

WEDDING ISSUES

a novel

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September

It was my third breakup of the month. Seventh of the year. I should be a pro at this by now. I *was* a pro. And yet . . . the words still weren't right.

"Aren't you *done*?" Aditya twitched nervously. "You've had my phone for ten minutes!"

"Shh! I'm trying to concentrate." I drummed my nails on the neon-green table and stared at the screen, willing the right words to appear. Aditya had asked for help crafting an it's-over-for-good message to a clingy fling. They'd been on and off for months, but she ghosted him whenever he was ready to commit. It was time for Aditya to put his metaphorical foot down. Which happened to be my specialty.

Leighton reached over and snatched the phone out of my hand. "*Hey, good to hear from you! I'm down to catch up, but I want to be honest—I'm looking for a relationship.* What's wrong with that, Liv?"

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I bit my lip and replayed the words in my head. Hearing them out loud was crucial. That was my father's first golden rule of negotiation: it didn't matter what you *meant*, it mattered what they *heard*. I shook my head and reclaimed the phone. "The last part's wrong. Gives her an opening."

Leighton tilted her head, her honey-blond curls falling across her shoulder. "An opening?" she asked. In the twenty years I'd known her, she'd never once had a bad hair day. Witchcraft.

"She could say she's looking for a casual relationship. Which—"

"A casual relationship?" Aditya interjected, sounding hopeful. "But that could be—"

"—exactly what he'd fall for!" I finished. Leighton laughed. "Aditya, this girl's your own personal boomerang."

He frowned. "Boomerang?"

"Every time you throw her away, she ricochets right back."

Leighton grinned. "Okay, love that. Don't be mad if I steal that line for an Instagram caption."

I hadn't intended to become the Relationship Grim Reaper. I'd sort of . . . stumbled into it. I had a knack for conversation. Not just fluffy cocktail chatter—*tough* conversations, the ones that scared everyone else. Asking for a raise. Persuading an enemy. Breaking up with an SO.

On our second day of classes at Vanderbilt Law, I'd coached Aditya through a polite thanks-but-no-thanks response to a post-first-date text. A classmate overheard and asked for help with a tenacious ex-girlfriend. And then word spread. In my first year of law school, I'd broken up with nine people, asked out six, negotiated three raises, and convinced a dog-walker to switch from an hourly rate to a per diem.

“Hey, good to hear from you! I want to be up-front—I’m looking for something serious, and I’m just not feeling that with you. Wish you all the best. There.” I slid Aditya’s phone back across the table, savoring the satisfaction of a deftly worded text. “My work here is done.” I might not have my own love life under control, but at least I could help Aditya with his.

Aditya pressed send and spread his arms dramatically. “Done! Free at last.” He stood and ran a hand through his shiny black hair. “That’s my cue to leave, before I get tipsy and start texting her again.”

“Sure you don’t want to stay for another drink?” I asked.

Aditya grimaced. “I wish. I’m way behind on prep for these malpractice interviews. Switching industries sucks. Catch you later.”

I glanced around the trendy Mexican restaurant, known as Insta-bait for its electric-green furniture and shockingly pink margaritas. The content-friendly décor was exactly why Leighton had chosen it. To my law school friends’ amusement, Leighton was an online influencer. She’d always had a knack for fashion and photography, a winning combination for someone growing up in the social media era. Her brand, Peach Sugar, was a blend of old-school Southern lady and feminist modernity (per her bio). She’d started a Tumblr in middle school, joined YouTube in high school, and was thriving on Instagram by college.

Since graduation five years ago, she’d been dividing her time between growing her brand and working part-time retail. As her closest childhood friend, I’d seen it all. I’d witnessed the time and energy she’d poured into Peach Sugar, and how hard she’d fought for every one of her seventy-eight thousand Instagram followers. Some scoffed at Leighton’s

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“fluffy” career, but they hadn’t seen her grueling content schedule or her three-inch-thick design sketchbook. It was hard work. I’d happily choose another Torts midterm over masterminding one of Leighton’s photo shoots.

Once Leighton had documented our photogenic drinks for her fans, I fixed her with a stern gaze. “I know what you’re doing.”

