



Leslie Carroll
Choosing
A NOVEL
Sophie



A+
AUTHOR
INSIGHTS,
EXTRAS, &
MORE

Choosing Sophie

Leslie Carroll

*For my late uncle Adam Carroll,
who always promised to take me to a Mets game and never got to do it.*

Contents

Top of the First	1
Bottom of the First	22
Top of the Second	41
Bottom of the Second	57
Top of the Third	69
Bottom of the Third	86
Top of the Fourth	100
Bottom of the Fourth	111
Top of the Fifth	121
Bottom of the Fifth	131
Top of the Sixth	144
Bottom of the Sixth	158
Top of the Seventh	167
Seventh-Inning Stretch	182
Bottom of the Seventh	197
Top of the Eighth	209
Bottom of the Eighth	227
Top of the Ninth	235

[Bottom of the Ninth](#)

242

[Author's Note](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by Leslie Carroll](#)

[Credits](#)

[Cover](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)



Top of the First

“My knight in shining armor,” I purred gratefully, as Tom stepped onto the balcony and placed a steaming mug of coffee in front of me. “Where would I be without my morning fix?” I teased, reaching up to run my hand through his hair.

“The coffee or the *New York Times* online?” Tom leaned over and pressed his lips to the top of my head. “Mmmm . . . you smell good. Must be all this Colorado sunshine.” He kneaded my shoulders and took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the sweet mountain air. “I can never get enough of this,” he said, gesturing to the wide world beyond as if he owned the place. “If this is ‘God’s country,’ as they say, it’s almost enough to make a man a true believer.”

I kissed his hand and rested my cheek against it. The view of the mountains was indeed spectacular. In Tom’s chalet-style house I felt like a modern-day Heidi. “The longer I stay here, the greater the urge to yodel,” I kidded, turning back to my laptop.

“What could be better to look at than *this*?” Tom glanced over my shoulder at the laptop and frowned at the screen. “A garbage strike, another rapper shot in front of a nightclub, record-breaking heat—this is as close as I ever want to be to your

precious New York City." He shuddered dramatically, faking a visceral adverse reaction that he knows always gets my goat.

"Hey—no picking on my hometown!" I squeezed Tom's hand. "I thought you didn't mind it so much when you lived there."

"As a grad student. With an exit visa. Two years of business school and I knew I was coming back to the slopes. There are no decent places to ski in your state."

I took a sip of coffee, savoring its warmth as it coursed down my throat. Tom had brewed it just the way I like it—strong enough to stand a spoon in. "Oh, c'mon!" I gently bit his knuckles.

"Ow!"

"I told you not to insult New York. We've got great mountains! What about the Catskills? And the Adirondacks? This coffee is perfect, by the way." I tilted my head to beam at him. "So, I guess I'll keep you, after all." I twisted my engagement ring with my left thumb so the diamond would catch the morning light. "Yeah," I sighed happily. "You're a keeper. Even if you dis my city all the time. After all, it's so hard to get a great cup of coffee these days."

Tom took my left hand in his. His skin felt warm against mine. "The *Catskills*? Those aren't mountains. Those are *hills*. *These*," he said, gesturing expansively toward the incomparable vista of the jagged Ten Mile Range, "*these* are mountains."

The sky was impossibly blue. "Della Robbia blue" as Blanche Dubois would have called it. A color found in early Renaissance ceramics and the Colorado sky. Another perfect day in Paradise.

I turned back to the computer screen, where a *Times* headline announced the indictment of a city council member. "You don't really hate New York that much, do you?" For some reason, I found Tom's over-the-top distaste for the city more

amusing than annoying; it was writ so large that I found it hard to take seriously.

"It's a nice place to visit."

"What about as a place to get married?"

"I thought we were going to get married here?"

"But all my friends are in New York. Except for your family, I don't know anyone here but you." And we'd only known each other since February. I'd treated myself to a ski vacation over Presidents' Day weekend, or whatever the calendars call it these days. Tom was conducting a clinic at Breckenridge that was really designed to introduce potential customers to Elliott and Sons equipment—the company that's been owned by his family for four generations. Nowadays, there are Elliott daughters in the business, but the name remains a Victorian-era throwback. By the end of the holiday weekend Elliott and Sons had taken my credit card number in exchange for a state-of-the-art pair of boots and bindings, new skis, and poles—and I'd given my heart to the CEO.

Sometimes you just know.

"We'll fly your guests out here, Ollie," Tom offered.

"You're not *that* rich!" I teased. "Nor am I. And you know I hate it when you call me Ollie. Shades of a dragon puppet from a long-gone TV show. Besides, no one else does."

