

CHARMED

Chapter one

Genevieve.

My name is Genevieve Santos and I am twenty-seven.--- I recited this like a mantra to every potential employer until I actually got the job.

I worked as a caregiver, moving from one house to the other, putting up with irritable elderly, nagging daughters-in-law, naughty grandsons and loquacious granddaughters. The one I hated more than anything and could never tolerate was the “flirtatious husbands”

A few months ago, I resigned from a caregiving job because one of those husbands had crossed the line. I still remember vividly how he was peppering insults at me as I walked out of his yard. I didn't care as long as I could walk and feel blameless. Meeting with the enigmatic Throndsens gave me goosebumps.

One of my well-connected friends who worked with an agency had put in a good word for me, so I headed to the Throndsen mansion.

If I was interviewed and approved, I would commence work at once and move into the mansion, but if otherwise, I would have to seek a job elsewhere. The taxi sped minimally on the black-tarred road in Los Altos Hills.

I had seen some of the Throndsens on TV but I had never thought I would actually meet them. The Throndsens were one of the families in the US that commanded a great portion of the wealth of the country. They were definitely an enviable household. I hoped to impress them. As soon as I alighted outside the magnificent gate that led into the mansion, the gatekeeper opened up.

However, I didn't expect to see a car waiting patiently for me. Get in, miss. It will take you to the main residence. --- the gatekeeper said, and I entered, quite surprised. The entire property of the Throndsens was like a national estate.

It was big and fascinating to gaze upon. Canopies of trees lined the road that rolled out in between, there were so many colours to see, so many flowers, bougainvillaea, the poppy, you name it. They all spread out, covering the mass of the estate.

And there were buildings too, grand ones coated in timeless painted colours. Even the flowers were enshrouding some. I heaved a sigh, I hoped I wouldn't fail the people who owned this mesmerising property that I could look at forever. We are here, miss. --- the driver finally said. I got down and he drove off, towards the driveway perhaps.

The door opened and an older man, smartly dressed in an immaculate white shirt, a black vest, a pair of black trousers and a black bow-tie came out. I guessed he was the butler.

Welcome Miss Santos, Madam is expecting you. --- he said in a tone of geniality. Certainly. -
-- I made sure to appear composed. Who could ever be herself when meeting with such a
prestigious family?

The waiting room was grand but I had to go into an even statelier room, the living room. I
thought I could have ten of my apartments removed from it. I was welcomed with seven pairs
of turquoise eyes and it kind of came as a foreboding.

Good morning. My name is Genevieve Santos.

Come, Miss Santos. --- the woman whose colour of eyes merely looked like turquoise but
was not truly turquoise turned to me. She looked middle-aged and she was dressed in a
classy mohair burgundy cardigan and a matching straight skirt. An older woman was sitting
next to her. I thought her eyes spelt discipline.

Have your seat. --- she said further.

By then, my skin was already tickled into goosebumps. As I sat on the exotic velvet sofa, this
same woman gave her hands a clap and two servants appeared with refreshments. I
managed not to show my anxiety by smiling often.

Your résumé has explained to us in detail your work experience and educational
background, but then Madame thought it wouldn't do any harm if she had an interview with
you, Miss Santos. --- her sharp voice was surprisingly sweet to my ears.

Certainly. --- I looked at the older woman who was being referred to. Her own turquoise eyes
were heavily besieged by tiny moles and wrinkles. She was wearing a blue hat which
matched perfectly with her sky blue lorgnette skirt.

It's a pleasure to meet you ma'am.

She only nodded. I wasn't so disappointed.

Miss Santos, have some tea cake. --- the first woman appeared to be very hospitable.

Thank you ma'am. --- I decided to have a taste of the appetizing tea cake set in front of me. Three of the turquoise-eyed group were men and I guessed they were husbands and sons, but I couldn't recognize Adam Throndsen among them. The last of them was a young lady dressed in a fashion green silk skirt and a red cropped blouse. Her hair was draped in rich dark curls. She was beautiful.

Miss Santos. --- the old woman's voice broke my thoughts.

Yes ma'am.

Why should we give you this job?---- her eyes were squinty.

Well ma'am, that should be for your sustainability. --- I tried to sound as calm as possible.

She stared at me for a while and then asked again.

Wouldn't you be earning a fortune from this job?

Of course, and that is what you have decided, ma'am. --- I never thought I'd be asked such a question.

Well, well...it's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Santos. --- she said lastly, before one of the servants came to wheel her away. Did that mean I had been hired?

Miss Santos, it's time you were introduced to the rest of the family. --- the first woman called me back from my distraction.

Yes. --- I smiled.

I am Bridgette Thronsen. Madam is called Ellie, --- she began.

The Madam was called Ellie. I was surprised. I had expected some tough nickname. Ellie was a sweet name.

I nodded as I listened.

Here is Ellie's daughter and my mother-in-law, Victoria. --- Bridgette was talking about the turquoise-eyed older woman whom I had earlier thought would be a disciplinarian. Her facial expression was nothing but serious.

It's a pleasure to meet you Madam Victoria. --- I smiled, but she regarded me with a curt nod. Was this woman generally cold or was she going to be the villain during my service to this household?

Here is Adam Thronsen, my husband. --- Bridgette's eyes were smiling at the oldest-looking man among the trio. I thought Adam Thronsen looked calmer in person than on TV. I knew there were two Adam Thronsens and I knew the other one, who was Bridgette's son, was absent from the assembly.

It's an honor to meet you sir. --- I went ahead to shake his hand.

Miss Santos. --- he gave a small smile.

And there is Daniel Throndsen, Adam's brother. ---

When I shook hands with this Daniel Throndsen, I caught the close semblance between him and Adam Throndsen II, whom I often saw on TV. I must say Adam took after his uncle.

Over there is Michael Throndsen, Daniel's son. --- Bridgette was introduced.

It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Santos. --- Michael was kind enough to say that before I could. He seemed a cheerful young man.

Last but not least, here is Danielle Throndsen...

Daniel's daughter! I chuckled inwardly.

... Daniel's daughter. --- Bridgette breathed.

As I came face-to-face with Danielle, I became even more enthralled by her beauty. She was young and she could pass for a model. Then it suddenly struck my mind that I had seen her somewhere before. Was she the lady whose profile was always constant in Vogue magazines? I wanted to ask but I decided to keep quiet.

Take good care of our Ellie. --- she shook my hand warmly.

So far, all of the Throndsens I have met were genial people besides Victoria Throndsen, who did not look as cheerful as the rest of them.

My son, Adam, you must have seen him in the media...

Certainly, ma'am.

Yes, he won't be joining us today. --- she thought it proper that I should know.

I nodded.

Come, Miss Santos, I will show you Ellie's schedule. ---Bridgette took me away from the living room into another big room which was apparently a study. The pleasant smell of the Thronsdens permeated the air, everywhere in the mansion, even in the study which I supposed should smell of books.

Here It is. I have had it printed out. Take your time to study it and then you can resume work tomorrow.

Bridgette handed over a file to me. I had not thought someone's schedule could be so detailed.

Yes ma'am.

And yes, you should have someone to assist you. She's a servant of the house. Hephzibah?

Yes ma'am...

I was surprised when a young lady ran inside as soon as Bridgette called. She must have been waiting nearby.

This is Miss Santos. You will listen to her henceforth.

Yes ma'am. --- Hephzibah bobbed.

Hello. --- I extended a handshake and she shyly accepted my gesture. I returned to the living room with Bridgette and I immediately signed the contract with the Throndsen family. The number of turquoise-eyed families had reduced to two by the time we got back. Adam and his brother, Daniel, I guessed, had left for work and Victoria Throndsen had apparently receded into her bedroom. So Michael and his sister, Danielle, were the only two left.

Danielle?

Yes, auntie. --- she looked up from her phone.

Can you kindly supervise the kitchen till I return? I'd like to give Miss Santos a tour of the house. --- while Bridgette spoke I noticed what I didn't notice earlier, that her lashes fluttered twice as usual.

Oh, yes, but you should make it quick. I'll be off to the studio in an hour. --- Danielle let you know.

Of course. Shall we Miss Santos?

Call me Genevieve ma'am. --- I was beginning to feel awkward with the title even though I knew it was all formality.

I shouldn't but I will, since you have mentioned it, Genevieve. --- her voice still held that sharp tone even after dropping the formality.

I smiled.

This way...--- I took her lead.

On my tour of the mansion, I counted thirty stately bedrooms in total and it did not come as a surprise when Bridgette Thronsen mentioned that the house paid the wages of forty employees. These people were filthy rich and I thought I was just too lucky to find myself here. Earlier, I had thought that being rich didn't require composure and, yes, many rich people lacked composure, but my notion had really changed since I arrived at the Thronsen house. The Thronsens were orderly to the core and I found myself admiring the fact. I wished to get along with every one of the family, both young and old, and especially Ellie, whom I would be caring for. Bridgette told me Ellie's room was on the left wing of the house, including her son, Adam's room. She did not forget to mention that her son was especially close to his great-grandmother and offending Ellie was equivalent to incurring the wrath of Adam. I took note, of course. I wouldn't dare offend anyone not to talk of Ellie, the most precious great-grandmother of the Thronsens.

I felt Bridgette took special care not to tell me what I wasn't required to know as a caregiver. She explicitly made me understand that the only person whose business was my business was Ellie and I should keep that in mind. To me, the names of every family member was enough information and I planned on facing what I came to the Thronsen house to do undistractedly.

I'll have Hephzibah show you to your bedroom, Genevieve. It's next to Ellie's. --- Bridgette finally said.

Chapter Two

Genevieve

I fully resumed work the following day. Moving was no big deal as I had just a small number of clothes and shoes. After I arrived at the Throndsen house, Hephzibah showed me to my bedroom and upon entry, I could just awe at it. It was beautiful and very well furnished. I loved the room but I still missed my bedroom at home and my mother's scent...my mother. She was in the hospital, very ill, but soon I hoped she would get better. My intention was to pay for her surgery bills with the advance payment I received from the Throndsens. I will see her soon. It was my first day at the Throndsens and I wanted to settle down.

As I went through Ellie's schedule for the eighteenth time, a knock came on my door.

Who is it?

Hephzibah! --- her high-pitched voice returned.

A minute.

When I opened the door, she told me Ellie needed my attention. I wasted no time and within a twinkle of an eye, I was standing before Old Ellie. She was wearing a yellow woolen cardigan and her lower body was covered with a draped blanket. She was staring at me with queer old eyes. I was smiling at her.

Tell Bridgette I will have my porridge in my room. --- her voice quaked.

Yes ma'am. --- I turned to leave.

Genevieve?

Ma'am? --- I turned to face her.

Tell Bridgette I don't want the red tray today. Bring the porridge in the purple one. --- Then she looked towards the direction of a massive array of flower pots.

Let her have the servants bring the forget-me-nots freshly picked from the garden. --- she added.

I thought that the dandelions sitting on the clay in Ellie's room were quite all right.

Yes ma'am. --- I humbly obeyed.

When I got to the kitchen, I told Bridgette what Ellie had asked.

I was too engrossed with the cooking and your arrival I totally forgot Ellie's flowers. She doesn't like her flowers sitting for too long. --- Bridgette said.

I nodded and reasoned that different people loved to have different things done differently.

According to Ellie's schedule, after her porridge came her bath. I helped her get into the bathtub and assisted her with shampooing her hair. To my surprise, her gray hair was full and not at all the usual receding hair you'd expect a hundred and two year-old to have. After her bath, she slipped into a casual outfit and I helped her get on the king-sized bed which

stood in the middle of the room. It was then I noticed the photo that stood on the bedside table--- it was a happy picture of Ellie and Adam, her great-grandson in his graduation robe. The picture was clearly old, so I knew Adam was going to look much older now. Nevertheless, he would still be handsome. I chuckled at my own thought.

