

SISTERLY LOVE

By Eleanor Nelson

Emma fiddled with her pen. An idea had come to her in a dream last night for her new mystery-romance novel, and now all she wanted to do was write. She was eighty-seven and might not have many good years left. How long before her mind became muddled and her younger sister Trudy shunted her off to some old folks' home?

She itched to get this new story down on paper, but in a few minutes, Trudy would be arriving for their morning coffee date. It was too late to back out now. For years at ten o'clock sharp, she and her sister walked down the street to the Tea Cozy for coffee and sweets.

Yesterday it had seemed like a good idea because she was wallowing in the doldrums of writer's block. Now she chafed at the thought of the next few hours: coffee would be followed by shopping—interminable poring over third-rate junk at the dollar stores. Trudy wouldn't be happy to quit until she unearthed at least one treasure, and that could take all morning.

Emma found herself wishing . . . well, almost wishing, that her younger sister would be abducted by aliens. Not permanently, just until she finished the first draft. Or perhaps, Trudy might contract a bout of pneumonia that would keep her homebound for days. But if Trudy were ill, Emma would feel obliged to make pilgrimages to the sick bed with pots of chicken soup, and

of course, something sweet. Trudy's appetite never suffered, even when she claimed to be at death's door. No, abducted by aliens was better.

“G'morning, Mrs. McCallum.”

Emma looked up at the girls from Saint Aurelia's School running past the low brick wall that separated her well-kept lawn from the well-kept grass of the school's athletic field. She watched as their strong young legs ferried them along not twenty feet from where she sat on the patio outside her red brick, colonial cottage. As they passed, Heather, the dark girl from Barbados, smiled and waved her field hockey stick in a friendly salute.

Emma raised her hand in reply, then let it plop to her lap. She looked down at her emaciated figure, her muscles shriveled from the passage of years. Reaching over her shoulder, she pulled a cardigan sweater off the back of the chair and slipped her arms into the sleeves to spare herself the view of time's carnage.

Only her little pot belly seemed incongruous with the withered figure—a testament to the scones and honey she downed each morning with Trudy. If she wasn't careful, soon she'd look sloppy, like her sister. Trudy bulged out of her clothes. Gaps popped open between the buttons on her blouse, exposing her undergarments. Emma was embarrassed to be seen with her.

As she rose and went inside the open French doors behind her chair, the grandfather clock in the hallway bonged the first of ten sonorous strokes. Sticking her head back out the door, Emma surveyed the yard but saw no sign of Mr. Philpotz. “Puss? Puss?” she called, her voice musically rising and falling. Darned cat. She squinted at the bed of chrysanthemums, framing the front of the house, a mixture of rusts and yellows that could easily camouflage the orange tabby cat. “Come get your breakfast.”

No cat materialized, so she drew the French doors closed and planted the floor bolt. She nudged it with her toe. Despite this routine, she was never quite sure if it had caught in the slot.

But, this was a safe neighborhood, and she didn't worry much about prowlers entering to harm or rob her.

It was probably just as well to leave Mr. Philpotz outside, she thought. Most likely he'd been feasting on mice all night and was sleeping off a full stomach in one of his hideaways. She envisioned soggy piles of partly digested tails and innards decorating her oriental rug. It had happened before. Nevertheless, she always felt more comfortable if he was safe inside the house.

Mr. Philpotz was friendly with everyone. When Emma returned, he would probably be up on the wall with his eyes closed and his paws tucked under his chest while the girls from Saint Aurelia's made a fuss over him. Such nice young ladies, Emma thought.

Yes, they were nice, but she knew what they called Philpotz behind her back. How many times had she heard giggling as she approached. It wasn't Pusspotz they called him, as she'd first thought, it was something far ruder. Still . . . he *was* a pisspot at times. Emma grinned. She felt wicked today.

The front door bell sounded. From the length of the tone Emma knew she had missed the first ring while looking for Mr. Philpotz. Her sister was leaning on the button. Just like Trudy to expect her to be hovering by the door.

"Coming, coming," she trilled as she pulled open the door.

"About time," Trudy grumbled. "A well-bred lady doesn't keep—"

"Have a seat while I gather my things."

"Honestly, it wasn't as if you didn't know I was coming."

