

*In a Dark
Time*

**Book 3 of
The Vortex Quartet**

By R. A. Conti

In a Dark Time

by R. A. Conti

Copyright 2019

Richard Anthony Conti

All Rights Reserved

Author's Note Please Read

This novel contains sexual content and is for adults only.

The Vortex Quartet

Consists of:

Book 1 - The Vortex

Book 2 - The New Age

Book 3 - In a Dark Time

Book 4 - Eirene

Table of Contents:

[Chapter 1 - Anita](#)

[Chapter 2 - What Is Normal?](#)

[Chapter 3 - Ordeal](#)

[Chapter 4 - Louisa](#)

[Chapter 5 - Sophia](#)

[Chapter 6 - Changes](#)

[Chapter 7 - Secret Lovers](#)

[Chapter 8 - Al and Theresa/Anita and Debra](#)

[Chapter 9 - Revelations](#)

[Chapter 10 - Going Back Home](#)

[Chapter 11 - Return and Regret](#)

[Chapter 12 - Life Spirals Downward](#)

[Chapter 13 - Old and New](#)

[Chapter 14 - In a Dark Time](#)

[Chapter 15 - Happy New Year](#)

Chapter 1 - Anita

The movie theater marquee had not changed since the last time Anita drove past the old Rialto Theater on Armat Street. 'Concert by Musica Orbis - New Year's Day - Five PM,' it read. Several years ago, Hecate's Circle, a local music club, had rented the empty cinema to put on a big New Year's celebration. The concert never happened. The police found out about it and reported it to the fire department. They inspected the building and found it unsafe because of damage from an electrical fire that had closed the theater. The ghostly unlit marquee announcement was all that remained.

Her connection to the Rialto was not through music or film but through her first lover Sophia. She took over the theater and opened it as the first (and for a time the only) repertory cinema in Philadelphia. Anita no longer grimaced when she thought about Sophia, a beautiful and sensual woman who fell in love with Anita. Dazzled by an older woman's charm and attention, Anita fell in love with her. Their love, however, did not last. Sophia poured herself into the Rialto and it became her new love. Anita endured neglect and routine lovemaking until she realized she would never again be Sophia's first love and then ran away.

All that happened several years ago but it all came back to her whenever she drove past the dark Rialto. Anita did not know what happened to Sophia when the Rialto closed but she could not help feeling sorry for Sophia losing her dream.

Anita also knew about loss. Long before she met Sophia, she dreamed of being with her high school best friend Carol Davis and ran away from home to find her. She would never have begun her journey of self-discovery had it not been for her overwhelming attraction to Carol and her faith in the unshakable truth of her own deepest feelings. However, Anita had not known she was a lesbian. When she confessed her love, Carol gently but firmly rejected her. A group of lesbians took her in, helped her find a job, and gave her a place to live. However, she did not learn what it meant to be a lesbian until she met Sophia.

Anita hurt and was herself hurt by many people on her journey, but eventually found herself, her family, and happiness. She went from a lovesick girl to a mature young woman in her mid-20s and eagerly looked ahead to the future. She did not know what might be coming, but she was certain, because of all she had experienced, she could handle it.

"I'm sorry," the woman said into Anita's ear. She did not recognize the voice.

"Huh? What?" Anita turned and saw Sheila Emory. The last time she saw her, Sheila was a slender, perky, shorthaired blonde woman with shifty eyes.

"Oh, it's you," Anita said, curtly.

Anita and Sheila had a sexual liaison a few years earlier that began with what Sheila called seduction but Anita insisted was rape. Sheila dominated that relationship. Anita ended it only by escaping from her downtown apartment where she was vulnerable to Sheila's manipulation and moving back with her father Alfonso and brother Tony.

Sheila had changed. Her hair was longer, and she had darkened it. Anita looked at her face. Sheila's eyes *hadn't* changed. Anita remembered how Sheila's intense gaze unnerved her when Sheila dominated her in bed. She hadn't only used her hands to manipulate Anita. Sheila wielded her willpower through her eyes and speech. Anita thought she would never be able to forget Sheila's smooth, slimy, controlling tone of voice, but she had.

"Yeah, it's me... I'm sorry."

"You already said that."

“Well, I really am. Sorry that I hurt you, I mean. What I did was wrong.”

“Hurt me? No, Sheila, I think you hurt yourself more.” Anita’s comment surprised Sheila.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“You confused sex with love. I’m pretty sure you don’t even know what love is, do you? That’s because you’re closed, isn’t it? Or, your legs are open but your heart is shut up tight,” Anita added, bitterly.

“I... I...,” Sheila stammered. “You might be right, Anita.”

“I *am* right. And, you didn’t hurt me. You just used me. I got over it and felt sorry for you.”

“Um, thanks, I guess. Can I sit with you?”

“If you insist,” Anita replied, coldly. Sheila sat down immediately but Anita did not feel threatened. Something about Sheila seemed different. She no longer seemed brash, insistent, and controlling. Maybe she no longer was a sexual predator. Anita wondered if someone had hurt her. Perhaps it was someone she truly loved instead of someone like Anita that she just used. Or, had she really loved Anita but had been incapable of showing it? Anita didn’t care and decided not to ask.

They had come to a meeting of gays and lesbians at the Hecate’s Circle coffee house, where Anita and her brother Tony had come often to hear music. (Tony met his wife Sharon there.) Anita did not know who called the meeting. She found out about it from Sharon who heard it about where she worked and told Anita.

“So what’s this all about?” Sheila asked.

“No idea. I came to find out.”

“I heard somebody wants to organize us.”

“Us?” Anita asked.

“Gays and lesbians.”

“To do what?”

“Come out of the closet. Get some power. Change things,” Sheila replied.

“I agree with changing things but I was never in the closet.”

“What about your family? Didn’t they throw you out when they found out you were...?”

“No, I left on my own. And, I didn’t know I was, not at first. When I came back, they accepted me.”

“You’re lucky. That doesn’t happen much from what I understand.”

“What about you?” Anita asked.

“I had no family to throw me out.”

“Right, I remember now. So you missed out on love.”

“I didn’t miss out on it, Anita. I never wanted it. It’s bullshit. I just wanted sex and I took it wherever I could get it.”

“You definitely took it from me.”

“Are you trying to tell me you didn’t enjoy it when we fucked?” Sheila asked. She looked at Anita’s face and wondered if Anita was being cruel or brutally honest.

“Nobody enjoys rape, Sheila.”

“I didn’t rape you!” she shrieked. Some people looked around to see where the outburst came from. Sheila looked down at the table. “I never raped you,” she hissed in a whisper.

“Yes, you did. I hated what you did to me.”

“But you came. I saw you come. That was something,” Sheila insisted. Anita wouldn’t let her have the last word.

“But, it was what *you* wanted, not what I wanted. And, I didn’t want you, ever.”

“Like I said, Anita, I’m sorry,” Sheila replied. Anita wanted to believe Sheila. She felt sorry for her. Because of her obsession with sex, she had missed out on love. Anita had her share of love. It was painful and confusing, but at least she had feelings that went beyond lust and she felt grateful.

“Are you? Or are you still raping other women?” Anita asked. Sheila glared at her but kept quiet. Someone had stepped onstage and gestured for silence. She was a tall, slender older woman with dark hair, a long face, a bright smile, and a commanding, but not controlling, voice. Anita liked her immediately.

“Thank you all for coming. I’m Allie Haines. I used to be part owner of this place. Now I own a bookstore downtown. You might have heard of it. It’s called Rainbow Bookshop.” A few people clapped.

“We think society is ready to accept us for who we are, but it’s not gonna happen unless we’re more open, vocal, and visible. This meeting is to talk about how we can do that. All we want is to live normal lives and not be singled out for prejudice and persecution. We’ve seen how Black people have achieved recognition and how women have stepped up to assert themselves as equals in society. We think it’s our turn.” There was some scattered applause. Anita looked around. People seemed eager to hear more.

“Wow, that was exciting, wasn’t it?” Sheila said as they drove away from the meeting. She had timidly asked for a ride when she learned Anita had a car. Anita no longer felt intimidated by Sheila and agreed to drive her home.

“What do you mean?” Anita asked.

“Weren’t you paying attention? We’re going to have a demonstration! It will be great to have a parade and not be afraid to be seen in public.”

“I’m not afraid to be seen in public,” Anita replied tersely.

“I know, but to be seen as a *lesbian*? That’s bold, don’t you think?”

“No. It doesn’t interest me. I’m not a lesbian to make a statement. I don’t think parading around chanting ‘I’m gay and I’m proud’ is worth the effort.”

“Are you ashamed of being gay?”

“No. It’s just that gay is not all I am. It doesn’t define me. I’m a lot more than that. Maybe you’re not- and maybe those people aren’t, but *I* am,” she added.

Anita had never felt her gayness was important. The people she loved were important. The fact they were all women, well, that seemed accidental. She knew it was not but felt it was no big deal, either. She was Anita, the person, not Anita, the lesbian. She knew others did not have the self-assurance she had. They struggled with their homosexuality and she felt sorry for them. In her view, who people love should be a private issue and not a public one. She knew homosexuals were persecuted and laws had to be changed. She was not convinced marches and slogans would carry out that change, but if others felt they would then she would support them.

Anita had never been ‘in the closet.’ She never had to hide her true nature from anyone. It was hidden from her until Sophia helped her understand herself but Anita never felt guilty or inferior being gay. She felt sorry for other homosexuals who did feel inferior and understood they might want to ‘come out’ and publicly proclaim their freedom to be accepted for who they

were. It took Anita a long time to accept who she was but her lesbianism was never an issue for her. Love was.

Anita sometimes recalled that timid, determined girl who rode a bus to Atlantic City on July 3, 1966. She hoped to reclaim and deepen her friendship with her high school best friend Carol Davis. Anita got the shock of her young life when she found out Carol was traveling in Europe for the summer. If it was not for Carol's mother Delores who took Anita in, found her a job, and helped her take her first steps into independent adulthood, Anita might not have survived. Mrs. Davis never told Anita the dangers that lurked in the seedier parts of Atlantic City but she protected Anita from them. Anita survived and flourished. She also regretted she never went back to thank Mrs. Davis.

The most difficult ordeal for homosexuals was dealing with their own families. Anita never had to face that difficulty. Her running away shocked her mother, father, and brother, far more than her being a lesbian. The hurt she caused them had healed over the past couple of years. When she reappeared after her mother Ida died, her father Alfonso did not know how he ought to react to her. Nor did he know if he even wanted her to be there. Yet, Anita had returned for her mother's funeral. Her father felt that meant something although he was not certain what it was. Maybe his daughter still had feelings for her parents. He knew he still had feelings for her. Nonetheless, they became a tight family again and never doubted their love for each other.

Anita's phone rang when she was making dinner. "Hello?"

"Hi, I'm calling for Anita."

"Speaking."

"I'm Allie Haines. Remember me from the meeting last week?"

"Of course. Hi."

"I wanted to ask you to be part of a planning committee."

"A planning committee?" Anita asked.

"For the big parade we're doing."

"Oh, that. No thanks. I won't be going."

"Oh," Allie sounded disappointed. "Any reason?"

"It's not for me."

"You're not a lesbian? You don't support gays and lesbians?"

"Yes, and yes. But, I don't think a parade is the best way to show it. It's gonna be a huge party but it won't accomplish anything," Anita explained. Allie found her candor refreshing.

"But, it gets us out there to be recognized. Maybe people's ideas about us will change."

"You don't see straight people marching around proclaiming 'I'm straight!'"

"True. But they don't have to," Allie replied.

"And *we* do?"

"I think so, yes."

"Why?" Anita asked.

"Well, if for no other reason than it makes us feel better about who we are." Allie's confidence impressed Anita but she still felt apprehensive.

"That's it?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"Um, no. Not nearly."

"I don't think you know what some of these people have gone through," Allie replied. Her sincerity impressed Anita.

“So... why don't you tell me?”

“When they came out they lost everything and everyone in their lives. For the simple truth about who they are. They were rejected, abandoned, banished, reviled, and even hated. They had to start over by finding understanding friends but at the same time feeling exposed and vulnerable. For some of them, that vulnerability was crushing. It destroyed them or wounded them for the rest of their lives. This pride parade is their way of saying ‘Hey, I’m okay. I’m not wounded. You didn’t destroy me. I survived your rejection. And sooner or later you gotta accept me.”

“Nobody I’ve met had told me anything like that,” Anita replied.

“Well, that’s mostly what I hear from the gays and lesbians I talk to.”

“I still don’t see how a parade is gonna change any minds.”

“It might not change the straight people’s minds but it will help gays and lesbians find strength in numbers,” Allie explained. “There are more of us than the straight world thinks and it’s time for us to come out of hiding.”

“My problem is this ‘us versus them’ idea. I’m not anyone’s enemy. I’m just a person. My being a lesbian isn’t the most important aspect of my personality.”

“Oh? So what is?”

“Being a daughter, sister, sister-in-law, and aunt.”

“You still have a family?” Allie asked, astonished.

“Yes. One that loves me as much as I love them.”

“You never had to hide your lesbianism from them?”

“The only person I hid it from was myself but that was because I was ignorant,” Anita confessed. She felt astonished at how comfortable she felt talking to Allie.

“I envy you, Anita.”

“Why?”

“Because you haven’t gone through what the rest of us have. You don’t know how lucky you are.”

“Lucky?”

“Anita, most of us have suffered a lot.” Anita felt Allie was stating a fact and not looking for sympathy. Her honest directness impressed Anita.

“Well, I’ve suffered, too. Everybody suffers.”

“Yeah, but you haven’t suffered for being a lesbian. You’ve suffered for love,” Allie replied. She envied Anita.

“I think I see what you mean.”

“Look, I have to go. I would like to meet with you sometime. Do you ever come downtown?”

“I work downtown.”

“Oh, where?” Allie asked.

“At the Boyd.”

“That old theater at 19th and Chestnut?”

“Yes.”

“My bookshop isn’t far from there. Could you stop by some time, or could we meet for coffee somewhere in-between? I’d like to talk to you some more.”

“Okay, I guess. I can try to stop by after work. Would that be okay?”

“That would be great. I look forward to seeing you. ‘Bye.’ Allie hung up before Anita could reply. *She looks forward to seeing me?* she thought. *Why? I’m nobody special, and I just shot down her entire idea.*

Chapter 2 - What Is Normal?

Allie Haines felt ready to cry. She had just turned down the third boy who asked her to dance and she knew the boys were getting suspicious. Allie also knew why they approached her. Everyone considered her one of the most beautiful girls in the high school and wanted to dance with her. However, there was one big problem. It was not that Allie didn't or couldn't dance. It was that the person she wanted to dance with hadn't asked her. She would gladly have danced, but only with Ginny Curtis. Allie knew Ginny was like her even though they had spoken only a few times and had no classes together.

Allie had come to the dance dressed as attractively as she could hoping Ginny might notice her. So far, Ginny was not aware Allie was in the gymnasium. She stood across the room with a couple of friends, talking animatedly, laughing, and having what looked like a good time. Allie wished she could share in that good time. She also wished she could tell Ginny she liked her but Ginny was a senior and Allie was only a sophomore.

Another timid boy approached her. He was someone she knew from one of her classes, Larry something. He was a good-looking fellow who seemed to go out of his way to appear nerdy. He wore thick, black-rimmed glasses that made his eyes seem bigger than they were. Allie smiled when she saw him. "Hello," she said before he stopped in front of her. Larry smiled. She felt sorry for him. She knew she had to reject him or it might seem she wanted to dance with boys and then what would Ginny think? She might assume Allie was not attracted to girls and was okay with boys. Allie did not want to send that message but she also did not want to hurt Larry's feelings.

"I was wondering..."

Allie cut him short. "I'm a terrible dancer," she lied, frowning. "But, I might like some punch if you got it for me." Her suggestion delighted Larry and he hurried away. Allie hoped Ginny had not been looking while she and Larry talked. She tried to think of a way she could chat with Larry when he came back but not make it seem as if she wanted to be with him.

"So, I liked your science fair project," Allie said when he returned with the punch.

"Oh, thanks. It was no big deal."

"Maybe not for you, but it impressed me." Shit! Did she just compliment him? Would that give him the idea she felt interested in him? "How did you come up with it?"

"I read about it in a magazine and it seemed easy to make," Larry replied. His project had been a 'computer' that played a simple toothpick game known as '23.' It was rigged so that no matter what its human opponent did, it would always win.

"Yeah, but how does it know what to do?"

"Simple math, Allie. There are only a small number of possible moves in the game, so it's easy to anticipate them and wire it for them." Allie thought she should make a move before Larry did.

"I see. Well, thanks for the punch, Larry. See you in class," she abruptly broke off their conversation, sipped her punch, and slowly walked away, hoping Larry would not feel offended. He watched her and wondered what he did to make her leave when they seemed to hit it off. One of his friends came over and stood next to him.

"She gave you the cold shoulder?" Bob asked.

"Not really. We were talking. I thought we were doing okay. Then she just walked away. I don't know what I did."

"It's not you, Larry. Everybody thinks she doesn't like guys."

“What does that mean?” Larry asked.

“She only likes girls.”

“I don’t get it.”

“She’s probably a lezzie,” Bob said.

“A what?”

“Never mind, Larry. Why don’t you come over and join the group of Allie Haines rejects. You’ll fit right in.”

“Oh, okay.”

Allie took her punch, walked out to the pay phone in the hallway, and called her father to pick her up. He arrived ten minutes later and asked if she had a good time. “It was fun,” she lied. Allie rode home feeling dejected. She had hoped the dance with its relaxed grade boundaries would enable her to interact with Ginny but she had made no progress and wasted her evening. She would have to find another way to connect with Ginny.

She found it later that night in her dreams. She and Ginny met in the schoolyard, talked, laughed, looked deeply into each other’s eyes, and discovered they felt meant for each other. They met after school, found an empty classroom, and kissed. Later, in another dream, they went on a date, sat in the dark balcony of the Orpheum Theater, held hands, and sighed. Allie wanted more to happen in the dream but she did not know what happened after people kissed. She awoke all tingly and wet but did not know why.

Allie looked up from the counter when she heard the Rainbow bookshop door open and saw Anita walk in. “Oh, hi. Thanks for coming by,” Allie greeted her, smiling.

“Is this a good time?”

“Yes. There’s not much going on right now.”

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Anita asked, cautiously.

“Well, I’m not gonna try to persuade you to help with organizing the parade, so don’t worry. You were very clear about your feelings.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“I wanted to talk to you about how unique you are,” Allie explained, without hesitation.

“Why? Because I’m a lesbian? It’s no big deal. It’s just what I am.”

“I know you see it that way but do you know how unusual you are? Most of us have had major struggles to understand and accept ourselves, to say nothing about having other people-often people we care about- accept us. Mostly, we’re just rejected and ostracized. That doesn’t seem to have happened to you.”

“Well, now that you mention it, you’re right,” Anita replied. She still didn’t get why Allie felt it necessary to talk to her.

“Do you know why?”

“Not really. I was just another runaway, and I didn’t come back until after my mother died. My brother had already accepted me. I think my father was relieved I’d come back and didn’t want to do anything that would alienate me ever again.”

“Why did you run away?” Allie asked.

“I was in love with my best friend, only I didn’t know it. I couldn’t live without her. I had no idea I was a lesbian. I didn’t even know that word.”

“What happened with her?”

“She told me she liked me but wasn’t *like* me. She was careful to make it clear she just wanted to be friends. I met some other lesbians who took me in, got me a job, and let me hang out with them. But I was still a confused virgin.”

“How long did that last?” Allie asked, fascinated by Anita’s story. Although she was twenty-five, because she was a petite woman, Anita seemed much younger. The contrast between her appearance and her wisdom impressed Allie.

It seemed Anita knew herself well. Allie knew that was unusual. Most people she knew—straight or gay—didn’t know themselves. Or, at least, they wouldn’t admit to themselves how they truly were. Anita seemed different, and Allie liked her even more.

“It lasted a couple of months. Then I met an older woman who fell in love with me, only I didn’t know it at first. She was my first and I’ve never forgotten that night.”

“What happened to her?” Allie asked.

“We lived together for a while but she lost interest in me.”

“She found somebody else?” Allie asked.

“No, she found *something* else— a movie theater. It was the fulfillment of her dream, and I wasn’t. So I left her.”

“What theater?”

“The Rialto, in Germantown.”

“Sophia Cohen?”

“You know her?”

Allie nodded. “Knew her. She’s long gone. Went out to the West Coast, last I heard. She and I were around the same age but we were only acquaintances. I liked her, though.”

“She was alright, I guess. It was a long time ago.”

“Did you love her?” Allie asked, pointedly. She had a reason for asking.

“Well, I fell in love with her because she fell in love with me. I never doubted her love until it was clear I was no longer her first love.”

“At least it wasn’t another woman,” Allie commented.

“No, but it still hurt. I would have stayed with her if her feelings hadn’t changed.”

“Everyone’s feelings change sooner or later. It’s the way life is.”

“Yes, I’ve figured that out,” Anita replied.

“So, are you with anyone now?”

“No, I’m happier alone.”

“What about your family?”

“They don’t seem to care either way. I met my last girlfriend Nancy and stayed with her at my Dad’s house and he had no problem with it. He seemed happy because I was happy, although we moved out when it seemed better to have a place of our own. He never changed and was still supportive.”

“He loves you very much,” Allie said. She envied Anita.

“I know, despite what I did to him and my mom.”

“He forgave you.”

“Yes, but he didn’t make a big thing out of it. He just hugged me but said nothing.”

“You’re really lucky, Anita. Do you have any idea how many homosexuals would envy you? Their families rejected them and expelled them. They yearn for normalcy and acceptance, which is what you have.”

“I’ve always had it,” Anita replied. “From when I told my brother Tony and he didn’t even say anything.”

“You and he must have been very close.”

“We were, and still are. He teases that I’m his favorite sister but I’m his only sister. That’s our little joke.”

“So, do you see how unique your situation is?” Allie asked. “Most of us can’t go home again, but *you* did and they accepted you.”

“Well, not my mom. She died before I went back. She never knew but I don’t think she would have cared, either.”

“The movement needs you, Anita. It needs normal people like you. So many of us have been wounded by how our families treated us.”

“What could I do? I can’t change that. I mean, I’m sorry about it, and it’s horrible, but that’s just the way it is, right?”

Anita found herself dropping by Rainbow Bookshop whenever she needed a good conversation and Allie welcomed her. She found herself liking Allie although she was not attracted to her. One reason was that Allie was older and she reminded Anita of Sophia.

Allie was different from the other people she met. She had a unique perspective on life, possibly because she was older and likely because as a lesbian had always been something of an outsider. Anita liked that Allie understood things and could explain them, and she never seemed to talk down to Anita. She felt Allie treated her like an equal, which was how Allie regarded her.

They were chatting one Friday afternoon when it occurred to Anita to ask a personal question.

“Remember the first time I came in here and you asked me if I was with anybody?” she asked. Allie smiled and nodded. “Well, I didn’t ask you, so I am curious- are you?” Somehow, Allie knew Anita was asking out of genuine curiosity and not because she was interested in anything romantic. Allie sighed and seemed to hesitate before answering.

“Me neither, unfortunately.”

“I hope you don’t mind my asking.”

“No, no, of course not. I’ve been with some wonderful women. I still write to a few of them.”

“Where are they?”

“Scattered around. You know how it is- people get jobs and move away. They don’t want to. I certainly didn’t want them to- but we agreed it was best for their careers. I was often asked to go, but I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I was still at Temple, and I wanted to get my degree more than anything. One girlfriend graduated ahead of me but couldn’t find a job here in Philadelphia. Callie’s somewhere in Oregon now, I think. After I graduated, I roamed around the country for several years and looked around for something I wanted to do. I had no luck anywhere, so I came back here and did odd jobs.

“Then I heard about some people who wanted to start a coffee house. It had always been a dream of mine to have a place where people could come and make music. I’m not musical but I love music. I had saved some money so I bought in and then ended up running Hecate’s Circle. It was more than a full-time job. Around that time, I had a girlfriend, Leslie. She got a job in Virginia and asked- no, *begged* me- to go with her. I wanted to but Hecate’s needed me. It would have closed if I left, and I couldn’t do that to the others who were involved so I stayed. I don’t regret it but it was hard to let her go.”

“It’s always hard even when there’s no other choice.”

“That’s what I like about you, Anita.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have a certain philosophical wisdom that most other people I meet lack.”

“I’m just being honest,” Anita replied.

“Do you have any idea how rare that is? Most people- gay and straight- don’t know how to be honest, especially not about themselves.”

“I never thought about it. I’m nobody special.”

“And you’re modest, too!” Allie teased. Anita grinned.

“Thanks,” she replied, feeling awkward.

“I mean it. You have what I can only call a ‘gift.’ You seem understanding, compassionate, forgiving, and genuine. Many people could benefit from knowing you. You could help them see themselves better, and maybe grow a bit.”

“Grow?”

“A lot of us got stuck in the hurts we suffered when we discovered what we were, came out to the people we loved, and then got rejected. We were only trying to be honest, and all we asked for was love and understanding, but they turned on us as if we were some sort of horrible creatures, like monsters. We got stuck in their belief that something was wrong with us. We find solace in being with others like us, but it’s not the same. We want to be with people to whom our difference doesn’t matter and there are very few. We just want to be normal, but we’re not allowed, and that hurts.” Allie’s voice began to break near the end of her speech.

Anita had the urge to offer Allie a hug but she did not know if Allie would accept it or feel offended. Instead, she asked a question. “You wanna talk about it, Allie?”

“Some other time,” Allie replied. “I can’t cry here in the store. Might drive customers away,” she added, forcing herself to smile. Anita nodded. Her heart went out to Allie. She could wait to hear her story.

Chapter 3 - Ordeal

Ginny Curtis graduated before Allie got the chance to get to know her. She never even got close enough to feel Ginny's presence and drink in Ginny's allure. Allie did not understand why Ginny had attracted her. She looked at the other girls and wondered if she felt anything for them. No one drew her the same way Ginny had, but she was gone.

Allie went to the party knowing she should not be there. Her parents would have forbidden her to go. She lied and told them she was staying at a friend's house. Natalie agreed to lie for Allie but refused to attend the party with her. Allie would be on her own. It was risky but this party was too good to pass up.

There would be many boys, but she could avoid them if she was careful. There would also be many girls from high schools other than hers and of different ages. She dressed as attractively as she could and hoped she might meet someone- anyone- like herself.

The party was at a large house that belonged to Jacqui Andrews, a girl she did not know. Allie had heard her name but did not recall ever seeing her. She thought the girl went to her high school. Allie assumed Jacqui was a senior. Her parents had money and went away on business a lot. They left Jacqui home alone because she was in school.

Jacqui rarely held parties but when she did word got around fast and many kids showed up. She never had alcohol but party crashers brought it anyway, as she knew they would, so plenty of booze was always around. The parties were raucous, loud, and sometimes dangerous (because the alcohol dulled everyone's inhibitions) but never attracted complaints or police because Jacqui's house was on a large estate near a wooded area.

Allie walked to the party from Natalie's house. She dressed in typical 1950s teenager clothing: a flared skirt, tight blouse, and dark patent leather shoes. Her skirt was just long enough to cover her thighs but did not reach her knees. Her top accentuated her breasts and narrow waist while covering every inch of her torso, including her arms. She would not wear the same outfit to a dance in the school gym. The skirt was too short and her top was too tight. Allie knew she would have to reveal more than a school dance would allow if she hoped to attract any girls like her. She also knew she was likely to attract boys, but felt confident she could deal with them.

The front door was open. Allie walked in and wandered around. She strolled casually through several rooms and checked out the other kids. People stood in clusters around the snack tables or near the punch bowls. She helped herself to punch, then took her glass and retreated to a wall so she could survey the others. Allie thought she would see people she knew but no one looked familiar. She looked at some other girls but felt nothing. They did not seem to notice her.

Some boys had already noticed her and were trying to decide how they could approach her, as Allie knew they would. She had rehearsed a few gentle, kind rebuffs she had used in the past. She was not aware those rebuffs only worked when there was no alcohol present, as at school events. This party was a new environment and Allie felt unprepared for it.

The boys- some of them, at least- came prepared. They brought rubber condoms and were eager for an opportunity to use them. It had been difficult to get them, and expensive. They bought them from a guy whose older brother had a friend who knew someone who worked in a drugstore and could get them secretly. The boys hoped their effort was worth it and they could use the condoms.

Rubbers did not concern Allie. She would not need one if she managed to connect with another girl and had sex with her. That was what she had come for. She did not care who that girl

might be or whether she even knew her name. She just wanted to touch her and be touched by her so she could find out what that was like, and then go home changed.

She heard loud music coming from somewhere in the house, found a stairway, went down, and entered a large recreation room. Some people were dancing to music that boomed from a huge, garishly lit jukebox. Others stood around talking or watching. Most held cups of punch or bottles of beer.

Allie did not share her peers' obsession with intoxication. She could not understand what the attraction was. Her parents were not drinkers and kept alcohol only for occasional guests. She assumed her older brothers drank socially but had never seen one of them drunk and did not know what her parents would do if that happened. They were not religious fanatics that opposed alcohol. They taught their children about the dangers of intoxication and made it clear those dangers outweighed any advantages or pleasures gained from drinking.

Allie did not know some boys had spiked the punch with hard liquor. She did not know what booze tasted like and the sweet punch masked the flavor of the alcohol. She assumed the punch was there for people who preferred not to drink alcohol. How naïve she was! She was likely the only teenager at the party who preferred not to drink. The punch was merely another way of imbibing alcohol.

She found another punchbowl on a table with snacks near the jukebox and refilled her glass. No one looked familiar down there. None of the girls seemed to notice her but several boys did. She caught them looking at her and quickly looked away. It was only a matter of time before one of them approached her.

"I haven't seen you before," the boy said, trying not to seem awkward. He was a cute dark-haired boy who seemed uncomfortable approaching her. Allie liked him immediately.

"I guess we go to different schools," Allie replied, amiably.

"I'm at St. Joe's Prep. Where are you?"

"At a lowly public high school, I'm afraid," she replied.

The boy grinned. "Nothing wrong with public schools," he said. "They sure produce some pretty girls. What's your name?"

"Allie. What's yours?"

"Jeff. Wanna dance?"

"I'm terrible."

"I saw you swaying to the slow song. You didn't look terrible to me."

"Oh, I'm fine when I just sway. But, I'm lousy with a partner. Thanks for asking, though." She smiled at Jeff and then started to walk away. He grabbed her arm.

"Don't go. We could sit and talk."

"It's noisy here."

"I know some quieter places in the house," Jeff said. Allie pulled her arm away.

"Thanks, but no thanks," she said, smiling. She immediately worried she was sending mixed signals. She was rebuffing him but also smiling at him. Would he see her as coy?

Luckily, Jeff had not drunk enough alcohol to be rude or pushy and he was a nice kid who only wanted to meet some new girls. So was Allie, but she could not tell that to Jeff. It would not have made him feel any better about her rejection.

"Well, nice talking to you, Allie. Hope I see you around."

Allie wanted to leave the room. She headed toward the stairway and went back upstairs. Not much had changed. There were still clusters of kids in each room. Most held drinks of some kind. They were laughing and talking. She looked for single partygoers, hoping to see an isolated

girl, possibly someone like her. She noticed someone she recognized, a girl named Sarah from her school. She did not know what grade Sarah was in but had seen her in the gymnasium a few times. Sarah sat on the huge sofa, alone. Allie walked over to her and said hello.

“I think we go to the same school,” she said. Sarah looked up.

“Oh, yes, hi. I recognize you, but I don’t know your name. I don’t know anybody’s name, right now. I’m so wasted,” Sarah replied.

“I’m Allie.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“I noticed you sitting here all alone. Didn’t you come with friends?” Allie asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t know what happened to them. How about you?”

“I came alone.”

“That was brave,” Sarah commented.

“Not really. I’ve never been to a big party like this with all these kids from different schools. I wanted to see what it was like, maybe meet some new people, you know?”

“Well, there are lots of new people here, especially new boys. They’re hitting on every girl they can, especially the ones they don’t know.”

“That’s because the ones they do know have already rejected them,” Allie replied, smirking. Sarah giggled.

“Yeah, they ask you to dance, but they’re sooo clumsy.”

“I know, and they think they’re so cool. All they want is to feel you up in the dark,” Allie joked. Sarah giggled.

“Right. I’d much rather dance with my girlfriends. It’s way more fun.”

“I know. Say, would you like to come downstairs and dance with me?”

“Well, sure, I think... *if* I can get up from this sofa.” Sarah tried to stand but hesitated. Allie reached out her hand and pulled the girl up. She was unsteady on her feet and slumped against Allie, who felt Sarah’s body heat, and then her own.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure dancing is such a good idea.”

“Maybe you need some air,” Allie suggested. “We could go outside for a bit.”

“That’s a great idea,” Sarah replied. Allie reached boldly for Sarah’s hand and pulled her across the room.

As they reached the door, a boy yelled over the din of voices, “Who let the lezzies in?” He meant it as a joke. Several people laughed. No one believed there were real lesbians at the party. Allie hoped Sarah was too drunk to respond but was disappointed immediately.

“Wait,” Sarah said. “I changed my mind. It’s too chilly out there. I think I’ll go back to my sofa. Nice meeting you.” She hurried away. Allie closed her eyes. She did not want to look at the others in the room because she felt all their eyes were on her. Allie opened her eyes, focused on the doorway to the kitchen, and then left the room, frustrated. However, she was not ready to give up yet.

She refilled her glass from the punchbowl and wandered out to the huge porch at the back of the house. It was dark and strangely quiet. She saw couples on the benches and porch lounges. Allie knew what they were doing. She tried not to look and then hurried back into the kitchen.

“I see you found the love nest,” someone said behind her. Allie turned and saw a short, pudgy girl with a large smile, bright red hair, and sparkling eyes.

“Um, yeah. I stumbled in. Hope I didn’t disturb anybody.”

“Oh, I’m sure they didn’t notice you. They’re too into each other- if you know what I mean.”

“Pretty sure I do,” Allie replied, smiling. The girl looked at Allie.

“God, you’re beautiful. Why aren’t you out there with a boy? Don’t tell me they haven’t tried.”

“I’ve only talked to one boy tonight and he was very nice, but he didn’t ask me out there. He just asked me to dance.”

“Oh yeah, that’s what they all do. Then they feel you up while you’re dancing, hoping to get you hot, then they suggest you go someplace dark and cozy.”

“Then what happens?” Allie asked, drolly.

“Um, you don’t know?”

“I can guess.”

“You mean it hasn’t happened to you?” the girl asked.

“Never.”

“Wow. You don’t get out much, do you?”

“Not to parties like this. Just to school dances where the adults watch everybody like hawks.”

“Yeah, those things are a waste.”

“I guess you’re speaking from experience?” Allie asked.

“Um, no. I’m not. Look at me. No one invites me into the dark. They just want girls like you.”

“And, what do you want?” Allie asked, boldly. She already liked this strange girl.

“To be honest? Girls like you, beautiful girls that will see the beauty in me, and want to share it.”

“Are you serious?”

“Completely. It’s why I have these parties from time to time.”

“Wait, you’re Jacqui Andrews?”

“The one and only. And you are?”

“Allie Haines.”

“Pleased to meet you, Allie Haines.”

“I was wondering if you meant what you said a moment ago.”

“About what?” Jacqui asked.

“Wanting a girl who would appreciate you.”

“Did I say that? It must be the booze. I’ve had a little, myself.”

“Did you mean it?” Allie pressed. She looked into Jacqui’s eyes, which suddenly lit up with a fire she had never seen in anyone’s eyes before.

“Are you asking me out to the porch?” Jacqui said cautiously.

“I hope I’m not offending you.”

“God, no. Do you really want to go out there with *me*? God, yes! ”

“If you’ll have me.”

“Well, that’s the problem. You see, I’ve never done this before,” Jacqui confessed.

“It’s not a problem. Neither have I.”

“Oh. Then, what are we waiting for?” Jacqui took Allie’s hand and led her outside. “I know a better place away from the porch,” she whispered, “where nobody will bother us.”

“Lead on.” They stepped down into the yard and assumed no one noticed them. A couple of people looked up as they passed and others watched through the window. They thought it

strange that Jacqui and Allie walked hand-in-hand in the darkness, but alcohol fogged everyone's perceptions and they did not think about what they saw.

There was a grove of trees behind the house. The largest tree had a treehouse about ten feet above the ground. The partial moon brightened the ladder just enough for Jacqui and Allie to climb up easily.

"This was my play space when I was a kid. Now it's my sanctuary. I come out here to dream."

"Oh, that's nice. What do you dream about?"

"Being here with someone like you," Jacqui replied, breathlessly. When they reached the top, Allie mashed her lips against Jacqui's. They were burning. "Oh, God. You don't know how long I've wanted to do that with someone."

"Probably as long as I have. Let's do it again." They did, but harder and longer and were both panting when their kiss ended.

"Allie, I think I just fell in love with you," Jacqui said, excitedly.

"But, we hardly know each other."

"Well, we can change that, can't we?" Jacqui said, shyly. "That is... if you want to."

