

Veiled Storm

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Chapter 1 - Raging Storm

In the fall of nineteen-ninety-nine, Josh spent the day visiting Aunt Lily at the State University. A heavy storm struck the campus as he was about to leave. Torrential rain, ferocious lightning, and earsplitting thunder raged outside. Instead of trying to drive home in the tempest, Lily invited him to spend the night in her absent roommate's bed.

"You know, Josh, we slept in the same bed sometimes," she recalled. Aunt Lily and Josh had lived together for several years when they were children.

Josh was settled into the other bed. "Yeah, I remember that." He cringed when another lightning flash lit the window. "Storms like this scared the crap out of me when I was little."

Lily grinned. "That's right." More lightning was followed by a deafening thunderclap.

"They still scare me," he added. Lily heard the fear in his voice and felt sorry for him.

"But, you're a big boy now," she teased.

"No, really."

"Want me to come over there?" Lily asked. Josh wanted to say 'yes' because the storm frightened him. However, they were no longer little children. Josh looked at his aunt. She was a statuesque nineteen-year-old blonde with classic facial features that could have won beauty contests if she had any interest in entering them. Lily was also shy and sometimes meek. She preferred remaining in the background instead of asserting herself.

Josh was still in high school. He knew he wasn't half as handsome as his aunt was beautiful, but he wasn't unattractive. Most girls described him as cute. He was just under six feet tall. His dark hair and glasses accented his boyish facial features. Josh wasn't athletic, but he was fit and had a pleasant physique. He was also open, friendly, easy-going, and had a good sense of humor.

Would it be wrong for us to sleep in the same bed? he wondered. *I guess not. We're family.*

"Yeah," he replied, meekly. "That would be great." Lily turned out the light and left her bed. Josh knew she was in her underwear but couldn't see her walk toward him in the dark room. She lay on her side next to him and pulled up the sheet. He felt sheltered and protected just as he had when they were children. The lightning seemed distant and the thunder unthreatening.

"Thanks, Lily," Josh whispered. *I feel safe from the storm,* he thought, *but am I really safe? Lily's awfully pretty.* They fell asleep back-to-back as the storm raged outside.

Something woke Lily a few hours later. Josh slept peacefully beside her. She listened for thunder. It was quiet. *The storm's over.*

Lily decided to go back to her bed. She moved and bumped into Josh. He had turned toward her back and she noticed he was erect. Maybe that was what woke her. She assumed he was dreaming about sex. Then she wondered if he was dreaming about sex with her. Finally, it occurred to her that Josh might not be asleep. Perhaps he wanted to have sex with her.

Lily was about to whisper his name but stopped herself. She didn't care if he were awake or asleep. A moment like this might never come again. If Josh were awake, she would give herself to him in the hope it would transform their lives. If he were still asleep, she would have her way with him. Josh might not remember it but she certainly would!

She pressed her backside against his erection but he didn't respond. Just to encourage him, she reached behind her back and touched his erection through his shorts. Again, Josh didn't respond. *He must be in a deep sleep*, Lily thought. *I guess I'll have to do everything*. She reached inside his shorts, freed his penis, pulled her panties aside, and then guided him between her legs. She hoped he would push into her but he didn't move.

Lily eased him inside and almost swooned from the intense sensations and the powerful immorality of what she was doing. Josh remained still so she began moving. It was easy. She slid him in and out tenderly and relished the fiery sensations. Lily paused only when ecstasy overwhelmed her. She pulled his penis deeper when she felt it swelling toward orgasm because she wanted to enjoy fully the powerful sensations when Josh gushed inside her. Her other sex partners had always worn condoms. She had never cared about their orgasms. Josh was special. He was the only boy Lily ever loved.

When it was over, she wanted to keep Josh inside but didn't want him to awaken and accidentally discover what she had done. Lily carefully replaced their underwear, changed her position, and fell back to sleep convinced her life had permanently changed.

Josh awoke after dawn and discovered their intertwined bodies. He wanted to get out of bed but didn't want his movement to awaken her and then have her discover how close they were. He didn't know if she would feel embarrassed, but he would.

There was a commotion in the hall. Somebody was calling for Lily. The door burst open. Josh pulled up the sheet and covered them. Dee, one of Lily's campus friends, rushed in. She realized she should not be there as soon as she saw Josh and Lily in bed together. Josh smiled.

"She's still asleep," he whispered.

"Oh, sorry I barged in. I'm Dee."

"It's okay. I was awake. What's going on?"

Dee felt like an intruder. "The storm knocked down some of the biggest trees on campus," she whispered. "They're lying everywhere. The whole landscape has changed. I wanted to tell Lily. I know she likes trees."

Josh smiled and nodded. "Okay. I'll tell her." This was Dee's cue to exit and she did. Josh breathed a sigh of relief; so did Dee when she was safely out in the hallway.

Josh turned to look at Lily as she slept. Warm sunlight streamed through the window and lit her face. He saw her as she was at that moment and recalled the way her face looked when they were children. Lily's eyes opened and she caught him gazing at her.

"Checking me out, Josh?" she asked, languorously. Embarrassed by her accusation, he blushed. "It's okay," she said. "Don't be self-conscious. I guess you've noticed how much I've changed from when I was a little girl." He nodded uncomfortably. "Do you like the way I look?" He was silent. "Do you think I'm pretty?" He felt confused and didn't answer. "It's okay if you do," she added, embarrassing him.

Lily wanted to clear up his confusion by having sex again. She reached for his penis. He recoiled when she tried to touch him. "What's wrong, Josh?" she asked.

"What's wrong with *you*?" he whispered.

"I wanted to make love again."

"Again?" he asked, astonished. "When have we... *ever*?"

“Last night? After the storm?” He remained puzzled. She wanted him to admit what had happened. “You don’t remember?” He shook his head. She felt confused. It had been spectacularly intense for her. How could Josh have slept through it?

“You made love to me, Josh,” Lily lied. She had done the lovemaking. He felt horrified. Was she joking? Why would she do anything so cruel? They were in bed together only because of the storm. Nothing else happened. He stared at her in disbelief.

“It was beautiful,” she added, then kissed him abruptly, catching him off guard. She sensed his discomfort. “I mean it, Josh. I’ve never felt like that before.” He didn’t believe her and assumed she was teasing him. This cruelty was a side of Lily he had never seen before.

After a moment of tense silence, Lily confessed her feelings. “Josh, I’m in love with you.”

Josh suddenly wondered if he was dreaming. “What? No way! That’s crazy.”

“I’ve felt this way for several years,” she declared.

“You shouldn’t be talking like that. You’re like a sister to me!” His obtuseness confused Lily and she didn’t know what else to say. They had suddenly become strangers.

Lily wondered if he was trying to protect her feelings. Perhaps he had not enjoyed their sex, even though it had been the best experience of her young life. She immediately rejected the idea. *He must want more!* Lily thought. *He must want me!*

Josh stared at her coldly and considered what he ought to do. He decided to leave immediately. Lily watched helplessly as Josh jumped out of bed. After dressing hurriedly, he grabbed his overnight bag and took out his car keys. Not looking at Lily, Josh left without saying a word. In shock and unable to speak, she felt her life was ruined.

Josh had a two-hour drive back home and plenty of time to think about what had happened. Any sixteen-year-old boy would feel ecstatic if an older girl seduced him, especially if that girl was as beautiful as Lily. However, her seduction and confession of love didn’t thrill Josh. It sickened him. He didn’t want her to be in love with him. He grew angrier as it became clear that she had recklessly betrayed their family bond.

On the other hand, had she? As Josh drove farther from the campus, he wondered if Lily had dreamed everything because they had been sleeping side-by-side. He felt certain he would not have remained asleep if they genuinely had sex. Josh persuaded himself that nothing really happened. The conclusion made the most sense and he felt relieved.

Then he noticed another problem. They both were asleep when she dreamed about having sex with him but awake when she told him she had always loved him. Something was still horribly wrong. He wondered if Lily was delusional. Did she genuinely feel that way about him? Did she believe he felt (or could feel) the same way about her? Did she have something seriously wrong with her? Should he worry about Lily? Was she a threat to him? He decided he would avoid her from now on so he could avert further danger and confusion.

Damn you. Lily! he thought, enraged. *Damn you!*

Lily and Josh had shared a wonderful childhood. They had been like brother and sister and he wanted their relationship to stay that way. He was proud of the ways he had helped her and kept her going. He had been her anchor and pillar of strength. Josh could not understand how and why she fell in love with him. *There are lots of other guys around,* he thought. *Why me?*

Josh tried to think of someone he could confide in. Not his parents, surely; he would have to tell them what happened. Nor his friends; they would congratulate him for (possibly) screwing a gorgeous girl. There was no one he could turn to; Josh felt alone.

Lily agonized in her room after Josh ran out. She cried into the blanket and tried to figure out how to recover from the disaster she had caused. Josh was the only boy she had ever loved. Her love for him was real, perhaps too real, and too intense. How could she have assumed that he felt the same way? He had never given any hint. She should have taken it slower, talked to him, and tried to assess his feelings. She feared she had ruined everything and would never see Josh again. Not being able to have him made her wonder if she should go on living. The despair seemed overwhelming.

Several hours later, Lily called her sister Helen, Josh's mother, to discuss college financial details. She hoped Josh would answer the phone but he was not around. Lily casually asked how he was doing. Helen asked what Josh's impression of college was. Lily told her he liked the campus. That was all they discussed.

When Lily finally came out of her room, her dorm mates teased her about Josh. Dee was the first. "There's the cradle robber!" she said, laughing. "God, he's cute. Can I have him when you're done with him?" All the girls agreed.

Lily didn't think of Josh as cute. She thought of Josh as the wonderful nephew who helped her through terrible times in her childhood. She didn't know where she would be without his help, or if she would even be alive.

Lily ignored her friends and their teasing quieted down. However, the storm that raged inside didn't quiet down. Just as the thunderstorm had uprooted and exposed the roots of the campus trees, her impulsive action exposed her deepest feelings and her life might never be the same.

Lily didn't know what to do.

Chapter 2 - Beginning

It was the summer of nineteen-eighty-seven, but Josh was too young to know about calendar years. He'd only recently become aware of life because his daily routine was about to change when he started kindergarten in September. Josh didn't know if he ought to feel excited or scared. He preferred not to think about it and just play.

One day, Aunt Amy arrived with a girl Josh vaguely recognized. He had seen photos of the girl but didn't know who she was. She wore a crisp yellow sundress and seemed uneasy. "Josh, this is your Aunt Lily."

Josh thought Aunt Amy was teasing him. Aunts were always big ladies like her, Aunt Amy, and Aunt Barbara. Lily didn't look much older than he was. How could she be his aunt? He decided to play along. "Hello, *Aunt Lily*."

"Hi, Josh," the girl replied, shyly. Lily's head was still reeling from the chaotic aftermath of her parents' sudden deaths. She managed a wan smile. Josh felt charmed by Lily at that moment.

"Lily's our youngest sister," Amy explained. "She was born long after your mom, Aunt Barbara, and me, just a couple of years before you." Josh, who was only five, nodded. "She'll be living here from now on. Why don't you show her around?" Josh finally understood why his mother had been fixing up the room next to him. He took Lily's hand and led her into the house.

A week later, Josh awoke in the dark and heard crying. He listened carefully and realized it was Lily in the next room. Her parents' sudden deaths had destroyed her life. Amy and Barbara lovingly cared for her but had to move her from one house to another until Helen took her in.

Overwhelmed by grief and chaos, Lily feared her life would never be stable again. She worried she would never belong anywhere and feared another crisis could sweep her away. Lily wondered if other people's lives could be turned upside down as suddenly as hers had been. She no longer felt real.

Josh tiptoed into her room. Bright moonlight shone through the window. "Lily?" he whispered. She looked at him through puffy eyes. "Are you okay?" She didn't answer. He suddenly realized he didn't know why he got out of bed to check on her. Josh wanted to leave because he feared her sadness might sweep over him but he thought leaving might hurt her feelings and make her sadder than she already was.

Lily gestured for Josh to come closer. He sat on the carpet next to her bed but didn't know what else to do. Lily went on crying and didn't say anything. She eventually cried herself to sleep. Josh quietly arose and went back to his room. The next day neither of them mentioned what had happened.

There were several more crying incidents over the next few months. Josh didn't understand what was happening but felt drawn to her. Was her weeping what awoke Josh? Was he tuned in somehow to Lily's emotions? He always entered her room and sat quietly on the floor until she fell back to sleep. Then Josh went back to bed.

The incidents finally ended. Lily became used to Josh being with her. She sometimes invited him to hang out in her room. They didn't talk much. He played or worked on a coloring book. She read or did homework.

Josh's mother Helen became seriously ill when he was ten. She could no longer take care of both children and sent Lily to live with Aunt Amy. Josh had come to regard Lily as his older sister and their separation devastated him. She never got the chance to tell him she saw him as her little brother.

At first, they were okay. They spoke on the phone and sometimes wrote letters. Nevertheless, they missed their closeness and it gradually began to fade. The children remained apart for several years.

Helen's health improved but she never became well enough to care for both Lily and Josh. The children's lives were busier as they grew into adolescence. They spent time together on vacations but never restored their former brother-sister nearness. There was little time for reflection or nostalgia and their former closeness faded beneath feelings and experiences that were more recent. They knew they missed each other but eventually forgot why.

A car crash killed Amy when Lily was seventeen and she came back to live with Josh. It upset her to leave her best friends and high school, but losing her big sister Amy overwhelmed her. Lily remained moody for several months. Josh was now a high school freshman. He tried to comfort her. His mother asked Josh not to try too hard. Lily had to deal with her grief in her own way.

Josh didn't press her but his friends begged him to introduce them. He had no idea why they wanted to meet Lily. They told him she was the hottest senior they had ever seen. Josh explained that Lily was grieving because his Aunt Amy (who was Lily's sister) had died. The boys tried to respect her grief but continued begging Josh to introduce them. They slyly offered to help her deal with her loss. Josh ignored them.

In high school, Lily reconnected with Margaret, who had been one of her elementary school friends. Margaret was shy and quiet. Both were practical and intelligent young women. Lily had been well into her college search but abandoned it when Amy died. Margaret convinced her to continue the search and hoped it would help Lily move past her grief.

It didn't help much at first, but Lily, still painfully aware that Amy was gone, realized she had to think about her future. Helen encouraged her and provided as much college research material as she could find. Lily slowly immersed herself in the college search and her schoolwork. She began to overcome her grief.

One day, Lily was in her room doing schoolwork. Josh was in his room and feeling hungry. He knocked softly on her door. She cheerfully invited him in. It was the first time her voice seemed happy since Aunt Amy's accident. Josh opened the door and saw Lily sitting at her desk with her back to him.

"Hi. I thought you might be getting hungry," Josh said. "Don't know when mom's coming home."

"Thanks, but I'm okay"

"You're sure?" Josh hoped he could somehow persuade her to cook for him.

Lily turned to look at him. "You just want me to make you something, don't you?" Josh frowned. She had figured out his intention. Then she flashed him a smile that reminded him of the day they met. He felt as if somebody had plugged in a wire and sparked him to life. Embarrassed, he tried to come up with a graceful exit as her smile overloaded every neuron in his brain.

"Lily, I...uh...really missed you." Josh stammered. He surprised himself as much as he surprised Lily. However, Josh also felt like a fool. He tried to back out of the room but she looked at him in a way that made him feel as if he was glass and Lily could see deep inside him. Josh wanted her to.

"Thanks," she said, and then released him from her gaze so he could leave. Josh nearly fainted in the hallway. His awkward confession astonished him. *Why did I tell her that? What did it mean?* He didn't know.

Josh didn't tell his mother what had happened. Lily did. What he said had touched her deeply. It awoke forgotten memories of the happy childhood she shared with Josh. Helen knew how difficult it was for teenage boys to express their feelings. She had been hoping Josh would eventually begin to share his. She tried to make space and time for him in case he wanted to talk. This was the first time he spoke to anyone about his feelings and his honesty moved her.

A few weeks later, Josh came home from school and went up to his room. As he reached the top of the stairs, he heard Lily sobbing. He tiptoed in and stood a few feet away from where she sat on the bed. She saw him and immediately felt embarrassed. Then, surprising them both, she leaped up and ran to him. He hugged her but didn't say anything. She smiled awkwardly and invited him to sit on the chair by her desk. Josh felt he should not leave her alone and sat down. Her crying slowed and she looked at him. Josh didn't know what more he could do for her.

Lily didn't need him to do anything. She began telling him what she remembered from the time they spent together as children. They had been the happiest years of her life. She missed those years and felt sorry she had lost touch with her memories. Her recollections had suddenly flooded back and saddened her.

Josh felt pleased when Lily stopped crying. He could not recall most of the things she told him. Lily was older than he was and more of the memories made sense to her. That was why she recalled them so vividly. She also told him about the losses she'd suffered. It was time to cry out her grief and she did. Lily felt grateful Josh was there for her. Afterward, there were no more crying episodes.

Lily graduated from high school and went away to college. She eagerly entered a new phase of her life. This time, no crisis separated them. Lily felt happy, and Josh missed her.

Chapter 3 - Grace

Lily had to put what happened with Josh out of her mind and focus on her senior year. Her workload would crush her if she let anything distract her. She was working on a major research project and asked the professor where she could find the data she needed. He told her that Grace Watkins, one of his Graduate Assistants, had just completed a project that might be relevant. She contacted Grace and they met for coffee at one of the campus hangouts.

