



Brunch
AT
Bittersweet
Café

A
SUPPER CLUB
NOVEL

CARLA LAUREANO

Praise for Carla Laureano

The Saturday Night Supper Club

“A terrific read from a talented author. Made me hungry more than once. I can’t wait to read what comes next.”

FRANCINE RIVERS, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Masterpiece*

“Bright, jovial, and peppered with romance and delectable cuisine, this is a sweet and lively love story.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review

“Romance aficionados and fans of stories about overcoming obstacles and the role of faith in everyday life will eagerly await the next entry in this sweet food-centered series.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Laureano’s latest novel, the first in her Supper Club series, is a delight for foodies! There’s a delectable amount of behind-the-scenes restaurant and cooking detail . . . that will literally have readers’ mouths watering for a taste.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, 4 ½ star Top Pick

“This romance nurtures the balance between following one’s dreams and embracing the moment.”

FOREWORD MAGAZINE

“Writing charmingly about faith, love, friendship, and food, Laureano will leave readers hungry for the next installment in the Supper Club series.”

BOOKLIST

“You don’t have to be a foodie to enjoy *The Saturday Night Supper Club*, but if you are, you’re in for an extra treat. Carla Laureano has written a delicious romance you’ll want to devour in one sitting. Filled with sugar and spice, *The Saturday Night Supper Club* will leave you hungry for more from this talented author.”

IRENE HANNON, bestselling author and three-time RITA Award winner

“At turns devastating and delightful, this novel contrasts the heartbreak of instant infamy against the charm of a budding attraction. Highly recommended!”

SERENA CHASE, author of *Intermission* and the Eyes of E’veria series

“An absolute delight with compelling characters, a rich sense of place, and food that lingers on your palate long after the final page.”

KATHERINE REAY, author of *A Portrait of Emily Price* and *The Austen Escape*

“Smart, funny, romantic, hopeful—the perfect starter for Laureano’s scrumptious new series.”

CANDACE CALVERT, bestselling author of *Maybe It’s You* and *The Recipe*

“*The Saturday Night Supper Club* is a riveting read, crafted with sophisticated characters, delicious settings, and a satisfying romance that will leave readers breathless and anxious for the next book in the series.”

JEN TURANO, *USA Today* bestselling author of *A Change of Fortune*

Five Days in Skye

“Sweet and scathing, lush and intimate. . . . This story has guts and heart as well as the depth and heat necessary to satisfy any romance reader’s palate.”

USA TODAY

“From page one, *Five Days in Skye* captured my imagination and every minute of my pleasure-reading time. With enviable finesse, author Carla Laureano weaves romance, hope, healing, and faith into a spunky and sparkling tale that made me sorry to say good-bye to the characters and the alluring Isle of Skye. I look forward to reading more from this author.”

TAMARA LEIGH, author of *Splitting Harriet* and *The Unveiling*, book one in the Age of Faith series

“After reading *Five Days in Skye*, I wanted to pack my bags and catch the first flight to Scotland to discover Skye for myself. In her debut novel, Carla Laureano brought Skye alive with vivid detail, drew me into the main characters’ budding romance, and kept me turning the pages late into the night. I’m looking forward to more books from Carla!”

BETH K. VOGT, author of *Things I Never Told You*

“*Five Days in Skye* swept me away to Scotland! Against the craggy beauty of the Isle of Skye, author Carla Laureano weaves a story . . . of love between an American businesswoman and a Scottish celebrity chef. Fans of the movie *The Holiday* are sure to enjoy this contemporary romance. Laureano’s voice is deft, seamless, and wonderfully accomplished. An exciting newcomer to the world of Christian fiction!”

BECKY WADE, author of *My Stubborn Heart* and *Undeniably Yours*

London Tides

“In *London Tides*, Carla Laureano shows how fear and grief can hold us captive—unable to love ourselves and others. Yes, Laureano has written a beautiful reconciliation romance, but she also delves into deeper themes of identity and acceptance. The character of Grace Brennan, in spite of her unconventional life, speaks to all of us.”

BETH K. VOGT, author of *Things I Never Told You*

“Achieving an aching depth and a resounding trueness within a heated yet baggage-ridden romance, author Carla Laureano has proven herself a storyteller who is not afraid to take her characters into the darkest regions of their own hearts. An excellent follow-up to *Five Days in Skye*, *London Tides* tugs and churns every emotion . . . right up until the lovely, hope-buoying end.”