She fluttered her long, thick eyelashes. Extensions, but good ones. Half of Leighton’s time was spent maintaining her immaculate appearance; I didn’t envy her that. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re buttering me up. Which you don’t need to do!”

Leighton slumped against the table, abandoning all pretense. “Are you *sure*? Liv, this is such a huge thing you’re doing for me. I still can’t believe it’s real.”

“It’s real! And it’s gonna happen.”

“Do you want to practice again what you’re—”

I grabbed her hand, wincing as her three-carat diamond monstrosity cut into my palm. “Stop. If it were *you* pitching Emma DeVant tonight, then yes, you’d have reason to be nervous.” Despite her online success, Leighton was terribly shy in person. “But come on. You’re insulting me.”

“I know, I know.” Leighton toyed with a lock of glossy hair. Her whole family looked like they’d stepped out of a beach volleyball ad: tall, lithe, and golden blond. Me, I looked as if I’d stepped out of an ad for vitamin D deficiency. “But what if—”

“Did I or did I not talk you out of that speeding ticket?”

“Yes, but—”

“And convinced that first boutique owner to sponsor your brand?”

“Yes, but—”

“But what?” I raised my margarita and toasted myself. “Why doubt me now?”

“Because this is *so* important,” Leighton said, green eyes widening in angst. “Landing that *Southern Charm* cover would be career kryptonite.”

“Isn’t kryptonite bad?”

“Is it?” She waved a hand. “Ads can only take Peach Sugar so far. The next level is a clothing collaboration. I’ve had some brands reach out. If I got the *Southern Charm* cover, I could land a deal.”

While *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* dominated Manhattan newsstands, in-the-know Southerners read *Southern Charm*, the women’s-magazine-turned-cultural-phenomenon favored by those who preferred Atlanta to Boston and Nashville to New York. Each year the magazine highlighted a high-profile spring wedding, with one lucky bride winning the coveted June cover, typically a country music star, football wife, or old-money family. Leighton’s following was *just* large enough to make her a reasonable choice. And the timeline worked: Leighton and Matt would be married next May, right ahead of the June issue. The newsstand and social media coverage were exactly what Leighton needed to level up Peach Sugar.

“Lest you forget, I proved my magic by *getting* this meeting.”

“That was lucky! You ran into her pumping gas.”

I wagged a finger at her, mentally wishing last week’s Emma DeVant encounter had occurred in a slightly more glamorous locale. After all, optimizing the environment was key to a successful persuasion. But Olivia Fitzgerald would

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not be held back by little things like catcalling hooligans or eau de gasoline.

The location hadn't been ideal, and neither was the timing; I'd returned to Nashville from my Manhattan internship only hours before. A layer of airport grime still clung to my clothes, and my head reeled from boy troubles of my own. But when I'd spotted Emma DeVant across a Mobil gas station, I'd recognized her at once. A successful alumna of my Nashville prep school, Emma had given our commencement speech. I'd kept tabs on her via LinkedIn, and knew she was a senior editor at *Southern Charm*.

So I'd seized the moment. I'd barreled over, complimented her pumps, mentioned our shared alma mater, and struck up a conversation about a recent *SC* article. Ten minutes later, I insisted on setting a meeting to pitch my up-and-coming bestie for the cover. We'd arranged to meet for drinks a week later. Like my dad, a tough-as-nails Big-Law-litigator-turned-high-profile-mediator, always told me, "You make your own luck."

Tonight, I'd win Emma over, clench the June cover for Leighton, and cement my title as Best Maid of Honor *ever*. Anyone could plan a killer bachelorette party or stuff a hundred envelopes. But *I* got my friend a magazine cover.

And Leighton wasn't just any friend. She was practically my sister, only without the sibling rivalry and coordinated Christmas-card outfits. We'd grown up together in a leafy Nashville suburb and stayed close even after we both left Tennessee for college. When we'd returned postgrad—me for a paralegal job and then law school, her for the state capital's cultural cachet—it felt only natural that we'd spend our twenties together in Nashville. It'd been an amazing five

years. Except, the end of this phase was rapidly approaching. In the spring, Leighton would marry and move in with Matt, starting her grown-up married life. And I'd graduate and move to New York to start my grown-up adult job.

