

WITHOUT A HITCH

A Novel

Mary Hollis
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FOGLE PAUL



HARPER MUSE

Without a Hitch

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*“A lady’s imagination is very rapid;
it jumps from admiration to love, from
love to matrimony, in a moment.”*

—JANE AUSTEN, *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

*“You know how those who can’t do, teach?
Those who can’t wed, plan.”*

—*THE WEDDING PLANNER*

*“The right man for you might be out there right now
and if you don’t grab him, someone else will, and
you’ll have to spend the rest of your life knowing
that someone else is married to your husband.”*

—*WHEN HARRY MET SALLY*

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PROLOGUE

What kind of person would plan her wedding without a proposal? The kind who ended up single, sweaty, and salty on the intended date, that's who.

I took another gulp of chardonnay, inhaled the scents of fresh-cut grass and Harper's Marlboros, and watched my three best friends dance on the sidewalk. An iPod and Bluetooth speaker blared "Since U Been Gone." Brightly colored Mexican muumuus stuck to their backs in the humid night air.

They toasted Cinco de Mayo, graduation, and the future, shiny as a new penny. I leaned back on the cool concrete steps of the Texas Christian University chapel and closed my eyes for a moment. The screw-top bottle dripped condensation between my bare feet.

On loop in my head ran the inescapable thought: *This was supposed to be my wedding day.*

"Lottie, get your butt over here!" Natalia, one of my soon-to-be-former housemates, yelled.

I waved the chardonnay at her in dismissive reply.

"Suit yourself," Megan said with a shimmy of her narrow purple

hips and a toss of her dark-brown curls. “But this may be the last night we’re all together. Like, forever.”

“Quit being such a party pooper. It’s graduation,” Harper said. “You have dancing to do, drinks to consume, and an ex to get over.”

“One day, four years of dating will feel like nothing,” said Natalia, ever the optimist. “This will just be a blip on your radar. A step on your way to your actual fabulous life.”

“Preferably with someone rich and famous who loves you, Jesus, and his mama.” Harper winked.

“Maybe someday you won’t even feel like such an idiot for planning your wedding years before Brody ever, I mean never, proposed,” Megan said.

“I don’t think it’s idiotic—just very, very committed.” Natalia smiled broadly, albeit unconvincingly, teeth white against golden-brown cheeks.

“Maybe more like deserving to be committed,” said Harper, arching a thin brow.

“Lovely. Very funny. Thanks, y’all.” I knew they were trying to be helpful. However drunkenly.

Three years, nine months, and three weeks prior, I had met Brody Stevens during freshman orientation. The football team let the players out of two-a-days long enough to figure out where their classes would be and to meet enough cute girls to stay motivated during muggy predawn practices.

Funny, I couldn’t remember the exact moment we met. Only that by the end of my third day of college, his six-foot-three frame had hauled all my textbooks to the freshmen girls’ dorm from the campus bookstore.

Brody was hilarious, ambitious, and smarter than most guys who had their heads bashed every day for a decade. Confident in the way

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all handsome men were confident, but with the endearing hint of insecurity that remained when your growth spurt hit at the tail end of puberty. He behaved like the gentleman his Baton Rouge mama intended, and he kissed with a certain . . . well, expertise.

We bonded over both being from the dodgy suburbs of our respective towns and scholarship students in the middle of a country club set. He worked hard to earn his spot in the starting lineup—and somehow found time and energy to push me to excel too. I'd spent our first couple of months together wondering why he picked me.

If I scrolled through my social media profiles or mental images of the last four years, his goofy grin appeared in nearly every frame. Every friendship, every club, every milestone was shared. We were Brody and Lottie. Campus sweethearts. All-conference quarterback and student association vice president. We had shed our working-class histories quicker than we dropped our heavily twanged accents.

Okay, yes, we'd even won homecoming king and queen. I knew deep down that it was due to our ethos, the aura surrounding our relationship, and not because I was especially beloved. But Brody was. All of campus and the entire alumni association got to fall in love with him every fall Saturday for four years.

I certainly did.

Sophomore year, my sorority great-grand-big (yeah, I know, I know . . .) got married in the TCU chapel, and I manned the guest book. Daydreaming through the vows, I imagined us at the altar instead. We'd been saying "I love you" for several months and using phrases like "after school" even though it seemed on some distant horizon. But two weeks later when Brody mentioned "our kids," I called the campus wedding coordinator.

I looked at the calendar and found a slim window between the NFL draft, graduation, and training camp. As every undergrad

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hopeful knew, if I wanted to get married in the chapel, I'd need to book it well in advance. Two years was plenty of time for him to get around to proposing. I could even deduct the \$200 fee from my on-campus spending account. Genius. Thus, with little fanfare or effort, May 5—the Saturday after graduation—was on the books.

I slowly and systematically tied my future to Brody's with the subtlest of threads. By junior year the planning had gone well beyond our vows. He'd play in the NFL, and I'd be a card-carrying member of the wives-and-girlfriends club. Law school could wait. It had to since, of course, he could be drafted anywhere.

I channeled all my organizational skills and energy into this new plan. I continued with my English and poli-sci double major, minoring in women's studies, but never took the LSAT, stopped applying for honor societies, and subscribed to *Martha Stewart Weddings*.

Good thing Brody never knew about the wedding date I'd set for us—which I had quietly let go a couple months prior, promising to call the campus coordinator again when the time was right. At least I was spared that particular humiliation. And since I'd caught the roommates eyeing BHLDN bridesmaids' dresses a time or two, I took small comfort that I wasn't the only one who felt confident that the day would come.

Instead, I had no grad school, job, fellowship, internship, or relationship on the horizon—and no clue what to do next. Incredible.

And now it was May 5.

So here my girlfriends and I danced. We'd donned muumuus from our spring break trip to Acapulco, feasted on Tex-Mex at Joe T's, and eventually ended up wandering the campus. We found ourselves at the site, and on the night, of my imagined, intended nuptials.

As I sat on the chapel steps, itchy from mosquitoes, I replayed how a week ago—two days before we donned our caps and gowns—Brody

had come over to do the deed. No, not *that* deed. The one that involved tears and a lot of “I just don’t think I can balance our relationship with my rookie season.” And “You’d be so bored while I played and traveled all the time.”

I pathetically tried to explain how low maintenance I was. It wasn’t like he’d have to babysit me. I could work, get a job in whatever city he was drafted. We could make friends and build a life there together. I groveled. Basically did everything short of lying prostrate. It wasn’t enough.

Natalia ripped a handful of roses from the bush next to the chapel doors and bunched together a sloppy bouquet. “Hold these.” She thrust them into my hand. She tucked a long dark lock behind her ear, yanked me from the steps, and led me to the end of the sidewalk near the street. She cued my tipsy band of maids, who began to hum, “Here comes the bride.”

“It was supposed to be *Canon in D*,” I mumbled, walking with her down the sidewalk aisle. Right, together, left, together, right. Arm in arm we strolled, summer locusts whirring in accompaniment.

As we reached the steps Harper clambered to the top to lead the ceremony, a cigarette dangling from her lips, bouncing as she spoke and nearly igniting a few chin-length blond strands. “We are gathered together tonight to celebrate the union of Lottie and her freedom.

