



1

Shay Hlenke



When someone mentions family, I think of unconditional love, hearth, home, and all things safe and wonderful. That is, until the word “reunion” is added to it.

Family reunions serve one purpose as far as I can tell—to remind us that we’re only one step away from Crazy Town, no matter how hard we’ve worked to stay sane and make something of ourselves. And I’ve worked mighty hard to get where I am, regardless of what Aunt Faye says about my being an old maid.

So when I get the message on the family email loop that the next family reunion is coming up in two months, I stare at it and try to figure out a way to *unsee* it. Unfortunately, as soon as I open the email, the person who sent it knows, making me long for the days when technology wasn’t so smart and we didn’t have everyone on the same service to see when the email was picked up.

I stare out the window and try to come up with a reason I shouldn’t go. It’s on a Saturday, and I hardly ever have to work on weekends. I’m not dating anyone, and I have very few friends outside my family, so I can’t claim to have other plans. I can’t think of a thing to keep me away, unless I lie, and I’ve never been very good at that, so I quit trying when I was a teenager. Mama used to tell me she got into so much trouble as a kid that she knows all the excuses. And she’s not kidding. I’ve never been able to pull anything over on her.

I turn back to the announcement on the computer screen. We used to get a couple weeks’ notice about these events, but that changed to a couple of months when people started overusing the excuse that they had

plans. Now there are no excuses—not even when someone has moved away from Pinewood, the small town near Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where my grandparents have lived all their lives. If the people who have to travel don't want to stay with someone who still lives here, there's always the Hilltop Family Inn, or they can stay in one of the chain hotels in Hattiesburg.

I'm about to get up to get a drink of water when my phone rings. It's my brother, Digger, who feels the same way I do about these reunion things.

"I'm not sure we'll be able to attend," Digger says. "It's Jeremy's third birthday, and Puddin' wants to do it up big for him, seein' as it's our last child and all."

"What better way to do it up big than to bring him to the family reunion where you'll have scores of aunts, uncles, and cousins twice removed to give him more attention than he'll ever need?"

"Shay. Seriously."

"Just sayin'."

"What are you going to do?" Digger sounds condescending, and his voice annoys me.

"I thought I'd rent a husband and a Cadillac for the day just to get everyone off my back."

He laughs. "I know you're not going to rent a husband because no one will ever measure up to Elliot."

"Digger." I hope he gets my tone of finality. Digger is the only person who knew about my crush on Elliot Stevens back in high school.

"Okay, let's start over." He clears his throat. "Really, Shay? A Cadillac? Can't you at least get a Beemer?"

"No, Digger, not really. I'm not planning to rent a car or a husband. Are you too dense to recognize sarcasm?"

"I knew what you were doing."

"Sure you did. At any rate, if I go, I think you should, too." I pause. "You know how Mama will be if you don't show up. Besides, she'll want to brag on Jeremy and show him off, he's so cute."

"True. I'll talk to Puddin'." I hear commotion over the phone. "I gotta go, Shay. Puddin' needs me to help put Jeremy to bed. He's been givin' us fits lately."

“Give Puddin’ my love.” How hard can it be to put a pint-sized person to bed? I laugh. Digger is like a loaf of French bread—crusty and macho on the outside but soft in the middle.

After we hang up, I read the email again. It says to RSVP, but I don’t have to do it right this minute. Not normally one to procrastinate, I figure I’m okay just this one time.

I’ve barely stood up from my computer chair when my phone rings again. This time it’s Mama.

“Why haven’t you responded?”

“Um . . .”

“I know you saw the message. It says right here that you read it almost twenty minutes ago.”

“Mama! Are you the one planning this?”

“Not exactly. There’s a group of us—”

“Why didn’t you warn me?” I pause to try to get the shriek out of my voice. “You know how I feel about these things.”

“And that’s precisely why you need to go. Everyone cares about you, even though you keep pushing us away.”

Do I hear a snuffle on the other end of the line? I clear my throat.

“I’m sure they do care, but last time they showed me how much they cared, a week later I got a half dozen phone calls from guys those caring folks gave my number to.”

“They’re just trying to help, sweetie. You need to get out there and meet some men.”

“I meet plenty of men at work.”

“Yeah,” she agrees. “They’re all stuffy types who have no idea where you come from. Don’t you forget for one minute who you are, Shay.”

“I know, I know.” I find it amusing that Mama thinks the men I meet at work are stuffy. If anyone’s stuffy, it’s me.

I don’t say what I’m thinking—that I’ve worked hard to hide the redneck in my bloodline. It’s one thing to be a redneck and another to be a geek. But being both . . . well, it’s all a matter of perception. It’ll always be there, and I’m not saying it’s always a bad thing. I just don’t think being a redneck helps encourage respect from the people I manage. Or date.

“So are you going or not?”