"Which is why *I* do. I figure the husband-to-be ought to get some special privileges or something."

I placed his hand on my breast. "You already do."

"Yay!" Tom's jubilant exclamation came out like a soft peal of music. He grinned. "I'm so glad you want to be Mrs. Tom Elliott of Breckenridge, Colorado."

"*Mmm . . .* aren't *you* an old-fashioned guy?" I nuzzled his knuckles. "Actually, I'll still be Ms. Olivia deMarley, late of New York for most of her years, and Las Vegas for several, by way of Massachusetts for three of them." I guided his hand

over the mountainous landscape of my chest. "But I'm still looking forward to marrying Number One Son of Elliott and Sons ski company and manufactorium."

"Is *manufactorium* a word?"

"It is now." I laughed and craned my neck to meet Tom's lips as he bent toward me. "You're the only man I've ever even *considered* marrying."

Come to think of it, I haven't had too many offers over the years. Burlesque dancers don't tend to be the kind of women a guy brings home to meet his mother. They hear what you do and figure it means you're a stripper. I've spent half a lifetime explaining the difference in order to justify my existence to people who don't deserve the disclaimer. But the truth is that most of my relationships tanked long before the subject of marriage (doing it, as opposed to avoiding it) was on the table.

"The only man?" Tom asked. "Really?" I nodded my head. "You never told me that before." He lifted my mane of hair and kissed the back of my neck. He could do that for days and I'd never tire of it. "The only one, huh? And why is that?"

"Skiing for compliments, I see." I turned toward him and snaked my hand between the buttons of his shirt, my fingers finding a slightly raised scar—the result of an unfortunate collision with a tree root—as I caressed his abdomen. "Because I love your crooked smile. And your curly hair. And the fact that you never curse, where I sound like a fucking stevedore sometimes. And because you give me earth-shattering orgasms, which I'd like to think is something I'll get to enjoy for the rest of my life. And because we totally trust each other and always have. But mostly. . . ? Because you make me laugh."

"Gee, I didn't know I was that funny looking." Tom went back inside the house and emerged a few moments later, shrugging on his knapsack. "All right, my love." He leaned

down and kissed me fully on the lips. "I'm off to work."

"I can't wait to see you later," I murmured.

Almost absentmindedly I clicked on the link to the *Times* obits. "Give each of your sisters a hug for me. And tell Luke he still owes me five dollars from that Trivial Pursuit match we had last month."

"My brother's not in on Fridays. But if I see Dad, I'll tell him to make good on Number Two Son's losses."

I reached for Tom's hand and squeezed it affectionately. "Nah—I can't take money from Papa Bear." I glanced back at the computer screen and literally felt the color drain from my cheeks.

"Ollie, honey—are you okay?"

"Uh . . . no . . . actually . . . I don't think." My head felt as though someone had just unscrewed it and, untethered, it was floating skyward of its own accord, leaving my body a hollow, gaping, useless thing, like a lamp stripped of its bulb.

"It's a very strange feeling to discover that you're an orphan by reading about it on the obituary page," I muttered, the words tumbling out of my mouth into the mug of hot coffee, where they melted into the dark liquid.

I have a morbid habit of checking the *New York Times* obits online every morning; it's what comes of having been a professional dancer for several years and losing too many friends to disease.

And there it was in black-and-white, with a decades-old portrait in shades of gray. Tom stood behind me and read the headline: *AUGUST DEMARLEY, SELF-MADE BILLIONAIRE, 82*. I found myself rooted to the chair, too stunned to move; Tom placed his arms around my shoulders and pressed my body against his midsection, holding me protectively. "Rats, Ollie. I'm so sorry."

Numb and tearless, I read the article. Deep inside, I'd hoped

for a bit more illuminating detail. Like *August deMarley, self-made billionaire, stubborn bastard, and rotten, absentee father*. The obit spent a few paragraphs on how he built up his business, gobbling smaller competitors like Pac-Man. "It's really a terrible photo they used. It has to be thirty years old," I said quietly.

I hadn't seen my dad in over two decades, not since I decided to chuck my trust fund and become a dancer, a rich girl's rebel experiment in living like a "real" person. But of course I went a bit too far for Dad's taste. With Dad, everything was a double-edged sword. In accordance with his no-handouts philosophy, I was expected to obtain my college tuition the old-fashioned way: I had to earn it—from freshman orientation week all the way through to commencement. And once I'd achieved that, I'd gain access to the trust.

But one Saturday, for a lark, I took a special master class offered through the dance department with the burlesque queen Sherry Britton, and I was hooked. I bought my own boa and never looked back.

