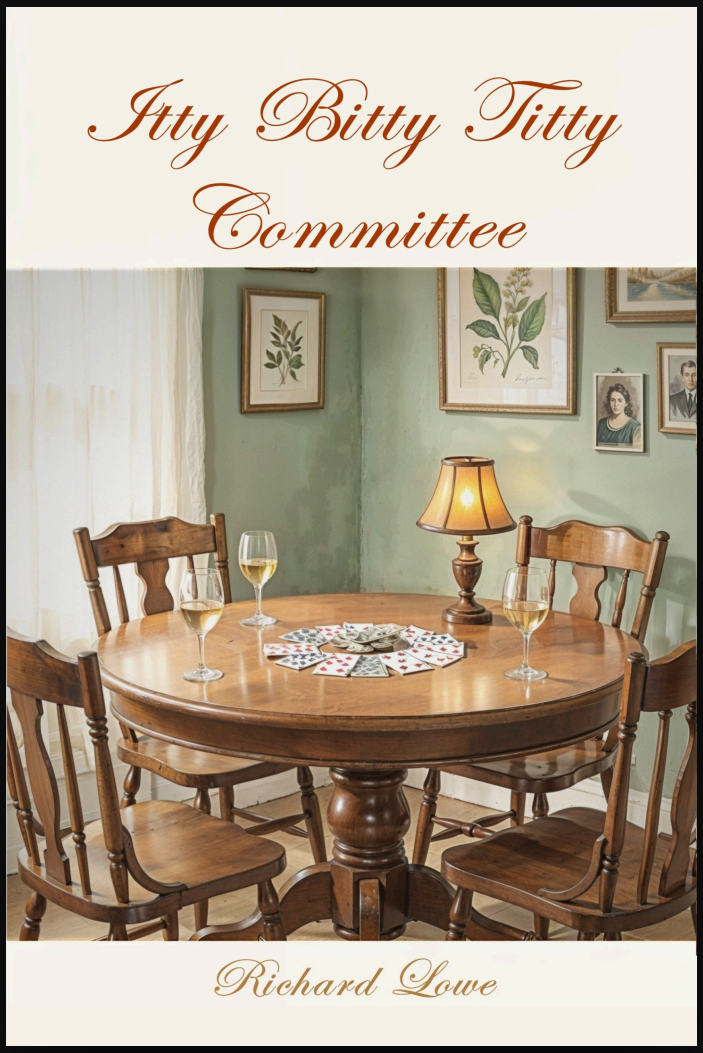
A FREE COMPANION TO THE ITTY BITTY TITTY COMMITTEE

Same Time Next Week

Lila has lost her phone, dinner has moved, and nobody told her. One of the other three works out where she will be at seven.



RICHARD LOWE

Same Time Next Week

Pri had a rule about silence in an interview. You let it run to seven seconds before you said anything, because most people broke at five and told you the thing they had come in meaning to keep.

Lila had not said a word in the group chat for fifty-five hours. Pri did not have a rule for that.

She was at her kitchen table on Monday morning with the conference paper printed out in front of her, eighteen pages, a red pen uncapped beside it. The panel was Wednesday at two. Her section of the paper was the one her committee chair had called ambitious in a tone that made the word sound like a diagnosis.

She had read the first page four times. She had not made a single red mark.

The phone lay face-up next to the paper, where she could see it without picking it up. She had placed it there on purpose. Picking it up would have been a decision, and she preferred to think of what she was doing as passive observation.

The thread was short enough to hold in her head. Saturday, around two in the morning, Jo had announced that there were nine hundred and fourteen words for snow and English had about four. It was false. It was also Jo telling them she couldn't sleep, and Pri had said so.

Jo had said goodnight. Lila had sent a star.

Then Sunday afternoon. Pri had written that she had a conference Wednesday through Friday and Thursday was out for her.

Jo had written that she'd gotten a spot at an open mic Thursday night, an actual spot with her name on a list, and she was sorry, she'd been trying to get on that list since February. Mara had written: The week after.

Jo: week after.

Pri: Agreed.

Then nothing. No star.

Pri had known Lila for one fitting room and one dinner. That was one observation, and one observation was an anecdote. She would have failed an undergraduate for building a conclusion on less.

But the star always came at the end of things. It came after Thursday was settled and the hour was fixed. It came after Jo's snow and Pri's correction, at two in the morning, when anyone sensible was asleep.

As far as Pri could tell, it came at the end of any conversation that had a human being in it.

Fifty-five hours was nothing for most people. For the star it was a long time.

She capped the red pen. She uncapped it again.

There were explanations, and she ran them in order of likelihood the way she would have run them for a respondent who missed a follow-up.

Lila was busy. Lila was a designer with clients, and clients were a full-time occupation of their own. Or Lila had looked at three near strangers organizing their Thursdays without her and decided the whole thing had been a nice evening and not a beginning.

