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CORBAN SOLSEK'S HEART DROPPED AND HIS STOMACH CLENCHED tight when he saw the B on his sociology proposal. The shock of it made heat pour into his face and then recede in the wake of cold anger. He'd worked hard on this outline for his term project! He'd checked his information and sources, reviewed the methods by which he planned to present his ideas, and proposed a program. He should've received an A! What gives? Opening the folder, he glanced through the perfectly typed pages, looking for corrections, comments, anything that might give an indication of why he hadn't received what he knew he deserved.

Not one red check anywhere. No comment. Nothing.

Stewing, Corban flipped open his notebook, wrote the date, and tried to concentrate on the lecture. Several times Professor Webster looked straight at him as he spoke, singling him out from the other hundred and twenty students inhabiting the tiers of desks. Each time Corban stared back for a few seconds before looking down and scribbling some more notes. He had great respect for Professor Webster, which made the grade even harder to take.

I'll challenge him. I don't have to accept this without a fight. It wasn't a good proposal. It was *excellent*. He wasn't a mediocre student. He

poured his heart and soul into his work, and he intended to make sure he was treated fairly. Hadn't his father instilled that in him?

"You have to fight for yourself, Cory. Don't let anybody kick you around. They kick you, kick 'em back harder. Knock 'em down and make sure they don't get up again. I didn't bring up my son to take any guff from anybody."

His father had worked his way to the top of a trucking company through hard labor and fierce determination. He'd done it all, from truck driver to mechanic to sales to administration to CEO, and finally to part owner of the company. He was proud of his accomplishments while at the same time embarrassed by his lack of formal education. He'd never gotten further than the sophomore year of high school. He'd quit to help support his mother and younger siblings after his father died of a massive heart attack.

The same kind of heart attack that killed him the year after he retired, leaving a wealthy widow and two sons and a daughter with healthy trust funds.

"Focus on where you're going," his father had always said. "Get into a good college. The best, if possible. Stick it out. Don't let anything or anyone get in your way. Get yourself a sheepskin from a big-name college and you're halfway up the ladder before you have your first job."

No way was Corban going to accept this grade. He'd worked too hard. It wasn't fair.

"Did you have something to say, Mr. Solsek?" Professor Webster stood staring at him from his podium.

Corban heard several students laugh softly. There was the rustle of papers and the creak of seats as others turned and looked back at him where he sat in the center middle row.

"Sir?"

"Your pencil, Mr. Solsek," the professor said with an arched brow. "This isn't a percussion instrument class."

Corban's face flooded with heat as he realized he'd been tapping his pencil while his mind raced in agitation. "Sorry." He flipped it into the proper position for writing and aimed a quelling glance at two twittering coeds. How did those airheads make it into Berkeley anyway?

"Are we ready to proceed then, Mr. Solsek?" Professor Webster looked back at him with a faint smile.

Embarrassment melted into anger. *The jerk's enjoying this.* Now Corban had two reasons to feel indignant: the unfair grade and

public humiliation. "Yes, sir, any time you are." He forced a dry smile and a pretense of calm disdain.

By the end of the lecture, the muscle in Corban's jaw ached from tension. He felt as though he had a two-ton elephant sitting on his chest. He took his time stuffing his notebook into the backpack already crammed with books and two small binders. Thankfully, the other students cleared out of the lecture hall in quick fashion. Only two or three paused to make any remarks to Professor Webster, who was now erasing the board. Corban kept the report folder in his hand as he walked down the steps toward the podium.

Professor Webster stacked his notes and tucked them into a file folder. "Did you have a question, Mr. Solsek?" he said, putting the folder into his briefcase and snapping it shut. He looked at Corban with those dark, shrewd eyes.

"Yes, sir." He held out his report. "I worked very hard on this."

"It showed."

"There wasn't a single correction."

"No need. What you had there was very well presented."

"Then why a B and not an A?"

Professor Webster rested his hand on the briefcase. "You have the makings of an excellent term paper from that proposal, Mr. Solsek, but you lacked one major ingredient."

How could that be? He and Ruth had both gone over the paper before he turned it in. He had covered everything. "Sir?"

"The human element."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The human element, Mr. Solsek."

"I heard you, sir. I just don't understand what you mean. The entire paper is *focused* on the human element."

