

Chapter One

The timing was the worst. He should have never returned home around that hour. Traffic was like a parking lot; driving was beyond frustration. So much for the mini-vacation he had just enjoyed. Had he acquired enough rest and relaxation to make it back home still recharged?

Adam was driving mindlessly at 40km/h in his jet-blue Audi 4. He had been driving for the last five hours with only two short breaks at service centers along the highway, and he was eager to get back home to Oakville, a suburb of Toronto. The town had the charming feel of European style, blended with the practicality of North American living. It had the benefit of good connections with the megacity of Toronto, Canada's business capital, and the beauty of numerous ravines and green spaces which made Oakville one of the most sought-after places to live for the rich and active people of Ontario.

When the sign of Hwy 403 advertised five kilometers left, Adam let out a sigh of relief and tried to focus on the task at hand. Needless to say, his thoughts were flying back to the pristine land of Algonquin Park, where he had spent the last four days in a rented cottage. He had chosen the place and time carefully: end of May after Victoria Day weekend when most of the weekenders and campers left the park. He also checked out on Friday morning before a new wave of city people would flood Northern Ontario. It was supposed to be a vacation spent

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in solitude, away from technology and other distractions and, in that respect, it was perfect. But once he hit Hwy 400 on the way back, the damn iPhone, buried among the laundry in his traveling bag which was lying on the back seat of the car, started to emit beeps, signaling new messages he had no desire or curiosity to check.

That was why, at the first service center when he stopped for a coffee, he moved the big bag from inside the car into the trunk. The annoying sound of day-to-day life was a reminder that his vacation had come to an end, and now the traffic jam was downright irritating. Adam swung his way to the right lane, cursing the other motorists who hardly allowed him room for the maneuver. Rat race! Mankind had become its worst enemy.

Adam managed to take the ramp to Hwy 403 and advance toward his destination at a higher speed. With no plans in particular, he was thinking to spend the remaining afternoon and evening with a cold beer on his patio watching the sunset, once he arrived home. He was hungry too.

Half an hour later he pulled into his double-car garage. His house was on a quiet cul-de-sac in a high-end neighborhood, its backyard facing the greenery of a ravine. It had the double benefit of privacy and natural beauty of Mother Nature unspoiled by suburban paths and unwanted traffic. From the high patio deck one could see the valley of Sixteen Miles Creek and the trees that trimmed the river's banks. Adam's backyard was large enough to accommodate an in-ground swimming pool, but he opted for a hot tub Jacuzzi basin instead, which seemed more appropriate given the landscape. Besides, Adam could use it year-round if he liked, and the maintenance was far less expensive than what a swimming pool would have required. Adam was a man who always valued practicality over luxury.

He closed the garage door, took out his luggage from the trunk, and stepped inside the house, which was diffused by

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a warm light filtered by the closed blinds. First, he let the sun back into the large living room and headed to the kitchen. He started the coffee maker, checked the freezer for something to microwave, settled for a light meal, then grabbed a Budweiser beer and went to the patio. The sunset was gorgeous above the tall trees of the valley, the air scented by pine trees, and the breeze refreshing. When the microwave beeped he went inside and set the meal on a large tray along with the cup of coffee and a salad. He sank down in the cushioned patio chair to enjoy his dinner. The home phone rang a few times but he ignored it. He had no desire to talk to anybody just yet. The only being he was missing was his Labrador, Ringo. It was too late to bring him home from the pet hotel where Ringo had camped for the last week.

Adam had moved into this house almost three years before, following the death of his parents which had both occurred within six months of each other. They were in their eighties but still active, until one spring day his father had a massive heart attack and was gone. His mother was in shock for the longest time and then, in the fall, she peacefully passed away in her sleep. His parents had enjoyed a fairytale marriage for sixty years.

Adam could not understand what was their secret for such a harmonious and fulfilling matrimony, but his parents' happiness set him up for a chain of failed relationships for the mere reason that none of them lived up to his parents. He was continuously comparing himself with them and, in the end, he could not find the right woman to spend the rest of his life with. That fact had saddened his mother a lot, especially since he was an only child and she never had grandchildren as a result.

Adam grew up surrounded by love and protection, went to the best schools, and enjoyed the most beautiful vacations. He traveled with his parents all over the map: first in Canada and the USA, then to Europe and reaching as far as Australia.

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By the time he graduated from high school he had more travel stamps in his passport than all of his mates put together. It was an exciting time, and he acquired a wealth of knowledge about different cultures. He was always impressed by the places and the people he met during his trips.

