

One

BLIX

I shouldn't have come, and that's the truth of it. It's not even five o'clock in the afternoon, and I'm already fantasizing about a swift, painless coma. Something dramatic, involving a nice collapse to the floor, with my eyes rolling back in their sockets and my limbs shaking.

It's my niece's annual post-Christmas tea, you see, when people who are barely crawling out from underneath weeks of holiday shopping, parties, and hangovers find themselves required by Wendy Spinnaker to don their red sweaters and pleated slacks *one more time* and go stand for hours in her living room so they can admire her expensive Christmas decorations and her refurbished mansion and drink a ridiculous red cocktail that a high school student in a waitress uniform delivers on a tray.

As near as I can tell, the purpose of this gathering is simply so my niece can remind the good people of Fairlane, Virginia, that she is a Very Important Person, and wealthy besides—a force to be reckoned with. A giver to charity. A chairwoman of most things. I can't keep track of it all, to tell you the truth.

I'm tempted to stand up and ask for a show of hands. *How many of y'all have souls that have withered in just the last few hours? How many would like to join me in a conga line right out the front door?* I know I'd have some takers. My niece would also have me murdered in my bed.

I live far away, and I'm old as dirt, so I wouldn't have even come to this thing—most years I have enough sense to avoid it—but Houndy said I had to. He said I'd regret not seeing the family

for the last time if I didn't. Houndy worries about things like deathbed regrets. I think he imagines the end of life like the finish of a satisfying novel: something that should be wrapped up with a nice bow, all the sins forgiven. Like that would ever happen.

"I'll go," I said to him finally, "but I am not telling them I'm sick."

"They'll know when they look at you," he said. And then of course they *didn't*.

Worse, this year *would* be the time when my grandnephew, Noah, has just gotten himself engaged, and so the party has stretched on into infinity because we're all waiting for him and his fiancée to arrive from California so she can be shown the high society she is marrying into.

"She's just some flibbertigibbet he met at a conference, and somehow she figured out how to snag him," Wendy told me over the phone. "Probably doesn't have a functioning brain cell in her head. A nursery school aide, if you can stand it. Family isn't anybody to speak of—the father's in insurance, and the mother doesn't do anything for anybody, as near as I can tell. They're from *Flah-rida*. That's how she says it. *Flah-rida*."

I was still processing the word *flibbertigibbet* and wondering what that might mean in Wendy's universe. No doubt I'd be described as something equally dismissive. I'm still considered the family misfit, you see, the one who has to be carefully watched. Blix the Outrage. They hate that I took my inheritance and moved to Brooklyn—which anyone knows is unacceptable, populated, as it is, by Northerners.

I look around this room in the house that was once our family homestead, passed down through the generations from favorite daughter to favorite daughter (missing me, of course), and it takes everything I can muster to block all the negative energy that slithers along the baseboards. The ten-foot-tall artificial Christmas tree with its glass Christopher Radko ornaments and the twinkling

fairy lights is trying to insist that everything here is just dandy, thank you very much, but I know better.

This is a family that is rotten at its core, no matter what the decor tells you.

I see things as they are, right through the fakery and pretense. I can still remember when this place really was authentically grand, before Wendy Spinnaker decided to throw thousands of dollars into some kind of fake restoration of its façade.

But that sums up this family's philosophy of life perfectly: plaster over the real stuff, and slap a veneer on the top. Nobody will know.

But I know.

A slightly drunk old gentleman with bad breath comes over and starts telling me about bank mergers he's merged and some acquisitions he's acquired, and also that he thinks my niece is the only person who can make Welsh rarebit taste like a potload of old socks. I'm about to agree with him when I realize with a start that he didn't really say that last bit. It's too loud and hot in this room, so I vaporize him with my mind, and sure enough, he toddles off.

I have my talents.

Then, miracle of miracles, just as we're all about to succumb to despair and heavy drinking, the front door opens with a whoosh, and the party suddenly takes on energy, like somebody plugged it back in and we're allowed to come back to life.

The young couple is here!

Wendy hurries over to the entryway and claps her hands and says, "Everyone! Everyone! Of course y'all all know my darling, brilliant Noah—and now *this* is his lovely fiancée, Marnie MacGraw, soon to be our *exquisite* daughter-in-law! Welcome to you, dahlin'!"

The little quartet in the corner of the living room strikes up “Here Comes the Bride,” and everyone flocks around, shaking hands with the couple, blocking my view. I can hear Noah, heir to the family’s bluster and bravado, booming as he talks about the flight and the traffic, while his fiancée is being manhandled and hugged as though she’s a commodity who now belongs to everybody. If I crane my neck over to the right, I can see that she’s truly lovely—tall and thin, red-cheeked and golden, and wearing a blue beret tipped askew with a jauntiness you don’t normally see at Wendy’s parties.

And then I notice something else about her, too, something about the way she peeks out from under her long blonde bangs. And—*pow!*—from across the room, her eyes meet mine and I swear something passes in a flash from her to me.

I had been about to get up from my place on the loveseat but now I fall back into it, close my eyes, and squeeze my fingers.

I know her. Oh my God, I actually feel like *I know her.*

It takes me a minute to regroup. Maybe I’m mistaken after all. How could it be? But no. It’s true. Marnie MacGraw is just like the old glorious me, standing there, facing this onslaught of Southern gentility, and I see her both young and old, and feel my own old heart pounding like it used to.

Come over here, sweetheart, I beam toward her.

So this—*this*—is why I’m here. It wasn’t to give some closure to years of family strife. It wasn’t to drink these absurd cocktails or even to revisit my roots.

I was meant to meet Marnie MacGraw.

Commented [SS1]: yes

I put my hand against my abdomen, against the ball of tumor that's been growing there since last winter, the hard, solid mass that I already know is going to kill me outright before summer comes.

Come over here, Marnie MacGraw. I have so much I need to tell you.



