

The New Age

**Book 2 of
The Vortex Quartet**

By R. A. Conti

The New Age
by R. A. Conti
Copyright 2019
Richard Anthony Conti
All Rights Reserved

Author's Note Please Read

This novel contains sexual content and is for adults only.

The Vortex Quartet

Consists of:

Book 1 - The Vortex

Book 2 - The New Age

Book 3 – In a Dark Time

Book 4 - Eirene

Table of Contents

- [Chapter 1 - Runaway](#)
- [Chapter 2 - After the War](#)
- [Chapter 3 - A New Life](#)
- [Chapter 4 - Homecoming](#)
- [Chapter 5 - Workday](#)
- [Chapter 6 - The Truth Comes Out](#)
- [Chapter 7 - The Rialto](#)
- [Chapter 8 - Downtown](#)
- [Chapter 9 - Funeral](#)
- [Chapter 10 - Reconciliation](#)
- [Chapter 11 - Lies and Truths](#)
- [Chapter 12 - Romance](#)
- [Chapter 13 - Return of an Old Friend](#)
- [Chapter 14 - Dilemmas](#)
- [Chapter 15 - The New Age](#)

Chapter 1 – Runaway

The Independence Day 1966 Greyhound bus rolled to a stop in Atlantic City. Beachgoers stood up as the hydraulic doors wheezed open. Anita Cataldi sat until everyone got off. Then she stood up, walked to the front of the bus, looked at the narrow folded doors and the city beyond, and paused. Once she walked through those doors, her new life would begin.

She went down the steps, stepped onto the hot tarmac, and waited with the other passengers. The weary driver lingered inside the cool bus writing on a clipboard. He finally rose from his seat and came down the steps into the July heat. The driver walked slowly toward the luggage bay, swung open the doors, and started pulling out passenger's baggage. They grabbed their bags impatiently and hurried away to begin their holiday.

Anita was the last to pick up her suitcase. The driver closed the doors and walked toward the air-conditioned terminal. Anita followed him to look for a telephone.

She found a booth with a phone directory, dropped her bag on the grimy floor, looked up her high school friend Carol Davis, and dialed the number in the book. The phone rang several times.

"Hello?" a woman answered cheerfully. She sounded older than Anita expected Carol's mother to be.

"Mrs. Davis?"

"Yes."

Anita continued in her sweetest tone of voice. "Could I please speak to Carol?"

"Um, who's calling?"

"My name's Anita Cataldi. We're friends from high school."

"Really? How nice of you to call. I'm afraid... wait, what's all that noise?"

Anita suddenly noticed the busy bus terminal racket outside the doorless phone booth. "Oh, sorry. I'm in the bus terminal."

"What bus terminal?"

"Atlantic City."

"Oh, you're *here*?"

"Yes. I was hoping to visit Carol."

Mrs. Davis's voice changed. She also feared she might be facing an unexpected problem. "Oh, sweetie, I'm awfully sorry, but Carol's not here."

Anita assumed Carol was out shopping, at the beach, or working. "Do you know what time she's coming back?"

Mrs. Davis didn't reply immediately. There was a long pause. "Um, not until late next month," she finally said, frowning. She didn't like being the bearer of bad news.

"Oh, shit!" Anita blurted out. "Oops, I'm sorry, Mrs. Davis. I shouldn't have said that."

"It's all right, child. I guess you don't know that she went to Europe for the summer."

"Oh, God, no!" Anita shrieked. No one in the hectic terminal noticed. "She never told me about that." Carol had felt excited that she was going to Europe after graduation but did not tell her friend. Carol knew Anita was not going anywhere after high school, not even to college.

Anita did not say anything. Mrs. Davis sensed something was wrong.

"Child, are you okay?"

"Um, yeah," Anita lied. "Well, no, not really."

"What's wrong?"

"Um, it's complicated."

“You’ve run away, haven’t you?” Mrs. Davis asked. Anita did not reply or wonder how Mrs. Davis knew what she had done. “And, now you have nowhere to go. Am I right?” Anita nodded and then realized Mrs. Davis could not see her nodding.

Anita thought she should hang up the phone. “I’m really sorry I bothered you, Mrs. Davis.”

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

“Um, you’re sure that’s okay?”

“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 the address and directions and then hung up.

Anita wondered if her experience as a runaway had just ended. *Should I go?* she wondered. *What would be the point? Carol’s not there. I would be wasting my time.* Anita started toward the window to buy a return trip ticket to Philadelphia. *But, Mrs. Davis sounded nice. Maybe I should go and see her anyway.* Anita thought she might have one last chance to avoid having to return home a failure.

She left the Greyhound terminal and found the local bus stop. As she waited, she felt frightened and wondered if running away had been a huge mistake. At first, her action seemed easy, natural, and certain; but now it seemed reckless, stupid, and insane. How could she have thought it would be easy to find her best friend without calling Carol first? She had hoped her surprise visit would delight Carol. Instead, Anita received the surprise. Carol was *away...*, far, far away..., in Europe! Now Anita didn’t know where *she* was. Her body was in Atlantic City. Her life, however, might be over.

As she rode the crowded bus, Anita thought about her trip to meet Mrs. Davis. She anticipated a short, cordial visit. Then she would leave, go back to the bus station, buy a return ticket, and endure the long bus ride back to Philadelphia, feeling crushed. There seemed no other option. She would then take the subway and trolley back to Germantown and arrive home late at night. Her father would likely scold her for worrying her mother. Anita would lie and say she went to visit Carol. She would not tell her parents she ran away.

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

Delores Davis was a short, stocky woman with a large smile and penetrating eyes. Her long gray hair flowed in waves down her back. She looked younger than she sounded on the phone. Anita guessed she was about fifty years old.

“Anita?” Mrs. Davis asked. The girl smiled weakly and nodded. “Come right in. It’s cool in here, although I don’t have air-conditioning. Old houses, you know.” Anita walked into the dim living room. The furniture looked aged and worn. “I bet you’d like some lemonade,” Mrs. Davis declared. Anita nodded. “Please put your bag down and sit awhile.” She bustled off toward the kitchen. Anita felt uneasy.

Mrs. Davis 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 long bus ride.” Anita nodded, took a cookie, and started to eat. It was peanut butter, her favorite. She smiled and relaxed a bit.

“These are good,” she said, and then sipped lemonade. “So is this lemonade. 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 to go live with her father in Philadelphia. The schools were better there than here. It hurt me 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, too,” Anita empathized. Mrs. Davis noticed Anita’s warmth and nodded. *I’m starting to like this kid*, she thought. *I can see why Carol was her friend.*

“Yes, it *was* hard,” Mrs. Davis replied, sighing. “But we spent every summer together, right here. There was no school, just lots of fun. We went to the beach, the boardwalk, movies, playgrounds, rides. We did all the stuff kids love. Every summer we were best friends, Carol and I. She cried when she had to leave.” Anita thought Mrs. Davis might cry as she told the story. “So did I... but of course I never let her see me,” she added, smiling wistfully. She fell silent, lost in her memories. Anita waited patiently. “So how long have you two been friends?”

“We met in ninth grade, but we went to the same elementary school.”

“That was Fitler, right?” Mrs. Davis asked. 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 the time when she was here- you two were so busy with all that fun stuff!” Anita commented, smiling. Mrs. Davis grinned and saw an opportunity to change the subject.

“So what brings you to beautiful Atlantic City? Ever been here before?” Anita 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.”

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

“Not even close!”

“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. She tried not to seem as if she was prying. Anita stopped munching her cookie and looked at her. The room felt cool and quiet. Summer heat and the noise outside seemed far away. “Do you want to talk about it?” Anita did not respond. “Or not, whatever’s comfortable for you.”

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

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

Anita hoped Mrs. Davis wouldn’t ask her to explain any more. “Yes, I do. It just doesn’t seem important now. In fact, it seems stupid.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I’m just being honest, Mrs. Davis.”

“Call me Dolores, please.”

“Dolores, I don’t know what to do now,” Anita confessed. She was nearly in tears. She had started 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 missed Carol and yearned to be with her, but did not know why. She had never discussed her powerful attraction to Carol, never even hinted about it. That was because she was unaware of it. They had talked about teenage feelings, but their conversations were always abstract and indirect. They never mentioned feelings for each other.

Carol had left Philadelphia immediately after graduation. Anita assumed she was going back to Atlantic City to spend the summer with her mother before she entered Columbia University in the fall. After she was gone, Anita realized they would likely never see each other again. She could not bear being apart from Carol. The only way to deal with the pain of losing Carol was to go to her, confess her feelings, and hope Carol felt the same way. Anita took a huge gamble. She saw no alternative. However, she could not tell Dolores the truth.

Dolores sensed something powerful troubled 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 Charlie paid for her trip to Europe as a graduation present. Dolores had agreed, but reluctantly. She knew her ex-husband was sacrificing more than she was.

Carol's parents knew she had grown up and was ready to leave them. She was traveling in Europe for the summer and would move to New York in the fall. *Growing up is hard on everyone*, Dolores reflected. Maybe, in the future, Carol would not need her parents as much as she used to. Dolores hoped their shared love would carry them through all the coming changes in their lives.

Dolores stopped thinking about Carol and looked at Anita. *What of her life?* she thought. *The kid needs help. What if I send Anita away, but she's too embarrassed or scared to go back home and she stays in Atlantic City?* Dolores knew about the dark side of the city. A kid like Anita could get hurt badly if she tried to survive alone. Dolores decided to help Anita and then she could decide what to do next.

Chapter 2 - After the War

“So, I want you to show the customers a good time,” Larry said. Puzzled by his instruction, his workers looked at him.

“You mean not fleece them, Boss?” Walt, one of the midway barkers asked, smirking.

“No, I mean be nice to them,” Larry replied. They felt stunned. Larry was never nice to anyone. He was not mean, just gruff and businesslike. They wondered what had softened him.

“So what does that mean?” Dolores asked, smiling. She knew the others were afraid to ask.

“Give them a little something extra, especially the soldiers. If you see a couple-boyfriend, girlfriend, or husband and wife- check them out. You can tell if a guy’s been in the war. This might be his first time out with his girl since he came home. Show him you appreciate what he went through.”

Larry recalled what he went through when he came home from France after World War I. He had not been ‘over there’ nearly as long as some of these guys who fought in World War II. Everything felt weird after he came back. No place seemed right to him. The places looked the same but felt different. When you go through the hell of war, you give up any belief in a place called home. That was why he started drifting. He wandered around on his own, found the carnival, and joined. Now, twenty-five years later, he owned it with a few partners he never saw. They let him run it any way he wanted as long as the profits rolled in.

His workers were still unsure they understood what he meant.

“Like what, Larry?” Clara asked. She took care of the mechanical rides,

“Let them ride a bit longer. Let them win a teddy bear for their girl; tell them good things about their future. I’m talking to you, Dolores,” he said, grinning. The other carnival workers looked on. They could not believe what they were hearing. Was he suggesting they give stuff away? He knew what they were thinking.

“But, don’t go overboard. You give too much stuff away, it’s coming out of your pay,” he added. They grinned at him. He knew they had understood his point. “All right, we open in two hours. Let’s finish setting up and get ready,” he ordered, and then walked away.

Dolores went back to her small fortune-teller tent. It resembled a nineteenth-century traveling carnival wagon. Painted above the tattered cloth door were the words *Madame Dolores, Woman of Mystery*. Just below was her slogan, *Knows all. Sees all*. Although it was not a great sign, it attracted customers.

There was never a line outside her tent, even on the busiest nights, but she always had a steady stream of hesitant, curious, awkward customers. Some came in for lighthearted fun, looking for silly predictions about love. Others seemed more serious and she sensed their lives had taken a darker turn they could not handle. They sought assurance things would work out. Sometimes they did. Often they did not.

Delores had a gift for reading people. She rarely told them what she truly felt when she read them, however. Mostly, she told them what they wanted to hear. She did it in a way that pleased them and they left satisfied.

Everything changed during the war. Her customers’ questions were no longer lighthearted and fun. War takes everything to extremes and wipes out futures. ‘Will I ever see him again?’ was the question that always broke her heart. It came from lonely women who had not *lost* their loves, but reluctantly sent them far away, into the unknown. ‘Will my baby grow up without his father?’ was another painful question. The hardest, for her, came from the children.

‘Will my daddy ever come back?’ She knew the truth was ‘maybe’ but never told them. Her answers were always reassuring. “You just have to wait,” she told them, sweetly. “It will be hard, I know, but everything will be all right.” She hoped her tiny lie helped them deal with their worst fears.

Dolores did not wait for someone to come back from the war. She had no man in her life. No boyfriend, brother, or father, either. She did not mind being alone and unattached. She never needed to worry about someone and felt grateful for her freedom. Nor did she ever worry about herself.

There had been only a few unexpected crises in her life. She usually sensed when something was about to happen and prepared herself. Her parents’ deaths had not surprised her. She felt something was going to happen to them and then it did. Her older brother died when she was little and she had no memory of him. The aunt who raised her turned her out during the Depression when she could no longer care for Dolores, but it worked out okay. Dolores survived. She was smart, eager, could read people, and won them over with quiet charm. People liked Dolores as soon as they met her and wanted to help her. She got jobs easily and supported herself. She even finished high school, although it was hard.

Charlie Davis stumbled on the fortuneteller’s tent later that evening. He looked at it, felt confused, and almost walked away. Something stopped him. He thought it was the unusual design of the tent. An old-fashioned nineteenth-century traveling carnival wagon looked out of place in a 1945 American carnival.

Charlie was six feet tall and had the chiseled features of a Hollywood actor but considered himself a regular ex-GI. He regarded his postwar future apprehensively. Now that his past had been wiped out, he didn’t know if he even had a future.

He wondered who was inside. Was it some mysterious Gypsy woman wearing a long, brightly colored dress and gaudy dangling earrings who spoke with a heavy Romanian accent? He dismissed that image as laughable. Such a person would never survive in mid-20th Century America. People would see her as a caricature or a phony. They would assume she was an actress or charlatan. He watched as people went into the tent and later emerged with pleased or relieved looks on their faces. *Something’s happening in there*, he thought, *but what? And who’s doing it?* He decided to find out.

He went in. There were a few candles placed around the small space. A round table topped with an intricately crocheted doily stood in the middle of the room. There was a candle on the doily, right next to a crystal ball. Charlie thought he had seen enough and was about to leave when a short, young woman with an innocent face and bright penetrating eyes stepped from behind a thick curtain and smiled at him.

“Welcome, sir. I am Madame Dolores. Sit down, and I will tell you your future.” Her soft command enchanted him and he sat down. She sat across from him, looked into his eyes, and smiled. Madame Dolores liked the man she saw opposite her. He had an honest face.

Charlie felt he was in the right place. “Really?” he asked. “You can tell my future?”

“I will if that is what you want,” she replied. *She’s good*, he thought. *She’s trying to get me to reveal something personal she can use to talk about me.* Then he surprised himself.

“Um, I don’t know what I want. I don’t even know why I’m here,” he admitted, shocked by his frankness.

“Oh, but you do, sir,” she replied. “I’m sure of it. I’m never wrong.” Charlie found himself believing her immediately.

“Okay, then why am I here?” Charlie asked. He tried not to seem combative.

“For truth, perhaps,” she answered. “Or happiness. Maybe a glimpse... of something? Or, maybe... love?” *Love?* Charlie thought. *Why would I come here for love?* He did not know most people went to fortunetellers to ask about love. She waited patiently for him to reply.

“Allow me to suggest...,” she began.

“Suggest what?” he interrupted, nervously.

“Let’s begin with a glimpse and see where it goes,” she said, to soothe his doubt. Charlie nodded. Dolores gazed into the crystal ball. “There’s really nothing here,” she admitted after a moment. “But, where there is nothing, there is *everything*,” she added. Dolores liked to create a sense of mystery to throw off her clients’ suspicions. She could tell Charlie was skeptical. “I can’t see everything, but I can see a lot.” He believed her, although he saw nothing but the clear glass reflecting the flickering candle.

He suddenly wanted to know what was in that ball. “What do you see, Madam Dolores?” he asked.

“You. I see you, along with a great deal of hurt, pain, and gloom. Were you in the war?” she asked. *Shouldn’t she already know that?* he wondered. *She must be playing me.* He did not reply. She went on.

“But, it’s not the war that caused your hurt, pain, and despair, is it?” She paused and waited for him to respond. “It’s something... else,” she added. Despite his skepticism, he nodded. *What will she say next?*

“Something’s happened... recently..., after the war.” Charlie gazed at her, waiting. She did not look up from the crystal ball. “Something horrible. Oh, God, it’s awful,” she gasped as if she felt his loss and despair.

He wanted to reach out, calm her, and assure her it was okay. He wanted to tell her he was dealing with it, but that was a lie. He came to the carnival hoping to find someone to help distract him from what had happened. He wished he might meet a pretty, unattached girl, flirt with her, maybe chat, go on a ride or two, and share some laughs. He had a choice between the carnival and a bar. Charlie did not want to start drinking. He feared he might never want to stop.

Charlie returned from the war two weeks earlier only to find his parents had just died in a raging house fire that wiped out everything from his life. He felt abandoned. Suddenly, the war was not the worst thing that ever happened to him, and surviving the war was not his greatest achievement. He wondered if he would survive the peace. He wondered if he wanted to survive at all.

Charlie did not know what he wanted from the fortuneteller, until now. He did not want to know what his future would be; he just wanted to know if he had any kind of future left.

“Yes, it’s awful,” he admitted, weakly. She immediately placed her hand on his.

“You *need* to tell me,” she urged. He no longer cared about what she could say to him. He no longer cared about his past or future. All he cared about was right now, his pain, loss, and despair. He looked away from her penetrating gaze and told her everything.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said. “I can’t go on. My mom and dad were all I had. They’re gone. So is their house- my house. That was my whole life. They were my whole life. And, it’s over. Just over.”

“No it’s not,” she said firmly. “Not at all.”

“I don’t know how you can say that.”

“Trust me, please. I see things. I know things.” He did not reply. “Tell me, sir.”

“Charlie.”

“Tell me, Charlie, before all this happened, before you came back from the war, what kind of future did you imagine?”

Charlie stopped sobbing and considered her question. He had stopped thinking about the war as soon as he came back and discovered that fire had erased his pre-war life. He tried to recall what the war was like. It ended only a few months ago, but his mind had already walled off and isolated it. Charlie recalled conversations with his fellow GIs. They shared their dreams of what they would do when they got home. His dream was simple and similar to many other men that fought next to him.

“I dreamed about coming home and meeting a woman, someone sweet and pretty,” he said, and then paused to look at her, “someone like you.” His frankness embarrassed him and he apologized immediately. She felt flattered and told him it was okay. “I think I should go,” he said. “How much do I owe you?”

“You should stay,” she said. “I have more of your future to reveal to you.” *What could that be?* he thought. As if she knew what he was thinking, she leaned across the small table and kissed him gently on his lips.

“Your future can start right now if you want it to,” she said, sweetly. Charlie looked at her, bewildered. She got up from the table, blew out the candle, closed the tent door, took his hand, and led him behind the drapes to a small trailer where she lived. She opened the door and invited him in. He saw a tiny kitchen and a bed. She closed the door, kissed him again, and waited for him to respond.

Madame Dolores offered herself any way Charlie wanted her, for as long as he wanted her, with no strings attached. She did not care if they spent just one night or would be together for a lifetime. Charlie felt grateful for her offer. He felt he was going to be all right.

Charlie never awoke in a woman’s bed before. He had sex a few times with his girlfriend Lucy. The last time was the night before he left to join the Army. He talked about sex with his buddies in the war. They fantasized about the pinups and local girls in the towns they passed through but nothing else happened. This was new for him and he did not know how a man ought to act the morning after a woman took him to her bed.

He wanted to be careful. He did not know what she expected him to say or do. He was not certain what he wanted to do, except that, now that he thought about it, he realized he wanted to stay with her awhile. Charlie liked Dolores a lot.

She had never done this either, never had a man in her bed. It was not the first time she had sex, but it almost was. There were plenty of opportunities for casual sex, but she avoided the freewheeling sexual escapades of the carnival workers. Others enjoyed that casualness and wanted nothing more. Dolores was no prude. She was okay with their adventures and never judged or criticized them. Dolores just wanted more than physical release. She wanted romance.

She was not certain she had found romance but Dolores felt elated she had found Charlie. Perhaps it was more accurate to say he had found her. Dolores believed in fate and felt it was significant that he came to her. *There are many fortunetellers in carnivals*, she thought, *but Charlie was meant to find me*. She felt delighted he had, and wanted him to stay at least for breakfast, maybe for a few more hours, maybe for another night, or just until the carnival moved on. The choice was his.

She thought about what she wanted as she cooked breakfast and let Charlie sleep. She hoped their intimacy had given him release and healing; she wanted him to have peace. The aroma of fresh eggs, bacon, and bread affected Charlie in his slumber. He dreamed about his

home and his mother's many delicious breakfasts. He had looked forward to coming back to her breakfasts while he was away in the war. Charlie would never again have another meal like the ones she made him. He gasped as the shock and horror of his loss hit him again and woke himself up. Dolores turned, saw he was awake, and smiled.

"Hungry?" she asked sweetly. Charlie looked at her as if he did not recall who she was, and she almost panicked. "It's not much," she apologized.

"It smells wonderful," he replied. "You didn't have to do that." He sat up but did not smile. He was still naked under the sheet and felt awkward. She noticed his discomfort.

"Do you want to get dressed before we eat?" she asked and then turned away. He reached for his underwear and pants and quickly put them on. She opened a small table attached to the wall and moved the only chair in the tiny trailer. "Sit here," she said. He moved over to the chair.

"Where will you sit?" he asked.

"Right here on the bed. It's where I always eat," she replied. Dolores handed him a plate, knife, and fork. She poured some coffee and handed him the cup.

"This looks great," he said appreciatively. "I haven't eaten like this, with someone else, since..." he said, and then abruptly stopped himself.

"I guess it's not like eating in the mess tent in the Army," she joked. He smiled.

"God, I hope I never have to eat like *that* again! I'd much rather eat with you." Dolores did not want to read anything into his remark and did not reply. She smiled and nodded.

They ate. He told her how hungry he was and praised the food. Dolores smiled back. She liked that he seemed shy but wanted more from him.

"So, you got any plans for today?" she asked, innocently. "Anything special you gotta do?"

"Oh, I don't know. Why do you ask?" he replied. Was she suggesting he ought to stay? Did he want to?

"I was thinking- and you won't offend me you say no- we could spend the day together. The carnival doesn't open until six so I have the day free." Charlie liked her suggestion but did not reply right away. He thought about what they could do together. He felt she liked him. Then he tried to recall their conversation from last night. They had connected. But why, and how? What had she said to him? What had he said about himself? What would they do together for a whole day? Suddenly, an answer came to him.

"I would like to take you to my mom and dad," he said. Dolores felt puzzled and wondered what he meant. Last night he told her they were dead. Then she realized he wanted to take her to their graves. *Well*, she thought, *it would be an unusual first date*. She did not reject the idea.

"I'd like that," she said. "Maybe you could show me where you grew up, too."

"Oh, okay. It's not much to look at now, but I'll show it to you if you want to see it."

"I do, Charlie, very much." He was a sweet, kind, gentle man who was hurting. He had opened himself to her. She knew most men hid their pain, and never talked about their feelings. They would never openly talk about what she could feel was happening inside them. She stayed away from men for that reason.

Charlie seemed different. Dolores felt glad he wandered into her tent last night and happy she took him to her bed. She hoped he might want her in his life but that remained to be seen. Then Dolores admitted to herself that she wanted Charlie in her life because she was already in love with him.

Chapter 3 - A New Life

Dolores invited Anita to stay with her. She felt she owed it to the girl and her parents to look after her and keep her safe. Whatever made Anita run away was none of her concern. As a parent, she knew how she would feel if Carol ran away and she did not know where she was. She assumed Anita's parents were distraught and suggested Anita call them. She refused. In addition, Dolores felt lonely. She missed Carol and enjoyed having Anita around.

She took Anita to her little fortuneteller storefront at the quiet end of the Atlantic City boardwalk. The shop was squeezed between an ice cream stand and a beach supplies store. Anita liked the subdued décor immediately. There was a worn but colorful oriental carpet, a beaded curtain, a carved wooden table topped by an intricate white doily, and a large crystal ball. Several fat candles were scattered around the small room. The only electric light came from a small lamp covered by a silken scarf.

Dolores explained what she did there. It surprised Anita that people would come to have their fortunes told. She thought it seemed a silly waste of money. Her disbelief pleased Dolores and she did not try to win Anita over. She did not want to explain how her intuitiveness and empathy were the keys to what she did. It was not a trick, nor was it 'reading the future'.

Dolores knew several boardwalk merchants and arranged a job for Anita at Carlo's Pizza. Carol had worked there during the past three summers and Carlo felt eager to give her job to one of her friends. Dolores also gave Anita Carol's bedroom. She found Carol's many childhood possessions charming. There were dolls, stuffed animals, and photos of Carol with her mother or father (but never both of them together). She liked the pink color of the walls, curtains, and bedclothes. The room gave Anita a feeling of closeness that helped soften her loneliness. She missed Carol, terribly.

Pete disliked Anita the moment she stepped into Carlo's Pizza. He assumed she was some kid sent by her parents to pick up a pizza but that was not why he disliked her. She resembled his older sister Debbie who had made his life miserable since they were little children. Debbie never got over her parents replacing her with another child. She did not blame her parents for this outrage; she blamed her little brother.

Debbie began to torment Pete as soon as he was old enough to suffer her wrath. The more she made him suffer, the happier she was. They were both adults now, yet Debbie still tormented Pete. He assumed her persecution would go on for the rest of his life.

Anita looked around the shop. She saw a gawky boy not much older than she was. He had tousled hair, a long face, serious expression, and looked as if he would have preferred being somewhere else.

"Excuse me, are you Carlo?" she asked. Pete frowned. He realized she was not a customer; she was likely another kid Carlo had hired. Most of them showed up a few times and then quit. Pete and Carol were the only employees who stayed longer than a week or two. It was going on two years since Carlo hired him and Pete was proud of his work record.

"No. He's in the back," Pete replied curtly and then looked away from Anita. "Carlo! Somebody to see you," he yelled. Anita cringed. There was no need to show her any courtesy or kindness. It was unlikely she would work there long enough for him to learn her name. Pete walked away and left Anita waiting at the counter.

Carlo appeared in the doorway, smiled at Anita, and walked around the counter. Anita felt at ease immediately. Carlo was an older man with a friendly face, round stomach, and ready

smile. He felt proud of his name on the shop and welcomed everyone who came in. "Let's sit in a booth," he said. Anita followed him and sat down.

"Dolores speaks highly of you," Carlo said in a pleasant voice. Pete overheard Carlo mention Dolores and recalled she was that witchy fortuneteller down the boardwalk. Her stuck-up daughter had worked at Carlo's a couple of summers. Pete tried to make friends with Carol. He liked that she came to work every day. She was only a waitress but eagerly helped with whatever jobs needed doing. She did everything except make the pies. That was Pete and Carlo's exclusive task.

"Pete!" Carlo's voice broke Pete's recollection. "Come over here." Pete went over to the booth. "This is Anita. She's a friend of Carol's. They went to school together in Philadelphia. I hired her to be the new waitress. Make her feel welcome."

"Sure, boss," Pete replied. Anita stood up. Pete sauntered back to the counter and Anita followed him.

"Get her an apron, too," Carlo added, "one of the new ones." Pete thought Carlo must have high expectations for this girl. He never gave new aprons to new hires. All they received were used, laundered ones.

During her first hours, Anita felt nervous but she was smart and observant. She watched what Pete and Carlo did as they took orders and imitated them. By the end of the first day, she was handling all the waitressing duties and had collected a few dollars in tips.

"They liked you," Carlo said at closing time. "That's a good sign. See you tomorrow at eleven, okay?" Anita nodded, took off her apron, folded it carefully, and put it on a shelf below the counter. Carlo and Pete looked at each other, impressed by her neatness.

Anita felt exhausted. She had never been on her feet for so long. Her legs ached and she had a mild headache. Carlo mentioned the shop had not been very busy. He added the weekends were always worse. His comment alarmed her. She did not know if she could survive a long weekend. Anita's exhaustion made the walk from the shop to Dolores' apartment seemed longer than usual.

"You're back!" Dolores greeted her. "How was your first day?"

"Okay," Anita replied, tiredly.

"What's wrong?" Dolores asked.

"Oh, nothing. I'm exhausted. I have to be back at eleven. I'm gonna take a shower and go to bed if that's okay."

"Of course." Anita started toward the bathroom, stopped, and then turned around. "Oh, here. This is for you." She handed Dolores her tip money.

"What's this?"

"Can you believe it? I made tips my first day!" Anita replied, proudly. "I can pay you some rent now. Thanks for getting me the job. Carlo's very nice." She plodded off toward the bathroom.

Dolores folded the bills and placed them in a canister on the kitchen counter. She planned to save Anita's rent money and give it back to her. Dolores hoped she would not stay in Atlantic City very long. She did not want Anita around for more than a few months. Today was just a start. Perhaps as Anita earned money and found her way into the working world she would come to value her independence and ability to survive. Dolores hoped she would think about her future, make plans, set goals, and move on.

Anita showed up at work every day, fourteen days in a row, long days. Pete felt impressed. He could tell the work wore her out. She was dragging when she left to walk home but she came back each morning cheerful and eager to work. Although she resembled Debbie, he was starting to like her.

Rainy days at the seashore were unpredictable. Most vacationers avoided the beach. Some thronged the shops. Others hunkered down in hotels, motels, or apartments. What they did all day depended on how much it rained. Today, the rain was torrential and no one walked the boardwalk. Carlo pattered around the shop. Pete sat idly behind the counter. Anita cleaned the tables a few times and then sat in a booth and read the newspaper. The lunch hour came and went. They only sold a couple of pizza slices to kids who wandered in, soaking wet.

"If one of you wants to leave, it's okay with me. How about it, Pete? Want to take the rest of the day off?" Pete shrugged, thought about it, and shook his head. "Anita?"

"I'm okay here," she replied. "Maybe the rain'll stop." Carlo knew the weather prediction was for rain through the night.

"Well, I'm going to go do some errands and then go home for a while. If, by some miracle, you get any customers, just call my house and I'll come right back," Carlo said. Pete nodded. He felt pleased he would be in charge.

Carlo left a few minutes later. Pete sat at the counter looking out at the boardwalk and the empty, rainy beach. Everything was dark, gray, and depressing.

"You don't say much," he said casually from where he sat behind the counter. She did not hear him. "Anita?"

"Um, what? Were you talking to me?"

"Yeah. You don't talk much."

"I talk to the customers. And I talk to you when I give their orders, right?"

"I don't mean that. I mean, you don't talk about yourself."

"Oh, am I supposed to? I thought... well, this is a workplace, so I thought I should just, you know, talk about work."

"Well, in case you hadn't noticed," he said sarcastically, "nobody's here right now, so we ain't working." She looked at him as if to ask, 'so?' "We could talk, if you wanted to," he added.

"Oh, sure; what about?" He had no idea what they could talk about. He had not chosen a subject. *Maybe the weather?* Pete thought. *No, that's too obvious.* The weather was ruining their business. *Maybe what she does when she's not working?* he thought. *But, she's always working, same as me. Maybe I ought to ask about her school.*

"So, you and Carol were friends at school? Where did you go?"

"Germantown High School. It's in Philadelphia. We met in elementary school but we didn't get to be friends for several years."

"So, were you close?"

"Why do you ask?"

"What I mean is, were you best friends? Do girls have best friends like guys do?"

"Yeah, we were. Don't you have best friends from high school?"

"Well, I did, but they moved away."

"That's a shame. You don't have any friends around here anymore?"

"Nope."

"Not even girlfriends?" Her question surprised Pete and he did not know how to answer. If he told Anita he did not have any girlfriends, would she think he was a loser? On the other

hand, if he told her the truth, would she perhaps feel sorry for him? Their conversation started to have possibilities. He just shrugged. She understood.

“Not right now,” Pete lied, hoping to impress Anita. She smiled, but he was not sure why. Had she seen through his lie or was she being sympathetic? He wanted to keep the conversation going but did not know what to say. He thought about asking if she had any other friends besides Carol.

“So, where’s Carol this summer?” he asked.

“Her dad paid for her to travel in Europe all summer. I don’t know what country she’s in right now. But Dolores says she’s having a great time.”

“Dolores? That’s her mom, right?” Pete asked. Anita nodded.

“Yeah, she has that little fortuneteller shop down the boardwalk.”

“Oh, right. I’ve walked by there. Always wondered what that was.” He thought Anita would explain it. She shrugged.

“She took me there, but I don’t get it.”

“What does she do?”

“That’s what I don’t get,” Anita replied. Pete wanted to ask more but felt she had said all she was going to say about Dolores and her shop. Or, about herself.

Chapter 4 - Homecoming

"I'll move out right away," Anita said. Dolores shook her head.

