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Heléna's
LEGACY



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*With heartfelt thanks
to all those who have left
a precious, lasting legacy in my life
through your wise words, sincere encouragement,
loyal support and faithful prayers*

and

*in loving memory of my parents,
Tom and Rene Wardrop*

Chapter 1

There was no doubt Susan Curtis was feeling the pressure of upcoming exams. She knew she had worked hard all year, but still found it necessary to study late into the night in a last ditch effort to cram all she could into her tired brain. Like so many of her fellow students, she wished she could skip lectures at this stage, but knew her absence would be noted. Well, at least she deserved to have *some* sort of break over lunch before heading home to plough into the books and notes once again, she told herself.

Gathering her belongings together, she filed out of the now half empty lecture room and walked to the cafeteria. Somewhat mechanically, she chose a healthy enough roll for lunch and a strong coffee, almost forgetting to pay for it before leaving. Her mind felt as if it could burst at any minute – and perhaps that was why she failed to notice the chair jutting out at an awkward angle from a nearby table. She tripped over it and would have crashed to the floor, except for the fact that someone managed to reach out a strong arm and break her fall.

“Whoa – watch out! You could hurt yourself doing that,” a friendly, masculine voice said close to her ear.

Susan tried to extricate herself from his hold with as much dignity as she could muster – but not before she noticed most of the contents of her coffee cup spreading rapidly across his T-shirt.

"I'm so sorry!" she gasped. "Oh, has it burnt you? Do you think ... would you like ..."

"Don't worry about it!" he cut in. "It's only an old T-shirt and I have to head home now anyway. I'm fine – you know as well as I do the coffee they serve here is half cold! Besides, I'm a med student, so I should be able to take care of myself."

Susan had been too flustered to look directly at him, but realised then he was one of the students in the year above hers. She couldn't remember his name – but she knew he was one of the brightest in his year. He was smiling at her now, almost enjoying her embarrassment.

"Look, I can't hang around – but my name's Grant Ingram. You're Susan Curtis, aren't you? Well, see you around, Susan – I'll watch out for you next time!"

And with that, he was gone. Susan put her now almost empty coffee cup down on the nearby table, noticing as she did that Grant had completely squashed her roll when he had tried to steady her. Well, nothing she could do except line up and buy another one.

A few days later, she found herself again heading to the cafeteria after morning lectures. She felt a little more relaxed – she'd managed to get through quite a bit of revision the past few nights. She chose her lunch a little more carefully this time and decided to join her friends on the grass outside. It would be good to enjoy the fresh air for a while at least. She smiled at everyone as she sat down on the edge of the group, but focused on eating, content to let the conversation flow around her.

After a few moments, she glanced around and noticed one or two couples nearby talking intimately. She envied them a little, she realised – she who out of all her friends had never been short of male company for long during her entire four years at university. With her dark curls, olive skin and large, expressive brown eyes, she had soon discovered she did not have to try too hard to attract admiring glances from the opposite sex or invitations to various functions on and off campus. Yes, she missed having a current steady boyfriend, but knew she had no time to invest in any serious relationship. At least, she knew that in her head – and it was definitely what her parents tried to drum into her too. They were determined she would succeed at her studies, whatever else happened. She had lived with that expectation all her life and had largely measured up to it throughout her school years. And she was not about to let either them or herself down now.

Eventually she stretched out full-length on the grass and closed her eyes. She was tired – tired of the constant grind of lectures and study and tests and prac sessions, plus the hundred and one other requirements that had to be met

to qualify as a doctor. Still, she was almost two-thirds of the way through her course. Then after it was completed, there would be a year of residency in one of the large Sydney hospitals – that is, if she did well enough and if her parents were able to pull a few strings on her behalf. Sometimes it did help, she had to admit, that they were both doctors. They had certainly managed to introduce her brother John to the right people at the Prince of Wales Hospital – he seemed all set for a career as a surgeon after a few more years of general residency. Not that she talked to him much these days. He was often too busy at work – and anyway, he had a girlfriend. She wondered at times whether he thought she was far too empty-headed and frivolous to make the grade in medicine. Well, she'd show him – and her parents as well.

