

The New Age

**A Novel by
R. A. Conti**

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On July 1st, 1966, recent high school graduate Anita Cataldi rode a Greyhound bus to Atlantic City. She was not planning to enjoy a long holiday weekend at the beach. Anita felt overwhelmed by anguish and despair, and had run away from home. She thought she was on her way to freedom and happiness, but her dream was shattered moments after her arrival. She came to Atlantic City to find her best friend, with whom she was in love, but did not know it. Her life swiftly changed in ways she never imagined. It took years for her to learn what she was, who she was, what love was all about, and find happiness where she least expected it.

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Chapter 1 - Runaway

The hydraulic doors on the Greyhound bus wheezed open, and Anita Cataldi stepped down onto the steamy Atlantic City tarmac. She waited patiently as the other passengers left the bus. The driver stayed in his seat, wrote on a clipboard, and ignored the annoyed passengers wilting in the July heat. He got up, slowly, came down the steps, tiredly walked to the cargo bay, swung the doors open, and strenuously pulled the luggage out. Passengers crowded around, picked up their bags, and then hurried away to begin their Independence Day weekend. Anita was the last to get her suitcase. The driver closed the cargo doors, and then walked toward the air-conditioned terminal.

Anita followed him and looked for a telephone. She saw a row of booths, stepped into one with a phone book, and dropped her suitcase on the grimy floor. She paged through the slim directory, and looked for her high school friend, Carol Davis. There were several people named Davis in the directory. She dropped a coin into the slot and dialed the first number. The phone rang several times.

“Hello?” a woman answered. Anita hoped she was Carol’s mother.

“Mrs. Davis?” she asked, hesitantly.

“Yes.”

“Could I please speak to Carol?”

“Um...who’s calling, please?”

“My name’s Anita. We’re friends from high school.”

“How nice of you to call! I’m afraid...wait, what’s all that noise?”

“I’m in the bus terminal.”

“Oh, really?” the woman asked, and then paused. “Um, *which* bus terminal?”

“Atlantic City.”

“Oh, you’re *here*?”

“Yes! I came to visit Carol,” Anita replied, enthusiastically.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m terribly sorry. Carol’s not here.” Anita assumed Carol was out shopping, on the beach, or at work.

“Do you know when she’ll be back?” she asked. Mrs. Davis did not answer right away.

“Um...late next month,” she said, after a long pause.

“Oh, *shit!*” Anita blurted out. “Oops, I’m sorry, Mrs. Davis” she apologized. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s all right. Didn’t Carol tell you she was going to Europe for the summer?”

“Oh, God, *no!*” Anita replied, stunned. Carol did not tell her friend about the trip. She felt sorry for Anita, who was not going *anywhere* after high school. She had no plans at all. Anita’s idea to surprise Carol, and her whole bright future, suddenly collapsed. She did not say anything. Mrs. Davis sensed Anita’s anguish.

“Child, are you okay?”

“Um...yes,” Anita lied, weakly, and then paused. Mrs. Davis waited, apprehensively.

“Well, no...not really,” Anita admitted, finally.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s complicated,” Anita replied, evasively. Mrs. Davis sensed Anita’s hopelessness.

“You’ve run away from home, haven’t you?” she asked, tactfully. Anita did not wonder how Mrs. Davis knew she ran away. “And now you have nowhere to go, right?” Anita began to sob, nodded, and then realized Mrs. Davis could not see her.

“I’m sorry I bothered you,” she apologized. She felt despondent, and was about to hang up.

“Wait! Don’t go! Let me give you my address. You come *right* over here, okay?”

“Um, you’re sure?”

“Yes. You *must* come and visit me. I *like* meeting Carol’s friends.” Mrs. Davis lied; she had never met any of her daughter’s friends. She gave Anita her address and directions, and then they hung up.

Anita left the terminal, found the bus stop, and waited. She felt certain she had made a colossal mistake. Her idea to run away seemed easy, natural, and positive when she started out, but now seemed stupid, and insane. How could she have come to visit Carol without calling her first? She had hoped her surprise trip would delight Carol. Instead, Anita had received the surprise. It was not delightful; it was devastating. Carol was away...*far* away...in Europe!

Anita anticipated she would have a brief, awkward visit with Mrs. Davis. She would then go back to the Greyhound bus terminal, buy a return ticket, and endure a long, gloomy ride back to Philadelphia. Anita would ride the subway, then a trolley, and arrive home well after dark. She did not know what to expect when she got home. She had written a brief note, hidden it, and planned to call her parents when she reached Carol’s house to tell them where to find it. Now, she hoped they had not yet found her note. But, what if they already had? Anita felt crushed; she was certain her young life was over.

Mrs. Davis waited anxiously for Anita to arrive, and rushed to answer the door when she knocked. She opened the huge, old door and saw a petite, dark-haired girl, with a round face, small mouth, and large eyes. The frail girl did not look old enough to be a high school graduate.

“Anita?” she asked, warmly. The girl smiled weakly. “Please come in.”

Mrs. Davis looked younger than she sounded on the telephone. She was about fifty years old, short, and stocky. She had a large smile, and penetrating eyes. Her long gray hair flowed in waves down her back. Anita noticed she resembled Carol.

