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The Christmas Cookie Club (English Edition)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurDiscover the perfect recipe for friendship this Christmas...On the first Monday of December, every year, twelve friends gather in the evening with batches of homemade cookies wrapped in beautiful packages. They drink wine, they eat and they take turns telling the story of the cookies they have baked. Somehow these stories are always emblematic of the year that has just passed, as complicated and rich as our own lives. Lives full of sisterly love and conflict, yearning for babies and grandchildren, passion and disillusionment with men, a secret decade long affair, the loss of a job, the death of a child... These women are as imperfect as real women, made heroic by their ability to resolve conflict, to endure and support each other. The Cookie Club is as involving, heartwarming and uplifting a story as you'll ever

read.ExtraitThe Christmas Cookie Club 1 Marnie Pecan Butter Balls 2 cups pecans 2 cups flour 1 cup melted butter 1/2 cup sugar 2 teaspoon vanilla 1/4 teaspoon salt Confectioners sugar Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Chop the pecans in a blender or food processor until you have two cups. Combine all of the ingredients except confectioners sugar. Gather the dough into a ball. With floured hands, shape into one-inch balls and bake on ungreased cookie sheets. I line my cookie sheets with wax paper or parchment paper and spray them with Pam. Bake for 20 to 22 minutes. Pull the cookies and papers off the cookie sheet and onto a cooling rack and let them cool slightly; be sure theyre still warm and then gently shake them in a bag with the confectioners sugar. Place them back on the paper and add more confectioners sugar while they cool. Makes 5 dozen MY DREAM FLUTTERS AWAY as I open my eyes. I stretch my arm out for Jim, but he is gone. Outside, the snow falls in tight crystals, almost like fog. Disney sits laughing beside my bed, his tongue lolling and his tail thumping the carpet. Today is a big and busy day and I had better start it. Reluctantly, I leave the remnants of the dream in the still warm bed and slide on my lavender fleece bathrobe, let Disney out, pour last nights coffee in a cup, and zap it in the microwave. I hug myself for warmth as Disney disappears behind the garage. I didnt cut back the perennials and now snow clumps in the hollows. Should have mowed the lawn one last time. The microwave dings and I grab the coffee and continue staring absentmindedly out the window. Seven A.M. Only four in San Diego. I wonder if Sky is awake. Shes supposed to get her results today sometime this afternoon, her time. During the Christmas cookie party. Disney bounds from behind the garage, black ears flopping, and sits at the sliding glass door. He runs in when I open it and shakes off the snow. You doing a good job bringing in winter? I ask him. He wags his tail. Good boy. He has simple answers to all my questions. I sip my coffee and scan the kitchen and dining room. The cookie party forces me to get decorated for Christmas. Mini bulbs are strung on the tree outside. Chili pepper lights surround my kitchen window. Yesterday I trimmed my tree with the crocheted and macram ornaments I used to sell at the towns art fair in my hippie days. A few wrapped presents and my collection of teddy bears cluster around the base. The one that Alex bought Sky for her first birthday lost an eye twenty years ago and Sky knitted him a lopsided red sweater when she was ten. A Steiff teddy I bought when I was in Germany with Stephen holds his arms open waiting for a hug. Taras teddy bear sits in her perfection with a pink dress and a tiara. Pretty but unloved. I plug the tree lights in and it looks like Christmas. After I turn up the thermostat, I make my bed, straighten the room, and slide on some jeans and a red T-shirt. Then I tie on my cookie bitch apron, the one Allie made with the stenciled cookie rules. At first, the pecans clattering around in the Cuisinart sound angry until the nuts are sufficiently broken. This year, Sky and Tara will get an extra dozen of the pecan balls so the recipe is multiplied by three. I put the butter, a pound and a half of it, in a glass container and turn on the microwave. My mothers KitchenAid mixer is on the counter. I add in the measures of flour, sugar, vanilla, and salt. The microwave dings and I pour in the melted butter and turn on the mixer. While it stirs, I pull out cookie sheets and reach in the drawer for parchment paper. Then I scrape down the batter into the depths of the bowl and this batch is done. I turn my iPod to my rock playlist and Tina Turner wonders whats love got to do with it. Everything, I tell her. But I remember my dream and wonder if I had it because I love Jim or simply because I just want to recapture our great sex. Maybe both. I dont really like that Ive fallen so in love with him. Flour feathers my hands as they roll the balls and I dote on the methodical, rhythmical work. My hands place the morsels in rows of four across the top edge of the sheet. Three dozen on each sheet. The simplicity and beauty of the math and the routine reminds me of women spinning yarn with a drop spindle, kneading dough, harvesting berries, beading shoes, weaving, or grinding corn. I am connected to those ancient women, and to women around the world, as all of us, each of us, make food, clothes, tools for our families, our friends, ourselves. I place one sheet in the oven and start on the next. The easy part is done. For a few minutes I return to the peaceful rolling, and place the sheet in the oven, check the timer. Five more minutes. I cover the dining-room table with sheets of parchment paper, fill a plastic bag with confectioners sugar, and place potholders in the center of the table. The timer rings. I drag out a sheet and rest it on the table. The cookies are the brown of fall oak leaves; the aroma of cooked pecans fills the room. Seger sings about autumn rushing in and here it is winter. Already. How did it happen so quickly this year? I think about the revolving seasons and the motions we go through during each of them. I start rolling balls for the third sheet. And then slide the loaded parchment from the hot sheet onto the table, put the metal on the stove to cool, and gently place the balls in confectioners sugar. The work must be done quickly; the cookies cant be too cool or the confectioners sugar wont soak in. Too hot and fingers get burned. The second sheet is done and I go into the kitchen to retrieve it. The phone rings. I jerk around to reach the receiver lying on the counter next to the empty butter container

