

★ **PIECE** ★
of **CAKE**
★

A Novel

*Mary Hollis Huddleston
and Asher Fogle Paul*



Piece of Cake

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PROLOGUE

I was happy for them, really.

A white, vintage A-line dress brushed just below her knees. Soft tendrils escaped her honey-colored bun, a grandmother's antique brooch the only accent. She clasped a loose pink bouquet in one hand, his hand in the other as they stood solemnly before the judge.

Lush, wild clusters of pink peonies and white hydrangeas interspersed with soft dusty miller lined the aisle of simple white folding chairs. Two larger arrangements in antique silver urns flanked the couple. A single cellist sat in the corner of the room. All simple, but elegant.

She couldn't stop smiling, and I realized I'd never seen her so at ease.

They quietly said vows they wrote themselves. Our small crowd watched in happy silence.

I tried not to shift too loudly, every movement echoing on

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the cold marble tiles. Someone sniffled. The sound reverberated in the cavernous space. The groom's mother caught me staring and winked at me across the room.

This bride had sent me on quite a journey, forcing me to finally reckon with my past and my future. With my identity, even. It hadn't been easy, but I was grateful.

I had no right to be here, but here I was.





CHAPTER 1

SEVERAL MONTHS EARLIER

In front of me, matching fluorescent-pink shirts glowed in the hazy morning light of Broadway. Eight a.m., it seemed, was not too early for Tanya's Bride Tribe to hit the streets in a "pedal tavern," a self-propelled bar on bicycle wheels.

Only two more blocks. Almost there, I huffed, my red-soled heels keeping time with the truly terrible Shania Twain sing-along coming from the already buzzed bride-to-be.

Stay classy, Nashville.

Even with four-plus inches of pure fashion torturing my feet, I was quickly gaining on them. Though it was rush hour on a *Thursday* for god's sake, the Bride Tribe seemed disinclined to pull over to allow traffic to pass, making me temporarily grateful my cheap-ass job refused to pay for employee parking at the lot closest to the office. Nope, to save the extra \$47.10 per employee

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annually, we'd been banished to Skippy's Park and Pay off a side alley close to the overpass, adding another seven blocks of walking to my already *wonderful* commute.

So here I was, walking faster than seven pink cowgirls on a bicycle built for booze during rush hour. But the women kept cycling down the street—ignoring, imbibing, and blocking traffic. Bachelorette bike rides could not be constrained by time or traffic laws.

Neon signs on honky-tonks named after country singers cast their own glares on us hapless passersby. It felt appropriate for a city on fire, metaphorically speaking. Nashville was booming before the pandemic, but it had blown up in the time since. People from all over the country flocked here. Whether for a weekend celebration or a fresh start with a lower cost of living, they kept on coming. Not for the first time, I was grateful I had moved before rent prices skyrocketed. My East Nashville studio apartment was only three miles from downtown, but sometimes those three miles felt like thirty.

My breath was visible in the dim February morning. *One more block*, I thought, pausing at the crosswalk while the bright little sign mocked me with its Do Not Cross. The neon hand, held up like a teenage Claire, almost screamed sass today—*Talk to the hand 'cause the face ain't listening*.

I could practically see my office from here. Putting on my game face, I smoothed my blonde strands in my phone's camera. Those wretched baby hairs that stuck out would be the eternal bane of my existence. I wiped a smudge of mascara from my

brow bone. Now I was ready to sprint to my desk—if I ever made it there.

I would *not* be late to work. *Not today, Satan.*

Last night, my boss had sent a company-wide email with the helpful subject: “DO NOT MISS THURSDAY’S STAFF MEETING.” The way magazine publishing was going, one could presume it was to announce more layoffs and budget cuts. I didn’t want to give Michelle any reasons to include me in this next round of firings. Which was why I needed the traffic light to change. Like, now.

The universe seemed to understand and gifted me with a walk signal. Hiking my inexpensive canvas tote back on my shoulder, I took one step off the curb—today was going to be a good day, I could feel it!—and was knocked immediately back down to the curb, pain radiating through my hip bone, Shania ringing in my ears.

Dazed, I looked up at the grey morning sky, then slightly down to the shock of fluorescent pink. *Have I just been in a hit-and-run with a pedal tavern?*

“Oh my gosh!” a thick Minnesota accent screamed. “Don’t ya know, I think we killed her!”

