

'What's wrong with it? It looks fine to me.'

Isabelle le Fanult stared at the computer screen, bending over to see the monitor. Colours flashed, and the school's logo came up just as it should.

'Look closely.' Raj Patel clicked the mouse again, 'There.' He and pointed at the screen. 'Did you see that?'

One web page segued smoothly to the next. Isabelle could see nothing wrong. Exasperated, she held up her hands.

'It hitches,' Raj explained, demonstrating again. 'Right there. There's a slight hesitation when you click on any link. As if it's going through a process it shouldn't go through.'

Cocking her head to one side, Isabelle held his gaze. 'OK . . . So it hitches. Why are you telling me this?'

The girl sitting at the computer next to Raj leaned over towards them. The light sparkled off the lenses off her narrow glasses and made her dark skin gleam.

'Because,' she said, 'it shouldn't hitch. And every computer in the school is doing precisely the same thing. It started last night and we can't trace the reason why.'

The girl's American accented voice was flat and steady. She didn't openly betray any excitement but Isabelle could see the nervousness in the way she held her hands, curled into tight fists.

Isabelle shot Raj a look and he shrugged.

'Dom discovered it first,' he said, with a hint of embarrassment. 'She's been working on this all day.'

'You'd have noticed it eventually.' Dom spoke without taking her gaze from the monitor.

She looked younger than her fifteen years - her figure was slim, and her black hair was clipped short and boyish - but Isabelle knew better than to dismiss her concerns.

Raj was in charge of security but Dom had helped him with tech for more than a year now. Everyone in the school found her both impressive and a little scary.

When it came to computers, there was almost nothing she couldn't do.

The headmistress ran a tired hand through her hair. It was late in the afternoon and her unruly locks had begun to escape from the clips that held them in place.

'The computers are networked,' she said doubtfully. 'Aren't they supposed to act the same?'

Dom rolled her eyes but said nothing. Isabelle got the feeling she was restraining herself.

Raj kept his tone patient. 'They're not supposed to act at all, Izzy. They're supposed to work normally and they almost are. But something's changed in the last twenty-four hours. I think we've been hacked. By someone who is very, very good at it.'

'I just,' Dom muttered, 'can't find the hack code.'

Isabelle turned her sharp eyes to the computer again. It sat in front of her, humming normally, a web page flooding its screen with primary colours. 'But you haven't been able to find any evidence of the hack other than this?' Raj shook his head. 'Whoever's done it is skilled. We're still trying to figure out what they're after.'

For the first time since this conversation began, a nervous chill ran down Isabelle's spine.

Cimmeria was home to children of the country's elite families. These were the offspring of billionaires, prime ministers and princes. They needed to be kept safe. All of them were vulnerable to kidnap and extortion. Each of them was worth a fortune to the wrong kinds of people.

Raj was one of the best security chiefs in the country – in addition to protecting Cimmeria, he ran a private security firm that included the prime minister among its clients. On his recommendation they'd already increased their CCTV, enhanced the electronic fences and replaced the school's locks with state of the art equipment.

Cimmeria may have looked like a school but in reality it was a fortress.

They were safe here. Isabelle was certain of it.

Straightening the hem of her black cashmere cardigan, she turned towards the door of the computer room, signalling the end of their discussion.

'Thank you for letting me know. Come back to me when you have something more concrete, Raj.'

But his voice followed her out into the hallway.

'I don't like it, Izzy,' he called after her. 'This could be bad.'

The headmistress didn't look back. Having spent a small fortune on the other security enhancements, she wasn't about to replace all the school's computers just because Raj was nervous. Besides, it was probably just kids anyway. All kids were good at computers these days. Look at Dom.

Still, Raj's concern was sobering, and as she walked from the classroom wing into the main building, Isabelle barely noticed the marble statues arrayed around her. The school's oak-panelled walls had been polished until they gleamed. Above her head crystal chandeliers sparkled like diamonds, but she was too lost in thought to see them.

She'd been headmistress for nearly a year now. Raj had been with her the whole time.

This was the first time she could remember seeing him nervous.

She replayed Dom's words in her mind, trying to decide how concerned she should be.

The truth was, they were all a little paranoid right now. It was that damned letter that had done it.

It had been a statement of intent, without question: 'What you have should be mine . . . If you don't return my inheritance to me I will take it back, Isabelle.'

One brick at a time if necessary . . . You knowl can do it . . . ‘

Her lips tightened at the memory of those words, written in her step-brother’s familiar, slanted script.

Nathaniel had taken the news of her promotion to headmistress very badly He’d threatened Lucinda, insulted the Board. He was vengeful and unstable – they had to be careful. But surely that was all hot air. He’d get it out of his system and move on. He’d never done anything violent before.

