

**A
Novel
by**

Heart

Entanglement

R.A. Conti

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Author's Note, Please read:
This novel contains some sexual content and is intended for adults only.

Allyson and Janine were teenage lovers in 1970. After they were forcefully separated by Janine's mother, they lost track of each other and their lives went on. In 1995 they meet accidentally and their passion reignites, but their lives are no longer as simple as they were in high school. Allyson is a single mother with a pre-teen daughter. Janine has a husband, teenage daughter, and two younger sons. Entangled by a love that neither woman knew never died, they struggle to find a way to be together without ruining the lives of others they also love.

When two particles, such as a pair of photons or electrons, become entangled, they remain connected even when separated by vast distances. In the same way that a ballet or tango emerges from individual dancers, entanglement arises from the connection between particles.

-Caltech Science Exchange website

Chapter 1

Callie's mother Allyson yelled at her to turn down the stereo but Callie ignored her. *It's not loud, she thought. She's just mad. It's not my fault her boyfriend left her. Again.*

Callie didn't know why her mother's boyfriends left and didn't care. She had no idea what the point was in having boyfriends. What purpose did they serve? What were they good for? As near as she could tell, nothing. As a bashful, modest twelve-year-old, Callie had yet to develop an interest in boys, nor (fortunately) had they developed an interest in her. Callie did not have her mother's good looks, nor was she even interested in looking good.

Callie knew her mother would likely dress up, go out, and look for another man. She marveled at how easy it was for Allyson to find someone to bring home. She could usually get a new boyfriend soon after an old one left. When she dressed up, she wasn't merely attractive, she was gorgeous.

Although Allyson was in her late thirties, she looked younger. She was a petite brunette with an oval face, delicate features, a shapely figure, and a sweet voice. Men noticed her wherever she went, even when she dressed in frumpy clothes. No man could resist her when she looked her best. Sometimes the men Allyson attracted were older than she was. Sometimes they were younger. She always kept an open-mind. If a man seemed interested, she would give him a try.

A few nights later, Allyson did exactly what Callie expected. She dressed in a short, clingy red dress with a low collar and silver belt, high heels, dark pantyhose, and just the right amount of makeup that highlighted her soft facial features. Her dazzling appearance gave Allyson the self-confidence she rarely displayed when she wasn't on the prowl. She knew how to attract men. Keeping one was another story. She was ready to try again.

Allyson promenaded out the door, got into her car, and drove away. Callie turned up her music and began a familiar wait. Usually, it was only a matter of hours before her mother found a new man. Callie wondered if she ought to fall asleep when she felt tired or stay up to check out the new guy, and then realized it didn't matter. He would still be around in the morning and she could meet him then.

When Callie went down to breakfast the next morning, it wasn't a new boyfriend she found at the table. It wasn't one of her mother's old boyfriends, either. Chatting with her mother was a blonde woman Callie didn't recognize. She was wearing Allyson's new sheer dressing gown.

Callie wondered what was going on.

"Here she comes! Good morning, sleepyhead. Janine, this is my daughter, Callie."

Janine stood up to greet Callie. A dazzling smile lit her face. She was taller than Allyson and had a willowy figure. Callie thought the woman was naked underneath her mother's filmy new gown.

"Your mom's told me so much about you! It's a pleasure to meet you." The way Janine leaped up made Callie think she was about to hug her, but Janine didn't.

"Uh, thanks. Same here."

"I hope we'll get to be good friends."

"Uh, yeah, um, maybe. I mean so do I."

“Do you want eggs and bacon?” Allyson asked. She only cooked breakfast when she brought a new man home. Callie usually ate cereal and milk. *If Allyson remembered to buy the cereal, and if the milk hadn’t gone bad. What is happening here?* Callie wondered. Then she wondered if she was still asleep and if this was merely a dream.

“Your daughter looked a little freaked out,” Janine said later when they were alone again. “I hope I didn’t frighten her.”

“She’s almost a teenager. It’s normal for them to look a little freaked out. It’s nineteen-ninety-five but not much has changed in twenty-five years. Remember what it was like for us?”

“Yeah, I remember. I remember a lot *more*, too.”

Allyson almost blushed. “Stop it! You’re gonna embarrass me.”

“Okay, I won’t mention it. But you know what I meant.”

“Yeah, I know,” Allyson replied. She wondered why now, of all times in her adult life, her first lover had come back. True, it was an accident that they met in that club late last night. *Then, again, Allyson thought, was it an accident? Or, was it some kind of fate?*

Allyson’s classmates were all high school freshmen like her and she felt safe. The lunchroom was gigantic and crowded, however. Everyone looked older than she was. Allyson felt overwhelmed. She seriously considered returning her lunch to her locker and going without eating. Then she realized that might work for one day but not for the term. Sooner or later, she would have to find a place to fit in.

Students occupied the corners but she found a spot next to the wall where she could stand. People passed endlessly. Allyson feared that if she took out her sandwich and started to eat someone might bump her (accidentally or deliberately- she wasn’t sure) and she would drop it. She considered sneaking outside but the doors were marked Emergency and big signs warned about opening them. Allyson felt trapped. As she was about to give up, she heard a voice.

“Crazy, huh? Have you ever seen this many people in one place?”

“What?” Allyson asked as she turned. Her eyes fell on a slender torso and she had to look upward to see a face. The girl who looked at her seemed friendly. “Uh, no. Not only is there no place to sit, there’s no place to *stand*. I’m afraid to take my sandwich out. I might be lucky to get a bite or two before somebody knocks it out of my hand.”

“And keeps going as if you don’t exist. Don’t forget that part.”

“Yeah. Say, who are you anyway?”

“Janine Cooper.”

“Allyson with a ‘y’ Bradley.”

“Are you hungry, Allyson with a ‘y’ Bradley?”

“Yeah. Are you?”

“I have an idea. What if we face each other and try to eat? Maybe if there’s two of us instead of one, people won’t bump into us.”

“Good idea. Let’s try it.”

Janine’s suggestion worked and the girls ate their sandwiches without incident.

“You still remember that?” Janine asked, feeling pleasantly surprised.

“Yeah. Changed my life.”

“Mine, too. Do you think we had any idea at the time?”

“I don’t know about you,” Allyson replied. “But, I didn’t. I just wanted to eat my lunch.”

“Yeah. But..., even if we knew what was coming, do you think we would have done anything different?”

“I wouldn’t have changed a thing. I only wished things would have stayed the same.”

“Yeah, now that you mention it, I feel the same way,” Janine replied, wistfully.

Although they had no classes together and rode different buses to and from school, the girls quickly became more than lunch partners. They exchanged phone numbers and chatted in the evenings or on weekends. There were occasional opportunities to get together. One of them morphed into a sleepover. That night, everything changed.

“Have you ever seen a *real* one?” Allyson asked, smirking.

“No, and I don’t want to.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

“No. They’re so ugly,” Janine replied. “Don’t you think so?”

“No! Well, yes. But, I’m still curious.”

“Don’t you think ours are prettier?”

“I don’t think mine is. It’s just *there*, you know?”

“It’s more than just *there*, Allyson. It’s *you*.”

“Sometimes- most of the time, really, I wish it wasn’t.”

“Oh, c’mon! I bet it’s lovely.”

“No, Janine. It’s not.”

“Let me see it.”

“What?”

“Let me see it,” Janine replied. Allyson hesitated. “Show it to me!” She had never shown it to anyone. “Do I have to pull your pants down?”

“Uh, no. Okay.” Allyson lowered her pajamas and panties.

“Oh, how sweet it looks,” Janine said. “Can I touch it?”

“What? Why?”

“To see if it feels like mine.”

“Why wouldn’t it?”

“Because it’s *yours*, Allyson.”

“But, you have your own.”

“Yeah, and I know what mine feels like.”

“Well, okay, I guess.”

“You can feel mine if you want to.” Before Allyson could stop Janine she, took down her panties and exposed herself. Well, that’s not exactly true. Allyson felt exposed but Janine didn’t feel the same way.

Allyson looked into Janine’s eyes. There was something there she never noticed before. While Allyson felt reluctant to be touched, Janine seemed eager for Allyson to touch her.

Mesmerized, Allyson reached toward Janine as she reached toward Allyson. They touched at the same moment. Suddenly they knew what to do. They cupped their hands on each other's crotches, pressed gently, and sighed. Then Allyson gasped as she felt Janine's finger slip inside her. Until now, the only way she had taken anything into her body was through her mouth. Eating felt natural. Surprisingly, so did what Janine was doing. However, Allyson wasn't ready to reciprocate. Janine didn't care. She did to Allyson what she had done to herself a few times, and liked very much. Janine rotated her finger inside Allyson's vagina. Allyson nearly swooned. Janine's face beamed. For the first time in her young life, she felt truly happy.

That first time happened almost twenty-five years earlier and Allyson had all but forgotten it. Then, last night, she entered a new club with some friends. They squeezed into a booth. When Allyson wasn't laughing, drinking, or checking out the men, her eyes fell on someone who walked in alone. A moment later, she realized who it was. Long lost feelings flooded her mind.

The girls' brief romance had lasted through the school year and then Janine's family moved away. Allyson's mother encouraged her to write to Janine. She composed a couple of letters but mailed only one. The others said things she didn't want to risk anyone else ever reading. The letter she did send had only three words. 'I miss you.' Allyson knew that was all she needed to write because Janine would know exactly what she meant to say. However, Janine never wrote back and Allyson never found out why.

Life went on.

Janine spotted Allyson as she looked around the club and then walked over to the booth. A delightful reunion followed. Allyson told her girlfriends about her high school friendship with Janine. (But she did not mention their romance. She didn't know if Janine would approve.) Later, when the women happened to meet in the Ladies' Room, Janine asked why Allyson hadn't told her friends the truth. "They don't seem like prudes," she commented.

"Oh, they're very open-minded. But none are..., well, you know. At least, not as far as I know."

"You mean like *we* were?"

"Yeah, but we didn't know it. I thought you might prefer that I not mention it,"

Allyson explained.

"Why?"

"I guess because I haven't seen you in twenty-five years and didn't know how you were now. Maybe you'd changed. Or maybe you forgot all about it."

"Allyson, I never forgot you. But, I thought you forgot me."

"You did? Why?"

"You never wrote me."

"But I *did*," Allyson protested. "It was only once. I didn't get a reply and thought you were done with me, so I threw my other letters away."

"Wait. You *sent* me a letter?" Janine asked. Allyson nodded. "I never got it."

"Oh, no! I'm so sorry."

“No, I’m sorry for hurting your feelings. I was too busy at first with school and a new town but I planned to write and tell you all about everything. Then when I didn’t hear from you, I decided I’d better not because you weren’t interested anymore.”

“Oh, but I *was*. I was heartbroken when you moved away. I actually thought of running away. I knew your new address but not much else, or I would have tried. Of course, I had no money, but I did start saving up for a bus ticket.”

“It’s better that you didn’t come.”

“Why?” Allyson asked.

“I don’t know how my mother would have reacted.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember how religious she used to be?” Janine asked.

“Used to be? Is she gone now?”

“Oh, no. She’s very much alive but no longer religious. Not since what the pastor in that new church did to her. Anyway, I think I know why I never received your letter.”

“You mean?”

“Yeah. I think she suspected we weren’t *just* sleeping during our sleepovers.”

“Oh, God!” Allyson exclaimed.

“God had nothing to do with her religion. It was all about rules and punishment.”

“I remember. She *was* strict. She wouldn’t let you go out with boys. I thought we were safe, though.”

“So did I, but now I’m angry about what she did. And, I didn’t want to go out with boys, anyway. I just said that to annoy her.”

“You’re not gonna tell her about our meeting again, are you?”

“Oh, yeah,” Janine replied. “She’ll be happy to hear I saw you.”

“So, are you...? I’m not. I was married but he left. I have a daughter.”

“I have three kids and a husband.”

“Let’s go back, shall we?” Allyson said. She knew what she wanted to happen next.

That was all they said about themselves, even after Janine followed Allyson back to her house and then into her bedroom where they renewed their acquaintance after a long time apart. It almost felt as if they had never separated.

Chapter 2

Callie worried Janine would never leave. *Doesn't she have a home of her own?* She thought. *Why doesn't she go back there?* However, Allyson and Janine didn't seem eager to separate again. Perhaps they feared the same thing would happen this time as happened last time and they would remain apart for years. Neither lover wanted to risk that.

Callie didn't know her mother and Janine were lovers. They slept in the same bed, but that was because Allyson had a king-size bed and there was no guest room. During the three days and nights she and Janine spent together, Allyson recalled how simple and beautiful life could be when a person was with someone they genuinely loved. She never felt the same with any man she'd ever been with. Allyson realized she hadn't even tried. The reason was simple. It was not a man she wanted, but Janine. And now, Janine was back. All she wanted now was to find a way they could remain together.

They awoke on the third morning. Janine got up, went to the bathroom, came back, and started dressing. Allyson interrupted her.

"You don't need to get dressed yet," she said.

"I can't leave here naked. I might get arrested."

Allyson sat up. "You're leaving? Why?"

"I have to get home. My family thinks I'm on a business trip. I do the kind of work that demands sudden trips. That's why I had a packed travel bag in my trunk."

"But, you can stay. I was hoping you'd move right in." Allyson thought she was saying what Janine wanted to hear. Janine looked at Allyson, unsure she had heard her correctly. She hesitated to reply. Allyson understood what her hesitation implied, but refused to accept it. "It's what we wanted twenty-five years ago, wasn't it?" Allyson asked, meekly.

"Yes. But that was twenty-five years ago. Our lives are different now. We're different women."

"Maybe *you* are, but I'm not. I still want you as much now as I did back then. Maybe more."

"Oh, Allyson, sweetie..."

Janine liked reconnecting with Allyson and recalling their wonderful love when they were mere teenage girls. However, she was an adult now with a husband, teenage daughter, and younger sons of her own. *It's easier for Allyson, Janine thought. She's not married, and I think her daughter could accept us. I'm not sure my kids could. I'd have to leave Mike and I don't know what that would do to him. He's been a devoted husband for all these years. Telling him I'm leaving because I met the love of my life again would hurt him deeply.*

Janine wondered how to explain why she couldn't stay. She knew she still loved Allyson, but what difference did that make? Love wasn't the most important thing in the world anymore. There were other things...

"Okay," Allyson said. Then she flopped down, turned over, and buried her head beneath the pillow. Janine finished dressing and left without saying another word. She had been thinking of suggesting they could start an affair, but now wondered if Allyson could accept that. *Would it be enough for her?* Janine wondered. *Could it make her happy? Maybe not.*

Later, Callie found her mother sitting in the recliner. The TV was on but Allyson had muted the sound. Her head was down and Callie thought she heard sobs. “Mom? Mom! What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Allyson raised her head and looked at her daughter. She wondered how she could explain how she felt without revealing too much about the relationship she and Janine started when they were not much older than Callie was. Allyson still wanted that relationship. It seemed that Janine didn’t. Allyson wondered if her life was worth continuing.

“No, sweetie. I’m not okay.”

“What happened?”

“Um, Janine left.”

Yay! Callie thought but then tried not to show it on her face. “Why are you sad?” she asked.

“I didn’t want her to leave,” Allyson replied, not looking at her daughter. She paused, wondered how much she ought to reveal, and then went on. “In fact, I asked her to move in.”

Callie tried not to show her surprise. “Move in? You mean *live* with us? Why?”

“Because we’re best friends, Callie.”

“So, is she coming back?”

“No, Callie. She refused.”

“Why, Mom?”

“Because she can’t leave her family,” Allyson replied, but then paused. She wondered again if she ought to continue, then decided to be honest. “But, we’re still best friends.”

If they had been best friends, Callie wondered why her mother never mentioned Janine. Callie didn’t even know the woman existed until she saw her wearing her mother’s dressing gown. Now, Allyson seemed obsessed with her. Callie looked at her mother and wondered why she changed so dramatically in the past few days.

“I don’t understand, Mom.”

“I know you’re too young to understand this, but I’ve loved Janine since we were not much older than you.” Callie looked at her, unable to grasp what she heard. Allyson saw the bewildered expression on her daughter’s face and felt she ought to say more. “You can’t predict who you’ll fall in love with,” she said, gloomily. Then she realized she had probably confused Callie even more.

“Love? What’s love got to do with it? Love stinks.”

“Don’t say that, Callie! Love is the most beautiful feeling you can have. I’m happier than I’ve been in many years.”

“Yeah, right,” Callie replied. “That’s why you look like you want to slit your wrists.”

“Slit my wrists? How do you know about that kind of stuff?”

“Kids talk in school.”

“Oh, right,” Allyson said.

But they don’t talk about weird stuff like this, Callie thought. They don’t talk about what you’re supposed to do when your mom starts acting crazy.

Chapter 3

Callie's best friend Virginia was a chubby, gawky, blonde-haired girl who liked wearing pig tails. She had a round face, a nose that was slightly too big, wore thick glasses, and often squinted. Virginia was also the smartest student at Springfield Middle School.

Naturally, the other kids made fun of her. Not because she looked funny, wore thick glasses, or was smarter than everyone else, but because she refused to dress like a girl her age. Most girls had already transitioned from child to teenage clothing. They traded frilly dresses, dressy shoes, and tops that covered most of their upper body for outfits that became increasingly revealing as they developed. The reason Virginia didn't dress the same way was not that she was clueless. It was because clothes were unimportant to her.

Callie liked Virginia because she was different. She didn't necessarily want to be like Virginia, but she didn't want to be like the other girls at school, either. Callie wasn't sure what her particular differences were yet but felt safe exploring herself with Virginia. She thought other girls had already given up on being unique. They had already chosen the safety that sameness conferred. Callie hated cliques, clubs, and conformity, although she didn't know all those words. She also didn't care that other kids made fun of her and Virginia.

"My little cousin made me watch *The Little Mermaid* tape again last night," Virginia said. "I had to babysit her when my parents went out with her parents. I should have known that she would want to watch it again, but I didn't think of it ahead of time. But, I got her back for making me watch it."

"How?"

"I told her the ending of the movie wasn't like the ending of the original story."

"How did you find out?" Callie asked.

"I looked it up in the library one day. It's in Hans Christian Anderson's book."

"So, what's the real ending?"

"Well, the movie has a happy ending," Virginia explained. "The little mermaid gets the prince. But, the fairy tale has a sad ending because she doesn't get the prince. In fact, she dies."

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, I told my cousin that."

"You told her the mermaid *dies*?" Callie asked, surprised.

"Yeah."

"What did she do?"

"She asked what death was," Virginia said.

"Did you explain it?"

"How could I? I don't know."

"So then what happened?" Callie asked.

"She told her parents when she went home, and now I'm in trouble."

There was a long silence. Finally, Callie looked away from Virginia's face and began to speak. "I think I'm in trouble, too."

"What happened? What did you do?"

"I didn't do *anything*. It was my mom."

"Okay. What did *she* do?" Virginia asked.

“She has a new girlfriend.”

“So? You and I are girls and we’re friends. Doesn’t she have girlfriends, too?”

“She’s only had boyfriends,” Callie explained. Until that moment, Callie hadn’t admitted to herself that the way her mother talked about Janine was the same way she sometimes talked about the men she dated.

“I don’t get what you mean.”

“My mom told me she’s in love.”

“So?” Virginia asked.

“With this girlfriend.”

“Oh. What’s wrong with that?”

“I don’t think that’s the way it’s supposed to be.”

“Why?”

“That’s just the way it is, Virginia. Don’t you know anything?”

“If you say so, Callie. I gotta go. Gym class. See you on the bus later.”

Callie wasn’t sure she wanted to see Virginia or anyone else later. She wasn’t even certain she wanted to go home again. What if Janine had come back and what if she wanted to stay this time? Callie tried not to think about it but found she couldn’t think about anything else.

Luckily, Janine wasn’t there when she got home after school. Her mother was still at work, too. Callie breathed a sigh of relief. *Maybe everything’s gone back to normal*, she thought. *Maybe she’ll even come home with a guy tonight.*

Callie hadn’t felt comfortable with the men her mother brought home although they had always been nice to her. She’d always hoped the latest man would be her mother’s last one, but there was always another. Callie knew one of them could become her stepfather, but that seemed unlikely. The men never stayed around long enough for them to become a family.

Chapter 4

It hadn't occurred to Allyson that Janine might not feel the same way she did. She thought connecting with her long, lost love would bring the permanent happiness they had been denied twenty-five years earlier. They were adults now. They could do anything they wanted. Only, they couldn't, really. Or, maybe Janine just didn't want to. Allyson wasn't certain which possibility hurt the least. Then she decided that she was wrong and Janine *did* want to be with her and it was only a matter of time before she came back, permanently. Since that was the only acceptable outcome, Allyson went with it.

Callie watched her mother change. Allyson started in her bedroom. She cleared out half the clothes and other junk in her closet so Janine would have room for her stuff when she moved in. Then she went through the closet in Callie's room. To make room for the stuff she cleared out of her bedroom closet, Allyson threw out many of the toys Callie saved from when she was little. When Callie complained, Allyson told her, "You're not a child anymore. You've got to take more responsibility for the things in your life."

Yeah, but what about you, Callie thought. *You're not a child anymore, either, yet you're not taking responsibility for your life. You're acting crazy.* If she had said aloud what she was thinking, Allyson would have sighed, nodded, and replied, "Yeah, crazy with love."

The biggest and most unexpected change was that Allyson no longer brought men home with her. Unexpectedly, Callie wished that her mother *would* bring a man home. That was the normal she was used to. She hadn't liked it but she accepted it. Callie didn't know where this new crazy would end up. *If I tell her she's acting crazy, will she even want me around anymore?* Callie asked herself. She had no idea what the answer would be and kept her fear to herself.

Allyson didn't keep her thoughts to herself. All she talked about was how wonderful it was going to be when Janine moved in. "You'll like her when you get to know her. I'm sure of it. And she'll like you. You guys are going to be great friends. We'll be a real family, finally. It will be so wonderful." *Will it?* Callie wondered. *Or, will I never see you because you're with Janine all the time?*

Several weeks passed without any word from Janine. Allyson tried not to worry. She assumed Janine wanted to surprise her and that she would just show up one day with suitcases and move in. Allyson stopped going out, except for work, so she could be certain to be home when Janine arrived. She sent Callie shopping. "Here's the credit card. Don't buy anything that's not on the list, Callie. We don't have much money and we have to save it for when Janine moves in."

Callie briefly thought about packing a bag, taking the credit card, and running away. But, where could she go? Virginia was her only friend. She might take Callie in, but her mother was weird, and Callie wasn't sure Virginia's mother even liked her.

Debbie (Virginia's mother) had always seemed a little weird but was looking more normal now that Allyson had changed. Before, Allyson had been the stable mom. Now, Debbie seemed that way. Virginia never talked about her mother, but Callie knew she embarrassed Virginia. She also felt Virginia worried that anything she complained about when her mother was nowhere around would somehow get back to her. It was as if she had

ears that could hear no matter how far away she was. Sometimes, Callie wondered if Virginia was afraid of her mother but never asked.

Are all moms weird? Callie wondered. She didn't know any other mothers because she had no friends other than Virginia. She also didn't yet know that there was no such thing as normalcy. Everybody was weird in some way. Some people were just weirder than others. Few were downright crazy or dangerous. So far, Allyson was acting crazy but had not yet seemed dangerous. Callie didn't want to think about what would happen to her if her mom got worse. Maybe she would have no choice but to run away to live with Virginia and again wondered if her mother would notice she was gone.

What did happen was almost worse. Allyson stopped noticing Callie even when she was at home. She no longer sent Callie to buy food, made meals for her, or did her laundry. Callie felt like a ghost in her own house. That was when she got scared.

I'm right here but she doesn't even see me, Callie thought. *I might as well be invisible. Or dead.* Allyson rarely spoke to Callie. She grunted if she passed Callie in the hallway, saw her in the kitchen, or came into the bathroom when Callie was on the toilet. Callie ignored her mother and Allyson didn't even notice. She went around the house humming or singing as if she was happy all the time. Callie felt pretty sure her mother had lost it. She even began wondering if Allyson was paying the bills.

One night, Callie crept downstairs when Allyson was already asleep, looked at the desk, and found her mother's mail and checkbook. There were no recent bills, and Callie found check stubs that showed that rent, electricity, and cable were paid up. She also found a few letters in envelopes with no addresses on the front.

Callie opened one and read it. It was a letter to Janine. Callie blushed at Allyson's recollection of when they were young girls just starting out. Allyson wrote words that described things Callie wouldn't have imagined were real. That was when Callie finally understood her mother was possessed by something Callie never knew existed. Love between two women. She didn't know if it had a name and refused to think about it. She did, however, feel afraid her mother was drowning. Then she wondered if she might go down with her.

Callie went back to her room but couldn't sleep.

A few days later, Callie came home from school and found her mother waiting. "You're home early," Callie said. Allyson smiled but didn't say anything. "Um, is everything okay?"

"Everything *is* okay, Callie. More than okay." *She remembered my name!* Callie thought. She had started to wonder if her mother still knew who she was. Callie didn't know what else to say. She poured a glass of milk, grabbed a cookie, and started out of the kitchen doorway.

"Janine called me at work today," Allyson said. Her voice was so quiet that Callie wondered if she was addressing her or talking to herself. Callie made the quick decision not to ask any questions just to see what her mother might say next and kept walking.

"She asked me how I was doing." Callie heard her mother but ignored her. "I was honest with her." Callie kept moving. "I told her I was a mess." Callie stopped, took a bite of her cookie, chewed, savored the chocolate chip sweetness, swallowed, took a sip of milk, and waited. "I am, aren't I, Callie?" *Is she really asking me?* Callie thought. *Or, is she just thinking out loud?* Callie didn't know how to respond and didn't say anything.

“I know I’ve changed. I know you probably don’t understand why. Maybe someday you will. Maybe someday it’ll happen to you and then you’ll know.” *I hope not, Callie thought. I never want to be like you. Ever!*

Callie took her milk and cookie to her room and finished her snack there. She didn’t see her mother again until dinner and Allyson didn’t say anything more. All she asked was whether Callie wanted any more spaghetti and meatballs before she put the leftovers away. Callie shook her head and that was the end of their meal together.

Back in the safety of her bedroom, Callie thought about her mother. *Will I get like her someday? Will I bring men home? If that’s what it means to grow up, I don’t think I want to. I refuse to waste my life on meaningless crap.*

Chapter 5

Callie didn't expect Wednesday's lunch period to be any different from most of the other lunch periods of the semester. She and Virginia would meet and then get snubbed by everyone else in their grade when they looked for a seat at a lunch table. Eventually, they would grab seats when someone else got up to leave. This time, something different happened. It was a small change, but a pleasant one.

"My parents are going away this weekend," Virginia said.

"That's nice," Callie replied, between bites of her peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"Not really."

"Why?"

"They're making me go with them."

"Sounds like it could be fun," Callie replied.

"It won't be. They'll leave me in the motel room while they go off and visit with their old friends who don't like kids or don't like me, I've never been sure."

"So, you don't wanna go?"

"No. They say I can stay with my grandma..." Virginia continued.

"Oh, that sounds nice, too."

"It's not. She's old and weird. She complains about her aches and pains whenever I see her. Like I'm supposed to care. And she makes me do stuff for her."

Callie frowned. "That doesn't sound like fun."

"Well, there's one other thing I could do, but I'm gonna need your help."

"What is it?"

"Could I spend the weekend at your house?" Virginia asked.

"I think that would be great, but I'll have to ask my mom."

"Of course. Will you ask at dinner and call me right away?"

"I'll try. It depends on the mood she's in."

"Yeah, I know the problem. But, thanks. I hope she says yes."

"So do I," Callie replied.

Allyson came home from work in a good mood and said yes as soon as Callie asked her. After school on Friday, Virginia and Callie rode the bus together and arrived ready for a snack and some real weekend fun for a change. They usually spent the weekends apart, bored, and often didn't even talk on the phone.

As she approached the house, Callie got out her key but then found the front door unlocked. She pushed it open and heard laughter. *Mom's in a good mood*, she thought. *Maybe she'll buy us pizza*. Then Callie heard more laughter and immediately panicked. It was a different woman's laughter.

"Oh, you're home!" Allyson greeted the girls, beaming. "Look who's here." Callie didn't respond. "You remember my mute daughter, Janine?"

"Of course. Hi, Callie."

"Um, hi. This is my friend, Virginia."

"Nice to meet you, Virginia."

"The girls are having a weekend sleepover. Aren't you, girls?"

"How nice," Janine said.

“And we’re having a sleepover, too,” Allyson added, gaily. *Oh, no*, Virginia thought. *Are we gonna be stuck with them all weekend? Maybe I should have gone to grandma’s house.*

Before Virginia could even look at Callie for an explanation, Allyson continued in her excited tone of voice. “You girls take whatever you need. There’s money for pizza if you want to order it later on.” Allyson picked up a wine bottle, took Janine’s hand, and left the kitchen. “Have fun, girls!” she said. A moment later, the girls heard the women climbing the stairs.

“Um, I guess they’re really tired,” Virginia commented. She wasn’t being ironic.

“Yeah,” Callie replied, feeling mortified. “But it looks like we have the place to ourselves and we won’t be stuck in my room all weekend. What’ya want to do first?”

“How about a snack?”

“Awesome.”

Callie wanted to remain downstairs for as long as possible so they wouldn’t overhear strange noises coming from her mother’s bedroom. She didn’t know how she would explain the noises to Virginia. Callie wasn’t certain how to explain them to herself.

They ordered pizzas and watched Callie’s favorite Friday night shows. Virginia had never seen *Family Matters*, *Full House*, and *Boy Meets World*. During the commercials, the girls chatted and giggled. While the shows were on, they stuffed themselves with food. For the entire night, they forgot about the adults upstairs.

Callie hoped all would be quiet when they went to her bedroom, and then suggested they sleep downstairs. She and Virginia changed into their pajamas so they could lounge more comfortably in front of the TV. The girls felt drowsy by nine-thirty. Callie asked if Virginia had much weekend homework. “Who cares?” Virginia replied, giggling, and then fell asleep before ten pm. Before she dropped off to sleep, Callie briefly wondered if Janine had come back permanently. Then she told herself that it might be a good thing if it meant she could hang out with her best friend a lot and have the whole house to enjoy.

Chapter 6

Virginia awoke before Callie. The house seemed quiet. It was light out but she didn't know what time it was. She tiptoed to the small bathroom next to the closet in the entrance hall and then returned to the sofa wondering if she could fall back to sleep.

Peaceful silence was not something Virginia was used to. Nor was she used to relaxing without any adults around to boss her. In fairness, her father never said much to her. But her mother Debbie nagged her every waking moment. Sometimes, Virginia even felt her mother nagging her in her dreams.

Her mother never allowed her to sleep in on Saturday mornings. She would wake Virginia early and give her chores before she ate breakfast. Virginia was supposed to start her weekend by straightening her room, which was rarely messy. Occasionally an item of clothing littered the floor, but Virginia didn't have many possessions so she couldn't use them to clutter her space. Every time her mother gave her something, she told her exactly where it was supposed to go when it was not in use, including the presents she received on Christmas morning, which were mostly clothes anyway. The last time she received a toy was several years ago, and that was a gift from her Aunt Margaret after Virginia had admired Aunt Margaret's Barbie collection.

"Don't you have a Barbie?" Aunt Margaret asked.

"She doesn't need a Barbie," Debbie (Margaret's older sister) had replied.

"Every girl should have a Barbie," Margaret countered, defiantly.

She bought Virginia a doll and several outfits for her birthday. Virginia knew what the gifts were before she opened them and felt thrilled. Debbie wasn't happy with her sister or daughter, and Virginia suppressed her enthusiasm. The unopened Barbie sat on a shelf, with the unopened outfits. Virginia had never taken them out of the packages even when she was alone at bedtime. She felt afraid her mother would discover she had opened them and punish her. She might even take the Barbie away from her, and she wouldn't be able to tell Aunt Margaret what happened. Whenever she asked Virginia if she was enjoying the Barbie, Virginia lied and said that she was. Debbie smiled as her daughter lied. *Apparently, lying is okay, Virginia learned, but playing is not.* It was a painful lesson.

Now, on the peaceful Saturday morning, Virginia marveled as she realized the girls had not seen an adult since just after school on Friday afternoon. *Is it always this way for Callie?* Virginia wondered. *She's so lucky!*

Callie wasn't feeling lucky, however. She felt confused, worried, and downright frightened. What was happening to her mother? Was she going to abandon Callie for that woman Janine?

