



The
Sisters Club

a novel

“A warm, wise, and witty tale. You will love it!”

—ELIZABETH LETTS, bestselling author
of *The Eighty-Dollar Champion*

LAUREN BARATZ-LOGSTED

The Sisters Club

Lauren Baratz-Logsted

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Sylvia

I burned the inside of my arm taking the double chocolate-chip muffins out of the oven.

Crap.

Forty-six years I've been cooking, ever since Minnie and I were four and our aunt used to let me stand on one of the scarlet, vinyl-covered chairs in her kitchen to help roll the dough for the rugelach. You'd think I'd learn how to cook one single thing without burning myself.

But there was no time for self-pity tears, no time to run for the first-aid kit in my small office because the phone was ringing.

"Sylvia's Supper," I answered.

"I'm having a dinner for four tomorrow night," an expensive woman's voice said, breathlessly, "and the caterer I always use just called and canceled at the last minute. Said something ridiculous about a fire."

She definitely sounded like the kind of woman for whom someone else's fire constituted "something ridiculous."

"That wouldn't be Kate Bakes, by any chance, would it?" I'd seen the story on the midday news on the little TV I kept on all day in my back office to check on the news and my soap operas between customers and cooking. Kate was my biggest competitor, and while I'd always dreamed of besting her, arson had never been in my plans, nor was this the way I wanted to win.

"Yes," the woman said hurriedly, "but I have no time for that now. My husband will be arriving here tomorrow night with his boss and the boss's wife. The holiday bonuses were delayed until January this year—right now! I've only got this one chance to make it a decent one. I need this dinner to be spectacular."

Far be it for me to say, *Then why don't you put on an apron and try cooking something yourself?* So instead, I said, "What do you need?"

"What have you got?" she countered.

"Lady," I said, having grown quickly tired of all of her breathlessness and angst, "I can make anything you want."

We reviewed menu options, finally settling on clams casino and a field greens salad for starters, homemade parmesan bread, side dishes of lemon-drizzled asparagus and rosemary roasted potatoes, main course of a crown roast with the little white booties left on—booties being her word—and for dessert a frozen chocolate praline layer cake. None of it combined to make a menu I'd ever want to eat all at once, but it seemed to satisfy her. I could hear her anxiety level subsiding as we settled on each item, until...

“And you’ll have it here by seven thirty,” she said, sounding as though her blood pressure was going through the roof again, “won’t you? And you’ll supply all the heating dishes and what have you—yes?”

“You want this delivered?”

“Don’t you do deliveries? You *are* a caterer.”

Actually, I did do deliveries. But I usually tried to avoid them because for the past year it was just me there, alone, every day. Plus, I hated that she thought she could just call at the last minute and expect me to dance to her tune.

“My delivery boy left five years ago,” I said, “and I don’t think he’s coming back.”

“I can’t believe you wasted my time like this,” she said. “All this while I could have been calling other caterers. I won’t have time to come pick it up myself. I’ll be too busy getting dressed. Plus, what if grease dripped onto the seats of my car?”

Well, that is a hazard.

“I can’t be—”

I cut her off. “I’ll deliver it personally,” I said. “Heating dishes, what have you, booties, and everything.” What the hell, I could use the money. Business had been slow, despite what the political analysts on the news programs kept saying about the economy recovering just fine. Probably just the own personal economies were fine. “Just give me the name and address,” I said, holding my lucky pen ready to write it at the top of the yellow order form.

Once she gave me the necessary information, she surprised me by saying something nice.

“You’ve really saved my life,” she said. Then she added, “Thank you, sir, thank you so much.”

“Sir?” I snorted. “It’s not sir. It’s ma’am. You’ve been talking to Sylvia.”

Click. I hung up.

But I didn’t really hold it against her. I get that all the time. We may have been twins, but Minnie had inherited Mom’s speaking voice while I somehow wound up with Dad’s. If I had a nickel for every phone-in customer who mistook me for a man, I could have afforded a sex change operation.

I placed the order to one side, figuring I’d start what prep work I could do for it that day: check what supplies I had on hand, what supplies I still had to pick up, set the sides and first layer of homemade chocolate ice cream in the springform pan, and toss the pralines with sugar and set the mixture out on sheets of wax paper. Then I went into the office and got out some aloe from the first aid kit, put it on the burn stripe on my forearm, and then went back out front and took a cooled double chocolate-chip muffin from the tray. I leaned against the counter and surveyed the business my sister and I had built.

Before opening Sylvia’s Supper, my sister and I were accountants. For twenty-five years we crunched numbers, trying not to scare shifty-eyed people into thinking we’d turn them over to the IRS. Yeah, our lives were exciting. I took a bite of the muffin.

It was a good muffin. My sister would have loved that muffin.

I miss my sister, dammit, I thought. I miss her every damned day.

But how many times can you cry when there's no one there to hear?

