

OLD FASHIONED

"PILOT"

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"Like any great seductress, Charleston presents a careful veneer of half-truths and outright fabrications... Few tourists ever hear the truth, because at the dark heart of Charleston is a winding tale of violence, tragedy and, most of all, sin."

- James Caskey

TEASER

CLASSICAL MUSIC. WE HEAR TINKLING LAUGHTER. A DATE APPEARS:

2002

INT. BALLROOM - UPPER KINGS COUNTRY CLUB - NIGHT - 2002

THE CITY DEBUTANTE BALL. A tasteful affair with black tie attire, clinking champagne glasses, and not a care in the world. Young men and women enjoy fine food and music currently drifting from the speakers as they mingle or shag dance on the ballroom floor.

CLOSE IN ON -- BOURBON, being poured into a glass.

SALLY (O.S.)

Another Old Fashioned. And I better not taste my competitors' product in that glass.

This is **SALLY BODDIFORD** (44, well-mannered and kind), and she observes the room as the **BARTENDER** mixes her drink. Everything about this world nearly sparkles with an ease of centuries of practice and a calming knowledge that these customs are of the utmost importance.

BARTENDER

Wouldn't dream of it, Mrs. Boddiford.

Behind her, shouts of, "Hey!" or "Excuse me," are heard, and Sally turns. Her EYES narrow as she spots a MOVEMENT...

SALLY

(recognition dawns)
Mary-Elizabeth? Mary-Elizabeth!

The Bartender sets the DRINK on the bar as a 17-year-old girl darts through the crowd. Sally readies to give chase. But first --

SALLY (CONT'D)

(re: cocktail)
I'll be back for that.

Already making her escape, find **M.E. BODDIFORD** (outspoken, lovable, and full of scrappy defiance), hunching over SOMETHING wrapped in a SHAWL, clutched against her chest. Wearing a flowing green gown clashing with her beat-up CONVERSEs, she slips through a group of slightly tipsy Country Club moms tittering over some champagne. One HUFFS as M.E. accidentally nudges her.

CONTINUED:

COUNTRY CLUB MOM

I take comfort knowing even the
Boddifords have a black sheep.

If M.E. hears this as she leaves the gaggle, she pays it no heed. In fact, she steadfastly ignores all disapproving looks as she darts around an older couple, behind an iconic white column, and scans the room, until her eyes land on --

JOHANNA BODDIFORD (21, the epitome of a southerner who "politely overlooks" the ugliness in life), dancing at the center of the ballroom with **REESE MAYHALL** (21, your typical southern good ol' boy). In a gorgeous white debutante gown, Johanna is in her element. The girls envy her. The boys admire her. And Johanna *shines*.

Amongst the onlookers are **LAUREN PEDDRICK** (21, a notorious schemer and gossip) and **PAT HOWE** (22, highly entitled), separate looks of JEALOUSY or CUPIDITY adorning their faces.

From her VANTAGE POINT, M.E.'s glance drifts over to -- **THE STAGE**. On break nearby, the **BAND** drinks and shares a laugh. She hones in on the **SPEAKER-SYSTEM**. Bingo.

M.E. moves towards a pair of double-doors leading out to the patio, open to let in a slight breeze. And strategically close to where the band has set their instrument cases.

As she arrives at her target spot, she looks around, sure that no one has seen, and unwraps the shawl, **REVEALING** -- a POT OF SPARKLERS. She places the pot down.

Twenty sparklers stick up through the potted sand - clearly to be used for some grand exit later on. But for now, M.E. takes out a packet of matches hidden in her bra, strikes one, and lights two **SPARKLERS**. As they **IGNITE**, M.E. dashes off.

CLOSE ON THE SPARKLERS - the two burning brightly, one spark flying off, igniting another, and then another...

ON THE BAND, one of them **STARTS** as he realizes -- part of the CURTAIN near the instrument cases is ON FIRE! He **SHOUTS**, he and his bandmates moving quickly. Around the room, people look towards the commotion. Well, not quite everyone...

CLOSE ON AN IPOD - you know, one of the very first ones that weighs about the same as a small brick - and **PULL OUT TO REVEAL** -- M.E., behind the stage. With the band distracted as planned, she scrolls through songs, **SMILING** as she lands on Nelly's "Hot In Herre." As she **CLICKS** on it, the classical music cuts off as "Hot In Herre" **NEEDLE DROPS**, and --

CONTINUED: (2)

THE FIRE ALARM GOES OFF. M.E. looks up, and across the room, where she'd placed the SPARKLERS -- the whole CURTAIN IS ON FIRE, people trying to put it out. As her face FALLS, the alarm still blaring and Nelly still singing, we SMASH TO --

EXT. UPPER KINGS COUNTRY CLUB - NIGHT - MOMENTS LATER

Outside the Country Club, EMERGENCY VEHICLES are parked, flashing lights illuminating the faces of unhappy partygoers. The **FIRE MARSHAL** makes an announcement to the group.

FIRE MARSHAL

Fire's out, and we're just doing a sweep. Shouldn't be more than a few minutes, folks. Then y'all can get back to it.

Find Johanna Boddiford in her group of friends, upset at this interruption. She hears a RIPPLE OF MURMURS and SCOFFS, turns to see M.E. approaching. Next to Johanna, Lauren's face screams condescension as her eyes land on M.E.

LAUREN

Your sister's causing trouble again, Johanna. And during your debutante ball...

Johanna ignores this, likes she's heard it before. She walks away from the crowd, and M.E. instinctively follows.

JOHANNA

Can you believe this? My perfect night, *ruined*.

M.E. feels guilty, fidgets.

M.E.

It's only a little interlude. And think of the story!

JOHANNA

Less than an hour in and we've already been evacuated... Plus, Mama is obviously in a *mood*. Now she'll have to get good and drunk.

M.E.

(cheeky grin)
That's what parties are for.
Speaking of which...

M.E. reveals a stolen BOTTLE of bourbon, hidden in her dress.

CONTINUED:

M.E. (CONT'D)

Sneak off with me. Have a drink.

JOHANNA

I can't just disappear. I have obligations.

M.E.

It's not like you need to be "presented" to society. Everyone knows who you are.

JOHANNA

That's not the point. This is my big night. And while you think it's dumb, you know what it means to me. It's tradition. Please don't mess this up for me.

Johanna's not kidding. M.E. gives it one more shot.

M.E.

We can't go back in yet anyway, and I have it on good authority that the Pavilion isn't locked.

(going in for the kill)

Is it such a crime to ask for a few minutes of cherished sister time? C'mon. We used to have so much fun.

JOHANNA

Well, I grew up.

M.E.

And this is how grown-ups celebrate. Just one drink. Please?

M.E. brandishes the bottle one more time, her eyes dancing, and Johanna gives in.

JOHANNA

Fine. You win.

Smiling conspiratorially, the two run off, and we SMASH TO:

IMAGES BOMBARD us, like a kaleidoscope:

The SISTERS in a screaming match... A YOUNG MAN kissing a YOUNG GIRL in the shadows... TWO YOUNG MEN in tuxedos brawling as a LATINO MAN watches from the corner... A MOVING POV of a DENTED CAR BUMPER... Police lights color M.E.'s face red and blue... A BODY BAG... And we END ON M.E. crying, at a funeral, and SMASH TO:

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - NYC AD AGENCY - DAY - PRESENT

M.E. (now 33), no more tears and a look of calm determination on her face as we reveal --

PARTNER 1 (O.S.)
 Our demographic-targeting algorithms are the best in town, to ensure Endura's message finds the right eyes and ears.

She's in a room full of execs (mostly men), pitching a new client - Endura Athleisure Wear. She's on team with two PARTNERS, and it's their turn right now. Her **BOSS** (50s, face giving nothing away) sits nearby, presiding silently.

PARTNER 1 (30s, not reading the room) leans forward as the **GROUP OF CLIENTS** (two men and one woman) lean back. **PARTNER 2** steps in -- clearly part of some routine.

PARTNER 2
 We've put together a presentation with plenty of examples to show you what we can do --

M.E. watches the Client Group as they fidget, bored. One Man - we'll call him **CLIENT #1** - even checks his phone.

M.E.
 What's the matter? Is it that you saw an identical chart down the street at Saatchi?

He shrugs. She nailed it. She stands, clearly going off book by her Partners' reactions. She addresses Client #1.

M.E. (CONT'D)
 You like cocktails?

CLIENT #1
 Nothing too flowery.

M.E. gives a little laugh. Partners 1 and 2 laugh nervously as well. She's in her element as she confidently explains --

M.E.
 Hey, I'm with you. I like an Old Fashioned myself. And I'm very picky about them. Obviously you start with good bourbon. That's a must.

(MORE)

CONTINUED:

M.E. (CONT'D)

One big ol' ice cube, two drops of bitters, a splash of simple syrup, and a slice of orange rind thin enough you can see through it. Now if you screw up the ratio, you're just gonna ruin good bourbon. But if you get it just right, you exalt the bourbon. You take something good and make it *transcendent*.

She's unstoppable. And her secret weapon? Charm.

M.E. (CONT'D)

You've got a great company here. You're starting with good bourbon. Saatchi, Chiat, Grey, they're gonna screw it up with too much sugar. But with us you get... *alchemy*.

As she locks eyes with the Client Woman, they share a smile.

AFTER, as the last of the CLIENTS shake hands and exit the room, Partner #1 leans in close. He's ticked.

PARTNER 1

Congrats. You won them over and you didn't say anything of substance.

M.E.

Yet somehow it was exactly what they wanted to hear.

He sneers and exits. M.E. turns to find herself face-to-face with her Boss. He looks annoyed despite her success.

BOSS

That was a carefully planned-out presentation you interrupted, M.E.

M.E.

But it worked.