"Oh, I want to." Allie reached to touch Jacqui's breasts through the cloth of her blouse. Jacqui moaned and lay back on the hard wooden treehouse floor. Allie fondled Jacqui, who smiled.

"God, Allie, you know just what to do."

"You inspire me," Allie replied. Jacqui moaned and then started to sob. "What's wrong?" Allie asked, concerned.

"You don't know how long I've waited for someone to say something like that to me."

"You don't know how long I've waited for someone to say it to," Allie replied. "I've searched for someone like me but always failed."

"And, to think we were there in the same school all the time." They were quiet for a while, basking in their newfound intimacy.

"Would you like to touch me under my skirt?" Allie asked.

"Oh, yes!" Allie took Jacqui's hand and guided it past the hem of her skirt. She touched Jacqui's fingertips to the flesh of her thighs and shuddered. Jacqui noticed the effect her touch had on Allie and smiled back.

"Did I do that?" she asked.

"Yes, yes you did. Do you want to keep going?"

"Try and stop me." Jacqui ran her fingertips up Allie's inner thigh toward her crotch.

They spent some time exploring each other and forgot about the party, the house, their school, the kids from the other schools, and the entire world beyond the treehouse. Then they heard a male voice.

"I saw them come out this way," someone said.

"Look, there's a treehouse."

"That must be where they are." The girls froze. There were at least three distinct voices, and they were too close for Jacqui and Allie to climb down and run away. Jacqui reached for the ladder, hoping to push it down, but someone had already started climbing. In a moment, a head appeared above the floor.

"They're here!" the boy yelled down to his companions.

"What do you want?" Jacqui yelled.

“Nice treehouse. We’ve come for a little visit, haven’t we, boys?” Jacqui looked around for something, a piece of wood, anything to fight them with, but saw nothing she could use. “You girls having a good time?” the boy asked, as a second boy came up the ladder. “We came to join you.”

“We?” Allie asked, trying to sound calm.

“Larry, Walt, Nathan, and I. We came to save you from yourselves.”

“We don’t need saving,” Allie replied, boldly. “You can go.”

“Oh, no. Not until we get what we came for.”

“And what is that?” Jacqui asked, frightened.

“It doesn’t concern you, fatso!”

“Just *her*,” the second boy added. Allie pulled up her legs and tried to think of a way to defend herself. She thought she knew why they were there. Jacqui clung to her tightly. A third boy arrived.

“Pull her off and keep her away,” the unnamed boy said. The other two went toward Jacqui, grabbed her, and pulled her up. She screamed.

“Leave me alone. This is *my* tree house! You have no right to be here.”

“We have every right. We’re here to teach you a lesson, aren’t we boys?”

“Damn right. We don’t allow lezzies around here.”

“But, this is my party and *my* house. You should leave.”

“Not until we’re done.” The boys held Jacqui by her arms. She tried to break away but they slapped her.

“Leave her alone!” Allie shrieked.

“Oh, she doesn’t have to worry,” the fourth boy, who had just climbed, said. “We don’t want her. She’s an ugly, fat pig not worth fucking. But you...” The first boy started to unbuckle his pants. Allie shrunk back into the corner of the treehouse.

“Larry, hold the fat one. Nate and Walt, hold this one down.” Larry grabbed both Jacqui’s arms. She struggled but was so afraid they would hit her again that she felt any struggle was useless. Allie watched the dark figures approach her. Two boys grabbed her arms. The third lifted her skirt, pulled her panties off, and got on top of her. She screamed when he penetrated. Pain, fear, and alcohol haze overwhelmed her. She tried to remember what she had heard about this kind of thing. What should she do? Fight? Scream? Surrender? Maybe they would not hurt her if she surrendered.

The boy grunted in the darkness. His friends laughed. “Get her, Joe,” they encouraged him. She felt something sticky as he pulled out and realized he had not worn a rubber. *Oh, God, Allie thought. I hope he didn’t just make me pregnant!*

Larry took Nate’s place and he approached Allie. “Don’t you have a rubber?” she pleaded. He laughed.

“Not gonna waste one on a lezzie,” he said as he penetrated her. He was bigger than the first boy and she winced in pain. Jacqui closed her eyes and prayed for the incident to be over as fast as possible. She feared all the boys would fuck Allie before they left them alone, and felt sorry for her new friend and herself. How could their newfound intimacy survive this?

Three months later, Allie’s pants felt tight. She asked if her mother had somehow shrunk them. Her mother looked at Allie’s belly and panicked. “I don’t think it’s your pants,” she said. She took Allie to the family doctor and he confirmed she was pregnant. Her mother did not ask for any details. She told Allie everything was going to be okay and not to worry.

A few weeks later, her mother told Allie to pack some clothes because she was going away for a while. Allie did not know what she meant. She protested that had another year of high school. Her mother told her she would finish when she came back. Allie panicked and wondered how long she would be away. Her mother said nothing more.

The nuns at St. Mary's welcomed Allie without smiles or warmth. Allie did not understand why she was there. Her family was not Catholic. They put her in a room with a scrawny older woman whose belly was huge. She seemed morose and Allie did not talk to her at first. Then late one night, she woke Allie by shaking her.

"You don't seem very pregnant," the woman said.

"What?"

"Your belly isn't like mine. Looks to me like it won't be for a while."

"I'm somewhere between four and five months," Allie explained.

"Oh. I'm almost due."

"How long have you been here?"

"About a week. I just came here to give birth; then I'm gone."

"What about your baby?" Allie asked.

"Oh, I'll probably never see little whoosis," the woman replied, grinning. Allie could not see her in the dark.

"That's awful."

"No, it's good. I don't want it. I just want it out of me so I can go home."

"But, it's your child," Allie protested.

"Not for long. Once I get rid of it, it becomes somebody else's problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, somebody adopts it," The woman replied, matter-of-factly.

"That's awful."

"No, it's what I want. It's why I came here. It's what they do."

"They *take* your baby?" Allie asked, shocked.

"Yes. They get rid of it for you. Then you go back to your life as if nothing has happened."

"But, what if you want to keep it?" Allie asked, aghast.

"Do you? You're just a kid. What do you know about babies?"

"Don't I have a choice? Nobody asked me."

"Oh, they don't ask, child- say, what's your name, anyway?"

"Allie."

"Hi, Allie. I'm Maggie. No, you don't have a choice. Didn't anybody tell you?"

"No. My mom arranged everything," Allie explained.

"She arranged for you to give birth and give your baby up for adoption. That's what this place, and these nuns, is for."

Allie burst into tears. "No, no, it can't be. I won't let them."

"Too late. Once you're here, it's a done deal. You'll thank your mom someday." Allie felt certain that day would never come.

"So, you're a mom?" Anita asked, shocked by Allie's story.

Allie nodded. "Well, I gave birth, but that doesn't make me a mom. At least, I don't feel like a mom. But, my kid's probably in college now."

"Have you ever tried to find her or him?"

“No. All the records were sealed. It’s unlikely my kid would try to find me since the adoption took place right away, I think. I’m certain no one told him or her about the adoption.”

“That must hurt.”

“It does, despite the way I got pregnant.”

“What happened after the birth?”

“I went back home, finished high school a year behind all my friends, and went away to college. I couldn’t wait to get away from my parents. I’ve never gone back. They don’t know where I am. They paid for my school but I managed to avoid them for four years. I didn’t go to my graduation. I just took my diploma and disappeared. I think my mother got the message that I hated her for what she did to me and she never pressed me for anything else, not even a visit. I guess she thought I would eventually forgive her but I never have.”

“You wanted the baby?”

“Yes. I would have done anything for my baby- left school, even. I wasn’t ashamed.”

“Did you tell them you were raped?”

“They never asked. They didn’t even care. I was an embarrassment to them. That was all that mattered. They had to hide me and get rid of the baby- *my* baby.” Allie filled up with tears. Anita stood up, walked to Allie’s chair, and put her arms around her shoulders. “I would have been a good mother,” Allie said through her sobs.

“I bet you would have,” Anita replied, soothingly.

“Thing is, Anita, I’ve never told anyone else about this. There’s something about you that made me trust you and want to share it with you. You’re different.”

“I’m not, but *you* are, Allie. I admire you for all you’ve achieved. And, I sympathize with you for all you’ve lost. You’re a remarkable woman. I’m glad we’re friends.”

“So am I, Anita, so am I.”

Chapter 4 - Louisa

The next time Anita dropped by Rainbow Bookshop she found Allie surrounded by a group of other women and assumed she had stumbled on a meeting. Anita was about to leave when Allie interrupted a woman who was speaking and called Anita over to the group.

"I'd like you to meet my friend Anita Cataldi. What you need to know about her is that she *listens*," Allie said. Anita did not know what Allie's comment meant and felt embarrassed. A couple of women smiled at her. Others assumed she was Allie's new girlfriend. Cassandra looked Anita over from head to toe and nodded approvingly. Allie noticed Cassandra's reaction and smiled.

"I'm... um... sorry to barge in. I didn't know you were busy," Anita apologized.

"It's okay. Do you want to join us?" Allie asked.

Anita shook her head. "No, I'm kind of tired from work. I'll drop by in a day or two. Nice seeing you all!" she said and turned to hurry out.

What the hell did Allie mean by 'she listens?' Anita thought as she walked to the subway so she could ride back to Germantown where she lived with her father, Alfonso. *Listens to what? Music, poetry, phone calls?*

What Allie meant was that Anita listened to *people*. She had a way of paying attention to what people said and reacting sympathetically that was rare. When most people engaged in conversations, they barely heard what others said and spent their time thinking about what they would say. Anita did not do that. She opened herself to the other person in the conversation and did not allow her personality, thoughts, or concerns to intrude. Allie had felt a deep acceptance when she told Anita about her rape, pregnancy, and losing her baby to unknown adoptive parents. She also felt something beyond acceptance. She felt healing.

"Allie said I should talk to you, but I hardly know you, and it's asking a lot, so it would be okay if you just said no," Louisa blurted out. Allie had given her Anita's phone number but she felt awkward reaching out to a stranger.

"It's okay, but I don't have a lot of time right now. Can we meet somewhere?"

"Yeah. Why don't you come to my place for coffee? My roommate works on the weekends so we can have some privacy."

"Wait, you have a roommate? Then why would you want to talk to *me*? I'm just a stranger."

"You may be a stranger, but Janice is just strange. We don't talk about ourselves. We just share rent. She's not much of a friend and certainly not my confidante."

"So you want me to be your confidante?" Anita asked, feeling apprehensive. She was regretting Allie's comment, 'she listens.'

"No, no, that's heavy. I'm sorry. Look, I'll explain everything if you still want to come over." Anita thought about her choice. She did not want to listen to other people's problems but felt Louisa's anguish through the phone. It seemed obvious that she needed help, and if a shoulder to cry on was all she wanted, how could Anita not support her?

Louisa was a slender, dark-haired, perky woman. She had a bright, pretty face that belonged to a teenager although Anita guessed she was in her thirties. Louisa also seemed restless.

She had coffee ready along with an Entenmann crumb cake, Anita's favorite. *Allie must have told her what I like*, she thought, impressed. They sat at the kitchen table. It seemed less formal than the sofa and high back chair only a few feet away in Louisa's small West Philly apartment.

"Did you have any trouble finding this place?" she asked. "Many of these old apartment buildings look alike. They're not much on the outside but they can be nice on the inside."

"No. The address was clearly marked. I like the garden out front. You don't see those much. It's a bit run down, though."

"Yeah. The landlord just collects the rent and sometimes fixes stuff, but that's about it. The place needs a couple of old ladies with time on their hands to keep the garden up. Trouble is, all those old ladies who used to live here are gone, and it's mostly younger people now. University students, workers, there's even a doctor or two from the nearby hospital. But, I like it. It's mostly quiet, which is nice."

"Quiet is good... So, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Thanks for asking," Louisa replied. She seemed relieved. Anita wondered if Louisa felt awkward telling a stranger whatever it is that she needed to talk about. "Me, actually, just me."

"You don't have to apologize."

"I guess I'm feeling a little embarrassed."

"Don't be. We're just two people sharing coffee and cake at a kitchen table in a small West Philly apartment."

"You think it's small?" Louisa asked, suddenly defensive. Anita regretted her offhand comment. *Louisa seems really sensitive, awkward, and hesitant*, Anita thought. She cautioned herself to be careful what she said.

"I live in a row house. It's just my dad and me. My brother, his wife, and their daughter have a place of their own. It's a big second-floor apartment in an old house in Germantown."

"So, yeah, it's small." Louisa grinned. "But, it's home."

"How long have you lived here?"

"About six months."

"Where were you before?"

"In a South Philly row house. Probably a lot like yours."

"You didn't like it there?" Anita asked.

"I had to move out. I couldn't stay," Louisa said and then paused.

"Because...?"

Louise looked down at her coffee cup. She had yet to take a sip. "I fell in love with the girl next door."

Anita waited for more. Louisa remained quiet. Anita couldn't decide if she felt hesitant to go on or had become lost in her memories. Anita wondered if those memories were pleasant or unpleasant. She decided to prod Louisa gently to say more. "It sounds romantic."

Louise came back from wherever her thoughts had gone. "Oh, it *was*! At first."

"Um, where is she?"

"She's still in the house next door."

"It didn't work out?"

"It *couldn't* have, only I wouldn't admit it to myself. I think she knew it from the beginning but we were having fun and liked each other."

"So what happened?"

"My husband found out."

“You were married?” Anita asked, trying not to seem shocked. Louisa nodded.

“Ten years. We have two kids.”

“And, were you a lesbian all that time?”

“Hell, no. I didn’t even *know* that word. I was a flaming heterosexual. I loved my husband, and I loved fucking him.”

“So how...?”

“Then Carrie moved in. She was single, pretty, friendly, charming, and seemed at ease around all sorts of people. Colorado Street was a narrow street crammed with small houses. All different kinds of people lived there, some of them for most of their lives. Others were new. Most of the neighbors had jobs, families, and all that normal stuff. A few were shady characters but we tolerated them because they mostly didn’t bother anybody. Most of us just avoided them.

“But, Carrie didn’t avoid anybody. She was friendly with the single people, the families, and the shady characters, no matter whether they were Black or white. In a few months, she became the best-known and best-liked neighbor on the block. The thing of it is that she wasn’t pushy. She didn’t ingratiate herself with people. She was just ... well... warm, friendly, kind, and nice. She always had a smile for everyone, even on the hottest days of summer or the coldest days of winter. It cheered people up just to see Carrie walk by even if they didn’t speak to her.”

“Wait, so how did the two of you... you know... connect?”

“Well, because we were next-door neighbors... and around the same age... and shared what passed for a backyard on that block, we saw each other a lot. Her neighbors on the other side were an older couple who we didn’t see much. I think the wife didn’t want her husband anywhere near Carrie so she was usually cool toward her. My husband, however, was not. I caught him looking at her whenever she was outside hanging clothes on her clothesline and checking the windows several times a day when he thought she might be outside sitting in the sun. I got jealous, so I went to see her.”

“What happened?”

“She laughed when I told her my husband had taken a fancy to her. At first, I thought she was mocking me. She saw the panic on my face and apologized. ‘Guys look at me all the time,’ she told me. ‘But that’s as far as it goes.’ I thought about how I’d never seen her with a boyfriend. But, I would never have guessed the reason why.”

“She told you she was gay?”

“Yes. But, she first added a comment that did something to me. I still don’t know why.”

“What was it?”

“She told me she was more likely to be interested in *me* than my husband.”

“She *flirted* with you?”

“That’s the thing, I don’t think she did. She said it matter-of-factly. I think it was supposed to ease my mind. But, it didn’t. I went home knowing there was a lesbian living right next door and couldn’t stop thinking about her. I didn’t know why. I still don’t know why.”

“Maybe because you’d never met a lesbian before?”

“Well, that’s true. I never even thought about lesbians. I was a heterosexual. I didn’t care about lesbians, gays, or anybody but my husband. I loved sex with Gary. We still fucked like bunnies even though we had been married for ten years, had two kids, two jobs, a mortgage, a beat-up old car, bills, and tons of other stuff just like everyone else. The fucking made all that go away for a time and I loved it. I had never been attracted to anyone else.”

“But, now you were?”

Louisa sighed and then nodded. “That’s what I realized.”

“What did you do?”

“I didn’t know what to do. I felt torn. Part of me still wanted Gary to be my only lover. I felt I owed it to him. Another part of me wanted to be Carrie’s lover- or, more precisely, allow her to be my lover since I had no idea what lesbians actually did. But, I wanted to find out. Boy, did I want to find out!”

Anita wanted Louisa to get to the point of her story. She did not think Louisa had called her just to listen to a tale of romance. She assumed there was more. Louisa looked down at the crumbs on her plate. Anita thought she saw Louisa’s face redden and assumed she was remembering her first time, or, perhaps many times she made love with Carrie.

“I take it you did?”

“Yes,” she said softly and then began to cry.

“You don’t have to talk about it if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“I’m okay. One Saturday Gary took the kids to Veteran’s Stadium for a Phillies game. It was one of those evening games when they added fireworks at the end so they would be gone for hours. I called Carrie, told her I was alone and invited her for coffee. I thought she would turn me down but she came over right away.

“I assumed she would show up in grungy clothes like most of us wore on the weekends. I could see she had put on makeup, fixed her hair, and wore sexy shorts and a halter-top. She looked like someone who might be going out on a date. It puzzled me for a moment until it dawned on me that she *was*, and her date was with me.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, shit. I was terrified. She was charming and delightful. She never came on to me but could tell I was attracted to her. We chatted about meaningless stuff for an hour and then she said she thought she should go home. She had some chores to do before she could go to bed.” Louisa paused as she recalled that first evening.

“I don’t know what came over me but I asked her if she would take me to bed and she said ‘yes’ immediately. I never felt as joyful at any moment in my life as I did right then. Not when Gary asked me to marry him, or we brought Donna and Jack home from the hospital, or any of that stuff. I had the feeling a door was opening to a whole other life for me, one I never dreamed of, or would have dreamed of, only a week or two before. She took my hand, led me upstairs, walked to our bedroom, undressed me, and took me to my- and Gary’s- bed. Then she made me do things I never knew two people could do together. It was wonderful. I can’t describe it.”

“It sounds beautiful.”

“It was, Anita, it was. I still get all tingly thinking about it.”

“So that’s how it began. What happened next?”

“It was real simple. We got together whenever my family was out. Sometimes I would just go next door in the middle of the day while Gary was watching a game and the kids were playing at friends’ houses. I was in love with Carrie from that first night. It never occurred to me that she wouldn’t feel the same way about me.”

“She didn’t?”

“No. I was devastated when I found out. She was so wonderful. She made me so happy, and I thought I made her happy, too. But, love was something she seemed to have no concept of or no interest in.”

“It was just sex, for her? Some people are that way.”

"I refuse to believe it was *just* sex. We were too amazing together. There *was* more, she just wouldn't admit it."

"Or, was afraid to."

"You might be right."

"So why are you here? What happened to your family?"

"Gary figured out I was being unfaithful. He confronted me and asked who the guy was. I pretended there really was a guy and swore I'd never see him again. Gary seemed hurt but believed me. I told Carrie. She got mad at me for not telling Gary I was a lesbian. She thought I was ashamed of her."

"Or, yourself."

"Yes, maybe. Anyway, it seemed to hurt her. She said we could keep going the way we were, but I knew it had to change. I couldn't have her; she didn't love me, and I didn't know how I felt about Gary. I was confused; that was all I was sure of. So, I left. I had to get away from Carrie and Gary and figure out what was going on with me. I'd never questioned myself before."

"What about your kids?"

"Gary lets me see them. They're confused, of course. I tell them I'll be back, but I don't think I ever will. We're probably gonna get a divorce. And then, what will happen to me? I'm gonna be alone for the rest of my life. How could I have been so stupid to fall in love with another woman?"

"You still love her, don't you?"

"Yes! I told her I'd do anything to be with her."

"But...?"

"She doesn't feel the same way about me. She likes me, but prefers to live alone."

"So, now what?" Anita asked, pointedly. Louisa did not answer for a long time. Anita waited, patiently.

"Allie was right. You are easy to talk to. I guess I just had to tell someone my whole story. Now that I have..."

Anita didn't know where Louisa would end their conversation. She had watched Louisa's facial expression change from the bright teenager to the love-struck older woman, to the devastated ex-lover. She didn't want to leave Louisa in a dark place. "Now that you have...what?"

Louisa's face brightened. The teenager was back. "I think I feel better." She reached out and touched Anita's hand. "*Thanks*, Anita. You're wonderful."

Anita visited Rainbow Books a week later. "I saw Louisa today. She dropped in to say hello," Allie mentioned as they sipped hot tea.

"Oh, how's she doing?"

"Great, thanks to you."

"Me? I didn't do anything," Anita protested.

"You listened to her."

"Yeah, but that's *all* I did. I didn't give her any advice. She didn't ask for it."

"But, that was what she wanted."

"Allie, it was *just* listening," Anita argued. She hadn't done anything special and didn't want Allie to think she had. "It was no big deal."

"Anita, it's not that you listen, it's *how* you listen."

"You make me sound like some kind of therapist or counselor."

“No, you’re not. And, it’s good you realize you’re not.”

“That’s right. People go to therapists and counselors for help. They need healing. I’m not a healer.”

“You may not *do* any healing but they heal when they talk to you.”

“You’re giving me too much credit!”

“I’m only telling you what I see. People need someone like you, someone who will listen without judging them or telling them what to do. People need someone to open up to, to get their stories out. Do you see all these books? Lots of them are people’s stories, not much different from the ones people will tell you. Most people are not writers, nor could they be, but they need to tell someone about themselves. It’s called, for want of a better term, catharsis. You help them do it. I envy you.”

“I still don’t think I’m special.”

“Maybe you’re not, and that’s a healthy perspective. But, what you can do for people is special. So, please keep doing it.”

“What’s happening with Louisa?”

“She didn’t give me many details, said it was private, but the gist of it is that she’s talking to her husband about getting back together, and a new family is living next door.”

“Oh. That’s good, I guess.”

“She seemed to think so. Thanks for helping her.”

“I didn’t *do* anything!” Anita insisted.

“You *did*, and you will help others. I’m convinced of it. It’s your gift.”

“If you say so.”

The idea of having a ‘gift’ made Anita feel uncomfortable. It seemed pompous and egocentric. She had always been shy and reserved as a child and was not the kind of adult that liked to draw attention to herself. She preferred to stay in the background and allow others to have the limelight.

Allie’s praise made her worry it could inflate people’s expectations about her and that she would fail to meet their needs. She wanted to help others and felt flattered Allie thought she could. Anita feared she would fail them and perhaps leave them worse off than before they talked to her.

Sometimes it was best not to open old wounds. What if they exposed themselves to Anita, only to be left with no help, resolution, or healing because she could not provide anything more than a sympathetic ear? However, Allie claimed Anita’s sympathy was *exactly* what people needed. Maybe she did not provide anything more. Maybe *they* provided the catharsis and healing.

Anita did not understand the process. She doubted Allie would be correct in all situations but hoped she was right at least some of the time. Anita wanted to help people who needed her. Truth was, she liked feeling she could help others. It made her feel better about herself. She also felt she was paying back the world for all the help she received when she needed it.

Chapter 5 - Sophia

Anita did not drop by Rainbow Bookshop on weekends. She often worked Saturdays and Sundays at the Boyd Theater because they were the busiest days. She assumed they might be the busiest days at Rainbow Bookshop as well and Allie would have little time to hang out and chat.

She felt sick on Sunday afternoon and her concerned boss told her to leave early. Anita did not want to go directly home, however. It was hot. She had an air-conditioner in her bedroom, but it was the only one in the house. Alfonso said he did not like air conditioners. Anita did not want to be cooped up in her room alone all evening so she decided to spend some time browsing at Rainbow Books. Even if she could not talk to Allie, she could enjoy the air conditioning for a few hours before she rode the hot subway and trolley back to Germantown.

Anita pushed open the door. A blast of cold air hit her and she grinned. It felt sooo good, after the short, steamy walk from the Boyd. She glanced around, impressed by the number of patrons in the shop. It was empty, or almost empty, most of the other times she visited. Anita looked at the counter but did not see Allie. She was in the back looking for a book. A customer waited by the counter. Anita thought she looked familiar from the back but assumed the person resembled someone she had seen at the Boyd. Then Allie called out from the back and the woman turned her head. Anita was stunned. The woman was Sophia Cohen.

She did not know what to do. Should she let Sophia see her? Anita had heard that Sophia had left Philadelphia and moved to L.A. Why was she in Allie's bookshop?

The panicked questions that raged in her mind distracted Anita and she did not notice Allie return to the counter. Allie noticed her, however. She grimaced, felt embarrassed she had done so, and hoped Anita had not noticed. Allie handed a book to Sophia. She took it and started to thumb through it. It was the novel *Herland*, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an early feminist writer.

"Yeah, this is the one I was looking for. I'm glad I asked you about it. I thought I would only find it in a library."

"It's old, but it's just been reprinted."

"Have you read it, yet?"

"No. I'll be interested in your opinion. Maybe we can talk about it at home." Anita overheard Allie say 'at home' and wondered what she meant. Before she could think about it, Allie looked up, pretended to notice Anita for the first time, and said hello to her. Sophia turned, saw Anita, and smiled awkwardly. Anita could not move.

"Um, hi, Allie. Hello, Sophia. Long time no see."

Sophia grinned. "Yes. How have you been?"

"Good. You?"

"Same, I guess." Anita knew her reply sounded stupid.

Allie and Sophia both worked at night. Sophia was at the Rialto seven nights a week. Allie had to be at Hecate's Circle whenever it was open whether musicians were performing or not. However, they had their days mostly free. They met by accident at the Rialto and then started a casual friendship in which they hung out together in the daytime. Sometimes they just went shopping for food or other necessities for their respective businesses. They also began to explore the city.

Allie grew up not far from Philadelphia. She knew many of its cultural and historical attractions and museums but had rarely visited any of them. Sophia had lived in the city for a

couple of years but had not ventured beyond Germantown. They took little excursions to some places tourists visited and had fun together pretending they were visiting from out of town on vacation.

They especially enjoyed the new cultural corridor that was developing along South Street in the 1960s and visited there often. New shops, galleries, and music venues had appeared on a street that had been run-down and all but abandoned to urban blight a few years earlier. It was thriving now. There was an eclectic assortment of young people, older artists, shopkeepers, hip tourists, and urban- and suburbanites who roamed South Street almost any time of the day and night. Occasionally, someone would recognize Allie or Sophia and stop to chat with them. They were amazed at how many people knew about Hecate's Circle and the Rialto.

They also settled into an easygoing personal relationship. It featured long conversations during warm afternoons on the benches in Vernon Park, a little green oasis near the heart of the Germantown business district only a few blocks from Hecate's Circle and the Rialto. They often met for sandwiches on warm days and passed lazy afternoons watching passersby and enjoying the tranquility of the open space. They petted the dogs that came by, conversed with their owners, and sometimes visited the Free Library branch located in the park.

Allie and Sophia seemed to understand they were older now and relationships no longer needed fire to be satisfying. The women had come to value companionship more than passion. They had feelings for each other but did not talk about them because they didn't need to.

Sophia had been living at the Rialto since she took over a couple of years ago. She never even looked for an apartment. Allie had a pleasant apartment on East Penn Street in an old house that could once have been a mansion but was now a motley assortment of apartments. Hers was the biggest. It had three rooms and a bath, took up the entire third floor, and looked out over treetops and other houses. Allie loved it because whenever she was at home she felt as if she was outside the city, above the world, in a little place all her own. It was her private sanctuary. Allie invited Sophia in.

Sophia was very eager to go, but she rarely stayed there.

Sophia loved being inside the Rialto not only when it was open and full of moviegoers but also when no one was around. She worked alone in the office, re-arranged the projection room, fixed the bathroom, or vacuumed the lobby. The Rialto was more than her home, it was her sacred space, her church, and she loved it more than any other place on earth.

Sophia did not learn about the sale from her husband, who owned the Rialto, and a couple of dozen other properties in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. She found out from Donnie, the man who bought it. He made pornographic movies, wanted a theater to show them in, and thought the Rialto was the perfect location. So-called 'art houses' had been appearing in neighborhoods since the late 1960s when pornography became more socially acceptable. Donnie hoped to cash in on the public's curiosity and enthusiasm for anything unusual, out of the ordinary, rebellious, and sleazy.

The night she found out the Rialto had been sold was the worst night of Sophia's life. It was far worse than losing any of her lovers, even worse than the deaths of anyone she cared for. A big part of her died, and she knew she would never be the same. She shut all the lights, locked the doors, hurried away from the theater, and almost ran to Hecate's Circle only a few blocks away. It was only eleven pm and she assumed Allie would still be there. Sophia needed Allie.

"Sophia, this is a rare surprise!" Allie greeted her, cheerfully. Did your show end early tonight?"

“Not just the show,” Sophia replied, almost in tears.

“What’s wrong? Is the theater okay? Did something happen?”

“The Rialto’s okay. I’m not. My life is over.”

“God, Sophia. Tell me what’s going on.”

“My son of a bitch husband sold it right out from under me.”

“No!”

“He never even talked to me.”

“Did he do it to hurt you?” Allie asked.

“No. He didn’t care about the place or me. He wanted to unload the property and did it for the money. It was just business to him. That’s what he does; he buys and sells properties. They don’t mean anything to him. He’s worth a lot of money and I’m gonna get some of it.”

“You’re going to divorce him?”

“Yeah. I gave him what he wanted. I moved out of New York so he could be free to see other women and fuck anybody he wanted to. All I asked for was the Rialto. He’s never given me a dime for the theater. I paid for everything and turned a small profit. I thought we had a deal but I was wrong. But, he’s gonna pay. I know what he’s worth and I’m gonna get some of that money in the settlement.”

“I hope you do, but what about right now?”

“What do you mean?”

“You weren’t serious when you said your life was over, were you? You’re not going to do anything... you know?”

“No. But I would like some company. Can I go home with you, Allie? I can’t stay at the Rialto. I’d just cry all night. I don’t want to be alone.”

“I’ll come back there with you if you want.”

“No, I need to get away.”

“I’m so glad you came to me.”

“I’m glad you were here. I don’t know what I would have done if you weren’t.”

Three weeks later, Sophia was back in New York at her brother’s apartment. It was the same place where she and Anita became intimate, fell in love, shared Sophia’s dream of running a repertory cinema, and decided to move to Germantown together. Sophia had come full circle.

She had also hired the best female divorce lawyer she could find, who assured her a large divorce settlement would be no problem. Sophia might soon be a millionaire. She had not given any thought to what she might want to do with all the money she would get but felt certain something interesting would come up when she was ready to move on. It did.

Several months later, she learned the Rialto had closed because of a small electrical fire and Donnie wanted to sell it back to her. She refused to buy it. She felt convinced he had ruined it in the short time he owned it and her loyal patrons would never return. Then she heard Donnie was abandoning the theater and the city. He was taking his pornographic movies on the road to present all over the country in the hopes of earning enough money to return, repair the Rialto, and reopen it.

That was when she got the idea to start a film production business. If Donnie would no longer be making porn movies locally, maybe somebody else could make them. Sophia recruited several friends who worked for Donnie and formed Rialto Pictures. Their pornographic movies were substantially better than their competitors’ movies because of the creative enthusiasm of the people in the company. They made money and Rialto Pictures flourished.

It was a small-scale operation in Philadelphia but demand outstripped supply and the company moved to Los Angeles where a large porn industry had already developed. Rialto never became as big as other producers did but its quality films gained a following. Sophia stayed with the company as long as she could but she hated Los Angeles and missed having her theater. She started shopping for a theater in New York or Philadelphia that she could buy cheap, fix up, and revive. The Sansom Cinema in a downtown residential neighborhood not far from Philadelphia's City Hall came on the market. She bid on the property without even seeing it and won. Sophia was back in the only part of the movie business she loved.

In addition, she was back in the city she had come to love because of the time she and Allie spent together exploring it. Lastly, she was back with someone she loved. Allie had left Hecate's Circle and opened her own gay and lesbian bookstore, Rainbow Bookshop, only a few blocks from the Sansom Cinema. She lived in West Philly in an area now known as University City. Sophia moved in and they were happy to settle down with each other, finally. Without saying it to each other, both women felt they had reached the place in their lives where everything fitted together perfectly, and they were happy.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you about Sophia and me," Allie said, the next time Anita came into Rainbow Bookshop.

"Why? It's none of my business."

"Well, I didn't want to hurt you."

"I'm not hurt. How did you two meet?" Anita asked.

"Back when we were both in Germantown. She was at the Rialto and I was at Hecate's Circle. One night Hecate's was closed. I don't recall why. I wandered over to the Rialto. I had heard about it from others at Hecate's and wanted to see what it was like."

"Sophia always liked those double features."

"She still does."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll get to that in a minute. Anyway, I bought my ticket, went in, and immediately noticed this stunning woman walking around. She was greeting moviegoers, straightening up fliers and leaflets on a big table in the lobby, and talking to the girl selling concessions. She acted as if she owned the place.

"I could tell she was a lesbian like me. She looked sexy but wasn't checking out any men. She just looked at women as they came in. I liked her right away and wanted her to check *me* out, but couldn't figure a way to get her attention without seeming forward or pushy. I noticed there was a flyer with information about the evening's movies, so I picked it up, looked it over, and then thought of a question I could ask her."

"Excuse me," Allie said, "This title's not in English. I don't know what it means."

"It's an Italian film. The title, *La Dolce Vita*, means the sweet life," Sophia replied.

"Oh, I guess it's a love story."

"Hardly," Sophia replied, smiling. "It's pretty famous. I'm surprised you never heard of it."

"I don't get to the movies much I'm usually at Hecate's Circle at nights."

"Oh, Hecate's. I've heard of that place. I hear the music's pretty good, but I have the same problem you do- I'm always here at night. Um, what do you do there?"

"I help run the place and I'm one of the owners."

“Wow!” Sophia replied. “We’re both local businesswomen. I own *this* place.”

“I thought so. It’s nice. You must be very proud of it.”

“Oh, I am. I poured my heart and soul into it. Probably like you, right?”

“Yeah,” Allie replied.

“Um, would you like something from the concession counter?” Sophia asked.

“Well, I do like fresh movie popcorn.”

“Great. We have the freshest in Germantown. The machine’s almost brand-new.” Sophia smiled as she handed Allie a bag. It smelled wonderful. So did she, when Allie got close enough to notice. “Um, where do you usually sit when you watch a movie?” Sophia asked.

“I like a seat about halfway back. I want to see the screen but not be overpowered by it.”

“I’m the same way. I mean, I can sit anywhere; it’s *my* theater, after all, but aesthetically, the spot you describe is my favorite too.”

“Then why don’t you join me. I can’t eat all this wonderful popcorn by myself.”

“Oh, I can help you with that,” Sophia replied, smiling suggestively. “I also love fresh movie popcorn.”

They went through the doors and walked down the aisle. It was a slow night and the middle row was still empty. Allie walked into the row and turned to make sure Sophia was following her. Then she whispered, “If I can, I like to be in the exact middle.” Sophia grinned at Allie, who then sat down. Sophia did, too. Their legs touched. The house lights dimmed.

“Just made it,” Sophia whispered as she reached for a handful of popcorn. “Smack me if I eat too loud,” she added after she turned so that her lips were next to Allie’s ear. That was it for Allie. She knew they had been flirting with each other and had just passed ‘Go.’ They could not do anything while sitting in the middle of the theater watching the movie, but afterward...

“Well, the double feature wasn’t two *movies*,” Allie said, finishing her story. “It was just one movie, and then... something different.”

“And, was it?”

“Oh, God, yes it was. *She* was different. I hadn’t been with someone near my age in quite a while and had forgotten what it was like. I found out later she and I both had disappointing relationships with much younger women... oh, sorry.”

“It’s okay.” It was. Anita had been over Sophia and forgotten her a long time ago. She felt happy Allie and Sophia were together again and wished them well.

Chapter 6 - Changes

Anita woke up feeling horny but could not figure out why. She lay there alone wishing she were naked beside someone and tried to recall her dreams. Maybe she'd had a sexy dream but could not recall anything. She wondered if she had seen someone attractive in the past few days but thought of no one. Finally, she realized she was tired of sleeping alone and wondered if she could do anything about it.

Anita did not like casual sex. At least, she thought she did not like it. Truthfully, she had never done it, mostly because she was too shy and insecure to try to pick anyone up, and no one ever tried to pick her up. Anita assumed she was too mousy, unattractive, or off-putting.

She decided her horniness might go away if she ignored it. She got out of bed, plodded down the hall to the bathroom, showered, and came back to her room to dress for work. Then she remembered she had the day off. She could do anything she wanted today. Perhaps her body was telling her what it wanted and she should listen.

She thought about where she could go to check out other women. Hecate's Circle closed in the daytime, and she did not want to wait until evening when she would have to get up early for work the next morning. However, she did not want to waste the day, either. The only other place she knew women like her might congregate was Allie's bookshop. Anita had stayed away from Rainbow Bookshop since she learned Allie and Sophia were together. She no longer felt comfortable around Allie even though she was a good friend.

