

AUTHOR OF CLEOPATRA AND FRANKENSTEIN

# Coco Mellors



A NOVEL

# Blue Sisters

# BLUE SISTERS

Coco Mellors

4th ESTATE • *London*

## Copyright

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### [Dedication](#)

*For Daisy, for being there from the beginning.*

*And for Henry, for promising to stay until the end.*

## Contents

Coco Mellors.....	2
Copyright.....	3
Dedication .....	4
Lucky .....	11
Bonnie.....	30
Avery.....	66
Lucky .....	93
Bonnie.....	119
Avery.....	138
Lucky .....	176
Bonnie.....	213
Avery.....	245
Lucky .....	277
Bonnie.....	311
Avery.....	338
About the Author.....	404
About the Publisher.....	406

A SISTER IS NOT A FRIEND. WHO CAN EXPLAIN THE URGE TO TAKE A relationship as primal and complex as a sibling and reduce it to something as replaceable, as banal as a friend? Yet this status is used again and again to connote the highest intimacy. *My mother is my best friend. My husband is my best friend.* No. True sisterhood, the kind where you grew fingernails in the same womb, were pushed screaming through identical birth canals, is not the same as friendship. You don't choose each other, and there's no furtive period of getting to know the other. You're part of each other, right from the start. Look at an umbilical cord—tough, sinuous, unlovely, yet essential—and compare it to a friendship bracelet of brightly woven thread. *That* is the difference between a sister and a friend.

The eldest of the Blue sisters, their leader, is Avery. She was born wise and world-weary. At four years old, she returned to their parents' Upper West Side apartment after walking herself home from kindergarten and declared herself *too tired to go on*. But she did go on, she always has. Avery taught all the sisters how to swim the front crawl, how to make friends with the bodega cats by tickling them under the chin, how to shuffle cards without bending the corners. She hates authority but loves structure. She has a photographic memory; in high school she broke into their school's records and memorized her entire grade's Social Security numbers, then spent the remainder of the semester freaking kids out by referring to them by their nine digits.

She graduated from high school at sixteen and completed undergrad at Columbia University in three years. Then, she ran away to join an "anarchic, nonhierarchical, consensus-driven community," otherwise known as a commune, before briefly living on the streets of San Francisco, where she smoked and, eventually, shot heroin. Unbeknownst to anyone in her family, she checked herself into detox a year later and has stayed clean ever since.

Afterward, she enrolled herself in law school, where she finally put that memory to good use.

They say you don't know your principles until they become inconvenient to you, and Avery is proof of this. She is deeply principled and often inconvenienced. She might have liked to be a poet or a documentary filmmaker, but she is a lawyer. Now thirty-three, she lives in London with her wife, Chiti, a therapist seven years her senior. She has paid off all her college loans and owns furniture that cost almost as much as her tuition. She does not know it yet, but in a few weeks, she will implode her life and marriage in ways she didn't think possible. Avery would like to be all backbone, but she is tender flesh too.

Two years after Avery was born, their parents had Bonnie. Bonnie is soft-spoken and strongwilled. Her language is the language of the body. By six, she could walk on her hands. By ten, she could juggle five tangerines at a time. She tried both ballet and gymnastics, but she never fit in among that flock of flexible, feminine girls. When she was fifteen, their father bought her a pair of boxing gloves after she punched a hole in her bedroom wall, and she found her true form. Bonnie discovering boxing is probably how other people felt when they discovered sex. So, *this* is what all the fuss is about.

Bonnie worships at the altar of discipline. After silently watching her older sister's adolescent decline, she vowed never to touch a drop of alcohol. Her drugs of choice are sweat and violence.

This got her all the way to the IBA Women's World Boxing Championships, the highest level of amateur competition in the sport alongside the Olympics, where she won silver in the lightweight division before turning pro. Unexpectedly, given her sport of choice, Bonnie is the gentlest of her sisters. She can get ice out of the tray without bashing it on the counter. Babies and

dogs trust her instinctively. She is a terrible liar. Though her body is like a vaulted oak door, her nature is transparent as a window. Now thirty-one years old and in what should be her fighting prime, Bonnie has quit both New York and boxing after a devastating defeat in her last fight. She fled to Venice Beach, Los Angeles, where she took a job as the bouncer of a dive bar.

