



IF WE'RE BEING HONEST

A Novel

CAT SHOOK

If We're Being Honest

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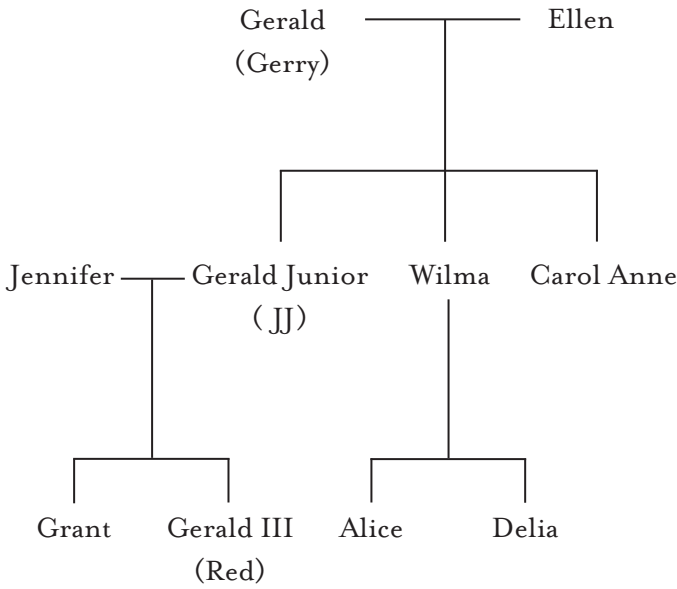
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For my sister, Mary Martin, and my brother, Patrick

THE WILLIAMS FAMILY



Prologue

They didn't mean to, but the cousins stood in order of age: Alice, then Grant, Delia, and Red. They stared at the house they had known all their lives, buzzing like an anthill, people mingling indoors and out, despite the thick June Georgia heat. They watched the new arrivals, all dressed in black, carry casserole dishes and pots and plates topped with aluminum foil. They could only guess how much food had already been dropped off inside. It was past time to go in.

The cousins were grown-ups, at least by age. Most of the time, it felt like their group text was the only thing that connected them. But they were fastened together by more than that: shared blood and their memories, an invisible twine snaking itself through and between them, tying them all together.

Chapter I

Gerry Williams's funeral was a shit show.

Before it even began, deciding who would eulogize Gerry, the beloved eighty-two-year-old patriarch of one of Eulalia, Georgia's oldest families, proved difficult. Ellen, Gerry's wife of sixty years that past November, hoped their middle child and older daughter, Wilma, would do it, but Wilma wasn't one for attention, and felt that taking the task could be interpreted as her claiming to be closest with her father (which she wasn't, necessarily) or smarter than her siblings (which she definitely was). Her older brother, also named Gerald but nicknamed Gerry Junior and called, however inaccurately, JJ by everyone who knew him—and even those who didn't but were fans of *Keep It Up*, his afternoon sports radio show on 97.7 The Jam—felt like he *should* do it, but had private concerns he would get visibly emotional in front of the crowd, and that certainly wouldn't do. According to JJ, he was now the “man of the family,” which made every Williams except for Ellen roll their eyes. Gerry and Ellen's thirdborn, Carol Anne, was completely out of the question for more reasons than can be listed, but

chief among them: she was usually under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol; Gerry's lifelong marriage could not be detangled from his identity, and Carol Anne had already been married four times (though her parents only knew of three); and she couldn't go more than five minutes without mentioning her acting career, which didn't really exist.

Which left the grandchildren. Delia, Wilma's younger daughter at twenty-seven, had a disqualifying romantic situation or, more specifically, a complete lack thereof. Her boyfriend of four years had just dumped her, and she had barely talked about anything else since. And no one, herself included, wanted Gerry's eulogy to devolve into a speculation of whether her ex, Connor, had cheated (there were signs, but no proof). Wilma had raised Delia and her older sister, Alice, in Atlanta, and both had moved to New York City after graduating college. Though, unlike Alice, this left Delia with a disdain for Eulalia she was unable to hide, and all wanted to avoid the eulogy becoming a rant about how sexist the "Welcome to Eulalia" billboard was (a smiling blonde woman standing in a kitchen, wearing an apron, holding a pie) or about how the Chick-fil-A playground was listed as a "tourist attraction" on the bulletin board downtown.

