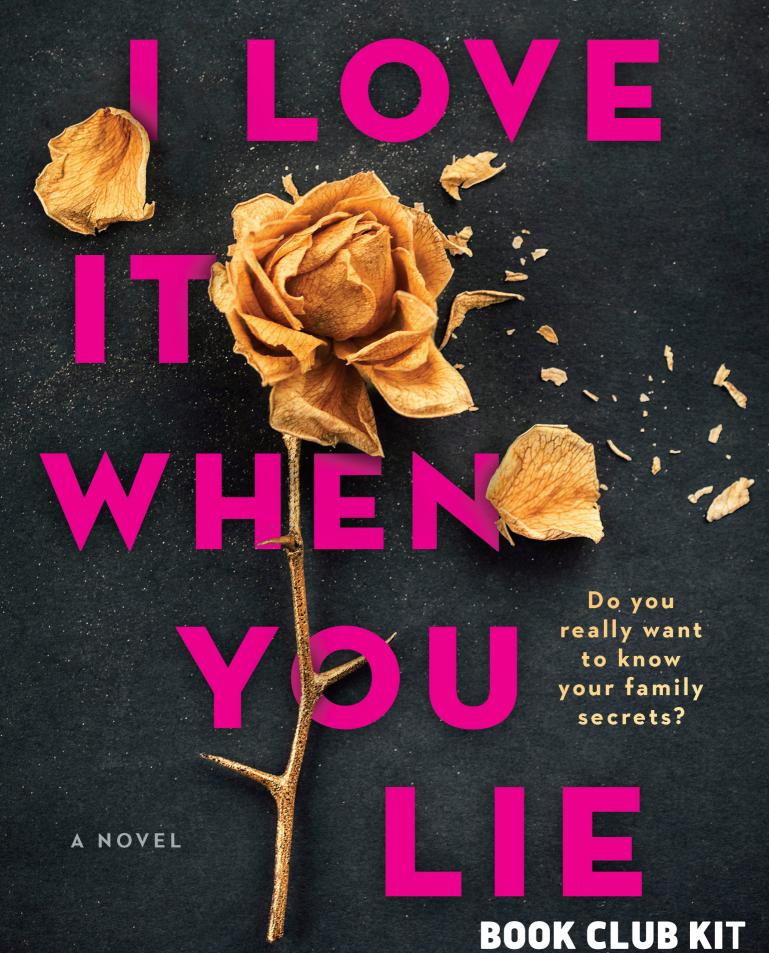
"A wicked blend of family secrets, sibling resentment and small-town ways."

—LISA GARDNER, #1 New York Times bestselling author



KRISTEN BIRD

Dear Reader,

Thank you for visiting the Appalachian foothills with me and the Williams sisters in this novel. Of all the short stories and novel-length manuscripts I've written, this book is the closest to home, both literally and figuratively, because the setting and the intense bond between the siblings mirrors my own childhood.

Though Willow Gap is fictional, I was raised in north Alabama in a small town where my parents grew up, met, and married at eighteen years old (they remind me that they were *almost* nineteen!). They joke about how they lived down the street from one another as toddlers, and I have a photo of them in the same classroom in seventh grade.

Both of my grandmothers were strong Southern women who could win any cooking contest. My nana was a cook at one of the two elementary schools in town, and my granny worked at a diner until she opened her own. Because of them, I grew up eating the best Southern food and learning the truest Southern phrases, gems like "I'll swawny," "hitch in your get-along," and "throwin' a hissy fit." Instead of "Bless your heart," my nana would say, "God love"—as in "God love that mess of a person"—and as I grew taller, she often told me, "I'm gonna put a brick on your head." These were the voices in my mind as I wrote about Gran. My immediate family moved to the West Coast for my father's job when I was in fifth grade, but we often returned to Sand Mountain to spend time with family.

As a child, my father attended Decoration Sundays, a tradition that involved potlucks, singing, religious services, and—most importantly—cleaning and decorating family graves. This tradition is unique to the Southern Appalachian Mountains, but some believe that Memorial Day developed out of this annual observance of the dead. My nana would take turns at different gravesites on a couple of Sundays in May each year, visiting deceased family members and sprucing up their final resting places, and shortly before she died, we had a conversation in which she lamented the lost tradition of Decoration among my younger generation.

