

SOUTHERN  
BY  
DESIGN



A NOVEL

HARPER  
MUSE  
**GRACE HELENA WALZ**



HARPER MUSE

*Southern by Design*

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## PROLOGUE

**T**HE SUFFOLK FAMILY'S HEIRLOOM CHINA plummets to the hardwood floor and shatters. Shards skate across the room. Mama prowls through their mahogany cabinet like an uncaged jungle cat, as she methodically removes one priceless item at a time, examines it, and lets it fall.

Delta Suffolk shrinks into the corner of the room, head bowed, and jumps at each porcelain explosion.

"Magnolia, I-I'm—" Delta shuffles her feet. "I didn't—I thought I was doing the right thing."

Mama makes a sound somewhere between a grunt and a growl, then grabs a stack of dishes.

"Quite the armory you've got here," she says.

*Smash. Smash.*

"Please, Magnolia. Stop. That china is generations old," Delta says. "It can't be replaced."

"Exactly like what you took from me!" Mama whirls around and sets her gaze on the woman. "Unless you have a way for us to go back in time and change it."

Never had I imagined my mama and my mother-in-law in such a showdown. They were childhood best friends. *Mags and Dee.*

Delta sat in the front row at my wedding, dabbing happy tears from the corners of her eyes as her son and I made marriage vows

we've since broken. Delta swept into my labor-and-delivery room, cooing and doting and oozing delight over my baby girl. Delta patted my hand and reassured me so many times. Delta had a free pass to come and go in my life.

*Smash.*

But what she took from my mama, she took from me too.

*Smash.*

What's one more broken thing?

"How dare you!" Mama roars. "I know it was you."

Ned Suffolk bustles into the room and looks between the women. "Dee? Magnolia? What's going on?"

In that flash he looks so much like his son, my ex, and I wonder what would've happened if we'd never met a Suffolk. Now that the secret that's lived within this family is being dragged into the light. This man tried for so long to be the father I never had, and the new irony of it slaps me.

"Yes, Dee," Mama chimes in. "Care to explain how you're the one to blame?"

*Smash.*

I don't even blink this time.

*Smash, smash, smash.*

Mama is relentless, and for the first time in my life I look at her with pride bubbling in my chest. I've spent all thirtysomething years of my life despising my mother, and now for the first time, I see her for who she really is. She's unimaginably like me, and finally, who she is makes sense.

"All right, all right!" Delta holds her hands up as she presses the words out. "*Fine.*"

There's quiet.

Mama's footsteps crunch over the dinnerware fragments as she crosses the room to where the rest of us stand. She slows, and her

hands shake almost unnoticeably. Mama's not a young woman, even if she does harness a youthful rage. My heart squeezes. Now I know what she's lived and what she's lost. She drops into an armchair.

Delta walks over and perches on the love seat across from her. "I'll tell you everything I know. Where do you want me to start?"

"Right at the very beginning. And you'll tell me everything," Mama says firmly.

Delta nods curtly. "Ok."

Magnolia meets her eyes. "You're the only living person with the whole story."



# CHAPTER 1

*Present Day*

*Three Months Earlier*

I WASN'T ALWAYS CONVINCED THE HOUSE at 29 Smith Street could be salvaged, but as I push through the wisteria-tangled gate this morning, I know it's true: nothing worth saving is beyond repair. When I first laid eyes on the house, the poor girl was nothing more than a dilapidated shell, her former glory left to fry under the southern sun.

Naturally we—me and my team at Bishop Builds—couldn't wait to get down to work with the old beauty, peeling back the layers of decay required to revive her. Those glittery new roof shingles, the crisp white siding, the overflowing flower boxes threatening to burst at the seams, this stone pathway that sounds musical as my footsteps make contact—all of it was hard-won. Those navy shutters aren't one bit of a happy coincidence.

Still, it's impossible not to feel like the lucky ones, tasked with keeping and tending the historic homes of Charleston. It's everything I've ever wanted.

