

The **Vortex**

Book 1 of
The Vortex Quartet

By
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The Vortex

by R. A. Conti

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The Vortex Quartet
Consists of:

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Preface:

Did you ever wonder what would have happened if you didn't do the thing you did, and chose something entirely different, instead? For decades, I wondered what if, at a pivotal moment in my life, I had not done what I did. What would my life have been like from that moment onward? What would my story be?

These questions reminded me of Zhuangzi's famous parable: "Once upon a time, I dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was myself. Soon I awakened, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man."

Is this novel only fiction? Alternatively, is it my 'real' life, and *this* life just fiction? To put it another way: am I R. A. Conti dreaming I'm Michael Romanelli, or am I Michael Romanelli dreaming I'm R. A. Conti?

Alternatively, is there someone else dreaming both of us?
(Cue *Twilight Zone* music.)

- R. A. Conti

Part One
A Different Path

Chapter 1 - First Steps

Michael bought a bus ticket for Atlantic City and waited on a bench outside the Greyhound terminal. There was time to kill before the bus boarded. He had never run away from home before and thought it was going well, so far. Next to him was a gym bag swollen with clothes and a plastic bag crammed with notebooks that contained everything he had ever written. He looked like a street person who lived out of a shopping cart, minus the cart.

The July morning heat in downtown Philadelphia felt bearable. A warm breeze blew down Market Street. Michael pulled out his beat-up copy of *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* and tried to read. He stared at the page but his thoughts drifted aimlessly.

Michael heard his name but did not look up. He assumed someone was calling a different Michael. A few seconds later, he felt someone standing over him. He looked up and saw prim Miss Owens, one of his high school teachers. She had been the faculty advisor for the Creative Writing Club and the best teacher Michael ever had.

A puzzled expression creased her friendly face. "Michael?" she repeated. Startled, he didn't reply. "It's nice to see you. What are you doing here?" They last saw each other at school. She invited a few of her favorite students to her classroom one last time to celebrate their graduation. Michael had been part of the Germantown High School Class of 1964.

Now, two weeks later, he was a runaway.

Michael felt awkward. "Hi, Miss Owens, I'm just waiting for a bus."

"Taking a little trip?"

"Well, yeah."

She looked down at his jumble of stuff. "Where to, if you don't mind my asking?" She was always scrupulously cordial and respectful.

"Atlantic City."

"Going on vacation?" She already suspected he was not going to the beach for the day.

"Um, no..., I'm... running away from home," he confessed, feeling even more embarrassed.

Miss Owens frowned. "Michael, are you sure about this?" she asked. Michael hesitated to answer. He thought he was sure, but suddenly lost much of his certainty.

"Mostly, yes."

"Just mostly?" she asked. "It's a big step. Can you handle it?" Miss Owens challenged her students whenever she thought they needed it. They respected her for her bluntness. Michael did not answer. "Wanna talk about it?"

"It's complicated."

She sat down gracefully next to him on the bus-depot bench. "Tell me anyway," she urged, warmly. He did not look at her.

"My parents lined up a job for me at Gimbels. As a stock boy! That's all they think I'm good for."

"Do you have something against stock boys?" she asked, smiling, "or Gimbels?" she added, but did not seem to be mocking him.

"No. Just against my parents. They don't see me as I really am."

"And that is?"

He did not know how to respond at first.

"Well..., I do feel I have some talent."

"You do, definitely."

"But they don't care."

Dr. Owens glanced at the plastic bag filled with notebooks. "You're running away so you can be a writer?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"How will you support yourself?"

“I have some money, and I figure I’ll get a job in Atlantic City. There must be lots of jobs in the summer.”

“Why Atlantic City?”

“Um, you won’t laugh?” She shook her head. “That’s where Kathleen Davis is from. I’m hoping I can find her.”

He planned to stop at a phone booth when he got off the bus, look up Kathleen’s number and address, and then call her to say he was in town. He assumed she would ask him to stop by. He didn’t know what he would do if she did not invite him over, or if he couldn’t find her address. It was not much of a plan, but it might work.

“I watched you and Kathleen at my graduation party. Neither of you seemed aware there were any other people there, including me.”

“Sorry.” He winced. He had not meant to be rude at the party. Kathleen enchanted him. Their hour-long conversation at the back of Miss Owens’s classroom had been the most wonderful experience of his life.

“It’s okay. I’m glad you two had a good time.”

“Oh, yes. I loved it.”

“There’s a slight problem with your plan though.” Miss Owens paused to be certain Michael was listening. “Kathleen’s not in Atlantic City. She’s spending the summer in Europe.” She dropped the bomb and then waited calmly until he figured out how to respond.

Michael looked down. He assumed he would have to return home, defeated. “Oh.” She felt sorry for him and gave him a few moments to think about what he would say next. He remained silent.

Miss Owens was a petite, demure woman who radiated calm dignity. She possessed intellectual brilliance along with great warmth. Her students found her supportive and non-judgmental. They had confessed personal secrets they would not dream of sharing with another teacher and she kept their confidence. She understood Michael needed her help.

Tired of waiting, she asked, “So, do you still want to go to Atlantic City?”

“Where *else* could I go?” Michael whined. He didn’t want to sound helpless but he felt that way. His bold plan had reached a dead end.

“How about Germantown?” she asked. Michael frowned immediately.

“I’m *not* going back home!”

Miss Owens knew about teenage runaways. If she didn’t help Michael, she feared what could happen to him. “I don’t mean going back to your house, Michael. I mean coming to *my* place. I’m going to Japan for the summer. I could use someone to house-sit.” Her offer surprised him. He had been one of her students, not a close friend or anyone special.

Michael faced humiliation and a future he didn’t want. However, it seemed Miss Owens wanted to save him. “Do you trust me *that* much?” Michael asked, just to reassure himself that he understood her correctly.

“Michael, I trust *all* my special students. That’s how I get such good work out of them,” she bragged. “But there’s a cost.”

“That’s no problem. I could give you money.”

“It’s not money. You have to promise you’ll call your parents once a week to let them know you’re okay.” Michael did not reply immediately. He trusted Miss Owens but wondered if she was planning to persuade him to go back home, eventually. When he didn’t reply immediately, she pressed him. “Will you do that?”

“Yeah, I guess I could do that.” *As long as I don’t have to see them*, he thought.

“You have to promise me or the deal is off,” she insisted. He nodded. Satisfied that he understood, Miss Owens went on. “Good. I have to go to the travel agency. I’ll be back in an hour. Cash in that ticket and wait here for me.” She turned to leave. He called her name. She stopped and turned, wondering if he changed his mind.

“Thanks,” he said, smiling weakly. Miss Owens smiled confidently and then continued walking away.

They got off the northbound subway at Erie Avenue station ninety minutes later. As they went up the stairs to street level, Michael asked, “Where do you live?”

“East Penn Street. Do you know where that is?” He nodded. “There are many big, old houses that have been divided into apartments over the years. My apartment is bright, roomy, and has a lot of character. However, sometimes I worry about security. I arranged with some friends to keep an eye on the place while I’m away, but I’d feel much better if someone was staying there.”

Several green and beige blunt-nosed trolleys waited at the island in the middle of the wide intersection. “There’s the 23,” she said. “Let’s hurry.” They boarded and handed the driver their transfer slips. A few minutes later the trolley started north on Germantown Ave. “It only takes about fifteen minutes from here,” she commented, cheerily. Michael nodded, gazed absently out the window, and thought about this strange day.

Carrying his gym bag and notebooks, he had secretly left his house only a few hours earlier, boarded a trolley just like this one, and then rode south to the same Broad and Erie subway stop. He was on his way downtown, planning to leave the city, possibly forever. Now he rode north on a different trolley line. He was not going back to his old home, but a different place, and, he hoped, to a new life.

They got off at Penn Street and walked to the middle of the second block. “Here it is,” she said, pointing to a huge old house. The place looked imposing; the large yard surrounding it contained heavy foliage. They had to duck their heads under tree branches as they walked up the path.

“This is really beautiful,” Michael said.

“Yes. I love it here.”

They went up the front steps onto the spacious porch. Michael noticed the wicker rocker and lounge. Miss Owens unlocked the tall dark oak door and went in. They climbed the steps to the second floor. She opened her apartment door.

The living room looked inviting; the furniture was elegant but simple. There was a large sofa, a high-backed reading chair, an oriental rug, several bookshelves, a small TV, and a genuine Tiffany lamp. Everything was neat, clean, and tidy.

Michael looked at Miss Owens and recognized this place fit her perfectly. Claire Owens was a petite slender woman in her thirties. She wore a crisp, simply cut summer dress, which looked fresh even though she had worn it for hours. Her hair was up in a tidy bun. She wore sturdy-looking sandals. Her face was fresh and bright, despite the summer heat, the hot subway and trolley rides, and the walk from the trolley stop to the house. She looked as if she had been reading mystery novels and drinking lemonade on the breezy porch all morning.

“Take a look at this,” she said, gesturing toward a huge bay window. A magnolia tree outside bore the largest leaves Michael ever saw. “Any idea how old it is?” she asked. He knew almost nothing about trees and shook his head. “Millions of years,” she said, smiling.

Michael looked at her, puzzled.

“Oh, not this *particular* tree. It’s one of the oldest tree species on earth. When I look at it, I see great strength and great wisdom. It knows things we can’t possibly imagine. I like to go out in the yard and touch the trunk. Sometimes I feel a vibration or energy. Other times it’s silent, like the stillness of time.”

“It’s beautiful.” He knew his comment was bland.

She gave him the living room couch as his bed until she left for Japan. Michael arranged his notebooks and clothes neatly. He did not want to disturb the elegant simplicity of the room.

It was just past noon and the apartment was feeling warmer. Claire felt relaxed around Michael and decided she ought to change into shorts and a t-shirt so they could have lunch. He realized he had not eaten since dinner the night before. They sat in her bright kitchen, ate, chatted,

and let the lazy July afternoon go by. Then she reminded him of his promise to call his parents. She pointed to the phone and left the room.

Michael felt anxious. He tried to rehearse a simple, straightforward message but kept getting it mixed up. Miss Owens came back in the kitchen. She looked at him and then at the phone.

“This is going to be hard,” he confessed.

“I know it is, but you can do it,” Claire said. “You *have* to,” she added as she turned and walked out.

His parents’ house was only a few blocks away. Michael picked up the receiver and dialed. His mother Amelia answered. “Hello?”

“Hi, Mom,” he said. She started babbling as soon as she recognized his voice. Michael listened patiently and waited for her to slow down. “Mom, I have something important to tell you. I’m not coming home. I’ve found another place to live.” Amelia did not respond immediately. After a pause, she choked out some painful words.

“I *knew* it! I could feel it. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine and I promise to call you once a week.” He hoped to end the call quickly.

“Wait! Where are you?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you.”

“Your father’s not going to like this,” she said.

“I know. But this is the way it is. I have to go now. Don’t worry about me. Talk to you next week.” He hung up. He knew she would worry. Not because her son had left, but because worrying was all she ever seemed to do.

Claire listened from the next room and came back in when he finished. “That was good, but it hurt, didn’t it?”

“Oh, God, yes it did,” Michael replied, shaking. She wanted to hug him but held back. Instead, she offered some words of insight and encouragement.

“What you’re doing may be necessary, Michael, but it’s painful for all concerned. There’s nothing you can do to change that.” Claire looked at his face. She thought she heard a sniffle, and saw a tear start to drip from his eye. He noticed her watching him and immediately stopped being sad.

“C’mon, let me introduce you to my wonderful neighbors,” she said as she pulled him out the door.

The integrated neighborhood was popular with college students. They liked the seclusion only a couple of blocks from the trolley line. Claire took Michael across the street to meet Lacey, Josh, and Evan. They were graduate students who shared one whole floor of another huge house. She also introduced him to other neighbors. It seemed most of them were younger than Claire but older than he was.

She also knew several of the old-timers who had lived on the street for decades. One or two residents had been born there. They all welcomed him warmly. The older black women made a fuss over him.

It was obvious that everyone liked Claire. After they got back to her place, she told him people were so generous when she first moved in that she did not have to cook for almost two weeks. They just kept feeding her. Claire warned him they might do the same after she left.

“So, when are you leaving?” he asked.

“Day after tomorrow, early in the morning. Lacey is driving me to the airport. Wanna come along?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Great! I need someone to lug my baggage.” She smiled sweetly at him.

“Okay.” He smiled back, pleased he could do something to show Claire his gratitude for rescuing him.

Chapter 2 - Girlfriend

Lacey was a short, chubby young woman with a round face, flaming red hair, and a friendly smile. She liked Michael the moment Claire introduced him. She was the person who was supposed to watch the apartment while Claire was away all summer. Lacey felt relieved. Now she didn't have to worry about doing it. She also tended to like people Claire introduced to her.

"So, where are you from?" she asked as they rode back from the airport. Michael told her he grew up a few blocks from Claire's house. She asked why he was living at Claire's place if his home was so close. He told her. She remained silent for a few minutes. "Well, I hope you like it here," she said.

Lacey called later and invited Michael to dinner. Several people in the neighborhood were getting together to share a meal. She told him he was a guest and would not have to bring anything, which was good. Claire had let her food run out, expecting she would not need it while she was gone.

He accepted Lacey's invitation and then laid on the couch for a nap but did not sleep. Instead, he thought about getting a job. A simple job seemed best, something that would give him the little income he needed, not be too taxing, and leave him plenty of free time to write.

Michael went downtown two days later and walked around looking for 'Help Wanted' signs. He found one on a huge newsstand. He had sold newspapers while he was in high school and liked the work.

The owner, Tony, was an amiable Italian guy from South Philly. He needed someone to open at five a.m. and sell until he came in at ten. He was tired of doing it all by himself. The pay was skimpy but fair. There would not be much work from five to seven. Just opening the stand, unloading the daily newspapers, and setting them out for sale. However, seven to ten would be busy as people hurried by on their way to work. Michael had to be quick to make change, keep track of the papers sold, and be cheerful.

Tony asked him to come back early the next morning so he could try him out. Michael was thrilled but felt apprehensive. He probably would not get much sleep before he had to get up at four to catch the trolley. However, the shift was ideal. He could nap in the afternoons and have the nights free for writing or socializing.

Michael adapted to the routine after a week. He became familiar with the newspapers, recognized many of the regular customers, and gave them especially warm hellos. He also noticed there was something otherworldly about the city just before it started to wake up and begin the day. All the objects were where they were supposed to be- buildings, cars, trolleys, buses, and trains- but there were few people. He found it a good time to work on story ideas in his head. It was also the coolest part of the day and it was pleasant to be outside.

He told Lacey about the job and she felt pleased for him. She asked what he did when he was not at the newsstand. He told her he was writing, sleeping, and keeping to himself, mostly. She asked why he kept to himself. Did he dislike the neighbors? He told her he liked them but was shy. He did not want to force himself on anyone.

Then Lacey mentioned she had not seen him with a girlfriend. Did he have one? He blushed and shook his head. She asked why not. He said girls did not like him. Lacey asked how many girls he had dated. "None," he answered.

"You never dated *anyone*? I can't believe that."

"I told you girls don't like me."

"But, you're cute, and I think some girls might like you. In fact, there's someone in the neighborhood who's asked about you."

"Um, who?"

"I don't think you met her. She lives down at the end of the block." Michael waited for her to continue. Lacey waited for him to respond. The awkward silence lasted a while until she asked, "Well, do you want to meet her?"

“Yeah. I guess so.”

Lacey invited him for dinner the next night. Her roommates were away and she felt lonely. Whenever that happened, she liked to invite a neighbor or two to join her.

Michael felt awkward when he started across the street toward her place. He almost turned around and went back to Claire’s apartment. He had not been lying to Lacey; he truly was shy and did not know what to do around girls. What would he do now, when some girl was going to be there solely to meet him? Could he relax and overcome his shyness somehow? How long was this dinner going to last?

Lacey introduced him to Agatha Hartford. She was a slender Black girl with a bright smile and long braided hair. Michael felt nervous but Agatha seemed at ease around him. She seemed nice, too. He asked how her summer was going and she told a funny story about her part-time job. They all laughed. Michael noticed how musical her laughter was. She was a year behind him in high school. She went to Girl’s High, so they could not talk about teachers or school events. That exhausted his conversation topics and he hoped Lacey would help him out.

They sat making small talk. Michael began feeling at ease. He almost felt sorry when he had to leave.

Agatha rang his doorbell in the middle of a rainy summer afternoon a few days later.

“Hi, Michael. Such a dreary day. I thought you might like some company.”

“Oh. Yeah. Okay,” he said, trying to disguise his discomfort. Michael had never been alone with a girl before. He stood there not sure what to do.

She smiled sweetly. “Well, can I come in?”

“Oh, sure.”

“What are you doing?”

“Working on some of my stories.”

“Great! Can I read one of them?”

“Well, they’re still rough.”

“Then tell me one.” Agatha sat on Claire’s couch. Michael sketched a story for her.

“An alien spaceship lands deep in the Amazon jungle. A single butterfly emerges. He is from a whole planet of butterflies. He has come to make contact with the butterflies on earth. He flits around looking for other butterflies. Then a butterfly collector sees him. The collector is excited and thinks he has discovered a completely new butterfly species. He captures the alien butterfly, takes it back to his cabin, and pins it to a display card.

“He is so proud of his discovery that he names it after himself. He doesn’t know he’s discovered a new species that’s not from earth. In his haste to congratulate himself, he misses the greatest event in human civilization, first contact with intelligent life from another world. The alien butterfly dies, pinned to a display in the collector’s cabin.”

“Oh, that’s so sad,” Agatha said, devastated. “Do the butterflies from his planet miss him? Do they come looking for him?”

“I don’t know. Probably not.”

“That’s too bad.”

Agatha dropped by almost every afternoon. He began looking forward to her arrival and her company. She told him about her family. Her two brothers (who were twins) were away at college. Her grandmother had migrated from South Carolina, forty years ago. Her mother, Bella, was born in the house they still occupied. Her dad was also a teacher and often spoke to Claire about school issues.

Her mother stayed home when the kids were growing up but was talking about going out to work when Agatha went off to college. Her father would not hear of it. He said he was a good provider and he wanted her to stay at home with her grandmother.

Agatha knew they would discuss this until she left for college next year. She also knew her mother would win. She always did. If her mother talked about flying to the moon, her father would go out and find her a spaceship.

She gradually got him to talk about his family. "So, why did you run away?"

"I just couldn't face the future they wanted for me."

"Which was...?"

"A crappy job as a stock boy at Gimbel's. That's all they cared about; just getting me a job."

"No college?"

"No. They wouldn't even consider it. They told me it was a waste of money."

"But you're smart. You should go to college."

"Yeah, but not now. I just needed to get away from them. And stay away, too!"

"You mean you're *never* going back to see them?" Agatha asked. Cutting off all contact with one's family was unthinkable to her.

"Maybe someday. I have to call them every week. It was what Miss Owens wanted me to do."

"And how are they?"

"Well, they sound okay."

"Do you miss them?"

"I haven't, at least not yet." His comment surprised him. He had settled quickly into his new life, and, just as quickly, his old life had faded away. He hadn't yet thought about missing them.

"Your draft registration letter came today," his mother said on the phone.

"My *what*?"

"You know, you have to register for the draft when you turn eighteen. That's next week."

Michael felt disobedient. "I'm not registering," he declared.

"You have to," she pressed him. "It's the law. You could go to jail."

"Only if they catch up with me," he boasted.

"Who's been putting these ideas in your head?"

"They just show up on their own. Can't help it." Then he grimaced and hung up.

He and Lacey sat on her front porch around dusk. "So, how do you like Agatha?"

"She's nice."

"I *know* she's nice. I asked if you liked her."

"I guess so."

"Well, that's a start. You could invite her out, you know."

"You mean on a date? I told you, dates don't work for me. I make a mess of everything."

"Well, how do you know that will happen with Agatha?" Lacey was not being confrontational. She was trying to be encouraging.

"It just will."

"Not necessarily. You two got along well, and she likes you a lot."

Michael felt surprised. "She said that?" Lacey nodded.

"So, why not ask her out?"

"Where would we go?"

"You could go to the park, or for a walk in the woods, or maybe out for ice cream. There's a good ice cream store right up the avenue a few blocks from here."

"I can't go there."

"Why?"

"My parents and their friends- they all go shopping along the avenue."

"Oh, right. You can't let them see you. You could take the trolley up to Mount Airy, or even Chestnut Hill."

“Yeah. That’s an idea.”

“You’ll ask her out, then?” she nudged.

“I might.”

Lacey frowned and shrugged but did not say anything else.

Michael had many opportunities. Agatha dropped by almost every day and spent an hour or two, but he still did not ask her. She asked him as they were hanging out one afternoon. He did not feel surprised and said yes, immediately. Agatha realized he had been waiting for her to do it and did not know what to make of that.

They rode the trolley north toward Mt. Airy a couple of days later. Michael sat next to Agatha and looked out of the window.

“Are you okay being with me?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re white and I’m Black. Haven’t you noticed the way people are looking at us?”

“We’re just sitting together on the trolley. It’s not like we were a couple or anything.”

“Oh, sure, it’s not like *that* at all!” Agatha replied, sharply. She desperately wanted them to be a couple. Despite his shyness and hesitation, she liked Michael and accepted that he was awkward at times. He was new at this. So was she.

As they were talking one afternoon, she leaned forward and kissed him abruptly. He looked at her, shocked. She could not tell if he liked it or hated it, and became worried. “Michael, I...”

“Don’t say anything. Let’s just sit here together.” He touched her hand. She could tell he had wanted to do it for a while and felt flattered. Maybe he liked her but was too shy to express it.

That was all they did, however. He asked her to leave a while later because he had to sleep before he went to work. His boss asked him to cover the night shift so he could take the night off. Michael was happy to do it. He was tired of seeing the same customers every morning.

Agatha offered to come with him. They could spend more time together. Her mother would not mind. It was not going to be a date but it might be fun. He agreed reluctantly.

Tony made a fuss over Agatha when they arrived at the newsstand. “So this is the little lady you’ve been telling me about? Nice to meet you.”

Michael showed her around the newsstand after Tony left. It was bigger inside than it looked from outside. There were storage cabinets for the candy and cigarettes. There was also a beat-up little chair that he offered her. She sat and read a newspaper. He rearranged everything the way he liked it. The sun was about to set and it had started to cool off.

They started talking about a story in the paper, the war in Vietnam. She asked him what he thought about it. He confessed he did not know much. Then he asked her the same question.

“Oh, my dad says it’s all a terrible mistake. He doesn’t think we should be over there.”

Agatha paused. Then she asked, “Will you have to go in the army?” He shook his head. “Why not?”

“I’m not going to register.” His answer surprised her. She became silent. Just then, someone called his name. He looked across the street and saw Uncle Fred walking toward the newsstand.

“I heard you were working at a newsstand. This is nice.” He did not see Agatha on the chair, at first. Then, he noticed her.

“Oh, Uncle Fred, this is my friend Agatha.”

She immediately corrected him. “Girlfriend. Hi,” she said, smiling. Michael turned away from Uncle Fred to avoid eye contact. Fred did not seem to notice she was Black, perhaps because it was dusk.

“So, how are your folks? Haven’t seen them since the spring.”

“They’re okay. How about your family?”

“The same. I have to get to the movies. Aunt Toni is waiting for me.” He waved goodbye and hurried away.

Michael’s heart beat rapidly. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself. Then he looked angrily at Agatha. “Girlfriend?” he asked.

“Yes. I am. You know it, and you just won’t admit it.” She was right. She was his girlfriend, and he did not want to admit it.

Michael had fantasized about them going further since her spontaneous kiss. It was the first time in his life the dream of being with a female had ever come close to becoming reality. He had never thought about it with Kathleen Davis because they had been together only briefly. He had not assumed Agatha felt the same way he did. Maybe her ‘girlfriend’ comment meant she did.

Chapter 3 - Exploration

“You’re dating a *colored* girl?” Michael’s mother asked. It was the first thing she said when he called her. He tried to ignore the anguish in her voice.

“She’s my friend.”

“Your Uncle Fred told me. Can you possibly imagine how embarrassed I am? A nig-.”

“Mom! She’s nice, and we get along okay.”

“You couldn’t find a *white* girl who was nice that you could get along okay with?”

Michael wanted to hang up but restrained himself.

“Mom, I wasn’t looking for a white girl or a colored girl. It just happened.”

“Well, the whole family knows. They’re asking me how I could let you do it.”

Michael quickly realized what his mother’s statement implied. “You didn’t tell anyone I left home, did you?”

“You’ll be home soon, and this will all be over. I’m sure of it.”

“Sorry, Mom, but I don’t think so.”

“Do you have any idea how angry your father is?”

Michael felt he had to be defiant. “He’ll get over it!”

“You’re a *disgrace*; you know that, don’t you? Don’t your care about your family? How could you do this to us?”

“I have to go now. Goodbye.”

Michael wanted to tell Agatha about the conversation with his mother. It was a perfect example of his parents’ small-mindedness that made him leave home. He was afraid to hurt her feelings. He also worried she might think he felt, deep down, the same way his mother did. However, Agatha was observant. When Michael mentioned he talked to his mother, Agatha noticed the dour expression on his face and assumed Uncle Fred had probably said something to his parents.

“Did she say anything...?” He gave her a puzzled look. “About me?”

“Um, not really,” he lied, hoping to protect her feelings.

“Come on, Michael, be honest.”

“She wasn’t happy.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I. What’s wrong with you and me dating? I just don’t get it. Now you see why I couldn’t live there anymore.”

“Yeah. And I think maybe you can never go back there.”

“You think she’d disown me?”

“She might. Worse things have happened.”

“I know. I don’t want anything to happen to us.”

“Us? Did you just say us?” Agatha asked, brightly. Michael did not realize what he had said and thought about it for a second.

“Yeah, I did. That’s how I see things now.” She flung her arms around him and gave him a long and sensual kiss. Michael was unprepared for what his penis did; it got hard, rather quickly. He was hoping she would not notice. She did. “I’m sorry,” he said, blushing.

“It’s okay. Actually, I feel the same way about you.”

“What do you mean?” She frowned at him.

“Michael, do I have to explain *everything* to you?”

“Not really. I know what you meant.” He stroked her face and then kissed Agatha, thrilling her. He moved his hands down her back and pressed her tightly toward him. His hands reached her waist, but he did not stop. Agatha moaned as he moved them down to her ass.

“That’s nice,” she whispered. He immediately pulled away from her. She took his hand and placed it on her breast. Michael’s jaw dropped. “Touch me,” she said, “It’s okay.”

Her words immobilized him for a few seconds. Then he slowly moved his palm over her breast. She smiled. "I've never touched anyone like this," he said.

"I like it."

"You're so beautiful."

"Thanks," she replied, smiling; he smiled back, self-consciously. They had connected in a new way. He understood she had just offered herself to him. He hoped she now wanted his body to belong to her. They both hoped there would be more.

Agatha's grandma was a short, wiry woman who possessed more dynamic energy than anyone else in the household. She awoke before anyone else, cooked and cleaned all day, and went to bed after everyone was already asleep. Her family was her life and her granddaughter needed her help. She was not about to restrain herself.

"I know what you and him is doin' over there, child," Grandma said, as she hustled around the kitchen, trying to find pots and utensils she needed to cook a big meal. Her comment caught Agatha off guard.

"Grandma, what do you mean?" Agatha had anticipated having this conversation eventually but assumed it would be with her mother.

"You and that boy, all alone in that apartment. I know what you're doin'!" Grandma stuck her head in a cabinet, trying to reach a pot in the back. She found the one she wanted and took it out.

"Grandma, we're not doing *anything*," Agatha protested. They both knew this was not true. They were doing things, only not the things Grandma thought they were doing; at least, not yet.

"Not doing anything? Huh! You know what will happen if you get pregnant?" Grandma turned and looked directly at Agatha. "Do you?" she glared at her.

"We're not doing *that*!" Agatha replied as kids usually did in this same situation. Grandma remembered it well from her girlhood.

"Let me finish. A baby changes your whole life. Nothing will ever be the same, and you can kiss your plans for college goodbye." She turned toward the stove and set the pot down.

"You don't like babies?" Agatha asked.

"Hush, child, you know I love babies. They are one of the greatest gifts the Good Lord can give you. But not when you're sixteen. I know about bein' sixteen. I was sixteen once, you know!"

"Nothing like *that* is going to happen, Grandma." Agatha felt trapped, and this was the only response she could give, whether it was true or not.

"Well, see that it doesn't. You understand me, child?" Agatha nodded. "And from now on, you and him can see each other here, or go out on dates, but you can't be alone in that apartment."

"No! Please."

"Yes! It's for your own good."

Agatha understood exactly what her grandmother meant and knew she was right. Nevertheless, intimacy with Michael had only moved slightly beyond light petting. They explored each other's bodies. Neither of them had ever dreamed they could experience the new delights they discovered.

They briefly discussed having sex. Michael assured her he would be careful and would not get her pregnant. She asked how he could be so certain. He told her about a rubber that a boy can wear on his penis. The rubber catches the boy's semen when it shoots out so none of it gets inside the girl's vagina.

Agatha wanted to believe it was that easy to be safe. Then she wondered if she was feeling too eager to move on. *Maybe it's not him*, she thought, *maybe this is about me*. Perhaps giving herself to Michael to show her affection for him was not her objective. Maybe she just wanted to lose her virginity.

Girls at school talked about doing it. Some already had. A few made it sound like a big deal, an act that held great significance and deserved some kind of ceremony. The kids had never heard

the term ‘rite-of-passage,’ but that’s what they were thinking of. Others seemed to think it was just something to get over with as quickly as possible. Agatha knew her best friend Alyssa had already come awfully close to having sex. Alyssa seemed eager to go all the way, Agatha still questioned whether it was the right thing to do. Then Agatha realized feelings of right or wrong seemed irrelevant. She felt ready. She also felt Michael was ready.

“You’re sure about this?” she asked.

“Yeah, that’s what I heard. Should I try to get some?”

“I don’t know. Do whatever you want.” Agatha wasn’t angry at him, just a bit surprised that he went through all the trouble of finding out about protection and was so eager to make her feel safe. *Has he been planning this all along?* She didn’t see the possibility they both had been moving toward having sex from the beginning of their friendship.

Michael and Agatha easily thwarted Grandma’s rules. They told her they were going out on a date, snuck up the back stairway to the apartment, and kept the lights off. Of course, this is exactly what Grandma expected them to do.

Grandma had successfully placed the idea of sexual danger in Agatha’s mind. She was certain that Agatha, being a smart girl, would not take any risks. The girl would make sure they were being careful and safe. This was all Grandma knew she could get them to do. The kids wouldn’t stop. She didn’t stop when she was Agatha’s age and her mother cautioned her. Back then, you couldn’t get rubbers. Nobody had ever heard of them.

Agatha and Michael kept exploring each other’s bodies and finding new ways to excite each other. However, they remained clothed. He reached under her dress, or inside her shorts, and she touched him through his underwear. It never occurred to them they could undress.

When they finally did, her body mesmerized him and he could not touch her. He merely looked at her and marveled at her beauty. Her eyes went to his hardness, which she had felt but never seen.

He had touched her pubic area but never seen it, and it fascinated him. He touched her belly, gently ran his fingertips to her crotch, and placed his finger lightly on her clitoris. Her body jerked in a way he had never seen before. Then he wondered what other new pleasure he could give her and stroked the lips of her vagina.

Agatha reacted even more strongly, and Michael gently inserted a finger inside her. After a few seconds of gentle stroking, she reached an orgasm and drenched his finger. He removed it and looked at her face. Her eyes were shining, her skin glowed, and she lit up the room. He was happy for her.

This handiwork kept them engaged for a few more sessions. They both knew what would have to happen soon. She stopped him one night as he started pushing his finger in her. “Remember when we talked about those rubbers?” she whispered. He nodded. “Did you get any?” He nodded again.

“Good. Put one on, please.” He ran to the bedroom, found the little package, ripped it open, and hurried to put the rubber on. It was not as easy as it looked. He unwound it wrong side up and had to pull it off and then slide it on again. That only took a few seconds and he was back with her, eager to resume.

She did not direct him and he wondered how to continue. Then he moved above her, and gently lowered his body on top of hers. Agatha kept her legs closed. Electric shocks surged through her body when his penis touched her flesh. She moaned loud.

It occurred to him that he could slide down and get closer to her vagina. She sensed the time had come, opened her legs, and allowed his penis to slip lower. When it reached her vagina, he pushed against her, then into her. He waited for her to stop him but she did not.

Agatha moaned louder.

Their bodies fully merged in a second. Then he stopped. The reality that he was inside her overwhelmed him. “What are you waiting for?” she whispered. “Do it!”

Michael was unsure of exactly what to do. He felt so nervous that he did not notice any sensations. He began pushing forward and pulling back slowly. As he repeated the motions, he began to sense how far to go in, and how much to pull out. He tried desperately not to make a mistake.

Agatha was strangely quiet. He worried she was not feeling anything, or had changed her mind. He kept moving in and out and began enjoying the rhythm. He felt himself nearing orgasm suddenly and did not know what to do. Should he stay in, or pull out? "I'm coming," he whispered.

"Oh, baby!" Agatha threw her arms around him so he could not pull out. She wanted to feel everything.

Their first time had not taken even a minute, yet their lives changed irrevocably. They were so scared that neither genuinely enjoyed the magnificent sensations their intercourse gave them. He pulled out and lay beside her. She was still and quiet.

"Are you okay?" Michael asked softly. Agatha did not respond. He looked at her and saw tears in her eyes. He never anticipated that reaction and did not know what to do. She cried a few minutes and then was silent again. Then she turned her head, looked into his eyes, and smiled. That was all she did. They laid there together for a while. Neither wanted to be the first to get up and put their clothes back on.

Claire wrote that she was returning by the end of August and he should look for his own place. He asked Lacey if they had any room, but they did not. He asked for her advice about where he could look. She told him many of the houses in the neighborhood had rooms for rent but they did not advertise. You had to ask around. She said she would do that and get back to him.

Lacey also teased him about becoming intimate with Agatha. "So, you told me girls don't like you. Aren't you glad you were wrong?" He was mortified that she knew what he and Agatha did and blushed.

The Johnsons had two empty rooms at the back of the second floor. They were hesitant to rent to him, at first. Once they found out Michael was Claire's former student and knew Agatha and her family, they agreed. He immediately liked the rooms and took them. Then he went to Claire's, got his stuff, and moved in.

The big problem was that he and Agatha could no longer be alone. The Johnsons knew her family. They also knew he was dating her and often asked how she was doing. He always said okay, but that was not true. They could not find a private place where they could make love and the frustration was driving them crazy.

They had gotten good at lovemaking since they started. They wanted to keep improving but could not figure out how they were going to do it. He could not talk to Claire. She might try to discourage them.

He talked to Lacey about their 'problem.' She knew right away that he was hinting about using a bedroom when no one was around. She thought about helping them but was not certain it was the right thing to do. She wanted to encourage young love but knew the parents on the block might object to Michael and Agatha using Lacey's apartment for sex. Lacey decided, out of respect for neighborhood propriety, to turn them down. Nevertheless, she hoped they would find another way to solve their problem.

Chapter 4 - Love

“Dr. Owens?” Claire turned around. She recognized the tall, slender blonde girl with a soft voice, turned-up nose, and bright, intelligent eyes. It was her former student Kathleen Davis.

“Kathleen! What a surprise! It’s so nice to see you.” The girl came in and hugged Claire. “How’s college?” Claire asked.

Kathleen was a freshman at a small liberal arts college just outside of the city. Although she lived in the dormitory, she had not made any campus friends yet. That was why Kathleen dropped by to visit Claire; she needed someone to talk to. Kathleen also hoped to reconnect with some of her high school friends who might still be around.

“Okay, I guess. I’m still getting used to it.” Kathleen paused and looked around the room. “I miss this place,” she said. “I miss you, and my friends.”

“That’s normal. It’s a big change. I’m glad you came in. Speaking of your friends, do you remember Michael Romanelli?” Kathleen Davis was the girl Michael planned to find in Atlantic City.

“He and I had a conversation at your party that went on for an hour,” she replied, grinning.

“I know. I don’t think either of you spoke to anyone else,” Claire commented. Kathleen blushed. “And I think he’d like to hear from you.”

“Do you see him? I’d love to talk to him.”

“I don’t think he has a phone.”

“Could you give him my number?” Kathleen quickly wrote down her number and handed it to Claire.

“Sure. I hate to cut this short, but I have a faculty meeting. Could you come back another time?” Kathleen nodded. “I’ll give this to Michael next time I see him.”

Claire wondered if she ought to tell Michael about Kathleen. It might affect his relationship with Agatha. She liked Agatha and did not want to see the sweet girl get hurt. She also liked Kathleen and understood how lonely it could be on campus without friends.

Claire mentioned Kathleen the next time she saw Michael. He peppered her with questions. How was Kathleen? How was her summer? Did she like Europe? How was college? What classes was she taking? His enthusiasm won Claire over and she gave him Kathleen’s phone number.

He called from a downtown pay phone the moment he left the newsstand at ten a.m. the next morning. No one answered. He assumed she was in class and tried to find a phone near his room where he could call later in the day.

Michael tried calling for several days. They talked for almost an hour when he finally reached her. He was outside in a phone booth. It was rainy and chilly. That was the only reason he ended their conversation. He mentioned his job at the newsstand. She said she would drop by sometime. She did, two days later. They talked for another hour and she invited him to visit her on campus. He eagerly accepted.

Kathleen’s college was a short walk from the end of the trolley line. He felt uncomfortable entering the campus. Students looked at him as if they could easily tell he didn’t belong there. He found the map and searched for her dorm. He couldn’t find it and called from a pay phone. Kathleen greeted him in person a few minutes later.

They went to the dining hall, bought lunch, and then sat to talk. Michael had assumed Kathleen was from a moderately wealthy family but found he was wrong. She was only able to attend college because she won a large scholarship. Her father was ill and often could not work, so there was always a problem with money. Her mother had left several years earlier, right when her father started getting sick.

