

Between Us Girls

Sally John



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BETWEEN US GIRLS

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For
Jonah Timothy Johnson
Welcome, little guy.



Acknowledgments

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*My God, how great you are!
... You advance on the wings of the wind;
you use the winds as messengers.*

PSALM 104:1,3-4

Residents of the Casa de Vida Cottages

Olivia “Liv” McAlister, owner

Riley and Tasha Baker

Noah and Déja Grey

Sean Keagan

Piper Keyes

Charles Chadwick Rutherford IV

Inez and Louis Templeton

Coco Vizzini

Samantha Whitley

Beau Jenner, maintenance man

One

March 15
Valley Oaks, Illinois

Jasmyn Albright watched the sun wink its first beam on the horizon. The light shimmered, a runner on a starting block, and then—*whoosh*. It raced lickety-split across field after field of rich, black earth. It hurdled the fence and streaked over the backyard, bumped into the porch steps, bounced up to her stocking feet, and then—*wham*. It splashed her entire body with light so unbearable she had to shut her eyes.

“Mornin’, Jasmyn.”

At the sound of the familiar rasp, the *whoosh* and the *wham* went *poof*. She opened her eyes. Where Zeb Swanson should have been standing were only yellowy flickers. “Good morning, Zeb. Coffee?”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Blinking away the light, she went into the house. It was the fifteenth of the month, the date Zeb always hand-delivered, at the crack of dawn, his rent check to her. He trusted neither the U.S. Postal Service nor electronic banking.

The man was as old as the dirt he tilled and a creature of habit. His routine on the fifteenth of the month was to gulp coffee, gripe about corn and soybean prices, and mention that he wasn’t sure how long he could keep leasing land from her at the rate she charged. He’d take another gulp of coffee and toss the remainder into the spirea bushes or down her kitchen

sink, depending on the season. Then, at long last, he would pull the neatly folded check from the front bib pocket of his overalls.

With her best customer-is-king waitress smile, she'd take the check and the cup from him. They would tell each other to have a good day. While he walked off to the barn, she would unfold the check and breathe a sigh of relief.

Every single month she did that. Her best friend said Jasmyn was stuck in a rut with both ends walled shut.

Jasmyn disagreed. The rut kept her safe. It offered *whooshing* and *whamming* and a grumpy man who helped her pay off the six hundred fifty acres that would not sell for more than she owed on it.

She filled two mugs with coffee that had brewed during the spectacular sunrise, retied her plaid flannel robe snugly, and headed back through the mudroom.

The rut also came with a cocoon, a two-story farmhouse with walk-up attic, built by her great-great-grandparents. It was too large for one person and in need of updating, but Jasmyn didn't mind that she could not afford new appliances or window treatments or a couch that did not sag. The place was home and she kept it pristine, just like Gramma June had taught her. The mere thought of leaving it gave her the willies.

Jasmyn smiled to herself. She was only thirty-five and as much a creature of habit as old Zeb Swanson.

He waited on the wraparound porch, leaning against the post at the top of the stairs. "Thank you." He took the mug from her and gulped his first gulp, right on cue.

Zeb reminded her of her late grandfather. Grizzled. Ornery. Dour. Hardworking. She was glad their paths did not cross often.

"Gonna get in the field tomorrow," he said.

"Really?" Her grandfather had never, ever planted in March.

He gazed off in the distance and lowered the brim of his green *Nothing Runs Like a Deere* cap. "It's been hot as blazes for three weeks straight. Spring never did show up. Don't expect it will now."

That was true. The lion that usually ushered in the month of March had failed to roar. Instead, the lamb arrived way ahead of schedule. Crocuses were already in full bloom, grass had greened, and daffodil shoots promised April blooms. But still.

"It's only March."

He scowled.

Jasmyn bit her lip before saying something else stupid. Of course he knew the date. Of course he knew frost was a real possibility until April fifteenth. Of course he knew corn and frost were not friends.

“It’s a gamble, I admit,” he said. “But an early harvest means the best prices we’ve seen in years. If the weather cooperates.”

Of course he knew what would happen if the weather did not cooperate.

He shrugged. “Farming always was and will be a gamble.” Zeb owned a large farm himself and added to it by leasing smaller tracts from others. Twenty years ago he had begun leasing from her Gramma June after her grandpa’s death.

Whenever Jasmyn thought about avoiding Zeb Swanson, she reminded herself what a godsend he had been.

He reached into his back hip pocket, pulled out his neatly folded check, and handed it to her. “I’ve been meaning to say I appreciate you not raising the rent all these years.”

