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**DID YOU
EVER HAVE
A FAMILY**

A Novel

BILL CLEGG



"Masterly." —THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

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Rick

My mom made Lolly Reid's wedding cake. She got the recipe from a Brazilian restaurant in the city where she went one night after going in with her friends to see a show. It was a coconut cake made with fresh oranges. She prepared for days. It didn't have any pillars or platforms or fancy decorations; just a big sheet cake with a scattering of those tiny, silver edible balls and a few purple orchids she had special-ordered from Edith Tobin's shop. She was proud of that cake. She bakes and decorates cakes for all the birthdays in our family, and she made the wedding cake for my sister's wedding, and mine; so when June Reid hired us to cater her daughter Lolly's wedding, I thought, Why not?

Unfortunately, she never got paid. I didn't either. Not a cent. And if June Reid had tried to pay me, I would have torn up the check. I couldn't accept money from that woman after what she'd been through. My wife, Sandy, saw it differently, still does, but that's her business and this is mine. We own Feast of Reason together, and technically she has a right to complain, but I wasn't—and am still not—about to pester June Reid

for a few dollars. Twenty-two thousand dollars to be exact, but who's counting? I should have worked up a contract like Sandy was always on me to do—at least we would have had half the money up front—but I never got around to drafting one and running it by a lawyer to make sure it covered all the bases. Lolly Reid's wedding was only the second big event we'd been hired to cater, and we were still getting the farm market and café on its feet, making sure everything there was up to code. If you want to lose sleep at night and eliminate all your free time or freedom, by all means open a small business, especially one that serves food. No one tells you about health inspectors or wheelchair access when you're first thinking of opening a place that serves the perfect lentil soup, fresh-baked bread, and almond-milk cappuccino. And it's a good thing they don't, because otherwise there would be no restaurants or cafés or coffee shops anywhere. I'm not sure why we thought the catering bit was a good idea, but it gives people you like a way to make some cash. Also, it's flattering to be asked to make the food for someone's important day—wedding or graduation or birthday. And when it's someone like June Reid, who could've had anyone from the city come up and do a first-class job, well, for us, it was a big deal. When she and Lolly came in and asked me if we'd be interested in making the food for the wedding, there was no way we were going to say no. June Reid would have been a hard woman to say no to anyway; she had that Glinda the

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Good Witch vibe to her, a sort of nothing-bad-has-ever-happened-to-me-and-nothing-bad-will-happen-to-you-if-you're-around-me feel. She was pretty in the way that some of the older women on my wife's soap operas are pretty. She took care of herself. She smelled good, too, like I don't know what but *nice*. I guess she probably still does, but we haven't seen her around here in a while. She took off months ago, and who can blame her? She pulled herself together for the funerals, kept her distance from everyone in town, and then was gone.

June Reid had been coming to Wells on the weekends with her husband and daughter for years and then, later, on her own, when she moved here full-time. No one ever made a fuss or thought twice about her, but when she shacked up with Luke Morey the whole town paid attention. This was more than a couple of years ago, and at the time she must have been at least fifty, about twice Luke's age. Sandy and her friends never got tired of talking about it. They just couldn't accept that he would hitch his horse to her wagon, or however the phrase goes, especially since Luke had more than plenty of wagons to choose from. We grew up together, went to the same elementary and high school, played on a lot of the same sports teams, too, until high school, when he dedicated every free second he could to swimming. And Jesus could he swim. Perry Lynch used to joke that it's because his people were from Cuba or Puerto Rico and came to this country by swimming to Florida, but like

with most things, Perry got it wrong. Luke's mom, Lydia, was white, but his dad, whoever he was, must have been straight-up black and not Hispanic or Latino or whatever you call it. In any case, Luke swam like a fish and broke school and state records and even got recruited by a few big universities—including Stanford—for scholarships. Stanford! He had the touch and had his pick of girls, schools, and futures. But then it all fell apart. All at once—bam—he was just like the rest of us, worse even. He got snagged for moving coke from Connecticut to Kingston and his whole life collapsed. He ended up serving eleven months in a prison in Adirondack, New York. It was unbelievable, and the shittiest part was that whole thing was rigged. Everybody knew Luke had nothing to do with drugs in high school. He was always too focused on swimming and keeping in shape. He drank like the rest of us on weekends. He even passed out once on the town green coming back from a party when we were sophomores. Strange to think how much of a big deal that was back then. Everyone knew about it and someone must have called Gus, the town cop, because he was the one to come down, wake him up, and walk him home.

