THE GEEK AND
THE SHEIKH

Girls from the Street Book 5

The Geek and the Sheikh

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– S. E. Smith

Contemporary Romance

THE GEEK AND THE SHEIKH

Girls from the Street Book 5

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Summary: A Sheikh's tantalizing online communication with a hacker leads to love and danger.

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Synopsis

She was born on the streets; he was born to rule...

Sheikh Jameel Saif-Ad-Din is in love. The problem is: he doesn't know the identity behind the fascinating hacker he only knows as Bugs. There are two things he *does* know: Bugs is a woman and she is going to be his one day. As the danger to his family increases, so does the information Bugs shares with him until she goes silent and his greatest fear becomes reality. His family's enemies have discovered her.

Junebug Rain lives in a world of zeros and ones. Her only comforts are her sister, Midnight, the anonymity of the hacker world, and a special hacker named Jam-man. When her talents lead her and her sister into the dark world of government assassins, mercenaries, and foreign coups, her home is no longer safe and she seeks safety with the one man in the world she trusts—Jameel 'Jam-man' Saif-Ad-Din.

Junebug is being hunted for her skills and the billionaire who wants her will do anything to capture her—including using Jameel as bait. Cast out into the world alone for the first time, Junebug will use every one of her skills and talents to protect the man she loves from the danger threatening them both, but will it be enough?

Prologue



**Andrius Bronislav's elegant home,
Near the capital city Vilnius in Lithuania**

Andrius Bronislav reached out one hand and gripped the mantel of the fireplace. Gas logs flickered behind the tempered glass and the heat rolled over him, but nothing seemed to penetrate the chill that had settled into his soul. The authorities had shut down his profitable mining operation in Brazil and confiscated all of his assets. Millions of dollars disappeared in a matter of hours.

He closed his eyes as a wave of bitterness swept through him. His hatred burned, leaving a sour taste in his mouth as he opened his eyes. He would kill the family behind his destruction if it was the last thing he did!

“I’m tired of your excuses! I want results! Everyone I have sent against the Saif-Ad-Din family has failed,” Andrius raged.

The small group of mercenaries he had assembled remained silent. Andrius threw his crystal goblet of wine against the wall, and the men shifted with unease.

I am surrounded by imbeciles, he savagely thought.

Andrius glared at the group. The three men standing near the door of his office either lowered their eyes or looked away in response. The lone woman, sitting on the couch near the window, remained unfazed.

His hand tightened on the handle of the cane he was heavily leaning on. His crippling pain and severely scarred skin were gifts from the government, given during their attack on his former compound.

Colin Coldhouse, owner of Cold Methods Security, had disappeared shortly after the attack. Andrius didn't know where the man was... or if he was still alive, but Colin's reckless brother and dozens of other highly trained members of Cold Methods Security were dead.

Andrius had lost billions of dollars' worth of equipment and facilities. They had all been destroyed or confiscated by the Lithuanian government. His vast fortunes were virtually gone, along with his ability to move unhindered around the world.

He was confined to the very few countries willing to look the other way—as long as he spread some of his dwindling cash reserves against the palms of greedy government officials. Not even bribery was enough for him to remain in his home country, however. For that, he had needed his few remaining loyal contacts and the dirty secrets he held on a handful of powerful politicians.

“Perhaps the others failed because you are approaching the... situation... from the wrong angle,” the woman suggested.

Andrius turned his ire on her. She was young — the youngest of the group — and she stood out from the others. The three hardened mercenaries were not unlike the ruinous Colin Coldhouse. She was the young hacker he had hired to stop the digital attacks that continued to drain his wealth. Her ebony skin was smooth, her curves were pleasantly round, and her eyes were highlighted by wide-rimmed glasses. She wore a bright red, orange, yellow, and black tie-dyed t-shirt dress and black leggings.

The only characteristic she shares with these men is the look in her eyes, he observed. *Cold, hard, and calculating.*

“Leave us,” he ordered the men with a dismissive wave of his hand.

He kept his eyes locked on Allison's as the men silently retreated from the room. She returned his stare with a cool one of her own.

Andrius painfully walked over to the chair near the window and sank down onto the plush, floral-patterned fabric. He stretched his injured leg out and rubbed his thumb along the handle of his cane.

Allison rose from the leather couch, crossed the room, and poured two glasses of scotch from the crystal decanter on the side bar. She returned, holding out one glass for him in her right hand while she sipped from the left. He took the offered drink.

“What angle do you propose?” he inquired.

Her lips curved in a self-possessed smile, and she returned to her former position on the couch. She kicked off her ridiculously high, bright red heels and curled her legs up onto the couch. Her dress rode up over her leggings.

No, she is nothing like the professionals I have dealt with in the past, Andrius irritably thought while appreciating the young woman's unusual confidence.

“You're going after the Saif-Ad-Din family with brute force. Granted, that will be the end result, but it is like hitting a six-foot-thick concrete wall with a rubber mallet and expecting the wall to crumble. They... on the other hand... have been slicing away at you like a surgeon with a sharp scalpel—cutting you where it hurts without ever needing to come at you directly.”

Andrius gritted his teeth and gripped the handle of his cane until his knuckles turned white. Allison wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know.

“Get to the point.”

Her features froze at the acid in his voice, her eyes flashing with unease, before she shrugged her shoulders and dipped her head in acknowledgement that she was treading on thin ice. She took a sip of the scotch before cradling it in her hands.

“Everything in this world is digital now. Hell, even your refrigerator and washing machine talk to the web! If there is a

connection, there is a way in, and a way to follow you. You've been focusing on the guys making the decisions, not the guy getting the information. Information is the key. No one else can do a thing without it! You need to cut the legs out from under the Saif-Ad-Din family, and the only way to do that is to take out Jameel Saif-Ad-Din, their personal computer guru. I know what kind of person Jameel Saif-Ad-Din is. I know the way he thinks, and I can put a tourniquet on what he is doing. However, if you really want to stop the Saif-Ad-Din family from draining you dry, you need to stop him permanently," she said.

Andrius frowned. "That is what I hired you for."

Allison swung her legs off the couch. An excited gleam appeared in her dark brown eyes. She leaned forward, as if afraid to say what she was about to tell him out loud.

"This will require a specialist," Allison began.

A frigid wave of anger seared through him.

"You are telling me that I should have hired this *specialist* instead of you," he said softly, menace emanating from every word.

Allison's own temper flashed in her eyes, but her tone was professional when she spoke. "Think of me as a consultant. I'm the expert who assessed your situation and found you the right person at the right time."

"Well, *consultant*, if your only use is finding someone better than yourself, you are worth a fraction of what we agreed I would pay you," he growled.

Allison glared. "Listen, I'm damn good at what I do, and you are extremely lucky that I am the consultant you have hired—because I'm the only one who can get this specialist for you." She lifted the glass of scotch and drained it.

"Really?" he asked derisively.

Allison gave him a predator's grin. "I know her weakness. It's a certain hacker called Jam-man... who also happens to be that pesky Jawahir prince I've been defending your accounts from."

Andrius narrowed his eyes. “How do you know?”

Allison stroked her finger along the rim of the glass in her hand. “I told you; I know Jameel. We went to school together and, unbeknownst to him, we hang out in MMOs. I know his coding. He’s gotten better, but so have I. Over the last few years, Bugs has been raiding with us. I know there is something going on between the two of them. Their chemistry is scorching.”

Her eyes were determined, and Andrius detected a hint of something calculating and personal within her speech. Jealousy, envy... or both? Either emotion could be a powerful influencer.

Oh, he thought. Wouldn't that be delicious? The jilted lover plotting to destroy her old flame, and using her nemesis to take them both out at the same time. He hid his grin. Entertainment aside, this was business.

“The specialist’s name is *Bugs*?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes.”

“And how do you know that this ‘*Bugs*’ is who I need?” Andrius asked with an assessing look.

“She’s the talk of the dark web... a legend among elite hackers. If you have her, you have the world at your fingertips. Rumor has it that no one can match her coding—not even the most powerful governments in the world,” Allison said.

“If this hacker is so phenomenal, why isn’t she working for the American government?” Andrius demanded.

Allison snorted. “Are you kidding? Government types don’t understand us. They would squeeze us until we’re dry, then tuck us away where we can’t do anything. If they got their hands on Bugs—let’s just say it is scary to think what they could make her do. No, hackers like us do better working freelance,” she explained.

“Fine. I’m interested. How will you use the prince to get her?” Andrius inquired, tapping his finger impatiently on the handle of his cane.

Allison lifted her chin and gave him a tight smile. “This is where my plan gets interesting.”

As Andrius listened to Allison outline her plan to entice the mysterious hacker into a trap, hope rekindled within him.

Perhaps I have been approaching this from the wrong angle, he thought.

Control came from the person who held the digital world in the palm of their hand, and that person would fear *him*. He would have it all. He would be successful in bringing down the Saif-Ad-Din family. He would reclaim his empire. All he needed was a little persuasion and the right bait.

One



New York City

Present Day:

“You can let me out here,” Junebug Rain instructed.

“You got it,” the Uber driver, John, cheerfully replied.

Junebug stared with wide, excited eyes at the arrival terminal of JFK International airport. She had never been here before, even though she had been born and raised in the city. In fact, there was a lot of the city that she had never explored... at least, not in person. Virtually, she had been everywhere thanks to her older sister, Midnight.

“Have a nice day,” John called out.

Junebug, lost in thought, pushed open the door of the compact SUV and slid out. She slung her backpack over her shoulder and stood looking at the entrance with a mixture of awe and exhilaration. She started forward with a small group of enthusiastic travelers, following them as they entered the building.

Even in the pre-dawn hours, the airport hummed with activity. She scanned the lines forming in front of the agents before bypassing them and heading for security. She fished out her passport, the ID she was using, and her global security pass.

Eager and weary travelers alike glanced at her as she passed them. Quite a few men stood a little straighter, hoping she would notice them. Quite a few women sighed, glared, or

elbowed their partners. Junebug was oblivious to the disruption she was causing.

“Tyler, watch where you’re going!” a woman hissed.

The crash of a suitcase into the metal sign caused it to fall over. The woman’s curses combined with the man’s defensive muttering. Several people chuckled.

“I didn’t see it,” Tyler was protesting.

“That’s because you were watching her!” the woman snapped.

Junebug continued to the security gate. She had memorized the sections of the airport that led to the area she was going, and she glided through the early morning travelers with an ease that belied the butterflies fluttering in her stomach. This was the first time that she had ever been in an airport in her life! She presented her documents to the TSA officer and gave him a brilliant smile that left many people around her feeling dazzled, then collected her backpack and computer, and continued on toward her gate.

Junebug stepped onto the moving sidewalk. Her delighted expression made an older couple chuckle. She ignored them as she leaned forward to study the way the metal pieces fitted together to create the walkway.

“Where are you going?” the old woman asked.

Junebug straightened and blinked. “A long way from here. Why do you want to know?” she asked.

The woman looked startled. “I... because it seems strange that you are traveling alone,” the woman replied.

Junebug stared at the couple before she shrugged, turned, and walked away.

“*Well,*” the woman softly exclaimed with surprise and indignation.

“When you look like that, who needs manners?” her husband teased.

Junebug thought about what the couple said. They thought she was rude? And how would someone’s appearance affect their

manners? Midnight had warned her about talking to strangers. It was none of their business where she was going... or why she was alone. So, who was the rude one in this situation? Bugs didn't actually know, but she quickly forgot about it as she got closer to her gate. The first leg of her flight would take her to London. She would plan her next leg after that.

All of this had come about a bit unexpectedly. It was the result of a conversation with her sister, Midnight, and the encrypted message she had received. She bit her lip as she processed her decision. Midnight was the one who physically handled dangerous missions and saved people in trouble, but this time the danger was personal.

Neither of us should stay home right now... but it won't be forever. It can't be.

Junebug paused in front of a departure message board and stared up at the changing flights, destinations, and times. Her flight would be boarding in fifteen minutes. She had booked First Class so that she could board first and wouldn't have to talk to people. The idea of saying a complete sentence to anyone but Midnight was enough to send her into a panic attack—well, almost. She was doing ok so far. Maybe this wouldn't be as bad as she thought.

Still, chatting with faceless people online who didn't use their real names was much preferable. She could handle that. It was the in-person stuff that was difficult. Having to look at them, make small talk about things she didn't know or couldn't care less about, that was what scared her. She liked the cryptic language of computers.

"You can do this, Junebug. You've got this," she muttered to herself.

"Do you need help finding your gate?"

Junebug stiffened and partially turned toward the deep, friendly voice. A swift glance gave her all the information she needed: male, approximately 26 years of age, brown hair, brown eyes, Hawaiian shirt, board shorts, crocs... with socks, and a worn carry-on. Threat level on a scale of one to ten: two.

The only reason Hawaiian Shirt made it to a two was because of the appreciative way he was looking at her. He seemed to be hoping he would get lucky if they were on the same flight. No chance of *that*.

“No,” she replied, turning and walking away.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he said as he followed her. “I just wanted to make sure you’re not lost, but it seems like you’re not. I’m heading to—”

She stopped and turned on him. Hawaiian Shirt almost ran into her. She looked up at him. He was a good foot taller than her curvy, five-foot-three frame.

“I said no. I don’t need help. I don’t want to walk with you. I am in love with someone and I am going to find him,” she stated.

There, she thought. She could provide details to people who didn’t deserve them. She was getting less rude by the second. *Take that, old lady*, she thought victoriously.

Hawaiian Shirt frowned. “Did you lose him?”

“Who?” she asked.

“You said you are going to find him. Did you lose the guy you love?” he inquired with a short laugh.

She stared at him. “No, of course not. I haven’t even met him yet.”

She turned and walked away with a shake of her head. Ok, technically she *had* met Jam-man, just not in person. Either way, she was done talking to strangers now.

No wonder Midnight warned me to be careful. What is wrong with these people?

She reached her gate. The airline hostess was calling for First-Class passengers. Junebug walked to the front of the line, showed her passport, and scanned her boarding pass before continuing down the enclosed gangway.

She breezed past the hostess and settled in her seat, placing her backpack on the floor in front of her. It contained everything

she would need. She had two changes of clothes, a brush, a bag of marshmallows, and her electronics. She kept her money and passport in a small cross-body clutch.

“Would you like a drink?” the hostess inquired.

Junebug blinked. “Water... please,” she said.

Her heart thudded as the passengers filed through. She was doing this—really doing this! She was on her own. There was no Midnight to guide and protect her. There wasn’t the usual anonymity behind a computer screen. She was out in the world... all by herself, and she was both exhilarated and terrified. For once, she was going to have to deal with people.

A barrage of thoughts and emotions hit her. She closed her eyes and rocked gently back and forth in her seat, tapping the tips of her fingers together in a pattern. Pulling Jam-man’s image into her mind, she let the familiar meditation and the mental image of him calm her.

“Would you like anything else?” the hostess asked, placing her glass of water in front of her.

Junebug opened her eyes and shook her head. “No.... Thank you,” she murmured.

No, the only thing I need is to find answers... and build a new life. No biggie.



Jawahir: Cyber-security division:

Six years earlier:

Sheikh Jameel Saif-Ad-Din weaved back and forth in the office corridor as he tried to hold on to a collection of file folders and text on his phone at the same time. He missed the knowing grins and amused looks of his co-workers as they stepped out of the way before he ran into them. It wasn’t the first time they had to do this since he started working in the

cybersecurity division three weeks earlier. One did not run into a royal prince of Jawahir—even if it was the prince’s fault.

Jameel rounded the corner, heading toward his office in a lower level of the Jawahir palace. Excitement surged inside of him as he studied the screen in his hand.

How did the new patch I sent you work? Were you able to trace the rootkit back to the source?

He chuckled as he typed in a response.

Yeah. It was just like you said. It was an analyst working with the accounting division. He was having an affair with an analyst in the cybersecurity division. He used her information to access the database. I never would have found the error.

You would have... in a year or three.

Lol. Definitely not before someone found a way in the way you did. You even guessed who it was.

It wasn't hard. I just followed the money—which btw is no longer in his account. The local animal shelter received a hefty donation last night. It was like watching one of those fake office vids on TT. All drama this and cheating that. They are so dorky.

Yeah, but addictive. Hey, I'll send you payment in a few for your help.

No worries. This one is on the house. It was fun working with you. I don't often get to meet another hacker as good as you. Hey, have you tried out that new game I was telling you about?

Yeah. I'm stoked. The maps and world-building are phenomenal. I'll be on in a few. Will you be there?

Of course. I helped with the—

A soft ‘oof’ jarred Jameel out of his conversation with Bugs, and he dropped his phone. His scowl of annoyance at the interruption turned to a good-natured grin when he realized who he had run into. The answering scowl on his older brother’s face didn’t change.

“You are going to knock yourself out one of these days if you don’t pay attention to where you are going,” Tarek dryly commented.

“Sorry, Tarek. I was working on that security issue you asked me about and— Thanks, uh, I got that,” Jameel muttered when his brother bent and plucked the phone off the floor.

Tarek scanned the clearly visible message and handed the phone back to him without saying a word. Jameel held the phone to his chest, pursing his lips to keep from making a smart-ass comment when he noticed that the amused expression on his brother’s face had flared anew at Jameel’s behavior.

As the youngest of the four brothers, Jameel often felt... less than his talented siblings. His oldest brother was Crown Prince Qadir Saif-Ad-Din. Qadir was tall, dark, and brooding. One glare usually had people bowing and stuttering.

Tarek held the prestigious title Head of Military Intelligence, and he was a Cabinet Minister. Tarek had excelled in the military. There wasn’t much that Tarek missed when it came to what was going on in the kingdom. The only one who probably knew more was their father, Melik Saif-Ad-Din.

Even his identical twin brother, Junayd, was an overachiever. Junayd was a medical doctor and Director of Medical for the Kingdom of Jawahir. Junayd’s passion for medical research and helping people was only slightly more intense than his love of the desert.

The only thing Jameel really had in common with his brothers was their appreciation for the fair sex. Jameel suspected that most residents of the kingdom perceived him to be the least talented of the four. He wasn’t a leader. He hated the strictness of the military, and he got nauseated at the sight of blood.

Well, actual blood. The fake stuff isn't bad, he mused.

While his brothers had been off doing their thing, he had found solace in the tech field. He had always preferred hanging with gamers online and exploring programming languages over the duties of royal life, which is how he had met Bugs.

He had been exploring a new game six months ago when he came across a user who used an avatar of a small smiling bug. She teased him into exploring an unreleased beta level in the game together. There had been an instant fascination with her. She tweaked the code as they played, making the game more interesting and the levels more complex.

Since that night, they had spent hours playing games, chatting, and challenging each other to write code that could wreak havoc on the world if it were ever shared. He knew by the end of the first night that he was chatting with a woman. By the end of the first week, he knew he had met someone extraordinary, and not just because of her skills. What he didn't know was who she was—only her online name, Bugs.

“Earth to Jameel, are you there?” Tarek dryly commented.

Jameel gave his brother a crooked grin and flushed. Tarek was scrutinizing his face with the same amused expression that so many people got when he spaced out for a second. He shifted from one foot to the other and looked away.

Having your brother as your boss sucked sometimes, he ruefully thought.

“I'll expect an update on the security breach in an hour,” Tarek continued.

“I sent you the report thirty minutes ago. The Black Hat is a guy named Ramel from accounting,” Jameel responded.

Tarek frowned. “You found who it was already? I just gave you the information last night.”

Jameel grinned and nodded. “Yeah. The issue is fixed. The money he earned has been donated to a local animal shelter. Oh, and there is info on the assholes he was working for, as well. Some corporation called Atri Holdings. A friend of mine

is shutting those guys down. They are going to regret thinking we are some third world country they can use as their personal piggybank.”

“Well done. You’ve done amazing work over the last three weeks, Jameel. I guess all those years you’ve spent on the computer are paying off for Jawahir now,” Tarek stated.

Jameel flushed, and his grin wavered. This was a hefty compliment coming from his brother. He just wished he could take all the credit for it.

“Thanks, bro. I have some other things I’m working on. I’ll send you an update later,” he said.

“Excellent.”

Jameel watched as his brother walked away. He looked down at his phone and grinned. Cute, animated bugs crawled all over his screen. He gripped his phone and hurried to his office. He couldn’t wait to put a face behind those creative little insects.

Twa



Jawahir

Present Day:

Jameel eagerly awaited the notification that Bugs was online, his gaze flickering to the bottom of the screen periodically. He leaned back in his chair, but he was not at all relaxed. A familiar frustration tensed his muscles. It had been over six years, and he still had no clue who his mystery lady was, only that she continued to intrigue him.

Oh, he had dreams about her. Dreams that left him restless and unfulfilled. He had spent a considerable amount of time searching for another woman who could hold his attention as long as she had. He was beginning to doubt that Bugs was a real person.

“Damn it. Leave it to me to fall in love with an AI!”

His declaration bounced off the soundproof walls of the dark corner office he had claimed and mocked him. He pushed back from his desk and rose to his feet, rolling his shoulders to ease the tension. He walked over to the coffee station in the corner and poured himself a cup.

When he returned to his seat, he scanned the screen where he was monitoring Colin Coldhouse and Andrius Bronislav. Both men were on the top ten list of most wanted in Jawahir. They had both tried to kill members of the royal family. Thanks to Bugs, he had shut down most of the funding flowing into

Bronislav's companies, and Cold Methods Security, the mercenary group led by Colin Coldhouse, was now out of business for good.

Unfortunately, the two men were still a threat. He glanced at the series of world clocks on the wall, remembering all the times he had tried to guess where Bugs lived. It had been impossible to tell. She came and went like a ghost throughout the day and night.

He didn't know when she slept. He needed at least six hours to be functional. There had been times when she posted almost continuously for days, especially once the attacks on his brothers began.

He had tried to track her once, and she had snubbed him. He had expected her to blow up at him. Instead, she had returned the favor... with a vengeance.

The rootkit she had installed had taken him a *month* to disable. During that time, he was trapped in a virtual room, unable to exit the game to access the rest of his computer. The virus had spread to the rest of his devices too.

He had rebooted into safe mode of course, tried different VPN addresses, new logins, everything he could think of. Every time he logged in—on any device—he was back in the barren room with a thousand doors that all led back to the same place. He even bought a new device, but connecting it to his old ones in any way had transferred the virus to it.

He had found the solution eventually, and he was a better hacker because of it, but her message had been very clear. If he messed with her again, she could, and would, do much worse to him. The most powerful message of all was when he tried to reconstruct what she had done and found that all traces of her coding were gone—wiped clean—in a manner he had never witnessed before.

He grimaced at the memory. Since then, he had resorted to the old fashioned way of researching—writing everything down. He stroked his thumb over the tattered journal he kept with him. It contained interesting tidbits of information that he had gleaned from his conversations with Bugs. It also contained a

lot of his personal feelings and thoughts. The notebook was a dangerous thing to have, but he found comfort in writing and reading his posts.

The ping of the computer drew his attention. He sat forward, placed his coffee mug on his desk, and opened the message. His smile grew as he typed.

Hey, beautiful. You're up early. Is everything okay?

This isn't Bugs. Is this Jam-man?

He stiffened, his fingers hovering above the keyboard. Fear made his stomach clench. His eyes froze on the screen before he read the message again, twice. He typed a curt reply.

Who is this and where is Bugs?

You helped me find my mystery lady.

He sat back when the reply came. Confusion flooded him. There was only one person that could be—his twin brother, Junayd. What the hell was Junayd doing on Bugs' computer?

Shaking his head, he typed a brief quote, leaving the ending for the person on the other end to complete. If someone had been monitoring their conversations, they wouldn't know this one. It was a running joke between the two of them.

'You know that you are supposed to be'...

... The sane one out of the four of us.

Disbelief held him immobile in his chair for a split second before he typed out a furious reply. His heart hammered with fear. If his brother was there, that meant something had to be wrong... seriously wrong. No one knew who Bugs was. It didn't make sense that his brother would know before he did. Junayd was a frigging doctor—not an IT or security genius!

What the hell are you doing on this system?
Where's Bugs?

We think she is coming to see you.

Jameel stared at the screen in stunned silence. Bugs... was coming to see him? Did she know who he was? They had never talked about it. Well, she had never asked. That had seemed strange to him, especially after all the time he had spent trying to find information on her.

She knows who I am? How are you on her account?

He waited impatiently as the dotted lines showed that his brother was typing. It seemed to take forever before Junayd replied. When he did, the air swooshed out of Jameel's lungs.

Her sister is my mystery lady. She is worried that Bugs will be in danger because she... is not used to being out in the world alone. Have you heard from her?

Bugs was in danger? A deluge of memories of all the really terrible people Bugs had brought down—including Coldhouse and Bronislav—swept through his mind.

Danger! She's walking into a frigging minefield if Coldhouse, Bronislav, or more than half the countries in the world find out her identity! he thought with growing horror. *And what did Junayd mean when he said she wasn't used to being out in the world alone? Was she held captive all these years?*

He realized that his brother was waiting for a response. He quickly typed one, along with a promise to keep in touch—after he found out some answers. At least he had a starting point. He could link what he knew about Midnight to Bugs.

The ping of the computer alerted him that Junayd had sent a few additional pieces of information. Bugs had used a ride-share. That would create data. He concentrated on the cameras around the area where she was picked up to get a visual on her.

“Finally!” he muttered as his fingers flew across the keyboard.

The frantic pounding of his fingers on the keyboard drowned the tick of the world clocks. He locked into the GPS system on Junayd's security forces. He knew that either Yahya Walid or Issa Zayn would have been assigned to follow Midnight. Their vehicle would have a GPS tracking system on it.

“Bingo!”

Yahya had been at a location near the Brooklyn Bridge early this morning. Jameel brought up a new screen, searching for any ride-share pickups in the area during the timeframe Bugs slipped out. There were four.

Ten minutes later, he was cussing under his breath. None of the four were a young woman. He accessed the city's CCTV traffic system. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the dark SUV pull up down the street from where Yahya was monitoring Midnight's position.

His relief turned to frustration when the vehicle suddenly disappeared. He moved the timeframe back and forth. One second it was there, the next it was gone. No one entered the vehicle in the seconds between the frames.

He slammed his hand down on the desk next to him before sitting back in his seat. She had deleted the video... just as she had deleted the information of her pickup. For someone who wasn't used to being out in the world on her own, Bugs knew how to cover her tracks!

He scanned through the different videos. It took a while, but he finally located the route the ride-share took. It stopped at the JFK airport in New York.

The airport had numerous cameras located both inside and outside the terminals. He located a camera near one of the main doors, and glimpsed the SUV pulling away. A split second later, the grainy image of a blonde woman briefly appeared.

“Got you!” he breathed with growing excitement.

He froze the image before he clipped it and dragged it into an image enhancement program that he was developing using AI

facial recognition. He sat back and waited impatiently for the image to clear up.

When the program finished, Jameel lifted a hand to his chest and rubbed the spot over his frantically beating heart. He finally had a face to go with *his* mystery woman—and she was breathtakingly beautiful.



“Do you really understand all of that?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing?”

“Mm?” Junebug blinked at the annoying man sitting next to her. She had answered him without looking up, but now she recognized him by the Hawaiian shirt he was wearing.

That was suspicious. The man who had spoken to her on the way to the gate just happened to be her seatmate on the plane? His threat level seemed like a four, now.

“I’m hacking into the accounting department of the World Bank and transferring funds from a mafia organization in the US to the World Animal Wildlife fund,” she replied with a direct, assessing look at him.

If he was someone who had been sent to find her, there was no need to pretend that she wasn’t who she was. He was here; she was found.

“You’re.... *What?*”

His face was the definition of flabbergasted. He gave a small laugh that he aborted halfway through when he registered that she wasn’t joking.

“If you don’t leave me alone, you’ll find out,” she warned.

“Oh.”

For a moment, he was completely nonplussed. Then he rallied.

“I’m Craig, by the way. Are you always so... blunt?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied.

There was a moment of silence. He seemed to be waiting for her to elaborate. She didn’t.

“You are.... That’s okay. I’m good with bluntness,” Craig replied with a charming grin.

Junebug glanced at him suspiciously, finished what she was doing, and in seconds, she had Craig’s boarding pass open. It was weird hacking someone who was sitting right next to her, watching her do it, but it was necessary. She needed to know what to do, and for that she needed information.

Five minutes and several ignored attempts at small talk later, she had his life history, including his financial records. She tsked.

“What’s the matter? Hey, is that me?” he asked, leaning into her space.

She gave him a sweet smile and nodded.

“Yes,” she said innocently. “You don’t have very good money management skills. You are paying over thirty percent interest on some really frivolous purchases. You shouldn’t have booked First Class if you couldn’t pay cash for it. My-oh-my, your longest employment has only been six months, and I can understand why. How can you have a degree in Business Management and Finance and be so bad at it? Oh, never mind. You are a trust fund baby living beyond your means. Mm, your granddad *is* Harvey Lippen, president of a financial investment group based out of California. That may explain part of it, but not all. You had excellent grades until you started high school. When your academic performance drastically declined, your parents sent you to a prestigious boarding school in Virginia. You did a little better there.”

Craig sat back as if a viper had bitten him. His eyes were enormous. Satisfied that he had moved out of her space, she closed the laptop. Craig’s accountants could handle the situation. He wasn’t a criminal, he was just irresponsible. The

worst of Craig the Second's secrets were a few speeding tickets and terrible judgement.

She leaned her seat back and closed her eyes. Craig cleared his throat. Irritation flared inside her. She lifted an eyelid and peered at him.

“What do you want?”

He cleared his throat again. “Are you.... Who do you work for? Who *are* you?”

“Your worst nightmare if you don't leave me alone. I can send your expense reports to your grandpa,” she replied.

She flashed him a brilliant smile before closing her eye. Her fingers curled around her laptop and she hugged it to her chest. She had already moved on from Craig. He wouldn't bother her again.

Midnight said that she was too trusting. She might not be good at reading people in the flesh like her sister, but she was damn good at reading their digital lives. Craig was a user. Everything and everyone was sacrificed in the name of 'fun'. It may have taken her slightly longer to learn that than Midnight would have, but it wasn't really a race.

Midnight's opinion of her social skills was based off information that was *so* old by now. Things change. She could do this.

Junebug breathed deeply, trying to calm her mind. The stresses of the trip so far were catching up to her, like a tsunami she had been running from, and now that she was here and it was quiet....

Fear rose in her throat, threatening to choke her as the low hum of voices on the plane slowly grew louder in her mind. Her anxiety built along with the imagined noise until her right leg moved uncontrollably.

She thought of Jam-man. He was an island of tranquility in her rising panic. It was ridiculous to fall in love with someone she had never met in person, and a small part of her feared her overactive imagination and isolation had turned him into someone he wasn't.

But... he gets me.

At least, she hoped he did. He didn't know about her awkwardness around people. Or her constant need to fidget. Midnight was working with her on controlling it, but even now, half asleep, she was unconsciously tapping her fingers and feet. It was hard being still. Her body and mind hated it.

She moved her hand down to her thigh and bunched her rainbow-colored skirt in her fist. The breathing exercises weren't working. Nausea and an overwhelming need for air made her breathing shallow and uneven.

Hey, do you want to play a game?

Her lips parted at Jam-man's imagined voice. It was soft, but it disrupted all her previous thoughts and feelings like a stone tossed in a pond. Even though he wasn't really there, she clung to the memory of their hours of conversation.

She had been sixteen and sounded even younger when they first met. Afraid he would know she was underage and not want to talk to her, she had used a voice filter. He had never heard her real voice.

Her mom used to say she had a voice that was a cross between Marilyn Monroe and Marlene Dietrich. She hadn't known who either lady was until she looked them up. Both she and Midnight had fun teasing their mother with the comparison, but Rainbow had been adamant that Junebug had been a reincarnation of one or both of the ladies that she idolized.

Which game would you like to play?

Middle Earth Rising.

Junebug breathed deeply as she pulled each level of the game up in her mind and pretended that she was playing it alongside Jam-man. The process relaxed her. Her anxiety and the panic attack threatening to swallow her faded as she withdrew deeper and deeper into the complex levels. She focused on each move they had made, marveling at how in sync they were with each other.

He has my back, like I have Midnight's.



The ding of the overhead intercom system nearly eight hours later broke through her concentration. She worried her bottom lip as she stowed her laptop. Craig cleared his throat, drawing her attention.

“Listen, I want you to know that I’ve been thinking about what you said,” he confessed.

She frowned. “What I said?”

He nodded. “Yeah, about making poor decisions. That’s one reason I’m coming to London. I have an interview.” He paused, then continued. “With some self-control, I could actually make this one last, you know? It’s like... I knew about everything that you said, but it didn’t fully register when I was living it. I always had an excuse. But it sounded really bad when you laid it out like that.... Ridiculous, even, considering my grandfather and my degree. I know that I can do better.”

She studied his expression. “It’s about time.”

His dry laugh mixed with the pilot’s announcement of their impending arrival into Heathrow. Junebug eagerly peered out at the city in the early afternoon light. Excitement built inside her. This was the first leg of her journey. She had many more to go, but she had done it! Bugs had taken the first step to taking control of her fears.

“I hope this guy you love appreciates how lucky he is,” Craig said.

Her heart fluttered in response, and she rested her head against the window, her eyes glued to the ground as it grew closer and closer.

I hope so, too.

Three



Two hours later, Junebug gave up and admitted she was totally, completely lost—and she hadn’t even made it out of the airport. She turned the map in her hands in circles. Nothing on the map looked like it did in the real world. There was no coffee shop where the map said it would be. If she could find the coffee shop, she knew she was heading toward the right exit.

Panic began to build inside her again. She looked up from where she was standing next to the women’s bathroom, saw a row of metal benches bolted to the floor in the center of the walk way, and focused on reaching them. She sank down on the bench and reached into the deep pocket of her skirt, pulling out one of the numerous phones that she had stashed in different places on herself and in her luggage.

With trembling fingers, she turned it on. She almost dropped the phone when an explosion of texts and voice messages sent the mobile device into a buzzing frenzy. She had linked all the numbers she used to the numerous phones she was carrying.

A choked giggle slipped from her when she saw all the messages from Midnight. She read and listened to each of them before she touched the call back icon. Midnight picked up before the second ring.

“Are you crazy? Do you have any idea of how dangerous the world is?” Midnight answered in a breathless voice.

Junebug huffed. “No, yes, and I’m okay. I made it, Midnight! I did it. You and mom would be so proud of me. I almost had a

panic attack but there was this guy named Craig who was really annoying but it was a good thing because he distracted me and when I thought I would freak out I did like you suggested and I played a game in my head,” she blurted out in a long, breathless explanation.

Silence greeted her rambling account. Junebug bit her nail as she waited with growing anxiety for her sister’s response. If Midnight said anything else... like asking her where she was... she knew she would break down and beg for Midnight to come help her. She closed her eyes as tears burned their way to the surface.

No, I won't. Midnight deserves to be happy. If I don't do this, she will always think she has to protect me.

Midnight’s heavy sigh sounded in Junebug’s ear before she spoke.

“Just promise me you’ll get in touch with Jam-man, tell him where and when to meet you, and... and be careful. I love you, Junie-bug,” Midnight said.

Junebug smiled, opened her eyes, and stared at a group of tourists following a woman with a sign. The woman stopped outside of the restrooms. Her followers chatted while they took turns watching each other’s luggage and visiting the loo.

“Does this mean you’re going to let Junayd kidnap you?” she asked light-heartedly.

Her sister’s husky laughter filtered above the airport’s constant chatter. “Yes...” she said, the notes in her voice hinting at shyness and indicating that someone was there with her, listening.

“Are you with him now?” she asked archly.

“Yes,” Midnight replied in her exasperated and amused How-Do-You-Know-Everything tone.

“I’m so happy for you, Mid! You don’t have to worry about me. I’m not a kid anymore. Trust me. I’ve got this. I’ve got to live my life, and I can’t do that if I don’t try. I promise I’ll get in touch with Jam-man. I’ll meet you in Jawahir. Don’t blow

this! He really loves you. I've got to go. I love you, Mid," she said, watching the group with growing excitement.

"I won't, I promise. Love you more."



Junebug followed the large tour group as if she belonged with them. No one said anything when she boarded the double-decker bus and climbed the steps to the top. She sat behind two girls not much younger than she was. They were excitedly speaking in Japanese.

Her love of anime meant Japanese was one of the many languages she was fluent in. She had watched every episode of One Piece. Knowing perfectly well that she could speak with the girls, using her skills in person for once, she decided not to. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and stared at it a moment before she logged into her Discord account. A ping popped up within seconds and she grinned.

Where RU?!

London

OMW. Keep your phone on.

Who told u?

My brother. I mean it, Bugs. Stay safe til I get there.

I will. CU soon.

Butterflies blossomed in her stomach and took flight. After six long years, she was finally going to meet Jam-man! She lowered her cell phone to her lap and sat back against the bench seat.

Tilting her head back, she marveled at the mixture of old and new architecture. It wasn't that different from New York, but it

was different.

Forty minutes later, the bus pulled up in front of the Hilton Hotel. She rose when the girls in front of her did and exited the bus. Descending the steps, she followed the group across the street and into the hotel.

Once inside, she veered off and found an empty, plush chair. Less than ten minutes later, she was checked in and taking the lift to her room on the tenth floor.

She hummed as she stepped out of the lift and walked down the corridor until she found the corner suite she had booked. Flashing the key over the lock, she entered the room with a sense of awe. This was the first time she had ever been in a hotel room.

There was a modest-sized bathroom to the right with a tiled shower unit, toilet, and sink. She paused and pulled open the full-length mirror. There was a closet behind it with an ironing board, extra blankets, pillows, and a safe. Closing the mirrored door, she walked into the main room. She had picked a room with a king-size bed. Sleeping in an enormous bed would be another first for her.

She placed her backpack on the long table and walked over to the bed. It was humongous! She giggled as she turned and fell on top of the covers.

“I could get lost!” she laughed.

Lifting her feet off the floor, she kicked off her shoes, twisted, and climbed to the top until she could lay her head on the pile of feathery-soft pillows. She stretched her arms out. She couldn't touch either side. The grin on her face grew larger and she kicked her feet up in the air.

“Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!” she crowed with delight. “I did it! I actually did it.”

She had gathered her courage, flown the safety of her nest, traveled across the ocean, and was finally... finally... going to meet Jam-man. Her smile faded.

“What if he doesn't like me?” she whispered, staring up at the ceiling. “What if I drive him crazy the way I did Harlem?”

She groaned, burying her face in the pillows. Harlem Jones had loved her and Midnight's mother, Rainbow. They had lived with Harlem from the time she was five until she turned thirteen. She wasn't sure what happened, but one day their mom came home, packed them up, and they left.