Most people go through life never knowing what it's like to have a calling, one that asks you to sacrifice the pleasure of the moment for the potential of a dream that may not be realized for years, if at all. It sets you apart from others, whether you want it to or not. It can be grueling, lonely, and punishing, but, if it is really your calling, it is not a choice. This is how boxing felt to Bonnie. And yet, right now, you can find her in some backstreet of Venice, collecting empty pint glasses, helping tipsy women into the back of cars, and sweeping up cigarette butts, with no trace at all of the anarchic, ironhearted warrior she was trained to be.

Their parents wanted a son next but, after two miscarriages never spoken of again, they had Nicole, known always as Nicky. Of all the girls, Nicky was the *most* girl. She could blow a bubble as big as her head. She listened to teen pop into adulthood without irony. Her favorite hobby as a child was raising caterpillars to become butterflies by feeding them tiny pieces of squash. When she was ten, she bought her first underwire bra, just so she'd be ready. She'd had five boyfriends by the time she graduated from high school. She liked to pick out a week's worth of outfits in advance, including underwear to match. She could apply a perfect cat eye with liquid liner in a moving taxi without smudging the flicks. Nicky was always popular with boys, but she had a knack for female friendship. She joined a sorority in college, a fact her sisters ruthlessly teased her for, but she didn't care. Her sisters were often



busy with their own careers, and she missed them, so she made a family of her friends.

If Avery was sensible and Bonnie was stoic, Nicky was sensitive. She was a carnival of feelings she never tried to hide. Sometimes she was the ecstatic swirl of a carousel, sometimes she was a bumper car collision, sometimes she was the still target waiting in the shooting gallery. She was born to be a mother, but her body had other ideas. After years of agonizing periods, she was diagnosed with endometriosis in her twenties. Though she died at twenty-seven, she was not a natural member of that club; she wasn't the lead singer of a band, and she didn't live particularly fast to die young. If you'd asked Nicky, she would have said she lived an extraordinarily ordinary life as a tenth-grade English teacher at a charter school on the Upper West Side, ten blocks from where she grew up. If it seemed a smaller existence than her sisters', she never saw it that way. She loved her students and dreamed of one day having a family.

Nothing about her life portended her death, except for the fact she was in pain.

A year after Nicky's birth, their parents tried one last time for the long-awaited son. They got Lucky. Born at home by mistake in only fifteen minutes, Lucky wasted no time establishing her place in the family. No matter how old Lucky gets, she will always be the baby. In fact, once Nicky could speak, she quickly proclaimed Lucky *my baby* and insisted on lugging her tiny form with her everywhere. They remained inseparable, but Lucky did not stay small. She is five foot eleven. Their parents got four shots to create that so-sought-after thing: female beauty. With Lucky, they succeeded. Even her teeth, which are crooked with unusually sharp canines, give her smile a sensual, wolfish quality. Recently, without the approval of

her agency, she chopped off most of her hair and bleached it white. Now, she looks like a combination of Barbie, Billy Idol, and a Siberian husky. Lucky became a model when she was fifteen and has worked all over the world, which is another way of saying she has been lonely all over the world.

When Lucky enters a room, it is like an electric eel slipping into a bowl of goldfish. She is sharp-witted and secretly shy. She taught herself to play the guitar while living in Tokyo and is pretty good but too self-conscious to ever perform in front of anyone. She still loves playing video games, loves any form of escape, in fact. Right now, she is living alone in Paris. She has said the words *I need a drink* one hundred and thirty-two times so far this year. That's more than she's said *I love you* in her entire life. In her apartment in Montmartre, she has the framed blue butterflies Nicky gave her before she died hanging above her bed, but she rarely sleeps. Lucky is twenty-six years old, and she is lost. In fact, all the remaining sisters are.

But what they don't know is this: As long as you are alive, it is never too late to be found.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Lucky

LUCKY WAS LATE. IRRESPONSIBLY, IRREVERSIBLY, IN-DANGER-OF-LOSING-THIS-JOB late. She had a fitting for a couture show in the Marais at noon, but that was ten minutes ago, and she was still miles away on the metro. She had spent the night before at a fashion week party enjoying the open bar (the only kind Lucky cared for), where she'd met a pair of corporate-employed graffiti artists who were anxious to restore their reputations as creatives on the fringe of society. They'd offered to take her on the back of one of their motorcycles to an abandoned mansion, a former diplomat's home in the 16th Arrondissement, that they'd set their sights on tagging. Lucky wasn't particularly into the concept of defacing a historical building with spray paint, but she was always happy to delay the night ending.