In that moment, I actually considered whether it was true. This surely was hell. Tanya, I presumed by her flower crown and veil, leaned over me off her bike/bar stool, with her breakfast beer still in hand, to verify whether I was alive.

“I’m getting married!” she cheered as if that was an excuse to run someone over with a bar, before she and her “tribe” did their best Peloton impersonation and kicked off. Felt really right.

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I slowly sat up, assuring the few locals on the street with me that I was okay and that yes, tourists were menaces. If the universe really did give signs, what did this one say? Something about how the bridal business was ready to run you over, I guess. The light changed again and with it a massive pickup truck with a flatbed trailer towing a hot tub turned into the intersection. A banner hung on one side that read “Stan’s Stag Do”—a nicely Anglophile and alliterative bachelor phrase for someone I imagined was not remotely British. As the truck veered in front of the tipsy women, the pedal tavern failed to brake yet again.

The scene seemed to unfold in slow motion into a beautiful mess. The women’s vehicle careened keg-first into the side of the truck, which was still blocking the intersection. The bike frame bent, though the women seemed unhurt. Then I watched as the trailer wobbled and tipped just enough for a large quantity of murky hot tub water to splash over the side and douse two-thirds of the bridal party. Forget the coronavirus—these women would be leaving the city with a nasty fungal infection thanks to their baptism on Broadway.

As the murky water washed over my own precious Louboutins, I looked up into a flickering pink sign and prayed for the pavement to swallow me whole.



A brutal thirty minutes later, I was finally perched at my desk and working on my first interview of the day. Through my earbuds, the harsh noises of downtown were washed away by the gentle

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sound of crashing waves. A breeze softly rustled palm fronds. My bare toes curled as if feeling the sand beneath them instead of the grungy carpet covering my office floor. Some exotic bird squawked. Loudly.

“Oh, sorry, Claire!” the woman yelled in my ear. “Jim dear, can you close the sliding door? I can’t hear the phone. What was I saying? Yes, so our first dance was—”

I sighed and stopped listening to the call. My recorder would capture the relevant details, and Intern Lauren would dutifully transcribe them for me by Monday.

Unfortunately, I was not, of course, in an overwater bungalow near a lush shoreline and turquoise waves. But the subject of my interview was. Instead, I basked in the glow of my massive desktop monitor at the granny-chic offices of *Piece of Cake*, the South’s oldest, most esteemed, and least profitable bridal magazine. Listening to the drone of a bride discussing the minutiae of her big day was my only distraction from the daily hustle that had become my life.

After hanging up, I leaned back into my desk chair. I’d made it to the office just in time to squeeze in my interview before the staff meeting. I eased my bare feet back into my drying high heels before limping to the coffee maker on the other side of our open-concept workspace. Thanks again for the bruised hip, Tanya.

We’d recently upgraded to a Keurig with a reservoir, which meant I no longer had to refill the water each time. Sometimes I thought longingly of the caffeine castle in the breakroom at my first (and only other) job back in Dallas at a wedding planning

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firm. But times were tough in publishing, so small improvements would have to do.

At *Piece of Cake*, gone were the days of merely offering advice to the South's most sophisticated brides. Covering real-life events had become our bread and butter. We could sell ads to most of the vendors featured, and our website was full of registry resources, including helpful links to retailers. When readers clicked through and spent money, we got a percentage of the profits. *Synergy*, the business side called it. It all helped pad low subscription revenue and fund my pathetic salary.

I ran into Amaya, one of the other two assistant editors, in our tiny breakroom.

"How'd the interview go for your 'Tying the Yacht' piece?" Amaya quipped while adding sugar to her coffee.

"When Michelle assigned me weddings on boats, I envisioned sailing off into the sunset with a cocktail in hand, on at least one boat. Instead, I just drowned in a sea of puns."

Amaya giggled. "I still can't believe you had to keep that ridiculous title."

"I refuse to add any more bad wordplay to this piece. If I'd been playing a drinking game based on the number of times people said 'love boat' to me when describing the wedding, pretty sure I'd have been washed away by tequila."

We both laughed. I liked Amaya, but I'd learned to not get too close to colleagues. You never knew when you'd be in competition for the same role or opportunity. It was lonely, but cleaner, this way. I was sticking to the rules outlined in my mental *Claire*

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Sommers's Guide to Business. I'd neglected to do so in the past and was still reaping the consequences.

"I see they're jazzing things up in here with flavored options," I said as I inserted my French vanilla K-Cup into the Keurig.

