

The Secret Life of Sarah Hollenbeck

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Turner, Bethany, 1979– author.

Title: The secret life of Sarah Hollenbeck / Bethany Turner.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2017]

Identifiers: LCCN 2017024938 | ISBN 9780800727666 (softcover) | ISBN 9780800729752 (print on demand)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian women—Conduct of life—Fiction. | Women—Religious life—Fiction. | Women authors—Fiction. | Christian life—Fiction. | GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3620.U76 S43 2017 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017024938>

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17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Ephesians 3:20–21

1.

The Next Emily Dickinson

If you're willing to admit it, you probably know me as Raine de Bourgh. Yes, *that* Raine de Bourgh. Did you blush at the mere mention of my pen name? Yeah. So did I.

Three and a half years ago, I certainly had no intention of ever becoming Raine de Bourgh. I was simply Sarah Hollenbeck. Or maybe I was still Sarah McDermott? No. Sarah Hollenbeck. Sarah McDermott was the product of an empty, loveless marriage, and I was doing all I possibly could to prove—at least to myself—that I wasn't the shell my marriage had reduced me to. But did I even remember Sarah Hollenbeck? The girl I was *before* I met the guy? Could I become her once again?

The answer had to be yes, so that Monday evening in June, three and a half years ago, I hoisted my Kate Spade messenger bag a bit higher on my shoulder, straightened my Stella McCartney blazer, wiggled my toes in my Christian Louboutin pumps, and took a deep breath. As I reached for the doorknob of the high school library, I noticed a slight tremble in my hand. I didn't understand what was causing the reaction. I'd been faithfully entering that library each week for two months, and it was, after all, just a book club.

Until a couple of months prior, my life had consisted of the duties of a trophy wife, proudly—though often resentfully—supporting my husband on his rise to the top of a Fortune 500 real estate conglomerate. *His* Fortune 500 real estate conglomerate. But suddenly, from the moment Patrick sent me a text message that said “Bringing Dan for dinner. He's gluten-free” followed by a thumbs-up emoji, my life as I knew it was over. Well, I suppose that wasn't the moment. The moment came later that evening when I caught Patrick making out with Dan's wife, Bree, in the room I had dreamt would someday be a nursery.

The dissolution of my marriage left me with a lot of free time. There were no gluten-free dinners to plan, no charity events to attend, no bigwigs to schmooze. We had been together since high school, and while the last few years certainly hadn't been fulfilling or happy, I didn't recognize my life without Patrick by my side. I didn't recognize *myself* without Patrick by my side. All of our friends were actually Patrick's friends, it turned out. I couldn't blame them, really. They were social-ladder-climbers, and I was most definitely a woman whose social status was experiencing a free fall.

Every job search came up empty. Apparently no one in the tough Chicago job market was interested in hiring someone who hadn't worked since college, where she'd earned a degree she'd never once put to use. I'd had one career and one career only, and I'd been forced into early retirement—and I never was able to figure out how to list my job experience as “Mrs. Patrick McDermott” on my résumé.

I was a social pariah desperately in need of something to do, but for a depressed, newly divorced woman with more money and time than talent or skills, finding the right hobby is a surprisingly

tricky thing.

Traveling meant traveling alone, and that wasn't something I knew how to do.

Quilting took too much patience.

Community theatre took too much confidence.

Painting took too much effort.

Book clubs? Book clubs could work.

I joined seven book clubs in the Greater Chicago area simultaneously. Seven. And that meant I was reading seven novels simultaneously. I thought that was the perfect solution—after all, doing that much reading, when would I have time to think about the shambles of my life? Yeah . . . that sounds good in theory, but every book reminded me of what I'd lost—or worse, what I'd never had. A fulfilling marriage. A life with someone who considered me his best friend. Children.

Every book, from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to *Eat, Pray, Love*, from *Lord of the Rings* to *The Hunger Games*, somehow reminded me of my misery. When my Dark American Romanticism book club started reading *The Scarlet Letter*, I knew I'd had all I could take. I quit all of the book clubs except for the one on Monday night, because that was the one that met closest to my house. I decided that Monday night book club would be my primary hobby and exclusive social circle.

And I approached that social circle the only way I knew how—with all of the rules and safeguards that had been so necessary for self-preservation in the highfalutin world of the snobs and blue bloods, into which I had made every effort to feel as if I belonged. I would dress for success and speak only when I had something monumental and memorable to contribute. I would hide my scars and shortcomings, and only put forth the most impressive version of myself. I would keep everyone at arm's length so that if I eventually fell out of favor with them, I would not be impacted.

It would be just like any other social gathering I had ever attended, apart from one striking difference: my last name was no longer McDermott, so I wouldn't be viewed as nothing more than an accessory from the moment I was introduced.

And with all of the extra time, once I had whittled the book club list down to one, I would write a book of my own. Then I could be in control of the content. Then my emotions wouldn't be putty in the hands of authors who had probably written to escape their own misery, with nary a care given to the feelings of the miserable divorcée who would one day read their work while attempting to bury her pain beneath enough cheesecake to bestow diabetes upon a small village. I'd never written anything before, but I'd certainly done more than my fair share of reading.