"Is that so?"

Corban stifled his anger at Webster's sardonic tone. He forced himself to speak more calmly. "How would you suggest I make it more apparent, sir?" He wanted an A in this course; he wasn't going to accept less. Sociology was his major. He had maintained a 4.0 for three years. He wasn't going to break that perfect record now.

"A case study would help."

Corban flushed with anger. Obviously the professor hadn't read his paper carefully enough. "I incorporated case studies. Here. On page 5. And more here. Page 8." He had backed up everything he had proposed with case studies. What was Professor Webster talking about?

“Collected from various volumes. Yes, I know. I read your documentation, Mr. Solsek. What you lack is any *personal* contact with those who might be most affected by your proposed programs.”

“You mean you want me to poll people on the street?” He couldn’t keep the edge of disdain from creeping into his voice. How long would it take to develop a proper questionnaire? How many hundreds of people would he have to find to answer it? Wasn’t that thesis work? He wasn’t in graduate school. Not yet.

“No, Mr. Solsek. I’d like to see you develop your own case study. One would do.”

“Just one, sir? But that—”

“One, Mr. Solsek. You won’t have time for more. Add the human element and you’ll earn the A you covet. I’m sure of it.”

Corban wasn’t quite sure what the professor was driving at, but he could sense an undercurrent of disapproval. Was it a personality clash? Did his ideas offend? How could that be? If the programs he proposed were ever put into practice, they’d solve a lot of current problems in government systems.

“Do you have anyone in your own family who might fit the lifestyle scenario you’ve presented, Mr. Solsek?”

“No, sir.” His entire family lived in Connecticut and upstate New York, too far away to do the number of interviews he’d need for a paper. Besides that, his family had money. His father had broken the chain of middle-class mediocrity. Corban’s paper zeroed in on those who were economically challenged. Nobody in his family depended on social security to survive. He thought of his mother living in Switzerland part of the year with her new investment-broker husband.

“Well, that presents a problem, doesn’t it, Mr. Solsek?” Professor Webster lifted his briefcase from the table. “However, I’m quite sure you’ll work it out.”

“Quit grouching, Cory,” Ruth said that afternoon in their shared apartment a few blocks off University Avenue. “It’s simple. If you want an A, do what Professor Webster wants you to do. It’s not like he’s asking you to do something terrible.” Raking her fingers through her straight, short black hair, she opened a cabinet in the kitchenette. “Are we out of coffee filters *again*?”

“No, there are plenty. Look in the cabinet to the left of the sink.”

“I didn’t put them there,” she said, closing the cabinet where she’d been searching.

"I did. Made better sense. The coffeepot is right underneath where the outlet is. I moved the mugs too. They're on the shelf above the coffee and filters."

Ruth sighed. "If I'd realized how difficult you are, I would've had second thoughts about moving in with you." She took the can of coffee and pack of filters down from the cabinet.

"One case study." Cory tapped his pencil. "That's all I need."

"A woman."

He frowned. "Why a woman?"

"Because women are more ready to talk, that's why." She made a face. "And don't ever tell my advocacy friends I said that."

"A woman, then. Fine. What woman?"

"Someone with whom you can develop some rapport," Ruth said, adding a fifth heaping scoop of French roast to the basket.

"I don't need to get that personal."

"Sure you do. How do you suppose you'll get answers to the kind of questions you want if you don't make friends with your subject?"

"I haven't got time to develop a friendship, Ruth."

"It doesn't have to be *lifelong*, you know. Just long enough to finish your paper."

"I've got a few months. That's it. All I need is someone who meets my criteria and who'll be willing to cooperate."

"Oh, I'm sure *that'll* impress Professor Webster."

"So, what do you suggest?"

"Simple. Offer an incentive."

"Money, you mean?"

"No, not money. Don't be so dense, Cory."

It annoyed him when she spoke to him in that condescending way. He tapped his pencil again, saying nothing more. She glanced back at him and frowned slightly. "Don't look so ticked, Cory. All you have to do is offer services in exchange for information."

He gave a hard laugh. "Sure. What kind of services could I offer?"

She rolled her eyes. "I hate it when you're in one of these moods. You can't be such a perfectionist in this world. Good grief, Cory. Just use your imagination. You've got one, haven't you?"