Kathleen cared for her father throughout high school. He felt she should not have to do it and ought to be with her friends. She did not mind. She did not have friends, except for two other girls

she saw mostly at school. Kathleen went occasionally to their homes to study. She had no friends in the neighborhood.

She also felt out of place at college. Most other students were from wealthy families. They did not know she was not. She was a sensitive girl and felt inferior to them, anyway. Her college coursework was excellent. She already had a reputation among teachers as a superior and dedicated freshman student.

Kathleen and Michael talked about themselves and shared memories of high school. She remarked that she liked some pieces he wrote, and recalled comments he made in class. He admitted he often looked at her from afar but felt awkward asking someone out, so he never did.

She walked him to the trolley when it was time for him to leave. He felt flattered. They promised to keep in touch and call each other whenever they felt like talking. This sounded great to him.

Agatha had not seen him come home from work and thought something happened to him. She saw him walking down the street, went out to meet him, and asked if he was okay. He told her he went to visit an old high school friend. They had spent hours talking and lost track of time. Agatha was not sure she believed him but did not let him see her doubt.

Kathleen did not tell Michael everything about her campus life. She had been drawn into an abnormal liaison with Nathan, a younger teacher, early in her first semester. She liked him at first but felt inferior to him. She could not see what he liked about her, but his attention flattered her.

Nathan asked her to sleep with him. Kathleen agreed. She felt he must at least see her as attractive, and not merely a gawky freshman. He was not much of a lover, however, and mostly used her to pleasure himself. After a month, Kathleen realized all they were doing was having clandestine sex.

At first, she feared he was married. She checked and found out he was not. She assumed he was being careful because intimate relations between teachers and students were against college rules. Those illicit hookups happened anyway and no one did anything about them.

She realized, finally, that he hid the relationship because he did not want anyone knowing he was merely using her. He preyed on her innocence and found her surprisingly easy to draw into a regular sexual arrangement. That was all he wanted. He said he was teaching her about sex but used her for his selfish pleasure.

In truth, he did not find her attractive. Kathleen felt all right about it. She was not looking for love, anyway, and she liked most of the sex while they were doing it. Afterward, she felt uncomfortable and ashamed for letting Nathan use her.

While there was no one else around for her to date, she let the sex-only liaison with Nathan go on. When Michael came on the scene, she thought about dating him. Kathleen did not know if Michael would be interested, but she liked him and felt warmth when they were together or spoke on the phone. All she ever felt with Nathan were his frantic orgasms and subsequent coolness.

Michael and Kathleen chatted on the phone often. He visited the campus on Sunday afternoons. Dates were impossible because neither of them had money. They took advantage of comfortable places on campus where they could sit talking for as long as they wanted.

Several weekend cultural programs interested them, too. They took part whenever they could. Their attendance gave them even more to talk about, as shared experiences usually do. Michael and Kathleen found they agreed on much, and disagreed a lot, too. They also realized they had fun together.

Kathleen told him her roommate was going home for Thanksgiving break but she planned to remain on campus. She invited Michael shyly to spend the holiday with her alone in her dorm room. He immediately said yes, although his mother pleaded with him to come home for Thanksgiving dinner. He had not refused yet but had not agreed, either. She nagged him each week when he called.

Agatha also invited him and he had planned to accept her invitation. Now it was clear he would have to turn them both down. He lied and told them he had to work. Agatha made a secret plan to surprise him at the newsstand with a turkey platter.

Kathleen's teacher-lover Nathan noticed she seemed less available to him. He was not sure if she was tiring of their affair or something else was going on. Nathan asked her to spend the four-day holiday weekend with him.

She turned him down, flatly. Nathan angrily insulted her. He told her she did not appreciate what a great lover he was and how lucky she would be to have him to herself for a long weekend of great sex. She responded by giving him a long derisive look that made it clear she knew he was using her and wanted no more of it.

"You're not very attractive," Nathan complained. "Do you think you can get a better man?" Kathleen shrugged. "You're not very bright, either," he went on. "How do you think you're going to get all the way through college and graduate without screwing some of your teachers? Eventually, the faculty will find out how stupid you are and you'll flunk out." His cruel comments stung Kathleen but she resisted him.

Then he begged her not to leave him alone during the holiday. She asked why and he told her he had spent most holidays in his youth alone. She began feeling sorry for him but still did not relent. That was when Nathan came apart. "Kathleen, I need you. I'll go crazy if I have to spend all that time alone." His confession surprised her. Nathan had never made her feel needed. She felt sorry for him but thought he was being pathetic.

"Please, Kathleen," he pleaded desperately. "My mommy never spent holidays with me. Won't you be my mommy, just for a few days?"

Nathan's entreaty stunned Kathleen. He seemed like a different person. She realized why sex with him was so cold. It was not her he wanted, but his mother. He wanted to do to Kathleen what his mother did to him. She had treated him with cold indifference, and never said she loved him. He wanted to punish her for being so unloving, but punished Kathleen (and maybe other women), instead. She realized Nathan was a sick man.

Kathleen rejected his plea. Even if Michael did not want more with her, this ordeal had to end. She could not be with Nathan again, ever. She remained quiet.

He scowled and hissed at her, "Well, shit! You're a lousy fuck anyway. I don't know why I wasted my time with you." She did not reply and walked out before he could add more insults to what he already said.

Kathleen went back to her dorm room and cried. It was not because he belittled her sexuality. She cried because her naiveté allowed him to suck her into an emotionless affair. Kathleen also cried for Nathan. His emotional damage would never heal if he just kept doing with other women what he did with her- mindless screwing. She felt sorry for him, but their sad series of disappointing sexual encounters was over.

Michael did not return home until the Friday after Thanksgiving. Agatha saw him walking down the street and went out to greet him. He smiled when he saw her, but seemed lost in another world. "Michael, where were you yesterday?"

"I told you, I had to work."

"I brought turkey dinner to the stand, but you weren't there. The stand was closed up tight."

Michael tried not to seem surprised.

"I know. I left early," he lied.

"Where did you go?"

"To my parents' house."

"Really? I thought you hated your parents. Why?"

"I felt sorry for my mom," he continued lying. "But I'm glad I went. All the time I was sitting there with them I knew I could get up and leave if I wanted to. I had my own place to live. I felt really free."

“And, you stayed over?”

“After I stuffed myself, I fell asleep on the couch. They didn’t want to disturb me.”

Agatha sighed and looked down at her feet. “You’re lying,” she accused, calmly.

“I’m lying.”

“So where were you?”

“You remember I told you an old high school friend was going to college near here? Well, I spent Thanksgiving with her.”

“With her?” Agatha shrieked. “What does that mean?”

“Well, she stayed on campus and invited me to hang out.”

“Hang out? Where?”

“Well, there.”

“You mean in her dorm room? That’s what you mean, isn’t it?” Agatha yelled. His betrayal stunned her.

“Agatha, I never meant for this to happen. I never thought I would see her after we graduated,” he lied, again. Kathleen was the reason he ran away from home.

“And, me?”

“What about you?”

“Don’t you have any feelings for me?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what, Michael? You’d better answer correctly. I’m just about ready to kill you.”

Michael had never seen her angry. He knew her rage was justified and felt sorry for the hurt he caused her.

“Yes, I liked you.” He had not meant to say it that way but the truth came out. Michael had already moved past Agatha.

“*Liked?*” she shrieked. He nodded weakly. “So that’s it?” He tried to explain but she stopped him. “I don’t want to hear anymore. Goodbye.”

Agatha turned and went into her house. He stared helplessly at the door. A few months ago, he could not have imagined having such a beautiful girlfriend. Now, he had hurt her deeply and she was gone.

Michael had not meant to hurt her. He had hoped their intimacy might cool off on its own. He didn’t realize her feelings were so strong. If she did not hate him now, she ought to.

Michael walked home, gloomy. He tried to be angry with himself, but all he felt was Agatha’s anguish. He knew exactly what she would do. What he did not know is whether there was anyone nearby to comfort her. She would have come to him for comfort in the past. He would have held her and soothed her. They would have talked and kissed. But, not this time. Michael and Agatha would do no more talking and kissing, ever.

Chapter 5 - New Apartment

Mr. Johnson told Michael they had a family member who needed a place to stay and he could no longer rent the rooms. Michael knew Mr. Johnson was lying. He could not believe they would throw him out just because he and Agatha broke up.

He went to Lacey and told her what happened. She understood immediately. "This is a close-knit neighborhood. You were welcome, but now you've hurt one of their children. They don't want you around anymore."

He wanted to ask if she could rent a room to him, but before he even got the question out, she shook her head. She offered to check out the roommates' bulletin board at school. Maybe someone was looking for a roommate and Michael could move in. He thanked her and left.

Michael found a note in his mailbox two days later. Lacey wrote the phone number of someone who was looking for a roommate. She had not written anything about him, so Michael was hesitant to call. The next day he phoned from downtown. A male answered and identified himself as Josh. Michael said he was calling about the roommate advertisement.

Josh seemed preoccupied. Michael had to pull all the information about the place out of him. Josh told him the former roommate had moved out. The apartment was in an old residential neighborhood close to downtown. Michael asked for the address and said he would come over.

Fifteen minutes later, he stood in a small foyer and looked at a motley collection of doorbell buttons. None of them had a name. Most did not even have an apartment number. Josh had told him to ring the second bell from the left on the bottom row. Two or three minutes later, he heard loud footsteps and the door swung open to reveal a lanky, bearded man wearing overalls but no shoes. "Michael?" he asked. Michael nodded and Josh invited him in.

They climbed two long flights of steps to reach the apartment at the back of the third floor. Josh had left the door open and Michael glanced inside. Josh told him he could not afford to buy furniture, so he relied on trash picking or gifts from friends to furnish the place. He asked Michael if he had any furniture. Michael shook his head. Josh frowned. "Well, the room's empty. Not even a bed. You'll have to sleep on the floor."

"I have a couple of bucks," he said. "Are there any thrift stores around here?" Josh nodded.

Michael liked the look of the room. There was a huge mural on one wall. He could not figure out the subject. Josh said he did not know what it was. Michael asked if it was finished. Josh did not know that, either. He invited Michael to finish it if he wanted to or paint over it.

Josh showed him the kitchen. Well, that was what Josh called the room. There was little evidence of kitchen activity. A forlorn apartment-sized gas stove sat in a corner. Michael asked if it worked. Josh said it did, but he never used it. There was no refrigerator. A small table sat under one window. There were two chairs, but one of them seemed ready to collapse.

Josh asked Michael when he could move in. Michael did not answer at first. He was looking out the kitchen window at a magnificent oak tree in the next yard. He did not know anything about trees, but he got a feeling from this one. "Some tree," he commented.

"Yeah. A beauty. Say, what kind of job do you have?" Michael told him about the newsstand, and that he was trying to become a writer. Josh seemed impressed. "Guess you like books, huh?" Michael nodded. "I work at that old bookstore on Ninth Street. Ever been there?" Michael's eyes lit up.

"Yeah. I love that place. What do you do?"

"Mostly cleaning and putting stuff back on the shelves. It gets pretty busy in there sometimes."

"You get to borrow any of the books?"

"Not really. Now and again, I'll grab one they're throwing away. I got them all stacked up in my room. Wanna see?" Michael nodded. Josh let him to his room, which was almost as sparse as the

rest of the place. There was a small mattress on the floor and a pile of books in one corner. "You can read them if you want," he offered.

Michael did not know what to do. Josh was a stranger. He seemed okay, but could Michael trust him? What if the guy was a little crazy? Michael thought a few minutes then decided to let the rent be his deciding factor.

"How much?" he asked. Josh seemed not to know what he meant. "How much is my share of the rent?"

"Oh, cheap. Forty dollars a month. That's all. When are you moving in?"

"How's tomorrow?" Michael replied, without a second thought.

"Great. It'll be nice to have some company again."

Kathleen felt happy for him but regretted that he would be moving further away from her campus. Michael did not tell her why he had to move. He never told her about Agatha. He did not want Kathleen to think, while he was seeing her, that he also had a girlfriend conveniently nearby.

Michael felt ashamed of how things worked out with Agatha. He truly liked her and had enjoyed their time together. He disliked the way it was so easy to hurt someone just by changing his mind and wished he had handled it differently.

Michael assumed, once he moved out of the neighborhood, he would never see any of the neighbors (except Claire and maybe Lacey) again. They would forget about him and what he did to Agatha. Maybe some neighbors would eventually forgive him.

Michael showed up at Josh's apartment the next day. He rang the doorbell. Josh didn't answer. Michael assumed he was out and cursed himself for not arranging a time. He finally gave up, left his few possessions in the foyer, and went outside to wait on the steps and learn about his new neighborhood.

There was a strange mix of upscale whites, poorer Blacks and Hispanics, and some Asians. They all passed each other on the street without saying hello, yet he could detect no real tension or dislike. He tried to greet everyone he saw and make eye contact.

Several people shot him a quick smile. Nobody stopped to say hello or talk. Nor did anyone enter his building all afternoon. Michael thought that was unusual. He had expected some other tenants to be around.

Josh finally showed up and apologized. Michael remarked that it was his fault. He had not arranged a time with Josh. He carried his stuff up the two flights and went into the apartment. It seemed bearable yesterday, probably because he had been so desperate to find a new place to live. Now that he was moving in, he saw it was dusty, noisy, and way too hot. The heat seemed out of control.

Josh helped him to his room and Michael discovered the only lights in the whole place were bare bulbs in fixtures that dangled from the ceiling. He had bought a cheap sleeping bag; he unfurled it, lay down to test it out, and quickly found out why was so cheap. There was almost no padding. He figured he could put up with it for a few nights before he could scrounge some cushions to put under the bag.

Kathleen had offered to look for household items other students at her college threw away. She said there was always good stuff, but you had to get it quickly. She had already found some towels for him.

Josh noticed the bag of notebooks and asked Michael what they were. Michael reminded him he was trying to become a writer. Josh seemed impressed. Michael had not written anything in weeks and had begun to wonder whether it was a good idea to continue trying. He had even stopped getting the quirky, sci-fi ideas that usually came to him.

He also had a journal but resisted writing in it because he did not want to share personal feelings that others might one day see. He hid these feelings from others and himself unless something was so overwhelming that he had to get it out on paper. There were several confusing

entries about Agatha and Kathleen. He had tried to mask their identities and his feelings, yet also sketch out what had happened and why. He was not very good at it.

Chapter 6 - Abortion

Kathleen went home to be with her father for the Christmas holidays. Michael received a terse postcard from her on January second. ‘Back on the 5th. Call me.’ When he called her, he asked about her holidays but she did not answer.

“Michael, I think I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, God, I’m sorry. I thought we were careful.”

“You’re not the father.”

“Oh.” Kathleen had not told him about Nathan. “Who is?”

“This guy I was seeing before you and I got together.”

“Have you told him?”

“I can’t. He’s an asshole.”

“So what do you think you want to do?”

“I don’t know. I’m so scared.”

“Can’t you get some help at the school infirmary?”

“No. If they find out, they’ll expel me.”

“Maybe you can talk to Claire.”

“Oh, yes!” He heard great relief in her voice. It was obvious she had been struggling with this crisis and had reached a dead end. “That’s a great idea. I’ll call her. Could you come with me to see her?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks.”

Michael rode north from center city on the trolley two days later. It was a sunny, bitterly cold January day. Kathleen rode south from her campus on the same line. She arrived first. As she waited, shivering, she wondered if the cold might somehow affect the fetus.

Michael’s trolley came over the hill. Michael jumped off a few moments later and ran to her. He hugged her and apologized for being late. “It’s okay. I just got here,” she said, relieved to see him. Then she took his hand and they walked toward Claire’s house.

They passed several houses and then someone called Michael’s name. A girl waved from across the street. It was Agatha. He suddenly realized it was a stupid idea to come here. Michael hoped she would not come over. She waved again, called out, “Nice to see you,” and then kept walking.

“She seemed happy to see you. Who was that?”

“One of the neighborhood kids.”

“I don’t think she’s a kid. She seemed about our age. She’s really beautiful, too.”

“She’s seventeen.”

“Did you know her well?”

“We dated when I lived at Claire’s last summer.”

“Oh,” Kathleen replied, surprised. She had assumed Michael was shy and theirs was the first romance he had. “You don’t seem too happy to see her. What happened?”

“We broke up.”

“Why?”

“I started going out with you.”

“You gave her up for *me*? But she’s so gorgeous.”

“She was okay. I like you more,” he replied.

Claire saw the couple walking down the street and went downstairs to meet them at the door. She ushered them in, asked them to take off their coats, and hugged Kathleen. They sat down in separate chairs.

“It’s so nice to see you both. I like it when my former students come to visit. Kathleen, how are you?” Kathleen grimaced. “Something wrong?”

“I think I’m pregnant.” Claire immediately looked at Michael. “He’s not the father,” Kathleen quickly added.

“I’m sorry, Kathleen. Why did you come to see me?”

“You’re the only person I could turn to. I can’t tell my father or the doctor at school. I can’t tell the guy who got me pregnant. There was no one to talk to but you.”

“How long has it been?”

“About two months.”

“So what are you planning to do?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“I have a friend who works downtown at a women’s clinic. I’ll get you her number.” Claire got up and left the room. Kathleen looked at Michael nervously. He smiled at her, but her facial expression did not change.

“Her name is Susan Worner. She’s an old friend. Call her for an appointment.” Claire handed the phone number to Kathleen.

“Will she help me?”

“Well, yeah. It’s her job.”

“Will she tell me what to do?”

“She’ll test you. Then you’ll have to decide what to do.” Kathleen’s eyes began to fill with tears. Claire got the feeling there was more Kathleen wanted to say. “Michael, I’m sorry to ask this, but could you leave? I need to talk to Kathleen, alone. You know, girl talk.” Michael looked over at Kathleen. She nodded that it was okay.

“Sure. I’ll call you tonight,” he said. Kathleen nodded again. Michael put on his coat and left.

Claire asked Kathleen to sit with her on the sofa. When they both settled in, Claire gently asked Kathleen to tell her everything. She knew Kathleen needed to let it all out. It was the first time Kathleen told anyone about Nathan. Her story didn’t surprise Claire. She knew that predatory college professors zeroed in on vulnerable female students and used them. It had almost happened to her.

Kathleen left Claire and rode the cold, empty trolley back to campus. Six months ago she had been a happy high school graduate on her way to Europe for the summer and looking forward to starting a bright new life as a college freshman. It seemed as if her happiness and optimism had evaporated overnight. If she hadn’t had Michael and Claire, Kathleen didn’t know what she would have done.

Michael walked Kathleen to the women’s clinic. She asked him to come in and wait, but he felt uncomfortable. People inside might think he was the father. He chose to wait for her at a nearby coffee shop. She kissed him and went in.

Susan was older than Claire. *Early forties*, thought Kathleen. She was cheerful, plump, wore a nurse’s white uniform, and exuded a warmth that helped Kathleen feel comfortable right away.

“I saw you kissing someone. Is he the father? They never want to come in.”

“No, he isn’t. He’s my boyfriend.”

“But, not the father?”

“Right. The father was a guy I had been sleeping with before Michael and I got together.”

“And are you sleeping with Michael?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re *certain* he’s not the father?” Kathleen nodded, annoyed at Susan’s prying. “I have to test you first, of course, but what are you thinking of doing about it?” Susan looked at Kathleen. The girl felt distraught and had not understood Susan’s question. “The fetus?” she asked, gently.

“Oh. There’s only one thing I can do, but I don’t know how.”

“You mean abortion?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure that’s what you want?”

“Yes, but I don’t have any money. Michael’s offered to help, but we don’t know how expensive it will be.”

“I can arrange for you to spend one day in the hospital. They will do the procedure. You’ll go home right away but you’ll hurt for a few days. Plus, you’ll be weak. Possibly even depressed.”

“Why is that?”

“For a brief time, you might regret what you’ve done. Lots of women do. But, it’ll be okay.”

“Why would I regret it? I have no other choice.” Susan realized Kathleen was too frightened to discuss the aftermath. She dropped the topic.

“So, shall I set this up?” Susan asked. Kathleen nodded. She was still not certain this was the right answer. She did not know if there *was* a right answer. Susan told her to call back in two days for the test results and she would explain the arrangements.

“Um..., how much?”

“You mean the cost?” Susan replied. Kathleen nodded. “It’s around \$500.” Kathleen jumped up.

“I can’t pay that. I told you!”

“It’s okay, sit down. They will bill you. You can take several months to pay, but you must pay in full. If you don’t, it reflects on this clinic. Can you do it?” Kathleen was sure she couldn’t but nodded anyway. She felt she had no other choice.

Susan gave Kathleen her card, reminded her to call back in two days, and then escorted her out of the office. She walked Kathleen to the outside door and sensed the girl seemed overwhelmed by what was happening in her life.

She had seen this many times. Girls, mostly good kids from decent families, went away to college and started exploring their freedom. Some used drugs, others became petty thieves. Most experimented with sex. The kids were tragically vulnerable. No one prepared them to handle their sexuality. The secondary schools did not teach much. Their parents cautioned them to abstain and left it at that. The kids often did not even know about rubber prophylactics. They might get lucky and find a partner who was considerate and careful, but that did not happen often.

Susan had a busy schedule of appointments with one distraught girl after another. Sometimes it depressed her. *Why must these kids be shocked into adulthood by dealing with crises like this, often alone?* She wondered. Kathleen was fortunate to have Michael as her boyfriend, although it was difficult to say how long he would stay around. Many guys got scared off. They would feel they were in over their heads and walk away.

A week later, Kathleen rode the trolley downtown, alone, on a cold, cloudy Tuesday. She felt numb. It was a long ride from the edge of the city to its heart. Kathleen wanted the ride to be as long as possible. She got off and walked two blocks to the hospital. It was eight a.m. She went in, asked for the admissions desk, and saw Susan coming toward her, smiling.

“I can’t do this often, but since you’re one of Claire’s students, I made time to be here. C’mon, I’ll walk through the preliminaries with you.”

Michael borrowed Lacey’s car and showed up around noon. He settled in the waiting room and tried not to seem obvious, although he felt certain everyone knew he was there to pick up his girlfriend who just had an abortion.

They wheeled Kathleen down around two. She looked pale and exhausted. Michael went up to her and took her hand. She could not even manage a smile. The nurse told him to get the car and pull in the driveway. He had not told Kathleen about borrowing a car, but she didn’t seem surprised. She was still in a post-anesthetic fog.

Michael helped her into the car and they rode away. He drove in silence for a couple of minutes and then decided he ought to start a conversation. It might help her come out of the daze.

“So, how do you feel?” he asked, aware of what a stupid question it was.

“God, I hope I never have to go through *that* again,” she stammered. Her voice was barely above a whisper. Michael nodded and drove the rest of the way in silence.

They arrived at Claire’s place. “Why are we here?” Kathleen asked, confused. Claire had arranged for Kathleen to stay a few days so she could recuperate in seclusion. Kathleen was too weak to protest, although she had work to do at school.

Claire put her to bed and gave her some prescription painkillers. Kathleen was asleep ten minutes later. When she woke up the next morning, the previous day seemed like a nightmare. Even though she knew it was real, she decided to think of it as just a bad dream. It made it easier to accept all that had happened, going way back to the first time she saw Nathan.

Chapter 7 - Going Deeper

Michael and Kathleen sat together in his bedroom on a rainy Friday evening a month later. He now had a mattress, some throw pillows, a table lamp, and a small shelf. The lamp plugged in the ceiling fixture so the light was less harsh. The mattress he bought from someone down the street. The pillows came from Kathleen. She had scrounged them from her dorm.

Kathleen had stayed at Claire's for three days and then returned to campus for the start of the spring semester. The secluded recuperation helped enormously. Coursework overwhelmed her as soon as spring semester classes began. Apart from being a little tired, she felt okay. She and Michael had seen each other only once two weeks earlier. They spoke on the phone every other day.

They had decided to spend the entire weekend together. Michael's roommate was working at the bookstore and they would have the place to themselves. Michael was still being cautious when he hugged her so as not to risk any undue pain. They had not had sex since before the abortion. Kathleen was as horny as she had ever been in her short active sex life. She was hoping they would spend much of the weekend making love.

She kissed Michael. He put his hand on her breast through the cloth of her sweater. She moaned and then broke the kiss.

"You can paw me later," she said, harshly. "Get your pants off." He pulled off his jeans and shorts while she removed her tights and panties. She left her skirt on. He left his shirt on. She told him she was *so* horny and asked him to enter her. He hesitated.

"You sure it's okay?" he asked.

"Yes! Just do it, will you?" She laid on her stomach, spread her legs, and then reached back to pull her ass-cheeks apart. Her hands were trembling. "Now, please."

"Wait! I don't have a rubber on."

"Did you buy any?"

"Yeah, a whole dozen. I thought we might need them." She smiled. He had gotten the message. A moment later, the thin rubber sleeve was tight on his penis and he slowly began to push in. She gasped and he stopped. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. It feels good." Then he was fully inside her. She sighed. "Okay. Nice and slow." He started moving. Kathleen buried her head in the pillow to muffle her ecstatic moans.

Michael became more confident that he would not hurt her with each stroke. She came in a minute. "Oh. Oh!" He stopped fucking her but left his penis inside. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing. I'm so excited about you that I'm nowhere close to coming. Why don't we save this erection for later?"

"That's fine." He pulled out and rolled over to her side.

"Why didn't you tell me about that son of a bitch who got you pregnant?" he asked, He tried not to sound like he was prying into her personal affairs that had nothing to do with him. He did not want her to think she belonged to him.

She hesitated, then answered, "There wasn't anything to tell. It was over. I wanted all of it behind me; I wanted to forget."

"But, you could have mentioned it."

"Would it have made a difference?"

"Well, no. I just wish I had known. That bastard really hurt you!" They laid together in silence for a moment or two.

"Michael?" she asked softly.

"Yeah?"

"Why didn't you tell me about Agatha?"

"Well, I felt bad about her and me breaking up. I didn't say anything to you because I didn't want you to think I was an insensitive bastard."

"You're not."

“Thanks. I felt like one for a couple of days.”

“Did you just drop her?”

“No. She figured out what was going on between us and asked me never to come near her again.”

“Well, she seemed okay last month when we went to Claire’s.”

“I hope she is. I still feel a little guilty.”

She rolled over onto her side, with her back to him. “Come inside me again.” He was still hard. He moved into position, took hold of his penis, and guided it into her. “That’s nice,” she said when he was all the way in. “Let’s just stay like this for a while.”

There was something extra intimate about the way her ass felt touching his groin and thighs. He felt she opened to him and trusted him with her body. As they lay together, he began to think about how sensual she was. So sensual that she scared him.

Sometimes, when they made love, she almost seemed transported to another place. He felt like she withdrew into her private universe, leaving everything, including him, behind. This made him feel like a penis that happened to have a man attached to it, instead of a man with a penis. She praised him when they finished and he always felt good about pleasing her.

He began to wonder where this sensuality came from. Was it her true sexual nature? Or, did that bastard she was with before him somehow instill it in her? He did not know why he saw a difference in possible origins, and why it should be an issue, anyway. He had a nagging feeling, however, there were some sexual parts of her he could not touch, and that these unknown parts belonged to that other son-of-a-bitch, not him.

She interrupted his worrying. “You’re quiet. What’s going on?”

“Just thinking”

“About what?”

“You, actually.”

“And what are you thinking about me?”

“I’m wondering if you miss screwing that son-of-a-bitch who got you pregnant.”

Kathleen pulled his dick out and then angrily turned to face him. She was livid. “What???”

“It was just a thought.”

“It’s the kind of thought you should *not* be having. How could you ask such a question?” He did not want to admit to her that he sometimes felt he did not have all her sexuality available to him, that he suspected she might be holding back.

“Are you jealous?” she asked.

“Of *him*?”

“Yes!”

“No. I don’t feel jealous. It’s more like envy. I wish I was the one making love to you all that time.”

“You’re the one, *now!* The only one I want. That other bastard is gone from my life.”

“So you never remember what it was like to screw him?”

“Oh, yes, I remember, every time you fuck me. I remember what a selfish boor he was. He gave me nothing, nothing at all when we fucked.”

“Do I?”

“Oh, yes. More than I can tell you.”

“I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“No, I’m glad you did. Do you feel better about it, now?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Can we drop this subject once and for all?”

“Okay.”

“Good.”

Michael stunned her two weeks later. He asked Kathleen if she would visit his parents with him. He explained his mother had mentioned all his stuff was still at the house and asked whether he wanted any of it. He told her there were a few books he would like to get.

His mother insisted he come for dinner. He declined and told her he did not know when he would have time. He thought about it and decided to ask Kathleen to come along. Whatever they might feel about him, however angry they might still be, Michael felt certain they would be civil with Kathleen there. They would also be relieved she wasn't Black. He saw this as the best way to get his stuff without a lot of yelling, recrimination, or embarrassing questions.

She felt a little uncomfortable about his request. Did he want her as a shield? He assured her his parents would be nice to her and she might even like them. She hesitated. He reminded her how he stuck by her during the abortion. "You bastard," she said, smiling. "How long have you been planning this?"

He looked embarrassed and answered, "Just this week. I talked to her last Friday."

"I'll go. But if I say we have to leave, we go; no discussion about it; agreed?"

"I'll probably want to leave before you will. They can be very nice. You might want to stay awhile," he said, grinning.

"I doubt it," Kathleen replied.

Chapter 8 - Going Back

“Mom, it’s Michael.”

“Oh, hi.” She sounded surprised.

“I’ll be in the neighborhood this afternoon. Can I come by to pick up some books?”

Why so sudden? Amelia wondered. *Couldn’t he have called before the last minute?* “This afternoon? Laura’s at school. I thought you would come for dinner.” She paused. Michael waited. He didn’t care which way she went. She could tell him to stop by or not. “All right. Your father and I will be here.”

“Thanks, I’ll see you around two.”

“Good.” Mrs. Romanelli did not feel good. She immediately began to agonize. She didn’t mention Michael’s call to her husband.

They got off the trolley a block from Michael’s house. Kathleen felt uneasy. He knew it was asking a lot for her to be a buffer between him and his parents and assured her there was nothing to worry about. She felt skeptical but committed to seeing it through.

Michael had not seen his old house in nine months. It seemed smaller than he remembered and slightly run-down. This surprised him. His father usually took care of painting and repairs and kept the place looking good. At least, it looked good when Michael lived there. Perhaps it had always been shabby and he never noticed.

He took Kathleen’s hand and asked if she was still okay doing this. She nodded. They went up the steps and rang the doorbell. His mother opened the door immediately, looked at him with an expression of hurt and anger on her face, and then noticed Kathleen. Her expression changed to puzzlement and caution. Michael introduced them. His mother, Amelia, forced a smile and invited them in. Michael had stopped breathing but did not notice. He felt scared.

His mother looked older. She seemed shorter and rounder than he remembered her. Michael didn’t recall the lines on her face or the veins on her hands. *Has she aged so much in only nine months?* he wondered. She also seemed stiff and distant, as if she was deliberately treating him as a stranger. *Maybe this is how she’s coping*, he thought.

She ushered them into the small living room. Louis, Michael’s father, sat on the couch. He did not look at Michael right away and Michael wondered if his father was going to ignore him. Then Louis glanced up, saw Kathleen, and his face brightened. He always had an eye for attractive girls and thought of himself as a charmer. He immediately stood up. Michael introduced him to Kathleen.

His mother asked them to take off their coats but Michael explained they could only stay a few minutes. Amelia was dying to ask about Kathleen. Michael saw the curiosity on her face. He explained that he and Kathleen graduated high school at the same time and started going out together in the fall. Amelia had hoped Kathleen would turn out to be his girlfriend and not just a friend who dropped by with him. She felt relieved he was not seeing that colored girl anymore.

He asked if he could go up to his old bedroom to get a few books and invited Kathleen to come along. She might see something she wanted. Michael’s abruptness surprised his mother. They had not even sat down. “Sure!” Louis replied. They walked to the stairway. Michael turned as they climbed the steps and saw his mother look at his father. Louis just shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, aren’t you going to talk to him?” Amelia whispered when she thought Michael and Kathleen were out of earshot.

“About what?”

“About how he left.”

“I can’t with *her* here.”

“Why not?”

“Her feelings might get hurt.”

“What about my feelings? I’ve been waiting for this for the past nine months. He finally comes home and you treat him as if he’s a guest.”

“He is. He lives somewhere else, now.”

“No. This is still his home.”

“I don’t think he sees it that way.”

“But, that’s the way I see it!”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Louis was not sorry. He had merely adjusted better to Michael’s absence than Amelia had.

Michael heard them from upstairs. He knew what they were whispering about. He had not apologized to them and did not feel he owed them apology, explanation, or anything else.

Kathleen browsed his books and chose some classic SF novels: *Childhood’s End*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and a few others. He took an old Shakespeare volume that he bought at a thrift store for a quarter. He also wanted his *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazines.

They were back downstairs in ten minutes. He walked in and noticed his mother glaring at his father. She turned and asked if they would like coffee or tea. Michael told them he had to go.

“Already?” Amelia asked.

“Yeah. I have to be at work in a few hours.”

“Where?”

“Downtown.”

“That newsstand?”

“What newsstand?” Michael asked, feigning ignorance.

“The one your uncle saw you at last summer.”

“Oh, yeah. Sometimes I do work there,” he lied. It was his only job. He hoped to leave before the questions became too specific.

“It was nice seeing you,” he lied. “Thanks for letting me come get this stuff.”

“You have to go already?” his mother asked again. Kathleen kept her eyes down and tried to avoid looking at either parent’s face.

Michael realized the only way they could leave was to hint that they would come back.

“Maybe we can stay longer next time,” he said as he headed for the front door.

“You want a bag for those books?” his mother, ever helpful, asked. He nodded. She went to get a paper bag. Michael felt uncomfortable standing there with his dad. He felt they both wanted to say something.

“How’s work, Dad?” Louis’ whole bearing changed. His face almost lit up. Now he could talk about something safe.

“Ah, same crap as always. That place never changes, you know?” he said, grinning. Amelia came back with the bag and handed it to Kathleen. Michael put the books inside and then started toward the door.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Bye,” she said, dejectedly. “Bye, Kathleen. Nice meeting you.” She started to fill up with tears.

Michael stepped outside onto the little porch. He let Kathleen come through the doorway and then closed the door behind her. They looked at each other. Their faces were blank. Neither could make out the other’s feelings. He held her hand as they went down the steps and walked away from the house. He turned to look behind him, concerned one or both parents might be following. No one was there.

Michael hoped the trolley would come on time. He was still not breathing. He squeezed Kathleen’s hand and she squeezed back. The trolley light came over the hill after a few silent moments. They boarded the trolley and sat quietly. He did not start breathing again until they were several blocks away.

Back at the house, his mother started protesting. "How could he *do* that? How could he act that way? As if we're not his parents, almost as if we're strangers?"

"It was nice to see him."

"But he could have stayed awhile."

"Maybe next time."

"You think he'll come back?" she asked, hopefully.

"Oh yes," Louis lied to comfort her. He had no idea what Michael might do. "Kathleen seemed nice," he tried to shift the subject.

"At least she wasn't a nigger. I wonder what happened to that girl."

"I don't know."

Michael's sister Laura arrived home from school and felt disappointed Michael had already been there. Amelia her about Kathleen. Laura said she hoped they would meet someday. She wondered what Michael was up to. She had tried to contact him a few times but could not find out where he was.

"Why did he leave so quickly?" she asked.

"He had to go to work." That newsstand! Of course! Laura would have to go downtown, look for it, and hang around until he showed up.

Michael gazed out the window as the trolley glided toward downtown. Kathleen felt he had withdrawn deep into himself.

"Talk to me," she pleaded. He turned and looked at her.

"I don't know what to say."

"Well, how are you feeling?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Was it harder than you thought it would be?"

"Yes."

"I thought it went well, and it was over quickly."

"Only the part on the outside," Michael replied. There was a faraway look in his eyes. "On the inside, it's still going on."

She gripped his hand. "Oh, okay." They rode the rest of the trip in silence.

Chapter 9 - Temptation

Final exams were two weeks away. Kathleen did not want to languish at home during the summer. She found a job in the city. Some college acquaintances would be sharing an apartment not far from where Michael lived.

Michael's roommate Josh told him that he found a high-paying seasonal job in Atlantic City, and was leaving for the summer. He apologized, saying he could not pay his half of the rent if he was not living there, and suggested Michael look for a summer roommate.

Michael told Kathleen Josh was leaving. She looked up at the sky as if dark storm clouds had suddenly parted and a light shone down from heaven, right onto them. They agreed swiftly to live together, hoping their summer domesticity would deepen their intimacy. They started to call it their 'summer of love.'

She moved in her stuff as soon as finals ended. Suddenly Michael's bedroom looked cluttered. It was a nice change from the sparse look it usually had. They had a little celebration to see Josh off and then settled into a domestic routine. Michael managed to change his work hours so they would approximate hers.

A week after Kathleen moved in there was an attempted robbery at the newsstand. Tony chased the robber, tripped, fell, and broke his leg. He would be unable to walk or work for at least two months. He begged Michael to cover all the time the newsstand was open. Michael balked, asking if they could cut back the hours. Tony said seven a.m. to seven p.m. would be enough, but it would have to be six days a week. Tony offered to increase his pay, and Michael needed the money. He had no savings and his current income was barely covering his meager expenses. He told Tony he would have to consult with Kathleen. Tony felt apprehensive. He understood but worried what he would do if Michael refused.

Kathleen listened quietly as he explained the problem. She felt surprised he was considering it. However, she knew Michael liked Tony, and Tony had treated him well.

"This was going to be our summer of love," she reminded him tenderly.

"I know. But he needs me, and I need the money."

"But, what about us?"