Alice, the oldest grandchild, seemed like a decent option: she was widely considered to be the smartest in the family because she was a writer and had even had a book published. She loved her grandfather deeply and could have remained poised throughout, but there was no way his eulogy could exclude significant heaven talk, and Alice was decidedly and openly not religious, a fact which kept her grandmother up at night.

Gerald III, JJ's second kid, called Red for his carrot top, was chief contender. He worked at a youth ministry in Nashville, so he was used to public speaking and invoking Jesus without irony. But the pressure here was too much, and Red's chronic fear of disappointing others and his resulting anxiety rendered him ineligible.

Carol Anne had no children, so that left Grant, JJ's older son. Grant

was the only family member who actually wanted to do it, and also the clearest nonoption. While he was affable, charming, and a dutiful grandson, most things he did in life were in an attempt to bed women or grow his client base (he was a personal trainer; these two goals often overlapped), and there was worry that his grandfather's funeral would be no exception. He tried to make the case for himself to JJ and his mother, Jennifer, JJ's wife of thirty years, arguing that a lot of the people at the funeral would want to hear from him anyway, given that Grant was currently living out his fifteen minutes of fame hot off a season of *The Bachelorette*. The episode in which he was eliminated had just aired, so he felt he had the sympathy of the nation on his side, with an uptick of 120,000 Instagram followers to prove it.

(The only person who was truly saddened by Grant's nationally televised elimination was his aunt Carol Anne, as Grant was sent home when the remaining five contestants became four. Had he made it to the top four, he and his family would have been featured on the hometown-date episode. Carol Anne had preemptively bought a plane ticket from LAX to Georgia the moment she realized it was possible she could be featured on television, plotting to pull Grant aside and engage in a long, tearful conversation about how she could tell he had found the one in Lindsay, the twenty-three-year-old "Outfit Planner." Her agent's phone would surely be flooded with calls once America saw her on-screen gravitas.)

It was decided that Fred Clark would deliver the eulogy. Fred was Gerry's lifelong best friend and business partner. He was a pseudo uncle and great-uncle to the rest of the family and would be the next best thing to actual kin speaking at the funeral. When JJ called to ask Fred if he would do it, Fred didn't speak for a good minute. JJ thought maybe he ought to repeat himself, before Fred replied, in a crackly voice wet with tears, that he would be honored. Ellen was humbled by Fred's agreeing. Even though she was pretty sure nothing could beat the numbness she had felt since the first night in over sixty years she'd lain down to go

to bed without Gerry beside her, she knew it was no cakewalk to lose a best friend, either. Linda, Fred's wife, had been Ellen's closest friend (by association but also by genuine connection). She had died of breast cancer ten years earlier, and that loss had hit Ellen much harder than any member of her family cared to realize.

The Williamses were all seated in the first pew in Eulalia's First Baptist Church, in which all the grandkids had been baptized, even though by the time Wilma had Alice and Delia, she did not consider herself Christian, or religious in any way really (unlike Alice, she kept this to herself). Wilma was struck then, and again now, that the smell of holy water in the church was somehow fresh and stale at the same time.

Pastor Tom had been the one to dunk all the grandkids, and he was running the show the day of the funeral, as well. When it was time for the eulogy, Fred slowly weaved his way to the pulpit, stumbling a bit and clearing his throat with the rattle of a drum line before he began to speak. The Williamses—particularly Ellen, who still saw Fred regularly—were surprised to see how disheveled he looked, tie loose, white hair sticking up in odd places like a toddler just waking from a nap. Even though he had to be shaken with grief over losing his best friend, and he was the same age as Gerry (which is to say: old), Fred was considered something of a Eulalia miracle: he still stood up tall and rode his bike around the neighborhood daily. Unlike Gerry, he was also very shy, so Ellen and her daughter Wilma thought nerves could explain his stumbling, the volume of his throat-clearing, and his untidy appearance. JJ and Carol Anne were too wrapped up in their own grief to notice.

As was her nature, JJ's wife, Jennifer, immediately suspected something more sinister. And she was right to, because as soon as he started speaking, it became clear to the rest of the Williams clan that Fred was shithoused, even drunker than Grant had been at his high school graduation party a decade prior, which had ended with Alice and Red throwing buckets of water on the bushes outside JJ and Jennifer's house

to dilute the vomit before anyone from the previous generation could notice. Jennifer's suspicion was confirmed when Fred pulled a flask out of his jacket pocket, took a swig, wiped his mouth sloppily, and leaned so close to the microphone it looked like he was trying to kiss it.

