



BEACON
of LOVE

Ann Roberts

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Acknowledgments

This story is as much about friendship as it is about love, particularly the friendships of our youth. I was fortunate to have many wonderful friends during high school, including my buddy Suemeree, a writer who just happened to wander back into my life as I was finishing this book. Thanks to her for her support and comments. I was also fortunate to have Katherine V. Forrest again as my editor. I always learn from her suggestions and guidance. It's a true privilege. Finally, I'm grateful to Bella and Linda Hill for the opportunity to reach so many readers. And as always, to Alex and Amy, the most important people in my life: they've trudged through marshes, walked many miles down dusty roads and climbed thousands of steps just to reach the top of all the lighthouses I wanted to visit.

About the Author

Ann Roberts is the author of the romances *Beach Town*, *Brilliant*, and *Root of Passion*. She's also written *Paid in Full* and *White Offerings* featuring real estate sleuth Ari Adams, as well as *Furthest from the Gate* for Spinster's Ink. She lives in Phoenix with her family and can't wait to move to Eugene, Oregon, in the future. She can be reached at www.annroberts.net.

Author's Note

The settings for this novel are the magnificent Heceta Head Lighthouse and the great city of Eugene, Oregon. For those of you who have been fortunate to visit Heceta or stay at the bed-and-breakfast, you'll recognize that I've taken some liberties with my descriptions. And as for Rue, the Grey Lady Ghost, she is indeed rumored to walk the halls of the bed-and-breakfast.

CHAPTER ONE

June, 1992

“I wish you could understand, Steph,” Paula sobbed.

Some of her tears fell on the paper that rested on her knees—Steph’s acceptance letter from UC Berkeley. Steph resisted the urge to yank the key to her future out of Paula’s hands. She knew Paula needed time to accept what was happening—that after ten years as inseparable best friends, she would be leaving their hometown of Eugene, Oregon, and moving to California for college.

They’d situated themselves behind the large rock that according to Steph’s father, divided her parents’ property from the adjoining woods. She was rather certain they owned all of the land that stretched to the road and cut through the base of Spencer Butte, but her father had declared the rock as her personal

boundary when she was five. She'd always yearned to explore the thicket of trees that grew southward, but that youthful curiosity disappeared when she was old enough to see over the rock and recognize its beauty and its potential as a privacy barrier between her and her parents.

She and Paula had no desire to venture beyond the backside of the rock, which proved to be a perfect place for private talks, smoking their first cigarettes and drinking Scotch—both of which sent them flying into the woods to vomit. Recently they'd spent much of their free time hiding behind the impenetrable granite curtain touching each other in delightful ways.

Most importantly it was a fabulous hiding place from Steph's mother, who refused to journey past the redwood deck. Steph always knew she was safe up the little hill since her mother would never venture that far from the liquor cabinet.

Paula sniffled and Steph sneaked a glimpse at her watch. It was after five. She peered down the hill toward the back door. It was still closed. *That's good. Mom's still watching TV, probably Donabue.*

She gazed at Paula's dejected face. She'd been put on the Berkeley waiting list last winter and had nearly given up hope of acceptance—until a letter arrived two days after graduation. She'd dreamed of becoming a Golden Bear since her freshman year of high school, convinced it was the perfect place for a pre-med student. She was euphoric but it had taken her a week to summon the courage to tell Paula, and after an hour of crying, Paula still couldn't accept what was happening.

She checked the back door again. Still closed.

"Paula, I don't understand why you're all worked up. I know I'm leaving but San Francisco isn't that far. We'll call and write."

She squeezed Paula's hand and her sobs faded away. They'd held hands for years but Steph knew that any touch now had lost its innocence, replaced by a desire that crept up on both of them like a virus infecting their bodies.

Much of Paula's profile was obscured by her long chestnut-brown hair, but it was impossible to miss the incredible eyelashes

she constantly fluttered and the full mouth that readily met Steph's whenever they were alone.

"I know we'll keep in touch but I just can't believe you're leaving."

"Yeah, but you'll still have Emilio to hang out with," she added, referring to their other best friend.

Paula scowled and she blushed. It was an insensitive comment. "Sorry," she said quietly.

Paula's face softened and she stroked Steph's hand with her thumb. Steph closed her eyes, enjoying the connection. She'd secretly admitted that she savored Paula's caresses and her touch could make her shiver as if she were standing naked in an Oregon downpour. Although they'd known each other for a decade, it was only in the last three months that they'd tiptoed across the line of friendship into a place that scared Steph to death.