And yet...

The tone of that letter was different. It had been ice cold. And he’d stolen Lucinda’s papers and disappeared.

What if he was planning this all along? What if this was just the start?

Isabelle shook her head as if to make the thought go away. A slight time lag in computer responsiveness seemed like a minor problem. The IT guys could sort it out. Or Dom would fix it.

They simply couldn’t afford to panic every time something seemed slightly offkilter.

‘Coming through!’ A dark-haired boy tore past her, his navy blue school jumper rucked up from the speed of his movements.

‘Carter. A moment, please.’ Isabelle didn’t raise her voice but her air of authority was unmistakable.

Skidding to a stop, the boy turned back. Huge brown eyes gazed up at her from beneath a lowered brow. A shock of dark hair tumbled forward to his eyebrows.

He had a graze on his nose and she wondered if he’d been in another fight.

He’d never tell her, even if she asked.

A wave of protectiveness washed over her and she struggled to resist the urge to hug him. She cared about him so much he might as well be her own child.

She’d helped to raise him after his parents died seven years ago. But he was nearly twelve years old now, and he needed to realise the school’s rules applied to him, too.

‘No running in the halls. You know the rules.’ She glanced at her watch. ‘What are you doing out here? Shouldn’t you be in maths?’

Carter blinked at her guilelessly. ‘That’s why I was running. I’m late. Bankston’s going to kill me.’

Despite herself, Isabelle’s lips quirked up. It was impossible to discipline a child with eyes like that.

‘Make your way directly to class at a reasonable speed,’ she said, feigning sternness. ‘Tell Mr Bankston you have my permission to be late this one time.’

Without another word, he whirled and hurtled away.

The headmistress raised her voice, ‘But don’t do it again. And I said reasonable speed.’

At the end of the hall, Carter skipped as he tried to force himself to slow down.

She fought back another smile. He’d had a growth spurt recently – suddenly he was nearly as tall as her. The girls were starting to notice him. Things would

change for Carter soon – she hoped he was ready for it. After all he'd been through . . .

The phone in her pocket buzzed and she answered it brusquely. 'Isabelle.' It was one of the security guards. 'Something's wrong. The gate keeps opening and closing on its own. We can't seem to control it.'

'Oh, good.' Isabelle pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. Her day just kept getting worse. 'The computers are acting up, too. Let's get Raj's IT guys to look at this – maybe there's a wiring problem.'

'I'll call him,' the guard said doubtfully. 'But it doesn't look like a wiring problem to me.'

Isabelle stopped walking. 'What do you mean?'

'I don't know, exactly,' the guard said. 'It's just... it's not randomly opening and closing. It's moving with intelligence. If you reach for it, it pulls away. You turn your back and it slams open. It's as if it can see us.' He paused as if deciding to say what he said next. 'I think someone's operating it from outside the school.'

Isabelle's heart stuttered.

'How could they do that?' she asked. 'It's a gate.'

'Yeah, it's a gate. But it's an electric gate wired into the school's mainframe computer . . .'

An awful feeling of inevitability chilled Isabelle's blood. If someone hacked the computers could they hack they CCTV?

'I don't like it . . .' Raj had said.

She turned back towards the computer lab and broke into a run. 'Call Raj on his mobile,' she said, her voice urgent and breathless. 'Tell him what's happening. Tell him I'm on my way to him now.'

In the wide, empty hallway her panicked footsteps echoed incongruously.

Around her, oil paintings of regal women in silk and pearls, and bearded men in stiff, 19th-century suits, stared down at her with disapproval as she rushed back towards the classroom wing.

What are you doing to our school? Their faces seemed to say. We trusted you. You must protect it.

As she ran, two questions circulated in Isabelle's mind: Would Nathaniel really do this? Would he go this far?

Would he attack Cimmeria Academy?

She didn't want to answer that question. She didn't even want to think about it.

She wanted to get back to Raj and work this thing out. Fast.

She was almost there when the lights went out.

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From the classrooms around her Isabelle heard gasps as the overhead projectors and computers powered down. It was a bright, sunny day - she could still easily see where she was going, but she slowed down anyway – her ribs seemed to compress her lungs and her breath came in short gasps.

The gates, the computers, the lights. This was no coincidence.

‘Everyone stay in your seats . . . ’ The commanding voices of teachers filtering through the closed doors helped her to focus.

A nearby door opened and Jerry Cole peered out at her, blinking owlishly through his glasses. ‘Isabelle? What’s going on?’

She forced herself to sound normal and in control as she spoke to the science teacher. ‘Keep the children in the classroom. Let the other teachers know to do the same. I’m going to see Raj – find out what’s happening.’

