

Sister Suffragettes



*a fictionalization of the March, 1913
Women's Suffrage Parade*

Dahlia DeWinters

Copyright © 2013 by Dahlia DeWinters

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

*“If the Illinois women do not
take a stand now
in this great democratic parade
then the colored women are lost...
I shall not march at all
unless I can march under
the Illinois banner.”*

Ida B. Wells-Barnett



Sister Suffragettes

Dahlia DeWinters

Author's Note: *Sister Suffragettes* is inspired by an incident in the life of *Ida B. Wells-Barnett*, a journalist, newspaper editor, and leader in both the women's suffrage and the civil rights movements. Her pointed exposé of the practice of lynching, documented in the pamphlets *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases* and *A Red Record*, ferreted out the real reason for the lynchings: *black economic progress*.

Because of her outspokenness and refusal to "play nice", Mrs. Wells-Barnett often found herself at odds with the women's suffrage movement. As a result, the leaders of the *National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA)* insisted that she not march with the *Illinois* delegation at *President Woodrow Wilson's* inauguration, where they were demanding the right to vote. The reason? A black woman marching alongside whites would offend some Southern women.

But *Ida* had other plans. On *March 9, 1913*, she watched the parade from the crowd until the *Illinois* delegation had passed then joined in, protected from angry Southerners by white women sympathetic to the plight of all women, regardless of race.

"If the *Illinois* women do not take a stand now in this great democratic parade then the colored women are lost ... I shall not march at all unless I can march under the *Illinois* banner."—*Ida B. Wells*

Anna Keyes called the meeting to order and took her place at the head of the mahogany dining room table. Brocade-upholstered chairs fitted around the massive table at odd angles, providing extra places to sit. The room was full of colored women of varied hues, delicate ivory to tropical caramel, to the rich dark brown of strong-brewed coffee.

Anna tapped the gavel once more and cleared her throat. "Welcome, ladies. I am certainly pleased to see so many in attendance. It is so very important that we, as colored women, take our places in the suffrage movement. It benefits all of us."

Dora Cooper, a thin, intense woman the color of browned toast raised her hand. Without waiting to be acknowledged, she rushed ahead to speak, "I must say, though I do agree with the movement in general, it is difficult working with some of those ofays—"

"*Dora!*" *Camilla* exclaimed, "that's not nice."

Dora dismissed the younger woman's protest. "Milly, I could care less about being nice. I know the things they whisper behind our backs."

"And say to our faces," *Edwina* spoke up, surprising herself. "I've heard the word nigger more times than I can count."

Dora nodded. "And these are from the same women who are supposed to be helping other women! Shame on them."

Anna smiled and hurried to stop the rising tide of murmuring voices. "*Dora*, I understand your concerns. Yes, though there are many indignities and attitudes that we must suffer, we must learn to put aside their ignorance and animosity. We must continue in our work. Our purpose is to lift as we climb, helping those around us as we also advance. For the record, many of our white counterparts do have the interests of all

women at heart.”

Dora crossed her arms. “I’m sure some of them are very nice, but I’ll be the first to let you all know this.” Her curls trembled as she spoke. “If there be any whisper of trouble about including colored women in this movement, they will take the road of least resistance. And can you blame them? Those peckerwoods have been inconvenienced ever since slaves were freed.” Her eyes narrowed. “They fear our competition—they are realizing that the color of their skin doesn’t make them better, that we can work just as hard—”

“Harder.” A voice from the back chimed in.

Dora leaned back in her chair. “Even harder than they can.”

Eddie shook her head. “It is a terrible thing when such hatred exists between people that are all the same under the skin. These types of attitudes hurt all of us terribly.”

“Eddie’s right.” Dora nodded. “It’s segregation, rather than the female issue, that is killing us.”

Dora and many of the others had good reason to be bitter about white people, Eddie reasoned. Dora’s family had fled the South because so many coloreds were falsely arrested and forced to work for free on plantations as “convicts”. It was also rumored that Dora had shot and killed a Klansmen, a “night rider” who had threatened her when her husband had been away helping a neighbor move.

Whatever the cause, the animosity wouldn’t help the suffrage movement. Some compromise had to be reached in order for all women to benefit. Colored and white women had to join together for strength.

“There is a double hurdle.” Anna’s voice was a soothing balm over the disgruntled group. “The double hurdle of race and sex. Not only must we prove our worth as women, which is difficult enough, but we also must prove our worth as Negroes.”

“It would be easier to prove our worth as maids and nannies.” Dora snorted.

The women laughed.

“I certainly did not study abroad for two years to become a caretaker for someone else’s infant or a cook in a hot kitchen.” Virginia Mays sniffed, her dainty fingers fiddling with her pearl necklace. “Nor do I care to be chased around by an overly amorous man of the house.” She gave the group a knowing look, wrinkling her delicate nose in an expression of contempt. “They have the oddest notion that all Negro women are of low morals.”

The laughter turned to disdainful snorts.

Eddie raised her hand. “I’d like to ask a question about the march on Wednesday. I’ve heard that the white women do not want us to join our designated delegation. Instead, they want us to march in the back. Can this be true?”