Well, almost.

Fitz throws open the front doors and grins as he strolls across

the property. The light catches the new grays in his sandy hair, and his tall, sturdy figure casts a morning shadow across the lawn. He pulls me into a hug. “I just have a feeling about today. This is *it*.”

Fitz is my right-hand man at the firm. He is the only other lead designer, one with whom I share a sort of cosmic twinship of taste. We met back at the College of Charleston and bonded quickly over our shared obsession with historic preservation as well as our shared disdain for our given names. It felt almost pre-ordained that Magnus and Magnolia should become best friends.

Fitz pulls back and fluffs my blonde curls. “Hair on point, I see, so you must be ready.”

“Assuming the humidity doesn’t turn me into a raggedy lion before the judges get here,” I say.

An intern calls over from the porch. “Fitz? Can we get your eye on some last-minute art?”

“Duty calls,” Fitz says over his shoulder as he takes off toward the house.

A car door slams, and a group of junior designers banter in pressed voices as they hurry toward the house. Michaela points to the tray of breakfast in her hands. “No worries, boss. This will stay well out of the way.”

We all know how important today is. Finally, after months of perfecting our application (over three different rounds, mind you), nit-picking our portfolio, and putting the finishing touches on our showpiece, 29 Smith, it’s time for our in-person tour. The board of the Charleston Historic Preservation Society will swan about this home and, hopefully, delight in every painstaking detail as they decide they can’t imagine granting any other firm the fellowship position.

The Charleston Historic Preservation Fellowship is a lauded prize as competitive as it is thick in legacy. All the biggest firms

in the city have taken their turn to hold the honor, and every time it boosts their standing even further as they lovingly care for the city's best buildings. Charleston is rich in skilled designers and restorers; a city this stunning couldn't maintain the status quo without battalions of talented folks working behind the scenes. And many of these experts and their firms apply. Few are victorious. It is a stamp of accomplishment not even snagging a celebrity client can match.

Movement atop a tall ladder catches my eye.

"Ron, could you pull that shutter just a hair wider?" I call up to my favorite handyman.

"Sure thing, Ms. Magnolia."

"Mack, please." Not even today will I let it go.

Magnolia Bishop is my mother's name, and if anyone were to ask me (an event for which I'm still waiting), I don't want a bit of it. She gifted it to me on my very first day of life, and I'm only surprised it didn't come with surgically attached puppeteering strings for her convenience.

I'm not certain my mother would be too happy with me adopting the name now anyhow—seeing as I'm still carrying around the ten extra pounds she tried for years to diet off me. Frankly, I like my curves. They're a perfect complement to the fuchsia maxi dress I bought for today. And with that loud of a pink, my regular barely there makeup works. My freckles and sun-kissed skin are nature's free glow up.

"Sorry, ma'am!" Ron shouts back. "This better?" He points to the shutter.

"Perfect," I say with a clap. "The same for the rest, please."

I cross the garden to the door. Inside, the house hums as various staff members steam drapes and fluff and chop pillows with five-star precision. I am sure of every design choice—even the loud

floral wallpaper in the breakfast nook that admittedly toes the line into over-the-top. Somehow it all works together, my perfect little symphony of color and pattern and texture, whistling and popping just as it should.

I duck back outside and swallow the nerves fluttering up my throat. This gem of a house is irresistible. After all we've poured in, it should be. It's Charleston charm; it's historic integrity; it's *please sign right here on the dotted line*. Right? What I wouldn't give for a booming celestial yes to echo down from the clouds, just for good measure.

The fellowship is a big deal, but it's really just one part of a much bigger picture. There's more at stake here: undeniable proof that I'm a legitimate designer. Proof that the work I've put in has paid off. Proof, perhaps, that my mother and the rest of them were wrong all along, that I really can do it on my own.

