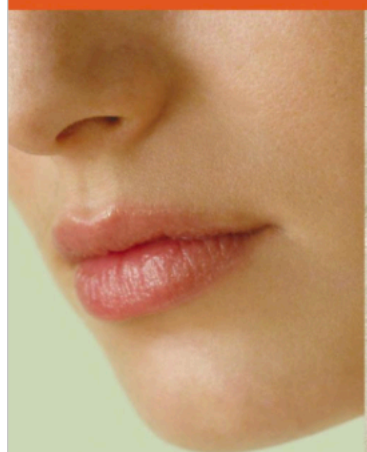




A Novel

SUSAN GILBERT-COLLINS



STARTING *from* SCRATCH

"Warm, witty, and redemptive."

—SUSAN REBECCA WHITE,
author of *A Soft Place to Land*

Photo: iStockphoto.com/Thomas M. H. Smith

"I mean," she said meekly, "the trip you and Vivian were supposed to take. Maybe you should still go."

"That was supposed to be a graduation present," Aunt Barbara said. "Here she hasn't even set a new defense date."

Father held up the flat of his hand to Aunt Barbara. "Olivia? Do you still want to go to Italy? We could always change the dates of the Casa Ombuto reservations, instead of canceling. A change of scene—"

"This isn't a Jane Austen novel," Olivia said, aware of sounding irrational. "No, I don't want to go." She had to work harder now to keep her mind blank. She focused on Aunt Barbara's pile of tissues, on the feel of the corner of the box against her toes.

"You wouldn't have to go alone," Father said. "Maybe Annie, or Ruby—"

"You could go, Charlie," Aunt Rubina said, but Father and Aunt Barbara both quelled her with a look. Vivian had been trying for years to get Charlie to take her to Italy.

"It's cheaper for me to stay home and make bad osso buco," Olivia said.

"I can't imagine it's anything but delicious," Rubina said.

"You're welcome to have some," Olivia said politely. "I have to run now, so I won't be having any." She stood. She could think of nowhere to go. The blank mind thing was working too well.

"Where are you going?" Father asked. He stood as well, and the aunts rose in tandem. They all stood there, tentatively.

Aunt Barbara said, "You aren't going to Annie's, I hope. It's my understanding that she still isn't feeling well."

"Exactly," Olivia said, because something had just come to her. "And she was supposed to deliver Meals on Wheels today. She called and asked me to sub for her."

Implicature: Olivia had agreed to sub for Annie. In fact, she had said no.

"So you see I have plenty to occupy my mind," Olivia said. She looked at her wrist, but of course she wasn't wearing a watch.