

***MOM'S
ENTANGLED
HEART***

By R. A. Conti

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Author's Note, Please read:

This novel contains some sexual content and is intended for adults only.

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

From the Caltech Science Exchange website

Chapter 1

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

Callie didn't know why any of her mother's boyfriends left. Nor did she care. She had no idea what the point was in even having boyfriends. What purpose did they serve? What were they good for? As near as Callie could tell, nothing.

As a bashful, modest twelve-year-old, Callie had yet to develop an interest in boys. Nor (fortunately) had they yet developed any interest in her. She'd overheard the girls at school talking about boys and wondered why they were wasting their time.

Callie was a normal height for her age, slightly plump, with short, straight blonde hair, a round face, and a shy smile. She didn't have her mother's good looks, nor was she even concerned about looking good. That was the other thing that obsessed the girls at school, but Callie liked herself just the way she was.

It was only a matter of time before Allyson would get dressed up, go out, and look for another man. Callie marveled at how easy it was for her mother to find someone to bring home. When Allyson was all dressed up, she wasn't merely attractive; she was gorgeous. She was a petite brunette with an oval face, delicate features, a shapely figure, and a sweet voice. Although she was almost forty, she looked much younger. Men noticed her wherever she went, even when she dressed in frumpy clothes. No man could resist Allyson when she looked her dazzling best.

On Friday night, as Callie waited for her favorite TV shows to begin, Allyson was upstairs getting ready to go out. She put on a clingy red dress with a low collar and a thin silver belt. Then Allyson added dark pantyhose and high heels. Finally, she put on just the right amount of makeup that highlighted her delicate facial features. Allyson's dazzling appearance gave her the self-confidence she rarely displayed when she wasn't on the prowl. She knew how to attract men. Keeping one was another story. She was eager to try again.

Allyson came downstairs. "Don't stay up too late," she told Callie. Then she promenaded out the front door and got into her car. An hour later, Callie went up to her room. She turned on the stereo and began a familiar wait. Usually, it was only a matter of hours before her mother found someone to bring home. Callie wondered if she ought to stay awake to check out the new guy. Then she realized he would likely be around in the morning, and she could meet him then. Eventually, she dropped off to sleep.

Callie awoke on Saturday morning wondering what she would find when she went to eat breakfast. She dressed in old jeans and a t-shirt and then headed gingerly down the steps. When she entered the kitchen, there was someone new sitting at the table, but it wasn't a man. It was a blonde woman. She was wearing the brand new bathrobe Callie bought her mother for her birthday. Allyson stood at the stove. She wore a T-shirt and shorts. Callie wondered what was going on.

"Here she comes," Allyson said brightly. "Good morning, sleepyhead. Joanne, this is my daughter, Callie."

The blonde woman stood up. She was taller than Allyson was and had a willowy figure. When she turned around, Callie saw a bright smile on her face. She thought Joanne was about to hug her and started to pull back, but Joanne didn't. Instead, she reached out and took Callie's hand.

“Your mom’s told me *so* much about you!” Joanne gushed. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you.”

Callie felt overwhelmed. “Uh, thanks,” she mumbled.

“I hope we’ll get to be good friends,” Joanne added.

Callie had no idea why she said that. “Uh, yeah. Um, maybe. I mean, so do I,” she replied, feeling awkward.

“Would you like eggs and bacon?” Allyson asked. Allyson only cooked breakfast when she brought a new man home. Callie normally ate cereal and milk. *What is happening here?* Callie thought. Then it occurred to her she might still be asleep, and this could be a dream.

But it wasn’t.

After breakfast, Callie went back to her room, and the women were alone again. “Your daughter looked a little freaked out,” Joanne commented. “I hope I didn’t frighten her.”

Allyson smiled. She had been doing that a lot since she and Joanne met on Friday night. “She’s almost a teenager. It’s normal for them to look a little freaked out. It’s nineteen-ninety-five, but not much has changed in twenty-five years. Remember what it was like when we were teenagers?”

Joanne nodded and smiled. “Yeah, I do remember.” Then she paused. “I remember a lot *more*, too,” she replied, lewdly.

Allyson blushed. “Stop it! You’re embarrassing me.”

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

Allyson nodded. She knew *exactly* what Joanne was referring to.

Joanne looked her up and down. Allyson felt Joanne’s eyes drinking her in. She liked what that feeling did to her. “So, Allyson,” Joanne said in a sultry voice. “I really love your fluffy new bathrobe, but I’m eager to take it off.”

Allyson smiled. “I thought you’d never ask. Let’s go back to my room.”

On their way upstairs, Allyson wondered why now, of all the times in her adult life, her first lover had come back. True, it seemed an accident when they met in that club last night. *Then, again, Allyson thought, was it an accident? Or was it some kind of fate?*

Chapter 2

Later, as they lounged in bed, Allyson recounted the first time she ever saw Joanne. It had been on the first day of her first year of high school. The enormous lunchroom had been packed. It seemed as if everyone was older than Allyson was, and she felt overwhelmed. She seriously considered returning her lunch to her locker and going without eating. Then she realized that might work for one day, but not for the whole term. Eventually, she would have to find a place to fit in. But, where? All the seats were taken.

She had found a spot next to the wall and stood there feeling awkward. People walking by ignored her. Allyson had been afraid to take out her sandwich. If she started to eat, someone might bump into her (accidentally or deliberately- she wasn’t sure which) and she might drop it. She briefly considered sneaking outside, but the doors were marked Emergency and big signs warned about opening them. Allyson had felt trapped. As she was about to give up, she heard a voice.

“Crazy, huh?” someone behind her said. “Have you ever seen this many people in one place?”

Allyson hadn’t been sure the voice was talking to her. “What?” she asked. She turned. Her eyes fell on a slender torso. She looked upward and saw a round face. The girl was smiling. “Uh, no,” Allyson said. “Not only is there no place to sit, there’s no place safe to stand. I’m afraid to take out my sandwich. I might be lucky to get a bite or two before somebody knocks it out of my hand.”

The girl nodded. “And keeps on going as if you don’t exist. Don’t forget *that* part.”

“Yeah. Say, who are you anyway?”

“Joanne Cooper.”

“Allyson with a ‘y’ Bradley.”

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

Allyson nodded. She felt a great sense of relief. Someone was talking to her. Someone nice! “Yeah. Are you?”

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

Allyson nodded. “It’s worth a try.”

Joanne’s suggestion had worked, and the girls had eaten their sandwiches without incident. Allyson wondered what would happen after lunch. Had she made a friend or was this only a one-time encounter?

“You still remember that,” Joanne said, wistfully. She was sitting up with her back against the soft headboard of the bed. Allyson’s head was in her lap. Joanne was stroking Allyson’s hair.

“Yeah. It changed my life.”

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

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

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

Allyson sighed contentedly. “I wouldn’t have changed a thing, Joanne. I only wished things would have stayed the same.”

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

The girls had quickly become more than lunch partners. They exchanged phone numbers and chatted in the evenings and on weekends. There were occasional opportunities to get together. One of them morphed into a sleepover at Joanne’s house. That night, a new world opened.

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

Joanne frowned as she visualized the large chart in Sex Ed that showed a male sex organ. “No! And I don’t want to.”

“Aren’t you curious about them?”

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

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

“Don’t you think what we have is prettier?”

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

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

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

“Oh, c’mon! I bet it’s lovely.”

“No, Joanne. It’s not.”

Joanne looked into Allyson’s eyes. Allyson was unable to look away. “Let me see it,” Joanne said. The tone of her voice had changed. Allyson didn’t know why, but found she didn’t want to resist.

“What?” she asked, warily.

“Show it to me,” Joanne said, softly. Allyson hesitated. She had never shown it to anyone. “Do I have to pull your pants down?”

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

“Oh, how sweet it looks,” Joanne exclaimed. “Can I touch it?”

“What?” Allyson gasped. “Why?”

“To see if it feels like mine.”

“Of course it does. Why wouldn’t it?”

“Because it’s *yours*, Allyson.”

“But you have your own.”

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

“Well, okay, I guess.”

“You can feel mine if you want to,” Joanne said. Before Allyson could stop her, Joanne took down her panties and exposed herself. Well, that wasn’t exactly true. Allyson was feeling awkward and exposed, but Joanne didn’t seem to feel the same way.

Allyson looked into Joanne’s eyes and saw something different, but couldn’t name it. Joanne reached toward her. She reached toward Joanne. They touched at the same moment. Cupping their hands on each other’s crotch, they pressed gently.

Then Joanne’s finger had entered Allyson, and she gasped. Until then, the only way Allyson had taken anything into her body was through her mouth. Eating had always felt natural. Surprisingly, so did what Joanne was doing. Joanne began slowly rotating her finger inside Allyson. She nearly swooned, and Joanne’s face beamed. For the first time in her young life, Joanne had felt truly happy.

“That was the first time in my life that I ever felt real,” Allyson said.

“Me, too.”

“I only wish it had lasted longer than it did.”

“So do I, Allyson, so do I.”

Chapter 3

That first time had happened almost twenty-five years earlier, and neither woman had thought about it in years. Then, last night, Allyson had gone to a new club with some girlfriends. They’d all squeezed into a booth and ordered drinks. Allyson laughed, drank, and checked out the men in the club. Then a well-dressed woman who walked in alone caught her eye. A moment later, she realized who it was, and long-forgotten feelings had almost overwhelmed her.

The girls’ brief romance had lasted through the school year. Then Joanne’s family had suddenly moved away. Allyson’s mother (who knew nothing about their intimacy)

encouraged her to write to Joanne. She composed a couple of letters but had mailed only one. The others said things she hadn't wanted to risk anyone else ever reading. The letter she did send had only three words in it. 'I miss you.' Allyson knew that was all she needed to write because Joanne would know exactly what they had been doing when they were alone and what they would be missing. But Joanne had never written back, and Allyson never found out why.

Their lives had gone on, separately, until they met and had a reunion at the club. Allyson told her friends about her high school friendship with Joanne. (She hadn't mentioned their romance. She didn't know if Joanne would approve.) Later, when the two women had gone to the Ladies' Room together, Joanne asked why Allyson hadn't told her friends the truth. "They don't seem like prudes," she commented.

"I don't know them very well. They do seem open-minded. But none are... well, you know. At least, not as far as I know."

"You mean like we were?"

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

"Why?"

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

Then Joanne looked into Allyson's eyes, and Allyson recalled that moment when they had touched each other for the first time. She swiftly recalled all the other moments that had followed until Joanne had moved away. "Allyson, I never forgot you. I did think you forgot me."

"You did? Why?"

"You never wrote to me."

"But I did," Allyson protested. "It was only once. I didn't get a reply and thought you were done with me, so I never mailed my other letters."

"Wait! You sent me a letter?" Joanne asked. "I never got it."

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

"No, I'm sorry for hurting your feelings. I was busy adjusting to the new town and school. I planned to write and tell you all about everything. Then when I didn't hear from you, I decided I'd better not because you weren't interested anymore."

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

Joanne frowned. "It's better that you didn't come," she said.

"Why?" Allyson asked. She thought Joanne was implying what she had feared back then. Maybe Joanne had no longer been in love with her and had been done with her when her family departed.

"I don't know how my mother would have reacted," Joanne explained.

"What do you mean?"

"Remember how religious she used to be?" Joanne asked.

"Used to be? Is she gone now?"

“Oh, no. She’s still very much alive but no longer a religious fanatic. Not since what the pastor in that new church did to her.” Joanne paused. Allyson waited for more, but Joanne didn’t explain. “Anyway, I think I know why I never saw your letter.”

Allyson nodded knowingly. “You mean...?”

“Yeah. I think she had figured out we weren’t just sleeping during our sleepovers. Maybe that was why we moved away so suddenly.”

“Oh, my God!” Allyson exclaimed.

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

“I remember. She was so strict! She wouldn’t even let you go out with boys. But I thought we were safe.”

Joanne grinned. “I didn’t really want to go out with boys, anyway. I just said that to annoy her.”

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

“Oh, sure,” Joanne replied. “She’s changed a lot and will be happy I saw you again.”

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

Joanne nodded. “I have three kids and a husband.”

They both became quiet. Neither was certain what should happen next.

“Let’s go back, shall we?” Allyson finally asked. That was all she said, but Joanne knew exactly what she meant. It was not just going back to the table with the other women. It was going back a lot further.

A few moments later, the women were saying goodbye to Allyson’s friends. Then they left the club. In her car, Joanne followed Allyson back to her house. Then they went to her bedroom, where they renewed their passion after a long, long time apart. It almost felt as if they had never been separated.

Chapter 4

Joanne stayed with Allyson all day Saturday and Sunday. After dinner on Sunday night, Callie worried that Joanne might never leave. *Doesn’t she have a home of her own?* she thought.

Allyson and Joanne didn’t seem eager to separate. Perhaps they feared they would again remain apart for years. Neither wanted to risk that.

Callie didn’t know that her mother and Joanne were lovers. She assumed they were sleeping in the same bed because there was nowhere else Joanne could sleep. Allyson had a king-size bed, and the house had no guest room.

As Allyson settled into her reconnection with Joanne, she recalled how simple and beautiful life could be when a person was with someone they genuinely loved and realized she had never felt the same with any man, including her husband. Allyson hadn’t even tried, and the reason was simple. She hadn’t wanted men. All those relationships had failed because she had really wanted Joanne. Now that Joanne was back in her life, all Allyson wanted was to find a way to keep her there.

Around dawn on Monday morning, Joanne got up and went to the bathroom. When she came out, she started dressing. Still in bed, Allyson watched her. She was feeling groggy and very much in love. “You don’t need to get dressed yet,” she said.

Joanne grinned. "I can't leave here naked, Allyson. I might get arrested."

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

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

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

"Yes," Joanne replied. "But that was *twenty-five* years ago, Allyson. Our lives are different now. We're different people."

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

Joanne paused as she was buttoning the jacket of her dark business suit. "Oh, Allyson, sweetie..." She had enjoyed reconnecting with Allyson and recalling their wonderful romance when they were teenage girls. But she was an adult now. She had a husband, two young sons, and a teenage daughter. *It's easier for Allyson*, Joanne thought. *She's not married, and I think her daughter could accept us. I'm not sure my kids could. I'd have to leave Mike, and I don't know what that would do to him. He's been a devoted husband for all these years. Telling him I'm leaving because I met the love of my life again would hurt him deeply.*

She wondered how to explain why she couldn't stay. She still loved Allyson. But what difference did *that* make? Joanne was an adult now. Romantic love wasn't the most important thing in the world anymore. There were *other* things. And people.

Disappointed, Allyson turned over and buried her head beneath the pillow. Joanne finished dressing and left without saying another word. She had been thinking of suggesting they could start an affair. Now she wondered if Allyson could accept that. *Would it be enough for her?* Joanne thought. *Could it make her happy? I'm not sure.*

An hour later, Callie came downstairs and found her mother sitting in the recliner. She was supposed to be getting ready for work. Callie worried something was wrong. The TV was on, but Allyson had muted the sound. Allyson's head was down. Callie thought she heard sobs. "Mom? Mom! What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Allyson raised her head and looked at her daughter. She wondered how she could explain what she was feeling. Allyson didn't want to reveal too much about the relationship that she and Joanne had started when they were not much older than Callie was. She still wanted that relationship but feared that Joanne didn't. She had been sitting there wondering if her life was worth continuing.

Allyson shook her head dejectedly. "No, sweetie. I'm not okay."

"Are you sick? Did you call into work?"

"No. I'm not sick. I'm not sure if I'm going in to work, either."

"What happened?" Callie asked.

"Um, Joanne left."

Yay! Callie thought. She tried not to show her glee on her face. "Why are you sad?" she asked.

“I didn’t want her to leave,” Allyson replied. She didn’t look at her daughter. Wondering how much she ought to say, she paused for a moment and then went on. “In fact, I asked her to move in.”

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

“Because we’re best friends, Callie.”

“So, is she gonna do it?”

Allyson shook her head. “No, Callie. She isn’t. She turned me down.”

“Why, Mom?”

“Because she can’t leave her family,” Allyson replied. Then she paused again. She wondered if she ought to explain more but decided not to. She looked at Callie. “But, we’re still best friends.”

If they are best friends, Callie thought, why hasn’t my mother ever mentioned Joanne before? Callie hadn’t known the woman even existed until she’d seen her wearing her mother’s robe at breakfast on Saturday morning. Now, Allyson seemed obsessed with Joanne. Callie looked at her mother and wondered why she’d changed so dramatically in the past two days.

“I don’t understand, Mom.”

The urge to confess suddenly took hold of Allyson. She felt she owed her daughter the truth. “I know you’re too young to understand this. I’ve loved Joanne since we were not much older than you are.” Unable to grasp what she heard, Callie looked at her mother. Allyson saw the bewildered expression on her daughter’s face. She wondered if she ought to say more. “You can’t predict who you’ll fall in love with,” she added, gloomily. Then she realized she had probably confused Callie even more.

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

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

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

Her accusation shocked Allyson. “Slit my wrists? How do you know about that kind of stuff?”

“Kids talk in school.”

“Oh, right,” Allyson said.

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

Chapter 5

Callie’s best friend, Virginia, was a chubby, klutzy, blonde-haired girl who liked wearing pigtails. She had an oval face and a nose that was slightly too big. Virginia also wore thick glasses and often squinted.

Some of the other girls at school made fun of Virginia. Not because she wore thick glasses and often squinted, but because she refused to dress like a girl her age. Most of her peers had already transitioned from childhood to teenage clothing. In elementary school, they’d worn frilly dresses, fancy shoes, and tops that covered most of their upper body. As they transitioned into middle school, they had traded those clothes for outfits that became

more revealing. But Virginia didn't dress the same way. It wasn't because she was clueless about clothes, but because they were unimportant to her.

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

On Monday, they were eating lunch together. "My little cousin Julia made me watch *The Little Mermaid* tape again Saturday night," Virginia said

Callie didn't reply, and Virginia went on. "I had to babysit her when my parents went out with her parents. I should have known that she would want to watch it again, but I didn't think of it ahead of time."

She paused to take a bite of her sandwich. Callie waited. Virginia swallowed and then smiled. "But, I got her back for making me watch it," she added.

"How?" Callie asked.

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

"How did you find out?"

"I had looked it up in the library one day," Virginia replied. "It's in Hans Christian Andersen's book."

"So, what's the real ending?"

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

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, I told my cousin that."

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

"Yeah."

"What did she do?"

Virginia looked at Callie. "She asked me what death was."

"Did you explain it to her?"

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

"So then what happened?" Callie asked.

"She cried when she went home, and her parents asked what was wrong, and she told them, and now I'm in trouble."

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

"What happened? What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. It's my mom."

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

"She's got a girlfriend."

"So? You and I are girls, and we're friends. Doesn't she have girlfriends, too?"

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

“I don’t get what you mean.”

“My mom told me she’s in love.”

“So?” Virginia asked.

“With this girlfriend.”

“Oh. What’s wrong with that?”

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

“Why?”

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

“If you say so, Callie. I gotta go. Math class. Maybe I’ll see you later.”

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

Luckily, Joanne wasn’t there when she got home after school, and her mother was still at work. (She had gone in late.) Callie breathed a sigh of relief. *Maybe everything’s gone back to normal*, she thought. *Maybe Mom will even come home with a guy tonight.*

Chapter 6

Allyson thought connecting with her long-lost lover would bring the permanent happiness they’d been denied twenty-five years earlier. *We’re adults now*, Allyson thought. *We can do anything we want*. Then Allyson caught herself. *Only, we can’t, really. Because we’re adults now, and our time for making big changes in our lives is over.*

Then another fear struck her. Perhaps they had merely shared a wonderful weekend that would never happen again. *Maybe that was enough for Joanne*, she thought, grimly. She knew it hadn’t been enough for her.

Allyson wasn’t certain which possibility hurt the least. Then she decided to believe that Joanne would want to be with her, and it was only a matter of time before she came back to stay. Since that was the only acceptable outcome, Allyson went with it.

Over the next week, Callie watched as her mother’s behavior slowly changed. In her bedroom, Allyson cleared out half the clothes and other junk in her closet so Joanne would have room for her stuff when she moved in. Then she went through the closet in Callie’s room. To make room for Allyson’s stuff, she threw out many of the toys Callie had saved from when she was little. When Callie complained, Allyson told her, “You’re not a child anymore. You’ve got to take more responsibility for the things in your life.”

Callie tried to control herself. *What about you?* she thought. *You’re not a child anymore, yet you’re not taking responsibility, either. You’re acting crazy.* If she had said aloud what she was thinking, Allyson would have sighed, nodded, and replied, “Yeah, crazy with love.”

The biggest and most unexpected change was that Allyson didn’t bring another man home. Unexpectedly, Callie wished that her mother would find a new man. That was the normal behavior Callie was used to. She hadn’t liked it but had accepted it.

Callie didn't know where her mother's new crazy behavior would end up. *If I tell her she's acting weird, will she even want me around anymore?* Callie asked herself. She had no idea what the answer would be and kept her worries to herself.

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

Another week passed without any word from Joanne. Allyson assumed Joanne wanted to surprise her. *Maybe she'll just show up one day with suitcases and move in,* Allyson thought. Except for work, she didn't go out. She wanted to be home when Joanne arrived. She even sent Callie food shopping. "Here's the credit card. Don't buy anything that's not on the list. We don't have much money, and we have to save it for when Joanne moves in."

Callie briefly thought about packing a bag, stealing the credit card, and running away. But where could she go? Virginia was her only friend. She might welcome Callie, but her mother, Debbie, was weird and likely wouldn't.

Virginia rarely talked about her mother, but Callie knew Debbie annoyed her. Virginia seemed to worry that anything she complained about would somehow get back to her mother, as if she had ears that could hear what Virginia said, no matter how far away she was. Sometimes, Callie wondered if Virginia was actually afraid of her mother, but never asked.

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

What did happen was almost worse. Allyson went around the house humming or singing all the time. She mostly ignored Callie except when she needed her to do something. Callie felt she was no longer real to her mother and felt pretty sure her mother had lost it. She even began wondering if Allyson had paid the bills.

One night, when Allyson was already asleep, Callie crept downstairs. She opened the desk drawer and found her mother's mail and checkbook. There were no recent statements, and Callie found check stubs that showed that the latest rent, electricity, and cable bills had been paid.

She also found a few old envelopes with no addresses on the front.

Callie opened one of the envelopes and read the letter inside. Allyson had written it to Joanne after she moved away. Callie blushed at Allyson's florid language and wondered what it really meant. She would never have used the same words to describe her friendship with Virginia, no matter how close they ever became. In another letter, Allyson wrote words that described things Callie could never have imagined. That was when Callie finally understood her mother was possessed by something Callie didn't know if she could ever accept. She

began to fear that her mother was drowning. Then she wondered if she might go down with her. Callie put the letters back and went to her room, but couldn't sleep.

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

Allyson looked at Callie and smiled. "Everything *is* okay, Callie. It's more than okay." Callie poured a glass of milk, grabbed two cookies, and headed out of the kitchen.

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

"She asked how I was doing," Allyson went on. Callie didn't react. "I was honest with her." Callie felt uncomfortable with what her mother was saying and started walking away. "I told her I was a mess."

Callie stopped and took a bite of a cookie. As she chewed, she savored the chocolate chip sweetness. It almost compensated for her mother's weirdness during the past three weeks. Then she swallowed and took a sip of milk. "*I am, aren't I, Callie?*" *Is she really asking me? Or, is she just thinking out loud?* Callie didn't know how to respond and didn't say anything.

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

Callie took her milk and cookies to her room and finished eating there. She didn't see her mother again until dinner. Allyson didn't say anything else about Joanne. Before she put the leftovers away, she asked if Callie wanted more mac and cheese. Callie shook her head, and that was the end of their meal together.

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

Chapter 7

Callie didn't expect Wednesday's lunch period to be any different from most other lunch periods so far. She and Virginia would meet. They would look around, but everyone else in their grade would snub them when they tried to find seats. Eventually, someone would get up, and the girls would sit down. Then they would hurry to finish eating before the bell rang, and they had to get to their next class. This time, something different happened. It was a small change, but a pleasant one. They found two seats right away and were able to relax, eat, and talk.

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

Callie finished chewing a bite of her peanut butter and jelly sandwich. "That's nice," she replied.

Virginia frowned. "Not really."

"Why not?"

"They're making me go with them."

“Sounds like it could be fun,” Callie commented.

Virginia shook her head. “It won’t be. They’ll leave me in the motel room while they go off and visit their old friends who don’t like kids or don’t like me, I’ve never been sure which.”

“So, you don’t wanna go?”

“No. They say I can stay with my grandma...” Virginia’s voice trailed off.

“Oh, that sounds nice, too.”

“It’s not. She’s old and weird. She complains about her aches and pains whenever I see her.” Virginia rolled her eyes. “Like I’m supposed to care. And she makes me do stuff for her.”

Callie frowned. “I guess that doesn’t sound like much fun.”

“Well, there’s one other thing I could do, but I’m gonna need your help.”

“What is it?” Callie asked.

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

“I think that would be great, but I’d have to ask my mom.”

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

“I’ll try,” Callie replied. “It depends on the mood she’s in.”

Virginia rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I know the problem. But, thanks. I hope she says yes.”

“So do I,” Callie replied.

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

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

“Oh, you’re home!” Allyson greeted the girls when they walked in. “Look who’s here!” Callie didn’t respond. Allyson grinned. “You remember my mute daughter, Joanne?”

Joanne smiled at the girls. “Of course. Hi, Callie.”

“Um, hi. This is my friend, Virginia.”

“Nice to meet you, Virginia.”

The girls are having a weekend sleepover. Aren’t you, girls?” Allyson said cheerfully.

“How nice,” Joanne exclaimed.

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

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

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

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

“How about a snack?”

“Awesome.”

Callie wanted to remain downstairs for as long as possible so they wouldn’t overhear strange noises coming from her mother’s bedroom. She didn’t know how she would explain the noises to Virginia. She only heard them when her mother wasn’t alone in her bedroom. Callie had never figured out what they meant.

At dinnertime, they ordered a pizza and then watched Callie’s favorite Friday night shows. Virginia had never seen *Family Matters*, *Full House*, and *Boy Meets World*. During the commercials, the girls chatted and giggled. While the shows were on, they nibbled pizza and forgot about the adults upstairs.

Callie hoped all would be quiet when they went to her bedroom, but then had a better idea. “Why don’t we sleep downstairs?” she said. “It’ll be more fun.” Virginia agreed enthusiastically.

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

Chapter 8

On Saturday morning, Virginia awoke before Callie. The house was quiet. It was light out, but she didn’t know what time it was. She tiptoed to the small powder room next to the closet in the entrance hall. Then she returned to the sofa and wondered if she could fall back to sleep.

Peaceful silence was not something Virginia was used to. Nor was she used to relaxing. At home, there were always adults around to boss her. In fairness, her father never said much to her, but her mother nagged her every waking moment. Sometimes, Virginia even felt her mother nagging her in her dreams.

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

“Don’t you have a Barbie?” Aunt Margaret had asked.

“She doesn’t need a Barbie,” Debbie (Virginia’s mom and Margaret’s older sister) had replied.

“Every girl should have a Barbie,” Margaret countered defiantly.

She bought Virginia a doll and several outfits for her next birthday. Virginia knew what the gifts were before she opened them and felt thrilled. Debbie wasn't happy with her sister or daughter. Virginia noticed her mother's reaction and suppressed her enthusiasm.

Now, Barbie sat on a shelf next to the outfits. Virginia had never taken them out of the packages, even when she was alone at bedtime. She felt afraid her mother would discover she had opened them and punish her. She might even take the Barbie away from her, and she wouldn't be able to tell Aunt Margaret what happened. Whenever she asked Virginia if she was enjoying the Barbie, Virginia lied and said that she was. Debbie smiled as her daughter lied. *Apparently, lying is okay*, Virginia learned, *but playing is not*. It had been a painful lesson.

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

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

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

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

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

"Sometimes early, sometimes later. It depends on whether she went out on Friday night and what time she came home. Sometimes she has to work."

"You mean she leaves you alone all day on Saturday?"

"Sure. Sometimes. Doesn't your mom?" Callie asked.

"She wouldn't dream of it. She plans every minute."

"Mom says Saturdays are for relaxing."

"My mom never relaxes," Virginia replied. "I don't think she knows the meaning of the word."

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

"That would be awesome!"

Allyson came downstairs just before noon. She greeted the girls and asked if they'd eaten. Not waiting for their answer, she headed to the kitchen. Callie wondered where Joanne was. *Maybe she left during the night*, she thought. *But, probably not.*

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

"Um, we're not hungry. We stuffed ourselves with cereal."

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

“Um, is Joanne still here?” Callie asked. She already suspected the answer.

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

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

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

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

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

“We weren’t planning to go anywhere.”

“Great! Well, see you later,” Allyson said. She hefted the tray and marched out of the kitchen. Then she headed up the stairs like a woman on a mission. Wow! Callie thought.

That’s a lot of food. They must have really worn themselves out talking last night.

“Is your mom okay?” Virginia asked.

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

“And leaves you all alone?”

“I don’t mind.” Callie didn’t say any more. She didn’t want to explain that her mother sometimes didn’t come home alone on Friday nights. When she spent Saturdays in her bedroom, someone else might be there with her. Until now, her companions had only been men.

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

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

“Some are. My mom has a few. Why?”

“Got any good ones?”

“They’re all good,” Callie replied.

“Can I look at them?”

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

“These sound great. Can we watch them?”

“All of them?”

“Yes, please?” Virginia asked.

“You haven’t seen them?”

“No, but I’ve heard about them.”

“Don’t you have them?” Callie asked.

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

“They’re all great. I love them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You mean you’re allowed to have pizza two days in a row?” Virginia asked, astonished.

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

“She throws it away,” Virginia replied.

“Throwing away pizza should be against the law!” Callie replied.

“I know, right!?”

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

“Yeah, Mom,” Callie replied.

“I could eat,” Virginia said.

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

“What about dessert?” Callie asked.

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

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

A half hour later, Allyson called the girls to the table. They found it spread with more food than Callie had seen in a while, even on Thanksgiving or Christmas. After everyone had sat, they passed the food around and filled their plates. Virginia only took some salad.

“What’s wrong, Virginia? Don’t you like spaghetti and meatballs?” Callie asked.

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

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

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

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

Everyone ate relaxed and at ease. Virginia ate her salad. The feeling at the table was new to her. They chatted and chewed and enjoyed their time together. There was no

bickering, nagging, or tense silence, just camaraderie. As soon as she finished her salad, Virginia asked for the spaghetti bowl. She piled a heap of spaghetti and took one meatball. Then she asked for the cheese and piled it freely atop her food. Everyone smiled. They were having fun.

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

“Yes, ma’am, if that’s okay.”

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

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

“Okay.”

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

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

Chapter 9

On Saturday night, the girls slept in Callie’s bedroom. No noises came from Allyson’s room. Virginia awoke early Sunday morning and started getting dressed. Callie awoke and wondered what she was doing. “Oh, you’re awake,” Virginia said. “What time is church?”

“Church?” Callie asked sleepily.

“Yeah. Doesn’t your mom make you go?”

“Uh, no. She’s never mentioned it. Why?”

“My parents take me every Sunday,” Virginia said.

“Why?” Callie asked, feeling confused.

“They say it’s good for me.”

“Is it?”

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

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

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

Callie grinned. “So, is church interesting?” she asked, ironically.

“It’s so boring that sometimes I want to fall asleep. That’s why I look around. I don’t know what my mother would do if I *did* fall asleep.”

“You don’t like your mother very much, do you?” Callie asked. Virginia didn’t reply. She feared that if she said aloud what she felt, her mother (no matter how far away she was) would somehow hear her. Callie didn’t ask again.