Grace was tall, slender, and lithe. She had a long face, a prominent nose, a wide mouth, and luxurious blonde hair. Men noticed her wherever she went but backed off as soon as she looked at them. Grace let them know she wasn't interested.

She was two years older than Lily and like no other student Lily had ever met. Grace was kind, outgoing, and cheerful. (Most people at the college were serious and self-centered.) She radiated positive energy that others lacked. Lily felt delighted she had found someone different. It turned out they both enjoyed music, art, theater, and old movies. They quickly became friends.

Lily had lost the only man she loved after her disastrous night with Josh and all she could do was try to move on. She dated but didn't stay with anyone too long. Usually, it was because the men found her strikingly beautiful but had no interest in the things she liked. Lily was quick to notice their indifference and dumped them. She didn't want to feel she had to change herself so men would like her. If she didn't make someone happy, that was okay. She would rather just break up.

Grace's passion and energy soon infected Lily. As they worked together on the project, they often found themselves sidetracked into conversations about common interests. Lily found herself opening up to Grace in a way she had never opened up to anyone in her life. Grace became more like an older sister than her real sisters Helen, Barbara, and Amy had ever been.

Grace's special energy came from her deep sensuality. She was more like a magnificent animal than a conventional woman. The way Grace moved, the way she spoke, and the way she laughed, all gave Lily the sense that Grace was a free and uninhibited person. Lily stopped dating men as she and Grace became friendlier. She was getting such passionate energy from Grace that she didn't need a man to provide excitement.

One day, they were in Lily's dorm room. Grace asked Lily about dating. Lily thought about not replying, but something made her want to tell Grace how she saw her, and she confessed how much she admired Grace's passion. She had also noticed subtleties that Grace usually hid from others.

No one had appreciated Grace for a long time. Grace looked at Lily and decided she could no longer hide her feelings. "Lily, there's something I want to tell you about myself, and I hope you won't be mad... I'm gay." Lily listened calmly. "I haven't been with anyone for a long time. No one seemed worth the time or effort." Grace looked into Lily's eyes. "That's changed now. I'm attracted to you."

Lily put her arms around Grace. She had thought Grace might be gay but had not mentioned it. Although she was not a lesbian, she had found Grace attractive from the moment they met. Suddenly it was no longer just attraction, but connection. It was the first step toward becoming partners.

They became lovers soon afterward.

Lily graduated with a Social Work degree and found a research job at a social issue think tank. She and Grace moved in with Helen and Frank, Josh's parents. Josh had transferred to a local college after his sophomore year so he could commute and save money. Now, he also lived with his parents.

He thought having Lily around again might be awkward but felt relieved that she and Grace were partners. Josh assumed Lily was no longer interested in him. It took all the emotional pressure off him. He and Grace got along well.

Helen and Frank decided to move to Florida the summer after Lily and Grace moved in. They had a profitable Web design service with many exclusive clients. However, they didn't know if they would like Florida and asked Josh, Lily, and Grace to take care of the house for a while. Since they all worked and could easily pay upkeep, they agreed.

Josh gradually became more relaxed around Lily and they recovered some of their childhood closeness. In conversations, Grace learned a lot about Lily from Josh. However, she never found out about that night in Lily's dorm room. Nor did she know Lily had been in love with Josh.

Lily didn't want to think about what happened that stormy night. If she did, she might come to realize it still meant more to her than she could admit. She also didn't want Grace to feel threatened. If she knew the truth about Lily's feelings, Grace might think she was competing with Josh for Lily's love. Lily loved Grace a great deal and didn't want to alarm her, especially when it would have been a false alarm anyway. Lily felt certain Josh was not interested in her, and nothing would change that fact.

She was right.

Chapter 4 - Penny

Josh encountered Penny when she was handing out fliers about a seminar on overseas sweatshops. The petite dark-haired woman wore mismatched sweats. He was about to make a dismissive joke about sweats and sweatshops when he noticed the zeal in Penny's eyes. She wasn't like other campus protesters he'd met. Her sweet, clear voice made him want to listen.

Penny shared a few facts and then tried to engage him in conversation. He felt (rightly or wrongly- he couldn't tell) that she was flirting and liked it. When she mentioned an upcoming meeting, he decided to attend, more for her than the subject matter.

When he arrived, he sat in the back and hoped no one would notice if he snuck out when he got bored. Penny got up and walked to the lectern five minutes later. She was dressed more formally than when he met her before and he liked the way she moved. Penny welcomed the audience and went over the schedule of speakers. Then she paused and looked around the room as she tried to estimate the audience size. Penny made eye contact with Josh and smiled. He felt pleased she noticed him and settled in to listen to the first speaker.

Later, after the question-and-answer period, Penny thanked everyone for attending. She announced some events, one of which was a bus to DC for a national anti-sweatshop protest. As people filed out, Josh hurried toward the stage to ask Penny a question. "Excuse me, could I ask you to clarify what you said about how the World Bank causes the problems that force small economies to allow sweatshops just so they can survive?" Penny walked to the front of the stage and smiled at Josh.

"I was hoping someone would ask about that. Let me explain it to you." Penny jumped down to the floor and then turned as she heard someone call her name. She waved and then spoke to Josh. "You're a freshman?" she asked. Josh shook his head.

"Junior. I just transferred." Josh smiled, hoping he had impressed her.

"Let's see, the World Bank..., well... how much do you know about it?"

"I just heard of it for the first time today."

"Oh, okay. Let me fill you in." Penny started to explain something about the structure and history of the Bank and mentioned the flaws pointed out by Bank opponents. As she spoke, he admired how fired up she was. After a few minutes, Josh looked at his watch. She fascinated him, but he had to catch a train home. Penny noticed him checking the time and asked if he had somewhere to go. He lied and said no. She was ravenous after the talk and invited him to join her at the campus deli. Josh immediately agreed. Then she continued explaining facets of the Bank she felt were important.

"This is way more than you wanted to know, isn't it?" Penny asked as they walked across the campus. "I usually get carried away." Josh smiled and shook his head; he felt delighted she was talking to him. Penny started up again.

They ordered food and then settled into a booth. When the food arrived, Penny remarked that she was starving, stopped talking, and started to eat. Josh liked the way she ate. He noticed the way the muscles in her face changed as she chewed. Now that he sat across from her, he also noticed how expressive her face was. Although she was petite, she didn't seem delicate. Penny had a sharp nose, a wide mouth, and eyes that seemed to dart everywhere and take in everything even as she talked about the subject that interested her. Josh found himself hoping he could

become something that interested her. She caught him looking at her and flashed him a dazzling smile.

“So, tell me, who are *you*? Where do you come from?” Josh explained that he was a commuting student; she mentioned she lived in the dorm. Josh asked how she liked living on campus. He thought he might get another long speech. Penny said she liked it and then continued eating. He asked how she became involved with the anti-sweatshop movement.

“I went to a talk just like the one we did today. I heard awful stuff that made me angry. After the talk, I volunteered to help organize a campus demonstration. I liked doing that, so I got even more involved.” Josh again admired her dedication and fervor.

Penny didn’t tell him the real reason she was so passionate about social issues. She was avoiding emotional issues in her personal life. When she was twelve, her parents’ divorce shattered her world. Penny became suspicious and uncertain about love and romance. She also feared she was somehow to blame for her parents’ divorce. Penny wondered if something bad about her drove them apart. Maybe she had flaws only adults could see. Now that she was an adult, she worried about someone loving her. She feared whatever horrible thing she had done to ruin her parents’ marriage was still within her and anyone with whom she became intimate would eventually discover she was repulsive and reject her.

Josh liked Penny more and more as he got to know her. They became a campus couple and spent much of their time together. Their friends teased them, but they were happy. She became serious about Josh and considered a deeper relationship. Her self-doubt and fear about intimacy nagged at her. She needed to find out how serious he was before she moved any further. Penny spent time at his house so she could be around Grace and Lily. She knew Josh and Lily grew up together but he never talked about her. The few times she had seen them together they seemed distant and cool. That seemed unnatural to her.

Penny worried Josh’s coolness toward Lily might signal how he would behave with her, once they became more intimate. She also had doubts about herself. *Will I mess this up the way I messed up my parents’ marriage?*

Penny questioned Josh and Lily about their childhood. They mentioned their earlier life together. They had been like siblings but neither mentioned feelings. They talked about warm memories that contrasted with their present coolness. Penny wondered if something had happened between them but could not find the clarity she sought. She kept asking questions.

Grace became suspicious. “Why do you keep asking all these questions? What are you looking for?”

“Josh told me he and Lily were close when they were growing up.”

“I know,” Grace replied. “But, you’d never know it from the way they behave now.”

“That’s right. You’ve seen them together. They’re different when they’re around each other. It’s like they’re struggling to be civil.”

“Well, Lily told me she had a rough childhood and Josh kept her from going crazy.”

“Yeah, Josh told me the same thing. Maybe something happened *after* their childhood?”

“You mean in their teens?” Grace asked. Penny nodded. “What could have happened?”

“Maybe they both fell in love with the same girl,” Penny said.

Grace thought for a moment. “I don’t think so. Lily wasn’t gay back then.”

“You don’t suppose they had some kind of embarrassing teenage experience, do you?”

“You mean with each other? Probably not. Lily would have told me.”

Penny felt unconvinced. “You’re sure of that?” Grace nodded. She and Lily talked all the time and she felt they knew each other well.

Penny remained concerned. She probed the depth of her doubt but was still unable to see that much of her caution came from her assumption that she was responsible for her parents’ divorce. Could she trust Josh if he promised he would never leave her? Penny didn’t see her real problem. It wasn’t Josh, it was her. Was she ready to open herself and risk true love?

The struggle raged inside her. She felt torn between risk and vulnerability and remained apprehensive. Her uneasiness undermined their intimacy. Josh sensed something was wrong. Everything was magical when they were alone but not when they went out. Penny was always watching other people. He thought she was checking out other men and became uncomfortable going anywhere with her.

Grace noticed the tension between them and told Josh about Penny’s questions. She hoped she was not too late to save their relationship. Josh thought Penny was about to leave him for someone else and felt relieved when he found out she was only testing his love. When he questioned her, she confessed that she feared intimacy. Josh told Penny he loved her and wanted to be with her. He begged her to trust him and pleaded with her to accept him and their relationship (which was happy) as it was. Trust was the real issue for Penny. *I trusted my parents and look what happened. Can I ever trust anyone else?* She asked Josh for time to think.

Josh had scheduled a spring break trip and didn’t want to cancel it. He left Penny alone for a week but worried she might not be his girlfriend when he returned. As he traveled, he thought about what she was doing and why. He realized that he was also seeking assurance that she would stay with him and decided to allow her time to work out her feelings.

Penny wanted a guarantee that Josh would not abandon her if she turned out to be a terrible person. (That was what she feared she was, deep down. It was also the part about her past that she hadn’t told him.) However, her feelings for Josh were stronger than her self-doubt. She didn’t want to lose him. Penny’s honest introspection brought real insight and resolution. Prepared to emotionally surrender to Josh, she anticipated his return and could not wait to see him again.

There were flight problems on Josh’s return trip and the delay tormented Penny. Josh found a changed woman when he finally arrived. She felt so happy to see him that she reminded Josh of the Penny he first met. They didn’t discuss how the change came about but felt relieved everything had worked out. From then on, they were a solid couple.

Chapter 5 - Strange Attraction

“It’s something about his eyes,” Grace told Penny. “The first time I met him, he looked right into my eyes and I didn’t look away like I usually do. I saw something that drew me in. And then..., I *felt* something. I’m not sure what. Maybe depth, or warmth, or a forgotten memory.”

Penny had no idea why Grace was telling her this. They had never discussed being attracted to people before. “Does he remind you of someone from the past?”

“No one I can think of.”

Grace met Richard when he moved into the office next to hers. What Grace didn’t mention was that she had to look down to look into his eyes because he was several inches shorter than she was. Richard was only a few years older but looked and acted as if he was well into middle age. He dressed in corduroy jackets with elbow patches and light or dark pants. Grace (and others in the office) wondered if he was aware that styles had changed. Maybe he didn’t care.

Richard had a friendly face and often smiled but seemed shy. He also had a gentle, self-effacing sense of humor Grace found refreshing. They didn’t converse much but did share a few laughs. Most people made fun of others to get laughs. Richard was different.

As Grace made an effort to help him learn office routines, she found herself looking forward to seeing him. She sometimes wandered next door to his office for no reason or brought him coffee. He felt more comfortable with her than with other co-workers.

Grace began to sense that he liked her. Did he see something in her? What was it? She wondered if she saw something special in him. More importantly, Grace wondered if she felt something for Richard. This kind of experience was new to her and she needed to know if something important was happening.

She invited him to dinner when Lily was out of town. They would be free to relax away from the office, just the two of them, and talk one-on-one. Grace didn’t think he would accept, but he did. They shared a take-out Chinese meal and some inexpensive wine Rick brought.

Grace felt it easier to converse as the wine lessened their inhibitions. She asked for personal details such as why he was not married. He told her his wife Sharon had died several years earlier from breast cancer. Her death devastated him and he decided to avoid intimacy for the rest of his life. He had few friends, mostly couples he and Sharon knew. He still liked them and didn’t feel lonely or out of place when he was with them.

From time to time, one of the wives would ask him to take out a friend and he usually complied. His friends had some other interesting friends and he enjoyed the dates. Nevertheless, he always made it clear that he wanted to remain alone for the rest of his life. Whether they liked the idea or not, the women always accepted what he told them.

As he talked about himself, Grace realized he attracted her because he was unapproachable, just like her father Dan had been. He had also been friendly, kind, and good-natured, but always remained distant. Grace could never see into him. She grew up feeling there was something indefinable that separated them. He died when she was seventeen. She never knew him as an adult and never found out what separated them.

Rick had locked up his love in the past and never expected to open up again. He seemed firm about his choice. However, Grace sensed his deep loneliness. He was probably unaware of

it, but she heard yearning in his voice. She could not figure out if he yearned for his deceased wife or someone else.

As they talked, she found herself increasingly curious about him and tried to work out a way she could let him know without scaring him. She decided to tell him she was a lesbian and hoped this would make him feel more comfortable and open up to her even more. Rick seemed relieved when she told him. He had wondered if Grace was coming on to him and wanted to put her off without hurting her feelings. Now, he no longer had to worry and could just enjoy being with her.

They finished the wine. She opened another bottle and they went into the living room to get more comfortable. He sat in an overstuffed chair. Grace sat on the sofa and crossed her legs. Her skirt rode up enough that he could see the tops of her black stockings on her shapely thighs. Grace was shamelessly flirting and risked sending him mixed messages. She watched as he noticed and then sensed that he was reacting.

They passed the wine bottle and refilled their glasses. She suggested he sit on the sofa so they could put the bottle between them. He immediately moved to the opposite end of the sofa. That was close enough, for now. Even though they sat far apart, Rick felt her heat and smelled the sweet wine on her breath.

Grace never stopped to ask herself what she was doing. The wine made such a question seem unnecessary. She just surrendered to her instincts. The second his glass was empty, she grabbed the wine bottle and slid closer to him so she could pour a fresh glass. After she poured, she stayed next to him.

A few moments ago, when they sat apart from each other, Rick thought he knew exactly what was happening and felt comfortable with Grace. Now he looked at her and refused to believe she had told him she was a lesbian. Grace turned him on. He assumed the wine had affected them and didn't know what to do. Perhaps he was misreading the encounter. Grace had been friendly and relaxed but now seemed to want more. Rick also wanted more. He decided to touch her hand, arm, or shoulder, just to see what would happen.

Grace held her glass with one hand while her other hand rested on her leg. He laid his hand on top of hers. A shiver went through her body. He feared he had gone too far and moved his hand. She grabbed it, put it back, held it there, and smiled. He quivered and decided, in his alcohol fog, there was no reason to restrain himself any longer. Rick leaned over and kissed Grace.

This was the critical moment. Her response would decide if something more would happen. She pressed her lips to his and moaned. That was all he needed. He placed a hand on her stockinged leg and began to caress her thigh. The way he responded delighted her. She was sure they were well past the moment when he would pause and ask if she was truly a lesbian. It was no longer important and Rick didn't care anyway. He wanted her.

Men were so easy to manipulate. Not like women lovers. They responded to more than just a moan and a sexy leg. (Well, for some that was a start, but there was always more.) Grace began unbuttoning her blouse. Rick helped her and then opened it to see her breasts. He immediately touched them, so enchanted he could not take his hand away.

Grace eased her hand toward his crotch so she could ratchet their lust a bit higher. Rick was bone-hard already. She had to decide if they should do it there. There was a risk that someone would catch them but Grace remembered no one was due back for hours. Perhaps she

should take him upstairs to bed but that would give him time to think. She was almost certain he stopped thinking just after he placed his hand on her leg. They stayed on the couch.

She looked longingly into his eyes. He immediately unfastened her skirt and eased down her panties. As soon as they were gone, she laid back and opened her legs. He guided himself in as gently as he could. Grace sighed and Rick smiled.

“Go slow,” she whispered as he began to move. She’d had sex with men a few times and liked it. However, that was all she liked about men. They didn’t have the right kind of love inside them for her. She could only fall in love with women. She could not, however, recall sexual pleasure with any man like what she was enjoying right then with Rick.

Something started to build inside her. She realized to her amazement that she was connecting with him, something she had never done before with a man. She watched her feelings just to see where they would go.

