



Let Her Eat Cake . . .

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To Ann Kruetzkamp who thinks every book should be dedicated to her.

Chapter One



MAGNOLIA Plantation wasn't really a Southern plantation, the guests milling about the wide verandas and lush green lawn weren't really extras from *Gone with the Wind*, and that wasn't Scarlett descending the curved staircase but my auntie KiKi in a green flouncy dress with enough crinolines to cover all of Savannah.

"Honey, what are you doing here?" KiKi said to me when she got to the bottom. "I don't recall seeing Reagan Summerside on the wedding guest list, and you're wearing a regular old skirt and toting your yellow pocketbook instead of a nice parasol. Are those new black flip-flops?"

Auntie KiKi was my one and only auntie. She lived next door to me in a perfectly restored Victorian that had been in the Vanderpool family since Sherman saw fit to park his unwelcome Northern behind in Savannah. "How

do you go to the bathroom in that thing?" I asked, eyeing her hugeness.

Auntie KiKi cut her brown eyes side to side at the others in full Southern regalia, chatting politely, trying not to look as if the beads of sweat dotting their upper lips and foreheads bothered them one bit. "I'm not even thinking about such a possibility and neither is any other woman here." KiKi fluffed her voluminous skirts. "Why on earth couldn't Waynetta have a normal August wedding? I do believe it's ninety-two in the shade, and the AC in this place isn't keeping up for diddly."

"When you're the only child of Reese Waverly, horse owner, ranch owner, fat portfolio owner, you get whatever you set your mind to, including someone else's beau," I whispered the last part with a good deal of upset in my voice since the particular someone who had her beau stolen happened to be my friend.

"Waynetta had it in her mind to get married," KiKi whispered back. "Simon Ambrose had it in his mind to get his name on a Waverly bank account. Marriage seemed the fastest way to accomplish both. One of these days Chantilly will appreciate that she's better off without that no-good, middle-Georgia, low-rent Simon hanging around." KiKi parked her dress over an AC duct to catch a breeze.

KiKi added, "And we're all just hoping Chantilly does her realizing right quick and gets back to being our efficient UPS delivery girl. Last week she was in such a state over this here wedding that she delivered the new girdle I

ordered from the JCPenney catalog to Dinky Landers' house. Dinky thought her husband went and got it for her since she's been putting on a few pounds of late. Nearly caused a divorce right there on the spot." KiKi flourished her fan to get some air circulating as Doreen-the-wedding-planner hurried up to us.

Doreen-the-wedding-planner went to school with Auntie KiKi back in the days of Rubik's Cubes and Pac-Man. Now Doreen-the-wedding-planner organized all notable weddings in the area to the point where no one ever referred to her as simply Doreen. She was calm, cool, and efficient, pulling off the most difficult ceremonies without a hitch or even breaking a sweat. Today her hair stuck out in tufts of gray, her petticoat hung a full inch below her blue dress, her nails were chewed to the quick, and she snagged a peach martini right off a passing waiter's tray.

"Have you seen Simon?" Doreen chugged the martini, her left eye twitching.

I unraveled a strip of black material from my purse. "Here's the bow tie you asked me to bring right over for him." That trip had translated into a forty-dollar cab ride from my consignment shop in town. My present financial status left me carless, pretty much furniture-less, and the reason I wound up in the consignment shop business in the first place. "How in the world could the groom go and lose his bow tie?"

Doreen slurped the peach slice from the martini and lowered her voice. "Honey child, how could I lose the groom?" She swiped her hand across her mouth and

burped. “I’ve had bridesmaids go missing, mothers-in-law, ring bearers, even a reverend and justice-of-the-peace a time or two, but never the groom . . . until now.” She held the glass up to the balcony overhead. “Simon’s room’s up there, last one on the end. Take the back stairs not cluttered with big dresses and Colonel Sanders look-alikes. Can you see if by some heavenly miracle Mr. Blue-eyes-with-goatee has managed to return himself to where he belongs? He needs to propel himself outside for pictures; the photographer’s having palpitations. You’d think Simon would be there front and center. I declare, that man’s so full of himself he wouldn’t go to a funeral unless he could be the corpse.”

KiKi rolled her eyes at me and gave Doreen a reassuring pat while prying the empty glass from her finger before she hurried off. Auntie KiKi said to me, “I best go find Putter. He camouflaged that golf club of his as a fancy walking cane, but he’s not fooling anyone. I bet that man’s chipping pinecones out of the flower beds right this very minute. I’ll keep an eye out for Simon and send him your way.”

