

Now You Know - Synopsis

Assigned as college roommates in 1947, Frances Wilson and Libba Charles forged an unlikely friendship of opposites that ended only with Frances's lingering death decades later. Now, Frances's three grown daughters, who have never been close, struggle with loss and grief as they battle their personal demons. Alice is the control freak who fears she'll have nothing to show for her life as "only a mother"; Allegra is a belligerent recovering alcoholic separated from her husband and children; Edie, the youngest, is chronically disorganized, inept, and commitment phobic.

The summer after Frances's death, her three daughters are unwillingly reunited with Libba, a mercurial, contradictory, fascinating novelist, the seeming polar opposite to Frances. Alice, Allegra and Edie have long felt excluded from the two women's relationship. They resent Libba for siphoning away their mother's love and attention, for blatantly using their lives in her fiction, and suspect moreover that she assisted Frances's dying. Adding insult to injury, Libba has inherited Creek Cabin, their beloved summer cottage in the mountains, and has moved there to work.

And also to die. Unbeknownst to Alice, Allegra, and Edie, Libba has pancreatic cancer and, having watched Frances's protracted agony, refuses to seek treatment. When Libba summons the sisters to Creek Cabin to divide Frances's possessions, they come grudgingly, but come they do. Libba's terminal illness is eventually revealed, and the sisters remain at Creek Cabin because of their mother's deathbed command to "Look after Libba."

Set against alternating flashback scenes that illuminate Libba and Frances's history, Alice, Allegra, and Edie confront not only their own issues, but the surprising breaches, betrayals, and secrets behind an unshakeable intimacy they have simultaneously admired, envied, and resented. Until, finally, Libba charges the sisters to do for her what she did for Frances, their mother and her friend.

Now You Know is not one story, but five. The novel examines dynamics between sisters, between mothers and daughters, and the compromises and commitments women face in marriage, children, and careers. Most of all, though, it portrays not only the powerful alchemy of women's friendship -- the devotion and details that comprise it -- but the obligations and sacrifices that love compels us to make.

Now You Know

By Susan Kelly (<http://www.susanskelly.com>)

CHAPTER 1

September 4, 1947

The designated dorm room was more glorified corridor than bedroom. Like mirror images, the right and left walls were lined with a single iron bedstead, a bureau at its footboard, and a closet door. Between the two beds stood a radiator and a window overlooking the Emerson Seminary entrance three stories below.

The speckled black linoleum floor was obliterated by belongings -- an open trunk spewing sweaters, two laundry bags stuffed with blankets and sheets, a jumble of shoes and sports equipment and books, none of whose titles Frances Simpson recognized as required texts for Freshman English. She picked one up: *Brideshead Revisited*.

The custodian had deposited her trunk in the only available space left: the narrow aisle between the twin beds. Frances stepped around the mess left by her assigned but absent roommate, scraped her shin against the wing nut of a tennis racket press, sat on the stained mattress ticking, and opened the trunk. Full bottles and jars and a plastic soap container were fitted in one quadrant of the upper tray. Stiff coiled belts kept folded underwear and slippers from encroaching on the area allotted to sock balls and the satin lingerie bag for her stockings, an afterthought graduation present from her father, who'd purchased the first item he saw in the Montaldo's display case, Frances was certain, just as he did at Christmas for her mother. Frances stood and opened the window to relieve the musty stuffiness of the dorm room.

The door slammed open so suddenly that the brass hook attached to its back rammed noisily into the closet door, leaving a mark on the wood. "Oops," the girl said and peered at Frances. "Whoa. Thought for a minute you were dead."

"Wh -- pardon?"

"The way the sun's coming through that window, lighting up the back of your head. Looks like you have a halo."

Frances reflexively touched her light hair. Whoever she was, the girl with wiry black hair and eyes silver as the tiny diploma charm dangling from the bracelet on Frances's wrist, was the loveliest person she'd ever seen.

"Welcome to our grim and squalid abode." The girl stuck out her hand. "Libba Charles."

Frances thought only men shook hands, but she took it. "Frances Simpson."

Libba gestured to the room, its minuscule dimensions. "Didn't you have any pull?"

"Pull'?"

"I requested a Southern roommate. Doesn't everyone know everyone else down here from four generations back? I thought a Southerner would naturally pull some strings, shake the genealogical family tree to get us a decent room." She rolled up a sleeve of the man's shirt untidily tucked into wrinkled Bermudas. "Instead of a shoebox."

Frances didn't know how to respond. It *did* resemble a shoebox. But she hadn't requested anyone as roommate. Her mother had suggested she not begin college by singling herself out as someone who asked for special favors.