"We'll be together whenever we can." Kathleen had hoped for a better reply. She realized he had already decided to do it and was merely trying to persuade her to accept it. It was mostly a financial decision but still left her feeling disappointed. Their blissful summer evaporated.

A week earlier, Kathleen had been first in Michael's life. Now she was second, or third. Last summer she was in Europe. She might spend much of this summer by herself in a sweltering downtown apartment. Kathleen didn't want to make too much of a fuss and force Michael to choose between money and her. She worried his choice would not be the one she preferred.

Kathleen agreed. She planned to come by the newsstand after her workday ended and hang out until he closed. They would have a few hours each evening for dinner, a movie, or a walk by the river. Sundays would be theirs, all day. However, she did not like the arrangement and wondered how long she would put up with it.

Michael knew he asked her for a big sacrifice and his gratitude was boundless. He also hoped she would not force him to choose between her and money. He believed they could have both, and the extra income would help them enjoy their 'summer of love' more than they would have otherwise.

Nevertheless, he also knew he was on shaky ground. He had to make this work, or else when she moved back to campus in the fall she might tell him never to call her again. This made him realize he did not know how she felt about him. He also realized he did not know how he felt about her. They had not discussed their feelings. They just got along well and were happy to be together.

The summer was hot and muggy. Time slowed to a crawl unless they were together, and then time zoomed like a rocket. At first, it was fun hanging out with him at the newsstand. Then it got so

hot she stopped by after work, grabbed some magazines, and headed to a nearby park where it was cooler. She spent a few hours reading under a tree, came back around seven, returned the magazines, and helped him close up.

Kathleen began to feel she had two jobs, not one. He tried to be cheerful about it, although the heat got to him several times and he was crabby with her. She angrily grabbed her magazines, told him she would see him back at the apartment, and then left. He came home with some cold sodas and a hoagie they shared for dinner.

It was too hot even to make love. They spent many evenings on the front steps of the apartment house. They greeted passersby and chatted about whatever came to mind. They usually stayed outside until midnight. When it got cooler, they went inside to sleep.

They slept naked but hardly touched each other. The only times they had sex were when it was cool or rainy. They began to joke about the weather report, checking every day to see whether there was any 'nookie' in the forecast. On several of the hottest days, thunderstorms rolled through just after dark and rapidly cooled everything off. They spent those nights making love.

It was all right, but it was not what Kathleen had planned. They rarely saw a movie, or ate out, and did not try to see other couples. She liked being with him but wondered if he wanted any more from her or their relationship than they already had, which was not much. She did not mention her doubts to him.

Kathleen slept late on Saturdays and then sought an air-conditioned place to spend the afternoons. She liked the museums but the department stores tempted her, too. She could not spend any money she earned, except for bare necessities. She wandered around the stores and went from one department to another just to see what they had for sale.

It did not surprise her that someone would notice her sitting or wandering alone in a store or museum and strike up a conversation. What did surprise her was how willingly she responded.

Kathleen noticed a tall, shy-looking guy glancing at her in the Art Museum. She looked directly at him and he walked over and introduced himself. Kathleen could tell he felt awkward and smiled.

"You look like someone I've seen at Temple," he said.

"I'm a student, but not at Temple." Kathleen didn't feel she ought to offer too many details about herself right away.

He told her his name. Richard was two years older than Kathleen was. He was about to start his senior year. He had a funny, lusty, embarrassed look in his eyes. He tried not to be too obvious but secretly hoped for a casual romantic encounter.

When he finished talking about himself, he told her about the university. As he described it, she felt overwhelmed by its sheer enormity. It did not seem like an educational institution, but a factory that manufactured students. Rick knew his way around campus. He described some quiet, private, and interesting places he knew. Perhaps the bigness that put her off was not a problem and she only imagined it.

They chatted for a while about college life and lost track of time. She enjoyed his engaging conversation. It grew late and the museum was about to close. Rick invited her to dinner at a nearby Chinese restaurant. She was not due to meet Michael until seven. She accepted because there was nowhere else to go that was air-conditioned.

Rick eased his arm around her waist when they left the museum and walked toward the restaurant. She did not resist. He seemed like an okay guy who was just a bit lonely. Rick told her he remained stuck in the city for the summer while his university friends went back home. She felt sorry for him, but just wanted his company and nothing more.

Kathleen wanted to mention where she lived and whom she lived with, but the opportunity never came up. She allowed Rick to assume she was not dating anyone but felt bad. She knew she should tell him about Michael.

Rick offered to take her to dinner, but she insisted on paying for her meal. He would not hear of it. She neglected to mention why she wanted to pay. He thought she was just being nice. This made it more difficult for her to leave, but it was getting close to seven.

“Look, Rick, I’ve had an enjoyable time, but I have to go.”

Rick’s facial expression conveyed his disappointment better than any words could have done. “Really? The night’s still young.”

“Yes it is, but my roommate gets off work at seven and I have to be there.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

“No. You stay and enjoy the rest of your meal.”

“Well, can I have your number?” Rick asked.

“The place I’m staying doesn’t have a phone. I won’t have one until I go back to school in September.”

“Well, how about I give you mine, then.”

“Oh, sure. But, I can’t say when I might be calling. Work and all, you know.”

“Well promise me you’ll at least try once or twice.” He tried not to sound as if he was pleading.

“I promise I’ll try,” she said, forcing a smile. He scribbled his phone number on a napkin and handed it to her.

“You won’t forget, right?”

“I won’t, but I gotta go now. Thanks for the wonderful dinner and conversation.”

She arrived after seven and Michael mentioned he had worried. She told him she met a friend at the museum and they went to get something to eat. He asked if it was someone he knew and she answered, truthfully, no, it was not. As they walked home, he told her what a strange day it had been. It seemed like the heat had made everyone slightly crazy. She laughed and told him she had missed him.

Both Kathleen and Rick went back to the Art Museum the following Saturday. He thought she came back to see him. He asked why she hadn’t called him beforehand. She shrugged and said she just woke up, felt an impulse to go back, and didn’t have time to call. Kathleen’s easy lie shocked her. She soothed her guilt by reminding herself that she *chose* not to call and pretended their meeting was accidental.

However, she had gone to the museum assuming he would be there. He seemed like a guy who would return to a place again and again, just because he thought she might show up. Well, she had.

Rick told her he had a wonderful time last Saturday and asked her to spend the afternoon with him again. She lied and told him she returned to the museum because the art in a gallery got stuck in her head all week and she needed to view it again. She hoped he would not ask her which gallery it was.

Then he mentioned that some friends were visiting the city. They planned to go out in the evening and he asked her if she wanted to come along. Kathleen surprised herself by how easily his invitation enticed her. She did not answer immediately and struggled to come up with an excuse.

“I’m glad we ran into each other, but I’ve had a rough week at work and I need some time to wander around here and clear my head.” His face immediately dropped. *Oh, God*, she thought, *I’ve hurt his feelings.* “But let’s meet in the courtyard after the museum closes,” she suggested. Rick smiled and seemed relieved.

“Okay,” he said, “I’ll see you in a few hours.” He walked down the corridor toward the medieval wing. Kathleen found an inconspicuous way out of the building. She crossed the street, entered a lush park, found a bench, and hoped the greenery would hide her. She also hoped he had not seen her leave. If he had, he would soon show up.

What was she doing? She liked Rick, but she was living with Michael and lying to both of them. She never knew it was so easy to be deceptive. Why was she doing it? Was there a reason, or

was the summer heat cooking her brain? She hoped it was the heat. If it was anything else, she did not want to know. Things had become complicated, worse than when she was pregnant.

Kathleen decided to go back to the sweltering apartment and spent the afternoon reading. She left to go to Michael's newsstand around six-thirty. It occurred to her as she descended the stairway that Rick might be waiting right outside the building. She felt afraid to go out. She knew her fear was irrational. She had not given him her address. Nevertheless, there was the possibility they could run into each other on the street. He probably worried when she did not meet him at five and might be looking for her. If she did not go to the stand, Michael would worry. He probably would wait there and not come home for hours. She did not know what to do and wished someone would just come along and tell her.

No one did.

It was the first time in her life Kathleen realized that she was alone. There were always people who helped her decide what to do, until now. She often did whatever they told her, without question. Now she was tampering with the lives of two men and did not want to hurt either of them. It was not only their hurt that concerned her, however. She was hurting herself worse than she was hurting them.

Kathleen remembered she had Rick's phone number and decided to call, apologize, and tell him it was over, such as it was. At least she owed him that. She went to a phone booth and dialed. A woman answered. Kathleen asked for Rick. The woman said he was spending the day downtown. "Who's calling?" the woman asked. Kathleen did not know how to reply and hung up.

Kathleen walked slowly to meet Michael. She avoided the larger streets where traffic increased as people came out to enjoy their Saturday night, and felt better when she reached the newsstand. If Rick saw her with Michael, he would probably stay away, just because he was so polite.

Unlike me, she thought.

Chapter 10 - Immersion

“Gonna be a hot one!” Michael heard the voice as he straightened the newspaper pile. He had not noticed anyone approach the newsstand and turned to see who spoke. It was a woman he never saw on Saturdays.

“They’ve all been hot ones, lately,” he said, genially. The woman carefully selected the paper she wanted. He noticed her baggy shorts, rumpled t-shirt, scuffed sneakers, and tousled blonde hair. She wore no make-up. Her casual appearance surprised him. She normally dressed like a cookie-cutter businesswoman in a plain straight skirt, white blouse, and dark shoes. Her hair was always neat. He guessed the woman was in her thirties.

She turned to pay him. Michael glanced at her face, and her eyes drew his interest. He had noticed them before and stared intensely. She felt he was probing her and looked away, embarrassed.

“I don’t usually see you on Saturdays,” Michael commented.

“Yeah. My home isn’t air-conditioned but my office is.” He nodded. “I guess you don’t get to be in air-conditioning. You gotta be out here all day.”

“It’s not too bad in the shade.” Michael wondered why she seemed friendly and chatty. Normally, she didn’t say a word.

“If you ever want a break, my office is only a block away.” She handed him her business card. Michael glanced at it. “In fact, I could use some help. I’m re-arranging my office and I need some boxes moved. I would pay you, of course. And you could get out of the heat for a while.”

“Thanks,” Michael said. The woman walked away. He looked at the card. *Betsy McGuire, Chestnut Street Methodist Church.* Michael was no fan of churches but he thought he might take her up on her offer of air-conditioning. He hoped she would not talk to him about God.

He pressed the doorbell button, heard ringing somewhere deep within the building, and waited. No one answered and he turned to leave. Then the door creaked open.

“Sorry!” she said. “It’s hard to hear the bell with the air on. Come on in.” She led him into a stone foyer, through several heavy oaken doors, up a flight of narrow stairs with worn carpet, and to a bright, sparsely furnished office.

“I’m the only one here today. Have a seat and cool off. Want a soda?” He shook his head. “Water?”

“Not right now.”

“There are boxes in my old office on the other side of the building that I need to be moved in here,” she said. “But, there’s no hurry. Do you have some time?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I closed for the afternoon. Once the morning papers are gone, nobody wants anything until the Sunday papers come in around six.”

“So you can stay till six?” she asked, brightly. He shook his head. She felt disappointed and feared he would have to leave soon. Betsy didn’t want him to go.

“Five, maybe, if that’s okay. You were right. The air conditioning is nice.”

“You can stay as long as you want. I wasn’t planning to leave until dark.” He nodded. She sighed and then sat behind the desk. Neither of them spoke. They basked together in the coolness.

“I’ve been coming to your stand for a while, now,” Betsy began. Michael nodded but did not reply. “I’ve noticed you looking at me a few times.” Her remark surprised him.

“Um, yeah.”

“I’ve been wondering why.” Betsy tried to seem inquisitive but not intimidating. She did not want to make Michael uncomfortable. She expected him to take his time before answering but he spoke right away. What he said surprised her.

“Your eyes are the most intense I’ve ever seen. They seem like a vast ocean. I could get lost in them.”

“Whoa! ‘A vast ocean’? ‘Lost in them’? That’s pretty vivid. Do you normally notice other people’s eyes?”

“I don’t even notice their faces. Usually, I’m too busy.”

“So why *my* eyes?”

“Some kind of magnetism, I guess.” He regretted his spontaneous reply and worried it offended her.

“Magnetism? Wow!” She wanted to say more but did not want to embarrass him. He was not embarrassed. He felt curious.

“Why are you asking me all this?” he asked. She remained silent. Had what started as light conversation suddenly become serious?

“I..., I’m not sure,” she lied. He looked at her, wondering if she was coming on to him. “Actually, I do know. Here’s the reason. People don’t usually pay attention to me. They don’t even see me.”

Michael looked at her more closely and noticed how attractive she was. He thought her formal business suit didn’t flatter her the same way casual shorts and the t-shirt did. “I find that hard to believe.”

“No, it’s true. I stand up in front of my congregation in my Sunday best preacher suit and no one looks at me. They hear me, but they don’t see me.” Betsy had felt invisible for a long time.

“So you’re the minister here?” Michael asked. She nodded. Her card just showed her name and the name of the church. “I thought you were a secretary or something.”

“Nope. I’m the preacher.”

“I’m surprised.”

“What, that I’m the minister?” She almost felt insulted. “You don’t think women can be ministers?”

“I’ve never thought about it. It’s just that you don’t seem like a minister to me. When I’ve looked at you I haven’t felt any minister vibes coming from you.”

“So, what vibes did you feel?”

Michael thought about it. What vibes had he felt when he saw her before? Pretty much, none. He knew he couldn’t tell her that. “Woman vibes. Just woman vibes. I’m sorry.”

His reply pleased Betsy. *At least he saw me as a woman*, she thought, *and not merely another customer in a business suit on the way to the office*. Something made her stand up. Michael thought their chat had ended and she would show him the boxes she wanted him to move. “Don’t be,” she replied. “I’m *not* sorry.”

Betsy walked slowly to where he sat and stood before him. “When you looked at me and felt those vibes, did you feel anything else?” *What the hell am I doing?* Betsy thought. She ignored her caution and looked down at him.

Betsy’s t-shirt was only a few inches from Michael’s face. He stared at her breasts beneath the cloth. She wore no bra. He realized Betsy had not invited him to move boxes. She wanted him to move her world. He looked at Betsy. She was more than ten years older than him. He guessed she had a thing for younger guys.

“When you asked me to come over and move some boxes, I didn’t think I would *really* be moving boxes,” he teased.

“Oh? Were you expecting something like this?” She cupped his head in her hands and then kissed him sweetly on the lips.

“Umm...,” he started to reply. She kissed him again, stepped back, and lifted the t-shirt over her head. He stared at her breasts. The cool air stiffened her nipples.

Betsy helped him remove his t-shirt and shorts and then touched his erection. “I’ve been thinking about this,” she said. “It’s all I’ve thought about since I noticed how you look at me.”

It was a lie. Betsy had never thought about having sex with Michael before that moment. The idea might have been hiding somewhere in her subconscious mind, but she never recognized it. She pulled away, removed her shorts, looked into his eyes, and then moved closer to him. His erection touched her panties.

“Is this okay?” she asked, suddenly timid. “I guess I’ve been coming on pretty strong.”
“Don’t stop.”

She pulled her panties aside, aimed his penis at her opening, and gasped when he pushed up into her. He put his arms around her. She sighed and laid her head on his shoulders. Her tender surrender touched him.

“You must think I’m crazy,” she whispered. He shook his head. “No?” she said, smiling.
“Well, I think I’m crazy. I’ve never done anything like this before.”

Michael did not care. His cock twitched inside her. She moaned and he started to thrust into her from below. She rolled her hips. There was no sound except their raspy breathing and the air-conditioner hum.

They enjoyed each other for a few intense moments.

“I think we should stop,” Michael said. Betsy assumed he was being careful. She hadn’t allowed him time to put on a rubber. She lifted herself away, knelt in front of him, and began stroking his cock. It swelled and squirted semen a few moments later. She watched as if she had never seen anything so captivating before. Michael moaned.

He reached for her crotch after he finished coming. Betsy stopped him. She stood up, reached for tissues, and handed a few to Michael. They wiped themselves off.

“When you come back, will you bring some condoms?” she asked. Her question stunned him. *She wants me back?* he thought. *I assumed this was a one-time thing, probably because she was crazy with the heat.*

Michael closed the newsstand Saturdays around one, bought some sandwiches, and spent the hottest part of the day in Betsy’s office. He offered the sandwiches when he arrived, but she never wanted food. She wanted him.

Betsy led him up the warm staircase into her cool office, undressed immediately, and then helped him out of his clothes. She kissed him gently, took hold of his penis, and kissed it as if it was a dear friend. She was ready for him and invited him to enter her any way he wanted.

She welcomed him inside her and then enfolded him. He liked the way she enjoyed his dick. She smiled and sighed as he moved inside her. He did not think she had a single orgasm. Rather, she seemed as if she experienced ecstasy the entire time they remained joined. She was different from Kathleen, or Agatha. Sex with them was cock in cunt. Sex with Betsy was body to body.

Betsy lay next to him when they finished and talked about herself. He was curious how a minister, someone called by God, could be so sensual and deeply orgasmic.

“Some people feel God calls them, or know from childhood they want to serve God. Not me. I didn’t think about God until I met my husband. He was deeply religious and told me he always knew he would become a minister. He was also handsome, charming, and a delightful companion. Lots of girls wanted him. I got him by telling him I didn’t want him, I wanted God, and I thought he could help me find God.

“This melted him, and he became mine. I kept asking myself if my faith was real and I kept saying ‘yes.’ I became so convinced that I decided to enter the ministry, too.

“We lived together on campus, absolutely celibate. We did not take cold showers when we became aroused. Instead, we prayed for God to strengthen us to resist the temptations of Satan.” She paused to be certain Michael was listening. She was speaking about her husband, but she lay naked, sweaty, and still aroused, next to him. He reached toward her crotch and fingered her labia.

“He was entirely different on our wedding night. He ravaged me and left us both exhausted in sexual bliss. After that, we made love a lot, and it was always the same: passionate, wild, fervent, and powerfully orgasmic. It was a side of him I would never have imagined, and I loved it, and him, even more. I felt loved by both God and my husband, and by God *through* my husband. I felt certain I had made the right choice, and maybe had been called, after all, when I first became attracted to him.”

“So what happened?”

“We tried to have a baby, but I couldn’t get pregnant. He thought he was doing all the passionate lovemaking he could possibly do, so it had to be my fault. Maybe I just didn’t want it enough or didn’t love him enough. He became cool toward me. Our sex wasn’t as frequent or intense. Eventually, it became sporadic and bland.

“I felt devastated. I still loved him but I knew I couldn’t make him happy, so I offered him a divorce. He blew up at me. He had said ‘until death,’ and meant it, regardless of the disappointment and suffering. I had gone from being the object of his love to being the cause of his unhappiness. My only hope was that God would send a miracle.

“God *did* send a miracle but it wasn’t him; it was you. Because of his rejection, I felt like the most unattractive and unwanted woman in the world. I dressed plainly and didn’t use makeup or do much with my hair. I was never more than just presentable. Then you started to notice me. I thought to myself, I feel like the plainest woman alive, but this guy looks like he’s attracted to me. So, I took the initiative but I didn’t know where it would lead. I never intended to do it with you that first afternoon. I just wanted to get to know you. I’m not sorry about what we did.” Neither was Michael, but he did not say anything.

Betsy and Michael met only on Saturdays so neither her husband nor Kathleen would be suspicious. Both wanted more but accepted that having more would cause great upheavals in their lives. Betsy looked forward to their Saturday afternoon trysts because she could be a markedly different woman one day a week. Sex with Michael took her to a new place. She liked merging with him. She liked who she became when she was under him. She liked how he melted her down to something true and essential.

Betsy thought of the alchemists who put lead inside hot furnaces and tried to transform it into gold. It did not work for alchemists, but it did work for her. Maybe it was just her body responding to Michael’s, but she felt it was much, much more.

Their sex joined them in ways neither would have believed possible. She never expected spiritual lovemaking to happen. When Michael cried out in orgasm, it resonated with something deep inside her. She vibrated in harmony with his ecstasy and felt whole.

Betsy thought of their connection as spiritual; however, being a minister, she also thought that idea was blasphemous. How could sex be spiritual? She convinced herself it was no affront to God to share carnal ecstasy. God created humans to find wholeness in pairs, and not hermit-like, alone. It was a new way of looking at God, for her, and she found some of her insights astonishing.

Betsy told no one. Angela, her only sister, lived far away and they had little contact. She couldn’t talk to anyone in her church. *How do I share insights about sex and spirituality with a congregation? she asked herself. I can’t lead Christian orgies. I also can’t describe to anyone else what I feel. Therefore, I won’t try.* They kept what they felt to themselves, and shared it, repeatedly, but only with each other.

Chapter 11 - Truth

"Why were you closed this afternoon?" Kathleen asked. They finished eating their hoagies and were about to go outside to sit on the front steps to enjoy the cooler evening air.

"What do you mean?"

"I came by around two."

"It was too hot to stay there."

"So, where did you go?"

"Someplace cool."

"You just took the afternoon off?" He nodded. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It was a typical Saturday afternoon. There weren't any customers." He replied as if that vague explanation ought to be enough.

"Have you done that before?" Kathleen felt annoyed she was hearing about it for the first time. He nodded. "And you never told me?"

"I decided at the last moment."

"But, we could have gone somewhere together."

"I assumed you'd be busy."

"Doing what?"

"Well, it's your day off. You work as hard as I do. I assumed you'd have things to do, or maybe just relax."

"But, I want to relax with *you*, Michael," she said. "Where did you go?"

"Over to a friend's place where it's cool."

"Oh, where was that?" She thought he meant a store or a nearby museum.

"A church."

"Considering how you feel about churches, I'm surprised you would go anywhere near one, let alone inside, even if it was only to cool off."

"Well, it's just around the corner, and there's air conditioning, so..."

"In the church?"

"No. In an office. I know somebody who works there."

"What's his name?"

"Who?"

"Your friend..., with the air..., in the church?" she asked, exasperated. He wanted to lie, but could not. He did not know why. Was it because she was badgering him with questions and he wanted to shut her up? Or, was it because he had feelings for Betsy that he could no longer hide?

"She's a customer. Her name is Betsy. She's the minister."

"Oh, the minister."

"Yeah. You'd like her."

"If you thought I would like her, why haven't you told me about her?"

"I was going to," he lied, again.

"Was anybody else there?" He shook his head. "You were alone with her?" He nodded. "What do you and Betsy do while you're in her wonderful air conditioning?"

"We talk about stuff. She's interesting."

"Does she try to convert you?" He shook his head. Kathleen knew what she assumed they did, and her suspicion shocked her. She thought she was crazy with the heat. *Michael said the woman was a minister*, she reminded herself. *How could I suspect that minister of screwing my boyfriend?* Nevertheless, she did.

"How old is Betsy?"

"I don't know. Thirties?" Kathleen had hoped the answer would be the fifties or sixties. She looked at Michael and tried to mask her hurt feelings. He turned away. Kathleen thought about her

next question. She hoped it would outrage him, but suspected she already knew what his reply would be. She hoped she was wrong but felt certain she wasn't "Did you fuck her?" she asked, trembling.

"Yes," he answered, unemotionally. Kathleen was stunned into silence. "You didn't expect that, did you?"

"Not really, no."

"Would you have believed me if I said no?" She shook her head. "That's what I thought."

"Do you love her?"

"Of course not. I love you." His bold lie astonished her.

"But, you screwed her? Why?"

"I don't know. I guess it was because she came on to me, and I didn't stop her." It was the first time Kathleen realized her image of Michael was all wrong. She thought he meant it when he said he loved her, and would not want other women.

Most, if not all men would not turn down a woman who wanted to have sex with them, no matter who they were. Not even if that woman was a minister. Maybe Michael had sex with Betsy *because* she was a minister. Kathleen realized suddenly that Michael was like all other men. He was using her just as Nathan did. What did that say about her?

"So, why?" she asked.

"Why, what?"

"Why did you do it?"

"I guess she intrigued me."

"Intrigued you? What the fuck does that mean?"

"She's struggling with some stuff I don't understand."

"Does this stuff involve you?"

"No. It involves Betsy and God. I think she's lost her faith."

"And, *that's* why you're fucking her?" she shouted, astonished. "What religion *is* this?" Michael did not answer. "How long has this been going on?" He did not reply. She felt he owed her the truth. "Why are you involved with her?"

"I feel sorry for her." Kathleen did not expect that reply. She had hoped that Michael and this woman were just screwing and nothing else was going on. Now it seemed there was more to it. Michael had feelings.

"Does she talk about God with you?"

"No. But, she talks about herself. It's sad. The anchor of her entire life is gone."

"And what anchor is that?"

"Her husband..."

"Wait, she's *married*?" Kathleen asked, flabbergasted. He nodded.

"Yes. Her husband was like God, but now he's abandoned her."

"He left?"

"No, he just won't touch her. He ignores her. She asked for a divorce, but he refused. Her life's been hell."

"And, you're her little piece of Heaven, aren't you?" Kathleen mocked. She was trembling. Her world was falling apart.

"Like I said, I feel sorry for her."

"So what about me?"

"It doesn't concern you," he said, coolly.

"Yes, it does. You belong to me." She knew it was a stupid assertion as soon as she said it.

"I don't belong to *anyone*!" he replied defiantly, and then realized he'd made a huge mistake. He could tell by the enraged look on her face it was too late to say anything else.

"Oh, really?" she said, coldly.

Their summer of love ended at that moment.

Michael called Betsy Monday to let her know what happened with Kathleen. "You told her everything? She must have been angry."

"She *was* angry," Michael explained. "She asked me why I made love to you."

"What did you tell her?" They had never discussed what they did. She had also wondered why he had sex with her. She also wondered why she had sex with him. Was he just a young stud who gave her pleasure?

She did not know much about Michael beyond his job, girlfriend, and where he lived. As she thought about it, she realized she did not want to know more about him. More details might take away the magic. Michael was her lover. He was a good, no, a *great* lover. That was all she thought she wanted him to be.

"Because you're you. That's the only reason if you need a reason at all," Michael said, honestly.

Betsy could not reply. She liked what he said. She liked that he wanted to be with her just because of who she was. Nevertheless, she thought *she* should want more. Maybe devotion, love, possession, or something. However, after she reflected on it, she realized she did not need more. He was enough.

She felt society expected people to want a lot from their relationships. She did not want anything at all from Michael, not even for him to want her. Wanting was irrelevant. It did not belong in their trysts. She was glad they seemed to feel the same way.

"So who is this snake?" Colin sneered. He accidentally found out about Betsy and Michael's affair when he dropped by one Saturday afternoon and caught them leaving together. He figured out what they had been doing and saw it immediately as the ancient drama of Eden.

"Snake?" Betsy asked, puzzled.

"Temptation. Disobedience. Isn't that what this is all about?" Colin argued. He had to find some way to understand her actions. It could not be that she just wanted to have carnal relations with someone. There had to be a Biblical drama happening. It had to be about him.

Betsy felt she owed him an explanation but did not tell him what really happened. "Not at all. He never tempted me. No one whispered 'sin' or 'adultery' in my ear," she replied.

"But, that's what this is. You've fallen."

"Strange you should say that, Colin," she commented. "Everyone's fallen. The world's fallen."

"Maybe that's true for your world, but not for mine."

"So you think you're not like the rest of us?" She did not want his fantasy Biblical worldview to draw her in.

"Well, yes."

"You're better than everyone else?" she asked. He nodded. "That's sad. I feel sorry for you."

"Why?"

"You'll never see God," she said, coldly. It dawned on her that Colin wanted others, including her, to see *him* as God, or, at least, as God's representative. Not a sinner, but a saint.

"What? Why?"

"Because you're blind. You're only able to see yourself. Pride, I think they call it. Only people who are fallen can see God," she asserted.

Colin tried not to allow the turmoil she stirred up inside to overwhelm him. Betsy waited for him to say something. He got up and left the room.

Betsy challenged Colin to see himself as he truly was, finally. He did not like what he saw. Furthermore, he would have preferred his true nature remained hidden. He did not know what to do. Could he cloak himself again? He would try.

Betsy felt sorry for her husband, but not sorry for what she and Michael had been doing. "I didn't argue with him. He avoided me for the rest of the night," she told Michael the next time they were together. Then she went on with her story.

The next morning Colin told her he had disappointed himself. He did not say Betsy deceived him, but that was what he meant. He claimed he believed Betsy was a woman of God, just as he was a man of God. She did not know what to say. She thought he expected her to beg for forgiveness and plead for his help to find her way back to God.

She just sat there.

"Don't you have anything to say?" he demanded.

"I don't know what to say." Colin got up and left. Betsy felt he was done with her. That was when she entered her personal hell.

"Michael, you're the only thing that makes life bearable, the only thing I can hold on to. I'm sorry if I sound pathetic, and I don't mean to put this all on you, but I need you right now. Don't leave me, Michael, please."

"You know that I don't love you, right?" He felt he had to say it. It was the truth. He was not trying to hurt her, only to make clear how he felt. "Betsy, this has all been just great sex, hasn't it?" She nodded but was not certain she agreed anymore.

"It's okay. Just promise to hold me, and fuck me, and help me cling to some pleasure in my life."

"I promise," he said and meant it. Michael did have feelings for Betsy but did not know what they were. He was pretty sure he didn't love her. Michael didn't know how love felt, although he thought he did.

Betsy waited until after they had made love to tell him the news. "Michael, I'm pregnant." He was on top of her, still inside her. There was a thin rubber barrier between his skin and her sheath.

"You're sure...?" he asked, puzzled. They had been careful. He always checked the condoms to make sure no semen leaked out.

"It's yours. Colin hasn't touched me in a while."

"Oh, God."

"Yes. Oh, God! I am so fucking happy!"

"Why?"

"I tried to get pregnant with Colin but it didn't happen. We kept trying, but I could tell he was becoming more and more frustrated and disappointed. Finally, it dawned on me that he blamed me. Now I know it wasn't my fault, but his."

"So now what?" Michael asked.

"Now we decide."

"You mean, keep it or get rid of it?" he asked.

"Keep it," she said.

"You've already decided," Michael said. She nodded. "What about me?" he asked.

"Keep you, too."

"You mean, get married?" She shook her head.

"I tried to get a divorce before. He wouldn't give it to me. I still don't think he will, even now. He might even want me to keep the baby and pretend it's his."

"But, it's definitely mine?" He wanted to be certain. She nodded and then smiled. He had never seen her smile like that before. Anticipation of pleasure and lust usually suffused her smiles. This smile was softer. Now that they had made a baby, her feelings for him had changed from lust to tenderness.

"The baby belongs to you. But the question is; do I belong to you?" she asked. "Look, I'm not gonna try to make you feel responsible just because you fucked me. I'm not gonna guilt-trip you or anything like that." He remained silent. "I know you have a relationship with Kathleen."

“She went back to school last month. I haven’t heard from her.”

“And, you didn’t *tell* me?”

“I didn’t see any point.”

“You mean you liked things the way they were and didn’t want to change them?”

“Yes. Well, what would we have changed, Betsy? You told me you could never get away from your husband, so we can’t be together. This is all it can ever be.”

“Now, it could be more,” Betsy said, touching his face and looking into his eyes. She didn’t know what she would find there. Would it be tenderness and love, or indifference? Betsy waited for Michael to respond. “But, maybe it’s *too* much right now?” she asked, worried she had gone too far.

He nodded. “Yeah. It’s a lot to think about.”

“Take your time, Michael. I’m not going anywhere. Neither is this baby.”

Chapter 12 - Escape

Betsy had an older car that might just get them there. They only had enough money for gas, tolls, and a motel room. She gathered a few items she could sneak out when Colin was not home. Michael gave away his furniture, kept some of his books, and all his writings.

They met at the church and then drove away without telling anyone. Not even Tony. That was the difficult part. Michael knew Tony liked and cared about him and thought Michael felt the same way. Michael planned to call Tony and apologize as soon as they were far enough away.

They rode without talking. It was just the two of them, a boy not yet twenty and a woman over thirty, pregnant with their baby. The car had no air-conditioning; they rolled down the windows all the way. Noise from onrushing wind at sixty miles an hour created a wall that separated them. They did not talk until they stopped. Betsy used the bathroom while Michael bought cold sodas.

“We’ve only been gone a few hours. There’s still time to go back and nobody will know we left,” he said. His comment did not alarm Betsy. He was being realistic, and she liked that.

“No. I’m not going back. I’m done with that life. If you want to go back, I won’t stop you.”

“I want to be with you, wherever we go.”

They stopped at a motel, ate cheap sandwiches for dinner, and lay together in bed with the air-conditioner turned on full blast. It barely wheezed any cold air into the room but Betsy felt better than she had all day in the heat. It was their first time together in bed, but neither wanted to make love. Betsy wanted him to cradle her in his arms so they could talk.

She admitted that she was afraid. They were only gone a day but the reckless extent of what they did hit her hard. They could still undo their escape. If he had again suggested they go back she might have done it, but he did not.

Instead, she talked about her life.

Betsy told him about her childhood. Her parents owned a general store in a small town. She and her younger sister Angela worked there when they were kids. Her family sold the store when it became obvious that stores like theirs were dying out. They found a buyer who wanted the property, but not the store.

Betsy got a scholarship and went to college. She and Angela had been close as sisters but grew more emotionally distant every year. Betsy’s departure relieved them both.

Her mother got cancer and was dead in a year. Her father’s grief overwhelmed him. He had a heart attack that left him seriously debilitated. Angela took care of him throughout his illness. He lived another five years. After he died, Angela found herself a husband and they rapidly became parents.

“So, do you and Angela get along?” Michael asked.

“Yes. We’re okay. We’ve grown apart but we don’t dislike each other.”

“Sad.”

“You’ll probably like her. She’s two years younger than me. She’s stunning. Guys can’t stop looking at her. She’s aware of how attractive she is but thinks men are silly.”

“What about her husband?”

“Ray’s another story. He was a drifter who came through town and needed a place to park his old car and sleep. My father had died one year earlier and Angela was lonely. The place needed work because my father had neglected it after he got sick. She hired Ray and gave him a place to stay.”

Ray could not keep his eyes off Angela. He was likable and good-natured, but shy and secretive. He never talked about his past and never told her where he was just before he came to town.

He lived in her house but he never took advantage of that fact. Instead, he started to woo her. He made lovely dinners and took her dancing or to a movie. She made it clear that she was not the kind of girl he was used to. He insisted he was not used to any, and told her she was his first. *Yeah, sure*, she thought.

It turned out to be true. Ray was hesitant and clumsy when Angela finally took him to bed. It was as if he did not know what to do. He was not a virgin but almost was. She knew a little more than he did. As they began to sleep together, they not only discovered each other but sex as well.

“So what’s he like?” Michael asked.

“He’s a short chubby guy who wants to help everyone he meets. He’s known in the town for his good deeds- fixing cars, carpentry, running errands, helping people who are sick. Everybody likes him and thinks she’s damn lucky to have him. For a while, there was a rumor that another woman might try to take him away from Angela. He found out about it and put a stop to it. He asked her to marry him.”

Ray changed after they married. He hardly helped anyone. He stayed at home and doted on Angela. She had a job. They lived on her wages and he tried to run the small farm. Ray also took care of Angela. After the birth of Eric, their first child, Ray settled into the role of stay-at-home father, and Angela felt delighted. When Emma was born a year later, he knew exactly what to do, and did it even better than with Eric. They had a strange family arrangement, compared to what was normal. They liked it; it worked for them, and they were happy.

“They’re still happy, or will be until you and I show up. I don’t know how they’ll react. Half the house is mine but I doubt they will see it that way since they’ve been living there all this time. They may welcome us, or just let us sleep in our room and fend for ourselves.

“Do they know we’re coming?”

“No.”

“You never called?”

“No. I thought it was too risky. They might call my husband.”

“So we’re just gonna drive into their front yard and yell ‘we’re here?’” She nodded. “And, they don’t know about me?”

“I never told her anything about you. This should be fun,” Betsy added. He looked at her and marveled at her comment. *She has a strange idea of fun*, he thought. But, it was too late to turn back now.

“You’ll like Ray and he will immediately like you and want to be best buds. Angela will probably get me alone and ask me what the hell is going on.”

“What will you tell her?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? There *is* a story.”

“Well, there are facts, but I don’t know my motivations, yet. Did I leave because of you? Or, my husband? Or, my ministry? Or, maybe something else I don’t know about yet.”

“The baby?” he suggested.

“That’s part of it, but not the most important part. It’s all the other stuff that’s confusing...”

Her candor surprised Michael. He heard deep misgiving in her tone of voice and words. “I didn’t know it was so complicated for you, Betsy. I’ll do everything I can to help you work it out.” Michael meant it, although he had no idea what else he could possibly do for her. He had already uprooted himself from his routine life and broken with his past without any certainty what his future might be.

“I know. Thanks, Michael. I’ll need your help.”

“How about needing me?”

“Yes, that, too,” she replied, kissing him.

Tony had just opened the newsstand. He was cutting the wires on the newspaper bundles and stacking the Saturday papers for sale. He did not see Kathleen approaching and smiled when she greeted him. “Hello, Tony. When is Michael coming in?” she asked.

“Oh, hi, Kathleen. He, um, isn’t.” He waited and did not know what else to say.

“You gave him the day off?” she asked, cheerfully.

“No, sweetie. He quit last week.” Tony felt sorry for Kathleen.

“Quit? Why?”

“Told me he was movin’ to a farm.”

“Michael? A farm? No way!”

“That’s what he told me. I guess he didn’t tell you?”

“No. I’m back at school. We haven’t talked in a month,” Kathleen explained. “I had to be downtown today so I thought I’d stop by and see him.”

Tony frowned. “Well, all you’re gonna see is me. Sorry.”

“Did he tell you where?”

“Upstate. That’s all he told me.”

“Did he go with anybody?”

“Said it was a friend’s farm.”

“Who?” Kathleen asked.

“That..., I do not know. Sorry.”

“I wonder if his roommate knows?”

