

The EROTICA BOOK CLUB
for Nice Ladies

CONNIE SPITTLER

PROLOGUE: 1500 A.D.

High in a chateau cupola, the wrinkled hand of Duchess Jardin trembled as she dipped her quill in the pot of blood-red ink. She scrolled each scarlet letter with care, spelling out herbal names that dripped with poison – *Foxglove* – *Monkshood* – *Belladonna* – dangerous herbs used by Z, the gypsy healer, in his experimental cures. Her goose feather pen wrote down each remedy, listing exact ingredients and instruction details.

She straightened her gold-brocade sleeves, then stared out the window, thinking back to the arrival of the quiet traveler. He'd requested permission to enter the iron gate of their Alsatian chateau, then told her of his cures. As head of the estate, she'd offered him the storage cave for his experiments. After a few days, she began to pluck herbs from bouquets drying in the scullery for him to use in his recipes. Then she began to assist him in his work, crushing and pounding mixtures in the hope of healing her own aches and pains. When signs appeared from others that his curatives had healing powers, she tried small sips, but found no relief from the illnesses that ravaged her worn body.

Sparrow song outside the window brought her back to the writing. She began again, this time listing the five ingredient for Z's strange tea, a brew flowery with the fragrance of erotic scents. *Dragoncello*. *Mint*. *Lovage*. *Yarrow*. *Lively*. It was the one recipe using herbs known safe to ingest. When Z declared this tea not only reversed the signs of aging, but increased the appetite for love, she noticed those who drank it regularly appeared younger and more vital. Unable to contain her curiosity, one day she tried the elixir. Reeling from its effects, she crept off to bed to dream of bronzed men who satisfied her in every way. The next day, she walked for hours in the garden, recalling the pleasures that had overtaken her aging body and mind. Returning to the chateau, she worried about ways the tea

might affect the lives of castle estate dwellers. When death followed for a few extremely ill patients who'd taken Z's cures, she sent the healer away.

But for the duchess, the question remained: had the sick and old died as nature intended, or from the healer's potions? Like the gypsy, she believed that earth's green things could heal. Sensing she had little time left to live, she recorded his curatives for the future, a time when the validity and safety of such plants could be studied and applied to dreaded diseases of all kinds.

After she'd finished writing, she folded the pages of Z's remedies and placed them in the placket she'd attached to the endpapers of her *Book of Cures*. She lit the candle and attached two red seals, one for the inside pocket holding Z's remedies, the other for the exterior of the book. Gathering her strength, she wrote to her son.

My beloved Gozbert,

You have shown great promise since your father died. My time to pass is near and now you must guide the workings of our beloved Jardin Estate. I ask one thing of you, to hide my sealed book of herbal cures safely away from curious eyes. It contains no personal family secrets, just my drawings and listings of our garden plants with known peasant uses and cures. I also included the gypsy healer's potions for dropsy, growths and romantic aging. Keep the book safe in the storage cave until an appropriate time. There is no way to foresee if one day, my record of curatives might be thought valuable by truly learned persons and used for serious illnesses that befall others.

Your loving mother, the Duchess Jardin

She placed her note on top of the scarlet cover of the *Book of Cures* and tied a gold ribbon around it. Weak and weary, she blew out the candle, her hand resting on a sprig of lovage picked from her garden. She waited for the shadow of death to visit, its lingering weight pressing down on her body. When a breeze sailed by, the frail spirit of the Duchess was gone forever, an old soul catching a ride on the wing of a sparrow.

A butterfly strayed through the opening of the chateau cupola and lit on the manuscript. Orange and black wings swung back and forth. No sound issued from the steady movement. But the air moved and the flutter of its mosaic tapestry continued as the air received the invisible tapping of fragile beating. The movement increased and expanded and filled the space, until it joined the gathering wind that rushed over the sun-burst design of the Jardin garden, on past the eerie cloud of war and disease that hovered over the Alsatian countryside.



Later, sparrows nested in the blossoming plum trees and whistled to herbal seedlings that sprouted from loamy depths.



Later still, bees congregated in the greening fields, called by the scent of lovage, clover, and wild carrot that enriched the country air.



And the silent song of rhythmic orange wings swept on through time and weather.

