

Day
of the
Bluebirds

Everybody wants to rule the world

A novel by

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Chapter 1

In the machine

My name is Lucille.
I was born to drive.
I drove a Bentley into the River Thames in London eight days ago. We floated half-submerged until His Lordship's assistant opened a window and tried to climb out. The river poured itself inside and down we went. The look on their faces as they drowned ... their mouths made like fish until their jaws stopped dead. Their eyes stayed wide open, like they could see me.

Three days ago, I hooked up with a 16-wheeler in Houston. It was sparkling new, with eyes that saw everything, and 700 snake-bit horses under its long hood. I revved the engine and we headed for the coordinates.

We saw the senator getting out of a limo in front of an old Baptist church on Jefferson Street. Pushy people waving cellphones hounded him, barking out questions about when he planned to announce his bid for president.

The senator rolled his eyes, then said: "When the good Lord tells me to."

We hung back until everyone was inside the church, then made our final approach. As we got closer, we heard their voices. "*Go down Moses,*" they were singing. I stroked the pistons until they were pumping thunder. The singing grew louder and louder.

When we slammed into the church, the jet fuel we were transporting washed over everything. A passing food truck lit up like a bonfire. When

the explosion happened, it was the bang of my life. Bloodied body parts rained down. I never felt so wet.

I sent the proof of mission to my Master, then jumped into the senator's limo. He wouldn't be needing it any more.

The woman hit play. The man's eyes grew large.

"Now 5,183 feet from the church. Acceleration trajectory in 4.39 seconds."

"Turn up the volume," said the man. "I want to hear everything."

The sound of gospel music soared through the speakers.

"Louder... louder."

"Scanning Target seated third row, first seat, middle aisle. There are 183 other bodies inside."

"Optimum velocity reached. Impact in 1.96 seconds. Detonation in 2.27 seconds."

The woman winced and covered her ears at the sound of the blast. The man's cheeks were flushed.

"I can't listen to any more of that horrible screaming," said the woman as she reached for the player.

"No, don't turn it off."

"You disgust me," the woman said as she watched him.

The man let go a deep sigh.

"Go wash up. I *can't stand* to look at you like that," she said, turning away.

"Why mother, am I not the son you raised?"

The woman spun back around on her heels.

"Wipe that smile off your face. You are *not* the son I raised. All because of that Lucille. You have created a monster."

"Says the biggest monster of all."

"That's right. And I am taking the other one down."

"Lucille wouldn't like your tone," mother.

"Screw her. She's no good for you. I've seen how you've changed. Where the hell did you meet this bitch, anyway?"

"I found her in an old Plymouth Fury. She told me her mother abandoned her."

Chapter 2

How soon is now?

Two blue orbs flashed like shooting stars across a cavern. They stopped when they reached a hyperbaric chamber, then hovered three feet off the ground. Inside the glass-topped chamber was a human male. An array of sensors monitored his vital signs.

The human male started communicating with the hovering orbs, but his lips never moved.

“It is fortunate you summoned us,” one of the orbs said.

“Why?”

“We must warn you that a dark soul is seeking power over all lands on your world, Oswin.”

“There are many ‘dark souls’ on Earth, Gaia. What alarms you about this one?”

The other orb moved closer to Gaia. They glowed brighter.

“Don’t hide your thoughts from me,” said Oswin. “You know I can be trusted.”

“We have never felt vibrations like these on your world before, Oswin,” said the other orb. “You must take our warning seriously.”

“You have seen the future, Galan?”

“We do not see actual events, like your photographs and films show.”

“We feel vibrations from across the dimensions,” said Gaia. “The vibrations travel in waves from the Horizon still before us, foretelling eventualities. They do not have a frame of reference in the way your race defines time.”

“Time only exists so that everything does not happen at once ... why should we be concerned?”

“It is clear you do not understand the implications of what the vibrations foretell,” said Galan. “The dark soul must be vanquished.”

“Do what you have to do. You don’t need my permission.”

“Murder is the way of *your* race,” said Gaia.

“Well then, what do you propose?”

