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# JAMAAL TARGET

## PHANTOM AGENT

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*For my mum, Carol, and my dad, Michael.*
*I love you.*

# PAIN

'It's getting dark outside,' said Jamaal, peering out at the streets of London.

It had been snowing for the past three days, and the edges of Myla Bennett's bedroom window were frosty. The roads, once a beautiful white, were now covered with a mixture of stubborn snow and dirty brown slush trampled on by cars and people.

'So?' Myla said. She was in a state of sheer focus: her thin back hunched as she faced the TV, hands gripped dangerously tightly round the PlayStation controller.

Jamaal watched each flake fall with nervous anticipation. 'Gala told me to be back at hers before the street lights come on.' He locked eyes with his

reflection, contemplating how much trouble he wanted to get himself in with his foster mum, Gala Gowne. After forgetting to do his homework last week, he was on his last strike; one more and he'd be grounded.

Myla tutted. 'Just tell her you lost track of time. Anyway, you look old enough to be out after dark,' she joked.

Jamaal rolled his tongue over his teeth to hide his grin. While Myla had a youthful face, with deep dimples, curly brown hair and chocolate eyes, the same couldn't be said for Jamaal. People always pointed out the unusual grey strands that weaved through his otherwise thick black hair, eyebrows and eyelashes. Even he couldn't deny they made him look much older than twelve. Though his skinny arms and legs were a dead giveaway of his actual age.

Jamaal's breath made the window steam up until it resembled a translucent whiteboard. Two trails of water trickled down the glass. *I'll let the droplets decide for me*, Jamaal thought, imagining that each one represented a different option. *To go or not to go? Brave the snow, or bask in the warmth and face a different kind of scorching later?*

Gala wasn't the meanest person Jamaal knew, not by a long shot. If anything, she was the best foster mum a care kid could ask for. While his experience in the care system had been generally positive, he also found it had a very uncertain and fragile feel to it. Jamaal knew some kids spent their whole childhood in care, moving around from family to family, not knowing what to expect, or how long they'd be there for.

Certain carers set the bar pretty low, too, like Jamaal's first, Diana. She'd had him up until he was eight years old, and barely paid him any attention, making him feel very isolated and alone. So, when Diana got married and decided she didn't want to look after him any more, Jamaal hadn't minded much. Living with Gala for the last four years had been worlds better, but, still, Jamaal didn't want to be on her bad side unless he *really* had to.

And yet the sound of Myla booting up *Warfare World* for another round of Capture the Flag was like honey to his ears.

*Left, I leave Myla's. Right, I lost track of time*. The droplets had picked up their pace; now they were at

the midway point of the glass. Right was winning, until a deep rumbling sounded from the road, so loud it made the window shake. The two streams jolted on the glass, splashing against the bricks below and ruining the race.

'What's that noise?' Myla said. She spun to the window, flashing a pair of confused eyes.

The rumbling continued, and a hulking Range Rover crept into view on the road below. Black as a panther, it glided gracefully over the frost. The yellow-plated registration was blank. *Odd*.

'It's a car,' Jamaal said. 'A big one.'

'It's making my room shake.'

*'My' room*, Jamaal thought, chuckling. He couldn't have cared less about his own set-up. At Diana's house, his room had been as big as a shoebox, and even though he had lived with Gala for almost four years, the feeling of being a permanent guest still lingered. One day, he would have his own house and all the time in the world to organize it however he wanted.

'I can't focus,' Myla moaned, tucking headphones over her ears.

'I'm sure it'll be gone in a second.'

But the Range Rover stopped dead in its tracks, the engine cut off and the headlights switched off.

'There you go,' Jamaal said. Though he did wonder why the car had halted in the middle of the open street.

The driver's door swung open, and a young-looking man in a black jacket stepped out. He was bald, with a stocky build and a purposeful stride, bracing himself on the ice before glancing down each side of the road. Jamaal got the sense he was looking for something or, more curiously, *someone*.

Another slam of the door. A second man emerged from the passenger side of the vehicle; slimmer, but with the same mechanical mannerisms in his walk and scheming look on his face. He strolled over to where his partner was standing and took a knee, grazing his hand gently across the snow. He rubbed his thumb with his index finger and pressed them both against his nose.

*Are they tracking something?* Jamaal was transfixed.

They analysed every inch of the street, sniffing the air as if checking for whiffs of potential prey.

Their warm breath billowed in clouds and the street lights flickered gently above them, as though wary of disturbing them. Then the lights came alive in a flash. And that's when Jamaal noticed something strange.

