

BABY CARTER

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C'mon, Faithy, you're it!"

Charlotte Grand slid across the White House floor in her socks as Faith Carter ran to catch up.

"Why do *I* always have to be it first?" Faith called.

Charlotte stopped abruptly and put her hands on her hips. "*Duh*. That's because I'm oldest."

"So?"

"*So???*" Charlotte rolled her eyes. "The oldest always gets to hide first. *Everybody* knows that."

"All right, you two, that's enough."

Jamie Carter filed the last of the memos into her office's new walnut cabinet and stood back to admire the room. The furnishing had been built by students at a local high school as a gift to the president, who had invited the senior class to the inauguration earlier that year. It was wonderfully imperfect, with a few nails sticking out and the left back leg shorter than the rest but obviously crafted with love and attention. It was the last piece needed to complete her office, which had taken six months to cobble together. Decorating never seemed to be a priority when part of your job was helping the person running the country.

“It looks nice, Momma,” Faith said, standing in the doorway with a smile. Her voice echoed throughout the chamber.

“Thanks, sweetie,” Jamie said, although she still felt some reluctance about taking up so much square footage, especially in the private residence. Because the room had originally been a meeting room for visiting guests, it was rather spacious—certainly bigger than many of the other designated office areas in the White House. However, the president had been adamant that she have a live-in work space, and Jamie was grateful. Trauma may not be the best way to begin a relationship, but, in part, because of what had happened to them, President Grand was not only Jamie’s boss but had become one of her very best friends. The First Family was like a second family.

She placed a photo of her and her daughter on top of the walnut cabinet, twisting it so that it faced the room. “How was school?” she asked Faith. “Did you—?”

“C’mon, Faithy, hide your eyes!” Charlotte called, pulling Faith back into the hallway.

“It’s just not fair,” Faith pouted, chasing after Charlotte.

Jamie watched the girls circle around an accent table, piled with their school backpacks. They had become like sisters over the past four years and acted more like it every day—playing, arguing, sulking, teaching each other, confiding in one another. Her daughter’s hair, which had grown long, trailed behind her as she ran, and Jamie could smell her raspberry-scented shampoo. Working closely with the president of the United States was certainly a highlight of Jamie’s career, but it paled in comparison to being able to work where she was near her daughter.

Jamie slipped a manila folder into her briefcase and checked her phone. "Careful, girls. That's an antique."

"She's being bossy again, Momma." Faith stopped running and crossed her arms.

"I am not," Charlotte protested. "Just because you don't know the rules of the game doesn't mean there's something wrong with *me*."

Charlotte's eyes zeroed in on Faith with an audacity that Jamie recognized in the First Lady, who scared most of the White House staff with that look. Jamie placed her phone into her purse and threw the strap of her briefcase onto her shoulder.

"C'mon, girls, work it out." She left her office and bent down in front of both girls, pulling them in for a huddle. "That's what this house is all about, isn't it? Compromise? Moving forward? Progress?"

"I thought it was about getting the bad guys," Charlotte said.

"Well, that too," Jamie said. "But how do you think we get the bad guys?"

"With guns?"

"Not always."

"But you carry a gun, Momma," Faith said.

"Not when I'm at work, sweetie. And the way things are done best is with diplomacy. Violence should never be a first resort." She looked at her watch. The president was running late for his cabinet meeting, which had been rescheduled for that afternoon. The secretary of homeland security was a stickler for punctuality, so this wouldn't bode well for the president's attempt to get him on board with his proposed legislation to shore up the borders.

“Are you having a meeting with my dad?” Charlotte asked with obvious pride. “He’s the president,” she said to Faith.

“Yes,” Faith said dramatically, “*we know.*”

Jamie smiled and kissed her daughter’s forehead. “Be a good girl for Mrs. Grand, okay?” She waved to President Grand’s mother, who was sitting on a sofa in the next room and reading a book to Phillip Jr. The old woman had become a fixture in Faith’s life ever since Jamie agreed to make the move to Washington with the Grand family.

“Charlotte, dear,” the old woman called, “let Ms. Carter say goodbye to her daughter without you hovering about.”

“Oh, that’s all right, Mrs. Grand,” Jamie said, “she doesn’t need to—”

“Coming, Grandmother!” Charlotte called and ran to the sitting room, her blond curls tumbling beside her.

“When are you coming back, Momma?” Faith asked Jamie, her dark eyes wide.

“In just a few hours. This shouldn’t take that long.” She smoothed down her daughter’s hair and adjusted her shirt.