He attended McMaster University in Hamilton Ontario and majored in electrical engineering. He graduated successfully and began his career in a big company which designed robotics and assembly line equipment for the automotive industry. Twenty-six years later he was still working there in a higher management position, but not the highest one. Although he could have become a CEO he had declined the offer at least two times so far. Adam had a love-hate relationship with his work. There were years when his career took precedence over everything else in his life. He was in his thirties then and willing to sacrifice his personal life for the sake of a promotion. His ambitions drove him and pushed him upward in the company's hierarchy. He was content with that, and set his goals higher and higher as soon as he achieved the previous one. That state of mind brought him into his forties with a sense of accomplishment and quite a bright future in climbing the management ladder.

Then he looked around and realized that he had completely forgotten to pause and smell the roses, to engage in a solid relationship, and to settle down and get married. But it was too late for him. All the futile affairs that he had over the years left him with a sour taste. They ended mainly in frustration, with bitter ex-partners who quite often trashed him at the end, emotionally and, a few times, even financially. Adam always bounced back eventually but, in the process, he became immune to the pain of heartbreak and started to treat his flings with a condescending sense of temporality and nonattachment.

While sitting on the large deck, he heard the phone ringing for the fourth time in the last hour. The answering

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machine was full and did not record any new messages. Good. Adam was not ready to finish his R&R just yet. He was still admiring the sunset and the wild nature behind his home. He might even decide for a hot tub bath before the evening was over.

On Saturday morning Adam woke up early and, after a quick breakfast, he went to pick up Ringo. The dog was ecstatic when he saw Adam. *If humans would only be half as true to their hearts as dogs are, there would be no such word as divorce in the dictionary*, Adam thought. Adam's face got washed in canine kisses for the first two minutes straight, before Ringo sat dutifully by his master, tail wiggling and eyes glued to him. After a short drive the two of them arrived home and Adam took Ringo for a well-deserved walk around Salva cul-de-sac and one block farther from their home.

It was then that he noticed that the "SOLD" sign on his neighbor's property was gone and, while there were no cars in the driveway, the house looked like it had exchanged owners already. It had been on the market for the longest time, probably because of the high asking price, and at beginning of May it was finally sold. Adam never knew his old neighbors well, and had the feeling that he wouldn't interact much with the new ones either, whoever they were. He did not give it another thought and took Ringo inside their home. The dog was eager to go in the backyard, his favorite place during the warm weather. He had a custom-made dog house where he escaped the rain and the noon heat for a comfortable nap. Ringo was a happy four-year-old dog. Adam let him out through the patio doors and filled Ringo's water bowl, before being annoyed by yet another phone call he decided this time to answer.

'Hello.'

'Adam, for God's sake, I was trying to reach you for ages. Did you get my messages? Why didn't you call back? I

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started to get worried and was thinking to check with the police about you!’

‘Slow down, Mimi. I’m fine, and no, I did not check your messages, or any message for that matter. I’m still on vacation, and we decided not to have any contact during this time, remember?’

‘What if I needed you, or I was in danger and did not have anyone else to call?’

‘As you’ve said before, you should call the police for that kind of matter, not me. I was away.’ Jesus, out of all the girlfriends he had had, Mimi was the most demanding and needy. She drove him crazy with all her false pretenses, which only strove to control him. At the age of 51 he did not need that kind of crap, did he? Yet, it was not easy to break up with Mimi. She was different than the previous exes. Adam was somehow hooked on her without even knowing why. Maybe it was a subconscious fear of ending up alone in his old age, or her sometimes motherly attitude to attend to his basic needs, her cooking, or simply her gorgeous looks. Whatever it was, he both liked her and hated her by turn.

He ended the conversation by giving in to her plea of coming over that evening for a quiet at home dinner, that she said she would cook herself. With that, Adam went about his weekend chores consisting of grocery shopping, laundry, and unpacking. He played with Ringo for a while in the backyard and by mid-afternoon he took a bottle of cold beer and sat on the front porch thinking of nothing, with his dog lazily sleeping under the iron table.

All of a sudden he heard a wave of loud music, like a sonic tsunami. It was growing stronger and stronger, accompanied by the sound of a car approaching. Ringo elevated his head, ears standing. Finally, after thirty seconds a bright silver sports car turned onto the street and was coming straight toward Adam’s house, gradually decelerating and, at

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the last moment, turning into his neighbor's driveway before coming to a full stop.