Debra reminded herself not to appear nervous as she walked up to the Boyd Theater box office. Sharon told her to ask for Anita Cataldi. Debra hoped whomever she talked to would not rebuff her or ask her to explain why she wanted to see Anita. She was not certain she could lie and say, "I'm a friend of hers."

Debra had never met Anita. She was fairly certain Anita did not know she even existed. When she met Anita's sister-in-law Sharon, Debra mentioned she lived downtown and was looking for a job. Sharon told her about Anita working at the Boyd Theater and urged Debra to go and see her. Sharon seemed confident Anita could help her but Debra was not certain anyone could help her. She had no success finding a job anywhere downtown, had become discouraged, and thought her only remaining alternative was to go back to her parents. That was the last thing she wanted to do. Debra was desperate.

The older woman in the box office did not look up from her newspaper when Debra asked to see Anita. "Sure, go on in," she said disinterestedly. Debra walked through the doors into the ornate lobby, noticed the concession counter, and headed for it. No one was there and Debra wondered why. The theater was open. There was a movie playing. Debra didn't see any customers. She had not noticed the title on the marquee. *Maybe it's a crappy movie*, Debra thought. *I've seen plenty of those.*

She walked up to the counter and waited for someone to notice her. A hidden door opened and a girl came through. She carried some boxes labeled with the names of various candy brands like Juicy Fruits, Hershey's Chocolate, and Good 'N Plenty. The girl sat the boxes on the counter in front of Debra as if she did not notice her. She stepped back from the boxes and saw someone waiting. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did you want something?" she asked.

"Um, I was looking for Anita."

"Oh, that's me."

"Sharon sent me."

“She did?”

“Yeah, she told me I could apply for a job.”

“Oh, so you’re not here to buy candy?” Anita asked.

“No.”

“Well, we don’t have any openings right now. But, I could take your name and number.”

“Oh. That would be great, I guess,” Debra replied, feeling she had wasted a trip.

“Ever worked in a theater?”

“No. Sharon said it might not make any difference.”

“Well, it kind of does but she’s partly right. It doesn’t have to. I mean, it depends on the person. Some people work out, and some don’t.”

“How do you know?”

“We don’t. We go by intuition.”

“And does your intuition tell you anything about *me*?” Debra asked, boldly. Anita had been unpacking the candy boxes while they conversed. She looked at Debra for the first time. She was tall, lanky, and boyish-looking, but wore a long peach chiffon skirt and loose-fitting white blouse. Her shoulder-length wavy blonde hair framed her long face, angular nose, wide mouth, and deep blue eyes. Anita felt drawn to her eyes immediately. She felt there was something in them and then realized what it was. Debra was a lesbian. That was likely why Sharon sent her. Anita now wanted to help her any way she could.

Debra felt Anita’s probing gaze and smiled as they made eye contact. She also understood why Sharon had sent her. *Maybe a sister will help a sister*, she thought, hopefully.

When he opened his eyes and realized what day it was, Alfonso Cataldi discovered he was smiling. He had not known how he would feel when he woke up on his birthday. Most people seemed unhappy the day they turned sixty but he was not. He thought perhaps he had a happy dream and tried to recall it. The image of his deceased wife Ida arose vividly in his mind. *That’s why I feel so good today*, he thought, *because she was so happy the day she turned sixty.*

That was only five years ago but it seemed like much longer. Al should have felt sad when he recalled Ida. Her sixtieth birthday was her last. He lost her before the year was out. It was not until long after she was gone that he realized how much he loved her.

While they were together, theirs was an uncomplicated domestic partnership. He was the breadwinner, she was the homemaker, and they had a pleasant family. Their children, Anita and Tony, were good kids who never got into trouble, obeyed their parents, were not surly or disrespectful, and seemed not to be too embarrassed by mom and dad. That family normalcy ended the day Anita ran away and continued for the rest of Ida’s life. Al sometimes wondered if the shock of Anita’s departure and absence contributed to Ida’s stress and somehow caused her heart attacks but he tried not to think about it.

Al felt angry with his daughter when she returned for Ida’s funeral. It took a long time for him to forgive her but he eventually did. Their family love was stronger now than it had ever been. Without saying it, Al, Anita, Tony, his wife Sharon, and their daughter Sara felt their love was the best way to honor and remember Ida and it made her loss more bearable.

Al arrived at Pep Boys garage to find his mechanics were already busy. Reggie, his assistant, had opened the garage and assigned mechanics their jobs for the day. Al entered his office and found a colorful cupcake on his desk. There was a skinny lopsided candle stuck in it, burning a weak flame. They all paused and waited for his reaction to the birthday cupcake. It was not long in coming.

“You guys...,” Al said after he stuck his head out of the office door, grinning.

“Hey, boss, it’s not every day you turn sixty,” Reggie pointed out. The other men spontaneously applauded.

“You make me feel like an old man,” Al replied. The men waited for him to say more. “I may be old, but I’m still your boss. Get back to work,” he added, grinning. “I have a candle to blow out and a cupcake to eat.” The men chuckled and then went back to their tasks. Al went back into his office cluttered with car manuals, parts, and piles of forms.

Reggie came in. “Mr. Evans’ secretary called. He wants you to bring the monthly report to him instead of mailing it.”

“Oh, okay. I have it ready. Did she say why?”

“He has a report due. He needs yours to finish it.”

“All right, Reggie. I’ll call to make sure he’s there. Thanks.”

Al picked up his phone and heard a woman’s voice. “Hello?” the woman said. He thought it was a customer.

“Um, Pep Boy’s garage, Al speaking. Who’s calling, please?”

“Oh, hi, Al, it’s me, Theresa.” She was Mr. Evans’ secretary.

“Hi, Theresa. What’s up?”

“He wanted me to check to see what time you’re coming over.”

“Is he in?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Great! I’ll tell him. See you soon.”

Al had seen Theresa only a few other times when he had gone to the main office. She was an older woman who had been with the company for a long time. She had a round, pleasant face, short brown hair, blue eyes, and wore thick glasses. Whenever he saw her, he always recalled their first meeting. Al had stopped by Mr. Evans’ office for a quick question. He noticed the secretary was absent and wondered what was going on. Then he heard some mild profanity coming from beneath the desk. He looked over the top and saw a woman’s wiggling backside, clad in shorts, which seemed strange until he noticed how warm the office was. *Air-conditioning’s probably busted again*, he thought.

“Oh, there it is!” she said, exasperated. She backed out from under the desk, stood up, noticed Al standing there, and immediately blushed. Al smiled cautiously. The woman held up a small ball. “Damn Selectric ball keeps flying off. I don’t know why. Pain in the ass.” Al immediately thought of her ass and hoped he did not blush, which would have betrayed his thought to the woman.

“Hi, I’m Al Cataldi,” he said, as business-like as he could. “Mr. Evans is expecting me.”

“Hi, Al. Nice to meet you. I’m Theresa Jericho. He’s waiting for you. Go right in.”

Theresa recovered from her frustration with the Selectric ball. She settled primly into her chair, slapped the ball onto the typewriter, looked down at the hand-written notes she was transcribing for Mr. Evans, and then started typing rapidly. Al went into the office.

He had visited a few times since then. Theresa was always friendly. She sometimes blushed when he came in. He assumed she was recalling their first encounter. He always recalled it as well, smiled, and greeted her warmly.

“Hi, Al! It’s nice to see you. Been a while.”

“Hi, Theresa. Here’s the report.”

“Oh, he wants to talk to you. Go on in.” Al walked into Mr. Evans’s office.

“Morning, Al,” Mr. Evans said. He was at least ten years younger than Al, probably more. Mr. Evans’s hair was still dark. He had a small mustache and wore a gray business suit. “Oh, by the way... Happy birthday.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“Sixty, huh?”

“Yes.”

“I’m still a ways from there. How’s it feel?”

“No different than fifty-nine.”

“Good. I hope it stays that way. I wanted to discuss something with you.” Al immediately felt apprehensive. “We’re thinking of changing the management structure at the garages. Instead of having a manager at each store, we’re going to try having a manager that oversees three or maybe four stores. It sounds like it will be more work, I know, but there will be assistant managers at each garage. You’re the first person I’m telling about this. There are other garage managers I don’t think could handle a job like this, but you could, so I’m offering it to you first. What do you think? Interested?”

“Yeah. But, why me?”

“I like the way you run your shop. You get a lot of work done, and complaints are few. Your guys seem really good.”

“I’ve tried to hire only the best mechanics I can find.”

“I know. And we want you to oversee the other garages so they can be as good as yours.”

“I won’t have to fire anyone will I?” Al asked.

“We’re hoping to save people’s jobs. Give them a chance to change and adjust so they’re more useful. We want to keep them.”

“I know these other guys. Won’t they be pissed?”

“They might, and we expect you to deal with that. But, we’re pretty sure you can make it work. And there’s a raise in it.”

“Really?”

“Of course. You’ll have to move around to each garage during the week but we think the assistant managers can handle most of what happens day-to-day.”

“I appreciate the offer.”

“So, you’ll think about it?”

“No; I accept. When do I start?” Mr. Evans grinned. He felt relieved. He had recommended Al for the job but there had been some resistance because of Al’s age. Evans convinced the other corporate managers Al’s age and experience were an asset.

They shook hands. “The promotion starts today. I’ll inform the guys at the other shops. Thanks, Al. I knew I could count on you.”

Al walked out of Mr. Evans’ office. Theresa looked up.

“It’s your birthday? Happy birthday, Al,” she said, brightly.

“Um, thanks. He just promoted me,” Al replied, eager to share his news.

“That’s great. Say, I’m about to go on break. Do you want some coffee to celebrate?” Theresa asked, surprising Al.

“That would be nice. But, it’s my treat.”

“No way! It’s your birthday,” she protested. They walked to the cafeteria, bought their coffees, and found an empty table. Al sat quietly thinking. Theresa waited patiently for him to

say something. Al did not know what to say. He had never been good at small talk. However, he liked Theresa. She was friendly and always seemed happy to see him.

“So you took the new job,” she said.

“You knew about it?”

“Yeah, I typed the notes from the meetings.”

“Oh, right. Yeah. I’m kinda shocked.”

“You deserve it. You’ve worked for Pep Boys a long time, right?”

“Twenty years,” Al replied.

“Wow. Me, too.”

“No kidding. Where did you start?”

“I was a cashier at the store on Erie Avenue.”

“I was a mechanic in my store. A friend got me the job. Then he left. I stayed because I liked the place.”

“Me, too. I finished secretarial school at night and then applied for a job here at headquarters.”

“Have you always been with Mr. Evans?”

“No. I worked for a couple of other bosses before I got to him. He’s the nicest, though.”

Al did not reply. He sat, thinking of how nice Mr. Evans was to offer the new position to him. Theresa noticed his silence and went on. “So, any special plans for your birthday? You and your wife gonna celebrate?”

“Oh, no... She’s been gone... a while now.”

“Oh, shoot! I’m sorry I mentioned it, Al.”

“It’s okay. It’s just me and my kids. We’re getting together. They think it’s a big deal, turning sixty.”

“Well, isn’t it?”

“I guess,” Al replied.

“You don’t think it’s *old*, do you?”

“Not really. Do I seem old?”

“No. You seem younger than me.”

“Really? How old are you?” Al asked. Theresa gave him a look. Al realized he had insulted her, possibly. “Oh, sorry. I’m not supposed to ask, am I?” She grinned at his obvious embarrassment.

“I’m a bit younger than you, Al,” she replied. “I’m also divorced...”

Chapter 7 - Secret Lovers

It was a gray, blustery day in mid-November. Krista shivered in her heavy wool coat as she watched the cemetery workers slowly lower Anna's coffin into the grave. She had asked them to wait until the other mourners left the gravesite because she wanted to be alone with Anna in her last moments above ground. Krista stared at the coffin after it came to rest on the bottom and considered jumping down into the hole. She sighed, dropped the last rose onto the coffin below, turned, and walked away fighting tears. She couldn't allow herself to feel her life was over just because her lover had died. However, that was exactly how she felt.

They had never discussed what they might do when one of them died and left the other alone. Krista thought Anna believed she would survive Krista, who was older by several years. Their age difference never got in the way of their relationship. They never even talked about it. However, Krista remained healthy while Anna started to decline. When she finally saw a doctor, she found her cancer was terminal.

Krista cried; Anna did not. She remained in shock for a few weeks, and then broke down one night and cursed cancer, doctors, the world, the universe, and everyone healthier than she was. Then she panicked when she realized she was cursing her best friend and lover, who held Anna while she cried. She seemed like a different person when her rage and sadness passed. Anna looked up at Krista. "Well," she said, as she wiped tears from her eyes, "I'm glad we finally got *that* over with. I knew it was coming but didn't know when it would happen. I wanted to warn you. Sorry."

Krista smiled. "Don't be sorry. You're entitled. I'm glad you're okay now. Would you like a cup of tea or a stiff drink?"

"Tea? No. Alcohol? Not yet. I just want you to hold me and tell me you love me and will always love me... no matter what happens."

"I love you more than anything in the world, more than myself, even. I can't imagine loving anyone else."

"Oh, you might get lonely. You can love anyone you want. It's okay... just never stop loving me."

"I couldn't, even if I tried, Anna. You're everything to me. If I could take your cancer, I would."

"No! I wouldn't let you! I love you too much. The only thing that makes this bearable is knowing that you will survive me. I want you to live a long and wonderful life even if it's without me."

As Krista's walked away from the gravesite, she knew that her life without Anna had begun. She did not know what kind of life it would be, or even what kind of life she wanted it to be. Even though she was Catholic and believed in an afterlife and resurrection, she somehow knew she would never see Anna again. Their bliss wasn't meant to be eternal. It was over now, except for her memories.

Krista started to recall how they found each other.

They met in a cold, dreary waiting room at the Frankford Arsenal in February of 1942. The United States had just entered World War II and was cranking up the war machine. The Arsenal manufactured munitions used throughout the military. As the men headed off to train and fight, women were taking their places in the factories. Krista and Anna had come to seek better jobs.

Krista worked in the hosiery department at Gimbel's department store downtown. She survived the Great Depression but worked long hours and took on more tasks as management laid off other workers. The pay stayed the same but she felt tired of never having enough money to do anything but subsist. Aside from an occasional movie and a cheap radio she bought with the Gimbel's employee discount, she had little amusement or distraction. Krista read the *Evening Bulletin*, sometimes borrowed books from the library, and survived the everyday grind. Factory work and the increased wages would be an improvement. Krista prayed they would hire her.

Anna waitressed in a downtown restaurant near City Hall. She also worked long hours for meager pay and fervently hoped to land the factory job. For both of them, the war could turn out to be a Godsend.

There were many women in the waiting room that day, all with the same hope. Most had lives like Krista's and Anna's, although several had boyfriends or husbands who already were or soon would be called to war.

Many of the women would be sent away without being hired. They tried to prepare themselves for rejection while they waited for the interviews. They also hoped they had correctly filled out the application form. The government was a stickler for accuracy and neatness.

A man wearing an Army uniform opened the door to the interview room and the light chatter of the waiting women stopped abruptly. Everyone hoped he would call her name. The soldier looked down at his clipboard, and called out, "Christa!" Krista and Anna jumped up immediately. The man looked at them, bewildered. They were both stocky women but one was taller than the other was and their faces and hair were different.

"Um, Christa?" he asked, looking at Krista. She was the taller one with a long face, dark hair, and an uneasy expression on her face. She nodded. "Christa?" he repeated, and then looked at Anna. She had blonde hair, a round face, and smiled brightly. Puzzled, the soldier looked down at his clipboard. "Christa Anna!" he bellowed. Both women replied, "Here!" The man looked even more confused. The women waited patiently.

The soldier again looked at his clipboard, then gazed at Krista, and then asked, "Christa Anna...?" he said. She nodded. Then he looked at Anna and asked, "Christa Anna...?" She also nodded. Overwhelmed, he muttered, "Okay, why don't you *both* come with me." They followed him into the interview room while the other women watched and wondered what was happening.

The soldier closed the door behind them, told them to sit, and handed the clipboard to a civilian. He was a middle-aged older man who had a puzzled look on his face and a cigar nub in his mouth.

"Carl, I thought we said one at a time."

"Um, well... it's like this. They both have the same name."

"But, you only have *one* form. Did you spell the name out?"

"No, sir, I used the middle name."

"Wait. They have the same *middle* name, too?" The soldier nodded.

"Okay. Let me read the first name. C-H-R-I-S-T-A."

"Oh, that's me," Anna said.

Krista realized what was happening. "Mine is K-R-I-S-T-A," she said. She expected they would tell her to go back to the waiting room but they did not. Instead, the man in the suit asked them a few questions and then hired them both on the spot.

The next time Anita dropped by Rainbow Books, Allie told her about Krista's visit. "She wandered in a few days ago," Allie said. "Sweet old woman. She told me she used to work downtown before the war."

"The war?" Anita replied, confused. *Which war?* she wondered. *Vietnam, Korea?* Then it dawned on her. "Oh, you mean World War Two?" Her father had been in World War II. He referred to it as The War but never talked about it. Not to her, at least; maybe to her brother, Tony.

"Yep, that one," Allie replied, nodding. "She was exploring the old neighborhood and came upon my store. She looked at the window and told me she had never seen books like the ones I had on display."

"You mean like *The Joy of Sex*, and *The Joy of Lesbian Sex*?"

"Right. Most people pass by, see those books, and keep on walking. Krista came in."

"Because...?"

"I'm getting to that. I could tell something was not right about her. I'm not as intuitive as you are so I couldn't tell exactly what was wrong, but I sensed tiredness as if she had endured great suffering or loss recently. First I thought- because she was so old- that maybe she was sick, even dying, and just wanted to take one last look at the places she knew from earlier in her life. So, I did what I always do. I smiled and offered her that chair you're sitting in and a cup of herbal tea. She sat down daintily and accepted without hesitation. But, she didn't smile."

"So why are you telling me all this? It's not the first time you've been nice to someone who just wandered into your store. I think it's the real reason you have this store, so it will attract people who need some sort of help."

"Oh, you think that, do you?" Allie replied, grinning. Anita's compliment delighted her. "Well, maybe I do and maybe I don't. I didn't plan it that way but it does seem to happen."

"So, I'm sure you got her to tell you her name."

"Krista Anna. She wouldn't tell me her last name. When I asked, she just repeated her first and middle names."

"Strange."

"But not weird. I mean she didn't seem like someone who was being shy or wanted to hide something."

"So what happened then?" Anita asked.

"We talked. I told her a little about the store, about myself, about Sophia-."

"How did she react?"

"About Sophia?" Allie asked. Anita nodded. "She smiled in the strangest way. I guessed she was recalling a happy memory. I waited for her to stop smiling but she didn't, and then I figured out why she was smiling."

"Because?"

"Because she's gay. So, I just mentioned it out loud. She laughed and shook her head. I felt really confused. I think I must have frowned. 'That word means something completely different to you than to me,' she said. 'I've just recently lost the love of my life, who was another woman.' Then she stopped smiling and burst into tears. I took the teacup out of her hands so she wouldn't spill the hot tea and burn her skin, and then I held her and let her cry."

"Must have been gut-wrenching for you."

"No, it was incredibly easy. She was a sister. I haven't experienced what she's gone through- at least, not yet."

“Yeah, breakups are different, aren’t they?” Anita commented, philosophically. Allie nodded.

“Right. But this woman had been with someone until she died. She’d- *they’d*- made a life together. An entire lifetime.”

“You sensed all that?” Anita asked.

“No. After she stopped crying, she told me a little about herself. They were together from the early forties until a month ago. They lived as spinster maiden ladies. No one knew they were lovers. But, they were deeply in love. I remember exactly what she told me, Anita. ‘It was a love like you read about in books or see in movies- but instead of being between a man and a woman it was between two women, and it was wonderful. I miss her terribly, and I fear my life is over, only I don’t want it to be.’” Allie paused and wiped a tear. “That’s what she told me. I immediately thought you could talk to her.”

“Me? You keep forgetting I’m not a therapist.”

“No, you’re something much better. I don’t know if there’s a word for what you are. But, I’m sure you can help her. She wants to go on living but she’s devastated and lonely.”

“You think because I’m so much younger I could be like a daughter to her?” Anita asked. “I don’t think I can do that.”

“I know you have a family- and you’re lucky they’re so great and they accept you as you are and you never had to go through what the rest of us went through. So I don’t expect you to have a relationship with her, just help her.”

“How?”

“Work some of your magic.”

“My *what*?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Anita. Just call her. Here’s her number-.”

“You told her about me?”

“No, no. I told her I would like to keep in touch if she didn’t mind. She seemed open to the idea.”

“What do I say?”

“Say you’re Allie’s friend.”

“I don’t know. This seems weird, Allie. I mean, I can’t do anything for her, can I?”

“Don’t think of it as doing anything for her. Think of it as doing something for yourself. She has a beautiful story and so do you. The two of you have been on both sides of the secret.”

“What secret?”

“About being a lesbian. You’ve never hidden it from your family, and they love you. Krista found great love with another woman, but they hid it from the world. It’s all about different approaches to love, I think.”

“I’m no expert on love,” Anita protested.

“But she might be. Talk to her.”

“Okay.”

Krista’s apartment was in a huge housing development called Pennypack Woods. Anita borrowed her father’s car and drove up Roosevelt Boulevard to the Holme Circle, followed Holme Avenue to Pennypack Street, and found herself driving between blocks of nondescript buildings that resembled military barracks. However, they were not barracks, storage sheds, or small industrial buildings. Anita saw cars, fences, yards filled with children’s toys and outdoor furniture, and people on the sidewalks. She found Krista’s building on Stardust Lane, parked,

and walked to a pleasant yard filled with flowers. Anita rang the doorbell and Krista answered immediately.

“So, you’re Allie’s friend?” Krista asked after she had settled Anita at the kitchen table with a mug of hot tea and a plate of freshly baked oatmeal-cocoanut cookies. Anita nodded.

“And you’re a...?” Krista asked. Anita nodded, again. “But, you’re not with Allie? She seems kind of old for you.”

“No. We’re good friends. But, she’s with a woman who I was with many years ago. It seems like a lifetime ago... Why do you ask?”

“I never got to talk to anyone about being... well, you know... except Anna. We didn’t know anyone else that was... well, you know.”

“Yeah. It must have been hard for the two of you,” Ania commented between bites of an excellent cookie.

“Not really. We moved into this apartment in the spring of 1942, just after the place was finished. We both worked at the Frankford Arsenal.”

“The what?”

“You’ve never heard of it? I’m not surprised. Only older people who live around here know about it. During the war, it produced more munitions than any other factory in the United States.”

“You mean *you* produced,” Anita interjected. Krista smiled. She appreciated the compliment.

“Well, me and thousands of other women, including Anna. When we got the jobs, we were both living in other parts of the city far away from the Arsenal. The commutes were a bitch, pardon my French, but the money was good. We heard about this place. The government built it specifically for workers in the war industries. We figured we could qualify to live here but there were no apartments for single women or men. It was set up for families. So we decided to be roommates and got the last open apartment.”

“Were you... um...?” Anita asked.

“No. We only saw each other at work. We had the same first and middle names and were superstitious enough to think that meant something although we couldn’t have imagined what it turned out to be.”

“What do you mean by the same first and middle names?”

“Oh, she was Christa, with a C and an h, and I was Krista with a K. We were both Anna. We got mixed up on the first day we were at the Arsenal. You could even say the government brought us together.”

“Sounds like a typical roommate situation.”

“It was for a while,” Krista replied, smiling. “

We got along great. We worked in different parts of the Arsenal so we never saw each other during the days. We took turns cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry. But, we were very different kinds of people. I loved listening to the radio but she didn’t like it. She would ask me to keep it low and go into her bedroom and close the door.”

“Maybe she didn’t like listening to the news.”

“No, it was more than that. She didn’t like music or comedy shows, either. But later, when we could afford a TV- you know, in the fifties when people were buying them- she took to it as if she’d had one all her life. That was probably because of the movies, I guess.”

“Movies?” Anita asked. She had become enchanted by Krista’s story and wanted to hear as much as she could.

“Well, we didn’t know it at first, but we both used to go to movies a lot when we worked downtown. We saw many of the same pictures. One day we were chatting and I asked her what she thought of *Gone with the Wind*. She didn’t answer right away, so I commented about Clark Gable. ‘Wasn’t he gorgeous?’ I asked. She shook her head and then paused. ‘He was okay,’ she said, ‘but I really liked Vivien Leigh.’” Krista paused. Anita could tell she enjoyed recalling that conversation so many years ago.

“Well, every woman who saw the film wanted to be Vivien Leigh just because she got to be with Clark Gable. I thought that was what she meant. So, I asked her, ‘You mean because she gets *him*?’ She shook her head, slowly. ‘No, I wouldn’t want him. I would prefer her,’ she answered, quietly. I didn’t understand what she meant, so I changed the subject to an article I’d read in the *Evening Bulletin* about rationing.”

“So, was that when you both figured out you were... you know...?”

“Oh, no, sweetie,” Krista replied, smiling again.

“Then, when...?”

“Well, you seem to be a nice young woman. I suppose it’s different now than it was back in the forties, but there are some things polite people just don’t share, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s okay, Anita. But, I will tell you this: only two women know what happened, how it happened, and *when* it happened. One of those women is now gone.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. Of course, I understand some things are private. That’s the way it should be.”

“That’s the way it *will* be, for us,” Krista replied, smiling. “Always.”

“Do you still like movies?” Anita asked, hoping to find a less personal topic.

“Yes, but I rarely go. Why?”

“I work at the Boyd. Do you know it?”

“Why, yes. That’s where I saw *Gone with the Wind*, *Wizard of Oz*, and many other pictures.”

“I could get you passes if you wanted to see some movies again,” Anita offered.

“That would be lovely. Would I see you there?”

“My hours vary but you could call me and let me know when you plan on coming and I could meet you if you want.”

“I’d like that. Anna and I went to the movies. She was the only person I ever went with. Before we met both of us only went alone. We weren’t lonely, though. You know how movie theaters are. Being in an audience, sharing the experience of watching a film... there’s nothing like it. I miss it.”

“When’s the last time...?”

“Several years. She was too weak to go out. She was okay here and got around the apartment fine. But, she got tired easily so we never went anywhere. I didn’t miss going out. I just wanted to be with her. I went shopping and we went to her doctor appointments but that was all.”

“Allie told me you were wandering downtown and went into her store.”

“Yes. I don’t know why I went out that day. The weather wasn’t very good. I felt restless. I drove my old car to the El and rode the train into town. Then I went to the places I remembered. Some are still the same. Most are gone. I was okay with that. I ran out of places pretty quick and just roamed around for a while. That’s how I found the bookstore.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“I’m not superstitious or anything but I think I was meant to,” Krista said, wistfully. Anita smiled.

“Well, I have to go. I’m working early tomorrow. I loved talking to you.”

“Wait, I’ve told you my story, but you haven’t told me yours,” Krista said.

“Maybe another time.”

“Promise?”

“Absolutely.”

Anita drove home thinking about two lonely women who found each other and shared a love no one knew about but them. She wondered what their lives would have been like if they could have shared the truth with others. Anita also wondered what her life would be like if she could not be honest about what she was with the people she loved. It was easy for Krista and Anna to be honest. They loved each other. They made a little world of their own and no one else mattered. Anita loved many people. She knew how miserable other homosexuals were when they could not be truthful about themselves. Anita felt she could learn a lot from Krista. She hoped they could be friends.

Krista had never spoken to anyone who was a lesbian (or ‘gay’, as they called it now) until she met Allie. She liked Anita, who was one-third her age, because they could be honest with each other. It was just like when she and Anna were honest with each other. They had been best friends. She hoped she and Anita could be good friends, too.

It was not until the next morning when Krista awoke that she understood she was now looking forward to her future instead of looking back toward her past. She would never stop grieving for Anna, but she liked Anita, thought of her as a new friend, looked forward to getting to know her, and maybe getting to know other lesbians that Anita knew. Allie seemed interesting, too. Krista thought the worst of her grief might be over and she felt grateful.

Anita had worked her ‘magic’ (as Allie called it) but did not know it yet. She had done it by being Anita, by being friendly, outgoing, concerned, likable, curious, and nice. And, possibly she had saved Krista’s life.

Chapter 8 - Al & Theresa/Anita & Debra

Alfonso would be the first to admit he did not know much about love. Now, however, at sixty, he knew a lot more than he did before. He loved his family- Anita, Tony, Sharon, and Sara (his granddaughter) and told them often.

His wife Ida died before he understood love. He regretted not telling her how he felt about her while they were together. After her death, he fell in love with Rita but it did not last. It was not Alfonso's fault. Rita presented him with an unacceptable choice. Whom did he love more, her or his lesbian daughter, Anita? The cost of Rita's love was too high. Al ended their relationship just as they planned their wedding.

Al resolved never to make a mistake like that again. He would be careful with anyone else he dated. He planned to be frank about who he was, what his family meant to him, and how unshakable their bond of love was. Al would welcome someone new into his family's loving environment but he would not consider harming that environment for any woman.

He was not looking for companionship, a relationship, or romance. Al did not even think about them. He was not lonely. He was happy and thought he had all he wanted until he met Theresa and then got to know her. His experience with Rita made him wary but also careful to be honest. He told Theresa about his children and granddaughter the first time they had dinner together. She seemed delighted he felt so proud of his family and shared a little about her own.

"I have two sons. They both live far away. Nate is in Minneapolis. He's married with no kids. Cal is in California. We used to joke about how we named him so he would want to go there. He lives in San Francisco. I think he's in the gay neighborhood, but I'm not sure." Al tried not to show his concern when Theresa used the word 'gay.'

"Oh, really?" he said.

"Yeah. He hasn't told me he's gay but I'm pretty sure he is."

"And, you're okay with that?" Al asked.

"Why wouldn't I be? You're okay with your daughter, right?"

"Of course," Alfonso replied. "I've met a couple of her girlfriends. They were nice."

"Well, Cal hasn't introduced me to any boyfriends, although I think he had some while he was still living here. I'd kind of like to meet one just to see what kind of men my boy likes."

"So, you've known for a while?"

"Yeah. Well, I suspected. Did you know about Anita?" Theresa asked.

"No. I don't think *she* did."

"Well, there were signs, hints, and suggestions. He liked dolls when he was a boy. He didn't play with them at home, only when he played with girls, which he didn't do often. But, he would tell me about the dolls, clothes, and accessories when he came home. Stuff like that."

"What did you do?"

"I was curious. I encouraged him to tell me more. He seemed fascinated as he described the dolls. But, he still played baseball. He even got a girl onto the team my husband coached. Frank thought Cal liked the girl and was cute about it. I think Cal wanted to be around the girl because he liked girls and felt more comfortable with them. Maybe she was a buffer between him and the macho boys and their sports mania. Sorry, I don't mean to offend. Are you much of a sports fan?"

"I like the Phillies, but I'm not a maniac. Does Cal still play ball?"

"I think so but he hasn't talked about it. I plan to go out there for a visit and I'm hoping he will open up to me and share his life and we'll get closer."

“It must be hard, him being so far away,” Alfonso said.

“It is. You’re lucky.”

“Well, it wasn’t always this way,” Al replied, sighing. Theresa saw his face darken and wondered what was coming. “Anita ran away and disappeared for three years. We didn’t know anything about where she was or what happened to her. It was hard. I think it tore Ida up inside.”

“You too, I would imagine,” Theresa replied, as she reached for his hand and squeezed it gently. Al almost filled up with tears but remained in control of his feelings. Theresa noticed and liked him even more. She changed the subject. “I’m almost glad Frank and I divorced before he found out about Cal,” she said.

“Frank doesn’t know?”

“Hell, no. I’m certainly not gonna tell him. I don’t know if Cal could tell him. I think Cal would be afraid of how Frank would react.”

Al nodded. He knew a little about how most parents reacted when they found out their children were homosexuals. He did not understand how they could reject their children but many did. It seemed disgusting to him. “I can’t imagine how a father could not love his son or daughter no matter what they were. As long as they were not hurting anyone, that is.”

“Well, as I understand it, many parents think their homosexual kids are out to hurt *them*. Some claim the kids don’t know what they’re doing and will end up hurting themselves. There are only a small few, like you and me, who don’t have any problem with it.”

“Well, my situation is unique. Anita was gone for three years. She could have been dead, for all we knew. There were scary nights when I felt she *was* dead and we would get a call eventually. I wasn’t overjoyed when she came back because it was right after Ida died and I was still in shock. When I got used to her being home the shock wore off. I realized how much I missed her and I was glad she came back to me. I never wanted to lose her again. When Tony told me his sister was gay, I asked him what he meant. He had to explain it to me!”

“And it made no difference, did it?”

“That’s right.”

“I admire you for what you did,” Theresa replied, as she squeezed Alfonso’s hand harder. He liked her touch.

“I didn’t do any more than any real father ought to do. I mean, how can you not love your kid? She’d have to do something awful for me to even consider not loving her and being gay is not awful. It’s just who she is.”

“Al, you’re amazing.”

“I’m thinking we both are, to feel about our kids the way we do and love them as we do.” It was Theresa’s turn to almost fill up with tears. Al reached out and touched her hand. She sniffled and suppressed a sob.

“This is happening very fast, isn’t it?” Theresa said. Al was not certain he knew what she meant at first but then understood. They easily and effortlessly had found a bond of intimacy. Their kids had cemented that bond and he was happy they had. They looked at each other, studying each other’s faces, searching for any expression that would signal hesitation, doubt, or reserve. There was none.

Theresa looked into Al’s eyes. “Would you like to come back to my place? I would like to show you some old photo albums of my boys. I promise not to bore you.” Al felt certain that she had something else she wanted to show him besides old photos. He felt certain he would not be bored and would make sure she was not bored either.

“I’ve heard some complaints...,” Anita said.

Debra looked down. “Oh, shit, I’m sorry. I guess I’m not very good at cleaning.”

“But, it’s the only job I can give you right now.”

“I know, and I’m grateful for it, really I am.”

“Then you’ve got to do it right. I don’t want to have to fire you, Debra. I had to fire someone right before you got the job. That’s why it was open.”

“I didn’t know that,” Debra replied, chastened. She worked hard, or at least thought she did, but never finished cleaning before the next show. Anita had been kind to her in the month and a half since she hired Debra and she thought of Anita as a friend. Now she worried she was letting her friend down.

Debra changed the subject. “Look, I was wondering if you’re doing anything Tuesday night.”

“No. Why?”

“It’s my birthday and I’m having a couple of friends over. I’m turning twenty-five. A quarter-century! Seems like something worth celebrating.”

“If you say so,” Anita replied and then recalled her twenty-fifth birthday. Her family got together. She played with her niece Sara who was still an infant and enjoyed the time with Tony, Sharon, and her father. It felt like nothing more than another passing year but she was okay with that.

“So, I’d like you to come, if you’re free. It’s gonna be real low-key. No presents or anything. Just friends, you know?”

“Yeah. I get off at six that night.”

“Great. I’ll give you my address. Hope you can make it.”

Anita appreciated the invitation but felt uneasy. Was Debra inviting her because she liked her? On the other hand, was Debra trying to soothe Anita’s displeasure with her job inadequacies? Anita felt apprehensive but wanted to go. She liked Debra from the moment they met but knew it would be risky to have anything more than a work acquaintance with her.

A romance would have been okay if they were merely co-workers. Her brother Tony had dated one of his co-workers at Gimbel’s and never had a problem. However, Anita was Debra’s boss, and that presented problems. She felt attracted to Debra but also wanted to keep her job. A romance with a co-worker might complicate both their lives.

She got off the bus at Forty-Sixth Street and walked along the block looking for Debra’s address. The houses were large old twins built somewhere in the early 1900s. They used to house big families but now mostly housed individuals and roommates in apartments. Debra’s house had five apartments: two on the first and second floors, and one on the third floor. Debra lived in the rear apartment on the first floor.

Anita rang the bell and waited. A few moments went by, nobody came to answer the door, and she wondered if something was wrong. Maybe Debra changed her mind about the party or was celebrating somewhere else. Anita rang again. A moment later, the creaky old door opened. “Oh, hi, Anita. I wasn’t sure you were coming.”

“I wasn’t sure you were here. I rang a few minutes ago but nothing happened.”

“I didn’t hear it. The bell doesn’t always work. Sorry. Come on in.”

Debra’s apartment was a large studio. The living room, bedroom, and kitchen were all in the same room. She did not have much furniture and the room looked big.

Anita noticed no other people were there. “Am I the first one?” she asked.

“Um, yeah. I invited people but no one was sure if they could come. You know how it is. Everyone’s busy with work or school.” Anita wondered if Debra had really invited anyone else and began to feel apprehensive. This could become an awkward visit.

“Well, I can only stay a couple of hours. I have to walk to the El and catch the E bus from 69th Street. It drops me off a few blocks from my house in Germantown.”

“The E bus? Germantown? Where’s that?”

“It’s up in the northwestern part of the city. You’ve never been there?” Debra shook her head. “It’s a lot like West Philly, except where West Philly is mostly flat, Germantown is hilly, but the houses and other buildings are similar.”