"Only the finest for the star assistant editors," she replied, examining a coconut cr me cappuccino pod. Revolting, but you do you. "Tell me, where is the couple honeymooning? I assume you had to do the follow-up interview from your lowly hovel of a cubicle while they're lounging on some fabulous beach somewhere."

"Pretty much," I said. "They're in Barbados, and it physically hurt to overhear a waiter in the background offer them another round of mai tais."

"Ugh, I could really go for a vacation to the tropics right now," said Amaya, shaking her dark curls.

"Girl, me too," I replied.

"Well, I'd better get back to it. Deadlines, deadlines, deadlines," she said as she headed back toward her desk.

I thought longingly about a vacation. Over the last four years in Nashville, between a shuttered world and my shrunken bank account, I hadn't exactly had much opportunity for travel. Truthfully, I hadn't even gone out much to reacquaint myself with this ever-evolving city.

Back at my desk, I looked out the tiny office window down onto Seventh Avenue, just off Broadway, the honky-tonk capital of the United States. It was just shy of ten o'clock in the morning, but the downtown blocks were already bustling. Nearby, the bars' doors were open, the country music hopefuls were singing their

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hearts out, and the tourists were ready for a full day of partying. I was still recovering from my own narrow escape from the scene. I cringed thinking of Tanya's soaking-wet and now-sober crew.

Clearly, Nashville's hospitality industry was ablaze. A new hotel was opening just about every week, and with it came a new event space. This meant more weddings and corporate events coming to town, and the past couple of years had been some of the busiest for weddings in a generation. From speaking with both brides and local vendors, I knew every weekend and many weeknights were booked at the best venues in town.

The shutdowns were a thing of the past. Weddings were back. And Nashville had come to party. *Great*, I thought. The hours in the magazine world pretty much sucked already, and we were going to be busier than ever. At least work would keep me preoccupied and help me forget how crappy the rest of my life was at the moment.

My phone vibrated on my desk, rattling me out of my thoughts. I answered while glancing at the time: 9:47 a.m. I could take Blake's call and then conveniently get off for my 10:00 a.m. meeting, if it came to that.

"Hi, Blake," I said, absently moving my mouse back and forth on the pad.

"Claire, you didn't answer my last few texts, so I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Sorry to worry you. I've been fine, just busy."

"Are you up for that music festival I mentioned on Friday? My buddy has a couple extra tickets."

Blake and I met on Bumble. I'd had a weak moment after

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opening a bottle of wine one night and decided to also crack open a dating app. Blake was finishing up his MBA at Vanderbilt. We'd enjoyed a handful of dates together, including one fairly romantic picnic at Centennial Park. But Blake was a man with a plan, and his plan didn't include staying in town.

"Blake, I've had a great time getting to know you, but I'm not sure this is leading anywhere."

"Why? I thought things were going well. I had an amazing time the other night."

"You're leaving Nashville after you graduate this summer. You're fantastic, really, but you should be free to pursue the life you want wherever you wind up and not worry about me." I thought the last part was a nice touch. *See, Mom, I can be diplomatic.*

My wall of self-preservation resolidified, the ice froze back intact. He put up a few half-hearted protestations, but by the time we hung up two minutes later, he'd only confirmed my suspicion that no one was worth the effort of maintaining a long-distance relationship.

Plus, a new boyfriend was a distraction I didn't need right now. I'd dated enough to know starting over with someone new could end up getting in the way of bigger goals. Better to nip it in the bud. Free from any romantic entanglement, I'd be able to focus all that extra time and emotion on my career. For once, I needed to follow my own rules and stick to the professional, not the personal. I'd throw myself even more into my job and try to succeed in at least one area of my life that was still somewhat in my control.

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Time to dash. Our editor in chief, Michelle Zhang, had of course asked that everyone be in the office today for the biweekly staff meeting. Watercooler scuttlebutt was that they were announcing more cuts. As if the staff could get any leaner. We were all writing, editing, posting, and promoting our own content these days. I figured the next step was for me to go to the printer and typeset the magazine myself.

Piece of Cake had always been run by the same family, but rumor had it they were trying to sell to a larger publisher out of New York. If Janice in HR was to be believed, said publisher had a lot of ideas about our revenue streams. I had my own ideas, if anyone cared to ask. Not that I was involved in any decisions or held any power whatsoever, but I'd started following some big-industry Twitter accounts to stay up on the news. Figured it was better to be in the know if I was going to get pink-slipped sooner or later.