Putting myself through Harvard by performing in pasties, however artistic, wasn't exactly what he'd hoped I had in mind as an after-school job. I'm sure he would have been happier if I'd cleaned toilets or flipped patties at Bartley's Burger Cottage.

So, August deMarley vowed that if his daughter was willing to cavalierly shed an Ivy League education to fan dance and twirl her tassels, not only would she never get another penny from him, but she'd never hear from him again. And he'd stuck to it, the bastard. The irony is not lost on me that I never gained his trust.

He even knew why I'd dropped out. And evidently didn't care.

Before I turned twenty-one, I ripped the Virginia Woolf and

Superman II posters from my dorm room walls, said ciao to my three suite mates, and headed for Las Vegas, where you could still make a damn fine living in burlesque; where some folks understood that there was more titillation and allure in what was artfully kept *on*. By that time, my mom was gone, too—long gone; but in her case there was no hope of reconciliation unless you held a séance. Mom was the only one who had a way with old Augie; she could extend a Shalimar-scented arm, and with a manicured hand that always had the magic touch (when it wasn't gripping a cigarette holder), gently reach for Dad's knee, or sleeve, as if to say "Stop. Reconsider." Lung cancer took Lilith deMarley just when I needed her most, just when my legs seemed to grow six inches longer overnight, hurtling me toward a precipitous six feet—ever been four inches taller than your prom date?—and my burgeoning bosom, horribly out of control—ever been four inches taller than your prom date?—began to resemble a grade B sci-fi movie: the boobs that ate the Bronx. Riverdale, to be more geographically specific. To be most precise, the private tree-lined enclave of sprawling Arts and Crafts homes known as Fieldston.

Augie deMarley was the quintessence of the up-by-the-bootstraps businessman. If you've poured a can of deMarley High-Performance Ultra-Viscosity Motor Oil into your engine, you've put oleo on our family table. I was in kindergarten the first time I heard the phrase "I don't raise spoiled brats." Then came the "learn-the-value-of-a-dollar" speech that I'd been compelled to listen to so often I could recite it in my sleep. And once or twice I probably did.

I read on as Tom stood by, a silent presence ready to offer moral support, Kleenex, and as many hugs as I needed. "*A dozen years ago, he indulged a childhood fantasy by purchasing a controlling interest in the Bronx Cheers, a minor league baseball*

franchise, building a brand-new stadium, deMarley Field, on City Island. The Cheers became deMarley's greatest love in his golden years, although, to his dismay, it always performed near the bottom of the pack, never even making it to the playoffs. Of the owner's zeal, manager Dusty Fredericks recalled, "The boss used to yell at the kids a lot, but at the end of the season, no matter how lousy we played, he would come into the clubhouse with a grin on his face like it was the Fourth of July. 'Just wait'll next year!' he always said, like he was revving up the troops. He could be a real pain in the patoot, but he loved that team like they were his own kids.'""

I tried to chuckle, but it stuck in my throat. *Like his own kids*, I thought. *Yeah, right. If this Dusty guy only knew.* The obit ended with the sentence, *deMarley is survived by his only child, Olivia, a former burlesque queen who performed nationally as Venus deMarley. Ms. deMarley currently resides in Manhattan.*

I guess he had no idea that, having just gotten engaged to the CEO of a Colorado-based sports equipment company, I'd put my Manhattan duplex on the market and winged it out West. But Dad had evidently known where I'd been for the past several years. Or someone close to him did, because my number is unlisted. And I'm not sure how I feel about that. Every year I sent him cards for his birthday and Christmas . . . even Father's Day . . . and they always came back stamped RETURN TO SENDER. So if the bastard knew where to reach me, and never did anything about it . . . son of a bitch! With a spiteful click of my mouse, I minimized the obit on my computer screen.

Then I cried all over my keyboard.

"I bet if someone were to hold a symposium on a mountaintop in Montana for everyone who spent their lives trying to please their parents and failing at it miserably, there'd be no one left in the rest of the contiguous forty-eight states, and an awfully deep crater in Big Sky Country. I've always admired your closeness to your family," I sniffled.

Tom knelt beside my chair and dabbed at my tears with one of the navy bandannas he uses for a handkerchief. "Are you going east for the funeral?"

I took the bandanna and finished the job. "If there is one. I guess I'd better do some sleuthing and find out. I *should* go. It would feel wrong not to."

I jumped at the sound of a disembodied jangle.

"Your pocket is ringing," observed Tom.