"Well," Libba said, "one out of two's not bad."

Frances couldn't resist. "What was the other one?"

"I already told you. A Southerner." Libba lifted a sneakered foot and nudged the trunk tray with its neat configuration of personal possessions. "You look pretty Southern."
"Alabama."

Libba positioned herself between the two beds and stretched out her arms to either side. "If my fingers were six inches longer I'd be able to touch both walls at the same time. Where's your mother, casing the joint?"

Frances opened her mouth. That's precisely what her mother was doing. An alligator belt unspooled in her fingers.

"I'm dying for a Coke." The door slammed again, and Libba was gone.

Pamela Simpson came in, her arms filled with student store supplies. She frowned at the disorder and picked her way gingerly across it. "There's a hotplate in the Commons area so you can heat soup if you're studying late at night. And an iron." She stacked new notebooks, diagonally blazoned Emerson Seminary across the front, on the scarred bureau top, then removed them again. "Do you see that dresser scarf? I packed it under your summer robe, next to your kid gloves."

Frances extracted the white linen rectangle. She hadn't known what a "dresser scarf" was when she'd seen it on Emerson Seminary's articles to bring, listed just below "white gloves" required for trips out of school. But her mother had known. Her mother, in fact, already owned a dresser scarf; several. "I bought a pennant for the wall too," Mrs. Simpson said, taking an elongated triangle of navy felt from the student store sack. "Now, what do you need help with?" she asked, raising her voice to be heard over a sequence of grinding thunks in the stairwell just outside the room. "I'll make your bed for you."

Again Libba Charles appeared in the doorway. This time she was pushing a two-wheeled dolly, with a chest of drawers leaning upright against its metal bars. She tipped the carrier

and the chest rocked forward and free, solid and enormous in the cramped room. Again she stuck out her hand, this time toward Pamela Simpson. "Libba Charles."

"What's that?" Mrs. Simpson asked.

"A dolly from the library. They won't miss it. I hated to ask one of those poor porters to bring my things in. It's hot, they're sweating."

"I didn't mean the dolly, I meant the --," Pamela Simpson said. Frances watched. So far, this scene was the most interesting aspect of going off to college. "I'm looking forward to meeting your mother, Libba. Where is she?"

"Which mother would that be? At any rate, none of them are here."

Mrs. Simpson blinked, plainly flustered by the plethora of information Libba had provided in her unrelated utterances, and returned to a topic she was sure of. "An extra chest of drawers wasn't on the Articles to Bring list. There's barely room for the two that came with the room."

"We'll make it work."

"I would imagine it's against the rules. Suppose everyone brought extra furniture, what then? Frances has a slipper chair she'd loved to have brought --"

But Libba was out in the hall, stashing the dolly in a linen closet. In the room again, she leaned over, pulled a handful of bundled wool from her trunk, regarded it, then re-wadded the sweaters. "Won't be needing these." She pushed the trunk under the bed. "Does it ever get cold?"

"November," Frances said, happy to oblige.

Mrs. Simpson reached to tuck her daughter's straying bra strap beneath the sleeveless blouse, where it belonged. "I'll make up your bed while you unpack, Frances," she said, and stepped dramatically over a cardboard carton of papers, books, record albums.

"Careful with those," Libba said. "They're my most treasured possessions."

As Frances's mother leaned into the trunk for folded sheets -- graduation presents as well, bearing her daughter's monogram stitched in pale pink -- a push-pin protruding from a bulletin board slanted against a battered leather suitcase snagged the hem of her skirt, ripping the seam. She sighed loudly.

"You know," Libba said thoughtfully, "it's too crowded in here for all three."

"Three chests," Mrs. Simpson agreed.

"Three *people*." Libba drummed her fingers against the offending wooden bureau. "I bet Frances can make her own bed. And lie in it too."

Pamela Simpson straightened. "Come out in the hall and give me a kiss good-bye, Frances."

Frances obediently followed her mother out of the room. She had no trouble maneuvering around the room's disarray. "Sweetie," Mrs. Simpson said, raising her voice slightly to be heard over the noise of other arriving girls. "Take my advice. Study hard. Be good. Never borrow clothes or money or anything else from a roommate. It only leads to trouble. I'll call you. The phone's --"

-- just down the hall," Libba called from inside the room.

Mrs. Simpson tensed, lowered her tone as she turned for the stairs. "If I were you, I'd look out for her."

When Frances came in again, Libba was examining the length of ironed linen that lay across the top of Frances's bureau. "What's this, a napkin?"

"A dresser scarf. It's required."

Libba rolled her eyes.