BOSS

Pitches are stronger as a multi-hander. We have protocol for a reason -

M.E.

Screw protocol! It's holding us back. We need to mix things up. Try something new, something different. They'd seen the same presentation a million times.

(MORE)

CONTINUED: (2)

M.E. (CONT'D)

It was written all over their faces! If they wanted to be bored to death, they could've ridden the circle line around all day.

He's *pissed*.

BOSS

That's not your call, and frankly, I'm *bored* of this conversation. We've had it too many times. You're talented, but that doesn't excuse your insubordination.

M.E.

I prefer to call it imagination.

BOSS

Call it what you want, but your southern charm won't get you out of this one. Pack your things. You're fired.

M.E.

You can't fire me. Because I quit.

M.E. ignores his SHOCK and leaves. But her confidence FADES as she realizes she's finally stepped too far out of line.

INT. OFFICE - NYC AD AGENCY - DAY - CONTINUOUS

M.E. packs her things in a BOX. As she does so, we PAN AROUND her office, finding a B.A. from Columbia and an M.B.A. from Wharton hanging on the wall, and various other accolades.

On her desk is a copy of FORBES MAGAZINE, BODDIFORD BOURBON splashed on the cover: "Traditional family business Boddiford Bourbon rolls the dice." As well as the PHONE NUMBER for one KEVIN LU. More on that later, but for now...

M.E. goes behind her desk, pulls out a FOLDER labelled "BODDIFORD BOURBON." Before she can open it, a KNOCK sounds. M.E. slides the magazine over the folder as the door opens.

Meet **CULLEN HAYNES** (43, black, compassionate and loyal, you wanna have a drink with him) as he steps in, walks to her. She strategically positions the box under the desk.

M.E.

So did the good guys win?

CONTINUED:

CULLEN

I can say that after a month of convincing the jury, wrongful conviction will not stand.

M.E.

(genuinely proud)

My hero. The ACLU is lucky to have you.

CULLEN

And how'd your pitch go? No, wait, lemme guess. You followed the routine you didn't practice at all.

Her smile falls and he can tell something's off. She hesitates, glances at the box, about to tell him --

CULLEN (CONT'D)

What's wrong? Are you nervous?

M.E.

What?

CULLEN

About the trip.

Oh. M.E. takes the out, pushing the box further out of view.

M.E.

First time going back in over a decade to see people I barely speak to on the phone once a year. What could I possibly be nervous about?

CULLEN

Might be good to see your family. You never talk about them.

M.E.

Nothing to talk about. We just don't always see eye-to-eye. But I'm accustomed to being a pariah. It adds to my charm.

More convincing statements have definitely been spoken.

M.E. (CONT'D)

Look, my family... We have some baggage. We buried it a long time ago, but I think it lingers more down there, so I stay away. And it's better for everyone.

(MORE)

CONTINUED: (2)

M.E. (CONT'D)

They have my sister, who played their game, married her high school sweetheart and had a kid right out of college, and I have the booming career and the man of my dreams.

She smiles at him, but it falls a little.

M.E. (CONT'D)

And I decided I was tired of being their disappointment.

CULLEN

Then why go back now?

M.E.

This article. "America's largest growing family brand?" My grandfather was a child of the depression. Those roots run deep. And a lot of their recent business moves have been... concerning.

CULLEN

You've been keeping tabs.

M.E.

I've just... been thinking about it. For a while. Something's off. And I have to find out what.

CULLEN

Well, Sarah and I will be there for support. I already let work know. They asked me to stop by the branch down there. Help consult on a case. Now, we have to celebrate. Your pitch. My case. C'mere...

She looks GUILTY, but he doesn't notice as he pulls her around the desk. And as they kiss, we go CLOSE ON a bottle of BOURBON on her desk, and MATCH TO:

EXT. CHARLESTON - VARIOUS - DAY

An IDENTICAL BOTTLE of Boddiford Bourbon, being touted by none other than - **MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY** (or someone Matthew McConaughey-esque), shrugging on a sports coat. Languid "cool" music SWELLS as he tells us --

MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY

You might not realize it on first sip.

CONTINUED:

Think those Lincoln commercials - yeah, you know the ones - as he walks us through various sites:

The lush lawn of Magnolia Plantation and Gardens.

MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY (CONT'D)
Or even the first drink. But it's something that stays with you.

The pastel-hued Georgian rowhouses of Rainbow Row.

MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY (CONT'D)
It'll envelope you, like a very warm coat on a frosty winter day.

The USS Yorktown at Patriots Point.

MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY (CONT'D)
It's the taste of Charleston, America's nicest city.

A fermentation warehouse at a bourbon distillery. As Matthew walks amongst the aging oaken barrels...

MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY (CONT'D)
If you're gonna drink bourbon, you better do it right. It's a feeling. It's a brand. It's an American tradition. Boddiford Bourbon.

We FREEZE FRAME and PULL OUT TO REVEAL --

INT. FERMENTATION WAREHOUSE - BODDIFORD BOURBON HQ - MORNING

This is a PROMOTIONAL VIDEO for the high spirits conglomerate. Like Matthew, we find ourselves in a distillery surrounded by GAUGE TANKS. Liquor ferments. Employees go about their business. And a small group watches the screen. **TOM BODDIFORD** (early 60s, patriarch of the Boddiford family, jovial but commanding) addresses his audience - a big-time European Distributor, **PIERRE MANADOU** (40s, French accent).

TOM
You may have recently seen we were on the cover of Forbes.

Tom begins walking, and the Distributor follows.

TOM (CONT'D)
Most people think Bourbon is only made in Kentucky, that only their water has the properties necessary for the fermentation process.

CONTINUED:

As he walks, we see the inner workings of this distillery.

TOM (CONT'D)

But my grandfather realized that Charleston houses a unique aquifer, and good spirits start with good water. Pair that with the most up-to-date processing and a skilled mixologist, and you've got yourself a high-end product with an exceptional taste.

PIERRE

Super. But you know, bourbon has been slow to find a foothold in Europe. Why is your product any different?

The Distributor watches as the Manager **CARLOS MORENO** (a brittle 65, Mexican-American, silent but intimidating) dishes out orders. We recognize him - 16 years older, but he is the **LATINO MAN** from the **FLASHES**.

TOM

That's Carlos Moreno, and he's been with us for almost 40 years. He could tell you just as well as I that our product transcends time and place. Because our bourbon is more than alcohol. It's tradition.

He turns as **REESE MAYHALL** (now 37) approaches, shakes hands.

TOM (CONT'D)

Ah. And family tradition at that. This is my son-in-law and right-hand man, Reese Mayhall. It's thanks to his enterprising vision that we've grown so much.

PIERRE

Thank you for having me.

REESE

Pleasure's all ours, sir.

TOM

Here, you're investing in a little piece of America's legacy. Other spirits might have their boons, but they can never *seduce* you the way a Charleston bourbon can.

CONTINUED: (2)

He oozes charm, and the Distributor is eating it up. But the battle's not quite won.

PIERRE

I see the appeal, and your recent growth is impressive, but I worry with the many directions your business is going in, you won't have the time and ability to truly tout your bourbon to the European drinker.

TOM

I hear you loud and clear, Pierre, but we're fixin' to divest of any extras this evening to focus on our core product. No distractions here. How about we show you tonight? A home-cooked meal at my house. Let ya get a taste of some southern hospitality and the best damn Old Fashioned you've ever had.

PIERRE

That sounds great, Tom.

As Tom sticks out his hand, shaking enthusiastically, he meets Reese's eyes, and we CUT TO --

INT. TOM'S OFFICE - BODDIFORD BOURBON HQ - MORNING

Tom sits at his beautiful mahogany desk as Reese paces the room. All around we see PHOTOS of the Boddiford family, going back several generations. And *lots* of Bourbon.

REESE

We lose the extraneous operations at the board meeting, woo Pierre tonight, we're sittin' pretty as a peach. Cornering the European markets would be huge.

TOM

It's not a done deal yet.

Reese looks down, insecure. Tom throws him a bone.

TOM (CONT'D)

Your contact at Forbes was certainly a big help. But we can't afford to mess this up.

CONTINUED:

Reese nods, knowing when he's dismissed. He leaves the room. As soon as he's alone, Tom pulls some DOCUMENTS out of his desk. CLOSE ON A LETTER: "Violation of loan covenants" on it. Tom takes a DEEP BREATH, and we CUT TO --

INT. MASTER BEDROOM - JOHANNA'S HOUSE - DAY

That neoclassical architectural feel as we find **JOHANNA BODDIFORD MAYHALL** (now 37), straightening a business suit. PAN OVER to the bed, past the entrance to her huge walk-in closet, and find discarded outfits strewn about, showing her apprehension. And on the bed, a page of HANDWRITTEN NOTES.

A KNOCK -- then, **TIFFANI MAYHALL** (15, wears privilege just as easily as she wears cowboy boots) enters in a tennis outfit. Johanna hurriedly covers the notes, smiling at her daughter.

JOHANNA

Tiffani. Darling, what have I said about knocking?

TIFFANI

I did knock. I... I have a question. I was thinking about asking Kinsley to come to Kiawah with us? For the Symphony Guild charity event?

JOHANNA

I think it's more of a date thing, sweetheart. What about Gabe? You two looked precious together at Junior Assembly last year.

Johanna misses Tiffani's face fall.

TIFFANI

Oh. Sure. Hey, Mom? Actually, can I talk to you about something?

JOHANNA

Always. But later. Curtsy practice for the debs ran late so I need to get a move on. Don't forget we have dinner at Pop-Pop's tonight.

Johanna straightens, checks herself out one more time. She gives Tiffani a quick kiss on the forehead and dashes out.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - BODDIFORD BOURBON HQ - DAY

CLOSE ON Johanna entering the boardroom, trying to portray confidence. Her hands TIGHTLY GRIP her purse, notes inside.