Allyson and the girls took Joanne on a tour of the neighborhood to give her a glimpse into their lives. The first place they went was Allyson’s workplace. She worked in a small company called HelpTech that provided computer support for local businesses.

Allyson was just the receptionist, but her job was one of the most important in the company. Sometimes she fielded hysterical calls from distraught customers who had serious computer problems that threatened to doom their businesses. Everything had to be taken care of *immediately*. It was Allyson’s job to field their hysterical calls and route them to the proper technicians. Since she was the first person clients spoke with, she sometimes had to endure their anger and frustration. Somehow, she never became flustered. Always responding soothingly, she calmed anxious customers. Her ‘bedside manner’ was essential to the company’s services, but she didn’t make much money. Nobody who worked there did.

“So, do you fix the computers?” Joanne asked.

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

“Do you want to learn?”

Allyson shook her head. “Not really. I’m too old. Most of the repair people are young hotshots who don’t seem much older than Callie or Virginia. They only stay a couple of years to get some experience, but the company keeps going. Sara, the woman who runs it, is pretty savvy. She lives for her work and has no personal life. I think she works almost 24-7-365. She has no husband or kids, doesn’t take vacations, and often looks tired when she comes in on Monday mornings because she’s been busy all weekend with some client or other. I like her and she’s been good to me, but I feel sorry for her, y’know?”

“Some people use their jobs to hide unhappiness in their lives,” Joanne replied. She didn’t add anything. Allyson wondered if there was more she could say. She also wondered if Joanne was speaking from experience.

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

Neither girl planned to attend college. Allyson had mixed feelings about Callie going to college. On the one hand, she thought Callie was smart enough to benefit from a college education. But Allyson also knew she barely made enough to support them and might not be able to pay college tuition. She tried not to worry because college was still several years in Callie’s future.

Lunch was her immediate concern. Everyone was feeling hungry. There was a diner in a strip mall near where Allyson worked, and she thought it would be a fun place to take them. The people who worked there knew her because she came in regularly. They would likely make a fuss over her and welcome her daughter and friends. Also, they might not make her pay the entire bill all at once. She hoped they’d allow her to pay it off over the next few weeks.

It was worth a try.

The strip mall also held a liquor store, a thrift store, a video store, and a dry cleaner. One empty storefront had been a beauty shop that had gone out of business. Allyson found a parking place, and they piled out of the car.

Nathan's Diner had existed for over sixty years. It had started as a real old-fashioned rail-car diner in the late nineteen-twenties and survived through the Great Depression. Then it flourished during World War II and into the 1950s and '60s. An arsonist torched it in the early Seventies. Ben Nathan died trying to fight the fire. His son Sam vowed to keep the name alive by opening another diner nearby.

Allyson walked in, hoping she could pull off her time-payment idea. She had a credit card but only used it for necessities. *I might have to splurge this once*, she thought. Sam spotted her from the kitchen. Still holding his favorite spatula, he came through the swinging doors smiling. "Hello! What a surprise! I've never seen you in here on a weekend."

Sam was not a stereotypical cook. Most of them had a big belly covered by a white t-shirt and a huge greasy apron. He was tall, skinny, dark-haired, and often whistled while he worked. Repeat customers joked that he was too cheap to install Muzak or buy a radio.

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

Allyson smiled when Sam greeted her. "Don't you ever take a day off?" she asked. "What for? To sit home and be bored? Nah."

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

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

Bonnie was the only waitress at Nathan's Diner. She looked as if she was the oldest waitress on earth. She had stopped liking taking customers' food orders some time back in the early 1970s. Sam kept her around because his father had hired her in 1956. He knew Bonnie had nowhere else to go and nothing to do and would likely die if she ever retired, so he refused to let her. Sometimes she complained about being exhausted after a busy day and threatened to quit. Sam told her that she'd better show up for work or he'd have to close the place. Bonnie always came back. He sometimes wondered if she would outlast him. *Maybe this place'll be called Bonnie's someday*, he thought. *Dad would love it!*

Bonnie was a short, skinny woman with a gaunt face, a toothy smile, a scratchy voice, and delicate hands that people noticed as she served their platters. There was a rumor that Sam's father and Bonnie once had a thing going, but none of the regular customers knew if it was true, and no one dared ask Bonnie. They had seen her become angry when some customers complained about the food. She had refused to listen to the customers' complaints and defended Sam vigorously. "If you don't want it, then don't eat it! It's no skin off my butt. Go hungry. I don't care," she yelled. The chastened customers always ate the food. A few apologized to Bonnie or left her big tips. She didn't care about the tips. She cared about Sam and the diner. It was her world, and she allowed no one to criticize it.

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

“Sure it is,” Bonnie squawked, drolly. She pointed to the big menu board that hung over the counter. “You ladies see what you want?” she asked. Everyone looked up at the board. Bonnie waited. “Um, ladies? I ain’t got all day.”

They asked for sandwiches, burgers, fries, Cokes, and one milkshake. That was for Virginia. She had always wanted to try one, but her parents had always refused. Bonnie wrote down everything and hurried away. “She never slows down,” Allyson whispered. “I’ve never come in here when she wasn’t around. I don’t even think she goes to the bathroom.”

“Eew!” the girls said, giggling. Joanne smiled.

Their food arrived quickly. As everyone ate, they chatted and enjoyed being away from their daily lives in a place that felt as if it belonged to another time. Allyson hadn’t eaten there before. She mainly came in to pick up takeout food for the people at work. Sam saw her come in so often that he began adding a free sandwich to her order. Bonnie never found out.

After they finished eating, Bonnie came back and asked if they wanted any dessert. She was ready to launch into the dessert specials, but Allyson couldn’t afford to spend any more money and interrupted her. “Can we just have our bill, please?”

Bonnie frowned and shook her head slowly. “No can do,” she replied.

Allyson was surprised. “What do you mean?”

“Just what I said, dearie.”

“What happened to it?” Allyson asked.

“Sam took it and tore it up.”

“He *what*? Well, can you write another one?”

Bonnie turned away. “Sam! Lady out here’s givin’ me trouble.”

“She *what*?” Sam bellowed from the kitchen. A moment later, he hurried through the double doors. After seeing where Bonnie stood, he walked slowly to the table. “What seems to be the problem here?” he asked in his most serious diner-owner voice.

“This lady is demanding her bill.”

Sam looked at Bonnie. “Tell the nice lady there is no bill.”

“I already did. She insists.”

Sam looked at the women and girls. He wasn’t smiling. “If you ladies are done, you should leave. I got people waiting for your booth.” There were hardly any other customers there. It was an unusually quiet Sunday.

Allyson looked at Joanne and then at the girls. “Well, are we finished?” she asked. Everyone nodded. She slipped a tip for Bonnie under her plate and then stood up. The others followed. Sam stood by the table. As Bonnie watched the little drama, she thought of Sam’s father. *He’s his old man*, she thought.

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

“For what?” Sam replied.

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

“You have a nice day,” Allyson said.

“You, too,” Bonnie replied, softly.

“He likes you,” Joanne commented as they walked toward the video store. The girls were already at the entrance.

“He likes everybody. So does she.”

Joanne grinned. “Yeah. If you say so.”

“You girls can pick three,” Allyson said inside the video store. Callie and Virginia headed toward the children’s section. Allyson and Joanne stood by the door.

“This one’s smaller than the one I go to,” Joanne commented.

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

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

“I know.”

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

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

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

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

“Okay, then,” Allyson replied. She turned the key to start the car. “Movies and a nap coming right up!”

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

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

“I’m wonderful. Why do you ask?”

“You’re up kinda early.”

“Yeah. I wanted to see Joanne off.”

“Oh, she already left?” Callie asked.

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

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

Allyson smiled and nodded. “No, she didn’t, did she?”

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

Allyson looked away from the girls and sighed. “I’m glad you do, Callie. I kind of like her, too.”

Chapter 10

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

“What do you mean?”

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

“Oh, yeah.” Callie thought of a quick explanation. “Well, old people work all the time, so they need lots of sleep.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Why not?”

“Not after your dad-. Oops! Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Callie replied. “I don’t think about him anymore. I figured out he wasn’t coming back a while ago.”

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

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

Rules sucked.

She found her mother in the living room when she got home after school.

“Mom, you’re home early! What’s wrong?”

“My boss told me to go home.”

“He did? Why?” Callie asked.

“He was worried about me.”

“What did you do?”

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

“So, why couldn’t you stay sharp?”

“I felt really tired.”

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

Allyson didn’t know how to explain to her innocent daughter what the women had really been doing in bed all weekend. They had a lot of catching up to do and still yearned for

each other when they had parted on Monday morning. A persistent tingling feeling (the result of all their lovemaking), plus a lack of sleep, had affected Allyson's work, and she had been unable to concentrate. When she tried to force herself to pay attention, fatigue clouded her mind. Allyson felt relieved when her supervisor believed her lie about not feeling well and sent her home. He had even offered to drive her. Allyson told him she would be okay, but he made her promise to call him when she got home.

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

It never occurred to Allyson that Joanne would appear in her dream, but that's what happened. Luckily, it was a pleasant dream and she awoke from her nap feeling happy and refreshed. She also felt more in love than ever. *Joanne has to come back to me, she thought. I'll go crazy if she doesn't.*

Despite the pleasant weekend sleepover with Virginia and Joanne, Callie was still worried that her mother had gone crazy and didn't know if she could do anything about it. She brooded over the changes that had come over Allyson but didn't mention her worries to Virginia. At dinner the next day, Callie felt she had to ask her mother to be honest with her.

"Mom, you and Joanne are girlfriends, right?"

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

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

Allyson put down her fork and looked at her daughter. "Oh, Callie. Is that what you're thinking? No. It doesn't work like that. Lots of women- *most*, probably- have girlfriends that never become... um."

"Become *what*, Mom?" Callie asked guardedly. She wanted to know what 'more' meant. But did she, really? Maybe it would be better not to find out.

Allyson decided to be frank. "Joanne and I are more than just girlfriends, Callie. Do you know what that means?"

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

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

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

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

Callie stiffened her shoulders. "I'll feel that way my *whole* life!"

"Honey, people get lonely. People need love. It happens."

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

Her comment surprised Allyson. "Honey, my life will *always* include you. That will never change. Lots of other things might, but not that."

“If you say so,” Callie replied. She didn’t doubt that her mother was being sincere at that moment. But Allyson had already changed so much since Joanne showed up that Callie wondered if she couldn’t change even more. Maybe she would eventually forget about Callie and their life together. *Then what’ll happen to me?* Callie asked herself. She couldn’t begin to guess and pushed the thought out of her mind. It was too scary.

Chapter 11

A month later, Joanne told her family she was going away on a business trip that would last an entire week. She kissed everyone goodbye and left, but didn’t go to work. Nor did she go very far away. Joanne went to spend the week with Allyson.

“How is it that your husband never tries to contact you when you’re away?” Allyson asked when they were alone in her bedroom, not long after Joanne had arrived and settled in.

“I don’t tell him where I’m going.”

“Not even where you’re staying?”

“That’s right,” Joanne replied.

“Why not?”

“I’m not allowed to. The work I do is very hush-hush.”

“Well, what is it, anyway?” Allyson asked.

Joanne smiled. “I can’t even tell you. Sorry.”

“Oh, okay. Well, I’m glad you’re here. Are you really here for the whole week?”

“Yep. Sunday to Sunday, if that’s okay.”

Allyson sighed contentedly. “That will be heavenly, Joanne.”

“What about your daughter?”

“What about her?”

“Is she okay with this?”

“Well, I’m not sure,” Allyson admitted. “But I have been honest about our relationship.”

“I don’t want her to feel neglected.”

Allyson felt grateful for Joanne’s concern. “Neither do I, and I won’t let that happen.”

“You’re a great mom. Now, where shall we start?”

Allyson didn’t reply immediately. Instead, she reflected on Joanne’s concern for Callie. “I had planned to start undressing you, but now I think we should wait.”

“Oh? Why?” Joanne asked.

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

“I love that idea, Allyson. I promise to keep my hands off you.”

“You better. I don’t want to shock Callie. She’s already freaked out by this.”

“Should I talk to her?” Joanne asked.

“No. We’ve already talked. What I think you and I need to do is make what we’re doing seem normal. We should include her and not just stay behind a closed bedroom door all the time.”

Joanne nodded approvingly. Allyson looked at her lover. “It must be hard for you to be away from your kids for a week.”

Joanne shrugged. “Oh, they’re used to it. So am I. So is Mike.”

“You never told me much about him,” Allyson commented.

“There isn’t much to tell.”

“Do you love him?”

“I did- a long time ago,” Joanne replied.

“Do you and he still... You know?” Allyson wasn’t sure why she had asked, but it seemed important. She had been sleeping with men until she and Joanne reconnected.

Joanne nodded. “Yes, of course. I owe him that.”

“Do you like it?” Allyson asked.

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

Allyson smiled. “Yeah. I know.”

Her comment surprised Joanne. “Was it that way for you, too?” she asked.

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

“I was lucky that way. I gave him what he wanted, and he’s given me a good life,” Joanne replied and then paused to look at Allyson again. “But he couldn’t give me what I needed.”

“And what was that?” Allyson teased. She hoped she already knew the answer.

Joanne grinned. “You have to ask?”

“Well, yeah.”

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

“Same here, but I guess I didn’t know it. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Let’s just be happy we hooked up again.”

Allyson nodded. “Oh, I am. I really am.”

“Yeah, me, too,” Joanne said. She leaned in for a kiss

Allyson pulled back. “Don’t even think of kissing me right now, or we’ll never leave this room tonight. Let’s continue this later.”

“But not too much later. I’ve been waiting a whole month. Longest month of my life.”

“I’ll make it worth the wait.”

“I know you will. That’s why I agreed to spend the evening with your daughter. I want to get to know her better. I’m hoping to become part of her life.” Allyson had never expected Joanne would say something like that and nearly swooned. *Does she mean it?* she wondered.

Joanne knew that she meant it.

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

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

In the kitchen, Allyson got out the popcorn and air popper. “Can I suggest a movie?” Joanne asked.

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

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

“Never heard of it. Is it new?”

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

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

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

“Do you want to tell me about it?” Allyson asked.

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

“It’s okay for Callie to watch?”

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

Allyson grinned.

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

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

“What’s that?”

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

“I guess so.”

They all cried at the end because the story got to them. Callie identified with Victoria, the daughter who lost her mother, Hillary. Joanne identified with Hillary. She was a lawyer doing good work that she (Joanne) admired and wished she could do. Joanne didn’t hate her job, but she didn’t feel it improved the lives of ordinary people. All she did was improve the bottom lines of corporate executives and shareholders. They paid her well but left her hungry for meaning in her life. Now that she had found Allyson again, Joanne hoped she would provide the meaning she craved.

Allyson identified with C.C., but not because she wanted to be a famous singer or famous anything. It was because C.C. followed her dream and became who she was meant to be. Allyson never had the opportunity to find out who she was meant to be. Her early life hadn’t allowed that kind of exploration.

“That was a good movie. I might want to watch it again,” Allyson told Joanne when they went back to the bedroom later. Although Callie had cried, she hadn’t said anything after the movie ended. Allyson didn’t know if her daughter had liked *Beaches* or hated it. It was possibly the first adult movie Callie had ever watched. *It might take her a while to process it*, Allyson thought. *I hope she talks about it with me. Maybe we’ll even watch it again after Joanne leaves.*

For now, Allyson didn’t want to think about Joanne leaving. They had seven nights of love ahead, and she wanted to make every one of them special. Allyson didn’t know what Joanne was planning to do during the daytime when she was at work. Maybe she would just

relax, work from home, or sleep. Allyson thought she might ask for some days off if the week didn't seem too busy.

The next morning, Allyson kissed Joanne goodbye (she was still in bed but not asleep). As she drove to work, she decided to do whatever she could to keep the week from becoming busy. She didn't know exactly how she would do that, but it was worth a try. Being away from Joanne was going to be hard.

"My mom's friend came back yesterday," Callie told Virginia at lunch on Monday.

"You mean that weird lady?"

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

Virginia nodded. "Actually, I did. But I guess I thought both she and your mom were acting weird that whole weekend."

"Adults always act weird," Callie joked. "Haven't you figured that out yet?" She didn't want to explain what she suspected her mother and Joanne did while they were alone in the bedroom. Callie had begun to think it resembled what her mother and men did when they were alone, but wasn't certain what that was, either. But she could maybe guess, and it made her feel funny.

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

Callie rolled her eyes. "Don't wrack your brains, Virginia. They're not worth it."

Virginia grinned. She liked that she and Callie could talk like this. Her parents never talked to her. Worse, they never listened to her, either. Sometimes she wondered why they even had her. "Yeah. They're not, are they?" Virginia said.

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

Chapter 12

Joanne didn't recall much about the first time she and Allyson had discovered how wonderful they could make each other feel. She did remember how much what happened *after* that discovery mattered to them. Back in high school, the girls had given themselves to each other repeatedly and never tired of the passion that infused their young lives with elemental rapture. Joanne had never been as happy as she'd been during that year before her family moved away. She felt certain Allyson felt the same way and felt devastated when Allyson never wrote to her after she was gone.

As Joanne drove home on the next Sunday night, she wondered if she could ever wipe the smile off her face or lose the glow she felt throughout her body because of the wonderful week she just spent with her long-lost lover. After she pulled the car into the garage and started to get out, she reminded herself that bliss was waiting for her whenever she wanted it. If the smile ever faded or the glow ever waned, she could spend more time with Allyson. That wasn't an assumption on her part. On Saturday night, Allyson had told Joanne that she would always be waiting, ready, and eager for her to return.

“If you wanted to, you could move in,” Allyson had said.

Joanne wasn’t certain she could go *that* far. It wasn’t because she didn’t love Allyson and didn’t want to live with her. It was because she didn’t know what leaving home would do to her children. Hers had always been a tight family. Whenever she wasn’t away at work, she devoted herself to her three children: Molly, Jake, and Sam.

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

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

Joanne never knew how her husband Mike felt about her long absences. He had always respected her need for professional secrecy. Sometimes he joked that she was really a secret agent. ‘Jane Bond,’ he called her. But, joking aside, Mike suspected her real job was likely intense, demanding, and tedious because Joanne often returned home exhausted and sometimes took off a few days before she returned to the headquarters office.

Mike plodded along in his job at the bank and in his daily life and was happy with the routine. He never worked overtime or on weekends and was always home at dinnertime. Mike enjoyed helping the children with their homework. Mike also did other things with them when their mother was away, but knew he couldn’t replace Joanne and didn’t try. He also knew he wanted to be a strong father figure and felt he was succeeding. Molly, Jake, and Sam’s father had always been there for them, even if their mother hadn’t.

There was rarely any tension between Joanne and Mike. She made enough money from her secret job that Mike never wanted for anything. If he wanted to buy something new for himself or take up a hobby, Joanne encouraged him. If he wanted to take the kids on a day trip, Joanne always agreed. She never said, ‘We can’t afford it,’ although Mike always asked, just to let Joanne know what he was thinking.

She felt grateful for his commitment to maintaining the family’s stability and normalcy. Mike appreciated her generosity and never complained. But the subject he would have liked to discuss never came up. Or, more accurately, he’d never had the courage to bring it up. He felt that if he started *that* conversation, it might end with Joanne leaving on a secret business trip and never coming back. Mike got used to suppressing his own emotional needs to ensure that his children’s needs were being met.

What bothered Mike was that when he and Joanne were alone, he never felt she was fully there with him. He wondered if he was still the love of her life, the way she was still the love of his. Mike knew Joanne loved their children. He just didn’t know if Joanne loved him and was afraid to ask because he feared the answer he might receive.

Instead, he took her willingly when she gave herself to him. Often, she initiated sex after she returned from a long assignment. Mike never knew if she did it because she wanted him or because she knew he needed it. Sometimes, he suspected she just wanted to make sure he didn't find someone else to be with when she went away. The sex always worked, and Joanne thanked him afterward. She never said that she had missed him, although she knew he had missed her. A lot.

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

The first night they were alone after her most recent business trip, Mike noticed Joanne's unresponsiveness as they were making love and wondered if something was on her mind. *Maybe this trip was harder than most*, he thought. Afterward, he tried to get her to talk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joanne secretly liked her job now more than ever because it allowed her the freedom to be with Allyson whenever she wanted. She also knew Allyson wanted more than occasional visits, but Joanne couldn't give her any more. They would have to content themselves with an affair, at least for now. *Maybe when the kids are grown and out of the house*, Joanne thought. *Maybe then we can live together. In our old age.*

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

It was also what she dreamed about.

As she dreamed, she said Allyson's name aloud several times. Mike happened to be awake and heard Joanne speak. He assumed Allyson was the name of a client, but Joanne's tone of voice made him wonder if Allyson was someone special in her life she'd never mentioned. Someone she had strong feelings for; feelings (he worried) that she didn't seem to have for him. Mike felt a little pang of jealousy but dismissed it as absurd.

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

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

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

Joanne shook her head. "No. I have no idea what happened to her." She lied without giving it a second thought.

"That's a shame."

"Well, it was a long time ago, Mike. She's probably forgotten all about me. I forgot about her until that dream." More lies, but what else could she do?

"Yeah," Mike replied. "Dreams are funny that way."

Joanne didn't ask him to explain. She wasn't interested in discussing dreams, anyway. All she could think about was the tingling feeling the dream had left behind. It was almost as wonderful as the real feelings Allyson gave her when they were together. She forbade herself from fantasizing about getting together another time and forced herself to go to work and concentrate on what she was supposed to be doing.

It wasn't easy.

Chapter 13

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

Neither girl was an exemplary student. Both just got passing grades. Allyson never paid much attention to Callie's report card. As long as Callie didn't get into trouble at school, her mother was happy.

However, Virginia's mother, Debbie, scolded her daughter because of her inadequate grades. She claimed Virginia was smart and ought to do better. But that wasn't the real reason Debbie complained. She genuinely believed she was better and smarter than other parents were and expected her daughter to reflect her superiority by getting higher grades.

The thing was, Virginia was smarter than most of the other pupils in the school. But she was also lazy. Learning didn't matter to her. Facts, details, timelines, exercises, problems,

tests, and all the other activities that filled middle school classes bored her. School wasn't worth her attention or effort. She just put in the time and went home.

To punish Virginia for her laziness, Debbie insisted that she attend summer school. Virginia should have been angry but was thrilled. She had been looking forward to a summer stuck in the house alone while her parents were at work all day. She told Callie, who immediately decided she would also attend summer school.

Spending that weekend at Callie's house with Callie's mother and her strange friend had changed Virginia's view of life. It wasn't that she'd learned anything new, but she did begin to wonder if there was more about life that she needed to learn. *Who is Callie's mother's friend?* she thought. *Why did they spend so much time alone in the bedroom? And why did they seem so happy?* Why did being with them make her feel different? And why did feeling different feel so nice?

They were eating lunch at school. Virginia began to speak. "Your mom's friend-."

"You mean Joanne?" Callie interrupted her.

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

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

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

"I guess so," Callie replied.

"And they were girlfriends like we are?"

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

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

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

Virginia's eyes widened in surprise. "Did she ever do that?"

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

"What do you mean?" Virginia asked.

"Well, I used to hear noises."

"What kind of noises?"

"I can't describe them," Callie replied. "I just turned on some music."

"You never told me all this before."

"What's to tell? Isn't your mom just as weird as mine?"

Virginia nodded. She didn't like thinking about her mother if she didn't have to, especially when she was away from home, where her mother always seemed to be on her about something. That was the only good thing about school; her mother wasn't there. "Well, she's weird, that's for sure," Virginia replied. "But it's only ever her and my dad in the bedroom."

"Oh, yeah, well, you still have a dad. I don't."

"What happened to him?" Virginia asked. She hoped her asking wouldn't annoy Callie.

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

“Parents are weird,” Virginia said. Then she paused as if a new thought was just occurring to her. “Y’know, I guess all adults are.”

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

“Well, I agree with you. But don’t you think the other kids think *we’re* weird?”

Callie shrugged. “I don’t care what they think.”

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

“*Are we weird?*” Callie asked.

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

Callie nodded. “You’re right. We’re weird girls!”

Virginia looked at her best friend, who was her only friend. “I wish you were my sister,” she said. “Then we could be together all the time.”

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

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

Callie was surprised. “You think so?”

“Don’t you?”

“Sometimes I’m not sure.”

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

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

“Yeah!”

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

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

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

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

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

“I guess it has something to do with what they taught us in health class, but I’m not sure.”

Callie nodded. “Yeah. I don’t want to even think about any of *that* stuff.”

Virginia grimaced. “Eew. Me neither!”

Thanks to Joanne, Allyson no longer felt the best part of her romantic life had happened in the past. She had reason to hope and dream again. Maybe true love had finally come back. Allyson was old enough to know how unrealistic that thought was, but couldn’t let it go. The longer she held on to it, the happier she felt. *What’s wrong with feeling happy for a change?* she thought. *Not a damn thing!*

She stopped worrying if she would see Joanne again because she felt certain she would. That certainty changed her outlook. Life was no longer meaninglessness punctuated by occasional flings with attractive men who eventually left her. She had Joanne now, and

Allyson felt certain they would never be apart again. Because of Joanne, Allyson's days had become more cheerful. Her nights were more relaxed and pleasant. She spent more time with Callie, too.

She had started sleeping more soundly than she had in years. Allyson didn't dream of Joanne but didn't complain. She no longer needed to dream because her real lover- her only *real* love- was back again, and life was good.

It was good for Joanne, too, but more complicated. She yearned to be with Allyson more, but couldn't get away. She also feared their attraction was so powerful that if she went back to Allyson's house, she wouldn't have the will to leave. Joanne was no longer the high school girl with unlimited freedom whose adult life was ahead. She was now approaching middle age with a husband and a family and couldn't allow her passion for Allyson to undermine her obligations to her 'loved ones.' The only problem was that she didn't feel certain they were still her loved ones, and that feeling terrified her. Molly, Jake, and Sam should have been the center of her life. She loved her children but was in love with Allyson. The strain threatened to tear her apart.

If they had had no children, leaving Mike wouldn't have been difficult. He was an adult, and her departure would hurt him. But adults understood these things and had no choice but to accept them. Children didn't understand, and parental separation often shattered kids' lives. Joanne had to find a way to keep her children's lives intact but also explore the love she and Allyson had reawakened.

Joanne didn't have any other close friends and envied Callie and Virginia. She also saw in them the possibility that the girls could find intimacy of their own, but thought it was improbable. Young girls didn't just stumble into lesbianism. Back when they were in high school, something had led her and Allyson to explore each other, but she couldn't recall the spark that had lit the fire of their love. *Maybe there wasn't a spark*, she thought. *Maybe we were both lesbians and just didn't know it. No, that wasn't it. I had secret boyfriends before high school. I think she had them, too. Maybe it was because that's what we were expected to do. But it would seem that wasn't what we truly wanted.*

Back in high school, what they had with each other wasn't merely dating. Together, they had soared into a passion unlike anything they'd known with any of the boys they'd gone out with. Both girls had been convinced that it was true love. Then Joanne's mother found out about them and crushed their romance. After the family moved far away, Allyson wrote to Joanne, but her mother had confiscated the letter without opening it because she felt certain she already knew what it said. Joanne tried to write to Allyson but couldn't find the right words. Her mother, Vivian, suspected her and checked everything she wrote on. Every sheet of notebook paper or memo pad. The woman was not going to allow what her daughter and that other child had done to continue. She had to crush it, and did.

In her new town, Joanne went on to finish high school and then went off to college. She dated boys in high school and men in college. Then she found a special one. Mike. After graduation, she married him. Her mother felt certain she had done the right thing and had prevented Joanne from having a miserable life.

As an adult, Joanne had developed no friendships with other women. She had always felt comfortable around men because they meant nothing to her. Her important job developed out of her training, expertise, and self-confidence. No one she ever worked for had ever felt

sorry they had hired her. Joanne could have had even more clients if she had wanted them. She was careful to balance her work and family life. Now, she had a third life and knew she was going to have to balance that, too. Joanne didn't know how she was going to do it, but had to try. She wasn't going to risk losing Allyson again.

For the first time in her adult life, Joanne lacked confidence in her ability to make everything work. Maybe it was because of her reconnection with Allyson. Maybe it was due to Joanne getting older. Maybe she was losing her organizing skills. The reasons didn't matter. Only Allyson did.

Joanne was determined to find a way to be with her lover. Just because they were no longer high school kids who were free to love uninhibitedly, it didn't mean they couldn't love at all. Joanne was determined never to lose Allyson again.

Chapter 14

After she cleaned up the dinner dishes, Debbie sat down to watch an episode of *Friends* on TV. She laughed a few times, and Virginia heard her from her bedroom upstairs. Hoping her mother might be in a receptive mood, Virginia finished her homework and came downstairs. When a commercial came on, Virginia spoke up. "Mom, Callie invited me for another sleepover this weekend. Can I go?"

Debbie turned to look at her daughter. Virginia couldn't read her mother's face. Her smile had faded after the commercial came on, but she wasn't frowning. Debbie took a deep breath as she considered her reply. Then she began to speak. "But Virginia, you're father and I aren't going away this weekend."

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

Debbie frowned. Virginia steeled herself for disappointment. "Well, I don't know."

"Please, Mom. Allyson and Joanne are so nice."

"Who are Allyson and Joanne?"

"Allyson is Callie's mom. Joanne's her friend."

"What about Callie's dad?" Debbie asked.

"Oh, she doesn't have a dad."

"What happened to him?"

"Callie doesn't know," Virginia explained. "Allyson told her that he just left when she was little."

"I see. And who's this Joanne?"

"She's Allyson's friend from high school. They get together sometimes. She's very nice, too."

"And what do they do while you and Callie are together?" Debbie asked. Virginia felt relieved that her mother hadn't asked what she and Callie did besides homework. She didn't want her mother to find out they had watched videos and played with Barbie dolls. Debbie might forbid her to ever go back again.

"Same as Callie and I do. They hang out."

"They don't go anywhere?"

"Of course not. They stay home."

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

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

“Except what?”

“When everyone’s sleeping, of course.”

“Where do you sleep?” Debbie asked.

“In Callie’s room.”

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

“Yes,” Virginia replied.

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

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

“Oh, she does, does she?”

The commercials ended. *Friends* came back on, and Debbie turned her attention back to the TV. She didn’t say anything else. “Um, Mom?” Virginia said.

Debbie waved Virginia away. “We’ll talk about this later. Go finish your homework.”

“I finished it.”

“Then get ready for bed.”

“I’m already in my pajamas,” Virginia pointed out.

“Oh, yeah. Well, go read or something.”

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

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

The way Callie’s mom treated Callie was different from the way Virginia’s parents treated her. Allyson loved Callie and treated her lovingly. Virginia’s parents never mentioned love. Virginia almost suspected they didn’t love her at all. That thought was so ghastly that she also pushed it away.

Virginia picked up a Baby Sitter’s Club novel she’d borrowed from the school library and tried to read, but the words wouldn’t form ideas in her head. A strong feeling blocked them. What she felt was neglect. Frustrated, she put out the light. *Maybe I can try to talk to mom again tomorrow*, she thought. That fragment of hope soothed her. She fell asleep and didn’t have scary dreams.

At lunch the next day, Callie mentioned the sleepover. “So, did you ask your mom?”

Virginia frowned. “Yeah.”

“Oh, great! We’ll have a great time again, I’m sure of it.”

“She didn’t say *no*,” Virginia interrupted. Callie looked at her. “But she didn’t say yes, either.”

“Well, what *did* she do?”

“She asked me a bunch of questions,” Virginia replied.

“Like what?”

“Like, where do we sleep, where does your mom sleep, and does Joanne sleep in the guest room?”

