

Dad motions to the female sitting opposite me.

"Ashley, this is Tonya Jeffers. She's an APRN and has been my right hand over the last decade."

Now that's news for me.

I'm working with my father almost every day and used to think his secretary was his right hand. Now I'm learning it's this stranger instead.

"Did you just say 'decade'?" I question in disbelief. "How come I've never met her?"

"You weren't supposed to know about her, sweetheart. Before I go into further detail, though, I need you to sign the document first. Mitch, would you, please?"

I blink dumbly. Document? What document?

The blond lawyer pulls a paper out of his portfolio and shoves it towards me. I'm quickly reading it, it's a statement of secrecy.

"Why is that for?" I eventually ask in puzzlement. "I already agreed in a professional discretion before I started working here."

"The actual case is different, Miss Catell," Mitch informs me and also hands me an expensive looking pen. "The standard discretion isn't covering the project you'll be getting involved in."

My brows furrow together. "What project?"

Dad leans towards me on his chair. He looks at me with a serious expression on his almost ashen face with the sunken cheeks. You can tell he's exhausted and sick. My heart hurts again while I'm witnessing the frightening signs of this damn disease.

He will soon be starting chemo, I'm seeing to it in horror. Antidepressants already cause a lot of unintended side effects, but what chemotherapy is doing to a human body is way more worse.

"Please sign the document," he says softly but insistently. "Mitch also has a new employment contract ready because I hope you're going to participate with us."

I'm slightly shocked. A new contract?

"Let me ensure you, sweetheart, that I'm not going to force you into something you wouldn't feel comfortable with. However, at least sign the document and listen to what I have to say. That's all I'm asking for."

Suddenly I feel somebody staring at me from the side.

It's Bill.

I eyeball him, and he's not looking away this time.

There's a pleading in his chocolate browns.

A strong pleading, so fiercely that it almost appears warningly.

I can literally read his thoughts. *'Don't dare refuse our father's wish... who knows how long he's going to be with us....'* I'm pretty sure it must be something like that.

Though I must admit, I'm thinking the same. I cannot reject Dad's plea. He's the reason why I keep working in this institution in the first place.

I'm also staying because of Mum.

Somehow, it makes me feel closer to her.

She often struggled with her job as I do.

One time, I even caught her crying. A very close patient of hers committed suicide immediately after he got released from the day-unit. He gulped down two bottles of painkillers, moments before dropping himself from the hospital's parking block.....

"Ashley?"

I blink absently as Dad's gentle voice brings me back to present.

I shake off the queasy feeling in my gut. And then I grab the pen and sign the document. I'm barely finished when Mitch quickly grabs it to put it back into his portfolio.

Dad smiles at me. "Thank you, sweetheart. Now, I'm not going to beat around the bush, I'll tell you everything from the very beginning. I started this project in 1992 together with Mum, your grandpa and Tonya. Tonya was his personal assistant back then, and she has proven herself trustworthy a hundred percent. She is the only non-family person who is involved. Gramps was very strict about that, he wouldn't allow us getting support from strangers. He wanted it to be a family thing for reasons you'll learn about later. Well, then he got sick and was bed-ridden. He was getting weaker every day, and we found it was about time preparing Bill to support us."

I'm at a loss for words.

And I cannot help feeling deeply hurt. It's even worse than I was thinking. Not only Bill, but my whole family - even Mum - has kept secrets before me.

"Please don't feel offended, sweetheart," my father speaks, reading my expression correctly. "For a long time, I was uncertain if I should burden you with this project. I hesitated because of your own good. However, the fact that you've finished your training so successfully, and the confident way you've been dealing with patients has made it clear to me that you'll be able to handle your job professionally."

I swallow hard. Me, confident? I guess I'm rather a good actress.

He gives the black-haired woman a sign. She leans over the table to hand me over a white file. I feel uncomfortable under her stern expression. She is not smiling a whit, not making a friendly face at all.

"This is only an overview," Dad explains. "There are a lot more documents to study. Due to safety reasons, it can only be done at Tonya's office, though."

I blink in confusion at this ongoing secretiveness. "Where is her office?"

"Under the basement garage in a security ward."

I almost gasp in surprise. "There is a floor below?"

"Yes, indeed. The whole project is happening in that place. No one except the five of us know about it."

"How does one get there?" I question in utter bewilderment. "The elevator ends at the garage!"

"It actually doesn't. Once you have your identity card programmed, it'll gain you access immediately. Tonya will take care of that. Now go on," he encourages and nods at the file in front of me. "Have a look."

My heart starts beating faster.

I'm not sure if I really want to know what's hidden between these innocent white covers.