SERENA CHASE, author of *Intermission* and the Eyes of E’veria series

“At times lighthearted; at times heart wrenching. Laureano has penned a delightfully romantic tale about the importance of finding home. If readers weren’t already smitten with the MacDonald brothers, they will be after *London Tides*!”

KATIE GANSHERT, award-winning author of *No One Ever Asked*

“Another captivating story! *London Tides* is as compelling and engaging as Laureano’s award-winning *Five Days in Skye*. It’s deliciously romantic and filled with tension, wonderful characters, and vivid scenery. A must-read this summer!”

KATHERINE REAY, author of *A Portrait of Emily Price* and *The Austen Escape*

“War photographer Grace Brennan is the kind of character I love to read about—she’s savvy, fearless, and damaged, yet is determined to carry on. Returning to London means making amends with Ian MacDonald, the fiancé she left behind, and author Carla Laureano knows how to make the most of their chemistry. But a chance at love for Grace also means facing the realities of PTSD, a subject Laureano handles with great sensitivity and care. Vividly written and deeply felt, *London Tides* will sweep readers away.”

HILLARY MANTON LODGE, author of *A Table by the Window*

Under Scottish Stars

“In *Under Scottish Stars*, independent single mother Serena Stewart returns to the beautiful land of Skye, looking for stability for her two small children—not romance with Malcolm Blake, who manages the hotel that Serena owns with her two brothers. Their ‘this can’t be happening’ relationship is engaging, and Carla Laureano reveals both Serena’s and Malcolm’s vulnerabilities as they fall in love when they least expected it. *Under Scottish Stars* is a satisfying romance that reminds readers that love doesn’t always go according to our agendas—and that can be a very good thing.”

BETH K. VOGT, author of *Things I Never Told You*

“*Under Scottish Stars* is a fabulous read, filled with compelling characters, a delicious setting, and a romance that can only be described as . . . swoon-worthy. Carla Laureano’s third and final book in the MacDonald Family Trilogy exceeded all my expectations and truly shouldn’t be missed.”

JEN TURANO, *USA Today* bestselling author of *A Change of Fortune*

“Solid characters, brilliant dialogue, believable conflict, a setting you can taste—and, always, breath-stealing love scenes. No one writes a romantic hero like Laureano! *Under Scottish Stars* takes us back to Skye to explore poignant truths of single parenthood, family loyalty, the pursuit of dreams—and faith. A satisfying and stellar finish to the MacDonald Family Trilogy.”

CANDACE CALVERT, bestselling author of *Maybe It’s You* and *The Recipe*

Brunch at Bittersweet Café

Brunch
AT
Bittersweet
Café

A
SUPPER CLUB
NOVEL

CARLA LAUREANO



*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois*

Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

Visit Carla Laureano's website at www.carlalaureano.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Brunch at Bittersweet Café

Copyright © 2019 by Carla Laureano. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph by Lindsey Bergsma. Copyright © Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved.

Author photo by Reynaldo Laureano, copyright © 2017. All rights reserved.

Designed by Mark Anthony Lane II

Edited by Sarah Mason Rische

Published in association with the literary agency of The Steve Laube Agency.

Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,[®] NIV.[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[®] Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Brunch at Bittersweet Café is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-800-323-9400.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Laureano, Carla, author.

Title: *Brunch at Bittersweet Cafe* : a supper club novel / Carla Laureano.

Description: Carol Stream, Illinois : Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., [2019]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018033470 | ISBN 9781496432704 (hc) | ISBN 9781496420282 (sc)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3612.A93257 B78 2019 | DDC 813/.6--dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018033470>

Printed in the United States of America

25 24 23 22 21 20 19
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my mom, Cathy.

You've supported me in every wild dream and change of direction.

I'll always be grateful for your love and encouragement.

Acknowledgments

OVER TIME, my acknowledgments begin to sound like broken records, because I'm always thanking the same people for the same things. Writing a novel may be a solitary act, but publishing and the writing life itself are not. When you're fortunate enough to have an amazing team around you, you settle in and thank the Lord and hope nothing ever changes.

A thousand thank-yous to the Tyndale #dreamteam: Karen Watson, Jan Stob, Sarah Rische, Kristen Magnesen, Amanda Woods, Sharon Leavitt, Mark Lane, Danika King, and our awesome Tyndale sales reps. I'm truly blessed to work with each and every one of you. The words "publishing home" are often used too lightly, but it truly does feel like home.

A big salute to Steve Laube, agent/mentor/counselor/story-teller extraordinaire. You wear a lot of hats, but you make it look easy. I want to be half the encourager you are when I grow up (even if the growing-up thing is looking less and less likely).