“We don’t have a guest room,” Callie pointed out.

“Yeah, I told her that.”

“What else did you tell her?”

“She asked where Joanne slept,” Virginia explained.

“What did you tell her?”

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

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

“Nothing. Her show came back on.”

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

“I know it will, Callie. It was great last time. I had so much fun. Your mom and Joanne were awesome.”

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

Virginia shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I hope she does.”

Callie thought about the sleepover when she got home after school. She liked Joanne, but when she came over, her mother seemed different. Allyson was happier than Callie had ever recalled seeing her. But the women spent a *lot* of time in Allyson’s bedroom. She didn’t want to endure the entire weekend alone while her mother and that woman were in the house, almost ignoring her. Callie needed Virginia.

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

Callie worried that Virginia might have told her mother too much about Allyson and Joanne. She vaguely suspected that what the women did might not seem okay. Maybe Virginia’s mother thought that was a problem.

Callie didn’t know it, but she was right.

Chapter 15

The next night, Debbie was standing at the sink cleaning the dinner dishes when the phone rang. She dried her hands and grabbed it before her husband or Virginia did. “Hello?” she said.

“Mrs. Davidson?” a woman asked.

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

“This is Allyson Marshall, Callie’s mom.”

Debbie stayed on. “Oh. Yes?”

“Callie asked me to call you,” Allyson said. She sounded uneasy.

“Yes?”

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

“My husband and I aren’t going out of town this weekend,” Debbie replied curtly.

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

“But, we don’t need a weekend to yourselves.”

“Oh, I see,” Allyson replied. She still felt nervous and tried to think of something that might persuade Debbie to agree. “Well, it would mean a lot to the girls.”

“I’m sure they have homework or projects to do.”

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

“So do I, and I’m very particular. I don’t tolerate mistakes.”

“I don’t, either.”

“Will your daughter be going to college?” Debbie asked, changing the subject.

“If she wants to, I will find a way.”

“My daughter’s going whether she wants to or not. Money isn’t an issue for us.”

“Lucky you. I’ve noticed how smart your daughter is. I bet she’d love college.”

Debbie felt uneasy. Was this woman trying to ingratiate herself? She didn’t like people who tried to do that. “It makes no difference whether she loves it or not,” Debbie said.

Allyson could tell she wasn’t getting anywhere and decided to embellish her appeal. “Look, Mrs. Davidson, the girls have been working hard. They could use a weekend like this. After all, it is summertime. It’ll do them both good.”

“Will it, Mrs. Marshall? Will it? I’m not so sure,” Debbie replied. Then she hung up.

Callie had been hovering nearby. “So?” she asked.

Allyson shook her head slowly. “I don’t know, Callie.”

“Well, what’d she say?”

“She didn’t say no,” Allyson replied. Callie looked hopeful. “But she didn’t say yes, either.”

Callie’s face fell. “Great. Now what?”

“I don’t know. I also don’t know what’s going on at Virginia’s house.”

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

Allyson tried not to look shocked. “What do you mean?”

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

Allyson understood Callie’s confusion and felt sorry for her. But she didn’t know how much she ought to tell Callie. “It’s complicated, and I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Maybe I should just ask Joanne next time she comes over,” Callie exclaimed.

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

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

Allyson didn't immediately reply. She tried to think of a simple story that would satisfy Callie's curiosity but not reveal too much. Then she recalled a scene she'd read in a teenage novel and decided to use it.

"Let me tell you a story," Allyson said.

Callie rolled her eyes. "Oh, this should be good."

"Stop it, Callie. This is hard."

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

"Once upon a time, there were these two girls. We'll call them Nancy and Gertrude."

Callie smirked. "Gertrude?"

"Shut up," Allyson replied, smiling. "It's her name in the story. Anyway, it was the first day of high school. You haven't experienced that day yet. It's not like when you go to middle school. High schools are bigger, and you can get lost in them. Not just lost in the building but lost in the crowd as well."

"Did you- I mean, Nancy or Gertrude- get lost?"

"Not at first. But they did feel overwhelmed. It was big. The older kids seemed to ignore them and looked down on them. Even the teachers seemed not to notice them."

Callie rolled her eyes again. "I get it, Mom."

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

"Were Nancy and Gertrude already friends?"

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

"I know what screwed means, Mom."

Allyson grinned. "I should have known that you would."

"So, then what happened?" Callie asked.

"Nancy and Gertrude sat down and cried."

"On their first day in high school?" Callie asked, aghast.

"Yeah."

"Is it *that* bad?"

"Not anymore, but it was when I- oops, I mean Nancy and Gertrude- were there. It's different now. Seniors show freshmen around. Teachers watch the halls for lost students."

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

"Well, when they finished crying, Nancy and Gertrude looked at each other and laughed."

"Wait. They *what*?"

"They laughed."

"Why?" Callie asked.

"Because they realized they weren't alone."

“I don’t understand.”

“They hadn’t found that room, but it didn’t matter. They had found each other, and that was way more important.”

Allyson paused. She hoped she had said enough, but Callie waited for more. Allison remained quiet. Callie looked at her mother. Allyson had a strange look in her eyes.

“I don’t understand,” Callie said. Allyson blinked as if her thoughts had been somewhere else and she had just come back.

“They became best friends,” Allyson went on.

“Then what happened?”

“They became *more* than best friends.”

“What does that even mean?” Callie asked, hoping for details that would make sense.

“I can’t tell you. It’s kinda private and you might not understand.”

“I don’t understand *any* of this, Mom,” Callie replied. Allyson didn’t say anything else. “So you’re not gonna tell me?”

“Maybe someday you’ll be old enough,” Allyson replied.

Callie grimaced. “Oh, it’s like *that*, is it?”

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

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

“I’ll tell you, but you’re not gonna like it.”

“Go ahead.”

“I think that Virginia’s mom is someone who doesn’t approve of Nancy and Gertrude.”

“You mean meeting in the hallway?” Callie asked. Allyson shook her head. “Then what do you mean, Mom?”

“Like I said, we have to respect Nancy and Gertrude’s privacy.”

Callie tried not to show her frustration and asked another question. “So, what does that have to do with Virginia’s mom?”

“She might think what the girls did was wrong-.”

“You mean the private stuff you can’t tell me about?”

“Yeah. There are people like that. There’s nothing anyone can do about it.”

“Nothing?” Callie asked, feeling disappointed. She still had no idea what those girls in her mother’s story had done. But she had experienced rejection and understood what her mother was trying to explain about Virginia’s mom.

Yet Callie still believed people could change if they wanted to. As kids grow up, they change a lot, and Callie assumed that would keep going as people got older. Her mother didn’t have the heart to tell her that some people never change. That could be a good thing where love was concerned (like with Allyson and Joanne), but a bad thing when not changing hurts others. Like with Joanne’s mother, Vivian, who had refused to accept that Allyson and Joanne had been different.

All kids fall in love sometime or other. Normally, girls fall in love with boys, and boys fall in love with girls. But Allyson and Joanne had fallen in love with each other. They’d kept their feelings to themselves because there was no one they dared to tell, and shared a private world that other kids their age couldn’t possibly imagine.

Everything had been wonderful until Vivian found out what they were doing and knew she had to end it. She also knew that merely ordering Joanne to stop seeing Allyson would never work. More drastic action was necessary.

Vivian had to separate the girls and found a way to do exactly that. The family moved away right after the school year ended. Allyson and Joanne promised to write to each other, but no letters arrived. Allyson had sent a letter, but Vivian had torn it up. Joanne secretly wrote several letters but kept them, waiting to hear from Allyson. When no letters came, she buried her letters, along with her heart, in the back of the bottom drawer of her dresser under the old clothes and childhood trinkets she kept there.

Both women forgot about each other until their encounter years later in that club. As soon as their eyes met, they had shared a flash of recognition and then a surge of joy. Memories of their tender passion flooded their minds. They suddenly realized the bond forged after they met in that crowded lunchroom years ago had never been broken. They wanted to reclaim their teenage love, and they had. Neither felt sorry.

Until now.

Allyson regretted that, because of her relationship with Joanne, Callie might no longer have a relationship with Virginia. Maybe Debbie wouldn't allow them to be friends anymore. Allyson had liked Virginia when they spent that first weekend together and hoped to see more of the girl. She knew it was unlikely the girls would ever share the same kind of bond that she shared with Joanne, but that was okay. The girls seemed to be good friends. Maybe they were destined to be life-long friends, and that was a good thing.

Later, Allyson talked it over with Joanne.

"Virginia's mother is like my mother," Joanne commented.

"What do you mean?"

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

"I don't think she will."

"Neither do I," Joanne agreed.

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

"I don't know, Allyson. I do know it's not contagious. They can't get it from us. Hanging out with us is not gonna corrupt Virginia or Callie."

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

"I could help with that," Joanne said.

Her statement struck Allyson as ironic. "How?" Allyson asked. "You haven't explained it to your own kids yet."

"Yeah, you're right. I guess I haven't figured out how to do that. But I could still help Callie, and I liked Virginia. Maybe there's a way we all could put all our heads together and figure this out."

"Maybe you're right, and that's what we ought to do. I owe the girls that."

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

Chapter 16

Callie had only visited Virginia's house twice before and had been invited both times. This visit was different. Also riskier. Arriving unexpectedly made Callie feel nervous. Her mother and Joanne had suggested it. They were waiting in the car. She rang the doorbell and waited.

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

Virginia also heard the doorbell and hurried to the top of the stairs. "Who is it, Mom?" she called down.

"I haven't opened the door yet, Virginia," Debbie replied curtly. "Are you expecting anyone?"

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

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

"Is she expecting you?"

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

Debbie felt blindsided. "Amusement park?" she gasped. She wondered if Virginia had lied to her.

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

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

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

"I came to invite you to come to the amusement park with me. My mom and Joanne are taking me. Do you wanna come?"

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

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

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

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

Debbie didn't like feeling pressured. "I don't know, Callie. This is so sudden."

"Please, Mom?"

"Please, Mrs. Davidson?" Callie pleaded again. Debbie felt overwhelmed by the girls' begging. She wanted to get back her peace and quiet.

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

"I'm already dressed, Mom," Virginia said. She breezed past her mother. Debbie noticed Virginia's pink shorts, pink and white striped top, and pink sneakers, and again wondered if she'd known that Callie would be stopping by. Before she could order Virginia

to stop, she was halfway to the car, and it was too late. *Let her go*, Debbie thought. *If she's not around, maybe I can finish those bills.*

"Thank you, Mrs. Davidson!" Callie called out.

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

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

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

"Um, thanks, Mrs. Marshall."

"Please feel free to call me Allyson. Here's the thing, we need to talk."

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

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

"Do?"

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

"Why not?"

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

"So what?" Virginia asked.

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

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

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

"I'd love that!" Virginia exclaimed.

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

"What do you mean?"

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

"About what?"

"To invite you to another weekend sleepover."

"Really?"

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

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

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

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

Allyson tried not to smile at Virginia's litany of complaints. "Like I said, she's your mom and she's only looking out for you."

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

"What did you tell her about that weekend, Virginia?" Joanne asked.

"Well, I didn't mention the tapes because I'm not supposed to watch them. But, I did tell her about eating pizza for dinner on Friday and lunch on Saturday night's

dinner with you, Sunday's lunch at the diner, and all the fun we had together. Like I said, she seemed mad."

"What did you tell her about Joanne and me?" Allyson asked.

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

"What did she say to that?"

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

"Yes, I did, and I'm sorry she said no."

"So am I."

"Don't be mad at her," Allyson said.

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

"I don't think it was *your* sleepover that bothered her," Allyson said.

"What do you mean?"

"I think it was the sleepover that Joanne and I were having."

"What does *that* mean?" Virginia asked.

"I don't think your mom likes that adult women have sleepovers. She might think it's wrong."

"Why would it be wrong?" Virginia asked. "Didn't you have any fun?"

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

"I don't mean with us, but when you were by yourselves."

Allyson thought about how to answer. She wanted to be careful. "Yes, Virginia, Joanne and I had fun when we were alone, too."

"Well, I'm happy for you," Virginia replied sincerely.

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

"Oh, I do. I really do."

"Well, you can't sleep over now because your mom said no," Allyson said. "But you can come to the amusement park with us."

"So we're *really* going?" Virginia asked.

"Of course. Did you think we weren't?"

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

"And we're happy you came," Joanne said. "Let's go have some fun."

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

and Joanne wanted- a few moments alone in the dark. They enjoyed them immensely and emerged smiling. The girls rolled their eyes. *Adults are so weird*, they thought, but felt grateful to be there, anyway.

Chapter 17

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

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

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

"Oh, do you think so?"

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

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

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

"I'm not a lezzie!"

"What's a lezzie?" Natalie asked.

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

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

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

"But, no girls."

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

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

She didn't want to acknowledge the suspicion that had arisen in her mind, but felt she had no choice. *Maybe Virginia's mom thinks my mom and Joanne are perverts*, she thought. *Maybe they're lezzies*. The next thought was even more disturbing. *If my mom is a lezzie, what does that make me?*

Callie hid in the back row of lockers until it was time to ride home on the bus.

At dinner, she sat quietly and didn't touch her food. It was spaghetti and meatballs in a sauce that came from a jar, Allyson's go-to easy meal after a busy and tiring workday. The food was filling, and the meal was fun to eat. Callie usually enjoyed it. So did Allyson. It reminded her of her childhood with her siblings. She had no idea where any of them were. It felt good to recall them occasionally.

"Remember Nancy and Gertrude?" Callie asked.

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

"Were they lezzies?"

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

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

"Yeah. Some girls, after gym class."

"What else did they say?"

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

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

"Well, it hasn't."

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

"Scared."

"Oh. Why?"

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

Allyson wasn't sure how to answer. *Should I be honest?* she thought. *Or, should I try to hide what Joanne and I are for a bit longer? Maybe Callie's not ready to hear the truth.* Then Allyson caught herself. *No, she asked. She's ready.* "Just because I am doesn't mean you are, Callie."

Callie weighed her mother's reply. She realized what Allyson had just revealed. "So, you admit that you are? That means Joanne is, too. That's what's been going on, isn't it?"

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

Callie tried to remain calm. "No? What about your daughter?"

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

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

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

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

"He was nice- nicer than any man I'd ever met."

"Did you love him?" Callie asked.

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

"So what happened?"

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

"Missing?"

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

"What about the other men?"

"I was lonely," Allyson replied, matter-of-factly.

“But *I* was here.”

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

Callie was silent for a few moments. “I feel sorry for you, Mom.”

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

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

Allyson looked at Callie and tried not to feel that she was about to cry. What Callie said had moved her deeply. “Do you mean that?”

“Yes.”

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

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

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

“I hope someday you can, Mom.”

“Thanks, sweetie. You’re the best daughter a mom could ask for.” Allyson got up and walked around the table to hug her daughter.

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

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

“So, when is Joanne coming over again?”

“I have no idea,” Allyson replied. “She rarely knows ahead of time.”

“That sucks.”

“Callie! Where did you learn that word?”

“At school.”

“Do you know what it means?” Allyson asked.

“Yeah. It means something’s awful.”

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

“Why not?”

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

An hour later, Callie called Virginia. They occasionally chatted in the evening, although Virginia’s mother didn’t like her wasting time on the phone. Debbie was in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner.

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

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

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

“What stuff?” Virginia asked.

“Big stuff.”

“Like what?”

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

“It’s Callie, Mom.”

“Don’t stay on too long.”

“I won’t, Mom. Like what, Callie?”

“She told me about my dad.”

“Oh? That’s nice.”

“It was. But there was more.”

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

Debbie dried her hands and picked up the phone.

“After gym class, some of the girls were in the shower, and they started talking,” Callie was saying.

“About what?” Virginia asked.

“Lesbians.”

Debbie remained quiet.

“What’s a lesbian?” Virginia asked.

Debbie wanted to end the call.

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

“You mean like us?” Virginia asked.

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

“Like what?”

“She said she and Joanne are lesbians.”

“Oh.”

Debbie quietly hung up the phone. Then she gazed out the kitchen window and sighed. The large tree in the backyard reminded her of something that had happened beneath a similar tree in her yard when she wasn’t much older than Virginia was.

It had been a warm summer evening around dusk. The crickets had come out, but something was keeping the mosquitoes away. Maybe it was the light breeze. Debbie sat behind the tree with Anita, a girl she’d met only a few hours earlier at the pool. Anita was a skinny, red-haired kid who wore glasses. She had a shy smile and a soft, clear voice. Debbie was the exact opposite. She was a shapely, outgoing, dark-haired beauty. She had a round face, a pert nose, a small mouth, and penetrating eyes. Debbie was tired of the boys always hitting on her or hinting lewdly about what they’d like to do to her. Boys disgusted her. She just wanted to be left alone.

“I like you, Debbie,” Anita said. “You’re different.” Debbie liked the compliment but didn’t say anything because she wasn’t sure why Anita had said it. Anita interpreted Debbie’s silence as concurrence. She kissed Debbie softly on the lips. Debbie closed her eyes and

remained perfectly still. Anita kept kissing Debbie. Then more happened. Time stopped. It didn't start again until Anita pulled back. Debbie saw light from the house reflect on Anita's glasses. She smiled. Anita smiled back. That was all it took.

She'd never told anyone about that night. Nor had she ever mentioned the days and nights that had followed. The girls had shared an intimate little world. They'd parted only because they chose colleges on opposite coasts. The parting had been as sweet as the beginning was.

Since then, Debbie had rarely thought about Anita. Not because she'd suffered a cataclysmic loss or was deeply hurt. It was because she knew she would never again feel as happy as she had during the time she and Anita had shared their love.

She didn't envy Allyson and Joanne, but she understood them. *I was right*, Debbie thought. *But maybe I reacted too hastily when Allyson called*.

After Virginia hung up the phone, her mother came into the room. "That was Callie, right?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Did she invite you for another sleepover?"

"No. Why?"

"If she does, you can go," Debbie said.

Virginia couldn't believe what she'd just heard. "Really?"

"Yes, really. Now go finish your homework!" Bewildered, Virginia went to her room. She didn't mention what had happened when she saw Callie the next day. She wasn't exactly sure what had changed her mother's mind, but felt happy that it had changed.

Chapter 18

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

Joanne didn't know what revealing her love affair with Allyson might do to her children. Strangely, she didn't even consider what it could do to Mike. He was an easy-going husband. He accepted her mysterious absences and efficiently ran the household whenever she was away. Mike also liked the high income she pulled down for her work. He got to do whatever he wanted with the money. He was never extravagant and always put the children first. But the money compensated somewhat for the loss of her companionship. Mike accepted Joanne's absences because he knew she would always come back to him.

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

Things were okay until early August, when the women and girls made another Saturday trip to the amusement park to celebrate Callie's birthday. They were walking from the Tilt-A-Whirl toward the bumper cars when Joanne spotted a good-looking man with a

teenage girl and two younger boys heading toward the Ferris wheel. She recognized her family and immediately froze.

“What’s wrong?” Allyson asked. Joanne pulled her aside.

“My husband and kids,” she whispered. “They’re *here*. I have to go.”

“But, we just got here!”

“Okay,” Joanne said. “You stay. Here’s some money. Take the girls on rides. I’ll go hide in your car. My family won’t see me there.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure! Now go and have fun,” Joanne said.

Allyson watched as Joanne hurried toward the gate. She wanted to comfort her, but had to stay with Callie and Virginia. The girls had no idea what was going on.

“Where’s she going?” Callie asked.

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

“She might barf?” Virginia asked.

“Exactly,” Allyson replied. The girls grimaced. “She didn’t want to ruin it for you girls, so she’s going back to the car to rest.”

“Will she be coming back?” Callie asked.

“Maybe. Don’t worry about her. Now, what ride shall we go on first?”

Allyson wondered if the girls would suspect that something else was going on, and the women would later have to explain. She went on every ride they wanted to as many times as they wanted. She also bought them anything they asked for. Joanne had been generous, and they still had money left when the girls admitted they felt worn out and ready to leave.

Allyson led them back to the car. She wondered if Joanne would be there. *What if her feelings about all this have changed? Allyson thought. Or, maybe her family somehow saw her and she went home with them. Either way, will I ever see her again?*

As they got closer, Allyson couldn’t see Joanne in the car and tried not to panic. She unlocked the doors and saw Joanne lying on the back seat. Allyson breathed a sigh of relief.

“Oh, hi, girls,” Joanne said. She seemed groggy. “All worn out? Time to go home?” She sat up and got out. Then she held the door for Callie and Virginia. After they got in, Joanne closed the door and got into the passenger seat.

“Are you okay?” Allyson whispered.

Joanne smiled groggily. “Had a wonderful nap. Nice dream, too.”

“Oh, what about? Amusement parks?”

“Uh, no,” Joanne replied. She didn’t want to admit she had dreamed about living with Allyson. In her dream, her real children no longer existed, and she hadn’t even noticed they were gone. It should have disturbed her, but it hadn’t. “What’s for dinner?” she asked.

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

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

Everyone rode quietly. The girls felt too tired to chat. Their day had been wonderful, even better than the first time they’d gone. Allyson wondered if she and Joanne needed to talk about what happened. She hadn’t liked seeing Joanne panic.

Her lover’s fear of discovery troubled Allyson. Joanne had explained how she didn’t want to disrupt her family by leaving them. Although she didn’t like it, Allyson understood.

She also recalled how devastated she had felt when her husband had abandoned her and Callie. *No spouse and children deserve to go through that*, she thought.

When they went to bed later, Joanne remained quiet. Allyson still felt excited from the day at the amusement park. Her body hadn't settled down from jostling, spinning, banging around, or pushing and pulling on the rides they'd enjoyed. She suspected Joanne's mind hadn't settled, either.

"I do love them," Joanne said in a soft voice.

"Who?"

"My kids."

"I know you do," Allyson replied.

"But, I ran away."

"I understand."

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

"I don't know."

Joanne sighed. "I've been lying for months. I guess it just hit me how my lies could hurt the people I love."

"But they didn't see you, so everything's okay."

Joanne frowned. "I can't get over the feeling they did spot me, and I'll find out when I go home. I'm scared, Allyson. Maybe everything's not okay."

Allyson sat up and reached to hug Joanne. "Do you need to cry?" she asked, softly. Joanne let Allyson's arms enfold her.

"I think I do."

"Go ahead. I'm here for you."

"I know. Thanks."

There are times when tears can wash away fear. There are also times when no matter how much a person cries, the hurt remains after the tears are gone. When she finished crying, Joanne wondered if her anguish was so deep that there was only one way of dealing with it. Maybe she would have to end things with Allyson. Not because two women were in love, but because one woman had no right to be doing it, no matter how powerful her love for the other woman was.

Eventually, Joanne fell asleep. In a dream, she watched a melodrama play out on a twenty-one-inch color TV. At first, she thought it was just another soap opera. Then she recognized Allyson on the screen. She looked older than the first time they were lovers, but younger than she was now. Dream-Allyson had a husband named Larry and a toddler. The kid was adorable, but the husband wasn't. Larry seemed preoccupied and moody. The marriage was not going well. His wife and daughter were not the problem. He was.

Larry had decided that being tied down wasn't the right life for him. He was a trucker who went away for trips twice a week. He drove the same route and sometimes slept in his rig. He often ate at the same roadside café. The waitress was a high school-age kid named Daisy. She was a buxom, round-faced girl who wore an apron over her shorts. Male customers admired her backside and bare legs as she walked away from them and were often vocal about what they saw. They often made lewd remarks about her. They ranged from

“Oowee! I wanna get me some of *that!*” and “Ain’t she somethin’?” to “That kid’s just askin’ for it.”

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

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

One evening, Larry parked his truck and walked into the roadside diner. The place was louder and more chaotic than usual, and Larry wondered what was going on. He looked around and didn’t see Daisy. Larry sat at the counter. The cook told him all they were serving were ham and cheese sandwiches. “Take it or leave it,” the cook said.

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

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

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

“Where’s Daisy?” Larry asked.

The cook frowned. “Bitch didn’t show up.”

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

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

“I ain’t never working there again,” Daisy replied.

“Why not?”

“They’s just a bunch of bastards.”

“What happened?”

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

“Oh, God!”

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

“No, no, of course not,” Larry said.

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

“Sure, you’re welcome to ride with me, Daisy.”

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

“I don’t want nothing, Daisy. I’m glad to help you.”

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

Daisy rode with Larry the rest of the trip and was still in the cab when he drove back to the depot. After he reported in and got his next assignment, Larry took Daisy to a rooming

house where some drivers stayed on layovers. He helped Daisy get a room and then suggested that he could stay there with her. She had no problem with that and welcomed him.

Now, Daisy rode with Larry on every trip. They had found other places to eat. Sometimes she made food ahead of time. Larry forgot all about his wife and daughter.

Joanne's dream ended. She got the message but didn't like it.

On Sunday morning, the girls talked excitedly about their Saturday at the amusement park, but Joanne tuned them out. She tuned out Allyson, as well. Her dream was haunting her. She had awakened and immediately began wondering if abandoning her family was her only option, but knew she couldn't do it. *Larry was a prick*, Joanne thought. *I could never do what he did. I could never just walk away from my family. What a stupid dream!*

Joanne went to her office on Monday morning. Feeling anxious, she left early and went home around the time Molly, Jake, and Sam got in from school. "Mom, you're back!" Jake said. Joanne hugged him.

"Yes, my job didn't take as long as I thought it was going to take."

"We went to the amusement park on Saturday!" Sam said, excitedly. He was tall for his age (six and a half, as he proudly told any adults he met.) His dark hair, black-rimmed glasses, and long face made him look older than he was. Sam behaved like a six-year-old. He was into video games, cars, action figures, and had become a remarkably good swimmer in the short time since he'd learned.

Joanne tried not to panic. "You did? I *love* amusement parks. Did you have fun?"

"We had a great day," Jake replied. He looked completely different from his siblings. Although he was three years younger than Molly, he was almost as tall as she was. He had light hair, a round face, and slightly oversized ears. (Jake was beginning to feel self-conscious about them.) He also had a shy smile. He liked all the things his brother did, but also some things that didn't interest Sam. (Jake was starting to notice girls. He hadn't mentioned it to anyone. The teasing he anticipated would have mortified him.)

"Molly almost threw up on one of the rides," Jake said, smiling.

"But, I didn't!" Molly yelled, laughing.

She was a gawky thirteen-year-old with a sweet face and a sharp mind. Molly liked to quietly observe the things around her. Mike and Joanne had learned not to have adult conversations in front of their daughter. She picked up on things that kids shouldn't have to think about. Sometimes she would later ask about something she'd overheard, and they would have to struggle to come up with an explanation she could understand. "She's wicked smart," other adults admiringly told her parents. Mike or Joanne would often reply, "Yeah, maybe *too* smart." Nevertheless, they felt proud of her intelligence and encouraged her curiosity.

"I haven't been to an amusement park in years," Joanne lied.

"That's funny," Sam said. "Dad thought he saw someone there that looked like you."

"Oh, lots of ladies look like me."

"Yeah, that's what he said, too," Molly replied. "It couldn't have been *you*, right?"

Joanne shook her head emphatically. "No. I was hundreds of miles away," she lied. She wondered how they would feel if they somehow discovered that she had really been there, but with a different family. Joanne recalled Larry from her dream. Was she starting to become like him? Would she just leave one day? Maybe it would be easier that way. On the

other hand, maybe it was never easy, but people lied and told themselves it was. Joanne hated lying. But she loved both Allyson and her children and dreaded that she might someday have to choose between her loves.

Chapter 19

Later that night, the calm domesticity that Mike cherished had settled over their household. His wife was in the bedroom with him. The kids were snug in their rooms. *This is the way it's supposed to be*, he thought. *Completely normal*.

He understood Joanne had to leave unexpectedly and stay away for unpredictable periods to do her job, but, if given a choice, Mike would have preferred their lives to be like this. Father, mother, and kiddies are all safe at home. *All's right with the world*, Mike thought.

As Joanne was removing her shorts, she spoke. "Sam told me you thought you saw me at the amusement park."

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

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

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

Joanne's work was highly confidential. Companies could suffer if word got out that she or one of her associates had been hired in a final desperate attempt to save a business. She had to watch what she said, but felt it was time to be honest. About her job, if not about who she loved. She paused as she was pulling up her pajama bottoms. "Well, do you know how superheroes save people?"

Mike grinned. "What do superheroes have to do with this?"

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

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

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

"Do you wear tights and a cape?"

Joanne nodded. "Cape, no. Tights, yes."

"Oh, really?" Mike reached for his wife.

"Actually, it's not just me," Joanne continued. "It's what my company does." Mike didn't care what the rest of her company did. The image of Joanne in tights turned him on.

Joanne realized how the conversation was going to end. She lay back on the bed. Mike removed the pajamas she had just put on.

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

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

Joanne couldn't sleep. *I wonder what Allyson's doing right now?* she thought. *It's definitely not what I just did.* Then Joanne recalled that Allyson had done exactly what she just did, as often as she could, right up to that night they had met in the club and rekindled their passion.

But Mike wasn't just any man. He was her husband. Allyson didn't have a husband, so her sacrifice was less. *I don't know if I can sacrifice Mike,* Joanne thought. Then she had a darker thought. *Some superhero I am! I can't even save myself.*

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

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

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

"Thanks, Callie. How's summer school?"

"It's okay."

"Has it been hard?" Joanne asked.

"No, just long."

"But you get to see Virginia every day, right?" Joanne asked.

"Yeah."

"Do you know her mom well?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They ran out of things to say and fell into silence. Callie thought of a question she'd been wanting to ask Joanne. "Joanne, I was wondering... when am I gonna get to meet your kids? I think I would like them."

"You do?"

"Well, yeah. I really like you."

Surprised but pleased by Molly's comment, Joanne smiled warmly. "Thanks, Callie. I really like you, too."

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

"I don't think so," Joanne replied. She had stopped smiling.

"Why not? Is there something wrong with me?"

Joanne shook her head. "No, no. Of course not."

"Is there something wrong with *them*?" Callie asked.

Joanne shook her head again. "Nope. They're great kids."

"Then... why?"

"It's complicated, Callie, but not because of you."

"Then explain it to me. I'm old enough to understand."

Joanne was taken aback by Molly's statement but had to agree. She nodded. "Yeah, I think you are," she said.

Expectantly, Callie looked at Joanne. "So, tell me."

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

Callie seemed surprised. "You mean you haven't told them?"

"No," Joanne confessed.

"Why not? Are you ashamed of us?"

Callie's question shocked Joanne. "No, of course not. I think you and your mom are great."

"Are you ashamed of *them*?" Callie asked.

"No."

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

Joanne's face darkened. "Callie, I... No!"

"What else could it be, then?" Callie asked. Joanne had no answer. Callie hadn't intended to hurt Joanne's feelings and wondered if she had said too much. "I'm sorry I asked," she said.

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

"Sure."

"And, thanks, Callie."

"For what?"

"Being such a great kid."

After Joanne left, Callie wondered how she was going to explain what had happened to her mother. She didn't want to get in trouble. *Maybe I won't mention that Joanne was here. If my mom finds out later, I'll just say I forgot to tell her.*

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

On Saturday morning, Mike felt happy when he awoke next to his sleeping wife and hoped she might be dreaming about him. Joanne was sleeping late because she had stayed awake thinking about her dilemma. She also wondered if the time had come to take action.

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

"Time to get up. I think the kids are awake."

"I'm not ready to get up, yet," Joanne said.

"Okay, you sleep a while longer. I'll take care of the kids."

"Stay with me awhile," Joanne said.

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

"Sure," Joanne replied, smiling. Mike plodded off to their bathroom. He hadn't put on any underwear after they had sex at bedtime. Mike thought he might be coming back to have more.

"I need to tell you something," Joanne said after he got back into bed.