“I don’t think—”

“If you decide not to go, there’s no tellin’ what everyone will say about you.” Mama blows out a breath. “You know how some of our kinfolk can talk behind people’s backs.”

“I don’t care what—”

“But I do. I care a lot. You’re my little girl, and I love you to pieces, and it just kills me when I hear—”

“All right, Mama. I’ll go.” I’m not in the mood to hear Mama’s diatribe about how she suffered the whole nine and a half months she was pregnant with me, how much she worried about the fact that I was a clumsy kid and lived in fear that I’d break my neck doing some daredevil stunt, how late she’d stayed up waiting for me the two times I went out when I was a teenager, and how she feared for my life when I left for college. I mean, isn’t that all a part of parenting? It’s expected.

“Good girl. Now don’t forget to bring something. You don’t have to cook anything. We always need potato chips at these things.”

“I can cook now. I’ll make something good, like maybe deviled eggs,” I say before clicking the Off button. I might have agreed to go, but I’m still a rebel. Now let Mama worry that I’ll leave the mayonnaise out on the counter too long and give everyone food poisoning. I’ve tried explaining that it’s not the mayo that makes people sick, but she’s not one to take lessons from her young’uns.

I plop back down in front of my computer, accept the invitation, and type the dish I plan to bring. My attitude is rotten, and it probably comes through. I haven’t figured out why it takes so little these days to annoy me, but I’m praying the Lord will show me so I can do something about it.

I take a deep breath and blow it out. *Forgive me, Lord. You know how I struggle with family stuff. I’ll try to do better.*

This wouldn’t be so difficult if I had a man in my life, more because of what other people think than what I need. Although, I have to admit, I wouldn’t mind someone to cuddle with on a cold night. Some of my aunts, uncles, and cousins will say something to me about the fact that I’m in my late thirties and still single. The ones who don’t will talk behind my back. It always happens. Mama’s right about my not showing

up. People will assume the worst, and I'll hear about it after the gossip has made the rounds.

An overwhelming urge to find an award-winning deviled egg recipe washes over me. I might be an old maid in some people's minds, but one thing they can't call me is a slacker. When I do something, I do it right.

I turn back to the computer and Google "deviled egg recipes." Most of them are the same—boiled eggs sliced in half, a dollop of mayonnaise, a smidge of mustard, a spoonful of pickle relish, and something colorful to dash them with after they're on the platter. Too common. I want something to wow 'em.

For the next couple of hours, I search recipe after recipe until I finally find the perfect one. It has one secret ingredient that no one will be able to resist. Bacon bits. And who doesn't love bacon?

Puddin' Hlenke

"I don't care what they say about Shay, I think she's a smart girl," Digger says.

I look at him from above my reading glasses. "Men don't care about smart," I remind him.

"What are you talkin' about? I'm a man. I know what men like." He gives me a scowl. "She's pretty, too."

"In a harsh, corporate-executive, hair-pulled-back-so-tight-her-eyes-are-squinty sort of way. I've told her more than once that she might want to loosen her hair a tad." I put down the book I've been reading, get up out of my La-Z-Boy recliner, and walk over to the man I've been married to for near 'bout twenty years. "Face it, Digger. Your sister has no idea how pretty she is or all the wonderful things she has to offer. I love her to death, but she chose her path in life, and it's not exactly one that'll keep her warm at night."

Digger sighs. "I just don't want her feelin' like she has to apologize for everything she does or chooses."

"She doesn't, sweetheart. Shay will always have us. She's your sister, and that makes her my sister, too." I give him a half-smile. "Besides, I really do care about her. Did you know she's the most trustworthy person I know?"

Digger casts a dubious half-smile in my direction before giving me a clipped nod. "I appreciate that, Puddin'." He lifts the newspaper that he's been trying to read since morning. "Did you see there's a sale on riding lawn mowers over at Jackie's Farm Store?"

I snort. "What on earth would you do with a riding lawn mower?"

"Mow the lawn." He gives me a disapproving glance. "What else would I do?"

The look of desire on his face is something I haven't seen in a while, and even though it's for a lawn mower, I can't resist. "Okay, Digger, if that's what you really want, I don't see why you can't have it."

"Do you mean that?" He gets up out of his chair and walks toward me.

"Of course I do. After all, I'm finally in my dream house, so who am I to deny you something you want?"

He reaches for my hand. I give it, and he pulls me to my feet. I love when Digger shows me some love, and if it takes a lawn mower, well, so be it.

"You know, Puddin', me and you make a great team."

I look up into his eyes and smile. "We do."

My heart aches when he doesn't smile back. He lets go of my hand and shakes his head. "You'd think that between the two of us we'd be able to figure out how to get out of my family reunion that's coming up. I don't get why they keep havin' 'em so close together. Didn't we just have one a few months ago?"

I nod, and as he backs away, I practically throw myself at him. "I think we should go to this one. After all, we finally have something to brag on."

