

Next Time



NEXT TIME



Virginia Gray

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Next Time

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Caught Up In Me
Back Where I Belong

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1

My First Mistake



Hi! I'm Susan Wade, a thoroughly exhausted, fully committed computer service representative bent on a dream promotion.

With so many colleagues vying for the position, it's a longshot, I know, but I have a plan that my best friend and I hatched over mimosas one morning. All I have to do is pull off a business miracle in six-months' time. Oh, and did I mention that this brilliant plan involves moving right next door to the very gates of Hell? Yep, the assignment is in the suffocatingly small town of Havelock, North Carolina, center of absolutely nothing at all.

Really.

I mean, they only have one cell tower. Can you imagine?

Havelock's only redeeming quality is that it's near the beach. Of course, the road to get there is riddled with

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speed-traps, Sunday-drivers, and the forever lost summer tourists. I should also pay tribute to the mosquito population which is so vast, it could suck an elephant dry.

Forgive me if I sound jaded. It's just that my world was absolutely, positively perfect before I moved here four months, seventeen days, and eleven hours ago—yes, I'm counting. I had an amazing life in Philadelphia, fully equipped with a wealthy and sophisticated boyfriend, world-class shopping, high-end restaurants, and a shiny, somewhat new BMW that has since gone to car heaven. Also, no Southerners dare go there, which is quite possibly the best part of all.

You must understand that I *am* a Southerner—born and bred in the great state of North Carolina, thank you very much—who's been hiding her roots under a rock for all of her adult life. It's not that I despise my heritage, it's more that when people in the non-South hear a Southern accent, they immediately think of sweet, naïve, and fairly unintelligent women. That's a load of crap, of course, but image is everything in my company. And I am all about image; I have to be.

Just three days after arriving in Havelock, I butted heads with the most arrogant, obnoxious, smart-mouthed, flat-out gorgeous man I had ever met. Did I mention obnoxious?

I walked into this grungy bar, named the Rusty Frog, for a few drinks to calm my nerves and walked out with a new arch-nemesis, named Pete Walsh. He may have implied I was a witch, and I may have implied he was an idiot—it's all kind of fuzzy, really. Anyway, things were great for a while—I hated him, he hated me, but then it all changed. Actually, my entire life exploded, nuclear bomb-style, when I discovered my boyfriend was sleeping with...well,

the number's not really important, and that damned Pete, Southern gentleman that he is, decided to pick up the pieces. In fact, he got so carried away, he changed his motto from "torment Susan at all cost" to "make love, not war."

I would have flatly refused all his unexpected and rather unsettling overtures, but honestly, the man kisses like a paid professional, and I had a weak moment or two...or well, let's just say he's a fairly seductive individual.

By the time month four of my assignment rolled around, I admittedly needed to let off a little steam, so my officemate, Mona Taylor, convinced me to let down my guard a bit and have some fun. I'm certain self-preservation was her underlying motive because I had been becoming a tad crazed, terrified that I wouldn't be able to meet my sales numbers and would thus get fired. Mona, who is both a hopeless romantic and desperately in love with Jimbo, Pete's stupid cousin and owner of the aforementioned bar, has been entertaining some bizarre fantasy that we could become one happy foursome.

Perhaps I should stop here and correct myself. Jimbo isn't stupid, and he's not a mute, though he acts like one most of the time. Rather, he's a monosyllabic dumbass fully incapable of telling Mona how he feels. Without question, I know he loves her, and it's absolutely heartbreaking to watch the two of them suffer in the silence of polite gestures and wistful glances, but I am not a patient person. And my attempts to intervene have already gotten me into some real trouble. I'll add here that Pete, my co-conspirator in this little matchmaking venture, has been fairly useless thus far.

But back to Mona's suggestion. I'm not allergic to fun, per se, I simply don't have time for much of it, what with

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all the service contracts I have to sell to get out of this wretched place. But at her well-intended insistence, I caved and decided to have a tiny fling with Pete. Just a casual one, nothing serious. I mean, it's not like he'd move North, being a Southerner and all, and I'll certainly not stay a moment longer than necessary in the place plaid madras Bermuda shorts come to die.

Things have been going along just fine. We've had a number of dates, I've met several of his relatives, and we've had a spectacular amount of amazing sex—*not with his relatives, of course!* I've assumed he's been fully onboard with this whole fling plan, but recently, some of the looks he's given me make me think he needs a giant flashing billboard-type reminder.