Both windows of the fancy VW Eos were down, and Rhianna's latest hit was blasting through the otherwise quiet street. On the driver's seat Adam saw a pretty dark blond head with big shades and a youthful look. Once the engine was turned off and the door opened, the music stopped, but his overexcited sense of hearing was overcome by the beauty discovered by his sight. The whole scene was playing in his head, and Adam found himself hyperventilating, a situation he had not been confronted with for at least two decades.

The apparition was quite striking: a beautiful, tall, slender young woman dressed to kill in a fuchsia tank top, white cotton shorts, and silver flats. Her legs were tanned and long, her bare arms toned, and her hair cascaded over her shoulders like a golden waterfall. She looked toward Adam's porch but, before having the chance to open her mouth to greet him, the big dog took off out of his sleeping place and jumped toward her with light speed. She did not even so much as blink when the caramel-colored Labrador landed beside her and started to sniff her first, and then lick her hand. Adam was terrified seeing his dog attempting to attack and was rushing toward the new comer shouting at Ringo, before he realized that the dog was under the young woman's spell, and not at all aggressive.

'My goodness, I'm so sorry about the dog. He is good with people and does not usually behave like that. I hope you are fine,' Adam said.

'He is a darling . . . Ringo, right? Don't worry about me. I love dogs,' the stranger responded. Adam's mind went into overdrive when she removed the sun glasses and gave him the most adorable look accompanied by a pearly smile. She looked like a model stepped out of a magazine. So fresh, so friendly, and so beautiful! Was she his new neighbor? Oh God, that would be just too much for him to take in all at once.

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Ringo was already eating from her hand, so to speak, and mesmerized by her, he settled down at her feet with his eyes looking up adoringly.

She measured Adam from head to toes. He was a handsome man. His hair was in disarray which gave him a boyish look, more like weekend nonchalant style, the color of salt and pepper. There was no sign of baldness in the future, and his tanned skin emphasized his blue eyes. He seemed to be fit, and even in the Bermuda shorts, he had an elegant posture that would have set him apart from the crowd. His genuine concern about her safety due to the dog's infusion of canine affection went straight to Camellia's heart, and she became even friendlier.

'Oh my, I was wondering if the house next door had any inhabitants. For the last week I saw no sign of movement there. Are you my neighbor or only a burglar passing by?' Camellia asked with mischief.

Adam was startled by the easy-going attitude of the young lady and let out a heartfelt laugh.

'I live here. My name is Adam Alder. I can see that you are new in the neighborhood. You must be the lucky owner of this house.'

'No, I'm not. I just camp here, so to speak. The house belongs to my mother. I'm Camellia Stevens, by the way. Nice to meet you, Mr. Alder.' She wiped her hand of Ringo's kisses on her immaculate shorts and offered it to Adam for a hand shake. The man looked into her bright green eyes and asked her to call him Adam. Likewise, Camellia said to him that friends called her Cammy.

With the introduction out of the way, Adam began to retreat toward his driveway not knowing what to say next. Camellia closed the car's door and took her shopping bags out of the trunk. They were quite a few, and some contained grocery which captured Ringo's attention, and again, the dog made a move that required Adam's intervention. He had no

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choice but to offer his help to guard the shopping bags while the girl took them inside, making three trips from the car to the front door and back. When she was done and went inside, the man and the dog returned to their porch, both thinking of the same thing: Camellia Stevens. It had been ages since Adam had such a charming neighbor. He was wondering who her mother was, being able to buy such a big and expensive house.

Of course, some would have wondered how he could afford his as well, but nobody knew that he paid for it with two of his late parents properties that he inherited.

That evening Mimi stormed into Adam's driveway in her outdated BMW she had won in her divorce settlement almost ten years before. At forty-four she was still looking like she was in her thirties, and behaved as if she were twenty. She was a woman every single man, and even some married ones, would date. She looked good as an accessory on a man's arm. When she entered a room people noticed, when she began talking people listened, and when she got pissed off she was a true diva. Her job as a marketing consultant opened a few doors for her in life, and she was used to success. She and Adam both worked for the same company, Trocar Inc., and that made it easier for Mimi to track him down at any given time, via email, phone calls, or even in person. This last week when he decided to go under the radar and seclude himself in his "fishing trip" at the cottage, she almost went nuts not being able to communicate with him. Now she was determined to make up for the frustration he may have caused her. She grabbed the big green shopping bag from the passenger seat and headed toward the front door. When she was about to ring the bell, she heard steps coming out of the neighboring house. A young woman in high heels was walking towards a nice sport car that she somehow missed noticing when she drove in. Mimi's blood pressure rose instantly, and a wave of jealousy flooded her. The apparition was a threat to her. With indignation she pushed the doorbell a little bit too hard and

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heard loud barking from inside. Adam opened the door just in time to see Camellia driving away and waving at him. He waved back, and Mimi was instantly downright mad.

