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Lauren Darby glanced at the clock on the wall beside her desk at the travel agency and decided the time was right to take the deposit to the bank. She placed a green cloth bag in her purse and stopped at Celia Carstairs' door. "I'm going to the bank. I won't be long."

"Take your time," Celia said, without looking up from her work.

"But do come back." Ambrose Carstairs grinned at her as he stood, about to pour himself another cup of coffee.

"Only if you promise to be nice," Lauren teased, knowing the man who tended to watch over her like a father had been nothing but kindness itself.

Out on the busy Philadelphia sidewalk, the warmth of the mid-morning sun on her shoulders felt particularly good after the cold rains of April. Lauren whisked back her shoulder-length hair and started toward the bank a few blocks away. Traffic jerked and screeched beside her with its usual alliance of impatient drivers and harsh-sounding horns.

She remembered the day, nearly four months earlier, when

she met Celia Carstairs. Celia had sat down beside her on a bench in the park, and what began with a casual comment about the weather turned into an hour-long conversation. Lauren shared about her mother no longer being able to work because of a stroke, and how she, herself, had been walking the streets in search of a job. Still unemployed and out of ideas, she had only minutes before sunk down on the bench thinking the matter hopeless.

“Perhaps we could help each other,” Celia had said. She went on to tell of the travel agency and that she and her husband, Ambrose, had talked of hiring someone to help them in the office. “Business has grown so fast,” she said. “Would you like to try?” The next morning, Lauren took up position at the front desk in the agency.

Celia Carstairs carefully plotted each tour offered by the agency. She knew which destinations would be the most interesting and which restaurants the most satisfying. The simple amenities she added made the tours both unique and memorable. Mr. Carstairs, however, had no talent for organization. He merely enjoyed people. His passion for adventure acted as a magnet, drawing clients back again and again to his tours. Together, the Carstairses had made Travel with Ambrose one of the most successful travel agencies in the Greater Philadelphia area.

She smiled as she remembered the small package Mr. Carstairs had placed on her desk at the beginning of her second week with the agency. Inside sat a small stuffed bear wearing a T-shirt reading, “You make things bear-able.” She’d never met anyone as warm and friendly and fun-loving. She admired the middle-aged man and often caught herself wondering if her father had those same qualities.

Her smile vanished. She did not know her father. She didn’t even know his name. Her mother would never speak of him.

Whenever Lauren asked about the past and her father, her mother shut down or simply walked away.

What was she hiding? Why didn't she want Lauren to know anything about him? The anger simmering of late in her heart began to boil and pulsate through her veins. At nineteen, Lauren believed she had a right to know about her father. She had a right to know who he was, who *she* was. But how would she ever know, if her mother would not tell her?

She recalled the *Ask Adrienne* column she had found in her mother's papers. Of course, she felt foolish turning to an advice columnist, but what other lead did she have? Whatever her mother had been keeping from her, Lauren believed it had something to do with the young man who had died.

"Good morning." The bank teller's greeting reminded Lauren of her purpose.

She placed the deposit on the counter. As the teller worked, Lauren surveyed the lobby. She jolted. Her breath stopped. In front of the last teller's window, stood her mother. A moment later, Kate Darby turned and, gripping her cane, made her way to the door.

"What's she doing here?" Lauren muttered. Since the stroke, she assumed she alone had been handling all their financial matters, and that her mother never left the apartment without her assistance. Apparently, her mother kept many secrets.

"Excuse me?" the teller said.

Lauren turned to see the woman looking at her askance. "Sorry, nothing." She waited on the transaction then walked out of the bank. Kate neared the bus stop, and Lauren wanted to go to her, to ask how long she had been getting out on her own and why she kept so much of her life a mystery.

The bus drew up to the curb.

Lauren called to her. "Mother?"

Kate looked at her, her face pinched. She then turned and slowly mounted the steps onto the bus.

A dark shadow fell between them. Lauren felt the paralyzing sting of separation.

The bus pulled away.

Lauren had never felt so alone as she did at that moment. Tears moistened her eyes. "I can't go on like this. I need answers." Pushing aside the pain pervading her soul, she straightened her shoulders, and walked down the street determined to find them.