Callie felt grateful Virginia was staying for the weekend. They had never spent a night together, let alone a whole weekend. Callie wondered why Virginia's parents agreed to let Virginia stay. She didn't know much about Virginia's home life. Virginia rarely complained or even mentioned what it was like in her house. She was afraid her mother might find out what she said and punish her.

Now both girls felt free, and determined to make the most of it. Saturday mornings were good for one thing- cereal, cartoons, and lounging in one's pajamas. Callie had done that often. Virginia hadn't done it since she was little, and had forgotten all about it.

“So, when does your mom usually get up on Saturdays?” Virginia asked.

“Sometimes early, sometimes later. It depends on if she went out on Friday night and when she came home. Sometimes she has to work.”

“You mean she leaves you alone all day on Saturday?”

“Sure. Doesn’t your mom?” Callie asked.

“She wouldn’t dream of it. She plans every minute.”

“Mom says Saturdays are for relaxing.”

“My mom *never* relaxes,” Virginia replied. “I don’t think she knows the meaning of the word.”

“Well, she’s not here, so you can relax all you want. We can play with my Barbies later if you want to. I have several and we can share them.”

“That would be awesome!”

Allyson came downstairs around noon, still in her bathrobe. She greeted the girls, asked if they’d eaten, didn’t wait for their answer, and headed for the kitchen. Callie wondered where Janine was. *Maybe she left during the night*, she thought.

She took the cereal bowls and spoons into the kitchen. Allyson was making coffee and putting sandwiches together. She had several pieces of fruit on a platter. “Can I make you girls a sandwich?” she asked, cheerfully.

“Um, we’re not hungry. We stuffed ourselves with cereal.”

“Oh, okay. Well, there’s plenty here when you’re ready.” Allyson bustled about as she finished the meal, loaded it on a big tray, and poured two cups of coffee.

“Um, is Janine still here?” Callie asked. She already knew the answer.

“Oh, sure. She’s still asleep. We, uh, talked all night and wore each other out.”

“Um, is she staying all weekend?” Callie asked.

“I think so. Is that okay with you? You have your friend here so I didn’t think you needed me for anything.”

“Yeah, it’s okay. And we’re having fun. I was just wondering.”

“Well, we won’t be bothering you,” Allyson replied. “You kids have a great time, only don’t go out unless you tell me first.”

“We weren’t planning to go anywhere.”

“Great! Well, see you later.” Allyson hefted the tray, marched out of the kitchen, and headed up the stairs like a woman on a mission. *Wow! Callie thought. That’s a lot of food. They must have worn themselves out talking last night.*

“Is your mom okay?” Virginia asked.

“Yeah. She’s just tired. She works hard and usually goofs off on Saturdays. Sometimes, she stays in bed all day.

“And leaves you all alone?”

“I don’t mind.” Callie didn’t say anymore. She didn’t want to explain to Virginia that her mother often did not come home alone on Friday nights and, when she spent Saturdays in her bedroom, was often not alone there.

“So, what do you want to do all day?” Callie asked.

“I don’t know.” Virginia looked around the room and noticed a shelf full of videotapes. “Wait! Are those yours?” she asked.

“Some are. My mom has a few. Why?”

“Got any good ones?”

“They’re *all* good.”

“Can I look at them?”

“Go ahead.” Virginia scanned the titles and several jumped out at her: *Toy Story*, *Babe*, *The Lion King*, and *Aladdin*.

“These sound great. Can we watch them?”

“All of them?”

“Yes, please?” Virginia asked.

“You haven’t seen them?”

“No, but I’ve heard of them.”

“Don’t you have them?”

“No. I’m not allowed to have any tapes. My mother says they’re bad for children. The only time I’m allowed to watch is when my cousin brings over *The Little Mermaid* when I babysit her. ”

“They’re all great. I love them.”

“Okay, so *please*, can we watch them?”

“Sure. Which one do you want to start with?”

Virginia reached for *Aladdin*. “This one.”

“Oh, that’s a great one.” Callie took the box, removed the tape, and inserted it into the player. The video started. Virginia’s body remained almost completely still on the sofa while the movie transported her mind to a magical fairy tale realm of color, action, song, story, and love. Callie looked at her friend several times and wondered how she could seem so enthralled with a movie everyone had likely seen a million times. Everyone but Virginia.

“That was...that was...beautiful,” Virginia said after the music ended. “Can we watch it again?”

“Maybe later. Let’s pick another. Since you liked that one so much you’d probably like *Lion King*, too.”

“If it’s anything like that one, I will!”

“Well, it’s different, but you’ll probably like it. But first, are you hungry?” Callie asked. “I think there’s pizza left from last night.”

“You mean you’re allowed to have pizza two days in a row?”

“If there’s any left, and there usually is, why not eat it? What does your mom do with leftover pizza?”

“She throws it away,” Virginia replied.

“Throwing away pizza should be against the law!”

“I know, right!?”

Allyson and Janine came downstairs around dinnertime. “Are you girls hungry?” Allyson asked.

“Yeah, Mom,” Callie replied.

“I could eat,” Virginia said.

“Well, Janine and I were thinking of spaghetti, meatballs, garlic bread, and a big salad. How does all that sound?”

“What about dessert?” Callie asked.

“That’s my daughter! She has her priorities straight. I bought some chocolate ice cream. Will that be okay?”

“That will be great!” the girls replied, simultaneously. Everyone laughed.

A half hour later, Allyson called the girls to the table. It was spread with more food than Callie had seen in a while, even at Thanksgiving or Christmas. Everyone sat, passed food around, and filled their plates. Virginia only took some salad. “What’s wrong Virginia? Don’t you like spaghetti and meatballs?” Callie asked.

“Oh, I like them. But, I was told always eat the salad first.”

“Oh? I never heard of that,” Allyson commented.

“In my house, we eat the salad before dessert,” Janine said.

“Callie and I eat it as a side dish sometimes,” Allyson explained. “Don’t we, Callie?” Callie was busy sprinkling grated cheese on her mound of spaghetti and grunted. Virginia watched her, amazed that her mother allowed Callie to take as much cheese as she wanted. “Um, save some for the rest of us, Callie,” Allyson teased. Callie stopped shaking the container and passed it to Janine.

Virginia ate her salad. The feeling at the table was new to her. Everyone ate relaxed and at ease. They chatted and chewed and enjoyed their time together. There was no bickering, nagging, or tense silence, just comradery. As soon as she finished her salad, Virginia asked for the spaghetti bowl. She piled a heap of spaghetti, took one meatball, asked for the cheese, and freely piled it atop her food. Everyone smiled. They were having fun.

“I was thinking of showing Janine around the neighborhood tomorrow. Would you girls like to come along? You could show her your school, the supermarket where we go, and the little strip mall. You guys could rent some tapes if you’re tired of the ones we have. You’re staying until Monday morning, right, Virginia?”

“Yes, ma’am, if that’s okay.”

“Of *course*, it’s okay. You’re always welcome here. You can stay as long as you like.” Virginia thought it was ironic that she felt more welcome at her friend’s house than at her own. Life was weird. Callie wondered how long Janine was staying. She frowned and looked away from her mother.

“What do you think, Callie? Does a ride tomorrow sound like fun?”

“Okay.”

“Great! Then it’s settled. We’ll go right after lunch. In fact, maybe we’ll go someplace *for* lunch.”

“Sounds good,” Janine replied. “I’m looking forward to spending time with you girls.” Callie wondered if being in public with her mother and Janine would embarrass her. Then she realized the only person likely to notice was Virginia, and she didn’t seem to care. *Maybe it’ll be fun*, Callie reassured herself. *And I’ll have to think of some other tapes to get.*

Chapter 7

On Saturday night the girls slept in Callie's bedroom. Virginia awoke early Sunday morning and started getting dressed. Callie woke up, saw her, and wondered what she was doing. "Oh, you're awake. What time is church?" Virginia asked.

"Church?" Callie asked, sleepily.

"Yeah. Doesn't your mom make you go?"

"Uh, no. She's never mentioned it. Why?"

"My parents take me every Sunday."

"Why?" Callie asked, still feeling confused.

"They say it's good for me."

"Is it?"

"I have no idea," Virginia replied. "I never pay attention. I just look around at all the funny-looking people all dressed up looking all serious and I wonder what they're thinking about. I bet it's not about church!"

"So, what *are* they thinking about?" Callie asked.

"Probably how they'd rather be home in bed, or at the beach, or playing with their friends, or watching TV."

"So, church is interesting?" Callie asked, grinning.

"It's so boring that sometimes I want to fall asleep. That's why I look around. I don't know what my mother would do to me if I fell asleep."

"You don't like your mother, do you?" Callie asked. Virginia didn't reply. She feared if she said aloud what she was feeling, her mother (no matter how far away she was) could hear her. Callie didn't ask again.

Allyson and the girls took Janine on a tour of the neighborhood and gave her a glimpse into their lives. The first place they went was Allyson's workplace. She worked in a small computer company that provided tech support for local businesses. Allyson was just a receptionist and dispatcher. Her job was one of the most important in the company, however. She fielded sometimes hysterical calls from distraught customers who were having serious problems that threatened to doom their businesses if they weren't solved immediately. It was Allyson's job to field the service requests and route them to the proper technicians for assistance. Since she was the first person that clients contacted, she had to sometimes endure their anger and frustration. Somehow, she never became flustered, always responded soothingly, and calmed anxious customers. Her 'bedside manner' was essential to the company's services but she didn't make much money. Nobody that worked there did.

"So, do you *fix* the computers?" Janine asked.

"Heck, no. I only know enough about a computer to push a mouse around and type stuff on a keyboard."

"Do you want to learn?"

"No. I'm too old. Most of the repair people are young hotshots that don't seem much older than Callie or Virginia. They only stay a couple of years to get some experience, but the company keeps going. The woman that runs it is pretty savvy, but she works almost 24-7-365. Sara lives for her work and has no personal life. She has no husband or kids, doesn't take vacations, and often looks tired when she comes in on Monday mornings because she's

been busy all weekend with some client or other. I like her and she's been good to me, but I feel sorry for her, y'know?"

"Some people use their jobs to hide unhappiness in their lives," Janine replied. She didn't add anything and Allyson wondered if there was more she could say. She also wondered if Janine was speaking from experience.

They drove past the middle school but the girls didn't say much about it. It wasn't a special place to them and they would just as soon never go back. School was something they *had* to do, not something they wanted to do. However, they had met each other there, so it had been good for something, at least. They hoped that they would help each other endure the insanity of middle and high school until they graduated and could begin their real lives.

Neither girl planned to attend college. Allyson had mixed feelings about Callie and college. On the one hand, she thought Callie was smart enough to benefit from a college education, but she also knew she barely made enough to support them and might not be able to pay tuition. Allyson tried not to think of that future. It was still several years away.

Lunch, however, was more of a concern. Everyone was feeling hungry. There was a diner near where Allyson worked and she thought it would be fun to take everyone there. She knew the people who worked there and they would likely make a fuss over her and welcome her daughter and friends. Plus, they might not make her pay the entire bill all at once and allow her to pay it off over the next few weeks. It was worth a try.

The strip mall held a diner, a liquor store, a thrift store, a video store, and cleaners. One storefront had been a beauty shop that went out of business. Nathan's Diner had existed for over sixty years. It started as a real old-fashioned rail-car diner in the late nineteen-twenties, survived the Great Depression. Then it flourished during World War Two and the 1950's and '60s. An arsonist torched it in the early Seventies. Ben Nathan died trying to fight the fire and his son Sam vowed to keep the name alive by opening another diner nearby.

Allyson walked in and wondered if she was going to pull off her time-payment idea. She had a credit card but didn't use it much. Maybe this was one time she'd have to get it out. Sam spotted her from the kitchen. Still holding his favorite spatula, he came through the swinging doors. "Allyson! What a surprise! I've never seen you in here on a weekend."

Sam was not the stereotypical surly kitchen guy with the big belly covered by a white t-shirt and huge apron. He was tall, skinny, dark-haired, and often whistled while he worked. Repeat customers joked that he was too cheap to install Muzak or buy a radio.

Sam never liked being called a chef. "I'm just a cook," he said. "Nothing fancy here. Just good food. If you want to see a chef, go to that place in the mall where they charge you double for food that's not nearly half as good as mine."

"Don't you ever take a day off?" Allyson asked.

"What for? To sit home and be bored? Nah."

"This is my daughter Callie, her friend Virginia, and my oldest friend Janine."

"You're having an all-girl weekend? How nice of you all to come to my place. I'll make you something special. Just tell Bonnie what you want."

Bonnie was the oldest waitress on earth. She stopped liking taking customers' food orders sometime back in the early 1980s. Sam kept her around because his father had hired her. He knew Bonnie had nowhere else to go and nothing else to do and would likely die if she ever retired, so he refused to let her. Whenever she complained about being exhausted

after a busy day and threatened to quit, Sam told her that she'd better show up for work or he'd have to close the place. Bonnie always came back. Sam wondered if she would outlast him. *Maybe this place'll be called Bonnie's someday*, he thought. *Dad would love it!*

Bonnie was a short, chubby woman with a gaunt face, toothy smile, scratchy voice, and delicate, youthful hands people noticed as she served their platters. There had been a rumor that Sam's father and Bonnie had a thing long ago but nobody knew if it was true and no one dared ask Bonnie. They had seen her become angry when a customer complained about their food. She defended Sam vigorously and refused to listen to the customer's complaints. "If you don't want it, then don't eat it! It's no skin off my butt. Go hungry. I don't care." The customer always ate the food. A few apologized to Bonnie or left her big tips. She didn't care about the tips. She cared about Sam and the diner. It was her world, and she allowed no criticism.

"Hey, Bonnie. It's nice to see you," Allyson said.

"Sure it is. You ladies know what you want?" Allyson pointed to the big menu board that hung over the counter. Everyone read it. Bonnie waited. "Um, ladies? I ain't got all day."

They asked for sandwiches, burgers, fries, Cokes, and one milkshake. That was for Virginia. She had always wanted one but wasn't allowed to drink them. Bonnie wrote down everything and hurried away. "She never slows down," Allyson whispered. "I've never come in here when she wasn't around. I don't even think she goes to the bathroom."

"Eew!" the girls said. Janine smiled.

The women ate, chatted, and enjoyed being away from their daily lives in a place that felt as if it was from another time. Allyson hadn't eaten there much. She mainly came to order takeout food for people at work. Sam saw her so often that he began adding a free sandwich to her order. Bonnie never found out.

Bonnie came back and asked if they wanted dessert. She was ready to launch into the dessert specials but Allyson interrupted her. "Can we have our bill?"

"No can do," Bonnie replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

"What happened to it?" Allyson asked.

"Sam took it and tore it up."

"He *what?* Well, can you write another one?"

"Sam! Lady out here's givin' me trouble."

"She *what?*" Sam bellowed and then hurried out the double doors, saw where Bonnie stood, walked to the table, and said, in his most serious diner-owner voice. "What seems to be the problem?"

"This lady is demanding her bill."

"Tell the nice lady there's no bill."

"I already did. She insists."

"Well, that's too bad. If you ladies are done, you should leave. I got people waiting for your booth." There were hardly any other customers in the diner. It was an unusually quiet Sunday.

Allyson looked at Janine, and then at the girls. “Well, are we all done?” Everyone nodded. She stood up and the others followed. Sam stood by the table, waiting. Bonnie watched his little drama and thought of Sam’s father. *He’s his old man*, she thought.

Allyson stood aside while Janine and the girls started toward the door. “Thanks, Sam,” she said.

“For what?” Sam replied.

“Don’t expect this every time you come in now,” Bonnie said. Allyson grinned at Sam. He smiled back. Then Allyson looked at Bonnie. She was smiling too.

“You have a nice day,” Allyson said.

“You, too,” Bonnie replied, softly.

“He likes you,” Janine commented as they walked to the car. The girls were already inside.

“He likes everybody. So does she.”

“If you say so.”

Everyone went into the video store. “You girls pick three,” Allyson said. Callie and Virginia went toward the children’s rack. Allyson and Janine stood by the door.

“This one’s smaller than the one I go to,” Janine said.

“Yeah. It’s a neighborhood place, not part of one of those big chains. But, they get all the new tapes and the people are always nice, and they sometimes let you slide if you bring back a tape late.”

“I hate those fees. They seem to love charging them, too.”

“I know.”

The girls chose *Black Beauty*, *Free Willy*, and *Jumanji*. Allyson paid the rental fees and they went back to the car. “So, where should we go next?” she asked.

“Would it be okay if we went back so we could watch our movies?” Callie asked.

“Is that okay with you, Janine?” Janine was aware that this was the last afternoon and evening they might spend together for a long time, possibly ever, and felt eager to go back to Allyson’s house. She didn’t want especially to watch any movies, though. She wanted to be alone with Allyson.

“Sure, Allyson. Whatever the girls want. I’m kinda stuffed from lunch, anyway. I might need a nap.”

“Okay, then. Movies and a nap coming right up!”

“But, I just had a thought,” Janine said. “Don’t leave yet.” She got out of the car, walked to the liquor store, and emerged a few minutes later with a small bag. Allyson smiled when she saw Janine walking back to the car. *She read my mind*, Allyson thought.

Monday morning, Callie and Virginia woke up, got ready for school, and came down for cereal and milk. They found Allyson sitting alone at the kitchen table in her bathrobe. She seemed different. “Are you okay, Mom?” Callie asked.

“I’m wonderful. Why do you ask?”

“You’re up kinda early.”

“Yeah. I wanted to see Janine off.”

“Oh, she left?”

“Yeah. She has work, too,” Allyson explained. “I’m not sure exactly what she does, but it’s important. And, stressful.”

“Well, she didn’t seem stressed this weekend,” Callie commented.

“She didn’t, did she?”

“And, she’s kinda nice. I kinda like her.”

“I’m glad, Callie. I kind of like her, too.”

Chapter 8

“So, what’s the deal with your mom and that other lady?” Virginia asked later when they sat at school eating lunch.

“What do you mean?”

“It seemed like they were sleeping a lot,” Virginia said.

“Oh, yeah. Well, old people work all the time so they need a lot of sleep.”

“Yeah, you’re right. My parents do the same thing. I’m *never* gonna work when I get old.”

“Me, neither!” Callie replied. “I’m just gonna have *fun*.”

Fun was something Virginia’s mother didn’t allow, and the potential of living a fun-filled adult life appealed to her. “What do you think you’re gonna do?” she asked, excitedly.

“I don’t know- maybe wander around, or win the lottery, or marry a rich guy.”

“Eew! Marry? I wouldn’t think you’d wanna do *that*,” Virginia said, frowning.

“Why not?”

“Not after your mom and dad-. Oops! Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Callie replied. “I don’t think about him anymore. I figured out he wasn’t coming back a while ago. And I know she’s not gonna marry any of those other guys she brings home. I’m not sure *why* she even brings them home, but they don’t bother me so I don’t think about them.”

“Even if she did marry one of them, he still wouldn’t be your *real* daddy, anyway.”

“No, you’re right. I’d know the difference, even if *she* didn’t.”

That was all the girls said. They hurried to finish their lunches before the period ended. Callie tried not to think about her father. Luckily, surviving gym class took all her concentration. She wasn’t very good at the exercises, activities, and sports they tried and would have preferred to watch the other girls, but that wasn’t permitted. The gym teacher was kind but explained that Callie had no choice but to participate. “It’s a rule,” the teacher told her. “I can’t do anything about it.”

Callie hated rules. She already knew life was full of them but wondered where they came from and how serious they were. You could get into trouble if you broke a rule, but sometimes the punishment (if there was any) seemed ridiculous. That made her suspect the rules were not meant to be followed. Maybe they were made up to annoy people or were leftover from another time when society was different and people needed regulation. Callie didn’t care.

Callie found her mother there when she went home after school.

“Mom, you’re home! What’s wrong?”

“My boss told me to go home.”

“He did? Why?” Callie asked.

“He was worried about me.”

“What did you do?”

“I was almost falling asleep on the phone. I have to stay sharp and help people. That’s why they call my company.”

“So, why couldn’t you stay sharp?”

“I felt really tired.”

“Tired?” Callie asked. “But you and Janine slept most of the weekend.”

Allyson didn't reply. She didn't know how to explain to her innocent daughter what the women had been doing in bed all weekend. They'd had a lot of catching up to do and a hunger for each other remained when they parted on Monday morning.

That feeling, plus lack of sleep, affected Allyson's work. She couldn't concentrate on her job. When she tried to force herself to pay attention, fatigue clouded her mind. Allyson felt relieved when her supervisor believed her lie about not feeling well and sent her home. He had even offered to drive her. Allyson told him she would be okay but he made her promise to call to tell him she got home safely.

Allyson wondered briefly if he had a hidden motive for offering to take her home. There was a rumor that his marriage was coming apart. Maybe he thought a workplace romance would be better. *Maybe it would, for him, Allyson thought, but not for me. There's only one romance I want.* Allyson still didn't know if she could get it, but only time would tell. Right now, she needed to get to bed. Alone, for a change. She couldn't miss much work and Allyson hoped sleeping would keep her from missing Janine.

It never occurred to Allyson that Janine would appear in her dreams, but that's what happened. Not only did she sleep deeply and awake refreshed, but she felt more in love than ever. *Janine has to come back to me, she thought. I'll go crazy if she doesn't.*

Callie worried her mother had already gone crazy and didn't know if she could do anything about it. She brooded over the changes that had come over her mother but did not mention her worry to Virginia. At dinner the next day, Callie felt she had to ask her mother to be frank with her.

“Mom, you and Janine are girlfriends, right?”

“Well, we started out that way back in high school, but then it became... how can I say this... *more.*”

“Well, Virginia and I are girlfriends now. Does that mean we're gonna...?”

“Oh, Callie, no, sweetie. Is that what you're worried about? No. It doesn't work like that. Lots of women- most, probably- have girlfriends that never become...um.”

“Become *what*, Mom?”

“Janine and I are more than just girlfriends, Callie. Do you know what that means?”

Callie knew what she suspected it meant but didn't say anything. “I don't know,” she lied.

“You don't have to think about it, Callie. Or, worry about it. There are no rules about love.”

“I don't want anything to do with love. You're my mom and I love you, but that's all.”

“You might not feel that way when you're older.”

“I'll feel that way for my whole life.”

“Callie, people get lonely. People need love. It happens.”

“I'll make sure it doesn't happen to *me*. But thanks for explaining it. I don't know what you and Janine see in your future, but I hope it includes me.”

“Callie, my life will always include you. That will never change. Lots of other things might, but not that.”

“If you say so.” Callie didn’t doubt that her mother was being honest at that moment. However, since she had changed so much since Janine showed up, Callie wondered if her mother couldn’t change even more. Maybe she would eventually forget about Callie and their life together. *Then what’ll happen to me?* Callie asked herself. She couldn’t even begin to work out an answer.

Chapter 9

Janine's next 'business trip' lasted a whole week. "How is it that your husband never calls you when you're away?" Allyson asked when they were alone in her bedroom after she arrived.

"I don't tell him where I'm going."

"Not even where you're staying?"

"That's right," Janine replied.

"Why not?"

"I'm not allowed to. The work I do is very hush-hush."

"Well, what is it, anyway?" Allyson asked.

"I can't tell you, either."

"Oh, okay. Well, I'm glad you're here. Can you stay the whole week?"

"Yep. Sunday to Sunday, if that's okay."

"That would be heavenly, Janine."

"What about your daughter?"

"What about her?"

"Is she okay with this?"

"Well, I'm not sure," Allyson admitted. "But I have been honest about our relationship."

"I don't want her to feel neglected."

"Neither do I, Janine. I won't let that happen."

"Good. Now, where shall we start?"

Allyson didn't reply immediately. She thought about Janine's concern for Callie.

"Well, I had planned to start by undressing you, but now I think I'd like to wait."

"Oh, why?"

"I think maybe the three of us should watch a movie, eat popcorn, and hang out for the evening. What do you think?"

"I *love* that idea, Allyson. I promise to keep my hands off you."

"You better. I don't want to scandalize Callie. She's already freaked out by this."

"Should I talk to her?"

"No. We've already talked. What I think you and I need to do now is make what we're doing seem normal by including her and not just staying behind a closed bedroom door all the time."

"You're a good mom, Allyson."

"It must be hard for you to be away from your kids for a week."

"Oh, they're used to it. So am I. So is my husband."

"You never told me much about him," Allyson commented.

"There isn't much to tell."

"Do you love him?"

"I did- a long time ago," Janine replied.

"Do you and he still- you know?"

"Yes, of course. I owe that to him."

"Do you like it?" Allyson asked.

“I did, once. Now I just pretend to like it. Men can’t tell the difference.”

“I know.”

“Was it that way for you?”

“Mostly,” Allyson said. “There were one or two who rang my chimes, but that was *all* they did for me, you know what I mean?”

“I was lucky that way. I gave him what he wanted and he’s given me a good life, but he couldn’t give me what I *needed*.”

“What was that?” Allyson asked.

“You have to ask?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I wanted *you*, Allyson. All those years. I wanted only you.”

“Janine, I don’t-.”

“Don’t say anything. And don’t even think of kissing me right now or we’ll never leave this room tonight.”

“Okay. We’ll continue this later.”

“I’ve been waiting a whole month. Longest month of my life.”

“I’ll make it worth the wait, Janine.”

“I know you will. That’s why I agreed to spend the evening with your daughter. I want to get to know her better. I’m hoping to become part of her life.”

Allyson never expected Janine would say what she had and nearly swooned. *Does she mean that?* she thought.

Janine meant it.

They went to Callie’s room and asked if she would like to watch a movie with them. *Don’t they want to be alone?* she thought. She anticipated spending the night finishing weekend homework and then entertaining herself until bedtime. “Uh, okay,” Callie replied, uncertain she understood what was happening.

“Come downstairs when you’re ready,” Allyson said.

“Can I suggest a movie?” Janine said as Allyson poured out glasses of the wine Janine brought with her.

“Sure. I’ve seen all Callie’s tapes. You probably have the same ones at your house.”

“There’s this movie *Beaches* that I like. Have you seen it?”

“Never heard of it. Is it new?”

“No, it’s from 1988. It was popular for a while.”

“I wasn’t going to the movies back then. In fact, I never went. We couldn’t afford it. The only reason Callie could watch tapes was because a guy at work gave me his old VCR when he bought a new one. He told me it didn’t record very well but it played rental tapes just fine. We started by borrowing stuff from the library and then I made enough to buy a few new ones when they came out.”

“Well, great, then. It will be new for you.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“It’s about two old friends. Not like us, though. And there’s a daughter in it. She’s not like Callie. I just want to share it with you, but if you’d prefer to watch something else, that’s okay.”

“It’s okay for Callie to watch?”

“Yeah. My daughter Molly first saw it when she was younger. She didn’t understand much of it, but now she likes it. Of course, she hasn’t thanked me for showing it to her yet, but when do kids ever thank their parents for *anything*?”

“Okay. I’ll run out and rent it. Why don’t you make some popcorn? Callie should come down by the time I get back. This’ll be a treat for her. We don’t watch movies together anymore. I’m usually too tired. Plus, I’ve seen all her favorites several times.”

“Great! One thing I should tell you, though.”

“What’s that?”

“I usually cry at the end. Is that okay?”

“I guess so.”

They all cried at the end, but no one felt certain why.

Callie identified with the daughter, Victoria, who lost her mother Hillary. Janine identified with Hillary, who was a lawyer doing good work that she (Janine) admired and wished she could do. It wasn’t that Janine hated her job, but she didn’t feel it improved the lives of ordinary people. All she did was improve the bottom lines of corporations and individuals. They paid her well but left her hungry for meaning in her life. Now that she had found Allyson again, Janine hoped *she* would provide the meaning she craved.

Allyson identified with C.C., but not because she wanted to be a famous singer or famous anything. Only because C.C. followed her dream and became who she was meant to be, even if her life ended in tragedy. Allyson never had the opportunity to find out who she wanted to be. Her life hadn’t allowed that kind of speculation and exploration. She loved Callie and liked being her mother, but if she’d been given a *choice*...well, she might have gone in another direction. Until Janine showed up in her life again, Allyson thought her chance at happiness was long gone. Now, all she wanted was a way to make it work.

“That was a good movie. I might want to watch it again,” Allyson told Janine when they went to the bedroom later. Callie hadn’t said anything after the movie ended. Allyson didn’t know whether Callie liked the movie, hated it, or had any feelings about it. But then, it might have been the first adult movie Callie ever saw. *Maybe it will take her a while to process it*, Allyson thought. *I hope she talks about it with me. Maybe we’ll even watch it again after Janine leaves.*

For now, Allyson didn’t want to think about Janine leaving. They had seven nights of love ahead and she wanted to make every single one of them count. Allyson didn’t know what Janine was planning to do in the daytime when Allyson was at work. Maybe Janine was going to relax, work from home, or sleep. Allyson thought she might ask for some vacation days if the week didn’t seem busy. As she drove to work after kissing Janine goodbye (she was still in bed), she decided to do whatever she could to keep the week from becoming busy. She didn’t know exactly how she would do that, but it was worth a try.

“My mom’s friend came back yesterday,” Callie told Virginia at lunch.

“You mean that weird lady?”

“Did you think she was weird? I thought you liked her.”

“Actually, I did. But I guess I thought both she *and* your mom were acting weird that whole weekend.”

“Adults always act weird. Haven’t you figured that out yet?” Callie joked. She didn’t want to explain what she suspected her mother and Janine had been doing while they were

alone in the bedroom. Callie had begun to wonder if it resembled what her mother and men did when they were alone. She didn't know most of the details and didn't want to.

"You know, you're right. But there's so many different ways they come up with to act weird. I don't know how they do it."

"Don't wrack your brains. They're not worth it."

"Yeah. They're not, are they?"

Callie didn't mention the movie. She assumed, because of Virginia's sense that adults were weird, that she would never understand the film, no matter how much Callie told her about it. Callie wasn't sure she understood it, either, but felt glad Janine and her mother had let her watch it. She wasn't sure if she felt happy because the film was good or because the adults included her. Either way, it was a good Sunday evening. Callie hoped there would be more evenings like that.

START HERE Chapter 10

Janine couldn't recall that first time she and Allyson discovered how wonderful they could make each other feel. She did recall how much that discovery mattered to them. The girls gave themselves to each other over and over and repeatedly, and never tired of the tingly feeling that infused their young lives with elemental rapture. Janine had never been as happy as she was during that year before her family moved away. She knew Allyson felt the same way and felt devastated when Allyson never wrote to her.

As Janine drove home, she wondered if she could ever wipe the smile off her face or lose the glow she felt throughout her body. It was the first full wonderful week spent with her long-lost love. After she pulled the car into the garage and started to get out, she reminded herself that bliss was there waiting for her almost whenever she wanted. If the smile ever faded or the glow ever waned, she could spend more time with Allyson. That wasn't an assumption on her part. Allyson had told Janine last night that she would always be waiting, ready, and eager for her to return. And Janine could stay permanently if she wanted to.

Janine wasn't certain she could go that far, however. It was not because she didn't love Allyson. It was because she didn't know what leaving Mike would do to her children. They had always been a tight family. Whenever she wasn't away at work, she devoted herself to Molly, Jake, and Sam.

Molly was old enough to help with Jake and Sam, and Janine always made sure to bring back something for her daughter whenever she went away. This time Janine had an antique cameo necklace she bought a month ago at a flea market and had saved for a special occasion. She knew Molly would like it because the cameo portrait resembled Molly. The girl liked old things. They made her feel connected to the past. Janine didn't understand Molly's need to feel connected, but she liked and encouraged it.

The boys couldn't have cared less about the past. Every Christmas and birthday they asked for the newest electronic gadgets and gizmos. Janine made enough money to give them almost anything they wanted. Mike encouraged her to be generous because he worried that her long absences negatively impacted the boys. They needed reminders that they were still special to their mother and expensive gifts made them feel they genuinely were. Janine felt happy that she could make her sons happy.

She never knew how her husband felt about her long absences. He respected her professional need for secrecy, and joked that she was really secret agent 'Jane Bond.' However, Mike suspected her real job was likely intense, boring, and tedious. She often returned home exhausted and sometimes took off a few days before she returned to the headquarters office.