After a few more moments of ecstasy, he whispered, “I’d better pull out.”

“No. It’s safe. You feel good.” Grace arched her back as he thrust deeper than before. Then she felt him gushing and smiled. A moment later, she came as well.

They lay still, unwilling to break their sexual connection. Finally, they both felt sticky and pulled apart. She reached for a box and handed him a wad of tissues. He sat there and held them as if he had no idea what to do. Grace thought his mind was likely somewhere else, probably in his past, with Sharon. She cleaned herself and then cleaned him.

Grace felt she had given him an opening into his past. Maybe connecting with her meant he had reconnected with his dead wife. Grace thought that could be good for him. “How long has it been?”

“Since before my wife went into the hospital. How long for you?”

“Huh?”

“Since you’ve been with a man?”

“Oh, too long,” she said, smiling. “That was incredible.”

“Yeah.” He looked into her eyes and she knew he was no longer in the past but there with her. She snuggled into his arms; they lay together and basked in their mutual afterglow.

“More wine?” she asked, after a few quiet moments.

“Wine, no. Sex, yes,” he replied, hoping he didn’t sound like a sex maniac.

She giggled. “I thought you’d never ask.” She played with his penis until he had another erection and then got up on all fours. Her renewed desire flattered him and he thrust harder than he had the first time.

Afterward, Grace noticed the time and explained one of her roommates was due at any moment. Rick understood and said he should go. He coyly admitted he didn’t want to, and shyly invited her to come to his place.

She smiled. “Next time.” He felt pleased she hinted there would be a next time.

They dressed. She walked him to the door and they shared a deep kiss before he left. Grace went into the living room. It smelled of sex. She didn’t want to think about what they did, or why they did it. Grace rearranged the pillows and sprayed some air freshener. Then she took a shower and got into bed. She hoped she would be asleep when Lily later came home from her trip.

Her alarm blared and woke her up. Lily was sleeping quietly next to her. Grace had awakened next to Lily almost every day for the past several years. Today, everything was different. The sober light of day made her realize she needed to think about what she had done and try to figure out why she did it.

They met at Rick's place after that and fell into each other's arms as soon as they were alone. They kissed, fondled, feverishly worked off their clothes, and couldn't get enough of each other. She had never been as sexually playful with anyone as she was with Rick.

Grace respected his decision never to be emotionally intimate again. She felt free with him, safe from entangling love. She thought she was just having wonderful sex and that was all either of them wanted.

She kept the affair a secret but became more passionate with Lily. Their lovemaking was the best since they first met. Lily noticed Grace's heightened passion but didn't ask where it came from.

The affair lasted a month. It ended when Rick confessed he was in love with her.

"What about your wife?" she asked him, pointedly. "What about being alone for the rest of your life? What about no more intimacy?"

"Well, what about *you*? You said you were a lesbian."

"I am."

"Then why did you-?"

"Rick, being a lesbian isn't about who you have sex with," she explained. "It's about who you fall in love with. I'm in love with another woman. I can *only* be in love with women, never men. They're closed up so tightly that nothing can get in or out. Women aren't like that. We are open, free, and loving in ways men can't imagine. Lily has me in her depths. I have her in mine. That can't happen with a man." She wanted to add, 'not even you' but she restrained herself. She didn't want her rejection to devastate him.

Her reply shocked him into silence, but then he had a revelation. "That's the way it was for Sharon and me." Grace looked at him, feeling puzzled. "I had her inside me, and she had me inside her. That's how it's supposed to be," he added, and then began to cry.

Rick let out all the hurt he'd carried since Sharon's illness and death. He had never grieved for her, just shut down all his emotions. He'd rejected intimacy because he was afraid of confronting his deepest grief. Rick's intimacy with Grace had brought it to the surface. He didn't know whether to feel angry or thank her. He just continued to cry as she held him.

She felt happy that he had shared himself with her. She also felt sad that she could never love men. Rick was a good person. He had been a great husband to Sharon and would be a great husband to someone new. However, Grace didn't want a husband. They had gone too far. She hugged Rick and kissed him on his forehead as he continued to weep softly.

Perhaps when he finished crying everything would be okay. Perhaps he would see himself in a new way; not worn down by the sad past but hopeful about the future. Maybe that could somehow liberate him. He finally stopped crying and she released him from her hug.

"I thought I found it again," he said, softly. She looked at him, puzzled. "Love, like Sharon and I had. I thought this was it..., only with *you* this time."

"It's not, Rick. It's not. You haven't found love with me. You've rediscovered it within yourself. It was there all the time but you couldn't feel it. Now you can. That's beautiful." She started to cry softly. "Beautiful," she repeated.

“I suppose you’re going to tell me we shouldn’t see each other anymore,” he said after a few quiet minutes,

Grace nodded. “Yeah. Go find somebody to live your life with.”

“I thought that was going to be you.”

She smiled broadly. “Listen, honey, you can do a *lot* better than me!”

“I doubt it,” he replied, also smiling, “But, I’ll take your word for it.”

Richard resigned the next day.

Chapter 6 - Breakup

Grace discovered she was pregnant six weeks after she broke up with Rick. They had used protection every time except the first when she thought it was safe because it was early in her cycle. Her eggs had other ideas. She went into shock immediately and was quiet and distant when Lily was around. Lily noticed and asked if she was not feeling well.

Grace looked away from Lily. “Oh, I’m feeling okay..., for a pregnant woman.” The look of hurt and betrayal on Lily’s face shamed Grace.

“Pregnant?” Lily could barely get the word out. Grace nodded. “How?”

“I was seeing a guy. We broke up last month.”

Lily’s shock nearly made her swoon. Her rage erupted before she could stop it. “Grace, when you told me you loved me, I believed you. I *really* believed you! How could you *do* this?”

“Lily, I’m sorry, but it’s done.”

“So when’s the abortion?”

“There isn’t gonna be one.”

“My God, you’re *keeping* the baby?” Lily shrieked. “Are you leaving me to be with the father?” Grace shook her head. “Then *why*...?”

“I need to.”

“And, me?”

“You can be the baby’s other mommy.”

“I don’t want to be *anybody*’s mommy!”

“Please don’t say that. Calm down.” Grace reached out to touch Lily but she pulled back. “Lily, I didn’t mean for this to happen, and it won’t change our relationship. I love you.”

“You *already* changed our relationship. Clearly, I’m not enough. You had to fuck some guy and then get pregnant!”

“It was an accident!”

Lily glared at Grace. “I’m just supposed to accept this *accident* and let things go on?” Grace didn’t answer. She looked into Lily’s eyes and wished she could touch her. “Shit! If you *wanted* to have a baby, why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I didn’t know until it happened. That’s the truth. I honestly didn’t know.”

“Does the father know?” Grace shook her head. “Why?”

“I don’t want him to know. I want this to be our baby, not his.”

“*Our* baby! You’ve got a lot of fucking nerve, Grace! Don’t you mean *your* baby?” Lily stormed out.

Two days later, on a Saturday, Josh got up early and went to the guestroom to get some old books from the closet. He found Lily asleep on the guest bed. He tiptoed into the room and tried not to wake her. Her eyes opened.

“Oh, hi, Josh,” she said, sleepily.

“Sorry to wake you. Um, why are you sleeping in here?” Lily sat up and then told him about Grace, her male lover, and the pregnancy. Josh felt incredulous. Lily and Grace seemed like the ideal couple. He thought nothing could ever affect them.

Lily was near tears. “Why does this always happen to me? First I lost my parents, then my sister, then you, and now Grace.”

Josh felt puzzled. What did she mean, ‘lost’ him? “Me?”

“Remember that night in my dorm room?”

Josh had persuaded himself she had been dreaming and nothing had happened. Should he tell her that, or did she still believe they had sex? “Yeah, it seemed like a misunderstanding. I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“Oh, really?” she said, feeling stung. “Well, I felt humiliated when I found out you didn’t feel the same way about me as I did about you.”

He tried to distance himself from what had happened. “Look, I was just sixteen. My feelings were all confused back then.”

“Well, my feelings are still the same,” she declared.

“What do you mean?”

“I still love you, Josh.”

“Lily, Penny and I...”

“I know, I *know*; you’re happy. You love each other. I can see that. I’m not trying to get you to change anything. I just want you to understand that my feelings for you have never changed.”

“Well, what about Grace? Didn’t you love her?”

“Oh, yes. Very much.”

“And, you’ve stopped loving her, just like *that*?” He snapped his fingers for emphasis.

“No, you have it wrong. She’s stopped loving *me*. She has someone else now.”

“But, the guy’s gone, Lily.” Josh paused to think. “Oh, I think I get it. You’re jealous of the baby?”

“I’m not jealous of anyone,” Lily lied. Jealousy seemed so petty. It made her feel she was being selfish. Perhaps she was. She thought she had all of Grace’s love, but now Grace wanted to share her love with someone else, a baby. She had already shared her love with Richard.

Perhaps Lily was jealous of both Richard and the baby and felt angry she was no longer the sole object of Grace’s love. Why should she just accept anything Grace wanted to do? There was nothing wrong with having boundaries and limits. Grace had pushed Lily past her limits and there was no way back.

Josh tried to get Lily and Grace to sit down and talk but Lily refused. She remained cold toward Grace but warm toward Josh and Penny. However, it was clear from her behavior that Grace’s unfaithfulness had opened a deep wound. Lily had to face the pain of all the losses she suffered throughout her life. She felt as if her life had come apart again and she was going to let it stay that way until she could figure out what to do.

Grace apologized to Josh and Penny for the disruption in the house. They felt sympathetic. Neither worried about her because both thought she knew exactly what she was doing, if not why she was doing it. Lily worried them. She could easily become stuck inside her feelings of grief and betrayal and not want to heal.

The crisis lasted two weeks. Josh hoped they would make up. When they didn’t, he spoke to Grace. Lily was his aunt, he explained, part of his family. She had lived there for several years. Grace was there because of Lily, but (Josh reminded her) they were no longer a couple.

Grace was way ahead of him. She told him she would be moving out. She and some friends were working out the details. Josh said he was sorry, Grace being pregnant and all, but he had to look out for Lily. Grace agreed and felt relieved she was leaving.

Lily's reaction stunned Grace. She could not believe she misread Lily and assumed Lily would want to share in parenting. Lily had become someone Grace didn't recognize anymore. She cared for Lily but knew they would never make up. Leaving seemed her only choice.

Grace and her friends moved out her stuff. Lily stayed in the guestroom, kept the door closed, and turned up the stereo. Grace wanted to say goodbye but decided not to intrude. She hugged Josh and Penny and then drove away with her friends.

Josh and Penny stood there feeling sad for a few moments. "I overheard that conversation you had with Lily a couple of weeks ago," Penny said. "I heard her say she still loved you. Grace is gone but she's still here, and I almost wish it were the other way around. I know she's your aunt, but I want you to know that, no matter how she says she feels about you, I love you and I'm not giving you up. Is that clear?" Josh said nothing and hugged her.

He worried about Lily. How were Josh and Penny supposed to deal with her if she became moody or depressed now that Grace had left? Did they even want to deal with her? He hoped she would come around to being more like the old Lily. If she didn't, he and Penny might have to move out as well.

Lily didn't become depressed or moody. Instead, she plunged into a series of short affairs. She brought men home and spent nights making love in her room. She saw each man a few more times and then broke up. Then she would bring somebody new home. Josh and Penny tried not to interfere.

When Lily was on her seventh affair, Josh felt he should talk to her. "Lily, this is your home and you can bring anybody here that you want. I have no problem with that. What I'm worried about is whether you know what you're doing. What I mean is, are your actions helping you, or hurting you even more?"

"I know *exactly* what I'm doing, Josh. I'm trying to get that fucking woman out of my mind. The only way to get rid of her is to fuck anyone I'm attracted to. Sooner or later, I'll know when I've had enough, and then I'll stop."

"Okay. Just be careful," he replied.

She smiled wryly. "Who's the older one here? Shouldn't I be giving *you* advice?"

"Just be careful," he repeated. He didn't know what else to say.

They didn't discuss it again. Lily continued her flings and gradually changed. She no longer resembled childhood Lily, teenage Lily, college Lily, or the Lily who was with Grace. She gained a sharp edge and became cool and sarcastic.

Lily also gradually changed the way she dressed and showed men what they liked to see. However, she never became a wanton party girl. She always remained in control and was almost methodical in carrying out her affairs. Josh saw that she knew exactly what she was doing, and why, and left her alone.

Chapter 7 - It's Over

Richard wasn't sure he recognized the woman's voice. "Hello, is that you, Grace?"

"No, this is Lily."

"Oh, sorry. Is she there?"

"I'm sorry, she's not," Lily told him.

"Oh, that's too bad."

"Who are you?"

"Just a friend. Well, a little more, actually. We used to work together, and we dated for a short time a few months ago. I just wanted to call and see how she was doing."

"So it was *you!*" Lily shrieked into the phone.

"*What* was me?" he asked.

"You're the one who got her pregnant."

"Pregnant? Are you serious?" Her statement shocked him and then conflicting feelings overwhelmed him. Could he have gotten Grace pregnant? Was he happy about it? How did Grace feel? Why didn't she tell him?

"She never told you?" Lily asked.

"We haven't talked in months. Are you sure?"

"She's probably in her fifth month by now," Lily said.

"You don't sound too certain."

"Well, she moved out. I haven't heard from her, either."

"Look, this is serious. I have to find out what's going on. Can I call her?"

"Yeah. I guess so. But, I don't have her number. My housemates might."

"Can you get it?" Richard asked.

"Not now. They're out."

"I can call back."

"No, I'll call you. What's your number?" He told her and she quickly ended the call.

Lily told Penny someone called for Grace and asked for her number. Penny quickly scribbled it on a scrap of paper. Lily realized Penny and Josh had kept in touch with Grace. She didn't know how she felt about it.

Her entire mental state changed after her talk with Richard. She had lived in a fog for several months but their conversation burned it away. Her brief, frenetic affairs seemed like fever dreams. She realized what she truly wanted was not men or sex. She needed to know the man who stole Grace's heart from her and how he managed to do it.

She called Richard two days later. He thanked her for being so prompt. She gave him the number and then casually asked him why he and Grace broke up. He hesitated to reply but she pressed him.

"I made the mistake of telling Grace I was in love with her," he explained. "She told me she could never love a man, no matter how much she liked him. Then she mentioned she was in love with another woman. She never told me who it was." Lily realized she had misjudged everything that had happened.

"It was me," she replied.

“I thought you said she moved out.”

“She did.”

“Well, *why*, if you don’t mind my asking?” he asked.

“She betrayed me. I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t talk to her or even pay attention to her when I saw her. I tried to put her out of my mind so that, even if she was standing right in front of me, I wouldn’t see her.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” he replied.

Lily sighed. “I guess it’s not really your fault. Anyway, it’s all over now.”

“Do you think you still love her?” Richard asked. His question surprised her.

“Do you think *you* still love her?” she retorted.

“I’m not sure. Probably I don’t.”

“Well, I *definitely* don’t. That ended several months ago.” She paused and neither of them spoke. Then she decided to ask the question that gnawed at her.

“Look, Richard, now that we’re having this heart-to-heart conversation, I need to ask you something.” Lily paused and steeled herself for his reply. “Why *you*? She and I were together for *four* years. She never mentioned finding men attractive. Suddenly she met you and everything changed.”

“I can’t answer your question. She never told me.” Lily felt he was being evasive, maybe to hide his real feelings, or to protect hers.

“You didn’t want to know?”

“Oh, yes. But, I didn’t want to *ask*. And, it wouldn’t have meant anything, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Well, she broke up with me. End of story.”

“You take care, Richard,” she said, and then hung up.

Lily thought about the reasons people fell in love. Everyone assumed it was because someone was handsome, beautiful, kind, gentle, smart, funny, passionate, or a myriad of other things. She thought people used those explanations because they didn’t know what else to say. Perhaps the real reason was something they could not name, something that touched them deep down inside. Love was a mystery. People only imagined they understood it. Lily certainly didn’t.

Grace’s new room was in a huge three-story Victorian house in one of the older suburban towns. There were four huge bedrooms, each with a private bathroom. The bedrooms were big enough for a bed, dresser, desk, overstuffed chair, and sofa. Her roommates were Lucy, Cornelia, and Rachel.

Grace had told her friend Cornelia how Lily rejected her because of the pregnancy. Cornelia introduced Grace to Lucy and Rachel. Grace told them her story and the women vowed to support her out of sisterly concern. They invited her to move in with them.

The bedroom had plenty of space for baby equipment. Grace picked up various items after she moved in. Besides her furniture, she had a crib, changing table, and the other paraphernalia she needed for the baby.

One evening Grace sat reading in her room. The house was quiet. She didn’t know who else was home. Her phone rang. She put down the book. “Hello?” she said, cheerfully.

“Hello... , Grace?” It was a man’s voice.

“Yes. Who is this?”

“Richard.”

“Who?”

“The father of your baby.”

“Oh. Who told you?”

“Lily. Why didn’t *you* tell me?”

“There was no need.”

“But, I’m as responsible as you for bringing a baby into the world,” he blurted out. “I’m willing to help and support you and the baby in any way I can. It’s the least I can do,” he added.

“Well thanks for the generous offer, but the baby and I are doing just fine.”

“Grace. This means a lot to me. Sharon and I never had kids. I want to be a father.”

“This baby won’t need a father. He or she has several mommies just waiting for the birth.”

“But, it’s my baby, too,” he protested. “Doesn’t that mean anything?”