She sat up then – and immediately became aware of someone sitting less than a metre away, staring at her.

It was Grant Ingram.

Susan managed to return his gaze, trying to smooth her curls into some sort of order at the same time. He was still staring intently at her and now a slow smile was spreading across his face.

“I was just wondering why I hadn't realised how cute you are before this,” he announced, grinning cheekily at her. “*And* why you're by yourself.”

Susan continued staring back at him, open-mouthed. She owed him something – she would have fallen and possibly hurt herself if he hadn't caught her. And she had to admit she was flattered by his questions and the admiration in his eyes. But he was definitely flirting – and there was an arrogance about him that made her just a little wary. Apart from their recent encounter in the cafeteria, she knew Grant Ingram only by reputation. Both of their intakes had been unusually large and the two of them had rarely crossed paths. Yet Susan was vain enough to conclude that his interest must have been very much centred on someone else, if he hadn't noticed her before this. Of course, *her* interest had been elsewhere too, but all the same, she was sure she'd noticed him hanging around with the same girl – the pretty, blonde lab assistant from the Chemistry Department. Still, he had known her name in the cafeteria, she remembered – for some reason he must have found that out before now.

There was no way she was interested in starting any new relationship at that point – least of all with Grant Ingram. Apart from anything else, she still felt embarrassed at the memory of the huge coffee stain on his T-shirt. And however cool the coffee, it could not have been a pleasant experience for him. In the end, however, instead of giving the curt response she had planned, something made her relent and decide to play along with his game.

“Well, I can't give you an answer to your first question, but I'm sitting here by myself because I was waiting for you to turn up, of course,” she said,

returning his smile and relaxing a little. “After all, you *did* rescue me the other day. Anyway, what’s happened to your own friends? Have they all deserted you?”

Again, Grant came straight to the point.

“Actually, you’re pretty close to the truth. At least, one of them has. Vicky and I have parted company – you must’ve seen us together around the place. Not that I’m broken-hearted, now I’m here with you.”

For an instant Susan recoiled – surely he couldn’t brush off a relationship so easily?

“Seriously, Vicky’s moved interstate,” Grant told her, quickly trying to redeem himself. “Anyway, we’d decided we really didn’t suit. So I’m footloose and fancy free – and I certainly fancy your beautiful face, so here I am. What are you doing tonight?”

“What do you think? Studying, of course. Or don’t you want to pass your exams this year?” Susan retorted lightly enough.

“I certainly do – but you have to have a break some time.”

Eventually Susan had given in and accepted his invitation to dinner and the movies. And she *had* studied better the rest of the afternoon, knowing she’d be meeting him later. Nevertheless, she was glad her parents did not arrive home before she left. Not that she should have to explain herself to them anyway. After all, she was twenty-two and quite entitled to make up her own mind.

They dated several times in quick succession, despite their busy schedule. As it turned out, Susan soon discovered Grant was equally as determined to do well at his studies and to prove himself – but for quite different reasons. For him, it was certainly not a matter of family expectations.

“There’s no way my parents would be checking up on how much I’m studying,” he explained to her one day, his voice flat and emotionless. “Not like yours do anyway. Mum’s around, but she lives out past St Marys and works weird hours as a cleaner at the local hospital. She’s done that for years – *somebody* had to, to support my younger brothers and me. Dad used to drink – at least, he probably still does, but we haven’t seen him since I was about twelve. Mum only went to high school for about three years. She couldn’t believe it when I got into uni – especially to do medicine.”