Pri stopped on the third explanation longer than the evidence supported.

She had seen it happen with groups before, in her research and outside it.

Four people met. Three of them kept talking. The fourth went quiet in a way nobody could point to, and in six weeks the three of them were saying, whatever happened to her, in the tone people used for a jacket they used to own.

She picked up the phone. That was the decision.

She opened a message to Lila alone. She typed: Are you all right.

She looked at it. It assumed a problem, and assuming was a methodological error. It also had the tone of a hospital.

She deleted it and typed: The dinner moved to the week after. Check the chat.

That was a fact. Facts were safe to send.

She sent it and put the phone face-down, then made her first red mark on page one. She crossed out the word significant, because her chair would circle it anyway.

* * *

The hotel was the kind conference hotels always were, carpet in a pattern designed to hide every stain that had ever happened in it, and a ballroom named after a tree. The panel ran in the Magnolia Room.

Pri gave her twenty minutes in nineteen. She had timed it at home. She had built in a minute for the moment when someone in the third row coughed through her best sentence, and someone in the third row did.

The question period belonged to a man in a quarter-zip sweater who stood up and said he didn't have a question so much as a comment. He talked for four minutes. His comment was that neighborhoods changed, and some people stayed and some people didn't, and the institutions either kept up or they didn't.

“That's the paper,” Pri said, when he finally sat down. “You've summarized it well. Thank you.”

The moderator laughed into the microphone and then pretended she had been clearing her throat. The man in the quarter-zip nodded, satisfied, as though he had been the one to think of it.

Afterward there was coffee in urns and a plate of cookies nobody trusted. A woman from a university in the Midwest wanted to talk about her sample sizes.

Pri listened and said the right things and checked her phone twice under the edge of the table. In anyone else she would have called it a nervous habit.

Nothing from Lila. Nothing in the chat since Tuesday morning.

That night in the room she sat on the bed in her conference clothes with her shoes still on. The room had a framed print of a sailboat on the wall above the desk. Every room in this hotel probably had the same sailboat.

She thought about the sidewalk outside the boutique, the afternoon gold, Lila digging through a bag that held everything except her sunglasses and checking the same pocket twice. Pri had seen the frames go into the left side of that bag as they came out of the fitting rooms. She had said so without looking up and then called it a lucky guess, because the truth would have sounded like she had been watching.

She had been watching. She had been watching all of them since the fitting room. It was what she did with people before she knew what else to do with them.

She opened the message to Lila. Under her last one, the fact about the dinner, she typed two words.

Left side.

It was a joke, or the nearest thing to one Pri had made in writing in about three years. It served no purpose, and only one other person in the world would understand it. She sent it anyway and lay back on the hotel bed in her shoes and looked at the sailboat until she fell asleep.

* * *

On Tuesday the oat man came in at seven-forty, as he did every weekday, and Jo had his cup in her hand before he got to the counter.

“Oat milk,” he said. He said oat as if he'd met the oat personally and had reservations about its family. “Extra hot, but not scalding. A third foam. Not a half.”

“A third,” Jo said.

“A half is a cappuccino.”

“It is,” Jo agreed. She had no idea whether that was true and had never once in three years been brave enough to look it up.

She made it. He took it to the end of the counter and lifted the lid and looked inside it, a long private look, like a man reading a letter from a lawyer. Then he put the lid back on and nodded at nobody, and Jo wrote on the back of a receipt: lid inspection, the face, he never knows it'll be fine.

She had a spot Wednesday at the open mic on the east side, and Thursday at the one she'd been chasing since February. The oat man was going to be the first four minutes of both, if she could find the ending.

She had the middle. The middle was always the easy part.

Between the eight o'clock rush and the nine o'clock rush, she took her phone out under the counter and opened the chat.

Still nothing from Lila. Jo scrolled up to make sure she hadn't missed it.

That was stupid, because the phone would have told her. She scrolled up anyway.

She typed: has anyone heard from lila or has she been raptured

She stopped with her thumb over the arrow.

Lila had told them about the church at the first dinner. She had said it plainly over the lamb, that from fourteen on she'd been taught her body was a problem other people had to be protected from, and that she'd left two years ago and was still working out what she believed. Jo had sat across the table and said that was a real thing to carry.

Jo deleted the message one letter at a time. She watched the word raptured come apart backward. Her face was hot, standing alone behind an espresso machine, as if someone had caught her.

Being good at it had a cost, and the cost was the order things came in. The joke arrived first, every time, fully dressed and ready to go out, and the part of her that checked whether it should go out arrived a second and a half later, still putting its shoes on.

She typed again.

lila. blink twice if the swatches got you.

That one was all right. It was about the couch, a picture Lila had sent them herself.