Genevieve?

Yes ma'am? --- she was then lying on her back and I was covering her legs with a blanket.

Open one of the windows. --- she demanded.

Yes ma'am. --- I did as she had asked.

It's time to use your medication ma'am. --- I got hold of her tray of medicines and gave her each of the different tablets as they were prescribed. She swallowed all of it immediately. Someone knocked on the door thereafter.

Come in. --- she answered, and then Bridgette walked in with three servants carrying new flower pots. In them were freshly picked Forget-me-nots.

I'm sorry Ellie. I'll make sure not to distress you again. --- Bridgette pleaded.

It's alright. --- Ellie groaned as the servants replaced the old pots of dandelions with new pots of Forget-me-nots.

Make haste girls. Stale flowers aren't good for Ellie. --- Bridgette cried.

Genevieve. You are in charge of replacing my flowers from now. --- Ellie announced.

I looked at Bridgette and it looked like she had been aware of Ellie's intentions all along.

Genevieve, make sure you constantly replace the flowers...

How many days do certain pots of flowers last, ma'am? --- I asked Bridgette.

Half a day. ---- she replied and turned to Ellie. I was utterly surprised, the flowers must be replaced after twelve hours.

Ellie, do you need me to bring anything from the kitchen?--- Ellie shook her head and Bridgette took her leave with the three servants up behind her, each holding a stale pot of flowers.

Later in the day, I happened to pass by a group of gossipy servants who were arguing among themselves on the matter of the arrival of Adam. Some were for a week's time, while some were against it. None of the servants actually knew when the man would be returning, I guessed. After Ellie finished her plate of fruit salad, she wanted me to take her on a stroll outside the house. We walked round the lawn until dinnertime.

On the following day, I decided to seek permission to visit my mother at the hospital. Bridgette allowed me to leave during Ellie's check-up with the family doctor. Afterwards, Ellie was to follow her schedule and take an afternoon nap. At the hospital, my mother was eager to know everything about the Throndsens despite her ailing state.

Mum, don't get too excited. It's not too good for your health. --- I tried to explain to her but she wouldn't let me.

Are they treating you well? Are they doing good by you? --- she kept on asking.

Of course. I do not deserve to be treated unfairly, mum. So just stop talking and rest. I'll be back after I see the doctor. --- I left the ward immediately to pay for her surgery.

Upon seeing Doctor Brown, he explained to me that the hospital had finally found a donor for my mother and I was more than pleased to pay for her surgery.

With that done, rest assured your mother's surgery will be successful. --- he smiled at me and left. A troop of interns in white coats trooped behind him.

I hoped my mother's kidney transplant would truly be successful. I returned to my mother to say goodbye, after placing a fruit basket near her patient's bed. As I stepped out of the hospital, I glanced at my wrist watch and I felt there was still time to visit the chapel.

The chapel was a place I often went to find solace. It was my refuge. I also especially loved the chapel because I usually chanced to give the orphans living in an area of it the little I had. This time, I had bought small wraps of chocolates when I had purchased a fruit basket for my mother. The nuns were already familiar with me.

Bye!!!--- the chirruping voices of the little children were like melody to my ears.

I will visit again! --- I made sure to tell them before finally boarding a taxi back to the Thronsen mansion. The air outside was calm and I simply breathed. The radio in the taxi was playing a 70s song I identified as" You are the sunshine of my life" by Stevie Wonder. It was nice to know people still fancied to do throwbacks.

The taxi stopped outside the big Thronsen gate as public cars weren't permitted to drive in. I paid the taxi driver as soon as I alighted.

Good day Miss. --- the gatekeeper saluted.

Haven't we pleasant weather today?

He smiled but before he could reply, a black sporty car drove towards us. The tinted windows were wound up so I couldn't see the driver at all. However, the gatekeeper hastily left his post and ran across the cobblestoned road.

Welcome young master! --- he took off his hat and that displayed subjection to higher authority as much as I knew.

Slowly, the driver's window wound down to reveal a tanned and chiselled face, smooth-bearded and masked with a pair of posh shades.

Sanders! --- the man's voice was deep baritone. Who was he?

Welcome sir! --- the gatekeeper saluted once again. Then I saw that the man turned his gaze at me. I hoped I was seeing correctly. Yes, he began to stare at me.

Who is this lady? --- he queried the gatekeeper, to my surprise.

Ah, Madame's new caregiver. --- Sanders responded. Instantly, the man removed his shades and my eyes immediately set upon a bright pair of turquoise lenses. My heart skipped a beat or two. Adam Thronsen? Was I finally meeting him?

Adam

I could then see her more clearly. I was disturbed by her beauty and youthfulness. Why would Ellie hire such a lady as her caregiver? Why was such a lady doing such a job in the first place? She must have ulterior motives. Her pale blue eyes were smiling at me. I disliked the look on her face as she waved at me. I must head in and talk to Ellie about it. She should have waited for me to return, she shouldn't have chosen such a lady as her caregiver. One can not meet with people, especially a young good-looking woman who has applied for the job of caregiver. The Throndsen family was no mean household and therefore we must be sought after by all and sundry, evil and good.

Open up. --- I said to a grinning Sanders.

Yes sir. --- he moved an inch or two and operated the gate with its remote. The lady was still standing there. Was she so stupid she didn't know that she was blocking my way?

I pressed hard on the car horn and she immediately jumped out of the way.

Welcome home! --- Sanders chirped as I drove in.

Genevieve

I couldn't believe what I had just witnessed. What sort of man would disregard anyone just like that? Was that truly Adam Thronsen? Yes, apparently! Did I look weird? I took out my compact mirror and examined my face. No, I looked just fine. I caught Sanders staring at me.

Is anything the matter? --- I blinked.

Are you applying make-up? --- he twitched his brows in curiosity.

No...

What are you doing then?

I was...--- I stopped talking, I couldn't tell him that I was checking to see whether I had developed a mole within the last few minutes or something. I might really be considered weird.

Never mind. --- I kept my compact mirror away.

I'm going in. --- I added. Sanders looked fleetingly at me before opening the small gate.

As I walked the distance to where the Throndsens stood. I couldn't but think Adam Throndsen had had a bad first impression of me and I didn't know the reason. What could the reason be? I had certainly not looked absurd. My dress was also perfectly fit, not too loose or not too tight. In fact, it was one of the best dresses in my closet. So what could the reason be? Perhaps he was in a bad mood, but I still believed that shouldn't warrant his uncourteous attitude. One shouldn't behave in such a way towards guests. Perhaps it was all a part of Adam Throndsen, perhaps he took after his grandmother, Victoria Throndsen. I didn't even know what to think or believe. I had always thought that my first meeting with him would be memorable and, indeed, it was but on the negative side. He was as handsome, or even more, as he looked on TV, but I didn't expect not to see his smile upon our first meeting. Finally, I decided to accept whatever unknown reason he had to have behaved in such a manner. There was nothing I could do anyway, but I doubted I was still anxious to get to know him. His attitude had put me off. Of course, we would see each other in the house and it might happen more frequently than I had expected, so I would have to put up with his cocky attitude. At least I thought it would be easier to do that than to put up with flirtatious husbands.

Chapter Three

Adam

I didn't see her until breakfast the following morning. As she walked towards the dining room, I recollected Ellie's position on the matter. Ellie thought this lady's spirit would be great for her health but I doubted it. She wouldn't be eating with the family, would she?

Good morning everyone. --- her voice was as coy as her pretty face and I suspected her even more. It seemed she noticed my gaze on her for she looked up at me and regarded me with a plain smile.

Have you met my son, Genevieve? --- Mother had to ask. I chewed hard on my bacon.

Yes, ma'am. --- she glanced at me before disappearing into the kitchen.

What do you think of Ellie's new caregiver, cousin? --- Michael asked.

I don't think you should ask me about that, it's clear you all did not wish to involve me from the outset.

But you were away, my son.--- Mother was staring widely at me.

You could have waited till I returned. It's so unfortunate I exerted myself and wrapped the deal within five days instead of two weeks. That was easy, wasn't it?

Mother sighed.

Don't worry my boy, it's not like she will live here forever. --- Grandma spoke while Danielle silently ate next to her. Danielle didn't like to involve herself in arguments.

Genevieve? --- Mother called my attention to her. She was standing at the entrance to the kitchen with a jug of milk.

Does Ellie need anything else?

No ma'am. I was just leaving. --- she responded quickly and walked briskly away.

I'm off. --- I dropped my fork and wiped my mouth clean.

Why, you haven't had more than two...

I have lost my appetite. I have a meeting with the shareholders today. --- I left the dining table before anyone could utter any more words.

Genevieve

It was clear Adam Throndsen was not a fan of me and my presence in his house literally irked him. And Victoria? She neither was and she was quite supportive of her grandson. I was rather bothered. When I entered the room, Ellie was looking out of the window. I had just changed the flower pots and now, Orchids lightened the atmosphere in the room by a large degree.

Here you go ma'am. --- I gave her a glass of milk.

Hmm. --- her fair shrunken hand collected the glass from me. As she sipped on, she seemed to be in deep thought. I thought I should let her be until lunch hour.

I'll leave you now ma'am. --- I had said before I remembered that I wanted to seek permission to go to the hospital on the following day as my mother's surgery would be performed.

Ma'am, --- I began. --- I'd like to take leave to stay with my mother at the hospital. Her surgery will be performed tomorrow.

Go to your mother Genevieve. One should never leave one's family during difficult times. --- her clear voice was soothing, though she didn't turn away from the view outside of the window.

Then I shall inform Mrs. Throndsen as well.

She nodded and I soon left the room.

As I came out of Ellie's bedroom, Hephzibah gradually appeared as she came up the stairs. I wondered why she didn't use the elevator. When she reached where I was standing, she patiently caught her breath before she spoke.

Mrs Throndsen wants you in the living room.

All right. ---- I turned to towards the elevator and I hoped Hephzibah would come with me but she didn't. She was headed towards the long flight of stairs.

Why are you going down the stairs and not using the elevator? --- I was prompted to ask by curiosity.

The thing is, I am claustrophobic. --- I watched her lean on the banister.

Oh. --- I kind of pitied her. She had to come up and go down a thousand times a day using the stairs even when the elevators were readily available and it was all because of a phobia. Good thing I didn't have such a phobia, I would have died of lethargy.

Bridgette Thronsen was tending to a house plant when I walked out of the elevator and stepped into the living room. The house was awfully quiet.

You called for me, ma'am?

Yes, Genevieve. I have something to tell you...

What is it ma'am?

By chance, Ellie might relapse into a state of utter confusion where she would hardly recognize anyone...

Yes ma'am.

Do not leave her alone. --- that was an order, I guessed.

Certainly I won't. ---- it was not like me to desert my ward during times like that. Not especially the Throndsens' beloved Ellie.

Bridgette looked at me for a moment and then gave a curt nod.

You can leave. --- Yes, I could. It appeared she had sent for me only to tell me that. Why though? Did she think I would shirk my responsibility towards Ellie? No, I would never do that. But I couldn't leave just yet, I wanted to tell her about mother.

Ma'am?

She returned her gaze on me.

I'd like to be permitted to take tomorrow off, my mother's surgery will be performed tomorrow.

Of course. You should go and take care of her.

I smiled and then left.

Upon my entry into the elevator, Victoria Throndsen quietly joined me. I was not expecting to see her at all.

Fifth floor. --- she said with her condescending voice.

Yes ma'am. --- I pressed the button. She was going to see Ellie... most probably.

While she stood perfectly still on a spot, I surreptitiously took a good look at her. I wouldn't want her to think anything weird or unnatural of me. Her salt and pepper hair was wrapped in a neat chignon, her slender neck was adorned with expensive pearls and she was wearing a beige maxi dress. Her arms were crossed against her chest. The usual stern look was plastered on her freckled face.