‘Who is that woman next door? You seem to know her well by the way you two greeted each other!’

‘Hello to you too, Mimi! Please come on in.’ They were already off to a bad start. He took the green bag into the kitchen, realizing that they had not even hugged. Mimi was too busy fighting with him because of his new neighbor. Oh Lord!

Over the tasty dinner and some chilled wine, the atmosphere became cozier and by the time they went to bed the fight was forgotten, along with Mimi’s frustration over the week-long separation. On Sunday morning they drove to an auction where Mimi was interested in buying antiques for her over-decorated condo. This was followed by a decent supper at the Lighthouse restaurant on Lake Ontario’s shore in Oakville, one of Adam’s favorite spots. The next day was a working day, and Adam tried hard to avoid the Sunday’s evening blues that he always had before Monday rolled in.

Chapter Two

Camellia promised her grandparents a visit that week. She was home alone and almost done with unpacking. The week before, she had to take care of all deliveries that her mother set up as part of moving. Everything was new.

The rented apartment in downtown Toronto had old and worn-out furniture, mostly from thrift stores. She and her mom had lived there for five years. While the place was small and sometimes looked cluttered, it was conveniently located and served them both well. It was just a short subway ride to the University of Toronto where she had studied and graduated from that spring. Her mother could walk to her workplace situated in one of the skyscrapers in the financial district.

Then, all of a sudden, her mother bought a house in Oakville. The news both surprised and worried Camellia. If it had been her dad, who was a successful business man, to make that kind of decision would have been completely fine. But her mother was living paycheck to paycheck, and was a very cautious person who rarely indulged in spending outside of her means.

In early May, Lisa Orsen, Camellia's mother took her daughter for a ride to Oakville. Camellia thought that they would end up on Lake Ontario's shore in one of the lovely parks her romantic and artistic mother loved to visit, but when she took the exit north of Queen Elisabeth Expressway, she was sure that they would go to Oakville Place Mall. Then, after

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a few turns right and left, they stopped at a circular street in front of a lavish house. She parked the rented Honda Civic in the large driveway and, getting the key from her purse, invited her daughter to have a look inside. Only then did Camellia see the “SOLD” sign on the front lawn. What was going on?

They went inside and, while the previous owner had not moved out yet, he wasn't home, and the house was at their discretion to wander around and observe. Camellia was in awe. It seemed much nicer than her father's home in Rouge Hill, a subdivision in East Toronto. This house had a wonderful backyard with an in-ground swimming pool and was facing a ravine toward a creek. The inside was an open concept for the main floor, and four large bedrooms upstairs complete with en-suite bathrooms for three of them, and another one with hallway entry. Her mother asked her to pick her bedroom and the color of the paint for it. It was surreal. She started to ask questions, but all she found out was that in two weeks they would move in, and that this was their new home. How, why, and what were the questions that Camellia had, and Lisa answered all of them evasively without offering any explanation, really.

That was a drastic change in their lifestyle. Her mother was happy, and twirled around the rooms making plans for paint colors, furnishings, and interior decorating. Half an hour later they left, locked the house, and drove away to The Brick to choose the new furniture together. It looked like Lisa did not have a budget, but rather a fountain of money. However, they did not overspend: each room would have the basic pieces of furniture and electronics. There was a leather sofa set for the living room, a good quality dining room table with a large encrusted credenza, three contemporary bedroom sets (one for each of them and one for the guest room), three flat-screen TV sets, two large ones for downstairs and the master bedroom, and one medium-size for Camellia's bedroom, and a white oak kitchen table with four matching chairs. Lisa set up the

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delivery date and then they moved next door to a lighting fixture store where they picked some floor lamps and night stand lamps for all the bedrooms. Last but not least, at a small store in the same shopping center they found a couple of large mirrors and an assortment of hallway furniture pieces for the entrance. All the purchases had solid delivery dates and times set for the week after Victoria Day weekend. With that done, they went to have supper at Oakville Place food court, and later they returned to their Toronto downtown apartment. It was then that Lisa told Camellia about her vacation plans to fly south for two weeks, around the moving date.

‘Mom, you never end to surprise me. How much more do you think I can digest of all these mysterious changes you are making lately? You haven’t gone on vacation since you and Dad got divorced.’

