



Getaway Girl

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CHAPTER ONE

Addison

Scandal Erupts as Captain Du Pont Left in the Lurch at Church

—*Charleston Courier*

WHEN I WOKE up this morning, I didn't plan on crashing a wedding.
But here I am.

In leather pants and a faded T-shirt, I didn't even bother dressing up, which is drawing censorious raised eyebrows from the Charleston upper crust. There they are in their pressed pastels and bow ties, neatly divided into two sides of the aisle. Golden blondes on the left. Deep, rich brunettes to the right. Not a head of midnight-black hair among them.

None like mine.

Defiance rears back inside me and I toss that mane of inherited black hair now, letting it whip and settle around my shoulders. Perhaps it's the move that causes an older woman in the back row to recognize me—finally. Or recognize my mother, rather. I've grown up a lot since leaving this town, and since I own a mirror, I'm aware of the resemblance.

Green eyes, resting bitch face, stubborn chin, indecent curves.

I'm a Potts girl, head to toe.

Looking as if she's seen a ghost, the woman fingers her pearls and leans over to start a gossip wildfire, no doubt. My mouth curls into a pleased smile and I go back to observing the congregation. Everyone is seated and waiting for the bride to walk down the aisle, except for me. I'm standing in the far back corner, cloaked in shadows. Appropriate, considering my cousin, Naomi, is getting married this afternoon and no one in my family was invited.

What family? You're the only one left now.

An invisible fist grinds into my chest and I push off the wall, intending to duck out for a breath of fresh air. No way I'm going to lose my composure in front of these people. *Especially* the blonde side of the room. When I turn to leave, however...that's when I see him.

Once, during a hurricane, I made the mistake of leaving my apartment in Brooklyn for a gallon of milk. Cereal makes up ninety percent of my diet, so I was desperate and tired of eating fistfuls of dry Cheerios. I didn't make it two steps out of the building when a hundred-mile-an-hour wind swept my feet out from under me, landing me on my back with a view of the dark thunderheads above. I still went and bought the milk, because I am a stubborn piece of work, but I remember that feeling of utter shock. The confirmation that forces more powerful than my iron will exist, just waiting to knock me on my butt.

That's how I feel when I see the groom. Naomi's groom.

My throat resists my attempts to swallow, coating itself in mud. Palms sweaty, pulse clamoring, knees buckling—yes, buckling—I fall back against the back wall of the church. I turn to find a full back row of blonde heads watching me and I lift my chin, commanding myself to pull it together. What in God's name is wrong with me?

As if induced by magic, my gaze lifts to the groom once more. He's not the cookie-cutter trust fund boy I was expecting. No, he's...compelling. Hands clasped behind his back, he's the authority in the room without moving a single muscle. He must be six foot five, based on the way he towers over the groomsmen, and the breadth of his muscular chest is somehow *fierce*. Braced and ready for action. He has a thick head of tobacco hair, face shaven but already battling a beard. His blatant masculinity isn't what robs me of the ability to stand, though.

It's his eyes. For all this man's obvious power, they're heartbreakingly kind.

When I read the wedding announcement online, I scoffed at the description of Naomi's fiancé. I rush to recall it now. Elijah Montgomery DuPont. Citadel graduate. Served three tours overseas with the army. What else? There was something...else.

Oh. Right. Elijah is the son of Charleston's longest-sitting mayor. Plans to follow in his father's footsteps. Imminently. Would I expect anything less in a husband for impossibly polished, former pageant girl Naomi? Granted I haven't seen her sailing through town since we were teenagers, Naomi in her private school getup, me in ripped jeans and Salvation Army specials. I remember well, though. I remember the way her gaze skimmed over me and shut down, the whispers to her friends. *Her mother. Her mother is the one...*

I release a shaky laugh under my breath when I realize...I'm jealous of Naomi. Right now in this moment. *Actually* jealous over this man I've never met, who can't possibly be as kind as his eyes suggest. I don't even *like* kind men. Even as I tell myself that, I squint, trying to make out the color of those eyes. When I realize what I'm doing, I shake myself and turn to leave the church through a side exit. As much I wanted to shake up the proceedings and remind these people my side of the family existed, I can't stay now. The irony of me returning home only to develop this weird, instantaneous attraction for my cousin's fiancé is *way* too much.

Tomorrow, I will probably forget all about him. This afternoon will feel like a dream or a hallucination. But for right now I...I don't think I can watch him get married.

Steeped in disbelief, I press the handle of the exit down. Turning to take one last, stupid look over my shoulder, I pause when I see a woman jogging up the aisle. She's not the bride, but in that teal, ruffled nightmare of a dress, she screams bridesmaid. Her face is white as a sheet, a bouquet of flowers limp at one side, a folded note in the opposite hand. I take my fingers off the door handle, noting that everyone around me has started to murmur amongst themselves. What is going on?