and hit my cheek on the corner of an open upper cabinet. The door bangs closed, my cheek smarts, and the sting spreads. Mom? You cant sleep, huh? I cant stop working, so I cradle the phone to my shoulder while my hands continue adding cookies to the sugar bag. Nope. Just tossing and turning. Afraid Id wake up Troy. Skys voice trembles slightly. The cookies roll in the sugar. I was worried about that. I figured youd be up making cookies. Youre right. I just took out the first sheet. Im shaking them in confectioners now. Ah. Nanas pecan balls. My favorite. Mine, too. I didnt know that Sky and Troy were trying to get pregnant that first time three years ago. After all, they were both in law school and Sky plans her life to achieve her goals.

But she called to brag that they had gotten pregnant on the very first try. The way she said it, We got pregnant on our first try, and then giggled, it sounded almost as if they had never made love before. I bought fabric to make my first grandchild a quilt, was carrying it into the house, when she called, crying. She had lost the baby. Darling. Im so sorry. My voice fell. Youll be blue for a few months. Thats what the doctor said. She said we could try again in six months. This is one helluva period. Sky sniffled and then tried to muster a laugh. Its not unusual to have a miscarriage. Especially for the first one, she said. Ill come be with you. You dont have to. But her voice lilted with relief. But then the next year she had a second miscarriage. Again she called to tell me, again I flew out to be with her. I wish you were closer. Me, too. When she was pregnant the third time, we held our breaths. I tried to wipe the tinge of concern from my voice when we talked. The pregnancy continued. Maybe I should quit work, she wondered. But theyre monitoring this pregnancy. By the fourth month, I breathed again. Then in the eighth month, movement stopped. An ultrasound indicated the baby had died. The best thing for a future pregnancy was to wait and deliver the baby when contractions started. The baby is rotting inside me. Ill be there tomorrow. No, wait, wait till the labor starts. Ill need you with me then. Hows Troy? Scared. Confused. Like me. She sighed. Ill just have to get through this next month. I guess I should remake the nursery into a guest room or office or something. Are you going to stop trying? I imagined her pacing, holding the cordless phone to her ear and walking past the couch and the dining table, making a loop around the kitchen, and doing it again. Its what she does when shes upset. She moves. I dont know if I can go through this again. Plenty of time to decide that. I dont know if I can even do this. Live for a month with a dead deformed baby inside me. Deformed? Thats what they said when they did the ultrasound. Theres something wrong with the baby. Probably why Ive had those miscarriages. I dont get that. Why would something wrong with this baby account for former miscarriages? It might be genetic. Troy and I may have a genetic problem. I hunted for magic to console her. Theyll find out what went wrong now. Maybe they can help you. Both. Yeah. Right. You want to come home? No. I want to pretend everything is okay and do my life. What I have of it. I couldnt argue with her bitterness. She called as soon as labor started. I flew out to her and arrived as she was entering transition. I held her hand.