I polished off the muffin and went back to business.

On the way home from work, I decided I would stop off at the bookstore. *No matter what goes wrong in life, I thought, the bookstore is always the best place to go.*

Cindy

Climbing onto the bus, I slid on the steps, icy from the boot leavings of previous passengers. If Eddie were with me, he'd say it was my fault for wearing those boots: four-inch heels, narrow toes, black suede, coming to mid-calf with a couple of inches of soft black fur at the top. Of course Eddie would have been totally right to say that. But I loved those boots. They were one of the few things that made me feel like an individual. Besides, after telling me it was my fault that I slid for wearing the boots, Eddie would tell me they made me look hot.

I teetered down the aisle, found a seat nearly at the back, sat down, and right away pulled out my brown suede satchel a copy of *Swept Away By Desire*, the romance novel I'd been reading. When I bought it a few days ago, I'd stripped off the jacket like I always did with a new book, stripped away the picture of the hero and heroine rolling around half clothed in the surf, because I didn't want to hear other people's snotty comments about my reading habits. It's been my experience that if you have a book in your hands, and you keep your nose in it the whole time, even the most die-hard talker that sits down next to you will eventually get the message and shut up. It's not that I'm antisocial, as a rule, but there are times when you just do not want to talk endlessly to strangers about the weather.

As the bus pulled away from the curb, I felt a strong chill. Even with the heat on, the cold windows always retained their own brand of weather. I pulled my patched, tan, suede full-length coat with the blond fur trim tighter around myself. If Eddie were with me, he'd say a lot of animals had died to keep me pretty. He'd say it even though he was the one who bought me the coat. Then he'd smile and tell me I did look pretty in it, that it was worth a hundred animals dying if necessary.

But none of that mattered. The coat covered my hated uniform, the black polyester pantsuit I had to wear to work in the lingerie store. And I didn't care about anything right then. I was just glad the bus was taking me away from the mall and all those obese ladies my manager was always pressuring me to get to buy thongs. Let me tell you, "one size fits all" is *not* truth in advertising.

Still, within the rose-colored walls of Midnight Scandals, the lingerie store, I was the blithe spirit, the one my manager, Marlene, was convinced could sell G-strings to an Eskimo. And I smiled, always smiled, convincing myself at least half the time that I really was the blithe spirit everyone thought they saw.

The bus chugged up the hill, depositing me at the stop outside the hospital. On the way down the stairs, book safely back in my satchel, I slipped again in my heels. Of all the things you can say about me—and Eddie always had plenty, good and bad—at least I was consistent.

If Eddie were with me, he'd have said, "Why do you have to come here every day, Cin? Give it a rest." I knew he just said those things because he worried about me. He worried that if I spent too

much time at the hospital it would depress me. But Eddie wasn't there and it was my time, the mag purple-blue time between afternoon and evening; and for one whole hour I could do what I liked.

As big a place as the hospital was, it felt like everyone knew me. Not surprising, really. And when I got off the elevator, the nurse on Douglas buzzed me right through.

In her room, my sister was where she always was when I came to visit, in a chair by the window looking out.

"Hey, Carly," I said, putting my arms around her, embracing her in a hug she didn't return. "How's it going today?" As I settled down on the edge of the bed just a couple of feet from her, I tried to think of something perky to say. "Any new cars come and go in that lot out there?"

No answer. Not that I expected any.

I reached out slowly so my movement wouldn't startle her, replacing a hair gone wild behind her ear. My mom always said that seeing us side by side was like looking at a carbon copy of the same person. But growing up, I could never see it. Carly was the super pretty one, while I was the pale version of her. Still, as I smoothed her hair with my hand, in profile I could see the basic resemblances: the same long and straight honey-blond hair, the same slightly darker sweep of brown over gray-blue eyes, and the same lips we used to joke were made for kissing. Of course there were obvious differences: I had my work makeup on while she was scrubbed beyond clean, as though someone would be wheeling her off to the lobotomy chamber any second. Plus, there was the lifelessness in her eyes, and the lack of conversation. Me, on the other hand, I was nothing but chatter.

I told her about every blessed thing I'd done at work that day, about the 38Ds customers trying to cram their way into 34Bs, about the 32As stuffing their way into Cs, about all the damn endless thongs, and Marlene being such an eternal bitch.

"I swear," I said, forcing a laugh like she might actually for once laugh along with me, "if I could afford to quit, I'd start some kind of thong bonfire in the store. Or maybe just threaten to strangulate Marlene with one."

No returning laugh. Not that I'd expected one.

And then, all of a sudden, I was full stop out of happy chatter. The only other thing to talk about in my life was Eddie. And I'd made a pact with myself from the day Carly landed herself in there, never to talk to her about Eddie if I could avoid it. When Carly had still been full of life, she'd hated the topic of Eddie, which was a bit of a big problem, since I loved Eddie so much. I swear, I loved the man *to death*.