The building had been more tightly secured than expected, dotted with security cameras and encircled by an intimidating pronged fence, so they'd settled for spraying the metal shutters of a nearby tabac instead, the graffiti artists opting for libertarian slogans popularized by the Paris protests of 1968—*It is forbidden to forbid!*—while Lucky went for a classic rendering of a penis and balls. They'd watched the sun come up from the steps of Palais de Tokyo while drinking bottles of pink Veuve Clicquot they'd swiped from the party, then returned to Lucky's place to smoke a joint. After a predictable attempt by the two men to initiate a threesome, Lucky suggested they skip the middle woman and just do each other before passing out fully dressed on

top of her bed, awakening several hours later in her empty and, thankfully, unransacked apartment to a perky reminder from her booker to wash her hair before the fitting today.

It was also the one-year anniversary of Nicky's death. As the metro surged on, Lucky checked her phone to find a missed call and voicemail from Avery, who was no doubt on a mission to get her to "process" her feelings about this day, plus a formal-looking email from their mother she promptly ignored. She missed the New York subway with its filth, reliable unreliability, and lack of cell service; the Paris metro was almost aggressively efficient and fully accessible by cell phone, even underground. Here, there was nowhere to hide. Without listening to Avery's message, Lucky slid the phone back into her pocket. She had not seen any member of her family since Nicky's funeral a year ago. That night, a strong, hot wind blew through the city; it upturned restaurant tables and sent garbage cans tumbling down avenues, it broke power lines and snapped tree branches in Central Park. And it scattered Lucky and her sisters to their corners of the world, without any intention of returning home.

She was now fifteen minutes late. In her hurry to leave, she'd forgotten her headphones, an oversight guaranteed to throw off her entire day. Lucky usually couldn't walk more than one block without digging them into her ears, building a musical buffer between herself and the world. But she'd gotten out of the door in record time, helped by the fact she'd forgone her usual breakfast of a Marlboro Red and an ibuprofen and left the house in the clothes she'd woken up in. Surreptitiously, she gave her T-shirt a sniff. A bit smoky, a bit sweaty, but, overall, not too bad.

*"Je voudrais te sentir."*

Lucky's eyes jumped to the man sitting across from her, who had just spoken. He had the tense, rodentlike face of prey, but his eyes were all predator. In his hands, he clutched a large Volvic water bottle over his crotch, pointing it toward her. He was smiling.

"What?" she asked, though she had no desire to know what this man had said, to speak to him at all.

"Ah! You are American!"

He pronounced it the typical French way—emphasis on the *can*.

"Yup."

Lucky nodded and reached for her phone again, trying to radiate uninterest. "You are beautiful," he said, leaning toward her.

"Mmm, thanks."

She kept her eyes glued to her phone. She considered shooting off a text to her booker to say she was running behind, then decided against it. That would only make the lateness real. Better to enjoy the comfort of this limbo period while she could, before anyone knew she was messing up yet again.

"And so tall," the man continued.

In dark vintage Levi's and a black cropped tee, Lucky was, indeed, as straight and long as an exclamation point. She hunched her shoulders forward, so he could see less of her, and she became a question mark.

"*Mon dieu!*" he exclaimed softly to himself. "*T'es trop sexy.*"

She should get up and leave. She should tell him to go fuck himself. She should take his water bottle—his big, stupid, blue imaginary phallus—and crush it between her hands. Instead, she pointed to her phone.

"Look, I'm just—"

She frowned and pointed at her screen to indicate that she was making a call. She scrolled quickly through her contacts. But who could she call? She didn't actually want to talk to anyone. Out of habit, she searched Nicky's name and hit the Dial button. They were all part of a family phone plan that Avery paid for; she guessed Avery had decided to spare herself the anguish of canceling Nicky's number by simply continuing to pay her share. Lucky didn't know where Nicky's phone was now, dead in a drawer somewhere she imagined, but she was grateful to still have this. Her sister's voice filled her ear.

*You've reached Nicky's phone, leave a message after the tone. Have fun!*

She was giggling, self-conscious about being recorded. Just faintly in the background, Lucky could hear herself, several years younger and oblivious to the loss her future held, laughing.

"I would love to know you," the man persisted.

"I'm on the phone," said Lucky.

"Ah, *d'accord*." The man leaned back, palms open in a ridiculous gesture of gallantry. "We speak after."

It wasn't the first time she'd phoned Nicky since she died; the urge to speak to her sister and tell her what life was like without her was constant. Calling her felt like being an amputee who, believing she still has legs, keeps trying to stand.