“Lottie, I mean, Charlotte, do you solemnly swear never to go back to that jerk, to, um, find somebody better, to—”

“Never to let him touch her forevermore!” Natalia said helpfully.

“Yes, yes, that *for sure*, and also to find someone else richer and handsomer and just all around better?” Harper finished.

“I do,” I said solemnly. I raised my right hand, pale in the glow of the streetlight.

“By the powers vested in me by the state of Texas and this fine

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college of arts and sciences, I now pronounce you a single lady. You may now . . . take a shot.”

With that, my three housemates cheered.

Brody is a jerk, I thought, while Harper and Megan began to dance some tequila-infused semblance of the Macarena across the chapel porch. As I stood on the stoop clutching my crumpled bouquet, my friends moved to the bottom, mock wrestling for a chance to catch the toss. Sticky, disheveled, mostly shoeless, some holding half-empty bottles. All perfect. I guess I’d known on some level they would be by my side today no matter what. I blinked, the click of a shutter, framing them in my memory.

I slowly turned my back to my friends, inhaled deeply, and let the tattered flowers fly.



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Seven Years Later

An azalea branch jabbed my thigh, and my heels sank into the mulch. Sweat trailed down my back, and I realized wearing a black silk dress to an outdoor wedding in July was a mistake as I squatted behind the ornamental shrubbery of the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden.

Guests filed past our hiding spot. They fanned themselves as they searched for seats, oblivious to our presence.

At my left hunched the groom. His pale face flushed and dripped while he yanked on his stiff collar. Good. This whole debacle was his fault anyway.

I could hear my new boss, Cedric, squawking orders at the caterers over the walkie-talkie. Any minute now he'd give me the go-ahead to dispatch the groom, Cole Parker-McNeil.

“All planners need to be in position for the ceremony. I repeat, all planners in position,” Cedric’s voice boomed over my walkie-talkie. “Operation Wingman has officially begun. We’re five minutes and counting from go-time.”

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The groom's only job was to show up on the big day, on time, with a big smile plastered on his face and, if possible, sober. Most would probably have preferred to have a stunt double stand in at the altar so they could keep sipping their flasks in the green room with the groomsmen. But Cole actually *got* his very own stunt double. Instead of walking down the aisle, Cole had a vision of arriving by helicopter. Yes, a helicopter. But he didn't want to do the jumping himself.

Unwittingly, Cole was also starring in my first official wedding at The Firm, known to outsiders as Cedric Montclair Celebrations. The scent of my anxious desperation mingled with my body odor.

Abigail Benton, my former boss at a floral design boutique for nearly six years, had sold her company to Cedric Montclair's megaevent production and planning conglomerate that summer. Architecturally inspired floral design was her specialty, and Cedric wanted to stop outsourcing that segment of the business. She made bank, but all I got was a \$500 bonus and a "You're welcome to come too. I'm sure Cedric can find a place for you." It was a no-brainer, as my massive student loans weren't vanishing anytime soon.

So I hunched in the bushes, tasked with helping pull off one of the spring's biggest Texas nuptials.

The bride, Gemma, was practically Southern aristocracy: her ancestors had turned West Texas cotton farming into a global textiles business. But the company recently halted production due to rising US manufacturing costs, and her family had high hopes for this union with the Parker-McNeil venture capitalists.

Despite drawing shrubbery duty, I'd been in awe most of the day. Both the bride and groom wanted to make an impression, which a million-dollar budget could achieve. Every last detail for their five hundred guests had been customized and special ordered from all over the world.

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The clients donated a six-figure sum to the botanical garden in order to secure the space for their ceremony and reception. It was almost impossible to shut down the entire gardens for an event, but an exception was made since Cole and Gemma had been so very generous.

The ceremony was set outdoors in one of the more secluded areas. Guests would leave the “secret garden” and move to the reception in a multilevel tent—a structure that had been under construction for almost two weeks leading up to the event.

The vast majority of these elaborate details fell to Gemma, her mother, and Cedric’s team. Usually this arrangement was ideal for all parties involved, I’d learned. Most men—grooms and fathers alike—were best left out of the planning process entirely except for occasionally being allowed to help with stocking the bar, selecting the band, and of course, signing the checks. Most men were relieved by this. But not this groom. Cole wanted to make a grand gesture of his own.

Typically, the *bride* was supposed to steal the show with her dramatic entrance, but she surprised us and acquiesced. If I had to hazard a guess, after a childhood of boarding school, equestrian lessons, debutante balls, and other requisite activities of the Southern gentry, she’d had enough of feeling like a stuffed turkey and was happy to concede the spotlight. The planning team was slightly worried Gemma would be a letdown after the groom made his impressive entry, but we always tried to accommodate the clients’ wishes. In this case that meant aviation.

The processional started as usual, but at the moment when the groom would typically walk out, the music suddenly stopped. Cedric approached the microphone at the front of the ceremony and announced that the groom was “missing.” Muffled sounds of dismay reached our perch.

A precisely plotted fifteen seconds later, the *Mission: Impossible*

theme song blared through the speakers, and the whir of a hovering helicopter filled our ears. I stuck my head out of the hedge just enough to see the stunt double jump from the chopper, two hundred feet above us.

“Are you ready?” I handed the real Cole the helmet and checked his parachute backpack.

“Huh, what?” He startled from staring at the guests through the branches. “Wow, we’re really doing this.” He gulped.

“Are you ready to run out there? We have about sixty seconds, give or take.”

He stood, dazed, his eyes as terrified as if he were actually being forced to leap out of the chopper—sans parachute.

“Listen, Cole, I know everyone you know is out there. But focus on this one thing: you’re marrying Gemma. If the band doesn’t show or her mother throws a fit or the food is terrible, none of that matters. It’s all just details.” (Obviously, Cedric would never allow *any* of that to happen regardless.)

“I know,” Cole said softly.

“My mamaw used to say that the only thing that will last other than pretty pictures is a marriage . . . So, do you love Gemma and want to marry her?”

“Absolutely. She’s my . . . well, my everything.” He straightened his shoulders as much as the overhanging branches would allow and turned to me, resolve in his eyes. He grabbed the helmet. “Let’s do this!”

The stunt guy we’d hired from the skydiving school in McKinney landed on the path right behind us and ran to our hiding spot, disconnecting his parachute and abandoning it on the ground for effect. I grabbed the jumper and shoved Cole out the side. He jogged to the altar, arms raised in victory, to the cheers of family and friends.

Would Cole ever confess that he hadn't actually jumped from the helicopter? Doubtful.

I had no idea where that pep talk had come from. I was the last person to pass along inspirational quotes and starry eyes. Deep down, I still hoped some people found their forever—and it looked like I'd helped make that happen for Cole and Gemma, at least for today. Plus, I really needed things to go according to plan.

For years Abigail and I had designed Cedric's florals and even assisted with day-of details—setting up arrangements before his long-standing team descended for the ceremony and reception—but this was the first time I'd worked on the main event. If anything, it was an audition to see if I could cut it with Cedric's pros and survive the merger. I'd unfortunately gone from Abigail's almost junior partner to a rookie in one fell swoop.

