

A dramatic sunset over the ocean. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a golden glow across the sky and reflecting on the water. Dark, heavy clouds are scattered across the sky, some catching the light from the setting sun. In the foreground, large, dark rocks are partially submerged in the water. Waves are crashing against the rocks, creating white foam and spray. The overall mood is powerful and evocative.

Cheryl Espinosa-Jones

AN OCEAN
BETWEEN THEM

SUMMARY

Chloe and her mom Sal haven't spoken since Chloe came out as a lesbian ten years ago. But Chloe's cancer diagnosis forces Sal to re-evaluate her decision and ask Chloe if they can repair what has been broken. Can Chloe forgive her? Can she trust Sal with her precious family, wife Rhonda and kids Quin and Ari? She has to try.

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An Ocean Between Them

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Early Praise for An Ocean Between Them

"Cheryl Espinosa-Jones tackles the complex dynamic of mother-daughter relationships with aplomb and searing compassion. *An Ocean Between Them* is a moving tale full of rich characters that will leave readers both deeply satisfied and ultimately more heart-wise than ever before."

Claire Bidwell Smith, author of *The Rules of Inheritance*

"Cheryl Espinosa-Jones displays the full range of her great, universe-wide heart through the most intimate exploration of what it means to love, to lose and to grieve the very specific things that fill our worlds with color, and in so doing, lets us know that as she has done, our own lives may be richly transformed and burnished into diamonds of clarity, seeing and even greater living."

Marie Matsuki Mockett, author of *Where the Dead Pause and the Japanese Say Goodbye*

"Cheryl Espinosa-Jones writes of grief and reconciliation and their subtle interplay with much understanding and love."

Sheila Kohler, award-winning author, including two O'Henry awards, of *Once We Were Sisters*

"Cheryl Espinosa-Jones' compelling book *An Ocean Between Them* is a pleasure from beginning to end. A page-turner filled with strong and memorable characters, this story helps us transform life's challenges into wise and loving action.

Espinosa-Jones introduces a diverse family of mixed races, beliefs, ages, and sexual orientations struggling with old and seemingly irreparable wounds. Serious illness is the spiritual catalyst that loosens old resentments and heals broken relationships. The main characters know they may have limited time to learn to love and trust again. As a therapist and host of a radio show about grief, Espinosa-Jones gently weaves in the power of honest communication, community, heart-felt apology, and hospice support.

Throughout the book, I was deeply moved by the courage of the strong women characters. I wept with them over their losses and celebrated their second chances and achievements. After reading *An Ocean Between Them*, I know for sure that human hearts heal when they are loved rather than judged."

Elaine Mansfield, IPPY award-winning author of *Leaning into Love: A Spiritual Journey through Grief* "In *An Ocean Between Them*, Cheryl Espinosa-Jones reminds us there are gifts in even our deepest pains, and that if we're open and courageous enough to acknowledge them, we can change our lives in transcendent ways. This heartwarming, beautiful novel is a love story on many fronts — between adoring spouses, between a community of friends, and perhaps most poignantly, between a mother and daughter who find a way to reconnect and forgive one another when it matters the most. This book is a testament to the power of acceptance, commitment, and love."

Scott Stabile, Author of *Big Love: The Power of Living with a Wide-Open Heart*.

“A sensitively crafted and richly imagined story of love, loss, and healing. Cheryl Espinosa-Jones has gifted us with a tale that takes us into the complex tangle of relationships strained by judgments and distance. Grief becomes solvent, softening the hardened heart and breaking it open to revelation. *An Ocean Between Them* reveals what is possible when we enter the alchemy of sorrow. A wise and tender book.”

Francis Weller, author of *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*

Dedication

For my wife, Deb My life
My love
My heart

Chapter One

Sally

The house was still dark as Sally wolfed down her morning ritual, a cinnamon roll and coffee. There was a silence through the bones of the house, as if conversation had faded into the wallpaper and become monastery hushed. When the phone rang, it pierced the air, seeming out of place and inappropriate. Recovering her senses, Sally glanced at the call monitor and, seeing it was her sister Adele, did nothing. She wasn't in the mood for Del's disapproving manner. She imagined her sister's face as she made the call, half frame glasses part way down her nose, looking like a button-down schoolmarm, as she found the number – she wouldn't know it by heart and it wouldn't be on speed dial – and pressed the buttons. She'd be regretting whatever made her feel she had to make that call. Just to stop the picture in Sal's head, she turned on the TV, but really didn't watch it. Instead, she stared out the window, barely registering the one puny tree she could see out in front of the house. Its under-watered leaves hung like loose clothes from the limbs, visibly withering away.