CONTINUED:

We see other shareholders and other execs gathered here, about 12 people, including Tom, Reese, and **SALLY BODDIFORD** (now 60) - those three seated at the head of the table. Two EMPTY SEATS sit near them. Johanna takes one.

SALLY

That's an... interesting choice.

JOHANNA

It's a suit, Mama.

SALLY

It's not very feminine.

Before Johanna can respond, Tom stands, and a HUSH falls.

TOM

All righty, y'all. Welcome to our biannual board meeting. First, congrats to Wood on his engagement.
 (pausing for HOOTS)
 A huge thanks to my own right-hand man, Reese, for his work in making the Forbes profile a reality.

Reese preens. Next to him, Johanna SHIFTS, unsettled.

TOM (CONT'D)

Boddiford Bourbon is a name brand, and we're just getting started!
 (amidst cheers and claps)
 To begin, we recently acquired a rival distillery and its extras. To lock down our European market deal and focus on our core business, the board moves to vote on selling the extraneous operations. I assume we're all in favor?

Steeling herself, Johanna stands.

JOHANNA

Sorry, but I propose keeping one division.

Confusion and impatience make a *Mood* in this room.

TOM

Despite the fact that the extras are believed to be non-performing and resource-soaking?

CONTINUED: (2)

JOHANNA

Yes. Despite your beliefs.

A TENSE BEAT, then -- Tom NODS ("ooookay"), giving her the floor. Johanna takes a DEEP BREATH.

JOHANNA (CONT'D)

One of these assets you've been talking about divesting is undervalued. A small mixers business. It's local to Charleston, so it won't soak resources, and I believe it *will* perform. We could convince the distributor it's a good idea. I think we're overlooking the massive potential -

TOM

Thank you, Johanna. We believe it makes more sense to sell.

His tone conveys he doesn't expect any push-back. But --

JOHANNA

Maybe y'all could take one more look. I think you're missing out on the big picture here. By combining -

TOM

That's enough, Johanna.
(then, placating --)
It will be put to a vote.

Deflating, Johanna sits down. She knows her vote will not be enough to stay the action.

TOM (CONT'D)

All in favor of keeping the acquisition, raise your hands.

Only Johanna raises her hand. It looks as if the sale will pass, until -- BANG!! The door flies open. REVEAL -- M.E. striding in. Ignoring the stunned looks directed at her, she struts to the empty seat next to her sister.

M.E.

If you're looking for your super majority, I've got some bad news. I'm with Jo on this one.

Motion overturned, and we SMASH TO CREDITS.

END OF TEASER

CONTINUED: (3)

ACT I

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - BODDIFORD BOURBON HQ - RESUME

The board meeting has ended, but the chaos has just begun. Only the inner-family remains, and shit is TENSE.

REESE

What are you doing here?

SALLY

(#priorities)

What have you done with your hair?

M.E.

Can't a girl visit her family?

REESE

Well you haven't. In 11 years.

But like any good southerner, M.E. knows the art of not showing your hand right away.

M.E.

I saw the Forbes article. Boddiford is my name too. I remembered we had a board meeting coming up, thought I'd check in. And I agree with Jo.

We go CLOSE ON Johanna, struck by this comment. She's not the only one. Tom is clearly torn about his youngest's reappearance. His hands twitch, belying his desire to show affection, but he remains restrained and commanding.

TOM

Where are you staying?

M.E.

I have a suite at the Restoration.

SALLY

Have you given *any* consideration to how that will look?

M.E.

Absolutely none.

Sally high-key looks like she's about to Hulk out. Tom moves to dissipate the situation.

TOM

You'll stay with us.

CONTINUED:

M.E.

My boyfriend and his daughter are here too. We're fine in the hotel.

Another round of LOOKS are served as everyone digests this.

M.E. (CONT'D)

I do have some business-related questions.

SALLY

We haven't seen you in *years* and you want to talk business?

(decisive:)

You'll come to dinner tonight.

REESE

But we've got the distributor...

TOM

No, she's right. We're a family company. If he wants our business, he can meet the *whole* family.

(to M.E. --)

I *won't* take no for an answer.

EXT. PARKING LOT - BODDIFORD BOURBON HQ - DAY - MOMENTS LATER

As M.E. heads towards her rental car, we see her pause, take a DEEP BREATH, like this was a strain. She looks down. Her hands are SHAKING. But she gathers herself as we hear --

JOHANNA (O.S.)

M.E.!

M.E. turns to find Johanna -- finally reunited. And alone.

JOHANNA (CONT'D)

I just... Thank you. In there. For siding with me.

M.E.

It's no big deal. You were right.

A tense and slightly awkward moment, but also a reminder of a deep and familiar bond - these are two sides of the same coin, despite their estrangement - a certain longing to say more fills the air.

M.E. (CONT'D)

Besides, we were way past due for an M.E. mic drop moment.

CONTINUED:

And that's how it starts: a shared smile. The slow and unintentional resuscitation of a bond that's *everything*.

JOHANNA

Yeah... It's good to see you.

Johanna gets into her car, leaving M.E. behind.

INT. THE RESTORATION HOTEL - M.E.'S HOTEL SUITE - AFTERNOON

M.E. returns to her hotel room and finds **SARAH HAYNES** (15, black, forthright, smart and she knows it) reading her iPad.

SARAH

Finally! Dad's been trying to "bond" with me all afternoon. They put gravy on everything down here. Everything.

M.E.

Let me guess. He made... a *List*.

SARAH

We *never* take vacations and then he drags me here.

(then, bummed --)

I'm missing so many parties. Last weekend of summer break.

She's clearly unhappy to be here. M.E. feels bad.

M.E.

Your Dad came because of me.

SARAH

Well... I guess it isn't all bad. My Instagram story is getting a lot of love. The amount of biscuit places is unbelievable.

M.E.

In the South we sleep on beds of biscuits. So fluffy and warm.

They share a smile. This relationship is very sweet, easy. The moment is broken as Cullen enters. He sees M.E.

CULLEN

Hey. Sarah, could you give us a minute?

CONTINUED:

SARAH

I just want to remind you that I'm
in the next room and these old
walls aren't *that* thick.

She winks at M.E. and Cullen shakes his head as she leaves.

CULLEN

How'd it go?

M.E.

Somehow I've been roped into family
dinner. My father basically
*demand*ed that you join too.

(then --)

Oh my god, don't look excited.

CULLEN

But I am.

M.E.

You know how hyenas eat each other
in the womb? Being a Boddiford is
like that.

CULLEN

I can handle a challenge.

M.E.

That's what I'm worried about.

But she can't say no to him. They kiss, and we CUT TO:

INT. MASTER BEDROOM - JOHANNA'S HOUSE - EARLY EVENING

A very different couple: Reese and Johanna. As Johanna puts
away the clothes we saw earlier, facing away from him --

REESE

I just can't believe you
embarrassed me that way.

JOHANNA

I believe the leftover could bring
a lot to the table.

REESE

If you have a business idea, you
can tell me, and I'll relay it.
Like we always do.

CONTINUED:

JOHANNA

And you'll get the credit. Like always.

REESE

I don't know what's going on with you lately, but your family already has one disappointment.

Johanna looks angry, but says nothing about the barb towards her sister. Reese looks like he regrets his comment, but he's too proud to apologize.

REESE (CONT'D)

Look. It's a volatile time. I don't want to fight with you. It's not about credit. It's about what's best for the family. You know that.

We see Johanna's beautifully lacquered nails dig into her palm. She's a powderkeg about to explode.

REESE (CONT'D)

We need to get going. We can't be late for this dinner.

He walks out of the room without a backward glance.

EXT. THE BATTERY - EARLY EVENING - ESTABLISHING

Stretching along the lower shores of the Charleston peninsula is THE BATTERY - a neighborhood of extravagant antebellum mansions too exclusive for anyone who's made their money in the last century. Follow a car down a road of stately manors to find as we pull up to --

EXT. BODDIFORD MANSION - EARLY EVENING - CONTINUOUS

The main Boddiford family mansion. Three stories. Iconic white columns. A sprawling green lawn. Not to get too GONE WITH THE WIND on us, but this definitely fits Scarlett O'Hara's brand. BIG LITTLE LIES wishes they filmed here. As the car pulls up, we see -- M.E., Sarah, and Cullen step out and take in the view.

SARAH

This is where you grew up?!

Cullen nods in agreement. M.E. is a little embarrassed.

M.E.

It is a little ostentatious...

CONTINUED:

SARAH

It's crazy!

CULLEN

I think it's beautiful.

Follow them up the beautiful porch steps and into --

INT. BODDIFORD MANSION - ENTRY FOYER - EARLY EVENING

The inside is just as lavish as the outside, if not more so. Paintings and sculptures spin a tale of the history and ghosts here, and even the ornate marble floor seems to sparkle. Everything about this setting DAZZLES you.

As Cullen and Sarah take in their surroundings, M.E. moves towards the bottom of a staircase. On a gorgeous Russian oak table, she picks up a PHOTO: her, Johanna, and a teenage boy. OFF M.E.'s expression, FLASHBACK TO --

M.E. (PRE-LAP)

And Mom's already agreed to let
Mrs. Turner's son be my escort...

INT. EMPTY POOLHOUSE - UPPER KINGS COUNTRY CLUB - NIGHT - 2002

2002 again. Same debutante ball as in our teaser. Johanna and M.E. are DRUNK, having a blast as M.E. is mid-story.

M.E.

And I'm realizing I can't get out
of this one, but then *he* saves me
by admitting he only likes me "in
small doses."

Johanna laughs despite herself, takes a SWIG.

JOHANNA

R.I.P. Mom's vicarious dreams.