“That guy? Probably not. He always seemed a little flaky to me.”

“He is, but I’ll go see him. Thanks, Tony. I’m sorry he left you in the lurch.”

“That’s okay. He helped me when I needed him. If it wasn’t for him, I woulda closed up for good.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re back. I just wish I knew where the fuck he was!”

“Girl! Language,” Tony said, grinning.

Betsy awoke in excruciating pain. She had just begun to show. Her abdomen felt tender. Michael kept her in bed, brought her food, although she could not eat, and watched anxiously over her. It was the week before Thanksgiving. They had settled comfortably into Angela and Ray’s house. The children adopted them as their New Favorite People.

Betsy was still in pain in the afternoon and Michael took her to the hospital. She started bleeding and the doctors performed an emergency procedure. The fetus was stillborn.

She recovered consciousness in the evening. The doctor told her she never should have gotten pregnant. There was something wrong with her womb that would prevent the fetus from growing to term. It was good she and Colin never conceived a child; it might have saved her life. The doctor suspected a botched abortion had damaged her womb. She denied it fiercely.

Betsy and Angela sat together in the dark hospital room later that night. Angela felt distraught all day and had just begun to calm down. The mention of abortion horrified her. She insisted the doctors were wrong.

“You don’t know what it was like,” Betsy confessed in a weak voice.

“What do you mean?”

“Being your ugly older sister.”

“You weren’t ugly,” Angela argued.

“But, I felt that way. You were so gorgeous. I saw how the boys looked at you.”

“It didn’t mean anything.”

“Yes, it did!” Betsy said. “It meant they wanted you. Nobody wanted me. Nobody even looked at me.”

“You were just my sister. They weren’t *supposed* to want you.”

“You don’t understand. I wanted them to. I watched them. I was jealous. You wouldn’t pay any attention to them. I overheard them talking about what they would do to you if you would just let them. I was shocked but turned on. If you wouldn’t give them what they wanted...”

“I didn’t,” Angela insisted. “Never!”

“I know. But *I* did.”

“Betsy! What did you do?”

“I did whatever they wanted. I used to tease them. ‘You can’t have my sister, but you can have me. Interested?’ They were. Plenty of them. I knew they were thinking of you when they were screwing me but I didn’t care. It was the only way I could feel as beautiful as you were. Until I started to get fat.”

“Oh, Betsy. You mean...?”

“Yes. I figured out what was wrong. I knew I had to get rid of it, so I did. It hurt like hell, but it worked. After that, I never let a boy touch me. They tried, but I always refused. I told them if it was you they wanted they should just persuade you to let them fuck you.”

“They never did. I don’t think anyone even tried.”

“I know. You were the goody-two-shoes by then, the beautiful virgin. And I was the whore. Well, ex-whore,” Betsy added, weakly.

“I’m sorry. I never knew about all this. I could have helped you.”

“I didn’t need your help. I got the help I needed elsewhere.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember. You started going to church with mom.”

“Every Sunday. No one at the church knew me. None of the boys ever came. I was a different girl. Right until I went to college.”

“I remember. Mom was so proud of you.”

“Then I met Colin and I knew my ordeal had been for a reason. God saved me so I could have this wonderful, Godly man, who loved me almost as much as he loved God.”

“Speaking of Colin...,” Angela said.

“You called him, didn’t you?” Betsy asked. Angela nodded.

“I thought you were gonna die. I thought he should know.”

“Did you call to tell him I’m okay?”

“Um, not yet.”

“Why did you wait?”

“I don’t know.” Betsy knew she was lying. Their sudden appearance had angered Angela. Betsy and Michael disrupted what had been a quiet and peaceful household. Michael was not the problem. Angela liked him. Betsy was the problem. Angela loved her sister but no longer liked her.

Angela did not understand her sister. It seemed Betsy had gone crazy. She left her husband, her church, maybe even God, and ran away with a boy who had gotten her pregnant. Betsy said they were in love but Angela did not believe it. She feared Betsy had fallen apart. Angela did not want Betsy’s instability to affect her household. She had her children to think of! If Colin wanted her back, Angela would be happy to see Betsy leave and never come back.

Part Two
The New World

Chapter 13 - Rosa

Betsy did not want Michael and Colin to see each other. She asked Michael to stay in the bedroom when Colin arrived to pick her up. Michael was still in shock from losing their baby and nearly losing her. Now, she was leaving him.

Michael knew she was no longer his Betsy the first time he saw her in the hospital. Her miscarriage had changed her. It did not surprise him to learn she spoke to Colin. Angela had called Colin, not Betsy. Colin apologized and begged her to come back; Betsy agreed.

Ray knocked after they left. "How about I take you into town and get you drunk?" he asked, cheerfully. Michael agreed. As they drank, Ray invited Michael to stay on. The kids liked Michael. Ray liked having Michael's help around the small farm. Angela felt sorry for him. She was glad Betsy was gone and assumed Michael would drift away after the shock of losing Betsy wore off.

Michael had a couple of drinks; Ray had one. They both got bored and left the bar. Ray stopped by the hardware store to pick up some parts he ordered. Michael waited outside next to Ray's truck. He felt a little tipsy and tried not to think about anything, anything at all, especially Betsy.

He noticed a young woman coming out of the Post Office across the street. The alcohol made her appear strikingly beautiful. Michael stared. She saw him staring and came over. She was a young Hispanic-looking woman with a beautiful face, long flowing hair, and a curvaceous body. Michael guessed she was around his age. He stared even harder.

"Take a picture. It'll last longer," she quipped. He didn't understand her sarcasm and said nothing. She recognized the pickup truck. "Are you with Ray?" she asked. Michael nodded and tried to form a sentence.

"Yeah. He's teaching me about farming."

The woman laughed. "You better plan on starving to death," she joked. Michael did not understand what she meant.

"Ray's a good guy."

"Oh, yeah. He's nice. Everybody likes him. But he's clueless."

"Well, he's still learning."

"That's the problem. He isn't. He doesn't seem to get any of it," the woman said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, a couple of farmers, including my grandfather, tried to help him. They showed him stuff, but he doesn't have any aptitude. It's a good thing his wife works or their kids would starve."

"That's kinda cruel."

"Maybe, but it's true," she replied.

"So, do you live on a farm?"

"Yep. I'm the third generation on our farm."

"I guess you know all about farming, then." It was his turn to mock her. She looked at him wondering if she should engage in clever banter or walk away.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Now that she spoke to him in her lovely voice, he felt enchanted and decided to take her bait.

"I would."

"Great! If you want to learn about farming, you should come to the Agricultural College. I happen to know someone who's a student there." He looked at her, bewildered. She smiled and then sighed in exasperation. Michael hadn't understood her hint.

"Me!" she said. "I'm just home for the weekend. You could visit the campus sometime if you wanted to. I might show you around." As soon as she said 'show you around' his mind flooded with lewd images of what he would prefer she showed him. It was not the campus.

"Um, when?"

"Next week. You could come on Friday and sit in on some classes." He noticed she did not say they would be *her* classes, but that was okay. She had stirred his interest. Michael thought Ray might like the idea enough to let him borrow the truck.

"Here's my dorm number. Call me if you can come." She flashed Michael a dazzling smile and walked away just as Ray came out of the hardware store.

"I see you met Rosa Rodriguez," he said. "Her grandfather's a friend of mine." Michael had an opening to borrow the truck.

"She's in Agricultural College. She says if I want to learn about farming I should check it out."

Michael's comment surprised Ray. "I didn't realize you were that into farming."

"Yeah, I like your place. The more I learn, the more useful I might be." Ray was not sure just how useful Michael would be if what he was planning to learn included beautiful Rosa Rodriguez but he felt sorry for Michael. If Michael needed Rosa to take his mind off Betsy, he would support him. "She said I could call her and visit the campus anytime."

"When do you wanna go?"

"Friday? I'll need your truck."

"Okay. But you gotta tell me what you learn." They looked at each other and then laughed.

"Will do," Michael said, as he got into the truck.

He left at dawn and met Rosa at the Dining Hall after breakfast. She handed him a list of classes he could visit. None were her classes; they were too advanced for him.

Rosa took him to a classroom in the Animal Husbandry building. She smiled at a couple of students and introduced Michael as her friend visiting for the day. They invited him to sit with them. The class turned out to be what he jokingly referred to (later) as Critters 101.

"This is a cow. Moo. This is a pig, oink," he joked.

"Oh, come on. It was more than that," she said, laughing.

"It got more interesting when I realized I was looking at a future steak and a future pork chop. I'm only a city boy, but I do know something about food."

"Farming's about more than food," she said, earnestly. Michael wondered if Rosa was teasing him. "How can that be?"

"You're a city boy so I don't think you'll understand. It's about roots."

"Oh, I know about roots. Plants have roots. I learned that today in Plants 101. Also in high school biology."

"I'm not talking about those kinds of roots."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"Human roots. My roots. My family's roots. My grandfather emigrated from Mexico and bought the farm where my parents raised me. That farm will be mine someday. It's not just land, animals, buildings, and tools. It's our piece of this earth. It's sacred." Michael listened and saw her change from a kid like himself into something else, something he could not name.

"Wanna see my dorm room?" she asked, abruptly. He nodded. She led him across campus to her building. "My roommate went home, even though there's a big party this weekend so we can blow off steam before the end of the semester and finals. You should stay late and come with me. I'm sure Ray won't mind." Rosa seemed to have figured it all out. Michael wondered if she mentioned her absent roommate because she had other ideas.

They talked about themselves. She asked why farming interested a city boy. Michael told her he was curious about farming, but more interested in writing. His reply confused her and she asked what he genuinely wanted. He did not answer and asked her the same question. Rosa told him she wanted him. He felt pleased and reached for her. She stopped him.

"I know what was in that lecture you heard today- all about the barnyard animals and their..."

"Sex," he said, daring her to go on.

“Yeah. They don’t know any better.” She paused and looked at him. “They just do it. They don’t need each other. It’s just instinct.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m not into instinct,” Rosa said. Then she explained she was not offering herself to him. She was not a barnyard animal in heat. She needed to know Michael wanted her. He said he did but she challenged him to show her, not tell her. He didn’t know what to do.

Nothing else happened. Michael skipped the party and drove home early.

He did not see or hear from Rosa until Christmas break. She called and asked him to meet her in town. When he pulled up outside the café, Rosa jumped into his truck and started talking.

“I was pretty hard on you back at school. I hope you didn’t take it the wrong way. I wasn’t trying to be mean.”

“I didn’t think you were mean. What you said got me thinking.”

“About what? Me?”

“No. About me. About my girlfriends.”

“Do you have much experience with...?”

“Sex?” he asked. She nodded. “Well, yeah, I think I do.”

“So, you’ve done it?” she asked. Of course, he had done it. That should be obvious. What started him thinking was how he had done it.

“Yeah. You?”

“Some. You get to a certain age..., watching the barnyard animals do it...; realizing humans do it, too. Well, I had to find out, you know?”

“Boyfriends?” Michael asked.

“Oh, no. Just guys at school. Too busy for boyfriends. College is a lot of work. I have to study hard. My parents pay a lot of money and they expect me to get everything I can out of it.”

“So why not just do it with me?”

“Because you’re different. I like you. I need you to like me.”

“I do.”

“There you go again, just saying it. Is that what writers do, just say stuff?” Rosa hadn’t meant to seem harsh. She hoped Michael wouldn’t be offended by her tone of voice.

“I don’t know what else to do.”

“That was my impression. You wanted me but you didn’t know how to get me. Maybe you still don’t.”

“Are you being mean, *now*?” he asked. Michael thought they were connecting although he wasn’t certain exactly how. Rosa already knew how she wanted to connect with him.

“No. Honest. Sorry. I can be blunt.”

“So can I, Rosa.”

“Great! That’s a start.”

“A start at what?”

“You tell me, Michael. I’m open to suggestions.”

“I don’t know. This is all confusing.”

“Okay. Let me clear it up for you. I like you, but I’m not gonna just give myself to you. I’m not gonna just lay back and let you do whatever you want to me. I can get anybody to do that.”

“So what do you want from me, Rosa?” he asked. Rosa wondered if he was clueless or merely sensitive. She liked the latter but couldn’t abide the former. Looking the way she did, guys approached her with one thing in mind. She let them know what they had in their minds was not in her mind and usually walked away without saying another word.

“Michael, I want what I can get only from *you*, and not from anyone else. Those barnyard animals- it makes no difference to them which penis or vagina they get. One’s as good as another. It’s all just biology. But for me, it’s more than biology. I’m Rosa Rodriguez. So tell me how you feel. Do you want Rosa or just biology?”

“I..., I don’t know.”

Rosa didn’t know what to make of his vague reply. “What about your other girls? Did you want them?”

“I don’t know.”

“Or did you do it with them just because they were there, the way barnyard animals just fuck whoever’s there?” Michael thought about Agatha, Kathleen, and Betsy. How did he feel about each of them?

More importantly, how did he feel about Rosa Rodriguez?

She seemed locked up. He needed to find the key that would open her. He did not know before today that such keys existed. Now he wondered where to get one.

Then it dawned on him: the key came from the woman. She gave it to you. You could only get the key to open her up if you opened up to her. For the past two years, despite meeting several women- Claire, Lacey, Agatha, Kathleen, Betsy, and now Rosa- he had not fully opened himself to anybody. Michael did not know why. He was going to have to find out.

Rosa looked at him, saw him struggling with something, and felt sorry for him. She liked Michael and wanted him to like her. Rosa didn’t care if they ever had sex or not.

She wanted to be with someone who lived his life with passion. It could be a passion for her, himself, his writing, farming, or anything else. It could be a passion for waking up with fresh eyes and a clear mind, ready to live fully in each moment, no matter how large or small the events on a given day. Rosa wanted a man who was on fire with life. She did not think Michael, no matter how attractive he was or how much she liked him, was such a man.

It would be up to him to convince her otherwise.

Chapter 14 - Dreams

“When you asked me to come over and move some boxes, I didn’t think I would really be moving boxes,” Michael remarked.

“Oh?” Betsy walked over to him. “Were you expecting something,” she leaned forward and kissed him hard, “like *that*?” He started to reply but she put her finger on his lips. “Don’t talk,” she murmured.

Betsy stepped back and took off her plain black jacket. She unbuttoned the crisp white blouse underneath. He watched her, enchanted. She gestured for him to undress, and then unzipped her black skirt and dropped it to the floor. Her figure astonished him. Those frumpy clothes had disguised a voluptuous body.

Betsy touched his erection after she removed his shorts. “I’ve been thinking about this.” She looked into his eyes and then moved closer. Michael’s erection touched her panties and he felt her heat. He put his arms around her. She sighed and laid her head on his chest. Her tender affection touched him.

“I’m afraid all we have is the floor,” she said, gesturing downward. He did not care. Michael slid off the chair. She straddled him, smoothly easing his cock inside her. Neither of them moved or wanted to. Just connecting felt powerfully erotic. Then, they fucked.

Betsy lifted off Michael after he finished. They lay quietly, side-by-side, touching each other. He reached toward her crotch, but she stopped him. “I’m sensitive there,” she whispered. “It’s okay. I feel great.”

“You know, with the sexual revolution that’s going on now,” he said, “sex is easy, but this felt magical.” Betsy did not reply. However, she felt the same way.

The scene shifted suddenly. Michael found himself walking toward the newsstand. He looked at the street, buildings, people, and cars, wondering if his tryst with Betsy had really happened. Then the dream ended.

A series of recurring dreams began not long after Michael’s conversation with Rosa. Each dream was a bizarre variation of his first tryst with Betsy. He wondered why his attraction to Rosa made him dream about Betsy and concluded the dreams were merely his body’s way of dealing with horniness and sexual frustration. Michael always awoke with forceful erections.

“When you asked me to come over and move some boxes, I didn’t think I would really be moving boxes,” Michael said, brashly.

“No?” Betsy smiled and walked toward him. “Were you expecting something like this?” She leaned forward and kissed him hard. He started to reply but she put her finger on his lips.

“Take it out. Let me see it,” she whispered. He shook his head. “You want me to do it?” she asked, smiling. He unzipped, reluctantly.

“That’s nice- not too big, not too small.” He shrugged. “Now I want to show you the main attraction.” She unfastened her skirt and let it fall to the floor. She had no panties on. “See this?” she asked, pointing, “This is the cunt of a goddess.” He looked at her and grew harder.

“Would you like to have orgasms so powerful you feel like an erupting volcano?” He liked her question and felt eager to have one of those orgasms right now. “I can teach you how. You think it’s all about dick and cunt, don’t you? But you’re *so* wrong.”

“What do you mean? Why are you telling me all this?” She did not answer. The dream ended abruptly. ‘What do you mean?’ boomed in his mind as he awoke.

“When you asked me to come over and move some boxes, I didn’t think I would really be moving boxes,” Michael said, brazenly.

“Michael, do you know where sex happens?” Betsy asked. He immediately pointed to his groin. “No, not there. Or, here,” she added, pointing to her crotch. “It happens here,” she fingered her head. “In the mind. Did you know that?”

He shrugged.

“The first time I saw you I got a powerful feeling you were a man who could appreciate me. I’m not talking about my body; there’s so much more.”

“So what exactly are you talking about?” he asked. He wanted to get on with the sex.

“Oh, it’s simple. Truth.” He almost laughed. She rubbed her crotch, closed her eyes, and sighed. He hoped they were about to have sex.

“You brought me here to tell me *that*? You know, I thought you were the sexiest woman I ever saw. Now I think you’re the craziest.”

As Michael watched her play with herself and heard her talk, he knew he could explode with only a gentle touch. She sensed his readiness.

“Go ahead,” she urged. “Do it. For me.” He felt embarrassed. It excited him that she was watching. He reached down and stroked himself, slowly. “Let it go, Michael, all of it,” she cooed. “Let me see it.”

His whole body exploded. Michael gushed semen on the carpet. He felt drained, fell back in the chair, and looked at Betsy. She smiled at him.

“You see? This is only the beginning. Now do it to me.” He got up and moved toward her with his hand outstretched. “No, no! Not with your hand. With your *mind*.”

Michael stopped, puzzled. What did she want him to do? She sensed his confusion. “Tell me how you felt just now. Tell me everything, in exact detail.” She waited as he struggled to find words to describe the intense orgasm.

“I felt ready to make love to every woman who ever lived,” he began. “I wanted to make them come when I did. I wanted their juices to create a flood that washed over the whole world. Everyone the flood touched would also come, so the whole world would explode in one cataclysmic orgasm.” Betsy moaned and came at that moment. “I felt like I could fuck you nonstop for a whole century,” he added. He felt fire. She moaned and squirted again.

“Ah, that’s good. You’re poetic, too,” she praised him.

“Yeah, I’m trying to be a writer.”

“Well, everything I told you about truth applies to art.”

“It does?” he asked.

“What do they teach you kids in school these days?” she joked. “Shall we adjourn for today? You look like you’re going to be a good student.”

“When will we do this again?”

“I’ll let you know. Next time, maybe I’ll let you touch me. You won’t be able to stand it. No man ever has.” He had no idea what she meant.

He woke up horny and confused. Betsy had changed from a minister to a Sex Goddess in the dreams. Her orderly, safe, and predictable Christian wisdom became carnal knowledge that somehow concerned his mind more than his body. Or did it?

It seemed his subconscious mind was trying to tell him something. He had no idea what it was. But, he enjoyed the powerful dreams, puzzling as they were.

“When you asked me to come over and move some boxes, I didn’t think I would *really* be moving boxes.” They were naked. She would not let him touch her. He wondered how he could persuade her to have sex with him. Betsy waited. Michael felt she wanted to talk more. “What did you mean by truth?” he asked.

“There is only one truth that’s important.”

“Okay, what truth?”

“The truth of the Universe, Michael. Until now, you’ve been living a closed life. You have to open yourself up.”

“No one can open up to the Universe,” he complained. “You would go crazy!”

“Remember when you told me how you wanted your orgasm to start a flood that washed over the whole world?” He nodded. “You were beginning to open. But, you’re not open all the way. Not yet.”

“So orgasms open people to the Universe?” He would have preferred she open her legs and let him inside.

“Was it the first time you had an orgasm like that?” she asked. He nodded. “You just need some more guidance.”

This was going nowhere. She kept teasing, confusing, and denying him. He was beginning to wonder if she had no other purpose than bullshitting him. Why couldn’t he just fuck her?

“Guidance from you?” Michael asked.

“Yes.”

“Through sex?”

“No, at least not the kind you’re used to.”

“There’s another kind?” he joked. He was so aroused he wanted to pound her now and chat afterward.

“The kind of sex I mean is mind-to-mind,” she replied. He listened but did not understand. “But..., not the way you imagine. It’s not your mind in your body fucking my mind in my body. It’s you directly feeling what I feel. It’s us being one, not two. It’s like nothing you’ve ever experienced.” *Yeah, he thought, I haven’t experienced it because it’s impossible. You’re fucking crazy.*

“But how?”

“I will show you if you want me to,” Betsy said. Michael thought about it a few moments. He was eager to be inside her; could he allow her inside him?

Michael suspected her motives. “I’m not letting you control me or anything like that,” he warned.

“There’s no control.”

“Then how does it happen? This isn’t anything to do with drugs is it?”

“No drugs, Michael. You just open to it, and welcome it.”

“Are you talking about some sort of ritual? I’m not a big fan of rituals.”

“It’s not a ritual,” she insisted. “I can’t describe it. I’ll have to show you.” She reached for his cock. Nothing else happened.

He waited patiently for a couple of moments.

“When?” he asked, in frustration. The dream evaporated. He awoke thinking the word ‘when’ and hoping for sexual release. That was his problem. Almost nothing sexual in the dreams happened or came close to happening. He wondered what the next dream would be like. If another one was even coming.

“When you asked me to come over and move some boxes, I didn’t think I would really be moving boxes,” he said, coyly.

Her office was pitch black. “The darkness is necessary,” she explained. “Take those clothes off. You stay by that wall, and I’ll stay over here.”

“All right.” Michael had no idea what she was doing.

“Now, I’m going to touch you.”

“But, you’re across the room!”

“Can you see me across the room?”

“Of course not. It’s dark.”

“Right. Can you feel me?” He felt something vague. Then he became aware of heat, wetness, and lust. Were the sensations coming from her?

“Now, touch me, Michael.” He reached his hands into the dark, but there was nobody there to feel.

“I can’t feel you.”

“But you do feel something, don’t you?”

“No..., but, yes. How? You’re over there!”

“Tell me where you feel what you’re feeling. Is it outside you or inside you?” she asked.

“It’s not outside, because my hands aren’t touching you.”

“Right. So where is the feeling?”

“Oh, it’s inside me!”

“That’s *me* you feel.”

“But, how?” he asked. The sensations intensified as they spoke. She did not reply. “Why? Where are you?”

“I’m inside you,” she murmured.

“Oh.” Michael felt violated. “I don’t think I like this,” he said, nervously.

“Don’t be afraid. The reason you feel me even though I’m not next to you is that I’m inside you, giving you feelings that you’ve never felt before.”

“I don’t like you controlling me.”

“I’m not!” she insisted. “Now, it’s your turn. I want you to find me with your mind.”

“But how?”

“Reach out! Feel!”

He probed and found her. He was just there, suddenly inside her, where he would never expect to be. “Oh, God. Yes, I can feel *you*!”

“Do you understand, now?”

“So I’m feeling you from inside, not from outside? Not your flesh, or muscles, or bones, or the marrow of your bones, but..., you!”

“Yes!” she exclaimed. Michael never felt anything like this.

“I think we’re done for now.” Michael did not want to be done. He felt they were just getting started. If she was in him, and he was in her, he wanted to continue to the orgasm that would fuse them into one. “Let’s put our clothes back on, but you should stay inside me.”

Michael felt himself within her flesh. He felt the cloth move over her skin as she dressed. “I can feel you putting on your clothes,” he exclaimed, awed.

“Do you like what you feel?”

“Yes. Will we stay connected like this?”

“We’re not connected.”

“No? Then what are we?”

“For two things to connect, they first have to be separate. You and I were never separate.” He had no idea what she meant and did not reply; the dream ended. Michael awoke, puzzled. That’s how these dreams usually left him feeling.

“When you asked me to come over and move some boxes, I didn’t think I would really be moving boxes,” he said.

“Oh, really?” Betsy smiled and walked over to him. “Were you expecting something?” she leaned forward and kissed him hard on the lips, “like this?” He started to reply but she covered his mouth with her hand. “You think because you have a cock, and I have a cunt that you go into me, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah. That’s how sex works,” he boasted.

“You think you know what cunt means, don’t you? You think it’s vagina, or pussy, right?” He nodded. “There’s an Italian word, *cunto* that means story or tale. Did you know that?”

He did not know, did not care, and just wanted to get to the reason he was there. "Please, I need to fuck you. You keep putting me off." He reached for her crotch.

"No. You don't want my cunt. You need to find your own cunt, your own *cunto*, your own story. Then go into it. You don't need to fuck me, Michael, you need to fuck yourself."

"That is impossible."

"You'll do it. Soon, perhaps. And when you do you'll know our lessons are over."

"You get me so hot every time I see you. You've got to let me fuck you," Michael pleaded.

"Michael, you and I can never be lovers."

"Why not?"

"Because one of us doesn't exist." She said it matter-of-factly but he had no idea what she meant.

"Who?"

"Eventually, you will answer that question yourself."

"But, you let me feel inside you!"

"Yes, I did."

"You liked it."

"I liked it a lot. But, this isn't about me. It's about *you*. About who you are, what you want, and what you can become. If only you can understand yourself better."

"I still don't understand what you're talking about."

"Michael, what's the most powerful force in the universe?" she asked. Michael felt she was trying to confuse him again. He did not reply, so she went on.

"I don't know," he replied, frustrated. He did not care.

"Most people think it's magnetism, gravity, or maybe nuclear fusion. It's none of those things, Michael. It's mind- your mind." The dream finished. Michael awoke aroused, confused, and angry. *Will these dreams ever stop*, he wondered.

"Oh, we're doing this crap, again?" The dream began with his angry question. Michael felt tired of her putting him off. "It seems like mystical nonsense!"

"Mysticism is highly overrated," Betsy remarked. "Most of it comes from gullible people who can't tell when they're deluding themselves. True mysticism is just the raw power of Reality. Either your mind handles it, or it doesn't." He had no idea what she meant. "You don't have to walk around in a loincloth trying to find God," she added. "You just have to sit still and let God find you."

Betsy hinted finally at the meaning of the recurring dreams. Perhaps they were not about sex after all.

"Are *you* God?" he asked, hoping she would finally make everything clear.

"I refer to myself as a Goddess but that's just a word. I am what I am."

"So you're whatever I think you are?"

"No, Michael. You are whatever you think *you* are."

Michael awoke, finally.

Betsy's last words echoed in his head. Who was he? What was he? He ran away because he didn't want the life his parents forced on him. However, what kind of life did he want? Who or what did he want to be? He'd never thought about it before. Maybe it was time he did.

Michael understood, finally. The recurring dreams contained a buried mystery. Perhaps Betsy appeared not because of sex, but because she was the only person who might help him figure out the mystery.

He told Angela he wanted to speak to Betsy, but not about their former relationship. He wanted advice. Angela assumed he meant spiritual advice. She considered religion a waste of time. For her, there was no hidden dimension to life. It was just whatever happened, day-to-day. You did not reflect on it. It had no meaning. It just was what it was.

Angela called Betsy. She told Michael to write her a letter.

Dear Betsy,

I've been having these dreams. You're in them but they're not about you. They're about me. We never discussed deep spiritual issues, but that's what I feel my dreams are about. You're the only person I know who understands God, religion, spirituality, and stuff like that.

I trust you because we were close for a time and you know me, so I'm asking for your help in figuring this out. Can we talk, please?

Sincerely,

Michael

p.s. I hope you and Colin are well.

They met in the downtown park on a warm March afternoon.

"So..., these dreams..., you wanna tell me about them?" Betsy asked.

"Well, they're embarrassing. But I think you're in them because you're the only religious person I know."

"You think they're about religion?" He shrugged. "Okay. Do you think they could be messages from God?"

"That's what I don't know. I've never been religious, so I wouldn't have thought God would appear in my dreams."

"I've always suspected that God contacts us in the way He's certain we'll understand."

"That's just it. I don't understand. What are the dreams telling me?" Michael replied.

"Let's take this one step at a time. First, God told you to talk to me, right?"

"Yeah, that was pretty clear. You're in all the dreams. But..., why? I've never needed a minister before. Why now? Does God want you to convert me?"

"No. I think God wants you to learn from me."

"What do you mean?" Betsy remained quiet as she tried to find words to explain what happened in her life.

"You know, Michael, I lost my faith."

"I know. It was my fault."

"No, it wasn't really."

"Well, I was an atheist."

"It happened before I met you."

"Oh? What happened?" he asked.

"One day my husband told me about someone in his congregation who confessed to not being sure about God. I made the mistake of saying I knew how the man felt. Colin just looked at me and said, 'So that's what's wrong.' He understood what I did not. I had lost my faith. But, after I thought about it, I realized it was his fault."

Betsy's faith depended on Colin. When she could not get pregnant, he cooled toward her and then stopped loving her. She felt God no longer loved her, either, and she became un-moored in her life. When she met Michael, she needed to find out if love was possible. Finding God in someone else did not concern Betsy. She just wanted to find herself.

"So, if I understand you correctly, you didn't lose your faith. You lost yourself?" he asked. She nodded and then grimaced. "Maybe that's why you're in my dreams?" he asked. She looked at him, puzzled by his remark. "Maybe the message was that I've lost myself?"

Maybe he's found the insight on his own, Betsy thought, delighted. "You might be right."

"So, did you find yourself, again?"

"Yes. Thanks to you, thanks to the pregnancy, thanks to almost dying when I lost the baby..., I learned what I had to learn about myself. I'm okay now."

"What about Colin?"

“He understands the reason I couldn’t get pregnant was that God was protecting me. He realized he had to choose what he loved most- me, or his desire to be a father. Instead of blaming me, which is what he did, he should have been thanking God. His selfishness drove me away. He’s not gonna let that happen again.” Betsy paused. “Our church has started a child care center and I run it. We have thirty wonderful kids. I can be their mom every day, and I love it. And Colin loves me.”

“I’m glad for you. But, that still doesn’t help me.” She shrugged her shoulders, unsure of what he meant. “I don’t feel I’ve lost myself,” he explained.

“Maybe you just don’t know who you are.”

“What do you mean?”

Betsy thought of a way to help him although she wasn’t certain what his dreams meant. “Michael, how have you lived your life, so far?”

“Ever since I left high school, things have just happened.”

“But, are the things that happened the things you *wanted* to happen?”

“Well, yes, in a way; but also no. I never set out to achieve anything. But when something presented itself, I responded to the opportunity.”

“So, you didn’t have any goals?”

“No. Should I? Is that what the dreams mean?”

“I don’t think God’s telling you anything specific. I think God just wants you to look at your life. God’s not saying your life is bad, or that goals are good. I think God’s saying you have a choice.”

“You mean I have to choose a goal?”

“Not necessarily. I think you can continue the way you’re going. Or, you can choose to start thinking about goals. But, you don’t have to. It might just be something you want to do.”

“So the spiritual guidance I’m getting is...?”

“There isn’t any spiritual guidance. Just think about your life. Then maybe make the choice that’s right for you.”

“*Think* about my life? That’s all I ever think about!”

Betsy gazed at Michael. “Maybe you’ve never *really* thought about it, Michael. Or, at least, not the way God’s suggesting you think about it.”

“There’s stuff about connection in the dreams. Most of it concerns sex, but there’s a lot of mystical mumbo-jumbo happening with the sex. I just don’t get what it means.”

“Sex, huh?” she asked, looking at him. She tried not to visualize their sex. He nodded and then shrugged. “With me?” she asked, shyly.

“Strangely, yes. I’m sorry. They’re just dreams. I can’t control them.”

“It’s okay. I’m getting the impression the dreams are not about connecting with me, again, but with yourself, maybe for the first time.”

“Yes! That’s what you tell me in the dreams.”

“Let me tell you what I think. The dreams are asking whether you’ve been living your life, or whether your life has just been happening to you. That’s the question you have to answer.”

“I’m not sure there’s an answer.”

“Oh, I feel certain there is. You’ve talked with me and found the question. What do you need to do to find the answer?”

“I have no idea,” he replied, softly.

“Nor do I, but I gotta go. Promise me you’ll keep in touch?” Her abrupt goodbye startled him.

“Um, yeah. Thanks for talking to me, Betsy. I’m very grateful,” he said. “If it wasn’t for you, I don’t know how I would have figured these dreams out.” She smiled and walked away.

Michael remained on the park bench after Betsy left. He didn’t feel alone. There was a teeming city around him. Spring was stirring. Trees budded, grass grew, squirrels and birds romped the park, people jogged or walked by. He heard yelling and looked over at the ballfield crowded with players enjoying an afternoon baseball game.

What was he enjoying, right now, in his life? Beyond the park, beyond Betsy, Angela, Ray, and their kids, beyond Rosa Rodriguez, with whom he talked, and sometimes hung out, whenever she was home from college. Michael wanted to have more with her but didn't understand what she wanted. He thought about his family. He had not called them in months. He told them he was living upstate but had never told them where.

It suddenly occurred to him that he did not know what world he was living in. Then he admitted it was time to find out.

Chapter 15 - Elyse

Rosa leaned down and kissed Michael gently on the lips to wake him. "C'mon babe, it's time to get up."

"But, it's still dark out," he complained, sleepily.

"Yeah, but we have to get busy."

"Great," he replied, "I'm ready to get busy." He pulled the sheet away and she saw his morning wood.

"Not *that* kind of busy," Rosa sighed. "I can't let you wear me out before the day even begins. The chickens are coming."

"Sure wish I was coming."

"Michael! Get up!"

They had built the coop and pen and ordered baby chicks from the local supplier. The children, Eric and Emma, were thrilled they were going to have a hundred new pets. It was the first big project for the new communal farm.

It started when Rosa came home after spring finals. Michael had not seen her since he spoke to Betsy. They sat alone in Ray's truck. Michael asked her how the semester went. She said it went okay and felt relieved it was over.

Rosa asked him what was new. He did not answer right away. Rosa wondered if there was a problem. She looked at him to see if he was all right. He remained quiet and she was about to repeat her question.

"I think I want to save the world," Michael said. Rosa blinked in surprise. She wasn't certain she heard him right. Michael had never spoken about 'the world' before. She assumed he never thought about it and didn't know what to say. "And I want you to help me," he added.

Rosa looked at him. *Is he serious?* she thought. "I have an idea," Michael went on. Rosa looked into his eyes and saw something new there. Michael had always been nice, kind, helpful, and friendly. He had never been passionate, however. Not about her, himself, or (she thought) anything else. Now, Rosa saw passion.

It turned her on. They had parked off the road in a grove of trees where they liked to hang out and talk. It was nearly dark. The evening was warm. She reached for the small pouch she carried like a pocketbook, opened it, took out a foil-wrapped condom, and handed it to him.

"I've been saving this." She lifted her ass off the seat and pulled down her shorts. He stared at her. "Put it on, Michael!"

He took his shorts off, put the condom on, and slid into the center of the bench seat. Rosa straddled Michael's legs, put her arms around him, and then kissed him. He guided himself into her. She moaned.

"So, how are we gonna do it?" she asked.

He thought it was obvious how they were going to do it. "Like this is good." Michael thrust upwards.

"No, I mean how are we gonna save the world?" He looked at her, astonished, delighted she wanted to fuck and listen to him at the same time.

"I wanna start a commune..., a communal farm. There are plenty of people who don't like cities. They want a different life. They want to go back to the land."

"The land is hard work," she grunted and then rotated her ass so she could feel him better.

"I know. I'm gonna do the work. I'm gonna find other people to do it, too. And, you're gonna tell us what to do."

"So, I'm gonna be like the foreman?" Rosa grinned. "You're gonna be the farmhand? I've always fantasized about being ravished by a swarthy farmhand." She giggled. Michael was anything but swarthy.

They talked to Ray. Even with Michael's help, he still struggled to perform even the simplest farming tasks. Most of their forty acres were uncultivated. They had room for chickens, pigs, and dairy cows but there were none.

Michael and Rosa asked Ray and Angela to turn the farm over to them. They would work it and find others to help, people who wanted to change the world by going back to the land. They would give them land to work and the opportunity to build a community.

Everyone would work, live, and make decisions together. Ray and Angela would not give up anything. The farm would remain theirs. They would not have to allow strangers in their house. The new people would build shacks to live in.

Ray felt reluctant; Angela loved the idea. The farm was destined to fail, probably soon, if Ray remained the only person running it. Angela might lose it and her parents' legacy. She wanted her kids to inherit the farm when she and Ray were gone. She also dreaded the thought of their family crowded in an apartment or small house in town. Another farmer could have rented the acreage but no one asked. With Michael's idea, they could grow all the food their community needed and sell the surplus. With Rosa helping them, the communal farm could not fail.

New World Farm was born.

Rosa could not live there, however. She could not even tell her parents what was going on. They couldn't know she was helping set up a commune at Ray and Angela's farm. They might suspect that was what she would do with their farm, eventually.

Rosa's parents paid a lot to send her to school so she could learn all the latest farming and business techniques. They wanted their farm to survive and prosper far into the future. It must always be the Rodriguez farm, and never become something else, like tract houses, or a hippie commune.

Rosa made sure she spent most of her time on her farm and only spent time on Michael's farm when her parents thought they were on dates. Her parents did not like when she sometimes spent the night with him. They assumed everyone at college did it and she had learned to do it too. They would say nothing as long as it did not get out of hand.

Simple New World Farm classified advertisements ran in *Mother Earth News*, *Organic Gardening and Farming*, and other back-to-the-land magazines. 'No financial investment needed. Personal investment is compulsory. Hard work will bring personal and spiritual rewards. Only people committed to the land and to change the world need apply.' There was a phone number but no location. They did not want to tell anyone where they were until they screened them.