“What about *your* house? What’s it like?” Debra asked.

“It’s a plain row house on a back street nobody ever heard of. Even people from Germantown don’t know it exists. But, it’s a block from the trolley and bus routes that go downtown, so it’s convenient.”

“You have an apartment there?”

“Oh, no. I grew up there. It’s my dad’s house.”

“You live with your *father*?” Debra asked. She seemed astonished.

“Yeah. My brother Tony and his wife live a couple of blocks away in a big apartment in an old house like this one. They have a child, Sara. I adore her.”

“I don’t like kids.”

“Why not?” Anita asked.

“Never could figure out what they want.”

“Mostly, attention; same as most adults I’ve met,” Anita remarked. “People never seem to grow up.”

“What about you? Is attention all you want?”

“No, I don’t like being noticed. I like being in the background.”

“You like being secretive.”

“Not really. I don’t have any secrets.”

“*Everybody* has secrets, Anita,” Debra declared.

Anita suspected Debra was hinting at something but she did not know if she wanted to take the bait. “That’s normal, don’t you think?” she asked.

“Well, yeah. We’re all entitled to our privacy, right?”

“Of course. But, privacy isn’t the same as hiding something. Are you hiding anything, Debra?” Debra felt strange and wanted to believe Anita was opening herself to knowing her better. She did not know if she should take the risk of sharing anything personal until she knew a little more about Anita, mainly because what Debra wanted to share concerned Anita.

Anita sensed that Debra might want to get to know her better and began to wonder if Allie was right about her. Maybe she did have some sort of intuition, empathy, or heightened awareness of other people’s feelings. She understood what was going on at Debra’s ‘party.’

“This isn’t really a birthday party, is it?” she asked, pointedly.

“Um, not exactly. My birthday is this week, though.”

“But, there’s no party?”

“Well, it could be,” Debra answered. She wanted to sound confident, even bold, but her statement came off tentative and uncertain. Anita sensed Debra’s uneasiness and felt sorry for her.

“So, I’m the only guest?”

Debra nodded. “You can go if you want to,” she replied, dourly.

“And leave you alone for your birthday party? No way.” Debra brightened up. “Although I was hoping for some cake.”

Debra’s expression soured. “There’s something better than cake if you want it,” she suggested.

“Ice cream, you mean?” Debra shook her head. She had bought no ice cream. “Well, we could go get some. My treat.”

“I was hoping you might want something even *better*, Anita. Although it’s my birthday, I wanted to give *you* a present.” Anita waited calmly for Debra to continue, although she suspected what Debra was about to suggest, and did not know how she was going to respond. “Me.”

“Debra, we hardly know each other...”

“But you liked me from the moment we met. I could tell.”

“I liked you immediately because I could tell you were a lesbian like me,” Anita replied.

“So what’s the problem?”

“I’m gay, but I’m also your boss.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Debra asked.

“I wouldn’t be comfortable being in a relationship with you. It would be hard for me to do my job.”

“So I guess that means you like your job more than you like other women?”

“No, I *do* like other women,” Anita replied. “But, I haven’t dated anyone for a while.”

“So, now here I am, and we work together. How convenient is that?”

“It’s not about convenience.”

“Then what is it about, Anita? You just don’t like me, is that it? I know I’m not as mature as you are. I knew that the moment I met you. But, I was sure you liked me right away and were attracted to me. I’m usually right about these feelings, although I don’t have as much experience as you probably do.”

“My experience has nothing to do with this.”

“Then what is it?” Debra asked.

“I don’t like hurting people.”

“You won’t hurt me.”

“What if we were in a relationship, but you screwed up at work, and the boss told me to get rid of you?”

“I would hope you would talk him into giving me one last chance.”

“What if it *was* your last chance?” Anita asked.

“I would hope you’d plead for one more.”

“I might not if *my* job was also on the line.”

“So you’d choose your job over someone you love?”

“It would be painful, but yes, if I had to,” Anita replied, bluntly, and then tried to soften the truth. “Even if it was you.”

“Oh.”

“But, it *won’t* be you, Debra... unless we no longer work together.”

“Well, how about just for tonight?” Debra tried not to sound like she was pleading.

Anita shook her head. “Sorry. I can’t.”

“You mean you won’t, don’t you?”

“I’m sorry if this hurts you.”

“I’ll be okay, but I think you should leave. I want to be alone.” Anita left without another word spoken. She reflected on her conflicted feelings as she boarded the bus for the long ride home. Her reaction to Debra’s attempted seduction surprised her. She hated to disappoint Debra, felt wary of where a quick fuck might lead them, and felt sorry they had not met under different circumstances. She also hoped she had not made a huge mistake.

Anita liked Debra. She would have slipped easily into a romance if their work relationship were not what it was. When Anita got off the bus, she understood she had become more of an adult than she would have thought. She also did not know what to expect the next time she saw Debra at work.

They had little to say to each other for the next week. Debra showed up early, worked harder than she had before, and performed her cleaning tasks without any problems. Instead of complaints, Anita heard praise for Debra’s work. “I don’t know what you said to her,” the manager, Samuel, said, “But you got her going. Good job!”

Anita felt reluctant to tell Debra about Samuel’s praise. She felt reluctant to talk to her at all. She knew she was avoiding what could be an embarrassing conversation for both of them.

“Did you hear that?” Debra asked, excitedly, several days later. “Sam told me I’m doing a great job. I’m so relieved.”

“Well, you’ve improved. I’m relieved, too.”

“Because you won’t have to fire me?” Debra asked.

“Well, sure. I didn’t want to.”

“Well, you were right to turn me down. I thought about it afterward. I put you in an awkward position. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Anita replied. “I’m sorry, too.”

“Now, can we be friends?”

“That’s what I always wanted.”

“Great! How about we get together for coffee later? I think we’re both getting off at the same time.”

“Okay. But, I wouldn’t mind dinner. It’s been a while since I’ve had good Chinese food. There’s a restaurant up the block that’s pretty good. Do you like Chinese food?”

“Kinda,” Debra replied, feeling awkward. She hadn’t eaten much Chinese food but she liked Anita a lot. *Maybe I can pretend I like it just to move things along*, she thought. *I can always throw the food away when I get home.*

“Or, if you don’t, coffee is fine.”

“No, let’s go to the restaurant. Maybe you can teach me about Chinese food.”

“That’ll be fun.”

Debra saw the dinner as her second and maybe last chance to impress Anita. She felt she might gain Anita’s trust and interest if she talked about herself.

“So, I guess you’re wondering about me,” she said after they had ordered from the Chinese menu and waited for their food to come. Anita suggested Debra play it safe with noodles and meat and recommended the Lo Mein with beef. The huge plate of noodles the waiter served them astonished Debra. Anita smiled, dove right in, and waited for Debra to continue.

“My family is from Princeton. My father is a professor there. My mom works in the library. They both are from old Princeton families, so they have a history in the community. Very upstanding, very proper, if you know what I mean.” Anita nodded as she sucked in a noodle. “Well, to make a long story short, I embarrassed them.”

“What did you do?”

“I marched in a gay pride parade on campus.”

“I wouldn’t think that would be a problem. Aren’t college campuses more tolerant than society?”

“This was back in the late Sixties,” Debra replied. She hadn’t taken a bite of her food. It didn’t look that appetizing to her. “I was seventeen. Nobody had heard of gay liberation back then.”

“And, you hadn’t come out to your parents, I’m guessing.”

“Right. They assumed, at first, I was marching to support the issue, and maybe some friends who were homosexuals. I let them believe that for a while. Then a campus group formed and I joined, although I was still in high school. I looked older than I was and nobody questioned me about being a student at the university.

The group became militant more quickly than anyone expected and caused some confrontations on campus. Debra took part in those confrontations. The protesters occupied Dean Johnson’s office. He recognized Debra. Her father was furious. He came to the occupation and tried to take her home. He assumed ‘these fucking homosexuals’ had lured her and she was too young to know what she was doing. All her friends from the group were looking at her. She knew her moment of truth had come.

“I’m not here to *support* homosexuals,” she said. “I am one.” That was all her father needed. He stormed out of the Dean’s office. The occupation ended three days later with some concessions by the university. Debra went home tired and frightened. She did not know what to expect. Her father was teaching but her mother was home. Debra had the feeling she had been waiting for her.

“How could you do this to us?” Emily asked, quietly angry. “Everyone knows. You could have told us beforehand. We wouldn’t have cared if you kept it quiet. But, you’ve embarrassed us in front of the whole university. Those other people who demonstrated all live somewhere else. Their families don’t have to know what they are. But, everyone we know now knows about you. How could you do this, Debra?” Her vehemence shocked Debra. Her mother was a Quaker. Debra had gone to First Day school and learned about Quakers who protested wars, injustice, and other social ills. Her parents had supported Quakers who sailed the *Phoenix* to Hanoi during the Vietnam War. Debra thought her mother, at least, would understand why Debra did what she did.

“But, it wasn’t about what you *did*, was it?” Anita asked. “She was angry about what you were.”

Debra nodded, and her eyes filled with tears. “Suddenly, I wasn’t their daughter anymore. That much was clear. I knew I couldn’t stay there.”

“So what did you do?”

“I bided my time, avoided talking to my father, concentrated on finishing high school, and finally graduated. They attended but we didn’t talk about it. I could have gone to Princeton without any problem. I almost didn’t have to apply- it was just a formality for professor’s children, but I didn’t.” Her father didn’t ask why. He didn’t ask where else she planned to apply and didn’t mention college the few times he talked to her at dinner. He also didn’t ask about her future. It was as if she did not have one, not there, anyway. Debra left. A student she met in the gay group told her she was going to stay in Philly during the summer and Debra could sleep on her floor if she wanted to. She took the train into the city and had stayed there since then.

“So, where have you been living? What did you do? Did you get a job?”

“Yeah, right away. The place was called Thirteenth Street Books. Do you know it?” Anita shook her head. The only bookstore she visited was Rainbow Books. “It was a crazy place. They had lots of employees but they were mostly unreliable. The owner didn’t pay them much to come in, open boxes, stock shelves, arrange magazines, and help customers find stuff. He never let any of these casual employees anywhere near the cash register. But, he paid by the day so people could earn enough money to keep going without having to make a big commitment and the owner got labor without having to keep any real records. He was doing pretty good business. The store sold lots of books and magazines to workers who came in during their lunch hours. The store also carried dirty magazines and books. A lot of businessmen types in jackets and ties came in for that stuff. There were always creeps reading in the aisles, but most of them moved if you told them to.”

“Wow. It must have been a wild place.”

“It was, but I loved it and showed up every day. The owner started to rely on me. He would tell me what he wanted me to do day after day and let me supervise the casual workers. And, he paid me more than them. I rented a room near the Temple campus only a subway ride from downtown. It was a dicey neighborhood. I never went home after dark but the rooms were safe.”

“So what happened?” Anita asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when you came to me for a job, you seemed desperate for work.”

“I was. I had been out of work for months.”

“What happened to your job at Thirteenth Street Books?”

“I showed up one day and found the place closed up tight. The lights were off. Nobody was inside. I waited. The owner never came. I went away and came back a few hours later. It was still closed. I went home and came back the next day. Still closed. A week went by. Still closed. I kept going back because he owed me back pay. Then I realized he was gone and I was screwed. I asked at other stores on the street but no one knew what happened. Finally, after a month, I gave up. I looked for work in a couple of places but no one would hire me. I would tell them about Thirteenth Street Books and they just brushed me off. When I came to you, I was down to my last few dollars. I was desperate. If it wasn’t for you, I don’t know what would have happened to me. I probably would have become homeless, maybe even had to go back to my parents.”

“Would that have worked?” Anita asked.

“I don’t know, and I hope I never have to find out.”

“I agree. And I think I have an idea about a job you might like better than cleaning the Boyd.”

“What is it?” Debra asked.

“I can’t tell you yet. Let me talk to someone.”

“Gee, thanks, Anita. I never expected you to help me like this.”

“Well, don’t get too excited. It might not work out.”

“I understand, but thanks anyway for just caring about me.”

Anita stopped by Rainbow Books and told Allie about Debra. She thought Allie might want to hire someone who knew something about running a bookstore. Allie became interested. She interviewed Debra and told her what happened at Thirteenth Street Books.

“I knew the guy that ran it, a little. I used to shop there before I opened this place. He carried a lot of unusual stuff other bookstores didn’t carry, at least not the ones in Philadelphia. He was a weird guy. I don’t know if you noticed...”

“No, he was always cool with me.”

“Well, I used to go there about fifteen years ago so maybe he changed. Anyway, there were rumors back then...”

“What kind of rumors?” Debra asked.

“About special stuff he sold, stuff customers would have to know how to ask for.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Are you sure you want to know?” Allie asked.

“Porn? I saw the porn he sold. It was gross, but no big deal. I used to unpack the paperback books and put the magazines out on display.”

“The kind of stuff I’m talking about wasn’t on display.”

“What was it?”

“It featured children...” Allie explained.

“What? I don’t believe it.”

“That’s what I heard. I never saw any of it, nor would I want to, but that’s what people told me he was into.”

“He seemed like such a nice guy. He was always nice to me.”

“Well, you were too old for him to be interested in, I guess,” Allie said.

“Maybe that explains why people came and went so erratically. I thought he was just helping them out, giving them day jobs so they could earn a little money and not have to panhandle.”

“I heard he did that, too. That was legit. I don’t know how he did the other stuff. I’m sorry. You were lucky to get out of there. If the police had caught him you might have been in trouble, too.”

“But, I didn’t know!” Debra argued.

“Yeah, but you’re a lesbian. Cops think we’re perverts. They would just assume you helped him with his perversions.”

“But, I didn’t!” Debra protested, suddenly worried the police saw her name written in the store’s records and were looking for her.

“I know. I know. You don’t have to worry. Now, tell me what you learned about running a bookstore.” Debra had learned a lot at Thirteenth Street Books and she impressed Allie. Her business was growing. She had been thinking of hiring someone to help with stocking, inventory, and running the cash register. Allie wanted to devote more time to get to know her customers, ordering more books, and neighborhood organizing. The blocks around Rainbow Books were rapidly evolving into a gay enclave in the downtown area. People came in to ask where they could find out about apartments and neighborhood activities. Allie installed a community bulletin board that started with only a little information and a few announcements but soon became crammed with all kinds of stuff. Her little bookshop had become the center of a thriving gay community.

Debra gave her notice at the Boyd. Anita pretended to she felt surprised. The manager seemed relieved when she told him Debra was leaving. On her last day, Debra shyly asked Anita for a date and she accepted. She knew she would miss Debra and did not want her to leave without arranging a way to see her again. Anita did not know if they had a romance in their

future. She only knew she liked Debra the moment they met and wanted to see if anything came of their attraction.

Chapter 9 - Revelations

Krista had her usual plate of fresh-baked cookies and a pot of tea ready when Anita and Debra arrived. “So, you’re Anita’s new girlfriend!” she said, smiling. “I’m so pleased to meet you. She told me a little about you. Have a seat.”

“She told me about you and your girlfriend, too,” Debra replied.

“Ah, yes. It feels strangely wonderful to use that word for Anna. We never could talk about each other that way. It had to be our secret.”

“Times have changed,” Anita commented.

“Have they?” Krista replied. “Is it permanent or just a fluke? It seemed like anything could happen in the Sixties. We almost told others about ourselves. But, now things seem to have tightened up. It’s not as bad as the Fifties but I think it could be, and there’d be nothing we could do to stop it.”

“I hope you’re wrong and I’m sorry you had to keep your love secret all those years. At least you had that love. You had each other.”

“Yes we did, and it was wonderful. Almost too wonderful. I still can’t believe how lucky we were to have found each other. I mean, what were the chances...?”

“It was fate when you met at that interview,” Anita commented.

“Maybe it was... maybe it was...”

Anita and Krista had become good friends. Anita visited every two weeks. She found herself drawn to the old woman and felt different whenever she finished one of their visits. It was not until her third or fourth visit that she realized she was no longer helping Krista, which was what she started out to do. Krista was helping her, but Anita was not sure how.

Krista’s mood had changed, too. The sharp pain and abysmal despair of losing her lover had softened. She grieved for Anna but accepted her death and understood how fortunate they were to have spent so many years together. Krista regretted they did not have more time but had no other regrets. Their love had been idyllic from the first moment they discovered their true feelings for each other to the last moment before Anna passed on. Krista felt certain Anna died happy despite her suffering near the end. She knew she was the reason for Anna’s happiness and that knowledge soothed her grief.

Her new friendship with Anita opened her up to new possibilities for friendships with other women who were lesbians. Although Anna was gone, Krista did not feel so alone anymore because she could be honest about who she was, what they were, and share stories of the life they shared for so many years. And now, Krista had two lesbian friends. Maybe they could benefit from her experience and wisdom.

“She’s delightful!” Debra said as they drove away from Krista’s apartment.

“I was hoping you’d like her.”

“How could I not?”

“Well, she’s a lot older than we are, even older than Allie and Sophia.”

“She’s about as old as your mom would be, isn’t she?”

Debra’s comment startled Anita. She was right. Perhaps the relationship Krista and Anita developed was the one she would have wanted if her mother had not died before they could reunite. Her attention wavered for a moment and the car swerved. There was no other traffic, so there was no danger. Debra noticed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to remind you...”

“No, it’s okay. I’m glad you mentioned it. You may be right. What’s funny about this is that Allie sent me to Krista so I could help her but maybe she’s helped me more.”

“From what I saw today you’re both helping each other. She likes you very much.”

“And, I like her. She’s dealt with things I can’t imagine. I mean, keeping a big secret like they had to do... all those years.”

“They were deeply in love, Anita. I’m not sure how common that kind of love is.”

“They were special, that’s for sure. She’s special. I’m thinking of introducing her to my dad and his girlfriend. She’s not much older than they are. And, they’re both cool about homosexuality.”

“That might be a good idea.”

Krista had never spoken in front of a group before but Allie asked Anita to persuade Krista to share her life story with people at Rainbow Books. No one had ever heard of her but people felt she must be special because Allie was presenting her. A small group showed up the afternoon Krista spoke. They were not disappointed.

“I thought I knew my love, Anna, really well,” Krista began, haltingly, “as well as any two humans *can* know each other. I thought there would be no surprises beyond the big surprise that we fell in love, especially after she was gone.” Krista paused, lost in her memories, trying to find the words she had rehearsed. The women (and a few men) assembled in the audience waited patiently for her to continue her story.

“But, I was wrong. A few months after she died, I started clearing out the extra room we pretended was her bedroom. It was where we stored stuff we had no place for in the rest of our apartment. You know the kind of junk I mean- out-of-season clothes, extra pieces of furniture, fancy dishes we bought together on a whim but hardly ever used.

“While I was going through this stuff, looking for some of her things I would be comfortable giving away, I found a large cardboard box. I was pretty sure it wasn’t mine, and it didn’t have her name on it either. I opened it and found some old framed photos. They looked like they were from the 1910s or 20s. I didn’t recognize the people in the photos and assumed they were Anna’s parents or relatives. She had never shown them to me.

“I also found a box of papers. Some were old letters, others were documents. There were even some stock certificates for companies that no longer existed, or had names I didn’t recognize. Then I found several small books. I opened one of them. A name was written inside, Christa Anna Hoffman. I recognized Anna’s handwriting. I turned the page and found more handwriting, a date, and words. By now, you’ve guessed it was her diary! I started reading, fascinated.

“Although she was gone, and I thought I would never get to learn anything new and wonderful about her for the rest of my life, I suddenly discovered I was wrong. Anna had left me a gift. There was more of her I was yet to discover.

“I can’t tell you how happy I was. It was almost as if she had come back to me. I read a few entries in the diary. They were about things that she did at school. She also wrote about something someone in her family said, or she made notes about visiting relatives or friends. I gathered she had started the diary when she was in her early teens. There were dates, but no years. They came later in subsequent entries.

“I already knew the usual stuff about Anna. She told me where she was born, where she grew up, who the members of her family were, who were the memorable relatives, and what they were like ‘back then.’ I had heard it, learned all the details, and savored them. Now I could

experience events in Anna's life as *she* experienced them when they happened. Whatever details she had lost in the fog of memory were sharp and clear in her diaries. As I read, I fell in love with her all over again. She had a way of describing things that was short and precise and often drew insights from what she wrote about.

"Throughout the early diaries, I had a sense she was searching for something. From the later diaries, I learned that she was searching for herself, an understanding of her world, and the truth about her personal feelings. I think she knew, although she never stated it clearly in her diary, probably because she feared someone else might read it, that she was a lesbian. Mostly she wrote about how she didn't seem to fit in, how her feelings seemed different, how bored she felt when her friends talked about boys, etc.

"She was more honest in later entries. Her thoughts also ranged over much more varied topics. She sometimes wrote about things that impressed her from the newspapers, radio, films, and books. She also wrote about events that happened at her job, or on the trolley rides to and from work. My Anna was a much more thoughtful and reflective woman than she ever let on. I learned this when I came to the diaries she wrote from the start of World War Two and when I came into her life. She wrote about her job, people at work, and life during the war. She only mentioned me when we decided to become roommates although we met months earlier in a funny situation.

"But, the most interesting diary entries were the ones she wrote during the years we were together. Some things happened after the war that she followed closely and wrote about that I had no idea she'd been so interested in. I pretty much ignored the news. I only read the comics section of newspapers. I sometimes watched TV with her but only the comedy shows and Ed Sullivan on Sunday nights. She continued her interest in current events while she was at work during the day. She took time to read newspapers, listen to the radio, talk to her co-workers, and she often discussed issues I knew nothing about.

"Going back to our time at the Frankford Arsenal during the war I was astonished to learn that she helped a Negro woman who was trying to get a job at the Armory. Anna read about how President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive order outlawing discrimination in defense jobs or government. That order opened doors for black people to land jobs at the arsenal and in plants and factories across the country. I didn't know anything about this. I never paid much attention to Negroes. Somehow, Anna was concerned about them having the right to apply for the same jobs as white people.

"I met a woman, Alfreda, after the war, when she came to visit Anna and me. She was nice. All Anna told me was that Alfreda was her friend but neither of them told me about what happened during the war. We saw her from time to time until she moved to New Jersey. She came to Anna's funeral and we had a nice reunion.

"What I gathered from Anna's diary was that she felt sympathy for Negroes who society treated as outsiders. I think her concern was because Anna felt herself to be an outsider. After all, she was a lesbian and didn't fit into 'normal' society. She helped Alfreda and the other Negro women who tried to get jobs at the Arsenal. Some other workers didn't like Anna for helping the Negroes but they didn't say anything. They just gave her the cold shoulder. I admired her.

"And then she wrote about the time in the early 1950s when our little community of a thousand households, Pennypack Woods, was due to be sold by the government. It had built Pennypack for workers in war industries. That was how we got our place there. Now that the war was over the government didn't want it anymore. We heard rumors that developers wanted it just to resell the houses for exorbitant prices or tear them down and build new houses on the land.

“Well, Anna worried we would lose our happy home and have to move. She also didn’t feel developers should get to make profits off buildings taxpayers had paid for. She heard about some residents who wanted to buy the place from the government and run it as a co-op. She got involved with this group and helped convince others to support the idea.

“I wasn’t interested. I stayed home. I found meetings boring. I also liked my neighbors and didn’t want to get into fights with them. It became pretty bitter. The co-op won only because the car carrying the developers broke down on the New Jersey Turnpike. The two groups were supposed to meet with government lawyers in New York. Anna and the others got there and made the final sale. Pennypack Woods has been owned and run by the people who live there ever since. Some people, including Anna, were called communists, back when that word had more power than it does now, but she didn’t care. She and the others had done what they believed was best for the community, and they were right.

“That was my Anna. She always fought for what was right. When Alfreda came back into our lives in the 1960s, we found out she had been marching with Martin Luther King in the South. Anna wanted to go and march too but I objected. I thought it wouldn’t be safe and I didn’t want anything to happen to her. I was totally selfish but I’m not sorry. I don’t know what I would have done without her.

“And then when that riot happened in New York City at the place called Stonewall, Anna was sad because she thought people had gotten hurt, but happy they made their point. ‘About damn time,’ she said. ‘Maybe we can finally come out of the closet.’ I didn’t care about being in the closet. I only wanted to be with her.

“It took me a while to get over losing her and I know I’ll never find anyone like her ever again, but that’s okay. Thanks to my dear friend Anita, I’ve found women like Anna and me and I’m not alone anymore. For some reason I don’t understand, these women say they’re interested in the story of Anna and me- and I’m grateful. That’s why I accepted this invitation to talk about Anna’s diaries. I’m hoping other women- lesbians- my age and older will be encouraged to share their own stories.

“We’re all sisters, in a way. We were hidden for so long, it seems strange to come out, but I think we should. Others need us. We’re the grandmothers and mothers. We know things the younger folks might need to know. And, we ought to support them, just like they’re supporting us. Thank you all for coming to my little talk. I’m tired, now. I think I want a cup of tea.”

Krista smiled weakly. Her little talk had worn her out. She looked for a chair, found it, and then sat down, quietly. The audience applauded politely. Anita looked around, wondered why the applause seemed unenthusiastic, and noticed some people were sniffing. One older woman was sobbing. Krista’s talk had more of an effect than Anita had anticipated.

Anita started the car and eased it out of the parking space on Stardust Lane. It was a quiet late fall Sunday afternoon. A few children were playing in the street. Most of the men were inside watching the Eagles football game.

Because she and Anna had lived there so many years, they were neighborhood fixtures. Krista knew many of her neighbors, but none really well. She had only been inside a few of their homes. People checked on her from time to time, especially if they did not see her for a few days. Random kids would ring her doorbell to ask if she needed anything from the neighborhood deli. Passersby might stop and talk if Krista was outside in her yard. She lived alone inside her apartment but she was never alone outside, and she liked that.

“It’s so nice of you to come and get me but you didn’t have to,” Krista protested, smiling.

“Oh, I don’t mind. It’s a long way from your place to my house and I’m lousy at directions. I didn’t want you to get lost.”

“Well, I appreciate the ride. Where’s Debra?” Krista asked.

“Oh, she’s coming on the bus from her place.”

“Her place? You mean you two aren’t living together?” Anita shook her head as she tried to concentrate on the erratic Roosevelt Boulevard traffic. “What’s keeping you?”

“We talked about it but we can’t agree on where to look. She’s in West Philly and I’m in Germantown.”

“I guess you wouldn’t be interested in being in my neighborhood?”

“It would be okay if we both didn’t work downtown but she hates the El.”

“I never liked it either. Too noisy, and dirty..., and smelly. Well, sometimes,” Krista added, frowning.

“Subway’s not much better, but I’m used to it,” Anita commented. They rode in silence for a few minutes. Krista looked out the window, watching the cars and people they drove past.

“It’s nice of you to invite me to this party,” Krista said, “What’s the occasion?”

“Oh, it’s my mother’s sixty-fifth birthday this week. My family has been getting together to celebrate her birthdays every year since she died. They celebrated them before when she was still alive but I wasn’t there, of course.” Anita paused, and then added, “I had run away.”

“It troubles you, doesn’t it?” Krista asked, thoughtfully. Anita did not reply. “Well, you shouldn’t let it. Your mother’s death didn’t have anything to do with your running away.”

“I know. I tell myself that whenever I think about it. But I’m sorry I went.”

“You can’t change the past, Anita. And, you’re back home with your family now. That’s the most important thing, isn’t it?”

“Yes. You’re right, of course.” They rode in silence.

“Speaking of family, I’m surprised you invited me. I’m not part of your family.”

“Well, I talk about you so much that my dad asked me to invite you.”

“How nice of him,” Krista said.

“And well... I almost think about you like family. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind? I’m flattered.”

They arrived at Anita’s house in Germantown. Everyone except Theresa and Debra was already there. Theresa had just returned from a trip to San Francisco to visit her son for the first time and Al had missed her. He was hoping they could spend time together alone after the party.

Al smiled broadly when he saw Krista for the first time. He had wondered how he would react to her being there. She was at least ten years older than he was. He wondered if she would seem older or appear younger because of the delightful things Anita told him about her. He also sympathized with her losing the long-time love of her life. He was a widower, so they had something in common. He did not know what a lesbian who lost her lover was called- was she a widow?

“It’s such a pleasure to meet you. Anita talks about you all the time,” Al said. He wanted to hug Krista but wondered if that would be inappropriate and shook hands instead. She smiled at him. She did hug Tony and Sharon (who, she noticed, was pregnant) and made a fuss over Sara, who seemed shy at first.

“Thank you for inviting me to your wife’s birthday party. I think it’s nice that you’re doing this. It keeps her memory alive, doesn’t it?” Al nodded and fought a memory of Ida’s last days when he spent his time sitting next to her hospital bed, watching over as she slept, hoping for a miracle that would keep her alive. It never came.

Al never got over losing Ida but his life went on. If Anita had not come back, he might not have gone on. The challenge of seeing Anita, accepting her back, and then living day-to-day with her gave him something new to deal with and eased the passage of time after he lost Ida.

“It was the kids’ idea. They remembered how Ida used to love birthdays. We thought it would be nice to celebrate hers that first year after she was gone. It was more like another memorial service than a birthday celebration, but I think it did us good. It was just the three of us then. We added Sharon, then Sara, and Nancy, when she and Anita were still together, and now Theresa and Debra... speaking of which, where are those two?”

“Here we are!” Theresa said brightly as she walked in. “We met outside.” She went right up to Al, kissed him hello, turned to smile at Anita, Tony, Sharon, and Sara, and waited for someone to introduce her to Krista.”

“Theresa, this is my friend Krista.”

“Delighted! Al told me Anita talks about you. I’m glad we finally met.” Theresa gave Krista a little hug. Krista felt embarrassed. Anita only told her Theresa’s name and that she was her father’s new girlfriend. Krista wondered whether Anita liked Theresa or was wary of her. She knew little about Anita’s relationship with her mother before she ran away.

Debra smiled shyly at everyone and then kissed Anita. Sara watched them, fascinated. She adored her Aunt Anita, who often played with her, took her to the park, or shopping at the big stores on Germantown Avenue. Sara loved Woolworth’s Five and Ten Store although she did not know its name. To her, it was a magical place filled with all sorts of fascinating items. Sara beamed with delight whenever they went shopping there. Sara did not know Debra but was willing to give her a chance because Aunt Anita seemed to like her.

Anita had put together a simple buffet. She laid out the food on the kitchen table and invited everyone to fill their plates. They sat around the large dining room table so they could eat and talk. Al wanted to sit next to Theresa but he was the last to get his food. The seats on either side of Theresa were taken before Al got to the table. Anita was in one and Krista was in the other. Undaunted, Al sat down, sipped his beer, and looked at Theresa. She looked down at her plate and did not notice him looking at her.

“So, Theresa, how was your trip?” he asked. They had only spoken once by phone while she was away. Long-distance calls were so expensive! She called to let him know she was okay, and to hear his voice, but the call lasted only a few moments, just enough for them to rekindle their affections.

“Really nice. It was good to see Cal. I didn’t realize how much I missed him.”

“He’s your son?” Tony asked. Theresa nodded. “How long’s he been there?”

“Almost four years.”

“What’s he do?” Tony asked.

“He works in a store. I don’t recall the name. He seems to like it.”

“So,” Al asked, “did you... meet... any of his friends?” He was not sure how much Theresa would want to talk about her son.

“Yeah. He surprised me. Shocked me, to tell the truth.” Al thought she was about to tell them Cal was gay. They waited for her to continue. “He introduced me to Angelique, his girlfriend!” Al grinned.

“Girlfriend?”

“Yeah. Can you believe it? All this time I thought he went to San Francisco because he was gay and happy there, and now he tells me he’s got a girlfriend!”

Al laughed. “You sound disappointed.”

“I am! I was all set to be the understanding, encouraging, and loving mom, proud of her son and his independent sexual identity, and he turned out to be *normal*.” The others smiled. Sara had no idea what they were talking about. She was thinking about that birthday cake waiting on the kitchen table.

“Well, normal’s not so bad, is it?” Krista asked. Theresa didn’t reply.

“What does this girlfriend do?” Anita asked.

“She’s a photographer. Freelance, whatever that is. I saw a show of her photos while I was there. They were okay. And, she’s nice. We got along.”

“Are they serious?”

“Hard to say. But they seemed happy. That’s all that matters. And, she takes good care of my boy. That’s all a mom wants, you know? Somebody who takes good care of her boy when she’s not around.” Tony, Anita, and Al’s facial expressions changed at the same time. They simultaneously recalled the mom who was no longer around. This party was for her. Krista noticed the changes in their looks. Sara impatiently waited for the adults to finish wasting time talking and get to the cake.

They went on chatting and Krista felt enveloped by the warmth that only comes from a loving family. She had savored that warmth when she and Anna were a family of two. This family was larger. Although only three of them had known Ida, it felt to Krista as if Ida’s love suffused their home and affected everyone else. She was happy to be there. When the party ended, she wished she could have spoken to Ida and told her what a wonderful family she had.

Chapter 10 - Going Back Home

Anita and Debra lounged in bed on a quiet Sunday morning. They had nothing to do and it felt wonderful. Anita took the bus to Debra's apartment after her long Saturday-night shift at the Boyd. She arrived late, exhausted, relieved to be away from the crowded theater, and alone with Debra, finally. They had waited all week for this.

Debra had a small dinner prepared; nothing fancy, just a couple of hoagies, sodas, and ice cream for dessert. Anita was not hungry for hoagies and ice cream. She wanted dessert but she didn't crave ice cream. She wanted Debra. Anita coquettishly persuaded Debra to put the food away, promising delights that were not gustatory but sensual in other ways. Debra felt eager to comply. She packed up the food, stashed it in her small refrigerator, and headed for the bed. Anita was already there, naked. They reacquainted themselves with each other's bodies for the next hour and then fell asleep relaxed and satisfied.

They awoke to find a cloudy and rainy day outside Debra's bedroom window. The women looked at each other and shrugged. "Well, I didn't have anywhere I wanted to go today. Did you?" Anita asked. Debra shook her head and reached for Anita. This time they did not fall asleep after they finished making love.

"Where's that food?" Anita asked. Debra giggled, got out of bed naked, went to her refrigerator, and got the food out. Anita liked the idea of eating naked. She got out of bed and started for the table.

"Stay there, my dear. We're having breakfast in bed today!" Debra said, brightly, as she put the hoagies on plates and carried them to the bed. Anita took hers, looked at it appreciatively, waited for Debra to crawl beneath the covers, and then took a big bite of the hoagie.

"This is delicious. Best hoagie I've ever eaten."

"That's because you're eating it with *me*," Debra replied, grinning. "I make everything taste better." Her remark surprised Anita. Debra did not usually praise herself. She was often meek, mild, and shy, even in bed.

"You seem up today. Did something happen...?"

"Well, yes. Something nice. My brother called me." Anita felt shocked.

"You have a brother? You never told me. Older... younger?"

"Um, older... by about fifteen minutes."

"No way! You're a fucking twin?" Anita asked. Debra nodded, smiling. "So there's two of you? I would have never guessed. Is he...?"

Debra shook her head. "Straight as an arrow."

"You two get along okay?"

"Yeah. Haven't seen him in a long time, but we talk on the phone every few months. He called me yesterday and told me his news. He's getting married."

"Wow, that's nice, Debra. When?"

"Few months. He wants me to come to the wedding."

"Oh, will that be a problem for you?"

"It won't be... But, I'm gonna need your help," Debra said.

"Um, sure. What?"

"Will you be my date for the wedding?"

Anita did not answer right away. Debra sensed hesitation and maybe refusal. She frowned. "You're sure?" Anita asked.

Debra nodded. "Well, I'd do anything for Daniel, but... I told him I wouldn't go alone."

“He’s all right with that?”

“He’s delighted. Says he can’t wait to meet you. I told him how wonderful you are.”

“So that’s why the big hoagies and great sex?” Anita asked, smiling. “You were buttering me up?”

“You’re not being fair! I wanted you to eat and the sex was because I missed you.”

“But you *were* buttering me up...”

“A little,” Debra confessed, grinning shyly. “What do you think? Will you come with me?”

“What about your parents? What about Daniel? Are they gonna be pissed at him? Could it ruin his wedding?”

“He seems to think there won’t be a problem.”

“Um, what do you think?” Anita asked.

“I want him to be right... but I’m not sure.”

“That’s why you want me to come?” Debra nodded. “Just in case something happens? But what could I do?”

“I don’t want to be there alone. Just be there with me, and maybe get me out of there if necessary. But, I don’t think it will be if my brother is right.”

“I hope he is. I guess we’ll find out...” Anita said, gently.

“You mean... you’ll go?”

“If that’s what you want, then, yes, of course, I’ll go. I’ll just tell them I need the day off. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Anita, I... don’t know what to say. I didn’t expect-.”

“I’d agree?”

“Well, not this fast. I thought I would have to convince you.”

Anita was silent for a moment. Debra waited. She felt Anita was going to say more but did not know what. “Things like this are what people do when they love each other,” Anita explained, softly. She looked at Debra and hoped she hadn’t said something stupid. Debra started to tear up.