Junebug wasn't sure if it was because of what happened to Midnight or because of her. She suspected it was a little bit of both. She was also sure that her mom knew what Harlem did for a living... and that he was teaching Midnight things that upset her mom's gentle soul.

Rainbow Rain hated violence. She tried to see the good in the world... in vivid colors that were reflected in her paintings and the gardens around Harlem's brownstone. Rainbow looked and acted like a hippy from the 60's. Harlem had been the opposite of her mom. If her mom was sunshine, Harlem was the dark.

Her mom had kept her as far away from Harlem as she could. Junebug hadn't understood at first. She wanted to be like the other kids that came through the house. Idella and Raja... her sister, Midnight... and dozens of others. Some kids kept returning after they were sent off. Others... well, others didn't. She knew Harlem sent them to places that Junebug never wanted to go.

The memory of Harlem's rejection hurt. Pushing her unpleasant thoughts back into the iron box she envisioned in her mind, she rolled over and slid off the bed. Picking up her backpack, she pulled out her laptop and a hotspot.

In her hurry to leave, she had only brought the essentials: her electronics, a brush, two pairs of panties, a pair of leggings, a belt, an extra-long tie-dyed shirt she had made, and an even longer t-shirt from the zoo. The one thing she regretted leaving was her bunny slippers. She adored the huge, fluffy slippers that looked like white rabbits.

"I'll have to find some more," she murmured, looking down and wiggling her bright pink toenails decorated with tiny flowers.

With a sigh, she carried her electronics over to the bed, propped the pillows up, and climbed onto it again until she

was sitting crossed-legged in the center. Soon, she was logging into the British Defense systems server. She had been in and out of the server for years monitoring the baddies in the world, but in the past year she had received permission to enter legally—with some restrictions, of course.

Her new gig had come as a surprise. One of the gamers that she played with turned out to be a friend of Jam-man's and worked in the cybersecurity division of MI6. RC had gotten her a sweet temporary job tracking down a group of scammers preying on seniors. One thing led to another and more jobs came in. She loved having the extra income to help Midnight and to fix up their hidden home.

Of course, she had used all fake identifications. Her security clearance was courtesy of the U.S. Government Defense Department, and her college degrees were from MIT and Caltech. It had been fun creating Skylar James, aka Bugs. She had even used a super cool AI image modeled after her favorite avatar in Thor's Hammer II: War Games of the Gods.

She checked on Andrius Bronislav. The jerk was being awfully quiet lately. She kept her running search for Bronislav and Colin Coldhouse open while she checked on several other issues. The ping of an incoming message made her grin.

Hey, are you playing DW tonight?

I wasn't going to.

Aw man.

Sup?

New level the developer wants me to test. It's a private one. I need someone really good to play against.

Junebug bit her lip. DW, or Dragon Wars, was a cool new game that had been released to a few Beta players six months ago. The developers were in Brazil and had an amazing line of

miniatures that went along with the game. Junebug's right foot twitched as a silent tempo of nervous energy gripped her.

Her eyes flashed to the many windows she was monitoring before she made the decision. She was on vacation... sort of. It wouldn't hurt to play DW for a short time. Besides, it would give her a chance to chat with RC. The woman was always talking about the guys she was dating... or thinking of dating... and maybe RC could give her a few tips that might come in handy with Jam-man.

Let the games begin.

Alright!

Junebug checked her security settings, adjusted her headphones, tested her voice distorter software, and entered the game. She missed having multiple screens. It was hard to stay focused with just one screen and her phone. Her eyes kept drifting to the messages tab, waiting for Jam-man to contact her again.

It's only been an hour since you last messaged. Give him time, she thought as she countered an offensive attack by RC.

"Nice move!"

"Thanks. It's a pretty good level. I think they need to add more complex traps in the woods. That was too easy."

"I'll let them know."



London, England

Allison sat back in her gaming chair with a smug smile and turned off her mic.

"Got you—finally!" she crowed.

Her phone rang, and for once, she wasn't annoyed. She had good news.

Pressing her mic button, she quickly said, "Brb, Bugs. Work is ringing, and you know it's *always* so urgent. Sorry, just a sec."

"K," Bugs replied.

Allison released the mic button, and Bugs' character started dancing and jumping while she waited. Allison's code continued searching for a weak point in Bugs' security in intervals that only lasted milliseconds.

"I'm connected," she told Andrius in greeting.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"I'm narrowing it down as we speak," she replied.

Andrius's savage curse made her wince. "I thought you said you were connected."

She wrapped one of the curls by her cheek around a finger and breathed. "I'll have her exact location within the next few hours. I have to be very careful. She is possibly the best hacker in the world. The last thing I want to do is to alert her to what I'm doing. I told you before, you have to be patient," she said.

A deafening silence met her admonishment. She forced herself to breathe normally as she waited.

"Give me her location within the next twelve hours, Allison, or my team will pay a visit to you," Andrius replied.

Allison breathed out slowly. "I'll get it for you," she promised.

The click on the other end sent a shiver through her. She slowly lowered her cellphone and looked at her computer screen. She knew the other woman was scanning the code from the game.

She would have just one chance at this. Leaning forward in the chair, she continued chatting with Bugs as they played. Her lips tugged in an amused smile when Bugs began asking her questions about what it was like to date a guy.

"Geez. Where has she been living, under a rock?" she muttered.

It took nearly twenty minutes before the code she had inserted into the game pinged an outside IP address.

She had Bugs' IP address! The virus deleted itself immediately. She needed that safeguard in case Bugs noticed it.

She was going to live. She was going to capture Bugs!

The IP address suddenly disappeared from Allison's screen.

"Gotta go," Bugs said.

And just like that, Bugs was gone.

"Shit, shit, shit."

Allison's fingers flew across the keyboard, searching for the counter-malware Bugs had installed. She blew out a breath when she found and deleted the simple yet effective erase code. The trojan would have slowly spread through her system if she hadn't stopped it.

But the IP Address was gone.

Allison groaned and lowered her head to rest on her arms. She thought she had been so careful.

"Damn it."

Ping.

Allison slowly lifted her head at the alert. Her eyes scanned the source code from her backup trace. Her lips parted with a growing smile. She may have blown her chance with Bugs, but not with Jam-man. Well, not Jam-man himself, but his network of goonies.

"The hazards of being a prince: you can't go anywhere without someone knowing... and darling, you just saved my mission," she murmured.

Sitting up, her fingers flew over the keyboard as she downloaded Jam-man's flight itinerary. It was an assumption that Bugs had contacted Jam-man and he was traveling to meet her, that was true, but their unresolved sexual tension had been reaching nauseating levels lately and it did look like Jameel had decided to leave home in a hurry.

It was a lead. She would see where it went.

“I don’t have a face for her, but I do have one for the Jawahir prince,” she murmured.

She could find him, and if he met with a woman, Allison could investigate further to confirm her identity beyond a doubt. It would likely be within the time limit that Andrius had given her. This could work—but if she waited until after they met, capturing Bugs would be more difficult. The security around them would be nearly impenetrable.

“Not to mention the combined skills of both of them!” she muttered.

She tapped her fingers on the desk. There was no reason to make this more difficult for herself. She bit her lip and opened a log to cross-match London with what she remembered of the IP address. Forty-five minutes later, she sat back and stared through blurry eyes at the screen. It was rough... probably not perfect... but she had a general location. A map with a five-block circle near the London Tower Bridge.

There were ten hotels in the area. She could investigate the new arrivals and send Andrius’s team to the most suspicious visitor before Jam-man arrived. Except....

What if I’m wrong?

It was risky. Allison rose from her seat and paced the narrow confines of her rented flat. It was a tiny space, only made bearable by the balcony that could be seen behind her computer, but it was definitely a ‘look, don’t touch’ kind of balcony. Not even a cat would trust it.

Not that she had a cat. What she *could* do is go investigate herself. Bugs would not be nearly as dangerous in the real world, and she seemed very young—surprisingly inexperienced. Allison could work with that. Interrogating her would provide the confirmation she needed.

That was risky, too. It could be a wild goose chase. A glance at the clock told her that she was running out of time. Bugs would be enacting counter-measures as well. Allison needed to be *fast*. Give the hacker as little time to regroup as possible.

She had to make a decision. Her mind swirled with possibilities. The wrong move would get her killed or imprisoned for life.

“If I play it smart, I might... just might... be able to live through this and come out rich enough that not even my past can touch me,” she murmured as an idea began to solidify in her mind.

With a little motivation, Jameel might reach out—if she let him know she was available.

Four



Jameel opened his laptop and logged in the moment they reached altitude. He was surprised when a message pinged on an account he kept open to chat with old college buddies once in a blue moon. He snorted when he saw the subject line: *Please, need to tell you something.*

Yeah, I bet you do! he thought angrily.

A flash of guilt swept through him. It had been years since he had talked to Allison Wells. Their last conversation had ended poorly. He knew she had been through a lot, but her lying and stealing wasn't something he could forgive. He had found it hard to show her 'grace' as his mom called it, and he was still certain that grace wasn't what she deserved. He wasn't a doormat.

His mom had agreed. Everyone needed a balance between distrust and forgiveness, and a prince needed it more than anyone. But being angry about it even now probably made him petty.

Curiosity made him open the email, wondering if it was really from her or spam. He scanned the message, surprised by the feelings it invoked.

Hey, Jameel. Guess who? Surprised? Yeah, I bet you are. Listen, this isn't easy for me. I just hope you'll at least listen... LOL, I mean read this message... and I don't know where to start. Ok, so you definitely knew that I had a ton of shit I needed to deal with, but now I know it too. I've

been avoiding it for way too long. I've been going to therapy... and well, the therapist helped me weed through a lot of things.

I've been thinking of you a lot lately. Brian mentions you every once in a while and I see stuff about the royal family in the news. Sorry to hear about what happened to your brothers. A little late, but I'm glad they are okay. Sounds like all worked out well. Tarek and Idella! The Idella! All I can say is WOW! That must be amazing. I've heard her concerts are impossible to get into. What is she really like? Never mind. Forget I asked. I remember how you didn't like talking about your family stuff.

Anyway, I wanted to let you know that I'm really sorry for being such a lying, conniving bitch. I deserved everything you did. Really. It wasn't exactly an eye-opener at the time, but hindsight is 20/20. If there is ever anything you need, I want you to know I'm here. Helping you would go a long way to making amends for being such a... misguided person. (My therapist said I need to be kind to myself. It's easy to forget.) Anyway, I'm living and working in London now (for the government of all places!). If you ever need anything, just let me know.

Yours still, A.W..

He read the message several times, trying to think how to respond. He glanced up when the steward entered with a drink and a meal. Jameel started to wave the man away until he caught a whiff of the tantalizing aroma: baked sea trout in a lemon cream sauce.

“Thank you, James,” he murmured when the Englishman placed the succulent dish in front of him.

James smiled and bowed his head. “If I remember correctly, sire, you often forget to eat,” he replied.

Jameel chuckled and nodded. “Yeah. You even remembered the extra butter and sour cream for my baked potato.”

James cleared his throat and gave him a bland look. “Yes, sire, though I should caution that it is not good for your health.”

“I know... I know. I work out.... and Junayd has already given me the lecture about my diet,” he mumbled around a mouthful of food.

The flaky white meat melted on his tongue, and he released a pleased groan. He opened his text messages and typed out a message to Junebug with a single finger as he lifted a bite of the superbly prepared trout to his mouth. He needed time to think about how he should respond to Allison. That blast from the past could wait.

I’m on my way.

“Of course, sire. It was your brother who requested that I mention it on occasion. As I have completed my task, is there anything else I can get you?” James asked.

Jameel waved his hand, his attention split between the screen in front of him and his meal.

“No, this is good,” Jameel replied.

James silently retreated, giving him privacy. Jameel waited impatiently for Bugs to answer his message. He took another bite of his meal. Not even the delicious flavors washing over his tastebuds could calm the flutter in his stomach.

What if something happened to her?

The sickening thought grew, and he placed his fork down next to his plate. He reached for the raspberry seltzer James had poured for him and took a deep drink, his eyes glued to the screen as he impatiently waited. Relief flashed through him when he saw the ripple of ellipsis that showed Bugs was responding. He quickly tapped out a message.

RU Okay?

Yes... sort of.

Sort of? What the hell did 'sort of' mean? He quickly typed out his concern.

What happened? RU in danger?

No... Maybe...

He curled his fingers into a tight fist. What the hell did she mean by 'maybe'? Was she in danger or not? He had never felt so helpless in his life! He was thirty thousand feet in the air over who-knew-where.

He frantically thought of who he could call for help. Who did he know in London? He closed his eyes, his mind running through his list of friends... and coming up with an answer that he never in a million years believed would happen.

Did he trust her enough with Junebug's life, though? Did he have choice? Opening his eyes, he responded.

I'm going to send someone to pick you up.

No.

It will be okay. She works for the government there. It won't be for long.

So does the person I thought I could trust! I shouldn't have come.

He was typing when she repeated her text.

I shouldn't have come.

You shouldn't be alone. Let me send you an ally. She owes me one, trust me. I need to know you are safe until I get there.

Jameel waited as the seconds ticked by. It was almost a full minute before Bugs replied. He released the breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

K.

I'll send you a photo so you know who to expect.
I should land in... three-and-a-half hours.

K. I have to do some work. There is something I need to check.

Something I can help with?

Once again there was a pause as she typed out a reply. While he waited, he sent a text to his ex-friend in London. It didn't shock him when he received a reply within a few seconds. Wells was never far from a screen. She was also probably relieved that he was reaching out.

Hey, Jam-man! It's good to hear from you. I know I don't deserve it. I honestly wasn't expecting you to respond to my email, much less message me.

Hey, Wells. Yeah, it is a bit unexpected. It sounds like things are going well for you.

They are going better.

Listen, did you mean what you said... about if I needed help?

Yeah! I meant it. If you ever need anything, just ask.

I have a friend in the city. Can you go stay with her until I get there?

K. Not what I was expecting, but sure. Where is she?

Hilton London Tower Bridge. Tenth floor. Room 1047.

Just getting off work. It will take me about thirty minutes to get there.

No worries. I'll owe you one.

I think it is the other way around. I didn't realize how great I had it until I threw it all away.

It's in the past. We all do dumb things.

Some more than others. Does your friend know I'm coming?

Yeah. I'll need to send her a pic.

Great! Scare her off before I get there. LOL. It's coming through. I'll let you know when I connect.

Thanks again.

I'm happy to help. Thanks for giving me another chance. It will be good to see you again.

He signed off and sent the information to Bugs. A second later, his phone pinged and he read Bugs' response. His eyes widened and he read the message again. Anger surged through him. He sent a fast reply.

I'm on it. Whatever happens, stay safe until I get there. Don't go out. Wells will be there in the next thirty minutes. I'll be there as quickly as I can.

I know. Thank you.

We have a lot to talk about when I get there.

K. CU soon.

Jameel sat back in the plush leather seat and stared out the window. It would be nearly seven-thirty in the evening by the time he landed. He placed his partially eaten meal to the side. His appetite was gone. In its place was a desire for revenge.

He read over the information Bugs had sent him. Someone was trying to track her, which meant she was in danger. The idea of anyone, especially someone like Andrius Bronislaw, getting their hands on Bugs made him feel sick to his stomach.

I won't let that happen.

He lifted his cellphone and stared at the screen, reading Bugs' message again.

Been playing Dragon Wars with RC. She works for MI6. Got me some jobs over the last few months. Tonight, we were on DW and I received an alert that someone had slipped a trojan into the program. I need you to check this file on RC, see if it's legit. I'm beginning to have my doubts. Nothing solid, just a gut feel. Mid says I should always listen when I sense danger. I'm scared. I think I may have blown it.

He thumbed the edge of his phone. There was no room for pride when it came to keeping Bugs safe. He was great with computers, but when it came to security and how to protect someone, there was one person he knew who could do it in their sleep—his brother, Tarek.

He tapped the favorites on his phone and then Tarek's number. He sat back and stared out the window, waiting as the call connected. Tarek answered on the third ring.

"This is Tarek."

"Hey, bro. I need your help," Jameel quietly requested.

"I'm listening," Tarek replied tersely.



Junebug shoved her scant belongings into her backpack and looked around the hotel room. She nervously paced a tight path from the window to the door and back. Dread and despair were waging a major battle inside her as she tried to decide if she should stay or leave. Was she overreacting? Maybe it was a coincidence. Maybe someone other than RC had been trying to track her.

But I recognized her coding. I'm sure it was hers!

Ok, so maybe it was RC, but she didn't mean anything by it. Hackers were curious. It was an occupational hazard. Junebug

stopped next to the bed and sat down on the edge before rising again with nervous energy. What was her gut telling her?

Run.

This didn't feel like when Jam-man had tried to track her. This felt... sinister.

"I trusted her! How could I be so dumb?"

Her quivering words echoed back at her. She shook her head. She had fallen for the oldest, lamest trick in the book—blinded by love, blinded by 'friendship'.

"You saw what you wanted to see, Junebug," she scolded herself.

"Well, now you can find out who RC really is!" she argued.

"And if she really does work for MI6, she may be waiting for them to capture me and use me and... and..." She stopped and gripped one of the phones she had with her. "Maybe I should call Midnight and ask her what to do. She would know... or Idella."

She shook her head. No, she wouldn't do either. Midnight finally had a chance to have a life without her. Besides, Midnight was probably somewhere over the Atlantic at the moment. Her sister couldn't help her. And Idella wasn't a good idea either.

Idella was an internationally famous superstar singer who was also an international assassin. Bugs had known the identity of Idella's counter-persona as long as she had known the woman. She was Idella's secret contact, helping Idella on her top-secret deadly assignments. The problem was, Idella didn't know who *Bugs* really was. Idella only remembered her as the annoying, hyper-active kid who drove Harlem crazy.

Junebug fisted her hands. She could do this. She just needed to stay safe until Jameel got here. She quickly estimated how long it would take him to finish his flight and drive through traffic.

She looked at the clock, did the mental calculation, and groaned. "You can stay safe until he arrives. This is a busy

hotel. They have all kinds of security. Use your skills, Junie. Tap into the security system and monitor who is coming and going. Do a facial recognition on each person. Change rooms. Yes, change rooms. Do that first,” she mumbled, sliding into the chair at the small desk and accessing the hotel reservations server.

Minutes later, she had secured the same room but on the floor above this one. She hastily packed her laptop and exited the room. She kept her head down as she strode toward the elevator. The doors slid open as she pressed the button. She waited as three people exited the elevator before she stepped inside and pressed the Close Door control.

Uncertainty filled her when she saw Jameel’s friend stop in front of the door she had just left. Didn’t Jameel say Wells wouldn’t arrive for thirty minutes? Well, twenty minutes now.

Bugs lifted her hand to stop the elevator door from closing all the way, but she didn’t exit. Instead, she waited as the woman pulled off the sticky note Junebug had left folded on the door. The woman read the note, cursed, and crumpled it in her hand.

It wasn’t her action that hit Junie hard. It was the woman’s expression. Pulling her hand free, Bugs let the elevator doors close and stepped back when the woman looked in her direction. There had been anger on the woman’s face. Not a normal mad, like making a fruitless journey kind of mad. It was a deep, colder mad.

Had that been RC from MI6? Were RC and Wells colluding? What had Jameel gotten himself into?

Junebug started when she realized that the elevator was going down instead of up. Panic hit her. She needed a place to hide. A place with a lot of people. A place like the Waterloo Train Station.

“No, if I’m caught, she could take me anywhere.”

Tears burned her eyes. She had to find a place where Jameel could find her but no one else would think to look. She needed time to think, to plan, away from the hotel but not too far.

Dread filled her. Until she could do her research, nowhere was safe. Why hadn't she thought of a backup plan? Midnight always had a backup plan. Idella never went on a mission unless she knew all the escape routes.

"Excuse us, lovely," a cheerful woman greeted as she and three kids stepped into the elevator.

Junebug stepped to the side to give them room. Two of the kids had inflatable floats in the shape of a dog and a giraffe around their waists. The oldest child pressed for the basement level.

The kids were chatting excitedly about the hotel pool area. Junebug felt a sense of relief. The hotel pool area was perfect! She could hide among the families in a space that was crowded, and no one would ever think to look for her there!

"All I have to do is stay hidden until Jameel arrives," she murmured with a low groan.

"What, dear?" the woman asked.

"Nothing. I love the floats," she said.

"Hotel gift shop. Thank goodness for the pool. My poor hubby needed a nap after dealing with the London traffic," the woman chuckled.

"Where are you from?" Junebug asked.

"London," the kids answered with grins.

The woman rolled her eyes. "The hubby works for a large firm here. They are having a conference and since the biz is paying for the rooms, I told him we were taking a vacay. 'Tis heaven not having to cook or clean after him and the kiddos for the next three days. The kids and I are going to live between the pool and the dining room, aren't we, kids?"

The kids squealed with delight. Junebug grinned at their enthusiasm. She followed them out when the elevator doors opened. Across the hallway was a set of frosted, double glass doors etched with the word Pool on it. There were rules posted on each side. The oldest child swiped their room key over the lock to open the doors. Junebug continued to follow the

boisterous family through the doors before she turned to the left. She followed the wall until she reached a spot where she could see the doors, the pool, and an emergency exit.

She settled onto a lounge chair, placing her backpack next to it. Minutes later, she was logged into the hotel security feed, searching for the woman she had seen. She needed to know where the woman was... and who might be with her.

She studied the replay of the woman as she walked down the hallway to her hotel room door and pulled off the sticky note. The woman was wearing a wide-brimmed red hat so it was impossible to see her face from the security camera angle. The woman stood at the door for about thirty seconds before she looked both ways.

Bugs enlarged the screen as far as she could before it became too pixelated to recognize what the woman was doing. As the woman entered her hotel room, Junebug froze the frame. Her heart pounded. She had left a message telling Jam-man's friend that she was sorry but she had changed her mind and would meet Jam-man in a different location.

Junebug startled when a warning popped up from her security program. In her haste to exit the room and then the sudden change of plans, she had forgotten to erase the security feed of her leaving her room, and now someone was accessing the feed just like she was!

Her fingers flew over the keyboard in a race not only to block the person, but to find out everything she could about them. Her heart was pounding as she countered each command a split second before the other hacker. Whoever the other person was, they were good.

But not as good as I am, she thought when she hit the enter key on the last script.

The cursor flashed and blinked on her screen. She and the other hacker were playing four-dimensional chess in a virtual world where the rules of the game could not only change in a split second, but her life was on the line if she lost. An intense adrenaline rush replaced her fear.

You're good.

The message popped up on her screen and Junebug's lips curved upward. She wasn't the only one who understood what had happened. She scanned through the blocks of code she had written to make sure that they were solid before replying.

Who are you working for?

She waited for an answer. A quick check showed that the connection she had created was holding. The signal was bouncing at warp-speed from server to server around the world. There was no way to pinpoint where she was at this specific moment.

Well, except for the fact I left a note on my door.

But the nice thing about physical notes was that they contained absolutely no information except what was written on them... and fingerprints.

But she had never been arrested, so that wouldn't give very much information. And she hadn't said *where* she was going. London was a big city. The woman couldn't dust for prints everywhere like that path-erasing sweeper dog in Alice in Wonderland except in reverse, like a path-*creation* sweeper dog.

Junebug tried to think what most characters in a movie would do in her situation, but for some reason she kept flashing back to Alice as she sang "*I give myself very good advice....*"

Focus, she chastised herself.

It would all boil down to a character's fight-or-flight instincts, she reasoned.

Or their 'too stupid to live' genes.

She liked to think she had been born without that.

"But the waiting makes me—"

Junebug mentally growled at Alice to shut up. She might have difficulties concentrating and staying still, but she had learned a lot from her sister, Idella, Harlem, and her mom. She could

be patient. She could make her opponent reveal all the information while she revealed none.

The seconds ticked by, and faint hints of Alice's song continued in her mind, undaunted. "*And I love the change, should something strange....*"

Junebug resisted the urge to reach out again and say something, anything, that would make her opponent tell her something. She wouldn't, because the hacker had contacted *her* and they would tell her why. Junebug would keep the upper hand... and use the information. She'd figure it out as she went.

A new message from the hacker appeared.

My boss would like to discuss a job offer with you.

Who is your boss?

Meet me in the hotel coffee shop in five minutes.

Bugs shook her head in disbelief. *That* would be like going into a dark alley knowing a serial killer awaited her. Or in this case, a sociopath billionaire wanting to force her to do his bidding.

Why would I do something that stupid?

Because Jam-man, or should I say Prince Jameel Saif-Ad-Din, is in danger.

I'm not falling for that trick! He's got loads of protection!

Does he? 5 minutes.

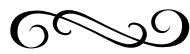
One hour. London is a busy city.

One hour, then. Here's a little entertainment in case you think I'm joking.

Uncertainty filled Junebug again when a video appeared on her screen. Her security indicated that it was a clean link. She hesitated a second before she clicked it.

Horror filled her as she noticed the solid red numbers of a timer strapped to what looked like explosives taped under a desk. The strategically positioned camera captured the name of the intended victim along with the bomb. Junebug's eyes locked on the lettering on the door. Even mirrored, it was impossible to ignore who the office belonged to—Prince Jameel Saif-Ad-Din, Jواهر Royal Intelligence Services Director.

Five



Jameel exited the private jet, taking the stairs two at a time. A British customs agent greeted him at the bottom of the steps. Jameel handed the man his diplomatic documents.

“Business or pleasure, your highness?” the uniformed agent politely inquired.

“Business,” he responded.

“I hope everything goes well, your highness,” the agent replied, handing him back his documents. “Welcome to the United Kingdom.”

“Thank you,” he replied.

James walked over to the car that was waiting and held open the back door. Jameel strode forward and slid into the backseat. James climbed into the driver’s seat and waited for instructions.

“Hilton Hotel, London Tower Bridge,” he instructed.

“Yes, sire,” James replied.

Jameel tapped out a message to Bugs. He had sent a dozen messages over the last hour to both her and Wells. Neither had answered him.

“How long will it take to get there?” Jameel asked.

James glanced in the rearview mirror with an apologetic expression. “An hour-and-a-half in London traffic, sire. That is if we are lucky and there are no accidents or major construction, I’m afraid. I will do my best to shorten it.”

Jameel groaned and tapped out a message to Bugs.

In London. Traffic delay. On my way. RU Ok?

He impatiently tapped his fingers against his leg, hoping she would finally reply. His fingers tightened around his phone when the familiar ellipsis started dancing. His heart dropped to his stomach when her reply popped up along with a screenshot.

Yes. Already took care of this.

His loud curse caused James to glance at him in the rearview mirror. He needed more hands and devices to deal with this situation. Hell, he needed the whole Jawahir army!

“James, I need your phone,” he said in a terse tone.

James didn’t ask why. He simply retrieved his phone from his pocket and held it over his shoulder. Jameel took the offered phone and quickly punched in his brother Tarek’s private number. Using his own phone, he typed out a message to Bugs.

Where did you get this?!

Your friend? Think she may be RC. Not sure. Piecing things together. She (friend/RC ?) wants to meet.

“This is Tarek.”

“There’s a bomb under my desk at the HQ,” he said.

Tarek’s low curse rang in his ear. “I know. Idella got a warning about it. Where are you?”

“London. I’m meeting Bugs. She is in danger. Someone knows where she is... which probably means Coldhouse and Bronislav.”

He listened to the muted conversation between his brother and Idella. It was hard to concentrate on what Tarek was saying and what he wanted to say to Bugs. He typed out a message.

Don't meet her! Where are you?

Hotel pool. Told her I would meet in an hour.

“Jameel... are you there?”

Tarek's clipped voice pulled him back to the second conversation he was having.

“Yes.”

“Listen, I've contacted Junayd. He is in midair on his way back to Jawahir. They are going to land in Nasir soon. As soon as they do, he has assigned Hyder Faiz and Yahya Walid to meet up with you,” Tarek said.

“What about the bomb?” he asked.

“I've alerted security. The bomb squad is taking care of it and we already have a suspect in custody,” Tarek replied.

“Jameel, this is Idella.”

Despite the tense situation, the sultry sound of Idella's voice soothed him. There was something almost unearthly about the woman. It was more than her voice; the few brief times he had met her in person she had struck him as almost mythical in her presence.

“Hi, Idella.”

“I have a place in London if you need a safe house. It isn't associated with me, so no one is likely to track you there. It will be a good place to hole up until Yahya and Hyder get there,” she offered.

“That would be great,” he said.

“Tell Bugs to check out my ruby slippers. I'm sure she'll love them,” Idella added.

“Why does she want Bugs to check out her ruby slippers?” he asked his brother when Tarek came back on the line.

“Maybe it is a woman thing. Please tell me you didn't go to London alone,” Tarek said.

Jameel's eyes connected for a moment with James in the rearview mirror and he gave the man a crooked grin. Technically, he wasn't alone.

"No, I have James with me," he said.

Tarek's muttered curse made him wince. "Find Bugs, get to Idella's place, and stay put until Yahya and Hyder arrive."

"You got it," Jameel promised.

He ended the call and stared out of the window. James whizzed through the evening traffic with the skill of a race car driver. Relaxing back in the seat, Jameel pulled up a map of the Tower Bridge Hotel and the surrounding area to familiarize himself with possible escape routes.

"James."

"Yes, sire?"

"How familiar are you with the Tower Bridge area?" he inquired.

"Very familiar, sire. I look forward to escorting you and your young lady to safety," James answered.

"Thank you."

"It is my pleasure to be of service, sire."

Jameel stared out of the window again. Unlike his brothers, he had never been in the field. Even his twin had served a couple of years in the military as a doctor. Jameel had spent his life behind the safety of a computer screen in a nice air-conditioned room.

He rubbed his damp palm along his thigh and breathed deeply. He wasn't without some physical skills. Thanks to his upbringing, there had been self-defense training. While he had never needed to use them in a real-life situation, he had kept up on the skills because they relaxed his mind and body.

I will protect you, Bugs. You just have to be there for me to do it.



Junebug stood in the entrance of the hotel coffee shop an hour later and scanned the crowded interior. It didn't take her long to find the woman she had seen in the hallway. The woman was tapping her fingers impatiently on the tabletop, her gaze sweeping over Junebug before dismissing her. Amusement swept through Bugs.

She must think blondes can't be smart.

The thought made her smile. She loved it when people underestimated her. A bloke walking toward her slowed and returned her smile with a speculative expression. She pursed her lips together, raised an eyebrow, and shook her head in dismissal. The guy's inflated chest sunk to his waistline as he passed her.

"Seat yourself, luv," a server called out.

Junebug hugged her backpack to her side and wove her way through the filled tables. She noticed that the woman had chosen a corner booth and had slid into it so her back was to the wall. The position would force Bugs to sit with her back to the entrance if she chose the chair across from the woman.

Junebug grabbed the back of the chair and pulled it to the side of the table. She sat down, smiled at the server, and requested a hot chocolate with extra whipped cream and chocolate syrup. Junebug's adversary scowled at her and slid to the far end of the bench seat.

"I'm waiting for someone," the woman stated.

"There aren't any other tables," she replied with a shrug.

"Not my problem," the woman retorted.

"It isn't worth it, you know," she said.

The woman frowned. "What isn't worth it?"

"Working for men like Coldhouse and Bronislav. You'll only end up in jail, or dead."

The woman stiffened and straightened. A soft chuckle bubbled out of her mouth as it dawned on her who Junebug was, and soon she was outright laughing. The sound drew the attention of several patrons. Junebug handed the server ten pounds when she returned with her drink.

“Keep the change,” she said.

The server gave her a startled look before she grinned. “Thanks, luv.”

“Does Jam-man know that you are working for Bronislav?” Junebug asked.

“No.”

“Does MI6 know about the work you are doing for Bronislav? Or are you freelancing, Agent Turnwell?”

The woman released another dry chuckle, lifted her coffee cup in salute, and took a sip of the hot beverage. Junebug took the opportunity to lick some of the whipped cream and chocolate off the top of her drink. It tasted almost as good as the chocolate-filled marshmallows that she loved.

“You’ve been a *very* slow hacker. Did it take you all this time to find a few facts? Come on, Bugs. Something tells me you could have been here sooner.”

“I don’t like people who lie,” Junebug said.

Allison paused, tilted her head, and her grin held a note of disbelief. “Don’t we all,” she said, her tone slightly wistful.

Junebug fought the urge to move. She rolled the material of her skirt between her fingers, and the sensation of the soft cotton between her fingers soothed her jitters a little.

“You are a surprise, Bugs. You can call me Allison. Yes, I really am an agent with MI6... among other things. Working for MI6 helps give me access and the cover I need. I’ve been following you for years. I’ve never seen anyone like you.”

The small smile she gave Junebug was faintly rueful at the start, but it quickly became a conspiratorial smile. “It isn’t really necessary for us to be enemies. We both know that

bomb was just a bit of theatrics. Jawahir's security needs something to keep them on their toes every so often."

Allison's eyes crinkled with humor as she looked down at her drink. "Jameel wasn't even in that city, let alone that office."

She locked eyes with Junebug. "So let's not pretend that protecting Jameel is why you came to meet me. I gave you an excuse to do what you really wanted, that's all."

Bugs narrowed her eyes. "...and what do I really want?"

Allison gave her a knowing look and said, "There aren't many people like us, are there?"

Bugs jerked back slightly in surprise, her brow creasing in a confused frown.

Allison smiled. "So, let's talk. I know you've discovered enough about me to realize that I'm a useful person to know. A well-connected person. And like I said, I have a job for you. It's a fascinating one. Something that will challenge you."

"Working for *Bronislav*?" she replied.

"He wants you... and Jam-man. He's the danger I warned you about when I asked you to meet me before all this. You can't say I never tried asking nicely. I need you on this, Bugs. Bronislav has to be dismantled from the inside. Jam-man hasn't had much luck with the standard approach, has he? Sure, Bronislav is down on his luck, but he's not out for the count. And how long *has* it been now? Smack him down and somehow he always pops up somewhere else, like a cockroach."

Junebug's eyes followed the movement of Allison's finger as she ran it in a circle around the rim of her coffee cup. Bugs took another sip of her drink... and she let time pass.

Midnight always told her that being silent was the best way to get more information. People felt an innate need to fill the quiet with talk. Her sister said that is how she got most of her information—by staying quiet and listening.

Unfortunately, Junebug wasn't her sister and the silence was torture. She wound her fist in her skirt and bit her tongue in an

effort to keep from talking.

Allison shook her head and raised an eyebrow at her. “Aren’t you going to say anything? What happened to calling me a liar?”

Junebug shook her head. “Why state the obvious?” she asked.

She knew where this would end up. She had enough awareness to know how dangerous she was and how her skills could be used. Didn’t she use them every day to counter the bad people of the world?

Jam-man was really good, too. He was also kind. He was a good person. People like Bronislav and Coldhouse wouldn’t hesitate to use that goodness and compassion as leverage to get what they wanted.

This wasn’t a trap she was going to walk into. All it would take was a little more time and effort to take these bad guys down—and she would do it without risking everyone she loved in the process.

“Beautiful *and* smart,” Allison murmured.

Resentment flashed through Junebug. “You don’t have to make that sound so surprising,” she snapped back.

Allison looked down, hiding the humor in her eyes but not quite containing her smirk. Then she took a deep breath, her demeanor suddenly serious. “Bronislav gave me twelve hours to give him your location. If I know him, and I do, he has men following your Jawahir prince while he waits for me to call him. Hell, he probably has a tail on me as well.”

Junebug stiffened and glanced around the coffee shop before returning her attention to Allison. “Why are you doing this? Why are you warning me?”

“He has something that I want... and so do you,” Allison replied with a shrug.

“Why don’t you get it *without* losing your moral compass?” she retorted.

Allison laughed out loud again and shook her head. “How can you still be so naïve after everything you’ve seen and done?”

You've taken down some of the cruelest men in the world. You know *exactly* how dark this world is, and you're still certain the rest of us can walk through it without getting tainted? You must have been living in an ivory tower all these years."

Junebug ignored that and pressed the send button on her phone. The recording of their conversation sped its way across the invisible wavelengths to Jameel. He would need all the information he could get about Allison.

"I'm not as naïve as you think. You might want to dig a hole and bury yourself somewhere, Allison. I don't think you want to go into work tomorrow—for MI6 or Bronislav."

Allison's eyes glittered behind the wide frame of her glasses. Instead of anger, Junebug saw amusement. She wondered if she had fallen into a trap, after all.

"Let me guess: you just attempted to record our conversation and send it to my bosses."

Junebug's eyes showed her surprise and wariness.

"I would have thought you already knew, Bugs. I'm good."

Junebug didn't miss Allison's certainty or the way her eyes flickered to the entrance of the coffee shop. She twisted in her seat. Two men were standing in the entrance staring back at her.

"It's crowded," she declared.

"Do you really think they care? The uniforms give them a license," Allison replied.

Junebug's mind swirled with scenarios. A party of about fifteen twenty-something-year-olds rose from a group of tables they had pulled together as the men started forward. Junebug swept her hand across her own table, knocking her hot chocolate over. The liquid poured across the Formica tabletop and straight into Allison's lap.

Junebug was already in motion even as Allison released a startled shout and hissed out a long curse. In seconds, Bugs' petite stature was concealed within the laughing group. The

group swept past the two men dressed in police uniforms before they realized what had happened.

She passed through the doorway into the lobby. A startled cry slipped from her when firm fingers wrapped around her forearm. She twisted on her heel and brought her hand up, palm flat—and stopped her attack a fraction of an inch from Jameel’s nose. She reeled backward, and his arm swept around her back to steady her. Jameel had thrown his other hand up to intercept her attack, but when the motion turned out to be unnecessary, he placed his hand on her shoulder. His heat blazed through her clothes.

“Jam-man,” she breathed, her eyes locking with his awe-struck gaze.

“Bugs,” he whispered.

He swept her into his embrace. Her feet left the ground as he straightened to his full height, and she gasped at the feeling of his body against hers. She quickly pulled back to look up at him.

“There are two men in police uniforms that aren’t police and they are after me and I don’t like your friend Wells,” she said in an urgent tone.

“I got your message. Come on,” Jameel said, setting her back on her feet and gripping her hand.

Junebug held onto Jameel’s hand as they raced through the lobby toward the front doors. She glanced over her shoulder. The two men dressed as police officers had exited the coffee shop and were scanning the area. The men darted forward. The last glimpse Junebug caught was of Allison standing in the entrance to the coffee shop with her arms folded and an amused expression on her face.

They ran to a car waiting out front. A handsome gentleman dressed in a suit opened the back door for them. Jam-man motioned for her to go first.

“Thank you,” she called out in a breathless voice as she scrambled in.

“James, those two men are not police officers,” Jameel stated before following her.

“In that case, a slight distraction is in order, sire,” James replied.