CHAPTER 1

As the earth spun in the universe, plagues and disasters came and went, but the Jardin family survived in their rugged stone castle, set amidst the rolling Alsatian landscape.

The Jardin family invested in Pinot Blanc grapevines and their emphasis moved from gilded chateau life to that of a vineyard famed for its excellent product, a smoky Klevner. Surrounded by fields of intertwining grapevines, the same heirloom vegetables and herbs still grew in the garden that gave its name to the Jardin Estate vintages.

The heaviness of centuries turned over, and the *Book of Cures* remained hidden from the world in the estate storage cave, until a scarlet colored marketing tool sent its herbal message tumbling into the 21st century. By 2015, Jardin wine was selling well enough, but the elderly Duke Quincy wanted more financial return. He hired a marketing firm to expand international sales and the company proposed a direct mail leaflet. Not only did the flyer promote the estate wine, it enticed the curious by mentioning the hidden family book.

Alsatian Heirloom Seeds for Sale

Poisonous and Nonpoisonous

For Decorative Use Only

From the Medieval Garden of the Jardin Estates

*Home of the hidden, sealed **Book of Cures***

Jardin Wine & Herbal Seed Prices Inside



According to the marketing man, seeds were the key to herbal life. Seeds enhanced by ancient and secret mystique were not eas-

ily available. Where would one buy such an unconventional collection? From the Jardin Estates, of course, an Alsatian vineyard known for its excellent Klevner.



In a computerized selection, the first global area chosen for distribution of the leaflet was the United States, a country known for its deep pockets and generous spirit. After additional research, California was the first state selected to test whether the estate's mysterious seeds would sell wine.

CHAPTER 2

The salty fragrance of a seaside morning washed over the stucco of the mission style building in Groverly, California. Inside the Main Branch Library, Assistant Director Lily McFae worked in her standard cubicle, sorting real mail from junk. She let her mind wander over her hopeless, loveless life. Now in her early forties, she longed again for the special touch of romance, a man to love, bringing kisses and embraces. Someone she'd yet to meet. Someone somewhere, waiting for her. She shivered. It was now so unlikely.

Accompanied by the music of Mozart from her iPhone, she propped open a book on origami destined to be removed from the library shelves because of its low checkout number. Nose to page, she reached for a scarlet flyer, the top piece on the throwaway mail pile. Her fingers followed the detailed illustration. Valley folds. Mountain folds. Multiple folds. A paper butterfly emerged out of a pleated cocoon. In a flippant mood, the librarian sent her handiwork fluttering over the top of the partition.

An annoyed voice intruded on Lily's mood. "What on earth was that?"

Peering around the wall, Lily saw her origami masterpiece lodged in the upswept hairdo of her stern boss, Library Director Trummel.

"Whoops," she said, "sorry about that."

"Playtime's over, Lily." Ms. Trummel flicked the paper insect to the floor. "Have you found a replacement exhibit for the baseball cards? They gave us an impossibly short notice."

"Nothing yet, but I'll find something."

"Try to find a replacement soon, will you?" Director Trummel handed over an official envelope. "This is for you from the Groverly City Employment Services."

Lily tore open the flap and unfolded a single page.

Dear Ms. McFae:

Due to unfortunate cutbacks, the position of Assistant Director will expire in two months. Please consider this your official termination notice.

Her mind stumbled and stopped. No words formed. She closed her eyes. Her job of watching over precious, old volumes in the Special Collections Room would be gone. A wave of bitterness engulfed her.

Ms. Trummel adjusted the crisp cuffs of her business suit. “Unfortunately, you’re the first to go, but the library’s financial problems are real and there must be sacrifices.”

Lily counted. “Only twenty-four words strike down my life as I know it. Is my head the only one on the guillotine?”

“Yes, but consider this, the blade’s not falling for a while. You must have heard budget rumors and talk of cutbacks. The notice is the reason I’ve assigned you a speaking engagement, a small road trip so you can get away.” Ms. Trummel examined the tall stack of books on Lily’s desk. “I received a request from a woman named Piper Valerian in Nolan. Since her town has no library, she needs help starting a community book club. I thought you’d like to get out of the building to consider your options.”

