

An excerpt from *The Book Club*

Pattie watched Walter trying to light the fire. "How come you didn't tell me Maggie's kids were going to see Ed in Oz if you knew? It's a big thing, Walt. A whole month abroad."

"I didn't think it was important." He blew into the hopeless pile of coals.

Pattie sat up in the deck chair. "Of course it's important. You didn't tell me Ed called you."

"Look, Ed called me, we had a brief chat about his tax exemption, he mentioned the kids' visit, and that's that."

While he waved a newspaper over the smoking charcoal, she got up and poured herself more wine.

"You never talk to me, Walter. I didn't know that you and Ed were still friendly."

"Honey, I don't know what you're going on about." He stepped back to look at the failing fire. "Just because you told me something Maggie mentioned at the book club, and I already knew, you're upset."

"I am. I just think we don't share things anymore."

Walter sighed. "Do we have firefighters?"

"How the hell should I know? I already know everything about the house. Must I now take over the garden shed, too?"

"Calm down. It's not my fault that Ed has a new girlfriend in Melbourne. Maybe I shouldn't have told you *that*."

"That's right." Pattie put her glass down with enough force to spill the wine. "Let's try to share a little less, shall we?"

She caught Walter's baffled look before she stomped back to the kitchen.

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Pattie stood in the queue, discreetly observing Erick. She told herself it wasn't the fight she had with Walter that had driven her here.

Then it was her turn and he looked up and smiled. "Good afternoon, Patricia. Made up your mind, did you?"

"The books are in my car. I've got twelve, if that's all right."

"I'll come help. Dalene," he called to the back, "can you take over for a couple of minutes?"

When a young girl emerged from a backroom, Erick took Pattie's arm and escorted her to the parking lot in front of his store. They didn't stop at her car. Erick led her to a coffee shop across the street and she didn't resist.

He pulled a chair out for her. "Tell me about what you read, Patricia."

"Oh," she sat down and fumbled with the paper napkin, "this and that."

"I think classics suit you. Charles Dickens. Charlotte Brontë."

"Classics?" She laughed. "Is that a way of telling me I'm old?"

His fingers slipped over hers. "Not at all. You're a classic woman."

She didn't move her hand. She was worried about looking like a prude and about making a scene. More than anything, she wanted to analyze her reaction to his touch. Instead of feeling repulsed, she felt a thrill, some shock, and guilt. She pushed the guilt aside.

"What exactly is a classic woman?" she said, trying to keep an even voice.

“A woman who has everything—brains, looks, a good body... The best part of your body is your feet.”

“What?”

“Perfectly proportioned. It says a lot about the rest of you. I’m sorry, but I couldn’t help notice.”

She looked at the menu, reading nothing. “Are you always this forward?”

“Only with rarely beautiful women.”

Her eyes lifted. “Are there many?”

“Too few. You are deliciously mature. So much more sensual than...”

She looked at their hands, suddenly intertwined. “I told you I’m married.”

“You did. I didn’t ask you to marry me. Can I tell you what I like about you?”

The waitress came to take their order. He ordered for them without asking her what she preferred. She had never been with a man like that. He looked like a man who could build a barbeque fire in no time.

Pattie stared through the window while the waitress scribbled in her ordering pad. Outside, honest people were scurrying home. She desperately wished to be one of them, carrying no bigger burden than a shopping bag. But she had crossed a line. It was both liberating and dreadfully sad.