Grant stopped talking at that point, feeling the familiar surge of anger and bitterness that threatened to overwhelm him and had driven him to try so hard at high school. He could never forget how, largely at the insistence of his Science teacher, who had taken a personal interest in him, he had applied for a scholarship to study medicine, undergoing a battery of tests and interviews in his final year at school. This was his only opportunity, he had quickly realised – and he had grasped it with both hands, hardly believing it when he was

successful. No applicant was more determined than he was or more desperate to escape the poverty of his home life and the stigma of having an alcoholic father who had deserted the family when his boys needed him most. And in the end, this had won the day for him.

He was no less determined now to rise above the limitations of his upbringing, even if it meant fitting his studies around hours of stacking supermarket shelves to make ends meet. Yet he was reluctant to miss out on the lighter side of uni life altogether. Despite having to work, he somehow managed to maintain a full social life, always a popular guest at parties and almost always accompanied by an attractive girlfriend. After all, as he had told Susan that first day, it was important to have breaks from study. Besides, he not only had his eyes on graduating as a doctor but also on meeting a girl from the right circles who would further his ambitions. Money was important – but class was too. And Grant did not want to miss out on either, if he could help it. Vicky had been sweet, but not quite what he was looking for. No connections in the right places there – and to be honest, he was plain bored with her. Besides, she kept hinting at marriage, which certainly was not on his agenda at that point.

Susan, on the other hand, seemed to fit the bill in every way. She was beautiful, intelligent, currently unattached – and best of all, both her parents were doctors. He'd have to go all out to win her over completely, he suspected, but still, a challenge was a challenge – and he was definitely up for it.

At first, Grant wondered if Susan would ever invite him home to meet her family. It was obvious she was bent on proving herself to them and fearful of falling short of their expectations in every area of her life.

“Oh, my parents would never agree to my moving out of home – at least not until I've finished my studies,” she told him early in the piece. “This way, they can keep an eye on me and make sure I don't go too wild. They care a lot about not letting the family down and that sort of thing. They're quite religious – they'd never think of not going to church on Sundays. And they definitely want all three of us – my older brother John and my younger brother Stephen and me – to carry on the family tradition and become doctors. John's well on his way already and Stephen's in first year. I'm sure they'll both make it through with flying colours, but I think they have serious doubts about *me*. I'm sure John thinks I'm an 'airhead' and too flighty for anything. It makes me laugh, because I've done a lot better than his stupid girlfriend has in her studies. She flunked medicine but now pretends she wanted to do nursing all along anyway. When our exams are over, I'll invite you home for dinner. I love my parents and I'm grateful for their support, but they can be pretty demanding. They're really busy right now – Dad's just started a new practice and Mum's involved in some important research.”

Grant did not press her. Plenty of time – and besides, they both had to concentrate on their studies. Fifth year exams were notoriously hard and there was no way he wanted to have to sit anything a second time around during the holidays.

There was no way Susan did either. At first, she found her relationship with Grant helped her focus, but as things developed between them, it became much harder to keep her mind on her studies. Often she would find herself staring into space, idly doodling on her notes, wishing they could be with each other. She was falling in love at an alarming rate, even for her, she soon realised. For some indefinable reason, she found Grant much more attractive than any of her previous male friends. Perhaps it was his strong personality and his determination to push hard for whatever he wanted that swept her along – but there was more to it than that. Grant was handsome and funny, with a kind of wild, devil-may-care air about him, and his shock of long, untidy brown hair gave him a distinctly rakish look she found exciting and attractive. He often purposely set out to be the life of the party when they went out with friends, his quick wit and easy smile enabling him to do so with minimal effort. But in his more serious moments, she often detected a steely look in his clear, grey eyes and a firm set to his jaw that must have come from his struggles on the home front in his early years. And she loved him for it. He was different and wonderful – a kind of free spirit, full of courage and determination and zest for life. Grant would never let anything stand in his way and stop him from getting what he wanted, she strongly suspected.

