

The Unbreakables

ALSO BY LISA BARR

Fugitive Colors

*The
Unbreakables*

A Novel

LISA BARR

HARPER

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HARPER

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*To David, Noa, Maya, and Maya—
my love and my muses*



I.

Love never dies a natural death. It dies because we don't know how to replenish its source. It dies of blindness and errors and betrayals. It dies of illness and wounds; it dies of weariness, of withering, of tarnishing.

—ANAÏS NIN



CHAPTER ONE

GABE, MY HUSBAND, STILL INCREDIBLY SEXY AT FORTY-TWO, APPROACHES ME from behind in our walk-in closet, wraps his muscular arms tightly around my waist and kisses my neck hungrily. Truth be told, I heard his approaching footsteps thirty seconds earlier stomping across our hardwood floor from the shower, pretended as though I didn't, and let him think he pulled one over on me.

I sink against his bare chest, still slightly damp, feeling those wispy hairs like feathers against my back. *God, he feels good.* His warm hands cup my breasts as he gently turns us both to face the full-length mirror on the back of the door. I look, unintentionally, pretty damn porn wearing a lacy black strapless push-up bra and matching panties, my favorite high-heeled sandals, clutching my new birthday dress—a one-shouldered form-fitting snorkel blue number, which I was about to put on pre—Gabe Interruptus.

His clean-shaven face nestles into my blow-out. It really has been a while—a few months perhaps?—since he's made this particular move, which is slightly surprising. But if I'm totally honest with myself, nothing really surprises me about us anymore and sometimes I wish it did. There are those days

when I go for my morning run and wonder what would happen if I just keep going past the three-mile marker and never look back—where would that road take me? It's more of a passing thought than a tangible want. I love my husband. We are each other's history, having chalked up more than twenty-five years together from high school seniors onward. So many years, so many sexual encounters, that Gabe's closet seduction feels a bit rom-com predictable, the left hook you know is coming. And yet . . . I smile into the mirror. We're still good, still us.

"Happy birthday, babe," he whispers into my ear while tracing my body in a more demanding way, which, if I don't put a stop to where this is headed, will definitely make us late to my own birthday dinner in the city. "Do you believe I'm sleeping with a forty-two-year-old?"

"That's *two* twenty-one-year-olds to you, bitch," I retort playfully, as I tenderly pull away but kiss him first, long and lingering, a kiss that says I'm not rejecting you just delaying you. "We have got to get moving. We are already going to be twenty minutes late. You know Samantha and Eric. Dinner is at seven thirty, but they will be there at seven." I tenderly graze my finger over the slim scar next to his left eyebrow. "Continue this later?"

Gabe nods his disappointment, his towel sliding off his waist in the process and I catch it, anticipating the fall as I do just about everything else about my husband.

AS PREDICTED, SAMANTHA AND ERIC ARE ALREADY AT FIG & OLIVE, THE SWANKY new French-Mediterranean restaurant downtown that everyone is talking about. So are Lauren and Matt. Not only are we run-

ning a half hour late, but also traffic from the burbs to the city is pure hell, much worse than usual. And it's a Tuesday night. There must be an accident up ahead somewhere. By the time we take the tiny elevator up to the Oak Street restaurant, our best friends are already well into their second round at the large rectangular bar, the ornate centerpiece of the dining room.

"Sophieeee!" my girls scream out, waving their wine goblets in the air, crimson liquid bouncing over the rims. "Over here!" As though I don't see them, as though everyone else doesn't hear them. I laugh to myself. Hillbilly suburbanites—the Clampetts let out of their three-car garages.

"I *love* this place. Everybody is so hip." Samantha points to her extremely low-cut dress. "Too slutty? Eric thinks so. Who cares, right? Happy birthday, gorgeous mama!"

"Perfect amount of slutty. You look great." I squeeze her tightly. Samantha and Lauren have been my closest friends since high school and they both smell amazing. A mix of cabernet and Jo Malone. I, of course, am wearing the same scent. We bought our new perfume together last weekend at Neiman's. We pretty much don't make a move without the others' tacit approval.