The entire population of Savannah called my uncle Putter because he carried one everywhere . . . restaurants, church, rounds at the hospital. Auntie KiKi maintained it was in case a golf ball dropped to Earth and he had to sink a birdie to save the planet. Thirty years ago KiKi married the perfect Southern gentleman and first-class doctor. Seven years ago I’d married the perfect Southern philanderer and real-estate bum. Then I was twenty-five, stupid, and thought

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love conquered all. Now I was thirty-two, divorced, living in a partially restored Victorian house with my consignment shop on the first floor and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that overdue bills conquered all.

I hitched Old Yeller, my beloved yellow Target-special pleather purse, onto my shoulder and cut through the crowd munching cucumber sandwiches and inhaling remarkable amounts of alcohol. I took the back stairway and glanced out the clerestory window to a manicured lawn. A muscled guy sporting a ponytail and clad in a bad-fitting suit sprinted across. Bouncer? My guess was he'd been brought in to keep wedding crashers away and that probably included a brown van with gold lettering parked back in the bushes and out of his view.

Sweet mother in heaven! No, it couldn't be . . . could it? UPS? Chantilly? Here? Now! Maybe it was some other UPS driver who used to be engaged to the groom in her UPS truck and visiting Magnolia Plantation to deliver wedding gifts?

I trotted back down the stairs and ducked out a rear entrance, then hustled across the grass. A weeping willow did a fair job of hiding the truck, but big and brown with gold lettering was downright conspicuous surrounded by rose gardens, white columns, and horse-drawn carriages.

"It is you," I said to Chantilly when I ran up next to the open door of the van. Even with her face turned the other way I'd recognize Chantilly's long brown curls anywhere. I'd been restoring my house for five years now, and

Chantilly had delivered everything to me from offset hinges to an antique brass coatrack I scored on eBay. Usually Chantilly had all those curls stuffed under her brown uniform ball cap. “Honey, you shouldn’t be here. It’s not good for you.”

Chantilly swiveled round in the driver’s seat. White icing and cake crumbs smeared her lips and a glob of raspberry filling dripped down her chin. A pink buttercream rose stuck to the front of her brown uniform blouse. “Dear God in heaven! You went and ate the wedding cake!”

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I climbed up into the van and hunted a tissue from my purse. I wiped Chantilly’s eyes. “You’re making yourself miserable. You need to go on home.”

She gave me a watery look. “What are you doing here?”

Uh-oh. I couldn't tell Chantilly I was dropping off Simon's bow tie. That would mark me as an accomplice and make Chantilly more upset and maybe bring on another cake attack. "Auntie KiKi," I blurted. Now I needed to come up with something about KiKi. I silently promised God at that moment that I'd help with the St. John's thrift sale at the end of the month if he'd tell me what to say. I was so bad at lying I required divine intervention to pull it off. It occurred to me that was like asking the FBI to help in pulling off a bank robbery.

"KiKi needed her headache medicine and called me," I said. "It's hot inside, people are melting. Everyone's having a painfully horrible time. Downright pitiful. Worst wedding ever. The only reason people came is that no one wants to cross Reese Waverly. The man carries too much weight in this town."

Chantilly brightened a bit. "Really?"

I made an X over my heart. "Now promise me you'll get out of here? If you don't deliver the rest of your packages, you'll lose your job. Look at it this way: Waynetta's a spoiled brat and Simon's a donkey's butt. The brat and the butt deserve each other." I squeezed her hand. "You can do better."

She took another lick of icing off her thumb. "This cake is drop-dead delicious and that's just what Simon deserves, the dead part, not the delicious part. Truth be told, Waynetta deserves dead even more." Another tear escaped, and I held her hand tighter.

"Hollis divorced me for a twenty-four-year-old cupcake,"

I reminded. “I understand the *who deserves to die more* dilemma better than most.” I gave Chantilly a sympathetic wink and hurried off. Wedding music drifted across the faux plantation that had opened last year for the sole purpose of hosting gatherings in need of Southern hype, notably Southern brides with more money than sense. Ribbons and roses decorating the gazebo and rows of white chairs caught a much-welcome summer breeze. Guests began to take their seats set far apart to accommodate hoop skirts, petticoats, parasols, and canes.

Once inside I made a mad dash for the steps. I should have found Simon ten minutes ago. Doreen-the-wedding-planner was probably having a stroke by now, and Waynetta must be in full-blown hissy-fit mode. Everyone in town had witnessed Waynetta in this particular state at one time or another and it wasn’t pretty, though it did keep the gossips clucking for weeks on end.

When I got to the second floor, KiKi was leaning over the railing, studying the guests below as they made their way outside. “Have you seen Waynetta?” she asked me.

“Jiminy Christmas! Now the bride’s missing?”