With nothing left to say, but with time still remaining on the clock, I pulled *Swept Away By Love* out of my satchel.

"Let me read you some of this," I said, sounding falsely excited in my own ears. "I really think you'll like it." I found the page I'd turned over into a triangle to mark where I'd left off. Funny, I hadn't noticed before, I only had one short chapter left. Holding the book open with one hand, I gent

covered the clasped hands in Carly's lap with my other. When her fingers didn't resist, I increased the grip, holding on tight. I was never quite sure who I was holding on tight for: her or me.

"Do you remember when we were small," I said, really smiling now at the memory, picturing us two little towheads full of girlish hopes and dreams, "and we used to read comics to each other under the sheets with the flashlight?"

• • •

Outside, cold had turned to colder. And the true light was gone, leaving just the light from the city.

I pulled the fur collar of my coat up around my neck and thought of the night ahead. If I were home right now, Eddie would be there, on the couch waiting. He'd want to know what I'd planned for dinner, which was absolutely nothing. He'd already know that, since there was nothing really in the house to eat, nor would there be any grocery bags in my hands if I walked through the door now. That's what Eddie'd say, even if he laughed when he said it, "How do you expect me to watch *Idol* with an empty stomach?"

And Eddie would be right, of course; he'd be completely justified to say those things. I was a failure. I was a failure as a girlfriend. I was a failure as a sister. Hell, if you listened to Marlene talk on the days she was off her meds, I was even a failure at selling thongs.

“Don’t you think you’re being a little hard on Danitra?” I asked John, forcing a smile in the hope of taking the sting out of my criticizing words.

It was always hard not to be critical of John, who was always so critical of everyone else.

But John was not to be condescended to, even if his professor was smiling while doing so.

I sometimes wondered what I looked like to my students, perched as I was then on the edge of my desk: spiky black hair streaked with auburn highlights, brown eyes behind dark horn-rimmed glasses, my white Oxford shirt beneath a brown tweed jacket, jeans like any of them might have worn, and the pump at the end of my foot every now and then swinging with the motion of my leg as I danced the occasional nervous twitch. Did they find me formidable? Did they, perhaps, laugh behind my back?

“No,” John said, clearly taking himself at least as seriously as any twenty-year-old intent on writing the “Great American Novel” ever has. “I don’t. Isn’t the saying ‘show, don’t tell’? Did you hear the section she read? She told everything!”

The sheer outrage of it. Still, it wouldn’t be proper to laugh at him.

“Well,” I said, considering, “Danitra did tell an awful lot. But here’s something you need to keep in mind: you write drama, Danitra writes comedy. They are, at the end of the day, two very different animals. If your goal is to create the first, you need to create fully developed characters and dramatic scenes in much the same way you’d paint a picture. Usually. But with the latter? Your goal is to make people laugh, and sometimes the quickest way to do that is by telling a few things, skipping the reader along to the funny bits. Neither way is superior,” I shrugged, “just different.”

It was a good thing John was looking at me, because he missed it when Danitra stuck out her tongue at his profile. I stifled a laugh. In the short time since the winter semester had started, I already noticed what a resilient creature Danitra was. She was the classmate John most criticized—well, they all criticized her—but she just took it with good humor, making appropriate revisions, vastly improving the work each time, and discarding without malice the suggestions that didn’t make sense to her. She had a good editorial ear. She would go far. And John? John might go far too, if his ego didn’t stumble him up. John never took criticisms graciously, including mine; he was always certain the way he’d written it first was best.

“Oh, come on,” John scoffed. “How can you even suggest comedy is as good as drama? You must know one is superior. And which one.”

“*Basta*,” I said, hopping down off my perch. “Enough. I want you to finish the chapters you’ve been working on and polish them to the best of your ability—and that means you too, John; none of this ‘It was perfect the first time I wrote it’—and have it ready to read next Tuesday. I haven’t decided

yet who's to go first, so you'd better *all* be ready."

Twenty faces met the news with dismay and groans about "But there's a football game on Saturday!"—as if any of my budding writers cared about football; besides which, our team sucked—and "There's an all-weekend party in Kent Quad!"

It didn't matter that they were all in college and taking their writing seriously enough that they were actually bothering to take Writing Workshop, an advanced single-genre course with the focus on either poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction—in my class it was straight fiction, and students in the know knew that if they were ambitious enough, I'd actually let them attempt novels—they were still all just kids.

"I'm not concerned about your social lives," I said with no mercy. "You want to be published writers, right?"

Twenty heads nodded.

"Well, if you are ever lucky enough to land a publishing contract—we won't even talk about talent—you'll be expected to meet deadlines. So you can consider this your first deadline. Now, shoo, get out there and write."