She saw concern dawn in his face.

‘Raj . . . ?’

She didn’t stop to explain why she was seeing the security consultant about a power outage. There wasn’t time.

In the now-dim computer room, and surrounded by dead screens, Raj was on his phone, issuing a steady flow of commands. Next to him, Dom was feverishly typing on her laptop. Powered by battery, it was the only computer still working.

‘Trace it through the external sites . . . ’ Raj was saying. ‘Yes, I know how they work but you know how we work. Get it done. See if you can find who’s behind this.’

He set down his phone and looked at her – she asked the question with her eyes.

‘It’s a deliberate attack,’ he said quietly. Isabelle lowered her head to her hands as he continued. ‘The computers, the phone system, the gate, the lights – anything connected to the school’s server is compromised.’

‘Can we get the lights back on at least?’ She looked through the window. It would be dark in four hours. The building housed more than two hundred students – they couldn’t sit in the dark.

‘We’re trying,’ he said.

Isabelle’s phone buzzed .

‘Isabelle,’ she snapped.

‘Explain this email, Isabelle. Has something happened?’ Lucinda’s tone was crisp.

She was chair of the Board that ran the school; Isabelle wanted nothing more than to hang up on her, but you don’t hang up on the boss. Particularly this one.

‘What email?’ Isabelle couldn’t keep the impatience out of her voice. ‘I’m very busy right—’

‘I’ll read it to you,’ Lucinda said. “With immediate effect, I hereby tender my resignation as headmistress of Cimmeria Academy and any and all roles I hold within . . .”

The room began to spin. Isabelle gripped the back of the chair in front of her. 'I don't . . .'

Something in her voice alerted Raj; he looked up at her sharply.

'It was sent to everyone on the Board from your email address.' Lucinda said.

'Please tell me what it means.'

'I didn't send that email, Lucinda.' Isabelle felt sick. 'The school is being attacked. It's Nathaniel.'

The pause that followed was significant. When Lucinda spoke again her tone was guarded. 'How?'

'What email, Izzy?' Raj leaned forward to meet her gaze.

Looking at him, Isabelle realised only he and Dom could get them out of this mess. Suddenly, she knew what she needed to do.

'Lucinda, reply to everyone who received that email. Tell them we've been hacked. Tell them we're investigating the source now. I'll call you back soon. We might need your help.'

Ending the call, she turned to Raj. 'Nathaniel has issued my resignation from all my positions on the board and at the school.'

Anger flickered like flames in his dark, brown eyes. They'd known each other since they were teenagers. In some ways, he'd always been her protector.

'So he's hacked our email,' he said. 'And our server – that's what the hitch was. Everything's being routed through a number of servers around the world that hide the user's location. We're tracing it now but . . .'

'... it'll take a little time,' Dom said, finishing his thought.

In Isabelle's pocket, her phone buzzed again.

Like a wasp, she thought, caught in a jar.

'The lights, Raj,' she said, pulling it out. 'Get the lights on.'

She accepted the call without looking at the phone. 'I will call you back, Lucinda...'

'Hello, Isabelle. It's been a while.'

Nathaniel's voice, once so familiar, stopped her in her tracks. Without thinking, she reached out for Raj – as if he could fight Nathaniel for her now, on the phone.

'Nathaniel, why are you doing this?'

She heard Dom's quick intake of breath.

Raj leapt to his feet, punching numbers into his phone, waiting impatiently for someone to answer. 'He's on Isabelle's phone now.' He spoke into the receiver quietly. 'Find out where he is.'

'You know why.' Nathaniel, like Isabelle, retained only the faintest hint of a Scottish accent. They'd both lived in England too long. Sometimes Isabelle thought it was like their past had happened to other people.

'You stole from me.' His voice was cold and distant. As if he was far, far away from her, in every way.

Isabelle pressed her fingertips against her forehead. 'I know why you think you have to do this, but Nathaniel, and we can talk about it, the unfairness. But there are children here. Please. Just . . . stop this.'

'I will stop. As soon as you do what I've asked.' His voice made her skin crawl.

'Give me my inheritance. Give me Cimmeria and the Board. Give me our father's corporation. Give back what you stole.'

'I didn't steal it.' Isabelle heard the heat in her voice and paused, trying to even her tone. 'It was given to me. You saw the will, Nathaniel. I stole nothing. Father chose me. Not you. And I don't know why—'

He didn't let her finish. 'And you chose to keep it even though you knew it was wrong. It was mine by tradition. By heredity. By family law. Father is dead so I can't make him give it to me. But you, little sister . . . you are still here. So I have come to you. Do what's right and I will make this stop. Refuse... And I will make you and Lucinda Meldrum suffer in ways you cannot imagine.'

