

WINGS



EBONY

J. ELLE

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WINGS ERBONY



J. ELLE

A DENENE MILLNER BOOK

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*For O.C. and Amelia, who held on to me tightly, determined to help me be
all that I could be.*

*And for you, reader, there is an ember in you that's hungry to burn.
That is your magic. Let it.*

CHAPTER 1



BULLETS DON'T HAVE NAMES.

But if they did, chances are one would have mine. Or someone brown-skinned like me.

Metal slats chill my legs and I shimmy sideways, craning for a better view from the bus stop, careful to keep the onyx stones fused to my wrists covered.

Up all night, I watched the sun rise like a traitor to the chill set in my bones. A yawn scratches at my throat, but my lungs refuse to breathe. Any moment Tasha will step out, her tie-dye drawstring knapsack on her back and her purple fuzzy phone clutched in her fingers. She always oversleeps. But she won't be late. Not today. She—like me—probably couldn't sleep, knowing we had to face today. Had to relive what this day means.

One year ago today, Moms died, shot dead on her stoop. No explanation. No investigation. Just blood, pain, and lots of tears. So many tears.

Since then, it's been Tasha, and me. Separated, living in different places.

But not today. Today my little sister won't be alone.

My eyes sting. I blink the tears away as a bass-filled trunk rattles by, blasting some rapper whose name I can't remember. I'm home. It's good to be back... even if I can't stay. I sigh, but my shoulders cinch instead of sink.

Construction crews spill out of work trucks across the street, bringing the block to life. Chiming bells snatch my attention. Kiki's wig shop? They opened early as hell today. Two doors down, dudes in glistening chains, hoodies, and baggy jeans chop it up, slapping hands and giving one-arm hugs. My niggas. The

whole damn block is family. Neighbors are aunties. I got more cousins than makes any sort of mathematical sense. You can't work that shit out logically with a family tree chart. The block is fam. Just the way it is. The way it has to be.

But even families keep secrets. I tug at my sleeves.

I lean back, slipping my hood on, face cloaked in shadow. I'm not trying to get tripped up with questions about where I've been. Some shit's just too wild to even *try* to explain. And where I've been this past year—the place I'm forced to now call home—is wild AF.

A jumble of voices pulls me around, twisting in my seat. I keep my head down, hoodie up, until their footsteps are faint patters. I exhale, my knee still bouncing.

Six a.m.

My sis takes the bus to school because it's too far to walk, and everybody at the house is off to work well before the streetlamps stop buzzing. Any moment now, she'll be out the door and find the gift I left on her step. A gift I wish I could hand to her if the risk wasn't so great.

As far as folks know, I disappeared a year ago. They probably think I'm locked up in juvie somewhere. It's not true. I've been in juvie twice. Two times too many. Being snatched from home before Moms was in the ground makes my insides ache more than how it felt sleeping on a cold cell floor.

And the bastard who took me left Tasha.

Such bullshit. "She isn't full blood," he'd said. We got the same mom, different dads. I tried to tell him the whole block is fam—that I can't be pulled from home and just forget where I'm from. It don't work like that. But he wouldn't get that because he's not from 'round here. Home won't ever be "behind me."

He wasn't hearing it. "Once you leave this place you can't ever come back... ever," he'd said without explaining. And for 364 days I didn't.

But Tasha won't be alone today. Today, she has me. Even if it means breaking their dumb-ass rules to leave her this gift.

She will know I remember.

I tuck my curls inside my hoodie and swipe the screen on my wristwatch. It warms, glowing a dull blue. It's barely breakfast time and this Houston heat is straight up disrespectful.

Six-oh-five. *Come on, sis.*

I promised Bri, just about the only friend I have at my new “home,” I’d get in, leave Tasha’s gift, see her off to school, and get out of here. She protested, but she made me this dope watch to get here and back—*without magic*—undetected. She’d just finished it days ago and was nervous it might not work. A pulsing dot shifts on its screen, zeroing in on Tasha’s location when I tap. Works just fine. Bri is smart as hell, I swear.

As long as I lay low, no one will even know I’m gone.

A frayed purple necklace dangles from my neck. I roll the thread back and forth between my fingers. The last time I saw Tasha, she wore a matching one. The sparrow charm that used to hang from it broke off months ago. Tasha’s got a thing for birds. Something about flying mesmerizes her. She was always back and forth between Moms’s and her dad’s grandma’s house. She’s like a bird, even if she can’t fly. Little bones, light, so small. Always flitting between fam’s houses. A bird with many nests. When I last saw her, she was going on about some new species she’d learned about in school. I smirk. She loves school. A trait we don’t share. Tasha musta got that from her pop’s side of the family.