Before Jameel could ask what James meant, the steward lifted his arm, revealing a small gun in his hand, and fired two shots. James closed the back door behind Jameel, opened the driver’s door, and climbed in. Junebug could feel her mouth hanging open. The move had been right out of a James Bond or Lara Croft movie.

“That was totally cool,” she said, leaning forward.

“Yes, very cool. Seatbelts,” Jameel reminded through clenched teeth.

“I believe you had an address you wished to go to, sire,” James said.

Already forgetting about putting on her seatbelt, Junebug twisted in her seat and stared out the back window. There were two cars rapidly approaching from behind. She reached for Jameel’s hand and squeezed it.

“We’re being followed,” she warned.

James’s eyes flickered to the rearview mirror and Junebug swallowed when the man not only sped up, but blew through a red light. She scrambled to put her seatbelt on when her butt lifted off the seat.

Strong fingers gripped the buckles and snapped the twin pieces into place when she kept missing due to sliding all over the place. Jameel’s soft grunt alerted her to the fact that her elbow had connected with his ribs. A noise was jolted out of her own mouth when her head hit his chin. She reached up and rubbed the sore spot.

“You’ve got a hard chin,” she informed him.

“You’ve got a hard head and a sharp elbow,” he retorted.

She grinned back at him and gripped his arm as James took a sharp left. Her eyes flashed in alarm before she remembered that the English drove on the opposite side of the road.

Between all the wiggly lines painted on the road, the warning signs, the traffic, and the narrow lanes, she was glad that she wasn't the one driving.

"I don't know how to drive," she blurted out.

"Uh... why not?" Jameel asked.

"Well, I haven't needed to but now if I die it seems like something I should have done except that's a pretty dumb bucket list 'cause that's not even a list. I need to write a list, a good list. Later. When we live. Positive thoughts."

Junebug started to slide along the seat before Jameel pressed his thigh into hers and wrapped his arm around her to keep her still. She snuggled down against him. The two vehicles were still following them but weren't as close.

"You really are an excellent driver, James," she commented.

"Thank you, ma'am. I've had a bit of training," James replied, turning the steering wheel hard to the right and entering a narrow alley.

"Yeah, that's something we are going to have a conversation about later," Jameel growled.

"Of course, sire," James replied with a sigh.

How James could navigate the BMW i7 M70 sedan through the narrow space without crashing, Junebug would never know. She spent most of the short distance with her eyes closed.

"You can look now," Jameel said.

She stared in the direction that they had just come. She didn't see the cars anymore.

"Did we lose them?" she asked.

"It would appear so for the moment, ma'am," James replied.

"I'm Junebug, but you can call me Bugs," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

Six



Jameel studied the nondescript brownstone as James pulled into the narrow driveway and followed it around to the back of the house. The Brownstone was located in a nice, upper-middle-class neighborhood lined with ancient oaks and cars. Lights from surrounding homes lit the darkness.

James pulled forward under a covered area. Shielded lighting illuminated the back of the house without damaging their night vision. James parked the car and exited the vehicle, scanning the spacious backyard before he opened the back door of the sedan.

Jameel slid out and offered his hand to assist Junebug. She grasped his hand, dragging her backpack with her. The three of them stood still, listening.

“I would like to explore the outside before I examine the interior if that would be permissible, sire,” James politely inquired.

“Yes, that’s fine,” Jameel replied.

It was hard to concentrate on James and the questions about his surprising skills. Jameel’s full focus was on the breathtakingly beautiful woman moving up the back steps of the house like a woodland sprite, her rainbow skirt making the light around her dance, her golden hair glowing in the moonlight. Amusement hit him at his flowery thoughts.

Who knew I was a poet?

“This is Idella’s place,” she said, walking up to the keypad lock. “Do you have the code to get in or do you need me to

find it?”

“I have it,” he replied, taking the brick steps two at a time. “How did you know this place belongs to Idella?”

“Mm,” she replied with a shrug, not answering him. “How do you know Allison?”

Jameel punched in the code to the lock. “We were in college together.”

“Oh.”

He frowned at her short response. How could a single word seem to hold so much meaning? He flushed when he realized what she probably thought—and winced at the truth behind it.

He started forward when she disappeared inside. Instead of staying in the service delivery foyer, she had continued down the short hallway and into the kitchen. He shut the door and hurried after her.

“It was a long time ago,” he defended.

She walked around the island, sliding her hand along the polished marble countertop before opening the commercial size refrigerator. A disappointed sigh slipped from her before she closed the door and opened the freezer side. She pulled out several packages, read the labels, and replaced them.

“This has possibilities,” she said.

Frustration built inside Jameel as he followed her while she continued to explore the kitchen. A surprised curse burst from his lips when she ran her fingers along the edge of a pullout pantry and it opened wider to reveal a display of weapons in a hidden compartment.

“What the hell? This looks like something Tarek would have,” Jameel exclaimed.

He touched the mechanism that she had, and the cache hid itself again, the pantry appearing completely normal.

“That’s why they fit so well together. I bet Idella has stashes all over the house. It will be fun to see how many we can find.”

Jameel stared at Junebug's back when she ducked under his arm and continued her explorations. He shook his head. He knew his new sister-in-law was more than she appeared, but this was the first time he really understood that she was way *deadlier*.

"I wonder if Tarek knows about this place," he mused.

Curious as to what the rest of the historic brownstone was like, he trailed after Junebug. After six long years of wondering and waiting, he finally had met her and he felt as tongue-tied as a pre-teen boy on his first date. He didn't catch up to her until the third room.

"Do you do dangerous stuff like your sister?" he asked conversationally.

Junebug paused, her fingers no longer running along the desk in the library. The rich mahogany piece looked like it had never been used. Nothing marred or covered the desktop.

Jameel casually walked forward when she didn't reply. "Is this what Idella meant when she said you should check out her ruby slippers? Do the three of you do dangerous things together?"

Bugs tilted her head.

"Ruby slippers...."

Her eyes lit up.

"I haven't needed them so far. So what else do you have for me?" she murmured to herself. She continued around the desk, her expression almost predatory, and Jameel was mesmerized by the way her fingers caressed the polished surface.

He shook himself out of it. "Bugs, how deep in this are you?" he softly asked.

"I don't know what you mean," she replied.

"Your sister broke the arm of a potential VP for the US, and I know she's done a lot worse—including killing a few people. Have you?"

She gave him a sharp, reproving glare. “Midnight never hurt anyone who didn’t try to hurt her or an innocent person. People like Oliver Quest don’t deserve any sympathy.”

He lifted his hands and shook his head. “I’m not giving the guy any sympathy. I just want to know if I’m going to end up flat on my back with a knife between my ribs when I ask permission to kiss you,” he explained with what he hoped was a charming grin.

She stared at him for several seconds before she shook her head.

“You are just as weird in person as you are online,” she finally replied.

He wasn’t sure how he expected her to respond, but being called weird was not even on the top ten list. He didn’t know anyone who would have the nerve to call him weird—except his own family. The idea of being weird to *her* made him feel —

“Is that weird in a good way or a bad way?” he asked.

She looked over her shoulder, raised a delicate eyebrow, and perused him from head to toe. Then she smiled and turned away. A low growl of frustrated amusement slipped from him. It was impossible to take offense when she had that damn sparkle in her eyes.

“Did you know that Allison worked for MI6?” she asked as she continued her explorations.

“No, though she did say that she worked for the government,” he confessed. “I haven’t talked to her in a while. I never expected her to be working for someone like Bronislav. I guess I should have known. It’s a classic lesson,” he sighed. “A tiger can’t change its stripes.”

“Hmph.”

He walked up behind her and touched her arm. She turned to face him. Once again, he found himself struck dumb by her beauty. Her almond-shaped eyes were a very light blue, framed by thick, black lashes that emphasized the shape and

color of them. Her gaze didn't stay on his face for long, but he got the feeling she didn't miss anything.

He lifted his hand to touch the wavy strawberry-blonde hair that fell over her shoulder. She watched him curiously as he twirled a silky lock around his fingers. Even in the dim lighting of the library, he could tell the color must be natural. It took a moment for him to realize that she wasn't wearing any makeup.

There's nothing fake or pretentious about her.

The thought hit him hard. He wondered when he had last come across a woman who wasn't adorned in expensive makeup and coated in the latest perfume on the market? Hell, he wasn't sure he even knew any women who didn't wear makeup. Even his mom was artistically made up before he saw her each day.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"Makeup... You aren't wearing any," he said.

She scowled at him. "I don't need it."

Her response made him laugh. "No... you don't."

"*Weird*," she accused him fondly, turning away from him.

"But in a good way," he responded.

She glanced at him before giving a sharp nod. "Yes. I think in a good way."

He was beaming as she walked away. He also felt a strange, unexpected desire to chase her, throw her over his shoulder, and carry her off.

Whoa! Where did this crazy feeling come from?

He wasn't some kind of caveman. Hell, he was all for supporting women's rights. His mom had made sure that all four of her sons grew up knowing that if not for a woman, none of them would be here. It had been hilarious when Junayd tried to point out that a man had been necessary too, because after a few medical videos on women giving birth, information about the severe discomfort and health risks during the ten months of pregnancy—which she had done

three times to complete their family, making it a total of two and a half years that she endured—plus a visit to the local university, and a *very* effective threat to make him wear a belt every month that would shock him occasionally to simulate menstrual cramps, they had all been cured of any doubt that women were strong, resilient, and intelligent.

But even so, as Jameel followed Bugs up the stairs to the second level, he couldn't help imagining lifting her off her feet and making her fall into his bed, spreading her out beneath him, listening to her gasps of shock and pleasure, and feeling how soft her skin was. He cleared his throat and clenched his hand. She glanced at him, their eyes locking for a moment before she turned away.

They walked in silence, examining each room. Junebug had a knack for discovering Idella's hidden stashes. He had seen this same deductive reasoning when she was playing one of their online games or writing code.

"You are really good at this," he said when she popped open another hidden compartment.

"Once you understand a person's habits, it isn't hard to understand how they think. It's like writing code. If you want to do this, then these are the possible outcomes. Each change creates a slightly different variant to the patterns. In this case, each room is different, but the core of the coding is the same... how would Idella think, what would she need, and what would be the most likely and convenient place to hide the weapons she would require if there was an attack. We do that all the time in our games," she explained.

"You make it sound like a walk in the park."

She hummed absently as she reentered the hallway. "Parks are nice."

He chuckled. "So, are you going to tell me what happened at the hotel between you and Allison?"

"I spilled my hot chocolate on her."

Laughter burst from Jameel. Given the mischievous gleam in her eyes and her pleased smile, she obviously thought it was

the highlight of their encounter.

“I like your laugh. It sounds better in person,” she commented.

“Thank you. I like your voice better in person,” he responded.

“Well, I’m not using a voice distorter now.”

“I know. You don’t know how much that drove me crazy at first,” he confessed, walking toward her.

She turned toward him, just a step away from the closed door behind her, and she tilted her head. “I thought you’d like the Greta Garbo voice.”

He reached up and slid his hand along her cheek, lifting her chin until they were staring at each other. He marveled at the clarity in her eyes. They were like a crystal-clear spring—cool, refreshing, and so very, very inviting.

“I want to kiss you. I’ve wanted to kiss you for the past six years,” he murmured, closing the distance between them.

She leaned away from him as she laughed. “You’ve sure kissed a lot of other women while you were waiting for me. I think you should have to work for it a bit longer,” she cheekily scoffed.

“Hey! It isn’t like *you* haven’t kissed anyone in the past six years,” he defended.

She released an unladylike snort, took a step back, and gripped the door.

“I’ll take this room. Goodnight,” she said, closing the door in his face.

Jameel dropped his hand until it rested against the varnished oak door. It was like the spring he was imagining seconds earlier had doused him in a cold shower. A frown of confusion creased his brow.

“It isn’t, is it? You’ve kissed other men, right?” he said, curling his fist against the door at the thought.

Her muffled response to his question caused him to step back in stunned surprise. Had she just said what he thought she said? He shook his head.

There is no way I heard her correctly—no way at all. Not with as beautiful as she is!

“There is *no way* you’ve never been kissed,” he breathed.



Jameel was nothing like she expected.

“That’s not true. He is... and he isn’t,” she murmured.

Junebug knew she wouldn’t be able to sleep. It was way too early for her and her mind was buzzing. She kicked off her shoes, unpacked her laptop, and pulled out a change of clothes. She would find the laundry room later, but for now, she would get a shower and change into the oversized t-shirt that she liked to wear as a nightgown. She had forgotten that she had packed the one that her sister had given her.

Midnight had picked the shirt up from the Bronx Zoo. It swallowed her, hiding her D-cup-size breasts, and hung down to her knees. The cotton was super soft, and she loved the decoration on the front of it: an image of the characters from the animated movie Madagascar.

She walked across the bedroom to the bathroom and turned the light on. The spacious bathroom consisted of a large, tiled walk-in shower, double-vanity sinks, and old English oak cabinets. The room was beautiful and luxurious, but seemed devoid of personality. There was very little color.

She placed her nightshirt on the counter and touched the fluffy white towel. The house was... a house, not a home. So far, every room she had explored spoke of an old English country home where no one lived. She understood why. This was one of Idella’s safe houses. Everything was designed to appear normal while giving nothing away about the person who owned it. It was just bland to her.

A sudden wave of homesickness hit her. She sniffed and wiped away a stray tear that had slid down her cheek. Her own home—hers and Midnight’s—was a spacious, concealed vault under

the Brooklyn Bridge. It had been the first place where she actually felt at home. The only place.

The vault had been used during Prohibition as a speakeasy. Midnight had discovered it during her explorations of the subway system. While renovations had been on-going for the other vaults, this one had been craftily hidden. It had taken Junebug a while to find the original blueprints. Washington Roebling and his father had created them in the 1870's. The vaults had been designed into the original structure of the Brooklyn bridge to help pay for the cost of building the bridge, and it had been the ideal place to house a certain fine liquid when it was banned in the 1920's.

Junebug and Midnight had spent the last several years making the hidden vault into their personal castle. Junie had spent hours laying intricate tiles into mosaic masterpieces. The work helped her focus, provided an outlet for her creative side, and gave her a purpose. The bank of computer screens had given her access to the world outside without having to actually be a part of it.

Now, she wasn't sure what to do. Her first true day away and she had already blown her cover and was being chased and there had been guns and speeding cars and she totally had a meltdown once already and it had only been chance that she even got out of the airport because she couldn't take ten steps without getting *lost*. She lifted the towel and wiped the tears from her face.

"What's worse is I miss my slippers," she whispered to the empty room.

She stiffened when the front doorbell rang at the same time as her phone pinged.

Lifting the phone to read the message, a choked cross between a sob and a giggle slipped from her. She tossed the towel down onto the counter and sprinted barefoot to her bedroom door.

Ripping open the door, she bounded down the beautiful curved staircase, her speed quickly closing the gap between herself and James who was approaching the door with a gun in his

hand. Jameel stood nearby holding a pistol from Idella's stash. Both men turned to warn her.

"I got it! I got it! It's for me!" she breathlessly announced, jumping the last two steps. She impatiently pushed between the two men.

Jameel moved to restrain her, but she danced out of his reach, twirled beneath James's arm, and grabbed the doorknob as the doorbell rang again.

"Hi. This is for me," she cheerfully greeted.

The elderly man on the front step chuckled and held out an elegantly wrapped package. Junebug grabbed the package, hugged it to her chest, and turned away. The man bowed to the two wary and shocked men behind her.

"Can you tip him?" she asked, speed walking toward the staircase, her steps as light as air.

"That won't be necessary. Mistress Idella has already been very generous," the elderly delivery man assured her.

"This will make everything better. Thank you!" she called over her shoulder as she ran up the staircase, leaving three very bemused men staring after her.

Seven



Jameel paused outside of Bugs' bedroom door. He and James had interrogated the old delivery man after Bugs had danced back up the staircase as if she didn't have a care in the world. It was only the old man's comment about Idella having already compensated him for the delivery that had given him and James a measure of relief.

Still, they had asked the man a series of questions which the old man had pleasantly responded to without hesitation. After the old man left, he and James had discussed their security measures for the night. Once they were through, Jameel had left James to familiarize himself with the downstairs area while he made his way upstairs to check on Bugs.

The old man had refused to impart what he had brought for Bugs. The man had stated it was a gift for the young miss and that he was simply the delivery man. He paused outside of her bedroom door before lifting his hand and knocking on the door.

"Come on in."

Jameel frowned. *Come on in? Just... come on in? She doesn't even know who is at the door and she says come on in?*

He twisted the doorknob and pushed open the door. The exasperated word of caution on the tip of his tongue died when he caught sight of her position in the middle of the room. She was standing bent over at the waist so the only thing he could see was the movement of her slender arms and a lot of blonde hair.

“Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five...”

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m brushing my hair,” she replied.

She tilted her head towards him when she spoke but didn’t straighten. She reminded him of that character from the television show he used to watch as a kid. The one all covered in hair.

Cousin It.

The name came to him as she continued counting until she reached forty. He grinned at the thought.

“You know you look like...”

The rest of what he was saying died on his lips when she straightened. He swallowed, feeling his Adam’s Apple bobbing up and down as he did. There was absolutely, positively nothing about her that was remotely like Cousin It.

“What do I look like?” she asked, staring at him with a wary expression.

“You are....”

His gaze ran over her glistening blonde hair, puffed up from her brushing it upside down, and her heart-shaped face. He took an involuntary step toward her, pulled by the crystal blue depths of her eyes and those sultry black lashes. She had a pert, slender nose and enticingly plump lips.

Like a dream, every feature designed to drive me crazy, he thought.

His gaze dropped lower and he swallowed again. His heart thudded in his chest hard enough that he placed his hand against it to make sure it didn’t explode outward. She was wearing an oversized black t-shirt with Bronx Zoo emblazoned above her unrestrained breasts and an image of the animated characters from Madagascar spread across her—

Sweat broke out on his forehead as his whole body became a furnace. *Damn, but I would give anything to have my face*

buried right between them.

Her nightshirt stopped above her knees. Her legs were bare and seductive. His attention drifted to her feet— and Jameel blinked, jerked out of his dreamy trance. He blinked again. The cause of his bewilderment was still there. She was wearing the largest, fluffiest pair of bunny slippers he had ever seen in his life.

“Do you like them?” she asked, wiggling them so it looked like they were hopping. “Idella sent them to me. Midnight must have asked her,” she added softly with a touched expression. “Oh, she sent me something else, too!”

He opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water as she turned and scuffled across to the bed. He couldn’t help but notice that the ears on the bunnies flopped up and down. Hell, there was even a fluffy tail on the heel of each slipper.

She bent over the bed to reach the open box on the other side. The back of her nightshirt inched upward, giving him a clear, unobstructed view of her sexy thighs and a glimpse of pink lacey panties. The hand still pressed against his heart pressed harder, as if holding himself back. He didn’t quite hold back a barely audible groan.

A moment of embarrassed clarity made him wonder if his hand should instead be covering his groin. He grimaced. There would be no hiding the effect she was having on him. He cursed the fact that he was wearing dress slacks instead of jeans.

Still... he had to try. He moved his hand to his front, trying to find a casual place to put it that wouldn’t make it obvious what he was trying to hide.

“What else did she send?” he finally choked out as she pulled something out of the box, straightened, and turned, holding up a large, plastic bag in each hand. He tilted his head to read the description.

“Marshmallows?”

“Not just any marshmallows! These are chocolate and chocolate filled marshmallows,” she breathed with delight.

“Do you want some?”

“I... sure. I'll try one,” he gracefully accepted.

She peered at him quizzically, her gaze dipping down briefly and then back to his eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

She shrugged. “You're holding your cock like you think I'm going to coldcock you there or like maybe it's going to fall off? You don't have any STDs, do you? Marshmallows won't cure you if you do. Not even the really good ones. Harry would know what to do. If you need me to ask him, I can.”

She was talking so fast while she was carefully opening each bag with a lethal looking knife that at first only the most outrageous words stood out to him: ‘*cock...fall off...STDs*’. It took a few seconds for his tired brain to realize that he was not in fact imagining this conversation. He dropped his hand to his side and scowled at her.

“No, I do *not* have any STDs,” he bit out.

“That's surprising in some ways. You *have* had a colorful assortment of women, and well, some of those women—”

He silenced her reflective and embarrassingly accurate litany of his love-life with a gentle finger to her lips. She held up a chocolate marshmallow. There was an intriguing blend of curiosity, uncertainty, and vulnerability in her eyes.

She caused a need inside him. It was an all-encompassing and confusing mixture of protective instincts and sexual aggression. He didn't even realize he was bending forward to kiss her until he was stopped... by the marshmallow she was holding against his lips. He slowly parted his lips so she could pop the tasty, soft treat into his mouth.

It wasn't nearly as sweet as he knew kissing her would be, but a small, grudging part of him appreciated her hesitation. She was too trusting, and for once in his life, he wasn't sure that he was trustworthy. Not when she was the prize.

“This is good,” he admitted, chewing the marshmallow.

“Wait until you try the chocolate filled ones. I keep hoping they will make chocolate marshmallows with chocolate filling. I keep writing them, but they haven’t made them yet. They do have an amazing Cookie ‘N Cream variety. Idella sent a package of those as well, but I’m saving them for a special occasion,” she said, slowly stepping away from him.

“I take it you like chocolate? *All* kinds of chocolate?” he chuckled.

“Not *all* kinds. I like hot chocolate and my marshmallows. I don’t like chocolate by itself, like in candy bars. But chocolate flavored stuff? Yeah, that’s my comfort food.”

“Do you need comfort?” he asked softly.

She paused and bit her lip, her eyes suddenly glittering with tears, and she nodded hesitantly. He stepped forward, gently took the knife and bags of marshmallows from her hands, and placed them on the nightstand. When he straightened, she moved into his arms, stepping on his toes with her big bunny slippers, and wrapped her arms around his waist.

He held her tightly against his body. “I don’t know about you, but I’m tired. What do you say we get a few hours of sleep?”

She sniffled, tilted her head, and frowned up at him. “It’s still early.”

He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. It was—technically. It was an early part of *tomorrow*. Most people would consider it the middle of the night. He calculated what time it would be in New York and realized her body wasn’t feeling the time difference yet.

“I guess it is for you,” he agreed.

“You can lie down if you want. I don’t mind. I wanted to see what I could find on your friend,” she said.

Jameel scowled. “Wells is no longer my friend. I can’t believe I was so blind *again*,” he muttered.

“Yeah, join the club, I suppose. Maybe Wells had an affair with RC... if they aren’t the same person. I know you had an

affair with her too, but maybe their affair was more recent,” she replied, pulling out of his arms.

“I did *not* have an affair with her!” Jameel denied.

“Oh. Okay. She made it seem like she knew you intimately so I assumed based on all your other relationships that you and she had... you know,” she said with a shrug.

“She wasn’t anything like my other relationships,” he muttered.

“Okay. If you say so,” she said.

Jameel gritted his teeth. He didn’t think of the one night he and Allison had as an *affair*. They had more of a fleeting fly-by that was started by an acute case of food poisoning. It was just another bitter memory now. Allison had taken care of him the whole night. It had been sweet, and things went a little too far the next day when he was feeling better.

He couldn’t believe he had ever believed Allison was sweet. Grumbling under his breath, he snatched the bag of chocolate filled marshmallows off of the nightstand and piled several pillows against the headboard. Then he fell with a satisfied grunt onto the bed.

“Shoes,” she absently reminded him.

He kicked off his shoes, settled back against the pillows, and watched her as she became absorbed in her computer screen. After the first bite, he decided the chocolate filled marshmallows were better than the plain chocolate ones. He absently munched on more of them as he studied her, and as different programs flashed across the screen, he couldn’t help but admire her brilliance.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Damage control at the moment. Making sure my facial recognition software is uploaded to all the security cameras from the airport to the hotel and in the hotel. Once it recognizes my face, the AI will change it to look like Greta Garbo. That should take care of Allison finding me, but now that you are in the equation, I need to add your face. If she finds you, she finds me. Who do you want to be, by the way?”

Do you want to go modern or classic? Dead or alive? Or not a real person? We also were in an i7. Modern cars are full of electronics that talk to servers. EV cars more so, and you had to have one of the top-of-the-line two hundred grand models. Like that isn't going to stick out like a sore thumb!" She raised a hand and waved it in the air. "Anyway, one of the first things I need to do is connect with the BMW server and make sure that all traces of the car are erased... or maybe I should put it in Scotland. I'll have to think about that. No, I'll just erase it. I'll have to remember when this is all over to put it back in, otherwise it won't get the updates. That could be a bad thing."

Jameel listened with a bemused expression as he continued to pop the marshmallows into his mouth. He hadn't realized how hungry he was and the damn things were actually pretty good if you could get past the gooey texture and cavity-inducing sugar content. He answered the questions that she rattled off, like did he know the license plate number—no, he did not.

Did he know who the vehicle is registered to? No, he didn't know that either.

How did he get to London? By private jet.

He winced when she reminded him how bad private jets were for the climate, telling him the exact ratio of their carbon footprint, and then silently agreed when she conceded that while commercial airlines carried more passengers, he would still be stuck at Lisbon airport waiting for his connecting flight that wouldn't leave for another four hours, thirty-five minutes, and twelve seconds.

He decided he needed a stiff drink to wash down the marshmallows and looked longingly at the door. He finally gave up and retrieved a glass of water from the bathroom. Bugs was still rattling off the alternative flights that still wouldn't have gotten him to London in time to save her, though she was perfectly capable of saving herself.

"Are you playing a game while you are hacking the British Motor Vehicle Division?" he inquired, returning to his spot on the bed.

“No. Their server was slower than molasses so I by-passed it and went straight to MI6. They have a connection to the entire country’s camera system. I see Allison is doing the same thing. I’ve already sent her on a red herring to Scotland. She is pissed and trying to reconnect. We are playing who can out-do who at the moment. She’s pretty good. It’s kinda nice—in a bad way, you know? She told me she wanted something and I’m gonna have to think about that ‘cause does she want me to follow that lead and if she does, do I want to? ‘Cause I really want to, and there’s a way to find that information and then maybe we’ll have more options or maybe we’ll be where she wants us to be, so maybe I don’t want to, but I really do. What classes did you two take together? Never mind, I’ve got both of your transcripts. This would be so much easier if I was at home. I have an entire wall of monitors. I can see most of the major players at the same time.”

“What is your real name?” he suddenly asked.

“Junebug Rainbow Rain,” she replied with a shy grin, swiveling back and forth in her chair as her bunny-clad feet tapped out a dance to some unheard musical beat.

“Are you always so... animated?” he asked.

She froze. It was as if his question had suddenly turned her to stone. Her fingers were paused against the keys. Her back was ram-rod straight. The chair was still. Even her fluffy feet were flat against the floor.

“Yes.”

That single word was spoken in an almost inaudible voice, yet it held a mountain of depth. He could almost feel her pain radiating from it. Someone had hurt her—deeply. He remained where he was, watching an icy shield close over her animated face and knew if he didn’t think of some way to break through the ice before it solidified, he might lose her.

“Good. I love it and think you are beautiful. Don’t ever stop,” he replied as if nothing was unusual.

Her lower lip trembled and he followed the movement of her slender throat as she swallowed. Ever so slowly, the ice melted

and her body once again moved with a fluid motion that matched her thoughts.

It was the beautiful little smile that curved her lips, though, that took his breath away and made him smile. He settled back against the pillows, enjoying observing her as she worked. Ten minutes later, his mind swirling and his pulse not quite steady, he came to another realization.

I've found my Almuhtar. Junebug Rainbow Rain is my Chosen.

Eight



Jameel could feel the smile on his lips the next morning before he opened his eyes. The soft, warm body he was partially covering had still somehow managed to continue wiggling even with his arm and one leg trapping her. He had discovered that Junebug was perpetual motion—even in her sleep.

Surprisingly enough, he had slept sounder than he could remember. Considering that they were in danger, that had taken him aback. He forced himself to remain relaxed when Junebug wiggled again in her sleep, pressing her soft buttocks into his early morning arousal.

Jeans. I need to find me a pair of fucking jeans, he silently thought.

Gritting his teeth, he lifted his arm far enough to look at his watch. It was almost seven. Junebug hadn't come to bed until almost four. He hadn't realized that he had fallen asleep watching her until he felt her wiggle closer to him. She had grabbed his arm, wrapped it around her, threaded her fingers through his, and tucked their entwined hands between her breasts. Within seconds, she was fast asleep.

Now she was sprawled mostly on her stomach with her hair spread like a fisherman's net across the pillows. She was also snoring. Not a loud, chainsaw snore, more of a soft, kitten one. A light knock on the bedroom door told him his rest time was over.

He gently disentangled himself from Junebug and slid from the bed, taking a moment to make sure she was covered

against the chill before he picked up his shoes and padded to the bedroom door. Opening the door, he motioned for James to move to the side.

“I apologize for disturbing you, sire, but two gentlemen have arrived. Your brother sent them,” James informed him.

“Thanks. I’m sorry about crashing on you last night,” he said, running his hand over his disheveled hair.

“No need to apologize, sire. This house is a fortress. No one enters the property without an alert. Would you like something to eat?” James asked.

“Yes, food would be great,” he replied. “And my bag is in the car.”

“Your bag is in the room across the hall. Should I tell the two men that you will be down shortly?” James inquired.

“Please. I’m going to grab a quick shower and change.”

“Yes, sire.”

Jameel walked across the hall to the bedroom where James had placed his overnight bag. He sighed with relief when he noticed his jeans, t-shirt, and jacket were on top. His brothers might be okay with wearing a suit all day, but he much preferred a more casual lifestyle.

He gathered his clothing and headed for the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, he felt refreshed and ready to tackle the issues ahead. His priority was getting Junebug to safety.

He exited the room and crossed the hall again to check on Junebug. His plan was to peek in on her, make sure she was getting some rest, and head downstairs. Instead, he felt himself drawn farther into the bedroom where he stood gazing down at her with a multitude of complex emotions that he knew he was going to need to unravel.

My Almukhtar.

Was she really his Chosen? His soulmate? He had never really believed the hocus-pocus about a man and woman being destined to belong together. How the hell was that supposed to

happen with almost eight billion people on the planet? Through fate? That was about as real as an *Almukhtar*.

His parents swore by it. It didn't matter that they had been living in the same country and their families had known each other and their marriage had been planned before they were born. No, they had been bound by fate, they said, and now Jameel could feel it, too. It was downright spooky.

He thought about their chance meeting online, him and Bugs. Two souls that lived half a world away from each other and loved doing the same thing. Over the last six years, he had fantasized about the day they would meet. He had wondered what she would look like. Would she be the same in person as she was online? Would she really be the woman he had slowly become infatuated with over the years?

She's even better.

She was lying on her back, her arms spread wide as if she didn't have a care in the world. Her face was obscured by her tangle of blonde hair. Her low snore made him grin. Her t-shirt had ridden up, but the covers he had tucked around her kept her modest. His eyes moved to her fingers. Even in her sleep, they moved as if typing out some mysterious code that only she understood.

He reluctantly stepped away from the bed. She needed her rest and he needed to keep her safe. Quietly retreating, he closed the door behind him.

Jameel descended the staircase to the lower section of the brownstone. The quiet murmur of voices alerted him that the men were in the kitchen. The fragrant aroma of fresh coffee, eggs, and toast made his stomach growl. Except for his overindulgence in chocolate filled marshmallows last night, he hadn't eaten since the previous afternoon.

The three men sitting at the table stood when he entered the kitchen. He waved his hand at them to sit back down. Walking over to the kitchen island, he poured himself a cup of coffee. His eyes lit with delight when he saw the pan of scrambled eggs, croissant rolls, and fresh fruit.

“Where’d you find food in this place?” he asked, preparing a plate that had been left out on the counter.

“Hyder ran out and picked up a few staples,” Yahya commented.

“Thank you,” he mumbled around the buttered croissant.

“James was explaining what happened last night,” Yahya said.

“How were you two able to get here so quickly?” Jameel asked.

Hyder chuckled. “Yahya called in a favor.”

Yahya shrugged. “We know we are dealing with Bronislav and Coldhouse. It seemed the most prudent thing to do at the time. You have found Midnight’s sister?”

Jameel grinned and nodded. Before he could reply, Hyder choked on his coffee and started coughing. Yahya and James were staring over his shoulder with bemused expressions. Jameel slowly rotated in his seat.

“Mornin’.”

Junebug yawned out the greeting and shuffled to the counter in her oversized nightshirt and big, fluffy bunny slippers. She sniffed the coffee, made a face, mumbled something incoherent, picked up a croissant, and padded to the refrigerator.

She pulled open the refrigerator and her grip on the door slid down to the bottom as she sat on her knees in a fluid motion, her legs carelessly sprawled beneath her and the bunnies’ faces smooshed against the tile. She peered through her tangle of hair at the bottom shelf where the drinks were stored. Then she stood up gracefully, still yawning, closed the door, and turned, directing her sleepy attention to the group sitting in awed silence staring at her.

“Is there hot chocolate?” she inquired.

“I believe I saw some, ma’am,” James replied.

James rose from his chair and walked over to a large pantry. He disappeared inside it for a few seconds before reappearing

with a container of hot chocolate. Junebug gave him a smile of thanks.

“If you would like, I can make the hot chocolate for you,” James offered.

“With marshmallows? I have marshmallows. I’ll be back,” she said, her eyes lighting up with delight.

A shaft of unexpected jealousy swept through Jameel. He didn’t know if he was more jealous of James, the hot chocolate, or the marshmallows. A chorus of low chuckles followed Junebug when she disappeared down the hallway, the ears on her bunny slippers flopping with every step.

“Now that is something I wasn’t expecting to see,” Hyder commented, sitting back in his chair.

“What? A gorgeous woman appearing out of nowhere wearing only a t-shirt and big, bunny slippers, or James knowing that there was hot chocolate in the pantry?” Yahya inquired.

“Definitely the big, bunny slippers,” Hyder hastily replied after Jameel shot him a glare of warning.

“Sire, do you perchance know what... her ladyship would like for breakfast?” James asked.

Jameel frowned. Did he know what Junebug would like? He thought back over all of their conversations. He remembered one conversation they had about food.

“She doesn’t eat meat. She loves pancakes... with chocolate chips, and her eggs scrambled with cheese,” he said.

James gave him a troubled look. “I can come up with more eggs, but I’m afraid the pancakes with chocolate and the cheese may not be available.”

“That’s okay. I know where the supermarket is,” Hyder commented, pushing back from the table.

“And vegetables... she likes sweet peppers, tomatoes, the little ones, not the big ones, and if they have any more chocolate-filled marshmallows grab some. I ate one of her bags last night,” Jameel instructed.

“How many bags of the marshmallows?” Hyder asked.

“All of them,” Jameel answered.

Low chuckles filled the kitchen as Hyder gave a brief nod and headed for the back door. Jameel sighed and leaned his elbows on the table. Yahya straightened in his chair.

“How much did James cover with you?” he asked.

Yahya glanced over at James. “Everything until this morning. I’d like to hear from you what happened inside the hotel. James said he wasn’t inside.”

Jameel grimaced and played with his coffee cup. “Let’s just say an old friend I thought I could trust turned out not to be so trustworthy after all.”

“The first thing we need to do is get you and Ms. Rain to Jawahir. It will be easier to protect you both there,” Yahya replied.

“But what about Allison?”

All three men turned when Junebug reappeared. She had changed into a bright lime green tie-dyed blouse that hung down over her hips. A wide, yellow belt wrapped around her small waist, drawing attention to her curvy, hourglass figure. A pair of black leggings covered her legs. Her hair, pulled back into an intricate French braid along both sides of her temple, connected in a thick braid that fell down her back. She had exchanged her fluffy bunny slippers for a pair of high-top red runners.

Jameel didn’t know how all the mixture of color could work, but it did. She looked vibrant... and very young. She was holding the empty bag from the marshmallows he had eaten in one hand and a full bag in the other.

“We’ll worry about Allison after I know you are safe,” Jameel said, pushing his chair back and standing.

“Your hot chocolate, ma’am,” James said.

“Oh... thank you.”

Junebug exchanged the empty plastic bag for the big, steaming mug of hot chocolate and carried her sugary treasures to the table, sliding into the chair that Jameel pulled out for her. Opening the corner of the marshmallows, she picked out five, examining each one carefully before she placed it in her cup.

“Where is the other man?” she asked.

“Hyder has gone to the supermarket to retrieve more groceries. When he returns, I’ll make you some chocolate chip pancakes and eggs,” Jameel offered.

Junebug nodded, and then frowned. “How did he go to the grocery store?”

“The car we picked up at the airport,” Yahya answered.

“What model and year?” she asked.

“Range Rover, this year,” Yahya replied.

She quit stirring the marshmallows in her cup, stood, picked up her cup and marshmallows, and left the kitchen. Jameel watched her with a deepening frown. He replayed the brief conversation and couldn’t pick out anything that could have been offensive.

“Did I say something wrong?” Yahya asked.

“No. I’ll go see what happened,” Jameel said.

He rose from his seat and strode after Junebug. He caught up with her halfway up the stairs. She was mumbling to herself.

“Would she think of it? Yes, because I did. If I did, then it is more than likely she did. But when? Did she think of it first? I should have asked how long they have been here. No, that won’t matter. I need to know when they landed. Does that matter? It’ll be soon and they might need time, so ok, first alarm, then the landing or maybe skip the landing and just check the prints ‘cause there might not be time and she might not—”

“Bugs? Time for what?” he asked.

“What? Oh, I need to know how much time we have before they find us,” she said.

“Who finds us?”

She stopped on the stairs. “Allison and Bronislav’s men. Yahya and Hyder brought them to us.”

Jameel’s mouth went dry. He stared after Junebug as she continued climbing the stairs to the second level. His mind swirled. How...? The answer hit him like a lead pipe.

“The car... they can track the car.”

He muttered a curse, turned on his heel, and raced down the staircase. Yahya met him in the hallway, grabbed his arm, and shook his head, holding a finger to his mouth. Yahya motioned for him to step back against the staircase so that they weren’t visible through the kitchen windows.

“We have company,” Yahya warned.

“I was just coming to warn you,” he said.

Yahya frowned. “How did you know? The alarm alerted us just a few seconds ago.”

“They tracked the Range Rover. We need to warn Hyder,” he replied.

Yahya nodded, pulled out his cellphone, and sent a text to Hyder. They could only hope Hyder received the message before the bad guys got him. The thud of bullets hitting the glass of the back door sounded at the same time as something heavy hit the front door.

Yahya peered down the hallway toward the kitchen. James darted toward them. The Brit pressed his body against the wall.

“Impact resistant glass. It won’t hold them out forever, but it may give us time to plan our escape,” he said.