“Listen, Richard, everything happened after you and I stopped seeing each other. I found out I was pregnant and I decided on my own to have the baby. I don’t expect anything from you, nothing at all.”

“But, I want to be involved!”

Grace thought for a moment. “Can you breastfeed?”

“Well, no... , of course not.”

“Then what else would the baby possibly need from you?”

“I just want to help you *and* the baby,” he insisted.

“Are you sure?”

“About what?”

“You just want to help me and the baby? I think you still want me, and you see the baby as a good way to get us back together.”

“Grace! That’s not fair!”

She knew his protest was hollow. “But, it’s true, isn’t it? You still think you love me, don’t you? I can hear the yearning in your voice.”

He thought about it and realized he still loved Grace, despite what he told Lily. “Yes, I still love you. I’m sure of it.”

“Do you remember why I broke off with you?”

“It was confusing,” Richard said.

“You said you loved me. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Did you really think the pregnancy would change anything?” Grace asked.

“Yes. I thought you might have changed your mind.”

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t.”

“I still don’t get it. I remember you told me you could only love a woman. But, then I just found out who that woman was and that you and she broke up.”

“So you thought there was an opening in my love life?” Grace didn’t intend to sound mean. He had caught her off guard. She had assumed he was out of her life and liked that he was gone. Now, he wanted to come back.

“I saw it as more than just an opening,” Richard explained. “With the baby and all, I thought you might need me, and wanted to get back together.”

“Look, I don’t want to hurt your feelings. I just want you to understand that I chose to do this on my own. That’s the way I want it. None of it has anything to do with you. I don’t need you. Period.” Grace waited for Richard to reply but her rejection stung him and he said nothing. She hung up.

The ambulance rushed Grace to the hospital two weeks later and she had a miscarriage. She asked Cornelia to call Penny and tell her. Lily was standing next to Penny when the phone rang. Cornelia’s message shocked Penny. As soon as she hung up, Lily asked what had happened. Penny felt it would be unfair not to tell her. The news disturbed Lily but she didn’t say anything.

Lily went to see Grace in the hospital the next day. Grace felt weak but pleased to see her. “I’m sorry you lost the baby,” Lily said.

“So am I,” Grace replied, weakly. “I guess it wasn’t time for me to become a mom.” Lily asked if she could make Grace more comfortable. Grace sensed Lily’s discomfort. “So..., how have you been?”

“Okay, I guess. Mostly.”

“Nothing exciting happening to you?”

Lily smiled uneasily. “Nothing as exciting as what’s happened to you, no.”

“You talked to Richard, right?” Grace asked.

“Yeah. Couple of weeks ago. Should I call him about this?”

“Hell, no. He’ll probably want to come and see me, and I don’t want that.” Lily stood in silence. Grace felt Lily wanted to say something but was not ready.

“What was it?” Lily finally asked.

“What was *what*?”

“About Richard?” Grace knew immediately what Lily meant.

“He’s a sweet guy. I felt sorry for him losing his wife. I also felt what I can only call an animal attraction to him the first time we were alone.”

“Do you still feel it?”

“What?”

“That animal attraction?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to find out. I never want to see him again.” Lily remained silent. Grace sensed she had something more to say.

“What about me?” Lily finally asked. “What about *us*?” she corrected herself. Lily’s question caught Grace off-guard and she looked away. She had not thought about Lily for several months and felt surprised Lily said ‘us’. Grace wanted to be extra careful about her answer. Lily had caused their breakup. She didn’t want to hurt Lily’s feelings but she had to let her know they would never be a couple again.

“Lily, they were wonderful years we spent together, weren’t they?”

“Yeah. I guess I didn’t realize how wonderful until after you left.”

Grace could not think of a kind response. “Oh, do you know about my new place?” she asked, changing the subject. “It’s a huge old Victorian with roomy bedrooms and private baths and I love it! And, my housemates are great. I like them, too.” Grace hoped Lily would take the hint and not talk about getting back together.

“Sounds nice.”

“Yeah. And, the woman that owns it is in Europe for the next five years.”

“So, you’ll be staying there?” Lily asked.

“Of course.”

“Oh. I wondered if you would consider... coming... *home*.”

“Lily, I can’t. That’s all behind me now. We had a beautiful relationship, but that was before. We can never have it again.”

“You don’t even want to try?” Lily pleaded.

“I know it won’t work. Please understand.”

“I wasn’t sure how you would feel about me now.”

“Oh, I like you, just like I always did.”

“But, you don’t love me anymore?”

“That’s right. What we had broke. We can’t put it back together.”

“I guess you’re right. I’m sorry for driving you out. What you did really hurt me. It reminded me of the other hurtful losses I’ve experienced. I felt overwhelmed.”

“Well, it’s good that you see that now and you understand what happened.” Grace’s sympathy was real. She still cared about Lily even if she could never again love her.

“Yeah, but I wish I could make it *un*-happen.”

“No one can do that.”

“I know.” Lily reached out to hug Grace and both began to cry.

Chapter 8 - Aftermath

Richard called Grace around the time the baby was due. He hoped she changed her mind after she gave birth. She told him about the miscarriage. He felt shocked and remained silent. Grace asked him if he was okay. He hung up.

Later, he fell into his memories.

Sharon had wanted children and felt disappointed Richard didn't give her any. They both were healthy but somehow his sperm never found her eggs. She wrongly assumed he didn't love her enough. He suggested artificial insemination. She thought it was disgusting and refused to consider it. They continued trying to get pregnant but the pressure made sex stressful and without pleasure. He felt he was trying to do a job.

Then they discovered Sharon had cancer. It had already advanced so far that the doctors offered little treatment. There was slim chance chemotherapy could slow cancer's spread, but she would die in a year or two, anyway. Sharon considered chemo but rejected it. She had seen what it did to others and didn't want to spend her last days in a weakened state. She wanted to use her energy while she still had it.

Richard apologized to Sharon for not having children. However, cancer had changed her perspective and she now believed it was good they hadn't. If there had been any children, they would soon lose their mother. Sharon became more religious. She went to mass, said the rosary, did confession, and took communion as often as possible. Richard accompanied her and supported her as much as he could although religion meant little to him. Neither of them had ever been Catholic before.

She also became more romantic. She bought sexy clothing and wore it to surprise him. They began to have passionate and uninhibited sex. There was no need to fertilize her. She just wanted to make love as much as possible. She wanted him to fill her up with love so she could carry as much as possible into the next life.

They had fun with each other for the first time in many years. Afraid it might cause her discomfort, he apologized for vigorous lovemaking. Sharon laughed and told him not to worry. She wanted him to fulfill all his sexual fantasies while she still could. One night they were making love and she cried out in pain. He immediately stopped but she urged him to go on.

"It's okay, now," she told him. Nevertheless, he was afraid of hurting her and said they should stop. "No, I want *more*," she demanded.

"Why are you doing this if it hurts?" he asked. She told him she wanted to make sure he would never forget her and would remain faithful to her for the rest of his life.

On her last night, she emerged from a morphine-induced haze and stared intensely at him. He looked into her eyes, saw her in there, and they reconnected one last time. She was still the woman he loved and she still loved him. She motioned for him to place his ear by her mouth.

"Don't forget me," Sharon whispered and then lost consciousness. She stopped breathing a few minutes later.

Richard cried uncontrollably for a week. His friends and family stayed with him, afraid he might hurt himself if he was alone. When he finally got his crying under control, he sat in their living room and looked around. The room looked as it always had throughout their marriage. However, Sharon was not there with him. She also was absent from the house and the world. Richard felt emptiness and loneliness that stayed with him for months.

He met Grace two years later. She was younger than he was and seemed different. She noticed him looking at her and smiled. They soon began to chat. There was a strangeness that made him wonder if she came from some other place; perhaps another world; maybe from the past; or another reality. He smiled at his goofy theories and decided he wanted to get to know her better.

Grace was from another reality, in a sense. She was a lesbian. He'd known other lesbians and they never seemed unusual or strange. Nor had he been curious about them. They were just people to him. Grace was different. He liked her very much. When she asked him to drop by for dinner, he was eager to go. He hoped to get to know more about her.

He assumed because she was gay that she would not feel attracted to him. That made it easier to talk to her. Their sexual chemistry began after they drank the wine. He became too tipsy to think and just went with the flow. Their sex was miraculous. It brought him back to life. The next day at work, he apologized. Grace told him it was okay.

Their mutual attraction baffled them. Grace went with the flow as well and hoped she would eventually understand what was happening. She asked if she could come to his place. They enjoyed each other passionately for a month and neither wondered where it would lead.

Richard finally confessed that he was in love with her and she realized it had gone too far. They were having a delightful time but she had just been playing. It was not mere play for Richard, however. He had been waking up, coming back to life after two years of grieving for Sharon. He had forgotten life could be fun but Grace helped him rediscover love and he wanted to keep her for himself. He thought she was the cause of his happiness but he was wrong. She was the stimulus for his reawakening. All the happiness was coming from within him but he didn't understand it. Now that he had found her, he didn't want to let her go. She told him it was over.



Her decision to have the baby destroyed Grace's life. She wanted to understand why she made that choice instead of having an abortion. She had never thought about becoming a mother. When she got pregnant, however, it became an obsession. She lost her relationship with Lily and rejected a relationship with Richard. All for a baby she ended up not having. Why?

There had never been anything wrong with her life. She had always felt happy, content, and self-assured. Others (like Lily and Richard) saw her as free, uninhibited, and sensual. She seemed more like a magnificent animal than a normal woman. The way Grace moved, the way she spoke, and the way she laughed, enchanted both her lovers. However, that was not really how she felt, deep down.

Grace had not wanted the baby so she could be a mother. Somehow, she believed a baby would return her to a time when life was just living and nothing more; when the only reality was the present moment; a time when life was new and full of unlimited possibilities. It was as if she expected the baby to become her parent, instead of the other way around.

However, it was wrong to want a child for selfish reasons. Children had their own lives and a parent's responsibility was to nurture them. Parents should never use their children to nurture themselves. Her miscarriage saved her from a terrible mistake.

Grace's elusive notion that she could somehow return to her childhood had ruined her life and her love for Lily. Instead of returning to a time of joy and bliss, she had hurt three people:

Richard, Lily, and herself. Only the unborn child had escaped being hurt. Grace realized that she would have been a lousy mother.

It was too late to fix everything and apologies would be hollow and meaningless. She didn't want to go on as she was, either. Grace now distrusted herself, her feelings, and her urges. Perhaps it was time to examine her life from a new and different perspective.

Josh's parents called and said they decided to retire to Florida and needed the money they had tied up in their house. They apologized to Josh, Penny, and Lily for putting the house up for sale. The three of them did not feel concerned. None of them thought the generous arrangement would last forever.

Penny and Josh wanted to live alone but didn't know how to tell Lily without hurting her feelings. They didn't want to seem as if they were rejecting her, they just wanted privacy. They also hoped their new place would strengthen them as a couple. Penny also wanted Josh to get away from Lily. They planned to tell Lily but kept putting it off.

One night Josh and Lily happened to be arriving home at the same time. "I'm going to miss this place," Lily said. Josh agreed and then saw an opening. "Penny and I have looked at a few places, but we haven't found anything yet." Lily looked surprised.

"You should have told me so I could have gone with you."

"What do you mean?"

"To look at places. Don't I get a say in what you choose?"

"Actually, no. The choice belongs to Penny and me. After all, it's going to be our first *real* place together."

"Oh... How nice," Lily replied. They separated as soon as they got inside the door. Lily went upstairs. Josh went into the kitchen. He was not sure that the conversation had gone well. In his haste to clarify what they wanted, he might have hurt Lily's feelings.

Overcome by sadness, Lily sat on the edge of her bed. She was close to losing the home she lived in for many years as well as the people she loved. The future suddenly seemed dark and cold, lacking the warmth of home and hearth. Josh knocked and asked if he could come in. She told him it was okay. He noticed she had been crying.

"Lily, we'll still see each other, and we'll always be family," he pointed out. She nodded and then motioned for him to leave. She didn't want 'family,' she wanted to live with the people she had lived with for years. A family tree and shared DNA were unimportant if people were apart. More important were security, trust, and sharing. These would vanish after they left the house.

She began looking for a place the next day and hoped to find something quickly so she could move out before they did. At least she could pretend she was leaving them, although it was small comfort. Luckily, the place she found opened her to a very different life.

Chapter 9 - New Friends

Lily hoped two-thousand-three would be a better year. She met Jane, her chatty third-floor neighbor, the day she moved in. As Jane helped her carry boxes, she told Lily about herself. She was a photographer and used the attic apartment for her studio. Jane traveled a lot for shows, research, and work. She had a couple of boyfriends who visited from time to time and stayed a few days or a week. Lily thought Jane was in her early fifties and would never have guessed she was a woman who had several lovers. She looked like a frumpy, slightly overweight middle-aged housewife. Lily didn't mention her impression to Jane.

Simon was Jane's younger boyfriend. He was around Lily's age and seemed shy. Her girlfriends teased her about having a 'boy toy,' but she and Simon had a special connection that went back to his adolescence. The older boyfriend (Peter) was closer to Jane's age. He was wild, spontaneous, and free. She loved both of them very much but had no desire to live with either one.

Jane also told Lily about Diana, who owned the house and lived on the first floor. Lily mentioned she heard that Diana was a minister. Jane smiled, told her Diana was a great person and asked her not to hold it against her that she was a minister. Lily chuckled and felt welcomed.

Diana invited Lily for coffee the first time they met. She was a chubby blonde in her early forties who never seemed to stop smiling. Lily asked Diana about her ministry and her church.

"Oh, we're liberal Christians," Diana said.

Lily felt curious but didn't want to offend Diana. "There are such people?"

Diana smiled. "Oh, yes. *Plenty* of us. We just don't make as much noise as the fundamentalists. Are you religious?"

"I think about it from time to time. That's all."

"Nothing wrong with thinking. I wish more people would do it, especially about their religion."

"So what made you become a minister?"

"Well, what happened was as big a surprise to me as it was to the rest of my family. I just accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and placed my life in His hands. And then, to everyone's surprise, He led me into the ministry." Lily felt uncomfortable with Diana's evangelical language and began to wonder if Diana was planning to proselytize her. Diana noticed.

"You look uneasy," Diana said.

"I'm not used to hearing people say those kinds of things."

"Don't sweat it. They're just words." Diana's candidness struck Lily. "Words come from up here," she said and then pointed to her head. "But Jesus lives here," she pointed to her heart. "He doesn't need words." Diana's religion intrigued Lily.

"Did you accept Jesus because of some mystical experience you had?" she asked.

"Many people think that's the way it happens. It's not. I understood I was free to choose from just about everything that exists. I chose Jesus. It was my free choice."

"Choice? Really? I wouldn't have guessed that."

"Well, I thought about it for a long time before I realized this world is exactly the sad, tired place it appears to be. It's full of people who are hurting in a myriad of ways. The only way

I could make any sense of it was by accepting Jesus. And when I accepted Jesus, I also accepted myself; because Jesus accepted *me*.”

“It sounds confusing.”

“The world *was* confusing, for a while. But, if you approach it in the right way, when the answer comes, you *know* it. My answer came in the form of Jesus. I don’t know how else to say it.”

“I’ve heard of other people who say Jesus chose them and then they surrendered.”

“I guess that works, too. I was too young and stubborn just to accept passively whatever revelation came along. I wanted to choose my revelation, and I did.”

“Wow.”

“Look, I don’t want to scare you into thinking I’m recruiting you or anything, but, you might enjoy coming to my church and meeting some of the members. You’d probably like many of them. A few live nearby, so you’d be meeting your neighbors, too!”

Lily frowned. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to sing. You don’t have to pray. You can just listen, or not. Sit in a back pew. Bring a book if you want. Nobody will bother you.”

“But, won’t they start trying to convert me?”

Diana’s smile broadened. “Lord, no! What kind of church do you think we are?”

“Don’t churches do that?”

“Oh, they try, but it rarely does any good. People make their choices in their own good time when they’re ready. Like I did.”

“It almost sounds too good to be true.”

“Well, it’s not all beautiful flowers and uplifting hymns, I tell you. Some people say the minister is *way* too bossy and can nag them unmercifully.”

Lily grinned. “Do you?”

“Of course. It’s my job!”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s my job to put it all out there where people can see it, touch it, and learn about it, and then see what effect it has on them.”

“I like that.”

“Drop by. Or, walk over with me some Sunday. Check it out.”

Lily thought for a few moments and then changed the subject. “So, you’re single?”

“I am now. My partner died two years ago. I miss her, terribly. So do many of the church members.”

“Did they know you were gay when they hired you?”

“Of course. They recruited me *because* I’m gay. One of my friends was a member. He thought the congregation and I might be a perfect fit.”

“So, it’s a gay and lesbian membership?”

“Hell, no! There are a few gays and lesbians. Most of the people are straight. But, they think differently than other congregations do. When most other denominations were hounding gays, they decided to hire a gay minister just because they were pissed at all the homophobia everywhere else. Of course, it helped that I was so personable and experienced,” she added, grinning. “What about you?”

“Well, my partner and I broke up almost a year ago. It was my fault. I couldn’t handle that she got pregnant and wanted to keep the baby. Of course, to get pregnant, she had a brief, passionate affair with a man. I was jealous and felt devastated.”

Diana nodded sympathetically. “Too much all at once?”

“Yeah. That’s it.”

“How long were you together?”