"Oh?"

Joanne nodded. This wasn't going to be easy, but she knew she had to get the truth out. "Yeah. Um... Mike, I haven't always been working when I was away on the weekends."

"Oh?"

"C'mon, don't tell me you weren't suspicious."

"Don't tell me what I might have been thinking, Joanne," Mike replied sharply.

"Okay, I won't. I've been with someone else."

Mike tried not to panic. "Who is he?"

"It wasn't a man."

"Then what the fuck are you talking about, Joanne?"

"I was with a girlfriend."

Mike felt a seismic shift. He knew from this moment on that nothing in his life was ever going to be the same. His face fell. "Oh, shit."

Joanne went on. "She and I knew each other in high school. We lost touch when my mother made us move away because she found out what we were doing."

"And, what *were* you doing?"

"We were lovers."

Mike tried to remain calm. "Oh. I had no idea. You've never mentioned any of this."

"It was over, Mike, I swear! And I've never even *looked* at another woman. Then I ran into Allyson at a club I went to several months ago, and went home with her. You can guess the rest."

Mike didn't want to guess anything. He didn't want Joanne to spell it out for him, either. Mike wasn't sure what he wanted.

"What does all this mean, Joanne? Are you leaving me?"

"No. That's why I'm telling you this."

"I still don't understand," he said.

"I'm not leaving you, but I'm not leaving her, either."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"I've always loved her, Mike. I didn't know it because I forgot about her until we saw each other again."

“Do you still love me?”

“You’re my husband.”

Mike’s face fell. “That’s not an answer.”

Joanne didn’t say anything else. Mike thought he understood why. “I don’t think I like this, Joanne. Not one bit.” Joanne remained quiet. “Isn’t there something else you want to tell me?”

“What?”

“That *was* you at the amusement park, wasn’t it?”

Joanne nodded. “Yes.”

“And that was *her*?”

“Yes. And her daughter.”

“What about her husband?”

“She doesn’t have one.” *And, I might not have one when this conversation is over,* Joanne thought.

“How convenient.”

“Nothing about this is convenient, but I won’t apologize.”

“I think that’s what hurts the most. I would at least expect you to tell me you’re sorry.”

“I’m not, Mike. In fact, I’ve never been happier.”

That was more than Mike could take. He jumped up from the bed. After he found his shorts and t-shirt, he grabbed a pair of old jeans and then escaped into the bathroom. Joanne sat alone, ready to cry. She had hurt the sweet man she once loved and still cared about. However, caring was no longer enough.

Mike came back fully dressed. Joanne wondered if he had been crying behind the closed bathroom door. “Not a word of this to the kids,” he said. “Not. One. Fucking. Word!”

“Of course not.”

Mike walked out. Joanne wondered where he would sleep on Saturday night. They had no guest room. If he slept on the couch, the children would ask why. *Poor Mike*, she thought. *He must feel trapped. I know what that feels like. I’ll have to find a way to help him. After all, helping is one of my superpowers.* She grinned at the word ‘superpowers.’ *I’m no longer the hero, though, she thought. Now, I’m the villain. See what love’ll do to ya?*

Chapter 20

Joanne decided to introduce her daughter to Callie. The girls were around the same age. A week later, she took Molly along when she visited Allyson and Callie. There were a few awkward minutes until the girls discovered they liked the same music and movies. Then they got along well.

While Joanne and Molly were visiting Allyson and Callie, Mike took Jake and Sam to the mall and then to the movies. The boys were happy to be free of their older sister for a whole afternoon and evening. Mike was happy to be away from Joanne as well.

Mike no longer told himself that all was right with the world. Something had gone horribly wrong. He had lost the strong connection he’d always felt with Joanne and didn’t want to lose the equally strong connection he had with his kids. They were all he had left of normalcy.

Since she had pulled the rug out from under his feet, things had been cool but cordial between Mike and Joanne. Mike tried not to show how shaken he was. If circumstances had been different, what she'd done might have caused Mike to react forcefully, perhaps even violently. He hated thinking that way but accepted his resentment as a natural reaction to what she had confessed. All that concerned him now was protecting the children. If Joanne left, he didn't know how he would care for them. Mike made nowhere near the income his wife did.

Joanne had again assured him that she wasn't planning to leave. She loved her children as much as he did. Mike doubted her words. *If she can betray me, she can betray them*, he thought. (Mike didn't know much about motherhood, nor did he care to learn. Joanne had wounded him too deeply.) He had to protect himself. The stress of being a father but no longer a husband was already taking its toll.

Joanne offered to have sex whenever he wanted it, but he didn't want her just for that. He had *never* wanted her just for that. Mike wanted a woman who loved him, and she no longer did. Unlike some other husbands, Mike hadn't married for sex. He had truly been in love with Joanne and thought he would always stay that way. He'd also felt she truly loved him.

Mike resented that she'd kept her teenage affair a secret. He wouldn't have thought anything of it if she had been honest about her past. It would have merely been another intimate story that lovers share as they forge the bonds that carry them through their lives together. *Had Joanne really forgotten about Allyson, as she claimed?* Mike wondered. *Or was she ashamed of having a relationship with another girl?*

Worse (to Mike) was the possibility that Joanne had deliberately hidden the truth about herself, that she had always been a lesbian at heart. The more Mike thought about this, the more his resentment grew. Finally, it became unbearable.

They adjusted to their estrangement by buying a king-sized mattress so they could sleep in the same room but as far apart as possible. It was the only way to preserve the fiction that they were still married. They hoped the children would never suspect there was tension between their parents.

Despite his resentment toward Joanne, Mike was always careful not to show his negative feelings around the kids. He tried to keep life in their household as normal as it had been before Joanne's revelation. However, Mike's behavior when he was not around the kids changed, especially when he was away from home. The biggest change came at work.

Mike had always been an easy-going, positive, and cheerful coworker. He smiled a lot and looked for ways to lighten others' days. Mike went out of his way to help bank customers who came in with difficult problems. He often found inventive ways to help, and both the bank's customers and his co-workers often praised him.

Instead of the warm and friendly co-worker everyone was used to, Mike had become sullen, withdrawn, gruff, and abrupt. He still focused on his job, and his work never faltered, but he didn't seem to enjoy his days at the bank. Customers didn't notice the change, but his co-workers did. They wondered why Mike had changed and worried about him. 'Is he ill?' someone asked. 'Doesn't he like it here anymore?' another co-worker wondered.

Mike's boss, Grace, was a woman slightly older than he was. He and Grace had risen through the bank's ranks together and were longtime friends. Three years earlier, Grace had

received the promotion to branch manager that Mike had hoped for. He never resented her, though, and had always remained loyal. He assumed she was promoted because the bank had launched a policy of promoting women. Mike supported that policy and happily supported his boss.

He also suspected Grace's attractiveness might have impressed a couple of the vice presidents. She was a curvaceous blonde with a gorgeous smile, a clear, mellifluous voice, and a cheerful manner. Her employees liked her and knew they could rely on her to treat them fairly. Grace always corrected people without criticizing them. She inquired about their lives outside the bank and was always supportive and sympathetic if her people came to her with problems. Mike admired her. Despite having desired the manager's position for himself, he was happy she'd received the promotion.

Their years working together had created a bond that Mike never wanted to lose. Grace felt that bond, too. She always thanked Mike for his help and saw to it that he got good performance reviews and regular raises.

Now, Grace was worried about her friend. At first, she thought she was the only one who noticed how different he seemed because they had worked together for so long. Then she overheard other employees expressing their concerns about him. She kept a close eye on Mike, checking in with him almost every day. She asked about the customers he was seeing. She also looked over his paperwork. Everything remained exemplary. Mike was still her star employee.

But he seemed unhappy, possibly deeply troubled, and (Grace feared) could become unpredictable if no one intervened. She finally worked up the courage to call him into her office. She didn't want to alarm Mike, but felt she had to find out what was bothering him.

"Mike, you and I have worked together for years. I feel like we know each other as professionals and trust each other." *Oh, shit, what did I do?* Mike thought. *Is she about to reprimand me?* "Your work is still first-class, but something about you has changed. Everyone's worried about you. Is something wrong? Is there a problem you need to talk about? Is it one of your co-workers? You know you can tell me anything in confidence. I've always trusted you to be completely honest and forthright with me, and you have. So, tell me, what's going on?"

"It's, um, nothing to do with work, Grace. It's, um, stuff at home."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is everyone okay? Kids, your wife?"

"Kids are fine. Joanne is fine, too," Mike replied, but it was out of habit. He wondered how honest he could be without risking his professional rapport with Grace. *Maybe there's a line I shouldn't cross*, he thought. She sensed he had something on his mind and waited for him to go on. "But our marriage... it isn't fine."

Grace frowned. *This is more serious than I anticipated*, she thought. "Oh, I'm sorry. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Are you sure? You don't have to do this."

"You and I have come a long way together," Grace replied. "Talk to me."

"It's Joanne."

"Your wife."

"She's no longer my wife," Mike said.

Grace frowned. "Has she left you?"

“No, she still lives with us.”

Grace looked perplexed. *What's he trying to tell me?* she wondered. “I don't understand.”

Mike shrugged. “I don't, either, Grace.” A second later, all the hurt he'd been carrying since Joanne revealed her lesbian lover finally overwhelmed him, and Mike started to sob. Grace let him cry for a few moments. Then she got up from her chair and walked around the desk. Mike kept sobbing. Grace put her arm around Mike's shoulder. She held him close. He went on sobbing. Grace waited. Finally, he was ready to go on talking. Without looking at Grace, he began to explain.

“Joanne has a lesbian lover. She's promised to stay until the kids are in college because she owes it to us, but then that's it. Our marriage is already over.”

Grace felt shocked but tried not to react. Hoping to soothe Mike, she pulled his head closer. He felt the rough wool of her business suit. “Oh, God, you poor man. I wish you had told me sooner.”

Mike stopped sobbing and sighed. “What could you or anyone else have done?” he asked.

Grace heard the resignation in his voice, and her heart went out to him. She pulled him closer. He felt the soft pillows of her breasts. As she held him, she considered her reply. *Mike is more than just my employee, she thought. He's my friend, too. He needs me.* “I don't care about her, Mike. I care about you. I know what divorce is like. I went through it myself. This sounds ten times worse.”

“It *is*, Grace. Sometimes I wish I could just die.”

“Don't say that. You have your kids.”

Mike moved his head. She released her hold. He looked up at her. “That's what keeps me going. But I've lost the joy my family once gave me. Sooner or later, they're gonna notice that dad's acting weird. They might feel sorry for me or worry about me, but they could become afraid of me, too. What if I have some sort of outburst, maybe a fight with Joanne in front of them? They're too young to understand divorce, let alone something like this.”

It was Grace's turn to sigh. *How can I help him?* she thought. “I can't fix any of that, Mike, but I can be here for you if you need someone.”

Mike sighed forlornly. “I'm so embarrassed.”

“Don't be. I'm not. We've been coworkers and friends for a long time. You're an asset to this branch-.”

Her comment startled Mike. He sat bolt upright and glared at her. “Is *that* why you care- because I'm an *asset*? Is that all I am to you?”

Grace looked deeply into his eyes. “If that's all you were, Mike, I would never have invited you to talk to me.”

Mike wasn't soothed. He felt she needed reassurance about his performance. “I won't let what's happened affect my work,” he declared.

I still haven't gotten through to him, Grace thought. Then she nodded reassuringly. “I know that, Mike. You're a professional. But this isn't about your work. It's about you. We're friends. You're hurting, and I want to help.”

Grace had never been a mother but had always wanted to be one. In her professional and personal life, she had met many males who, although they were grown men, had never

ceased being little boys. She had never asked why they never grew up or what was missing from their lives, but had developed a theory. *Maybe their mothers just weren't there for them*, she thought. *Maybe all they needed was sympathy, a hug, and soft reassurance.*

She had also wanted someone to be there for. Her ex-husband had been dynamic and self-sufficient. He turned out to be emotionally distant and cold. He hadn't wanted nurturing or anything from Grace except regular sex. When he stopped wanting *that*, she knew their marriage was over. After the divorce, Grace found herself wondering if it had ever begun.

Now she wondered if Mike needed her. *Really* needed her. As far as she could tell, he wasn't a little boy. But he was hurting and needed someone to share his pain. Maybe someone to help him bear it. Grace felt eager to be that person. She knew such a relationship would be risky because she was his boss. Grace told herself not to care. His need was more important.

Without another thought, she leaned down and kissed Mike softly on the lips. Then she whispered. "I'm here for you, Mike. Anytime. Any way you need me."

Astonished by what she had done, Mike realized what she was offering. Help, support, and solace. "I might need you a lot," he replied, looking into her eyes. He had never noticed how blue they were.

"That's good. But we're gonna have to keep it professional."

"Of course. Thanks, Grace. I think you just saved me."

Grace stood up. She removed her arm from Mike's shoulders and smiled contentedly. Then she walked back to her chair and sat. "I guess I'll get back to work," Mike said.

"Yeah," Grace replied. Now that her impulse had passed, she wondered if what she had just done had been incredibly stupid. Had she offered herself to him? What did she want to be, his mother or his lover?

Grace felt confused but not regretful. She had reached out to someone for whom she cared. Maybe that's all it was and would ever be, just a special moment alone in her office. On the other hand, maybe it would lead to more. Grace tried not to speculate about what was going to happen next. *Maybe nothing*, she thought. *Or, maybe a lot.*

She left it up to Mike to decide. Then she caught herself hoping it would be a lot. But, only time would tell.

Chapter 21

Mike hadn't realized how alone he felt. Now he had someone who genuinely cared about him, and it made a difference. No longer being able to talk to Joanne had left him feeling isolated and helpless. But he reminded himself not to take advantage of Grace's friendly support.

Whenever they chatted at work, instead of dwelling on himself, Mike asked about her life. What he didn't know about someone he'd worked closely with for almost two decades astonished him. Grace liked talking about herself. It had been a long time since she'd had anyone in her life who was genuinely interested in who she was and how she felt about things. They found they had similar tastes in movies, TV shows, and some foods. There were also striking differences, but neither wanted them to be an obstacle to their deepening friendship.

Grace began to wonder if that friendship could become anything more.

During one conversation, they stumbled on the subject of involuntary celibacy. Mike had overheard the phrase when someone used it in the break room. It was Julie, one of the younger employees, who everyone thought was flirtatious and some thought was likely promiscuous. She had been complaining that she'd hardly had any dates and couldn't figure out why. Mike had wanted to offer an observation about her flirtatiousness, but he was almost twice her age and felt he might offend her. He mentioned the incident to Grace, thinking Julie might be receptive to advice from an older woman. Simultaneously, Mike and Grace then realized they had stumbled onto the subject of sex. She smiled in a way Mike hadn't seen before. Then, realizing what she was doing, she cleared her throat. Neither knew what else to say. Sex was still personal, private, and a little embarrassing.

After that conversation, Mike looked at his boss differently and began to wonder what she was like under her crisp business suit. He also recalled thinking the same thing when they had first met as new hires. Grace had been even more beautiful back then, but Mike had already been married. Casual thoughts about other women embarrassed him, and he'd put Grace's attractiveness out of his mind. Now, thoughts about Grace were back, and Mike realized he no longer had to keep his distance. He started to wonder if she might feel the same toward him, but didn't know how to find out.

In the weeks that followed, Joanne specified when she was away working and when she was spending time with Allyson. She gave Mike Allyson's phone number (with her permission). Joanne didn't talk about Callie, though. She didn't want to give Mike the impression that she was starting to feel about Callie the way she felt about her own children. The only person who mentioned Callie was Molly. Mike listened as his daughter told him about her new friend, but didn't show any interest. Molly never noticed her father's indifference.

One afternoon, Mike and Grace were wrapping up a meeting just before closing time. Mike stood up to leave her office. She stopped him. "Say, Mike, I was wondering. Would you be interested in getting a drink or maybe a light dinner after work sometime?"

"I'd like that, but the kids need me at home for dinner. And it's kinda important to me, too."

Grace ignored her disappointment and nodded. "Oh, right. I understand."

"But I was thinking about this," Mike went on. "And I had an idea."

She perked up. "Oh?"

"Well, Joanne goes to her girlfriend's house some weekends, but I never get any weekends off." Mike realized he might be hinting at something far beyond what Grace would consider. He started to feel embarrassed and paused. "I'm not saying you and I could-."

Grace had already figured out where he was going. "Spend a whole weekend together?" she asked, smiling. "You're thinking Friday night to Monday morning?"

"Well, that's when she goes."

"I think it's a *wonderful* idea, Mike. It might be what we both need."

"You mean it?" he asked, genuinely surprised.

"Yeah. It'll give us time to get to know each other better. Lord knows we can't do that here at work. It wouldn't be right."

"And we're pretty busy anyway."

"Right. So, when?"

“I’ll talk to Joanne and let you know,” Mike replied. “Is that okay?”

“That’s great! I can’t wait.”

The next Friday, they sat in a cozy booth at an Italian restaurant Grace had suggested. Mike often made spaghetti and meatballs for his children. He felt eager to try something different. Grace offered several alternatives. Mike chose the chicken cacciatore.

“Look, Mike, we’re both bankers and do everything by the book. We don’t leave anything to chance. We cross all the Ts and dot all the Is. But we’re not at work now. We don’t have to be bankers for a whole weekend. We can be spontaneous and free.”

“I have three kids. I know what spontaneous and free means,” Mike joked.

She looked at him. “Good. Maybe you can teach me.”

Mike smiled at her suggestion. “Maybe I can.”

After dinner, Grace took Mike back to her place. When her ex-husband divorced her, she had forced him to sell their house. Grace then found a roomy, charming apartment in a renovated older building on the river. “I’m paying mostly for the view,” she told him as they walked in around dusk. Then she paused, sighed, and looked out at the wide river. “But it’s worth *every* penny.” When she said the words, Mike heard something in her voice that he couldn’t quite identify.

Mike looked out through the wide balcony door, saw the smooth water, and felt surprised. He would never have thought of living near a river and realized immediately that it meant something more to Grace than movies, TV, books, or food. Maybe even more than her job at the bank.

“So, why?” he asked.

“Why *what*?”

“Why the river?”

Grace closed her eyes and thought for a moment. “Can’t you feel it?” she asked.

“Feel *what*?”

She pointed to the water. “That river. It’s deep and strong and moody. Trees are great, but they just stand there. The river moves and never stops. I’ve never seen the water that’s outside that window right at this very moment. I’ve maybe seen water *like* it, but that particular water is new, fresh, and full of something. I’m not sure what it is, but I call it life, for want of a better term. That river is life.”

Mike stopped looking out the window and turned to look at Grace. He had never seen the expression she had on her face. It was childlike awe.

“You probably think I’m crazy,” she said.

“No, I think you explained it so wonderfully that I can see it, too. And feel it. Thanks for opening my eyes.”

“So, do you like my river?” she asked, shyly. Grace wanted him to like more than just her river. She had revealed something deeply personal and worried she’d said too much.

“Yeah.”

“Good. It’s as much a part of me as the bank is.”

“I understand,” Mike replied, softly.

“Do you? The most important thing in your life is your children, and I envy you. My life is that river.”

“Do you ever think of...?”

“Sailing away?” Grace asked. She was unsure if she read his mind or if he was reading hers and didn’t care. “How did you know?”

“I heard the yearning in your voice. You think of adventure, don’t you?”

Grace smiled embarrassedly. “Do you think I’m weird?”

“I think you’re beautiful, Grace.”

Grace liked to sit quietly in the dark on the large balcony. She’d done it alone many times, always clothed. Later that evening, she sat naked with Mike under a thin blanket to keep out the early fall evening chill. She liked that he didn’t doze off and didn’t talk. The silence was important to her. She and Mike had nowhere to be, nothing to do, and no need to speak. The river did and said everything for them.

Mike didn’t even think about his children. It was the first time in many years that he thought about himself. Suddenly, what Joanne had done didn’t seem so awful and no longer hurt as much. Mike wondered if he and Grace were on a path toward something serious. They had three nights and two whole days to get to know each other better, and were off to a great start.

Mike looked out at the dark water. He hoped the river was only the beginning. Maybe Grace would reveal more amazing stuff about herself during their weekend together. His only concern was that she might not discover that he was as terrific as she was. He needn’t have worried because she already saw him that way.

Already, he had unknowingly passed two tests. The first was the river, and the second was how he made her feel when, soon after they gazed at the river, she had taken him to her bed. Grace had assumed their first time would be exciting. She hadn’t had sex in a long while and was horny but what she felt with Mike wasn’t just the reawakening of her sexuality. There was something more, but Grace couldn’t give it a name. Nor did she need to. Something in the way they made love told her that if she wanted him, Mike could be hers.

Later in bed, as she fell asleep next to him, Grace fantasized about how they would explain their decision to marry to everyone at work. (If their relationship went that far. Grace wasn’t sure if she wanted that to happen, but liked to fantasize. It was fun.) One of them would have to move to another branch office. Grace didn’t care. Nothing mattered except the present moment.

Mike awoke Saturday morning with one of the best ideas he had ever had in his life and couldn’t wait to share it with Grace. She was already out of bed and making breakfast. He dressed in a t-shirt and shorts and left the bedroom, hoping his attire was appropriate. It was.

Dressed in a light robe, Grace stood over the stove. Mike could tell she wore nothing underneath. “Morning,” he said as he entered the small kitchen.

“You’re up! I was wondering if you were gonna sleep all day.”

“Uh, no. I never do that. Kids won’t let me.”

“Oh, right. Well, if you wanna go back to bed, I’d understand.”

“No, thanks,” Mike replied. “I slept great.”

“Good. Hungry?”

“Yes. What are you making?”

“Nothing fancy. I like easy breakfasts on the weekend. Just coffee, toast, maybe a couple of eggs. Occasionally, I’ll make some bacon, or if I’m feeling ambitious, I’ll rustle up some pancakes.”

“Rustle up?” Mike teased, grinning. She didn’t reply. “So, what’d you make today?” he asked.

“Everything. I wasn’t sure what you would like.”

“I like all that stuff. Need any help?”

“No. It’s almost ready. Sit.”

Grace served him a plate piled with all the foods she mentioned. “Wow! This is enough for several days,” he joked.

“You don’t have to eat it all. We can save some for tomorrow. I mostly don’t cook on Sundays.”

“Oh, okay.”

They ate in silence. Mike enjoyed their feeling of closeness. It wasn’t merely the food. Nor was it the fact that he wore his underwear and Grace wore a thin robe. “I haven’t had Saturday breakfast without my kids for as far back as I can recall.”

“Oh. Do you miss them?”

Mike answered without hesitation. “Strangely, no.”

“I’m glad,” Grace replied, smiling.

“So am I. Thanks.”

“So what do you want to do today?” she asked. Then she put a forkful of food into her mouth.

“I thought we could be spontaneous and free.”

Grace considered his suggestion. “Oh? What did you have in mind?”

“Rides.”

“You mean like a long ride in the country? That sounds nice.”

“No, I mean roller coasters, carousels, Tilt-a-Whirls, stuff like that.”

“Oh, *that* kind of ride,” Grace replied, smiling.

“We could pretend we’re teenagers on a date.”

Grace smiled and nodded. “I like the way you think.”

“You inspire me.”

At the amusement park, they forgot about being a bank manager, a loan officer, a divorcee, a spurned husband, and a devoted father and became two kids on a lark. “Ooh, they have a Tunnel of Love,” Grace commented as they walked around.

“I’ve been on almost all the other rides but never in there,” Mike said.

“So, you’re a Tunnel of Love virgin?”

“You could say that.”

“We gotta go in,” Grace urged. She pulled him toward the ride.

“Yes, but not just yet.”

“Why not?”

“If we go on that ride first,” Mike explained. “It will be the only one we go on all day.”

“Oh? Is it that good?”

“No, *you* are.”

They rode every ride, sitting as close as they could, and their closeness titillated them. As they strolled from one ride to the next, Mike noticed the admiring looks Grace received from passing men. She looked pert and sexy in her shorts and top. Mike didn't have to look, however, because he already knew what Grace looked like when her clothes were off.

Later, they stopped to pick up Chinese take-out food and took it back to her kitchen.

"The first time I meet your kids, I want it to be at that amusement park," Grace said as they were eating. Mike didn't reply. Grace wondered if she had said something wrong. "Don't you want me to meet them?"

"Yeah. Eventually."

Suddenly embarrassed, Grace looked down. "Oh."

"It's not you, Grace. The kids don't know anything's wrong between Joanne and me. We've tried to keep things as normal as possible. If dad introduces them to his girlfriend, I don't know what that'll do to them."

"You're a considerate dad."

"They're all I have," Mike commented.

Grace shook her head slowly. "No, Mike. That's no longer true."

"What do you mean?"

Grace felt like being evasive. "You're wrong about that."

"I am?"

"Yes."

"C'mon, Grace. Tell me what you mean."

"You now have *me*, Mike," Grace explained, shyly. "That is, if you want me."

Mike did. It was only Saturday evening, but both of them felt certain that their weekend together was already a success.

Chapter 22

When Mike returned home after work on Monday evening, Joanne didn't ask him how his weekend with Grace had been. The look on his face told her all she had to know. *He's different*, she thought.

She hadn't been surprised when he told her he wanted a weekend to spend with a woman. What had surprised her was who that woman was. "Grace, your *boss*?" Joanne had asked. Mike nodded. "I've known her almost as long as you have. How long has this been going on?" She didn't feel jealous, only curious.

"It just started," Mike had replied. "Actually, it hasn't started yet. This weekend will be the first time we've spent together away from work. Ever."

Joanne hadn't been sure she believed him, but what did it matter? *If I can have Allyson, why can't he have Grace?* she thought. *It's only fair. For us, anyway, but what about the kids?*

In the following weeks, Mike and Grace settled into a mutually satisfying relationship. But, despite finding happiness with Grace, he still felt Joanne had wronged him irredeemably. Joanne might feel that Mike having a girlfriend somehow compensated for what she'd done to him, but he didn't feel the same way. He had expected their marriage bond would last a lifetime, but Joanne had broken it. No matter how she explained it, Mike couldn't accept that he was no longer her first and only love.

If Allyson had remained in the past, if he'd never found out about her and Joanne had remained his loving wife, there would have been no problem. Even if he somehow found out about Allyson later, it would have made no difference as long as she remained old news. But that's not what had happened. Mike wasn't about to forgive Joanne for what she had done. Nor did he want to think about the chaos she might cause in the future.

He and Joanne had built a good life together. They brought three wonderful children into the world. Mike had felt secure and happy. Then she pulled the rug out from under him and wounded him deeply. He never expected to heal fully. Grace was a great woman, and he was happy he found her, but being with her couldn't compensate for losing not just his wife but the stability and security of his entire life. Of course, he never mentioned any of this to Grace.

Mike became obsessed with questions he couldn't answer. *Why did Joanne have to mess up everything by meeting her old girlfriend in a club? What was she doing there, anyway? She was supposed to be hard at work saving some business or other.* His questions made no difference because she had already disrupted their lives beyond repair. His feelings, however, were not repairable and weren't going to change. He felt hurt. If he ever found an opportunity to hurt Joanne as badly as she'd hurt him, Mike knew he would take it. He also knew that he couldn't tell anyone how he felt because no one would understand. Not even Grace.

After their first month together, Grace was eager to build a life with him and his children. Mike held back, and she didn't know why. Was it because he didn't want more than an affair? Or was it because he didn't want to disrupt what was left of normalcy for his family? Maybe he was still in love with his wife and either didn't know or wouldn't admit it. That possibility, for Grace, was the worst. She had already fallen in love with him.

Grace was willing to be patient and give Mike time to figure things out, but wondered if a time would come when it would become clear that their relationship had no real future. At some point, she would have to think of her own feelings. *Then what?* Grace thought. *Workplace romances are so stupid! How did I get sucked into one? Oh, wait. I didn't get sucked in. I reached out. And, I haven't been this happy, despite Mike's complications, in a long time.*

Grace decided to hang in a while longer.

"You have to understand that I can't push him any further because I don't know what his breaking point is," Joanne told Allyson. She had brought Molly over so the girls could play together. Whenever Molly and Joanne visited, the women stayed away from Allyson's bedroom. Callie wondered why her mother and Joanne were so cautious when Molly was around. She guessed it was because Molly still didn't know Allyson and Joanne were lesbians.

"I understand, Joanne. You have to be fair to him. A lot has changed in his life. Pretty fast, too."

"Yeah, and I'm trying to keep what little stability he has left. I owe him that."

"Is it because you're still his wife or because you still love him?" Allyson asked. Her sharp query surprised Joanne, and she looked hurt. *Have I said too much?* Allyson thought.

“I love you, Allyson. *Only* you. But we’re not kids anymore, and we both know it. Life was simple back in high school. So was love, but both are complicated now. Really complicated. I don’t think life will ever be that simple again.” Joanne paused and sighed. “Maybe that’s what it means to be an adult. I don’t know.”

Allyson also sighed. She’d had the same thoughts many times since Joanne came back into her life. There were no good answers. “I know. I don’t know where that came from. I’m sorry.”

“Maybe you have doubts,” Joanne said. She meant it to sound like a question, but it came out as a statement.

Allyson didn’t know how to reply. *Do I?* she wondered. She looked at Joanne and grinned. “Maybe we need to talk more often instead of just going to bed.”

“I like doing both,” Joanne replied, smiling. “But it does seem a strange conversation, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe it’s one that was long overdue.”

“You might be right. I don’t want there to be anything between us.”

“Neither do I, Joanne. And, I do understand your concern for Mike. He and I have experienced the same kind of loss. But you haven’t.”

Joanne looked away from Allyson. “And, I hope I never will. But let’s not think about that right now.”

“You’re right. Let’s not talk about loss. We have so much to be thankful for. You’ve brought so much joy into my life, joy I never thought I’d ever experience again. I know we’re not kids anymore, but I sure feel like one when I’m with you.”

Joanne smiled sweetly. “Same here,” she said, softly.

They simultaneously thought back to the night six months ago when they met at the club. Their first weekend together had been passionate, and they’d wanted more. That fun visit to the amusement park with Callie and Virginia had allowed the women to feel young and playful again. They also relished all the times they’d been alone in the past six months. Happiness, like what they were feeling, would have seemed impossible if they’d thought about it before they found each other again. Yet, there they were. And, hoped to remain.

That was always the risky part. Both women were old enough to know the child’s belief in something called ‘happily ever after’ was an illusion. Yet the dream of a love that would never end was real. Allyson and Joanne had it back in high school, but it had only lasted a year. Then Allyson thought she had it with her husband, but he left. Mike thought he had it with a wife he adored and depended on. Then she took her love away from him and gave it to someone else.

No one wanted to admit that things always changed, often in ways people didn’t like. Mostly, no one got a choice. Shit just happened. Yet, Allyson and Joanne had had a choice. They could have allowed their romance to remain in the past. Instead, they chose to revive it in the present. Both knew what it could do to the lives of others, but plunged in anyway. Neither regretted it. The best they could hope for now was that they kept going for as long as circumstances or the world allowed. That would have to be enough.

Realistically, both knew it never was. That was the way love was. Lovers always wanted more. But getting more could be a problem.

Joanne felt uneasy because she hadn't told Molly what Callie already knew- that their mothers were in love. Joanne had explained about boys, sex, dating, and babies. Molly had even mentioned a boy she liked at school.