The rumble of a vehicle pulling up in front stirs me from my thoughts. A glossy black SUV stops and shuts off. Out of the door steps a Ferragamo loafer, equally as polished, followed by Grady Edgar Suffolk III—my husband. His stringy hair is almost black and reliably slicked back with overpriced hair products.

My soon-to-be ex strides toward me with limbs he still hasn't quite grown into. He moves with a confidence born only from growing up with power and privilege. "Mack, how does it look?"

"So far, so good." I look past him to the car.

His hand meets my back, and I stop myself from pulling away. "Good. I told the crew this was not the day to go halfway."

"Yesss." I draw the word out like a prayer. "Everyone is doing their best, I can assure you."

Grady shrugs and skips up the steps to the wraparound porch, the rising sun highlighting the sharp lines of his face.

I stride toward the vehicle, pull open the back door, and there

she is, the only person who could outshine this whole production—my daughter, Hallie. Yes, she should probably be at school, but something about leaving her out of this day didn't feel right.

"Dad! What the heck?" she yells over to Grady on the porch. "You forgot about me?" Hallie huffs, slides over the seat, and hops out. Her auburn curls bounce on her shoulders as her sneaker-clad feet hit the ground with a thud. She looks up at me with her big, round eyes and flashes a smile less a few teeth that the tooth fairy has long since recovered. I resist the urge to plop my index finger on her delightful button nose.

We stand together and watch Grady slink in through the French doors, muttering something about quality control and being right back.

I wrap an arm around Hallie's shoulders. "You bring your design eyes for today, honey?"

Hallie has impeccable taste for a seven-year-old and could easily outstrip me as a designer before she's thirty. But pursuing design is a choice I'll let Hallie make for herself. I know very well what it's like to have a mother plan your life, cradle to grave.

Hallie bugs out her eyes. "Shined them up just for the occasion."

"Thank goodness. You're much better than Daddy at quality control." We giggle.

We do it like it's a joke, and for Hallie it certainly is. But on my end the sentiment right below the surface is very real.

Grady may technically still be my husband, and officially my partner in this design endeavor, but he is not my ally.

Back when we applied for the fellowship, about ten months ago, Grady was my partner in every sense. We ran the business together. We were married for a decade—happily enough, I thought. We had Hallie. Even my mother doted on him. On paper, it was precisely what he wanted.

But it all came apart one morning a couple of months later when Iris Vance lit up the moms' group text with a single message. At the time I was running Hallie through the carpool line as she choked down a toaster waffle. I let my phone chime in my cup holder like a bell choir of one, and only once I parked in my driveway did I pull it out to indulge in the latest juicy drama.

It was, in fact, juicy. A friend of a friend of a friend had attended a networking event in hopes of finding a new job or a contract gig. She'd exchanged contact information with several people, and not long after received a rather uncouth—and unsolicited—photo of some enthusiastic man's nether region. Out loud I'd call it a *personal picture*; among friends, I'd call it something else. It came with no text, simply the implied proposition via the phallus in still frame. Per the group chat, the woman on the receiving end of the photo "*threw up in her mouth a little at the sight of it.*" I'd scrolled back up and braced myself for the image to hit my eyes.

The moms were right; it was nauseating. At least he had good taste in decor—I had the same wallpaper in my own bathroom. When I looked closer, the realization stunned me like a spark from a live wire. My eyes peeled back to double and triple check. Mortification ran over me as if it'd sprung legs. Because not only was that my wallpaper, but the man with his sorry crotch exposed and photographed into immortality was my very own husband.

This was *Grady*. My high school sweetheart who'd promised me a whole life of our own, that we were on the same page, that marriage would be a perfect second act to our childhood together. The boy who'd been able to convince me to marry him (despite my reservations). And even when, years later, he seemed to lose track of these promises, I still believed, at least a little, that we could make it good.

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't suspected Grady of being unfaithful

in the past. The multitude of dinners that ran long, the shocking amount of business that required him to hang out at college bars, the mysterious charges that showed up on our credit card bill—after a while I could no longer justify these *obligations* as work. When I asked, he denied any wrongdoing, up and down, and I never had any proof.