Rosa told some friends from college and they told others. Word spread.

One day, a young woman came looking for New World Farm. She'd heard about it from a friend who knew where Rosa was from. They had not yet made a New World Farm sign. They did not want to make their commune real until at least one new person joined.

Elyse hoped to be that first person. She was in her mid-twenties, short, muscular, and energetic. She had no high school diploma, not that they asked for one, and admitted to being a runaway. Elyse had held various jobs that included working in a bakery, running a sewing machine in a garment factory, painting houses, and clerking in a small used bookstore. She seemed rough and tough but her face lit up when she saw Eric and Emma and a tear came to her eye.

Elyse, of course, knew nothing about farming or gardening and just wanted to 'change the world.' She disliked hearing people talk about how bad 'the system' was. People attacked it from the outside but she wanted to transform it from inside. Elyse thought going back to the land meant a return to what was essential and basic.

Michael, Ray, and Angela talked with Elyse all afternoon. They ate an impromptu dinner on the porch and realized they had a decision to make. Either send her away or let her stay.

Elyse also had a dilemma.

"Look, I know this is a big deal for you. It's a big deal for me, too, but I can't just walk away now. It's dark. Where would I go? I can't afford a motel while you make up your minds. You've

given me a very nice meal. If you could just give me a place to bed down for the night then we could talk some more tomorrow.”

Michael turned to Rosa. “Can you say Elyse is a friend from school who’s visiting the area and needs a place to sleep?” Rosa took her back to the Rodriguez Farm.

“Just so you know, I told my parents you were a friend who studies at the Agricultural College with me. They might try to talk farming with you. Hopefully not. If they do, we’ll just have to fake it.”

“I’m good at faking it,” Elyse replied, smiling. “But, I have a question. Will I have to get up at the crack of dawn? I’m exhausted from talking to Michael, Ray, and Angela.”

“No. You can sleep in. I’ll take you back after breakfast.”

“Thanks. I’m not lazy or anything. I just need my sleep, you know?” she said. Rosa smiled. *Boy, are you in for a rude awakening, she thought. Farmers never get enough sleep.* But she liked Elyse and hoped Michael, Angela, and Ray would let her stay. They did.

Chapter 16 - Earth Mother

A few months later, Michael and Elyse went out just after dawn and found a woman kneeling naked beside the cornfield. She raised her arms, bowed her head, and softly chanted something Michael could not understand.

“Excuse me,” Michael interrupted. The strange woman ignored him.

“Miss?” Elyse said.

“She’s not happy,” the woman said.

“Who’s not happy?” Elyse asked, puzzled.

“The field. She’s good, but not great. You could do more.”

“Um, okay. Why are you kneeling here and telling us this?” Michael asked.

“She called to me. I had to come and connect with her. She needed me to talk to you.”

“Naked?” Elyse asked. The woman looked down at herself and suddenly realized she was not wearing anything.

“Oh, sorry. It makes it easier to connect. Wanna hand me my poncho?” Elyse picked up a dusty poncho and handed it to the woman. She put her head through the hole and it dropped down over her body.

“Um, who the hell are you?” Michael asked.

“Brenda Berg.”

“And what the hell are you doing here?”

“I came to help out.”

“Help out? How?”

“This is New World Farm, isn’t it?” Michael nodded.

“Yeah. I’m Michael. This is Elyse. The others are still asleep.”

“I wanna make sure you’re getting it right.”

“Getting *what* right?” Michael asked.

“The new world. You can’t just escape from the cities and ‘go back to the land’. The land’s fucked up. You gotta bring it back. You’ve got a good start here but there’s more work to do. I can help.”

“Are you a farmer?”

“Me?” she laughed. “Oh, no. I’m an Earth Mother!” They could hear the caps as she spoke the words ‘Earth Mother’. “Not to be confused with ‘Mother Earth’. I wouldn’t dare presume...”

“Okay, okay,” Michael said. “Why don’t we go on up to the house so we can talk.”

“Um, just a minute. I’m not done here.” She stood up, walked to one of the corn stalks, took it in her hand, and kissed it. “I’m here for you, now, baby, and I’ll help these good people take care of you.”

Then she turned and walked toward Elyse and Michael. “So, what’s for breakfast today? I’m starving. I’ve been walking for days, and haven’t eaten much more than berries I found in the woods.”

Brenda picked up a knapsack that presumably contained her clothes. She was just wearing the poncho with nothing underneath but seemed comfortable. Michael and Elyse were not certain they felt comfortable but they were curious about the crazy naked woman who appeared out of nowhere.

She was at least fifty, with deep blue eyes, a prominent nose, large lips, cropped gray hair, and a huge smile. Although she was hefty, solid, stocky, and well built, she walked serenely. Her bare feet seemed not to touch the soil. Michael wondered why his boots left impressions in the soil while her feet did not.

Later, when they were all at breakfast, Angela asked, “So, Brenda, where do you come from?”

“Nowhere in particular. I’ve been roaming around trying to find the place where I belong. I think this might be it.”

“Well, it’s not up to you,” Michael pointed out. “We’re careful about who we take in. No offense, but we gotta get to know you first.”

“Okay, but do any of you know the land?”

“Yeah, my girlfriend Rosa is a third-generation farmer and she helps us out.”

“That sounds good. But does the land talk to her?”

“If it does, she’s never mentioned it. But her family loves the land and they’re committed to it.”

“Well, that’s good, too. You can live on the land, or live off the land.” Brenda paused to be certain everyone was paying attention. “But can you *be* the land?”

“You mean to be the dirt, stones, insects, plants, etc.?” Elyse asked, fascinated.

“You can see the land in a utilitarian way, by what you can get from it. But can you see it by what you can *give* to it?”

“We give plenty of hard work.”

“I don’t mean that. The earth isn’t just something we use. It’s what we are. Do you see the land as part of yourself? Are you the land, and is the land you?” she asked. No one answered. “Do you worship the land? Do you pray to it?”

“Most prayers are to God, aren’t they?” Angela asked. Brenda’s talk and appearance frightened her a little.

“Yes. If you associate God with land, it’s because you believe God created the land, like the story in the Book of Genesis. But, I believe God is the land.”

“So were you praying out there when we found you this morning?” Michael asked. He was starting to wonder if they made a mistake inviting her to the house.

“In a sense, yes, but I was mostly listening. Like everything else in this world, the land has a story. I came to hear it.”

“And, what is it?”

“It didn’t tell me,” Brenda apologized. “The land doesn’t tell stories. It is a story.”

“I have no idea what you mean,” Ray remarked.

“Let me join you and we’ll come to understand the story together. Unless you understand it, you’ll never succeed.”

“But, we are succeeding. We have a thriving egg and milk business and the corn and wheat crops look good. We’ve worked hard,” Elyse boasted.

“I can see that. You’ve all been putting your work into it. But, have you been putting your souls into it?” She looked around the table. No one answered. She wondered if they understood her question.

“I didn’t think so,” she said, looking down. “I’m here to help you do that. Where do I sleep?”

“She’s nutty, but I like her,” Rosa commented after she spent time with Brenda later in the week. Michael nodded.

“So do I, but she doesn’t know anything about what we’re doing. So far, everyone’s had a skill we can use. Ray can sort of fix machinery. Jason knows how to build stuff. Elyse has been incredible with the chickens and cows, and the kids love her. We probably need more skills, but I don’t know what they are right now. Brenda doesn’t have any skills we can use.”

“Except being an Earth Mother,” Rosa pointed out. She tried not to sound skeptical. “She’s serious, you know. I watched her. She went into the field and spent time with the crops, looking at them, listening to them, digging her fingers in the soil. She must know something.”

“And, she cooks. Boy, can she cook!” Michael added. “Simple stuff that’s amazingly good. But, we don’t need a cook.”

“So you’re thinking of turning her down?”

“I’ve been honest with her. I’ve told her things are tight and we have to be careful everyone contributes or the whole project could fail.”

“And what did she say to that?”

“She understood. She said she’ll respect our decision when we reach it.”

“Tonight’s the full moon,” Brenda said. She had been there for two weeks and they still had not decided if she could stay. She was not worried.

“Yeah, so?” Elyse asked.

“Full moons are special. The fields are lit up at night. There’s an energy that comes from the moonlight.”

“Yeah, so what?”

“You can dance naked in the fields and commune with the crops.”

“I’m not doing that,” Elyse declared. “But, you can if you want to,” she added, trying not to offend Brenda.

“So, it’s okay with you? I don’t want to upset anybody.”

“Talk to them. I don’t think they’ll be upset. I think they’ll be asleep.”

Brenda told them what she planned to do and promised to be far away from the house so no one would see her. No one seemed to care.

She waded to the center of the cornfield before the moon came up and then waited serenely. It was a warm night and she wore her poncho. As the sky brightened from the rising moon, she started lifting her poncho over her head but paused when she heard rustling nearby. Brenda thought it might be an animal. She stopped to listen. Rosa came walking up and asked if she could join Brenda.

“I haven’t planned anything,” Brenda said, grinning. “You and I can make something up if you want to.” Rosa took off her t-shirt, shorts, and panties. Brenda finished removing her poncho.

Rosa grew up on a farm but had never been out in the field at night. She liked the way it felt. The silver moonlight lit her tan skin as soon as she undressed. Rosa liked being illuminated.

“I think I wanna dance,” she whispered. She had seen the cornstalks bend when the wind blew through the cornfield and began swaying in imitation of their movement.

Brenda did not sway. She twirled slowly. The tall corn stalks moved by at eye level. When she felt dizzy, she stopped twirling and started swaying with Rosa. She imagined she was one of the corn stalks in the vast field and then imagined that field covering the entire earth. Brenda danced in celebration of growth and fecundity, not just here in this field on this farm, but every field on every farm on the entire planet. Brenda began to sweat and pretended the moisture came from warm summer rain.

Rosa noticed Brenda swaying and stopped her movement. Brenda had her eyes closed and she appeared to be in ecstasy. Her moist skin glistened in the moonlight. Rosa sat on the soil, lay down, and looked up at the sky. She watched Brenda swaying out of the corner of her eye.

She had the sense that Brenda was drawing down the moonlight onto the earth. Rosa felt she absorbed the moonlight from the soil. She began to hum the tune from ‘Ring Around the Rosy’. She repeated the ‘ring around the rosy’ melody but did not add the ‘ashes, ashes we all fall down’ part. Brenda heard her and joined in as she swayed. Rosa stood up, took both Brenda’s hands, and they danced in a circle, grinning at each other and the universe.

After a few moments, they heard a rumble of thunder and looked off in the distance. A storm was coming. It would be a small one. Clouds would soon cover the moon. There would be thunder and lightning (but not too much), then some rain, and then it would move away. The sky would clear, and then the moon would come out and brighten every water droplet that fell during the storm.

Brenda and Rosa looked at each other as if to ask, ‘You wanna go inside?’ Neither said anything. Instead, Brenda started swaying again. They waited for the storm to reach them. Both women fell to the ground when the first drops began. They welcomed the soft rain.

The storm moved away. They stood up, looked at each other, and then at themselves. Brenda and Rosa were glowing wet in the moonlight.

“My God, we’re moon-maidens,” Rosa gasped. Brenda laughed.

“Don’t tell anyone. They’ll think we’re crazy,” she said. They laughed again and then stooped to pick up their soaked clothing. Neither of them dressed. They walked out of the field. Rosa went to the house and crept into Michael’s bed. Brenda quietly went to her little bed in the shack Jason built. No one else was awake. No one would ever know the women became moon-maidens.

The next day Rosa urged Michael to persuade the others to let Brenda stay. She did not give him a reason other than she liked Brenda and felt she belonged in the community. That was good enough for Michael. Brenda stayed.

Chapter 17 - Redemption

“His name is Anthony,” Elyse said. She mentioned her friend at their weekly community meeting. “He’s been in ‘Nam. We were friends before he went into the Army. He wrote me a letter and wants to see me.”

Elyse and Anthony had been close. For a while, Elyse thought they might live together. Then he went to the war. They talked on the phone after his letter arrived and she offered to go to the city to spend time with him. He wanted to come to her. He told her he felt people were looking at him funny in the city. “Like he’s done something bad and everybody knows,” she explained. “I guess that’s what he means. I have no idea what happened to him over there.”

Tony joined up hoping to avoid the war. He avoided combat but ended up part of a medical helicopter rescue team that picked up wounded soldiers and took them to field hospitals.

“I know it’s asking a lot for him to come here. He just wants to see me. I don’t think he wants to stay. I’ve told him I work a lot, sometimes sunup to sundown, and he would be alone; but he said that’s okay. I can’t afford to meet him at the motel in town. So I’m asking, can he come and visit me for a while? Would that be okay?”

“You feel sorry for him, don’t you?” Brenda asked.

“Yes. He was a nice guy. Probably still is. He needs me. But, I’ll tell him no if that’s what you want.” Elyse hoped they would not tell her to refuse him.

“I wouldn’t feel right about that,” Ray said. “I knew a couple of guys who were over there. It was hard for them when they came back. Let him come, but let’s give it a time limit. Say, a week or two?”

“I’m not sure he would even stay that long. I think he just wants to see me and then maybe move on with the rest of his life.”

“Well, no more than a month,” Michael said. “And, he has to do some work. But, we don’t do rehab here, so if there’s a problem, he would have to go.”

Elyse felt relieved. “Thanks. I’ll call him.” She did want to see Anthony again, although she wasn’t sure why.

He hitchhiked to town and called the farm. Rosa and Elyse went to pick him up. Once he put his arms around Elyse, he did not want to let her go. She pulled him to the pickup truck and they got in. He sat next to her by the open window.

Rosa started up the truck. Tony didn’t notice her. “Hi, I’m Rosa,” she said, aiming the truck down the road that led out of town. Tony didn’t answer.

When they arrived at New World Farm, he asked Elyse if there was a private place they could be alone. Elyse felt flattered. She also felt embarrassed he did not want to meet any of the others. They were all working anyway. She led him to her shack.

“Wow. This is nice. Simple. It reminds me of the native huts the villagers live in ‘Nam.”

“Oh, were you in their houses?”

“Yeah. A few times. A room like this wouldn’t just be for one person, though. Sometimes you would see five or six beds.”

“Why were you there?”

“Medical stuff. Sometimes the teams had to help out in the villages.”

“So how much medical stuff did you do?” Elyse felt pleased he talked about his experiences in ‘Nam.

“Mostly assist the doctors and nurses. Load, unload, and carry supplies. That sort of thing.”

“What about guns?”

“We didn’t carry them. We had soldiers protecting us.”

“What were their houses like?”

“Amazing. Neat. Clean. Orderly. They all had these little statues of some woman. At first, I thought she was the Virgin Mary. Some of them are Catholics over there. But it wasn’t Mary.”

“Who was she?”

“They called her Quan Yin.”

“Did they pray to her?”

“I guess so. She was everywhere. I even saw a big shrine when I was in Saigon.” He fell silent. Elyse looked at his face. He seemed older. She wondered if his trip had tired him out.

“You wanna sleep a while?” she asked. “I got work to do for a few hours, anyway.”

“Oh, yeah. A nap would be good.”

“I’ll wake you for dinner.” Elyse walked out as Tony lay back in her bed. She wondered if he planned to sleep with her. She had not decided whether she wanted to have sex with him again.

Elyse and Tony had been somewhat in love, before; but that was before. Now they seemed like very different people. They would have to figure out if they could be in love again. Elyse was pretty sure her love didn’t carry over from their past. She assumed his feelings would not have, either. Nevertheless, maybe he thought they did. She wondered if it had been a mistake to invite him to visit.

“So, Mike, are you on a student deferment?” Tony asked at dinner. Michael shook his head. “Four-F?” It was rare, but sometimes men were rejected for military service.

“No. I didn’t register,” Michael confessed. He did not know how Tony would react.

“So you’re a draft-dodger?” Michael nodded, afraid his admission would anger Anthony. “Aren’t you worried about the FBI catching up with you?”

“No. My parents get the letters and they don’t know where I am. They know I’m safe, that’s all.”

“Oh, well that’s good.”

“I hope you’re not pissed at me,” Michael said.

“Why would I be pissed at you?”

“Well, you went. I didn’t.”

“Look, man, this war is seriously fucked up,” Tony replied. “I think people gotta do what’s right for them. I made my choice. You made yours.”

“So, Tony, why did you come to me?” Elyse asked when they were alone again.

“I saw a lot of horrible stuff when I was in ‘Nam. You were the only person back home I ever thought of.”

“I’m flattered, but why?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like we were engaged or anything. I think it was just because you’re a good person.” Tony saw so much evil, so much pain and horror that he needed to counter it with something good. Elyse was the only good thing strong enough in his mind to make the rest of it bearable.

“Wow. Thanks, I guess.”

“Thank you. You were nice to me. I think you liked me.”

“I did.”

“You didn’t treat me like others in my life. Everyone else wanted something from me, or wanted to hurt me, but not you. You just treated me like a person.”

“Yes.”

“Well, over there, where people are getting killed all around you, no one is a person anymore. Everyone is just a statistic. One more wounded, one more dead, one more lost. It got really bad for me. And then something happened that almost sent me over the edge.”

“What was it?”

Tony looked away as if the story he was about to tell might be too difficult and painful to share. Then he began in a low voice. Elyse listened attentively. She somehow felt that it was important to Tony that she understand and accept everything he said.

“They sent us into a village after a firefight. We discovered several of our soldiers dead or badly wounded. We also discovered something worse. Dozens of villagers got wounded in the firefight. They didn’t have time to run and hide. They were scattered all around.

“I went to help an older woman holding a baby. Just as I was reaching for the baby, my sergeant told me to back off. I argued with him. ‘We can save these people, sir. There’s no danger. We can fix them up before we leave.’ My sergeant yelled at me to get to the chopper. I pleaded. He told me the villagers would be taken care of. Then he threatened to take off without me.

“I got on the chopper. As it slowly rose above the village, I noticed movement beyond the huts. A single soldier- not VC, one of ours- walked into the village. He stopped and looked at one of the villagers lying on the ground. I thought he was going to help the woman but he didn’t. He took out his sidearm and shot her in the head.” Anthony paused as the shocking memory overwhelmed him. Elyse tried not to show how horrified she felt.

“Then he went through the village shooting the victims in the head, one by one. I assumed he was Special Forces or something, sent in to mop up. He *was* taking care of them. I looked at my sergeant. I wondered if he knew that was going to happen.”

“Did he know?” Elyse asked, appalled.

“I never had the guts to ask him. Two weeks later, I got left behind. Our chopper had to lift off or get captured with wounded and crew onboard. Everyone would have been killed. Before the chopper was out of sight two of the village women came toward me. I thought they were going to kill me and the wounded man next to me. They didn’t. They lifted him and directed me toward one of the houses.

“They took us inside and laid him in front of a statue. I sat down next to him. They went outside and I heard them yelling. I assumed they were calling the VC to capture or kill us. But, they weren’t. They were telling them a lie: that we had escaped into the jungle. They came back, knelt in front of the statue, and bowed. I was so scared and moved that I bowed, too.

“Then they cleaned the man’s wounds and patched him up. They offered me a bowl of rice. I tried to ask them why they were helping us. I didn’t speak much Vietnamese and they didn’t understand much English. The gist of what they told me was that she- the statue- was some kind of Goddess, and she told them to help us.

“I was shocked that these women heard the statue telling them what to do. I started thinking about how the soldiers- *my* soldiers- had left an entire village of wounded people to be killed. I thought about how different we were, as human beings. They have a Goddess that hears the cries of suffering and she sends help. We don’t have a Goddess like that. We’re the ones that are causing the suffering. So, I wondered if I was hearing the Goddess when I tried to help those villagers we were ordered to abandon. Had she been talking to me?”

“What did you decide?”

“I don’t know. What I do know is that I should have saved those people and I owe that Goddess an apology. I want to ask her to forgive me for not saving them. Maybe if she forgives me I can go on with the rest of my life.”

It was another full moon. Brenda lay naked and alone in the middle of the cornfield. Silvery-white light lit her skin. Brenda looked as if she was sculpted out of alabaster. Her eyes were closed. She sensed the life beneath her in the soil and above her in the sky. Brenda was the connection between the two realms.

She heard the corn rustle, assumed Rosa arrived to join her, and smiled. Maybe they were about to become moon-maidens again. She felt the air stir above her, opened her eyes, and saw Tony.

Brenda tried to remain calm. “Tony? What are you doing out here?”

“I came to worship.”

“The moon?” Brenda asked. She liked his suggestion. Worship might be something new for her to try.

“No. The Goddess.” He replied. *Oh, she thought, the Goddess. Mother Earth. Wow.* She would never have guessed Tony knew anything about the Goddess.

She waited for him to sit, kneel, or lie down, but he stood over her, absolutely still. He looked down and saw her shiny skin and recalled the little white statue in the Vietnamese women’s house where he hid until a chopper came back to pick him up the next day.

“I was looking for you,” he said, softly. “I’ve come to you. I need you.” Brenda tried to sit up. He pushed her down. She noticed he had an erection.

“Tony, I don’t...”

“Please. This is the only way.” He knelt next to her, put his hand on her crotch, and slid a finger into her vaginal slit. She gasped.

“Tony. I don’t... That’s not what I’m here for.”

“But it is. I know it is. I’ve been looking for you, waiting for you, and now I’ve found you. You’re the only one that can heal me.” He massaged her gently and she began feeling aroused.

“No. I can’t heal you, or anyone. I’m just an old woman.”

“No you’re the Goddess, and you’re immortal, and you can forgive me, and heal me, and then I can start over again,” he blurted out.

Tony pushed into her before she could protest.

“This is the only way,” he whispered, moving slowly. “To go back to the beginning and start over.”

It had been a long time since Brenda had sex. She did not miss it; she never even thought about it. However, Tony awoke something within her. His intense need overwhelmed her.

“Yes, Tony, you’ve found me. I waited for you. I opened for you. Now you have to open up for me. Pour everything out. Pour it into me.” She raised her legs to admit him deeper. He sped up. She resolved to lay beneath him for as long as he wanted her. It could be a moment, an hour, a day, a century, or from now until the end of time. If he wanted a Goddess, Brenda would be that Goddess. For Tony. Only for him.

Tony finished and lay on top of her, inert. Brenda rolled them on their sides and looked at his face. His eyes remained closed. He seemed peaceful. She was still tingling from their sex. Brenda wanted to reach down to see if he was still hard but was afraid to disturb him. She decided to allow him whatever peace he had found.

Tony opened his eyes after a few moments, looked at her as if seeing her for the first time, got up, and walked back through the corn toward the house.

Brenda had referred to herself as an Earth Mother but never claimed to be a Goddess. That would have been prideful and presumptuous. She was no longer certain she was merely an Earth Mother. What if Tony, seeing her as a Goddess, perhaps Mother Earth, had transformed her into one? The moon was her witness. Brenda felt changed.

“I wanted you to know,” Brenda said to Elyse. “Something happened last night. Tony followed me out into the field. We had sex.”

“Oh, God, did he rape you? I’ll never forgive myself for letting him come here.”

“No, no, no..., it wasn’t rape. He was gentle. I’m okay. I wanted you to know because I know you two have a thing and I hope this doesn’t ruin it.”

“Oh. We had something, but it ended when he went away. If you want him, you can have him. Is that what this is about?”

“To be honest with you, I don’t think he would care what I wanted, even if I did want him. I just wanted you to know what happened. I’m sorry.”

“Brenda, don’t be. You sure you’re okay?” Brenda nodded. “Should I talk to him?”

“Oh, God, no. You might hurt his feelings. As long as everything’s okay, let’s just let it go.”

Tony asked Rosa to drive him to town two days later. He wanted to get a bus. He would not tell her where he was going. She wished him luck and told him to come back anytime.

“Thanks, but I don’t think so. This is a nice place, but it’s not where I belong,” he explained. Rosa smiled and waved goodbye. Later she spoke to Michael on the phone. He mentioned that Tony had disappeared. She told Michael Tony left on the bus and it was unlikely they would see him again.

Tony had found the cleansing and healing he needed and moved on. Brenda, however, was left with a new problem. He awoke something buried deep inside her. It wasn’t something divine. It was something earthy but just as powerful as the divine.

Chapter 18 - Lust

"So you should know that I don't want your men," Brenda said. She paused to look at Angela. "I don't want Ray, and I don't want-." She paused again, turned to face Rosa, and added, "Michael." Angela and Rosa listened, puzzled by her statement.

"But something has happened and I need your help. You two don't know this, but Anthony had sex with me."

"You mean he raped you?" Angela cried.

"No. I don't think he could have done *that* even though he forced himself on me."

"Does Elyse know?" Angela asked. Brenda nodded. "So that's why he left so suddenly?"

"I don't think so. I think he was done here. He never planned to stay."

Elyse walked into the room. "I'm sorry I'm late. You wanted to see me?"

"I wanted to talk about Anthony," Brenda said. Elyse nodded.

"I'm sorry about what happened. I didn't know he was that kind of guy."

"He isn't. But, he's not who you knew before he went to 'Nam. Anyway, he's gone now. But he left me with something." She paused and looked at the women who were now her closest friends, but knew little about her.

Brenda did not continue. "Okay, what?" Rosa asked.

"Lust. I didn't realize it until I caught myself looking at your men."

"*Looking* at them? What do you mean?" Angela couldn't suppress the alarm in her voice.

"You know, in *that* way."

"Oh."

"I was upset with myself. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you or your men. I'd rather leave than cause a problem or give you anything to worry about."

"Wait, you mean you were thinking about *screwing* them?"

"It wasn't thought; it was pure lust."

"And, Tony did this to you?"

"Tony opened up what had been closed for a long time. I had no problem with it being closed. I never even thought about it. But, now that's it's open, I can't close it back up, and it's almost all I think about."

"So you're horny?" Elyse commented. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"Yes. I need somebody. Not necessarily to love me. I've got all the love I need and I'm happy. I want him to take care of me."

"There's no guy that you knew before, maybe...?"

"Only my husband."

"You were married?" Elyse asked.

"I still am."

"I had no idea," Rosa said.

"Where is he?" Angela asked. "Does he know you're here? He could come here if you want. I would be okay with that."

"No. It wouldn't work. He couldn't give me what I want."

"Well, my experience with guys is that, if you give them what *they* want, they come around," Elyse remarked. Rosa and Angela smirked.

"He can't. He loves me too much."

"And, that's a problem?" Rosa asked.

"Yes," Brenda replied. She looked down and said no more.

"I thought all the hippies at that commune were young people," Luis, Rosa's grandfather, commented.

“They mostly are,” Rosa replied as she frowned at his characterization of everyone at New World Farm as hippies.

“I saw Ray in town with an older woman. Is she his mother?”

“Oh, that’s Brenda. She’s part of the commune.”

“What does she do? Cook, clean, and look after the kids?”

“No. She runs the egg and milk business. Plus, she’s learned a lot about seeds, cultivation, carpentry, and soon, harvesting.”

“Why does she dress so funny?”

“What do you mean?”

“She was wearing a long heavy skirt and a poncho over a shirt. If she wasn’t with Angela she would’ve gotten arrested for vagrancy,” he joked.

“Oh, those were her going-to-town clothes. She usually just wears overalls. Why are you asking all these questions? Did you like what you saw?” Luis blushed and looked away. Rosa knew immediately her grandfather liked what he saw.

“You wanna meet her?” Rosa asked. Luis did not reply. “Maybe you could help Ray out. He’s having trouble with his old tractor. He got the part but he can’t figure out how to fix it. He thinks maybe the tractor was modified and now the original parts won’t work. You wanna take a look at it? He would really appreciate it.”

“I might, as long as you don’t tell anybody I’m coming.”

“Okay.”

“Or, that I was there,” Luis added. Rosa grinned.

Luis arrived in his battered pickup. It reminded him of himself. It was old and banged-up but still going strong, able to do an honest day’s work and then some. He had kept it running for years by scavenging parts and adapting what he could not replace.

Rosa went to get Ray and they met Luis outside the barn. Ray thanked Luis for taking the time to come over and help fix the tractor. Luis said gruffly he was not there to fix it, just to look at it.

Brenda came into the barn to get a shovel and pickax while the men examined the tractor. Luis noticed her walking in but pretended not to see her. She wore tight-fitting farmer’s overalls that highlighted her bosom and ass. If she was forty years younger, she could have been a pin-up girl on a feed store calendar. Luis almost dropped the wrench he was holding. Rosa watched him but pretended not to notice his reaction.

Brenda’s appearance presented Luis with a new dilemma. No longer was he there solely to work on the tractor. He immediately wanted to meet Brenda but his sudden urge embarrassed him. Luis did not know how to act around women. Clementina died seven years earlier and he had not, because of his age, thought about any other women. Besides, there was no one available in town. All the women his age were married to his friends and he got along with them. They also knew Clementina and reminisced about her whenever they saw him.

This woman was a stranger. She did not know anything about him. She had no history in the town. She did not know, nor had she ever heard of, Clementina. Also, she had a nice ass. Brenda was not parading herself in front of him. She was just sweaty from working outside.

Luis suddenly discovered he had forgotten what lust was. He was glad the memory, and the feeling, came back. Boy, had it come back! He felt embarrassed.

He turned to the tractor, grabbed the part in one hand, and the wrench in the other. Then he pushed as hard as he could to force the part to fit where it belonged. When he grunted, the part snapped into place, and he tightened the bolts that held it down. Ray looked on, astonished. Rosa was not sure what just happened. Brenda left the barn and went back outside to work.

“Luis, you fixed it! I don’t know how to thank you. Please come up to the house for some iced tea,” Ray gushed.

“Um, thanks, but I’d rather just get cleaned up. I gotta go.”

“Come on, *abuelo*, stay a couple of minutes. You can spare the time,” Rosa urged. Luis couldn’t refuse his granddaughter. They walked to the house. Luis washed the grease off and then sat on the porch.

He saw Brenda on the other side of the yard preparing a plot of ground. She was far enough away that he could not see what she was doing,⁸ but he did not care. She was bending over and the curve of her ass mesmerized him.

“New plot?” he asked, casually.

“Brenda wants an herb garden,” Ray said. “She’s been reading about herbs and wants to try growing them. She thinks she might be able to make herbs a new cash crop for us.” Clementina had an herb garden for years. She only used herbs around the house but she tried many different kinds and shared what she learned with him. He now had the urge to share what he knew with Brenda.

“Grandma had an herb garden, didn’t she?” Rosa asked as if she read his mind. Luis stopped looking at Brenda’s ass and turned toward his granddaughter.

“*Si*. She worked on it for years.”

“So, I guess *you* know a lot about herbs, too?” Rosa prompted.

“Who, me? No. Never paid much attention,” he lied.

“I remember you and Grandma out there on the cool mornings, talking and working in the soil. Always seemed to me you liked it.” He knew what she was doing and was not sure he wanted to play along.

“I just did what she told me, Rosa. You know your *abuela*. When she told you to do something, you did it, no questions asked.”

“I never met your wife. I wasn’t living here when she was still alive,” Ray said. “Angela remembers her, though; she told me she was a wonderful person.” Luis started looking at Brenda’s ass again. He was not sure he remembered his wife, or that he even wanted to, right now. They sat in silence, sipped their iced tea, and enjoyed the mid-afternoon breezes.

“Did she get her herb seeds, yet?” Luis asked.

“I don’t think so. Why?”

“Some stuff does good around here. Some don’t. Might help her not waste time if...”

“You mean you’d give her some advice?” Rosa suggested. “She’d probably like that.” Luis had a vivid image of what he would like to give her and it was not advice. He knew it was time to go.

Luis thanked Ray for the iced tea and walked to his truck without looking at Brenda. He hoped she wouldn’t notice he was leaving but was not certain why he felt that way. He got away without any more embarrassment.

“Did what I think just happened, just happen?” Ray asked Rosa. She nodded.

“Yup,” she said.

“You think he’ll do anything?”

“Don’t know. Maybe he’ll start dropping by, but not to help you fix anything.”

“Should we tell Brenda?”

“No. It would embarrass her. The ball’s in his court, now.”

“Or, in his pants,” Ray mumbled.

Rosa guffawed. “Did you see the way he was looking at her?” she asked.

“I think it’s nice. Maybe they can get together. You wouldn’t have a problem with that, would you? He is your grandfather.”

“Oh, God, no. She might be just what he needs; and vice versa.”

“My grandfather sent these for you,” Rosa offered Brenda a bag of seed packets. “He said my grandmother had the best luck with these. The seeds are old but you can buy fresh ones.”

“Wow! These are great. I recognize some of the names. I don’t know much about them. I haven’t been able to find many books.”

“Oh, I think my grandmother had some herb books, too.”

“Do you think I could come over and look at them?”

“I’ll ask him. He might let you borrow some.”

“Well, if they’re not too special. After all, they belonged to your grandmother.”

“Yeah, but my grandfather, like most people around here, likes helping people. He’s not sentimental. He likes to see stuff get used,” Rosa explained. “Farmers never waste anything. He wouldn’t let a book sit on a shelf if somebody could use it.”

Chapter 19 - Hieros Gamos

Rosa drove Brenda to the Rodriguez farm so she could look at the herb books. She planned to pick up Brenda on the way back from town but Luis offered to drive Brenda home. Rosa left them alone.

“Rosa told me her grandmother died seven years ago,” Brenda said. “I guess you still miss her.”

“Well, sort of,” Luis replied. He felt awkward alone with a strange woman inside his house. He had planned to show Brenda the herb books and then leave her alone to peruse them. He had not planned to converse. “I mean, *si...*, yes, yes I do.”

Brenda worried she had asked a delicate or hurtful question. She frowned. Luis thought he should explain more.

“But, I know that’s just how things are,” he added. Brenda looked puzzled. Luis worried she didn’t understand his reply and he ought to explain what he meant. That made him feel even more awkward.

“I’ve lived on the land my whole life,” Luis began. “I’ve learned nothing stays the same. Everything changes. What’s alive doesn’t stay alive. What’s dead doesn’t stay dead. It’s the way God made this world, so you have to believe He did it for a reason, and you have to believe it’s good.” His blunt revelation shocked Brenda. She looked deeply into his eyes, saw something wonderful there, and kissed him spontaneously.

Afraid he would throw her out immediately, Brenda apologized. Luis looked at her, waiting. He didn’t seem angry. “You just said exactly what I feel,” she explained. Brenda paused, unable to think of anything else to say. “I guess I should go now. I didn’t mean to embarrass you. Thanks for sending me those herbs.” She started for the door.

“Wait!” Luis stopped her. “You haven’t looked at the books yet.”

“Are you sure you’re comfortable with that?” What she wanted to ask was ‘are you sure you’re comfortable with me?’

“*Por favor*, don’t go,” Luis replied. Brenda heard more than courtesy or neighborliness in his voice. She thought what she heard was loneliness and longing. He found the courage to say more. “So, you believe all that stuff, too?” he asked.

“Yes! It’s why I’m at New World Farm. I got fed up living in the city. You get a sense of time there, but you don’t get a sense of eternity. Out here, you do.”

“*Si, es verdad!*” Luis replied. “That’s exactly right. That’s what I was trying to say.” He embraced her, kissed her swiftly, realized how impulsive he had been, and tried to pull away. She stopped him. He stayed still. Neither wanted to let go.

After a couple of quiet moments, Brenda whispered in Luis’ ear. “Would you like to take me upstairs?” She felt certain he would know why she asked and that he would say yes.

He looked at her, nodded, took her hand gently, led her up the narrow steps, and then down the dim hallway toward the back of the house. They entered a small bedroom. Brenda noticed a huge window that dominated the space. She went to the glass and saw the Rodriguez farm, his whole world, outside.

The bedroom Luis and Clementina had slept in was at the front of the house. It overlooked the lawn, garden, and driveway. That was the orderly side of the house. It never changed.

This was the wild side. It changed from season to season: there was plowing, planting, growing, harvesting, and letting the land lie fallow in the winter. For Luis, this side was alive. It was also his life.

Luis felt wild for the first time in many years. He wanted to plunge himself into Brenda and merge into ecstasy with her. He wanted to lie panting next to her after they finished, laugh, hold hands, talk about their lives, and do it again when renewed passion seized them.

“This is my room,” he explained. “Rosa’s parents sleep in the master bedroom. I gave it to them after Clementina died...” His voice trailed off. She knew what he meant. There was no ghost in this room. No wife. No past love, or lovemaking. It was a virgin space.

Brenda wanted to rip her clothes off and pull him into bed with her. Instead, she gazed out the window. What she saw gripped her. She knew it was the first thing Luis saw when he awoke every morning, and the last thing he looked at when he went to bed at night. It was his farm, his love.

The grandeur of his fields mesmerized her. “It’s so beautiful,” she whispered, overwhelmed. As she stared out the window, Brenda heard movement behind her. She turned and found Luis almost naked. She smiled, opened her arms, and circled his powerful chest. “So are you,” she whispered, smiling.

He kissed her. She stepped back, lifted her poncho over her head, and then removed her t-shirt. He smiled when he saw her breasts. She unfastened the belt on her heavy denim skirt and it fell to the floor. They stood looking at each other, clad only in their underpants. Luis looked as if he was about to cry.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, sweetly.

“Am I dreaming?” he replied, barely able to speak.

“If you are, then I am, too,” Brenda said. “And, I hope this dream never ends.” She put her fingers in the waistband of her panties and pulled them down. He removed his boxer shorts. It was a defining moment for both of them.

Brenda reached for his penis. Luis gasped. “*Dios Madre*,” he said, smiling. They suddenly wanted not just to merge into each other’s bodies, but also to become each other’s bodies. She gently tugged him, fell backward onto the bed, opened her legs, and guided him inside her. She was so excited she immediately had an orgasm.

Her reaction astonished him and he thrust deeper and harder than he ever remembered doing before. Clementina was a small, delicate woman and he always made love to her with tender passion. He sensed Brenda was different. She was larger, sturdier, and more solid than Clementina. He did not have to hold back and did not want to. Her second orgasm made her scream. She smiled at him as she came. He smiled back, came inside her, and then collapsed panting on top of her.