Barring disaster, I'd be assigned to Mary Ellen Bovander, Cedric's number two in the planning division. Her most recent assistant had gotten married and stopped working entirely—right after Cedric did her wedding, of course. Rumor had it that the girl put in two years at The Firm just to secure her premier date.

Now Mary Ellen needed help, and she didn't have time to train someone new with wedding season in full swing. When Abigail suggested me for the job, they were intrigued by the fact that I'd worked with Cedric's team in the past. They opted to throw me straight into the role and see if I could survive. What they didn't know was that my entire financial survival in Dallas was also contingent on surviving at The Firm.

As I stood on the path, admiring my coordinating handiwork, Mary Ellen marched over and grabbed my arm. "Lizzie, you look disgusting. Have you seen yourself? You've got a sweat line down your back and circles under your arms."

“Uh, it’s Lottie. And sorry?”

Mary Ellen, however, seemed impervious. Her brunette blowout was shellacked in place, and her brow remained a dewy peach in contrast to my dripping flush. Ugh.

“Don’t you know how to prevent that? You live in *Texas*.” She handed me two thin panty liners she’d whipped from her bag. “Here, stick these inside the pits of your dress and it will sop that right up.”

With that she sauntered back to her original destination, and I crept to the bathroom while the ceremony continued. Baffled, I tried to figure out how the things worked. Horizontally or vertically? I finally stuck them inside my underarms and hoped they didn’t show.

“Lottie, please report to the tent,” crackled over my earpiece. With panty liners in place I dashed out of the bathroom.

The reception tent was rigged with a custom lighting system that projected twinkling constellations in an evening sky. Every table had a massive floral centerpiece draped in lush white flowers and dripping with crystals. The china, crystal, and sterling silver were brought in from England. Fun fact: just *one* sterling place setting cost roughly \$800. The gilded custom stage for the orchestra-style band would have been suited to a Roaring Twenties New York City ballroom. Ornamental bushes dotted the room, trimmed to resemble the constellations brought to life, from the Hunter to the Big Dipper.

However, the crown jewel was the head table, a round mirrored table underneath a huge hanging ring of white orchids, peonies, and crystals—and in front of a solid wall of five thousand white roses and ranunculus. The sight was truly breathtaking.

Just then, Cedric ducked over to check on the space. “Oh, Libby, there you are. I desperately need someone with floral expertise or this tablescape will be *ruined*. One batch of hydrangeas must have been left in the truck or something and have already started wilting.”

“Um, it’s Lottie . . .”

“Whatever. Come help me fix these centerpieces. They’re positively tragic.”

A flair for the dramatic, brilliant design chops, and impeccable diction were not Cedric’s only distinctive qualities, I pondered as I trailed him. He wore a fedora and designer sunglasses both day and night, indoors and outside, along with at least one Hermès accessory. This time, it was an ascot. His salt-and-pepper hair was luxuriant; his designer clothes impeccably tailored. He also carried a tiny Yorkie—Prince Charles, or PC for short—anytime he wasn’t at an event.

In my years around Dallas’s wedding world, I’d heard all about Cedric. He could execute parties that most people would never even imagine. Dallas socialites heaped hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars upon Cedric to plan and design their dream debutante ball, birthday soiree, wedding, or even the occasional baby shower (and not always in that order). His wait list, while choosier than the Vaquero Club, still stretched longer than traffic on the Turnpike.

Cedric employed a large staff of “minions”: the project managers, floral designers, and production workers who made his visions come to life. Working for Cedric guaranteed a job anywhere in the event industry. He’d built a business from scratch to become the best of the best in our part of the world—and was poised to join the ranks of the country’s most prestigious planners.

No wonder Abigail had leapt at the chance to go from his occasional floral contractor to a full-time team member—but I felt woefully unprepared for this level of “eventing.” Still, it was time to prove myself proficient to Cedric in the one area of wedding details I already understood: fixing expensive flowers.

All the tables were named after constellations, and we faced the offending centerpieces at the Big Dipper and the Little Bear. In the

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scheme of big-day disasters, this was minor. Cedric waved his hands at the bothersome bouquets and winced.

“Don’t worry, I can fix this.” I grabbed the closest caterer and sent him for a cup of boiling hot water from the kitchen. I pulled out the wilting hydrangeas one by one, recut their stems, dipped them into the boiling water for about thirty seconds, and then placed them back into the arrangements.

It took a few minutes, but this trick would perk the flowers right up, at least for the next hour or so. Didn’t people know hydrangeas were the absolute most finicky flowers? I also grabbed some floral wire to prop up some of the worst offenders. At least they weren’t dead. There was no resurrecting a bloom once it had completely wilted.

As I worked, half forgetting that Cedric was breathing over my shoulder, rearranging the most leafless to the inside and plucking petals off the seats, the arrangements started to resume their intended shapes.

Clapping sounded right next to my ear. I almost knocked over the closest vase, I was so startled.

“Bravo, Libby! Those look *marvelous*.” With that he hustled away.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead—*Thank you, Mary Ellen, for my armpit panty liners*—then returned to my post at the rear of the tent.

As the ceremony ended I stood by Abigail, waiting at attention. Her long braids piled atop her head—and off her neck. Smart. And her dark-brown complexion, I noted, was as unaffected as Mary Ellen’s. What *did* these women know that I didn’t?

Guests streamed in from cocktail hour to the seated dinner. We were on table-directing duty for the moment.

To accompany the theme of “*The Secret Garden* meets *The Great Gatsby* in outer space” (with James Bond parachuting vibes thrown in),

the seating cards were vintage paddle fans for the men and vintage lace folding fans for the women, both dotted with Swarovski crystal constellations and the names embossed in gold script. The constellation table names, while clever, meant that no one could look for the numbers near theirs to find the right spot. Lots of rich people wandered around, holding fans up to table centerpieces and appearing puzzled. We tried to help when we could.

“Thanks for handling those flowers.” Abigail nudged my shoulder. “I’ve told him over and over for *years* that hydrangeas can’t take the heat, but he believes they will magically bend to his will one of these days.”

“Seems like most things *do* bend to his will.”

“Ha, very true. The trick with Cedric is to pick your battles—and don’t be afraid to fight the ones that matter. I’ve known him since he first came to Dallas. When you know what’s right and it could make a difference, push back. His bite is pretty bad, but he rarely does more than bark.”

“Thanks, I’ll try to remember that next time,” I said with the frantic hope that there would be a next time.

“Lottie, you’re doing great. Don’t stress so much about screwing up someone’s wedding and just do the tasks in front of you.”

Working with Abigail had truly been a dream. She had the kind of warm aura that you want to snuggle up to. I was anxious about no longer being her direct report but was grateful she’d still be around the office.

“Yes, ma’am.” I nodded.

“How many times do I have to tell you, don’t call me *ma’am!*” She laughed, brown eyes twinkling. “Now go help those poor guests find their way to their constellation. Next time I’m going to insist on regular table numbers.”