Our group of six has been together for years. Eric is a college add-on, but the rest of us have been friends since high school. We vacation together, celebrate every milestone and holiday together. Every important occasion is shared with one another: Samantha & Eric, Lauren & Matt, Sophie & Gabe, and our kids. I am happy this way—like curl-up-in-a-favorite-blanket-on-a-rainy-day happy. No matter what life brings, ups and downs, twists and turns, these are my people.

"So . . . what are we eating?" Lauren asks after we are

seated at our table, her long French-manicured finger skimming the menu.

Lauren's nails, unlike mine, are always perfect, always chipless, even days after a manicure. Mine chip five seconds after I leave the salon because I don't have the patience to wait-n-dry. I don't find beautifying therapeutic, though I do all the maintenance because one must—mani-pedis, blow-outs, waxing, facials, and yoga: the absolute worst. My mind goes into overdrive when I'm told to be still, be present, or hold a pose. I'm an artist—*was* an artist. The only time I ever sat still was when I was in my twenties, studying an object that I planned to sculpt. My artwork back then was considered cutting-edge and exhibited in galleries around the city, and selling. It was everything I had ever dreamed of until severe carpal tunnel syndrome took over and prevented me from doing what I loved most. The doctors (four unanimous opinions) insisted I stop sculpting or I would cause irreversible nerve damage to my hands. I was willing to take the chance, but realized there were things bigger than my passion—actually only one thing. I needed to reserve my hands, my strength, for my then precocious five-year-old, Ava, now nineteen. So, I gave up what I loved most for someone I loved even more.

Now I run the Art Center in town and represent local artists' work. I enjoy my job, but not a day goes by that I don't yearn for what was, who I once was—so much potential cut off before hitting my prime. I buried my own dream, cut my losses, and now I bring others' vision to light. It's the consolation prize that never really consoles.

“Hey, Soph, you with us?”

I smile at Lauren, who has asked me twice what I wanted to eat: my birthday, my choices. I glance at my friends and my husband. “You guys pick. Surprise me.”

Eric, who always takes control of every group food event, happily orders us an assortment of appetizers. The marinated olives come first, followed by more wine, six types of crostini, beef something, mushroom croquettes, then more wine. We catch up on our hometown’s latest gossip, particularly the Elm Street “temporary” road closure—the town’s main drag—a construction project that is taking three months longer than promised to complete, killing everyone’s route and making driving around town unbearable.

Matt raises his glass. “Here’s to the Great Wall of China, the Hoover Dam, the Colosseum—all built in less time than the goddamn Elm Street construction project.”

We all laugh and clink glasses.

“It’s like living in the third world,” Gabe complains, just as the overly exuberant waiter, who is definitely an actor, brings in the entrées. “It took me nearly thirty extra minutes to get to the hospital yesterday. My patient was having complications and I’m watching that goddamn crane dump cement in slo-mo. I was going out of my mind.”

“Can we talk about something other than Elm Street—so boring already. That’s all anyone talks about these days.” Lauren sighs, then inspects her nails approvingly.

Eric, mouth full, leans forward with a mischievous glint in his eye. “Well, I’ve got something for us that’s definitely *not* boring. I was saving this for later when we were all sufficiently buzzed. I’m sure you all heard about the Ashley Madison lists? Fucking train wreck.”

“Ashley Madison?” I slur slightly, after having tossed back glass two. “Never heard of her.”

“It’s not a her,” Samantha explains. “Where have you been? It’s a thing, an online company. A despicable website for married cheaters. Their motto is ‘Life is short. Have an affair.’ Apparently, it was hacked a few weeks ago, and it’s turned into a total shit-storm. I read about it on my newsfeed.”

“Oh right.” I nod. “Someone from the club was talking about it yesterday in the locker room. I wasn’t really paying attention.” I look over at Gabe, who has begun a meticulous operation on his filet mignon—always the surgeon. I glance over at Eric and Matt and smile, surprised that they have waited this long before making fun of Gabe. Eric sees what I see, points to Gabe, “Steak surgery. Scalpel?” He hands Gabe his knife.

Gabe looks up without cracking a smile. “Asshole.”

