

Half of What You Hear

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Introduction

Greyhill, Virginia—refuge of old money, old mansions, and old-fashioned ideas about who belongs and who doesn't—just got a few new residents. When Bess Warner arrives in town with her husband Cole and their kids, she thinks she knows what to expect. Sure, moving to Cole's small hometown means she'll have to live across the street from her mother-in-law, and yes, there's going to be a lot to learn as they take over Cole's family's inn-keeping business, but Bess believes it will be the perfect escape from Washington. She *needs* it to be. After losing her White House job under a cloud of scandal, she hardly knows who she is anymore.

But Bess quickly discovers that fitting in is easier said than done. Instead of the simpler life she'd banked on, she finds herself preoccupied by barbed questions from gossipy locals and her own worries over how her twins are acclimating at the town's elite private school. When the opportunity to write an article for the *Washington Post's* lifestyle supplement falls into Bess's lap, she thinks it might finally be her opportunity to find her footing here...even if the subject of the piece is Greyhill's most notorious resident.

Susannah "Cricket" Lane, fruit of the town's deepest-rooted family tree, is a special sort of outsider, having just returned to Greyhill from New York after a decades-long hiatus. The long absence has always been the subject of suspicion, not that the eccentric Susannah cares what anyone thinks; as a matter of fact, she seems bent on antagonizing as many people as possible. But is Susannah being sincere with Bess—or is she using their strangely intense interview sessions for her to further an agenda that includes peeling back the layers of Greyhill's darkest secrets?

As Bess discovers unsettling truths about Susannah and Greyhill at large, ones that bring her into the secrets of prior generations, she begins to learn how difficult it is to start over in a town that runs on talk, and that sometimes, the best way to find yourself is to uncover what everyone around you is hiding....

Questions for Discussion



1. Does Bess's move to Greyhill feel like an escape from her humiliation in Washington or a proactive move for her family? What would you have done in her shoes?
2. Do you think Bess deserved to lose her job at the White House? Is "venting with a coworker," as Bess describes her behavior, ever acceptable or is it always a bad idea?
3. In what ways is Greyhill a typical "small town"? Does it seem like the residents make a conscious effort to keep out outsiders, and if so, do you think this is true of small towns in general? Would you ever live in a place like it?
4. Does Cole owe it to Bess to help her feel more comfortable in Greyhill because it's his hometown, or is it better for her to have to carve her own path?
5. What does Susannah owe the residents of Greyhill? Is it fair for her to sell off the land even if it means a fundamental change in the town's character? Is change inevitable?
6. How do the flashbacks to Bess's high school years reflect her current-day experience with the other mothers in Greyhill? Is Cole right that she's projecting a bit? Or is Livvie's experience trying to find friends in their new town similar to hers?
7. Susannah is a layered, complex character with many secrets. By the novel's end, how had your initial impressions of her changed? Did you feel more or less sympathy for her?
8. Henrietta Martin has taken on an important symbolic significance for the residents of Greyhill. What does she represent for them? How do you think they'll change their opinions about her and her death now that Bess's article has shed some light on the incident?
9. Diane is, in some ways, a typical mother-in-law, but she surprises Bess by the end of the book. Did you have to revise your earlier impressions of her, as Bess did? What do you think their future relationship will be like?
10. Does gossip serve any positive purpose in this novel? Have you ever had an instance in your own life when gossiping helped a situation, or do you believe in the old adage that if you can't say something nice, then you shouldn't say anything at all? What do you think of people who are described as gossips?