

When We Were Sisters by Emilie Richards

Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

Robin

The stories of our lives can be told in so many ways, but no one account, no matter how carefully rendered, is completely true. Words are, at best, only an outline, something I discovered years ago whenever I was asked about my childhood. In the same way, I'm sure I'll tell the story of last night's accident differently every time I'm forced to recount it.

I hope that won't be often.

Right up until the minute I slid into the backseat of Gretchen Wainwright's Camry, I remember everything that happened yesterday. For better or worse I remember little that happened afterwards. The neurologist on call at the hospital promised that wisps of amnesia are not unusual, that after even a minor brain injury, patients often recount "islands of memory," when past events are viewed through fog. Sometimes the fog lifts, and blessedly sometimes it does not.

Here's what I do recall.

Meadow Branch, a housing development just outside Leesburg, Virginia, is more than my home. This little patch of earth is my refuge and my center. The friends I've made here are more important to me than I am to them, which is not to say they don't care. They do. But I treasure each of them in a way they'll never understand. To my knowledge I am the only woman in our neighborhood who grew up without a real home or family. And before Meadow Branch I never had a friend who didn't blow away on the winds of fortune. No friend except Cecilia, of course. Cecilia, my sister, and—of no real importance to me—an international pop star, is my anchor in a way that even Kris, my husband, will never be.

In the past year, as my neighbors have begun to drift into new chapters of their lives, I've been discouraged. Our house is strangely quiet. The small group of women on our street no longer see each other regularly, no longer huddle together at soccer games, passing communal white wine in go-cups up and down bleacher rows. These days our sons and daughters travel to matches all over the state in jewel-tone polyester jerseys, like flocks of migrating parrots. At home they're busy preparing for ever increasing batteries of tests or studying karate, piano, or ballet. Most of my friends have jobs now, and we no longer sweat together in the Meadow Branch exercise room. Some work part-time so they can continue being the family chauffeur. Others send their children to after-school care or to a stranger who's paid by the hour to make certain they arrive at scheduled activities on time. So many rituals have ended.

I miss the rituals and the women, so I'm particularly grateful that our monthly dinner has continued. Each time I get an email announcing time and place, I close my eyes for a

quick prayer of thanksgiving. Every month I wait to learn that this, too, has quietly died away.

Last night as I put my children's dinner on the kitchen table, I tried to remember when I'd last seen all my friends in the same place. When the telephone rang I was still going over the past month in my head. The moment I realized Kris was the caller, I considered not answering, but I knew nothing would prevent him from leaving a message.

I took the telephone into the living room and asked him to wait as I yelled up the stairs to tell Nik and Pet to come down and eat. Then I took the phone out to the front porch and closed the door behind me.

"Are you calling from the car?" I asked.

A pause. I pictured a bleary-eyed Kris checking his surroundings to see if he was on the road home.

"I'm still at the office."

I lowered myself to our porch swing, which was swaying in a breeze growing colder as the sun dropped toward the horizon. "Kris, I have to leave in a little while. I'm riding to the restaurant with Gretchen, and she'll be picking me up right on time. She's nothing if not punctual."

"You need to find somebody else to watch the kids tonight. I'm sorry, but a potential client just showed up, and this is important."

I watched a heavier gust of wind ruffle the chrysanthemums I'd planted in brass pots flanking our steps. I fill the pots according to season. This fall they're particularly beautiful, the chrysanthemums in hues of bronze and deepest purple interlaced with silvery dusty miller and trailing sedum.

At one time in my life I didn't speak at all. No matter how badly I wanted to, I couldn't push words out of my throat. Even now I sometimes fall mute when I feel strong emotion, but this time I managed a sentence.

"Kris, my plans are important, too."

His sigh carried the necessary miles, and I pictured him sitting in his expansive Tysons Corner office with its coveted view of a nondescript street below. Without facial clues I couldn't tell if Kris was upset that I hadn't just snapped my heels and saluted, or if he was upset with himself for disappointing me. I didn't want to guess.

He was speaking softly now, as if someone might overhear. "Listen, Robin, I know going out with your friends is important. I really do. But this guy flew in unexpectedly—"

"And Buff assumes you'll drop everything and take him to dinner because you always do." Buff is a senior partner at Kris's law firm and the one with whom he most often works.

He fell silent.

I filled the gap, unusual in itself. "Pet and Nik will be fine alone for the time it takes you to drive home. Leave right now and tell Buff you'll bring the client with you. Pick up pizza or Chinese. You can return him to his hotel once I'm back."

"You always seem to be able to find a babysitter. Just call somebody. Promise you'll pay them extra."

"I'm supposed to leave in . . ." I looked at my watch. "Twenty-five minutes now. I can't find a babysitter in twenty-five minutes."

"Look, I don't know what to tell you about that. But I am telling you I can't come home. I'm sorry. If you can't go out tonight, maybe you can arrange another dinner with your friends sometime soon."

I closed my eyes. "Do what you have to, but please come home."

"You should have arranged something ahead of time. Just in case."

And there it was. I should have arranged for a babysitter, because I should have known Kris would disappoint me.

"I'm hanging up now." I ended the call.

When the telephone rang again, I wondered foolishly if Kris was about to apologize. With the client, without the client, I didn't care, but surely he wanted me to know he was on his way home to be a father to the children who rarely saw him.