Do we perhaps, have anything in common, Miss Santos? --- hardly had she finished talking when I hiccupped.

She threw a disdainful glance at me and then she returned her gaze on the elevator door.

I had been caught. Silly me! I was still hiccupping and it seemed like I would not stop.

My mother and I require privacy. --- she mentioned when the elevator stopped and the door opened up to the fifth floor. I wanted to yes her statement but she was gone. How cold!

Adam

I wondered what Mr. Hilton would say to my just concluded statement as his crafty eyes quirked in different directions. As the President of the Throndsen Group I had a veto on every matter concerning the company but then my decision could also be vetoed by the five highest shareholders of the company. Apparently, Mr. Hilton was one of them and I was often at odds with him. I thought that Mr. Hilton was not very much pleased with the agreement reached in Japan--- I had represented Throndsen Group and met with the Asian magnate who owned multiple hotel chains and pachinko parlors.

Mr. Throndsen, I think the height of the stipulation which you reached at Japan is not the limit. --- his voice finally came, old and raspy. I sighed softly as the others began to murmur their agreement. I was not surprised, in comparison to Mr. Hilton I was regarded merely as the Group's heir and not a business man. This had been implied quite a number of times.

Mr. Hilton, I didn't forget to put the Shogun's interest into consideration.

Chairman Yū's interest must be considerably lesser than the company's, Throndsen...--- he was quick to respond.

Hilton is right, we cannot go through with it. It has to be withdrawn. --- another shareholder opined, he was called Stallone.

I believe it would be inappropriate to withdraw considering the situation the company is in and our long affiliation with Chairman Yū...

In the long run, the situation will remain the same even if we do not withdraw. The profit percentage will hardly be noticeable. The Shogun will benefit more, it's no win-win! ---- Mr. Hilton cut me off.

He is right. --- Stallone added.

I stared from one shareholder to another and it seemed no one wanted to hear what I had to say any further. They had began talking among themselves. Michael had been utterly quiet all along.

Genevieve

Danielle was seating quietly in the living room and I thought she was often quiet. Her bedroom, I knew, was located in the right wing of the house. Since I arrived, I noticed she

didn't sit in other people's company and she was always on her phone. It seemed she caught sight of me as I turned away for she called out to me.

Miss Danielle? --- I smoothed down my skirt as I often did when I was caught unawares.

Just Danielle. --- she smiled softly.

Do you mind joining me? --- a tray of wine sat on the furniture in front of her.

I'd love to...

Thank goodness Ellie was napping.

She clapped once and a servant appeared.

Get me another wine glass. --- she ordered. I was sort of surprised she invited me to chill with her.

Soon the servant reappeared with a clean wine glass.

Thank you. --- I said to the girl as she left us alone.

Danielle poured two glasses of red wine and gave one to me.

Thank you.

She sipped and kept her phone away.

So Genevieve, I'm curious about you. ---- she smiled.

Oh my...I think I'm quite transparent Danielle. I wonder why you are curious about me.--- she tucked back a curlicue of rich black hair behind her ear with finesse.

It's just that, though no one has mentioned it we all are quite curious about you. I don't mean to sound offensive, yes and your job too. Ellie's never had a caregiver who was less than forty. --- she lowered her glass and stared intimately at me. She was really a straightforward lady.

Hum, well...all I can say is my job has grown to be a hobby over the years although it originally started out difficult for me.

Danielle slowly nodded. I thought I had not given enough information about myself even though she seemed quite interested. Therefore I added instantly;

I did it for my mother at that time. She's going to have a surgery tomorrow, and now I think I am doing it for myself.

She smiled softly.

What does she look like?

I unlocked my phone and showed her a picture of my mom which I had taken when we had a mother-daughter date a year ago. She was looking pale but the pink balloon in her hand distracted anyone who looked at the picture. It was a good distraction.

She's pretty. You have so much in common. --- Danielle complimented.

I smiled wryly. I wanted to ask her about her mother as well, apparently I had missed her in the gathering the first time we met. However I hesitated upon remembering Bridgette's words--- only Ellie's business was my business and not anyone else's. So instead I asked whether Michael usually drank with her.

Sometimes. He's a busy man. --- she responded non-chalantly. I nodded.

Michael was the older of the two siblings and from the look of it, I guessed he was part of the Thronsen Group board.

Here. ---she refilled my glass.

Thank you.

How's Ellie?

Well, sincerely, I have read her these previous days and I feel she's a little disturbed about something. --- I answered.

Danielle nodded knowingly.

Ellie can be like that. Perhaps it's part of ageing. --- Danielle concluded. However inwardly I didn't agree with her, it looked far beyond symptoms of ageing to me. Ellie was not at ease and it did not bode well for her health. Suddenly the door opened and Adam walked in with Michael. Our eyes locked and for a moment I was fixed into his bitter gaze until Danielle's query shook the spell off me.

Why are you guys home so early?--- she was staring at the men.

The meeting ended sooner than we expected. --- Michael answered and then Adam walked on. Danielle glanced from her brother to me and I saw that she also noticed Adam's bad mood but she didn't ask Michael what the matter was. She let him leave and quietly poured herself another glass. I found myself thinking the Throndsens were certainly very different from any other family I had worked for though each family member was specially different from the other. Nevertheless all I could conclude was that everyone seemed so... distant.

Chapter Four

Adam

I went directly to Ellie's bedroom and Michael came with me. In the room, Ellie was staring out the window.

Orchids, I see...

She turned around at the sound of my voice.

My boy! --- her eyes lit up happily and she gesticulated she wished to embrace me. Ellie was usually like this whenever I went out of town and returned. The previous day she had

smothered me with kisses before I was able to scold her regarding her new caregiver. I warmly embraced her, her fresh scent filling my nostrils. Ellie was usually seated among flowers, her bedroom was literally a garden so she usually exuded the sweetest odor without spraying bottled perfumes.

Michael... --- she embraced him while I settled down on her bed.

How are you, Ellie? ---- she blinked when I asked.

How am I? ---- she repeated the question as if it sounded strange to her ears. Michael joined me on the bed.

Yes...

I'm afraid I don't know how best to reply, my boy. --- she smiled. I chuckled.

I think Ellie is never better. --- Michael said. Ellie nodded in agreement and laughed.

Ellie will you have lunch with me?

Of course. --- she grinned just as a knock came on the door.

It's Genevieve. --- her voice came right after. I grunted when she quietly walked in. She went straight to where Ellie was seated.

I guessed you might have woken so I came to see if you needed anything ma'am. --- when she stopped talking, Ellie said;

I will have lunch with my boy.

She quietly nodded.

Then I'll leave you for now. ---- she turned on her heel to go and our eyes locked again. Quickly, she broke the contact and left the room. There was something about this lady I

couldn't place my finger on. I was just so unsure of her and when our eyes locked, I felt strangely awful.

Genevieve

As I patiently sat outside the theatre room, my heart prayed fervently for my mother. She was in there all alone and all I wanted for her was strength, strength to keep on. It was no small deal, I knew that and I could only pray for the success of the surgery. The hospital surgeons were quite known for their remarkable successes in performing surgeries so I hoped my mother would not be a failure.

My mother had been ill for a long time now, she became an hypertensive patient when I was very little and I had long since concluded that it was due to the untimely demise of my father. I barely knew the man and only a picture of him could assist me in describing him. I didn't have the luxury of a large family either since my mother chose not to remarry. According to her, my father was a soldier, a lieutenant and he had died in active service. Naturally, I often envied people with big families and full houses such as the Throndsens. Although I was not everyone's fan at the house I liked my stay over there.

It took hours for the surgery to be completed and I had gone out, returned, bought some things, took a long phone call, helped a senior citizen cross the street, watched a blood-soaked victim being rushed into the ER(it had been a heartrending scene for me), unwrapped a lolly for a cute little mongoloid girl who was wearing a Fountain in Love-in-Tokyo and read through Ellie's medical check-up report when the theatre room finally opened.

Doctor Brown? --- the man removed his face mask as the assisting surgeons and nurses trooped out.

Rest assured Miss Santos, your mother is fine and will soon be awake. ----he announced.

I heaved a sigh of relief.

Thank you doctor.

He smiled and then went his way. Thank goodness mother's surgery went well and I wanted to see her badly but I had to be patient, she must wake up before I could see her.

Few hours later, mother woke up in her ward. She was thrilled to see me, for a patient who was just operated on there was so much verve in her eyes. It was like she had been to heaven and returned, it was as if she had been reborn. I did no longer see the sick and pale woman I'd known my whole life, all I could see then was a strong woman who had waded through the sea of death. Her hand grasped mine firmly.

How are you, mamá? --- I asked her in my Spanish accent.

Nunca he estado mejor(l've never been better')... --- she chortled.

Con que madre tan fuerte he sido bendecida!(what a strong mother I have been blessed with) I'm pleased to know that mamá. ---- I kissed her soft palm.

Mi hija es un angel(my daughter is an angel). ---- her beady eyes were smiling at me.

I hope all is well with you at your new workplace, mi hija(my daughter). ---- her tone was serious.

Sí, sí...(yes, yes)

She smiled softly.

What did you have for lunch?

Mum? You shouldn't be worrying yourself about that. You should be resting...

It is no worry...--- she coughed in the middle of her speech.

See? ---- I frowned.

But she continued talking anyway. --- it is no worry for a mother, Genevieve.

But it is a worry for a daughter when her mother refuses to listen to her... --- I felt my words sounded like a reproach.

She caressed my hand and gave a slight nod. She had agreed to stop worrying

Here are some fruits I bought earlier but you must eat food too, I'll get you some chicken and yogurt. What do you say?

Whatever my daughter says. ---she responded and then I kissed her forehead before leaving the ward.

I had read somewhere that chicken and yogurt were part of the foods someone who just underwent surgery could take, that was why I had suggested it to my mother. After I had gotten them from a close by cafeteria, I headed back to the hospital. In the waiting room, I was surprised to see Adam Thronsen talking with Doctor Brown. What business did he have in the hospital and with doctor Brown? Who knew? I had not seen him at the mansion but now he was smartly dressed in his business man fashion; three-piece feldgrau suit, a stripped Hermes tie and a posh pair of Oxford. His rich dark hair was perfect in a slick back hair cut. I swallowed awkwardly and decided not to stand and continue admiring him. I decided to go my way but Doctor Brown stopped me in my tracks. I shut my eyes in embarrassment.

Doctor Brown...

Genevieve? --- I had no choice but to walk to the duo. I could feel Adam's bitter pair of turquoise eyes on me.

I just came out of your mother's ward. She told me you stepped out for a minute. What do you have there? --- he moved his head towards the plastic bag in my hand.

Here...food. --- I tried to gather my composure.

I'm sure you know she's not meant to eat just anything. Did you see the hospital food service team?

No....but I only wanted to get her chicken and yogurt...

You cannot give her fried chicken Miss Santos.

It's not fried Doctor Brown, it's only boiled. --- I corrected while Adam stood quietly.

All right then. --- the doctor nodded. I wanted to turn and leave but I decided to regard Adam's presence.

Mr. Throndsen...--- I said but he wouldn't even look at me.

Do you know each other, Miss Santos? --- Doctor Brown was curious to know.

Ah, yes...

And who might you be? --- Adam glared at me. I blinked repeatedly. Was he kidding? I saw what he was doing there and I felt it would be wise of me to dismiss his act so I made up an excuse.

You know, the Throndsens are super famous...I think my mom is expecting me....

Let her eat at her own pace... --- Doctor Brown's voice trailed after. I felt so embarrassed with myself. Adam Throndsen had really stepped on my toes, I didn't know he was such an arrogant man. What was I supposed to do when next I saw him? Ah, if only I could bury my face in the earth right then and there.