‘You’re right. And that happened six years ago. Don’t you think that I’m well overdue by now?’

‘That is not what I meant. Of course you deserve to go somewhere nice, but the house, the big item shopping, and now flying to a beach resort, it is a bit too much all of a sudden! Are you dying or something? You worry me to no limits, you know?’ Camellia was trying to understand what was with her mother’s new found wealth and change of character.

‘Look honey, I’m 47 years old and while I’m not dying right now, one day I will, and before that happens I need to live my life. Ever since I can remember, I’ve lived for the people I loved. At the beginning I lived for my parents who raised me and gave me the best they could in the form of shelter, education and guidance. I felt that I had to behave the proper way to make them proud and happy. Then came your father, who meant the world to me for years and years. I was his wife, and the mother of his child. I gave up on my dreams to follow his.’

She paused before continuing. ‘I had you to keep me strong and focused, and I love you to no end. That was a

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purpose that nobody could take away from me. Not even after my marriage fell apart and my parents disgraced me for that. Now look at you, all grown up, smart and beautiful with loads of opportunities waiting for you after graduation. You'll shape your own life knowing that I'll support you through thick and thin, and love you unconditionally always.'

Camellia listened carefully. It was not usual for her mom to make a confession like that. Something must have been wrong. It almost gave her goose bumps. Lisa told her that she booked her vacation a while ago before she knew the closing date of the house and could have lost the money for the trip had she cancelled. So she would have to rely on Camellia to handle the moving in her absence. There was really not much to do anyway, since Lisa paid for the cleaning, wall painting, and delivery in advance, tip included. All her daughter had to do was to open the house and direct the people to the right rooms to assemble the furniture and put it in its right place. When that was done a small moving company would come to the apartment and pack the few things that they planned to take along, mostly clothes and a few house-ware pieces. The old stuff was to stay behind, and Lisa worked out a donation of the old belongings with the superintendent. They were to be taken to a charity after Lisa and Camellia left the premises.

Right after their visiting weekend in Oakville, on the following week, Camellia was invited to her father's place where she received his graduation gift to her: a brand new, silver VW Eos. John Stevens was generous toward his daughter because she was all he had in his life, besides his career. While the latter had rewarded him with good money that over the years turned into a fortune, Camellia brought humanity and warmth into his otherwise sterile life.

The car was quite a shock, and the 22-year-old could not believe how lucky she was to have such good parents, even though they weren't a family anymore. Well, she deserved to

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be spoiled for the mere reason that her teen years were quite a nightmare due to the frequent fights that went on to no end between her parents prior to their divorce. It looked like they both wanted to make it up to her for the hard time they had given her back then. Camellia never judged her parents for their failed marriage, and honestly, even after all these years she had no certain idea about what or who caused the divorce. She sailed between her mother's and her father's places, taking care of her duty to finish her education which they paid for. She was a good child, an only child, and even an only grandchild. She could have been spoiled by everybody and become a brat, but she turned out well, a responsible and sweet young woman everybody liked.

She never let her gorgeous looks go to her head; she minded her own business and stayed out of trouble. She was always popular, and boys were always after her, but she managed to keep them at arm's length and make them her friends rather than boyfriends. When in her first year at the University of Toronto, a modeling agency contacted her for recruitment, she declined graciously, telling them that her studies occupied all her time and she could not fit in an appointment for a photo shoot. When they insisted again two months later, she was in exams period and refused again. She did not want to be just a pretty face in the tabloids. She worked hard to get her university diploma and secure the job that she had always wanted: redactor-editor of a successful magazine. She could learn from her parents how important it was to have a career that you love.

That Monday morning, Camellia drove to her grandparents, who lived about two hundred kilometers away in an adult living community in Seaforth, Ontario. Rose and Don Orsen were both in their seventies and used their egg nest to buy a spacious house in a senior living environment which offered them a luxury life without the high price tag. Camellia knew that her grandparents were missing her and took the

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advantage of spending the week with them, since she was home alone anyway. Without much of a thought, she packed a few summer clothes along with some jeans and a jacket, and off she went. The day was hot and the sun shone over the hilly scenery.

The senior community at The Bridges in Seaforth was like a vacation resort. The pretty houses were adorned with manicured lawns; it was almost like driving through a park. At the top of the curvy street was the Community Center with its state-of-the-art amenities: library, pool, indoor swimming pool with retractable glass roof, walk-in medical clinic, restaurant and dining, gym, convenience store, and arts and craft shops. When her grandfather took her for a tour about a year ago, Camellia was fascinated by everything she saw, making her wish she was closer to retirement instead of being in the last year of university. Her grandparents had decent-paying jobs in the automating industry in their working years, and enjoyed a good pension plan that allowed them to travel, and live life.