And now this just happened...

2

Personal Space



“What time do ya want me to come over?” Pete asks in a tone so alluring, it makes me want to throw down my phone and race to his architectural firm at some highly illegal speed.

“I don’t know. I’m swamped.” Three days in and it has already been a very long week.

“I can stay late at the office. I’ve got plenty of beach house designs to complete. Been puttin’ some stuff off—preoccupied,” he says, softly chuckling.

“Pete—”

“You sound tired. I’ll come over at nine and we’ll just crash early.”

A balmy warmth spreads over me at the mere thought of his body curled around mine, his hands...*mmm*. Leaning back in my chair, I enjoy the pretty picture for a moment, but that image vanishes when I glance at the ever-

mounting pile of service orders on my desk. It's like some festering wart, growing uncontrollably. I sigh.

"Jimbo needs help Friday night," Pete continues, "so we'll grab an early dinner and then go over to the Frog."

Albeit a mangy bar, the Rusty Frog has much alcohol and plenty of highly entertaining local characters who typically take my mind off my personal problems. I scribble Frog on Friday's square of my calendar. "Also, there's a boat show Saturday afternoon. A DJ friend of mine will be there giving away t-shirts and stuff. We'll head on over about three. It'll be fun."

I need time in the office Saturday—lots of it. Perhaps if I come in at some ungodly hour, I can cram a day's worth of work into a few intense hours. I write down boat show.

"Oh, and don't make any plans for Sunday. We'll be gettin' up pretty early and goin' over to Emerald Isle to meet my cousin, Rudy. He's taking us out on his charter to do some deep-sea fishing. The marlin are running." Pete sounds very excited.

I realize my pen is busy gouging a deep crater into my thick desk calendar, denting the days and weeks that mark my brief time left in Havelock. Already, I can't get everything done and breathe simultaneously, and now my weekend has vanished like a breeze-blown puff of smoke. I hesitate, warring with reality, but finally acquiesce.

"Okay."

"Great. See ya at nine."

"At nine," I reply, rubbing my temples.

I dive back into my purchase orders, but within fifteen minutes I give up completely, unable to concentrate. Tapping my foot, I try to push aside the feelings of frustration and anger expanding like a giant balloon inside

my chest. I stare at my overbooked schedule, thinking about what he'd just said—and not said.

How have we gone from enemies to friends to casually dating to spending every spare minute together in a matter of weeks? And how does he get off planning my whole weekend for me? Maybe I don't want to go marlin fishing on Sunday. Maybe I just want to lie in bed all afternoon and read a book—okay, that's not realistic, but what if I want to go to the beach or do something else? And maybe, all by myself!

Exhausted or not, I can work as late as I damn well please and sleep when I am good and ready. As a matter of fact, I didn't even invite him over in the first place.

I calmly pull out my box of colorful tacks, select a pretty red one to match my shifting mood, and launch it at the dartboard that is Pete's face—one of the residual practical jokes from our early time together. I generally just smile at it now, but not tonight! My tack impales his lower lip—the one attached to the mouth that keeps pushing and pushing, the voice that's begun telling me what to do, the man who's sucking away my professional time with dinners, and bartending, and boat shows, and, and...fishing!

Since this entire relationship thingy began, Pete has always asked; he's never assumed I have nothing better to do than be with him. And though I've yet to say no to any of his invitations, nor had I just now, due wholly to my helpless attraction to the man, he's always given me that option. But this week, he's stopped asking and started telling. In fact, this is the second—no, sixth time, counting the four directives he's just delivered, that he's planned something without consulting me first. And frankly, I am done with it. As much as I enjoy being with him, I refuse

to be possessed by anyone—ever. And that’s exactly what this is becoming: possession.



A few minutes before nine, after entering the condo fuming, I pull fresh sheets from the drier and stomp up the stairs, grumbling to myself. I seriously considered working until eleven, or even midnight, just to send him a message, but I truly am bone tired, and I wasn’t accomplishing anything there, anyway—what with all the pacing and the tack-throwing. Besides, knowing him, he’d just show up at the office and drag me out, kicking and screaming. He’s good at that.

I hear the clunking engine of his mangy pick-up truck shut off and I fly downstairs. So excited to see him, I habitually open the door before he even steps onto the landing, but tonight I restrain myself and wait until he knocks—at least he’s still doing that.