“Over four years. She was the only woman I’d ever been in love with.”

“So how’s her baby?”

“She had a miscarriage.”

“Oh, God, that’s awful. I’m sorry,” Diana replied. Lily didn’t agree. She still thought the miscarriage was punishment for what Grace did to her.

Two nights later Lily’s phone went dead. She knew Diana wasn’t at home and climbed the steps to Jane’s apartment on the third floor. Jane heard her on the steps. “Come in. It’s open. I’m just finishing up some work.” Lily opened the door. Jane’s apartment was the entire large attic. She had divided it into a photo studio, kitchenette, and bedroom.

“I don’t mean to bother you,” Lily said. “My phone went dead and I need to call the phone company.”

“Sure. I’m glad you dropped by. Can you stay and talk awhile?” Lily noticed someone else in the room. She saw Simon posed on the floor with randomly sized pieces of rough tree bark draped over different parts of his body. There were floodlights on thin metal stands. Jane flipped off the lights and told him they were done, for now.

“Simon, this is Lily, my new neighbor downstairs.” Simon nodded, removed the bark, and got up, stark naked. He walked casually over to the bed and put on his pants, unconcerned that Lily was watching.

Lily saw enough of him to notice that he wasn’t muscular but wasn’t scrawny, either. He had a slender, well-proportioned body with long legs, graceful arms, and a pleasant long face. His full head of tousled blonde hair made Lily wonder what kind of photos they had been taking. Perhaps the tree bark wasn’t supposed to be in the picture but something Simon grabbed to cover himself when Lily interrupted them.

“Put some on coffee, will you?” Diana asked, casually.

“He’s comfortable in his body, isn’t he?” Lily remarked, trying to mask her embarrassment.

“You noticed! He trained as a dancer but he sells software now. He grew up the only male in a household of five women. A small house, too.”

Jane told Lily about Simon’s mother who realized that she could not rearrange their household just to keep him separate from the girls. She decided to let him and the girls mix in the bathroom. They became used to him wandering in to pee and he put up with them blow-drying their hair all the time. Females were nothing special or different to him. Simon saw every woman as a sister and not as a sex object. He was not like most men who swooned over boobs, asses, or legs. He knew the real woman was inside her body. He sometimes stared intensely into women’s eyes because he wanted to connect with the person.

Lily's embarrassment began to fade. "Is he one of your models?"

"Yeah. Also my boyfriend. I mentioned him to you, remember?" Lily nodded.

The three of them sat at the little kitchen table, sipped coffee, and discussed Lily's discoveries about the neighborhood. She was not opposite Simon and he didn't try to look directly into her eyes. However, after she left, she realized she might want to look directly into his eyes. She had no idea where the random thought came from and dismissed it with a chuckle.

"Lily's beautiful, isn't she?" Simon said after she left.

"I saw how you looked at her," Jane teased. Simon ignored her insinuation.

"She's around my age, but she doesn't seem like the other women I've met who are my age."

Jane felt genuinely curious. He didn't often share his thoughts with her. "What do you mean?"

"Well, most people finish school, start careers, get married, and start families. Little by little, they metamorphose into somebody else. And, they don't realize how they've changed. You can see it in their eyes. They know something's missing. It's like they've lost themselves and they don't even know it."

"That's some serious philosophical stuff for somebody as young as you," she joked.

"Hey, I can do more than pose and screw, you know," he teased her back.

"Speaking of which..., it's been a while. I've missed you. Why don't we turn in for the night?" They shut off the lights and climbed into Jane's huge bed. The couple had shared it many times before. She didn't know if Simon ever thought about their previous lovemaking but each time had been memorable for her.

"You think she'd pose for you?" he asked, afterward.

"Were you thinking about her while we were doing it?" she asked, mildly surprised. He didn't normally talk about other women. They were all just people to him.

"Not *while*, no. She just popped into my head after we finished," he admitted.

"Maybe. I was thinking that too."

"Make sure I'm around when she does."

Jane grinned. "Thanks for the warning. I'll make sure you're *not* around."

The church service turned out to be nothing like what Lily expected. She anticipated pretend piety but there was none. There was some joyful singing and vigorous clapping. Occasionally somebody would release a loud 'hallelujah' into the sanctuary. No one tried to be holier than anyone else was; they just all had a good time. The notion of religious service as pure celebration had never occurred to Lily and she liked it.

Diana gave a sermon on the danger of self-centeredness. She told them about the interconnectedness of all lives. Events that affect others affect us as well, even if we do not realize it at the time. She urged people to practice making small positive efforts and doing small generous actions. In addition, she didn't say Jesus or Christ even once!

Several people greeted Lily after the service. When they found out Lily lived in Diana's building, they asked if Lily had known Sarah, Diana's deceased partner.

“We loved her. She was an amazing woman,” David, one of the oldest members of the congregation, told her. “In fact, some of us joke that we only hired Diana so we could get Sarah to come here,”

“Was she a minister, too?” Lily asked.

“No, Sarah was a therapist. She had a deep well of joy that never became exhausted. Not the schmaltzy, self-centered pseudo-happiness some people use just to get people to like them. Her joy was real. Everyone felt it.”

They knew from the first interview they wanted her. She worked hard to build up the congregation, but she was not a Christian. She was a Wiccan and started a coven. It broke up after she died. No one could bear the agony of repeating the rituals and prayers she taught them.

“It’s funny that the sermon was about self-centeredness,” he said. “Sarah didn’t even know the word. Whenever there was a problem, she would work harder than anyone else to solve it. She didn’t do it so everyone would notice what a wonderful effort she was making. She did it because she genuinely cared about the problem, almost as if it was hurting her, as well as the real victims.”

Lily walked home alone, thinking about Sarah. *Where do people like that come from? She wondered. I wish I had known her. She sounds awesome.*

Chapter 10 - New Home

Penny and Josh felt strange in their new apartment. They liked the place well enough. It was roomy and pleasant. It had a nicely appointed kitchen and there were many windows for houseplants. They took several pieces of furniture from the house but the place never looked right, no matter how they arranged things. Their familiar furniture was in the wrong place, and they missed that place. Consequently, they were not happy; there was tension in the air.

After a month, Penny began talking about moving to another city where she had friends who were activists. Josh didn't want her to go without him, but he didn't want to go with her, either. They both knew the cause of their unhappiness was more than just moving out of the house.

Josh encouraged Penny to involve herself in local issues and advocacy groups. She tried, but most of the groups were impractically small. Although they had many meetings, they didn't get much work done. Penny wanted a group that was more than letterhead, an answering machine, an email list, and a website. She looked for a group that talked and acted. Her earlier interest in globalization issues led her to a local group, Mariposa Pax, which concentrated all its effort on one huge multinational corporation. The group conducted protest marches, demonstrations, candlelight vigils, and occasional civil disobedience actions. Everyone was focused, principled, and in it for the long haul.

Mariposa Pax had a small, cluttered office in a church basement. Larry, the sole staff person, worked there. Penny volunteered to help. She cleaned, organized, and took inventory of banners, signs, placards, and other props used for demonstrations. The work took several months. Penny also attended meetings, planning sessions, demonstrations, and civil disobedience actions. She discovered that she wanted to work for a group like Mariposa Pax, or start a new group and build it up.

Penny vowed to stay away from pretentious names and fancy letterhead. She hoped to lay a foundation for action. Mariposa Pax had a long history of focused action and contacts with similar groups all over the world. These groups included committed activists who would not let go of an issue. They didn't protest the trendy issue of the month. They carefully planned and carried out lengthy campaigns to raise awareness of important problems and change public opinion. She wanted to look at the world, decide what needed to be changed, organize, and then do it.

Josh didn't share her enthusiasm. He tried to sidetrack her activism by asking her to marry him. Penny turned him down. Then he suggested having a baby. She refused, more emphatically. Finally, he realized the only way he could remain close to Penny was to become part of the group she was forming.

Penny knew all the ways a group could shine a light on a hidden issue. She could think fast and spoke well on TV or radio. Josh became an envelope stuffer, gofer, or driver, and someone they could always hit up for a loan to keep the group going. Nevertheless, he spent time with her. He hoped if he just stayed with her long enough, she would lose interest in her activism, and return to her interest in him.

One weekend when Penny was away at a conference, Josh called Lily. They chatted for a while about their new apartments and neighborhoods. She noticed his voice seemed tinged with

sadness and asked him if anything was wrong. He told her about Penny's 'new' love, and his worry that he might eventually lose her.

Lily suggested he was overreacting. He didn't like what she said but realized she might be right. He reminded her of how he was once her anchor and pillar of support and asked if she could now do the same for him. His plea moved her and she invited him to come over so they could talk.

The moment she let him in the door, Josh exclaimed that it was great to see her and kissed her. He insisted it had been too long since they were together. Lily knew her feelings for him had not changed. She began to wonder if his feelings for her had begun to change and if she could take advantage of his difficulty with Penny to reconnect with him. Josh wanted to reconnect. He had convinced himself Lily could soothe and comfort him and fantasized about spending the weekend in bed with her.

They settled down with some pizza and beer and started to talk. Josh didn't tell her anything he had not already shared on the phone. They relaxed together in a way they had not done for years.

"Why don't you hang out here all weekend?" Lily suggested. "I can introduce you to my neighbors and you can go to church with me on Sunday."

Lily had never mentioned religion.

"You go to church?"

"Yeah. It's great."

"I had no idea."

"Well, you would have known if you had bothered to keep in touch since we moved out," Lily scolded, playfully.

"Oh, speaking of keeping in touch, that reminds me; Grace married that guy who got her pregnant. She gave him another chance and found out she had been wrong about him. They seem happy."

"I had no idea," Lily said, coolly. She didn't want her old feelings about Grace to reawaken and overshadow her time with Josh.

"Well, you would have known if *you* had bothered to keep in touch," he mocked. She abruptly got up.

"Well, goodnight. Here's a blanket. You'll be comfortable on the couch." He balked at the mention of the couch and asked if he could sleep with her.

"No!"

"You told me you loved me."

"I do. But, that doesn't mean you can drop by and sleep with me whenever you're sad."

Josh frowned. "Oh, Lily, I didn't mean that. I'm sorry. I meant the way we used to sleep together when we were kids."

"Remember what happened the last time we did that?"

"Yes, I do. I was an asshole. I hurt you. I never got a chance to apologize."

"Thanks. Here's the blanket. Sleep well." She went into her bedroom and closed the door. She heard him walk to the bathroom and back and then heard the couch springs squeak as he lay down. Satisfied that he had settled in, she turned off the light and went to sleep.

Lily awoke around two-thirty to find Josh fully dressed and sound asleep on top of the covers beside her. She had not heard him come in or felt him get into bed. Lily eased herself out of bed and spent the rest of the night on the couch. She woke him around nine.

“C’mon. It’s a nice day. Let’s get coffee and sit in the park.”

“Okay.” Neither mentioned that he had slept in her bed. They met Jane and Simon heading out for the day. Lily introduced everyone. They went their separate ways.

“Is he her son?” Josh asked.

“No; her boyfriend. One of them, anyway,” Lily replied.

Josh smiled. “Boy, this is turning out to be an interesting neighborhood. I might want to live here, too.”

She laughed and playfully punched his arm. “No way,” she said.

They bought coffee and found a park bench. “All right. Let’s try to sort this out. I know you, and I know Penny. I should be able to help.”

“I’m not sure you’d know Penny anymore.”

“How much could she have changed?”

“Well, maybe it’s just me, but she seems to have changed an awful lot.”

“I think that’s because you are too close to the problem. Maybe we can back away for a while and you can fill me in on what she’s been doing.” He told her about recent events, her returning to activism, being great at it, and founding a social action community of her own.

“Wasn’t she an activist when you met her?”

“Yeah.”

“Isn’t that why you fell in love with her?” she asked, pointedly. He nodded. “Then she’s just returning to her roots. What’s the problem?”

“Well, she’s changing back to the person she was when I first met her.”

“Didn’t you like that person?”

“I did, but I didn’t. And, over time, I weaned her away from activism.” She sensed his problem right away.

“So now you’re jealous?” she stated, flatly.

“Of what?” he asked, confused.

“Her activism.”

“Well, I think she prefers that over me.” It was his real feeling and he finally admitted it. She let his comment hang in the air and hoped he had heard himself.

“Maybe you should just ask her what she’s feeling,” Lily suggested.

“But, I don’t want to.”

“Are you just going to let this go? What if she breaks up with you?”

“What should I do?”

“Sit down and talk to her. Be calm. Discuss your feelings. But, don’t pressure her. No guilt.”

Josh frowned. “I don’t know if I can do that and remain calm and everything.”

“You can. Just be realistic and honest. Discuss it like two adults. Don’t cling to her. Let her see you can be rational and understanding. It might make a difference.”

“You mean things will go back to what they were?”

“I wouldn’t expect that. From what you’ve told me, I don’t think she’s going to give up her activism. But, things could change, and then go on in a new way. You might like it.”

“You lost me now.”

“Okay, just remember to be calm, honest, and thoughtful.”

“I’ll try.”

They ran into Diana later. She hugged Lily enthusiastically and nodded to Josh. They stood together and talked about the neighborhood. Diana mentioned some church gossip and then warmly hugged Lily again before they went their separate ways.

“Is she always like that with you?” he asked.

“What?”

“She seemed pretty affectionate.”

“That’s the way she is.”

“She was only warm with you. She was cool toward me.”

“She doesn’t know you.”

“No, I think there’s a different reason.” He paused and wondered if he should go on. Lily had been frank when they talked about him and Penny. Perhaps he should be frank, as well.

“She’s interested in you.”

Lily didn’t seem surprised. “You think so? I’ve never noticed.”

Josh suspected Lily had noticed but didn’t want to admit it. “She seems nice.”

“She is. I like her a lot.”

“Maybe you should let her know that.”

“And, maybe I shouldn’t. I don’t know if I want to get involved with anyone.”

“Think about it. She definitely likes you.”

After Penny returned from the conference, she and Josh sat down for a heart-to-heart talk. Penny apologized for neglecting him and assured him she didn’t want to break up. She explained her activism preoccupied her because there was so much work to do and never enough time to do it all. They spent a romantic evening together but the next morning Josh remained unconvinced. He hid his anxiety from her.

Weeks later, Penny went to an activist conference in Chicago. She received a job offer there and accepted it. She phoned Josh and told him the news. He was not enthusiastic. Penny sensed he felt threatened and they might now face a crisis she had hoped to avoid.

She called Lily to ask her to help convince Josh to move to Chicago with her. Lily invited Josh over to talk. Josh suspected Penny wanted them to break up and was pushing the decision onto him. Lily tried to convince him that was not true.

Around eleven pm, Jane’s older boyfriend Peter knocked at the door. Peter was ruggedly handsome but soft-spoken and a little shy. Lily had only met him once before and had not thought about him afterward. She wondered why he had knocked at her door. He apologized for the late visit and asked if Lily knew where Jane was. His apartment had flooded and he hoped to stay at Jane’s place but didn’t have a key. Lily told him Jane had been gone for days and she

didn't know when she was coming back. Since she also had no key, she offered to let him stay with her. Josh offered to leave but Peter told him not to.

Josh and Peter hit it off right away. They shared a couple of beers and chatted about their lives. Lily listened for a while but eventually went to bed. She didn't care where they slept so long as it wasn't in her bedroom.

Peter and Josh talked into the night. Peter owned Aphrodite Limited, a chain of classy sex accessory shops. He described the business to Josh, who found himself fascinated. Aphrodite Limited carried sex toys, clothing, videos, and books, and provided a private bulletin board for customers to connect.

The shops were not out-of-the-way stores in roadside sleaze strips. He had developed a way to market his goods in malls. His stores looked no different on the outside from Victoria's Secret or other mall shops. He never displayed sex items openly in store windows. There was a store logo, but the bags were plain brown with no printing or images.

The next day they went with Peter to check on his apartment. The flooding had done much damage and repairs would take at least six months. Josh invited Peter to share his apartment and Peter agreed.

That accidental circumstance helped Josh decide not to move with Penny to Chicago. He called her and told her calmly there was no need for her to come back. He would box and ship all her possessions. Josh's abrupt ending of their relationship surprised her. She had found what she wanted. It seemed he had figured out that he didn't want her. Their breakup happened quickly and neither regretted it.

Penny settled in with her new activist friends. Her enthusiasm, acuity, and daring impressed them, and they felt pleased they recruited her. They asked her to host a conference, but she refused. "I don't do conferences," she said. "I do *action*. If that's what you want, then I'm your girl. Otherwise..." They realized she was already way ahead of them. She sketched a plan for a national campaign that awed them with its simplicity and directness. Penny happily immersed herself in her work and never looked back. Josh became a distant but pleasant memory.

Chapter 11 - Simon

Lily ran into Simon on the stairs. He seemed perplexed and asked if she knew when Jane was coming back. Lily shook her head. Simon was quiet. She continued up the steps and unlocked her door.

“Remember when you came in and I was posing for Jane?” he asked, just as she entered her apartment.

She stopped and looked at him. “Yes.” He smiled at her. His eyes sparkled. She felt something in the pit of her stomach.

“I caught a glimpse of your eyes when you looked at me,” he said. The feeling in her stomach became stronger and more pleasant. “I thought I saw lust in them.” Her body was flooded with heat.

Lily looked away. “You did.”

“After you left I couldn’t stop talking about you. Jane almost got mad.” He paused again and considered what to say next. Lily waited anxiously. “Well, could we meet for coffee sometime?”