Troy paced. I wiped her brow. She clenched her eyes and panted. Grunted. She gripped my hand tight. Screamed. She endured all the agony of birth without the happy end. The pain didnt vanish with the babys first cry. She squeezed out tears as she squeezed out the dead infant. Blue. We saw the deformities the sonogram had hinted at. He had very short arms, a smashed-together face. Our glimpse was quick before they bundled the baby away for genetic testing and evaluation. At least thats over. She sank as though to fall through the operating table and disappear. I didnt think I could do it. You did. And you came through like a champ. I squeezed her hand and kissed her forehead. Why didnt you warn me? Her eyes were wide with shock, as though I had betrayed her, purposely kept important knowledge from her. Because you forget the pain as soon as you hold your baby. She sniffed. I guess I wont forget, then. Troy kissed her. I love you so much. Tears fell down his cheeks. Our poor baby. Youre so brave. She sucked out a cry. Yes. Brave. Both of you. I held up water for her to drink. The doctor stitched her episiotomy. They gave her a shot to dry up her milk. We didnt know what else to say. We simply cried under the blazing surgical lights, the doctor still sewing between her legs. We all lost the baby, didnt we? Skys gray eyes met ours, the pupils magnified by her tears. I kissed her. And were all with you, darling. Troy squeezed her hand and pulled away strands of hair stuck to her face with sweat. We cried then and we cried together later on the phone when I returned home. Finally we went through a conversation without tears. And by that time Sky was pregnant again. Now, four months along, she whispers as though shes apologizing, All I ever wanted is to be a mom. I mean thats whats most important. You know? I place more cookies in the confectioners sugar. Yes. She tells me this often, as though if she says it enough then itll happen, as though prayers are always answered. She was the little girl who wanted baby dolls when her peers were collecting Barbies. She carried Matilda in her old Snugli, sang lullabies and slept with her. Even her Pound Puppy wore a diaper. I dont know if it stems from a longing for our closeness before Tara was born, or from some sort of reverse jealousy or competition

because of Taras birth. Or maybe its from seeing my joy at being a mother. Or simply the drives of biology and loving Troy and wanting their love personified. But being a mother is the apex of Skys sparky ambition. Maybe I need to accept that what is, just is. I place the cookies in neat rows. Now six to a row. Theres lots of ways to be a mother. I just want it to be over. I want the test results. Four months of worrying has been enough. Now, other people know something crucial to my life and I just have to wait. Wish I could know first thing in the morning to start facing whatever's next. Or enjoy it, the pregnancy and the birth. I roll additional balls in the sugar. Im sure shell call you as soon as she knows. Sky is quiet. My cheek hurts, I should put some ice on it, but I cant. Not now. After we finish talking. After this batch is done. I hope it doesnt ruin the cookie party. Ruin it? Ill have my friends to help me celebrate. She hears my glimmer of optimism as tarnished hope. Or console you. And you, too. They love you, too. Youre not alone. The confectioners sugar is soft as feathers as I place the cookies in rows. The first sheet is almost done. Theres quiet. She stops walking. I keep thinking, wondering why this has happened to us. So weird that Troy and I share this rare recessive gene when were not even in the same ethnic group. I mean, were mostly German and hes Italian. Theyre very close, you know? I know, but the doctor said its like were brother and sister, like from the same family. Maybe thats why you two are so good together. And dont forget, youve got a fifty percent chance that this one is okay. Each baby has a fifty percent chance. Maybe youve done the sad half and now youll have three normal pregnancies. It doesnt work that way, Mom. Its fifty percent with each roll of the dice. I know that. I tell her pretty fairy stories with happy conclusions as though they can erase the negative edge that haunts her. Happy endings arent impossible. Sometimes they actually happen, I say. The first sheet is finished. The cookies from the second are getting cool. I have to work quickly. You have enormous strength. Even after the last time, youre trying again. Something inside you knows this will work out. I sweep a handful of cookies into the sugar and roll them from side to side in the bag. So what are you going to do today? Hows Tara? Fine. The truth is that her little sister, Tara, is eight months pregnant, eighteen, and unmarried. The father of her baby is a black ex-convict and aspiring rap star. This summer she voiced the irony that didnt escape any of us. Shaking her black hair chunked with blue, shed said, Damn, here I am in an unplanned pregnancy in what most would call a, like, insane relationship and youshe tilted her head toward Skywho does everything in the supposed-to way, wants a baby so badly and Her voice trailed off; her eyes met Skys fully. Like they say, life aint fair. Its what do they call it? A mockery. Unspoken tension and competition dissipated with our laughter. Now I say, You never know how any of this is going to turn out. And each event is ours to interpret. You can see yourself and Troy as victims of peculiar biology, or see yourselves as even physical soul mates and this ordeal as strengthening. I place the sugared cookies in their row. So what are you doing today? I repeat. Its Monday. I have a trial to prepare for. Im hoping other peoples problems will be a relief. A distraction to make the time go quicker. Im carrying my cell phone with me. She stops talking. Hey. Troys up. And calling me. Go to your husband. Ill be here all day. Call if you feel like talking. I love you. I blow her a kiss. I love you. The pop of her kiss vibrates in my ear as I finish shaking the cookies from the second sheet. More confectioners sugar floats on the two sheets of cooling cookies. Six dozen cookies done. I cover the baking sheet with fresh paper and turn to the bowl of batter, gather some dough, and begin rolling another series of balls. Sky met Troy in the eighth grade right after the winter break. Troys family had just moved to town and a teacher assigned Sky to escort him to his classes since their schedule was the same. Hes not cute, but hes nice, she reported. That night they talked on the phone. By the next month, he was in front of our TV watching 90210; Sky sat next to him on the sofa. Tara sprawled in his lap. I popped popcorn. Troys my best friend. Skys shirt was cropped, her jeans low, her belly button revealed. You look cold. But I thought, No one, not even a thin girl, looks attractive dressed like that. Its the style, Mom. She squinched her face to express her exasperation. You sure are taking your responsibilities seriously. Introduce him to some guys. I did. We just like hanging out together. She grinned a quick smile but didnt change her clothes. Why dont you have a sleepover this Friday? Invite Marissa and Jennifer. Cool. In the fall of ninth grade, her backpack slumped over one arm, her glasses sliding down her nose, wisps of hair strategically pulled from her ponytail, she said, Mom. When she started like that, I knew she was setting an agenda for a serious conversation. What. I put down the workbook I was reading on health insurance and turned toward her. At that point, I was studying to pass my state test licensure exam. Now Im licensed in life, health, and long-term care insurance and run my own small agency. Troy said he loves me. Loves you? I said, I love you, too. And he goes, No, I mean, I love you. Love you like that. I had the remote to the TV, so I turned it up. An invisible remote was in her hand and she hit a button. I didnt want to hear him. I just go, I love you, too. Youre my best friend. But he says, I want more. So I pushed the sound