What will she do, Joanne wondered, when she learns what her mother truly is? Will she still love me? Callie still loves Allyson. But they've been a two-person family for a long time, and their relationship is different. Molly has a father she can turn to if her mother disappoints or frightens her. Joanne didn't want that to happen but wasn't sure how to prevent it. She suspected that eventually Molly would figure out something was going on between her mother and Callie's mother. *Then what?* Joanne wondered. *And, what will happen when my boys find out? Will I still have a family?*

It occurred to Joanne that, in the future, the only person who loved her might be Allyson. As soon as that realization struck her, she knew that was not how she wanted her life to be, but had no idea how to prevent it. For the first time since she and Allyson had reconnected, Joanne felt she was no longer in control of her life. Despite that realization, she refused to regret what they had done. Joanne allowed herself to think that maybe, just maybe, they merely had allowed things to go too far. Perhaps the love they had shared in the past should have *stayed* in the past.

She didn't know that Mike felt the same way.

The next time the women were alone, it was just after noon on a Friday. Allyson had called in sick because Joanne called her unexpectedly and asked if she could spend the weekend. The women sat next to each other on the bed but kept their clothes on. Joanne seemed uneasy. Allyson assumed Joanne was feeling job pressures and wanted to soothe her before they started what she hoped would be a weekend of lovemaking. She waited for Joanne to start talking. When she did, Joanne didn't talk about her job. She talked about their relationship.

"I know you've wanted us to live together, Allyson. I did, too. I thought it would happen. But only after my kids were grown and out of the house."

"I told you I was okay with that."

"Yeah. But, now I don't think I'm okay with it."

"What?" Allyson asked. "Why?"

"What if, no matter how old they are, my kids never understand this? What if they just stop loving me? I don't want to not be their mother."

"Do you think that could happen?" Allyson asked.

"Yes, it could, and I don't want it to." Joanne couldn't look at Allyson. "I'm sorry."

Allyson tried to conceal her shock. "You're *sorry*, Joanne? Does that mean you're breaking up with me?"

"I don't know what it means, Allyson. I'm so confused, and I can't afford to be confused. My job demands that I be laser-focused. My clients expect my mind to work 150% to solve their problems. But if I can't solve my own, then what?"

"So, I'm a *problem*, now?" Allyson asked.

"No, No. That's not what I meant."

Allyson knew what was in her heart and knew it belonged to Joanne now. Was her heart about to be broken? "Then what did you mean, Joanne?"

“I don’t know. That’s another problem. Everything seems like it’s either coming apart right now or will soon come apart, and I can’t let it. I have to stay in control.”

The conversation was heading in a direction that terrified Allyson. She needed to soothe her growing apprehension. Nodding, she took Joanne’s hand and looked at her face. “I understand.”

“Do you really, Allyson? You have no idea. Your life is completely different. You have a freedom I can’t even imagine.”

Allyson fought to control her churning emotions. Then a question occurred to her. She should have hesitated to ask it because Joanne’s answer could be devastating. But maybe they had reached the point where everything needed to be said, no matter how risky that was. Allyson looked directly at Joanne. Her intense gaze made Joanne wince. Allyson tightened her grip on her hand. “Can you imagine a life *without* me, Joanne? Can you imagine *that*?”

Joanne looked at her lover. Allyson couldn’t read her face. “I... I... can’t answer that.”

Allyson’s apprehension boiled over into rage. “What the fuck, Joanne! Why don’t you just leave now and think about it, and then let me know when you’ve figured it out! That’s what you’re good at, isn’t it- figuring shit out, fixing things, saving companies? Do your job, Joanne. Do your *fucking* job!”

Joanne recoiled from Allyson’s rage. She looked at her and tried to find words, but they wouldn’t come. Words were a big part of what she did. She analyzed companies and had to use words to explain what her analysis found. Often, the companies were so out of touch with themselves that they couldn’t grasp what she tried to tell them. Then she had to find new ways to get through to them. It was her job to make them understand. Eventually, she always did.

But she had no words for her feelings, no words for Allyson, and no words for anyone else. Joanne felt devastated. All she could think of was that she needed to get away. From Allyson, her family, her job, and, maybe, the world.

That was when she realized she’d lost herself. She didn’t know if it was because of her love affair with Allyson, her marriage to Mike, her love for her children, or something else. Since companies in trouble paid her to fix them, she thought she ought to try to make sense of her life because, yes, *she* was in trouble. In addition, her loss of control threatened several other lives. There were people she could hurt; people she had already hurt.

That was the moment when Joanne came apart. She walked out of Allyson’s bedroom and headed down the steps. A moment later, she was out the front door. After she got into her car, she pulled away quickly but had no idea where she was going.

Alone in her bedroom, Allyson sat on her bed and wondered what had just happened. Had she inadvertently caused a crisis that might never be resolved? The thought that her life might not be worth living if she couldn’t be with Joanne crossed her mind. Then she thought of Callie and realized she had to go on. She had no choice.

Callie had stayed home from school because the teachers had an in-service day. Allyson went downstairs and walked into the kitchen. “I thought Joanne was staying all weekend,” Callie said.

“She had an emergency,” Allyson replied. But Joanne’s job wasn’t the emergency. Her life was, and Allyson felt helpless. She also ached because she might never see her lover again.

Chapter 23

As she drove further away, Joanne wondered the same thing. *I could just disappear*, she thought. *I could lie and say I’m on a job, and no one would know what was really happening.*

She thought more about her dilemma. *I thought I had everything I wanted, and it was all under control. Then it suddenly all came apart. I guess what wasn’t under control was me. Now, on top of hurting everyone else, I’ve hurt Allyson, too.*

Joanne drove around for several hours before she ended up in the parking lot in front of the Airport Motel office. She had sometimes stayed at the motel to decompress before going home after difficult assignments. When Joanne walked in, the desk clerk, a skinny blonde woman, was chewing gum and reading yesterday’s comic pages. She barely looked at Joanne, just handed her the pen, and told her to sign the registry. Then she indifferently took Joanne’s credit card and asked how many nights she was staying. “A few,” Joanne replied. The woman shrugged. When the registration was finished, she handed Joanne the room key, and Joanne left the motel office wondering if the woman would even recall seeing her. *Maybe she had other things on her mind*, Joanne thought. *Or, maybe it’s just a shit job and she’s only putting in the hours.* Either way, Joanne didn’t care.

She drove to the parking space outside her room and took her travel suitcase out of the trunk. After fitting the key in the lock, she opened the door and went inside. Joanne threw the suitcase on the bed and locked the door. Then she looked around.

Although it didn’t look like much from the outside, the Airport Motel was remarkably pleasant on the inside. That was why she had gone there. The bed was comfortable; the sheets and towels were always fresh; and the furniture and carpeting were better quality than many other places Joanne had stayed. It was a good place to relax, a sanctuary. That was what she needed right now. She wanted to keep out the world and... and... Joanne wasn’t sure what else she wanted.

Her stomach gurgled. She looked at her watch and noticed it was almost dinnertime. She’d skipped lunch because she felt so overwhelmed by what had happened with Allyson. There was no food at the motel. She recalled passing a Chinese restaurant down the road. *That’ll do*, she thought.

Joanne took her key, pocketbook, and fall jacket and headed out the door. She walked past the parked cars and stopped at the motel driveway entrance. Joanne spotted the restaurant a few hundred feet away. *There it is, only it’s further away than I remember. And, look! There’s a gentlemen’s club right next to it. How convenient.*

Joanne was feeling reckless. At that moment, she decided what she would do after she ate dinner. An hour later, Joanne left her room again and walked to the club.

Friday nights were Ladies’ Nights at the Aphrodite Gentlemen’s Club. Joanne went right in. She walked up to the bar and ordered a Scotch and water. Then she found a table. Joanne didn’t know what to expect next. She liked that.

It was still early, and not many other women were there. Loud music with a pounding beat started. Two slender, shapely young women slinked onto the stage. They started writhing around poles. Joanne didn't watch them; she paid more attention to the men in the club. Many watched. A few liked what they saw and smiled. Some leered. Others ignored the dancers and chatted with friends.

More people arrived, and the tables began to fill up. The performing women didn't seem to care what happened in the audience. Joanne admired their indifference. *I guess when you do this every night, you don't care what reaction you get so long as you get paid*, she thought. Then she wondered what life was like for someone who did this every night.

After the music stopped, the dancers hurried off the stage. An announcer came on the loudspeaker. He welcomed everyone and reminded the audience that it was ladies' night. That meant it was amateur night. "If you've ever dreamed of earning big bucks as a dancer, now's your chance to audition," the announcer said, without a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

Joanne ordered and then consumed her second and third Scotch and water. The dancers who'd been on stage started circulating in the room along with others who hadn't yet performed. They zeroed in on women (more had arrived) and asked them to come up on stage and give the guys a little show. "It's all in fun," the girl who approached Joanne said. Fun was why Joanne was there. *What the hell*, she thought. *Nobody knows me. I can just let it all hang out. Maybe that's what I need*. She got up and headed tipsily for the stage.

Two other women were already dancing. Joanne stood between them. She watched as they tried to move as the real performers had done. It was harder than it looked, and the amateurs didn't seem to be getting it right. *I can top them!* Joanne thought.

She bent her legs and stuck out her ass. Then she rotated it. She took hold of the hem of her skirt and closed her eyes. Soon she had synchronized her backside motions to the pounding beat. Pulling her skirt upwards over her thighs, more of her skin showed. She flashed glimpses of her dark panties. The audience started getting excited. They realized amateur night, which usually consisted of women goofing around onstage, was about to get serious.

Somebody in the back yelled, "Take it off." Joanne let go of her skirt and started unbuttoning her crisp white blouse. When there were only two lower buttons left, she opened the blouse and showed her breasts. The reaction was exactly what she'd hoped for. The men went wild.

Then there was more. After Joanne finished unbuttoning, she slowly removed the blouse and then unfastened her bra from the front. The halves dangled from her shoulders and moved as she swayed her breasts. Joanne opened her eyes. She looked out at the audience and ran her tongue over her lips. Then she reached down and lifted her skirt past her thigh. Thrusting out her pelvis, she started fingering her crotch. A moment later, she sat down on the stage with her legs splayed wide. Then she laid back with her exposed crotch visible to the audience.

Joanne felt the raunchy heat in the room and was eager to ratchet it even higher. She started humping her midriff up and down. Two men got up from their chairs and started toward the stage, but the bouncers stopped them. The bartender called to one of the dancers. "She's drunk. Get her off the stage before somebody starts a riot."

“I think we have a winner!” the announcer proclaimed. The dancer mounted the stage and reached out to help Joanne stand. She didn’t lower her skirt or cover her breasts.

“C’mon, honey, before you get yourself in trouble,” the dancer said. She picked up Joanne’s blouse and pulled her toward the curtain. The audience wanted more. They clapped, cheered, and booed. Joanne lowered her panties, flashed her bare ass, and then disappeared.

“I wasn’t finished,” Joanne complained, slurring her words. She was drunk not only on booze but on the effect her sleazy show had on the men. She liked being wild and bringing out the animal lust that lurked just below the surface.

“Yes, you were,” the dancer said. “Now you’re coming back to the dressing room.”

The dancer sat Joanne in front of a large mirror. She smiled at the half-naked woman she saw there. Then she noticed the dancer up close. On stage, everyone had watched the dancer’s figure. The girl had small, pert breasts, a shapely ass, and long legs. Up close, Joanne saw her delicate facial features. “You’re *pretty*,” Joanne said. “Can I have you?”

“What does that mean?” the dancer asked.

Joanne made a pouty face. “I think I just broke up with my girlfriend, and I’m lonely. Will you spend the night with me?”

Unlike some other performers, this dancer never went with male customers who propositioned her. It wasn’t a demand of her job. The club owner pretended not to know what the girls did on their own. She would have been happy to take the money the men offered if she’d been into men. But she wasn’t. Joanne’s lewd show had aroused her as much as it had excited the men. Maybe even more.

“Sure.”

“Good. I’m at the Airport Motel.”

“All right. Let’s get dressed and I’ll help you get back there.”

Back in her motel room, Joanne asked the girl for her name. “Louisa,” the girl told her, although it wasn’t.

“You can call me Allyson,” Joanne said. She undressed herself and Louisa before she turned out the light. Joanne’s lovemaking impressed Louisa, and she let herself go for the first time in a long while. Afterward, Louisa praised Joanne and said how much she enjoyed it. Joanne felt surprised. “Don’t you enjoy it with the men?” she asked. “They must surely enjoy you. You’re so beautiful.”

Louisa frowned and shook her head. “I don’t go with the men. I hate them.”

“They’re not so bad,” Joanne said, thinking of Mike.

“Maybe the ones *you* know aren’t, but the ones I’ve met are.”

“So what do I owe you?” Joanne asked.

Louisa scowled. “I’m no whore,” she said, curtly.

Joanne smiled. “We’re all whores, honey, and don’t you forget it. We all prostitute ourselves. There are endless possibilities...”

“I don’t wanna know.”

“Good. Then I won’t tell you,” Joanne replied. “The stories are all sad, anyway. Let’s fuck again, shall we?”

“I should get back to my job.”

Joanne took Louisa’s hand. “Look, whatever money you’re missing, I’ll make it up. Just a gift, nothing more. Stay with me. Please.”

“I’d rather not,” Louisa replied.

Joanne let go of Louisa. “I understand. Well, thanks for your company. Have a great life.”

“You, too.”

Not much chance of that, both women thought simultaneously. Louisa left without saying goodbye. Joanne fell asleep soon after.

Chapter 24

After Joanne awoke on Saturday morning, she immediately thought of Louisa and wondered if she ought to go back to the club later to look for her. Then she wondered if Louisa had been real or merely an alcohol and lust-infused fantasy. Maybe the Aphrodite Club was, too.

She wasn’t the kind of person who fantasized and thought fantasies were a waste of time. If something wasn’t real, it didn’t interest her. Joanne had the resources to make things happen. Fantasies were for people who didn’t. She forgot about Louisa and went back to sleep.

Early Saturday afternoon, Mike called Allyson’s house looking for Joanne. Jake had fallen and fractured his wrist. After an awkward moment (it was the first time they’d ever spoken to each other), Allyson told Mike Joanne wasn’t there. He felt confused. “She told me she was spending the weekend with you,” he said. Allyson explained what had happened. “I don’t understand,” Mike replied.

“Neither do I,” Allyson said. She went on to admit she felt sorry for Mike. “I know what it’s like when your spouse leaves,” she explained.

“That’s the problem,” Mike replied. “She hasn’t left me, but she kinda has.”

“I think she might have just left both of us, Mike, and I don’t think there’s anything we can do about it.”

“Do you think she’ll come back?” Mike asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

By Saturday afternoon, Joanne had cleared her head from last night’s debauchery. Sitting in bed, she looked at her options. She could go back to Allyson, back to Mike, back to her office, or stay in the motel room. Going back didn’t appeal to her, but she didn’t know what she would do alone at the motel.

It’s easy when you’re a teenager in love and you just follow your heart, she thought. *I can’t follow my heart, now.* Joanne couldn’t even find her heart. That was how lost she felt.

Then she thought of something else. *Maybe I need to look back at my life and figure out how I got here and where I want to go. Nah. That would be a waste of time. Maybe I shouldn’t think past dinner.*

Joanne decided to go out to look for a convenience store. She wanted to buy some groceries. She drove past the Aphrodite Gentlemen’s Club and smiled. For a brief time Friday night, she had been someone different. Instead of being the cool, controlled, corporate analyst, she’d become the hot bitch whose lewd movements on stage had nearly caused a riot. Getting drunk and losing her identity had felt so good. So had making love with Louisa. Joanne smiled again.

Later, sitting alone in her room, she wondered if she ought to disappear forever. Perhaps she should just go to the airport and buy a ticket. Joanne began to wonder where she could go. She had no passport and had to stay in the United States, but had a credit card and a savings account no one knew about. If she found somewhere to run to, she wouldn't have to get a job right away. She could settle in first.

Settle into what? she thought. *A new life? Alone? Without my children?* Her job had taken her away from them too much already. The thought that she might never see them again frightened her.

Running away was not a realistic possibility. Nor was keeping things exactly as they were. Yet what other choices did she have?

Joanne didn't see any. She thought about getting drunk and dancing again. But the bartender at Aphrodite probably wouldn't serve her, and the bouncer might not even allow her in the door. She thought about Louisa again and wondered if there was a way to get in touch with her. Another night of lovemaking might help. Even if it didn't, it would still be fun.

Joanne decided to spend a week at the motel. She liked the idea that no one knew where she was. Her kids would likely assume she was at work. Her bosses would assume she was with a confidential client. She liked that she had escaped, but knew it was temporary. Eventually, she would have to go back. But to *what?* That was the nagging question. Joanne wished there was a clear answer, but couldn't see one.

Her impulsiveness in leaving Allyson baffled her. She thought she had everything she wanted, and it was all working splendidly. Then she panicked and ran away. *Why did I suddenly realize it wasn't working?* she asked herself. Was it because of Allyson's question? What had that question triggered? And why?

All Allyson had asked was whether Joanne could imagine life without her. Joanne had already lived that life for the twenty-five years she and Allyson had been apart. The romance Allyson and Joanne had shared when they were teenagers should have ended when Joanne moved away. But it hadn't. When they reconnected, it was as if they had never separated. Joanne wondered if they'd revived their long-lost love or had only been revisiting it, and that visit had lasted too long. *We should have had our weekend fling and then gone back to our adult lives*, Joanne thought. But they hadn't. Instead, they had tried to be teenagers again, but it hadn't worked. Maybe it never could have worked. *So, maybe it's over*, Joanne told herself.

She sighed. Perhaps she had reached clarity. Maybe even a decision. Was it the *right* one, the one she really wanted? She didn't know, but had a week to figure out what to do. Joanne wondered if that would be enough time. Not seeing any other way to approach her dilemma, she went back to sleep. No dreams came this time.

Chapter 25

It didn't take Joanne a week to decide what to do. Only a few days. She checked out of the motel late Tuesday and went back to her husband, her children, and her job. But not to her lover. Nevertheless, the changes set in motion by her affair didn't stop.

Mike had no wish to stop seeing Grace. He made that fact clear the first night Joanne came home. He told her that no matter what she did, he wasn't going to change what he was

doing. There would be no going back. If Joanne's affair had collapsed, that was her problem. His affair was going well and would continue. It was her turn to adjust.

In the weeks after Joanne came back, Mike sometimes dropped off Molly at Callie's house. Other times, Allyson drove Callie to meet Molly at the movie theater or the mall entrance. The girls' friendship deepened, and Virginia sometimes joined them.

After her business trips, Joanne returned with even more lavish gifts for her children. Sometimes she and Mike talked in bed at night. He told her about household expenses, things the kids wanted to do, or places they asked to go. She listened, nodded, and felt grateful she still had a family.

Talking in bed was *all* they did. Mike no longer felt attracted to Joanne and wondered why he'd ever found her attractive. Whenever he looked at her, he reminded himself that she was a lesbian. *She can never be mine again*, Mike thought. *And, maybe she never was*. Grace met his needs now. Their affair remained confidential and did not affect their work at the bank.

After a month alone, Allyson wanted to call Joanne just to hear her voice, but never worked up the courage to dial the phone. Nor, when Molly was visiting Callie, did she ask Molly about her mother. Now that the affair seemed over, the girls no longer thought about their moms. They were kids and had other things to talk about.

In mid-October, Callie and Virginia were enjoying another sleepover. There had been several since Virginia's mother, Debbie, had softened her feelings toward Callie and Allyson. The girls watched videos, shared a pizza, talked, did homework (but not too much), and enjoyed their time away from school.

At school, the girls remained as subdued and unobtrusive as possible. Now that their second middle school year was underway, the strategy seemed to be working. The other kids mostly left them alone. At Callie's house, they could be themselves and didn't have to worry about what anyone else thought about them.

During their sleepovers, Allyson fed them dinner and made sure they'd done some homework, but otherwise left them on their own. Callie felt sorry for her mother because she seemed lonely and sad all the time. Virginia noticed Allyson's changed behavior.

"I haven't seen your mom's friend in a while," Virginia said when the girls were alone. After they'd eaten, Allyson had cleaned up and then gone off to her bedroom. Callie expected she wouldn't see her mother until later, when she came downstairs to remind the girls not to stay up too late. Then she would retreat to her bedroom and not check on them again. The girls had tried staying up all night a couple of times just to see what it felt like, but so far hadn't made it.

"Yeah. It's been a while. I don't think they're friends anymore."

"You're not sure?" Virginia asked.

"Mom's never said it out loud. But Joanne hasn't come over or called in a month. I asked about her, and mom told me she was just busy."

"That's a shame. She was nice."

"Yeah, I liked her, too," Callie replied. "But, I don't believe she's busy. I think they had a fight."

"What about?" Virginia asked.

"I have no idea."

“Well, whatever it was, your mom looks like she’s really sad now, and really hurt.”

“I know,” Callie said. “I’ve tried to make her feel better, but she won’t talk about it. When I ask, she just tells me I wouldn’t understand.”

Virginia scowled. “I *hate* it when parents tell you that.”

“I know! I mean, she could try, at least. I’m not stupid.”

Callie had liked the way her mother was when Joanne was around. Virginia liked the way Joanne treated her when all four of them were together. She had felt as if she was in a family with two mommies and realized she normally felt as if she didn’t have even one.

“Well, I don’t understand,” Virginia admitted in a quiet voice.

“Neither do I. All I know is that my mom was happy for the first time I can remember.”

“Is there anything we can do?”

“I don’t think so,” Callie replied.

“Can we talk to that woman, Joanne?”

“Well, no. But, I still see Molly. She’s coming over to join us tomorrow. I hope that’s okay.”

“Yes! I like her. Do you think we should talk to *her*?” Virginia asked.

“I wouldn’t know what to say, and I don’t know how much she knows. So, no.”

“Darn!”

They left it there.

Callie was worried about her mother, but kids shouldn’t have to solve adult problems they scarcely understood, no matter how much they cared about the adults. She had liked Allyson better when Joanne was around than when her mother brought home any of the men she used to date.

A few nights later, when Callie and Allyson were eating dinner, Callie decided to renew an old conversation. “So, Mom, remember Nancy and Gertrude?”

Allyson didn’t grin this time. She remained impassive. “Vaguely. Who were they again?”

“Those two lesbian girls you told me about.”

“Oh, yeah. Why did you mention them?”

“They were in love, right?” Callie asked. Allyson nodded. She wondered where Callie was going with this. “So were you and Joanne,” Callie stated. She watched for her mother’s reaction, but Allyson just nodded impassively. Callie went on. “So, what happened, Mom? Why do you seem so messed up?”

“Because Joanne and I broke up, Callie.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought. But why?”

“I’m not sure, but I think it was because she couldn’t handle her life with me. Things got too complicated.”

“Is love always so complicated?” Callie asked.

Allyson wasn’t sure how much she should say. “For some people, it is; for others, it’s simple, or they think it’s simple.”

“Is it?”

Allyson thought before she replied. “No. But most people don’t care. When they fall in love, that’s all that matters to them. The other person is all they want.”

“Is that what *you* wanted- Joanne?”

Allyson nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

“But she ended up not wanting you?” Callie asked.

Allyson tried to think of a response. She looked at her daughter but didn’t reply. A moment later, she burst into tears. Then she cried for a while. Callie watched but didn’t understand why her mother was crying. Was it because of Callie’s questions, Joanne’s absence, or something else? Callie hadn’t intended her questions to cause her mother to cry. She wondered if Allyson would explain.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” she said.

Allyson smiled through her tears. “Please don’t be. You’ve done me a big favor.”

“I have?”

“Yeah. I needed to do all that crying. I needed it *bad*. Thanks so much, Callie. You’re the best daughter a mom could ever hope for.”

“I *am*? You’re sure of that?”

Allyson got up from her chair and walked toward Callie. She leaned down and hugged her forcefully. Callie felt something had changed. Allyson wasn’t hugging the way a loving mother soothes a hurting child. She was hugging with the gratitude a hurting mother gives her understanding daughter. “Yeah, Callie. I’m sure,” she said.

Callie hoped she had eased her mother’s pain. She had. Maybe the worst was over.

On Friday night, Grace and Mike again huddled on her balcony overlooking the water. Joanne was at home with the kids. The warm fall afternoon had turned cooler. They were naked beneath a thick, warm blanket. It had become their favorite way to enjoy the river.

“So, what’s happening with your wife?” Grace asked. “You haven’t mentioned her in a while.”

“I’m not sure,” Mike replied.

“Is she still around?”

“Yeah, she is.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does she still see that other woman?” Grace asked.

“She told me it was over, but I’m not sure. She hasn’t mentioned her, though.”

Grace sighed. “You’ve put up with a lot in your marriage, Mike.”

“Have I? It didn’t seem so bad before-”

“The other woman?” Grace interrupted.

“Yeah. I accepted Joanne’s secret job. I was proud of her. And the money she makes is incredible.”

“Yeah, but... is *she* incredible?”

Mike thought for a moment. “Yeah... Well, she *was*, anyway.”

Hoping to prod him into admitting that the marriage was finally over, Grace asked, “But she’s not anymore, right?”

Mike didn’t look at Grace. He tried to think of a diplomatic answer. “Please don’t ask me that. You know how I feel about you. It’s not the way I feel about her. Not anymore, anyway.”

Grace nodded. "Yeah, I know that, Mike. And, I'm not trying to pressure you. But if she doesn't meet your needs... and I do, then..."

Mike still didn't look at her. "Then why aren't you my wife instead of her?" he asked.

"Well, yeah. That thought had occurred to me."

"I guess because she's the mother of my children," Mike explained.

"So you stay with her because of them?" Grace asked. It wasn't a jealous question. Grace just wanted clarity. For her, dealing with feelings was a lot like dealing with money. You had to do it carefully and account for every penny or emotion. She was a banker and used to asking and getting bottom-line replies.

"Yeah, Grace. They're all I have now."

"Well, not exactly, Mike."

"What do you mean?"

Grace looked at Mike. "As I told you before, you have me. And, I want you. I want to be with you. I want to be your wife. I'm willing to do anything."

"I know all that, and I feel grateful. If I thought we could do more, then I'd do it, but I just don't know how. It all seems so complicated now."

"Was life ever simple?" Grace asked. She still hoped to pull him further away from Joanne and closer toward her.

"I guess I thought it was. After you fall in love, you get married and then start a life together. You have kids, build a household, and cherish your family. And, in the end, what does it all add up to?"

Grace thought of her own marriage and divorce. What had *that* added up to? Not a damn thing. "I don't know, Mike. What?"

"I don't know, either. What I do know is that if I didn't have you, I wouldn't be able to handle any of this. I would have fallen apart long ago."

Grace sighed forlornly. "Thanks. I guess." Then she turned away from him.

"What's wrong?"

Grace didn't turn to look at Mike. "I'd like to be more than just the glue that holds you together."

"Oh. Yeah. Well, you are, Grace. You are." Mike said it absently, as if he knew he had to say something. But Grace wanted more. A lot more. She wanted him to say *exactly* what she meant to him. Grace thought she already knew but needed to hear it anyway. Maybe if he said it aloud, he would hear it himself, and it would become real. But Mike didn't say any more. Grace tried not to seem disappointed, but deep down, she was.

Chapter 26

Dressed in a dark blue power suit, Joanne stood confidently in front of the boardroom easel. She was *on*. *I've still got it*, she thought. *Maybe everything else in my life is shaky, but my work is rock-solid.*

She was about to lay out her game plan. The old family firm had fallen on hard times and lost many of its customers. The owners couldn't figure out what went wrong or how to fix it. The board wasn't there, only the CEO, CFO, and vice presidents. Joanne gave them her standard pitch. "This is what I do, this is how I do it, and this is what you get."

Everyone at the table listened intently to her presentation. They knew she was their last hope of saving the company. She sympathized with the concern she saw on their faces. Well, not all their faces. The older men (there were no women besides her) looked worried. One younger man (the son of the company president; she thought his name was Roger) seemed more relaxed. She wondered if he felt unconcerned or had already developed a plan of his own. Sometimes companies hired consultants to affirm what they already knew or wanted to hear, whether it was correct or not. Joanne didn't work that way. She told it like it was. She also knew she would at least have to reach out to the younger man and listen to him.

Roger's interest wasn't in Joanne's presentation. He was more interested in her. She was well-built and looked awesome in her power suit, white blouse, high heels, and dark pantyhose. He guessed she was fifteen years older than he was. Roger didn't care about Joanne's analysis of the company. He wanted to know what Joanne looked like naked and planned to find out as soon as possible. The small gold ring she wore was no obstacle.

He was handsome, well spoken, suave, and a little cocky. Roger was not a playboy son of a corporate president, however. He had contributed to the company but hadn't worked so hard that he had no time left to play hard. He wanted to play with Joanne and hoped he could coax her into playing with him.

Just the difference in their ages should be enough of an inducement. Roger had learned that gorgeous women around Joanne's age often had husbands who were losing their virility and could no longer satisfy their wives. Roger liked finding those wives and thrilling them. By the end of the meeting, he felt certain he could have Joanne. All he had to do was let her know he was available.

It was Joanne's standard procedure to start with one-on-one interviews with all the corporate executives. Roger wanted to get to Joanne early in the process so he could have more time to get to know her and, hopefully, more time for sex. At the close of the meeting, he volunteered to be the first to share his analysis of the corporation. The others gave Roger the go-ahead. He took Joanne aside after the meeting to invite her to have dinner with him. "I know a nice little Italian place where we can eat and talk and no one will bother us for hours," he said. She didn't see any reason to refuse, and they made an appointment.

"So," Joanne began as soon as the waiter brought their antipasto platter. "Tell me about your company."

Roger smiled and shook his head. "No," he said, smiling.

Joanne remained calm. She didn't sense defiance and wondered what would happen next. Sometimes the people she interviewed felt uncomfortable sharing their concerns, and she had to allow them time to warm up to her and trust her. "Why not, Roger? That's what we're here for."

"We can talk about the company later. First, I want to talk about you. How did a gorgeous woman like you come to be doing a boring job like this?"

Joanne smiled knowingly. Sometimes, she had to persuade her clients that she was more than up to the task of saving their companies. "Would you believe me if I told you it's never been boring?"

"No," Roger replied.

"Well, it's true. I love what I do, and I'm good at it. I'm not permitted to disclose past clients, but they've always been happy with my work."

“And what do you do to make them so happy?”

“Whatever it takes,” Joanne replied.

Roger grinned slyly. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Joanne took a bite of food. She looked at Roger. “I bet you were,” she replied and then kept looking at him. He didn’t flinch. Joanne knew she’d read him right. “So what do you want, Mr. Collins?”

“Please call me Roger. Or Rog, if you prefer.”

“I prefer Mr. Collins- for now.”

“To answer your question, Joanne- I want you. I’ve never seen anyone as beautiful as you doing a job like this. I couldn’t stop thinking about what I would do to you if we had been alone in that boardroom without all those old guys around.”

Joanne was unruffled. “You flatter me.”

“I meant what I said. And I can back it up if you’ll let me.”

“Let you *what*?” Joanne asked.

“You won’t regret it.”

Joanne took a moment to reflect on regret. She had alienated Mike, and he was now in love with Grace. She’d also left Allyson, the only person she had ever truly loved romantically. *My love life has gone to shit*, she thought. *I might as well have a little fun.*

Joanne smiled. “But *you* might,” she said. Roger looked bewildered. “You apparently don’t understand what’s going on here,” Joanne added slyly. Roger didn’t react. “I am in complete control.”

He tried not to seem surprised. “Uh, well, okay.”

“Do you know what that means?”

Their conversation wasn’t exactly going as Roger had anticipated. He tried to remain calm. “Not really,” he said.

Joanne stopped chewing and swallowed. She looked into Roger’s eyes. He didn’t flinch, and she liked that. “You do what I say, when I say it, exactly the way I say it should be done.”

Roger felt bewildered. “That’s how you save companies?”

She grinned. “I’m not talking about companies, Roger. I’m talking about you and me.” Roger didn’t know how to react. He didn’t want Joanne to suspect she had been way ahead of him, and he still hadn’t caught up. “So what happens next?”