Susan finally invited him home just before Christmas. Their results had been posted a few days earlier and, much to their relief, both had passed. In fact, Grant had come through with flying colours, well up amongst the highest marks for his year. Susan's results were a little lower than she had expected, but were still creditable in her books, if not in her parents'. She knew her mind had been elsewhere a little too often and her thoughts focused far too frequently on a pair of teasing, grey eyes and a firm mouth that she longed to kiss. Yet she had made it through – and she was proud of herself. Proud enough and bold enough to suggest Grant come for dinner to meet the whole family.

At first, Irene Curtis was taken aback by her daughter's request.

"Oh dear, I *do* have a busy week, but I suppose we can have guests this Friday night. Explain to me again, Susan, just who Grant is. Of course, I know you and he have been out several times together – you did tell me that much. And I know he's in the year ahead of you and did very well in his exams. But what's his background? What school did he go to?"

Susan had been dreading these inevitable questions. She loved her mother, but sometimes her comments and views were irritating beyond belief. Taking a

deep breath and clenching her hands tightly, she tried to control herself.

“Oh, Grant went to a high school in the western suburbs – Westgrove, I think,” she managed to say airily enough in the end. “He won a scholarship to do medicine, actually – he had to sit some special exams for it and go through quite a gruelling set of interviews even before he left school.”

But here her mother interrupted her in a flustered tone.

“A scholarship? Why did he need that? What do his parents do?”

“I don’t know what his father does,” Susan said slowly, turning her back and busying herself making a cup of coffee. “All Grant told me is that his dad left them when he was about twelve. I don’t think Grant’s seen him much since then. His mother works at one of the hospitals out that way – she often does early morning or late night shifts. She’s had to work hard all her life to support the family – Grant’s two younger brothers still live at home.”

“Oh ... so she’s a nurse, is she?” Irene asked a little cautiously.

“No. She’s a cleaner.”

Susan’s response came out much more baldly than intended, but she was at a loss to know how to put things any differently. In the silence that ensued, she felt the last four words she had uttered were like stones dropping into a deep pool – and soon the ripples became very apparent.

“Oh Susan – a *cleaner*? Of course it’s a respectable job – after all, *someone* has to do it. But how could she ... what happened to the children while she was at work? Who looked after them?”

Susan was not about to divulge any further information along those lines, however. Grant had painted all too clear a picture of his home life only a week earlier when they had been sharing about their respective families.

“I can remember Dad being home most mornings when Mum got me up before going to work, but he was usually out to it – stone cold,” he had told her. “She always made me promise to watch the clock and have the others up in time to get dressed and walk to school. Sometimes we’d grab some breakfast, but often there wasn’t all that much in the house to grab, to be honest. Anyway, what am I telling you all this for? Plenty more interesting things to talk about – like *you*, my love.”

She could tell he found it painful to dwell on his childhood – just like she was unwilling now to pursue the same subject with her mother.

“I’ve never asked him that,” she told her truthfully enough, her voice defensive. “Why should I? It’d be a bit too much like prying for me – it’s not really our business, is it?”

“There’s no need to be rude,” her mother responded in a disapproving tone. “We’ve brought you up to speak more respectfully than that. I was merely wondering what your friend had to go through in his growing up years and

how his family managed. After all, you can't argue that our home environment is a significant factor in who we become later on in life. I assure you, Susan, you should be very thankful for the opportunities you've had to attend a good private school and be supported through your uni course in so many ways."

Susan could see her mother was gearing up for another of her lengthy lectures, which was the last thing she felt like. Besides, she was almost due to pick up Grant and head somewhere for dinner to celebrate their results.

"Yes, yes, I know, Mum," she said quickly, trying to hide her resignation. "I'm a lot luckier than most students in my year, still being able to live at home and all that. I didn't mean to be rude – it's just that sometimes I feel we can get a bit smug about our standards being the best and look down on others who might not have had the same opportunities. I'm sure you didn't mean it like that though."

"I most certainly didn't!" her mother retorted, her face slightly flushed. "Your father and I have always tried in our own careers to reserve judgment on colleagues and patients alike. I merely want the best for you, Susan, in both your career and your friendships. Go ahead and invite your friend Geoff on Friday then ..."