again. She hits the imaginary button. I didnt know what to say. He wants to be my boyfriend. He wants us to go together. Like steady? She shrugged and slid the backpack off. Itll ruin the friendship. It always does, she said as though she had worlds of experience. I wondered if shed been eavesdropping on my conversations with my girlfriends. How? Well, our relationship will change. Well never be able to go back to being just friends. And our friendship is perfect. She draped her coat on the back of the dining-room chair. This time I didnt scowl. Not for him, I pointed out. Its not perfect. She chewed on the inside of her lip. I was just beginning to like Ryan. My eyebrows rose. Oh. So hes afraid hell lose you to Ryan? He cant lose me. Hes my best friend. She popped open a can of Diet Coke. See what I mean? Already when you get that love stuff you fuss about losing someone or someone cheating. Do you think hes hot? I never think of him like that. Well She bit her lip and slumped into a chair. I just dont want to risk our friendship. Now that hes made it clear he feels this way about you, you cant pretend youre just friends anyway. I used my fingers to place quote marks around the words. Thats what he said. He said he cant help how he feels cause Im so cute. Red crept up her face as though shed crossed a boundary. Hes right. You are cute. I laughed. Beautiful. With unbelievably fascinating eyes. She widened those gray eyes of hers, flecked with green, and said as though amazed at the coincidence, Thats just what he says. Their friendship evolved into boyfriend and girlfriend and then at some point, I didnt know when, they became lovers. They went to college together, and by their sophomore year, shared an apartment. Graduated together, went to law school together. Too grown up, too early, I complained. It is what it is. Its happened and its as good as it gets. Why would I throw away something so perfect just because of my age? You two have such little experience in relationships. I worried if curiosity about other lovers might destroy them in a future mess of cheating and betrayal. Why would I throw away something so perfect just because we were virgins when we met? Besides, Ive watched you.