Her tone grated. He leaned back in his chair, shoving his proposal away from him on the table, wishing he had taken a different avenue with his project. The prospect of having to talk with people made him nervous, although he wasn't about to admit that to Ruth. She had a double major in marketing and

telecommunications. She could talk to anybody, anytime, on any subject. Of course, it also helped to have a photographic memory.

“Quit stewing about it.” Ruth shook her head as she poured herself a cup of black coffee. “Just go down to the supermarket and help some little old lady carry her groceries home.”

“With my luck, she’ll think I’m some mugger after her purse.” He took up his pencil and started tapping it. “Better if I go through some community organization.”

“There. You came up with a solution.” She leaned down to kiss him on the lips, then took his pencil away and tucked it behind her ear as she straightened. “I knew you’d figure it out.”

“What about dinner?” he said as she moved away from him. “It’s your night to cook.”

“Oh, Cory. I *can’t*. I’m sorry, but you know how long it takes me to put a meal together. If I’m going to do it, I have to do it right, and I’ve got two hundred pages of reading and some materials to review before a test tomorrow.”

No less than what he had to do most nights.

She paused in the doorway. Leaning against the jamb, she gave him a winsome smile, her dark hair framing her perfect, oval face. She had such beautiful dark eyes and the kind of smile toothpaste advertisers liked on billboards. Her skin was flawless, like an English lady’s. Not to mention the rest of her from the neck down. Ruth Coldwell came in a very nice package, and underneath it all, she was smart. Not to mention ambitious.

One date was all it had taken for Cory to know she was a match for him. Even more so after the second date and a passionate night in his apartment. She made his head spin and sent his hormones into overdrive. A month after their first date, he was having trouble concentrating on his work and wondering what he was going to do about it. Then providence had smiled on him. Ruth had spilled out her money worries to him over coffee. In tears, she said she didn’t know where she was going to get enough money to finish the semester. He suggested she move in with him.

“Really?” Her beautiful brown eyes had glistened with tears. “You’re serious?” She’d made him feel like a knight in shining armor saving a lady in distress. Money was no problem for him.

“Sure.”

“I don’t know, Cory . . .”

“Why not?” Once he made up his mind, it was a matter of finding the best way to achieve his goal.

“Because we haven’t known one another very long,” she had said, troubled.

“What don’t you know about me that you need to know?”

“Oh, Cory. I feel as though I’ve known you all my life, but it’s a big step.”

“I don’t see that it would change much. We spend every spare minute together as it is. We’re sleeping together. Save time if we lived together.”

“It’s sort of *serious*. Like getting married. And I’m not ready for that, Cory. I don’t even want to think about marriage at this stage in my life. I have too many things I need to do first.”

The word *marriage* had sent a chill through him. He wasn’t ready for that kind of commitment either. “No strings,” he had said and meant it. “We’ll share expenses and chores right down the middle. How’s that?” He grimaced now as he remembered saying it. But then, he’d said a lot of things to convince her. “It’d cut expenses for both of us.” Although money was no problem for him, he had been worried about hurting her pride.

She’d moved in the next afternoon.

They’d been living together for six months, and sometimes he found himself wondering . . .

Ruth came back into the kitchen and leaned down to kiss him again. “You have that look again. I know it’s my turn to cook. I can’t help the way things fall sometimes, Cory. School comes first. Didn’t we agree on that?” She raked her fingers lightly through the hair at the back of his neck. Her touch still made his blood warm. “Why don’t you order some Chinese food?”

Last time she’d called in an order, it had cost him thirty bucks. It wasn’t the money that bothered him. It was the principle. “I think I’ll go out and have some pizza.”

Straightening, she grimaced. “Whatever you want,” she said with a shrug.

He knew she didn’t like pizza. Whenever he ordered it, she ate it grudgingly, pressing a paper towel over her slice to soak up the grease. “I need my pencil,” he said as she headed toward the doorway again.

“What a grouch.” She took it from behind her ear and tossed it onto the table.

Sitting alone at the kitchen table, he wondered how it was possible to be so crazy about someone and still feel things weren’t quite right.

Something was askew.