Luke wasn't perfect, but for him to get caught with a major cocaine haul made no sense. It still doesn't. I'd heard that his mother, Lydia, somehow had something to do with it, one of her shady boyfriends. And later I was told by a guy who works in the Beacon Police Department that Luke had been screwed into pleading guilty by

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a lawyer and a crooked judge who were protecting bigger fish. Whatever went down, Luke never said anything about it to me or anyone else I know. After he got out, he came back to Wells, got jobs here and there, and eventually started his landscaping business. One thing about Luke is that he never talked shit about other people. He could be moody and sometimes lose his temper, but he didn't talk trash. That his mother had been gossiped about so much over the years must have had something to do with it. Who knows. Even when he'd start seeing some girl, it was always from somebody else that I'd find out. Growing up, the rest of us practically took out ads in the paper when we got to first, second, and third base. And home run, Jesus, everyone had to know and usually within a few hours. But not Luke. He played it cool. Like when he started up with June Reid. Sandy's the one who told me—she keeps tabs on everyone—and by the time I found out, he was already living in that old stone house on Indian Pond Road. I must have seen him once or twice a week back then and he never mentioned it.

When Luke first got out of prison, his swimming coach from high school, Mr. Delinsky, got him a job lifeguarding at the town beach. I was down there all the time with Sandy and Liam, who was just an infant. It was before we started Feast of Reason and I was still working evenings, mostly on the weekends, for a catering company in Cornwall. My days were free and we were living with my mother, so we would park Liam on a towel at

the lake and kick back. Luke was there, and Jesus if he didn't get big in prison. He's always kept his shit tight, but with swimming the guys never get too bulky. He must have lifted weights every day, because it looked like he'd put on at least twenty pounds of muscle. He was ripped. He'd be up on that white chair looking out over the kids splashing around in the algae-covered lake, black as a berry and built like an Olympian. It's a weird thing to say, but he was like a movie star or a famous athlete. Too big, too handsome, too *something* for the likes of us. No one around here looked like he did, and I don't just mean because he was black. I caught Sandy looking at him more than a few times, and I thought what the heck, who can blame her?

He worked as a lifeguard for most of that summer. By August, a few of the mothers who took their kids to the lake complained about the town hiring someone fresh out of jail and he had to give up the job. After that he started helping out with Steve Pitcher's estate management company. Raking leaves, cleaning gutters, clearing brush. He did that for a couple summers, and in the evenings and in the winter I got him a few cater-waiter jobs for big events at Harkness. The company I worked for had a contract with the boarding school for their fancier alumni events and we always needed help. I'd watch Luke move through the room fetching coffee and pouring wine for these white-haired, old bankers and lawyers in blue blazers and think there was something very

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wrong. At that point he would have been a sophomore at Stanford, winning races, planning a future filled with nights like this, but with him being waited on and not the other way around. It's not that I think one life is better than the other—hell, I'll be serving white-haired New Yorkers in blue blazers the rest of my life—but it's just that this wasn't the life he was *supposed* to live. Anyone who knew Luke in high school could tell he was not long for our town. Of all the lazy potheads and drunks we grew up with, who one way or another have managed to live off disability checks, insurance settlements, or both, who would ever have guessed that it would be Luke Morey who would be buried here at thirty years old? No one, that's who. Not even Dirk Morey or his old man, Earl, who used to be married to Luke's mom. Those crazy, redheaded Moreys never liked Luke—and fair enough, they had their reasons—but the truth is that Luke never did anything to them besides being born and having the same name. It didn't matter. He was always in their crosshairs, and in a town as small as Wells you're bound to cross paths with everyone, even the people you want to avoid. And despite the fact that Dirk was a little guy and a few years younger than us, he was always just over our shoulders cracking jokes, giving Luke a rough time. Luke could take care of himself, but there were a few times some of us had to step in. Dirk's the only person I've ever punched, and the night I did, he had it coming. It'd be one thing if we were still kids, but this was only