Yes. I touched her cheek. Twenty years ago we had gone through her father Alexs illness, a lingering tiredness and chills that was diagnosed as acute leukemia. They hospitalized him and he dwindled before our eyes, each day a noticeable loss. He died in one week. I didnt have time to believe he was seriously ill before he was dead. He was thirty-five years old. Thirty-five. Just thirty-five. Only now am I beginning to reconcile it. Sky was seven. She watched as I started a relationship with Stephen, got married again, and had Tara. Stephen. His philandering raked me over burning coals. The flurries of sincere guarantees that I was the love of his life and promises that it would never happen again worked for a while. But always, a few months later, I would face again the unexplained and inconvenient absences, hoping hed been in an accident rather than what I anxiously suspected. Then the smell of another woman on him, credit-card bills for hotel rooms, suddenly minimized computer windows, whispered telephone calls, increased drinking the clichd paraphernalia of adultery. A divorce. Remaking my life again, now as the single mother of two daughters. Troy was the most stable man in her life. I sure dont have the answers to relationships. Truth is, the absolute truth, after Stephen, the men I saw wanted a commitment, but I needed a guarantee of perfection, and people dont come that way. And my daughters came first. I wasnt sure what to do with my life when it fell off its anticipated track other than raise them. Men want your attention. Dont forget this. They have problems sharing you with their own child, let alone another mans. Their needs must be paramount. One wanted me to send Tara to boarding school. Another wanted me to leave her in the house and come live with him. She was fourteen then. I would have loved living alone when I was fourteen, he told me. Yeah, I bet. No way. No fucking way, I answered. I met Jim at a party, the friend of a colleagues son. She hadnt invited him to meet me. He was simply there. Bald, with his cuddly potbelly, and his grin. His absolute friendly warmth. Youre beautiful with that white hair. Shows off those bright blue eyes, he told me. Youre my friends sons friend! I exclaimed, as though that made him a baby. Hey, Im over twenty-one, he said with a laugh. Legal. And he grabbed me to dance to Marvin Gaye, swaying into me and then spinning me away. And like I said, youre beautiful and sexy as hell. And theres never any harm in dancing, is there? Of course there isnt. I relaxed in his arms. And youre good. I am at that. He held his head back and laughed as he twirled me under his arm. So first there was that palpable electricity and then there was the curiosity we had about each other. After the party, he came over. He told me that he had primary custody of two teenage sons. And that they were his first priority. I used to caution men about my daughters with almost the same words. I like that. Children do come first. He leaned away from me. Most women dont understand what that means. It means what with my job and taking care of them, I dont have much time for a relationship. Women want more time. So I havent been looking. He sipped some wine and shrugged. I guessed this would be a nights flirtation. I threw him a quick escape and easy out. Listen, I have to trim my tree. Im having a party on Monday night. Cant come on Monday. Ill be in Atlanta. Youre not invited. Its women only. But I do have to trim my tree. The tree was