When Camellia pulled in their driveway, Rose Orsen came out with her arms stretched to welcome her granddaughter.

‘Oh my, Cammy, what a fancy car you rented to come here. Look at you! You are beautiful and rebellious at the same time. Welcome my dear!’ Rose gave the girl a bear hug and invited her inside, out of the heat. Her husband was out shopping for groceries. The two women sat comfortably in the spacious living room having coffee and some homemade cookies, and they started to chat.

‘Well Grandma, you look good and healthy.’

‘Is that right? You, my darling, look fabulous, although I can see that you must have lost some sleep lately.’

‘Oh, it is nothing really. I was busy unpacking my things last week and receiving all the deliveries to the house. I’m fine. I’m sure your cooking will do wonders for me while staying here.’

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‘About that house of yours, what was your mother thinking to buy it out of the blue? The pictures you sent me in the emails show that it is quite a mansion. Does she really need that? Not to mention the mortgage she must have taken on. Makes me wonder how the bank approved her in the first place?’ Rose complained.

Camellia knew by now that the relationship between her mother and her grandmother was incendiary, to say at least. She had never understood why, but sadly, there was not much she could do about it. It did not seem fair to Camellia to always have to defend her mother in front of her grandparents, but some things just never change, do they?

‘Grandma, the house is fabulous, and I’ll live there too, remember? Power to my Mom for buying it. The neighborhood is safe and quiet, the backyard is facing a ravine and I cannot wait to open the swimming pool for the summer. Mom and I, we lived long enough in that shoebox apartment downtown not to deserve a better place. She works hard for her money and once I get a real job now after graduation, I will help her paying the bills too.’

‘Ha, that was what Lisa must have had in her mind when she bought it; that now you can pay her back all the expenses she helped you with during the school years!’

‘Now that is not fair Grandma. Why are you always so mean to your daughter? Mom did not ask for a single penny back from me. I feel like helping if I can.’ Camellia was furious already. All the time she talked to her grandparents they used her to dig up dirt about her mother. It was like she was used only to provide information and be the buffer for their frustration caused by their own daughter. Her mother very seldom visited them and cut down the communication to a minimum in order to avoid the inevitable fights.

‘I’m not mean, dear. Your mother is her worst enemy, that’s all. If you are not careful and spend your money on fancy

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cars like the rental you came here by, you may end up like your mother one day’

‘The Eos is not a rental. It is my car.’

‘Lisa must be out of her mind to buy you a luxury car like that. Did she sell her soul for all these fine things, and the lavishing vacation? Good Lord save her from perdition! Where did she find the money to pay for all these? Haven’t you asked yourself this question already?’

At that moment Don Orsen walked into the house carrying two huge green bags of groceries. It seemed to him that the dearest women in his life were pitted in a heated conversation.

‘Ask what?’ he interrupted.

‘Hello Grandpa, how are you?’

‘Hello darling. I’m glad you could make it here at last. I haven’t seen you in almost a year. Congratulations to my favorite university-graduated granddaughter!’ Don hugged Camellia with love. ‘Nice car there in my driveway. Did you get a good deal from the rental company?’

‘No, Don. Cammy was telling me that the car is hers, not rented, the minute you walked in. Now, who in their good mind would buy such an expensive car? Lisa must be out of touch with reality,’ Rose told her husband, looking for an ally.

‘My father!’ Camellia exclaimed, a little too sharply for her grandparents’ ears.

Rose’s mouth opened and closed without a sound. Don was looking at her, then he moved by the window to give another glance to the Eos parked outside.

‘That is a nice graduation present from your father. Your grandma and I were thinking to give you a gift also, but it would be too insignificant in comparison with the one you already have received. Well, I guess, congratulations are in order!’

‘Grandpa, my father’s present was quite unexpected, and I like the car very much, but the best gift of all is for us to

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be healthy, and to love each other like a close family. That, I would like!’

‘That loving family was forever lost darling, when your mother divorced your father six years ago. Do not set your hopes too high.’ Rose said coldly, while Don headed toward the kitchen to put the food away, silently agreeing with his wife.

Camellia was wondering when this hate towards her mother would end. She would have to be careful what she said. She felt like she was walking on eggshells. It was going to be a long week.

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