

I look at the driver. Henry is his name. He's young like me, twenty maybe? Kinda cute. A tattoo peeks out from under the sleeve of his dress shirt, giving him an edgy look to offset the rest of him. His short hair is gelled to perfection and he's clean-shaven. If I hadn't seen his tattoo, I'd've thought he was a Mormon missionary.

"Let's get a couple rules straight before you meet the boss," he says, looking over his sunglasses at me. "First, never talk about her age. You'll piss her off."

I raise an eyebrow, but say nothing, nodding. Hmm. Either she's really old, or young like Henry and me.

"Second, never *ever* talk down to her. She'll fire you, and you'll most likely end up in the brig. Got it?"

"Got it." Duh. Why would I talk down to my boss?

"Most importantly, do absolutely everything she says. Sometimes her requests are bizarre, but I'm telling you this chick is brilliant. She knows her stuff, and she knows she knows her stuff. She is here to stay. For a *long* time. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Good. If she's asked for you, it must mean you're the best at whatever it is you do. "

"Thanks."

"Let's hope you survive the week."

What?! Who says that? How many people has eccentric old lady been through?

Henry pulls our black Chevy Suburban into a McDonald's drive thru. "One medium orange juice, please." He turns to me. "Want anything?"

"Coffee. Black."

"No coffee. It's another of her rules. Something about no addictions and how it smells

bad. If you wanna drink coffee, do it on your own time. Oh, and no swearing. Bad habits and all that.”

“Noted.” I stifle a sigh. No coffee? I’m gonna die.

We drive another couple blocks to an elementary school. It's a brick building teeming with energetic children, jumping out of cars and waving good-bye to loved ones. Henry pulls into a parking space facing the playground.

A bell rings, and the children skulk off the playground, aided by adults herding them toward the school.

A little girl wearing a hot pink tulle dress covered by a sequined zebra print jacket breaks from the crowd and skips in our direction. Her jewel encrusted ballet shoes glint in the sunlight as she adjusts the Barbie backpack on her shoulders.

Judging from her size, I’d gauge her to be a first or second grader. Her curly brown hair is pulled into a ponytail, accentuating her large eyes and cherubic cheeks. I expect her to walk past us to another car. Instead, she stops at the back-passenger door and opens it, climbing inside.

“Ah, Kat, I see you've made it.” She smiles at me before turning around and placing both hands on the door handle and leaning back to shut it. Then she jumps over the back seat into the trunk area, drops her backpack on the floor, and hefts a booster seat to the captain chair next to mine while calling, “Henry, do you have my juice? If mom feeds me oatmeal one more time I'm going to *freak out!*”

I’m staring. I know it. But how can I not? This is my boss. What the--?

She rolls her eyes and leans her head against the headrest, sighing. She closes her eyes for a second, takes a deep breath then opens them. In that brief second, it's almost as if little miss

Courtney changes entire personalities from bubbly little school girl, to full-grown woman. Her back straightens, and her lips set into a demure smile as she holds out her tiny hand to me. “I’m Courtney. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

I’m usually pretty good with my composure, but this little girl is freakin’ *me* out.

She pulls her unshaken hand away and smiles. “That’s okay. I get the same reaction with everyone.”

She jabs a finger at Henry, “You should’ve seen what *he* did when we met.” She grins at the driver and he shakes his head.

“Hey now, no need to spread rumors.”

I stare at him, slack-jawed, through the rear-view mirror and his eyes crinkle as he wags his eyebrows.

She half-giggles, but doesn’t elaborate. Instead she gets to work, “What’s on tap for today, Henry?”

“You have a meeting with the White House as soon as you arrive. Apparently, there was an incident last night. Something to do with Operation Snowball.”

"What happened?"

Henry's eyes dart to me, then back to Courtney. "There was an accident."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"Yes ma'am."

Courtney waits for a beat, but when Henry says nothing, she raises both eyebrows. "Spit it out, Henry."

He glances at her again through his mirror then says, "The Summers', ma'am."

"As in the entire family?"

Henry nods.

She takes a long drink of her orange juice then pulls a bracelet off her wrist. It, like the rest of her outfit, is pink and bedazzled. But when she tugs on the band, it becomes straight and rigid revealing a cell phone touchscreen on the underside. She taps in a passcode to unlock the phone then begins dialing a number from memory.

“I need you to find out as much as you can about what has happened with Operation Snowball within the past 24 hours. Is this accidental or intentional? Collateral Damage? How bad is it? I have a meeting in five minutes. Also, contact Randy, Jason, and Amy. After the meeting, I want status reports on each of their projects. And can you pick up something for me to eat?”

My eyes dart from Henry to Courtney. Who are the Summers? What’s Operation Snowball? Was I supposed to be debriefed on them earlier? What the freak is going on?

Courtney pauses as she listens to the voice on the other end of the phone. “Yes, call me as soon as you find anything out.” She pushes a button on her screen before slapping the phone to her wrist, folding it back into a bracelet again.

We drive in silence as she closes her eyes and shakes her feet nervously, humming a tune only she knows. I wonder if I should ask her to explain what’s going on. I glance at Henry who catches my eye and shrugs as if to say, “I have no idea. Just go with it.”

The phone rings, but this time Henry presses a button, putting the call on speaker.

“What have you got?” Courtney asks.

"There was a car accident last night around 1930. Keith and his family were hit head-on. The official report states that it was a teenager drunk and high off ecstasy. Keith and his wife are dead. The children are at the hospital."

"What is the condition of the children?"

"Neither had anything life-threatening, but the car flipped several times, and they were both knocked unconscious."

"What's the *unofficial* report?"

"Based off the information we gathered, this looks like a hit. He tried to swerve out of the way, and the car swerved with him. We have video of the driver leaving the scene, but not before hitting another kid who was at the wrong place at the wrong time. The cops are pinning the accident on the kid, saying he was ejected from the car."

Courtney gnaws on her lip. "Do Keith's kids know their parents are dead?"

"No, ma'am. Neither child has been told of their family's condition."

"Do they know each other is alive?"

"No ma'am."

"Okay. Let's initiate protocol Bravo. Contact Patricia and Monte and set up appointments to meet with me later today. We'll go over the rest once I'm inside."

"Yes ma'am," the woman says, then the connection severs.

Our Suburban slows. We've pulled into an industrial lot filled with acres and acres of cookie-cutter buildings. I search for street names or building numbers, but don't find any.

Henry slows at a building with a large opening for unloading semi trucks. He pulls into the space and creeps forward. The little hairs on the back of my neck stand up, making me feel uneasy, so I search for anything suspicious. When we break the threshold of the hanger, I see on each side of the entrance an armed guard in head-to-toe high-tech quantum stealth camouflage resulting in an "invisible cloak" effect. Henry stops to present his credentials, and I look out the window. Our vehicle is bisected by the cloak. If I lean back, the building looks like a ghost

town. If I lean forward, there are dozens of urban-cammo'd bodies standing in strategic positions with their weapons aimed at our car. I lean forward then backward a couple of times, trying to reconcile the dueling realities. It's surreal, but kinda cool. When they say Top Secret, the *mean* it. I glance over at Courtney who is sipping on her orange juice, watching me.

"Kinda weird, huh?" she says, taking another sip. "I learned pretty quick that nothing is ever as it seems around here."