“You mean that?” she asked. Anita nodded. “Um... are you finished eating?” Anita looked down at her plate. Half of her hoagie was still there.

“I guess so, why?”

“I thought we could have more dessert...” They did. It was the most wonderful Sunday either had spent in a long, long time.

Anita found a parking space on the grass in front of the small stone building that looked centuries old. The only thing that made the location look modern was the cars parked nearby. They all belonged to people invited to Daniel and Carleen’s wedding. A large limousine parked close to the front porch. A few people were going in as Anita parked.

“The wedding’s in a farmhouse?” Anita asked.

“That’s the meetinghouse,” Debra said.

“What’s a meetinghouse?”

“It’s a Quaker church.”

“What’s a Quaker?”

“You have Quaker meetinghouses in Germantown. Two, I think.”

“So?” Anita asked.

“You’ve never noticed them?”

“I guess not.”

“Quakers are also known as Friends.”

“Oh. There’s a Friends’ Free Library on Germantown Avenue. My mom used to take us there when we were little.”

“It was probably run by the Quakers in the meeting.”

“But, we didn’t go there for meetings,” Anita explained. “We went there to get books.”

“No, the meetings would have taken place in the meetinghouse. It was probably somewhere nearby. I’ll show you the next time we go to Germantown.”

“I can’t wait.”

They walked toward the little building. Anita felt curious. She had expected a big church and wondered why anyone would get married in a quaint little stone building like this. Debra had never told her about her family being Quakers. This was going to be strange, but interesting. She reminded herself she was there to support Debra and not become annoyed by weird religious stuff.

Debra paused before she went up the steps toward the open door. She was feeling mild anxiety mixed with nostalgia. Her mother took Debra and Daniel to this meeting when they were children. She recalled the first time they went in. People were standing around talking quietly. Alice, her mother, smiled and said ‘good morning’ to a couple of people. Debra and Daniel followed their mother to a bench at the back of the small room and sat on a bench.

A few moments later, everyone stopped talking and quickly sat. An eerie silence fell over the room. *What is happening?* Debra thought. She waited but nothing happened for what seemed like a long time. She wriggled on the bench and dangled her feet above the floor impatiently. Debra turned to look out the large window and sighed. It was as boringly peaceful outside as it was inside. After an eternity of nothing happening, someone stood up. Debra focused her attention on the old man and waited for him to do something. He just stood there. When she thought he was not going to do anything, she gave up waiting and started to turn around again, hoping she might see a bird fly by or a spider outside making a web. Then she heard a soft, firm, and deep voice.

“Friends, I am troubled by the reports we’re hearing of tests of nuclear bombs on little islands in the Pacific Ocean. I keep thinking of the people whose homes are being destroyed. I think of the scientists and soldiers who arrange and conduct these tests. I think of the money our government is spending on these horrific weapons of mass destruction, as they are known.

“The last war ended only a few years ago. It seems we are preparing for a new and much more horrible war. It’s said these bombs can wipe out whole cities, maybe whole countries. Some say if there were enough of them, and they were all used at once, they could destroy the earth. Is it right that we should be making weapons like this? What if we’re creating the end of the world? I don’t know what to do about it. I don’t know if I, or anyone, can do anything at all. It seems out of our hands...” His voice faded and the final words were almost impossible to hear. He sat down slowly. The silence that followed his speech seemed, to the adults in the room, more eloquent than his words, but they knew that silence and speech went together and fit the solemnity of this place.

That speech remained buried in Debra’s subconscious. She did not recall the words; she recalled the pain and resignation in the old man’s voice as he raised concerns about the end of the world. She was thinking of that speech now as she entered the meetinghouse for her brother’s wedding. It felt strange that she would recall it when she had been here so many other times and

heard so many other speeches. Debra never learned the name of the old man who spoke and he did not attend many meetings after that but she never forgot him.

The end of the world. Why am I thinking about that today? Is my world about to end? What will my parents do when they see me? Debra thought. She felt grateful Anita was with her, just in case she needed to escape this wedding as fast as she could.

They slipped into the bench next to the back wall and sat down quickly. Debra wanted to see who else was there and where her parents were but they were not in the room. She recognized some of their friends- other professors, University staff, and big shots from the community. Her family had always been well connected. Her parents spent much of their time preserving the veneer of social respectability. That had been why she left. She was not respectable then, and probably still was not.

She reminded herself she was here for Daniel and his bride. Debra reached over and took Anita's hand. Anita turned and smiled. "Nervous?" she whispered. Debra nodded. They waited, holding hands.

The room started to fill up. No one seemed to notice Debra. If anyone did, they did not react to her. Two strangers sat down beside them. The woman noticed Debra and Anita holding hands and smiled. Debra suddenly felt better. Then her parents walked in. They went up front where a row of benches faced the room. Debra tensed. They were sitting in the last row but the room was small. As soon as her parents turned to sit on the facing benches, they would surely notice Debra there. *Then what?* she wondered.

She squeezed Anita's hand, hard. "Is that them?" Anita asked. Debra nodded. "Be cool. I'm right here." Anita moved closer. Their legs touched. She felt the heat of Debra's body and sensed her rising panic. Then Anita did something Debra never expected. She let go of Debra's hand, raised her arm, draped it around Debra's shoulders, and squeezed. Part of her hoped Debra's parents would notice them at that moment. She wanted them to see that someone loved their daughter- whom they rejected- deeply, strongly, and passionately. Debra sighed.

"Thanks," she whispered. A hush fell over the room as Daniel and his bride walked in. Debra felt astonished by how handsome he looked and how gorgeous Carleen was. This was a Quaker wedding. Quakers were known for their lack of ostentation but Daniel and Carleen had gone all-out getting dressed up. He wore a rich black tuxedo and Carleen wore a dazzling white lace gown. A filmy veil covered her face and she carried a bouquet of garishly bright flowers. Their presence lit up the room. A few people gasped. Debra grinned broadly. *Way to go, big brother*, she thought. *Way to go*.

There was no minister or ceremony. The couple sat together on the facing bench and a period of silence began. After a few moments, Carleen looked at Daniel and smiled. "Here goes," she whispered. She stood up, faced Daniel, and began to speak.

"When I was a little girl, I did what many, perhaps most little girls do. I spent hours dreaming about my wedding. As you know, I have a vivid imagination." (Debra found out later Carleen was a budding science-fiction writer. She had only published one story so far, but felt certain it was only a matter of time before she would be discovered.) "Because of that my imaginary weddings were pretty lavish. I had a carriage pulled by large white horses, dozens of maids of honor, groomsmen all over the place, a huge audience, a lavish banquet that went on for days, and the most handsome groom any woman ever had.

"Well, I only got *one* of those things, but I'm not going to complain. I got the handsomest husband any woman ever had. And, you know what? I don't care about all the rest, because I love you so much that none of that stuff matters. That little girl I was so long ago had a great

imagination but she couldn't imagine a love like the one we have. I wouldn't trade it for anything and I promise you I will make you the happiest man alive." She finished, sat down, folded her hands, lowered her eyes to the floor, and fell into silence.

Carleen's speech stunned Anita. *This is a wedding?* she thought. There was more.

After another short silence, Daniel took Carleen's hands in his. He looked deep into her eyes still covered by the veil. It did not matter. He knew those eyes better than anyone else in the world. He did not need to see them to know and feel the love that dwelled within the woman those eyes belonged to. "I never fantasized about weddings," he began. "I guess I never thought, when I was little, I would ever get married. I never thought that when I got older, either. I thought many other things, though, but my imagination's not as vivid as yours is. But the reality of meeting you, getting to know you, falling in love with you, and now marrying you... well... that's so far beyond anything I could have imagined it's not worth thinking about. I'm glad I don't have to imagine you. The real you is far better than anything my puny imagination could ever conjure.

"This day, this moment, is also far beyond anything I could imagine. I will never forget it. I promise you in front of all these wonderful people that I will never let you forget how much I love you and how grateful I am that you chose to marry me. I guarantee you will never regret it." They hugged each other. Carleen started to cry. Several people in the small meetinghouse sniffled. A few sobbed. Others smiled.

Anita did not know what she should do. She watched Debra, who seemed moved in a way Anita had never seen before. Did Debra also fantasize about weddings, as Carleen described? Probably. However, she would never have one. She and Anita could be together for the rest of their lives. They could be as devoted to and in love with each other as much as Krista and Anna had been but they could never have a wedding like this.

The silence lasted a few more minutes and then Daniel and Carleen stood up and walked toward a little table off to the side next to the wall. On it sat a certificate of consecration for their marriage. They would sign it and be wed. Others would also sign as witnesses. Many believed God was also a witness and had blessed their marriage.

The strange ceremony ended. Spontaneous applause broke out. The couple smiled, embarrassed by the applause. Carleen's sisters hurried to her. They each hugged her, and then hugged Daniel. Anita waited. She knew Debra was the only sibling left to congratulate the couple.

Debra saw Daniel look around the room, spot her, and smile. She knew what to do. She stood up slowly, took Anita's hand, and walked toward the new couple. Debra tried to look only at Daniel and Carleen and not at her parents. She did not want to see the expressions on their faces. Debra did not want a reason to turn around and leave before she congratulated her brother and his bride. She reached them, hugged Daniel as tightly as she could, and held on. "This is my favorite sister," Daniel said to Carleen. She laughed. She knew Debra was Daniel's only sister. Debra let go of Daniel and turned to look at Carleen, who was stunning up close.

"You... you look beautiful," Debra said, haltingly. "He doesn't deserve you."

"I'll remind him you just said that whenever he gives me trouble. C'mere." Carleen grabbed Debra and crushed her in her arms. Debra gasped. Daniel smiled at his sister and new wife and then turned to look at Anita.

"You must be Anita. She's told me so much about you. I'm so glad you could come." His warmth overpowered Anita. She reached out to hug him and he swept her into his arms.

“Oh, yeah, guys, this is Anita, my girlfriend,” Debra said after Carleen released her. She had not planned to introduce Anita that way, to use the word ‘girlfriend,’ but the overwhelming power of the bond of love between Daniel and Carleen emboldened her. If he could find and share such overwhelming love, so could she.

Anita hugged Carleen. “Congratulations. You look stunning,” she said.

“Um... thanks. It’s nice to meet you.”

Someone behind Debra cleared their throat. “Ahem, can we congratulate your brother and his bride, please? You can have them back later.” Debra turned slowly, afraid of the grim facial expressions she might encounter. She had not seen her parents for several years and wondered if they had changed much. They were not smiling but they were not grimacing, either. She did not greet them but took Anita’s hand and stepped aside.

“Sure,” Debra said weakly.

“Nice meeting you both,” Carleen said brightly. “I hope we can talk later.”

“I’d love to,” Debra said as they walked away from the cluster of well-wishers. They went outside to the crisp fall air. Debra started to breathe again. She had not realized she had almost stopped.

“How do you feel?” Anita asked. “This must be hard for you. The joy, the love, the parents!”

“I don’t know.”

“Your mom and dad-.”

“Don’t! Please,” Debra cut her off. “That wasn’t what I expected, and I don’t know how to deal with it.”

“That’s why you brought me, remember? To help you deal with it.”

“Yeah,” Debra sighed. “Thanks.”

Daniel’s parents had rented the faculty dining room for the reception. Debra knew the building. She also knew there was limited parking. “Let’s leave and get there early so we can park near the building just in case...”

“We have to make a run for it?”

“Right.”

“Okay. You’ll have to direct me.”

They made their way onto the campus, found the parking lot, and waited in silence. “You want to talk?” Anita asked.

“No. I think I’m okay for now.”

“Does this place bring back memories?” Anita asked.

“Yeah. My dad used to bring me here for lunch when I was little. All his faculty friends would make a fuss over me. The staff knew me too and they were always very nice. I wonder what they’d all think of me now.”

“Because you’re gay?” Anita asked. Debra nodded. “Just remember that some of them probably are, too!”

Debra laughed. “I bet that’s true. I hadn’t thought of that.”

They went in after the other guests and the wedding party arrived. A lavish buffet table took up one wall just outside the kitchen doors. The family table was near the front wall of the large dining room. Anita and Debra waited by the door for others to come in. Waitstaff bustled around the tables finishing preparations for the wedding banquet. If the wedding ceremony was distinctively Quaker in its simplicity, the banquet was the exact opposite. A rich variety of delectable food awaited the guests. Daniel’s parents had spared no expense.

The headwaiter escorted the wedding party to their table. They stood at their chairs as more guests filed in. Clusters of well-wishers formed around the many tables in the bright room. Debra and Anita waited in a corner. They did not know where to sit. Debra recognized a few of the guests but did not know anyone well enough to want to sit through a meal and socialize with them. She noticed Daniel had left his place and walked toward them.

“Why aren’t you at the family table?” he asked.

“What? You want us up *there*?” Debra asked, uneasily. “With mom and dad?”

“Not exactly. You and Anita will be next to me, then the best man and maid of honor, and mom and dad at the end. You’ll be insulated from them. Does that seem okay?”

“I guess so. You didn’t have to go to all that trouble.” They walked over to the family table. Debra avoided looking at her parents. Anita stole a glimpse at them. She and Debra’s mother, Alice, made eye contact, but neither smiled and both quickly looked away. Anita could not decide if Alice was avoiding her or if their fleeting eye contact took her by surprise. Daniel placed them at their chairs.

“We’re all here, now,” he said to those at the table. “Let’s sit.”

An older waiter who was a friend of Debra’s father Saul walked to the front of the family table and cleared his throat. He welcomed everyone to this most festive celebration on behalf of the family. “Although they are the guests of honor, Daniel and Carleen have asked to be served last. They invite you to take part in the buffet. I will conduct tables one-by-one, so please wait until you are called.” The waiter walked over to the first table, gestured for people to stand, and then led them to the buffet. The people at the family table watched.

“This is beautiful,” Anita whispered to Debra.

“Yeah.”

As the guests got their food at the buffet table, the waitstaff brought plates of food to the family table. There was an assortment of fresh-baked rolls in several baskets. Everyone received a salad plate and started eating right away. After it began, the flow of food never stopped. As soon as someone’s plate was empty, another plate of food appeared. Salad, soup, main course, coffee, tea. The dining room was renowned for the excellence of its food and no one felt disappointed.

Debra and Anita ate warily. Debra could not relax and enjoy all the excellent food. She kept wondering if and when her parents might confront her. Anita sensed Debra’s anxiety and watched her hoping to be ready if something happened, but nothing did. Although they did not relax during the meal, they ate everything they were served and enjoyed it. It was the best food they had eaten in a long time.

“So what happens after?” Debra whispered to Daniel.

“What do you mean?”

“They haven’t done anything.”

“They probably won’t.”

“You mean that?” she asked. He nodded. “Did you tell them I was coming?”

“I told them I invited you but I didn’t know if you would come. I knew it might be difficult for you. If you hadn’t come, I would have understood. But, I’m glad you did.”

“So am I, Daniel. But I don’t know what to do now.”

“Do?”

“Should I talk to them? Will they make a fuss? I don’t want to embarrass them or ruin this for you guys.”

“You should do what feels right. You couldn’t ruin it if you wanted to. You made my day by being here.”

“Really?” Debra asked, astonished. He nodded. She reached for his hand under the table and squeezed it. They both smiled. Anita took Debra’s other hand. It felt clammy.

“Um, Debra, could you tell me where the bathroom is?” Anita whispered.

“It’s right outside, down the steps near the door.”

“Sounds complicated. I might get lost. Could you show me?”

“Oh, okay.” The women excused themselves, got up, and started toward the door. Alice, Debra’s mother, noticed them walking and thought they were leaving. She stood up, mumbled something about going to the ladies’ room, and followed Debra and Anita out. She saw them go down the stairway to the bathrooms in the basement. Hoping no one else might be around, she followed them.

Debra stood by herself when her mother entered the bathroom. Neither knew what to say. Should they greet each other or politely ignore each other? Alice headed for a stall. Debra assumed she was ignoring her. Anita flushed the toilet, unlatched the door of her stall, came out, and found Debra trembling next to the sinks. “What’s wrong?” she whispered.

“My mom’s in that stall,” Debra said.

“Shit!” They grinned at the absurd comment.

“Yeah, maybe. I think she does that from time to time.” They giggled. Alice flushed her toilet and came out to find Debra smiling at her. She immediately responded with a smile of her own.

“Debra!” Alice said as she moved to hug her daughter.

“Mom,” Debra replied, unemotionally.

“It’s nice to see you again.”

“Um, me, too. Oh, how rude of me. This is my girlfriend, Anita.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Anita. Is this your first time in Princeton?” Anita, stunned, nodded. “How do you like it?”

“What I’ve seen of it is lovely. You’re lucky to live here.”

The word ‘formidable’ popped into Anita’s mind when Alice addressed her. Debra’s mother was tall, stately, impeccably dressed, and had an air of nobility about her. She didn’t resemble Debra, and Anita wondered if she had failed to mention she had a stepmother. “And, Debra grew up here. It was nice, wasn’t it?” Debra nodded. Just then, another woman came in, recognized Alice, and smiled.

“Alice! Hello. Lovely wedding. You and Saul must be proud of Daniel.”

“Hello, Louise. Glad you’re enjoying it. Do you remember my daughter, Debra? And this is her girlfriend, Anita.” The woman smiled, nodded at them both, and then went to a stall. “You two ready to go back to the reception?” Alice asked. They nodded, unable to believe what had just happened. “Can I walk with you?” They all went out.

Daniel noticed as his sister, his mother, and Anita reentered the dining hall. He studied their faces but saw no signs of distress. Alice passed someone and stopped to greet her. Debra and Anita were about to continue back to their table. Alice stopped them, gently. “Hello, Margaret. Do you remember my daughter, Debra? This is her girlfriend, Anita.”

Margaret smiled. “How do you do?” she asked, graciously.

“Hello,” Debra and Anita replied and then continued to their chairs.

As soon as they sat down, Daniel leaned closer to Debra’s ear and asked, “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. She was nice. She introduced us to her friends. She called Anita my girlfriend. You tell me what’s going on.”

“I guess you don’t know,” Daniel said.

“Know what?”

“Things have changed since you left. Homosexuality is ‘in’, among the ‘upper crust’.”

“When? No... how did that happen?”

“No idea, but it did. She was showing you off to impress her friends.”

“You’re kidding!” Debra replied.

“Nope.”

“So you’re telling me *society’s* changed; but they haven’t, have they?”

“They’re still trying to impress their friends. They thought there was a social cost to having a lesbian daughter, but now you’re a social advantage.”

“Shit. That’s disgusting. They’ll never change.”

“You’re right, sis. And, you were lucky to be away from them all these years. You’d be better off staying away, too.”

“You mean they want me back?” Debra asked.

“They might mention it. Ignore them.”

“I plan to. Thanks for the warning.”

“Don’t mention it. But, I would like it if the four of us- you and I, Carleen and Anita, of course- would see each other more often.”

“I’d love that.”

“Great. Oh, here comes the cake. You’re not going to believe this cake. It’s the most un-Quaker cake you’ve ever seen. But, Carleen wanted it and I knew it would blow everybody’s minds.” The headwaiter wheeled a cart on which sat a huge chocolate wedding cake. There were no figures on top like most wedding cakes had, but the icing was an ornate, intricately worked pattern of different sugary flowers. The dark chocolate brown icing set off their colors. “I can assure you it tastes even better than it looks. It’s the richest chocolate cake you ever saw.”

“I can’t wait,” Debra whispered.

Daniel and Carleen got up together and walked around the table. The waiter handed Daniel a long cake knife with an extra-length handle. He and Carleen clutched the knife together and positioned it ceremonially above the cake. They lowered the knife toward the icing, slowly sliced into it, and then sensuously cut through the cake down to the bottom. The chocolate interior was even darker than the icing. “Wow!” Carleen exclaimed. “That’s beautiful.”

Daniel grinned. “It’s what you wanted,” he said, matter-of-factly.

“Do I have to share it?” Carleen asked.

“We’ll tell the waiter to cut tiny pieces and then take the rest home,” Daniel joked.

Carleen smiled. “Good idea.” She was perfectly serious. The waiter took the knife and skillfully parceled out pieces of the wedding cake to waiting plates. Other waiters hurried the cake plates to all the tables. When everyone had a slice, the newlyweds started to eat theirs, signaling to everyone else to dig in. Exclamations of surprise and pleasure filled the room.

“They like it,” Daniel said. Carleen did not reply. She was chewing, savoring the chocolate, recalling the pleasure of eating chocolate that began when she was a little girl. Daniel was only her second love, she reminded herself. Chocolate was her first. She made a mental note never to tell him.

While she was looking down at her cake, Debra noticed someone standing in front of the table. She looked up and saw her father. "Some cake, huh?" he asked casually. He was not smiling and seemed nervous. Debra nodded.

"It's... um... great." She refused to call him 'dad.'

"How've you been?" Saul asked.

"Okay."

"Who's your friend?"

"This is Anita."

"Hi, I'm Saul."

"Hello," Anita replied. Saul looked like she thought a college professor ought to look. He wasn't tall but had a strong build and a serious, scholarly face. She noticed a resemblance to Debra immediately and liked him just because he resembled his daughter. However, she also reminded herself to tread cautiously. Neither she nor Debra knew what was coming.

"So how are things in Philly?" Saul asked.

"Okay, mostly."

"You working?" Saul asked. Debra couldn't believe he wanted to know anything about her. Neither of her parents had made any effort to contact her after she ran away. Debra assumed they felt relieved to be rid of her.

"Yeah."

"What do you do?"

"I help out in a gay and lesbian bookstore." Debra could not resist mentioning it. Saul seemed unperturbed.

"Oh? You like it there?"

"It's a great place. Lots of different people come in."

"The University bookstore's always looking for skilled people," Saul said.

"No, thanks. I like it in Philly."

"Oh, all right. Just thought I'd mention it. What about you, Anita? Where do you work?"

"The Boyd Theater."

"That big one on Chestnut Street?" Anita nodded. "I used to go there. I grew up in Philly, went to Penn after the war, and then moved here." Anita felt he wanted her to ask more about his past but she did not want to. She did not want to know too much about him. What if they had something in common besides the Boyd?

Saul wanted to ask how long Debra and Anita had known each other, if they were living together, and what they saw as their future. He wanted to absorb details so he could brag to his friends about his lesbian daughter. Neither volunteered any more information so he gave up and tried to end their conversation, gracefully. "Well, it was nice seeing you, Debra, and meeting you, Anita. Hope to see you again." *Fat chance*, Debra thought.

Anita almost read her mind. She did not know everything there was to know about Debra, but she was certain Debra wanted to have nothing to do with her parents ever again. Debra felt her real family was now Anita's and not her own and that was the way she wanted it. There was genuine love in Anita's family, not phony love like in her own. If not for her brother, she would never have come back to Princeton. She was certain she could have a friendship with him and his new wife without ever having to see her parents again.

The women rode in silence back to Philadelphia. "You okay?" Anita asked, after about a half-hour on the road.

"Pretty much, thanks."

“Did that go like you expected?” Anita asked. She wanted to get Debra talking in case she needed to vent feelings stirred up by seeing her parents.

“Can’t say. I don’t know what I expected. But, it was all right. It didn’t hurt. Nothing bad happened. I’d say we made it out okay. How about you?”

“I agree. That cake was amazing. Glad we didn’t miss that!”

“And my brother was pretty special, too.”

“You do plan on keeping in touch, right?” Anita asked. She also liked Daniel and Carleen.

“Yeah. I liked Carleen. He didn’t tell me much about her beforehand.”

“I did, too. Let’s plan to visit them when they get back from their honeymoon.”

“Okay. I’m sure he’ll like that.”

“Maybe they’ll still have some of that cake left,” Anita commented, grinning.

They rode in silence again. As they crossed the bridge into the city Debra asked, “Do you think you could stay tonight?”

“I can’t. I have to bring my dad’s car back. Why don’t you stay with me?”

“He won’t mind?”

“Of course not. He likes you.”

“Your dad’s so nice, and he’s cool, too. Not like my dad, who seems cold and wooden and... I don’t know, just not someone I could love... ever again.”

“I’m sorry. That’s his loss.”

“Yeah, but he’ll never know it.”

“But, *you* will, and it hurts, doesn’t it?” Debra did not reply. She was thinking of when she was a little girl. She, Daniel, and their parents had happy, carefree, and uncomplicated lives. Debra thought she remembered there had been love in their house. It lasted until she grew up and became who she really was and suddenly they did not want her around anymore. She would never forgive them for that no matter what they said or did now. Debra hoped today would be the last time she ever saw them. She no longer thought of them as her parents. She thought of them as strangers.

Chapter 11 - Return and Regret

Allie and Sophia had an ongoing friendly disagreement. Who had the best job? Was it Allie, who ran a gay and lesbian bookstore, or Sophia, who ran a movie theater? They both loved what they did and knew they were fortunate to have the work they loved. They also liked to argue. It made their sex better when they had a heated disagreement beforehand.

What Sophia did not tell Allie was that Sansom Cinema was not doing as well as she had hoped. Her audience had not increased. The random movie choices, irregular scheduling, and often-confusing newspaper listings for films bewildered would-be patrons. Several people came whenever there was a new show but she had trouble attracting new moviegoers.

The only way Sophia could turn a small profit was to limit the films she ran to ones she could afford; they were often quirky, unfamiliar, and unpopular. There were nights when the theater held less than a half-dozen people. The income from their admissions barely paid for the electricity to run the projector. She kept the theater going but feared she would soon have to decide if she ought to close it and put it up for sale.

One afternoon Sophia noticed someone peering through the locked glass doors of the Sansom Cinema. She went to see who it was and discovered an old acquaintance. Donnie Allen was a man she knew from her beloved Rialto Theater in Germantown. Those years and that neighborhood seemed far away now. She had long ago laid that part of her life to rest. The sudden appearance of someone from the past unnerved her.

Sophia had never liked Donnie but had been coldly cordial to him because he was in the film business. He introduced himself as a filmmaker but the pornographic films he made disgusted Sophia. For her, porn movies had no right to exist. (At least, not the kind he made; the movies she and her associates at Rialto Films made were art, she told herself, and not merely pornography.)

Later, because of what Donnie did to her, she felt people like Donnie had no right to exist. He stole her beloved Rialto right out from under her and she never forgave him. He had convinced Sophia's husband to sell the Rialto without telling Sophia. The day she lost the theater was one of the worst days of her life.

She later confronted her husband, sued for divorce, won half his wealth, and gained enough money to start her own movie production company. Donnie started showing pornographic movies, and tried to make them at the Rialto, but was unsuccessful. He left Philadelphia after a fire damaged the Rialto and he could not afford to repair it. Sophia saw an opportunity to make some money and started her own porn company, Rialto Films. She never watched the movies they made, but they did well at the box office. The company eventually moved to Los Angeles where she continued to run it for several years until she got bored. She also hated LA, yearned for the East Coast, sold her share in the company to her partners, and moved back East.

Donnie was on the road for several years driving throughout the United States offering his collection of porn movies to small theater owners. He made enough money from these showings to keep going, and eventually ended up in LA where there was a stable porn industry. There was no market for his films there; they were outdated. He tried to get work in the porn studios. Since he had some production experience, he was hired as a freelance producer/director on several films that only made a little money and his employment was rare.

Then he found out about Rialto Films. He knew the name from the Rialto Theater and wondered if there was a connection. Sophia was gone, but a couple of partners remembered him,

although not fondly. They blamed him for the demise of Sophia's beloved Rialto Theater. He reminded them that it was because of him they now had a successful porn company. They hired him for a few projects but his work never impressed them.

Donnie thought he was a master of opportunity and always had a scheme or two he was cooking up. It was his dream to produce the first blockbuster porn film. He spent his free time writing a script he felt convinced would make a ton of money but no one wanted to hire him to produce and direct *Deep Gasm*.

He decided to find a way to make it on his own but needed a star no one had seen before. She had to be extraordinary and light up the screen as no porn star had yet done. He wanted an actress no man could stop looking at, or resist buying tickets to watch her lewd performances, over and over again. She would have to be a voluptuous sexpot with an overpowering aura of sensuality coupled with compelling innocence.

"So, Donnie, did you come to steal another movie theater from me?" Sophia asked sarcastically as she let him into her theater. He was still a short, skinny, balding guy but he no longer wore a cheap yellowish suit. Now he had on a dark, expensive-looking suit that didn't fit right and Sophia assumed he found it on a rack at a thrift store. He still didn't wear a tie.

"I didn't steal the Rialto. Your husband sold it to me," Donnie protested, half-grinning and half-leering. Donnie leered a lot.

"Yeah, but he never talked it over with me."

"That wasn't my fault."

"I might be ready to sell this one if you want it," Sophia said.

"I don't want to buy it. I just want to rent it."

"For what?"

"My new movie, *Deep Gasm*," Donnie replied. The pompous tone of his voice made Sophia feel he was trying to impress her.

"Oh, God. You're *still* at it?"

"Yeah. This one's really good, too. It's got somebody you know in it. Aphrodite DeMilo."

"Don't know her."

"Oh, but you do," Donnie replied. "As a matter of fact, as I recall, you know her pretty well."

"Cut the crap, Donnie. Who is she?"

"It'll be a surprise."

"I can't wait," Sophia replied, coolly.

"She's my new star, and she's hot. I want to premiere her new film here. Big splash. Sell lots of tickets. Maybe play it here for a while, and then go into wider release. What do you think?"

"I'll have to come up with a number."

"Do it quick. I'm looking at a couple of other theaters," Donnie lied. He needed a downtown theater, and Sansom Cinema was the only one he could afford. The Aardvark already booked movies for next year and he hoped to steal some of their audience. If this movie did the business he expected, he would not need or want a theater of his own, just places to show his films.

"Two-fifty for the night. If you fill all the seats you'll take in more than twice that. I'll cover the projectionist. I'll be here just to make sure you don't wreck the place but I'll stay out of sight. You'll have to hire somebody if you want to sell concessions."

“Nobody’s gonna want to eat anything but her,” Donnie replied, leering again. “Done! Draw up a contract. If we have a big night, we’ll talk about future rentals. But, not at that price.”

“I can go lower depending on how many nights you want.”

“Okay, Sophie. You won’t regret this. You’ll get a steady income.”

“Yeah, but will I lose my reputation?”

“Maybe the reason you don’t get people in here is that nobody knows this place exists. I’ll put you on the map. You’ll thank me.”

“I’ll thank you when you give me a check when we sign the contract,” Sophia replied.

“I was hoping after the show.”

“No way. I want all the money in advance.”

“You don’t trust me?” Donnie asked, feigning offense.

“I do trust you. But, this is how I do business.”

“Okay, I think I can manage that.” He said no more and got up to leave. Sophia watched him go out the door.

“Don’t thank me or anything,” she said, sarcastically.

“Hey, you’re gonna be thanking me.”

Sophia arrived two hours before the show to open the theater, check that everything was in order, and wait for the projectionist and Donnie to arrive. When Donnie came in, Agatha Hartford accompanied him.

“Hello,” Agatha said, meekly. She was a stunning Black woman who never seemed to age. She had a blockbuster body and an innocent, trusting face. Donnie felt certain the combination would wow audiences and he would soon be obscenely rich. Sophia and Agatha had last seen each other in LA when they worked together at Rialto Films. Sophia ran the business. Agatha had been the bookkeeper and accountant. They got along well at work but avoided each other otherwise. That was because they had once been lovers.

“Agatha? You work for Donnie, now?”

“Sophia, may I present Aphrodite DeMilo.”

“*You’re* his big star?” Sophia asked. Agatha nodded. When Sophia was in LA, Agatha lived with her boyfriend Tyrone. He was one of Rialto Film’s main actors. He kept Agatha busy at home. When he was not working he liked a cozy home life and Agatha was his dutiful little wifey. She did the cooking, cleaning, and shopping, and liked the domesticity as much as he did. It allowed them a feeling of normalcy, despite the bizarre jobs they had. They always seemed to be a happy couple.

Tyrone was good to her. He was sweet, kind, and bought her flowers, candy, and little gifts when he could. She knew it was because his day job required sex with various gorgeous porn actresses and sometimes he felt guilty. However, he never said he wanted to quit. Agatha did not mind. They loved each other. His heart was hers even if his dick was not. She was okay with that.

Shooting schedules were unpredictable and he sometimes stayed out all night working on a project but he always came home to her and she felt grateful for the time they spent alone. They had a solid intimacy that kept them both going.

“Hello, Sophia. I hoped I would see you. How are you doing?” Agatha said, cheerfully.

“I didn’t know you would be here.”

“Donnie didn’t tell you? He wants to show me off. By the way, when we’re in public, it’s Aphrodite,” Agatha replied, smirking. “It was his idea.” Sophia wondered how Donnie came up with that name.

“I understand. Um, are your parents coming to your big premiere?” Sophia asked. She knew about Agatha’s parents. They had thrown Agatha out when they discovered she and Sophia were a couple. Agatha had never been back to see them.

“They don’t even know I’m in town.”

“Do you hear from them?”

“Yeah. We talk- from LA. They don’t like me being out there. You know- ‘that city is full of perverts; the whole town seething with sin,’ etc., etc. But, I’m merely an accountant, so I have nothing to do with all that. And, I send money, so they tolerate my being far away.”

“You *were* merely an accountant,” Sophia pointed out. “Now you’re a...”

“Porn star,” Agatha replied, her voice tinged with shame. Sophia could not tell what Agatha regretted more- her estrangement from her parents or being a porn star.

“Do you miss them?”

“Yes, I do. And, I hate keeping the truth from them. But, it would kill them... you know?” Sophia nodded and wondered how soon a photo of Agatha would appear in a newspaper or on TV. Porn had already seeped into the general culture and was becoming more acceptable. If *Deep Gasm* became the success Donnie hoped for it could attract publicity that would expose Agatha and hurt her parents. (Sophia hated the film's title; Agatha did, too, but Donnie loved it and was proud of his creation.) It was none of her business.

“So that’s why I always carry these sunglasses,” Agatha said as if she read Sophia’s thoughts. “I can cover my eyes if any reporters show up.” Sophia smiled at Agatha’s comment and then looked at her eyes. She immediately recalled looking into them many times before, starting when she flirted with Agatha at the Rialto and when they first made love there.

They had lived together blissfully until Tyrone came along and Agatha discovered she no longer wanted to be gay. Losing her was a disappointment but not a catastrophe for Sophia. There was a great difference in their ages. Sophia’s outlook on life was different from Agatha’s. They would likely have broken up anyway. At least Agatha found what she thought of as true love with Tyrone. She had not known what sort of love she had with Sophia. However, that was all in their distant pasts.

Donnie wandered into the theater and left the women alone.

“Your eyes- they look puffy. Have you been crying? Did Donnie...?”

“No, no. He’s never tried anything. He knows I’ll walk away if he does, and I’m his ticket to the big time. Tyrone called me at my hotel an hour ago.”

“Does he miss you?”

“Um, no. He left me several months ago,” Agatha replied, unemotionally.

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“He left the porn business, too. Well, the heterosexual porn business. He makes gay porn now. He’s gay.”

“Tyrone? I would never have guessed. He seemed to enjoy the women a lot.”

“I know, and he enjoyed *me*, too. He’s never told me what changed. He just walked out.”

“So that’s why you’ve been crying?” Sophia asked.

“No. He called to tell me he has AIDS.”

“Shit!”

“Yeah. Poor guy. Some of the gay porn actors haven’t been too careful, if you know what I mean.”

“That’s awful.”

“Yeah,” Agatha said. “He’s a mess. He was crying on the phone. He’s terrified. Thinks he’s gonna die any moment.”

“It *is* terrifying. People coming into my girlfriend’s store sometimes talk about it. There’s been some organizing around getting help with research and caring for victims in advanced stages, but not much else is happening.”

“Well, for Tyrone, it’s all happening to *him*. I don’t like being here...”

“There’s nothing you can do for him.”

“Not medically,” Agatha said. “But, I still care about him, you know?”

“What about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Could you be... you know?” Sophia asked.

“No. He didn’t start doing gay porn until after he left me.”

“Oh, that’s great.”

Donnie emerged from the theater and saw Sophia and Agatha talking. “There you are! We’re getting ready to start. Are you coming in?” He walked closer to the women and noticed Agatha’s eyes were still puffy. “You look like shit. Better put those glasses on.”

Donnie took her arm and steered her toward the theater doors. Sophia watched them walk away and then went to the little closet behind the snack bar. She watched through the half-opened door as the rest of the audience drifted in. Donnie’s advertising seemed to have paid off. The place filled up. Maybe Donnie was right and the only way to make money with a movie theater these days was with pornographic movies. *‘Give the people what they want and they’ll come.’ Isn’t that what P. T. Barnum said?* Sophia thought. Maybe it was time to give up on her repertory theater dream and let someone else have the Sansom Cinema.

