

## The Wedding Drifter

“Need some help with that?” Dominic asked, offering the stricken woman a few paper towels and an unopened bottle of water. She politely smiled, then threw her hands up, shaking her head while looking down at the cake icing on her dress. She thought about how hard it would be to convince the dressmaker not to charge them for the stain.

“Thank you,” she said, taking him up on his offer.

He laughed—louder than her response called for. “You should see me on Buy One, Get One Free Tuesdays at BDUBs—like a pig after a mud bath. It’s a scary sight, actually.

She quietly chuckled while attempting to rid her dress of the stain as much as possible. After a few hard strokes, the type you had to put on a black shirt after a drop of toothpaste escaped your morning tongue, it was hard to notice the stain at all from a distance. That’ll have to do, she thought.

“My name’s Dominic, but *you*, can call me Nick,” said the seemingly kind man, extending his hand to her.

She looked at both her full hands, then at his—extended out.

“Oh, yeah. Right—hands full from the two items I just gave to you,” he awkwardly laughed.

She set the bottle of water and paper towel down atop the bar countertop behind them, then their hands finally exchanged faces, like the tide kissed the rocks on maritime shores.

“I’m Ahmeena,” said the woman.

“That’s nice—soft and goddess-like,” said Dominic. He placed his glass of wine down on the bar, a serious move. Wine was his date at the weddings, and brown liquor was for all the other gigs. He could sing a whole aria while forcing the maroon to caress the transparency of the buffed stemware goblet. “So, you’re a bridesmaid, huh?” he asked, taking in the identical dress Ahmeena was wearing.

“Yeah, maid of honor, actually,” said Ahmeena. “Kirsten’s my best friend. We go way back—from braces to messy buns and college.”

“Oh!” Dominic pointed to her, smiling. “That was *you* giving a toast. I was sitting on the toilet in the bathroom, and I remember thinking, ‘damn does she have a beautiful voice.’”

Ahmeena laughed, covering her mouth with her hand—a habit she had picked up in grade school, before her mom could wrangle some doe-eyed man out of enough dough to see an orthodontist.

“You sure lay it all out there, don’t you?”

“Sorry,” he replied, a little defeated.

“Don’t be, I like that. I could learn a thing or two from you about vulnerability.”

“You shouldn’t cover your laugh or your smile or anything really—you have a beautiful smile,” Dominic said—thoughts flowing out of him like a stream.

Ahmeena cleared her throat, “And you, are you a friend of Mark?”

He scratched the back of his neck, “Not quite. Unless you count struggling musicians getting by off of pennies from being a wedding singer, player, entertainer...? I’m still figuring that last part out.”

“Wait, that was *you*? I was trying not to fall flat on my face while walking down the aisle, and I thought, ‘God, he has a nice voice.’”

They both laughed and Ahmeena instinctively covered her smile.

“See, you’re doing it again,” Dominic said. “But, you did pick up that whole vulnerability thing quickly. You just say the first thing that pops into your head, no matter how awkward it is, so when something awkward inevitably happens, it’ll seem normal. Like reverse-psychosis alienation or something like that.”

“Well, I got a long way to go before I can do that comfortably,” Ahmeena said, loosening up her posture. “Plus, I hope to be a lawyer one day, which is like the exact opposite: you gotta think before you speak—especially in court.”

“Lawyer, huh?”

“Yeah, but not criminal law. I want to help fight racism and police brutality, sexual assault violence against minors, and immigration law. Which is way too much to handle, but that’s the story of my life, I guess.”

“That’s admirable, just make sure you leave some time for yourself in all that litigation.”

“Noted,” said Ahmeena. “What about you, any demos or albums I could listen to?”

“Nah, too personal.”

“Oh,” replied Ahmeena as the deafening chatter of the venue divided the two.

“I’m just kidding, I’m an open book, maybe too much sometimes. I’m probably the only person on the planet banned from the Secretary of State because, apparently, it’s a crime to survey musically artistic demonstrations while trying to renew your license.”

Ahmeena laughed widely, but her hands stayed at her side. Then, a middle-aged woman in a white gown and veil approached the two at the bar.

As Ahmeena and the bride conversed, Dominic took the opportunity to attend to his date; he wouldn’t want to be rude.

“The video guy wants to film us on the patio,” the bride said—her words overstepping each other, “but I told him that it’s too windy and our hair will be all in our faces and Mark somehow had an allergic reaction or caught food poisoning or something I don’t even know but he’s shitting nukes all in the bathroom and I can’t find the—”

Ahmeena grabbed the bride by her shoulder, and if not for the wedding attire, it wouldn’t be a stretch to assume you were looking at two college roommates—one hyperventilating and the other anchoring her breath back down to her lungs.

“Kirsten, calm down—breathe,” she inhaled hard and exhaled after a 3-2-1 count, demonstrating for Kirsten. “Why don’t we get some footage by the dance floor? You still haven’t thrown the bouquet yet.”

Kirsten nodded, then walked off, shoulders in a rhythm as she managed her breathing. She didn’t get too far, though, because, in seconds, she turned crisply on her heels, the silk of her dress gripped tightly in her hands.

“Is it just me or does somebody have the heat on hell?” Kirsten said as sweat dripped slowly from her forehead, somehow dancing with her makeup and giving her face an electrifying, misty glow. “Look at me, I’m sweating like a sinner in church.”

“I’ll tell the venue guy to turn the heat down. *You* just go get ready to toss the bouquet,” Ahmeena instructed.

Ahmeena carried the weight of her best friend on her back well. She was used to it after all these years, plus it didn’t seem to bother her because she was an expert at letting stress slip off her back as bald tires atop January asphalt. Once Kirsten hurried away for sure, Ahmeena sauntered her dark brown eyes back over at Dominic.

“Well, have any other college friends getting married soon?” Dominic asked. “If so, I’m sure I’ll see you there: lately, I’ve been going wedding drifting more than I’ve been out on actual dates.”

“Don’t knock yourself up over it, look at me! I’m the maid of honor, and I couldn’t even muster up a plus one—unless the Torts and Negligence 101 book in my car counts.” They shared a laugh, the kind everyone else can’t help but look over and question what’s so funny. The pair didn’t notice the judging glares periodically peering in on their meet.

“Nick,” Ahmeena continued, “while she throws the bouquet, why don’t you set the mood for us on the dance floor at the piano?”

“Yeah, of course. Setting the mood, musically: I’m good for that,” he shot her a wink.

At the head of the dance floor, the best man took to the microphone. In the right light, you could still see the shimmer in his eyes from his best man speech earlier.

“Can I get all da single ladies on the dance floor, pleaseeee!”

An array of bridesmaids, widowed old aunts, and even a few banquet hall ushers and servers gathered in the center of the glossed wooden floor. The videographer circled the scene as Kirsten gave off a count of three.

“3,” said the bride.

“2,” whispered the maid of honor.

“1,” sang the wedding singer.

The prescription of irises, lilies, hydrangeas, and red roses flew across the ripe garden of lonely hearts. Gliding across lotioned hands and through manicured nails, the arrangement fell right into the unsure palms of Ahmeena. Instinctively, Ahmeena and Dominic’s eyes met as he played on—no longer as the wedding drifter, but as a guest.