Faith reached underneath the collar of her shirt and retrieved her gold cross, which she pulled so that the chain formed a V down her torso. The jewelry had become her most prized possession, especially after she misplaced her Hello Kitty watch several weeks ago. The rope chain had become all kinky from the little girl’s constant fiddling, and, on cue, Faith began to rub the gold cross between her fingers, probably signaling her frustration with Charlotte. Every time she did, Jamie’s mind’s eye flashed back to the man who had worn

the jewelry first—a man she was never sure if Faith remembered.

“Try to play nicely with Charlotte, okay?” Jamie whispered.

“But—”

“Try your best.”

Faith sighed. “Okay, Momma.”

“And be careful, okay?”

“Yes, Momma.”

“Remember, always be on the lookout for anyone—or anything—weird or out of the ordinary.”

“I know.”

“And stay with Mrs. Grand.”

“I *know*, Momma.” Jamie sensed that Faith had the urge to roll her eyes but was too respectful to. “You tell me every day.”

“I know I do,” Jamie said, cupping her daughter’s soft cheek with her hand.

The truth was that Jamie probably told her twice a day. Stranger danger was not the same for them as it was for other families—and not just because they spent much of their time with the leader of the free world. Although the events of early 2014 were long behind them and, true to his word, Don Bailino had done all he could to ensure Faith’s safety, the circumstances surrounding her daughter’s lineage would always make her a potential target, one way or another. People could forget, of course, but they didn’t always, and organizations could have long memories. Would the FBI or NYPD one day make the child pay for the sins of the father? Were there other organized crime families lurking about and waiting? For what, Jamie didn’t

know. Would the paparazzi ever tire of Faith's salacious story of conception? President Grand's tenure as president may have been relatively calm, but Jamie's personal threat level would never be at green. And, unfortunately, neither would Faith's.

"I'm just double-checking," Jamie said, "because—"

"Because it makes you feel better."

"That's right." She pinched her daughter's cheek.

"I didn't forget ... In an emergency I go right to the men in the suits." Faith pointed toward the Secret Service agent standing down the hallway. This afternoon, Agent Brandon Fuller had private residence duty. Brandon, who was young and handsome, was Faith's favorite and was one of several agents President Grand had brought with him from the FBI's team at the Executive Mansion in New York. Jamie knew the best security was layered security, and the White House was perhaps the most layered residence in the country. She thought that would make her feel better, but some days Jamie felt Faith was as exposed as she was insulated.

"Right," Jamie said, "and if you don't have time, you—"

"I hide in the hiding spots that you showed me."

"And if—"

"And if I don't have time or if there's big, big trouble," Faith got in close to whisper, "that's when I hit one of those red buttons." She pointed to various locations in the residence. "But that's only for real emergencies," Faith added, "not peanut emergencies. It's for when something's really, really wrong, but not because of food."

Charlotte had already gotten into trouble for hitting one of the panic buttons not long after the inauguration

when Philly, who had a raging peanut allergy, had eaten a dessert that had been given to the president as a gift by a traveling dignitary; it had been manufactured in a plant that processed peanuts. As Philly began to lose his breath, Charlotte went straight for the panic button before anyone noticed. The Secret Service arrived just after Mrs. Grand administered the EpiPen, but the situation got out to the press and caused an uproar in social media circles. Jamie had spent the rest of the afternoon and the better part of the next morning in the press briefing room trying to explain what had happened. It was another of many President Grand moments to make it onto *Saturday Night Live*.

“Right.” Jamie wrapped her arms around her daughter. “I love you so much,” she said with a squeeze.

“I love you too, Momma.”

Charlotte, who was standing by her grandmother’s side, watched them closely, as she often did. It was no secret that the First Lady wasn’t the warm and fuzzy type, and neither was the president’s mother, for that matter, but Jamie knew that President Grand was a big softie and more than made up for it. Jamie winked at Charlotte, who smiled.

Secret Service agents appeared at the end of the hallway, followed by Phillip Grand’s looming head, which tended to tower over most others in his proximity. His large eyes searched the hallway. “Jamie, are you ready? We’re just about—”

“Daddy!” Charlotte squealed and ran into her father’s arms.

“Hey, cookie.” The president lifted Charlotte into the air. “How was school?”

“Great! We learned about fractions.”

“Ah, very important,” the president said, placing Charlotte on the ground. “I want to hear all about it later. Daddy has to go now with Jamie. You and Faith play, and I’ll be back soon.”

Jamie hurried back into her office and picked up a package of hard candies to smooth things over with the secretary of homeland security, who had a notorious sweet tooth.

“Remember, girls, talk it through!” Jamie called, joining the president and adjusting her jacket. “Pretend you’re the ambassadors for two countries and that you need to resolve your situation through diplomacy.”