“Hey, Sal, give me a call. Wanna tell you something. Should be home around five.”

What was wrong with Adele's voice? She had a choked sound, very soft, her “something is wrong” voice. Sal's sister, usually determined and certain, sounded lost. This was so unusual when it came to Del that the irritation brought a flush to Sal's face. Why didn't she just spit it out? Did she have to add drama to the intrusion? Sal huffed to the bathroom, deliberately avoiding the message, which blinked insistently from across the living room. Her first response to nearly anything her sister did or said was a resounding “no.” And today would be no exception.

Del and Sal had been dancing their sister dance ever since Sal was born. Del was three at the time and considered this little wrinkled thing an imposition. Mary, their mother, had had very little to offer in the first place, and adding another child to the mix did not improve things. Del ignored and occasionally taunted the little thing, and, as Sal began to realize that the object of her fondest hope, her big sister, had no wish to know her, she learned to act as if she didn't care and learned how to needle Del to blow up in front of their mother. One time, the needling led to a punch in the nose, bleeding down Sal's clean little pink t-shirt, ruining it. Their mother, not geared towards creative solutions, said the same thing every time, “Del, you're the older one and I expect you to act better.” She would then promptly leave the room.

So, as anyone might expect, Sal took her time returning that call. That day, a Sunday, she cleaned the whole house top to bottom, all two bedrooms, living room, bath, and kitchen. Top to bottom was just a figure of speech, since it was a tiny one-story bungalow. She even cleaned the windows, though she couldn't remember the last time she had, and it showed

in the dirty, greasy streaks across them. She had avoided shame about those windows, and every other dirty corner of the house, by gradually reducing the number of visitors she invited in.

Sal hadn't opened her eyes to really look at that house in much longer than she could remember. As she scoured the sink and toilet, she noticed that the whole place, not just the windows, had taken on a kind of grey tinge. Nothing had been painted since she and her ex first got the house, a few years into her marriage to Stan. They had big plans back then, but after the first kids came and the arguments amped up, none of those hopes and dreams ever moved forward. Half the time she was thinking, "Why would I fix up a house I'm going to have to get rid of when he leaves me?" Then, after he did leave, and all the kids finally grew up, she didn't care anymore. Looking back, criticizing each other about what the other wasn't doing had quickly become their favorite hobby.

The tiny North Oakland Craftsman was remodeled in the sixties, before their time, popcorn ceilings and white paint, when the goal of a remodel was to make a house look like it would if it was recently built. If Sal ever thought about the great price they'd gotten on the house, she imagined no one wanted to fuss with the potential mess that might come with trying to fix what had been done to it, or the asbestos that could, very possibly, be involved. People around their neck of the woods liked the houses better if they were "original." Sal and Stan, later Sal alone, didn't really care about that; they were too busy with kids, arguments, and bad jobs. Then, after Stan left, Sal resented the house, as if he had left because of it. Even though she got the house in the divorce, she still had to get a job at the nearest coffee shop, Daily Grind, to make ends meet and keep health insurance. It was really the only one she could get since she had little to no work experience. Anyway, why clean up when she was the only one there? What did it matter?

But that Sunday, Sal got everything spic and span, and it felt pretty good, after all, to look around at the clean formica counter and the dusted table and the clean sheets on the bed, rose colored like she liked. Even with the uncorrectable dingy paint, it did look better after a little elbow grease. And besides, in the background of her mind was the sense that she had won the latest round with Del by not returning her call.

The next day, Sal woke up tired and glum. All the pep of the day before, along with an unusual sense of accomplishment, had vanished like a dream. She pulled herself out of bed and picked clothes that felt as much like pajamas as she thought she could get away with. She went to work in the morning and tried her best to blur through the day, barely conscious. She never once looked out the window to see that it was a bright, crisp day, blue as the sea and smelling like spring. By the time she got home at three, she had pretty much given up on the day. She turned the TV on and watched Real Housewives shows for the rest of the night. Didn't really matter which town. Was it New Jersey or Orange County? It didn't

once cross her mind to call Adele. Or, to be more truthful, she was thinking about it but did not consider actually doing it.