“Hey,” he says, kissing me on the cheek as he breezes by. Rather than respond, I simply watch him walk to my kitchen and plunk a grease-soaked bag on my countertop. “I brought you a fish sandwich,” he announces cheerily.

He’s choosing what I eat now? I narrow my eyes and glare at the back of his lovely blond head. “I didn’t ask for a fish sandwich.”

“Oh. Well, I got a crab cake one for me. Would you rather have it?” He turns and smiles, his eyes infused with a light I want to believe is mine alone. For a moment, I melt inside, but that liquid candlewax feeling hardens again when he pulls plates from my cabinet as though he lives here, and places the sandwiches on them. The heavenly

aroma of fried seafood snakes through my nostrils, causing my stomach to growl and my mouth to water.

Rather than devour both sandwiches and the paper bag in under a minute, I cross my arms and say, "I don't want either."

He looks completely taken aback, but then his generous lips turn up, and he shakes his head, his perpetual good mood fueling my reddening embers. "Okay, well, what do ya want?"

I lean against the counter and watch him dump out the rest of the bag's contents. My eyes track a stray hushpuppy as it somersaults onto the floor.

"I want you to ask!" I burst out. "Did you ever think of that?"

"You probably wanted a salad, didn't you? You're right, I should have called ya before ordering. Salads tomorrow, then." He smiles brightly and tries to kiss me again, but I turn away.

"I don't belong to you," I grump.

"Huh?" He stops squirting tartar sauce all over his—my fish sandwich and faces me, his expression deteriorating into frank confusion.

During my mile-long powerwalk around the office earlier, it occurred to me that this was just the way of it in the South: men like acquiring things—land, cars, farm equipment, livestock...women.

"I'm not your property."

"Where's this coming from?"

"From you. You don't own me. You don't get to decide where I go—or when, for that matter, or," I seethe, glancing at the plates, "what I eat!"

"I don't understand."

“Of course, you don’t. You assume I’m here at your beck and call. Well, I’m not!”

“I know good and well you’re not, Susie-Q. Why would you think that?”

I regard the clutter of little plastic forks, non-absorbent napkins, and those dumb sanitary wipe packets everyone down here is so fond of, and smirk, feeling a new wave of revulsion for my home state. I snatch the empty bag from his hand, ball it up, and throw it violently at the garbage can, missing it entirely. Ignoring his bewildered expression, I turn and march to the dining room, exhaling loudly.

Suddenly, he’s right behind me. I can feel the warmth of his body, his rich essence lightly flavoring the air. I fight the strong urge to wrap my arms around his neck and devour his lips for dinner. He places his strong hands on my shoulders and begins massaging them. “Susan, what’s got you so upset? I know this isn’t about a dumb sandwich.”

I turn to face him. He’s about five inches from my nose, and I find his close proximity and overall maleness suddenly irritating. I don’t have all my thoughts formed yet and need some room to pace and possibly throw my arms around while ranting.

“Back off, Pete, you’re crowding me!” I snap, scowling at him.

He steps backward like I’ve pushed him, which is sort of what I want to do anyway, and I brush past his solid form, going with great urgency to nowhere in particular. I finally end up in the kitchen, staring at his back. His shoulders are slumped, and when he turns around, his expression is the very picture of self-loathing, so misplaced and unfounded and altogether alien to his features that I almost laugh.

I also notice he hasn't settled into his normal fighting posture either: chest puffed out, hands on hips, cocky-as-hell with some smart-assed comment poised to spring from his forked tongue.

"Susan, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—" He looks down at the floor and chuckles darkly. "I'm such a dumb ass." His voice trails off, and I'm not sure if he's talking to me or to himself. His eyes meet mine again. "I just...I love being with you. And I guess I just assumed that you felt the same way. I didn't stop to think that maybe...you didn't."

I open my mouth to respond, but no words come out. In fact, I'm not sure exactly what he's talking about.

"I'll go now," he murmurs, and then turns unexpectedly and walks right out my front door, shutting it quietly behind him. What the hell?

Of course, I feel the same way. What a stupid thing to say! Further, how dare he walk out during a fight? Leaving in the middle of a good, solid argument is a personal foul, according to our rulebook. And he doesn't get to end this one, anyway. I do.