Raking a hand through his hair, he stood up. He didn't have time to think about his relationship with Ruth right now. He needed to figure out what he was going to do about his report. Snatching the telephone book, he slammed it on the table and flipped it open to the yellow pages. There was a long list of charity organizations offering services to seniors. He spent the rest of the afternoon calling them and asking questions until he found the one that might suit his purposes.

"It's wonderful that you're interested in volunteering, Mr. Solsek," the lady on the other end of the line said. "We have very few college students among our ranks. Of course, you'll need to come down for a personal interview, and we have forms for you to fill out. You'll also need to take a weekend orientation class. Do you have a CPR certificate?"

"No, ma'am," he said, stifling his irritation. Personal interview? Forms? Orientation classes? Just to volunteer to take some old lady to the bank or grocery store?

Jotting down the pertinent information, Cory gave a deep sigh. *A pox on you, Professor Webster, for getting me into this!*

"You will do no such thing, Anne-Lynn! What ever made you even consider anything so utterly ridiculous?" Nora was positively trembling. Just when she thought everything was perfect, her daughter threw a monkey wrench into the works. Well, she wouldn't have it! Everything was going to move forward as planned.

"I've tried to tell you how important—"

"I'm not going to listen, Annie." Nora rose from the table, picking up her cup and saucer. They rattled, revealing her lack of control. She forcefully steadied her hands and carried the dishes to the tile sink counter, setting them down carefully. "You can just call Susan and tell her you've come to your senses."

"Mom, please. I've thought it all through very carefully—"

"I said *no!*" Nora refused to look at her daughter. She didn't want to see how pale she was, how pleading her blue eyes could be. Emotional manipulation, that's all it was. She wouldn't fall for it. Striving for calm, she rinsed the cup and saucer, opened the dishwasher, and placed them carefully on the rack. "You're going to Wellesley. That's been decided."

"You decided, Mom, I didn't."

Nora slammed the dishwasher door at the quiet comment and turned to glare at her daughter. "Someone has to have a little

common sense. For once, even your father agreed. Didn't he tell you a degree from a prestigious college like Wellesley will open doors for you?"

"He said Cal would do the same."

"Oh, *Cal*. Just because he went there."

"Dad said he wants me to do what will make me happy."

Nora's heart pounded in anger. How dare he undo all her work. Just once couldn't he think of someone besides himself? The only reason he wanted Annie to go to Cal was to keep her on the West Coast. "He wants your best, and I don't? Is that what he's implying? Well, he's wrong! Love means you want *the best* for someone."

"This is best, Mom. I have a job. I'll be able to make it on my own."

"As a waitress. Earning minimum wage. You're so naïve."

"I know I won't be living as comfortably as I do here with you and Fred, but I'll have a place of my own—"

"Shared by a hippie—"

". . . and food and—"

"Do you think I've sent you to the best private schools so you can wait tables? Do you have any idea how much it's cost to educate you? Music lessons, dancing lessons, gymnastics lessons, deportment classes, modeling classes, cheerleading camps. I've spent thousands of dollars, not to mention thousands of hours of *my* time, bringing you up with the best of everything so that you would have the opportunities I *never* had. I've sacrificed for you and your brother."

"Mom, that's not fair—"

"You're right. It's not fair. *To me*. You will not go off and live in San Francisco like a hippie in that cheap little flat of Susan's. You are not tossing your opportunity to go to Wellesley to the wind just so you can take some art classes. If you had any real talent, don't you think I would have sent you to Paris to study?"

She saw the wince of hurt flash across Annie's face. Good. Better to cut clean and make reality come clear. Better to hurt her a little now than see her daughter throw away all her chances for a bright, affluent future. She could continue her silly art classes as elective courses.

"Mom, please hear me out. I've prayed for a long time about this, and—"

"Anne-Lynn, don't you dare talk to me about God again! Do you hear me? The worst thing I ever did was send you to that church camp. You haven't been the same since!"

Tears welled in her daughter's eyes, but Nora refused to weaken. She couldn't if she were to see her daughter beyond these crossroads. Anne had to take the right path. Nora knew that if she gave in for one moment, every hope she had ever had for Anne would be lost.

"I love you very much, Anne-Lynn," she said, taking a soothing tone. "If I didn't, I'd let you do whatever you want. Trust me. I know what's right for you. Someday you'll thank me. Now go up to your room and think things over again." Seeing Anne open her mouth to speak, she raised one hand. "No more right now. You've hurt me enough as it is. Now please do as I've asked."