But she wouldn't think about it—couldn't think about it, even as Paula's lips found the curve of her jaw and traced it with butterfly kisses. Steph melted under the delicate gesture. Paula giggled as her lips continued their journey to Steph's mouth. Paula pressed her against the rock, unbuttoning her shirt and fondling her breasts. Steph knew what came next. Paula pulled off her T-shirt and unhooked her bra. She was consumed by Paula's determined tongue buried deep in her mouth, and it wasn't until Paula's nipples pressed against her own that she realized they were half naked.

Paula kissed her completely, as if she were leaving for California in just a few moments. When Paula unbuttoned her shorts, she didn't pull away as she had in the past. Paula's tongue was too persuasive and she pulled Steph's yearning to the surface. Her hand crept between Steph's legs and rested on her mound.

"More," Paula whispered, breaking the kiss and shattering Steph's lust.

Steph gently pushed her away. "We can't today. My dad's home and he'll come looking for me if I forgot one of my chores."

Paula frowned and her eyes gleamed with tears. Steph didn't know if she was upset at losing the moment, or the letter from

Berkeley or both. They'd never talked about Steph's fear. Paula's soft lips confused her terribly. She wanted to run away—right into Paula's arms. She'd created an emotional circle that she couldn't escape but her sexual terror trumped the guilt over leaving her.

"It's just..." Paula stammered.

She sucked in air but failed to complete her thought.

"It's just what?" Steph asked impatiently, peering around the rock, willing the back door to stay closed.

She stared at Steph for a long time before she said, "I'll miss you a lot."

She immediately looked down and Steph exhaled, not realizing she'd been holding her breath.

The screen door squeaked. After a flurry of redressing, they peered over the rock. Steph's mother, Debbie, tottered out, highball glass in hand.

"Steph! Stephanie! Yoo-hoo! C'mon, Stephie, where are you? John, are you home?"

She was wearing a silk negligee, having changed out of the leggings and oxford cloth shirt she'd worn when she'd greeted Paula an hour before at the front door. The thick blond tresses Steph had inherited were stacked on the top of her head with a black clip and her customary deep-red lipstick proved a stark contrast to her ghostly white skin.

She glided back and forth across the deck, scissoring her legs in one of her old dance moves. Her lithe body shifted effortlessly and the alcohol did little to thwart her natural grace. She'd told Steph a hundred times she'd given up a theatrical career in New York to be with her father.

Periodically she'd stop and take a serious drink and then sweep across the deck in the opposite direction. They watched her performance and Steph thought that without her glasses she couldn't see them. Steph hated that Paula was there but she loathed the prospect of babysitting her mother so she stayed behind the rock. Her father was obviously ignoring her mother—at least for now—and Steph couldn't blame him. He was a saint, constantly caring for her mother, suffering her abuses and enduring the

public embarrassments she caused the family. There wasn't an adult resident of Eugene who didn't know Debbie South, the drunkard, and her unfortunate husband, John.

He kept his sanity by frequently traveling his sales route through the Midwest where he sold medical supplies to hospitals. Steph missed him but she understood his work. They'd had long talks about her departure for college and she felt horrible about abandoning him, but he assured her everything would be fine and she had nothing to feel guilty about.

"I wish I could dance like your mother," Paula said, interrupting her thoughts. Steph knew Paula admired Debbie, despite her weird quirks and antics, but Paula couldn't see what she did. Steph thought Paula's mother, Francine, was the epitome of a great parent and she'd sought refuge at the Kemper house hundreds of times over the years.

Debbie pirouetted and stopped short of falling over the balcony railing. Hopefully she would give up soon and go back to her La-Z-Boy recliner and the bottle of Jack Daniel's she'd bought yesterday.

She serenaded them with music from the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a movie she'd seen dozens of times. As long as she kept her clothes on—which wasn't a guarantee—Steph didn't care. They lived at the top of a cul-de-sac at the base of Spencer Butte. It afforded them a privacy they frequently needed—like today. Steph took comfort that their closest neighbor, old Mr. Crick, wouldn't be able to check out Debbie South's latest performance.

Paula wrapped one of Steph's blond locks around her finger in a playful gesture of understanding. It was her trademark. She never offered pitiful looks or spoke in a sad tone because she knew it made Steph feel more pathetic. Paula always distracted Steph from her misery by filling her heart with Paula's own optimism and logical view of the world.