"It's not Geoff – it's Grant," Susan broke in, impatient now to be going. "But thanks, Mum – Friday night would be excellent. I can make dessert – I'll ask him what his favourite is. Will I tell him around seven?"

"That should be fine," Irene said stiffly, wondering why the qualms she felt on her daughter's behalf were even stronger than usual. "I'll try to leave work a bit early and shop on the way home, but I'll take you up on the offer of dessert. I keep forgetting you're on holidays now. Perhaps if you could set the table and see to the drinks too, that would make things easier. Are you heading out now?"

"Yes – I have to pick Grant up and then we're going to dinner."

"Doesn't he have a car?" her mother asked, her voice sounding hollow even to her own ears. "I suppose that'd be an impossibility on a scholarship, wouldn't it?"

But Susan was determined not to embark on any further discussion about Grant. No doubt there'd be plenty of questions when he came to dinner.

"No, he doesn't," she said, hastily snatching up her car keys and moving towards the door, "but I don't mind picking him up. I have to fly now. See you tomorrow!"

"Don't be too late!" Irene called out after her, her voice falling on deaf ears as Susan shut the front door with a decided slam.

It seemed to Susan that Friday came around much quicker than normal that week. While part of her was proud to introduce Grant to her family,

especially considering his excellent exam results, another part cringed at the thought. It would be a pleasant night, on the surface at least. Her parents and brothers would be civil towards Grant and there would be no lack of intelligent conversation. But afterwards, she felt certain, there would be repercussions – and she would once again be made to feel she had let them down, that her choices were foolish, that she could not be trusted to make her own decisions.

Susan drove Grant to the old, tumbledown house in Erskineville he shared with two other students so he could change before meeting her family. He did the occasion justice, she felt, dressed in dark shirt and jeans, his long brown hair brushed neatly back from his face.

“I’m really looking forward to meeting your parents,” he told her, his excitement obvious. “Imagine both of them being doctors! At least we’ll have something in common.”

“Yes, there won’t be any lack of conversation, but I need to warn you they’ll probably be a bit curious about your background. What are you going to tell them?” Susan asked, her voice edged with a touch of fear that Grant did not miss.

“Oh Susan, just the truth, I guess. What more can I do? They’re adults – and they would’ve met all sorts of people in the course of their careers. They must know we’re not all born with a silver spoon in our mouth,” he said a little impatiently.

“I wouldn’t describe our family like that exactly,” Susan responded, her voice tense. “Anyway, people from privileged backgrounds have problems too – just different ones.”

“I’ll have to take your word for that,” Grant said lightly enough, taking Susan into his arms as he did so. “Don’t worry – I’m sure it’ll be fine. And what’s the worst that can happen? Only that they hate me. I’ll be at my scintillating best though and charm them all – you wait and see!”

And the night *had* gone well – or so it seemed to Grant. At first, he had been obliged to go all out to break the ice, particularly where Susan’s mother was concerned. But then things had become more relaxed after Steve decided to help the conversation along a little.

“I agree the temperature went down a few degrees when your mother asked about my family,” Grant conceded to Susan afterwards when she was driving him home, “but it could’ve been worse. I think it helped that you’d already warned her – it might’ve been a shock otherwise. And it was nice of your dad to congratulate me on my results.”

“He needn’t have sounded so patronising though,” Susan said hotly. “And John didn’t make things any better either by going on about the legacy alcoholic parents leave behind. How insensitive can you get?”

“Susan, if *I'm* not upset about it, why should *you* be? I think it was quite a promising start. And Steve and I were getting on pretty well by the end of the night, I reckon.”

“I know my parents, Grant – I bet when I get home, there'll be a barrage of questions and insinuations, particularly from Mum. She has a way of really getting under my skin. I know I've brought home some strange boyfriends in the past and got into a few scrapes, according to my parents at least, but surely at twenty-two they could trust me to make my own decisions.”