Anne rose slowly and stood at the table, her head down. Nora watched her, measuring whether she was going to have to fight more to make sure Anne didn't throw her life away. She was such a beautiful girl, tall enough to be a model, hands perfect for playing the piano, grades high enough to go to any college in the country, but not a bit of common sense. Nora's eyes burned with unshed tears she didn't bother to hide. What cruel irony was this? Did Anne now mean to strip her of all her dreams?

"Mom, I have to start making decisions for myself."

Nora clenched her teeth, sensing the gulf widening between them. "Since you're so fond of the Bible these days, perhaps you should look up the part about honoring your father and mother. Since you have an absentee father, you're to honor *me*. Now go to your room before I really lose my temper."

Anne left quietly.

Trembling again, Nora leaned back against the kitchen counter. Her heart was drumming a battle beat. It had never occurred to her that Anne would resist the plans made for her. Perhaps she shouldn't have been so pleased about Anne's graduating from high school early. That had given Anne too much time to think of other things to do.

Relaxing slightly, Nora sighed. She'd been so proud of Anne, eagerly telling her friends how she had graduated in January with a 4.0 GPA, actually higher than that with the few college classes she had completed. But how can you have a better-than-perfect average?

She should have gotten Anne into something to keep her mind occupied. Then Anne wouldn't have had time to go visiting Susan in her flat and thinking how grand and exciting an independent, poverty-stricken life would be.

"I'm going to move in with Susan. . . ."

Susan Carter! That girl would never amount to more than a hill of beans. The Carters were nice enough, but they lacked class. Tom

and his blue-collar job, and Maryann with her low-paying nursing job. How they managed to feed and clothe six children was beyond Nora's understanding. It was a pity Tom Carter didn't have more ambition so Maryann could have stayed home and minded her children. Their son Sam had landed in jail, and Susan was trouble waiting to happen.

Nora went into the dining room and took a crystal-stemmed wineglass from the mahogany china cabinet. Returning to the kitchen, she opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of chilled white Chablis. She needed something to calm her nerves. She filled her glass, then recorked the bottle and replaced it before going out into the sunroom. She sat on the white wicker chaise lounge with the plump flowered cushions and stretched out her slender legs.

The old resentments bubbled. What Nora would've given to have the opportunities she was giving Annie. And did her daughter appreciate them? No. Like a spoiled child, Anne-Lynn wanted her own way. She wanted to make her own choices. She hadn't yet said, "It's my life and I want to live it." But it all came down to the same thing.

"I won't allow it. She's not going to ruin her life."

Inhaling through her nose, she released her breath slowly to calm herself. Then she sipped her wine. She needed to think about Annie and what she would do if this pipe dream continued. There was the rest of spring and summer. Anne-Lynn had too much time on her hands. That was the problem. Well, that could be solved easily enough. Nora would make sure Anne was committed to something. Tutoring at the middle school through June and then helping during summer school would look good on her records.

Her head ached. She could feel another migraine coming on. If Anne came downstairs again, she'd have her make up a cold compress. Maybe that would make it clear to her how this stress affected her mother.

Oh, why did Anne-Lynn have to rebel now? Just because she had turned eighteen last week didn't mean she was ready to run her own life! It was Susan planting ideas in her head. Or Anne's father. Nora had a good mind to call him and tell him what she thought of his latest interference. Cal! Middle-class people go to Cal. Perhaps if he had suggested Stanford . . .

The last four years had been so wonderful. Anne had buckled down after the turbulent, emotionally charged preteen years when Nora had often wondered if her daughter was going to run away and live on the streets. Anne had excelled at everything, pleading only

once to quit ballet and music. But when she was told no, she went along with the program laid out for her. She had studied and worked hard at school, was popular with the other students, and received more than her share of calls from male admirers. But there were only a few Nora had allowed her to date. After all, she didn't want Anne marrying some ordinary Joe from the Bay Area.

Wellesley. That's where Anne-Lynn would meet quality people, where she would mix with students from Ivy League colleges—and marry the right kind of person.

Why did Anne-Lynn want to throw it all away now?

"I've prayed . . ."

Those words grated more every time Nora heard them. She downed the rest of her wine and rose to pour herself another glass.