I'd do anything to make this last year spectacular. Our Nashville friendship deserved a highlight-reel-worthy final year. That was enough motivation to chase Emma DeVant across a dozen gas station parking lots. And then . . . there was also the line I'd crossed two weeks ago. A major lapse in girl code required an equally major good deed in return. I needed a card up my sleeve to make sure I could smooth things over.

But then something clicked. "Wait." I put my margarita down. "Did you say brands had reached out to you? Leighton, that's huge!"

Leighton chewed her bottom lip. "I know."

"What brands? When? What's the offer?" I couldn't understand why she was so quiet. Leighton had been trying to land a clothing collaboration for years. "Why didn't you tell me?" Mentally I kicked myself for not asking Leighton earlier. I'd gotten back into town only last week, after a ten-week stint in Manhattan as a summer associate for Holmes & Reese, my dream Big Law firm. I'd now returned for my last year at Vanderbilt Law. My last year living in the same city as my best friend, who had an ironclad rule against living where it snowed. I squashed that thought; it was too depressing.

She blinked a few times, like she was working up the courage to spit something out. "This DTC fashion brand based in Houston, Kenne's—"

"DTC?"

"Direct-to-consumer. They reached out earlier in the

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summer for a sponcon, and I brought up the idea of a collaboration.” She hesitated. “They weren’t interested then . . . but yesterday I told them I might be on the *SC* cover. And now they want to set up a Zoom meeting.”

I would’ve laughed if she didn’t look so genuinely tormented. “*That’s* what you’re worried about? That you jinxed it by telling someone?”

Leighton flushed. “It’s too good to be true!” She took a long sip of her drink. “Tell me again about what Emma’s like. *New Yorker*-style.”

Patricia and Charles Sawyer, Leighton’s parents, were longtime *New Yorker* readers and always kept a stack on the kitchen table. Back in high school, the *New Yorker*’s flair for pretentious interviewee descriptions had become a running joke among me, Leighton, and her brother, Will.

“The unruffled editor wears her success like an understated designer bag—you find yourself impressed, without consciously understanding why.” My cheeks reddened, but Leighton didn’t notice. I’d had my answer ready because I’d imagined telling Will about the run-in. Since Will was currently off the grid on a dive trip in Thailand, I’d been stocking up on clever things to tell him.

Leighton laughed. “And in English?”

“Confident. Speedy but not rushed. Vaguely unapproachable,” I added. “You’ll know it when you see it. She oozes *Southern Charm*.”

“Are you describing yourself, or . . . ?”

And that’s when I smelled it, a second before the talons closed over my shoulder: the sickly sweetness of Givenchy’s Very Irresistible perfume. The petrified expression on

Leighton's face confirmed my dread: the Evil Empress had arrived.

"*Southern Charm*?" floated the soft, feminine drawl. "What's this, Olivia?"

I shook a mental fist at the happy hour gods—was this not sacred time?—before spinning around. "Hello, Aunt Lotte."

My aunt Charlotte pursed her plump lips, expertly lined in a blush pink that she never left the house without. Today she was clad in a peach sheath dress and nude stilettos, her signature look. I'd never seen her in flats, let alone sneakers. A boxy designer purse swung on her elbow like a shield, the sharp corner hovering dangerously close to my left eye.

"Hello, darling." Charlotte's Southern drawl sounded reserved and proper, like everything else she did. What was she doing in Nashville? Atlanta was her domain. Leighton and I had nicknamed her the Evil Empress, since Georgia's the Empire State of the South. "What's this about a magazine?" Her eyes bored into Leighton, who's always been the weaker-willed of us.

Exposure to Charlotte Harlow was an unfortunate side effect of spending your childhood with me, like Leighton had. Although Charlotte lived in Atlanta, she'd made frequent trips to Nashville to visit my mom and drag her to benefit dinners, galas, and glamorous rich-people "charity" work. Their secondary purpose was allowing Charlotte to critique everything about my life, and, by extension, Leighton's.

"Olivia's pitching me as *Southern Charm*'s next June cover star!" Leighton chirped, the news bubbling out in a combination of pride and fear.

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“June?” Charlotte arched a dark eyebrow. “Isn’t that the wedding issue?”