Lily looked at him and wondered if he could tell how aroused she was. “Sure. Do you want to come in, right now?” She tried to seem casual. “I can make coffee and we can talk.”

She went in ahead of him and closed the door as soon as he was in the room. *It’s now or never*, she thought, lustily. Lily backed him against the door and kissed him. Simon kissed her back. Their hands explored each other and their lips never separated.

Lily began to remove his shirt and he pulled her sweatshirt over her head. She was not wearing a bra and his hands went right to her breasts. She gave a little moan and jammed her tongue inside his mouth. They were on the couch naked a moment later and he was about to enter her. She closed her eyes so she could delight in her senses. He eased himself in.

“God, you’re wonderful,” he remarked. She replied by lifting her hips a little so he could get in deeper. Simon was in no mood to hurry. He wanted to make this last as long as possible. They moved together slowly and dreamily. She noticed sweat covering their bellies.

“I’m going to turn over,” she whispered.

“Great.” Simon pulled out and Lily turned over. She reached for his penis and guided him back inside. Then she went wild under him. He realized this must be her favorite way to do it. Their earlier sex had been slow and patient but this was fast and intense.

“Oh, my God!” Simon had not expected such intense sensations. Lily came and then waited. A moment later, his penis swelled and spurted.

“Oh, yes,” she moaned. He slowed down. She had another orgasm almost immediately. Then, it was over.

“My God, that was incredible,” she said. Simon lifted his body off hers and reached for a nearby box of tissues. Lily told him not to worry. He lay beside her. When they were side-by-side, she pulled a light blanket over them.

“I’m really glad you looked into my eyes and saw my lust,” she said. “That was amazing.” He smiled. “So, tell me about you and Jane.”

“She and my mom were close friends for many years but then something happened and they stopped speaking to each other. Around the same time, I was having problems with my mom and decided to leave home. Jane found out from one of my sisters. At first, I just lived on

the streets or stayed with some friends. She found me and told me the streets were dangerous. She said that if I ever needed a place to stay, I should come to her. A few days later I did. I thought it might be for a night or two, but she invited me to stay as long as I wanted. Well, I settled in and started getting used to living with her. She was easygoing. She didn't treat me like a kid. I liked her art. After a while, I started to realize that I liked her, too." He paused as if he was unsure if he should go on.

"Tell me more," she encouraged. "It's kind of beautiful." He smiled.

"I started to notice things. You know, I saw my sisters naked or saw their undies and it didn't bother me at all. But, then I saw Jane's undies hanging in the bathroom, or sitting in the laundry basket. I began to notice how beautiful she was. I got such a hard-on that I couldn't stand it. One night I decided to take a risk. I sneaked into her bed when she was asleep. I figured she would either throw me out or screw me."

Lily smiled. "And, she screwed you."

"We've been lovers ever since."

"Wow!"

"Yeah. I stayed a few months and then got my own place. We spend nights together occasionally."

She wanted him to talk more about himself. "Do you have any other girlfriends?" Simon didn't want to answer. His girlfriends were none of her business.

"Well, you," he teased, deflecting her question.

"Do you ever spend the night with any of your other girlfriends besides Jane?" she asked. He became uncomfortable again. He didn't want to ignore her question but his love life was private and he didn't want to discuss it with Lily. She sensed his hesitation.

Lily smiled. "Well, I'm asking because *this* girlfriend wants you to stay." He smiled back. She sensed his relief. He was a private man who didn't casually discuss intimate details. She respected that. He agreed to stay and they moved into the bedroom.

After a lovely night of cuddling and more sex, they sat at her little kitchen table, drank coffee, ate toast, and chatted.

"I don't know what to do about Jane," she confessed.

"What do you mean?" he asked, sleepily.

"She's my friend and I really like her. Now we've had sex, and, that could be a problem."

"You can talk to her if you want to," he said. "I will, anyway." She looked at him, puzzled. "I tell her about my lovers. She understands love. She gives me advice, sometimes. She's like an older sister."

"Does she talk to you about her lovers?"

"Oh, God, no!" he exclaimed. "I wouldn't want that. Some things are private, you know?" He looked at her. Her breast peeked out from the opening in her robe. She opened the robe and smiled. If he wanted more of her, she felt eager to give it.

Lily liked Simon. He seemed uncomplicated and didn't want romance. She was content to be his lover. She assumed Jane was more than just a lover. Lily decided not to pry into their

arrangement. Lily merely wanted him in her bed. He could have his secrets as long as he shared himself with her occasionally.

Jane's comment the next time they met caught Lily by surprise. "So you and Simon had sex." Lily didn't know how to respond. Jane had said she loved Simon.

"Um, yeah. I, uh, couldn't... didn't... don't."

Jane smiled and listened sympathetically to Lily's incoherence. "You don't need to apologize. I don't own him. He told me he liked you."

"He did?"

"Yeah, the first time he met you."

"He didn't come on to me," Lily said, defending Simon.

"I know. He gets in your head."

"So, now what? Should I sublet my apartment, and move out?"

Jane grinned. "Only if you want to."

"Well, no, but I was hoping... you know..." She paused and looked at Jane to see if she seemed angry. "And, I thought, maybe I shouldn't be around here anymore."

Jane ignored Lily's comment. "You're hoping to do it again, aren't you?"

Lily felt flustered. "He's *your* boyfriend, and I don't want a boyfriend."

"*Me?* I'm not his girlfriend!"

"But, you told me he was your boyfriend."

"It's completely one-way. Simon loves women. All women. Not just one woman. Get what I mean?"

"I think so." Lily paused and thought about it. "Well, no, actually."

"He can be sweet, kind, funny, charming boyish-."

"I don't want sweet, kind, and charming," Lily interrupted her. "Or, a boy, either."

"Good. Because those things are not the *real* Simon. You don't get qualities or characteristics. You get Simon. And, you don't genuinely get him. Nobody does. He doesn't give himself. No one takes him. Simon is just Simon. He enjoys being Simon and wants others to enjoy him, too. And, most importantly, when they enjoy him, he thoroughly enjoys them."

Lily recalled their tryst. "So, we enjoyed each other?" Jane nodded. It made sense. "Yeah, we did. Boy, did we. No wonder you like him so much."

"He's awesome. Thanks for understanding."

"No, thank you. Although I'm not sure I understand."

"Don't worry about it," Jane said. "It's just the mystery of life." She grinned. "One of them, anyway."

Chapter 12 - Parallel Lives

Peter and Josh became good friends. Josh had been a Political Science major and had no business experience but found himself fascinated by Peter's business. He had started with nothing but a radical idea to mainstream the sex toy business. Peter reasoned, correctly, there was a strong but hidden demand for sexual enhancement products. Customers had to visit sex shops in seedy neighborhoods and risk harassment if anyone found out, or they ordered mail-order products advertised in unsavory magazines. Peter wanted the sex toy business to be as mainstream as home appliances, furniture, clothing, or cars. He assumed more people would buy products if they could find them sold discreetly in dignified places. It turned out that he was more right than he dreamed.

Peter hired Josh to help him run Aphrodite Limited. Over the next several months, Josh learned as much as he could about the company. He eventually took on more responsibility and no longer thought about Penny. Nor, he assumed, did she think about him.

One day, Josh saw a newspaper article about a protest at a weapons manufacturing plant and noticed Penny's name on the list of people who had been arrested. He wondered if that was where her activism had always been moving. *I hope she's happy in jail*, he thought. He didn't stop to think if he was happier without Penny. Their lives had taken different directions. Josh wanted to focus on his future and let his past go. Penny no longer concerned him. *Maybe jail is where she belongs*. Josh knew he was where he belonged.

Although Lily liked Diana's church, she wasn't ready to join the congregation. She attended services occasionally and went to less religious events, such as bake sales, clothing donation drives, and neighborhood volunteer projects. Lily liked many of the church people she met and no one talked about religion when she was around. She began to appreciate the community Diana bragged about when they first talked. Indeed, the church was as unique as Diana was.

Diana never showed any interest in Lily, as Josh had suggested. Lily didn't care. She was interested in Simon. He dropped by unexpectedly and she never turned him away. His spontaneity thrilled her and she excited him. Lily didn't know why Simon liked her. Perhaps it was because she was much younger than Jane was. Maybe the pleasure she gave him was so unique that he kept coming back for more. Whatever the reason, their trysts always left her sated and happy. She knew not to ask Simon for more, and didn't.

Perhaps Diana knew Lily was sleeping with Simon. Maybe Simon even told her. Lily didn't think they were friends, but Simon felt comfortable with women and might have mentioned Lily to Diana. If he had, Diana was too cool to say anything to Lily. Even if she didn't always act like it, she had souls to save. Whoever people had sex with was none of her business, not even if the screwing went on in her house.

Grace's failed pregnancy had changed her. Richard reached out and she found herself bawling over her lost baby. Richard cried, too. The loss seemed to connect them in a way that

their sexual adventure hadn't. Although he got inside her as often as he could, they had never gotten inside each other.

When they tentatively began to explore, they discovered they shared similar likes and dislikes. He liked minor-league baseball. She had played softball in college. They both liked Hallmark Channel romance movies, although neither liked Valentine's Day because it had become too commercial. The romance started to happen. Richard never talked about Sharon, his deceased wife. He only talked about the future and he wanted to share it with Grace. The night he proposed was the sweetest of her life.

"Look, I know you're a lesbian and you can only love another woman, so I'm not asking you to *love* me. But, we're good together, so I am asking you to be with me. It doesn't have to be love. Friendship is good enough. Will you marry me?"

"No," Grace replied.

Richard's face fell. "But I thought-."

"Stop. What I told you- that was all in the past. A lesbian is what I was, but I changed that month we were together. I just didn't understand how much. So, I said no now to friendship, Richard. I want love- *your* love. And, I'll give you *all* of mine. I'm not holding anything back. Will you marry me?"

"Yes!"

Her second pregnancy was successful. They had a son whom they adored.

"Hello, Josh. Guess who?"

"Penny?"

"Yes! You remember me. How nice."

What does she want? Josh thought. "I'm surprised that you remember me."

"Um, that's kinda what I called about."

"What do you mean?"

"Josh, I'm sorry about what happened to us. I didn't intend to seem so mean. I didn't want to hurt you."

She's not calling because she wants to get back together, is she? "I guess I didn't see it as mean, and it did hurt, a little. But, I'm over it. I got a dog. Her name is Betsy."

"Good. I always felt bad about how we finally broke up. I could have handled it better."

"I guess I could have, too."

"No, no, you did okay. I was the one who ran away."

"I guess you did, yeah."

"I'm sorry. You're a great guy. I was happy with you."

"Until you weren't."

"Yeah, but it wasn't you. There were things I wanted to do."

"And, you've been doing them! I've read some of the news."

"Yes. We've been successful. But, success comes at a cost."

"What cost?"

“People burn out.”

“Have you burned out?”

“Not yet, but I think I’m close.” Penny sounded wistful.

Josh refused to be drawn in. “I wish I could tell you what to do but I have no experience with burnout. Oh, wait. You could get a dog, too.”

“No thanks. Listen, I gotta go. Nice talking to you.”

“Same here.”

After he hung up, Josh couldn’t help wondering if she had been hoping he would say something, maybe that he’d take her back. There was no chance of that. He preferred Betsy.

Chapter 13 - China

Emily Yee stood outside the customs section of the Shanghai airport. She held a hand-lettered sign that said *Aphrodite* and waited for Josh to pass through customs and meet her. Meanwhile, Josh left the plane feeling amazed that he'd arrived in China. This was his first trip. Peter always made regular trips before but wanted Josh to become familiar with the Aphrodite product suppliers.

Emily was a skilled translator and guide for foreign businesspeople visiting China. She studied English throughout her educational career and was fluent. Emily was also young, tall, and attractive. She wore brighter colors and clingier fabrics than other Chinese women did.

She held the sign above her head, over top of the crowd. Josh saw it immediately and made his way to her. He introduced himself and immediately mentioned how awestruck he was to be in China. She told him there was more to China than the airport. He told her he was looking forward to seeing as much of her country as he could.

Outside, Emily hailed a cab and they drove to the Regency Hotel. Peter had stayed there a few times and liked it better than other places he tried. Emily helped with the check-in and directed Josh to the elevators. They went up ten floors. Emily found the room and they both walked in. The room was dark. Emily went to the window and pulled the drapes back. Josh saw the sprawling cityscape.

"*This is China,*" Emily said, proudly.

Josh unpacked while Emily went over their ten-day schedule. The plan was for Josh to meet the managers, inspect the production lines, and establish cordial business connections with everyone. Emily unfolded a map and showed him where they would go each day. She told him travel times would vary from a few minutes to several hours. While she was briefing him, Josh noticed a small statue of Kwan Yin on the dresser.

"Look, somebody left this. Must be a statue of Mary," he said.

"No. It's Kwan Yin. She is our goddess of mercy and compassion. We believe she hears the cries of the world."

"That's beautiful. Is she important in China?"

His question surprised Emily. "Chinese have been worshiping her for over a thousand years."

"I never heard of a Kwan Yin religion."

Emily smiled. "She's Buddhist."

"Are you religious?"

"Actually, yes."

"I asked because I was wondering how the government felt about religion."

"There doesn't seem to be any problem anymore."

"Do Buddhists go to church?"

"Temple."

"Do you go?"

"Yes. Whenever I can."

"Will you be going while I'm here?"

"Yes."

“Would it be okay if I came with you?” His question surprised Emily. No other client had ever asked about the statues. Josh seemed different. She didn’t understand where his curiosity came from but it delighted her. Most westerners just ignored Chinese culture. They came, conducted their business, and left. Chinese were proud of their heritage and modernization and liked to show off their country.

“Well, you might find it confusing. All the prayers are in Mandarin.”

“That’s okay. I just want to experience what it feels like to be there.”

“Sure. I’ll let you know when.”

Early the next morning they went to visit one of the factories. The trip only took an hour. The manager, Mr. Fong, greeted them and then grandly ushered them into his office. He gave them an official welcome and said he hoped their trip was pleasant. Emily translated and Josh nodded.

Josh had developed a list of questions for each factory they visited. How old was the factory? How long had the manager worked there? What other kinds of products did they produce? Mr. Fong answered all of Josh’s questions pleasantly. During a short silence, when it seemed no one knew what to say next, Mr. Fong opened his desk and brought out a huge dildo. It was a prototype Aphrodite product. Mr. Fong said a few words and Emily translated.

“He’s asking ‘what do you call this?’”

“It’s a dildo,” Josh replied. Mr. Fong smiled, tried to repeat the word, and then continued. When he finished, she translated.

“He says he’s concerned about specifications. Is this the correct size?” Josh nodded. Mr. Fong spoke again.

“Does it have to be this big?” Mr. Fong asked. Emily translated.

“Yes,” Josh answered. “That’s exactly right.” Mr. Fong understood and spoke again.

“He said, ‘no man is this big.’”

“I know,” Josh replied.

She translated and Mr. Fong said a few words.

“He said, ‘then why does it have to be so big?’”

“Tell him it’s supposed to be a toy.” She translated and Mr. Fong chuckled.

“He said, ‘You Americans think everything is big.’”

Josh smiled. “Yes, especially in our imaginations.” Mr. Fong laughed when Emily translated.

Emily sensed Mr. Fong liked him. Josh felt as if he was dealing with friends instead of business associates. Mr. Fong invited them to tour the factory and showed them the machinery. Whenever they passed by a dildo, he started to chuckle. He even told the joke several times to his employees. Everyone laughed respectfully. It was unusual to hear Americans make jokes about themselves.

Emily and Josh talked over dinner. Josh asked about her life in China. Emily kept herself busy. She was single and liked her freedom. He told her he had ended a long relationship and was still trying to get over it. She complimented him on the visit to Mr. Fong’s factory and told him that a business call had social as well as commercial significance. He shrugged his shoulders.

“I mentioned it because you seemed to know that already,” Emily commented. “Which surprised me.”

“I didn’t know anything. I just liked Mr. Fong.”

Emily found Josh likable. He was different from other American businesspeople she met. She liked his curiosity about her religion and sense of humor. He was warmer and more easygoing. Normally, she kept her business and private lives separate, but he was different. She also found him attractive and considered bending the rules.

When they were back in his room, she suggested they spend all their time together. She told him he might always need a translator, night and day. Her suggestion surprised him and he wondered why he might need a translator at night when he was in bed. Emily batted her eyes. “Oh, you might not *need* any translating then.” Josh looked at her, still feeling confused. “But, you might *want* a translator.” He still didn’t get it. Emily smiled. “Me.” Josh felt flattered. They spent the rest of his visit together.

Chapter 14 - Dolores

Josh stood in the airport holding a handwritten sign that read *Aphrodite*. He was waiting for Dolores Hernandez. Peter had hired her to oversee the company's West Coast expansion. She would spend a month learning the basics of the business and then head back to San Francisco to open an Aphrodite office there. Her qualifications were excellent. She had already set up two successful businesses and sold them both when they bored her.

All the passengers had left the plane but Dolores didn't appear. Josh wondered if he had the wrong flight or time. Then he felt someone standing next to him.

"Excuse me, are you Josh?" Josh looked at the woman. She was in her mid-thirties, of average height, with dark hair she wore up in a bun. She also had bad feet and hemorrhoids. "Dolores?" She smiled and nodded. Josh noticed a small gap between her teeth that added a wistful charm to her smile. They shook hands. "Nice to meet you."