In the beginning, Nora hadn't thought much about Anne's "conversion." True, the word had rankled. It was like a slap in the face, an insult. What did the girl suppose Nora was? A heathen? Hadn't she made the family attend church services regularly? Anne's biological father had been a deacon once, and though Fred didn't have time, he gave generously to the church. Nora frowned in annoyance thinking about it again. She had served on women's committees many times and filled bags with canned goods whenever there was a food drive.

And then, all of a sudden, after one summer camp, Anne-Lynn comes home and says, "I've become a Christian, Mom. I accepted Christ Jesus as my Savior and Lord at camp. Pastor Rick baptized me. I'm so happy, and I want you to be happy, too."

She'd *become* a Christian? What did she think she'd always been? A pagan?

Nora had let it go. Although she viewed it as a silly proclamation, she did begin to notice some welcome changes taking place in her daughter's attitude and behavior. If Anne wanted to attribute it to Jesus, fine. As long as the rebelliousness and stubbornness ceased, that's all that mattered to Nora. Anne listened and did as she was told. She even said thank you, kept her room neat and clean, and offered to help around the house. A blessed change, indeed, after several years of fits of preadolescent moodiness. If Anne came home from camp a young lady willing to do what she was told, well, then, thank God for it.

Only occasionally did Nora see a look come into her daughter's eyes that indicated she was caught in some sort of inner battle.

Everything had been so wonderful over the past few years. Anne

had become the daughter Nora had dreamed she could be. All of Nora's friends envied her such an accomplished, lovely girl—especially when their own daughters were talking back, experimenting with drugs, sneaking out with boys, running away, or getting pregnant and having to have an abortion.

Anne was perfect.

Anne was her pride and joy.

And she was *not* going to be allowed to make any foolish mistakes.

Upstairs in her sunny room, Annie sat cross-legged on her bed, beneath the lacy, crocheted canopy. Clutching a pink satin pillow against her chest, she fought the tears spilling down her cheeks. Why did her mother always have to make her feel so guilty? No matter how hard she tried, no matter how well she did, it was never enough. One mistake, one thought out of line with what her mother wanted, and Annie knew she'd be told again how ungrateful, rebellious, stubborn, and stupid she was. When words didn't prove strong enough to maintain control, a migraine came on with a vengeance. Her mother was probably downstairs right now tending herself with a glass of white wine and cold compresses while lying on the chaise lounge in the sunroom.

And it's my fault, Annie thought, feeling hopeless. Every time I try to break away, this happens. When will it stop?

Oh, Lord, You know how hard I try to take captive every thought and focus on You. Mom knows how to press every button. Why is she like this? Jesus, You know I've tried to understand my mother, tried to please her, but nothing is ever enough. Worse, nothing made sense anymore. Her mother complained about how much money and time she spent on Anne, but she wouldn't allow her to get a job or live on her own. She's the one who insists I go to Wellesley. You know how much that costs, Lord. I can't go when I feel You nudging me toward studying art, but Mom won't even listen. Lord, she says she likes Susan, but now she's calling her a hippie and saying she's not good enough to be my roommate. How could her mother say she was proud of Anne's scholastic achievements one minute and in the next breath tell her she was stupid and incapable of making decisions about her own life?

"Since you're so fond of the Bible these days, why don't you look up the part about honoring your father and mother?"

Did honoring mean to do everything you were told without question? Did it mean swift capitulation? Did it mean giving up yourself

for the sake of living out someone else's dreams? No matter what that dream was?

Annie knew if she went to Wellesley as her mother wanted, the plans for her future wouldn't end there. Mom would be calling and asking whom she was dating, if the young man had "potential." Of course, what that meant was high test scores, excellent grades, and a major that would guarantee a financially healthy career. Law. Medicine. Business. Her mother would want to know if the young man came from a "good background." Someone descended from a passenger on the Mayflower. Someone with a family tree. Someone whose successful parents had lots of *old* money and high social standing.

She shook her head. Mom could be open-minded. She wouldn't mind it if her daughter dated a descendant of immigrants as long as the family was well respected and well known.

A Kennedy, perhaps?

Guilt gripped her. She was being irrational. Her mother wasn't *that* bad.