How hard could it be?

My first attempt was a book of poetry, and while I waited for the call from the president asking me to accept the post of Poet Laureate of the United States, I decided it was time to share my gift with the world. Or at least the Monday night book club. Though I couldn't ever remember their names, the ladies in that circle were, after all, my closest friends. No, I hadn't known them very long, and yes, our conversations had never plunged any deeper than whether we'd preferred Jim Caviezel as the Count of Monte Cristo or Jesus, but they were the constants in my life of upheaval, and I knew that our bond was true and indestructible.

I'd been walking into that high school library every Monday evening for two months, but that first Monday evening in June was the beginning. That Monday evening represented a fresh start.

That Monday evening was the first book club meeting of the rest of my life.

"Excuse me." I raised my hand and smiled as the ladies began gathering their things to go, having exhausted all possible thoughts, feelings, and debates over *Northanger Abbey*. "If you could all spare just a few more moments of your time, if it's not too much to ask." I blinked sweetly, conveying humility so well in that tried and true manner I had watched Patrick employ for so many years.

I rarely spoke in book club, so I wasn't surprised that everyone stopped in their tracks.

"Of course, Sarah. What can we do for you?" asked the leader of the book club, whose name had slipped my mind. And by "slipped my mind," I mean I hadn't bothered to learn it.

"I value each and every opinion in this circle. You each present such witty and insightful views, and that, I believe, is what I as a budding poet need in order to develop my craft." I saw them take in my rehearsed speech, and they responded with enthusiastic support. Once I was fully convinced that they were the eager demographic I was seeking, I meekly proceeded. "You are all just the best. If no one would mind . . . may I?"

I opened the leather-bound binder in my hands and pulled out the crisp linen stationery on which I had lovingly transcribed each poem by hand over the course of the past several days and began to read.

Lights flicker. Kerosene?

Perhaps.

The man in suede wishes me well,

But I doubt his sincerity.

Never you mind.

Suede and kerosene. The two don't mix.

Boom.

I read poem after poem after poem and, as expected, I was rewarded with stunned silence. They were clearly overcome with emotion and overwhelmed by the power of the lyric. I smiled at them all and gave them a moment to collect themselves. I cast my eyes downward, not wanting to impose upon their deeply intimate moment.

"Thank you, Sarah," Book Club Leader Lady said after clearing her throat. "That was truly . . . something."

"Yeah . . . wow . . ." random women in the circle said in unison.

I was so very full of myself that I took it as true, sincere praise.

"Thank you all so much." I beamed condescendingly. "It was an honor sharing my work with you."

"I'm sorry," a woman I had never noticed before said softly. "Can I be honest?"

You want me to take over the book club? You think I'm the next Emily Dickinson? You're a Hollywood producer who wants to adapt "Lavatory Purgatory" for the screen?

"Of course." I smiled and gestured to indicate I would allow her to proceed. "Please."

"Well, I don't want to be rude, but this group is about honest analysis of the quality of what people write, and it's also about the way what we read makes us feel. So, I just have to say, I have some issues with your poetry that I would be happy to elaborate on if you would allow me to do so."

Convinced that she couldn't possibly be referencing anything more than a rhyme she didn't like

or, more likely, a long-buried emotion within herself that my words had unwittingly brought to the surface, I nodded that she had the floor.

“Okay,” she began, sitting up a little straighter. “I think there is a pretty decent chance that you’ve actually got some writing talent, but let’s face it—poetry isn’t where you need to be. And what’s with the subjects? It’s like you just flipped through the yellow pages until something jumped out at you. What’s next? Exterminators?”

I looked down at the papers in my hands and sheepishly shuffled “Insecticide Nuclear Winter” to the bottom of the stack.

The critic pressed on. “Look, I didn’t feel any emotional connection to any of it, and that’s fine. I don’t feel any connection to Jane Austen, either.” Every other woman in the room gasped, which made her smile, I noticed. “But the problem is, I don’t think you felt any emotional connection to any of it. That is what it is, I suppose, and if you’re running from something or trying to avoid feeling, well, that’s your decision. But please don’t subject the rest of us to it.”

The others in the circle seemed not to breathe, anxious for, and yet dreading, my reply. I knew she was right. Of course I knew she was right.

And that was the moment. The depression and the hole in my heart and the suffocating sadness couldn’t be pushed to the background any longer. I started crying like in an old *Looney Tunes* cartoon—you know, where the tears shoot out horizontally with the force of a garden hose. Actually, I think it was kind of a combination of *Looney Tunes* and *I Love Lucy*, because I think I actually made that “Waaaaa!” sound.

All of the women in the group—the nameless women for whom I hadn’t taken the time or made the effort to develop true respect or affection—gathered around me and hugged me and said generic things like “There, there” and “It’s going to be okay.” I was so touched by that moment. So much so that I told myself I was going to make brownies for them all and bring them to next week’s meeting. They may be the only thing I know how to bake, but my brownies really are amazing, so that was a big gesture for a social pariah allowing herself to feel again.