First a discussion about planting, and now words of gratitude? And the check was in his *back* pocket? Whoa. He was way off the grid today.

“Uh, sure. I’m, uh, I’m glad it’s worked out all these years.”

“It’s a prime piece of land. I’m happy to keep it in use. Your grandparents were good people.”

Jasmyn could have clued him in on the realities of life with Jerome and June Albright. Probably best that she did not. He might get testy and stop leasing from her before he planted his early crop. She smiled instead.

He drained his mug and gave it to her. “You take care now.”

Huh? Take care?

He was halfway across the yard before she found her voice. “Have a good day, Zeb.”

He paused and turned. “It’s a weird one. Can you feel it?”

She shook her head.

“Barometer’s dropping.”

Maybe that explained his weirdness.

“Storm’s coming.” He walked away.

Jasmyn unfolded the check and sighed a sigh so different from her typical fifteenth-of-the-month sigh that she had to sit down on the porch step.

Zeb had doubled his check amount.

The barometer must have dropped clear through the floor.



Two days later

Jasmyn slid onto the padded stool in front of the bedroom vanity and grimaced at her friend reflected behind her in the mirror. “Okay, the guinea pig is ready to roll.”

Quinn Olafsson laughed. Her latest goal was to become a hairdresser in her spare time. “It’ll only take ten minutes, I promise.” She gently brushed Jasmyn’s long dark hair back from her face. “We’ll do a French braid this time. Nothing fancy. So, finish your story. What did Zeb say about his check?”

“He drove off before I had a chance to talk to him.”

Quinn stopped brushing and met Jasmyn’s stare in the mirror. Since kindergarten they had been as close as twins, though no one would mistake them for blood relatives. Quinn had an athletic build, super short hair—naturally blond and naturally curly—big pale blue eyes, a cute turned-up nose, and confidence as big as the outdoors.

Jasmyn, on the other hand, resembled the photograph in the eight-by-ten frame on the dresser: a helpless, not-in-this-lifetime-cute premie. The only difference was that she now had hair.

“Zeb drove off? Jasmyn, he should have been in the barn. What’s going on with him?”

“Air pressure. Have you noticed a big change?”

“Do I look like a farmer?” She combed Jasmyn’s hair and began parting it into sections. “What are you going to do with the extra money?”

“Hire Zeb’s grandsons to haul this vanity over to your house so you can play beauty shop whenever you want.”

Quinn smirked. “Oh, I wouldn’t want to mess up the feng shui you got going here in your little cocoon.”

Jasmyn glanced around the frilly yellow room that had been her mother’s from birth until she passed away three years ago. “Mom’s hand-me-down furniture is not the secret to my blissful cocoon.”

Quinn laughed so hard she let go of the hair strands. “Oops.” She

ruffled Jasmyn's hair, undoing the braid. "Starting over." She brushed again. "'Blissful cocoon?' That's a good one, Sunshine."

Sunshine. The nickname was compliments of their third-grade teacher. According to Miss Fowles, Jasmyn smiled a lot and her last name was Albright. How perfect was that?

It turned out to be not in the least bit perfect. Classmates put their own spin on her name. They wondered why a student who was *all bright* would be in the Panda reading group, the pokey Pandas. That was probably the year Jasmyn first felt the enormous safety of home, of the cocoon. Even with a gruff granddad, a super strict gram, and a wacky mother, the place was always far better than the war zone, aka her school and peers.

"Earth to Jasmyn. I said, please hand me—never mind." Quinn reached over Jasmyn's shoulder and took a ribbon from the vanity top. "Got it. I probably shouldn't ask the client to hand me things. Where were you?"

"Third grade."

"David Webb!" Quinn named the boy she'd had a crush on. Typical. It was how she kept track of her school years.

Jasmyn groaned.

"What? He was nice." Quinn handed her a mirror and nudged her around the stool. "Ta-da! Check it out. Not a strand out of place and note the green ribbon for St. Patty's Day. Pretty cool, huh?"

Jasmyn tilted the mirror to see the back of her head. "It is definitely cool. You should be a beautician."

"Thanks. Now why on earth did you zone out to third grade? That year was nasty. Except for David Webb." She took the mirror and bent to face Jasmyn nose to nose. "Hon, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Quinn." She smiled. "I'm just fine."

She was always just fine. Was there another choice?

Two

March 17
San Diego, California

Samantha Whitley tried to smile. She gave it her best shot, stretching her lips to unaccustomed distances. She showed her teeth, hid her teeth, made the corners of her mouth defy gravity.

The camera went *click, click, click* and Sam gave up. It would be better to express her solemn, professional self than look like a flibbertigibbet. Besides, supermodels never smiled.