Adam

I silently took pleasure in her disappointment as she walked away. Doctor Brown turned to me.

Mr. Throndsen?

Yes, Doctor.

As we were saying, the boy's family would like to meet you in person. They want to express their appreciation...

I'd like to remain anonymous, Doctor.

Oh but I think the boy should be able to identify his benefactor, personally... he's awake and wants to see you. --- the Doctor stressed further.

I will see him but I don't want him to know who I am, Doc.

Of course. --- Doctor Brown seemed pleased.

Then my mind fleetingly wandered to the thoughts of her. Why was her mother in the hospital?

Doc...

Yes Mr. Throndsen.

Why is that lady's mother here?

Which lady?

The one who just left...

Oh, Miss Santos!

Yes, I guess that's her name. ---- I feigned ignorance.

Mrs. Santos has just undergone a kidney transplant. --- Doctor Brown said.

A transplant? I was a little bothered and I seemed to wear it on my face for Doctor Brown queried me right after. He questioned my claim of not knowing Miss Santos.

Of course I do not. I was just curious. --- I responded. He nodded.

Shall we? To the boy? --- I changed the subject.

Yes. --- and he led the way.

The boy I was going to see was a victim of a road accident whom I had brought to the hospital the previous day. Since it had been a hit-and-run, I had also reported the case to the cops. He was lying on the hospital bed and the doctors had put him on drip. He looked about ten years of age.

Hey Ben! --- Doctor Brown felt his forehead.

Are you feeling better today?

The boy slightly nodded. He shifted his gaze on me, staring at me with blue wistful eyes.

This is the man you want to meet.--- Doctor Brown introduced me. Then he suddenly tried to sit up.

No, no... --- I urged him to lay still. He reached for me and I caught his hand in the air.

Thank you. --- he managed to say, his voice breaking. I regarded him with a nod.

Rest. --- I slowly dropped his hand by his side.

I'll take my leave now. --- I said to Doctor Brown and then I walked out of the ward. I didn't want to stay any longer, I didn't want to meet his guardians knowing that they would make me feel too important for saving the life of their ward. I didn't want that, I didn't want anyone to feel indebted towards me. And the boy? I'm happy I saw him. I wished he would have a better life from there onwards. He would grow into an amiable young man, I was happy just because of that. The cops had assured that they would certainly keep me abreast of the investigation.

Ambling out of the boy's ward, I happened to see Miss Santos tending to her convalescing mother through the ajar door of her ward. She was smiling so broadly and she was looking just as pleased as she had looked on our first meeting. Her smile wouldn't change the way I felt about her, I decided. There was still something about her which my spirit suspected as dubious. No one knew I was keeping a close watch on her especially when she was around Ellie. I was not sure about her true personality just yet and until I was, I would never really accept her.

Chapter five

Genevieve

My mind leapt when I saw him in the elevator. However, I was quite upset so I dared to enter the elevator. He didn't even look at me when I walked in and his eyes were glued to the elevator door. I instantly pressed the button which would take me to the fifth floor, not minding where he was going. His bedroom was on the sixth floor. I also knew that Mr Thronsen's bedroom was in the right wing of the mansion; he shared it with his wife, Bridgette. Victoria Thronsen had her bedroom on the right wing too, likewise Michael and his father. Danielle's bedroom was on the second floor of the left wing.

I watched as Adam Thronsen folded his arm in the most condescending manner I'd ever seen. So much pride he exuded! And his eyes? They were looking so greenish-blue and so jaded at the same time. I looked away, I didn't know why I was always captivated by his appearance. We shared an awkward silence for a long time but then I felt the need to ask him why he didn't appear to like me. But on a second thought, I perceived it sounded stupid. I wouldn't say a word to him when he acted like a jerk. However it was uncomfortable to be at odds with Ellie's most loved person in the family. Soon the elevator chimed and the door opened to the fifth floor. In my haste, I bumped into him.

I'm sorry...--- came the repressed timidity in my voice. I inhaled his cologne, heaven knew I could drown in his scent. He was quite tall so I moved out of his way. I tucked my trespassing strand of hair very quickly behind my reddened ear. I thought he saw them for he said;

Do your ears turn red whenever you've done something wrong? --- his deep baritone voice tickled my face to a flush. However I looked up at him, he was glaring down at me.

I have done nothing wrong. --- when I said that he examined my face disdainfully. What was the issue with this man?

Didn't you just apologize? --- he relaxed, crossing his large arms. His biceps were still so much apparent underneath his suit. I saw that he was trying to make me feel intimidated but I, Genevieve Santos, would not give in so easily.

It's a figure of speech. People say it to fill in the silence. --- I remembered that I had read that somewhere, in one of Julia Quinn's Bridgeton series perhaps.

Oh, I didn't know you fancied literature. ---- his tone was purely sarcastic.

And I see you are eager to teach me some lessons too. --- he twitched his thick dark brows.

You are mistaken Mr. Throndsen. --- I appeared tough but I must admit I was lingeringly staring into his fierce pair of turquoise eyes.

Well you can remain here so Ellie and I don't have to bear your face.--- he bluntly shot back. Then he walked out. Could he be any more arrogant?

Adam

She seemed too confident in herself, perhaps that was why Ellie hired her in the first place. I knocked on Ellie's door and then I entered. She was lying on her bed and I saw that the orchids had been replaced with fresh pots of poppies.

Adam! --- she embraced me.

How do you feel today? --- it had been a routine since I was a boy to ask Ellie about her welfare.

My eyes are heavy but I can remember a lot today...do you recollect where you had buried Big Bones?

No...that was a long time. --- I lied. I wanted her to tell me, she looked so delighted merely by talking of the past.

In the shrubbery close to William's shelter. --- William was the Throndsens' old gardener. Was it not last year Ellie threw his seventieth birthday party?

Ah! I totally didn't remember. What a sharp memory you've got Ellie!

Ellie chuckled. I caressed her feeble hand, the hand which she had used to crochet and knit all of my cardigans and beanies in high school. She had baldly instructed my mum to stop getting me off-the-rack cardigans and she would order the best yarn with every coming winter and then she would make me cardigans specifically to suit my taste. That was my Ellie. She hardly gave anyone else space to care for me. There were Victoria, my grandmother and Bridgette, my mother but I was more familiar with Ellie than with the both of them.

Now it's my turn to ask you...

What! What!...---- her eyes glimmered. My Ellie was a hundred and two not out.

How old was I when Big Bones passed away?

She fell silent but optimism laced her eye lids. Then suddenly she sprang like an infant and cried;

You were about to have your fourteenth birthday, my boy.

I smiled.

You are really amazing Ellie!

Oh, my boy, I told you I can remember things today. It started earlier, when Genevieve had just returned from the hospital and was replacing the flower pots. You know, I remembered your great-grandfather...

She paused when a knock came on the door. I knew it could be no other person but Genevieve. When she came in, she went to sit right next to Ellie. She regarded me with a coy look before proceeding to pouring Ellie a glass of milk.

Here! --- she handed over the glass to Ellie. I thought she was daring to have come even though I had called her indirectly called her an intruder. She was undaunted, wasn't she? Our eyes locked again but the minute Ellie dropped her glass on the bedside, we broke contact.

Now, shall I read you a story? --- she asked.

Hmm...I won't hear a story today I'd like to tell you one instead. --- Ellie responded.

In that case, I'm more than delighted to hear a story from you ma'am. --- her smile was disturbing.

Would you like to hear my boy? --- Ellie turned to me. I nodded acquiescently.

There was once a beautiful young girl who lived in the serene country-side with both her parents. Her father farmed the earth while her mother was a governess. She had neither a brother nor a sister to play with so this beautiful young girl was quite lonely...--- Ellie paused to see if we were listening. When she was contented she continued.

On one bright summer morning, she found a strange boy in her father's unlocked barn. He was a lovely young boy. He told her he had come looking for his Cockerel who came that way. Suddenly the Cockerel flew from behind the barn and a hot chase began. After hours of pursuit, they both relented and slumped on the floor of the barn. She told him her name and him, his and they shook hands. They became friends and from time to time he visited her. Their pure friendship soon grew into strong affection but...

Ellie stopped and fell silent.

Ellie?--- I whispered and attempted to tap her shoulder but Genevieve stopped me. She shook her head in negation. Though I didn't want to listen to her, I felt I was obliged to since she was Ellie's caregiver.

I think you should leave. --- I read her lips. I was confused. Did she then understand Ellie more than I did?

Go!--- she waved her hand and I was forced to leave the room.

I patiently waited outside and placed my ear on the door but nothing was forthcoming. No sound and if a needle happened to touch the ground I would hear the drop. Therefore I left for my bedroom.

Genevieve

Ellie was silently looking on, her breath was steady so there was no cause for alarm. However I couldn't figure out why she had stopped talking.

I covered her legs carefully and stood up to sit on a farther chair in the room but surprisingly her voice stopped me.

He left. --- she whispered. I couldn't understand what she meant.

Ma'am?

Genevieve? --- she looked at me, her turquoise eyes were back to life again after the long silence.

Yes ma'am.

How is your mother?

She's better ma'am--- I sat back.

You never mentioned, where is your origin? ---It surprised me Ellie wanted to know. Yes, I had only stated in my résumé, my American citizenship.

Catalonia ma'am. My family migrated to the US a long time ago, so I was told by my mother.

Did your parents meet here in the US?

Yes ma'am. But mother told me her family has had long time relations with my father's family since they both come from Catalonia. --- I explained.

Ellie nodded.

When I thought the enquiry was over, she said;

I do not really appreciate migration, it is like one abandons one's roots and heritage.

I agreed with her.

I have tried to learn one or two things about my ancestry. Both maternal and paternal...--- I paused to see if she was interested in what I was saying. She was quite attentive.

I know some names and places and periods of deaths. I was even surprised to know that my maternal great-grandfather lived his early years in the US before his family returned to Spain. Since mother outlived him she...

Did you say your great-grandfather lived in the US? --- Ellie queried.

Yes ma'am.

Do you know where he lived? --- I was beginning to detect curiosity in her eyes.

I think mum told me he lived in Idaho. Yes, Idaho.

Idaho? What was his name? --- she was looking more interested than ever.

Paulo Hernández. --- as soon as I mentioned that name, her old turquoise eyes widened. She grasped my hand and quaked vehemently.

Ellie?--- what was going on? Had I perhaps triggered a bad memory?

Then she began to touch my face, crying Paulo.

Ellie? What is the matter? --- I tried not to panic. Suddenly she began to laugh.

Here is my Paulo!

I couldn't comprehend what was going on but I sat still, hoping I would soon figure it out.

Here is my Paulo! --- she laughed again.

Did you know my great-grandfather? --- I wondered. She nodded stifling her laughter.

Here you are, his own flesh and blood! Genevieve, it is fate that has brought you to me. Come here! --- she immediately enveloped me into a warm embrace. It was new to me, everything, Ellie's laughter and her warm motherly embrace. I only saw her embrace her great-grandchildren, I didn't ever hope she'd embrace me or laugh this much. I didn't quite understand yet she claimed she knew my great-grandfather, Paulo Hernández. Was that really true?

When she disentangled from me, she held my face in her hand and said;

You really do look like him now that I know you are his blood. Well, I must tell you Paulo was someone I hoped to meet again.

What was your relationship with him Ellie? --- it was my turn to be curious.

He was a great man. --- she didn't hesitate to say.

A great friend! --- she chuckled. I slowly nodded, trying to understand.

Where does he lie? --- I thought she would never ask that question but she did. Talking of death when you were quite old enough to die was something scary...to me.

Barcelona.