I headed over to the seating assignment table to gauge guests' progress and see how many people had yet to pick up their fans. As my eyes scanned the names, they stumbled upon one I'd hoped not to see for a long time: Mr. Matthew McKenzie, in calligraphic flourish. *Crap.* I'd have to avoid him at all costs, which wouldn't be a problem. Blending into the background was a primary reason why we wore black at weddings.

Once guests finally found their seats, dinner service was prompt and the catering team operated like a well-oiled machine. Three-course gourmet meals to five hundred people was no small feat. I watched in awe as Mary Ellen seamlessly directed the happy couple through their cake cutting and first dances, while also instructing the necessary vendors involved. She was clearly a pro; I had a lot to learn about wedding planning.

An hour later, I spotted Matt across the tent near a group of guests on the dance floor. Wavy brown hair, tall, with deep-set hazel eyes and the shoulders of a swimmer under his crisply tailored tuxedo. Yep. Still made my stomach clench. I ducked behind a screen.

From my hiding spot, I strategized how to avoid him all night. Matt started to turn in my direction, so I jerked my head back—right into cold, hard metal.

"Ouch!" I pivoted to face what turned out to be a camera lens, then gazed up into a scruffy dark beard and wide, horrified brown eyes.

"Gosh, I'm so sorry!"

I frowned and rubbed my skull. "Couldn't you have given me a heads-up?"

"Sorry, I'm supposed to stay out of sight, so this is one of the best angles on guests without being in their way. I thought you saw me when you came back here."

"Obviously not," I interjected.

“Well, when you leaned out, it meant I could too. I didn’t expect you to jump back like you saw a ghost.”

I sized him up while I checked for blood. Heavy work boots and dark not-quite-skinny jeans. (In Dallas, straight men are known to walk a fine line between slim fit and too tight.) Tight black V-neck that belied a solid, albeit lanky, frame. Thick, unruly black hair. Puppy-dog eyes behind retro glasses and enviably tanned, tawny skin. All in all, the prototype of a Dallas hipster-nerd. Of course he was a photographer.

“I’m Griffin.” He extended the hand that wasn’t wielding the camera. “I work with Val.”

Like most other wedding vendors, good photographers came with a team of their own. This couple had hired one of the top photogs in the state: Valeria Trujillo. She had started shooting for magazines before most of these brides and grooms were born. After a climbing injury on a *National Geographic* shoot, she’d scaled back to covering events. Her rates were still upward of \$25,000, but the health risks were far less. But when couples got photos “by Val,” they were usually getting a mixture of her takes and her entourage of promising young photographers, eager for the chance to learn from a master. While she prominently roamed an event, her assistant’s job was to sneak around and capture candid shots. I only knew all this because of a feature in *D Weddings* I’d thumbed through during a slow night at Neiman’s, my side hustle workplace until recently.

“I’m Lottie.” I took his proffered hand. “When I’m not having my skull beaten in, I work with Cedric.” I crossed my fingers and hoped that was the truth.

“So you’re one of the trust fund girls who parade around with clipboards while the grunts do all the work, huh?”

Before I could craft a dismissive retort, I got a call over the walkie

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to come out behind the main tent. “Nah, you couldn’t be more wrong, but excuse me, I’ve gotta go be one of those ‘grunts’ now,” I said as I waved a hand over my shoulder and hustled away. I was absolutely going to have a knot on my head. *Many thanks, Griffin.*

One of the new interns, Claire, paced outside the tent, freckled cheeks pale and terrified. I had just met Claire a week ago when she was assigned to help me help Mary Ellen. I didn’t know her well yet, but she seemed competent enough. My adrenaline started pumping when I saw her face.

“Lottie, we need you down at the dock,” she said, close to tears. “There’s been an accident.”

I didn’t bother asking what kind of accident, just hustled down the path to the water as fast as possible in heels. An elderly grandparent could have tumbled down the steps—or something worse—so I barely noticed my surroundings in the mad dash. The night smelled like wet moss and roses. Hidden ground lights lent the path an otherworldly glow. No wonder people found this place magical.

Cole and Gemma were supposed to end the night floating across White Rock Lake in a vintage wooden rowboat that cost more than most people’s cars. The fireworks would burst above them—and a few subtle spotlights would make it possible to snag a final round of photographs as they rowed into the moonlight.

Cedric’s new batch of interns had been tasked with tying a Just Married sign to the back of the boat and getting it into position. But the boat came untied (probably while they all took selfies on the job) and was now floating away. All the other helpers were back in the main tent, wrangling guests and getting the bride and groom ready for their final dance. The interns freaked out, unsure how to fix the situation. So they called me. I’d like to think it was my Zen-like unflappability, but more likely they hoped that as a fellow low rung on the totem

pole, I might berate them less for the mistake. They weren't necessarily wrong, but only if we could fix this.

All the pleasure boats available for rent on a normal day at the arboretum had been hauled away for the event. I scanned the shoreline, hoping for a stray canoe or something.

As I stood there, Griffin, who had followed me down from the tent, spoke up. "When I was scouting the angles earlier, I saw some of the kids' boats docked not too far from here."

With no other option presenting itself other than swimming out into a dark lake in the middle of the night, I turned in Griffin's direction. "Lead the way, buddy."

As we rounded the corner I saw the "boats" Griffin had referred to. He'd neglected to mention that they were paddleboats—and they were all shaped like swans. *Swans*. White textured "wings" flanked the sides, and a long neck and head arched over the passengers. The paddle itself, ignominiously pedaled by said passengers, was orange and made to look like webbed feet. The overall effect was hideous and tacky, and I could understand why Cedric had mandated they be completely out of sight of the guests.

Nevertheless, I was out of options. I untied the closest bird boat and climbed in, then slipped off my heels so I could paddle. Before I could push away, Griffin hopped in next to me.

"You really don't have to—"

"It's no problem. We'll go faster with two."

The hipster had a point. We pointed the bird across the moonlit water and pedaled as hard as we could. We had about thirty minutes before the wedding party trekked down to the water, ready to send off the happy couple. Once again, I was grateful for the panty liners soaking up my sweat.

Too polite and Southern not to make small talk—a religion in its

own right—I spoke over the sound of splashing paddles. “So, what’s your deal? Where are you from?”

“I’m from Austin. You?”

“Memphis, but I came here to go to TCU.”

“Very cool. I went to A&M.”

It was hard to get enough breath to speak, but I managed. “So, how did you get into wedding photography?”

“Well, I’m not really ‘into’ wedding photography,” he wheezed. “I’d rather shoot nature or editorial stuff than these”—inhale—“overpriced brouhahas. Like, it’s a lot of money to blow on a party. Why bother? But I’ve always been a fan of Val’s older work, so when I got the chance to work with her, it seemed foolish not to take it.”

There were about three points in there to address—starting with why people might bother getting married—but before I could interject, he continued. “How did *you* get into weddings?” He smirked. “Just biding your time until your own big day?”

Did *everybody* in town know that that was a thing for Cedric’s staffers? “No.” (Yes, but I could pretend that zero marital prospects meant I just loved the work.) “After college I started working with a florist who ended up becoming one of Cedric’s partners. I followed her here. It’s not really where I thought I’d end up either, but here I am.”