We're in trouble, I thought as I walked through the empty space toward the conference room. The vacant cubicles now used for "storage" made the office feel like a ghost town. But I had one advantage: boots-on-the-ground experience. I understood weddings—what went into them and what connected with people. And I had a lot of suggestions for how to bridge the fiscal gap.

One late night while waiting for my pages to close, I put some of my ideas together and compiled a deck about mini-documentaries. I'd gotten the idea while watching *Say Yes to the Dress* (while also wallowing in self-pity and self-soothing with a pint of Jeni's) a couple of months ago. I sent it to Michelle, who

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was notoriously behind on email. When I followed up, she said she would consider it, run it up the flagpole. So I'd waited. And watched more layoffs.

As I neared the conference room where I'd surely learn my fate, I steeled myself and thought back over the last four years. *Piece of Cake* had been a haven for me after I'd practically run away to Nashville without a real plan and with barely enough in my personal savings account to secure an apartment and survive a few weeks while looking for a job. I hadn't been a total stranger to the city, and given its growth and surge of new residents, I figured I could do something in the event-related world, like working for a caterer or stationer. But when I saw the entry-level job posting at *Piece of Cake*, I actually felt excited about the idea of a wedding-based magazine—and one of my longtime favorites at that. The feeling had caught me off guard.

Sure, I wasn't fully qualified for the role and had to start at the bottom. I'd studied writing and been on the newspaper at Vanderbilt, which—coupled with my prior wedding planning experience in Dallas—was enough to get me an interview at *Piece of Cake*. I glazed over some details and fast-talked my way through the conversation with Janice in HR, who kindly passed me along for another round. I started out fact-checking stories. I hustled harder, worked longer hours, and generally went overboard to earn the attention of the top editors. I eagerly walked pages directly to their desks in attempts to get them to recognize my face among the rotation of freelancers. I spent seven months calling every fashion label, wedding planner, or bride mentioned in our pages to verify everything from name spellings to vendor

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contact information. It was mind-numbing, but someone had to do it. Or so I thought.

Fortunately, it paid off. I got promoted to assistant editor just before the entire fact-checking department was eliminated completely. Now writers were expected to confirm their own accuracy, and outsiders checked only the most controversial of stories (which, for a bridal magazine, meant none of them).

I never expected to enjoy doing something like this, but I'd fought tooth and nail to get a foot in the door here and was determined to stick it out. If holding onto my job meant begging Michelle to keep me as the last employee standing, I wasn't above it.

I'd resorted to drastic measures and gone to great lengths before, which led to some of my biggest mistakes. I was unrecognizable to myself afterward. Those choices still haunted me. I still wasn't sure I'd ever recovered. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that again.

Taking one more deep breath at the end of the hallway, I walked through the door to the conference room. I'd be darned if I was going down this time without a fight.



CHAPTER 2

I took my seat at the long reclaimed-wood conference table in our cozy meeting room. Chintz fabric lined the walls. I crossed my feet at the ankles because I'm a *lady*, thank you. After my promotion, I'd moved up from having to stand in the corner and now felt very powerful, despite my chair being at the farthest possible spot from Michelle. Honestly, I probably got a seat because too many legacy editors with bloated salaries got laid off, but I wasn't complaining.

Sadly, today's team was a lean machine. I was the bottom rung of the full-time staff, along with Amaya. Our senior editor, Kevin, made sure our articles made sense. Alex and Liz covered beauty and fashion, respectively. Nancy was the copy editor, and she oversaw a couple freelancers who came into the office when we were closing pages. We had a handful of Vanderbilt and Belmont interns, mostly for running samples and helping post social media content. Michelle was, of course, at the top. She only

answered to the publisher, a shadowy name for the representative of the business side. And then there were people in advertising sales, who clearly had their work cut out for them now that subscriptions had taken a nosedive.

After welcoming everyone, Michelle cleared her throat and got right to it. “We’re going to implement some important staff changes,” she said. The communal cringe was palpable. I didn’t look around the room but braced myself for the bad news.

As she continued, Michelle threw around a lot of phrases like *sponsored content*, *branded content*, *social media promotion*, *influencers*, *live streams*, *socially conscious*, *ethical consumerism*, etc. I think I zoned out during the jargon. But I got the gist. Our esteemed Southern belle was transitioning into a modern, digitally savvy woman. Michelle didn’t have a very specific plan to save the old girl, it seemed. But somehow, we were going to make expensive Southern weddings appeal to Gen Z brides on the coasts. Easy-peasy.