Click, click.

Not that she was supermodel material.

Click, click.

Good grief. What was up with the photographer? If he hoped to catch the tall, black-eyed, black-haired, black-suited woman smiling genuinely in the back row of a group of twenty-some people, he would be snapping for a long, long time.

Sam considered texting insults to her boss about his idiotic decision to send her to the event. Randy had insisted the assignment was necessary. It was a boost up the ladder for her. And besides, no one else was available. The guy was a hoot a minute.

At last the photographer lowered his camera and the group dispersed, laughing and chattering. Sam wondered if it was too soon to leave.

She retrieved her oversized handbag at her feet, unclipped the name-tag from her lapel, and dropped it in the bag. Enough with the PR already.

Samantha Whitley of Collins and Creighton Engineering Firm was going back to the office to do some real work.

“Excuse me.”

Sam turned toward the voice. It belonged to a teenager with long blond hair, horn-rimmed glasses, and a long deep crease between her brows. Sam said, “Hi.”

The girl gave a quick nod. “Would you mind telling me what you did?”

“What I did?”

“Here.” She swept her arm in a wide arc.

The gesture encompassed the building behind Sam, a playground, a parking lot, shrubbery, fences, housetops peeking over them, and the cloudless Southern California blue sky.

What had she done there? Well, she had shaken hands politely, per Randy’s instructions. She had pronounced the name of her firm clearly into the microphone as she said thanks for the certificate of appreciation. She let others cut the ribbon. She had her picture taken countless times with a couple dozen strangers. She had even tried to smile.

“I mean...” The girl pushed at the bridge of her glasses and did not hold direct eye contact. “I mean, your work.”

Sam watched the girl’s face turn hot pink and saw herself fifteen years ago, blushing and stammering in front of a stranger.

The woman had been a guest at her high school’s Career Day. Typically a collection of locals spoke, people the kids saw at work every single day of their lives. The Arizona town was too remote for outsiders to bother with. Except that one time. Irene Hibbs blew in like a puffy white cloud, a thing of amazement that hovered long enough for Sam to dare to approach.

She was the only one who had cared to approach the woman. Classmates were bored silly and acting like it. No surprise. The video player was on the fritz. No surprise. It was monsoon season and water plopped loudly into buckets around the room. Even the woman’s laptop seemed jinxed. She had resorted to passing around a coffee-table book.

The girl standing before Sam now said, “Did you... did you build it?”

It was the same question Sam had asked Irene Hibbs. *Did you... did you build it?* She had referred to a Chicago skyscraper photographed in the book. The girl referred to the structure behind Sam. The answer, though, would be the same as the one she had heard.

“What do you think?”

The girl blinked and nudged her glasses upward again. “They said you’re an engineer with Collins and Creighton.”

“Yes.”

She exhaled. “Really?” The word rode on her breath, as if Sam were a thing of amazement.

Inwardly Sam squirmed. That was no skyscraper behind her, only a simple community center, its most remarkable feature a gym. She wanted to slink off. But the girl’s reddened cheeks and avoidance of eye contact was doing a number on her.

“It just takes a lot of math and science.”

“But you built it.”

“If we don’t count architects and construction people.”

“Their work wouldn’t happen without yours.”

Sam’s mouth twitched. “How do you know?”

“My little sister draws pretty pictures and my little brother plays with Legos. Sometimes I put them together.”

“And you get an aesthetically pleasing structure that doesn’t fall apart.”

“Not always.” She shrugged and met Sam’s gaze at last, her expression an unabashed desire for knowledge she had not yet been able to acquire.

Sam understood. “Do you want to take a tour behind the scenes? I’ll tell you about base isolation and what we did with the beams and columns that allows energy to dissipate during an earthquake.”

The girl’s eyes did not glaze over.

Sam went on. “I can explain why we put the gym on the north side and the kitchen on the east, how the passive and active fire protection systems were designed.”

The girl nodded. She was hooked.

It was Sam’s turn to blink. If she still wore glasses instead of contact lenses, she would be adjusting them on her nose. She’d met a soul mate. “Sound fun?”

A more vigorous nod.

“Okay. Keep in mind that there’s a whole team of us. I’m still doing entry-level stuff. I only worked on the beams and columns.”

Another nod and a tentative smile.

Sam put out her hand and shook the girl’s. “I’m Sam Whitley.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Lisa Kingman.”

Kingman? As in... "Are you related to Mayor Kingman?"

"He's my dad."

Sam nearly burst out laughing, but she only smiled, a genuine expression this time. She was schmoozing the mayor's daughter.

That might be worth two boosts up the ladder.