Mike plodded along in his job and daily life happy with the routine. He never worked overtime or on weekends, was always home at dinnertime, and helped the children with homework and other things when their mother was away. He knew he couldn't replace Janine, and didn't try, but he also knew he wanted to be a strong father figure and felt he was successful. Their father was always there for them, even if their mother wasn't.

There was rarely any tension between Janine and Mike. She made enough money from her secret job that Mike never wanted for anything. If he wanted to take up a hobby, buy something new for himself, or take the kids on a day trip, Janine never discouraged him. She

never said, “We can’t afford it,” although Mike always asked, just to let Janine know what he was thinking.

She felt as grateful for his commitment to maintaining family normalcy as he felt for her generosity. Mike never complained about either. The subject he wanted to complain about never came up. Or, more accurately, he never brought it up. He felt that if he started that conversation it might end with Janine leaving on a secret business trip and never coming back. Mike got used to suppressing his own emotional needs to assure his children’s needs were met. For him, it seemed like the only right thing to do.

However, when he and Janine were alone, he never felt she was fully there with him. He never felt he was the love of her life the way she was the love of his. Mike knew Janine loved their children. He also knew that parental love took many forms and most of them somehow worked out to be the right ones, no matter how bizarre they might seem to outsiders. He just didn’t know if Janine loved *him*, but never asked. Mike feared the answer he might receive.

Instead, he took her willingly when she gave herself to him after she returned from a long assignment. Mike didn’t know if she did it because she wanted him. He wondered if she did it because she knew he needed sex. Sometimes, he suspected she just wanted to make sure he didn’t find someone else to be with when she went away. The sex always worked, and Janine thanked him afterward. However, she never said she missed him although she knew he missed her.

Mike and Janine were around the same age. He had a full head of light hair, a round face with friendly eyes, larger than average nose, and wide smile, and was the same height as Janine. His easy-going manner was well-suited to a father of three and bank employee who handled customer problems and (sometimes) complaints. No task ever seemed to overwhelm him. He was always methodical, persistent, and efficient, and never gave less than one-hundred percent of his attention and effort to anything he did, including lovemaking and fatherhood.

Mike noticed Janine’s unresponsiveness and wondered if something was on her mind. *Maybe this trip was harder than most others*, he thought. Afterward, he tried to get her to talk.

“You seemed distracted. I hope that was good for you.”

“Oh, it was. It was. Sorry if I seem distracted. I guess I’m just tireder than usual.”

“Was this assignment harder than most?” Mike asked. *No*, Janine thought, mischievously, *actually, Mike, it was softer. Deliciously softer. That’s the way Allyson is. That’s what I really want.*

“I guess it was,” Janine lied. “But, I didn’t notice until now. Thanks for being so understanding.”

“I’m always here for you. You can talk to me about anything and you know I’ll help any way I can.”

“You *do* help, Mike. I know I can count on you. I know this marriage is hard for you, but my job is my job. I don’t like leaving you and the kids, but it’s what I have to do. Thanks for putting up with it.”

Janine secretly liked her job more than ever now because it allowed her the freedom to be with Allyson whenever she wanted. She also knew Allyson wanted more than

occasional visits, but Janine couldn't give her more. They would have to content themselves with an affair, at least for now. *Maybe when the kids are grown and out of the house*, Janine thought. *Maybe then we can live together. In our old age.*

The thought of being with her true love until death parted them made Janine smile. Mike noticed her facial expression change and assumed his lovemaking had pleased her. He fell asleep happy that Janine was back in his bed. She fell asleep missing Allyson's bed and set about planning when she could go back to it. It was all she could think of. It was also what she dreamed about.

In her dream, she said Allyson's name several times. Mike happened to be awake and heard Janine shout. He assumed Allyson was the name of a client, but Janine's tone of voice made him wonder if Allyson was someone else in his wife's life that he'd never heard of. Someone she had strong feelings for, feelings she didn't seem to have for him.

Mike had always admired his attractive wife when she dressed in one of her power suits. She looked formidable, even forbidding. *I'll bet nobody messes with her when she's dressed like that*, Mike thought. *She probably puts people in their place with a look or a sharp word.* Mike also knew the woman underneath the suit. He knew her smooth skin, the inner softness of her thighs, and the shape of her breasts. He felt lucky he married her. Mike never had a reason to feel jealous. Until now. Although it was a woman's name she shouted in her sleep, it was the way she said it that struck Mike as unusual. 'Oh, Allyson,' Janine had said. He couldn't recall Janine ever mentioning a person named Allyson. Mike thought he would ask Janine when he could, just to ease his mind and perhaps learn something about his wife that he didn't know.

Of course, Janine lied when he asked her the next morning. "She was my best friend in high school. My family moved away but I wasn't allowed to tell anyone we were leaving. I don't know why it was a secret. Anyway, one day I was there and the next day I wasn't. I wrote to Allyson but she never wrote back. I really missed her and didn't know why she just dropped me. Could she have been that angry with me for moving? There was nothing I could do about it. I guess I was dreaming about her."

"I guess you were. It's a sad story. Did you guys ever reconnect?"

"No. I have no idea what happened to her."

"That's a shame."

"Well, it was a long time ago, Mike. She's probably forgotten all about me. I forgot about *her* until that dream."

"Yeah," Mike replied. "Dreams are funny that way." Janine didn't ask him to explain. She was already thinking about Allyson and savoring the tingling feeling the dream left behind.

Chapter 11

The kids at school ignored Callie and Virginia, but they liked being invisible and didn't feel resentful. In a way, they had the freedom to do whatever they wanted. They wouldn't have dreamed of doing anything mischievous or disobedient, as some other girls did.

Neither girl was an exemplary student. They just got passing grades. Allyson never paid much attention to Callie's report card. As long as Callie didn't get into trouble at school, her mother was happy. However, Virginia's mother Debbie scolded her daughter because of her inadequate grades. It wasn't because she believed Virginia was smart and ought to do better, it was because her grades reflected the intelligence and competence of her mother. Debbie liked believing that *she* was smart, and expected her daughter to reflect her superiority.

Virginia *was* smarter than most of the other pupils in the school, but she was also lazy. Learning didn't matter to her. Facts, details, timelines, exercises, problems, tests, and all the other activities that filled classes bored her. Virginia wasn't looking for knowledge that could be taught in schools, but didn't know it, and was not yet old enough to start having experiences that would teach her about life. Virginia didn't think school was worth her attention or effort. She just put in her time and went home.

Spending that weekend at Callie's house with Callie's mother and her strange friend changed Virginia's viewpoint on life. It wasn't that she learned anything *new* but she began wondering if there was more that she wanted or needed to learn. Who was Callie's mother's friend? Why did they spend so much time alone in the bedroom? Why did they seem so happy? Why did being with them make Virginia feel different? And why did feeling different feel so nice?

"Your mom's friend-," Virginia said.

"You mean Janine?"

"Yeah. What's her deal? Who is she?"

"She and my mom were old friends. I think they met in high school."

"So, they weren't much older than we are."

"I guess so," Callie replied.

"And they were girlfriends like we are?"

"Yeah. But something happened. They lost touch for years and thought they would never see each other again. Then they ran into each other one Friday night at someplace my mom used to go to after work."

"I bet they were happy to see each other again," Virginia commented.

"Oh, they *were*. Mom brought Janine home with her and they spent almost the whole weekend in her bedroom. She said they were tired and they needed to talk so they could catch up. Mom apologized but I told her it was okay with me. I was glad she met her old friend. I was also glad she hadn't brought home another guy."

"She did that?"

"Oh, yeah. They spent time in her bedroom, too, but I don't think they did much talking."

"What do you mean?" Virginia asked.

“Well, I used to hear noises.”

“What kind of noises?”

“I can’t describe them,” Callie replied. “I just turned on some music and blocked them out.”

“You never told me all this before.”

“What’s to tell? Isn’t your mom just as weird as mine?”

“Well, she’s weird, that’s for sure,” Virginia affirmed. “But it’s only ever her and my dad in the bedroom.”

“Oh, yeah, well, you still have a dad. I don’t.”

“What happened to him?” Virginia asked.

“Mom hasn’t told me much. She just said he ‘went away’ whenever I asked. So I stopped asking.”

“Parents are weird. I guess all adults are.”

“I’m never being an adult,” Callie declared.

“Well, I’d agree with you about that, but don’t you think the other kids think *we’re* weird?”

“I don’t care what they think.”

“Neither do I,” Virginia agreed. The two girls sat quietly for a few moments.

“*Are* we weird?” Callie asked.

“If it’s weird that we’re not like them, then I’m okay with that.”

“You’re right. We’re weird girls!”

“Callie. I wish you were my sister, then we could be together all the time.”

“Yeah, that would be nice. But where would we live? I don’t really like your mom- no offense.”

“That’s okay. I don’t like her, either. I wouldn’t mind living with your mom, though. She really loves you.”

“You think so?” Callie asked.

“Don’t you?”

“Sometimes, I’m not sure.”

“Oh, I could feel it that weekend I was there,” Virginia said. “You’re lucky.”

“Am I? Well, okay, if you say so. Sister.”

“Yeah!”

The girls fell silent again. They thought about how wonderful it would be if they were together all the time and not just at school.

“Say, I was wondering, what do you think adults are doing when they’re in the bedroom so much?” Virginia asked.

“Well. I understand old people need more sleep.”

“I don’t know if that’s all they’re doing.”

“Well, what *else* can people do in bed?” Callie asked.

“I’m not sure I really want to know.”

“Yeah. I don’t want to get old before I have to.”

“Right!”

Suddenly, thanks to Janine, Allyson no longer felt that the best part of her life was in the past. She had reason to hope and dream again. Maybe true love was finally in her life. Allyson was old enough to know how unrealistic that thought was but couldn't let it go. The longer she held on to it, the happier she felt. What was wrong with feeling happy for a change? Nothing.

She stopped worrying if she would see Janine again because she knew she would. That certainty changed her outlook. Life was no longer meaningless drudgery. Her days were more cheerful and her nights more relaxed and pleasant. She spend more time with Callie, asked about Virginia, suggested they have another sleepover, and slept more soundly than she had in years. Allyson didn't dream of Janine but didn't complain. She knew- just *knew*- that Janine was back in her life to *stay*, and that was enough. She no longer needed to dream because she had her real lover- her only *real* love- again. Life was good.

It was good for Janine, too, but also more complicated. She yearned to be with Allyson but couldn't get away. She also feared their attraction was so powerful that if she went back to Allyson's house again she wouldn't have the will to leave. She was no longer the high school girl with unlimited freedom whose adult life was ahead of her. Janine was now approaching middle age with a husband and family. She couldn't allow her passion for Allyson to undermine her obligations to her 'loved ones.' The only problem was that she didn't feel certain they were still her loved ones. That doubt frightened her.

Molly, Jake, and Sam should have been the center of her life. She loved her children but was in love with Allyson, and the pull was tearing her apart. Janine could have left her husband Mike without a problem. He was an adult and her departure would hurt him, but adults understood these things. Children didn't. Often, their parents' separation shattered their world. Janine didn't want to shatter anyone's world. She had to find a way to keep her children's world intact but also explore the world she and Allyson shared.

Janine didn't have a close friend and envied Callie and Virginia. She also saw in them the possibility that the girls could find an intimacy of their own, but thought it was unlikely if not impossible. Kids didn't just stumble into lesbianism. Janine felt something led her and Allyson to explore each other but couldn't recall the spark that lit the fire of their love. *Maybe there wasn't a spark*, she thought. *Maybe we were both lesbians and just didn't know it. No, that wasn't it. I had boyfriends before high school. I think she did, too, maybe because that's what we were expected to do. But maybe that wasn't what we really wanted.*

They wanted each other, then had each other, and their rapture knew no bounds. They soared into bliss unlike anything they knew with any of the boys they dated. What they had wasn't merely dating. They felt convinced it was true love. And then Janine's mother found out and shattered their lives when she moved the family far away. Callie wrote but Janine's mother confiscated her letter without opening it. She didn't need to know what it said. Janine tried to write but couldn't find words and her mother checked everything she wrote on- every sheet of notebook paper or memo pad. The woman was not going to allow what her daughter and that other child had done to continue. It didn't.

Janine graduated from her new high school, went to college, talked about men she dated, found a special one, and married him when she graduated. Her mother felt certain she had done the right thing and prevented Janine from having a miserable life.

Janine developed no friendships with other women. She felt comfortable around men because they meant nothing to her. Her important job developed out of her training, expertise, and self-confidence. No one she worked for ever felt sorry they'd hired her. Janine could have had even more clients but had always tried to balance her work and family life. Now, she had a third life and knew she was going to have to balance that, too.

For the first time in her adulthood, however, she lacked confidence in her ability to make everything work. Maybe it was because of her reconnection with Allyson, or maybe it was due to Janine getting older and losing her youthful harmonizing skills. The reason didn't matter, but Allyson did, and Janine was going to have to find a way to be with her lover. Just because they were no longer unfettered high school kids who were free to love uninhibitedly didn't mean they couldn't love at all. That wasn't going to happen.

Chapter 12

Virginia waited until she thought her mother was in a good mood. She finished her homework and came downstairs for a snack. Debbie was watching a sitcom on TV. Seeing an opportunity after Debbie laughed at a good joke just before a commercial, Virginia spoke. “Mom, Callie invited me for another sleepover weekend. Can I go, please?”

Debbie turned to look at her daughter. Virginia couldn’t read her mother’s face. Her smile faded after the commercial came on, but she wasn’t frowning, either. Debbie took a deep breath as she thought of a reply. “But Virginia, you’re father and I aren’t going away this weekend.”

Virginia tried to get her plea out as fast as possible before the commercials ended. “I know, but Callie and I had so much fun last time- and we both did our homework, too. Her mom made sure of it. Callie wanted to do it again. Please.”

“Well, I don’t know.”

“*Please*, Mom. Allyson and Janine are so nice.”

“Who are Allyson and Janine?”

“Allyson’s Callie’s mom. Janine is her girlfriend.”

“What about Callie’s dad?” Debbie asked.

“Oh, she doesn’t have a dad.”

“What happened to him?”

“Callie doesn’t really know,” Virginia explained. “Allyson told her that he just left when she was little.”

“I see. And who’s this Janine?”

“She’s Allyson’s friend from high school. They get together sometimes. She’s very nice, too.”

“And what do they do while you and Callie are together?” Debbie asked. Virginia felt relieved that her mother didn’t ask what she and Callie did besides homework. She didn’t want her mother to find out they watched many videos or Debbie might forbid her to go.

“Same as Callie and I. They hang out.”

“They don’t go anywhere?”

“Of course not. They stay home.”

“So, you have adults with you all the time?” Debbie asked.

“Yes, Mom, *all* the time. Well, except...”

“Except what?”

“When everyone’s sleeping, of course.”

“Where do you sleep?”

“In Callie’s room.”

“Okay. And her mother sleeps in her bedroom?”

“Yes,” Virginia replied.

“And the other woman- she sleeps in the guest room?”

“They don’t have a guest room, at least I don’t think so. She sleeps in Allyson’s room.”

“Oh, she does, does she?”

The commercials ended and the laugh track came on. Debbie turned her attention back to the TV show and didn't say anything else. "Um, Mom?" Virginia said.

"We'll talk about this later. Go finish your homework."

"I finished it."

"Then get ready for bed."

"I'm already in my pajamas," Virginia pointed out.

"Oh, yeah. Well, go read or something."

Virginia hesitated. She worried that if she walked away the conversation would never continue and she might not find an opportunity or the courage to start it again. After Debbie laughed at some jokes and ignored Virginia she felt it was pointless to stand there hoping for her mother's attention.

Had she lost the opportunity to spend another weekend with Callie? She hoped not. Virginia went up to her room feeling that her mother had failed her once again. She knew it was pointless to talk to her father because she would tell her to ask her mother. The thought that her parents didn't care about her crossed her mind but she pushed it away. What if they somehow found out what she was thinking? Virginia didn't know what they might do to punish her.

The way Callie's mom treated Callie was so different than the way Virginia's parents treated her. Allyson loved Callie and treated her as if she loved her. Virginia's parents never mentioned love and didn't treat their daughter the same way. Virginia almost suspected that her parents didn't love her at all, but the thought was so ghastly that she refused to allow it space in her mind. She picked up a book and tried to read, but the words wouldn't form ideas in her head. There were too many feelings blocking them, but the one feeling that stood out was neglect. Virginia didn't know the word so she couldn't use it. Frustrated, she put out the light.

Maybe I can try to talk to Mom tomorrow, she thought. The fragment of hope soothed her enough that she fell asleep and didn't have scary dreams.

"So, did you ask your mom?" Callie asked at lunch the next day.

"Yeah."

"Oh, great! We'll have a great time again, I'm sure of it."

"She didn't say no," Virginia interrupted. Callie looked at her, waiting. "But she didn't say yes, either."

"Well, what did she do?"

"She asked me a bunch of questions," Virginia replied.

"Like what?"

"Like where do we sleep, where does your mom sleep, and does Janine sleep in the guest room."

"We don't have a guest room," Callie pointed out.

"I told her that."

"What else did you tell her?"

"She asked where Janine slept," Virginia explained.

"What did you tell her?"

“The truth. It’s obvious. You and I sleep in your room so why shouldn’t your mom and Janine sleep in her room?”

“Yeah. It is obvious. So what did she say to that?” Callie asked.

“Nothing. Her show came back on.”

“So, you’re gonna ask her again, right? I want us to do this, Virginia. It will be great.”

“I know it will. It was the last time. I had so much fun. Your mom and Janine were awesome.”

“Do you think your mom will let you?” Callie asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I hope she does.”

Callie liked Janine but when she came over her mother seemed different. Allyson was happier than Callie ever recalled seeing her, but the women spent a lot of time alone in Allyson’s bedroom. *Could they have that much to talk about?* Callie wondered. Callie didn’t want to endure the entire weekend alone while her mother and that woman were in the house almost ignoring her. She needed Virginia.

She also liked the way she felt being with Virginia outside school. Callie thought their first weekend together was good for Virginia and she wanted to give her another. Her friend seemed to loosen up, become more relaxed, and more playful. She talked more, seemed less shy, and opened up to Allyson and Janine. Now Callie worried they weren’t going to have another weekend together because Virginia’s mother wouldn’t allow it.

Callie wondered if Virginia had told her mother too much about Allyson and Janine. She knew vaguely that what the women did might not be seen as normal, but didn’t know why. Maybe Virginia’s mother knew why, and that was a problem.

Callie was right.

Chapter 13

Debbie was standing at the sink cleaning the dinner dishes when the phone rang. She grabbed it before her husband or Virginia did. "Hello?" she said.

"Mrs. Davidson?" a woman asked.

Debbie assumed it was someone trying to sell something. "Um, yes," she answered, ready to hang up.

"This is Allyson Marshall, Callie's mom."

Debbie stayed on. "Yes."

"Callie asked me to call you." Allyson sounded nervous.

"Yes."

"I, um, wanted to ask if your daughter could do a sleepover again this weekend. It would mean a lot to Callie. The girls are such good friends and they had such a great time when they did it before."

"My husband and I aren't going out of town this weekend," Debbie replied, tersely.

"Yes, I know, but you could have a weekend to yourselves."

"But, we don't need a weekend to ourselves."

"Oh, I see," Allyson replied, nervously. She tried to think of something that might persuade Debbie to agree. "Well, it would mean a lot to the girls."

"It's getting near the end of the term. I'm sure they have more homework or projects to do."

"I'll see they do *everything*. I check Callie's homework every night." It was a lie, but Allyson hoped she sounded convincing.

"So do I, and I'm very particular. I don't tolerate mistakes."

"I don't, either."

"Will your daughter be going to college?" Debbie asked.

"If she wants to, I will find a way."

"My daughter's going whether she wants to or not. Money isn't an issue for us."

"Lucky you. I've noticed how smart your daughter is and I bet she'd love college."

Debbie would not allow herself to be persuaded by anything this strange woman said. "It makes no difference whether she loves it or not."

Allyson could tell she wasn't getting anywhere and decided to strengthen her appeal. "Look, Mrs. Davidson, like you said, it is almost the end of the term and the girls have been working hard. They could use a weekend like this before they finish up. It'll do them both good."

"Will it, Mrs. Marshall? Will it? I'm not so sure." Then Debbie hung up.

"So?" Callie asked. She had been listening to the call.

"I don't know, Callie."

"Well, what'd she say?"

"She didn't say no," Allyson replied. Callie looked hopeful. "But she didn't say yes, either."

Callie's face fell. "Great. Now what?"

"I don't know. I also don't know what's going on at Virginia's house."

Callie sighed and looked away from her mother. “Well, Mom, I don’t know what’s going on in *our* house!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, who *is* Janine? Where did she come from? Why do the two of you spend so much time alone in your bedroom? Don’t tell me you were best friends. Virginia and I are best friends, but we only went to my room to *sleep*. Is that what you and Janine are doing?”

Allyson understood Callie’s confusion, felt sorry for her, and didn’t know how much she ought to tell her. She also didn’t know if she should explain what she and Janine were doing alone. “It’s complicated and I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Maybe I should just ask Janine when she comes over,” Callie exclaimed. Her mother seemed flummoxed.

“No, Callie. Don’t do that. Please. It’s my job to explain it, not hers.”

“Then *explain* it, Mom. Why all the secrecy?”

“Let me tell you a story,” Allyson said.

“Oh, this should be good.”

“Stop it, Callie. This is hard.”

“Sorry, Mom. Go ahead. Tell me a story.” *Just don’t make it a fairy tale. Disney does those a lot better than you ever will*, Callie thought.

“Once upon a time there were these two girls. We’ll call them Alice and Gertrude.”

“Gertrude?” Callie asked.

“Shut up,” Allyson replied, smiling. “It’s her name in the story. Anyway, the two girls met the first day they were in high school. You haven’t experienced that day yet. It’s not like when you go to middle school. High schools are bigger and you can get lost in them. Not just lost in the building but lost in the crowd as well.”

“Did you- I mean, Alice or Gertrude- get lost?”

“Not at first. They were scared, though. And overwhelmed. It was big. The older kids seemed to ignore them and looked down on them. Even the teachers seemed not to notice them.”

Callie rolled her eyes. “I get it, Mom.”

“Well, there was this big freshman orientation in the auditorium. When it broke up, everyone left with their little rosters in their hands. Most of the kids seemed to find their way to their first class. Alice and Gertrude didn’t. They never figured out how they did it, but they must have taken a wrong turn and found themselves in an empty hallway that wasn’t marked. It looked like an abandoned part of the school.”

“Were Alice and Gertrude already together?”

“No. That’s the funny part. They entered the abandoned hallway from either end and met in the middle. That was when they found out the classroom they were looking for wasn’t in either direction. ‘Maybe the roster is wrong,’ Alice said. ‘Or, maybe someone is trying to prank us,’ Gertrude replied. Either way, they felt they were screw-, oops, I mean lost.”

“I know what screwed means, Mom.”

“I should have known that you would.”

“So, then what happened?” Callie asked.

“Alice and Gertrude sat down and cried.”

“On their first day in high school?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it *that* bad?” Callie asked.

“Not anymore, but it was when I- I mean Alice and Gertrude were there. It’s different now. Seniors show freshmen around. Teachers watch the halls for lost students.”

“Good. You were scaring me. So then what happened, Mom?”

“Well, when they finished crying, Alice and Gertrude laughed.”

“Wait. They *what*?”

“They laughed.”

“Why?” Callie asked.

“Because they realized they weren’t alone.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Somehow, they had found each other. They realized later they had been looking for someone or something their whole lives but never figured out what or who it was. Then, when they laughed in that hallway, they knew. Alice had been looking for Gertrude and Gertrude had been looking for Alice.”

“It sounds crazy.”

“Oh, but it wasn’t,” Allyson replied, dreamily. “It was the most wonderful experience of their young lives... and it was only the beginning.”

“Of what?”

Allyson didn’t reply. She remained quiet and looked away from Callie. Finally, she said, “That’s all there is to that story.”

Callie suspected her mother was fibbing. “C’mon, Mom, tell me the rest.”

“I can’t, Callie. It’s... how can I put this... *private*.”

“Oh. So you’re not gonna tell me? Okay, I get it.”

“Maybe someday when you’re old enough to understand,” Allyson replied.

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?”

“I’m sorry, Callie. I have to ask you to respect Alice and Gertrude’s privacy.”

“Well, okay. But how do they relate to Virginia’s mom?”

“I’ll tell you but you’re not gonna like what I say.”

“Go ahead.”

“I think that Virginia’s mom is someone who doesn’t approve of Alice and Gertrude. She might even think that what Alice and Gertrude did was wrong. There are people like that. There’s nothing anyone can do about it.”

“Nothing?” Callie asked, feeling disappointed. She was young and still believed people could change if they wanted to. As kids grew up they changed a lot and she assumed that would keep going. Her mother didn’t have the heart to tell her that some people never change. That could be a good thing where love was concerned but a bad thing when not changing hurt others.

Allyson and Janine had never thought of themselves as ‘others.’ They were just two girls who fell in love. All kids fell in love sometime or other and it was no big deal. That was all some of the other girls talked about- who the cute boys were, who they had crushes on, who they wanted to ask them out, etc. Allyson and Janine assumed the boys’ conversations were similar. They likely talked about the girls they liked, had crushes on, asked out, and maybe dated or went steady with. That was what most kids the girls’ age did.

However, what *they* were doing was not what most kids their age did. Alice and Janine no longer cared about boys. They only cared about each other. They kept what they did to themselves because there was no one else to tell. It was also magical because they shared a world that other kids their age couldn't possibly imagine. Those teenagers mostly just dated. Allyson and Janine fell deeply in love.

Janine's mother found out what they were doing and knew she had to end it as forcefully as possible. She also knew that merely ordering Janine to stop seeing Allyson would never work. She had to separate the girls and found a way to do that. The family moved away the day after the school year ended. Allyson and Janine planned to write but no letters ever arrived. Allyson sent her letter but Janine's mother tore it up. Janine wrote several but kept them, waiting to hear from Allyson. When no letters came, she buried her letters, and her heart, in the back of the bottom drawer of her dresser, under the old clothes and childhood trinkets she kept there.

Both women forgot about each other until the night they met again years later. They shared the same flash of recognition, surge of joy, and memory of their tender passion. The bond forged in that desolate hallway years ago had never broken. Their long wait was over. Neither Allyson nor Janine knew how they were going to make it work as adults, but they had to reclaim their teenage love, and they did. Neither felt sorry.

Until now. Allyson regretted that Callie might no longer have the same relationship with Virginia she once shared. She liked Virginia when they spent that first weekend together and hoped to see more of the girl. Allyson knew it was unlikely the girls would ever share the same kind of bond as she shared with Janine, but that was okay. The girls seemed good friends, maybe life-long friends, and that was a good thing.

Allyson decided there was one last thing she could try but she thought she ought to talk it over with Janine first. She was glad she did.

"Don't do it," Janine told Allyson. "You'll just make it worse."

"What do you mean?"

"Virginia's mother is like my mother," Janine said.

"What do you mean?"

"She's not afraid of you and me. She's afraid for her daughter. She doesn't want Virginia to become like you and I are."

"I don't think she will."

"Neither do I," Janine agreed.

"Neither will Callie. It's not genetic. Is it?"

"I don't know, Allyson. I *do* know no virus can infect people and make them homosexuals. Hanging out with us is not gonna corrupt Virginia or Callie."

"You're right. I won't talk to Virginia's mother. I'm gonna just have to think of a way to explain all this to Callie."

"I could help with that," Janine said.

"Do you think you know what to do? You haven't had to explain it to *your* kids."

"Yeah, you're right. But I could still help. I like Callie and I liked Virginia. Maybe there's a way we all could all put our heads together and figure this out."

"Maybe you're right. I owe the girls that."

"So do I, Allyson. So do I."

Chapter 14

Callie had only visited Virginia's house twice before. She had been invited both times. This visit was different, and riskier. Showing up unexpectedly made her feel nervous. It was only because her mother and Janine had suggested it, and were waiting in the car, that she agreed to their idea.

Debbie didn't know what to do when the doorbell rang. *It's Saturday morning, she thought. Who could that be? Can't I get some peace and quiet? Bills don't pay themselves. Checks don't write themselves.* After the second ring, she put down the pen, closed her ledger book, stacked the bills and checks carefully on the dining room table, and got up hoping the interruption would be short.

Virginia waited at the top of the steps when Debbie approached the door. "Who is it, Mom?" she asked.

"I haven't opened the door, Virginia, so how can I answer that?" Debbie replied, curtly. "Are you expecting anyone?"

"Nobody ever visits me," Virginia replied. Debbie ignored her.

She opened the door and saw Callie. "Hi, Mrs. Davidson. Is Virginia home?"

"Is she expecting you?"

"No, ma'am. We're on our way to the amusement park and wanted to invite her to go with us."

"Amusement park?" Debbie asked, feeling blindsided. She wondered if Virginia lied when she told her she wasn't expecting anyone.

"Yeah, my mom and her friend wanted to take me but they didn't want to go on too many rides with me, so they suggested I invite Virginia to come along."

"Oh, they did, did they?" Debbie replied.

"Did somebody say amusement park?" Virginia asked from just inside the door. She poked her head out and saw Callie. "Oh, hi, Callie. What are you doing here?"

"I came to ask you to come to the amusement part with me. My mom and Janine are taking me. Do you wanna come?"

"I've never been to an amusement park. Can I go, Mom, please?"

"I don't know, Virginia. What about your homework?"

"I did most of it already and I'll have all day tomorrow to finish the rest. After church, of course."

"Please, Mrs. Davidson? I won't have anyone to go on rides with and it won't be any fun."

"I don't know, Callie. This is so sudden."

"Please, Mom?"

"Please, Mrs. Davidson?" Callie pleaded. Debbie felt overwhelmed by the girls' begging.

"Oh, all right! Get dressed, Virginia."

"I'm already dressed, Mom," Virginia said as she breezed past her mother. Debbie saw the pink shorts, pink and white striped top, and pink sneakers Virginia wore and again wondered if knew Callie would be stopping by. Before she could stop Virginia and order her

to turn around, she was out the door and it was too late. *Let her go*, Debbie thought. *If she's not around, maybe I can have some peace and quiet so I can finish those bills.*

"Thank you, Mrs. Davidson!" Callie called out as she and Virginia hurried toward the car.

"Have her back by eight!" Debbie yelled. She had to set a limit. *Kids today have no respect*, she thought. *And some parents don't, either. They could have called first. I would have told them no and Virginia would never have known about it.*

Debbie didn't realize that was exactly why Callie, her mother, and Janine stopped by unexpectedly. They knew Debbie would refuse their invitation, and they needed to talk to Virginia.

"Hi, Virginia, it's nice to see you again," Allyson said as she drove away.

"Um, thanks, Mrs. Marshall."

"Please feel free to call me Allyson. Here's the thing. We're going to the amusement park, but not right away. We all need to talk first."

"Talk?" Virginia replied. "What about?"

"Well, about us. And your mom. And what we can do about your mom."

"Do?"

"I don't think your mom likes me," Allyson said.

"Why not?"

"Because Callie doesn't have a father like you do."

"So what?"

"Well, it might mean more to your mom than it does to us."

"My mom doesn't like anybody, Mrs.- I mean, Allyson. It's not just you. She complains about other people all the time. That's just the way she is."

"Well, we like you, Virginia, and we'd like to include you in more stuff with us."

"I'd love that!" Virginia exclaimed.

"But we can't do it because of your mom."

"What do you mean?"

"Did she tell you I called her?" Allyson asked.

"About what?"

"To invite you to another weekend sleepover."

"Really?"

"Yeah. We had so much fun the last time that we wanted to do it again and wanted you to be part of it. But your mom said no."

"I'm not surprised," Virginia replied, meekly.

"Well, she is your mom and she's only looking out for you."

"Is she? I never get to have any fun. She's always making me work or lecturing me about something. 'You have so much potential, Virginia. You're so smart, Virginia. Why can't you do better in school, Virginia?'"

"Like I said. She's your mom and she's only looking out for you."

Virginia frowned. "Like *I* said, she never lets me have any fun. When I told her how great that sleepover was she wasn't happy for me. She seemed mad."

"What did you tell her about the weekend, Virginia?"