"Hi, it's me," began Lucky as the tone sounded. "I ... Well, I'm just calling to say hi."

She glanced at the man, who made no attempt to pretend he wasn't listening to her.

"It's fashion week here so things are kind of hectic, as always, but I wanted to call because ... Um, it's a big day for you, I guess. One year! I can't believe

it. So yeah, I just wanted to call and say ... Not congratulations, obviously. It's not, like, a goddamn celebration. But I wanted you to know I'm thinking about you. I'm always thinking about you. And I miss you. Obviously." Lucky cleared her throat. "So that's it. I love you." Lucky waited to see if she would feel anything, some energetic shift in the cosmos to let her know her sister was listening. Nothing.

"Also, Avery's being annoying. Bye."

She hung up and glanced out the window. They were almost at Saint Paul, her stop. As she unfurled herself to stand, the man reached to touch her arm. She jumped as though he had held a lit match to her skin.

"Can I take your number?"

The train slowed into the station and Lucky stumbled. He grinned up at her as she faltered. His teeth were stained brown from tobacco.

"You are so sexy," he said.

Lucky looked at the man eyeing her with possessive joy, as though picking out his pastry from a glass display case. The water bottle still protruded toward her from his crotch.

"Can I?" she asked, pointing to it. The train came to a halt.

"This?" he asked, baffled. He handed her the plastic tube. "*Mais bien sûr.*"

She took the bottle from his hands, unscrewed the cap, and tipped the remaining water into his lap. The man shot up with a yelp as a dark patch spread across his jeans. Lucky darted toward the exit and pulled the silver lever, that curious object of agency unique to Paris's metro, and the train doors sprang apart. From the platform, she could hear him calling her a bitch as passengers streamed onto the train between them. She took the stairs two at a time and emerged into the sunlight.

On Place des Vosges, stone archways swooped overhead as Lucky raced toward the address her booker had sent her. Two old men smoking in matching olive trench coats turned to watch her as she passed. She rang the bell and passed through the chipped blue wooden doorway that led to the courtyard. At the other end was a tall, spiral stairway; her heavy boots reverberated off the stone walls as she climbed each floor, stopping on each landing to catch her breath. A pack-a-day smoking habit, started when she was a teenager, had left her ill-suited to this sort of activity. Finally, she dragged herself by the banister to the very top. A woman with her hair scraped into a tight dark bun and a tape measure snaked around her neck was standing in the doorway waiting for her.

“I’m late, I know,” Lucky panted. “*Je suis désolée.*” “And you are?” asked the woman in a sharp voice.

“Lucky—” she heaved. “Blue.”

“Loo-key?” the woman repeated, looking down at her clipboard. Behind her, Lucky could hear the industrious hum of sewing machines. “You are not late. In fact, you are quite early. Your fitting is at two.”

Lucky placed her hands on her knees and exhaled.

“I thought it was twelve?”

“You are mistaken. Please return at two. Ciao!”

With an authoritative *click*, the door was shut in her face. Lucky resisted the urge to collapse right there and sleep in the doorway like a neighborhood cat until it was her turn to be seen.

Slowly, she carried herself back down the stairs.

With nothing else to do, Lucky wandered through the sun-dappled streets of the Marais in search of a place to get a drink. The adrenaline from her



Volvic vengeance and ensuing race to the fitting was wearing off, revealing the start of what promised to be a brutal hangover if she didn't nip it in the bud. It was early July and despite the clement weather, an air of restlessness had pervaded Paris that summer. A general strike and the resulting congestion had filled the air with a hazy smog, and a flurry of stabbings in subways and residential neighborhoods had led to a heavy police presence on the streets. Yet the Marais, with its boutiques, packed bars, and bustling cafés, felt cheerfully removed from all that.

Lucky heard a woman's voice calling her name from across the street and turned to see her friend Sabina, a French redhead and fellow model whose body Lucky had once heard a designer describe as *like a hundred miles of good road*, sitting outside a café with two male models. She beckoned Lucky over.

"If it isn't punk Pollyanna," said the taller of the men, Cliff, as she approached.

Cliff was an Australian former pro surfer enjoying some notoriety that season for walking a Milan runway in nothing but a gold thong. Despite this, it was impossible to objectify him; the sheer force of his ego would not allow it. That, and the knowledge that he could always quit fashion and go back to his life of chasing surf and living out of his van, meant that he appeared completely unconflicted about his current choice of career, unlike Lucky, whose beauty was a source of both income and shame for her. Lucky had never done anything but model, which made her feel like she had never done anything. She would not admit it aloud, but she envied Cliff his freedom.