"Don't. Wait until Carol gets here. She won't mind you're using her room. You girls can sleep together. She's only here a few nights anyway before she goes off to Columbia." Anita did not know how she felt about sleeping with Carol. It might feel uncomfortable and embarrassing.

Dolores scarcely recognized her daughter when she stepped down from the bus. When Carol left for Europe, she was just a graceless teenage girl, a member of the Germantown High School Class of 1966. Dolores suspected Carol was no longer a girl, however. Europe had changed her. She was now a woman.

Dolores guessed why and how her daughter changed. She might never know exactly what happened. There were intimate experiences daughters might never tell their mothers. Dolores traveled all over with the carnival. She knew what it was like to feel like a stranger wherever she went. There were certain ways men noticed unattached girls and approached them. There were certain ways unattached girls responded. Dolores recalled how she responded. She kindly and firmly rejected the men without hurting their feelings. She guessed her daughter might have found the men's attentions flattering. Carol likely declined some but perhaps not all of them. Some men could have charmed her beyond her inclination to resist.

She always suspected Carol inherited her intuition and empathy but did not understand or use them yet. Whatever roles they played in her daily life were most likely in her subconscious. Carol was young; it was okay. She would grow to understand her sensitivity and inherited ability to read people. She would come to understand and appreciate how she could quickly sense things about people they did not know about themselves. It was more important that she learn about herself at her age. Dolores sensed that Carol had learned a lot during her travels in Europe and she was happy for her.

The long flight and bus trip from the airport exhausted Carol. She had expected to find her mother waiting at the bus stop. She did not expect to see her friend Anita standing there, too. Carol had no idea why they were together.

Dolores beamed at Carol as she stepped off the bus. The driver got out of his seat, kindly lifted Carol's bag, carried it down the steps, and mumbled a quick, "Welcome back." The tall, willowy girl with the big smile and long blonde hair had charmed him. She struggled to pick up the suitcase, thanked the driver, and walked awkwardly toward Dolores and Anita. Carol did not greet her mother first.

"Anita?"

"Surprised?" Dolores asked, beaming.

"Um, yeah. Hi, Mom, what's going on?" Neither of them answered. "Why are you here, Anita?"

"Aren't you glad to see me?" Anita asked, smiling.

"Oh, sure. I'm just surprised."

"Anita lives here, now," Dolores said, cheerfully. She grasped the handle on Carol's luggage and helped her carry it down the street toward their apartment.

"Oh, really? Where?"

"Well, she's been renting your room."

"You mean she's living with you?"

"Yes! We've become good friends." Carol turned toward Anita. She knew Carol wanted an explanation.

“I ran away from home. Your mom took me in. I have a job now.”

“Oh, that’s great, I guess. Um, why did you run away?”

“We can talk about it later. Let’s hurry and get out of the heat,” Dolores urged. They walked to the apartment in silence. Carol had time to calm herself. The surprise of seeing Anita had confused her. She was not upset to find Anita there, and pleased her mother had helped her, but wondered what was going on.

“Feels cool in here, like always,” Carol said.

“Yeah. Sit down. I’ll make some sandwiches.” Dolores bustled off to the kitchen. Carol picked up her bag and went to her bedroom. Anita stood by uneasily and felt she was intruding on an intimate family reunion.

Anita thought Carol should have her room while she was at home. She had packed her few possessions and removed them from Carol’s bedroom even though she was renting it from Dolores.

Dolores came back from the kitchen with a huge hoagie. She had bought the lunchmeats, huge Italian roll, and other ingredients fresh from the market a day ago. She knew it was Carol’s favorite sandwich.

“Where’s Carol?” she asked.

“She went to her room,” Anita replied.

“Carol! Come eat! I made your favorite.” Carol came in, saw the hoagie, and smiled broadly.

“Wow! Thanks, Mom,” she said, enthusiastically. Carol rarely called her mom and Dolores felt pleased. *Carol’s really glad to be back!* she thought. They sat. Dolores sliced a piece of hoagie, put it on a plate, and handed it to Carol. She passed it to Anita, who looked at her, puzzled.

“You’re the guest,” Carol said. “You get the first piece.” Anita forced a smile and took the plate. Dolores passed another plate to Carol.

“Dig in, kids,” she said. They began eating their hoagies. The room was silent a few moments as they chewed. “So, I bet you didn’t get anything like this in Europe,” Dolores bragged. Carol stopped chewing and smiled.

“Nope. They had sandwiches but nobody makes a hoagie like you do,” she replied. Dolores saw Carol’s comment as an opening.

“So, how was it?” she asked. “What did you see, what did you do?” she added and then paused. “More importantly, *who* did you do?”

“Mom!”

“You can tell us. We won’t tell anyone, will we Anita?” Anita looked at Dolores and Carol and wondered what she should say. She also wondered if she should leave. She still felt she was intruding on private mother-daughter time. Suddenly, her mother Ida came to mind. Anita frowned and wondered how her mother was doing. Carol did not notice, but Dolores felt Anita’s uneasiness. “Will we?” Dolores repeated to snap Anita out of her musing.

“No, of course not. Tell us everything,” Anita replied.

“I traveled around, just like I planned to,” Carol said. Dolores waited for more.

“And...?” Dolores asked. Carol remained silent. Anita felt sorry for her. She was not certain how she felt about Dolores grilling Carol.

“And, what?” Carol asked, coyly.

“Did you meet anyone while you were over there?”

“Well...,” Carol began. Her facial expression changed from annoyance at her mother’s probing to delight at the recollections Dolores’s question provoked. Dolores noted the change.

“I thought so!” she gloated. “What’s his name?” Carol realized her mother had skillfully caught her and she would have to say more.

“Pierre.”

“You met him in Paris?” Dolores guessed.

“No. London. And, he wasn’t French, Mom. He was English.”

“So his real name was Peter?” Dolores interrupted.

“No, it was Pierre. He told me his parents met in Paris and loved the city so much they gave him a French name.”

Dolores pressed for more details. “So what cities did you see with him?” She was relentless but also delighted that her daughter met someone who shared her European experiences. Carol looked exasperated.

“Just London and Paris,” she answered, coolly.

“Oh, that’s all?” Dolores replied, disappointed. “What happened?”

“He went north to Sweden, and I went south to Italy; that’s what happened.” Dolores did not know what to say next. She wanted juicy details but did not know how to get them. Then a question came to her.

“So, how many nights did you spend together?” she asked. Carol was ready for her. She looked at her mother and smiled.

“Two,” she replied. “Just two.”

“And what was he like?” Dolores asked.

“Sweet, kind, and sexy,” Carol answered. She hoped to shock her mother but Dolores did not feel shocked.

“How sexy?” she asked, grinning. They both knew what she meant. Carol looked at her mother and smiled coquettishly.

“Sexy enough,” she answered, evasively. “In fact, more than enough,” she added. Dolores felt delighted but was not finished.

“So, who’d you meet in Italy? I’ve heard those Italian guys are crazy about American women.”

“Oh, they are,” Carol answered, and then shut up. She hoped Dolores would drop the inquiry and then realized that was unlikely. She decided to change the subject instead.

“So, Anita, how long have you been in Atlantic City?” she asked.

“I got here two weeks after graduation.”

“That was right after I left. Why did you come here?” Anita had not thought about how to explain why she came to Atlantic City. She did not want to tell Carol the truth so Carol would not find out how stupid she was.

“She came here to find you. Imagine her surprise when I told her where you were,” Dolores said.

“Me?” Carol asked, surprised. Anita nodded, embarrassed. “Why me?” Anita did not know how to explain her actions. She could not see the truth hidden somewhere deep inside her. All she had were vague feelings. She did not understand them but felt certain they were real. Anita had needed to be with Carol. Of that, she was certain.

“I, um, missed you, and wanted to see you,” she said, trying to make her statement sound as casual as possible.

“Oh, that’s nice. Well, it’s great to see you, too.”

“Okay, let’s get back to the real subject,” Dolores interrupted. “These Italian guys, who were they?”

“There was only one. His name was Rocco. He saved me from the others. They were pushy and wouldn’t take no for an answer. He swooped in and politely told them to leave me alone. Then he started talking in his wonderful accent, and I fell. . . , oops!”

“You *fell*, did you?” Dolores asked, smiling. Carol blushed.

The moment she met Rocco Carol knew he was not like other Italian men. She did not know why she knew that but felt certain she was right. The other men just wanted to seduce an American girl. Rocco was different. He wanted to be with her, show her his town, his family, their farm, and work. He knew she was only a tourist, but he treated her as if she was the woman with whom he would marry, make babies, and grow old. Carol felt enchanted. His family welcomed and charmed her as well.

He asked Carol to stay with him only once, in the middle of the night while they were making love. She refused to tell him a flat ‘no’ and gently reminded him she had to go to college in a few weeks. He smiled, nodded, and replied in his liquid accent, “Well, then, you will come back after you are a smart lady, and you will marry me.” She immediately felt she might do exactly as he said. He never asked again, nor did she mention it.

Rocco beamed at her when she boarded the train for Rome. He was happy for her. She was happy for him. She thought about their three incredible weeks together on the long flight back and knew she would likely never see him again. He would probably forget about her in a month or two. If she returned in four years, he would probably have a wife and babies. However, what a time they had! Those had been the best three weeks of her young life. She learned what love was. It was not lifelong love. They both knew she had to leave; but it was *true* love, nevertheless. Carol went home happier than she had ever been.

Of course, she shared little of the true story with her mother or Anita. She did not have to. Dolores sensed her daughter’s deeper emotions. The joy Carol felt when she thought about Rocco delighted Dolores. Anita sensed it, too, but it did not make her happy. She felt jealous. Dolores sensed that jealousy and it troubled her.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Anita asked, fretfully.

“Yes! This bed’s plenty big enough for both of us. I don’t want you sleeping on that couch.”

“But, this is *your* room.”

“It was, but now my mom’s renting it to you. I should be the one sleeping on the couch,” Carol joked.

“You don’t mean that!”

“No, I’m kidding. But, I’m also tired. My day started thousands of miles away. Do you mind if we turn in now?”

“Sure. I’ll get the light.”

“Thanks. Good night.” Carol reclined and turned toward the window. Anita got out of bed and flipped the light switch. The room went dark. She got back into bed cautiously, as if she assumed Carol was already asleep.

Anita had slept in this bed- Carol’s bed- for only six weeks but felt it belonged to her. In a sense she was not sharing Carol’s bed, Carol was sharing hers. Anita did not feel angry, however. She ran away because she feared she would never see Carol again. Now, they were

together but Anita felt uncomfortable and confused. She had longed to see her friend but not longed to be in bed with her.

Anita never slept with anyone when she was growing up. She was always a shy, modest child, and her bedroom was her private domain. She was also uncomfortable with anyone seeing her body or sharing her privacy.

Carol saw her getting ready for bed and she saw Carol. She undressed right in front of Anita. Carol's beauty overwhelmed her. Anita wanted to stare but feared Carol would catch her and feel embarrassed or alarmed. She had seen sculptures and paintings of nudes at the Art Museum. Unlike the art, however, Carol was real. Anita wanted to touch Carol. She had never thought of touching the sculptures. They were cold marble. Carol was warm, living flesh. Sculptures were stone. Carol was a real girl.

Anita experienced feelings she could not identify as she rested in bed next to her beautiful friend. She felt drawn to Carol's sleeping body but repelled by her own need to touch Carol. As she often did, she obsessively over-thought her feelings. Why did she want to touch Carol? What would Carol do if she did? Would Carol hate her? Would Carol tell Dolores? Would Dolores throw her out? Anita repressed her wild speculations and calmed her thoughts. Then a new thought struck her. It was not just that she wanted to touch Carol; she also wanted Carol to touch her. Not merely touch her, but... *more*. Anita's desire shocked her. *What the hell is wrong with me?* she thought.

She got out of bed, left the room, and went to lay on the sofa. However, she was too agitated to fall asleep and started to cry instead. Dolores sensed her sadness from her bedroom and wondered what was wrong. She thought the girls would feel delighted to sleep together. She assumed they would catch up on what happened in their lives since they left school. Perhaps they would also discuss their futures.

Carol was leaving for Columbia in a few days. Her new independent life as a college freshman in New York City was about to begin. Anita had already begun her new independent life away from her parents and it appeared she was doing okay.

Dolores' life would not change much. She had lived without her daughter during the school year when Carol lived in Philadelphia with her father Charlie. Dolores felt sorry for him. He would no longer have his daughter in his daily life. Carol might visit him on holidays but that was all. Perhaps Dolores and Charlie would need to work out an arrangement for the summers. However, Carol was old enough to make her own choices about which parent she would spend her time with. She might not want to see them as often.

Kids grow up so fast, Dolores reminded herself. *Thank God, Carol grew up safe and loved and turned out all right*. Dolores felt she ought not to worry; everything would work out for the best.

Anita did not want to wake up. She wanted to keep her eyes closed, hide beneath the sheet on the old couch, and pretend she was sleeping. She wanted to avoid Dolores, who was bustling in the kitchen, making a big breakfast for the girls. Most of all, she did not want to see Carol.

However, she was due early at work. Anita waited and hoped Carol would come to the kitchen for breakfast, but she did not arrive. Suddenly, Anita needed to pee. She heard the bathroom door close and realized Carol had just gone in. She got up sleepily, greeted Dolores, and casually asked if Carol was up yet

“She’s just gone into the shower,” Dolores said. “You can go in if you want to. I’m sure she won’t mind.” Anita shrugged and walked toward the bathroom. She knocked but Carol did not answer. “Go on in,” Dolores urged.

Anita opened the door and called out, “Carol? Can I come in?”

“Sure, just not in the shower, okay. It’s kind of small, but you already know that.” Anita went to the toilet and sat down. She listened to the splashing water and tried to hurry her pee. The water suddenly stopped.

“Shit!” Carol said. “I forgot a towel. Could you get me one?” Anita finished and stood up. She reached for the towels on a shelf next to the door. Just as she grabbed one, Carol opened the shower curtain and reached, eyes closed, for the towel. “Where is it?” she asked.

“Um, right here,” Anita said. She offered the towel and glanced at Carol. Her naked, glistening body dazzled Anita. She felt something happening inside her and tried to look away, but could not. She watched Carol towel off and wanted to caress Carol with the towel but did not know it.

Anita hurried out of the bathroom and went into the bedroom to dress quickly for work. She needed to leave right away. *What the hell is wrong with me?* she thought. She remembered having the same thought last night when she lay next to Carol in bed and the recollection disturbed her even more than the feelings she could not explain.

“You ran out fast this morning,” Dolores said.

“I’m sorry. I forgot I was supposed to be at work early and I overslept.” Anita had rehearsed her apology all day. She hoped they bought it.

“Were you busy at the pizza shop?” Carol asked. Anita nodded and then frowned. She hoped Carol noticed that she seemed worn out from her day’s work. “That place was always short-handed. Carlo never hired enough people,” Carol said, sympathetically.

“Oh, he hires them,” Dolores interjected, “but they don’t show up. Not everyone’s like you two.” Carol smiled at her mother’s compliment. She had worked hard at the pizza shop. Carlo liked her and gave her different jobs so he could train her and she did every job well. He gave her a raise halfway through her first summer and upped her pay each year. She was one of his most reliable workers. He assumed it was because her mother was so conscientious. Anita worked as hard as Carol had and Carlo had come to rely on her as well.

Anita hoped to go to bed early and avoid Carol. Carol invited her to look at photos of her trip. She had them developed at the camera shop in town. Anita did not think she could refuse and she was curious about the places Carol had seen. They were places she felt certain she would never go.

Her best friend traveled in Europe, was going to college in New York, and then what? For Carol the sky was the limit, but not for Anita. She felt stuck in her job at the pizza shop, living with her friend’s mother, who could (if she wanted to) turn her out anytime. She gave up her independence when she ran away. She rapidly went from a high school graduate’s boundless life choices to no alternatives at all. Or, so it seemed.

Anita had not considered what she would do, or how she would live after she left home impulsively. She would not have survived, even for a few days, without Dolores’ generosity. She felt grateful but apprehensive. Anita feared grim adult reality was closing in on her.

They looked at Carol’s photos. Many showed the buildings, streets, and landmarks in the cities she visited. Other photos featured people she met at the hostels she stayed at. There were several photos of Pierre, who did not look like Anita imagined him. He was not tall, muscular,

and intense. He was short, chubby, and wore black-rimmed glasses. He looked like someone who could have worked in a pizza shop. Anita liked him immediately.

Rocco, however, did look like she imagined him. He had chiseled Italian patrician facial features, a warm beguiling smile, and eyes that any teenage girl could fall into and never want to come out of. She could see why Carol fell for him. Anita might have fallen for him, too, if she was a normal teenage girl. She realized she was not normal when she saw a photo of Carol and Rocco together on the beach at a lake near his home. Rocco's body looked like Michelangelo had sculpted it. Carol's body looked like God had sculpted hers. Anita felt drawn to Carol's body but not Rocco's.

"God, he's gorgeous!" Dolores said when Carol passed her Rocco's photo. "I can see why you fell for him."

"Mom!" Carol protested. She became quiet as she remembered her sweet Italian lover. Anita watched Carol, suspected what she was thinking, and felt a wave of jealousy.

"He's just a boy!" Anita said, irately. "I don't see what all the excitement is about."

"He's more than just a boy," Carol replied. "He was *my* boy." Anita stood up abruptly, scattering the photos Carol had piled on the coffee table.

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed. Gotta work early again, tomorrow. Good night!" She rushed toward the bedroom. Anita's distress concerned Carol and she sympathized. She knew how demanding days at the pizza shop could wear a person out.

Dolores did not think the pizza shop was Anita's problem. She had begun to suspect what her problem was and felt sorry for the girl. If she was right, Anita was in for a lifetime of heartbreak. Starting, possibly, right now.

"It's a shame you two didn't get to spend more time together," Dolores said after they saw Carol off at the Greyhound Bus Terminal. She was on her way to New York to start her new life as a freshman at Columbia University. Dolores felt proud of and happy for her daughter. She had barely finished high school. Dolores had no doubt Carol would finish college and maybe go beyond a Bachelor's Degree to something more. She was also happy Carol had not noticed Anita's emotional difficulty. Perhaps that was because they spent so little time together.

Anita's emotional struggle did not end or even decrease with Carol's departure. She still burned with a powerful attraction to Carol. She could not forget the feel of Carol's body beside her in bed or get the sight of Carol's naked glistening flesh out of her mind. Her feelings confused her until she thought about how she reacted to the photo of Carol and Rocco together. At first, Anita thought she was jealous that Carol went to Europe, had adventures, met guys, had sex with them, and fell in love. Then she realized she was jealous of Rocco. He got to do what she wanted to do, love Carol. Anita did not understand why she felt that way but she knew it was true. She did not know what she ought to do about it.

Anita felt grateful Carol left and they would be apart. It would be difficult, but it might be better for now. Perhaps Anita could deal with what she had discovered about herself and then decide what to do. She did not think she could talk to Dolores. She assumed confessing she was in love with Carol would horrify Dolores. Anita had felt appalled before she understood how she felt. Then she accepted her feelings and struggled to understand them.

Dolores felt sympathetic toward Anita's emotional turmoil. She understood and wanted to help in any way she could. She did not think Carol was a lesbian, and that would likely hurt Anita worse than her discovery that she was a lesbian. However, Dolores did not want to initiate

a casual conversation about lesbianism hoping Anita might talk about her feelings. She decided to watch Anita and wait for an opening.

Chapter 5 - Workday

Pete thought about his first rainy day conversation with Anita. He wondered if there was a reason Anita asked about his girlfriends and inferred she might be interested in him. *Naw. That's absurd!* he told himself. Anita was at least four years younger than he was. She resembled his aggravating older sister Debbie. Nevertheless, he began to watch her as she did her job. He listened as she conversed with customers and admired her small movements and gestures.

Despite his reservations, Pete started to like Anita. He began thinking of ways he could get her to like him. He invited her to try slices of specialty pizzas. She said she was not hungry or too busy. He suggested she take pies home for Dolores; she told him Dolores was not a big fan of pizzas and she did not want any food to go to waste. He suggested he make her a special sandwich or hoagie. She refused because she did not want to get in trouble with Carlo. Pete kept striking out but he did not give up.

He offered to walk her home one night. She laughed at his offer.

"Are you worried about me?" she asked.

"Well, no, I just thought you might like someone to walk with," he answered boldly.

"Don't you walk in the opposite direction from me?"

"Well, yeah."

"Aren't you too tired to do much walking? I know I am. You don't want to wear yourself out," she teased. "You might be too tired to come in tomorrow." Her joshing annoyed Pete and he dropped the suggestion. She left the pizza shop and walked home alone.

Pete thought he might try meeting her casually somewhere away from work. He could not think of any place they both went. As far as he knew, she did not go anywhere but the shop and her apartment and he did not know where she lived. He decided to find out.

The next night he let her leave first, waited a few moments, and followed her home. She did not notice him. He went home happy he learned something about her and tried to think of a way he could use the information he gained.

The summer resort season wound down. Dolores's business normally declined in the off-season but she remained open because she suspected people might need her services. Even though she did not know who they were or when they might arrive, she opened the shop on time and stayed all day, just in case someone came in.

Carlo's pizza business also declined, although he never closed the shop. Pizza was always in demand. He just cut back his hours. Carlo sometimes vacationed when the weather got cold but he went away only when he could leave a trusted employee in charge. Some years he had no such employee and sacrificed his vacation. This year, he felt certain he could trust Anita so he planned a trip out West to see his grandchildren. Carlo told her what he had in mind and she felt flattered. He asked her not to tell Pete. Carlo worried about how Pete would feel about having Anita in charge of the shop.

The extra responsibility and training occupied Anita. There were fewer customers and the workdays no longer wore her out. Most of her work was mental as she learned the basics of Carlo's business. He wanted her to be fully competent in handling finances, ordering supplies, opening, closing, and maintaining the health regulations that governed food shops in Atlantic City. Anita was so busy she did not have time to think about Carol.

Dolores arranged for Carol to call only when Anita was at work. She did not want Anita's emotions agitated if she and Carol spoke accidentally on the telephone. She also kept their conversations private and did not share news about Carol with Anita.

Dolores had not yet figured out how to help Anita understand her feelings. She had known several lesbians and thought she understood them. She admired them because they were true to what they were. Dolores also felt sorry for them because they had to hide their real identity. She assumed society would accept them someday but not until far in the future. Meanwhile, she remained sympathetic. She had never known a lesbian as young as Anita and assumed Anita did not know the truth about herself. Her greatest concern was how to help Anita deal with what she was. She wanted her to feel proud, unafraid, realistic, and cautious. There was no way for her to avoid the hurt. *Love hurts*, Dolores thought. *Forbidden love hurts even more.*

Pete felt happy when Carlo announced he was taking a vacation. His elation flattened when he found out Carlo was leaving Anita in charge. Pete had never run the shop but wanted to. Carlo had not gone away during the two years Pete worked for him. He assumed Carlo did not have the time or money. Now he suspected it was because Carlo had not trusted Pete to take care of things.

Pete thought his opportunity to get closer to Anita might have finally come. They would be alone in the shop for several weeks. He showed up early the first day after Carlo left just to make sure she opened on time. Anita did not say much but was not intentionally rude. She did not want to seem bossy. Pete knew his job and she did not feel she ought to order him around. He had expected her to share responsibilities and let him co-manage the shop but he sensed she was not going to do that. Pete did not know she was following Carlo's orders. Her job was on the line, not his. She wanted to be painstakingly careful every minute of every day Carlo was gone. Nevertheless, Pete felt hurt.

It was an unusually warm early November day. A few people sunned themselves on the beach. A couple of brave souls were in the waves. Most people were roaming the boardwalk. A small crowd came in around lunchtime but the afternoon was dead. Anita sat in a booth reading the newspaper. Pete stayed behind the counter near the ovens.

"So, you went to school with Carol in Philadelphia?" he asked, breaking the long silence that began after the last customer left. Anita did not hear him. "Anita? I was asking you a question." She heard him and looked up.

"Oh, what?"

"You went to school in Philly with Carol, right?" Pete asked again. Anita nodded and then turned back to her reading. "So how did you end up here?" Anita put down the newspaper and looked at Pete. She wondered what she should tell him and quickly invented a story.

"I came down here for the summer, and liked it, so I stayed," she answered.

"What about your family?" he asked, bluntly.

"What about them?"

"Are they here, too?"

"No. They're in Philly. I'm by myself."

"But, you live with Carol's mom."

"Yeah, she rents me a room. What about it?" she replied, curtly. She did not mind Pete talking to her but did not want to answer personal questions. Her life was none of his business.

"I was just wondering," he said. "Just making conversation." She did not want to tell him not to make conversation and lifted her paper to continue reading. He ignored her gesture and thought about something else that he could ask her.

"So what was your high school like?" he asked.

"Probably a lot like yours. Aren't they all the same?" she replied. He guessed they were and said nothing. They were quiet for the rest of the afternoon and only started speaking when

dinner customers came in. She began to clean up after dinner. Pete watched her. Then she prepared for the next day. Just before closing time, she reminded him to shut off the ovens and straighten up behind the counter.

“I’ve done this before,” he protested, weakly.

“I know, Pete. I’ve watched you. You do a great job. Carlo told me how much he values your work,” she lied. Pete did not detect the lie.

“He did?” he asked, flattered. Anita did not answer. She moved the money from the cash register to the safe in the backroom. Pete had not realized Carlo gave her the combination and felt hurt yet again. She grabbed the keys and her bag and then went to the door. Pete stood behind the counter looking as if he did not know what to do. She waited with her hand poised at the light switches.

“Pete? We’re done. Let’s go home,” she said smiling at him for the first time all day. He hurried out; she shut the lights, went outside, and locked the door. “See you tomorrow,” she said cheerfully and then turned and walked down the boardwalk. Pete had spent much of their day together assuming she did not like him but now wondered whether her smile and cheerful goodbye meant she somehow did. He felt encouraged to talk to her more when they came back tomorrow.

The next day was bright, sunny, and again unseasonably warm. Anita sat in a booth after lunch reading the daily newspaper. Pete walked out from behind the counter and approached her.

“Um, do you mind if I have the sports section?” he asked.

“Sure.” Anita handed it to him without looking. She was hoping he was not going to sit in her booth. He went to the booth closest to the door. They sat and read. Pete tried to think of something he could ask her or talk about. He got an idea, stood up, went to her booth, and handed her the sports pages.

“Thanks.”

“Sure.”

“Um, can I look at the movie page?” She looked through the newspaper.

“Yeah. I think it’s right... here.”

“Thanks.” He went back to his booth and hoped she would ask him if he was planning to see a movie. He would need to mention it if she did not. He looked at the list of local theaters and saw several movies he recognized. He wondered which ones she might find interesting. Pete had no idea about Anita’s tastes in anything, not even food, although they worked in a restaurant and sometimes ate the food Carlo sold. He did not know if she liked it or just ate it because she was hungry and it was free.

“So, what movie did you see?” Anita asked him when it was quiet the next afternoon.

“What do you mean?”

“Yesterday, when you looked at the movie listings, what movie did you pick?”

“Oh, I didn’t go.”

“Did you find any you might like?”

“Yeah, a couple. There’s this new one called *Fantastic Voyage*, and another one with Batman in it.”

“Oh, they sound like fun.”

“You want to go with me?” His boldness surprised her.

“Well, no. I don’t like movies much.”

“So, what do you like?”

“I watch TV sometimes, but not often. I’m here when all the good shows are on.”

“Yeah, I hate missing stuff. That’s what happens when you work all the time.”

“Well, I really like this job, and I need the money, and TV is just, well, TV, you know? I can do without it.”

“I guess.” Pete thought he had found an opening to get closer to her but it was gone just as quickly as it appeared. He was still hoping to find a way to connect with Anita but was running out of ideas. The indirect route was not working. Perhaps a more direct approach would be best.

Pete’s attention affected Anita. She began to understand what normal boys and girls ought to do. Teenagers like her should go out, have fun, meet people, and maybe date. She realized she wanted to do all these things. But, not with Pete; she wanted to do them with Carol.

Dolores told her Carol was coming home for Thanksgiving. Anita felt overjoyed but Dolores felt apprehensive. She sensed a change in Anita’s manner. The girl seemed more confident, self-assured, and pleasant. Dolores assumed the change was due to Anita’s successfully handling the business while Carlo was away. When he returned he found Anita and Pete running the shop well. Carlo praised them both and gave them raises. He told Dolores Anita had management potential and should think about going to business school. Dolores told Anita but Carlo’s advice did not impress her. Anita had a job and did not want a career. There was something more important she needed to figure out.

Anita greeted Carol jubilantly when she arrived. The pizza shop closed for Thanksgiving and Anita did not have to work. The girls spent all their time together. They felt like they were back in high school. Carol felt pleased Anita seemed happy. She assumed Anita’s new life made her happy. However, she was wrong. Anita finally realized she was in love with Carol and she was happier than she had ever been.

Carol left to go back to school. Anita felt sad not heartbroken. It was clear she could not live without Carol, although she did not understand what that implied. She still had no idea of what lesbianism was. Anita decided to follow Carol to Columbia and finally tell her how she felt. Afraid Dolores might try to talk her out of going, she did not tell her. One day, she boarded the New York City bus. She planned to find Carol, confess how she felt, and then return.

However, Anita never saw Atlantic City again.

Chapter 6 - The Truth Comes Out

What Anita confessed was more than shocking and Carol felt too embarrassed to look at her friend. "Anita, I'm so sorry. I don't know what else to say." She immediately worried what impact her rejection would have on Anita.

"I thought you loved me!" Anita cried.

"I do, but as your best *friend*. That's all."

"You're sure?" Anita pleaded. Carol nodded. "What am I going to do, now? I feel like an idiot."

"Don't say that," Carol insisted. "You're not an idiot. You're a wonderful person. But I'm not like you."

"Like me? What do you mean?"

"Well, I like guys. And, it seems, you... don't." Carol replied. Anita nodded, reluctantly. "You like girls."

"Not *girls*, Carol. You."

"No, Anita. Not me. I don't want you to like me that way. But, there are other girls like you, and you might like them."

"I don't understand what's happened. Everything seemed simple, before. It's complicated now."

"Look, we're still best friends, right? I'll help you figure everything out if you want me to."

"Okay, I guess. But... you're really, really sure you don't... you know...?" Anita appealed for the final time. Carol nodded. She wanted to hug Anita but did not want her to get the wrong idea. She was afraid of what would happen if they touched each other. Maybe Anita would try to...? Carol did not want to think about it.

She could not imagine how two women could be intimate. Being naked in the gym showers was one thing, but touching seemed unnatural. It *was* unnatural, and Carol wanted no part of it. Nevertheless, she cared about Anita and wanted to help her figure everything out. Their friendship did not change despite Anita's feelings for her.

Carol overheard some girls in the dorm talking about lesbianism. They did not joke about it or make snide remarks. They took it seriously. She was not certain how much they knew but thought she could ask, 'for a friend.' Perhaps someone would be willing to talk to Anita and help her out.

She asked her roommate Leslie if Anita could sleep on the floor and Leslie agreed. However, she did not know Leslie well enough to tell her about Anita. Leslie was not there much. She had friends who lived off-campus and stayed with them often. Carol did not know how Leslie had found friends so quickly. She was only a freshman like Carol. She assumed the other girls were Leslie's friends from high school.

Carol insisted Anita call Dolores to tell her where she was. Dolores admitted she almost panicked; then Carol got on the phone and assured her mother Anita was okay. Dolores apologized for not warning Carol.

"It's okay, Mom. We talked about everything. She's safe here with me."

"And?" Dolores interrupted.

"I told her I'm not interested, but I might know other girls like her and maybe she could talk to them."

"I've known lesbians. I wanted to talk to her but I didn't. Tell her I'm sorry."

“Mom, she’s grateful to you. She’ll be back soon, anyway. Maybe you can talk then.”
“Tell her I’m here for her. Maybe she’ll leave you alone. You got schoolwork to think of.”

“She’s my best friend. She needs me. There won’t be any problem with my schoolwork,”
Carol reassured her mother.

“Okay. I love you.”

“Bye, Mom. I love you, too.”

It was a small dorm room. Anita slept on the floor under the window. She did not want to block the space between beds. Carol was grateful for Anita’s consideration. She did not want Leslie to feel put out by Anita’s presence and did not know how long Anita was going to stay. Leslie tried to talk to Carol while Anita was in the shower.

“Carol, can I talk to you? It’s about your friend, Anita.”

“Oh, sure. Look, I’m sorry. You’ve been very nice. I’ll tell her she has to go.”

“No, no. It’s not like that. I’m okay with her being here. But I’ve noticed... things.”

“What things?”

“Well, the way she looks at you. It’s as if she can’t take her eyes off you. Are you aware of that?” Carol nodded. “Are you *okay* with it?”

“Well, yeah. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Well, I think it does. Is she a lesbian?”