“Well, I didn’t mention the tapes because I’m not supposed to watch them. But I told her about eating pizza for dinner on Friday and lunch on Saturday, Saturday night dinner with you, Sunday’s lunch, and all the fun we had together. Like I said, she seemed mad.”

“What did you tell her about Janine and me?” Allyson asked.

“Not much. I told her that you guys were always in the house with us and that you were having your own sleepover, too.”

“What did she say to that?”

“Nothing, Mrs.- I mean, Allyson. Did you really call her to ask me to another sleepover?”

“Yes. I’m sorry she said no.”

“So am I.”

“Don’t be mad at her,” Allyson said.

“Why not? What harm can come to me at a sleepover?”

“I don’t think it was *your* sleepover that bothered her,” Allyson said.

“What do you mean?”

“I think it was the sleepover that Janine and I were having.”

“What does *that* mean?” Virginia asked.

“I don’t think your mom likes that adult women have sleepovers. She might think it’s wrong.”

“Why would it be wrong? Didn’t you have any fun?”

“Oh, yes, we had fun. You and Callie were a part of that.”

“I don’t mean with us, but when you were by yourselves.”

“Yes, Virginia, Janine and I had fun when we were alone, too.”

“Well, I’m happy for you.”

Allyson didn’t say anything. She thought she had gone as far as she could discussing things with Virginia. She didn’t know if the girls would talk more. “We were happy, too. That was why we wanted to do it again. But we didn’t want to leave Callie by herself when we had our sleepover so we wanted you to come over and be with her. You guys had such a great time that we thought you would want to do it again.”

“Oh, I do. I *really* do.”

“Well, you can’t sleepover now, because your mom said no,” Allyson said. “But you can come to the amusement park with us.”

“So we’re *really* going?”

“Of course we are. Did you think we weren’t?”

“I wouldn’t have cared. Just *inviting* me to your sleepover is wonderful, even if I can’t go. I’m so happy to be with you all.”

“And we’re happy you came. Let’s go have some fun.”

It turned out the women had fibbed when they said they didn’t want to go on rides. They went on the same rides the girls did, only Janine and Allyson sat together. They were behind the girls on the roller coaster and screamed just as loud on the steepest drop. They struggled through the fun house (and held hands a few times to help each other through the mirror maze.) They sat together on the tilt-a-whirl and enjoyed how it pressed them close. However, they rode through the Tunnel of Love by themselves. The girls didn’t want a boring ride in a little boat that didn’t do anything but travel through the dark. That was all

Allyson and Janine wanted- a few moments alone in the dark. They got them and emerged smiling. The girls rolled their eyes. *Adults are so weird*, they thought.

Chapter 15

Callie was getting changed in the girls' locker room after gym class. She usually stayed apart from the other girls because she felt modest, but she was close enough to overhear their banter. Usually, it revolved around how the girls had played whatever sport the class featured that day. 'If it wasn't for you dropping that ball, we would have won that game,' was a frequent complaint. 'Well, I didn't see *you* hitting the ball. If people don't score, you can't win.'

Sometimes the girls stripped off their gym clothes and took quick showers before dressing for their next class. They usually chatted through the showers. Callie tried not to listen. They weren't addressing her, anyway. This time, however, something someone said caught her attention.

"Damn, Katie, you're looking awfully good," Marge commented.

"Oh, you think so?"

"She always says that. I think she's some kind of lezzie."

"I'm *not* a lezzie. I just think we ought to be proud of our bodies."

"I don't know, Marge, I think Carla is right. You seem to look an *awful* lot."

"I'm not a lezzie!"

"What's a lezzie?" Natalie asked.

"Most girls like boys," Carla explained. "Lezzies are perverts. Instead of touching boys, they want to touch girls."

"Well, I don't want *anybody* touching me," Katie replied.

"You will, Katie, you will," Marge said.

"But, no girls."

"God forbid! You *don't* want to be a pervert!" They all laughed.

Callie finished dressing hurriedly and ran out of the locker room. She didn't know where to go. Math class was next, but she didn't want to think about geometry problems. Callie had just discovered a much bigger problem, one there was no class for.

She didn't want to admit the suspicion that arose in her mind but she had to let it in. *Maybe Virginia's mom thinks my mom and Janine are doing something wrong. Maybe they're lezzies.* The next thought was even more disturbing. *If my mom is a lezzie, what does that make me?*

Callie cut her last three classes and hid in the back row of lockers until it was time to ride home on the bus.

"Remember Alice and Gertrude?" Callie said at dinner. She hadn't touched her food. It wasn't much, just spaghetti and meatballs in a sauce that came from a jar, her mother's go-to easy meal after a busy and tiring day. The food was filling and Callie usually enjoyed it. So did Allyson. The meal was always fun to eat. Spaghetti reminded her of her siblings. She had no idea where they were, but it made her feel good to recall them occasionally.

"Yeah. You didn't seem to like my little story. Why do you ask?"

"Were they lezzies?"

Suddenly, Allyson's comfort food didn't seem so comforting. She had looked forward to a lazy dinner, easy cleanup, and serious downtime in front of the TV while Callie did her homework. Hopefully, Callie wouldn't need Allyson's help again.

"Um, where did you hear that word? At school?"

"Yeah. Some girls, after gym class."

"What else did they say?"

"That lezzies are perverts. Is that true, Mom?"

"No, Callie. Lez- I mean, lesbians- may be *different* but there's nothing wrong with what they're doing. That's an outdated idea that should have died long ago."

"Well, it hasn't."

"How did what they said make you feel, Callie?"

"Scared."

"Oh. Why?"

"I thought... well... I wondered that, well, if *you're* a- you know- does that mean I am, too?"

"Just because I am it doesn't mean you are."

Callie weighed her mother's reply and realized what she had revealed. "So, you admit that you are. That means Janine is, too. That's what's been going on."

"Yes, and there's nothing wrong with it. We're not hurting anyone."

"No? What about your daughter?" Callie asked, trying to remain calm.

"You'll probably want to go out with boys. That's what most girls do."

"Well, I don't want to go out with anybody but Virginia. Does that mean I'm gonna be a lez-?"

"No. You and she are best friends. Janine and I are *more* than best friends. She's the only woman I ever wanted to be with. When she and I stopped being together, I eventually dated boys, and later I married one."

"You've never told me much about my father."

"He was nice- nicer than anybody else I'd ever met, and he made me feel good. I liked being with him."

"Did you love him?"

"I thought I did. And I felt he loved me. That's what you're supposed to feel when you get married- that you love the boy and he loves you."

"So what happened?"

"I think he fell out of love with me. I honestly don't know why. I gave him a wonderful daughter, made a good home for him, and did all I could to keep him happy, but I guess something was missing."

"Missing?"

"Yeah, either I did something wrong, or something was wrong with me. Something big. Something he saw only after we got married and settled down. It was big enough to make him leave, Callie, but he never told me why. I still don't know. It was a long time ago."

"What about the other men?"

"I was lonely."

"But *I* was here."

“Sometimes a woman wants a man. I can’t explain it any better than that. I still loved you and I always will. Maybe I was looking for another man to love, or maybe I was hoping to find out what was wrong with me, what made your father leave us, so I could fix it.”

“I feel sorry for you, Mom.”

“Thanks, but you don’t have to. I’m an adult. Life is different for adults than for kids. And the world I grew up in wasn’t like the world you’re growing up in. Your life will probably not be anything like mine. At least, I hope it won’t.”

“I don’t know about that. I hope when I get to be a mom that I turn out as good as you.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“I’m okay with you and Janine. I guess I just needed to understand. If she makes you happy then that makes me happy. And I like her, too. Do you think she’ll move in here?”

“It’s not likely, at least for a long time. She has her own family. That’s how it is for people sometimes. They have to hide who they really are because of their commitments to others that need them. Her kids need her right now. I understand and think she’s right, but I wish I could be with her every day.”

“I hope someday you can.”

“Thanks, sweetie. You’re the best daughter a mom could ask for.”

“I’m sorry if I seemed angry, you know, before.”

“I understand why you seemed angry and I’m glad you talked to me. It would have been worse if you had kept it to yourself. You can talk to me about anything, anytime.”

“So, when is Janine coming over again?”

“I have no idea. She never knows ahead of time.”

“That sucks.”

“Callie! Where did you learn that word?”

“At school.”

“Do you know what it means?”

“Yeah. It means something’s really awful.”

“Okay, but please don’t say it except when you’re around me.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s not *all* that it means. I’m not going to explain anything else.”

The phone rang and Virginia picked it up because she was nearby. It was Callie. They occasionally chatted in the evening, although Virginia’s mother didn’t like her wasting time on the phone. Debbie was in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner.

“My mom talked to me,” Callie told Virginia.

“Doesn’t she always talk to you?” Virginia asked. It was a difficult question. She envied the closeness Callie and Allyson shared.

“Yeah, but this was different. She told me stuff.”

“What stuff?” Virginia asked.

“Big stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Virginia?” Debbie called. “Did you answer that? Who is it?”

“It’s Callie, Mom.”

“Don’t stay on too long.”

“I won’t. Like *what*, Callie?”

“She told me about my dad.”

“Oh? That’s nice.”

“It was. But there was more.”

“Like *what*, Callie?” Virginia repeated, nervously. She knew it was only a matter of time before her mother interrupted the call and told her to hang up and do her homework instead of gabbing with Callie. She usually yelled something like, ‘You two see each other at school. What do you have to talk about at night?’

Debbie dried her hands and reached for the phone. What she heard shocked her.

“...Are lesbians,” Debbie heard. She remained quiet.

“What’s a lesbian?” Virginia asked. Debbie wanted to end the call but remained quiet.

“My mom explained it. Girls who like other girls and don’t like boys.”

“You mean like us?” Virginia asked.

“No. Not like us, at all. She said we’re just friends, and that’s normal. But some girls at school said lesbians are perverts so I asked my mom. She told me the girls were wrong. But then she told me more.”

“Like what?”

“She said she and Janine are lesbians.”

“Oh.”

Debbie quietly hung up the phone and gazed out the kitchen window. The large tree in the backyard reminded her of a similar tree in a friend’s yard when she wasn’t much older than her daughter. It was dusk. The crickets had come out but something kept the mosquitoes away. Maybe it was the light breeze.

Debbie sat behind the tree with a girl she’d met only a few hours earlier at the pool. Anita was a skinny, red-haired kid who wore glasses, had a shy smile, and had a soft, clear voice. Debbie was the exact opposite of Anita. She was a shapely, dark-haired beauty with a round face, pert nose, small mouth, and penetrating eyes. Debbie felt tired of the boys always hitting on her or hinting lewdly about what they’d like to do to her. Boys disgusted her. She just wanted to be left alone.

“I like you, Debbie,” Anita said. “You’re different.” Debbie wasn’t sure what Anita meant but liked the compliment. Then Anita did something Debbie wouldn’t have expected in a million years. Anita interpreted Debbie’s silence as agreement and kissed her softly on the lips. Debbie closed her eyes and remained perfectly still. Anita kept kissing Debbie. Time stopped, and didn’t start up again until Anita pulled back. Debbie saw light from the house reflect on Anita’s glasses and smiled. Anita smiled back. That was all it took.

Debbie never told anyone about that night or about the days and nights that followed when the girls shared their intimate little world. They parted because they chose different colleges on separate coasts. The parting was as sweet as the beginning. Debbie never thought about Anita, but not because she’d suffered a cataclysmic loss or was deeply hurt. It was because she knew she would never again feel as happy as she had during the time she and Anita shared their love.

After Virginia hung up the phone, her mother come into the room. “Was that Callie?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Did she invite you for another sleepover?”

“No. Why?”

“If she does, you can go,” Debbie said.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Now go finish your homework!” Feeling bewildered, Virginia went to her room. She didn’t mention what had happened when she saw Callie the next day. That was because she wasn’t sure exactly what had happened, but felt happy that it had.

Chapter 16

Although she was at home with her children, Janine couldn't stop thinking of Allyson and wondered if she was going crazy. Molly, Jake, and Sam were good kids, the best a mother could ask for, and she loved them. *Maybe I just don't want to be the mom they're used to*, she thought. *Maybe it's time to let them know who their mom really is, and the woman their mom truly loves.*

Nah.

Janine didn't know what it would do to her children to reveal her love affair with Allyson. Strangely, she didn't consider what her revelation would do to her husband Mike. He was an easy-going guy who accepted her mysterious absences and ran the family when she was gone. He also liked the high income she pulled down for her work. Mike got to do whatever he wanted with the money she brought in. He was never extravagant and always put the children first, but the income did compensate for the loss of her companionship. He accepted Janine's absences because he always knew she would come back to him, and never suspected she might be seeing someone else.

How would Mike react when he found out his wife *was* seeing someone else, and that someone was another woman? Janine didn't want to deal with the possible upheaval such a revelation might cause. Maybe it was enough for her to be her true self with Allyson and continue to be her fake self with her family for a while longer. She didn't like it but felt it was the safest thing to do.

It worked until the women and girls made another trip to the amusement park. They were walking from the Tilt-A-Whirl toward the bumper cars. Janine spotted a good-looking man with a teenage girl and two younger boys heading toward the Ferris wheel. She recognized her family and froze. "What's wrong?" Allyson asked. Janine pulled her aside.

"My husband and kids," she whispered. "They're *here*. I have to go."

"But we just got here."

"Okay," Janine said. "You stay. Here's the money. I'll go hide in the car. They won't see me there."

"Janine, are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure! Now go and have fun." Allyson watched Janine hurry toward the gate. She wanted to comfort her but knew she had to stay with Callie and Virginia.

"Where's she going?" Callie asked.

"She's feeling queasy and is worried that it might not be a good idea to go on any rides."

"She might barf?" Virginia asked.

"Exactly," Allyson replied. "She didn't want to ruin it for you girls so she's going back to the car to rest."

"Will she be coming back?" Callie asked.

"No, but she'll be okay. Don't worry about her. Now, what ride shall we go on first?"

Allyson wondered if the girls would suspect that something else was going on and if the women would later have to explain. She went on every ride they wanted to, as many

times as they wanted, and bought them anything they asked for. Janine had been generous and they had money left when the girls admitted they felt worn out and ready to leave.

Allyson led them back to the car. She wondered if Janine would still be there. *Maybe her feelings about all this have changed*, Allyson worried. *Or, maybe her family somehow saw her and she went home with them.*

Janine was not sitting in the car when they approached. Allyson unlocked the doors and saw her lying in the back seat. “Oh, hi, girls,” Janine said. “All worn out? Time to go home?” She sat up, got out, and held the door for Callie and Virginia to enter the back. Janine closed the door and got into the passenger seat.

“Are you okay?” Allyson whispered.

“Had a wonderful nap. Nice dream, too.” Janine still seemed groggy.

“Oh, what about? Amusement parks?”

“Uh, no.” Janine didn’t want to admit she dreamed about family life with Allyson. In her dream, her real children didn’t exist, and she hadn’t noticed they were gone. It should have disturbed her but hadn’t. “What’s for dinner?” she asked.

“We ate at the park. You want to stop for something?”

“No, thanks. I’ll find something back at your house.”

Everyone rode quietly. The girls felt too tired to chat, although they’d enjoyed an exciting day, even better than the first time they went. Allyson wondered if she and Janine needed to talk about what happened. She hadn’t liked seeing her lover panic. Janine’s fear of discovery troubled Allyson. Janine had explained how she didn’t want to disrupt her family by leaving them, and Allyson understood, although she didn’t like it. She did recall what she felt like when her husband abandoned her and Callie. *No spouse and children deserve that*, she thought.

Janine was quiet when they went to bed later. Allyson still felt excited from the day at the amusement park. Her body hadn’t settled down from being jostled, spun, banged around, or pulled in other ways on all the rides they enjoyed. She suspected Janine’s mind hadn’t settled, either.

“I really do love them, Allyson,” Janine finally said.

“Who?”

“My kids.”

“I know you do,” Allyson replied.

“But, I ran away.”

“I understand.”

“No, you don’t. You can’t. Because *I* don’t understand. Was I more worried about my kids finding out I wasn’t on a business trip, or my husband seeing me with you?”

“I don’t know, Janine.”

“I’ve been lying for months. I guess it just hit me how my lies could hurt people I love.”

“But they didn’t see you so everything’s okay.”

“I can’t get over the feeling they *did* spot me and I’ll find out when I go home. I’m scared, Allyson. Maybe everything’s not okay.”

Allyson sat up and reached to hug Janine. “Do you need to cry?” she asked, softly. Janine let Allyson’s arms enfold her.

“I think I do.”

“Go ahead. I’m here for you.”

“I know. Thanks.”

Janine cried, but weeping didn’t help. There were times when tears could wash away the pain, and times when no matter how much a person cried, the hurt remained after the tears became exhausted. When she finished crying, Janine wondered if her pain was so deep that there was only one way of dealing with it. Maybe she would have to end things with Allyson. Maybe what they were doing was wrong. Not because two women were loving each other but because one of the women had no right to be doing it, no matter how powerful her love for the other woman was.

Then she fell asleep.

In her dream, Janine watched a melodrama play out on a twenty-one-inch color TV. At first, she thought it was just another soap opera but then recognized Allyson on the screen. She looked older than the first time they were lovers but younger than she was now. Allyson had a husband named Larry and a toddler. The kid was adorable; the husband wasn’t. Larry seemed preoccupied and moody. The marriage was not going well, but his wife and daughter were not the problems. He was.

Larry had decided being tied down wasn’t the right life for him. He was a long-haul trucker who went away for trips twice each week. He drove the same route, slept in his rig, and ate at the same roadside café. The waitress was a high school-age kid named Daisy. She was a chubby round-faced girl who wore an apron over her shorts. Male customers admired her backside and bare legs when she walked away from them.

Larry admired her face when she approached his table. Daisy always had a smile for him because he wasn’t like the other men she waited on. They often made lewd remarks about her. They ranged from, “Oowee! I wanna get me some of that!” and “Ain’t she somethin’?” to, “That kid’s just askin’ for it,”

Daisy ignored them. All she was asking for was their orders. She served food and nothing else. She didn’t like the way the men talked about her but never said anything because no one ever tried anything. If anyone had, Daisy would have dumped the food plate on his lap and splashed hot coffee in his face. Then she would have walked out.

Larry liked watching her but he was always cordial, friendly, and (most importantly) respectful. He asked how she was doing, praised her for the number of tables she waited on, and thanked her when she served his food. Larry had a couple of favorite menu items and she began to play a game with him, guessing which of his favorites he was in the mood for. While the other men would have said they were in the mood for *her*, Larry never even thought of suggesting it.

One evening, Larry walked into the roadside diner and the place didn’t feel the same. It seemed loud and chaotic. Larry wondered what was going on and looked around. He didn’t see Daisy. He sat at the counter and the cook told him all they were serving were ham and cheese sandwiches. “Take it or leave it,” the cook said.

“That’s fine,” Larry replied. “Can I get some coffee, too?”

“Serve yerself- pot’s at the end of the counter.”

Larry got coffee and returned to his seat. The cook appeared with a sandwich and told Larry he had to pay right away because the place was so busy.

“Where’s Daisy?” Larry asked.

“She didn’t show up.” That was all the cook said.

Larry ate and left. It was dark and he almost didn’t notice the person lurking by his truck. It was Daisy. She was carrying a small suitcase.

“What are you doing out here?” Larry asked. “It’s busy inside.”

“Ain’t never working there again.”

“Why not?”

“They’re just a bunch of bastards,” Daisy explained.

“What happened?”

“One of ‘em cornered me when I was coming out of the Ladies Room. He thought because we was out of sight of the others I might give him a little somethin’ extra.”

“Oh, God!”

“That’s what he said when I kneed him in his balls. Then I walked out. I ain’t no piece of meat, despite what those assholes think.”

“No, of course not,” Larry said.

“All I’m askin’ for is a ride. Just get me away from here. You can drop me wherever you want. I got some money saved and I’m gonna start over somewhere else.”

“Sure. You can ride with me, Daisy.”

“Thanks. And, in return, I’ll give you anything you want.”

“I don’t want nothing. I’m glad to help out.”

“Thanks. You’re a real friend,” Daisy replied.

She rode with Larry the rest of the trip and was still in the cab when he drove back to the depot. After he reported in and got his next assignment, Larry took Daisy to a rooming house near the depot where some of the other drivers stayed on layovers. He helped Daisy get a room and then suggested he could stay there with her. She had no problem with that and welcomed him.

Now, Daisy rode with him on every trip. They found other places to eat, or she made food ahead of time. Larry never thought about his wife and daughter.

On Sunday morning, the girls talked excitedly about their Saturday at the amusement park but Janine tuned them out. She tuned out Allyson, as well. Her dream haunted her. She had awakened wondering if abandoning her family was her only choice but knew it was not a path she could take. *He was a prick, Janine thought. I could never do what he did. I could never just walk away from my family. What a stupid dream!*

Janine went to her office Monday morning and then went home around the time Molly, Jake, and Sam got in from school. “Mom, you’re back!” Jake said. Janine hugged him.

“Yes, my job wasn’t as hard as I thought it was going to be.”

“We went to the amusement park on Saturday,” Sam said.

“You did? I *love* amusement parks. Did you have fun?”

“We had a great day,” Jake replied. “Molly almost threw up on one of the rides.”

“But I didn’t!” Molly yelled, laughing.

“No, she didn’t. It wasn’t as gross as it could have been.”

“I haven’t been to an amusement park in years,” Janine lied.

“That’s funny. Dad thought he saw someone there that looked like you,” Molly said.

“Oh, lots of ladies look like me.”

“Yeah, that’s what he said, too. It couldn’t have been you, right?”

“No. I was hundreds of miles away.”

Janine briefly wondered how they would feel if they found eventually that she *had* been there, and with *another* family. She recalled Larry from her dream. Was she starting to become like him? Would she just leave one day? Maybe it was easier that way. Or, maybe it was never easy, but people lied to themselves that it was. Janine hated lying. But she loved Allyson and her children and dreaded that she might someday have to choose.

Chapter 17

Mike and Janine were getting ready for bed later. The kids were snug in their rooms and the calm domesticity that Mike cherished had settled over their household. *This is the way it's supposed to be*, he thought. *Completely normal.*

Mike understood that Janine had to leave unexpectedly and stay away for unpredictable periods to do her job, but he preferred their lives to be like *this*. Father, mother, and kiddies, all safe at home. *All's right with the world*, Mike thought.

"Sam told me you thought you saw me at the amusement park," Janine said as she removed her shorts.

Mike smiled and nodded. "I could have sworn it was you."

"Lots of women look like me. My face isn't that unusual."

"It wasn't just your face," Mike explained. "I recognized the outfit. Those dark green shorts and that light green sleeveless top. You've worn it when we had cookouts or went somewhere on weekends."

Janine tried to remain casual. She reached for her pajama bottoms. "I bought those at Macy's, Mike. Probably hundreds of women wear the same outfit."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"In fact, I was dressed in my power suit for two grueling sixteen-hour days."

"What exactly do you do, Janine?" Mike had asked before and she'd never given him an answer. He expected the same thing would happen this time.

Janine's work was confidential. Companies could suffer if word got out that she or her associates had been brought in. However, she felt it was time to be honest with Mike. About her job, if not about who she loved. She paused as she was pulling up her pajama bottoms. "Well, do you know how superheroes save people?"

"What do superheroes have to do with this?"

"I'm a superhero, but I don't save *people*. I save companies." Janine said. Mike watched her fluid motion and admired her slender figure. He missed his wife whenever she went away. Not just for the sex. Mike missed Janine because he loved being with her. The secrets she withheld made her seem mystifying. Mike liked having a secretive wife. He knew of couples for whom familiarity had killed the passion.

"Superhero, huh?" he replied, smiling. "Do you have a secret identity?"

"Yes, but I can't tell you what it is."

"Do you wear tights and a cape?"

Janine grinned. "Cape, no. Tights, yes."

"Oh really?" Mike reached for his wife.

"Actually, it's not just me," Janine continued. "It's what my company does." Mike wasn't interested in what the rest of her company did. The image of Janine in tights turned him on. Janine realized how the conversation was going to end and let Mike do what he wanted. She laid back on the bed and he removed the pajamas she had just put on.

As Mike got going, Janine didn't think about Allyson, nor did she think about her husband. While he was making love enthusiastically, she thought about herself. *This used to be fun. He's a nice guy who doesn't deserve to get hurt, but what I'm doing with Allyson is hurting him.* Janine forced herself to writhe under him and faked an orgasm when he came.

Mike fell asleep pleased that his wife finally told him what she did when she went away. Also, he couldn't wait until she came back the *next* time. Maybe she would wear her tights just for him.

Janine couldn't sleep. *I wonder what Allyson's doing right now?* she thought. *It's definitely not what I just did.* Then Janine recalled that Allyson did exactly what she had just done as often as she could up to that night they met in the club and rekindled their love. However, Mike wasn't just any man. He was her husband. Allyson didn't have a husband, so her sacrifice was less. *I don't know if I can sacrifice Mike,* Janine thought. Then she had a darker thought. *Some superhero I am! I can't even save myself.*

Callie found Janine waiting when she came home from school on Friday afternoon. "Is my mom expecting you? She didn't mention anything."

"No. I had something canceled on me. I hope it's okay that I just showed up."

"Sure. Mom'll be glad to see you. Come on in."

"Thanks, Callie. How's school?"

"I'm glad the year's almost over."

"Has it been hard?" Janine asked.

"No, just long."

"Got any plans for the summer?"

"No," Callie replied. "I just hang around here when mom goes to work."

"Do you get lonely?"

"No, I'm used to it."

"Does Virginia come over?" Janine asked.

"She didn't much before but maybe she'll come over more this summer."

"Do you know her mom well?"

"I've only met her a few times. She seemed as if she didn't like me. Virginia told me her mom doesn't like anybody, not even her."

"That's sad, Callie. Virginia's a nice girl."

"And, she's *so* smart. Her mom yells at her because she says she's smarter than her grades show. Her mom doesn't understand that school is hard and grades are only a part of it."

"I remember when it was like that, too."

"You knew mom when you were in school, right?" Callie asked.

"Yeah. We met on the first day of high school. We kinda saved each other."

"That's nice. I met Virginia during the first week I was in middle school. We were in the same homeroom for a while, but then I got moved. But we stayed friends."

"Well, I'm glad for you both," Janine said.

They ran out of things to say and fell into silence. Callie thought of a question she'd wanted to ask recently but hadn't. "I was wondering, Janine, when am I gonna meet your kids? I think I would like them."

"You do?"

"Well, yeah. I really like you."

"Thanks, Callie. I really like you, too."

"So, can I meet them? Could you bring them over someday?"

“No, I don’t think so,” Janine replied.

“Why not? Is there something wrong with me?”

“No, of course not.”

“Is there something wrong with *them*?” Callie asked, but not in a mean way.

“Nope. They’re great kids.”

“Then... why?”

“It’s complicated, Callie, but not because of you.”

“Then explain it to me. I’m old enough to understand.”

“Yeah, I think you are.”

“So, tell me.”

“It’s like this, Callie. Your mom and I- we love each other. You know all about it, but my kids don’t.”

“You haven’t told them?”

“No,” Janine admitted.

“Why not? Are you ashamed of us?”

“No, of course not. I think you and your mom are great.”

“Are you ashamed of *them*?” Callie asked.

“No.”

“Then you must be ashamed of what you and my mom are doing, right?”

“Callie, I... *No!*”

“What else could it be, then?” Callie asked. Janine had no answer. Callie hadn’t intended to hurt Janine’s feelings but wondered if she had said too much. “I’m sorry I asked,” she said.

“It’s okay, Callie. I’m kinda glad you did. I changed my mind. I don’t think I’m gonna wait for your mom to come home. I’m going home so I can hang out with my kids. Tell your mom I was here and I’ll call her as soon as I can, okay?”

“Sure.”

“And, thanks, Callie.”

“For what?”

“Being such a great daughter.”

Janine left. Callie wondered how she was going to explain what happened to her mother when she came home. She didn’t want to get in trouble.

As she drove home, Janine knew she was already in trouble and it had just deepened. She regretted leaving Callie and missing a chance to spend a night with Allyson, but somehow it felt right to leave. She knew her children would welcome her excitedly and assumed Mike would be happy she came home as well. But, how would she feel spending Friday night with the family she loved instead of the woman she loved? Janine didn’t know, but she knew she couldn’t go on like this much longer.

On Saturday morning, they both slept late. Mike felt happy when he awoke next to his sleeping wife. He hoped she might be dreaming about him. Janine slept late because she had stayed awake thinking about her dilemma and wondering if the time had come to take action.

Her eyes opened and she caught Mike looking at her. She thought he might be feeling frisky. “Morning, sweetie. What time is it?”

“Time to get up, I think. I think the kids are awake.”

“I’m not ready to get up, yet,” Janine said.

“Okay, you sleep. I’ll take care of the kids.”

“Stay with me a while.”

“Um, okay, that sounds good, but can I pee first?”

“Sure,” Janine replied, smiling. Mike plodded off to their bathroom. He hadn’t put on any underwear after they had sex. Mike thought he might be coming back to bed to have more.

“I need to tell you something,” Janine said as he got back into bed.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Mike, I haven’t always been working when I was away on the weekends.”

“Oh?”

“C’mon, don’t tell me you weren’t suspicious.”

“Don’t tell me what I might have been thinking, Janine,” Mike replied, sharply.

“Okay, I won’t. I’ve been with someone else.”

“Who is he?”

“It wasn’t a man.”

“Then what the fuck are you talking about, Janine?”

“I was with a woman.”

“Oh.”

“She and I knew each other in high school but we lost touch when my mother made us move away because she found out what we were doing.”

“And, what were you doing?”

“We were lovers.”

“Oh. I had no idea.”

“It was over, Mike, and I never looked at another woman. Then I ran into her at a place I went to several months ago. I went home with her. You can guess the rest.” Mike didn’t want to guess anything. He didn’t want Janine to spell it out for him, either.

“So, you’re leaving me.”

“No. That’s why I’m telling you all this.”

“I don’t understand,” Mike said.

“I’m not leaving you, but I’m not leaving *her*, either.”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“Just what I said, Mike.”

“But, you do love her more than me, right?”

“I’ve always loved her. I didn’t know it because I forgot about her until we saw each other again.”

“Do you still love me?”

“You’re my husband, Mike.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Janine didn’t say anything else. Mike understood why. He didn’t like it. “I don’t think I like this, Janine. Not one bit.” Janine remained quiet. “Isn’t there something else you want to tell me?”

“What?”

“That *was* you at the amusement park, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“And that was *her*?”

“Yes. And her daughter.”

“What about her husband?”

“She doesn’t have one.” *And I might not have one when this conversation is over,* Janine thought.

“How convenient.”

“Nothing about this is convenient, but I won’t apologize.”

“I think that’s what hurts the most. I would at least expect you to tell me you’re sorry.”

“I’m not, Mike. In fact, I’ve never been happier.”

Mike jumped up from the bed, found his shorts and t-shirt, grabbed a pair of old jeans, and escaped into the bathroom. Janine sat alone, ready to cry. She had hurt the sweet man she once loved. She still cared about him, knew that wouldn’t be enough, and didn’t blame him.

Mike came back dressed. She wondered if he had been crying behind the closed bathroom door. “Not a word of this to the kids,” he said. “Not one fucking word!”

“Of course not.”

Mike walked out. Janine wondered where he would sleep Saturday night. They had no guest room. If he slept on the couch the children would ask why. *Poor Mike must feel trapped,* Janine thought. *I know what that feels like. I’ll have to find a way to help him. After all, helping is one of my superpowers.* She grinned at ‘superpowers.’ *I’m no longer the hero,* she thought. *Now, I’m the villain. See what love’ll do to ya?*

Janine had no idea what love- or the end of it- could do.

Chapter 18

Although they were around the same age, the first time Callie and Janine's daughter Molly met there were a few awkward minutes until they discovered they liked the same music and movies. Then the girls got along well and became friends. Jake and Sam refused to go with their mother to meet her new 'friend.' Their father took them to the movies, instead. The boys were happy to be free of their older sister for a whole afternoon and evening. Mike was happy to be away from Janine, as well.

Things had been cool but cordial between them since her confession. Janine had pulled the rug out from under his feet but Mike tried not to show how shaken he was. If it wasn't for the kids, what she did to him might have caused him to react differently, perhaps even violently. He hated thinking that way but accepted his resentment as a natural reaction to what she confessed. All that concerned him now was protecting the children. If Janine left him, he didn't know how he would care for them. Mike made nowhere near the income his wife did.