Chips and salsa to Audra Jennings for making my life so much easier while I was editing this book; it's the least I can do.

A thousand tiny packets of airline peanuts (and my undying gratitude) to Vance Franks, who helped me with the aviation

details, reviewed the pertinent passages, and made my sons' year by letting them climb inside his own gorgeous homebuilt plane.

Caffeine and chocolate to my writer squad: Lori Twichell, Brandy Vallance, Evangeline Denmark, Jen Turano, Elizabeth Byler Younts, and Amber Lynn Perry. You guys keep me sane, focused, and encouraged, especially on the days that our "water cooler chats" are the only thing keeping me going.

Hugs and kisses to my husband, my two wonderful boys, and my mom and dad. You take the crazy in stride and are still proud of me. I love you bunches.

And lastly, *all the books* to my wonderful readers, including Tai Sith, who came up with the fabulous fractional name AvionElite. Without all of you, I wouldn't get to live my dream. You're the reason I'm here, so *thank you*.

Chapter One

ONCE UPON A TIME, Melody Johansson had believed in happily ever afters.

To be truthful, she still believed in them, but with her thirtieth birthday in the rearview mirror, the fairy-tale ending had turned away from meeting a handsome prince to owning a little *patisserie* in Paris. Even if sometimes, as she toiled away in her own version of Cinderella's attic, both fantasies seemed equally far-fetched.

Melody brushed past the ovens in the bakery's kitchen, giving the loaves inside a cursory glance, then dragged a rolling rack of rectangular tubs from the back wall. Customers no doubt had romantic ideals of what it meant to be a baker, picturing quaintly dressed European peasants kneading loaves by hand and shoving them into ovens on long-handled peels, but the American commercial bakery had far more in common with an assembly line than a charming country *boulangerie*.

Still, there were worse places to spend the dark, still hours of the night than surrounded by loaves of bread, their deep-brown,

crackling exteriors fragrant with wheat and caramel and yeast. But Melody was closing on the end of a twelve-hour shift alone, and the only drifts she wanted to be enveloped in were the fluffy plumes of the down duvet on her antique bed. Not the hard, wet snow that coated the city like a sprinkling of demerara sugar on a freshly baked pastry. It looked beautiful, but the peaceful surface concealed treacherous sheets of ice, courtesy of Denver's mercurial warm-then-snowy March weather. Every time spring looked to be on the horizon, winter yanked it back for one last hurrah.

Melody muscled a forty-pound tub of dough to the benchtop and overturned it in one swift movement. She'd done this enough in her career to judge two-pound portions by eye, but she still put each piece on the scale after she cut it from the mass with her steel-bladed bench knife. Unconsciously, she matched the cadence of her movements to the music softly pouring from the speakers. Cut, weigh, set aside. Cut, weigh, set aside. Then came the more complex rhythm of shaping each loaf. A dusting of flour, push away, quarter turn. Each stroke of the scraper beneath the loaf rolled the dough inward on itself, creating the surface tension that transformed the loose, wet lump into a taut, perfectly formed round. Then the loaf went into the cloth-lined proofing basket to rise before she went on to the next one. Twenty times per tub, multiplied by the number of tubs on the rack. She was going to be here for a while.

Baking wasn't usually such solitary work. A second baker normally worked the weekend shifts to make up for the café's increased traffic on Saturday and Sunday, but he lived south of the city, just past the point where they had closed the interstate. It shouldn't have been a surprise—practically every storm closed Monument Pass. Had it been Melody, she would have driven up earlier on Friday morning to make sure she was able to make her shift on time. But then, she'd worked her entire adult life in restaurants and bakeries, where the first rule was: always show up.

That meant her usual eight-hour shift had morphed into twelve.

She muffled a yawn with the back of her arm. “Get it together, Melody. Only two more hours.” Assuming the morning staff got here on time to put the proofed loaves into the oven.

Maybe it was time to cut this job loose. She’d been here for six months, which, with the exception of a single fine-dining gig, was the longest she’d been in one place in her life. She needed variety. She could churn out someone else’s mediocre recipes for only so long before she felt like she’d sold out.

She’d been wanting to go back to Europe. She’d been away from Paris for eight years, and even then she’d been so busy as a baking apprentice that she’d never had the chance to explore France beyond the capital. A few months to travel sounded like heaven.

Melody sighed. That was as much a work of fiction as any book in her extensive library. Based on the current state of her savings account, she could barely fund a trip to the airport, let alone any points beyond.