“So to that end, I wanted to let you know about a thrilling new direction that I think is going to help us all.” I perked up. This sounded promising.

“We’ll be launching a documentary series that will include a select number of brides covered in our Real Weddings section. The plan is to sell to a partner like Discovery Plus, Netflix, or another streaming service. To run it, we have a true visionary. I am so excited about all the experience this person brings to our team. Such insight, creativity, and passion will be a huge asset as we take *Piece of Cake* into the future.”

Was there a chance she’d actually read my deck and wanted

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to give it a shot? (I *may* have sent it to her twice, just to be safe. The ol' casual-yet-desperate "bumping this in your inbox" routine.) I had hustled the last few years to finally get some reporting experience, and a docuseries was *my* brainchild. I knew it was a stretch, but maybe she'd gotten the publisher's approval or found a partner to coproduce it with us.

I gripped the arms of my chair. I started to sit taller and made sure my shoes were on securely so I could stand when she said my name. This was my moment, finally.

"Which is why I want you all to give a warm welcome to our new social media consultant, Dominic Gravino."

Seemingly out of nowhere, a lanky brown-haired man stepped into the room and slid into the empty seat next to her. Actually, he was a boy. That's what he looked like. An overgrown boy. Who the heck was this? Stealing my baby, my idea?

"Thank you, Michelle," he said with a crooked grin, running a hand through the floppy hair that had fallen across his dumb forehead. "It's an honor to be here joining the team, and I won't let you guys down."

I was fuming. Seeing red. I couldn't hear a word.

Michelle nodded and opened her mouth once more. "We're thrilled to have Dominic joining us all the way from New York, where he worked for the *Huffington Post*, as well as a couple other media startups. He also runs his own massively successful socials about weddings, known as 'The Brides' Man.' He's a born and bred New Yorker, and I've promised him a warm Southern welcome from y'all."

At this my ears perked. Now *that* was fascinating.

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“And I am glad to share he will be partnering with our very own Claire Sommers on this project.” She gestured to me and smiled as if I should be thrilled by this news.

Like hell he will, I thought. Instead, I smized back and waved a hand at Michelle in acknowledgment.

With my phone casually in my lap under the table, I fired up Instagram as she spoke. I typed in *Dominic Gravino*, and there it was: the Brides’ Man. Prominently featuring his stupidly handsome face, if you liked green eyes and cleft chins like some daffy prince from early nineties Disney. The page had an annoying number of reels and TikToks, which not only made my eyes cross but also meant I couldn’t watch in the meeting. I grudgingly could admit that some of the images looked lovely, and his follower count was in the high six figures. Sure, he could edit video. And he seemed to know his way around a wedding. But could he tell stories brides actually wanted to read? *I can’t believe they gave the assignment to some Gen Z Yankee social media star. C’mon, Michelle, whatever happened to female solidarity?* I left his profile open to do a deep dive later at my desk.

I looked up from my phone to find Dominic staring at me, like he somehow knew I was already stalking him online. I started to blush like a child caught passing notes at school, then avoided further eye contact.

No way he knew what I was doing. He was probably just trying to intimidate me with his unfortunately handsome face, and in doing so, enact his master plan of taking over my job. I hadn’t met many influencers at his level in person, but the few I had acted as if they were a superior breed. They seemed to think they

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were entitled to anything they wanted in life given their “status.” And if Dominic was like the rest of them, he would be a thorn in my side for sure.

After the meeting ended, everyone dispersed. I watched Dominic walk down the hall with Janice in HR, presumably for boring onboarding stuff. This was my moment. Once Michelle was back in her office, I gave her a precise fifteen seconds at her desk before knocking.

“Come in,” she said coolly.

I took a breath and stepped inside. If *Piece of Cake*’s décor was granny-chic, Michelle’s space had elevated the aesthetic to elegant vintage. Toile curtains framed the bricked window facing downtown. A pair of recovered, velvet, French bergère chairs sat before an antique partners desk. She absently tapped a manicured nail on the aged leather as I approached.

“I wondered whether I’d hear from you,” she said.

“Then you must know that I was, well, a little taken aback by that announcement.” Michelle Zhang was known in the industry for being a straight shooter, so I attempted to meet her in kind. “I realize it isn’t exactly revolutionary, but doing mini-documentaries on our brides and pitching them to sponsors was kind of my idea.”