We all laugh, drink more wine, and Eric holds up his brand-new iPhone with its extralarge face and shines the phone’s blaring light directly at us. The restaurant lighting is so dim that the phone casts a blinding gray-blue hue across the sleek ebony table. “Back to more interesting stuff. Apparently, the hackers stole all of Ashley Madison’s database—emails, names, home addresses, sexual fantasies and credit card information, and threatened to post all of the details online if the site was not permanently closed. Of course, the Ashley Madison honchos thought they were bluffing, the site stayed open, and the hackers are now making good on their threat. The cheaters are now being cheated out of their anonymity.”

“How many people are we talking about?” Lauren asks.

Eric shoots us a wry smile. “Get this, the database estimates are well over thirty-two million cheaters, and the out-

reach is as far away as Saudi Arabia. And that, my friends, is cheating punishable by death or stoning—not just being kicked out of a house and forced to couch-crash.”

“You enjoy this shit,” Matt says accusingly, wrapping his arm around the back of Lauren’s chair.

“Hell yeah.” Eric smirks devilishly, holds up his phone again, this time high overhead as though he is at a Springsteen concert, demanding an encore via phone-cum-lighter.

“What’s wrong with you? Put that down,” Samantha scolds Eric. “You’re embarrassing us.”

“Let me tell you what we’re about to enjoy . . .” Eric places the phone faceup on the table. “Apparently, the hackers chose today,” Eric turns to me, “your birthday, Soph, to release its first round of customer records. This Impact Team—or whatever the bullshit hacker name is—says they are planning to release names of cheaters all month. But today, July twenty-first—he speaks slowly, purposely building up the suspense—“is the debut of Chicago and its friendly—make that, *very* friendly—suburbs. Nearly twenty pages of names on this infamous list belong to our very own, very cozy North Grove.”

“No shit.” Matt takes a generous swig of wine. We all do.

Eric nods. “Yes. Someone from work emailed me the list, and I have held on to this baby for six straight hours without looking at it and you can only imagine the torture. I saved it for us, for tonight. I thought we’d review the list of our town’s cheaters together.” He turns to me, faux apologetically. “Dark and evil, I know. Happy birthday, Soph.”

I laugh because I’m buzzed and because Eric has always been as obnoxious as he is kindhearted. A top-producing investment banker for one of the city’s leading firms, we all know

that Eric would chuck his job in a heartbeat if he could make a living as a stand-up comedian. He even did a short stint with the Second City after college, taking a gap year before attending the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. And he was talented. He's always been my favorite.

Gabe looks up from his sliced steak masterpiece, shakes his head. "Not on Sophie's birthday. C'mon, dude, no class."

I glance at Gabe, smile, appreciating his care. "This is awful, but the truth is, don't you all kind of want to know if we know anybody? And who better to check the list with than all of us together. I know it's wrong . . . but kinda good-bad-wrong, if you know what I mean."

Samantha, who is sitting next to me, leans her head on my shoulder. "I totally agree. Make that *great*-bad-wrong. Let's have fun with this. I propose a drinking game. It's called Can You Guess the Names of North Grove's Cheaters. If you're wrong, you have to do a shot. If you're right, you get to pick who does a shot."

Gabe turns to me again, his face long and serious. "This is not your thing. This is Eric's demented crap. Let's not do this."

"Overruled," I say, shaking my hair that is so oversprayed it simply does not move. "I'm now three glasses in—it is *so* my thing."

The waiter appears. Eric orders coffee for all and asks to see the dessert menu. I can tell by his obvious whisper that he also asks the waiter to bring out something sweet for my birthday. I smile. Eric is always on top of things, our group organizer of everything—from PNOs (Parents Night Out) to vacations and group bike rides. Gabe excuses himself to the bathroom, saying something about his stomach. I glance at his empty plate. No wonder. He finished that entire steak.

But Gabe's stomach is ironclad. I'm the one who downs Tums like a grandmother. I gesture to Matt to follow him. "Matty, go make sure he's okay."

Matt gets up, stumbles after Gabe, but then returns two minutes later. "He said he was fine and just needed a few minutes."

"Screw him." Eric laughs. "I've been waiting hours for this. I'm not waiting another few minutes. I say, let's get started."

"Do it!" Samantha and I squeal. Gabe will catch up when he returns.