“Well, you know what I'd do,” Grant responded, reaching across to her, as they pulled up at his place. “Tell them you're moving out! There's nothing they could do about it – and at least it'd give you a bit of space to do your own thing. That's certainly a big plus in my set-up – I don't have to answer to Garry or Dave or anyone. Speaking of Garry and Dave, why not come in for a bit? They're both out – they won't be home till late, knowing them.”

It was wonderful to relax in Grant's arms, after the tension of the evening. They watched TV for a while, but soon Susan found herself fighting off sleep, her head resting comfortably against his shoulder. Eventually Grant switched the TV off and began kissing her gently, brushing the dark curls from her forehead and running his lips over the smooth silkiness of her skin. Susan snuggled closer.

Grant's arms tightened around her as he felt the passion rising in him. Their lips met and they stayed locked together for some time, until suddenly they heard footsteps outside, followed by the sound of someone opening the front door. Before they could spring apart, Garry had switched on the light and stood staring at them.

“Oops, sorry!” he mumbled, embarrassed. “I didn't see you sitting there in the dark. Sorry to interrupt. Like me to turn the light off again?”

At that point, Grant and Susan saw the funny side of the situation and began laughing.

“It's okay, mate,” Grant eventually got out, “but thanks for the thought. You've met Susan, haven't you?”

“Sure – hi, Susan! Sorry again – I'll disappear now.”

“You don't have to,” Susan assured him. “I need to be getting home. It's late – and you have to work all weekend, Grant.”

“Don't remind me!” Grant groaned, as he stood up and walked to the door with her. “That's one advantage of living at home with parents who can afford to support you. Independence does come at a price.”

“Yes ... but the price might be worth it,” Susan said enviously, as he gave her one final kiss.

“You can't have your cake and eat it too, kiddo,” he commented then. “One

day soon you'll have to choose your own path. See you tomorrow night – remember Dave's invited a few friends around for a pre-Christmas bash. Any chance you could raid your parents' wine cellar for a bottle or two of that excellent red we had at your place?"

"Can't promise anything, but I'll see what I can do," Susan smiled as she waved goodbye.

The party was the first of a number held over the holidays at the Erskineville house. Susan seemed to fit in well with the diverse crowd who usually turned up – med students from Grant's year, an interesting selection of Garry's uni friends, plus others from Dave's more bohemian music circles. Susan loved the relaxed atmosphere of these nights, especially the lack of fuss over catering. It seemed understood that everyone would bring some sort of food and drink, but if supplies did run out, then someone would simply head out for more. Susan could not help comparing this with how things were done when her parents invited people over.

"My mother would be horrified," she commented once to Grant, as she looked around at half empty plates of food and glasses scattered on the floor or perched precariously on windowsills. "She likes to know who's coming when – she plans everything days ahead. She found the last Christmas family get-together at our place such a trial because my cousins didn't let her know they'd be coming until the last minute."

"Well, better let her know I want to come again soon," Grant joked. "It's a while now since the last visit."

Susan was quiet for a few moments before answering.

"If you want me to, I will – but are you sure? There'll probably be even more questions this time."

"She'll be right!" was Grant's breezy response.

And for the most part it was. Susan had held her breath at a few stages, but each time Grant managed to acquit himself reasonably well. That is, until the conversation turned to Christmas.

"We've always made a point of getting to church on Christmas Day, even if it's our turn to have the extended family here for dinner, as it was last year," Irene explained. "Traditions like that are important, don't you think?"

"That's the last thing that would've entered our heads to do as a family," Grant laughed. "The only Christmas traditions we had as kids was that Dad would always be drunk and there was never any money for presents. Usually the Salvation Army saved the day."

Susan's father eventually broke the shocked silence that followed.

"Very sad. What about your grandparents? Weren't they part of your lives at all?"