The groom inclines his head, leaning down so the harried bridesmaid can reach his ear. Finished speaking, she hands him the note, closing her eyes as he unfolds and reads it. He's very still. Something is definitely wrong, but he seems more concerned about the bridesmaid's obvious upset, even patting her on the shoulder with a steady hand as he reads. *Gentle giant.*

I flinch at my own thoughts. They simply cannot be coming from me. Men are meant to be pleasant diversions from time to time. They all want one thing and I take a twisted pleasure in proving that. Proving *I* don't want

anything more, either, and sending them on their way. Reminding myself of how I operate doesn't help now, though. As the groom—Elijah's—face turns more and more grave, I grow restless. I want everyone to stop whispering.

Finally, the bridesmaid turns and leaves the way she came, sniffing into her forearm. Elijah tucks the note into his pocket and faces the congregation alone, appearing almost thoughtful. No one is whispering now. They're all made of stone, waiting to see what the robust military man in the tuxedo will say. "I'm very sorry you all came out on a Sunday. It would appear...no one is getting married today, after all," he drawls, his deep voice resonating with southern gentility. At his announcement, there are gasps from every corner of the aisle, women fanning themselves with almost fanatical fervor. Camera flashes go off. Elijah isn't immune to the sudden activity. Or the fact that he's just been jilted. No, he doesn't seem to know what to do with his hands, a forced, wry smile playing around his lips. "I hope your wedding gifts came with a good refund policy."

His attempt at a joke is met with a smatter of uncomfortable laughter, but mostly silence. I think. It's hard to hear anything over the wrenching in my breastbone. Yeah, I didn't want to watch him marry my cousin for some weird reason. But there's zero satisfaction in watching him get left at the altar. None. I've never seen someone look more alone in my life.

I watch as Elijah turns to his groomsmen and rolls a shoulder, his eyes averted. And in that tiny slice of time, I know exactly what he's going to do. Tomorrow, maybe I'll marvel over how easily I read Elijah in a room full of people who should know him better than me. But for now, I don't waste time slipping out the side exit, getting swallowed up in warm March wind and the scent of salt air. I weave through the parked cars to find my ancient Honda, breathing in time with my steps.

Moments later, I watch from my idle at the curb as Elijah strides out of the church, then comes to a dead stop. He looks straight ahead at nothing, the powerful cords of his neck standing out in the hazy, southern afternoon sun. Heartbroken? Angry? I can't tell a single thing, except that he wants to escape. Now. But before I apply my foot to the gas, I give myself a mental slap in the face. A cold, hard reality check.

Rich, powerful, handsome. Unattainable. This is the same kind of man

my mother fell for. Fell *hard*. Everyone inside that church remembers how *that* ended, too. It tore apart two halves of a family, leaving one side to flourish in their wealth and the other to fall from grace.

Elijah Montgomery DuPont, the next mayor of Charleston, heir to southern immortality might have been left behind by his bride today, but someday soon? There will be another one.

She won't be a Potts girl. She will never, ever be me.

It costs me a surprising effort, but I paste on my most dazzling smile and pull up to the curb at the bottom of the church steps. By now, guests have begun filling the church doorways, slinking out one by one in the distance behind Elijah.

When I roll down the passenger side window, I get Elijah's attention all to myself for the first time and it hits me like that gale, hurricane wind—only nine times stronger. He's so *inviting* up close. A man who could double as a human shield. Or a furnace. He's just *radiating* warmth and capabilities, like he's someone to depend on. Oh God. I'm losing my freaking mind.

Sucking in a breath, I open the glove compartment and fish out the bottle of Grey Goose vodka, waving it at the jilted groom. "It's half empty, but you're welcome to it."

I was right about his eyes. That's my only coherent thought as he ducks into my Honda and straightens, his head resting against the ceiling. His gaze is made of the finest chocolate and just as fulfilling as it lands on me, grateful and weary. "Thank you, ma'am."

His thick burr rocks me down to the soles of my feet, making me think of cuddling. *Cuddling*. An activity I've never performed a day in my life. Hoping my shock isn't showing on my face, I twist open the bottle and hand it over. "All dressed up and nowhere to go?"

Humorless laughter leaves him in a slow rumble. "Something like that."

"I'm so sorry about what happened," I whisper, without thinking. "No one deserves that."

He cuts me a look, obviously just realizing I witnessed his humiliation. He becomes aware of more than that, though. Until right this second, I don't think he was really *seeing* me. I was just a blurry figure in a car. An escape hatch. Now, his attention travels down to my leather-clad thighs, before

shooting back up to my face, alertness inching into his expression. “Who are you?”

“That’s a long story.” I tip the bottle up to his mouth. “For now, I’m Addison. And if you want to avoid the sympathy coming down the steps, I’m your girl.”

Without turning to look at the church, he twists the bottle on his knee. “How so?”

“There are probably very few places you can hide in this town, am I right?”