• • •

I hurried from the classroom to my office, hurrying not because I wanted to get there quickly but because I just wanted to get out of the damn cold. The campus would be pretty enough in a few months, when the flowers sprang up around the lake and it was finally warm enough again to sit on the benches and feed the ducks, but for now I was sick of winter.

The plaque outside my office door read "PROFESSOR LISE BARRETT, MFA." I never looked at it without a feeling of pride: pride at what I did for a living, followed hard by a feeling of imposture.

Fifteen years ago, I'd been a student at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where I'd received my MFA with much fanfare. I was supposed to be the Next Great Thing. In truth, I was much as John was now: all sound and a lot of fury, signifying not much. Oh, sure, I'd placed the odd story in increasingly less prominent publications, starting out with the *Paris Review* and *Esquire* before the precipitous fall that had landed my last story in some last-chance publication named the *Last Chance Review*. Seriously, I think maybe they paid me two dollars and a contributor's copy. And I may be being optimistic about those two dollars.

At least the MFA at Iowa earned me the right to teach writing at the university level. And when I started here right after receiving that MFA, I'd been greeted with open arms. The dean was sure I'd earn prodigious renown, earning some for the university as well. But if the name of the game was

publish or perish, then I was perishing here. I'd never set out to write short stories—I was a novelist heart—but between teaching classes and tutoring others on how to write, somehow there never seemed time to write anything in my beloved long form.

Before you know it, a decade and a half have slipped by, and you've got nothing to show for it but a dollar from the *Last Chance Review* and a handful of students who will probably succeed where you failed.

I draped my winter coat over the back of my chair, rubbed my hands together in the north-facing tiny office that was never warm enough, even in spring, and turned on my computer.

Funny, but when I first started out teaching, office hours, which I was supposedly there for right now, were always filled with students stopping by. We'd get into debates about what was going on in the classroom or about what Art with a capital A should/shouldn't be. We'd talk about life. But now everyone relied so heavily on computers as a form of communication, nearly no one ever stopped by. They just e-mailed. My colleagues complained relentlessly about this. They said students were always making the most outrageous, not to mention stupid, requests through e-mail: "Will you read my essay now and tell me what you think before it's due on Friday so I can perfect it before the due date?" "What notebook should I buy for your class?" "I'm not going to be in class on Friday—big kegger the night before—so do you think you could loan me *your* notes?" Me, I couldn't see what they were complaining about; answering e-mails, even a whole slew of them, took less time than talking face-to-face with students for ninety minutes two days a week. Me, I had a whole file of stock answers to pull in because students did predictably ask the same questions over and over again. Me, I missed the contact of talking to other human beings, even much younger ones looking for a good grade, face-to-face.

The computer was warmed up; my e-mail was on.

There were several e-mails involving departmental bullshit plus the usual assortment of spam the university's supposedly strong spam-filter never quite managed to keep out. There were also three other e-mails: one from student John, one from my sister, and one from Tony. I opened John's first.

From: JohnQuayle@yahoo.com

To: Lise.Barrett@ctubiversity.edu

I'm attaching my chapter for your early review. Since you *did* say even I wasn't exempt from revisions, perhaps you could read it now and tell me what you think I ought to change.

I pulled out one of my stock replies from the folder I'd created just for such purposes.

From: Lise.Barrett@ctuniversity.edu

To: JohnQuayle@yahoo.com

'Fraid not. If I read your chapter today, it would give you an unfair advantage over the others. The only way to make it fair would be if we declared your due date to be today instead of next week and graded you accordingly. Are you sure that's what you want?

I was sure it wasn't. With John out of the way, I could concentrate on Sara.

From: sarabarrett@peacers.net

To: Lise.Barrett@ctuniversity.edu

Sis-tuh!

You would not *believe* how amazing it is here! We've moved east and it's much better than the last village we were in. Of course, I got diarrhea right off the bat, but I recovered nicely and am still just loving everything about Africa. The people! The animals!

How is the novel going?

Love

Several months ago, Sara had thrown over a safe and respectable job at a relocation agency, plus the full benefits and retirement plan that came with it, to follow her dream of working in a Peace Corps type of organization. It was a move that our parents, security-oriented workers right down their own 401Ks, were appalled at. As far as I was concerned, in their eyes, they were glad I seemingly given up my dream of writing novels and were even more so now that Sara had done bunker on them. On some level it was galling to think my younger sister was braver than I. But it was tough to resent Sara. In sympathy and solidarity, then, and in part not wanting to be out-adventured by my younger sister, I'd recently told Sara I'd started working, finally, on a novel, in earnest and in secret. Our secret. Of course, I hadn't done anything of the kind.

I wrote back, telling her what I thought she wanted to hear—that the secret novel was going well—and imploring her to keep on top of her malaria pills. Then I opened the last e-mail.

From: Antony.DiCaprio@ctuniversity.edu

To: Lise.Barrett@ctuniversity.edu

Do you have any idea how good you look in those jeans? And how much I'd like to see you out of them? But, alas and alack, I promised Dean Jones I'd pop by for some of his wretched sherry this evening. Rain check on those jeans?