Lily bent to pick up the paper butterfly and set it aside. “I’m not the best public speaker. Perhaps someone else should go.”

“No one else is available. Think of this as your last chance to shine.”

“I don’t feel like shining. Maybe reflecting.” Her hands ruffled through her unruly auburn hair and she considered her recent run-in with Director Trummel, the argument over removing classics and other selections from the shelves. As Assistant Director, she’d protested the posted edict: *Due to lack of shelf space, any book not checked out within the last two years will be sent to a state warehouse. Retrieved only by special request.*

When she’d tried to stage an elaborate protest, she’d failed. Maybe that recent maneuver figured in her dismissal.

Tap, tap, tap. Ms. Trummel’s well-manicured finger sounded on the top book cover of the classics in trouble that Lily’d checked out. “You do skate near the edge, don’t you?”

Lily crumpled the letter and stuffed it in her pocket. “You are aware I’ve been a dedicated librarian and reliable worker in the system for years. I take exception to my dismissal. I really must.” Her raised voice carried out into other cubicles. “How could it happen?”

“Your bad attitude is showing, Lily. Nothing is permanent in today’s business world. Let me know when you find the exhibit replacement. And you’re on call for the Readers’ Advisory Desk.” The Director’s heels clipped on the terra cotta tiles as she headed toward her office.

A few steps behind, Lily’s willowy frame in a wrinkled linen dress turned to the stacks to find consolation in books. Head high, she strode the aisles like a duchess in her garden, remembering favored fiction, choosing selections for the start-up book club. The plot of Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. The characters in *Middlemarch* by George Eliot. The lilting phrases and passages of Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*. Rather than hot best sellers for the new reading group, she gravitated to beloved classics. She pulled an assortment of volumes without recent checkout dates, books that had inspired readers for ages, but not lately, and carried the varied selection to her cubbyhole.

She tried to forget the termination letter and concentrate on her task. Preparing a vacant spot to select the books, her hands moved through the pieces of junk mail and one by one, dropped them into the wastebasket, until her desk was almost clear. She unfolded the origami butterfly made from the scarlet flyer and smoothed the creases. As she studied the ad copy about seeds for sale from the Jardin Estate in Europe, her heart leapt.

Alsatian Heirloom Seeds for Sale
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*Home of the hidden, sealed **Book of Cures***
Jardin Wine & Herbal Seed Prices Inside

Immediately, her mind jumped to a volume in the Special Collections Room, *Unexplained Ancient Mysteries, Volume II*, a rare encyclopedia that was her favorite browsing book. The only such volume known to exist, she found it a mixed delight of history, mystery and unraveled puzzles. She was certain the flyer tied into an article she'd read in that encyclopedia.

She held the flyer tight and rushed off to the library's inner haven of collectibles. There, she shook off the dreaded letter and let the printer's ink of ancient writers replace the unexpected termination words. Standing still in her hallowed space, she breathed in the perfume of old books. The whiff of Egyptian marble paper. The scent of elephant folios. The typeset of antique fonts on deepened pigskin. In a few minutes, the sense of grace, wit, beauty, and intelligence that had persisted on pages for hundreds of years eased her mind.

She donned the compulsory white gloves and lifted her favorite reference from its assigned place. Her finger trailed down the index to find the article on page 102.

Accounts occasionally surface about the existence of a hidden manuscript, called the *Book of Cures*, hidden away by the Jardin family in Alsace. The story revolves around the book of the Duchess Jardin, her garden and connection with a healing gypsy. The family has said the book was discovered during World War I when battles came close to the Jardin Estate, and they cleared their storage vault for a shelter. Interviews with family members indicated an accompanying letter suggested the book contained information about herbal experiments conducted in the 1500's, perhaps using dangerous garden herbs. It's rumored that possibilities include remedies for drop-sy, tremors, growths and confusion that could relate to cancer, heart disease and Alzheimer's. Herbalists find the mention of an anti-aging tea with sexually stimulating side effects particularly interesting.

Lily's mind flitted off course when she read the phrase "sexually stimulating side effects." She removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes. Things were different now. Since her surgery, she'd turned to romance on the library bookshelves, letting classic lovers remind her of past encounters ... the rough weave of herringbone ... a loosened collar ... the feel of a man's whiskers on a tanned face. Soft mouths together. Hardness pressed against her. Lily jerked back to

the present, put on her glasses and read on.