"I'm Fred," he said, his amplified voice so loud the Williamses all jerked back like a spark had been lit in their faces, momentarily shocked out of their grief. "Thank you to the Williamses-eses for asking me to speak today." He nodded in their direction before letting his eyes lazily drift to the ceiling and breathing a massive sigh. Ellen had never seen Fred drink. Gerry had told her that Fred's daddy had been a major alcoholic (the abusive kind, not the fun kind, like Ellen's father had been), and Fred had vowed never to touch the stuff, even though he and Linda never had any kids to abuse, anyway.

"The Williamses-eses are the nicest family around town. Ellen has one of the kindest hearts of any woman I've ever met. And I like Ellen the most of anyone because she's quiet, like me." He pointed his index finger at her like they were old buddies in the pub telling war stories. "She gets it," he said, slurring. Whatever he had consumed thickened his Southern accent to an unrecognizable drawl. "And Gerry and Ellen had such good kids. They were such beautiful kids. JJ could smile and throw the football, and Wilma was so sweet and artistic." Wilma cringed; she never handled praise for her photography well, even in situations that weren't already awkward. "And Carol Anne, well, she's always been her good ole Carol Anne self. A star. Sort of." The family nervously averted their eyes while Carol Anne smiled and nodded, understanding this to be a compliment.

"And all these grandkids, these gorgeous grandkids," he said, eyelids half closing. "Alice, Grant, Delia, Red. He loved all of 'em so much, Gerry did."

All four grandchildren had cried more than once since they had gotten the news of their grandfather's passing five days earlier, but none of them shed a single tear now, so disturbing was Fred's drunkenness.

Horrifically, Red felt nervous giggles coming on, but was saved and silenced by a wave of anxiety so powerful that had he been standing it would have knocked him to his knees.

"Gerry . . ." Fred trailed off, leaning against the podium unevenly enough that Alice almost went up to the pulpit to prop him up. He bent his head down and leaned on his fist, and Delia was strangely reminded of how she always held her head when she was in pigeon pose at the heated yoga studio near her Manhattan apartment in the West Village. She thought of how proud she had been when her now ex-boyfriend Connor had started going to classes with her, how satisfying it was to be one of those couples chatting before class, their mats next to each other, and how she would sometimes see other women and a few guys checking him out as he moved through the flows. Then she remembered she was at her grandfather's funeral, watching his eulogy get butchered.

Fred raised his head quickly, like he was a cartoon character whose alarm had just gone off. "Gerry and I met a very long time ago. Eulalia High. He was the best person in the world. His smile could light up a whole damned—sorry, Pastor—room. Everyone knew who he was. We built our construction business together, and there's no one better in the world to work beside every day. He loved music and was always dancing. He liked jokes." Fred was still slurring, but Ellen felt a small glimmer of hope that he could get this on track, that maybe the threat of complete disaster had passed.

But then he screamed, tears streaking down his face like streamers: "You all think he was my best friend! He wasn't my best friend, wasn't JUST my best friend. He was my Gerry. Mine. We were in love."

Between the nine still-functioning Williams hearts seated in that first pew, not a single one beat for a terrifying moment. They all wondered if they had heard Fred correctly, or if Fred really was so drunk that he was spewing nonsense. Only Carol Anne leaned forward, reaching for her weed pen before remembering where she was, completely intrigued, without an ounce of fear.

"He was," Fred said, pawing with huge swipes at his own face in a futile attempt to dry his tanned, wrinkly cheeks. The crying then transformed slowly, over a period of time that felt like one thousand years, into a chuckle, then into a roaring laugh. The whole church sat perfectly still, like they had been petrified, like *their* souls had also left their bodies.

"We weren't just friends. I mean, my God"—in between laughs—"and none of you knew. None of you had any idea." This was where he made arguably his biggest mistake, which was to look at Ellen and say, "Linda knew. I think you knew. Maybe you tried not to know. Linda knew. She probably told you, for all I know, who knows."

A wave of nausea passed over Red and his father, JJ, at the exact same time, though neither of them had the capacity to be aware of the state of anyone else's stomach.