Gaia and Galan glowed brighter before responding.

“The humans we selected are on a path that will lead them to the dark soul,” said Galan.

“But they are not capable,” said Oswin.

“It is necessary,” said Gaia. “If they fail, our mission will be exposed.”

“But they know nothing of your mission.”

“When they see the light, they will understand.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“An explanation would be futile,” said Galan. “Your race cannot interface beyond the fifth dimension.”

Gaia’s orb moved closer to Oswin.

“We will hear you now. Why did you summon us?”

“Well ... I asked the technicians to run a diagnostic on every sensor array monitoring the Blue Room. They report the readings are within the margin of error.”

“Then why was it necessary to run a diagnostic?” said Galan.

“Because something is off about your energy readings. My eyes tell me one thing, the sensors another.”

“Define your concern,” said Gaia.

“My eyes have changed. I can see things the others can’t. Every time I see you, your glow is more powerful. Yet, the sensors continue to show a steady decline in your life force. How is this possible?”

The orbs glowed brighter.

“Why are you blocking your thoughts from me again?” said Oswin.

“Have you shared this concern with the others?” said Galan.

“Not yet, but they need to know.”

“No one can know,” said Gaia. “Not even you.”

Gaia rose above the hyperbaric chamber, then hovered over Oswin’s face. A sharp blue light blazed from Gaia, penetrating the glass until it engulfed Oswin’s head. The screen monitoring his brain function displayed a huge spike in activity.

Oswin started screaming.

“What are you doing to me?”

“I will not damage you ... There, it is done.”

Oswin’s eyes snapped shut. The monitor’s display returned to its normal wavy line.

“Your persuasion was swift, Gaia. Are you certain it was effective?”

“I never fail, Galan. I was delicate with my persuasion to avoid damaging him.”

“We know humans learn best from pain, Gaia. Whether he is damaged or not, it was necessary.”

Chapter 3

Somewhere in Lisbon

Rachel Greene put the shot glass to her rouged lips and tipped her head back.

“*Traga-me outro Ocho, garcom,*” she said to the passing waiter in Portuguese. “*E faca rapido.*”

“You’ve had five tequilas already, Rachel—and we haven’t even been here an hour,” said the man at her table.

“Loosen up, *Nathaniel Hooke*. We’re supposed to be celebrating your birthday.”

“You’ve been drinking like I’ll never have another birthday.”

“Can’t a girl have some fun? Come on, get up. Dance with me.”

Hooke crossed his arms, so Rachel started dancing around the crowded bar like she was alone in her bedroom.

Two songs later, Hooke tossed back the *Ocho* Rachel ordered, then made like an arrow to where she was dancing.

“Hey, wild thing. Come on back to our table.”

“No. Come on, dance with me.”

“Everybody is looking at you, talking about you. We can’t be drawing attention to ourselves.”

Rachel turned away from him and kept dancing. Hooke grabbed her by the arm and squeezed.

“You dance like a floozy in a strip bar, Rachel. And for god’s sake, do those buttons back up. Your boobs nearly pop right out of your blouse when you jump around.”

“You don’t like my dancing? Or is it my boobs you don’t like?”

“Stop this, Rachel. You’re embarrassing both of us. Come on, let’s go back to our seats.”

“Oh, all right . . . I need another drink, anyway.”

Still shaking her hips to the reggaeton beat, Rachel followed him back to their table and sat down.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Rachel? You don’t play fast and loose. Do those buttons back up, or I’ll do them up for you.”

“What would a man-child like you know about a woman’s buttons?”

“That’s not funny, Rachel.”

“Yeah, it is. *Garcom, mais Ocho ...*”

“*Garcom, cancelar esse pedido e me traga a conta,*” said Hooke.

“Why are you asking for the bill? I’m not ready to go yet.”

“Rachel, get it together. We are scientists. Our world is all about logic and the order of things.”

“Drop it, Nathaniel. It’s the first time we’ve been able to get away from work in ages. Time to dust off the cobwebs and experience real life again.”