“Whatever you want,” he replied.

His bravado was gone, but Joanne didn’t care. She had already decided to do what he wanted. She smiled. “You give in far too easily. That’s no fun.” She reached for a garlic bread stick, broke off a piece, and started eating. Roger knew how to read what she was doing.

He had assumed Joanne would be a challenge. She’d turned out to be much more. Her intention to control him turned Roger on. He no longer just wanted sex with her. Roger wanted Joanne to like him, care about him, and want to be with him. Deep down, he wanted to be her little boy. Roger had mother issues.

Joanne sensed the reason he had approached her. She already had three children and wasn’t interested in being his mother. But Roger offered an experience that might take her mind off the chaos in her life. When she stopped chewing, she looked at him and asked, “So,

what's it gonna be? Your place or mine?" Roger couldn't think of a reply. She decided for them.

Joanne had been perfectly happy with Mike until Allyson reappeared in her life. Then she had been happy with Allyson as her lover until she ran away. Louisa had been a brief, younger delight. She'd never had a younger male lover. That experience proved to be different. Roger turned out to be as good as he thought he was. He was also just what she needed. He made love with a wild abandon that reminded her of amusement park thrills, only now *she* was the ride.

Roger knew they had limited time together and tried to make each moment as passionate as he could. Joanne liked dissolving herself into his desire. She came out of their lovemaking refreshed, clear-headed, and more dedicated to her job. Roger usually fell asleep like a little boy curled up beside her.

The company evaluation took longer than most others did because the business was in worse shape than anyone had imagined. For the first time in years, Joanne wondered if she could salvage it. *Maybe they brought me in too late*, she thought. She should have felt sad, but didn't.

Joanne spent all day, every day (even on the weekends) at the company. She looked at every shred of information she could find. She talked to everyone, even janitors, window washers, and the people who answered phones at the helpdesk. Joanne had a prodigious memory, but it was short-term. She could gather vast amounts of client information and process it rapidly. She also took thorough notes just in case she had to go back. In this case, Joanne knew she wouldn't be going back. There was unlikely to be any company to go back to. Things were that bad.

After her grueling days at the company, Joanne enjoyed passionate nights with Roger. Neither of them allowed company business to get in the way of great sex. Joanne felt grateful for the distraction. It made her mind work better. But she didn't like the direction in which the signs seemed to be pointing.

Roger was too busy with her to think about the company. Joanne let him do whatever he wanted. *Why not?* she thought. *We'll never see each other again. Might as well let him have all the fun he can handle. Might be good for me, too.*

It was.

On the night before her final report, Joanne expected Roger to beg her to stay or plead with her to continue their affair. He didn't. Instead, he made love to her vigorously, and she responded passionately. When they finished, they both fell asleep exhausted.

Although she would have refused Roger's plea, she was curious why he hadn't asked. Then she realized Roger had gotten to know her well enough to assume that she would say no. Joanne almost felt sorry she had to leave, but missed her kids and wanted to go home. There was no passion awaiting her (Mike had Grace, and Allyson and Joanne were no longer a couple), but there was love. Molly, Jake, and Sam were all she now had. She treasured her relationship with each of them.

The experience with Roger had lifted Joanne out of her doldrums, and she felt better about herself after it was over. Passion was still important to her. She started thinking about what she would like her future to be. Joanne couldn't rely only on men like Roger to liven things up. She would have to rely on her ingenuity.

The company found a buyer, and the owners escaped with some of their money. For the first time in his young life, Roger had to look for a job. He contacted Joanne, but not because he missed her. He asked if she would teach him to do what she did. Could he be her apprentice?

“No,” she replied. Then she hung up before he could say anything else.

Chapter 27

Whenever Allyson’s younger co-workers had invited her to go out after work with them, she had refused. But she worried she might be hurting their feelings. She also realized she might be feeling superstitious. The last time she’d gone to a club, it was on the night when she and Joanne met again. Her co-workers knew nothing about that night. She finally decided not to let it worry her. *Oh, what the hell*, she thought when they invited her again. *Perhaps I should go just this once. Maybe a night out is what I need.*

She called Callie and told her to order a pizza for dinner. At 6 pm, everyone headed out the door. There were five of them. Jason and Mark offered her a ride. (Allyson suspected they might be a couple but felt too embarrassed to ask- she feared her query might embarrass them.) The men reminded Allyson of Laurel and Hardy, although they were too young to know who Laurel and Hardy were. She felt mentioning the comedians would make her seem old and kept her conjecture to herself.

Leslie and Jane went in another car. Allyson didn’t think they were a couple. Leslie was a buxom, round-faced blonde. She complained about the clients but never became angry or irritated when she was on the phone with them. Instead, she was warm, sympathetic, and patient. Some callers asked for her because she made them feel comfortable. Leslie had a huge engagement ring and talked endlessly about her upcoming wedding (when she wasn’t helping clients). She had barely mentioned her fiancé, and no one had met him.

Jane kept to herself. She was a short, slender, dark-haired woman with intense eyes, a sharp voice, and a wry sense of humor. Allyson liked Jane because she helped everyone else. She had a prodigious knowledge of the clients they served. Jane could answer almost any technical question and solve any problem. She never acted like someone who thought she was an expert, though, and was always very modest.

Allyson was aware that she was going out on a Friday night with four youngsters, only a few years older than her daughter Callie, and wasn’t sure how to act. What would they expect her to do? What would they expect her *not* to do? Would anything she did embarrass them? Would their workplace be the same Monday morning after they partied together on Friday night? Allyson didn’t know.

At the club, they settled around a table and ordered drinks. Allyson wanted to get a conversation going. She knew very little about any of their personal lives. She looked at Leslie. “So, tell me about the fiancé that bought you that beautiful ring,” she said. “What’s he like?”

“Oh, he’s like most other males I ever met. Interested in only one thing,” Leslie replied. Then she rolled her eyes and smiled. “But he’s different, too.”

“How so?”

“He likes me.”

“That’s always a plus,” Allyson joked. Leslie smiled again. “Seriously,” Allyson went on, aware she was about to give unsolicited advice. “The wedding is the easy part. It’s what happens afterward that takes work. And I’m not talking about the honeymoon.”

“Then, what *are* you talking about?” Leslie asked.

“Building a life together. It’s not as easy as some people think. But it’s worth doing, as long as you’ve chosen the right person, which I’m sure you have.”

Leslie sighed. “Yeah. I think I have.”

“Are you married, Allyson?” Jason asked. “You don’t wear a ring.”

“You know about my daughter. I also had a husband... once.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to bore you or ruin a fun evening.”

Mark smiled. “Okay, give us the condensed version,” he said.

“He walked out.”

“Wow!” Jason said.

“Yeah. It does happen- although I’m sure it won’t happen to you, Leslie.”

“Why did it happen?” Leslie asked. She seemed genuinely curious. “Was it something he did? Or, maybe, something you did?”

Her pointed question didn’t offend Allyson. She had been asking herself the same thing for years. “You know, to this day, I’ve never figured that out. I wish I could, though.”

“Well, you seem like a great person, Allyson,” Jane said. “Haven’t you met anybody since?”

“Nah,” Allyson lied. “I wasn’t really looking. I dated a couple of times, but nothing worked out. It’s not as easy when you’re older.”

“It’s not easy when you’re young, either,” Jane commented. Allyson wanted to ask a follow-up question but didn’t want to embarrass her. Jane immediately changed the subject. “So, Allyson, tell us about your daughter.”

“Her name’s Callie. She’s in the second year of middle school.”

“Ugh! I *hated* middle school,” Mark said. “I could never figure out why it even existed.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of a limbo, isn’t it?” Jason commented. Everyone nodded. Allyson wondered if Callie felt the same way.

“Well, she seems to be doing okay. No big teenage crises yet. Or little ones... so far.” *No, Allyson thought, her mother provides all the crises in her life.*

A lull in the conversation allowed Allyson to recall the last time she’d been in a club on a Friday night. She had been with some casual friends in a place they sometimes went to unwind and check out the men. Occasionally, someone she saw in the crowd interested her. Some men had even approached her. Allyson was always quick to let them know about herself. “I’m single and have a daughter,” she told them upfront. Her daughter put some men off, but Allyson never figured out why. *Many women my age have kids. What are these guys looking for? Virgins?*

That last time had been different. It wasn’t a man that had interested her but a woman. Allyson thought back to how she felt when Joanne walked into the club that night. There hadn’t been much of a crowd yet. Most of the people who came early wanted to check out the

folks who came in later. Allyson had gasped when she saw Joanne. Joanne immediately noticed her and walked over to the booth.

“Is it really you?” she asked.

“Well, what’s left of me,” Allyson joked. “It’s been a long time.”

“I missed you,” Joanne replied. Allyson knew she meant it. “Can I sit? Are you here with anyone?”

“Yes, please sit. I’m with friends, but they’re in the ladies’ room. What about you?”

“I came alone.”

Allyson noticed that Joanne wore what looked like business clothes and stood out in the crowd. “Coming from work?” she asked.

“Yeah. Rough day. I didn’t even want to change, just unwind. What about you?”

“Not so rough.”

“It’s nice to see you again,” Joanne said. The last time the women had been together, they had been kids in high school. The years between seemed to vanish as soon as their eyes met. “It’s been- what- twenty-five years?”

“Yeah.”

“I never forgot you,” Joanne said.

“Really? I think I forgot about us, but then again, I didn’t. I guess I never thought I’d ever see you again.”

“Me, neither. But now, here we are.”

When Allyson’s friends came back, she introduced Joanne to everyone. Then she got up to go to the Ladies’ Room. Joanne followed, and they talked some more when they were alone in the bathroom.

“Do you want to come back to my place?” Allyson asked just before they left.

Joanne smiled sweetly. Allyson had read her mind. “I thought you’d never ask,” she replied.

Allyson smiled again as she recalled that surprising encounter and their first passionate weekend together. She wondered where Joanne was now and what she would do if Joanne came walking through the door again. Their recent separation hadn’t lasted twenty-five years, only several weeks, yet it seemed just as final as the first one. Allyson couldn’t help wondering if it was really final. Then she asked herself if she *wanted* it to be final, but stopped herself from answering. She knew how she felt, but admitting how much she still wanted Joanne hurt more than she could bear.

Alone at home, Callie had finished eating her slices of pizza and called Virginia. “My Mom went out with people she works with. She hasn’t gone out on Friday night for a while.”

“So you’re all alone?” Virginia asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t mind. There’s some good shows on TV, and she promised not to come home late again.”

“Did she use to do that?”

“Sometimes. I was usually asleep and didn’t hear them come in.”

“Them?” Virginia asked.

“Oh, yeah, she sometimes brought men home with her.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea,” Callie replied. “Maybe they were friends.”

“Did you think that was weird?”

“At first, but the men never bothered me. I stayed away from them. They were more interested in my mom, anyway.”

“I hope so,” Virginia commented.

“Why do you say that?”

“Doesn’t it bother you that she bought strange men into the house?”

“I didn’t say they were strange, Virginia.”

“Well, *strangers*. You didn’t know them, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And that didn’t bother you?”

“No, Virginia, it didn’t. My mom was right there.”

“Well, it would bother me if my mom let strange men in the house.”

Virginia’s negative hints were starting to irritate Callie. “Virginia, your mom lives with a strange man. And, she was strange, too, for a long time.”

Virginia sighed. “Yeah, but she’s different, now. I never figured out why she changed. But I like it. She’s not as hard on me.”

“I’m happy for you,” Callie said.

“So, when’s the next sleepover?”

“I have no idea. Mom hasn’t mentioned it.”

“Couldn’t you ask?” Virginia pleaded.

“No. She’s busy.”

“But we have so much fun!”

“I know. But maybe it’s your turn to have one.”

“I don’t know if my mom would let me,” Virginia protested.

“Well, why don’t you just ask?”

“Maybe I will.”

“Goodnight, Virginia.”

“Night, Callie.”

Allyson enjoyed her night out with her younger co-workers. She didn’t do or say anything embarrassing and had nothing to feel awkward about at work on Monday morning. Home in bed, she thought about what she would have done if Joanne had walked into the club. She concluded she would do what she’d done the first time. She would have just invited Joanne to her bed. What other choice did she have? She was still in love.

Allyson fell asleep feeling happy. She didn’t dream about Joanne. She dreamt about her former husband, Frank. He hadn’t shared her bed in over ten years. She had forgotten what his voice sounded like, what he looked like, felt like, or smelled like. The best thing he did for Allyson was that he gave her a wonderful daughter. She and Callie rarely talked about him. She had no idea if Callie ever thought about her father. They’d never needed him.

Despite her nine-month romance with Joanne, teenage Allyson had never thought of herself as a lesbian. After Joanne moved away, she had never looked at girls at school or anywhere else. Other girls would have reminded her of Joanne, and Allyson didn’t want to revisit her feelings of deep love, loss, hurt, and betrayal. She eventually turned to boys. They couldn’t break her heart because they couldn’t penetrate her heart the way Joanne had, and Allyson felt safe.

From the first time Frank saw Allyson, all he wanted was to protect her and keep her safe. They had met the day she came to work at his supermarket. Well, he didn't own the market. He merely managed the produce department. Frank had been begging for a new hire. When Allyson turned up, he thought his supervisor was playing a joke on him. She seemed too young to be working full-time. He expected she would turn out to be an awkward, clueless, indifferent teenager just out of high school, but Frank's first impression soon changed.

He was several years older than she was, but didn't like women his age because they seemed sharp, hard, and (he thought) mean. Allyson was soft, pure, kind, and a precious gem. She captured his fancy. Frank joked that she belonged in the flower shop instead of with the fruits and vegetables. He told her that she was prettier than any flower he'd ever seen. Somewhat embarrassed, Allyson giggled. Then she hurried off to stack the loose corn.

Although she didn't want him to, Frank fell in love with her. He had no choice. She was the kind of girl he'd been looking for. Frank set out to convince Allyson that marrying him would guarantee them the happiest life imaginable. It took a while, but his persuasion eventually worked, and she agreed to be his wife.

Allyson gave Frank everything she had except for her heart because Joanne had broken it a couple of years earlier, and it was beyond repair. She didn't know it, nor did Frank. He felt happy as a new husband with a lovely, sexy bride who welcomed him to their bed.

Allyson worked hard to please Frank and didn't think about pleasing herself. When he fell asleep after making love, Allyson often stayed awake and wondered why their sex felt a little off. It wasn't just that her lover was a man. She hadn't been a virgin when they married, and Frank knew it. Their feelings of love weren't mutual, but she wasn't aware of it.

Frank was good to her. He brought home little trinkets, flowers, baubles, and doodads. The company promoted Frank to regional produce manager not long after the honeymoon. He insisted Allyson quit so they could prepare to have a baby. She agreed because she'd had enough of looking at cantaloupes, carrots, lettuce, tomatoes, onions, potatoes, and other fruits and vegetables. She also hated what happened to the unsold produce. There was a smelly dumpster out back for outdated stuff. Allyson sometimes wondered if that was how unneeded people ended up, no more than stinky garbage carted off for disposal. It was a morbid thought, and she never mentioned it to anyone.

Later, after Frank had abandoned them, Allyson felt she and her small daughter had somehow become unneeded people. In the dream, she relived that last morning when Frank had kissed her and Callie goodbye. Allyson had wished him a good day. "You too," were the last two words he'd ever said to her.

Frank hadn't come home that night. Allyson immediately knew he hadn't met with an accident; he'd just left. His promise of a happy life turned out to be a lie. His promise to 'love, honor, and obey' was just empty words. Allyson didn't feel hurt, angry, or bitter, though. In high school, she had survived losing Joanne. Now, as a young adult, she would survive losing her husband. Allyson had dedicated herself to Callie's happiness. Whatever it took, she would not lose her daughter. And she hadn't.

Chapter 28

Callie called Molly and invited her to come over on Saturday afternoon. Allyson knew Mike usually drove her and decided to talk to him. They had spoken once on the telephone but had never met. She watched for his car and went out when she saw it. Molly got out, and Allyson greeted her. "Go on in, Molly. Callie's waiting." Then Allyson turned to Mike.

"Do you have a minute?" she asked. She was afraid he might feel awkward and drive off without a word. He didn't.

"Okay," he replied.

"I was wondering how Joanne's doing. I guess I worry about her."

"I worry about her, too," Mike replied. "But I honestly don't know how she's doing." Allyson looked puzzled. "She doesn't say much to me. At least, not about her feelings. We talk about family stuff, house stuff, and school stuff, but never feelings. I don't ask about hers, and she doesn't ask about mine."

"Maybe you could ask sometime?" Allyson suggested warily.

"I guess maybe I could, but I don't know what kind of reaction I would get. She might just ignore me."

"Yeah, she might. But here's the thing, Mike. I don't know why she walked out on me. I don't know what she was feeling. We could have made it work. I knew she wasn't gonna leave you and the kids and move in with me, but I was okay with that. She seemed happy, too."

"Maybe that was the problem," Mike said.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe it all seemed to work, but something made her feel it wasn't right."

"You mean she felt guilty?" Allyson asked.

"Yeah, maybe. I can't believe I'm saying this, but she did seem happier with you than she ever was with me."

"I'm awfully sorry, Mike."

"Don't be sorry, Allyson," he replied. "I've met someone I'm happy with. She wants to marry me and be a step-mom, but I haven't let her meet my kids because I don't want to worry them."

"Do you think your kids know something's going on anyway?" Allyson asked.

"They might have noticed something's different between Joanne and me. But they're kids and they're mostly caught up in their own little worlds."

"Yeah, I envy them, in a way. Life was so easy when we were kids, wasn't it? We never questioned our impulses; we just acted on them without thinking."

Mike was starting to feel comfortable with Allyson. When Joanne had told him about her, he wondered if Allyson was in love with Joanne as much as Joanne seemed to be in love with her. Now he understood that their feelings had been mutual.

"Luckily, nobody I knew ever turned out to be a juvenile delinquent," he quipped.

Allyson smiled. "Right. We had pain and disappointment, but fun, too."

"Hopefully, more fun than pain and disappointment."

Allyson sighed. "Except for Joanne and I. Her mom saw to that."

"What do you mean?" Mike asked.

“Didn’t she tell you?” Allyson replied. Mike shook his head. “Her mom found out we were lovers and uprooted the family and moved away just to break us up.”

“Shit,” Mike replied. “Do you think that could be what’s bothering her?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“The fact that her mom did what she did because you and Joanne did what *you* did?”

“I don’t understand,” Allyson said.

“Considering the family upheaval it caused back then, maybe Joanne felt you and she never should have done what you did. Maybe deep down inside, she still felt guilty about what happened back in high school. And now, it’s happening again.”

“We never discussed it.”

“Maybe it’s worth looking at,” Mike replied. “Although I can’t discuss it with her. My only interest is in keeping my family together.”

Allyson nodded. She then realized what was happening. The two adults who were closest to Joanne and once rivals for her love were talking. It was clear they both cared about her very much. “I understand, Mike. I just wish I could help.”

“So do I. I don’t understand what you guys did or why you did it, but I respect what you had and I’m sorry it ended.” Mike’s spontaneous frankness surprised him. He felt happy he’d been honest. So did Allyson. She smiled warmly at her lover’s husband.

“Thanks. I just wish it *hadn’t* ended. We could have made it work.”

Mike nodded. “I believe you could have.” He meant it.

Allyson looked at Mike’s face. He seemed like a kind man who only wanted what was best for people. Maybe that came from working in a bank and trying to satisfy customers. On the other hand, maybe Mike worked in that bank *because* he was eager to help people fix their problems and was good at doing it. Either way, Allyson felt grateful. “You’ve been really helpful, Mike. I feel I owe you an apology.”

He looked puzzled. “For what?”

“Messing up your marriage,” Allyson explained.

Mike sighed. “I was angry at first, really angry, but I’m past it now. If she had gone with another man, I would probably have gone berserk. But how can I compete with another woman? All I care about now is protecting my kids. If they were older, maybe they would understand all of this. Right now, I just want to avoid upheavals.”

What is life, Allyson wondered, but just one upheaval after another? She didn’t mention it to Mike. He already had enough to deal with.

While Allyson and Mike were outside talking, Callie and Molly were chatting inside. “So, how did our moms meet?” Molly asked. “Were they old friends or something?”

“Well, yeah, they were friends in high school. But they were more than friends, too.”

“What does that mean?”

Callie looked at Molly. She wondered how she ought to reply. “Do you know what lesbians are?”

“I think so,” Molly replied, trying not to show her feelings of alarm. Maybe the answer to her question would be something she’d rather not know. “Um, they’re girls who go with girls instead of with boys, right? Do you mean that’s what our moms were?”

“Yup,” Callie said. She paused and looked at Molly’s face, but didn’t see any change in her expression. “Let me tell you the story of Gertrude and Nancy.”

Molly looked puzzled. "Who?"

"It's a story my mom told me a while back. Those were the names she chose."

"Okay. What's the story?" Molly asked.

"The two girls met the first day they were in high school. It was big. They felt overwhelmed and scared. The older kids seemed to ignore them and looked down on them. Even the teachers seemed not to notice them."

"Is that what high school's like?" Molly asked, apprehensively. She would be starting in a year.

"This happened a long time ago. My mom says it's not that way now. Anyway, they got lost looking for their first class and met in an abandoned hallway. First, they sat down and cried because they felt so frustrated. Then they looked at each other and laughed."

Molly looked surprised. "Laughed? Why?"

"Because they weren't alone. They had found each other."

Now Molly looked confused. *Where is this going?* she wondered. "That's nice. What happened next?"

"They became friends. Then they became... *more*."

"More than what?" Molly asked, still confused. "Oh, you mean more than friends?" Callie nodded and waited. Then Molly connected the dots. "You mean *lesbians*?" Molly asked. Callie nodded again. "But what does *that* mean?"

"My mom told me the rest of the story was private," Callie replied. Both girls suspected what 'private' implied. The thought made them feel squeamish.

"But, what connection do Nancy and Gertrude have with right now?"

"Well, way back in high school, something happened to break them up. Then, recently, they got together and it started all over again." Callie told Molly about how Joanne spent long weekends and a full week with Allyson.

"So when we thought she was working, she was really *here*?" Molly asked.

Callie nodded. "Yup. Right in my mom's bedroom. Of course, they did other stuff, too. We watched *Beaches* together—"

"Oh, you did? I watched it with my mom."

"Did you like it?" Callie asked.

"It's okay. But she likes it a lot, and watching it with her was special because we don't do that much together."

"They also took Virginia and me to the amusement park. It was my birthday present."

Molly was surprised. "Was that the same day my dad took us?"

"Yup," Callie said.

"No wonder he acted so weird."

"You're not mad, are you?"

Molly shook her head. "Mad? I don't think so. I'm more confused. What happened to them?"

"I don't know," Callie replied. "They broke up, but I don't know why. I don't think my mom does, either, but I can't be sure. Maybe she's just not telling me."

"How is she acting?"

"Why?" Callie asked.

“My mom’s been acting weird. She’s not the same. It’s like she’s just going through the motions of being our mom. But she doesn’t seem to care about us anymore. At first, I thought she was mad at my dad. Then I thought she was mad at my brothers or me.”

“No. I think her heart is broken. I’ve heard people say it. I don’t understand what it means, but maybe that’s what she’s feeling.”

“It’s sad,” Molly said.

“I know. My mom’s been different, too, but it’s not the same for us because it’s just the two of us. My dad ran away a long time ago.”

“Do you miss him?” Molly asked.

“I never really knew him.”

“I’m glad I have both of my parents, but I’ll never understand adults as long as I live. How can they be so weird?”

Callie nodded. “I *know*, right? They make everything so complicated.”

Callie’s comment gave Molly an idea. Later, after Mike picked her up, she asked him if Callie was right and their mothers were lesbians. Her question startled him. Mike felt he had to be honest and confirmed it. Then Molly asked, “And they broke up, right?” Mike confirmed that, too. Then, shocking her father, she asked a final question. “Well, what’re you going to do about it?”

“I wasn’t going to do anything, Molly. I just want to keep our family together.”

“But Mom’s miserable. Everybody knows it. We thought there was something wrong between you guys.”

“No, we understand each other. We just didn’t think you kids would understand.”

“Well, *I* understand, Dad. At least I think I do.”

“You’re the oldest,” Mike said.

“But I think the boys might, too, depending on how you handle it.”

Mike thought about his relationship with Grace but didn’t mention it. They had been wondering how to handle introducing her to his children, but hadn’t come up with a plan yet. “It’s complicated. I don’t think I could explain it.”

Molly felt exasperated. “Well, *somebody*’s gonna have to, sooner or later,” she said. “I don’t think things can go on as they are.”

“You’re probably right. I’ll talk to your mother.”

“Please *do*. I don’t see how you adults can be so wishy-washy. Why can’t you deal with things the way we kids do?”

“And what way is that?” Mike asked, trying not to sound skeptical.

“We handle whatever it is directly. If you don’t, things can get out of control.”

“Molly, I admire your outlook. But I have to tell you that I think this is already out of control.”

“So let’s not waste any more time, okay? Adults! I don’t know how you survive!”

Molly wasn’t joking.

I don’t, either, Mike thought. *But, somehow we do.*

Chapter 29

Later, at bedtime, Mike talked to Joanne. “Molly knows about you and Allyson.”

“She *what*?” Joanne replied, aghast. “Did you tell her?”

“Of course not! Callie explained everything.”

“Why would she *do* that?”

“Molly asked.”

“Why did she ask?”

“She’s worried about you,” Mike replied.

Joanne was about to protest, but stopped when she realized how strange it was that her daughter was worried about her. *Shouldn’t it be the other way around?* she thought. *I’m the adult. I’m supposed to do the worrying.*

Mike interrupted her thought. “She wants to know what we’re going to do about it,” he said. Joanne looked at him as if she hadn’t understood his question. “What I mean is, she asked me what *I* was going to do. So, I said I would talk to you.”

“What’s there to talk about?”

“C’mon, Joanne- you know you’re miserable. Molly noticed how unhappy you were. The boys have probably noticed, too. You can’t stay like this.”

Joanne looked forlorn. “You’re right. I can’t. Not if it’s hurting my children.”

“So, you’ll talk to Allyson, then?”

His question surprised Joanne. “Why should I talk to *her*?”

“Um, because you’re still in love with her. And have been since you were teenagers.”

“So?” Joanne asked defiantly. The thought of talking to Allyson again terrified her.

“Stop it, Joanne.”

“Stop what?”

“Pretending. You’re the smartest woman I know. You do a job that only a brilliant person could do. You crunch massive amounts of data and come up with not just an answer but the *right* answer. You save companies. So, why can’t you admit the truth that’s staring you in the face? Why can’t you save yourself?”

Joanne scowled. “Why can’t you mind your own fucking business?”

“This *is* my business, Joanne.”

There was more that Mike could have said, but he didn’t. He wanted to push Joanne to deal with her problem so he could be free to be with Grace. She had been pressuring him. Mike didn’t know how to introduce her to the children without causing confusion or concern. He knew children expected stability and certainty from their parents, although they didn’t know that’s what they needed. So far, there hadn’t been any disruptions in the family. Nevertheless, massive changes seemed to be looming in their future, and Mike couldn’t figure out how to make those changes without causing chaos. He had told that excuse to Grace. She’d accepted it at first but wasn’t buying it now. Mike needed Joanne to start the ball rolling. If she could be honest about her relationship with Allyson, then Mike could be honest about his relationship with Grace.

He already knew Allyson was open to taking Joanne back. Getting Joanne to *go* back was the problem. Mike understood he was going to have to try harder.

“Joanne, I’m past being hurt by this. I’ve gotten used to it. So, why don’t you just do what your heart tells you to do?”

Joanne frowned. It was something he’d rarely seen her do. She had always seemed confident and in control. Nothing ever seemed to puzzle or trouble her. She looked away from him. “I don’t know, Mike.”

“What can I do to help?” he asked.

“Nothing. I don’t need help.”

“I’m confused.”

Joanne looked at her husband. His concern seemed genuine. *He doesn’t have to be doing this*, she reminded herself. *But, he is. The least I can do is be honest with him.* “So am I, Mike.”

It was his turn to look puzzled. “I don’t understand,” he said.

“What I meant was, I don’t know why I walked out on Allyson. Something made me do it, but I still haven’t figured it out.”

“Why do you have to figure it out?”

“Because that’s what I do,” Allyson replied. “Like you said, that’s my job and I’m good at it.”

“But your job doesn’t involve your *heart*, Joanne. This does.”

Joanne sighed. “You make it sound as if it’s easy, but it’s not.”

“Why not?”

“My heart has always been a mystery, Mike. I can’t trust it. The two times I’ve given in to it have caused me agony.”

Mike thought he understood. “That first time,” he said. “It was your mom who caused the agony, not you. You didn’t do anything wrong, but she did. This time, well, I don’t know what caused you to do what you did. But it seems to me that you are causing your *own* agony now.”

Joanne seemed not to have heard him. “I don’t like agony, Mike.”

“Then do what you already know you really want to do.”

“I can’t,” Joanne replied, almost whispering.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know what I really want to do,” she insisted. Mike didn’t believe her but didn’t say anything else. It seemed pointless to continue. Mike turned out the light so he could go to sleep. He didn’t know what Joanne would do.

She stayed awake, thinking. As Allyson and Mike had suspected, Joanne finally realized that if she followed her heart, she would again cause upheaval in the lives of people she loved. And that upheaval could lead to a catastrophe. She could lose her family. That was why she had panicked and run away. As someone whose job it was to *prevent* disasters, she felt helpless to deal with the catastrophe loving Allyson might cause. Feeling helpless and overwhelmed, Joanne closed her eyes.

Chapter 30

After she fell asleep, everything from long ago came back. Her dream started with Vivian, her enraged mother, looming over her as Joanne cringed. “How could you even *think* of doing what you did?” Vivian shouted, seething with rage. “Do you have any idea how *disgusting* it is? It’s an abomination!” The vicious words stabbed into Joanne’s heart. None of what she and Allyson had done was abominable; it had all been sublimely beautiful. Joanne hadn’t defended herself. She tried to focus on her feelings for Allyson. But her mother had somehow known what was in Joanne’s heart and did all she could to crush the girls’ love. Over time, she repeatedly berated Joanne and came close to crushing her as well.

Joanne cried out in her dream. "No! No! Stop! Stop! Leave me alone!" Mike awoke and heard her. He turned on the light and looked across the empty bed space between them. Joanne was tossing and turning. The pained look on her face was unlike any expression he'd ever seen there.

"Joanne, Joanne, wake up!" Mike said.

Her eyes popped open. "Mike?" she gasped. "What's wrong?"

"I think you were having a nightmare."

"Was I?" Joanne asked. She closed her eyes and felt the tension in her body. Then she opened them again. "Oh, yeah, I guess I was."

"What was it about?"

"My mother."

"Your *mother*? It must have been pretty bad. You were thrashing around, and I thought you might start screaming. I didn't want you to wake the kids."

"Yeah, I'm glad you woke me."

"You wanna talk about it?" Mike asked.

Joanne seemed perplexed. "No... Yes... Well, no."

"I think you want to. So, just go ahead."

"You're sure?" Joanne asked.

"Yeah, I'm awake now."

"My mom tormented me about Allyson. She wouldn't let me forget her outrage. She told me how disgusting, degenerate, and evil I was- *we* were. She called us whores and perverts."

"How long did that go on?" Mike asked.

"Long after we moved away. All through high school. She kept reminding me why we had to move and how that move had disrupted everyone's lives. I picked a college as far away as possible so I wouldn't have to hear her anymore. She called me a few times, but I wouldn't let her talk much, and I rarely went home. When I did, I avoided being alone with her. There were always campus jobs, trips, or something I could do to get through the time between semesters or over the summers."