Leighton held up her left hand and wiggled her fingers.

“Congrats, darling.” Charlotte’s smile didn’t reach her eyes, although that could’ve been the Botox. “What a . . . bold ring.”

Leighton twitched, elation draining out of her faster than air from a punctured balloon. I coughed to draw the Empress’s attention back to myself. I’ve always felt bad that Leighton had to put up with my ridiculous aunt and her comments. One Halloween, Charlotte had told eleven-year-old Leighton that her handmade Snow White costume was “derivative” and “uninspired.” In retaliation, I’d taught myself to use a bottle opener and stuffed gummy worms into all of Charlotte’s best wines.

Charlotte refocused on me. “I was unaware that *Southern Charm* found cover stars through public submissions. Although I’m not surprised my niece is involved. She talks her way into everything!” She tittered unconvincingly.

Charlotte’s always thought that I meddle too much. Takes one to know one, I suppose.

“It’s not *public*,” I said, nailing the balance of disdain and disinterest, like I barely cared to correct her misunderstanding. “A drinks meeting with a senior editor. No big deal.”

Charlotte lifted an eyebrow. “And you chose *here*?”

Leighton snorted. “Of *course* not.” I widened my eyes at her in a stop-talking-now way. “They’re meeting at MM Baxter in an hour.”

Dammit. I smiled sweetly at my aunt, aiming for composure as my mind churned through possibilities. Would Charlotte

call ahead and cancel my reservation? Book out the whole patio for herself? Phone in a phony bomb threat? Phone in a *real* bomb threat?

You're being crazy, I scolded myself. Charlotte and I were family enemies (famemies?), the type of relative whose visits you endured with patronizing bless-your-hearts galore. Mostly I despised her because she'd brought out the worst side of my mother: the status-obsessed "philanthropist" who'd attended countless gala dinners while her own daughter reheated frozen pizzas and taught herself precalculus. It was a sleep-deprived surgeon who'd T-bone my mom on the interstate, killing her instantly three months into my freshman year of college. But I couldn't help blaming Charlotte for taking my mom away from me years earlier.

"Have a lovely time." Charlotte's brown eyes rested on me with a curious intensity. "I'd say good luck, but Olivia could talk Chevrolet out of making trucks! Enjoy your evening, girls."

"Bye, Aunt Lotte," I called after her, taking pleasure in the irritation creasing her forehead as she stalked away. She hated when I called her that.

Leighton leaned forward. "What's she doing in Nashville?"

"No idea. I thought she wasn't in town until next week—I'm supposed to have lunch with her."

"Ew, why?"

"It was her idea. She's been in Nashville a lot lately. I think she's getting involved in some 'charity' work here." I made air quotes around "charity." "Maybe she feels some familial obligation when she's in town?"

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“As long as she doesn’t move here.” Leighton shuddered. “I don’t want anything keeping you from visiting me next year!”

“Nothing could,” I promised, holding my margarita high to toast her. “I’d battle a thousand Empresses if it meant—”

My wrist jolted sideways, and my lap was immediately drenched. I was so stunned, it took me a second to piece together the facts: Charlotte’s bag had swung in a whistling arc as she whirled, toppling my drink.

“Oh, I am *so* sorry,” Charlotte cooed, her voice dripping with insincerity as my blouse dripped with spilled margarita. “So clumsy of me!”

Leighton gaped wordlessly. The image should’ve been funny: jalapeño margarita splashed across my white blouse, my messy bun turned to pure mess. Except I had an hour to get across town and impress a magazine editor at a swanky cocktail bar. I couldn’t show up looking like this.

“I only wanted to confirm we’re on for lunch on Tuesday?” she purred.

I had to hand it to her: the woman was cold as ice. She’d dumped a drink on me like we were filming a reality TV special, but her poise might fool you into thinking it was an accident.

If you didn’t know Charlotte.

“Yup, I’ll see you then.” I pasted a smile on my face. “But if you don’t mind, I’ve got to head home to change before—”

“Of course, your big meeting! But I insist on making it up to you.” Charlotte snapped her fingers. A nearby waiter produced a fresh margarita (had she kept him on standby?), which she handed to me with a firm politeness.