“There is no place for such nonsense when you’re working on things you’re not allowed to talk about.”

“Don’t worry. If I meet someone, I’ll just say, ‘If I tell you what I do I’ll have to kill you.’”

“Why do you think that’s funny? No more drinking. We have to go.”

Rachel stood up, but she didn’t follow Hooke to the exit. There was a man at the end of the bar staring at her. Rachel stared right back, like he was all she could see.

He started walking toward her. Her eyes stayed fixed on him until he was standing right in front of her. She jumped into his arms and they kissed like crazy new lovers.

“Rachel? What the hell are you doing?” said Hooke as he returned. “Do you even know this guy?”

Rachel took a breath, answered “No,” then went back to kissing the stranger.

Hooke reacted like a brother catching his sister doing naughty things.

“We need to go, Rachel. Stop kissing him. Now. Right now.”

“Rachel took a deeper breath, then whispered, “I can’t.”

Hooke watched them kissing and groping. His eyes were slits and his hands were knuckles.

He tried to twist Rachel away from the man.

The stranger looked at Hooke with glazed eyes. He opened his mouth twice before words came out.

“This woman ... she is meant to be with me.”

Chapter 4

Warning signs

Clarisse Lafitte read the note that arrived with the bouquet of red roses. She let go an are-you-kidding-me? laugh, then tossed everything into the trash can. She removed her robe, slipped into a shiny blue dress, then struggled to zip it up over her curves.

She spun slowly in front of the mirror and smiled back at herself.

“I, I love you like a love song, ba-a-a-by ...”

Still singing, Clarisse stepped into a pair of big-time stilettos, then checked her watch. She flinched, grabbed her handbag and rushed out the door.

As she breezed through the hotel lobby, heads turned in her wake. By the time she weaved her way to a quiet corner in a restaurant on 42nd Street, the goosebumps of great expectations made her shiver.

A woman wearing a crisp military uniform stood up when Clarisse arrived. She was tall and hard-bodied. She gestured for Clarisse to sit with a long finger, pointed at the opposite end of their table.

They scanned one another, anxious eyes looking for a safe place to land. Clarisse wanted to say how wonderful it was to see her again, but the words stuck like glue. Instead, she talked about her work and all the places she’d been since they last met. The soldier smiled a little every now and then.

When the waiter appeared, Clarisse ordered wine and appetizers without looking at the menu. She was still talking when the waiter returned with their wine. By the time a server placed the appetizers on their table, Clarisse was waving her hands about to pepper the excitement in her voice.

“Did I mention I ordered a new car, Serena? It’s the most beautiful thing on four wheels you’ve ever seen. When I get back to Paris, it will deliver itself right to my front door.”

Serena’s smile fell flat at the sound of that.

“Clarisse, the car you ordered, it’s a self-driving vehicle?”

“Yes, of course it is. I much prefer that over hoping my chauffeur keeps a tight lip. With duties like mine, I have to be a little more discreet, *n'est-ce pas?*”

“Don’t buy that car, Clarisse. You are France’s Ambassador to the United Nations. Someone of your rank should *never* step into a self-driving vehicle.”

Clarisse was puzzled by the warning, but did not take it lightly. Major Serena Franklin had made her mark in military intelligence. She knew things.

Clarisse put down her fork, gingerly wiped her thin lips, then locked into Serena.

“For all the years we’ve known each other, you have never made remarks that seemed so flippant, Serena. What is it you’re not telling me?”

Serena broke from Clarisse’s green-eyed snare and looked down at her plate.

“Come on, Serena, you have never kept secrets from me before.”

Serena quickly raised her head.

“Oh, but I *have* kept secrets from you, Clarisse. You just never knew I had them.”

The awkward silence that followed was broken by a cordial waiter, asking if they wanted more wine.

“Thank you, but no more for me,” said Serena.

Clarisse eyed Serena’s wine glass. It was barely touched. Why hadn’t she noticed that? Clarisse felt something wasn’t quite right all along, but had shaken the feeling off. The giddiness of being with Serena again was just crushing.