He nodded, then quietly gazed at the water.

I tried not to quietly gaze at the way his shirt pulled tight across his shoulders as he leaned into paddling. Or to inhale too deeply as his woody cologne floated on the breeze, which was a challenge amid all the huffing and puffing. Just because I’d sworn off dating, refocusing my priorities didn’t mean I couldn’t appreciate the rare opportunity to be, you know, near a man.

After what felt like eons, we finally pulled up next to the wooden boat. How had it gotten so far in such a brief amount of time? Thank

goodness we hadn't tried to swim out. We'd have needed that helicopter back for a lake rescue.

We gingerly stepped inside, grateful to be out of the paddleboat that was beginning to make my calves burn. I sat in front while Griffin tied the swan to the back of the boat. Then he picked up the oars to row us back to the dock. I glanced at my watch: ten minutes left.

Cedric timed his weddings with the precision of a drill sergeant. There would be no extra time.

I covertly watched while Griffin strained at the oars. Lugging around a heavy camera had certainly done his biceps good. Had I not been sweating profusely, this could almost feel like a date.

We pulled up to the dock just as the revelers reached the top of the path. Their sparklers glittered in the shadows cast by the trees. I tied the wooden boat to the pylon, shoed Griffin into the bushes, and made a mad dash there myself.

Guests lined the path as Cole and Gemma made their way through the row of lights. I could barely see them from my perch behind some ornamental shrubbery, my MO for the night apparently. Griffin's job was to document their progress. Music played from hidden speakers. The overall effect was magical, celebratory, and thanks to a bit of quick aquatic prowess, seamless.

The newlyweds climbed into the vintage boat. Cole grasped the oars, something he couldn't fake this time, and Gemma arranged her skirt just the way Mary Ellen had instructed her. They shoved off the dock, waving at their guests. It was the perfect good-bye.

Then it hit me. I tried to run out onto the dock, but it was too late.

Panicked, I glanced around. Maybe no one noticed my mistake. But then I saw Cedric and Mary Ellen at the top of the stairs, pointing toward the lake and looking bewildered. In my haste I'd forgotten to untie the swan boat from the back of the getaway watercraft. As the

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bride and groom made their way to the center of the lake, under a canopy of fireworks, the hideous plastic bird trailed them.

I moved my gaze across the group of guests starting to disperse now that the send-off was complete. Many of them were chuckling as they headed back up the stairs. Of course, my eyes landed directly on Matt's face. He waved. *Double crap*. I was zero-for-two.

I heard the sneaky *click* of a shutter, then whirled around. "If you so much as show those photos to your boss—or anyone—then I will *end* you. Pretend you missed the moment or something."

"Are you kidding me?" he scoffed. "The light and the fireworks are perfect."

"Can't you Photoshop the bird out? You people are always editing stuff in and out of photographs, right?" It might not save my job, but it felt good to direct my frustration at someone.

"No way. Plus, my job is to capture the truth. Yours is to keep stuff like this from happening. Even though, I gotta say, it's pretty hilarious."

Ugh. Maybe I'd need to find yet another backup plan if wedding coordination didn't work out. But as I gazed at the happy couple holding hands under the fireworks and their contented guests waving from the shore, I hoped deep down I'd get at least one more chance.



If any space could perk a girl up, it was the Cedric Montclair Celebrations office. I hadn't heard anything from Cedric himself, but Mary Ellen had pulled me aside during the postwedding teardown to tell me we would discuss the swan fiasco Monday. I considered not being fired on the spot a win.

Big Saturday weddings compressed our entire weekend into one “off” Sunday and a late start on Monday. So around noon, I crawled through the oversized red lacquered doors, triple-shot latte in hand. Months into the job, the space still felt to me like a beautiful Fifth Avenue boutique. One with glass desks and gold MacBook Airs. Everything was chic and sleek, white, and red—Cartier red, to be exact.

The ambiance made one feel sexy, like a million bucks, which was probably the precise intention. I, however, usually just felt reminded that I was, as legally defined by the IRS, broke.

Cedric held court from his office near the two front meeting rooms. Lined with brass bookcases and featuring a velvet chaise longue for “brainstorming,” it was immaculate and intimidating. A tiny white linen cushion rested on the floor next to Cedric's white desk, the only

concession to his tiny Yorkie, Prince Charles. PC traveled in his own tote bag most of the time but was allowed the cushion when he was “working” with Cedric. From his domain Cedric could witness the comings and goings of his staff and clients—and he didn’t have to walk very far from the front door. If the man sounded a bit like a cliché, well, he leaned into it, God love him.

But the man truly guarding entry to the palace of parties was Travis. He only worked “for fun,” whatever that meant, as his partner was a top stylist who made a fortune dressing the wealthiest Dallasites. Travis had two Birkin bags, clearly gifts from his partner. It drove Cedric crazy with jealousy. One of the bags was white, which was a total power move because white said, “I don’t care if I get dirty,” despite costing more than Travis made in a year.

Though Travis was a glorified secretary, he was the most important person in town if you were planning an event. He had the power to book a meeting with Cedric tomorrow or in two years, depending on his mood that day and whether or not he liked you. He’d been around, seen it all, and could shut you out before the social season even started. Those bright-blue eyes could laser in on a fake Louis Vuitton from fifty yards. He was invaluable as The Firm’s gatekeeper.

Travis was at his post, bushy tailed as always. “Ohmigod, how was your first wedding? I heard that the helicopter went off like a *dream*.”

“Yes, I managed not to screw up anything with the ceremony at least. Though I did send the couple across the lake dragging a swan-shaped paddleboat, which will be documented in Dallas’s society pages forever. But they got married, which is a win, right?”

“If you say so, puffin.” He patted my hand.

Despite my lack of Saint Laurent handbags or Valentino shoes, Travis had taken an instant liking to me. He was always willing to help out at least one of the new minions each year, especially those who,

in his opinion, lacked a sense of personal style and taste. As offended as I should have felt by this, I considered myself lucky. Travis was always willing to give me his opinion on my attire and ask a million questions about my love life, or lack thereof. And despite my being somewhat of a pity project, I took pleasure in knowing he cared about me, in his way.

“Thanks, Travis.”

I trudged down the hall to my desk.

Behind the meeting rooms was a large common area where most of the project managers and upper-level planners worked. Mary Ellen and Abigail were both ensconced there. Each had a glass desk, a white lacquer filing cabinet, and a few small clear cubes in which they could store pens and pencils but not much else. Forget about a family photo or any personal knickknack. If you put out anything remotely sentimental, you might as well start packing. Cedric wouldn't stand for it.

From her perch Mary Ellen could keep an eye on the junior staffers—and Abigail. It was rumored that Mary Ellen had pitched a fit when Cedric brought Abigail to the team instead of simply buying her inventory and client list. Abigail had told me, grudgingly, that she and Mary Ellen had a bit of a fraught history. They'd disagreed over publication credits a couple times over the years.