I didn’t have a dad, so home for me didn’t change every weekend. I pull the knot in the charmless necklace, making sure it’s tight. As ratty as it is, it’s mine, my sister’s—ours. One of the few things I was able to hold on to from this place when I left. My only real keepsake from home.

Tasha’s glittery pink Converse catch the sunlight as the door opens, and I gasp. She’s taller than before. How she grow that fast? The door fully opens and I’m up on my feet. I lighten my pace across the street, careful to stick to the shadows. I can see her, love her from a distance, be here, but I can’t touch her. Touching her is the one rule I can’t break.

Something changed when I was bound to magic in Ghizon, the place I live now. I rub the onyx lump fused to my wrist and it warms. Having magic is cool, but it isn’t worth the cost. If I’d had the choice, I’d have chosen Tasha and life here on the block.

A message on my watch shakes my wrist and I ignore it, eyes fixed on my sis.

I skip across the street to get closer, careful to keep my hood up. Shade swallows me on her side of the street. She pops in earbuds before locking the door and slipping her string straps on her shoulders. That faded-ass tie-dye. I told her

that went out in the seventies, but she loves it. She was never one to follow what everyone else is doing. She's always been like that though—cool doing her own thing. Like me. That we musta both got from Moms.

Come on, Tash. Look down. Neon braids dangle from her cornrows, dancing across her scalp in zigzags. Her hair is always tight. Her nails probably match. That's my sis. Nail polish isn't my thing. Chips too easy. I keep my fresh white 1s clean though. Toothbrush in my pocket at all times. Tash ain't leaving the house without the dopest 'do and flyest nails. Period. Twelve years old and stuntin'.

I slick down my edges, grinning... remembering. On the stoop, Moms used to rip through our heads, braiding ours and half the neighborhood's with a piece of cigarette dangling on her lip. Took the whole Saturday, I swear. She'd smack the hell out of my hand with a rattail comb if I moved too much.

"You got too much damn hair to be tender-headed," she'd say.

I flick away hot tears. Moms is gone and crying never solved shit.

Glasses perched on Tasha's beautifully wide nose hide her dark eyes. Her shoe nudges the wrapped box I left on her bottom step and my heart skips a beat. She grabs it and looks around. I press into the neighbor's brick. She *cannot* see me. How would I explain that? Where do I say I've been? What do I do if she wants to come back with me? She wouldn't understand. And what if she tries to touch me? Patrol back in Ghizon says touching humans gives them memories of all your feelings and experiences. She'd know everything about the secret place I live and the magic they gave me. I can't. Ghizon exists in secret and they intend to keep it that way. Just being here for a few is enough. It *has* to be enough.

Chin up, I pretend the dull ache in my chest isn't there. Lines riddle Tash's forehead.

The paper, look at the wrapping paper.

She rips the side open, then stops. She brings it closer to her face and tiny craters dent her cheeks. She holds the package there, staring, smiling. A priceless smile, worth every bit of trouble I could get into for this. I wasn't sure what to wrap it with. They don't exactly have a mini-mart with wrapping paper where I'm living. They'd probably magic some shit together, but I don't know those spells yet. So I took pages from Moms's old journal and wrapped the box, like an extra gift in addition to what's inside.

Tasha peers closer at the paper and gasps. *Moms's words, she's reading them.* Her fingertips find the corners of her eyes. I stay on her six as she walks with quick steps toward her bus stop, opening the package. *I can't see her face.* I wanna see that big-ass grin when she actually opens it up.

We round the corner, head down Fischer Street and turn into Moms's complex. A square block of row-style brown brick apartments with a basketball court in the center. My old spot. The janky-ass hoop still hangs there with a piece of plywood for a backboard. The smell of bay leaves, onions, and garlic curl my toes. *Somebody's grandma is cooking gumbo.* I haven't set foot in my old stomping grounds since I left. Seeing the backside from across the street wasn't easy. But walking into my neighborhood is... hard.

The block's lit like it's a Saturday night. People are everywhere, spilling out of their homes. Moms's old door is still coated in chipped green paint. The number nine dangles there like it always did, perpetrating as a six. My fingers twitch to fix it out of habit. Tufts of weeds peek through cracks on the stoop where I spent summers drinking Kool-Cups, gossiping with my girls, hollering at dudes.

I walk along the shade. Tasha's digging into the box now. The playground swings shuffle in the wind, creaking. They're like a clock, reminding me I shouldn't be here.