“Yes. I’m pretty sure she is. But, she’s also very confused. Look, we were best friends in high school. I’m trying to help her out.”

“That’s great. I think I might be able to help, too.”

“You? You’re not...?”

“Oh, God, no!” Leslie replied, smiling. Carol had grown to like her roommate’s broad smile and easy-going nature. She didn’t know what attracted women to each other, but Leslie had a gorgeous figure that attracted men’s attention wherever she went. She tried to dress unattractively but the frumpy clothing failed to conceal her body. “I like *guys*. Believe me. You know how I told you I stay with a bunch of other girls off-campus?” Leslie asked. Carol nodded. “Well, that’s not exactly true. I know a bunch of women who live off-campus. But, I stay with my boyfriend at his place whenever I can. He works funny hours, so it’s weird.”

“Leslie, that’s great. I’m happy for you. What about that help you mentioned?”

“Well, my friend Grace is a lesbian. I’ve met a couple of her friends. They’re nice. They might be willing to talk to Anita and help her figure things out. They know it’s not easy.”

“No, it’s not. I have no idea what she’s going through.” Carol knew she could not help Anita as much as she might want to. She did not understand why Anita had feelings for her but that was not important. Anita needed to think about herself now. She needed to work out her deepest feelings, figure out what she was, and perhaps discover why she was a lesbian. “I want to help her, but I don’t know how.”

“You don’t have to. Let me talk to Grace.”

“Thanks, Leslie. I appreciate this. By the way, am I gonna meet this secret boyfriend of yours?”

“Maybe,” Leslie replied, smiling. “I’ll let you know. Okay?”

Leslie introduced Anita to Grace. She, in turn, introduced Anita to her lesbian friends. They helped Anita find a job. Her meager income enabled her to rent a room in the sprawling house where they all lived. Anita settled into living in New York. She did a couple of temporary

jobs and then found work in a pizzeria near where she lived. She quickly impressed the owner who appreciated her maturity and business shrewdness. Her life became stable. She saw Carol occasionally and hung out with the women in her house.

Anita was the youngest lesbian Grace had ever met. She thought of her as a little sister and kept an eye on her. She taught Anita how to move around the city, the safe places to go, and the ones to avoid. Grace also warned her about other lesbians she ought to watch out for. One was Denise, who lived with them. She was a hard-edged hunter who preyed on virgins. Denise sought out young, innocent lesbians like Anita, who had not yet experienced their sexuality and were dealing with the shock of discovering their true nature. She pretended to help them deal with their emotions, but what she wanted was their bodies. She conquered her lovers and used sex to manipulate them. There was no love involved, not on Denise's part, anyway.

She was not sadistic, however, only possessive. Denise wanted her prey fixated on and subservient to her, unable and unwilling to resist or challenge her. The more they needed her, the more powerful she felt. The ability to make meek women do whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted it gratified her perverse ego.

Anita wondered why the women allowed Denise to live with them if she behaved so dreadfully. They felt sorry for her and hoped one day she would change. No one would admit to firsthand knowledge about Denise but Anita suspected a couple of women had been Denise's conquests. Maybe they still had feeling for Denise, even if it was only pity.

Anita was cautious at first and avoided Denise. Then Denise started flattering her. She seemed charming and nice and was hard to resist. Denise had a movie-star face and a slender, sensual figure. Her voice was soft and sweet when she wanted it to be and she exuded sympathy and concern. The other women warned Anita that Denise's concern was false, but she wondered if they exaggerated her flaws. Denise knew Anita had no sexual experience and slyly offered to initiate her. Anita almost accepted. The others knew Anita was close to falling under Denise's spell. They made an effort to distract her.

One night everyone except Denise took the subway to Tomkins Square Park. A group called The Fugs was giving a concert. They performed their original songs but also many poems set to music. A couple housemates were English Literature majors and were curious about what The Fugs did with poetry. They worried the band might butcher the poems or flagrantly disrespect them. However, band members were themselves poets. Anita did not know much about music or poetry but the invitation flattered her. The others wanted to get her away from Denise but she did not know it.

They arrived just after the concert started. The Fugs were singing "Ah, Sunflower." Two of the women, Natalie and Sarah, recognized the William Blake poem and found the singing jarring but interesting. The song drew in Anita and she found the sunflower captivating. She had seen sunflower paintings but never heard songs or poems about sunflowers. Paintings merely showed the flowers as objects in space. Poems and songs brought them to life as objects in time. She was too young and inexperienced to understand the sunflower symbolized human ambitions that must (no matter how fervent and pure) end in death. Anita never thought about death. Indeed, she felt her life had not yet begun but suspected that beginning was coming closer every day.

An older, stocky confident-looking woman with short dark hair walked past their group. Marsha recognized her and called out, "Sophia!" in a loud whisper. Sophia turned and smiled as she recognized Marsha. She came over and they hugged. Marsha invited her to sit with them.

They listened quietly to a few more songs but became boisterous when the Fugs sang “Boobs A Lot.” Anita felt mortified but no one in the crowd seemed to notice their rowdiness.

Sophia had some marijuana with her. She took out a joint, lit it, and slyly passed it around. Anita balked when it reached her. She did not know what to do. Sophia noticed her awkwardness and moved next to her. She gestured for Anita to pass her the joint and then took a deep drag. Anita noticed Sophia’s lips as they caressed the joint. Sophia made marijuana smoking look sensual. Maybe the music or poetry had suddenly made Anita aware of sensuality. (On the other hand, maybe it was Denise’s attentions.) Sophia handed Anita the joint. She carefully inserted it into her mouth, took a feeble puff, and started to cough. Sophia smiled patiently. Anita breathed out, caught her breath, and then tried again.

“Good. Now hold it,” Sophia whispered into Anita’s ear after she inhaled again. She held the smoke for a few seconds and then let it out. “Now pass it on,” Sophia said. Anita handed the joint to another woman.

Sophia noticed that Anita seemed much younger than the other lesbians were and felt curious. She studied Anita while the Fugs sang “Nothing.” Anita closed her eyes as she listened to the song. She understood, somehow, they were not singing about *nothingness*. The song was about emptiness, clarity, and detachment. However, none of those ideas percolated into her consciousness. The marijuana was working.

The women went to see *La Dolce Vita* at the Thalia a week later. They heard of the film’s director, Federico Fellini, and were curious about his work. Sophia appeared again and felt delighted to see them, especially Anita. She jokingly apologized for not having any grass and invited them to sit with her anyway. The group settled in the back row of the theater.

La Dolce Vita played often and always drew a crowd. It depicted the *sweet life* as frenetic and empty. People chased endless stimulations but found only disappointments. Audiences found it compelling.

The subtitles annoyed Anita. She had trouble keeping up. Nevertheless, she found the film mesmerizing. Anita did not know why she almost cried when Steiner killed his children and then himself. The children’s miracle scene mystified her but she found it spellbinding. There was no marijuana to manipulate her emotions this time. *Is this how adults actually live their lives?* she wondered.

Anita and Sophia sat next to each other. Sophia sensed Anita’s discomfort with the movie and eased her arm around the girl. Anita felt calmer. Sophia started to fondle her. No one had ever touched her that way before. She had never even touched herself as Sophia was touching her.

As the vivid and compelling movie played on the screen, Anita’s response to Sophia’s gentle caresses overcame her. She stopped watching the screen and withdrew her attention into her own body. It was almost on fire. Sophia was skillful, and Anita wondered if Sophia preyed on innocent lesbian virgins the way Denise did. However, because of the way Sophia was making her feel, she did not care. Anita did not have to let Sophia pull her in and manipulate her as the others warned Denise could do. She could just let Sophia fondle and arouse her and then see what happened next

Sophia was not like Denise. She liked Anita and found her attractive. She saw Anita’s innocence as sweet, charming, and fresh. She did not want to take advantage of her; she wanted to share Anita’s innocence. After the movie ended, she invited the women back to her apartment and offered them grass and booze. They diverted themselves by smoking, drinking, listening to music, and talking about the movie.

Sophia sat next to Anita and fondled her furtively. This time she took Anita a little higher than she had before. When she thought Anita was ready, she whispered, “Come with me,” and stood up. Sophia’s words startled Anita and almost took her over an edge she had never known was there. She went with Sophia to her bedroom.

Sophia knew all the erotic regions of women’s bodies. She wanted Anita to become used to being touched in places where no one ever touched her before. She went slowly and gently. Sophia also knew women liked being sweet-talked. Sophia’s loving whispers opened up Anita even more than Sophia’s touching. She surrendered herself as soon as they were alone in Sophia’s bed.

Anita’s time had come. She was eager to give herself up. As her body responded to Sophia’s attentions, so did her soul. She looked deep into Sophia’s eyes as Sophia made love to her. Sophia sensed Anita wanted more than fondling, stroking, penetration, and orgasm. Anita wanted to connect. Not just with her fingers, lips, breasts, thighs, ass, or vagina, but with Sophia the woman, the person inside the body. Sophia felt enchanted. As she delved into Anita, their lovemaking took her deep into herself. After they finished, both felt thoroughly satisfied.

The other women were outside in the living room listening to music, laughing, drinking, and smoking grass. They were having a good time and forgot about Sophia and Anita. Alone in Sophia’s bedroom, the pair had formed a cherished bond that would take them down a new path in their lives. They had already fallen in love.

“I’ve never fallen for anyone so hard, so fast,” Sophia said just after they awoke late the next morning.

“Fallen?” Anita asked, surprised.

“Anita, I’m in love with you.”

“You can’t be!”

“I am. You don’t have to be. It’s okay.”

“Sophia, I don’t know what I feel. I’m too overwhelmed by what we did last night.”

“So am I. Um, there’s more where that came from.”

“I hope so,” Anita said. Sophia smiled, nodded, and kissed her. “A lot more?” Anita asked, expectantly.

“As much as you want. But, right now, I’m hungry... for food. Are you?”

The living room was empty. The other women figured out Sophia and Anita wanted to be alone and left hours ago. Sophia found eggs, bacon, bread, and coffee. She made a simple breakfast. Sophia wore a silk robe that came down to her thighs. Anita watched her move and recalled the body underneath the robe. Sophia was a stocky woman but she was not short. Her breasts, belly, ass, and thighs were ample and shapely.

Anita gazed at her and recalled Carol’s nakedness. She was tall and slender, with gentle and subtle curves. Anita had thought Carol was the most beautiful creature she would ever see. Now she knew she had been wrong. As she gazed at Sophia, Anita saw Sophia had what Carol lacked. Carol was a fragile, heavenly eighteen-year-old girl. She resembled a statue. Sophia was a solid, mature woman. She was real flesh.

Anita guessed Sophia was at least ten years older than she was, maybe more. To Anita, Sophia’s beauty surpassed Carol’s. That was because Anita knew Sophia differently than she knew Carol. She only ever *looked* at Carol. Her beauty was visual but distant. Anita had *felt* Sophia. Her beauty was tactile and immediate. She knew she could never touch Carol in the way she had touched Sophia. She also knew she could touch her again and again, as much as she

wanted, whenever she wanted. Sophia was hers in a way Carol would never be. Carol was just her friend. Sophia was her lover. Anita felt whole.

Their first month together was an eclectic cornucopia of music, film, and lovemaking. Sophia had unusual tastes. They heard The Mothers of Invention at the Garrick Theater, listened to Sun Ra at Slug's on Monday night, and danced to the Grateful Dead in Tompkins Square Park. They saw *Rashomon* at the Thalia, *The Seventh Seal* at the New Yorker, and *The Great Dictator* at the Bleecker Street Cinema. They never felt awkward together, despite the difference in their ages. Anita was eighteen but looked younger. Sophia was thirty-two but looked older. If anyone noticed them at all, most people thought they were mother and daughter. What they probably did not notice was the way they secretly held hands and stole kisses from time to time.

They never got together just to make love. They went out to have fun and came back to Sophia's apartment afterward. The music and film fired Sophia's passion. She loved Anita and loved art. Anita had little prior exposure to film and music. She liked the films but did not understand them. She was not certain she liked the music but was happy Sophia did. Anita liked the way the fervor of the bands inspired Sophia.

They were lounging in bed early one morning. Sophia told Anita something she had dreamed about. She thought it might soon become reality and she was eager to share it.

"My husband owns a lot of real estate," she began. Anita sat up and glared at Sophia.

"Wait! Your *what?* You're married?" Sophia nodded. "To a man?" she asked, aghast.

"Well, yes, of course, to a man. Women can't marry each other," Sophia replied, coolly.

"Well, who is he, where is he? When's he coming back?"

"Oh, he doesn't live here. I still live with him, but we're separating. This place belongs to my brother. I just stay here once in a while," Sophia explained.

Anita suddenly felt vulnerable. "Oh. This is confusing." She feared their whirlwind romance was about to get serious. She was not ready for seriousness. She liked the unbridled passion of quirky films, raucous music, and intense sex. She wanted those obsessions to be their entire world. It had never occurred to her there might be more to Sophia's life.

"It doesn't have to be. Don't think about anything but us."

"That's all I *can* think about, Sophia. Everything is beautiful. You're beautiful. Thank you."

"No, thank you. I do love you, and I want you to be part of my dream."

"Okay, so tell me what it is."

"One of my husband's properties is an old theater. I've been trying to get him to give it to me so I can start my own repertory cinema, like the Thalia or New Yorker. I think we could make work." Anita listened carefully and wondered what role she could have in Sophia's plan. "But there's one problem."

"He won't let you have it?"

"No. It's not in New York."

"Oh, where is it?"

"It's in Philadelphia, in a neighborhood called Germantown."

"What's it called?" Anita asked, stunned.

"I think it's the Rialto, but I might change it."

"My God, I know that theater!"

"You're from Germantown?" Sophia asked, astonished. Anita nodded.

"It's where I grew up!"

“This is a sign! He *has* to give it to me, now. Then you and I can run it. What do you say? Will you move there with me?”

“Sophia, I would move anywhere with you. But, I don’t know anything about running a theater.”

“Well, Neither do I, but I haven’t just been watching movies, I’ve been talking to the theater owners and I’ve learned a lot. I think I can do it... I *know* I can do it.”

“I do, too,” Anita agreed. “My parents still live there.”

“Oh, great. Then you could go back and see them.”

“I don’t know if I want to. I ran away. I haven’t contacted them since I left. They don’t know whether I’m alive or dead.”

“Well, I know you’re alive,” Sophia said, hugging Anita. “I’m glad I found you and I want you to do this with me. Will you do it?”

“That depends. Would you still do it without me?” Anita asked. Her anxiety made her voice warble weakly. *What if Sophia says yes?* she thought. Her question surprised Sophia. She became quiet and thoughtful. Sophia wanted to give the right answer and an honest one. She knew what it was.

“It’s my dream,” Sophia replied, in a quiet voice. It was the same tone of voice she used to express her love for Anita. “I hope you understand.” Anita felt a surge of jealousy. It occurred to her she might no longer be Sophia’s only love. Maybe she would go on being Sophia’s lover, but Sophia’s heart might soon belong to that theater. She did not want to lose Sophia, however, and was willing to follow her back to Philadelphia and start a bizarre project with her just to make her happy.

Anita was in love. “Yes,” she answered, meekly. What *else* could she say?

Chapter 7 - The Rialto

The Rialto was a small, plain neighborhood movie house on Armat Street, just off Germantown Ave, the heart of the main business district. Compared to the huge movie palaces nearby it was almost intimate. The theater had closed two years ago but was still in good shape. Sophia and Anita cleaned it up and made plans for an opening. Sophia had saved some money and had working capital for expenses like operating permits, repairs, and film rentals. There was an office near the projection room. It was big enough for them to live in, temporarily. They found a bed, a used refrigerator, and cooked on a hotplate. One of the bathrooms had a decent shower. Sophia guessed the theater had been a vaudeville house before it became a movie theater.

Anita knew the local stores. She told Sophia where to buy groceries and cleaning supplies but did not venture out unless she had to. Anita felt grateful they did not have to find a place to live right away. It would be easy to run into someone who knew her parents. She had no idea what they might have told people after she left and did not want them to find out she was nearby. Sophia understood Anita's caution.

Sophia felt happy working on the preparations for the grand opening. It was the most fun she had in years. Despite several love affairs with remarkable women, Sophia never accepted love as her purpose in life. She always felt she was meant to do something special. This was it, and she plunged headlong into her dream.

Sophia wanted the Rialto to be something new: a repertory cinema. They would have only one chance to get it right and Sophia planned everything carefully. Advertising, invitations, the right films and atmosphere; everything had to be perfect. The other Philadelphia movie houses showed first-run or second-run movies. There were even a couple of neighborhood third-run theaters. They all showed Hollywood films. No theaters showed the wonderful variety of foreign films Sophia enjoyed in New York. She was certain there were people in Philadelphia yearning for a theater such as the Rialto. All she had to do find a way to attract them.

She came up with an opening night low-priced double feature: *Grand Illusion* and *Black Orpheus*. The two films could not be more different or unique. Sophia knew there must be people who heard of the films but never saw either one. She picked a date for the grand opening, placed some advertisements in the local papers, and hoped a crowd would come. The turnout did not disappoint her.

Anita sat in the back row and watched as people came in. She hoped none of them would recognize her. Anita assumed any of her friends, or her parents' friends, would not come to the Rialto. They would go to the palatial Orpheum Theater on Cheltenham Avenue or the small New Lyric Theater several blocks away. At least a hundred people were in the seats as Sophia walked down the aisle and went up on stage. She looked out at the crowd and felt fulfilled by what she saw.

"Hello. Welcome to the Rialto. It's wonderful to see you all. I am Sophia Cohen and this is my theater. I'm hoping it will become *your* theater, too. I've been watching films like *Grand Illusion* and *Black Orpheus* in New York for several years. There are several theaters that run foreign films there. But, there was no such theater in Philadelphia. Until now. I can assure you future shows will be as wonderful as this one is."

She paused and looked at the faces in the audience. As she expected, there were quite a few older people. There were many younger people, too. She assumed they were college students. *Maybe the older people are their professors*, she thought, smiling.

“I have to warn you that foreign films are not like Hollywood films. They’re not in English. They have subtitles. You’re going to have to work a little harder to watch these films.” The audience chuckled. “I think you will find the reward worth the extra effort. Once again, welcome to the Rialto. Enjoy the films.”

Anita could tell Sophia had felt nervous. Her usual silky voice cracked a couple of times but she came off as sincere and welcoming. Anita assumed the audience did not notice Sophia’s nervousness. They just wanted to see the movies.

Sophia left the stage. The theater gradually darkened and the curtain slowly opened. Walter, the projectionist Sophia had hired, told them the equipment was old but serviceable. He recommended upgrading it soon. Sophia knew that was unlikely. There would be no money for upgrades for a long time. She hoped the equipment would not break down, especially tonight.

The only other employee they hired was Cathy. She was a chubby blonde high school student who stood behind the concession counter and presided over a sparse assortment of movie theater candy and treats. Cathy had learned to operate the popcorn machine but it was slow and noisy. It barely sputtered out enough popcorn to get through the night. Sophia had not ordered many movie theater treats. She was not certain that moviegoers would show up or buy anything. If this gamble worked and people started coming regularly, she planned to have a wide variety of movie theater food available.

The sparse snack choices were okay with Anita. She had to clean the theater after the shows; the less trash the better. Cleaning was the only job she felt comfortable doing. Sophia had asked her to run the concessions, but Anita did not want to be where anyone she knew might see her. Sophia had offered to let Anita take tickets as well, but she refused. She preferred to work behind the scenes, doing office work, arranging shipments, processing payments, filling out forms, and handling money. She had learned about these tasks at Carlo’s Pizza.

Anita winced when she thought about Carlo. He had been so kind to her and she abandoned him without warning. She wanted to call him and apologize but felt embarrassed, as well as afraid that he felt she used him. She put Carlo out of her mind and watched the movies.

Within the two months after the grand opening, the audiences became a steady flow of new and returning film fans. Weekends were the busiest but several people came on weeknights. Despite Walter’s warnings, the projector and sound equipment did not break down. There were new items at the concession counter. Sophia found a used popcorn machine and they now had a satisfactory supply of fresh, hot buttered popcorn. There was more trash to sweep up after the shows but Anita did not mind.

What bothered her was what was not happening. She and Sophia were still living in the office. The Rialto made enough money to keep itself going but no extra income to give Sophia a profit. They could not afford an apartment. It seemed Sophia did not care. She was in heaven. Heaven, for Sophia, was her very own movie house. Her dream had come true.

Anita’s dream of love, however, had faded. Just as she had expected, the Rialto became Sophia’s first love. She still paid attention to Anita. They still made love, but Anita knew it was because Sophia felt she ought to and not because she needed Anita.

She began to dread the nights. Anita sat alone in the theater but did not watch the movies. They all seemed alike. Hardly any were in English. She often overheard patrons talking excitedly after the shows. Anita wondered what movies they were talking about. She was not seeing anything that excited her.

Anita missed going out. Back in New York, she and Sophia watched movies, heard music, went to the art museums, and once to the opera. In Philadelphia, they left the theater only to buy food or supplies. Anita was slowly going crazy. She knew needed to get out of there.

The doorbell rang one afternoon. Anita went to see who it was. She thought someone was delivering a new film. A slender, dark-haired woman peered through the glass. She appeared to be not much older than Anita was.

“Um, we’re not open until six,” Anita said after she unlocked the door.

“Oh, I’m not here for a movie, although I’m sure they’re great,” she said. Anita noticed she was holding a pile of leaflets in her hand. “I’ve been going around to stores asking if they would take a few of these.”

“What are they?”

“We’re having some new music at Hecate’s Circle and we wanted to let people know.”

“Where?”

“Hecate’s Circle. You haven’t heard of it?” Anita shook her head. “It’s a couple of blocks from here, on Cheltenham Avenue. We have great music and some food almost every night. We have Sweet Stavin’ Chain coming soon. They always sell out. Plus, a bunch of other musicians. You like music?”

“I don’t listen much. Just the radio. I used to go to clubs in New York.”

“Oh, cool. Who did you see?”

“The Fugs, the Mothers of Invention, Sun Ra.” The woman’s eyes widened in awe.

“Really? You’re so lucky. I’ve only heard their records. Did you like them?”

“Yeah, they were okay.”

“Well, if you like them, you’d like the musicians we have. You should come. Will you take some of these fliers, please?”

“Sure. I’ll leave them on the table in the lobby.”

“Great. Thanks. I’m not having much luck getting businesses to take them.”

“Why not?”

“They’re not too happy about us being here. They say we’re just a bunch of hippies and all we’re doing is bringing drugs into the neighborhood.”

“Well, are you?”

“Maybe a couple of us are,” she admitted. “Mostly, we just love music. You should come.”

“Maybe I will.” Anita reached for the fliers and the woman handed her a pile.

“I really appreciate this,” she said. Anita smiled. “I might drop by some night. I hear you’re showing some silent films soon with a piano player. I’d like to see those.”

“Yeah, come by. If I’m in the box office, I’ll let you in free.”

“Really? Cool! I don’t usually sit at the door at the Circle, but if you ask for Sharon I can get you in free.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“I hope to see you soon,” Sharon said. Anita nodded, closed and locked the door, and went inside the lobby. She put the fliers on the table next to the Rialto schedules, fliers from other local arts groups, and neighborhood restaurants. Then she forgot about them.

However, she could not forget about Sharon. Something felt different about her. Anita thought about why Sharon seemed different. She realized that Sharon resembled the woman Anita lived with when she was in New York. It dawned on Anita that Sharon was a lesbian.

Anita left her seat, grabbed a flier from the table, and stepped outside to the warm late spring dusk. The marquee lit the night, and the box office had a small sign that said it would reopen at 8:30 for the second film. She turned right, walked down to the corner, crossed the street, and headed for Chelton Avenue, a long block away. She was unfamiliar with that part of Chelton Avenue. She could not recall ever walking there when she lived with her parents.

Hecate's Circle was near the run-down train station, just past the Whosoever Gospel Mission, a long gray building with few windows. She recalled riding past the mission many times in her father's car. The huge Jesus Never Fails sign always delighted her. *Jesus never fails what?* she had wondered. *History, Biology, Shop Class?* A couple of people loitered outside the mission. She smiled but no one noticed her.

Anita heard Hecate's Circle before she reached it. Music spilled out the front door. She assumed the show already started and hoped she was not too late to find a seat. Two other people were approaching from the opposite direction. They reached the door as she did. She smiled and let them go in ahead of her. She noticed a large painted circle on the window. It had what looked like a labyrinth inside it. When she got inside Sharon was there.

"You made it!" she said, cheerfully. Anita smiled. She hoped Sharon recalled her offer to let her in free. "Just sit anywhere. We're not too crowded tonight." Anita looked around. Every seat seemed taken. She wondered what 'too crowded' was like. The couple who walked in ahead found the last two seats and sat down. Anita hesitated. Sharon walked by and noticed her.

"You wanna sit with me? I'm in the front, way over on the right. It's close but loud," she said.

"That's okay. Thanks." She followed Sharon toward the front of the small audience space. The stage was merely a raised plywood platform the width of the building. There were a couple of musicians, amplifiers, and microphones on stands. Somebody was singing. She could not follow the lyrics.

They sat down. Sharon turned to Anita when the song ended. "I forgot your name," she said.

"Anita."

"Are you from around here?"

"I grew up a few blocks away, near Wayne and Manheim."

"Where's that?" Anita pointed in the general direction of her parents' house. "I used to walk to Germantown Avenue to go shopping, and sometimes I walked to high school."

"You went to Germantown?" Sharon asked. Anita nodded. "When did you graduate?"

"A year ago."

"Really? Only a year ago? You seem older than me."

"Where did you go?"

"Girls High," Sharon replied. Anita nodded. The musicians began another song.

Anita left before the music ended. She had to clean up after the movie and did not want Sophia to notice she had disappeared. Before she left, she reminded Sharon to ask for her if she ever came to the box office. Sharon thanked her for coming.

People were leaving after the movie ended. Several milled about in the lobby. The air-conditioning felt good. They could only afford to run Rialto's air-conditioning for the audiences, but the old building often remained cool overnight so they slept comfortably.

"Oh, there you are," Sophia said, smiling.

"I was in the bathroom," Anita lied. She found her cleaning bucket and broom and went into the theater to start working. An hour later, she finished, put everything away, took out the

trash, and then went upstairs to the small office where they slept. Sophia had already locked up and was counting the money from the box office.

“It was a good night,” she said. “How’d you like the films?”

“I wasn’t paying attention,” Anita did not want to get into a conversation about foreign films with Sophia. That was all Sophia talked about now. She never mentioned music, art, or anything else that was fun. The old Sophia that Anita fell in love with seemed a distant memory. That Sophia, despite being much older than Anita, had always seemed vibrant, young, passionate, and intellectually as well as physically exciting. The new Sophia was preoccupied, distracted, and tired all the time. She was happy but so engrossed in her personal happiness that she did not notice Anita’s unhappiness.

Anita felt alone, isolated, and frustrated but did not know how to tell Sophia. She almost longed to go back to Atlantic City where Dolores looked out for her, cared for her, and liked her. She was not sure Sophia liked her anymore. Perhaps Sophia kept her around but was no longer in love with her. That was what Anita believed, anyway.

She went back to Hecate’s Circle a few more times but paid to get in. Sharon scolded her but Anita felt funny getting in free. She sat with Sharon and they talked. Anita felt certain Sharon was a lesbian. She often followed women with her eyes. She would stop talking midsentence so she could look at someone who just came in. She introduced Anita to the other people who worked there. Anita wondered about the other women. She could not tell if they were lesbians and did not realize she was looking. Anita was also unaware someone else was looking at her.

Tony recognized his sister right away but could not believe his eyes. *What’s she doing here?* he wondered. He felt reluctant to go up to her. Would she even want to see him? Maybe she hated him as much as she hated their parents. He began thinking about how he felt about Anita. They were only a year apart in age. They had always been close until she devastated him when she ran away.

She never told him she wanted to leave and he wondered if something he said or did had provoked her. He could not figure out what it could have been. All she left was a brief note. “I’m leaving. Don’t worry. I’ll be okay.” There was no explanation or apology. It seemed cold and selfish and made them feel she hated them. Anita’s gone. Too bad. Their parents were furious and worried after she ran away.

Tony wanted to search for her. He asked a couple of kids at school if anyone knew his sister but all her friends had already graduated and there was no one else who knew her. He went to the teachers she had liked. They were all surprised. No one had a clue where she could have gone. One recalled her friend Carol Davis but did not know how to get in touch with her. A teacher mentioned Carol was planning to go to Columbia. Tony thought of contacting Columbia but did not know how to go about doing that. They might refuse to tell him if Carol Davis was a student there.

Meanwhile, he had to deal with his distraught parents who alternated between fear for their daughter’s safety and anger at her indifference to the pain she caused them. Tony tried to remain on his best behavior. He did not want to cause them further pain or draw attention to himself. They might take all their frustration, hurt, and anger out on him.

He heard about Hecate’s Circle from one of his friends in English class. There were other new music venues in Philadelphia, but they were far away. His father would not allow him to borrow the car and he was afraid of public transportation. Hecate’s Circle was within walking distance, not far from the high school. He could walk there at night and just tell his parents he

was going to a friend's house. If he told them he was going to Hecate's they would have warned him about drugs and hippies. He kept his destination to himself.

His entire world changed when he saw Anita at Hecate's. He kept his distance so he could watch her before he approached her. She seemed friendly toward another girl. Tony had noticed the other girl before and liked the way she looked. She was around his age and seemed nice.

Most people at Hecate's Circle were older than Tony was but he did not feel out of place. Everyone seemed friendly and the music was interesting, if not always great. He liked hearing bands that were just starting to perform. Some had fervor that permeated their performances. Other musicians could not play their instruments well. Many were not good songwriters, but they tried. Several talked great between songs but their music was flat and uninteresting. Tony liked watching bands putting the pieces together, developing their unique sound, style, and confidence. He admired them for trying.

Tony left the first night without talking to Anita. He wanted to think about how he should approach her, what he should say, what she might say, and if she would even want to see him. Maybe she hated him. He thought about it and finally realized there was a chance she did not hate him and he ought to take a risk. He had loved his older sister and still loved her even though she ran away. Tony wanted to be with Anita again. He needed to talk to her. He wanted to find out where she had been the past year, what she had been doing, and if she still loved him.

He went back a few nights later and she was there again. Instead of confronting her at Hecate's, where they both might feel embarrassed, he decided to follow her after she left to see where she went. He hoped to find out where she lived. She walked along Chelton Avenue, turned down Kenyon Street, then turned again at Armat and went into the Rialto. Tony felt shocked.

The theater had been closed the last time he went by. Now, the marquee was brightly lit and people were coming out. He looked in the door, did not see Anita, and wondered if he should go in. *Why did she go in?* he thought. *The show's already over. Maybe she's meeting someone?*

Tony wondered if he should wait around to find out but felt uncomfortable. He did not want to spy on his sister. What if she saw him, thought he was spying, and became angry? No, it would be better to leave. He now knew two places she went. He could come back and check them out whenever he wanted. Tony turned and walked out. He wondered about his sister's behavior and her life as he walked home. It had only been a year since she left. How had she changed? Who was she now? When he got home, he knew he had no choice but to find out.

Three nights later Tony waited outside Hecate's Circle hoping Anita would show up again. It was dark when she arrived and he almost did not recognize her. She was dressed differently than before. He liked her boots, shorts, and halter-top. She wore her hair up and had on some make-up, although her natural facial beauty still shone through. He realized his older sister was gorgeous and wondered why she was alone. He imagined many men would flock around a beautiful woman like Anita. Maybe she was all dressed up because she was planning to meet someone inside?

Anita felt lonely and needed companionship. She thought she might attract some attention from someone, anyone, if she dressed up. To her surprise, someone noticed her as soon as she arrived.

"Anita?" Tony called. She recognized him immediately. Her brother had grown slightly taller since she last saw him. He was sturdy but not muscular. His facial features were similar to hers. Most people who saw them would recognize that they were siblings.

“Tony? My God. It’s you, baby brother.” She threw her arms around him and hugged him as hard as she could. He never liked being called baby brother but hugged her back. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been coming to hear the music. What are you doing here?”

“The same thing.”

“No, I mean what are you doing here in Germantown? Where have you been?”

“Oh, it’s a long story. A lot’s happened since I saw you,” she answered. Tony wanted more.

“Okay, what?” he pressed. She sensed his need for an explanation but did not want to launch into her story.

“Look, I’m meeting someone. Do you want to come in and hang out? We can talk later if that’s okay.” He did not feel he had much of a choice. They went in and Sharon greeted Anita. Tony felt delighted to see Sharon again and waited for his sister to introduce him. “This is my baby brother!” Anita said, proudly.

“Hi,” Sharon said. “I’ve seen you here, before. How are you doing?”

“I’m okay. Nice to meet you.” The place was not as crowded as usual. They found two seats in the corner.

“Sharon’s my friend. We met over at the Rialto. She lets me in free, sometimes.”

“I didn’t know the Rialto was open.”