She nodded and nostalgia besieged her lenses but she still said with a smile;

Welcome home.

Chapter Six

Genevieve

His hard part descended on me as I made way for him between my legs. He was kissing me more passionately than I ever experienced. His good elbow was supporting him, pegged in the sheets, while his other part sought my bare breasts. I was drowning in ecstasy. I never knew I could feel like this. His cheeks went down to explore my collar and shoulders. He dug his fist under my skirt and my middle bubbled in pleasure. As I flung my hands around his collar, my soul quaked with excitement and I thought I would never know the end of this feeling and... Adam... I moaned out his name. He crashed his cheeks against mine once more and came right into me and...

At the chiming of my phone, I gasped from my sleep, beads of sweat aligned on my forehead. What sort of daydream was that? I felt my head; I was boiling. I panted and rushed to the toilet. Splashing water all over my face, I tried to recover myself. I didn't know the innocent nap I had taken would put me in this situation. What was wrong with me? I stared at my reflection in the toilet mirror, and a picture of Adam Thronsen flashed through my mind. Why was I thinking of him? Why would I have such a dream? A wet dream? And Adam...oh goodness. Perhaps I have been occupied with thoughts of him these days. I can't let that happen anymore.

I wiped my face with a towel, and then I glanced at my wristwatch. It was already time for Ellie's medication, so I went to her. Since the other day, Ellie had become friendlier, and she now talked a lot, chatting about the weather and the food and even her flowers. It became more interesting caring for her. As soon as I stepped out of my room, my eyes locked with Adam's. It felt like something was wrong. Why was he the first person I saw after such a dream? I bit my lips in anxiety. He was coming from Ellie's bedroom, so he just ignored me and stepped into the elevator. I watched as the door shut in front of him. I managed to regain my composure before I knocked on Ellie's door.

Come in. --- her voice said, and I ambled in. Ellie was in her wheelchair, facing the door like she had been expecting me. Behind her were the newly replaced pots of flowers. I got her white roses this time. William, the gardener, was perfect at his job. Ellie had put it this way; he spoke the language of Flora.

It's time for your medication, Ellie. --- I went to her as she stretched out her arms to reach me.

Come, sit. You haven't told me anything about Paulo, have you? ---- I blinked at her question. For the past three days, we had been talking about nothing but my great-grandfather and I had literally told her everything I knew, yet she was claiming I had not. I stared at her unbelievably. Now, I began to suspect my great-grandfather was not just a great friend to Ellie, there had to be something more, something no one else knew of.

Of course, I have. --- I replied, much to her discontentment. Her face immediately wore an old frown.

When can I see your mother? Has she been discharged? --- she queried.

No, the doctor said the hospital would look after her for the next, one week, then she could be discharged afterward.

Ellie nodded in agreement. I wondered what she wanted to see my mom for.

Let's have your medicine now and then. We can take a stroll outside in the evening.

She sighed softly. It could be so difficult being on medication. When she had taken her drugs, I assisted her with lying on her bed.

What do you think of Adam, Genevieve? --- her question came as a surprise to me. What did I think of the man I couldn't get off my mind?

Though we are not the best of friends, I think he is an enviable son. --- I answered.

Oh, Genevieve, he is merely protective of his Ellie. Don't you find him handsome? ---- I couldn't help but chuckle. However, I knew he was the most handsome man my eyes had ever beheld.

Ellie frowned. She was grave.

Of course, every woman will.

She smiled.

You can go now, I'll call on Adam to take me out. You can have some time for yourself. --- She said, staring at the ceiling. What was on her mind? She looked like she was really bothered about something she would rather not share.

All right then. --- I exited the room.

Board of being in my room all day, I decided to walk around the house. Touring the house was like touring a museum or landmark. There were many things to see and admire. I entered the elevator, and it took me to the living room. There was no one around, but once or twice, servants passed by me. Wondering where Danielle could be, I moved towards the right wing, even when I knew her bedroom was on the left wing. Sincerely, I had been curious about the right wing since my arrival. As I had been there with Bridgette, it didn't

seem like I was trespassing. She wouldn't have shown me the area in the first place if she would later consider my coming there a trespass.

The right wing had a living room of its own. It was not as big as the one on the left wing, but it was quite stately for me. A magnificent chandelier was suspended in the center and, like velvet sofas, were mounted to form a semicircle. The décor was slightly different from the décor of the left wing living room, as the artistic value of the inhabitants was portrayed through the display of several paintings. I was sure they were old masters and paintings that were auctioned for prices I wouldn't dare imagine. The sculpted head of Adam's great-grandfather stood bold. Bridgette had told me it was sculpted seventy years ago after Victoria's wedding. My eyes glanced at the exuberant curtains and the slim China vase that held an upright houseplant before I proceeded further.

Hardly had I walked three inches when I heard the rush of people's steps. I immediately hid away and waited to see what would happen. Suddenly, someone cried out, and I was forced to leave my hiding place. Through the ajar door of a room situated close to the living room, I was shocked to see Bridgette with her hair disheveled, and her face soaked in tears.

You and your mother have been treating me this way for the past thirty years, and I have endured it, Adam! What exactly have I done wrong? --- she yelled. What was happening? I could see Mr. Throndsen's side view, he was looking so bitter.

You've never truly acknowledged me as your wife. I am not a mistress, yet you treat me this way. I yearn for your love, Adam. Likewise, I have yearned for your love since I stepped into this house! You hardly show me love, you barely touch me, Adam! What am I supposed to do? Tell me! --- she cried at the top of her voice. I wanted to leave, but I was glued to the spot by the cupidity to find out what was going on with the couple. Bridgette usually appeared contented and unbothered, so I was definitely shocked to see her in such a state. And Mr. Throndsen? He didn't look like a troublemaker or one who wouldn't please his wife, so I was confused, hearing Bridgette lash out.

Enough...--- Mr. Throndsen said in a cool voice.

No!

Enough Bridgette! --- he yelled at her.

She reduced her cries by covering her mouth. I watched Mr. Throndsen pace up and down the room. He raked his fingers through his hair and stopped in his movement.

Just go upstairs. --- he said to his wife. Bridgette was shaking her head vehemently.

No, no...--- she groaned. I began to panic, seeing the distraught state she was in.

Just go Bridgette...

And where will you be? --- she sobbed. Mr. Throndsen remained quiet.

I didn't ask for much, Adam. You shouldn't have married me...you still love her, don't you? --
- Bridgette came nearer to him and began to pound his chest with her fists.

You still love her! But you don't love me! Why must I share you with a dead woman!

Bridgette! --- he hit her on the face. I gasped. She fell silent, touching her cheek.

Bridgette's eyes shifted disturbingly to him, as if she were searching for something. Hit me more...--- she said softly. Mr. Throndsen angrily banged his fist on the wall. I guess he must regret having hit his wife. Then he marched out of the room and I discreetly hid away. My gaze returned to Bridgette. She had already stopped crying and was now sprawled on the floor. As a woman, I felt pity for her and I didn't like the fact that I couldn't console her. In fact, she must not find me here. That would be the end of my job. I stealthily walked out of the living room into the waiting room that stood as a border between the right and left wings.

Genevieve? --- I was startled when I heard my name, but it was only Hephzibah. She looked tired as usual.

Have you lost your way? --- she queried.

No, no.

Okay. --- she was about to go her way but I stopped her.

Hephzibah?

Yes.

How long have you been here? I mean... working for the Throndsens. ---- the sad scene I had just witnessed made me a lot curious.

Just three years. ---- Hephzibah answered innocently.

Hmm. --- I nodded as she left. I knew Hephzibah couldn't provide information on the Throndsens given the short duration she had served at the mansion. Only people like the butler, the gardener and yes...the chief cook, Anna, could tell me what I wanted to know. However, I couldn't begin to pry into the affairs of the Throndsens, it was against the contract. If only I had not wandered off in the wrong direction, I wouldn't be so curious.

Adam

When Ellie was comfortable in her wheelchair, I covered her numb legs with a blanket and then I wheeled her out. It was evening and it was good, health-wise for Ellie to breathe in different air besides the one she was used to in her room.

When I had returned to Ellie's room to check up on her three days ago, I had stopped outside her door while I listened to her hearty laughter. I didn't know what that lady had done, but Ellie had sounded so happy, so I was pleased.

Adam? --- Ellie broke into my thoughts when we entered the elevator.

How's the company doing? You haven't really told me anything since the past week. And your father? He hardly has time to visit me. Daniel told me he is doing okay. Is he really okay?

I sighed. I didn't know how best to reply to her.

Father is doing fine, Ellie. --- I responded, hoping I wouldn't have to answer her first question, but as Ellie was Ellie and no one else, she repeated her question.

The company's doing great. --- I lied. I couldn't tell Ellie that I was bothered about the situation in the company. And the shareholders? I couldn't tell Ellie that we were not really on the same page. I hoped Michael would be thoughtful enough to keep his mouth shut if Ellie happened to question him later.

William limped towards us upon seeing Ellie. He delightfully smiled, taking off his hat.

I hope you are enjoying the weather, ma'am. --- he said when he finally reached us. His wrinkled eyes regarded me quietly.

Yes, it's nice outside. --- Ellie looked up at him through her round glasses. The wind softly blew across the lawn.

How's it going? --- Ellie asked.

William threw his hands in the air before he said:

I must admit I miss the old times, ma'am.

I thought everyone should miss the old times only if they were good.

Old times, huh? --- Ellie smiled.

Ageing makes one nostalgic. --- he added. Anyone who was with these two would feel old, naturally. I was only thirty, yet I was already thinking my life was past.

Ellie looked on towards the sky but I knew she was not staring at the azure firmament, she was thinking.

Ellie, what is on your mind? --- I decided to ask. She touched my hand, which rested on the back of her wheelchair.

What do you think about Genevieve? --- I was surprised she brought up Genevieve. What did I think of her new caregiver? Oh Ellie, what was she driving at?

She takes good care of you...--- was all I could say in the end.

She's quite sweet and thoughtful. --- Ellie complimented.

Isn't it so William? --- her old eyes enquired.

She seems rather tender...

Like the flowers. --- Ellie smiled and reached for a fully-grown tulip.

How much I'd love a tender girl to see me off to my grave!

Why talk about death, Ellie? --- I didn't like it when she mentioned her death. I became naturally petrified when I heard the word. William laughed.

Death is everyone's lot, young master..and it is what the aged often think about. --- he said.

William might be right, but I wouldn't agree with him. There were quite a lot of nicer things to think about if death should never be one of them.

Ellie, I'd like you to be over there. The air there is much milder than the one here. --- I didn't want her to remain in the company of William any longer and I prayed the old man would let us be.

Well, then William...

Well then, ma'am.

Ellie agreed and then I wheeled her away while William's frayed eyes trailed after us.

Genevieve is a nice girl and you should know I once knew her great-grandfather when my parents lived in Idaho, --- Ellie began again. I didn't mind her talking, but about Genevieve? She had apparently become so fond of the lady.

Hmm. --- I nodded.

She is totally him in flesh and blood and I can't help but assert that fate has brought her to us.

Ellie possessed attic faith in the predetermination of events by the Supreme being even though she was a Christian just like the rest of the family.

I didn't say much about what she had said.

The people from Catalonia are quite friendly. You should visit Spain soon and drop by Barcelona...

Okay, Ellie, but I can't say how soon...

She nodded. I breathed and a long silence fell between us. When I glanced at my wristwatch, it was almost time for Ellie to go back in, but before I could mention it, she told me to take her in. I thought, perhaps, she was feeling the evening cold and wanted to go up to her room. I pushed her in, but she asked the servants to summon everyone to the living room, much to my surprise.