M.E.

That's what happens when you ditch
me for college.

JOHANNA

I've missed you too.

M.E.

(insecure)
Really? I thought you were
embarrassed by me.

CONTINUED:

JOHANNA

Why would you think that?

M.E.

I might have read it in your diary.

JOHANNA

It's a goal journal. And that's private!

M.E.

What's mine is yours. It's the law of sisters. I don't make the rules.

JOHANNA

No, you just break them.

M.E.

I just missed you, is all. I saw other stuff too. I didn't know you were interested in the business.

JOHANNA

(insecure herself now)

I know you probably don't think I can juggle a family and a full-time job, but I'll have you know I'm a VP in my sorority, on club field hockey, and in cum laude at school.

M.E.

Dad would be lucky to have you, Jo.

Johanna smiles shyly. She passes the bottle.

JOHANNA

Well, you have to say that. You're my little sister.

M.E.

I only say what I mean. You know that.

As M.E. swigs and passes to Johanna, who takes a daintier but still rather large gulp, a VOICE interrupts them --

STOKES (O.S.)

What *would* Mother say?

This is **STOKES BODDIFORD** (19) - debonair and good-natured. Johanna is momentarily embarrassed, but M.E.'s eyes dance.

CONTINUED: (2)

M.E.

Stokes! Now the party *really* begins. C'mon, join the Resistance.

STOKES

How can I say no to that?

He sits between them, pulls out three glasses. As he pours them three drinks --

STOKES (CONT'D)

I gotta say, I was feeling a little left out. I propose a toast. To not giving up, and to each other. The brilliant Boddiford siblings.

Off the CLINK of their glasses, until --

SALLY (PRE-LAP)

Mary-Elizabeth?

INT. BODDIFORD MANSION - ENTRY FOYER - EARLY EVENING - RESUME

We're pulled back into the present by SALLY, drink already in hand as she arrives to receive her guests. She takes in their casual attire with a FROWN. M.E. braces for impact.

M.E.

Mom, this is my boyfriend, Cullen Haynes, and his daughter, Sarah.

CULLEN

It's so nice to meet you.

She holds out her hand, as if he might kiss it. He shakes it.

SALLY

I'm sure that we can find you a respectable sport coat to wear.

M.E.

He's fine, Mom.

SALLY

Of course. It's not *his* fault that he wasn't informed as to appropriate dinner attire.

M.E.

Mom. God, it must have been hard to go 11 years without nagging me.

CONTINUED:

A TENSE BEAT as M.E. suddenly realizes what she's said. She instinctively grabs at Cullen's hand. Sally's lips PURSE. It's awkward, until... The door opens as Johanna and co. arrive. Johanna smiles warmly. She notices M.E. SQUEEZE Cullen's hand, and how he squeezes back.

JOHANNA

Oh. Hi!

The tension snaps like a ratty hair tie. And M.E. breathes a sigh of RELIEF.

EXT. FRONT YARD - BODDIFORD MANSION - EVENING - MOMENTS LATER

Sarah finds Tiffani outside. We see more of the Boddiford grounds. A large pool and poolhouse. Tennis courts. A line of beautiful dogwoods. Tiffani sits on a cute swing, phone out. Sarah approaches, trying to make a friend, awkward.

TIFFANI

Look, I already have to spend my night at this dumb dinner. The last thing I want to do is "bond" with some girl I'll never see again.

SARAH

So that famed southern politeness thing *is* a façade.

PARKER (O.S.)

That's the public persona South.

PARKER BRASSFIELD (16, perceptive and wry in the best way) arrives, holding a foil-wrapped pecan pie.

PARKER (CONT'D)

Once you dig in you find the ugly. But it's not all bad. Parker Brassfield. Classmates with Princess Tiffani here. Thirsty for sweet tea and attention.

He holds out his hand, and Sarah shakes it.

SARAH

Sarah Haynes. Um, I'm from Brooklyn, I love sushi, and... I volunteer at the animal shelter once a week?

PARKER

We love a charitable queen.

CONTINUED:

And speaking of queens...

TIFFANI

What are you doing here, Parker?

PARKER

My mother heard the news. Sent me over right quick with a pecan pie.

TIFFANI

She wanted you to find out what you could about Aunt Mary-Elizabeth.

PARKER

What can I say? She's a legend. Rumor has it she released a bunch of crickets into the ballroom to get out of Cotillion once upon a time. Took the exterminators a week to get them all.

SARAH

Sounds accurate.

PARKER

You know her well?

SARAH

Very. My Dad doesn't exactly make time for "girl talk," but she's always been there for me. I can tell her everything.

This hits Tiffani, but she's snapped out of her reverie as Parker thrusts the pie at her, taking Sarah by the arm.

PARKER

Speaking of everything, before y'all have to go, spill the tea...

As Sarah grins at him, we PULL AWAY, and return to --

INT. LIVING ROOM - BODDIFORD MANSION - EVENING

INSIDE, Sally fusses over Cullen, who is now wearing a SPORTS COAT. He looks like a deer caught in the headlights, but he's a good sport. A **SERVER** offers them tea. Cullen takes a sip.

CULLEN

Wow! That's very... sweet.

CONTINUED:

SALLY

It *is* called sweet tea, darling.
 (to the Server)
 I'll have my usual.

On one side of the room, Reese and Tom game plan. Sally gestures at her husband to come over, but he SHAKES his head. He's busy. The Server hands Sally her drink and she takes a large GULP of it, setting down a nearly empty glass.

From the corner, M.E. stands alone with Johanna, watching.

M.E.

So who's this guy coming to dinner?

JOHANNA

Big-time distributor. They want to corner the European markets.

M.E.

Why?

JOHANNA

Why the sudden interest?

Both girls are suspicious. But the DOORBELL rings, ending the conversation.

INT. DINING ROOM - BODDIFORD MANSION - EVENING

Everyone is seated for dinner, and no expenses have been spared. The spread is extravagant. There are no less than eight utensils at each place setting, several platters of various (mostly fried) foods, and some beautiful cocktails.

Tom and Sally each sit at the heads of the table, Pierre to Tom's right. Beside him is M.E., Cullen, and Sarah. Reese sits to Tom's left, with Johanna and Tiffani beside them. An EMPTY SEAT remains between Tiffani and Sally.

REESE

So we're at the Carolina Cup, the bets are in, and I turn to Tom and say, "Any words of inspiration?" And you know what he says to me? ... "Don't screw it up!"

The Distributor and Tom ROAR with laughter. Cullen smiles at this scene, and M.E. rolls her eyes. We can see she wants to respond, but she clamps her mouth shut and downs her drink.

A mirror across the table, Sally does the same and motions at a **SERVER** for another.

CONTINUED:

SALLY

We're so glad you could make it tonight, Pierre.

PIERRE

You have a beautiful home.

SALLY

It's been in Tom's family since that late unpleasantness.

M.E.

She means the Civil War.

Sarah laughs into her napkin. Tom rushes on.

TOM

It was built before then. Each brick was laid by hand.

PIERRE

The level of craftsmanship is exquisite.

M.E.

Slavery's a bit of a sore subject here, Pierre. Kind of like your Vichy, for context.

Sally glares at M.E. Johanna shakes her head. Tom ignores it.

TOM

Do you like your drink, Sir?

PIERRE

It's exquisite. I have never been a bourbon man before, but I can appreciate a good drink.

(he takes a SIP)

Did you take care of your extra asset problem?

Johanna fidgets, can't help herself --

JOHANNA

Actually, Monsieur Manadou --

REESE

It'll be taken care of. Nothing can divert our focus. It's one of the reasons we've grown so quickly domestically. If that's your only hesitation...

CONTINUED: (2)

PIERRE

It's not. I am quite interested, but I wonder how it is you will distinguish yourselves from other bourbons in today's markets to gain footing overseas.

TOM

(practiced spiel --)
Like we were saying earlier, this is the spirit of the South, and the taste speaks for itself --

M.E. watches, interested, as this seems like a repeat of her ad sales pitch. Tom is losing Pierre's interest.

M.E.

You want to know why we're different than other bourbons? It's made in Charleston. Legend goes that Blackbeard blockaded the harbor looking for medicine, but I think he was just the first in line for the creation of our bourbon.

PIERRE

That seems a little... farfetched.

M.E.

More like inventive. I know marketing. You wanna succeed? You gotta stand out, cast a spell, and our bourbon has a story to tell.

Pierre studies her over his drink, intrigued. Johanna watches this dynamic, face unreadable.

PIERRE

You have a habit of saying whatever's on your mind, don't you?

CULLEN

(fond)
Always.

SALLY

(exhausted)
Always.

PIERRE (CONT'D)

(to Cullen)
And you two are married?

M.E.

Marriage was invented as a way to control women. No thanks.

CONTINUED: (3)

SALLY

Mary-Elizabeth, I hate to see you squander your youth this way.

CULLEN

We're both on the same page.

M.E. catches the LOOK that Sally shoots Tom.

TOM

So, Pierre, speaking of Charleston -

M.E.

Do you have something to say, Mom?

SALLY

I just never expected your boyfriend to be so... so...

M.E.

Black? Older? Outspoken?

SALLY

Liberal! Are you a Democrat now?

SARAH

(confused)

Wait, you guys aren't?

JOHANNA

Let's all just take a step back --

M.E.

Yes, Mother. I'm a liberal. And I'm still messy and brash and loud, and I like that about myself. But don't worry, I still know how to set a table, so there's that!

SALLY

I don't even know who you are anymore!

This stokes the flames of M.E.'s insecurities in a big way.

M.E.

That's the problem, Mom. You never did. And you never tried.

TOM

(losing his cool)

Mary-Elizabeth Boddiford! You will not speak to your mother that way.

CONTINUED: (4)

But something in M.E. will no longer stay quiet. She stands.