What Sal was loath to admit was her jealousy of her sister. Del had a great husband who made plenty of money, two kids who adored her – unlike Sal's three who actively avoided her, and the fourth, Chloe, whom she actively avoided – and a good group of friends. Plus she had always been the pretty one, by everyone's estimation. Their parents didn't try to protect her feelings by keeping that opinion to themselves. So to think about her sister was to feel bad about herself, one and the same, which she needed no help in doing. They might talk at most four times a year, even though they lived a couple miles apart.

It was getting late and Adele's message was still lighting up the machine, but Sal wasn't looking. The little red indicator cast a faint shadow on the still grey wall behind it, the glow nearly ominous. Sal had just begun to drift off, the TV blaring loud enough for the neighbors to hear, most likely, when the phone rang again, and again Sal jumped, startled out of her reverie. But this time, before she had time to think about it, she'd picked it up.

"Sally, I'm glad I got you."

"I was just falling asleep, Del. What's up?" Sal hoped Del would take the hint that she really wasn't in the mood for a talk, as if she ever was. Del seemed to ignore that.

"You talked with Chloe lately?"

"Del, you *know* we don't talk." Sal heard the bitter edge to her voice, as if this was Del's fault and she should be embarrassed to bring it up. Would she never leave Sal alone about that girl? Would she never understand why Sal just couldn't have Chloe in her life?

"Well, Sal, I don't know if I should be telling you this, if she'd want me to, I mean, but she had a doctor's appointment the other day, and they found something. It's not good, Sally."

At that moment, it was as if the room collapsed and all Sal saw was the phone book, sitting across from her, with all her mostly out of date numbers in it. The gold writing on the cover and the brown, worn out leather, sitting on the little old table that belonged to their grandmother. Sal insisted she should have it when she died, along with the chair Grandma had needle pointed and the little toothpick cup. Sal just stared at first and didn't say a damned thing.

Finally, she said, "What are you telling me? I don't get it."

"Damn, Sally, I'm telling you Chloe is really sick. She has breast cancer and it's not the easy kind, whatever that is." Sal took a breath, stunned into silence again, but minus the resentful, obstinate feeling of a few moments ago.

“Are you still there? Should I have told you?”

How was Sal going to answer that? Should she have told her? Would Sal ever have known if she hadn't? Would one of the kids have called, or Chloe, or that woman she tried to call her wife? Would Sal have answered the phone?

“I have to get off the phone now, Del,” Sal said quickly and slammed the phone on the hook, way harder than she'd intended. Her antiquated phone, still requiring a dial to use, could actually slam. She stunned herself with the noise. *My first born has cancer*, Sal heard in her head, *my first born has cancer*. Repeating, over and over, until she recognized that she hadn't called her that for years, since that day she invited Sal to lunch to tell her she was with a woman. “My first born...” It hit her like a tank. “Chloe is my first born.” The air went out of her and she stood there for a minute, watching the landscape of her life shift, like the tectonic plates they talked about after an earthquake.

Just because Sal was going to go crazy if she stood there anymore, she started to clean again, going over the same spots she'd covered just a day ago, but with added fury, rubbing the wood, running the vacuum over the floor three, four times. Anybody watching would have thought she thoroughly liked to clean. She couldn't stop.

Then her fury hit her, boiling her blood and bringing a fierce tension to every muscle! *She's ruined her life and now she's gonna go and die*, Sal thought. *She's gonna run out of time to make this right! She robbed me of my child and now I can't get her back! It's not fair!*

Later, Sal would be embarrassed to admit that's how she'd felt, but in that moment, the rage consumed her, leaving no room inside for anything else. She had been thinking that Chloe's life was designed to hurt her for so long that, even at a moment like this, she couldn't give it up. She was going to go down believing that Chloe had destroyed her life by going in the wrong direction. She didn't even question why she thought so. It just seemed obvious.

If Sal were being honest with herself, she'd say that none of her kids had lived exactly as she wanted. Chase, number two, lived in a little basement studio and did odd jobs. Candice got pregnant very young and stayed married to the guy until the previous year, when she finally admitted to herself what a loser he was. So now she had two little kids, Josie and Ralphy, and a pile of bills and a boring job. Then there was Grant. He started off good, going to college on scholarship and even graduate school but he just couldn't finish it. Adele called him a perpetual student and Sal had to admit Del was right about that.