Janine assumed that worried him and stressed that she wasn't planning to leave. She loved her children as much as he did. Mike doubted her words. *If she can betray me, she can betray them*, he thought. (Mike didn't know much about motherhood, nor did he care to learn. Janine had wounded him too badly.) He had to protect himself, but the stress of being a father yet no longer a husband took its toll.

Janine suggested she was willing to be his wife whenever he needed her but he didn't want someone to have sex with, he wanted a woman who loved him, and she no longer did. Unlike some other men he knew of, Mike hadn't married for sex. Mike and Janine had truly been in love and he thought they would stay that way. How could he have known she had a lesbian lover in her past that would return to wreck their marriage twenty-five years later?

Mike resented that Janine never told him about Allyson. He wouldn't have thought anything of it if she had been honest. It would have merely been another intimate story that lovers shared as they forged the bond that would carry them through their lives. Had Janine forgotten about Allyson, as she claimed? Was she ashamed of having a relationship with another girl? Or, had she deliberately hidden the truth about herself, that she was a lesbian at heart? The more Mike thought about this, the more his resentment grew. Finally, it became unbearable.

They adjusted to their estrangement by buying a king-sized mattress so they could sleep as far apart as possible. It was the only way to preserve the fiction they were still married. The children never suspected there was tension between their parents.

Despite his resentment toward Janine, Mike was always careful never to show his negative feelings around their children. He tried to keep life in their household as normal as it was before Janine's revelation. However, Mike's behavior when he was not around the kids changed, especially when he was away from home. The biggest change came at work.

Mike had always been an easy-going, positive, and cheerful coworker. He smiled a lot and looked for ways to lighten others' days. Mike went out of his way to help bank customers who came in with difficult problems or dilemmas that seemed unsolvable and often found creative ways to help.

Now the person that needed help was Mike, but he didn't know how to ask for it. Instead of the friendly co-worker everyone was used to, he became sullen, withdrawn, gruff, and abrupt. He focused on his job and his work never faltered but didn't seem to enjoy his days at the bank. Customers didn't notice but co-workers did. They wondered why Mike had changed and worried about him. 'Is he ill?' someone asked. 'Doesn't he like it here anymore?' another co-worker wondered.

Mike's boss was a woman slightly older than he was. They had risen through the bank's ranks around the same time and become friends. Grace got the promotion to branch manager that Mike hoped for, but he never resented her and always remained loyal. He assumed she got the promotion because the bank had launched a policy of promoting women. He also suspected Grace might have impressed a couple of the vice presidents. She was a short, curvaceous blond with a gorgeous smile, clear mellifluous voice, and a cheerful manner.

Their years working together created a bond Mike never wanted to lose. Grace felt that bond, too, and always thanked Mike for his help and saw to it that he got good performance reviews and regular raises. Now, Grace worried about her friend. At first, she thought she was the only one who noticed how much he seemed to change because they had worked together for so long. Then she overheard other employees expressing concern about him. She kept a close eye on him, checking in almost every day, asking about the customers he was seeing, and checking his paperwork. Everything he did remained exemplary. Mike was still her star employee.

But, he was unhappy, possibly deeply troubled, and (Grace feared) could become unpredictable if no one intervened. She finally worked up the courage to call him to her office. She didn't want to alarm Mike but felt she had to find out what was bothering him.

"Mike, you and I have worked together for years. I feel like we know each other as professionals and trust each other." *Oh, shit, what did I do?* Mike thought. *Is she about to reprimand me?* "Your work is still first-class, but something about you has changed. Everyone's worried about you. Is something wrong? Is there a problem you need to talk about? Is it one of your co-workers? You know you can tell me anything in confidence. I've always trusted you to be completely honest and forthright with me, and you have. So, tell me, what's going on?"

"It's, um, nothing to do with work, Grace. It's, um, stuff at home."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is everyone okay? Kids, your wife?"

"Kids are fine. Janine is fine, too." Mike paused as he wondered how honest he could be without risking his professional rapport with Grace. *Maybe there's a line I shouldn't cross,* he thought. "But our marriage... it isn't fine."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Are you sure? You don't have to do this."

"You and I have come a long way together," Grace replied. "Talk to me."

"It's Janine."

"Your wife."

"She's no longer my wife," Mike said.

"Oh, did she leave you?"

"No, she still lives with us."

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t, either, Grace,” Mike replied and then started to sob. All the hurt he carried since Janine revealed her lesbian lover welled up and finally overwhelmed him. Grace got up from her chair, walked around the desk, put her arm around Mike’s shoulder, and held him. Feeling tremendous release, he pressed his head to her breasts and she didn’t stop him. Mike sobbed. Grace waited. “She has a lesbian lover. She’s staying until the kids are in college because she owes it to us, but then that’s it. It’s already over.”

“Oh, God, you poor man. I wish you had told me sooner.”

“What could you or anyone else have done?”

“I don’t care about *her*, Mike. I care about you. I know what divorce is like. This sounds ten times worse.”

“It is. Sometimes I wish I could just die.”

“Don’t say that. You have your kids.”

“That’s what keeps me going. But, I’ve lost the joy my family once gave me. Sooner or later they’re gonna notice that dad’s acting weird. They might feel sorry for me or worry about me, but they could become afraid of me, too. What if I have some sort of outburst, maybe fight with Janine in front of them? They’re too young to understand divorce, let alone something like this.”

“I can’t fix any of that, Mike, but I can be here for you if you need someone.”

“I’m so embarrassed.”

“Don’t be. I’m not. We’ve been co-workers and friends for a long time. You’re an asset to this branch-.”

Mike stopped sobbing and looked up at Grace’s face. “Is that why you care- because I’m an asset? Is that all I am to you?”

“If all you were was an asset I would never have invited you in here to talk to me.”

“I won’t let what’s happened to affect my work,” Mike declared.

“I know that. You’re a professional. But you’re also a hurting man.”

Grace had never been a mother but always wanted to be. In her professional and personal life, she had met many men who, although they were adults, had never ceased being little boys. She never asked them why they never grew up or what was missing from their lives. But she had developed a theory. *Maybe their mothers just weren’t there for them*, she thought. *Maybe all they needed was sympathy, a hug, and soft reassurance.*

Grace had always wanted somebody to be there for. Her ex-husband was dynamic, self-sufficient, and turned out to be emotionally distant and cold. He didn’t want nurturing. He didn’t want anything from Grace except regular sex, and when he stopped wanting *that* she knew their marriage was over. After the divorce, Grace found herself wondering if it had ever begun.

Now she wondered if Mike needed her. As far as she could tell, he wasn’t a little boy. But he was hurting. And he needed someone to share his pain with and maybe help him bear it. Grace felt willing to be that person. She knew such a relationship had risks because she was his boss but told herself not to care. He was more important.

Without another thought, Grace leaned down and kissed Mike softly on the lips. “I’m here for you,” she whispered. “Anytime. Any way you need me.”

Astonished by what she had done, Mike realized what she was offering. Help, support, solace. “I might need you a *lot*,” he replied, looking into her eyes. He had never noticed how blue they were before.

“That’s good. But we’re gonna have to keep it professional.”

“Of course. Thanks, Grace. I think you just saved me.”

Grace stood up, removed her arm from Mike’s shoulders, and smiled. She walked back to her chair and sat. “I guess I’ll get back to work,” Mike said.

“Yeah,” Grace replied. Now that her impulse had passed she wondered just what the hell she had done. Had she offered herself to him? What did she want to be, his mother or his lover? Grace felt confused, but not regretful. She had reached out to someone for whom she cared. Maybe that’s all it was, and would ever be. Just a sweet moment alone in her office. Or, maybe it would lead to more. Grace felt happy she had opened herself and tried not to speculate about what was going to happen next. Maybe nothing. Maybe a lot. She left it up to Mike to decide.

Chapter 19

Knowing that he had someone who genuinely cared about him made a difference. Mike hadn't realized how alone and isolated he felt. No longer being able to talk to Janine left him feeling adrift. Grace anchored him, but he was careful not to take advantage of her friendly support.

Instead of dwelling on himself, Mike asked about her. What he didn't know about someone he'd worked closely with for almost two decades astonished him. She liked telling him about herself. They found they had similar tastes in movies, TV shows, and some foods. There were also striking differences, but neither wanted them to be an obstacle to their deepening friendship.

Grace began to wonder when that friendship might become something more. They stumbled on the subject of involuntary celibacy once but stopped themselves. Laughingly describing their unwanted abstinence almost became painful. Neither wanted to suggest anything beyond shared agony, funny as that kind of was. Their sexual needs were still personal, private, and a little embarrassing.

Mike looked at his boss and wondered what she was like under her crisp business suit. He recalled thinking the same thing when they first met as new hires and she was even more strikingly beautiful than now. He was then already married, and casual thoughts about other women embarrassed him, so he put her out of his mind. Now, thoughts about Grace had come back and she no longer had to be the other woman. Mike started to wonder if she might feel the same way toward him but didn't know how to find out.

Janine was specific about when she went to spend time with Allyson and when she was away working. She gave Mike Allyson's phone number (with her permission.) Janine did not, however, talk about Callie. She didn't want to give Mike the impression that she was starting to feel about Callie the same way she felt about her own children. The only person who mentioned Callie was Molly. Mike listened but did not show any real interest. Molly didn't notice her father's indifference.

Mike and Grace wrapped up a meeting just before closing time. As Mike stood up to leave her office, she stopped him. "Say, Mike, I was wondering. Would you be interested in getting a drink or maybe a light dinner after work sometime?"

"Oh, I'd like that, but the kids need me at home for dinner. And it's kinda important to me, too."

"Oh, right. I understand."

"But I was thinking about this," Mike went on. "And I had an idea."

"Oh?"

"Well, Janine goes to her girlfriend's house some weekends, but I never get any weekends off." Mike realized what he might be suggesting and became embarrassed. "I'm not saying you and I could-."

"Spend a whole weekend together?" Grace asked, smiling. "You're thinking Friday night to Monday morning?"

"Well, that's when she goes."

"I think it's a *wonderful* idea, Mike. It might be what we both need."

“You mean it?”

“Yeah, Mike. It’ll give us time to get to know each other. Lord knows we can’t do that here at work. It wouldn’t be right.”

“And we’re pretty busy anyway.”

“Right. So, when?”

“I’ll talk to Janine and let you know,” Mike replied. “Is that okay?”

“That’s great! I can’t wait.”

Two Fridays later, they sat in a cozy booth at an Italian restaurant Grace suggested. Mike often made spaghetti and meatballs for his children and felt eager to try something different. Grace suggested several alternatives. Mike chose the chicken cacciatore.

“Look, Mike, we’re both bankers and do everything by the book. We don’t leave anything to chance and cross all the Ts and dot all the Is. But we’re not at work now, so we don’t have to be bankers for a whole weekend. We can be spontaneous and free.”

“I have three kids. I know what spontaneous and free means,” Mike joked.

“Good. Maybe you can teach me.”

“Maybe I can.”

After dinner, Grace took Mike back to her place. She had forced her ex-husband to sell their house when he divorced her. Grace found a roomy, charming apartment in an old refurbished building near the river. “I’m paying mostly for the view,” she told him as they walked in around dusk, “but it’s worth every penny.”

Mike looked out at the smooth water and wondered who this woman was. He would never have thought of living near or on a river and realized immediately that it meant something to her more than movies, TV, books, or food.

“So, why?” he asked as he looked out of her large window.

“Why what?”

“Why choose a river?”

“Can’t you feel it?” Grace replied.

“Feel what?”

“It’s deep and strong and moody and endlessly moving. Trees are great but they just stand there. The river moves and never stops. I’ve never seen the water that’s outside that window right at this moment. I’ve maybe seen water *like* it, but that particular water is new, fresh, and full of something. I’m not sure what it is, but I call it life, for want of a better term. That river is life.”

“You’re amazing.”

“You probably think I’m crazy.”

“No, I think you explained it so wonderfully that I can see it, too. And feel it. Thanks for opening my eyes.”

“So, do you like my river?” she asked, shyly. Grace wanted him to like more than just her river. She had revealed something deeply personal and wondered if she said too much.

“Yeah.”

“Good. It’s as much a part of me as the bank.”

“I understand,” Mike replied.

“Do you? Your life is your children, and I envy you. My life is that river.”

“Do you ever think of...?”

“Sailing away down the river?” Grace asked, unsure if she read his mind or if he was reading hers. She didn’t care. “How did you know?”

“I heard the yearning in your voice. You think of it as an adventure, don’t you?”

“Do you think I’m weird?”

“I think you’re beautiful, Grace.”

Grace liked to sit quietly in the dark on the large balcony that overlooked the water. She had done it alone many times, always clothed. This was the first time she sat naked with a man under a thick comforter. She liked that Mike didn’t doze off and didn’t talk. The silence was important to Grace. She and Mike had nowhere to be, nothing to do, and no need to speak. The river did and said everything for them.

Mike didn’t even think about his children. It was the first time in many years that he thought about himself. Suddenly, what Janine did to him didn’t seem so awful and no longer hurt as much. Mike wondered if he and Grace were on a path toward healing each other. They had three nights and two whole days to get to know each other and were off to a great start. Mike hoped the river was only the beginning and Grace would reveal more that was amazing about her during their time together. His only worry was that she wouldn’t see him as anything as close to terrific as he saw her.

Mike needn’t have worried. He had already passed two tests. The first was the river, and the second was how he made her feel when he was inside her. Grace had assumed their first time would be exciting just because she hadn’t had sex since before her divorce and she was likely horny. However, it wasn’t the sudden fulfillment of long-denied need that she felt with Mike. There was something *more*, but Grace couldn’t give it a name. Nor did she need to. Something told her that, if she wanted him, Mike could be hers. As she fell asleep next to him, Grace fantasized about how they would explain their decision to marry to everyone at work. One of them would have to move to another branch office, but Grace didn’t care.

Mike awoke Saturday morning with one of the best ideas he ever had in his life. He couldn’t wait to share it with Grace. She was already out of bed making breakfast. Mike dressed in a t-shirt and shorts and left the bedroom, hoping his attire was appropriate. It was.

Grace stood over the stove dressed in a light robe. Mike could tell she wore nothing underneath. “Morning,” he said as he entered the small kitchen.

“You’re up! I was wondering if you were gonna sleep all day.”

“Uh, no. I never do that. Kids won’t let me.”

“Oh, right. Well, if you wanna go back to bed, I’d understand.”

“No, thanks,” Mike replied. “I slept great.”

“Good. Hungry?”

“Yes. What are you making?”

“Nothing fancy. I like easy breakfasts on the weekend. Just coffee, toast, maybe a couple of eggs. Occasionally, I’ll make some bacon or if I’m feeling ambitious, I’ll rustle up some pancakes.”

“Rustle up?” Mike teased, grinning. She didn’t reply. “So, what’d you make today?” he asked.

“*Everything*. I wasn’t sure what you would like.”

“I like all that stuff. Need any help?”

“No. It’s almost ready. Sit.”

Mike sat. Grace served him a plate piled with all the foods she mentioned. “Wow! This is enough for several days,” he joked.

“You don’t have to eat it all. We can save some for tomorrow. I don’t cook on Sundays.”

“Oh, okay.”

They ate in silence. Mike enjoyed the feeling of closeness their breakfast allowed. It wasn’t merely the food. Nor was it the fact that he wore his underwear and Grace wore a thin robe. “I haven’t had Saturday breakfast without my kids for as far back as I can recall.”

“Oh. Do you miss them?”

Mike answered without hesitation. “Strangely, no.”

“I’m glad,” Grace replied, smiling.

“So am I. Thanks.”

“So what do you want to do today?” she asked just before she put a forkful of food into her mouth.

“I thought we could have some fun.”

As Grace chewed she considered his suggestion. There were many kinds of fun. “Oh? What did you have in mind?”

“Rides.”

“You mean like a long ride in the country? That sounds nice.”

“No, I mean roller coasters, carousels, Tilt-a-Whirls, stuff like that.”

“Oh, *that* kind of ride,” Grace replied, smiling.

“We could pretend we’re teenagers on a date.”

“I like the way you think.”

“You inspire me.”

They forgot about being a bank manager, loan officer, divorcee, spurned husband, and devoted father and became two kids on a lark. “Ooh, they have a Tunnel of Love,” Grace commented as they walked around the amusement park.

“I’ve been on almost all the other rides but never in there,” Mike said.

“So, you’re a Tunnel of Love virgin?”

“You could say that.”

“We gotta go,” Grace urged as she pulled him toward the ride.

“Yes, but not just yet.”

“Why not?”

“If we go on that ride first,” Mike explained. “It will be the *only* one we go on all day.”

“Oh? It’s *that* good?”

“No, you are.”

They rode every ride sitting as close as they could. Their closeness titillated them. As they strolled around, Mike noticed the admiring looks Grace received from passing men. She looked pert and sexy in her shorts and top. Mike didn’t have to look, however. He got to feel her closeness all day, and he knew what Grace felt like when her clothes were off.

“The first time I meet your kids, I want it to be there,” Grace said as they ate the Chinese take-out they picked up on the way home.

“No.”

“Why not? Don’t you want me to meet them?”

“Yes. Eventually.”

Grace looked down, suddenly embarrassed. “Oh.”

“It’s not you, Grace. The kids don’t know anything’s wrong between Janine and me. We’ve tried to keep things as normal as possible. If dad introduces them to his girlfriend, I don’t know what that’ll do to them.”

“You’re a considerate dad.”

“They’re all I have,” Mike commented.

“No, you’re wrong about that, Mike.”

“I am?”

“You have *me*, now,” Grace explained. “That is, if you want me.”

Mike did. Their weekend had been a success.

Chapter 20

“Janine, you can’t be serious!” Mike exclaimed.

“But I am. I think it would be nice for everyone to sit down together and celebrate Thanksgiving.”

“Look, if you want to spend Thanksgiving with that woman, I’m willing to lie for you and tell the boys you have to work.”

“But, I don’t, and nobody has to lie, Mike.”

“But it won’t work!”

“Why not? Grace is your boss. You can say you invited her because she was going to be alone on Thanksgiving.”

“No.”

“And Molly already knows Callie and her mother. It’s only the boys who haven’t met everyone.”

“I’m *thinking* of the boys. I don’t know what this might do to them.”

Janine didn’t reply immediately. She noticed the hurt tone of Mike’s voice and realized what he meant. “You’re not thinking of the boys, Mike, you’re thinking of yourself. *They* could handle it just fine. You couldn’t. I’m sorry I suggested it. I’ll make sure this Thanksgiving will be just like all the others if that would make you feel better.”

Mike wasn’t sure what would make him feel better. He felt certain Janine’s Thanksgiving idea would make him feel worse, but didn’t know why. Perhaps just having everyone around the same table was more than he could handle. It might make what they were doing seem acceptable, maybe even normal, and it wasn’t. Mike refused to let it be normal.

Despite Mike and Grace settling into a mutually satisfying relationship, Mike still felt Janine had wronged him irredeemably. Janine might feel that Mike having a girlfriend somehow compensated for what she had done to him, but he didn’t feel the same way. He thought their marriage bond would last their lifetime but Janine had broken it. No matter how she explained it, Mike couldn’t accept that he was no longer her first love.

If Allyson had remained in the past, if he never found out about her, and Janine had remained his loving wife, there would have been no problem. Even if he somehow found out about Allyson it would have made no difference as long as she was old news. But that’s not what happened.

Mike and Janine had built a good life together and brought three wonderful children into the world. He felt secure and happy until she pulled the rug out from under him. Janine wounded Mike deeply and he would never heal. Grace was a great woman but she wasn’t compensation for losing not just his wife but the stability and security of his entire life.

Pretending they could all be part of some happy extended or reconfigured family seemed disgusting to Mike. He wanted his original family back. He wanted their complex new lives to return to their simple former lives.

Mike became obsessed with questions he could not answer. *Why did Janine have to mess up everything by meeting her old girlfriend in a club? What was she doing in that club, anyway? She was supposed to be hard at work saving some business or other.* His questions made no difference because she had already disrupted their lives beyond repair. His feelings,

however, couldn't be repaired, and they weren't going to change. He felt hurt, and if he ever found an opportunity to hurt Janine as badly as she hurt him, Mike knew he would take it. He also knew that he couldn't tell anyone how he felt because no one would understand. Not even Grace.

She offered Mike something wonderfully new. Grace was eager to build a life with him and his children, but Mike held back. She didn't know exactly why he was holding back. Was it because Mike didn't want more than an affair (which was okay)? Or, because he didn't want to disrupt what was left of normalcy for his family? Maybe he was still in love with his wife and either didn't know it or wouldn't admit it. That possibility, for Grace, was not okay.

She was willing to be patient and give Mike time to figure things out. However, she wondered if a time would come when it would become clear that Mike was beyond saving. At some point, she would have to think of her feelings. *Then what?* Grace thought. *Workplace romances are stupid! How did I get sucked into one?*

"You have to understand that I can't push him any further because I don't know what his breaking point is," Janine told Allyson the next time they were together. She had brought Molly over so the girls could play. Whenever Molly and Janine visited, the women stayed away from Allyson's bedroom. Callie wondered why her mother and Janine were so cautious when Molly was there. She assumed Molly didn't know Allyson and Janine were lesbians.

"I understand, Janine. You have to be fair to him. A lot has changed in his life."

"Yeah, and I'm trying to keep what little stability he has left. I owe him that."

"Is it because you're still his wife or because you still love him?" Allyson asked. Her sharp query surprised Janine. She looked hurt. *Have I said too much?* Allyson thought.

"I love *you*, Allyson. Only you. But we're not kids anymore, and we both know it. Life was simple in high school. So was love, but both are complicated now."

"I know. I'm sorry I seemed as if I was doubting you. I don't know where that came from."

"Maybe *you* have doubts," Janine said. She'd meant it to sound like a question, but it came out as a statement.

Allyson didn't know how to reply. *Do I?* she wondered. She looked at Janine.

"Maybe we need to talk more often instead of going to bed."

"I like doing both," Janine replied, smiling. "But it does seem a strange conversation, doesn't it?"

"Maybe it's one that was overdue."

"You might be right. I don't want there to be anything between us."

"Neither do I, Janine. And I understand your concern for Mike. He and I have experienced the same kind of loss, but you haven't."

"And I hope I never will, but let's not think about that right now."

"No, let's not talk about loss. We have so much to be thankful for. You've brought so much joy into my life, joy I never thought I'd ever experience again. I know we're not kids anymore, but I sure feel like one when I'm with you."

"Same here," Janine replied with a sigh. They simultaneously thought back to the night they met in the club, that first weekend together, their fun visit to the amusement park,

and all the other times they were alone. Happiness such as they felt would have seemed impossible if they thought about it before they found each other again. Yet, here they now were. And hoped to remain.

That was always the risky part. Both women were old enough to know the child's belief in something called 'happily ever after' was an illusion. Yet the *dream* of a love that never ended was real. Allyson and Janine had it back in high school but it only lasted a year. Then Allyson thought she had it with her husband, but he left. Mike thought he had it with a wife he adored and depended on, with children who meant the world to him.

No one wanted to admit that things changed, often in ways people didn't like. Mostly, no one got a choice. Shit just happened. Yet, Allyson and Janine had a choice. They could have allowed their romance to remain in their past. Instead, they chose to renew it in the present. They knew what it would do to the lives of others, but plunged in anyway, and neither regretted it. The best they could hope for now is that they kept going for as long as circumstances or the world allowed. That would have to be enough.

However, both knew that it never was. That was the way love was. Lovers always wanted more.

Janine prepared the most lavish Thanksgiving dinner she had ever made. Molly helped. The huge turkey, overabundant stuffing, mashed and sweet potatoes, green bean casserole topped with fried onions, and the sparkling apple cider they were allowed to drink did not impress the boys. They only cared about the pumpkin pie. When it didn't appear on the table with all the other food they seemed disappointed. Janine guessed why and reminded them they had to clear their plates before eating any pie.

Mike couldn't keep his mind on the dinner. Although Janine had outdone herself and given him the Thanksgiving he wanted, Mike couldn't ignore the nagging suspicion that it would be their last as a family. Strangely, Janine felt the same way. Neither said much at the table.

Molly tried to talk about Christmas, thinking the boys would excitedly offer suggestions about what they wanted Santa to bring, but the conversation didn't last long. Molly had left dolls behind and was into music, clothes, videos, and shopping for all three. She persuaded Janine to plan a trip to the mall just for the two of them, ostensibly to shop for the others but really to look for stuff she would write on her Christmas list. Janine didn't mind. She felt pleased Molly seemed such a normal teenager. Janine knew of neighbors' children who got into trouble but didn't think Molly would be like them, ever.

She, however, was feeling uneasy because she hadn't told Molly what Callie already knew- that their mothers were lesbians. Janine had told Molly all about boys, sex, dating, and babies. Molly had even mentioned a boy she liked at school. *What will she do*, Janine wondered, *when she learns what her mother truly is? Will she still love me?*

Callie still loves Allyson, Janine thought. *But they've been a two-person family for a long time and their relationship is different.* Molly had a father she could turn to if her mother disappointed or frightened her. Janine didn't want that to happen but wasn't sure how to prevent it. However, she suspected that sooner or later Molly would figure out something was going on between her mother and Callie's mother. *Then what?* Janine wondered. *Will my*

daughter still love me? And what will happen when my boys find out? Will I still have a family?

It occurred to Janine that, in the future, the only person who might love her could be Allyson. As soon as that realization struck her, she knew that was not the way she wanted her life to become, but had no idea how to prevent it. For the first time since she and Allyson reconnected, Janine felt she was losing control. She refused to regret what they had done but allowed herself to think that maybe, just maybe, they had allowed things to go too far. Perhaps the love they shared in their past should have stayed there.

The next time the women were alone, they sat next to each other on the bed but kept their clothes on. Janine seemed uneasy. Allyson assumed pressures from her job preoccupied Janine and wanted to soothe her before they started what they both hoped was a weekend of love. Allyson waited for Janine to start talking. However, when she did, Janine didn't talk about her job. She talked about them.

"I know you've wanted us to live together, and I did, too. I thought it would happen but only after my kids were grown and out of the house."

"I told you I was okay with that."

"Yeah. But, now I don't think I'm okay with it."

"What?" Allyson asked. "Why?"

"What if, no matter how old they are, my kids never understand us? What if they just stop loving me? I don't want to not be their mother."

"Do you think that could happen?" Allyson asked.

"Yes, it could, and I don't want it to. I'm sorry."

"*You're* sorry? Does that mean you're breaking up with me?"

"I don't know what it means, Allyson. I'm so confused. I can't afford to be confused. My job demands that I be laser-focused. My clients are expecting my mind to work 150% to solve their problems. But if I can't solve my *own*, then what?"

"So, I'm a problem, now?"

"No, I didn't mean that."

"Then what *did* you mean, Janine?"

"I don't know. That's another problem. Everything seems like it's either coming apart right now or will soon come apart. I can't let it. I have to stay in control."

"I understand."

"Do you? You have no idea. Your life is completely different. You have a freedom I can't even imagine."

Allyson fought to control her churning emotions. Then a question occurred to her that she should have been afraid to ask, but instead blurted out. "Can you imagine a life without me, Janine? Can you imagine *that*?"

Janine looked at Allyson and Allyson couldn't read her face. "I...I...can't answer that," Janine admitted.

Allyson's surprise turned into rage. "Well, then, why don't you leave now and think about it and then let me know when you've figured it out. That's what you're good at, isn't it-figuring things out, fixing things, saving companies. Do your job, Janine. Do your fucking job!"

Janine looked at Allyson and tried to find words but they wouldn't come. Words were a big part of what she did. She analyzed companies but had to use words to explain what her analysis found. Often, the companies were so out of touch with themselves they couldn't grasp what she tried to tell them. Then she had to find new words to get the message across. It was her job to make them understand, and eventually, they did.

Now she didn't understand her life and had no words for what she felt, no words for Allyson, and no words for anyone else in her life. All Janine could think of was that she needed to get away- from Allyson, her family, her job, and the world. Janine had to find Janine.

That was when she realized she had lost herself. She didn't know if it was because of her love affair with Allyson, her marriage, motherhood, or whatever. Suddenly her life made no sense. Since she was paid to make sense of companies that were in trouble, she thought she ought to try and make sense of her life because, yes, *she* was in trouble. And, her indecision threatened several other lives, people she could hurt; people she had *already* hurt.

That was the moment Janine came apart.

Chapter 21

Janine abruptly left Allyson's bedroom, sped out the front door, got into her car, and drove away.

"I thought Janine was staying all weekend," Callie said when Allyson came downstairs.

"She had an emergency," Allyson replied. She knew it wasn't Janine's job that was the emergency, it was her life, and Allyson felt helpless. She also wondered if she would ever see Janine again.

As she drove away, Janine wondered the same thing. *I could just disappear, she thought. I have money stashed away that Mike doesn't know about. I could lie and say I'm on a job and no one would know what was really happening.*

But, no. I'm done lying. I'm done hiding. I'm done asking people to lie for me or hide the truth about me. The truth has to come out, now. If it doesn't, I'll go crazy.

Then, Janine wondered if she'd already gone crazy and that's why she was thinking that way. *I thought I had everything I wanted. It was all under control until it came apart. I guess what wasn't under control was me. Now, on top of hurting everyone else, I've hurt Allyson, too.*

Janine drove around for several hours before she found her way to the Airport Motel. She sometimes stayed there to decompress before going home after a difficult assignment. The desk clerk was a chubby blonde woman chewing gum and reading yesterday's comic pages. The woman took Janine's credit card, told her to sign the registry, asked how many nights she was staying, and then handed her the room key. Janine left the motel office wondering if the woman would even recall that she'd been there. *Maybe she had other things on her mind, Janine thought. Or, maybe it's just a shit job and she's only putting in the hours.* Either way, Janine didn't care.

She drove to the parking space outside her room, took her travel suitcase from the trunk, went inside the room, threw the suitcase on the bed, and locked the door. Then Janine looked around.

Although it didn't look like much from the outside, the Airport Motel was remarkably pleasant on the inside. That was why she liked it. The bed was comfortable; the sheets and towels were always fresh and clean, and the furniture and carpeting were better quality than many places Janine had stayed while she was on the job. It was a good place to relax, a sanctuary. That was what she needed right now. She wanted to lock the door, keep out the world, and... and...

Janine didn't know what she wanted to do next. Usually, she stayed at the motel after returning from an assignment. This time, she'd gone there to get away. *Get away from what, exactly?* she asked herself. Janine didn't want to start over, she just needed to bring her life to a full stop.

I don't know who I am anymore, she thought. Maybe I was fooling myself that I could make this work. Usually, she was the one expected to handle everything. Now, she had no idea what to do.

A moment later, she realized how wonderful that felt.

Then Janine noticed it was almost dinner time. She had been so overwhelmed by what happened with Allyson that she'd skipped lunch. There was no food at the motel but she recalled passing a small Chinese restaurant nearby. *That'll do*, she thought.

Janine took her key, pocketbook, and jacket and headed out the door. She walked past the parked cars toward the road, stopped at the motel entrance, and looked for the restaurant. She spotted it a few hundred feet down the road. *There it is! But it's further away than I remember. And, oh, look! There's a gentleman's club right next to it. How convenient.* Janine was feeling reckless. She decided at that moment how she was going to spend her evening.

A few hours later she walked to the Aphrodite Gentleman's club. It was Ladies Night. Janine went right in and no one noticed her. She walked toward the bar, ordered a Scotch and water, and then found a table. Janine didn't know what to expect next, and she liked that.

There were not many other women there but it was still early in the evening. Loud music with a pounding beat started. Two slender, well-built young women slinked onto the stage and started writhing around poles. Janine didn't watch them; she paid more attention to the effect the women's gyrations were having on the men in the club. Many of them watched. A few liked what they saw and smiled. Others ignored the women and chatted with friends.

More people arrived and the tables began to fill up. The swiveling women didn't care what happened in the audience. Janine admired their indifference. *I guess when you do this every night you don't care what reaction you get so long as you get paid*, she thought. Then she wondered what it was like when a woman did this every night.