“Oh, yeah. About three months now. I work there.”

“Cool. What do you do?”

“Clean, mostly. What are you doing since you graduated?”

“Mom and dad got me a job at Gimbel’s. I work in the Receiving Department.”

“That’s that big department store downtown, isn’t it? The one where we used to watch the Santa Claus parades? What’s the receiving department?”

“It’s where all the stuff comes into the store to get sold. I open boxes all day and check what’s inside them.”

“Sounds nice.”

“It isn’t. It’s boring as hell. But, I get paid. That’s all mom and dad care about.”

“So what would you rather do?”

“Go to college, but dad wouldn’t let me. He says it’s a waste of money.”

“I’m not surprised. He told me the same thing. I expected it because girls aren’t supposed to get an education. But, boys? I thought he would want you to go.”

“No. I might try to save money so I can at least start, but it’s expensive.”

“If that’s what you want, do it. Screw them!”

“I never heard you say anything like that before.”

“Well, I’ve grown up, little brother.”

“Yeah, I can see that. I almost didn’t recognize you. I mean I did, but you’re so beautiful, now.”

“Thanks. I guess I was an ugly duckling before, wasn’t I?”

“You were never ugly,” Tony said. His eyes followed Sharon as she walked across the front of the club. Anita noticed him looking.

“She’s not, either,” Anita commented. He looked at his sister, embarrassed. “It’s okay to look, but I don’t think she’s into guys.” Tony did not know what she meant.

“Why not? Does she have a boyfriend?”

“I don’t think so, but I don’t know her that well. So how are mom and dad?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Pretty messed up, still. You hurt them bad.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t hate them, just so you know.”

“Are you thinking of coming back?” Tony asked. Anita shook her head.

“I don’t know how I could. It would hurt them worse, I think. Better they don’t know where I am.”

“So you don’t want them to know I saw you?”

“God, no, please don’t tell them. You haven’t, have you?” He shook his head. “Thanks. I’m not ready.”

“Where have you been? Have you been around here for the past year?” Anita did not know how much she should tell Tony. She felt stupid telling him she ran away because she was in love with Carol but did not know it at the time. Yet that love had driven her to drastic action. Anita reflected on the power of love. She was only beginning to understand it. She remained in awe of, and in thrall to, that power, but no longer in a positive way. Her intimacy with Sophia had soured and she felt miserable. She wanted the love they once had and feared it was gone. Anita felt certain Sophia would never love her again.

Was anyone out there for her now? Sharon was nice but Anita did not view her as a potential lover, just as a friend. She even wondered if she was still a lesbian. Maybe her experience with Sophia had embittered her toward intimacy with women. However, she did not find men attractive, either. *Maybe I should become a nun*, she thought. Perhaps that was the only alternative left.

Chapter 8 - Downtown

Anita wondered if running away became easier the more times a person did it. This was her third time in just over a year. She did not know which getaway was the most difficult. Was it when she ran away from home, her parents, and her brother Tony? Alternatively, was it when she left Dolores and Carlo, who had taken care of her and looked out for her so kindly? Was it the third time when she left Sophia who had been her first real love?

Anita no longer thought of Carol as her first love. Her attraction to Carol had been a mere girlish infatuation strong enough to motivate her to run away but nothing more. The one thing she felt certain of was that each time she ran away she learned something new and important about herself. She wondered what self-knowledge she would gain this time.

Sharon offered to help when Anita told her she wanted to find a new place to live. The next time they met, she mentioned she knew someone who was looking for a roommate. Delilah came to Hecate's one night and Sharon introduced them. She was a voluptuous Black woman who turned heads wherever she went. The first words out of her mouth were, "Everyone calls me Dee." They talked for a while. Dee sympathetically listened to Anita's story (what little she told.) She also liked Anita. *The kid seems to be shy and lonely and needs a break, Dee thought. And, I need a roommate.*

Dee verified that Anita could afford to share the rent and did not use drugs. Satisfied, she offered her a place to stay. Her place was a basement apartment downtown at Twenty-second and Walnut Streets. It was in a row of old brownstone houses build near the end of the last century. They once were the ornate homes of wealthy Philadelphians. Now they were run-down apartments rented mostly to students.

The basement apartment was plain and simple. Its wooden front door was three steps down from the sidewalk. Inside there was one large room, a kitchenette, bathroom, and a huge closet at the back. A long thin window along the sidewalk let in natural light and bus fumes. Most of Delilah's furniture came from thrift stores or friends. She had a double bed, couch, and a huge bookcase that divided the room. She offered Anita the space behind the bookcase for a cot or bed. Anita felt grateful for anything. She slept on the couch for the first few nights. Dee did not mention the other occupants, the cockroaches. Anita found out about them by accident.

Dee oversaw the concession stand at the Boyd Theater a few blocks from the apartment. She supervised the staff and ordered popcorn, candy, and other treats. When she heard Anita worked at the Rialto, she offered to get her a job cleaning at the Boyd. It was a huge theater and needed many cleaners. The manager hired people but they never stayed long. Anita assured her that she knew what to do and would stay. Dee asked the manager to give her a job. He agreed. Dee told Anita to report the next day at noon.

The Boyd was a huge movie palace built in the 1920s. It had a gigantic Art Deco lobby, a grand staircase, and a huge mural on the walls. The entire Rialto could fit into the lobby. It contained almost 2500 seats and was the largest theater Anita had ever seen. She did not know it, but the Boyd had shown many famous first-run films such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *High Noon*. Her parents had been to the Boyd when they were dating in the early 1940s, just before her father went into the Army.

The first time she saw the Boyd she wondered how anything less than a small army could clean it. She already knew how to do the work but the cleaning was hard. There was little time between shows. She tried to keep up with the other cleaners and quickly learned to increase her effort. The manager complimented her after her first week.

After Anita cashed her first paycheck at the bank, she went to the nearby Salvation Army thrift store to look for a bed. She found a narrow metal folding cot. Anita bought it and wheeled it home over uneven downtown sidewalks. It was small but big enough for now. She expected to be sleeping alone for a long time.

Anita had soured on love. It seemed shallow, fleeting, and not worth the effort. Whenever she recalled her first time with Sophia, her heart started to ache. They had started high and kept climbing into ecstasy. Then they crashed. Anita wondered if all had been an illusion. Perhaps she had fooled herself or allowed Sophia to use her, but Anita could not blame Sophia and felt guilty for hurting her by running away. Anita also felt guilty for hurting her parents, Tony, Carol, Dolores, and Carlo. She felt like a spoiled child who had succeeded in hurting everyone she knew and cared about and hoped her new life would go better.

Tony supported her move downtown and checked in on her at least once a week. He was the perfect brother. Gimbel's, where he worked, was a huge department store only a mile from her apartment. Tony dropped by after work. She was often at her job and he left her notes. She replied in notes so they kept in touch. He was all she had right now and she needed someone to care about her without wanting anything from her. Her brother merely wanted to keep his big sister safe.

Dee often went to Rittenhouse Square where hippies congregated at night. Anita had never seen a hippie and did not know what they were. She'd heard that Rittenhouse Square was where people went to get drugs. There was no evidence Dee used any drugs. She merely hung out with friends and invited Anita to come along. She usually felt too exhausted from cleaning the Boyd to go anywhere after work. She stayed alone in the basement with Dee's books, records, stereo, and the cockroaches.

Dee had eclectic taste. Some books were old, worn hardbacks that came from thrift stores. Some were paperbacks from authors Anita never heard of. People like Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Castaneda, and Herbert. She recognized some of the records. The Mothers of Invention were there, as well as the Doors, Beatles, and Rolling Stones. There were strange albums by people like David Peel and the Lower East Side (whom she has seen with Sophia but did not recall), Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, and John Coltrane. Anita could not figure out what Dee's favorite music was. She even had an album by Tchaikovsky! Dee invited Anita to play any of the albums she wanted to, but she never did. Music reminded her of Sophia and she wanted to forget Sophia. Instead of listening to music, Anita read newspapers and magazines, listened to the radio, and avoided the books and records. That seemed safer.

Early one morning, Anita awoke and heard moaning. *Oh, my God!* She thought. *Dee's sick.* She was about to call out but heard more moaning and a different voice. She realized Dee was not sick; she was having sex with another woman. Anita needed to use the bathroom but did not want to disturb them. She realized she could not wait and moved cautiously. The old cot springs squeaked. She got out of bed, scurried to the bathroom, closed the door, and flipped on the light. Anita felt certain she had disturbed the lovers and regretted her movement. However, the need to pee was irresistible.

Anita waited before she left the bathroom. She listened at the door and heard nothing. Either they had fallen asleep or they were awake and waiting for her to come out so they could confront her. She turned off the light, opened the door a crack, and saw a light. *Oh, shit!* She thought. *They're mad at me.* She hesitated.

“Come on out, Anita. It’s okay,” Dee said. Anita tiptoed back to her bed with her head down.

“I’m awful sorry,” she mumbled.

“It’s okay. I’m sorry we woke you,” Dee replied. “Would you like to meet my friend, Alice?” Anita did not know how to reply. She was not used to meeting people’s friends when they were in bed together.

“Well, okay,” she said. Her head was still down. She looked at her bed and not at Dee.

“Hi, Anita,” Alice said, cheerfully. Anita couldn’t see her well in the low light but noticed she was also Black.

“Hi.” Anita sat on her bed and wondered what to do. “Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you guys. I just had to go.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I know you’re a deep sleeper. I thought we would be quieter. Well, we weren’t. So we’re the ones who should be sorry.”

“No, no. It’s my fault. Look, I understand. Do you want me to go outside? Or maybe I could just move my cot into the closet?” Anita said. Dee giggled.

“No, please. Why don’t I make some tea and then we can talk?” Dee got out of bed naked. She strode into the little kitchenette that was across from Anita’s bed, grabbed the teapot, filled it, put it on the stove, and turned on the gas. She walked back to her bed and put on a thin robe. Alice sat up with the sheet wrapped around her.

“Come and sit with us,” Dee said. Anita got up and walked over to the large bed. She smiled awkwardly and nodded to Alice. “Sit down,” Dee said.

“I’m... so sorry I... interrupted you. Awful sorry.”

“Don’t be. We’re fine, aren’t we, Alice?” There was an awkward silence. Alice didn’t seem as if she agreed everything was okay. She seemed irritated or disappointed. Anita wondered if she had interrupted them when Alice was close to orgasm and felt even worse for disturbing them.

“Alice and I are old friends. We ran into each other tonight at Rittenhouse Square and I invited her to come back here and spend the night. We haven’t seen each other in a long time and had some catching up to do,” Dee explained. Anita appreciated the nonchalant way Dee handled their embarrassing situation.

“Oh, that’s nice,” she said.

“Anita works with me,” Dee explained to Alice. “I met her at Hecate’s Circle in Germantown. She was working in a movie theater there. What was it called?”

“The Rialto.”

“But, she wanted to leave and move downtown, right?” Anita nodded. “I was looking for a roommate and we hit it off, didn’t we?” Anita nodded again.

“So how long have you lived here?” Alice asked.

“Two months.”

“Is Dee a good roommate?”

“She’s great. She’s helped me a lot.”

“Anita works hard. She cleans the theater. That’s the hardest job and you don’t make any more money than the people who run the snack bar or take tickets.”

“I like it, though. It’s what I did at the Rialto. Of course, that was much smaller.” The teapot started to boil. Dee arose and walked to the kitchen. She got out mugs, tea bags, lemon, and sugar, and put everything on a tray. She poured water into the cups, dropped the teabags in, and carried the tray to the bed.

“Let it steep a moment,” she said. Anita began to relax. She felt less awkward, but still upset she had interrupted them. They chatted, drank their tea, and then agreed it was time to sleep. Anita began to feel awkward again.

“Don’t worry, Anita. We’re gonna be quiet. We’re really gonna sleep this time, aren’t we, Alice?” Dee said, smiling. Anita went back to her bed. Dee turned out the light; she and Alice intertwined their bodies and fell asleep.

Anita lay awake. Dee’s casualness and self-control amazed her. She would have felt humiliated if the situation had been reversed. Then she thought about why she would have felt humiliated. Was it because they were having sex, or was it because they were two *women* having sex? They seemed comfortable with their sexuality. Anita realized she was not comfortable with hers. Sexuality itself had never been an issue for her. It was the two women, Carol and Sophia, who attracted her that were her concern. Then she fell asleep.

Dee and Anita walked to work the next day. “Alice and I are old friends,” Dee explained. “We’ve known each other for a long time.” Anita did not see how that was possible. Dee and Alice did not seem much older than she was. They were in their early twenties, at most.

“How long?” she asked.

“About ten years,” Dee answered. “She was my first. I was hers...,” she added.

Anita wondered what Dee meant. “Your first?” Then she understood. “Oh. You must have been pretty young.”

“We were. It started as just two kids fooling around. Then something happened. She’s really special.”

“But, you never were in love?” Anita asked, bluntly. Then she wondered why she had asked such a personal question.

“No. That didn’t happen. But, we like each other a lot.”

“I could tell.”

“Sorry about that. We got carried away. It’s been a while since we saw each other.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry I ruined it for you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. We’ll have other times, I’m sure. She and I are connected for life.” The frank way Dee said it made Anita certain she was right. She wondered what it was like to connect with someone for life. She connected to Sophia for only a few months and her memories of the ecstasy and pain were almost too much to bear.

“That’s beautiful,” Anita commented. They walked in silence for a few moments.

“So, what about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

“No, and I don’t want to,” Anita replied, firmly. Anita’s sharp reply stung Dee.

“I wasn’t asking like *that*.”

“I know. I mean, I don’t want anyone.”

“So what’s your deal, anyway? Why did you need a place so fast? What happened?”

Anita told Dee about Sophia. “Damn. She loved you, but then fell in love with herself, didn’t she?”

Dee’s insight impressed Anita. “Kind of, yeah.” It was true. Sophia got what she wanted. The Rialto became her first love, not Anita.

“Once a person does that, it’s all over,” Dee remarked.

“I couldn’t stay. I knew she was never going to love me again.”

“You were right. She’ll regret it, someday.”

“I don’t care. I would never go back to her.”

“You know, Alice told me she felt concerned about you. She was picking up a vibe.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. She’s like that. She senses people. She told me you didn’t feel good about yourself.”

“Well, she’s right. Twice now I felt like my heart got ripped out and stomped on.”

“No, I don’t think it was your relationships she meant. I think it was *you*. You don’t feel good about being a lesbian, do you?” Dee’s direct question surprised Anita. For some reason, she felt secure giving Dee an honest answer.

“No. I’m confused. I don’t know how it happened. What did I do? Why do I feel this way? What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing’ wrong with you, Anita. It’s just who you are. And, it’s okay. There are lots of us and we take care of each other. When you’re down, there’s always gonna be someone to pick you up. The world may not understand, but we do. Guaranteed.”

“Thanks, I guess. It’s still confusing, though.”

“It might always be confusing. That’s life and love. But, you’re going to be okay. I know it. Alice told me the same thing. She said you were gonna be okay, too.”

“I hope you’re both right,” Anita said, as they reached the Boyd and went in to start their workday.

Alice was gone when they got back to the apartment after work. Dee didn’t seem surprised. Anita didn’t say anything, but she didn’t understand their relationship, either.

Alice returned a month later. Delilah took time off from work so the women could have sex when Anita was cleaning the theater. One night when she came home Delilah announced she was leaving to travel around with Alice in her beat-up car. The next day Delilah quit her job, gathered her possessions, and gave the apartment and everything in it to Anita. She suddenly had a real bed of her own, a collection of books and records, a stereo, pots and pans, food, and a couch. In addition, she now had to pay full rent on the basement apartment. At first, she thought she could not afford it but the manager at the Boyd offered her Delilah’s job. Her hours became more regular and the work was not as hard. She suddenly became an adult and did not know what to do.

Tony offered to help her pay her rent. He intimated it was more than brotherly concern that motivated him. He had started dating a girl he met at work and needed a place where they could be alone. He shyly asked if he could bring the girl to Anita’s apartment when she was at work. She felt delighted but concerned for him.

“You sure she’s still gonna like you when you bring her to this dump?” she joked.

“Um, she’s not coming to check out the furnishings,” he replied, grinning. Anita understood. *No, just the bed*, she thought and was proud of her brother. He was also becoming an adult.

Tony had endured the brunt of their parents’ anguish after Anita ran away. They were never angry with him and never blamed him but wondered if he knew she was going to leave and did not warn them. Tony had no inkling of what Anita was going to do. In addition, he had his own life. He was only a year behind her in high school and facing an uncertain future. His father made it clear he would not pay Tony’s college tuition, and would not support Tony if he tried to go on his own. Tony felt trapped in his parents’ narrow worldview. His mother had finished high school. His father had not. Education was not important to them. It was an annoyance. The only important thing was a job.

They arranged a job he did not want. His uncle worked in Gimbel’s department store and got Tony a job in the Receiving Department. He spent all day opening boxes and checking their

contents against packing lists. Tony hated the work but liked the unusual people he worked with. He found the working world was not like the high school world. Everybody in high school had been the same age. The only older people were the teachers, and students did not socialize with them. Tony's co-workers at Gimbel's were all different ages and he did not know how to relate to them at first. He learned a lot about human nature in his first few weeks on the job. It took an effort to get along with everyone. He was a likable person and people were nice to him, but he worried he would never fit in. Tony also discovered quickly that this job was not what he wanted to do for the rest of his life.

However, Tony did not know what he did want. He felt ambivalent about college. He envied Anita for running away but knew he could not do the same. When his father got sick, not long after Tony started working, he at least felt useful. He contributed his meager earnings to keep the family afloat. Although he knew they were grateful, his parents never thanked him. They felt bad for him but never said anything. It was unfair for him to have to shoulder such a burden at his age. That was the way adult life was. There was nothing anyone could do about it.

His parents did their best to thank him in small ways. His mother cooked the foods he liked whenever she could afford the ingredients. His father let him use the car occasionally. Tony would have liked to use it more but his father's illness prevented him from fixing it and the neglect made it useless much of the time. None of them wanted their family crisis but they did their best to survive it.

Tony did not tell Anita much about what was happening at home. He did not think she cared, felt she had problems of her own, and was grateful she was there for him. Then, when he met Sydney, his horizon broadened. A new phase of life opened for him and he was eager to explore it. Anita felt happy Tony had a girlfriend and was eager to meet her but Tony was reluctant. She could not tell if he was shy or embarrassed and did not press him.

One afternoon, Tony called the concession stand telephone when he knew Anita was likely to answer. "Some of my friends at work want to see that new Space Odyssey movie that's coming out," Tony asked. "I was wondering..."

Anita smiled. "If I could get you in free? Sure, I can get some passes, but not for the first week. Is that okay?"

"We don't care."

"Only thing is, I won't be able to say hello to you and you have to pretend you don't know me. I'm not supposed to give passes out."

"I don't want you to do it if you're gonna get in trouble."

"It's no trouble. We'll just be careful, okay?" Anita assured him. Tony felt grateful for her understanding.

A week later, Tony, Mark, Amos, and Sydney showed up excited to see the strange movie everyone was talking about. The huge screen made the Boyd Theater the best place in the city to see the new film. Tony looked for his sister but did not see her. She watched from the storage room just off the lobby and noticed the people he came in with. There was another white guy, a black guy, and a black girl. These were his friends from work. They all looked nice. She was glad Tony had a social life. They went to the snack bar, bought popcorn and candy, and wandered into the ornate, cavernous theater.

Tony dropped by her apartment a week after the movie. She asked him how he liked it. He said it was okay but admitted he did not understand some of it. She told him that's what other people also said. He shyly reminded her about bringing his girlfriend to the apartment.

"Sure. When?"

“Next Tuesday afternoon. We both have the day off. You’re working, right?”

“Yeah. I’m working from noon to maybe midnight, so you can stay as long as you want. When am I gonna see this girlfriend of yours, anyway?”

“Oh, she came to the movie,” Tony replied. Anita looked puzzled. She thought back to when she saw Tony and his friends at the Boyd. She recalled three guys and one girl.

“Wait,” Anita replied, surprised. “That Black girl?” Tony looked offended.

“Yes. That’s Sydney, and she is Black. Is that a problem for you?”

“Oh, no, Tony. I’m sorry. I was just surprised, that’s all.”

“You’re sure you don’t have a problem with her?”

“No. Mom and dad would probably freak out, but why would I?”

“Well, you just seemed shocked and I thought…”

“No. I don’t care. But I’m wondering whether you’re getting any looks when you two go out together.”

“Oh, yeah. Sometimes. It’s not bad downtown and around here. But when we go to Germantown, we get looks.”

“Germantown? You took her to Germantown?”

“She’s *from* Germantown. I knew her in high school although we never dated or anything. We weren’t even friends, just had some classes together. We didn’t connect until we both started working at Gimbels.”

“Do they know at work?”

“Our friends know.”

“Does anybody give you any shit?”

“Not shit, no. There was this asshole- I think his father is some kind of big shot- who said something to me.”

“What did he say?”

“He told me he was disturbed when he found out about Sydney and me but then he realized he didn’t care where I got my pussy from.” Tony seemed embarrassed he used the word ‘pussy’ in front of his sister. Anita was aghast. Was that all that was important, where somebody got their pussy? What about the person? What about love?

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. I wanted to punch him in the face, but I didn’t.”

“You would have been fired.”

“Yeah, and then I wouldn’t be working with Sydney anymore. Luckily, that asshole got transferred to another department.”

“Well, since we’re revealing stuff about ourselves right now, there’s something you ought to know about me.”

“What? Are you running away again?” Tony asked. Anita detected sarcasm in his voice and recoiled from his comment. He had not meant to offend her. She wondered if the sarcasm came from his true feelings about her running away and leaving him alone with their parents.

“No, I’m staying in my pathetic apartment. For now, anyway,” she answered, smiling.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be harsh. What did you want to tell me?”

“I’m a lesbian.” Her statement puzzled Tony.

“A what?”

“You don’t know what that means?” Tony shook his head. “It means I don’t like boys, I like girls.”

“Oh. So…?”

“I just wanted you to know, that’s all.”

“So, was Delilah your girlfriend?”

“No, we were just roommates. She was a lesbian, though. She ran off with her girlfriend.”

“She *was*? That makes sense, now.”

“What makes sense?” Anita asked.

“She was gorgeous. I tried to... kind of... you know... talk to her.”

“You made a pass at my roommate?” Anita teased.

“I think I did, but I could tell she wasn’t interested. I thought it was me.”

“I hope your feelings didn’t get hurt.”

“No. It was no big deal. It was just before I started going out with Sydney.”

“Well, she never mentioned it.”

“I’m glad. I wouldn’t have wanted to offend her.”

“You wouldn’t have. Guys were always hitting on her. She laughed them off.” Anita regretted saying it the moment she spoke. She hoped her little brother didn’t think Delilah had laughed at him.

“So, are you seeing anyone?” he asked.

“No. I left someone about nine months ago-.”

“You mean you ran away?” he interjected. She again sensed a strong feeling.

“Yes.”

“Who was she?”

“This woman named Sophia who ran that theater in Germantown, the Rialto.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I worked there, and we lived there together. Have you been there?” He shook his head.

“Not since I was in junior high when they were showing *Fire Maidens of Outer Space*.”

“What movie was that?”

“You don’t want to know.” The scowl on her brother’s face made Anita feel certain her little brother was right and she didn’t want to know.

Chapter 9 - Funeral

Anita got off the trolley, walked slowly toward her parents' row house, and almost turned around before she arrived. She reached the house, went up the front steps, and knocked weakly on the storm door. Her father Alfonso opened the door and frowned when he saw her. He admitted Anita but did not speak to her. She did not know what to do. Should she try to hug him? They had never been an affectionate family. Anita and Tony hugged when they began seeing each other. She could not recall the last time she hugged her father or kissed him. It likely hadn't happened since she was a little girl. Fortunately, Tony was waiting in the living room. He went up to her and hugged her warmly. Their father ignored them. Anita felt her arrival had added to his emotional pain.

She came back home because her mother Ida had died suddenly. She regretted there had been no opportunity for a reunion with her mother. Anita felt she should be there for her father and Tony. Now she realized she might be wrong. Her father did not seem eager to make up. Anita assumed he no longer saw her as his daughter. Perhaps he was right.

Anita did not run away to hurt them but knew she had hurt them badly. She could have gone back, apologized, and tried to become part of their lives again. However, the huge pain she caused her parents weighed on her and she felt certain they would never forgive her. She never discussed any of this with Tony and he told her little about what life was like after she left.

Ida's sudden death crushed Alfonso. They had gone through a lot the past few years. It started when Anita ran away and they searched for her fruitlessly. They did not know if she was alive or dead and their anguish was unbearable. They might have gone crazy if not for Tony.

Then Alfonso got sick. The doctors said it was his heart. They could not operate but he would be okay if he reduced his stress and physical activity. He tried to work but could not keep up and lost his job. He was less active but his stress increased. Alfonso and Ida stopped worrying about Anita and started worrying about themselves.

Tony graduated from high school, started working, and brought in enough money to keep the family going. It took a year, but Alfonso slowly got stronger. He found another job and their finances improved. He never saw what the stress of Anita's running away and his heart problems did to Ida. She kept her anguish hidden and never talked about it. However, Ida worried endlessly, often far into the night. She often lay awake in terror of their future while Alfonso slept soundly beside her.

Ida managed their household expenses and knew how close they were to disaster. They had exhausted their meager savings. Tony's salary was sparse at best. She thought about getting a job but did not know where to start looking. She had been a wife and mother for so long she thought she would not qualify for paid labor. Her anxiety weakened her. One night she awoke in pain and Alfonso rushed her to the hospital. Tony was not home. He stayed with a friend in the city. The doctors just barely kept Ida alive. They were not certain what had happened to her and assured Alfonso she would be okay in a few days. He believed them. They turned out to be wrong.

Alfonso thought about their marriage as he sat next to Ida's hospital bed during the final hours of their life together. He did not love Ida. He did not hate her either. For Alfonso, love and hate were feelings that belonged to people in movies. Real people did not have them. Real people merely lived their lives connected or not, as fate or circumstances dictated. He had gotten used to Ida being around and taking care of him. Their recent ordeals had not drawn them closer together

but merely made them realize how dependent they were on each other. He liked his wife and did not want to lose her.

Then, he lost her.

Anita needed to get out of the house. The stress from her father's resentment was more than she could bear. A long walk around Germantown would give her time to think about how to deal with him. She also needed to deal with the shock of her mother's sudden death and the lingering weight of her grief and guilt.

She left the house and walked toward Germantown Avenue. Some older stores had new businesses in them. There was a used bookstore, a macramé and candle store, and a shop that sold houseplants. She passed some familiar businesses that had been open as far back as she could remember. There was a small five-and-ten, a sewing goods store, and a TV and radio shop. She felt apprehensive as she approached Armat Street, where the Rialto was. Anita worried she would somehow run into Sophia. She decided she did not care if she did, but steeled herself anyway.

She crossed Armat Street and then walked toward the old Woolworths where she used to shop with her mother when she was little. She went in just to see what it looked like now. It hadn't changed much. There were endless counters of sundry items and notions. Familiar old salesladies bustled between the counters. The soda fountain was still at the back of the store near the fish tanks. It was wonderfully normal.

Anita walked among the aisles and recalled the times she and her mother shopped there on Friday nights. Her father and brother often went off to the E and H hobby shop a couple of blocks away. Anita and Ida roamed Woolworth's looking at the seemingly endless supply of *things*. There were tiny objects, small items, middle-sized notions, and a few large articles. She and her mother always had fun shopping together. Woolworths always had whatever they needed.

She paused to look at a counter divided into bins of diverse hair accessories. There were compartments full of pins, clips, combs, brushes, ties, and many other items. She reached to pick up a decorative hair clasp that reminded her of a similar one she had as a child and heard someone say her name. Anita looked up from the counter and saw a girl she recalled from high school.

"Hi, remember me?" Anita could not recall her name. "Sheila Emory."

Sheila was a slender, perky, shorthaired blonde woman with shifting eyes. Anita remembered her eyes. The way Sheila was always looking around made Anita suspect she was uncomfortable but Anita never figured out why.

"Oh, right. Sorry. It's been a while."

"Only three years, but it seems longer, doesn't it?" Anita smiled. She nodded but did not reply. "So, how are you doing?"

"I'm okay, I guess. You?"

"Same. I don't see you around anymore."

"I live downtown now. I'm back because my mom just died." Anita said it without feeling. Sheila didn't notice.

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry. What happened to her?"

"I don't know all the details. It happened so fast. My dad is a wreck."

"I guess so. How are you doing?"

“I’m still in shock.” That was true. The full force of Ida’s sudden death had not hit Anita yet. Maybe it never would.

“Yeah, I understand. Look, if there’s anything I can do...”

“Oh, thanks. I think we’ll be okay.”

“Well, I still live in the area, so I’m around if you need me.”

“Thanks. Look, I gotta get back. I just went out for a walk but I need to check on my dad.”

“I understand. Nice to see you. Sorry about your mom.” Anita did not reply. She left the store and headed away from her house. Despite what she told Sheila, she did not want to go back yet. Anita walked to Hecate’s Circle and found it closed until the evening show. She turned down Kenyon Street and then passed Armat Street near the Rialto. Anita stopped, read the marquee (*Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo* were playing), and then kept going. She did not want to get any closer to the theater. *At least, she thought, it’s still there. I guess Sophia has kept her dream alive. Too bad I wasn’t part of that dream. Not an important part, anyway.*

When she returned Alfonso immediately filled her in on the plans for her mother’s funeral. The viewing would be tomorrow night. Mass and burial would take place the following morning. Those rituals did not concern Anita. They were meaningless nonevents. Her mother’s death was the only important event.

Ida’s death cut Anita off from her mother forever. There would be no homecoming, tearful reunion, apology, forgiveness, or moving on. There was only an empty place in the world where her mother used to be. That was when the full shock of what Anita lost hit her. She was unprepared for the impact.

Anita had attended only one other viewing. Her aunt Millie died when she was still in high school. Her father told her she had to go although she did not want to. She did not argue with him. She was the obedient daughter, went to the viewing, hoped the experience would not disgust her, and got through it okay. A dead body was just a dead body. Her real aunt was gone.

So was her mother. Her father and Tony went to the open coffin as soon as they arrived but she hung back. Her father did not notice. They were alone in the room. The people coming to pay their last respects had not yet arrived. Tony felt bad for her and his father.

Two hours later, as the viewing ended, she felt exhausted by all the people who told her how sorry they were for her loss. She wondered how many of them knew she had run away and caused her parents unimaginable fear and worry. They would not have been so kind to her if they knew the grief she caused her mother. She sat in the back of the room, alone, watching people talk among themselves. Someone sat down next to her, but she paid no attention.

“Back then, I wasn’t sure. But, *now* I am.” The voice shocked Anita. It was Sheila.

“About what?” Anita asked, angry she had come.

“You’re gay, but we didn’t use to call it that did we?”

Anita looked directly at Sheila. She stared at Anita. The intensity of her gaze unnerved Anita.

“Yes, I’m a lesbian. What business is it of yours?”

“You didn’t know, did you?”

“Know what?”

“Back when we were in high school, I was crazy about you.”

“You were? We hardly even knew each other. I don’t think we had any classes together, either.”

“Maybe you didn’t know *me*, but I knew you,” Sheila asserted.

“That was a long time ago.”

“Yes. But, what about now?”

“What about now?” Anita snapped.

“Are you with anyone?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Well, neither am I,” Sheila said. She leaned toward Anita. “And I would love to fuck you,” she whispered. Anita felt Sheila’s statement was a threat and looked away, embarrassed. Had Sheila come to make a scene at her mother’s viewing?

“What?” she replied.

“You’ve done it, right? You know what it means.”

“Yes.”

“Well, they tell me I’m pretty good. Want to find out? We can do it right here. There’s a private room in the back. I checked. We can lock the door and go at it. You won’t regret it.”

“Sheila, have you no respect? My mother just died!”

“*You’re* the one with no respect. I heard you ran away from home and the shock killed your mom.”

“That’s not true! I left home three years ago. She just died last week.”

“Look, I’m sorry your mom died; really I am,” Sheila said. “But, I’m glad I met you again. It brought back memories. I’m all wet just thinking about those memories. That’s how I used to get thinking about you.” Sheila jumped up and hurried away. She wanted to leave Anita with the mental image of sexual arousal. Her ploy worked.

The next night, Anita lay in bed too exhausted to think about sex. The rituals of the day had drained her. After the viewing, mass of Christian burial, funeral procession to the cemetery, graveside prayers, and the final ordeal of watching the coffin lowered into the grave, the long ritual of her mother’s funeral was finally over. The emotional aftermath had only just begun.

She saw the body only once during the viewing and the change in her mother’s appearance shocked her. Not only death had altered her mother. Life had changed her. Anita’s leaving was only the first of many shocks her mother had endured in the past three years. Her father developed heart disease and was out of work for a year. They were barely able to survive. Her parents might have lost their house if Tony had not helped them. He never mentioned anything to Anita. They saw each other regularly and enjoyed each other’s company. He did not want to burden their sparse time together with news about their parents. He feared Anita would think he was trying to make her feel guilty and she would become angry with him. Tony kept quiet.