By now, Pastor Tom had gotten his wits about him enough to know that it was time to intervene, and to do so quickly, decorum be damned (though he never would have used such language; well, not figuratively, anyway). He speed walked up to the pulpit and put an arm around Fred's waist.

"Yeah, I bet *you* especially don't want to hear this." The words were spilling out of Fred's mouth like oil as he leaned against the pastor the way a sorority pledge would on a sophomore. Pastor Tom jerked the microphone toward himself, still supporting Fred's weight, and began talking about how he knew Gerry, trying to tell the story of when he was new to the church and how kind Gerry had been to him, but it was difficult to hear over Fred leaning forward and shouting, "LOVERS!" into the microphone every few seconds through his returned sobs.

While all the Williamses by blood were too confused and stunned to do anything, Jennifer couldn't stand it anymore, and understood that it would have to be she who took action. She tossed her perfectly straight blonde hair over her shoulder, marched up to the pulpit, wedged herself beneath Fred's shoulder, and started to haul him down the stairs while

Pastor Tom halfheartedly and with lots of uncharacteristic “ums” talked about the year that Gerry built the manger for the Nativity scene.

Although every member of the family was too stunned to begin really considering what had just happened, Alice couldn’t help but feel the beginning of a crack in her heart as she watched Fred’s withered, drunk, and heavy hand trace the outline of her grandfather’s coffin as Jennifer carried him to a pew. She was too sensitive to be able to keep Fred’s tragedy at bay, no matter how consuming her own had felt just moments before.

Red felt like several hundred arrows had pinned him to the pew. His mind was a white-hot, blank slate, and even though doing so scared the shit out of him, curiosity overtook, and he turned to his left to sneak a peek at his father’s and brother’s reactions. Grant’s big brown eyes were wide in confusion, which wasn’t atypical. JJ’s eyes were narrowed, flickering between his wife handling Fred and the preacher blabbering on. Red felt perverse for looking, like he was pulling back a curtain to watch his parents have sex or something.

Somehow, though no one there could have given an accurate play-by-play, the funeral ended. The Williams family robotically followed Pastor Tom and the pallbearers, struggling under the weight of the casket, down the aisle and out into the aggressive sunshine. They watched through tinted lenses as Gerry was lowered into the ground. They prayed over the grave, none of them able to focus on anything other than the fact that he might have been sleeping with their pseudo uncle.

By the time they got back to Ellen and Gerry’s—well, now just Ellen’s—house, there was nowhere to park, as cars covered every driveway on the street and every inch of curbside. The lawn was crawling with people whose plans earlier that day had been to attend a reception to celebrate the life of Gerry Williams, man about town. Now, like alcoholics at Communion, they were there to lap up one of the biggest scandals Eulalia had ever seen.

In their separate cars, not a Williams said a word, allowing the numb-

ness they felt to spread throughout their bodies and across their family unit, unable to picture where they would go from here.

The cousins ended up crowded over a bowl of pimento cheese in Ellen's kitchen. As they entered the house, the guests clambered to get to Ellen and their parents first, under the veil of expressing their condolences but mainly to stuff their pockets with anecdotal evidence of how Gerry Williams's family was handling his posthumous outing. It seemed like everyone from Myrtle Lane, and even Eulalia itself, was in the house. Delia had beelined for the kitchen, and Grant, Red, and Alice had followed.

Alice looked back and forth between the pimento-cheese-topped crackers she had in each hand. She decided to pop the left into her mouth. "Well, that was fun," she said after swallowing.

Grant pulled a cracker through the bowl of cheese, piling on so much it was a miracle it didn't break. "Definitely the juiciest funeral I've ever been to, I'll say that."

Red looked around the crowded kitchen nervously. "Do y'all feel like everyone's staring?" Alice put her hand on her cousin's shoulder, which actually did calm Red's nerves a bit. He had always felt a special kinship with Alice, as they were the only members of the family to have inherited Gerry's red hair.

"Why did *Fred* do the eulogy?" Delia asked, as though not the day's revelation but the fact that it was revealed at all was the issue.

"None of us can be trusted, apparently," Grant said, tossing his head to flip the boyish peeking-under-the-helmet hair he no longer had. His overly gelled locks stayed exactly in place. "I tried. And I would have crushed it."