"What about your dad?" Mike asked.

"I saw him when I went home. He also drove me to campus a few times. We always had a great time, but neither of us mentioned her."

"Did he know about you and Allyson?"

"If he did, he never said anything," Joanne replied.

"What was her problem?"

"I never figured it out back then. But from what I've learned since, I suspect she had a similar relationship that went bad when she was young. Apparently, it ended painfully. I think it traumatized her, but I don't know any other details. Maybe that was what drove her to become a religious fanatic. I've never asked."

"I don't recall her being fanatical."

"She wasn't by the time you met her. But while I still lived at home, she never let up about me and Allyson. I hated her."

"I expect you did," Mike commented. Although he didn't understand the romantic urges Joanne had succumbed to, he felt sympathy for her suffering.

“And I felt guilty for hating her.”

I bet that's not all she felt guilty for, Mike thought. “I guess that's natural.”

“I also knew it was over and there was nothing I could do about it, so I just tried to forget Allyson and did, until...”

“You saw her again?”

“Yeah. Then it all came back,” Joanne said. She looked at Mike. She looked distraught. “I didn't want it to, Mike. Really! I swear. But it did. I mean, I was *married*. With kids! I didn't need a lover. I didn't *want* a lover. But it all came back, and I didn't resist. I couldn't. I'm sorry, Mike. I let you down.”

Mike didn't say anything. What could he say? Maybe, ‘Yeah, you let me down’, but what difference would it make? He had moved on. Joanne hadn't walked out, and their family was still intact. But, for how long? Mike tried not to speculate.

Joanne felt overwhelmed by the upheavals her romance with Allyson had caused. First, when they'd been teenagers. And again, now that they were adults. She couldn't deal with what she'd done and felt miserable.

How long can she live with that guilt? Mike thought. He wondered if Molly had been right. Maybe he ought to do something that would have been unthinkable earlier when they were still a normal suburban family. He might have to find a way to reunite his wife with her lesbian lover. *I never thought of myself as a matchmaker*, he thought. *But why not? Besides, Grace and I have a future. Joanne and I don't.*

A few nights later, Mike and Grace snuggled naked under the comforter on her balcony. “The other night, my wife had a nightmare about what happened with her girlfriend,” he said.

“That's a sentence I never dreamed I'd ever hear,” Grace joked.

Mike didn't smile. He went on. “Well, it wasn't really about Allyson, it was about my mother-in-law. She tormented Joanne about what she and Allyson had done long after it was over.”

“That's too bad,” Grace replied. Mike appreciated the sympathetic tone in her voice.

He hated to admit it, but he found a deeper comfort and familiarity with Grace than he'd ever felt with Joanne. Grace was more easygoing, warm, and loving. He'd never thought about needing those things with Joanne, but now wondered why he had married her. And why she'd married him, since she'd still been in love with another woman.

How could she not have known? Mike wondered. *Maybe all that pressure from her mother made Joanne deny her deepest feelings. Maybe that's also what she feels guilty about now.*

Mike again considered the possibility that he might have to do something to help. *I think Joanne and Allyson do belong together*, he thought. *Just as Grace and I belong together. Perhaps if we make some changes, it could all work out for the best. Joanne can have Allyson, and I can have Grace. And the kids... well, they'll have to get used to the changes. But I think they'll be okay.*

Feeling grateful for Grace's understanding, he hugged her. She appreciated the gesture and smiled. Grace was willing to do almost anything to make him belong to her, but worried he wasn't ready to change his life yet. *Hopefully soon*, she thought. *I don't know how much longer I can wait.*

Chapter 31

As it turned out, Molly came up with an idea before her father did.

“Did you talk to Mom?” she asked a day later.

Mike nodded. “Yes, I did.”

“And?”

“I don’t know what to tell you. She seems confused, even scared.”

“About what?”

“I don’t know. I guess until she figures it out, none of us will know.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Molly asked.

“Like what?”

“I was thinking, maybe I could get her to drive me over to Callie’s house instead of you. Callie and I can arrange to have her mom see my mom.”

“I’m not sure what good that would do,” Mike responded.

“Well, it can’t do any harm, can it?”

“I don’t know,” Mike replied. He didn’t want to discourage Molly, but hoped she wouldn’t be disappointed if nothing happened. “But do it if you want to.”

“I do!”

Molly immediately called Callie. “I need to get our moms together,” she told her.

“Will you help?”

“Um, yeah, I guess so.”

“This is important, Callie. I need you to be committed.”

“Okay, I am.”

“Good.”

“But first tell me why,” Callie said.

“Because they belong together.”

“Then why did your mom leave my mom?”

Molly sighed. “I don’t know,” she replied. “My dad says she doesn’t know either.”

“Then what makes you think we can get them back together?”

“We just have to,” Molly insisted.

“Well, okay, I guess.”

“Committed, Callie. *Please!*”

“Okay! What do you want me to do?” Callie asked.

“Talk to your mom. Tell her my mom is coming. Try to get her to want to see my mom.”

“What if she doesn’t want to?”

Molly sighed. “Then, it’s all over, I guess.”

“Yeah, it would seem that way.”

“But it *can’t* be over!” Molly shouted. “I don’t want it to be. My mom and your mom... they don’t want it to be, either.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I just am, and so is my dad. Aren’t *you* sure?”

“About what, exactly?” Callie asked. She wasn’t confused. She merely wanted to be certain Molly knew exactly what she was proposing. There could be no doubts or slip-ups.

“Our moms belong together,” Molly repeated. Callie understood how serious and committed Molly was, but was unconvinced.

“I’m not even sure what that means.”

Molly sighed. “Yeah, neither am I, but *they* know.”

Callie thought about their idea for a moment. “This could backfire, you know.”

Molly had made up her mind. She wanted to follow through before she lost her nerve. “Please, Callie, help me do this. I can’t stand seeing my mom so sad.”

“She’ll get over it, Molly. My mom’s lost boyfriends, and she always got over them.”

“But this isn’t about boyfriends, Callie. Your mom and my mom are meant to be together. Isn’t your mom sad, too?”

“That’s a good question. She did cry once. But I’m not sure. Although now that I think about it, she hasn’t had another boyfriend since your mom left.”

“There! That should tell you all you need to know.”

Callie thought some more. “I tell you what I’ll do. I’ll ask her about this idea and see what she says. Then I’ll call you back.”

“You can just talk to your mom like that?” Molly asked. “I envy you.”

“Why?”

“I can’t talk to my mom about this- or anything- anymore. It’s like she’s moved further and further away. But she’s still here, pretending she cares about us.”

Callie felt sorry for her friend. “I’m sure she still does, Molly.”

“Well, if she does, I sure don’t feel it. I don’t think my brothers do, either.”

“Okay, if it’s that bad, then I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Thanks, Callie.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Let me talk to my mom first, and I’ll let you know what happens.”

“You’re a true friend.”

Callie wasn’t sure if she could just approach Allyson and bring this up. *What if I get it wrong? What if she just gets mad at me?* Callie also didn’t like having to be an adult. Usually, if someone needed talking to (say, about her homework, her loud music, or not cleaning her room), it was the mother who would start the conversation and not the daughter. *Why did I agree to this?* Callie asked herself.

But she appreciated Molly’s concern about Joanne. Moreover, Callie liked Joanne. If their mothers could make each other happy, why not try to get them back together? Maybe all this craziness would end, and everything would make sense. Then again, maybe not. Callie didn’t know. But she had agreed to try, and that was what she was going to do.

The next evening, Allyson rushed home after work and hurriedly put together her fallback easy meal of spaghetti and meatballs. Callie assumed her mother had a bad day and needed comfort food. She wondered if asking her mother about Joanne might be a bad idea. Then she recalled that all Molly had asked her to do was *try*.

They began eating dinner. It was quiet for a few moments. “Why doesn’t Joanne come over anymore?” Callie asked.

Alyson continued eating. She didn’t seem annoyed by the question but didn’t seem eager to reply, either. “Why do you ask?” she said.

Darn! Callie thought. *She would have to ask me that. What do I tell her?*

“I was just curious.”

“Truth is, Callie, I don’t know.”

Callie breathed a sigh of relief. *If she doesn’t know, maybe she’d be interested in an opportunity to talk to Joanne again and find out*, Callie thought. Now all she had to do was keep their conversation going. “Well, what happened?”

Allyson put down her fork. She looked at her plate of food as if she no longer knew what to do with it. “She walked out on me,” Allyson replied. Callie thought her mother was about to cry again. She almost felt sorry she’d started the conversation.

“Um, do you know why, Mom?”

Allyson shook her head. “No. Not really. I thought we were doing great. I was happy. She was happy. You seemed to like her.”

“I did.”

“And I know she liked you,” Allyson said.

Callie felt exasperated. “Okay, so everyone liked everyone else. But that doesn’t explain what happened.”

“There is no explanation, Callie. I wish there was. I thought we belonged together. I know it was weird for you at first. Maybe the other kids wouldn’t have understood your mom being with another woman-”

Callie interrupted her. “I never cared about the other kids. You’re more important than they are.”

“Thanks.”

“So, what would you do if you saw her again?”

Allyson didn’t know how to reply. She hadn’t wanted to think about them getting back together. It seemed unlikely, if not impossible. In addition, the loss hurt almost more than she could bear. She had already spent a lot of effort keeping herself from thinking about Joanne. “That’s impossible.”

“But what if it’s not?”

“What are you saying?”

“What if Joanne came over again?”

“I wish you wouldn’t say things like that, Callie. I know you don’t mean it to hurt me, but it does.”

“Mom, tell me the truth. I’m your daughter. It’s just you and me against the world. If she came back, would you take her back?” Callie wanted to add, ‘Do you still love her?’ but didn’t. She felt she was too young to know anything about love, and such a question might just make everything worse. Besides, the way her mother and Joanne had been acting made love seem more confusing than anything else she could think of.

Allyson no longer felt like eating. “Yes,” she whispered. Callie exhaled. *Thank you!* she thought, although she didn’t know whom she was thanking. Callie took another forkful of spaghetti and chewed slowly. Allyson remained quiet for a long time. Had Callie gone too far, said too much? She worried that her mother hated her now. “Thank you, Callie,” Allyson finally said, softly.

Callie swallowed quickly. “Um, what for?”

“For what you just did. It was the most wonderful thing anyone’s ever done for me.” Callie wanted to ask what she had done that was so wonderful, but let it go. Maybe it didn’t matter.

Chapter 32

Mike and Grace were spending the weekend together. On Saturday afternoon, Joanne drove Molly to Callie’s house. She had planned to drop off Molly and then drive away. As they rode down the street, she spotted Allyson and Callie waiting on the front steps. Joanne pulled in front of the house and told Molly to get out of the car. “They’re waiting for us. Aren’t you gonna say hello?” Molly asked. She tried to sound casual but felt nervous. Everything was hanging on the answer her mother would give.

Joanne turned to look at Molly. “I wasn’t planning to,” she replied, coolly.

“Why not?”

“I have to get back home.”

“Why?”

“I’ve got things to do,” Joanne replied.

“Like what? Dad’s out. The boys aren’t home.”

“Housework.”

“Dad already did all the laundry and cleaned the whole house this week. I helped him.”

Joanne didn’t say any more. Molly noticed that Allyson was behind her mother. She had delayed Joanne’s departure just long enough to allow Allyson time to walk to the car without Joanne seeing her. Molly smiled.

Allyson leaned down and looked in the driver’s window. Joanne sensed movement behind her and turned. Allyson smiled at her. “It’s nice to see you again,” she said through the closed window. Joanne didn’t react.

“Roll down the window, Mom. She’s talking to you.”

But do I want to talk to her? Joanne thought.

“Mom? Roll it down!”

Joanne hit the button. The window slid open. Cool air hit her face. Allyson’s face so close to hers snapped Joanne out of what seemed like a daze.

“I said, it’s nice to see you again,” Allyson repeated, smiling.

“Uh, yeah,” Joanne replied, not smiling.

“How have you been?”

“Okay, I guess,” Joanne replied. Molly exited the car quickly. She met Callie on the steps. A moment later, they went inside.

“I’ve really missed you,” Allyson said.

“I, um...”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to say it.”

“I’m not trying to be evasive.”

“Then what are you trying to do, Joanne?”

“Live my life, if that’s okay with you.”

“I thought I was a part of your life. I know you were an important part of mine.”

Joanne tried to remain calm. “That’s all in the past.”

“Is it, Joanne? I don’t believe that’s really the way you feel. We lost each other once. Then we found each other again. It was kind of a miracle, if you think about it. I thought we both realized how important we were to each other. But, maybe it was only me.”

Joanne sighed. She knew what she wanted to say but felt afraid of where saying it might lead. “No, no, Allyson. It meant a lot to me, too.”

“Then, why can’t we be together?”

Joanne wanted to get back with Allyson, but the upheaval it would cause still terrified her. “It would cause too much chaos.”

Allyson looked into Joanne’s eyes. “That’s not what you’re afraid of,” she declared.

Joanne scowled. “What do you mean?”

“That’s not what scares you.”

Joanne had forgotten how looking into Allyson’s eyes usually made her feel. “Then, what *does* scare me?” she asked, shakily.

“Us.”

Joanne looked away. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“That we really are what your mother was terrified of when she separated us.”

“You mean lesbians?”

“Yes, but more.”

“What?” Joanne asked.

“In love. We belong to each other, Joanne. Our romance in high school wasn’t a fluke. It was meant to be. That’s what your mother knew back in high school. It was why she separated us. It was true and everlasting love. It still is.”

That was how looking into Allyson’s eyes had always made Joanne feel. She fought the feeling. Unable to respond, she waited.

Allyson went on. “There is no person- man or woman- that we could ever love more than we love each other. Look into your heart and you’ll see I’m right. Sure, you love your kids, as you should. I love Callie, too. But kids know when something’s wrong. Here’s your chance to make it right. They’ll adjust. Kids always do. Callie did when her father left.”

“But... but, she was only little when that happened.”

“Yeah, and it may have affected her in ways we don’t even know yet. But your boys are old enough to understand. Maybe not *everything*. But enough to be sure that their mom still loves them and will always love them.”

“Do you think it’s that easy?” Joanne asked.

“It won’t be *easy*, but you can do it. That is, if you really, really, want to.” Allyson’s plea touched Joanne deeply, but she didn’t respond. “Do you, Joanne?” Allyson asked.

“I... I... don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore. I’m so messed up.”

“The longer you keep telling yourself that, the longer it will be before you find true happiness,” Allyson replied. She looked at Joanne and waited for her to say something. The puzzled, frightened, helpless look on Joanne’s face told Allyson that she was still mired in confusion. Maybe she would always be.

Allyson decided to stop talking. There was nothing more she could do. “Nice seeing you,” she said. Then she turned and walked away from the car. A moment later, she went inside.

Joanne saw the door close and wondered if this would be the last time she ever saw Allyson. She wouldn't allow herself to consider the next question that arose. *Is this the last time I ever want to see her?* Joanne already knew the answer. It had remained hidden within her since she ran away from Allyson weeks earlier.

Callie and Molly were waiting in the living room. Allyson knew they were eager to find out what had happened outside, but she ignored them and went upstairs. She needed to be alone. That was how she might be spending the rest of her life. *I might as well get used to it*, she thought.

The girls looked at each other. "What happened?" Molly asked.

Callie shrugged. "I have no idea."

"Adults are so weird!"

Callie nodded. "I don't want to grow up if I'm gonna be as weird as they are!" she said. Molly sighed. Neither girl knew what to do next. Perhaps there was nothing more they could do. Maybe it truly was over.

Chapter 33

After Joanne got everyone in bed on Saturday night, she began to think about her earlier encounter and unsettling conversation with Allyson. The statement, 'We belong to each other,' was haunting her. She wanted to believe that Allyson was right but didn't want to think about what it would mean if she truly was. *I would have to leave my family to live with Allyson*, she thought, agitatedly. *Mike and Molly would be okay. But I don't know what it would do to the boys.* Alarmed by where they were leading, Joanne stopped her thoughts. *No! I can't do it! I can't even think about doing it. I can't put my family through that. Not again.*

Joanne's mother, Vivian, had mercilessly criticized her for her relationship with Allyson, but she wasn't the only person in Joanne's family who was angry about the family's move. Joanne's older brother, David, had been a junior in high school when the family was uprooted. He had been a talented athlete who was popular with other students, both boys and girls.

David had assumed the best year of his high school career was ahead of him and had looked forward to riding a wave of popularity right through his senior year and straight on into college. But his senior year in his new high school was dismal. He made few friends, was unable to excel at any sports, and got grades barely adequate to qualify him to receive a diploma.

His freshman year of college wasn't much better. Starting in his sophomore year, however, he was able to find the success he had enjoyed before his senior year in high school and ended up graduating near the top of his class. As an adult, he became a very successful businessman who attributed his success to the fact that he had to rebuild his life after that disastrous move his family made when he was in high school. He had discovered talents and strengths he never knew he had, and those had enabled his success in business.

Ironically, his talents and strengths were not unlike Joanne's, although neither knew it because they no longer had anything to do with each other. Joanne assumed that David had broken off contact with her because he'd somehow found out that she was the reason the family had been moved. But David's rage was directed only at his parents. He'd rejected all contact with his family as soon as he became established in business. Joanne didn't know

where her brother or parents were or if they were even still alive, and didn't care. She had a more immediate problem.

After calming her agitated thoughts, she finally fell asleep, and her dreaming picked up where her waking life had left off. She and Molly were together in their kitchen. No one else was in the house. "I was mad at you at first," Joanne said. Molly didn't react. "I thought you set me up. Then, when I thought about it later, I was glad you did. If you hadn't, well, I don't know what would have happened. I guess I would have never seen the truth."

"The truth?" Molly asked.

Joanne nodded. "Seeing Allyson again, seeing her face, seeing the way she looked at me... all that made me feel what I was missing in my life. Thank you, Molly."

Molly's face lit up. "I love you, Mom. And, I just want to see you happy again. So does dad. So do Allyson and Callie. Everyone loves you."

"I know."

In the dream, Mike came home on Sunday night. She told him she and Allyson had talked, and everything was going to be all right.

"You mean it?" Mike asked. He felt relieved. Maybe he and Grace could soon be together all the time. That was what they both had been wanting. He tried to suppress the joy that surged within him.

Joanne was way ahead of him. "Yes. You can be with Grace, and I can be with Allyson. We'll make this work."

Mike called Grace right away. She was thrilled that she would finally meet his family and get to have him all to herself. The dream shifted, and Joanne saw Molly talking on the telephone with Callie. The girls came up with an idea for how everyone could meet.

Then Joanne's dream shifted again.

It was a warm, pleasant Saturday afternoon. Joanne was holding Jake's hand, and Molly was holding Sam's, and they were walking toward the amusement park entrance. As they neared the gate, the boys tried to run ahead, but Joanne and Molly tightened their grip.

The amusement park was the only thing besides video games the boys genuinely enjoyed. As they waited for Joanne to buy tickets, they looked at the rides. The giant Ferris wheel rotated quietly in the distance. Riders on the roller coaster screamed as the track plunged them into a steep dive. Sweet, tinny merry-go-round music wafted through the air. There was the scent of hot dogs, cotton candy, popcorn, and funnel cakes (whatever those were.) They saw lines at the bumper cars, tilt-a-whirl, Trabant, and Spaceship rides, but the boys didn't care.

After Joanne bought the tickets, she handed them to Jake, Sam, and Molly. Then she noticed Allyson and Callie approaching and smiled warmly. Callie and Molly greeted each other. Then Callie said she needed tickets, and Molly offered to share hers.

As the little group walked toward the rides, Joanne saw Mike and Grace walking toward them. "Everyone's here!" Mike remarked cheerfully. He introduced them to Grace and referred to her as his boss from the bank. They all smiled at her except for his sons. Smiling, Grace greeted the boys by name. They seemed shy, and Grace backed off. Then the new, larger group continued walking.

The boys chose the Spaceship ride first. They liked the way the silver cigar-shaped 'rocket ships' hung on wires from a central hub. When they were moving, riders swung over

the heads of everyone on the ground and saw the park from high above. It wasn't outer space. But it could be if the riders pretended hard enough.

The adults weren't ready to try anything yet. They told the kids to go on the ride by themselves. "We'll sit this one out," Joanne said.

"But we just got here!" Sam argued.

"Go ahead, Sam- have fun," Mike urged. Sam ran off with Jake. Molly and Callie followed.

"Remember when we were that age?" Allyson asked. "I couldn't wait to get on rides and couldn't believe anyone was crazy enough not to want to ride everything in sight as many times as possible." The others didn't reply. They knew they weren't there for the rides.

The boys rode with their sister and her friend. (But, fortunately, the girls didn't sit with them.) When the first tickets were gone, Allyson bought more. Then Joanne treated everyone to food, but not too much. Finally, Grace treated everyone to a ride on the gigantic carousel.

Jake and Sam sat next to each other on muscular, colorful horses. Molly and Callie chose a unicorn and a swan. Joanne sat with Allyson on a small bench. Mike sat next to Grace on a different one. The benches were behind the horses the boys rode. They didn't notice their father holding that new lady's hand or their mother holding that other lady's hand.

Had the boys noticed, they wouldn't have cared. The amusement park wasn't a place where you went to care about stuff. You went there to get away from your humdrum life and have more fun than in almost any other way you could imagine. Jake and Sam didn't care who was with them as long as they were there.

The boys wanted to stay until the park closed, but the adults refused even to consider it. Everyone started walking toward the exit around dusk. When they reached the parking lot, something unusual happened. Molly, Jake, Sam, and Mike went toward their car, but Joanne didn't go with them. Instead, she walked off with Allyson and Callie. The boys were too tired to notice.

Grace walked to her car alone. She then drove to Mike's house and waited until he showed up with his children. Then they all went inside. Mike asked Molly to put the boys to bed. She did. Exhausted, she also went to bed.

"We did it," Grace whispered to Mike. At almost the same time, Joanne said the same words to Allyson at her house.

"Yes, we did. We pulled it off," Mike and Allyson simultaneously replied in the dream.

Joanne suddenly woke up. She felt disappointed because she was curious about what was going to happen next in her dream. She went to pee and then tried to fall back to sleep. Her thoughts started running wild. Soon she drifted into twilight sleep and started dreaming again.

They were back at the amusement park. Joanne kissed her boys goodbye. She said she was going away for a while. It was a lie, of course. She was moving out and would see her sons only when they visited her from now on, but Joanne didn't explain any of that.

Their father's friend had waved goodbye as their mother left. (They finally remembered that the woman's name was Grace.) Unfortunately, Molly stayed with the boys.

They briefly wished there was a way to also get rid of their annoying older sister because they hated that she bossed them around, but also felt contrite when she was the one who came to tuck them in at bedtime.

The dream shifted again. Joanne saw Molly and Jake in his bedroom. “Where’s dad?” he asked. Then he yawned.

Molly straightened his blanket. “He’ll be here in a couple of minutes,” she replied. A moment later, Jake was asleep.

The dream shifted to Sam’s room. He was so tired that he didn’t care if anybody came in. Sam conked out soon after his head hit the pillow. Molly kissed him goodnight.

Exhausted, Molly went to her room. She reached for her phone to call Callie, but then realized it was late. “At least she’s used to having my mother around,” Molly said. “I don’t know what it’s going to be like not having her living here anymore.” Then Molly frowned. “And, having a new mom to deal with.”

Joanne’s dream shifted yet again. It was morning. Grace and Molly sat together in the kitchen. Grace held a cup of coffee. Molly was eating a bowl of cornflakes.

“So, are you my new mom?” Molly asked.

“No, Molly. I’ll never be your mother. She’s a great person, and I won’t try to replace her.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because your dad and I love each other.”

“Oh, I see,” Molly replied. “And that must mean that my mom and dad *don’t*? ”

“Yes, that’s right. But you knew that, didn’t you?”

Molly grimaced. “Yeah. I wasn’t trying to be mean. Although I don’t know what my brothers are going to do.”

“I might have to try to be their mom. But you’re too old for me to do that with you.”

“Thanks for understanding that.”

Grace paused and took a sip of coffee. “I admire you, Molly. Both you and Callie, actually.”

“Why?”

“What you girls did for your moms was pretty amazing,” Grace replied.

“They love each other. Although I don’t understand why.”

Grace nodded. “Yeah. I don’t understand it, either.”

“I don’t want to even think about it. You adults and your love tangles confuse me.”

You take it so seriously. There’s more to life.” There was a long pause while Molly ate cereal and Grace sipped more coffee.

“How old are you, Molly?”

“Fourteen.”

“And Callie?”

“She’s thirteen.”

“I remember when I was the same age. My family didn’t get all reshuffled the way yours has. But other stuff happened. I had a good friend like Callie, too.”

“Callie and I are friends, but not best friends.”

“My friend Betty was my best friend. Until she wasn’t.”

“What happened?”

“A boy,” Grace replied.

“You let a *boy* mess up your friendship?”

“Neither of us knew what was happening until things got out of control.”

“I’m never letting something like that happen to me,” Molly declared.

Grace nodded. “That’s what I said back then, too.”

Molly wanted to hear more, but her father walked into the kitchen. “What are you girls doing up so early?” he asked.

“Just chatting,” Grace replied.

“About what?”

“Girl stuff,” Grace said.

Mike smiled, and the dream ended.

Joanne woke up. She vividly recalled every segment of her dreams. Despite wanting it, she doubted what she had dreamt could ever happen in real life. Romantic love entangled hearts, but a special glue held families together. It was a bond of love, trust, and fidelity. Unfortunately, families couldn’t reshuffle themselves like decks of cards. That was what she told herself, anyway. But was it the truth?

Chapter 34

After their conversation outside her house, Allyson felt there was a sliver of hope that things could change and considered what she ought to do. *I can’t let Joanne mess up her family, but I can’t turn my back on her, either. There has to be a way to work this out, but it won’t be easy. Maybe I should start by following up on our conversation.* Allyson decided to call Joanne. She asked if they could meet somewhere for coffee. Joanne agreed. Allyson suggested Sam’s Diner. It had private booths in the back where people could talk.

Allyson arrived first. Sam smiled when he saw her walk in. “Working today?” he asked, genially.

Allyson shook her head. “Meeting my friend for coffee,” she replied.

“Enjoy!” Sam said. He went back to his cooking.

Allyson sat down and waited. At first, Joanne hadn’t seemed enthusiastic about getting together, but then she had agreed, and Allyson wasn’t sure why she had changed her mind. Then she worried she had already changed it back and would stand her up. Allyson hoped she was wrong.

Then Joanne walked through the door. Bonnie saw her and pointed to the booth where Allyson was sitting. Joanne walked slowly toward her and sat down. Before they could say anything, Bonnie came up. “Coffee, ladies?” she asked. They both nodded. Bonnie went to fill the cups.

The women sat in silence. Joanne felt some apprehension. She was grateful that Allyson had asked her to meet, but knew it wasn’t just to chat over coffee. Maybe Allyson wanted to talk about her feelings. Perhaps she remained hurt or angry about the way Joanne had walked out. *Maybe I should start by apologizing,* Joanne thought. “Um, Allyson, I’m-.” Just as Joanne began, Bonnie brought their coffees. Joanne shut up.

Bonnie set their coffee cups on the table. She sensed tension between the women. *Something’s wrong,* she thought. Bonnie had witnessed enough tense conversations between

couples trying to work things out to suspect why Allyson and Joanne were there. She stood quietly and waited.

Allyson looked at her. "Is everything all right?" she asked.

Bonnie looked at her and then at Joanne. "I don't know, ladies. Is it?" Then she turned and slowly walked away.

Allyson looked at Joanne. She waited, hoping Joanne would say something, but she remained quiet. "Look, if you don't want to be here . . .," Allyson said.

Her statement surprised Joanne, and she reached out to touch Allyson's hand. Without looking at Allyson, Joanne began to speak. "No, this is exactly where I want to be. And you're who I want to be with. I guess I've known it all along but kept denying it because of the upheaval it would cause in everyone's lives."

Allyson blinked. *Am I hearing her correctly?* she thought. She *had* been hurt and angry, but her feelings had not been strong enough to cause her to reject Joanne. Allyson still loved her, almost more than she could bear. But Allyson needed to be sure that Joanne knew what she was doing. She couldn't bear it if Joanne might change her mind again in the future. She looked at her lover. "Joanne, we can do this any way you want as long as you're sure this is what you want. I mean *absolutely* sure. I can't go through losing you for a third time."

Joanne appreciated Allyson's frankness. "This *is* what I want, Allyson," she replied. "I'll make it work. Somehow. I promise."

Joanne's assurance was good enough for Allyson. "Okay," she whispered. "Okay."

Allyson's long ordeal of living without her lover was over. She felt ready to make Joanne a part of her life in whatever way Joanne wanted to arrange it. They likely couldn't live together, but that was okay. At least they would no longer be apart.

Bonnie came back with their check and noticed the women were holding hands. She put the check on the table and walked away. She was smiling.

Later that day, Joanne talked to Mike. "I'm getting back with Allyson," she told him. "And this time I won't be leaving her. But I'm not leaving here, either. You and Grace should do what is best for you. I won't be the one to break up this family. Somehow, I will make it work."

Mike had hoped the pull of her love for Allyson would prove too strong and she would leave. He didn't know what to make of her announcement that she wasn't leaving. How would that affect his romance with Grace? She wanted more than just an affair. Grace wanted to be his wife.

That night, Mike and Grace again sat naked under the heavy comforter on her balcony. "Joanne told me she's getting back with Allyson," Mike said. Grace felt a surge of hope. "But she's not moving out," Mike added. Grace's hope faded. She remained quiet. *Maybe she thinks this means we're over*, he thought. *But I don't want to be.*

"So, I guess you have a decision to make," Grace finally said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she made her decision. Now you have to make yours. She's staying. But are you staying *with* her? Or, do you want to be with me?"

"I'm already with you," Mike replied.

"No, you're not. Not the way I want you to be. The only reason I started this with you is that I knew I wouldn't be the other woman. I knew that your marriage was over, even

though you still lived in the same house. I also assumed she would go be with her lover, eventually. I often *hoped* she would, for her sake and mine.”

“For yours?”

“Yeah. Then I could have you. But now it seems I can’t,” Grace said. Then she paused. Mike waited. He sensed the most important part of the conversation was coming. “And now I don’t know what to do.”

“I suppose that you’re expecting me to decide.”

“Yes, I am, Mike,” she replied. Then she paused again. Mike waited for more. “But, I don’t want you to make the *wrong* decision.”

Mike wondered if her comment was meant to be sarcastic. Grace was not usually cynical. She had a bright and cheerful sense of humor that rarely expressed itself negatively. When she made a joke or funny comment, it was usually gentle and insightful rather than critical or mean. Mike worried that being with him and dealing with the complications in his life had changed her, but hoped not.

A strange question occurred to him. At first, he hesitated to ask but decided he had to know the answer. “Okay, Grace. Then tell me, what do you think would be the *right* decision?”

Grace didn’t hesitate to reply. “I want to be your wife.” She looked at Mike and waited for him to respond. When he didn’t, Grace went on. “She obviously doesn’t, so why stay with her?”

“You’re right. It’s just that I don’t know what the change will do to the kids.”

Grace didn’t hesitate to respond. “I’m sure I could love them as much as she does. Maybe even more,” she replied. He could tell by the conviction in her voice that she believed it. But Mike doubted she was right. He already knew Joanne could have left him the night she reconnected with her lost love. It was only because of the children that she’d come home.

“Love is complicated, Grace. So is family. I’m only figuring that out now.”

“It doesn’t have to be. She’ll always be their mom. I could be their step-mom. The kids would probably do just fine.”

“Joanne doesn’t think so. That’s why she won’t leave.”