I reached into the Navajo cardigan and answered the phone. Realizing I was in no shape to concentrate on memorizing anything, I waved to Tom for a notepad so I could jot down the information, while the caller—Dad's lawyer, Casper Gaines—did most of the talking. I held up my end of the conversation by managing a few subdued "*uh-hunhs*" and "*mm-hmms*."

"There's not going to be a formal funeral," I said, flipping the phone closed. "Just a memorial service on Sunday."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Tom softly stroked my hair. "I'll even buy a suit."

I shook my head and glanced up at him. "Papa Bear would be very disappointed if you were to miss the annual staff retreat. Besides, considering the way things were—or weren't—between old Augie and me, I think it's probably better anyway if I go it alone. It's only for a weekend. I'll catch a flight back on Monday."

He was trying very hard not to look relieved. "You sure?"

"Yeah," I sighed, still unable to muster a feeling I would characterize as grief. "And you're kind and sweet to want to be there for me—with me." I managed a weak smile. "But given the way you feel about New York, you'd probably have an even more miserable time than I will."

Within five minutes I'd booked a flight.

Tom perched on the edge of our bed as silent as a cat and watched me struggle with what to pack. If the little black dress

and Ferragamo pumps I'd brought out to Colorado wouldn't cut it, somewhere in my closet in New York was a suitable outfit. It had been a while since I needed to don a dress and heels. I hadn't worn much more than jeans and boots in the six weeks I'd been living with Tom in Breckenridge.

Tom drove me to the airport in the (IMO) unnecessarily capacious Expedition I always refer to as his Ford Mastodon. "I'll miss you," he whispered in between good-bye kisses.

"I'll miss you, too. Sorry I made you late to work," I murmured, tasting his post-breakfast Snickers bar on his tongue. I patted my purse. "I'll just have to make do with cuddling your photo for the next couple of nights." I glanced toward the security checkpoint. The TSA attendant was glaring at me with an air of exasperated impatience. I surmised that she didn't have a sensitive and handsome fiancé to comfort her on the demise of her dear old dad. "I guess I should go, sweetheart. Enjoy the retreat. Don't eat too much junk food."

We kissed once more. Tom cradled my face in his hands. I could see my reflection in his hazel eyes. "And you enjoy the—well, no, I suppose that would be wildly inappropriate. See you Monday, my love."

I drank in his body—tall and fit in his fleece jacket, the boyish blue backpack, the curls that flopped over his forehead and refused all attempts at taming, his sweet, off-center smile—and mouthed the words "I can't wait."



"It's a big day, Marty. At least you could dress like a man." Marty deMarley's wife, Linda, was smoothing a pair of twenty-eight-dollar pantyhose over her freshly waxed legs. "Take off the stupid jersey and put on a suit, for Chrissakes. The lightweight navy pinstripe. At least you look like a grown-up in that one."

Who is this harpie and why did I marry her? Marty wondered, yanking the Bronx Cheers shirt over his head and folding it reverentially before placing it in a dresser drawer. "I thought," he said, trying very hard to pitch his voice in a tone that his wife wouldn't consider whining, "that I would honor Uncle Augie by wearing the team jersey."

Linda emitted an exasperated sigh. "Not to a funeral. Have a little respect."

"I thought that's what I *was* having."

She gave a little snort. It was a personal habit of hers that Marty detested. In fact it set his teeth on edge. "No class, Marty. No class," Linda scolded, without a trace of irony. "You can have all the money in the universe, and still have no class." Marty was a wealthy Chihuahua of a bond trader, who more than anything had wanted to become an athlete. But given a naturally scrawny build that all the Wheaties in the world couldn't improve upon, and his complete lack of hand-eye coordination, Marty couldn't have followed his bliss with a divining rod. And once upon a time, about ten years ago, he'd considered himself very lucky to have married the tanned, toned, highlighted and lipo'ed Linda Bud-dinsky. She had all the elegance of a racehorse, was always the best-dressed among their set, and took care of her body the way their gardener Emmanuel tended to their prize orchid collection.

What Linda got out of it was the opportunity to change her surname to something that screamed WASP breeding, a generous allowance, and a man she could push around like a wheelbarrow. Neither one of them had wanted children, which suited Linda just fine because half the time Marty behaved like more than enough of a child for her to handle.

"You never know who you're liable to run into," Linda continued to carp. "Your uncle Augie was quite the philanthropist.

The mayor could be there . . . Donald Trump. The press. People know about this event; it's been in the papers. You need to prepare yourself for the spotlight."