Tick tock. Tick tock.

Maybe a little closer. Just a little.

I stroll down a broken concrete path alongside the swing set, carefully cloaked in darkness, but closer to her now. She cracks a smile and I'm warm all over.

She rounds a corner up ahead and I follow as a pair of six-foot-two somethings walk by. Baggy jeans, another face I don't know, says, "What's up." I do the same. Their bling dangles and clinks above zip-ups and long sleeves. It's not cold enough for all that. Like most winters in Houston, it's muggy as hell.

My watch vibrates. Another message. Ignored.

Just a few more minutes. A chance to see her face light up at what's inside that box. Something to let her know that today of all days, I am still thinking of her.

Around the corner is Tasha's school bus stop. Six-nineteen. On time. She rips off the last piece of paper and pulls out a golden trinket from inside the box.

It was a little pendant Moms gave me. The last thing I had from her. She put the heart-shaped pendant in my hand three weeks before she died. Told me she worked a double shift for months to afford it. That didn't mean I needed to feel bad, she'd said. Just that my ass better not lose it because she can't afford another one. Tash used to ask me to play with it. I wouldn't even let her breathe on it. Now it's hers. I'm the oldest, which means I have to be the strongest. She needs it more than me.

My watch pings. I swipe right. A new message and all the ignored older ones scroll up the screen.

Bri: You okay?

Bri: It's been a long time. I'm getting worried.

Bri: Rue?

An old-school Cadillac with a rattling trunk steals my attention as its shiny chrome wheels slide to a stop. His black-tinted windows crack and kids at the bus stop rush over. Two kids about Tasha's age hop out. Nosey, like Moms always said I was, I crane my neck trying to see.

Tasha looks in my direction. Like, dead at me. I can't move. Does she see me? *Shit. Shit. Shit.* She waves at me, but she's looking past me. I spin on my heels. Some dude's hanging out a car across the intersection, waving back at her.

I exhale.

"Aye, yo, T," he yells. The dude's white button-up is tucked neatly into a pair of faded jeans. His face—do I know him?

"Sup!" Even her voice sounds older. She puts the heart-shaped pendant in her pocket and jets his way. I squint, hunching beside a dumpster. Who is this dude? And why the hell is whatever he wants so damn important she has to leave her stop to cross the street to come *to him*. You want something, you come here. My sister won't be running after no one.

She looks both ways and he does too, beckoning her closer. She's all smiles. Her bus. She's going to miss her bus. Uneasiness coils in my gut.

She knows this dude. And by the way she's grinning, she knows him *well*. I'm on my feet, keeping her in my sights. I don't like this. She darts across the first half of the street as the sound of a horn zips by.

"Hurry up, girl," he says with a smile, his pasty skin reflecting the morning sun.

"Aye, wait up," she answers. "I'm coming."

Coming where? Where the hell we going? I need to be closer. I'm not feeling this, any of this. Not with my sister. Not while I'm here. I creep so close, the scent of her vanilla hair puddin' swirls in my nose. I'm so close. So very close. If she turns around she *will* see me. Then what?

As she checks both ways again, tires peel out in the distance. Burnt rubber stings my nostrils. The dude's now in his Impala—dark blue with glistening wheels. My heart won't slow and I no longer expect it to. Tasha dips across the rest of the intersection and hops in his passenger seat. He pulls off the curb and she turns my way.

Our eyes lock.

She sees me.

SHIT!

I'm no expert on the ins and outs of Ghizon—the magic world—but one thing I know for sure: Magic folks, like these Laws here, do *not* like broken rules. What does a slap on the wrist even look like there?

Tash knowing I'm here is a problem. A big-ass problem.

Her mouth is hanging wide open in utter shock. She grabs the dude's shoulder to slow down. He throws me a glance, black ink peeking at me from the collar of his shirt. His eyes burn into mine and he doesn't smile... doesn't stop... just slows, approaching a yellow light. My excitement shatters.

Tires screech far off in the distance. The tatted driver runs the red and keeps rolling across the intersection... staring at me instead of the road. A white sedan dents my peripheral, racing toward them. The skin on my back bristles like icy hot knives.

Th-they're going to get hit.

The sedan driver's eyes bulge as he slams on the brakes.

No. No. No.

Rubber screams and skids against pavement. *My magic.* I close the distance between us and raise my hands, fingers spread wide. I tug all my focus to the center of my wrists. Energy like heat rushes through me, pooling in the balls of onyx glowing at my wrists. Waiting, ready.

The time spell. The damn words. What are the damn words?