I accepted the drink, even though I wanted to toss it in her

face. But you can't fight Charlotte; I've made that mistake before. She's well versed in the Art of Indirect War, the science of slippery attacks and verbal daggers that could pass for butter knives in the right lighting. And I had a big reason to keep the peace with her, at least for one more year. "Thanks."

"No trouble," she trilled, and then disappeared again, this time for good.

Leighton glanced at her watch. "Liv, you'll be cutting it close—"

"Call me an Uber." I took two hearty swigs of margarita, never one to let a good drink go unfinished. "I'll schedule another for pickup in twenty minutes. I have a backup outfit sitting on my bed. I can be in and out of my apartment in six minutes flat."

"I hope so—"

I leapt to my feet and swept my stuff into my bag. "Leighton, relax. I've got this. By tomorrow morning, we'll be celebrating your June cover."

Flashing one last reassuring smile, I hurried toward the restaurant entrance before she could notice that I was convincing myself, too.

I should've spent the Uber ride to MM Baxter rehearsing my pitch. But I was too worked up over my run-in with the Empress. I'd spent much of my childhood waging war against Charlotte, aided and abetted by Charlotte's daughter, my cousin Kali. When I was little, no one had faulted me for being open about my dislike. One Christmas, Grandpa even congratulated me for replacing all of Charlotte's presents with coal.

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But once I was in high school, Mom’s tolerance for my “hijinks” evaporated practically overnight. I was now expected to *admire* my glamorous aunt, like Mom did. To *aspire* to accomplish as much philanthropic work as Charlotte. To *emulate* Charlotte’s composure and refined elegance.

I did none of those things. But after several groundings and a missed homecoming dance, I’d revised my war strategy to better align with my aunt’s. Some would say there’s no difference between a thrown margarita and a spilled one. But others—like me and Charlotte—know there’s all the difference in the world.

And since Charlotte had driven Mom away from me, I’d chosen to emulate my father instead. It didn’t take a therapist to unpack my reasons for following Dad into law: Mom had become a stranger. If I wanted parental approval, I needed to look elsewhere. And the easiest way to get my father’s attention was achievement. There was a well-trod pathway to Big Law, the term for the elite, cutthroat law firms where the real money was made, and where my father had launched his mediation career. All I had to do was follow it. At eleven, I’d first pinned up the steps on my vision board, my own yellow brick road leading to the Emerald City of giant checks and ruby-soled shoes. And, if I were really lucky, more than one phone call a month from Dad, the wizard himself. The steps:

- A. High grades and SAT scores (extracurriculars a bonus)
- B. Acceptance to an impressive college
- C. Continued high grades and killer LSAT score

- D. Name-brand law school
- E. Summer associate program at a Big Law firm

After working my ass off during my first year at Vanderbilt Law, I'd landed a coveted summer internship at Holmes & Reese, one of Manhattan's most powerful firms. High-performing interns ("summer associates") were typically asked to return the summer after 2L, the final "tryout" before a full-time employment offer was extended in the early 3L year. Some firms sent offer letters during the summer before 3L started, but H&R was notorious for keeping you waiting. According to office rumors, a senior partner had once caught his wife screwing a summer associate on the associate's last day, right after his new employment contract had been signed. Since then, they took their sweet time with contracts.

So last January, when I'd agreed to return for a second summer with Holmes & Reese, I'd known a formal job offer wouldn't materialize until the fall. I'd adjusted my expectations and looked forward to celebrating come September.

But two months later, my well-laid plans were ripped to shreds. In a cruel twist of fate, Charlotte's new husband, Hank, transferred to Holmes & Reese at the senior partner level. Meaning that Hank now wielded power over my soon-to-be-incoming job offer. And if Hank could influence my future in Big Law . . .

Charlotte, for the first time in my life, had real leverage over me.

Six minutes later, I was still pulling myself together as my Uber turned into the drive of the swanky hotel. *Focus, Olivia,*

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I chanted. Leighton was depending on me. And *I* needed my plan to work. If I could snag this opportunity for Leighton, she'd be ecstatic. The *Southern Charm* cover could solve my boy problems and my friendship problems in one fell swoop. *If* I pulled this off.