*Are those men . . . silver?*

He studied the metallic skin, smooth-looking but dull, on their faces, necks and hands. Jamaal wondered if they were ill, gripped by a sickness that had morphed them into lifelike robots. But they walked with such sureness it was difficult to believe they could be unwell. *Could it be spray paint*? Jamaal quickly ruled that out, too. Their skin was too consistent to have been painted on. If anything, it was more likely to be some kind of suit, but even that seemed far-fetched.

'Jamaal!' called Myla from her chair. Jamaal felt his heart pound against his ribs. Myla held a controller out to him and shot him a vacant stare. 'Why aren't you watching?'

The two friends had been anticipating the newest *Warfare World* game for weeks, counting down to its release like it was the most important event of

the year. Jamaal would have given anything to get it himself, but Gala said all the violence was much too graphic for a boy not even thirteen. Practically the whole of Year Eight had the game, but he had to settle for playing it at Myla's.

'One sec,' Jamaal replied, returning his attention to the window. Nerves pierced him as the slim man looked up. His murky eyes were cold and endless like an empty sinkhole, sending a shiver down Jamaal's spine. Out of sheer instinct, he ducked beneath the apron of the window, tucking himself tightly against the wall.

'What the hell are you doing?' Myla blared, jumping to her feet.

'Get down, before they see!'

'Before *who* sees?'

Jamaal pulled Myla down by her legs. 'Just wait a moment, OK?'

'But the game –'

'Just wait!'

The pair sat against the wall with their legs crossed, playing a game of tennis with their short, batting breaths. Jamaal felt Myla staring at him uncertainly.

‘Are you feelin’ all right?’ Myla said, an odd mix of annoyance and concern on her face.

Jamaal said nothing, but the deep rumbling noise returned. He peeked his head over the edge of the window and saw the Range Rover had disappeared. All that remained were two trails of thick boot prints in the slush.

‘OK,’ Jamaal said. ‘We can get up now.’

‘What was that about?’ Myla said, her voice shaky as they returned to their feet. She cleared her throat and tried again. ‘Why were we hiding?’

Jamaal scratched his forehead, sensing he might have overreacted. ‘I guess it was nothing . . .’

‘Nothing? You made me die in *Warfare World* for nothing?’

‘No . . . yes . . . I don’t know. Something just felt –’

‘Are we playing this game or what?’

The bright gold street lights burned the corners of Jamaal’s eyes. He shook his head. ‘I’d better get back,’ he said reluctantly. ‘If I get another strike, Gala might not let you stay over while your parents are away this weekend.’

Myla slumped, throwing her controller on the chair. 'Fine. I'll walk you to the door.'

Jamaal smiled. 'You're too kind.'

Jamaal's shoes squelched with every trudge through the slush. *I should have left earlier,* he thought. It was darker now and the wind was having a field day, freezing his ears and numbing his fingers. Though the snowfall had paused, goosebumps still covered every inch of his skin.

Before long, there was only one more hill to go, but it was so cold that Jamaal considered skipping his ritual. Usually, every time he walked back from Myla's, he stopped at the island in the middle of the slope's peak, took in a single deep breath and glanced out at the city's skyline. London had a hectic reputation for good reason, but at night Jamaal only ever saw it as peaceful. This was when he would let his thoughts run wild and free, and not worry about anything at all.

*Finally,* Jamaal thought, as he reached the summit. The air was frosty, and everything was still. That was, until a peculiar rumble sounded . . . Soon, it had grown so deep that chunks of snow were crumbling and slipping from the trees. *Where's it coming from?*

Jamaal thought, as he paused in the middle of the road. The hill was so steep that he couldn't see very far below, and as the rumble grew louder it shook his entire frame. *Something doesn't feel right about this*.

In a flash, a huge white van sprang over the top of the lower hill, its rusty wheels pointing up like the legs of a rearing horse. Ice spurted to the side as the van slammed back down to the ground, then carried on at full speed. The driver was out of control, skidding erratically through the slush.

*The tyres have no traction on the ice!* Jamaal realized, as the van swayed uncontrollably into the centre of the road. His body jerked in shock. *Oh no, oh no!* A jolt seared through his chest, and every fibre of his muscles tensed against the bone. The grip of his shoes failed against the slush and, with a thump, he slipped, his palms burning fiercely in the snow. He pushed himself back to his feet, wobbling until he was upright, but the panic remained as the van drew nearer, its horn blaring and headlights blinding.