He also had needed her. She was his escape from the burden of keeping his parents’ lives from coming apart. Anita’s running away was the first of many shocks but Tony never blamed her for anything that happened afterward. He had developed the philosophical attitude that ‘shit happens.’ He was glad he helped his mother and father deal with the shit and never resented it.

Tony was asleep in the room where he had slept for three years since Anita left. He was sleeping in his own home; she was not. She was trying to fall asleep in the guestroom. It was a cluttered junk room with an old single bed and a garishly painted dresser. Her father asked her to stay the night and she could not refuse him. She did not know where he was. Perhaps he was still downstairs, sitting alone in the living room of the small row house, staring into space or at the blank TV.

She thought about how he felt when she showed up after her mother died. They had not known what to say to each other. She had disappeared for three years. Anita wondered if her

sudden reappearance angered him. That rage on top of grief at losing Ida must have nearly overwhelmed Alfonso. The stress could not have been good for his heart.

Perhaps her father was not alone in the living room right now but had some liquid company. He never drank hard liquor but she noticed a bottle in the dining room sideboard and wondered if he was draining it right now. Perhaps he should drown his sorrow, anesthetize himself, make the pain go away for a few hours, and keep the shock of loneliness at bay awhile longer. She felt sorry for her father but felt there was little she could do to help him. Anita was not even sure he wanted her to be his daughter anymore.

Since her return, he had not asked where she had been or what she had been doing for three years. He treated her like a distant relative and not his daughter. Anita understood and did not protest. Her running away canceled everything from her birth to the last moment she lived at home. Staying away made it even worse. She had no contact with them but did not know why. Anita could have gone back home or called them at any time, but she did not.

She assumed they wondered where she was, what she was doing, and if she was even alive. Worrying about their missing daughter probably hurt them a lot. They probably hated her for her indifference and rejection. *What was their worst feeling?* Anita asked herself. *Fear? Loathing? Anger? Hate?* Time went by so fast. Maybe they stopped thinking about her and gave up hope they would ever see her again. Once she was out, she was gone and stayed gone. They moved on with their lives. Then their lives started falling apart.

Anita did not hate her parents but she did not love them either. The realization saddened her. She was no longer the impetuous high school graduate. Although she was just three years older, she felt like an adult now. As she stumbled into adulthood, her adolescent impulsiveness had burned away. She felt lucky that it had. People often repeat their mistakes throughout their lives. She made her mistakes, suffered for them (and made others suffer as well), learned from them, and moved on. Anita was older, and a little wiser, hopefully. She now understood that a person should not go running after love. Giving up everything for love or passion was wrong. And, very stupid. The romantic stories were bullshit. Life was not a fantasy, but reality, and a person damn had well better accept it.

She accepted it, now. Love had not come her way since she left Sophia. She liked some women and they liked her but Anita hadn't found love again. She did not know why. Did she hold herself back, or were the women just not the ones her heart pined for? She wondered if her heart was looking for anybody. It had plunged her into two abysses. She ran after Carol, and ran away with Sophia. Perhaps now her heart was just methodically beating, quietly doing its job, keeping her alive, and not causing any new crises.

Her father had heart disease. Her mother's heart gave out, gave up, or maybe just broke. Anita felt sure she broke it. She began to wonder how strong her heart was. Could it withstand the emotional cataclysms her parents endured? She had no clue what the answer was.

Sheila came to her parents' house the day after the funeral to 'see how the family was doing.' "I meant what I said the other day," Sheila whispered. "I didn't say it nicely and I'm sorry. I know it was your mom's viewing. I was so excited seeing you I couldn't hold myself back. I just had to be honest with you. I hope you'll forgive me." Sheila's reappearance and apology surprised Anita. She had hoped she would never see Sheila again.

"It's okay. It was a difficult day. I hope you understand."

"Look, would you like to get out of here for a while? There's a cute little coffee shop at the Maplewood Mall. We could hang out and talk."

"Okay. I could use a break."

They walked in silence. There were a few people in the coffee shop. They ordered and then sat in a booth.

“You’re very beautiful. I’m surprised you’re not with anyone. Don’t you date?” Sheila asked.

“Sometimes,” Anita said. She did not want to share personal information with Sheila. Anita was not certain what Sheila’s interests or motives were. Did she want to date Anita or merely fuck her?

“Recently?” Sheila pressed.

“Why are you asking?” Anita replied, annoyed.

“No reason,” Sheila answered and then fell silent. “Well, I guess there *is* a reason. I get lonely and I don’t like being alone. I like company.”

“So?”

“I can’t understand someone who *chooses* to be alone. That’s how you seem to me. I know it’s none of my business. I’m just interested.”

“Well, I don’t mind being alone. Plus, my brother Tony and I are close, so he’s good company.”

“You’re lucky. I don’t have anybody. My parents are dead and my sister ran away years ago. She was way older than me. I have no idea what happened to her.”

“That’s sad.”

“Thanks. So, you *do* understand me a little now, right? I’m not so terrible.” Sheila forced herself to smile. Anita didn’t smile back.

“I didn’t think you were terrible. But, yeah, I understand you a little better now,” Anita replied.

“So, am I your type?”

“I don’t have a type.”

“Anita, everybody has a type. Even you.”

“No. You’re wrong. I’m different.”

“Well, yeah. You like girls the same as me.”

“If you say so.”

“You mean you *don’t* like girls?”

“I don’t know, Shelia. It’s just not something I think about.”

“Well, maybe you don’t *think* about it. But, what does your body tell you? When you fantasize about sex who are you having it with?”

“Not that’s it any of your business, but I don’t fantasize. And, I don’t want to talk about this. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I didn’t mean to offend you. I told you I always liked you and I wanted to get to know you. That’s all.”

“Okay, let’s talk about something else. What did you do after high school?”

“I tried a year of college but didn’t like it. I just wanted a job and I wanted to party. I started working as a waitress and then I moved to retail. Now I’m a manager in the notions department at Rowell’s”

“That’s the big department store at Germantown and Cheltenham, right?” Anita asked. Sheila nodded. “But, when we met at Woolworth’s, I thought you worked there.”

“No, I was just checking out the competition, such as it is,” Sheila said. Anita nodded. *And checking me out*, she thought, but did not say aloud. She wondered where their conversation was going. They seemed to have little if anything in common.

Anita felt happy being alone. Sheila did not interest her, nor did anyone else. She did not get horny or check out other women. Anita did not think about the women she had been with. She never missed them. She did not think about passion, ecstasy, or intimacy. She felt no need to be close to anyone, physically or emotionally. Anita did not know why.

Who am i?
What am i?
My body is that of a lesbian,
But, is my mind?
i've loved women.
should i, can i,
love a man?
Is any of this even important?

Anita looked at the poem and wondered why she wrote it. She was dimly aware of internal unease but tried to ignore it. She did not need any more complications in her life. Her mother's sudden death and her father's intimations that Anita caused her mother's death devastated her. He'd never said it, but she knew that was how he felt. She was certain her father was wrong and overreacted because of his grief. Anita felt certain he now despised her.

She worried her brother Tony could not help her. They had kept their bond secret. Their parents never knew Tony and Anita saw each other regularly. If their father now found out, would he feel betrayed by both his son and daughter?

Anita realized she cared about her father and did not want to lose him, too. His sufferings had piled up and seemed mostly caused by her. If she had not run away it seemed everything would still be okay. Her mother would still be alive. Her father would not have heart problems. All would be right with the world.

Or, would it? she thought. *Perhaps their world would be all right, but would mine? What would my life be like now if I had not run away three years ago? Who would I be?* Anita did not know but wanted to. She realized why she wrote the poem and resolved to think about finding answers to the questions it posed.

Sheila asked for her phone number but Anita still had no phone. Sheila asked where she lived and worked. Anita told her 'downtown.' Sheila remained undeterred. She stopped Tony on the way home after work and asked for Anita's address. He assumed Anita would want to be in touch with an old friend and gave it to her.

Sheila waited across the street for Anita to come home from work after an exhausting Friday night. She watched Anita enter her apartment. Then Sheila crossed the street and knocked on the door. Anita felt wary about answering so late at night. Tony had a key but he never came late.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"A friend," Sheila said. Anita recognized her voice.

"Sheila?" Anita asked.

"Yeah. Can I come in?" Anita did not know what to do. She worried Sheila might be tipsy and not go away even if Anita told her to. She opened the door. Sheila stepped quickly into the apartment. Before Anita could speak, Sheila mashed her lips against hers, gave her a sloppy, wet-hot kiss, and grabbed Anita's crotch. Anita stepped back to avoid Sheila's grasp but

stumbled against the wall. Sheila pressed her body against Anita's and kissed her forcefully again. Anita tried to protest.

"Don't speak!" Sheila said. "Just get those clothes off." She began undressing Anita. She felt too tired to fight back. "I told you I wanted you all through high school. Well, now I'm going to get what I wanted. I'll do everything. You won't regret it. In fact, you'll love it."

"But... but..." Anita protested.

"Shut up. Lock the door. Get into that bed. Now!" Anita felt overwhelmed. She did not like Sheila's forcefulness but did not think she could stop her. Sheila was stronger than she was. She decided to surrender.

"So, how long has it been?" Sheila asked later as they lolled next to each other, exhausted. Sheila had worn Anita out. She had more orgasms in one night than she had in the past year.

"A while," Anita replied. She felt no warmth or attraction to Sheila. Anita did not care if Sheila had any orgasms. If Sheila wanted her, Anita was willing to be her plaything, but she would not reciprocate. Anita felt certain there could be no love between them. She did not know if that was what Sheila wanted, expected, or hoped for, but assumed Sheila was smart enough to know you don't get somebody to love you by raping them.

Sheila did not consider it rape. She thought she was doing Anita a favor. The girl seemed timid, shy, and inexperienced. What was the point of having such a gorgeous body if you didn't share and enjoy it? *Might as well be a nun*, Sheila thought. She felt determined to prevent Anita from ever considering becoming a nun. She wanted to awaken Anita to her sexuality. Sheila had found meaning and purpose for her life in sex and she felt other women ought to do the same. *Why did God give you great tits, an ass, a cunt, lips, and hands if not to enjoy them?* she thought. That was her philosophy. She not only thought about this philosophy, but she also acted on it whenever, wherever, and with whomever she could.

Sex made Sheila happy. She did not need or want emotional entanglements. She had never fallen in love. Sheila fell in lust, reveled in that lust, and that was enough for her. She was young, horny, ready to fuck, and did, as often as possible. She might think about the emotional stuff when she got older and could not fuck as much. Right now, sex was all that mattered.

Sheila had wanted Anita for a long time. Now that she had her, she was not sure what she wanted to do next. She did not know Anita and was not sure she would like her if she did. Sheila looked around at Anita's crappy apartment. *What a dump!* she thought. *How could anyone live in a place like this?* She positively could not. Anita was neat and the place was clean. However, it was still a dump.

Sheila wanted Anita again but she was asleep. *You can sleep when you're dead*, she thought. *But, you can't fuck!* Sheila reached for Anita under the covers. She was still wet from all her orgasms. She slid her fingers into Anita's wetness and Anita moaned in her sleep. Sheila felt pride and accomplishment. Her rough seduction had been successful. She was sure Anita was hers. What would she like to do to her this time?

They had all weekend...

Chapter 10 - Reconciliation

Tony stopped by Anita's apartment after work. They had not seen each other since Ida's funeral. As they chatted, Tony tried to work up the courage to ask Anita a question. He didn't know how she would respond and didn't want to infuriate her.

When there was a lull in their conversation, Tony sighed. "Dad and I were wondering if you would like to come back home." Anita felt shocked.

"Dad and you? Really, Tony? He hates me! This is *your* idea isn't it?" Tony nodded, sheepishly.

"He doesn't hate you. He really needs our help," he explained. Anita heard pleading in his voice.

"You want me to take care of him?" Tony did not reply. "Tony, is that what you think?" she pressed.

"Well, sort of. He doesn't need actual care. But, I think we should be together. It could help you, too. You could save money. I'd give you your old room back if you want it."

"No. I'm sorry, but no."

"Why? Don't you think you owe us?"

"Owe you?" Anita gasped. "What do you mean?" She thought she already knew what her brother meant but wanted him to say it aloud. He did not. "You think I killed mom, don't you?" Tony looked away. "You do! I'm shocked, Tony. I thought you understood me."

"And, I thought you'd grown up," Tony commented. Her immediate refusal angered him. "I thought you finally got it. Life is shit, Anita, and all you have is your family. Nobody else cares about you." Anita had not seen her brother's dark side before. It frightened her.

Tony had always been sweet and kind. He was likeable and people felt good around him. Anita saw him as a good person and liked who he had become when he reached adulthood. She worried about deep feelings he might be hiding from her. Then she read the sad expression on his face and understood he had been hurt. It was not Ida's death that caused his pain.

"Tony, what do you mean? What's happened? Did you break up with Sydney?" Tony nodded and then filled up with tears. He refused to cry. "Oh, my God, why?"

"She wanted to come to mom's funeral. I told her not to. She got angry and told me I was ashamed of her because she's Black. I guess she was right." Anita hugged Tony and he began to cry. Her little brother had suffered yet another loss in his young life. She wondered how many more losses it would take to break him. He was too young to give up on life. Anita decided to change her mind immediately and give him something positive.

"All right," she said. "I'll come home, but only if *he* asks me. He has to want me to. Do you understand?" Tony stopped crying. Her offer surprised him.

"You mean it? You would do it?" he asked.

"I'll give it a try. It's the best I can do. If it doesn't work out, I'm leaving." Tony nodded.

"That seems reasonable. I'll talk to dad."

"Okay. Let me know what he says. What are you going to do about Sydney?" she asked. Tony looked at her, puzzled. "Can't you get her back?" He shook his head. "It's really over?" she asked. He nodded. "I'm sorry. She made you happy. You deserve that kind of happiness. Lord knows I've never given it to you."

"No, I'm sorry about what I said earlier. You have. You really have. You're a great sister. You always have been."

Anita thought Tony's proposal might save her from Sheila. She stopped by whenever she felt like it, forced Anita into bed, and did whatever she wanted to her. Although Anita did not like Sheila, she did not fight her. She felt it would be useless to resist. It was just sex. Anita felt trapped with no hope of escape. Until now.

Anita would be safe from Sheila if she moved out. She could disappear from her apartment. Sheila might look for her and even go to the Boyd. Anita thought she could get rid of her if she showed up there. She might follow Anita home but it would not make any difference. Sheila could not continue dominating her with her father and brother around.

Alfonso felt pleased that his son and daughter went out together in the evenings. They kept each other safe. Germantown was changing. There were more Black people on every block. Al grew up with Black people and worked with them but never felt comfortable with them. It always seemed more than just their skin color that made them different.

The little church he and Ida went to for years was in a Black neighborhood. Some of his white neighbors were talking about moving away. He might consider moving but there was no money for a new house. They were doing okay on three incomes. He had enough money to fix up the house and do the work he neglected when he was sick. He did not go out at night and he parked as close to the house as possible. There were rumors of break-ins on nearby streets. He did not know whether they had anything to do with Black people moving into the neighborhood but that was what his white neighbors assumed.

Tony and Anita walked to Hecate's Circle. A band named Whole Oats had been performing regularly for several months and they were drawing good audiences. Anita's friend Sharon still worked there. She remembered Anita and even let them in free although both Anita and Tony protested. They could afford to pay admission now and wanted to support the club.

Anita noticed Tony watching Sharon but did not remind him she was a lesbian. It had been two years since she last saw Sharon. Perhaps she had changed. Anita decided to wait until Tony expressed an interest in Sharon. She did not want to discourage him from seeking a new girlfriend.

"Your brother keeps looking at me," Sharon told Anita when Tony was in the bathroom.

"I'm not sure about this, but I think he likes you."

"Maybe he just knows I'm different. Kind of like you."

"No, I pretty sure he likes you," Anita insisted.

"Did you tell him I was gay?"

"Should I? I mean, I didn't want to speak for you."

"You think I should give him the bad news?" Sharon asked, grinning. She was not trying to be cruel or insensitive, just factual.

"I was hoping he might look tempting to you." Anita smiled. She meant her comment ironically.

"Anita!"

"Well, he *is* my little brother and I want to see him get what he wants."

"Wait, so he *wants* me?" Sharon replied, smirking. "You're serious?"

"I honestly don't know. But I don't think I should interfere in his love life, or yours."

"You're right. Thanks, I guess."

"Be gentle with him, okay?"

"Sure. What about you? Seeing anyone?"

"No. I just moved back home. Our mom died a few months ago."

“Shit! I’m sorry. Was it sudden?”

“Heart attack. We think it was coming for years but nobody noticed.”

“That’s awful. How’s your dad?”

“He’s a little better every day. Other people have told me it takes a long time. Tony and I are helping him.”

“Were you still living with Delilah?”

“No, I was living alone. She took off with her friend Alice a while back. I got her apartment and her job.”

“Alice? I knew her. She was weird.”

“I think they were in love although they wouldn’t admit it.”

“Wish I was in love...,” Sharon said, wistfully. Anita wondered if she was coming on to her.

“My brother’s coming back. Check him out. You might like what you see,” Anita teased. Sharon smirked again. They both giggled.

“Ladies! Talking about me?” Tony asked, brashly. Anita knew she was right. Tony found Sharon attractive. The girls looked at each other and feigned embarrassment. Tony assumed they had been talking about him and grinned. “So, Sharon, how long have you known my sister?” he asked.

“She used to come here when she was working at the Rialto.”

“Right. Back when she was living with that older woman, Sophia. You ever meet her?” Sharon shook her head. “Me neither. That was back when you were a lesbian, right?” Tony asked Anita. His question shocked her.

“I still am Tony.”

“Oh of course. It’s just that I never see you with anybody and you don’t talk about anyone. Do you even date?” Tony’s abrupt personal question surprised Anita. She wondered if he knew Sharon was gay and was trying to get the two of them together.

“No,” she answered shyly. They had shared much about their lives but never talked about dating or what kind of people attracted them. She assumed Sydney was his first and only girlfriend. Perhaps she was wrong and he had more experience than she knew. “But, I’m still gay.”

“So am I,” Sharon chimed in. She wanted to see how Tony would react. He immediately looked at her.

“Really? That’s a shame,” he commented. Sharon wondered if she ought to take offense.

“What do you mean?” she snapped.

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I just meant that I think you’re really pretty. I like you and would love to go out with you.” Tony tried not to feel awkward after blurting out his feelings. His honesty surprised both girls.

“You want to take *me* out?” Sharon asked. She felt flattered but tried to hide her feeling. No boy had asked her out since she was in the ninth grade. “That’s sweet,” she added. Tony saw an opening.

“I can be very sweet,” he said in as sexy a male voice as Anita ever heard. She saw a side of her little brother she never knew existed. Was he trying to seduce Sharon?

“I think I need to use the bathroom,” Anita said as she jumped up. She hoped they would still be sitting together when she got back. She looked at them when she reached the bathroom door. They were still talking. *Damn*, she thought, *my little brother’s got some moves*. Anita grinned and went into the bathroom. They were gone when she came out.

Tony told Anita what happened as they rode the trolley toward the subway that would take them downtown to their jobs. “She took me to her place.”

“Did you...?” she asked cautiously. He knew she would ask and pretended her question shocked him.

“Anita!”

“I know it’s none of my business. I was just curious.”

“We just talked most of the night. I like her and I think she likes me.”

“But?”

“But, what? She’s not into guys? I’m not so sure, Anita. Don’t get me wrong, but I think she could be into me.”

“I don’t know, Tony. You could get hurt.”

“Hell, sis, I’ve *been* hurt. I know what it’s like. And, I don’t care.”

“Are you seeing her again?”

“Yeah. We have a date. We’re going to the Rialto. She wants to see a couple of movies they’re showing.”

“Oh, really? That’s great. I’m happy for you both.” She did not want him to go to the Rialto yet there was no reason he should not. He did not know Sophia and was unlikely to meet her. He would just be another moviegoer and not the brother of Sophia’s former lover.

She wondered if Sophia had another lover now. It was likely she did. She was compellingly sexy when she wanted to be. Sophia could charm any woman, gay or not. That was how Anita saw her love affair with Sophia. She felt Sophia had charmed her, seduced her, and pulled her into an irresistible world of sweet, delicious, passionate sex, and soft, kind, and caring love. It was great, for a while.

If only it had lasted.

Anita realized what she wanted. It was simple; she wanted a love like the one she had with Sophia, only she wanted it to last forever. *Is that so much to ask?* Anita thought. Tony would tell her it was if he could read her mind. However, guys were different. They did not care so much about everlasting love. They loved in the moment. They wanted happiness today and did not care about tomorrow. It might never come.

Anita wondered if Sharon and Tony were truly in love. Sharon had been a lesbian. Perhaps she still was. It was obvious Sharon adored Tony and the feeling was mutual. They had become great friends overnight and were soon referring to each other as ‘best friends.’ Sharon lost some of her gay friends who accused her of being a traitor but she did not care. She had not been a lesbian to make a social or political statement but to assert who she rightly was. Tony also made her feel who she rightly was. They fit together seamlessly.

They married a year after they met. Tony did it mostly for his father. He saw the way Alfonso’s eyes lit up the first time he met Sharon. Alfonso felt delighted to have a ‘second daughter.’ Anita felt hurt when she first heard him use that term. However, it made her understand the depth of his torment after she ran away. Her selfish action had shattered him and it was obvious he never recovered from it or fully forgave her.

Anita felt happy for them but sad for herself. She now lived at home alone with her father. Tony spoke to her before they married. He knew his departure would put pressure on Anita. She might never be free to leave, even if she wanted to. She told Tony she was okay with him leaving. She did not want to deny him happiness with Sharon. However, she did not feel all

right. What if something happened that made it impossible for her to stay with her father? Would she feel she could leave him alone? Anita felt trapped.

Sharon called Anita one evening at the Boyd. "Nancy's got nowhere to go," she explained. "I worked with her at Hecate's and I know she's okay. She never uses drugs. She doesn't even drink. But she's broken up and needs a friend."

"But, you're her friend, not me," Anita replied.

"Yeah, but our apartment is too small." Sharon and Tony lived in a one-bedroom apartment. It was located in an old row house on Twenty-first Street not far from their jobs. Tony still worked at Gimbels and Sharon worked at a folk club called the Second Fret. "Plus we just got married. I care about Nancy but I can't let her stay with us. Could she stay with you 'til she gets back on her feet? It won't be long. Please."

"Well, okay, but I don't know how my father's gonna react."

"Just tell him the truth, but leave out the part about her being gay. Besides, you have that extra room."

"It's a worse mess than when I was sleeping there. I moved all Tony's stuff out when I took his room."

"Yeah, he keeps saying he wants to get that stuff but I don't know where we're going to put it. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He left that big double bed. There's plenty of room for two people. It'll work out."

"Thanks. I'm really grateful. I wouldn't ask, but she's a good person and I feel sorry for her, and..."

"Look, you helped me when I wanted to leave Sophia, remember? You introduced me to Delilah. We'll have to find another Delilah for Nancy."

"Or, you can be her Delilah."

"I don't think so."

"Well, thanks for doing what you can."

Alfonso heard Anita unlock the front door and looked up from his newspaper. The TV news played in the background. She wasn't alone. He had just finished a simple dinner of a leftover hoagie and a lite beer. Anita smiled when she saw her father. "Dad, this is my friend Nancy."

Al smiled at the tall girl with long dark hair. Her simple beauty struck Alfonso. She had the slender figure of a model but she had an unusual face. It did not go with her body. Her face was attractive but not beautiful. She had a prominent nose, small lips, wide-set eyes, a large forehead, and a shy smile.

"Nancy and Sharon are good friends." Alfonso brightened when Anita mentioned Sharon. "They worked together for a couple of years," Anita added. He adored his daughter-in-law. Any friend of hers was okay with him.

"Hello, Mr. Cataldi," Nancy said, brightly. Alfonso liked her smooth, sweet voice. It went with her body.

"Hi. Have you guys eaten? There's leftovers from the other night. There's beer, too, if you want one."

"Yeah, we're gonna make something. Um, would it be okay for Nancy to stay tonight? She's between apartments."

“Sure. But that guest room’s a mess, you know.”

“She can sleep with me. My bed’s plenty big enough.”

“Okay. Sit down, Nancy. Make yourself at home.”

“We’re gonna go in the kitchen,” Anita said. “You want anything, Dad?” Alfonso shook his head. The girls disappeared into the kitchen. Al went back to reading the newspaper.

“Your dad seems nice,” Nancy said. Alfonso overheard her comment and smiled.

“Oh, he’s great,” Anita replied. Alfonso smiled even more. He had never heard his daughter call him great. He never knew what she thought of him. They were getting along okay, but there was still awkward tension between them. They both felt it.

“I really appreciate this,” Nancy said as they ate the sandwiches Anita made and shared a beer.

“Glad we could help. Do you have to work tonight?” Anita asked.

“No. We’re closed. They’re doing some work there. Might take a couple of days.”

“Good. We can just hang out. But, I have to go to work tomorrow.”

“Oh, good. I have to go downtown to meet some people.” They finished eating and Anita cleaned up.

“I’m kind of tired. It was a very busy at the Boyd today. You wanna turn in?” Anita said.

“Sure.” They walked back toward the living room and Anita showed Nancy the stairway.

“Goodnight, Mr. Cataldi. Thanks for letting me stay,” Nancy said.

“No problem. You guys sleep well.”

The girls went upstairs to Anita’s room. She had wanted to make the room her own after Tony moved out. She cleared out his possessions except for the furniture. Her father had offered to help her redecorate; Anita had not decided what to do with it yet. The girls took turns using the bathroom and got ready for bed. Nancy seemed sad after they settled in. Anita asked her what was wrong.

“It all happened so fast,” Nancy said, softly. “One day Marjorie and I were fine. Then she changed. I still don’t know why.”

“Did *you* leave?” Anita asked. Nancy shook her head.

“She threw me out. All my worldly possessions are in my suitcase.”

“That’s horrible.”

“It is. The terrible thing is that we were really in love. I thought she was my goddess. She told me I was hers. I know it sounds silly, but we meant it, or, at least, that’s what I thought.”

“I know what it feels like...”

“You mean it’s happened to you?” Nancy asked. She felt surprised to have accidentally met someone who had a similar failed romance.

“Not the same way but... yes.”

“Tell me about it.” Anita told Nancy how Sophia seduced her, fell in love with her, and then moved into the Rialto.

“Wait, she’s that woman that runs the Rialto?”

“Yeah, do you know her?”

“No, but I’ve seen her. I would never guess she was gay.”

“She wasn’t always. She’s married. The theater belongs to her husband.”

“So what happened?” Nancy asked. She pictured Sophia in her mind.

“It took me a while but I figured out she loved that damn theater more than she loved me.”

“That’s awful,” Nancy replied.

“It was. It hurt badly. I try not to think about it.”

“But, I brought it all back. Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Anita said. Her memories overwhelmed her. There were good ones and bad ones, confusing ones and clear ones, all of them about Sophia and love. The good ones were memories of the times they spent together when she was Sophia’s only love. The bad ones were when Sophia changed and began to love the Rialto more than she loved Anita. She missed Sophia and felt overcome with sadness. Anita started to cry.

“God, she really hurt you didn’t she?” Nancy asked.

“I’m sorry. I thought I was over this.”

“I don’t think you ever get over it completely.”

“No?” Anita asked, through her tears. She felt helpless. Nancy shook her head and opened her arms to hug Anita. Moved by Nancy’s sympathy, Anita fell into her arms and wept uncontrollably. She hoped her father could not hear her but could not stop crying. Nancy held her for a few moments and then kissed Anita. She wanted to make Anita feel better. She also wanted to feel better as well.

Anita had not responded to someone emotionally for a long time. Her body responded to Sheila’s sexual dominance but she kept her emotions locked up tight. Now, however, she felt differently. Nancy’s sympathy melted her. She wanted to connect her painful loss to Nancy’s and strive with Nancy to lessen their shared suffering.

Downstairs, Alfonso thought he heard crying and assumed the girls were talking. A little while later, a loud moan surprised him. He was not sure what they were doing. Perhaps one of them had called out in her sleep. He hoped they were okay.

The next morning, Anita woke up early. Nancy was still asleep. Anita went downstairs to make a big breakfast. She found her father sitting in the kitchen with a cup of coffee.

“Is she your girlfriend?” he asked calmly as she came into the room. Anita shook her head. “I... um... heard some noises last night, and wondered,” he added.

“You *heard*?” Anita replied. He nodded.

“Yeah, I knew you were... um... what do they call it, now. Gay?”

“You knew?”

“Tony told me a while back.” Anita felt mortified and did not know what to say or do. Should she ask Tony why he told their father? Before she could give it any more thought, Alfonso added, “So if she *is* your girlfriend, she can stay as long as you want.” His offer stunned Anita. She wondered if her father’s open-mindedness extended to Tony having dated a Black girl. She doubted it; there were limits.

“So, when did Tony tell you?” Anita asked, surprised her sexuality had ever been a topic of discussion between her brother and father. She wondered which of them brought it up.

“He knew how hurt we were after you ran away. After your mother died, he told me you didn’t run away because of your mother and me, but because you were in love with some girl.”

“Yes, that’s true. I’m sorry, Dad. I know I hurt you and mom when I ran away.”

“Yeah, but the worst part wasn’t that you ran away. You *stayed* away and we never heard from you. We worried about you. We didn’t know what happened to you. We went crazy. You could have called us, Anita. Just to say you were all right.” The words spilled out as if he had bottled them up and hoped one day to say them. That time had finally come. He wanted her to know the pain she caused her parents.

“I know. The person I was staying with tried to get me to call. I couldn’t.”

“Why not? Was it because you hated us?”

“I didn’t hate you, I just couldn’t call. I’m sorry. I was different, then. Stupid. I know I can never make it up to you.”

“No. But, at least you’re home now. Your mother would have been happy to see you, though.” Anita thought he was accusing her of neglecting her mother and somehow causing her death.

“It happened so fast, and it wasn’t my fault.”

“Her death wasn’t anybody’s fault, Anita. I miss her, but at least I have you, Tony, and Sharon. Your mother would have liked Sharon.”

“You think so?”

“All she wanted was for you kids to be happy.”

“And, Tony and Sharon sure are happy!” Anita added. They both laughed. Nancy came into the kitchen in her pajamas. She seemed embarrassed.

“I hope you don’t mind that I’m in my pjs,” she said self-consciously. “I couldn’t find my robe.” Alfonso felt awkward. He already knew too much about this pretty young woman who was a stranger in his house but who had sex with his daughter last night. *Kids today!* he thought. He did not want to imagine them in bed together. Al got up, said goodbye, and headed out to work.

“Did I offend your father?” Nancy asked.

“No. He’s running a little late. How did you sleep?”

“Great, after... well, you know. Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to happen. I’m not trying to get you to like me or anything. It’s enough that you’re helping me.”

“Slow down. Don’t feel guilty. I enjoyed it. You took a lot of my hurt away. I hope I did the same for you.”

“So you’re not angry with me?”

“No. I’m looking forward to tonight,” Anita replied. Nancy seemed surprised.

“Really? We hardly know each other, but I feel a real connection to you. Maybe it’s because of what happened to us... you know, before.”

“And maybe it’s because of what we did last night. It felt right to me. My dad said you could stay as long as you want.”

“No way! The people I’m seeing downtown are helping me find a new place to live. What should I do?”

“Talk to them, but come back here tonight, okay? I’ve slept alone for too long.”

“I don’t want you to think I’m taking advantage of you, Anita. We hardly know each other.”

“I think we can change that, don’t you? That is if you want to,” Anita replied. Nancy did. She kissed Anita. Anita kissed her back.

Chapter 11 - Lies and Truths

Nancy was no one special and she knew it. She was just an average girl, with an average life, in an average world. Then she met Marjorie and something happened. She became special, not just special, but the center of Marjorie's universe. At least, that was what Marjorie told her.

Marjorie was five years older than Nancy was. She had bounced around from city to city since she left college when she was twenty. She had an old car, enough random skills to get odd jobs, and a wanderlust that kept her moving.

They met when her car broke down on Eleventh Street right outside Community College of Philadelphia. Its 'campus' was a renovated department store. Nancy went there to get an admissions application and take a short tour. She left feeling it was not the ideal place for her. The building was old, crowded, and dirty. The classrooms seemed cluttered and disorganized, although the students and teachers looked interesting. However, it was the only college Nancy could afford. She might have to enroll there, even if it sucked.

Marjorie walked up to her on the sidewalk and brazenly asked for help. At first, Nancy thought Marjorie was a panhandler. There were plenty of them downtown and Nancy always avoided them. None of the panhandlers looked as stunning as Marjorie was. Before she could wave Marjorie off, she started to explain her dilemma.