They claimed her baggage and walked to Josh's car. He loaded everything and got in. As they drove to the Residence Inn near the Aphrodite office, they chatted about the weather, east coast-west coast differences, and other trivial stuff. Josh invited her to dinner after they unloaded her luggage and she was happy to accept. There was a great Chinese restaurant nearby where they could talk.

Josh liked Dolores right away. She was out to impress him from the start. She understood business on a nuts-and-bolts level and not from the lofty viewpoint that many business owners have. Dolores wanted to assure him she was smart and capable and Aphrodite could entrust her with the West Coast expansion.

Dolores had done much research about Aphrodite and had tons of information readily available. Her knowledge and thoroughness impressed him. She mentioned one or two details that even he didn't know.

They would need to develop a solid working rapport. Dolores liked Josh right away and wanted to get to know him. She noticed he was not wearing a wedding ring and mentioned it. Josh told her about Penny and their split. He asked if she was married. She told him she was divorced. Then Josh decided to probe her feelings about Aphrodite and its products.

"You know the kind of products we sell. What do you think of them?"

"Oh, the stuff is great, very high quality. The emphasis on privacy, especially at retail stores, is pure genius. I was buying your stuff long before I met Peter. A girl can get lonely after a divorce, you know?"

Surprised by her comment, Josh looked at her. "I wouldn't think you'd stay lonely for long."

"What do you mean?"

"You're incredibly attractive. I would assume guys lined up to ask you out."

"I wish. It's not that easy, especially at my age."

"You talk like you're old."

"No, I'm not. I like to go out, and I like to have a good time. It's just that I also like more in a relationship."

"Long walks on the beach, candlelight dinners?"

She smiled. “Hell, no! More like come over and spend time with me. Maybe we’ll wash the car, paint the bedroom, or fix a light. You don’t get to know anyone when you’re out partying. It’s when you’re alone at home, being as domestic as you can, that people reveal their true personalities.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

Dolores grinned. “Most guys don’t.”

“Oh. I see where this is going.”

“No. Sex is okay.” She rolled her eyes. “Who doesn’t like sex? But it takes more to keep me interested than a muscular body or a big cock.” Dolores paused to wonder if she had been too bold. Her bluntness didn’t faze Josh. “It’s domestic stuff that turns me on,” she continued.

“Then, I become a tiger.” She paused to let him imagine her as a tiger.

Josh liked what he imagined and smiled. “Does that happen often?”

“Not often enough,” Dolores answered, candidly. “Scares guys away. Especially divorced guys. They think I’m trying to tame them. They don’t realize how hot I get when the domestic stuff gets going.”

“Sounds like their loss.”

“It is.”

Josh liked her self-confidence. “I know it’s got me hot just listening to you talk about it.”

“Oh, really?” she replied. “Does that mean you want to play house with me?” She already felt comfortable teasing him.

“Is that an invitation?”

“You decide.”

“I’d love to play house. Especially the part about how hot it gets you. Tell me that again.”

“No. If things go right, you’ll find out.”

“You know, all kidding aside, I’ve never had a conversation like this with someone I’ve just met.”

“Same here. It’s fun. Let’s keep it going.” They got up and he paid the bill. Without her telling him, he drove right back to the Inn and parked. Then he got out and walked her to the door.

“This place isn’t very domestic. Maybe I should go get you a blender or something,” he joked as she unlocked the door.

“I love blenders,” she replied. Then she pulled him into the apartment and kissed him.

“Oh, really? What setting?” he teased.

Dolores didn’t know what he meant at first, but then realized they had gone beyond flirtation into verbal foreplay. She smiled lasciviously. “Whip, of course.”

They spent the whole month living together at his place. Dolores and Betsy bonded like sisters. Josh and Dolores cooked and played with household appliances. She also showed him what she knew about the use of Aphrodite products.

Dolores was remarkably easygoing. She would crack a joke at the strangest time, or mention something she read in a financial report while they were having sex. It became a challenge for him not to lose his rhythm while they were discussing shipping dates and quarterly results. “I’ve never had sex with anyone I’ve been in business with,” he mentioned.

“I know. Interesting, isn’t it? Most business partners probably never have sex. But, they should, even if both are women or men. You can learn a lot, and it breaks down barriers.” Her comments impressed him.

“Are you writing a book about this?” he joked.

“I might someday,” she answered. “Maybe I’ll put you in it. Betsy, too.”

Chapter 15 - Cassandra

One Sunday morning, Diana mentioned life's mysteries in a sermon but she didn't linger on the phrase or try to explain it. She merely hoped it would stick in her listener's minds. Maybe the idea would clarify something they were doing, feeling, or seeing while they went about their daily routines, add another facet to their experiences, or deepen them.

Lily noticed there was a missing dimension to her life since she and Grace broke up. Simon had reawakened her passion but it was more than that. She missed being close to someone. Josh had suggested that Diana seemed to like her and Lily wondered if she should try to find out if that was true.

Lily began to watch Diana whenever they were together. She tried to note Diana's interests, habits, likes, and dislikes. When people at Diana's church talked about her, Lily listened carefully. However, none of her extra attention produced any useful knowledge. Nor did she pick up any hint that Diana felt attracted to her.

Early one morning, she ran into Diana as she left her apartment with a tall but stocky woman who had cropped red hair and a plain face that was just short of homely. Diana smiled. "Oh, hi, Lily. This is Cassandra." Lily smiled at both women. Cassandra looked away shyly but then took Diana's hand. Lily looked at her and smiled awkwardly. Cassandra never looked at her.

Lily felt disappointed. Had she somehow failed to notice that Diana was seeing someone? She felt like an idiot.

Jane invited Lily for tea and a chat after she returned from a photography trip.

"I met Cassandra yesterday," Lily said.

"Who?" Jane asked, absently. "Oh, is she around?"

"Is she Diana's girlfriend?"

"Oh, no. She's Sarah's sister."

"Sarah, who died?" Lily asked. Jane nodded.

"She and Diana were friends before Diana and Sarah got together. I guess Diana met Sarah through Cassandra."

"Cassandra didn't look happy."

"She never does. She's a strange duck. I've spoken with her a few times yet I've always come away wondering who I was talking to."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we had this one conversation about photography. She had an incredibly deep knowledge. She knew stuff even I didn't know. But, when I handed her a camera, she just looked at it as if she had no idea what it was. I offered to lend it to her so she could do some shooting and she looked at me as if she didn't know what shooting was. She handed it back and walked away."

"I don't understand."

"Neither did I. There's something weird about her mind."

"Is she autistic?"

"I don't really know."

"What does she do?"

Jane shrugged. "I don't know that, either."

Diana stopped Lily on her way home from work the next day. "Cassandra asked me to talk to you about dinner," Diana said.

"Oh, I'm flattered. I'd love to come."

"Well, that's not what she means. She would like you to invite her to dinner."

"Oh." Lily didn't ask why.

"You don't have to. She won't be offended."

"No. I'd like to have her for dinner. Will you be coming, too?"

"She hasn't told me yet," Diana replied.

The next night, Cassandra knocked softly, almost as if she didn't want anyone to hear her. Lily opened the door and smiled.

"Hi. I've been looking forward to this. Please come in." Cassandra entered and immediately looked around. She gazed intently at several parts of the room as if she was recording her impressions of Lily's environment.

Lily felt self-conscious. "It's not much, I know, but I like it. I don't buy stuff just to have it. I only get something when and if I need it." Cassandra ignored Lily's comment. She sat down on the sofa.

"You may think this is strange, that I'm strange," Cassandra said. "I am. But, I'm this way for a reason. People waste a lot of time with indecision, procrastination, confusion, and doubt. I don't have time for all that. Life's too short. If something or someone interests me, I zero in and connect, then go from there."

"I'm not sure I understand," Lily replied. They had been together for only a moment, yet their conversation had become deep, intense, and somewhat bewildering. Lily wondered if she should joke. "Are you asking me out?" she said. Cassandra smiled, wryly.

"I do like you," she said. "Maybe not like that. But then, maybe I do. I'm not sure, yet."

Lily wondered if the dinner invitation had been a good idea. "When will you be sure?"

"Oh, I'm never sure. I don't try to be. Certainty is a myth. For me, it's all chances, not certainties."

"Fascinating."

Cassandra smiled at Lily's comment. "Am I? Do you think so?"

"Well, yes, if I'm right about what you're suggesting."

"Which is?"

"When people connect and then fall in love, the defining characteristic of their relationship is often a certainty. It's an absolute. They trust it, one hundred percent. They build on it. We call it 'happily ever after.'" Lily's explanation genuinely surprised Cassandra. She thought it showed great insight. Insight and connection were the same, for her. She was starting to find Lily attractive.

"Yes! Go on."

"You're suggesting it's not real. Am I right?" Cassandra nodded. "So what *is* real, then?" Lily's question didn't please Cassandra. She looked at Lily coldly and then abruptly got up and left the apartment.

Later, Lily went upstairs and knocked on Jane's door. Luckily, she was alone.

“I think I offended Cassandra,” Lily said, and then told Jane about the conversation.

“I don’t think she can be offended. She’s not like us.”

“But, I think she was trying to tell me something. I didn’t get it and said something stupid.”

“What did you say?” Jane asked.

“I asked her ‘what is real?’”

Jane nodded. “She doesn’t know what reality is.”

Lily felt puzzled. “How can someone not know what reality is? Is she mentally ill?”

“No, I don’t think so. She’s mentally... different. She doesn’t see things the way most people do.”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“No, you’re right. There isn’t.”

“You’ve had a similar conversation with her?”

“Remember I told you about handing her a camera?” Jane asked. Lily nodded. “What do cameras do? Think about it. They take photos. Of what? Reality. You point at something real, you push a button, and you get an image of reality.”

“Yeah, so?”

“She didn’t know how to do that. She didn’t know what to point the camera at. It’s like she doesn’t know what reality is.”

“Well, I guess a person could easily live without the concept of reality. But, things would still be real, wouldn’t they?” Lily asked.

“You would think so. A thing would still be a thing.”

“Something you could take a photo of.”

Jane nodded. “Right. But, not for her, I think.”

Curious about Jane’s insight into Cassandra, Lily asked, “Then what is a thing, for her?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve wondered if, for her, a thing is somehow not a thing,” Jane replied.

Lily still felt confused. “You mean it doesn’t exist?”

“No, I mean *she* doesn’t exist. Things remind her she’s not a thing.”

“I don’t understand. Then what is she?” Lily asked, mystified.

Jane smiled. “Maybe you’ll find out.”

Two nights later Cassandra knocked softly on Lily’s door and waited for her to open it.

“I’ve decided,” she said.

“Um, about what?” Lily asked, puzzled.

“You.”

“Oh, okay, I guess. Should I be flattered?”

“You should be what you want to be. It’s all okay with me.”

“Okay, then, what now?”

“What would you like?” The question took Lily by surprise and she thought about an answer. Cassandra waited patiently.

“I’d like more,” Lily said. She meant her reply enigmatically but had no idea how Cassandra would take it. Cassandra smiled. She liked enigmas.

“More of what?” she asked, shyly.

“You,” Lily replied. Cassandra seemed surprised by the answer. She smiled, nodded, and walked away. Lily didn’t know if her reply was the right answer or the wrong one. She would have to wait to find out.

The next morning, Lily saw Diana leaving the apartment and called out to her. “Diana, wait up.”

Diana turned and smiled. “Lily, how are you?” she asked, brightly.

“Confused.” Diana didn’t react. “About Cassandra.”

“Oh, right.”

“Who is she?” Lily asked. Diana didn’t answer. “Um... what is she?”

Diana smiled. “So you’re there,” she said. Lily looked at her, puzzled, and then nodded. “Good.”

“Good?”

“She’s affecting you.”

“Yes. But, how?”

“I can’t say. It’s different for everyone. She’s on your mind, right? But, you don’t know why. You’re not infatuated with her; at least you don’t think so.” Diana paused and smiled. Lily sighed and nodded.

Lily frowned. “It’s more like *what-the-fuck*.”

“Exactly! Good for you.”

“So, you’re not gonna be any help?”

“I can’t. I want to, but I can’t. No one can. You’re on your own.” Diana walked down the street.

What-the-fuck? Lily thought and then went to work.

On Friday evening, Lily heard a soft tapping and opened the door to find Cassandra standing there.

“Will you love me?” Cassandra asked.

“You mean, make love?” Lily replied.

“No. I mean be love. Will you be love with me? Not make something, but be something.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I know. It’s okay. I don’t want you. You’re beautiful, but I don’t want your body. You’re a lovely person but I don’t want your personality. I don’t want your love, which is mostly possession anyway...”

Lily interrupted. “Then what do you want?”

“Nothing at all...,” Cassandra replied. She walked in, closed the door, gently took Lily’s head in her hands, and kissed her softly on the lips. Lily felt something stir deep in her womb. She thought it was Cassandra.

Much later, Lily was glistening with sweat. She still tingled from Cassandra’s passion. Lily had discovered parts of her body that had never been aroused before. They were sated now, but her mind was on fire. “I think I understand, now,” Lily said.

“I’m sure you do,” Cassandra said and leaned over to kiss Lily.

“I can’t explain it...”

“Don’t try,” Cassandra urged, and kissed her again.

“But, I like it. I mean something happened, didn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad it did.”

“So am I. Thank you,” Cassandra said.

“You’re thanking me?”

“You don’t think you deserve it?”

“I don’t know what I deserve, Cassandra. I really don’t. But, I wouldn’t have missed this for the world.”

“That’s because this is the world.”

“Is it? You’re sure about that?”

“Oh, yes. It’s the only thing I’m sure of.”

“One hundred percent?” Lily teased, gently. Cassandra knew what she meant and smiled. “One thousand...,” she said, lustily, and then reached between Lily’s thighs to find her wetness and bring her to orgasm again. Lily closed her eyes, sighed, and melted into the sheets. Then the sheets and bed were gone, and she floated in a cosmic bubble. When she looked at the bubble, she realized she no longer had a body. The bubble popped and she was floating among the stars. She felt a joy unlike any she could have imagined.

They spent what seemed like three days and nights alone. Lily stopped thinking after the first day and stopped feeling after the second. On the third day, she went beyond everything she had ever been. She went beyond her parents’ deaths, beyond living with Josh and then moving away from him. She went beyond her realization she loved him and his rejection of her love. She went beyond her love for Grace. She went beyond the mistakes she made with Grace, and beyond her new life here with Diana, Jane, Simon, her other friends, and, finally, Cassandra.

Then Lily came back to who she was. The past was no longer the past and the future was no longer the future. Everything was just now. That feeling she had in her womb when Cassandra first kissed her- that was Lily waiting to be reborn. And, finally, she was.

Chapter 16 - Aftershock

Lily heard Cassandra dressing quietly but felt too exhausted to speak. What was there to say? Cassandra left feeling satisfied. She had done what she came to do. What happened next was up to Lily.

No longer having a past or future, Lily remained in bed. She wasn't sure how long she and Cassandra had been together. *What day is it? Have I slept?* Lily wasn't sure. *Was it all a dream?* Lily didn't know. Was Cassandra real? Was anything real? What was reality? Lily couldn't answer. She wasn't even sure whose voice was asking those annoying questions.

What she did know was that something had changed. She didn't feel like the same woman. What had Cassandra done to her?

She heard knocking at her apartment door. It was a gentle knock. *Oh, that must be Simon.* However, Lily couldn't recall who Simon was, or anything about him. Part of her hoped he would go away. Part of her knew he wouldn't. It was not that Simon was pushy. He never became impatient and banged on the door. He was always sensitive.

Simon knew when someone needed him. Sometimes that need was sexual and he showed up to fulfill it. This time, however, Simon didn't know why he felt called to Lily's apartment. He just knew he was supposed to be there.

"Lily? It's Simon."

Lily didn't answer. She hoped he would assume she was out. Simon already had a feeling that she was at home and wasn't planning to leave until he saw her.

"Lily, are you okay?"

"Go away, Simon. I don't want sex right now." *And, I might never want sex with you again,* she thought.

"I'm not here for that."

"Then why are you knocking at my door?"

"Because you need me."

I do? Lily thought. *For what?* "Go away, Simon."

"Please open up, Lily."

"Why can't you just go away?"

"Because you need someone to take care of you." Simon didn't know why he said it. He hadn't realized that was why he was there. Why did he feel that way? He'd never needed to care for Lily before. Had something happened to her? If something had, how did he know she needed him? Simon felt bewildered but waited calmly. When the door didn't open, he called out again. "I'm getting the key from Diana."

"No! Wait! Don't do that. I'm coming."

Lily got out of bed and found her heavy winter robe. It covered her from head to toe with a thick cloth that obscured her slender figure. She looked like a cloth doll with a head sticking out of the top. Lily remembered she had a doll like that when she was little. The antique original had a China head with delicate facial features sewn onto a cloth body. Its head broke during one of the times she moved. Her older sister Barbara had it repaired with a plastic head. She thought repairing it would give Lily an anchor during her turbulent life; however, Lily never liked the

doll after its new head was sewn on. Now she felt like that doll. Her old head was gone and the new one didn't look or feel right, or natural.

The door swung open and Simon stepped in quickly before Lily could change her mind. He turned and saw Lily behind the door. Lily's hair was a mess. Her face looked exhausted. Simon saw something in her eyes that he couldn't identify.

"What the hell happened to you?" he asked, then regretted his abruptness.

"I... I don't know."

"Have you been sick?"

"I don't know what I've been. Or, *where*, exactly."