a few years ago. We were leaving the elementary-school cafeteria, where the volunteer fire department has its monthly spaghetti dinners. Everyone goes. They always have. June and Luke had already walked out, and Dirk was behind me and Sandy. *Looks like he found a broad just like his mother*, he said, poking his finger into my back and looking up ahead at Luke and June. I ignored Dirk as most of us do when he's had a few too many beers. Usually he'll shut the fuck up and move on, but not that night. *Some of 'em just like dark meat, I guess. Funny thing, eh, Rick?* He poked my back again and I could feel my fists clench. Luke and June were only a few yards ahead of us, but I don't think they could hear. And then, making sure everyone in the cafeteria could hear: *Difference is this rich cunt pays for it.* With that, I spun around and decked him. Half the town at one time or another has wanted to deck Dirk Morey, and some of them have. He's been hauled out of the Tap almost as many times as his father. The Moreys are loud drunks, but they're little guys, wiry, and as aggressive as they can get, they usually avoid a brawl. Problem is that there are so many of them around here. Dirk always feels free to mouth off because there are usually two or three cousins nearby to defend him if he gets in a scrape. His family is the volunteer fire department, so he must have felt bigger than usual that night. It was lucky that Luke got to me before any Moreys did, because after I hit Dirk the first time, I shoved him to the floor and dove in. I'd heard this guy heckle and mouth

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off since we were kids, and I'd saved up a few swipes over the years. I got a couple good ones in, too, before Luke dragged me off to the parking lot. June Reid stood to the side while Luke made sure I wasn't going back in for more, but when Sandy and I started walking to our car, June ran up and grabbed my hand. Not a thank-you, no words. She pulled one of my hands into hers, squeezed it, and let go. She was looking down the whole time, so I couldn't see if there were tears on her face, but she was upset. She rushed back to Luke before I could say anything.

I didn't know much about June Reid before she starting seeing Luke. I knew the house—it was one of the oldest in Wells, and I remember going there as a kid at Halloween for candy and being frightened because the place looked haunted. It's funny to imagine that she would have been roughly my age now when I came knocking at her door in my He-Man costume. When I first heard about her with Luke, I thought it was a little weird, but when I saw them together, I was mostly glad to see Luke lighten up, begin to have fun again. He was a pretty depressed guy when he came out of prison. And he didn't hang out much. He crashed in a room above Mr. Delinsky's garage for those first few months and then got an apartment near the hospital. I'd see him at the lake and then at Harkness, but besides that he kept to himself, went to the gym at the high school and still swam laps in the pool. I saw him there with June a few times, working

out. I think it was the first time I heard him laughing or saw him smiling since high school. I remember one time watching him attempt to teach her a complicated exercise with free weights and was surprised to see how quickly he got frustrated by how uncoordinated she was. She didn't seem to mind and instead teased him by mimicking his serious face and exaggerating his careful movements. He was clearly annoyed but she was relentless and eventually he couldn't help but smile. I don't think most people would have expected June Reid to have a silly side, but she did, and I think it was just one of a number of things about her that brought Luke back to life.

When my mother found out what happened, she asked me to bring the cake down to the firehouse for the guys who'd been called out to June's place that morning. Dirk Morey was there when I arrived and so was Earl, along with all the others. For once these guys had nothing to say. I brought the cake into the kitchen and told Dirk's cousin Eddie that I'd come back next week for the tray. I got out of there as fast as I could. I didn't want to hear any of the grisly details. I just wanted to get home to Sandy and Liam and lock the door. I started back to our place, but for the first time since my dad died when I was in eighth grade, I started to cry. Maybe it was because both were accidents—my dad's car got hit head-on by a drunk driver on Route 22 after he picked up some part for Mom's dishwasher. Or maybe it was because Luke had become a friend. We were always

friendly growing up, but he had his eyes elsewhere—girls, swimming, college—and for better or for worse we never were that tight. But after he got out of jail and was up and running with his landscaping business, we saw each other all the time. He'd swing by with the Waller boys for a cup of coffee and a pastry in the mornings while we were opening up. We never got too deep into anything, never talked about his arrest or his time in jail or the life he missed out on, but I knew he and his mom were patching things up after a lot of years of not speaking. He never said a word about it to me, but Sandy knew that June had brokered some kind of truce. When you see someone every day for a while, you settle into a rhythm and you come to count on them even if for nothing more than the fifteen minutes each morning they spend sitting at your counter, on one of your stools, talking about the weather and giving you a big smile and thumbs-up when they sink their teeth into a poppy-seed muffin. I never talked to Luke about my dad or Sandy or Liam, our money troubles, or my mother's second breast-cancer scare last year. I don't talk about that stuff with anyone but Sandy.