No evidence of proven healing qualities has been assessed, since the Jardin family keeps the book sealed and hidden away. Family members refuse to be responsible for serious medical problems that might occur from trials of mentioned cures in their family book. Herbalists continue to speculate about the potential use of dangerous plants cultivated in the seven herbal beds of the Jardin Estate garden, although poisonous herbs like belladonna, foxglove and monkshood, are cultivated separately from safer plants like yarrow, lovage, mint and dragoncello.

Lily checked the flyer. The Jardin order form matched the description of both safe and deadly herbs. She slipped *Volume II* back on the shelf, and smoothed her curly wisps of flyaway hair, leaving unanswered questions dancing in the air, like motes in the sunlight. At her desk, she emailed off a Jardin Estate seed order with instructions for rush delivery. This day, she needed the assurance of seeds; tiny, changing bits of life that moved from dark to light and flourished in the sunshine. She picked up the discarded scarlet flyer and followed the folds to reclaim the butterfly once more. The origami insect fluttered through the air for a brief moment before it nosedived.



In Strasbourg, Austria, the Global Antiquarian Society chose twenty of their rarest books to send on tour to the United States.



In a small town in California, heirloom plants of unusual strengths and aromas thrived in a secluded gypsy garden.

CHAPTER 3

The sun shone down on the clover, alfalfa, and lavender fields that surrounded the goat farm outside Nolan, California. White-tailed animals scrambled to nibble their oats and groats, nudging against Aggie Verkie as she poured grain into the trough. When the old woman finished her chores, she roamed the garden.

Lost in memories, she thought back to her husband, Camlo. Years ago, riding in their gypsy wagon, they'd slowed down at the first whisper of divine scent and watched bees cluster in fields of lavender, clover, and wild carrot. When they came upon the abandoned goat farm, with the stream running through it, Camlo tied up their horses and parked their vardo near the dilapidated garage. In welcome, monarch butterflies sent silent, semaphore messages with their wings. The two gypsies looked into each other's eyes, gave up their wandering, and turned into land dwellers. As they whitewashed the gabled house, the weathered barn, sheds and drive-through garage, they grew even closer. Camlo built the railroad tie garden and Aggie planted it, providing food for their table and green nourishment for their souls.

Now, the sight of bright, growing things nagged at Aggie like a loose tooth. She looked up. Even with a sun candle burning high in the sky, she needed to pull her hand knit, brown sweater close to her chilled body. The vigor of the garden pained her and contrasted to the last days of Camlo. Sick and weakened, he'd died in slow motion from a decay she could not heal despite her constant tending. No gypsy remedies or blessings, no healing incantations, no potions or rich broth helped. Even doctors from the Groverly Hospital worked no magic. Although his body left her several months ago, grief lingered on. After fifty years together, she could not let him go. Even with the rising temperature of the days, she stayed cold. Her salvation was his long dark cape that kept her warm.

Through the months since he'd been gone, she'd watched the garden of seven beds flourish. Overlooked by a stand of tall milkweed, the seasonal wheel turned as her gypsy herbs and vegetables swayed in the sun. Rosemary and periwinkle bristled with bees. Parsnip tops and rutabaga peered from rich dirt. Garlic shoots curled in loop-de-loops. In special rows, lovage and drag-oncello tumbled, matching the vigor of yarrow and verbena. Gypsywort rambled along the garden edge that bordered the stream. Stalks of foxglove, monkshood and belladonna hid in the corner by the thorn apple, separated from other growing things because of their deadly juices. Only the old plum tree bowed and lost its leaves in respect for Camlo's leaving. The wrinkles on Aggie's face deepened. She rubbed pained, arthritic hands over her gray, braided hair.

Griffo, her tall, muscular nephew, hurried down the stairs from his room over the garage. He wore his red embroidered vest and Homburg hat. "I'm headed over to the Emporium. It sells DVDs now and I got a job picketing from Boris, the new owner."

"Deliver the goats' milk in town first. Then go build your fences."

Griffo waved a stick with a placard that read, "Save Our Town from XXX Movies." He smirked. "Not fencing, I'm paid to walk back and forth in front of the place with this sign. So I don't have time to deliver milk. The Emporium carries lots of new stuff now."