Sophia saw the house lights dim through the small round windows in the theater doors and assumed the movie had started. She began taking inventory of the snacks stored in the closet, trying to keep herself distracted so as not to notice or think about the movie running in her theater. She tried not to accept the possibility that it was no longer *her* theater. Maybe the theater belonged to this audience now; these men that wanted Aphrodite De Milo instead of Truffault, Fellini, Bergman, Ophuls, Kurosawa, Renoir, Godard, Bunuel, Eisenstein, Ozu, Tarkovsky, Bertolucci, and so many other directors she had come to love and whose work she had been proud to present. Sophia feared her dream was dying and she could do nothing about it. She stood alone in the little storage closet and began to cry. Someone called her name, softly.

“Sophia... Sophia... Are you there?” It sounded like Agatha. Sophia tried to stifle her sobs. She wiped her tears and opened the closet door. Agatha saw that she had been crying. “Sophia, what’s wrong?” she asked.

“I’m losing another theater,” Sophia replied, sobbing.

“Oh, you think so? Because of me?”

“No, because of *him*... and people like him... and people like *them*.” She was referring to the men in the packed house.

“I’m sorry, Sophia. I don’t know what to say.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know. I’m not proud of what I did. And... I decided tonight that I’m never gonna do it again. I’m going back to being Agatha. Fuck Donnie. Aphrodite’s dead,” Agatha said, also sobbing. “She died tonight.”

“What did that fucker do to you?”

“He paraded me in front of them and I felt disgusting. I used to like sex. I really did. With you, with Tyrone, even with some of the men in the movie, but I don’t anymore. Now that I’ve seen what it does to them.”

“It makes them into something ugly,” Sophia commented.

“It does! I didn’t see it until now. Um, is that why you’re a lesbian?”

“No, it wasn’t my husband who disgusted me, it was what he did. He fucked anybody he could. He didn’t care about me or my feelings. I doubt he cared about the feelings of the other women he fucked, either. That’s when I learned the truth about men. They don’t care about feelings. Feelings aren’t even real to them. They think they know about love, and even use that word, but they don’t know what it means...”

“But, women do?”

“Yes, I think we do.”

“I missed you, Sophia. I’m sorry I ran away with Tyrone.”

“You were in love and he’s a good man. I think he loved you.”

“Until recently, I would have agreed with you.”

“I’m sorry it had to end.”

“So am I. I don’t know what I’m gonna do now. I can’t go back to LA, and I don’t want anything more to do with Donnie. I feel like I don’t belong anywhere. I don’t even want to go back to that hotel room he rented for me.” Sophia sensed Agatha was hinting she wanted to spend the night in the Sansom Cinema or go somewhere else with Sophia. What started as Agatha’s dilemma became hers.

“Why don’t we go up to my office,” Sophia said. “I have a bottle of scotch. Maybe it would help.” A few moments later, Sophia closed her office door to shut out the ugliness that had taken over her theater, along with much of the outside world. She found two glasses and poured them each a drink. Agatha took a sip and made a face.

“Never liked this shit,” she said, and then took another sip.

“It’s what you need right now.”

“Yeah, but what I need more is a friend. Thanks for being here.”

“Glad I could help.” She sipped her drink. “Nasty stuff.”

After a couple of glasses, Agatha became tipsy and began to ramble. “Well, I’m sorry I left you back then.”

“It’s all right. We would never have lasted anyway. I realized it after you left. You were so young. I was glad I seduced you and made you happy, but it wouldn’t have gone beyond that. Eventually, it would have fizzled out on its own. At least you left me because you fell in love. You didn’t just walk out because of me, the way...” Sophia stopped before she said too much. She had never told Agatha about Anita and resisted mentioning her now. “But, I’ve found love, now, more than just for this theater. Allie is my age and she’s a lot more like me than anyone else I’ve ever met.”

“Good for you. You deserve that.”

“Yes, I do. And I don’t know how I’m gonna tell her how my dream died tonight.” The alcohol had affected her and deepened her sadness and sense of loss.

“What do you mean?”

“Like I said downstairs, I’m afraid my days in the theater business are over. The business belongs to bastards like Donnie now. He’s been right all along. It’s just about money, not art. He saw it before I did. Even at Rialto Films, we tried to make art. Sometimes we succeeded. Maybe this film is the new ‘art.’”

“Trust me, it’s not. It’s pure fucking. I’m still sore...,” Agatha confided, her voice trailing off. They sipped their drinks and sat in total silence.

“So, what are you gonna do next?” Sophia asked, hoping something might have occurred to Agatha as they drank and talked.

“I think I want to go home. I don’t know where else to go. Not tonight. Tomorrow. Tonight, I would just like some company. Are you up for that?”

“Yeah. We don’t have to go anywhere. I can lock up after the show and we can hang out here. There’s a couch if you want to sleep.”

“No, I think I’d like to talk. There’s so much to talk about. My life...” Agatha still looked young, innocent, and vulnerable. Maybe that was what made her screen presence so attractive to porn audiences. Despite all the pornographic debauchery, she remained pure.

For Sophia, Allie, and many others, the problem with pornography was not the filmed fucking, but the attitudes toward it. Much of the porn audience was attracted to corruption, humiliation, and exploitation. Human interaction became reduced to cocks and cunts, all personhood obliterated. Where was the beauty of sex? Where was its soul? When Sophia looked into Agatha’s eyes, she felt she saw into her soul. Agatha felt it, too.

“We were good, weren’t we?” she said, softly, as if she read Sophia’s thoughts.

“Yeah. I don’t regret it if that’s what you mean.”

“Me neither. I’ve forgotten what you were like. That was a long time ago. You wanna...?”

“Oh, no. I love Allie. Really.”

“Sophie?” Donnie yelled through the door. “You in there?”

“Yes.” Donnie came in, saw the two women and the booze, briefly wondered what was going on, and realized he did not care. “We’re done. You can close up. I definitely want to rent this place for a few more nights. Maybe days, too. You’re a hit, baby,” he said, looking at Agatha. “Aphrodite DeMilo is a hit! You’re gonna be a big star. I told you years ago, didn’t I? But, you wouldn’t listen. We’re gonna be rich!” Agatha and Sophia looked at each other. They had both left the movie business as of tonight. Neither wanted to tell Donnie.

“Um, okay. Call me tomorrow and we’ll work out the details,” Sophia said. Donnie left.

“So you’re gonna let him use the theater?” Agatha asked.

“Why not? It’s just a building, now. I’m just the owner. I’ll rent it out and make some money.”

“At least you got something. I’m not letting him use my body anymore.”

“I think you should disappear. Just go home, like you said. Does he know where your parents live?” Agatha shook her head. “Good. Maybe you can get rid of him. Things might seem better in a couple of days.”

“Or, worse. But, it’s been nice talking to you.”

“Same here. You don’t have to go. I’d like some company tonight. This might be my last night here. It might be Donnie’s place soon.”

“I hope not,” Agatha replied, taking another sip. “I really do.”

“Where the fuck were you all night?” Allie asked. “I called the theater.”

“I was there. The phone must have been out. It never rang.”

“So what were you doing there all night? Was that Donnie guy with you?”

“Um, no. He left after the movie. I hung out with Aphrodite De Milo.”

“Who?”

“The porn star,” Sophia explained.

“You’re into porn now?”

“No. She just wanted to talk.”

“That’s all you did?” Allie asked, suspicious.

“Of course, Allie! What do you think?”

“I was worried something happened to you.”

“Well, something did.”

“Oh, God, what?”

“Donnie’s movie drew a huge crowd. He made a lot of money. He wants to rent the theater from me.”

“That’s bad?” Allie asked.

“I realized I’m done. Nobody wants to see the movies I love. They just want that stuff he shows. I guess I should’ve seen this coming, and maybe not bought the Sansom Cinema. But, it was still my dream, you know?”

“And, it isn’t anymore?”

“That’s right. It died last night,” Sophia admitted.

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry.”

“So am I. I’m just what my husband was- somebody who owns a piece of real estate- a movie theater.”

“Stop it, Sophia, you’re making me cry.”

“That’s what I’ve been doing. It’s gone...”

“You still have me...,” Allie said.

“I know, but my *dream* is gone. Again. I don’t know what I’m going to do now.”

“We’ll think of something. Don’t worry.” Sophia was beyond worry. She felt afraid. So did Allie.

Donnie rented the theater for several weeks and *Deep Gasm* played to full houses. He was too busy counting money to notice Agatha was gone. She told him she was going to visit her parents but did not tell him where they lived. Donnie made plans to release the film to more theaters and wanted Agatha to appear in person but he could not contact her. He had also written a sequel and wanted to talk to her about doing it. He asked Sophia where she was. She lied and told him she did not know.

Sophia, however, did know. She had taken Agatha to her parents’ house. The taxi dropped Agatha off. She took her suitcase, carried it up the steps to her parents’ front door, and rang the doorbell. The door opened, there were squeals of surprise, Agatha disappeared inside, and Sophia rode off in the cab. She assumed she had seen Agatha for the last time but was happy Agatha was back home where she belonged and where she could, hopefully, safely remain.

Chapter 12 - Life Spirals Downward

Allie noticed the stunning young Black woman after she came into Rainbow Bookstore, glanced around, and seemed overwhelmed by the selection. "Hello, is there a book I can help you find?"

"Um, I'm not looking for a book. I was hoping you might have some information."

"About what?"

The woman seemed hesitant to reply. "A... support group....," she said, haltingly, "for... AIDS."

"Sure. There are several. One meets here. I have a list. Come on over to the counter." The woman followed Allie to the counter. She rummaged underneath until she found the list. "Here it is." She handed the woman a paper with a few names on it. The woman looked down at the groups. "Looking for anything special?" Allie asked.

"Just wondering where they are."

"Any certain area?"

"Germantown."

"I don't think there's one in Germantown yet."

"No, I don't see any. But, you said one meets here?"

"Yeah. Once a month. The next meeting is in two weeks. You're welcome to come. Anyone is welcome from any part of the city."

"Maybe that'll work. Can I keep this?"

"Sure. I keep them to give out." The woman folded the paper, stuck it in her pocket, and then stood there awkwardly. Allie could not tell if the woman wanted to ask for something else or was trying to decide what to do next.

"Mind if I look around?" she finally asked.

"This is a bookstore. That's what you're supposed to do," Allie replied warmly. "Feel free to sit and read if you have time to hang out awhile."

"Thanks." The woman smiled at Allie weakly and then looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. Allie had a sense the woman was preoccupied with something and her thoughts were elsewhere. She did not seem to know whether she wanted to stay or leave.

"I was just going to have some tea," Allie said. "Would you like to join me?"

"Why... yes, that would be nice."

"Why don't you sit here? I'll make it and bring it out."

"Okay." The woman sat down in one of Allie's overstuffed high-backed reading chairs, but she did not settle into it. Allie wondered if she would still be there when the tea was ready. A few minutes later, Allie brought out a tray from her office and the woman still did not seem relaxed.

Allie served the tea. "By the way, I'm Allie," she said, hoping to get a conversation started. It seemed obvious to Allie that this woman needed someone to talk to.

"Hi, Allie," she replied and then took a sip of her tea. They sat in silence. Allie did not know if she should talk but decided to try to pry more information out of the woman.

"Um, if you don't mind my asking, who is it?"

"Who's what?"

"Is it a friend or relative who has AIDS?"

"No."

“Oh, so you’re just interested? Looking to join a support group? There’s several for people who want to volunteer.”

“No. It’s me,” the woman replied.

“Oh, God. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You’re the first person I’ve told since I found out.”

“So, how are you doing?”

“Not too good,” the woman replied. She started sobbing. “I’m gonna die, Allie. I don’t want to. There’s nothing I can do about it. There’s no cure.”

“Not yet, no. But there will be, someday.” Allie knew it was a worthless comment. This woman would likely be dead long before anyone made a cure available.

“I’ll probably be long gone...,” the woman added. They fell into an uneasy silence.

“It’s mostly a male disease,” Allie said, hoping to continue learning what she could about the woman. She might be someone Anita could help. “Do you know how you got it? From blood transfusions or drug needles, maybe?”

“No. It was from the guy I was with. He was a porn actor. I was a porn actress, but I only made one movie. You might have heard of it. It was called *Deep Gasm*.”

“You’re in *Deep Gasm*?”

“I’m the star.”

“You’re Aphrodite DeMilo?”

“I *was*, but I’m not anymore. I’m just Agatha Hartford, like I’ve always been.” Allie immediately recognized the name. Someone named Agatha had lived with Sophia at the Rialto a long time ago. Could this be the same woman? Allie tried not to show her surprise. They sipped tea and sat in silence. Perhaps Agatha had said all she needed to say for now. Maybe she just needed to tell someone she had AIDS.

Agatha noticed a photo on the wall behind Allie’s counter. It showed a woman standing in front of what looked like a movie theater. “Is that the Rialto?” she asked.

“Why, yes. Do you know it?” The woman nodded. “My girlfriend used to own it. She has no children but jokes that it’s her first baby.”

“I used to live there.”

“You did? It must have been before she got hold of it,” Allie replied.

“That’s Sophia Cohen, right?”

“Yes.”

“I lived there with her.” Her statement confirmed Allie’s suspicion. This woman was the same Agatha.

“Wait. Sophia told me you lived in LA.”

“I moved back here.”

“Does she know?” Allie asked.

“Yes. I saw her several weeks ago at her theater. What’s it called, Sansom Cinema?”

“Yeah. She loves that place as much as she loved the Rialto. Did you see a show there?”

“I... um... was in a movie that premiered there.”

“The only movie that premiered there was... oh, right, *Deep Gasm*.” Allie paused as the implications of what Agatha revealed dawned on her. “Sophia told me she hung out with Aphrodite that night. She didn’t tell me your real name.”

“She was very kind to me. I had just gotten a phone call from my ex-boyfriend in LA. He found out he had AIDS and I was crying at the premiere. We had been together for several years but then he left me and started doing gay porn.”

“So that’s how he got AIDS?”

“Not exactly. I found out later from the guy who made *Deep Gasm* that the gay stuff wasn’t new. He was seeing other men while he and I were still together.”

“My God!” Allie gasped. Her heart went out to Agatha, whose life was unraveling in real time.

“So I got tested, and... well, you know the rest.”

“Does Sophia know?”

Agatha shook her head. “I was lucky she was there that night. I don’t know what I would have done if I was alone. I didn’t know anyone else in Philadelphia. I might have just jumped off the Walnut Street Bridge...” Agatha fell silent. Allie waited for her to continue. “I still might,” she added, just above a whisper.

“Don’t. Come to the next meeting. It will make a difference, I promise.”

“If you say so.” Agatha got up abruptly and headed for the door. Allie did not know if she would ever see her again. She did not want to admit to herself that she hoped Agatha would never come back.

“Goodbye,” Allie said. Agatha did not reply. In a moment, she was gone. The suspicion she aroused in Allie, however, had just begun.

So that’s who Sophia was with all night, she thought. *Why didn’t she tell me? Why did she use that fake name? What did they do all night?* Allie began to seethe and determined she would confront Sophia the moment they got home.

Sophia felt a weird sense of Déjà vu. She was living in a movie theater again. The first place she lived in Philadelphia was the Rialto Theater in Germantown. It was the only place she lived until she moved in with Allie after her husband sold the Rialto and she had to leave. She was fortunate she had not sold Sansom Cinema to Donnie as she wanted or she would have had nowhere to go. He was still running his porn movie there but at least she had a place to stay after Allie threw her out.

Her life had truly taken a backward turn. She wondered philosophically if life was a slow spiral or a downward plunge. In her loneliness, Sophia kept thinking about her final quarrel with Allie.

“Um, someone you know came into the store today.” Allie had said.

“Oh, who?”

“Agatha Hartford.”

“Really? I haven’t heard from her in a while. What’s she up to?”

“You didn’t know she was back in Philly?” Sophia shook her head but felt guilty. “You haven’t seen her?” Sophia shook her head again and felt even guiltier. Allie could not contain her anger.

“Why didn’t you just tell me it was Agatha you were with that night?” Allie screamed.

“I don’t know.”

“Were you trying to hide her from me?”

“No,” Sophia claimed.

“But you *did*. Is it because you’re still attracted to her?”

“I’m not attracted to her.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Sophia replied, weakly.

“I don’t think you’re sure. If you had told me, I would have thought nothing of it. You were old friends. We would have laughed about her stupid stage name. But, you hid the truth.”

Allie paused and glared at Sophia, who did not respond. Then Allie went on. “That says something about your true feelings toward me. I don’t like what it says.” There was a tense silence. Allie tried to find a way to say what she had to say.

“Did you know she has AIDS?”

“What? No! How?”

“Her boyfriend,” Allie explained.

“But, he left her before he started making gay porn.”

“Yes, but she told me he was fucking around with guys while he was still with her.”

“Oh, my God. That poor kid.”

“That poor kid? What about *us*, Sophia?”

“What do you mean?”

“I know you fucked her that night. You were gone all night. She’s very young and devastatingly attractive.”

“You’re wrong. She needed someone to talk to. Everything changed for her that night. Her life started to come apart. The next morning I took her back to her parents in a taxi. I haven’t seen her since.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Allie, I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“You already did! I’m sorry, Sophia, but I can’t trust you ever again. You’ve ruined everything. We were good- no, *great*- together. I think you should go.”

“Don’t do this, Allie. Nothing happened.”

“Go!” Sophia had never seen Allie so enraged and did not protest further. She packed some clothes and left. She had not been trying to hide Agatha. There was nothing bad to hide. Now, looking back, she wondered if it was something in Allie’s past that had caused her rage that seemed out of proportion to what had happened. Sophia wondered if their relationship was weaker than they thought and if they had been in trouble but neither saw it. Perhaps Allie was looking for an excuse to break up. Sophia did not want to, but maybe now that it was over her life was better without Allie.

The next time Anita came into Rainbow Books she noticed the photo of Sophia in front of the Rialto was missing. The picture had special meaning for her just as it did for Agatha and she always enjoyed looking at it. She asked and Allie told her what happened, almost in tears.

Anita immediately went to see Sophia at the Sansom Cinema.

“Allie’s not the same,” she told Sophia. “She’s down- really down. I’ve never seen her like this. She’s asked me to help people before, and I think *she* could use my help now, but I can’t reach her. This is beyond me.”

“She’ll get past it. She’s pretty resilient.”

“I hope so. How are you doing?”

“I’m resilient, too,” was all Sophia said.

Agatha came to the AIDS meeting but Allie would not acknowledge her. There were not many people so Allie had to make an effort to avoid Agatha. She pretended she was not feeling well.

Agatha liked the group and said she would come back. She went up to the counter after the meeting and noticed the photo was missing. Allie ignored Agatha and talked to some other people. They finally left and Agatha approached her. "That picture's gone," Agatha said.

"So is Sophia- for good, I hope!"

"What do you mean?"

"She was unfaithful to me," Allie complained.

"Oh, that's awful. You must feel hurt."

"Yeah, and it was *you* who hurt me."

"Me?"

"You and her fucked around the night of that stupid premiere. I guess you thought you could get anyone you want with that incredible body of yours. You got into porn, you got Sophia, and I got the shaft."

"You're wrong. I didn't 'get' Sophia. I didn't even *want* Sophia.

"You're lying."

"Look, Allie, I told you I have AIDS. My life and love are over. No one's gonna want me ever again. No one's gonna want this beautiful body. Sooner or later it's gonna stop being beautiful and I'm gonna die." Allie could not decide what made her feel worse, Sophia's betrayal or Agatha's AIDS.

"I did not fuck your girlfriend, Allie," Agatha continued. Allie stared at Agatha and tried to decide whether to believe her. "You broke up with her for nothing. If you're smart, you'll get her back, before somebody else gets her. She's pretty amazing." Allie stared at Agatha harder. She agreed Sophia was amazing, but she was gone.

Anita found Rainbow Books dark in the middle of a pleasant Saturday afternoon. There was no sign on the door. Anita had never stopped by and found it closed before and she wondered what was going on. Had something happened to Allie, and where was Debra? She should have been there even if Allie was not.

Anita waited and hoped someone might show up to open the store but no one did. Other customers stopped by. One customer mentioned a scheduled meeting and worried something serious had happened to Allie. "She's never not been open for us," the man said. "I don't know where else we could go on short notice." Anita did not know either. She had not come for a meeting, just to check on Allie. She was still distraught about her breakup with Sophia. Allie's mood had not changed in a month but she kept the store open anyway, until today.

Anita left after an hour. She decided to walk twelve blocks to the Sansom Cinema to see if Sophia was there. As she walked, she tried to think of ways to avoid the moviegoers who had likely come for the weekend porn shows. Seeing a woman approach the theater might cause a riot if they thought she was coming for the movie. She decided to call Sophia from a payphone a block away. Sophia answered. "Could you meet for coffee?" Anita asked, hesitantly.

"Sure. I'm not doing anything. The perverts are arriving. I'll sneak out the back door." Ten minutes later, they found a booth in the Holy Grounds Coffee Shop in the basement of the Chestnut Street Presbyterian Church. Customers bustled in and out. A waitress came to take their order immediately.

"So what's new?" Sophia asked. "I haven't seen you in a while."

"Rainbow is closed right now. I'm worried," Anita replied. "Do you think anything's wrong?" Sophia did not reply. Anita watched as several emotions played on her face. Those emotions included concern, worry, indifference, detachment, guilt, and fear.

"I'm sure everything's okay," Sophia finally said. "Something probably came up."

"Yeah, but Debra should be there, even if Allie's not." Sophia had forgotten about Debra. More feelings passed over her face.

"You're right," she said. "I don't know what to do."

"Maybe call her apartment?" Anita suggested. Sophia looked around and spotted a payphone on the wall. She slid out of the booth, went to the phone, dropped in some coins, and dialed. No one answered.

"She's not there."

"Maybe she just isn't answering," Anita replied, feeling more worried. "Maybe we ought to go over."

"No," Sophia declared.

"What if something happened to her?"

"Look, Anita, I care about her as much as you do, but we can't go chasing around the city looking for her. Have you called Debra?"

"Actually, no. Good idea." She called and came back to report. "She's off today. She went to a friend's wedding this morning. Somebody she went to school with. She didn't mention it to me because I was scheduled to work but she wanted to go anyway. She has no idea where Allie is."

"Well, that's it, then. It's all we can do."

"You don't seem very concerned," Anita commented.

"Of *course*, I'm concerned, but I haven't spoken to her since I left and I have no idea what's going on in her life. Maybe she's on a date."

"She's not and you know it. She wouldn't close the shop for a date."

"No, you're right. That was stupid. But, I don't know what else we can do. I'll go over tomorrow to see if she's open."

"Will you call me at work?"

"Sure. If you don't hear from me, call me in the evening."

"You promise to go?"

"Yes! Now go spend the rest of your unscheduled day off."

Anita thought about walking back to the bookshop but felt it would be a waste of time and energy. She had a feeling Allie had not come back anyway. Anita did not like feeling uneasy about her friend. She had come to trust her intuition so she did some introspection and nothing felt wrong. She decided Allie was all right despite her not being where she was supposed to be. Anita went to the subway and headed home.

When she rounded the corner to her street, she saw Allie sitting on the front steps of her row house. She also noticed her dad's car was gone. He was out somewhere with Theresa, probably.

"Allie? What are you doing here? Is everything okay?"

"I called your work. They told me they gave you the day off. I called here but nobody answered. I knew Debra was going to that wedding. I assumed you might get home, eventually, so I came here."

"What's wrong?"

"Everything."

Anita called Sophia at the cinema as soon as Allie left. Sophia didn't seem concerned that Allie came to see Anita. They were friends, now.

“She didn’t come because we’re friends, Allie, and you know it. Won’t you *talk* to her, at least?”

“What would be the point?” Sophia replied.

“She wants to apologize.”

“It’s too late for that.”

“You can’t forgive her?” Anita asked.

“She didn’t trust me. I don’t know how to fix that. It’s on her, not me. I thought she loved me but it turned out not to be true. There’s nothing left.”

“But, she realizes she made a mistake.”

“Yes, she did. What you don’t seem to understand is that she *shouldn’t* have made that mistake. The fact that it did tells me all I need to know about our relationship.”

“What was that?” Anita asked.

“It wasn’t what I thought it was. It wasn’t real. Do you have any idea what that means? I trusted her to give me the benefit of the doubt, to take my word over her suspicion, to believe me. Well, she didn’t. I guess we weren’t right for each other.”

“But, what you had-.”

“Is gone,” Sophia interrupted. “She wiped it out. She can’t get it back.”

“You’re sure?” There was silence on the other end of the phone line. “Sophia? You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“What if I sat down with the two of you?” Anita asked.

“Did she ask you to do that?”

“No, it’s my idea.”

“No. I’m sorry, Anita. I know you care about us both, but she hurt me. There’s no going back.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“I feel what I feel,” Allie replied. “That’s just the way it is.”

“Okay, I’ll tell her.”

“Thanks. I know this probably hurts you, too. Don’t think I’m ungrateful for you trying to get us back together. I am. I still love you as a friend. That will never change.”

“Could you love *her* as a friend?” Anita asked.

“You never give up, do you?”

“Just asking.”

“I gotta go. Let’s get together for coffee soon. I hate being stuck in this theater all day and night.”

“You’re not getting out?”

“Nope,” Sophia replied.

“Why don’t you come to the Boyd? I can get you in free and we can hang out and watch a real movie.”

“If I want to spend time watching movies I can just go into my own theater.”

“But, you hate those movies!”

“I’m starting to think they’re not so bad.”

“Sophia! What do you mean?”

“Well, they’re just about sex, right?” Sophia asked. “No emotions, no romance, just fucking. That makes sense to me now.”

“You’re just horny. You should get out to a club or bar. Meet someone. Have some fun.”

“I’m too old for that kind of fun, Anita.”

“No, you’re not. My dad’s in his sixties and he’s having the time of his life with Theresa. The two of them are like teenagers. You’re nowhere near his age.”

“Yeah, but I feel like I am,” Sophia protested. “Maybe even older.”

“I’m sorry, Sophia. I don’t know what to say. That wonderful, vivacious, sexy, charming, sensual woman I fell in love with back in New York is still inside you. You ought to let her out.”

“She’s tired. I’m tired; but thanks for reminding me, Anita. It seems so long ago, but it did happen, didn’t it?”

“Remember when we first met at that concert in Thompkins Square?”

“The Fugs?”

“Right!” Anita replied. “You loved that shit.”

“I still do.”

“You ever listen to them?”

“No. I lost all my albums.”

“I’ll buy you one at Sam Goody’s. Maybe it’s what you need.”

“I don’t know what I need, Anita. Well, that’s not entirely true. There is one thing I’m sure I need.”

“What’s that?”

“A good friend like you. Thanks.”

Agatha’s symptoms appeared overnight. She had a headache, fever, tiredness, swollen lymph nodes, sore throat, thrush, a rash, muscle, and joint pain. Her parents thought she had a bad case of flu and rushed her to the Germantown Hospital. She knew what the symptoms meant.

The doctors examined her, did some tests, and told Agatha she had AIDS. Her parents were in the room. They heard the diagnosis, looked at their daughter in disbelief, and wondered how she had gone from their lovely, innocent child to this monster in the hospital bed. They walked out and never came back.

The hospital moved her to a special isolation unit until they could figure out what to do. In despair, Agatha called Allie at the bookstore. She did not know who else to call. Allie knew Anita lived a mile from the hospital and begged her to visit Agatha. She called and told Agatha to expect Anita.

The women had never met before but did not feel like strangers, somehow. They both had been Sophia’s lovers. Although they did not know about each other, they felt an immediate affinity.

The doctors treated Agatha’s symptoms. They wanted to discharge her because there was nothing more they could do but she had nowhere to go. Anita called Allie and asked if she knew somewhere Agatha could stay. None of the AIDS groups she knew had any room for Agatha. Allie suggested Anita call Sophia. She explained her parents abandoned Agatha and asked Sophia if she knew any place for Agatha. The Sansom Cinema was not a large building, but it was old and had unused rooms in the basement. Agatha could be comfortable there. Sophia felt she owed it to the girl to help her. She would find a way to take care of her, until...

Sophia knew she would have to keep Agatha’s presence in the building a secret from Donnie. She did not expect compassion or concern from him. He was making lots of money with *Deep Gasm*, wanted it to run as long as it could, and was already planning a sequel. She did not know how he would react if he found out Agatha had AIDS. Would he even care about her? He might worry only that her presence was a threat to the theater, his use of it, and his sequel.

Sophia did not care if he found out and she had to close the Cinema. Agatha was more important than anything else was. She knew Agatha would likely die there, but that was okay. At least she would be comfortable, have some privacy, and concerned friends to care for her. It was the best Sophia could do.

She and Anita took turns caring for Agatha. Anita worked a few blocks away and checked in before and after work. She often called during the day and sometimes stayed all night. Her father assumed she was staying with Debra and felt unconcerned. Debra, however, was concerned.

Anita hid the truth about Agatha from Debra. She worried about how Debra would react because there was so much irrational fear and panic about AIDS. She feared Debra might assume Anita was at risk of catching the AIDS virus, and become terrified she, Debra, would then also be at risk.

Debra eventually noticed Anita's behavior had changed and worried she was seeing someone else. She confronted Anita but she was evasive and avoided explaining. Debra felt angry and insecure. She questioned Anita about their relationship. Anita finally revealed the truth about Agatha. The revelation seemed like an assault. Over the past few weeks, they had been together only long enough for little more than quick lovemaking. Now that Debra knew where Anita had been, and whom she had been with, she dreaded the possibility that Anita had exposed her to the AIDS virus. She felt betrayed and would not believe Anita's assurance that there never was any real danger.

Debra demanded that Anita leave immediately and never come back.

In the lonely moments when she sat with Agatha as she slept, Anita reflected on her affair with Debra. They had seemed happy and content, but Anita realized there had been no love, only companionship, and pleasure. Had there been real love, Debra would have praised what Anita was doing. She might not have taken part in Agatha's care but she would have supported it. Instead, her selfishness and irrational fear came out. Anita was glad it had because it revealed Debra's true character.

Love is often all people have to help them through crises. Love gives strength and support because it is unselfish, pure, and comforting. The connection between Anita and Debra went no deeper than passion, friendship, companionship, and geniality. Anita felt relieved they broke up, but sad she had no one who cared for her when *she* needed concern and support. Those things would have to come from within her now. She would have to dig deep to find them but felt certain they were there.

Anita felt sad they broke up, and sad to be alone again. She soothed her hurt by telling herself there would be other girlfriends, and future loves, perhaps. She decided not to worry and focus on Agatha, who had no love and no future.

At least Anita still had her family.

"Oh hi, Anita. How are you?" Theresa asked as she answered her doorbell and found Anita smiling in the doorway.

"I'm good. Happy birthday!"

"Thanks. Come in. You're by yourself. Is Debra coming?"

"No, she couldn't make it."

"Oh, I was hoping she'd be here. I like her."

"Well, I don't think you'll be seeing her again."

“No?” Theresa understood what Anita implied and frowned. “Sorry to hear that. Well, everybody’s here. Come on in.” Anita handed Theresa her present- an envelope containing a gift certificate for several movies at the Boyd. She thought it would make an excellent gift for Theresa and her father for their dates. They mostly saw movies at their neighborhood theaters. Those places were satisfactory but they were not luxurious movie palaces like the Boyd. If they came in when she was working, she could treat them to free popcorn and candy.

She had never been to Theresa’s house before. It was a newer row house in The Northeast. She had grown up in an old neighborhood in Germantown but the newest homes in Philadelphia were in a part of the city that had been farmland into the 1940s. Theresa’s house was built after World War II. It was plain red brick with no porch, a long front lawn, and a garage off a drive in the back. Theresa had installed a small patio. It had some chairs and a table, but it was too chilly to sit outside tonight.

Fortunately, there was much warmth inside. It came from Anita’s family: her father, Alfonso, her brother Tony, his wife Sharon, and their children, Sara and Rocky.

“There she is!” her father said as she came in.

She smiled and hugged him. “Hi, Dad.”

“Seems like you’re always out anymore.”

“Yeah, I’ve been busy.”

“Speaking of busy, Tony said, “Isn’t Debra with you?” Tony liked to tease Anita about Debra, although he liked her and was happy his sister had found a wonderful person to fall in love with. He felt forever grateful to Anita for introducing him to his wife Sharon. She was a lesbian when she met Tony. The innocent boyish attraction that made him confess that he liked her the first time they met had charmed her. The rest was history.

“She’s... um... no,” Anita evaded. Theresa looked at Al and gestured to him not to ask any more about Debra. Anita saw her father’s surprised expression.

“Well now that we’re all here, let’s get this party started.”

Anita looked around the room and noticed bowls of snacks and glasses of drinks. It seemed like way too much food for her family. “Looks like you already started it,” she said, smiling. “Are more people coming?”

“No. Just the family,” Al answered. Anita thought it was interesting that Theresa became part of her family. She wondered if there was more reason for the party than just a birthday.

“Where are Sara and Rocky?”

“Downstairs in the TV room watching cartoons, I think,” Theresa answered.

“We should tell them Aunt Anita is here.”

“Yeah, they haven’t seen you in quite a while.”

“Nobody’s seen you in quite a while,” Sharon said, and they all laughed. The children came running into the room and attacked Anita. She hugged them and took their favorite candy out of her pockets. She always brought them something from the snack bar at the theater. Sara liked Good N’ Plenty, and Rocky liked M & Ms. She handed the candy to the children. They squealed with delight.

“Mom, can we open them?” Sara asked.

“Yes, but only one piece each, for now. The rest goes in my bag for later.” The children grimaced, then opened their candy, took out a piece, and popped it into their mouths.

“Mmmm,” they exclaimed, rubbed their tummies in a gesture Anita had taught them, and everyone laughed. “One more, pleeeeeease!” they pleaded a moment later.

“Okay, but then the candy gets put away,” Tony said. They took another piece each and then Sharon took the candy from them and put it into her handbag where they could not get it.

“Okay, who’s hungry?” Theresa asked. “Food’s in the kitchen. Help yourselves.” They went in, grabbed plates, and scooped salad out of a big bowl. Then they made sandwiches from the lunchmeat and Italian rolls Theresa had bought fresh a few hours earlier. Everyone sat around her living room eating and chatting. Anita treasured the warmth and love in the room. Although this was not the house she lived in, she still felt at home here with all the people she loved. She had not realized how much she needed to be with them and savored the wonderful presence she shared.

I love these people, she thought, and they love me. That’s the most important truth in my life. Nothing can ever change that. Nothing ever will.

After dinner, Theresa took everyone’s plate and asked Al to help her. After a few minutes of bustling around in the kitchen, Al came out carrying a birthday cake topped with brightly lit candles. The children’s eyes lit up. The only thing better than Aunt Anita’s candy was birthday cake. Even if it was not theirs, it was still special. Al placed the cake on the dining room table, called everyone to gather around, and they sang ‘happy birthday’ to Theresa. She felt so moved by their warmth that she almost started to cry. Al noticed and hugged her. “Blow them out,” he said, softly. She did, all at once, and everyone applauded.

Theresa sliced the cake and Sharon reminded her to cut the children’s pieces small. Sara and Rocky grimaced but eagerly took the plates when Theresa handed them out. Everyone ate.

When they finished, Theresa asked if anyone wanted more. Everyone felt tempted, but Sharon shot Tony a glance and he did not ask for more. Al realized what was happening and he declined. So did Anita. The children wanted more- they would have happily consumed the entire cake if their mother allowed it- but they declined, reluctantly. “Well, then, I’ll just put this away,” Theresa said.

She came back from the kitchen, asked if anyone wanted coffee, and told them to help themselves. Everyone settled down on the sofa and chairs in the living room.

“Well, there’s something else we want to tell you,” Al said.

“Yes,” Theresa interrupted. “Some good news. Al is going to move in here with me.”

“We’re not getting married. I hope that’s okay with you kids; I know people live together these days.”

“Of course it’s okay, Al,” Theresa commented, grinning.

“It’s great, Dad,” Tony said. “But what about your house?”

“Well, I thought you guys could live there. It’s way bigger than your apartment, and the kids would have lots of space, including a backyard.”

“You mean it?” Tony asked.

“Sure, if it’s okay with Anita.”

“Of course it’s okay,” Anita replied and tried not to show how shocked she felt. “I’m not around much, so you’d have the place to yourselves.”

“So when are you moving, Al?” Sharon asked. She did not call him ‘dad’ although he had invited her to. There was no other dad in her life. Her real father had left long ago and she never used the word. It felt strange. Maybe it reminded her of the father she never knew and she felt an uncomfortable sense of loss or abandonment. She preferred to call him ‘Al’. He did not mind.

“He’s already moved in most of his stuff,” Theresa said as she took his hand contentedly. Al smiled at her.

“Yeah. I mean, it wasn’t much. I’m leaving my tools in the basement. I’ll get them as I need them. I’ve cleaned out the bedroom. Everything else stays there- especially the kitchen. Theresa already had everything.”

“Except your wife’s pizzelle maker,” Theresa said.

“You took that?” Anita asked, alarmed.

“I hope it’s okay,” Al said, concerned.

“No, no, it’s all right. Maybe you can use it, now,” Anita replied, and then tried to soften her reaction. No one had used it since her mother Ida died. It was a family heirloom to Anita; something she would rather not part with. She realized it was already too late; it was gone.