Frances picked up the pristine Emerson Seminary pennant. "Here," she said, "use this." And laughed, the first time Libba Charles was to hear that laugh, neither trill nor tinkle nor peal, but loud and unforced and unique.

As she grew up, the oldest sister Alice had difficulty deciding who to admire more in the Em Sem opening day scenario: the roommate who knowingly broke the rules, the roommate who wouldn't complain, or the parent who fought for her child's rights. Alice admired her mother's obedience to a parent yet scorned it. She admired Libba's presumption yet resented it. She admired her grandmother's adherence to principles, yet was embarrassed by her interference.

"I should have known then," Frances laughed years later. "Hand me the cruet."

"Known what?" Libba said. "Don't use too much vinegar."

"To steer clear of anyone with so much nerve."

"You should have known then that your redeemer had cometh to teach you the meaning of chutzpah. You should thanketh me on your kneeseth for giving you balls."

"Libba," Alice's father complained from behind the newspaper, but he laughed.

"What's `chutzpah?" Alice herself asked. "When's supper going to be ready?" The story became a metaphor for Alice, a life-theme of torn-betweenes.

"Has she done anything about that chest?" Frances's mother asked over the telephone several days later.

"Yes," Frances lied, a first.

By October, Frances was wearing Libba's pilled and raveled sweaters. By October, Libba was picking up the care packages Pamela Simpson mailed weekly from Alabama to her daughter in Virginia, and reading aloud the letters enclosing a ceaseless litany of social and academic advice. By October, the radiator was scorching their faces at night and waking them with its pre-dawn clanking, and warping the covers of the books Libba carelessly left atop it. By October there were eleven gashes on the closet door, which Frances drew a line through as a running tally of Libba's slammings. By December they knew they would room together again, knew they'd request the same shoebox of a room, knew what the other was thinking, knew what childhood refrains they'd been raised with.

"Here's what I was told from the moment I could talk until the moment I got on the train to come to Em Sem: `Lower your voice.'"

Frances laughed, that blurt of hilarity, juicy and joyous. "And here's what I was told: `Laugh like a lady.'"

By December, Frances Simpson and Libba Charles, the modest, obedient, Southern girl with the startling laugh and the brassy, ballsy Yankee gal with the startling good looks were inseparable. Classmates couldn't conveniently pigeonhole this perfect pairing of opposites in temperament, behavior, appearances, upbringing. The relationship between light-haired, fair-skinned, hazel-eyed Frances Wilson and dark-complected, grey-eyed Libba Charles was so unlikely as to seem both inexplicable and ludicrous: calm, reticent, unassuming and accepting Frances indivisible from restless, reckless, critical and aggressive Libba. As cliques subtly, invariably formed, the wilder girls--the smokers, the rule-breakers, the burgeoning beatniks, the literati--sought out Libba as an obvious recruit to their nonconformist ranks. The traditionalists -- the daters, the shoppers, the studious, the carefully groomed and attired-- let Frances know she was welcome in their studious, social midst. Both groups were ignored. Other girls speculated, whispered and conjectured behind their hands, unable to comprehend this bond, even less able to penetrate their cocoon of inseparability.

"How can you stand it?" a classmate asked Frances, "Libba's such a slob."

"Bite back, Frances," Libba said, "defend me."

"How can you stand it?" another asked, "waking up every morning next to someone so beautiful?"

"Bite back," Libba said, "that's a cut to *you*. Defend yourself!"

"Double O's" they dubbed themselves. For they discovered they were both only children of only children. Or in Libba's case, the only original child in a choppy sea of step-siblings and broken marriages. At holiday tables set for three, Frances sat lonely and bored. When someone managed to pull a meal together in whichever family Libba found herself during the holidays, she sat surrounded by relations she couldn't quite place and adults who threatened to break into bickering over something as insignificant as the consistency of the gravy.

"How old were you when they divorced?" Frances asked Libba of this inconceivable world, crowded, boisterous, argumentative.

"Eight, ten, fifteen," Libba shrugged. "Depends on how you count them. The original one? Or my mother's next divorce or my father's or -- never mind, doesn't matter. I'm not getting married."

"I am," Frances said, and pressed the sleeve of a shirt with the iron her mother had been so pleased to discover in the dorm's Commons. "I want to feel secure and loved. You will too."

"Oh, I won't. *Au contraire*. I want to feel free and irresponsible. Besides, you can be loved without being married. Hurry up with that." The only things Libba ever ironed were cheese sandwiches she'd wrapped in tinfoil.

"But what about children?"

"You can have a child without being married, too."

"Oh, Libba, be serious."

"I *am* serious."

