

Rules for  
the Southern  
Rulebreaker

*Misssteps and Lessons Learned*



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SHE WRITES PRESS

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Published 2019

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-63152-858-3

ISBN: 978-1-63152-859-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020901197

For information, address:

She Writes Press

1569 Solano Ave #546

Berkeley, CA 94707

She Writes Press is a division of SparkPoint Studio, LLC.

Interior design by Tabitha Lahr

Illustrations by Alli Arnold

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# 1. Always Wear Sensible Shoes



Before I even crossed the finish line of the long maze of metal detectors, my feet were throbbing. As I ascended the stairs to the main floor of the White House, I clutched the railing with both hands to pull myself up. Every step created more intense pain. Twenty minutes into the media holiday party, I had to lean against a wall of the East Room, shifting my weight from one miserable foot to the other. Surrounded by high-profile media figures, centuries-old portraits of George and Martha Washington, and silver tureens erupting with shrimp and snow crab, all I could do was constantly scan the dozen or so little gold tables praying I'd find a place where I could take a load off.

My black satin shoes were beautiful, but the heels were four-inch shards of glass, the intricate organza ruffle crossing my foot: barbed wire. A friend insisted I borrow them because they went so well with the black sweater with pleated organza sleeves I'd bought for the big night. I tried the ensemble on at her house

the day before I left for Washington, D.C., and though it was the perfect pairing, I was wary of the high elevation.

“Just take some Advil right before you go to the party. That’s what I always do,” Stephanie advised me. At the time I didn’t think of this as drugging oneself in the name of fashion. I only saw sheer genius.

The Advil, however, didn’t do the trick. An epidural could not have lessened the severe pain from my toes to my spine as I hobbled through the most elegant night of my life.

I couldn’t carry a drink, much less a conversation, because I needed complete focus and free hands for balance to stand upright. I didn’t get to try any of Dolly Madison’s orange pound cake or the silver dollar biscuits pricked with fork tines and filled with Virginia ham. Maternal instincts did briefly overcome the pain, and I managed to collect a stack of sugar cookies iced to look like First Dog Bo, complete with holly leaves on his red collar. I wrapped them in a napkin and stuffed them in my pocketbook to take home to my kids.

I was at the White House Media Christmas Party with Adam, my husband at the time, who was the political editor for the *Tampa Bay Times*.

About an hour into the evening, it was our allotted time to go to the Map Room and get a picture taken with the president and first lady. As we neared the front of the line a white-gloved Marine instructed: “You may call him Mr. President, and her, Mrs. Obama.”

“Hello, Mr. President,” I said, and then turned to the first lady and added: “Merry Christmas, Michelle.” Oh yeah. I went there. I went right there. I mean, was I really expected to retain simple etiquette instructions for a whole thirty seconds? I acted like we were the oldest of friends getting together for the Secret Santa gift swap at the office. What’s up, Shelly? Hey FLOTUS, have you been naughty or nice?

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out.

“Oh, it’s fine,” she said as the photographer positioned my new bestie Michelle on the far left, then Adam, then me, then the president. Just as we smiled for our big moment, my left foot twisted, my knee gave way, I fell against the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States then headed backward.

“Don’t worry. I got you,” Barack Obama said as he hoisted me back up.

“I should not have worn these shoes,” I managed to say. “They’re a mile high. I borrowed them.”

He leaned his tall frame over and gazed down at my feet.

“Oh, those are great shoes,” he said, reassuringly.

“I’m glad you wore them,” added the leader of the free world who sometimes doubled as my stylist.

Adam had planned to ask Obama a quick question during our photo op about the infamous hug the president shared with Florida’s former governor Charlie Crist when he was visiting the Sunshine State to dole out stimulus money. Crist, who was a Republican at the time of the hug, ran against Marco Rubio for Senate and lost in the primary. He switched parties to become an Independent and lost again in the general election. His hug with Obama was used against him in ads and posters to symbolize a lack of conservative GOP values.

I had caused such a commotion with the near fall that Adam just smiled for the camera and kept moving without asking the question.

“Oh, yeah,” I said, once I was steady on my feet. “Adam wanted to ask you if you feel bad about the hug with Charlie Crist.”

“Adam,” he called after my red-faced husband. “I do feel bad. I’m sorry he lost, because he’s a great guy.”

Adam would recount the incident later, saying the Secret Service then pulled out their Tasers to get me out of the Map Room. We returned to the East Room and I had the best story of the night to share with fellow reporters. They may have been regulars in the White House Press Corps, but had President Obama

ever complimented their shoes? Had he ever saved their life? As we left the White House, I took off my heels and carried them as I walked barefooted into the frigid D.C. night telling my story yet again to someone else who heard I'd fallen on the president.

Four years later, we were somehow invited back for another Obama holiday party. I wore sensible shoes with a ruby red dress. I called the first lady Mrs. Obama.

"Oh, what a nice, festive dress," the president commented as we posed for our photo. After the camera clicked, I started to ask him a question, but he'd already turned left to greet the next guest.