Weary brown eyes focus back on me. “Yes.”

So much weight and meaning packed into a single word. “I have a place. You can lay low for a little while.”

His body language is still grateful, but hesitant now. “I mean no disrespect, Addison. I’m not assuming a damn thing, either, you understand.” He waits for my nod. “But if you’re thinking of offering me more than a place to lay low, I’m not sure I’m in the right frame of mind for it. Wouldn’t be fair to you.”

Just the suggestion of sex with this man makes me slippery between my legs. Which is pathetic considering he’s just turned me down—not that I was offering. Still. What did I think? I would pull up in my old as hell, chipped paint steed and sweep him away like an avenging cowgirl? The man is reeling from being jilted. Any romantic notions I have that are coming to life against my will need to be put to rest. Immediately. Not so easy to do when I like him more with every genuine word that comes out of his mouth.

Ignoring the clang of doom in the back of my head, I pull away from the curb. “That’s pretty noble of you. Most people wouldn’t be concerned with fairness after something so shitty happened to them.”

“Shitty things happen to people all the time,” he answers, his tone conversational. Not in the least bit preachy. “It’s no excuse to be selfish.”

“No, I guess not.” I barely manage to sound human after hearing him say *selfish* in relation to sex. Is that how he’d be with me beneath him, if we went to bed this afternoon? Rough and selfish and—*Lord*. I need to get a hold of myself, right now. Even if he was in the right mind frame for sex...Naomi is his type. Girls with a pedigree. Not a girl who was born out of wedlock and

spends her life scraping by, week to week. I would be nothing more than a quick itch-scratcher.

That mental kick in the pants is exactly what I need. I know all too well what becomes of a woman who lets herself be a man's scratching post. "I'm not offering you anything but room-temperature Grey Goose and a place to watch television for a while." I take a turn onto the avenue, before flicking him a teasing look down my nose. "You think I want a man who got left out on the curb like yesterday's recycling?"

When Elijah throws back his head and laughs; the sound sends an appreciative shiver down my spine. *Ignore it.* "Something told me to get into this car." His big shoulders are still shaking. "I'm glad I listened." I pull up to a red light, startled when he takes my hand off the wheel, holding it in his warm grip. His head tilts, his brown eyes bursting with character. A torturously handsome, kind-hearted rake with an actual sense of humor. "Friends?"

Feeling as though I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, I roll a shoulder. "I'm reserving judgment."

His laughter defeats me this time and as I coast through the light, I smile.

CHAPTER TWO

Elijah

Special Report: Gift Return Policy Loopholes.

What the major department stores don't want you to know.

—Charleston Post

WALKING UP THE stairs to a second-floor apartment in an unfamiliar part of town feels like a dream. I don't know the girl in front of me from Adam, but I follow her in a trance. Laughter drifts from an unseen source, a baseball connects with a metal bat at the park across the street. Life as usual. Except for mine. When I woke up this morning, my entire life was plotted out on a strict timeline. Now it's like someone used their backhand to sweep my milestone markers off the table...and they're all left suspended in midair.

Was I really just left at the altar?

If I had my cell phone, it would be shrieking like a fire alarm in my pocket. But I didn't bring it to my wedding, since everyone I knew was going to be there. And they were. My parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends and colleagues came expecting to witness a union, before retiring to Gadsden House for dinner and cocktails. They bought clothes for the occasion, booked hotel rooms and purchased gifts. What are they going to eat for dinner now that their plans have changed? I pause on the stairs. Maybe I should have carried on with the reception. It wouldn't kill me to smile for a few hours and let everyone enjoy the party they were promised.

"Are you coming?"

Several steps ahead of me, Addison leans against the wobbling railing, inspecting her nails as if she couldn't care less whether I follow or not.

Moving fast, I grip the unsteady wood in my left hand, in case it decides to give way behind her, little thing though she is. Her eyes cut to mine at the action, somewhat startled, before she goes back to examining her nails.

Lord. She's such a departure from the mayoral aides, campaign volunteers and Charleston residents who beam as I pass them in hallways and streets, addressing me as Captain Du Pont. Yes, Addison is indifferent. Insulting, even. When I drifted down the steps of the church, at a loss for the first time in my life about what to do, an invisible wind seemed to push me toward the car. An outlandish notion if I ever heard one. I was merely hoping to avoid making everyone feel awkward. Southern manners dictate that each and every guest pat me on the shoulder and tell me I'm better off without Naomi. Jumping into Addison's car was simply the easiest way to spare them from that obligation.

It has nothing to do with the instant...kinship I felt for her when she smiled and shook the half-empty bottle of Grey Goose at me.