An announcer came on the loudspeaker when the women finished. He welcomed everyone and reminded the audience that it was ladies' night, which meant it was amateur night. "If you've ever dreamed of earning big bucks as a stripper, now's your chance to audition," the announcer said, without a trace of irony in his voice.

Janine ordered and then consumed her second and third Scotch and water. The strippers she watched gyrate on stage started circulating in the room, with others that hadn't yet performed. They zeroed in on women and asked them to come up on stage and give the guys a little show. "It's all in fun," the girl who talked to Janine said. Fun was why Janine was there. *What the hell*, she thought. *Nobody knows me. I can just let it all hang out. Maybe that's what I need.* She got up tipsily and headed for the stage.

Two other women were already dancing. Janine stood between the women and watched as they tried to swivel as the real dancers had done. It was harder than it looked, and the women didn't look as if they were enjoying it. *I can top them!* Janine thought.

She bent her legs, stuck out her ass, rotated it, and started lifting the hem of her skirt. Then she closed her eyes and synchronized her motions to the pounding beat. As her skirt crept upwards over her thighs, more of her skin showed, and she flashed glimpses of her dark panties. The audience started getting excited. They realized amateur night, which usually consisted of girls goofing around onstage, was about to get serious.

Somebody in the back yelled, "Take it off," and Janine started unbuttoning her crisp white blouse. When there were only two buttons left, she lifted her breasts and offered them to the audience. The reaction was exactly what she hoped for. The men went wild.

But there was more. Janine finished unbuttoning, removed the blouse, and then unfastened her bra from the front. The halves dangled from her shoulders and moved as she swayed her breasts. Janine opened her eyes, saw the building lust in the men, and ran her

tongue over her lips. Then she reached down, lifted her skirt past her thigh, thrust out her pelvis, and started fingering her crotch. A moment later, she sat, legs spread wide, and then laid back. Janine humped her midriff up and down as if she was fucking. One or two men started toward the stage but the bouncers stopped them. The bartender called one of the strippers. "She's drunk. Get her off the stage before somebody starts a riot."

"I think we have a winner!" the announcer proclaimed as the stripper mounted the stage and reached out to help Janine stand. She didn't lower her skirt or cover her breasts.

"C'mon, honey before you get yourself in trouble," the stripper said as she picked up Janine's blouse and directed her behind the curtain. The audience clapped, cheered, and booed. They wanted more. Janine lowered her panties, flashed her ass, and then disappeared.

"I wasn't finished," Janine complained, drunk not only on booze but on the effect her little show had on the men. She liked being wild and bringing out the animal lust that lurked just below the surface.

"Yes, you were," the stripper said. "Now you're coming back to the dressing room with me."

Janine sat in front of a large mirror, looked at herself, and smiled at the half-naked woman she saw. Then she noticed the stripper. She was even prettier up close. On stage, everyone's eyes fell on her figure: small, pert breasts, shapely ass, and long legs. Up close, Janine saw the young woman's delicate facial features. "You're pretty," Janine said. "Can I have you?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I think I just broke up with my girlfriend and I'm lonely. Will you spend the night with me?"

Unlike some other performers, the stripper never went with customers who propositioned her. It wasn't a demand of her job and the owner denied knowledge of what the girls did on their own. She would have felt happy to take the money men offered her if she was into men. But she wasn't. Janine's lewd show had aroused her as much as it had excited the men, maybe more.

"Sure."

"Good. I'm at the Airport Motel."

"All right. Let's get dressed and I'll help you get back there."

Back in her motel room, Janine asked the girl for her name. "Louisa," the girl told her, although it wasn't.

"You can call me Allyson," Janine said. She undressed herself and Louisa before she turned out the light. The fireworks that followed left them both in awe.

Janine's lovemaking impressed Louisa and she enjoyed herself for the first time in a long while. Janine felt surprised. "Don't you enjoy it with the men?" she asked. "They must surely enjoy you. You're so beautiful."

"I don't go with the men. I hate them."

"They're not so bad," Janine said, thinking of Mike.

"Maybe the ones *you* know aren't, but the ones I've met are."

"So what do I owe you?" Janine asked.

Louisa became angry. "I'm no whore," she said.

“We’re *all* whores, honey, and don’t you forget it. We all prostitute ourselves. There are endless possibilities...”

“I don’t wanna know.”

“Good. Then I won’t tell you,” Janine said. “The stories are all sad, anyway. Let’s fuck again, shall we?”

“I should get back to my job.”

“Look, whatever money you’re missing, I’ll make it up. Just a gift, nothing more. Stay with me. Please.”

“I’d rather not,” Louisa replied.

“I understand. Well, thanks for your company. Have a great life.”

“You, too.”

Not much chance of that, both women thought simultaneously.

Janine slept deeply after Louisa left and awoke late in the morning. She immediately thought of Louisa and wondered if she ought to go back to the strip club to look for her later. Then, she wondered if Louisa had even been real, or had merely been an alcohol and lust-infused fantasy.

Janine wasn’t the kind of person who fantasized. She thought fantasies were a waste of time. If something wasn’t real, it didn’t interest her. Janine had the resources to make things happen. Fantasies were for people who didn’t. She forgot about Louisa and went back to sleep.

Early Saturday afternoon, Mike called Allyson’s house looking for Janine because Jake fell and broke his leg. Allyson told Mike Janine wasn’t there. He felt confused. “She told me she was spending the weekend with you,” he said. Allyson explained what happened. “I don’t understand,” Mike replied.

“Neither do I,” Allyson said. She went on to say that she felt sorry for Mike. “I know what it’s like when your spouse leaves,” she explained.

“That’s the problem,” Mike replied. “She hasn’t left me, but she kinda has.”

“I think she might have just left *both* of us, Mike, and I don’t think there’s anything we can do about it.”

“Do you think she’ll come back?” Mike asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

On Sunday afternoon, after dealing with her hangover and clearing her head from Saturday night’s debauchery, Janine sat up in bed and looked at her choices. She could go back to Allyson or Mike, back to her office, or stay in the motel room. None of the choices appealed to her. At first, she thought she needed more options. Then she realized what she wanted was someone to tell her what to do.

It’s easy when you’re a teenager in love and you just follow your heart, she thought. *I can’t follow my heart, now.* Janine couldn’t even find her heart. That was how lost she felt.

Then she thought of something else. *Maybe I need to look back at my life and figure out how I got here. Nah. That would be a waste of time. Maybe I shouldn’t think past dinner.*

That idea worked. Janine went out to look for a convenience store so she could buy some groceries. She drove past the Aphrodite Gentlemen’s Club and smiled. For a brief time

Saturday night, she had disappeared into a different world. Instead of being the cool, controlled, corporate analyst, she became the hot bitch whose lewd movements on stage had nearly caused a riot. Getting drunk and losing her identity had felt so good. So had making love with Louisa. Now, sitting alone in her room, she wondered if she ought to disappear forever. Perhaps she should just go to the airport and buy a ticket to somewhere exotic.

Janine began fantasizing about where she could go. She had no passport, so she had to stay in the United States. But she had a credit card and savings account neither Mike nor her employer knew about. If she found someplace to run to, she would have to get a job, but not right away. She could settle in first.

But settle into what? A new life? Alone? Without her children? Her job had taken her away from them too much, and the thought she might never see them again overwhelmed her. Running away was not a realistic possibility. Nor was keeping things exactly as they were. Yet what other choices were there?

Janine didn't see any. She thought about getting drunk and stripping again but the bartender at Aphrodite probably wouldn't serve her and the bouncer might not even allow her in. She thought about Louisa and wondered if there was a way to get in touch with her. Another night of lovemaking might help clear her head. Even if it didn't, it would still be fun.

Janine decided to spend a week at the motel. She liked the idea that no one who cared about her knew where she was. Allyson and Mike assumed she was at work, and her bosses assumed she was with a client. In fact, Janine was nowhere to be found, and liked being nowhere.

She also knew her escape was temporary. She would have to go back- but to *what*? That was the nagging question. Janine wished there was a clear answer. She thought she had everything she wanted and it was all working splendidly, but then she ran away. Her impulsiveness baffled her. *Why did I suddenly realize it wasn't working?* she asked herself. Was it because of Allyson's question? What did that trigger? And why?

All Allyson had asked was whether Janine could imagine life without her. But she had already lived that life for the twenty-five years Allyson was gone. Janine had never expected to see her again. Now, Janine realized that life with Allyson would be impossible. *I just can't do it yet, maybe ever.*

Did she leave Allyson because she couldn't bear the stress of living two lives, or because she knew that stress might never end? Kids dream of 'happily ever after' and it seems easy. Adults know it's impossible. The love Allyson and Janine shared as teenagers died when Janine moved away. They didn't so much revive it as revisit it. But that visit lasted longer than it should have. *We should have had our fling and then gone back to our adult lives,* Janine told herself. *We didn't.*

Amusement parks were not the same for adults as they were for children. Children think of them as exciting magical places. Adults think of the money they're spending on entertainment. *We tried to be teenagers again, but it didn't work. Maybe it couldn't have, ever. So, maybe it's over.*

Chapter 22

A few days later, Janine went back to her husband, her children, and her job, but not to Allyson. The changes set in motion by their affair didn't stop because the affair ended. Mike continued seeing Grace and did not intend to give her up, no matter what Janine did. It was her turn to adjust.

Molly and Callie were still friends. Mike drove Molly to Callie's house, or Allyson drove Callie to meet Molly at the movie theater or mall entrance. Janine bought more lavish gifts for her children when she returned from business trips. She and Mike talked in bed, but that was all they did. He no longer felt attracted to her. Grace met his sexual and emotional needs now. Their affair remained confidential and did not affect their work at the bank.

Allyson wanted to call Janine just to hear her voice, but never worked up the courage to dial the phone. She didn't ask Molly about her mother and didn't know if the girls ever talked about their mothers' behavior. Maybe, now that it had ended, the girls would no longer find it curious. They didn't.

Callie and Virginia were enjoying another sleepover. They'd had several since Virginia's mother Debbie softened her feelings toward Callie and Allyson. The girls watched videos, shared pizza, talked, did homework (but not much), and enjoyed their time away from school. They could be themselves and didn't have to worry about what other kids thought of them.

Neither girl cared about other students, nor did they want to be like them or impress them. When they tried expressing or showing their independence they got in trouble. Now the girls tried to remain as subdued and unobtrusive as possible at school. In their second year of middle school, the strategy seemed to be working. Mostly, the others left them alone.

Allyson stayed out of the girls' way. She checked to make sure they'd eaten and done *some* homework (at least) but otherwise left them alone. Callie felt sorry for her mother because she was not only alone on the weekends but lonely for her ex-girlfriend, Janine.

Virginia noticed Allyson's changed behavior. "I haven't seen your mom's friend in a while," Virginia said when the girls were alone after dinner. Allyson had fed them, cleaned up, and then went off to her bedroom. Callie expected she wouldn't see her mother until later when she came downstairs and reminded the girls not to stay up all night. Then she would retreat to her bedroom and not check on them again. The girls had tried staying up all night just to see what it felt like but hadn't made it, so far.

"Oh, they're not friends anymore, I think."

"You're not sure?" Virginia asked.

"Mom's never said it out loud. I'm not sure she believes it happened, but Janine hasn't come over or called for a while. I asked about Janine and mom told me she was just busy."

"That's a shame. She was nice."

"Yeah, I liked her, too," Callie replied. "But I don't believe she's busy. I think they had a fight."

"What about?"

"I have no idea."

“Well, whatever it was, your mom looks like she’s really sad now, and really hurt.”

“I know,” Callie said. “I’ve tried to make her feel better but she won’t talk about it. When I ask, she just tells me I wouldn’t understand.”

“I *hate* it when they tell you that.”

“I know! I mean, she could *try*, at least. I’m not stupid.” The girls fell silent, feeling frustrated they could think of no way to help Allyson.

Callie liked how her mother was when Janine was around. Virginia liked the way Janine treated her when the four were together. She had felt as if she was in a family with two mommies, and realized she normally felt she didn’t have even one.

“Well, I don’t understand,” Virginia admitted, in a quiet voice.

“Neither do I. All I know was that my mom was happy for the first time I can remember.”

“Is there anything *we* can do?”

“I don’t think so,” Callie replied.

“Can we talk to that woman, Janine?”

“Well, no. But I still see Molly. She’s coming over to join us tomorrow. I hope that’s okay.”

“Yes! I liked her. Do you think we should talk to *her*?” Virginia asked.

“I wouldn’t know what to say and I don’t know how much she knows. So, no.”

“Darn!”

They left it there. Kids shouldn’t be expected to solve adult problems they scarcely understood, no matter how much they cared about the adults. However, Callie worried about her mother. She liked her better when Janine was around than when Allyson brought home any of the men she dated.

A few nights later, when Callie and Allyson were eating dinner, Callie asked, “So, Mom, remember Alice and Gertrude?”

Allyson grinned. “Vaguely. Who were they again?”

Callie knew her mother was teasing her. “Those two lesbians you told me about.”

“Oh, yeah. Why did you mention them?”

“They were in love, right?” Callie asked. Allyson nodded, wondering where Callie was going with this. “So were you and Janine.” Allyson nodded, again. “So, what happened? Why do you seem so messed up?”

“Because Janine and I broke up.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure, but I think it was because she couldn’t handle her life with me. Things got too complicated.”

“Is love always so complicated?” Callie asked.

“For some people it is, for others it’s simple, or, they think it’s simple.”

“Is it?”

Allyson thought before she replied. “No. But most people don’t care. When they fall in love, that’s all that matters to them. The other person is all they want.”

“Is that what *you* wanted- Janine?”

“Yeah.”

“But she ended up not wanting you?”

Allyson didn't reply. She looked at her daughter, tried to think of a reply, burst into tears, and then went on crying for a while. Callie watched her mother. She didn't understand why Allyson was crying. Was it because of Callie's questions, Janine, or something else? Callie hadn't intended her questioning to cause her mother tears and wondered if her mother would explain.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Callie said.

"Please, don't be. You've done me a big favor."

"I have?"

"Yeah. I needed to do that. I needed it *bad*. Thanks so much, Callie. You're the best daughter a mom could ever hope for."

"I am? You're sure of that?"

Allyson got up from her chair, walked to Callie, and hugged her awkwardly but forcefully. She hadn't hugged her daughter quite so fiercely in a long time. Callie, however, felt something different in the hug. It wasn't the hug a mother gives to a hurt child. It was a hug a hurt mother needed to give her wonderful daughter. "Yeah. I'm sure."

Callie hoped she had eased her mother's pain. She had. Maybe the worst was over.

Grace and Mike huddled on her balcony overlooking the water. The warm fall afternoon had turned cooler and they were naked beneath a very thick, warm blanket. It had become their favorite way to enjoy the river.

"So, what's happening with your wife?" Grace asked. "You haven't mentioned her in a while."

"I'm not sure."

"Is she still around?"

"Yeah," Mike replied.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Doesn't she see that other woman?" Grace asked.

"Not as far as I know, but I could be wrong. I didn't know when she was seeing her before."

"You've put up with a lot in your marriage."

"Have I? It didn't seem so bad before-," Mike said.

"The other woman?"

"Yeah. I accepted Janine's secret job. I was proud of her. And the money she makes is incredible."

"Yeah, but... is *she* incredible?"

"She was, Grace."

"But she's not anymore?"

"Please don't ask me that. You know how I feel about you. It's not the way I feel about her. Not anymore, anyway."

"Yeah, I know, Mike. And, I'm not trying to pressure you. But if she doesn't meet your needs and I do, then..."

"Then why aren't *you* my wife instead of her?"

"Well, yeah. That thought had occurred to me."

“I guess because she’s the mother of my children and you’re not,” Mike explained.

“So you stay with her because of them?”

“Yeah, they’re all I have.”

“Well, not exactly.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have *me*, Mike. And I want you. I’m willing to do anything.”

“I know you are, and I feel grateful. If I thought we could do more, then I’d do it, but I just don’t know how. It all seems so complicated now.”

“Was life ever simple?” Grace asked.

“I guess I thought it was. You fall in love, get married, have kids, build a life together, build a household, and build a family. And, in the end, what does it all add up to?”

“I don’t know. What?”

“I don’t know, either. What I do know is that if I didn’t have you, Grace, I wouldn’t be able to handle *any* of it. I would have fallen apart long ago.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, really. But I’d like to be more than just glue that holds you together.”

“Oh. Yeah. Well, you are.” Mike said it absently as if he knew he had to say something. However, Grace wanted more. She wanted him to say exactly what she meant to him. He didn’t. She tried not to seem disappointed, although she was.

Chapter 23

The old firm had fallen on hard times and lost many of its customers but the owners couldn't figure out what went wrong or how to fix it. Janine was standing before the boardroom easel laying out her game plan. It was her standard pitch. "This is what I do, this is how I do it, and this is what you get." The board wasn't there, only the CEO, CFO, and Vice Presidents.

Everyone at the table listened intently to her presentation because they knew she was their last hope of saving the company. She sympathized with the worry that creased their faces. Well, not all their faces. The older men (there were no women besides her) looked worried. One younger man (the son of the company president; she thought his name was Roger) seemed more relaxed. She wondered if he felt unconcerned or had already developed a plan of his own that she might have to deal with. Sometimes, people hired consultants to affirm what they already knew, or wanted to hear, whether it was correct or not. Janine didn't operate that way. She told it like it was. But she knew she would have to reach out to the younger man and listen to him, at least.

However, Roger's interest wasn't in Janine's presentation. It was her. Even though he guessed she was fifteen years older, she was well-built and looked awesome in her pin-striped power suit, white blouse, high heels, and dark pantyhose. The man didn't care about Janine's analysis of the company. He wanted to know what Janine looked like naked and planned to find out as soon as he could. The small gold ring she wore was no obstacle. Roger knew how to get what he wanted.

He was handsome, well-spoken, suave, and a little cocky. However, he was no playboy son of a corporate president. He did contribute to the company but didn't work so hard that he had no time left to play hard. He wanted to play with Janine and thought he could seduce her into playing with him. Just the difference in their ages should be enough of an inducement. Roger had learned that gorgeous women around Janine's age often had husbands who were losing their virility and could no longer satisfy their wives. Roger liked finding those wives and thrilling them. By the end of the meeting, he felt certain he could have Janine. All he had to do was let her know he was available.

Roger wanted to get to Janine early in the process so he could have more time to get to know her and, hopefully, more time for sex with her. He suggested he be the first one to share his impressions and analysis of the corporation. It was Janine's standard procedure to do one-on-one interviews with all the corporate executives. The others agreed. Roger took Janine aside after the meeting and invited her to have dinner with him. "I know a nice little Italian place where we can eat and talk and no one will bother us for hours," he said. She didn't see any reason to refuse and they made a date.

"So," Janine began as soon as the waiter brought their antipasto platter. "Tell me about your company."

"No," Roger said.

"Why not? That's what we're here for."

"We can talk about the company later. I want you to tell me about yourself, first. How did a gorgeous woman like you come to be doing a boring job like this?"

"Would you believe me if I told you it's *never* been boring?"

“No,” Roger replied.

“Well, it’s true. I love what I do, and I’m good at it. I’m not permitted to disclose past clients, but they’ve always been happy with my work.”

“And what do you do to make them so happy?”

“Whatever it takes,” Janine replied.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

Janine looked at Roger while she took a bite of food. “I bet you were,” she replied, and then kept looking at him. He didn’t flinch. Janine knew she’d read him right. “So what do you want, Mr. Collins?”

“Please call me Roger. Or Rog, if you prefer.”

“I prefer Mr. Collins- for now.”

“To answer your question, Janine- I want *you*. I’ve never seen anyone as beautiful as you are doing a job like this. I couldn’t stop thinking about what I would do to you if we had been alone in that boardroom without all those old guys around.”

“You flatter me.”

“I meant what I said. And I can back it up if you’ll let me.”

“Let you *what*?” Janine asked, but not mockingly.

“You won’t regret it.”

“But *you* might,” Janine replied, smiling. Roger looked bewildered. “You apparently don’t understand what’s going on here,” Janine said. “I am in *complete* control.”

“Uh, well, okay.”

“Do you know what I mean?”

“Not really,” Roger replied.

“You do what I say, when I say it, exactly the way I say it should be done.”

“That’s how you save companies?” Roger asked, still feeling confused. As the president’s son, being in charge was second-nature to him.

“I’m not talking about the company, Roger. I’m talking about *us*.” Roger didn’t know how to react. He didn’t want Janine to suspect that she had been way ahead of him and he still hadn’t caught up. “So what happens next, Roger?”

“Whatever you want,” he replied, but not as boldly as he would have liked.

“You give in too easily. That’s no fun.”

Roger suddenly lost interest in eating. Janine hadn’t. She reached for the garlic bread, broke off a piece, started eating, and smiled. Roger felt more aroused than he could ever recall in his life. He had assumed Janine would be a challenge, but she’d turned out to be so much more. It was no longer just sex he wanted with her. Roger wanted Janine to care about him, to like him, to want to be with him. He wanted to be her little boy.

Janine hadn’t finished taunting him. When she stopped chewing, she looked at him and asked, “So, your place or mine?” Roger couldn’t think of a reply. She decided for them.

Janine had been perfectly happy with Mike or Allyson as lovers, although Louisa was a brief younger delight. She’d never had a younger male lover, however, and that proved to be different. Roger turned out to be as good as he thought he was and just what Janine needed. She had no idea if it was her body that inspired him or something else that was going

on in his head. Roger made love with wild abandon that reminded Janine of amusement park thrills, only now *she* was the ride.

Roger knew they had limited time together and tried to make each moment as passionate as he could. Janine liked dissolving herself in his desire. She came out of it refreshed, clear-headed, and more dedicated to her job. Roger usually fell asleep.

This job took longer than many of the others because the company was in worse shape than anyone imagined. For the first time in many years on the job, Janine wondered if she could save it. Maybe they had sent for her too late. She should have felt sad but she didn't.

Janine spent all day every day (even on the weekends) at the company looking at every shred of information she could find. She talked to everyone, even janitors, window washers, and the people that answered phones at the helpdesk. Janine had a prodigious memory, but it was short-term. She could gather vast amounts of client information and process it rapidly, but as soon as she left the client, her head emptied of all the data she got. She also took thorough notes just in case she had to go back. In this case, Janine knew she wouldn't be going back. There was unlikely to be any company to go back to. Things were that bad.

However, after her grueling days at the company, Janine enjoyed passionate nights with Roger. Neither of them allowed company business to get in the way of great sex. Janine felt grateful for the distraction because it made her mind work better. However, she didn't like the direction the signs seemed to be pointing. Roger was too busy with her to think about the company. Janine let him do whatever he wanted. *Why not?* she thought. *We'll never see each other again. Might as well let him have all the fun he can handle. Might be good for me, too.*

It was.

It was the night before her final report. Janine expected Roger to beg her to stay or plead with her to keep in touch, but he didn't. She wanted to ask him why, although she would have refused, anyway. Then she realized Roger had gotten to know her well enough to anticipate she would refuse. Janine almost felt sorry she had to go, but she missed her kids.

The experience with Roger lifted Janine out of her doldrums and made her feel better about herself. Passion was still important to her. She started thinking about what she would like her future to be. Janine couldn't rely only on men like Roger to liven things up. She would have to rely on her ingenuity.

The company found a buyer and the owners escaped with some of their money. For the first time in his young life, Roger had to look for a job. He contacted Janine only once, but not because he missed her. He wondered if she would teach him to do what she did. Could he be her apprentice?

"No," she replied, and then hung up before he could say anything else.

Chapter 24

Allyson's younger co-workers had asked her out several times and she refused every time. However, she worried about hurting their feelings. Allyson also realized she might be feeling superstitious. The last time she went to a club was the night she met Janine again. Her co-workers knew nothing about that night, and she decided not to let it worry her. *Oh, what the hell*, she thought. *Perhaps I should go just this once. Maybe a night out is what I need.*

She called Callie and told her to order pizza for dinner and then everyone headed out the door. There were five of them. Jason and Mark offered her a ride. (Allyson suspected they might be a couple but felt too embarrassed to ask- her query might embarrass them.) The men reminded Allyson of Laurel and Hardy, although they were too young to know who Laurel and Hardy were. She felt mentioning the actors would make her seem old and out of place so she kept her impression to herself.

Leslie and Jane went in another car. Allyson felt pretty sure they were not a couple. Leslie was a chubby round-faced blonde who liked to chatter but changed her personality when she was on the phone. She complained about the stupidity of the clients but never became angry or irritated when she was talking to them. Instead, she was warm, sympathetic, and patient. Some callers asked for her because she made them feel so comfortable. Leslie also had a huge engagement ring and talked endlessly about her upcoming wedding (when she wasn't helping clients.) She barely mentioned her fiancé, however, and no one had met him.

Jane kept to herself. She was a short, slender, dark-haired woman with intense eyes, and sharp voice, and a wry sense of humor. Allyson liked Jane because she helped everyone else. She had a prodigious knowledge of the clients they served and could answer almost any question and solve any problem, never acted like someone who thought she was an expert, and was always very modest.

Allyson was aware that she was out on a Friday night with four youngsters only a few years older than Callie and wasn't sure how to act. What would they expect her to do? What would they expect her *not* to do? Would anything she did embarrass them? Would their workplace be the same Monday morning after they all partied Friday night? Allyson didn't know. She decided to wait and see what they did.

"So, tell me about the fiancé that bought you that beautiful ring," Allyson said to Leslie. "What's he like?"

"Oh, he's like most other males I ever met. Interested in only one thing." Leslie rolled her eyes. "But he's different, too."

"How so?"

"He likes me."

"That's always a plus," Allyson joked. Leslie smiled. "Seriously," Allyson went on, aware she was about to give unsolicited advice, "the wedding is the *easy* part. It's what happens *afterward* that takes work. And I'm not talking about the honeymoon."

"Then, what *are* you talking about?" Leslie asked.

"Building a life together. It's not as easy as some people think, but it's worth doing, as long as you've chosen the right person- which I'm sure you have."

"Yeah. I think I have."

“Were you married, Allyson?” Jason asked. “You don’t wear a ring.”

“Yes. You know I have a daughter. I had a husband once.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to bore you or ruin a fun evening.”

“Okay, give us the condensed version,” Mark suggested, smiling.

“He walked out.”

“Wow!”

“Yeah. It does happen- although I’m sure it won’t happen to *you*, Leslie.”

“Why did it happen?” Leslie asked. She seemed genuinely curious. “Was it something he did? Or, maybe, something *you* did?”

“You know, to this day, I’ve never figured that out. I wish I could, though.”

“Well, you seem like a great person, Allyson,” Jane said. “Haven’t you met anybody since?”

“Nah,” Allyson lied. “I wasn’t really looking. I dated a couple of times but nothing worked out. It’s not as easy when you’re older.”

“It’s not easy when you’re young, either,” Jane commented. Allyson wanted to ask a follow-up question but didn’t want to embarrass Jane, who changed the subject anyway. “So, Allyson, tell us about your daughter.”

“Her name’s Callie. She’s in the second year of middle school.”

“Ugh! I hated middle school,” Mark said. “I could never figure out why it even existed.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of a limbo, isn’t it?” Jason commented. Everyone nodded. Allyson wondered if Callie felt the same way.

“Well, she seems to be doing okay. No big teenage crises yet. Or little ones, so far.” *No*, Allyson thought, *her mother provides all the traumas in her life.*

Allyson recalled the last time she was in a club on a Friday night. She had been with a couple of friends. It was a place they went to unwind and check out men. Occasionally, someone would interest her. A few even approached her. Allyson was always quick to let them know about herself. “I’m unmarried and have a daughter.” Her daughter put some men off. Allyson never figured out why. *Many women my age have kids. What are these guys looking for, virgins?*

That last time was different because it wasn’t a man that interested her but a woman- Janine. Allyson thought back to how she felt when Janine walked in that night. There wasn’t much of a crowd yet. Most people who came early did so to check out the folks who came later. Allyson gasped when she saw Janine. Janine immediately noticed her and walked over to the booth. “Is it really you?” she asked.

“Well, what’s left of me,” Allyson joked. “It’s been a long time.”

“I missed you,” Janine replied, and Allyson knew she meant it. “Can I sit? Are you here with anyone?”

“Yes, please sit, and I’m with friends but they’re in the ladies’ room. What about you?”

“I came in alone.”

Allyson noticed that Janine wore what looked like business clothes and she stood out in the crowd. “Coming from work?” she asked.

“Yeah. Rough day. I didn’t even want to change, just unwind. What about you?”

“Not so rough.”

“It’s nice to see you again,” Janine said. The last time the women were together was when they were in high school. The years between seemed to vanish as soon as their eyes met.

“It’s been- what- twenty-five years?”

“Yeah.”

“I never forgot you,” Janine said.

“Really? I think I did, but then again, I didn’t. I guess I never thought I’d ever see you again.”

“Me, neither. But now, here we are.”

“Yeah. Do you want to come back to my place?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Allyson’s friends came back and found her gone. They grinned at each other. *Wow!* they thought. *He must have been really hot for her to take off with him. You go, girl!*

Allyson smiled as she recalled that first meeting and their first weekend together. She wondered where Janine was now, and what she would do if Janine came walking through the door. It hadn’t been twenty years, only a few months, yet this separation seemed just as final as the first time. However, Allyson couldn’t help thinking, *is it final?* Then she asked herself if she *wanted* it to be final, but couldn’t answer.

Callie called Virginia as soon as she finished her pizza. “Mom went out with people she works with. She hasn’t gone out on Friday night for a while.”

“So you’re all alone?”

“Yeah, but I don’t mind. There’s some good shows on TV and she promised not to come home late again.”

“Did she used to do that?”

“Sometimes. I was usually asleep and didn’t hear them come in.”

“Them?” Virginia asked.

“Oh, yeah, she sometimes brought men home with her.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea,” Callie replied. “Maybe they were friends.”

“Did you think that was weird?”

“At first, but the men never bothered me. I stayed away from them. They were more interested in my mom than me.”

“I hope so,” Virginia commented.

“Why do you say that?”

“Doesn’t it bother you that she bought strange men into the house?”

“I wouldn’t say they were strange, Virginia.”

“Well, *strangers*. You didn’t know them, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And that didn’t bother you?”

“No, Virginia, it didn’t. My mom was right there.”

“Well, it would bother me if my mom let strange men in the house.”

Virginia's hints were starting to irritate Callie. "Virginia, your mom *lives* with a strange man. And, she was strange, too, for a long time."

"Yeah, but she's different, now. I never figured out why she changed. But I like it. She's not as hard on me."

"I'm happy for you," Callie said.

"So, when's the next sleepover?"

"I have no idea. Mom hasn't mentioned it."

"Couldn't you ask her?" Virginia pleaded.

"No. She's busy."

"But we have so much fun!"

"I know. But maybe it's *your* turn to have one."

"I don't know if my mom would let me," Virginia protested.

"Well, why don't you ask her?"

"Maybe I will."

"Goodnight, Virginia."

"Night, Callie."

Allyson survived her night out with her younger co-workers. She didn't do or say anything embarrassing and had nothing to feel awkward about on Monday morning. When she was home in bed, she thought again about what she would have done if Janine had walked into the club. She knew she would do what she did the first time; she would invite Janine to her bed.

Allyson fell asleep happy, but it wasn't Janine Allyson dreamed about. It was Frank. He hadn't shared her bed in over ten years. She had forgotten what his voice sounded like, and what he looked like, felt like, or smelled like. Although she had married him, it was as if Frank never existed. She and Callie never talked about him and she had no idea if Callie ever thought about her father. They never needed him. The only good he did for Allyson was that he gave her a wonderful daughter.

Despite what she and Janine did for almost a year, Allyson never thought of herself as a lesbian. She had never looked at girls at school or anywhere else. Other girls would have reminded her of Janine, and Allyson didn't want to revisit her feelings of deep love, loss, hurt, and betrayal. She eventually turned to boys. They couldn't break her heart because they couldn't penetrate it the way Janine had. She felt safe.

From the first time Frank saw Allyson, all he wanted to do was protect her and keep her safe. They met the day she came to work at his supermarket. Well, he didn't *own* the market, he merely managed the produce department and had been begging for a new hire. When Allyson turned up, Frank thought his supervisor was playing a joke on him. She seemed too young to be working full-time. He expected an awkward, clueless, indifferent teenager yet Frank's first impression soon changed.