“My mother’s parents didn’t want to know her after she decided to marry Dad – I’ve never even met them. And Dad’s father died when he was young – or at least that’s what I was told. I do remember meeting his mother once or twice, but she lived somewhere up north Queensland, so never had much to do with us. Dad was one of eight kids, so I’d say life was pretty tough for her.”

Again, Steve came to the rescue.

“Well, I reckon seven brothers and sisters might drive me to drink too. Imagine if I had three or four Susans or more to put up with day in and day out!”

“It’s hardly a laughing matter, Stephen,” Irene Curtis had commented then in her iciest voice.

Susan quickly took her cue from her brother and endeavoured to keep the mood light.

“Thanks a lot, Steve! Perhaps if you’d had more brothers and sisters to lick you into shape and weren’t the youngest and most spoilt member of the family, you’d be a much more pleasant person all round.”

“Whoa – now you’re firing!” Grant had chimed in then. “Better call it quits though, before you embarrass the guest.”

But Steve had been determined to have the last word.

“You’re hardly a guest – more like family really.”

These words were definitely not destined to placate Irene Curtis. If she had anything to do with it, Grant Ingram would not be darkening the doors of their home again, however bright he was. Of all Susan’s boyfriends so far, he was possibly the least eligible as a future son-in-law, given his background. She would speak to Susan later about it all.

The arrival of John and his girlfriend Cassie at that point had created a welcome diversion, at least from Susan’s perspective. She disliked Cassie, but was thankful no one would grill Grant any further about his family. Well, there was no doubt Cassie was acceptable as a future family member, however annoying she was, Susan thought angrily. After all, their parents had been friends for years and Cassie had gone to the same elite school as she had.

“I love my parents and I *am* grateful for all they’ve given me, but it really bugs me how much importance they place on people having the right ‘pedigree’,” she fumed to Grant later. “People can’t help their background – and if it doesn’t matter to *me* what your parents do or what school you went to, why should it be such a big deal for anyone else?”

Grant had merely laughed, but resolved to be a little more circumspect about what he said when he was next invited to the Curtis’s – or was it *if*? After all, the connection might come in very handy in the future, when he would no doubt want to specialise. It was the same in medical circles as anywhere else –

it was often not so much *what* you knew as *whom*.

Susan tried to stay out of her mother's way as often as she could the rest of the holiday break. She had avoided the inevitable confrontation with her in the days immediately following Grant's visit by means of staying out late and then sleeping in as long as possible, but knew she could not do that forever. Finally, she was called to account one Sunday around a week later – only it was her father who cornered her in the end.

“Susan, can I talk with you for a minute?” Roy began, putting his newspaper down and clearing his throat as she walked past him on her way to the kitchen. “Since your friend Grant came for dinner the other night, I've been meaning to say how much he impressed me. He seems to be a very intelligent young man – I'm sure he'll go far, if he keeps at his studies. And I think it's very commendable he's working so hard to support himself and supplement his scholarship. But my dear ... er ... are you sure this is the most helpful relationship for you? There must be plenty of other young men around campus with family backgrounds more similar to yours.”

Susan could always tell when her father felt even a little uncomfortable. Right now, he was refusing to meet her eyes and was fidgeting with the top button of his shirt. Yet that didn't excuse him in her books – she knew he wouldn't have said anything unless he held the same convictions about Grant as her mother did. Before she could stop herself, her anger got the better of her and she let fly.

“Why do both you and Mum insist on treating me as some sort of brainless schoolgirl who's far too immature to make up her own mind about anything, including her friends? Don't bother to pretend you and Mum haven't talked this whole thing over since Grant was here! I can just hear it all – it makes me sick! You go to church and say you believe everyone deserves to be shown the same courtesy and respect, but when it affects you personally, it's a different matter altogether. Yes, there probably *are* guys around campus who've been brought up with the same prejudiced outlook on life, but to be honest, I'd find them plain boring, to say the least. Grant's funny and different and full of life – and I find him very attractive. Besides, we happen to love each other very much.”