The hotel interior was a sea of glossy marble and tasteful gold accents. I headed to the elevator bay and hit *R* for rooftop. My reflection stared back at me from the elevator's mirrored doors. I looked like garbage.

Internal alarm bells rang in my ears. How was this possible? I'd changed into a fresh outfit fifteen minutes ago. But I looked . . . wilted. Like a Southern belle after six straight hours of Kentucky Derby sunshine. My face was unpleasantly flushed, my chest was tinged a weird green, and my roots looked downright greasy. A bead of sweat dripped down my neck and ran down my lower back. I might not hold a candle to Leighton, but I wasn't a gremlin. Not normally. What was going on?

The elevator doors slid open, and I dashed inside, frantically digging through my purse. As the elevator soared thirty floors, I fluffed out my hair, dabbed up the sweat, and popped a breath mint to counteract the sickening dismay in my stomach.

"You *can* do this, and you *will* do this," I muttered to myself. It was something Dad always said, a way of toughening me up before a big exam or internship interview.

The elevator dinged, and the doors opened to an airy, modern-looking space, all glass walls and exposed metal beams. Small trees were planted in tiny squares of soil, creating a pleasing juxtaposition against the concrete floor.

Ahead, the walls curved outward to reveal a glistening balcony, crowned by a giant bonsai tree. In the distance, the Nashville skyline glittered.

The place was gorgeous and hummed with Friday-night energy. Every table was crowded with young professionals with money to burn on nineteen-dollar cocktails. I'd never been to MM Baxter, but I'd researched the place all weekend. I was relieved to have chosen well. Emma's auburn hair was nowhere to be seen, as expected. I'd timed my Uber to ensure I was seated when she arrived.

"Can I help you?"

I turned to face the bored-looking host. "I have a seventy-three reservation. Olivia Fitzgerald."

He glanced down at his iPad and scrolled through a list of names. My stomach twisted unpleasantly; had Charlotte canceled my reservation?

Finally, he looked up. "We already seated the other member of your party. She's right over there, near the balcony—"

"Really?" I followed his gaze across the restaurant. "But she's not supposed to be here for—"

And then I saw the platinum-blond head of hair: Charlotte. My stomach churned again.

"Un-freakin'-believable," I muttered.

"Are you okay?" He frowned. "You look like—like you've seen a ghost."

"More like the devil."

Leaving him staring confusedly after me, I strode across the restaurant and threw myself down at Charlotte's table in a show of indignation. My butt, slamming into a trendy steel

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chair, did not appreciate the flashy entrance, but my flair for the dramatic sure did.

“Aunt Lotte,” I said through gritted teeth. “What’re you doing here?”

Composure intact, my aunt reached forward and took a sip of her white wine. “Don’t make a scene, Olivia. I’m here to meet with Ms. DeVant.”

“This is *my* meeting!”

She inclined her head. “Yes, and I’m so grateful for the introduction.” Her eyes caught mine. “Family connections can be oh-so-useful.”

A not-so-veiled threat to my Holmes & Reese dreams. My cheeks flushed. “Why,” I said with forced calm, “do you even want a meeting with Emma? *Southern Charm’s* audience is young professionals.”

Having slightly emphasized the *young*, I fake-laughed to twist in the dagger. Her eyes narrowed. My cheeks were flush with victory—or was that nausea? My stomach rolled.

“Not me,” she said primly. “Kali.”

This time my laugh was genuine. “Kali? Come on, Aunt Lotte, you’ll need a better cover story than that.”

Charlotte’s daughter, Kali, my only cousin on my mom’s side, was—there was no other word for it—*cool*. Looking back, her being three years older probably meant I’d have idolized her no matter what. But she earned every ounce of that adoration. In middle school, she’d played truant from every fancy-schmancy boarding school Charlotte shipped her off to, until my aunt had finally given up and enrolled her back in the public school system.

As children, we’d united at family gatherings to rebel against our mothers and their hoity-toity expectations. Kali’d

been the first to identify the chinks in Charlotte's Chanel armor. When I was nine, she'd shown me where Charlotte kept the "real" trash cans, instead of the fancy, stain-free ones she put out for company. We'd spent one glorious summer swapping trash cans at every opportunity. As Charlotte's fury intensified, we clung to our declarations of innocence, and the rest of the family sided with us. After all, who could get mad at two preteens for throwing their tissues in the wrong container?