“It was, which is why I’m letting you stay on the project.”

“But . . . ?”

“But you’re an associate editor on our Real Weddings beat, Claire. Just last year, you were calling in samples and getting coffee. Do you have any video editing skills? Or on-the-ground wedding experience?”

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I was faced with the increasingly familiar conundrum of whether to remind her about my prior career in Southern weddings, which had ended in disaster, or whether to let her think me inexperienced, which was a blow to my pride. Instead, I just mumbled, “I understand, I just—” But she cut me off before I could go on.

“Which is why I want you to partner with Dominic. He’s got great video and editing chops, and he has a built-in, loyal audience. He’s got enough charm oozing out of him to make women swoon over his socials. It’s like watching a *Bachelor in Paradise* contestant talk about weddings. Women love that, especially coming from a handsome, young, *straight* man. That makes him a bit of a unicorn in this industry, and we’re lucky to have him on the team.”

Did her eyes just get all misty? Was she under this pest’s spell? Suddenly I was riled up again.

“With all due respect, are you kidding me? He’s some narcissistic influencer who is probably only out to promote his personal brand. I doubt he has ever read a physical magazine in his life. Plus, he’s from *New York*. What does he know about the particular flavors, history, and nuances of the events we cover down here? I bet he—”

“Is this a bad time?” A smooth, deep voice chuckled behind me.

“Not at all,” Michelle said with a Cheshire cat grin. “We were just discussing your new project. Dominic, this is the famous Claire I’ve been telling you so much about. Claire, meet Dominic.”

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I stood up from my chair, face basically into his chest. I hated having to look up at anyone. Especially someone I intended to metaphorically look down upon for the foreseeable future.

He extended a hand and gave me a rakish, crooked smile. “It’s Dom. Nice to meet you, ma’am, as they say.”

“Watch who you’re calling *ma’am*.” At twenty-nine, I probably had a year or two on him, but I was still at least a decade or so from *ma’am* status. “And lovely to meet you, too, I’m sure.”

We sat down next to each other, the air between us tense. I could tell he was glaring at me again, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. The air was also weighted with the smell of the full, black coffee in his hand, mixed with something woody and masculine. I started breathing through my mouth.

“This is great—saves me from having to email you both to set something up,” she said. “Let’s dive into how this is all going to work.”

I looked around, not for the first time, at her walls. Impeccable modern art broken up by Ivy League diplomas and magazine covers. It was a real power move to display award-winning covers you created for other brands. But that was Michelle.

“The publisher has approved the budget for six episodes, due by July 1. So you’re looking at four months and change. Then we’ll take those out to creative partners, TV networks, streamers, places like that, and try to sell it as an unscripted franchise.”

“Sounds good,” Dom said before I could. “I have a couple producer contacts, too, and a decent pulse of what they’re looking for.”

“I know, that’s why I’m counting on you.”

Suck-up, I thought.

Michelle went on. “And remember that we need *drama*, you two. These need to be glamorous and Southern, like all the weddings we cover. But if you can find a hook, lean in to that. We need an angle that sets us apart.”

“That makes sense,” I said, wheels turning.

“We’ll do a soft launch for the series, let you two get your feet wet on a couple weddings while we find the right one to use as our main feature. There’s a lot of corporate stuff going on, but I’ll spare you the details. Just know that in addition to some lower-profile but stunning weddings, we’ll need to find one massive, elaborate event with the perfect wealthy or high-profile couple to film so we can sell this thing.”

“Brilliant,” I said, jumping in. “It’s like *Say Yes to the Dress* meets *Four Weddings* meets *Southern Charm*.”

“Exactly. Such a nightmare, but people eat this stuff up. You’ve got the elevator pitch down. First up,” she continued, “will be the Preston wedding in Murfreesboro.”

“Oh, that’s great,” I replied. “Wouldn’t have been my first choice necessarily, given that the wedding was in Murfreesboro of all places. But since I’d already done some pre-coverage work on the event for the magazine, I had a leg up on Dom. “I’ve been emailing with the bride, who seems lovely. Potentially a little rough around the edges, but very sweet. Can’t wait to meet her in person.”

“I’m glad you’ve developed a rapport with the bride, Claire. The family seemed thrilled with the idea of any coverage of their wedding, so this is the perfect trial run for the series. They could

be the perfect guinea pigs, if you will. Hopefully it will be quirky and over-the-top enough to keep viewers interested.”