“You might think that now, Susan,” her father interrupted, trying to reason with her, “but I'm sure the differences in your upbringing will emerge soon enough, the more time you spend in each other's company.”

“That's exactly what I plan to do, Dad, whatever you and Mum say,” Susan retorted, still angry. “In fact, I'm off right now to spend more time in Grant's ‘company’, as you put it. At least I know I won't be judged and criticised and made to feel like a naughty child over every little thing!”

Susan knew she was over-reacting. It was as if a dam had burst inside her – she could not hold back the tide of anger that was spilling over. Without waiting for her father's response, she grabbed her bag and slammed out of the house.

That night, she and Grant made love for the first time. She was in no mood to deny him anything, he could see. And when, with the house to themselves, he had pressed her close, covering her with kisses and caresses, she had simply melted in his arms. As he carried her to his room, he had felt the tension rising in her but was determined to put her at her ease.

"I want to make sure you feel right about going ahead, Susan," he said gently, as they sat together for a moment on the side of the bed. "I don't want to rush you. There's nothing for you to worry about – I'm definitely taking precautions. And I wouldn't want to hurt you in any way, so you can relax and trust me – okay?"

She nodded, holding him close once again. For a fleeting moment, she sensed a slight check in her spirit as she wondered whether he always had 'precautions' ready for such occasions. But then she pushed the feeling aside, allowing her own passionate desire to experience this ultimate act of intimacy to take over.

And soon it was too late to draw back. Soon they were completely one – and Susan had never ever felt so loved and wanted.

In the remaining weeks of the holidays, they spent as much time as possible together. At first they made love only if they were alone in the Erskineville house, but once lectures recommenced and Garry and Dave were around more often, they had to decide how open they would be about their relationship.

"The guys won't care," Grant maintained. "We're all adults – we don't run one another's lives. They won't come poking their heads into my bedroom if we disappear for a while. And they know how strict your parents are, so they wouldn't expect I'd be welcome at your place – especially not in your bedroom."

After that, their lives began to fall into a kind of pattern. At Susan's home, a truce seemed to have been declared as far as her relationship with Grant was concerned. Her parents never mentioned him, but were aware the two of them saw a lot of each other, especially on weekends. Irene at least wondered exactly what went on between them, yet part of her did not want to know for sure. That way, it was easier to pretend everything was fine in their family. And, to all intents and purposes, it was. Susan continued living at home, studying till late most weeknights. But from Friday afternoon until late Sunday, they saw little of her. She came home eventually each evening, or rather, early in the mornings, but when asked where she had been, merely said she and Grant

had been at a party. In general, it was true – yet it neatly sidestepped the issue of the hours spent together afterwards at the Erskineville house, as Dave and Garry could have told them.

Where this was all heading, Grant was unsure. Something told him he was being a little unwise in allowing their relationship to develop to such an extent. But he couldn't pull back now – he didn't want to. Susan was a great girl in every way. She was beautiful, intelligent – and head over heels in love with him. But best of all, she came from a well-known medical family. They would accept him in time – especially if he and Susan continued to do well in their studies. Sooner or later they'd realise he was determined to succeed in the medical field and in every area of his life, whatever his background and different moral standards. And if Susan truly loved and wanted him, they'd have to give in and back their daughter's choice eventually.

On occasions, at Roy's insistence, Irene reluctantly asked Grant for dinner.

"Better not to alienate him completely," he reasoned. "Besides, if we don't make too much fuss, the whole thing's much more likely to blow over."

Yet as the year progressed, this possibility seemed more and more unlikely. Grant continued to accept any invitations to the Curtis's with alacrity, although Susan was never fully at ease on these occasions. He and Steve still seemed to hit it off, for which she was extremely grateful. But in her heart of hearts, she knew her family would never truly accept him. That would take a miracle – and she had long ago ceased to believe in miracles.