

PALM SUNDAY

by Susan C. Barto

SECOND EDITION

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CHAPTER 1

FAMILY HISTORY

As usual when they arrived, the table looked gorgeous laden with flowers, the Easter egg name holders, and of course Christine's Lenox. Susan took a good look at the table and at Christine's loving decorations for the holiday before heading with Harry and Bill into the kitchen for a glass of wine. Al sat behind the counter cutting up Italian bread into manageable pieces along with sausage pieces, cheeses, and other traditional Italian goodies to munch before Christine served the antipasto that signaled the start of the almost five hour feast. Bill told all his friends, "You should see Aunt Chris's spread on Palm Sunday and Christmas. The dinner lasts for hours."

Susan, one of five cousins, helped to keep their closeness intact by showing up each Christmas and

Palm Sunday for dinner at Christine's house in Staten Island, New York. The five cousins were children of sisters, two of whom were married to brothers—they felt closely woven. After her cousins' mother died and following the death of Susan's father, Uncle Joe married Susan's mother. This officially made Susan sisters with Andy, Claire and Merry. Christine, the daughter of Susan's mother's twin, already seemed entwined with Susan. Although, Susan only had one actual sibling, her brother, Bill, she had always felt that Andy, Claire, Merry, and Christine were her sisters.

The families celebrated holiday dinners together as long as Susan held memories. Susan married first, and shortly thereafter the other girls married. Soon the holiday dinners included the babies and their assorted high chairs and diaper bags. During her childhood and early married years, Aunt Emily, Mother's twin, and Aunt Marie hosted the events. When the babies grew to be adolescents, Christine began to host the dinners. She had a large house in Staten Island that easily held not only the families, but various friends of the family members. Christine's house's walls seemed to stretch wide enough to include anyone with no place to go. Christine never even had to water the soup, as she cooked enough for an army with leftovers for each to take home.

As the years passed, and the holiday dinners slipped by, changes came and went within the family. Along with the joyous births came the loss of

family members. Always the lost ones got toasted with champagne, and Christine kept the food stained name cards of the departed loved ones. Along with grace, homage was always paid to the absent family members, and all acknowledged how they were missed. The holiday parties saw their share of family crises and family dinner table arguments usually over politics. Watergate, Clinton's disgrace, and Bush's failures got debated hotly by the family members.

The five cousins' mothers came from a family of nine children. Their grandparents were born in Italy and descended upon these shores to raise their children and find a new life. Grandpa, one of the success stories of his generation, ended up with several meat packing and shipping trucks. His trucks supplied meat to the big super markets. While his family may not have been rich, they never lacked for meat during the depression. They had steaks and roasts, and they even had their own chickens. While the grandmother and grandfather only learned rudimentary English, the nine children learned English in school and from each other. The twins, Susan knew, spoke impeccable English and could spell up a storm. Eda, Susan's mother, corrected not only Susan's and Bill's English, but the English of their friends much to Susan's annoyance and Bill's embarrassment. One of the nine children died as a baby, but the rest thrived and grew—each different from the other, but they remained close. The oldest two brothers joined Grandpa in the meat business,

and legend had it that Mario had ties to the Mafia. Eda used to tell Susan that Uncle Mario ate steak every day, and earned \$1000 a week even during the depression.

"Maybe so, Eda, but I loaned him \$1,000 once, and I never saw it again."

However Susan's Dad acknowledged that friendship with Mario proved to be important for him as he had the guts to run his warehouse trucks during a Mafia truck strike, and, of course, he was stopped and informed that only his relationship with Mario saved his hide. He put his trucks promptly in a garage and didn't release them until the strike was over. He always said that Mario deserved to keep the \$1000 loan. The oldest daughter Margaret contracted spinal meningitis at 2 yrs. of age, and lost her hearing. She subsequently learned to sign and married a deaf man whom she met at her special school. The next daughter, Phyllis, grew to be beautiful and accomplished. She attended Hunter College and became an English teacher. Susan noticed that Eda and Emily never got over their jealousy of Phyllis's having attended college. Next in line, Marie, felt extremely close to Phyllis all her life. Secret family lore informed Susan that Marie had an ill-fated affair with a married man, and when the romance broke up, she dated many men and seemed to have no interest in marriage until her thirty fifth year when she met a Southern gentleman and flipped for his charm. She had a small wedding and a happy, though childless marriage. Aunt Marie

adopted all of her nieces and nephews and behaved somewhat like a fairy godmother granting wishes to all. Aunt Marie became the family reporter keeping track of birthdays, anniversaries, and births and deaths. She typed lists with this information and mailed it along with permanent birthday date books to all the cousins encouraging all to keep in touch with each other.

Food and feasts became part of the family tradition. Grandma made and canned her own tomato sauce in the basement of her family home. Lasagna, served at all holidays even Thanksgiving before the turkey, proved to be the favorite. Each of the daughters added their own individual touches to Grandma's original recipe. Even the sauce varied from sister to sister. Aunt Marie, baker to the family, made cheese cakes and chocolate mousse pie along with the traditional chocolate chip cookies and pound and chocolate cakes. She also whipped up a cheese bread—Susan's favorite.

Eda and Emily, the twins, played an ongoing verbal game of ping-pong with each other. This served to spike their competition with each other that needed little spiking. The competition reminded Susan of a ping-pong game because as she observed the twins arguing it appeared to Susan as if first the fight grew because of something Emily said, and the fight expanded and added heat with the next thing Eda said. "Point to Eda here, Point to Emily there," Susan said. They take turns heating up the friction between them. Susan felt as though

the twins did not like each other because they saw each other's selfish traits magnified in the twin. Not only did the twins dislike each other, but the twins' husbands hated their wives' twins. "That Emily," Susan's father could be heard to intone, and Frank, Emily's husband could be heard uttering oaths regarding Eda. The whole competition both amused and wearied Susan. Funny to watch as it could be, it also served as fodder for the twins' constant criticism of every other female on the planet. As a child if Susan while watching a movie on television with her mother said, "Isn't she pretty?" Eda would reply "Why shouldn't she be? She can afford spas and plastic surgery."

Indeed, Claire reported that one summer when she visited Eda by her pool in Florida with her small daughter Angela during the time when everyone had fallen in love with Bo Derek in "10" Eda announced "I don't know what's so special about Bo Derek. If I lost 5 pounds, I could look as good as she." As Eda, 70 at the time she uttered this to become memorable line, finished this Claire and Angela had to go under the water in the pool as they howled with laughter. Susan never heard Eda praise another woman's beauty. Susan got further fall out from the twins' competition as she felt that Eda felt jealousy of her that caused her to criticize Susan constantly so as to cause Susan to feel for all of her childhood that she didn't measure up to some standard set only by her Mom. Christine related stories that showed that she suffered similar problems with