"I know you won't miss this when you're gone. Debbie is just...Debbie."

Steph turned away, hoping Paula couldn't see how the simple gesture affected her.

Debbie hit a high note and raised her hands to the sky in a big finish. The glass slipped through her fingers and crashed to the deck but she didn't seem to notice. She held the pose, obviously hearing thunderous applause in her head. With her arms outstretched the silk clung to her curves.

"She's beautiful," Paula sighed. "I hope I look that good when I'm in my forties."

Paula and their friend Emilio had seen Debbie drunk often and they'd all laughed together about some of her antics, like the afternoon she staged a pickle rolling contest, offering twenty bucks to the winner, who turned out to be Paula. Her friends always understood Debbie and it was why they were the only people who ever visited during high school.

John South emerged from the house, the breaking crystal more than he could stand. Debbie took her bow and her ample breasts slipped out of the negligee. She drew herself up before she saw him standing next to her.

"Want a little action, Johnnie?" she asked loudly, jiggling her chest in his face.

Steph thought she might be sick.

"God, Debbie, you're trashed," he scolded sharply, turning away from her and gathering the large shards from the deck.

She looked ashamed and she readjusted herself without looking at him again. As she opened the screen door, she glanced up toward the rock and Steph wondered if she'd known they were there all along.

Once John went back inside they scrunched down again behind the rock. Paula closed her eyes as if she were meditating. Steph didn't know what to say. Her mother had interrupted an important emotional moment they couldn't get back, and now Paula seemed to have slipped away into her own private world. She fidgeted uncomfortably while Paula remained still. It was an unusual twist since usually she was the quiet one, lost in her own thoughts while Paula chatted endlessly.

The silence became too much. "Paula, are you okay?"

When Paula's eyes fluttered open, a few tears escaped before

she said with a laugh, “Nope.” She reread the letter, quietly folded it into thirds and handed it to her. She wore a look of sad resignation. “I really am happy for you, Steph. We’ve always wanted the best for each other and I don’t want that to change.”

“Thanks,” Steph said, relieved.

She leaned closer and Steph could smell the Chanel No. 5 she’d given her for Christmas. “But if you’re going away then I think we need something special to remember each other by. I want more, Steph, right now. Your mother’s in the house and your dad is preoccupied. No one’s coming. I want to be your first. Please,” she begged.

Paula nuzzled her neck until Steph was blinded by sheer ecstasy. Their clothes were shed again in a matter of seconds and Paula hovered over her, wearing only her underwear. She was beautiful but Steph sat limp against the rock, like a discarded rag doll. She didn’t know what to do.

Paula crawled to her and kissed her softly, her body flowing against Steph’s. She lay her down on the soft grass and traced circles on her belly. When her hand swept under Steph’s waistband, it was as though an alarm sounded. Steph sat up and Paula fell backward.

“Paula, I can’t.” When her eyes remained unconvinced, she added, “I love you as a friend but I don’t want you like that. I thought you understood.”

Paula’s jaw dropped and it seemed to Steph that her mind floated away from the moment, from anything that had existed between them. She remained motionless for a long time as if absorbed fully in herself, long enough for Steph to hear the cars racing home on the road beyond the little forest. Suddenly Paula reached for her clothes and hurriedly dressed as if she were late for curfew.

She started down the hill quickly, Steph trailing after her. They walked around to the front of the house and into the sunlight. Paula put on her sunglasses and looked up, as if a spotlight had been turned on her. Her hair shimmered and her creamy skin relished the attention of the sun. Gone were the tears of an hour

ago, replaced by a mask of self-assuredness.

“Well, goodbye, Steph.”

She was puzzled. Paula was spending the summer in Seattle with her grandparents but she didn’t leave for a week.

“What’s with goodbye? We’ll see each other before you go, right?”

She looked away. “Actually I’m leaving tomorrow. My grandfather asked me to come early and help with the chores.”

Steph knew Paula’s grandparents were third generation fishermen who owned their own business on the Washington coast. Paula loved visiting them and had invited Steph along one summer. It was the best summer she could remember.

“Oh,” was all Steph could say, unable to right herself from the emotional whiplash she felt. In only a few seconds it was as if the last ten years vanished.

Suddenly it was all overwhelming and the clear path of her future was covered in fog. She opened her mouth to say—something. But Paula turned away, her face impassive, and headed down the sidewalk. Steph watched the sunlight sparkle against her hair for as long as she could, until Paula rounded the corner to her street and disappeared.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