I felt a stab of nostalgia at the memory. For us, growing up had meant growing apart. While I bonded with my dad over my journey to Big Law, Kali didn't have that option: her father, my uncle Mark, died from colon cancer when she was thirteen and I was ten. Kali had always been close with her dad, and she took the loss hard. After struggling through high school, she took a gap year before college to backpack around Europe and Asia. Then she'd gotten her degree and landed a job in advertising for Patagonia.

Charlotte smiled without warmth. "It's Kali who'll get the cover story."

"What're you talking about?"

"Didn't you hear the happy news?"

Charlotte slid her phone toward me: Kali and her long-term girlfriend, Greta, beaming on top of some mountain, both wiggling rings on their left hands.

"Kali's engaged?" I was caught off guard; how had I not known? Were we so distant that I didn't even merit an *FYI, we're engaged* text? My surprise made me slow in putting it all together, until I realized what Charlotte had said. A cover story . . .

"You're here to pitch Kali's wedding for *Southern Charm*."

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My aunt sat back, triumphant. “As convincing as you think you are, Olivia, I assure you that mine is the more compelling story. Kali and Greta are an environmental power couple. I hear saving the Earth is *very* hot among your generation.”

“An unfortunate choice of words,” I muttered.

“And, as I’m sure you discovered in your research, *Southern Charm* is struggling to remain relevant. Kali and Greta would revolutionize the wedding issue. The first same-sex cover stars!”

A sour taste rose in the back of my throat. Her angle was good. Even worse, I agreed with Charlotte: *Southern Charm* was long overdue for a progressive overhaul. In the last decade, it had successfully expanded from a print magazine to an online media company, like most of journalism. But it’d been slower to widen its narrow definition of aspirational womanhood, which tended to feature thin white women marrying rich cowboy types. Diversity was not a strong point of *SC*, and I loved the idea of that finally starting to change.

But . . . that change didn’t have to start with the next wedding issue. *SC* could choose a queer woman for any of its upcoming covers! Or feature a badass lesbian wedding the following June, after Leighton had already risen to fame. Besides, my cousin would never want a splashy magazine wedding. Not the Kali I knew.

I didn’t have a rebuttal, so I focused on yet another unknown. Charlotte was speaking like someone who’d done *her* research, but Leighton had spilled the beans only an hour ago. “How’d you have time to prepare?” I said blankly.

“Isn’t there a saying about this?” Charlotte took a dainty

sip of her wine and regarded me with a curious glint in her eyes. “Youth underestimates age, or something of that nature? You forget, darling niece, that I have a bachelor’s from Harvard and an MBA from Wharton. I am a capable woman with many connections. I simply called a friend who works in the magazine industry and asked for her advice.” She leaned forward and the glint hardened. “Some of us do not rely on nepotism alone.”

I hated to admit it, but she’d rattled me. A bead of sweat rolled down my temple, and my stomach was in outright revolt. I forced myself to stay calm. I needed this. Leighton needed this. Kali swooping in to steal the spotlight made no sense at all. Unless Charlotte had arranged for a personality transplant, my cousin wouldn’t be caught dead on a magazine cover unless it was *Rock Climbers Today*.

“Leighton has a following,” I said weakly. My mind seemed foggy; how had I forgotten the talking points I’d rehearsed all week? “She can bring additional readers and clicks to *Southern Charm*. She’s a perfect fit for their brand—”

“She already *is* their brand,” Charlotte countered. “A repackaged Carrie Underwood, without the singing. There’s nothing exciting about that, Olivia. Novelty sells. Even in the South.”

My head throbbed. The corners of the room swam in and out of focus. “That’s not true, and Kali’s not some novelty to trot out—”

“Are you all right? You look dreadful—”

A sudden wave of nausea crashed over me. I pushed my chair away and lurched to my feet. If I could get to the bathroom before Emma arrived, maybe I could still—

WEDDING ISSUES

“Olivia Fitzgerald?” said a bright voice behind me. “So good to see you again—”

And with that, I turned and emptied my stomach all over Emma DeVant’s magenta Jimmy Choos.