Until I saw that photo.

But there wasn't time to swim in the mess he'd made.

We both wanted the fellowship, even—or perhaps *especially*—if our marriage was heading for the dumpster, and we didn't want to spook the buttoned-up board members. So we continued working together, as painful and terrible and uncomfortable as it was, and I pushed aside my hurt and my shame as best I could. I put off digesting the rest of the carcass of the life I'd thought was a good choice. For the sake of my big shot. For the sake of the business.

For the sake of not letting that absurd picture rob me of more than it already had.

“Good morning, Mack.” The voice comes from beside me, and I look over to see one of the landscapers on his knees deadheading the begonias in the border.

I squeeze a grateful smile. “Those are exactly the details that really matter today.”

“They start looking kind of scruffy once they start to wilt,” he says.

My gaze lingers on him. His skin is deeply tanned and weathered from what I'd guess was sixtysomething years in the sun. Still, the rest of him is muscular, and his eyes sparkle with health from behind wire-rimmed glasses. Warmth runs over me.

“I'm sorry, have we met?” I ask.

He rises slowly to his feet and pulls off a gardening glove before extending his hand. “Theo Hartman of Hartman Landscape.

When I heard what y'all were up to, I couldn't help but offer our services to the Suffolks for the big day." He removes his hat to reveal short-cropped gray hair.

That's right. Grady's parents' landscapers offered to trek all the way out from Beaufort, our hometown, an hour and a half down the coast. I told Grady we'd be fine with our regulars, that it didn't make a whole lot of sense for Hartman's to make the trip, but Mr. Suffolk, Ned, wouldn't budge. "*Theo is the best in the business. And he insists.*"

"I appreciate you going out of the way for us," I tell him as I squeeze and pump his hand. Firm but gentle. "You're sure we haven't met at the Suffolk property?"

He chuckles as he shrugs, then starts his retreat backward. "Maybe in another lifetime, Mack."

I raise a single hand and let myself enjoy this moment. Call it the universe or the heavens, but small things like this gardener's kindness make today feel touched by fate, or destiny, or any of the other woo-woo things in which I'm not a big believer. Maybe it's the pressure that pushes me to admit it, but it's a relief to know other people are looking out for us too.

Maybe between everyone, we really can pull this thing off.

## CHAPTER 2

I'M STILL BESIDE THE BEGONIAS when I feel a set of seven-year-old fingers wrap themselves into mine. I look down, and Hallie's staring up, indignant.

"Why was that man ripping off our flowers?" she demands.

"He was pulling off the dead ones, love bug. That's how the plant can focus on growing new ones."

"Oh." Hallie's expression falls to neutral, and she seems instantly satisfied.

That simple explanation was all she needed, and I can't help imagining how my own mother would've gasped and launched into a lecture on *respect* if I'd dared to question an adult at the same age. Respect: something Magnolia has always loved to receive but rarely dishes out.

The squeak of a braking car interrupts the quiet of the street, and Hallie runs to the wrought iron fence to see for herself. She gasps, then sprints back to me, her face lit with excitement. "They're *here*."

I smile in an effort to appear confident, despite the zero-gravity effect that rushes through my insides at the thought of the committee members right here, in the flesh.

She yanks me into a tight hug. "Go get 'em, Mama."

It hits me like a wave: *I want this*. For me, yes, but also for her,

to show her what she can do and what she can build.

“All right, sweetheart,” I say. “Let’s get you inside.”