I'm the oldest child in a family of three girls and one boy, and the wide age differences in my characters are almost the same as that of my actual family (my brother is actually the youngest). Because I was so much older than them, I distinctly remember visiting my sisters and my baby brother in the hospital shortly after their births, and by the time I was fourteen, I was often cleaning up messes they made. Today, the relationship I have with my siblings is defined by loyalty and laughter, and while we've never buried a body together, we know we've got each other's backs.

My hope is that you will feel like you've been invited to those beautiful mountains as you read this book, that you'll be able to see the lightning bugs soaring around you, that you'll pull up a chair on the front porch and make yourself at home.

Sincerely,

Kristen Bird

The strong women in my life informed the complicated female characters in my book, especially that of Gran. To the right is a picture of our family matriarch, Pearl Brock, who was born in 1900 and married her husband, Harley, when she was thirteen years old. I was in eighth grade when my Granny Pearl passed away at the age of ninety-five. Here she is in the 1950s in her flower garden, which



was no doubt appreciated each year during Decoration. Granny Pearl was the grandmother of my grandfather, Delmus Willard Brock, who married the woman who would become my beloved nana, Johnnie Fay Brock. The two of them had my father, Lynn Brock. The photo on the



left shows a 1970s Decoration Sunday—PawPaw and Nana are pictured on the far left, and my dad and Granny Pearl are on the far right.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- I. The few days that span the novel are centered around a tradition specific to Tennessee and north Alabama. Have you ever heard of Decoration Sunday, one day a year when family members come together to clean and decorate the graves of their ancestors and "kinfolk"? What does this tradition, as well as the novel as a whole, say about the bond families share? Are there any similar traditions in the community where you grew up?
- 2. These women have been called "a new kind of Southern." Do you view them this way? Why or why not? What assumptions have you personally seen dismantled about people from various regions of the US?
- 3. Tara acts as the unofficial matriarch of the family after Gran's death. Which aspects of her character allow her to quickly step into Gran's former role?
- 4. What drives June's desperate act of stealing Elena from the hospital? Did you feel like you could sympathize with her decision? How did you hope her plotline about keeping or giving up Elena would end?
- 5. From your perspective, why has Clementine stayed with Professor Matthew Conrad for these past few months? What did you expect to happen in their relationship?





DISCUSSION OUESTIONS



- 6. Stephanie is the outsider, especially at first. Do you think she's truly a Williams girl by the end of the novel? Why or why not?
- 7. Tara's daughter, Lottie, is not a main character, but she plays a pivotal role in the story. What did you notice about her character that makes her like or unlike her aunts or Gran? In your own family dynamics, what similarities do you share (or not share) with generations before or after you?
- 8. Gran is already dead when the novel opens, but how does her presence insert itself into the story? Which of her pieces of her advice stood out most to you? Why?
- 9. This novel deals with relationship dynamics and how much we should reveal to people in our lives. Which relationships captured your interest? Why?
- 10. Which character did you understand or sympathize with the most: Tara, June, Clementine or Stephanie? Or another character? Why?





My Granny Daugette's BANANA PUDDING

with notes from my mother

Directions

- I. Combine sugar and flour. Stir in evaporated milk, egg yolks, milk. Add butter. Heat over medium to medium-high heat, stirring constantly until thickened. Remove from heat. Add vanilla.
- 2. Before cooking custard, layer vanilla wafers and bananas (Granny didn't specify the quantity, so have at it!) in a casserole dish. Pour custard over fruit and wafers. Top with meringue. Bake at 375 degrees until meringue is lightly browned.
- 3. Meringue: Beat egg whites until stiff peaks form. Gradually add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar.

Note: It's best to eat this dessert straight out of the oven, but you can let it cool or place it in the refrigerator and eat cold as well. Also, Granny tried all sorts of fruit with this recipe. Believe it or not, cantaloupe was a favorite.

Ingredients

I cup sugar

¼ cup flour

I can evaporated milk (small can)

3 eggs (separated—you'll use yolks
for pudding, whites for
meringue)

I ¼ cup milk

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

½ stick butter

Vanilla wafers

3 bananas

¼ cup sugar

Serves: 6



Kristen Bird lives outside of Houston, Texas with her husband and three daughters. She earned her bachelor's degree in music and mass media before completing a master's in literature. She teaches high school English and writes with a cup of coffee in hand. In her free time, she likes to visit parks with her three daughters, watch quirky films with her husband and attempt to keep pace with her rescue lab-mixes.