“Luis..., I never..., that was..., wow!” she said, and then laughed at her ecstatic incoherence.

“*Si*,” was all Luis could reply.

“Where have you been?” Jason asked Brenda when he spotted her walking down the driveway. Luis had dropped her off at the road.

“Over at Rosa’s. Her grandfather let me look at some books about herbs.”

“Great! Find anything?”

“Yes. Some really good information.”

Jason noticed she was not carrying any books. “He wouldn’t let you borrow them?”

“He said I could take whatever I wanted.”

Jason looked at her, puzzled. “So where are they?”

“Oh, I guess I forgot to take any,” she replied, smiling at her absent-mindedness. Brenda wandered off. Jason watched her, wondering if she was ill.

Rosa and Brenda were working together in the herb plot, out of earshot of the others.

“My grandfather talked to me,” Rosa said.

“I swear I didn’t take advantage of him!” Brenda blurted out. Rosa smiled.

“He thanked me.”

“*Thanked* you?” Brenda tried to conceal her surprise.

“For introducing him to you.”

“Oh.” Suddenly, Brenda felt like a shy teenager.

“I take it you two hit it off?” Rosa asked, looking at Brenda. She wondered where this conversation was going. Brenda blushed and nodded. “I thought he was acting differently. He seems less intense and he has new energy.”

“Oh, really?”

“What about you?”

“I’m still tingling,” Brenda hoped to shock Rosa into dropping the subject, but her comment confirmed Rosa’s suspicion.

“Wow! Great sex?”

“No. I mean, yes. But, it wasn’t about sex. Look, he’s a handsome man and I think I’m sort of good-looking for an older woman. But that wasn’t why we did it.”

“So you *did* do it?”

“I didn’t come on to him, I swear!” she insisted, again.

“It’s okay, I believe you. Tell me what happened.”

“We talked.”

“About herbs?”

“About eternity, I guess.”

“*Then* you had sex?” Rosa asked, incredulous.

“Not just sex. Anybody can have sex. We had was cosmic, spiritual sex.”

“Sounds weird.”

“You’ve never had it?” Rosa shook her head. “Not with Michael?”

“Not with anybody.”

Brenda felt sorry for Rosa. “You have no idea what you’re missing,” she said, softly.

“So, do you wanna tell me about it?” Brenda did not answer right away. She tried to think of a way to explain how it was for her and Luis.

“Do you know what *hieros gamos* is?” Brenda asked. Rosa had never heard the words before.

“Some sort of herb?” she asked.

“No. It’s something an agricultural college probably wouldn’t teach about. It’s part of mythology.”

“You’re right, my college doesn’t teach mythology, only science. So what is it?”

“The Greek words literally mean ‘sacred wedding.’ It’s when a God and Goddess mate and create the entire world.”

“*That’s* what it was like?” Rosa asked, astonished. She tried not to laugh. “You and my grandfather created a world?” Brenda frowned. She thought Rosa was making fun of her.

“Well, not exactly. We affirmed the elemental power of this world, the power that creates life, death, and everything.”

“Whoa, Earth Mother. Slow down. You got it bad.”

“Got what?”

“He asked me to find out whether you like him,” Rosa said. “I’m guessing you do.”

“What is this, high school?” Brenda asked, charmed by Luis’ innocence. “Is he gonna ask me to the prom?”

“No. Maybe just to the soda fountain.”

“And, how do you feel about that?”

“It’s not me who might be a problem. It’s my mom. She protects him.”

“From what?”

“Being hurt again.”

“Rosa, I don’t know how to say this, but he doesn’t seem like someone who needs protecting. He doesn’t seem hurt.”

“Well, she loves him. There’s no telling what would happen if he started something with another woman.”

“He could be happy,” Brenda suggested.

“Yes, but for how long? That’s how she thinks.”

“Oh, so she doesn’t want him to lose another love?”

“She doesn’t want him to *have* another love. She wants my grandmother to be his only love.”

“But, that’s not fair to him, is it? Shouldn’t he get to decide? He understands things your mom probably doesn’t.”

“Yes, and she probably doesn’t want to. She’s a completely different type of person than my grandfather.”

“Do *you* want to understand?” Brenda asked.

“What do you mean?”

Brenda stopped shoveling, stood up, came close to Rosa, and stared her in the eyes.

“I want this to be perfectly clear. I would let him fuck me anywhere, anytime. In a hurricane, a blizzard, or on the hottest night of the year. I would take him inside me and we would transform each other, and when we finished we would be in our own realm for however long we wanted to stay there. Could be a moment, or an hour, or a day, or a year, or maybe for the rest of our lives. But it wouldn’t matter, because time wouldn’t matter. He understands.”

Rosa blinked, overwhelmed by the intensity of Brenda’s declaration.

“But time *does* matter, Brenda,” Rosa said.

Brenda looked down. “Yes. I know. Nobody knows it better than me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wasn’t always an Earth Mother. I was an aging housewife with a nice husband and a couple of okay kids. Nothing much ever happened- good or bad. Then I found out I had cancer.”

“Oh, my God, Brenda!”

“Do you know what I did?”

“What?”

“At first, nothing. Then I thought about it. I had been nice, sweet Brenda for fifty years, and what had it gotten me? Nothing. Maybe it was time I tried to become somebody else.”

“Who?”

“Somebody real. Somebody cosmic. Somebody connected to the elemental forces of this world, somebody who has the power to transcend cancer.”

“Wait, you *cured* it?” Rosa exclaimed, astonished.

“No, I didn’t cure it. I denied it power over me.”

“And, how did you do that?”

“I stopped being little Brenda in her little world where life-and-death were absolutes, and she was helpless and terrified. I decided I would transcend that little Brenda. I became Earth Mother Brenda. The earth has no beginning and no end. Everything that was, is, or will be is here in this moment. I connected with the deepest power there is.”

“You mean God?”

“Well, maybe. But definitely a Goddess.”

“So you became a Goddess?” Brenda did not answer. She just nodded. “A Goddess with cancer?” Rosa added.

Brenda shook her head.

“*No!* A Goddess who *is* cancer, along with everything else. The sun, the moon, the stars, the rain, the soil, the rocks, the laughter of small children, and the agony of old people who are alone. It’s all here.” She pointed to her chest. “I am *all*.”

“You’re crazy,” Rosa said. Brenda smiled.

“Am I, Rosa?” she asked, seriously. “Or am I free?” Rosa stared at her. They were silent for a few moments.

“You can decide,” Brenda said, in a softer voice.

“Decide if you’re crazy or free?” Rosa asked, confused. It seemed absurd that her opinion would mean anything to Brenda.

“No. Now you know the truth about me. I meant you can decide whether to tell Luis or not. Do what you think is best.”

“Don’t you dare put that on me!”

“Okay, then tell him I didn’t give you an answer and suggest he ask me himself.” She walked away.

Rosa did not like knowing Brenda’s secret; nor did she like having her grandfather’s happiness in her hands. What if there could be something between Luis and Brenda that would make them both happy? What if Brenda was right and they both understood things other people did not?

Rosa did not tell Michael or anyone else about Brenda’s confession. She just went home. Later, she told Michael she left abruptly because she had to study. However, study what? Crop yields, rainfall totals, seasonal changes, fertilizers, harvesters, the commodity markets? Or, her soul?

Luis did not fall in love with Brenda. With her, he came back to life. Back to a life that began and ended with the soil, sky, sun, rain, and the eternal cycles of fertility and decay, love and death.

He wanted to be with her. She felt the same about him. They had been looking for the same bliss without realizing they were looking for each other.

However, Luis’s daughter, Dolores, did not see it the way her father did.

“I don’t want that *puta* in my house!” she complained to Robert, her husband. He wanted to point out that it was not her house but her father’s, and Luis could bring in whomever he wanted.

“She’s just a friend, dear,” Robert said, softly, trying to calm his wife.

“Friend? That’s what you think? She’s *no* friend! She wants to steal everything we have.”

“I don’t think she even cares about what we have.”

“You don’t think she seduced him so he would marry her and then she could own half of everything he has? She had nothing when they met.”

“I don’t agree,” he said, calmly.

“How could you be so stupid? Everything we’ve worked for could be gone if she sinks her claws into him.” Dolores was livid. She gazed at Robert as if he was the stupidest man alive and she had just pointed out the most obvious fact in the world. Robert shook his head.

“I don’t think she would marry him even if he asked her,” he argued.

“I don’t think she would marry him even if he asked her,” Dolores mocked. “You don’t think she wants to live here and have all this for herself?” she asked. He shook his head. “You’re an idiot.”

“I talked to Rosa. She knows Brenda.”

“Don’t say that *puta*’s name in my house!”

“Her name is Brenda and she lives at the New World Farm, or commune or whatever it is, and that’s where she told Rosa she belongs. Not here.”

“And you believe that?”

“If you don’t believe me, ask Rosa.”

“She’s just a kid. She’s still naive. Her inheritance is at stake here.”

“She thinks this is just about your dad having a girlfriend,” Robert argued.

“A girlfriend! A *puta* who comes over when we’re not here and takes my father to bed.”

“That’s what girlfriends and boyfriends do, now. They go to bed together.”

“Well, we never did that! And neither did my father and mother.” Robert grimaced. He recalled their courtship differently. He hoped she had not forgotten their passionate trysts when they hid from her parents and had sex in the barn.

“Times are different now.”

“It’s still wrong. And I won’t allow it!”

“You can’t stop your father. He seems happy.”

“How can he be happy? His wife is dead.”

Robert tried to remain calm. “I think he’s aware of that, Dolores.”

“He should accept it for what it is!”
“And what is it?”
“He’s a widower, not a bachelor.”
“No, darling. He’s a man.”
“Oh, now you’re defending him?” she said, fuming.
“No, I just think I understand him.”
“So it’s okay with you that he has a *puta*?”
“It’s okay that he has a girlfriend if that’s what makes him happy.”
“And, what about his family? Don’t *we* make him happy?”
“He still loves us. That will never change.”
“I think it’s already changed. It might be too late to do anything about it.”
“What could you do? He’s not a teenager. You can’t forbid him to see her.”
“True, but I might be able to prevent him from seeing her.” His wife’s vehemence shocked “I think he’s aware of that, Dolores.” He had never known her to threaten anyone.
“I don’t like how that sounds.”
“Oh, you don’t? What are you going to do about it?”
“I won’t let you hurt him.”
“He’s my father. I wouldn’t hurt him for the world.”
“Really? Then let him have his happiness.”
“I don’t think a *puta* can make him happy.”
“She’s not a *puta*, and she has already made him happy. You know it,” Robert argued, aware he risked provoking her more.
“She’s not a *puta*? You know this for a fact?”
“I know that your father would not let a *puta* seduce him. He’s smarter and savvier than that. She was just a lonely woman and he was a lonely man, and now they’ve found each other.”
“I didn’t know you were such a romantic.”
“I think it’s nice when people fall in love.”
“So you think they’re in love?” she asked, astonished by his naiveté.
“I think they like being together, and I don’t see that as a threat to us, or anybody else. Times have changed. Luis is entitled to have a girlfriend, and it’s none of our business.”
“What about *me*?” Dolores asked.
“What do you mean?”
“If I was dead would you get yourself a girlfriend?”
“Don’t talk like that.”
“Would you?”
“You’re the love of my life. You always have been,” Robert defended himself.
“Yeah, but will I always be? Even after I’m gone?”
“What’s gotten into you today? Why all this crazy talk?”
“I’m thinking about how my mother would feel about all this. He doesn’t care that he’s hurting her.”
“How?”
“He’s being unfaithful. He’s with that whore.”
“He’s not being unfaithful. For the last time, Brenda is not a whore. She’s just a woman.”
“There was only one woman good enough for my dad. She may be gone, but she’s still the only woman good enough for him.”
Robert made an effort to lower his voice so he could calm his wife. “I don’t think Brenda wants to replace your mom in his heart.”
“Oh, no?” Dolores shrieked. “The longer they’re together the more he’ll forget about my mother, and eventually she’ll be gone. Gone! That *puta* will have taken over.”

“I’ve had enough of this, Dolores. I don’t know what’s going on here, but I don’t think this is about your dad. I think it’s about you.”

“Me? Me? You’re saying I’m being selfish?”

“I think you’re worried about something, but I don’t know what it is. I don’t think it’s your dad and his girlfriend.”

“You never understood me, anyway. I don’t know why I’ve been talking to you. Leave me alone!” Robert didn’t want to leave his wife alone. He wanted to comfort and reassure her but didn’t know how.

Chapter 20 - Dance

“Thanks for helping me come out here, ladies,” Brenda said. Her voice seemed weak. “I may not make it back, but that would be okay,” she kidded. Joan spread a blanket. Elyse helped Brenda sit on the soil.

“Stop it, Brenda,” Jessica pleaded. She started crying. Rosa put her arms around Jessica and held her.

Brenda soothed the uneasy girl. “Sorry, Jessica honey,” she said.

Rosa, Jessica, Elyse, Joan, Angela, and Brenda gathered in the cornfield under the full moon. They shed their clothes so they could honor the ancient Wiccans who held their naked worship and renewal gatherings deep in the forests on sacred nights of the old calendar.

This was a special night but it was not on any sacred calendar. Brenda would never go naked under the full moon again. Tomorrow she would check herself into the hospital. She would stay there until she died. She might have her friends encircling her, but she would be in a hospital bed and not a cornfield.

Jessica was the newest and youngest member of the commune. She joined only five months earlier. Jessica heard about it from her older brother who was Rosa’s friend from agricultural college. She liked New World Farm so far, but she did not want to be naked in the cornfield with other women. She did not like feeling they were worshiping the earth.

Jessica was not a prude or fundamentalist. Her parents had taken her to church and she still considered herself a Christian, but merely a Sunday one. For her, religion was private and personal. That’s what she thought death ought to be, too. It frightened her to be there under the open sky with a dying woman who seemed unafraid.

It seemed unnatural not to fear death. Most Christians, despite what they said, felt terrified of death. They claimed they believed Jesus conquered death and they would be with Him in eternity. However, deep down few were certain of this. It needed faith and trust that was beyond the powers of many.

“My friends, we’re here to celebrate,” Brenda began. No one responded. “What are we celebrating?” she asked, smiling. “Me. My life. My death.” Jessica sobbed on Rosa’s shoulder. Brenda was almost three times her age. She looked at Brenda’s sagging, frail body and saw only weakness, decay, and death. Nevertheless, Brenda acted as if, in the end, *she* would win, and death would lose.

None of this made any sense to Jessica. She did not see how such a strong belief was possible without Jesus, and she knew Brenda was no Christian.

“I came into this world well before the rest of you,” Brenda continued. “You may have seen more of it than me, and that’s okay. I’ve seen what I wanted to see and I’ve done what I wanted to do. Believe it or not, I found what I wanted to find. I feel very blessed.” She paused to catch her breath.

“Now, I’ve come close to my end, which also is okay. There’s nowhere I’d rather go, nowhere else I’d rather be. I don’t need more years, or months, or days, or even hours. I can honestly say that this moon, this earth, this night, and you, are all I need. I am complete. I thank God for putting me here on this earth.”

Jessica stopped sobbing when she heard Brenda mention God. She tried to figure out what God Brenda meant and looked at Brenda as she sat smiling. Then Jessica looked at the other women sitting around the little circle. She looked at the corn, the stars, and the bright moon.

Jessica became aware of the rich soil alive under her and suddenly knew what God Brenda had in mind. The deep God, the old God, the God who created the earth and sky. She realized Jesus was not all of God, just one part. She realized death and resurrection were not personal, but cosmic.

The God Brenda meant was the life of the universe, which would never die. Brenda somehow knew she would never die, even though she was going to die, possibly very soon. Jessica understood suddenly why all the women sat there together. She stopped crying and smiled.

Then she had an idea. She stood up slowly and reached out to the women on either side. They stood, took each other's hands, and helped Brenda stand up. Jessica began to sway in the moonlight. The others moved silently with her. The only sound in the field was from the wind rustling the stalks of corn.

Then Jessica began to sing:

*“Dance, dance, wherever you may be,
I am the Lord of the Dance, said He.
And I’ll live in you if you’ll live in me.
For I am the Lord of the Dance, said He.”*

The others listened as Jessica repeated the lyrics and then joined in one-by-one. They sang softly, repeating the words as they swayed in the moonlight. This was ancient magic, the magic of wholeness, power, and belonging. The magic did not come from words; it came from people. People like Brenda, who knew they would never, never die.

It was a warm, humid evening. The women perspired from their movement. Their bodies glistened in the moonlight. They realized slowly the truth of the song they were singing. They were much more than isolated beings trapped in frail bodies. They were the moon, and the sun, and the earth, and, most importantly, they were not alone. Brenda was not alone. They lived in each other.

They were Brenda, and she was them.

“Is she awake?” a woman asked. Brenda did not recognize the voice.

“I don’t know,” a second unfamiliar voice said.

“Hello?” Brenda said, weakly.

“Hi,” the woman said. Brenda opened her eyes and saw Luis’ daughter. “I’m Dolores. Remember me?”

“Are you my nurse?” Brenda asked. Dolores shook her head.

“No. I work on another floor. I just came by to check on you.”

“Does Luis know I’m here?” Dolores shook her head again.

“Not yet. Rosa told me.”

“You don’t have to tell him if you don’t want to. I would understand,” Brenda said. Dolores did not reply.

“This is Nora. She’s your nurse for now.” Nora smiled shyly. She seemed to be as young as Brenda’s high school age daughter that she left behind. “Brenda, there’s still time for you to get treatments. It’s not too late. They might do some good.”

“No, thanks,” Brenda replied. “I don’t want all that fuss. I made my peace with this a long time ago.”

“Maybe *you* did, but did you think of Luis? How do you think he feels about this?” Dolores asked.

“I think he understands. I *know* he does.”

“Did he know all along?”

“No. I didn’t tell him. I didn’t think it was important. In fact, it wasn’t. It wouldn’t have changed anything.”

“You didn’t think it would hurt him?”

“I thought he and I understood things like this from the very beginning.”

“I’m not sure he understands. He’s been different since the last time you saw him. He hasn’t spoken much. He keeps to himself. He just works from sunup to past sundown, then eats dinner and falls into bed. I’ve never seen him like this.”

“I’m sorry. I loved him, very much. And he loved me.”

“What about now?”

“We knew it would end someday.”

“End like this?”

“End somehow. He understands what most men never will. He understands time and loss. It’s why I loved being with him. He understood me, the real me, the Brenda he didn’t even know about.”

“What about now?”

“What do you mean?”

“How do you think he would feel *now*?” Dolores asked, sharply.

“Did you ask him?” Brenda understood Dolores’s concern, but her persistent questions annoyed her.

“I’ll drop by again,” Dolores said. She left abruptly. Nora remained. They were silent for several moments. Brenda felt Nora was uncomfortable with her.

“So what are you planning to do?” Nora asked, finally.

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t often get people who don’t take treatments.”

“Never?”

“Well, you’re my first.”

“I came here to die,” Brenda said. “That’s all I have left to do.”

“You don’t wanna live? You don’t wanna fight? You could. I would help you. We would all help you. That’s our job.”

“Thanks, but that’s not what I want.”

“So you want to die, then? Maybe you should talk to a priest.”

“No. I don’t need to. God understands what I’m doing.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I just am. I need you to take care of me. Can you just do that? If you’re uncomfortable, maybe you could send another nurse in.”

Nora had been a nurse for ten years. During that time, she had seen many patients go home healed. Some of her other patients died and she soon forgot them. She knew people said they wanted to die when they truly did not. Sometimes the pain was so great death offered the only release.

Brenda wanted death, but not because of pain. She was not seeking release. She was merely at peace.

Nora did not understand how anyone could be at peace with dying. Her parents taught her to always fight for life and never give up. She wondered how Brenda could see life so differently. It would be difficult to take care of someone who did not want to get better, but she would try.

The women from the cornfield came to visit Brenda on the night of the next full moon. They stood around her bed in a circle. This time they kept on all their clothes.

“We miss you,” Jessica said.

“I wish I could be back on the farm with you,” Brenda replied, weakly. “But... I’m here. That’s the way life is.” She smiled at the irony of what she said. Brenda was there to die, not to go on living. They tried to smile back but found it difficult. “So, how’s my herb garden? Have you sold anything yet?”

“Yes. We found regular buyers for a few of the larger crops. They say the quality is the highest they’ve seen from any supplier.”

“Well, of course it is! We’re the *best*, right?” Brenda wanted to make this as easy as possible for them. She knew she was in a different place than they were. They were prisoners in the here and now. She had already crossed over into eternity. That was okay. This was where they belonged. Eternity was where she belonged.

She asked about the menfolk, as she jokingly referred to them. They told her the menfolk would come to visit soon. She knew that would be difficult for them. Women understood cycles and

changes. Men did not. Except for the rare ones, like Luis. This was why she had loved him, and still did. Linear time did not obsess him. He was not always moving forward and never looking back. Luis understood the only way to move forward was to look back. Yesterday was tomorrow. She and Luis both knew this. The others did not. She would not try to explain it to them.

“Brenda?” It was the first male voice, except for her doctors, that she heard since she came to the hospital. She thought she recognized it.

“Luis?” she said, faintly.

“Si. It’s me.”

“Oh, Luis, why did you come? I didn’t want you to see me this way!”

“I thought you would be glad to see me!” he said, forcing a smile.

“But, I’m sick, Luis.”

“I know. I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner. Will you forgive me?” he pleaded. She did not answer. “It’s just that I couldn’t handle this, at first. It took me a while.”

“Don’t be angry with me,” she pleaded. He waved her off.

“Why would I be angry?”

“For not telling you.”

“I know why you didn’t tell me. You didn’t want me feeling sorry for you.”

“Well, yeah, that, too.” Brenda smiled at him. He looked puzzled. “I thought you might not want to fuck me anymore if you knew.” He immediately got a faraway look in his eyes and she knew he was remembering all the times they made love. So was she. “I loved you, Luis, and I wanted you, no matter what.”

“I loved you, too. I still do. Do you still love me, or are you finished with me?” he teased.

“If it was up to me, I would *never* be finished with you; you know that, right?” He nodded. They looked at each other.

“*Chica*, can’t we just make this all go away? Can’t we go back to what we were?” She shook her head, feebly.

“We can never go back,” she said. “Never.” He nodded and reached out to take her hand.

“Si. I know. But we can go forward together, can’t we?” he asked.

“Oh, God, would you do that for me?” He smiled and then squeezed her hand. She started to cry. “Luis, I’m so afraid. I didn’t tell you because I thought you would feel obligated to come here and be with me.”

“I’m not here because I feel I owe you anything, Brenda. I’m here because I love you. I want to be here. This is the only place I belong, right now.” He laid his head next to hers on the pillow and they both cried.

“My father came to see you, didn’t he?” Dolores asked. Brenda smiled. “I thought so. He’s changed. He’s not quiet and moody now. What did you say to him?”

“I told him I loved him.”

“And what did he say to you?”

“That he loved me.”

“That’s all?”

“What more is there?” Brenda asked.

They were quiet for a few moments.

“Did he ever tell you about my mother?” Dolores asked.

“Tell me what?”

“How she died?” Brenda shook her head weakly and wished Dolores would get to the point. “It wasn’t like this, like it’s happening with you. It was sudden.”

Clementina had her own horse and often went riding in the afternoons. She liked to go up into the rocky hills just beyond the fields. One day the horse came back without her.

Luis feared the worst and called Dolores at work. Rosa was not yet home from school. Everyone went out to search. They found Clementina lying on some rocks along a narrow path she liked to ride. At first, they thought she fell and hit her head, but there was no sign of blood. They determined she fell and crawled to the rock somehow. No one could figure out why she fell.

Dolores told them to carry her mother down to the house. She called for an ambulance to take Clementina to the hospital. Rosa arrived from school as her grandmother rode away. They all went to the hospital.

Clementina was in a coma. She had internal bleeding. Luis stayed with her, holding her hand. She died a day later without waking up. It was the worst two days of his life. After the funeral, he told Robert, his son-in-law, to get rid of that horse.

“I need you to help me go the rest of the way,” Brenda asked Rosa, her voice barely audible. Rosa looked uncomfortable. “Don’t worry. I’m not asking for drugs or anything. But, there’s a ritual I read about. It’s fairly simple. It’s just some words I need you to say. The others can do it, too. I wrote it out. Here, you can read it.”

Brenda handed the pages to Rosa. She must have typed them out long ago and kept them with her, knowing she would need them one day.

Rosa read the text. “I don’t understand. What is this?”

“It’s an old Buddhist practice I read about. I will get closer to the end. Then you will read these words when I cannot and you will help me go the rest of the way.”

“You mean, die?” Rosa asked. Brenda nodded. “You want us to watch you die?”

“If it makes you uncomfortable you don’t have to do it. I would understand.”

“No, no, no. It’s okay, I think. You’re sure this is what you want?”

“Yes, but only if you’re okay with it.”

“I’m okay,” Rosa said. “I’ll talk to the others.”

“I won’t need it yet, but maybe soon. I’m not sure when. I’ve never done this before.” Brenda grinned weakly.

Rosa regarded Brenda as a unique and wonderful woman unlike anyone else she ever met or was likely to meet. She thought that, when Brenda came to the hospital to die, there was no more amazement to be had from her. However, Brenda had astonished Rosa yet again. Rosa now suspected Brenda would continue astonishing everyone even after she was gone.

Brenda was more like a force of nature than a person. She had an elemental power that transcended individuality. Where most people were collections of memories and actions, with no center, Brenda was the Center. For the first time, Rosa felt in awe of Brenda, and she realized what they were about to lose when Brenda died.

Brenda remained in a coma for several days but her breathing was quiet and normal. Then it became a raspy death rattle and the women knew Brenda would die soon. They took turns reading aloud from the script Brenda gave Rosa. They carefully voiced everything on the pages, assuming Brenda could hear the words. The script contained a series of simple exhortations of how to let go.

“These feet are not you. Let them go. These legs are not you. Let them go. This vagina is not you. Let it go. This belly is not you. Let it go. This heart is not you. Let it go.” Each repetition of the reminders was more difficult than the last. When one woman broke down sobbing she stopped reading and another took over. Their emotions drained, they left the room one by one to recover their composure. Finally, Rosa was the only one remaining.

She recited the final step, “This head is not you, let go of it...” Rosa sighed, laid her head on the bed beside Brenda, and fell asleep.

Someone shook her to wake her up. "She's gone," Dolores whispered. Rosa stood up. Her mother put her arms around her, and they both cried. The others came in and stood around the bed. Then Dolores left to call Luis.

"Do you want to say goodbye before they take her away?" Dolores asked. Luis arrived a half-hour later and asked everyone to leave the room. Dolores hesitated. "Will you be okay?" she asked. He nodded. She left quietly.

Luis stared down at Brenda. He wanted to curse God for making the universe such a fucked-up place, but then remembered Brenda had not seen it that way. She saw it as a wonderful, magical, powerful place. She knew her death was coming and lived passionately anyway.

He knew because she had shared all her passion with him. It dawned on him how fortunate he was to have been her lover. He sat on the chair next to her bed, put his head in his hands, and cried. They had to pull him out of the room.

They could not pull her out of his life. He went home and thought about how he would face death when his time came. Had he learned anything about life and death from Brenda? When they met she acted as if he already knew what she knew, only he never figured out what that was, until now.

Brenda's death devastated everyone despite the way she prepared them. Luis, who was closest to her, dealt with it better than the others. They missed her so much they stopped working for a week. Luis reminded them to keep up with their chores. Most of them considered leaving New World Farm. They never discussed it, and no one left. They felt they owed it to Brenda to continue her work.

They began to emerge from the worst of their grief after the funeral. Elyse suggested they change the name to *Brenda's Farm*. They all agreed, felt better, and resumed their chores. From then on, they mentioned Brenda often as they went through their days. There was no chore or task she had not performed. They found themselves recalling her work and telling their recollections to each other. She was sharp in their memories and became part of their daily routines. It was almost as if she never left them.

Luis was alone again but did not feel lonely. He grieved for Brenda, but he was happy. He had shared and lost not just one magnificent love in his life, but two. Women like Clementina and Brenda were rare and he was lucky to have had them both. He doubted other men had such luck and felt sorry for them. Truly, they did not know what they missed.

Strangely enough, he did not miss either woman.

Memories of his life with Clementina started coming back to him. He had repressed them after she died suddenly. He forbade himself from recollecting anything about her in the years after her death.

Clementina had not paid much attention to the farm when she was alive, except for her little herb patch. She did not dislike farming, she merely lacked interest, but loved him for the work he did. She loved that he was happy outside, working the farm, sometimes from sunup to sundown. Clementina did her best to keep him happy in the home she created for him. The outside was his realm, and the inside was hers.

However, Brenda was different. She had come to understand and appreciate the outside and Luis loved sharing it with her. Now, he talked to her as he worked around the farm. He told her about the crops, the tractor, or the animals. He imagined her replies, her smiles, and suggestions. Her company made his work much easier.

Luis joked to himself that he had an inside woman and an outside woman. He hoped that, wherever they were, they now knew and liked each other, and both smiled down on him. He often smiled up at them.

Dolores expected him to grieve but that was not what he did. She wondered if anything was wrong with him. She feared he was getting old, and perhaps 'losing it.' The fear of losing him took hold of her. She didn't mention it to her husband or daughter.

Elyse happened to be in the house when the phone rang in the middle of the afternoon. She cheerfully answered 'hello' and heard a woman crying. "Hello?" Elyse repeated, urgently. "Who is this? Is something wrong?"

"Is Michael there?"

"No. Can I take a message?"

"Oh, God!" Elyse heard the woman tell someone 'he's not there.' "Tell him to call home right away," she said, and then hung up.

Michael and Rosa arrived an hour after the phone call. Michael dialed the phone nervously, wondering if something was wrong, or if his mother was being dramatic to get his attention.

Something *was* seriously wrong. His father Louis had a heart attack at work and was in the hospital. Michael briefly wondered whether his mother was lying, but her crying seemed real. He had never known her to fake tears, or fake any emotion. Often she seemed emotionless.

Michael asked for details but there were few. He wondered if she was withholding information to lure him home. He was certain that was what she wanted, but unsure he wanted to go.

He hung up the phone and told the others about his father. The crisis seemed more severe than it might have if they had not just lost Brenda. Everyone urged him to leave right away. He did not tell them he wondered if it was a lie. Michael never told them much about his parents. He had tried not to think about them.

Rosa loaned him enough money to rent a car. He left before dinner, drove into the night, and arrived late at the hospital. He went to the Emergency Room. His mother and sister sat slumped on worn-out chairs. His mother, Amelia, did not recognize him at first. He realized he had grown a beard since he last saw her. He saw his sister and said her name. She jumped up and hugged him.

Amelia remained in her chair. "You're late!" she said. Michael looked at her, unsure of what she meant.

"Daddy died an hour ago," Laura explained. Michael did not know what to say. He crouched in front of his mother, took her hand, and then held it tight. She burst into tears and reached for him to embrace her. He did.

Michael had become used to grief in the aftermath of Brenda's death, but he felt no grief now. Nevertheless, he could tell his mother and sister needed him. He resolved to stay with them for as long as he could and sort his feelings out later.

"Michael, I thought you hated me," Laura, told him, bitterly. They sat in a corner by themselves while the bustle of mourners milled around at their father's viewing.

"Hated you? Why?"

"Well, after you left, you never tried to call me or write me. It was like you died or like you thought I had died."

"I'm sorry, Laura. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Did you do it to hurt them?"

"You mean when I ran away?" he asked. She nodded. "No. I just had to get away from them. Somebody told me it would hurt them but there was nothing I could do about it."

"I missed you. I thought I'd never see you again."

"I called them so they wouldn't worry."

"Or, was it so they wouldn't look for you?" she asked.

"Were they planning to do that?"

"I think they tried. They asked people to check on you at that newsstand. I went there once and asked that nice man about you."

"Tony?" She nodded. "Yeah, I hurt him too."

"He didn't tell me that. He just said you quit and didn't know where you went."

"I never told him anything before I left. I just ran away."

“Like you did from us...”

“Laura, there was no other way,” Michael insisted, although he thought his sister wouldn’t believe him.

“I guess not.”

“Can you forgive me?”

“If you hadn’t come back now and just left mom and me to deal with this alone, I would never have forgiven you.”

“Well, I’m here now,” *But I’m not sure I belong here*, he thought. Michael returned ‘home,’ but his mother and sister seemed like strangers. They *were* strangers. Rosa, Elyse, Angela, Ray, and all the others at the farm were his real family now and he missed them.

“You belong here!” Laura said as if she read his thoughts. “We *need* you. Now.” She took his hand but avoided looking into his eyes. Laura did not want him to see her tears. They were tears of grief over their father’s sudden death, and tears from the shock of their lives changing from sane, stable, and normal to something new, unknown, and terrifying.

“And, there’s something I need to ask you,” Laura added. Michael did not reply. He tried to seem as open and receptive as he could. He felt he owed that to her.

“Um, what is it, Laura?” he asked, gently. She looked him in the eye and then asked a question he never expected.

“Michael, are you saved?”

Part Three
The Rialto

Chapter 21 - Movie House

Sophia Cohen had finally cleared the clog she struggled with since yesterday. She watched the water gurgle down the drain. It was the high point of her week. The knock on the door startled her. She had not heard footsteps outside the bathroom.

“What do you want?” she barked.

“I saw the sign on the office door that someone was in here working,” Michael replied. “I’m here about the job.”

“Oh, right. Come on in.” A bearded young man walked in. Sophia took a quick look at him and then turned back to her plumbing effort. “Know anything about plumbing?” she asked.

“Um, not much. I know how to turn a faucet and flush a toilet.”

“You’re a regular genius,” she mocked. There was a pause.

“Do you need any help?” Michael asked, feeling inept.

“No. It seems okay now. Let’s head back to my office.” She brushed by him and went down the hall. He followed.

“I’m Sophia,” she said, offering her hand when they reached the office. He shook it. “This dump belongs to me,” she added. Her casual put-down surprised him.

“Dump? The Rialto’s not a dump!”

“No, you’re right. I just call it that. So, you want a job?” He nodded. “What do you know about movies?”

“I like them.”

“Gooooood. Have you ever been here for a show?”

“Yeah, a few times.”

“What’d you think of the movies?”

“They’re different. I never saw subtitles before.”

“Yeah, that’s what you get with the movies I run.” Sophia paused. She hadn’t prepared any interview questions and tried to think of something to ask. “Do you know anything about *foreign* films?” He shook his head. “No favorites, directors, countries?”

“Do I need to... to work here?” he asked. “I wasn’t sure.”

“It’s better if you don’t. I can’t tell you how many people came in here and thought they were experts on foreign films. They wanted to choose my movies and run the place. That’s my job. Yours would be to clean, do set-ups for shows, handle deliveries, run the snack bar, and maybe the box office. Stuff like that.” She paused and looked at him. He waited expectantly for her to continue.

“I pay minimum wage. You can watch all the films you want but on your own time. I only pay when you’re working.”

“Sounds like just what I’m looking for.” Michael felt relieved he had not blown the interview.

“So, why’d you come in? It’s only a part-time job and the hours are weird. You’re not working somewhere else, are you?”

“No. I lived upstate on a commune for a while. I just came back home.”

“Do you live around here?”

“A few blocks away. My dad just died last month. He didn’t leave much for my mom. She got a job and so did my sister but neither pays much. I decided to stay home and help out.”

“Aren’t you the good momma’s boy!”

Michael felt embarrassed. “I guess so.” Sophia liked the way he blushed when she praised him.

“Well you would work odd hours, sometimes every day, depending on the movies and how many people show up. I want you to be available whenever I need you. How’s that sound?”

“Great! That works for me.”

“Okay, come back tonight at six and I’ll show you what to do. Oh, what’s your name?”

“Michael Romanelli.”

“See you at six, Michael.”

The biggest audiences came on Friday nights and the weekends. Michael went to the Rialto at noon and stayed until midnight and he loved it. He saw movies unlike any he imagined existed. Michael was amazed by the number of people who showed up to watch what were, to him, unknown films.

One evening Michael was in the box office selling tickets. “Michael?” a woman’s voice said. He looked up from the cash drawer and saw Agatha Hartford, his first girlfriend. He did not know what to do. Should he smile or be serious? “You work here, now?” she asked, smiling.

“Yeah,” he replied as Agatha handed him her money. “How are you?” he asked as he gave her the change.

“Good.”

“Are you still in college?” he asked.

“Yeah. Community College.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s for commuters. Downtown. My parents couldn’t afford to send me anywhere else. But the teachers are great... and the classes are *hard*.” Michael wondered if she’d deliberately used the word ‘hard’ to remind him of when they had sex. Or, had she forgotten all about her first lover and moved on?

“What’s your major?”

Agatha shrugged. “Business Administration.” She said it as if she felt embarrassed.

“I haven’t seen you here before,” he said.

“I’ve been meaning to come. I’m supposed to meet some friends.” He handed her a ticket and she walked into the lobby.

Michael stayed in the box office through the first film and closed after the second movie started running. He went into the theater and sat in the back. Agatha walked up the aisle on her way to the bathroom, saw him, and smiled. A few minutes later, she slipped into the seat next to him.

“Can I sit with you?” she asked, timidly. “My friends never showed up.”

“Sure.” He could not concentrate on the film because he felt uneasy sitting next to Agatha. When the lights came on, he started speaking.

“Look, about what happened; I was fucked up. I’m really sorry.”

“It was a long time ago, Michael. I got over it.”

“You don’t hate me?”

“Not anymore.”

“Thanks. I’d like to talk but I have to work. Maybe I’ll see you next time you come in?”

“Yeah. Great.”

“Michael!” Betsy said, smiling. “It’s nice to see you again.” Their last conversation was four years earlier when he asked her to help figure out what his dreams meant. Her insights led to a transformation of his life. He was not seeking insight or transformation this time but religious advice. It was not for him, but Laura.