It was the kind of joke that said we see you're gone without saying so. She sent it to the chat and put the phone in her apron and steamed milk for a woman who wanted to know if the oat milk was certified.

“Certified by who?” Jo said.

“It's a whole thing,” the woman said.

“I'm sure it is,” Jo said, and wrote that down too.

At ten-fifteen the phone buzzed against her hip. It was Mara.

Mara: She hasn't answered anything since Saturday.

Jo: is that a lot for her

Pri: We have one week of data.

Mara: It's a lot.

Jo read it twice. She leaned against the back counter by the bean grinder, where the manager couldn't see her from the office.

She had been in a hundred group chats. She knew how to keep one alive. She knew the exact week one started to die, when somebody stopped answering and the rest of the conversation stepped politely around the gap like a wet floor.

She knew because she was usually the one who stopped answering. She did it beautifully.

She left on a high note. She sent one last good line, and then a little less, and then a heart on someone else's message, and then nothing, and nobody was ever hurt, because the exit had been so warm they didn't notice it was an exit until it was over.

Her mother had taught her that if you stopped giving people what they wanted from you, they went somewhere else. Jo had decided early that she would rather be the one who went.

She looked at Mara's message. It's a lot.

Mara had known Lila exactly as long as Jo had. Mara had a squat rack and two uncomfortable chairs and had said, on the first night, that she didn't let people in. And Mara had been counting the hours.

The bell over the door went. Jo put the phone away and smiled at a man in a bike helmet and asked him what she could get started for him, in the voice she used for everyone, and it worked, the way it always worked.

* * *

That night Jo sat on the floor of her apartment with her back against the couch and the TV on with the sound off. She did that when she was working on material. The faces moving without voices helped, for a reason she had never worked out.

She had the ending of the oat man now. The ending was that one day the coffee would be wrong, finally, after three years of it being right, and he would not know what to do, because he had built his whole personality around a disaster that never arrived. She said it out loud to the muted TV twice.

It was good. It was a little sad. That meant it was good.

She picked up her phone to put the line in her notes and opened the chat instead.

blink twice if the swatches got you.

Under it, Mara's two messages and Pri's one. Nothing from Lila.

It was a funny message. She was proud of it. It was also the kind of message Lila could answer with a star and never have to say anything.

Jo had written it that way on purpose. She had built Lila an exit and left the door open and held it, warmly, so that if Lila wanted to go, she could go without anyone having to feel anything.

Jo looked at that for a while.

She opened a message to Lila alone. She typed hey and stopped. She typed three different second lines and deleted all of them, because all of them were funny.

Finally she wrote: hey. no bit. you okay?

It looked naked on the screen. It looked like the first line of a set she would never do.

She sent it before the part of her that checked things could get its shoes on. Then she sat on the floor with the phone in her lap and watched a woman on the muted TV win a car.

* * *

Mara's Wednesday started at five with a client named Theo who was sixty-one and had decided after a heart scare that he was going to deadlift his own body weight by summer. He was two-thirds of the

way there.

He complained the entire hour and did every rep she asked for. That was the kind of client she liked best, because the complaining kept him from feeling how hard he was working.

At ten she had a soccer player with a hamstring that pulled every March like a seasonal allergy. At one she had nobody, so at one she sat at her kitchen counter and opened her email.

Nine applications out. Two answered, both no. The other seven sat in her sent folder like letters to people who had moved without leaving an address.

She closed the email. She opened the group chat.

Lila: nothing.

She scrolled up and read the thread from the top. It took her four minutes. She read the way she watched a client's first squat, not looking for anything yet, letting the whole movement go by once before she decided where the problem was.

Then she read it again, slower.

Lila had sent a star a little after two on Saturday morning. The rescheduling had started at about three on Sunday afternoon. Between those two points there were thirty-seven hours and no messages from anyone.

So Lila had not seen the change. That was the first thing.

The second thing was what Lila had seen. The last plan anyone had made, the last one before Lila went silent, was Pri's. Same time next week.

Then Mara's Yes. Then the photograph of the wall, the couple leaning toward each other over the corner table, and Lila asking who they were.

Mara went back to the photograph and looked at it for a while. It was blurry. Lila had taken it with her whole arm moving.

She thought about how a person stopped answering. In her experience there were two ways. People who decided to leave did it slowly, tapering, a shorter message, a longer gap, until the gap was all there was.

Mara knew that pattern. She had run it herself on more than one person who had wanted more from her than she had ready.

Lila had not tapered. Lila had sent a star at two in the morning and then dropped straight off the edge of the thread, like a weight off a bar.

That was a person who had put her phone down and couldn't find it.

Mara thought about the sunglasses. She thought about Lila on the sidewalk outside the boutique, checking the same pocket twice. The sentence formed in her head, plain and complete, the way the right cue formed when she finally saw what a client's hips were doing.

She lost her phone.