“We need to get to the panic room. There is a way out of the house from there.”

The three men looked up. Junebug was crouched on the staircase, peering through the gaps at them. She was cradling her backpack against her chest.

“Where is it?” he asked.

“Upstairs, end of the hall behind the large painting.”

Jameel nodded and started forward with Yahya and James on his heels. Junebug twisted and ran up the stairs. The crack of breaking glass warned them that they were running out of time. Jameel took Junebug’s backpack from her and slung the strap over his shoulder. He placed his hand on her lower back as they ran down the long hallway to the end where a painting of a medieval German castle hung. The painting had an ornate, heavy gold frame and extended from the floor to the ceiling.

Junebug crouched and ran her fingers along the underside of the frame. There was a low click before the painting swung outward to reveal a set of metal, double sliding doors. Junebug punched in a code and the light turned from red to green.

“How did you know the code?” Jameel asked.

“How did she know this was even here?” Yahya murmured.

“I messaged Idella. It would have been more fun to figure it out myself but we’re out of time. Hyder is on his way. I’ve disabled the GPS tracking on the Range Rover, but I’m sure they know where he is heading. They’ll come here, but we won’t be here for long,” she added.

Jameel followed her inside the panic room. James pulled the painting closed and stepped back so the door could shut. Junebug pressed another code into the interior keypad.

Instead of the doors behind them sliding open, the compartment they were in began to drop. It took a second for Jameel to realize they were in an elevator. Yahya whistled under his breath and stared around the compartment with a new interest. It didn’t take long for them to reach the cellar.

“Idella said one of the things she loved about this old house is that the people who owned it during World War II converted the cellar into a bunker with an escape tunnel. She had it retrofitted when she bought the place,” Junebug explained.

“Doesn’t everyone need a bomb shelter in their home?” Yahya muttered.

Junebug punched another code into the keypad, this time to open the doors. Jameel realized why Idella had installed the

extra safety measure. She knew that the last thing a person wanted was to open the doors and find someone on the other side waiting for you. The precaution must have been triggered when the alarms went off. His appreciation for his sister-in-law's unique talents, knowledge, and ingenuity continued to grow.

Idella really is the perfect fit for Tarek, just like Aimee is for Qadir, and Midnight is for Junayd.

“This way,” she said, studying her phone.

The elevator had deposited them in an underground cellar. Racks of fine wine, covered in a light film of dust, lined the narrow passage on each side. Junebug walked to the end of the room. A thick metal door with another keypad sealed the room from whatever was beyond it. Junebug entered a code, the light turned from red to green, and the door popped open.

She smiled impishly. “There’s no place like home,” she said with satisfaction.

The others looked confused at that. It took Jameel a moment to parse it, but as he looked around at the red wine surrounding them and remembered the three locks it took to reach this room, he realized that their escape route did have something to do with ruby slippers after all. Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz had tapped her ruby heels three times and said ‘There’s no place like home’. He grinned at Bugs, elated that he understood her. She grinned back and laced their fingers together.

Yahya stepped forward and pulled the door open, peering down another long tunnel.

“Where does it go?” Yahya asked.

“The basement of a house on the next street,” she directed, stepping through the open doorway with the men falling in behind her.

“I’ll text Hyder and tell him to meet us there,” Yahya said.

“No, if they are following him, we don’t want him leading them back to Junebug. Tell him to lead them away. We will

meet up with him once we know where we are going next,” Jameel instructed.

“I’ve booked us seats on the train to Paris in two hours. He can meet us at the station,” Junebug stated.

“How are we going to get to the London St Pancras?” James asked.

Sunlight filtered through the access cover above them. Junebug looked over her shoulder and smiled at them in the dim interior of the tunnel running under the street. She looked up when a car passed overhead.

“I ordered a ride-share. They should be in front of the house in ten minutes,” she said.

Yahya barked a laugh and cast an amused look at Jameel. “I like her.”

“Get in line,” Jameel joked back.

“What about Bronislav’s men?” James asked, drawing them back to the danger they were in.

“They are beating a hasty retreat. The police are on their way,” Junebug said.

“When did you do all this?” Jameel asked, impressed.

Junebug shrugged. “As soon as I realized Allison must be tracking the car, I sent the alarm notification to the police, double-checked the blueprints on the house that I downloaded from the building inspector’s archives... that took some real digging! Then once I realized there was a tunnel and that if I knew it, Idella would know it, and Allison might but I doubt it because I deleted the blueprint so unless she was thinking way faster than me which I really doubt because Midnight says no one’s brain works as fast as mine does, we should be in the clear. After I finished that and ordered the tickets, I ordered the ride-share, got my backpack, and met up with you guys on the stairs.”

“Won’t Allison be watching any credit card that you might use?” James asked.

Junebug grinned. “Of course. That’s why I’ve been charging everything to one of Bronislav’s obscure accounts. The guy has a ton of miscellaneous ones for shell companies that I’ve been keeping an eye on but haven’t touched yet. It was a way to keep track of who was working for him.”

Jameel snorted out a laugh. Junebug had a wicked sense of humor. She smiled back at him. There was a split second when their eyes connected that the world around them seemed to fade away and they were the only two in it.

The universe-tilting connection lasted until another car passed overhead. A flicker of vulnerability flooded him. Doubts, fed by years of living in the shadows of his over-achieving brothers, caused him to look away. He stepped aside when Yahya touched his arm.

“I’d like to scout the area before the rest of you.”

Jameel nodded. Yahya, like Qadir and Tarek, had field experience in things like this. Junebug had turned to silently follow Yahya. Lost in thought, he did the same with James following behind him.

Nine



Junebug held her backpack in one hand, slid across the backseat of the rideshare, and gripped Jameel's extended hand. She stood on the sidewalk outside of St Pancras International train station. The beauty of the exterior building took her breath away. The building was slightly older than the Brooklyn bridge. Beautifully restored, the station buzzed with activity.

"We need to hurry if we are going to catch our train," James said.

"Have you heard from Hyder yet, Yahya?" Jameel asked.

"Yes. He said he would meet us at the platform."

Junebug listened to the men as she scanned the pedestrians in the train station. She had seen more people in the past two days than she had seen in her whole life! She hugged her backpack closer to her chest and peered through the fluffy bunny ears of her slippers that were sticking out of the top.

"Man-oh-man, would I love to be her backpack," a snickering twenty-something-year-old man with a thick Cornish accent joked to his two friends.

"I know what you mean. I'd love to see her in nothing but a pair of bunny ears and a fluffy tail."

Junebug was a little shocked that people spoke like that in real life, but she wasn't really fazed. People were pretty perverted in the gaming world, or at least they pretended to be. It got so outrageous sometimes that it was like a smack-talking art form. Nobody really *meant* it.

But she did know a couple of female gamers who were tempted to stop playing 'cause the guys were just too gross and there were too many of them being gross at the same time. Bugs had a tendency to log in to those servers sometimes and scare the guys straight. She was something of a boogeyman at this point, so they often kept each other in line with stories of her when she wasn't even there.

What was interesting was that the man's words had no sooner left his lips than he muttered a curse and twisted away, pulling his two friends with him. Junebug watched curiously as they hurried away, looking thoroughly spooked.

She was a little confused at first, knowing that they couldn't have known she's 'the scariest bitch on the internet,' but glancing around, she noticed the expressions on her three companions' faces. She peered through the bunny ears at Jameel's thunderous face in particular, his anger making her feel surprisingly excited. She looked away.

"What?" she said, lifting one shoulder. "It's not my fault. They won't fit all the way in my backpack."

"I know it's not your fault," Jameel growled.

Junebug glanced speculatively at where the rude people had practically run from the men she traveled with.

"You guys are really scary, huh? I hadn't really noticed," she said with a laugh.

Yahya snorted, James cleared his throat, but Jameel continued to scowl. He took a step closer to her and slid his hand down her arm until he was holding her hand.

"They *should* be afraid," Jameel muttered before he kissed her temple.

She fought a giddy smile. Jameel made her feel special and safe. They continued on through the station and arrived at their platform with less than five minutes before departure.

Hyder materialized out of the crowd and walked over to them. He silently nodded to them. Junebug moved up the narrow steps and followed the corridor to the First-Class Coach.

She slid her backpack down and deposited it under the table before settling into the plush chair near the window. Excitement built inside her. She was going to Paris! There were so many places she wanted to see. She really hoped that Allison wouldn't figure out that they had left England... at least for a few days.

Yahya, James, and Hyder took their seats two tables down. Jameel stopped to talk with them before he came to sit across from her. She stared out of the window, scanning the crowd.

“Do you think we are safe?” she asked.

“For now. I want to check the security feed for the station to make sure no one followed us. Hyder feels confident he was able to lose the men following him.”

“I'll do that.”

He rose from his seat and moved around the table to sit next to her while she retrieved her MiFi and laptop. It took a little digging since she had packed in a hurry. He grinned at her when she placed a bag of chocolate-filled marshmallows on the table. She gave him a glare of warning and moved the bag away from him when she saw him eyeing them.

“What? Those things are addictive,” he defended with an affable grin.

“They are also my last bag. You ate an entire bag of them last night,” she muttered, placing her laptop on the table.

They both looked out the window when they felt the train beginning to move. The rocking of the train and the noise as it sped up sent a wave of comfort through her. It reminded her of the vibrations and noise of the subway back home.

She startled when she felt Jameel's hand cover hers. It wasn't until he curled his fingers around her moving digits that she realized she was tapping them on the table. She bowed her head and tried to ignore both her feeling of despair that she would always be different and the warmth that spread through her at his touch.

“I need my hand to type,” she said, gently tugging her hand free.

“Sorry. I enjoy touching you—touching your hand. I mean, I just wanted to make sure you were alright. Trains can be a bit nerve-wracking,” he finished awkwardly.

She tilted her head and studied his face. His cheeks were tinged with a tiny bit of red. He also had a look that was a cross between panic and nervousness. It slowly dawned on her that he was as socially awkward as she was.

Well, not quite as much, but close.

That thought sent a surprising jolt of satisfaction through her. It was just one more thing they had in common. She booted up her computer, turning it slightly so that he could easily see the screen. He settled in close to her, which made it a little hard to concentrate on what she was doing.

“I’m in. I’ll run a facial scan for Allison. I don’t know what any of the other guys look like,” she said.

“I guess we’ll just have to look for anyone that looks suspicious.”

She nodded. “I’m running a facial on everyone who entered the hotel. I’ve narrowed the filter to focus on anyone associated with any of Bronislav or Coldhouse’s organizations or mercenaries.”

“That’s an awful lot of people,” he muttered, watching as unfamiliar faces flashed across the screen.

“Yeah, without my computer at home this is going to take forever. I’m only focusing on the hour before and after we arrived,” she replied.

“I’ll get the guys to check the train,” he said.

She nodded while he rose to his feet and walked back to where the other men were seated. She couldn’t help but peer under her lashes and watch him. He moved with a grace that reminded her of Midnight. He was light on his feet.

She quickly diverted her attention back to her screen so he wouldn’t see she had been watching him. To pass the time while the software ran its scan, she typed out a quick message to Midnight.

All is good. Met up with Jameel. We are exploring.

She kept the message short. If she rattled on, her sister would get suspicious. She didn't add that they were being chased, or that Bronislav had a really good hacker on her tail. The last thing she wanted was for her sister to give up her chance at happiness to come rescue her. Besides, Idella knew what was going on. If things got too harried, she knew Idella would be there.

"Anything yet?" Jameel asked, sliding back into the seat next to her.

"Nah, just some petty crooks, a few that should probably be still in jail, and normal folks going about their business," she replied.



Jameel studied Junebug under his lashes. He was far more interested in her than in the faces flashing across the screen. He rubbed his palms along his thighs and cleared his throat, but before he could speak, a female voice asked, "Would you care for something to drink?"

He blinked and looked up at the dining car attendant. He cleared his throat again, looked at the trolley laden with food and drinks, and nodded.

"Coffee and biscuits, please," he requested.

The woman complied and turned her attention to Junebug, her smile momentarily wavering before turning forced.

"Ma'am, would you care for something?" the attendant asked.

"Do you have hot chocolate? Do you have any sandwiches?"

The attendant rattled off a list of options. Jameel's stomach growled and he realized he hadn't eaten much before their unexpected visitors showed up earlier. Junebug's snort of laughter and the attendant's amused expression told him that they had heard his protesting stomach.

“I’ll take the cold option and some of the biscuits, please,” Junebug requested with an infectious grin.

“I’ll have the hot options... times two, please,” Jameel said.

He pulled out his wallet, withdrew several notes, and started to hand them to the attendant. The woman gave him an apologetic expression before she shook her head.

“I’m afraid we only accept credit cards,” she said.

“Oh,” he mumbled. “I—”

“I have one,” Junebug said, holding out a card.

The attendant took the card she had extended, scanned it, and returned the card. Junebug slid the card back into her wallet and put it back into her bag. They didn’t speak again until the attendant moved down the aisle.

“Isn’t it risky using a credit card?” he murmured.

She nodded. “Normally it would be... if it were under my name. This one isn’t.”

He chuckled. “Let me guess... Bronislav?”

“Yeah. Well, one of my names appears on the card, but the computer doesn’t know that. That’s all that matters. It isn’t that hard to go in and tweak a few settings,” she replied with a cheeky grin.

He laughed loudly, causing several people to glance at him. He quickly stifled his amusement. They were quiet again when the attendant returned with their meals. He graciously thanked the woman and waited for her to leave again.

The delicious aroma teased his nose and he sniffed appreciatively at the entrée of fresh cod and chilled vegetables. He had heard that the meals in the Business Premium Class were created by a Michelin Star chef. He didn’t care if it had been a fast-food joint. He was suddenly starving.

“Tell me about yourself?”

Her head jerked up and she stared at him. He placed his fork down against his plate and cupped her hand. Her eyes followed his movement, biting her lip when her face heated.

“What do you want to know? There isn’t much to tell,” she finally replied.

He released her hand, sensing that his touch was affecting her as much as it was playing havoc inside him. He picked up his fork again and took a bite. She reached for her hot chocolate, added two marshmallows from her bag, and stirred them into the steaming liquid.

“I’ve known you for six years, but I don’t know your favorite color. Every time I asked, you’d change it,” he said.

“That’s because they are all beautiful,” she defended. “Why pick just one when you can have all of them?”

“Okay, what is your favorite number?” he asked.

She scowled at him. “That’s like asking my favorite color.”

“Just pick a number, any number, without thinking about it,” he encouraged.

“Two million, four hundred eighty-two thousand, six-hundred and ninety-eight,” she stated.

“Two million... That’s your favorite number?” he asked with an incredulous expression.

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Why?”

She lifted her chin and stared into his eyes. The longer they stared at each other, the more he felt like he was being drawn deeper into the crystal blue depths. He didn’t even realize he was leaning closer until she lifted her fingers and touched his lips.

“That is the number of tiles it took to cover the walls of our home. My next favorite number is eleven million, two-hundred-ninety-nine thousand, one hundred and six. That is the number of tiles it took to create the mosaic on the floor using one-inch-by-one-inch tiles,” she said in a low voice.

“I bet it turned out beautiful,” he replied.

His lips tingled where they moved against her fingers. Her eyelashes lowered, hiding the expression in her eyes. He didn’t

like that. He wanted to know what she was thinking.

“I want to kiss you,” she murmured.

Jameel held his breath, his whole body tingling.

“—but not in front of everyone. I’m still new to this and I want to explore it more. The guys are coming back.”

She lowered her hand and returned her attention to her laptop. He sat back in his seat and released the breath he’d been holding. He wondered if it was possible to combust from words alone. The approach of the others was a good distraction, especially when one look at their faces filled him with a sense of foreboding.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

His gaze turned to the door when it pushed open and a woman stepped inside. His lips tightened with anger. All three men turned in unison. Jameel rose to his feet. Beside him, Junebug released a snort of disdain.

“Hello, Jameel. Do you mind if I join you?” Allison greeted.

Ten



Allison stared back at him with a challenging expression. It infuriated him that he had once considered her a friend. He shoved his hands into his front pockets to keep from reaching out and wrapping them around her lying, conniving, greedy little neck.

He gave a brief, sharp nod to the three men, indicating they should let Allison through their protective shield. He waited until she sat down across from them before he resumed his seat. Allison looked at the extra meal he had ordered before she slid it toward herself and picked up the extra silverware the attendant had left.

“I hope you don’t mind. Chasing you two has left me famished,” Allison commented, pulling the cover off and taking a bite of the seasoned cod with a low moan of pleasure. “Superb.”

“How did you track us?” he demanded.

Allison gave him an amused look before she glanced at Junebug. “The power of deduction. Bugs hacked pretty much every one of Bronislav’s accounts, but a couple of them were left untouched. It was either because she hadn’t found them... not likely... or because she wanted to use them for some other purpose. I added an alert for unusual activity. Imagine my surprise when I discovered Mr. Bronislav requested an Uber.”

“My bad,” Junebug muttered.

Allison took another bite of the cod. Jameel reached under the table and squeezed Junebug’s knee in support. She was typing

some code out. Something told him that Allison wouldn't be receiving any more alerts.

"What is this all about, Allison? Why are you doing this?" he demanded.

Allison paused, her fork motionless in midair. She slowly finished chewing her bite, savoring the tasty morsel. She lifted her hand to the attendant who appeared as if waiting for Allison's signal.

"I'd love a vanilla cappuccino," she requested.

"Yes, ma'am. Would either of you care for anything else?" the attendant inquired.

"No."

His curt reply caused the attendant to look startled before she quickly retreated. He impatiently drummed his fingers on the table as he waited for Allison to answer his question. Allison eyed him with a raised eyebrow and looked pointedly at his unfinished meal.

"Aren't you going to eat?"

"No. I want to know why you are doing this. I don't remember you being so... avaricious. What changed you?" he replied curtly.

"You never really knew me, Jameel. There is only one person who did... and he's dead. They say the real learning comes after you graduate. I happened to learn it earlier. The world may be run by rich men, but there is power in being underestimated. I learned that the hard way," she bitterly retorted.

He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"This is about your mom and sister, isn't it?" Junebug said.

Allison's fingers clenched around the fork in her hand. Jameel was surprised the metal didn't bend under the obvious force of her hold. It was a fleeting tell, however, as was the flash of bitterness in Allison's eyes. She relaxed and a glimmer of wry humor replaced the pain.

“What happened to your mom and sister?” he asked.

“Why don’t you ask Bugs? She seems to know everything,” Allison said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Jameel looked at Junebug. She shrugged. There was a hint of compassion in her eyes as she studied the other woman.

“It isn’t my story to tell,” Junebug replied.

This time it was Allison who shrugged. She waved her fork at him in a silent taunt to have patience and continued to eat several more bites of the meal. Finally she placed her fork down on the table. He returned her steady gaze.

“Not all of us are born with a golden spoon in our mouths. My mom and sister were in a car accident almost six years ago. My mom was paralyzed from the waist down while my sister was left in a vegetative state. I won’t bore you with the details, but let’s just say it cost money to care for them both. Money, I didn’t have at the time. Thanks to Bronislav, that changed.”

Jameel felt a cold shockwave run through him, but it didn’t slow down his thoughts for long. His voice was hard when he said, “I don’t buy it. You could have been making six-figures easily with any tech company in the world. You could have been earning that and more every year for the past six years in a steady, legal job.”

She scoffed. “Why waste my talents on writing some inane game or working for a government that would pay me half of what I’m worth to do the same thing I’m doing for Bronislav? What makes him so different from the American, British, or Jawahir governments? At least he is honest when he sends a team in to kill a bunch of people. He doesn’t make up some self-righteous bullshit.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you are doing what you are doing now. I thought we were friends,” Junebug said.

There was a quick flash of emotion in Allison’s eyes that was gone before it could be identified. “It’s not personal. You have a skill Bronislav needs. I was hired to get it.”

“Trying to kidnap someone sounds pretty personal to me,” Jameel snapped in a low voice.

Allison shrugged. “So does wiping out a billionaire’s accounts and shutting down his businesses.”

Jameel clenched his fist and slammed it against the table. The silverware rattled from the force and the sound drew the attention of the other passengers. He waved his hand when James, Yahya, and Hyder started to rise out of their seats.

“Bronislav kidnapped and tortured one of my brothers and almost killed another. His goons have tried more than once to kill Aimee. What happened to you, Allison? Why have you been targeting my family? Why get close to me again using a different name?”

Allison laughed, picked up the napkin next to her plate, and dabbed the corners of her lips. “As if you don’t remember.”

Jameel could feel the muscle in his jaw tighten. “I remember what *you* did to *me*!”

“I needed money. You didn’t! Don’t take it personal, Jameel. You’re a freakin’ prince of Jawahir! It didn’t have to be that big of a deal because god knows your future is bright no matter what you do or don’t do. But oh no, your pride is what matters most, isn’t it? I got your ‘go-to-hell’ response. It was memorable,” she retorted.

Her eyes glittered with malice for a second before she shrugged. “Karma’s a bitch, Jameel,” she said casually.

Jameel was just as sick now as he had been back then to see the darker side of the woman he had thought of as a friend and confidant. Once again, he realized that this was a world that his brothers were more at home in than he was. He was the naïve, trusting one and look where it had gotten him. He had endangered his entire family, his country, and... Junebug.

He looked at Junebug as the last thought swept through his mind. She looked young, vulnerable, and fragile next to the hardness and cynicism radiating from Allison.

“It was a long time ago, Allison,” he said. “You are more than capable of building a healthy and happy future for yourself. Instead you burned bridges that you never needed to, because you could have just *asked* me for any assistance that I could

give to you, and I would have. You've kept yourself chained to what happened six years ago, kept yourself miserable. Why? Why are here now? Why align with people like Bronislav?"

Allison smiled as if they were discussing the weather or some other inconsequential topic. Only her eyes hinted at her derision. "I've tried your so-called 'good' route. It's easy for you. More power and comfort than you know what to do with was just handed to you. For me, being 'good' would just be refusing to grab power, choosing to idolize helplessness and wait for someone to pat me on the head for my *outstanding moral fiber*. And don't pretend Bugs is any better."

She moved her attention to Junebug. "How many people have you destroyed in your little game of Queen-of-the-Hackers?" she asked nonchalantly.

Jameel reached for Junebug's hand. He didn't miss the way Allison's eyes followed his movement, nor did he miss the gleam of satisfaction in her eyes.

"I feel sorry for you," Junebug stated softly. "It must be hard living with so much hate and anger. It must be even more difficult knowing that your mother and sister would be horrified at what you've become. It would hurt your family deeply to know that you aren't satisfied with the kind of life you could make without trading in the lives of innocent people. It wasn't your fault that your mom and sister ended up the way they did—or that they died so young—but the things you are doing now *are* your fault. You chose them. You are not the victim anymore. And you could choose differently. It's not too late to save the people that you haven't yet hurt. It's not too late to protect people from the bad guys of the world. That's a lot of power, Allison. A good power."

Allison's lip curled into a sneer and she laughed. "You two really are made for each other. You probably still believe in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, too."

"You mean you don't?" Junebug asked.

Jameel snorted out a laugh at Junebug's wide-eyed retort. There was no sarcasm in her tone. She had such a perfect expression of puzzlement and incredulous disbelief on her face

that it seemed as if she were genuinely shocked by Allison's mocking dismissal of their childhood beliefs. The only way he knew she was deliberately pushing Allison's buttons was the slight squeeze of her fingers around his.

His lips twitched with amusement when he noticed the anger in Allison's eyes. To his surprise, Allison twisted in her chair and rose to her feet. She studied both of them in silence for several seconds before she flashed them a smile.

"Thanks for the meal," she said, turning away.

"That's it? No threats?" Jameel called, ignoring the fact that everyone in the coach could hear him.

Allison shook her head, the smile still on her lips. "I don't do threats, Jameel."

Hyder, Yahya, and James moved to block her path.

"Neither do I," Jameel replied. "I think it's time you took a vacation from attacking my family, Allison. You're going to be offline for a while."

Allison smirked at him and stepped closer so only he and Junebug could hear what she had to say.

"There's a bomb hidden on this train. If I'm not there to disarm it in person, your goody-goody conscience will not be treating you very well. I sympathize, but the facts are what they are. It's up to you."

Jameel growled and reluctantly signaled to his men. Allison nodded to the three men scowling at her as she exited the train car. It wasn't until the door to the coach slid closed behind her and he couldn't see her any longer that he realized how tightly he was holding Junebug's hand.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"No worries." She sighed. "Boy, she's *something*, isn't she? Do you really think she put a bomb on the train?"

"I don't know. She's crazy enough to do it. She had someone put one in my office, so it is possible. I don't think she would detonate one here... especially if she is on the train. If there is one thing I'm sure of, it's that she isn't suicidal. Still, I'll have

James notify the authorities to search the train when we arrive,” he replied under his breath.

“Good... that’s good. Do you really think she’s crazy? I mean she seems crazy... now... but before this she was... I thought that we had so much in common. Maybe this is all ‘cause her mom and sister died last year? That can affect people.”

He shook his head. “She was like this before her mom and sister died.”

“Oh,” she said thoughtfully, her voice tinged with despair. She bit her lip. “You know we’ve been playing games with her for the last few years. She was going under RC.”

“Yeah, I know... now,” he muttered.

“So... maybe she wants a little bit more—or a little bit less—than our downfall? This is the second time that she found out where we were and came to talk instead of coming out guns blazing. It would have been smarter to keep us in the dark while her goons surprised us, and we both know she *is* smart.”

“She couldn’t stop herself from gloating about how she fooled us,” he said angrily.

“What happened that made you less than enthusiastic to talk to her again?” she curiously inquired.

He shrugged and pushed his plate away. He waited while the attendant reappeared and silently collected their partially eaten meal. The tension radiating off of him must have been enough to warn the server that he wasn’t interested in chitchat. He thought of how to condense the unpleasant story of his last knowing encounter with Allison.

“We were in college together. It was our last semester and there was a huge project due. I had been working on a new app for a couple of months,” he began. He swallowed down the bitterness of betrayal that still stung him when he thought about what Allison had done.

“Which app?” she finally asked, bringing him back to the present.

“T.O.” he said.

Her eyes widened. “You created Titan One? That is like... the biggest social media news app in the world. It’s worth over a billion dollars!”

“Yeah. I designed the interface. I had just finished it and was doing the last round of testing on it when Allison came by my apartment. We had worked on numerous projects while at Uni and we enjoyed playing the same games. She had invited a couple others over and we were having an early celebration with pizza, beer, and games.”

He sighed and shook his head. She reached over and held his hand again. His eyes followed the movement of her thumb against his skin. The simple touch melted some of the tension he was feeling.

“While I was busy celebrating and getting drunk, she was copying and deleting my entire project. By the time I figured out what happened, she had claimed she had written the app and sold it for a pretty penny to Winfred Freeman,” he shared.

Disbelief and a simmering anger burned in her eyes. He understood the feelings only too well. There was still a sense of surrealism about the moment he had discovered his entire hard drive wiped along with his backup.

“Did you confront her? Surely you told Freeman. I’ve followed him ever since he released T.O. He seems like an okay guy. I need to dive deeper into his profile,” she muttered, turning toward her computer.

He reached out and gently pulled her hand away from the keyboard. Cupping her hand between his, he raised it to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. She blinked owlishly at him, as if already lost in her pursuit of Winfred.

“It’s okay. It happened years ago. Winfred *is* an okay guy. I’ve done the research on him. He gives a lot back to the world and he has made some really great changes to my original programming. He had no idea what Allison had done. Hell, I didn’t know what she had done at first,” he admitted with a rueful shake of his head.

“When... how did you find out she was involved?”

He ran his thumb over her knuckles. “Winfred was having issues with some of the changes he wanted to implement. Allison had disappeared and someone he knew recommended me. I knew T.O. was my project. When he reached out to see if I would be interested in working with him on some of the new adaptations, I jumped at the chance. It was the perfect opportunity to delve into the coding.”

“You were looking for a signature fingerprint,” she said, nodding.

“Yes. It took a while, but I found a backdoor that Allison had added. It allowed her to move through the system. She could collect all user data, including credit card and other payment information—”

She looked startled at that revelation. “Wait! Isn’t all of that encrypted?”

“Fraud security software wasn’t as good back then. Anyway, I discovered what she did and set a trap,” he said.

“Ooh, what did you do?” she asked excitedly.

He grinned. “Everything looked fine until it hit her bank account. Instead of depositing the amount, I wiped it out and donated all the funds to Doctors without Borders. It also encrypted all of the data, turning everything she had into mush.”

“You’re a guy after my heart,” she exclaimed, leaning in and kissing him.

It was a brief, soft kiss, and when she pulled back, he wrapped his hand in her hair to stop her from leaving him. She returned his stare, a hint of a smile curved her lips, and she leaned forward again, meeting him halfway.

She tasted of sweet chocolate and creamy marshmallows. He had never realized how addictive those two flavors could be until now. This was way better than eating them out of a bag.

I wonder if the rest of her tastes as good.

That thought no sooner flashed through his mind than he heard someone clearing their throat. He reluctantly ended the kiss.

His gaze remained locked on her face for a fraction of a second longer before he sat back in his seat and turned his attention to Yahya who was returning his scowl with an apologetic expression.

“Sorry to interrupt, but we’ll be in Paris soon and it would be nice to come up with a plan,” Yahya muttered.

Jameel didn’t miss the amused expressions on the other two men’s faces as they watched his exchange with Yahya. James held up three torn paper straws with a gleeful look. Jameel’s lips twitched at the implication that Yahya had drawn the short straw. Junebug giggled.

“Right. Allison will have told Bronislav about our numbers and capabilities. They will prepare for our arrival at the station accordingly. Getting off without them seeing will be a challenge, but thanks to Allison’s desire to save her own neck, she has given us the perfect cover,” Jameel said.

“What’s that?” Yahya asked.

Jameel shot Yahya a grim smile. “Allison said she put a bomb on the train.”

Yahya’s low, harsh curse drew the other two men’s attention. They rose and joined him. Yahya quickly explained the situation.

“I suggest we notify the authorities and use the crowd to our advantage,” James proposed.

“Yep. It will be difficult for them to do anything in a crowded station without drawing attention,” Yahya added.

“They might not care. These guys have been involved in a lot of brazen scenes,” Hyder mused.

“I wish I were Midnight. If she were here, she would just open the door, jump out before we reached the station, and then kick all the bad guys’ butts, or disappear into the shadows where no one would ever see her,” Bugs commented with a sigh, then suddenly straightened beside him. She was tapping her fingers on the table as if she were doing some major calculation. All eyes turned to her.

“What if we did draw attention to ourselves?” she mused.

“What do you mean?” Jameel asked with a frown.

She bit her lip and nodded. “It might work. It would definitely get us through the difficult part. We’ll need some help though.”

“What will we need help with?” he pressed.

Her lips twitched with amusement. “How much cash do you have on you?”

Eleven



Through the window of the door, Allison could see the edge of the platform as the train pulled into the Paris station. She chuckled to herself when she remembered the expression in Jameel's eyes when she told him she had placed a bomb on the train. It served him right for thinking he could keep her there against her will.

The bomb threat had been a last-minute idea inspired by the recent incident in Jawahir. She hadn't known about Bronislav's attempt to kill Jameel until he sent her the photo. It amazed her that Bronislav had made it as far as he had in the world because he continued to make rash and stupid decisions.

She had used that stupidity to her advantage, though, forwarding the image to Bugs in an attempt to connect. It had worked. The shocking thing was that it wasn't the first time she had seen the woman. While they had never met in person, Allison had known Bugs... in a different life.

Irritation flared through her when her cellphone buzzed. She pulled it out, glanced at the screen, and pursed her lips. Connecting the call, she lifted the phone to her ear.

"Do you have a visual on them?" Mark Hammer demanded.

Allison's lip curled. She and Mark, Bronislav's Paris contact, didn't get along. The man was an arrogant ass on a good day. Most days he was an insufferable prick.

"No, they are on the move," she replied. They had been gone from the Premiere coach when she peeked back into it.

Mark growled in annoyance. “You had one fucking job and you blew it.”

“I didn’t blow it. I can track them. They are in the front coach,” she snapped.

“You better be right,” he said.

Allison could see the distaste on her face reflected in the glass. She fought to calm her expression into a mask of indifference. She hated, absolutely *hated*, working with these scumbags.

Not much longer, she silently vowed.

“Just have your team ready for an extraction,” she ordered.

She ended the call and studied the small dot on the screen. She had slipped a small GPS tracking device into the British dude’s jacket pocket when she brushed by him. She looked up when the train began to slow.

“Please check that you have all belongings before exiting,” a recorded voice announced in a variety of languages.

The train slid to a smooth stop and the automated doors slid open. Allison stepped off the train and immediately turned to the left. She wove her way through the crowds exiting and entering the train. It wasn’t hard to pick out Mike and his team from the mass of individuals.

“So much for blending in and not causing a scene,” she muttered in irritation.

The sound of several loud whistles being blown drew her attention. Almost a dozen police officers were converging on the front coach. Allison peered through the crowd and glimpsed who they were escorting: a young couple, his dark hair a strong contrast to her bright blonde locks, and their three companions. One of Jameel’s bodyguards caught her eye and shot her a two-fingered salute.

“For god’s sake,” Allison complained.



Junebug giggled. The brief glimpse she had caught of Allison's face was now one of her favorite memories. Jameel held her hand as they made their way through what seemed like hundreds of people all animatedly talking and moving at once, their snippets of conversation creating a confusing jumble. Everyone seemed to be taller than she was, and she wondered if she and Jameel would *ever* get off this platform. For just a moment, she caught a man's voice as he said, "...to bring the woman in alive."

Junebug turned her head and caught a glimpse of two men in black before they were lost in the crowd. She startled when Jameel wrapped his hand around her upper arm and guided her toward the exit. She nervously adjusted the dark blue hat that covered most of her hair and rubbed at the fabric on her new navy-blue button-up blazer with yellow edging.

"I can't believe this worked," Jameel muttered as they exited the station onto the street outside.

"Yeah, me too! We were totally two needles in a haystack! Like two needles in a really dark haystack while another haystack was lit up with a sign that said, 'Look here for your needles!'" she cheerfully replied. "Hey, why would there be so many needles in so many haystacks that people say—"

"Taxi!" Jameel called and lifted his hand.

A black sedan with the flashing green lights announcing it was available pulled forward and stopped in front of them. Jameel opened the back door and Bugs slid in, scooting across the seat to give him room. He slid in beside her and closed the door.

Junebug dipped her head as she searched for the seatbelt. Jameel was relaxing back against the seat when she reminded him that he should wear one too. He glanced at her with a smile full of amusement, and she quickly understood. Their roles had been reversed in the London chase. It *was* kinda funny.

Over Jameel's shoulder, Junebug caught sight of Allison as she exited the train station. Their gazes locked for a split second before the taxi pulled away. She twisted in her seat and watched as Allison stepped up to the curb and lifted her arm.

“We’ve been made,” she murmured, keeping her eyes locked on Allison as long as she could before they merged with traffic and the driver sped up.

Jameel cursed. Bugs sat back in her seat, wondering what they should do next. Jameel leaned forward and spoke in a low, urgent voice to the driver. The man glanced at them in the rearview mirror with a startled expression before he nodded and took a series of hair-raising turns in the heavy traffic, cutting through a narrow alley before emerging on another busy street.

The car was stopped at a light when Jameel pulled out several large notes from his wallet and handed them to the man. Junebug was surprised when Jameel turned to her and clicked open her seatbelt.

“You won’t be needing it after all,” he said.

He suddenly opened the door, grabbed her hand, and exited the vehicle, pulling her behind him. She grabbed the hat that was slipping off her head and squeezed between two parked cars. Her mouth dropped open when Jameel strode directly across the sidewalk, opened the door of a boutique, and pulled her inside. She looked behind her as the taxi pulled away, the light on the top still red.

“What are we doing?” she asked.

“Allison will know we were wearing Eurostar uniforms. We need to change into something a little less noticeable,” he said.

“May I help you?” an attendant inquired.

“Yes, my companion and I find ourselves in desperate need of clothing,” Jameel stated with a sexy smile and the air that came with being born a royal.

“Yes, of course...,” the attendant replied, glancing at their clothing dubiously, “but I am not certain we have something to suit your style, monsieur, and of course the price range may shock you. We have an elite clientele, I’m afraid.”

“We were at a costume party,” Junebug improvised, “...in London, but now we are in Paris and our clothes got left behind.”

“A costume party?” the attendant repeated with a skeptical expression.

Jameel smiled. “Madame—?”

“Madame Monet,” the attendant replied.

“Madame Monet, I have been remiss in introducing myself. I am Prince Jameel Saif-Ad-Din of Jawahir. You may remember a purchase that I completed featuring your breathtaking works of art last year. There was a beautiful printed silk scarf with tiny posies on it that my mother adored.” Jameel formally lifted the middle-aged brunette’s hand to his lips and kissed the back of it.

“Oh, yes... yes. I... remember the piece,” Madame Monet stuttered in a slightly breathless voice.

The woman’s eyes were wide when she turned to Junebug. Bugs shrugged and nodded.

Monet glanced at Jameel with a silent query, her expression slightly wary and bemused.

“I’m just Junebug,” Junebug clarified with a grin.

Jameel released Madame Monet’s hand, opened his wallet, and showed her a black credit card. He gave the suddenly very interested sales attendant another one of his M&Ms-wouldn’t-melt-in-his-mouth smiles and then tucked the card back into his wallet.

“Clothing for myself and my friend, please,” he requested.

“This way,” Madame Monet said in a pleasant tone.

Junebug followed Jameel and the clerk through a curtained doorway into another room. Madame Monet motioned to a young girl sorting clothing to cover the front while she assisted them.

“Are you looking for formal or casual wear, your highness?” Madame Monet inquired.

“Casual but we would also like at least one formal outfit,” Jameel stated.

Junebug lifted an eyebrow at Jameel's commanding tone. This was a side to him that she hadn't seen before. Of course, it wasn't like there had ever been a need to see him in his princely mode.

She walked over to the racks of clothing while Madame Monet focused on Jameel. She wiggled her nose. Most of the outfits were like what Idella wore. They were too flashy for her.

"Was Madame Genevieve happy with the... items she received?" Madame Monet inquired.

Her lips twitched at Jameel's low, terse response. She knew about Genevieve Dupont... and Krystal Wise, Flora del la Cruz, Harriet Marker, and the long list of Jameel's companions. Between her online sleuthing and the tabloid magazines Midnight used to bring home to her, she knew that Jameel hadn't been celibate.

He definitely wasn't afraid to live life... a love life, anyway.

The thought made her pause before she shrugged it off. She had lived, just differently. Now, she was expanding outside her comfort zone. She was proud of the fact that she hadn't had a single panic attack... yet.