That night, when she ran down her list of the offenses her children had committed against her, there was only one item on Chloe's list. She was a homosexual. She had told Sal lesbian was the word she preferred, but Sal could never bring herself to say that. It always sounded so nasty. Now Sal noticed that she knew so little about Chloe, other than that one fact. She hadn't allowed anyone to talk about her and she didn't do her own research, even though

she had a Facebook account and could have looked; Chloe wouldn't have known. But Sal had created a vacuum where Chloe used to be. Now a crushing pain suddenly filled that cavern inside. Sal's baby was sick.

Sal wasn't sure how many times Adele called that week, but when she looked back on it later, she had to admit that was nice of her. Sal didn't go near the phone or call her back. In fact, she didn't go anywhere, just called in sick and stayed in bed, feeling sorry for herself. She never once thought that maybe she had made a bad choice or that she should try to make things right with Chloe. She was still blaming Chloe for the mess she believed Chloe had made between them and, out of habit or stubbornness, was sticking to her guns. She was sure not going to call her and lower herself.

Though she ached for Chloe now with every cell in her body, she was not going to make the first move. How long did Sal stay like that, suspended between a terrible past and a worse future? There was a trip to the store for cat food about a week in. She might have ignored that little calico if she hadn't been yowling in a thoroughly unacceptable tone. Otherwise, it was just an endless stream of reality shows and every bit of ice cream she had in the freezer, which was not a little bit. A few glasses of wine, too, and once all the glasses were dirty, Sal swigged out of the bottle. It was the lowest she'd been since Stan walked out.

It would be hard to say, in retrospect, how she began to inch back towards living. First, she looked at her checkbook and acknowledged that she was close to the bottom of the barrel. She dragged herself to Daily Grind and stood at the counter, usually taking orders, sometimes making drinks. At first, it felt like a big imposition when someone ordered their skinny extra strong triple pump latte with whipped cream, but after a few days, it began to comfort her to do familiar things. She knew how to make a drink. She knew how to say good morning, four dollars and fifteen cents please, have a good day. She knew how to wipe the counter, count the tips. Life resembled an ordinary pattern. She didn't have to drag herself around as she had when Del first told her about Chloe.

At that point, the nights became unbearable. Sal added extra shifts just to stay occupied. A few nights she drank herself to sleep, even though she'd never been much of a drinker. She finished off the pain pills left over from a sprained ankle and was lucky there were not more. She might have tried to end it if there had been enough. She had never been good at reaching out when something was wrong and avoided it even more now. In fact, right then, she truly believed that she was entirely alone in the world, that no one cared if she lived or died.

What preyed on her mind was that no one would really notice if she never came out of this. Adele continued to call now and then and leave a message like everything was normal. If she'd been dead, there would have been no way for Del to know it. Sal didn't call back, just the same as always. After that one time, she kept her guard up, prepared for Del to call, so that without much effort, she didn't pick up the phone. She even wondered if she should have it disconnected. *Waste of money*, she thought. But she never did. It would be quite a

while before she admitted to herself that she kept it for only one reason. Chloe had that number.

As the weather changed, Sal began to perk up just a little. In what might have seemed an odd thing to an outsider, as winter came to her neighborhood, with its California rain and cloudy days, she started to cheer up. The weather matched her state of mind and that was oddly reassuring. Life took on a pattern, however vacant, of home and work. Work and home. Grocery store. Drugstore. Home and work.

Sal hardly noticed when the thought began to plague her mind, *you've got to talk to someone*. Such an unusual thought for her, the loner chick, the "needs nobody" lady. But there it was. *You've got to talk to someone*. At first, it would pop into her mind occasionally, at odd moments, unbidden. She shooed it away as if it was nothing. Sal just wasn't the type to need stuff from other folks. Her ex, Stan, used to say he felt a little useless, just standing there while Sal dominated everything. The way he said it was mean, but he wasn't wrong. That made it a real shocker when once, while Sal was working, she had the most overpowering urge to say to a regular customer, "I haven't seen my oldest child in ten years and she has cancer." It was as if the force of the universe wanted to come through her mouth and it took a tremendous act of will not to say it. Was it the softness of her eyes, or the way she said, "thank you," as if this simple cup of coffee and the person who delivered it made a real difference in her life? Whatever it was, Sal couldn't shake the voice, *you've got to talk to someone*, and it started seeming like that had something to do with this woman she didn't even know.

After that first time, Sal took extra effort to chat with her in the mornings about little nothings, really. Did she live in the neighborhood? Did she want a muffin or a breakfast sandwich? When she ordered her coffee, Sal would take the effort to smile though she was usually all business. She knew her name, Kim, since she wrote it on her latte cup every morning, and found herself reaching out.