“It’s my sister,” he began.

She looked at him. “You never mentioned having a sister.”

They had never mentioned much of anything about themselves when they were together. He had no idea where she grew up or went to school, who her parents were, or if she had any siblings. None of that seemed important amid the burning passion that consumed them every Saturday afternoon and made them run away together after he got Betsy pregnant. Michael regretted running away after she had the miscarriage and then left him to go back to her husband. The life he found with Rosa, New World Farm, Brenda, and the others erased his regret. Now he had been back

'home' in yet another life long enough that his time at the farm was fading. He prevented the memories of what he lost from overwhelming him and reminded himself to focus on his present life and the reason he had contacted Betsy.

"Laura's three years younger than me. She just finished her first year of high school when I ran away."

"What's her problem?"

"It's something my mother's worried about. My sister's really religious."

"How were you two raised?"

"Catholic."

"So what's the problem?" Betsy asked.

"Well, Laura's left the church. But that's not what my mother's upset about."

"Where did she go?"

"She had friends in a new church that's more, well, fundamentalist, I guess you could say."

"Oh, she's now something like a Jesus Freak?"

"Not quite, but that's what my mother called it!"

"Now she asks if you're saved, or rebukes you about theological stuff that doesn't concern you?" Betsy asked. Michael nodded. "She's harsh, confrontational, and thinks she has to save you from yourself?" He frowned. "There's a lot of them out there. They show up at my church from time to time. They're hard to get rid of."

"Well, we don't want to get *rid* of her," he protested.

"Of course not. She's your sister. But you do want her to stop."

"Yes. I'm not interested. And she's driving my mom crazy."

"I've talked to a few of them," Betsy explained. "They're hard to get to know. But I sense that they become that way for a reason."

"Like what?"

"Some kind of trauma, I think."

"I don't know what could have traumatized her," Michael replied. Betsy gazed at him in disbelief.

"You *don't*? Are you serious?" He looked at her. "Michael, think about it. You abruptly ran away from home. Then you stayed away. Did you have any contact with her after you left?"

"Uh..., no."

"None at all?" she pressed. He nodded. "For several years?" He nodded again. "How do you think she felt about that, Michael? She *is* your baby sister."

Michael felt he might have made a big mistake coming to Betsy for advice. He thought Laura had a religious problem Betsy might help him solve. However, Betsy was older and wiser than he was and knew Laura's problem was Michael.

"Then your father died suddenly. Don't you think both she and your mother might be traumatized?"

He shrugged his shoulders and remained silent for a few seconds.

"I guess so."

"You might try apologizing to Laura," Betsy suggested, "and to your mother as well."

"Why?"

"Michael, they're your family."

"No, they're more like strangers. I have no idea what their lives were like after I left. I only talked to them on the phone and we never talked about ourselves."

Michael still felt like a stranger in their house. He did not know how to talk to them and was not certain he wanted to. He had put them behind him when he ran away and liked the new life he lived without them, the life he had to give up because of them.

Michael's mother and sister sensed he was no longer their Michael. Their house was no longer his real home and he did not want to be there with them. They needed him because they were

in a precarious financial situation. Michael stayed on after the funeral because he felt he owed his mother and sister some help in their time of need but never felt he had come home.

“Maybe you should sit down with your mom. Get her to talk to you,” Betsy advised. “Ask her what she’s been doing for the past several years. Ask Laura, too,”

Michael did not want to find out. He genuinely did not care.

When he called *Brenda’s Farm* to tell everyone he would have to stay with his mother and sister, they were sympathetic but admitted they missed him. He also missed them, especially Rosa, who was the most sympathetic of all. He apologized for not coming back to her. She told him she understood that his family came first. It was what her family raised her to believe. He had hoped Rosa would agree to come to the city to live with him, but she just wished him well.

Michael felt angry with his father for dying and leaving his mother and sister without money. He hated that he had to help them, and, because of them, had lost Rosa. Michael wanted to go back to his ‘real’ family at the farm. He knew they would send him back to his mother and sister if he showed up again. Michael felt trapped in a life he did not want but could not run away from this time.

Agatha liked the movies and came back often. Michael let her in free when he was in the box office. They sat together and watched the films. She stayed around after the movies so they could talk about them.

Sophia caught on that he wasn’t charging Agatha and confronted him one night. He thought she was going to fire him.

“Is she your girlfriend?” Sophia asked.

“She was, but it was a long time ago.”

“So, why are you letting her in free?”

“She doesn’t have much money but she loves the films.”

“Oh, that makes it okay? Do you give her free popcorn and drinks, too?” He frowned and did not answer. “It’s okay. But, just her, right? Nobody else.”

“I wouldn’t think of it.”

“Good. I like your work. You’re a big help to me. I just want to be sure I can trust you.”

“You can. Thanks.”

“She’s really not your girlfriend?” Sophia asked. He shook his head. “She’s very beautiful.”

“I know. She’s a nice person, too.”

“So, is Michael your boyfriend?” Sophia asked. She had noticed Agatha enter the theater earlier and look around for Michael. Sophia told Agatha Michael was off so he and his sister could take their mother out for her birthday. Then Sophia casually invited Agatha to her office.

“No, but he was, a long time ago,” Agatha replied. “We’re just friends, now.”

“Are you dating anyone?”

“Nope. Just hanging out.” Agatha thought it was just girl talk. “How about you?” she asked.

“I’m not with anyone, right now, either.” Sophia paused, unsure she should go on. “Do you mostly date boys?” she asked.

Agatha thought the question was weird. “Well, yeah.”

“How about girls?” Sophia’s question surprised Agatha. No one had ever asked it before. She had never thought of dating girls.

“Um, no... Do you?”

“Yes,” Sophia answered. Agatha did not know what to say. She had never met a woman who dated other women. “You seem surprised.”

“Women dating other women? I didn’t know about this.”

“It happens. You can’t tell who you’re gonna fall in love with.”

“But aren’t women supposed to fall in love with guys, and vice versa?” Agatha asked. She felt curious but guarded as well.

“That’s what most people think but it’s not that way for everyone.”

“You mean you?”

“I’ve had several girlfriends. They were incredible women and I was happy with them.”

“So, what happened?”

“Same as happens with guys. Somebody moves away..., you fall out of love..., or just drift apart.” Agatha recalled the way she and Michael drifted apart. He never told her he was dating Kathleen. She found out by accident. It hurt. A lot.

Neither woman spoke for a few moments.

“So, what’s it like?” Agatha asked, feeling adventurous.

Agatha’s question emboldened Sophia. “The sex, you mean?” Agatha nodded. “It’s different. I can’t describe it. You have to experience it to understand it. But, love is love. That doesn’t change.”

It dawned on Agatha that maybe they were not just having a casual conversation. “Are you hitting on me?” she asked. Sophia looked at her and nodded. “Wow!”

“You’re beautiful and I can’t help myself. I’m attracted to you.”

“Yeah, I see that. But what does that mean?”

Her question baffled Sophia. She remained quiet for a few moments. “Well, we could get to know each other,” she suggested and then struggled to think of what else to add. “Would you like to have dinner with me? I take a break after the show starts and eat here in my office every night.”

“Wait, is this why you’ve been letting me in for free?”

“No. Michael’s been doing that because you’re his friend.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes, please. You won’t regret it. I promise.”

Agatha felt reckless. “You’re sure about that?” she asked. She had always been a ‘good’ girl, respectful, careful, cautious, and timid. A new world suddenly opened before her and she wanted to explore it.

“Absolutely. Do you think you know what it’s like to be a woman? You don’t know anything. Men don’t know anything about women.” Sophia thought she already said too much but went on anyway. “I can show you stuff.”

“Show me *what*?”

“How beautiful you are. How you make me feel. How I can make you feel. It’s a whole different world.”

“Do you want to start now?” Agatha asked.

“Now?”

“I thought you might want to kiss me.”

“Oh, I do.”

“Then what’s stopping you?” This was a test. Sophia’s talk excited Agatha. However, she was not someone who found talk persuasive. She wanted to know what feelings Sophia offered. Agatha needed a sample. A kiss would do.

Sophia got up from her chair and walked over to Agatha. She turned her head upward so Sophia could kiss her on the lips. When they touched, Sophia’s powerful lust, passion, and need overwhelmed Agatha. She felt wanted in a way she never felt before.

Agatha looked at Sophia differently after the kiss. Sophia was much older, but that and all the other details of their lives vanished. They were no longer two separate women. They became yoked in burning passion.

“You didn’t talk to them, did you?” Betsy reproached Michael when they met again. He shook his head. “I didn’t think you would,” she added. Her comment surprised him.

“Why not?”

“You didn’t seem interested in what I told you.” He shrugged. “So, how have things been at home since I saw you last month?”

“Okay, mostly.”

“How is your sister?”

“I don’t see her much because of my job. She and my mom work in the daytime, and I work mostly at night and on the weekends.”

“So, you’ve been able to avoid them?” Betsy nodded. Avoidance seemed what Michael was good at.

“Mostly, yes.”

“How are they getting along?”

“My sister is at church all day Sunday, and on Wednesday evenings..., and sometimes on Saturdays.”

“What about your mom?”

“I’ve heard her crying at night. I think she misses my father.”

“Don’t you?”

“Well, no. I mean, how could I? I wasn’t there for the last six years of his life.”

“Then maybe your mom misses the time when you *were* there and when you were all a family.”

“Maybe.” They sat in silence for a moment. Michael decided to change the subject. “What about you?” he asked. “How’s Colin?”

“I don’t know. We broke up a long time ago.” Her reply shocked Michael.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Betsy. When did it happen?”

“Not long after you came to me about the dreams.”

“So, it was my fault? I seem to be responsible for ruining many people’s lives. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. It wasn’t because of you. It was because of him.”

“What do you mean?”

Betsy had not told Colin that Michael came to her for advice and counseling. When he discovered they saw each other, Colin assumed Betsy and Michael were trying to get back together. He accused Betsy of being ungrateful for all he did after her betrayal and miscarriage. Colin reminded her he had performed a generous action and rebuked her for not appreciating his great sacrifice and compassion.

Betsy understood Colin took her back not because he loved her but because he wanted to impress God with what a magnanimous person he was. She realized their relationship had been a lie from the beginning.

Colin did not know how to love anyone but himself. He had always been obsessed with God and would never be obsessed with anyone or anything else, especially not her. (Probably not any woman, she believed, feeling sorry for him.) She did not understand this before Michael came along. Now, thanks to him, she knew what love felt like. She knew it was not going to come from Colin, so she left him.

Michael wondered if she was telling her story because she thought the two of them could get back together. “Um, I don’t think I truly loved you, Betsy.”

“But, I felt you did. That was all that was important to me. When we were together, it was just you and me. You didn’t need God there, and neither did I. We just needed each other. That was what was different from when I was with Colin. He did everything to impress God...”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Did you ever think about our child?” Betsy asked.

“I have. A few times..., but not recently.”

“Did you think about me or miss me?”

“Yes. It was hard after you left. Ray took care of me.”

“I told you he was a good guy.”

“I don’t know what I would have done without him. It hit me hard- both losing you and the baby.”

“You would have made a great father.”

“I’m not so sure. My dad wasn’t much of a role model. He wasn’t great, but he wasn’t really bad, either. Anyway, I wasn’t old enough to be a dad but you were old enough to be a mom. That’s how I see it.”

“So, it was a good thing that I lost the baby?”

“No, of course not. How could you say that? It happened and there’s nothing we could have done about it. At least you survived.”

“Yeah. I’m still amazed by how close I came to dying.”

“Sit, girl!” Bella commanded, “You and I need to talk!”

“What is it, Mom?” Agatha asked.

“Mrs. Robinson came to see me yesterday.”

Agatha feigned ignorance. “Oh, yeah? What about?” She knew what it was about.

“You!” Bella said, glaring at Agatha.

“She doesn’t even know me!”

“She knows *me!*” Bella snapped and then stared at Agatha. “And she told me she saw you.”

“Saw me? Where?”

“In Woolworth’s!”

“Yeah. I go there sometimes.”

“She saw you with somebody else.”

“Yeah. A friend. We go shopping.” Agatha was deliberately vague.

“Boyfriend?” Bella barked. Agatha shook her head. “Girlfriend?” Agatha hesitated. That was enough to confirm her mother’s suspicions. Agatha realized she just made a huge mistake.

“Girlfriend!”

“Sophia. She runs the Rialto. We hang out sometimes.”

“Do you hold hands, sometimes?” Agatha was silent. “Do you kiss sometimes?”

“Well, we’re friends.”

“On the lips? Like girls kiss boys?” Agatha did not answer. “Mrs. Robinson saw you! It would be bad enough if you kissed a boy like that in public. That what whores do. But, a woman? Have you no shame?”

Agatha stopped feigning innocence and felt angry. She knew what her mother was trying to say and felt she should defend herself and Sophia against Bella’s prejudices. Bella cut her off before she could speak.

“Are you *with* that woman? Are you dating her?” Bella shouted. She didn’t give Agatha time for a reply. “Are you a lesbian?” Bella shouted. Her intensity overwhelmed Agatha. Bella took her silence as an admission of guilt. “How could you do that to us? Don’t you care about your family?”

“It has nothing to do with our family.”

“Nothing!?! Every time I walk down the street our neighbors probably whisper, ‘her daughter is a lesbian.’ How do you think that makes me feel?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ashamed!” Bella was ready to cry. She looked at Agatha, hoping for sympathetic recognition of her humiliation and disgust.

“What I do is none of their business,” Agatha blurted out. On impulse, she added, “They can all just go fu-,”

Bella slapped Agatha. “Get out of this house!” she screamed. “Get out, now!”

“She threw you out?” Sophia asked. Agatha nodded. “I’m sorry. It’s my fault. Where will you go?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been asking around..., and it’s not your fault.”

“You could stay here at the Rialto for a while.”

“Here? Where?”

“There’s another small office and a private bathroom that has a shower. I have a couch you can sleep on. It could be okay until you find someplace more permanent.”

“Well, I don’t know. I was hoping...”

“To live with me?” Sophia prompted. Agatha nodded. “You’re sure?”

“Don’t you want me to?”

“Yes, I do, very much. But, I wanted you to have a choice. That’s why I offered to let you sleep here.”

“I’d rather sleep with you. Don’t you want that, too?”

“Yes, but only if it’s your choice. I don’t want you to come live with me because you have nowhere else to go. I don’t want you to have chosen me out of desperation.”

“I’m not desperate, Sophia. I love you.” Sophia had yearned to hear those words since their first passionate kiss.

Chapter 22 - Screen Test

“You could make a lot more money,” Donnie insisted.

“Maybe, but I’d have a lot more trouble,” Sophia protested.

“Why? Movies are movies.”

“My movies are not the same as your movies, Donnie.” She tried to inflect a scornful tone in her voice.

“Sure they are. Who cares, anyway?”

“The neighbors.”

“What neighbors? You’re in a business district.”

“Yeah, and I have business neighbors. How do you think they’re gonna feel about a sex cinema near their stores?”

“You can keep it subtle.”

Sophia frowned. Despite knowing him for several years, she never thought much of Donnie or his movies. They weren’t friends but because they were both in the film business they compared experiences occasionally. “I’ve seen the marquees at sex cinemas. The movie titles are not subtle. This is a family-friendly business district, not a sleaze strip.”

“Well, it’s a shame. You could make tons of money. And we don’t call them sex cinemas. They’re art theaters and they’re getting popular. It’s all legal now. The law can’t touch you.”

“I don’t need to worry about the law, Donnie. My theater is popular enough. My patrons are loyal. They like the movies I show.” A knock on the door interrupted their argument. “Come in,” Sophia said.

Agatha entered. She noticed Donnie. He was a short, skinny, balding guy wearing a cheap yellowish suit and no tie. Agatha wondered who he was. He didn’t look like the kind of person Sophia would know. “Sorry. I didn’t know you were in a meeting,” she said.

“It’s okay. This is my friend Donnie. He knows a lot about the movie business.” Sophia paused. “And he also makes movies, sometimes. Don’t you Donnie?”

“Oh, really?” Agatha asked. “You *make* them?”

Donnie was smitten. He nodded. “I’ve only done a few short ones,” he replied. Sophia noticed him almost devouring Agatha with his eyeballs. If they had been penises, Donnie would be sporting huge erections. As it was, Agatha hadn’t noticed.

“That’s cool,” she said. She handed Sophia the mail. “Some of this looks important,” she said.

“Thanks. I’ll look at it right away.” Agatha turned and left.

“Sweet kid. Does she work for you?”

“She helps out around here.”

“Well, I gotta go. Think about what I said. You could be rich in a few years, maybe sell this place and buy a *real* movie house.”

“Donnie, this is a real movie house.”

“Sure it is,” Donnie’s sarcasm stung Sophia but she tried not to react. Donnie was only in the movie business for the money. Porn brought in quick profits but needed new sleaze to bring audiences back week after week. Sophia didn’t offer sleaze. She offered art, and her audiences appreciated what she did.

Donnie left the office, went down the narrow stairway, and noticed Agatha behind the snack counter. “Excuse me,” he said walking up to her. “I was wondering if you’ve ever thought about acting in a movie.”

His question shocked her.

“Uh, no. Why?”

“I think you might look great on the big screen.”

“Me? Really?” She wondered if Donnie was about to make a pass at her. “I’ve never done any acting.”

“It might surprise you how many people in the movies had never thought of being actors or actresses before they started,” Donnie replied. He was trying to impress her. She smiled at his air of self-importance. “It’s not about what you can do, but what you look like. If people want to see you, it doesn’t make any difference whether you can act or not. All you need to do is look good. And the camera can make that happen.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.” Agatha was not interested in him or acting but could not figure out how to turn him down.

“It’s true. Would you like to do a screen test for me?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s simple. I shoot some film of you and we project it on the big screen and see if you light it up.” Donnie tried to coax her.

“Light it up?”

“Well, what I mean is, when you’re up there on the screen, do you look good? Will people look at you, or not?”

“What do you think?” Agatha tilted her head and looked sweetly at him. “Are they gonna want to look at me?” She felt certain Donnie wanted to look at her.

“Oh, yes. I can guarantee it.” He tried not to seem lewd and then paused to see if he had convinced her.

“When?” Agatha asked.

“Here’s my card. I’ll set something up. Call me in a couple of days. You won’t regret it.”

“So, are you nervous?” Donnie asked.

“A little,” Agatha answered. She tried not to frown.

“It’s better if you just relax. You have to be natural in front of the camera.”

“How am I supposed to relax?” She already felt awkward, and he hadn’t turned on the lights or camera.

“Do you like wine?” He offered a glass. “Sip a little.”

“Okay, but just a bit.” Agatha took a sip. “I don’t want to get drunk.”

“Definitely not!” Donnie assured her. “That would ruin everything.” He smiled. The opposite was true. The wine would help loosen her up so he could get what he wanted from her. “But I think you’re gonna do great.”

Ralph, the cameraman, set up a couple of lights. When they were ready, Donnie said, “I’m going to turn on a light. It’s bright, so shield your eyes.” She covered her eyes and he flipped the switch.

“Whoa! That’s awfully bright.”

“There’s one more,” Donnie said. She waited. “Okay, you can take your hand away from your eyes, now. Let’s see if you can adjust. Have another sip of wine.” She looked away from the lights and sipped the wine. “How is it?”

“It’s not so bad. I think I’m used to the lights already.” Agatha flashed them a warm smile. Donnie couldn’t wait to exploit her innocence.

“Great! Start the camera.” Ralph flipped a switch. Agatha heard soft whirring. A few seconds later, Donnie asked her to sip more wine, look at the camera, and smile. “Don’t think about it, just do it,” he directed her, calmly.

She held the glass in front of her face, gently swirled the wine, smiled, parted her lips over the edge of the glass, and sensuously took a sip. Donnie told her to turn her head slowly. The camera whirred as she moved. Donnie liked what he saw and asked her to repeat the movements in the opposite direction. The second shot was even better than the first. It was obvious she knew how to look erotic.

"Okay, we've got some great headshots. We're gonna pull the camera back and get a medium close-up." Ralph zoomed out so her torso and head filled the frame.

"Now I want you to repeat what you just did; smile, sip, and turn. Do it slow and easy. Just relax. The camera can pick up nervousness. You don't seem nervous, though; you're doing great. This is looking good, so far." She repeated the sequence of motions.

"Great. Now we're gonna try more movement. Audiences don't just want to see someone with a pretty face, although that helps. They want to see graceful actresses." Donnie paused to anticipate what he would see next. He summoned his best movie-director voice and told her what to do. "We need to get a sense of how you move. Take your top off. Do it slow..., really slow. Don't think about your movements, just be natural."

Agatha knew they wanted to do more than see how she moved. They wanted her to undress and give them a show. She lifted her t-shirt over her head as provocatively as she could. Her belly and breasts came into view as the cloth hid her face.

Donnie and Ralph grinned at each other. Agatha finished removing her shirt and tossed it toward the camera suggestively. She noticed the surprised looks on the men's faces.

"How am I doing?" Agatha asked and then sipped more wine. She felt comfortable sitting in her bra and teasing them.

"Um, that's very good," Donnie praised. "Thanks for anticipating where we're going. You sure you haven't done a screen test, before?" She shook her head coquettishly.

Agatha was doing well because Sophia warned her about the movies Donnie made. Even though Agatha knew she would never have sex in front of a camera, she wanted to experience the screen test and find out what Donnie and his dirty movies were all about.

"What's next?" she asked.

"More movement. This time it will be a full-body shot." Ralph moved the camera back until her entire body, from head to toe, was in the frame.

"Okay, listen carefully. I need you to stand up, and then slowly turn all the way around." She did as he asked. "You have a lovely figure, but we can't see it with those baggy shorts."

"Should I take them off?" she purred.

"Well, yes, that would help." Agatha inserted her fingers in the waistband of her shorts and slowly pulled them down. The two men almost gasped. Donnie asked her to turn toward the camera, slowly and deliberately, so he could film her in bra and panties. She was almost ready.

"Those lights are getting to me. Are we almost done?" she asked.

"Sit back down and have another sip of wine if you want to."

"No. I think the wine's made me dizzy." Agatha swooned and fell back into the chair. Her head lolled back and she closed her eyes. The men gazed at her. She did not move.

"She's passed out?" Ralph whispered.

Donnie checked her. "Yeah. She's ready. Tyrone!" he said. The door opened and a tall, muscular black man strode into the room. He had a towel wrapped around his waist and nothing else on. "You're up," Donnie said.

Tyrone looked down at Agatha and noticed that she was unconscious. He noticed her breasts peacefully rising and falling as she breathed. "You sure?" he asked.

"We haven't got all night, Tyrone," Donnie whispered. "Get busy." Ralph watched through the camera viewfinder. Tyrone hesitated.

"Man, she's out of it."

"So? You forgot what to do?"

"No, I didn't *forget*, man. But I don't fuck unconscious women."

"So what?" Donnie replied. "She'll *never* know. Just do it, and make it look good."

Tyrone stared at Donnie so he would be sure Donnie heard what he was about to say.

"No."

"What? I'm paying you! Plus, this equipment costs plenty to rent. Get on her, man."

“No. I don’t do rape. I’m not going to jail.” Tyrone said. He backed away from Agatha.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Police see this, I’m in jail and so are you. No way.” Donnie thought about it. Ralph looked nervous.

“Maybe you’re right,” Donnie relented. “So, what do we do now?” he asked.

“You guys pack up and leave,” Tyrone said. “I’ll see that she gets home. We’ll try this again another time.” Donnie nodded to Ralph. He took down the camera, tripod, and lights; then they left. Tyrone and Agatha were alone.

The room was dim. Agatha opened one eye. Tyrone noticed her. “Are they gone?” she asked.

“Yeah. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” he said. She believed him.

“This is how you guys do it?” she asked. He looked at her, puzzled by her question.

“Do what?” he asked.

“Get women for your dirty movies?”

“This is one of the ways, yes, but the women usually don’t pass out. They just get drunk.” Tyrone did not seem embarrassed by his admission.

“So, I’m lucky, then?”

“What do you mean?”

“That I passed out.” Tyrone did not answer. She felt sorry for him. “Are you disappointed? Now you won’t get paid.”

“I don’t care. There will be other scenes.”

“Do you only do it for the money?” Agatha asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you ever do it for the women?”

“Yes, sometimes, if I like them,” Tyrone replied.

“Do you like *me*?”

“You’re exquisitely lovely.”

“Do I turn you on?” Agatha asked. She already knew what he would say.

“Can’t you tell?” She glanced down at the bulge in the towel. Her eyes widened. “So why don’t you do what you came here to do?”

“God, I’d love to. Can I have some of that wine first?”

“Sure..., if you drink it from my mouth,” she teased.

“I think I’m in love.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“I’m not. How about I show you?”

“I can’t wait.” Agatha did not have to wait. He dropped his towel, peeled off her panties, gently pushed her on her back, and eased his large cock inside her. Agatha gasped, smiled, moaned, and thought she might also be in love.

Chapter 23 - Camera Girl

Michael was on the high ladder changing the movie title on the Rialto marquee. He rummaged in the box of letters and glimpsed some movement out of the corner of his eye. A short, stocky, dark-haired girl on the sidewalk pointed a small movie camera at him.

What the fuck? he thought.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Filming. What does it look like?”

“Filming *me*?”

“Yes..., well, no. Not all of you. Just your hands and the letters. I like the way they move around.”

“Oh.” He did not know what else to say and continued replacing the letters in the movie title.

The girl took the camera away from her eye. Michael looked at her again. Her penetrating eyes and wide smile struck him.

“What’s the new movie?” she asked.

“*Bitter Rice*,” he answered, bitterly.

“Never heard of it.”

“Me neither.”

“What’s it about?” she asked. Michael felt annoyed she was interrupting his work.

“Figure it out,” he said. She did not reply. He turned, looked at her, and decided to be sarcastic. “Rice. The bitter kind,” he said, grinning.

“Oh, that *nasty* kind of rice. Got it!” She continued filming as he rearranged letters; then he finished and climbed down the ladder. She looked up at the marquee to check his work.

“Looks good,” she said. He turned to look at her and stared. She was strikingly attractive.

“Hi, I’m Babette,” she said.

“Michael. What’s your movie about?”

“You, actually. Well, your hands and those shiny black letters.”

“That’s it? Doesn’t sound very interesting.”

“Oh, I *made* it interesting, Michael,” Babette boasted. Michael carried the ladder inside the theater, and then came back for the box of letters. “So, what time’s the show?” she asked.

“Starts at seven. We open at six.”

“Maybe I’ll come back for some of that rice. I want to see how bitter it is,” Babette said, grinning. He smiled, then went inside and locked the doors so she could not follow him.

“Hello again,” Babette said. Michael stood behind the snack counter looking in the cash drawer. He looked up but did not recognize her. It had been several weeks since they met outside.

“Oh, the lady with the camera. Hi,” he said when he recalled who she was.

“Lady?” she replied, feigning annoyance.

“Well, girl, then,” he corrected himself.

“That’s better.” Michael did not care which word she preferred. He turned to check something behind the snack bar. She was still there when he turned back. “I got my film back,” she said.

“What film?”

“The stuff I shot of you doing the marquee.”

“Oh, right. Real action stuff.”

“Thanks,” she replied, hurt.

“Sorry. I can’t imagine how that footage could be interesting.”

“You wanna see it? You can decide whether it’s interesting or not.”

“Maybe. When are you showing it?”

“Anytime. I have my own projector. You can come over and watch it.”

“Maybe.”

“Your enthusiasm overwhelms me,” she pouted but Michael didn’t get the sense that she felt offended.

“Sorry. I’m just busy here. I’m about to close up so I can watch the movie. Where are you sitting?”

“Wherever you are.”

“Okay. Back row. Ten minutes.” She smiled, nodded, and walked away.

“So, you wanna make movies?” he asked after they sat down together. She nodded. “Like these?”

“I don’t know. Like *something*. I’m still learning.”

“I guess you can’t do much with just your little camera.”

“That’s true, but it’s a start. Gotta master the basics, you know?”

“Do you do a lot of filming?”

“As much as I can afford. I buy the film, but I get the processing for free.” Her uncle worked at a big processing lab and snuck her film through the machinery when work was slow.

“You ever do anything with actors?”

“Why? Are you an actor?” she asked, eagerly.

“No. A writer. Or, that’s what I wanna be.”

“Oh? Written anything?”

“A few stories. Not very good ones.”

“You don’t sound enthusiastic.”

“It’s hard, you must know that.”

“Maybe you just need some inspiration.”

“Maybe. You know where I can get some?”

“Right here. These films are inspiring, don’t you think? I mean, where else can you see movies like these?”

“I like some of them. There’s that one with the knight who plays chess with Death; and that other one where the kids see the vision of Mary; and that one where all the different people testify about a murder. But, I don’t understand a lot of the stuff.”

“That’s okay. I think it’s enough just to be exposed to it.”

“So, do you ever get any ideas?”

“Lots. But they all cost money. I have film, but that’s all I have, you know?” He heard the frustration in her voice.

“You need talent, too,” he said.

She glared at him. “Got that, too,” she replied, indignantly. “Would you like to see my stuff?”

“Yeah, I would.”

Babette had already set up the projector when he arrived at her apartment. He noticed a pile of small film cans on the floor. *I’m either going to be entertained tonight or bored out of my mind*, he thought.

“This is my first one. It’s not very good but I want you to see it anyway, just so you can compare it to the films I made later on.”

“Okay.”

Babette flipped on the projector and images of lines danced across the bedsheet screen. It took him a few moments to figure out the lines were electric wires. She seemed fascinated by how they sagged as they stretched from pole to pole. She panned, zoomed, and almost made them move. He got the feeling she was trying to suggest wires coming from a place and going somewhere else as if the viewer was in the middle of a mystery.

Near the end, there was a lone bird perched on a wire, then several birds, then a small flock. It looked as if she had changed her message. She was now suggesting the wires existed solely for the benefit of birds, and not for humans. He smiled.

“You like that one?” Babette asked when she switched off the projector. Michael nodded.

“I like the way you took something static and made it move. I think I’ll look at wires differently, now.”

“Really? Wow! Thanks.” He could not tell if she was being sarcastic. What was he supposed to say? Her film was very subjective. It could be anything she said it was. He assumed she would tell him more about what she meant it to say but she did not. She rewound the film and loaded another reel.

This one was about waves. Where the first film took something still and made it move, this one took something that moved and gave it a feeling of stillness. Babette somehow captured the essence of the waves. It was as if, in seeing just one wave, you were seeing all the waves that ever existed. *The eternal wave*, Michael thought. He could not figure out how she did it.

“Wow,” he said, impressed.

“Yeah, that one came out good. It’s one of my favorites.”

The next film featured kids at a playground. Babette evoked childhood joyfulness by focusing on individual children on the swings, sliding board, jungle gym, and merry-go-round. She made each kid seem an archetype of childhood. The film was a celebration of youth. Michael was captivated.

She flipped off the projector and waited for him to speak. He did not say anything. “Did you like that one?” she asked, gently.

“I liked them all,” he replied. “They’re beautiful.” Babette got up, came over to his chair, and put her arms around him.

“Thanks,” she said. She was starting to fill up with tears.

“Are you crying?” he asked. “Did I say something wrong?” She shook her head.

“You’re the first person I’ve shown them to.”

“Really? Why?”

“I’ve never had the guts to show them to people. They’re not very good.”

“Define ‘very good,’” he challenged her without thinking. She leaned down and kissed him.

“Was *that* very good?” she asked.

“That was great.” Babette kissed him again. “How long have you been making movies?” he asked.

“I’ve been fooling around with cameras since I was in elementary school, but I just got this new one and I’m shooting as much as I can.”

“I love your work.” Michael meant it. Babette believed him. She took off her t-shirt and kissed him again. He interrupted her. “Don’t you want to show me any more of your movies?” he asked. “I haven’t seen the one with me in it.”

“Later,” she said. “There’s something else I want to show you.” She sat on his lap and felt his erection through his pants.

“You’re sure about this?” he asked. She looked at him.

“Why do you ask?”

“I really did come to watch your movies, and not so we could have sex. I want you to know that,” he confessed.

Babette started to cry. “So, you *did* like them?” He nodded. “But, you like me, too?” He nodded again. She unzipped his fly, gently took hold of his erection, and lowered herself onto it. They both groaned. He began fucking her.

“I like you, too, Michael,” she said, and then moaned again. After they finished, she got up and went to get a towel. He cleaned himself up.

“I didn’t expect this,” he said.

“Are you feeling guilty?” she asked. “You got a girlfriend?”

“Oh, no.”

“You want one?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think I do.” Then he paused. “Know anybody?” he teased. Babette smacked him playfully on the head and then kissed him hard.

Michael unlocked the door, opened it slowly so the hinges would not squeak, and tiptoed into the foyer. It was well past midnight. He stayed later than usual at the Rialto because of the large audience that showed up for the first night of the Ingmar Bergman Film Festival.

After removing his jacket, he hung it on a hook by the stairs and started toward the kitchen. He thought he heard someone sobbing in the dark living room and paused to listen.

“Hello?” No one answered. “Mom?” he said. The sobbing stopped.

“No, it’s me,” his sister Laura whispered. Michael went into the darkened room.

“Laura, what’s wrong? Did something happen to mom?”

“Shhh! She’s upstairs, asleep.”

“What’s going on?” he asked. She did not answer. “Talk to me,” he persisted.

“I’m... a... bad person,” Laura answered. He did not know his sister well but felt certain she could never be a bad person.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“I betrayed Jesus,” she replied. *Oh, it’s just some of her religious shit*, he thought, *nothing important*. Michael was about to turn and leave the room when she began crying again. He went to the sofa and sat next to her. She immediately turned and buried her head against his chest.

He stroked her head. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not, Michael. I’m going to Hell!” her vehemence shocked him. He continued stroking her head and asked what was wrong.

“I’m a bad girl.”

“No, you’re not. That’s impossible. I know you and you can’t be bad.”

“But I am,” Laura insisted. “Like I said, I’ve betrayed Jesus.”

“How?”

“I don’t love Him with my mind, my heart, and my soul.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“It’s true. He’s supposed to be first in my life. He was, but he’s not anymore.”

Michael wanted to keep her talking but was unsure of the next question he should ask. Was this a religious crisis or a personal one? He had little experience with either. If it was a religious crisis, he might accidentally ask a question that would anger her. He quickly tried to frame a general, innocuous question that might keep her talking.

“So, is it someone else, now?” he asked. She looked up and nodded. Then she realized she clutched hard at his chest, felt embarrassed, let go of him, sat up, and remained silent. He sensed her hesitation. “It’s okay. You can talk to me. I’m here for you.” It dawned on Laura that, for the first time in years, her brother was indeed there for her. She felt perplexed.

“I don’t know how to explain it,” she began.

“Take your time. I’m not going anywhere.” His words struck her hard. Several years ago he ran away and left her feeling abandoned. He came back but she still felt alone, until now.

“There’s this new guy at the church... He’s talked to me a few times..., he’s nice.” Michael knew immediately what she was trying to tell him.

“He likes you,” he said, gently. She nodded but did not say anything. Michael felt he should help her along. “And you like him?” She nodded and burst into tears.

“Yes! And, now I’ve betrayed Jesus.”

“Look, Laura, I don’t know much about Jesus but I can’t imagine that he would be mad at you for liking a boy. I would think he would be happy for you.”

“That’s not what Jack says.”

“Who’s Jack?”

“My minister.”

“You talked to him about this?”

“Oh, God, no! I could never talk to him about *this*. He teaches us that Jesus must first. There can never be anyone but Jesus in our hearts.”

“I think he’s wrong.”

“But what if he’s not? What if I’m the wrong one?”

“Maybe you could talk to someone else about this.”

“Who?”

“I have a friend who’s a minister. She understands all this stuff. I’m sorry, but I don’t. I’m sure she would talk to you.”

“You know a minister?” she asked, astonished. He nodded. “And she’s a woman?”

“Yes, she’s an old friend I met when I used to work downtown. I’ve talked to her about my problems a few times and she’s helped me.”

“I didn’t know you were religious.”

“They weren’t religious problems. But, she’s wise and I admire her for her faith. I think you would like her and she might be able to help you.”

“You’ve already helped me. Thanks. I would like to talk to her if you think she would see me.”

“I’ll call her. Are you better, now? Do you want to talk some more?”

“No, thanks. I’m really tired. Tomorrow’s a workday. I think I’m gonna get some sleep.”

Laura stood up, turned, leaned down, and kissed him on the cheek. “Thanks, big brother. I’m glad you came back.”

It was Michael’s turn to cry but he waited until after Laura left the room.

“You’re gonna film a *what*?” Michael asked as they rushed along the sidewalk.

“An anti-war protest,” Babette answered.

“You do protests, now?”

“I’ve been shooting them for several years. I’m hoping to make a documentary when this war is over.”

“We’ll both be old, if and when that happens,” he replied, cynically.

“Hopefully not.”

She thought the protest was in small Vernon park in the heart of the business district but it was empty. They waited a few moments and then someone else walked up.

“Excuse me, is this where the march is supposed to end?” he asked.

“It’s a march?” Babette asked. “I didn’t know. I thought it was just a rally.”

“Yeah, it’s supposed to get here, eventually.” Just then, they heard distant drumming and looked down the street. A crowd carrying banners was a couple of blocks away.

“I guess that’s them,” Michael said. Babette raised the camera to her eye and looked through the viewfinder.

“Shit, I’m too far away. Stay here. I’m gonna get closer and walk with them.” She handed him her camera bag and walked toward the marchers. He shrugged and watched the group approach.

Michael noticed there were cops with the marchers when they were only a half-block away. “Shit,” he said under his breath, “this was not a good idea. Maybe I shouldn’t be here.”

The marchers arrived at the park a few minutes later. Babette walked just ahead of them, filming. Michael stayed on the fringe of the crowd. She came over to him.