And if she lost her phone on Saturday night or Sunday, then the last thing she knew was Thursday at seven. Same time next week.

Lila had walked past Thessaly before the first dinner and stood outside it to smell the kitchen. Lila had gone back alone afterward to ask Elena about the sign.

Lila would be at the corner table tomorrow at seven, probably closer to twenty past, with three empty chairs and no way to find out why.

Mara put the phone down on the counter.

She could post it to the chat. Jo would answer within a minute with three exclamation points, and Pri would ask for the evidence, and everyone would agree it was a good theory.

Then Thursday would come, and none of them would be at Thessaly.

Jo would be onstage. Pri would be in a hotel. Mara would be at her six o'clock across the city, a woman whose shoulder had frozen over the winter and was only now giving back its range.

The theory would be correct. Lila would still sit there alone.

Mara picked the phone back up. She did not open the chat. She scrolled to the woman with the frozen shoulder and called her.

"Is everything okay?" the woman said. Mara had never once called her. Mara texted, two days ahead, with the time and nothing else.

"Can you do five instead of six tomorrow."

There was a pause on the line. Mara heard a dishwasher running somewhere behind it.

"Sure," the woman said. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Mara said. "I have a dinner."

She hung up and sat at the counter. Her heart rate was up, as if she had finished a heavy set.

That made no sense. All she had done was move an appointment by an hour.

She did not post anything to the chat. If she was wrong, there was nothing to tell. If she was right, it wasn't news.

* * *

Thessaly at six fifty-five on a Thursday looked the way it had looked the week before, and Mara counted that in its favor.

The sign had faded toward sage. The menus were still laminated. On the walls, actors in black and white still shook hands with a shorter man in a tie who looked deeply pleased about it.

The shorter man was behind the bar in the same tie, or one like it, the photograph of the woman behind him at the angle where he could see it from anywhere. He looked up when Mara came in. He gave her the same brief look he gave every table, a man adding up a column, and went back to his ledger.

The corner table was open. She took the chair with her back to the wall and sightlines to the door.

Danny arrived with a notepad held in front of him like a shield. She remembered him catching a chair with his hip.

"Welcome back," he said. "Is it only you tonight, or are we expecting the whole…" He made a circle with the pen that was meant to take in four women and a deck of cards and mostly took in the salt shaker.

"One more," Mara said.

"Great. Wonderful. Can I tell you about our specials?"

"Water," Mara said. "Two."

He wrote down water and two and looked at the two empty chairs on the far side of the table and then at Mara, deciding whether to ask about them. He decided against it. He was learning.

Elena brought the water, not Danny. She set down two glasses and looked at Mara once, the same long-practiced assessment, and her eyes went to the empty chair across from her.

"The calamari is good tonight," Elena said.

"And the lamb is always good," Mara said.

Elena's mouth moved at one corner. She went back to the floor.

At seven Mara drank some of her water. At five past, a couple came in and took the table by the window and ordered without looking at the menu. At ten past, the door stayed shut.

At seven-fifteen Mara looked at the door more often than the door required.

She had run the logic four times on the train over. Every step of it held.

She had been certain about things before. For most of her life she had been certain that if the work was good enough, the work would be enough.

If Lila didn't come, Mara had moved a client and ridden two trains to eat calamari alone at a corner table in a Greek restaurant on a Thursday night. That was an outcome she could survive.

She would eat the calamari. It would be good, because Elena had said so.

She would not tell anyone, and no one would ever know she had been wrong.

Near twenty past she turned her water glass a quarter turn.

A minute later the door opened and Lila came in out of the evening a little out of breath, with a canvas bag over one shoulder and a smear of rust-colored ink on the side of her hand. She stopped inside the door and looked toward the corner table. She saw Mara.

Then she saw the two empty chairs, and her whole face changed.

* * *

Lila had been without her phone for four days and had come to some conclusions.

The first was that the phone was not in the apartment. That was impossible, because she had not gone out between the last time she held it and the first time she reached for it and found nothing.

She had sent the star at two in the morning on Saturday from the couch, or near the couch, or possibly while walking from the couch to the kitchen. Then she had slept until noon and gotten up and started on the rust.

She did not reach for the phone until Sunday night. That was how the rust went.

The second conclusion was that four days without a phone were not quiet. She had expected quiet. What she got was every hour arriving without edges, so that she looked up from the loom and it was dark and she did not know which dark it was.

Twice she had eaten dinner at four in the afternoon. Once she had eaten breakfast at what turned out to be eleven at night.

The third conclusion, reached around Tuesday, was that the group chat had kept going without her.

Of course it had. Three people did not stop talking because a fourth one went into a couch.

They were probably talking right now about Jo's open mic and Pri's dissertation and whatever Mara thought about things, in her short sentences with periods where the question marks should go. They had probably seen that Lila wasn't saying anything and decided that was how she was.