In the small, fiercely competitive world of high-end events, they were two alphas trying to survive—and working for Cedric was a dream job for those aspiring to make a career in the business. It might not have been personal, but the fact that Cedric put the two of them in a shared office showed that (a) he didn't know about their tension, (b) he had a wicked sense of humor, or (c) he simply didn't give a rip. My vote was option C.

Cedric definitely had a type. He preferred the ultra-polished girls

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who showed up in *Chloe* over us average, off-the-rack gals. When I got to college, I had highlighted my hair within an inch of its life in an attempt to fit in with my sorority sisters. (I worked two nights a week at Neiman's to afford the dues.) Jeans and a cute top—with heels, of course—were once the weekend uniform, but these days, my weekend uniform tended more toward Nordstrom Rack funeral chic, and my hair had darkened back to its natural dishwasher state. Only once had Cedric ever commented on how much he liked my outfit, and I considered those clothes sacred.

Cedric was known for gifting his favorite employees with a pair of the latest Louboutin pumps, and it was painfully obvious who was “in” or “out” at the time based on the soles of their shoes. I would be waiting on mine for a long time, maybe forever—especially after the swan incident.

Past the common area was another open space, this time with fewer windows and a half-dozen Parsons desks. Here sat the assistants. I slipped into my shared cubicle, thankful for a moment of quiet. Intern Claire, my newly assigned desk mate, likely wouldn't be in for hours. She and the other “Trusties”—as I liked to call the trust fund girls from Dallas who frittered about the office, biding their time until their big payouts at twenty-five or thirty—typically didn't show before 2:00 p.m. on Mondays.

As Trusties went, Claire didn't seem as bad as most, and I was trying to withhold final judgment. Slim and smartly dressed, she had, like almost all of the other Trusties, long blond hair that was blown out every day. My midlength dishwasher mane got washed every three days at best. *Thank you, Lord, for dry shampoo.* However, unlike the others, Claire had a constant smile and one of those annoyingly cute faces (adorable dusting of freckles included) that drew you in. It could have been worse.

Every day at Cedric Montclair Celebrations was like stepping into the abyss. No one ever knew which version of Cedric would be waiting. Or what other wildcards would walk through the door. Even Mary Ellen cringed behind her desk most mornings as he swept into the office, and they were supposed to be friends. In this case, the devil wore ascots.

I sat at my desk, determined to work and not think about either of them. An email popped into my in-box. From Matt. He'd seen me at the wedding and was disappointed we didn't get to talk.

Oh, Matt . . . I recalled how two years ago, Natalia and I were celebrating Cinco de Mayo, as was our tradition, at a Deep Ellum bar. I typically marked the night with questionable amounts of alcohol and even more questionable decisions. I'd just turned twenty-seven (hello, late twenties and spinsterhood). Harper was married and Megan had just started dating her now-fiancé, making Natalia and me the last of our college group with no rings and no prospects. For the girl who was supposed to beat everyone else to the altar, it was the perfect recipe for wallowing in self-pity and desperation.

I vaguely recalled sidling up to Matt's broad shoulders to order my third or fourth margarita. (I usually fell asleep after two.) Matt remarked how cute my muumuu was. He had just finished business school at UT and was back at his parents' house for the summer before taking a big sports agency job in Miami.

My memory got foggy. I was already three margaritas in, and He. Was. Really. Hot. As our respective groups whittled down and my drinks accumulated, a sloppy makeout in the corner was inevitable. I wished I could say we had a deep connection or even that the night was especially steamy. But all I really remembered was kissing at the bar, followed by an enormous hangover the next day.

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Less inevitable were the late-night drinks at Capitol Pub a few nights later. (My mamaw used to say, “A gentleman always calls within two days of the first date.” Oh, Mamaw. If only you’d known what dating looked like in the 2000s.)

We went on several sober dates that summer, but he was leaving for Miami in the fall, so we both knew what it was—and what it wasn’t. By mid-August I quit answering his texts and phone calls and put him on limited Facebook access. He eventually stopped checking in with me.

Replying to him now would have required facing my own personal shame, which I was comfortably wearing like a sweater, thank you very much. Delete.

I scanned through a couple vendor invoices and then spotted an email from griffinflo86@gmail.com.

Dear Ms. Jones,

I regret to inform you that there seems to have been a snafu at your recent event at the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden. Somehow, a rogue swan attached itself to one of our delightfully rustic-chic rowboats. We’re investigating the matter. In the meantime please accept this altered version of reality, sans swan boat.

Sincerely,

Griffin Flores and the DABG,
probably

PS: I’m sorry for what happened and hope you don’t get into too much trouble!

I chuckled quietly, saved the edited photo to send to Gemma, and fired off a reply.

Without a Hitch

Dear Mr. Flores,

While your skillfully modified photograph might not be sufficient to save this lowly assistant planner's position, I am certain that the happy couple will appreciate your documenting the day as it existed in their imagination.

Gratefully,
Lottie Jones

PS: Thanks for helping me paddle. And for this. ☺

I looked up, and Mary Ellen was hovering over my desk.

"Lottie, let's chat."

Before she could tear into me, I tried to explain. "The boat had come untied from when the interns put it into place, so I had to go get it before everybody came down there."

"I still don't understand how a giant bird got stuck to the back."

"Well, that was the only other boat left on the lake, so we used it to bring the dinghy back . . . And then forgot it because we were so focused on getting the boat tied up and ourselves hidden before the guests arrived."

"Who was helping you?"

"One of Val's new assistants." *The one with puppy-dog eyes and great hair.*

"Hmm. I see." She pursed her lips a moment. "Well, fortunately for you, Gemma's family thought the whole thing was some *hilarious* prank by the groomsmen. I started to explain that it was a mistake, but they were so charmed by the whole thing that I decided not to burst their bubble. Cedric played along, too, when they handed him an extra tip for the added amusement. Go figure."

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I couldn't believe what I'd heard. "So I'm not fired?" *Did I say that out loud?* I'd just said it out loud.

"No. Just try to keep waterfowl out of the picture from now on. Literally. With a less-weird family, this could've been a real issue. It ruined the final image of the wedding that will be ingrained upon every guest's mind. With these kinds of clients there can be no more slipups. They pay us a small fortune to provide perfection, or at least the illusion of it."

I assumed the extra tip would never make its way to my pockets and considered it the cost of not losing my job. Mary Ellen wasn't known for her magnanimity or collegial attitude, to put it mildly. She'd made multiple assistants and vendors cry. One of our rental companies wouldn't work with her because she'd made too many of *their* assistants cry as well.

But she was an amazing saleswoman. She could, as they say, sell oceanfront property in Arizona, which was good and bad. It became clear very quickly that Mary Ellen, like Cedric, would tell clients that *anything* was possible and then expect everyone who worked for her to deliver on that promise—no matter how ridiculous. Of course, the weddings always came together. Promises were delivered. And not one bride below the Mason-Dixon line didn't want to work with them.



Two days later, I was making phone calls at my desk. Finding a baker who could make a gluten-free, vegan wedding cake that didn't taste like earwax was proving futile. It shouldn't be impossible in this day and age. But telling Mary Ellen I'd failed to track down a bride's must-have wasn't an option either. As I started to dial yet another dead end, Cedric stormed into the open office area.