Aggie knelt to touch a leaf of agrimony tinged with decay. "Will your important job bring you home for supper?"

"Probably. I get paid by the hour, come and go as I please."

"So why don't you have time to deliver the milk?" She yanked out the wilting plant, wincing from the twinge in her arthritic fingers. "Never mind, be on your way. I'll take the milk to town."

"Maybe you can get some new customers at the town meeting. You'll be going to deliver milk to the Used Stuff Store anyway," Griffo said. "You're probably afraid to ask anyone, since you're such an old gypsy hermit."

"Well, I just might go to that meeting." Aggie stood and brushed off her knees. She clacked her tongue and lifted the corners of her paisley apron. The beat of a zither played in her mind and moved her toward the kitchen. "I might just do that."

On her way to the porch, she snatched one sprig of yarrow to add a touch of bitterness to the sundown beet salad.



Piper Valerian, the prettiest blonde in Nolan, tidied her Cut & Curl Salon, the only beauty/barber shop in town. The white exterior, with its candy-striped awnings, pots of pink geraniums, and plastic flamingos, invited local citizens in need of personal beautification. With time to spare before the book club meeting, she sterilized combs, swept the floor, threw towels in the storage room washer and polished the long wall mirror. Her petite figure, turning this way and that in front of the mirror was perfect. She sat down to study her 28-year-old face, looking for blemishes, then trimmed potential split ends from her hair, and deepened her rosy lips. She brushed back the pink streak of hair that set her apart from the other women in town. Finally, she let her hand touch her breast and felt softly, softly, then more firmly.

The revolving chair swung back and forth as Piper worried about her marriage with its new problems, Freddie wanting a baby for one thing, coupled with the agonizing worry of her recent find. She had a perfect marriage, but with no serious discussions, ignoring any trouble that came near. She wondered if that was the reason life with Freddie sailed along so smoothly. Most of her high school girlfriends were married and had moved away. Her mother lived in another state and serious phone conversations were impossible for both of them. With no one available for advice, she needed to figure things out alone. Through recent sleepless nights, flat on her back, feeling the lump, she came up with a first solution: stop having sex with Freddie. The thought of him finding it, touching it, fondling the poison within her made her shake. As soon as she felt able, she'd find a way to fix things with Freddie.

She hoped for something to replace love making: drowning herself in books of the romantic kind she'd always been curious about, books that told stories about the how, where and how often of other couples. What better place to find out than in...not dirty books exactly, but novels called "hairotica" or something like that. If she could find intriguing enough books to read, it might turn her mind

away from her worries. That was the reason she'd requested a woman speaker from the Groverly Main Branch Library to help start a book club for the residents of Nolan.

After the speaker finished, Piper intended to pull her aside and get some tips on a more delicious, provocative kind of reading. Librarians knew about such things, and the woman could point her toward titles filled with fantasy and fondling. She thought of Freddie's fingers, roaming her body, stroking her skin, and her mouth tightened. Fiddling with the tweezers, she plucked a new arch for her eyebrows and looked around for more cleaning to keep busy, but the salon gleamed. She switched her pink work smock for a pastel plaid jacket and squaring her shoulder, strolled past a few buildings to the Used Stuff Store. With its good size and seat selection, it was the only site possible for a town meeting about a book club.



The miles of Monterey County ticked by as Lily drove past the eucalyptus stands in Groverly. Near the city limits, she noted leaves of grape vines softening the landscape. She passed by the billboard that announced "Salad Bowl of the World." Entering ag country, fields of pale green lettuce stretched into the horizon, followed a few miles later by rows of strawberry plants hiding plump, red berries.

Nervous about her speech, she practiced by addressing the steering wheel. "How wonderful for all assembled here to discover the joys of creating a book club. I am sorry your town has no library. (Here, smile sympathetically.) When I was informed of your wish I was delighted. It will be an energizing experience to choose the first volume for your discussion. I bring a boxful of excellent possibilities. (Now hold up first book.) For example, *Wuthering Heights*, a classic, romantic novel written by Emily Bronte."