Lila knew how she was. She had been told, by her mother, by teachers, by a youth pastor and a man she dated for four months at twenty-six. She was a lot, and then she disappeared, and then she was a lot again, and people got tired of keeping her place.

By Wednesday she had the apology written in her head. She'd gone over it while she worked, the way she went over a pattern before she warped the loom. I'm so sorry, I lost my phone, I know that sounds like an excuse, it isn't, I lose everything, you'll find that out about me, I'm sorry in advance for that too.

It was a good apology. She'd been giving versions of it her whole life.

On Thursday she knew it was Thursday because the recycling truck came, and the recycling truck came on Thursdays. She stood at her window and watched it eat the bins on the curb. She thought:

same time next week.

She did not know whether next week was still happening. She had no way to know.

She could have walked to the coffee shop where Jo worked, if she had known which one it was. There were eleven in the area that might have been it. The logo on Jo's shirt had been a cup with a face on it, and so were half the logos in the city.

She went to Thessaly because Pri had said seven and nobody had told her otherwise.

She was late. She was always late. She had meant to leave at twenty to seven. At twenty to seven she looked down at a loose thread in the rust, and when she looked up again it was ten past.

She came through the door with the apology ready in her mouth, and Mara was sitting at the corner table with her back to the wall, and the other two chairs were empty.

Jo and Pri weren't coming. They weren't late. There had been a conversation without her, and it had arrived somewhere.

The four of them had been one nice evening. Mara was the kind of person who would come and say so to her face, because that was the correct thing to do.

She walked to the table. Her legs got her there. She sat down across from Mara and put her bag on the floor and her hands flat on the tablecloth.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I lost my phone, I know how that sounds..."

"I know," Mara said.

Lila stopped.

"You lost your phone," Mara said. "Saturday night or Sunday. Dinner moved to next week. Pri has a conference. Jo has an open mic. They told the chat on Sunday afternoon. You weren't there to see it."

Lila looked at her.

"Next week," she said.

"Next week," Mara said. "Or the week after. Jo has two of them."

"So it's still..." Lila's hand made a shape on the tablecloth that meant the four of them, the chat, the table, all of it. "It's still happening."

"Yes."

The apology was still in her mouth, with nowhere to go. She closed her mouth and kept it there.

"How did you know?" she said. "About the phone."

"You stopped sending stars," Mara said.

Lila didn't say anything for a moment. She was afraid that if she said anything she would cry in Thessaly on a Thursday night in front of Elena, and Elena was right there, putting a basket of bread on the table without being asked.

"Calamari?" Elena said.

"Calamari," Mara said. "And the lamb."

"Two lambs," Lila said, before she remembered that she had twenty-three dollars in her account until a client paid on Monday. Then she decided she would worry about that on Monday.

Elena looked at the two of them, and at the empty chairs, and at the water glass that had been waiting for Lila since before she came in. She did not say anything. She went back to the kitchen.

* * *

"You came," Lila said, when the calamari was down to its last few rings. "You knew they'd moved it and you came anyway."

"You would have sat here."

“I would have sat here until they closed.”

“Yes,” Mara said.

“Didn't you have plans? It's Thursday. People have plans on Thursday.”

“I had a client at six.”

“What happened to the client?”

“I moved her to five.”

Lila set down her fork. She could not say things she didn't mean, even small ones, even to be polite. So she let herself feel what she meant, and it was large and warm and embarrassing, and she said it in the smallest words she had.

“That was kind,” she said.

Mara ate a ring of calamari. “It was an hour,” she said.

That was not an answer, and Lila had grown up around a great many people who gave answers that weren't answers. She recognized the kind Mara was giving. It was the kind that meant: you can have this, but don't make me hold it up to the light.

So she didn't. She took some bread instead.

“Where did you have it last,” Mara said.

“Have what?”

“The phone.”

“Oh.” Lila thought. “The couch. I think. I sent the star from the couch. Or near it. I might have been standing.”

“Have you checked the couch.”

“You can't check the couch,” Lila said. “You saw the couch. The couch is not a place. It's geological. There are layers in it from last year.”

“Have you checked the couch,” Mara said again, in exactly the same voice.

“I've checked around the couch.”

Mara put her fork down. She folded her hands on the table in front of her. Lila had a sudden clear picture of her sitting across from someone with a bad knee in exactly this posture, asking where it hurt, and declining to accept the first answer.

“After the star,” Mara said. “What did you do.”

“I went to bed.”

“Did you have the phone in bed.”

“No. I always have it in bed. That's how I knew it was gone, Sunday, I reached for it and it wasn't…” Lila stopped. “No. I didn't have it in bed.”

“So it didn't leave the couch.”

“It could have gone to the kitchen.”

“Did you check the kitchen.”