Of course the person on the other end wasn't Kris.

"Robin! Were you sitting on the telephone?"

I stared at the darkening sky and pictured Cecilia, auburn hair waving down her back, expressive, exquisitely pampered face scrunched up in question. I couldn't picture the spot from which she was calling. She might be in a dressing room, getting ready to go on stage, or at her home in Pacific Palisades looking over the ocean.

"No," I said, "I just hung up with Kris."

When I didn't go on she lowered her voice. "Is everything okay?"

"Not so much." I blew out one breath before I gulped another. "In the scheme of things it's nothing."

"Tell me what it is."

So I did. Cecilia doesn't give up, and I had to leave time to call Talya and tell her that Gretchen wouldn't need to stop at my house on the way to dinner. I wouldn't be going.

After I finished Cecilia was silent a moment. She doesn't like Kris and never has, but she knows that criticizing him will drive a wedge between us. Cecilia would hate that worse than anything, even more than she hates the occasional scathing review of a concert or album.

"Call your next door neighbor," she said.

"Talya's going to the dinner, too."

"Her husband isn't going, is he?"

"Michael?" Michael Weinberg is an anesthesiologist and never on call at night. "Ask Michael to babysit?"

"Why not? He'll be babysitting their daughter anyway. What's her name?"

"Channa. But Michael bores Nik to death. He's always trying to get him interested in chemistry or astronomy, and Nik hides when the Weinbergs come over, just to avoid him."

"Too bad for Nik, but who's more important, you, a grown woman who needs to see her friends, or a twelve year old boy? Besides, Nik's probably really hiding from Channa. The last time I saw her she was growing up and out, and I bet he doesn't know what to say around her anymore."

I carefully weigh advice from Cecilia, at least advice of a personal nature. She knows so little about ordinary people. Her life is larger than mine, larger than almost anybody's. There's not much room for simple matters, and other people, like Donny, her personal manager, handle those.

Still, this time she was right about Michael, and about Channa, who one day in the not so distant future would be as pretty and well-endowed as her mother. Cecilia has been behind me pushing hard since the day we met. And this time I needed the shove.

"You nailed it again. I'm going to hang up and call him." I glanced at my watch. "Can we talk another time?"

"Okay, but don't put me off. Something important's come up, and we need to talk. So call when you're free and I'll drop everything." She hung up.

I could probably put my children through college on what a tabloid would pay me for Cecilia's private cell number.

Twenty-five minutes later Talya and I climbed into Gretchen's car, me in the front, Talya in the back next to another neighbor, Margaret. Our neighborhood is made up of young to middle-aged professionals, but the similarities stop there. We represent every religion and political outlook. Gretchen, a Reese Witherspoon look-alike, is a professional fundraiser for the Republican party. Brown-haired ordinary me assembled campaign literature during both Obama campaigns. Black-haired Talya is a Conservative Jew; red-haired Margaret planned to shut herself away with the Carmelites until she fell madly in love in her senior year of college. The other four women we were meeting at the restaurant are just as diverse, one from China, another who grew up on a farm in South Africa.

When we both got home I wasn't looking forward to a confrontation with Kris, but I was looking forward to conversation and meal with my friends in the meantime.

Two hours later as we stood up to leave, I was sorry I had come.

On the way out the door Talya and Gretchen were still locked in the conversation that had consumed them throughout dinner. In the restaurant I had taken a seat beside Talya, but we had hardly exchanged a sentence. She and Gretchen had discussed their jobs, volleying questions and responses back and forth across the table. Talya, who is now managing a small local theater, wanted Gretchen to give her tips for their next fund-raising drive. On my other side Lynn, who had once been my favorite tennis partner, chatted with another woman about camps their children might attend next summer. Margaret, across from me, spent a portion of the evening texting a colleague, apologizing for texting, and then texting some more.

Our lives are now separate. My neighbors are moving forward without looking back. The common ground we once shared is giving way under our feet.

Halfway through the meal I'd finally admitted to myself that I was the only one at the table with nothing new to say.

In the parking lot Gretchen unlocked the car, but instead of sitting in the front passenger seat, as I had on the trip there, I opened the rear door.

"Robin, I'll be happy to sit there again," Talya said.

"No, you sit up front with Gretchen. You two haven't finished your conversation."

Talya looked puzzled, as if she heard the undertone to my words. I felt her hand on my shoulder. "Why don't you and I both sit back here so we can catch up. We hardly had a chance tonight, and I never see you anymore."

How differently the evening would have ended if I'd said yes. But I didn't. I remember smiling. I remember that the smile felt like aerobic exercise. I remember the seconds the exchange took, seconds that later might have made all the difference. Then I remember shaking my head and gesturing to the front. "We can talk another time. You go ahead."

Talya and I had been friends for so long that she knew I was hurt. Recognition flashed across her face, but she smiled, too, as if to say, "We have a date," and climbed into the passenger seat beside Gretchen.

Ten minutes later Talya took the brunt of the impact when a driver streaked through the stop sign of a cross street and plowed into the right side of Gretchen's car. I think I remember seeing the small SUV inexplicably heading for us. I do remember terror rising in my chest, like the bitterest bile.

I don't remember the crash itself. When I came to in the hospital a doctor told me Talya was gone.

Talya died instantly, and I'll spend the rest of my life wondering what might have changed if she and I hadn't traded seats.