"How are you this morning, Kim? I know I'm weird, but I'm enjoying the rain."
Responding to this new warmth, Kim asked about Sal. "Do you have children?"
"Yes, four." There was a shock through Sal's body when that number erupted from her lips. After she'd told Chloe she was dead to her, she always told anyone who asked she had three children. Yes, two boys and a girl. She'd been telling that lie so long it seemed like the truth. But somehow, she couldn't pretend with this stranger.

She was working up to ask Kim what she did for a living. By the time she did ask, she'd told Kim more about herself than she told her friends. About loneliness, and old friends who were gone, and not seeing much of her children or grandchildren. Nothing about Chloe, of course.

When it happened, it seemed so natural. "What do you do for a living?" How did Sal know it was an important question? But she'd been afraid to ask, knowing that it was.

“Do you work near here?”

“Right around the corner.”

“Oh. What do you do?”

How had she managed to sound so casual? “I’m a counselor.”

“Oh, that sounds like interesting work.”

That’s all she could manage right then. Kim smiled and moved to a one-person high table, pulled out a computer, and began to do something on it. In Sal’s imagination, Kim was solving someone’s problem, completely and forever, right there in Daily Grind. She imagined the person on the other end, grateful to receive the warmth and care this kind woman offered.

That was a Friday and Kim didn’t come in when Sal worked the next day. No surprise, since Sal had found out she didn’t live near the shop. Sal was building up her courage, for what, she couldn’t say. She just knew that she’d need it for what came next.

Monday was sunny, incongruous with Sal’s state of mind. Her insides were swirling and her knees felt weak. For no reason that was clear to her, Sal still felt like something big was about to happen. She walked to work instead of taking the car, putting off getting there. The line was out the door by the time she arrived. They’d be charging up the Monday morning hordes heading to work. All those long lines of folks tanking up on their caffeine. Daily Grind addiction, they’d joke in the back room.

Sal almost thought Kim wasn’t going to show up. Why did she care? Sal couldn’t understand herself because she didn’t believe in therapy, counseling, whatever you want to call it. She had been quick to offer the opinion, whenever the subject came up, that people who went to therapy were a bunch of navel gazing into themselves entitled bitches. But she was imagining herself asking, *how much does it cost? Can I come talk to you? I need to talk to someone.* The persistent ring of her own voice in her ears was louder every day.

Finally, Sal saw Kim walking towards the door. She took a deep breath and got ready. There she was.

Chapter Two

Chloe

It had taken a long time for Chloe to let go of her mother. As a child, her mother had told

her they were two of a kind, that no other child of hers could ever be as close to her. Two peas in a pod, she used to say. Same red hair, fierce temperament, energy. Then when Sally cut her off, she wondered whom her mother had been close to. Not the real Chloe, for sure. The real Chloe was her own person, with likes, dislikes, beliefs, and truths of her own. She was not just a reflection of her mother. Acknowledging that she was a lesbian was just the tip of the iceberg on their differences. But it was also the one fact about her she couldn't hide or get around. So, when her mother refused to have anything to do with her, she had to face the fact that Sally, who had adored her, had never loved her.

She knew some people didn't make it through these things, but that just wasn't her. There was an optimistic streak in her that simply couldn't be killed. She didn't know where she'd gotten that, since both her parents were glass half-empty people. So, since she wasn't a quitter, she set to work trying to get over her mother.

The first thing she did, even though she couldn't see the connection at first, was break up with Daz, the woman she'd been seeing. She just couldn't keep it up, dealing with all the shit they had between them and getting over her mother's rejection. She knew she wasn't making a mistake when Daz said, "You are such a load of crap!"

The next thing she did was email all the people she trusted in the world to ask whether they knew a good therapist. She'd gone a few times when she was trying to figure out why she felt nothing when she dated men and it had been okay. The therapist hadn't even been that great, but she could see the potential.

This time when she stepped into the therapist's office, she was nervous, but less than she expected. Her friend, Claire, had told her to go to Angie, a woman who had been helping people deal with coming out for twenty years. Chloe tried to reserve judgement, to play it close to the vest, not risk too much, but by the end of the first hour, she was telling Angie things she hadn't told anyone ever.

Such as, her childhood best friend had cut her off after asking her to play naked house with her – "You be the boy and I'll be the girl" – and then, the very next day, telling her she was a lezzie and they couldn't be friends anymore.