Am I becoming like her, Lord? When I tear loose, am I going to do to my children what she's doing to me? Or am I going to lose all reason and find myself saying to them someday, "I didn't have any freedom, so you can do whatever you want"? Oh, Father, forgive me, but I'm beginning to hate her.

The last thing Anne wanted was for anger and bitterness to take hold of her, but it was so frustrating! Her mother wouldn't even listen to her. And it was only getting worse. *I thought I could grow up and move out, be on my own, but it's as though she has her claws sunk into me. The harder I struggle, the deeper she wounds me.*

"God, help me . . . please."

Honor. What did it mean?

Maybe if she went to Wellesley . . .

No, that would just delay the inevitable. Even if she went to Wellesley, she would still hear how much her mother had sacrificed for her future. And if she didn't go to Wellesley, she would never hear the end of how ungrateful she was for the opportunity she had wasted.

Lord, I'm in a no-win situation. What do I do?

Every which way she turned, Annie felt blocked. Like a calf making a run from the herd only to have the drover ride her down and nail her with a lasso. The fire was burning and the iron red-hot, but it wasn't God's name her mother wanted branded into her flesh.

“Property of Nora Gaines,” *that’s* what she wanted. But would that be enough?

Nothing she did was right unless it was done her mother’s way. “*Get back in the corral, Annie. I know what you were meant to be, and I’m going to make sure I drive you to it.*” But did she know? What was it her mother really wanted?

I don’t know what to do, Lord. I feel You drawing me one way, and Mom’s dragging me back in the other. How do I break free to do Your will without hurting her? Why can’t she let go?

Annie wanted to love her mother the way a daughter should, but it was getting harder. She could barely stand to be in the same room with her. If she hadn’t come upstairs, she would’ve exploded with words she’d only regret later. She had kept her head down to hide her feelings from her mother. She had held her tongue because she knew it would be like a grass fire if she let loose one word. She had to clench her hands to keep from rising up and shouting, “Get out of my life, Mother! Nothing ever pleases you! I’m sick of living like this. Why don’t *you* get a life, so I can have my *own*?”

The molten words would have come pouring out of her, burning away the landscape of her relationship with her mother, blackening everything. Some things Annie knew about her mother, things she wished she didn’t. One of them was that Nora Gaines was good at holding grudges. She kept a list of the hurts she had suffered over her lifetime. And who had caused them. She never forgot anything, never forgave. The past was like ammunition, boxed and waiting. And she was quick to load and fire. Annie knew the name of every person who had ever hurt her mother and how they had accomplished it. Nora Gaines made sure of it.

Sometimes the blame from past transgressions spilled over onto Annie’s head, and the litanies would begin.

“You’re just like your father. He never had sense enough to think about the future either. . . . You’re just like your father, dreaming all the time. You’re just like him. . . .”

Or worse.

“You’re just like your Grandma Leota. Always thinking about yourself. Never caring about anyone else’s feelings. . . . My mother never had time for me. Look at all the time I’ve made for you. I was never loved the way you are. . . . My mother never gave me a thing. I had to go out on my own at eighteen and make my own way. . . . I’ve always wanted to make sure you had the best opportunities. I’ve made sure you had all the things I never had.”

Not once could Annie remember ever hearing her mother say a nice thing about her own mother, Leota Reinhardt. And it made Annie wonder. Was Grandma Leota to blame for the way her mother was?

There was no way to measure cause and effect because Annie only knew her mother's side. She'd never heard Grandma Leota say much about anything. In fact, Annie had seldom *seen* Grandmother Leota. Though her grandmother lived right over the hills in Oakland, Annie could count on two hands the times she had been taken for a visit. And as soon as the family arrived, Annie and Michael were sent out to play in the backyard so the adults could talk.

She frowned. It had never been her grandmother who sent them out.

Her mother always developed a headache shortly after they arrived at Grandma Leota's, so they never stayed longer than an hour or two. On the way home, Mom would fume and catalogue Grandma's failings.

Once, when her parents were still married, Annie had overheard her father say he liked Leota. Only once. The words had been thrown down like a gauntlet. A battle royal had ensued, long and loud, with doors slamming, glass breaking. The memory of that night was etched permanently in Annie's brain. A memory of brutal accusations shouted back and forth. Six months later, Annie's parents filed for divorce. By the tender age of eight, Annie had known better than to mention or ask questions about Grandma Leota.