Frank was several years older than Allyson. The women his age were sharp, hard, and (he thought) mean. Allyson was soft, pure, kind, and a precious gem. She captured his fancy. Frank started by joking that she belonged in the flower shop instead of with the fruits and vegetables because she was prettier than any flower he'd ever seen. Allyson giggled and then hurried off to stack the loose corn.

Although she didn't want him to, Frank fell in love with her. He had no choice. She was the girl he had been looking for. Frank set out to convince Allyson that marrying him would guarantee them the happiest life imaginable. It took a while, but his persuasion worked.

Allyson gave Frank everything she had except her heart because Janine had broken it and it was beyond healing. She didn't know it, nor did Frank. He felt happy as a new husband with a lovely, sexy bride who eagerly welcomed him to their bed. She worked hard to please him and didn't think about pleasing herself. When Frank fell asleep after making love to her, Allyson often stayed awake wondering why their sex felt a little off. It wasn't just that her lover was a man. She was not a virgin when they married and Frank knew it. It was that their feeling of love wasn't mutual, but she wouldn't allow herself to admit it.

Frank was good to her. He brought home little trinkets, flowers, baubles, and doodads he picked up at the market or as he traveled to other stores. The company promoted Frank to regional produce manager just after the honeymoon. He insisted Allyson quit so they could prepare to have a baby. She agreed because she had enough of looking at cantaloupes, carrots, lettuce, tomatoes, onions, potatoes, and other fruits and vegetables. She also hated what happened to the unsold produce. There was a smelly dumpster out back for outdated waste. Allyson sometimes wondered if that was how unneeded people ended up, no more than stinky garbage carted off to be disposed of. It was a morbid thought and she never mentioned it to anyone.

Later, somehow, Allyson and her small daughter became unneeded people. She vividly recalled the last morning Frank kissed her and Callie goodbye. Allyson wished him a good day. "You too," were the last two words he ever said to her. It turned out to be a shitty day.

Frank never came home that night. Allyson immediately knew he hadn't met with an accident; he had just left. His guarantee of a happy life turned out to have been a lie and his promise to 'love, honor, and obey' was just empty words. Allyson didn't feel hurt, angry, or bitter. She had survived losing Janine and she would survive losing her husband. Allyson dedicated herself to Callie's happiness. Whatever it took, she would *not* lose her daughter.

Chapter 25

Callie was expecting Molly. Allyson knew it was Mike who drove her over and decided to talk to him. She watched for his car and went out when she saw it. "Do you have a minute?" she asked.

"Sure."

"I was wondering how Janine's doing. I guess I worry about her."

"I worry about her, too. But I honestly don't know how she's doing," Mike replied. "She doesn't say much to me. At least, not about her feelings. We talk about family stuff, house stuff and school stuff, but never feelings. I don't ask about hers and she doesn't ask about mine."

"Maybe you *could* ask, sometime?" Allyson suggested.

"Maybe, but I don't know what kind of reaction I would get. She might just ignore me."

"Yeah, she might. But here's the thing, Mike. I don't know why she walked out on me. We could have made it work. I knew she wasn't gonna leave you and the kids and move in with me, but I was happy anyway. She seemed happy, too."

"Maybe that was the problem."

"What do you mean?" Mike asked.

"Maybe it all worked but something inside of her told her it shouldn't."

"You mean she felt guilty?" Allyson said.

"Yeah, maybe. I know it sounds crazy after what she did, but she did seem happier with you than she ever was with me."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not," Mike replied. "I've met someone I'm happy with. She wants to marry me and be a step-mom but I haven't even let her meet my kids yet because I don't want to worry them."

"Do you think they know something's going on, anyway?"

"They might have noticed something's different between Janine and me, but they're teenagers and you know how they are- caught up in their own little worlds."

"Yeah, I envy them, in a way. Life was so easy back then, wasn't it? We never questioned our impulses, we just acted on them without thinking."

"Luckily, nobody I knew ever turned out to be a juvenile delinquent," Mike commented, grinning.

"Right. We had pain and disappointment, but fun, too."

"Hopefully, more fun than pain and disappointment."

"Except for Janine and I. Her mom saw to that."

"Do you think that's what's bothering her?" Mike asked.

"What do you mean?"

"The fact that her mom did what she did because you and Janine did what *you* did?"

"You mean being lesbians?" Allyson asked.

"Yeah."

"I never thought of that," she replied. "And we never discussed it- either back in high school, or recently."

“Maybe it’s worth looking at, although *I* can’t discuss it with her. My only interest is in keeping my family together.”

“Right. I understand, Mike. But I still care about her. I just wish I could help.”

“So do I. I don’t understand what you guys did or why you did it, but I respect what you had and I’m sorry it ended.”

“Thanks. I just wish it hadn’t. We could have made it work.”

“I believe you could have,” Mike agreed.

“You’ve been really helpful. I feel I owe you an apology.”

“For what?”

“Messing up your marriage,” Allyson explained.

“I was angry at first, but I’m past it now. If she had gone with another man, I would have been upset. But how can I compete with another woman? All I care about now is protecting my kids. When they’re older, maybe all these changes will enable them to look at their lives differently. Right now, I just want to avoid upheavals.”

What is life, Allyson wondered, but just one upheaval after another? She didn’t mention it to Mike. He had enough to deal with.

Janine had buried her pain so deep that it could never emerge in waking life. It was only when sleep turned off her conscious mind that her unconscious could be honest. And it *was*, brutally honest. ‘You’ve carried this guilt long enough. It’s time you exorcised it,’ her unconscious declared, but not in words. Then, in a dream, her anguish erupted.

The dream started with Janine’s mother Vivian’s voice uttering cold, vicious words that stabbed her heart. “How could you even *think* of doing what you did? Do you have any idea how *disgusting* it is?” Janine knew she couldn’t defend herself. Her mother didn’t want an apology, and the only explanation Janine could give was, “We were in love.” That would have enraged her mother even more.

Moving Janine away from Allyson hadn’t been drastic enough. Vivian reminded her repeatedly why the family had moved. She didn’t want Janine to ever forget the horror of what she and Allyson did. Janine didn’t want to forget what they had done, either, but what she recalled wasn’t horrible, it was beautiful. Her mother assumed that was Janine’s real feeling and did all she could to crush it. She came close to crushing Janine as well.

Janine’s exclamations of, “No! No! Stop! Stop! Leave me alone!” woke Mike. He turned on the light, looked across the empty bedspace between them, and saw her tossing and turning. The pained look on his wife’s face was unlike any expression he had ever seen.

“Janine, Janine, wake up!” Mike said. Her eyes popped open.

“Mike? What’s wrong?”

“You were having a nightmare.”

“Was I?” Janine asked. She closed her eyes, then opened them again. “Oh, yeah, I was.”

“What about?”

“My mother.”

“Your *mother*? It must have been pretty bad. You were thrashing around and I thought you might start screaming. I didn’t want you to wake the kids.”

“Yeah, I’m glad you woke me.”

“You wanna talk about it?” Mike asked.

“No... Yes... Well, no.”

“I think you want to. So, just go ahead.”

“You sure?” Janine said.

“Yeah, I’m awake now.”

“My mom tormented me about Allyson, Mike. She wouldn’t let me forget her outrage. She told me how disgusting, degenerate, and evil I was- *we* were. She called Allyson a whore and pervert.”

“How long did all that go on?”

“Long after we moved away. All through high school. I picked a college as far away as possible so I wouldn’t have to hear her anymore. She tried calling me a few times but I wouldn’t let her start. I rarely went home. There were always campus jobs, trips, or something I could do to get through the time between semesters or over the summers.”

“What about your dad?” Mike asked.

“He came to the campus a couple of times and we had a great time, but neither of us mentioned her.”

“Did he know about you and Allyson?”

“If he did, he never said anything,” Janine replied.

“What was her problem?”

“I never figured it out, but from what I’ve learned since then, I’ve suspected she had a similar relationship that went bad when she was young. Maybe that was what drove her to become a religious fanatic.”

“I don’t recall her being fanatical.”

“She wasn’t about most things- but she never let up about me and Allyson. I hated her.”

“I expect you did,” Mike commented. Although he didn’t understand the urges that Janine gave into, he felt sympathy for her suffering.

“But I felt guilty for hating my mom.”

“I guess that’s natural, too.”

“I also knew it was over and there was nothing I could do about it so I just tried to forget Allyson. I did, until...”

“You saw her again?”

“Yeah. It all came back. I didn’t want it to, Mike, I swear. But it *did*. I mean, I was married. With kids! I didn’t need a lover. I didn’t *want* a lover. But it all came back, and I didn’t resist. I couldn’t. I’m sorry, Mike. I let you down.”

Mike didn’t say anything. What could he say? ‘Yeah, you let me down’? It was all in the past now and he had moved on. Janine hadn’t walked out, so the family was safe. But Mike wondered how long she could live with her despair. Then he wondered if he ought to do something that would have been unimaginable a year earlier when they were still a normal suburban family. He might have to think of a way to reunite his wife with her lesbian lover.

Mike smiled at the thought. *I never thought of myself as a matchmaker, but what the hell?*

Mike and Grace snuggled naked under the comforter on her balcony. “The other night, my wife had a nightmare about her girlfriend,” he said.

“That’s a sentence I never dreamed I’d ever hear,” Grace joked. Mike hated to admit it, but he’d found a deeper comfort and familiarity with Grace than he’d ever felt with Janine. Grace was more easygoing, warmer, and loving. He’d never thought about needing those things with Janine, but now he wondered why he married her, and why *she* married him, since how she was still in love with another woman.

How could she not have known it? Mike wondered. Maybe it was because of her mother. All that pressure to be normal made Janine deny her deepest feelings. Maybe that’s what she feels guilty about.

Mike again considered the possibility that he might have to do something that had been unthinkable before. *Maybe Janine and Allyson belong together, he thought. Just as Grace and I belong together. Perhaps if we adjust things, it could all work out for the best. Nah.*

Chapter 26

“So, how did our moms meet?” Molly asked Callie. “Were they old friends or something?”

“Well, yeah, they were friends in high school. But they were *more* than friends, too.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“Do you know what lesbians are?”

“I think so,” Molly replied, trying not to show her feeling of alarm. Maybe her question was not one she ought to have asked. “Um, they’re girls who go with girls instead of with boys, right? Do you mean that’s what our moms were?”

“Yup,” Callie said, and then paused. “Let me tell you the story of Gertrude and Alice.”

“Who?”

“It’s a story my mom told me a while back. Those were the names she chose. It’s really about your mom and my mom.”

“Okay. What’s the story?”

“The two girls met the first day they were in high school. It was big. They felt overwhelmed and scared. The older kids seemed to ignore them and looked down on them. Even the teachers seemed not to notice them.”

“Is that what high school’s like?” Molly asked, nervously.

“This happened a long time ago. My mom says it’s not that way now. Anyway, there was this big freshman orientation in the auditorium. When it broke up, everyone left with their little rosters in their hands. Most of the kids found their way to their first class. Alice and Gertrude didn’t. They never figured out how they did it, but they must have taken a wrong turn and found themselves in an empty hallway that wasn’t marked. It looked like an abandoned part of the school.”

“Did Alice and Gertrude know each other?”

“No. They hadn’t met yet. They entered the abandoned hallway from either end and met in the middle. That was when they found out the classroom they were looking for wasn’t in either direction. ‘Maybe the roster is wrong,’ Alice said. ‘Or, maybe someone is trying to prank us,’ Gertrude replied. They were screwed.”

“So, then what happened?” Molly asked.

“Well, they felt like little, lost kids, so first they cried. But when they finished crying, Alice and Gertrude laughed.”

“Wait. They *what*?”

“They laughed,” Callie repeated.

“Why?”

“Because they realized they weren’t alone.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Somehow, they had found each other. They realized later they had been looking for someone or something their whole lives but never figured out what or who it was. Then, when they laughed in that hallway, they knew. Alice had been looking for Gertrude and Gertrude had been looking for Alice.”

“It sounds crazy,” Molly commented. Callie nodded. It had sounded crazy to her the first time she heard the story. Now, it had become normal.

“My mom said it was the most wonderful experience of their young lives.

“That’s it?” Molly asked.

“That’s all she told me.

“So, Alice and Gertrude are our moms?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s so weird,” Molly said, more puzzled now than alarmed.

“I know. It made no sense to me, either, but it did to them.”

“Why?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Callie replied. Neither girl wanted to think deeply about it.

“What happened next?”

“My mom told me it was private.” Both girls suspected what ‘private’ implied, but the thought made them feel squeamish and they didn’t talk about it.

“But, what connection do Alice and Gertrude have with right now?”

“Well, way back in high school, something happened to break them up. Then, recently, they got together. I guess it started all over again.” Callie told Molly about how Janine spent long weekends and a week with Allyson.

“So when we thought she was working she was *here*?” Molly asked.

Callie nodded. “Yup. Right in my mom’s bedroom. Of course, they did other stuff, too. We watched a movie together, and they took Virginia and me to the amusement park.”

“Was that the same day my dad took us?”

“Yup,” Callie said.

“No wonder he acted so weird.”

“You’re not mad, are you?”

“Mad? I don’t think so. I’m more confused. What happened to them?”

“I don’t know,” Callie replied. “They just broke up, *again*, but I don’t know why. I don’t think my mom does, either, but I can’t be sure. Maybe she’s not telling me.”

“How is she acting?”

“Why?” Callie asked.

“My mom’s been weird. She’s not the same. It’s like she’s just going through the motions of being our mom but she doesn’t care anymore. At first, I thought she was mad at my dad, then I thought she was mad at my brothers or me.”

“No. I think her heart is broken. I hear people say it, and I don’t understand what it means, but maybe that’s what she’s feeling.”

“It’s sad.”

“I know. My mom’s been different, too, but it’s not the same for us because it’s just the two of us. My dad ran away a long time ago.”

“Do you miss him?” Molly asked.

“I never really knew him.”

“I’m glad I have both of my parents, but I’ll never understand adults as long as I live. How can they be so weird?”

“I know, right? They make everything so complicated.”

Callie's comment gave Molly an idea. On the drive home, she asked her father if Callie was right and their mothers were lesbians. Her question startled him but then he confirmed it. Then Molly asked, "And they broke up, right?" Mike confirmed that, too. Then, shocking her father, she asked a final question. "Well, what're you going to do about it?"

"I wasn't going to do anything, Molly. I just want to keep our family together."

"But Mom's miserable. Everybody knows it. We thought there was something wrong between you guys."

"No, we understand each other. We just didn't think you kids would understand."

"Well, *I* understand, Dad. At least I think I do."

"You're the oldest."

"But I think the boys might, too, depending on how you explain it all."

Mike thought about his relationship with Grace but didn't mention it. "It's complicated. I don't think I *could* explain it all."

"Well, somebody's gonna have to, sooner or later," Molly said. "I don't think things can go on as they are."

"You're probably right. I'll talk to your mother."

"Please do. I don't see how you adults can be so wishy-washy. Why can't you deal with things the way we kids do?"

"And what way is that?" Mike asked.

"We handle whatever it is directly. If you don't, things can get out of control."

"Molly, I admire your outlook, but I have to tell you that I think this is *already* out of control."

"So let's not waste any more time. Adults! I don't know how you survive!" Molly wasn't joking. *I don't, either*, Mike thought. *But, somehow we do.*

"Molly knows about you and Allyson," Mike said.

"She *what*? Did you tell her?"

"Of course not! Callie explained everything because Molly asked."

"Why did she ask?"

"She's worried about you," Mike replied.

Janine was about to protest but stopped when she realized how strange it was that her daughter worried about her. *Shouldn't it be the other way around?* she thought. *I'm supposed to be the adult and do the worrying.*

Mike interrupted her thought. "She wants to know what we're going to do about it," he went on. Janine looked at him as if she hadn't understood his question. "What I mean is, she asked me what *I* was going to do. So, I said I would talk to you."

"What's there to talk about?"

"C'mon, Janine- you know you're miserable. Molly noticed how unhappy you were. The boys probably will, too. You can't stay like this."

"You're right. I can't. Not if it's hurting my children."

"So, you'll talk to Allyson, then?"

His question surprised Janine. "Why should I talk to *her*?"

"Um, because you're still in love with her- and have been since you were teenagers."

"So?"

“Stop it, Janine.”

“Stop what?”

“Pretending. You’re the smartest woman I know. Why can’t you admit the truth that’s staring you in the face?”

“Why can’t you mind your own business?”

“This *is* my business, Janine.” There was more that Mike could have said, but he didn’t. He wanted Janine to face her problem so he could be free to be with Grace. She had been pressing him but he didn’t know how to introduce her to his children without causing any confusion or concern. Mike knew kids expected stability and certainty in parents, although the children didn’t know that’s what they needed. So far, there hadn’t been any disruptions to their family routines. However, massive changes lurked nearby, and Mike couldn’t figure out how to allow those changes without causing chaos. That was the excuse he used with Grace, and she accepted it at first. But she wasn’t buying it, now. So, he needed Janine to start the ball rolling. If she came out about her and Allyson, then Mike could come out about him and Grace.

He already knew Allyson might be open to taking Janine back. Getting Janine to *go* back was the problem. Mike understood he was going to have to try harder.

“Janine, I’m past being hurt by this. I’ve gotten used to it. So, why don’t you just do what your heart tells you to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“What can I do to help?” Mike asked.

“Nothing. I don’t need help.”

“I’m confused.”

“So am I, Mike.” She paused and looked at her husband. His concern felt genuine. *He doesn’t have to be doing this*, she reminded herself. *But he is. The least I can do is be honest with him.* “What I meant was, I don’t know why I walked out on Allyson. Something made me do it but I don’t know what. I still haven’t figured it out.”

“Why do you have to figure it out?”

“Because that’s what I do,” Allyson replied. “That’s my job and I’m good at it.”

“But your job doesn’t involve your heart, Janine. This does.”

“You make it sound so easy but it’s not.”

“Why not?”

“My heart has *always* been a mystery, Mike. I can’t trust it. I just get all tangled up. The two times I’ve given into it have caused me agony.”

“That first time, it was your mom who caused the agony. You didn’t do anything wrong, but she did. This time, well, I don’t know what caused you to do what you did, but I have to say that it seems to me that you are causing your own agony.”

“I don’t like agony, Mike.”

“Then end it and do what you already know you want to do.”

“I can’t do that,” Janine replied, almost whispering.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

Chapter 27

“Did you talk to Mom, yet?” Molly asked.

“Yes,” Mike replied.

“And?”

“I don’t know what to tell you. She seems confused, even scared.”

“About what?”

“I don’t know. I guess until she figures it out none of us will know.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Molly asked.

“Like what?”

“I was thinking, maybe I could get her to drive me over to Callie’s house instead of you. Callie and I can arrange to have her mom see my mom.”

“I’m not sure what good that would do,” Mike responded.

“Well, it can’t do any harm, can it?”

“I don’t know. But, do it if you want to.”

“I do!”

Molly immediately called Callie. “I need to get our moms together,” she told her. “Will you help me?”

“Um, yeah, I guess so.”

“This is important, Callie. I need you to be committed.”

“Okay, I am.”

“Good.”

“But first tell me why,” Callie said.

“Because they belong together.”

“Then why did your mom leave my mom?”

Molly sighed. “I don’t know,” she replied. “My dad says she doesn’t know either.”

“Then what makes you think we can get them back together?”

“We just *have* to,” Molly insisted.

“Well, okay, I guess.”

“*Committed*, Callie. Please!”

“Okay! What do you want me to do?” Callie asked.

“Talk to your mom. Tell her my mom is coming. Try to get her to want to see my mom.”

“What if she doesn’t want to?”

“Then, it’s all over, I guess.”

“Yeah, it would seem that way.”

“But it can’t be over!” Molly shouted. “I don’t want it to be. My mom- and your mom- don’t want it to be, either.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I just am, and so is my dad. Aren’t *you* sure?”

“About what, exactly?” Callie asked. She wasn’t confused, she merely wanted to be sure Molly knew exactly what she was proposing. There could be no errors or slip-ups.

“Our moms belong together.”

“I’m not even sure what that means, Molly.”

“Yeah, neither am I, but *they* know.”

Callie thought about their conversation for a moment. “This could backfire, you know.”

“Please, Callie, help me do this. I can’t stand seeing my mom so sad.”

“She’ll get over it. My mom’s lost boyfriends and she always gets over them.”

“But this isn’t about boyfriends, Callie. Your mom and my mom are meant to be together. Isn’t your mom sad, too?”

“That’s a good question. Y’know, I can’t tell if she is or not. What I do know is that she hasn’t had another boyfriend since your mom left.”

“There! That should tell you all you need to know.”

Callie thought some more. “I tell you what I’ll do. I’ll ask her about this idea and see what she says. Then I’ll call you back.”

“You can just talk to your mom like that? I envy you, Callie.”

“Why?”

“I can’t talk to my mom about this- or *anything*- anymore. It’s like she’s moved further and further away, but she’s still here, pretending she cares about us.”

“I’m sure she still does, Molly.”

“Well, if she does, I sure don’t feel it. I don’t think my brothers do, either.”

“Okay, if it’s that bad, then I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Thanks, Callie.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Let me talk to her first and I’ll let you know what happens.”

“You’re a true friend.”

Callie didn’t know how she could just approach her mother and talk to her about something as confusing as all this seemed. *What if I get it wrong? What if she just gets mad at me?* Callie also didn’t like having to be an adult. Usually, if *someone* needed talking to (say, about her grades, loud music, or not cleaning her room) it was the mother who would start the conversation, not the daughter. *Why did I agree to this?* Callie asked herself.

However, she also recognized her friend’s agony. Molly felt genuinely concerned about her mother. And Callie liked Janine. If the mothers could make each other happy, why not try to get them back together? Maybe all this craziness would end and everything would make sense then.

Or maybe not. Callie didn’t know. But she had agreed to try, and that was what she would do.

A few nights later, Allyson rushed home and hurriedly put together her fallback easy meal of spaghetti and meatballs. Callie assumed her mother had a bad day and needed comfort food. She wondered if asking her mother about Janine might not be a good idea. Then she recalled that all Molly asked her to do was *try*.

“Why doesn’t Janine stay over anymore?” Callie asked as they began eating dinner.

“Why do you ask?” Alyson replied. *Darn!* Callie thought. *She would have to ask me that. What do I tell her?*

“I was just curious.”

“Truth is, I don’t know.”

Callie thought the conversation ended almost before it began and breathed a sigh of relief when Allyson answered her question. Now all she had to do was keep it going, keep digging, and maybe get somewhere. “Well, what happened?”

Allyson put down her fork and looked at her plate of food as if she no longer knew what it was for. “She walked out on me.” Callie thought her mother was about to cry. She almost felt sorry she’d started the conversation.

“Um, do you know why, Mom?”

“Not really. I thought we were doing great. I was happy. She was happy. You seemed to like her.”

“I did.”

“And I know she liked you,” Allyson said.

“Okay, so everybody liked everyone else. But that doesn’t explain what happened.”

“There is no explanation, Callie. I wish there was. I thought we belonged together. I know it was weird for you at first and maybe other kids wouldn’t have understood your mom being with another woman-.”

“I never cared about other kids. You’re more important than they are.”

“Thanks.”

“So, what would you do if you saw her again?”

Allyson didn’t know how to reply. She hadn’t thought about the possibility of them getting back together again because it seemed unlikely, if not impossible. And the loss hurt almost more than she could bear. She’d spent most of her effort keeping herself from thinking about Janine. “That’s impossible.”

“What if it’s not?”

“What are you saying?”

“What if Janine came over?”

“I wish you wouldn’t say things like that Callie. I know you don’t mean to hurt me, but it does.”

“Mom, tell me the truth. I’m your daughter. It’s just you and me against the world. If she came back, would you take her back?” Callie wanted to add, ‘do you still love her?’ However, she felt she was too young to know anything about love and thought such a question might just make everything worse.

Allyson looked down at the plate of spaghetti she no longer felt like eating and sighed. “Yes,” she whispered. Callie exhaled. *Thank you!* she thought, not knowing who she was thanking. Callie took another fork full of spaghetti and chewed slowly. Allyson remained quiet for a long time. Had Callie gone too far, said too much? Did her mother hate her now? “Thank you, Callie,” Allyson finally said, softly.

Callie swallowed quickly. “Um, for what?”

“For what you just did. It was the most wonderful thing anyone’s ever done for me.” Callie wanted to ask what she had done that was so wonderful but let it go. Maybe it didn’t matter.

Janine planned to drop off Molly at Callie’s house and then drive away. However, as she drove down the street, she spotted Allyson and Callie waiting on the front steps. She

pulled in front of the house and told Molly to get out of the car. “Aren’t you coming in to say hello?” Molly asked.

“I wasn’t planning to,” Janine replied, coolly.

“Why not?”

“I have to get back home.”

“Why?”

Janine didn’t reply. Molly delayed her mother’s departure just long enough to allow Allyson time to walk to the car. She leaned down and looked in the driver’s window. Janine sensed movement behind her and turned. Allyson smiled.

“It’s nice to see you again,” she said through the closed window. Janine didn’t react.

“Roll down the window, Mom, she’s talking to you.” *But, do I want to talk to her?* Janine asked herself as she hesitated. “Mom? Roll it down!” Janine hit the button and slid open the window. The fresh air on her face, and Allyson’s face so close to hers, snapped her out of what seemed like a daze.

“I said, it’s nice to see you again,” Allyson repeated.

“Uh, yeah,” Janine replied.

“How have you been?”

“Okay, I guess.” Janine noticed Molly had exited the car and now stood next to Callie on the steps. They saw her looking at them and turned to go inside.

“I’ve really missed you,” Allyson said.

“I, um...”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to say it.”

“I’m not trying to be evasive.”

“Then what are you trying to do, Janine?”

“Live my life, if that’s okay with you.”

“I thought I was a part of your life. I know you were an important part of mine.”

“That’s all in the past.”

“Is it? I don’t believe you really feel that way. We lost each other once and then found each other again. I thought we both realized how important we were to each other. But, maybe it was only me.”

Janine sighed. She knew what she wanted to say, but felt afraid of where saying it might lead. “No, no, Allyson. It meant a lot to me, too.”

“Then, why can’t we be together?”

Janine wanted to get back with Allyson but the upheaval or commotion it would cause terrified her. She feared her life would come apart. Her orderly mind didn’t want that to happen. “It would cause too much chaos, Allyson.”

Allyson looked into Janine’s eyes. “That’s not what you’re afraid of,” she declared.

“What do you mean?”

“That’s not what scares you.”

“Then, what scares me?” Janine asked.

“Us.”

Janine looked away. “What do you mean, *us*?” she asked.

“That we really are what your mother was terrified of when she separated us.”

“You mean lesbians?”

“Yes, but more.”

“What?” Janine asked.

“We belong to each other. No person- man or woman- that we could ever love more than we love each other. Look into your heart, and you’ll see I’m right. Sure, you love your kids, as you should. I love Callie, too. But kids know when something’s wrong. Here’s your chance to make it right. They’ll adjust- kids always do. Callie did when her father left.”

“But... but, she was only little.”

“Yeah, and it probably was even harder back then because she wasn’t old enough to understand what was happening. But your boys are old enough to understand- maybe not *everything*, but enough to be sure that their mom still loves them, and will always love them.”

Allyson’s plea startled Janine and she replied immediately. “Do you think it’s that easy?”

“It won’t be *easy*, but you can do it. If you want to.”

Janine didn’t respond.

“Do you, Janine?”

“I... I... don’t know. I don’t know anything, anymore. I’m so messed up.”

“The longer you keep telling yourself that, the longer it will be before you find true happiness.” Allyson paused, looked at Janine, and waited for her to say something. The puzzled, frightened, helpless look on Janine’s face told Allyson that she remained mired in self-doubt. Allyson decided to give up. She’d had her say. “Nice seeing you,” she said, and then turned, walked away from the car, and went inside.

Callie and Molly waited in the living room. Allyson knew they were eager to find out what happened, but she ignored them and went upstairs to her room. She needed to be alone. It was the way she might be spending the rest of her life. *I might as well get used to it*, she thought.

The girls looked at each other. “What happened?” Molly asked.

Callie shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“Adults are so weird!”

“I don’t want to grow up if I’m gonna be as weird as they are!”

“Yeah. They’re acting like teenagers!”

Chapter 28

It was a pleasant Saturday afternoon and families were streaming toward the garish amusement park entrance. Janine held Jake's hand and Molly held Sam's. As they neared the gate, the boys tried to pull their hands away so they could run ahead but Janine and Molly tightened their grip.

The boys felt elated. The amusement park was the only thing besides video games they genuinely enjoyed. As they waited for Janine to buy them each a handful of tickets, they looked at all the rides. The giant Ferris wheel rotated quietly in the distance. Riders on the roller coaster screamed as the track plunged into a steep dive. Sweet, tinny merry-go-round music wafted through the air, with the scent of hot dogs, cotton candy, popcorn, and funnel cakes (whatever those were.) There were lines at the bumper cars, tilt-a-whirl, Trabant, and Spaceship rides, but the boys didn't care. They had all day, and would gladly spend the rest of their lives if their parents would let them. They knew the rides would tire them out, but they would never tire of going on them, no matter how long they lived.

Janine handed tickets to Jake, Sam, and Molly, and noticed Allyson and Callie approaching. She smiled warmly. It had been a while since she and Allyson saw each other but Janine felt pleased her friend was there. Callie and Molly greeted each other. Then Callie said she needed tickets and Molly offered to share hers. As the little group walked toward the first ride the boys chose, Janine saw Mike and Grace walking toward them. "We're all here!" Mike said, smiling. He introduced Grace to everyone, especially his sons, and the new, larger group continued walking.

The boys chose the Spaceship ride first. They liked the way the silver cigar-shaped 'ships' hung on wires from a central hub. When they were moving, riders swung over the heads of everyone and saw the park from high above. It wasn't outer space, but it could be if riders pretended it was. The adults weren't ready to try anything yet and told Jake, Sam, Molly, and Callie to go on the ride by themselves. "We'll sit this one out," Janine said.

"But we just got here!" Sam argued.

"Go ahead, Sam- have fun," Mike urged, and Sam ran off.

"Remember when we were that age?" Allyson asked. "I couldn't wait to get on rides and couldn't believe anyone was crazy enough not to want to ride *everything* in sight as many times as possible."

No one commented. They were no longer children and rides weren't the main excitement in their lives.

The boys rode with their sister and her friend (but they didn't sit with them, fortunately.) When the first tickets were gone, Molly's friend's mother bought more. Then their mother treated everyone to food, but not too much. Finally, their father's friend treated everyone to several turns on the gigantic carousel.

Jake and Sam sat next to each other on bright, colorful horses, of course. Molly and her friend (they thought her name was Callie, but it seemed a weird name) chose a unicorn and a swan. Their mother sat with Callie's mother on a small bench. Their father sat next to his friend on a different one. The benches were behind the horses where the boys sat and they didn't notice their father holding that new lady's hand or their mother holding that other lady's hand.

Had they noticed, they wouldn't have cared. The amusement park wasn't a place where you went to care about stuff. It was where you went to get away from your humdrum life and have more fun than in almost any other way you could imagine. They didn't care who they were with as long as they were there. Nor did they care what was going to happen after they left. In their wildest fantasies, they might never leave, but that was unlikely. Besides, there was no place to sleep at an amusement park.

Despite their exhaustion, the boys wanted to stay until the park closed. The adults refused even to consider it. They started back toward the parking lot but something unusual happened after they exited the gate. Molly, Jake, Sam, and their father went toward their mother's car, but she didn't come with them. She walked off with Allyson and Callie. Grace went to her car alone, but she wouldn't go home alone. She wasn't going back to her riverside apartment that night. She drove to Mike's house, waited until he showed up with his children, and went inside with them. The boys were so tired they didn't notice Janine wasn't there. Mike asked Molly to put them to bed and she did. Then, exhausted, she went to bed.

"We did it," Grace said to Mike at almost the exact time Janine said it to Allyson at her house.

"Yes, we did. We pulled it off," Mike and Allyson simultaneously replied in the dream.

And then, Janine woke up, although she wanted to stay in the dream to see what happened next. When she couldn't fall back to sleep, she let her imagination run wild. Soon, twilight sleep spun another dream.

The life the boys went home to after the amusement park wasn't the same one they left that morning. Their house was the same. Their rooms, toys, video games, school, and everything else, too. Almost. What was different was their parents.