*It's too late*, Jamaal thought. *It's too close.*

His heart was like a drum and, as he braced for impact, a firm shudder seemed to sprout from his

chest. It spread to his shoulders and arms, through his stomach and legs, and all the way down to his toes. He suddenly felt warm and strong, and any lingering fear was replaced by an unfamiliar sense of sureness. *Jump*, he urged himself, as though it was the obvious and natural thing to do. *Jump!*

At once, Jamaal leaped, just about clearing the roof of the van. Wind whooshed across his face as his upward momentum stopped and gravity pulled for him to return. He screamed, meeting the ground with a thud, his body carving a twelve-year-old-boy-shaped hole in the snow. His breathing was short and rushed as he quickly scanned his body for damage. No broken bones. No tender areas or muscles with looming bumps. No pain.

*No pain?*

Jamaal remembered two years ago, when he was ten, he'd fallen head-first from the monkey bars in the playground at the local park. The accident was so bad that Gala had asked if the paramedics could sedate him until they reached the hospital. The pain Jamaal had felt was *indescribable*, and he'd fallen a fraction of the distance then that he had just now.

*Is it the adrenaline, or am I dead?* Did people die and immediately cross over into the afterlife, where the only pain they felt was a warm buzz and a slight tingle in their big toe? But as Jamaal watched dark red blood run down his sleeve he decided he couldn't possibly be dead. A dead person doesn't bleed.

'My goodness!' The old lady had sky-blue eyes behind thick glasses, but she squinted as if she could barely see. With her came the scent of old candles, just like the ones Gala lit in the evenings. 'Hoodlum!' she wailed at the retreating van. 'You could've killed him!' Then, her frail body shaking furiously, she turned back to Jamaal. 'Are you all right, my dear? Can I call you an ambulance?'

'No,' Jamaal said, before realizing he may have been too short. 'No, thank you.'

She spotted his blood and rummaged in her handbag. 'Take some,' she offered, pulling out a packet of tissues.

Jamaal got to his feet and took one. As he did, he noticed that the old lady had a small but distinct scar perfectly in between her eyebrows.

'What's your name?' she asked.

'Jamaal . . . Target.'

'You have a strong name, Jamaal Target. Call me Regina.'

At that moment, a wet speck hit Jamaal's forehead. It had started to snow again. Small flakes fell underneath the street lights, melting their way down to the gutters.

'You get home safe now,' Regina said, covering her neck with a scarf. 'And be careful crossing the road.' She smiled before hobbling away, fading into obscurity as quickly as she had appeared.

Jamaal felt as if he were in a dream. His memory flashed with blinding lights, and suddenly he saw the image of himself lying in the middle of the road again, only his body *was* broken and so much snow fell on his face that he was buried and choking on his own breath.

*I've got to get out of here.*

He couldn't stay any longer. He had to get back to Gala's house and think about what had just happened. He ran as quickly as his legs allowed, and before long his shaking fingers were stuffing his key into the door at 22 Goodden Street. Swinging

it open, he raced upstairs to the bathroom. He took off his jumper, and used the soap bar and a towel to clean up the blood and scrub off the slushy ice.

'Jamaal, is that you?' Gala yelled from downstairs, followed by a creak of the floorboards.

*If I seem shaken up, she's going to bombard me with questions,* Jamaal thought. *I need to act normal.* He scurried into his room and sat on the edge of the bed, stealing deep breaths to cool his nerves. Then he called out, 'Yeah, it's me.'

'You're cutting it fine, young man,' Gala warned from the hallway. 'You were almost out of strikes.'

*A rumble. An engine. Lights.* Jamaal's heart thumped. 'Sorry.'

'Hmm. Make sure your things are ready for school tomorrow.'

She creaked away, leaving him in silence.

*Too much silence*.

Jamaal rubbed his hands over his face and slapped himself gently. The room didn't look as familiar as it usually did. The yellow walls seemed a radioactive green, and the desk and chair looked like they'd shrunk in size. The bed was stuffed in the same corner,

but it didn't feel as smooth. He sat on the chair and spun round in a full circle, his heart slowing one beat at a time as he booted up his laptop. He'd watched a YouTube video one time about how humans in danger could do extraordinary things – a woman who had lifted a van with her bare hands to save her young son from underneath, a man who had jumped from a ten-storey building that was on fire and survived the fall. Was *that* what had happened to him? A simple case of reacting to an extraordinary circumstance?

Jamaal found tons of other reports and videos online of grave life-or-death situations, and scanned them eagerly. It all started to make sense. He had been in danger, and the instinct to save himself had kicked in. It was instinct, and nothing else. Instinct. He climbed into bed and buried into the pillow until the thought programmed itself into his mind.