Or the times when her classmates whispered behind her back and, when she came close enough to hear, laughed and shut up.

Or hearing, when her mother took her to church, a rousing sermon about all the ways a person could go wrong, touching yourself, touching someone else you're not married to or, God forbid, someone of your own sex. She never told Sally why, but she refused to go to church from then on.

So those were the kinds of things she suddenly told Angie, this person she had never even laid eyes on, about herself. Angie was not one of those silent, nodding therapists. They had a two-way conversation, but it was clear that Chloe was the center of it. She tried not to look at Angie, but the intensity of her deep blue eyes was hard to avoid. She had to stare hard at the pillow she had grabbed off the couch when looking at Angie became too much. Angie asked her questions, suggested ways she might look at all this, asked her if she knew anyone else that had been through anything similar. "What you're feeling is so familiar to me," she said. "It is such a tremendous loss when just being yourself sends people packing." Chloe left that office shocked and not a little worried, but also strangely comforted.

At home later, when she tried to figure out why she had said so much, she just wasn't sure. She did know that it had been a long, long time, if ever, since anyone had paid that much attention to her.

That had been three years ago now, and she had gone to see Angie for two, walking through each painful part of losing her family. Because it didn't take long to see that, even though other people in the family still kept in touch, now and then, they were in and she was out. When she did see them, it was so uncomfortable she just wanted to go home. She always wanted to ask them, "Why do you let her get away with it? Why do you keep seeing her when you know it's at my expense?" But she never said anything.

Somehow, magically, working with Angie helped her to accept all that. She even imagined that maybe she came to love herself a little better. When she told Angie that she was ready to go it alone, Angie said something she thought of each and every day from then on. "You have had struggles, and you have faced them. Now you are going to have a beautiful life, because you know struggles don't have the power to take your own amazing life away from you."

And she said to Angie, when Angie asked what was next, "I'm setting out to find a kind of love that doesn't hurt me."

She thought that might be impossible, and she prepared herself to live a good life without a special someone. She had finished college in literature a few years back and never used it, so now she began a search for a career that would get her back to her great love of words. Almost by magic, she got a job editing books. A friend had a friend with a small press and they gave her a try. She loved it! All day reading and working to improve the beautiful books her boss had chosen to publish. Suddenly, life was something to treasure.

She even put the love thing on the back burner; she was having so much fun with this new life. All the pain had been worth it. She could almost call herself happy!

The day Rhonda walked into the office, Chloe found herself suddenly shy. She was at the front desk, which was unusual, but she'd been filling in for the receptionist, who had a terrible flu. She knew there was a new writer coming in. It wasn't decided yet who was going to edit the book, but there was lots of excitement about this one. Sometimes the books just seemed like business as usual, but Chloe's boss had said, when she told her about it, that this book could "put us on the map." She was a very subdued type, so that was saying a lot.

Reception faced the entrance, fully blocking access into the rest of the offices. Every visitor had to stop there, no choice. When Rhonda bolted through the door, Chloe almost imagined she felt a wind whooshing through too. The first thing she noticed about Rhonda was not a detail of her looks, but that Chloe herself suddenly felt alert. Something in her whispered, *I know you*. Rhonda was oddly familiar while also seeming absolutely new. And Chloe found her more beautiful than any woman she'd ever seen.

Rhonda couldn't have looked more different from Chloe herself. Chloe's red hair fell long down her back, while Rhonda's was jet black, short, and in soft dreadlocks. Chloe had moon cheeks, as if she'd never lost all her baby fat, while Rhonda was lean and just a little muscly.

Chloe imagined standing in front of her, looking eye to eye. In her mind, they were exactly the same height. She stood up to see if she was right. With her four-inch boots, Chloe was a little taller. Chloe worried that she looked foolish standing for no reason and fiddled with the filing cabinet behind her as if there was something very important to attend to.

Rhonda walked over to the desk and asked for April, the boss. Caught off guard that Rhonda spoke first, Chloe turned quickly to face her and had a little trouble forming the words when she said, "Sure, just a minute." She was suddenly terrified that her telltale blush, bright red, had risen up her cheeks. There was a good chance it had, because she suddenly felt feverish. If she could have put off the moment when Rhonda headed back to April and the meeting room, she would have.