Tony was in the same department as I am, but he taught only dead authors, while I'd committed myself to live ones. Hey, at least we both loved to read. Tony was also the kind of rangy, long-limbed blond-and-blue-eyed man who could make tweed look trendy, and he was my other big secret. Not that we'd get fired if people learned of our on-again, off-again affair—I mean, it wasn't like he was

student, after all—but it would be frowned upon, particularly when each of us came up for peer review.

We'd been together for three years. At the end of the first year, he'd asked me to marry him. Not realizing how serious he was, I'd all but laughed in his face.

"Who gets married these days after just one year together?" I'd said. "And why? I'm not even ready to have kids yet."

A year later, following a pregnancy scare of Sara's, I thought I had the childbearing itch and asked him to marry me. It was his turn to laugh.

"You're still not ready to have kids. You're not ready to be married," he'd said. "Don't be ridiculous. Ask me again someday when you understand what it is you're saying."

I had a hunch that his "no" was a defensive reaction to my earlier "no," but even I could see he was right: I wasn't ready, neither for marriage nor kids.

Since then, we'd just continued on in our off-again, on-again way, neither of us ready for anything more, both content to remain what we were—at least for the time being—a man and a woman who enjoyed each other's company more than we did anyone else's. Oh, and the sex was still good.

I wrote him back that he could have as many rain checks as he needed, provided he had some power over the universe and could make it warm enough to turn the oddly persistent snow into rain.

Then I shut down the computer and declared office hours over early for once. No one was going to show, and if John Quayle wrote back again, well, I could always deal with him tomorrow.

Diana

The early-morning sun streaming through the mini blinds cast zebra-striped, tan shadows diagonal across my naked body. Too bad the body thus illuminated wasn't a better one. Put it this way: Ruben would have placed me on a diet.

"Come on, Diana," Dan said, his voice husky, "roll on top. Please. You know you come better than any other way."

It was true, of course. But I always hesitated, fearful I would crush my husband of one month. Not that I weighed that much more than Dan. Not that much. The high-tech scale in our enormous bathroom put his weight at two hundred pounds—he was very tall, so he could carry it easily—while mine put my own at two seventy-five. It had taken me a while to get used to the American system of weights and measures, but really, whatever language you were putting the numbers up in, it was a lot.

As gingerly as I could, feeling something like an elephant in a rose garden, I did as Dan asked. I spread my thighs around him and he entered me, his hands on my buttocks pulling me closer to him. It felt so good.

I could never look down at my husband from this position without marveling at my incredible good fortune. He was so beautiful with that jet-black hair, startling blue eyes, straight nose, and determined jaw, and those perfect lips that never minded taking the dive down between my legs.

I'd met Dan early the previous year. My girlfriends from work had insisted I accompany them to a private club to celebrate one of their birthdays. I didn't normally like to go to places like that, because there was too much risk of someone saying something hurtful, but it seemed churlish to opt out of someone else's birthday celebration. Not in the door a half hour, Dan made his move on me. At first, I thought it was some kind of put-up job. Surely, it was a joke, this American man in London on business taking an interest in pathetic me. But Dan was so determined to talk to me, dance with me, and get to know me better—he said I was charming, funny, and beautiful—and I started to believe maybe fairy tales really do come true.

We'd been standing at the bar, winded from dancing three dances in a row, waiting for our drinks. Dan had his arm possessively around my shoulders when some sot sat down on a stool next to him and, leaning in with bleary eyes, tapped Dan on the arm.

"What's this?" said the sot. "Fancy a bit o' the lard, do you?"

And then Dan did something disgusting; a truly and wonderfully disgusting thing I'd never seen him do before or since. He put his finger up his nose, took out a snot, and examined it as though puzzled.

"What's this?" he said, echoing the sot's own words. Then, as though discovering the answer to the

sphinx, knowledge dawned on his face and he looked at the sot with a cold gleam in his eyes. “O that’s right. It’s *your brain*.” Then he wiped it on the sot’s sleeve. “Now fuck off.”

It was a vulgar thing to do, of course, but Dan was so refined in every other way, it made it O Plus, he’d done it in defense of me. No one had ever done such a thing on my behalf before.

I suppose if Dan hadn’t been so much stronger looking than the sot, the sot might have fought him but instead he slinked off, ashamed.

But I no longer cared. There was no one else in the club any longer as far as I was concerned. Because if it hadn’t been love at first sight earlier, it certainly was then.

We were married on New Year’s Eve.

And now I was back in the present, and Dan was squeezing his hand between our jointure, as I liked to do, placing two fingers on my clit and rubbing until he was sure we’d come at the same time.

“I love you,” he said afterward, a bead of sweat above his gorgeous brow as he strained upward to kiss me on the lips, “so very much.”

