

## Chapter One

By R. K. Washburn

“Oh my gosh! I love it! Thank you, Daddy!”

The sun shone through the trees that clear June morning, casting warmth and brightness onto the houses of Larkspur Lane. Although humid days were usual for the suburbs of Philadelphia, the residents were all enjoying the unpredicted comfortable weather. In the driveway of the last house on the cul-de-sac’s line of houses, however, stood one of the happiest individuals of them all.

“I’m glad you like it, sweetie,” replied a tall, well-dressed man. He stood next to his wife, both smiling contentedly as they watched their daughter jump up and down with joy.

Laughing, Payton Trivison clapped her hands together excitedly. She had reason to appear so happy. Although it was way too early for anyone else on the street to be up and about, she and her parents stood facing a shining black SUV, complete with a large pink bow on the hood.

“Happy birthday, darling,” her mother said, smiling.

“A new car!” exclaimed Payton. “I can’t believe it!”

Having turned the age of seventeen just the day previous, Payton had in reality suspected her parents’ mischief. She didn’t have to beg her father for anything. He always seemed to know exactly what she wanted. Payton giggled as she reached up and touched the sleek surface of the car. Most children were lucky enough to get their parents’ old cars for their first car. Then again, most children did not have successful men for a father like she did.

“Hybrid model, you know. Oh, and I know you like brighter colors, but the black one just called to me,” her father said, laughing as Payton circled the car completely, wearing an expression a child in a candy store would wear. “You’ve done so well paying the insurance on your own and have been ticket-free all year. You definitely deserve it, kiddo.”

“Thank you so much, Daddy,” Payton said. She bit her lip and looked worried. “It’s so big. I mean, as a gift. I don’t think I’ll be able to top this one on father’s day!”

Her father laughed and shook his head. “It’s a father’s job to spoil his daughter,” he said. “Go ahead and try out the seating.”

Payton nodded and walked around to the driver’s side door. She hesitated in front of the shiny surfaced door. She smiled at her reflection and gently pulled on the handle. It opened noiselessly and Payton could not help but squeal softly with excitement. The beige seats looked so pristine that she did not want to sit down on them. The black dials and dashboard glistened in all their untouched glory.

After a few seconds of admiring the surface, Payton forced herself to sit. Facing the front, she exhaled and then breathed in again. The smell of the faux-leather made her smile a little.

“Like the view?” called her father.

“Yeah,” Payton replied, flashing the two a grin. “I might just want to live in here for the next couple of days.”

“Oh, no you won’t,” her mother replied, crossing her arms with a smile still on her face. “You need to help me re-do the back garden this week.”

Payton grinned. “I will, scout’s honor!” she said, raising her fingers mockingly.

“Uh huh. Right.”

Turning around, Payton gazed over the dashboard. As she traced her fingers over the steering wheel, a new sense of ownership filled her. She had been dreaming of getting her own car ever since she earned her license last year. Her job at a local hair salon store paid well, but most of her paychecks went straight to insurance. Her family was well off financially, but her parents had always made it clear if she wanted something, she had to earn it on her own. In the end, all of her hard work had paid off after all.

Payton looked up and adjusted the rearview mirror to her height and grinned at the sight of the two rows of seats. She loved big cars. Her mother’s Jaguar, which she had been driving around for the last few months, had been much too small. Now, she would be able to drive around with her friends and still have plenty of room.

“So?” her mother asked. She had walked over to the driver’s side and was smiling up at her daughter. “How do you like it?”

“It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Payton replied, turning to grin at her.

Her mother laughed. “I’m happy you like it. Your father was so excited to get you a car. I was worried he was going to pick some sort of sports car. Those things are absolute death traps.”

Payton sighed, but knew how to humor her mother’s worrying. “Well, in this mammoth, I’ll be safe from anything,” she said. She patted the steering wheel. “Like a tank, only prettier.”

“Not from everything,” warned her mother. A new light appeared in her eyes and Payton inwardly groaned, knowing what was going to come next. “If you run into some kind of bio-chemical situation, the car’s not going to protect you.”

“Mom, even if I was in a real tank, I would still die from that,” Payton reminded her.

“Or a car bomb.”

“I don’t think we have many of those in Philly just yet, mom.”

“Or abductions—!”

Payton coughed loudly and whipped her head around. She saw her father was busy expecting at the rear of the car, maybe the license plate. He didn’t have seemed to have heard her mother’s comment.

“Payton, are you listening to me?” her mother asked, frowning. Payton slowly turned around and forced herself to smile.

“Yeah, sorry, dad distracted me. Um, yeah, abductions. Don’t think its gonna happen, but I’ll make sure to have mace and cell phone with me. They’ll go right in this compartment here, see?” She pulled out one of the small item holders under the radio.

Her mother’s frown deepened. “They’re completely unpredictable,” she said, her voice low. She leaned closer, eyeing each side of their location as though looking for hidden people listening in. “We have to be ready for them, Payton. It could happen to anyone.”

“I know, mom,” Payton said in a sigh.

“No, you don’t. Did I ever tell you what happened to me, right before you were born?”

Payton closed her eyes, exhaled heavily and then gave her mother a hard stare. “Yes,” she said calmly. “Many times. I believe you. Aliens are evil. Gotta watch out for them. Please, mom, not when dad’s right there. You know he doesn’t like you talking about that stuff.”

“Talk about what?” her father asked, coming up. He smiled brightly.

Thinking quickly, Payton grinned back. “She was complaining about sports cars. She’s glad you didn’t get one for me.”

Her father stopped and placed his hands on his hips. “There is nothing wrong with sports cars,” he exclaimed.

Payton nearly melted with relief when her mother took the bait. A look of realization entered the older woman’s eyes and then, she smirked.

“They’re small and dangerous,” Mrs. Trivison replied. She mimicked her husband’s pose, her previous agitated mindset forgotten. “You wanted to get that Mustang for her, but for once, you listened to reason.”

“It was a great car! It had a steel cage in it and everything!” her husband said.

“Yes, but would you really put our only daughter in something half the size of half of all the cars on the road?”

“I didn’t get it, did I?”

“Don’t change the subject!”

Payton smiled to herself as her parents bickered. They argued like this a lot, but it was never in an angry way. It was a word game they would play ever since she could remember. Most of their arguments were about silly things, like this. When they did argue for real, over serious things, it scared her. For that reason, she acted as the secret mediator and hoped she’d always be there to catch any slip-ups from her mother.

“So,” she said, catching her parents’ attentions. “Can I drive it now? I want to show Alicia and Tina!”

“Whoa, what about helping out your mother?” her father asked.

“But!” she cried.

“Scout’s honor?” her mother quickly said, smiling smugly.

Payton groaned, but obediently slid out of the front seat. She gave the car one last, mournful stare before she closed the door. Turning, she saw her father holding out his hand. From it dangled a set of keys.

“It’ll be waiting for you when you’re done,” he said.

Biting her lip in excitement, Payton took the key and held it up. The shining metal gleamed and its base was a dark black that matched the car. She took the locking button between her thumb and finger and pressed the button. The car blipped and a grin appeared on her face.

“Come on,” she said cheerfully, turning to her mother. “Let’s go tackle those rhododendrons!”