bolted in its stand. The lights were strung but unplugged. A green plastic ornament container rested beside it. He lit the tree and said, Thats better. Nodded at the box, then asked, So are the ornaments in there? Yep. Lets do it. I love trimming trees. We trimmed the tree and then poured some more wine. To a great holiday, he said as our glasses clinked. To meeting you. That was a year ago. The Saturday before the Christmas cookie party. By New Years we were lovers and by Valentines I was in love with him. But I didnt tell him. Ive never said I love you to any man after Alex. Stephen first told me he loved me when I discovered him cheating. As though that would compensate for his adultery. All it did was convince me that saying I love you was manipulative. When he proposed, he held my hands tight and looked into my eyes and said I was the most important person in his life. The world was empty without me. Love, he said, is just another word. So I didnt say it to him. And he was cheating on me by the time I was pregnant with Tara, so I didnt even tell him after she was born. Ive told Sky and Tara I love them. And my parents. Some of my girlfriends. But with a man, Im not certain what those words mean. Theyre too much of a demand and a burden. They sound like you want something. Strings are attached. Obligations. Besides, how can we know what it means? I read somewhere that the color of our eyes impacts the hues that we actually see. If thats true, how do I know love means the same to me as love means to you? Especially since we dont even know if red is the same to both of us. Plus, isnt love supposed to be forever? And theres no forever with a man. So that Valentines Day, when Jim said, I think Im falling in love with you, I answered, Im infatuated with you, too. He nodded. Infatuation is safe. It lets you both off the hook. Theres no weight of permanence; in fact, theres a promise of flightiness and transience that reassures. That impermanence should be a relief to Jim as Im parceled around his edges. He sells medical software to hospitals across the country, so hes often away working, and then hes home helping his sons with their homework, watching them play soccer, teaching them how to drive. My time, our time, happens when hes home and his kids are out. Or on a Friday or Saturday night before their curfew. Now Im the one having to make allowances for a lovers attention to his children and his work. But its what I respect and love most about him: he takes fatherhood seriously. I havent seen him alone for two weeks. We watched his son play indoor soccer on Saturday night. We were supposed to spend Friday night together, trimming the tree as an anniversary celebration, but his plane home was delayed and by the time he checked on his sons, it was too late. And then on Sunday the younger one twisted his ankle and they were in the ER. I went to the hospital to be with them. We havent spent the night together, made love, for several weeks. Thats partly the reason for the sexy dream. The question remains: Is Jim another chance for intimacy, an attempt at a permanent relationship, or another dodge from commitment? To make matters more complicated, hes twelve years younger than I am. Forty-five. Just forty-five. I pull the last sheet from the oven, slide off the cookie-laden parchment, and prepare to start rolling the last six dozen in sugar. Thank God for parchment paper. It makes baking cookies so much easier. I make some more coffee and let one of the finished balls melt in my mouth with its nut and butter and smooth vanilla flavors. Disney runs to the door, tail wagging, bouncing. Snow dusts Jims jean jacket. Why, hi! I didnt expect you. Thought Id stop by on the way to the airport. When he brushes my cheek with his lips, the dream returns with all its sensual details. In it, Jim kisses my eyebrows, traced around my eyelashes to the length of my nose. His kisses tasted of cinnamon. And I was all sensation, reception. I hesitated to savor this perfect join, this golden unite. The glow intensified to sharp waves filling me, washing me. The bliss woke me. The luscious dream surprises me. When was the last time Ive had a dream like that? Its been years. Decades. Maybe when Tara was a baby. I thought that squeeze of lust and obstinacy of satisfaction was finished, my desire dimmed by time and menopause. I dont see Jim enough. But now here he is, surprising me with a visit and kissing my cheek. Hmmm. We can do better than that. He wraps his arms tight around me, one hand cupping my ass, and holds me close. I relax into him, savoring his slight cinnamon scent and the elements of the dream that are here with me now. Mmm, Ive missed you, he moans. He pulls away, checks his watch. Checking if you have time for a quickie? I laugh. I wish. He parodies a sad face. I have to be there in forty-five minutes. How bout a cookie? I glance at him sideways and lift an eyebrow. Yeah, he drawls, I want one of your cookies. I hand him one and also my cup of coffee. These are fabulous. Hope you made extra for us. Us. I dont know if there is an us. When he says things that imply a future, I have too many feelings to pull apart. Fear, excitement, happiness, peace. I watch him enjoy the pecan ball. Dont worry, I made several extra dozen. Besides, well have scads of cookies after the party. Oh, but these have got to be the best. Then he reveals a red-striped bag with green paper on top. Ta da! He bows and hands it to me. I came by to bring you this. Figured you needed it for your tree. I riffle through the green tissue paper stuffed on top and pull out a caramel teddy bear wearing a sweater with Christmas trees trimmed with red hearts. Oh, Jim. Look at him. Hes so dapper and

hes smiling. I laugh and lean over to kiss him. Youre so sweet. Its all a manipulative ploy. I just wanted to see you because Ill miss you. But I didnt want you to know that. I love it when you flirt with me. Especially when I dont have any makeup on. I go into the living room and place the bear under the tree. He fits right in with his new pals, I joke. Im sorry I missed helping you trim the tree this year. I consider saying, It was the anniversary of the first day we met, but I dont. Too presumptuous. Instead I say, Well, hes perfect. Hey.

What happened to your cheek? I forgot about it. When I touch it, it smarts. You look like someone tried to beat you up. Combat cooking. I laugh. Jim grabs another cookie. He tries to watch his weight and bemoans his potbelly, but I find it cozy. Put some ice on it or something. He checks his watch again. Hey, I gotta go. Ill call you. See you Friday night. For sure? I keep my voice light so he doesnt hear me as needy or nagging.

But he does. Nothing but taxes is for sure. And death. Have to see whats up with the kids. Ill call. Have a great week, I say, kissing his cheek. He opens the door and I see snow crystals caught like motes in a sunbeam. The door closes as though he sucks away all sound with his leaving. Then I hear my iPod playing and its time to get back to work. The music fills me as I roll the last of the dough. The trees lights twinkle, the teddy bears beneath it. The one Jim brought looks like hes always been there. The secure implication of saying us, I realize as I line up more completed cookies to cool, was immediately erased by his joke about death and taxes, his parry after my press for reassurance. Perhaps thats how the previous men felt about me, a seesaw, a push-me, pull-you. Was I always like this? Tentative about commitments? My relationships last only seven, eight years, not the long forty-five years my parents shared until my mother died. Maybe its the