“Isn’t it great?” she said. “You wanna get closer? We won’t be able to hear anything from here.”

“No. There’s cops.”

“There always are.”

“What if they start something? I don’t wanna get arrested.”

“You probably won’t. Why do you care?”

“I’m not registered for the draft.”

“What? You’re a draft resister?” she asked, surprised and impressed.

“No, just a draft dodger,” he whispered, afraid someone might overhear him. “I lived away from home for many years so I never got caught.”

“You can go if you want to but I need to be here,” she said.

“I’ll stay. But if something happens, I’m gonna leave.”

“Okay.” Babette hurried toward the center of the crowd so she could continue filming.

Michael stood and watched. He heard someone say his name, looked around, and spotted Agatha with a man he did not recognize.

“Hi,” Michael said. “I haven’t seen you at the theater.”

Agatha smiled as if she was happy to see him. “Yeah. I stopped going.”

“Seen all the foreign films you wanna see?” he joked. He knew she stopped going because she and Sophia broke up.

“Yeah. Something like that. By the way, this is Tyrone.” Michael and Tyrone shook hands.

“You come to these things often?” Tyrone asked.

“No. First time. My girlfriend’s making a movie.”

“Is that her with the camera over there?” Agatha asked.

“Yeah. She makes films. Not just events like this. All kinds of stuff.”

“She ever get paid?” Tyrone asked.

“Not that I know of. But she’s serious about it.” Tyrone wandered toward the crowd. Michael stood back and watched the demonstration. More people arrived. He watched the cops for signs they were about to cause trouble but they hung back and did not interfere.

Michael noticed Tyrone had wandered over to where Babette was filming. Agatha was still beside him. “Is she your girlfriend?” she asked. Her question startled him. He should not have felt embarrassed but he did.

“Yeah. Is Tyrone your boyfriend?”

“Several months now. You know I left Sophia, right?”

“I heard.”

“How’s she doing?”

“She doesn’t talk much. The theater’s doing great. I think she’s finally making a profit.”

“But she doesn’t talk about me?” Agatha asked. She didn’t know what else to say.

“Not to me, or anyone else, as far as I know.” Michael paused. He didn’t know if he should ask anything more but Agatha seemed open to a conversation. “What happened?” he asked.

“I met Tyrone. That’s what happened.”

“That’s it?”

Agatha nodded. “Yeah.”

“But, you seemed to be in love with Sophia.”

“I was. And I was happy. She’s a neat woman. But my parents gave me all kinds of shit.”

Michael recalled Agatha’s parents. They always welcomed him into their house. He had always wondered if they knew what he and Agatha were doing at Claire’s apartment. If they did, they never showed any concern. “Your parents? Why?”

“Because she was another girl.”

“But they didn’t get upset about me because I was white?”

“Oh, they didn’t care about that. They liked you.”

“But lesbianism is...”

“An abomination,” she said, grimacing.

“So, what about now?”

“They’ve forgiven me. I’m dating a handsome black man. Although...”

“Although *what*?” Michael asked.

“I’m also living with him, and we’re not married. But it’s still not as bad as being a lesbian.”

“I’m sorry. But I understand.”

“Didn’t your mom give you shit about me?” Agatha asked.

“Oh, yeah.”

“But now you’ve got a nice white girl. Is your mom happy?”

“My mom’s never happy, but it has nothing to do with me or my girlfriends,” he replied. She did not ask him to elaborate.

Tyrone watched Babette filming. “You seem pretty good with that thing,” he said after she lowered the camera.

“Yeah. I have an instinct for where to point it, and what to shoot.”

“Do you ever get paid for shooting?”

His question surprised her. She had never thought about getting paid. “No, why?”

“I know a guy who hires cameramen. He might give you a job.”

“Really?”

“He’s a movie producer.”

Babette shook her head. “Oh, I don’t know enough to work in the movie industry.”

“You’d be surprised. I could see if he’s interested. Would that be okay?”

“That would be great. Thanks.”

“Where can he reach you?”

“I don’t have a phone. Maybe he could leave a message for Michael at the Rialto?”

“Okay,” Tyrone replied. “That works. I’ll talk to him.”

Chapter 24 - Dirty Movies

“Michael?” Sophia interrupted him as he was taking out the trash. “I got a message for your girlfriend. One of my friends wants to talk to her about his movies.”

“Really? That’s great,” Michael replied.

“Yeah. But I’m not sure she should talk to him.”

“Why not?”

“Well, if she’s thinking of being in one of *his* movies, she ought to know about the movies he makes.”

“Oh, she’s not an actress,” he explained. “She’s a cameraman.”

“I guess that’s okay, then.” She handed him the number and then turned and walked away. He did not know why she seemed abrupt. Michael felt delighted someone might recognize Babette’s talent and give her a chance to make movies.

Babette arrived at Donnie’s office with a couple of film cans. “I didn’t bring my projector,” she said. “I assumed you had one.” Her youth and attractiveness made Donnie doubt she would be a good fit for the job.

“No. Just a Moviola. But that’s okay. I don’t need to see your films.” Babette felt puzzled. She had assumed he would want to see her work. “Tyrone told me you seemed pretty good with a camera,” Donnie stated. Tyrone had only seen her shoot an anti-war demonstration. She wondered how he could have noticed anything about her work.

“Well, I’ve been shooting for years. Short films, nothing special.”

“Well, my films *are* special. I have to make them cheap or I won’t make a profit on them,” Donnie explained. Babette felt confused. “I need cameramen I can rely on. They need to shoot fast, get what I want, and not waste my money. They can’t get distracted or tell me what to do.”

“Are you the director as well as producer?” Babette asked.

“Sometimes the actor, too.” His statement confused her even more.

“Well, if you saw my films you would see that I love the camera. I have an instinct...” He waved away her claims.

“Good. That’s what I want; somebody who puts the camera before anything else and won’t get distracted.”

“Distracted? By what?”

“What you’re shooting.”

“I assume you mean actors, right?”

“Yeah.” Donnie paused and wondered how to tell her what the actors would be doing. He had never interviewed a female cameraman and thought she might be less likely to get turned on by the action and want to join in as some male camera operators did.

“Doing *what*?” she asked. He hesitated to answer.

“You know a theater called the Apollo?” She shook her head. “How about the Angel Art Cinema?” She shook her head, again. “The Walton?” Babette’s expression changed from enthusiastic to cautious.

“Oh, you make *those* kinds of movies,” she said, blushing. Babette finally understood the type of filming she would be doing.

“Yes. They make money. It’s getting more profitable every day. But, I have problems getting actors and cameramen.”

“Actors, I can understand. I mean, who would want to...?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” he interrupted. She thought she caught a glimpse of a leer.

“But cameramen?”

“I’ve had a couple who got distracted by the action they were filming,” he explained. It was the first time she heard anyone refer to fucking as ‘action’. “They forgot their jobs and the footage they got was junk. We had to re-shoot scenes. That cost me money. I can’t have that.”

“I don’t understand. What did they do?”

“They, uh, tried to put themselves into the movie,” he said, and then paused while she pictured what they did in her mind. “But they ruined the scenes.”

“Oh, I think I get it.”

“So, can you stay *behind* the camera?”

“Absolutely,” she confirmed, “that’s where the cameraman belongs, right?”

“No matter what’s happening in *front* of the camera?” Donnie challenged. She nodded. He looked at her. She thought she saw him leer again but dismissed it.

“All right. I’m gonna give you a chance. A normal shoot is two or three days. We work twelve-hour shifts, sometimes longer. I’ll call you when we’re ready to go.”

“Okay, thanks.” Babette turned to leave. Donnie stopped her.

“I need to be perfectly clear. I want hot stuff. You see some hot action, you go after it with the camera. You know what kind of action I’m talking about right?” Babette nodded. She had never seen any dirty movies but she’d had sex. It had never occurred to her to film herself doing it, however. Now that she would be filming others, she began to imagine ways to make it interesting, dramatic, and hot, just like Donnie wanted.

“Yeah, I know *exactly* what you mean.”

“Give me something new and different every time. Audiences don’t want the same tired scenes. Theater owners need fresh faces and hot action to keep their customers coming back. I’ll get you the fresh faces, you give me the hot action, and I can make some real money.”

“I’ll give you what you want,” Babette promised. Donnie believed her.

Babette’s first shoot was difficult. She kept reminding herself Donnie was paying her to film sex and this was a big deal for her. She stayed behind the camera but she did not stay out of the action. She figured out how to arrange the lights so she could roam freely around the set and shoot from different angles.

She learned how far she had to stay from the actors in order not to distract them. Babette worked the camera in ways Donnie never imagined. She zoomed, panned, changed angles, went toward faces and gonads, and tried to show more than just the sex act, but the essence of copulation, the connection. By the end of the shoot, she gave Donnie more hot action than he dreamed possible.

Babette called Michael at the Rialto as soon as she got back to her apartment after the shoot. He was finishing for the night and about to go home. She ordered him to come to her place immediately.

He arrived a few minutes later and found her naked. She stripped him, grabbed his penis, and put her mouth around it, just like the woman in the scene she filmed. As soon as he was hard, she turned, bent over, and told him to pound her as hard as he could. She would not let him stop even after he had his orgasm. She had several.

Babette stood up and turned toward him when she finally had enough. Her eyes blazed with passion. Michael knew he had not made that happen. He assumed the shoot did.

“Thanks. I needed that!” Babette panted.

“Tough first day at work?” Michael asked, grinning.

“You have no idea... *I* had no idea.”

“So, you liked it?”

“Oh, God! Yes, I liked it.”

“What’s it like, filming people fuck?”

“I think I’m gonna need to develop a sense of detachment. But, I also learned a lot. There were a couple of times when they got tired and were just going through the motions. I looked at Donnie’s face and he seemed disappointed. I decided to get creative. I think I got some good footage.”

“What’s he like?”

“Who, Donnie?”

“Yeah. Did he hit on you?”

“No. He’s a sleazebag, but not on the set. There, he’s a moneybag. He keeps reminding everyone that every minute is costing him money. It got old, really fast.”

“Well, he’s just a businessman.”

“Yeah, just a guy with a product to sell. It could be furniture, or cars, or pizzas, but it happens to be sex.”

“Sad, that it’s come to this,” Michael lamented.

“What?”

“Sex used to be private. Just between people.”

“You’re such a romantic! Is that how you think it should always be?”

“Well, yeah. At least as far as *you’re* concerned.”

“Michael!”

“Just promise me you’ll stay *behind* the camera.”

“Why? Is there something wrong with what they’re doing?”

“No. It’s just that I don’t want anyone else to see how gorgeous you are. I want you all to myself.”

“You *are* a romantic! That gets me so hot. Are you ready to do it again?” He was not, but he did it anyway. He realized if he didn’t, maybe she would find somebody else who would. She would now have access to casual sex partners. It would be easy for her to find someone to help her out if she got horny. Maybe too easy. And Michael would never know.

“It’s funny, I’ve known your brother for several years but he never mentioned you until recently,” Betsy said.

“I guess I just wasn’t important to him,” Laura replied.

“No, I don’t think that’s it. I think other things occupied him.”

“Like what?”

“He hasn’t told you?”

“I don’t know anything about his life from the time he ran away until he came back after our father died.”

“Well, you should ask him if you’re interested.”

“You won’t tell me?” Laura asked. Betsy shook her head. “So, how do you know him?”

“He used to visit my church.”

“He told me he wasn’t religious.”

“He thinks he’s not, but he is. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he didn’t come for the services. He came to talk. We were friends. He got me through a rough time in my life. He’s like that. He helps people. I don’t think he does it deliberately or even consciously. He just does it.”

“Like you? You help people, don’t you? Isn’t that what ministers do?”

“Yes, if we’re lucky. I’ve met ministers who care about people and help whenever they can. I’ve met others who only care about themselves. If they help anyone, it’s not because they care, it’s because they think it’s what they ought to do.”

“Well, isn’t that what Jesus wants?”

“Well yes. But, you have to do it not just for Jesus. You have to do it because you care.”

“And that’s why *you* do it?” Laura asked. She realized Betsy was supposed to be helping her and wondered if all the personal talk was necessary.

“I like to think it’s because Jesus is inside me and I’m acting on his behalf, expressing his love. But, maybe that’s not it, at all.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I feel Jesus in you.”

“Well, what about you? What’s your relationship to Jesus?” Betsy asked.

“I thought it was great. And then I betrayed Him,” Laura confessed.

“Betrayed is an awfully strong word, Laura. Aren’t you being hard on yourself?”

“That’s what Michael told me.”

“Maybe he was right. Why don’t you tell me about it?” Betsy asked. Laura explained her crisis. “Well, you and I are from different churches,” Betsy commented after Laura finished. “I don’t mean to challenge your beliefs. I can tell you, from my own experience, there is room in your heart for both a boy that you like and Jesus. In fact, I believe Jesus would be glad you found a boy who makes you happy.”

“Oh, well, I don’t know him well enough yet to be sure he makes me happy.”

“But, it makes *you* happy to think about him, right?” Betsy asked. Laura nodded.

“That’s a start. If there’s one thing I’ve learned in the years I’ve been a minister it’s that love isn’t exclusive and compartmentalized, especially Jesus’ love. It’s everywhere. To try to confine it or control it is a mistake. You won’t lose your love for Jesus if you start seeing this boy. You’ll find there’s room in your heart for both the boy and Jesus.”

“You’re sure?” Laura asked. She wanted to believe Betsy but felt reluctant to trust any minister but Jack from her church.

“Absolutely certain.”

“Michael didn’t tell me where your church is,” Laura remarked. “Maybe I should come some Sunday.”

“Oh, don’t do that. Stay where this boy is. You won’t be sorry.”

Michael finished cleaning the theater after the last show and was ready to leave. Sophia came down from her office about to close up for the night. She handed him his paycheck. Michael noticed her face was puffy.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “Do you have a cold or something?”

Sophia seemed distracted. “Or *something*,” she answered glumly. Michael assumed she had been crying about Agatha. Sophia had not spoken about it, but he knew she had not gotten over their breakup.

“Anything I can do?”

“No... well, maybe you should start looking for another job.”

“What? Am I fired?”

“We both are, or will be, soon.”

“What’s going on?”

“The Rialto has a new owner,” Sophia explained.

“You *sold* it?” Michael knew, despite its ups and downs, Sophia loved the Rialto as much as, if not more than, she had loved Agatha.

“I never owned it. My husband did.”

“Husband? I thought you two were divorced.”

She shook her head. “No. Just separated.”

“But, you told me you got the Rialto as part of the divorce settlement.”

“Not exactly. It was just sitting empty. Nobody else wanted it. Carl couldn’t sell it. So, I asked him if I could run it. That’s what I’ve been doing.”

“And you’ve been doing great,” Michael said. He hoped to make her feel better, but then quickly realized it was a fruitless effort. It was too late.

“Well, somebody came along who wanted to buy it.”

“Oh, no. Who?” he asked.

“You remember Donnie? I think you met him once or twice.”

“Yeah. My girlfriend works for him, now.”

“Your girlfriend?” Her shock and grief had made her forget Babette.

“Babette?” he reminded Sophia.

“Oh, right, she works on his dirty movies?”

“She’s his cameraman.”

“But, she’s not acting in them, right?” He shook his head.

“No. At least, I hope not,” he said.

“Good. I hope it stays that way.”

“So do I. What about Donnie?”

“He tried to get me to convert the Rialto to a sex cinema about a year ago. You know, just porn, all the time. He said I could make a lot more money. I turned him down. Then he somehow found out I didn’t own it. He got in touch with Carl and offered to buy it. Carl didn’t even consult me.” Sophia started to cry. “He didn’t even care. He just sold it right out from under me.” Michael offered a hug. Sophia waved him off.

“Shit. I’m sorry. I love this place. I know you do, too. Can’t you fight this?” he asked. She shook her head and continued crying.

“Carl didn’t even tell me. I found out from Donnie. He called me and asked me to run it for him. You could stay if you want to.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll be leaving. There’s nothing else I can do. You’ve learned a lot about the business, though. You could probably run it alone. I could ask Donnie.”

“I don’t know. My mom would probably be shocked and embarrassed if I worked in a sex cinema.”

“Moms are like that. But, what will you do?” Sophia seemed genuinely concerned.

“I don’t know.” Michael did not know whose hurt was worse. He was about to lose his job but Sophia had lost her love. “I’m sorry, Sophia. I love this place. I love these movies. What about your customers? Where are they gonna go?”

“There’s a rumor somebody is opening another theater like this but I don’t know where or when. I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

“So, what are you gonna tell the customers?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we should just close right away.”

“Could we think about it, first? Maybe we can save it,” Michael suggested.

“Not if I know Donnie.”

“Well, then, maybe we can go out with a bang.”

“No. Donnie will be showing lots of banging.” It was a stupid joke. Sophia grinned through her tears.

“What about a marathon film festival? Like a twenty-four-hour nonstop collection of the most popular films you’ve ever shown?” Michael suggested.

Her eyes brightened. “Yeah. And maybe let people in free just to thank them.”

“Well, you’d have to pay to rent the films, wouldn’t you?” he asked.

“You’re right. Bad idea. Maybe just charge enough to cover the rental fees?” she said. He nodded.

“And we could give away all the popcorn and candy you have left.”

“Yeah. Let’s not leave anything for Donnie! I like it!” She hugged him. “Thanks, Michael.” Sophia went to lock the doors of her beloved Rialto, maybe for the last time.

The show was over.

“Remember that guy Tyrone that I met at the demonstration?” Babette asked. She had shot two films for Donnie. He finished editing the first one, was working on the second, felt thrilled with her work, and hired her to do a third.

“The one who got you the job?” Michael asked.

“Yeah. He showed up on-set, today, ready to perform.”

“He’s an actor? Is he any good?” Michael asked, and then smirked when he realized it was an absurd question. They were making pornos. All an actor had to be good at was fucking, and fucking was not acting.

“He doesn’t have to be.”

“What does that mean?”

“He’s got the biggest dick I’ve ever seen,” Babette replied. She noticed the panicked expression on Michael’s face. He tried to change the subject away from penis size.

“He seemed like a nice guy when I talked to him,” he said.

“He is. I wouldn’t let him anywhere near me with that humongous dick of his, but he’s a sweet guy, and fun to talk to. He’s fairly well-educated. English Lit major, although he never graduated.”

“So you two must have a lot to talk about,” Michael said, cheerfully, as he fervently hoped talking would be the only thing Babette and Tyrone ever did.

“Well, yeah, but only when he’s dressed.”

“What about when he’s not?”

“That only happens when I’m behind the camera.”

“I guess you like to zoom in on his dick a lot?” Michael asked, smirking.

“I don’t have to,” she joked. “It attracts attention to itself.” He frowned. She felt delighted that Michael seemed worried. He had no reason to worry. Babette was in love with Michael. She would not think of having sex with another man. Tyrone was in love with Agatha; he would not think of having casual sex with another woman. Fucking was just his job. Filming him fuck was Babette’s job. It was all just business.

“So what about the actresses? How do they react to it?”

“They all know him.”

“Um, is Agatha one of the actresses?” he asked.

His question surprised Babette. “Why? Are you worried about her?”

“I was just wondering. I first knew her when she was a shy sixteen-year-old girl. I was wondering how much she’d changed since then.”

“I never see her.”

“Oh.”

“You seem relieved.”

“I am,” he mumbled. He thought of that gorgeous sixteen-year-old girl lying under him on sultry summer afternoons, and how much sweaty passion they shared. For some reason, he hoped she would want to keep her sexuality private and not flaunt it to the world.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you still attracted to her?” Babette asked.

“Well, she’s beautiful. I’m sure you noticed. But I don’t want her if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s what I wanted to know.”

“So, are you invited to the opening?” He changed the subject.

“Of what?”

“The new Rialto?”

“What do you mean?” He explained that Donnie had bought the theater from Sophia’s husband without her knowledge.

“Oh, God, I’m so sorry. What are you going to do now?”

“Look for another job. There are other theaters.”

“None like that,” she said, kissing him. “It’s where we met.”

There was no twenty-four-hour marathon. Donnie took over the Rialto quietly and Sophia moved out. He ran a few foreign films, switched to dirty movies for a few nights, and then ran a

couple more foreign films. The regular patrons were confused. However, there were some new patrons. After a month, it was almost all dirty movies. The old Rialto was gone.

Michael stayed on after Sophia left. He cut back his hours so he could look for another job. Donnie felt grateful for Michael's help running the theater. One day Michael announced he was leaving. He had applied for a job downtown at the film equipment rental and processing company where Babette's Uncle Jerry worked. They needed a young guy full-time for rentals and counter work and hired him.

Michael hated to leave the Rialto. It had been a magical place. Ingmar Bergman once said movie theaters were places where people sat together to dream in the dark. Michael liked the way people came together to dream. However, the Rialto now showed only dirty movies. Other things happened in the dark and he did not want to know what they were. It was now Donnie's theater and the messes were his to clean up.

Donnie was no businessman, however. Running a theater that showed dirty movies was a lot harder than making and selling dirty movies. He spent a lot of time dealing with the theater and less and less time making movies.

Donnie set up a small studio in the Rialto to cut his production costs and shot a couple of sex scenes there. However, his cash flow faltered. The theater was not drawing the audiences he expected. He also spent more money than he planned to rent other producers' films. That expense left him unable to afford to make films of his own.

Nevertheless, he tried. He thought he might succeed if he found some new, beautiful women to be in his movies. He still had Agatha's screen test and hinted to Tyrone that she could perform if she wanted to. He thought her innocent beauty would attract audiences. Agatha was no prude but she knew it would kill her parents if they found out she performed in a sex movie. She refused even to consider it.

Amelia finished setting the table just as Michael and Babette arrived. She wondered what kind of girl Babette would be. She had only seen Michael with one other girlfriend and that was a long time ago.

Babette looked nothing like Kathleen. She had been a tall, slender blonde girl with long hair and a round face. Babette was short, stocky, and dark-haired. She nodded when Michael introduced them. Her penetrating eyes and wide smile struck Amelia.

Amelia ushered them into the dining room. "Everything's ready. Please sit down." She had set the table with simple elegance. There were plain white dishes, wine goblets, ornate knives and silverware, and a large bottle of red wine. "Michael, pour us some wine while I get the food."

"Where's Laura?" he asked as they sat.

"She had to work late. I hope she gets home before you leave." Michael was not surprised. Since their conversation and her meeting with Betsy, Laura and Michael talked more often. He knew why she had become 'busy' at work. That was what she told her mother. She had started dating Elliott, the young man she met at church. He suspected Laura was with Elliott and smiled.

Amelia brought a huge pan of lasagna to the table. "That's beautiful!" Babette gasped.

"Wait 'til you taste it," Michael said. "You won't believe what you're eating." His compliment flattered Amelia. She could not recall the last time her son praised her cooking. She took Babette's plate and filled it with lasagna. Babette's eyes got bigger.

"I think that's too much," she protested. Amelia ignored her, filled Michael's plate, and then her own.

"I hope you like this wine," Amelia commented, raising her glass. She waited for Michael and Babette to raise their glasses. "It's good with lasagna- and just about anything else!" She took a couple of long sips. Michael and Babette tasted the wine and then set their glasses down.

"Let's eat." Amelia waited to see Babette's reaction to her first taste of homemade lasagna. Babette realized Amelia was watching her and put a fork-full in her mouth. Her facial expression

changed from curious to ecstatic. Amelia felt delighted but she did not want to embarrass the girl and did not comment. Instead, she took another long sip of wine.

“Mom, this is delicious. I swear it’s the best one you’ve ever made.”

“Oh, he’s just saying that,” Amelia protested. “It’s always been his favorite from when he was a little kid.”

“I can see why. This is wonderful, Mrs. Romanelli.”

“Please call me Amelia.” She smiled and then sipped more wine. Michael had not eaten many recent meals with his mother. He was surprised she liked the wine so much.

“So, I only ever met one of Michael’s girlfriends, and that was a long time ago.” She paused to take another bite of food. “What was her name?”

“Oh, that’s when I came here to pick up some stuff. That was Kathleen Davis.”

“Oh, yes. I remember now.” She finished her glass of wine and asked Michael to pour her another. As soon as the glass was full, Amelia picked it up and took another mouthful. “I never met that nig-.”

“Mom!” Michael cut her off.

“Colored girl.”

“Oh, you mean Agatha?” Babette asked.

“You know her?” Amelia asked.

“I’ve met her. She’s very sweet. I sometimes work with her boyfriend.”

“Oh.” Amelia took another long drink of wine. “How nice. What does he do?”

“He’s an actor,” Babette said.

“Is he...?”

“Black?” Michael asked, annoyed. “Yes, he is.”

“Good. That’s the way it should be,” Amelia commented.

“What should be?” Babette asked.

“Those people should keep to themselves. We should all stick to our own kind. Like you two.” Babette wondered if Amelia was suggesting Michael dated her because she was white and not because he liked her and wanted to be with her. She decided to probe Amelia.

“Well, I don’t see a problem, if two people fall in love...”

“Were you in *love* with that girl?” Amelia asked, aghast, and then reached for her wine glass. Michael ignored her. Babette felt sorry for him.

“He’s in love with *me*,” she said reaching for his hand.

“Yeah, Mom. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’m moving in with Babette.”

Amelia drained the glass. “But, I’m not running away this time.”

Amelia did not know what to say. Her intuition used to warn her when something big was about to happen although she rarely knew precisely what it would be. However, she had no inkling that Louis would die of a heart attack. Since his death, her intuition and foresight had failed her. She might have to start worrying about why that happened and what it meant for her future, but she put it off, for now.

“Are you’re getting married? That’s so sudden, but it’s great.”

“No, Mom, we’re just moving in together.”

“But, you might get married?” she asked, excitedly. They looked at each other, unwilling to let her pin them down.

“We haven’t talked about it,” Babette replied before Michael could speak. He nodded.

“I’ll still see you and Laura. And, I’ll help you out financially as much as I can. I’m making more money now. I don’t want you to worry.”

“Um, thanks, Michael.” Amelia thought about refilling her wine glass but did not reach for the bottle. She had enjoyed the wine until now. It relaxed her. She enjoyed the pleasant dinner with her son and his girlfriend. Now she realized the real reason Michael brought Babette to meet her was so he could say goodbye.

He had been her impulsive little boy when he ran away. She and Louis had assumed Michael would come running back begging their forgiveness because he had nowhere else to go. However, he did not. The longer he stayed away, the more she accepted that he no longer wanted them to be his family.

Amelia recalled the conversation they had a few months earlier. Michael took Betsy's advice and tried to talk to his mother when they were alone. He wanted to find out how she felt about what he had done. It had been a difficult conversation. Amelia revealed her feelings right away.

"You hurt me bad, Michael. You never should have done what you did to us. We're your family."

"I did it to survive," Michael asserted.

"Survive? Did you think we were trying to kill you?"

"Of course not. But you didn't understand me and you didn't seem to even want to. That hurt. I knew my leaving would hurt you. Someone who helped me told me as much, but she said it was inevitable."

"You could at least say you're sorry."

"But I'm not. I had to do it."

"That means you'd do it again if you had to."

"I'm older now."

"I know you wanted to stay with those other people you were with. You only came back because your father died. You probably hate it here with us."

"They were great people and I loved that place. But that was another life and it's over. I came back for you and Laura and I stay to help you and Laura. I'm glad I can do it."

"That's all we are to you, now, people you can help? We're not your family anymore?"

"It's never gonna be the way it was when Laura and I were little, Mom. That family is gone. Dad is gone."

"Don't remind me. I haven't gotten over losing either one of you."

"But, you haven't lost me!"

"Haven't I? It's obvious you don't love me anymore. You only stayed because you had to, but not because you wanted to."

"That's true. I wasn't planning to stay. But, I changed my mind."

"Because you felt you *owed* us, not because you loved us."

Michael found it strange his mother kept mentioning love when she never seemed to understand what love was when he was younger. He left because she seemed incapable of loving him. Now he thought maybe she did love him, but back then, he couldn't see how her particular kind of love worked. He still didn't. Amelia seemed to want something from others that she was unwilling or unable to give.

Michael had come to know many people. They were all different and unique. He received much love from them. He knew what being loved felt like and didn't feel it from his mother.

However, Amelia was still his mother. She loved him and felt hurt that he didn't reciprocate. She also knew it was normal for a son to find a girl, marry her, and move out. But, she did not feel ready for it to happen with her son. Not so soon after he came back. Not so soon after she lost Louis. Amelia wanted to cry. She reached for her wine glass and gestured for Michael to refill it. He hesitated.

"Mom, why don't you sit there and we'll clear the table for you."

"Oh, don't bother. I can do it," Amelia protested. Michael stood up. Babette pushed her chair back and began to stand. Amelia looked at Babette and had an idea. "Maybe us girls can let the man do the cleaning up, for a change," she said. Babette sensed Amelia wanted to talk and sat down.

"Um, yeah. He's pretty good at that," Babette commented. Michael collected their plates and carried them toward the kitchen.

“Men are so different nowadays,” Amelia observed. “When I was your age, no man would come into the kitchen to do anything but eat.” Babette smiled and nodded. “My husband was no exception.”

“I’m sorry I never met him.”

“He would have liked you. He had an eye for pretty girls.” Babette did not reply and Amelia drifted into a wine-induced memory fog. “You know, I envy you, in a way,” she whispered as Michael walked back into the room. She waited until he picked up the lasagna pan and left. “You’re lucky,” she said.

“How so?”

“Maybe it’s better to try things out first and not get married right away.”

Amelia’s comment surprised Babette. “You really think so?” she asked, hoping Amelia would open up to her.

“I sure wish I had.”

“Had what?” Michael asked as he came back. His mother ignored the question.

“While you’re at it, why don’t you serve the dessert?” Amelia suggested. “There’s apple pie in the oven and vanilla ice cream in the freezer. Do you like pie and ice cream, Babette?” Babette smiled and nodded. “Who doesn’t, right?” Amelia waved Michael out of the dining room.

“I didn’t know anything about men when I married Louis. I went from my parents’ house to our little apartment. It wasn’t easy. Oh, I knew how to cook and do housework. I had worked a few jobs, too. But, I didn’t know about men. I only had sisters, no brothers, and my father worked a lot so I hardly ever saw him when I was growing up. He was nice enough....,” she added, and then paused to reflect. “I found out not all men were nice. Not that Louis ever hit me, or anything like that. And, he didn’t get drunk. He was a good provider....” Her voice trailed off.

“But...?”

“That was *all* he was. I felt so alone. I couldn’t cry when he was around but I did when he was at work. I couldn’t admit it to myself back then but I know now that I shouldn’t have married him.”

“You didn’t love him?”

“No, not at first. That came later. But sometimes it was hard, you know?”

“He didn’t love you?” Babette asked. She felt surprised and flattered that Amelia opened up to her.

“He said he did, but I was never sure.”

“Do you mean...?”

“No, he was never with other women as far as I know. It’s just that he was never with me, either. He was just with himself. I don’t know how else to say it.” Amelia paused. “He was his own best friend.”

“He didn’t *need* you.” Babette’s heart broke for this lonely woman.

Amelia nodded. “I don’t think he needed anybody.”

“I’m sorry, Amelia. I really am.”

Michael returned with their desserts and sat down. He overheard much of what the women discussed but did not want to embarrass either his mother or Babette and said nothing. Michael finally understood why he ran away from home and never came back or even communicated with his family while he was away.

“Donnie wants to talk to you,” Babette told Michael one night.

“I don’t want a job,” he replied.

“It’s not about a job. He wants you to talk to Sophia.”

“Why me?”

“Because she won’t take his calls.”

“We both know why,” he replied, and then waited for her to explain.

“He wants her to buy the Rialto from him.”

“I don’t think she wants it anymore.”

“He doesn’t want it, either.”

“Why?” Michael, asked, surprised.

“He had to close it because of the fire.”

“You didn’t tell me about a fire.”

“I didn’t know until we went there to shoot today. We tried to use the little studio but the power was off. He tried to get it back on, but the fire damaged the circuits.”

“When?”

“It happened a few weeks ago. It damaged the projection room, too. He can’t run films. It’s been closed.”

“So, when’s it getting fixed?”

“It isn’t. He doesn’t have the money.”

“What about the insurance?”

“He didn’t have any.” Babette shrugged. She seemed sad. He suspected she was out of a job.

“So, it’s closed for good?”

“Looks like he’s finished. It was his main source of income. Both incomes, really. The movies he showed and the ones we made.”

“I can’t say I’m sorry. Does it mean you’re out of a job?” She nodded. “I am sorry about *that*. I know you love the camera. Can’t you work somewhere else?”

“Maybe. That’s another reason you could call Sophia. Not just for him but for me. She knows movie people in New York. She might know of others who could hire me.”

Michael called Sophia the next day. “Well, if he gave it to me I *might* take it,” she said, bitterly. “But I won’t pay him for it. My husband and I finally divorced and I got half his money. But I’m not sure I could get the Rialto going again. Donnie’s probably ruined it.”

“It’s a shame. I loved that place.” Sophia didn’t reply and Michael thought she was ready to hang up.

“What’s more of a shame is the talent Donnie’s losing,” Sophia said after a moment of silence. Her comment surprised Michael.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, Babette, Tyrone, and the others who worked on his movies.”

“Yeah, Babette’s bummed out that she won’t be shooting anymore.”

“Do you know what Donnie’s gonna do?” Sophia asked. He had assumed she would not care about Donnie.

“Why? Are you worried about him?”

“Hell, no. I was just wondering.”

“He doesn’t have the money to make any new movies. He plans to travel around to small cinemas to show the ones he’s already made. He might make enough money in a year or two so he can come back and reopen the Rialto.”

“So, he’s leaving?”

“Yeah. He’s got a station wagon full of dirty movies and he’s taking them on the road.”

“He’ll probably never come back. Not that I care. But I’m wondering. If his production stops, where’s the new stuff gonna come from?” Her statement amazed Michael. She had refused to let Donnie use the Rialto as a sex cinema. He assumed Sophia was a prude but that was not why she had refused. “Somebody has to make new ones, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, but who?”

“What about us?”

“Us, who?”

“You, Babette, Tyrone, the others. What if we started a little production company? Babette knows all about camerawork, right? And Tyrone, well..., he knows all the sex stuff.”

“But, I don’t know about any of that.”

“Yeah, but you and I know the theater angle. And, you can borrow equipment now. They could make the films and we could sell them.” Her suggestion surprised Michael, but then he started to work with it.

“Remember Agatha?” he asked.

“Of course,” Sophia replied.

“She was a business major in college. She could probably help put all the business pieces together.”

“Yes! That could work. Do you want in? You wouldn’t have to tell your mom what you were doing, just that you were working in the movie business.”

It was their first shoot. Tyrone recruited some actors he knew. Michael wrote a simple script and borrowed equipment from work. He used ideas Babette created when she shot scenes for Donnie but Donnie never liked them.

Instead of renting a motel room, like Donnie often did, they borrowed a cabin cruiser big enough to stage several different scenes. Sophia and Agatha stayed away. They did not want to get involved until the filming finished. They also did not want to see each other.

Michael also wanted to stay away. However, because he wrote the script Babette asked him to oversee the filming and he became the director. He was terrified. He did not know how he was going to behave while gorgeous people fucked and his girlfriend filmed them. He was afraid that, as soon as she saw his spontaneous erection, she would push him overboard in a rage.

Babette did not. She took him aside, told him she had gotten used to it and he would, too, and he had damn well better save his erections for her. He was glad she understood and saved them for her.

Sex Cruise turned out to be a big hit because they filmed most of it outside, in natural light, and not in dim, cramped motel rooms. There was lovely aquatic scenery and plenty of tits and asses. It was only natural they would do *Sex Cruise 2*.

They also began to consider ways to make sex films in unusual places and came up with a sex tourism series. These films consisted of individual scenes of people having sex in various locations. Churches were popular. They also filmed in museums, near (or in) outdoor fountains, arboretums, historic houses, and other places. The scenes were shorter than typical sex scenes. The hint of danger added to the sexual excitement because people in the scenes had to get off before they got caught.

Babette’s camerawork was the key. Her signature opening shot was an extreme close-up of a hand in someone’s crotch, or on a breast, or a cock, or a mouth. Then she would pull back to reveal the place where the sex act was about to happen. She found ways to trick people into thinking they were in one location only to pull back and reveal a different one that was more dangerous and sexier. Audiences loved her films.

Rialto Films were popular and made money. They kept their productions small and local. No real names appeared in the credits so nobody who knew them ever found out they were making dirty movies. (Michael’s mother and sister never found out what he was doing.)

Michael dreamed of saving enough money to revive the Rialto but the marquee stayed dark and the theater sat empty, except for the ghosts. Since movies are shadows projected on screens, the ghosts of the Rialto were the movies Babette, Michael, Agatha, Sophia, and all the patrons watched and loved for the few years the Rialto flourished. The theater might be gone, but those ghost movies would play on forever.

Epilogue

Michael began this car trip excited about the future. He and Sophia wanted to give Rialto films a permanent home. They were on their way to visit a small, defunct movie studio that was for sale. She had enough cash to make an immediate purchase and they hoped to get a good price.

They drove past the Greyhound bus terminal. Michael thought back to that hot July morning when he sat outside. He reviewed all that happened in his life since Claire found him on the bus stop bench. Michael recalled her surprised look as she noticed his bag of notebooks filled with his sci-fi story ideas and suddenly realized how inadequate all those ideas had been.

Back then, Michael thought science fiction was the highest expression of imagination. It dawned on him that was not even close to the truth. On that day he could not have guessed how his life would unfold over the next seven years. Not even in his wildest dreams would he have imagined Agatha, Kathleen, Betsy, Rosa, New World Farm, Brenda, the Rialto, Sophia, Babette, Rialto Films, and so much more.

He smiled as he realized he did not have much imagination after all. Back then, he thought he was special because he could picture life on other planets but he had no inkling of what life- his life- could be like on earth. Michael's real life had eclipsed all his imagining.

He was glad that it had.

The End