Tony, Sharon, and the kids started moving in right away. At first, it was just a few boxes and some clothes they hung in the front bedroom where Al and Ida used to sleep. They moved the kids’ toys and tried to figure out how they were going to fit them in the smallest bedroom. Anita offered her larger bedroom and they gratefully accepted.

The transition was over in a month. Anita had not helped much. She was out, mostly. She told herself she was just staying out of their way as they settled in but she felt guilty anyway. Anita came home late one night after visiting Agatha and consulting with Sophia on the progress of Agatha’s illness and found Sharon asleep in the living room.

“Sorry to wake you,” Anita whispered as Sharon opened her eyes.

Sharon smiled. “It’s okay. I should be in bed, anyway. How are you doing? Where have you been? Work?”

“No. Taking care of a sick friend.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is it anyone we know?” Anita shook her head. “What’s wrong?”

“She’s dying of AIDS.”

“That’s awful.”

“It is. We don’t know how long she’s got left,” Anita explained.

“We? You and Debra?”

“No. Debra and I broke up a couple of months ago.”

“Oh, Anita, I’m sorry. I suspected something was wrong but I didn’t want to pry.”

“Yeah. It’s okay.”

“Is it?” Sharon nodded. “Do you miss her?”

“Not really,” Anita lied. She felt lonelier than she had ever felt in her life. Anita was too busy to take Sophia’s advice, go to a bar, and meet someone. Where could she take another woman? Not back here to her house. It was not her house anymore. When her father lived there he was okay with her bringing Debra (or, before Debra, Nancy) home. Now there was no place in her house she could have any real privacy or intimacy. She briefly thought of finding an apartment downtown but would have to postpone looking until after Agatha died and she had free time again.

Anita had a glass of warm milk and went up to her room. She noticed the ruffled bedclothes and assumed the children had been playing in her room again. She did not mind and always left the door open. They adored her and wanted to be near her even when she was not around.

She closed the door, undressed, and heard Sharon climbing the stairs. The floorboards creaked as Sharon walked down the hall to check the children in their bunk beds at the back of the house. Sharon walked past Anita’s bedroom. She whispered, “G’night, Anita,” as she passed, and then went to her bedroom. Anita sighed as she realized she no longer felt at home in her own

house. It was not a good night. There were not going to be any good nights, ever again. Perhaps it was time to move out and let Rocky have her room.

Anita slept late because she did not have to be at work until late afternoon. She went downstairs and found Sharon and the children in the living room. "There's some eggs and bacon if you're hungry," Sharon said.

"Great, thanks."

"Aunt Anita, will you play with us?" Sara begged.

"Let her eat first," Sharon told them. The children waited while Anita ate and then begged again. She took them outside. It was a chilly morning but the sun was shining. Tony had built them a sandbox, and Anita liked to play with them while they enjoyed it. He was talking about getting them a swing set. Anita thought she might buy it as a Christmas present if she could afford it, which she probably would not if she had to rent a place of her own. *This sucks!* she thought. *My life sucks, and I'm not the one who's dying.*

The children noticed Anita seemed preoccupied and was not playing with them. "What's the matter, Aunt Anita?" Sara asked. "Are you sad?"

"Yes, sweetie. One of my friends is sick and I'm thinking about her."

"Oh, is it Debra?" Sara asked.

"No. You don't know her."

"Maybe we could visit her."

"No, she's far away."

"Maybe we should make something for you to take to her," Sara suggested as she jumped up inspired by her idea, wiped the sand from her hands, and ran to the back door. Rocky watched his sister but hesitated to follow. "Rocky, come on!" she ordered. He did without wiping his hands. As soon as they got inside, Sharon stopped them from leaving the kitchen and cleaned them up.

"Mommy, mommy," Sara exclaimed, "Where's my crayons? We're gonna make something for Aunt Anita's sick friend!" Sharon found crayons and paper, sat the children at the kitchen table, and grinned at Anita when she walked in.

"See what you started?" she said.

"Sorry."

"No, it's okay. In fact, it's great."

"I'm going to get ready for work," Anita replied and then left the room.

"Aunt Anita, wait!" Sara shrieked. "What's your friend's name?"

"Oh, it's Agatha."

"Mommy, can you write that name right here?" Sara asked.

"Well, you don't need her name," Sharon said. "Why not draw a great picture, instead?" Anita went upstairs.

The children were waiting for her when she came back, holding the two colorful but confusing drawings they made. Anita thanked them, carefully rolled up the drawings, and put them into her large handbag. She did not say anything else and left for work.

"Mommy, Aunt Anita's friend must be really, really sick," Sara said. "She's really, really sad." Sharon nodded, guided the children into the living room, and turned the TV on so the kids could watch cartoons until dinnertime.

Anita stayed with Agatha and Sophia that night. After her long day at work and then helping care for Agatha, she was too tired to go all the way home. She kept a change of clothes at the Cinema.

Tony was waiting for Anita when she came home the next evening. “I need to talk to you,” he said. She felt exhausted and wanted to go straight to bed but did not want to ignore him.

“Sure, but can we make it quick? I’m tired.”

“What the hell is going on?” Tony asked, angrily.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m not doing anything,” Anita protested, unable to fathom why Tony would be angry.

“The kids told me you have a sick friend. Sharon told me the person has AIDS. And you’re taking care of her?”

“Not just me. There’s a couple of us...”

“I don’t care about anyone *else*, Anita. What about your family?”

“Look, Tony. I’m sorry I haven’t been around as much as I’d like, and I think that will change in the future. I don’t mean to ignore you and the kids. You know how much I love them.”

“How can you say you love them and then be with somebody who has AIDS?”

“What’s that got to do with them?” Anita asked.

“What if you bring it *home*? How long has this been going on? What if you’ve *already* brought it home?”

“And, how would I do that, exactly?” Anita asked, aghast. What had happened to her loving, sympathetic brother?

“On your clothes or something like that. Aren’t you worried about catching it?”

“No. That would be impossible.”

“It’s not impossible, Anita. That’s a myth. Don’t you read the papers, or watch the news?”

“Tony, that stuff’s all bullshit.”

“It’s not, Anita. I’m surprised you didn’t tell us about this until now.”

“There was nothing to tell,” Anita insisted.

“So you’re sure you don’t have it?” She nodded, tiredly. “And you claim you can’t get it?”

“It’s not a claim, it’s a fact.”

“Well, if you’re going to live in this house, you’re gonna have to stop helping that woman.”

“What?”

“I have to think about my kids, Anita.”

“I wouldn’t do anything to hurt your kids. You know that.”

“I can’t take any chances. Either you have to stop or move out. And, you won’t be able to be around them...”

“You’re serious?” Anita asked. Tony nodded. “Well, okay, then.” Anita went to her bedroom, gently closed the door, and cried herself to sleep. She dreamed about Sara and Rocky, about their births, when they first recognized her, said her name, and made a fuss over her. She awoke wondering if perhaps Tony was right, and she was putting them in danger, and then rejected the thought. It was absurd.

Lies and superstitions about AIDS were all over the mass media, but the truth was coming out, slowly. She never expected her brother to choose lies over her, but his sister was less important than his children now, and he had to protect them above all else. Anita did not know if she could ever forgive him but she knew what she had to do. Agatha needed her and Anita needed to be there for Agatha until the end.

Chapter 13 - Old and New

Anita finished a long busy shift at the Boyd Theater and headed to the Sansom Cinema for what could be a difficult night with Agatha. The movie theaters were only a few blocks apart and she usually walked directly from one to the other. It only took a few minutes. This time she took a detour to clear her head and enjoy some fresh air. She found herself walking by her old building. Her first apartment was in the basement of a brownstone on Walnut Street near Twenty-Second Street. She paused to look in the long narrow apartment window that ran the entire width of the brownstone's basement. It was dark inside but the drapes were open and she could see opaque objects that were pieces of furniture.

Anita recalled how the apartment looked the first time she saw it. She had just run away from Sophia and the Rialto Theater in Germantown. A woman named Delilah was looking for a roommate. Her kindness and generosity saved Anita from either staying with Sophia or going back to her parents. Delilah's furnished her apartment with thrift store bargains, and cast-off items from friends. The cockroaches were already there when she moved in. She also had a sizable eclectic collection of books and records but they had not interested Anita.

Delilah and Anita worked together at the Boyd and the roommates lived together amicably for several months. Then Delilah's lover Alice came back into her life and everything changed. Delilah took time off to be alone with Alice while Anita was at work. The lovers decided to go on the road together and gave the apartment and everything in it to Anita. She lived there alone for more than a year. Her brother Tony helped her with the rent and brought his girlfriend there when Anita was at work. Anita finally moved back home when she reunited with her father after her mother died.

Anita had mixed feelings about the basement apartment. It was a large one-room studio and her first taste of independent living. She had found out she could survive and feel secure on her own and did not need her parents, Delilah, or Sophia. She, however, never got over sharing it with the cockroaches.

She wondered if the person living there now had a life anything like hers was several years ago. Anita also wondered if that was her real life, someone else's life, or a dream. On days, like today she wished this life was really a dream and she would soon wake up. Agatha would not be dying, there would be no AIDS, and her mother would still be alive. Those things were the ones in her life that she most wanted to change. She would not alter her brother's life, despite what he had done to her. She wanted him to be happy with Sharon and their children. Anita had already forgiven him for throwing her out. She understood his fear for Sara and Rocky. AIDS terrified most people she knew.

Anita continued walking to the Sansom Cinema and entered through the back door. She was about to enter the room where Agatha lay in bed but stopped when she saw someone else there. It was a man she did not recognize. He and Agatha were chatting softly. Agatha was smiling weakly and seemed comfortable with him. Anita went directly to Sophia's office, instead.

"Who's that with Agatha?" she asked.

"Oh, that's Zack. He's a male nurse, Allie's friend. She told him about Agatha. He's been treating AIDS patients a while now and offered to look in on her."

"Wow. That's great. Did he have anything to say?"

"I haven't talked to him yet. He should be out any minute. Are you staying around?"

"Got nowhere else to go."

“Oh, I forgot. They kicked you out.”

“*Who* kicked you out, if you don’t mind my asking?” Zack asked as he entered Sophia’s office.

Anita did not hesitate to answer. It was old news and none of his business but she did not care who knew. “My brother. He’s afraid I’ll infect his kids. He doesn’t want me around.”

“You told him it’s impossible, right?”

“He doesn’t believe that,” Anita replied.

“That’s a shame. It must be hard for you. Did you get a place yet?”

“I haven’t had much time to look, what with my job and taking care of Agatha.”

Zack nodded. “Um, hi, you must be Anita. I’m Isaac Maloney,” he said, as he reached to shake her hand. “Friends call me Zack.” Isaac was tall and lanky. He seemed older than Sophia, but he had a youngish face and a warm, playful smile, which turned to a frown as soon as he stopped shaking Anita’s hand. “You guys know she’s close, right?” he asked, bluntly.

“To death?” Sophia asked.

Zack nodded. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“We didn’t know,” Sophia replied. “We couldn’t tell.”

“I guess we had hope,” Anita added. She had not realized until that moment that she expected Agatha would get better somehow although she knew in the back of her mind that was impossible.

“I’m afraid there’s no hope,” Zack replied, calmly. “For her or any of us.”

“*Us*?” Anita asked.

“I’m gay, although there’s a colossal irony using that word in this grim circumstance,” he said with a mocking smile.

“You’re not infected?”

“No. I’ve been working with AIDS victims for a while now. If anybody could get infected by casual contact, it would be me, but I’m not.”

“That’s good,” Anita commented.

“Is it? Sometimes I feel guilty. I don’t know why, though. I guess it just gets me down.”

“So... how long... for her?” Sophia asked, warily.

“A week, possibly a few days more.”

“Oh, God,” Anita said. They were quiet for a moment as they reflected on what they were discussing. Agatha, who not long ago was in the prime of her life, was about to die. It did not seem right and was *not* right. It was an abomination.

“Yeah, God,” Zack said, quietly. “Some people think this is all God’s idea.”

“What do you mean?” Anita asked.

“Some religious assholes think AIDS is a plague sent by God to kill off all the homosexuals.”

“You can’t be serious!” Anita exclaimed.

“You haven’t heard about it? I have it written down. I carry it around so I don’t forget it.” Zack reached into his back pocket, took out his wallet, opened it, took out a paper, and unfolded it. “Here it is. Are you ready for this? It’s ugly. ‘AIDS is the wrath of a just God against homosexuals. To oppose it would be like an Israelite jumping in the Red Sea to save one of Pharaoh’s charioteers. AIDS is not just God’s punishment for homosexuals. It is God’s punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.’ Ain’t that a bitch?”

Anita had never heard such a hateful statement in her life. It made her wonder what kind of human being could have uttered it. “Who said that?” Anita asked, aghast.

“Jerry Fallwell. A so-called man-of-God.”

“You mean ‘man-who’s-a-piece-of-shit,’” Anita commented angrily. It was the first time anyone told her some people wanted the AIDS virus to exist, wanted homosexuals to be infected, and then get sick and die. *They’re happy AIDS is real* she thought; *they want Agatha to die*. The fact that the world didn’t want her or people like her to exist overwhelmed Anita and she burst into tears. Sophia hugged her.

“I’m glad you can still cry,” Zack said. “You’re lucky in a way. You haven’t seen too much of it yet. I stopped crying a while ago. I just didn’t have any more tears left. Cry for me, too...”

Anita liked Zack immediately, and not because he was helping take care of Agatha. She liked him because he was a compassionate human being. She was beginning to understand how little compassion there was left in the world. It seemed as if people were becoming less compassionate and more insane every day. Tony had never told her she had no right to exist. However, what he did to Anita made her feel as if her existence meant nothing to her brother and she finally realized just how deeply he had hurt her.

Zack stopped by every day to spend time with Agatha. She liked him right away. He was handsome and reminded her of Tyrone. She missed Tyrone, wondered what happened to him, and did not want to assume he was dead. She hoped he beat the illness somehow and remained alive somewhere.

Agatha already knew she was not going to beat the illness. She knew as soon as her parents took her to Germantown Hospital. Some people believed you could cure disease by force of will, prayer, or magical thinking. Agatha was a practical girl. She knew that once confined to her bed she would stay there until she left this world. Since there was no other world to go to she did not pretend to have any hope.

Then Zack arrived and she wanted to stay in this world, fervently. He was kind, sweet, charming, and handsome. Agatha recalled what it was like to have a handsome man on her arm and in her bed. She knew Zack would do neither but her memories cheered her a little.

She’d had a good life and did not feel ashamed of anything she did. Her parents should feel shame for what they did to her. She believed family love was unshakable when she was growing up. Her mother, father, and grandma loved Agatha and her brothers as if they were the three most important people in the universe. She thought that love would never weaken and never die. The truth was that it did not die. Her parents killed it. If they walked in the room right now, said they were sorry, and tried to embrace her, Agatha would tell them to go fuck themselves. Their love had been false all along. They cared more about themselves than her. They also claimed they were Christians, just like that Falwell guy.

Fortunately, Sophia, Anita, and Zack cared about Agatha. She felt grateful for their care, not merely because she was ill and desperately needed help, but because their devotion seemed genuine. They were not helping her for personal gain but because she was important to them. Moreover, she would continue to be important until she died, and maybe even longer than that. They would remember her and perhaps tell others about her. Agatha Hartford wanted people to remember her and to tell others that she had been in the world for a time and was not sorry for the life she led.

Sophia spoke at the memorial service they held for Agatha at Rainbow Bookshop a few weeks later. Only a handful of people were there. Most people who knew Agatha were in LA.

They expressed shock when Sophia called them about her death but they could not attend her small memorial service.

Sophia felt surprised that Donnie came to the service. She mentioned Agatha's death when he called looking for Agatha so he could get her to do another movie for him. He had written a script and was recruiting actors but she was to be his star.

"She's *what*?" he asked, sounding stunned by the news.

"Dead. Last month. AIDS."

"How did she get AIDS?"

"From Tyrone."

"But, he's still alive! I just talked to him. It doesn't seem fair. She was a sweet kid. That's why she was so great in my movie."

"Donnie, nobody wants to hear about your movie right now." *Or ever*, Sophia thought.

"So when's the memorial?"

"Why?"

"I'd like to be there."

"Okay. I'll let you know." Sophia hung up. She thought she would never see Donnie at a memorial service for Agatha or anyone else. Death was part of the real world and Donnie always seemed afraid of it. Sophia thought he made porn movies so he could live in a fantasy world where everybody fucked and nobody died. However, Donnie showed up and asked to speak.

"I knew she was a sweet kid the first time I met her in Sophia's old theater in Germantown," Donnie began. *Yeah, the one you stole from me*, Sophia thought. "That sweetness and innocence stayed with her the entire time I knew her. I honestly thought she would be a sweet, innocent old lady someday.

"I'm sorry she's gone. I've known a couple of other people who died of AIDS and it makes me angry no one seems to be doing anything except taking care of the sick and burying the dead. This is the greatest country on earth. We sent men to the moon. Why can't we cure a damn disease?" Donnie paused. Sophia wondered where he was going with this. Was it about to become a rant?

"I'll tell you, friends. It's because the powers that be don't want to. I don't know what it's gonna take, but I think we should make them want to, for all our friends that have already died and especially for Agatha." Donnie started sobbing and sat down. Sophia wanted to put her arm around him, but Zack did it first. Donnie seemed surprised anyone would touch him but felt grateful someone had.

Sophia stood up and asked if anyone else wanted to speak. The only people in the room who knew Agatha were Sophia, Donnie, Anita, and Zack. Anita and Zack only met her when she was dying. Sophia wrestled with whether she should talk about how she and Agatha had been lovers long ago. She did not think Agatha would mind her mentioning it but did not know how to put the experience of being in love with Agatha into words.

"Well, I guess I'll get the last word about Agatha. She was special to me because I fell in love with her many years ago. I was her first and only lesbian lover. Ironically, she left me for a man, her husband, Tyrone, who she loved far more deeply than she ever loved me, but I was okay with that." Sophia paused to fight back tears. They were for Agatha, lost love, change, time, and death. "I moved on, too." Sophia didn't glance at Allie but knew Allie would understand her comment.

"Love was important to Agatha. She came from a loving family who couldn't handle her being with me. Her mother threw her out. After she started living with Tyrone, her family

accepted her back and accepted Tyrone, but then she moved to LA and only talked to them on the phone for several years. When she finally went to see them, she was already infected. Agatha suspected it but they didn't have a clue. I think she hoped they would accept her and take care of her but they rejected her a *second* time. I know that hurt her. I assume she never forgave them.

"Fortunately, she didn't die alone. Anita, Zack, and I were with her. She knew we loved her and not just because she was dying. I'm making a panel for the AIDS quilt people are talking about, and I'll be proud to display it. It will have her full name, Agatha Hartford, on it. Maybe her parents will see it, and maybe they won't. If they do, I hope they're sorry for what they did to their lovely, sweet, innocent, kind daughter. She never deserved to die of AIDS. Nobody does. Maybe in the future, nobody will have to. Goodbye, Agatha. I'm glad I knew you. Wherever you are, I hope you still feel the love you knew in this life and have forgotten the disappointments and pain you experienced. I'm sorry the world let you down. Maybe you've gone to a better world. I hope so." Sophia paused and searched for the right words to close the little memorial service. They came to her, finally.

"Maybe we'll be together again, someday," she said. "Maybe..." Sophia's sobbing overwhelmed her and she sat down. Anita hugged her. The little group sat in silence for a few moments, and then some people got up and left without saying a word. Only Sophia, Anita, Zack, Allie, and Donnie remained. Agatha's ordeal was over. Their ordeals would continue.

Anita moved into Zack's apartment with him. He had two bedrooms but lived alone since his boyfriend David moved to San Francisco. They did not break up, however. They both agreed there was nothing to break up. They were good friends and lovers, but they would not admit to being in love with each other. Zack missed David; he had helped Zack find his role in helping others through the early AIDS crisis. Now Zack was helping Anita find her role.

She could have gone back home after Agatha died, told Tony the person with AIDS was gone and there was no more danger, but she chose not to. Their estrangement saddened Al, their father. Theresa, Al's girlfriend, talked to Anita about it. She felt sympathetic to both Anita's concern for AIDS victims and Tony's concern for his children. Anita felt grateful for her interest and thanked her. She missed Sara and Rocky almost more than she could bear. Theresa told her they missed her, as well.

Zack and Anita gradually became an AIDS care team, but their work was different. While Zack cared for people who became ill and eventually died, Anita did not. She helped the people who loved the AIDS victims, the ones the victims left behind. The trauma of loss and grief almost overwhelmed most of these people.

The loss of a loved one to AIDS led people to question everything about their lives as homosexuals. It was the loss of meaning, purpose, value, and conviction. Many asked themselves after they lost someone they loved, 'who am I? Why did I have to go through this? Is it wrong for me to be what I am? Did I somehow cause my loved one's suffering and death?' These questions and others like them haunted survivors, but they rarely voiced them. Anita helped them do that. She got them talking. They opened up to her eventually, although it sometimes took a while and felt painful. People often walled themselves off from the truth. Anita helped them tear down those walls, or, at least, make windows and doors so they could first see outside, and eventually go outside and move on with their lives.

When Zack and Anita learned of a new AIDS patient, they would visit that person, talk with those around them, and try to understand the relationships that mattered in the patient's life.

Both Zack and Anita kept their day jobs. He took care of rich people as a private nurse. She continued to work at the Boyd. It was how they earned enough money to get by, pay their bills, take care of themselves, and do their work. It often left them exhausted, but every person they freed from despair or eased into a quiet, peaceful death made their efforts worthwhile.

People started to refer to Anita and Zack as ‘angels’. Customers would come into Rainbow Bookshop and ask how they could get in touch with ‘the angels.’ Allie took their phone numbers and gave them to Anita or Zack. They followed up as they could but they could not talk to everyone. There were too many. The plague did not subside. Every patient, every illness, and every network of relationships mattered to them, and they tried to honor the humanity, privacy, and intimacy of all the people they met. They knew they were not angels and never used that word themselves. They were merely Anita and Zack.

Donnie was still making money from showings of *Deep Gasm* in little theaters all over the United States. He had planned to invest his profits in a new porn epic and had a script written, but changed his mind. Instead, he decided to make a documentary about AIDS.

Over a year, he shot many reels of sixteen-millimeter film. Many people wanted to talk about what was happening, how it was affecting them, and what they thought ought to be done about it. He even asked to interview Anita and Zack, but they declined.

There were demonstrations, protests, and other public actions to raise AIDS awareness, and Donnie filmed as much as he could. Then he sat down at a rickety Movieola machine, tried to edit his footage into a coherent film, and failed. He thought making a documentary would be easy, but documentaries need creators who know how to tell stories. Donnie never told stories in his porn movies. He did not have to. People came to the theaters to see lots of fucking and that was what he showed them. He found he could not make a movie with no fucking in it, so he boxed up his footage, put it in Sophia’s basement, and walked away.

Sophia decided to revive the Sansom Cinema. She fixed up the exterior, replaced the dead bulbs in the marquee, and bought some new plastic letters so she could announce the movies. She started showing movies that were recent but not new. They had played in theaters months ago. Many people saw them but not everyone. Other theater owners were charging only a dollar admission for third-run movies and they were keeping their theaters open.

Sophia ran some 80s movies and they drew an audience. She threw in some older films, from the 30s and 40s, and they did well, too. People liked *Casablanca*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *King Kong*. She even showed silent Charlie Chaplin films and had a few all-night horror and sci-fi marathons. The biggest film she showed was *Gone with the Wind*, which played for a week. Her audience loved it. She was no longer running the foreign films she dreamed of showing in a repertory cinema but she did not care anymore.

Sansom Cinema became the neighborhood movie house. It was especially popular in summer. Nights in the city were hot. Most people did not have air conditioners in their cramped apartments. There was air-conditioning inside the Sansom Cinema and neighbors came to cool off with movies and popcorn. Sophia greeted moviegoers in the lobby and sold tickets. She often ran the concessions counter. She signaled the projectionist to start the movies and sat in the back of the theater to take part in the audience’s enjoyment of the show. Sophia felt fulfilled; doing all this made her happy. It was the only happiness she enjoyed.

When Donnie came back, he had a new mission. “Video is the future!” he insisted. “Maybe *your* future, Donnie, but not mine.”

“No, it’s not just for porn, Sophia. You know Hollywood studios are releasing their movies on tape now. You could make money by renting them.”

“But, that would cut into my theater business.”

“No, it wouldn’t. It would just get you another revenue stream. There’s no rental store in this neighborhood yet, but I bet one’s coming. It’s only a matter of time. It shouldn’t be some outsider, it should be you.”

Sophia thought about Donnie’s argument. People were buying videocassette recorders, hooking them up to their TV sets, and watching movies and shows whenever they wanted. They were more likely to stay home in cold weather. As winter approached, she set aside part of the Sansom Cinema’s lobby as a small video rental store.

The idea took off. Soon, she was doing so well that she could not handle the workload alone and asked Anita to staff the store while she ran the theater. Anita felt hesitant at first but Sophia assured her she could have the freedom to work whenever she wanted. That might make it easier for her to help people whenever they needed her instead of having to work around her shift schedule at the Boyd. Anita was not sure there would be enough income to pay her rent and meager expenses. She hung out at the Sansom Cinema for a few days and evenings and saw how many customers came for movie shows or rental tapes. Then she went home and thought about what she saw, and became convinced the theater was thriving, quit her job at the Boyd, and went to work for Sophia.

Allie’s Rainbow Bookshop continued to be the center of community goings-on as more gays and lesbians came into the neighborhood. She provided meeting space for community groups and support for neighborhood organizing. Most of the good things that happened locally began in her store and she was happy people trusted her.

Anita came in several times a month, mostly to visit. She never talked about Sophia or the Sansom Cinema. She did talk about Zack and the people they were helping. Allie listened to Anita’s stories about the impact of AIDS on many different kinds of people. She felt glad she encouraged Anita to explore her empathy and compassion and noticed Anita was gaining maturity and wisdom. Allie felt pleased Anita was not pretending to be humble and compassionate; she was just that way naturally. Anita shared her gifts freely with as many suffering people as she could.

Allie went home at night feeling good about where she was, what she was doing, how important her bookshop was to the life of the community, and pleased she was always busy. She sometimes poured a small glass of wine to relax, sat in her living room, stared at the TV, which was off, and wondered why she still felt something was wrong with her life. Her bookstore attracted new customers all the time. Interesting people came in. Some asked questions, found books they were looking for, and stayed a while to chat. Then they left and she was alone again. As she sat in her chair and sipped her wine, Allie admitted she no longer wanted to be alone. She wanted someone to come home to, sip wine and watch TV with, talk about her day, and snuggle next to in bed on cold nights. She wondered why, given all the interesting people her bookshop attracted, no one special came in for her. Then she started checking out other women.

Allie recognized Patricia Harrington as soon as she walked in the door because she had seen her on the news a few times. Patricia was a short, slender woman in a pink pinstriped power suit. She had close-cropped blonde hair, a prominent nose, and a large mouth. She also had a fire in her eyes Allie hadn’t noticed when she saw her on TV. Patricia was a lawyer who fought tirelessly for the rights of people with AIDS. They deserved equality and dignity. What they

often faced was discrimination. Patricia was winning cases and people in other cities were now seeking her help and advice.

Patricia closed the door, looked around, and hesitated. "Something I can help you with?" Allie asked cheerfully. Patricia looked at her as if she had not realized anyone else was in the shop. She liked the way Allie looked.

"Um, yes... I was looking for something... unusual."

"Most of what I have is unusual," Allie replied. "This is a gay and lesbian bookstore. *We're* unusual," she joked.

"Yes, we are," Patricia replied as she walked toward the counter where Allie waited. Allie noticed that Patricia seemed younger in person than she looked on TV. She guessed they were around the same age.

"So, what were you interested in?"

"I like mysteries. They help me relax. I solve people's problems all day, but they aren't puzzles like mysteries are. I guess I like puzzles. I heard about your store and wondered if you had any lesbian mysteries. Do such things exist?"

"They do. Let me show you some." Allie walked to the shelves along the far wall. "This one might interest you. It's about Hollywood persecution during the McCarthy era"

"Have you read it?"

"Yes. I loved it. It's the first of a series. Kathleen, the detective, meets the person she will live with for most of the rest of the series, so it's got some romance in it, too."

"I like romance," Patricia said, in a tone of voice Allie hoped was suggestive.

"Me, too... and not just reading about it, if you know what I mean."

"I do, indeed. Are you busy tonight?" Allie felt shocked by Patricia's forwardness but then reminded herself she was a lawyer and used to arguing with people to get what her clients wanted. Could Allie believe Patricia wanted her?

"I've got a bottle of white wine, a frozen dinner, and some quality time with my TV waiting at home."

"Sounds great. What time should I be there?"

"Seven-thirty okay?" Allie replied.

"Should I bring anything?"

"I've got plenty of frozen dinners and a few bottles of wine, but you could bring your pajamas... or not."

"Do you wear pajamas?" Patricia asked.

"When I sleep alone, yes."

"Well, you won't be needing them tonight," Patricia replied. Allie liked the confidence in her voice.

"I can't wait. Here's my address. I'm only a few blocks away. I walk home."

"Oh, nice. Can I walk with you?"

"That would be lovely. Here, take the book. My gift. If you like it, you can buy more in the series. If not..."

"Maybe I won't have time to do much reading," Patricia commented, smiling. "At least not tonight."

"I close at seven."

"I'll be here."

Patricia did not arrive at seven. Allie waited. Patricia did not come at seven-thirty. Allie finally closed at eight and walked home feeling dejected. She approached her building, went up

the steps, opened the door, and saw Patricia waiting in the lobby. "I'm awfully sorry. This case I'm working on... I lost track of time. Do you still want some company?" Allie wanted more than companionship and felt certain she was going to get what she wanted and needed.

"I'm not much on breakfast," Allie apologized as they were dressing the next morning. "I usually get something on the way to my shop," Patricia was not due in court so she wore the same outfit she had on yesterday.

"Oh, but I am. Since you treated me to dinner and dessert last night, why don't I treat you to a nice breakfast? There's a great coffee shop in my building."

The place was busy but Allie and Patricia found a booth. The waitress came over as soon as they sat down, greeted Patricia, and took their orders. They waited in awkward silence. Allie thought about how great she felt being with someone again. She had missed lovemaking, and loving, but cautioned herself not to expect too much. Patricia was a busy woman who had little free time. She might also already have a lover. Allie worried what they had was merely a one-night stand. That was okay with Allie but she hoped for more.

"Look, I don't know how to say this, and I don't want to scare you off, but I really like you and would like to see you again," Allie said.

"You're direct. I like that. I've been with women who don't know their own feelings and are vague and evasive. You probably can tell I'm not that way," Patricia replied. Then she looked directly into Allie's eyes. "Yes."

"Great! When?"

"Not tonight, I have a meeting. How about tomorrow evening? Will you have dinner with me?"

"I'd rather you come back to my place. It's not much, and the food's not first-class, but... well, the company is, how can I put this... special."

"Oh, yes. Very special. How about I bring some Chinese food? I know a great Szechuan place."

"Excellent! I've got more of that wine."

"You don't have to get me drunk, you know, just to have your way with me."

"Okay, no wine. Just Chinese."

"And then dessert," Patricia said. They smiled conspiratorially. It was a date. Hopefully, the first of many.

Patricia had not been alone as Allie had. She had affairs with women who needed her more than she needed them. Patricia somehow attracted needy women and was tired of having to end relationships and feeling remorseful. She did not like hurting people but that was what she ended up doing.

Allie seemed different. She did not seem needy. She was confident, intelligent, funny, charming, and sensitive. Patricia had never been with a bookish woman, someone who was thoughtfully introspective and seemed aware of the many variations in human nature. Patricia assumed Allie read a lot and had learned from the books she read. Patricia did not read much. She learned about life from the people she helped, people with problems, often big ones, that needed solving. They were all different problems, yet the people seemed much the same. She thought she would talk about that with Allie sometime, maybe compare notes about how reality compared to books.

For now, whenever they were together, Patricia did not want to do much talking. She wanted just to be. Allie quickly became her oasis away from the harsh realities of the legal

system and the overwhelming despair of AIDS. Patricia could get lost in Allie and often did. She forgot about herself. They had fun, found a deep connection, and felt happy together.

Anita walked into Rainbow Books just as Allie and Patricia were saying a cheerful goodbye. “*You* know Patricia Harrington?” She asked, astonished.

“Yeah. We’re... um... dating.”

“That’s wonderful, Allie. She’s wonderful. I’ve only seen her on TV, but Zack talks about her. She’s like a God to him.”

“She’s fighting for us.”

“And winning, I hear.”

“Yes,” Allie replied, and then changed the subject, abruptly. “So, how are you?”

“I’m good. Busy, but good.”

“New clients?”

“Always. Too many to take care of. Breaks my heart, sometimes, but we can’t help everyone, you know?”

“I wouldn’t want to be in your place, Anita. I wouldn’t want to have to make the kind of decisions you have to make. I just deal in books- inanimate objects that don’t mind sitting ignored for months at a time, or left in a box, or lost, or even just unread. They’re stories about the living, but they’re not alive. You, on the other hand, deal with the living and do it very well. I told you that you had a gift, and I was right, wasn’t I? Thank you for sharing it. People need you.”

“Yeah, too many. I don’t have a life of my own anymore. I’m just all tangled up in other people’s lives. Sometimes I don’t remember who I am or what I’m supposed to be doing, but I keep going somehow. I really don’t know how.”

“You’re strong and compassionate. I hope you’re doing something to take care of yourself.”

“What can I do? I haven’t got the time.”

“You’re not seeing anyone?” Allie asked.

“Like I said, I haven’t got the time.”

“Maybe you ought to think about finding someone.”

“You’re not listening, Allie. I haven’t got the time!”

Anita did not find someone. Someone found her. One weekday afternoon Sharon came into the Sansom Cinema video store with Sara and Rocky. Anita felt so happy to see them again that she cried. She had missed them more than she could admit to herself because the pain of not seeing them was too great.

“Does Tony know you’re here?” she asked, worriedly.

“No, but I’m sure they’ll be so excited when we get home that they’ll tell him.”

“What will you do, then?” Anita asked.

“Tell him I’ve had enough of his selfishness.”

“He isn’t selfish,” Anita argued. “He’s worried about them.”

“But there’s no danger. He’s just being stupid.”

“You’re right. There’s no danger. Thank you for bringing them here.”

“Are you staying here now?” Sharon asked.

“No, I live two blocks away.”

“You have your own place?”

“No, I’m living with a guy,” Anita explained.

“Really?”

“He’s a gay guy. We’ve become good friends.”

“That’s great. And, you’re working here, now? I was surprised to hear you left the Boyd. Your dad told me.”

“Yeah. Sophia needed help and I got tired of the crazy hours there. She lets me work during the days in the store and she works nights in the theater. I help out sometimes.”

“And, what *else* are you doing?” Sharon asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Seeing anyone?”

“No time,”

“You’re free at night,” Sharon pointed out. “That’s when most people go on dates.”

“I’m busy at night. Zack and I... well... we’re volunteers.”

“Oh, what do you do?”

“He takes care of AIDS patients, and I take care of the patients’ families and loved ones.”

“That must take a lot out of you, Anita. No wonder you’re not dating.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s that I’ve got nothing left to give after a long day with the loved ones of someone who’s dying, or who just died.”

“You may not have anybody to be with, but you have me for support, whenever you need me.”

“You mean that?”

“Yes. I *mean* that, Anita. The kids weren’t the only ones who missed you. I was hoping you might consider coming back to live with us but it makes sense to live down here where it’s more convenient.”

“I miss being around them,” Anita replied, nodding toward the children who watched a cartoon tape on the TV. “I really do.”

“Well, we’re not going to be strangers anymore.”

“Good. I’m so glad to see you, Sharon, and so glad you’re my sister-in-law. You know that, right?” Sharon nodded. “Good. That will never change, despite Tony, my bone-headed brother.”

“Who loves you, and misses you, but won’t admit it. Your father is angry at him.”

“Give Tony time,” Anita replied. “He’ll eventually see there’s no danger.”

“I hope so, but it may take a while.”

“I’m sure it will. He can be stubborn.”

“Don’t I know it! But, I love him. I have since that night we met at Hecate’s Circle.”

“I remember that night. I teased him the next morning about what you guys did all night together. He told me you just talked.”

“We did! Nothing else happened. It was so romantic, though. I was so flattered that he liked me. It changed my whole way of looking at myself.”

“I’ve always been happy for you both,” Anita commented.

“I know, and I’ve been happy to be your sister-in-law. We’re more like sisters, the way I see it.”

“Me, too.”

“So, sister, I’m glad to have you back in my life,” Sharon replied. “I’m not gonna let you go anywhere. But, we have to leave now. I know they’re not gonna be happy about leaving. They like that tape.”

“You want to take it with you?”

“We don’t have anything to play it on.”

“You mean Tony hasn’t bought one yet? I think his store sells them.” Anita asked.

“He thinks they’re just a fad.”

“No, they’re real, and getting more popular all the time.”