Chloe had never before plotted for assignment to a particular project. She loved the adventure of knowing almost nothing about a book before she opened the first page. She loved knowing that she and the author, no matter who it was, were embarking on a journey to put words between two covers or, in the case of their growing e-book business, onto the internet. She would never have chosen many of the books she ended up editing, but she always learned something of value, from the book or its author. A few times, what she learned was how to work with difficult people, but that was valuable in its own way; it made her appreciate the many other writers who made her work a sheer pleasure.

None of that came into play one way or the other when Rhonda came through the door. All she could imagine were endless hours in her office, on the phone, heads bent over the page, maybe even getting a drink afterwards, intimate in their discovery of what Rhonda's book could be. Just the idea of reading what this creature had to say seemed beyond any fantasy she'd ever had about the possibilities of being an editor. She was certain that Rhonda was an amazing writer with important things to say. And this was before she even knew whether Rhonda had written a novel or a book of essays.

She wasn't sure how to work the angle. April didn't like her staff to have strong opinions about their assignments. She liked to be the leader. She believed she had the best line on who was good for what book. In all fairness, she was usually right. As Rhonda passed the front desk on her way out, Chloe looked up just in time to say a quick, "Nice to meet you." Without turning around, Rhonda raised her hand in the air, an almost wave the only clue she had heard.

Chloe didn't have to wait long, or waste too much strategic energy. April called her in within the hour.

"Did you meet Rhonda Flax out there?"

"Yes, I did." *Don't give away your secret, Chloe. Stay cool.*

"She's an interesting author. It's a novel. She's a lesbian, but the only lesbian character in it is pretty minor. When I asked her about that, she said she doesn't want to get pigeonholed. Doesn't want to be the 'lesbian writer.'"

Chloe thought it was best to look interested and say nothing.

"Anyway, I hope you won't take this the wrong way, like I only want you to work with her because you're gay, but I think you might be good for the project. What do you say?"

Chloe was not sure she could say anything. She swallowed hard, then "sure, why not?" came from her throat. It seemed as if someone else was speaking. Did she sound casual enough? Too blasé? But April didn't seem to notice.

"I know I usually wait for the editor's meeting, but I already know I want you to do it, and we don't have another meeting for a while. How close are you to being done with Mick? I want you to have plenty of time."

She'd been editing Mick Patterson's book about Stonewall for what seemed like forever. April didn't want Chloe to think she gave her all the gay projects, but she couldn't remember the last one she didn't give to Chloe. Chloe's best friend at work, Emily, said she had a corner on the market. "When can a straight girl catch a break?" she said when Chloe got the Stonewall book, because it was Mick's tenth book and he sold well, and there was going to be her name in the acknowledgements, "Thanks to my amazing editor, Chloe Bess, without whom this book would be in the toilet."

She paced around the office, which was conveniently laid out in a circle around the building, until she found Emily. Before they met, Chloe never thought she'd be able to dish with a straight girl, but Emily had just the right blend of academic interest and bald humor. Once when Chloe told her Daz' parting shot, after recapping the worst relationship she'd ever been in, Emily said, "Wow, she's such a guy," and Chloe couldn't stop laughing, to the point where she lost her breath.

Emily told her all about her dates with men, and appreciated Chloe's critiques. Some of the guys Chloe truly seemed to like better than Emily did. She'd tell Emily, "Why don't you straight women like men as much as me? It's weird!"

So, with all of that going on, this latest Rhonda adventure must be shared. Emily was hanging out in the coffee room, steeping an endless cup of tea, or, as she'd call it, "meditating on her next chapter."

"Emily, I've just been introduced to my new life."

"What are you talking about?" Chloe always had to earn it with her.

"There's this new author. Rhonda Flax. Oh my God, Emily. I think I'm in love."

"Chloe, I thought you weren't gonna go nuts on me anymore."

"Wrong, apparently. I am gone!"

"Oh, God, I can't wait to talk you down off the ceiling when she turns out to be a loser."

Chloe couldn't sleep the night before their first meeting. They had arranged everything by exchanging what seemed like an endless string of voicemail messages.

"Hello, this is Chloe Bess, an editor at Pace Books. You can reach me by phone at...or email..." The communications were so mundane that Chloe bored herself.

Then she'd get one back. "Hi, this is Rhonda Flax. I can meet anytime Tuesday."

"Tuesday isn't good, how about...?"

It was almost an anticlimax by the time they sat down in Chloe's office to try each other out.