“It’s cool in here, although I don’t have air-conditioning. Old houses, you know,” Mrs. Davis commented, casually. Anita walked through the foyer into the dark living room. The furniture looked old and worn. “I bet you’d like some lemonade,” Mrs. Davis declared, brightly. Anita nodded. “Put your bag down. Please sit.” She bustled off toward the kitchen, and returned a moment later with a black lacquered tray, two tall glasses of lemonade, and a plate of cookies.

“You’re probably hungry after that bus ride, too,” she said. Anita nodded, took a cookie, and started to eat. The cookies were chocolate chip, her favorite. She smiled, and relaxed a bit.

“These are good,” she said, and then took a sip of lemonade. “So is this. I really appreciate you’re inviting me over, Mrs. Davis.”

“Please call me Dolores. Everyone does, even Carol.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah. It started way back when she left here to go live with her father in Philadelphia. The schools were better there. It hurt to lose her, I don’t mind telling you, but I loved her and I knew she loved me, so I felt it was okay -.”

“I bet it was *hard*, though,” Anita remarked, sympathetically.

“Yes, it was,” Mrs. Davis agreed. “But, we spent every summer together, right here. And there was *no* school, just fun. We went to the beach, boardwalk, movies, playgrounds, rides. We did all the stuff kids love. We were best friends, Carol and I. She would cry when it was time to go back. So would I, of course, although I wouldn’t let her see me,” she added, and then fell silent, lost in her own memories. Anita waited, patiently. “So, how long have you two been friends?” Mrs. Davis asked, finally.

“We met in high school, but we actually went to the same elementary school -.”

“That was Fidler, right?” Mrs. Davis interrupted. Anita nodded. “And Roosevelt Junior High?” Anita nodded again.

“Yeah, somehow we never connected, but when we finally did, well, we became great friends, overnight.”

“It’s strange she never mentioned you, or any of her friends.”

“I guess she never had time when she was here - you two were *so* busy with all that fun stuff!” Anita said, brightly. Mrs. Davis smiled. She thought Anita had begun to relax, and saw an opportunity to change the subject.

“So, what brings you to beautiful Atlantic City? Ever been here before?” Anita munched a cookie, and shook her head. “Not even on vacation?”

“My parents never took us on vacations. We just went on Sunday trips, mostly to relatives’ houses. I got to see my cousins a *lot*, which was okay, I guess.” Anita replied.

“But not as okay as a vacation?” Mrs. Davis asked, smiling.

“Not even close!” Anita replied, wryly.

“So who is ‘us’? Brothers and sisters?”

“Just me and my brother, Tony. He’s a year younger than me.”

“Does *he* know you ran away?” Mrs. Davis asked, gently. Anita stopped munching her cookie and looked at her. The room felt cool and quiet. The summer heat and noise outside seemed far away. “Do you want to talk about it?” Mrs. Davis urged, gently. Anita looked down, and did not reply. “Or not, whatever is comfortable for you.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Anita answered, and then paused. Mrs. Davis waited for her to continue.

“Do you even *know* why you ran away?” she asked.

“Yes, I do, actually. It just doesn’t seem important, now. In fact, it seems *really* stupid.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I’m just being honest, Mrs. Davis.”

“Dolores, please.”

“Dolores, I don’t know what to do now,” Anita admitted, discouraged. She had started out with a simple plan. Take the bus to Atlantic City, call her friend Carol, go to Carol’s house, and somehow start a new life. She hoped Carol would be happy to see her, want to be with her, and eager to help.

Anita felt drawn to Carol, but did not know why. She had never discussed it with Carol, never even hinted about it. The girls enjoyed each other’s company, both in and after school. They had talked about teenage emotions, but their conversations were always abstract. There was no mention of feelings for each other.

Carol left the day after graduation. Anita missed her, immediately. She realized they would likely never see each other again, and felt devastated. She could not bear the pain of being apart from Carol. The only way to deal with it was to go to Carol and confess her feelings. She

hoped Carol would understand, and feel the same way. Anita knew it was a huge gamble, but saw no alternative. However, she could not tell Dolores the truth. She felt she would have to lie.

Dolores sensed something was troubling Anita, but did not know what it was. Her heart went out to the girl. Dolores also missed Carol. This was the first summer they spent apart since her daughter went to kindergarten. Carol's father had paid for her trip to Europe as a graduation present. Dolores had agreed, reluctantly. She knew her ex-husband was sacrificing more than she was.

Dolores understood Carol had grown up and was leaving her parents behind. She was traveling alone in Europe for the summer, and would be a freshman at Columbia University, in New York City, after she returned. *Change is hard on everyone*, Dolores reflected. In the future, Carol would not need her parents as much. Dolores hoped their shared love would carry them through the coming changes in their lives.

She stopped thinking about Carol, and studied Anita. *The girl obviously needs help*, she thought. *I can't send her away. What if she's too scared to go back home, and she stays in Atlantic City?* Dolores knew the dark side of the city. A kid like Anita could get hurt, badly, if she tried to survive alone. She decided to give her a place to stay, and help her find her way around. Then Anita could decide what to do next.