Chapter 14 - In a Dark Time

Babette's phone rang while she was repairing a slide projector. She put down the screwdriver and reached for the phone. "Audio-Visual. This is Babette Romanelli."

"Hi, Babette, it's me." She recognized the voice. It was Michael, her ex-husband. He lived in Los Angeles and worked for Rialto Films, a small porno film studio. Babette had worked as a cinematographer when the studio started in Philadelphia and went to LA when it moved. She had not spoken to Michael since their divorce.

"Michael? It's been ages! How are you?"

"Not too good. My mom just died. I'm on my way back for the funeral. You always liked her, and she adored you, so I wanted to let you know."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I haven't seen her in a while. Thanks for telling me. When's the funeral?"

"Day after tomorrow. Kirk and Nice, in Germantown. Remember where that is?"

"I do vaguely," Babette replied. "But I can't get off during the day. Is there a viewing?"

"Yes, tomorrow night."

"I might be able to make it. So... how are you doing?" she asked.

"Bummed out. I didn't keep in touch when I was in LA and now she's gone."

"Well, you were busy."

"Yeah, but I also just didn't want to make the effort, you know? But, whenever I did talk to her she always asked about you, even after you left. I think she hoped we'd get back together."

"Well, I visited her a few times after I came back. I don't know if she told you. I'm married now, with two wonderful kids."

"And a wonderful husband, I hope," Michael said.

"Yes, yes, he is. What about you?"

"After you left, I got even busier and there's been no time for anybody."

"No one? But, I left a long time ago. You've been alone all this time?"

"Not alone, alone, but there was no one special, you know what I mean?"

"Oh, you mean the girls in the movies?" Babette asked. Although Michael made porn, he had never seemed attracted to the women in his films. They were just actresses that he hired. The women told her privately they appreciated Michael treating them as professional actresses instead of whores and always felt eager to work in his films.

"Sometimes, yeah. Most of them are nice, but no one was like you."

"Yeah, well, I'd rather not talk about that time in my life. I'm glad it's over."

"Okay. Sorry I mentioned it. Maybe I'll see you at the viewing?" Michael asked.

"Maybe. Thanks for calling me. Tell your sister I said hello, and give her my condolences."

"I will."

Babette did not tell her husband that she was going to her ex-mother-in-law's viewing. She told him she would be busy that evening. Babette sometimes worked in the evenings. Gregory assumed she would be at the college and felt happy to take care of the children.

She drove to the funeral home and parked on the street a half-block away. She was on time but did not see many people going in and wondered if it had been a mistake to come. Babette did not want to spend time with Michael and only wanted to pay her respects to him and his sister, Laura.

Babette and Amelia had liked each other from the first time they met. They had many wonderful moments together before Babette and Michael moved to LA. Not long before Babette met him, Michael had moved back home after his father died to help his mother Amelia adjust to her new life as a widow, which she did without much trouble. She got a job, made new friends, and seemed content. She had never been a happy person, but she was always helpful, supportive, and kind. Others liked her and she got along with everyone. She never found another man, although Michael and his sister Laura encouraged her to go on dates. No one ever asked Amelia out. She was alone but did not feel lonely.

Michael noticed Babette as soon as she arrived. She was no longer the short, stocky, dark-haired girl he met outside the Rialto one afternoon. He had been on the ladder arranging letters on the Rialto marquee as she stood on the sidewalk pointing a small movie camera at him. She dyed her hair blonde and she wore more lipstick than Michael recalled. Babette still had her penetrating eyes. That was why she was such a good filmmaker. Her eyes saw what others couldn't or wouldn't see. Not only did she see them, but her camerawork also enabled others to see them as well. Babette had been the reason Rialto Films became so popular.

His mother lay in the open coffin at the front, surrounded by flower displays, most of them purchased by Michael. He and Laura stood by the door to greet people. Her sad demeanor brightened when she saw Babette.

"Oh, my God!" She hugged Babette. "It's so good to see you again, Babette. Thanks so much for coming."

"I had to, Laura. I liked your mom. She was always really good to me."

"She was good to everybody," Michael commented as he also hugged her. He pulled away but held onto her arm and looked into her eyes. "I've missed you."

"But... I haven't missed... LA," Babette replied, evasively. She did not want to lie and say she missed him because she had not. They had parted abruptly but amicably. After a grueling day shooting a porn epic, she came home and realized that she felt empty and had felt that way for a long time. She no longer liked what she was doing.

It was fun when they started making porn films because she could be creative, but that seemed like a long time ago. Then pornography became an industry like any other, and her cinematography became a job like any other. They cranked out film after film. There was no longer a challenge to make them unusual, interesting, or inventive. She filmed every way people fucked until she ran out of ideas. Unless someone invented a new way to have sex, the medium was doomed to endless repetition and boredom, maybe not for the audiences, but for the creative people making the movies.

Babette decided she wanted to quit but she did not walk out. She told Michael how she felt and asked him to leave the business with her. He refused. They had remained happily married for several years. Despite the business they were in, they were faithful to each other. She loved him and he loved her, but she realized she loved herself more and her life was going nowhere.

She wanted to have children but he did not want to raise kids in LA. She packed, got a taxi to the airport, bought a ticket, and flew back to Philadelphia. Babette stayed with some friends for a few weeks until she got a job and a place of her own. She also visited Michael's mother and sister several times before she got busy. She met Gregory, a history teacher, a year into her new job running the Community College Audio-Visual Department. They seemed ready and waiting for each other and fell into a sweet romance. Babette forgot about Michael, Rialto Films, pornography, and LA.

She did not want to revisit that time in her life. She never felt ashamed of the work she did. Her husband Gregory knew all about her camerawork but had never seen any of her films. He was unusual in that he had no taste for pornography. Many men were voyeurs. He was not. Babette felt pleased. She had forgotten most of what she filmed and no longer saw sex as something to be watched. Now, for her, it was more about love than anything else. She liked it better that way.

Other people came in and Michael and his sister greeted them. Babette felt uncomfortable going up to the coffin, found a chair halfway down the aisle, sat down, and wondered what would happen next. She also wondered why she had come. She had never been to a viewing. As a cameraperson, she knew how to view the world through a camera eyepiece, compose shots, and create movement and drama. This viewing, however, was static. *It's a corpse*, she thought. *Why does anyone need to view it? To make sure it's dead?* Babette shivered at her macabre thought and looked around the room. More people came in and some were standing by the corpse. She wondered why they bothered.

Michael slipped into the chair next to her. "So what's it like having a 9 to 5 job, kids, and a normal life?"

"I love it. My kids are wonderful, and my husband, too. And the job keeps me busy."

"Do you do any filmmaking?"

"I've done some video," Babette replied. "But, not much."

"Me, too. I've fooled around with it."

"Speaking of videotape, did you know that's part of Sophia's business?"

"I don't know anything about what she's doing."

"She has another theater. I understand it wasn't doing so well when she tried to run it like the Rialto, but now it's doing great, and she has a video store, too."

"Have you seen her?"

"Just once. She came on campus to lecture in a film history class for an English teacher. She was there to talk about foreign films, repertory cinemas, and stuff like that. I was there because the professor needed a movie projector for the lecture. I was setting it up when Sophia walked in. We had been working close by for years and were shocked to see each other. Her theater is only a few blocks from the college. We had coffee after the lecture."

"How's she doing?"

"Great, now. She seemed happy."

"Where's her theater?" Michael asked.

"It's the Sansom Cinema."

"I think I've heard of it. Maybe I'll drop by."

"You should. She'd probably love to see you."

Michael did not want to fly right back to LA after the funeral. He worried about his sister Laura. She had handled all the funeral arrangements, and done all the legal and financial work after their mother died. None of those things concerned him. He was more interested in her. Laura and her mother had been close and lived together in their Germantown row house since Michael's father died. He did not know what the emotional impact of their mother's death would be and decided to hang around awhile to make sure Laura felt okay.

She worked in the daytime and he used his free time to visit places in Philadelphia that he remembered from when he was growing up- schools, stores, parks, theaters, and favorite music venues. Some were still going but many had closed. He went downtown, found the Sansom

Cinema, and walked into a brightly lit, plain lobby with shelves full of rental videos along one wall. A young woman smiled at him but did not say anything. There was a movie playing on a small TV on the counter. She was ignoring it.

“Excuse me, I was looking for Sophia. Is she around?”

“Yeah, she’s in the office.” The woman went to a stairway hidden in a corner and yelled “Sophia! Somebody to see you!”

“Be right down.” A few minutes later Sophia emerged from the stairway and saw Michael smiling at her.

“How are you doing?” he asked, nonchalantly. “Nice place you got here.”

“Yeah. Not as nice as the old Rialto, but it’s in a better location, and it’s all mine. I own it.”

“Good. No Donnie to worry about,” Michael replied smiling.

“Haven’t seen him for a while.”

“You mean he’s been around?”

“Yeah. Remember that film *Deep Gasm* he was always talking about making? Well, he premiered it here and it ran for well over a month until audiences stopped showing up. Then he took it on the road. He wanted to make a sequel, but...” Her voice trailed off.

“But what?”

“His leading lady got sick with AIDS.”

“Who was she?” Michael asked.

“Remember Agatha?”

“Our business manager?” Agatha had not only been the Rialto Films business manager. Long before that, she had also been Michael’s first girlfriend.

“Yeah. She changed when Tyrone left her and Donnie convinced her somehow to be in the film. He had an old screen test and got money from backers just because of her.”

“What happened to her?”

“She died of AIDS. It messed Donnie up really bad.”

“Selfish, a usual.”

“No, it changed him, Michael. She wasn’t the first person he knew who died of AIDS. He shelved his script and started working on a documentary about AIDS.”

“Donnie... making a documentary? You’re serious?” Michael asked.

“Yeah. He never finished it, though. I don’t know how much money he spent working on it. He shot tons of footage, but couldn’t make anything out of it. He gave up after a year. I have boxes of film in my basement. He asked me to keep them until he figures out what to do with them.”

“Do you think I could look at them?”

“Sure.”

“Donnie wouldn’t mind?” Michael asked.

“I don’t care. But what do you want them for?”

“Remember Babette?” Michael asked. Sophia nodded. “I just saw her. She used to make short documentaries. Maybe we could take Donnie’s footage and make something out of it.”

“That would be incredible.”

Michael took a couple of film reels. Babette knew someone who had an old Moviola machine. They looked at the footage together. “We’re going to need to sync up the sound, but this stuff looks pretty good,” Michael said.

“I don’t know. How much film did you say there was?” Babette asked.

“Couple boxes of film and tape. He shot over a hundred hours, according to Sophia.”

“I never worked with that much film. Have you?”

“No. You know how cheap we were. We didn’t use any more film than we had to, and didn’t edit it unless we had to.” Michael paused and looked at the images spooling by on the little editor’s screen. “So what do you think? Shall we take a crack at it?”

“I have to think about it, but I’m interested. I won’t have much time, though, what with my job and family and all.”

“Well, I have plenty of free time. You could help me direct it, and I could do the editing when you’re not around. The first thing we need to do is watch all this stuff. You have time to do that?”

“It will take several months, but yes.”

“Good,” Michael replied.

“Aren’t you going back to LA?” Babette asked, puzzled.

“I don’t want to. I’m finished with all that. It finally got to me, too.” His admission surprised Babette. It seemed he had become as disenchanted with the porn business as she had.

“Well, if you’re going to stay and work on it, count me in.”

“Great. Let’s get everything together so we can start soon.”

It took over a year, and there were serious problems. Donnie had not organized his footage. They found no logbook of the scenes he filmed. Some films and tapes had no labels. There were filmed scenes with no matching audio, and audiotapes with no matching film. They went back to Sophia’s basement a few times to look for the missing stuff.

However, the quality of the filmed interviews and stories astonished them. Strangely, Donnie could get revealing, intimate interviews with AIDS victims and their loved ones. Much of the footage moved Babette and Michael to tears. They could not believe anyone trusted Donnie with their feelings but they had. Inspired by Donnie’s work, they shot some new footage with Anita, Zack, and a few other people.

They finally cobbled together a film that explored the lives and loves of people with AIDS. *In a Dark Time* premiered at the Sansom Cinema. There were few announcements and no press releases but word got around and it sold out on the opening night. Donnie got screen credit as a cinematographer but they could not find him to tell him. Local papers did not review the film but it played for several weeks. A few patrons came several times and suggested Michael and Babette enter it in the Academy Awards competition for best documentary.

The Academy rejected it. They were told no one wanted to see a documentary about AIDS. *In a Dark Time* did not play much around the United States. Michael and Babette did not care. They had spent an intense year on it and felt exhausted. Michael remained in Philadelphia for the entire year. Babette eventually introduced Michael and her current husband Gregory and they became friends.

One day Michael received a call from a video company that wanted to release *In a Dark Time* on tape. He discussed it with Babette and Sophia. They agreed it was a wonderful idea. Bookshops, theaters, video rental stores, and libraries throughout the nation could display it. More people might see it that way than would ever see it in theaters. They agreed they should give the film rights to the releasing company. They felt strongly that as many people as possible should see *In a Dark Time* and didn’t care if they made any money from it.

A box arrived at Sophia’s video store one day and she opened it to find a dozen copies of the film. She had not ordered the copies; they just showed up from the video company. She took

some tapes to Allie for her store and gave one to the local library. The rest she kept for rentals and people rented it many, many times.

As they reflected on the film, they thought the time was not as dark anymore. By bringing the stories of AIDS victims to the screen, and sharing their lives intimately and compellingly, they enhanced and uplifted the humanity of both the filmed participants and the viewers. There was a common bond in suffering. The idea that suffering by itself was redemptive in some way, as Christians claimed, seemed absurd to them. Christians had been the enemies of homosexuals and wanted them wiped from the face of the earth. They celebrated suffering, not redemption.

What was truly redemptive was compassion and shared humanity. *In a Dark Time* affirmed compassion by highlighting the humanity of homosexuals. Society had disparaged, demonized, and written them off for far too long. Centuries of ignorance and persecution seemed to be ending. The film, along with other events, helped everyone realize homosexuals were, in the end, just like everyone else, but also just a little bit different. Moreover, that was perfectly okay.

Chapter 15 - Happy New Year

Zack pattered around the apartment early one Saturday afternoon straightening up the place after a busy week. Anita was out visiting a man who had recently lost his long-time lover to AIDS. The phone rang and Zack picked it up. Before he could say 'hello' a voice said, "Hello, Isaac."

"David?"

"Yeah, buddy, how you doing?" Zack thought he had been doing okay, but hearing David's voice sent him soaring.

"I'm okay, how about you?" Zack replied, trying to seem calm.

"I thought I was okay until I saw you in that movie."

"You've seen it?"

"Several times, Zack. It's been playing here for a couple of weeks. You didn't know?"

"No. I don't know much about it beyond the part I did. I've met the filmmakers, of course."

"Well, the whole film is great. They captured the essence of what it means to be gay in the 1980s," David said.

"Funny you should say that. They're all straight people who used to be in the porn business."

"Well, they've made one hell of a documentary. Seeing you in it made me realize how much I missed you."

"I miss you too, David." There was a long pause. Neither man knew if he should go on. Sharing true feelings with someone thousands of miles away could be difficult and painful, especially if it dredged up pleasant memories of past love.

"I was wondering if you're..." David asked, tentatively.

"Seeing anyone? I haven't been exactly keeping myself for you. I've had a couple of dates, and I do have a new roommate."

"Oh," David replied. Isaac imagined the disappointed expression on David's face and quietly chastised himself for teasing him.

"Anita, the woman in the scene with me. She's an amazing person. I think you'd like her as much as I do."

"Well... I was wondering... I'm thinking of moving back to Philly."

"Yes!" Zack replied, excitedly. "I'll meet you at the airport," he blurted out. "Just tell me when your flight comes in."

"I was thinking of driving back. I have a car now and I kind of like it. You wouldn't consider going on a little road trip with me when I get back, would you? Are you busy?"

"I can clear my calendar, David, and do anything else you need me to do. Having you come back is a dream come true. Thanks."

Anita stayed at Sophia's theater the night David arrived. She wanted to give the boys time alone. They talked all night. Zack told David about the work he and Anita had been doing. They committed themselves to helping people face terminal illness and death. David felt awed. He also felt like an idiot. All he had been doing was working in the computer industry that was developing in San Francisco. He spent his free time with friends both gay and straight, but never met anyone he wanted to settle down with. It took him a while, but he finally realized there was no one on this earth for him other than Zack. If he wanted love, he would have to go back to Philadelphia, so he did.

They called Anita the next morning to tell her to come home. They were leaving for a trip to the Jersey shore, maybe a jaunt to New York, and possibly beyond. They needed to get away, re-discover each other, and deepen their bond of love. Anita praised them for doing something carefree and romantic. She felt concerned about the emotional pressure on Zack that resulted from the intense work he did with AIDS patients. It was time to take a break.

A month later, they called to tell her they were coming back in a week or so but she should continue to live in the apartment. After all, it was her home, too. She understood they were hinting, gently, that she should start thinking about moving out. She went to Rainbow Books to place an 'Apartment or Roommate Wanted' notice on the community bulletin board. She had not seen Allie for a few weeks. Allie's girlfriend Patricia was there waiting for Allie to close up so they could go to dinner.

Patricia mentioned she knew someone who owned a couple of brownstone houses on Walnut Street near 22nd. Anita said she knew the neighborhood and felt interested in a place if one were available.

Patricia called her friend and learned there was a basement apartment someone had just left. Anita frowned when Patricia told her. She had been hoping for something above ground this time. The owner offered to show it to Anita, who reluctantly accepted. She feared if she seemed too picky, the woman might not help her find a better place. Anita immediately recognized the address. *Oh, shit! This is too weird. How is it even possible?* she thought. It had been her first apartment. She persuaded herself to see it just so she would not appear ungrateful to Allie's friend for helping her out.

Anita stepped down to the basement entrance under the stone stairway and noticed the freshly painted door. Not only did the door look new, but it also looked like a steel security door. Anita recalled the cockroaches and reminded herself not to get her hopes up.

The owner, Patricia's friend Nadine Frost, came down the front steps, saw Anita, and smiled. Nadine had a bright smile and businesslike manner that Anita liked. "Hello. You're right on time! Patricia told me you lived here twenty years ago. What a coincidence. I have some idea of what this place was like back in the Sixties. Probably just like when I bought it four years ago." *Probably like it still is*, Anita thought. *She's trying to sell me before we even go in.*

"The last tenant took off on me a couple of weeks ago. I had it cleaned, of course. I was fed up renting to students or kids who have no sense of responsibility. I want older people like you." *More selling; this lady's good, and maybe desperate*, Anita thought.

Nadine unlocked the door and flipped a light switch. Anita noticed the plush carpeting right away. "Go on in." Anita stepped down into the little foyer, which was the same size as when she lived there but looked entirely different. There was a dark-stained closet door and tasteful wallpaper. Anita reminded herself to be careful and not show her reaction too soon.

She stepped into the main room. "There's a light switch right next to you," Nadine said. Anita found it and flipped it on. The room that greeted her was nothing like she expected. She gasped.

The walls were beige. The large radiator that took up most of the front wall was gone. The ceiling held soft lights and air ducts. "I had it re-done after I bought it. What do you think?"

"It's... um... not like I remember it." She stood on a plush carpet and looked at the kitchenette at the back. The cabinets were oak, the counter tasteful Formica. There was an old-fashioned backsplash behind the new sink and stove. The refrigerator looked new as well. Anita walked into the kitchen. The floor was wooden planks. She looked for cockroach carcasses.

Nadine chuckled. "They're gone," she said. "And, you'll never see one again. They disgusted me when I moved in upstairs so I had them taken care of. Check out the bathroom."

Anita found another dark wooden door that opened to a luxurious tiled bathroom with a large shower, vanity sink, and toilet. It was bright and spotlessly clean. "I don't have to tell you- but I will- I expect you to keep it looking like this."

"I will, I promise," Anita replied, in awe.

"So you'll take it? I'd love to rent to someone who knows one of my friends rather than a stranger. Oh, by the way, it's also air-conditioned."

"No way!" Anita replied.

Nadine smiled. "You gotta pay the electric bill, but you can use it all you want."

Anita left the bathroom, looked at Nadine, and dreaded the question she now had to ask. She was certain the place was far beyond her price range. "Um, how much is the rent?" she asked, sheepishly.

"Here's where it gets interesting," Nadine replied. Anita had no idea what she meant. "I need you to be completely honest with me. Think carefully before you answer. How much can you afford?" The question surprised Anita. Was the rent negotiable? That seemed weird. Should she feel suspicious? Maybe something was wrong with the place, something she had not seen yet.

"Um, I don't make a lot. This work I do, it doesn't pay well. I probably can't afford it. Sorry to take up your time."

"I know about the work you do, Anita. I know who you are. I saw the movie. I *want* you here. You tell me what you can pay me, and you've got the place. All I ask is that you be honest with me. From what I've heard about you, you don't know any other way to be. So, give me a number."

"Well, I'm sharing a place now, and I pay around \$250, but I could go higher."

"Two-fifty it is. When can you move in?"

"I don't have much furniture. I'll have to hit the thrift stores. Maybe within a week? But I could start paying you now."

"No, we'll start the lease on the first of the month, but here's the key. It's yours. Welcome to my building. I hope we will be neighbors for a long, long time."

Anita walked back to the Sansom Cinema and excitedly told Sophia the news. Sophia also had news. She had been working hard for several years, had finally succeeded in reviving the Cinema, and was making a good profit on the movies and videos. She woke up one day, felt exhausted, and knew she could use a break. Sophia asked Anita to run the place for a couple of weeks while she went back to visit New York. She was feeling nostalgic about the places she knew when she lived there twenty years earlier. Sophia also wanted to reconnect with old friends if any of them were still around. Anita said she would be happy to run the video rental store but felt uncomfortable running the theater. Sophia decided to close it for two weeks. She felt certain the neighborhood patrons would not mind if she took a vacation.

She waited until Anita settled into her new apartment and then called the Milford Plaza in New York City. It was not classy but was clean and quiet. Sophia reserved a room, packed her suitcase, and went to the Greyhound bus terminal. She rode the bus feeling excited to be leaving but worried she had acted too hastily. What if the Milford Plaza hotel was not as nice as she had heard? Where else could she go? She calmed her fear, reminded herself this was the first vacation she had in many years, and enjoyed the rest of the ride.

The Milford Plaza Hotel was in the heart of the Theater District, one block from Times Square. At 27 stories and 1,331 rooms, it was the largest hotel in New York City when it opened on February 13, 1928. Back then, it was named the Hotel Lincoln. It opened one day after the 119th anniversary of the birth of its namesake, Abraham Lincoln. It had a towering mast on top with neon lettering reading “HOTEL LINCOLN” which was lit on opening day by Governor Al Smith who pressed a button in Albany to illuminate it.

The Hotel Lincoln was sold in September 1957, remodeled, and renamed the Manhattan Hotel. The Hotel Lincoln sign was removed. In 1958, a sign was added to replace it, an enormous letter “M,” 31 feet wide and 12 feet deep. The last time she saw it, when she was still in New York in the 1960s, it was known as the Hotel Manhattan.

What she did not know was that in the 1960s (after she left New York) the Manhattan started going downhill. By the mid-1970s, the hotel was boarded up. In 1978, a new owner purchased the hotel and reopened it in 1980 as the Milford Plaza.

Sophia decided to stay there for two reasons. She was no longer a New York resident. She was now a tourist and felt there was no better place for a tourist to stay in New York than near Times Square. The other reason had to do with her love for old movies.

The “HOTEL LINCOLN” sign was visible in the 1933 film *42nd Street*, her favorite 1930s musical. She had seen it many times in the repertory cinemas in New York and run it in her theaters a few times. The hotel also used the song *Lullaby of Broadway* in television advertisements for many years. She saw the advertisements when she lived in New York. The song was from another of her favorite musicals, *Gold Diggers of 1935*, which was a Warner Brothers comedy with music starring Dick Powell, one of her favorite 1930s actors.

Sophia also knew that jazz pianist, organist, and bandleader Count Basie played in the Blue Room nightclub of the hotel in its heyday. So did jazz saxophonist Lester Young, and bandleader and clarinetist Artie Shaw. She loved their music as much as she loved the 1930s musicals.

Sophia exited the taxi with her suitcase and walked into the lobby. She had never before been inside the Manhattan, or Milford, as it was now known, but Sophia felt like she had come home.

Anita picked up her new phone and dialed her brother’s house, which used to be her house until he threw her out. “Tony, it’s me.”

“Oh, hi, sis.”

“I’m in my new place,” Anita said.

“You didn’t tell me you were getting a new place.”

“Well, it’s new but it’s not.”

“What do you mean?” Tony asked.

“You’re not going to believe this. Remember my old apartment at 22nd and Walnut?”

“You didn’t move back to that old dump, did you?”

“Tony, it’s not a dump. The whole place has been done over. Everything is brand-new. You wouldn’t believe it was the same place.”

“I *don’t* believe it. I thought those old houses were all dumps.”

“They were, but people are fixing them up now.”

The Beekman, Bleeker Street, and Thalia theaters were still open. Sophia had fond memories of sitting for long hours in all three. She found a new one called The Biograph and

checked it out. Sophia stumbled on one she had forgotten, the Avon 42, an XXX movie theater housed in a Times Square storefront on 42nd Street. Some films her Rialto Company made probably played there. Maybe there was one showing now but she was reluctant to check.

It rained on the third day of her vacation. Sophia was reluctant to venture out to ride subways to theaters she wanted to visit. She stayed in her hotel room paging through the phone book looking for old friends. Most of the names she recalled were no longer listed and she felt sad. *Where did they all go? The suburbs?* she wondered.

Sophia decided to go out for lunch to a place she had heard about but had never been to. It was the Café Edison, on W. 47th St. Donnie (of all people) had mentioned the restaurant to her in a casual conversation a few years ago. It was in the heart of the theater district and she assumed it would have a mix of tourists and theater people.

Sophia walked there in the light rain that briefly cleansed the city of its grime. Pedestrians were more subdued than on sunny days. People just wanted to get where they were going and get out of the rain. No one dawdled or stopped to chat.

She found the café with its simple window lettering and went in. The ornate embossed wall décor seemed out of place in what was essentially a Jewish deli. Lunch-goers packed the long curved counter, and most of the booths. She found an empty seat in the back and waited for service.

After she finished eating, Sophia got up and started for the door. She could see why Donnie recommended the place. It felt like no other New York restaurant or deli she had ever been to. Maybe it was because it was in the theater district and many famous theater people had eaten there. Perhaps it was because of the tourists who also came looking for famous theater people. Everyone checked out everyone else, hoping to get a glimpse of someone famous. She did not pay attention to other people as she walked toward the door but then heard someone say her name.

“Sophia?” She stopped, looked around, tried to make out where the voice came from, and noticed someone she had not seen since she was in high school.

“Gladys? Gladys Pomfrey? Is that really you?”

“Well, I’m Gladys Williams now, but yes, it’s really me. I can’t believe it. It’s been thirty years, at least. Yet you still remember me.”

“I’ve never forgotten you,” Sophia replied, her eyes cast down in embarrassment.

“Won’t you join us?” Gladys gestured for Sophia to sit next to her in the booth. She was sitting across from a young couple.

Gladys Pomfrey had been a gawky teenager the last time Sophia saw her. She had grown into a stately, almost statuesque middle-aged woman who turned heads when she went out. Gladys had short hair and wore rimless eyeglasses, but her Ingrid Bergman-like facial features struck Sophia. That face was one of the reasons Sophia had fallen in love with Gladys that summer at camp.

“Sophia and I spent a summer together as counselors at- what was the funny name of that camp?” Gladys asked.

“Camp Watchahootchie, or Whatsahutchie, or Hoosawatsie; I honestly don’t recall the name,” Sophia replied, looking deeply into her eyes. “But, I remember *you* quite well.”

“That’s very flattering,” Gladys replied, blushing. “Um, these are my children, Andy and Naomi.” Sophia smiled at the children. They didn’t resemble Gladys. Sophia assumed they got their looks from their father, but she didn’t care about looking at them. She wanted to look at Gladys.

“Nice to meet you. So your husband, how is he doing?”

“Oh, he died about a year ago. Andy and Naomi came in from where they live on the West Coast to be with me just to make sure I’m okay.”

“That’s lovely.”

“What about you?” Gladys asked. “Are you by yourself?”

“Yeah. I got divorced a couple of years ago. My husband was a real estate tycoon, or at least he thought he was. Friend of that guy Trump, but they weren’t in business together. Also, he was a piece of crap.”

“Sorry. I guess marriage didn’t agree with you?”

“Well, no. I guess it agreed with you, though. The three of you look like a lovely family.”

“Yes, we were... we are, I mean,” Gladys replied, her voice breaking with a sudden sadness.

“Mom, are you okay?” Naomi asked. Gladys nodded.

“So, you’re still in the city,” Gladys said. “I remember how you loved it so much. You hated being at that camp.”

“Well, not *all* of the city,” Sophia replied, but didn’t offer any details. Then she paused. “I live in Philadelphia now.”

“Really? You know, I’ve never been there. It’s so close, but I never had a reason to go.”

“Well, now you do. Maybe you could visit me. I’ve got plenty of room. That is if you’re free.”

“Oh, I am, Sophia. Bill left me pretty well off. I don’t have to work.”

“Great. Here’s my number at the hotel, and in Philly.”

“Okay. Let me give you mine. How long are you staying?”

“Until late next week.”

“You must come over. The kids are leaving tomorrow. I’d love to talk some more.”

“Great. I will. Why don’t you call me when you’re free? I don’t have any specific plans. I’m just doing touristy stuff.”

Gladys and Sophia had a lot to reminisce about. They had a brief summer of love in 1957 when they were counselors at a summer camp. They slept in the same bunk at night and spent most days together as they supervised their campers. The other counselors were all busy herding campers during the days and having clandestine romantic meetings at night. No one had the time or inclination to look into the offbeat intimacy of two young women passionately in love with each other.

Anita hung the colorful cutout letters that spelled HAPPY NEW YEAR in her long narrow front window. Her Christmas lights framed the window and blinked cheerfully. She prepared snacks, chilled a couple of bottles of wine, and loaded a small borrowed cooler with bottles of beer, cans of soda, and ice. She was only expecting a few people but had invited them to bring others if they wanted to. The weather was good. No rain, snow, or extreme cold were forecast. Anita expected everyone would make it to the party and felt excited.

This would be the first New Year’s Eve she celebrated in a long time. In the past, whenever she was alone, she ignored and mostly slept through New Year’s Eve revels. The few times she was with someone on New Year’s Eve, they went to a party or celebrated in a bar or club, and then went home to bed.

This New Year’s Eve party would be a little different. It was also a housewarming party. Although she had been living in her new (old) apartment for several months, she had not had

time to invite others to see it. Tonight she invited Sophia and Gladys, Allie and Patricia, Zack and David, Krista (who was unlikely to come because she was so far away), and Nadine Frost. She mentioned it to Tony and Sharon but did not expect them to come because of the children.

Anita finished setting out the snacks and arranging borrowed glassware. She double-checked the bathroom to be certain it looked presentable. Her apartment was sparsely but tastefully furnished. A large bed dominated the living space. She had several old rocking chairs she found at thrift stores. A bookshelf held her radio/record player, a few albums, and books. A long sofa took up the wall beneath her window. She had invited people to bring music they might like to share but did not know if anyone would. She had no kitchen table but used the large counter as eating and workspace.

The only people who had seen her apartment were Sophia and Zack. That was because they lived nearby and dropped in to see her, briefly. This would be the first time all her friends would be at her place, and she thought about what that meant. Anita realized that Al, Tony, Sharon, and the kids were her biological relations, but she no longer felt they were her real family. She loved them but loved others, possibly more.

Anita would never have dreamed she would have found herself here, in this apartment, in this life, with these friends, in this world. Long ago, she started alone on her journey of self-discovery when she ran away from home after she graduated from high school. Back then, she gave the future no thought. Anita needed to reconnect with Carol, the girl she fell in love with and could not live without.

That plan went awry almost from the moment she put it into action. Yet she survived, grew, and flourished, but not without episodes of pain and unhappiness. Neither lasted, and that was what she had learned from living for the past twenty years. Nothing lasts.

The people she now helped who watched their loved ones die of AIDS found the statement 'nothing lasts' to be pathetically banal and almost insulting. She never mentioned it to them. They were experiencing that truth for themselves in their guts and did not need cheap philosophical platitudes to soothe their minds. There was no way to relieve the pain of loss and grief and Anita never tried to do that.

She respected their anguish and went within it to touch them and bring them out into their new lives minus the people they lost. She did not know how she did this and took no credit for it. It was, as Allie had told her long ago, just her 'gift.' Anita did not know where that gift came from or who gave it to her. Was it her parents, or the Universe, or God, or just basic compassionate human nature that revealed itself more in her than in others? Anita did not know why she had it but felt fortunate she did. All that mattered to her was helping people. That's what she lived for. Not love, happiness, fulfillment, passion, or companionship. Anita did not willingly sacrifice her life for the benefit of others but she accepted that sacrifice and embraced it. She felt grateful for each day she woke up to help someone. It was all that mattered to her.

The doorbell chimed and she hurried to answer it. Sophia and Gladys stood there, smiling. They stepped into the foyer and immediately hugged Anita. She saw them almost every day at the Sansom Cinema. Gladys had moved down from New York after she visited Sophia and fell in love with the Cinema, video store, Sophia's neighborhood, friends, and her. (She wondered if she had ever fallen out of love with Sophia, despite the past thirty years of her 'normal' marriage and family life. Gladys thought she had loved Bill, but discovered her passion had always belonged to Sophia. They had rekindled that passion and were happily sharing what was, for both, an impossible dream come true.)

Zack and David arrived several minutes later. They, too, had found new happiness together. David's absence had convinced them they belonged together. His return answered a prayer neither of them had ever uttered but both felt in their hearts. Allie and Patricia came later. Patricia was, as usual, busy late into the evening with a case that could not wait for a holiday. She was as devoted to her work as anyone Anita knew but also devoted to Allie. They still lived apart but spent as much time as they could together. It was only a matter of time before one of them gave up her apartment and moved in with the other.

Anita was the only one without someone special, a partner, or a lover. She did not like to think about it. She felt okay not being in a couple. Anita told herself she preferred being alone and never felt lonely. It was enough for her that her extended family members seemed happily mated.

None of her relationships had gone well. Although they all started out promising and had their high points, they all ended. She had learned much about endings and now dealt with endings every day of her life but they belonged to other people. Their endings were all in the present. Her endings were in the past and she liked it that way. Life went on.

Anyway, it was New Year's Eve, time for a party with her best friends. Time to forget the past and celebrate the future. People she had helped would be alone tonight grieving for their loved ones. She had invited a few of them but they probably would not come. It was undoubtedly best for them they were alone with their hurtful memories tonight. The year their loved one died was ending and a new year without that loved one was about to begin. It was one more step on the path to healing.

Tony called around midnight to wish her a happy new year. He told her Al and Theresa had gone to Atlantic City to celebrate the New Year and were likely planning to announce they would marry soon. Anita felt pleased but not surprised. It had been obvious for months they would marry. She forgot about the news as soon as she put down the phone.

Anita said goodbye to her guests, cleaned up the snack plates, washed the glasses, put away the leftover food, and moved the remaining beer to her refrigerator. She sat down in one of her rocking chairs and realized she had not called Krista to wish her a happy new year. Krista probably had already been asleep for hours. Anita did not feel sleepy.

The new year had begun. She was still a couple of years away from forty, but she did not feel as if she was getting old. What she did feel was the passage of time. That was the purpose of New Year's parties, to mark the passage of time. Out with the old, and in with the new. But, what was genuinely new about the new year? AIDS would still be around. People she knew would still die. Others she knew would live on, probably asking why.

As she pondered, she looked further ahead and wondered what the future held. This decade would end in a few years. The century would end a decade later, and a completely new millennium would begin. This was an auspicious time, a time of hope and dreams, a time of ferment and change. Anita wanted to continue to be part of that change. She did not know if her 'gift' as Allie called it would be relevant in the new decade, century, or millennium. Perhaps it was only useful now and would fade when times changed. On the other hand, maybe *she* would change and a new gift or gifts would develop or emerge. All Anita felt certain of was that she wanted to continue growing, maturing, helping, and being needed for the rest of her life.

She recalled Dolores whom she called a few minutes after she arrived in Atlantic City on the day when she ran away just over twenty years ago. Dolores turned out to be her guardian angel. Without her help, Anita would not have survived. She would not have become the person she was today. She recalled how much Dolores had done for her, and wondered if she was

destined to be anyone's guardian angel. If so, she was ready. If anyone called her for help, she was ready. If someone needed protection, care, concern, support, or encouragement, she was ready. Whatever life asked of her, she felt ready to give.

In the early morning of New Year's Day that immature and reckless teenage girl who threw away everything to find what she wanted- love- realized she had finally grown up. *Happy New Year to me, she thought. Maybe it will be happy, or maybe it will be sad. Whatever it is, I'm ready for this year, next year, and all the years yet to come.*

Anita had finally come home, but not to a place. To herself.

The End