Hallie skips to her designated post, just like we planned. There, she’ll be set up with a stack of coloring pages, snacks to last a lifetime, and a tablet for when she ultimately grows so bored she “*might just shrivel up and die a little.*”

Just as she’s settled, I hear the gentle pop of doors closing on a car. My stomach twists like a pretzel as the group files through the gate into the courtyard. A woman in a tweed skirt with a neat bob leads the group, a clipboard tucked efficiently under one arm. At her side is a graying man in a seersucker suit, and they mutter to each other as they point at different parts of the landscaping. A woman wearing a neon-green, tailored shift teeters on her razor-thin heels as she struggles to keep up behind them. The last member, a younger man with still-wet hair, darts from the car and joins them, looking suspiciously like he might’ve just woken up from a nap.

“Hey, there! Welcome.” I wave as I walk down the path to greet them.

“Good morning,” the lady in tweed says. “You must be Ms. Bishop.”

The rest of the group looks up at the house and around the garden. Assessing, surely.

“It’s Suffolk, actually. But I guess . . . I guess Bishop’s fine as well.” I do like the sound of having my own name back. “Do y’all want to start outside?”

I feel the butterflies in my middle grow into seagulls swarming a downed beach snack as I walk them through our gardens, pointing out the restored fountain and the new installation of native plants.

“I can’t resist a well-maintained begonia, myself.” The man in

seersucker smiles at the flower border.

I remind myself to send a thank-you gift to Hartman Landscape—well-maintained is no easy feat in the brutal Charleston heat.

“It’s gorgeous,” the woman in neon says. “Not too stuffy either.”

I could swear I see the woman in tweed stifle an eye roll at her counterpart before she speaks. “Timothy,” she turns to the man with the wet hair, “the scoring papers?”

Timothy looks sheepish as he turns back to the car.

“Shall I give y’all a moment out here before we head inside?” I ask. I’d rather eat a roach than stand and watch them whisper opinions until they scratch a number on the clipboard.

The woman in tweed nods gratefully. “That would be best,” she says. “We’ll meet you up on the porch in a few minutes.”

I’m grateful for the pause and turn to head up the wide steps. I could use a sip of water, a wave of air-conditioning, and a glance at Hallie. Before I reach the porch, a low rumble grabs my attention, and I look to the sky for unforecasted rain clouds. There is no hint of gray in the sky, but the sound continues in sharp crunches and one final smash.

I whip around at the gasps of the committee members. The wet-haired man is wide-eyed, finally awake, and the woman in neon has raised her gargantuan sunglasses to the top of her head.

I skip down the steps. “What on—” I stop when I round the corner and see.

A smashed planter box that was just fastened beneath an upper window has crashed to the ground, its perfectly coordinated contents scattered beside the boxwoods.

“We checked the planters three times. This just cannot be possible. Or right. I’ve never had one fail. Not once.” The words run out of me like I’ve burst a pipe of liquid language.

The woman in tweed gives me an embarrassed smile as she pats her bob. “Well then,” she says. “I guess it’s time we head inside.”

The man in seersucker takes a wide berth as he approaches the house, and the others follow.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “Quite the shock for everyone.”

I lead them inside and launch into the history of the reclaimed door we installed. I point out the foyer tile we salvaged from the mucky grip of carpeting glue.

“Carpet glue, huh?” wet-haired guy says, bending to touch the tile. “I bet you could sell your trade secret for a pretty penny.”

I can tell he’s making an effort to lighten the mood, and it’s a relief. “I wish.” I lean in and whisper, “Mostly it was elbow grease and the fact that whoever smeared the glue was a bit lazy.”

I get a gentle chuckle from the group and guide them into the formal sitting room. Morning sun streams through the window and highlights the discreet stripe in the cream curtains, and the rich tones of cypress glow in the coffee table. Even the spines of the old books lined on it are pristine.

The woman in tweed speaks up. “This globular light fixture. It’s a bit modern, no?”

I swallow. I was nervous about this piece, even if I do stand by my choice. “It is on the modern side. Especially for a house of this age, but one of the things Bishop Builds values is allowing our clients modern elements while maintaining the historic integrity. Real people don’t want to live in museums.”

“Don’t speak for all of us.” The man in seersucker forces a chuckle.