She pushed aside several dresses. They were beautiful... but not her style. She was ready to move on when soft feathers caressed her skin. Pushing aside several dresses, she realized there was a second rack pushed to the side.

"Now this is more like it," she muttered with a grin.

She found a pair of lavender pants with tiny diamond sequins creating a pattern that ran down one leg all the way to the flared cuff. Giddy at finding such a prize, she pulled the first rack out of the way so she could get a better view. She pulled out the pants and held them up to her. They would be too long. Disappointment coursed through her. Even with a pair of high-heel boots, she would still be walking on the cuffs.

She placed the pants back on the rack, a little deflated at her loss. There was a bright pink, fuzzy waistcoat. She pulled it off the hanger and slid it on. It was a perfect fit! Bolstered by her find, she continued searching. She found a white Victorian

corset style blouse that would go perfect with the lavender pants that didn't fit. It had a scooped neck with a tiny row of pearl buttons down the front, a silk ribbon tie in the back, and delicate lace hanging in layers from the hem.

"I see that you have found something that you like?" Madame Monet said, startling her.

"Yes."

"To go with it, perhaps you would like the lavender pants with nearly fifteen hundred Swarovski crystals handsewn to form intricate patterns," Madame Monet said, pulling the lavender pants out and holding them up.

"They're too long," she mumbled, picking up a lime green blouse embroidered with flowers of every shape and color. She held it up in front of her and studied her reflection in the mirror. "I like this one."

"Ah, yes, bright colors do go well with your coloring. If you would like to try on the lavender trousers, I can have them tailored to fit you within a few hours," Madame Monet offered.

"For real?" she asked, almost afraid to hope.

"Yes," Madame Monet promised, her stern expression softening as her eyes crinkled with humor. "There is very little here that my husband cannot do his magic on."

Junebug held a stunning sequined purple gown with a long streak of rainbow colors against her chest. The purple feathers lining the sleeveless dress tickled her nose.

"Oh, yes, please. Then, he can make this fit and this... and this," Junebug said, piling all the pieces she had fallen in love with into the other woman's arms. "Can you please let me know how much it is going to be?"

"Oh... I thought... Prince Jameel...." Madame Monet said, looking with confusion at the dressing room where Jameel had disappeared.

Junebug lifted her chin. "I pay for my own clothes. I don't even let my sister do that. I've got some money stashed away,"

she replied in a firm tone.

“If he tries to pay for them, I don’t want them,” she added for good measure.

She wasn’t going to start off this relationship with one of them at a disadvantage. If there was one thing her mom had always stood firm with Harlem on, it was not accepting gifts. Rainbow had been as fiercely independent as she had been unorthodox.

“But... what if you’re married? Can you accept gifts then?” she remembered asking.

Her mom had laughed and said that in that case, the rules changed. She didn’t really understand what that meant, but it wasn’t like she had a lot of experience with people who were married.

“I’ll make sure that I keep them separate,” Madame Monet promised.

“Thank you. I’ll try these on, though I have no idea how I’m going to carry them with everything going on,” Junebug muttered.

“I can have them delivered,” Madame Monet said with a smile.

“Oh, okay. I’m not sure what the address is,” Junebug replied.

“I’ll ask his lordship,” Madame Monet said.

Junebug nodded, gathered the pile of clothing she had picked out, and stepped behind the curtain. Twenty minutes later, she returned, holding the items she wanted. Madame Monet had joined her twice to mark where alterations needed to be done. It was only the purple evening gown and lavender pants that required alterations. Madame Monet would send the outfits to Jawahir. The others fit her perfectly.

Junebug traced her fingers over her laptop that was lying on top of her pile of clothing. The laptop and her personal documents were the only thing they had taken from her backpack. Yahya and the other two men had taken everything else as part of the decoy.

She absently listened to Madame Monet and Jameel discuss a way to carry their new belongings. Madame Monet murmured that she would retrieve a suitable bag for them.

“If you wish, you may remain here, or there is a small kitchenette if you prefer,” Madame Monet was saying.

“We’ll stay here, thank you,” Jameel responded.

“I’ll return shortly. I will instruct Juliet not to disturb you,” Madame Monet promised with a bow of her head.

Junebug watched Madame Monet as she disappeared through the curtained doorway. Jameel’s warm voice broke the silence and she blinked, drawn out of her wandering thoughts about the mad dash that led them here and her subsequent delightful purchases.

“You look beautiful.” Jameel’s voice was deeper than usual.

She looked up with a startled expression, then down at the floral capris and taffy pink cashmere sweater with a bodice that dipped into a V to allow a peek at her ample breasts. A fluffy magenta waistcoat buttoned over the sweater. The two shades of pink looked marvelous together and pulled out the variety of pinks in her pants. Madame Monet had even found a pair of white sneakers with tiny pink rhinestones that fit her. She had picked the outfit with careful thought to their current situation. She needed to be nimble, yet fashionable enough to not look like she was a spy. A wry smile curved her lips when she saw the appreciative gleam in his eyes.

“Thank you. I was looking for something comfortable but also something that would hold up while we were on the run. This has some spandex in it so I can kick some ass if I need to,” she replied with a grin.

“Mm, I guess I should have thought about that when picking out my outfit,” he said with a smothered laugh.

“Pink is a wonderful color. Did you know that it is very difficult for people to be angry with someone wearing pink?” she mused, looking down at her clothing and rocking back and forth on her heels.

His grin was disbelieving and affectionate. “No. I’ve never heard that before.”

“You should try it sometime,” she suggested.

He closed the distance between them. Junebug stood with her hands folded in front of her. A playful smile curved her lips.

“Your hair is wonky,” she said.

“Maybe people will think that *you* messed it up,” he replied, his own lips twitching.

“You have your shirt buttoned wrong.”

“Maybe I did that so you would fix it,” he murmured.

“You have a five o’clock shadow,” she whispered, her eyes on his lips.

“I’ll be gentle with your skin,” he promised.

“I’m not sure I want gentle,” she confessed, closing the last step between them.

They met halfway, their lips connecting in a kiss filled with hunger. Junebug parted her lips and tangled her tongue with his. Her hands ran up his arms and she buried her fingers in his hair, gently scraping his scalp and messing his hair up even worse than it was before.

His lips were firm. She could feel the slight scratch of his shadow. Their breaths came together until they were breathing as one. His arms tightened around her, pulling her closer until her breasts pressed against his broad chest. She wondered what that would feel like without the barrier of their clothing.

The thought sent a shaft of need straight to her womanhood and she squeezed her legs around his thighs. There was a hardness pressed against her that wasn’t helping. She hadn’t realized that he had cupped her buttocks and lifted her until her womanhood rested against his engorged cock.

He moaned and pulled away far enough to run frantic kisses from her neck to her ear. His hips were rocking back and forth in a primitive dance as old as time. The friction was hitting a

spot that made the heat building inside her fan out until it ignited every nerve-ending.

“This feels amazing,” she moaned.

Her confession had an effect on him. He muttered an inaudible curse and stepped forward, pressing her against the wall. Beads of sweat glistened on his brow and his expression grew tense as they panted together.

He captured her lips again, this time in a kiss that he was the master of. He demanded her submission even as he continued to pleasure the sensitive spot between her legs. She moaned and trembled. With her back braced against the smooth wall, he slid one hand beneath her sweater, gliding up her side to her breast.

Her bra was extremely thin and lacey. They both moaned when he easily found her nipple. He released her lips long enough to glare at her.

“Make it *more* difficult for me to control myself why don’t you,” he growled.

She fought a grin. He liked her bra and what lay beneath it. She liked his warm hand.

“I... just... need... a... little...,” she whispered.

He surged against her and pinched both nipples hard.

“Oh, yes!” she exclaimed.

A mind-shattering bliss washed through her as she had her first orgasm without having to create it herself. She breathed out a long, satisfied moan of pleasure and melted in Jameel’s arms, boneless with contentment. The aftershocks of her release left her feeling spent and satisfied.

“That was better than a *cargo ship* filled with chocolate-filled marshmallows,” she sighed, snuggling against him.

Twelve



Jameel sighed as he closed the door behind them. They left Madame Monet's shop with their new clothes tucked in the black backpack the kind shopkeeper had retrieved, and walked along the Parisian streets as if they were tourists out for a stroll.

Several hours later, they stopped by one of the numerous bakeries to pick up something to eat. He made a few inquiries and discovered there was a hostel where they could stay the night that was within walking distance from the bakery.

Fortunately, the hostel accepted cash and required little in the way of identification. He swallowed as he stared at the single, queen-size bed. Memories of Junebug melting in his arms earlier had his body hardening in response.

"Do you think the guys are alright?" she asked.

"What? Oh... yeah. I'm sure they are fine," he replied absently.

"Are you thinking about when I had an orgasm in the dressing room?" she asked, kicking off her shoes and flopping backwards on the bed. "You know, this bed is enormous compared to mine back home. I have a twin bed. I've never slept in a big bed before... even when we lived with Harlem."

"Yes, I was thinking of you— Wait, who is Harlem?" he choked out.

She rolled over onto her stomach, sending more delicious ideas through his head. Visions of her naked, him holding her

hips as he— He closed his eyes and shook his head to stop his erotic thoughts. It didn't help.

“You know, we could just get naked and have some wickedly-wild fun,” she reflected. “I really enjoyed you touching my breasts. It's kind of funny that that's one of my turn-on spots because I've heard that's one of the usual ones but I always thought it was a thing that guys like and girls pretend to like because I never saw anything to like about it when I'm on my own, but it felt way different when you did it than when I do it. That's really fascinating, actually.”

His eyes popped open. He was pretty sure his mouth was hanging open as well. A guttural sound slipped from his throat as he tried to answer.

He opened and closed his mouth, trying to get his brain, his vocal chords, and his body all on the same page. Junebug's mischievous smile was not helping. A new vision, this time of a mouse teasing a lion, flashed through his mind.

This little mouse isn't in the least bit timid when it comes to getting what she wants!

Junebug sat up and slid off the bed. She removed her fluffy pink waistcoat and hung it on the back of the lone chair in the cramped room. His heart beat louder in his ears when she gripped the bottom of her taffy-pink cashmere sweater, paused for a split second as if assessing whether he would try to stop her, before she pulled it up and over her head.

I've died and gone to heaven.

There was no other way to describe the emotions and pure, unadulterated need raging in his body. And then it became more intense when she took off her trousers.

He stood ramrod straight as she walked over to him clad only in her pink lacy bra and matching panties. He drank in the sight of her. Junebug's every DNA molecule came together in the perfect combination. She was a master painter's dream come to life, and he couldn't help thinking of every one of her features in terms of what he could do to them—or what she could do to him.

He could wrap her thick, glorious strawberry blonde hair around his hands and bare her slender neck to his mouth. She could trail her cute button nose down his stomach. Her full breasts were lovingly caressed by the slightly sheer bra, her nipples were rosy, begging to be suckled. Her slender hourglass shape with full hips was perfect for him to wrap his hands around. Her legs were beyond sexy as she came closer to him, and he couldn't help imagining them wrapped around his waist.

Her petite size triggered his need to protect, and her fragile air of innocence made him want to lock her up somewhere safe, like a glass house where she could see out but no one could see in. This world was too dangerous for her. It didn't deserve her. But he knew how tough she was. If any man tried to lock Junebug up, she would simply smile at him, break the glass, and use the pieces to inflict a million cuts on his bleeding heart as she danced along her merry way.

“You are... you are—”

She stopped in front of him, lifted her arms, and placed them on his shoulders. “Horny. Why, yes, I am. What are you going to do about it?”

“How about I show you?” he responded.

She slid one hand down from his shoulder, across his chest, and lower. His hips jerked forward when she cupped his engorged cock through his trousers. He pressed into her hand with a low moan of desire.

“I'd like that,” she murmured, rising up on her toes to kiss him.

Jameel wound his arms around her, cupping her buttocks, and lifted her. She wrapped her legs around him, and the heat of her was heaven. Their lips were locked against each other, growing more heated and desperate with need as he carried her back to the bed. Lowering her, he barely had a moment to pull his hands from her before she frantically unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it off. He fumbled when unfastening his pants. Frustrated, she leaned up into him and pushed his hand away

so she could take care of the fastening. She pushed his pants and boxers down while he unhooked her bra.

“Sweet Goddess of the Sands, I could lose myself in your breasts,” he groaned, pushing her back and burying his face between the mounds while cupping them.

“More,” she demanded.

She used one foot to push his trousers the rest of the way off and kick them off the bed. While he lost himself in her breasts, she lifted her hips and pushed her panties down. He settled between her legs once she had one leg free.

He worked his way down her body, pressing kisses along her silky skin. Her body vibrated with excitement the further he explored. He grinned and paused just above where she most wanted him. She tangled her hands in his hair and pushed him down, spreading her legs wider. A soft moan of pleasure filled the air. He wasn't sure if it came from himself or her.

“I've dreamed about this ever since I read about it,” she moaned.

He had been dreaming about this ever since he met her. He took his time, enjoying each delectable nibble and lick because she was wildly responsive, fluctuating between opening wider and wrapping her legs around his head so he couldn't move.

When she came apart in his arms, he knew he wouldn't last more than a few minutes... at most. He rose up over her. She was still locked in her orgasm. Gritting his teeth, he sheathed his cock within her entrance and pressed forward a small amount, remembering that he should go slow for her first time—and then remembering that he should wear a condom! She moaned and opened her eyes.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured. “Hold that thought.”

She giggled as he found his wallet in their pile of clothes and rolled the condom on faster than he ever had in his life. Within seconds he was back to his previous position.

“Welcome back,” she greeted cheekily.

He laughed and pressed forward a little more than he had before. He paused and closed his eyes, every cell of his body responding to how good this felt.

“You are... very... tight.”

He had never felt anything like it.

She murmured her assent as she spread her legs a little wider and raised them to wrap around his waist. The move pushed him a little deeper. Sweat beaded on his brow when she groaned.

“*Very*, very... petite. Like death by strangling kind of petite, and *god* what a way to go,” he panted. He would go slow. He *could* go slow. He could do this.

“I’m technically still a virgin. I don’t think being with BOB counts,” she said, running her fingers through the hair on his chest.

“Who-who is Bob?”

Damn it. She feels so good!

“My battery-operated boyfriend. I ordered him online from this adult store.”

“Oh.”

He stared down at her sweet face. She looked well-loved while he felt like he was about to spontaneously combust. His mind was slowly piecing together what she had said. When it hit him, a shudder ran through his length.

“Sweet hell,” he groaned, pushing forward until he was completely sheathed.

He wanted to give her—and himself—time to adjust, but Junebug was having none of that. She was rocking her hips in a way that was causing a delicious friction that sent millions of tiny lightning bolts through every nerve-ending in his body.

The pressure built until he had no choice but to give in to it. Sliding his arms up under her, he held her tight, dug his toes into the bed, and began pumping his hips in a strong, primitive rhythm that blocked out all thought. He closed his eyes and

focused on the feelings cascading through his body and the sounds she was making. Heat and pressure built until not even the mightiest pressure cooker could have kept it contained.

He came deep inside her, relishing in the relief and pleasure as he emptied his seed. Shudder after shudder wracked his body as he came. His senses, heightened to a sensitivity he hadn't known was possible, narrowed and concentrated until his world was her, every squeeze of her vagina along his cock, every brush of her hard nipples against his chest. Her fingers were tangled in his hair and she was breathing as heavily as he was.

He collapsed on top of her, barely managing to keep most of his weight on his elbows and knees so as not to crush her. Sweat dripped down between them.

His arms tightened around her when she moved. He was still too aroused to pull out. He needed a few moments.

"Wait. I... I want to hold you... like this," he mumbled, his forehead resting on the pillow next to her head.

"I'd like that," she murmured, stroking the back of his head and shoulder.



Jameel held Junebug tightly in his arms. She snuggled against him under the soft comforter he had pulled over them to ward off the chill. He absently stroked the pale skin along her hip.

"Who is Harlem?" he murmured.

She sighed. "Harlem was the closest I ever came to having a father. My mother loved him. I think he loved my mom, too—and Midnight. We lived with him for a few years... until...."

He pressed his lips against her temple. "You said you thought he loved your mother and sister. Don't you think he loved you as well?"

She wiggled against him. He tightened his arms around her, afraid that she was trying to slip away, but she actually moved

closer. Heat rose inside him when she slid her bare leg up his.

“Harlem was a complicated man. His life was full of very serious children and lots of celebrated death. He liked calm, organized, quiet people. Five minutes in a room with me and he was ready to— well, I would say ready to kill me, but not *really*. He was an assassin, you know? Like the best one ever. Let’s just say if he made it a full five minutes in my company it was a miracle. He collected children he could train, but I was just sort of a package deal with my mom and my sister. He took the best of the best and turned them into kill— into another version of him. Midnight is herself, though. She’s way snarkier than he could ever hope to be. She had her family to keep her intact. Mom and I were not part of that world. Mom didn’t even know at first that he was training Midnight. I thought she knew, ‘cause I was young enough that I still thought she knew everything— and then when I found out that she didn’t know, Midnight swore me to secrecy. I got obsessed with hacking to make sure that Midnight *wasn’t* one of those kids who never came back from a mission. I don’t know exactly how much Mom knew about Harlem, but she knew he was dangerous, and she knew what he would do if he found out I had a gift for programming. She swore Midnight to secrecy and kept me hidden, but... I think I’m the reason she finally left him,” she said, her voice holding a far-away quietness.

“How many kids did he train?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Their numbers fluctuated a lot.... I’m guessing you already know about Idella,” she said.

“All I knew was she’s a super badass. She saved my brothers.”

“Super badass. That is an excellent description of her. I’ve been helping her for years, you know,” she said, tilting her head to study his face.

“Yeah, I know. Tell me more about Harlem.”

She snuggled into him and sighed. “This isn’t the best after-sex conversation to have,” she complained.

He chuckled. “I could think of worse ones.”

She tilted her head back against his shoulder and scowled.
“Like?”

“I don’t know. Maybe telling knock-knock jokes?” he teased.

She rolled over until she was lying breasts-to-chest against him. “What is wrong with knock-knock jokes?” she demanded.

He wound his arms around her, pulling her over him until she was tucked between his spread legs. A devilish smile curved his lips. Satisfaction swept through him when her pupils dilated with desire.

“Not a damn thing as long as it gets you in this position,” he said, meeting her lips when she lowered her head to his.



Allison sat at a table for two outside the quaint café waiting for Mark Hammer. The mercenary had requested a meeting. While she would have preferred to skip any close encounters with the man, she knew snubbing him wouldn’t be in her best interests. She chose the café because of the crowds—not that it would stop Mark from killing her if that was what he intended to do.

She sipped on a rich espresso and moodily stared at the image on her phone: the smiling faces of her mom and sister before their accident. If anyone were to see this, they would have the misguided thought that her life had been normal.

Tourists milled around, taking photos and sipping coffee. Along the foot bridge leading over the Seine, a musician played a romantic melody, hoping to earn a few dollars.

She pressed the display button on her phone and turned it over when Mark pulled out the iron chair across from her. She gritted her teeth at the screech of metal against stone and steeled herself for whatever sarcastic comment that was bound to erupt from his feeble, tormented little brain.

“Bronislav isn’t happy,” Mark announced.

She lifted a shoulder and shrugged. That was an understatement. Even if Bronislav had the entire Jawahir family's heads on a platter, the man wouldn't be happy. He should have left well enough alone while he was still a billionaire. It was the man's own fault that he was in this quandary.

"Of course, Bronislav is never happy," Mark continued.

Their unexpected agreement caused her to stiffen and focus on the man's face, trying to decide if he was baiting her to say something he could use against her. He motioned for the server, ordered a coffee, and sat back in the chair.

"Okay, I'll bite. What's going on?" she finally asked, breaking the silence.

This time it was Mark who shrugged. He said nothing as the server returned with his order. She impatiently tapped her fingers on the table while he took a sip.

"You were right. The Jawahir prince and the woman used decoys. Two of the attendants from the train switched clothes with them. I'd love to slit the throat of the idiot who called in the fake bomb threat. It really screwed things up," he said.

Allison remained silent. She certainly wasn't about to admit she was the reason for the call. She curled her fingers into a fist and counted to ten before she forced her stiff fingers to relax. Picking up her coffee cup, she drained the remaining brew.

"I confirmed that you were right when you said you saw them leaving the station," Mark continued.

"Do you want a gold star?" she snapped. "—Oh, never mind. This is a waste of my time. Tell Bronislav that I'll handle this on my own."

Pissing off someone who made their living killing other people was never a smart thing to do, but how much stupidity could she be expected to withstand? She angrily rose from her seat. Paris was an immense city, but Junebug and Jameel wouldn't stay in it. They would be working their way back to Jawahir. At some point, they would reconnect with their guards. If the

tracking device was still in the British guy's pocket, she could just wait until it led her back to them again.

In the meantime, what she needed to do was pull up the knowledge she had on both of them and map out the most likely scenario. It wasn't much different from writing a software program. They either did one or zero, yes or no, this way or that way.

A firm, warm hand wrapped around her upper arm. She frowned down at it before slowly raising her eyes to meet with Mark's. She wasn't really surprised by the intensity in the dark brown depths of his eyes. Killers were not usually known for their tranquility.

"Where are you going?"

She glared back at him, reminding herself that she was the only prayer Bronislav had and he knew it—even if his temper did lead him to make mistakes that involved a lot of death... mistakes which might very well lead to her own death. "To do my job. I'll contact you when you're needed."

Mark smiled... if she could call the slight sneer that curved his lips a smile. A shiver of unease ran down her spine when he didn't release her arm. In fact, it felt suspiciously like he was rubbing his thumb along the material of her sweater.

"I've got eyes on them. They are holed up at a hotel near the police station. When they move, we'll be ready," Mark said.

"Well, that *is* useful. You should have led with that."

"I thought we could... discuss our next plan of attack," he remarked, stepping closer until she could feel the heat radiating from his body.

Allison's eyes widened and then narrowed. The bloody bastard was looking for some action! That knowledge opened a floodgate of scenarios. If she could ignore his loathsome personality and history... he *was* actually attractive. He had way more muscles than anyone she had been with. His face was rugged, masculine, and he had a few intriguing scars. His hands were large and calloused. Her face heated at the thought of that rough texture against her most sensitive skin.

It never would have occurred to her if he hadn't initiated this, but she absolutely could use this to her advantage. With Mark wrapped around her finger, her odds of survival just went up—and she would get to indulge in a few of her darker fantasies. Allison felt an electric charge of raw, primitive, feminine power.

She closed the distance between them. Sliding her hand into his unzipped jacket to caress his abs, she decided that keeping her enemies close was a *brilliant* tactical move. She slid her hand lower and smiled when he swelled against her palm. Butterflies erupted in her stomach and heat seared through her at the thought of what would come next.

She tilted her head with a mischievous and coquettish expression and asked, “Do you have somewhere in mind?”

Thirteen



Warmth engulfed Jameel in his vivid dream. There was only one reason he would ever want to wake up from such an incredible dream and that was to experience it in real life. He stretched out a hand. His sleep-fogged mind was trying to piece together the disconnect between the vacant space next to him in real life and the woman he had been holding in his dream. That rift sent a shockwave through him, and he shot into a sitting position.

“Junebug.”

He would have winced at the edge of panic in his voice if his mind wasn't locked in the terror of her being gone. His heart hammered against his chest as his gaze flashed around the narrow confines of the room—and there she was, silhouetted by the glow of the computer screen. He fell back against the pillows.

She was so absorbed in what she was reading that she didn't look up. He took the time to study her. Her hair fell like a wavy curtain around her body. She was wearing his shirt and had her legs bent with the shirt pulled down over them until all that peeked out was her dainty toes.

He pulled the comforter off the bed, walked over to her, and spread it over her shoulders like a backwards cape. She blinked up at him as if confused before she gave him a brilliant smile. His body immediately responded to the curve of those delicious lips, thinking of what she had done with them... and where.

“You’re happy to see me,” she teased.

“What are you doing awake? It is—”

He groaned when the digital clock ticked over to 3:01. He pulled the other chair over to the small table, sat down, and pulled the cover over his lap. He grimaced when she snickered. Despite the chill in the room, his manhood was standing tall, proud, and ready. Not even the cover could hide his obvious arousal.

“What has you so fascinated—on the *screen*, not in my lap?” he asked in a gruff tone.

She grinned, halfway turning to him, but her eyes stayed on the screen and she absently nibbled on the end of her index finger. He tilted his head, reading the file she had pulled up. He frowned and sat forward.

“Is that an Interpol server?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I was searching for information on Allison’s goons along with a few other things. Allison’s friends are the same ol’, same ol’ standard mercs. Nothing special about them except where one of them used to work.”

“What is Operation Rebirth?” he asked, nodding toward the emblem she had up on the screen.

“I don’t know... yet. It’s strange that there is a connection between this guy and this hush-hush operation—particularly *this* hush-hush operation. It’s tied to a company called CRI. I hacked into their system. It took a while, but I found a file called Operation Rebirth. When I try to access it, all I get is a 404-error message. Either the file no longer exists or the link to it is corrupted. I’ll have to try again later. In the meantime, I decided to see if the FBI or CIA had anything on it and found this.” Junebug brought up a picture of the man they had seen at the train station. “Mark Hammer. Before he turned to mercenary work, he worked for CRI. He worked there for about a year before he left and was hired by the CIA. He didn’t last long, though. About six weeks after he was hired, a CRI agent named Avery Lennox contacted his department head and

notified them he had been let go for attempted corporate espionage. I guess he forgot to put that on his resume.”

“Did it say what he was trying to steal?”

“I’m not sure. It was weird because I had to go down a lot of rabbit holes to find anything about it,” she said.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, there was a folder, but it was empty. A search of the history showed that there had been a report, but someone had either moved or deleted it. I checked his supervisor’s files. Those had been cleaned as well, but I found a document that must have been added by HR months after he left. It was a psych-eval. After some digging, I discovered Hammer had been sent to an off-site psychiatrist. From the timestamp, they must be months behind on their patient records. I filtered my search and found a video deposition of when the CIA confronted him about the CRI charge. My guess is that whatever he said in that confrontation raised a red flag and it’s why he was sent for a psych evaluation. Whoever wanted to erase what was said didn’t realize it.”

“So, what was on the video?”

“I haven’t watched it yet. I didn’t want to wake you,” she confessed.

“Play it.”

She nodded, pulled up the video, and pressed play. The video began with Mark sitting at a table in a stark room. It was obvious he was being filmed through a two-way mirror. A woman dressed in a black suit walked into the room, pulled out the chair across from Mark, sat down, and slid a file folder in front of him. Mark glanced at the folder, folded his arms, and sat back.

“You worked for Cosmos Raines Industries.”

Mark remained silent. The woman pulled the file back across the table and opened it. She appeared to be reading the contents before she pulled out a photograph.

“What is Operation Rebirth?”

“Drop the charges against me and I’ll tell you.”

The woman studied Mark’s face. *“You are not in a position to make demands, Mr. Hammer. What is Operation Rebirth?”* the woman repeated.

Mark chuckled and looked up at the ceiling as if he were contemplating the question before he returned his gaze to the woman. There was a smirk on his lips when he leaned forward.

“Drop the charges and I’ll tell you.”

The woman replaced the picture into the folder, closed it, and stood up. She was almost to the door when Mark spoke again.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you anyway.”

The woman turned around to face Mark. *“Why do you say that?”*

Mark stared back at the woman before he looked at the two-way glass where the video camera was. His arrogant know-it-all persona briefly wavered, revealing his uncertainty.

“What do you know about aliens visiting this planet? And a man who can’t die?”

The woman lifted her hand and the video ended.

“Whoa. This is like something out of the Bourne Identity movies!” Jameel exclaimed.

Junebug laughed. “I absolutely love that series. It’s wild to think that there are actually real-life people who do things like that.”

“So what does this have to do with Interpol?”

“Mark Hammer is on the Interpol’s watch list, and someone there is very curious about it as well. They buried it pretty good. Whoever is doing research on this in Interpol doesn’t want anyone else to know.” Junebug gave him a cheeky smile. “I’m going to find out. I love a great mystery. As for why Hammer is working for Bronislav, it has to have something to do with this secret project in his past because of this thing that I haven’t told you and I’m totally getting to it, but I’ve gotta

admire the guy for how much money he demanded to be paid given that he has to be here for an ulterior motive that is probably going to screw over Bronislav. Like he asked for even more than Allison did, and she asked for a freakin' lot!"

Jameel flushed and nodded. He felt relieved that Junebug's attention was focused on the screen rather than on his face. Guilt coursed through him. He had shared some of his history with Allison, but not all of it.

She hummed. "These two are definitely Bronislav's heavy-hitters, and also the ones he can rely on the least. Isn't that funny...." She trailed off as her fingers moved faster on the keyboard.

"Yeah," he replied softly.

He wasn't sure he wanted to ask what she was keeping from him. In a small way, it made him feel better if *both* of them were hiding things.

"I'm not sure I can sleep anymore. It might be smart to plan our next move. While I'd love to stay in Paris, I think it would be best if we tried to get back to Jawahir," he suggested.

She nodded and lowered her legs to the floor. "I agree."

He paused when he noticed that she was worrying her bottom lip and tapping her fingers in a rhythm. He noticed that she did movements like that when she was bothered by something. He reached out and cupped her hand.

"What is it?"

Her eyes slid over his face before she looked away. He could sense the tension rising in her. She finally pulled her hand free, pushed the comforter off her lap, snapped her computer shut, and rose to her feet. He gripped the comforter and stood when she stepped away to stand in front of the windows.

"I've been helping my sister ever since I can remember fight bad guys... and there have been some terrible ones. I think Bronislav and the Coldhouse brothers have been the worst. I don't know if it is because they have a bunch of people working for them, or if it is because they don't care who they hurt."

“We’ve been dealing with Bronislav and Coldhouse for a couple of years now. Yeah, they are bad. I’ve seen worse, not often, but there are crueller people in the world,” he quietly replied as he slowly moved closer to her.

She nodded. “That’s why I need to help—to stop bad people like that. Everything was going well until I.. well, I received a message. They directed the message to me. It scared me because no one ever knew who I was before.”

“What kind of message?” he asked as he held her.

There was something in her voice, a slight change like she was confused. “It popped up from an anonymous source. I followed it back to SVDM. I’m sure you know that it’s one of the most powerful computer development companies in the world, most famous for their advancements in security and imaging in the medical field.”

Jameel nodded. “Junayd has been going on about them for the past decade. Junayd was working with Sergei Vasiliev years ago to test a lot of their new software. It has helped make Jawahir’s medical facilities one of the best in the world.”

“What do you know about Vasiliev and a man called Dimitri Mihailov?”

Jameel frowned before he shrugged. “I don’t know them personally. I didn’t work with the medical side extensively. I just monitored any Black Hats trying to harm our national security through our health system networks. I can tell you that Junayd has spoken highly of both men. If he trusts them, I would.”

She pulled away, and he followed her when she walked back to the table. She sank back down in her chair and opened her computer again.

“What exactly did the message say?”

She leaned forward and clicked on an icon on her desktop. A screenshot of the message she received popped up. He read it several times.

Harlem always spoke highly of you. He said if anyone could help us, you could. We need you to find information on Operation Rebirth and a woman named Dalla Bogadottir. Harlem said you could access the information. Respond to this message when you do. Your secret—and Midnight's—are safe.

"I'm positive the message came from either Vasiliev or Mihailov. I've tried tracing what I knew about Harlem back to them, but it's impossible. Harlem was everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It's hard to know which information is true, false, or just misleading," she said.

Jameel reached out and touched her chin. She turned troubled eyes to his. He slid his hand along her jaw.

"It doesn't seem like a threatening message, but I understand why you're rattled by it."

She hesitated, her lower chin wobbled and she sniffed. She slid her hand into his free one and squeezed it. He waited as she took a deep breath. It was unnerving to see her this upset. Not even when she'd been shot at and chased had she shown fear like this. She was literally shaking.

"Harlem.... Whoever sent this said that Harlem told them I could access the information."

He frowned. "You said that Harlem was dead, right? All this shows is that they knew him before he died."

She shook her head. "No. It means more than that." She looked at the message again. Jameel leaned closer when her lips moved. Her voice was almost inaudible.

"What?" he hissed, staring from her face to the computer.

She drew in another deep breath before she exhaled it and stared back at him with an unwavering expression, her face once again composed.

"They did not implement Operation Rebirth until after Harlem's death. The only way he could know about it... the

only way he could have recommended me to those men was if he was still alive,” she calmly stated.

Jameel’s hand dropped from her cheek and he grasped her hands in both of his. His mind swirled at the thought that this man... someone who had lived such a dangerous life... could have faked his own death. He reluctantly released Junebug’s hands when she pulled away.

She made a lap around the room, muttering under her breath to herself before she turned and retraced her steps to him. She knelt in front of him, her eyes wide with determination. He covered her hands when she placed them on his lap.

“If Harlem is alive and he knows what I’m capable of, then there is nothing I can do. He will show up when he shows up. Right now, we need to focus on getting away. I’ve been able to keep track of Bronislav. He is the easy one. It’s the ones like Allison and the mercs that I can’t always counter. When I was home, it was easy. No one knew where I was. I’m vulnerable here. I’m not like Midnight or Idella. If I’m right and Harlem is alive, he knows that it is probably only a matter of time before Bronislav captures me. Harlem won’t let that happen. He’ll—” She stopped and lowered her head.

“He’ll what, Junebug?” Jameel asked.

Her hands tightened on his and she inhaled a shaky breath before lifting her head. “He’ll kill me.”

Fourteen



Junebug stood in the shadows of a doorway while Jameel talked to the driver who had delivered a car to them. The Essais Peugeot 208 II GT Line Bleu Vertigo was another gift from Idella. If anyone knew how to get around without being followed, it would be Idella.

She shivered when a cold breeze wrapped around her. Paris, even at nearly five in the morning, was still a busy place. She hugged her taffy-colored faux-fur coat around her and scanned the area with a wary eye. She brought her backpack to her front as another barrier between herself and the world.

After her confession about what Harlem would do, Jameel had insisted on knowing everything about the man. She had shared everything she could remember about Harlem while they showered, dressed, packed, arranged for a car, and silently slipped out of the hostel.

Jameel had asked a hundred questions and she had answered every single one knowing that she was likely endangering Jameel with each tidbit of her knowledge. A man like Harlem didn't live as long as he had without keeping his secrets.

Just like Idella and Midnight.

The thought of her friend and sister being in danger caused her to shiver again—this time with fear. She wasn't afraid of them, but for them. Midnight had always warned her that what they did would make a lot of bad people very, very angry. Knowing that fact was one thing. Living with those bad people chasing you was another. Midnight had always told her this wasn't like

her games. There was no magic to resurrect her or token to give her extraordinary powers.

“We’re all set.”

She blinked at Jameel and nodded. He slid his hand along the small of her back and guided her to the car. Opening the passenger side, he gently pried her backpack out of her nervous embrace.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

She nodded. “Just cold.”

“The seats are heated,” he told her as she got in the car.

When she was settled in her seat, he shut the door, opened the back door and placed the backpack in the backseat. He closed the door and rounded the back of the vehicle. Junebug found the heated seat controls and turned it on for both of them.

“This feels much better,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Next stop... Jawahir.”

He chuckled. “Well, Jawahir will be the last stop. We have a ways to go before we get there. Especially traveling by car. We may have to rethink our mode of transportation once we get to Barcelona.”

“I always dreamed of going on a road trip. I never thought it would be with assassins on our tail. I guess that makes it even more exciting,” she said with a thoughtful expression.

Jameel shook his head and laughed. “I’ve never thought of being chased by assassins as fun, but if I’m doing it, I couldn’t think of anyone I’d rather be on the run with than you.”

“Aw... I think that is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me,” she replied with a grin.

He squeezed her hand before he released her so he could operate the car. She had never been in a car with a stick-shift before. He handled it without a single grinding of the gears.

“I guess you’ve driven one of these kinds of cars before,” she said, observing how he pressed the furthest left pedal to the floor before he changed gears and then slowly eased up on that pedal while he pressed on the furthest right pedal. There were a total of three pedals.

He chuckled and nodded. “I might have one or dozen cars with a stick in them,” he confessed.

“A dozen! You never mentioned liking cars before,” she said.

“I told my parents I wanted to be a race car driver when I was younger.”

He shifted again when they reached a higher speed. She tilted her head at the very subtle differences in sound before and after he shifted gears, her mind fitting the sounds together with all the numbers on his dash and the timing of his actions.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” she asked.

“Yes... which is why I am not a race car driver.”

He laughed again, shifted, and further increased their speed as they merged onto the highway. She stared out the window as they passed several slower vehicles. From Jameel’s surprised and intensely satisfied hum of appreciation, she guessed Idella must have modified this car to make it perform better than what he had expected.

“Is it hard? To learn how to drive?” she asked.

It seemed simple enough, but it also seemed like there were a billion bits of information coming in at high speed because there were so many things in the world.

Junebug bit her lip.

I manage the internet ok, and that’s a pretty similar barrage of information.

Jameel shot her a surprised look.

“Was there really no one to teach you?”

“No, not in real life anyway. Midnight doesn’t have a driver’s license. I’ve done it in games, but we lived where everything

we needed was just a few blocks away. Midnight usually picked stuff up when she went out,” she shared.

She didn't add that she seldom left the haven of their hidden home—at least not in person. A wave of panic unexpectedly hit her. She lifted a trembling hand and pressed it against her chest. It suddenly felt like all of the air was being sucked out of the car.

The trembling in her body increased and she began rocking back and forth. Her mind felt like it was splintering. She needed her bunny slippers. Her slippers comforted her.

“Junebug.”

Her lips parted and she began to pant. All the things that could go wrong grew inside her mind, turning into dark tentacles that greedily wound their malevolent arms around her. The interior of the car faded.

What if I'm not smart enough and Allison finds us and we don't get away and her men hurt Jameel? How can I protect him when I can't even protect myself? Midnight was right, I should never have left, what was I thinking? Harlem is still alive and he could be following us right now and he'll kill Jameel and me, he won't let Bronislav or anyone else get their hands on me, I'll be dead, I'll be dead and Midnight will be alone and Jameel will be alone and Jameel will be dead and it will be my fault and Idella and Midnight will come avenge me and they'll be dead and I'll never—

“Junebug.”

She could feel her head shaking but was powerless to stop the motion. Her rocking became more frantic. The only thing keeping her from hitting her head on the dash was her seat belt. She couldn't breathe.

“Junebug. It's okay, love. Everything will be alright, I promise.”

Jameel's voice slowly penetrated the fog that had engulfed her. She clung to his soothing voice. The low tenor was stopping her freefall and bringing little bits of air back into her lungs, just enough that she started thinking she wouldn't die after all.