“I checked the refrigerator,” Lila said. “Twice. And the freezer. I put my keys in the freezer once, in college. It's a known location.”

“Did you check the bathroom.”

“Yes.”

“Your bag.”

“The same pocket three times.”

Mara looked at her steadily across the corner table, kindly enough, with the patience of someone who had already finished the problem and was waiting for Lila to catch up.

"It's in the couch," Lila said.

"It's in the couch."

"I was afraid of that," Lila said, and it came out exactly as true as she meant it, and Mara laughed.

It was short and it surprised both of them. It came out of Mara like a cough.

Lila had heard her laugh before, through a fitting room wall and then on the sidewalk outside, and neither time had sounded like this. This was closer and rougher, with nobody on the other side of a partition.

Across the room, Stavros looked up from his ledger at the sound. He looked at the two of them at the corner table and the two chairs nobody was using. Then he looked back down and turned a page.

* * *

The lamb came and was what Elena had promised.

They ate it mostly without talking. Lila found that she didn't mind.

With most people a silence made her want to fill it, to explain or apologize or tell them about a sign she had seen once outside a café. With Mara the silence sat at the table like a fifth person who had ordered and was happy with what came.

Halfway through, Lila reached into her bag and took out the deck of cards. She put it on the table between the bread basket and the water.

Mara looked at it.

"It's a four-person game," Lila said. "The one I was thinking of. I always have them."

Mara looked at the cards a while longer. The box was soft at the corners and the flap had been tucked in so many times it had a permanent crease across the face of the jack.

"Then it waits," Mara said.

Lila left the deck where it was. It sat there through the rest of the lamb, not opened, and Lila found she liked looking at it there, the way she liked looking at a piece on the loom that wasn't finished but had already decided what it was going to be.

When the plates were gone, she said, "Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask."

"Why didn't you put it in the chat? That I'd lost my phone. You could have told them."

Mara thought about that. Lila watched her think. Mara's thinking showed, though not in her face.

Her face stayed where she put it. Her hands were what gave her away, going still on the tablecloth as if they were waiting for instructions.

"If I was wrong," Mara said, "there was nothing to tell."

"And if you were right?"

"Then it isn't news."

Lila turned that over. She didn't entirely understand it. She had a feeling she would understand it better in about three days, because that was how long most things took her.

"Are you going to tell them now?" she said.

"No."

"Should I?"

Mara shrugged, a small economical movement of one shoulder. "Tell them you lost your phone," she said. "That's true. It's the part they'll want."

“And this?”

Mara looked at the table, the cards, the two water glasses, the chairs.

“This was dinner,” she said.

Elena brought the check, one number, face-down in the center of the table. Lila reached for it and Mara had it before her hand got halfway there.

Mara didn't move fast. She was already there, the way she'd been already at the table, already at the end of the problem.

“I can pay for my lamb,” Lila said.

“Monday,” Mara said.

“How do you know about Monday?”

“You looked at the menu,” Mara said, “and then you looked at the ceiling, and then you ordered the lamb.” She put cash on the tray. “Monday.”

Lila decided not to argue with someone who could read the ceiling.

* * *

On the sidewalk the evening had gone blue. The sign over Thessaly was lit. Inside, through the window, Stavros had come out from behind the bar to speak to the couple by the window, his hand on the back of a chair, and the couple was laughing.

“Rows,” Mara said.

“What?”

“The couch. Take the swatches off in rows. Left to right. Put each row on the floor in order.”

“I'll sort them,” Lila said. “I know myself. I'll pick one up and I'll see it's next to the wrong green and I'll be there till three.”

“Don't sort them.”

“I'll try.”

“Don't try,” Mara said. “Lift. Look. Next row.”

“Lift. Look. Next row,” Lila said. She meant to do exactly that.

She also knew herself. Mara knew that she knew herself, and neither of them said another word on the subject.

Mara buttoned her coat. She looked toward the corner, toward the train, and then back.

“Next week,” she said. “Or the week after.”

“I'll have my phone,” Lila said.

“You'll have your phone.”

She went left, toward the train, her coat buttoned to the collar, her shoulders straight. Lila watched her as far as the corner.

Mara didn't look back. Lila had not expected her to and was glad anyway that she had watched.

* * *

The couch had been a couch once. Lila had bought it secondhand three years ago from a woman who was moving to Portland and had cried a little handing it over. Lila had found that moving at the time.

It was dark green velvet under everything. Lila had not seen the velvet since the fall.

She put on the overhead light. She never used it, because it made the apartment look like a waiting room. She stood in front of the couch with her coat still on.

“Rows,” she said, out loud.

She started at the left arm. She lifted the first layer, a stack of cotton prints she'd been sent as samples in January and had never sent back, and set it on the floor.

She did not look at it. She looked at the layer under it, wool, and lifted that and put it beside the cotton.