The women murmured amongst themselves and even Anne looked slightly displeased. Before she could speak, Dora’s brows creased and she jumped into the fray. “I can’t say that I’m surprised. Far be it for us Negro women to detract from the lovely southern magnolias of the National American Woman Suffrage Association.” She fluttered her eyelashes comically and waved a hand in front of her face.

Eddie nodded her head once. “They feel that our presence as an integrated part of the march will harden southern hearts against the women’s movement.”

Beulah, a heavy-set woman with a lined face that told of harder times spoke in a

smooth, cultured contralto, “They don’t fancy Negroes with brains and mettle in the gallant South. Remember Thomas Moss?”

The women nodded. There was a moment of solemn silence as each woman thought about Thomas Moss, a dear friend of Mary Church Terrell, a leader of the Negro women’s movement. He had been viciously lynched along with two other Negro men. His crime? Owning a grocery store in Memphis, Tennessee and defending said property from white men who tried to burn it down. Eddie knew the story well, had read about it in a pamphlet written by Ida Wells, a prolific and outspoken opponent of Southern lynching. Ida was one of the few who drew national attention to America’s dirty southern secret.

“What are we going to do, Anne?” Dora’s voice rose above the murmurs. “Will we be banished to the back of the procession?”

Anne’s red-stained lips pressed together. It seemed that the normally composed woman was at a loss for words. She tapped the gavel once and laid it to the side. “This is a matter that will be discussed in more detail later.”

“But the march is the day after tomorrow!” Eddie cried out. Her heart beat a frantic tattoo, rendering her breathless. She had never spoken this much at a club meeting, but somehow this issue was very important to her. “We have to know what our places will be.”

Anne shook her head. “I will have to meet with the head of the delegation for further instruction.”

Dora leaned close and whispered in Eddie’s ear. “‘Further instruction’ means we will be marching in back.”

Anne’s voice was shockingly loud over the rising conversation. “Ladies!” She banged the gavel. “That will be the end of the discussion about the march. Let’s move to our next agenda item.”

“And that,” Dora muttered, “is the end of that.”

* * *

Wednesday arrived and Eddie’s fear that Dora had been correct was true. In order to advance the higher cause, they would have to put their own cause as Negroes aside.

As she pulled on her coat, Eddie wasn’t sure how she felt about that, but she was going to the march to lend her support.

She had reached the door, her hand on the brass knob, when her husband’s voice stopped her. Why hadn’t she closed the library door before she tried to make her exit? He must have heard the creaking of the old hardwood floor despite the posh Oriental rug in the hallway, a gift on their last anniversary.

“So, you’ve decided to go.”

She turned to face him. “Yes.” Eddie forced a smile to her face. “I will be back this afternoon, likely before teatime.”

“I thought we discussed this?” A tall, stocky man, his thoughtful, quiet manner had attracted her when they’d first met. “You were upset about the march’s segregation, yes?”

Eddie lifted both hands in a gesture of futility. “Yes, that was my concern, but I have to go.” She gripped her handkerchief, her fingers tightening around the fine linen. “It’s necessary to the cause.”

“If I know my wife well, and I think I do, I have a distinct premonition that you may be breaking rank today.” Robert frowned and shook his head. “It’s dangerous.”

“Life is dangerous.” Eddie’s laugh was nervous. “Why not live it as it comes?”

He took a few steps closer to her, his bay rum scent tickling her nose. She reached backward to grip the doorknob again, the proximity of her husband nearly dissolving her courage. Why venture out into the dangerous night when she could stay here, secure in his arms and sheltered from the hubbub in the streets?

His tone was soft when he spoke, “You don’t have to prove anything to me.”

“I know that.” Eddie reached up to straighten his tie and patted the lapels on his jacket. “But all men aren’t as evolved as you are. And it’s not merely men as a whole. What I do is—”

“Good for the race. Yes, Eddie, I’ve had all the discussions over brandy and cigars with our fellow members of the Negro elite.” He said the last word with a twist of irony. “It’s all jolly good when you’re tossing an abstract idea around—”

She laid a gloved hand on his arm. “That’s the point, dear. It’s not an abstract idea. It’s happening. All around us. I don’t want it to pass me by.”

“Just because I support it, doesn’t mean I want my wife in the thick of it.”

“Someone’s wife has to be in the thick of it, Robert. How else is it to get done?”

“Let me go with you.” He turned to get his coat.

“You can’t escort me. It’s a march for women. Any man will be looked upon with suspicion.” She waved a hand in his direction. “Everything will be fine. Keep the tea warm for me.”

He leaned over kissed her on the forehead, his dark eyes concerned. “Eddie ... I won’t say I’m allowing you to go, because I am not. But I will say you are leaving under duress. If I were another kind of man, I would lock you in the bedroom and not allow you to leave.”

She hid a small smile, feeling a blush crawl across her cheeks. “Perhaps we can make arrangements for that at a later time.”

“Perhaps.” He gave her the briefest of smiles, a dash of white creasing his dark brown face. “But I want you back in one piece.”