Red's eyes wandered through the wood-paneled kitchen and the entryway into the living room, and he felt an AED-level jolt in his chest

when they snagged on a young man looking back in his direction. He sat at a card table set up for the occasion, sipping a glass of iced tea with Tina, the neighborhood gossip. Red felt his trademark flush creeping up his neck. The boy peered over his glass directly into Red's eyes, and Red quickly turned his attention back to the group.

"I don't know if *how* we found out is the thing I'm super worried about at the moment . . ." Alice said, looking around at her sister and both of her cousins. Delia's eyes suddenly widened, as if she were trying to signal to Alice, and Alice gave her younger sister a look of confusion. Alice gasped a little when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

She spun around and found herself looking right up into Peter Bell's brown eyes.

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing down his neck. "Hey," he said.

She wanted to respond, knew, socially, that she should respond, but her throat suddenly felt so dry that she worried her neck would burst into flames should she try to speak. He went on, "I'm so sorry—"

He was cut off by Delia squealing as she ran around him to hug his sister, Rebecca. Peter and Rebecca Bell also grew up on Myrtle Lane, in a brick house down the street from Gerry and Ellen's. Peter was Alice's age, and Rebecca was Delia's, giving Alice and Delia the perfect built-in companions for every summer of their childhood and adolescence, in which the sisters would trade Atlanta's sweltering heat for Eulalia's. Grant and Red, Eulalia natives, grew up across the street from Gerry and Ellen, so they knew the Bells, too. Alice sidestepped, shoving Red forward a little, as though Red and Peter would be the two most excited to reunite. They dabbed each other up with all the awkwardness that comes with being family friends seven years apart in age.

Red stood aside, leaving Alice to face Peter again. They looked at each other.

Clocking this, Delia said, "Connor and I broke up," so loudly several people near them turned their heads. Grant and Red looked confused.

She tugged on the ill-advised, post-breakup bangs she'd recently had cut and flicked them out of her eyes. Rebecca put her arm around her childhood summer best friend and gave her a squeeze.

"I already told Peter," she said.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Delia," Peter said.

"Yeah, uh, I remember you met him last Christmas Eve, so I just wanted to save you the embarrassment of asking me how he is, only for me to have to awkwardly tell you that we broke up," Delia said. She hoped she wouldn't cry.

Peter looked to Alice for help, but she was looking around the room, at the ceiling, at her shoes, anywhere but at him.

"Yeah, thanks for letting me know," he said.

Delia nodded and shifted her weight from foot to foot. She slipped her sister a look and noticed the green tinges spiking up in Alice's cheeks. Alice started fanning herself, suddenly unbearably hot. "Um," Delia said. She returned Rebecca's squeeze. "People! Can we believe we're about to marry off the first of us in a week?"

"Are you okay, Alice?" Red asked.

"Yeah, yeah," Alice said, a bead of sweat running down her temple. "Rebecca, we can't wait for the big day! Sorry, I just gotta go to the . . ." And she turned quickly on her heel and practically sprinted down the shag-carpeted, family-photo-covered hall to the powder room, growing terrified of what would happen if she found it occupied. It was empty, and she breathed a sigh of relief as she slammed the door closed behind her, shaking the framed photo on the sink of herself at ten years old, but instantly feeling ten degrees cooler. She leaned back and closed her eyes. When she opened them back up to her reflection in the mirror, they immediately flickered downward to her stomach and hips. She turned to the side, looked back up into her eyes, and sighed.

Back at the pimento cheese, Red felt his nerves buzzing through his limbs. As the reassuring hand of his cousin had left him, the overwhelming sensation that everyone was staring at them returned. And he had

never seen Alice behave so awkwardly in front of anyone before, much less Peter. It was like she had left a cloud of discomfort behind her, and it was moving over Red, bearing down and clinging to him. His breaths started to come shallower, a sure sign that anxiety was taking the driver's seat. He cleared his throat and muttered something; he hoped it was something along the lines of "Be right back," but he couldn't be sure. He padded down the crowded hallway, head down, dodging the mourners who would have loved nothing more than to stop him and engage him in conversation, and essentially dove into what had formerly been Carol Anne's childhood bedroom but was now the guest room.

