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Stardust & Moonbeams ~ Synopsis

Beth Delkit and Janet Van Mirron are determined to level the playing field, to shoot for the moon and accept nothing less, even with modern men like Will Townsend and Cary Gwynnart. Scandalous divorcée Janet is achieving the impossible in 1927 – running a department store. Sharing the helm is her brother, Will, whose artistic dreams are languishing like his half-baked canvases. When Cary, Will’s college buddy, moves to town to be their new advertising manager, he doesn’t realize Beth also recently moved to Hastings, New Hampshire. Long-lost cousins, Beth and Cary share Ukrainian immigrant grandparents. A writer who stands up for her beliefs, Beth helps run her father’s Curious Moon bookshop.

Beth and Janet are strangers when they join the Athena Guild, a new birth control rights group. Never married, Beth runs into restrictions but is bold and unyielding in her visions of sexual equality, further stirring controversy by proposing a birth control clinic when only a handful exists in the US (including Margaret Sanger’s first legal clinic, opened in 1923).

Cary proposes something exciting for Merton’s Department Store – a lively radio show, hosted by a woman. (These are radio’s formative years, with NBC launching in 1926, CBS in 1927.) Envisioning a subtler approach, as many did, Janet isn’t so sure, but Merton’s enters the broadcasting age. When the rather reserved lady boss has a droll right-hand man and neither wants to pursue a nascent attraction, interactions become increasingly complicated.

Cary’s introduction of Beth and Will gets those two thinking, and Beth decides to spell out for Will her feminist ideals. She’s no inexperienced historical heroine or the familiar contemporary type needing Mr. Right’s sexual unleashing. Will is unusually real, not a “perfect man” in bed; importantly, his mother was a suffragist. Yet Will balks at Beth’s aggressive activism, like confronting a man as she hands out leaflets. Defying propriety, Beth and Will tackle myriad issues as their relationship progresses: Victorian-minded elders; differing communication styles; prejudice against people of East European descent; negotiating “radical” and avant-garde pursuits; conflicts rooted in gender-based moral, social, sexual, and economic codes of behavior; concerns about parenthood; and, on occasion, Janet’s more typical feminism.

For Janet and Cary, tensions rise until Will perceptively sets them up on a blind date. However, they hide their relationship in public to avoid gossip and further complications. Since women are judged more harshly and Janet's ex-husband disdained her feminism, she proceeds cautiously with Cary – in the bedroom and the boardroom.

Will and Beth's penchant for frankness sometimes backfires – like ending up gossip column fodder – but it leads to all manner of lively discussion. Their 6-person “Algonquin round table” of intellectual/political debates – where sex is not a taboo topic – includes friends Cherilyn Sykes and Russ Fitzsimmons. All three women belong to the Athena Guild, and despite the obstacles, the women of Athena strive to make the birth control clinic reality. They are lucky to interest two physicians, a woman and a man who, unlike most doctors, believe contraceptive information and devices should be removed from federal obscenity laws and made accessible to women without medical necessity criteria and to men without disease protection criteria.

Aware of marriage's historical inequity for women, Beth resists it in response to various moral attacks. She's also concerned about her property rights with her pending acquisition of the Curious Moon. Yet she likes the idea of an eventual modern marriage of true equals with Will. Besides, married women are allowed to do far more in the struggle for fully legal birth control. After fighting, hammering things out, and an atypical engagement, Beth and Will marry in a Unitarian ceremony, based in part on an actual 1932 wedding and liberal Unitarian beliefs.

Inspired by Will, Beth has been working on a forward-thinking book on women and men, drawing ideas from writers like Edna St. Vincent Millay and Havelock Ellis. To Will, Beth is the ultimate modern woman in whom he finds his muse, helping him discover photography. But even there, Beth insists on sexual equality. She agrees to pose for Will, even though she may end up the all-too-familiar female object of the male gaze, only if he will be the male object of the female gaze, indelibly expressed via the camera and far more radical. Exposing much more than skin, this exposes and questions accepted codes regarding gender, the body, and sexuality – and their links to power in society. (*Key to this novel is the carefully worded/structured sex scenes and other scenes dealing with sexuality, including the photo shoots. They are designed to be realistic and empowering, where active-passive roles shift, partners have equivalent experience, birth control is integral, pleasure is not predicated on supposed masculine sexual prowess, and characters negotiate these things. This differs from the overwhelming majority of mainstream

depictions, including fiction targeted to women, and from lesbian-oriented feminism. This is about actively reversing the dominant male-oriented heterosexual gaze in our culture, actively claiming the pleasures, actively equalizing heterosexuality, and based on extensive research.)

Meanwhile, Cary and Janet's hidden relationship leads to trouble: separately, they overhear nasty store gossip and tensions become unbearable. An argument over artistic control of the radio show sends their work relationship spilling into dangerous personal territory and a blow-up. When they negotiate a truce, Janet is adamant about maintaining her tenuous authority as a woman manager, Cary has artistic control of the show, and they discreetly reveal their personal relationship. Getting past memories of failed relationships and wanting children, they take the plunge into marriage with a justice of the peace. (Atypically, Will and Beth are the same age, both 30, as is Cary, who is two years younger than 32-year-old Janet.)

When debate follows their friends' discovery of their photographs, Beth and Will strive to use their images to promote new ways of seeing women and men: uneasily, Beth okays a small Boston gallery exhibit of two of Will's photos; she finds a small feminist press interested in her book, and Will uneasily okays two of Beth's photos for her book, *Embracing Moonbeams*.

An accidental pregnancy (from miscalculation and lax contraceptive technique) adds further stress to Beth and Will's marriage as they tackle nonconforming and traditional attitudes in each other. After uncertainty and argument, their openness ultimately moves their relationship forward. For thematic purposes, however, this pregnancy is not meant to be: Beth has a miscarriage before she's very far along, and they will still be able to choose to have a child in the future.

As a married woman, Beth is publicly involved in the clinic's opening, including meeting with local religious leaders. Despite uncertainty about his provider status, Will finally quits as Merton's co-manager to devote himself to his art and opens Stardust Gallery. He also devotes himself to gender equality as never before, first as a board member and then the first male regular member of Athena, now Women's Health Advocacy (WHA) and Clinic. Janet is Merton's sole manager and broadens her feminism to business practices that help working mothers, like an in-store nursery for employees. Cary's feminist future includes the WHA board of directors and an expanded radio show format that includes informative segments by, for, and about women. Last but not least, Janet and Cary want children and go without contraception after their wedding. She's pregnant by the end of the story.

Character- and politics-driven, *Stardust & Moonbeams* is historical fiction that's modern and romantic yet targets ongoing contemporary debate over women's right to control their own bodies, including birth control access and assertive female sexuality, as well as the paucity of empowering images/stories of real and equitable sexuality. Our pervasive feminist take is along the lines of "Man as Object: Reversing the Gaze," a nationally touring art exhibit. The Kinsey Institute, whose archives we used in our research, calls that exhibit "an important development in feminist art." It's about time! We want to remedy and reverse taken-for-granted images and ideas about women and men in shoot-for-the-moon, swing-on-that-star feminist fun – that's downright serious.