“Well, you can count on me to capture all the great moments and details—” Dom started to say.

“Me too,” I said, cutting him off before he could toot his own horn. “The bride has already really warmed up to me, and over-the-top weddings are a specialty of mine.” (I wasn’t going to elaborate on this for Dom, but he needed to know I had expertise.) “So you can count on me to deliver as well.”

“Good, good,” Michelle said, taking off her glasses and rubbing the bridge of her perfect nose. “Now, I don’t have to tell you, and frankly I shouldn’t, that times are tough at the magazine. But they’ve given us one month after submission to sell this baby, or they pull the plug.”

I wasn’t following. “On the project?”

“On *us*.” Her dark eyes were somber. “No more print magazine. We go all-digital, the way they did with *Southern Crafter* and *Belle Home* last year. That’s what most media corporations are having to do. They’ll probably keep two or three staffers and use freelancers and algorithms for content.”

I shuddered despite myself.

“Yes, it’s horrific. So please don’t mention that part to the rest of the team. We don’t want morale plummeting even further . . . But this has the potential to really save all our necks and change the direction of this company. No pressure.” She fake-chuckled like a maniac.

No pressure was like *no worries* or *sorry to bother*. It *absolutely* meant we should feel pressure.

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“Roger that, boss,” Dom said. *Shut up, Dominic.*

She practically ushered us out of her office, and Dom and I stood in the carpeted hallway lined with iconic covers from decades ago. After an awkward beat, I turned to go just as Dom said, “Hey, want to grab a coffee? Talk more about this first gig and get to know each other better? I’m getting the vibe that we started out on the wrong foot.”

I paused. Looked him up and down and decided to play dumb. “No, I think we’re good,” I said. “We can go over the details of the wedding in the car on Saturday. I’ve got a very busy workday.” I really didn’t have that much to do at the moment, but Dom needed to think I played a critical role here at the magazine and had zero time to stroke his huge New York ego—or anything else for that matter.

As I wobbled back to my desk, determined to project strength in my heels, I reminded myself that Mom always said, “*If you can’t say something nice . . .*” And I did not want to disappoint her any more than everything about my life already did.



CHAPTER 3

That night, I walked into the rear entrance of my apartment in East Nashville. When I moved back to town, I'd managed to find a cozy studio carved out of what was once a charming bungalow. Now there were three units in the building, but at least I had my own kitchen and separate entrance. I'd even landed the unit with a fireplace.

Not for the first time, I longingly remembered my high-rise apartment in Dallas with a pool and a doorman. Now, I considered days with consistent water pressure a win. *C'est la vie.*

I slipped off my shoes and padded into the kitchen. I opened the freezer and threw an Amy's organic dinner in the microwave. Then I grabbed the half-eaten bag of tortilla chips from the pantry and poured a small bowl of my favorite salsa, Joe T. Garcia's, which I kept in stock. More accurately, my younger sister, Lucille, kept me stocked by regularly sending it over from Texas.

Nashville had become my home for the second time. Though

I attended college here almost a decade ago, I'd moved home to Dallas immediately after graduation. Then, three years later, I moved *back* to Nashville, tail between my legs.

At first, I'd relished nights like these. No commitments, no family obligations, no after-hours work. Just an entire evening to do with as I pleased. Now, I'd exhausted most offerings from the few streaming services still in my budget, and the nights stretched endlessly on. Meetup sports teams required costly dues, postgame drinks, and athletic ability I didn't have. I couldn't afford takeout I actually wanted to eat, and I'd never properly learned to cook. (Cooking wasn't exactly part of the Sommers daughter training, alas.) So I usually checked out romance novels and thrillers from the online library—the physical ones were too dirty, ew—and subscribed to every true-crime podcast that didn't have a paywall.

I wasn't exactly sure what it was that drew me in. Maybe it was because true crime offered a polar-opposite to the wedding frivolity I was constantly surrounded by—brides by day and serial killers by night. Maybe it was in line with my admittedly cynical outlook on the world. Maybe it was simply an escape, though probably not the healthiest one for a single woman living in a ground-floor apartment. Either way, I needed more free hobbies other than self-flagellation and despair, and I chose murder.

Wow, something is wrong with me. Whatever, I thought as I searched for a clean fork, instead finding a pile of dirty forks in the sink. My relationships might be nonexistent, but I hadn't signed up to be pen pals with any convicted criminals, so it couldn't be that bad. At least not yet.