"For God's sake, Linda, it's a *memorial service*, not a ticker-tape parade." Marty took the freshly pressed blue suit from his closet. He was still upset about his wife's nixing of the baseball jersey. "I have to dress like this every day," he muttered.

Linda chose to ignore him, turning her attention to Rosebud, her Yorkie, which she carried everywhere in her monogrammed Prada bowling bag. "You never give me any trouble," she cooed to the dog's liquid brown eyes and wet nose. She opened a drawer filled with carefully organized accessories and removed a black satin bow, murmuring inanities as she affixed it to a topknot of hair.

"You . . . you aren't bringing her to Campbell's . . . are you?" Marty asked his wife.

Linda's expression managed to blend both pout and sneer. "She calms my nerves. You know how I get at funerals."

"It's not a funeral, it's a memorial. There won't be a body. Just a bunch of people making nice speeches," Marty insisted. "And under the circumstances, I think it's inappropriate to bring the dog. Can't you leave her home just once?"

"She has a delicate constitution. You know she throws up when we leave her alone for too long." Linda meticulously folded her black pashmina, and used it to carefully line the inside of the Prada bag. "Are *you* going to clean up the mess?"



The limos lined Madison Avenue outside the Frank E. Campbell funeral home. Frankly, I was surprised that so many people had turned out to say good-bye to Augie deMiser. I didn't know any of them, though the folks from the Bronx Cheers organization wore lapel pins with the team logo, a biplane dropping a

baseball. I always hated the logo, but I guess someone thought it was clever, since the image suggests the venerated New York Yankees—affectionately known as the Bronx Bombers. Actually, it was pretty funny when the players burst into “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” and tossed boxes of Cracker Jack to the mourners sitting oh-so-respectfully amid Campbell’s staid, faux-eighteenth-century decor.

“You ever wonder why they’re called Cracker Jacks when there’s no crackers in them?” whispered my cousin Marty to his wife, Linda.

“No, Marty,” I haven’t,” she hissed back. “Now look respectful.”

There were several “civilians” in attendance, including a tall young woman who nervously played with her brown ponytail and hung by the wall looking distinctly uncomfortable. After a second glance at her, I briefly wondered whether Dad had committed a little indiscretion somewhere along the way, but I wasn’t in the mood to chitchat, let alone condole, so I didn’t approach her—or anyone else for that matter. I was there out of obligation, not out of love—or even curiosity.

The *Times* obit had mentioned Dad’s philanthropy, so I suppose a lot of beneficiaries decided to pay their last respects. In our household, charity didn’t begin at home, so it pleased me that at least someone—several someones by my head count of dark suits—had derived more than a clean engine from de-Marley Motor Oil.

“Were you invited to the distribution, Livy?” Linda de-Marley, my cousin-in-law, whispered jealously. We’d never particularly seen eye to eye, especially since hers tended to be right at my chest level. At forty-three, Linda was perfectly toned, though entirely lacking when it came to curves. My cousin Marty, however, had a bit of a beer gut, despite his resemblance otherwise to the ninety-pound weakling in the old

Charles Atlas ads. Linda always reminded me of a whip with a human face. Not just because of her too-rich-and-too-thinness, but because at any moment, she looked like she might crack and unleash a helluva sting.

The “distribution” meant the reading of Dad’s will, and to my surprise, I had in fact been invited. Casper “Cap” Gaines, Dad’s lawyer—whose nickname had been deliberately bestowed—had e-mailed me about the 2:00 p.m. postmemorial appointment in his office. I wondered what sort of a gathering it would turn out to be.

I’d expected to be no more than a spectator at that shindig, asked to attend out of courtesy, given that I was Dad’s only child. So I tried not to express any astonishment when a black leather chair was pulled out for me in a most gentlemanly fashion by Cap Gaines. His conference table was about the size of a football field, dominating a multiwindowed room high over Wall Street with an enviable three-way vista. The August heat visibly shimmered off the rivers. Even through the summer haze, you could see all the way east to Coney Island, catch the Statue of Liberty in mid-wave to the south, and glance north to glimpse the House that Ruth built. *These are my Rocky Mountains*, I thought, my lips curling into a faint smile, which I quickly suppressed by covering my mouth with the back of my hand. I slid into the chair and slipped off my slingbacks, hoping no one would notice. As it was, in my four-inch heels I’d towered over everyone at the memorial service. Though my height had been somewhat intimidating, truth told, it masked the incredible insecurity I’d felt—worried I’d seem such a phony—that after all these years The Daughter only showed up once her difficult dad was safely resting for all eternity in a brass urn.

There was my cousin Marty, who had changed into his Bronx Cheers shirt, wearing the custom-made number 0, which I