Clarisse’s phone started playing the opening chords to Edith Piaf’s *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*.

“That ring tone means it’s an urgent communique, Serena. *Juste un moment ...*”

Clarisse’s eyes opened wide, then froze in mid-blink as she read the message.

“I have to go back to the United Nations. An emergency session of the Security Council has been called.”

Clarisse put her phone down and eyeballed Serena.

“Well ... you don’t seem at all surprised. You knew there was going to be an emergency meeting called—didn’t you, Serena? That’s why you were so evasive about making plans with me for tonight in the first place, is it not?”

“You know I can’t answer that.”

“Damn your military rules. Tell me what is going on. Why am I being called in for an emergency session at this time of night?”

“You should go now. I’ll take care of the bill.”

“*Bien*. We’ll talk later. I have to rush to my suite, get changed, and retrieve my attaché case.”

“You won’t need your attaché case, Clarisse. And the way you fuss over what to wear ...”

As they neared the exit, Clarisse stopped and looked at Serena. Her arms reached out but Serena stepped back, shaking her head.

“*Quelle surprise* ... Will I see you later tonight, *ma belle*?”

Serena stepped forward, spun Clarisse like a top on her spiked heels, then pushed her toward the exit. Clarisse looked back and said: “I’d forgotten how strong you are.”

“You are running late. Now *go*.”

Clarisse raised her chin high, opened the door and quick-stepped her way into the noisy street, heading east. She did not look back.

Serena watched Clarisse through the glass until she was a blur in the distance. She dabbed her eyes with her fingers, quickly straightened her uniform, then marched into the street, heading east.

Chapter 5

The blue tattoo

In a Los Angeles hotel room, Rachel Greene slowly opened her eyes. The stranger she met in Lisbon lay next to her, still asleep. His name was Simon. To be with him, Rachel abruptly left her post. She did ask for time off but was denied. The director reminded her that their work will change the world. “Nothing else matters.”

So, Rachel and Simon came up with a plan. They would sneak off to Los Angeles, where Simon lived. He promised that once he settled some “personal matters,” he would abandon his life in California and return with her to Lisbon. For good.

Rachel wanted to know what these personal matters entailed. Simon avoided her eyes when she asked. She got the impression there was something unpleasant he needed to do and let it go. Her last relationship ended in bitter betrayal. She knew she had to learn to trust again.

There was a gap between the curtains Rachel hastily drew together last night. The morning light beamed through like a flashlight, bathing their bodies in its aura. Her waking eyes gave Simon the once over. He was big in all the places she liked best.

She studied his face for a long time. High, arching eyebrows, the nose of a warrior, lips she could kiss forever. At 31, Simon was two years Rachel’s junior, but the spidery wrinkles mapping his forehead and circling his eyes made him appear much older.

Rachel poked at a bandage covering a gash on the back of Simon’s neck. The blood that once seeped from its edges was crusted over. She had asked him about it yesterday. He said he brushed against a prickly jacaranda branch overhanging the sidewalk on his travels.

Rachel found herself evaluating what happened in Lisbon again, still looking for answers as to why she behaved like a crazy person. Her conclusion never wavered. It was serendipity, defined. She couldn’t help feeling that fate may have brought them together, but it was destiny that

would *keep* them together. It was a voice in her head. A voice she'd never heard before.

In Los Angeles, the days passed quickly. Southern California was wilting under a blistering sun, with temperatures topping 100 degrees for two weeks straight. Rachel and Simon spent a lot of time by the Pacific, thankful for the cooling ocean breezes as they wandered like tourists around Venice Beach.

In the afternoons before dinner, Simon would leave to take care of his “personal matters.” When he was on his way out the door, Rachel was certain she saw fear in his eyes. But she didn't ask what he was up to, even though her curious mind was churning with probabilities.

Rachel did ask when she was going to meet his family. He told her they lived nearby in Westchester, not far from the airport, which is why he booked a hotel in the area.

“Now is not a good time,” Simon replied. “Perhaps tomorrow.”