Dan rolled me off of him and slapped me on the thigh. “I wish I could stay here like this with you all day,” he said with an easy smile, “but someone has to work around here.” The words might sound like criticism, but there was no criticism in his voice. Then he rose from the bed, looking like a Greek god, and headed off to the bathroom. A moment later, I heard the shower. Already, I knew his habits. The shower would take no more than five minutes, another five to do whatever it is men do in the bathroom, then he’d be into his expensive dark-gray suit like a light, and, briefcase in hand, he’d head downstairs for a quick exit. I’d offer to make him breakfast, but he’d insist I wasn’t to move one of his beautiful limb, that he’d have the limo driver stop on the way into the city.

And then he was gone. Dan Taylor, CEO.

Alone, I did what I did most days since Dan had moved me there: lived the life of a lady of leisure, tidying up a bit before the cleaning lady came. Mostly, I thought about my life.

A long time ago I had taken the words of the Duchess of Windsor to heart. I’d wanted nothing more than to be rich and thin. And loved, of course, but that had always seemed like an impossible dream until Dan came along. Now, thanks to Dan, I had that as well as the first item in the duchess’s dictum. I lived in a house that could only be termed a modern mansion, made of red brick with white trim and black shutters framing the long windows, not far from one of the best golf courses in the country. Dan always said that, come the warm weather, he’d teach me how to play. I thought it was great that he’d want me there, part of his own private oasis of sanity; but even though I smiled whenever he suggested it, I knew I’d never say yes. The idea was sheer madness; there were too many possible sand traps of embarrassment there. For whatever else I was, whatever Dan had enabled me to become—a rich woman who was loved—I’d never have the other half of the duchess’s equation: I would never be too thin.

Of all the men I’d been with in my forty-two years, and I had been with several, Dan was the one

one who never asked me to lose weight for him.

“You have such a pretty face.” I’d heard those words all my life. And it was true. I also had thick, wavy blond hair I usually wore up in a French braid, soft brown eyes, naturally clear skin that any spot-actress would envy, a cupid mouth revealing even white teeth. I did have a pretty face. And yet even Fat Frank, who would have outweighed me on that bathroom scale by at least a hundred American pounds, had always said, “If only you’d lose a bit of that weight, Di, you’d be such a looker.”

As if he was one to talk.

But Dan never said that. Oh, he did tell me I had a pretty face, often. But he also told me the rest of me was pretty too.

The phone rang and when I looked at caller ID, I saw it was London calling. It was my sister Artemis. Well, it was already afternoon there.

I let it ring for a few times, debating whether or not to pick up. Even reviewing the hurtful things men had said to me in the past was sometimes preferable to talking to Artemis; if I were a bunny rabbit, I often thought, Artemis would be both my carrot and my stick. But I knew if I didn’t pick up she’d only keep calling. Artemis knew I rarely left the house.

“How’s Connecticut treating you?” she said in plummy tones as soon as I answered. “Are you ready to pack it in and come home yet?”

“No,” I said, not for the first time. “I like it here. Dan’s here.” Well, the second part was true, at any rate.

“Just give it a little time,” she said. “Before you know it, Dan’s being there won’t feel like a lifetime enough.”

She was always such a ray of sunshine, my sister, Artemis.

Four years my junior, Artemis had received every good thing and gene the Richards family had to offer, plus she got all the love; I just got the food. Whenever I was sad about something, or angry or hurt or even happy, my mother would just give me another piece of cake. Before I knew it, my body was something like cake.

“How is that possible?” Artemis said, after I’d assured her Dan was enough. “You don’t go out anywhere. You don’t see anybody. You haven’t made any new friends there yet, have you?”

All of this was true.

I tried to tell myself that her words only *sounded* bitchy, that in reality she was merely worried I would wind up hurt. Still, those words of hers did rankle.

“It’s only been a month,” I pointed out. “Technically, I’m still on my honeymoon.” I was starting to feel angry. “*You* give it time.”

“Now, now,” she laughed. “There’s no need to get shirty.”

“I’ve got to go,” I said.

“Brunch date?” she said sharply, suspiciously.

“Yes,” I said firmly, thinking of the cleaning lady, Consuela, due soon to arrive. Well, it didn’t qualify as a date. Sort of.

“Is it with a man?” she said. “Does Dan know?”

“No,” I said. “It’s with a Brazilian...dignitary.”

“Oh. Well. La-di-da. Be sure to shoot me out an e-mail later and tell me how brunch went with your dignitary.”

“Give Mum my love,” I said.

“Will do. But perhaps you might call her sometime yourself?”

Here’s the thing about Artemis: she could be a bitch to the hilt, but sometimes she had a valid point.

She rang off.