Genevieve

I came out of the kitchen to find all of the family members assembled in the living room just the same way they had done on my first meeting with them. All the servants disappeared into the servants' quarters and even Anna left the kitchen. I decided to go up to my bedroom since it was a family gathering, but when Ellie called out my name, I changed direction and directions of my room, I went to stand next to Ellie.

Bridgette's face was so bright one couldn't have guessed she had just cried her eyes out. I thought she masked her true feelings well with make-up and feigned smiles. Mr. Throndsen was the only one absent. He had not returned from wherever he stomped off to. Victoria was sitting majestically next to Danielle with a grumpy look on her face. Daniel sat with his legs crossed adjacent to Ellie's wheelchair, he always wore a cheerful look and I wondered whether it was a façade like Bridgette's or not. Adam was standing not very far from Michael. I wouldn't dare look at him. I felt embarrassed.

Since Adam is not here, he'll have to know when he comes back. Because of what I am about to say, I cannot wait for anyone. --- Ellie might be old and can always speak the remaining strength in her when she speaks.

What is it, mother? --- Victoria's sharp gaze shifted from me to Ellie.

It is something very important which I had just thought about this evening...--- she glanced from me to Adam.

I'll go straight to the point, Adam?

Yes Ellie.

I want you to get married to Genevieve.

My heart skipped a beat.

Ellie? --- I could see the stunned look on Adam's face.

Mother? --- Victoria couldn't hide her astonishment.

Ma'am--- I whispered.

Yes Genevieve...that is what I want. I know I haven't spoken to you about it, but I find you a perfect match for Adam...

No. Never, Ellie...--- Adam protested.

Ellie, I think both Adam and Genevieve are mature adults who can...

Stop, Daniel. --- she cut him off. I looked at Bridgette, she was utterly quiet and the look on her face gave me the feeling that she had been expecting it all. Micheal and his sister didn't say a word.

Ellie, uncle is right. You cannot marry us without our consent...

I believe I am seeking your consent right now, Adam. You very well know I am nearing my grave. You shouldn't deprive me of the joy of seeing your wedding, Genevieve. ---- Ellie interrupted his speech.

Why Genevieve, Ellie? --- by then I could see the bitter look on Adam's face. I quaked with fear as he marched towards Ellie, completely losing his usual composure. I feared Ellie might have misspoken. Marriage? And to Adam? What exactly was she thinking?

You now doubt your Ellie, don't you? --- she looked up at him.

Doubt? --- he raked his fingers through his slick back haircut, ruffling it.

Yes, with all my hundred and two years of being in existence, I know very well what is good and what is bad, especially for you, my boy. It is my joy to have lived to see you grow into such an amiable gentleman and now it will be great joy to see you wed Genevieve before
.....

Will you stop talking about death, Ellie? --- he yelled. Ellie wasn't intimidated, it looked like she had been ready all along.

Ellie, can we stop this? --- I said to her.

No, Genevieve...--- her soft voice came before Adam's deafening one.

You fooled her into this, right? You are behind it all right? --- he moved threateningly towards me and shook my shoulders vehemently.

Get your hands off her right away! --- Ellie ordered. I quivered, gazing into his bitter eyes. Adam hated me and I didn't know why. It sort of hurt. Slowly he released his grip on me and then turned to Ellie.

I won't wed her. --- he gritted through his teeth and marched out of the house. Michael ran after him.

Mother, you are not making the right decision. ---- Victoria stated.

Be wise to keep quiet, Victoria. --- Ellie warned. Victoria shot a hateful glance at me before walking out of the living room. She must hate me more than ever.

I'll leave now. --- Daniel took his leave.

Anything you want to say, my girl? --- Ellie was staring at Danielle.

Not at all Ellie, I should go to the studio now. See you later. --- Danielle left too and Bridgette was left with me and Ellie.

Chapter Seven.

Adam

I heard Michael's incessant calling, but I was too furious to stop. Genevieve had truly crossed the line by using Ellie as her manipulative tool. I was right after all, she had ulterior motives. My head was spinning and I felt anger burn within me. I would never agree to marry Genevieve, no matter what. Her selfish plans would not succeed. But Ellie? She had become corrupted by Genevieve and it was driving me insane. I didn't know what exactly I could do or who to turn to. Why did it have to be Ellie? I regretted never sending Genevieve out of the house though I had suspected her from the onset. So this was her plan? To capture me and become a member of the family? What a shameless gold-digger she was! She was on the verge of throwing my relationship with Ellie into turmoil and I knew she must be enjoying her games.

When I reached the garage, I entered my car and drove out. In my side mirror, I could see Michael panting from his pursuit. Michael was a great guy, but I actually wanted to be alone.

Genevieve

Bridgette was quietly sitting in front of Ellie. I wondered why she had not left with the others. Everyone had been overwhelmed by Ellie's announcement but she was not ruffled.

Bridgette? --- Ellie said.

Ellie, I think Adam is being childish. He will return to his senses sooner or later. --- she stated in one breath.

Ellie nodded.

You've always been the most sensible, Bridgette. Keep it up.

I'll take my leave now. --- she said and dismissed herself. I looked at Ellie and before I could say a word, she said:

I believe you have a lot to say...

I nodded.

Come, sit. --- she patted the velvet sofa nearby.

When I was seated, she began,

You must be surprised at my announcement.

I nodded.

It's only natural. But I must tell you, Genevieve, that I am past the age of being wrong. A long time ago, I lost Paulo, your great-grandfather, due to my youthful naivety and I still regret it. -- her eyes twitched as if they wanted to tear up.

I owe who I am to him and the only way I can repay him is by taking you in and caring for you and your mother. You'll be happy here with Adam. I am sure he'll come around. ---- she concluded.

I nodded quietly. I really didn't know what to say. Then she asked:

You are not in a romantic relationship, are you?

No, ma'am...

It's Ellie. You are my family now. No more ma'am's ever again. --- she caressed my cheekbones with her thumb. Her wrinkled skin was soft against my face. I felt different. I could have had doubts later, but there and then I really felt she was my family.

Do you agree with me...on marriage?

I bit my lower lip in uncertainty. I guess she noticed this because she patted my back.

I know how you must feel, allowing your fate to be decided by someone else. But it's all good, Genevieve. I want you to have faith in me and my conviction. You are perfect for Adam and he is perfect for you. He'll surely come around. You heard of his mother?

I nodded.

She is a product of my excellent conviction, thirty years ago. --- as soon as Ellie said that, I recollected the sad scene on the right wing and, although I had begun to become convinced, I couldn't but doubt Ellie in the slightest. Why would Bridgette suffer in silence when Ellie claimed her as a product of her excellent conviction? I couldn't figure it out.

Adam's disappearance at dinner didn't seem to bother anyone but me. I knew I was the cause and I was almost irritated with myself but for Ellie's persistent and reassuring smiles. She had told me to join the family at dinner for the first time. In previous times, I ate in the kitchen with Anna or in my bedroom, alone. Now, eating with the family is creating a weird sensation in me. I felt unwanted and I was ashamed to look up at the glum faces that surrounded me. A servant hurried over and whispered softly into Ellie's ear.

Send him over. --- she said out loud. Soon Mr. Throndsen trudged in.

Have you decided to skip dinner too? --- Ellie queried as he sat down.

I was busy. --- he didn't seem interested in talking. I watched Bridgette's pained eyes shift gradually in his direction. She wanted to look at him. In spite of herself, her gaze travelled from her dish to Mr Throndsen.

Earlier, I made an announcement...Adam would wed Genevieve. --- Ellie was quite straightforward. Mr Throndsen dropped his fork and looked up at his grandmother, then at me.

Does Adam consent to this?

He will...very soon. --- Ellie assured. He nodded and continued his meal. I didn't expect him to react that way but I was relieved, I didn't want to be the cause of another drama at dinner. The others ate silently. Stretching to reach the bowl of fruit salad, Mr Throndsen's hand brushed against Bridgette's as she reached it before him. She placed the bowl in front of him and quietly ate it. Mr Throndsen swallowed and fleetingly stared at her before he helped himself. The only thing I could deduce from what just happened was the utmost devotion on Bridgette's part.

As I sat in the bath, several thoughts filled my mind. I was overwhelmed with uncertainty and confusion--- the first was as a result of my proposed marriage to Adam, while the other was because of Bridgette's silent relationship with Adam's father. How was it connected to Ellie's "excellent conviction"? I slowly rubbed my body as I drowned in thoughts. I needed to know and it seemed if I didn't ask, no one would actually tell me. One of these days, I needed to summon the courage to ask what was bothering my mind. My thoughts suddenly diverged to Adam--- where could he be? I wished his temper would die down so he could return home. I felt so guilty. And marriage? I wasn't sure of what I wanted but I must admit I was attracted to Adam. I had been attracted to him even before I physically met him. I was a fan of his many interviews on TV. He was outspoken, handsome and charismatic. Yes, I couldn't deny that, but I also can't deny the fact that he disliked me. I wished I knew his reasons. Personally, I didn't think marriage was for us.

Adam

I tossed and turned on my bed. I was so upset I couldn't sleep at all because of that woman, even when I was far away from home. I definitely haven't returned home recently. I needed to figure out what to do. Ellie would never withdraw her words. I very well knew that, so I was greatly disturbed. My phone chimed, it was a text from Madison..

I miss you dreadfully. I need you. Let's meet.

I threw my phone across the bed and gazed outside the hotel windows. The city was brightly lit and the sky rumbled threateningly. It would pour soon and I hated the fact that it reminded me of the day I met Madison.

I had come to Cuba for business and I had just exited a shopping complex when it began to rain heavily. I ran swiftly in the rain to my car in the car park but I was still drenched. Just as I ignited the engine, three impatient knocks came on my tinted window. Winding down, there was a woman drenched in the rain. She spoke Cuban whereas I couldn't understand.

Eh? --- I tried to tell her I was American.

Oh, of course. Can you give me a ride? --- she immediately changed both language and accent. I agreed to help her.

When she was in, sheltered by my car, I clearly saw her broad face, studded nose and ringed ears. Her hair was dyed golden and two wet braids hanged down her breasts. I could also see her underwear through her wet, sticky clothes. Water was dripping all over her and she was insanely attractive.

Thank you. --- her smile was as wide as her face. I nodded.

Where is your destination?--- I wanted to know.

Where is your destination? --- she repeated my question. I couldn't but chuckle.

I'm on my way to the hotel down the street.

I'll find a taxi there then. --- she smiled again. I looked at her unbelievably. I thought she was a peculiar woman.

I'm Madison. What is your name?

Adam. Adam Throndsen. --- I replied before driving out of the car park.

When we reached the hotel, I drove into the underground garage.

Thank you. --- her sepia eyes stared lingeringly at me. I knew she was flirting, I was quite familiar with that. I nodded.

You are welcome.

You have something here... --- she reached for my hair. I didn't even bother to look at what she claimed to be in my hair when she removed it. In my mind I calculated what she could want from me. I had not given a hooker a lift, had I?

You are handsome. --- she seductively bit her lower lip. I chuckled.

Can I have your number? --- she produced her phone.

Sure. --- I typed in my phone number. I was used to women ogling around me, but I had never come across one who was so straightforward.

Can I come see you tomorrow? What time?--- she collected her phone.

4pm?

Yeah, 4pm it is. --- she showed me what she had saved my number with. I wasn't surprised to see "Perfect Looks". I only chuckled. Then she dialed my number and her own number was displayed on my phone.

That's mine. Save it. ---- she winked an eye and got out of my car. Through my windshield, I watched as she walked out of the car park. I was apparently amused and I thought she was going to be fun.

The following day marked our first date and I got to know that her mother was Cuban while her father was American. Her parents were separated, so she alternated between the Caribbean and South America. She introduced Havana to me as she fancied the cigar. I also found out she was into modelling. I thought she perfectly suited it with her long slender legs and fine height. Finally, she initiated our first sex.