"Yes. I'm coming." I clear my throat and continue up the steps, raising an eyebrow when Addison shrugs, as if she can take me or leave me. It's not a reaction I'm accustomed to—and it's somehow exactly what I need. Because I've just been abandoned in front of an entire congregation. And I'm not ready to unpack why I'm more upset about the guests being cheated out of dinner and a party...than I am about my newly forced singledom. Addison's nonchalance gives me an excuse not to think. To leave the mile markers of my life hanging in the air.

Just for today.

When we reach the door and Addison turns the key, it sticks, so she jiggles it, black hair falling into her face. She must belong to Naomi's side of the family, since I don't recognize her. There's no doubt I would remember Addison. Dressed in leather and scuffed boots with a permanent sulk to her mouth, she's the polar opposite of my fiancée. *Ex-fiancée*. Not to mention, this neighborhood and her car don't suggest a high income. Whereas Naomi will never have to work a day in her life, thanks to family money.

"Where did you come from?"

"Huh?" Addison finally gets the door open, but pauses in the doorframe at my unrehearsed question. "New York. I've been there about six years, but

before that I—”

“No, I mean today. Where did you come from today?” The last hour is a blur, but I try and recall the timing. “If you were in the church to see what happened, you only had about a minute to go get your car. Before I walked out.”

“Anyone lucky enough to be near an exit would have fled, too.” She rolls her lips inward and lets them go with a pop. “It was painful.”

I find myself fighting a smile. This girl is kind of mean. Have I ever met a girl who doesn’t hide a mean streak behind backhanded compliments and *bless your hearts*? “Yet you picked me up. If it was so painful, why bring me along as a reminder?”

“Do you always question basic human decency?” She gives an annoyed flick of her hair. “So, before we go inside, I have to prepare you. The place is decorated for Christmas. You will lose count of Santas and Frostys. It can be jarring at first.”

“You seem like more of a Halloween girl.”

Addison pats her head. “Is it the devil horns? I thought I hid them better.” A twist of her lips, then she’s pushing into the apartment, flipping on a ceiling light. “This place belonged to my grandmother. She passed away a few weeks ago and left it. To me.”

Just as promptly as she makes that pronouncement, she’s gone from the room, vanished down a back hallway. My sympathy sits on the tip of my tongue, waiting for her to come back so I can express it. But the longer she stays away, the more I start to think she doesn’t want it—and left the room for that very reason.

Shaking my head over Addison’s unique nature, I turn and get my first glimpse of the open-plan living and dining area. Well I’ll be damned, she wasn’t lying. There’s fake snow on every surface, Christmas lights—although not plugged in—are strung from every corner of the ceiling. There are no less than eight Christmas trees, some floor-sized, some perched on brightly skirted tabletops. Suspended from the middle of the living room ceiling is a giant plastic sleigh...and eight reindeer being lead by Rudolph.

When Addison returns, she’s mid-sentence by the time she clears the hallway. “There’s a master switch to all the Christmas stuff. When I flip it

on, this place turns into Kevin McAllister's house in *Home Alone* when he's trying to convince the robbers his parents aren't in France. That they're actually home having a party?" She wiggles her fingers. "It's like having the nuclear codes, except I drop fake snow instead of bombs."

"I like it." I turn in a circle, noticing a mural depicting a trio of carolers. "Think of all the time you'll save on decorating in December."

Her shock of laughter brings me up short. It's nothing like the husky purr I would have expected from her. No, it's bright and clear and appreciative. "Exactly." She scratches her eyebrow. "You want to see?"

"Dying to."

"Well...if you feel like getting comfortable..." Her indifference is back in place as she struts to the kitchen. "No one is stopping you."

There was a moment in Addison's car where I thought she was propositioning me. Clearly I was way off. Although, she's nothing like the women I've dated, so reading her in that regard is something of a challenge. Everything about her is bold. Her clothing, the long, black hair that moves with her, the spontaneity. The way she looks me in the eye like we're adversaries even when she's smiling. Like I said, nothing like the polite, often predictable—God forgive me for saying so—women of my experience. Considering her lack of interest in me, I'm probably nothing like the men she sees, either.

Searching the room for signs of a man, I'm not sure why I relax upon finding nothing since I'm only here to check out for a while. When I try to pinpoint where everything went wrong, though, a throb starts behind my right eye. Dating. Couplehood. Based on today's events, I've been doing them wrong. For two years, I've been telling Naomi I love her. I've been her plus-one to parties, we've gone skiing together, double dated, posed for engagement photos. Wasn't that love? Weren't the two of us in love?

Yeah. Yeah...I think we were. When I came back from my three tours overseas, our parents began putting us in the same place often enough that it seemed natural to start dating. We talked about having children and picked out china patterns. She smiled and waved at my campaign events. People don't do those kinds of things for one another unless they're in love. For some reason, though, I missed the signals telling me she wasn't going to show up to the church today. I missed whatever was wrong—and I missed it hard.

Last night at the rehearsal dinner, Naomi seemed like her usual smiling self. Not a hair out of place. But someone doesn't just skip town to avoid their own wedding if they're happy. And I had no clue.