I stand in the middle of my kitchen for a moment, tapping my foot, trying to process what just happened, waiting for him to storm back in and spew out something inane, so we can finish this properly and move on to the post-battle sex we both live for. Then I realize what this is: some new and clever tactic designed to make me run after him. Well, that is not happening!

As time stretches to its reasonable limits, I stomp across the putrid green carpet and yank open the door, fully prepared to take this into the parking lot. But instead of meeting his smug smile, I find myself quite alone on my sidewalk, the only sound, a cricket serenade. *Huh.*

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Ask And Ye Shall Receive—Or Something Like That



He doesn't call later that evening as I expect, nor do I hear from him the next day. I naturally assume he is waiting for me to atone for my rightful indignation, but I can promise, I have no intention of doing any such thing. He is the one who should apologize—well, I guess he has, technically, but for what I'm still not exactly sure. This is a respect issue, and he needs to understand that before we move a step farther.

I keep my phone attached to my being during my service runs and late afternoon meetings, ready to contest whatever defense he's devised, but...nothing. Disregarding Mona's urgings, I choose not to visit the Frog the next evening; I will not be bent to his will. But by Saturday afternoon, I'm starting to panic.

Okay, maybe I generally, possibly, perhaps, overreacted a little. And yes, he had done something very thoughtful by bringing me supper when I was clearly starved. And, I suppose I might have made an accusation or two that I could possibly consider retracting. But dammit, he needs to take the first step!

I think about finding him at the boat show just so I can completely ignore him, but in the end, I just spend the entire day at the office, hoping he'll show up and grovel a little; a little would be enough, I suppose. What surprises the heck out of me is that after only three short days, I've truly missed being with him, talking to and laughing with him—at him, whatever. This isn't supposed to happen. I'm not supposed to feel this way towards him. This is just supposed to be a summer fling!



After a fully restless night and a certain amount of guilt, I decide to completely forgive him for being an ass and go find him. I don't care about marlin, or deep-sea fishing at all, but he does. And I know I will have a great time simply watching him enjoy himself, especially if he actually catches something. He'll be euphoric for days, and I don't want to miss that.

I'm not sure what time he is planning to leave. "Pretty early" means something very different to Pete than to me.

I pack a few essentials in my canvas tote and drive to his house as dawn's great petals gently open. The scene of blooming infant sky and pale mist hovering at the edges of the forest is all rather lovely and a touch holy, until I come upon an evil-eyed mass of fur, smiling at me as if it would gladly rip out my throat for its breakfast. After slamming on my breaks to avoid a head-on collision with this stupid, yet highly menacing possum, I creep into Pete's neighborhood, heart beating wildly.

To my dismay, his truck isn't in the driveway, and neither is Bessie, his boat. I speed to Seagate marina, where he usually docks her after we've finished our joyrides through Bogue Sound, and slide into an empty parking space in front of the pearly gray water. He is in the process of loading a very large white cooler onto his boat with the help of...*Jimbo*. Oh, so that's how it's going to be, is it?

"Pete!" I yell, slamming my car door loudly. A sleeping flock of ducks explodes into the air, squawking at me fiercely, and both men snap to attention with equally startled expressions. Jimbo mutters something inaudible and sets down his half of the cooler before striding back to the truck in his casual, stoic kind of way. He nods solemnly as I storm past him, and I give him an evil eye on principle.

"What are you doing here?" Pete asks, overtly surprised.

"Well, you invited me to go marlin fishing, did you not?"

"Yeah, but I assumed you didn't want to come."

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

He gapes at me for a moment, and then sputters, "You told me I was smothering you." He holds out his hands like it isn't his fault or something, and I balk outright.

"I never said that."

“Yeah, ya did. You told me I was smothering you—well, crowding was the word you used, but it’s the same thing.”

I roll my eyes. “Is that what your problem is? You’re afraid you’re smothering me? That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard!”

“But you said—”

I quickly run through the script of our spat, and then laugh out loud. “All I meant by ‘crowding’ was that you were in my personal space, and I wanted you to back off so I could pace. Is that so hard?” He is probably the first man who has ever wanted to spend this much time with me, and for the most part, I’ve been basking in it. “You aren’t smothering me, you idiot. Trust me.”

His shoulders relax and he smiles tentatively. “But next time I’m fuming, maybe you should consider moving your butt out of my way instead of jumping to idiotic conclusions. ‘Smothering me,’” I scoff, snorting.