The relationship was all good and we had many sexual exploits until I travelled back to the US and was then caught up with the company and its various businesses. I had not expected her to cheat on me on our first time being apart, but she did. I was so irritated when she even made efforts to justify herself. I ended it with her a year ago but she wouldn't stop bothering me with calls and texts. Sometimes she sent nude pictures of herself, hoping I'd see her again, but I wouldn't. I wasn't sure I'd return to a new hers. It was clear we weren't meant to last. I had long since considered it a fling.

Genevieve

I was dumbfounded when she said she was Adam's girlfriend. I couldn't believe Adam could date someone like her--- her hair was obviously dyed pink, her nose was pierced in nearly ten places, her ears wore several gold earrings and she was almost naked in the transparent dress she was wearing. Bridgette immediately took her to the right wing. She concluded Ellie must not see her.

Where is Adam? --- she continued to ask.

He's not been home since yesterday. I don't know where he is. --- Bridgette responded.

Are you not his mother? You should know the whereabouts of your son. --- she demanded.

Bridgette sat down and offered her a glass of wine.

I'll call him and tell him you are here, all right?

When Bridgette disappeared into one of the rooms, she turned to me and asked:

Who are you?

I didn't know how best to reply, but I didn't want to feel like a nobody.

I'll be getting married to...

Genevieve? --- Bridgette re-appeared and rushed towards me.

Genevieve? Can you excuse us for a minute? --- she asked.

Sure. --- I took Bridgette to be a little tense, so I exited from the right wing.

I decided to sit in the living room on the left wing. A part of me patiently awaited the return of Adam while the other part of me was anxious for the strange woman to leave. Madison or what did she say her name was? Bridgette seemed a lot familiar with her and I was not surprised she was preventing Ellie from seeing her. Ellie wouldn't like such a woman, it was obvious. But I couldn't help but wonder what Adam liked about her, she didn't even have half of my beauty--- her eyes were big and her face was wide. Her hair wasn't even half the length of mine or did Adam like women with short hair? Or was it her height? She was a tall woman, whereas I was not quite tall, but I was sure I was not short either. I found myself comparing myself to her and it began to drive me crazy. I was also sort of jealous that she was his girlfriend. I didn't know why he resented me.

A few hours later, Adam dashed in and went directly to the right wing. I inquisitively followed.

What are you doing here? --- he wrung Madison's slim arm and jolted her.

Let go of me!--- she cried.

Let go of her, Adam. --- his mother warned him. He released his grip.

Leave now. I don't want to see you. We are done. --- he gritted through his teeth. Something in me jumped for joy. I was pleased to know he was not in a relationship with her anymore.

I came to find you and you treat me like trash uhn? --- she frowned.

How many times do I have to tell you we are done, Madison? --- Adam's temper was really not nice.

I can't do without you. --- she cried. Bridgette had stepped back in noninterference.

Oh, of course you can. --- he bellowed.

But...

He strongly grabbed her wrist and dragged her along with him, marching outside the house.

Davies! --- he yelled out to the butler.

Yes sir! --- the man appeared at once.

Where are the security men? And let this be the first and the last time I'll see this woman in this house. You let her in, you are fired! --- he warned her and pushed her away. Then he went in.

Adam! Listen...

Excuse me miss. This way! Security! --- three hefty men jogged forward.

Follow them calmly, you won't want to be mishandled by men three times your size. --- Davies advised. I was amused. She shot me a wicked glance as the security men accompanied her out.

Bridgette was standing behind me when I turned around. She looked relieved.

Well she's...--- I couldn't complete my speech because she turned back and walked away. I was confused. Had I done something wrong? After a moment, I shrugged it off, wondering where Adam could be. I looked around but he was nowhere to be found. Perhaps he had

gone up to his bedroom. I decided to go to Ellie since the drama was over, but upon the opening of the elevator, my eyes locked with Adam's as he stepped out. My heart began to pound in my chest. I wanted to ask him where he was headed but I hesitated, he wouldn't appreciate my concern and I could only be looking for trouble anyway. But he stopped in his steps and said in his cold voice;

You!

Me? I touched my chest questioningly and then I turned to face him. His height overwhelmed my stature, I almost shuddered at his icy glare, but I didn't show it.

Your games will only incur you losses, let that sink into your thick skull. --- it was so easy for him to insult me. I shut my eyes in annoyance. Did he think he had the right to insult me?

I play I...

You should be wise and not involve yourself in my personal matters. Do not get too comfortable. --- he cut me off and then he turned to leave. But I just couldn't let him leave without telling him a piece of my mind.

I think you have something against me, but I don't care and, really, I do not enjoy getting involved with you. I happened to have seen your girlfriend before anyone else.

She's not my girlfriend. --- he turned around but I had already entered the elevator.

Whatever. --- the elevator closed on his face. I felt pleased to have left him standing awkwardly outside. I thought I should do more of it when I had the chance.

Adam

What the hell? Who did she think she was? Did she just by chance shut my face? I felt so embarrassed. I hated her confidence. It irked me so much I wanted to punch someone in the face. I really couldn't stand her and yet, Ellie wanted me to marry her? It wasn't possible. I had gotten some of my personal things so I was going to return to the hotel.

Adam? --- my mom's voice stopped me in my tracks.

What is it mom?--- I really didn't want to stay a minute longer in the house.

For how long will you stay away from your family, from Ellie? --- she queried. Her eyes searched for answers on my blank face.

Couldn't you convince Ellie to change her mind? I really don't have the slightest affection for that caregiver of hers. And Mom, it is obvious she corrupted Ellie, she's a golddigger. --- I protested.

You very well know Ellie never withdraws her word. Genevieve is no match for Ellie, she's harmless. --- my mom responded. I was not very disappointed, all my life I had watched my mom serve Ellie.

Yeah. I knew you'd side with them. You know what, I'm never coming home. --- I stated it as a matter-of-fact.

But Adam...you should consider your decisions very well...

And you want me to wed Genevieve, right?

That's not it, but you have to weigh the options, my son. Ellie is not just anyone to you, she's been your guardian since your conception. If she wants you to wed Genevieve, do it for her sake...

No mom, I won't. That's exactly what Genevieve wants. Can't you see? She's after our fortune!

But Adam...

That's enough mom. --- I was gone in the next minute.

Chapter Eight

Genevieve

Adam was gone for a week and I knew Ellie noticed his absence, yet she wouldn't admit it to either herself or anyone. Personally, I dreaded the day I'd be accused of disrupting the smooth relationship between both of them. I feared they'd say I worked, but I didn't face what I had to do. I saw Michael, but I often looked at Danielle. She seemed indifferent to the situation, and I couldn't lie that I wasn't relieved to some extent. My routine continued, and I visited my grandmother; I had discharged her from the hospital and was feeling better. I also took up the chance to tell her everything that was happening. It surprised their parents arranged for me when my mom told me about her marriage with my dad. They had not met in the US. No; it had all been planned. However, she was not so sure of established marriages these days. And she was uncertain about my dependability on the Throndsens, but Ellie still wanted me to be a part of the family. She concluded she would meet with the Throndsens when she was strong enough. I thought that would only be necessary if Adam consented.

Will you get married to him if he does? --- I saw mother wouldn't inquire, but she did, and I got paralyzed to speak. Would I set about marrying the man whom I had a wet dream about? I was uncertain. When I figured out about it, it appeared as lust to me.

I can't give you an answer now, mama.

She caressed my face.

All right.

But then, out of inquisitiveness, I asked;

Why did you agree to get married to my father?

Well, there was one thing, and that was I found out that I could rely on him. Besides, I didn't have any other love interests. --- she responded.

Didn't you know it was a risk?

Of course, I did, but once or twice in history one must not consider risks and just go for it.

I nodded.

I wanted to please my mother, too. Furthermore, I felt I owed them more than I could dare to imagine. --- she added.

But in your case, I have told you my story.

No, mama...never say that. I incur you the entirety of my existence. It's indubitable.

She smiled.

I'm glad to have you and your father as my fathers. I'm happy you both fell into affection despite your marriage being arranged. Besides, I'm grateful you conceived me out of your love for each other, mama...

I could see her eyes had torn up.

I wish a life like yours for myself...

I want--- she stroked my hair. --- a good amaretto too, who would care for you like you deserve to be loved.

I smiled.

I bit my lips and said---I think Adam hates me, but I don't see why.

She chuckled.

Does anyone actually have the capacity to hate? I doubt that. Love is everywhere ! --- she threw her hands in the air in a theatrical gesture. I laughed.

But I know he doesn't like me...at all...

Hmm-hmm, --- she shook her head, disapprovingly and raised my chin to her face. --- my daughter is the sweetest person in the entire universe. Who wouldn't like you with such a pretty face?

I smiled.

Thank you mama. --- she drew me into her arms.

The following day, being at the Chapel made me feel so connected to the children as I watched a lot of them have fun. What kind of mother would I be? What would my children look like? Of course, I wanted to have more than one child. I couldn't have my child bear any form of loneliness like I did. Personally, I wanted a large family.

I returned to the house to find Victoria scolding Anna in the kitchen. I wouldn't dare interfere though I wished someone would save the poor cook from Victoria's temper. I hurried up to the fifth floor, but I soon went down to get some extra fruit from the kitchen. Then, Victoria had finished lashing out at Anna and was quietly going through a magazine in the dining room. The air around her was intimidating as she sat upright with the utmost elegance. Her hair was the usual chignon. I thought she wouldn't mind my presence but she spoke;

You must feel proud of yourself. Ellie has chosen you for my grandson. --- her eyes were fixed on the magazine. Anna looked cautiously at me. I felt I must flee but I didn't.

She chooses the ones who are easy for her to control, --- she continued.

You wouldn't dare imagine more...

What is there to imagine, ma'am? --- I summoned courage.

She looked up at me. Her turquoise eyes bore some conviction I couldn't understand.

You'll not be in paradise...--- was she trying to discourage me?

I haven't agreed to marry your grandson, ma'am.

Yes, --- she sighed softly. --- but you will. She shifted her gaze to the magazine. I noticed she was reading the page with Danielle's picture on it. I was right after all, Danielle was a celebrity. But that didn't matter at the moment. What was the old lady driving at?

What if I don't?

I know young girls like you, I know how carried away you can be...do not get too comfortable. --- she said, and then she stood up to leave. I sighed, Adam had said the exact same thing and I was disturbed. Anna was staring at me when Bridgette walked in.

How's Ellie doing? --- she went straight to the cooker.

She's faring well. --- I lied.

You do not have to lie to me, Genevieve. --- she turned to face me. Why then did she ask when she knew the truth?

She's been quiet lately.

She missed Adam. --- she got closer and stared at me for a while. I wondered what was on her mind. I hoped she wouldn't say nasty things like Victoria.

Why did Ellie choose you? --- she asked at length.

I wouldn't know that, ma'am.

Hmm. --- she nodded to herself.

Why do you think she chose you?

I believe it's because she was familiar with my great-grandfather. --- I answered honestly.

Do you want to get married to my son? If Ellie wasn't involved, would he be your choice? --- I was feeling awkward being questioned about the whole marriage thingy by everyone.

Well, why do you ask ma'am? --- I wanted to evade the question.

I'm trying to tell you, as a wife in this household, ---- she covered the space between us and looked directly into my eyes. --- that your choice matters.

I do know that ma'am.

I am glad you are. --- she returned to the cook. Anna was busy chopping some carrots while her assistants were painstakingly working on other things.

Would you accept me as your son's wife and your daughter-in-law? --- I wanted to know how she felt about me.

Which of the two do you want an answer to? --- her tone was sharp.

Both.

Well, I am obligated to take care of my son's wife, since she must be dear to him. As for my daughter-in-law, we would not treat each other as strangers...