Meeting in person did not dilute Chloe's enthusiasm, even though Rhonda seemed a bit guarded. Half way in, Chloe realized Rhonda might not know Chloe was a lesbian. Many people didn't, since there was no giveaway in her style. She liked her dresses, skirts, long hair, and makeup. She'd tried the shorn, tough style when she first came out, but it never fit. So now the only problem was somehow letting people know when she wanted them to know.

Rhonda was all business. She brought the manuscript, "in case," she said. April had given Chloe a copy the day before, and she'd read a few chapters. She was relieved not to be disappointed. It was good, maybe even excellent. The characters moved through the story, jumping off the page and demanding that you like them. Even the villains were nuanced

and complete – real human beings. There was insight into their motivations and windows into their deepest selves. And, even so, there was room for a serious edit. They would have to meet many times to get this done. Chloe would be able to help make this great book better, if Rhonda could trust her.

“I love the book,” she said.

“Great! I guess we can call it done and get the thing published!” Rhonda replied, only half joking. Chloe was glad that she responded to Rhonda’s joke by laughing, but only a little bit. She was suddenly afraid that if she spoke, she was going to make a mess of it.

“I’d like to know what you think could improve it,” Chloe said. She was falling back on her usual tactics with writers, let them think all the ideas were theirs, approach gently, support, then stubbornly insist on the changes she knew the book needed if they couldn’t get there on their own.

“Well, I wouldn’t touch chapter three; it works just the way I want it to. That’s the only one I really don’t want much of an edit on, unless you see any typos. The first two chapters work in general, but they feel a little too much like I’m trying to get the background over with, which I was, and I want them to catch the reader up in the story a little more. Chapter four and seven need major editing. I want you to say what sections you think need more, maybe a little about what’s missing, then I want to work on it, then check back, your usual high intensity edit. The rest are mostly right; we need to tweak them. The last sentence I refuse to change for any reason.”

“Wow, I haven’t quite finished the book – I got it yesterday – but everything I’ve read I had the same hit as you. That sure doesn’t happen often. Let’s start with the first two chapters, since I’ve read them, and then call it a day.”

Once Chloe was engaged in her work, she forgot to be nervous, tongue-tied, or crushed out. She was in her element, making suggestions, giving Rhonda her best, and they worked together well. For the next two hours, it was all about the book. But right as they were finishing up, she remembered that, with most of her writers, she only had the one face to face. This had already gone on longer than most. From here, she usually did everything by email and phone. Her heart dropped. What to do.

“You know,” Chloe said, “I usually don’t do this but, since you’re local and today worked so well, I wonder if maybe we should do a lot of the editing across a table like this.”

Rhonda looked at her for what seemed like a long time, her face betraying nothing of what she might be thinking. Chloe couldn’t remember a time she had been looked at so thoroughly.

“I’d like that,” said Rhonda. And at that moment, as if this had always been coming, Chloe’s life turned on its axis.

It wasn't until their fourth meeting that things took a turn. Chloe thought Rhonda was maybe the most interesting person she'd ever met, and her crush did not diminish, but at the same time, she was a little hesitant to mess with a work connection. If she offended Rhonda or made her jittery, it could hurt the book. Chloe was pretty ethical when it came to work; she didn't mess around. Emily would have said she was a morality freak. That made it hard to imagine turning this work connection personal, especially before they finished the work. The other thing Chloe hated to admit about herself was that she was never forward when it came to potential romantic interests. So, it came as no surprise that the first move was Rhonda's. When it happened, it seemed a little bit strange that it hadn't happened before.

They were sitting in the trendy little coffee shop down the street from the office. Brick walls and rough metal table, lights that looked like they should hang over a typewriter table in an old-fashioned newspaper office. They had figured out this was the best place; away from distraction, from phones, from anyone paying any attention to what they were talking about. They always sat at a corner table that was blocked off, but right by a window. If it wasn't free, they waited. It seemed almost superstitious, but they were really productive here. They had gotten to the fourth chapter in just three meetings.

"Are you not asking me out because you're not gay or because you're not interested?" Rhonda said, looking straight at her with her intense green eyes.

"I'm not asking you out because I'm afraid of rejection," she said before thinking, and then registered it was the exact truth. She didn't hesitate because she was meek, or shy, or didn't know what she wanted. She hesitated because she didn't want to hear no!

"Well, you sure won't hear 'yes' if you never ask!" Rhonda said, and stood up, ready to go.

"If I ask, what will you say?" Chloe heard her own timid voice.

As Chloe could have predicted, Rhonda came back in a hurry. "You'll have to ask and find out," she said over her shoulder, already at the door.