Like most of the house, it was rather frilly, a lace throw across the four-poster bed, which was covered with crochet pillowcases. His eyes landed on the Bible resting on what little room was left on the bedside table considering all the framed family photos. He sat on the bed and leaned over, put his head in his hands, and took deep breaths, as he knew he was supposed to do when he got this way, which was less often now than in his youth, but not as infrequent as he would have liked. He twisted his head to the side and reached out, placed a freckled hand on the Bible.

It wasn't a meaningful family Bible; he was pretty sure he had never seen it before. But there was something about placing his hand on the stiff (which confirmed that it was just for show and not used) leather, pressing down, and feeling the resistance of the pages against his hand. His breaths deepened, and he felt himself returning to his body. He wasn't thinking of a specific verse, or even praying, really; he certainly wasn't at his most articulate. But something about the particular feel, the give of that particular book, managed to calm him.

Across the hall, feeling better and sucking in, Alice opened the bathroom door and, for the second time in five minutes, gasped to see Peter Bell. "Sorry!" he said, registering her shock, his eyes wide.

"It's fine," she said, exhaling. She was trying to superglue her abdo-

men to her spine and was proud she could get any words out. "How's . . . Texas?"

"Uh, fine," he said. "Listen, I want to make sure you're okay. I know how much Gerry—and especially after Fred's speech . . . I know you probably don't want to talk to me, but I just wanted to make sure you were okay." Peter swallowed, that brown Adam's apple bobbing again. He bounced on his feet a little, looking as nervous as he had when they were thirteen and he saw her in her grandparents' yard the morning after they kissed for the first time.

"I don't not want to talk to you, Peter," she said, unable to let him think that, even though her behavior up until this point had only indicated the opposite.

He nodded and looked into her eyes with such focus she physically felt the eye contact like it was, well, contact. "Look, I—"

"Oh, Alice, with that beautiful red hair!"

The tension between their gaze broke, and they simultaneously turned toward the familiar voice of Tina, another longtime resident of Myrtle Lane. Tina was older than even Gerry had been, and she had served as the neighborhood gossip all her life. She was wearing so much blue eye shadow Alice wondered if she had to buy a new container for every occasion.

"And, Peter, your height still shocks me every time. What a beautiful couple you two would still make." Peter shifted his weight to his other foot and forgot to breathe. Alice tried to smile and worried it looked like she was farting, which she was.

Peter's beauty was enough to make any couple he was half of worthy of Tina's ill-timed compliment. Alice stole a quick look up at his perfectly full and symmetrical eyebrows, raised in a wince over his bright brown eyes. He still had that bump on his nose from when he broke it the first time he drank in high school and walked into a door. Alice wondered if he still wore glasses, or was contacts-only these days. He

was clean-shaven, which she knew from social media was rare for him. He probably liked looking older, considering that he had been late to puberty and, being the first Black youngster in the neighborhood, was called “precious” and “adorable” by all of Myrtle Lane’s white ladies for far too long. It might have been well-intentioned, but the thought made Alice cringe.

“Your grandfather was just so proud of you,” Tina said, gripping on to Alice’s shoulder as though it were a handrail on a rainy day. “A real-life *author in New York City*—”

“Oh, Ms. Tina,” Alice said, “that was all years ago, and no one read the book—”

“I read the book . . .” Peter mumbled. “I loved it—”

Alice felt her face turn a similar shade to her hair. There was no conversation topic Alice hated more than the book.

“What a funeral, huh,” Tina said. “Honey, are you just . . . in shock?”

Or maybe there was a conversation topic Alice hated more. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out, as she had nothing to say. What *could* she say to a woman wishing to gossip about her dead grandfather’s recently revealed gay sex life?

“Alice, will you show me that thing you were gonna show me at the . . . by the . . . the chicken salad? You said you would.” Peter gulped. “You said you would show me the chicken salad?”

“Yes, yes,” she said. She turned to Tina, shrugged, and said, “Men!”

Tina laughed, as though that comment meant something. Alice and Peter walked down the crowded hall, and Alice felt a bizarre yet completely familiar urge to lace her fingers through Peter’s. She didn’t.

After wolfing down more pimento cheese, Rebecca and Delia stepped outside into the Georgia heat. They sat on the stoop of Gerry and Ellen’s porch, just as they had over the course of so many summers growing up. The two of them had gone from playing with Polly Pockets to spying on Peter and Alice’s summer flirtations to comparing tampon brands and squealing through first-make-out stories. They still followed each

other on social media, in an active way, actually pausing and thoughtfully considering each other's posts, and felt warmth in their real hearts instead of just posting one in the comments. Now they went long stretches without seeing each other, but whenever they reunited, it was as if no time had passed at all.