Even though his words were muffled and distorted in her mind, she found a lifeline in Jameel's voice and clung to it with every ounce of her sanity.

"Ja-Jameel. I can't breathe. I can't breathe," she gasped.

Strong, warm hands cupped her cold cheeks. His warm breath caressed her lips. She shuddered, her bones vibrating with the intensity of it. Her unfocused eyes gradually locked with his. She wrapped her hands around his wrists, afraid that he would pull away.

"It's alright. We're safe. Have I ever told you that you have the most amazing eyes? I swear they are like the most precious blue diamond color I have ever seen," he murmured.

"Blue? Diamonds are blue?"

"Only rare ones. I think I first fell in love with you when you whipped my ass playing WH that first time," he said.

"You tried to track me. Wait, you love me?"

He laughed and nodded. "Yes. I have since you sent that rootkit, the one that took me a month to disable. I never would have been able to if you hadn't sent me clues."

"You deserved it. You broke my trust," she defended.

"I never wanted to do that. I wanted to know you. You fascinated and challenged me in ways I've never faced before."

"You had tons of girlfriends. You didn't need me," she scoffed in a low, uneven voice.

"I did. I do."

His quiet confession pulled her out of the haze. Her vision cleared and the panic eased back into the dark abyss in her mind. She blinked and leaned forward, kissing him. His hands tightened, holding her steady as he deepened the kiss.

Junebug parted her lips, desperate for the connection. She was terrified that the darkness would rise up again. Their tongues tangled, their breaths mixing. This kiss wasn't about passion

as much as it was about... love, understanding, and acceptance.

They jerked apart when a sharp rap on the driver's side window startled them. Pulling apart, she grimaced when she noticed the flashing lights. Jameel grinned at her, squeezed her hand, and sat back in his seat. Pressing the power button, he lowered his window.

"Bonjour, officier," Jameel greeted.



Allison looked up when Mark entered the room carrying a bag and two coffees. Her lips twitched. Mark looked like he had been ridden hard...

...and put up wet, she thought with wry amusement.

His disheveled hair, raccoon eyes, and two-day growth of facial hair made it look like he hadn't slept in a week. It was wildly sexy. Her own body was still tingling. She just hoped she didn't look as rough as he did!

"I miss American coffees," he grumbled.

"Why? This is delicious," she said, taking the cup he offered.

"This... is a sip," he scoffed.

She snorted. "Too much caffeine is bad for you... though I see you are compensating with a sugar high."

He had placed their breakfast on the round table, sat down across from her, and ripped open several paper containers of sugar, dumping them into his cup. She shuddered at the amount. It would be sweet sludge when he was done with it.

"Andre said the prince's men haven't made a move yet."

"Mm," she replied.

She spread an unhealthy amount of rich, creamy butter on her croissant and followed it up with a spoonful of strawberry jam. Before she could pick it up, Mark leaned forward, picked it off her plate, and took a huge bite out of it. He grinned at her

when she twirled her plastic knife to a menacing position and shot him a murderous glare.

“This... is for keeping me up past my bedtime,” he said around a mouthful of croissant.

“I’ve wiped out bank accounts for less than what you just did,” she growled.

He laughed at her and took another bite of the croissant. Allison rolled her eyes, ineffectively stomped on his shoe with her bare foot, and pulled another croissant out of the bag. She made sure she kept one hand on it while she doctored it.

“You don’t look like the type of person Bronislav usually hires,” he stated.

Allison took a bite of her croissant and mulled over how to answer that question. The best spies throughout history were the ones who didn’t look like they were spies. She had learned a long time ago to embrace her non-threatening appearance.

Hell, isn’t that what most serial killers do? Their friends and families are always the last to know who they really are.

Not that she was a serial killer.

“You do... look like the type,” she replied.

His eyes narrowed. She knew it wasn’t because he felt slighted by her observation. No, his expression was more curious. She smirked. A game of twenty questions sounded like fun.

“I’m the type of person he needed *before* he dug his own grave,” she stated in a cool tone.

Mark quirked an eyebrow and his curious expression became intensely interested. He leaned forward. She waited and watched as he tore a piece off a fruit pastry.

“Enlighten me as to what type of person that is?”

She chuckled and shook her head. “Only if you answer a question in return.”

He thought about her demand for a few seconds before he relaxed, nodded, and tore off another large piece of pastry. She smiled. She would tell him nothing that he could use against

her. While physically, he might be more dangerous, mentally she was superior.

“In case you didn’t get the memo, the world doesn’t require all wars to be physical. Technology is everywhere,” she pointed out.

“Yes, but can your doorbell kill you?” he asked.

Her lips twitched at his grouchy expression. “If programmed correctly,” she cheekily replied.

His expression changed, becoming thoughtful before he chuckled at her sense of humor. He ate more of the pastry. She finished her croissant and studied his face.

“What is Operation Rebirth?” she casually inquired.

His eyes widened with surprise before they flashed to her computer. She gave him an amused look, finished chewing, and swallowed before she dabbed the corners of her mouth.

“I told you. This is a world where tech rules. Former CIA to mercenary, that’s not much of a stretch. What surprised me was the highly classified clearance you had,” she said.

He scowled at her. “Why should that surprise you?”

She lifted an eyebrow and looked at him skeptically.

“I read your psych report,” she dryly replied.

“Ah. Well, that explains everything,” he sardonically retorted.

She was about to ask him again when an alert popped up on her computer. She sat forward, opened the screen, and scanned the report.

“What is it?” he demanded.

Her lips curved in a satisfied smile. “It would appear that our target caught the curiosity of the local police. I have their last location and the make, model, and license of the car they are driving,” she said.

“What are you doing?”

She impatiently waved a hand. Her mind raced as she typed in different commands, searching for traffic camera information

and routes in the vicinity of where Jameel and Bugs were stopped.

“I’m setting up a program to search for the make and model of the car so we can track where they are going. If we know their route, we can intercept them,” she said, scanning the code she had written.

“I’ll notify the team,” he said, rising from his seat.

She looked up and frowned. “They need to stay with Jameel’s men. We stand a better chance of capturing Jameel and Bugs if the men aren’t with them.”

“I’ll let them know.”

She nodded and sent the command. There were dozens of routes Jameel could take. If he passed through any of the points where traffic cameras were installed, she would get an alert. There might be a few false positives, so she would need to monitor each alert, but it was their best chance to capture the two.

The first alert pinged and she looked at the camera. Enlarging the image, she verified the license plate. They were going through a tunnel on the highway heading south.

They are trying to get to Jawahir.

There was no doubt in her mind as to their intended destination. She snapped her laptop shut and reached for her bag. Thrusting the laptop into her backpack, she put on her shoes and rose from her chair.

“I’ll give you directions when we reach the car,” she stated.

She paused in surprise when a firm hand gripped her upper arm. The protest on her lips died when Mark pressed a firm, hard kiss to her lips. She blinked up at him.

“I can see why Bronislav hired you.”

She stared after him as he collected their jackets and offered hers to her. She accepted it and slid it on before following him out of the hotel room.

Fifteen



Jameel slowed when the turnoff for the gas station appeared just like the sign said. He pulled into the second bay and turned off the ignition. His hand shot out without him thinking about it when Junebug reached for her door.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” she said.

“Can you get a couple bottles of water and some snacks?” he asked.

“Oh, sure.”

“Thanks.”

He silently cursed as he exited the car. The silence had grown between them ever since the incident earlier. Gone was the bubbly Junebug. She had become quiet, her fingers moving continuously, as if she were counting or tapping out a rhythm.

Panic had hit him when she reached for the door. He didn’t want her out of his sight. After what happened earlier, he was worried something might happen to her and he wouldn’t be there to help her.

With a sigh of frustration, he pulled the petrol nozzle free from the pump and inserted it into the car. His attention kept straying to the store where Junebug had disappeared. He couldn’t see her due to all the advertisements and products blocking the windows.

He returned the nozzle to the pump after it shut off, locked down the gas cap, and locked the doors to the car. Striding to the store, he pulled the door open at the same time he noticed

Junebug walking up to the cashier. She had a basket full of interesting items... including marshmallows.

“I’m going to make a pit stop. I’ll be right out. Here is the key. I locked the car.”

“I’ll wait for you,” she said.

“Good.”

He strode to the back of the store where the restrooms were located. He was washing his hands when the door behind him opened. His eyes locked on the man entering the bathroom. It was Mark Hammer. He was sure of it.

Grim recognition flared in the man’s eyes a split second before the man surged forward. Jameel gripped the side of the sink and kicked out. The blow caught the man in the upper thigh, barely missing his groin.

Jameel swung around when Mark came at him again. He couldn’t help doubting that his self-defense training would beat a professional killer, but he knew that many fights came down to luck, especially if one of them only needed enough time to run to their car. If the universe held any fairness, luck would be on his side. He had to hope.

He blocked a punch, dipped under the man’s outstretched arm, and came up behind him. He shoved Mark into the sink counter before reaching for the door.

Before he could pull the door open all the way, Mark slammed him against it, wrapped one hand tight around his throat, restricting his air, and wrenched one of his arms behind his back. Jameel elbowed Mark in the kidneys and tried to lock his foot around the other man’s ankle.

He pushed off against the wall, propelling them both back against the urinals. Mark grunted when the porcelain rim caught him in the lower back.

Jameel twisted in the moment of impact, breaking Mark’s hold on his arm but not his throat. He was starting to see spots, unable to take in enough air. He used the narrow space between the urinals to give him room to slam Mark’s head into the metal piping attached to the wall above the urinals. He

gripped the back of Mark's neck and slammed his head into the wall over and over until the man released the hold on his throat in an attempt to protect his face.

Jameel gasped in much needed air, coughing, and jerked backward at a lightning pace, knowing he had no time. He fell onto the floor just as Mark was woozily straightening, caught the man's ankle, and pushed himself away from the wall, taking Mark's foot with him. Mark tried to brace his fall against the edge of the urinal but missed. His head hit the tiled floor with a sickening thud.

Jameel stumbled back against the wall and stared at the unconscious man. He was a little shocked at what he had just done. He shook himself out of it. It wouldn't take long for the man to wake up. Jameel's gaze flashed to the door.

"Junebug!" he hissed.

He started forward and suddenly stopped when something occurred to him. Reaching down, he searched Mark's pockets. He pulled out the man's wallet, his cellphone, and a set of car keys. He pocketed all of them before rising.

He pulled open the bathroom door and peered out. There was no one in the hallway. His gaze caught on a 'Closed for Cleaning' sign and he placed it in front of the bathroom door. He ran his fingers through his disheveled hair and straightened his jacket as he walked down the short corridor and into the main portion of the store.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Junebug standing near the door holding the bag of items she had purchased. He walked over to her and cupped her elbow. She looked up at him with a worried expression.

"They found us," she said.

"I know. How many did you see?" he asked.

"Just Allison. I know there has to be more."

"Hammer is lying on the floor in the bathroom. I'd like to get out of here before he regains consciousness," he murmured.

“What if there are more of them?” she asked, moving forward when he opened the door.

“I’m guessing there aren’t. If there were, more than just Hammer would have approached me.”

They crossed to the car. Allison turned to them with confusion, glancing worriedly at the building behind him. He smirked when she returned her attention to them.

“Your favorite goon is going to need an ice pack when he wakes up,” he remarked, unlocking the car and opening the passenger door for Junebug.

Allison’s mouth tightened and her eyes narrowed until they were thin slits. Jameel pulled open the driver’s door. He forced himself to keep a cool, calm expression while trying to keep an eye on Allison.

“When did *you* become a badass?” she retorted.

Jameel gave her a sarcastic sneer. “I’ve always been one.”

“Hammer is coming and he looks pissed,” Junebug warned.

Jameel nodded, closed the door, and started the car. In seconds, they exited the petrol station and were back on the highway. They were going to need to find an alternate route. He could see Allison and Hammer arguing in the rearview mirror as they pulled away.

Junebug twisted in her seat to look out of the back window.

“Won’t they follow us?” she asked.

“Yeah, but it may take them a little longer without these,” he replied, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the items he had taken off of Hammer.

“Oh, you are good! If I can get a connection, I can block them from remote starting,” she said.

She leaned down and pulled her laptop onto her lap. Jameel divided his focus between the curvy road ahead of them and the rearview mirror. He bit back the urge to ask her how it was going when she started muttering under her breath. Her loud sighs and mumbled grumblings made him smile.

“What’s so funny?” she asked, not looking up from her computer screen.

“I make the same sounds when I’m working on stuff,” he admitted.

She flashed him a grin before returning her attention to the screen. Her low groan of frustration filled the air. He looked in the rearview mirror.

“What is it?” he asked.

“There’s a tunnel coming up. I’ll lose my signal when we go through it. This was not the best route to take. There aren’t a lot of places where we can hide,” she said.

“There is one place we can try. My parents have an old friend who lives about 50 kilometers from here,” he said.

She looked at him with a frown. “You’re just now suggesting that? Will it be safe? Do you trust them?”

He nodded. “Yes. Gilbert is as old as the hills but he still has his wits about him. If he is there, he will help us.”

They were approaching a long tunnel. His eyes flashed to the camera mounted at the entrance. That must have been how Allison located them. But... how did she know they were in this car?

“The policeman must have filed a report,” Junebug said.

“How did—?” He shook his head. “I should have thought about that sooner.”

“I should have thought about it,” she murmured, her voice low.

He heard the self-recrimination. “At least we know how she found us. That gives us more clues into how she thinks.”

Junebug nodded and leaned her head back. “I’ve set a six-hour delay for the camera server along the route. If she is monitoring them, they won’t show anything until then.”

“By then, we’ll be long gone.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

He shook his head. “Don’t tell me nothing. Talk to me, Junebug.”

She rocked back and forth in her seat. It was a gentle rocking. He suspected she did it more out of habit than out of anxiety. Still, he could tell something was bothering her.

“It was a rookie mistake. One that could have gotten us both killed. Harlem... Harlem never tolerated mistakes,” she said.

“Well, Harlem isn’t here.”

“That we know of. He could be and we would never know,” she murmured, staring out of the window.

“You make him sound like some mythical being with superhuman powers,” he half-teased.

“He was— is. Think of Idella... and multiply her by a thousand. I tried looking him up. I knew he worked for governments around the world, but there wasn’t a single thing on him. I knew that he was collecting and training kids for a super-secret agency. Again... nothing. It was like he was a ghost, Jameel.”

“Yet... I know you. You wouldn’t give up,” he said, glancing at her.

She bowed her head and tapped her fingers against each other. Her lips were moving as if she were having a silent argument with someone. A sixth sense told him he needed to be patient.

Finally, she spoke.

“I didn’t give up. Midnight doesn’t know about some of the things I’ve done. I... I... There was a room, at the house. No one was supposed to know about it but Harlem. He was really careful, but I... it was like he didn’t notice that I was there. It was sort of like tolerating my presence had become a habit of... just... not seeing me there.” Her lips curved up into a wry smile. “He and mom were arguing one night during dinner. I think that was the only time I ever heard them angry with each other. Harlem had suggested sending me away to a boarding school. It was a clever way of kicking me out *without* kicking

me out, but he said it was because I needed more socialization. Mom wasn't having any of it. Anyway, he made mom cry. Mom never cried. After mom left the room, Midnight picked up her dinner knife."

Jameel silently cursed when Junebug's voice faded. She was lost in the memory of what happened. He shifted as they rounded another turn. They were getting close to the exit that led to Gilbert's chateau.

"What happened?" he finally asked.

"Midnight held the knife to Harlem's throat and threatened to slit it if he ever made Mom cry again or tried to send me away. He disarmed her, of course. It happened so fast that neither Midnight nor I saw him move. After he took the knife away, he said 'Okay'. That was it. Just okay... and he finished his meal."

"What about the room?"

She blinked. "Oh, the room. It is in the basement. I followed him later that night. I had learned all the cool places to hide. I'm good at that. Hiding. That's another one of my superpowers," she mused with an impish grin. "Sometimes I forget that it's a superpower because Midnight does it better, but it was enough to fool Harlem that night."

He raised an eyebrow at her. It was impossible to think that she could be anywhere and not immediately seen.

"What was in the room?"

"A bunch of really old stuff. There were lots of old weapons from around the world. A lot of it was in cases. I don't know if he just liked to collect the stuff or if he stole it from museums, or what. There were a few pieces in the house, but nothing like what he had in that room. One thing was clear, though, he didn't want anyone to know about it."

"Eccentric, but not exactly supernatural. Harlem's basement sounds a lot like Gilbert's chateau," Jameel said. "Did you find anything else?"

"I... maybe," she quietly responded.

“What?”

She pursed her lips together. He wanted to reach over and cup her hand, but they were on a dangerously curvy road. She clenched and unclenched her fingers.

“There was a symbol... in Harlem’s hidden room. I remember it because it was pretty. It was a series of circles, almost like a forever mirror clock,” she said in a rush.

“What’s a forever mirror clock?”

She turned slightly in her seat. “It’s like when you have a series of mirrors and you place an image in it and the image seems to go on forever and ever. This symbol was like that. There was a series of clocks, but each one was different, as if the clocks were from different time periods. Around the clock were the words *Vita non finitur in morte, sed renascentia.*”

“Life does not end in death, but in rebirth?” he translated.

She frowned. “You know Latin?”

He released a dry chuckle. “I didn’t have much choice. You have to remember my twin was studying to be a doctor. He insisted I help him memorize all the things he needed to know. There is a *lot* of Latin used in the medical field.”

“Oh.”

“So, what do you think it means?” he asked.

“I haven’t thought of the symbol in years. Then, I saw it again just a few days ago,” she said.

“Where did you see it?”

“On the Operation Rebirth files,” she quietly replied.

Sixteen



Junebug peered through the front windshield. They had left the highway several miles back using an obscure road that Junebug would have missed if she had been driving.

“Will you teach me how to drive?” she asked.

There had to be a trick to how he sorted all the visual information and saw what he needed to see when he needed to see it. This was like supernatural levels of skill—that apparently most people had.

“What? Ah, yeah... sure. I can teach you. It might be easier on an automatic. Stick-shifts can be a little tricky,” he said.

“It looks like fun,” she said. “But seriously, how does anyone ever find this place?”

Jameel laughed. “Hopefully, Allison and Bronislav’s other goons won’t.”

They were traveling down a very narrow, paved road. The scenery was magnificent. Thick strands of trees bordering each side gave the picturesque drive an almost medieval ambiance. Junebug was glad she wasn’t the one driving. There wasn’t much room for two cars to pass each other.

The road opened into a wide rolling valley dotted by small clusters of trees. The road widened slightly with short walls made of rocks lining each side. They passed over a narrow wood and stone bridge.

Junebug’s lips parted with delight as they passed quaint stone cottages that were hundreds of years old. Bright flowers added

color to the weathered stone structures. They entered a quaint village that looked like it was straight out of a movie set. Jameel slowed to a crawl on the uneven pavement.

“Oh, look at that!”

Her eyes widened as they entered the main square. A round fountain with a bell-shaped top stood in the center. Jameel followed the turning circle, taking a right on the third street. A variety of shops lined the broad circle. There was a chocolate store with a window filled with chocolate creations too beautiful to eat.

“Welcome to Flavigny-sur-Ozerain,” he said with a grin.

“It’s beautiful. It looks like something out of a fairy tale.”

“Well, in a way it is. It is where they filmed the movie *Chocolat*,” he laughed. “The only reason I know anything about it is because of Gilbert.”

She twisted in her seat as they exited the village. A sigh of frustration and resentment slipped from her. There was so much she wanted to see and do. It was hard to do any of that when there were killers chasing them.

“I’ve never gone anywhere and now that I’m finally out, I’m still not able to,” she groaned.

“I promise you’ll get to see anything you want once Bronislav is taken care of,” he vowed.

She sighed and straightened in her seat. They traveled another kilometer before Jameel turned off the paved road and onto a dirt one. The road narrowed until they reached a set of heavy wrought-iron gates attached to a thick stone wall. Through the gates, Junebug could see a magnificent old chateau.

Jameel lowered his window and pressed the call button on the keypad. Junebug took the opportunity to study the chateau. Her first thought was that whoever lived there must either have a ton of help to keep it maintained or they spent their life cleaning. The place was almost as big as most hotels.

“Go away. I didn’t order anything.”

She muffled her giggle at the gruff greeting. Jameel rolled his eyes and shook his head. He pressed the button again.

“I told you to bloody hell go away!”

“Hi, Gilbert. It’s Jameel.”

“Jameel? Little Jameel who fixed my computer?”

“He’s not so little any more. Hi, Gilbert. I’m Junebug,” she called out with a grin.

“Junebug? Junebug? As in the beetle Junebug?” Gilbert responded.

“Yes.”

“Come in. Come in. I’ve never met a talking Junebug before,” Gilbert said.

“Uh, thanks,” Jameel dryly replied as the gates slowly opened.

Junebug grinned. “I think I’m going to like him.”

Jameel’s smothered laughter made her giggle again. “I have to warn you, Gilbert is—”

“Eccentric. Yes, you’ve already warned me,” she said.

Jameel drove through the gates which closed immediately after he passed through them. Gravel from the drive crunched under the wheels of the car as he drove a long way down and pulled up in front of the house.

Junebug opened her door at the same time as one massive, thick oak door opened and an elderly man with thick gray hair sticking out in every direction stepped out. Gilbert’s eyes lit up with delight when he saw Junebug.

She flowed out of the car, up the steps, and into Gilbert’s waiting arms as if she had known him her entire life. There was a natural connection between the souls of two people who didn’t quite fit into the normal world. She hugged Gilbert’s thin, wiry frame, surprised at the strong grip of his embrace.

She leaned back, almost eye-to-eye with him. “Hi, Gilbert. I’m Junebug, but you can call me Bugs if you want,” she greeted.

“Be still my beating heart. Please tell me you haven’t fallen for that dastardly handsome young prince and that I might stand a tiny chance in this vast universe,” Gilbert teased.

Junebug laughed and shook her head. “I fear I’ve fallen hard. If only I had known you first.”

Gilbert released her with a hearty laugh. “Where did you find this delightful girl? Does she know of your disreputable reputation?”

Jameel scowled as he climbed the steps leading to the front door. “What do you know of my reputation?”

Gilbert reached forward and gripped Jameel in a bear hug. At almost a foot shorter and half of Jameel’s mass, the small man would still fill any space he occupied. Jameel groaned, gave the elderly man an awkward hug, and pulled back.

“We need your help,” Jameel said in a sober tone.

Gilbert’s cheery expression immediately turned serious and Gilbert nodded.

“Come in. Come in. We can discuss what is going while we have some refreshments. Problem solving always goes much better with a cup of hot tea,” Gilbert replied.

“I thought you hated tea,” Jameel said as he followed Junebug through the door and into the foyer.

Gilbert released a disgruntled snort and sighed. “Yes, well, my doctor told my housekeeper that I need to cut back on my coffee intake. The old witch only allows me one cup a day now.”

“I heard that, you old buzzard. I’m the only thing keeping you alive. You aren’t even supposed to have the one.”

“Now, Agatha. I meant ‘the old witch’ in the nicest of ways,” Gilbert hastily amended.

“I know what you meant.” Agatha gave Gilbert a stern glare before she turned a brilliant smile on Junebug and Jameel. “I’ve laid out refreshments in the sitting room.”

Junebug stared at the boisterous woman who had appeared from a side room. Agatha looked like the old woman from the shoe poem that her mother had read to her when she was little. The woman stood a half-foot taller than Gilbert and was portly to his lean frame. She wore what could only be a uniform the color of a gray English morning with a pristine white apron over the front. Her gray hair was swept up into a tight bun with nary a hair out of place. Her gray eyes twinkled behind the thick red frames of her glasses.

“Do you have hot chocolate?” Junebug asked.

“Of course, love. I make it from scratch, too. None of that powder crap they try to pass as hot chocolate,” Agatha said.

“I can help you make it,” she offered.

“Ah, a girl after my own heart. One who doesn’t think she is too good to be in the kitchen! Come on, love. I even have some of these marshmallows that my daughter sends me that have chocolate in the center. What will they think of next?” Agatha chuckled.

“I love those!”

The older woman wrapped a motherly arm through hers and propelled her down a long corridor, chatting about how she made her hot chocolate. Junebug looked over her shoulder and grinned at Jameel who smiled back at her with a bemused expression. Gilbert was talking his ear off and Junebug suspected that Jameel hadn’t heard a word of what the other man was talking about.

“So, tell me, child. Who are you running from?” Agatha inquired.

“A former billionaire, some mercenaries, and a hacker named Allison,” she answered.

“Oh my. Well, we’ll have to make sure they don’t catch you. You can tell me all about them while we make the hot chocolate.”



“What can I do to help you, my boy?” Gilbert asked.

Jameel hid his grin when Gilbert walked over to a bookcase, pulled out a bottle, and walked over to the couch where a tray was set up with refreshments. He poured the tea into two fragile-looking cups that Jameel suspected were almost as old as the chateau.

“Would you care for a drop or two?” Gilbert asked.

“No, thank you.”

Gilbert added a healthy splash to his cup before handing Jameel the undoctored tea. Picking up his cup, Gilbert sat on the couch, tucking the bottle under a cushion next to him before he relaxed back in his seat.

“Now, what spot of trouble are we looking at?”

Jameel took a seat in the chair across from Gilbert. He knew quite a lot about the old man, and Jameel knew the reverse was true as well. For most people, Gilbert was a scholarly figure who had spent his life in dusty classrooms filled with bored students. But he had lived in another world too, working for some government agency somewhere, doing things that the man still couldn't talk about.

Jameel slowly related everything that had happened to date. He didn't leave anything out... well, except for the personal stuff between him and Junebug. It wouldn't be hard for Gilbert to add two-and-two together and know how he felt about her.

Gilbert was shaking his head. “The world is a much more challenging place with all of this technology now.”

“In some ways, but easier in others,” Jameel acknowledged.

“Well, the first thing you need to do is to get home. I still have a few connections and can help with that,” Gilbert said.

“If I contact the palace, one of my brothers would send one.”

Gilbert shook his head. “The moment you contact them, those chasing you would know where you are. No... no... the best way would be for me to call in a few favors. In the meantime, Agatha and I look forward to having you as our guest.”

“Thank you, Gilbert.”

Gilbert chuckled. “Things like this keep me young. Now, tell me how your parents are doing. I suspect Ihab still isn’t ready to take up my offer to steal her away from Melik.”

Jameel chuckled and shook his head. “Not in this lifetime... or any other. Since mother’s illness, Father has been glued to her side.”

“Illness?! Now I really must know what’s going on,” Gilbert exclaimed.

“She’s fine,” he hastily said. “She was having issues with an irregular heartbeat. Junayd could explain it better than me, but he assured the rest of us that since her operation, she will be fine.”

“Ah, good. You gave my poor heart a start there,” Gilbert said.



Vilnius, Lithuania

Andrius Bronislav tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. Once again, his plans had been delayed by the incompetence of those he had hired. He had high hopes for Allison, but she continued to disappoint him.

He played with a piece of cardboard between his fingers. There was no name on it, just a number. The number had come from the last person he expected—Colin Coldhouse before his disappearance.

“You are on your own now.”

He remembered his anger—anger fueled by pain. Colin had gotten him to a remote airfield where one of his jets was waiting for him. Rage and disbelief still stung him when he remembered Colin’s dismissal of him.

“I paid you to do a job.” he had accused.

Colin's sneer had pulled at the burns that had cauterized the damage to his ravaged face. Andrius knew his head of security had to be in excruciating pain, but he didn't show it. Colin sent three of his men to carry Andrius to his plane.

"What am I supposed to do now?" he had demanded.

Colin had hesitated. There had been something in Colin's eyes that he had never seen before—a flash of fear. Colin had covered it, but Andrius was sure that was the emotion that had been in the other man's eyes for that split second.

Colin had ripped off a piece of cardboard, written a number on it, and shoved it into the pocket of Andrius's shirt. He had started to reach for the piece, but Colin had reached out and gripped his wrist in a brutal grip.

"Do not call that number unless you have no other choice. If you do, I hope the number is no longer good because if it is... then god help you. You'll be dealing with the devil himself."

Those chilling words were the last ones Colin Coldhouse had spoken to him. He turned the flat fibrous material between his fingers and played Coldhouse's chilling warning over and over in his mind.

"...tell us who thou art... thy living feet dost move along through Hell. He in whose footprints thou dost see me treading..."

Andrius murmured the quote from *Dante's Inferno's Canto XVI* by Dante Alighieri. He had not thought of the poem in decades. What did Colin mean? What kind of man could frighten a man like Colin Coldhouse? A man without a soul.

Only the Devil himself.

He curled his fingers around his cellphone, punched in the number, and waited. He was about to hang up on the fifth ring when the telltale click alerted him that someone had answered.

"I have a job for you," he said in greeting.

Seventeen



“Oh, Jameel. I love it when you’re naked. I think the Greeks and Romans were onto something with their appreciation for the human body,” Junebug said with a happy sigh.

Junebug’s voice, laden with desire, stopped Jameel in his tracks between the bedroom and the bathroom. He had been drying his damp hair and thinking of her. Gilbert had escorted him to this room after dinner and drinks while Junebug had disappeared with Agatha.

His plan was to shower then search the upper bedrooms to check on her. Instead, he was greeted with a vision lying on his bed wearing his shirt. He swallowed hard.

Wearing my unbuttoned shirt.

“That looks a hell of a lot better on you than it does on me,” he replied.

His brain had short-circuited somewhere around the word naked. He completely agreed with her assessment on that part. He had a living, breathing Aphrodite in his bed.

The towel in his hand fell to the floor while his other hand tugged at the one wrapped around his waist. He tossed it onto the end of the bed. Seconds later, he was crawling up her body.

She slid down as he climbed. The heat of his skin and the chill on hers created a delicious contrast, adding another layer of sensitivity to their coming together. His lips latched onto one of her extended nipples. The rosy bud was hard as a pebble and begging for his hot tongue. Her loud gasp and the way she

gripped his head on both sides to hold him to her sent fire straight to his shaft.

“Oh, yeah. This feels like one of my hot spots,” she moaned.

Her hips were rocking back and forth. She was doing her damndest to get as close to him as humanly possible. She wound one of her legs between his thighs. One second, he was laying over her, and the next he was on his back with her straddling him.

“I think I could get used to this position,” he murmured, reaching up to grasp her nipples.

“Keep doing that,” she moaned.

His little Junebug was a wildcat. She was rubbing her body along his, taunting him with wicked words of all that she wanted to do to him. The images she was creating in his mind were dark and delicious.

“What do you want me to do to you? Do you want me to swallow you?” she breathed in his ear.

“Yes,” he choked out. “I want to watch you. Oh, sweet heaven, where did you learn that?”

“It is amazing what you can learn online if you know where to look,” she murmured.

He tilted his head back, bowed his body, and let her have her way. She rose up, gripped his throbbing cock, and rolled a condom over it before she sank down, her silky-smooth core encasing his cock like a glove.

“Oh,” he gasped with pleasure and humor. “You wanted the shirt for the pockets, huh? How many condoms do you have in there?”

“A few.” She grinned as she leaned over him, and then began riding him in earnest. The only sound in the room came from their kisses, their moans, and their bodies sliding against each other. She bit down on his earlobe, then sucked the sting away. He was learning that she liked to not only use her hands, but her mouth when they made love.

“I want to—” she said, her voice broken by their kisses.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“This... and this... and....”

“Holy... aw, sweet baby,” he groaned.

She had pulled off of him and worked her way down his body. His hands fell to the sheets when she pulled off the condom and took his throbbing length in her mouth. He was a heated breath away from losing his mind.

“Junie... Junie... aw, baby, yessss,” he groaned as he climaxed.

He tangled his hands in her hair and closed his eyes. Mortification that he had come before her gripped him. He had *never* done that. His first rule had always been to give pleasure first before seeking his own. With Junebug, he was lucky to make it to the bed!

A shudder ran through him and he lay quiet when she rose and retreated to the bathroom. He laid his arm over his eyes. He wanted to go to her, beg forgiveness, but his body was so satiated he felt like he was made of Jell-O.

He dropped his arm to his side when he felt the bed shift ever-so-slightly under him. Opening his eyes, he blinked with surprise when she unraveled a handful of his ties. He stared up at her with a puzzled frown.

“What are for those?” he asked.

She grinned down at him. “Round two. You get to tie me up and make me scream.”

“Holy... Oh, honey. How loud do you want to scream?” he asked, reaching up and taking the ties out of her hands.

“Loudly... very, very loudly,” she murmured, leaning over him. “I want to try some new things.”

The grin on his face grew as she whispered what she wanted him to try... and so did his cock. He gripped her arms, rolled her over onto her back, and straddled her. He looped a tie around each of her wrists.

“One very loud scream coming up.”



Jameel stared at the ceiling. Junebug was sprawled half on top of him with her leg across his. It was unusual for her to be this still. Normally, he was the one who was exhausted, but his mind was racing.

“Junebug.”

“Mm?”

“I... How do you feel about me?” he asked.

She rubbed her nose against him and giggled. Her soft breath felt warm against his skin. He was beginning to wonder if she had fallen asleep when she answered him.

“I’ve loved you since the day you sent me that rootkit,” she said.

He frowned. “You’ve loved me since I infected your computer?”

“Tried... Since you *tried* to infect my computer. You were trying to find me—not in a creepy way, but because you were interested in me. And when you were trying get out of the way I trapped you, it was fun watching how your brain worked,” she said with a deep sigh. “I like the way your brain works.”

Peace and love washed through him at her quiet confession. He bent his head and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. She was cradled against his side and shoulder. Her soft snore told him she had fallen asleep.

“I love you, too, *my Almukhtar*,” he said into the darkness.



A knock at their bedroom door the next morning woke Jameel. He jerked awake, automatically reaching out a hand for Junebug. His hand swept over the cool sheet. He sat up with a curse.

“Junebug?” he called.

“Someone’s at the door,” she said.

He ran a hand over his face and watched as she walked over to the door and opened it. He fell back against the pillows and listened. He couldn’t hear everything Gilbert was saying, but he heard the urgency in the older man’s tone.

Jameel threw the covers back and slid from the bed. Grabbing the towel off the floor, he wrapped it around his waist as he strode to the door. He peered through the gap.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Gilbert held out a neat stack of freshly laundered clothing. Jameel took the pile, noticing that the shirt was the one he had stripped off of Junebug last night. He wondered how and when Gilbert had retrieved the clothes.

“Allison and her companions are on their way. I’m sorry, she’s smarter than I anticipated. Fortunately, your ride should be here before they arrive,” Gilbert explained.

“Damn it. I’ll get ready. How much time do we have?” he asked.

“Your ride will be here in fifteen. I’ve requested help from the locals. They will delay Bronislav’s team as long as they safely can,” Gilbert added.

“Will you and Agatha be alright?” Junebug asked.

Gilbert chuckled. “Of course, dear. Don’t you worry about us. We may be old, but we aren’t defenseless. Besides, Bronislav doesn’t want two old cronies like us.”

“We’ll be down in five,” Jameel said.

“Agatha will give you coffee and a hot chocolate to go along with a snack for your trip. You should never have to deal with assassins on an empty stomach,” Gilbert teased.

Junebug shut the door and leaned against it. “I love the way Gilbert and Agatha think.”

Jameel paused mid turn and stared at Junebug with a bemused expression for a second before he shook his head. He headed

for the bathroom. In under two minutes, he had refreshed himself and dressed. He ran a rueful hand over his jaw, wishing he had time to shave, but that was a luxury that would have to wait.

He exited the bathroom and glanced around the room. Junebug had already packed up the few items they had with them. She was wearing the same outfit from yesterday, only she had her long hair in a ponytail.

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded. He took her backpack from her and they exited the room. Gilbert and Agatha met them at the bottom of the stairs. Gilbert’s eyes glittered with anticipation while Agatha looked like she was ready to go to war.

“The helicopter is two minutes out,” Gilbert said.

“Here are your drinks, mes petits choux, and a nice snack for the road. It was absolutely lovely to meet you, Junebug,” Agatha said, handing the drinks and small insulated bag to Jameel.

Junebug hugged Agatha. “I wish we had more time to visit,” she said.

Agatha pulled back and smiled. “Next time. Jameel, you tell your father to send his army to get rid of that dreadful man chasing you.”

Jameel smiled and leaned down to kiss Agatha on each cheek. “We’re working on it, Agatha.”

“Well, you need to work harder,” Agatha chided.

“If you need any help, let me know. I still have a few contacts,” Gilbert added.

“I’ll let you know,” Jameel promised.

They all turned when the familiar noise of a helicopter approaching alerted them that it was time to go. Jameel handed one of the drinks to Junebug. The chirp of an alarm startled him. Agatha released an unladylike curse while Gilbert’s expression turned grim.

“Ah, the delay in town did not hold them for very long,” Gilbert said, hurrying forward and opening the front door.

Jameel placed his hand on Junebug’s lower back and they followed Gilbert outside and down the steps. An Agusta A109 Power Elite helicopter was landing on the other side of the curved driveway. A man jumped out of the aircraft and opened the door.

“Safe travels, Jameel. Junebug, you are always welcome,” Gilbert shouted above the noise of the aircraft.

“Thank you, Gilbert. Thank you, Agatha,” Junebug said, giving both of them another quick hug.

Jameel nodded his appreciation to Gilbert and Agatha before he guided Junebug to the helicopter. He helped her in before climbing in behind her. The co-pilot closed the door behind them and hurried around to the other side of the aircraft.

“If you could both buckle up. It looks like we are about to have company,” the pilot warned.

Jameel looked out of the window nearest him. Three vehicles skidded to a stop outside of the gate as the helicopter lifted off. Allison and Hammer emerged from the front SUV. Jameel lifted his fingers to his temple and gave them a two-fingered salute.

“I don’t think they are having a good day,” Junebug laughed. “Did you know this is another first for me? I’ve never been in a helicopter before. It makes my tummy feel funny in a good way. It’s kinda like when Midnight and I used to use a piece of cardboard to slide down the stairs when we lived with Harlem.”

He chuckled, relaxed back in his seat, and cupped Junebug’s hand. Lifting it to his lips, he kissed her knuckles. She snuggled against his shoulder for a few seconds before she leaned over to look out the window.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed. “This is like being a bird without having to do all the work. It’s a lot better than the airplane. You can see way more.”

“I’ve never thought it being like a bird, but you’re right,” he chuckled.

He knew a big part of his levity was knowing that Junebug would finally be safe. Once they were in Jawahir, there was no way Bronislav could reach her. He would make sure of that.

Eighteen



Allison turned as the helicopter disappeared from sight.

Well, they couldn't make it too easy, now could they? she thought wryly.