She made it through four rows without sorting anything, and then she picked up a square of linen in the exact faded green of the Thessaly sign, and she stopped.

She held it for a minute. Then she put it in her coat pocket, which did not count as sorting.

She did a fifth row, and a sixth.

The phone was at the right end of the couch, down where the seat cushion met the arm, under two yards of a gauze she had forgotten she owned. It was face-down.

The screen was black. When she pressed the button, nothing happened, because four days was longer than any phone she had ever owned could go without her.

She sat down on the velvet. She hadn't sat on the velvet in months. It was softer than she remembered.

She plugged the phone into the charger on the floor. The charger had been lying there the whole time, plugged into the wall, waiting for her like a dog by a door.

It took five minutes to come on. She sat with her coat on and her hands in her lap and waited, and didn't pick up a single swatch.

When it came on, it buzzed in her hand for most of a minute.

The chat came first, all of it at once: Pri's conference, Jo's spot on the list since February.

Mara: The week after.

Jo: week after.

Pri: Agreed.

Then came Tuesday.

Jo: lila. blink twice if the swatches got you.

Lila laughed, alone in the waiting room light, and then she read the next part and didn't.

Mara: She hasn't answered anything since Saturday.

Jo: is that a lot for her

Pri: We have one week of data.

Mara: It's a lot.

She read it three times. She had spent four days writing an apology to people who had spent four days counting the hours.

Below the chat there were two more. Both of them were messages to her alone.

The first was from Pri, from Monday: The dinner moved to the week after. Check the chat.

Under it, sent Wednesday night, was a second one.

Left side.

Lila looked at it for a long time. Then she looked at the right end of the couch, at the gap where the cushion met the arm, and then at the gauze lying on the floor where she'd lifted it.

She wrote back: right side.

She thought about it. She added: but thank you for looking.

The second was from Jo, late Tuesday night.

hey. no bit. you okay?

There was no joke in it and no exit. Jo could not say anything without making it funny, and she had said five words and none of them were funny.

Lila sat on her own couch for the first time since the fall and read the five words again.

yes, Lila wrote. lost my phone. it was in the couch. the swatches got me.

She sent it. She sat back.

There was nothing from Mara. Not in the chat and not to Lila alone. Lila scrolled up through the whole week to make sure, and there was nothing, not a word since Mara had written It's a lot on Tuesday morning.

Mara hadn't texted. Mara had come.

Lila opened the group chat. She had a great deal she could say.

She could tell them about the couch and the rows and the gauze, and about the four days that had no edges, and about breakfast at eleven at night. She could put the apology in after all, the good one, the one she'd been polishing since Wednesday.

She typed a star and sent it. Then she set the phone face-up on the arm of the couch, on the velvet, where she would be able to see it in the morning.

The World of The Itty Bitty Titty Committee

Who's Who

The committee and the people around their table, as you first meet them. Nothing here gives away where the year goes or how it ends.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Jo	A stand-up comic who works at a coffee shop to pay for the stand-up. She has been the one who makes the room lighter since she was eight. She put a microphone after her name in everyone's phone, and she named the committee on the sidewalk outside the boutique.
Mara	The engineering voice from the fitting room. Tall, visibly strong, a trainer who works with athletes and private clients and is sending out applications for training director and head coach jobs. She arrives first, sits with her back to the wall, and owns a squat rack and two chairs that are not comfortable chairs. She is the only one who typed in her last name.
Pri	The zip code woman. A doctoral candidate whose dissertation studies how neighborhoods and their institutions respond when the people who live there change. She watches people before she knows what else to do with them, and she rounds up for effect.
Lila	The underwire blouse. A designer who works in textiles, thirty-two, two years out of the church she grew up in. She carries a battered deck of cards, signs off with a star, loses everything except what she is looking at, and has a couch that is no longer a couch.
Stavros Papadimitriou	The owner of Thessaly, a man in his seventies with big hands and a tie, who has been there every night since 1994. He keeps his ledger at the bar. Behind him, where he can see it from anywhere in the room, hangs a photograph of a woman.
Elena	A waitress at Thessaly since 2004. She has seen the complete range of human behavior across a restaurant table. The calamari is good tonight and the lamb is always good, and that is her contribution: take it or leave it.
Danny	A young waiter, new enough to be trying very hard at all of it. He catches chairs with his hip and is learning to read a table.
Claire	A comic who does the Wednesday night show at the venue where Jo plays. Jo thinks she is good. Actually funny.
Marcus	A man Lila meets through the church she found after she left the one she grew up in. Kind and stable, with a career he cares about.
Ray and Connie	Two readers who have made a regular arrangement of the alley behind Thessaly.
Brooke	The sales associate at the boutique, a rallier who believes in solutions.

In this story only: the oat man appears in the novel, but Theo, the client with the frozen shoulder, the soccer player, the man in the quarter-zip and the woman who sold Lila her couch belong to this story.