"What do you mean? Haven't you been right here?"

"Yes, but no. I'm not really sure."

"You're not making any sense, Lily."

"You're getting the picture."

"You need coffee."

Simon knew his way around Lily's kitchen and soon had a pot of coffee brewing. Lily stood by the door. She didn't know what else to do. Simon wondered if he was going to have to tell her to sit. Had she lost it?

Luckily, Lily knew what to do with the coffee. She sipped and felt surprised at how good it tasted. It almost seemed as if this was the first time she had ever drunk coffee. "Wow, this stuff is great!"

"It's your usual brand."

"I have a usual brand?"

Simon looked at her. "Lily, what the fuck happened to you?"

"Strange you should put it that way. I think it had something to do with fucking."

Simon wondered who Lily had been with. Despite the passionate sex they had starting from that first time, he'd never had this effect on her. "He must have been pretty amazing."

"It wasn't a he, Simon."

"Okay. Then, who was she?"

Lily ignored his question. She looked into her coffee cup. "I'm not the same person I was the last time you were here."

"But, you're still Lily."

"Yeah... I think so."

"You're not sure?"

"A lot's happened."

"I can see that. What?"

"I can't explain it."

"But, it has something to do with sex?"

"Yeah- but it was a lot more than that."

"Okay. So, who was this mysterious sex with?"

"I'd rather not say. I hope you're not offended."

"No, I'm not. It's okay to keep these sorts of things private."

"Oh, it's not about privacy. I honestly don't know the woman I was with. I could tell you her name but that wouldn't tell you anything."

“This is weird, Lily.”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t change what happened for anything.”

“So what did she do to you?”

Lily didn’t reply. She couldn’t. She didn’t know. Everything that had happened with Cassandra was a blur. Her body knew. Her soul knew. However, neither could explain. Lily would just have to wait until what had happened became clearer. However, she felt that she might never achieve that clarity, and could remain stuck knowing she had been transformed but not how it happened. Perhaps it wasn’t important, anyway.

“Well, you seem okay, if bewildered.”

“I feel okay.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

“I don’t need sex right now, Simon. I’m sorry.”

“Not for sex. Just because I’m your friend and you might need me to take care of you.”

“No. I’ve already been taken care of, in ways neither of us ever dreamed were possible. I think I need to sleep.”

“Okay. Well, you can call me anytime. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, thanks. Are you going up to see Jane?”

“I was thinking of it. I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“Don’t tell her about me, please.”

“Why not?”

“Just don’t. I’d appreciate it. If you are my friend, please do as I ask.”

“Sure, Lily. I *am* your friend.”

“I know. Thanks. Sorry about no sex.”

“It’s not important. But, you are.”

I am, aren’t I, Lily thought. *That was why Cassandra came to me, wasn’t it? She saw something in me. I didn’t see it but she did, and then she brought it out.*

Lily’s problem was that she had no idea what Cassandra saw or had brought out. However, she felt grateful Cassandra had spent time with her. Maybe, someday, she could understand what Cassandra had done.

Lily slept all night and went out the next morning. Diana was just leaving to go to her church. Lily hadn’t realized it was Sunday.

“Hi, Lily. Are you walking over with me?”

“No. Not today.”

“Oh, okay. Well, have a nice day.” Diana smiled and started walking away.

“Wait, Diana.” Diana turned. “I was wondering if you’d like to have coffee sometime. We’ve never really gotten to know each other.

“Why, yes, I’d like that very much. I’m glad you asked.”

“So, you’ve been waiting?”

“Sort of. I didn’t want to ask you because I saw how hesitant you were about my church. I didn’t want you to think I was going to try to recruit or convert you.”

Lily looked puzzled. “So, you’re not interested in saving my soul?”

“Your soul is your business, Lily. But, I am interested in you.”

Lily smiled. “The feeling is mutual.”

Their interest was mutual but didn't lead to romance, as Lily had anticipated. There was more to Diana than her religion, love for Sarah, and grief over her loss. The women found they liked many of the same books, movies, TV shows, and music. Lily told Diana about how difficult her childhood had been because of the losses she'd suffered. “All that made you who you are, Lily. I know that you would have done anything you could to change things but the fact is that you couldn't then and you can't now. It was what it was.”

“I know that, now. I never dwelled on it but I never got over it, either.”

“Sometimes you just have to let it all go. Clean the slate, so to speak.”

“You're right.” Lily thought of Cassandra. “I've learned that, but only just recently.”

“You're fortunate. Some people never learn. So what's next?”

“Not more of the same, I can tell you.”

“Good. That's a healthy attitude.” Diana had a thought and frowned. “But, you're not like... moving out or anything, right?”

“No, I'm staying put. I finally know where 'put' really is and what it means.”

“Like I said, you're lucky.”

Lily thought of Cassandra again. “I'm not sure luck had anything to do with it.”

Diana didn't agree, but she didn't say anything.

Broken people who didn't know they were broken attracted Cassandra. She didn't know how she found them, or why she even noticed them. Something about their brokenness called to her. That was her theory, but she didn't know how any of it worked.

She possessed a special kind of healing that required a brief, deep, and more intense intimacy than the people she healed had ever known or would ever know. They went into it as one person and came out as another, better person. Cassandra didn't know how she changed them but felt happy that she could. It was her purpose in life, her gift.

Although she worked her healing using sex, it was only a tool and not an end in itself, a sort of tantra that wasn't spiritual but psychological. Cassandra didn't care what it was so long as it worked, and it usually did. She felt proud of what she could do.

Cassandra couldn't recall how she discovered her talent. She lived only in the present moment. Not only couldn't she recall her past, but for all practical purposes, she had no past. It simply didn't exist.

Her inability to have a past might be why she saw how some people's pasts burdened their present lives. Cassandra cleansed them and freed them. *Suffering is only suffering if you carry it with you*, she reasoned, *so I'll help them get free of it. No more suffering, no more burden. Freedom!* Born again, but not into someone outside themselves, but into their fresh, new, and liberated selves.

Sarah, Cassandra's sister, and Diana's deceased lover, had often thought of her sister as the real witch in the family. Sarah did witchy things that invited people to relate to the world in a new way. She helped people form new connections and find new paths.

What Sarah did slowly and gradually, Cassandra did intensely and only once. Cassandra didn't help people explore new connections and find new paths. She was the only connection and there was no path. She burned away people's hurts and then deposited people at the beginning of the rest of their lives freed of their past burdens. Cassandra didn't take on their burdens, however. That would have been impossible. She wasn't a Savior. She was more like an exorcist. She purged people of their past hurts and, without the energy invested in them by the person carrying them, they dissolved into nothingness.

Cassandra did all this with fire, the fire of their bodies, searing their minds, disassembling and then reassembling their souls. Cassandra used a unique form of heat, but she never burned.

The first time Cassandra met Lily she sensed Lily's pain immediately and looked away. When she took Lily's hand, the pain intensified and Cassandra knew Lily needed her.

Cassandra decided to find out if what she could do would be right for Lily. Would spending time alone with Cassandra heal and transform Lily or was she too far gone for Cassandra to reach? Early on, Cassandra had offered herself to people thinking she could help them only to fail to effect any change at all. She wasn't interested in sex, as the other people were, only in healing. Cassandra sometimes entangled herself in relationships hoping repeated sexual encounters would work. They didn't. She learned the hard way that some people were so lost in their pasts they literally had no futures. They wouldn't live life so much as stumble blindly through it. They would remain lost, no matter what Cassandra did to help them find themselves. Reluctantly, she gave up on them. There didn't seem to be any other option.

Cassandra learned to be more discerning. She found a way to determine which people had hope and which people had lost it. When she met Lily, she felt Lily's pain but also sensed that she hadn't let it take over her life and crush all hope. Lily wasn't yet dead inside. Cassandra knew she could offer her renewed life, and she did.

She used love; not making love, as she told Lily, but being love. That was the difference. They weren't going to go through the motions and produce a product. They were going to tear down everything and then build it back up again. Lily didn't know it but Cassandra did.

When she reached out to touch Lily for the first time, she felt Lily's resistance. "You have to let go and trust me," Cassandra told Lily. "I know what I'm doing." She highlighted her statement by touching Lily in a way no other lover had ever touched her. Lily sighed and surrendered.

When Lily thought Cassandra was bringing her to orgasm repeatedly much more was happening. Cassandra was using orgasms to wipe out Lily's brain and purge the negative thoughts and experiences that were holding her back. Lily thought only her body was on fire, but her mind is what Cassandra's lovemaking had burned. She gave herself to Cassandra not caring if Cassandra would ever give her back. Lily stopped being Lily. And then, she became Lily again.

Chapter 17 - Conspiracy and Truth

Josh kept up long-distance affairs with both Emily and Dolores. He regularly flew out to San Francisco to spend a week visiting Dolores and the West Coast stores she managed. Afterward, he flew on to Shanghai to spend another week with Emily and visit the Chinese factories. Both women enjoyed their romantic interludes with Josh. They found that long separations kept up their ardor.

Two years later, Peter sent Dolores to Shanghai. Josh didn't want Dolores and Emily to meet, so he arranged for a different guide and translator. When Dolores arrived, however, Emily greeted her. The man Josh had hired was Emily's friend. One of his frequent clients had arrived unexpectedly and offered to triple the fee. Emily had no client and she took his place.

The women liked each other and got along well. The first evening, they sat in a restaurant and discussed their lives over dinner. Emily noticed Dolores had no ring. Dolores told her she was divorced. Dolores then asked Emily if she was married. Emily told her she was too busy for anything but her relationship with Josh. Dolores asked what she meant. Emily told Dolores the romantic story of Josh's first visit.

"Did he ever mention me?" Dolores asked.

Emily smiled. "Of course, many times. He told me what was happening with you and the new stores. He admires you a lot."

"It's more than admiration," Dolores said. "I have the same kind of relationship with him that you do."

"No!"

"It's true. That bastard."

"Are you thinking of marrying him?" Emily asked.

"God, no! Are you?"

"No way. I like it just the way it is."

"He's lucky to have two women like us, isn't he?" Dolores commented. Emily nodded.

"Yes, but we should punish him, even if we don't want to marry him."

"Punish him? Why?" Dolores asked, surprised.

"Well, we should let him know he can't do this to us."

"Um, I actually don't have a problem with it."

"Honestly, neither do I," Emily admitted.

"So what should we punish him for?"

"Just being a male who takes females for granted," Emily explained. Dolores nodded. They would not punish him for themselves but for all women whose men cheated on them.

"Okay, what should we do?"

"Let's tell him we're both pregnant!"

Emily's suggestion shocked and delighted Dolores. "My God, he'll have a heart attack!" she said.

"No, just a good scare."

“What will we do when he finds out we’re really not pregnant?”

“He won’t. We live so far apart that we can get away with saying we’ve had miscarriages.”

A month later, Josh was on his way to pick up Dolores at the airport. She was flying in for an emergency meeting at corporate headquarters. Peter wanted everyone there, including Emily. He was planning to make several important announcements about the future of the company.

A midsummer afternoon thunderstorm flooded some roads and others were dangerously slick. The sky became dark at six o’clock as a second heavy storm approached. Josh’s cell phone rang and Dolores told him her plane had landed early. He told her he was running late because of the storms. She urged him to take his time and drive carefully.

A week earlier Emily had surprised Josh when she told him in an email she was pregnant. He suggested they discuss it further when she flew in for the big meeting. He felt her pregnancy was a sign it might be time for him to marry and settle down. He wasn’t sure he could persuade Emily to come to the East Coast to live. She loved Shanghai and her work. He thought he might move there but the company didn’t need someone full-time and he might have to give up his job.

Just before she left San Francisco, Dolores also told Josh about her pregnancy. She tried to sound upbeat and told him it was good she was flying in so they could talk about it. He didn’t say anything and wondered what he would do about both women he had gotten pregnant.

Dolores thought about the prank during her flight and started to have doubts. *Perhaps I should just tell him the truth before anything gets out of hand.* Then she decided to get a sense of how he felt before she confessed.

Josh was driving too fast on the slick highway near the airport and the car skidded. He lost control and crashed into an underpass. The airbags saved his life but the collision knocked him unconscious. Someone called an ambulance and it rushed Josh to Taylor Hospital. Dolores called Peter when Josh failed to pick her up and she could not reach him by phone. Peter picked her up and they were driving to a hotel when the police called Peter about Josh.

Peter, Dolores, and Emily arrived at the hospital in time to hear the diagnosis. Josh’s physical injuries were not serious but he remained in a coma. They had to wait until he came out before they could assess his other injuries. Peter called Lily. She was on vacation in Europe and due back in two days. Everyone settled into a nervous waiting period.

Josh came out of the coma two days after the crash with no recollection of the accident. Worse, he had little recollection of his past life other than his name. They wondered if the amnesia was temporary or permanent. Everyone felt terrible. The possibility Josh might be with them physically but not mentally unsettled them.

Lily rushed to the hospital after her plane landed. She expected Josh would still be in a coma. Peter, Dolores, and Emily waited outside the door. They told Lily that Josh was awake but had amnesia. She was distraught and asked if she could see him. The nurse let her into Josh’s room. Lily closed the door and entered as softly as she could. Only the lights over his bed lit the room. She went over and kissed him gently on his cheek. He opened his eyes.

“Lily?” he whispered.

“Hi, Josh. You remember me?”

“Of course. How could I forget *you*?” She didn’t know what else to say. They gazed at each other in silence. It occurred to her she should try to find out what else he recalled. Perhaps his memory was coming back.

“Um, what else do you remember, Josh?”

Josh smiled. “Oh, a lot,” he answered. I remember that time when you came to live at my house. We were two bewildered little kids standing there wondering what the hell was going on.”

She smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I remember that day, too.”

“And, I remember when you used to cry in your room and I would come in and sit on the floor and that would make you feel better. It meant so much to me that I could soothe you,” he added. “And, there was that time we spent a weekend in your dorm. That was the most wonderful weekend of my life.”

“I... I... didn’t know that. I thought you hated me after that weekend,” she replied, worried his inaccurate memory was a sign of brain damage. Maybe he would never again be the Josh everyone knew and liked.

“Hated it? No way! I guess you don’t remember it the way I do.”

Despite Lily’s concern for his welfare, the conversation was starting to alarm her. She assumed his confusion was due to his amnesia and maybe the medications they were giving him. “You rejected me and ran away!” she replied. “I was devastated.”

“No way,” he protested.

“It’s true,” she said, calmly. He was aghast.

“But, I love you. I’ve always loved you. I’ve never loved anyone else!”

Josh had finally said the words Lily yearned to hear for her entire life. She stared at him in disbelief. Then she looked into his eyes and immediately knew he was telling the truth. He did love her. He smiled sweetly as they continued their eye contact. Her loving gaze soothed him.

Lily understood that the old Josh was gone and a new Josh had replaced him. She wanted the new Josh to stay. “I love you, too, Josh,” she replied and then wondered if any of the old Josh remained. “Do you know those people outside the door?”

“They tell me they’re friends and business associates,” he replied. “I think they’re lying. I never saw any of them before.” Just then, the door opened. Peter, Dolores, Emily, and the doctor walked in. They had seen Lily and Josh talking through the window and wondered what was happening. Josh smiled at the doctor.

“Look who’s here! My Aunt Lily came to see me.” They felt stunned. Lily turned and there was an *I-can’t-explain-it* look on her face. The doctor went to the bed.

“Aunt Lily, huh? You remember Aunt Lily, Josh?” he asked.

“Yes! Of course!” Josh replied, annoyed. “What a stupid question!”

“Does this mean his memory’s coming back?” Peter asked.

“He remembers *me*,” Lily said, “but no one else,” she added. They all looked at the doctor expecting an explanation.

“Everything could come back,” he told them, “or just this much and no more. We’ll have to wait and see.” Josh didn’t want to wait.

“Well, I feel fine,” he declared, “and I want to go home, *now*. I want to be with Lily.” Everyone worried that Josh’s brain injuries were more complicated and serious than they first seemed.

“Josh, you have a wonderful place of your own,” Lily protested. “We can get a nurse to stay with you.”

“No!” he interrupted her. “I want you to be with me!”

“I don’t know if I can. It’s complicated.”

“But, I love you and I want to be with you!” His declaration shocked Dolores and Emily. They looked at each other and suddenly realized their affairs with Josh were over. The doctor asked everyone to leave so Josh could rest.

“Does Lily have to leave?” Josh pleaded. The doctor nodded. “Come back soon,” Josh called out. Lily smiled weakly and assured Josh she would come back. They all left.

Outside the room, they asked the doctor to explain what had happened. He told them that partial recovery of memory was common. However, Josh was unusual because the only person he remembered was Lily. They asked him why. He shrugged. They pressed him for more of an explanation.

“Who knows?” he replied and then shrugged again. They felt disappointed the doctor didn’t have a definitive answer. Everyone looked at Lily, hoping she could explain what happened to Josh.

Lily didn’t tell them about their childhood relationship or reveal the terrible mistake in her dorm room many years ago that made him despise her. She also didn’t tell them she had always loved Josh but long ago gave up hope he would ever feel the same way about her. That was ancient history.

For her, Josh’s accident hadn’t been a tragedy. In a way, it had been as transformative as her experience with Cassandra. Lily didn’t understand why, but his amnesia somehow revealed his true feelings. Josh had always loved Lily and she had always been a part of him. Now, if he truly wanted her, she was ready to be with him for the rest of her life. He wouldn’t have to ask again.