

THE
LONELY
HEARTS
BOOK
CLUB

a novel

LUCY GILMORE

THE

LONELY

HEARTS

BOOK

CLUB

LUCY GILMORE

Thank you for downloading this Sourcebooks eBook!

You are just one click away from...

- Being the first to hear about author happenings
- VIP deals and steals
- Exclusive giveaways
- Free bonus content
- Early access to interactive activities
- Sneak peeks at our newest titles

Happy reading!

CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP

Books. Change. Lives.

Copyright © 2023 by Lucy Gilmore
Cover and internal design © 2023 by Sourcebooks
Cover illustration and design by Sandra Chiu
Internal images © Yulya Bortulyova/Getty Images
Internal design by Tara Jagers/Sourcebooks

Sourcebooks and the colophon are registered trademarks of Sourcebooks.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems—except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews—without permission in writing from its publisher, Sourcebooks.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious or are used fictitiously. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

All brand names and product names used in this book are trademarks, registered trademarks, or trade names of their respective holders. Sourcebooks is not associated with any product or vendor in this book.

Published by Sourcebooks Casablanca, an imprint of Sourcebooks
P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410
(630) 961-3900
sourcebooks.com

Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Contents

[Front Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[SLOANE](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[MAISEY](#)

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

MATEO

16

17

18

19

20

21

GREG

22

23

24

25

26

27

ARTHUR

28

29

30

31

32

SLOANE

33

34

35

[Reading Group Guide](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Back Cover](#)

This one's for Mary. Arthur and Sloane belong as much to you as they do to me.

“All things great are wound up with all things little.”
—Anne of Green Gables

SLOANE

1

The day I met Arthur McLachlan was perfectly ordinary.

I woke up at my usual hour. I ate my usual bowl of oatmeal while hunched over the last few pages of my library copy of *Parable of the Sower*. I can't remember what I wore, but I'm pretty sure it was both machine washable and designed for comfort.

Everything in my closet was machine washable and designed for comfort, but not by choice. Rule number one of being a librarian: You'll leave work every day looking like you waged battle with a league of ancient scribes. Adapt early and adapt often, or your dry-cleaning bills will bury you.

When Arthur first came barreling into my life, I was in the Fiction section restocking a bunch of titles someone had moved for the sake of internet kudos. There was a new TikTok trend going around where people descended on bookstores and public libraries in order to write out sentences using titles. If you ignored the part where *I* was the one who had to put everything back where it belonged, it was kind of clever.

Looking for Alaska Where the Sidewalk Ends

We Were Liars Under the Never Sky

Are You Anybody? I Am No One

I was still chuckling over that last one when I heard the sound of an annoyed cough behind me.

"Young lady, you are blocking the way to Roman History."

Years of practice had me immediately stepping back, an apology on my lips. As I pushed my cart aside, I noticed the man was elderly, his wire

glasses perched on the end of his nose and his tweed jacket sporting a pair of suede elbow patches. He walked with the aid of a gold-tipped cane that looked as though it might conceal a sword stick inside.

“Do you want me to look up a specific title for you?” I asked, since he had some way to go to reach the nonfiction shelves. “Anything by Tom Holland is good, but I find I prefer to get my history from Mary Beard. Her approach is wonderfully emotional.”

He snorted. “Typical sentimental claptrap.”

I blinked at him, wondering what I could have said to cause offense. “I’m... sorry?”

He tapped his cane sharply. “Emotion doesn’t belong in history. Emotion belongs in maudlin childhood literature. You should know that, *Pollyanna*.”

I was taken aback but not dismayed by the belligerence in his tone. Strange though it seemed, we had actual library rules about patrons like this. Soothe and disarm, that was the order of the day. Leave them in a better frame of mind than when they arrived. And never, under any circumstances, engage.

“You don’t have to read anything you don’t want to,” I said with a careful smile. “But my name isn’t Pollyanna. It’s Sloane.”

Instead of accepting my peace offering, Arthur tilted his head and appraised me. Something about the intelligent gray eyes behind his rims caught my attention.

“You know what I meant,” he said, stabbing a finger at my cart. Sure enough, a copy of Eleanor Porter’s beloved childhood tale sat on the top. One of the teens had had the audacity to pair it with John Grisham’s *A Time to Kill*.

I held both books up with a laugh. “Don’t blame me,” I said. “It’s *A Time to Kill Pollyanna*.”