For a moment Isabelle couldn't believe what she was hearing. She'd always known he was vindictive but she hadn't realised he was capable of this.

She struggled to keep her voice reasonable.

'This is absurd, Nathaniel. You have to give up this bizarre obsession that the family robbed you. You were well taken care of.'

He ignored her words as if she hadn't spoken.

'This can get worse.' Nathaniel's voice was low and threatening. 'Much, much worse. People could get hurt. You can stop it now, Isabelle.'

'Every computer,' Raj was saying into his phone as Dom typed faster and faster. 'Every server and anything connected to it. Everything that can be hacked. Rip them all out.'

'Nathaniel don't be ridiculous. We can work this out—' Isabelle began, but Nathaniel cut her off.

'This is just the beginning,' he said.

Then he hung up.

For a long moment, Isabelle stood holding the silent receiver to her ear. Only when she finally dropped her hand did she realise she was trembling.

Through the doorway she could hear the sounds of excited conversation from the classrooms, and teachers trying to keep order. All the things you'd expect to hear when the lights went out. But her heart still pounded in her ears.

She turned to Raj but, before she could speak a click and a buzz signalled the return of electricity. The room flooded with light.

Down the hallway, the students cheered.

But the computers didn't come back on – Raj had unplugged every one.

In the strange silence of the computer room, Isabelle turned to Raj, forcing herself to appear calm.

'How did he do it?'

'Whoever is working for him is very good,' Raj said with reluctant admiration. 'From what we can tell so far, they've hacked into every device we've got. It appears they started with the mainframe, and that gave them access to the networked computers, through which they accessed CCTV, electronic gate, phones.' His voice was calm but she could see the anger in his gaze.

'Everything.'

'How did he access the mainframe?' Isabelle asked.

Raj hesitated. 'It had to be done in person.'

Anger brought heat to Isabelle's face. 'He was here? In my school?'

'Someone was here,' Raj said. 'Someone who worked for him.'

Isabelle's world was crashing around her. She'd worked so hard to take control of this school. It was part of her. Now it felt invaded.

Tainted.

'How is that possible, Raj? We vet everyone.'

'No system is perfect, Isabelle. And you know Nathaniel is very good. He's one of us. He knows how we work.'

Someone tapped at the door. It swung open to reveal Jerry Cole's concerned face. 'What's going on? Is everything ok?'

Raj and Isabelle exchanged a look. Cole was new but they both liked him. He was sharp and talented. Raj inclined his head.

Isabelle cleared her throat and tried to look confident and in control. 'It's Nathaniel. The computers are compromised. We're working on it.' Jerry's mouth formed an 'o' of surprise but before he could speak, Isabelle turned back to Raj. 'Can we make them safe?'

He shook his head. 'Anything electronic that looks out can be used to look in. Anything can be hacked.'

There was no decision to make, really. They couldn't let Nathaniel do this again. 'They all have to go,' she said.

Raj nodded but Jerry and Dom both stared at them both as if they'd gone mad. It was the first time Dom had stopped typing since the crisis began.

'No computers at all?' Jerry said, his voice ringing with disbelief. 'In a school? Come on, Isabelle, that's not feasible. Parents won't stand for it. You can't...'

'My decision is final, Jerry.' Isabelle fixed him with a hard stare. 'We don't have any choice. Raj will look for a way to build a secure network but if it can't be done then...' She shrugged, as if it didn't matter that the school wouldn't have computers. 'We have no alternative.'

Dom looked as if she wanted to speak, but Raj rested a warning hand on her shoulder.

'The parents won't—' Jerry began.

Isabelle held up her hand. Her head was beginning to pound. She couldn't do this right now.

'Go see to your students now, Jerry. We will discuss this later.'

The science teacher left with obvious reluctance, closing the door behind him.

When he'd gone, Raj turned back to Isabelle. 'He's right, you know. Parents are going to see this as a failure.'

Isabelle straightened her spine. 'Then Lucinda and I will convince them it is an advantage. Their children will learn to study instead of spending time playing online. No distractions. Old-fashioned hard work. Anyway, selling this is our job. Your job is to find out what Nathaniel is planning and stop him.'

Silence fell, heavy with unspoken words. It was Raj who broke it.

His expression held a warning. 'Isabelle, he'll never give up. He's obsessed.'

It was a terrifying thought – her own half-brother hated her so much he wanted nothing more in life than to destroy her.

They had been close once, a long time ago. But that, like childhood, was over.

Now she had to start treating him like the stranger he had become.

Isabelle walked to the door. Only when she opened it did she reply, her voice cold as ice.

'Neither will I.'