“For Doreen’s sake let’s just go with no one can find Waynetta at this particular moment in time. One of the bridesmaids seems to have misplaced her dress and the photographer has threatened to leave the premises.”

“Chantilly’s here. UPS truck parked out back.”

KiKi’s jaw dropped a full inch and she stared at me bug-eyed. “Heavenly days. Doreen-the-wedding-planner has already fainted twice, and Waynetta’s daddy is having chest pains. Putter’s with Reese now. This wedding cost

the man a blooming fortune and I'm not all that sure he's thrilled about the marriage to begin with."

It was always nice to have a cardiologist on the guest list. I said to KiKi, "Simon's a loan officer at the bank. You'd think Reese Waverly would welcome someone in the financial field with open arms. You help Doreen find Waynetta and I'll get Simon into a bow tie if I have to strangle the man to do it." The strangle part had definite appeal. KiKi hoofed it down the hall as fast as billowing yards of taffeta, lace, and chiffon would allow. I knocked on Simon's door. "It's Reagan Summerside."

"Well, have you found him?" Vidallia Ambrose hissed, pulling my purse strap and hauling me inside the room. Vidallia was Simon's petite mamma and socialite wannabe. "Where is that blessed bow tie? You should have had it here a half hour ago"

"Do you know where Simon is?"

"Do you believe that Chantilly person dared show her face around here? I saw her truck out the window. I called the Savannah police myself. Can't leave it up to the locals to take care of something so important. What if she causes another dreadful scene like she did at the engagement party? It'll ruin the wedding."

From what I heard, that particular scene involved being naked and on a horse, but Chantilly was a friend so I ignored the details.

"I do declare," Vidallia went on, adjusting her hat, which was nearly as big as her matching dress. She looked like a piñata. "Why can't that truck-driving trollop understand Simon is marrying someone with more

class in her little finger than Chantilly has in her whole body.” Vidallia went dreamy-eyed for a second. “This wedding will be in all the society pages. *I’ll* be in the society pages. The photographer promised to make me look divine.”

Vidallia shooed me toward the door like a pesky fly off an apple cobbler. “Now get a move on and find Simon. Tell him he best behave himself and not mess up this here wedding or he’ll have to answer to me. He didn’t meet Waynetta just by chance, you know. Sometimes cupid needs a good shove, and I did a pretty fine job of it if I do say so myself.”

I stepped into the hall and the door slammed closed behind me. Mamma matchmaker, or was troublemaker closer to the truth? But where was Simon? Where was Waynetta? Not that I cared so much for their sakes as Doreen’s. I’d been in six weddings over the years and Doreen-the-wedding-planner and I had bonded, proven by the fact that she sent a lot of customers to my consignment shop for wedding attire.

My guess was that Simon and Waynetta had made their way to the van. Both thrived on drama and the ex at the wedding screamed drama. I headed for the back steps, the slapping of my flip-flops echoing in the now-empty hallway. Everyone was seated outside, wanting nothing more than to get back to air-conditioning and chilled champagne quickly as possible. I turned for the atrium in time to hear Delta from Cakery Bakery arguing with Tipper, her ex, over the color of the buttercream roses and

collided head-on with a waitress coming out of the dining room.

“Have you seen the bride or the groom?” I asked breathless, my hundred and twenty-three pounds and Old Yeller taking the worst of the impact. Okay, a hundred and twenty-eight pounds, but I swear I’m on a diet and just thinking ahead.

The waitress’s side ponytail drooped down around her ears and she leaned against one of the fake marble columns, her blue eyes with even bluer eye shadow not focusing. “What am I ever going to do?” She slid to the marble floor, her black-and-white uniform inching up to her thighs.

I hunkered down next to . . . Suellen, or so her badge said. “Hey, are you all right?”

Suellen shook her head, blonde hair pulling free. She sobbed. “How could this happen?”

“We just ran into each other, is all, honey. Take a few deep breaths.” I rummaged around in Old Yeller and came up with a half roll of Life Savers and peeled off a red one. “Here, eat this. Sugar cures all. Are you okay?”

“This is terrible, just terrible.” Suellen slurped the candy and pointed a shaky finger to the double doors leading to the dining room. A chill replaced the August heat cooking me to near done.

I stood and entered the dining room, quiet and still, dust motes floating in the setting sun. Round tables were decked out in peach-tone linens with white flower arrangements of roses and forget-me-nots. Candlelight danced about the room and Doreen-the-wedding-planner lay crumbled in a heap on the floor.

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“Oh dear Lord!” I starting for Doreen but then stopped in my tracks because Simon was there, too. He was face-down in the five-tiered wedding cake with a silver cake knife sticking out of his back.