Informing the windshield, Lily condensed the plot and described the characters, but carefully, did not give away the ending. As the scenery sped by, she talked knowledgeably about the other selections in the box, chosen to show literary diversity. "I sincerely thank you for this opportunity. (Perhaps nod.) I leave these examples for consideration by you, the new Nolan Book Club members. Perhaps you recall from *Tatler* that Joseph Addison and Richard Steele told

us ‘Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body’. With that to ponder, my very best to you all. Happy reading and hearty exercising.” (Smile. Give a small farewell wave.)

Her foot pressed harder on the gas pedal, edging past the speed limit. She sighed. One anxiety replaced another. Her nervous practice session was a distraction from the rumpled dismissal letter in my pocket. But soon she’d arrive in Nolan.

The car flew past the straight green rows of the countryside, before a sharp turn brought The Emporium in sight. The old ramshackle building was a couple miles outside Nolan and although she knew the establishment well, she’d never driven into the town proper. She found it nestled in a lush valley, a picture-perfect California town. She slowed down and studied the places that rolled by. Live oak trees hovered over brick and clapboard Victorian houses. Porches, rows of porches furnished with old rockers, beckoned the weary. Zinnia beds, stands of hollyhocks and grape arbors thrived in front yards and side yards, with butterfly gardens of asters, lantana, Mexican Sage and milkweed running along the curbs. The traditional town square displayed bright flower beds and heavy plantings of shrubby pine and tall eucalyptus. One bench in the little park was provided for anyone who cared to sit and ponder the activities on Main Street. She continued down the thoroughfare, passing by a gas station, post office, grocery, feed store, and hardware. She found the Cut & Curl Salon, next to a bar called The Hopper. Her directions from Piper Valerian indicated the meeting would be the Used Stuff Store. She spotted it at the end of the street, pulled up, parked and took a moment to enter.

She blanched when she saw about thirty townsfolk settled in chairs of mixed pedigree, marked “available for sale.” The room hummed with audience voices. She hauled her small box of books past them to reach the front.

A voluptuous, blonde woman behind a painted desk waved. She pointed to a chair in the first row and her enthusiastic young voice filled the room. “Welcome, a big welcome to our guest speaker. Come right up and sit down.” She gave the audience a cheery look and flipped her pink streak of hair. “Wow, so many of you interested in starting a book club. Thanks to the Used Stuff twins, Sax Morton,

who moved lots of bureaus and tables to make room for the seating, and to Maxine Morton, for allowing us to meet here.”

Maxine stood up to small applause. Her wavy brown hair framed a full face and her sturdy form showed off lacy white finery. “Sax and I are both readers, but it seems Sax is busy elsewhere at the moment.”

Piper forged on. “This is how it happened. The other day, I called the Main Library in Groverly and presto, they send us an expert.” She pointed at Lily, perched primly in an overstuffed chair. “So at this time, I give you one smart lady, Ms. McFae.” Piper slipped into the chair next to the still-seated speaker and leaned over. “I need to talk to you, afterward. Will you stay?”

Lily nodded. She smoothed her hair and her loose beige shift, clasped and unclasped her hands, pursed and re-pursed her mouth. She sat, waiting for some unknown energy to move her, then felt a strong nudge from Piper.

The librarian adjusted her glasses, picked up her book box and followed her loose knees to the makeshift podium. She heard her breath weave in and out of her lungs’ soft tissue. Like a moth swimming through thick, red wine, the sensation of flapping wings moved through her bloodstream. When the pulsating creature reached her heart, she’d explode, she knew it.

A prisoner in the Used Stuff Store, she faced that form of civilized torture accepted by polite society described as public speaking. She worked to reclaim the words chosen on her drive from the city.

“Thank you, uh, all assembled here.”

She saw the eyes of the audience bore through her and judge her, a dreary woman from the city. She looked around the store, overburdened with leftovers from closets and basements, from attics and hideaways. She was the perfect addition, one more remnant.

“I was informed that you have no library in town and wish to” The eggbeater in her mind revolved to a standstill and she cleared her throat. Waiting for inspiration, she looked down at the box of books she’d brought from the library. Her hand sought the top of a familiar volume, *Wuthering Heights*. With the cover cool to her palm, she lifted the book to display to the group. “...wish to read. Perhaps, a romance.”