"It's my car," Marjorie said. "I can't fix it alone. Could you help me?" Nancy looked across the street and saw an old Chevy with its hood open.

"I don't know anything about cars," she said. "I ride the bus."

"Oh, I can fix it, but I need somebody to pump the gas and hit the starter while I look under the hood. You can do *that*, right? Anybody could do that!" Nancy did not think she was just anybody, so she agreed. They crossed the street, Nancy got in and Marjorie stuck her head under the hood.

"Okay, turn it over!" she shouted. Nancy turned the key in the stiff ignition. "Pump the gas a little!" Nancy pumped, hard. "Stop! That's too much. Damn! I think you flooded it." She came to the door and looked at Nancy.

"You like to pump, don't you," she said, grinning. Marjorie had a round face, a dazzling smile, and penetrating eyes. She was tall but not slender and had sensuous curves most women only dreamed of. Nancy looked at her, sheepishly. She had done something wrong and was not helping. "So do I, but more about *that* later."

They waited in silence for a few moments. Nancy felt Marjorie expected her to ask who she was, where she was going, or something else about how she happened to be on Eleventh Street that afternoon. Nancy remained quiet.

"Okay, let's try it again. Maybe she's ready to put out." Marjorie said. She stuck her head beneath the hood, and yelled, "Hit it!" Nancy turned the key and pressed down gently on the accelerator. "Oh, you can be gentle, too. I like that even more," she cooed. Nancy concentrated on cranking the engine. It almost started.

"I think I see the problem!" Marjorie shouted. "Stop!" She reached into the engine. Nancy heard some banging and cursing and then Marjorie said, "There! Try it now." The engine started and began to idle smoothly. "Gets me hot when she purrs like that," Marjorie commented. She dropped the hood and walked to the door. "Drop you anywhere?" she asked, breezily.

"I was heading for the El."

"The El! You must be kidding me. Nobody rides the El when they can have a ride in my sweet car. Where are you going?"

“Home.”

“Where’s that?”

“Kensington.”

“I’m heading that way. Let me give you a ride. It’s the least I can do.” Nancy did not know what to say. Was the car safe? Was Marjorie? She could not tell, and hesitated.

“Move over, girl,” Marjorie said. She slid onto the bench seat. Nancy scooted aside. Marjorie wore a thin skirt. Her legs were bare, and she had cheap leather sandals on. Nancy felt heat coming from her thighs when they briefly touched. It was a cool fall afternoon. She assumed the heat came from Marjorie’s effort while she tried fixing the car. It didn’t, but Nancy did not find out until later after she invited Marjorie up to her tiny studio apartment.

“I like you, Nancy. You’re nice. Most women wouldn’t have helped me,” Marjorie said, as they pulled into traffic and then crossed Market Street.

“Lots of guys know about cars. I’m sure they would’ve helped you.”

“True, but I didn’t *want* their help. They’re always so friendly and helpful but they’re too eager if you know what I mean.”

“Eager for what?”

“Look at me, Nancy. What do you see?” Nancy looked at Marjorie as they rode up Frankford Avenue beneath the El.

“Um, I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“Do I look hot to you?”

“It’s not that hot today. It was warmer yesterday.”

“Not that kind of hot.”

“Oh, yeah, you look pretty.”

“I’m not just pretty, Nancy, I’m gorgeous. Guys always want to help me because I’m gorgeous. I never let them unless I’m desperate.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re not there to help me but to help themselves to me, if you get my meaning.” Nancy was not certain what Marjorie meant.

“Help themselves...?” she asked, puzzled.

“Yeah. Happens all the time- well, almost all the time. There are some nice guys, but I haven’t run into many. They think because they help me I’ll give them a little something. You know what I mean?” Nancy thought she was beginning to understand.

“Really? They expect *that*, just for helping you do what I did?”

“Yup. Guys are always horny. There’s nothing wrong with that. I mean, *I’m* always horny. But, I’m not into guys. I’m not about to give them what they’re hoping for. What I got is special and only girls get it. Special girls, you know what I mean?” Nancy thought she understood. Had Marjorie implied Nancy was a ‘special’ girl?

Did Marjorie think Nancy was a lesbian? How could she have gotten that impression? Nancy wore plain dark jeans, a loose-fitting shirt, a thin jacket, and sneakers. She did not look like anyone special or sexy. She was just a girl who rode the El downtown to Community College. What the hell was Marjorie suggesting?

“So what kind of street do you live on?” Marjorie asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Is it apartment buildings, row houses, single homes? Any trees? Many cars?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Is it safe to park so I can sleep in my car tonight?”

“Sleep?” Nancy replied, in disbelief. “In your car? Why?”

“I’m just passing through your fine city and I don’t have a place to stay. This old jalopy is my home.”

“You *live* in your car?”

“Well, not all the time. When I’m working I get rooms, sometimes. Rooms with beds, baths, and hot food, even.”

“Well, I’ve got a sofa and bath. I’m not much on food, though.”

“Yeah, I noticed you were a skinny little thing. You got a really pretty face, though.”

“Thanks, I guess. Look, my place is small, but if you need a place to sleep and take a shower, well, you could stay tonight.”

“I take it you live alone?”

“What do you think?”

“You shouldn’t live alone with a sweet face and dynamite body like that. But what do the boys say?”

“There aren’t any boys; there haven’t been, for a while.”

“Pity,” Marjorie commented.

Marjorie slept on the couch. She went to sleep in pajamas but awoke naked. Nancy saw her body beneath the light blanket and noticed the pajamas on the floor. She assumed Marjorie took them off during the night. Perhaps the apartment was too hot.

Nancy did not sleep much. She stayed awake and wondered about Marjorie. Who was she? Why was she so compelling? Did Nancy want to find out? She felt she had nothing to lose. She could experiment. It was the Sixties; there was a sexual revolution happening. Everybody was fucking everybody else. Why not her? Sex with another woman seemed okay if only to find out what it was like.

She found out. Despite Marjorie’s brashness, she was not insistent or pushy. She did not come on to Nancy. She waited until Nancy came on to her. Marjorie could not have been sweeter. She pretended she was the virgin, not Nancy. She let Nancy begin almost every move. Nancy’s lust came out and built to a point where she quenched it and discovered a new sexual identity as Marjorie’s lover.

However, Marjorie did not play Nancy. She liked her sweetness, naiveté, and softness. She fell into Nancy as Nancy fell into her. Nancy could not believe she was in bed with the brash, sexy, suggestive, flirty woman she had helped on the street. Marjorie was different in bed. She was sweet, demure, gentle, and more passionate than Nancy could have imagined anyone ever being. There were two sides to Marjorie. Nancy liked them both and wondered if she would discover more sides as time went by.

Marjorie moved in and found work right away. There were always jobs for women who could type over one hundred words a minute. She got her first paycheck and they looked for a bigger apartment. Nancy’s cramped studio with its single bed and occasional hot water was not adequate for one person, let alone a couple.

Their new apartment was in an old house in Germantown. Nancy did not know the neighborhood. Marjorie fell in love with it as soon as she saw it. The wide variety of buildings fascinated her. There were stately row houses, huge mansions, and old apartment buildings, all on magnificent tree-lined streets. There also were old mills, warehouses, and even a steel mill by the train tracks at Wayne Junction. Trolley and bus routes crisscrossed the neighborhood. It was easy to get around and ride downtown. Everything blended into a magnificent whole.

Nancy and Marjorie also blended into a magnificent whole.

Nancy had never fantasized about love affairs or romances. She never yearned for love or felt lonely. Neither was a big deal, for her. She was practical. For her, liaisons did not have pasts or futures, only presents. She was either with someone or not. If she dated someone, she dated them. She moved on when it ended; there were never hard feelings.

Marjorie never talked about her feelings. She never talked about feelings at all. She just acted on them. Nancy was more observant and introspective. She watched herself experiencing her life. When she asked Marjorie about her life, her answers were vague about where she had been and what she did before they met. Nancy feared Marjorie was hiding something. She did not become suspicious, however. She convinced herself Marjorie's previous life did not matter. They were together and fit seamlessly. She was not certain why, but she felt they were going to remain together. It seemed they were meant for each other.

Marjorie helped Nancy apply for college, qualify for financial aid, and start a work-study job. Nancy liked being a student. She found the college classes intellectually challenging and the other students at Community College interesting. She liked the variety of people she saw on campus. Most college campuses were homogeneous. Students were mostly in the same age range, roughly eighteen to twenty-two. However, Community College was different. Some students were just out of high school. Others had already attended college elsewhere and then dropped out. There were working adults who were trying college for the first time. Some older students were just taking classes for fun. At the end of every day, Nancy would regale Marjorie with stories about the classes she took and the people she met.

Marjorie found her work environment to be almost as interesting as Nancy's college environment. Every workplace has a wide variety of people of various ages, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. If the workplace was effective, the employees blended into a creative whole, and the combined effort was successful. Marjorie was only a typing pool member but the law firm was thriving and she took pride in being a small part of its success.

She worked close to Community College and visited Nancy at lunchtime. They felt at home among the students and faculty. Nobody noticed as they held hands or stole a kiss when they greeted each other.

Marjorie's workplace was different. She had to be careful about what she shared about her personal life. She came alone when they held social events. Some of the men noticed and tried to befriend her but she gently rebuffed them. She had traveled around, held many jobs, and understood the back-and-forth of workplace sexual politics. A beautiful young woman was always vulnerable.

Marjorie considered herself a beautiful young woman who was *not* vulnerable. She was savvy, cautious, and diplomatic. She had fended off advances from cooks in restaurants where she worked, teachers in the university she briefly attended, and mechanics who fixed her car and wanted something extra for payment. Marjorie was always firm, but pleasant. She never fought the men, but resisted them in such a way that they gave up. When they accused her of being a 'lezzie,' she laughed, took it as a compliment, and nodded.

Marjorie did not reject the men only because they were male. She rejected them because most of them were pathetic. She learned early on that most men never saw her as the beautiful, wonderful woman she was, but only as a version of their mommies. She felt sorry for them. They thought they were adults, but they never had grown up.

She had known only a few men who were not that way. They saw her as a new, exciting, and unique woman. That was the way she wanted men to see her, and she liked it. Marjorie eagerly gave them what they wanted but only when she knew she was moving on, so neither

could form any attachments. She had fun, and the men turned out to be enjoyable. They wanted romance. She did not, but that was okay.

Marjorie was a lesbian because women wanted love, pure love, free of childish yearning, and the emotional baggage that came with stunted maturity. Other women saw Marjorie not as a mother (as most men saw women) but as a woman, every time. It was easier to have affairs with other women and she had them as often as she could. However, Marjorie had left those other women but stayed with Nancy. She sometimes wondered why. How was Nancy different? She did not know but wanted their liaison to last.

It lasted for nearly two years. One day, Nancy awoke and realized she had to leave. The feeling was so strong that she did not question it. She just acted. She packed a suitcase, left a note, and locked the door. She walked to Hecate's Circle, a few blocks from their apartment. The place was occasionally open during the day. On her walk, she invented a believable story. She hoped Sharon or someone else she knew would help her.

She found out Sharon no longer worked there because she married and moved downtown. Nancy asked for her phone number and called. She lied to Sharon and told her Marjorie had thrown her out. Sharon felt shocked. She saw the two women many times and they always seemed in love. They fit together; there was never a sign of friction or unease. They had even involved themselves in some lesbian and gay events that happened at Hecate's Circle. Sharon called Anita in Germantown and asked her to give Nancy a place to stay for the night. Anita went to Hecate's Circle, met Nancy, and they walked back to her house.

One night months later Marjorie came into the *Second Fret*. She greeted Sharon warmly but Sharon was cool toward her. Marjorie wondered why. They were always friendly at Hecate's Circle. Sharon snubbed Marjorie a few times during the show, so Marjorie waited outside and stopped Sharon as she was leaving.

"What's wrong with you?" Marjorie asked. "We used to like each other."

"Well, I don't like you anymore, not after what you did to Nancy."

"What *I* did? What do you mean? *She* left me."

"No, she didn't. You threw her out. After almost two years. How could you? I saw the two of you and you guys were perfect together."

"Yes, we were, until she walked out on me."

"She told me you threw her out!"

"That's not what happened, Sharon. I came home, found a short note, and all her clothes were gone. I couldn't believe it. I thought we were happy."

"I thought you were happy, too. What happened?"

"You tell me if you know so much. Where is she, anyway?"

"She's staying with my sister-in-law. I don't think you know her."

"Oh. Good. I've been worried about her."

"She's okay."

"Are they... together?" Marjorie asked. Sharon nodded. Marjorie's face fell.

"Did you love her?" Sharon asked, gently.

"I really liked her. She was fun to be with and I thought we had a great life. I was happy. I thought she was, too."

"But, she wasn't, I guess."

"She never told me anything was wrong."

"Maybe she didn't know. People are like that," Sharon commented. Marjorie nodded and walked away. Her sadness overwhelmed her. She thought the worst of her shock was over but it

came back forcefully. Marjorie wondered how she'd fallen in love with a naive girl who was not a lesbian. *Life sure is funny*, she thought. *When it doesn't suck.*

"Sit down, Nancy," Anita said, sternly "We need to talk." Nancy saw Anita's frown and immediately sat down.

"What's wrong?" she asked, nervously.

"You're what's wrong?"

"What did I do?"

"You lied, Nancy." The accusation did not surprise Nancy. She knew it would come one day.

"Oh, how did you find out?"

"Sharon saw Marjorie at the *Second Fret*. She told her the truth."

"Oh."

"Why?" Anita asked. Nancy thought about her answer. She had dreaded this moment. Their relationship could either end right now or go on. Everything depended on what she said.

"Why did I leave?" she asked, hesitantly. "Or, why did I lie about leaving?"

"Both."

"I lied about Marjorie throwing me out because I needed help. No one would help me if I said I walked out," Nancy admitted. "But, I didn't honestly know why I left," she added.

"You didn't know? Does that mean you believed your own lie?" Anita asked. Nancy shook her head. Anita went on. "That first night I told you everything. I thought we understood each other. You held me. I cried. We made love. You played me, Nancy."

"No! No, I didn't!" Nancy shouted, alarmed by Anita's accusations. "By listening to your story, I understood my own. You had real love with Sophia, and then you didn't. It was sad. I don't think I ever had real love with Marjorie."

"But, you two were happy. You said so yourself."

"Yeah, but that was all."

"That was a *lot*. You walked away from it."

"You had passion, love, excitement, and ecstasy with Sophia. You had something. We were just okay with each other. It was nice, but that's all it was."

"You were lucky to have her. You threw it all away, for what? You don't even know, do you?"

"I don't," Nancy admitted. Anita looked at her, puzzled by her cluelessness. How could Nancy not know what she wanted? People talked about what they wanted all the time. They had yearnings. They made plans, set goals, tried things. If Nancy wanted something different with Marjorie, why didn't she talk to Marjorie about it? Why did she just run away? It did not make any sense. Unless...

"Is love what you truly wanted?" Anita asked. Was it that simple? She hoped Nancy would be honest with her and herself.

"I... I... think it was," Nancy admitted. "Look, Anita, I didn't know. I'd never thought about it. I was happy; we were happy. That seemed to be enough. Until it wasn't."

"And, what about *now*? What about us? Aren't we friends? And lovers? Aren't we happy?" Anita asked. "Is that enough for you, this time? Or, do you want more? Tell me, Nancy!"

"Yes! I'm happy, and yes, I want more. I'm sorry, but I just do. I don't know why, and I don't want to hurt you."

“But, you might just walk out on me the way you walked out on Marjorie?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You’re not *sure*?” Anita pressured her for the truth. Nancy shook her head.

“It’s different with you,” she explained. “You’re different than Marjorie. I liked her, but I never felt like her. We were very different. She was older than me and she had been on her own for years. She’d gone places and done stuff I could never even imagine.”

“So you never felt comfortable with her?”

“No, I did; but I guess I never felt comfortable with feeling comfortable. Does that sound crazy?”

“Well, it does, in a way. But, I have to ask this, and your answer is really important. How do you honestly feel about *me*?” Nancy looked at Anita. She suspected Nancy did not understand her own deepest feelings. Few people ever did. They ignored or buried them. They played it safe. It was better to be with someone instead of alone even if only to have somebody to share your bed. Anita worried if, deep down, Nancy felt afraid of intimacy and preferred emptiness. She felt sorry for Nancy but waited for Nancy to explain her feelings.

“You’re not like Marjorie,” Nancy said, softly. “You’re more like me. I like that. I feel good being with you. I trust you. You probably think I’m fucked up right now, but I have to say this- and you can believe it or not- but I think I love you, Anita.”

It was the first time anyone loved her since she was with Sophia. Anita did not know what to do. Nancy’s lies were suddenly unimportant. Nancy’s truth, and Anita’s response, was most important now. They didn’t break up.

Chapter 12 - Romance

Anita had helped Al find his way around the local Acme supermarket while she lived with him. Now he went food shopping only when necessary and always with great apprehension. After several solo trips, he still wandered the store feeling overwhelmed by all the choices. It was easier when Ida sat a plate in front of him and he ate whatever was on it without having to think about how it got there.

He stood in the soup aisle and gazed at the cans. Someone else stopped to look at soup. He stepped aside so the person could see the shelves.

“Alfonso?” Al looked around and saw his wife’s friend. Rita Morrison was a slender, wiry woman with a long face and short hair. She always had a lot of kinetic energy.

“Oh, Rita! Hi.”

“I haven’t seen you since-.”

“Ida died,” Al said, his voice tinged with grief.

“Yeah. It’s been what, eighteen months, right?” Al nodded. Rita hoped their meeting would not sadden him.

“Um, how are you, Rita?”

“I’m okay. How are you doing, Al?”

“I’ve been okay, mostly.”

“It takes a while,” Rita replied, softly. Al recalled that she was a widow and was speaking from experience.

“How long has it been for you?”

“Ten years since Billy died.”

“Long time. Do you still work at the hospital?”

“Yeah. Still in the kitchen making all that delicious hospital food,” she replied, grinning.

“I never thanked you for looking in on Ida while she was there.”

“I was happy to do it. I liked your wife.”

“She liked you. She always told me whenever she ran into you.”

“She was a good person,” Rita added.

“So was Billy, as I recall.” Rita nodded but didn’t answer.

“So how are your kids?” she asked.

“Great. Tony got married and they live downtown. Anita was living with me but she just got a place a half-block from Tony and his wife. She works downtown too, like Tony and Sharon.”

“So, you’re all alone?”

“Yeah. I’m just getting used to it. How are your boys?”

“Great. Nick and his wife live in New Jersey. Andy lives in Rydal. He’s got a really good job. They bought a brand-new house in one of those developments.”

“Sounds nice. Do you see them much?”

“Not as much as I’d like. My car’s not so great. It gets me to work and shopping, but that’s about all. I haven’t put money into it because I don’t know if it’s worth fixing.”

“That’s too bad,” Al said. Then something occurred to him. “You know, I might be able to look at it for you.”

“You work at a garage?”

“Yeah. It’s a big Pep Boys. I run the shop now. I could have somebody look at it and not charge you anything. I might even be able to get you a discount if you decide to have it fixed.”

“Really? That would be great.” Rita said. It was her turn to pause as she thought of something. “Say, do you remember the Gills and the Allens?”

“Yeah. The Gills lived across the street from me, and the Allens lived a couple of houses from you, didn’t they?”

“Yeah. They moved away a few years ago before all this started.” Al was not sure what she meant by ‘this.’ “Anyway, I’m having them over for dinner on Saturday. Would you like to come? I’m sure they’d love to see you.”

“I didn’t know them very well. I think Ida knew the wives better, back when the kids were little.”

“I know, but it might be fun to reminisce about the way the neighborhood used to be. What do you say? Will you come, please?” Unable to think of a reason to refuse, Al smiled and nodded, “Great.”

“Can I bring anything?” Al asked.

“I’m asking people to bring their favorite dessert. It can be anything you like. Surprise me!”

Bought treats would have to be good enough for Rita’s dinner party. Alfonso was not ready to try baking at home. There was a bakery near where he worked and he went in at lunchtime. Several showcases displayed delightful sugary treats. They all looked tempting and he could not decide which ones to choose. He thought of Ida as he looked everything over. She never went to a bakery. She baked at home. Her Christmas cookies were the talk of their family. Al silently apologized to her for visiting a bakery and then chose a few treats that looked good.

When Al arrived at the dinner party, Nadine Allen, another guest, recognized the white bakery box Al carried. “Oh, you’ve been to Hassis’ bakery!” she enthused. “I used to love that place. It’s what I miss most about the neighborhood.”

“Yeah, me, too,” Dorothy Gill said. “But, it used to be in a white neighborhood. It’s not anymore. I wouldn’t go there now.”

“Well, I work near there, so it’s convenient for me,” Al replied.

“I don’t care where you got them. They’re probably wonderful,” Rita added, hoping to forestall any discussions about the changing neighborhood. She wanted an enjoyable evening without controversy.

Her dinner was delightful. She cooked all day in the hospital kitchen but never felt bored with food. She liked simple nourishing meals. This one included chicken, vegetables, salad, inexpensive wine, coffee, and her dessert, apple pie.

“So, Al, Rita told us about your wife. Sorry we didn’t know or we would have been at the funeral,” Dorothy Gill said. The others nodded.

“Thanks. It was sudden but she didn’t suffer. I’m grateful for that.”

“What happened?”

“Heart attack. Two, actually. The first one didn’t kill her but the second one did.”

“Oh. That’s sad. How’ve you been doing since she died?”

“Okay. My kids lived with me for a while and helped me out but they’ve moved now.” He told them about Tony, Sharon, and Anita. Al could tell they were merely being polite. He hoped someone would change the subject before he started to fill up with tears as he recalled Ida.

“So they’ve moved but what about you?” John, Dorothy’s husband, asked. Al did not know how to answer. He liked his house. It was the only place his family had ever lived. Al could not afford to move but did not want to admit it.

“I like it here,” he said. Rita could see he felt uncomfortable.

“So do I,” she said. “I don’t want to move either. I like being close to work.”

“Don’t you worry about the neighborhood?” Bob Allen asked. Al was not sure how Bob expected him to reply. “It’s... you know... changing,” Bob added. Al did not say anything. He knew what Bob meant but did not see it as a problem. Folks moved all the time. That was the way neighborhoods were. There was a young Black mom with two little children living next door. He had met the kids and immediately liked them. They reminded him of Tony and Anita when they were young. Al didn’t say anything. If he admitted he did not mind Blacks moving in, what would the others think of him?

“It’s still a nice neighborhood,” he replied, tactfully.

“I’m glad you see it that way,” John replied. Rita wanted to change the subject again.

“So, Al’s offered to help me with my old car.”

“What are you going to do?” Bob asked. Al explained his offer to Rita.

“Isn’t that nice?” Rita commented. She seemed genuinely pleased by his offer. He had another idea but hesitated to mention it in front of everyone.

The other guests left soon after dinner because did not want to stay in the neighborhood after dark. Rita and Al were alone. “I was thinking about what you said about your car not making it to see your sons. That’s sad. I could drive you some time if you want.”

“Really? That’s so nice of you to offer.”

“Yeah. I’m free on weekends. But, you work, don’t you?”

“A lot of weekends, but I sometimes get off. Can I let you know?”

“Sure.”

Rita called him two weeks later. Her son Nick’s birthday was coming up and there was a party. She doubted her old car would get her to New Jersey and back. Nick’s wife had offered to pick her up but it would be inconvenient for her. Would Al like to take her to the party instead? He immediately agreed but then thought about it after they hung up. The trip was at least forty-five minutes. That seemed like an uncomfortably long time. What would Al and Rita talk about? They hardly knew each other. He thought of backing out. It was her son’s birthday, however. Al did not want to disappoint Rita or her family. He had to go.

Strangely, Al did not feel awkward alone in the car with her during the forty-five-minute ride. She chatted amiably about her son and his family without burdening Al with too many details he would have to recall when he met them. Not wanting to distract him from his driving, she did not ask him much about his life. It was a pleasant trip and Al arrived eager to meet her family.

Nick’s wife Cindy met them at the door and told them it was a surprise party. Nick was out shopping at Sears with his brother Andy. Al bought a Pep Boys gift certificate as a birthday present for Nick and Rita had a large wrapped present. They deposited their gifts on the table in the dining room and everyone waited for Nick to come home. The party did not surprise him but seeing his mother with a man did. She had not mentioned she was dating anyone. He and Al shook hands as Al wished him a happy birthday. Rita tried to stay close to Al during the party. She did not want him to feel overwhelmed by guests and family members, all of whom were strangers. He enjoyed himself.

As he drove home, he mentioned that he had not been to a party like that since before Ida died. His family had not celebrated birthdays or holidays for the past year and a half. Back at Rita’s house, she hesitated as she was getting out of the car. Al wondered if something was wrong.

“I appreciate your doing this, Al. I hope you had a good time,” she said.

“I did. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Well, you offered. My car would never have made the trip.”

“I’m glad I could take you. Thanks, again.”

Without warning, Rita leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “No, thank *you*, Al. I hope I see you again, soon,” she said. Al did not know how to respond.

“Well, we are neighbors...,” he replied, feeling awkward.

“That’s right! So don’t be a stranger. Drop by anytime, okay?” Rita exited the car. Al drove up the block, parked near his house, and went onto his porch. Mrs. Johnson was out on her porch and said hello to him. He greeted her and wondered if she saw Rita kiss him only a short distance away. Then he went inside so he could feel embarrassed in private.

Alfonso had never thought about ‘love.’ He knew the word, but rarely said it. Love between people was an abstraction. ‘Woman’ was an abstract idea, as well. He never imagined himself with other women. Ida was his Ida, not his woman. He did not marry Ida because he loved her, but because she was Ida and he was Al and they belonged together. He never thought about sex either. He and Ida did not ‘have’ sex; they did not make love. They just were Al and Ida in bed wanting to make each other feel great, so they did.

Rita’s kiss made Al think about women, love, and sex. He was not comfortable with those thoughts. They confused him. Worse, his feelings now confused him. Al was an easygoing guy. He had never paid much attention to feelings. They had never been a problem, until now.

Al was good at solving problems with cars. He often fixed problems that baffled his mechanics. Cars were simple and not like humans, who seemed complicated. He mostly avoided all except casual dealings with people. Ida, Anita, and Tony had been his world. Theirs were the only emotional connections he needed. The rest of the people in his life were just there and he dealt with them without engaging with them.

Anita shattered his world when she ran away. If she had returned quickly there would have been no problem, but she stayed away for three years. He saw what her absence did to Ida. The worry had not killed Ida but made her so weak that she did not want to go on. He was not certain he wanted to go on living after she was gone but he never told anyone. If not for Tony and his reconnection to Anita, he might have followed Ida into death.

Al felt grateful Ida’s death brought his daughter back. They found a new love for one another. Their lives continued without Ida. He was proud of his kids and knew they loved him differently than they had before. Ida’s death had taught them a family lesson; they were the three most important people in the world. She would have been delighted.

Now Rita had come into his world and he did not know what to make of her. Did he want her to come fully into his life or turn around and leave? Moreover, what did ‘fully in’ mean? Did it mean his house, his life, his bed? *I’m too old for this stuff*, he thought and then realized he was not too old at all.

When Al finished feeling perplexed by her kiss and what it did to his emotions he turned his thoughts to her and tried to be objective. *What if Rita’s kiss meant nothing at all? What if it was merely her routine way of saying thank you?* Did he *want* it to mean nothing at all? Did he want it to be more than a thank you kiss? He could not find an answer. His head began to hurt and he decided not to think about it anymore.

Al never dropped by ‘anytime’, not even to visit his closest family members. He never made unannounced, uninvited visits to his brother, sisters, or children. Rita figured this out when

she did not see him for a month. She called one night, invited him for dinner, and hoped he would assume it would be another dinner party. It wasn't.

Rita made a fuss when he arrived but no one else was there. To distract him she chatted about mundane happenings in her life since they last saw each other. When she ran out of details, she asked about his life. Nothing much had happened to him and he told her. She chatted more about her sons and their families. It was mostly anecdotal and useless information, but she needed to talk so he listened patiently. Al and Rita were both over their awkwardness when she served dinner. They relaxed, enjoyed being alone together, and liked the meal. She planned to tell him a little more about herself during dessert.

"You know, it's been ten years since Billy died," she began and then hesitated. Al nodded for her to go on. "I've been alone all that time. My boys got me a few dates. I appreciated their concern and I liked the guys I met but I never felt ready, you know?" Al did not know what it felt like to be ready or not ready. He had never thought about it. "But my feelings have changed..." she added softly. She hoped he would take the hint and say something encouraging. He remained silent. "What about you? How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I... I don't know. I guess I don't think about it much."

"Do you get lonely?" she pressed him.

"A little. I can't believe how much time has gone by since Ida died. It seems like yesterday but it's been almost two years. I can't imagine what *ten* years feel like."

"You never get over it, Al," Rita said as she placed her hand on his arm to soothe him. "But, you can move on." She wanted to add 'if you want to,' but was afraid she might seem pushy. "Do you remember my son, Andy? His wife's birthday is coming up and they're having a party. Andy asked me to invite you."

"Is that so I can give you a ride, again?" Al asked, grinning.

"Oh, no. He's closer than Nick. Andy usually comes to pick me up when I visit him and his family. He would gladly give you a ride if you'd like to come along."

"No, that's okay. When is it?"

"It's a week from Sunday. Are you free?" Al was free whenever he was not working.

"Sure. I'd like to go, but I'd prefer to take you there. Is that okay?"

"Great! Andy will be glad you can make it. Thanks."

Al enjoyed the party and did not feel as out of place as he felt the first time he met Rita's family. Her sons were happy to see him again. Nick spent some time talking to him about car problems. Al told him he did not do much mechanic work anymore. He merely supervised the mechanics at the Pep Boys where he worked. Nick explained his car problem and Al made a couple of suggestions for repairs. Nick was grateful for his advice and thanked him.

"My boys like you," Rita told him as they drove home.

"I like them. Your family's nice. Your grandchildren are great, too." Rita smiled. She was proud of her grandchildren.

"They think you're my boyfriend," she said, boldly. "You know how kids are, they have active imaginations." Al had never thought he could be anyone's boyfriend until that moment. However, if there were anyone he would consider as a girlfriend, it would be Rita. He had gotten to know her and her family well enough to like everyone and feel comfortable with them. Rita decided to go for broke.

"Look, Al, I like being with you. I haven't liked being with anyone for a long time. I would like us to see more of each other. You can tell me if it's too soon for you and I would understand, but I'm hoping you'll agree with me that we ought to be together more." The

sincerity and simplicity of her plea struck Al. It seemed she just wanted to be friends and he liked that idea. He did not have many friends. They also were neighbors and could easily hang out if they wanted to.

“Okay. Some guys from work are going to a Phillies game in a couple of weeks. Would you like to come along?” Rita felt pleasantly surprised. Was he asking her on a date? Would she feel out of place? Would other women be there?

“Um, are they bringing their wives or girlfriends?”

“Oh, yeah, some are. You won’t be the only woman there. Do you even like baseball?”

“Yeah, but I don’t follow it much. I’d love to go.”

“What about your work?”

“I never ask for time off. The heck with work, I’m going!” she declared. Al grinned.

Al was different with his co-workers. They had a wonderful camaraderie. They were all animated, chatty, and funny. The men were deferential to Rita. They assumed she was the boss’ girlfriend, and commented to Al how nice she seemed when the women left together to go to the bathroom.

It was a crappy ball game. The Phillies played poorly and lost badly. The men had fun yelling at the players, teasing each other, and arguing about the plays. They treated each other to sodas, popcorn, peanuts, and other food from the roving vendors. Al apologized to Rita for the lousy game but she had a great time. She verbally thanked him when he dropped her off and then kissed him on the lips. He almost kissed her back but she ended it before he could respond.

Her kiss made Al feel good and that surprised him. Perhaps she was right. Maybe they ought to see more of each other.

Al wondered how Tony and Anita would feel about Rita now that he had been seeing her for several months. He felt he should tell his children, but he worried they would object to him dating anyone so soon after Ida died.

“Her name is Rita and we’ve been seeing each other for three or four months now. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Dad, why would we mind? That’s great!” Tony said.

“Is she Mrs. Morrison from down the street?” Anita asked. “I remember her. She had two boys, right?” Al nodded. “They were both older than me so I didn’t really know them.”

“So, you don’t think it’s too soon after your mother died?” Al asked.

“It’s two years!”

“You think it’s okay, then?”

“Yes! We think it’s great, Dad. Don’t we, Tony?”

“When will we get to meet her?” Tony asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you invite all of us to dinner?” Anita suggested. Al looked at her, aghast. “Don’t look shocked. I could cook, and we could meet her. What do you say?”

“Yes, that would be great. I’ll talk to her.”

The following Sunday, Anita, Tony, and Sharon rode the trolley from the subway stop to their old house. Anita and Sharon set about preparing a special meal for Al’s girlfriend. When the doorbell rang around three pm, Sharon rushed to answer it.

