

Now I was up at the ass crack of dawn on this rainy “January” Wednesday (a Vancouver specialty of solid rain and cold in June) to chauffeur a spoiled Gen Z to his family’s private jet. Apparently, Taroosh “Topher” Sharma always pitched a fit about going back to his Chemical Engineering degree at Caltech and the latest tantrum had been impressive. Two antiques had been gravely injured after his father had forbidden Topher from hanging out at the beach house in Los Angeles, insisting his son devote July and August to an academic research project before starting his senior undergrad year. Boo fucking hoo.

I’d been assured that the jobs wouldn’t all be of this ignoble caliber, but Topher was known to bribe other drivers to help him play hooky, so a trusted professional had been engaged. Mine was not to question why, mine was to do or die trying.

As my employer, Tatiana Cassin, had impressed upon me, failure was not an option. Should I blemish her impeccable reputation, I’d be on my own without her protection for my loved ones and with no help to solve my parents’ decades-old murder. A murder that may well have been intended to be my end, too.

Bleary-eyed, I drove from my duplex off Main Street in East Vancouver to the University of British Columbia, yawning far too often under the hypnotic rhythm of the wipers. There was little traffic on the road, and I made it across town in half an hour to the University Endowment Lands, which housed both the enormous campus and a lot of expensive homes.

The Sharma house was a mid-century modern stunner with clean minimalist lines and an eye-catching asymmetry. Unlike many expensive homes in Vancouver that were hidden away behind tall hedges, the ones in this area tended to floor-to-ceiling windows designed to capture the best light at all times of day, leaving them lax on privacy.

As the gate to the driveway was open, I pulled up to the front door, and took a sip of my lukewarm double espresso before popping the trunk with a sigh. It was a two-hour drive to the Chilliwack Airport where daddy’s private plane was stationed, and Topher Sharma screamed douche canoe from the tips of his platinum-frosted over-gelled hair to his sunglasses worn before the sun had fully risen and his excessively tight V-neck, exposing a small triangle of brown skin under a partially zipped hoodie.

I was tempted to ask him if he could make his pecs dance but when I got within ten feet, I tasted the cologne that he’d gone water rafting in and thought better of it. At least he hadn’t been late—as I’d been warned he was prone to be.

Topher grunted good morning, graciously allowed me to load his suitcase into the trunk, and only showed signs of life when I offered to put his leather satchel in with his luggage. He slung the strap over his head as if worried I'd wrestle him for it and got into the car. Given his wealth, I'd expected his suitcase to be embossed with his initials or some luxury brand name logo, but he only had a single banged-up hard plastic case on wheels. The 1 percent, they're just like us!

The only upside of this assignment was that Tatiana had procured a fully tricked-out luxury SUV by means I chose not to question. It was like steering a silver cloud that warmed my butt and massaged my back at an almost spiritual level.

The silence in the car lasted about three minutes before Topher switched on the radio, tuning in to a hip-hop station without asking me if I minded. Basic car etiquette 101: the driver controls the music.

My hands tightened on the wheel.

And where was my bribe? Not that I'd take it, but according to Tatiana, this kid tossed them out like beads at a Mardi Gras parade. Was I not worthy of one? Frowning, I chalked it up to my Big Mom Energy.

Topher's leg bounced light-speed fast, and he didn't stop fiddling with the satchel's clasp. While he wasn't constantly sniffing—which was the extent of my knowledge on cocaine side-effects—his shirt was soaking through with sweat, so maybe methamphetamines?

We left the manicured streets and swung onto one of the wider avenues leading off campus, the forest pressing in on either side. The gray sky bathed the trees in a cold light, pine needles spiking out from branches like witches' fingers.

“Los Angeles, huh?” I'd merely intended to make conversation but given the way Topher jumped and swung his wide-eyed gaze away from the window, you'd have thought I'd forcefully dragged him back into his physical body from the spirit realm. Was this all an elaborate act to guilt the parent figure of the vehicle, also known as me, into taking pity on him and not driving him to the airport? Snorting, I turned off the music. Amateur hour. Nonetheless, I chatted on like the professional I was. “I hear the Getty Museum is outstanding. Have you ever been?”

He pulled the oversized hood of his sweatshirt up, throwing his face into shadow. “No.”

Crushed by his stellar conversation skills, I finished my now-cold beverage and settled in for one hundred and twenty minutes of my life that I would never get back. In my head, I made a

new to-do list consisting of one item: get Twitchy safely bundled onto the plane as soon as possible, at which point he'd become the flight staff's problem.

The sour stench of sweat overwhelmed the car. I didn't want to embarrass him, but I wanted to be trapped in a small space with bad smells even less.

"Do you need water or medical attention?" I said.

"Picked a bad time to quit smoking," he muttered. Smoking what, though? He pulled a package of Life Savers out of his pocket and tossed a green one in his mouth—the most disgusting flavor and another strike against him. He offered me the last candy, an orange one. "Want it?"

I subtracted one point off his douchiness and accepted. "Thanks."

Nodding absently, he dropped the empty packaging in the cup holder. I ground my candy to orange-flavored dust. Why yes, I'd love to clean up after you.

The rain sluiced down under a dark sky and my wipers worked double time in a brisk staccato. I slowed down on account of the weather, so when a speeding car came up behind me, I flicked on my signal and moved into the right-hand lane to allow the driver to blast ahead and roar around the curve.

I shook my head at his reckless driving, then checked on my passenger, still slumped in the seat, staring out the window.

At least my butt was toasty warm.

Suddenly, there was a deafening bang and a blinding flash of light that made me see spots. I couldn't even tell what side of the car it was on or where we were on the road, just that we were going sixty miles per hour and fishtailing. I yelped and jerked the wheel against the onslaught of g-forces, fighting to avoid a spin.

I was really starting to regret signing up for book club and not upper body toning or Pilates.

With one last herculean burst of effort, my weak noodle arms wrenched the SUV back into our lane. My eyes still wept out a stream of tears from the bright light and my ears rang a bit, but we were okay. We'd made it. I did a small fist-pump. Years of defensive driving in Vancouver had paid off.

Topher had lost his sunglasses in the scuffle and his eyes were wide with shock. "What was that?"

I shook my head. “I don’t know. Maybe a transformer blew? Sometimes that—”

But whatever small talk I was going to make Topher would never hear, because that was when a second blast sent us careening on the wet road.

As the car hydroplaned, I went into emergency mode. Get to safety. Don’t lock the brakes. Can’t fucking see.

Topher breathed rapidly, terrified like a little kid before opening night of their second grade drama production.

“Hang on.” Furiously pumping the brakes, I steered away from the telephone pole dead-ahead, but the car had taken on its own skidding momentum.

Topher threw his arm up over his face.

My hands on the wheel felt oddly disconnected, stuck in an unfamiliar sluggishness.

Time sagged, and I let out a breath, feeling like I was sinking into a sea of molasses, already a ghost. The world sharpened into a crystal-hard spike of pointlessness. There was no to-do list, no problem solving, and no multitasking that could save us now.

We bumped onto the shoulder of the road and smashed into the pole.