M.E.

At least I'm speaking to my mother, Dad, which is more than you can say tonight. I guess all that "family before anything else" stuff was crap.

Tom's eyes bug out as M.E. turns to Sally.

M.E. (CONT'D)

And Mom's already had more cocktails than everyone else combined. But no one's saying anything about that.

Johanna suddenly STANDS too, and everyone seems shocked.

M.E. (CONT'D)

If you have something to say to me, say it.

JOHANNA

That's a lot of talking come from someone who just got *fired*.

CULLEN

What? That's not true. M.E.?

But she doesn't look at him as she faces her sister.

JOHANNA

You come down here like a wrecking ball, and crash through everything we've built. For what? Because you still want attention from the very people you claim to be better than.

M.E.

The only attention I've ever craved was from the people I cared most about, and they're gone. Because you're all shells of who you were. So you can keep lying to yourselves about everything else, but don't pretend we're just one big happy family. That dream died with Stokes.

With that, we SMASH TO BLACK.

END OF ACT I

CONTINUED: (5)

ACT II

INT. EMPTY POOLHOUSE - UPPER KINGS COUNTRY CLUB - NIGHT - 2002

LAUGHTER surrounds us as we return to the three siblings on that fateful night. They are druuuuunk.

STOKES

I still can't get over when you jumped out a second floor window to escape etiquette camp.

M.E.

Yeah well, neither can Mom. But you wouldn't know about that since you're so obviously her favorite.

STOKES

You're Dad's favorite.

Johanna buries her nose in her glass.

M.E.

You're his "heir apparent." The business will be yours at 35. That's why I'm not waiting around to get what's mine. I'll find it somewhere else if I have to.

JOHANNA

Without us?

M.E. shrugs: Maybe.

STOKES

Well, Dad's not so thrilled with me right now, so let's not get crazy.

JOHANNA

Why?

STOKES

It's nothing.

It's definitely not nothing, but the girls don't push.

STOKES (CONT'D)

Pretty sure my 35th birthday will be the worst day of my life.

JOHANNA

Well, at least you can plan around your midlife crisis. What a luxury!

CONTINUED:

Stokes pushes Johanna, who falls into M.E. All three laugh.

STOKES

All right. We make a pact. We get together for a small celebration. Just us three. For my new title and mid-life crisis at 35.

(they drink)

Boddiford Bourbon and its reluctant leader, Stokes Boddiford.

M.E.

Screw that. If you don't wanna do it, don't do it. We're so programmed by stupid expectations. This place is the worst.

JOHANNA

That's not true. This is our heritage. People coming together in a show of support and pride. Like tonight. It's meant to help empower young women to take on the future.

M.E.

(yeah, no)

It's an archaic tradition meant to sell girls as brides.

Stokes can tell this is going downhill fast.

STOKES

Let's just agree it's a good occasion to drink, all right?

JOHANNA

It's a rite of passage.

M.E.

A self-proclaimed and self-delusional one. That party nearly suffocated me with elitism and overpriced perfume.

M.E. takes a CHUG, and Johanna spots a tiny MARK OF ASH on the underside of her sister's forearm. *From the sparklers.*

JOHANNA

(realizing --)

You set the sparklers off. You caused the fire.

CONTINUED: (2)

M.E.

That part was an accident.

Stokes stands up.

STOKES

Look, I came to tell you guys we're allowed back in. So let's all just calm down and -

JOHANNA

God, M.E. You think you can just do whatever you want without any regard to the rules, or other people's feelings. You'll *never* understand what it means to be a part of a community, something bigger than yourself. I can't believe I just wasted half my big night on you. You're so selfish.

M.E.

If tonight's about feeling *empowered*, I'm just expressing my opinion. Something you could stand to do more. You're just another cog in an obsolete machine.

JOHANNA

Must you always be such a bitch?

M.E.

You say it like it's a bad thing.

M.E. gets up and storms off. MATCH CUT of her face --

INT. THE RESTORATION HOTEL - M.E.'S HOTEL SUITE - MORNING

CLOSE ON M.E. as she STARTLES AWAKE. REVEAL -- that was a dream. Next to her, Cullen stirs at the sudden movement, but doesn't awaken. M.E. looks at him sadly, but gets out of bed without making a sound, leaving him alone as we CUT TO --

INT. BODDIFORD MANSION - KITCHEN - MORNING

CLOSE ON coffee being poured into a mug. PULL OUT to see the a gorgeous kitchen. Granite counters. A decorative barn door. And an **EMPLOYEE** pouring a generous amount of BOOZE into the same coffee mug.

INT. BODDIFORD MANSION - MASTER BEDROOM - MORNING

Sunlight streams through the curtains. Sally puts on make-up as an **EMPLOYEE** approaches with a steaming drink.

EMPLOYEE
Your coffee, Ma'am.

SALLY
Thank you.

The Employee leaves, and Sally sips her drink. It's strong. Nearby, Tom looks into a mirror, working a tie.

SALLY (CONT'D)
(tinge of sadness)
At least Mary-Elizabeth looks well.
Maybe... Maybe we should have
reached out before now.

TOM
It's better this way. She's happy,
and she's *safe*. Away from all this.

What does *that* mean? Sally lays a hand on her husband's arm. M.E.'s words are bothering her.

SALLY
Tom. What's going on?

TOM
The girls are meddling and frankly
we can't survive that right now.
(off her confusion)
Our cash-flow... We've expanded too
much, too quickly.

SALLY
(shocked)
Why didn't you tell me sooner?

TOM
I didn't want to worry you, love.
We've been through so much.

Both Sally and Tom glance at a portrait of their family.

SALLY
We're a team. We always have been.
Don't shut me out too. I want to
support you however I can...

CONTINUED:

TOM

I have it under control.

He kisses her and exits, leaving Sally alone with her drink.

INT. FERMENTATION WAREHOUSE - BODDIFORD BOURBON HQ - MORNING

Reese paces, speaking quietly into his phone - shady AF.

REESE

This is *not* what we agreed. I can't
keep this up. Tom's getting
suspicious --
(notices something --)
I'll call you back.

We see what Reese has zeroed in on: M.E., in the fermentation warehouse, talking to Carlos. She laughs prettily.

M.E.

And I still think I could take you
in arm wrestling.

CARLOS

Perhaps, but only if I let you.

They have a good rapport. But M.E. grows more serious.

M.E.

Carlos, is everything all right
around here?

Something shifts in Carlos' eyes, but before he can answer --

REESE

Come to wreak further havoc?

M.E.

Ah, Reese, ever the delightful
conversationalist. No. I'm looking
for my Dad.

REESE

He's golfing with Pierre. Trying to
do damage control.

M.E.

If that distributor doesn't care
for the extras, find another.
(off Reese's discomfort)
Unless you can't... Are y'all in
trouble?

CONTINUED:

Reese pulls M.E. away from Carlos, speaking quietly.

REESE

If you really care about your family, you'll leave before you blow anything else up.

M.E.

I'll leave. But don't think for one second that I don't realize something weird is going on.

M.E. walks back over to Carlos, and Reese watches her go.

INT. THE RESTORATION HOTEL - M.E.'S HOTEL SUITE - MORNING

Cullen wakes up, reaches over... And opens his eyes upon realizing he's alone in bed. He looks around, FROWNS.

We TIME CUT TO -- Cullen, now dressed and reading the newspaper. The article: "Domestic violence survivor sentenced to 30 years in prison." We clock - this hits him hard.

CULLEN

Almost ready in there?

IN THE ADJOINING ROOM, Sarah gets dressed when a sudden FACEBOOK MESSAGE pings on her phone - it's from Parker: "Want a real taste of the South? Meet me here." It includes a location pin. She grins. As she walks into --

THE MAIN ROOM, Cullen pockets the article as she enters.

SARAH

Actually, Dad, there were some things I wanted to check out. Maybe we could meet up later?

He's a little hurt, but hides it well.

CULLEN

Where do you plan to go?

SARAH

Shopping... Uh, with Tiffani.

CULLEN

Oh. I just thought maybe we'd spend a little time together.

CONTINUED:

SARAH
 (uncomfortable)
 Dad, chill. I won't be back too
 late. We can get dinner later.

CULLEN
 I'd like that.

He smiles, and she tries to muster a grin of her own.

EXT. CHARLESTON - VARIOUS - DAY

M.E. drives by various old haunts, nostalgic. She takes in the gorgeous sights of the harbor, the beautiful oaks dripping with Spanish moss, the quaint cobblestone streets.

EXT. CAFE - KINGS STREET - DAY

Finally, the bustling and beautiful trolley-lined Kings Street. M.E. approaches a sidewalk cafe and sits across from -
 - **KEVIN LU** (30s, Asian American, intelligent and curious).

M.E.
 Kevin Lu?

KEVIN
 The very same. So nice to meet *the*
 Mary-Elizabeth Boddiford.

M.E.
 So my reputation precedes me?

KEVIN
 That, and it's my job to know.
 (down to business)
 Your message intrigued me. If I do
 this, I'm going to need credentials
 for your family's distillery.

M.E.
 I can get you those. No problem.

She pulls a LETTER out of her purse and hands it to him.

KEVIN
 I'm not cheap. But I assume you
 know that.

M.E NODS. Kevin stands, offers his hand.

KEVIN (CONT'D)
 Then let's do this.

CONTINUED:

They shake, and whatever this is, it's a done deal. As M.E. stands and turns around, she spots -- JOHANNA, walking purposefully through town. Curious, M.E. follows.

EXT. HUGE HOUSE - UPPER KINGS NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

Sarah gets out of a Lyft and stares at a nice gated house. Though not as big as the Boddiford mansion, it's still stately AF, and the neighborhood is highly desirable.

PARKER (O.S.)
There she is.