People say Luke was responsible for what happened. That June was dumping him and he wanted to get back at her or that he was high that night and accidentally left the gas going. For a while a hateful rumor went around that one of the Moreys from the volunteer fire department found a crack pipe in the kitchen near Luke's

body. Sure they did. But facts never got in anyone's way when it came to Luke, so I guess it should be no surprise that the story of what happened that night would be no different. What might have cleared things up would have been a proper investigation, but for reasons that no one can explain, what was left of the house was bulldozed and destroyed before the state could examine the wreckage properly and locate the exact cause of the explosion. The county fire chief told me when I called to ask what the hell was going on that they *cleared the site* for safety reasons, to prevent accidents; but given that June Reid had no neighbors besides the Moonies and the Episcopal church down the road, my guess is that it was the town protecting itself from liability. Thoughtless fuckers. One more time the system failed Luke Morey and trampled the facts to serve itself. Funny how no one seemed to mind. June Reid vanished, Lydia Morey quit her housecleaning jobs and now keeps to herself, and the family of the guy who was going to marry Lolly left right after the funerals and went home to California or Washington State, somewhere on the West Coast. There was no one left to push for the truth, and everyone else didn't care. What use was the truth when they had Luke, the ex-con, bastard black son of the town floozy who landed in a pot of honey with an older gal from the city. *It follows a logic*, one of my customers said at the time. He's an old-timer who comes in every morning for a grilled cheese with egg and coffee and he's not a bad

guy, just an old man who never left this town and never will. I let him finish his toast and sip his coffee and I didn't say a word.

June Reid didn't stick around long enough to clear up any of these stories. I used to get worked up about it and sometimes I guess I still can, but I've learned that people will believe what they believe no matter what you say or do. What I know about Luke is that he was a friend of mine. He was a good man who had come through some hard times who got to be happy for a little while. And now he's gone.

I didn't want Sandy and Liam to see me blubbering that day, so after I dropped the cake off at the firehouse, I drove to my mother's place. She still lives in the same house I grew up in, the same place where Sandy and I lived when we were trying to get on our feet. Funny how in a small town like ours things play out, circle back, end up. Who would have thought that one day Earl Morey, with his son Dirk, and all their brothers and cousins, would be eating Brazilian wedding cake made by my mother and meant for the daughter of Luke Morey's older, city-rich girlfriend? No one, that's who. But the crazy, haphazard upside down of it all somehow made sense.

I sat in my childhood driveway and watched my mother turn on the porch light, something she always does before opening the front door, since I was a kid and even in broad daylight. I watched her shut the door

behind her and pull her thin housecoat tight around her bony shoulders and button the top two buttons. I thought of her squeezing all those damned oranges and cracking all those coconuts for the last two days, sprinkling the little silver balls that the Moreys were now crunching in their tobacco-stained teeth down at the firehouse. And then I started to laugh. I couldn't help it. Nothing was funny, not one thing, but it was all so absurd and fucked-up. Tears and snot were everywhere, and here was my mother, making her way from the stoop to the driveway, shuffling in her slippers, old. She'd left her glasses in the house and I could see her squinting to see me more clearly. *Rick? You okay?* she asked as she stepped to my side of the car and tapped the window. This was my mother: both hands on the roof of the car, leaning into the window, half-blind, worried. Funny how disasters can make you see what you could lose. I don't think I'd ever seen my mother as clearly as I did that day: sixty-six, widowed at fifty, a secretary at the elementary school for over thirty-five years; a single mom who raised two kids, who took care of her granddaughter while my divorced sister went to nursing school in Hartford; a breast-cancer survivor who let her grown son move back in with his nineteen-year-old wife and one-year-old boy.

You okay in there? she asked, tapping the window again. *Rick?* I unlocked the door and got out of the car.

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It was now evening. *Tell me*, she said, her hands on my shoulders, her feet balancing on tippy-toes. I leaned in and put my arms around her little body. *It was a good cake*, Mom was all I could think to say. *They would have loved it.*