The woman in neon swats the air. “Whatever, Hugo. I think it’s amaze-balls.”

I know without a doubt that elements dubbed *amaze-balls* will not score well with committee members who have pull. I might’ve

overshot this one.

“I appreciate the feedback,” I say. “The kitchen next?”

I point the committee out into the foyer, past the grasscloth table stacked with fresh flowers and traditional brass decor and beyond the nineteenth-century art we borrowed for the occasion.

On our way I second-guess the pale celery-green cabinetry. Color is typically bold in southern interiors, and I adore the pop of color. This one isn’t offensive or garish; it’s muted. We tested what felt like one hundred swatches to get it just right. Still, most of the older design firms stick to neutrals in the kitchen—creams, whites, tans. It all gets a bit vanilla after a while, and I’ve always felt it a shame not to dip our toes into the brighter tones southerners can’t seem to resist.

The wet-haired man reaches the kitchen entrance and recoils from the threshold. “Whoa, Nelly!”

My gut drops. He hates the green; he must. Which means, *chop-chop*. That’s it for us.

The woman in neon screeches to a halt behind him, narrowly avoiding a pileup, and looks past him. “Clean up on aisle three,” she says, her nose turned upward.

I gently squeeze past the pair and halt just as they did. My mouth drops open.

In front of me, blocking my entry, sits a knee-high wall of foamy soap suds that carries on in a sea throughout the kitchen. Two of my interns stand in the center of the kitchen, red-faced and mopping frantically as bubbles continue to erupt from the dishwasher.

“The floors!” The woman in tweed fumes. “These are hundreds of years old, and your staff is throwing a bubble party. I’m only glad Arthur and the others aren’t here to see this. Such a travesty, a disgrace! I can’t even imagine—”

One of the interns, Cecile, bursts into tears. “I’m so sorry, Mack. This is my fault. I used the wrong soap.”

My chest tightens, and I look from the committee members to my interns. There’s no question where I stand on this. “It’s ok, Cecile. It happens, even to the best of us.”

“Well, I’d hope it doesn’t happen *often* in your homes.” The man in seersucker props his hands on his hips. “I can’t imagine hiring you folks in and then getting my irreplaceable hardwoods ruined.”

I pull in a breath as my voice threatens to wobble. “This is an innocent mistake. Cecile is a hardworking member of our team, and she’s been dedicated to the restoration of this home. We would never be careless with our clients’ homes. We treat them as if they were our own.”

“You must be a foamy lot then,” the woman in tweed says under her breath.

“Can I take you upstairs?” I ask.

My mind is reeling as we make our way up the creaky staircase. I probably forget to explain how a local woodworker helped us salvage some spindles, how seamlessly he incorporated them. We make it upstairs and continue through rooms, me in a mental haze. I point out the repaired stained glass in the bathroom, the newly functional pocket doors in the main bedroom, the linens that were sourced from a historically inspired line.

All of it feels like a last-ditch effort.

“Kinda wishing you’d done a runner here in the hallway,” Neon Green says.

“It was a consideration,” I say with a smile.

The older committee members breeze into the primary bedroom. The walls are lined in a muted-blue wallpaper with a silvery floral design. The window dressings are traditional—read: flowy, heavy, and hopefully to the liking of the older crowd.

The man in seersucker and the woman in tweed take in the room.

“You opted out of a traditional canopy bed?” the man in seersucker asks.

“The client prefers a lower-profile bed frame,” I say. “And if you take a closer look, you’ll see it’s an early nineteenth century frame that fits the history of the home. We even have reason to believe it was crafted here in South Carolina.”

He tuts to himself like we tossed a flat-pack bed frame in here. I’m resigned by now. It seems they’re decided.



## CHAPTER 3

IT'S A TUESDAY MORNING ABOUT a week after our miserable fellowship tour, and Grady is parked on a wooden barstool at my kitchen island. It's right where he used to sit every morning, eating his breakfast and dropping crumbs like he was putting it through a wood chipper.