She turns to see Parker approaching. He grabs her arm.

PARKER (CONT'D)
Ready to see some real Southern hospitality?

Sarah nods, excited.

EXT. BACK YARD - HUGE HOUSE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Parker leads Sarah around back, where we see -- TIFFANI, standing with her posse of popular girls - **BETSY BRYAN**, **HOLLAND**, and **MARY KATHERINE** (all three 15 years old and, like guac, they're extra). None look thrilled at the new arrival.

PARKER
Sarah, this is Betsy Bryan, Holland, and Mary Katherine.

TIFFANI
Why are you here?

SARAH
Parker invited me. Said he could convince me that this place isn't as bad as I think.

HOLLAND
(offended)
Sorry, this party is invite-only.

GABE (O.S.)
And the host dishes out invites.

Meet **GABE PIERCE** (16, the boy everyone has a crush on) - apparent hero du jour and host of said party. Even Sarah seems a little starry-eyed as he hands her a red solo cup.

GABE (CONT'D)
Not enjoying your trip? I'm Gabe.

CONTINUED:

SARAH

Sarah. So far the food is too rich
and so are the people.

GABE

Maybe I can change your mind.

The opening notes of "CAROLINA GIRLS" by Chairman of the Board play, and some teens begin shag-dancing. Gabe holds out his hand to Sarah, but she declines.

SARAH

Oh no. I can't dance... like that.

GABE

Good thing I can show you.

He leads her to the dance floor, sweeps her off her feet. Off her GRIN, and the MUSIC SWELLS --

INT. EMPTY SHOP - KINGS STREET - DAY

CLOSE ON another Carolina girl, Johanna, as she looks around an empty shop. She finds a clean desk in the corner, and from her purse we see her pull out - an iPad, a textbook, some typed notes. She organizes them - very type-A.

M.E. (O.S.)

All right. I'll bite.

Johanna turns to see M.E.

JOHANNA

What are you doing here?

M.E.

Being in the wrong place at the
right time is still one of my
quirks. So... what is all this?

JOHANNA

I've been secretly getting my
M.B.A. So I can finally step up.

M.E. can't help her surprise as Jo spreads out materials.

JOHANNA (CONT'D)

Last year before Mom's 60th, I was
looking through the attic, trying
to find one of those scrapbooks
we'd made her when we were younger,
and I stumbled across one of my
goal journals from high school.

CONTINUED:

M.E.

Your diary.
 (off Jo's LOOK)
 Okay, I'll stop. Go on. Please.

JOHANNA

Nobody tells you growing up that life happens so fast, and so quietly. How settling disguises itself as the practical choice. I did everything right. Everything I was supposed to. But reading that... I guess I realized that in trying not to give up on my perfect life, I gave up on myself.

(her eyes SHINE)

So I decided to fix it. I looked into getting my MBA at College of Charleston. I tried to take on a more active role in the company. And then we acquired that mixers side business during a recent deal. I thought, this is it. My voice. My ideas. I can be a part of this.

M.E.

Why didn't you call me? If you needed my vote that much.

JOHANNA

We hadn't talked in so long... I didn't know you were keeping tabs.

M.E.

(re: that dinner)
 Guess I wasn't the only one.

JOHANNA

I'm sorry I told them you got fired. I worried that... Well, it's nothing.

M.E.

How did you even know about that?

Johanna GRINS, proud, and M.E. looks intrigued.

JOHANNA

I have my sources. It's thanks to them the Forbes profile exists. My idea, my contacts.

(her smiles falls)

And it didn't even mention me...

(MORE)

CONTINUED: (2)

JOHANNA (CONT'D)

You know, even if Mom and Dad don't talk to you, they respect you.

M.E.

If they can't see your worth, screw them. Don't let anyone stop you.

A HUGE MOMENT for these two, but Johanna's passion deflates.

JOHANNA

Easy for you to say.

M.E.

It's never been easy. You think I *liked* being a "mess?" An "embarrassment?" But I wasn't gonna let them hold me back. Sometimes you have to bet on yourself, especially if no one else will.

JOHANNA

What good is success if you don't have the people you care about on your side? Family is family. I need their support.

ON M.E. as she considers this...

INT. ACLU OF SC OFFICES - HALLS - DAY

Cullen follows **CHANTEL GRIFFIN** (late 30s, her presence and poise command your attention) through the halls of the ACLU.

CULLEN

We just wrapped a similar case in Queens. Not sure what you've heard -

They approach an office with a name plate: Chantel Griffin, Executive Director of the ACLU of SC. As they step inside --

INT. ACLU OF SC OFFICES - CHANTEL'S OFFICE - DAY

It's a bright office. News clippings of deeds well-done and cases hard-won adorn the walls.

CHANTEL

We get calls here and there. They neglected to mention this ambush. I didn't realize the New York office was making house calls now.

She's defensive, but he responds with the calm of a Dad used to dealing with much worse: the moods of a teenage daughter.

CONTINUED:

CULLEN

The things I'll do for a vacation day...

His easygoing nature rubs off and she relaxes. She smiles, and it's contagious. There's a kind of dangerous chemistry here. Two formidable people sharing a mutual attraction.

She stands, searching her FILE CABINET. He suddenly remembers the newspaper ARTICLE from this morning, pulls it out.

CULLEN (CONT'D)

Oh, I flagged this earlier. Thought it sounded like a case for us.

CHANTEL

Yeah, saw that. I plan to help. When we're able to.

CULLEN

(confused)
She needs help now.

CHANTEL

Look. We're understaffed, and our case load is at an all-time high. Hate groups. Unlawful city ordinances. And we lose more lawyers than we keep. But despite that, we keep fighting.

As she finds a FILE, we go CLOSE ON Cullen, realizing that the Boddiford family aren't the only ones hiding problems...

EXT. BACK YARD - HUGE HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

CLOSE ON SARAH, exalted as she breaks away from the dance floor, unable to stop grinning as Gabe winks at her.

As her breathing slows, she looks around, doesn't recognize anyone. She sifts through the crowd of kids, passing a few sniffing ADDERALL and other PRESCRIPTION MEDS and skirts around them until she finds -- Parker drinking with **ALBERTO MORENO** (16, Latino, athletic and aloof). She approaches them.

SARAH

Okay. This is fun. I begrudgingly admit I judged you private school kids a little too quickly.

PARKER

So brave. Thank you for sharing your story.

CONTINUED:

She shoves him playfully before she notices Alberto.

PARKER (CONT'D)

Oh, how rude of me. I've only had one venti cold brew today and I'm clearly off my game. Sarah, this is Alberto. Alberto, Sarah.

(loud whispering)

She came to town with the infamous Mary-Elizabeth Boddiford.

ALBERTO

Ah. Boddiford-adjacent. They're basically southern royalty. My grandfather has worked at the distillery for forever. Guess that makes me Boddiford-adjacent too.

SARAH

Yes. They seem... well-intentioned but offensive. And very dramatic.

ALBERTO

Welcome to the South.

Sarah smiles at him. There's something *cool* about him that makes her want to know more. But she **STARTLES** as --

SARAH

Shoot! What time is it?

Sarah hurriedly finds her purse, checks the time: 4:53 PM. She tries to call a Lyft, but...

SARAH (CONT'D)

Crap. There's no reception here.

ALBERTO

It'll be better in the house.

SARAH

(shy smile --)

It was nice meeting you.

He **GRINS** as she leaves. From the dance floor, Gabe has seen this whole thing, **GLARES** at Alberto. Parker looks between the two teen boys. He rolls his eyes at the entire interaction.

PARKER

Straight people are wild.

INT. HUGE HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON - CONTINUOUS

Sarah walks around the house, looking for a better signal.

SARAH

Come on... Come on... Yes.

As she finally finds one, about to order a Lyft, she rounds a corner and sees -- Tiffani, MAKING OUT with a **FEMALE CLASSMATE**. Suddenly, the party's calm is interrupted by --

TEEN (O.S.)

Cops! Everyone run!

Tiffani spins, sees Sarah looking straight at her. Tiffani darts away, and Sarah follows, heart POUNDING. Out the door --

OUTSIDE, AROUND THE SIDE OF THE HOUSE, Sarah pursues, towards a FENCE. But suddenly, they're apprehended by two **COPS**.

COP #1

You two!

They're much ROUGHER with Sarah, pinning her hands and making her kneel on the ground. Tiffani and Sarah lock eyes: Shit.

INT. EMPTY SHOP - KINGS STREET - LATE AFTERNOON

Some time has passed. Johanna and M.E. sit together against a wall, an easy contentment hanging in the air.

M.E.

I missed *this*. It just feels like the old you is back.

JOHANNA

I don't know when I lost her. But you're here, it won't happen again.

M.E. feels guilty, and it shows.

M.E.

You know, it takes a certain kind of strength to stick it out. I didn't have that, I guess.

JOHANNA

But you've always had self-confidence. And that's everything.

It's a sweet moment. M.E. can't help a feeling of contentment bubbling up, finally excited to be back. She hesitates, but --

CONTINUED:

M.E.

I have to tell you something. It's about Stokes...

It's amazing how quickly Johanna's walls slam up.

JOHANNA

I don't want to talk about him. No sense dragging up a painful memory.

M.E.

It's important. That night -

JOHANNA

No! We're not talking about this. Not now. Not ever. He's gone. And it's my fault.

But Johanna's phone BINGS with a TEXT from Reese: "Dinner tonight with Distributor. Fried Chicken Night. 8 PM." Both women see it.

JOHANNA (CONT'D)

Never mind. We should go.

She stands to leave, effectively ending the discussion.

EXT. EMPTY SHOP - KINGS STREET - EARLY EVENING

M.E. bumps into Johanna, who's stopped dead in her tracks.

M.E.