"Ciao, Golden Balls," she said, taking a cigarette from the pack in front of him and pinching it between her lips. "I didn't recognize you with your clothes on."

The other model, a baby-faced American Lucky didn't recognize, laughed and leaned over to light her. He had the coloring of a golden retriever and the same seemingly indiscriminate desire to please. The men each had a large beer in front of them, while Sabina twirled a small glass of white wine without sipping from it. Lucky beckoned for the server and ordered a beer before she took a seat.

"Hey, I'm Riley," said the younger man.

"I need a drink," said Lucky and leaned back to expose a pale slice of stomach.

"This is Lucky," said Sabina. "*Ma soeur.*"

Lucky acknowledged this with a vague nod. Sabina had the only child's tendency of recruiting friends as family members; in truth, the two didn't know much about each other beyond their most recent campaigns and drink of choice.

"You're American!" said Riley. He had a soft southern accent that made each vowel sound like it was wrapped in cotton wool. "I've been waiting to see an American today." He raised his beer. "Happy Fourth of July."

Lucky exhaled smoke in a narrow column toward the sky.

"I don't celebrate that," she said.

This year, next year, every year for the rest of her life, the Fourth would only ever be the day that Nicky died. Riley frowned at her.

"But you're American, right?" he asked.

"New York," she said. "So, barely."

"But today you live in Paris," said Sabina. "Which means you will have to celebrate Bastille Day."

"When's that?" asked Cliff.

“In fact, only next week,” said Sabina.

“July is *the* month to wrestle back control from tyranny,” said Cliff.

“Well, I miss it,” said Riley. “I’ve never been out of the country on the Fourth before. My folks always throw a big barbecue.”

“Sorry to say,” said Sabina, “the French do not barbecue.” She set down her glass with a flick of her hand. “I can’t drink this. I still have a headache from this morning. Why do they insist on serving champagne before breakfast backstage?”

“Because it’s the only thing you girls will eat,” said Cliff. “What’s the saying? Champagne, cocaine, and casual sex, baby.”

Sabina simply ignored him. She glanced up at the sky, which was turning an anemic shade of gray.

“It’s looking to rain, *non*?”

“Ah, man,” said Riley. “My next show’s outdoors.” “Mine too,” said Lucky.

“My first fashion week and it rains,” he said glumly.

Cliff began singing the chorus of Alanis Morissette’s “Ironic” in a surprisingly tuneful voice. *It’s like raaaaain on your wedding day.*

“This is *haute couture*,” said Sabina. “La crème de la crème. Trust me, they won’t let you get wet.”

“By you she means the clothes,” said Lucky, then turned back to Cliff. “Anyway, what you were saying about female models? It’s not like you guys are paradigms of health and moderation.” She tapped Cliff’s near-empty beer glass.

“We can handle our booze, unlike you lot.” He pointed a finger at her. “If you don’t eat, you shouldn’t drink.”

“I eat,” said Lucky, picking up the beer that had just been placed before her. “So I can drink.” Cliff laughed and ordered another round.

“Anything you can do I can do better,” he sang.

“I bet I can hold my own better than you,” said Lucky.

Cliff raised his drink and downed the last gulp.

“Wanna see about that?”

AN HOUR LATER, LUCKY WAS five drinks in and about to tell the most hilarious story she’d ever told. The sadness from the morning that had covered her like grime was being washed away with each new round.

“So I’m nineteen and I’m living in Tokyo for the year,” she said. “It was fun, but I was also maybe being a little bit irresponsible, you know, staying out late, missing appointments,

basically everything you should *not* do when you’re starting out.”

Here, Lucky gestured to young Riley and raised an eyebrow in warning.

“This seems like a do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do teaching moment,” said Cliff. “Since I’m pretty sure you still do all that, Lucky.”

“Hey, you don’t need to teach me,” Riley said. “I’m twenty-three. I know what I’m doing.” “Me too!” exclaimed Sabina. “In fact, I have been twenty-three for the past three years.” Lucky laughed and took another gulp of her drink.

“My agency was threatening to drop me, but then, out of nowhere, I booked a campaign. It was for a cheesy commercial brand but still, money, money, money. My agent calls and says to me, ‘Lucky, if you are even one minute late to this shoot, we will fire you. One minute.’”

“I know what happens,” said Riley. “You were late, and they fire you, but you still end up becoming a big, famous model anyway.”