Timeline

From the restaurant's first life to the night the committee is given a better table.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
The early 1980s	A young couple is photographed leaning toward each other over the corner table, back when the restaurant was still an Italian place called Milano's. Their picture goes up on the hallway wall.
1994	Stavros Papadimitriou takes over Milano's. He keeps the sign, same green, same frame, and has the new name painted over the old one.
2004	Elena starts at Thessaly.
2009	A man in his sixties is photographed alone at the corner table, one glass, one empty chair.
An April afternoon	Four women in four fitting rooms laugh at the same wrap dress. On the sidewalk, Jo names the Itty Bitty Titty Committee, and Pri names the group chat before Mara reaches the end of the block.
A Thursday soon after, seven	The first dinner at Thessaly, at the corner table. The deck of cards sits unopened between the water glasses. Afterward Pri writes in the chat: Same time next week.
The week after	Pri has a conference and Jo has open mics, and dinner moves. Lila loses her phone for four days. *Same Time Next Week* takes place here.
Three weeks after the first dinner	The second dinner. Jo tests the oat man bit on the table, and Pri describes a man to his face while he is standing there.
The third dinner	The cards come out at last. Danny builds an L of two tables, food on one side and Hearts on the other.
October	Stavros offers them the round table in the back on Thursday nights, with a lamp nobody asked for and nobody explains.

Places

- **Thessaly.** A Greek restaurant on its block since 1994, the sign faded from dark green toward sage. Inside it smells of olive oil and old wood, the menus are laminated, the kitchen is a low steady presence, and the A rating has hung in the window for eleven years running.
- **The corner table.** In the back, four chairs, clear sightlines to the entrance. Where the committee sits first, and where the couple in the oldest photographs once sat.
- **The round table.** The bigger table in the back. Everyone faces everyone.
- **The hallway wall.** Both sides, floor to ceiling, hundreds of photographs held up with pushpins: birthdays, anniversaries, people in paper crowns, couples who may or may not still be couples.
- **The boutique.** Where the whole rack is built on an aspirational premise, and where the committee began.

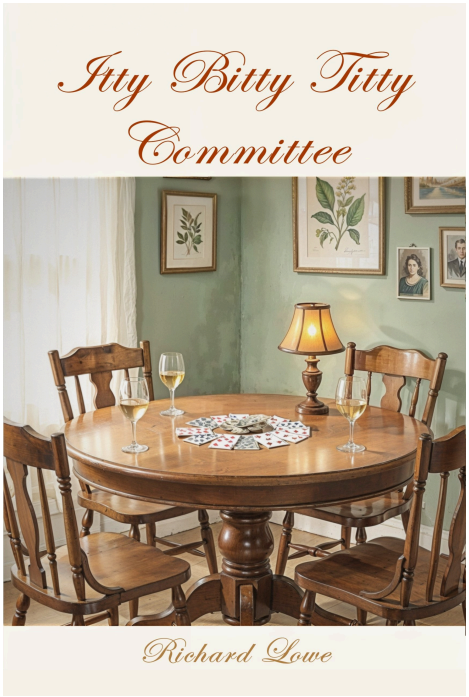
- **HOT SOUP.** A restaurant sign Lila once photographed. It has real energy. It is not a direction. It is a noun.
- **Lila's couch.** Technically a couch. A work in progress.

Glossary

- **The Itty Bitty Titty Committee.** The name Jo gave the four of them on the sidewalk. Mara said no. Lila said yes. It was decided.
- **The group chat.** Where the committee lives between Thursdays, sorted by month.
- **The star.** How Lila signs off. Nobody asked about it. It seemed right.
- **The microphone.** The emoji Jo puts after her own name. It speeds things along.
- **Load-bearing.** Mara's word, through a fitting room wall, for what the dart placement assumed was present.
- **Structural optimism.** A blouse with underwire.
- **The oat man.** A coffee shop regular whose order has stopped being an order and become a philosophical position.
- **Same time next week.** Pri's text after the first dinner, and the plan every Thursday after it.
- **Okay.** When Jo says it, it is a question. When Mara says it, it is a door.
- **Hearts.** The game in Lila's battered deck. The two of clubs opens, everyone passes three cards to the left, and the queen of spades is the card nobody wants.
- **Shooting the moon.** Taking every penalty card on purpose. In Hearts you win by losing least, unless you take everything.

Read the Novel

Four women who met laughing through the walls of a boutique fitting room keep a Thursday night table at Thessaly, the Greek place with the faded green sign and the photographs pinned up the hallway. Over a year of calamari, lamb and Hearts, Jo, Mara, Pri and Lila learn what it costs to be known and what it is worth. This story is one Thursday; the novel is the whole year at that table.



The Itty Bitty Titty Committee

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