She approached me.

I hope I have answered your question.

Yes ma'am. --- with that, I left the kitchen.

Adam

I resisted the urge to return home. I wondered how Ellie was doing. I couldn't do without seeing her for a day, but now I had intentionally spent a week away from her. Apparently, I wasn't feeling myself. I wanted to phone the house and ask after her but my ego didn't permit me. I thought I was doing myself a favor by ignoring my family. Michael had called several times, asking where I was, but I didn't reveal my location to him. He told me everyone wanted me to return but I couldn't bring myself to do that, not when Genevieve still lived and thrived in the house.

Meanwhile, at work, Mr. Hilton was at loggerheads with me and he was already instigating some of the members of the board against me. I was just so stressed out by all that was going on. And my father? He wouldn't interfere since I was the President. He used to be the President until Ellie ceased his appointment. I rarely saw him at the company too, but Uncle Daniel tried to encourage me in every way he could. Sometimes I wished he was my father.

Madison wouldn't stop texting and calling, so I decided to add her to my prohibited list. Regardless, she appeared at my hotel all drunk. I didn't know how she figured out my location. She almost created a scene in the waiting room, so I was forced to take her with me.

Come here. --- she grabbed the neck of my shirt and was ready to crash her lips against mine, but I managed to avoid it. A plume of smoke escaped through her nose and her mouth as she fixed the cigar between her lips again. I helped her to the sofa and soon she was throwing up all over the place. Afterwards, she staggered to the bathroom and returned naked. Her breasts stood pointy plastered to her chest and I found myself looking away, very irritated. Madison really knew how to ridicule herself. I wasn't going to get laid off tonight.

You'd better put on your clothes or you'll catch a cold. --- I ignored her and went to the bedroom. She tried to follow me but I locked the door.

Adam! You idiot! --- she yelled. Nothing came afterwards. I didn't know she wouldn't sleep over until the next morning. In her anger, she had forgotten to snuff out the burning end of her Havana and so it had ashamed through the night on the console.

Genevieve

Passing by Adam's bedroom, curiosity suddenly jumped at me. Was his door locked or not? If it was unlocked, I'd like to look around the room not because I was busy playing Sherlock Holmes, but because I actually wanted to see what it looked like. I pressed the door handle and the door opened. I thought I was lucky. Entering the room, I was overwhelmed with the concentration of Adam's usual odor, I could drown in it. His room was perfectly arranged and his things were neatly kept away. There was so much to see and...

Miss Genevieve? --- I was startled by the voice of one of the servants. She was holding with her a mop and a vacuum cleaner.

Go ahead. --- I immediately crept out. Hephzibah ran towards me.

Ma'am!

Ma'am? Ellie?

Yes, yes... --- I could see panic on her face. What had happened?

Adam

Mom? --- the entire family was standing outside the ward when I arrived at the hospital.

Adam? --- she was whimpering. I was overwhelmed with anxiety. What had happened to Ellie?

Genevieve was consoling Danielle. She glanced my way.

Father? --- he turned to me and patted me on the shoulder.

Doctor Brown will talk to us soon. --- he assured. Uncle Daniel stood next to Michael and Grandma sat, wearing a glum face. No one seemed to want to say anything, though I had phoned that Ellie had been rushed to the hospital.

She's going to be fine. --- I wasn't so sure but I wanted to console my mother whose tears were then soaking my shirt. I was beginning to regret ever leaving home, ever staying away from Ellie. And now she was in there with the doctors, fighting for her life. A tear swam down my cheek, I felt Genevieve's eyes on me. I guessed she was happy to see me break down, but then on a closer look at her, her blue eyes had become so wistful. I was paralyzed by her gaze, and it felt like she was trying to tell me something. Suddenly Grandma began to cough profusely.

Are you all right ma'am? --- Genevieve got to her before any member of the family could. I watched how she was shrugged off by Grandma.

Can I get you water? --- Genevieve persisted. Grandma was proving stubborn yet she was disturbed by the nasty fits of cough.

Grandma? --- Danielle cried.

I'm fine. --- she said in between dry coughs. Genevieve stood up and rushed down the hall. When she returned, minutes later, she was with a bottle of water and some lozenges.

Here.

Grandma decided to ignore her still.

You should take it, Grandma. --- I intervened. Reluctantly, she accepted Genevieve's kind gesture. My mother was still sniffing against my chest. The door opened and Doctor Brown walked out. The entire family rushed to him.

How's Ellie? --- My father asked. My eyes impatiently searched for answers on the doctor's face. I wouldn't ever forgive myself if anything happened to Ellie.

Her condition is stable now and it's all thanks to Genevieve... performing CPR at such a critical moment revived Ellie's pulse. --- he explained. First of all, I was grateful for Ellie's life. The others sighed in relief.

Thank goodness. --- my mother wiped away her tears. Her face was then pale from crying. Grandma gently sat back.

Thank you Genevieve. ---- Danielle cried.

No, I did what I was paid to do. --- she said and briefly looked at me. Was she also expecting a- thank-you speech from me? I doubted that. But deep down, I was grateful and I guessed my feeling of gratitude displayed on my face because she smiled and looked away.

Thank you Genevieve. --- uncle Daniel regarded her with a soft smile.

Genevieve? --- mother went to her and held her hands. Grandma watched like a mute.

You have really proven your worth. ---- she caressed Genevieve's knuckles with her thumb.

It's good to see how much Ellie is loved. ---- Dr. Brown's cheerful voice distracted everyone.

Thank you Doctor. ---- I extended a handshake and he accepted it instantly.

You can see her now...

Everyone jumped to the door at his statement.

Not you all at once! ---- he corrected. I decided to sit outside the ward. I felt too ashamed to look at Ellie, but when mother and Grandma went in, mother returned claiming Ellie wanted to see both me and Genevieve.

On the hospital bed, Ellie's eyes were wide open.

Genevieve

I was grateful Ellie was back with us. When I had performed CPR on her, I had been uncertain of resuscitation but I had kept on until I could feel her pulse again. Bridgette had panicked as the security men assisted us in lifting Ellie into the car and it had only been grace that sustained Ellie's life. That I knew very well. Now, as she gently held my hand, she placed it in Adam's. Immediately, I felt a thrill within me. In spite of myself, I always responded to his touch.

Ellie? ---- Adam's turquoise eyes were not bitter but they were the most soulful eyes I had seen. I knew he partly blamed himself for Ellie's breakdown.

I'm so sorry. Could you ever forgive me?

Ellie managed a chuckle.

You should get married to her. ---- her voice came, quaky and old.

If that's what you want, I will.

As soon as he said that, I felt my heart skip a bit. How could he agree so quickly? He must fear the death of his beloved Ellie. However, I couldn't believe my ears. Did that mean I would really be married to him? To the man who made my heart flutter?

I watched Ellie's thin lips form into a smile. Adam glanced from me to the pile of our hands. I felt it bothered him so I attempted to jerk away from him but he firmly held my hand and mouthed;

Ellie!

I immediately smiled. So we had begun to put on a show?

Genevieve?

Yes, Ellie.

Get married to my boy, will you? --- I blinked. What was I supposed to do? I couldn't deny the fact that I was already emotionally attached to Ellie, I even considered her as the grandparent I hadn't chanced to meet. And Adam? If I could react so much to his touch, what could I lose when I was with him? Yes, my choice indeed mattered, as Bridgette had said. What if Adam was my choice? What if I was still terribly attracted to him despite the fact that I knew he didn't like me? What if I wanted to prove that I was truly loveable? What if I could make him fall in love with me? What if I married him? I slowly turned to face him, and once again I was unable to look away from his overwhelming gaze. I swallowed, staring intently at every feature of his face--- from his trimmed full brows to his stunning turquoise eyes to his slim nose to his lips. His lips? How would they feel about mine? I became excited as I drowned deeper in these thoughts.

Genevieve? --- I heard him call my name for the first time. It was like a sweet melody.

Genevieve? ---- this time, I snapped out of my reverie. I was really no longer myself when I was with him. The more he seemed to despise me, the more I couldn't stop thinking about him. He might further push me away once we were married, but I wanted to take the risk.

Yes, Ellie. ---- my eyes were still glued to his when I replied.

My great joy is finally here. Send for Bridgette, we have a wedding to plan. ---- Ellie laughed, dispensing her feeble health.

Bridgette came in with Danielle and Ellie's favorite Forget-me-nots.

Ellie? --- Danielle cried and hugged and kissed her on the face.

I must have scared my little angel. --- Ellie smiled.

Yes and it was so creepy. ---- I made room for Danielle next to Ellie. Adam was already leaning on the wall. It gave me butterflies merely thinking we would be married soon. I hoped I wasn't too transparent in my emotions.

You have to get the most beautiful wedding dress for Genevieve as soon as possible. ---- she was telling Bridgette when Adam got a phone call and exited the room. Michael went in with Victoria.

Certainly Ellie. I will contact Sebastian immediately and he will come for her measurements. --- Bridgette replied.

Sebastian is the family's fashion designer. --- Danielle thought it proper to inform me.

Oh. --- I nodded.

Our Genevieve will be the most beautiful bride of the season. ---- Ellie smiled. I grinned.

How are you feeling mother? ---- Victoria queried, shifting her attention back to Ellie. Bridgette stepped out.

Yes, Ellie... how are you feeling? ---- Michael repeated.

I'm feeling so excited...at this age, I have a wedding ceremony to host. Isn't it wonderful? --- I felt Ellie would never be out of verve though her body aged. The twinkle in her eyes was like the one you could find in the eyes of a little girl whose wish had just come true. I felt really good to know that Ellie wanted me for Adam.

Victoria threw an indifferent glance at me.

Congratulations Genevieve. ---- Michael said.

Thank you.

It's wonderful you seem very much recovered mother. ---- she said to Ellie.

Victoria?

Yes mother?

See to the invites...no one should be excluded. I believe Bridgette is very occupied with preparing Genevieve, she shouldn't be bothered about other things. ---- Ellie said.

Victoria nodded. It was obvious she was only going to do it because Ellie asked her to. She was the least concerned about me. I wondered how long it would take to win her over.

Come with me Genevieve. ---- Bridgette returned.

Yes ma'am...

It's Bridgette. ---- she corrected.

Adam

When he found us a cozy bar, Michael finally settled on Rosé.

The chicks are going to go crazy when your marriage hits the headlines. ---- he joked.

I chuckled.

Hey, ---- his voice became serious. ---- I know you are doing this only for Ellie, but sincerely, Genevieve is a nice girl.

Nice girl, indeed. ---- I wasn't interested.

Seriously. I mean, she takes good care of Ellie and I must admit she's the only one who can stand up to grandma's obstinacy. ---- I thought Michael really liked her.

Hmm. ---- was what I only said.

Moreover, I believe she's your type of woman, isn't she? The curves and the hair? ---- Michael laughed.

I chuckled. I had not really looked at her.

I bet you still like your women like that. ---- he sipped.

Sure.

So I've been meaning to ask you, Is your relationship with Madison really over? I mean...

It is. ---- I was irritated at the mention of her name.

Great! I never really liked her...

Bro, I thought you said a model was your type...---- Michael was giggling.

I like models doesn't mean I like Madison, personally. Modelling is the magic profession.

Understood.--- I nodded.

How do you feel getting married?

Bro, I thought I was going to pop the question to the love of my life, but right now, I don't feel too good...

Yeah, but you must know popping the question doesn't guarantee a happy marriage, Adam. You must build any form of marriage, either it is arranged or a love match on love and trust...

I chuckled.

You sound like Ellie.

Oh, man. I stole some lessons, you know. ---- he laughed.

Then he continued, ---- Genevieve is a nice girl, I bet you'll fall in love with her in no time at all...

Nah. I don't think so...