Johanna -

LAUREN (O.S.)

Johanna!

M.E. sees they're not alone. FIND **LAUREN PEDDRICK HOWE** (now 36, now married, still a bitch), her husband **PAT HOWE** (now 37, still entitled), and several other **PEERS**.

PAT

Hey Johanna.

Pat touches Johanna's elbow, and M.E. notices her sister FLINCH AWAY. Every fiber of Johanna's being seems ON EDGE.

LAUREN

So it's true. Charleston's most notorious disaster has made her incendiary return.

We see this hits M.E., but she covers and smiles. Instead, M.E. pulls a BOTTLE OF BOURBON and LIGHTER out of her purse. Everyone watches, riveted by her every move as she takes a SWIG, holds out the lighter, turns it on...

CONTINUED:

And SPITS BOURBON into it, creating a MINI FIREBALL. Many of the ladies SCREAM. Lauren falls back flat on her ass. M.E. looks down at her.

M.E.

Incendiary enough for you?

LAUREN

You're a public menace!

M.E. shrugs as Johanna steers her away, still avoiding Pat.

JOHANNA

I am so sorry. Please excuse her.

M.E.

Stop. Johanna. Stop!

They do. Finally. They're alone now.

M.E. (CONT'D)

You didn't even try to defend me.

JOHANNA

You were embarrassing me! You can't go through life fighting everyone. Why can't you just be normal?

The moment stretches. It's awkward incarnate.

JOHANNA (CONT'D)

M.E., I didn't -

M.E.

Wow. I actually thought you'd changed. This whole place is stuck in the past, and so are you. If you really want more, then *leave*. Otherwise you'll never be anything other than a boring Country Club mom in a failing marriage.

JOHANNA

Not all of us run away from our problems. Maybe it's best that we go back to not speaking.

M.E.

Fine by me.

Off this impasse, the rift between them wider than ever...

END OF ACT II

CONTINUED: (2)

ACT III

INT. THE RESTORATION HOTEL - LOBBY - EVENING

M.E. waltzes through the lobby when she notices TOM in the waiting area, staff flitting about him. He waves them off.

M.E.

Come to see me off, Daddy?

But Tom's not in the mood to pretend all is well.

TOM

Reese tells me you stopped by.

M.E.

I did.

(then, worried --)

What's going on? Why these hasty business deals? Are you in trouble?

TOM

(defensive)

If you want to disappear for eleven years, that's your business. Boddiford Bourbon is *not*. We don't need unnecessary assets, and we don't need anyone stirring the pot.

M.E.

"Unnecessary assets." Is that how you see me?

TOM

I look at you and realize I failed you as a parent. I thought we raised you better.

(a BEAT, then --)

You should return to New York.

This stings.

M.E.

You know, I used to look up to you, more than anyone. The Dad I remember banished monsters in the closet, taught me to swing dance, and hunt. He was kind, and fun.

(spine of steel)

Guess he lost himself somewhere along the way, but I learned a lot from *that* man.

(MORE)

CONTINUED:

M.E. (CONT'D)

I don't ask permission, and I don't apologize. And I'm not about to start now.

She turns heel, leaving two broken hearts in her wake.

INT. CHARLESTON PRECINCT - EVENING

It's quiet, not a lot going on. Tiffani and Sarah sit in the corner, quiet and sullen. Sarah in handcuffs. Cop #1 - let's call him **HANK** (40s, twitchy) - looks them over.

HANK

One of them's Reese Mayhall's daughter.

Cop #2 - **BRIAN** (50s, more seasoned, more ignorant) - nods.

HANK (CONT'D)

Maybe we should let her go.

BRIAN

She claims they're together.

Sarah overhears this, looks to Tiffani, who ignores her. Sarah speaks quietly.

SARAH

Hey. Back at the house --

TIFFANI

You didn't see anything.

Before Sarah can respond, JOHANNA enters. All eyes on her.

JOHANNA

I got a call about my daughter.

BRIAN

Mrs. Mayhall. Always a pleasure. Yes, your girl is fine to go. Might want to talk to her about the kind of crowd she's running with.

Johanna notices SARAH, and the CUFFS.

BRIAN (CONT'D)

Kids never know bad influences when they see them.

JOHANNA

Sarah's in town with my sister. Did you call her too?

CONTINUED:

For the first time, Brian hesitates. Hank twitches nervously.

BRIAN

We found illegal substances. Seems a little coincidental that those should show up the same time -

This insinuation is too much for Johanna. Suddenly M.E.'s words don't seem so far-fetched. She's *pissed*.

JOHANNA

You know, I've always been good at sweeping things under the rug. It was something I picked up early on. I was always afraid of making a mess, of what people would say. But I'm realizing that this fear isn't real. It kills hope. It kills growth. It keeps us stuck in the past. An ugly and outdated past.

Johanna unleashes a side of her that's been laying dormant for too long: Johanna Boddiford Mayhall, Queen in this town.

JOHANNA (CONT'D)

I'm done sweeping. Whatever you *found*, I can assure you neither of these girls had anything to do with it. I will be taking them *both* home with me. And if you try to stop me, well. I'll make such a mess that no one will be able to sweep it under the rug. And I won't be the one who's afraid then.

Hank and Brian share a LOOK, and Johanna knows she's won.

INT. JOHANNA'S CAR - EVENING - MOMENTS LATER

Blurring, beautiful Charleston streets. Sarah looks out the window from the back of Johanna's car. Tiffani sits shotgun.

JOHANNA

Sarah...
(she hesitates, then --)
I'm sorry for... what they implied.

Sarah just nods. Tiffani says nothing.

JOHANNA (CONT'D)

Some people are stuck in old ways, or don't feel comfortable standing up for what's right.

CONTINUED:

SARAH

You did.

JOHANNA

This once. If I were someone else, someone stronger, I'd have laid into them harder so they'd never act like that again.

SARAH

Like M.E.

JOHANNA

Yes. Like M.E. She was never afraid to take a stand. Expectations and consequences be damned.

Johanna gives a fond laugh, tinged with admiration. But ensuing the silence is sobering as she pulls up to the hotel.

JOHANNA (CONT'D)

And don't worry. This can be our little secret.

Sarah gives a half-smile, and opens the car door.

TIFFANI

That's what our family does best.

Sarah sees the bitterness on Tiffani's face, and how Johanna is too absorbed in her own thoughts. She shuts the car door.

INT. THE RESTORATION HOTEL - M.E.'S HOTEL SUITE - EVENING

Cullen paces around the room, speaking into his cell.

CULLEN

Sarah. Call me back. I'm *worried*.

He hangs up as the DOOR OPENS, revealing -- M.E. She immediately notices his concern.

M.E.

What's wrong?

CULLEN

Sarah. She hasn't been answering her phone, and I haven't seen her all day...

She approaches to hug him, but he steps back.

CONTINUED:

CULLEN (CONT'D)

And she wasn't the only one.

M.E.

I... I'm sorry, okay? I'm not very good at apologizing, but I was embarrassed.

CULLEN

We're adults. We're *us*. We don't just walk out when it gets hard. And we don't keep secrets. Why didn't you tell me about your job?

M.E.

I know, it's just... Look, when I was 17, my mother sat me down. Told me if I kept acting like such a deviant, I'd never get a man. I pointed out, if I hide who I am, what happens when I meet someone I wanna settle down with, and then decide to be myself? I won't be the girl he fell for. Mom said she just wanted me to be happy. But she couldn't wrap her head around the idea that being myself is the only way to do that. Instead, she tried constantly to change me, *fix* me. And I guess a small part of me still worries she's right. There's so much you don't know about me.

CULLEN

Then you tell me. And I'll listen. I didn't even know you had a brother, M.E.

M.E.

You can take the girl out of the South, but you can't take the South out of the girl. I haven't talked about Stokes in a long time. None of us have, but when he died... It's like he took a piece of all of us with him.

(embarrassed --)

This place brings out the worst in me. It makes me angry, like I need to *fight*. And it makes me sad, because I miss it. And I hate that. And last night... That wasn't me. Not anymore.

CONTINUED: (2)

CULLEN

I know who you are. And you know who I am. I would never judge you for that. Just, tell me the truth.

She nods. Just then, the door CLICKS as a key works, and Sarah enters. Cullen stands as she steps in. And he's *mad*.

CULLEN (CONT'D)

Where have you *been*? Do you know how worried I've been?

SARAH

I'm sorry --

SARAH

God! You won't even give me a chance to explain myself.

CULLEN

You didn't even *think* to check in!

SARAH

And where do you think I learned *that* from?

Sarah storms into the adjoining room and SLAMS the door.

IN SARAH'S ADJOINING ROOM, M.E. enters. Sarah basically *throws* her things into her suitcase, still agitated.

M.E.

So. What happened?

SARAH

I got invited to a party, and it... well, it was awesome. But then the cops came, and they...

Sarah pauses, tearing up. It finally hits her, and she looks at her wrists. She can see the faint outline of the cuffs.

M.E.

Shhh. It's all right. It's done now. We're going home.

SARAH

I didn't even want to come down here in the first place.

M.E.

This is my fault. I was looking for something that was never here. And you got hurt, and I'm sorry. But don't take it out on your Dad. He cares about you so much.

CONTINUED: (3)

SARAH

All we ever do is fight.

M.E.

I think we fight with those closest to us because we know they'll accept us no matter what.

SARAH

Like you and Johanna?

M.E. pauses, thinking about that.

SARAH (CONT'D)

She got me and Tiffani. She went off on the cops. She told me she wished she were stronger, like you.

CLOSE ON M.E., truly affected by these words...

BACK IN CULLEN'S ROOM, M.E. enters, grabbing her purse.

M.E.

I'm so sorry, but there's something I have to do.