"Yes, yes," Emma muttered under her breath, as she adjusted her hat and checked her purse. "That should do it." She forced a smile at the roadblock in the doorway. "Okay, let's go," she said, pulling the knob harder than she intended. The door closed with a loud slap, and she

steeled herself for Trudy's caustic comment about how a lady doesn't slam doors. Turning her back, she strode off toward the street.

"Have a nice coffee, Missus. Save a couple of cinnamon buns for us."

Emma looked up to see Heather and her friend, Amy, smiling across the wall. "Stop by tomorrow, girls. In the meantime, keep an eye out for Mr. Philpotz, would you? I haven't seen him this morning."

"Sure thing, Missus." The girls jogged off to finish their third circumnavigation of the athletic field with their pony tails—one black, one blond—flipping from side to side.

"Really. You shouldn't encourage her—the dark one. You never know about those people. How did someone like that get into a school like St. Aurelia's, anyway?"

"Trudy, I'm ashamed of you. She's a lovely girl, and her father is the Cultural Attaché." Emma increased her pace, forcing her sister to trot behind her. That comment had done it. Forget about aliens. If they did abduct Trudy, she could never be sure if or when they'd return the hefty harpy. A nice resting place under the rich Virginia sod was better. Far more permanent.

But she knew planting Trudy in the back yard was not a viable solution. She could never harm her sister, not in real life. Better to create a disagreeable character for her new book, using Trudy as a model, then kill her off in a fiendish way. She'd done it many times before. Trudy had never caught on.

Ever since she inherited the old family home, Emma thought, her sister had been snippy to her, and Trudy's resentment seemed to be worsening each day. It wasn't as though she had been left out of their father's will. He'd been more than generous. And with Emma being twelve years older than Trudy, the house would be hers one day. Emma had put it in her will. But that wasn't good enough. Trudy had to have everything now—instant gratification. Just like all the cake she ate. Well, that was too darn bad. She'd have to wait. Abruptly, Emma halted.

“Oof!” Trudy plowed into her. “What the—”

“I’ll be right back. I want to check the cellar for Mr. Philpotz. The door was ajar earlier and I may have closed him in. I’ll worry all morning if I don’t look.”

“That lousy cat! You think more of it than you do of me—your own sister. Don’t have a decent word to say to me.” She folded her arms and planted her feet. “I’m sick of it, you hear? Sick of it. Just because you have the house you think you’re better than me. Now you make me wait all the time. Everything at your convenience, no respect for what I want. You don’t give a fig about me.”

Trudy’s tirade left Emma speechless. How long had she catered to Trudy’s whims? Only all her life. Stepping onto the grass, she kept her eyes locked on her sister as she turned toward the house. “I’ll just be a minute,” she said through tight lips.

Leaving the front door open, Emma hustled down the hallway to the cellar door, flicked on the switch for the light at the top of the steep stairs and grabbed the banister. She had only descended two steps when the light dimmed behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, Emma saw a large mass silhouetted in front of the forty watt bulb. A heavy purse struck her right arm, jolting her fingers free from the railing. She pitched forward and tumbled down the stairs.

Heather cradled Mr. Philpotz in one arm while she rang the side doorbell of Mrs. McCallum’s house. The chime sounded hollow through the closed French doors. She rang twice more.

“I don’t think anyone’s home,” Amy said. “We’d better get back to class before Miss Wallace misses us.”

Heather set the cat on Emma’s patio chair and picked up her hockey stick. “That’s odd,” she said, studying the door. “We haven’t seen Mrs. McCallum since yesterday. She always sits out here on nice days.”

“Maybe she went on a trip,” Amy said.

“She said she’d bring us cinnamon buns today. And she never leaves Pisspot outside when she goes away.”

“Maybe she never found him and had to leave in a hurry. Some emergency.”

“No, something’s wrong. I can feel it.”

“Oh, you and your feelings.” Amy wiggled her fingers in front of her eyes. “Woooo. Your island ways give me the creeps.”

Ignoring her friend, Heather asked, “What time is it?”

Amy looked at her watch. “Ten twenty-five.”

“The sister always comes at ten. On the dot. No sign of her this morning.”

“Wouldn’t the fat blob call the police if Mrs. McCallum didn’t open the door?”