He looked pained.

“It’s a joke,” I explained. “Kids trying to make sentences out of book titles. Some of them are actually pretty good. Maybe I should try my hand at it next time I run into a patron.” In an attempt to defuse the tension, I said the first title that came to mind. “*Pollyanna is Pleased to Meet You*.”

“Those kids are a plague on the public library system,” he said, glaring. “And so, I’m starting to think, are you.”

I had no response for this. Well, to be fair, I *had* one, but I knew better than to voice it aloud. One of my greatest skills in this world—some might say it was my only skill—was how good I was at being inoffensive. The trick was to look bland, act blander, and voice no opinions whatsoever. The looking bland part I had down pat, my frizzy brown hair and lightly freckled skin blending into the background so easily that I sometimes felt like a potted ficus. The acting part was easy, too. I could go for days at a time without opening my mouth to say anything but “Yes, of course” and “No, you’re right,” and no one seemed to think there was anything odd about it.

The opinions part was harder, but working in a public space like the Coeur d’Alene library had taught me the value of tact.

“Well?” he demanded. “Don’t you have anything else to say?”

I shrugged, wishing—not for the first time—that I was more like my sister Emily. She’d have known *exactly* how to wrap a grouchy old man like this around her finger. I don’t know if it was all the doctors she grew up around or just her natural charm, but she’d had a way of making even the meanest grumps do her bidding. Before she’d gotten too sick to roam the neighborhood with me, we used to visit an ice cream shop a few blocks away from our house. No matter how many fingerprints we left on the glass or how exasperated the shopkeeper got with all our requests for free samples, she always walked out of there with at least one extra scoop.

What would Emily do?

“We could probably incorporate some Roman history, if it helps,” I said, thinking of the towering ice cream cones Emily used to carry home with her. She’d never been able to eat the whole thing, but that hadn’t been the point. It had been the *triumph* of it she’d enjoyed. In all the years since I’d lost her, I hadn’t triumphed over anything.

Or anyone. Not even myself.

Before I could think better of it, I reached for a copy of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and held it up. “How about *Beloved Pagans and Christians*? You have to admit it’s catchy.”

I could have almost sworn that Arthur's nostrils flared to twice their size. "So that's how you want to play this, huh?"

I wasn't sure I wanted to play much of *anything*, but I was already in too deep at that point. There was no ice cream at the end of this particular rainbow, but I couldn't help feeling that Emily would have been proud of me all the same.

"*The Roman Triumph Of Mice and Men?*" I suggested, thinking up Roman history titles as quickly as I could. Inspiration struck, and I snapped my fingers. "Oh! I know. *I, Claudius, Journey to the End of the Night*. These are good. I should probably write them down."

Something almost like respect was starting to spark in Arthur's eyes. "You seem to know an awful lot about books on ancient Rome," he said grudgingly. "Why? Are you planning to stab someone in the back?"

This time, I didn't hesitate over my reply. "Only if he deserves it."

A sound somewhere between a bark and a laugh escaped him. "Is that your way of telling me that Caesar got what was coming to him? Is that what it says in your precious Mary Beard?"

"Not exactly," I was forced to admit.

If this conversation kept going along these lines, I was going to have to admit a lot more: namely, that I wasn't nearly as conversant with Roman history as I was letting on. As far as librarians went, I was more of a jill-of-all-trades than a deep scholar. I knew lots of random book titles and could recite the first line from almost every classic piece of literature, but I could only talk intelligently on a subject for about three minutes before my storehouse of knowledge petered out.

"Ha!" he practically shouted. "That's what I thought. You don't know anything about Caesar that isn't written in the back-cover copy somewhere."

This was the point where I should have bowed gracefully out of the conversation. I'd already broken all the rules about not antagonizing the patrons, disorganized my own library cart, and said unthinkable things to a man who was old enough to be my grandfather.

For the first time in my life, however, I didn't bow out. Strangely enough, it didn't even occur to me to try.

“That’s not true,” I said as I pushed the copy of *Pollyanna* back on the shelf where it belonged. “I just think that anyone who had as many enemies as Caesar did should’ve been more careful. If he didn’t see that knife coming, that’s on him. My only enemy is the copier by the south window, and even I know better than to believe it when it says the toner levels are totally fine.”