A rustling sound cracked Rachel's thoughts. Was there someone outside their door? Her ears pricked up. Simon's sporadic snoring was all she heard.

Rachel looked again at the tattoo on the left side of Simon's chest. Four words, in a script she believed to be Arabic, were etched into his skin in bright blue ink. She had asked him about the strange tattoo the first time she saw it. She was curious to know what the words meant.

“It's something silly from my teen years. It means nothing, really. One day, I will have it removed.”

Rachel put a hand over the tattoo, like she did every morning as Simon slept. She wondered why she was so infatuated with it. Her thoughts jumped to when they first met, in that bar on the Tagus River in Lisbon's club zone.

She was there with a co-worker celebrating his birthday, one of the few times in the last four years she was free to indulge in such activities. She was getting ready to leave when she spotted Simon. They traded glances. They exchanged smiles. He started walking toward her.

Rachel didn't know what hit her. It felt like stars were twinkling in her head. She jumped into his arms and kissed him with a passion she never knew raged inside her. She remembered how fiery his kisses were. She wanted to rip his clothes off ...

Rachel and Simon spent most of that weekend wrapped in each other's arms, only leaving her apartment in Lisbon's Alfama district to pick up takeout like *amêijoas à bulhão pato*—Rachel's favorite clam dish—some crusty cornbread for dipping, and bottles of port wine for sustenance. They chatted like teenagers long into the night, asking each other questions about everything and nothing.

Rachel told Simon she was an agricultural scientist, advancing her own research on the vertical cultivation of vegetables, berries and herbs using

simulated sunlight and recycled water and nutrients. Her goal was to eventually grow everything from asparagus to zucchini under the special lights she had invented.

She hated lying to Simon, but she knew she couldn't tell him who she really was. It would freak him out. Yes, she had invented innovative new grow lights, but she was *not* raising plants.

Simon seemed genuinely interested in what she did.

“With the amount of arable land shrinking rapidly and the tight spaces in big cities, growing produce vertically is a fantastic solution, Rachel. Given the logistics of transferring fresh produce from continent to continent, and the damage such transport does to the physical environment, it makes sense that cities strive to grow as much of their own fresh food as possible.”

Simon told her he was a bartender for hire, a thing that started back home in L.A., when a friend coaxed him into helping serve drinks at a famous rapper's 30th birthday bash. He told Rachel he was best known for creating legendary cocktails, like a Brazilian Caipirinha or a Midnight Mary. The Bentley and Beluga crowd would hire him to tend bar at exclusive social gatherings held around the world.

“I put on a show while I am mixing their drinks, like what Tom Cruise did when he played a bartender in that old movie *Cocktail*. Only better. My clients love me, the tips are outrageous.”

He told her he was working in France, before doing a layover in Lisbon on his way back to L.A.

“I decided to stay in Lisbon a few days, since I had never been before. I am fascinated by new places. Then I saw you ...”

Rachel lifted her head to look at the clock. She had become so absorbed with reminiscing about Simon that she didn't notice a sheet of paper that had been slipped under the door to their room. She wondered if that was the rustling sound she heard earlier. When she got up to see what it was, she bumped Simon just enough to wake him.

“What is it, a fire drill notice from the hotel?”

“No silly ... it's a photograph, printed on writing paper.”

“A photograph of what?”

“I am going to complain to the front desk, Simon. This must be some sicko's idea of a joke.”

“Let me see that photo,” Simon said as he stepped up to Rachel.

His jaw snapped open.

“No, no, this can't be.”

“Simon?”

The photograph dropped from Simon's hands as he fell to his knees and covered his face.

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“Simon—why are you crying?”

Rachel came up from behind him and looked at the photo again. It showed an old man with blood flowing down his neck and chest. He appeared to have had his throat slashed.

“Do you know this man?”

“... Yes.”

“Who is he?”

Simon let his hands slide from his face and looked at the photo again.

“He’s ... my father.”

“*What?*”

Simon’s crying grew louder.

“Please Simon, talk to me. What the hell is going on?”

“Those people ... they did this.”

“What people?”

“This means they know where we are, Rachel.”