"We are all going straight to hell." I giggle. "But you know what, cheaters have it coming. I'm not going to feel guilty—they, they didn't."

"Cheaters suck!" Samantha clink-clinks my glass.

"That's what she said," Matt adds predictably.

Eric glances at his wife, who is now visibly loopy. Samantha, cheeks flushed, is a lightweight like me. He moves her glass to the other side of his plate. "I can see I'm either going to get majorly laid tonight or I will be holding back your hair while you heave."

"You know it, baby—whip out the damn list. Chop, chop." Samantha reaches over Eric and reclaims her wine and points to his phone.

Eric, laughing, picks it up, types in his passcode, downloads the list, as we all lean in with perverse anticipation. How ridiculous we must look watching that damn spinning loader, which controls all of our lives. "First one up . . .," he announces as though he's Ringmaster Ned pointing to the Bozo buckets. "Michael Abrams—nice Jewish boy with ten transactions, his own minyan of cheats. Next up, Peter Altman—coming in second with seven transactions."

“What do you mean by transactions?” Lauren interrupts just as Gabe returns. He really doesn’t look good. I grab his hand.

“Your stomach?” I whisper.

“Yeah, not so great. Maybe we should hit the road soon.”

Hit the road? When does Gabe ever want to leave anywhere early? We are always the last to arrive, last to leave. Even when I’ve seen him sick as a dog on numerous occasions, he always wants to stay. “Give it a few minutes. See how you feel,” I say as he slowly sits down. I turn my attention back to Eric.

“So each time the name is on there, it correlates to the amount of times the cheater paid for a cheat,” Eric explains. “Miles Bender with fourteen transactions is—”

“Miles Bender cheating fourteen times!” Samantha shouts out.

“Bingo. Brain surgeon. That’s why I married you.” Eric smiles at his wife and continues. “Bender—fourteen . . .” The names roll off his tongue in alphabetical order. “Rhonda Black—eight . . . Jeremy Blatcher—nineteen.”

“Stop right there!” Lauren interrupts. “Jeremy Blatcher, nineteen times? He’s the head of the synagogue’s fund-raising committee. And oh my god. Rhonda Black—she’s in our yoga class.”

“Clearly Blatcher has a lot to atone for this Yom Kippur.” Eric chuckles, dips his head to continue naming names. “Neil Blazer—five . . .” Suddenly, he stops abruptly, flips over his phone.

“What is it?” I ask. We’re all curious now. “Who is it? Who do we know?”

Eric quickly sticks the phone back inside his jacket. “This was stupid. I was wrong to do this. You guys are right. I’m an asshole.”

I glance accusingly at Matt. His face is red. I've always suspected him of hooking up with his flirty secretary. And so has Lauren. I will strangle him with my bare hands.

Samantha eyes Eric suspiciously, then wasting no time, with E.T.-like forceps precision, she snags the phone right out of his jacket.

"Give it back, goddamnit!"

"I know you, Eric. I know you."

Now everyone is getting nervous. I glance over at Gabe, who is not nervous. No, he's white. No, make that albino. I put down my wineglass as my heart stops in midbeat. It's not his stomach, not the steroid steak. I know every move of my husband's, every damn nuance of his since he was seventeen years old. I glance at Samantha, who is now holding her husband's phone to her chest and staring at me, her mouth drops open.

And there it is.

Samantha has never lied to me. Never. She told me right away when a boy I liked freshman year in high school called her first. She always tells me if I have something in my teeth, the right dress to wear, always what is best for me, not what will make her look better. She took care of my daughter, Ava, right after I'd given birth, came over twice a day when I had postpartum depression and couldn't get out of bed. She always puts me first. I glance over at Lauren, who is staring at Samantha, her large doe eyes not blinking. It's always been the three of us together, the no-matter-what friends, the "Jo Malone for three" friends. Always. And now . . . I turn back slowly toward Gabe, who is frozen, fearful.

The burning rage rises rapidly like a tsunami inside me, but the numbing pain is stronger and gets there first. My eyes,

the only part of me that can actually move, dart around the table like a 35-mm camera lens taking a panoramic scan. This is my world, equal parts of a whole: Lauren & Matt. Samantha & Eric. Sophie & Gabe.