That was when it happened. I wasn’t a good enough writer to describe it, but it was as if Arthur decided, right then and there, that I was an adversary worth having.

“I’ve forgotten more about Roman history than you’ll ever know,” he said, pointing his cane at me.

“That’s probably true,” I admitted.

“And I’ve already read every word Mary Beard has ever written.”

“That’s...impressive,” I said.

He didn’t appear to find my return to meekness to his taste. With suddenly narrowed eyes, he added, “And when I want book recommendations from a second-rate Pollyanna who wouldn’t know a good book if it landed in her lap, I’ll ask for it.”

This barb stung more than he realized. Finding pleasure in reading—*losing* myself in a story—was the one thing I did know.

“*The Art of Racing in the Rain*,” I said.

He blinked and took a step back, as if even the title of such—what had he called it? *sentimental claptrap*?—had the power to harm him. “What did you just say to me?”

I wore a smile that was only partially faked. He couldn’t have been more outraged if I’d told him we were holding a book-burning party down by the lake that made our little city famous.

“If you’re looking for a book recommendation, I think you should pick up *The Art of Racing in the Rain*. It’s what I suggest to all our regular patrons. I know it has a reputation for being sad, but—”

The spark in his eyes grew almost martial. “Not now. Not ever. Not if it was the only book left in the world. If I want to immerse myself in someone else’s pointlessly self-indulgent drivel, I’d give in and listen to podcasts.”

I kept my mouth shut. It just so happened that I loved that book. I loved podcasts, too, though that was mostly because I never cared for sitting alone in a silent apartment. There are these really fun ones of people reading classic books in a flat monotone to help you go to sleep. You haven't known true peace until you've drifted off to Proust read aloud in B-flat.

Arthur took himself off after that, muttering under his breath about Roman conquests and literary abominations and librarians who should know when to keep their uninformed opinions to themselves.

And all I could do was smile after him, feeling like I'd eaten a *dozen* scoops of ice cream.

"I can't believe you just tackled Arthur McLachlan and lived to tell the tale," a deep, rich voice said from behind me. I turned to find Mateo, my fellow librarian, watching me with a detached look of awe.

I'd always liked Mateo. Everyone did. His voice made him seem like he should be seven feet tall, but he was as slight of build and limb as I was. Add to that a boy-band swoop of inky-black hair and a willingness to laugh at everything—including himself—and it was impossible *not* to enjoy his company.

"You know who that guy is, right?" Mateo asked.

"No," I said, my brow furrowed as I watched the gold-tipped cane and elbow patches disappear into the German Philosophy section. "Should I? I've never seen him here before."

"That's because he comes first thing in the morning and only lets Octavia help him. He says everyone else here drains his brain cells by proximity." Mateo clucked his tongue. "You never open, so you've never seen him reduce the staff to terrified goo. We usually have to keep a mop handy."

I thought about that spark in the old man's eyes that only intensified when I started to push back, and shook my head. "He's not that bad. A little curmudgeonly, maybe, but—"

"Yeah, right," Mateo interrupted. "Mark Twain was a curmudgeon. Ebenezer Scrooge is a curmudgeon. Arthur McLachlan is Satan's grandfather. One time, he even managed to eke a tear or two out of Octavia. He's that bad."

"Really?"

This was a more sinister warning than Mateo realized. Of all of us on staff at the Coeur d'Alene Public Library, Octavia was the best—and the fiercest. Mateo found himself here because this was as far from working in a hospital as he could physically get, and I was here because reading was my only real life skill, but Octavia was hard-core. She'd been a librarian for more years than I'd been on this earth, and I was pretty sure she had the Dewey decimal system memorized. As in *all* of it.

You know that thing when people come into a library and ask for a blue book with weird writing on the cover? She always knew the exact book they were talking about. Without fail. Someday, I was going to grow up and *be* her.

“Take it from me, Sloane,” Mateo said. He eyed me up and down, sympathy in every sweep of that gaze. “If you want to keep this job, you’ll stay far away from him. He’ll tear you to pieces...and worse, he’ll enjoy every second of it.”

Mateo's words turned out to be truer than he knew.

Not the part about me keeping my job—my post as a librarian meant everything to me—but about Arthur's single-handed determination to reduce *me* to a puddle of goo. For the next few weeks, he waged a campaign that Caesar himself would have been proud to call his own.