Their mother had kissed them goodbye and said she was going away for a while. It was a lie, of course. She was moving out, and she would see her sons only when they visited her from now on, but she didn't explain any of that. Their father's friend waved goodbye as their mother left. (They finally figured out her name was Grace.) Molly stayed with the boys (unfortunately.) They briefly wished there was a way to get rid of their annoying older sister. She bossed them around, but then felt guilty when she was the one who came to tuck them in at bedtime.

"Where's dad?" Jake asked, yawning.

"He'll be here in a couple of minutes." Jake fell asleep before his father looked in. Sam was so tired that he didn't care if anybody came in. He conked out soon after his head hit the pillow, just after he felt Molly kissing him goodnight.

Molly felt awkward. She knew how to act around her mother but had no idea how this new woman expected her to behave. It hadn't occurred to her that things might have to change now, and she wished she'd thought of it earlier. However, the amusement park had exhausted her, too. She considered phoning Callie but assumed she was already asleep. *At least she's used to having my mother around*, Molly thought, and then wondered what it was going to be like *not* having her mother living there anymore.

As she lay in bed waiting to fall asleep, Molly realized she and Callie had done it. She thought back to the change that made it happen. Her mother came to her three nights after she and Allyson talked. "I was mad at you at first," Janine confessed. Molly didn't react. "I

thought you set me up. Then, when I thought about it later, I was glad you did what you did. If you hadn't, well, I don't know what would have happened. I guess I would have never woken up."

"Woken up?" Molly asked.

"Seeing Allyson again, seeing her face, seeing the way she *looked* at me... all made me feel what I was missing in my life. Thank you, Molly."

"I love you, Mom. And I just want to see you happy again. So does dad. So do Allyson and Callie. Everyone loves you."

"I know."

Janine had talked to Mike and he talked to Grace, who felt thrilled she would finally meet his family and maybe, finally, get to have him all to herself. She agreed immediately to any meeting everyone wanted to try. Allyson and Callie came up with the idea of getting together at the amusement park. It had all worked perfectly.

Molly fell asleep happy. So did Grace, next to Mike in *his* bed for the first time. There was no space between them. So did Allyson and Janine. Now that they were back together, they knew nothing would ever separate them again.

Lastly, Callie fell asleep knowing her mother was going to be okay. She had two mothers now, but she liked Janine and didn't think there would be any problems between them. She wondered about Molly, however. She met Grace for the first time at the amusement park and now they were living under the same roof. Callie reminded herself to check on Molly often and make sure she was getting along with the woman who would become her stepmother. She didn't worry about Jake and Sam, however. Boys were mostly clueless, and they probably wouldn't notice that much had changed at their house, anyway.

Then Janine's second dream shifted to a different scene.

"So, are you my new mom?" Molly asked, only half in jest.

"No, Molly. I'll never be your mother. She's a great person and I won't try to replace her."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because your dad and I love each other."

"Oh, I see," Molly replied. "And that must mean that my mom and dad- *don't*."

"Yes, that's right. But you knew that, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I wasn't trying to be mean to you- although I don't know what my brothers are going to do."

"I might have to try to be their mom, Molly but you're too old for me to do that with you."

"Thanks for understanding that."

"I admire you, Molly. Both you and Callie, actually."

"Why?"

"What you girls did for your moms was pretty amazing."

"They love each other, although I don't understand why."

"Yeah. I don't understand it, either."

"I don't want to even think about it. You adults and your love tangles confuse me. You take it so seriously. There's more to life."

Molly's comment struck Grace as insightful but naive. She felt pleased that Molly was still too young to know how important love could be, and hoped she would recall her attitude later in her life when she became an adult. *Maybe she's right*, Grace thought, although she knew Molly wasn't right. Something or someone would come along to change Molly's feelings. *It happens to all of us*, Grace thought. It had happened to her when she was not much older than Molly was.

"So, how old are you, Molly?"

"Thirteen."

"And Callie?"

"She's twelve."

"I remember when I was the same age. My family didn't get all reshuffled the way yours has, but other stuff happened. I had a good friend like Callie, too."

"Callie and I are friends but not *best* friends."

"My friend Nancy was my best friend. Until she wasn't."

"What happened?"

"A boy," Grace replied.

"You let a *boy* mess up your friendship?"

"Neither of us knew what was happening until things got out of control."

"I'm never letting something like that happen to me," Molly declared, certain it could never happen.

"That's what I said back then, too."

Molly wanted to hear more but her father walked into the kitchen. "What are you girls doing up so early?" he asked.

"Just chatting," Grace replied.

"About what?"

"Girl stuff."

Mike wanted to ask 'What girl stuff?' but knew he shouldn't. They wouldn't tell him, anyway. He felt pleased Molly and Grace were talking by themselves. He hoped to integrate Grace into the family as quickly and easily as possible. Her bonding with Molly was a good start. Mike didn't think it would be as easy with the boys. He was right.

And he had already all but forgotten his wife and the years they lived together.

Then, Janine woke up. For real this time. She knew her dreams could never happen. Families could not reshuffle themselves like decks of cards. Love tangled hearts but family bonds were stronger. There was a glue that held families together- the glue of love, trust, and fidelity. Janine had weakened that glue, but she refused to dissolve it.

Chapter 29

“Can we pick up where we left off?” Janine asked, meekly. She felt unsure how Allyson would react. Perhaps she remained hurt or angry about the way Janine walked out.

Allyson did feel hurt and angry, but not enough to refuse Janine. She still loved her. However, Allyson wanted certainty that Janine knew what she was doing and wouldn't change her mind again in the future. “It can be any way you want it to be, as long as you're sure *this* is what you want. Really sure, Janine. I can't go through losing you again.”

“This is what I want. I'll make it work. I promise.”

Janine's promise was good enough for Allyson. “Okay,” she whispered. “Okay.” Her long ordeal of living without her lover was over. She felt ready to make Janine a part of her life however Janine wanted to arrange it. They couldn't live together, but that was okay. At least they would no longer be apart.

“I'm getting back with Allyson,” she told Mike, “and this time I won't be leaving her. But I'm not leaving here, either. I know about you and Grace and you should do what is best for you, but I won't break up my family. Somehow, I will make this work.”

Mike had assumed the pull of her love for Allyson would prove too strong, and she would leave, eventually. He didn't know what to make of her announcement that she wasn't leaving. How would that affect his romance with Grace? He knew what she wanted was more than just an affair.

“Janine told me she was staying,” Mike told Grace the next time they sat naked under the heavy comforter on her balcony. She didn't say anything and he wondered if her feelings had changed suddenly. *Maybe she thinks it's over*, he thought. *But I don't want it to be.*

“So, I guess you have a decision to make,” Grace replied.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she's made her decision. Now you have to make yours. She's staying, but are you staying with her? Or, do you want to be with me?”

“I'm already with you.”

“No, you're not. Not the way I want you, at least. The only reason I started this with you is that I knew I wouldn't be the ‘other woman.’ I knew that your marriage was over, even though you still lived in the same house. I also assumed she would go with her lover, eventually. I often hoped she would, for her sake and mine.”

“For yours?”

“Yeah. Then I could have you. But now it seems I can't, and I don't know what to do.”

“I suppose that you're expecting me to decide.”

“Yes, I am, Mike,” she replied and then paused. Mike waited. “But, take your time. I don't want you to make the wrong decision.”

Mike wondered if she intended her comment sarcastically. Grace was not usually cynical. She had a bright and cheerful sense of humor that rarely expressed itself negatively. When she made a joke or funny comment, it usually was gentle and insightful rather than mean. Mike worried being with him and dealing with the complications in his life had changed her. He hoped not.

Then a strange question occurred to him. At first, he hesitated to ask but decided he had to know the answer. “Okay, Grace. Then tell me, what do you think would be the *right* decision?”

Grace didn’t hesitate to reply. “I want to be your wife.” She looked at Mike and waited for him to respond. When he didn’t, Grace went on. “*She* obviously doesn’t, so why stay together?”

“You’re right. It’s just that I don’t know what the change will do to the kids.”

“I’m sure I could love them as much as she does. Maybe more.” Mike doubted that was possible. He already knew Janine could have left him the night she reconnected with her lost love. It was only the children that pulled her back home.

“Love is complicated, Grace. I’m only figuring that out now.”

“It doesn’t have to be. She’ll always be their mom. I could be their step-mom. The kids would probably do just fine.”

“Janine doesn’t think so. That’s why she won’t leave.”

“But what do *you* think, Mike? We’ve been happy together for months. It could be like this for the rest of our lives. Don’t you want happiness? Why should she dictate what happens?”

“She’s not.”

“Oh, yes she is. You and I have worked together for twenty years. In a sense, we’ve spent more time together at work than you’ve spent with her at home. The only difference is that she shared your bed and I didn’t, until recently. Well, I like sharing your bed, and want to spend more than just time at work with you.” Mike didn’t reply and Grace wondered if she’d said too much and offended him. However, she refused to back away from what she’d already told him. Grace felt certain of her feelings. She loved Mike and wanted to be his wife. She was willing to ‘love, honor, and obey, till death do you part.’ Maybe even beyond death.

It wasn’t her fault Mike’s wife turned out to be a lesbian. Their marriage was over, so why couldn’t he end it? Then Grace would help Mike create new happiness to replace the one he’d lost. Grace felt eager to devote herself to his life and family. She couldn’t understand why he didn’t see her offer as the generous gift it was, and why he didn’t accept it gratefully.

Mike didn’t understand, either. Grace was a wonderful woman who lifted him out of the gloom of his failed marriage. There was nothing about Grace he didn’t like, and much he knew he could love more if they were together all the time. Yet he worried that, although he loved Grace, his children would not or could not love her and might resent him for bringing her into their household.

Molly understood and accepted what had happened so far. Jake and Sam were the problems. Mike knew marriages broke up and families and households reconfigured themselves all the time, but he didn’t know how to pull it off in a way that wouldn’t, in the end, scar his children.

“Grace, I agree with everything you’ve said, but I don’t know if I can make what you want to happen. If that’s not good enough for you, then I would understand if you didn’t want to see me anymore. I can ask for a transfer.”

Mike’s bold declaration shocked Grace. “No, no, Mike, please don’t think of doing that. I don’t want you to transfer and I don’t want to break up.”

“But you’re not happy and I completely understand. It’s my fault.”

“Can we not talk about this anymore? Could you hug me, instead?”

“Are you chilly?” Mike asked. The heavy comforter that covered them usually kept them toasty even though they were naked underneath.

“No, I’m not chilly. I’m scared.”

“Scared? Why?”

“I run a successful bank branch and have been doing it for ten years. Lots of people come and go, and lots of money and paperwork flow through my branch. I’ve won awards for how well our branch is run. I’m a good manager, but I can’t manage my life outside the branch, and I feel frustrated.”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Join the club.” They both laughed. But at what? Their lives, their helplessness, each other, or the absurdity of life in general? Neither knew. All they wanted to do now was sit quietly and listen to the waves lapping at the breakwater below the balcony. Somehow, the river always flowed. Somehow, obstacles always cleared. Long before and long after humans, the river was there and would remain. Mike wondered what the river knew that he didn’t, then stopped thinking about it and just held Grace in his arms.

“Grace wants to be my wife,” Mike told Janine.

“Oh, does she? And, do you want to be her husband?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know how.”

“Oh, it’s easy. All you have to do is get on top.”

“Stop it, Janine,” Mike replied, grinning.

“Look, Mike, I’ll do whatever you want, if you can figure out how to make it work.”

“That’s the problem, I can’t.”

“Neither can I,” Janine replied.

“Molly understands, right?”

“I think so, but you should ask her.”

“Yeah, I will. But she’s not my real worry.”

“What is?”

“The boys, of course. Same as you.”

“Yeah. They’re our sons, Mike, and I refuse to hurt them. It’s our job to protect them.”

“From what?”

“Life, the world.”

“And *us*?” Mike asked.

“Yeah, us. That’s the hardest one, isn’t it?”

“It is for me.”

“Me, too. But, I can’t help thinking that we can’t go on like this. At first, I thought we could, and then once they were adults we could rearrange our lives when it would be safe.”

“But that’s a long time to wait,” Mike commented.

“Yeah.”

“Is it too long?”

“That’s what I don’t know,” Janine replied. “But, I just had an idea.”

“What is it?”

“Thanksgiving is coming up. I think we should get everyone together, Allyson, Callie, Grace, you, me, and the kids.”

“What good would that do?”

“You would sit next to Grace. I would sit next to Allyson. The four kids would sit where they want, and we see what happens.”

“What do you think will happen?”

“I think we might all get along okay.”

“And then what?”

“*Then* we see what happens.”

“Do you boys remember my boss, Grace? You met her when I took you to work a couple of times.”

Jake and Sam looked at Grace and couldn't recall if they'd met her or not. If she wasn't a character in a video game, TV show, or movie, she didn't interest them, anyway, but their parents had reminded them they had to be polite at Thanksgiving.

“And this is my old friend, Allyson,” Janine announced. “She and I met each other when we were a little older than Molly.”

The added people at the Thanksgiving table didn't interest the boys, at first. Only the food did. Not the turkey, stuffing, mashed and sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, and fluffy dinner rolls, but the pumpkin pies that were waiting in the kitchen. Their mother had baked one of them, and that other lady had brought a different one. Jake and Sam couldn't wait to do a taste test like they saw on TV.

Molly and Callie sat next to each other and chatted quietly during the meal. The adults bored Jake and Sam by talking about themselves. Nobody paid attention to them. They thought about the video game they left running in the living room, and how soon they could get back to it.

Occasionally, their father or mother would glance at their plates to see if they were eating, but they didn't say anything. The only bad thing that happened was when their mother announced that she was so stuffed that she wanted to hold off on eating pumpkin pie until later and the boys nearly freaked out. They'd only been playing along to get pie. Waiting another hour or two seemed unfair. Janine sensed their disappointment and suggested they could sample the pie if they still had room. “Small pieces, for now,” Janine told them. “You can have more, later.” That was better than nothing, and they agreed.

Molly and Callie cleared the table and then brought out the pie and whipped cream topping. Their slices were minuscule, but the boys didn't protest. Everyone watched them eat.

“You guys have never been here before. Would you like to see the rest of the house?” Janine asked, after dinner.

“Great idea!” Mike replied. “Why don't we give them a tour?” He stood up and took Grace's hand. She smiled and Mike led her out of the dining room.

“I'd love to see the rest of the place,” Allyson said. Janine took her hand and led her off.

Molly and Callie sat there and wondered what they should do. So did the boys. It occurred to them to beg for a second slice of pie but they decided not to. They knew nothing gave their older sister more pleasure than denying them something they wanted.

Later, after everyone left, Molly offered to help her mother clean up but she asked Molly to see to it that Jake and Sam got ready for bed. The boys went up to their rooms and then Molly went to check on them. She found Sam looking at a picture book and wished him goodnight. He ignored her.

Then she went to see Jake. He was waiting for her and seemed uneasy. "What's wrong? Too much pie?" Molly asked. Jake shook his head. "Too much video game?"

"Molly, what's going on?"

"What do you mean, Jake?"

"Who were those people?"

"Mom and dad's friends," Molly replied.

"But why did they come?"

"Mom and dad invited them for Thanksgiving."

"But *why*?" Jake whined.

"Maybe they had nowhere else to go."

"But why did they have to come *here*? No one else ever came on Thanksgiving before."

"Thanksgiving is about sharing, Jake."

"No, it's not. It's about *us*, not strangers."

"You're wrong," Molly replied, but not harshly. She remained quiet for a moment as an idea formed in her mind. "Do you remember the story of the first Thanksgiving? Didn't they tell you about it in school? About how the Indians and Pilgrims sat down together, shared their food, and celebrated?"

"Yeah, but It was a stupid story. I didn't believe it."

Jake's disbelief surprised Molly. At his age, she believed everything she was told by adults- the First Thanksgiving, the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus. "Really? I don't believe it anymore but did back when I was in first grade."

"You did?" Jake asked, surprised by his sister's gullibility.

"Yup."

Jake looked at his sister. It was the first time he felt smarter than her. "Is that girl your friend?" he asked.

"You mean Callie? Yes, we're friends."

"And that lady was her mom?"

"Yes," Molly asked, nodding. She tried to recall the last time she and her brother had a conversation like this. *Never*, she thought. *What's happening?* Jake interrupted her thought with another question.

"Okay, but who was that *other* lady?"

"Dad's boss at work."

"Why would dad want to eat Thanksgiving dinner with his boss?" Jake asked. Molly shrugged but she knew she would have to answer.

"Maybe she had nowhere else to go. Maybe he felt sorry for her. I don't know."

"I thought you knew *everything*, Molly. That's why you're always bossing Sam and me around. But, maybe you're not as smart as you think."

"I may not be, but I'm older than you and mom told me to look after you and that's what I'm doing."

“Yeah. Thanks,” Jake replied, and then he did something he’d not done since he was a toddler. Jake spontaneously hugged his sister. Molly didn’t understand why he was doing it but hugged him back as tightly as she could. She knew somehow that hugging was the most important thing to do right now. Important to Jake, and important to her. But she wasn’t sure why she felt that way.

Molly knew why Callie and her mother came to dinner but had no idea why that other woman was there. Who was she? And why had her father held that woman’s hand the way he had?

Molly didn’t go downstairs to help her mother finish cleaning up. She went to her room, closed the door, sat on her bed, and considered bursting into tears. Molly hadn’t planned to lie to her brother but she didn’t know how to explain what was going on. And now, after what happened today, she had more questions than answers. She already knew about her mother and Allyson, but what was the story with her father and Grace?

Suddenly, Molly knew exactly why Jake hugged her. He sensed the vague possibility of what she knew was already happening. Their world had started coming apart. Molly felt she could probably handle the changes that were coming, but also felt sorry for Jake and Sam, who were too young to understand. She wondered if her parents were even thinking about them and decided that, if no one else would consider their feelings, then she would. What else were big sisters good for?

Then, she started crying.

Chapter 30

“I thought I understood all this, Callie,” Molly said, her brow furrowed and her voice breaking. “But now I’m worried.”

“Why?”

“What’s gonna happen to us when our parents rearrange everything?”

“My life won’t change much, but yours might.”

“I’m not worried as much about myself as I am about my brothers. I can understand what’s happening, although I don’t understand why. But *they* won’t. What if it all hurts them?”

“I’m not sure the adults care, Molly. Well, maybe I shouldn’t say that. What I mean is, I’m not sure there’s anything they can do about it.”

“But they *should* care, and they should do something about it! We’re their children. They owe us!”

Molly’s anguish worried Callie and she tried to think of a way to respond. “Have you talked to your mom or dad?” she asked.

“My mom, yeah, but that was just about her and your mom.”

“But you haven’t talked to your dad?”

“I don’t know what to say,” Molly replied.

“Well, let’s practice. Talk to me, first. Tell me what the problem is.”

“I don’t know who that other lady was that came to Thanksgiving dinner. And I’m worried she’ll be there Christmas morning.”

Callie hesitated to say what she was thinking, then felt she had to be honest. “I think she was his girlfriend, Molly.”

“Yeah, that’s the way it seems. But why didn’t he tell me about her? Why did he keep her a secret? I’ve been helping my parents figure out what to do about my mom and your mom, but they haven’t helped me deal with this at all.”

“Molly, they’re adults. They live in a different world than we do. They only think of themselves.”

“But your mom isn’t like that!”

“Oh, yes she is! Or, she has been, in the past. I can’t tell you how many times she’s left me alone so she could go out at night. And then she brought men home when I was asleep and I found them eating breakfast the next morning. Can you imagine how embarrassing that was?”

“No.”

Caught up in their confusion and pain, the girls remained silent. Molly worried about the changes coming in her future and what her life would be like after her parents split up. She had assumed her father would be alone. Now, it looked as if a new woman would come into their household, maybe soon. Molly could have accepted just having one parent. She thought her brothers might accept it too. But none of them wanted a new mother.

Callie had stopped worrying about her future when her mother and Janine settled into a regular relationship. Allyson no longer brought men home. Callie no longer felt embarrassed. She felt better having another woman around the house. Although she felt certain she would never love Janine, she genuinely liked her and felt secure with her. Callie

also felt grateful for the stability she saw in her future. Molly saw chaos ahead, both for herself and her brothers, and felt trapped.

At dinner the next night, Callie decided to tell her mother what was going on with Molly. “Mom, you gotta talk to Janine.”

“Um, okay. But why?”

“Molly’s really messed up.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s scared,” Callie explained. “She doesn’t know what’s happening. Thanksgiving was weird for her and she’s worried about Christmas. It’s supposed to be a fun time but she’s afraid something’s gonna ruin it.”

“What’s she scared of?”

“She doesn’t know what her parents are doing.”

“But she’s been a part of this,” Allyson pointed out.

“Of *this*, yes. But she doesn’t know what her father’s doing or who that woman was that came on Thanksgiving.”

“Grace is her father’s girlfriend.”

“Yeah, I think Molly knows that. But is that *all* she is?”

“I’m not sure, Callie, but I’ll talk to Janine. Thanks for letting me know.”

Allyson called Janine later that evening. “I’m glad you told me about this, Allyson. Mike and I were going to make the big announcement on Christmas. We figured all the excitement of presents and stuff would soften the surprise.”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea, Janine. You might want to reconsider. It might traumatize the boys and they’ll hate Christmas forever.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. But what else can we do?”

“What else can any of us do? Everything is in motion now. It could end up in a train wreck if we’re not careful.”

“Thanks a lot, Allyson. You’re not helping much.”

“I’m here for you, Janine. You and I know where we stand with each other. The rest will work out, but it might take more time and be more complicated than we’d like.”

“I don’t want to hurt my kids. I’d never forgive myself.”

“I don’t want you to hurt them, either. I’d feel awful if that happened.”

“Thanks, Allyson. I know you care. I just wish I could figure this out.”

“You will. You save companies, Janine. You can save your family, I’m sure of it.”

“I’m glad *you’re* sure. I’m not. Those companies I save don’t mean a fucking thing to me. I really couldn’t care less if they went under. It’s just my job. But my family is my life. I have to get this right.”

“You will, Janine. You will. *We* will. All of us- you, me, Mike, and Grace.”

“I hope so.”

The doubtful tone of Janine’s voice scared Allyson. She wondered if her lover felt regret that they’d met again after twenty-five years apart. “Janine, if this is all too complicated, too gut-wrenching... then, I... I... I’d be willing to call it quits.”

Janine didn’t reply and Allyson didn’t press her. She let it go, for now. However, she felt haunted by the feeling that letting go was all that was left. Maybe they were approaching the end and there was no way to prevent it.

A couple of days later, Jake and his friend talked at recess. “I think my parents might be getting divorced.”

“Man, you’re so lucky!” Pete replied.

“Lucky? What do you mean?”

“I wish *mine* would get divorced. All they do is fight and then apologize to me for upsetting me. I don’t know what’s worse- the fighting or the apologizing.”

“My parents *never* fight. My mom is away a lot for her work.”

“Maybe that’s why,” Pete commented.

“Well, I don’t care about them. I care about me and my little brother.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I don’t know, but it scares me,” Jake confessed.

“Did you talk to your dad or mom?”

“No, only my sister.”

“And what did she say?” Pete asked.

“Not much, but I think she’s scared, too, and doesn’t want to scare me.”

The boys sat quietly for a few moments pondering the weight of their young lives. “I get all the scaring I need from video games,” Pete said.

“I know!” Jake exclaimed. “I don’t need scary stuff in my *real* life, too.”

“Nobody does.”

The first weekend Janine showed up in her mother’s life, Callie wondered if the strange woman would ever go home. Now they were getting closer every day to sharing a home and Callie felt okay with that. However, she still didn’t understand anything more about adult women being in love with each other, nor did she care to learn.

Love was a mystery that didn’t interest Callie. She didn’t need to understand it and wanted nothing to do with it. Callie planned to grow up without attachments, devoting herself to being her own person, and living her life free of emotional entanglements. She saw the chaos love created and wanted no part of it.

Loving her mother was easy, natural, and safe. Mothers couldn’t betray their children. They *wouldn’t*. Callie didn’t know if there was a rule or if it was just what mothers did, but she felt certain she was right. She trusted Allyson.

Molly no longer trusted her mother, Janine. She had supported her mother’s affair with Allyson but now worried if it was a mistake to do so. Molly expected to live in a one-parent household. It never occurred to her that her father had another woman in his life.

She didn’t dislike Grace and she accepted that her father needed companionship. Molly just didn’t want Grace moving in with them. Her father might want a replacement wife but Molly didn’t want a replacement mother.

Molly also felt she was old enough to be the woman of the house. There were books about girls her age who, after their mothers died, took care of their families and everything worked out fine. Those fictional girls inspired Molly, but she felt certain no one would listen to her. Any adult she spoke to would tell her she was still just a kid and she shouldn’t want to hurry growing up. However, Molly didn’t feel she had any more growing up to do. She felt convinced the upheavals in her family had thrust her into adulthood.

Molly considered running away. Then it occurred to her that she could go with her mother to Callie's house and live there. The idea looked more appealing the more she considered it.

Christmas morning was as normal as Janine and Mike could make it. The rest of the day was the same. No one visited and the family celebrated as it always had, as a tight five-person household. However, neither Mike nor Janine knew what they were going to do about New Year's Eve. They wanted to celebrate it with their new loves but didn't know how to arrange things.

Knowing their split was close to happening, Mike and Janine tried to adjust to each other's desires. Janine knew she couldn't invite Allyson and Callie over, but suggested Mike invite Grace. "This could be the perfect chance for the boys to get to know her," Janine explained. "The boys don't do much celebrating and usually fade long before midnight."

"Yeah, that might work."

"It's what you want, isn't it- that she comes here to live with you?"

"It's what she wants, yes," Mike replied.

"You don't?"

"I do, but it's not as easy to do as she thinks it should be. You move out, she moves in. I mean, in a sense, that's happened already. At least, in my life if not in this house."

"You're right, it has," Janine said. "But, the emotional stuff was the easy part."

"In a way, that's also right."

"*Our* emotional stuff, anyway. But what about the kids? What about their feelings?" Janine paused so she could think. "I have a suggestion. Why not tell them you'd like to invite Grace over and ask them what they think?"

"They're likely to ask if you'll be there, too."

"They might," Janine agreed. "But they might not. It's worth a try."

"Okay, I'll talk to them."

Chapter 31

Mike didn't talk to his sons but told Janine that he had. He also told her to leave after dinner on New Year's Eve and Grace would show up later. Molly went with her mother. Callie had invited her and Virginia to a sleepover.

"Where'd Mom go?" Sam asked after dinner.

"She had to work," Mike lied.

"Oh. Where's Molly?"

"Mom's dropping her off at her friend's house."

"You mean we're alone tonight?"

Mike didn't know how to reply. "Kind of." Sam didn't ask what he meant.

Grace arrived an hour after Janine and Molly left. Mike kissed her when she came in and noticed she carried a large manila envelope. He wondered what was inside but didn't ask. "Let's not make a big deal out of this," Mike suggested. "Let's just sit in the living room and let the boys come to us instead of making a fuss."

"Whatever you think is best."

The boys stopped playing their video game, went looking for their father, burst into the living room to nag him for a snack, and found him with that lady who came for Thanksgiving. The boys looked at her as if she was an alien from the game they'd been playing. "Hello again," Grace said, smiling. "Remember me?" she asked. Neither boy replied.

"Guys, try and remember your manners. Please say hello to Grace."

"Um, hello, Miss Grace," Jake said, meekly.

"It's nice to be here. I've been looking forward to seeing you again. In fact, I brought you something."

"You, um, did?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"It's in this envelope. Here, let me pull it out." The boys watched as she opened the envelope and took out two large color photographs.

The boys felt wary at first. *Who wants to look at a bunch of pictures?* Jake thought. The first photo showed a vast expanse of water framed by what looked like a patio door. Neither boy reacted. Grace showed them the second photo. This one showed the wall of a balcony and the water beyond. Trying not to seem too interested, Jake asked, "What are these?"

"This is where I live," Grace replied. "That river is right outside my window."

"Yes, but where is it?" Sam asked.

"Not far from here."

"Really? Can we see it?" Jake asked.

"Sure."

"When?"

"Whenever you want," Grace replied.

"How about *now*?"

"Well, okay, if it's okay with your dad."

"Please, dad?" Sam pleaded.

“Sure. Let’s go.”

While they rode to Grace’s apartment, the boys asked more questions. “Have you ever been out in the river?” Sam asked.

“Actually, no I haven’t. Is that something you’d like to do?”

“Yeah! I’ve never been in a river.”

“Well, there’s a big paddleboat that goes up and down the river. I sometimes watch it from my balcony. Would you like to watch it with me? I think it’s running tonight.”

The boys spotted the wide window as soon as Grace unlocked her apartment door. They ran to the glass and gazed out but couldn’t see much in the darkness. Grace asked if they’d like to go out onto the balcony and then opened the glass door. They heard the water splashing below and pretended they were already in a boat.

Then a real boat appeared. It was the paddle boat Grace mentioned, slowly moving up the river, ablaze with lights. The boys watched it, enraptured. They felt they’d stepped into a magical realm they never imagined could exist.

Grace remembered something else that was going to happen. “I forgot until just now—there’s going to be fireworks. I think they start soon.”

“Fireworks?” Sam asked, without moving his eyes from the paddleboat. “On the water?”

“Yes. That’s how they do it.” Grace sensed something had changed inside the boys. *I think I just did it*, Grace thought as she watched them. She was right. She had won them over.

Later, exhausted by their exciting discovery of a wonderful new world, the boys fell asleep on the balcony. Mike said he’d carry them to the car so he could drive home. “I think they’re sleeping here tonight,” Grace said.

“It’s cold on the balcony.”

“Let’s take them to my bedroom.”

After they undressed the boys and tucked them in, Grace and Mike retreated to the living room. Grace went to the kitchen and returned with a bottle of wine and two glasses. “Happy new year,” she said, handing Mike a glass of wine.

“You know, I think it will be,” Mike commented. “I don’t know how you knew to do what you did, but it worked. Thank you.” Grace didn’t reply. She sipped wine and looked out at the river for a while.

“Did I pass?” Grace asked, without looking at Mike.

“What do you mean?”

“I know tonight was a test.”

“Well, maybe for them.”

She turned to look at Mike. “No, for you, too. What would you have done if they hadn’t liked me?”

“I don’t want to think about it, Grace. It’s over, anyway. You passed. Boy, did you pass!”

“Wait’ll they wake up in the morning and see the river in its full glory when it’s light.”

“I’ll never get them home.”

The boys spend all of New Year’s Day on the balcony and only agreed to leave Grace’s apartment when Mike reminded them they had school the next day. They begged

Grace to let them come back on the weekend and she heartily agreed. As they were leaving, Mike reminded them to thank Grace for showing them her river. Sam seemed upset and Mike asked him if something was wrong. "Isn't she coming with us?" he asked.

"Do you want her to?"

"Oh, yes, please, Miss Grace."

"Thank you, Sam. I'd be happy to."

Callie and Molly hadn't yet decided if they wanted to live together. Their mothers wisely left the decision up to them. Molly also had to go back to school so Janine drove her home late on New Year's Day. Mike, Grace, Jake, and Sam were already there. The boys couldn't stop telling their mother about Grace's river.

'Thank you,' Janine mouthed to Grace when the boys weren't looking.

'No, thank *you*,' Grace mouthed back. Both women smiled.

As Callie waited to fall asleep, she thought back through all that had happened. Her life started to change that Saturday morning when she came down to breakfast and found a strange woman wearing her mother's dressing gown, although she had no idea how big the change would be. Now she felt happy for her mother, who finally had the love of her life back in her life. She also felt happy about her new friendship with Molly, and her continuing friendship with Virginia. And, she felt relieved the upheaval caused by her mother and Molly's mother deciding to live together didn't turn out to be disastrous for Molly's family.

The only downside Callie foresaw was that she might have to put up with Molly's little brothers when they came to visit their mother. However, as long as they didn't stay over, she thought she could survive. Somehow, everything had worked out for the best.

Despite all that had happened, Callie remained a bashful, modest girl who still didn't understand what purpose love served. She wanted life to be straightforward and uncomplicated and had yet to develop an interest in boys. She also hoped they never developed an interest in her.

Of course, a few months later, all that changed.

The End