CULLEN

What? Wait, M.E. --

But she's already out the door. CUT TO:

INT. LARGE DINING ROOM - UPPER KINGS COUNTRY CLUB - NIGHT

We're back in Charleston's most prestigious Country Club, but no, it's not a flashback. It's fried chicken night - the place to see and be seen - and everyone is here for dinner.

PAN past the band, past the buffet and circular tables where various families gather, to the CENTER of the room, where Tom, Sally, Reese, and Johanna eat with Pierre.

TOM

Everyone wants in on bourbon now, and who can you trust more than a family-owned and grown company?

PIERRE

I understand, but my concerns remain. Unfortunately, I think -

He stops as WHISPERS ripple through the room. Everyone turns to find the cause, revealing -- M.E. at the entrance.

CONTINUED:

She strides through the room, giving no fucks about the whispers, pulls a chair from another table, and sits down.

M.E.

Hello everyone. Sorry I'm late.

Reese tries to get her to stand up and move away.

REESE

Mary-Elizabeth, can we speak -

M.E.

We can't, Reese, but I will.

(to Pierre)

Sir. Pierre. I've been in New York for *years*, and while I love it, there's something about Charleston that you won't find anywhere else. And the same goes for our Bourbon.

She looks around the table, as everyone watches. Hell, everyone in the entire place is watching, spellbound.

M.E. (CONT'D)

We're better than our domestic rivals. That's a fact, and it's reason number one to work with us. Here's reason two: Our business is an *institution*, transcending time and place. We'll market the sensuous *pull* of Charleston. The idea that this bourbon is for everyone. It's about relationships. It's about family. And nothing comforts people like family. That's a universal fact. Right, Johanna?

Everyone watches in shock as M.E. passes the pitch. But with an encouraging look from M.E., Johanna doesn't miss a beat.

JOHANNA

Yes. And while we value tradition, we can also evolve to fit a changing market. This is why we'll succeed where others have failed. You've noticed we recently acquired a leftover mixers business. You worry we'll lose focus on our core product. Let me allay those fears. Yes, it's small, and it's not what we're known for, but one of the reasons we're so successful is that we don't overlook potential.

CONTINUED: (2)

She looks at Tom and then Reese - slowly, and pointedly.

JOHANNA (CONT'D)

Sometimes you have to break the surface to see the truth, even if it creates waves. My great-grandfather saw something in this Charleston aquifer no one else did. Well, we see something in this. Something that will add to our product, not detract from it.

M.E.

Listen, Pierre. We're the real deal. A dash of imagination. A hint of practicality. And a winning product. The perfect combo. It's just basic mixology. So, you in?

Pierre is blown away, and he's not the only one. Sally seems shocked, and Reese stews in jealousy. Tom is unreadable.

PIERRE

You two are really something.

M.E.

Well, you know what they say about Carolina Girls. Sweeter than candy, hotter than heat.

PIERRE

I think I'm going to enjoy working with you both.

REESE

Mary-Elizabeth lives in New York.

Johanna looks at M.E., asking that silent question. And M.E. knows what she needs to do.

M.E.

Well, as it happens, I'm recently on the job hunt. Looks like I'm coming home.

Pierre raises his glass. M.E. smiles, downs the rest of Reese's drink, and shakes hands with Pierre. Over his shoulder, she meets Tom's eyes. Game on. And Tom can't help but smile.

END OF ACT III

CONTINUED: (3)

ACT IV

INT. LARGE DINING ROOM - UPPER KINGS COUNTRY CLUB - NIGHT

Minutes have passed. M.E. still laughs with Pierre. Tom examines his youngest daughter, torn between his feelings. Pride. Confusion. Worry. But as the band starts playing "Chicken Fried" by Zac Brown Band, Tom shakes out of it and turns to Pierre.

TOM

Please excuse me for a moment, Sir.
They're playing our song.

With that, he extends his hand to his surprised wife. But Sally's shock morphs into a beaming smile as she puts down her drink, and her husband sweeps her onto the dance floor.

M.E.

On that note, I really must excuse myself. Thank you for tonight, Sir.

PIERRE

It was my pleasure.

As M.E. readies to exit, Reese intercepts her privately.

REESE

I don't know what you're trying to prove here, but Johanna doesn't need a bad influence from the family's *outcast*.

M.E.

You don't *own* her, Reese. It's 2018.

REESE

(taken aback by this)

I care about her. Johanna needs a strong man --

M.E.

That's the thing about strong women. We don't need a strong man. We only need ourselves. And the right man doesn't fear that. He celebrates it.

She pulls away, smiling, and walks out. From the table, Johanna stands too. Reese grabs her wrist as he returns. He leans in close.

CONTINUED:

REESE

Why do you really think she's here?
She's always been your Dad's
favorite. She's going to steal the
spotlight, take away what we've
worked for. Just like always.

Johanna HESITATES and we see - this WORRIES HER. But she
still pulls away, leaving him behind to follow her sister. As
she nears the exit, we find Lauren, standing with another
COUNTRY CLUB MOM.

LAUREN

Damage control duty again, Johanna?
Seems like your rude sister will
never grow out of causing scenes.

Johanna smiles. Is she going to apologize again?

JOHANNA

(sweet as candyfloss)
At least she grew out of being a
petty bitch. So Lauren, dear,
kindly shut the f*** up.

She leaves them slack jawed as she follows M.E. outside.

EXT. UPPER KINGS COUNTRY CLUB - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

M.E. walks out, hands shaking, but a smile on her face.

JOHANNA (O.S.)

Wait!

Johanna catches up, catching her breath. She looks thrilled.

JOHANNA (CONT'D)

After what I did, what I said...
Why'd you come back?

Unexpectedly, M.E. gives her older sister a hug.

M.E.

You were right. About family. And
about me. I thought I'd be past all
this, but I didn't realize until I
came down here. I missed you. And
Mom, and Dad. And I'm done running.
(a beat, then, humorous -)
But I haven't changed too much, so
don't expect me to remember all
those etiquette lessons.

CONTINUED:

JOHANNA

Just so long as you know that when someone asks for the salt, you also send the pepper.

They share a LAUGH - so very fond of one another.

M.E.

You have good ideas, Jo. It's time you make them stop underestimating you, and it might require breaking a few rules. But you're worth it. And I'll be right here when you prove it.

JOHANNA

Well, you have to say that. You're my little sister.

M.E.

(eyes glittering)

I only say what I mean. You know that.

A wise woman once asked, *who run the world?* and promptly answered, "Girls," and this duo is the proof.

INT. THE RESTORATION HOTEL - M.E.'S HOTEL SUITE - NIGHT

Exhausted, M.E. walks into her hotel room. Her fatigue melts into surprise and affection as she sees Cullen, still here.

M.E.

You stayed.

CULLEN

We weren't leaving without you.

M.E.

I'm not going back to New York. I have to stay, see what's happening with my Dad and help Johanna. I can't abandon her again.

CULLEN

We'll make this work. I love you.
We love you.

We finally see a CRACK in M.E.'s tough disposition as she breaks down, crying. Cullen is both surprised and worried.

CULLEN (CONT'D)

What's wrong??

CONTINUED:

M.E.

I said I'd tell you the truth. I'm not just here for my family's business, or even for my sister.

She sits beside Cullen, gathering herself as best she can.

M.E. (CONT'D)

Stokes would've turned 35 a month ago. He would have been named my father's successor, and the business would have passed to him.

POPFLASH: The three Boddiford siblings, toasting and making Stokes' "mid-life crisis" pact.

M.E. (CONT'D)

The day came and went, and it was like it didn't even matter, but I suddenly felt like... Like I had to do *something*. That night's events have always felt off.

And SUDDENLY - like a series of flashbulbs going off - we get a quick succession of POPFLASHES to:

- that night in 2002 from M.E.'s POV: Stokes and Tom, yelling at each other... Johanna stumbling into the ballroom, fixing her dress, trying to grab her brother... Stokes trying to talk to Sally, who is focused on M.E.... Stokes heatedly rushing outside, fury evident in his every motion... M.E. slapping Stokes, tears in her eyes...

And we SLAM BACK into the present with M.E. and Cullen.

M.E. (CONT'D)

You know, I've spent *years* thinking it was my fault. I pushed alcohol on him that night. We got into this *huge* fight... And he took my Dad's prized Rolls Royce and left Jo's deb ball and...

(eyes burning --)

No one knew the exact details, but we never talked about it. And it was never the same afterwards.

And that was the unseen crack that's been festering in this family ever since. As she talks we INTERCUT --

IN THE BODDIFORD MANSION, Tom and Sally at home, Sally drinking a nightcap as Tom looks over some business forms. Tom glances up to the family portrait on the wall...

CONTINUED: (2)

M.E. (V.O.)

It was like everyone just retreated into themselves.

IN JOHANNA'S HOUSE, Johanna says good night to Tiffani, and marches straight past Reese and into their bedroom. Already we can see the RIPPLE EFFECTS of M.E.'s return...

M.E. (V.O.)

Johanna. She was like a different person after that night. It was like... this spark went out.

AND BACK IN THE HOTEL SUITE, M.E. looks *drained*.

M.E.

And I left and never looked back. But then I was in my office, prepping for a meeting, and I looked at the date. It was Stokes' birthday. And I realized I needed to stop hiding from the past. I made some calls down here, but all of the records surrounding that night have been *sealed*. Two days later, I received a letter postmarked from Charleston. But no one could tell me exactly who had sent it. I couldn't stop thinking about what it said. So I hired a P.I. here to look into it.

POPFLASH: M.E. handing Kevin Lu the letter.

In the present, Cullen leans in.

CULLEN

What did the message say?

M.E.

It said that Stokes' death was no accident. He was murdered that night, and someone in my family was to blame.

And with that bomb, we --

SMASH TO BLACK.

END OF PILOT