"What else is there to discuss?" I slump onto the counter and drop my face into my palms. "We didn't get it—which was a fairly obvious outcome to the person leading the tour. It's over and done."

"I just can't understand *why*," Grady says. "We shouldn't be dinged for a bimbo intern's mistake. They could've rescheduled, come back and looked when they could actually get inside the kitchen."

"Grady." I stand upright. I open my mouth to tell him the rest of what I think.

"Sorry," he says, rescuing himself. "I shouldn't say *bimbo*, but I stand by the other part. Say we hadn't had soap suds spewing everywhere? It would've been us. You remember how much we sank into that kitchen, right?"

I think of the light fixture, the downed flower box, the lack of a canopy bed upstairs that I tried to gloss over. The soap-suds explosion was certainly the flashiest mishap, but it was not our only issue.

“We just weren’t it for them,” I say. “You’re right: they could’ve come back another day. They were doing tours all week, but they didn’t think it was worth it. They’d made up their minds.”

I cross the living room, my wide-leg pants flowing loosely with each stride. I drop onto our—no, my—sofa. It’s where I’ve sat wrapped in a cable-knit blanket, a gallon of mint chocolate chip ice cream in hand, with the TV screen flickering in the dark each night since we lost the fellowship.

The epitome of *doing just fine*.

Even Fitz took off for the French Riviera soon after the loss. Thank goodness he has a trust fund—courtesy of the design dynasty from which he hails, Fitzgerald Interiors—because the man’s got expensive taste in self-care.

Grady comes over and sits down, elbows on his knees. “I’m going to say something at the historic preservation office. I’ve got some sway.”

I stretch my arms out and drop them on the sofa with a *thump*. “Don’t. *Please*. For the love of all things good in the world.”

“Why not? We were good enough.”

I’ve thought about this a lot in the days since South Broad Interiors was named the city fellowship winner, what it means to be *good enough* and who gets to decide it. I’d thought we were good enough, too, and maybe we were, at some point, in someone’s eyes. Maybe if we’d had a better day, it would’ve been ours—the rumbblings had been that we were a front-runner, after all. But even in the moment after the tour of 29 Smith, when I knew it was just a matter of time until I got the disappointing call and the lights went out on this dream, I couldn’t point to a single thing I’d do differently if given a second chance. Short of double bracing the flower box, I don’t regret a thing.

“I’m proud of the effort we put in,” I say. “But I can’t change

their minds, and neither can your word.”

Grady tilts his head and lowers his voice. “What about my checkbook?” He grins like the devil himself.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I want: a fully-paid-for, stolen fellowship award. Then I can walk around town and be proud of what my soon-to-be-ex-husband purchased for us.”

Grady stands slowly. “Ok, when you say it like that . . .” He pulls his hand up his neck and through his hair and squeezes his face into a grimace. It’s how he looks when he’s about to unload something undesirable.

“Out with it,” I say.

“It’s just, seeing as we’re not doing the fellowship gig, I think it’s time for me to move on.” Grady looks away.

“The divorce paperwork’s already been filed,” I say.

“No, I mean I need to move on from the firm,” Grady says. “I think I’m going to join my dad’s investment group. I’ll work from here and travel occasionally to Beaufort for meetings.”

It’s been painfully awkward dancing around each other at the studio. I wanted him gone the moment I laid eyes on that photograph of his groin. Which is why the sadness that hits me is surprising. “Whatever you think,” I say.

“You’ve wanted me gone,” he says like he’s asking for confirmation. “You haven’t exactly been coy about it: the box of donuts labeled *for everyone but Grady, forgetting* to invite me to the staff BBQ, telling the IT guy to freeze my computer every other Tuesday morning.”

These things aren’t untrue, but they *did* happen immediately after his snapshot was virtually circulated around the neighborhood eight months ago. It was childish of me, but also, I would argue, not entirely unwarranted.