One side of his generous mouth turns up, but his eyes are tinged with sadness. His voice drops to a mere whisper. “Susan, the last time someone said that to me...” He spends nearly a minute simply looking down at his beaten-up tennis shoes before continuing. “Well, I thought...” Suddenly, his eyes meet mine, his smile breaking like the sun breaching the tree-lined horizon behind him. “Oh hell, never mind.” Reaching out, he pulls me to his warm chest and hugs me tightly as he laughs. I join him, recognizing the ridiculousness of it all.

When he loosens his hold, I look up into his relaxed and glowing eyes. “And by the way, you ruined a perfectly good fight walking out like that. You owe me a serious make-up session,” I say, poking him in the chest.

He raises an eyebrow. “No, I believe you owe me one.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Jimbo idly leaning

against the truck with his arms folded, watching us impassively. Then I get mad all over again and jerk from Pete's grasp.

"So, this is your idea of not smothering me? Not calling to apologize, and then slinking off with Jimbo?" I exhale in a huff.

His jaw drops open. "I didn't call you 'cause I figured you'd call me when ya got ready. Jimbo was planning on going whether we went or not. He's the one who invited us in the first place, so when I didn't hear from you, I told him we'd ride over together. I know you don't really like fishin', Susie-Q, but I thought you might enjoy goin' out on the ocean. Rudy's got a really nice boat, and I just wanted to spend the day with you, that's all."

I survey the expanse of shimmering water, wondering if drowning will ease my newfound guilt.

"I'm still not exactly sure what I did wrong," he continues, "but I really am sorry I made you mad."

Feeling justifiably stupid, I exhale and look up at him. "Just...next time, before you buy me dinner, or drag me to one of your cousin's softball games, or plan my whole weekend for me...ask first, okay? That's all I want."

He mulls over my request for a moment and then begins laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"It's just—damn woman, why didn't you say so in the first place?" He then pulls me into his arms again and kisses me so deeply that I eventually forget my own name. This time when he releases me, he says hesitantly, "So, would you like to go marlin fishin' with me?"

I sigh theatrically. "I'll get my camera." Passing Jimbo on the way back to my car, I smile at him and mouth,

“Thanks.” He nods, a trace of amusement painting his features, and then starts towards the dock.



“I’m going to die!” I garble, hugging the trash can Pete had so kindly provided me. I’ve spent much of this glorious male-bonding afternoon below deck in the darkened cabin, sunburned and seasick. The four doughnuts I devoured before we launched out to sea, followed by a very generous helping of mid-morning potato chips has only exacerbated matters. By the time we reach the Gulf Stream, the ocean had grown rough and rolling, and with every drop of the bow, my stomach heaves again.

“Do ya want some more water, sweetheart?” Pete asks, rummaging through the cooler. He twists off the cap and gently brings the bottle to my lips. “Ya gotta drink more or you’ll get dehydrated.”

“I hate you,” I moan.

Smiling brightly, he leans down, kisses my cheek, and says, “Susie-Q, I do believe green’s your color.”



So here is the dilemma, my friends. I’m hopelessly in lust with this annoyingly Southern, sex-on-a-stick, drop-dead gorgeously handsome summer fling, and in less than five weeks I’ll leave this mosquito-infested town for good and return to my once fabulous life. But as I gaze into a set of emerald eyes so deep and vast that I could quite easily

drown in them, I'm left wondering if lust isn't starting to feel more like love, and more horrifyingly, if I might want Pete Walsh every bit as much as I want that big promotion.

If you're the praying sort, send one up for me. It looks like I'm going to need it.

I hope you enjoyed this short story. If you need more Pete and Susan in your life, please check out *Caught Up In Me*. It's a full-bodied, incredibly romantic, utterly hilarious bestselling novel. I promise you'll love it.

[*Caught Up In Me*](#)

And, if you'd like to meet the sweet, quirky girl that Susan was before her company molded her into its evil image, please read *Suddenly Susan*. It's darling and absolutely, pee-in-your-pants funny!

[*Suddenly Susan*](#)

Reviews keep us going. If you could take a quick second to write one, I'd be grateful. Thanks in advance!

About the Author



Bestselling Author Virginia Gray is known for her intimate portrayals of women's lives, her trademark humor, and her attention to detail. Gray brings to life the colorful people and compelling story layers of her North Carolina home and its beaches.

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