



"Thanks," Ellie said. She didn't think David and Susan understood all of what she felt. They were married after all. They'd bought their ticket to respectability. But it was good to have them on her side.

David squeezed her hand. His expression was serious. "You know, I was watching a TV program on AIDS a few weeks ago. It's not only gay men who get AIDS. It's going to be everyone. But a lot of people don't act like they know that."

Ellie nodded. "Like Steve. He just wants to use AIDS as an excuse to hate gays." She tightened her grip on David's hand. "There's a lot of Steves out there."

"I know there are," David said. He rubbed his beard thoughtfully. "I think it's always easier to hate someone, or to fear them, than to try to understand them."

Ellie looked at David, at his slightly hooked "Jewish" nose, strong eyebrows, and honest brown eyes. "I'm glad you're not like that."

David put his arm around her again, just for a moment. Then he exaggerated a smile, puffing out his cheeks and rolling his eyes — just as he'd done as a little boy — until Ellie had to laugh along with him.

When they went downstairs, the party was starting to break up. The couples were

gathering coats and children and getting ready to head homewards. Tomorrow, after all, was a regular workday. In the American work world, the Jewish New Year didn't exist.

As they were leaving, Lois and Dan Levine came over to where Ellie, David and Susan were standing. Lois put her hand on Ellie's arm. "I'm glad you said what you did. We wouldn't sit still for anti-semitic jokes. A lot of people don't see it, but anti-gay comments are the same kind of thing."

Dan Levine nodded his agreement. They both smiled warmly at Ellie, David and Susan. "Good to see you again," Lois said to Ellie. "Hope we'll see you next year."

Ellie smiled. "Good to see you too."

The friends and relatives said their goodbyes. Ellie kissed her aunt goodbye, let her uncle pat her on the back as he helped her on with her coat, and thanked Richard and Lynne. Happy New Years were wished all around.

It was dark outside now, and the air had the chill of a Midwest fall. Ellie hugged Susan and David goodbye, before they got into their car. Then she took her accustomed place in the backseat of her parents' car, with her father driving and her mother sitting beside him.

I should have a husband sitting next to me

or driving me home, Ellie thought. That's what's expected. Not that a husband was what she wanted. But Kate would have been nice.

She wouldn't have felt so alone if Kate had been there. Or John. Or one of her other friends, who could understand what it felt like to be a lesbian running up against a guy like Steve.

Thank God they weren't all like him. She thought about David and Susan. About Lois Levine and her husband Dan. Even if they were comfortably married, with two kids and Dan a doctor as well, they were good people. She couldn't be angry at them.

And Kate. Whom she'd hoped would come with her this year. Who wasn't there with her and wasn't going to be.

That though left sadness in its wake. Ellie closed her eyes and swallowed hard against the knot in her throat. The car was dark, so she let a few tears run down her face. Kate, she thought again. She pictured Kate smiling at her, her blue eyes warm.

Ellie wrapped her arms around herself, trying for the feeling of giving herself a hug. Everybody seemed to have a place already. Kate and Diane were together. David and Susan would have their first child soon.

And what about Ellie's life, she thought

ironically. Rosh Hashonah meant the beginning of the year after all. The time when the Book of Life was opened.

Ellie hugged herself one more time. What she wanted for herself most of all was someone to love. Some new woman who would love her back. Maybe, just maybe, that would happen this year. And maybe then she could forgive Kate and Diane.

They passed a Greek restaurant, then a delicatessen, then turned onto a mostly residential street. It was never easy to come back to Chicago, Ellie thought. Her parents' dreams for her and her own dreams were so far apart. She guessed that all she could do was live her own life. Maybe just by being herself, and not apologizing for that, she could make a little bit of a bridge between her parents and herself. Then sometime she might bring a new lover to Chicago, show her the city she'd grown up in.

Relaxing her arms, Ellie leaned back against the car seat. Her father was driving at his usual slow pace, but they were getting close to parents' house now. From the window of the darkened car, Ellie looked out at the familiar streets of the city.