"Ready?"

Addison's voice calling from the kitchen snaps me to attention. "Yes, ma'am."

She groans. "Ma'am *this*."

The apartment roars to life. Roars. "Carol of the Bells" clangs from several reanimated toys. Rudolph's nose turns a bright red and the sleigh begins to travel in a circle around the living room. Monkeys slap cymbals together, at least ten different versions of Frosty begin to dance and millions of Christmas lights twinkle, giving the space an ethereal golden glow. It's like standing in one of the department store windows on Fifth Avenue in New York City. Just overwhelming and comforting and...a little terrifying all at once.

"Wow."

"Yeah." Not having heard Addison approach, I turn to find her standing beside me, her head only reaching my shoulder. "Do you get to the City Market very often?"

"I used to." Thinking of the stack of paperwork and emails and invitations waiting for me at City Hall, I sigh, knowing the sound will get swallowed by the abundance of noise. "Used to sneak in for free praline samples when I was young. Haven't been in a while, though."

"Running for mayor is time consuming. That's why I've never done it."

My laugh sneaks up on me. "Oh, is that why?"

Her lips twitch. "My grandmother had a coveted vendor permit at the market. She's been selling Christmas ornaments there since I can remember. The booth is aptly named Jingle Balls." The floorboards move under our feet as she shifts. "She left me that, too. Added my name to the license and never told me."

"Are you going to run from the room again before I can offer condolences?"

Her arms drop, mouth opening and closing. "I don't know what you're talking about—"

"No explanation needed. But I am very sorry, Addison." I take pity on

her by changing the subject. "Are you going to work at the booth?"

It takes her a few beats to answer. "I wasn't going to. I was going back to New York as soon as I tied up her loose ends," she says, sounding somewhat dazed. "But when I went to collect her things...I figured, maybe one more day? And now I've been selling Christmas ornaments for two weeks. In freaking March."

"You like it."

"Yeah. I like it." She turns to me with a far-off expression. "My grandmother raised me. She was really good to me, even when things got hard. It doesn't seem right to abandon her life's work quite so fast."

Underneath the glow of Christmas lights, something is becoming very hard to ignore, though I've been doing a good job until now. Addison is a beautiful woman. That's an understatement, actually. When I was a young boy, I overheard my grandfather describe a woman, saying, "That one could end friendships, start wars and make a glutton suck in his gut."

Seems to me a woman shouldn't be blamed for wars, simply because of her appearance, but I understand the sentiment. Long story short, Addison is a complete knockout.

What the hell am I doing here? My relationship just ended without preamble. Tomorrow morning, I'll be headline fodder. What happened today might even affect the campaign. I've probably got a search party looking for me by now. Hell, I've somehow offended my fiancé enough that she jilted me. The last thing I should be doing is standing in another woman's apartment, noticing she's gorgeous.

"You're freaking out on me," Addison says. "Is it the dancing Frostys?"

"No." I press two fingers to my eye socket. "I'm sorry. Impulsive decisions aren't like me. I should be back at the church saying goodbye to everyone. Denying southerners their chance to give condolences is a sin. They'll want to hear me say I'm fine."

Maybe I should be trying to find Naomi. Weird how I'm only thinking of that now.

"Are you fine?"

"I don't know," I say on an exhale. "That's why I got in your car. I needed somewhere to go figure that out."

She hesitates before asking her next question. "What did the note say?"

I dig it out of my pocket, unfolding the pink, scented stationary, complete with a glitter border. "I'm sorry, Elijah. I couldn't do it." Just like the first time I read the note, I'm somewhat alarmed by my reaction. There's surprise. Confusion. But not the kind of pain I would expect from a man being stood up by his bride. "I didn't want to end it this way, but it's for the best."

There's only a flash of sympathy on Addison's face, before she nods and leaves the room. A second later, Christmas powers down and I'm back to standing in the cool, hazy apartment in the muted afternoon light. Before and after. Full speed straight into stagnancy, just like my day leading up to the note being delivered mid-aisle. Bootsteps signal Addison's return and I put the note back in my pocket.

She takes my arm as she passes through the living room. "Come on."

"Now, hold on, Goose..."

We come to a halt halfway down the hallway. "*Goose?*"

"You greeted me with a bottle of the stuff."

"Thank God you won't be around long enough to make that stick." With a decisive nod, she keeps going, leading me into a bedroom. It's big, sparse and clean, not much more than a queen-sized bed and an antique bureau. Any suspicion I have that she's going to invite me to join her in the bed fades with the wide berth she gives me. "If you don't want to go home right away, you can stay here for the night. But I'm not cooking for you."

A reprieve from the responsibilities that face me sounds like heaven. My father is probably dying to strategize a way to spin today's events into getting votes. Reporters are more than likely already camped outside my...my what?