Things hadn’t always been quite this way between Artemis and me—her being unpleasant, me parrying the unpleasantness. When we were very young, we even shared a pair of friends, Sally and Samantha, who were themselves sisters, same ages as we were. I always envied the way Samantha stood up for Sally when the boys at school picked on her for being too puny to be any good at sports, and I envied the way they liked to wear the same clothes, despite the difference in their ages; it was as though they admired each other so much, they liked looking the same. I longed to have what they had—sisters, loving and supporting one another—and was grateful for their friendship. I was grateful that our friendship with them brought Artemis and me just a little closer together. But then they moved away and Artemis and I drifted apart.

Of course, despite Artemis’s propensity toward the bitchy *bon mot*, there was an underlying truth to what she’d said on the phone: I was lonely in Connecticut. There was nothing for me to do there. When Dan wasn’t around, there was no one for me to be.

I was grateful that Dan found me beautiful, and I was grateful he married me; I was grateful he stood up for me to the sots once upon a time, and I was grateful he never asked me to lose weight. But none of that was why I married him. I married him because I loved him. Still, sometimes it was lonely being Mrs. Dan Taylor, CEO.

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Dan called on the mobile to say he wouldn’t be home in time for dinner, again, and something about working late with a client. I might’ve been resentful if I didn’t recognize the truth in what he’d said earlier: one of us *did* need to work around here. Not wanting to eat alone, yet again, although I *did* need to eat, I decided to go to the bookstore. Maybe I’d have a sandwich or two in the café area which

cracking the spine on a new thriller.

When I went to pay at the cash register, I saw they had out new copies of the store newsletter. I picked one up, perusing the contents while I ate my smoked turkey with roasted red peppers and fresh mozzarella on focaccia bread.

The newsletter listed notices of upcoming store events, story times in the children's department, author appearances, that sort of thing. On the flip side, there were schedules for groups meeting in the bookstore: book-discussion groups, writers groups, even Scrabble groups. As I glanced around the crowded café, I realized that must be the Scrabble group meeting in the corner right over there. I recognized the colorful board and the wooden tiles, even though I'd never played the game myself. There were also two women who looked remarkably similar to one another sitting at a corner table, laughing over their coffee and cake as though they truly enjoyed one another's company; I envied them, sure they were sisters.

Then the thought occurred to me: If other people could place ads in the store newsletter for all these other clubs, why couldn't someone place an ad for something different, for a sisters club? Certainly, there must be other women in the area who had a sister they were missing who, for one reason or another, was not physically on the scene. Sure, in the modern era, a sister need only be a phone call or mouse click away, but you can't hug a telephone when you're feeling lonely. You can't hug a computer. And maybe, like me, there were others whose relationships with their sisters were not all books and TV would have you believe they are, and yet they wanted that sister-like bond, dreamed of it.

Yes, I thought, a sisters club. Why had no one else ever thought of it? Of course I knew I couldn't just blatantly call it that from the start—other women would think I was balmy—but it's what would be nonetheless.

In my excitement, in my haste to find the store manager, I forgot all about my smoked turkey with roasted red peppers and fresh mozzarella on focaccia.

I had more important things to do.

I was going to find some sisters. Whether they knew it or not, it was what they were going to be.

Four Women

Recommended Reading:

Sylvia: *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Harold Kushner

Cindy: *The Notebook*, Nicholas Sparks

Lise: *More Like Wrestling*, Danyel Smith

Diana: *She's Come Undone*, Wally Lamb

• • •

“This is the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard in my life!”

It didn’t start out that bad, but it was awkward.

Diana was the first to arrive at the bookstore, getting there at six forty-five, fifteen minutes early. Since she was the one to organize the whole thing, she felt a responsibility to be there to greet everybody else. Plus, still getting used to the horrors of driving on the wrong side of the road, she always allotted herself extra time to get anywhere.

She sat at the table for four in the café with a gigantic cinnamon bun on the white plate before her, filling up the time with nervous nibbles and taking in the familiar room around her: the cone-shaped light fixtures hanging down over the square and round tables, the soothing periwinkle walls, some amateur photographer’s work displayed on them—she liked the one of the cat on the windowsill, at least—and the people at the other tables. The ones in groups of two or more all looked like easy friends with fun or important things to discuss. The loners looked content to be so. Next to the cinnamon bun, Diana had a copy of a bestseller from a few years back with an Oprah’s Book Club sticker on it; since the ad she’d placed said she was looking for women who were also book lovers, she’d figured it would be prudent to arrive with a book.

Diana’s gaze shifted back and forth between the round analog clock on the wall, the hands of which seemed to sweep so slowly, and the front entrance. Perhaps no one would come? Even though three people had RSVP’d to her plea in the newsletter, maybe they were all just having her on. With just two minutes remaining before seven o’clock, Diana thought of getting up and giving up. Her first serious attempt to make new friends in her new country, and already it was an obvious failure.