Sophie & Gabe, TLF.

He'd actually carved that into the large oak tree in front of my house with his Swiss army knife on the night we graduated from high school. It's still there, the jagged scar on the tree—one that I never wanted to heal. For some reason, right now, all I can think about is that tree and an axe in my hand. I have to get to that tree tonight somehow, to chop it down. Right now. I have to—

“Sophie, Soph . . .” Samantha's voice is soft and protective, nurturing like Bambi's mother's just before she gets shot.

My gaze rests squarely on Gabe and I feel sick. This man, this incredibly loving father who smells like Tom Ford mixed with Crest mixed with Degree, who has been my rock my entire life, has betrayed me. I know it without even hearing the words aloud. That sexy move in the closet earlier was not an attempted surprise but a lie, a cover-up, birthday guilt. And now as he stares back at me—his beautifully carved rugged face, that slim scar lining his left brow, those hazel eyes that turn gold when the sun hits them, so many angles that I have once known, touched, kissed, tasted—I no longer recognize him.

Everyone is silent, too afraid to move. I finally find my voice and it is eerily steady, clinical. “Bender . . . Black . . . Blatcher . . . Blazer . . . Bloom . . .” This stranger's voice that has taken over mine waxes accusatory. “Gabe Bloom comes next. Isn't that right, Eric?” My gaze remains laser-focused on my cheating husband as I speak.

Eric looks to Samantha, not knowing how to handle this. *Do something*, his thick-lashed blue eyes plead desperately, blaming himself for turning a game into the real deal, and counting on her to fix it.

Gabe, barely breathing, reaches for my arm, which has become taut like the rest of me. I'm now in full body armor, and somewhere in the back of my steel-plated brain—the part that isn't drunk, in shock, in pain, enraged, betrayed—I hear a tender, frightened boyishly familiar “Sophie, do you hear me?” echoing, just as the chocolate lava cake drizzled with raspberry syrup bearing a lone pink candle arrives in the hands of the animated waiter. Just as my best girlfriends reach for me and shoo him away, hovering over me like a perfumed igloo, protecting me from the cold, stark inevitable truth. Except there is no protection. Ignorance is bliss and knowledge is definitely its own kind of hell.

I push them all away. I have to see this Ashley Madison list for myself. I grab Eric's phone and he knows better than to stop me. The hackers, I give them full credit, were well organized. The cheat sheet is in Excel format, like a business plan for fucking; a line-by-line attendance sheet. And there he is, front and center. My very own Gabe Bloom, his name listed in one column; North Grove, our home address in another; random letters and numbers that don't make sense in another column, a credit card number that I don't recognize, and finally in the last column is an email address that I've never seen before: GMB18@gmail.com. Gabriel Michael Bloom. Number 18—legendary high school star quarterback, whose jersey is immortalized in the school's glass case after winning State—the same high school our daughter had attended. The

same town that we never left. GMB18. Eighteen is for *chai*—meaning the life that was just swiped out from under me.

Sophie. Sophie.

My name is now surround-sound. It's as though I can no longer hear nor see anyone clearly. Everyone is gesturing wildly, like a sepia-tinted collage of body parts. I hear them all, feel their presence. I can even smell them. My family, my lifeline, my umbilical cord has been severed. The Unbreakables, as Eric once called us, have just shattered into a thousand tiny irreparable pieces.

All I can register in my clogged brain is that Gabriel Michael Bloom—number 18—sole owner of my heart, the father of our only child, Ava, is listed on the hacked Ashley Madison site forty-three times. To be precise: one and a half pages full of Gabe's transactions, along with millions of others, whose spouses are about to wake up to the secret infidelity exposed by mean-spirited hackers seeking an LOL. Ashley Madison—a name that sounds like a preppy clothing line—is an online playground in which you can stay married, stay committed while messing around because it is a quid pro quo affair: You're married, I'm married—why not, nobody gets hurt.

Except everybody gets hurt.

I stare hard at Gabe, the only man I have ever slept with, the one with whom I experienced all my firsts. This being yet another, I think numbly. Dr. Bloom, hot-shot North Grove cardiologist chalked up forty-two paid-for-fucks and one for good luck.

Happy birthday to me.