"Maybe you can, but I want lots and lots. No one's ever going to be as lonely as I was."

"I wasn't a `child'. I wasn't even an offspring. I was a `product.' Says so right on the divorce papers, plural. You're the one majoring in husbandry, you have the children."

"What are you majoring in, English?"

"I'm majoring in experience so I can describe something with authority when I begin writing novels."

Frances lifted her chin with small triumph. "But who's going to describe the experience of having children for you, of being a family?"

Libba switched off the iron. "You."

As a child, the middle daughter Allegra took piano lessons just as her older sister Alice did. But unlike Alice, Allegra refused play the assigned pieces. She wasn't interested in *Fur Elise* or the theme from Hansel and Gretel or the Toreador's song from *Carmen*. Allegra took piano lessons only long enough to be able to pick out the song her mother and Libba sang snatches of, a song from Em Sem nickelodeon days. *If you'll be M-I-N-E mine I'll be T-H-I-N-E thine and I'll L-O-V-E love you all the T-I-M-E time. You are the B-E-S-T best of all the R-E-S-T rest and I'll L-O-V-E love you all the T- I-M- E time, rack 'em up, stack 'em up any ol' time.*

Libba and Frances were never sure whether the piano teacher gave up on Allegra or Allegra gave up on the piano.

"What do I intend to be?" Libba had echoed the guidance counselor's question. "Tough with a capitol T." Libba had shrugged when the story traveled the dorm and reached her. "She shouldn't have asked me what I wanted to *be*. She should have asked me what I wanted to *do*."

"Poor Libba," classmates said, and Frances knew what they meant in the low-flying radar of denigration. Libba was quick, decisive, clever and self-sufficient, traits that in a mid-twentieth century Southern milieu translated as abrupt, shrewd, manipulating, caustic. Not to Frances, who watched Libba pitch the oranges provided nightly to the dorms out the open window at teachers who-- innocently, unfortunately--chose to leave the college after dark. Not to Frances, who watched Libba sit in that same window, legs drawn to her chin, and smoke illegally, languorously, inches away from a tumble down a slate rooftop and three stories to the sidewalk. Not to Frances, for whom Libba Charles revealed a previously unglimped world of insisting upon what she wanted, of challenging what she didn't, and of questioning what she did.

Eddie -- the youngest daughter, the last -- spent hours closeted with the pebble-grained Em Sem yearbooks, locating her mother and Libba among the slick pages of black-and-white photographs: Glee Club, Altar Guild, Debating Team, athletic and academic and social clubs. And in the formal Senior pictures, too: ovals that encapsulated page-boy hairstyles and curving shoulders bare but for a modest yet provocative drape of black fabric below which Eddie could only guess at bosoms. The Em Sem yearbook pictures were nearly all she had with which to glimpse or imagine her mother's life before she became a mother, and nothing was more fascinating than a mother before she became A Mother. Unlike Alice and Allegra, Eddie hadn't been around to hear her mother and Libba's laughed conversations and reminiscences and jukebox tune duets. Because Eddie wasn't so much as a twinkle in her father's eye then, as they say. Eddie wasn't supposed to have been born at all.

After two weeks, the chest was still there, stolidly blocking passage. Mrs. Simpson decided it was time to get tough with her daughter, who seemed, after two weeks away

from home, to be just the slightest bit tougher herself, in an unattractive way. "If you don't turn that girl in to the Resident Advisor I'll do it myself."

Frances had returned glumly to the room. Flat on her back on the bed, Libba was walking her bare feet up the walls, leaving a staggered, shadowy path of footprints toward her bulletin board covered with lists and quotes and cartoons and celebrity--not family--photographs.

"That was my mother on the phone."

"Ah." Libba got up, began inching the chest toward the deep closet. "Let's make a deal," she said, grunting. She succeeded in wedging the chest inside the closet, scraped the coathangers to one side, then scrambled up to perch atop it. Her eyes gleamed in the semi-darkness. "A perfect place for writing."

"What's the deal?" Frances reminded her.

The proctor called from the hall. "Lights out in ten minutes."

Frances reached for the brass hook, and her nightgown.

"The deal is," Libba said, "that if you promise not to tell anyone I have this chest in *my* closet, I promise not to tell anyone that you're so modest you dress and undress in *your* closet."

The immovable object opened her mouth to protest. The irresistible force lifted her eyebrows.

"Okay," Frances said. "The chest stays."

I would look out for that girl if I were you, Mrs. Simpson had told her only daughter Frances.

"It's not exactly what she meant," that only daughter would tell her three daughters, Alice and Allegra and Edie, "but as it happened that's exactly what we did. We looked out for each other."