“Good morning, Sloane,” he said the day after our first meeting. I was so surprised to see him again—and in that same elbow-patched tweed jacket—that I almost dropped all five pounds of the *Cryptonomicon* I was shelving. “Any more painfully obvious historians you'd like to suggest I read today?”

Mateo squeaked and hid himself behind the nearest computer kiosk, but I wasn't about to let Arthur win so easily. Especially since I had the Neal Stephenson to protect me.

“No, but they just put out a new list of Reese Witherspoon's summer book club picks. I'd be happy to put a hold on anything that catches your fancy.”

Arthur's eyes goggled so hard that I was afraid he might have popped a blood vessel. "Never say those words to me again, young lady."

"What?" I returned brightly. My second-rate Pollyanna charm was on high, but only because I felt sure he'd be disappointed in anything less. "Reese Witherspoon? Or book club? I hope it's not the latter. I've always wanted to start a reading group for the library, but I've never been able to convince Octavia to allocate the resources."

"Good for her. I knew there was a reason I liked that woman."

I tilted my head and pretended to consider him. "If I grabbed you a volunteer application, do you think you might like to help me get one going? We could meet over cups of hot cocoa and explore John Green's backlist together."

"Balderdash!"

From then on, Arthur showed up to the library every day at the same time. Ten thirty on the dot, an exact half hour after I clocked in for the day. The precision of it wasn't lost on me—or on Mateo, who always scurried away the moment he caught sight of his nemesis.

"I talked to that boss of yours, by the way," Arthur said as he thumped past me, his cane making pointed jabs at the blue-carpeted floor. "I warned her that if you try to start a book club, I'll write a letter to the mayor and have this whole place shut down. I can, you know."

"For shame, Mr. McLachlan," I said. I set down the pile of recycled paper I'd been sorting through and smiled sweetly at him. "Banning books from the public? What's next? Shutting down food pantries? Painting the rainbows out of the sky?"

"Harrumph!"

By the time two months had passed, Arthur McLachlan had all but lost his power over me. When Mateo saw him coming, he still ran for cover—or, in this particular instance, ducked behind me—but not me. I was made of sterner stuff...and more to the point, I actually *liked* him.

"If you sacrifice me to that old goat, so help me, I'll be out of commission for the rest of the day," Mateo warned on this particular day. He clutched at me with his hot, ink-stained hands. They were likely to leave marks on my favorite yellow skirt, but that wasn't anything new.

“I’m pretty sure goats are historically the ones who get sacrificed.”

“You know what I mean,” he said. “I don’t know how you can stand the way he talks to you. You usually cry every time Octavia calls you to her office. Sometimes more than once.”

That was true, but only because Octavia rarely had anything good to tell me. Today’s meeting had been a rough one in particular, and my eyes were still stinging with the tears I’d only just managed to keep in check.

“I can’t explain it,” I said—and I couldn’t. Not in a way that Mateo would understand, anyway. I barely understood it myself. All I knew was that I’d come to enjoy these little scuffles with Arthur McLachlan. His tongue was sharp and his tone acid, but he never cut any deeper than I could handle. And he always seemed happy to see me, even if nothing would prevail upon him to let it show.

“It’s another beautiful day, don’t you think?” I called to him as soon as Mateo maneuvered an exit strategy. “The sun is shining, the spines of all your favorite depressing German philosophy books are uncracked, and there are half a dozen librarians hiding from you in dark corners.”

“Not today, Sloane,” Arthur said. His head was down as he moved past me, an unfamiliar shuffle in his step.

I paused in the middle of the aisle, my hand poised over the copy of *A Little Princess* I’d planned to slip into his stack of books when he wasn’t looking. I’d spent most of last week coming up with a plan diabolical enough to take our strange friendship to the next level, and this had seemed like the best approach.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Is something the matter?”

“I just want to browse the library in peace today, if that’s all right with you,” he snapped, genuine anger in his voice for once. “I don’t need you following me around like a lost child, questioning my every move.”

“I didn’t mean to... That is, I’m not...” My voice trailed off as a hot, pricking sensation rushed to the surface of my skin. This was the point where I’d normally tuck tail and run, but something made me stand my ground. It might have been my confusion at the sudden one-eighty in Arthur’s personality, but I suspect it had more to do with the expression on his face. Instead of looking outraged or amused, like he usually did, he looked...*bleak*.