“Attention, ladies.” He rapped a Baccarat crystal tumbler against the wall of the nearest cubicle and anxiously shuffled his blue suede Hermès loafers. Always with the Hermès. “I need everybody to come in here. Chop chop!”

He led the way to one of the two large client meeting rooms in the front office. Each room was wrapped in gold Gracie hand-painted floral wallpaper that cost as much as a luxury vehicle. White velvet curtains embellished with red-tassel trimmings framed large frosted windows; natural light poured in, but no one could see the parking lot. Massive flat-screen TVs displayed images from Cedric’s past events on a constant loop and often helped banish any hesitation—if the on-hand Piper-Heidsieck hadn’t done the trick—before signing a contract.

Once satisfied that the team was assembled, Cedric cleared his throat so gratingly that I almost offered to give him the Heimlich maneuver.

“Now, everybody knows that my partner, Geoffrey Berry, is opening a new luxury spa-retreat center near the Chattahoochee National Forest.” Yes, Cedric, we all knew because you pasted copies of the *Garden & Gun* article in the break room and both bathrooms.

“As he begins to spend more time in that area, I’ve decided to do so as well. The time at the spa and with Geoff will do me good, seeing as I stress too much and work too hard and run myself ragged with this business.” He paused to stare pointedly at each of us. “I’ll be able to unwind and get in touch with nature, like hiking and things of that sort. And I can focus more on building our dream home there and establishing our social calendar.”

I struggled to envision Cedric hiking through the hills, a dust-covered Hermès cravat at his throat.

“But because I’ll be down there more, I’ve decided to expand our business. Atlanta is exploding. Now, it’s no Dallas, but many big

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companies are based down there, not to mention the movie and TV people, music execs, and tech billionaires who have also come to town. They may not have tickets to the symphony or a box at Truist Park to watch the Braves, but they have private jets and houses in Malibu—and the best *Real Housewives* franchise, in my humble opinion. And they want weddings to rival Sean Parker’s or Beyoncé’s. So, what this means for you darlings is that we’re opening a second office of Cedric Montclair Celebrations in Atlanta!”

He paused for dramatic effect. No one clapped; we just looked at each other, unsure how to respond. Cedric shook his head as if we were children whose development was significantly behind expectations, then continued. “We’re aiming to launch the office next spring, so over the next couple months, we will begin the process of setting everything up and utilizing our existing vendor relationships.

“None of this should really trouble you all. But I am going to be restructuring how we run things around here and making some big hires, including a lead planner to run that office. So everybody be sure and bring your A-game to our current slate of clients. I’d much rather promote from within and avoid having to completely retrain everyone. God knows I spent enough time turning all of you into functional humans. Well, that is all. Any questions? Good.”

He clapped twice and retreated to his office.

I stood, mind racing. Sure, the lead planner job in Atlanta would go to Mary Ellen if she wanted it. But I looked around the room and could see the staffing dominoes that would fall after her promotion. By spring I could be in a position to move into one of the lead planner roles here. After that, the boost in salary (and actually keeping the clients’ tips) could make a big difference for my student loans. Plus, a girl had needs, like sensible shoes and cash for tacos. I might even be able to move into my own place.

Without a Hitch

I loved living with Natalia, but if I really wanted to prove that I could make it on my own, even that would have to end eventually. In my mind's eye I imagined purchasing a new wardrobe, signing up for dating apps that cost money, meeting the husband of my wish list, and finding my life completely changed by my thirtieth birthday.

Later, I sidled up to Abigail at the sleek marble countertop bar in Cedric's version of a break room. The Nespresso machine gleamed. (I credited him with teaching me the difference between a latte, an Americano, and a flat white.) The fridge was stocked with nine different types of milk and dairy alternatives, although the skim and cashew were not-so-subtly positioned at the front of the shelf and more frequently restocked as an encouragement. I usually used a splash of half-and-half out of spite. This Memphis girl didn't do nut milk.

Abigail perused the snack basket, her dark braids today plaited down her back in typical laid-back-yet-impossibly-chic style. Kashi bars, chia seed packets, fresh fruit, and ethically sourced turkey jerky were the day's offerings. I often made a lunch of whatever was available. God knew the Trusties weren't indulging, so I felt it was my duty to make sure the food didn't go to waste.

We often had thank-you gifts of food sent to us by clients, and they invariably made their way to the break room counter too. Magnolia Cupcakes and Jacques Torres Chocolates were a current favorite, but I wasn't picky when it came to sugar. I grabbed a local baker's crispy rice treat and leaned against the bar next to Abigail.

"So, big news today, huh?" I said tentatively.

"Hmm . . . yeah. I guess so." She sounded distracted.

"This is great news for you and the other partners, right?" I crunched too loudly into my snack.

"Yes, if it succeeds in bringing in more business. It's also a lot of

additional overhead, so I'm worried about how everything will work out. Cedric will have a new lease, staffing needs, insurance, and so on. A lot of logistics to manage."

"Have you thought about who you'll ask to go there? I hope you know how much I've appreciated getting to work with you and learn from you. It's meant a lot that you were willing to bring me with you when you came to Cedric's team." There. I'd probably shown my hand too quickly.

"Lottie, you know I think you're a fantastic asset to the team."

"But?"

"Do you want my honest advice?"

"Yes, I think so?" Honesty was one thing I had always been able to count on from Abigail.

"You're a hard worker; you're more organized and reliable than anyone I've ever worked with, which is why I promoted you at my shop. But you just started here. There's a whole staff of junior and senior planners and even assistants who have been here years longer than you. So you've really got to stand out between now and next spring. I'm your biggest advocate, but Cedric will make the call.

"You've also got to work to impress his other key people, like Mary Ellen. She's not usually inclined to like staffers she didn't directly hire or groom herself, so you'll have to really hustle to win her over." Abigail started reaching for a Snickers bar, cut her eyes at me, and put her hand back on the counter.

"Thanks for the insight." I recognized my cue to let her get back to the snack tray. "Please let me know if you think of anything else or have other tips between now and then."

"You know I will. I'm rooting for you."

It sounded like I shouldn't start looking at studio apartments just yet, but at least I had a road map.

Without a Hitch

I walked back to my desk in the pod, musing. I passed Claire and the other Trustees huddled together still gossiping about Cedric's news. Savannah, a redhead from Houston, painted her nails carelessly on the clear acrylic of her desk. Those girls had no idea what was coming for them.



HARPER
MUSE



The Blue Bell ice cream selection at Kroger was pretty thin, which wasn't what I wanted to see after a long day at the office. We'd been ironing out details for a big wedding in New Mexico and come across some construction snafu. As a result Cedric had been especially snippy, which traveled way down the food chain to me.

I threw in a pint—okay, a gallon of Cookie Two Step and another of mint chocolate chip along with the leafy greens and other organic produce I'd virtuously placed in my cart. I grabbed a couple grocery store bouquets to rearrange for our table at home. Fresh flowers had become my version of sparking joy.