“I just can’t help but notice that your timing is uncanny,” I say.

“Were you planning the same move had we gotten the fellowship?” I spring up and gently shuffle him toward the door with my palms. He doesn’t answer my question.

Once he’s outside the door, I lay it on him. “Not to mention, you can’t quit because you’re *fired*.” I slam the door shut, the perfect period on the end of a conversation I’ve finished.

From behind the closed door, Grady barks out a muffled, “No, I quit first!”

I wander back through the house, smiling to myself at getting that last shot off before the door closed. It’s not my best, most adult behavior, but frankly, I’m tired of giving him my best. Not to mention, the childish tit for tat is a distraction from the feelings that sit beyond it, well below the surface.

Despite the fact that I want the divorce, it’s hit me with a surprising sadness. There was love between us. I’m sure there was, even if it came and went. At some point it ran out, despite the trying, and we just ran out of energy to come up with any more. And there were fond memories, but the longer I think about it, those seem mostly from years back. He and I, together, were supposed to make our own path, to step away from our families to be ourselves. Until he changed his mind and decided he liked the feel of being a Suffolk better. And it hurts, knowing he couldn’t turn his back on their stuffy social games, on the routine peacocking of wealth, because he knew it meant losing me in the process.

On top of those dashed hopes, I’m now faced with forging the path for Bishop Builds on my own. Grady may not be my favorite person, but he is good with the financials and particularly good at finding jobs that pay real money. He was no designer, but he was helpful on the business side. Him gone is what I wanted—what I still want—but there’s a newness to doing this alone, one I haven’t felt in so long. Still, I know I can manage the fresh nerves

fluttering in my stomach.

Just as I'm considering opening the fridge to assess whether or not I'll have to hit the grocery store before dinner tonight, my phone rings. I check it right away as I always do when Hallie's at school.

It's my mother, Magnolia the Dragon.

I hit the green button to accept. "Mother," I say.

"Yes, hi, Magnolia." She clears her throat. "I heard the unfortunate news."

Of course she did. Magnolia sits on the Carolina Historic Society Board, and half of her friends are tied up in the Charleston Historic Preservation Board. It's as incestuous as the fortunes upon which the members' families are built, and not a one of them knows how to keep news of any variety to themselves.

"So you and the girls have been gossiping about me?" I say with a firm yank on the fridge door.

"Heavens, no," Magnolia says. "But Delta Suffolk called me right away when she heard. She knew you'd be heartbroken. Even if you are divorcing her son, she doesn't wish you any misfortune."

"How very kind of her." I dig through the vegetable drawer of mostly squishy, moldy options.

"It's all so sad," Magnolia says.

I sigh, slipping the crisper in place and closing the fridge. "For once we agree. I wish things had turned out differently too, but I'm not sure the folks on that committee would really get me anyway. The light fixture in the—"

"No, child. I'm talking about the separation."

I imagine her examining her latest manicure, unbothered by the professional loss that's got me in a medium-serious tailspin.

"Well, I'm much more concerned about the fellowship," I say.

"Not to bother," Magnolia says. "I've got something for you

that'll fix that all up."

I pause and wait for her to go on.

"But I can't explain now. Victor's got the car pulled around front. I've got to go for auction planning—for the one-legged dogs of South Carolina or something like that."

"The ASPCA?"

"Oh yes, that's right. I'm in charge of the wine, so that's really all I've got covered. Anyway, I'll come to town for lunch tomorrow. I'll send you the details."

"But—"

"Just maybe think about patching things up with Grady in the meantime."

"Mother, I—"

The line goes dead.

I drop the phone on the countertop and resume my task, scouring the pantry. This is nothing new for Magnolia, and quite frankly it's not even close to her worst. Lunch will certainly be more unpleasant than usual because I'll have to, once again, justify why I no longer desire to be married to the man who sent a picture of his penis to another woman—a woman who didn't even want it, mind you. But it's all par for the course in the lives of the Magnolias.