“You must be Anita!” Rita said as she came in the door.

“No, I’m Sharon, Tony’s wife.”

“Oh, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Rita! You made it.” Al said, from behind Sharon.

“Of course, I made it, Al. I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

Al introduced Rita to Tony, Anita, and Sharon. Nancy was working and could not be there. Rita greeted everyone warmly. She felt genuinely pleased Al had arranged the dinner. It showed he was more serious about their relationship than she thought.

They had been dating for a few months. He seemed happy they were friends. She liked that he was shy but also wanted him to kiss and hug her. She needed touch to feel a person’s emotions. Her family members were all huggers.

She worried Al did not touch her because she was not Ida. Rita could not compete with a dead wife. She could not replace Ida, either. Al would have to see her as a new and different woman for their companionship to move forward. She knew how hard that was. She had tried dating not long after Billy died and all she learned from being with a new man was how much she missed Billy. Those dates reminded her of what she lost when he died. She did not want to push Al if that would just remind him of Ida.

The dinner was a test for Al. The future depended on what happened. It was not enough his children were enthusiastic when he told them about Rita. He wanted them to *like* Rita, and Rita to like them. It would be all over if they did not get along.

Al walked Rita home while the kids cleaned up after the meal.

“That was delightful. The girls are good cooks. And, your son is nice. I like the way Tony and Sharon still act like newlyweds. It’s charming,” Rita said.

“Thanks, I’m glad you liked them.”

“You say that as if you thought I wouldn’t.”

“No, no. I wasn’t worried,” Al lied. He had worried, but more about himself than Rita. How would Anita and Tony feel when they saw him with a woman other than their mother? Would it bother them? He knew he couldn’t have Ida back. But, he could have someone. Rita seemed like a good person. They got along well, enjoyed each other’s company, and had fun together. Rita was attractive and liked him. There was nothing to stand in the way of a deeper connection if they wanted it.

They walked up the front steps onto Rita’s porch. She unlocked her door and turned to say goodnight. Al shocked her with a kiss on her lips. She immediately pressed herself against him, kissed him back, and then slowly pulled away.

“Good night, Al,” she whispered. “See you soon, I hope.”

Al walked home in a daze. Everything had just fallen into place. For the first time in several years, he felt happy. A new phase in his life began.

That happiness increased over the next few months. He had been distant and reticent at first but now told her more about his life. He talked about growing up, told her about his first job, his friends, and his dream of owning a hobby shop like the one he and Tony used to go to. Rita noticed that he mentioned Ida less often. When he did, he did not pause as if the painful memories overcame him. Ida was receding into Al’s past, into a different life. Rita was now the woman who shared his life.

He helped clean up after her New Year’s Eve party. They were both a little tipsy and stumbled around as they picked up plates and glasses and carried them into the kitchen. Rita bent over the trashcan. Al came up behind her and unintentionally bumped into her. She almost fell over giggling. He reached out to steady her and grabbed her ass instead of her arm. She squealed in surprise and he quickly withdrew his hand. Rita stood up, turned to face him, and mashed her lips hard against his. He pulled her close and hugged her tight. She melted in his arms and then almost slipped out of them. He noticed how unsteady she was.

“Maybe we should clean up tomorrow,” he suggested, “And you should just go to bed, now.”

“I will, but only if you come with me. It’s not safe for you to drive home in your condition.”

“But, I only have to walk a half-block,” he protested.

“Walking’s not safe, either. It’s dark out. You might get lost. Stay here where it’s safe,” she teased. She pulled away, took his hand, and walked toward the stairs. He followed willingly. She pulled him up the stairway and then started down the hall.

“And, this is where I sleep,” she said tipsily as if she was giving a house tour. He gazed into the doorway. “Don’t look! It’s a mess, but you don’t care about that, do you Al?” she asked, slurring her speech. She pulled him into the room and flopped on the bed. He stood, looked at her, and hesitated. “What’s the matter? Did you forget what to do?” she teased. Al did not know how to reply. He had not forgotten; he had not wanted to, until now. She boldly reached up and touched his crotch. “Oh, you didn’t forget! Take your pants off and lay down next to me.”

“What about you? You’re still dressed.”

“Oh yeah... Let me deal with my clothes. You deal with yours.” They dealt with their clothes. “Happy New Year, Al!” she said, cheerfully as he was about to enter her. They made love clumsily, giggled a lot, and then fell asleep side-by-side.

They awoke in bright sunlight on New Year’s Day, 1973, embarrassed by their nakedness. She playfully made him cover his eyes while she put a light robe on. He reached for his clothes. “You’re not leaving, are you?” she asked, feigning surprise. “The year’s just started. Stay awhile.”

Rita handed Al a fluffy terrycloth bathrobe and he put it on. They went downstairs. He finished cleaning up while she cooked breakfast. She wanted to talk about what they did. Rita wanted him to know she had not planned it. She was as surprised as he was. It just happened. Nevertheless, she also liked it, and him, and wanted more.

Al was no fool. He noticed she had given him the heavy robe and put on the light revealing one. He looked at her body, and could not believe they merged in a sexual embrace only a few hours earlier. It seemed like a dream. He wondered if it would be okay for him to touch her again. Would that make what they did more real? He decided it would. Al came up behind her, put his arms around her, and cupped her breasts from behind. She nearly swooned and dropped the spatula she was using to turn their eggs. Al liked the effect he was having on her. He also liked the effect she was having on him.

“Here?” she asked. “Now? Before breakfast?”

“Why not?” he suggested. Rita had no answer.

“Okay.” She turned off the gas stove.

They were not tipsy and tired this time. There was no alcohol to fog their inhibitions. It had to be a pure need that fueled their lovemaking, and it was. Al was more insistent and commanding. He wanted her, took her, and pleased her. It was a great way to celebrate the New Year, and perhaps, their new life together.

Rita and Al felt embarrassed about planning a wedding, at their age. (They never discussed the possibility of living together. They were old-fashioned and never even considered it.) They decided on a small wedding, just family and a few friends. They sat together one evening to make a list of people they would invite: their children, Rita’s grandchildren, their

siblings, and a few friends from work. They worked to refine the list so they could tally up all the people who might attend.

“What about Anita? Is her boyfriend coming?”

“She doesn’t have a boyfriend. Nancy will be coming with her, I think.”

“Nancy? But she’s just her roommate.” Rita asked.

“Not really. Nancy’s her girlfriend.”

“Well, I guess it would be okay. I invited my best friend to my first wedding.”

“They’re not just best friends or roommates.”

“Well, okay then,” Rita replied. She had misunderstood his statement. “Anita can come alone if she wants to. Or, she could just get a date.”

“No, no. I meant Nancy would be her date. Nancy’s Anita’s girlfriend. They’ve been together a couple of years now. They’re in love.”

“In *what*?” Rita asked, alarmed.

“They’re lesbians.”

“Your daughter is a *lesbian*? And, you never told me?”

“Why should I tell you? It’s no big deal.”

“Maybe not for you, but it is to me. I won’t have people like that at my wedding. It’s bad enough you’re inviting those colored guys from work.”

“They’re my friends. And Anita is my daughter.”

“Well, she won’t be *my* daughter, I can tell you that!”

“What are you saying?”

“How do you think my boys are gonna feel about having a lesbian as a step-sister?”

“I wouldn’t think they would care.”

“And what about my grandchildren? Do you think I want them to see two women together like that?”

“What difference does it make?” Al asked. Rita suddenly became a different woman.

“What *difference* does it make?” she shrieked. “People like that are freaks! Abominations! I don’t want anything to do with them. Understand?” Rita glared at him. Al understood she was offering a choice, her or Anita. He decided not to argue with Rita. He knew what his choice was but said nothing.

Tony and Anita did not know what happened to Rita. Time went by, and their father did not mention her. They felt uncomfortable asking where she was. He seemed okay, however. They looked for signs of sadness or despair and saw none. It was almost as if Rita had never existed.

Rita called and begged him to reconsider breaking off their engagement but Al remained firm. He made his choice. His children came first. That was how he and Ida agreed it should be when the kids were growing up and he saw no reason to change it now. He had been happy with Rita but she was not family. Anita, Tony, and Sharon were. Nancy was, too, although she was shy around Al and he didn’t know her well. He never saw Rita again or forgave her for insulting his daughter.

Chapter 13 - Return of an Old Friend

The phone woke Alfonso. He wondered who had interrupted his Saturday nap and hoped it was one of his children.

“Hello?” he mumbled.

“Mr. Cataldi?” He did not recognize the woman’s voice.

“Yes. Who’s this?”

“My name is Carol Davis. Your daughter and I were best friends in high school.”

“Oh, hi. What can I do for you?”

“I’ve lost track of Anita. I’ve moved back to Philadelphia. I was wondering if you know where she is.”

“Yeah. She lives downtown.”

“Really? That’s great. I wanted to get in touch with her.”

“Wait, I’ll give you her number. I’ll give you her address, too.” Al looked up the information and gave it to Carol.

“That’s so nice of you. By the way, how are you? How’s Mrs. Cataldi?”

“Oh, she died a while back. I guess you didn’t know.”

“No, I’ve been away at school since we graduated. I’m sorry.”

“Where were you?”

“Columbia University in New York.”

“How did you like it?”

“It was hard but I got through.”

“Good for you. Give Anita a call. I bet she’ll be thrilled to hear from you.”

“I will. Thanks. Nice to talk to you.”

“Bye.” They hung up.

Even though Carol had no idea what happened to Anita after she left New York she never thought Anita would go back home. She had assumed that if she found Anita she would only be able to call her. Now she discovered she could not just talk to her but also see her. It was more than she hoped for. Carol felt delighted but also apprehensive.

Weeks later, Al asked Anita if she heard from her friend. Anita did not know what he meant. He told her someone named Carol called looking for her. Anita had assumed she would never see or hear from Carol again and began to worry. What did she want? Where was she? Why, after all that happened, was she trying to get in touch?

Nancy answered the first time Carol called the apartment and Carol did not know what to tell her. “We knew each other in high school,” she explained as vaguely as possible. “I just got back to the city. I wanted to say hello.”

“Oh, that’s nice. I’ll tell her you called. What was your name, again?” Nancy asked. Carol told her. “Do you want her to call you back?” Carol gave Nancy her number, thanked her, and then hung up. Now Carol would have to wait. Would Anita even call? What if she didn’t? What if she did?

“Somebody named Carol called,” Nancy said.

“She finally called? My dad told me she called him looking for me. She and I were friends in high school. We haven’t seen each other in years. Last time I saw her was in New York.”

“Oh, she was in New York?”

“She moved there to go to Columbia. I took a quick trip to visit,” Anita lied. “We lost touch with each other when I moved back here.” Nancy did not know much about the time Anita ran away. It was a painful and difficult time in Anita’s life. She felt ashamed for what she did to Tony, her parents, Dolores, and Carlo. It also seemed like a long time ago; Anita had matured and wanted to forget that time in her life. She might have to face Carol again and re-live some of what happened. Anita hoped she was ready. She called Carol from work so she could end the conversation if it became uncomfortable. The call went well and they decided to meet.

A few days later, they met in a coffee shop two blocks from the Boyd. Anita wanted to hide as much of her life as possible from Carol. She didn’t know her father gave Carol her address.

“You disappeared,” Carol said. “Nobody knew where you went. All they told me was they lost track of you after you moved in with some woman named Sophia.”

“That’s right. She was my girlfriend.”

“That’s great, I guess, but she’s not, anymore, right? What happened?”

“Well, you’re not going to believe it. She and I moved from New York to Germantown. You know that old movie house on Armat Street?” Carol shook her head. “It’s called the Rialto. It had been closed for two years. She took it over and reopened it. I helped her run it.”

“A theater? That’s wonderful!”

“Yeah, it was wonderful... but, for *her*, not for me.” Carol did not understand what Anita meant. Anita explained that Sophia was obsessed with the theater. It became her first love. Anita felt Sophia no longer loved her and left.

“You ran away from her, too?” Carol asked, but not in a harsh way. She felt sympathetic.

“Yes. I moved downtown with another woman who helped me out. She let me be her roommate and got me a job. But, we weren’t lovers. She had a girlfriend who showed up out of nowhere. They ran off together.”

“Oh, finally somebody ran away and left you,” Carol commented, and then realized she might have offended Anita.

Anita nodded. “Yeah. I got her apartment, plus all her furniture, books, records, and her job. I still have it.”

“So you made out good,” Carol said. Anita grinned.

“What about you? You stayed at Columbia, right? What do you have, now? Bachelor’s, Masters...?”

“Both. I’m looking for a teaching job.”

“You should try the Community College. Nancy works there. Maybe she could help you.”

“She’s a teacher?”

“No, she works in the administration. Counseling, I think they call it.”

“I’ll have to talk to her.”

“So what about the rest of your college career? I left halfway through your first year. What happened after that?”

“A lot. Too much, really. I had a hard time.”

“Was school too difficult?”

“No, I was okay with the academics. It was all the other stuff...”

“Like what? Guys?”

“Well, there was only one.”

“That’s *all*? What’s the matter with you, girl? Don’t you know you’re supposed to screw around in college? Get it all out of your system?” Anita joked. Carol laughed awkwardly.

“I wish all I had done was just screw around,” she said.

“Oh? What happened?” Anita asked. She was unprepared for the story Carol told her.

It started when police arrested students for protesting Columbia University’s connection with the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), a weapons research think tank affiliated with the U.S. Department of Defense. At the same time, people were organizing to protest the University’s plan to build a new gymnasium in Morningside Park, which was in Harlem. Protesters occupied the University offices in Hamilton Hall in April of 1968. Carol was not a protester but she felt curious. She, like many other students, went to Hamilton Hall to see what was happening. Carol learned about the issues that sparked the occupation. Martin Luther King had been assassinated only a few weeks earlier. There were riots in Harlem. Everybody was uneasy and on guard.

As Carol looked around, someone caught her eye. One of the onlookers stood slightly apart from the crowd. He was slightly taller than she was, of a slight build, had a long face, a short beard, and black-rimmed plastic glasses. Carol assumed he was one of the younger professors who came to check out what the protesters were doing. Something drew her to him.

She walked over and said a quiet hello when he noticed her standing next to him. “What’s all this about?” Carol asked, boldly. She wondered if he would speak to her. He didn’t seem annoyed and launched into an explanation of the issues that provoked the sit-in.

“This protest brings together two issues Dr. King spoke about when he was here last year,” he told her.

“You saw him?” she asked.

“You didn’t?”

“I was too busy.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. I’ll never forget his speech. He put everything into perspective.”

“But, what good can protests do?” Carol asked.

“They can do a *lot*. If you want to stop the war and racism, you gotta start somewhere. The issues are everywhere in society. Protests can spread.”

“You seem pretty passionate about this.”

“I am.”

“Then why aren’t you inside with the protesters?”

“Um, I didn’t know about it beforehand. I was busy with an experiment and just finished and came over here.”

“Experiment? You’re a scientist?”

He told her his name was Nate Abrams and he was graduate student. “I’m doing my master’s thesis research.”

“Oh, wow! What’s it in?”

“Um, I can’t talk about it right now. Maybe I could tell you in private.” Carol thought he was trying to pick her up and felt skeptical.

“Sure,” she said, frowning.

“Sorry. I know how that sounded. The research is sensitive, and I’m not supposed to discuss it in public. That’s all I meant. But I would like to tell you about it if you’re interested.”

The only science Carol knew was from high school classes in biology, physics, and chemistry. She always got As, but did not consider herself inclined toward science. Then Nate

added something that made her curious. “In fact, you might be just the sort of person I’m looking for to help me with my research. You could also earn some money.”

Carol had never heard of LSD. Nate assured her it was becoming widely used as a psychedelic recreational drug and he was conducting research on its effects. He recruited college students for his experiments and suggested she would be a perfect subject. Carol never used recreational drugs. She rarely even drank alcohol. Drugs and alcohol clouded a person’s mind and she needed to remain focused on her schoolwork. Nate guaranteed she would not become addicted and there would be no permanent effects from the LSD.

The experiments were simple. The subject and observer sat together in an enclosed private space. The subject swallowed a 250-microgram dosage of the drug while the observer watched. They waited until the drug took effect and then the observer noted the responses of the subject. The sessions could take as long as twelve hours, however, so they did them on weekends or when the subjects had no classes.

The pay for each session was twenty-five dollars. Most subjects had several sessions. Carol needed the money. Her father’s finances were running low. She had applied for financial aid for her junior year and would likely qualify but any extra income would be helpful.

She asked him several times if he was certain the drug was safe. Nate assured her it was and she agreed to a session. There was an elaborate screening questionnaire and then an exhaustive interview that she passed. She refused to do the session until she finished her final exams. Then she learned the dormitory was closing and she had to move out immediately.

Carol reconsidered the experiment. Nate was desperate. He offered to let her stay at his apartment. She could go home for the summer after they conducted a session or two. She wondered if his plan had always been to seduce her. He assured her there was no danger. She could sleep in the bed and he would use the sofa. The experiments took place in a lab at the University. He would be the observer, nothing more. The experiment would be ruined if he tried anything. She agreed.

“So what did you do?” Anita asked, fascinated by Carol’s story.

“I took the drug.”

“What happened?”

“I can’t describe it but it was amazing. I had no problem. Nate was professional. He was thrilled with the session and immediately asked me to do another one. I wanted to go home but he begged me. So, I waited a few days and did one more, and then waited a few more days and did another one. They were all great.”

“What about Nate?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean! Was *he* great?” Anita asked. Carol blushed.

Carol was lounging in the apartment all day. The New York heat and humidity beat her down. She only left the chair in front of Nate’s huge fan to get cool drinks or use the bathroom. Nate went out with some graduate students after work and came home tipsy. A few were leaving for the summer or going off to do research elsewhere.

Carol wore short shorts and a thin halter-top. Nate hadn’t seen so much of her flesh before and his eyes nearly popped out of his head. She smiled at his reaction. The heat made her horny. They moved the fan to the bedroom, dived into each other, and did not stop until morning. Carol and Nate became a couple.

She stayed another week but told him she missed her parents and then left. They swore they would get back together in the fall and neither had a reason to doubt it. Nate had a couple of other test subjects. She did not know if they were male or female but did not worry. She felt connected to Nate and thought he would not date anyone else while she was gone.

He called her in August and asked her to live with him so she could save money and she agreed. She told her parents she would room with friends and they did not question her. They both contributed to her education and were grateful for any cost-cutting effort. Carol began her senior year with a boyfriend, an apartment, and a job as a test subject.

Nate tried to get her into the LSD lab as soon as she returned but she refused. She wanted to settle into her classes first. However, she was eager to get into his bed right away. They had a reunion that lasted several days, left them pleasantly exhausted, and convinced them they belonged together.

“They call them ‘trips,’” Carol explained.

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve heard,” Anita replied.

“Well, I had a bad one. I was standing at the edge of a huge cliff and then I wasn’t. I was falling, the ground was rushing towards me, and then it wasn’t. I was high above a river, flying in beautiful fluffy clouds, then I was swimming, then I was under water, and then I was drowning. It happened over and over. Each time the heights got higher, the depths got deeper, and the falls got longer. It went on for hours. I forgot who I was, where I was, even *what* I was. It was like all the worst nightmares I’ve ever had, rolled into one.”

“Damn!”

She came down exhausted but Nate felt energized. Carol swore that was her last session. Nate saw how weakened and shocked she was, took her home, and made love to her. She never knew he could be so sweet. Later she wondered if the sweet sensations were aftereffects of the LSD. She also wondered if those were the only aftereffects. Maybe there would be additional erotic boosts. She never mentioned her speculations to Nate.

Nate praised her for taking part in his experiments and told her she was his best test subject. He insisted the bad trip was an abnormality. He planned to adjust the dosage downward for the next one to see what effect that would have. Carol was not certain she wanted another session. However, part of her felt curious about how she would handle another trip. It might be different now that she knew what could happen.

She agreed to do one more. The depths were darker and more terrifying than before but the heights were more dazzling and ecstatic than she ever imagined. She came out of it exhausted and confused. She could not recall who she was, where she was, why she was there, or whom she was with. Nate wanted to make love to her after the trip to soothe her but she would not let him. She slept alone for two days and missed several classes. He slept on the sofa.

Nate did not know what to do. Carol was important to him and his research, but at what cost? He worried she no longer wanted to be with him. He worried that his scientific zeal ruined their relationship. Would he have to choose between his love and his work?

Carol went to her classes but felt restless and did not stay. There were crying incidents in the women’s bathroom. She wandered aimlessly around the campus. Friends greeted her but she did not recognize them. Nate did not know what to do. He felt responsible for what was happening to her but also helpless. His research suffered but he could not abandon it. His university career would end if the project failed.

He came home early one afternoon and found her packing.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, calmly.

“*You’re* what’s wrong!” she yelled.

“What did I do?”

“You *used* me, Nate. Admit it. You never wanted me for me. I was just your Guinea pig.” Carol’s accusation hurt him deeply.

“No, Carol, that’s not true. You helped me with my research but I really wanted to be with you.”

“Too late, Nate!” she shouted. “You pushed me too hard and look what happened. I’m all fucked up because of your LSD. If I don’t get back on track, I’m going to flunk out. My parents will think they wasted their money. I can’t do that to them.”

“What about me? Don’t you care about me?”

“I can’t be your little Guinea pig anymore. I should never have agreed to help you.”

“But, I paid you,” he replied, angrily. “You *took* the money. You told me you were glad to get it. It’s your fault, Carol, not mine.” He realized his mistake as soon as he spoke. She turned away, finished packing, and dragged her bag toward the door. “Where are you gonna go?” he asked.

“None of your business,” she replied coldly. She pulled the bag into the hall. He heard it bumping as she dragged it down the steps. Nate went to the window and saw a car waiting for her. Two women got out, helped Carol load her bag in the trunk, and then drove off.

“So where did you go?” Anita asked.

“Do you remember Grace and that house full of lesbians where you lived?”

“You went *there*?”

“It was the only place I could get a room fast. I was lucky someone else had just moved out,” Carol replied. It was a stable environment and she felt safe there. The LSD flashbacks faded away. She worked hard to catch up on her courses and got good grades at the end of the semester. Nate found out where she lived and came to the house but the women protected her and drove him away. He never tried to see her again.

“But then things got even weirder,” Carol added. Anita wondered what could be weirder than LSD trips and almost flunking out of Columbia University. “I met Denise.”

“She was still there?”

“Yeah. She was one of the oldest residents of the house.”

“Did anyone warn you about her?”

“Several women did. I was careful.” Carol avoided her. Denise bided her time. She knew Carol had been through a wrenching emotional experience and waited for an opportunity to express her concern.

“I heard all about that guy and his ‘research,’” Denise told Carol, slyly. Anita looked at her, unsure if she should ask Denise to tell her more. “You weren’t the first, that’s all I’ll say,” she added.

“What do you mean?”

“I understand there have been several others like you. That stuff he’s messing with-.”

“LSD?”

“Yeah. Everybody who’s tried it knows you shouldn’t mess with it. I’ve tried it but I would never do it again. He’s too stupid to understand his research is useless. It’s a fucking drug. It freaks people out. End of story.”

“He thinks it has medical uses and maybe other uses as well.”

“But, it doesn’t. It’s just another illegal drug that somebody’s making money off of,” Denise complained. Anita did not reply. “And, he hurt you, didn’t he?” Denise asked. Her soft voice dripped with empathy. Carol nodded, overcome by her contradictory feelings.

She had thought she was falling in love with Nate but also suspected Nate shamelessly and selfishly used her for his experiments. It was only the second time she had come close to love in her life. The first time was with Rocco in Italy. That lasted a few weeks and left her glowing for months. Her affair with Nate lasted months but left her with painful emotional scars that could endure for years. Denise knew about emotional scars. She also knew the best way to heal them.

“She *seduced* you?” Anita asked, aghast. Carol blushed and nodded.

“I knew it was happening. I knew all the warnings. But she was so sweet, gentle and kind, that I fell into it and let her do whatever she wanted.”

“And, afterward?”

“I moved in with her.”

“What?”

“I was hooked. What they didn’t tell me was that she’s like a drug. She’s addictive. The stuff she does in bed is... well, amazing. She made me feel better than anyone I’ve ever been with. I still tingle when I think about it.”

“So, you’re still with her?”

Carol shook her head. “Oh, no. It’s been over for a while.”

“What happened?”

“What everyone warned me would happen. She got bored with me but she was nice about it and let me down easy. I’ll always be grateful to her.”

“For what?”

“I learned a lot.”

“About sex?”

“About *myself*,” Carol replied. “And about you, too,” she added, shyly.

“Me? What do I have to do with this?”

“It took me a long time, but I realized I did love you,” Carol revealed. “And, I also realized it was okay to love you. So I came back to see if you still love me. I know it’s a long shot because I hurt you, deeply, but I had to try.” Anita felt stunned. Her emotional scars began to throb.

“I have to go,” Anita mumbled. She got up, hurried out, walked home, and cried.

“Isn’t Carol the girl you ran away for?” Tony asked, confused. Anita nodded nervously. “So your first love is back. What happens now?”

“I don’t know, Tony. All I keep thinking is that it’s fucked up.”

“You’ll figure it out, Anita.”

“Will I?” Anita replied, bitterly. Tony wondered if she was going to run away again. She was no longer a confused teenager. Anita was a responsible adult with a job, apartment, girlfriend, and a good relationship with her brother and father. She had returned to her family, healed the wounds her running away had caused, and they were all close again. Could she give all that up because she felt confused or alarmed?

Anita did not know what Carol would do now that she had declared her love. She wondered if Carol would wait until she responded and worried Carol might pressure her if she didn't respond. Would she leave Anita alone if she asked Carol to do that?

Anita had a painful scar over the place inside her where her love for Carol blossomed before Carol crushed it by rejecting her. She did not know if any love remained beneath the scar. Anita did not know if she even wanted love to still be there. There was so much to work out. Tony was the sole person she could talk to. However, she was afraid even he couldn't help her.

Chapter 14 - Dilemmas

“No, Tony! I’m not ready,” Sharon protested. Her voice was sharp. Tony couldn’t recall ever hearing her speak harshly before. “That’s all there is to it!” She tried to leave the room. Tony grabbed her arm.

“Please, Sharon. It would mean so much to my dad. It would make him so happy. We could name her Ida after my mom,” he pleaded.

“We don’t know if it’s a girl or a boy and I don’t want to have a baby. Not now. I’m too young. We can’t afford it.”

“I think he would help us,” Tony argued.

“How? By us moving back in with him so I could quit work and take care of a baby? No! I don’t want to live like that.”

“You know he adores you. Won’t you think about it?”

“I’ve already thought about it a lot. I’m not having a baby. Not for your dad. Not for you. I’m not gonna have a baby for anyone but myself when I’m ready.”

“That’s awfully selfish,” Tony said. His stubborn insistence they should allow her pregnancy to continue angered Sharon. She did not want to become a mother. Not now, maybe not ever. She had never felt comfortable around children.

Sharon looked at Tony, saw the disappointment on his face, and felt sorry for him. She didn’t know if he felt upset because she refused him or because he’d angered her by insisting she ought to have the baby. Tony liked to keep the peace. He never argued and rarely insisted on anything. “I’m just being honest,” she replied. “Haven’t we always been honest with each other from the beginning? You knew I was a lesbian when I met you. I changed for you, Tony!”

“Are you sorry you did?”

“No, of course not. I want to be with you, and only you. Not with a baby. And not your father.”

“But, you’re talking about abortion. That’s serious.”

“Not as serious as having a baby when you don’t want one. And, I don’t. It’s my choice.”

“Yes. I know. I understand that. But, it’s *my* baby too, Sharon.”

“Great! Then *you* carry it.” *Shit!* Tony thought. *I’ve angered her more.* He took a deep breath and thought about how he ought to reply.

“Okay,” he said grinning at her. Sharon looked into his sparkling eyes and giggled. Tony thought his charm was beginning to soften her. They made love and he tried not to think about the fetus. He tried only to think of Sharon, about how much he loved her, and how much she meant to him. Sharon was his world. Tony did not understand why she would not agree to enlarge their world. A baby would be the fruit of their love. It would declare their love to everyone. He hoped he could persuade Sharon to change her mind.

Two days later, Sharon visited Anita when Tony was at work. Nancy was out shopping.

“Sometimes I envy you and Nancy,” she confessed.

“Why?” Anita asked.

“You can just be in love. You don’t have to worry about getting pregnant.” Anita knew immediately what Sharon meant.

“Oh my God! You’re pregnant? That’s great!”

Sharon frowned. “No, it’s not, Anita. It’s horrible. I don’t want to be a mom. I’m not ready.”

“What about Tony?”

“He says he wants it. We’re having a terrible fight.”

“So, what are you gonna do?”

“I know what I *want* to do, and if I do it, I’ll need him with me. Instead, I think he might hate me if I go through with it.”

“Sharon. I’ll go with you. But, please don’t hurt my brother. We’ve lost our mom. Give him a little time. He loves you.”

“I don’t have much time and I’m not sure he loves me anymore. I think this whole marriage was a mistake.” Her woeful comment shocked Anita. Sharon and Tony’s love was an inspiration to everyone that knew them. They had magically fallen in love without giving a thought to their past loves or regrets. Anita felt their unbreakable bond whenever she was with them. She hoped that bond had not weakened beyond repair.

The next day Anita happened to be walking home from work when the bus Tony rode passed. He jumped off at the next corner, waited for her, and started ranting before she could even say hello.

“I would expect you to take *her* side!” Tony said.

“Why? *You’re* my brother.”

“Well, she was a lesbian like you. So, of course, you two would stick together.” Anita ignored his claim. Neither she nor Sharon was part of a group. There was no cult of like-minded, lockstep people. Lesbians were as different from each other as straight people were.

“Sharon loves you, Tony. She just doesn’t want to be a mother,” Anita explained. Tony felt deflated. The pregnancy crisis was taking a toll on him.

“Is that really so bad?” he asked.

“It’s bad if she’s not ready.”

“There you go..., taking her side again.”

“It’s common sense, Tony. People shouldn’t become parents until they’re ready.”

“I *am* ready!”

“But, your wife *isn’t!* You have to respect that.”

“Do I?” Tony’s petulant retort made it obvious he was not ready. She wondered why he was being so stubborn.

Anita felt grateful for the crisis in Tony and Sharon’s marriage. It allowed her some distraction from her crisis. Carol’s sudden reappearance and declaration of love unsettled her. She needed to probe her feelings for both Nancy and Carol but did not want to. She feared she might uncover hidden feelings for Carol still within her.

She wondered what Carol expected her to do. Did she want Anita to just throw Nancy out? If Carol was that cruel, could Anita accept her love? *But, that’s not the real question, is it?* Anita thought. *The real question is..., do I still love her?* Anita did not have an answer.

Tony and Sharon had created a new life. They were arguing about whether that new life should be allowed to continue or terminated. Anita could create a new life with Carol as her love. If Anita created that life, she would have to kill her present life with Nancy. Anita worried the cost of love with Carol was too high. She did not want to hurt Nancy.

Anita assumed Carol would wait for her to respond. She decided to procrastinate, avoid examining her hidden feelings, and wait to see what Carol did. Anita refused to consider the possibility that she still wanted Carol.

Carol called Nancy at her job. “Hello, Nancy? My name is Carol Davis. I’m Anita’s friend. She gave me your number. She said you might give me some advice. I’m looking for a

teaching job. I'm just starting out so I'll take anything I can get." Carol hoped to get a job teaching English composition or some other Basic English course.

"Well, I can give you the department head's name and number. I don't know much about how they hire teachers."

"Okay, that would be a big help."

Carol applied at the right time. The college was expanding beyond its downtown campus and looking for new teachers. They hired her as an adjunct teacher for English 101, a class required of all students no matter what their majors were. She went to the main campus to sign a contract and get her teaching assignment. While she was there, she dropped in to thank Nancy for her help and Nancy invited her to lunch.

They crossed Eleventh Street to the Goldmine Deli. The sandwiches were obscenely large but very tasty. Nancy suggested they share a chicken salad sandwich and Carol agreed. The size of the half-sandwich that arrived on her plate awed Carol. Nancy grinned at her reaction, picked up her sandwich, and took a small bite.

"So you and Anita were friends in high school?" Nancy asked after she swallowed. Carol nodded as she chewed her sandwich. "What was she like back then?" Carol swallowed before she answered.

"Well, she was different. I think that's why we were such good friends in high school. We weren't like the other girls. We hit it off right away and remained close through all four years. But, she wasn't gay."

"Yeah, I know. It wasn't until she was with that woman Sophia."

"Not exactly," Carol replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Did she ever tell you why she ran away from home?" Carol asked. Nancy had wondered if there was more to Anita's past than Anita had told her.

"She said her parents made her miserable."

"That's not why she ran away. It was because of me."

"*You?* What did you do?"