bad luck of Alexs illness that set me on a path I never wanted to tread the knowledge so young that life doesnt turn out the way you expect and that tragedy can be around the corner. Just like great happiness, I remind myself. I inhale the dissipating aroma of the cooling cookies and as I exhale I think of Sky and the wait for news about the viability of her pregnancy; Tara and the birth of my first grandchild, a son, she was told; and Jim, about to fly to Boston. My girlfriends are coming tonight to the party laden with wrapped cookies. I know all their secrets. I know the tensions between them. I have to remember to try to seat Rosie away from Jeannie. They probably havent resolved their fight. Rosie will be all over Laurie about her baby. I

hope Taylor, or her husband, has found a job by now. Both of them unemployed and their severance packages must be dwindling. And I wonder how Sissy will fit in, meeting a bunch of women she doesnt know. Disney brings me his monkey, a squeaky toy that long ago lost its voice. I reach down, pet him, and take the toy. I say, Thank you, and return it to him. Im grateful for the joys of life. No. Not just the joys. The richness of it. The opportunity to experience it all. Thats where I am. The cookies are done. All they have to do is cool completely and I can pack them in their bags. Disney drops the monkey and inspects the floor for fallen morsels. Its still morning. I saut onions and add chopped tomatoes, chicken broth, and basil for soup.

It simmers on the stove. When its reduced, Ill turn it off so the flavors will intensify. Therell be something warm when the cookie bitches come in from the cold. Three small pots of poinsettia add color to the bay window over the sink. The living room is clean and ready. The bedrooms and my office are straightened up.

I have a window of time, so I check my face and sure enough theres a bloom of purple under my eye. I should get some ice for it. But instead I get the holiday bandanna I bought for Disney and tie it around his neck. I swear he tilts his chin up and prances around like he thinks hes extra handsome. I sit on the sofa with a new murder mystery, my feet propped on the coffee table. Disney jumps up and glides his head on my thigh. I read a few pages. The phone rings. Hey. Howre the cookies? Cooling. Howre you feeling, Tara?

Hows the baby? Kicking the hell outta my bladder. I feel like Im nothing but a ball with a head and tiny appendages. I chuckle, because thats pretty much how she looks. All baby way out front and she has a month to go. Hows Aaron? I remember to include him as though hes part of the family, though Im not sure hell be permanent. Maybe no ones permanent. But hell always be the father of my first grandchild. Were in the recording studio. He and Red are changing some lyrics, so I thought Id call. Im on break. I picture Tara with her dyed black hair and blue chunks, sitting in the vestibule of a recording studio. In my image, theres a cigarette dangling from her fingers, but she quit when she found out she was pregnant, so I erase the cigarette. She became pregnant shortly before she graduated from high school. She told me in an offhanded way, as though she were telling me she was going to the movies. Her casualness was a way to diminish her concerns about my reaction or, perhaps, to encourage a nonchalant response from me. What in the world are you going to do? I asked her. Its amazing to me that I have two such different daughters. Sky always told me everything. Tara said as little as possible. Sky sometimes hung out with me during high school. Tara wouldnt have been caught dead with me in public. Sky did what she was supposed to do, considering the future. Tara did what she thought of at the moment, living in the eternal now. She blinked long light