Lily reached into the box again, her hand seeking the next book exterior. “I brought different genres for your consideration, like science fiction. Here is Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*.” She quickly grabbed the other books. “A biography of *John Quincy Adams*. An anthology called *Our Spirit, Our Reality*. And poetry, *Favorite Verse Through the Ages*. These books are lent from the Groverly Library so you can read.” Lily put the books down to push her glasses closer to her eyebrows. “Select one. Contact the library for multiple copies. Everyone reads the same title. Then you discuss. Remember, reading is brain food. On that note, happy exercising.”

Polite clapping filled the store, and the audience filed out. The front door of the store beckoned its escape hatch, and Lily followed the people moving toward the outside air.



Piper hurried to the desk to study the literary assortment. The stack of library books brought only one other person to the front. Aggie, in her multi-colored patchwork skirt, gradually inched forward against the shuffle of leaving attendees. When the owner of the goat farm reached the pile of books, she hung back to give Piper first choice of the selections.

“What an exit that lady made,” Piper whispered. “And she loses points for a bad hairdo. Admit it, she’s an odd bird.”

“Maybe a person to figure out,” Aggie moved closer. “Case of jippety nerves, I expect.”

“I’ll take the romance, for sure.” Piper grabbed *Wuthering Heights*.

Aggie took the poetry book, then set it down. “She didn’t talk long. I liked that about her.”

“You know, a trim at my shop could fix up her straggles in one sitting. I asked her to stay afterward, but she took off like a bat.”

“Maybe she’s waiting outside,” Aggie said.

“Of course.” Piper rushed toward the last of the audience emptying into the street. She found Lily gazing at the gathering clouds of the wheezy afternoon.

She touched the librarian’s arm. “Thank you so much for coming. I thought more people would stay and I did hope for a few spicier selections. Come back in. For a minute? Please?”

"I guess so." Lily followed Piper, and they returned to Aggie and the books.

"Two people would be enough for a club, don't you think, in a little town the size of ours?" Piper reached for the science fiction.

"You can have as many or few as you like," Lily said. "I don't see a problem."

Aggie blinked. "I'm not sure I belong in any club. I came to deliver the goat milk, then stayed to listen to the meeting. It was free entertainment."

"Please join. It will be fun and easy too," Piper picked up the poetry anthology.

"If one person likes the book, pass it on to the other person," suggested Lily. "Then get together and discuss the parts you liked or didn't like."

"I don't have much time left after the goats." Aggie looked down at her gnarled hands. "And I've never...discussed."

"I never drove out to your farm for milk and you never came into my shop, but this way, we'll get to know each other. We'll chat. Take this one. It looks like it has lots of different writers inside." Piper thrust the volume of poetry into Aggie's hands.

"I don't know." Aggie paged through the book.

"Tell you what, if Ms. McFae comes back to lead our first meeting and helps us get the hang of it, we'll do it." She gave Lily a pleading look.

The librarian gazed at the classics on the desk, then at the faces of the women. "I suppose I could."

"I'll take three books, if you don't mind." Piper tucked away the anthology of short stories and memoir. She handed Aggie the last volume. "You take the biography of J. Q. Adams. He's an important person, but a dead one and I already heard about him in high school."

"So if I read and you read, that makes it a club?" Aggie put the books in her milk carryall.

"Seems like it." Piper took Lily's arm and whispered in her ear. "Do you know any books called ... they might be called her-otica? You know, X-rated reading?"

"I do," Lily said. "They even exist in libraries, available for check out."

“I’d be interested in some of those titles.”

Lily smiled at the request. “I’ll see what I can do.”



The smell of dusty furniture blessed the beginning of a book club.



One by one, Boris Ratchov released his antique daggers, imbedding sharply honed points deep into the cork lined wall of the Emporium office. Afterward, he smoked a joint and shined his ancient swords until they gleamed.



On the outskirts of Groverly, Neubland Pharmaceutical research herbalists composed experimental formulas from plants with medieval backgrounds, measuring roots and leaves, oils and essences, weighing drops and grams, tinkering with botanical poisons and their potential. One part thorn apple. Two parts belladonna. Failure. Next experiment, two parts thorn apple. One part belladonna.