“What?” Faith asked, puzzled.

“Be nice to one another,” Jamie rephrased. “Be fair, and, most important, have fun!”

“We will, Momma!” Faith yelled as Charlotte grabbed her hand and pulled her in the opposite direction.

“Where are we going?” Faith asked.

Charlotte put her finger to her lips and tiptoed past her grandmother toward the presidential bedroom suite.

Faith dragged her feet. “I *told* you, Charlie. We’re not supposed to play in here.”

“You’re such a scaredy-cat.” Charlotte peeked into the president’s bedroom. “I bet it has the best hiding spaces. Look how big it is.” She waved her hands dramatically in the air. “You know all my spots in the other rooms. We’ve done them a gazillion times. A gazillion is more than a billion. You’ll learn that in kindergarten.”

“But I’m not sure—”

Charlotte pulled Faith around a small table with a lamp.

She turned it off. “Just this once, okay? You can listen to me. I have president’s blood in me.”

Faith shrugged. “I guess.”

“It’s okay,” Charlotte said, patting Faith’s head. “I know you really don’t know anything about that. Having a daddy, I mean.”

“You’re being mean again,” Faith said. She crossed her arms and narrowed her dark eyes.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Charlotte said. “It makes me feel weird.” She peeked down the hallway where her grandmother was escorting Philly into another room. “Quick, here’s our chance,” she whispered. “Hide your eyes.”

“Wait, what about *dipomacy*? What my momma said?”

Charlotte sighed. “Okay, you can hide first. We’ll pretend that it’s Opposite Day. Is that fair?”

“Yes!” Faith said, delighted.

Charlotte put her head into her folded arms on the table.

“No peeking,” Faith said.

“I’m not.” Charlotte squeezed her eyes shut. “You better hurry! I’m a really fast counter. One, two, three ...”

Faith ran into the large bedroom and stopped. She had never been in this room before, or if she had, she didn’t remember what it looked like, and her eyes took in the large furnishings—desk, dresser, chairs, bed, curtains, rugs. She thought about hiding under the desk, but that would be the first place Charlotte would look. It always was. Behind the curtains would be the second place. Faith’s eyes scanned the floor for some hiding places, and she noticed a space under the giant bed that was disguised by a little flowery curtain. If she got back far enough, Charlotte would never find her there.

“Seven, eight, nine ...” Charlotte called from the hallway.

Faith darted toward the bed and crawled underneath. It was dark, but the little curtain didn’t hang all the way to the floor, so it let in a bit of light. She scooched back as far as she could when her hand touched something furry.

“Ewww ...” She pulled her hand back but realized it was one of President Grand’s bedroom slippers—the ones he wore when he was stealing cookies from the kitchen in the middle of the night. She lifted the curtain and peeked out, hoping that Charlotte didn’t hear her *ewww*.

“Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen ...”

Faith climbed over the slipper, and then its partner, making sure to place them neatly back where they were. As she scuttled farther back, the palm of her hand grazed something else, something big and hard—she ran her hand around it—and square. She thought maybe President Grand liked to keep a memory box under his bed like she did. She tried to push the box out of the way so she could hide, but it was heavy and wouldn’t budge. She tried turning it, but it was wedged against the bottom of the bed. She lifted the little curtain facing the window, and the sunlight shined on it. Faith could see a little bit inside the top—it was filled with wires and smelled like a gas station and way down at the bottom she thought she saw her Hello Kitty watch. *What could it be doing in there?*

She could feel her arms start to get all bumpy like they did when she was cold. Her mother’s words floated to her:

Be on the lookout for anyone—or anything—weird or out of the ordinary.

Was this weird, she wondered. Was it weird that

President Grand would steal her Hello Kitty watch? Weird enough to give up her hiding spot? Was this big, big trouble? Did big, big trouble come in a big, big box?

“Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five ...” Charlotte cheered. “Ready or not, here I come!”

Charlotte came charging toward the bedroom as Faith crawled out from under the bed.

“What are you doing?” Charlotte asked. “When I said *Opposite Day*, I didn’t mean *this*. I can totally see you, and, yuck, you’re full of dust.”

Faith ran past her toward the hallway.

“Wait, where are you going?” Charlotte yelled, running after her.

“No-peanut emergency, no-peanut emergency,” Faith whispered to herself, her speed across the varnished floor getting the attention of Agent Fuller down the hall.

“Faith, what is it?” he asked, but before he could get to her, Faith squeezed herself next to the bookcase outside Charlotte’s bedroom, stood up on her tippy-toes, and slapped her hand against the red panic button, sounding the silent alarm.