She was heading back for a fourth tub when she heard a tapping from the front of the store. She frowned, cocking her head in that direction. Probably just the snow or the wind rattling the plate-glass windows. This strip mall was old, and every storm shook something new loose.

No, there it was again. She wiped her hands on her apron and slowly poked her head out of the kitchen toward the front entrance.

A man stood at the front door, hand raised to knock on the glass.

Melody hesitated. What on earth was anyone doing out in this storm at 4 a.m.? Even worse, what was she supposed to do? It didn’t bother her to be here alone, but she kept everything securely locked until the morning staff arrived to welcome customers.

“Hello?” His muffled voice sounded hopeful. Didn’t sound like someone who was planning on murdering her. But what did a murderer sound like anyway?

She approached the window cautiously. “Can I help you?”

He exhaled, his breath crystallizing around him in a cloud. “My car got stuck down the street. Can I use your phone? Mine’s dead, and I forgot my charger in the hotel.” He pulled out a cell phone and pressed it against the wet window. Evidence, apparently.

Melody wavered. From what she could tell through the snow-crusted window, he was nicely dressed. Didn’t sound crazy. And sure enough, when she peered down the street, she could see a car cockeyed against the curb with its emergency flashers on.

“Listen, I don’t blame you for being cautious. I’m a pilot, see?” He opened his overcoat to show a navy-blue uniform and then pulled out a badge clip holding two unreadable cards. “These are my airport credentials. Homeland Security and my employer trust me with a thirteen-million-dollar plane. I promise, I just need a phone.”

A gust of wind hit him full force, the smattering of snow crackling against the window. He turned up his collar and hugged his arms to himself, waiting for her response.

Melody sighed and pulled a key ring from her belt loop. She couldn’t leave the poor guy outside to freeze, and she knew there wasn’t likely to be another place open for miles. She just prayed that her compassion wasn’t going to backfire on her. The lock clicked open, and she pulled the door inward.

He rushed in, rubbing his hands together. “Thank you. You have no idea how much I appreciate this.”

“Sure. The phone’s over there by the register.” Melody pointed him in the direction of the counter.

He nodded, turned toward the phone, then hesitated and stuck out his hand. “I’m Justin Keller.”

As his cold fingers closed on her warm hand, she looked up and found herself frozen by brilliant blue eyes. “Melody Johansson.”

He smiled, causing her heart to give a little hiccup, and released her before moving toward the phone. She watched as he dug a roadside assistance card from his wallet and dialed.

The stranger she’d rescued was handsome. Almost unfairly so. Hair that vacillated between blond and brown, cut short and a little spiky. Those arresting blue eyes. And a crooked leading-man smile that must routinely melt women into puddles at his feet. No, not leading man . . . fairy-tale prince. Why was it that pilots seemed to dominate the good-looking end of the gene pool? Was it a prerequisite for the job?

Justin was talking in a low voice—a sexy voice, she had to admit, just deep enough to balance the boyish charm—and she realized she should probably get back to work before he caught her staring. But he turned to her and cradled the handset against his shoulder. “They said it’s going to take a while. Is it okay if I wait here?”

“Sure.” She might have been reluctant to let him in, but her answer now was a little too enthusiastic. From the slight glimmer of a smile he threw back to her, he’d probably heard it too.

Well, a guy like that had to be aware of the effect he had on women. She had just never thought of herself as predictable.

He hung up the phone. “They say two hours, but they also said that there are people stranded all over Denver right now. I have no idea how long it will be. Are you sure it’s okay? I don’t want you to get in trouble for letting me in.”

“It’s no trouble.” Especially since the opening manager was a single woman. She’d take one look at him and understand Melody’s decision. “I’ve got to get back to work, though. Do you want some coffee?”

“I’d kill for some coffee.”

“I’m not sure I like the choice of words, but I understand the

sentiment.” Melody smiled at the flash of embarrassment that crossed his face. “Have a seat and I’ll get you a cup. One of the perks of the night shift—unlimited caffeine.”

“Sounds like more of a requirement than a perk.”

“Sometimes.” She found a ceramic mug under the counter and then went to the vacuum carafe that held the coffee she’d made a few hours earlier. She pushed the plunger to dispense a cup and set it on the counter. “Cream and sugar are over there.”

“I take mine black.” He retrieved the mug and warmed his hand around it for a moment before he took a sip. “It’s good. Thank you.”

“Sure.” She’d said she needed to get back to work, but now she found herself hovering awkwardly behind the counter. It seemed weird to leave a stranger out here by himself—even weirder that she was reluctant to walk away.