“Then we have a common goal.” She stood on tiptoe and kissed his lips. “I will be back.”

“In one piece?”

“In one piece.”

* * *

The late morning sun cast a cold glare on the people crowding the streets to see the mayor speak. March was cold and damp, the warmth of spring a distant promise. The masses hummed with excitement, anticipating what was to come next. Rumors of a protest march had been circulating for weeks and many were there more to see the protest than the mayor.

Eddie squeezed her gloved fingers together as she was pressed by bodies on both sides. Dissent aside, the majority of her club had decided to participate in the march as an expression of solidarity, even if they had to march in the back.

However, on the walk over, remembering the conversations she’d had with Robert and galvanized by the grit and determination of Dora, she’d decided that marching in her proper place in the parade was her right and she was going to take it. Whatever the cost.

Camilla clutched her arm so tightly that Eddie felt her fingers through the heavy

wool of her coat. The young woman was more than nervous. She was terrified. "I can't believe we're doing this."

"We haven't done it yet," Eddie whispered back. "I'm not sure if I have the nerve to go through with it."

"Oh no, Eddie!" Camilla looked up at her with wide, trusting eyes. "We *must* go through with it. We must."

The ranks began to form and Eddie spotted their delegation's flag. Her gaze swept the gathering groups of women and she saw many Negro women lining up at the back of the crowd. Eddie frowned. She'd be a horse's petootie if she allowed the blatant prejudice of a few to ruin this day for her. Today she was going to march for both women's and Negroes' rights.

"Ladies, aren't you in the wrong area? The colored section is a half a block to the left."

Eddie turned to the voice. Dora grinned at her and winked. "I saw you two hovering, pretending to be spectators. Are we barn-storming today?"

Eddie wanted to throw her arms around Dora. "I'm so pleased you're here, Dora. Three is so much better. It's lucky."

Dora pulled her coat aside to show Eddie the butt of her pistol. "Four's even luckier."

Camilla sucked in her breath. "Dora! Don't tell me you're planning on using that?"

"Honey, you have to be prepared for everything. But don't worry, it's just for show. It's not even loaded."

Camilla breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good."

Dora looped her arm around Eddie's. "Are we ready, gals?"

She squeezed Dora's arm. "Is the gun really empty?"

Dora shook her head and matched Eddie's volume. "What's the point of an unloaded gun? Might as well be carrying a rock." She winked. "Don't want Milly to be nervous."

"Much too late for that."

The crowd's anticipation became more intense and the group of women in the street began to move. The three women moved along the sidewalk, as if following the parade. Then, on Eddie's signal, they waded into the crowd, ignoring the gasps of the white women around them, as they took their place with their delegation.

Eddie grinned at the look on Delegation President Erica Shaw's face as they approached. Three Negro women, arms linked, clearing a path through the crowd.

Dora dropped Eddie's arm and hooked arms with Camilla on the other side. Erica extended her arm and hooked it around Eddie's.

The expressions on the faces of the other women in the delegation ranged from shock to determined acceptance to not-so-hidden glee. Some frowned, still unwilling to accept the role of Negro women in their ranks, while others recognized the strength in numbers.

Eddie wrapped her arm tighter around Camilla's, noting the high flush in the woman's cheeks. It was exciting, being part of history.

"We're in the thick of it, ladies!" Eddie yelled over the bustle of the crowd. "Forward, march!"

* * *

At the end of the protest march, Eddie bid goodbye to new friends and old. Hugs and kisses were exchanged between Negro and white alike. Eddie took the quick route to her house, eagerly seeking the quiet solace of her home.

She found Robert in his study, smoking his pipe and leafing through one of his books. The stiff set of his shoulders and the fact that his jacket was in a tossed pile on one of the armchairs rather than hung up told her he'd been worried about her.

"I have returned," she said, triumphant. She tugged off her hat and flicked it onto the settee.

"I see." He turned to peruse her, her wild hair, the street smudges on the bottom of her skirt. "How did it go?"

She dropped onto the settee and loosened her jacket. "I was half expecting to see you in the crowd."

Robert stood and made his way over to her, eased down next to her. "Don't think that it didn't cross my mind." He played with a lock of her hair, smoothed it between his fingers. "I don't care for this risk-taking, Eddie, but I won't stop you. Ever. I know what this means to you and I love you too much to..." he smiled then, "restrain you."

Eddie leaned forward, pressed her forehead to his, and closed her eyes. Her heart felt as if it were going to crack open, her love for him was that strong. "Thank you for that, Robert."

"That being said, now that you're back in one piece..."

She leaned back against the cushions, drew him with her. "Perhaps you should check, just to be sure."

Dahlia DeWinters is a multi-published author of erotic and sensual romance with offbeat heroines. She enjoys crochet, gardening, and reading anything from historical romance to science fiction. Her taste in music ranges from Frank Sinatra to Fuel and she prefers action movies to rom-com. She currently lives in the lovely Garden State, a Jersey girl through and through. Find her on Facebook posting unsolicited opinions on movies and random music/film quotes.