“Maybe she had an accident and needs help.”

“Maybe she’s . . . dead.”

The two girls stared at each other. Shivers crawled up Heather’s spine. “I’m afraid for Mrs. McCallum.” Gripping her hockey stick, she tiptoed to the French doors and leaned her forehead against the glass. As she pressed harder to see inside the room, the door inched open, the floor bolt scraping across the hardwood floor. Turning sideways, Heather slipped inside the living room. Philpotz brushed past her legs and ran mewing down a hallway toward the back of the house.

“Heather, are you nuts?”

“Come on,” Heather urged.

“We can’t—”

“Come!” Heather tiptoed across the room toward the hallway where she had last seen Philpotz. Turning a corner, she spotted the cat sniffing the base of a closed door near the end of the passageway. He picked at the wood, trying to reach his paw underneath.

“Must be where she feeds him,” Amy whispered.

Heather pursed her lips and approached the door. She tried the knob. It was locked. Tucking her hockey stick under her arm, she jiggled the handle, then yanked it with both hands. The hockey stick clattered to the floor. Both girls froze.

The house was deathly still. As they held their breath, they heard what sounded like the faint click of a door closing and the heavy tread of approaching footsteps.

Heather put her finger to her lips and nodded toward the living room. As they turned to leave, Philpotz hunkered down by the door and yowled.

Distant thunder reverberated through Emma’s head . . . or was it drumming? Indistinct sounds pounded in her temples . . . voices. She opened her eyes. Nothing but blackness. Cold seeped through her from the cement floor. She ached all over, and her right arm throbbed with stabbing pain. Gingerly she turned her head. Above her she saw a thin strip of light. Faint shadows moved across it. If she could only clear her mind, remember.

“Grab your stick, Heather. Let’s get out of here. Now!”

A girl’s voice. Heather? What was she . . . ? “Help,” Emma called. “Someone help.”

Had she spoken the words or were they inside her head like the thunder? She saw a dark shadow partially blocking the thin strip of light. Something was scratching. Rats, Emma thought. Rats were coming to eat her. “Help,” she called again.

“Mreow!” A sharp yowl split the air. “Mreow.”

Mr. Philpotz! The cellar . . . she was in the cellar. The light was coming from the gap under the door. “Puss. Puss! Help!”

“Amy, shh. I thought I heard something.”

“The cat.”

“No, a voice. Pisspot heard it too. We have to open that door.”

“Heather, someone’s coming. We’ve got to go.”

“What’s going on here?”

Trudy’s voice! Only she could bellow like that. Memories came rushing back to Emma. Trudy . . . the stairs . . .

“I asked you a question, girl. Yes, you. I always knew you were trouble. Told my sister so. You think there’s all kinds of good stuff here for the taking? Is that it? Well, let’s have a look.”

Emma heard the click of the deadbolt and then the door burst open, light from the hallway spilling into the room. Philpotz flew down the stairs.

“Run!” Amy shouted.

“She’s blocking the hallway.”

Trudy seized Heather’s pony tail and whacked her head against Amy’s nose. Amy fell forward, knocking Heather to her knees. With one hand still clutching her hockey stick, Heather slashed sideways, landing one sharp blow on Trudy’s shin.

The mass of flesh shrieked and fell to the floor. “My leg. You’ve broken my leg. I can’t move.”

Emma closed her eyes. The scene above her in the doorway seemed unreal, like a lantern show. But it was real. Trudy had left her to die. And the girls . . . she’d hurt the girls. Emma felt

bile rise in her throat. She couldn't imagine harming her sister . . . only in her fantasy world. But Trudy had tried to kill all of them. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

Philpotz snuggled close and licked her face.

Heather flipped on the light switch and sprinted down the stairs. "It's okay, Missus, Amy's phoning for help," she said, cradling Emma's head in her lap.

Emma smiled up at her. "Thank you, girls. You saved my life."

Heather smiled back. "No, Missus. It was Mr. Philpotz. He led us to you."

"You and Amy . . . and Mr. Philpotz. How can I ever thank you enough?"

"Hush, Missus, don't even think about—"

"I know!" Emma clasped Heather's arm. "The three of you . . . I'm going to dedicate my next book to you."

<THE END>