"I don't have a choice," I say slowly. "We were leaving for the Bahamas tonight. When we returned in two weeks, the house was going to be ready."

"What house?" I rattle off an address and her jaw drops. "That corner mansion on the Battery? The one right across from the park?"

"That's the one." I lower myself to the bed and drop my head into my waiting hands, the reality of my situation finally registering. "The lease on my apartment ended and I moved out. Been staying at the Dewberry Hotel until the wedding, but I checked out of there this morning. Most of my

things are in storage, waiting to be moved into the new house.”

Addison sits down on the bed next to me. “Do you have a friend you can call?”

“Yes, but...” I shake my head. “He has a family. I can’t bring a bunch of press down on their heads by showing up there. And they *would* show up. They always do.”

“Parents?”

I tuck my tongue into my cheek and don’t answer.

“I’ll get you some sheets so you can make the bed.” She rises and starts to leave the room, but stops with a hand on the frame. Without looking at me, she sighs and asks, “Grilled cheese and tomato soup sound okay?”

“Better than okay.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

CHAPTER THREE

Addison

*Who was the mysterious Getaway Girl?
And what has she done with Captain Du Pont?
—TheTea.com*

MY APARTMENT HAS shrunk ten sizes since Elijah walked in the door. Now the future mayor of Charleston, South Carolina and his smooth southern gentleman's drawl is sitting across from me eating a grilled cheese. He's still wearing his tuxedo, but it has been deconstructed into pants, a white undershirt and an unbuttoned dress shirt that hangs loose around either side of him. The pendant light hanging over the kitchen table gives his robust body a glowing lining, picking strands of his hair to stroke into the color of new pennies. Not that I'm noticing.

I've never cooked for a man before. At best, I've grudgingly shoved a box of Cocoa Krispies across the counter toward a dude who'd overstayed his welcome. There's no denying the pleasurable little flip in my stomach every time Elijah takes a bite, though, chewing with no self-consciousness. Just a big, healthy man enjoying a meal.

To be fair, I barely cook for *myself*. Ever since returning to Charleston, though, I've found myself falling back into habits formed as a teenager. Stopping at the local market on the way home from work and buying the ingredients for something that will last two or three days. The way my grandmother used to do. Stew, lasagna, meatloaf. *They always taste best on the third day*, she used to say, pouring herself a mug of wine from the Bota Box. Saluting me with it.

These recaptured habits probably have something to do with being sur-

rounded by reminders of the highly efficient and hard-working woman who raised me from childhood, after my mother left. I could almost feel her silent disapproval on the first night of my return as I munched on Lucky Charms on a spread-out blanket in the living room.

Fine, I'd muttered to the lit-up room. *I'll go shopping tomorrow.*

"This is great, Goose."

"Oh, come on."

"No, really. It's great."

"I was talking about the nickname."

He acknowledges my gripe with a teasing wink, leaning back in his chair with half a grilled cheese in his hand. "What is with the shoes?" When I merely raise an eyebrow, he gestures with the sandwich. "Over by the door."

I follow his line of sight to my shoe shelf, which is a glass half-moon affixed to the wall. Except for my bedroom, which I've made my own out of necessity, this is my only personal touch in the main living area of the apartment. Neatly arranged on the shelf sit four pairs of shoes. Black stilettos, green rain boots, flashy pink sneakers and basic brown sandals. "I have a theory that human beings only need four pairs of shoes. Those are mine."

"Why do you keep them on a shelf?"

Not used to explaining myself, I squirm in my chair. "Um. Putting my shoes on is the last thing I do before leaving the house. It's kind of...I don't know. Symbolic, maybe? Like a final touch to assure myself I'm prepared for whatever I've planned that day. A donning of armor before going into battle." I poke the air with my spoon. "If you laugh, Mr. Mayor, I'll dump the rest of my soup on your head."

"I'm not the mayor yet. I still have an election to win." He tosses the rest of his sandwich into his mouth and I try not to watch the muscles of his throat shift and flex. "My mother has a thousand pairs of shoes."

"I'm willing to bet she only wears four on a regular basis, though."

"This is the part where I prove I'm a man and admit I don't notice her shoes." He narrows an eye at me. Something he does when he's curious or asking questions. I'm registering way too many things about him. Like the fact that he waited for me to pick up my spoon first, before picking up his own. The well-muscled stomach beneath his undershirt that boasts just

enough padding to make him human. And the way his chest hair curls over his neckline, black and unruly, so at odds with his perfect gentleman vibe. “So the rain boots are an obvious choice for bad weather, sandals for summer...”

“Sneakers for running.” Realizing my voice has dropped to a low rasp, I clear my throat. “Heels for going out to meet men.”

Why do I say that? For two reasons, I think. One, I want to see his reaction. Is he really as immune to me as he seems to be? This attraction I’m battling for him is wrapped around me so tight, it’s hard to believe it doesn’t run both ways. Two—and this is most troubling—I’m trying to reassure him I’m only interested in friendship. Because I don’t think he’ll stay otherwise.