"So," Rebecca said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Delia sighed. "I don't know if I *want* to talk about it, but it feels like I'm never not talking about it."

Rebecca nodded. "Checks out."

"I think he may have cheated," Delia said.

Rebecca paused. "I'm truly sorry to ask this, but are we talking about Gerry or Connor?"

Delia barked out a dry laugh, then winced. "Jesus. Connor."

"Well," Rebecca said, pausing to choose her words carefully. "On the one hand, I could ask you why you think that. We could go forensic and try to figure it out. But on the other hand, I want to ask you how much that would change anything."

Delia huffed, blowing those damn bangs out of her eyes. "Of course it would change things." Rebecca squeezed Delia's shoulder and gave her a sympathetic look. There was a time for tough love and a time for the softer kind. Delia squeezed Rebecca's hand over her arm and swallowed with all of her might in an attempt to suck the tears that had welled in her eyes back into her body. "I'm gonna take a sec," she said, standing up. Rebecca nodded.

Around the corner, Delia leaned against the side of the house to avoid the people milling about the front yard. She couldn't go to the backyard, because thinking about all the hours Gerry and Ellen spent in their back garden would have been too upsetting. The brick was almost scalding against the back of her head, but the way the heat slowed everything down in that brain of hers felt good.

The constantly gnawing desire to call Connor was rearing its head higher than usual. She knew she shouldn't call him. There had been

many a drunken night, a bad day at work, or moments she knew he'd find funny when she had walked herself down the mental road of why it would be acceptable to call, but ultimately had resisted every time. She had sent the occasional text, and his responses were so perfunctory they raised the threshold her pride would have to surmount in order to actually make a call.

But today was different. Her beloved grandfather was dead, and had also maybe lied to her for her entire life. Just like maybe Connor had lied to her, which made it all the more disgusting that she still longed to hear his voice. She huffed, making her bangs dance above her brown eyes. She unlocked her phone and went to her Favorites list in her contacts. He wasn't there, because she had removed him in a dash of bravery and rewarded herself after with an expensive skirt she didn't need. Remembering this, seeing proof that she had once taken this preventative measure, was enough to make her click the side of her phone, darkening the screen.

Here was the thing. Delia knew that if she called Connor, he would either answer or call back as soon as he could. Sure, they weren't in love anymore (or at least he wasn't in love with her), but they still loved each other, right? They had been together for four years; they *lived* together. Of course he still cared for her—deeply. And if she left some weepy voicemail on his phone, he would immediately be in touch in a real way, and that would be too much for Delia to handle.

But there were always the not-so-real ways. She turned her phone back on and went to the photos she had saved, the ones she had looked at tearily on her flight from LaGuardia to Atlanta, and again on the four-hour drive from Atlanta to Eulalia. There was Gerry smiling next to the horse a seven-year-old Delia straddled, grin almost as wide as the horse's flank. There was Delia at four, floaties and bucket hat on, swimming toward a waiting, laughing, pool-immersed Gerry. High school graduation, Gerry hugging Delia as she clutched her diploma. Gerry at Waffle House, Gerry with Alice on one side, Delia on the other, the last

summer they had spent in Eulalia as kids, before Alice's senior year of high school.

She posted them on her Instagram story, knowing she would obsessively check the list of people who watched, hoping not only for Connor's handle to appear but also that it would be near the top of the list (someone had once told her that if someone was near the top of the list, it was because they visited her Instagram page often). God, how she hoped he was checking on her.

Delia looked up at the sky, at the brilliant blue that stretched so much wider over her head here than it did in New York. She was not religious, which she considered to be an intellectual attribute, but at that moment, it occurred to her that her grandfather was no longer on this earth, and according to most of the people in the house behind her, he was maybe . . . up there? Up in that gorgeous Hollywood-background blue sky. She suddenly felt watched. While she didn't *really* believe it (she lived in Manhattan, for fuck's sake, and ordered sushi to be delivered to her apartment at least once a week and raised her middle finger to rude people on the subway platform), a wariness crept in that Gerry saw what she was doing. And she did not want Gerry to see her making the day of his funeral about whether or not she should call her ex, regardless of how far off the rails the day had already gone.