"I left the city after we graduated. She missed me so bad she took the bus to Atlantic City to find me but I was in Europe so she moved in with my mom. We spent a few days together when I came back from Europe before I went off to Columbia in New York, and again at Thanksgiving."

"She told me she visited you in New York."

"It wasn't just a visit. She came to tell me she couldn't live without me."

"*What?*" Nancy asked. She stopped eating and almost dropped the sandwich.

"It's true. She took me by surprise. I didn't feel the same way about her. She was my best friend, but that was all. I wasn't gay back then," Carol admitted. Nancy immediately became suspicious.

"But, you are now?" she asked. Carol ignored her question.

"When she and I had coffee I apologized for rejecting her. I didn't know about girls loving each other back then. I only had a little experience with loving boys. I knew I'd seriously hurt her."

"She never told me *any* of this."

"As you know, I plan to stay here. I need to help take care of my dad. He's getting old and he's been sick. So I was hoping Anita and I could be friends again," Carol lied. She was hoping for much more.

“I’m sorry about your dad.”

“I owe it to him. He’s sacrificed everything for me.”

Nancy felt she had to make their relationship clear. “Anita and I have been together two years. We love each other. I don’t know what I would do without her,” she said.

“That’s great!” Carol replied although she did not think it was great. She thought it was an obstacle. It might require some effort, but removing that obstacle shouldn’t be a problem.

They finished their lunch. As they parted, Carol thanked Nancy for helping her. She went home and thought about how she would proceed to win back Anita.

The next afternoon, Tony stopped by the Boyd after work. “I was mean to you last time we talked,” he said. “I’m sorry.” Anita nodded and encouraged him to continue.

“I understand. You want a kid. Sharon doesn’t. It’s between the two of you.”

“No, you’re wrong. I mean you’re right, I do want a kid, but I love Sharon and I don’t want her to have an abortion.”

“Why not? Do you think it’s wrong?”

“I don’t know if it’s right or wrong. I only know it’s dangerous.”

“But, it isn’t. Not anymore,” Anita argued.

“That’s not what I’ve heard.”

“From who?”

“This guy at work. His girlfriend almost died from an abortion. I don’t want Sharon to risk it. I don’t want to lose her. I don’t even want to think about losing her. I don’t know what I would do without her.”

“So this is not about a baby?”

“No, it’s about love, Anita. I’m trying to find a way we can have a baby without making it a burden on her. I want to be an involved father.”

“That’s good.”

“But, it’s not working. Everything I’ve come up with to persuade her just makes her angry.”

“Did you tell her the real reason, yet?”

“No.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Do you think she’ll understand?”

“I think you should be honest with her. It’s still up to her.”

“I know. That’s what I’m afraid of. I’ll just make her angrier than she already is and she’ll go and do it anyway and I’ll lose her. Anita, I don’t want to lose her.” Tony was distraught. He didn’t like to talk about the possibility of losing Sharon. Anita had only one remaining suggestion.

“Then be honest with her and tell her what you’re feeling. It’s the *only* way.”

“Maybe you’re right.” He did not want to admit his big sister was right again but hoped that she was.

Carol decided not to lure Anita away from Nancy but to ingratiate herself with both women. She wanted the three to be friends and pal around together. She befriended Nancy because they worked together and then asked both women to meet for dinner, go to concerts, see movies and plays, have coffee, or just hang out. She invited them to visit her father’s apartment and tried to cajole an invitation to their apartment but it never came. Nancy would not allow it. She distrusted Carol’s motives but she kept her suspicions to herself.

Carol often mentioned experiences the friends shared in high school. She wanted Anita to recall how special they were to each other. She hoped that specialness would remind Anita how she fell in love with Carol back then and perhaps reawaken her love now. Whenever Carol told a story or mentioned an event she always added, “Oh, it’s a shame you weren’t there, Nancy, you would have *loved* it!” However, Nancy did not love hearing about these experiences. She knew Carol and Anita had an old connection and assumed Carol was trying to make her seem like an outsider.

Anita and Nancy lived a private life. They had formed a bond that did not have extraordinary experiences or exceptional memories as its foundation. The women had not attended great concerts, traveled together, or done anything else that was memorably special. Theirs was a quiet affection. Its roots were in everyday intimacy.

Nancy countered Carol’s subtle actions when she and Anita were in bed. She was more loving and attentive, but worried Anita would see her as clingy. She also talked to Sharon about intimacy but did not tell Sharon why. She made it seem as if she was asking Sharon for tips on lesbian lovemaking. Sharon mentioned *The Joy of Lesbian Sex* but Nancy never looked at it.

Anita knew exactly what Carol’s designs were but never told Nancy the truth. Carol had declared her love for Anita but Anita still did not know how she really felt about Carol. She had matured as both a person and a lesbian. When she first looked back on her time with Sophia, she saw the love affair negatively. Now, because she was older and more experienced, she saw it as a time of learning and growth.

Sophia had taught her lovemaking, and love, in a committed, mature relationship. Anita viewed her adolescent obsession with Carol as immature. That obsession had caused her to run away, and *that* had caused huge damage to her family. Now she wondered if she had ever really loved Carol. Besides, Carol had rejected her. How did she know Carol was in love with her now? Maybe Carol was mixed up or lying to Anita. Perhaps Carol was also lying to herself.

After a few months of socializing, hints, and frustration, Carol decided her strategy to lure Anita away from Nancy was not working. All she succeeded in doing was intensifying her fixation without achieving her goal. She needed a new strategy.

Anita obsessed Carol. She also had complicated and confusing feelings about love. It had disappointed Carol for most of her life. As she now understood it, there were two kinds of love. One was fake, the other real.

Her parents always said they loved her. They were great people and gave her everything except what she fervently wanted. They refused to be a real family. A true family was not a mother and father in different cities, no matter how much they loved her. She yearned for both parents to be together. In her view, their love for her was not true love. To Carol, parental love was a lie.

Carol’s three wonderful weeks with Rocco taught her what real love was like. They both knew it could never be ‘happily ever after.’ She believed, however, it was true, pure, and perfect. Rocco loved her for who she was; not like her parents who only loved her for *what* she was, their daughter. Carol and Rocco shared a love that was total, complete, certain, and overwhelming. Anita had loved her the same way but she rejected Anita. Now she wanted to undo that rejection.

She thought about a more direct approach. Seducing Anita was the only move she had left. However, there were risks. Carol’s obsession with Anita blinded her to the risks. She looked only at the potential reward. Anita was the prize. Carol had to win it.

Carol taught at three different locations and commuted in her father’s old car. A couple of other teachers also taught at multiple Community College sites. She would often see them

several times during the same day. Rob Jeffries taught basic math. He approached her one morning at the Navy Yard site and asked her if he could ride to their next location in West Philly. His car had given out. Rob called a tow truck to pick it up. His car was gone and he was stranded. She was happy to give him a ride.

They talked about themselves as they rode. Rob had been on the tenure track at an older college in the region. He lost his job when the college abolished his entire department. Now he taught four classes at different locations but the income hardly paid his bills. He was barely surviving. Carol sympathized. She told him she would have trouble surviving on her own with the low pay and difficult commutes if she did not live with her father. Rob told her he had no family and lived alone, so his expenses were minimal.

“But, I don’t have to pay alimony, so that helps,” he added.

“Oh, you’re divorced?” she asked.

“Yep. Three years. We were a couple of wannabe hippies who got married in college and pretended we were gonna change the world. We couldn’t keep our marriage together long enough to figure out what being adults was all about.” Carol felt confused. Rob seemed a lot older than she was.

“How long were you married?”

“Eight years.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Too long. Being hippies, smoking dope, and teaching weird classes didn’t keep us from falling out of love.”

“But, you teach math, now. That’s not weird.”

“No. I went back for some extra courses so I could qualify. I always had a good head for numbers.”

“What was your first major?”

“Poetry.”

“Wow. *That’s* what you taught?”

“Yeah, for a while. Modern stuff, Twentieth century, mostly. I loved it, but schools are removing those courses now. Everybody just wants jobs. No one wants poetry.”

“Yeah, I majored in English Lit but I minored in teaching, so English 101 was no problem for me.”

“That’s good. You’re lucky. I was too specialized to teach 101. I also hated the idea of doing it.”

“Why?”

“I just felt like kids shouldn’t have to study their native language. I mean, they’ve been speaking and reading it since they were little. If they haven’t got it by now they’re never going to get it.”

“But, they *didn’t* get it in secondary school. I don’t know why. And they need it to go on.”

“I know, but it makes me sad. What the fuck is happening in the schools? They’re turning out kids who don’t know anything.”

“Yeah, but some of them seem real smart. They learn fast. I like teaching them.”

“You’re right about smart. But, I worry what happens to the ones who *don’t* go to college? What kind of lives are they gonna have?”

Carol liked the way Rob cared about the students and people in general. She did not know how good a teacher he was, but he seemed a good human being. She offered to drive him

home after his last class and he quickly agreed. The long, grueling day had tired them out. He talked more as she drove, mostly about his car. He hoped the garage would fix it soon but worried something serious and expensive had broken. Rob hated public transportation. Carol offered to help him out when she could and he thanked her.

When they reached his apartment, he exited the car. Before he closed the door, he stuck his head in and asked if she would like to get coffee sometime. She nodded, replied “Sure,” and then drove off.

Sharon and Tony’s impasse finally wore both of them down. They discussed abortion, finally. Tony told her he objected to it because he feared losing her. She had assumed he wanted the baby more than he wanted her and she felt jealous. Tony assured her she had been wrong. He told her he loved her more than anything else in his life or anything else in the entire world. He did not want a baby to replace her but as the fulfillment of their love. His heartfelt concern overwhelmed Sharon and she agreed to have the baby. Tony couldn’t believe what she said. He and his beautiful wife were going to become parents!

Carol saw Rob again two days later.

“How’s your car?” she asked.

“It’s running but I don’t know for how long,” Rob replied. “It’s probably time to look for another one. I was wondering if you have time for that coffee.”

“Yeah. I’m done for the day.”

“There’s a little place a block from here. It’s called Holy Grounds. It’s a coffee shop in an old church. Want to walk over there with me?”

“Sure.” They walked in silence. The church was in a business district, a perfect location for a coffee shop. They went down a few steps and entered a large room with booths, tables, chairs, and a large counter. The place seemed crowded for late afternoon. They ordered their coffees and then sat in a booth.

“Nice place,” Carol remarked.

“I used to come here when I lived in the neighborhood, back when I was still married.”

“So where’s your wife?”

“She left the area. She’s in Denver now.”

“I’ve never been there.”

“Me neither. Where did you go to school?” he asked. She told him about Columbia. “Wow, you were there when there was a lot of protesting going on, weren’t you?” She nodded. “Um, were you involved in any of it?” Carol shook her head.

“I watched it, but I didn’t join in, although I did meet my boyfriend at one of the protests.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Yeah. He was a grad student doing research.”

“Was?”

“We broke up a long time ago,” she explained. Rob nodded, relieved. He liked Carol and hoped she did not have a boyfriend.

“So what do you do when you’re not teaching?” he asked.

“My dad is sick. I help take care of him.”

“Do you get out much?” he asked.

“No,” she lied. She went out with Anita and Nancy a lot. Rob smiled. He thought he had a way to get to know her better.

“Do you like movies? I’ve been going to the TLA Cinema a lot, on South Street. They run foreign films mostly. There’s a great festival coming up of films by this Swedish director named Ingmar Bergman. Ever heard of him?”

“Why, yes. I saw a couple of his films in college. I liked them.”

“Would you like to see more of his work?”

“I don’t know. When are the movies playing?”

“The festival starts tomorrow night and runs for three weeks. There are a couple dozen films. We could pick whatever ones we wanted to see.”

“Thanks for letting me know. I’ll think about it.” Rob thought he was going to get a date with Carol but she suddenly seemed uninterested and he felt rebuffed.

“Oh, okay. Let me know if you want to go, okay?”

“Look, Rob, there’s something you need to know.” Rob wondered what else he needed to know. He already knew she was hot and did not have a boyfriend.

“You’re seeing someone?” he asked.

“Actually, no. But I don’t date guys.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“I’m a lesbian.”

“But, you talked about a boyfriend in college,” he replied, confused.

“Yeah, and I also had a few boyfriends before that. But I’m a lesbian now.”

“So... are you dating any women?” he asked, trying to mask his disappointment.

“Not exactly,” she replied. Rob did not know whether he should feel frustrated or pleased.

“Oh, okay. Well, I hope I didn’t offend you.”

“Of course not. I just didn’t want you to get the wrong idea about me. You seem like a great guy and I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

“Well, I *am* disappointed. You’re really nice and very attractive.”

“Thanks for the compliments.” Rob did not reply. He did not know what else to say. He wondered if he should have sensed she was a lesbian before he tried to ask her out but he saw no overt signs she was different. Rob felt like a fool.

“Look, I gotta go. Are you ready to leave?”

“No, I think I’ll stay here a while. You go ahead.” Rob got up feeling awkward and walked away. He turned and looked back at Carol as he approached the door. *Damn, she’s hot*, he thought. *What a waste*. He tried to imagine a way to change her mind as he walked back to his car. He saw her as a challenge. She said she had been with men before so why not now, and why not him?

Rob’s car died again the day after they had coffee. It was late afternoon and the parking lot was starting to empty as people left for the day. He had parked on the lowest level in the back. He walked around looking for someone to give him a ride. Carol came walking down the ramp and saw him.

“You look lost,” she joked.

“Car’s fucked,” he replied.

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry. You want a ride?”

“Yeah, that would be great. You don’t mind?”

“No. I’ve got time. I don’t have to be anywhere for a few hours.”

“Great. Do you want to walk to my car? I need to get my briefcase.”

“Sure. Lead the way.” They started down the ramp. Rob was walking funny.

“Are you okay?” Carol asked.

“Yeah, why do you ask?”

“You’re not walking normally.”

“Oh, right. I am a little tipsy, I guess. A couple of us went to the bar to celebrate. It’s Larry’s birthday. Do you know him? He teaches History 101.”

“We haven’t met.”

“He’s a great guy,” Rob said as they found his car. “Here it is,” he said. He took out his keys, unlocked the door, and then dropped the keys on the concrete.

“You sure you’re all right?” Carol asked, concerned. She was glad she found him. He did not look sober enough to drive.

“Yeah. I guess I drank more than I thought.”

“Let me help you.” His briefcase was on the back seat. She noticed it through the window. She opened the door, bent over, reached in, and then felt him shove her onto the seat. Rob jumped in beside her and pulled the door closed.

“What the...?” she said, confused. He reached under her skirt and touched her panties. She felt him tugging at the cloth. “Rob, what are you doing?” she asked.

“What do you think?” he replied as he pulled her panties down.

“Please stop!” He ignored her. “Rob, stop. I want you to stop, now.”

“And, I want to fuck you. Gorgeous babe like you should have a man, not another woman. I’m going to remind you what a dick feels like.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Try and stop me.” Carol’s briefcase and small purse fell to the floor when he pushed her into the car. As Rob fumbled to get her panties off, Carol reached for her purse, opened it, and felt for the small cylinder of Mace her father insisted she carry it. Rob was too busy trying to prepare her to see what she was doing. Her fingers found the cylinder as he was unbuckling his pants. A second later, he tried to pry her legs apart. She carefully lifted the Mace out of her purse and hoped he would not notice. Rob moved on top so he could penetrate her. Carol lifted the Mace, closed her eyes, and sprayed his face. Rob screamed and leaped back. She wriggled away from him, opened the other door, jumped out, grabbed her briefcase and purse, and ran away. She left her panties and an injured would-be rapist behind.

Carol ran to her car, got in, locked the door, and sat there shaking with fear. Then she burst into tears. She cried for a few moments before she started the car, backed out of her parking space, and drove away. She wanted to be certain he would not chase her.

Carol had difficulty driving. She pulled over when she saw a telephone booth. Rummaging in her purse, she found some change and then got out of the car. She went to the phone booth, lifted the receiver, dialed Anita’s number, and prayed she would answer.

“Hello?” Anita sounded sleepy.

“Anita?”

“Yeah, who’s- oh, it’s you, Carol. How are you doing?”

“Not too good. Somebody just tried to rape me.”

“What? Oh my God! Where are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, but shaken up. Look, I hate to bother you, but could I come over?”

“Of course. Come right away. I’ll be waiting for you. My God, are you sure you’re okay?”

“I will be if I can see you. Thanks. I’ll be there soon.”

Carol arrived twenty minutes later. Anita opened the door, hugged her as tightly as she could, and then led her into the apartment.

“Nancy’s not here?” Carol asked.

“She’s working late tonight, something at the College.”

“Oh.” Carol fell silent.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Anita asked, after a few moments.

“No..., well..., yes. It was this other teacher. He was drunk. I was trying to help him. He took me by surprise.”

“Did he...?”

“No. I Maced him before he could, but he got close.”

“You gonna report him?”

“What good would that do? He won’t try it again, I’m sure.”

“Okay, so how are you feeling right now?”

“Awful. I was so scared. Nothing like that has ever happened to me.”

“Come here,” Anita said as she opened her arms to hug Carol. She collapsed into Anita’s embrace and started crying. Anita stroked her head.

“It’s okay,” Anita said to soothe her. Carol looked up at Anita. Her face reminded Anita of a distraught child overwhelmed by something horrible that had invaded her safe childhood realm. Anita felt like a nurturing parent. “It’s okay. You’re safe, now. No one can hurt you.” Carol went on crying. Her sobbing ebbed and she realized whom she was with. An opportunity had presented itself. Carol lifted her head and surprised Anita with a kiss.

“I love you, Anita.” Startled, Anita kissed Carol back.

Several hours later, exhausted from a busy night helping register new students, Nancy unlocked the door, walked in, and found a coat and purse on the living room chair. She thought she recognized the items and then recalled they belonged to Carol. Nancy looked around, didn’t see Anita or Carol, and wondered if anyone was home.

Exhausted, she headed for the bedroom and found the women asleep. Nancy did not feel surprised, just disappointed. Part of her had suspected this would happen eventually. Carol’s friendship always seemed phony and forced. Now she knew what her motives really were.

Nancy went out, slammed the door, and came back in. They were now awake. She sat on the edge of the bed ready to confront them and did not say anything. Nancy waited for Carol or Anita to explain what had happened. Neither spoke.

“One of you has to say something,” she prodded them.

“Carol was almost raped. She called me and I told her to come over,” Anita explained. She thought Nancy might show some sympathy but she continued to glare at them.

“Don’t lie to me,” Nancy said, coldly.

“It’s the truth,” Carol said.

“Bullshit. Look, Carol, I’ve suspected you for months. Did you think I was stupid?”

“I’m sorry, Nancy, but I love her.”

“Well, she’s *mine*, not yours. So get the fuck out of our bed and go home. We never want to see you again.”

“Wait,” Anita interrupted. “This is my fault. Not hers.”

“What do you mean?”

“I knew what she was doing but I didn’t stop her. She told me months ago that she loved me. I never told you. I didn’t do anything. I was just passive.”

“She *told* you? Anita, how could you not tell me? We could have avoided her.”

“I guess I didn’t want to. After all, she was my friend. We were best friends in high school. I ran away because I loved her.”

“And, then she rejected you. Did you forget that part?”

“I didn’t forget. And I really wanted to be with you.”

“It sounds to me like you wanted to be with both of us,” Nancy argued.

“No, I don’t think so. I mean it.”

“Anita, I won’t share. This shit has to end tonight. So, you’re going to have to make a choice.”

“I think Nancy is right,” Carol said. “I’ll respect whatever decision you make. It’s up to you.”

“Shut up, Carol,” Nancy ordered.

“But, I’m *agreeing* with you! And, I’ll do whatever Anita wants.”

“Okay, then. So, Anita,” Nancy said. “Who do you want? Me or her?” Anita suddenly felt exposed and vulnerable. It was not because she was naked in bed with Carol after they had sex, fell asleep, and got caught by Nancy. She suddenly did not know what her feelings were and felt she needed time to think. She looked at Nancy, then at Carol, and did not know what to say. After a few moments of confusion and hesitation, a thought came to her.

“I think I’d like you both to leave,” Anita said, surprising both women.

“You don’t want to choose?” Carol asked.

“Not like this. I have to think.”

“What’s there to think about?” Nancy asked. “You’re in *our* bed. Kick her out and end this.”

“Please, Nancy, just leave me alone. I need time to think.”

Carol saw her moment had arrived and she goaded them. “This may be your bed, Nancy, but I’m the one here naked with her, so maybe it’s *my* bed now.” Carol’s brazen attack stung Nancy and she knew this was where Carol’s devious friendship had been leading all these months. If she had lacked self-control, she would have hit Carol just to shut her up. Instead, she looked at Anita.

“Her or me, Anita? Her or me!” Nancy shouted.

Anita got out of bed, strode into the bathroom, and slammed the door. Carol and Nancy stared at the door and waited. Anita did not come out.

“Anita?” Nancy called after a few minutes had passed.

“I’m not coming out until both of you leave,” she replied.

“You first,” Nancy commanded. Carol glared at her. “C’mon, Carol, you don’t belong here. Why don’t you just leave?”

“No, *you* first.”

“This is my bedroom.”

“No, it’s Anita’s, and she invited me into it, didn’t she?” Carol claimed.

“And I’m asking you to leave. Now! Please, Carol.”

“Okay, I’ll leave the bedroom. But, I’m not leaving the apartment until Anita decides.” Nancy turned around so Carol could dress. She followed Carol to the living room where they plopped down in opposite chairs to wait for Anita. They heard her moving around in the bedroom. Then she came out fully dressed. She was carrying a backpack. In the bathroom, Anita had realized she felt like a bone two dogs were fighting over. She did not want to be that bone and she did not want to choose the dog to whom the bone belonged.

“I’m leaving,” she announced. The finality in her voice was unmistakable. Neither woman challenged her. She carried her backpack toward the front door, stopped to get her jacket and shoes from the closet, and then went out the door. Anita walked a half-block to Sharon and Tony’s apartment to spend the night with them. They knew something was wrong but did not ask what had happened. All they felt certain of was that it was big. Anita’s life had changed, again. She had run away, again.

Chapter 15 - The New Age

Anita stood by the back doors and waited as the trolley rolled to a stop. She wore an overstuffed backpack and stood next to a large old suitcase crammed with her clothes. She had gone back to the apartment to get the rest of her possessions while Nancy was at work.

The doors wheezed open. Anita stepped down, reached for the suitcase, and hefted it onto the sidewalk. She was beginning to worry she had packed too much. Her father's house was only a block away but Anita wondered if she would make it there. She was already tired from lugging the heavy suitcase downtown, onto the subway, and up the steps at Broad and Erie where she boarded the trolley. *Only a little more and then I'll be home*, she told herself.

The trolley glided away. Anita sighed, picked up the suitcase and started down the block toward her father's house. She arrived, struggled up the steps, and unlocked the door. Her father had given her and Tony keys in case they ever needed to get in. Anita left the backpack and suitcase in the hallway, went into the living room, and looked around. This was going to be her home now if her father agreed to let her stay. She had nowhere else to go.

After resting for a few moments, she thought she ought to start dinner. It would be a nice surprise for her father. Al would be home from work in a couple of hours and he had no idea he would find her there. She felt certain he would be happy to see her but not happy when he found out why she had come. Anita was not merely visiting. She had left Nancy and needed a place to live.

Al smelled the aroma of freshly cooked food the moment he opened the door. He saw the suitcase and backpack in his hallway and wondered what was going on. *Maybe I'm in the wrong house*, he thought.

"Hello?" he called out.

"Hi, Dad," Anita greeted him as she approached from the kitchen.

"Anita! It's good to see you. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" he joked. She ignored his playful inquiry.

"Hungry?" she asked. Al nodded. "I threw something together. It isn't much."

"Smells great. Is it ready?" Al asked. Anita nodded. They went into the kitchen. She told him to get a drink while she served the food. It was just tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. Her mother used to make the same comfort food when she and Tony were little. Al complained jokingly when he found out they ate soup and grilled cheese while he was at work. "What about *me*?" he teased his wife and children. "Don't I rate grilled cheese and soup?" Anita would always giggle, Tony would grin, and Ida would beam at the three of them. It always delighted Ida when her cooking made them happy. She even made him the same lunch from time to time. She never thought it was anything special but he did.

Anita told her father why she needed a place to stay. She did not show any emotion about the breakup with Nancy nor did she tell her father the details of the ordeal with Carol. Anita wanted to put both women out of her mind for now. She hoped to have no further contact with either of them. Someday she might want to think about what happened but she would wait until everything was far in the past. Then, perhaps she could look at it objectively.

Al went upstairs immediately after dinner to clean Tony's old bedroom. It had been her room while she was growing up. She told her father not to fuss over it but he doggedly straightened it up. He put fresh sheets on the bed, checked to see if there was enough available space in the dresser and closet, and made it feel welcoming. Al sensed his little girl had come back home to stay.

Anita settled in quickly. She already knew the commute. She and Tony did it when they lived with their father right after Ida died. The trolley and subway rides were longer and more involved than the short walk to work from Anita and Nancy's downtown apartment, but she didn't mind. She adjusted to the commute and started taking books along. Her mother had been an avid reader and her books were still around the house. Al had never discarded them.

Anita found a poetry anthology. It surprised her. Although it was large and heavy, she carried it along on her commutes. She liked that she could read several poems on each trip. Some of them stuck with her during her workday and she felt the poetry changed her outlook. She found a few favorites she reread occasionally. Anita wondered which ones Ida had liked. She felt sad that she never discussed poetry with her mother. It might have been fun to chat about something besides schoolwork, chores, neighborhood gossip, and trivia.

Anita never thought her mother had any intellectual depth when she was growing up. She was wrong and now it was too late to learn more. She determined not to make the same mistake with her father. They were living together now and she resolved to share time with him and make certain they did things together.

She wanted to learn more about him. What did he do? What did he like? Who were his friends? How was his work? What happened to Rita? Did he still see her? She thought he would mention Rita but he did not so she looked for an opening to ask. He had never explained why the wedding never took place. Anita assumed Rita had broken it off and her dad was still hurting. She wanted to help him get over his disappointment.

"I did it for you," he explained when she finally asked.

"Did what, Dad?"

"Broke it off."

"Wait, *you* broke off the marriage?" she replied, shocked by his statement. "Why?"

"She made me angry."

"What did she do?"

"She didn't want you at the wedding." Anita understood immediately.

"Oh, because I'm...?"

"Right. Can you imagine? The prejudice! Is that what you have to deal with?"

"Actually, no. Most people don't care."

"Well, she did, and I couldn't go through with the wedding. Imagine, me rejecting my daughter, for *her!*" The contempt in his voice was clear.

"But, I thought you loved her."

"I did. I love you more. She's just a woman. You're my daughter." The emphasis in his voice when he said 'daughter' was new. Anita felt her father's deep love for her that she recalled from when she was little.

"Dad, I'm really sorry."

"Don't be," he replied, smiling. "I'm glad I found out she was not right for me before the wedding."

"I wish she was. I kind of liked her."

"Yeah, so did I, but family is family." Anita hugged her father more tightly than she had in a long time, perhaps since she was a child. "And speaking of family, did you know ours is about to get a little bigger?" Al boasted. Anita grinned.

"They finally told you? I've been bugging them."

“Well, I noticed Sharon was putting on weight. She’s such a slender girl that I wondered if anything was wrong. They told me I’m gonna be a grandfather!” Anita thought she had never seen her father as happy as he seemed at that moment.

“I knew you’d be happy.”

“Your mother would have been, too,” he commented.

Both Nancy and Carol knew where Anita worked. Nancy showed up several weeks after Anita moved out.

“Um, you left some of your stuff. I wanted to see if you wanted any of it.”

“I took what I needed. I moved in with my dad and he had everything else.”

“I know.”

“You do?” Anita asked.

“I talked to Sharon. She’s getting big. Pregnancy agrees with her.”

“Yeah.” Anita didn’t want to drag out their conversation. Nancy felt her coldness but needed to take a risk.

“I miss you.”

“Well, I *don’t* miss you. Or, Carol. How is she?”

“How would I know?” Nancy asked.

“Don’t you work in the same place?”

“Not really. I’m in Counseling and she’s in the English Department.”

“Look, Nancy, what we had was great while it lasted. But, I’ve learned that good things don’t last, so it’s not a big deal that we broke up.”

“Maybe it’s not a big deal to *you*, but I’m devastated. I was serious when I said I missed you. I’m going nuts alone. You left a big hole in my life. It hurts.”

“I hurt you and I’m sorry, but I’m not coming back. I’m not falling in love again. In fact, I’m thinking of becoming a nun.”

Nancy couldn’t decide if Anita was joking or serious. The intimacy that would have allowed a response had ended. Nancy finally understood that Anita was not coming back. She left Anita feeling sad and wondered what the rest of her life was going to be like without Anita in it. Anita already knew what the rest of her life was going to be without Nancy in it. Free of entanglements.

Carol showed up a few days later. She waited just outside the Boyd Theater for Anita to come out at the end of her shift. “What do you want?” Anita asked, sharply. Her question didn’t put Carol off.

“We need to talk.”

“You’re wrong. We don’t. Not now, or *ever*, Carol.”

“Please, Anita. Just listen to me.”

“So *you* need to talk, is that it?” Anita asked. Carol nodded. “Okay, so talk.”

“I need you. That one time we were in bed was the best time of my life. I understood what I had missed when I rejected you at Columbia. We *were* more than best friends, Anita, but I didn’t realize it back then. I was also afraid of what being more than best friends meant. I was a fool, and I hurt you. I’m sorry. I’d like to make it right.”

“You weren’t a fool then, Carol. You weren’t gay and you were honest about it.”

“But, I should have let you make me gay.”

“Well, that would never have happened. I wasn’t really gay at Columbia.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sophia.”

“Oh.”

“And you weren’t until Denise, right?” Anita asked. Carol thought she heard sympathy in Anita’s voice. *Maybe we’re connecting*, she thought. She was wrong. “So, it just wasn’t meant to be, Carol. It’s okay. Neither of us was ready.”

“But, I’m ready now, Anita. I’m *so* ready. Please, won’t you give me another chance to make you happy?”

“Being gay never made anyone happy, Carol. Haven’t you figured that out yet?” Anita asked as she hurried toward the subway.

Carol tried to follow her. “Where are you living?” she shouted.

“With my dad.”

“Where’s that?”

“Ask Nancy. She’s been there.” Anita started running. Carol didn’t try to catch up.

As she rode north in the nearly empty subway car, Anita looked back on her short, complicated love life. When she was seventeen, and in love with Carol (although she did not know it) she thought happiness was getting what she wanted, and she wanted Carol, desperately enough to upend her life and cause her family irreparable harm. Now that she was nearly twenty-five she saw things a bit more philosophically. *Happiness isn’t getting what you want. It’s wanting what you already have.*

Anita now had everything she needed. All that was immature, unimportant, shallow, or meaningless was gone. She had pared her life down to essential people. Her father, brother, sister-in-law, and soon-to-be-born niece or nephew. Anita felt her life was simple but complete. Carol and Nancy were unnecessary and disposable. She let them go. *That kind of love’s not worth it*, Anita told herself as she rode the trolley home. *I botched it, anyway.*

Family love was enough for her. She did not need or want anything else. Perhaps she would want another lover in the future. Anita was young. She had what she hoped was a long life ahead. Besides, the world was changing. Society was changing. Gays and lesbians were becoming more accepted and tolerated. Now, however, she did not want to be where she merely felt tolerated but where she felt truly loved. Anita could not imagine what was ahead for her but she knew for the first time in her life that she was where she belonged.

Al had offered to help Tony and Sharon financially when they told him he was going to be a grandfather. They thanked him for his offer but declined it. They had worked out a budget and wanted to do everything on their own. Al backed off but remained ready to help if they needed it. He asked Anita to let him know if she saw they were struggling so he could step in.

Sharon’s water broke and Tony rushed her to the hospital. He called Al and Anita. They came to the hospital and waited for the birth. It was a girl. Al nearly cried the first time he saw her. He hinted to Tony that Ida would be a great name. Tony agreed but said he and Sharon had already chosen a name, Sara. They wanted their baby to be a brand-new person and not an echo of someone else.

Anita and Alphonso visited Sharon every day she was in the hospital recovering from the birth. Whenever they arrived, Anita noticed the Maternity Ward nurse looking at her in a strange way. When they came to take Sharon and Sara home, that nurse handed Anita a piece of paper as they left the ward. Her telephone number was on it, along with the words, ‘Call me. You won’t be sorry.’

Anita held onto the note as she considered calling the nurse. She didn’t know her name and hadn’t looked at her as someone she might find attractive. She still had the note weeks after

Sara cemented her role as the new focus of the Cataldi family. Anita realized she didn't need a lover to be the center of her life, threw the note in the trash, and devoted herself to her niece.

Sara's birth had ushered in a new age for Sharon and Tony, her proud parents, Al, her doting grandfather, and Anita, her adoring aunt. Despite losing Ida, the Cataldi family could not have been happier. Ida, wherever she was, shared their joy.

The End