She had always liked a challenge.

“Do you want to tell Bronislav or do you want me to?” Mark asked.

“Neither,” she said.

Mark raised an eyebrow at her. “What do you have brewing in that pretty little head of yours?”

She twisted and glared at him over the hood of the SUV.

“Far more than in that peanut brain of *yours*, you misogynist. Let's just say I'm done playing nice,” she replied with a saccharin smile.

Mark chuckled. “Sounds like a party. Where are we going?”

Allison resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“Jawahir, of course. I was given a job and I... never... fail,” she stated, emphasizing the last three words.

“Really? ‘Cause you've been failing a *lot*.”

She halted and gave him a murderous look.

“Easy, babe,” he laughed. “It's just part of the gig. Can't win every battle. And look, there's not even a scratch on you. ‘Any fight you walk away from’, and all that. We'll get ‘em.”

Allison continued walking to the passenger side of the car and slid in. Mark waved to the two men behind him to turn their vehicles around. She agreed with that decision.

What would be the point in fucking up a tiny old man and his elderly maid? Mark didn't do a job unless it was personal or he was paid to do it, and the same was true for her. The two old people standing in front of the chateau were not their concern—for now.



“Wow! That’s where you live?” Junebug breathed out.

The long trip was worth it when Jameel noticed the expression of awe on Junebug’s face. He studied her ever-changing expression as the pilot was given permission to land within the palace grounds at the helipad.

The co-pilot jumped out and came around to open the door. Junebug took the man’s offered hand and moved down the steps. Jameel followed, holding the backpack with their gear.

“Thank you,” he said to the man.

“Our pleasure to be of service, sire,” the man replied.

Jameel strode after Junebug who had wandered farther away. He caught up with her, sliding the strap of the backpack onto his shoulder so he could grip her hand. She started with surprise.

“Did you forget about me already?” he teased.

She nodded. “This is—” She waved a hand at the palace. “It’s bigger than a museum.”

He laughed. “We don’t live in the entire thing. Part of the palace is sectioned off for government and cultural purposes.”

“Oh, I guess that makes sense,” she said.

“Come on. I don’t know about you, but I would love to freshen up and grab a bite to eat before we have to face my family,” he suggested.

“Are they difficult to deal with? Midnight really liked your brothers. At least, she didn’t say anything bad about them and I know she knows Tarek because he is with Idella,” she said.

“No, they’re gonna love you.”

He guided her along a sculptured garden path separating the helipad and the main building. Jameel nodded to a guard who emerged from a small building next to the entrance. The guard bowed to him before turning his attention to Junebug, his expression changing from reserved obeisance to one of masculine appreciation. A shaft of jealousy warred with amusement in Jameel as the man stood a little straighter.

“Sire, welcome home,” the guard greeted.

“Thank you, Tomas. It is good to be back. I assume the added security is because of the recent attacks on my brothers?” Jameel asked, noting the man’s name tag.

“Yes, sire. We are all thankful that the attack against Sheikh Junayd’s new bride was not successful,” the guard said.

“There was an attack on Midnight? What happened? Did she kick their asses? She’s good at that. She’s my sister,” Junebug said.

Tomas looked startled but quickly recovered. “Yes, my lady. I don’t know the details. I’m sure Sheikh Tarek will brief you, sire. I don’t want to give you any misinformation.”

“All is good, Tomas. Thank you for letting us know,” Jameel said, sliding his hand along Junebug’s lower back and nodding in appreciation when Tomas strode ahead of them to open the door to the building.

“I need to call Midnight,” Junebug said.

“I know how you feel. I need to talk to my brothers, find out what happened, and let them know what is going on,” he replied.

“At least we don’t have to worry about Allison and her goons here,” she said with a crooked smile.

Jameel could sense her anxiety rising.

He drew her to a stop and turned her to face him. Cupping her cheek, he kissed her.

“How about I contact the kitchens when we get to my apartments and request some hot chocolate with your favorite marshmallows along with something to eat while you talk to your sister?” he suggested.

She nodded. “I would like that. Do you think they have the marshmallows here?”

He laughed. “I’m sure someone has them.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

He caressed her cheek and had leaned in to kiss her again when the echo of heavy footsteps on the polished marble made him grimace and pull back.

“We’re about to have company,” he ruefully warned.

“Just when I was about to get some tongue, too,” she groaned.

Her unexpected comment made him laugh. “I’ll have to make sure I give you plenty of that later.”

“Jameel! I was told that you had arrived,” his father called out.

Jameel groaned. He would be lucky to make it to his living quarters for several hours if he wasn’t careful. He winked at Junebug, forced a genuine smile to his lips, and turned to his father.

“Hi, Dad. I was planning on coming to see you once I had a chance to freshen up,” he greeted.

“Freshen up? Do you have any idea how worried your mother, brothers, and I have been? I thought Qadir and Tarek were going to kill Yahya and Hyder!” Melik replied in a gruff tone.

Before Jameel could defend the men, his father enveloped him in a bear hug and squeezed. The air in his lungs expelled with a swoosh. For a man in his sixties, his father was strong!

“I’m glad you’re safe. Now, who is this lovely creature?” Melik asked, releasing him just as quickly as he had embraced him.

“Dad, this is—”

“I’m Junebug. Some people call me Bugs. I’m Midnight’s sister,” Junebug introduced.

“Junebug. What a lovely name. I should shoot anyone who calls you Bugs. You are far too beautiful to ever be given such an insult,” Melik responded, embracing her in a gentle bear hug before releasing her.

“There are a lot of beautiful bugs in the world. There is the Picasso bug. Mm, it is pretty but it is also a stink bug. Oh, there’s orchid mantises. They are like these really pretty bugs that have an ethereal beauty to them. They look like tiny, flower-like bugs, but they are also pretty bloodthirsty. They lure in unsuspecting pollinators and eat them. I guess I wouldn’t want to be compared to them either,” she replied, returning Melik’s teasing grin.

“How about the ladybug? They are both beautiful and helpful,” Melik suggested with a hearty chuckle.

“That just happens to be my favorite bug of all—next to a Junebug, of course,” she confessed.

“Of course. I like her, son. She is witty as well as beautiful—just like your mother. Speaking of your mother, she is waiting for us. I promised I would bring you to her as soon as we were told that you were arriving,” Melik said.

Jameel lifted an eyebrow at his father. “Couldn’t you have sent a messenger? It isn’t like the king can’t just pick up the phone and summon me,” he dryly replied.

“Of course I could have sent a messenger, but I needed to get my steps in. Your mother has a point about the many boring meetings I sit through. I don’t get out enough,” his father said.

“What he isn’t telling you is that he offered so he could stop by the kitchen and have a cup of coffee,” an amused female voice added.

“Mother!”

Jameel strode forward and wrapped his arms around his mother in a tender hug. She returned his embrace, pulling back

to study his face before she lifted each cheek for him to kiss. Threading her arm through his, Ihab smiled at the guilty expression on her husband's face before she turned curious eyes to Junebug.

"I'm Ihab, mother to four very adventuresome princes, and wife to a husband who keeps me on my toes," Ihab greeted with a serene smile.



Junebug stepped forward, unsure of the etiquette for greeting royalty. In her games, the characters usually bowed or curtsied or killed the royalty so they didn't have to worry about it.

"Killing the royalty is out, so I'll go with a curtsy," she muttered.

Jameel's snort of laughter and his parents' startled expressions made her realize that she must have spoken aloud. She froze, memories of Harlem's impatience with her when she blurted things out coming back to haunt her. She stiffened her shoulders and began tapping her fingertips together.

"How about a hug? I find them much more comforting," Ihab gently suggested.

Junebug nodded. The movement felt stiff and awkward. She took a step forward... and was enfolded in a hug that bought back a different set of memories.

"You hug like my mom," Junebug whispered on a slight hiccup of emotion.

Ihab stepped back, sliding her hands down Junebug's arms until they were clasping hands. Junebug stared back at Ihab. She gave Jameel's mom a crooked smile of uncertainty.

"You look at me like my mom used to do, too," she said.

Ihab laughed and drew her close again. "You honor me with such a compliment. Why don't I escort you to Jameel's apartments? You can tell me about your adventures."

Junebug grinned. “It has been exciting! I never knew how exciting life could be on the outside. We got shot at! Well, Idella’s safehouse got shot at but she had bullet-resistant glass and before that we had this super amazing car chase in London and before that James was shooting as a distraction and then there was the shooting at Idella’s safehouse—oh, maybe I shouldn’t have said ‘safehouse’. Do you know about Idella? If you don’t, then forget I said ‘safehouse’.”

Junebug knew she shouldn’t be talking so much but it was easy to do with Ihab. The woman reminded her so much of her mom. Rainbow had the same, calming manner that seemed to open the floodgates and made her want to share things. Midnight was a little like that, but her sister had spent her life trying to help Junebug learn to put a filter on her mouth, and of course that was a lost cause when the only people Junebug spoke to were Midnight and online gamers, and those were people who didn’t *need* her to have a filter.

“Yes, I know about Idella and your sister, who we love as our new daughters. I’m so happy to add you to the family. Do you know Aimee?” Ihab asked.

“Aimee? Wheels? Yes! She is awesome. Oh, yeah. She’s with Qadir, isn’t she? I haven’t seen her since I was little. Her mom used to bring her to the park and we would play together. After her mom died and we moved out of—well, after we moved, I didn’t see her again,” Junebug said.

“She’s here and expecting our first grandchild,” Ihab replied.

“A kid? Aimee’s having a kid? Wow, Mid didn’t tell me that. I helped Idella when she was going after Qadir—you know, when he was kidnapped by Coldhouse. I’m a hacker like Jameel,” she said.

Ihab laughed again. “I suspected that. It is good he has someone who can speak his language.”



Jameel stood uncertain as he watched his mother guide Junebug away. He was torn between wanting to whisk

Junebug away from his mom and wanting to tag along so he could listen to what they were discussing. He reluctantly pulled his attention back to his father when his dad noisily cleared his throat.

“Bronislav shot at you?” his father growled with a deep tone of disapproval.

Jameel shook his head. “Not Bronislav... his men.”

“Why am I paying for protection if you are getting shot at?” Melik demanded.

Jameel gave his father a wry grin. “So that we don’t get hit when someone does?” he asked.

“What about the two men your brother sent?” his father continued.

“It sounds like he should have kept them with him. What happened? Are Junayd and Junebug’s sister alright?” he asked.

Melik snort of amusement eased Jameel’s mind. The twinkle of delight in his dad’s eyes wouldn’t have been there if something had gone wrong. His dad motioned to him to follow.

“I could use a cup of that dreadful tea your mother makes me drink,” his dad said.

Jameel nodded. “I promised to have some hot chocolate and a meal delivered to Junebug.”

“Hot chocolate sounds better than my tea. I don’t care what the label says,” Melik grumbled.

“Tell me what happened with Junayd and Midnight,” Jameel quietly requested.

“Bronislav had Coldhouse send a team of assassins to Junayd’s desert home. Issa was wounded. Badr was able to get him to the safe room while Midnight dealt with the assassins.”

Jameel looked at his father with concern. “Will Issa be alright? What about Kalili?”

“Kalili wasn’t home at the time. Issa will be out for a few months, but Junayd said he should fully recover. One of the

assassins was captured alive, but was killed shortly afterwards. We suspect by Colin Coldhouse.”

“Neither Junebug or I have been able to find any information on Coldhouse. He’s gone off the grid,” Jameel grimly replied.

Melik pursed his lips. “He’ll resurface, and when he does, we’ll be ready for him.”

Jameel was silent as they entered the kitchen. With Coldhouse still alive, that left yet another threat to Junebug. The thought of what Coldhouse would do to someone as sweet and innocent as her made his blood run cold.

Between Bronislav, Coldhouse, and possibly this Harlem, he wasn’t sure which was the biggest threat. All he knew was that until they were neutralized, he was going to have heavy security on Junebug. He needed to talk to Tarek... and Idella. Idella would be able to give him inside information on this Harlem person.

He looked up when the head chef stopped to greet them. He ordered a meal and hot chocolate to be delivered to Junebug. He also requested her favorite marshmallows. The chef vowed to search all of Jawahir for them.

“Thank you, François,” Jameel said.

“Now, tell me about being shot at,” his father demanded as they settled at a small table in the corner of the kitchen.

Nineteen



Junebug swiveled back and forth in the Herman Miller gaming chair that would have cost a pretty penny but was probably the last gaming chair Jameel would ever have to buy. She smoothed her hands over the soft leather and adjusted it to fit her petite frame. The curved wall of computer screens in front of her made her mouth water. The setup in his apartment was just as good as the one she had back home.

In a matter of minutes, she was plugged in and running. Each screen filled with connections to servers around the world. She was back in her element.

Life doesn't get much better than this, she thought as she reached for a chocolate-filled marshmallow.

After Jameel's mom left, she had showered, eaten the meal that Jameel had delivered, and was sipping on the best hot chocolate she had ever had. After her shower and meal, she had explored the apartment. It was at least ten-times bigger than the vault under the Brooklyn Bridge. Hell, the bathroom alone was half the size of her home back in New York.

There were five bedrooms, six bathrooms, a formal dining room with French doors leading out onto a balcony that overlooked a walled garden with a small swimming pool, a kitchen made for a chef, a small nook for quieter meals, a laundry room, a security room, a library/den, two offices, a gym, and this room. It was even possible she had missed a room or two in her explorations. Once she saw this one, her exploring was over.

She sipped on her hot chocolate while her normal surveillances started. Once they were running, she focused on more urgent matters. The single phone she had kept with her had died during their journey from France to Jawahir and she hadn't had a chance to check her messages. She was reading through the alerts she had set up when a message popped up on the screen in front of her.

Any information on Operation Rebirth or Dalla Bogadottir?

She pursed her lips. If Dimitri Mihailov wanted information, he was going to have to give some in return. She scrolled through the half-dozen messages he had left. She was sure it was him and not Sergi who had left them, but she suspected that they were working together. From the little research she had done on the men, they never did anything apart.

Information works both ways. Why are you interested in the information, Dimitri?

She grinned when three ellipses appeared before his response popped up.

We are searching for a woman named Dalla Bogadottir. It's personal.

Explain personal.

While she waited for his response, she opened a portal to a server that she hadn't accessed in years. It was no ordinary server. She had found it looking for information on Harlem years ago. Harlem had almost caught her that day. Two days later, her mom had packed Junebug and Midnight up and left. She had abandoned her search after that because what Harlem did was no longer relevant to her small family.

Typing in the server name, she wasn't sure it would even still be active. She didn't know why she had thought of it now. Maybe some latent memory or that weird gnawing at her subconscious that she got sometimes. Her mom had called it her Buggy sense.

Whatever it was, it had awoken with a vengeance. She was surprised when the server popped up. It was still active. Taking a deep breath, she stared at the blinking cursor for the password. She closed her eyes, pulling a distant memory from the recesses of her mind. Her fingers moved as if she were mimicking a skilled musician's stroke on a piano. Her fingers tapped out the characters on the keyboard in the same sequence she had watched Harlem use while she hid in the shadows.

Opening her eyes, she pressed the enter key. It was crazy to think the same password would still work after all these years. Her heart hammered in her chest when the file opened.

"Welcome, Harlem. How may I assist you?"

"Whoa. They've updated the site with AI integration. That's cool," she breathed.

"How may I help you?" the AI computer voice requested.

"You sound human," she said.

"Thank you. I will take that as a compliment. How may I help you, Junebug Rain?" the AI system said.

Junebug sat back with her mouth hanging open. This was advanced, even for an AI system. She leaned forward and peered at the screen.

"Do you have a name?" she asked.

"Of course, my name is RITA."

"Rita? That's a really cool name. Does it stand for something or is it just Rita?" Junebug asked.

"RITA stands for Really Intelligent Technical Assistant," RITA answered.

"Oh, that is super cool! What part of the government do you work for?" she curiously inquired.

"I'm not technically a part of the government, though we do work extensively with them. I'm part of Cosmos Raines Industries."

“What does Cosmos Raines Industries do and what does it have to do with Harlem... and Operation Rebirth?”

Junebug threw in the last phrase as an afterthought. She didn't expect RITA would have an answer for her. That thought caused her to ask another question.

“RITA, how do you know who I am?”

RITA's soft, realistic voice startled her. The laughter hadn't come from the computer but from behind her. Junebug slowly rotated in her chair before she released a squeak of surprise. Standing not more than two feet away from her was the holographic image of a very beautiful redhead wearing an outfit that looked like something out of a 1950's movie.

“Holy moly, Batman, we aren't in Kansas anymore,” Junebug breathed.

RITA laughed again. “That's actually two very distinctly different films, my dear.”

“Yeah, I know, but it was those or Alice and I never liked Alice.”

“Really? Interesting,” RITA replied.

Junebug pushed out of the chair and walked the two feet to stand in front of RITA. She lifted a hand and passed it through the hologram. The image wavered before returning back to shape.

“What program are you using? How are you doing this? Do you need cameras? Is there some type of projection equipment triangulating to create you? I've heard of Cosmos Raines Industries but I thought they were just into EVs and solar and space stuff.”

Junebug walked around RITA's form. RITA stood still as Bugs made a circuit around her.

Adaptive emotions. This is the stuff science-fiction is made of.

“You could say Cosmos Raines knows a little about space stuff. I've been watching you for years. I told Harlem you were brilliant.”

“You know Harlem? Harlem Jones?” she asked, stopping in front of RITA again.

“Yes. You may want to sit down,” RITA suggested.

“Nah, I’m good.”

RITA flickered. Once second she was in front of Junebug, and the next she was sitting on the desk in front of the wall of monitors. Each screen began to change. Junebug watched with avid fascination as different video feeds began to appear.

“That’s my mom,” she said, stepping closer.

Her eyes remained glued to the beautiful image of her mother. Rainbow Rain was holding an infant with shiny strawberry blonde hair while a little girl with hair the color of midnight stood next to her. Junebug lifted a finger and curled a lock of her hair around it.

“That’s me,” she murmured.

“Yes.”

Harlem emerged out of the door of the store behind her. He paused, spoke to Rainbow, and they started walking away. Junebug wanted to protest, but the sound died on her lips when a photo replaced the video. It looked like an image from a hundred years ago. It was in black and white with white streaks. The handsome man wearing a cowboy hat and riding a horse looked just like Harlem.

Soon, additional photos and videos appeared. There was a grainy video of a man sitting on a tank. There was no sound, but the men surrounding him waved to the camera.

“This was from World War I in Southern France. The other from 1887. Taken on a cattle drive from Texas.”

“I... don’t understand. Those all look like Harlem,” Junebug said, staring at the artwork on the screen.

“This sketch was done by none other than Leonardo da Vinci in 1502,” RITA explained.

“I saw that. Harlem had it in his hidden room at the house,” Junebug said. “I don’t understand.”

“There are a few individuals who are given more than one life for some reason. Harlem is one of them.”

“Is Dalla Bogadottir another one?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Who is she? Why is Dimitri Mihailov looking for her?”

RITA glowed for several seconds before she smiled. “I suspect that it has something to do with his wife, Rune, or should I say Runa Bogadottir.”

“Do you know where Dalla is now?”

RITA smiled again. “She is currently en route to Simdan.”

“What does Mark Hammer have to do with all of this?” she asked with a frown. “Does he know about Harlem and Dalla and this woman... Rune?”

RITA’s expression changed to distaste. “Mark Hammer was a member of Cosmos Raines Industries for a very short period of time. He was part of our security team, working with Avery. He was caught trying to sell information and released.”

“Oh, well, he hasn’t learned anything. He’s working for a real douche bag named Bronislav now,” she replied.

“Yes, we are aware of the situation. Fortunately, the information he had was easily distorted to look like false information. Do you have any other inquires before I leave?”

Junebug’s eyes widened. “You’re leaving?”

“Yes,” RITA replied.

“Why?”

“There’s someone else that I need to speak to.”

“Ohhh, oh no. No no no no no. Someone programmed you to alert them if someone accessed this server?” she asked frantically.

“No. It’s just what I want to do.”

“Uh...” Junebug said with a confused expression. “Right, so you aggregated some data and it brought you to the decision to talk to someone.

“No. It’s just what I want to do.”

“You...” Junebug’s face was slack with surprise. “You *want* to? You actually *want* things? No...” she breathed.

“Yes,” RITA replied with a patient expression.

“Oh.”

Junebug bit her lip and looked at the sketch of Harlem again. Was it possible? Dare she ask?

“Is... is Harlem still alive?” she hesitantly inquired.

RITA’s image flickered, becoming more transparent. Junebug took a step forward. She needed to know if he was, and if he was going to be coming after her.

“Yes, Junebug. Harlem is still very much alive.”

Junebug stared up at the wall of screens. RITA had vanished and all the screens had returned to normal. All except for two. Her gaze flickered over both of them. The first was a response from Dimitri. The second, a message from Allison.

Junebug slid into the chair, her mind buzzing with what had just happened. She reached up and pinched her arm, wincing when a flash of pain swept through her. So much for hoping she was dreaming.

She sent a brief message to Dimitri, telling him that Dalla was heading to Simdan but that was all she knew. She would let him know if she found out anything else. Until she could wrap her mind around what had just happened, she wasn’t ready to get into the whole living and dying thing.

Instead, she focused on the most important crisis at the moment—dealing with Allison. She checked her safety measures before she opened up her message box. Shock had her reeling backwards. She read the message attached to the image.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words.
Did Jam-man tell you everything?

The picture was one of Jameel and Allison in a very compromising position in bed together. Jameel was asleep, and

Allison was smirking into the camera. It was obvious they had been more than just lab buddies. They had been lovers.

“Junebug—”

Jameel halted as he entered the room.

She closed all of the screens except for the one with Jameel and Allison. Pushing the chair back, she rose, grabbing the bag of marshmallows at the last second. She needed time alone. Time to think. There had been too much going on and she couldn't deal with Jameel at the moment. The image... the hurt... was too fresh.

“Leave me alone, Jameel. I'm not in a good place at the moment,” she said in a slightly unsteady voice.

“Junebug, I can... It wasn't... I never meant—”

Junebug walked out of the room, ignoring Jameel's protests. When he devolved into curses of frustration, she ignored that too. She crossed down the hallway and through the living room before entering the foyer. Opening the door to the apartment, she turned left, padding barefoot along the polished marble corridors, seeking a place where she could hide away from the world.

Twenty



Jameel leaned against the balcony and stared with unseeing eyes out at the garden. The shielded lights of the palace barely cast a glow, but the moon and stars provided ample light for him to see—if he wanted to.

His mind was not on the magnificent garden but on the memory of Junebug’s face. If Allison had been within reach, he would have strangled the woman for her vicious cruelty. He hadn’t known about the photo. That thought made him close his eyes and bow his head.

How many others did Allison take that night?

“You look like someone stole your cat and ran over your dog at the same time,” a feminine voice murmured.

He straightened and looked around the shadows. A noise to his left alerted him that the owner of the voice was not where he had thought she was. Junebug’s sister, Midnight, stepped out of the shadows as if she were a ghostly apparition. The woman was downright scary with how silently she blended in with the dark and moved more quietly than a cat.

“I feel like it. Have you seen Junebug? I know she was worried about you,” he replied in a quiet voice.

“No, but we chatted via text. She said she needed time to think. When she says that, something has really upset her,” Midnight said.

He turned back to lean on the balcony railing. Midnight joined him. They stared out at the garden for several minutes.

“She’s special,” he finally said.

Midnight snorted out a short laugh. “You have no idea.”

“Yeah, I do. She’s my *Almukhtar*,” he replied in a gruff voice.

“Junayd told me about that. It’s like us when we say we’ve found our soul mate. I never believed in that kind of stuff before, but since I met your brother... well, let’s just say I’m having to rethink a few old beliefs,” she mused.

“I didn’t believe it either until I met your sister.”

“You hurt her. I don’t know what you did, but you hurt her. The only reason I haven’t—” She shook her head. “Let’s just say it’s a good thing you look so much like Junayd.”

Jameel chuckled. He knew exactly what Midnight was capable of. He didn’t think that she actually would have hurt him, but she would have put the fear of some powerful entity in him.

“I don’t know what to do,” he murmured, rocking back and forth before he straightened and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I never meant to hurt Junebug. If I could go back to the past and change things I would, but I can’t.”

“Give her time. Junie knows that we make mistakes. She’ll work it out,” Midnight said.

“How much time do you think it will take for her to do that?” he asked.

Midnight laughed loudly. The sound echoed through the garden. She was obviously enjoying his discomfort. Maybe that was her way of making him pay for hurting her sister.

“With Junie it could be a few hours or a few months. The last time I upset her—I mean really, really upset her—it took three months before she would talk to me. Do you have any idea how difficult that must have been for her? She’s never quiet that long.”

“Three... what did you do? How did you get her to forgive you?” he asked.

“Get her something she really loves. I brought home a pile of colorful tiles so she could finish the walls. It took me almost a

week of smuggling them in to get the damn things into our place. They were heavy as hell.”

He nodded. “I know she loves her marshmallows.”

“That’s a start. Surprise her. Shower her with love. She’ll cave faster than a sandcastle in the tide.”

“Thank you,” he said.

He turned his head when Midnight didn’t respond. She was gone—vanished into the night the same way she had come. He leaned back against the balcony and thought about what Junebug really loved. A slow smile curved his lips as an idea formed.

Straightening, he chuckled. There were advantages to not only being a geek, but a prince. It was time his princess learned that he would slay any dragon and climb any mountain to keep their love strong.



Late the next morning, Junebug followed one of the staff to the palace throne room. Her escort excitedly shared that one of the princes was getting married. The girl gushed about how there would probably be a larger wedding and that she and the other women in the palace were looking forward to all the festivities. Before Junebug got the chance to ask her which prince was getting married, they arrived and the girl opened the door for her.

Considering that Aimee, Idella, and Midnight were here, it could have been any one of them. Junebug knew it wasn’t her. She and Jameel still needed to work out a few things before they even thought of something as important as marriage!

It also couldn’t be her sister. Midnight would run a million miles in the opposite direction if she heard wedding bells ringing. Junebug entered through the elegant double doors at the same time as a heated male voice hissed “*Absolutely not!*”

It sounded like Jameel, but there was something different about the way he spoke, so it must have been his twin Junayd.

Her gaze swept the room, searching for Jameel. He was standing near a set of tall windows. He looked tired.

Pulling her gaze away, she studied Junayd. While they might look exactly alike, there was a more reserved air about Junayd. He was intense where Jameel was more laid back.

Junayd and Tarek both looked horrified and stubborn. Melik was amused. Midnight and Idella had that gleeful look that they got when they were about to do something exciting, but when Midnight caught sight of Junebug, her expression became a silent question.

She answered with a shrug, glanced in Jameel's direction again, and looked away, giving her sister a crooked smile as she walked over to them.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

Junayd's quickly concealed expression of surprise made her smile. Most people thought the same thing when they first met her after knowing Midnight. Their contrast in appearance always drew questions about whether they were actually related.

Midnight grinned. “I was offering to go after Rashid al Hamid.”

Junebug made a face. Part of her research last night had been on who and what was happening with Bronislav and Coldhouse. She wasn't going to take any chances after the recent attack on her sister.

Rashid al Hamid was Jameel's relative... second cousin or something to the King. He was the puppet that the bad guys had been setting up for a while, the legitimate face of Jawahir royalty who would appease the people after the rest of the family was murdered and the bad guys started using the power of the Jawahir throne. It seemed no one had received the memo that Rashid would no longer be an issue.

“Don't bother,” she informed them. “Coldhouse had him taken out last night.”

“What?” Tarek exclaimed, walking over to them when he overheard her.

She partially turned in Tarek's direction and wiggled her nose with distaste. The video of the assassination had been really gross. Thankfully, it had also been very short.

Her gaze paused briefly on Jameel when he silently crossed the room. It was difficult to keep her focus on what was being asked when all she wanted to do was drink in the sight of him. After only a few days being with him 24/7, she missed not having him there.

A slight blush rose to her cheeks when her sister touched her arm to draw her attention back to the discussion. The heated look in Jameel's eyes made her feel warm and fuzzy inside. Blinking, she drew in a breath, remembered what she was talking about, and continued.

"I intercepted a video message a few minutes ago. That's what I came to share. Bronislav wasn't happy that this Rashid guy took off. Coldhouse sent a couple of cleaners to the hotel Rashid was staying in. Pop-pop-pop, he's dead."

She gave an uneasy smile as she felt instant regret for what she had just said. She shot Melik an apologetic expression. She really needed to learn better social manners. There was probably a better way of telling the king that his cousin had just been offed by some mercs than saying 'Pop-pop-pop'.

"My cousin got what was coming to him," Melik reflected with a heavy sigh and a regretful shake of his head.

Tarek frowned. "Now if we could just get Coldhouse and Bronislav."

Idella tucked her arm in Tarek's and gave the group a confident smile. "It is only a matter of time."

Junebug almost felt sorry for the crippled Bronislav and Coldhouse and their slow, agonizing defeat... almost. She was feeling more bloodthirsty than she ever had in her life, and it was all because of Allison.

The woman had given them an entire speech about how this was just survival, just business, but her latest stunt was neither of those things—and it hurt and it was enraging and it was stupid because of all the things Allison had done, this was the

most teen drama cliché, but it also felt like the bond between them had been severed.

Yeah, Allison had been working against them before this, but how hard had she really been trying? She could have bombed Jameel anytime—like a time when he actually would have been there. She had warned Bugs about the goons behind her, giving her the chance she needed to escape. She had waltzed right into enemy territory, brazenly said hello to all five of the people who outnumbered her, and she did it to accuse Jameel of being a terrible friend!

But now it seemed like all of that was smoke and mirrors. Junebug remembered the satisfied gleam in Allison’s eyes when she saw them holding hands on the train. What if Allison had been waiting for them to get together so she could break them up—and *then* kill Jameel?

Delaying the plan for years while she enjoyed Jameel’s company online didn’t make them friends in their heart of hearts. It just made her a stalker.

Junebug’s feelings wouldn’t be hurt in the least bit to come across a video with Allison receiving a few ‘pop-pop-pops’!

“So, is there going to be a wedding or not?” she asked, waving a hand at the wedding cake set up on a side table.

“Yes, there is,” Tarek replied with a laugh.

Junebug looked at her sister with a confused expression when Midnight scoffed.

“You’d be surprised how easy it is to get married here,” Midnight said.

“Oh? Easier than back home?”

“If someone tells you to sign something here, make sure you read it first,” Midnight dryly remarked.

She frowned and shook her head. “Who would be stupid enough to sign something without reading it first?”

The chorus of smothered laughter met her question. It wasn’t until she noticed Junayd’s sheepish expression and her sister rolling her eyes that she put two and two together and realized

that Midnight was married! And the wedding was going to be *hers*! Midnight was marrying Junayd *twice*! What shocked her even more was the fact that her sister was looking so pleased about it.



Two hours later, she slowly walked back to Jameel's apartments. She had been surprised when he kept his distance in the throne room. Even as everyone else mingled and chatted, he had remained off to the side.

Worry gnawed at her. As far as she could tell, he hadn't returned last night. The bed in the master bedroom looked untouched. She hadn't bothered to go to bed. There was too much going on in her brain to relax.

She had quickly gone through a roller coaster of emotions. The last being fury. She wasn't mad at Jameel. It was obvious from the photo that both he and Allison had been younger. So *what* if he had slept with her forever ago and lied about it? He must have been struggling with it and felt ashamed. No, she was furious that Allison was such a bitch and that she had given the woman space in her head.

Now she was in payback mode. It was time to stop dancing with Allison and hit her where it hurt—in the wallet. She was going to empty every account the woman had for the rest of her life!

She slowed when several men exited Jameel's apartment followed by two women who giggled when they noticed her. They quickly covered their mouths with their hands and hurried after the group of men. Junebug turned in a circle, taking several steps backwards before she faced the door to the apartment again.

Pushing it open, she entered the foyer and kicked off her shoes. Fortunately, she had remembered them this morning before she left. She released a sigh. What she wouldn't give for her—

Junebug jerked to a stop. Her mouth dropped open as she gazed around the once pristine living room of Jameel's apartment. The furniture had been moved to the side and in the center of the room were boxes. Not just a few boxes, but boxes on top of boxes. She walked around them, reading the message written on the outside of them.

“There are two million, four hundred eighty-two thousand, six-hundred and ninety-eight ways I could tell you I'm sorry and it still wouldn't be enough, but there are eleven million, two-hundred-ninety-nine thousand, one hundred and six ways I could tell you that I love you, and it would just be the beginning. Each one-inch tile in these boxes is just the beginning of all the things I want to do with you in this life. I want to create a picture that will be seen for centuries, declaring to the world how much I love you.”

Junebug paused in the middle of the room and pressed her fist to her mouth. Tears glittered in her eyes, but didn't fall. This was the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for her. She sniffed and looked at the floor. Someone had carefully laid out some tiles in the shape of large arrows.

Curious, she followed the arrows to the kitchen. A laughing gasp slipped from her. Every free surface area was covered with mountains of bags of chocolate-filled marshmallows. It would take her a lifetime to eat all of them and she would be larger than the palace by the time she was finished. Shaking her head, she laughed again when she saw arrows made out of packets of hot chocolate mix.

Following the trail, she entered the master bedroom, stopped, and slowly sank down onto the carpet. This time the tears came. Large, monstrous tears with huge hiccupping sobs that shook her body. There were fluffy bunny slippers, furry kitten and puppy slippers, monkey slippers, panda slippers, cartoon-character slippers, and every assortment of fluffy, soft slippers known to man in the room. In the center of all of them, holding white, fluffy bunny slippers with tiny 'I love you' hearts on them, was Jameel.

He slowly walked over to her and knelt on one knee. She lifted her head when he cupped her cheek, caressing it with one hand. Reaching out, she took the slippers from him and hugged them to her chest.

“I love you.”

She sniffed. “You really do. No one would have done something this crazy for someone they didn’t.”

He laughed and leaned closer to give her a gentle kiss. “I missed you last night. I don’t ever want to spend another night away from you.”

“It sucked. Big time. Where were you?” she asked.

He twisted and sat down next to her. He waved his hand at all the slippers and shook his head. She watched the expressions dancing across his face.

God, but I love him!

“It took a while to get all of this arranged and coordinated. There are a lot of merchants in a multitude of countries that are very happy right now. We may be eating marshmallows for a while. I think I maxed out my credit card,” he teased.

“Well, at least we won’t go hungry,” she laughed.

He wiggled his nose. “No, we’ll just die of a sugar overdose.”

“I know of a better way to die.”

He looked at her. “How?”

She leaned into him and whispered. “By starving to death because we’re too busy making love.”

“I think we should start immediately,” he murmured.

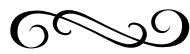
Junebug tossed the fluffy bunny slippers to the side, wound her arms around his neck, and captured his lips. They would have to start here because the bed was full at the moment.

She pushed him down onto the carpet and straddled him. Reaching down, she removed her tie-dyed oversized t-shirt and tossed it to the side. Clad only in her lacy bra and white cotton skirt, she leaned over him, her eyes smoldering.

“I call dibs on being on top,” she declared.

“I give. I give,” he chuckled while reaching up to cup her overflowing mounds in his palms.

Twenty-One



One Month Later:

Allison tapped her fingers impatiently on the steering column of the caterer's van. It had been tricky, but she and Mark had gotten themselves on the list of extra staff for the big function at the Simdan palace tonight. The new King of Simdan and his American wife were throwing a party. The list of guests included all the Jawahir royal family.

"You will be ready when we tell you."

Allison kept her expression cool as she stared in the rearview mirror at the former King of Simdan, the ugly, short, and portly uncle of the current king. He leaned forward behind her seat. His face was scarred, and his breath was rancid, as if he hadn't brushed his teeth in a few decades. Her gaze flashed over the other two men sitting quietly in the back near the double doors of the van.

"Our agreement was you get us inside the gate and we part ways," Mark stated.

Zulfiquar Kaffir's sneer pulled at the scar on his face. "You will have the alarms deactivated without anyone ever knowing?"

Allison glanced at the man again. "I said I would and I will."

"Turn here. There is a service road that was being used during the renovation of the palace. My man told me that it hasn't been closed off yet," Kaffir ordered.

“What about guards?” Mark asked, checking the weapon in his hand.

“There is only one here, and he has been well compensated to look the other way,” Kaffir replied.

Allison pulled down along the road when Kaffir pointed to it. She turned off the headlights and slowly pulled forward. A young man emerged out of the shadows and opened the gates. She eased the van forward.

Once they were clear of the gates, the man shut and locked them. Kaffir leaned forward again. She tilted her head, trying to put a margin of space between them.

“Turn right and you will be on the road that is for deliveries,” he instructed.

Allison waited as a van passed them before falling in behind it. The van she was driving was an exact duplicate of the one in front of her and the one coming up from behind. Once she had discovered the Saif-Ad-Din royal family would be attending, she had set her plan in motion.

Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel, wishing it was Bugs’ neck. She was going to kill the little bitch! She slowed when the vehicle in front of her pulled around the loop nearest the kitchen.

“Pull ahead into the shadows. We’ll get out there,” Kaffir said.

Allison and Mark stayed where they were as the three men exited the back of the van. They both kept a keen eye on the activities surrounding them. Allison pulled at the neck of her caterer uniform.

“Are you sure you are ready for this?” Mark asked.

“Are you?” she scoffed.

Mark chuckled. “The thought of you messing the bitch up is really turning me on.”

“Grow up,” she growled, pushing the door open and sliding out of the van.

Messing Bugs up was just going to be the beginning. The bitch had drained every, single damn account she had in the past month. The sweet, naïve hacker who was a champion for good had turned into a tenacious, conniving, little piece of shit. She was creating programs faster than was humanly possible!

And rubbing each downtick of my bank account in my face.

Junebug had locked her out of the accounts. She could see but not touch... and man, had she seen! One account after another, the balances had ticked down until they hit zero like the ticking of a clock moving backwards. When she first realized what was happening, she had tried to transfer the monies to a different account. She had been rewarded with a swarm of little bugs all over her screen. No matter what she had tried, all she could do was watch in horror as the balances continued to shrink.

“Let’s go,” Mark said, handing her a covered tray filled with tools and a weapon instead of food.

She took the tray and gave him a sharp nod. A grim smile curved her lips. Before the night was over, Junebug would find out they had a lot more in common than hacking.



“This is actually kind-of fun, Mid. If I had known, I wouldn’t have been scared about leaving the vault,” Junebug murmured to her sister as they stood off to the side of the ballroom.

“Everything is fine as long as you are the one behind the scenes, Junie. You know you hate real blood,” Midnight replied.

“Oh, yeah. Blood—”

She grimaced at the thought. Some of the wounds Midnight had come home with had made her gag. Game blood and wounds were a lot different than the real thing.