"Jeremy?" he asks.

"Well, yeah, we can brag on him, too. But I'm talkin' about this house. We can take a bunch of pictures and pass 'em around to everyone. They'll all be so impressed that we finally have a brick, ranch-style house with big ol' shutters and a two-car garage."

In spite of Digger's feelings about going to the reunion, he snorts. "I don't know that anyone in my family will be as impressed as you think they'll be."

"Oh, they'll be impressed, all right, even if they don't show it. I know your family near 'bout as well as I know my own."

He lets out a groan. "Well, since you didn't give me any flak about the ridin' lawn mower, I'll think about it."

"You'll think about it?"

"Okay, Puddin', I reckon we'll go."

“And you’ll go with a good attitude?” I lift one eyebrow—a skill I’ve recently learned after countless hours practicing in front of the bathroom mirror.

He grimaces and nods. “If it’s that important to you.” He yawns and stretches. “I best be headin’ off to bed. Mornin’ comes mighty early around here during the week.”

“I’ll be there shortly.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Digger shaking his head and his mouth moving as he mumbles something about my need to be accepted. As much as I hate to admit it, he knows me all too well.

All my life, I’ve felt like the poor kid. I remember from a very early age when folks would drop off big bags of clothes that Mama would sort and stack for all six of us young’uns. “This might not fit you now, but you’ll grow into it,” became her mantra.

Daddy used to say we were too poor to paint and too proud to white-wash, when he talked about the sorry excuse for the crumbling wood house we grew up in. Something was always broken, but we managed to find ways to do what it took to get through life.

Mama tried to put on a positive face when we went out as a family, but I could see her shame behind the facade. It hurt me as much as I’m sure it did her, but there wasn’t a thing any of us could do about it. At least not until we became adults.

All of us are doin’ just fine now, and we’re able to send Mama some money every month to supplement her little social security check. Daddy took sick about ten years ago, and he was finally able to meet his Maker, knowing everything would be just fine with his family, now that we’re all grown up and able to tend to Mama.

Every single, solitary one of us is much better off than my parents ever were. My siblings all have jobs and nice homes. My Digger has a great job with UPS, and he gets to wear that cute little brown uniform that makes me tingle all over. I’ve always loved men in uniform.

My brother Billy Ray is a hauler with his own fleet of trucks that take cargo coast to coast. Mason started out going to college but quickly learned that he was a better salesman than student. Now he sells used

cars up in North Carolina, so we don't see much of him since he works seven days a week. Here in Mississippi, most of them close on Sunday, but apparently where he lives now, people never stop shopping for cars. Mason has never been one to miss out on making an extra dime. Once he started making money, he became addicted. Too bad he doesn't take some time off to enjoy it, but at least his young'uns are livin' in high cotton. Tyrell is a maintenance supervisor in a hospital down in Biloxi. My only living sister, Patricia, became a bank teller, married the branch manager, and eventually became a stay-at-home mama just like me. The oldest of us young'uns, Sue Ellen, didn't go to the doctor when she found a lump in her breast, so it spread until she wasn't treatable. We lost her several years ago, shortly after Daddy passed. It still makes me sad, but at least we all have comfort in knowing she loved the Lord. I figure she's up in heaven with Daddy, scopin' the place out for the rest of us.

So now I want to show off what me and Digger have accomplished through hard work, determination, and the desire to pull out of our lower-than-humble beginnings. Digger was better off growing up than I was, but not by much. He still talks about how they wouldn't have had much on their plates if it weren't for his mama bein' such a good gardener and havin' the ability to squeeze a quarter so tight he could hear the eagle scream. When he tells me I can't buy something I want, I accuse him of takin' after his mama. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't. All depends on the last conversation he and his mama had.

Since we bought this house before the builder put the final touches on it, I still have brochures, swatches, and samples of everything we got to pick out. I open the bottom drawer of the buffet table in the dining room and pull out the box of memorabilia from the pickin'-out stage of our home-buying experience.

I lovingly stroke the square piece of carpet that I'm still in love with. It's not the highest end, but it's not the cheap, not-enough-yarn-to-cover-the-backing quality either. It's much better than what we had in the rental house. Some folks say we should have gone with hardwood, but we couldn't afford that option.

Before I head to my room, I jot down my to-do list for tomorrow,

which includes taking pictures of all the rooms in the house so I can pass my phone around at Digger's family reunion. For once, I'll have something besides the kids to brag on.

We were still in the buying stage during the last reunion, so I promised Digger I'd keep quiet about it in case something went wrong. I don't think he believed it would actually happen until it did.

I put the box back in the drawer and let out a deep sigh of satisfaction. I imagine the sounds of Digger's aunts and cousins as they ooh and ahh over our beautiful home with country décor straight out of *Southern Living*, and I can't help but smile.



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