Sylvia walked into the bookstore at exactly two minutes to seven and went straight to the cafe scanning the faces there. When she saw a large woman with gorgeous, thick blond hair wearing a pant ensemble all in winter white starting to gather her things as though she might be leaving, Sylvia approached her. On the phone, Diana had said, with a self-deprecating laugh, "I'll be easy to spot. I'm a bit bigger than most people."

As Diana shook Sylvia's offered hand, she took in the other woman's appearance. Sylvia obviously older by a handful or more of years, had a natural thinness to her, like she'd never had to worry about a calorie in her life. She was petite but with a hard edge, as though you wouldn't want to cross her in an alley; her taut body was clad in jeans and a long-sleeve yellow T-shirt you'd expect to see on a younger woman. Sylvia had red hair that had to be a dye job, but it was cropped in the new short cut of someone who couldn't be bothered with much fuss. Her brown eyes, encased with lined lids, looked as though she'd laughed a lot at one point; but the steely expression on her face said that had been a long time ago and she saw nothing funny about life right now.

And when she talked, she sounded more like a man.

In short, she was nothing like Diana.

"So, you're a fan of Oprah?" Sylvia observed as soon as they were seated.

"Well," Diana laughed nervously, "everything can't be Dostoevsky and Dickens, can it? What kind of books do you favor?"

"Everything," Sylvia said, "I read everything." She drummed her hand on the table. "Crap, this is awkward."

"Excuse me?" Diana said politely. But she never got an answer, because just then, at seven on the dot, Lise walked in.

Lise strode with purpose up to the other two, still wearing her usual teaching outfit of tweed and denim. She didn't offer to shake hands, claiming she thought she'd caught a cold from one of her students, someone named John. Instead, she just took a seat next to Diana, across from Sylvia, Diana looking like the warmer of the two.

"That's three of the four of us, then," Diana said brightly. "I suppose we could start telling a little bit about ourselves, although it doesn't seem quite fair to do so before the fourth arrives. After all," she laughed nervously, "we wouldn't want her to think we'd been talking about her."

"We don't even know her to talk about her," Sylvia said. "And anyway, I hate people who are late. If you're late, you deserve to go to bed with no supper."

"Perhaps we should just wait a few more minutes?" Lise offered Diana helpfully. "After all, the roads aren't all that great tonight."

Lise and Sylvia went and ordered cups of coffee. When they returned, Diana addressed Lise. "Sylvia says she reads everything, while I," she lifted her paperback and waved it ruefully, "favors popular fiction. What sort of books do you like?"

“Oh,” Lise said with an easy smile, “I suppose you could put me down in the everything can too.”

“That’s wonderful!” Diana said. “The two of you have something in common already.”

Lise tried to smile again encouragingly, but Sylvia just scowled and the conversation thumped in awkward silence as the three watched the clock tick together.

“This is—” Sylvia started to say at seven fifteen, but she never got to finish her thought, at least not then.

“Omigosh, I am so sorry!” Cindy threw her brown suede satchel down on the table in a move so sudden, the coffee cups would have flown if the other women hadn’t moved quickly to grab them out of the way. Then Cindy shrugged out of her patched, tan, suede coat, letting it fall onto the chair behind her. She rooted in her satchel, pulling out a brand-new red spiral notebook and a cheap pen. She flipped the notebook open to the first pristine blue-lined page, and then, pen in hand, looked up at the others expectantly. “What did I miss?”

“Introductions, for starters,” Sylvia snorted. “By the way, you’re not really going to take *notes*, are you?”

Cindy blushed, dropping her pen as though it had burned her. “I guess I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“Who has?” Sylvia snorted again.

“Perhaps we could just talk a little bit about ourselves first?” Diana suggested. “It would probably be a little bit easier to have a conversation if we actually knew who we were talking to.”

The others looked at her.

“So talk,” Sylvia finally challenged Diana. “This was all your idea, after all.”

“Oh, no,” Diana said. “I mean, it was my idea, but I couldn’t possibly go first. I’d feel as though I were hogging the limelight. But,” she added, “I do think it would be nice if whoever does go first tells us a little bit about what she wants out of life, what her goals are. You know, if we’re going to become, um, *close*, it’s important that we help each other achieve our best selves.”

As Diana spoke her last sentence, Sylvia rolled her eyes. “Don’t you think that’s forcing things a little bit?”

“I don’t mind going first,” Lise said with an easy confidence. “I’m Lise Barrett. I’m thirty-seven years old. I work at the university, teaching writing. I have a younger sister who threw over her job to do peace work in Africa. I envy her. Most days, I love my job. Most days, I also love one of my colleagues, who I’ve been dating secretly for the past three years. But this was never what I wanted out of life. Oh, the romance part of it is fine, just not the work. What do I really want? I want to write a novel.”

“A novel?” Diana gushed. “Oh, my. I *love* reading novels so much, I can’t imagine anything more wonderful than writing one.”

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