Lying back on her bed, Annie stared up through the crocheted canopy. It had been a present on her fourteenth birthday. Her mother had thrown a party for her, complete with friends from school, ballet, and gymnastics. The house had been full that day. Her mother had made sure her present was opened last, then proceeded to tell everyone how she'd seen the canopy covering in a home-design magazine and called the publisher who put her in contact with the company. "It came all the way from Belgium." Everyone had oohed and aahed over it. One friend had even leaned over to whisper, "I wish my mother would buy something like that for me."

Annie remembered wishing she could throw it back into its big professionally wrapped box with the massive silk ribbons and flowers and hand it to the girl with her best wishes. She wanted to scream, "I didn't ask for it! She's going to use it against me. The next time I dare disagree with her, she's going to say, 'How can you be so ungrateful? I bought you that beautiful canopy cover. I had to call

long distance to that magazine and then stay on hold forever just to find out where it came from. And then I had to write to the company in Belgium. Do you have any idea how much that canopy cover cost? I would have died to have something so beautiful in my drab little room when I was a child. And now you won't do the simplest thing I ask of you.'”

Something shifted within Annie, a subtle warmth, the barest flicker of light. Just a spark, but it was like a match lit in a dark room. She could see clearly, and a chill went through her.

Oh, God . . . oh, God. I'm lying here on my bed the same way Mom is lying on her chaise lounge downstairs. I'm nursing my grievances the same way she nurses hers. I despise what she does, and I'm becoming just like her.

Annie sat up, heart pounding. *I can't stay here. I can't go on like this. If I do, I'm going to end up hating my mother the same way she hates hers. Lord, I can't live like that.*

Slipping off her bed, Annie headed for her closet. Sliding the mirrored doors open, she reached to the high shelf and pulled down her suitcase. Opening her dresser drawers, she took out only what she needed, packing hastily. She had enough to get by until she was settled with Susan. She took her Bible from her nightstand and put it on top of her clothes. Closing the suitcase, she locked it.

Should she speak with her mother? No, she didn't dare risk it. She knew the scene that would come if she confronted her. Sitting down at her desk, she opened a side drawer and took out a box with pretty stationery. She sat for a long moment, thinking. No matter what she said, it wasn't going to change her mother's mind. Wiping her eyes and rubbing her nose, Annie pressed her lips together. *Lord . . . Lord . . .* She didn't know what to pray. She didn't know if she was doing right or wrong.

Honor.

What did it mean anyway?

“Mom,” she wrote, “I'm grateful for everything you've done for me.” She sat for a long time, trying to think what else to say to make the blow easier on her mother. Nothing came to her. Nothing would help. All she could imagine was the anger. “I love you,” she wrote finally and signed it simply, “Annie.”

She placed the note in the middle of her bed.

Nora heard the stairs creak once and knew Annie was coming down. *That's good. She's had time to think things over.* Nora relaxed on the

chaise lounge, pressed the warming compress over her eyes, and waited for her daughter to come and apologize.

The front door opened and closed.

Surprised and irritated, Nora sat up.

“Annie?”

Growing angry, she threw the compress down and rose. She went into the family room and called out to her again. Annie was probably just going out for a walk to sulk. She’d come back in a more pliable mood. She always did. But it was aggravating to be made to wait. Patience wasn’t one of Nora’s virtues. She liked to have things settled as quickly as possible—and she didn’t like to worry and wonder about what Annie was thinking and doing. She liked to know where she was and what was running through her mind.

Why is she being so difficult? I’m only doing what’s best for her!

As she entered the living room, she saw Annie through the satin sheers of the front plate-glass windows. Her daughter was tossing a suitcase into the trunk of the new Saturn her father had given her as a graduation gift. Shocked, Nora stood staring as Annie slammed the trunk, walked around to the driver’s side of the car, unlocked it, and slid in.

Where does she think she’s going? She’s never to leave without asking permission.

As Annie drove down the street, two emotions struck Nora at once. White hot rage and cold panic. She ran for the door, throwing it open and hurrying outside. “Annie!”

Nora Gaines stood on her manicured front lawn and watched the taillights of her daughter’s car flash once as she stopped briefly at the corner and then turned right and drove out of sight.