While standing in the epic line, I glanced at the rack of magazines to my left and eyed the healthy cooking tips and wedding planning guides. Speaking of joy . . . ah, *People's* Sexiest Man Alive issue. My annual reward for good behavior slash celibacy. This year, one of the Hemsworths was back on the cover. But then my eye caught on the cover chip, the small inset photo. "The NFL's Hottest QB" read the caption below, and my heart sank as I stared at Brody's wide grin and uniform.

I grabbed the issue and shoved it in my cart, too, as my number

on the overhead screen popped up. What could I say? I was a glutton for punishment. And a snoop.

It had been years—well, at least six months—since I'd gone on a news-clipping deep dive into what Brody was up to. He no longer had personal social media, so I had to read celebrity news like the rest of the world.

That night, over two flavors of ice cream, I allowed myself to snuggle up on our plaid hand-me-down sofa with the magazine. I read the brief Q&A about his hobbies (riding dirt bikes and cooking barbecue), his favorite charity (Make-A-Wish), and his love life (currently single but with a few famous exes mentioned in parenthesis), and it didn't hurt the same way. I looked at his goofy, handsome face and mostly wished him well. Our relationship felt like a lifetime ago, and I supposed it was.

But as my eyes started to glaze over, I briefly imagined that alternate version of my life. The pang was enough confirmation that I should probably avoid celebrity news on the internet for a while.

Years later, it still stung to recall our final conversation. After I tried to explain why we could make things work—a desperate, embarrassing showing on my part—he finally cut off my objections with a torrent.

“It's not just that, Lottie. When we started dating, we were like a team. Two scholarship kids pushing each other, reaching for our dreams. It was all I could do to keep up with you. You were . . . hell, a steamroller. You had all these crazy-big plans for law school and politics, family and ‘having it all’ or whatever. And no one was going to get in your way. Now it feels like if I asked you to just follow me around to games and practices, you would.”

“That is unfair and untrue,” I sputtered. “I just—”

“You've changed. Or maybe I have. But I'm tired. Tired of being

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the only one who really wants something, who's motivated. What if I got hurt? Would you still want me without football? And what would we do? It's a lot on one person. I don't know . . . I care about you, always will. But maybe we've stayed together because we're good together and it's easy, not because it's right."

I thought he was overthinking it. And I preferred *loyal* and *devoted* to *unmotivated*. But it cut. I'd still wanted those things. I just wanted him *more* than all that. Apparently, that wasn't enough.

I could admit to myself, with the wisdom of an, ahem, almost-thirty-year-old, that he wasn't *entirely* wrong. I'd finished school with no real experience, no plan, and no fallback option.

For the first six months after graduation, I had picked up extra shifts at Neiman's, but that wouldn't cut it once my lease ran out. With pretty meager savings and student loans coming due, I had the choice to find a new job or move home to Memphis. Boomeranging wasn't really an option for my brother, Tom, or me after the recession wiped out our parents' savings and tanked their home equity.

Tom had joined the navy and planned to stay through retirement, which meant his living expenses were practically covered in perpetuity. No oil magnates or tech entrepreneurs had lined up to marry me yet, but fingers were still crossed.

Like a good roommate, Natalia had swooped in to save the day. I'd been griping one day, per usual, about my lack of career prospects, boredom with LSAT study prep, and general poverty and heartbreak. I'd signed up for the next test date, figuring three months was enough time to get back in the legal mindset—and find a useful activity to pad my skimpy résumé before I applied to law school.

"Lottie, shut up. We all know you spent the last two years actively *not* trying to become a lawyer or any other useful member of society."

"Yes, but—"

“No buts,” she quipped while filing her nails short. “You basically wasted a four-year education because you were busy scrapbooking wedding collages and making secret Pinterest boards. Don’t pretend you don’t have file folders of wedding décor clippings that could work for each major market Brody could have been drafted to. There’s gotta be a California bohemian beach wedding in there, as well as a Southern rustic-inspired barn reception . . . But that’s just it.”

“What?” I was clueless.

“You’ve spent all this time planning your dream wedding and fantasy life—that’s literally the only experience you have right now—so why not use it? Didn’t you even take that series on wedding planning or home ec or whatever they called it?”

A lightbulb went off. I called Abigail, who’d taught a couple sessions of A History of Weddings and Ceremonies (a *very* important sociology class that counted toward my political-science major), and asked if she ever needed an assistant or extra set of hands. Turned out, she wanted help for a bridal shower she was throwing the next week in Highland Park.

I figured I had nothing to lose, so I hopped on I-30 from Fort Worth a few days later, with no clue as to what I had agreed to do. I helped create a large bassinet covered in white rose petals (the classy alternative to a diaper cake) and mixed pink peony-and-tulip centerpieces. My only prior “experience” was helping with my dad’s landscaping business and arranging flowers for our sorority alumni events.

That first day working for Abigail, I pulled off perfect centerpieces and even managed not to drop any champagne flutes. Afterward, she handed me \$200 and offered to call the next time she was in a pinch. She hired me a couple other times for the standard bridal shower or birthday party, and eventually I got her to bring me on full time as an assistant.

Mary Hollis Huddleston and Asher Fogle Paul

Mom and Dad weren't totally thrilled with my new job, given that it was about as far away from practicing law as I could get. (I'd never confessed my premature wedding plans, or how they derailed me, so my parents' befuddlement got a pass.) However, they *were* thrilled I was getting paid while I figured things out. My mother had said one evening over the phone: "I guess that silly wedding class you took senior year wasn't a complete waste of your time."

As Abigail's business expanded, she trained me on event logistics, floral competency, and the ins and outs of the planning world, at least from the perspective of a boutique firm. Most of the work wasn't especially satisfying, but I discovered that the skills I'd assumed would rocket me to the top of a law firm—being quick on my feet, problem-solving, and managing people in stressful situations—also came in handy at events. Even my tendency to envision the absolute worst-case scenario was an asset.

Apparently, I'd also convinced Abigail of my competence, and she was a tough sell. I even surprised myself. I helped digitize her systems, pitched her to be on a few Black female entrepreneur lists, and expanded her social media presence. Abigail's event company was soon landing bigger clients—and attracting the attention of Cedric Montclair. There I was: Lottie the wannabe lawyer, turned wannabe bride, now florist extraordinaire.

A year or so into the job, I'd tried to muster some of the fire I used to have about law school, cramming for yet another LSAT date and saving up my party tips to pay the entrance fee. The whole Elle Woods vibe. But my college memories of torts and court opinions were a bit rusty, and after taking—and bombing—it twice, I admitted defeat for the foreseeable future. Elaborate baby shower and ladies' luncheon flowers might not be my passion or even really engaging

Without a Hitch

97 percent of my brain, but they paid the rent in a city that didn't include Graceland.

Working in weddings was a bit torturous for someone who still secretly hoped her big day would arrive. I couldn't help feeling like I had lost my best chance at a happy ending: husband, kids, domestic bliss, the whole enchilada.

But nothing to do about that tonight. Tonight, I needed to turn off my brain, savor the Blue Bell, pop a melatonin, and get a good night's sleep. I had a rehearsal dinner to work tomorrow, and Abigail was right about stepping up my game with Mary Ellen. I also knew I'd never make it through cake cutting if I didn't rest, and there was no way I was missing out on cake.



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