“But what do *you* think, Mike? We’ve been happy together for months. It could be like this for the rest of our lives. Don’t you want that happiness? Why should she dictate what happens?”

“She’s not.”

“Oh, yes, she is. You and I have worked together for twenty years. We’ve spent as much time together at work as you’ve spent with her at home. The only difference was that she shared your bed, and I haven’t. Until recently. Well, I *like* sharing your bed and want to spend more than just time at work with you.”

Mike didn’t reply. Grace worried she had said too much but refused to back away from what she had already told him. She felt certain of her feelings. Grace loved Mike and wanted to be his wife. She was willing to ‘love, honor, and obey, till death.’ Maybe even beyond death.

It wasn’t her fault that Mike’s wife had turned out to be a lesbian. Their marriage was over. Why couldn’t he just end it? Then Grace would help Mike create new happiness to replace the one he had lost. Grace felt eager to devote herself to his life and family. She

couldn't understand why he didn't see her offer as a generous gift and why he hadn't already accepted it gratefully.

Mike didn't understand, either. Grace was a wonderful woman. She had lifted him out of the despair of his failed marriage. There was nothing about Grace he didn't like, and much he knew he could love more if they were together permanently. Yet he worried that, although he loved Grace, his children might not or perhaps could not love her. They might even resent him for bringing her into their household.

Mike knew Molly understood what was happening and had accepted it so far, but felt guilty he hadn't yet told her about Grace. Jake and Sam were the problem. Marriages sometimes broke up and families and households got reconfigured, but Mike didn't know how to make the changes in a way that wouldn't scar his children.

He sighed. Grace suspected he was about to say something momentous, and everything could change in the next moment. She waited and tried to remain calm.

"Grace, I agree with everything you've said. But I don't know if I can do what you want." Mike paused. The next statement was crucial. "That might not be good enough for you. If you didn't want to see me anymore, I would understand. I can ask for a transfer."

Mike's abrupt offer shocked Grace. "No, no, Mike, please don't even *think* of doing that. I don't want you to transfer, and I don't want to break up."

"But you're not happy, and I completely understand. It's my fault."

Grace suddenly felt they had gone too far and worried that they had passed the point of no return. "Can we not talk about this anymore? Could you just hug me, instead?"

"Are you chilly?" Mike asked. The heavy comforter that covered them usually kept them toasty warm even though they were naked underneath.

"No, I'm not chilly, Mike. I'm scared."

"Scared? Why?"

"I run a successful bank branch. I've been doing it for five years. Lots of people come and go. Lots of money and paperwork flow through my branch. I've won awards for how well our branch runs. I'm a good manager. But I can't manage my life outside the branch, and I feel frustrated."

Mike sighed. "Yeah," he said. "Join the club."

They looked at each other and started smiling. But, at *what*? Perhaps it was their lives. Or, maybe it was their helplessness. It could have been each other. Or, maybe it was the absurdity of life in general. Neither knew.

They decided to sit quietly and listen to the water as it lapped at the breakwater below the balcony. Somehow, the water always flowed. Somehow, obstacles to its flow always cleared. The river had been there long before Grace and Mike and would remain long after they were gone. Mike wondered what the river knew that he didn't. Then he stopped thinking about it and just held Grace in his arms. She wanted to cry but held herself back. If she started crying, she feared she might not be able to stop.

Chapter 35

At bedtime on Monday night, Mike talked to Joanne. "Grace wants to be my wife," he said. Then, apprehensively, he waited for her response.

Joanne wasn't surprised. But she didn't want to seem as if she would agree to let Mike go easily. "Oh, does she? And, do you want to be her husband?"

"Yeah, I do. But I don't know how."

Joanne was unsure she felt ready to have this conversation. Instead of sharing her trepidation, she evaded it and smirked. "Oh, it's easy, Mike. All you have to do is get on top."

He didn't grin. "Stop it, Joanne."

"Look, Mike, I'll do whatever you want, but only if you can figure out how to make it work."

"That's the problem, I can't."

"Neither can I," Joanne replied. "Because of the kids."

Mike thought for a moment. "Molly's not my real worry."

"What is?"

"The boys, of course. Same as you."

Joanne nodded. "Yeah. I refuse to hurt them. It's our job to protect them."

"From what?"

"Life, the world."

"And us?" Mike asked.

Joanne frowned. "Yeah, *us*. That's the hardest one, isn't it?"

Mike nodded. "It is for me."

"Me, too. But, I can't help thinking that we can't go on like this. At first, I thought we could. Then, once they were adults, we could rearrange our lives when it would be safe."

"But that's a long time to wait," Mike commented. *And Grace won't wait*, he thought.

Joanne nodded slowly. Mike understood that she no longer wanted to wait to be with Allyson. He knew he no longer wanted to wait to be with Grace, either. Mike didn't want to say it aloud in case Joanne would think he was trying to manipulate her for his own benefit.

"Is it *too* long?" he asked.

"That's what I don't know," Joanne replied. "But, I just had an idea."

"What is it?"

"Thanksgiving is coming up. I think we should get everyone together. Allyson, Callie, Grace, you, me, and the kids."

"What good would that do?"

"Hear me out. You could sit next to Grace. I could sit next to Allyson. The four kids would sit wherever they wanted. Then we could see what happens."

"What do you think will happen?"

"I think we might all get along okay."

"And then what?" Mike asked.

"Then we'll see."

Two weeks later, strangers arrived on Thanksgiving Day. "Do you boys remember my boss, Grace?" Mike asked Jake and Sam. "You met her when I took you to work a couple of times." They looked at Grace quizzically and couldn't recall if they'd met her or not. If she wasn't a character in a video game, a TV show, or a movie, she didn't interest them anyway. But their parents had told them beforehand that guests were coming and had reminded them to be polite. They smiled awkwardly and nodded slowly. But neither said anything.

“And this is my old friend, Allyson, and her daughter Callie,” Joanne announced. “Allyson and I met each other when we were only a little older than Molly is.” The boys didn’t react to Allyson and her daughter, either.

When everyone sat down to eat, the boys put the awkwardness of having strangers at the Thanksgiving table out of their minds and focused their attention on the food. But it wasn’t the turkey, stuffing, mashed and sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, and fluffy dinner rolls that interested them. Jake and Sam couldn’t stop thinking about the pumpkin pies that were sitting on the counter in the kitchen. Their mother had baked one of them. One of the strangers had brought the other one. Jake and Sam couldn’t wait to sample them both.

Molly and Callie sat next to each other and chatted quietly during the meal. The adults talked among themselves. As Jake and Sam ate, they thought about the video game they had left running and how soon they could get back to it. After they ate some pie, of course.

Occasionally, their father or mother would glance at their plates to see if they were eating. No one said anything. After everyone finished, their mother announced that she felt stuffed and wanted to hold off eating pumpkin pie until later. The boys nearly freaked out. They’d only been eating their dinner to get to the pies. Waiting another hour or two seemed unfair.

Joanne saw their disappointment. She suggested they could sample the pies if they still had room. “Small pieces, for now,” Joanne told them. “You can have more later.” That was better than nothing, and the boys agreed.

Molly and Callie cleared the table. Then they brought out the pies and whipped cream topping. The boys’ slices were tiny, but they didn’t protest. Everyone watched them eat. After they finished, there was an awkward silence. No one knew what to do next. Joanne looked at Allyson and Grace. “You guys have never been here before. Would you like to see the rest of the house?”

“Great idea!” Mike replied. “Why don’t we give them a tour?” He stood up and took Grace’s hand. She smiled as Mike led her out of the dining room.

“I’d love to see the rest of the place,” Allyson said. Joanne took her hand and led her off.

Molly and Callie sat there. They wondered what they should do. So did the boys. It occurred to them to beg for second slices of pie, but they decided not to try. They knew nothing gave their older sister more pleasure than denying them something they wanted.

Much later, after the guests left, Molly offered to help her mother clean up. Instead, Joanne asked Molly to see to it that Jake and Sam got ready for bed. The boys had already gone up to their rooms. Molly went to check on them. She found Sam looking at a picture book. She wished him goodnight. He ignored her.

Then she went to see Jake. He was waiting for her and seemed uneasy. “What’s wrong, Jake? Too much pie?” Molly asked. Jake shook his head. “Too much video game?” Jake shook his head again. He looked troubled.

“Molly, what’s going on?” Jake asked in a shaky voice.

“What do you mean?”

“Who were those people?”

“Mom and dad’s friends,” Molly replied.

“But why did they come?”

“Mom and dad invited them for Thanksgiving.”

“But *why*?” Jake whined.

“Maybe they had nowhere else to go.”

“But why did they have to come *here*? No one else ever came on Thanksgiving before.”

Molly quickly tried to think of an explanation. “Thanksgiving is about sharing, Jake.”

He shook his head. “No, it’s not. It’s about us, not strangers.”

“You’re wrong,” Molly replied, but not harshly. She remained quiet for a moment as another explanation formed in her mind. “Do you remember the story of the first Thanksgiving? Did they tell you about it in school? About how the Indians and Pilgrims sat down together, shared their food, and celebrated?”

“Yeah,” Jake replied. “But it was a stupid story. I didn’t believe it.”

Jake’s disbelief surprised Molly. At his age, she’d believed everything that adults had told her. That included the First Thanksgiving, the Easter Bunny, and Santa Claus. “Really? I don’t believe it anymore. But I did back when I was in first grade.”

His sister’s gullibility surprised him. “You *did*?” Jake said.

Feeling awkward, Molly nodded. “Yes.”

Jake looked at his sister. It was the first time he’d ever felt smarter than her, but he didn’t dwell on his feeling of triumph. “Is that girl your friend?” he asked.

“You mean Callie? Yes, we’re friends.”

“And that one lady was her mom?”

Molly nodded. “Yes.” She tried to recall the last time she and her brother had talked like this. *Never*, she thought. *What’s happening?* Jake interrupted her thought with another question.

“Okay, but who was that *other* lady?”

“Don’t you remember? Dad told us we met her before. She’s his boss at work.”

“Why would Dad want to eat Thanksgiving dinner with his boss?” Jake asked. Molly shrugged but knew she would have to come up with an answer.

“Maybe she had nowhere else to go. Maybe he felt sorry for her. I don’t know.”

“I thought you knew everything, Molly. That’s why you’re always bossing Sam and me around. But, maybe you’re not as smart as you think.”

Molly grinned at her brother. “I may not be, but I’m older than you, and mom told me to look after you, and that’s what I’m doing.”

“Yeah,” Jake replied. “Thanks.”

Then he did something he hadn’t done since he was a toddler. Jake spontaneously hugged his sister. Molly didn’t understand why he was doing it, but hugged him back as tightly as she could. She knew somehow that hugging was the most important thing to do right now, for both of them. Molly wasn’t sure why she felt that way.

Molly thought she knew why Callie and her mother had come to dinner, but had no idea why her father’s boss was there and wondered why he’d held her hand the way he had when they went off to tour the house. After she left Jake, she didn’t go downstairs to help her mother finish cleaning the kitchen. Instead, she went to her room and closed the door. After she sat on her bed, she considered bursting into tears. Molly hadn’t planned to lie to her brother, but didn’t know how to explain what was going on. And, after what happened today,

she had more questions than answers. She'd already known about her mother and Allyson. But what was the story with her father and Grace?

Suddenly, Molly knew exactly why Jake had hugged her. He likely sensed the vague possibility of what she had just realized was already happening. Their world was starting to come apart. Molly felt she was old enough to handle the changes that were coming, but also felt sorry for Jake and Sam because they were too young to understand, and wondered if her parents were even thinking about them. Molly decided that, if no one else would consider their feelings, then she would. What else were big sisters good for?

Then, Molly started to cry.

Chapter 36

Molly came to visit Callie on the Saturday after Thanksgiving. "I thought I understood all this," she said. Her brow was furrowed, and her voice was breaking. "But now I'm worried."

Callie felt concerned about her friend. "Why?" she asked.

"What's gonna happen to us when our parents rearrange everything?"

"My life won't change much," Callie replied. "But yours might."

"I'm not worried as much about myself as I am about my brothers. I can understand what's happening, although I don't understand why. But they won't. What if it hurts them?"

"I'm not sure the adults care, Molly. Well, maybe I shouldn't say that. What I mean is I'm not sure there's anything they can do about it."

Molly became agitated. "But they *should* care, and they *have* to do something about it! We're their children. They *owe* us!"

Molly's anguish concerned Callie. She tried to think of a way to respond. "Have you talked to your mom or dad?" she asked.

"My mom, yeah, but that was just about her and your mom."

"But you haven't talked to your dad?"

"I did- but about our moms. Not about him. Now I don't know what to say," Molly replied.

"Well, let's practice. Talk to me first. Tell me what the problem is."

Molly gathered her thoughts before she began to speak. "Dad, I don't know why Grace was there on Thanksgiving. And don't tell me it was just because you were being nice to her. Something else is going on. You owe it to me to tell me the truth."

Callie hesitated to say what she was thinking. Then she felt she had to be frank. "I think she's his girlfriend, Molly."

Molly sighed. "Yeah, that's the way it seems. But why didn't he tell me about her? Why did he keep her a secret? I've been helping my parents figure out what to do about my mom and your mom. But they haven't helped me deal with this at all."

"Molly, they're adults. They live in a different world than we do. They only think of themselves."

"But your mom isn't like that!"

"Oh, yes, she is! Or, she has been, in the past. I can't tell you how many times she's left me alone so she could go out at night. Then, she brought men home when I was asleep,

and I found them eating breakfast the next morning. Can you imagine how embarrassing that was?"

"No."

Caught up in their confusion and anguish, the girls remained silent. Molly had assumed her father would remain alone if her mother left to be with Allyson. Now, she worried about what her life would be like after her parents split up. It looked as if a new woman might come into their household, maybe soon. Molly could have accepted just having one parent. She thought her brothers might accept it, too. She didn't think any of them wanted a new mother.

Callie had stopped worrying about her future back when her mother and Joanne had settled into a regular relationship. Allyson had stopped bringing men home, and Callie no longer felt embarrassed. She also felt better having another woman around the house. Although she felt certain she would never love Joanne, she genuinely liked her and felt secure with her. Callie also felt grateful for the stability she saw in her future. Molly saw chaos ahead, both for herself and for her brothers, and felt trapped.

At dinner on Sunday night, Callie decided to tell her mother what was going on with Molly. "Mom, you gotta talk to Joanne."

"Um, okay. But why?"

"Molly's all messed up."

"What do you mean?"

"Thanksgiving was weird for her. She doesn't know what's happening. She's scared," Callie explained.

"What's she scared of?"

"She doesn't know what her parents are doing."

"But she's been a part of this," Allyson pointed out.

"Yeah, but she doesn't know what her father's doing or why that woman came on Thanksgiving."

"Grace is her father's girlfriend."

"Molly figured that out. But what does it mean?"

"I'm not sure, Callie, but I'll talk to Joanne. Thanks for letting me know."

Allyson called Joanne later and told her what Callie said.

"I'm glad you told me about this, Allyson. Mike and I were going to make the big announcement on Christmas Day. We figured all the excitement of presents and stuff would soften the surprise."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea, Joanne. You might want to reconsider."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. But what else can we do?"

"What else can any of us do? Everything is in motion now. It could end up in a train wreck if we're not careful."

"Thanks a lot, Allyson. You're not helping much."

"I'm here for you, Joanne. You and I know where we stand with each other. The rest will work out. But it might take more time and be more complicated than we'd like."

"I don't want to hurt my kids. I'd never forgive myself."

"I don't want you to hurt them, either. I'd feel awful if that happened."

"Thanks, Allyson. I know you care. I just wish I could figure this out."

“You will. You’ve saved companies, Joanne. You can save your family, I’m sure of it.”

“I’m glad *you’re* sure, but I’m not. Those companies I save don’t mean a fucking thing to me. I really couldn’t care less if they went under. It’s just my job, and my children are far more important. I have to get this right.”

“You will, Joanne. You will. *We* will. All of us- you, me, Mike, and Grace.”

“I hope so.”

The insecure tone of Joanne’s voice scared Allyson. She wondered if her lover regretted that they were together again after twenty-five years apart. “Joanne, if this has become too complicated, too gut-wrenching... then, I... I... I’d be willing to call it quits.”

Joanne didn’t reply, and Allyson didn’t press her. Instead, she let it go, for now. She felt haunted by the feeling that ending their relationship might be the only way to prevent the upheaval their remaining together could cause.

At school on Monday, Jake talked to his friend Pete at recess. “I think my parents might be getting divorced.”

“Man, you’re so lucky!” Pete replied.

“Lucky? What do you mean?”

“I wish mine would get divorced. All they do is fight and then apologize for upsetting me. I don’t know what’s worse- the fighting or the apologizing.”

“My parents never fight. My mom is away a lot for her work. And then when she’s home, my dad sometimes goes away.”

“Maybe that’s why,” Pete commented.

“Well, I don’t care about them. I care about me and my little brother.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I don’t know, but it scares me,” Jake confessed.

“Did you talk to your dad or mom?”

“No, only my sister.”

“And what did she say?” Pete asked.

“Not much, but I think she’s scared, too, and doesn’t want to scare me.”

The boys sat quietly for a few moments and pondered the weight of their young lives. “I get all the scaring I need from video games or at the amusement park,” Pete said.

“I know!” Jake exclaimed. “I don’t need scary stuff in my *real* life, too.”

Pete nodded. “Nobody does.”

That first weekend when Joanne had shown up in her mother’s life, Callie had wondered if the strange woman would ever go home. Now they were getting closer every day to sharing a home. Callie felt okay with that, but still didn’t understand anything more about adult women being in love. Nor did she care to learn.

Love was a mystery that didn’t interest Callie, and she didn’t need to understand it. She also wanted nothing to do with it. Callie planned to grow up without attachments. She wanted to devote herself to being her own person and living her life free of emotional entanglements. She was seeing the chaos love created firsthand and wanted no part of it.

Loving her mother was easy, natural, and safe. Mothers couldn't betray their children. They *wouldn't*. Callie didn't know if that was a rule or if it was just what mothers did, but felt certain she was right. She also trusted Allyson.

However, Molly no longer trusted Joanne and worried that supporting her mother had been a mistake. She had expected to live in a one-parent household when Joanne and Allyson finally got together. It had never occurred to her that her father had another woman in his life.

She accepted her father's need for companionship but didn't want that other woman moving in. Her father might want a replacement wife, but Molly didn't want a replacement mother. She also knew there wasn't much she could do about it. *Adults and their little dramas!* she thought. *They're worse than teenagers.*

Molly also felt she was old enough to be the woman of the house. There were books about girls her age who took care of their families after their mothers died, and everything worked out fine. Those fictional girls inspired Molly, but she felt certain no one would listen to her. Any adult she spoke to would tell her she was still just a kid and shouldn't want to hurry growing up. Molly didn't feel she had any more growing up to do. She felt convinced the upheavals in her family had already catapulted her into adulthood.

Molly considered running away, but couldn't think of anywhere else she could go. Then it occurred to her that she could move with her mother to Callie's house. The idea looked more appealing the more she considered it. But she couldn't decide if it would be the right thing to do. Was it right to leave her little brothers? *What if they need me even more?* Molly thought. *I want to be here for them.*

Christmas Day arrived and was as normal as Joanne and Mike could make it. They had made sure there were plenty of gifts to open. Joanne cooked a hearty breakfast to enjoy. The boys dived into their new toys and forgot about the rest of their lives. Dinner was even better than breakfast had been. This time, Joanne allowed them to eat as much pumpkin pie as they wanted. No strangers visited. The family celebrated as a tight five-person household. Everything was as it was supposed to be, and the boys felt safe.

But neither Mike nor Joanne knew what to do about New Year's Eve. They wanted to celebrate with their new loves, but didn't know how to arrange things. Joanne knew she couldn't invite Allyson and Callie over. The boys would likely be uncomfortable with outsiders.

Then Allyson invited Joanne and Molly to spend New Year's Eve with her and Callie. Joanne liked the idea and suggested that Mike invite Grace to come over. "This could be the perfect chance for the boys to get to know her," Joanne explained. "The boys don't do much celebrating and usually fade long before midnight."

Mike nodded. "Yeah, that might work."

"It's what you want, isn't it- that she comes here to live with you?"

"It's what she wants, yes," Mike replied.

"But you don't?"

"I do, Joanne, but it's not as easy as she thinks it should be. You move out, she moves in. I mean, in a sense, that's happened already. At least, in my life, if not in this house."

“You’re right, it has,” Joanne replied. She tried not to feel the pangs of regret that lurked inside her. “But, the emotional stuff was the easy part.”

Mike nodded but felt apprehensive. “In a way, that’s also right.”

“*Our* emotional stuff, anyway. Yours and mine. But, what about the kids? What about their feelings?” Joanne paused so she could think. “I have a suggestion. Why not just tell them you’d like to invite Grace to come over and ask them what they think?”

“They’re likely to ask if you’ll be there, too.”

“They might,” Joanne agreed. “But they might not. It’s worth a try.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to them.”

Chapter 36

Mike didn’t talk to his sons because he couldn’t figure out how to start the conversation. But he did invite Grace to come over on New Year’s Eve, and she eagerly accepted. He told Joanne to leave after dinner because Grace planned to show up later.

Not long after Joanne and Molly left, there was a problem with the video game that Sam and Jake were playing. Sam came to find his father and noticed that his mother and sister were gone. Neither had said goodbye because they hadn’t wanted to make a fuss, and thought a quick exit would be the best. Sam wondered what was happening. “Where’s Mom?” he asked.

“She had to go to work,” Mike lied.

“Oh. Where’s Molly?”

“Mom’s dropping her off at her friend’s house.”

“You mean we’re alone tonight?”

Mike didn’t know how to reply. “Kind of,” he said. Sam didn’t ask what he meant. Instead, he explained the problem with the video game. Mike went with him and easily fixed it. The boys started playing again, and Mike went back to the living room.

Grace arrived an hour after Joanne and Molly had left. Mike kissed her when she came in. She was carrying a large manila envelope. He wondered what was inside but didn’t ask. “Let’s not make a big deal out of this,” Mike suggested. “Let’s just sit in the living room and let the boys come to us.”

Grace nodded. “Whatever you think is best, Mike.”

Around eight, the boys were feeling hungry. They stopped playing the game and went looking for their father. They burst into the living room to nag him for a snack and found him with the stranger who’d been there on Thanksgiving. The boys looked at her as if she resembled an alien from the game. “Hello again,” Grace said, smiling. “Remember me?” Neither boy replied.

Mike frowned. “Guys, try and remember your manners. Please say hello to Grace.”

“Um, hello, Miss Grace,” Jake said, shyly.

“I’ve been looking forward to seeing you again. In fact, I brought you something.”

“You, um, did?” Jake said.

“Yes.”

“What is it?” Sam asked.

“It’s in this envelope. Here, let me open it.” The boys watched as she took out two large color photographs. They felt wary at first. *Who wants to look at a bunch of pictures?*

Jake thought. The first photo showed a vast expanse of water framed by what looked like a patio door. Neither boy reacted. Grace showed them the second photo. This one showed the wall of a balcony and the water below. Trying not to seem too curious, Jake asked, “What are these?”

“This is where I live,” Grace replied. “That river is right outside my window.”

“Yes, but *where* is it?” Sam asked.

“Not far from here.”

“Really? Can we see it?” Jake asked.

“You mean go there?” Grace asked. Jake and Sam nodded. “Sure.”

Mike wasn’t sure what was happening but trusted Grace to handle it.

“When?” Sam asked.

“Whenever you want,” Grace replied.

“How about now?” Sam said.

“Well, okay, but only if it’s okay with your dad.”

Sam turned toward Mike. He had been listening carefully. “Please, dad?”

“Okay. Sure. Let’s go.”

On the ride to Grace’s apartment, Sam asked, “Have you ever been out in the river?”

“Actually, no, I haven’t. Is that something you’d like to do?”

“Yeah! I’ve never been in a river.”

“Well, there’s a big paddleboat that goes up and down the river. I sometimes watch it from my balcony. Would you like to watch it with me? I think it’s running tonight.”

As soon as Grace let the boys into her apartment, they spotted the wide patio door. Jake and Sam ran to the glass and gazed out. They couldn’t see much in the darkness. Grace asked if they’d like to go out on the balcony. They nodded. She flipped on a small outside light, then slid open the glass door. The boys stepped out. They heard water splashing softly below and immediately imagined that they were in a boat.

A few moments later, the real boat appeared. Ablaze with light, the paddleboat Grace had mentioned was coming slowly up the river. Mesmerized, the boys watched it move. The bright paddleboat seemed mysterious. They imagined it was a spaceship alone in the darkness. Jake and Sam felt they’d stepped into a magical realm they never dreamed could exist. This wasn’t a game on their TV. It was real, and they loved it.

Grace remembered something else. “I forgot until just now. There’s going to be fireworks. I think they start soon.”

“Fireworks?” Sam asked. He didn’t move his eyes from the paddleboat. “On the water?”

“Yes. That’s how they do it.”

A few minutes later, there was a loud boom, and a ribbon of light shot out over the dark water. The noise scared Sam. He reached for Grace’s hand. Suddenly, there was another boom, and green and red streamers exploded in the sky. Sam tightened his grip and didn’t let go.

More booms, streamers, and dazzling, different colored displays followed. The show went on for a while, and the boys tried not to blink so they wouldn’t miss anything. After the fireworks ended, Sam turned to look at Grace. She sensed something had changed. Although

he said nothing, she could feel his excitement. There was also something else. She wasn't sure what it was. It had something to do with the way Sam was clasping her hand.

For Jake, this New Year's Eve had turned out better than any video game he'd ever played and almost as good as the amusement park had been. He looked at Grace. She couldn't be sure of the expression on his face in the dim light from the small balcony lamp, but guessed it could be awe. *I think I did it*, Grace thought. She was right. Her river had won them over. She was no longer that stranger who had shown up on Thanksgiving and unsettled the boys. Grace was now the woman with the enchanting river. They liked her.

It was a start.

Later, the boys fell asleep on the balcony. Mike said he'd carry them to the car so he could take them home. "I think they're sleeping here tonight," Grace whispered.

"It's cold on the balcony."

"Let's take them to my bedroom," Grace replied.

After they undressed the boys and tucked them in, Grace and Mike retreated to the living room. Grace went to the kitchen and returned with a bottle of wine and two glasses. She handed Mike a glass of wine. "Happy New Year," she said. Then she kissed him.

"You know, I think it will be," Mike commented. "I don't know how you knew to do what you did, but it worked. Thank you." Grace didn't reply. She sat next to Mike and sipped her wine.

Feeling good about what she had done, Grace looked out at the river. Mike looked at her. He recalled the first time he'd seen her river and the conversation that had followed. Grace had revealed a side of herself he would have never guessed existed. He hadn't appreciated how much of an effect the river had on her until he saw the effect it had on Jake and Sam. It had been truly magical. And, in a way, so was Grace.

She turned toward him. He was still looking at her. "Did I pass?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I know tonight was a test."

"Well, maybe for them," Mike replied.

"No, for you, too. What would you have done if they hadn't liked me?"

"I don't want to think about it, Grace. It's over, anyway. You passed. Boy, did you pass!"

"Wait'll they wake up in the morning and see the river in its full glory when it's light."

Mike grinned. "I'll never get them home."

Despite the cold, the boys spent most of New Year's Day on the balcony. They saw the riverboat in daylight and marveled at the big paddle that propelled it. Grace promised to take them on the boat whenever they wanted to go. They only agreed to leave her apartment when Mike reminded them they had to go back to school the next day. He called Joanne at Allyson's house to tell her everything had gone well. She was pleased. The hardest part was over.

The boys begged Grace to let them come back on the weekend, and she happily agreed. As they were leaving, Mike reminded them to thank Grace for showing them her river. As she saw them to the door, Sam seemed reluctant to leave. Mike asked if something was wrong. "She's not wearing her coat," Sam said.

“She lives here. We have to go home.”

“Can’t she come with us?” he asked, shyly. Jake wondered what was happening. He didn’t say anything.

“Do you want her to?” Mike asked.

“Oh, yes, please, Miss Grace.”

Grace smiled. “Thank you, Sam. I’d be happy to.”

“Me, too,” Jake added.

“Then, I guess it’s unanimous,” Mike said. The boys didn’t understand what he meant, but Grace smiled because she knew he was right. Not only did the boys want her to go back with them, but so did Mike. And so did she.

Later on New Year’s Day, Joanne drove Molly home, but Joanne stayed in the car. She didn’t want to go in to see the boys because her showing up might confuse them. Also, seeing Grace with them would likely unsettle her. *This is only the beginning*, she thought. *It’s going to take a while for everyone to adjust. But, it’s a start.*

Chapter 37

By New Year’s night, Molly had gone home, and Callie was again alone in her room. Joanne had driven Molly back, but then returned because she was now living at Callie’s house. The women had gone to their bedroom after saying goodnight to Callie.

Her stereo was playing REM’s *Monster* CD that Molly had given her as a Christmas present. She wasn’t sure if she liked it, but was willing to listen just because she wanted to please Molly. They were, it seemed, destined to be more than just friends from now on. They couldn’t be step-sisters (because their moms couldn’t get married), but, since neither had a sister, they wanted very much to be *like* sisters.

Callie thought back through all that had happened over the past nine months. She hadn’t known it at the time, but her life had already begun to change that Saturday morning when she went down to breakfast and found a strange woman wearing her mother’s bathrobe. And she could never have guessed how momentous the changes in their lives would become.

Now they were starting a new year. And her mother, Joanne, and Molly’s family were starting new lives. Callie felt happy that her mother finally had the love of her life back in her life. In addition, she felt relieved that the upheaval caused by her mother and Joanne deciding to live together hadn’t turned out to be a disaster for Molly’s family. At least, not yet.

So far, things seemed to be working out pretty well.

Callie found herself recalling the fairy tales she had read when she was younger and the Disney movies she now watched, and wondered if, now that all the changes had been made, everyone was going to live happily ever after. *Of course not*, she immediately thought, scoffing at the very idea. *Stories end. Movies end. But real life goes on.*

Despite her young age, Callie knew how slim anyone’s chances at happiness in real life were. She had lost her father and almost her mother. Allyson had lost her first love and several boyfriends. Now that she had found her first love again, how could Callie or anyone be sure future happiness was guaranteed? Callie wished that the happy times to come would outnumber the sad times that were also coming. That was the best she could expect. She hoped it would be enough for everyone.

Then she brought her attention back to the present.

She and Molly had decided they would keep a careful watch on what was happening in their separate households. They had taken a great risk in bringing their moms together. Now that their goal had been accomplished, they wanted to do everything they could to make the new arrangements work. Molly was planning to focus on being there for her brothers. Callie was planning to keep a close eye on her mother and Joanne. The girls weren't going to allow what they had joined to come apart.

However, Callie saw one downside to the new arrangement. Molly's little brothers. She might have to put up with them whenever they came to visit Joanne. But, as long as they didn't stay overnight, she thought she could survive. Maybe someday she would even grow to like them. But that might take a while. Possibly a long while.

Despite the big changes, Callie still hadn't figured out why her mother and Joanne, Mike and Grace, and the other adults she knew or had heard about, behaved as they did. They said it was because of love, but that explanation baffled Callie because she still didn't understand what they meant by love and what purpose it served. Other girls her age talked about boys and, she assumed, were becoming involved with them. But adults seemed to take love to a whole new level. They could (and did) become entangled in what seemed, to Callie, to be at best a quagmire and at worst a catastrophe.

As Callie had repeatedly told her mother, she still wanted nothing to do with love. Nor did she feel any interest in boys (or other girls) and fervently hoped no one would ever develop any sort of romantic interest in her. But, of course, a few months later, all of that changed.

The End