eyelashes at me and shrugged. Took a drag on a cigarette and snuffed it out. Guess Ill have to stop. Have you decided? I pressed the issue. I didnt know exactly how I felt. I didnt know exactly what I wanted her to do. It wasnt his race, but I didnt kid myself that racism was resolved. Hed been to a juvenile prison and seemed little able to support himself. And their dream of making it big as hip-hop musicians seemed like pie-in-the-sky. She composed the music and the backgrounds, played keyboard, and sang to his lyrics. Were excited about the baby, Mom. Youre getting married? Married? She brought her brows together, huffed an explosion of air from her mouth, and shook her head. Our love doesnt need legalities. Besides, what does being married promise? I didnt know how I felt about that, either. At least if it didnt work out, she wouldnt have to go through the hassle of divorce. I hugged her then and at first she stood stiffly and then relaxed into my arms. Ill give you a shower. She pulled her head back and grinned. Sure. Invite all your friends. I love them. Now, she says breezily, Hey. Im driving Aarons mom to the party. Sissy? Youre bringing her? I thought Id see a friend while the party was going on and then drive Sissy home. Means Ill get to see you. Yeah, and Sissy doesnt know how to get there. Oh, Mom, shes excited about this party. She spent all yesterday cooking. Shes the cookie virgin this year. Sissy thought that was a riot. A party making her a virgin at something, anything, again. And her about to be a grandma for the fourth time. In the background, the anger of electric guitar strings and then I hear Aaron, Hey! Babe! You on. I gotta go. See you about six, then? Between six and seven. Okay? Sissys shift at the hospital isnt over until four and shell have to get ready. And then the rush-hour traffic and were supposed to get a sleety mix this evening. Okay. So Ill just get to see you for a hot minute Bye, Mom. Drive safe. She doesnt hear me; shes hung up. I try to lose myself in the mystery Im reading, but I cant concentrate. Maybe the cookies are cool enough. I start counting out twelve and put them in a Ziploc bag. When thirteen bags are filled with cookies, I retrieve the small makeup kits that I found at the dollar store in animal prints: leopard, snake, tiger. The bagged cookies go into their containers. I pull out ribbon and tie red and gold metallic strands around the handles of the kits and curl the ends. Theres an extra bag for Tara to take. The remainder of the cookies, about three dozen, go in larger Ziploc bags and then into the freezer. I wipe the table and sweep under the floor. The house is tidy. My cookies are done. The soup is simmering. Eartha Kitt purrs so hurry down the chimney tonight. Everything is perfect. FLOUR I take flour for granted. I dont wonder about it; its always in my kitchen as it was in my mothers kitchen, part of my day-to-day life. When Sky and Tara were small, they drew pictures in the flour I sifted on the counter after we cut out cookies or rolled pie shells. The flour we use as the base of almost all of our cookies is ground wheat. Wheat, a cereal grain, can be turned into bread, cakes, pasta, cookies, noodles, juice, breakfast cereal, and couscous. Its also fermented into beer, vodka, and alcohol. I read somewhere that wheat was probably first cultivated in Turkey about ten thousand years ago. It was an ideal first crop because it self-pollinates, its grown from seed, can be harvested in a few months, and is easily stored. The domestication of wheat allowed hunters and gatherers to settle. Villages grew. Once we humans were able to count on a stable food source, we didnt need to travel to hunt and gather. As sufficient food became available, we traded with other groups and spread our knowledge and products around the world. Thus, wheat reached the Aegean about eighty five hundred years ago and India about six thousand years ago. Five thousand years ago it reached Great Britain, Ethiopia, and Spain, and a thousand years after that, China. Three thousand years ago horse-drawn plows and seed drills increased grain production. Until recently, the 1800s, wheat was harvested as it had been in prehistoric times, with a sickle, then tied into bundles for threshing, where animals crushed the stalks or farmers beat out the grain. The grain was tossed into the air and the chaff blew away, leaving the important kernels. In 1834, Cyrus McCormick invented the reaping machine and industrialization changed food production, and our society. The story of turning wheat into flour follows the history of machines. First, it was made by grinding with a pestle and mortar, which produced a gruel or pottage, not flour for bread. Saddle stones, which are two large stones, the top one of which is pushed by an operator, are seen in ancient Egypt. Water power was used to move the stones two thousand one hundred fifty years ago in Rome. Wind power was harnessed one thousand years ago. Then steam engines and electricity. Flour is composed of carbohydrates, fat, and protein. Wheat contains more protein than rice or other cereals, and is the most nutritious of the common grains. Heres a baking tip: The percentage of protein, which ranges from 9 to 12 percent, determines how hard and chewy the food will be. Bread flour benefits from a higher percentage of protein while cookies are more delicious when made from flour with less protein. Softer flour, with less protein, is best for chemically risen products like cakes, cookies, and biscuits. Pastry flour is best to use for these, but if you dont have that, use all-purpose, and take a tablespoon out per cup. Wheat is like air, we take it for granted. But for most of us, most of the time, grains

really are the staff of life. Just think, the cultivation of wheat allowed the development of settlements and the first neighborhoods. So the next time you measure out some flour, consider its prime role in human civilization. Prsentation de l'diteur Discover the perfect recipe for friendship this Christmas... On the first Monday of December, every year, twelve friends gather in the evening with batches of homemade cookies wrapped in beautiful packages. They drink wine, they eat and they take turns telling the story of the cookies they have baked. Somehow these stories are always emblematic of the year that has just passed, as complicated and rich as our own lives. Lives full of sisterly love and conflict, yearning for babies and grandchildren, passion and disillusionment with men, a secret decade long affair, the loss of a job, the death of a child... These women are as imperfect as real women, made heroic by their ability to resolve conflict, to endure and support each other. The Cookie Club is as involving, heartwarming and uplifting a story as you'll ever read.