Back inside, Rebecca peered through the mass of food-laden plates and black clothes. She pushed her glasses up—they kept sliding down her sweaty face.

"Well, well, if it isn't Miss Rebecca Bell."

She turned to face Grant. She hated that even though they were both grown adults, she couldn't quite shake the queasy feeling in her stomach that a cool older boy at Eulalia High was talking to her.

"Do they teach poetry on *The Bachelorette* now?" she asked.

"Hardy har," Grant said, absentmindedly flexing beneath his suit. "Play nice, remember it's a sad day for me."

Rebecca stopped herself mid-eye roll and squeezed Grant's shoulder.

The fact that it was rock-hard did not escape her notice, and the fact that it did not escape her notice did not escape Grant's.

"Med school's clearly treating you right," he said, giving her an unabashed up-down. This took more effort now that they were adults; growing up, she had always towered over him, even though he was a year older. She continued rolling her eyes, but she also self-consciously pushed her hair behind her shoulder. He had always loved when she let her hair naturally curl and wore it down, as she did now.

"Please don't make me slap you on the day of your grandfather's funeral."

"Ooh, don't talk dirty to me on the day of my grandfather's funeral, either."

"Jesus." Rebecca exhaled, and Grant stopped being the cool older guy at school and transformed back into the obnoxious neighbor she had known her whole life, the one who stole her Halloween candy every year and spent all of 2005 playing ding-dong-ditch on her. "Have you no shame? I'm getting married in a week."

Grant mimed stabbing his chest with a knife. "Just when I thought the day couldn't get sadder, you have to remind me of that." She smirked and took a sip of her iced tea, and Grant noticed the lip gloss stain left on her glass. "Does what's-his-face know your first kiss is invited to the wedding?"

"You know his name is Justin."

"Is *Justin* still a dweeb?"

Rebecca narrowed her eyes. "Hey, be nice to Delia this week," she said, changing the subject.

"Bell, I'm always nice."

"Mm-hmm. But seriously. She's really going through it. Although I gotta say, never liked the guy," she said. "Anyway, how are you holding up?"

Grant shrugged. "Fine. She may have been the Bachelorette, but it's not like she holds a candle to you."

From across the room, Jennifer noticed Rebecca talking to her older son and wondered where her fiancé was, while also clocking Alice taking deep breaths while Wilma patted her shoulder, and gossipy Tina slowly making her way from one group to another, the day's scandal painting a grin on her wrinkled face. She saw two ladies from Ellen's bridge club talking to the new widow, who stared blankly at them, her face drained of color. She also noticed how one of the card tables piled with food trembled when someone put their glass of iced tea down to grab a spoon and load up on some form of mushy casserole, and made a note to rectify that. As a (former) decorated and highly respected competitive cheer coach, Jennifer had an uncanny ability to look at a chaotic situation, parcel out every individual movement, and identify its shortcomings, all at the same time.

She narrowed her eyes and her heart rate quickened when she saw her husband, JJ, speaking to Stephanie, the associate producer of his radio show. She was young and had only been there for two years or so, getting the gig straight out of college and receiving no promotion since, even though JJ was always going on about how smart she was. Jennifer (rightfully) didn't think Stephanie would stand out in a crowd of women her own age as pretty, but only (annoyingly) because she didn't try. There was natural beauty there—clear skin, shiny hair, straight nose, big eyes, bigger bust—but her dirty-blond hair was too long, her clothes baggy and outdated. Maybe her lack of effort only made her seem more attractive, Jennifer thought, irritated.

JJ nodded intently at whatever it was Stephanie said. Jennifer wondered what they were talking about, if it was work-related or dead-dad-related. She thought about how many more hours of the week JJ spent talking to Stephanie, or "Stephie," as he annoyingly called her, than he did talking to his own wife. She wondered if he thought about Stephanie when he was in their home across the street. JJ had been working late a lot recently, rushing in with his gym bag over his shoulder while Jennifer was halfway through a lonely dinner. Her jaw tightened like

a corkscrew and bile rose up through her stomach at the thought that *Stephie* could be the thing keeping him.

She tossed her shiny, perfectly straight blonde hair over her shoulder and went to rearrange the plates so the table wouldn't collapse, feeling a small but noticeable relief that she could keep *something* upright that day.

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