Piece of Cake

“And in the cold, dark winter night, he crept up to Beverly’s kitchen window,” came the typically soothing voice of my favorite podcast host. “Watching her as she cut vegetables and washed dishes as usual. Biding his time . . .” I looked up from the sink through my own window at the dark side yard and shuddered. I closed the sheer café curtain, as if that did much good. A dog might be a nice idea. Or some friends.

My college friends and I believed we’d stay in touch. Most of my crew scattered to the coasts or back home where they came from. A few took corporate jobs in Houston or Chicago; others headed to law school or teachers college. Or, of course, they got married, and that became their world. I’m sure I knew more people in town than I realized, but without being active on social media, it just seemed like too much effort to seek them out.

It was not that lonely, really. I liked my coworkers. Amaya and I got drinks once, which was plenty. And in an emergency, I could call my old roommate, Jill, who lived in Franklin with her family. Well, she might not make it to me quick enough for an actual life-or-death emergency, sure, but she’d be there in a pinch.

As the haunting podcast underscoring played, I carried my plate across the room and imagined how long help would take to arrive if I got attacked. Would I decompose before someone found my body? Surely Michelle would notice my absence, but it wouldn’t hurt to have a few safeguards just in case.

I plopped on the couch to eat my sad dinner and check my email while safely immersing myself in Beverly’s cold case.

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Claire,

Good to meet you today. Really looking forward to our collaboration.

Best,
Dom

Not a name I was excited to see on my screen. I rolled my eyes and then stood up to pour myself a glass of Trader Joe's wine with my meal. Dom might have been brought in to help, but at least Michelle was giving my idea a shot. That was something to celebrate, even if I was celebrating alone. I finished my micro-waved meal before replying to Dom's email. No need to look too eager and available.

Dom,

Nice meeting you too. Someone with your video expertise is important to making my idea a successful series for the company. Hopefully you'll enjoy Nashville during your brief time here.

Yes, I said *my idea*. And yes, I suggested he would only be in town briefly, but I couldn't help myself. He needed to know his place as soon as possible. But he responded way too fast.

Claire,

Well, if I know anything, it's how to capture a moment

Piece of Cake

on camera. And hopefully by sharing my skills, I'll convince you that we're on the same team and can pull this off for the magazine together. I also hope we can explore Nashville while we work. I could use a good tour guide for my very, very brief stint. ;)

Geez, high road. Now I *really* didn't like him. Not wanting to poke him anymore and feeling somewhat stupid for what I'd said, I simply replied:
Sounds great. See you tomorrow.

Two minutes later:
Can't wait!

Ugh, his optimism. No one was naturally *that* positive. No one in the workplace had entirely pure motives. Especially not a New Yorker. He had to be playing me in hopes of eventually stealing all the credit from this project if it worked out in the end.

Thoughts of my former colleagues in Dallas entered my mind, unbidden. There, I'd been the new kid on the team, along with a few other recent graduates, almost all of us plucked straight from the same echelon of Dallas society as our clientele. No one expected that any of us would make a career of wedding planning or show any promise. Just biding our time until trust fund access or our own wedding days. Well, no one except Lottie.

I allowed myself to spare a rare moment for my former supervisor. Even as just a junior planner herself, Lottie Jones had taken me in, shown me the ropes, and encouraged me to pursue an actual career in events, not just a stopgap. I ignored the pang of regret.

I'd enjoyed wedding planning far more than I'd expected,

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especially since I'd come by it through pity and charity. In short, I'd been hired as a favor to my mother. Already an embarrassment, I wasn't running a business or crushing law school like my sisters. I wasn't expected to like it, let alone succeed.

Somewhere buried in my inbox was an unanswered email from that time. Parts of it, though, were burned in my mind: *I thought I knew you, and I guess I don't—but I don't think you know yourself either.*

The words still tormented me. I'd done something awful. In my efforts to succeed at all costs, I'd become someone I didn't recognize or know. What was so broken about me that I could do that? Could it be fixed? Could *I*?

But those were mistakes I vowed never to repeat. I rolled my neck and shoulders to loosen up muscles and shake off ghosts. My sisters and I were taught to perform, to be the best. Our competitive edge, as outlined in my mental business guide, came from doing your thing, working hard, and not getting wrapped up in the personal. Attachment was a recipe for losing that advantage, as I'd learned. Memory lane had just given me enough fright for one night, so I decided to forgo the podcast after all. I polished off my second glass of wine and headed to bed.