And God, that makes total sense after what he went through today. He’s probably—no, *definitely*—still in love with Naomi and only putting on a brave face, because that’s what war veteran politicians with blue blood flowing through their veins do. If I’d been stood up at the alter, I wouldn’t appreciate a man trying to get into my pants *the same day*, either. I would knee his balls up into his neck for good measure. Friendship is what he’s offering me. So I say the thing about going out to meet men. I say it so he’ll feel comfortable being my friend.

“Right.” Elijah coughs into his fist. “Well, I’m sure they do the trick.”

Is that it, then? The line is drawn? I’ve never been in this kind of situation. Wanting a man I don’t think I can ever have. If sexual attraction was the only reason I was drawn to him, I would go stand in front of his chair and disrobe slowly, drag my nails through his hair and whisper bad things beside his ear.

Sex is rare for me, but when I let myself indulge, it’s like going on vacation. It’s a free pass to let my thoughts blur and physical instinct to take over. I love sex. The idea of it, mostly. Two people moving like violin and bow until the strings snap. I don’t get close enough to men to get bogged down by emotion, though. Or let insecurities prick under my skin. It’s just me there in the darkness. Would it be that way with Elijah? Something tells me no. I’d be very aware of him there with me in the dark. So very aware.

If I turned on the sexy, he might resist, but he’d ultimately follow me to the bedroom. That would be it, though. He would leave. And I don’t think

I'd see him again. At least not in this capacity, where it's just the two of us and there's no social protocol. Every minute that passes with him in this apartment—which felt so lonely until now—makes me hate the idea of losing the possibility we could spend time together again. God, it might not be possible either way.

“My grandmother only had one pair of shoes. Galoshes. They were army green and she wore them year round.” I scrub at a spot on the table with my fingernail. “She would say I’m being very extravagant with four pairs of shoes.”

When I look up, his eyes are so bottomless and compassionate, I could fall into them and sink for decades. “You miss her.”

I shrug in an attempt to shake free the knot in my chest. “I should have visited more.”

“How long had it been?”

Six years. I can’t even bring myself to say it out loud. “New York is hard. First you’re scrambling just to get a stable situation. A job, a place to live. And then it’s a non-stop grind to maintain.” My mouth edges up. “Every time we spoke on the phone, she would tell me she didn’t have time for visitors, anyway.”

Elijah’s laugh lines appear on either side of his mouth, carved into his strong, stubbled jaw. “You two sound nothing alike.”

I wrinkle my nose at his sarcasm. “What are you going to do tomorrow, Elijah?”

The smile flattens. “I don’t know.”

“What do you *want* to do?”

His surprise lets me know how often he acts selfishly, doing only what he wants and not what’s expected. Never, probably. But he takes a moment to think now, his fingers tapping on the table. “I want to walk into my office like nothing happened. I want to ignore questions. Just walk in and get back to work. I don’t want advice or sympathy or greeting cards.”

“You’re going to need a suit.” I stand up and start to collect plates and bowls, pushing Elijah back down into his chair when he gets up to help. “If you want to pretend like nothing ever happened, you can’t show up wearing your wedding tux.”

"I'm in the public eye. I can't pretend at all, Goose."

Just like every other time he's called me that, warmth expands in my chest, but I go cold as ice when something occurs to me. Something I'd completely forgotten in my haste to play Elijah's getaway driver and my subsequent—and misplaced—mooning over him. How could I have forgotten such an important detail? "I have to tell you something."

A groove appears between his eyebrows. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I sit down again, the plates and bowls forgotten in a stack. "I didn't think very hard about this today. I just...I figured you would want to get away. So I went to get my car."

"I'm grateful for that." He leans forward. "Whatever it is, Addison, it can't be worse than me being left at the altar."

"Hold that thought." My pulse is ticking in my ears. "Elijah, Naomi is my cousin. Our grandmothers were sisters."

That brings his eyebrows up. "Really." It's almost imperceptible, the way his gaze roams over me, very likely making note of the dark hair and lack of upper-crust polish. "And we've never met because you've been in New York?"

A nervous laugh breaks free of my lips. "Partly. But mostly because my mother didn't get along with Naomi's mother. At all. My mother did some things that didn't exactly endear her to the family." I meet his eyes and find only curiosity there. But the other shoe hasn't dropped yet, has it? When it does, how long until he's out the door? "When my mother was young—around my age—she made some bad decisions. She...slept with Naomi's mother's fiancé." I laugh without humor. "Hold on, it gets worse. There was never a paternity test taken and the possibility was never acknowledged by anyone except my mother, but...there's a good chance I'm the product of their affair. Naomi and I are cousins, yes, but we might be half-sisters, too. Trust me, I have no plans to prove we share a father, but there it is. Bottom line, we're related."

