



# SOUTHERN BY DESIGN

A NOVEL

GRACE HELENA WALZ

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**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.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo by Lisa Liberati Photography*

GRACE HELENA WALZ received a master's degree in social work at the University of Houston and has worked with children in foster care, as a medical social worker, and in a mental health capacity. She currently resides outside of Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband and two young children. She writes women's fiction in the moments between sticking Band-Aids on scraped knees and coordinating pint-size social engagements.



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