He was looking around the bakery. “So, you’re the only one here?”

Now Melody took an involuntary step back, red flags waving wildly in the periphery of her mind.

He picked up on her tension and held up one hand. “Forget I said that. It sounded less creepy in my head. I just meant, are you the one responsible for all that bread? It seems like a lot of work for one person.” He gestured to the metal bins behind the counter, still awaiting their bounty for the day’s customers.

“Usually I have an assistant on the weekend, but yeah. It’s mostly me.”

“Impressive.” His nod made her think he meant it.

“Not really. This isn’t baking.”

“What is it then?”

Melody shrugged. “Assembling, maybe? But it’s a job, and working with bread all day beats sitting behind a desk in an office.”

He saluted her with a coffee cup. “I hear that. Exactly why I went into aviation.”

A little smile formed on her lips. She’d expected a guy that

good-looking to be arrogant, but his relaxed, comfortable attitude suggested the opposite. “I’m not supposed to let anyone back here, but if you want to keep me company . . .”

He straightened from his perch by the counter. “If I wouldn’t be bothering you. Normally I’d stream a video or put on a podcast, but . . .”

“Dead phone. Right.” She moved back to the kitchen, aware of him following behind. She nodded toward a stool by the door. “You can sit there if you like.”

He shrugged off his wet overcoat and hung it on the hook by the door, then perched on the stool. She couldn’t resist giving him a subtle once-over from the corner of her eye. Seemed like in addition to being unfairly good-looking, he had the physique to match—tall, lean, broad-shouldered. From the way his slim-cut white uniform shirt skimmed his torso, she would not at all be surprised if it were hiding six-pack abs.

She could tell already that this guy wasn’t the type to let himself go soft from too much sitting and bad airport food. He probably had a gym membership or a personal trainer or something to stay in that kind of shape.

She shook herself before she could become another pilot groupie. *Focus, Melody.*

Starting on the next tub of dough gave her something to think about other than the man sitting a mere five feet away from her. She started cutting and weighing the dough. “So what kind of planes do you fly? 747s or something like that?”

“No. Not anymore. Light business jets.”

“Like for executives?”

“Executives, politicians, athletes, celebrities. I work for a fractional, so it’s different people all the time. You know, they buy a share of a particular plane so they can travel whenever they want without having to pay for the whole thing and the cost of having a crew on standby.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“Sure.”

Melody cast a look his direction. “That didn’t sound very convincing.”

Justin chuckled and rubbed a hand through his hair. “Had you not asked me at the end of a seven-day, twenty-five-leg tour—followed by being stranded in the snow—I probably would have said yes, absolutely.”

“Okay, I guess I can give you that one. You said, ‘Not anymore.’ You used to be an airline pilot?”

“Do you always ask so many questions?”

“By my count, that’s only three.”

“Five.” He ticked off on his fingers. “What kind of planes? 747s? Executives? Do I enjoy it? And did I used to be an airline pilot?”

Melody rolled her eyes, but she laughed. “You must be fun at parties. Answer the question.”

“I flew for a regional 121 operator out of Texas for a while . . . one of the smaller companies that code-shares with the majors.”

“And you left because . . .”

He shook his head, like he realized he wasn’t going to get out of the conversation. “The pay wasn’t great and the schedule sucked. I flew twenty-four days out of the month, which meant I usually stayed in hotels twenty of those. Now I work eighteen days a month for more money, and even though there’s a lot of waiting around for passengers, I actually get to fly instead of babysit autopilot.”

“You seem pretty young to be a pilot.”

“You seem pretty young to be a baker.”

“How old should a baker be?”

“I don’t know. But they shouldn’t be young and stunning.”

Heat rose to Melody’s cheeks before she could control it. “Are you hitting on me?”

“If I were trying to hit on you, you wouldn’t have to ask.” He caught her gaze, his expression dead serious. Just when she feared she wouldn’t be able to breathe again, his mouth widened into a grin.

The flush eased when she realized he was just teasing her. “You’re terrible.”

“I’m honest.” He hopped off the stool. “Is it okay if I get more coffee?”

“Help yourself.” She let out a long exhale when he left the room. That guy was dangerous. He was gorgeous and he knew it. He had a sexy job and he knew it . . . even if he pretended to be blasé about it.

Pretty much the sort of guy she was always attracted to and lived to regret. In fact, the more attracted to a man she was, the worse off she knew she’d be at the end when the relationship imploded like a popped soufflé.

Judging from the little quivers she felt in his presence, a mere twenty minutes after their first meeting, this one was a heartbreaker.