Elijah remains silent.

"Even though my mother was pregnant, Naomi's parents went ahead with the wedding. They got married and my mother never really got over it. Asshole or not, she loved him." I swallow a handful of gravel. "My mother

left when I was a child. I stayed with my grandmother.”

His frown intensifies. “Addison.”

“Someone recognized me at the wedding. By now, they all know who you left with and being with the black sheep is *not* a good look for you.” My laughter is strained as I stand up again, collecting the dishes with clumsy hands. “It’s been real, Elijah. But you should probably cut your losses and go.”

Before meeting Elijah, I would have cackled and patted myself on the back knowing I’d hijacked the groom. I would have thought it perfectly poetic. A middle finger to the past. But the possibility that I might have hurt his reputation bothers me. A lot. I’ve never felt more like my mother than I do at this moment. Without realizing it, I’ve become the one woman he shouldn’t be caught with.

I’m startled when big hands appear to take the dishes from me. We play tug of war for a few seconds, before I give up and cross my arms, glaring as Elijah sets everything down in the sink. “First off,” he says, wheeling around. “I’ll admit this does not look good.”

“No,” I whisper, dropping my arms. “It doesn’t.”

“Charleston loves to live in the past.”

“They do.”

“But I don’t. Every time we erect another monument or memorial downtown, I wonder why we’re not building a school. Or continuing to revitalize North Charleston. I’m more interested in the present. Are you still reserving judgment on us being friends?”

Caught off guard, I sputter. “I—what?” Why is my chest aching? “No.”

“No, you’re not reserving judgment or no we’re not friends?”

“No, I’m not reserving judgment anymore. We’re...good.”

“All right, then.” His head dips and I catch the ghost of a smile. “I’m a grown man and I’ll spend time with whomever I choose. I don’t know what a black sheep is, but I’m sure they don’t go out of their way to offer getaway rides and guest bedrooms without asking for anything in return.”

It takes me a few beats to get a breath. “I didn’t mention I’ve been running a tab? That grilled cheese cost you twenty bucks.”

His hearty laugh, I swear to God, it makes me want to sob. This is bad. I

almost wish he would curse me for being so thoughtless and compromising his political future. That way, I could lock the door behind him and go back to business as usual. Forget I ever met this unique and interesting man.

But I can't shake the feeling that from this moment forward, my existence is never going back to normal.

"Well." I back away from the giant, magnetic force field of Elijah Montgomery Du Pont. "If you do the dishes, it might put me in a good enough mood to drive you to your storage locker in the morning. Unless you want me to loan you a dress. It would definitely distract everyone from your fall from grace."

His mouth curves. "True, but I doubt it would fit."

An image of Elijah pressing up between my legs and growling those same words into my neck gets me moving. *I'm so much bigger than you, Addison. I doubt it's going to fit, but stay still so I can try like hell.* Lord, who knew I was a masochist? Before he can catch my definite flush, I pivot and head for my bedroom. "Your ride leaves at eight o'clock sharp, freeloader," I call over my shoulder.

The water in the sink turns on. "I'll be ready."

"Night, Captain."

"Night, Goose."

I groan at the nickname, but when I close my bedroom door, I lean back against it and smile.

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ABOUT TESSA BAILEY

Tessa Bailey is originally from Carlsbad, California. The day after high school graduation, she packed her yearbook, ripped jeans and laptop, driving cross-country to New York City in under four days.

Her most valuable life experiences were learned thereafter while waitressing at K-Dees, a Manhattan pub owned by her uncle. Inside those four walls, she met her husband, best friend and discovered the magic of classic rock, managing to put herself through Kingsborough Community College and the English program at Pace University at the same time. Several stunted attempts to enter the work force as a journalist followed, but romance writing continued to demand her attention.

She now lives in Long Island, New York with her husband of ten years and six-year-old daughter. Although she is severely sleep-deprived, she is incredibly happy to be living her dream of writing about people falling in love.

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**This unlikely getaway driver never expected
to help the mayor escape . . .**

After a six-year absence, **Addison Potts** is back in Charleston to stir things up. And what better place to make her villainous return than her estranged cousin's wedding? Only, the nuptials hit a snag when the bride doesn't show, leaving Addison to play getaway driver for the jilted groom. A groom whose heartbreaking smile and deep, southern drawl she should not be noticing . . .

Elijah Montgomery Du Pont is the future mayor of Charleston. From his military career to city hall, every detail of his life has been meticulously planned. Until now. His only respite from life's sudden upheaval is Addison, his new, improbable best friend. She makes him happy. Grounds him. And public disapproval be damned, he's not willing to give her up. But with an election on the line and public pressure rising, Addison—and the cruel hand of fate—might not give him a choice.

'Tessa Bailey's books completely, utterly, totally wreck me.'

— **Sophie Jordan**, *New York Times* bestselling author,

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