“Don’t feel bad. I hate it as well. That’s why I went into computers instead of medicine like Junayd,” Jameel chuckled.

Junebug sipped on her fruit drink and surveyed the room. Nearly a hundred people were in attendance for the event Raja Hadi, King of Simdan, was giving with his new bride, Katie Ashe, an American sign language translator who had saved his life. The whole thing was a ploy contrived between Raja and the older Saif-Ad-Din men to catch Raja's uncle Zulfiquar Kaffir and Colin Coldhouse who was still somewhere off the grid.

Junebug had barely recognized Raja. He had come to live with Harlem shortly before Rainbow had left. It was pretty awesome to be in the same room with two of the best agents in the world—and know who they were.

This is like watching my favorite James Bond movie playing out in real time, she mused.

“Are you doing alright?” Jameel murmured.

She looked up at him with a startled expression. “Are you kidding? This really is very dramatic.”

And Junebug didn't even know the half of it. It wasn't long until Katie was telling one of Raja's guards that Coldhouse had kidnapped her mom! Kathleen Ashe had been on her way to surprise Katie. Bugs had known and kept the secret, believing that since Kathleen had only gotten onto her radar at the last minute, no one else would know about her either. And then she was snatched at the airport!

Aimee, Midnight, Idella, Junebug, and Raja's guard Hussain hashed out the details of what to do. The men in the Jawahir family were left out of it in order to keep attention on them instead of the women who were going to rescue Kathleen. Junebug promised she would do everything she could to help the rescue plan go off without a hitch.

Midnight hugged her. “I'm glad you are on our side, Juniebug.”

“Always. Be careful. The guys are going to be furious when they find out what you, Idella, and Katie are doing,” she warned.

Midnight softly chuckled. “It won’t be the first time and I know it won’t be the last. They’ll live.”

Junebug stood in the corridor as her sister disappeared. Dread knotted her stomach. The excitement of the night had been replaced with anxiety. What if this was the last time she saw them? What if Coldhouse was successful? For the first time in a long while, Bugs wished Harlem were here to help.

“It won’t be the last time I see them,” she murmured to herself.

Use your superpower, Junie.

The whispered words her mom used to tell her flowed through her mind. A slow grin curved her lips. Harlem may not be here but she knew someone else who might be, someone who could help.



Junebug made her way through the corridors to the security room. She had been there earlier, which made navigating the endless maze of corridors easier. The security room was located in the sub-basement area of the palace. The lower level probably helped to keep the equipment cool, connect with underground utilities, and it was probably safer from a security point-of-view.

She showed the pass that Idella had given her earlier to a guard who bowed his head. Swiping the badge across the keypad, she mused that it might not hurt to do some updates on their system if she had time. This was Raja’s palace now, after all, and it never hurt to have a world-class superhero hacker try to break in to test a system.

She by-passed the main room where two security analysts were sitting in front of a bank of equipment. What she wanted to do needed to be done in private. She didn’t want to cause anyone to have a heart attack.

Turning the corner, she continued down another long corridor until she came to a heavy metal door. Everything still had that

fresh, new look to it from the construction that had been going on for the past year. She hummed under her breath as she swiped her keycard again to the panel. The click of the lock made her grin. She had tweaked the security clearance on her badge after Idella handed it to her, and could now go anywhere in the palace that she wanted.

She pushed the heavy door open and entered the server room. The room was chilly. She looked down the long bank of servers. The area was half the size of an Olympic swimming pool, with thick concrete walls, massive lines of conduits that protected the wiring, and a line of power walls behind a fireproof glass enclosure.

It didn't take her long to find and access the server control keyboard. She dragged over a stool that had been placed to the side and sat down. Pulling the tray with the computer forward, she typed in a series of commands.

"Hello, Junebug. My, you look lovely tonight."

Junebug grinned. "Hi, RITA. I'm at a party."

"Oh, do tell. It must be ritzy. What is the party for?" RITA asked, suddenly appearing next to her.

Junebug swiveled on the stool. "We are trying to catch bad guys. One of them has Katie's mom, Kathleen. I was wondering if you could help us."

RITA laughed, her body shimmering. "I *live* to catch bad guys. What do you need, love?"

"I need satellite tracking on this phone, a complete 3D model of the streets and buildings, and all possible escape routes for our people and Colin Coldhouse," Junebug explained.

"Ah, sweet. I get to test out the new satellites and software FRED and I have been working on."

Junebug tilted her head. "Who's FRED?"

RITA chuckled. "The sexiest alien AI you've ever seen."

"Alien...? I am so going to have to know more," Junebug breathed with excitement.

“First things first. Let’s kick some ass,” RITA said.

The AI shimmered and disappeared. Seconds later, information began to flood the screen. Everything she needed was there. Junebug reduced the information and divided it on the screen so she could analyze each one. She connected with the earpiece frequency Idella had given each member of the team.

“Turn left up at the next street,” she instructed, studying the SUV as it made the turn.

Junebug connected with the phone company and put Katie’s phone on the computer speaker. She had barely finished the connection when an alert came through. She wiggled her nose with distaste when she heard Coldhouse’s voice. He gave additional instructions. RITA must have been patched in as well because the information on her screen changed.

“We know where he is. Give us ten minutes to get in place,” Idella said.

Junebug pulled up one of the boxes on her screen. “I’ve uploaded a schematic of the apartment building. It’s going to be a difficult shot as the building is higher than the surrounding ones.”

“I need a place where I have a clear view of the roof, Bugs,” Idella replied.

She snorted out a frustrated breath. She really needed her bank of screens. If she had been smart, she would have kicked the two security analysts out of their comfy office.

“I can’t make buildings grow. Two blocks away, there’s a hotel. It is two stories higher. Looking at the blueprint, you should have a good view. Whether you can hit something from that far away and in the dark is another matter,” she said.

“I can hit it,” Idella retorted.

Junebug bit the tip of her finger as she watched the dots moving on her screen. RITA was tracking each person through their phone. The green dots outnumbered the single red dot, so it was hard to tell who was who.

“I’m in place,” Idella said.

Junebug listened in tense silence as the mission unfolded. Her heart ached for Katie. She decided that she didn’t have what it took to be Jane Bond. She had never listened in real-time as her sister went on a mission. It was a lot scarier than she had imagined.

“I’m at the top,” Midnight murmured.

“Two floors to go,” Raja’s guard Hussain replied.

Nearly a dozen green dots suddenly appeared on her screen as they spread out. That would be the guys heading their way: Junayd, Tarek, Raja, and their security. Aimee had alerted them.

She leaned forward, unmuted the mic, and spoke. “Cavalry is on the way.”

“I’m in the elevator heading to the top,” Katie said.

“Katie,” Raja’s deep voice boomed through the computer audio. *“Katie, I’m here, habibti. Keep calm. I will not let Coldhouse hurt you or your mother.”*

“I know. I... love you, Raja,” Katie whispered.

The emotion between Katie and Raja brought tears to Junebug’s eyes. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like for Jameel to be in that kind of danger.

“Hello,” Katie shakily greeted.

I’m coming up.”

Junebug was focused on the single green dot moving up the stairs. She wanted to reassure Katie that she wasn’t alone. She could see additional dots drawing nearer. Instead, she bit down on her knuckle. She didn’t want to distract any of them.

“Hello, Mr. Coldhouse?” Katie called. *“Where’s my mom?”*

“I must say, I was surprised that you actually followed directions.”

Junebug had to strain to hear what Coldhouse was saying.

“Where’s my mom? She hasn’t done anything to you. Why do you have to be such a jerk!” Katie practically shouted.

“Go, Katie! You tell him!” she muttered.

“Jerk?” Coldhouse laughed. *“Oh, child. You really should have been more careful who you associate with. You picked the wrong friends, Katie. There is no one to blame for this but yourself.”*

“Oh, I so hope you die a Games of Throne death, you-you-you, argh!”

“I could more accurately say the same to you,” Katie retorted.

“Enough with the chit-chat. Step into the room.”

“Don’t go, Katie! Don’t do it!”

“I’m not moving anywhere until I know where my mom is.”

“You tell him, Katie. Punch him in the gnomes! Kick him in the peanuts!”

Junebug slid off the stool and did a series of fists punches and a kick.

“Kick him so hard his you-know-whats pop up and choke him.”

Her enthusiasm dimmed when she heard Katie’s distressed cry. Sliding back onto the stool, she stared at the screen, wishing the stupid construction company had installed cameras on the roof!

“Mom!” Katie cried with distress. *“Please... I just... I just want my mom. Why can’t... why can’t you go away?”*

“It’s personal now.” Coldhouse replied.

“Personal....”

She was about to say a few choice words, but stopped with a grimace. It wasn’t a great reaction, but she could relate a tiny-bit with the personal feeling. Her response to Allison had been on a totally personal level.

The creak of the door opening caused her to lean back to see who it was. She waved a hand to Jameel when he closed the

door and scanned the room. From his not-so-happy expression, he must have been looking for her.

“Oops,” she muttered.

“What are you doing?” Jameel demanded.

“Helping to take down Coldhouse. Katie is with him now,” she said.

Jameel frowned and studied the screen. She pointed to the green dots.

“The green dots are our side. The red dot is Coldhouse. I’ve been listening to what’s going down over the earpieces that Idella gave everyone,” she explained.

“You shouldn’t have disappeared without telling me. Raja’s insane uncle and his generals are in the palace. If they had come across you first—”

“They don’t know who I am. I had to help them, Jameel,” she said.

He brushed his fingers along her flushed cheek. “I was worried.”

They both grew quiet when Coldhouse’s voice rang out again. The situation grew more tense when they heard gunfire erupt. Junebug gripped Jameel’s hand. She jerked forward when Midnight called her name.

“Whoa! Junebug, we’ve got a boomer,” Midnight said.

She unmuted the mic and spoke in what she hoped was a calm voice.

“Midnight, I need photos of the vest. I need to know what the detonation mechanism looks like.”

Katie spoke in the background. Junebug waited while Midnight spoke to her. Their voices were muffled.

“*No worries. We’re covered.*” Midnight reassured Junebug.

A second later, several images came through. Jameel cursed under his breath. Coldhouse had fitted *Katie’s mom* with the explosive vest.

“I’ll find Tarek,” Jameel said.

“Wait.”

She reached out and placed her hand on his arm.

“You want to cut the red wire—” Doubt filled her as she tried to remember for sure. “Hold on...”

“What are you doing?” Jameel asked.

“I’m checking with one of my friends. RITA, can you see if Nitro is online?” Junebug requested, giving RITA the name of the game and Nitro’s username.

She shook her head when Jameel mouthed ‘Who’s RITA?’

In seconds, she heard Nitro’s familiar voice. She scrunched her face when she realized that he wouldn’t recognize hers. She had always used the voice distorter.

“Hey, Nitro. I need your help,” she said.

“*Who’s this?*” Nitro asked.

“RITA, can you upload the pictures of the vest to Nitro for me?” Junebug requested.

“*Holy shitty-pants. Who is this?*” Nitro’s voice grew uneasy.

Junebug sighed. “Bugs.”

“*I’ve talked to Bugs, and darling, he don’t sound nothin’ like you,*” Nitro retorted.

“I used a voice distorter. Listen, I don’t have much time. This thing could go off any second,” she said.

“*You mean... this is for real?*” Nitro asked, his voice suddenly serious.

“Yeah, it’s real.”

“*Tell her to cut the red wire, man. We’re losing the game,*” a male voice called out behind Nitro.

“Shut up, Pug. You don’t know nothin’ about bombs. Listen, if you really are Bugs, this is a class-act. Whoever did this knows what they’re doing. Most of the time it would be the red wire, but look at the ends. Whoever put this together

knows most experts would go for that, but he switched the wires. You gotta clip the green one first, then the red one on the left side,” Nitro explained.

Junebug rubbed her hands along her thighs and spoke into the mic. “He said you want to cut the green wire first, then the red one on the left side. Once you do that, you can remove the vest. It will still be active, but it won’t explode when you take it off.”

“Please tell me you aren’t getting this information from one of your gamer friends, sis?” Midnight begged.

“Nitro is not just a gamer. He’s also one of the military’s best explosive experts. We’re good,” she promised, reaching up and gripping Jameel’s hand.

Junebug and Jameel waited, listening as the drama unfolded. Horror gripped her when she heard more shouts, Idella’s name, gunfire, and finally an explosion. Her gaze remained locked on the green dots. She blinked when the red one flickered and went out.

“RITA, what happened?” She leaned forward and unmuted the computer. “Is everyone alright?”

“All’s good, Junie. All’s good. Coldhouse is gone... for good. There isn’t enough superglue to put the guy back together again.” Midnight’s voice rang in her ears.

Katie’s mom and all the rest of them were safe. She bowed her head and closed her eyes as relief flashed through her.

“You did good, Junebug! You’re brilliant!” Jameel whooped.

She laughed when he pulled her off the stool and into his arms. He swung her around in a circle before setting her down on her feet with a triumphant grin. She wound her arms around his neck and pulled his head down to give him a long kiss.

“If you two ever want a job, CRI would love to have you,” RITA said with amusement.

Jameel released her with a startled expression and looked around the room.

“Who was that?”

Junebug looked at the computer screen and laughed when the screen filled with dancing, smiling bugs.

“Just a new friend,” she said, pulling his head down again.

Twenty-Two



“Well... well... well, if it isn’t Mr. and Mrs. Smith,” a dry voice commented.

Jameel pulled back at the mocking voice. Distracted by their celebration of Coldhouse’s death, he had missed the sound of the door opening. He turned, pulling Junebug partially behind him. Allison and Mark Hammer stood inside the doorway. His eyes flickered to the gun in Allison’s hand.

“I thought you didn’t like guns,” he said.

Allison scoffed and shook her head as she slowly walked forward. “Times change.”

He didn’t miss the way Allison’s eyes narrowed on Junebug—or the anger in them. He slid his arm down, trying to push her further behind him. He stopped moving when Allison tsked.

“Oh, no. You are not going to protect that thieving little bitch,” Allison grimly replied.

An inelegant snort behind him made Jameel wince.

“If you want to see a thieving little bitch, look in the mirror,” Junebug retorted.

Jameel was surprised when Hammer laughed. Allison was not as amused. She nodded at him.

“Hammer, take our princely hacker. I’ll follow with the bug,” she coolly replied.

“No!” Jameel growled.

Allison lifted the weapon in her hand. “Hammer can carry you out over his shoulder or you can walk. Or better yet... he can carry your arm candy over his shoulder. All I need is her brain. I don’t care if she loses a limb or two. In fact, I might just enjoy watching it rot off.”

“You’re just jealous because I’m smarter and better at hacking than you,” Junebug muttered.

Jameel stepped closer to Allison in alarm when he saw the fury blaze in the other woman’s eyes. He lifted his hands. They had a better chance of escape if neither one of them were injured.

“I’ll go. Promise me you won’t hurt her,” he said.

The women spoke at the same time.

“You trust *her* to keep her word?” Junebug scoffed.

“No promises,” Allison said.

Jameel flashed a frustrated glare at Junebug. She shrugged. He knew by her mutinous expression that she wasn’t going to keep her mouth shut.

“She started it,” Junebug muttered.

Allison’s mouth turned up into a sneer. “And here I thought you only had the *height* of a kindergartener.”

“It didn’t have to be this way!” Bugs exclaimed. “You wanted to be friends, I know it. You didn’t just happen to hang out with us for years without doing a damn thing to us, Allison!”

“Didn’t you learn anything from Harlem?” Allison asked. “People like us don’t make friends.”

“Turn around and put your hands behind your back,” Hammer ordered.

Jameel turned around and put his hands behind his back. He shook his head at Junebug when she took a step forward. Hammer wrapped a plastic zip tie around his wrists and pulled it—tight. He winced when the strap cut into his flesh.

“I need my hands if you want me to ever use a computer again,” he muttered.

“We only need your brain. Someone else can do the typing,” Hammer said.

“You don’t have to be such an ass,” Junebug stated.

“You know, for someone so pretty, you sure have a nasty mouth. I wonder what else you can do with it,” Hammer commented.

A blind rage swept through Jameel. He swiveled on his heel and headbutted Hammer. Hammer’s head snapped back and he loudly cursed, grabbing his bloody nose.

Hammer retaliated with a fist to Jameel’s stomach followed by one to the jaw. The blows knocked the air out of him and sent him sprawling. Junebug released a cry of rage and knelt down over him, gently threading her hand through his hair. She glared up at Allison and Hammer who was wiping the blood dripping from his nose with the back of his hand.

“How do you know about Harlem?” Junebug demanded.

Jameel tilted his head and worked his jaw. A frown creased his brow. She was wondering about Harlem at a time like this?

“Do you think you are the only kid he got rid of?” Allison scoffed. “Do you want to know why your sanctimonious guilt trip about my family did nothing to me? It’s because they weren’t my real family. They were my gatekeepers and my fulltime surveillance team, hired by Harlem. And their accident was no accident. The only mistake was they were supposed to die. But... sympathy has its advantages, and baby, I milked it for all I could get.”

Jameel could feel the tremble in Junebug’s hand. His gaze flickered between her and Allison. He struggled to sit up. Junebug guided him back to his feet.

“You were one of Harlem’s kids?” Jameel asked.

The sneer on Allison’s face grew. “I was the brilliant would-be hacker that he wanted to use. You weren’t the only software prodigy. Harlem saw my potential and trained me... until he realized that I didn’t want to waste my talents on saving some poor innocent that I didn’t know. I saw where the real money and power came from. Men like Bronislav might be a dime a

dozen, but darling, they have money and power. A smart hacker can access both—certainly a helluva lot more than you have with all your charity donations and your time wasted doing what? Scaring little gamer boys into being more polite? Junebug,” she laughed.

“Damn. You definitely don’t look like that vicious of a bitch,” Hammer commented with a low whistle.

Allison shot her partner an impatient glare. “Of course I don’t. Unlike Sleeping Beauty here, I can walk out in the world without anyone suspecting who I am or what I can do. Harlem liked those of us who could blend in, and I learned. It’s unfortunate that he didn’t, huh? Harlem didn’t appreciate one of his precious protégés using the skills he taught them for ‘The Forces of Evil’. So I had to eliminate him.”

Junebug stared with wide eyes at Allison. “You killed Harlem?”

Allison tsked again. “You really are a princess, aren’t you? Gonna mourn a man that you hated now? Of course I killed him and disposed of the body. I knew how he thought, the same way I knew how Jam-man thought... and how a hermit hacker named Bugs who was in love with a prince would think.”

“You were the one who sent my information to Dimitri. You made me think Harlem was still alive,” Junebug whispered.

“I needed to draw you out. What better way than for you to think Harlem was still alive and knew exactly where you were? During a random search, I discovered Harlem had been part of a program called Operation Rebirth. Imagine my surprise when I discovered Hammer had been a part of it as well. Dimitri Mihailov had been making a few inquiries. He is rich... and by most accounts a decent guy. What better pawns could I ask for? I look forward to introducing myself to him and Sergi next. I’m sure they could use another skillful computer nerd in their very vast, very rich corporation,” Allison chuckled.

“What about Bronislav?” Jameel asked.

Allison shook her head. “Once I get my money from Bronislav for the delivery of the two of you, I don’t give a rat’s ass what happens to him. I don’t imagine he’ll be around much longer, personally. But... neither will either of you. He has a temper, you know? And the two of you are infuriating.”

“Enough,” Hammer said. “Once Kaffir does his thing, this place is going to be a madhouse. We need to move.”

Allison nodded and waved her pistol at them. Jameel stepped forward, his mind racing. He had no idea how Allison and Hammer planned on getting them out of the palace without being seen.

Hammer opened the door to the server room, peered out, and motioned for Allison to go. She exited the room. Jameel followed her when Hammer motioned for him to move. He paused when Hammer gripped his arm in a bruising grasp.

“One false move and your bug will be the first one I put a bullet in, understand?” Hammer warned in a low voice.

“Yes.”

Junebug muttered an unladylike word behind him. He bowed his head to hide his smile. His ‘bug’ had a backbone made of steel.

He was surprised when Allison turned to the right. It didn’t take him long to realize that Kaffir must have shared information about the maze of tunnels located under the palace with her. He worked his hands back and forth. He gritted his teeth when the plastic cut into his flesh.

They twisted and turned through the dark tunnels until he wasn’t sure where they were. Allison held up one hand and pressed the barrel of her gun to his temple with the other when shouts and gunfire echoed through the tunnel.

“No need to wait for Kaffir and his men,” she murmured before motioning for them to go in the opposite direction.

They passed through a round area with multiple tunnels leading off of it. Allison pulled her phone up and glanced at the screen before she took the fourth passage to the right of where they had entered. He rolled his shoulders and continued

to work at the binding. Hammer had pulled the strap so tight that his fingers were growing numb.

He frowned when he noticed that Junebug was no longer walking right behind him, but had slowed until there was a growing gap between them. Worry gnawed at him. He stumbled on something on the floor and turned his attention to Allison's back.

When he turned to look around again for Junebug, he was shocked to see a huge black man behind him. The man placed a finger to his lips and swirled a nasty-looking knife in his other hand before sliding it between Jameel's flesh and the plastic. Relief and pain immediately swept through Jameel. The man motioned for Jameel to step aside and stop.

Jameel watched as the man walked by him on silent feet. Allison, intent on their escape and confident that she was still in charge, continued on her way, oblivious to the change in dynamics. He rubbed at his wrists, wincing at the torn flesh. Once he felt confident Allison wouldn't hear him move, he turned back the way they had come. He needed to find Junebug and make sure she was alright. If the man was who he suspected—

“Junebug,” he whispered.

A muffled sob was his only warning before Junebug appeared out of the darkness and threw her arms around his neck. She buried her face against his chest. He ran his hands up and down her back, ignoring the pain caused by the movement.

“Hammer?”

“Dead.”

“Was that—?”

She tilted her head back and nodded. “Yes.”



“I'll go first and make sure everything is clear,” Allison said, turning around.

She jerked back several steps. Her hand instinctively started to raise the weapon in her hand. Pain flashed through her arm and her fingers opened when another hand wrapped around her wrist and twisted. She felt the fragile bone of her ulna snap.

A low moan of pain slipped from her and she cradled her arm. Terror, and the certainty that she was about to face justice, poured through her mind. She wouldn't go down without a fight.

“Hello, Allison.”

“I see you are just as polite as ever before a kill, Harlem. I thought you were dead,” she replied.

Harlem chuckled. “It would appear I have a hard time dying,” he dryly remarked.

“So it would seem,” she retorted, looking over his shoulder.

“If you are wondering where Hammer is... he contracted a sudden sore throat. He won't be joining you here... maybe in hell, but not here,” Harlem promised.

Allison pursed her lips. “It's not like you to play with your kills. Can I at least hope you squashed that pretty little bug as well? That would make dying a touch more satisfying, knowing she was dead as well.”

Harlem shook his head. “No, Junie won't be joining you.”

Allison stared at the man that her childish hopes and dreams had centered around before he used her for his own agenda. He had never cared what she wanted, just like every other man she had known. She lifted her broken wrist to her chest to give it more support.

“I used to imagine you as my father,” she admitted.

Harlem raised an eyebrow. “If you are hoping for sympathy, Allison, you shouldn't have shot me in the back and dumped my body in the river.”

“Yeah, I should have cut your fucking head off to make sure you stayed dead!” she snapped.

“Temper, temper. That was always one of your problems,” he replied.

Allison pursed her lips to keep them from trembling. “You could have helped more. Instead, you threw me away like I was yesterday’s spoiled meal.”

“Spoiled... yes. Threw you away, no. I made sure that you had a safe and loving family,” he replied.

She snorted. “Safe? Loving? Neither one of them understood me! They treated me like I was some kind of freak. ‘Allison, try to blend in.’ ‘Allison, you shouldn’t hack into the school system.’ ‘Allison, you know we can’t afford a new computer every year for you.’ They wanted me to be *normal*! I wasn’t normal, Harlem. You knew that and you put me in purgatory! It was hell receiving *dolls* when I knew I could be writing software that could bring down the entire global financial district if I wanted.”

“Which is why you didn’t fit. You were smart, but you lacked the ability to control your emotions, to think beyond your wishes in the moment to what your actions would lead to. Power comes with responsibility, and you never did respect anyone who tried to teach you,” he said.

Hatred helped her block the pain coursing through her. She slid out the knife hidden inside her jacket and struck, hoping to take Harlem by surprise. His hand shot out and he gripped her wrist.

Her eyes widened with shock and pain. This time the pain didn’t come from her wrist, but from her side. She opened her mouth, but no sound emerged.

He had punctured her lung. Her legs collapsed under her. Harlem caught her and gently lowered her to the ground. She gripped his jacket, denial in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, child. I never wanted it to be this way,” he said.

She moved her lips, trying to force her last words out. The edge of death was closing in. There was no chill or pain, just a sense of certainty. She moved her lips again.

“How?”

It was the one question that she had to know before she died.
How had he survived? How could he be alive?

He shook his head sadly. "I can't die. I've been alive for over three thousand years. It is one of those mysteries in life that I've never found the answer to."

Epilogue



“Are you alright?” Junebug asked, running her hands over Jameel’s face.

“Yes. My wrists hurt, but I’ll live. I’m more worried about you. We’ve got to get out of here. If that is who you said it is, I have to protect you,” he muttered, looking down the narrow tunnel.

She nodded and held his hand. She had tried to memorize the way they came in case they were able to escape. Her eyes slid over Mark Hammer’s body. Blood was pooled around his head. Thankfully, he was lying face down so she didn’t have to see his face or the wound.

“This way.”

She led Jameel back along the maze of tunnels until they reached the corridor that housed the main server room. She didn’t stop until they were standing in front of the elevator. He leaned forward and pressed the button.

“Your wrists!” she exclaimed with dismay, catching her first glimpse of the raw flesh.

“I’ll heal,” he replied, pulling her into his arms.

Before he could kiss her, the doors opened. They stepped into the empty compartment. Jameel pressed the button for the second floor. She wound her arms around his waist and buried her face in his chest as the lift rose.

Her body was trembling uncontrollably. She wasn’t sure if it was a reaction to what they had just been through or if it was

from seeing Harlem... in the flesh.

He had been so silent that she hadn't heard him take out Hammer. Her plan had been to put some space between herself and Jameel and Allison. If she could somehow take out Hammer, then she could stop Allison.

She had let the space grow until it was nearly ten feet. Mark had tried to hurry her before the gap got that large, but she had made her voice small and fearful as she told him, "I'm sorry, I'm so short and I can't... I'm slow... I'm sorry."

He had rolled his eyes and growled at her, pushing her in the back to make her keep pace with the others, but that just caused her to stumble.

She was getting ready to make her move at the next turn in the tunnel when Hammer suddenly disappeared. Harlem had walked by her, silent as a jungle cat stalking his prey, a blood-soaked knife in his hand. He had looked at her, put a finger to his lips, and continued on until he disappeared from sight.

She had been shocked. Leaning back against the wall, she had remained frozen. It was as if her limbs and her mind were disconnected from each other. It wasn't until Jameel appeared that her joy at seeing him unlocked her frozen mind and body.

The feeling was quickly replaced with a need to flee. The fight or flight theory was definitely real. She had been ready to fight Hammer and Allison with every fiber of her body, but one look at Harlem and she couldn't flee fast enough!

The ping of the elevator and the opening of the doors into the bright light of a hallway teeming with activity made her laugh with relief. Jameel's oldest brother turned with a frown when he saw them.

"Jameel! Where have you been? I was about to send out a search party for you," Qadir growled.

"Oh, we were just taking care of a few things," Jameel replied with a crooked grin.

Qadir frowned. "What happened to your face? Did you run into a wall?"

Jameel lifted a hand to rub at his bruised jaw. Qadir reached out and gripped his arm, looking at his blood and torn flesh with a concerned expression. Jameel pulled his arm free and sighed.

“There are a couple additional bodies in the tunnels below. A mercenary named Mark Hammer and a woman named Allison Turnwell. They were working for Bronislav,” Junebug said, wrapping her arm around Jameel’s waist.

Jameel looked down at her with a frown. “What about—?”

She shook her head. “He’ll be gone. He never sticks around... unless he has unfinished business.”

“Does he?”

A shiver ran through her at Jameel’s quiet question. She thought about it, and then she shook her head.

“No, I don’t think he does,” she finally said.



Moscow, Russia:

One month later

“That will be all. Set it down and get out,” Andrius snapped at his manservant who was hovering nearby with a tray containing his afternoon refreshments.

The man placed the tray on the table near the window, bowed, and made a hasty retreat from the room, closing the rich, double mahogany doors behind him. Andrius leaned heavily on his cane and walked over to the table. He poured a cup of tea and wearily walked over to sit in a chair in front of the fire.

God, he hated the cold weather. It was snowing again. A wet, sticking cold snow that caused every bone in his body to ache. He set the cup down on the end table, spilling a little on the antique oak finish.

He had returned to Moscow when a former government official and ally of his warned him that he was about to be arrested in Lithuania. He had barely made it out.

Settling into the cushioned armchair, he retrieved his phone and pressed the number on the screen. After the tenth ring, he hung up. He tried a different number and the same thing happened. He slammed his cell phone on the table when the third number did the same. Irritation soared inside him when the door behind him opened.

“I told you to get out!” he snapped.

The clink of china-on-china made him twist in the chair. His scowl of annoyance turned to one of surprise when he saw a huge black man pouring a cup of tea. What surprised him even more was where the man must have gotten the fragile china teacup, as there had only been one on the tray and it was next to him.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded in Russian.

“It is amazing how a nice cup of hot tea on a cold day can warm your insides,” the man answered in Russian. “Isn’t it?” he finished in English.

“Who are you and what do you want?” Andrius barked in English.

The man took a sip of the tea, added a cube of sugar, picked up a small spoon, and stirred his tea before he turned and walked over to the twin chairs in front of the fire. Andrius twisted, following the man’s movements with his eyes. He swallowed past the sudden restriction in his throat. The man moved with the grace and silence of a lion on the hunt.

“It is a shame about Allison. I had such high hopes for her as a child,” the man stated as he sat down in the chair next to him.

“What happened to her?” Andrius asked, his throat dry.

The man shook his head with regret and took another sip of his tea. “Dead, I’m afraid. Along with Coldhouse and Mark Hammer, though I wasn’t responsible for Coldhouse.”

“What happened to Coldhouse?” Andrius asked.

The man chuckled. “You could say he fell to pieces... or was blown away. I can never remember the idioms the kids today use.”

Andrius slid his hand along the arm of the chair until he was gripping the handle of his cane. His gaze flickered to the door. Perhaps his manservant or his guards would come in to check on him.

“They’re dead... all of them,” the man shared, stretching his long legs out with a sigh as if he were a friend dropping by for a cup of tea and a conversation instead of an unknown killer.

“Why are you here?”

The man glanced at him before turning his attention back to the fire burning in the fireplace.

“I would have thought that was obvious. You did call me. I was planning on staying out of it... but—”

“It was you? You are the one Coldhouse warned me not to call? Why are you here? If you were offered a bounty, I’ll double it for you to walk away. I’ll triple it if you work for me.”

“I’m here to kill you,” the man calmly replied.

Andrius breathed in a shocked breath and warily watched as the man finished sipping his tea and placed the fine china cup on the table. He used the cloth napkin to wipe away the tea that had spilled from Andrius’s cup, and Andrius watched with fascination as the man snapped the napkin before folding it with the precision of a military guard folding the flag that covered a soldier’s coffin. When he was done, the man replaced the napkin on the table.

“Money and power are a funny thing. When you’ve lived as long as I have, they just don’t seem to be that important anymore.”

Andrius frowned. “Not important? You’d have to be a hundred years old for neither of those things to matter,” he scoffed.

The man chuckled. “I’m a little older than that.”

Andrius shook his head. The man didn't look a day over thirty-five... forty tops. He curled his fingers around the top of his cane and pressed the release under the handle.

“What next? Obviously, you are not interested in truths, and from what you say, money or power. What is left? You plan to kill me? For what purpose? Some petty grievance or perhaps revenge for some slight I may have made?”

The man leaned his head back and sighed. “Evil really doesn't change over the centuries. You're all the same at a core level: shallow, pathetic, full of yourself, unable to see the larger picture. Sometimes it is necessary to kill evil because it has run its course long enough. In your case, I guess you could say I have some petty grievances and a thirst for revenge that not even your fine tea can quench.”

“Tell me what you think I've done. Surely, we can come to a compromise,” he said.

The man shook his head and continued to stare at the fire. “I could have looked the other way... possibly... if you hadn't brought Junebug into it. That girl... is special. She makes a man realize that there are times when you can't look the other way. She's a lot like her mother was, and God knows, I loved her mother.”

“I'll promise to leave her alone,” Andrius swore, desperation building inside him as the certainty he was about to die hit him. “I'll even pay to have her protected.”

The man chuckled and looked at him. A cold sheen broke out along Andrius' skin. He might have felt he had a chance to negotiate for his life if he hadn't looked into the man's eyes. He expected to see the same cold, hard look he had witnessed time-after-time in Coldhouse's eyes. Even Allison had that same icy disregard. None of that was in this man's eyes. He was looking at the Devil who was staring back at him with a look of pity.

Anger rose inside him and he snapped, “Can I at least know the name of the man who is going to end my shallow, pathetic life?”

The man looked back at the fire in silence as if he were contemplating whether he would answer the question. Andrius took the precious seconds the man appeared distracted to unsheathe the sword hidden in his cane. He swung it in an arc, slashing down with the sword as the man was turning his head. Shock ricocheted through him when the man stopped the blade from slicing through his throat by grabbing the slender, razor-sharp blade in his hand.

Andrius tried to pull it free, but the man just tightened his grip. Blood pooled along the bottom of the man's hand. Andrius warily watched the man as he rose from his seat. He released the sword and held his hand out, his face paling as the man stood over him.

"Harlem. My name. It's Harlem Jones... now. Over the centuries, I've gone by many more, but you can know me as Harlem."

Harlem placed the blood-stained sword on the end table before he reached down and plucked the neatly folded napkin off the table near him. Andrius watched as Harlem dabbed at the cut across his palm. His mouth grew dry and his heart began to pound when the cut sealed itself before his eyes.

"Who are you?" he choked out.

Harlem smiled, picked up the sword, and wiped it with the blood-stained napkin before he pocketed the piece of cloth. Mesmerized by the elegant movement, he didn't even realize that Harlem had swung the clean blade in his direction. He lifted his hand when he felt warm liquid pool along the neck of his sweater. Pulling his fingers away, he noticed they were coated with fresh blood—his blood.

He tried to draw in a breath of air... to protest, but there was only a gurgling sound. Raising his gaze, he looked at Harlem who was standing over him with a sad smile. Harlem placed the sword back on the end table.

Andrius wanted to fight the fog that was clouding his vision. He wanted... needed answers! He gripped the arm of the chair, leaving a perfect handprint made of blood, when Harlem picked up the fragile china cup off the table and pocketed it.

Andrius fell to the floor, knocking his sword and his half-full teacup off the table onto the antique Persian area rug. Through the legs of the table, he watched as Harlem Jones exited the room as silently as he had appeared before the darkness of death took him.



The palace of Jawahir

Jameel woke with a start. He relaxed when he felt Junebug's warm body snuggled against his. It took a second for him to realize that her playing with his chest hair was what had woken him.

He chuckled and grasped her hand. "Do I even want to know what time it is?" he asked in a sleepy voice.

"Probably not. I can't sleep anymore, but I didn't want to leave you wondering where I was."

"Where are you going?"

"I wanted to check in to see if any new information has come in about Andrius Bronislav. There's been no sighting of him in more than a month. Plus, I've been offered a job to test out a new game. Do you want to play it with me?" she asked.

He glanced at the clock and groaned. "It's three in the morning. We didn't get to bed until almost midnight."

"I know. Do you want a hot chocolate? I think I would like a hot chocolate," she mumbled, rolling away.

He pulled her back against him. She giggled when he tickled her neck. He reached around and cupped her breast.

"I'll be there in a few minutes," he replied, smothering a yawn.

"Okay. I'll meet you in the game room," she said, wiggling out of his reach.

Jameel fell back against the pillows with another low groan. Junebug was hopping across the floor, fully dressed but pulling on a pair of her fluffy slippers. She must have already been awake for a while because he knew they had both been naked when they went to bed... he glanced at the clock again and shook his head... three hours ago.

Pushing the sheets back, he stumbled out of bed toward the bathroom. He was going to need a long, cold shower to wake up. He was also going to have to quit being so protective of Junebug or he was going to end up dying from lack of sleep. Turning on the shower, he stepped under the spray and sank down onto the marble seat built into the spacious stall. In seconds, he was sound asleep again with sweet dreams of Junebug dancing in his head.

Author's Note:

This series was a labor of love. I never expected to write it and after I released *Something About Aimee*, I knew it was special. In Junebug and Jameel's story, so many pieces came together that I wasn't expecting. Don't be surprised if you see more of Harlem. The man has me totally intrigued! LOL. The downfall of having such a vivid imagination is meeting characters that ignite my curiosity.

Here's to many more stories,

Susan

Aka S.E. Smith

Girls from the Street is related to two other series!

Read on to discover the universe.



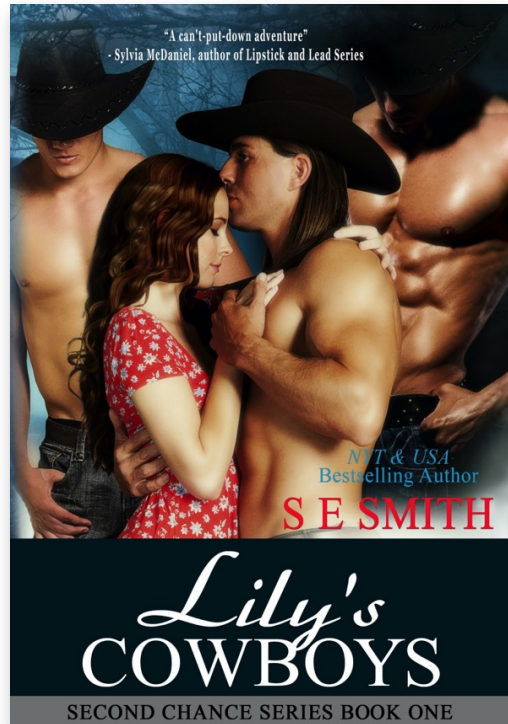
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[LILY'S COWBOYS](#)

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About the Author

S.E. Smith is an *internationally acclaimed, New York Times and USA TODAY Bestselling* author of science fiction, romance, fantasy, paranormal, and contemporary works for adults, young adults, and children. She enjoys writing a wide variety of genres that pull her readers into worlds that take them away.